

Examine the stance of Luce Irigaray's sexual difference alongside the artwork of Pipilotti Rist. How do the two compliment each other in offering us a positive representation of the female sex?

The dominance of the male sex and the symbolic presence of the phallus has undeniably ruled Western culture's historical understanding and perception of sexuality. This subject has remained at the forefront of feminist discourse, and the question of sexual difference has been approached by many theorists with a multitude of perspectives. However, for the purpose of this essay, I shall be focusing solely on Belgian-born French feminist theorist, Luce Irigaray, and her notion of sexual difference; alongside the visual work of Swiss-born video artist, Pipilotti Rist.

According to Irigaray: 'sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age.'¹ In her prolific body of work, Irigaray addresses how the female sex has been misrepresented throughout the canon of Western philosophical thought and culture. She argues that the reason for this lies in the failings of historical sexual difference, which has *only* recognised the male phallus and viewed the female sex as no more than the 'other,' which is 'lacking' in visible sexual organs. The female sex has not been viewed in its own significance, but only as an inferior atrophy, 'a sort of inverted or negative alter ego'² of the male phallus. Irigaray calls to abolish this phallogocentric logic and reinterpret sexual difference with the invention of new language and forms; that allow for the female sex to be acknowledged in its complexities and recognised as an equal.

Although there is no evidence to indicate that Irigaray's writing *directly* influenced Rist's work, Rist has confirmed that feminist thinking has been a heavy influence on her practice. When Rist began making experimental video, audio and installation work in 1986; Irigaray was well established as a prominent and popular figure in the realm of feminist thought. Therefore, I shall argue that we can view the way in which Rist visualises the female body and the female erogenous zones through an Irigarayan lens, to establish a positive representation of the female sex and a new rhetoric for female sexuality; that exists outside the restraints of phallogocentrism.

I shall begin by analysing Rist's 1992 video work, titled *Pickelporno* (fig.1) The short film, spanning twelve minutes, is a hetero-erotic account featuring a man and a woman and unfolds as a phantasmagoric sequence of sexual intercourse between the pair. The video is made in Rist's recognisable style: the two bodies overlapping and merging with each other against the 'hypnotic landscape'³ of flowers, fruit, coral, sea and orifices including the eyes and mouth; all recurring visual symbols that can be spotted across Rist's body of work. The writer and curator, Laura Castagnini, describes the female character in *Pickelporno* as being, 'the active agent of her own sexuality and pleasure, giving and sharing this with the male in a significantly different approach to that of the usual tactics of pornography, which exploit

¹ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 5.

² Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987), 22.

³ Laura Castagnini, "The 'Nature' of Sex: Parafeminist Parody in Pipilotti Rist's *Pickelporno*," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 15, no. 2 (July 2015): 165.

the objectification, submission, and domination of the female.’⁴ The film appears as a rejection, or a subversion, of this mainstream pornographic tradition that has inundated our visual culture. In *Pickelporno* we never seen the physical act, unlike mainstream pornography which focuses solely on the sight of penetration and a distanced view of the sexual act. Instead, it is implied heavily in *Pickelporno* through visual puns such as the penetration of fingers into fruit, a penis entering underwater imagery of sea coral and the gradual increase in speed and movement that concludes with visuals of a volcanic eruption. Overall, *Pickelporno* is a much more sensorially focused account of the sexual act, documenting instead; a porn film from the inside.

Rist explains that her theory when making *Pickelporno* centred around the idea that women, ‘may be more interested in knowing what the other is feeling and thinking than seeing the action as a third person from the outside.’⁵ The film focuses heavily on physical touch and sensual feeling as opposed to sight: the camera traces the bodies of the characters as they stroke and caress each other. This decision of Rist's mirrors the ideology of Irigaray. In her book *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray explains that, ‘woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking.’⁶ She goes on to ascribe feeling and touch to the female sex, and sight to the male sex. She argues that this is because seeing is inherently male, represented by the sight of the erect penis. Whereas, feeling is inherently female, represented by the feeling of the labia lips which are always in contact and ‘caress each other.’⁷ The discourse of the lips is a major feature in Irigaray’s writing and one that I shall discuss in more detail later on.

