

Pipilotti Rist: Images as quasi-objects

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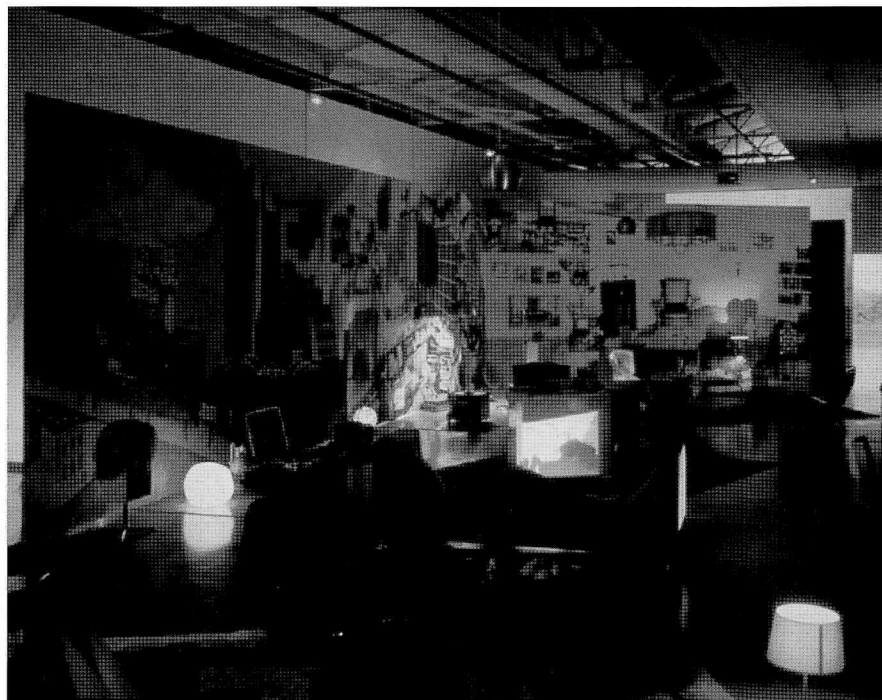
*'In practice [...] we shamelessly confuse our desires with natural entities [...]. As soon as we are on the trail of some quasi-object, it appears to us sometimes as a thing, sometimes as a narrative, sometimes as a social bond, without ever being reduced to a mere being.'*¹

'I glorify hysterical actions. They are powerful gestures, a form of resistance when one is in a weak position.'² This statement by Pipilotti Rist made in the context of an interview for the journal *Afterimage* manifests how much the representation of hysteria has been for her the privileged (yet manifold) means to stage and question femininity. Hysteria is already at play in her early single-channel videotapes such as *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), which records Rist dancing and signing in front of the camera in a fast-forward off-focus mode so as to introduce the body into a series of somatic convulsions. Two years later, in *(Absolutions): Pipilotti's Mistakes* (1988), images of her face are repetitively frozen (by the use of the pause mechanism) into organic symptoms recalling Charcot's established visual vocabulary of the hysterical woman; these opening sequences will be followed by a proliferation of scenes where we see Rist repetitively fainting and attempting to move forward but whose actions are electronically cut and replayed without resolution. Hysteria also structures the female performances of her video installations. One thinks immediately of *Sip My Ocean* (1996), a video projection of under water scenes staging Rist swimming in paradisaical

waters and transforming herself into a grotesque figure – not only visually but even more so aurally, as she sings Chris Isaac's love ballad *Wicked Game* to the point where she not so much shouts than screams the lyrics of the song. In *Ever Is Over All* (1997), a woman strolls innocently on the sidewalk clothed with a light blue dress and shiny red shoes, but as she walks she smashes car windows with the steel flower she holds tightly in her hands.

Hysteria, as Elizabeth Bronfen has shown, manifests itself through theatrical bodily attacks standing in for a traumatic distress that remains impenetrable and unrepresentable.³ It is the hysteric's inability to represent the origin of her trauma that pushes the body into spells and convulsions. Corporeal disorders disclose her deep sense of loss, fallibility and deprivation, her endless search for plenitude. If hysteria can be seen as a figure of resistance – as it has been by contemporary thinkers Catherine Clément and Slavoj Žižek⁴ – it is because of the hysteric's engagement in versatile and potentially infinite self-representations which both sustain and protest against paternal authority, simultaneously engaging in femininity (to fulfil the desire of the Other) and questioning femininity (to test what the Other wants from

