


Wishing for synchronicity
Works by Pipilatti Rist



*Wishing for Synchronicity
works by*

Pipilotti Rist

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PIPILOTTI RIST'S MUSIC

Mark Harris

I find it very exciting to think that our own personal wave-patterns may, according to their richness, energise many "vessels" when we "die." How fascinating to feel that part of oneself — perhaps just one of one's overtones — might, "in a twinkling of an eye," energise by sympathetic resonance an atom or a molecule ... of an arbutus tree...of an amethyst ... of a sea anemone, of Mount Annapurna, of an antelope, of an Armenian ... and ... of the galaxy of Andromeda. What experience it would give "one"!

—Daphne Oram¹

Introduction

By the time of *Pickelporno* [*Pimple Porno*] in 1992, we see the aggressively experimental approach of Pipilotti Rist's early single-channel works, with their convulsive relation between image and sound, displaced by a new production model where ambient soundtracks and drifting video calmly weave into one another. To some extent this shift in sensibility is marked by a change in music. Anders Guggisberg's electronic ambient compositions take over from sampled pop songs, which, if they reappear, are generally as fragments which soon sink back into the mix. Always retaining a connection to pop however, Guggisberg and Rist are comfortable blending experimental electronic music with melodic arrangements. Rist's typically high-key singing is a distinctive element in many of these compositions. An origin for her artless but affecting vocalization lies in early Swiss punk, particularly Kleenex, whose 1979 single *You/Ü* featured a stylized incantation by vocalist Regula Sing that was highly original for the time.

Across a twenty-year period Rist has lipsynched, intoned, whispered, and spoken her lyrics, hummed along with melodies, casually sung and desperately shrieked songs. She has performed with her band of the time, Les Reines Prochaines, on two of the videos (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* [*Absolutions* (*Pipilotti's Mistakes*)] (1988) and *Pickelporno*, and has incorporated or adapted music by Chris Isaak, John Lennon, Kevin Coyne, Etta James, and Sophisticated Boom Boom. Whatever the extent of Rist's roots in popular music, the manner in which she adapts that material to construct her soundtracks reveals a deep interest in the experiments of the musical avant-garde since the 1960s with its strong connections to the ambient sound of contemporary composers. Rist's explicit refusal to accept distinctions between high and low art is behind the extensiveness of her musical sampling and helps explain the sense of ease and informality she brings to her sound montages, whether these draw on Beatles' songs or Murray Schafer's ideas about acoustic ecology.

Even though this essay suggests that a map of this restless experimentation can be charted from a selection of her work over the last twenty years, it will periodically remind the reader that Rist's journey from pop to ambient is complicated by her treatment of sampled songs as part of an immersive soundscape and, in a complementary way, by her relaxed and accommodating approach to precedents in electronic music, as if their popularization were taken for granted. Without a hierarchization of sound, such a map of Rist's compositions is

best conceived as moving out in various directions simultaneously and at times turning back on itself, without warning, to recycle sonic motifs or resume approaches previously set aside.

Where the early videos tend to show Rist and other actors as discrete figures centrally-framed, in near or middle distance, the later work fragments its subjects with intersecting imagery or pushes their bodies right up against the lens in extreme closeup. A corresponding shift happens with Rist's audio. The extensive music sampling of her earliest pieces—John Lennon in *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1986) and *Sexy Sad I* (1987); Kevin Coyne in *You Called Me Jacky* (1990)—the videos more or less to the length of a song, even where that song is edited and reinterpreted, as with the Lennon examples. After these works, any correspondence between music and image is largely abandoned by Rist for music compositions of more open structure and for videos desynchronized from their soundtracks. Moving from linear to cyclical narration enhances Rist's emphasis on the paradisiacal imagery of bodies reposing in their various environments. Without the video installations having a distinct beginning or end, and with no diminution or crescendo to their content, Rist expects the audience itself to determine how long and attentively it watches. The principal catalyst for these later innovations is Rist's grasp of how video and music could more effectively convey her feminism, as it emphasizes a confident sensuality and a deep identification with nature. From this juncture Rist increasingly develops immersive video installations as she recognizes how somatically persuasive is this kind of enveloping image-sound experience. In later works Rist's music approaches continuous ambient color, in character with the drift of the video imagery, where seams between sequences or filmed entities are made to appear to dissolve. Filmed in Japan, *Supersubjektiv* [*Super Subjective*] (2001), for example, sets a flow of undifferentiated closeups of urban utilities, trees, plants, and water, over a gently melodic song that emerges from a background of electronic samples. Here the integration of image and music shares the sonic allure developed in earlier immersive works like *Sip My Ocean* (1996), *Ever Is Over All* (1997), and *Related Legs* (*Yokohama Dandelions*) (2001). The pace of these compositions is slow and their spectrum incantatory, in this sense distinct from one musical axis to which it might be compared—the 1960s minimal compositions of Terry Riley or Tony Conrad, using pulse as structure, through to the early 1990s ambient musicians they anticipate, like Autechre or Aphex Twin, whose compositions retain a rhythmic structure derived from club

culture. Rist's sympathies lie rather with a different trajectory formed by the pioneering electronic music studios in North America and Europe and the music they have stimulated, which would include Pauline Oliveros and Wendy Carlos, working in the 1960s and 1970s with sampled natural sounds, and later ambient musicians like Brian Eno, Tetsu Inoue, and Leafcutter John, all of whom establish strong connections between their soundscapes and the noise of the natural world.

