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The Subversion of Male Hegemony in Pipilotti Rist's Representation

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Abstract: Pipilotti Rist (1962-), who is a video artist from Switzerland, she has been worked focusing on the female body. She started her career since 1986 with a work "I'm Not a Girl who misses so much" and continues to be active today with her bright colors and pop style. Rist's works are often mentioned that they are related with the feminism. In particular, "Ever is over all" (1997) won an award at the Venice Biennale. What is the ideological source of her representations of women? Reseachers have often pointed out that Rist's work is influenced by the idea of *écriture féminine*. For example, Nancy Specter, has pointed out that Rist's work has its ideological sources in French post-structuralist feminism, such as Irigaray and Cixous at the art magazine *Parkett*. There is also a study of the work that made Rist famous, *Ever is over all*, which analyzes the symbolic system represented while using Bakhtin's Carnavalesque theory. Since Irigaray and Cixous were influenced by Bakhtin, there is no doubt that some influence of *écriture féminine* can be found in Rist's work. However, none of these studies have examined the direct similarities between Rist's expression and the *écriture féminine*. In this presentation, I will describe the characteristic expressions of Pipilotti Rist. Then, after summarizing previous research on these works, I will point out that *écriture féminine* is key to consideration when analyzing her work from a feminist perspective.

Introduction

Pipilotti Rist is a video artist from Switzerland, who made her debut in 1986 with *I'm not the girl who misses so much*. Through this work, Rist became famous for her style, which focuses significantly on the female body, including on menstruation and pregnancy, as well as for her vivid colors.

Due to the impact of this style, her works are often associated with feminism. Previous studies have indicated out that the sources of Pipilotti Rist's feminism indicate a resemblance to the ideas of *écriture féminine*, which emerged in the fields of psychoanalysis and philosophy in France in the 1970s. In this presentation, I describe *écriture féminine* and introduce Rist's works in terms of their similarities to this style.

L'Écriture féminine

In the early 1970s, second-wave feminism was flourishing worldwide. Two feminist currents were seen in France, or two main schools of thought, known as the Equality School and the Difference School. The latter was led by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and others, developed the ideology referred to as *écriture féminine*. This perspective, which centers the difference between men and women in its thinking, holding that women's pleasure cannot be expressed through the symbolic system created and dominated by men but must have an *écriture* that is unique to women, has had a major influence, particularly in literature and philosophy. *Écriture féminine* focuses on what has been suppressed by men and by

the culture and symbolic order created by men: women's sexuality, their unconscious, and that which precedes segmentation by language.

Although *écriture féminine* opposes the binary opposition between men and women, it has not been able to escape this dichotomy. Prior studies have analyzed how Cixous reverses that dichotomy. The shifting of stereotypes is characteristic of Cixous. She accepts clichéd discourses and stereotypes about women. For example, Cixous applies the clichéd trope that women are hysterical, at first, employing the stereotype as it is. Then she turns the idea of hysteria from a negative to a positive meaning. She notes that while men feel pleasure with their penis, women feel it throughout their entire bodies. Female pleasure has multiple beginnings, as it occurs simultaneously and cannot be described in a unilinear way. Cixous proposes for it an endless discourse that has several beginnings, seeking to create a new language, an *écriture féminine*. According to Cixous, women's libido "expands and multiplies itself" through the experience of the difference from the other. A woman's sexuality is a heartfelt communion with the other, and the *écriture féminine* is what describes it. Women can exist in a dispersed form due to their different sexuality and desire of the other.

Irigaray, on the other hand, gives central importance to fluids. She compares women's speech to a fluid, describing it in this way: "It is a continuum, capable of compression and expansion, viscous, conductive, and diffusive. It is both powerful and powerless because it defies calculation, and it goes on forever. It pleases and suffers to be more sensitive to pressure. It changes in volume, strength, etc., depending on temperature.... Fluids are inherently unstable. She never speaks in the same way, and what she says is shaky and indistinct. Therefore, what a woman says can only be heard (without the sense of the inherent)." Here, Irigaray contrasts the language used by men with women's own speech; men's discourse is distinct and formative, while women's is hyperactive and fluid. In my opinion, *écriture féminine* shares much with Rist's own expression. A specific characterization of these resemblances will be presented below.

Description of Rist's works

(1) Interest in fluids such as water and blood

Sip My Ocean

Rist's *Sip My Ocean* (1996) is a double-channeled work, consisting of two videos. It was shot underwater in the Red Sea. In it, Rist in dressed in a yellow bathing suit and a salmon pink dress and a man appear, and we also see swaying sea grass and coral reefs. Household items sink to the bottom of the water, suspended above the ocean floor. A kitschy coffee mug with a heart-shaped pattern, a bright yellow teapot, a plastic truck, and an old LP all sink to the sand. A school of tropical fish is shown. Bikini-clad women frolic in the surf. Mirror-reflected images are doubly projected on two adjacent museum's wall and the images develop symmetrically with the corner as the vertical axis. The back ground music was "Wicked Game" by Chris Isaak, covered by Rist. Generally, neither songs nor everyday conversation usually involves screaming. Here what is normal is what a masculine-centered symbolic world has asserted to be normal. Throughout the entire course of this film,

the screams overlap with the singing and echo them hysterically. Taking a cue from the arguments of *écriture féminine*, I think that the screams here represent the voice and expression of women.

