

## Guilty Pleasures: Pipilotti Rist and the Psycho/Social Tropes of Video

Rebecca Lane

The holy-unholy subject of gender has taken hold of the unconscious in a particularly powerful manner. For this reason I am convinced that we will be able to approach the wounds, the festering kernels that have been stored there, only with the force of the visual, the figurative, and sounds. 'Different' images can help bring about resilient change far more readily than verbal pamphlets. The language of images finds a more direct access to the unconscious, where prejudices slumber; it coins us far more strongly than words.

-Pipilotti Rist<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult, within the context of contemporary art, not to feel some degree of ambivalence towards the tacit celebration of video art. Its current normative status is undoubtedly—along with that growing up around internet/web based and telematic pieces—representative of yet another embrace of technology and new media as the means to constitute contemporary “progressive” forms of artistic expression. Judging from the current overt glorification of cutting-edge technology as artistic media, one finds that with the acceptance of these media practices, come comparable value judgments as to the undeniably “progressive” nature of the content of the works featured. The overarching acceptance on the part of museum curators of video’s relevance and expressive potential points not only to prevailing sentiments about the creative promise of technology, but also reflects and simultaneously taps into the most marketable constituents of the current art/museum-going public. In the near domination of new media in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and recent exhibitions such as *Bitstreams*—just two of the most recent cases in point—the inversely reciprocal relation between curatorial celebration, and critical outrage highlights the inherent issues at the levels of taste and consumption that continue to plague discussions of new media.<sup>2</sup>

Since the early 1990’s, Pipilotti Rist, the Swiss video artist and one-

time pop star, has been implicated in exactly this sort of dialogue between the commercial/commodity status attributed to much video art—as simply MTV in the gallery—and its potentials for meaningful contemporary expression. Rist occupies a unique position within video art's identity/identification debates, for, throughout her career she has openly embraced *both* poles of the debate as relevant and beneficial to her artistic aims. Not only does Rist not have any problem with her work being ascribed a pop-cultural status (she revels in it, in fact) but she also sees her work as part of a larger project of social change.<sup>3</sup> Her staunch belief that the unconscious is “where prejudices slumber” contributes to the overriding thematic of extremely personal, internal imagery coupled with the medium through which many individuals both receive and communicate those exact internal prejudices at the level of the social.<sup>4</sup> Her video installation work, as a result, unsurprisingly courts psychoanalytic readings,<sup>5</sup> and Rist herself cites themes of dreaming, sensory modification, fairy tales, and probing the depths of the psyche as key elements inspiring her installations.<sup>6</sup> The psychological dimension which Rist brings to the medium of video is arguably an important element among many that have secured her work critical success in the eyes of audiences and critics alike.

I would like to suggest that the discernable presence of this union of the internal/psychological with the external/social in Rist's work serves to throw into relief the ready embrace of representations of the psychological in lieu of the encroachment of the technological into art at this historical moment; her videos seek to provide a social remedy of sorts that exposes the mechanical/functional wounds of the psyche by way of the machine's capacity to render imagery “psychological/internal”—in other words, it's formal capabilities to create imagery that is both distorted and manipulated to an individual's personal ends. Rist's approach entails the conveyance of the psychological through visually coded representations specific to “feminine” psychology. Two pieces most demonstrative of this trend, and most indicative of Rist's own attempts to probe the psychological, are her early piece (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilotis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipiloti's Mistakes*), 1988 and the more recent *Ever is Over All*, 1997 (Fig. 1-10). Both videos—the former a single channel video tape, and the latter an adjacent two screen video installation—deal with issues of gender and female sexuality, and in a broader sense, with environment, space, and the sensory experience of art viewing by way of their video format. Both the content and formal elements of these two pieces articulate two poles of contemporary discord and ambivalence towards technological media and its use in art production, as well as similar sentiments towards feminine sexuality/psychology; this continuum is articulated through the artist's own biography and statements about these pieces.