Irigaray also describes women as being ‘autoerotic,’ due to the fact they are always simultaneously touching and being touched: ‘woman touches herself all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact.’⁸ This connection between touch, feeling and the female sex is something that is at the centre of *Pickelporno*, and in fact encompasses the majority of Rist’s films. Furthermore, Rist’s decision-making in how the audience interact with her works emphasises an attention to tactility. Rist has become known for her large scale immersive installations: typically Rist’s work would be experienced in a carpeted dark space, often with beds or beanbags that the audience are encouraged to lie on while they watch the projected film (fig.2). All Rist’s films have a vividly sensorial overtone and many trace over the body in the same delicate way that the camera travels over the body in *Pickelporno*: highlighting a desire for physical contact and positioning the sensation of touch within the female erotic.

A celebration of the female erotic is common amongst Rist’s body of work: as is the celebration of the female genitalia itself. In *Pickelporno*, the female body is naked and the female actor’s genitalia is left exposed throughout the

⁴ Juliana Engberg, “A Bee Flew In The Window,” in *Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest*, (London ; New York, NY: Phaidon Press, in association with New Museum, 2016), 22.

⁵ Massimiliano Gioni, “Body Electric: An Interview With Pipilotti Rist,” in *Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest*, 64-65.

⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1985), 26.

⁷ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid*, 24.

length of the short film, while the male actor's genitals are covered with 'green grass panties, an updated version of the fig leaf.'⁹ This decision of Rist's can be read as a retaliation against the lack of visible female genitalia from visual culture. While we are familiar with seeing the male phallus; the female genitalia is rarely seen and instead it is typically hidden from view or just 'simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack,'¹⁰ as stated by Irigaray.

Pickelporno also features a 'humorous homage to the female body'¹¹ in historical visual culture, 'when the camera focuses on a little globe that has settled into the female actor's vagina, reminding us of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* 1866' (fig.3). *L'Origine* being the famous French Realist painting depicting a female model sprawled on a bed with her legs open to reveal a close up of her genitalia; the framing of the painting is cropped so we cannot see her face or any other part of her body. The painting famously caused a mass of controversy and was not shown publicly until the 1980s; *L'Origine* still continues to be cause debate now about who should see it and where it can be shown. An example of how our culture reacts in fear and shock when confronted with the female sex, even in the present day.

Moreover, Rist's 2007 work titled *Gina's Mobile* (fig.4) faces this issue head on. The installation work features close-up imagery of the vulva, projected onto rounded, oval shapes mimicking the shape of the vagina; the bright lighting and contrast in the images is so stark that we can almost see the follicles on the skin. However, the images we see are so zoomed-in that one may not recognise it to be female genitalia straight away: it's particularly ambiguous as the camera traces over glistening pink flesh and hair, in the same soft and hypnotic way that we see the bodies in *Pickelporno*. I have noticed while conducting my research into the work of Rist that *Gina's Mobile* is seldom featured in books dedicated to the artist's work and there is little coverage of the artwork online too. Perhaps this is another indication of just how much our society and culture still struggle to truly accepted the female sex in the same way they have accepted the phallus. Rist is rejecting the societal construct that we must not discuss or visually represent the female sex and is instead presenting it to us through her trademark style of playfulness and beauty.

Rist's uncensored and plentiful shots of the female genitalia throughout her work as well as and her visual pun in *Pickelporno*, highlight how Rist and Irigaray's thinking aligns in their desire for a positive and inclusive representation of the female sex within visual culture and society at large. Again in *This Sex Which Is Not One*; Irigaray criticises the lacking visual presence of the female sex, declaring that Western culture is predominantly 'foreign to female eroticism.'¹² She continues to argue that this is partly due to the absence of the female sexual organs from the discourse of sexuality; particularly when discussed within Western philosophy and psychoanalysis. Irigaray heavily criticises Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud for their minimal discussion of the female sex in their extensive bodies of work: as well as the way in which the female genitalia is only referred to as the less developed 'other' of the phallus in historical psychoanalysis.

