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### Recommended Citation

Li, Yanlin, "The Narcissistic Gaze in Pipilotti Rist's Video Work Mutaflor (1996)" (2017). *Art and Art History Summer Fellows*. 2.  
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The Narcissistic Gaze in Pipilotti Rist's Video Work *Mutaflor* (1996)

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July 21, 2017

## Abstract

Pipilotti Rist began her artistic career in the mid-1980s when video, as an art form, flourished on the international art scene. It was a period when a new system of visual culture emerged – a system that commodified the human body; a system that was made increasingly narcissistic by the rapid development and expansion of MTV and advertising. In the context of this research project, I discuss the concept of narcissism through a feminist psychoanalytic perspective. Critics have debated whether to define video as a narcissistic art form, for a growing number of works reference or directly employ a commodified culture. Some critic labeled Rist, among others, a narcissistic female artist because she generously employed sensual self-representation in her works. She arranges a platform from which the spectator can look at the bodies freely in the world she presents on the monitor while she, as an object, returns the gaze through the exposure and destruction of imagery of the physical body. In this paper, I explore the narcissistic gazes of both the spectator and the object in Rist's early single-channel video *Mutaflor* (1996), while arguing against the stigma of narcissism imposed by previous scholars and critics. Rist presents her body in a state of nature to engage spectators and implicate the ubiquity of narcissism while inviting them to contemplate the relationship between the act of looking and being looked.

Keywords: feminist psychoanalysis, narcissism, spectatorship, voyeurism, video art

When Pipilotti Rist named the forty-three-second single channel video work after the name “Mutaflor,” she might have already implied the kind of audience experience the work is to give to its spectators – one that scratches off the dirt from the eyes, one that is both tortuous and gratifying.<sup>1</sup>

Pipilotti Rist is a Swiss installation and video artist who is internationally renowned for her innovative use of the video manipulation techniques, her unique take on and representation of the popular culture of the western societies, and her sensual depiction of the human body. In the early period of her career, that is from the mid-1980s to the end of 1990s, Rist created a series of videos featuring herself as the subject.<sup>2</sup> These video works have drawn great attention from the international art scene. Some critics made connections between her work and the infamous MTV and commercial advertising. They censured the self-representational video works of Rist’s for chasing after a kind of narcissistic visual culture that is reinforced by these industries – one that makes the human body as the projection of desires, that is, one that objectifies or sexualizes the human bodies.<sup>3</sup>

*Mutaflor* is one of the video works that acquires such criticism. Due to time constraints, I won’t talk in detail about the research I did on the artistic representation of the visual culture that is affected by the 1980s and 90s MTV and advertising industries, nor on how art historians have used Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis on narcissism in the criticism of video art. What I could be explicit about, however, is that scholars have never stopped the discourse on the representation of narcissism in video art since artists began to use the body of their own as the

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<sup>1</sup> Mutaflor is a probiotic comprising of bacteria which has been used in clinical studies to treat gastrointestinal disorders. One may find a historical reference of Mutaflor as a drug from *Blitzed: Drugs in the Third Reich*, written by the German novelist, screenwriter, and journalist Norman Ohler.

<sup>2</sup> Gioni, Massimiliano, and Margot Norton. *Pipilotti Rist: pixel forest*. London: Phaidon Press, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Walsh, Maria. *Art and psychoanalysis*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

subjects of their work. Such a discourse, in the case which the female body is the subject, has more or less touched upon psychoanalytic theories put forward by Freud and Lacan on female sexuality. Feminist theorists, such as Rosalind Krauss,<sup>4</sup> Laura Mulvey,<sup>5</sup> and Julia Kristeva,<sup>6</sup> have undertaken critiques that counters the moralization of the female sexuality. And the priority of my research here is, through the feminist psychoanalytic lens, to provide a new angle for understanding the theme of narcissism in Rist's video works of the same kind of *Mutaflor*.



*Mutaflor*, 1996. Single-channel video installation, silent, color; 43 sec.

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<sup>4</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism." *October* 1 (1976): 51-64. doi:10.2307/778507.

<sup>5</sup> Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44 (This essay was first published on *Screen* 16[3]: 6-18, 1975[Autumn]).

<sup>6</sup> Kristeva, Julia. 1982 (1980). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (Pouvoirs de L'Horreur: Essais sur l'abjection)*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Using *Mutaflor* as an example, I argue that Rist visualizes the discourse on narcissism through the representation of the female nude, featured by the artist herself. Through not only the very content of the video but also the designing of the exhibition context, she creates a platform for the spectators to look at the body and confront the narcissistic desire implied by it. Rist's application of the theme narcissism in the self-representational video works is not, as her contemporary critics argued, a mere act of pursuing the hyper-sexualized visual culture of the late twentieth century. It is rather a channel she creates to invite the spectators to experience the narcissistic gaze and reflect on its significance in video art. More broadly speaking, in doing so, she invites the spectators to reflect on the philosophy of seeing and being seen.

