The color or your socks: a year with Pipilotti Rist (review)

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Abstract
The Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist was honored with a commission to re-open the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City in 2004. This project, a large-scale video installation titled Pour Your Body Out, requires visitors to lie on specially prepared carpets and gaze at the projections on the surrounding walls and ceiling. "What should we do if people don't want to take their shoes off?" asks one of the museum docents. Use some humor, suggests Rist: "Tell them, I'd like to see the color of your socks."

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Multimedia

The Color of Your Socks: A Year with Pipilotti Rist

Reviewed by Mike Leggett, University of Wollongong, School of Creative Arts, U.K.
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The Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist was honored with a commission to re-open the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City in 2004. This project, a large-scale video installation titled Pour Your Body Out, requires visitors to lie on specially prepared carpets and gaze at the projections on the surrounding walls and ceiling. “What should we do if people don’t want to take their shoes off?” asks one of the museum docents. Use some humor, suggests Rist: “Tell them, I’d like to see the color of your socks.”

Color and movement is the theme throughout this observational video of the preparation of the commissioned work. Rist is the colorfully dressed CEO of her art production company, darting from one meeting to the next with her collaborators, sponsors, assistants and technicians. Sketches, maquettes, then scaled-up models move inexorably toward the day of the opening (interrupted by other more minor projects), each stage announced onscreen with titles, the what and the wherefore of the contemporary art scene: a “chic” Monument to Emilie Kempin-Spyri, the first Swiss woman “to attain a doctorate in law at the end of the 19th century; a Liberty Statue for London, in Basle; the shooting of Rist’s first feature film, Pepperminta—so many more people will see a film than will see an installation,” she observes.

For the film and video shoots, her crew uses the new technology of high-resolution micro-cameras mounted on the end of boom poles. The camera operator has power and screen strapped to his body, leaving his arms free to move the wide-angle, deep-focus camera around, above, below and close into Rist’s performers, both clothed and unclothed, ensembles and individuals. “Naked people?” asks the visiting Swiss MOMA curator. Could this be a challenge to New Yorkers, one wonders? Surely not . . . ? Shoes off in public? Now that could be an issue.

There is little else left with which to engage in this DVD. It is an electronic catalogue entry, providing some background to the central character and her work. “Am I an Artist, a Video Artist or a Fine Artist?” she discusses with another assistant at one point. “An Artist,” she decides. There is no interpretation of the work as would occur in a print catalogue, no probing of the concepts behind the movement and color. “I wish for a more colorful life,” says someone at a preview of the film; it’s also about “overcoming barriers” and providing “exercise for back and hips,” encourages the artist. Her onscreen subjects demonstrate the precept as they entwine, entangle and cavort through green fields, red apples, the “fires of hell” and super-green tree-tops; Caribbean seas too—“Maybe too cute?” queries Pipilotti.

Large-scale video installations as semi-immersive, cinema-like environments have become de rigueur on the international art circuit of biennales, exhibitions and festivals. The affordances of computer-based video and sound technology have made this possible, not only in the gathering and ordering of sound and images but more essentially in their presentation across multiple screens and sound sources, maintaining perfect operatic synchronization for hours and weeks, sometimes months on end. Contemporary art on a grand scale requires a production effort and organization akin to that of the 19th-century monumental sculptors, the Renaissance religious image industry and Hollywood itself.

At an early stage of this disappointing DVD, we are reminded of the vagaries of the fine art scene, populated as it is by bright and optimistic people like Pipilotti. Rist inspects the photograph of a work by the celebrity queen of video art, Yoko Ono. It is an installation of a stepladder with a piece of paper stuck on the ceiling above it. Visitors climb the ladder with magnifying glass to read the tiny word “yes.” “This work cost $32 million, and $100 to produce,” she pauses to muse, before darting off to another meeting about her installations and projections onto the walls and ceilings of MOMA.

**THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS**


Reviewed by Eugene Thacker, Media Studies and Film, The New School, New York, NY. U.S.A. E-mail: <thacker@newschool.edu>.

Some years ago I recall visiting a sound installation by Francisco López. I cannot recall the name of the piece, although I do recall the experience. In a quiet room with speakers, I waited. Knowing López’s work and seeing that the space itself (the windows, the floor, the sound recording and the sounds of one’s own environment) was, in a way, what I got—though I expected nothing but sound. And this was, as a way, what I got—though I never actually heard anything. Standing in that room, I couldn’t hear anything except for the subtle and gentle rattling of the windows. Eventually the whole room started to quake. And still nothing coming from the speakers (or so I thought). Then I realized that the speakers were, in fact, playing sounds, but they were outside of my hearing range. These non-human sounds were only accessible to me indirectly via their acoustic and physical effects on the space itself (the windows, the floor, my body). Eventually more audible, rumbling bass sounds did make their appearance, but only after the sounds had first manifested themselves as the physical space itself.