⁹ Engberg, "A Bee Flew In The Window," 22.

¹⁰ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 26.

¹¹ Engberg, "A Bee Flew In The Window," 22.

¹² Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 26.

Reflecting on the writing of Freud, Irigaray's highlights how the female sexual organs have been perceived only as 'non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself'¹³ as well as only being recognised within the rhetoric of the male sex: 'the feminine must be deciphered as inter-dict: within the signs... of an intentionally phallic currency.'¹⁴

In his vague and very short essay on "Femininity", Freud refers to the 'inferior clitoris'¹⁵ and describes the clitoris simply as a 'little penis.'¹⁶ He also speaks of the female sex as lacking sexual organs, describing them as possessing 'the horror of nothing to see.'¹⁷ This arguably contributed to Western society's fear of female genitalia and a belief that women are *not* sexual. This in turn, leads to women feeling ashamed of their sexuality as it is embedded into our culture that those with female genitalia must keep it hidden as it should not really exist. The exception of this, as Irigaray declares, is in the act of sexual intercourse when the woman is no more than 'the receptacle that passively receives his product'¹⁸. Freud denies sexual difference as he claims there is nothing that women have that men do not: 'unless we can find something that is specific for girls and is not present or not in the same way present in boys.'¹⁹ The belief within psychoanalysis, headed by Freud, is that women fall victim to 'envy of the penis';²⁰ and as a result of this discovery that the female sex *lack* a penis — 'they are debased in value for girls just as they are for boys and later perhaps for men.'²¹

Irigaray states how it is simply not true that the female sexual organs represent nothing to see, in comparison to their male counterparts. Instead, the female sex is in fact more complex as the female has multiple sexual organs compared to male's singular phallus: 'so woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones.'²² Being multiplicitous, the female sex resists simplistic definition: resulting in the association with female sexuality to instability and incomprehensibility. For example, the statement that female sex has left (men) knocking their heads against 'the riddle of the nature of femininity,'²³ as declared by Freud.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Irigaray uses the self-touching of the labia lips to emphasis the duality and plurality of the female sex. The female sex cannot be defined phallogcentrically as they do not fit with the 'isomorphic standard of the phallus,'²⁴ as explained by Margrit Shildrick in her book *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*. The labia is formed of two lips — but they cannot be defined simply as two, either, because they are in unity. In her lyrical essay, "When Our Lips Speak Together," Irigaray calls for a new rhetoric for the female sex, founded on this concept of fluidity and duality, that exists outside of phallogcentric definitive ideals: 'let's leave one to them: their oneness, with its

¹³ Ibid, 23.

¹⁴ Irigaray, *Speculum*, 22.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. James Strachey (London: W.W. Norton, 1995), 158.

¹⁶ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 23.

¹⁷ Ibid, 26.

¹⁸ Irigaray, *Speculum*, 18.

¹⁹ Freud, "Femininity," 154.

²⁰ Ibid, 155.

²¹ Freud, "Femininity," 157.

²² Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 28.

²³ Freud, "Femininity," 140.

²⁴ Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 176.

prerogatives, its domination, its solipsism.’²⁵ Irigaray calls for the female sex to break free from the labels, examples and definitions set down by the male sex and the patriarchy and instead, enjoy our sexuality for ourselves: ‘for a long time now they have appreciated what our suppleness is worth for their own embraces and impressions. Why not enjoy it ourselves? Rather than letting ourselves be subjected to their branding.’²⁶ In “When Our Lips Speak Together,” Irigaray refers to the female sex as: ‘luminous’²⁷ intermingled,²⁸ as having ‘so many dimensions,’²⁹ and being ‘moving bodies’ that are ‘without limits or borders.’³⁰ These are all descriptions that could be attributed to the female bodies that we see in Rist’s 1996 work *Sip My Ocean*.