By juxtaposing these two seemingly disparate elements—the “masculine” practice of technology with explicitly “feminine” imagery and con-

tent—Rist's work reveals an attempt over time to fuse together what Michael Balint has termed "narcissistic withdrawal" and the "unavoidable integration of the discoveries of 'modern art' with the demand for 'mature love' for the [art] object."<sup>7</sup> Such reintegration occurs at both the level of the art objects themselves and at the level of female psychology in Rist's videos. This is particularly evident when one examines her pieces through the lens of Janine Chassaguet-Smirgel's formulation of female guilt.

### Mistakes or Guilty Repetition?

Creatively I work with so-called feminine methods. For planning and organizing I copy a lot from what men do. Sometimes I could die of shame when I sit in meetings and have to play games, but that's the price I have to pay. When a woman wants to get a project going she has to use methods that go against her nature. Women do not like to admit that they are using men's strategies because they're afraid that by doing so, they are no longer sexually attractive and they have to suppress their feelings.<sup>8</sup>

*(Entlastungen) Pipilottis Fehler ([Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes)* is a nightmare; it is torture enacted over and over again before the viewer's eyes. In multiple sequences one observes the video's female protagonist struggling against physical and psychological impediments; the physical struggles enacted on screen are accompanied by voice-overs that speak directly to the irreconcilable gap between the woman's efforts and reality. In one sequence the woman faints repeatedly; in another, she dives into a swimming pool only to have her head forced under water as she breaks the surface; in yet another she attempts to climb over a fence, but falls before she can propel herself over to the other side. Amidst these failures of action/volition, the video itself fails; the reception is distorted, pixilated beyond the point of verisimilitude and full of static. The woman's trials are thus obscured from complete representation: the viewer never gets the full story, for neither does one see the woman complete her action, nor is one able to view these attempts uninhibited due to the treatment of the video medium itself. As viewers, then, we too occupy a position of failure: a failure to experience visually the resolution of Pipilotti's mistakes; instead, one is left with the flickering repetition of simple, easily achievable actions gone sour.

The visual "truth" of these images is ambiguous as well in relation to the voice-over narratives that accompany each scene. These voice-overs explicitly run contrary to the actions depicted via the images; what appear to be mistakes, as the title to the piece suggests, are discordantly attended by a "voice-over [that] keeps listing rules, accompanied by the beating of a metronome. A child's voice responds by repeating phrases such as 'All the things I must learn,' 'This is the world, this is correct,' 'Everything is exactly where I

left it.”<sup>9</sup> At the level of vocal narrative, much like that found in the piece’s visual narrative, then, one finds another form of failure, for these statements refuse to acknowledge the woman’s very apparent efforts of resistance. Either she struggles against external physical forces, in the form of the hand that submerges her beneath the water or the barrier of the fence, or she wrestles with her own internal weakness in the re-occurring fainting spells; these struggles are figured and indicated *only* through the repetition of the video’s images. By showing these mistakes over and again (and in some cases within different settings, as is the case in the different fainting sequences) Rist presents struggle *itself* as failure, and subsequently presents no possibility of success in the wake of her mistakes. Experience—i.e. multiple attempts—here does not con- note learning or its possibility, but rather, points only to the reiteration and reaffirmation of the impossibility of the protagonist’s activities. Rist presents resolution in both its positive and negative forms: the woman and the viewer alike are resigned to accept the inevitable normalizing presence of failure, and one is forced to arrive at such resignation by viewing a digitized image that itself refuses to “resolve.”

If the woman’s efforts in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti’s Mistakes*) truly denote “mistakes,” then one is prompted to question why the child we hear in the voice-over taught to learn these same “mistakes” as rules? In her essay on the piece, Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that the combination of the images and the voice-over content function as an expression of female hysteria, and as such, “is ruled by the belief in perfection and plenitude, even while it insists on highlighting the dissatisfaction with any given situation.”<sup>10</sup> In that respect, then, the hysterical subject of the piece according to Bronfen, seeks to convince herself (the child, immature element within her) that her “mistakes” are in fact a part of her life, and must be accepted and incorporated within it as a necessary and unquestionable aspect of experience despite their painful reality.