I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much

In the early single-channel videos, Rist performs two of the songs herself, lip-synching Coyne's lovelorn lament "Jackie and Edna" (1973) and obsessively repeating a modified refrain from Lennon's "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" (1968). A naked man performs in another of these videos, feigning attacks on the camera to a sampled and reinterpreted Beatles song "Sexy Sadie" (1968). These two Lennon songs are off the Beatles' *White Album*, celebrated since its 1968 release for the extent of its musical experimentation and its range of song styles. It is also notable as the first album on which Yoko Ono contributed to the band's recordings: she can be heard speaking on "Revolution 9," the one track that incorporates electronic tape loop and montage compositional techniques developed by the musical avant-garde, whose legacy has had the most enduring impact on the music used by Rist and her musician collaborator, Guggisberg.² Rist has described Ono's work as enabling her own entrance to the art world. In the context of her *Innocent Objects* project, for which Rist continues to assemble a collection of unmarked food and commodity containers, we would expect the spare surface of *The White Album*, designed by Richard Hamilton, to hold particular significance. For the first pressing, on an otherwise bare white surface, Hamilton had "The BEATLES" embossed in small letters at the lower front of the gatefold album and printed beneath it a serial number, referencing his long involvement in print editions.

For most of *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*, Rist's singing and dancing are speeded up to a manic pace. The line she adapts, "She's not a girl who misses much. Do, do, do, do, do, do, oh yeah," is sung by Lennon in the original song only once as an introduction, followed by four distinctly different musical sections of widely varying tempi, lyrics, and timbre. Rist's decision to stay with only those first twelve seconds of the song recalls the way a pop refrain can stick in your head, becoming monstrously garbled as you struggle to get clear of it.

Her treatment has as its model experimental tape processes from the 1960s, like Oliveros's or Alvin Lucier's work that would acoustically modify a motif through repetition, overlay, or progressive degeneration, usually by feeding the tape through multiple players to generate variations of the same recording played in delayed sequence. In the video Rist works her refrain through sudden changes of speed and pitch, including fast-forwarding the recording or bringing it to a slurred halt before suddenly taking off again at breakneck pace. There is also a noticeable degeneration of the recording quality: her singing, although always accelerated, starts off relatively crisp, and then the sound becomes progressively muddier as if the acoustics of the room in which Rist sings and dances has been allowed to incrementally influence the soundtrack.

Although originally drawn to Lennon's song for its ambiguous female characterization, Rist was clearly also interested in its structure. Following a silent introduction, her own video, like the song, is also divided into five parts where varying relationships between sound and image develop. At fourteen seconds, Rist's introduction, with titles appearing over a brown-screen image of her dancing, is exactly the length of the appropriated section sung by Lennon in the original song. After the many repetitions of the line throughout the early part of the video, she ends the way Lennon began, by singing it only once. Then, three-and-a-quarter minutes into the video, after a section where the image of Rist's dancing has been progressively fragmented by vertical interference, quite unexpectedly we hear Lennon singing much of the first three parts of "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" in partial synchronization with image treatments that we haven't been shown before. In a blue-tinted passage, Rist appears in out-of-focus close-up before suddenly dancing frantically in the middle distance. She is then glimpsed for a few seconds as a static, full-color foreground image, which starts to move just as the video cuts to a black-and-white scene of a woman viewed from the side, perhaps Rist again, pulling a shirt down over her bare breasts. The image of a tree, first static and then in motion as the guitar solo breaks, marks the transition back to the image of Rist dancing, this time degraded by horizontal distortion. At this point Lennon begins the third section of his song, "I need a fix 'cause I'm going down," which abruptly cuts out to make way for Rist's coda, marking the furthest degeneration of both audio and image. At these final stages, the picture is unusually blurry and interrupted by pixelated horizontal interference, while Rist's voice seems to be coming from a deep

chamber, the words now indecipherable beneath the echo effects and a shrill mechanical tinniness.

The title of Rist's video must indicate an awareness of the experimental music toward which her work is oriented—and that her video addresses its antecedents from a radical contemporaneity. It recalls in particular Lucier's landmark 1969 recording "I am sitting in a room," in which he rerecorded, over sixteen generations, a short passage he had earlier read into a microphone. He positioned the speakers, through which the successive and increasingly degenerated tapes were played for rerecording, exactly where he had been sitting when he read the passage aloud. By the time of his seventh recording, Lucier is sounding much as Rist does in her final version of the Beatles' line.