Left: Pipilotti Rist *Himalaya Goldsteins Stube/ Himalaya Goldstein's Living Room* 1999
 videoinstallation at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1999
 Photo: Marc Damage

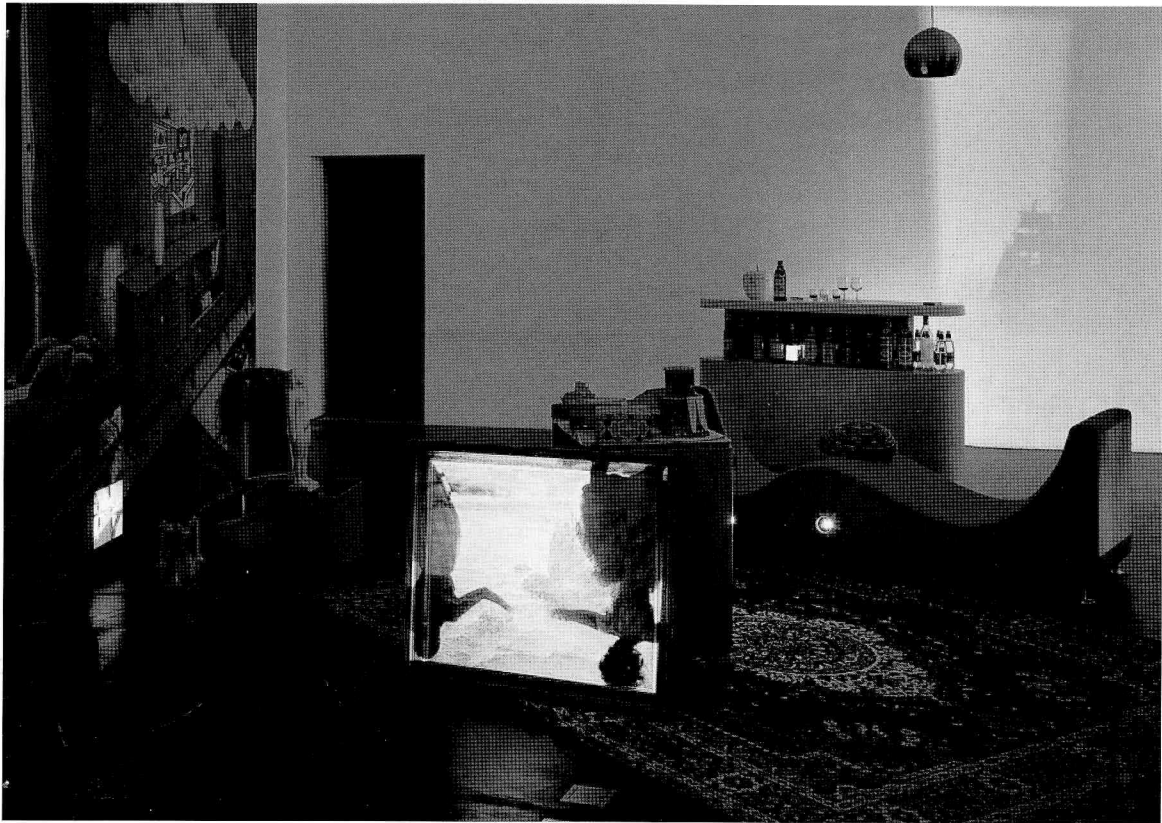


her).⁵ This is why hysteria is often referred to as a malady of representation. Hence, in Rist's work, disruptions occur not only at the level of the represented body but also in the body of the electronic image – through formal distortions of the image, the constant flux of colours and forms metamorphosing one into the other, and the meeting of screens so as to integrate squinting in the viewer's vision. Following the definition of hysteria as a simultaneous adherence to and protestation against paternal desire, the hysterical may be said to be even more so at play in the floor-inlaid screen installations *Selfless in the Bath of Lava* (1994) and *Mutaflor* (1996). Here, the nude Rist attempts to at once seduce and threaten the spectator either into the flames of hell (*Selfless*) or through the metamorphosis of her mouth into anus (*Mutaflor*), turning excessive femininity into a menace so as ultimately to hystericise the viewer.