Sip My Ocean (fig.5 & 6) is presented in the same phantasmagoric, kaleidoscopic way as *Pickelporno* and consists almost entirely of underwater footage which shows female bodies submerged in the ocean. *Sip My Ocean* marks the first of Rist’s works that explored the use of the exhibition space to create mirroring and doubling effects.³¹ The work is a mirrored projection into the corner of a room: meaning the two screens are dual, and reflect each other. Therefore, the imagery of the female bodies we see are constantly merging, dividing and doubling. We are never seeing just one; but a plurality. One of the women in the film is Rist herself; as the viewer we feel as if we are submerged with her, ‘swimming behind her and through her legs, as she divides like a cell and doubles herself, her two halves drifting apart then rejoining to form the prior self.’³² The female bodies in *Sip My Ocean* seem to be visualising the duality and fluidity that Irigaray attributes to the female sex in her writing. The bodies of Rist’s work as not singular or definable, it is hard to follow the bodies as they morphing in and out of each other; separating and joining back together. They reflect a complexity of the female sex as well as a plurality. As Shildrick summarises in *Leaky Bodies*, the body that Irigaray gestures toward is: ‘determined by no one form. It is always plural, fluid and unbounded;’³³ which is also, a perfect description of the submerged underwater bodies of *Sip My Ocean*.

Moreover, as the film continues, we are show close-up shots of the breasts and the groin. All the women are wearing bikinis and look playfully at the camera, one sticks out her tongue and another eats an apple. A theme that runs through all of Rist’s work is a merging of eroticism and coquettishness with aggression and hysteria — which plays with the traditional role of the female and of femininity. This can be found in *Sip My Ocean* through the contrast of the voyeuristic frames of close up shots of the female body against the soundtrack of Rist singing a cover of Chris Isaac’s *Wicked Games*. The beauty of the imagery is interrupted as the sweet tone of Rist’s singing is overruled by her voice again, but instead she sings in a harsh, high-pitched, lingering, violent scream: but still singing the same lyrics of: ‘I don’t

²⁵ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 207.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 215.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 207.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 213.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 213.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 217.

³¹ Engberg, “A Bee Flew In The Window,” 25.

³² Bice Curiger, “The Plasmatic Gesamtkunstwerk,” in *Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest*, 77.

³³ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*, 178.

want to fall in love,' while we can hear a male voice in the background.³⁴ Perhaps, this is a hint towards Rist's own rejection of the standards and conditions put upon by the male sex and in sync with Irigaray's call to stop living by the desires of men and break free of the borders and limitations expected of us: she writes in *Our Lips* that they (men): 'have wrapped us for so long in their desires, we have adorned ourselves so often to please them, that we have come to forget the feel of our own skin.'³⁵

Both Rist and Irigaray play with the representation of vaginal iconography. While the labia lips are a prominent and recurrent feature in Irigaray's writing: it is important to note that when originally written in French, the word for lips and labia lips is the same: les lèvres. This connection between the lips of the mouth; being a symbol for femininity, and the lips of the labia: a symbol of female sexuality is an overarching theme of Irigaray's work and also in Rist's films. Rist uses vaginal iconography repeatedly in her work, juxtaposed images of lips, mouths and flowers are prominent and feature in almost all of her films. The flower is an acknowledged symbol of the female; due to its visual similarity to the vulva as well as its beauty and fragility. However, this association becomes limiting as: 'these symbols are essentialising to the feminine as a whole, reducing the feminine to one symbol instead of many.'³⁶ In Rist 1997 work *Ever Is Over All* (fig.7), the artist breaks down this historic feminine imagery by subverting the symbolic system while continuing to play with the contrasts of coquettish and aggression. In the work, we are presented with two slow motion projections onto adjacent walls: on one wall, we see a camera exploring a field of red flowers, while the other shows a beautiful woman playfully swings her arms whilst walking down a street, holding a long-stemmed flower. As the woman passes parked cars, she begins to smash the glass windshields with her flower, while continuing to smile and laugh. In this act of vandalism performed by the woman with her flower — the traditional symbolic order is broken down and Rist instead, merges the feminine symbol with the masculine: the penetration of the flower's stem through the car windows symbolising the phallus. Rist is deconstructing the symbolic structure of the female sex *and* the male sex through her fusing of vaginal and phallic iconography. Consequently, Rist has undertaken Irigaray's goal of reinterpreting the symbolism sexual difference; as well as emphasising an Irigarayan multiplicity and complexity of female sex.