One could also extend a contrary reading to this hysterical formulation if one frames (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti’s Mistakes*) with feminine guilt as articulated by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel.<sup>11</sup> According to Chasseguet-Smirgel, the female experience of the Oedipus complex involves a change of object—an idealization process—that results in “*a specifically feminine form of guilt attached to the anal-sadistic component of sexuality, which is radically opposed to idealization.*”<sup>12</sup> This shift in the girl’s idealization from that of the maternal breast to the paternal penis entails an exchange of one extreme for another; at the time of the change of the object Chasseguet-Smirgel notes:

The idealization process on which the change of object is founded weighs heavily on women’s future psychosexual development. In

fact it implies an *instinctual diffusion*, each object being, at the time of the change of object, either entirely negatively cathected (the mother, her breast, her phallus) or entirely positively cathected (the father and his penis). Because of this the little girl will tend to *repress and counteract* the aggressive instincts which exist in relation to her father in order to maintain this instinctual diffusion.<sup>13</sup>

Because the girl experiences frustration in relation to her mother, her turn to the father's penis as the new idealized object, contrary to more standard Freudian interpretations of this phase,<sup>14</sup> in fact stems out of necessity; the girl is placed in a no-win situation, for she only has two possibilities in terms of ideal objects: only two parents to choose from in the wake of frustration. Therefore, "[t]he father then becomes the last resort, the last chance of establishing a relation with a satisfying object.... In most cases the father-daughter relation is characterized by the persistence of instinctual diffusion... since the second object must be safeguarded."<sup>15</sup> The ensuing guilt towards the father/the masculine which Chassguet-Smirgel's formulation outlines—the fact that the idealization of the masculine object must be preserved at all costs regardless of aggressive tendencies towards that object—permeates female psychosexual development.

If we turn once more to (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) this notion of female guilt reveals itself to be entirely appropos. The bracketed portion of the title, [Absolutions], which Bronfen herself also notes,<sup>16</sup> I feel, when coupled with the visual presentation of "mistakes," highlight the tensions to be found in female relations to idealized masculine objects explicitly—in this case, the technological media of video as a creative device. I am retaining the word "mistakes" in quotes at this point, because I would like to question whether the repeated actions figured in the video are themselves the actual mistakes to which the title refers.<sup>17</sup> As I mentioned earlier, the child's voice in the video assents to learning the rules listed, learning that this indeed is the state of the world in its verity. However, what I would argue is that the failures of transgression featured in the video demonstrate the *end result* of Pipilotti's mistakes; these mistakes *have already been made*, and the (inner) child must learn that such mistakes merit *this* reality.

As an arguably "masculine" format, with all its associations of hi-tech, scientific process, video may be read as functioning in a manner analogous to the idealized father/penis in Chassguet-Smirgel's formulation. Rist acknowledges that her medium of choice involves precision and technique,<sup>18</sup> yet she insists upon its expressive capabilities. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist she comments: "I often say that video is like a painting on glass that moves, because video also has a rough, imperfect quality that looks like painting. I do not want to copy reality in my work; 'reality' is always much sharper and more contrasted than anything that can ever be created with

video. Video has its own particular qualities, its own lousy, nervous, inner world quality, and I work with that."<sup>19</sup> Rist herein expresses a desire to attribute to video an expressive capability once only associated with painting and graphic formats, by denying the documentary capacities normally associated with video. Instead, we find that Rist emphasizes the peculiarities of the medium, and her description of video sounds not unlike a description of the unconscious.