Blutclip

Blutclip opens with a shot of blonde flowing hair. Beginning at the top of the head, the camera passes over the face, with close-up shots along the center line of the body. Immediately after a wider shot of her pubic hair, the lower abdomen of a woman wearing white clothing is shown. As the woman removes her white pants, blood can be seen on the part of the cloth that had been touching her crotch. After a moment, a foot wearing red shoes is shown, followed by a bare foot with a red nail. There other bloodstains are seen on the foot. The camera then moves up the woman's body as if crawling from her feet, in a long close-up scene, Blood is dripping from the top of her thighs and on her breasts. When the camera reaches the breasts, the entire foot, dripping with blood, appears in the center of the screen. In the background, a star is shown. The camera moves again to the foot, on which more blood is dripping than before. With the earth in the background, the buttocks, dripping with blood, are shown close-up from various angles. The camera then moves freely along other angles, including the face and the body looking down from above. Next, we see a close-up of the face of Rist, sitting with her legs outstretched, while the camera moves down to the lower part of her body. She is wearing white pants, and his crotch, covered in blood, is shown. The vocal part of the background music sings, "yeah yeah yeah," a fun, up-tempo song.

After this comes a scene of a nude woman, studded with jewels, sleeping in a forest, a scene that could be considered beautiful when viewed from the perspective of patriarchal values. Nudity is here replaced by white clothes and red shoes. The background turns from a forest scene to pitch black, and the jewelry begin to drip with blood. The viewer is led to accept the blood as something positive due to the cheerful background music.

Fluid is an important motif in these works. Irigaray characterized women's speech as fluid-like. Water and blood, which have no specific form, are elusive and flow in unexpected ways, seeming to express femininity in these works.

(2) Interest in interior body

Rist shows an interest in the interior of the body as well.

Digesting Impressions

A spherical monitor is placed inside a yellow bathing suit, giving the illusion of a bulging belly from the outside. The monitor's image can only be seen if it is approached and examined by peering through the hem of the swimsuit's legs. This device prompts the viewer to think of him or herself as peering into the inside of the clothing. The inside of the monitor shows an image of the inside of the stomach, taken by a gastroscope.

You Renew You

Rist considered the restroom a sacred place and built a 30 square centimeter altar with a crystal and an object modeled after a museum inside it. On the objects are

projected images that celebrate the transformation of food and drink into blood, tears, and visceral tissue in the body, as well as words of gratitude for the excrement. Rist showed interest in the interior of the body. In Laura Mulvey's well-known article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she notes that in Hollywood films, men actively look at women and feel sexual pleasure, while women are passively watched and appear only to fulfill men's sexual desire. This hegemony of sight is taken for granted in a male-centered society. Irigaray attempts to downgrade this hegemony. She compares male genitals, as visible and external, to female genitals, invisible and internal, stating that male pleasure can be obtained through sight, and female pleasure must be obtained through the whole body.

(3) Disturbance of boundaries in representation and exhibition methods

Rist began to create multi-channel video installations in the 1990s. These were works that consisted of two or more display devices, such as monitors and projectors, within the same work of art. "Ever is Over All" is one such work.

Ever Is Over All

On the left, a woman is seen proudly striding down a city sidewalk. She carries a tall flower of a variety that is also seen in the projection at right, depicting a field of large tropical blooms. Both videos have been slowed to a hypnotic pace, creating a sense of calm that is periodically disrupted when, in an inexplicable burst of violence, the woman forcefully swings the flower at the window of a parked car, which shatters dramatically. Meanwhile, an approaching female police officer smiles and salutes her in approval.

4th Floor to Mildness

4th Floor to Mildness was shot on the banks of the Rhine River. The film features close-ups of small bubbles on the undersides of leaves, various organisms, light leaking from insect holes in leaves, mud, algae, and other objects, projected onto a cloud-like screen suspended horizontally from the ceiling, while the viewer's perspective is from a bed, looking up from below.

Rist uses this technique in a variety of works, including *Ever Is Over all* and *Sip My Ocean*, a double-channel work, in which two images overlap in a kaleidoscopic manner in one corner, creating a new expression that transcends conventional boundaries. These works are in installations that include a place for the viewer to lie on a bed or relax on cushions while viewing them. For the viewer, the boundary between public space (museum or gallery) and private space (bedroom or living room) becomes blurred. In addition, physically, the installation seems to be enveloped by the screened images, immersing the viewer in the world within them. For example, in *4th to the floor*, viewers can lie on a bed and look up at the ceiling. Sleeping in bed is usually a private act. Performing this act in a museum, a disturbance of boundaries occurs.

Conclusion

In this research, I have outlined the *écriture féminine* and the works of Pipilotti Rist, describing the elements of the *écriture féminine* that have their correlates in the

works of Pipilotti Rist, along with specific descriptions of those works. I have identified similarities in terms of three elements: an interest in fluid, an interest in the interior of the body, and a disturbance of boundaries. Few papers in Japan have examined Pipilotti Rist from a feminist point of view. Moreover, this research approach, which examines the works of feminist art, has yet to take root in Japan. I hope that this study will help promote a better understanding of feminism in Japan. In my master's thesis, I will incorporate Judith Butler's critique of *écriture féminine* to better clarify my position on it.

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