I would suggest, however, that the critical strength of Pipilotti Rist's work lies not so much in the representation of hysteria than in the hystericisation of representation. To be more precise, redefinitions of femininity (of subjectivity *tout court*) occur because of the interconnection of different aesthetic strategies that allows the image to become a site of enjoyment *and* fallibility, empowerment *and* dependency. The setting-off of visual pleasure, the exploration of image making as a seductive threat, the proliferation of the image

outside the TV box: all these aesthetic strategies work together to seduce the viewer into an awareness of non-plenitude *despite* pleasure. My contention is that Rist's installations propel the image out of the TV box – convulsing floors, walls and furniture as it were – so as to materialise pleasurable fantasies in space. In so doing, they disclose not only how images in contemporary visual culture have become the necessary screens by which subjectivity (memory, identity, sexuality and agency) is constituted, but also how they need matter and bodies to exist. This reliance on matter is crucial for, even though her work embraces contemporary definitions of subjectivity based on fluidity, enjoyment and performativity, it attempts to convey a sense of limit to this articulation. To clarify this point, I will be focusing here on three installations: *Himalaya Goldstein's Living Room* and *Extremities (Smooth, Smooth)* both from 1999, and *The Room* initially produced in 1994.

In a site-specific installation made for her 1999 solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich, Pipilotti Rist designed a one-room installation entitled *Himalaya Goldstein's Living Room*, which consisted in a recreation of an open space apartment within the museum. The domestic environment organised itself through the display of household furnishings from and on which were projected different electronic images. Immersed in a landscape of soft atmospheric music,



Pipilotti Rist *Himalaya Goldstein's Stube/Himalaya Goldstein's Living Room* 1999 videoinstallation Kunsthalle Zürich, 1999
 Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich and Luhring Augustine, New York Photo: Alexander Troehler.

the spectator was asked to circulate, stand and sit down to look at the images. In this interior, any object – a pile of books, a frame, a sofa, a bottle, a table, a wall – could become a projecting surface for electronic images. The projections were intimate not only in their physicality and location – small in scale and to be looked at in proximity – but also in their content, either with a meditative (images of fire and water in slow motion) or dream-like quality (a naked woman walking on a desolated street; upside down images of two women walking off a cliff projected on a Romantic landscape painting). This intimacy propelled the images on the side of fantasy, defining them as psychic images of desire, fears, hopes, and remembrance of things past. The installation thus constructed the household as a hybrid, material *and* immaterial world in which objects are not merely objects but quasi-objects whose signification resides in their double function as furniture and media receiving and transmitting the psychological, emotional and affective states of inhabitants, visitors and passers-by. Where does the object cease and the subject begin? The installation

insisted on the impossibility of separating the realms of objecthood and subjectivity. Rist explains in the following terms the relationship she wished to establish in *Himalaya Goldstein's Living Room*:

I had different reasons to make this apartment. One is that I always treat the museum as an extension of an apartment. I also think that the museum is a public space and that people should really squat it or possess it if they go there. [...] objects we are surrounded with, which are around us, have memories. They are media in themselves that tell us stories. Everybody tries to make a combination of hundreds of imaginary living rooms, so with *Himalaya Goldstein's Living Room* I made a kind of a collective living room. Even if there were no TV sets, the fact that we concentrate so much on these boxes was in the air. And I wanted to get the stories out of the box and just spread them around. Today, the mediated picture is very present but it's still caught in a box, it's not really melting with the physical environment. That interested me technically – how it could melt: moving pictures with three-dimensional life. So there could be memories and longing for the people



Pipilotti Rist *Himalaya Goldsteins Stube/Himalaya Goldsteins Living Room* 1999 videoinstallation Kunsthalle Zürich, 1999
 Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich and Luhring Augustine, New York. Photo: Alexander Troehler

who lived in this living room. Content wise, it was a kind of poem, an after hour poem. The living room is the room where you try to sort out every picture you have seen the whole day. You catch yourself back in these protected spaces. Museum spaces, like living rooms, are protected spaces in the city. Because a sense of security exists in these types of spaces, they guide you to a place where there is silence.⁶

This statement is important for it emphasises not only Rist's attempt to expel, extend and proliferate images "out of the [TV] box" into the sanctuary environment of the home or the museum, but also the phantasmatic dimension of her images. I borrow my definition of the phantasmatic from Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis for whom fantasy n.paradoxa Vol.7

is the "setting" of desire – not the fulfilment of desire but, as Slavoj Žižek has also shown, desire as such, in so far as desire is understood to be a process in need of continuous reconstruction: as a 'screen for the projection of desire', it doesn't satisfy desire but 'coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such, with its circular movement.'⁷ The repeated use of slow motion, the reiterated exploitation of hypnotic musical scores, the recurrence of erotic images, the use of household furnishings as projecting screens: all those formal investigations so characteristic of Rist's work stage the image as a staging of desire – as fantasy. Active as much in conscious day-dreaming than in *a posteriori* re-workings of dreams (in our attempts to put order onto our dream material once we are awake) and unconscious



