



Pipilotti Rist
Sip My Ocean 1994/6

harmony and disturbs the idealistic hopes of any passing liberal. The exhibition worked best when the artists attempted to challenge rather than seduce the viewer. Serious commentators, however, might find Rebecca Warren and Fergal Stapleton's behaviour insulting: the pair had drawn with masking-tape a pair of eyes and a mouth, complete with cigarette butt, on the screen of one monitor – the lazy double act is filmed trying to match their faces to the grinning mug. On another monitor a tedious drinking session turns into a table-top disco. To relieve the boredom of the long session, Warren and Stapleton manipulate the empty bottles, glasses, cigarette butts and match sticks and make them dance. The pair could be accused of enjoying the romance of a meaningless existence but their work can also be seen as a refusal to produce an entertaining spectacle. 'I beg to differ' was a problematic exhibition but the problems made for an engaging show. Tim Rollins, at a recent conference,¹ explained his interest in the final image of Kafka's *America* in which the protagonist Karl joins a circus called 'the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma'. In the circus everyone is allowed to blow a horn and play anything they like. Rollins thought that this cacophony of sound was similar to his idea of democracy, a mess but an interesting place to be nevertheless. 'I beg to differ' felt something like this. ■

1. Imagined Communities, One-day Conference, May 11, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton.

David Burrows is an artist and lecturer.

■ Pipilotti Rist

Chisenhale Gallery London April 20 to May 26

Despite the hallucinatory non-reality of Pipilotti Rist's videos and their state-of-the-art technology and skill, this work is actually quite demystifying of the artist as personality and as practitioner. Recognizable, modish staples of everyday life – our familiarity (or expertise) with style culture and MTV; the compulsive listening and re-listening to select pop tunes; the habit of narcissism; a weakness for lapsing into daydreams – are the stuff of

her work, elevated into things of beauty. Rist belongs to an old-fashioned, visionary tradition of consummate aesthetes who made art back in the days when art and beauty were still on speaking terms, and perhaps for this reason her work fits somewhat uncomfortably in a broad contemporary art context. 'Slept in, Had a Bath, Highly Motivated' is truly pleasurable, but don't let that trigger any suspicions. The best way to look at this artist's videos is to toss aside any resistance or moralistic expectations, and enjoy the lulling music, the seductive imagery, the repetitive comfort of both. Pipilotti Rist is a romantic, an accomplished video technician, a DJ, a feminist and a fashion addict, and her videos combine these very unself-conscious talents to great effect, so why quibble over details like, 'what is art?'

The show at hand, 'Slept in, Had a Bath, Highly Motivated' (and the title's just-another-perfect-day-at-home feeling is actually very fitting), is dominated by a larger-than-life, double-screened video, *Sip My Ocean*, 1994/96. The imagery is shamelessly romantic: the sea, the sun, the sky, a lovely girl cavorting in the water (Rist vogueing in the Red Sea), random objects falling soundlessly to a sea floor of gently brushed sand. The underwater world here is an unthreatening, light-filled and welcoming place; the camera shifts from above to below water with no technological or existential difficulty in the transition. Girls' lips kiss like beckoning goldfish; women, pitchers and other assorted vessels abound in an uncomplicated universe of pleasure and cool. The soundtrack to *Sip My Ocean* is almost overwhelming, set to Rist's cover version (previously, Rist sang and played bass with the band Les Reines Prochaines) of Chris Issac's hypnotically melodious *Wicked Game*, retitled *I'm a victim of this song*. A voice screams AM-radio platitudes ('I never dreamed I would meet somebody like you') over a very easily-swallowed melody, suggesting a talent for fashionable pop screeching rather than actual desperation. Meanwhile the images are relentlessly successful, switching as soon as they verge on the boring, one more dazzling than the next. There is a moment when Rist adds cut-outs of dozens of other scantily dressed pin-ups to her own devilishly bikini-clad self-portrait, as if admitting that yes, these are pleasurable pictures of near-naked young women; let's move on to the next thing.

In film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry's seminal text 'The Apparatus', he connects the movie-watching experience with dreaming, and lists a string of shared circumstances (the darkness of the movie theatre, the passivity of the situation, the forced immobility of the cine-subject) which create a state of temporary, 'artificial regression' in both. In dreams as in film-watching, we are stripped of immediate control of the imagery and offered a 'more-than-real impression of reality', an artificial psychosis. This partially describes our experience watching Pipilotti Rist's videos, although the connection isn't so much to film as it is to television; like the guilty pleasure of falling asleep in front of the TV, *Sip My Ocean* is a pure indulgence impossible to resist. This impression is reiterated by the rest of the installation, a giant, *Through the Looking-Glass*-type sitting room, *The Room*, 1995, from which to watch a standard-sized TV-set showing Rist's previous videowork. This set-up forcibly conjures the sensations of a surreal yet familiar, homey TV-watching experience; the oversized (and well-designed) sofas allow us to lie down, ready for sleep, dwarfed into feeling like six year-olds, giggling and playing with the remote control before drifting to sleep or being sent off to bed. And certainly Rist's imagery borrows heavily from quality TV advertising and video-clip aesthetics (Swiss-born Rist began by making educational/promotional videos for high-powered conglomerates like Ciba-Geigy). Like MTV, these videos are quirky, glamorous, entertaining; moreover, being set to music, they admit unashamedly that their similarity to video clips is by no means covert, derogatory or accidental. She's just very, very good at it.

In 1984, Jacqueline Rose wrote that 'only a project that comes via feminism can demand ... that it renounce a narcissistic perfection ...'. And yet Pipilotti Rist, with her high-polish videos, her enviable narcissism, is an excellent female and feminist icon; her confidence is triumphant, a fine example of second- or third-generation feminism. Video is the ideal narcissistic aid with which to create a 'theatre of the self', and in heightening her technical skills Rist can manipulate her image and the video screen with an ease as pleasurable as a perfect love affair. ■

Gilda Williams is an art critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

■ Orlan

Zone Gallery Newcastle-upon-Tyne April 11 to May 26

Rather like separating living skin from the flesh beneath, it is very difficult to remove oneself emotionally from the experience of watching French multimedia/performance artist, Orlan, being operated upon. 'This is My Body ... This is My Software' is the first British showing of large-scale cibachromes made from Orlan's seventh operation/surgical performance, *Omnipresence*, from the series: 'The Reincarnation of St Orlan'. Presented by the



Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, the proceedings were transmitted live around the world on November 21 1993 to sites including Paris, Toronto and Banff. The performance began in May 1990 in Newcastle as part of the *Edge* festival so it is fitting that documentation of her command 'anti-performance' should begin its national tour here.

Orlan adopted her sobriquet in 1971, alluding to a mythical character created from religious images of madonnas, virgins and saints. Appropriately, the artist has focused on the classical images of feminine beauty as manifested in Greek mythology and the history of art. She is at pains (no pun intended) to stress that she works to reinvent herself not as a perfect composite of such images but as the embodiment of the conceptual qualities that Psyche, Europa, Diana, Venus and *Mona Lisa* represent. We are discussing abstract art here. Orlan aims to subvert accepted notions of beauty, to interrogate 'the status of the feminine body' and deal

Orlan

Women look like the moon, my eyes like flowers or self portrait with narcissi; made by the body-machine 5 days after the 7th surgical operation/performance Omnipresence in New York 1993 1996

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