Experimental Music

It seems likely that in the editing process for *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*, a pre-digital video assembly, Rist subjected her material to treatments analogous to those used by Lucier and others a decade or two earlier. Her attraction to these early avant-garde music compositions points to a principal concern in her practice: representation of the vitality of our somatic integration with our environment. *Sip My Ocean* and *Als der Bruder meiner Mutter geboren wurde, duftete es nach wilden Birnenblüten vor dem braungebrannten Sims* [*When My Mother's Brother Was Born, There Was a Fragrance of Wild Pear Blossom outside the Brown-burnt Sill*] (1992) feature the powerful idylls offered by nature; (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilotis Fehler*, *Ever Is Over All*, and *Supersubjektiv* trace the contentious intersection of natural and urban environments; and *Related Legs* (*Yokohama Dandelions*), *Pickelpomo*, and *I Want to See How You See* (*or a portrait of Comelia Providoli*) (2003) explore our interactions with other human beings. The carnivalesque treatment given her early music pieces like *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*, *You Called Me Jacky*, and *Sexy Sad I* can be traced, with different emphases, throughout her later video work, including the flagrant bodily display, theatricality, and clownish engagement with the camera. But these are also features of a confident advocacy of sensory pleasures. To that end Rist's emphasis on extreme structural and material interventions serves an important function, for it is through such alterations that the audience is drawn in to the work's events and succumbs to the artist's somatic imperative.

It is especially significant in this respect that much early

experimental music was produced by female composers, who saw ambient electronic sound as the means to achieve a radically new representation of nature. This music, most relevant for Rist's later immersive video works, is recognized as an antecedent to ambient compositions existing today on the fringes of classical and popular music, or to experimental noise music emerging from within the rock and roll milieu. Inoue's 1996 *World Receiver* or Tim Hecker's 2001 *Haunt Me, Haunt Me Do It Again* are examples of the former, while Sonic Youth's amalgam of 1970s punk and downtown New York avant-garde electronic music represents the latter.³ Rist has expressed her admiration for Tony Oursler's unconventional music video made to accompany Sonic Youth's 1990 song "Tunic (Song For Karen)," with its wide array of low-budget montage effects and animation. Reaching far beyond their local downtown scene, Sonic Youth's 1999 release *Goodbye Twentieth Century* consists of scored versions of eleven historical avant-garde compositions, including "Six For New Time," a new piece by Oliveros, and "Voice Piece for Soprano," a 1961 work of Ono's. Eventually including music by John Cage, Steve Reich, Christian Wolff, and others, these performed works were all selected from a collection of scores assembled by the band over a period of time.

Oliveros's 1965 "Bye Bye Butterfly" is a radical farewell to earlier musical models of emotional intensity, in this case Puccini, whose *Madame Butterfly* is sampled beneath an abstract, sine wave, tape delay noise that unsentimentally points toward a future of unassociative sound. As new models developed, dream states, somatic intensities, and identification with natural forces became functions of early experimental music, all of which can be readily traced in Rist's practice; she keeps a precise record of her own dreams and has stipulated that the soundtracks she develops with Guggisberg are as important as her images. In the 1950s, well before Oliveros's first recordings, English composer Daphne Oram developed a tape studio in a British Broadcasting Corporation facility to explore the potential of electronic music. From this laboratory came her 1960 composition "Four Aspects," which uses swathes of color tone to form a new kind of space where listeners appear to encounter the music indirectly, apprehending it as both off to one side and modified, as if the music is passing through a medium of thickened air or water.⁴ The remoteness of the sound in "Four Aspects" and its deep spatial layering give this precedent for ambient music a correspondence to Rist's own acoustic video montage, where one's perception

of the relationship between figure and surroundings has to take into account hallucination and dream representations as components of the aesthetic experience. Oram brought an exceptional range of ideas, including a theory of dream assemblages, to her arguments for electronic music's utopian directive. Her skepticism of dream structures as useful influences on music composition points more to the radicalism of her proposals for the long-term effects of sound than to any prejudice she had against hallucinatory experiences. In fact she found dreams a vital component of healthy self-knowledge and an effective framework for understanding certain kinds of experimental music.

We can recognize Oram's kind of radical pantheistic materialism—suggestive of Spinoza's modes, the particular manners assumed by the single substance of God/Nature—in a number of later Rist installations like *Remake of the Weekend* (1998), *Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)*, or *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* (year), whose fluid montages merge filmed sequences of vegetation, human bodies, natural phenomena like fire and water, and urban structures as if revealing an interdependency at a molecular level.⁵ The soundtrack for *Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)* reflects this structural fluidity by interspersing synthesized sounds and melodic passages with recordings of sampled natural sound. This video is set almost entirely in a generic European cityscape where tram lines run down a commercial street of indifferent modern shops and belle époque balconied residencies. When first two, and then later three women are shown in bright red-and-green party skirts striding contentedly down the street, the audio incorporates Robert Moog-type sine waves, amplitude modulation, and white noise, with cooing dove sounds and women's laughter. At another time the swelling of orchestra strings accompanies an animation of receding points of light in a dark void, an evocation of movement in outer space that encourages reading a corresponding sequence of a stove's lit gas rings as hovering planets. Other footage from Rist's restlessly mobile camera includes the exterior of a high-rise (where she is seen pressing her made-up face against a window) and the interior of a hospital room (where reverse sequences show a naked woman throwing herself around the space). Using motorized mirrors, the actual installation of *Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)* involves a second projection that circles in unpredictable arcs, occasionally catching the gauze curtains hanging in the gallery. Although apparently sharing a locale, these city scenes are as conceptually dissociated from one another as