In the video, Rist appears as a nude figure. The figure squats down on the ground, being surveyed outside-in by Rist from a third-person perspective. The picture, setting the woman's front face as the focus, gradually zooms into her parted red lips. As the camera lens enters her mouth and reaches the end of her throat, the screen, less than a second, appears in darkness. The image shown right after that is the woman's anus. The image appears from indistinct to distinct. The camera lens zooms out from the bottom of her haunch, moves upward along the back, returns to the front face of the female nude, and again, zooms in and enters her mouth. In this order, the video plays on a loop.



*Mutaflor*, 1996. Single-channel video installation, silent, color; 43 sec.

Rist uses the darkness on the screen to create an illusion through which the spectator is induced into thinking that the camera enters the woman's body from her mouth, goes through her bronchus, esophagus, and intestinal canal, and eventually exits her inner body from the anus. The transient darkness implies the entire trip the camera takes inside of her. This illusion not only establishes the basis for the audience experience but also implies a kind of self-destruction Rist undertakes to the completeness of her body, and a kind of psychological suggestion – the pain and angst one experiences when imagining the body being burst open, in this case, by an ice-cold machinery.

The video tableau differs every time when the camera lens zooms out from the anal area. Sometimes, it is the sharpness of the image or the shooting angle that varies from one to the next. Sometimes, it is the composition of the picture. That is, Rist, for two times throughout the video,

places a lime right beneath the anus. The texture of the lime skin juxtaposing with that of the anus provides a sensational visual impact. At the same time, the illusion made by the looping camera which travels through the inner body of the female nude from mouth to anus arouses all sorts of repulsiveness.

Seeing the bodily organs one uses to eat and to excrete in the same visual context while experiencing the suggestive agony engendered by the fragmentation of the body is the very element Rist uses to construct the awareness of the narcissistic gaze for her spectators.

Rist first constructs an imaginary space in which the spectator identifies with either the physical appearance of the female nude or the desire implied by the survey of it – the desire everyone shares since the formation of the selfhood, the desire to look at one's own body from the perspective of the other.

In his research on the development of human sexuality, Sigmund Freud categorizes the human libido into the ego-libido and the object-libido. Narcissism occurs when the libido, that is, the sexually charged desire, one directs at one's ego exceeds that of the outward object. Therefore, according to Freud, the primary narcissism, that is the appropriate attention and desire one invests to the ego, is not a psychosis but a part of the development of the human psychology.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Jacques Lacan departs his theory, the Mirror Stage, from Freud, elucidating that the formation of the perceptions of selfhood begins when one sees one's projected double from the mirror, or from the reflection in the mother's eyes. Thereupon, the

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<sup>7</sup> Freud, Sigmund, Joseph Sandler, Ethel Person, and Peter Fonagy. *Freud's "On narcissism: an introduction"*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.



desire to learn or to look at one's own body, not as fragmented but in its entirety, emerges and therefore is narcissistic.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to the work itself from these points, I argue that through the provocative representation of the female nude in *Mutaflor*, Rist amplifies the voyeuristic desire aforementioned among the spectators and thus amplifies the narcissistic pleasure.

The female nude in the video not only is the projected double of Rist but also signifies that of the spectator. The gaze Rist projects on herself, therefore, is in effect the gaze the spectator projects on his or her own body. The desire the gaze carries, therefore, implies the spectator's desire that is suppressed by the superego. This suppressed desire reaches satisfaction through Rist's eyes. Therefore, when Rist looks, the spectator looks; when she desires, the spectator desires; and when she destroys the imagery of her nude, the spectator reassures the completeness of his or her own body. Rist's incompleteness, that is, aggrandizes the completeness the spectator assumes of him/herself.



Installation view of *Mutaflor* (1996) at the exhibition *Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest*

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<sup>8</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. *Jacques lacan: a feminist introduction*. Place of publication not identified: Routledge, 2015.

Looking back to those exhibitions, I have found that Rist has always chosen a comparatively open environment to display *Mutaflor*. For instance, at the retrospective exhibition held last year at the New Museum, *Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest*, *Mutaflor* was displayed on the ground of the exhibition hall, right next to an open staircase corridor which leads to the upstairs – a rather awkward spot to project a video work. On the left of the displayed area, across the forest of the LED light bulbs, rays of light diffused from the monitors disappear into the dusk of the exhibition hall. On the right, through the floor-to-ceiling window next to the staircase that leads to the forth-floor exhibition hall, the light sheds on and creeps to the bottom step, from which the darkness veiled the entire hall retreats.<sup>9</sup> It is a half-private-half-public exhibition environment, in which the spectators project the narcissistic gaze onto the intimate and abject<sup>10</sup> female figure. Her facial expression sometimes looks empty sometimes ecstatic. As the subsequent sight of the private part appears on the screen, that unspeakable emptiness and ecstasy turn to imply pain – the pain of self-destruction and incompleteness that Rist made visible and acute to the spectators. They then realize that they ache and please as she does. Nevertheless, as people come and go, as the beam of light intrudes into the dusk, the spectators take notice to the potential voyeurs of their amplified vulnerability, agony, pleasure and satisfaction.

The narcissistic gaze *Mutaflor* carries is then in a sense a fine needle by which Rist pokes at the spectators, asking for attentions from their obtuse perceptions.

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<sup>9</sup> Gioni, Massimiliano, and Margot Norton. *Pipilotti Rist: pixel forest*. London: Phaidon Press, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> The term “abject” and its meaning is referenced from Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).

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