Above: Pipilotti Rist *Das Zimmer / The Room* 1994
 videoinstallation at Kunstmuseum St Gallen, 1994
 Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich and
 Luhring Augustine, New York Photo: Stefan Rohner.

imaginary constructions involving primal fantasies such as seduction or castration, fantasy is an imaginary reality that cannot be merely opposed to reality.⁸ The point then is not to get rid of fantasies as though they were mere illusions or misrecognitions of reality. They both posture as real and give coherence and continuity to the real.⁹

So the question emerges: are Rist's installations to be seen merely as a proliferation of fantasy? I would insist that they do indeed articulate such a proliferation but that this proliferation doesn't deploy itself without resistance, without matter, without a sense of limit, one that is important to delineate if we are to start to understand the complexity of this work. For Žižek, the subject needs to "*traverse*" fantasies so as not to close the gap of non-plenitude – a form of unconscious acceptance of the impossibility of fully satisfying desire.¹⁰ In Rist's words, as stated in the same *Afterimage* interview, the need is to situate the viewing subject as an irresponsible child whose "*critical position*" lies in its ability '**not to reduce [itself] to limited fantasies, not to simply follow rules, not to be afraid of being ridiculous.**'¹¹ Her reiterated localisation of the subject – as much the woman in the image than the spectator facing it – *in* fantasy environments must be seen as a continuous effort to counter this reduction. Such an approach implies a major reassessment of the anti-ocular strategies that have been so important in feminist art and theory since the 1970s and 1980s following Laura Mulvey's attack on '**visual pleasure**' set out to dismantle the logic of the spectacle of woman-as-object-of-the-look. Rist's is an attempt to be critical of the visual through the spectatorial pleasures of popular music

and television. The traversing of fantasy will be deployed here only insofar as projections reach the viewer whose perceptibility has been affected by television culture. This is to say that embodiment is crucial to Rist's work: her installations and single-channel tapes stage seduction, pleasure, displeasure, erotics and sexuality so as to address the turn-of-the-millennium viewing subject whose perception materialises through the integration of sensual visual pleasures provided by popular culture. As Linda Williams has convincingly argued, this move is a necessary one if we are to cease opposing '**the sensual pleasures of vision and the abstraction of critical thought – as if thought could never take place in and through a body.**'¹²

By removing the video images from the TV box and into the half-public (doubly protected) space of the house-in-the-museum, Rist reveals, confirms and accepts the fantasy status of the image. In this regard, one should not underestimate the centrality of her 1994 video installation, *The Room*, that has been re-presented many times in slightly modified versions. This work, very simply composed of an oversized lamp and sofa on which the viewer is asked to sit and enjoy different videotapes shown on a small TV monitor, defines the contemporary viewing subject as a child, an Alice in Wonderland, who may well be absorbed by the fantasy world of television but who also easily accepts to play the game – to sit in the oversized sofa and become a spectacle for others – and situate him or herself in a fantasy environment which is not delimited by the TV box (and moves beyond that contained by Lewis Carroll's book's narrative). In this exteriorisation and potential unboundedness of the image – one that her installations incessantly articulate – Rist elaborates the proliferation of the image in space to both spatialise psychic reality and situate the viewer in the realm of pleasurable fantasies. Such a spatialisation discloses fantasy not only as an inherent feature of daily contemporary subjectivity, but also as an unresolvable tension between fiction and reality. To be more precise, images are staged as psychic realities which are part of the environment. Such a staging blurs the distinction between the object and the subject, the imaginary and the symbolic, the immateriality of the image and the materiality of the environment. The question thus remains: how does this spatialisation support Rist's quest '**not to reduce ourselves to limited fantasies**'? How does the exteriorisation '**out of the box**' allow one to *traverse* fantasy? I would say, briefly: by its necessary materialisation.