they are from their audio accompaniment. The audio, besides being entirely non-diegetic (outside of the video's narrative, what there is of it), belongs in a realm of synthetic sounds that are treated as innocent parties, like other soundtracks of Rist's: seemingly from a "natural" field, they are undifferentiated from the sounds that might be derived from nature or the city. For Rist, it is as if electronic sounds, their alienness naturalized by use, in some way constitute a sonic source as ready to hand as any other. The aural ubiquity this creates, where we are unable to attribute the sounds to a particular cause or place, in spite of the specificity of their coloration and timbres, lends an otherworldly fascination to the video imagery of women crossing different thresholds of transgressive behavior.⁶

A decade earlier than Oram's speculations, Bebe Barron wrote about the electronic circuits with which she and her husband, Louis, composed their 1956 score for *Forbidden Planet* as if they were organic entities, generating their best sound just before expiring.⁷ The ninety-minute soundtrack for the film marks the Barrons as early pioneers in developing complex electronic work. Bebe Barron recounted one woman's surprised remark that their film music matched the sound of her dreams. Indeed, the involuntary aspect of their compositional process, where electronic circuits would be left on their own to create sonic motifs, which the Barrons would later arrange in sequence, came to seem analogous to dreams, both seen as unconscious productions.⁸ The Barrons' electronic work is frequently high-pitched, sustained by sine tone whines, dry whistling, siren-like drones, or chirruping electronic pulses. Laid into this body of noise are hints of melodic moments, as well as tones approximating natural sound recordings of dripping water, bells, and wind. A frequent modification involves an electronic "fluttering" effect where sounds undulate across a spatial scale before dying away. The Barrons very effectively made their composition feel derived from previously unknown musical ideas. Though with fifty years' hindsight this otherworldliness can seem caricatured, their project to develop the sonic profile of a speculative future is realized fully enough to be congruent with visionary work like Rist's that today imagines earthly spaces where our potential can be fulfilled.

Water

The rhythm and timbre of several of the more pensive-sounding tracks of *Forbidden Planet* find more immediate correspondences in Rist's compositions. "Once Round Altair," "Shangri-La in the Desert," and "Robbie Arranges Flowers" share spatial and percussive qualities with the soundtracks of *Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)* and *Supersubjektiv*. Even though the latter work is predominantly a gentle male and female duet of English and Japanese lyrics, a number of sampled and generated sonic motifs referencing natural sounds are laid within the piece: Rist's electronic ambient music from time to time breaks free of the vocal lines to set up a series of pulse melodies, in one instance resembling the chirrup of a telephone modem and, in another instance, dripping water.

The latter motif has characterized electronic music from the start. A year before the Barrons' film score, Hugh Le Caine composed *Dripsody* from the electronic embellishment of a drop of water falling into a bucket. After a performance of gamelan-like timbre and shifting rhythmic patterns, the two-minute piece eventually returns to its source in slow, single drips. This work was seminal for its economy of means and its direct use of natural sounds, but Le Caine's invented equipment also had a significant influence on key electronic musicians like Moog and Oliveros, who traveled to Canada to work with him.⁹ In the 1960s Oliveros wrote in detail about her intense auditory attunement to her environment. The complex environmental "score" that she described effectively provided a blueprint for later music that would sample natural sounds: "I am inside my house now. Outside, sounds are attenuated by the insulation. I hear a dripping faucet and the ticking of my cuckoo clock. They combine and are joined by the refrigerator. The planes from Palomar Airport dwindle in through the furnace openings."¹⁰

Where they combine sampled natural sounds with electronic music, Rist's soundtracks appear to embrace concepts of acoustic ecology. In *Supersubjektiv* the sympathetic relationship between the close-up panning of foliage and water, and the soundtrack's delicate electronic sounds excludes industrial or mechanical noises, absent also from Rist's other works, including those filmed in the city. Murray Schafer's 1977 book recounting the destruction of rural acoustic idylls during the Industrial Revolution imagines a "curative" sound palette as one that preserves or restores what came before. As the natural body most resistant to the industrial age, the sea becomes the primordial image for Schafer. "The roads of man

all lead to water. It is the fundamental of the original soundscape and the sound which above all others gives us the most delight in its myriad transformations.... The sea is the keynote sound of all maritime civilizations. It is also a fertile sonic archetype. All roads lead back to water. We shall return to the sea."¹¹ From Carlos's overlaid samples of waves and melody in the "Fall" section of her 1972 *Sonic Seasonings* to Leafcutter John's 2006 electronic folk recording *The Forest and The Sea*, which concludes with the sound of waves on the shore, electronic musicians have shared a fascination with the ocean as a sonic environment. Rist's videos may answer the question of what lies behind the recurrent appeal of the acoustic resonances of liquids, which persist as explicitly figurative components within the realm of otherwise abstract sound.