By rejecting a traditional format such as painting in favor of video, Rist is representative not only of current trends in contemporary art, but also of contemporary female/feminist artists as well. Not only are traditional media "frustrating" in their inability to engage the world of contemporary art, but they also leave the female artist relegated to "traditionally female" modes of creation—a situation that one finds Rist rejecting at every turn.<sup>20</sup> Instead, video is like the unconscious, it contains the means within its use to express "universal feelings,"<sup>21</sup> to express female sentiments while still appealing to a mass audience. This of course requires a change in object—a change in media—to thwart marginalizing efforts to categorize female artists by their choice of media, and this requires playing ball with the boys. (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilotis Fehler* (*[Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes*) is fraught with exactly these tensions, for by accepting a format like video as a means of creating a "female" art, one is doomed to fail from the onset; the only way to get noticed in the contemporary art world is to use new media techniques, "to use methods that go against [her] nature."

The repetition of absolution that the imagery of (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilotis Fehler* (*[Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes*) features not only represents the implicitly feminine situation of transgression involved in being a contemporary female artist—and it is impossible not to take the title's autobiographical reference at face value, to read this guilt as specifically Rist's own—but it also breaks with the "instinctual diffusion" of repression and counter-cathexis involved in the idealization of the male object; this is found at the level of the video's formal surface. As I mentioned earlier, the video's reception is distorted, and the artist describes her intentions when she explains:

I subjected the images to all kinds of interference: I played them too quickly for two simultaneously activated recorders, then put the pictures through a time base corrector that evens out the irregularities. That was only one of twenty-five kinds of disturbance that I experimented with on the tape. Asking too much or too little of the machines resulted in pictures that I was thoroughly familiar with, my inner pictures—my psychosomatic symptoms. This technique is similar to painting where expressiveness or tackiness comes closer to the truth than a perfectly sharp, slick representation.<sup>20</sup>

Rist clearly articulates in this statement the extent to which the images alone are unable to convey the entirety of their emotional relevance/resonance; she is compelled to aggressively attack the *images* (and their connotations) through the medium's formal/technical capacities in order to achieve the psychological/social effect and response she desires. In their refusal to adhere to the guilt-ridden state of instinctual diffusion, Rist's formal manipulations of the video run the risk of alienating the woman/the artist from this idealized masculine format; by eschewing guilt on a technical/creative level for the self-admitted mistakes of the work's title, Rist enacts a simultaneous gesture of conciliation and obstinate refusal.

Rist does not utilize video's documentary potentials to document her mistakes, but rather presents them in relation to her self-acknowledgement not to fall into similar traps; in a sense then, the only absolution occurring in this piece is Rist's absolution of herself from any culpability in her move to "work with so-called feminine methods" while consciously "using men's strategies."<sup>22</sup> Such self-absolution is not unlike the results of the "narcissistic withdrawal" of which Michael Balint speaks in his 1953 essay "Notes on the Dissolution of Object: Representation in Modern Art," where he states:

The treatment of the object [in modern art], or the artist's attitude to it, i.e., his phantasies, feelings, emotions, ideas, images, etc., when stimulated by his chosen object, are conspicuously on what psychoanalysis would describe as the *anal-sadistic level*. The objects are dismembered, split, cruelly twisted, deformed, messed about; the dirty, ugly qualities of the objects are 'realistically' and even 'surrealistically' revealed;...less and less regard is paid to the object's feelings, interests, and sensitivities; kind consideration for, and 'idealization' of, the object becomes less and less important.<sup>23</sup>

Rist's strategy of distorting the video in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilotti Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) entails a similar disrespect for the object as that which Balint describes; the anal-sadistic content of female guilt from which the images stem are thus also locatable within the modern artist's own internal/psychological process of narcissistic withdrawal from the object as object, in one's refusal to treat it in an idealized fashion. This video alienates Rist as an artist somewhere between this state of un-idealization and disrespect, and that of guilt and conciliation.