To conclude, although evidently there is still a lot of progress to be made in the way of reinterpreting Western culture's perception of sexual difference, the visual work of Rist and the writing of Irigaray compliment each other greatly in order to create an innovative language which allows the female sex to exist outside the isomorphic dialect of the phallus, as an equally important difference. While Irigaray underlines what must be done, Rist actions these wishes and translates Irigaray's writing into visual realities. Both are promoting positive female eroticism, challenging the taboo of female genitalia, deconstructing symbols of the female sex and calling for a female sexuality that is fluid, plural and

³⁴ Joan Jonas, "Flying Carpets," in *Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest*, 146.

³⁵ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 218.

³⁶ Elizabeth Mangini, "Pipilotti's Pickle: Making Meaning from the Feminine Position," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 23, no. 2 (May 2001), 2.

unashamed of it's own pleasure — successfully aiding a discourse towards a more positive representation of the female sex.

Anna Eaves, 2019.

Visual References:

Fig.1: Pipilotti Rist, *Pickelporno*. 1992. Video stills, 12 min, colour, sound. From Phelan, Peggy, Hans Ulrich Obrist,

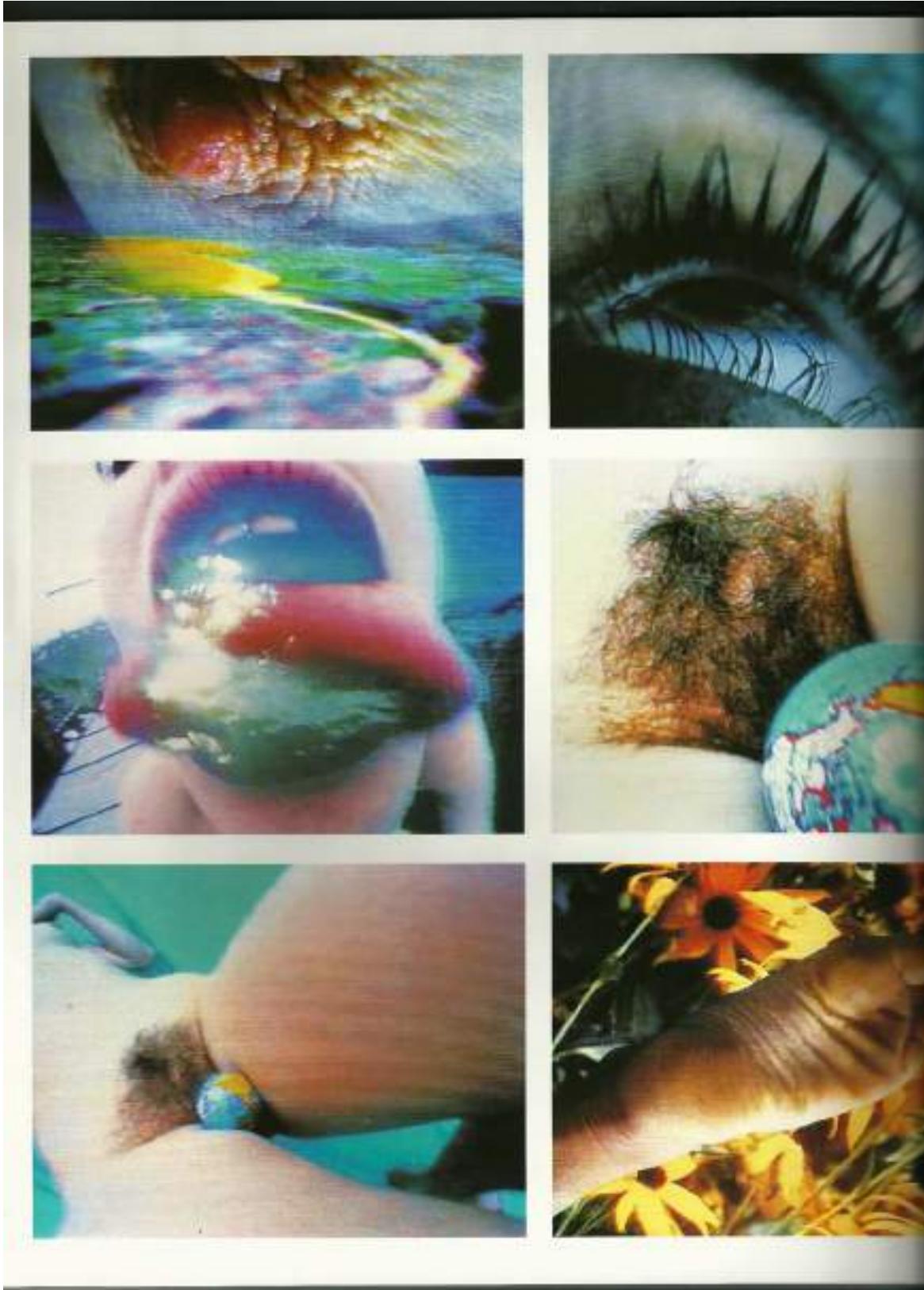


Fig.2: Pipilotti Rist, *Worry Will Vanish*. 2014. Installation view. Hauser & Wirth, New York. From: DailyArtFair,



<https://dailyartfair.com/exhibition/3516/pipilotti-rist-hauser-wirth>. (accessed January 8, 2019).

Fig.3. Gustave Courbet, *L'Origine du monde*. 1866. Oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. From: Musée d'Orsay, <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in->

focus/search/commentaire.html?no_cache=1&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=2406 (accessed January, 8 2019).