In *Rain Woman (I am called a plant)* (1998) and, as we have already noted, in *Supersubjektiv*, there are moments when the music incorporates the sound of water. *Rain Woman (I am called a plant)* reprises the modifying of a sampled pop song, in this case a speeded-up and distorted sample of Etta James's emotionally charged 1967 recording "I Would Rather Go Blind." The short video circles over the naked body of a pink-haired woman lying in a pool of water in a rainy landscape. Starting a complex interchange between audio and image, a single reverberating keyboard note mimics the sound of the rain as James's vocal line begins, "Something deep down in my soul said, 'Cry, girl' / When I saw you and that girl walkin' around." As we hear that part of the song, a semitransparent white text overlaid on close-ups of the woman's body reads, "I'm laying really on the ground / I am called a plant / Did I tell you that rain washes pain away," before spelling out the lyrics that we can hear sung by the backing vocalists: "... cry, cry, girl." We next see those sung by James herself, "I would rather go blind than to see you walk away from me." As the distorted vocal dies away to an abstract clatter, the text reads, "I send some greetings from everywhere to Sweden / Where it rains too."

In 1996, reflecting on his motivations for experimenting with ambient music, Eno coincidentally illuminates Rist's intentions: "We wanted to use music in a different way—as part of the ambience of our lives—and we wanted it to be continuous, a surrounding.... And immersion was really the point: we were making music to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside."¹² Rist's immersion in a tropical sea in *Sip My Ocean*, accompanied by her and Guggisberg's version of Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game," or the sex of *Pickelporno* that accelerates to

the sound of running water and begins its climax with a penis rising through a coral reef represent physical idylls of acute sensory realization. Within *I Want to See How You See (or a portrait of Cornelia Providoli)*, Rist's densely layered homage to an old friend, is a sequence showing roiling water extending to the horizon. Though more traumatic, the pixel footage of a woman repeatedly dunked in the swimming pool in (*Entlastungen*) Pipilottis Fehler and the partially submerged female body in *Rain Woman (I am called a plant)* also use water to evoke succumbing to intense physical experience. Rist's reference to fluids in the context of developing a new feminist aesthetic is of obvious relevance here, the use of liquid sounds and imagery extended by the nonlinearity of much of her music as it meanders through a play of spatial acoustics and sonic textures.¹³

Significant developments in experimental musicians' sampling of sounds from nature include Carlos's "Spring" section in *Sonic Seasonings*, featuring a seven-minute recording of a thunderstorm, and Annea Lockwood's 1975 *World Rhythms*, incorporating recordings from a wide range of water sources throughout its forty-five-minute length. Lockwood explains her intentions as revealing the inherent qualities of natural sounds: "I'm really interested in acoustic commonalities amongst various disparate sounds and tracing them. That's been one of my focal points for my electroacoustic works rather than treating these sounds as intrinsically raw material and then working them over and transforming them. I regard them all as self-sufficient, certainly as intricately complex and complete audio phenomena in and of themselves."¹⁴ Although Carlos's *Sonic Seasonings* was always intended to be heard as recorded music,¹⁵ Lockwood's *World Rhythms* was first experienced as an environmental sound performance in ways similar to an audience's encounter today with a video installation. Writing in *The Village Voice* of a performance on January 26, 1976, Tom Johnson saw Lockwood as developing a critical context for improvisation: "For about an hour a rapt audience ... listened to these sounds as they faded in and out, and interacted with one another.... By mixing the ten tracks spontaneously, Lockwood was able to respond to the acoustical realities of the moment, and pace things according to the mood of the evening."¹⁶ Going further, Eno's development of a similarly immersive type of music recognized an unattended boundary where sound might beguile (like Lockwood's) and yet remain just beneath notice, like a background hum, phasing in and out of one's attention. Rist's soundtracks for *Supersubjektiv* and

Homo Sapiens Sapiens are of such a kind. In the former video, the continuous wha-wha drone fades time and again to near inaudibility, while the “drips,” the white noise, the Arabic *maqam* melody, the dial tone, and the anodyne vocal treatments likewise move in and out of earshot without building up to any conclusion. Where *Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)* represents the estranging aspect of ubiquitous sound, *Supersubjektiv* is about its seductive counterpart, the sonic experience that Augoyard and Torque call “envelopment.”¹⁷