### **Ruby Slippers And Red Hot Pokers**

[*Ever is Over All*] is a fantasy. When I created it, I wasn't thinking about fairy tales. It's true that it has some similarities, but maybe

that's because it depicts a delicate, feminine girl doing something very aggressive. This is a familiar aspect of fairy tales: the small child wins against the monster. There's always a balance of power to comfort the weak, the poor, the children. Fairy tales prove that the key to winning a struggle depends on our mental force and not on power or physical force. That interests me a lot. I'm very interested in the power of weakness and the beauty of the non-elegant. In that way, you can say that I refer to fairy tales. You know, if you glorify or empower a seemingly fragile woman, it can suggest mental strength. I'm fighting against clichés by exaggerating the person and giving her an unusual physical presence on screen. This suggests to me mental power or the strength of self-hypnosis.<sup>24</sup>

Pipilotti Rist's 1997 video installation *Ever is Over All*, in stark contrast to (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* (*[Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes*), is far from ambiguous in its content, and revels in formal brilliance, saturated color and discernable narrative. The piece contains two adjacent screens typically installed to meet one another at the intersection point of two walls of a room. On one screen, a young woman dressed like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* strides confidently down a city street; she wears a pretty, flowing blue dress and red shoes and in her hand is what appears to be a magic wand of sorts with a flower at its tip. The woman eventually smashes this wand into the passenger window of a parked car with visible glee. A female police officer, rather than apprehend the young woman for her vandalism, simply smiles and salutes as the two women pass each other by. The second screen shows a video loop of a field of flowers shot at incredibly close range, rendering them monumental in scale when juxtaposed with the adjacent street scene. They have the appearance of bright abstract forms more so than flowers, and at points their projection even encroaches upon the screen of the woman.

In Peggy Phelan's description of the piece she writes:

Many read the video as a kind of feminist revenge fantasy. The phallus flower is wielded by a woman in a conservative dress; her counterpart, the woman police officer wearing the clothes of the state and representing 'the law of the father,' applauds the power of the phallic woman. Unlike other feminist 'revenge' texts, however, *Ever is Over All* is matter-of-fact, hypnotically beautiful in its slow motion effects and fade to flowers. The video is clearly a feminist work, but...[t]he daring exuberance of thinking outside the law, imagining a different relationship to property, to movement, to the criminal power of beauty itself is the video's truest achievement.<sup>25</sup>

As Phelan rightly observes, *Ever is Over All* is celebratory in its tone and presentation. The transgressive element of the video that Phelan cites as the piece's primary strength, however, needs further elaboration in order to determine exactly what such celebration and transgression are in reference to. Rist's own comments about the piece, particularly when she states: "I'm fighting against clichés by exaggerating the person and giving her an unusual physical presence on screen. This suggests to me mental power or the strength of self-hypnosis,"<sup>26</sup> also make apparent the necessity to delve more deeply into the question of transgression in this installation. Phelan's description, in its own critique of clichés, nonetheless posits an alternative, and equally stereotypical reading of this piece: that a female artist depicting resistance automatically intends it as a feminist act of "thinking outside the law," meaning the law of the conscious world of (masculine) society. Yet Rist herself overtly posits the unconscious, and even more specifically the fantasy element involved in an individual's personal capacity for mental empowerment, at the center of this video's concept. As a result, the content of this work is not strictly rooted strictly in social transgression, but incorporates mental transgression as well; transgression of mental norms here stems from a deliberate exchange between the psychological *and* the social in this piece, and is one which takes place between its form and its visual/narrative content.

It is difficult not to address Rist's claims in relation to the unarguable visual quotations *Ever is Over All* takes from *The Wizard of Oz*, a movie which itself centers around imagination, dreaming, and rebellion.<sup>27</sup> Based on L. Frank Baum's original story of 1900, the MGM film version of 1939 starring Judy Garland is the version of the story with which most audiences are familiar, and is also the version in which the tropes of Dorothy's blue dress and ruby slippers figure most prominently.<sup>28</sup> Linda Rohrer Paige has argued that Dorothy's ruby slippers in the film are indicative of the character's ability to "imagine" herself outside her situation as a woman within a patriarchal society, but that these tools of the creative, imaginative potential of woman are both a blessing and a curse.<sup>29</sup> Noting the ties to the Hans Christian Anderson Tale "The Red Shoes"<sup>30</sup> and the story of little Karen who puts on the forbidden dancing shoes—to Karen's dismay, once she has donned the shoes she cannot get them off again and has to have her feet cut off—Rohrer ventures that the shoes function as a specifically female attribute of the problematic nature of female imagination.

