
A LIBERTY STATUE FOR TOKYO

An immersive encounter with Pipilotti Rist's installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. This introduction was first published on gensojapan.org (now offline).



'A Liberty Statue for Tokyo', Pipilotti Rist (2009). Video still (detail)

This is a welcome experience. It doesn't even feel as though I'm in a museum anymore. It feels as though I've stumbled into a plush lounge at a music festival instead. Formality has been dispensed with. There's about a dozen of us here, loafing around on cushions, sinking into ambient audio while gazing up at the projections on the ceiling. It's quite refreshing, letting the intense colours and fuzzy imagery wash over me. Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist's "A Liberty Statue for Tokyo" is an immersive sensory excursion that's difficult not to warm to.

Initially, its generosity is well disguised. Veiled behind indigo curtains at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo lies this hideaway, a refuge from the upright world. The edges of the

room are framed by a soft fabric to ease onto. There's something hushed about the way the textiles are used, they both soften the room's acoustics and allow you to listen carefully. Speakers are secreted somewhere beyond the Lynchian drapes. They play a slow tempo soundtrack that blend forest soundscapes with lush keyboards; a bowed cello and a bass guitar. The cello carries with it the suggestion of tension but this soon subsides. Spoken word is used briefly to recite a message in German, maybe a letter or a poem. It's delivered intimately. The entire exhibit feels personal; as though a secret being shared.

Set into the floor of the room is a large mirror reflecting the footage screened above. Light flares between the two. Overhead, two videos play at once. The first uses the square ceiling, the second swims on a circular fish-eye lens in the centre of the first. Neither video takes precedence. My attention is somewhere between the two. Sometimes their content overlaps, or seems to, as similar footage plays from another angle; not unlike the way we've been reorientated to view the work by lying down.

The fish-eye lens offers a portal to be transfixed by. Bulging textures bend past it and are then swallowed by its slippery edges. It seems vaguely endoscopic but roves widely, capturing semi-abstract close-ups and saturated patches of colour. At one point, a Japanese lantern sways in the central sphere, partially escaping its confines, partly defining its context. Visually, this lens has the hypnotic pull of a whirlpool.

Rist's videos show an array of textures; gnarled tree stumps, sprigs of grass, wire fences, twisted rope, plastic sheeting, water sluicing through river reeds, bursts of sunlight, fallen autumn leaves and auburn hair, a flag fluttering in the wind. The videos show simple acts; the most memorable is a woman's hand placed on the bark of a silver birch tree, and then again against the soft yellow petals of a flower, before the spaces between her fingernails are painted deep red. But it isn't the symbolism that stays with you so much as the overall experience, as an escape into visual pleasure.

"A Liberty Statue for Tokyo" is an alluring, sensuous work with glorious optics. Its informal arrangement may seem a novel presentation, but these are carefully considered conditions in which to experience it; a lure that takes hold quickly. After it finishes, it starts once more. I'm certainly in no hurry to leave.

"A Liberty Statue for Tokyo" (2009) was created by the artist Pipilotti Rist (b. 1962, Grabs Switzerland). It was filmed north of Tokyo in the rice fields of Kawachi and a garden in Yokohama. Selected by Yuko Hasegawa, "A Liberty Statue for Tokyo" was acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo as a participating museum in the 'Aspects of Collecting' project for the Essl Museum, Austria.