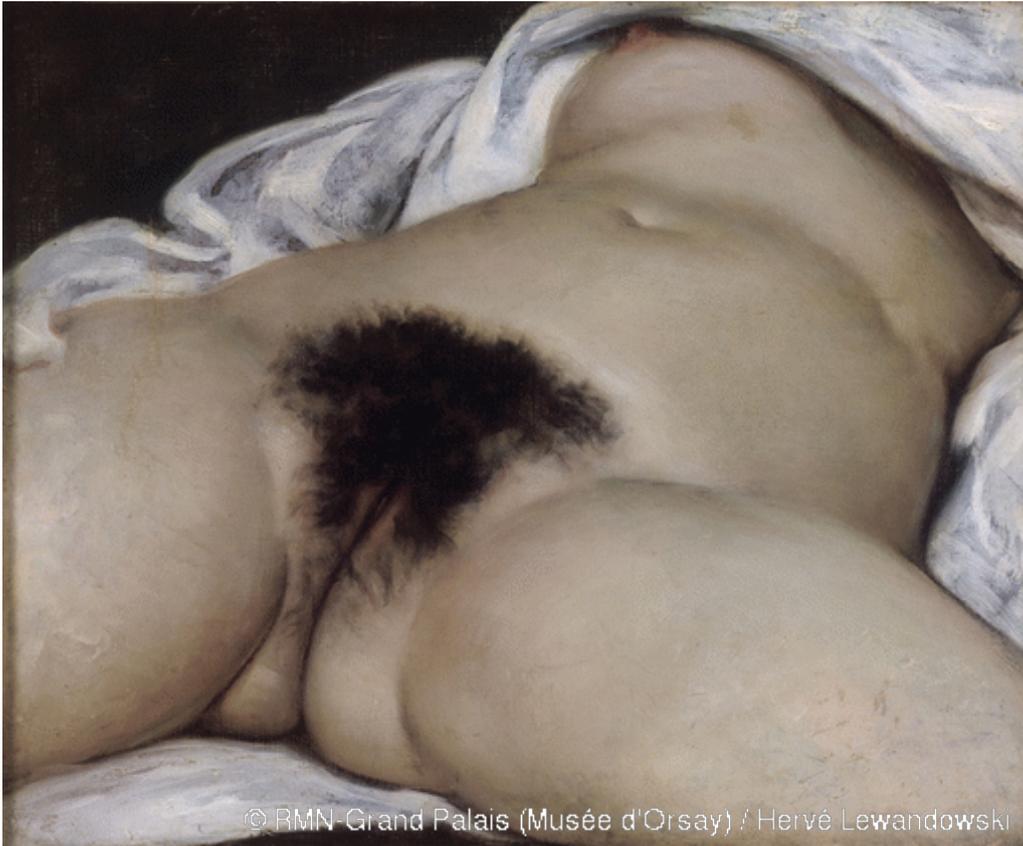
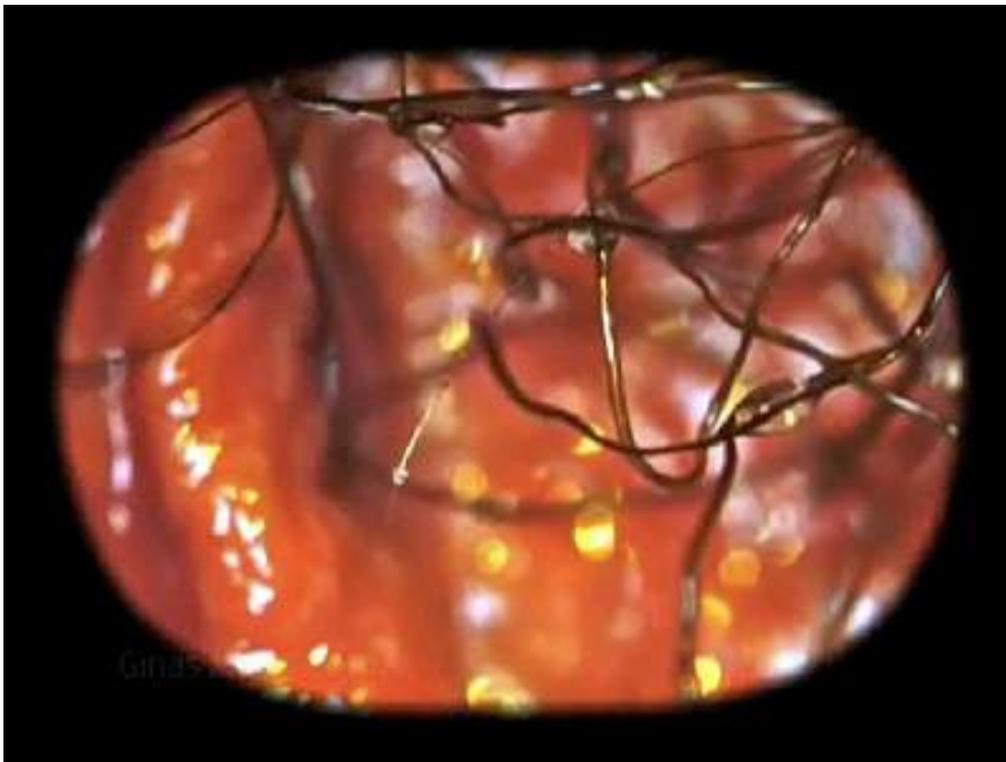


Fig. 4. Pipilotti
mobile, 2007.
From:



Rist, *Gina's*
Film still.

<http://aliceon.tistory.com/1298> (accessed January 8, 2019).

Fig.5. Pipilotti Rist, *Sip My Ocean*, 1996. Installation view. Shown using two projectors, 8 min, colour, sound. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. From: Guggenheim Museum, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5208> (accessed January 8, 2019).



Fig.6. Pipilotti
Ocean. 1996. Film

Phelan, Peggy, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Elisabeth Bronfen, and Pipilotti Rist. *Pipilotti Rist*. Contemporary Artists. London; New York: Phaidon, 2001.

Rist, *Sip My*
stills. From



Fig. 7. Pipilotti Rist, *Ever Is Over All*. 1997. Installation view. 4:07 min, colour sound. Museum of Modern Art, New



York. From: MoMA: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81191> (accessed January 8, 2019).

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