These are the shoes of power, which signal anxiety or death for those who dance in them; they are Dorothy's slippers in the *Wizard of Oz*....The ruby slippers constitute evidence of Dorothy's symbolic kinship to the wicked witches. Although they belonged to the first witch [who was killed by Dorothy's house, and from

whom Dorothy inherited the slippers], they fit Dorothy's feet perfectly. They are Dorothy's inheritance of the female imagination and thus function as a semiotic marker of her sisterhood to the two wicked witches. Because she inherited woman's symbol—the red slippers—Dorothy unknowingly reveals her kinship to the witches.<sup>31</sup>

By giving her own female protagonist in *Ever is Over All* the same ruby slippers as Dorothy—and she unmistakably forces the viewer to make this connection by likewise including Dorothy's signature blue dress—Rist also invokes the double-edged sword of female imagination and creativity. However, unlike Dorothy, Rist's protagonist does not compromise her fantasy with any mantra such as "there's no place like home;"<sup>32</sup> she doesn't show any signs of seeking a return to the "real" (masculine) world outside the realm of her vandalous (feminine/ist) activity. This woman instead is the embodiment of fantasy: Rist's own. As such, *Ever is Over All* functions as a projection of such fantasy through the creative activity of art making. As Freud proposes in "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming":

We can begin by saying happy people never make phantasies, only unsatisfied ones. Unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind phantasies; every separate phantasy contains the fulfillments of a wish, and improves on unsatisfactory reality. The impelling wishes vary according to the sex, character and circumstances of the creator; they may be easily divided into two principle groups. Either they are ambitious wishes, serving to exalt the person creating them, or they are erotic. ...But we will not lay stress on the distinction between these two trends; we prefer to emphasize the fact that they are often united.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, if *Ever is Over All* is to be read as Rist's own fantasy, it is clear that despite the celebratory, formally and emotionally bright appearance of the work, these qualities in actuality serve to mask the artist's dissatisfaction, and is an attempt on her part to act out in response to frustration. While Phelan would identify this dissatisfaction as "the law of the father," I would argue that the frustration Rist projects here is akin to the feminine guilt discernible in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*). In this case, by contrast, rather than figuring guilt itself through an emphasis upon failure, *Ever is Over All* presents a response *against* guilt. Contrary to Phelan's assertion that this piece is a "feminist revenge fantasy," which effectively locates the intentions of the piece to be oppositional with regards to the outside world of patriarchal society, if we take this piece to be a fantasy in response to guilt—one dealing specifically with the artist's own female psyche—

the piece takes on new significance. Whereas in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*), Rist enacted guilt and attempted to respond to it by *rejecting* instinctual diffusion in relation to the idealized object—technological media—*Ever is Over All*, embodies a new maturity on the part of the artist to deal with frustration and guilt through the production of an art object.

In this installation, not only does the piece incorporate the room—the very environment housing both the viewer and the object—but in its crisp, colorful presentation, the video conjures up the surreal realm of fantasy while simultaneously functioning as an aesthetically pleasing piece to view. The dual projections of the woman with her “red hot poker”—the type of flower on the tip of her metal wand—and the field of actual red hot poker meet to form a rich tableau and project the appearance of “an animated painting,”<sup>34</sup> the one scene bleeding into the other. Gone are the distortions, flickers, and static of the earlier piece: elements that serve to draw attention to the failure and weaknesses of the video medium itself. *Ever is Over All* is a celebration of the video medium in all its glory and potential to give a “perfectly sharp, slick representation”: exactly what Rist claimed to be avoiding in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*).<sup>35</sup>