Pipilotti Rist *Extremitäten (weich, weich)/ Extremities (Smooth,Smooth)* 1999 videoinstallation at Kunsthalle Zürich, 1999
 Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich and Luhring Augustine, New York Photo: Alexander Troehler

In *Himalaya Goldstein's Living Room*, materialisation comes about through the household furniture displayed in the domestic and sanctuary-like environment of the museum. Because of the half-private nature and meditative quality of this environment, any household object may function as a receptacle or projecting screen for fantasies which are themselves projective screens of desire. Mental (phantasmatic) images are not only aroused by the domestic staging of the installation, they also become visible – emerge, materialise, take form and unfold – through those surfaces. Another installation from 1999 *Extremities (Smooth, Smooth)* pushes the process of materialisation even further, as it spatialises images of a polymorphous, fragmented and weightless body. The viewer is immersed in an immaterial world, a projection – on the walls, on the floor and on the spectators' body – of galaxy-like images composed of body parts floating in space. An ear, an eye, a penis, a breast, a foot, a hand. One important characteristic of the installation is its fluidity, one that lies mostly in the smooth circulation

of the globule-like forms, which float in space as they fold, enter in and depart from the dark black space of the background, dancing without the imperative of gravity. The overall fluidity is enhanced by a soft enchanting feminine voice murmuring short statements to the viewer so as to hypnotise him or her into similar globular states ('**you are minuscule, you are pollen, you are nothing, tu es rien de rien**', '**I am different from you**', '**you are different from me**' and '**you are anaesthesia**'). In her description of the piece, Rist stipulates that the rendering of corporeal lightness is similar to that experienced in self-suggestive breathing techniques in which the practitioner, in a state of '**half-awake dream**', concentrates on different body parts so as to relax and '**let [the body] go in an endless stream**'.¹³ But the fluidity also comes from the *mise en visibilité* of the projected forms – the fact that the forms acquire visibility through a close-up view of the camera and by the contact between floating body parts and *any* materiality, *any* interchangeable body present in the room.

Yet – and this best indicates what I mean by the traversing of fantasy through materialisation – the autonomous body organs float, fold, turn, stretch and slide, either in complete isolation from one another or in a state of coexistence without any form of dialogue between the body parts. In 1968, Marshall McLuhan postulated that the history of the development of informational technologies corresponded to a continuous exteriorisation of human organs.¹⁴ This meant that every newly invented technology absorbed corresponding organs (the foot for the wheel, the ear for the telephone). Such an absorption was seen as the result of numbing defence mechanisms. Grounding his theory on Hans Selye’s research on the immune system, McLuhan postulated that each technological invention was experienced as a form of aggression to the human organism, one that was resolved by the organism’s numbing (through biological anaesthesia or ‘self-amputation’) of the threatened organs. The problem lay not so much in anaesthesia but in our inability to see the continuous exteriorisation of our body set out by this defence mechanism. The myth of Narcissus, says McLuhan, shows us **‘the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves’**.¹⁵ In the era of the computer, this narcissistic blindness represented a major threat, for it was now the whole central nervous system that was about to be fully exteriorised and absorbed by communication technologies. *Extremities (Smooth, Smooth)* has to be read in reference to McLuhan’s theories. Not only does it articulate the phantasmatic *mise en scène* of exteriorised organs – their autonomy, isolation and potential commodification – but also the anaesthesia of the viewing subject. Body parts transcend the laws of gravity and death, they circulate freely in space without ageing, they have ceased to depend on mortality to engage in eternal life. I contend, however, that in this remaking of the Faustian myth a form of intersubjectivity does occur, one that depends totally on the female voice directed towards the viewer and on the circulation of images into the viewer’s space. In other words, when the images circulate in the room, co-dependency takes place. For the organs may be floating smoothly in space, they are shown to exist in their materialisation. Reciprocally, the viewer depends on the material surfaces – the architecture of the museum (the walls, the floor), the viewer’s body and the lived here and now – to see its own exteriorisation and dematerialization.

As is the case for most of her installations, Rist’s video projections articulate the co-dependency of the immaterial

and the material, of fluidity and gravity in relation to body images and physical bodies in space. Her installations stage co-dependency: they are not so much about objects, space, images or fantasies of femininity than fantasies-in-space to be interpreted by the spectator. Pleasurable fantasies exist outside the TV box only insofar as they are materialised in space. They do not pre-exist but exist in the materialisation that make them visible and intersubjective. Moreover, as they materialise in the museum, as they form themselves through the projecting surfaces of objects, bodies and architecture, the fantasies surface an alterity which reopens them to other configurations (in shape, texture and colour). In *Extremities (Smooth, Smooth)*, the phantasmatic body parts are anonymous polymorphous forms floating, without anchor, in a boundless field. This means that they are condemned to eternity or, to paraphrase Žižek, ‘*enjoined to enjoy*’¹⁶ their fluidity. For a short while, however, as they become visible to the viewer and meet the viewer’s body, coming out from and just before returning back to chaos, they start to depend again on gravity, space, objecthood, and physical corporeality. What is this proliferation of images outside the TV box if it is not a form of hysterical spatialisation? As a malady of representation, the proliferation both confirms and contests the fantasy, compels us to enjoy the loss and to seek the return of gravity. This is what I would call not a rejection but a *traversing* of fantasy, one that comes about through a staged material dependency.