Are we there yet?—Utopia now

Rist’s blurring of high and low culture would also explain the inclusiveness of her imagery and sound as both traverse “the tension between the micro and macro.”¹⁸ *Blutclip [Bloodclip]*, Rist’s 1993 celebration of menstruation, recontextualizes motifs of *Pickelporno* in scenes that move from close-ups of a woman’s body covered in gemstones and lying in a woodland grove to hovering naked figures, dripping with blood, that have been montaged over footage of the moon and earth seen from space. Rist’s miscellaneous imagery since *Pickelporno* has sustained the imperative that human engagements be profiled against the widest possible habitat, returning actions not just to their immediate natural surroundings but also to their environment envisaged on a global or cosmic scale: “So in every human body you can see the reflections of the continents. In my case the breast is Europe ... the teeth are Asia ... the toes are Africa...”¹⁹ *Blutclip* has the most textured imagery and sound of all Rist’s pieces. The primarily ambient soundtrack by Rist and Guggisberg begins with a pellucid synthesizer melody of nine notes (also used in *Related Legs*) before rapidly thickening into orchestral strings, organ riffs, and xylophone notes, continuing up to where the keyboard develops a prolonged rock guitar-style solo. Sampled sounds drop in and out of the track, at one time resembling clattering horses’ hooves. Rist’s

reedy vocal intones repetitive lyrics—“I want to show how I see you want to show how you see...”—through most of the piece.

Carlos’s and Lockwood’s intention that their compositions not differentiate natural sounds from music opened up their productions to the kinds of effects we are familiar with in Rist’s work. The “soothing harmonies” of Carlos’s own innovations, which in the 1970s ostracized her from the academic musical avant-garde, were at that very same time being pursued with a vengeance in the ambient music of Harold Budd’s 1972 *Pavilion of Dreams* and in Eno’s 1975 *Discreet Music*. By 1970 Budd had exhausted himself with the forced minimalism of his earlier experiments and provocatively plunged into its musical opposite: “The entire aesthetic was an existential prettiness ... simply *pretty*: mindless, shallow and utterly devastating”²⁰ Rist is unperturbed by these qualities as they surface and disappear among the layered sounds in her and Guggisberg’s compositions.

What Greil Marcus has called “the utopia of the present moment” in relation to Kathleen Hanna’s Riot Grrrl musical expression constitutes one feminist alternative to hegemonic utopian strictures that sacrifice present thrills for uncertain imaginary futures.²¹ Rist’s work asserts this utopia of the present moment as it invents immediate pleasures that go against the grain of strategies predicated on future outcomes. Characteristically, Rist’s sensual subversions circumvent their definition in opposition to a dominant ideology by developing a counter-aesthetic, one that could stand as an update of 1960s hippie economies of withdrawal, which developed communities of economic independence and leisure that valued chronicles of inner experiences facilitated by drugs, sex, psychedelic imagery, and music. What Rist reinvigorates of that time depends largely on its reformulation as women’s experience—free, however, from delineation against a masculine realm of ideas and imagery (related to early feminist productions) as much as it is free from *detourning* impersonations of

contemporary sexism (related to contemporary young British artist [yBa] work by women).

In spite of the term's lineage, when Michel De Certeau connects "tactics" to the actions of those walking through a city as if they are writing an innovative text, he illuminates an achievement of Rist's projects, most obviously of *Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)* and *Ever Is Over All*.²² De Certeau characterizes these trajectories as anti-geometric and anti-panoptic, as if a new kind of haptic navigation were emerging from unprogrammed city walking: "These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each others arms."²³ So dense is the mesh of their encounters that the sightlessness of De Certeau's walkers might be somnambulism, or at least the trancelike attentiveness of drug-induced hallucinations. Clearly enough, neither state is likely to help conventional labor productivity. The purpose of De Certeau's tactic is a subversiveness so inadvertent and carefree that it resists becoming serviceable or reaching accommodation. Rist's later music is of this trance-like kind—not club trance that locks ecstatic movement into beats per minute in an intensification of urban engagement, but a more intimate attunement to lost time, where day-dreaming becomes bodily pensiveness. The slowed pace of Rist's walkers has the weightlessness of the dream world. The women in *Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)*, for the most part seen only as far up as their waists, with their flashy dresses and shoes, the color heightened to the intensity of hallucinations, cut a path of celebration across the town. The protagonist of *Ever Is Over All*, dressed for a dream in blue gown and red shoes, parades down a street imbued with a cerulean cast. With the permission granted by intoxication, these women treat the city as a playground of desires, indeed as a utopia of the present.

At the end of a work on the representation of utopian

communities in science fiction, Fredric Jameson states that the measurement of such a text's imaginative qualities should depend on its effectiveness at imagining plausible utopian artworks.²⁴ Taken from Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*, the most exemplary illustration of Jameson's claim is a musical performance by a wind-activated aeolia. Jameson acknowledges that his statement responds to Robert C. Elliot's thoughts from 1970 on the issue of the status of the artwork in utopian fiction, but Jameson insists on the viability of literature by Stanislaw Lem or the Strugatskys that Elliot's historically more traditional frame of reference excludes. In Elliot's bleak summation of the literature, utopian artwork is seen as oxymoronic: "To the degree that a literary artist helps bring about the conditions of utopia, he contributes to the death—or at least to the severe debilitation—of his art."²⁵