Due to the element of wish-fulfillment present in *Ever is Over All* (as per Freud's conception of phantasy noted above) one finds this reversal in formal approach indicative of Rist's own desire to idealize the object, to adhere to an “instinctual diffusion” in relation to the video medium. This shift corresponds to what Balint describes as the reconciliation of “narcissistic withdrawal” with an “unavoidable integration of the discoveries of ‘modern art’ with the demand of ‘mature love for the object.’”<sup>36</sup> The acquisition of this mature state on the part of the artist will come about, he claims, because: “The artists and the general public equally will have to learn to feel again regard and consideration for the objects, but this time not because the objects can be used for the purpose of projecting onto them our phantasy of ourselves as independent and inviolate, imperishable and eternal; *the objects will have to be loved for what they are.*”<sup>37</sup> *Ever is Over All* unlike (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) is not a projection on to the object of Rist's guilt and aggression against idealization, but, I would argue, is a projection *through* the object—through the capacity of projection itself contained within video—of a mature love and embrace of both the object/video medium and the artist's own situation in relation to the object/video medium. In other words, *Ever is Over All* overtly denies any reason for guilt in the wake of the transgressive activities that its videos feature. 1997, the year of the piece's inception, interestingly enough, is the year Rist's work was first selected for inclusion in the Kwangju, Istanbul, Lyon, and Venice Biennales, in addition to 10 other group exhibitions over the course of the same year. The undeniable

art world embrace of her work, and the success the artist had begun to enjoy by this point in time, is clearly reflected in *Ever is Over All*'s complete rejection of guilt as found in the earlier video.

(*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) and *Ever is Over All*, therefore, occupy two distinct and extreme poles of within the career of Pipilotti Rist. The extremity of these two positions are evident in the struggle the artist enacts through her changing approach towards and use of the medium of video. These two works demonstrate a continuing process towards both a mature love for the art object of video, as well as towards a resolution of feminine guilt on the part of one of today's most prominent female artists. In her current work, respect and wholeness for the medium of video dominate, and female guilt has morphed into a celebration of the success of the persistent challenges the individual psyche poses to technological media. Pipilotti Rist's career promises to serve as an example of the potential to develop a mature relationship with one's own unconscious and the communicative possibilities of even the most "impersonal" of media, both in the psychological and social realms in which her works continuously impact viewing audiences.

#### Notes

- 1 Pipilotti Rist, as quoted in Elisabeth Bronfen, "*(Entlastungen) Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*)," in Peggy Phelan, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Elisabeth Bronfen, *Pipilotti Rist*, (New York and London: Phaidon, 2001), p. 90.
- 2 *Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, March 7-May 26, 2002, *Bitstreams*, Whitney Museum of American Art, March 22-June 10, 2001.
- 3 See epigraph and note 1.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Cf. Phelan and Bronsen in *Pipilotti Rist* for the two primary examples this paper will engage.
- 6 Cf. Rist, "I rist, you rist, he rists, we rist, you rist, they rist, tourist: Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Pipilotti Rist," interview in *Pipilotti Rist*, 6-28, and Rist, Pipilotti, "Interview with Rochelle Steiner," in *Wonderland*, catalog, The Saint Louis Museum of Art, July 1-September 24, 2000, pp. 90-94.
- 7 Michael Balint, "Notes on the Dissolution of Object-Representation in Modern Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 10, no. 4, (1952): p. 327.
- 8 Rist, " 'I am Half-aware of the World': Interview with Christoph Doswald, 1994" in *Pipilotti Rist*, p. 125.
- 9 Bronfen, p. 88.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 11 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, "Feminine Guilt and the Oedipus Complex," in *Female Sexuality—New Psychoanalytic Views*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970, pp. 94-134.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 97, original emphasis.

13 Ibid., original emphasis.

14 Cf. Sigmund Freud, "The Passing of the Oedipus-Complex," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, Philip Rieff, ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 176-182.