In activating the hysterical spatialisation out of the TV box and out of the hidden realm of the mind, Rist’s installations reveal how contemporary subjectivity constitutes itself through images – screens of screens of desire – which may well stage a desire for fluid and floating identities but which are nevertheless continuously limited, traversed as it were, by materiality, corporeality, gravity and the body of the other. In this, the installations must be seen as an attempt to re-imagine what Žižek has called the post-1960s ‘*decline of Oedipus*’, a decline that corresponds to the present weakening of paternal authority and the correlative emergence of the performative subject—the passage from a Freudian subject in conflict between the ‘*prohibited*’ and the ‘*allowed*’ to a polymorphous subject in cleavage between the ‘*possible*’ and the ‘*non-possible*’.¹⁷ If indeed the imperative today is to perform (to initiate and be responsible for) one’s identity instead of being disciplined to do so, if fluidity and flexibility predominate over fixity and persistency, Rist’s video production is at once a staging,

an embracing and a critique of this imperative. For, as Žižek has convincingly argued, the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century ‘**prohibition to enjoy**’ has shifted into the ‘**injunction to enjoy**’ – i.e. to choose one’s life in all its modalities, to perform our true entrepreneurial self, to set about the constant refashioning of our identity, to adopt the plasticity of late-capitalist remodelling, to activate our power of decision even though the absence of a symbolic law means that ‘**the situation is radically “indecidable”**’¹⁸ Rist’s materialisation of fantasy must be seen as an attempt to go with enjoyment insofar as one can accept non-plenitude – that is, to hysterically limit the fantasy of the unlimited recreation of the self. Her installations are reiterated efforts not to close the gap between dream and reality, leaving ‘**both dream and reality free to criticise each other**’.¹⁹

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Notes

1. Bruno Latour (trans. by Catherine Porter) *We Have Never Been Modern* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993 pp.88-89.
2. Christine Ross ‘Fantasy and Distraction: An interview with Pipilotti Rist’ *Afterimage*, Vol. 28, No. 3 November/December 2000 pp.7-9.
3. Elizabeth Bronfen *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998 pp.34-40. See also Bronfen’s analysis of Rist’s (*Absolutions*): *Pipilotti’s Mistakes* in ‘Focus On: (Entlastungen) Pipilotti Rist’s *Fehler*’ [unpublished article], 2000.
4. See Catherine Clément *L’opéra ou la défaite de la femme* Paris : Grasset, 1979 and Slavoj Žižek *The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology* London: Verso, 1999.
5. The hysteric opts for *jouissance* ‘**to confront the enigma of What am I for the Other? What does the Other want (from me)?**’ Žižek *The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology* p.249.
6. Rist quoted in Ross (2000) op.cit. 4
7. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis ‘Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality’ in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds) *Formations of Fantasy* London: Methuen, 1986 p.26 and Žižek *Looking awry: An introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular n.paradoxa* Vol.7

Culture Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991 pp.6-8.

8. See Elizabeth Cowie ‘Fantasia’ in *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 p.130.
9. See Judith Butler ‘The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess’ *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* Vol.2. No.2. 1990 p.108.
10. Žižek *The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology* p p.51-57.
11. Rist quoted in Ross (2000) op.cit. 4
12. Linda Williams ‘Discipline and Distraction: Psycho, Visual Culture, and Postmodern Cinema’ in John Carlos Rowe (ed.) ‘*Culture and the Problem of the Disciplines*’ New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. p.91.
13. Rist quoted in Ross (2000) op.cit. 4
14. Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964.
15. *Ibid.* p.41.
16. Žižek *The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology* p..345.
17. For a sociological examination of identity insecurity in contemporary (post-60s) subjectivity, see Alain Ehrenberg *La fatigue d’être soi: dépression et société*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1998.
18. Žižek *The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology* p.337.
19. Susan Buck-Morss *Dreamworld and Catastrophe : The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000. p.65. The statement refers to the utopian projects of the Soviet avant-garde of early 20th century.