This play between sound in space and sound as space is, for me, indicative of much of Francisco López’s work. For over 30 years, López has been working in that liminal space between the audible and the inaudible, producing recorded works, installations and live performances. Recently, the Vienna-based label Kairos released Through the Looking Glass, a beautifully produced CD box set of López’s work. While López’s output is voluminous, Through the Looking Glass offers an excellent survey of one of the most important sound artists of our time. The set ranges from field recordings made in the early 1990s to more abstract ambient works from the late 1990s to recent work that exists at the limits of sonic experience. While there are discernible continuities in López’s work, in my view, the pieces collected on Through the Looking Glass are of four types, each differing in the way they balance the sounds of the world and sound worlds. Qal’a Ahd’al-Salam (1993) and O Pavilhão Desamortizado (1995) both combine field recordings with various sound processing effects.

The sources of both pieces are discernible—one hears birds, cicadas, the bustle of street markets, the hum of the countryside, resplendent forests, the echo of a distant temple. The sources retain their referential aspect (“bird,” “car,” “bell”), but the subtle effects and layering gradually create a vibrant cacophony, a kind of shimmering din that belongs neither to the external world nor to the world of purely synthetic or electronic sounds. The titles of these pieces hint at this cacophonic naturalism (“The Game of Mud,” “A Time Spirit in the Body of a Plant”). In these pieces, sounds taken from the world begin as referential sounds and gradually become non-referential. At the same time, they never completely lose their referential quality, placing us as listeners in a strange in-between place.

From here López experiments with this relationship between sound and effects. In La Selva (1997) and Buildings (New York) (2001), López presents us with sounds without effects. Both are straight field recordings but from very different environments—in La Selva the recordings are drawn from several sites in the Costa Rican jungle, while Buildings (New York) are drawn from different residential, industrial and office buildings in Manhattan. While there is no processing to the sounds, these are, strangely, the most surreal of the recordings, in part because we as listeners do not know if one location simply follows another in sequence or if different locations are layered on top of each other, producing an “impossible” sonic reality. Both pieces are also characterized by an abstract texture—a swarming texture of insects and rain in the jungle, and the vacuous, ambient hum of empty buildings, generator rooms and abandoned tunnels. These field recordings are “fields” in the true sense, in that they transform a physical location in the world into a location that, strangely, has no actual “place” (interestingly, the sounds of human beings are absent from both pieces). La Selva is the dense, polyrhythmic sonorism of non-human life, while Buildings (New York) is the cold, mechanical life of the city.

The near inverse approach characterizes Belle Confusion (1996), in which there seem to be only effects, and no source sounds. Distant overtones, delicate trills and diffuse echoes are juxtaposed with non-directional washes, eventually condensing into a kind of thick, ambient noise. Over a period of 50 minutes, these “ambient” sounds eventually become so dense that they start to occupy and fill space itself, instead of ambient sounds carving out or hollowing out space. In Belle Confusion we as listeners experience an acoustic paradox: diffuse sounds that hollow out a space from without, and, at the same time, nearly subsonic rumbles that fill a space from within. Belle Confusion is indicative of many of López’s better-known works, such as Untitled #74 or his numerous sound installations. In pieces like these, one rarely notices when the piece itself has begun. The sounds begin so faintly and emerge so gradually that one can easily mistake them for the sounds of one’s own environment. First there is silence; then before you know it, there is suddenly an amorphous, diffuse wash of sound—was it always there or did it suddenly begin? This acoustic uncertainty is central to Belle Confusion, a confusion between the sound recording and the sounds of one’s environment (which in most cases are never totally separate). While works such as La Selva and Buildings (New York) present us with sounds without effects, in Belle Confusion we have effects without sounds—as if the sound sources themselves have vanished, leaving only sonic traces.

All of this is taken to another level in López’s more recent works, many of which bear the simple title of Untitled. Through the Looking Glass contains three such works, all produced in 2008. These pieces are distinct in their subtractive approach; they truly exist at the limit of audibility. Occasionally one hears faint hints of found sounds, but more often than not the Untitled pieces operate at the highest and lowest registers, the supersonic and subsonic: sub-bass rumbles and high-pitched, aleatoric