To what degree can we look back over the field of electronic music and see it not as utopian projection, but as utopian artwork already present, as if advancing Jorge Luis Borge's narrative of utopian infiltration, *Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, where the components of a fictional country, including its artifacts, gradually displace their imperfect terrestrial counterparts? Given that Jameson's musical example is relatively conventional in description—"the music fluctuated like a composition, mournful, angry, dissonant or in sudden snatches harmonic: it seemed the work of a mind, an alien mind perhaps, but certainly something more than random chance"²⁶—much of the music (including Rist's) that has been discussed in this essay is sufficiently alien-sounding and radically aleatory to be products of utopian advance parties, as the opening quote of Oram's envisions. With Rist, it is through the infectious conjoining of music and video that we know we are already there. The present utopia may be neither particularly reliable nor equably enjoyed, but because we can hear it in our art, we at least know it is among us.

Notes

1. Daphne Oram, *An Individual Note of Music, Sound and Electronics* (London: Galliard, 1972), 121–22.

2. “Rock precedents for pure studio tapework come from ... The Beatles’ pure tapework on ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ from the 1966 album *Revolver*. ‘Revolution No 9’ on *The White Album* is also full of plundered radio material” (Chris Cutler, “Plunderphonia,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner [New York: Continuum, 2004], 148). *The White Album* was one of the first records made using the new technology of eight-track recording. Mark Coleman notes how producer George Martin worked with The Beatles on *Revolver* to find ways of extending four-track recording by layering and then rerecording tracks to build up complex sound qualities (Mark Coleman, *Playback: From the Victrola to MP3* [Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2003]). Other writers have remarked on the relationship of this album to experimental music. Mark Prendergast explains “Revolution 9” as Lennon’s tribute to Karlheinz Stockhausen, especially his *Hymnen*, which incorporates samples of forty national anthems: “Tape loops, record snippets, radio edits, Mellotron, backwards tape, echo delay, bits of *Sgt. Pepper* and lots of voice samples and dialogue built up a picture of repetitive chaos. A voice repeatedly intoning the words ‘number nine’ gave the track its Minimalist edge. It’s worth noting that Lennon had just met Yoko Ono, who’d worked with the American Minimalist composer La Monte Young in New York.... Stockhausen himself commented in 1980 that at that time: ‘Lennon often used to phone me. He was particularly fond of my *Hymnen* and *Song of the Youths* and got many things from them” (Mark Prendergast, *The Ambient Century: From Mahler to Trance* [London: Bloomsbury, 2000], 194).

3. That both Inoue and Hecker’s compositions can be described as painting with sound makes the connection to Rist’s video montage technique, where highly colored images intersect over complex audio textures, particularly appropriate: “Working with a combination of sampled sounds and synthesized tonalities of his own design, he [Inoue] carefully architects his music moment by moment.... This time I told him that his music sounded like a Sol Lewitt pencil wall drawing with all of its intricately intersecting matrices of lines. ‘Ah, I can see that. Yes, maybe that is better.’ Tetsu works with sound like an artist does with paint, creating libraries of tones and textures and carefully—meticulously—organizing them into startling, explosive works of crystal clarity” (Thomas Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music*, 2d ed. [London: Routledge, 2002], 99). The correspondences between tracks like “Health Loop” and “Invitable Color” from Inoue’s *World Receiver* and Rist and Guggisberg’s composition for *Supersubjektiv* are striking.

4. Some of Oram’s music is now being recognized for pioneering ambient composition. Paradigm Discs released a collection of her work, including “Four Aspects,” in 2007, while Guy-Marc Hinant has included the same piece on the Sub Rosa CD *Anthology of Noise & Electronic Music/Second a-chronology 1936–2003*. In the sleeve notes to that compilation, Hugh Davies writes of “Four Aspects”: “This is probably the most interesting of the earliest British tape compositions

for concert performance, from around 1960. No doubt fortuitously, the main thematic material and atmosphere of the work uncannily anticipates that of Brian Eno’s pioneering first recorded work of ambient music, *Discreet Music* (1975). At the time, its impact on the avant-garde electronic music scene was small; in the light of more recent developments we can listen to it today with fresh ears and assess it more positively.”

5. “Modes are geometric but fluid structures that are transformed and deformed in the light at variable speeds. Structure is rhythm, that is, the linking of figures that compose and decompose their relation” (Gilles Deleuze, “Spinoza and the Three ‘Ethics,’” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 142).

6. This sonic effect is also “found in the tradition of carnivals and fêtes, which are themselves ubiquitous. The carnival, as a place and time of negation and inversion of normal social relations, and as a place and time of ‘transgression of the obligations and prohibitions of everyday life’—as shown by J.-P. Dupuy using the Girardian theory of mimetic crisis—is based on a process of ‘panic’ or scrambling of social differences. This lack of differentiation introduces a ‘total confusion of demarcations and compartmentalization’ in which the multiplicity of orchestras, dance contests, and processions play a determining role” (Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, *Sonic Experience* [Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005], 147).