15 Chasseguet-Smirgel, 98.

16 Bronfen, pp. 81-84. Bronfen herself brackets off the term [Absolution] by dealing with it entirely in a manner separate from her interpretation of the images in this piece as "hysterical," in the tradition of Charcot. She aligns Rist with other women working with these themes such as Louise Bourgeois and Annette Messager merely based upon the formal similarities of the woman fainting to images of female hysterics. Unfortunately, this reading neglects Bronfen's own astute initial observations of the significance of absolution to all of Rist's images in this piece. She argues that: "The hysteric's excessive language—her fits of bodily incapacitation, her hallucinations, her histrionics, her double consciousness—serves as a mode of address to an audience. The message behind this aberrant behavior is her uncompassionate discontent with the symbolic codes that constrain her, forcing her to accept a clear gendered identity when she would prefer to conceive of herself along more fluid lines. The hysteric's body, contorted with unsatisfied desire seeking to relieve itself of the rigid laws of normalcy, follows one of Sigmund Freud's seminal discoveries regarding the hysteric's body language. Namely the hysteric has recourse to speaking her distress through her body when symbolic language fails." (Bronfen, 87-88) While I agree that Rist is indeed drawing from this tradition, I feel there is a glaring ellipsis between Bronfen's attention to the hysterical and the notion of absolution. While the hysteric has no recourse to language, and is overcome by her bodily responses to an impossible situation—these responses being outside of her conscious control—the notion of absolution which Rist invokes speaks directly to volition, to seeking recourse for one's actions via one's feelings of guilt; this absolution presents itself in the form of repeating the *result*, the "mistake" itself: failure. For Rist figures atonement in the insistence that the transgressive actions themselves are the after effect of the mistake—the original approach itself is what is flawed in her formulation. I will show further that Rist's atonement and recognition is very conscious and self-directed.

17 See note 14 above.

18 Rist, "I rist, you rist, he rists, we rist, you rist, they rist, tourist: Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Pipilotti Rist," interview in *Pipilotti Rist*, p.15; see Rist's comments on Nam June Paik.

19 Ibid., p. 12.

20 It seems worthy of notice with regards to this point that there is an increasingly high number of women working with video as their primary medium, and that female video artists have been at the forefront of this practice since its introduction during the 1970's; one thinks in particular of the extensive work by Joan Jonas during those early years. Another woman currently working with projects similar to Rist's that readily comes to mind is Diana Thater.

21 Ibid, p. 19.

22 Ibid, p. 125.

- 23 Balint, p. 327.
- 24 Rist, "Interview with Rochelle Steiner," in *Wonderland*, catalog, The Saint Louis Museum of Art, July 1-September 24, 2000, p. 90.
- 25 Phelan, "Opening Up Spaces Within Spaces: The Expansive Art of Pipilotti Rist," in *Pipilotti Rist*, pp. 59-62.
- 26 Rist, "Interview with Rochelle Steiner," p. 90.
- 27 Phelan notes the fashion tropes of the blue dress and red shoes (59) as I have done above, but makes no further analysis of the relationship between the two pieces.
- 28 Victor Fleming, dir., Mervyn LeRoy, prod., *The Wizard of Oz*, MGM/UA, Santa Monica, Ca., original release date, 1939, sound, color, and black & white film.
- 29 Linda Rohrer Paige, "Wearing the Red Shoes: Dorothy and the Power of the Female Imagination in the *Wizard of Oz*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23, (Winter 1996):146-53.
- 30 Anderson, Hans Christian, "The Red Shoes", trans. E.V. Lucas and H.B. Paull, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1945: pp. 62-69.
- 31 Paige, pp. 147-149.
- 32 Here one might refer back to the voice-over narratives within (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) and their self-convincing tone and make a comparison to Dorothy's repetitious "There's no place like home."
- 33 Freud, "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming," in *Character and Culture*, Philip Rieff, ed., (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 37.
- 34 Phelan, p. 59.
- 35 Rist, "'I am Half-Aware of the World': Interview with Christopher Doswald, 1994," p. 124.
- 36 Balint, p. 327.
- 37 *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of horizontal segments in shades of yellow and orange, with a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Guilty Pleasures: Pipilotti Rist and the Psycho/Social Tropes of Video

SOURCE: Art Crit 18 no2 2003

WN: 0300206030002

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
<http://www.sunysb.edu/>

Copyright 1982-2004 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.