7. “That was the end of that circuit. It was the best circuit we ever had. We could never duplicate it. And it was one of the more long-lived circuits. It must have gone on for several hours” (Bebe Barron, quoted in James Wierzbicki, *Louis and Bebe Barron’s Forbidden Planet* [Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2005], 41). Taking her anthropomorphizing a step further, Barron added, “Those circuits really could express a full range of human emotions, and we treated each little theme like a *character* rather than a musical theme.... It was more fun to build a circuit, activate it, and *personify* it” (38).

8. Electronic music had become associated with dream states through soundtracks like the one Miklos Rozsa composed for Alfred Hitchcock’s 1945 film *Spellbound*. That film was notable for a hallucination sequence designed by Salvador Dali and accompanied by Rozsa’s theremin music.

9. As Thom Holmes has noted, “Oliveros did what came naturally to her: she pushed ‘the edges as far as possible.’ Le Caine’s studio gadgets and instruments were invented with the sound sculptor in mind” (Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music*, 155).

10. Pauline Oliveros, quoted in *Audio Culture*, 104. Diederich Diederichsen has explained how Soft Machine’s keyboard player Mike Ratledge popularized the early experimental drone music of Riley in “Out-Bloody-Rageous” (Diederichsen, “The Primary: Political and Anti-Political Continuities Between Minimal Music and Minimal Art,” in *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968* [Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004], 116). In “Drip,” composed for Soft Machine’s album *Fifth*, Ratledge enacted a similar metamorphosis of Le Caine’s work by starting off the track with

electronically modified dripping sounds before moving into a much more conventional jazz-rock fusion.

11. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 14–18

12. Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," in *Audio Culture*, 94–95.

13. Connections between the prevalence of water imagery and sound, and Rist's particular feminism have been commented on often enough. "Associated with the female, this metaphoric realm imagines a body with no boundaries, a body with multiple and autonomous erotic zones, a body in full possession of its own desire" (Nancy Spector, "The Mechanics of Fluids," *Parkett* [December 1996]: 85). Luce Irigaray's observations on *l'écriture féminine* are also relative to Rist's practice: "Woman never speaks the same way. What she emits is flowing, fluctuating, *Blurring*" (Luce Irigaray, "The Mechanics of Fluids," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985], 112). As Irigaray draws the idea of the "feminine" out from under the rules that have fixed it, including Lacanian terms that posit women as an absence in relation to a phallic presence, she develops a vocabulary of liquidity to define a condition of movement and equivocation, rather than stasis: "And the object a? How can it be defined with respect to the properties, also, of fluids? Since this 'object' refers back most generally to a state that is theirs? Milk, luminous flow, acoustic waves ... not to mention the gases inhaled, emitted, variously perfumed, of urine, saliva, blood, even plasma, and so on" (113). With the notion of blurring (the incorporation of sounds with liquids), these passages evoke a number of Rist's video installations and make plausible the link to their origins in sampling compositions by women.

14. Annea Lockwood, quoted in Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music*, 262.

15. Holmes describes it as "the record that started the movement in new age music that persists today, soothing harmonies, electronic meditations, and blends of music with the sounds of nature.... Carlos's version of musique concrète without all of the melodramatic edits" (Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music*, 176).

16. Tom Johnson, *The Voice of New Music: New York City 1972–1982* (Eindhoven, Netherlands: Het Apollohuis, 1989), 209. Polemicizing its radical innovativeness, Johnson's 1974 review of Lockwood's installation of sampled water recordings at The Kitchen in New York had him posing certain rhetorical questions: "Is it even possible to discuss a trickling brook or a foaming rapids in terms of music? How can we be so naive as to think that a recording of a river has artistic value? Yet

how can we be so presumptuous and narrow-minded as to say that it doesn't? Where is it possible to draw the line between art and nature?" (114).

17. "The feeling of being surrounded by a body of sound that has the capacity to create an autonomous whole, that predominates over other circumstantial features of the moment. The envelopment effect is sometimes applied to negative situations, but most often it provokes reactions comparable to bewitchment—staggering, delightful" (Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 47).

18. Pipilotti Rist, quoted in interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in *Point of View: An Anthology of the Moving Image, Pipilotti Rist*, Electronic Arts Intermix, DVD, 2003.

19. *Ibid.* Rist is discussing her adaptation of the lyrics from *I Want to See How You See (or a portrait of Cornelia Providoli)*.

20. Harold Budd, sleeve notes, *The Pavilion of Dreams*, recording, 1972.

21. Greil Marcus, lecture, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, March 2007.

22. To better formulate his dichotomous terms "tactics" and "strategies," perhaps it's inevitable that Michel De Certeau would take images from Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* (1832). The mold formed by the earliest militaristic metaphors of the avant-garde is so rigid that later attempts to define alternative subversive actions fall back on analogous imagery.

23. "[T]hey are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each others arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poem, in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility" (Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 93).

24. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), 416.

25. Robert C. Elliot, *The Shape of Utopia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 128.

26. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 416.