

folly matters

How I learned to stop worrying and love the throngs

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I simply don't have the strength for central London in full holiday swing. Rammed with people moving at alarming speeds in cars and buses, on bikes and foot, I become quickly disoriented and lose all sense of purpose – why did I come here? where am I going? where can I find an independent cafe? – before giving up and settling for a Starbucks. I order a filter coffee and feel defiant, before being relegated to the same queue as the usual suspects. There's no winning this game without a solidly researched plan of approach. I have one card up my sleeve, which has led me to Regent St in the height of Christmas shopping in the first place, and it had better pay off. Walking up the high-end historic strip, punctuated by the Night at the Museum lights so sardonically slated by Stewart Lee, I was jostled, cut off and tsked by shoppers much more determined and skilled in the ways of consumerism (I, like so many others, have retreated to the safety and security of online shopping, Amazon-free this year).

I'm with Lee here – someone has sucked the spirit out of Christmas, and while I hesitate to pin this on Ben Stiller and the remaining members of Take That (though they may rightly deserve it), I fear there's a much more menacing monster that's holding our festive souls hostage. It's loud, corporate, exploitive and it reeks of department store perfume. I sip my Starbucks filter coffee with contempt and judge those around me. Their bulging bags of shopping, their chestnut praline lattes, their smug, glazed faces staring down at smart phones, fingers swiping and tapping away. They've bought it (literally), hook, line and sinker. We are lost.



Night at the Museum lights, Regent Street, London

Despairing and misanthropic I make a move for my destination, an installation by Pipilotti Rist at Hauser & Wirth. It's on Savile Row, a street known for its traditional bespoke tailoring shops and commercial galleries. The exhibition has been celebrated by critics and events guides alike and promises something different, even pleasurable for the contemporary art-goer. Entering the gallery I take my shoes off as required and slip behind a giant denim curtain which runs the length and height of the space. Inside I am greeted by a sight that is instantly calming. A carpeted floor scattered with thick duvets and pillows. They look like cocoons, and as my eyes adjust I see visitors (participants?) sunk within them like babes in swaddling. Significantly, I notice all this before the art itself – a video work projected colossally across two full walls of the generous space.

I find a free duvet, drop my bag, and set about making myself a nest. I'm going to stay for a while, I decide, regardless of the art. But as I lie there, limbs akimbo, my back thanking me for this much needed respite, I am lulled gently into the work. *Worry Will Vanish Horizon* (2014) is a feast for the senses, combining visual and audio elements (Rist collaborated with musician Anders Guggisberg), its slippage between beautifully rendered layers of translucent membranes, spiderwebs, veins, leaves and liquids (from water to blood) is utterly transfixing. Based on a 3D animation of the interior of a human body, Rist takes us on a journey that mirrors our own organicism, through an eyelid, along the inner tubes of fingers, the throat, the belly; softly lit corridors all magically emptied of bones and

muscle to make way for us. Sound strange or disgusting? It isn't. It's beautiful. Celestial scenes are glimpsed through delicate orifices and figures unfurl across fleshy vibrant skeins. It's like being inside a foetus, looking out onto the world through a prismatic beam of coloured light.



Pipilotti Rist, Installation view 'Worry Will Vanish Horizon' (2014), Hauser & Wirth, London © Pipilotti Rist

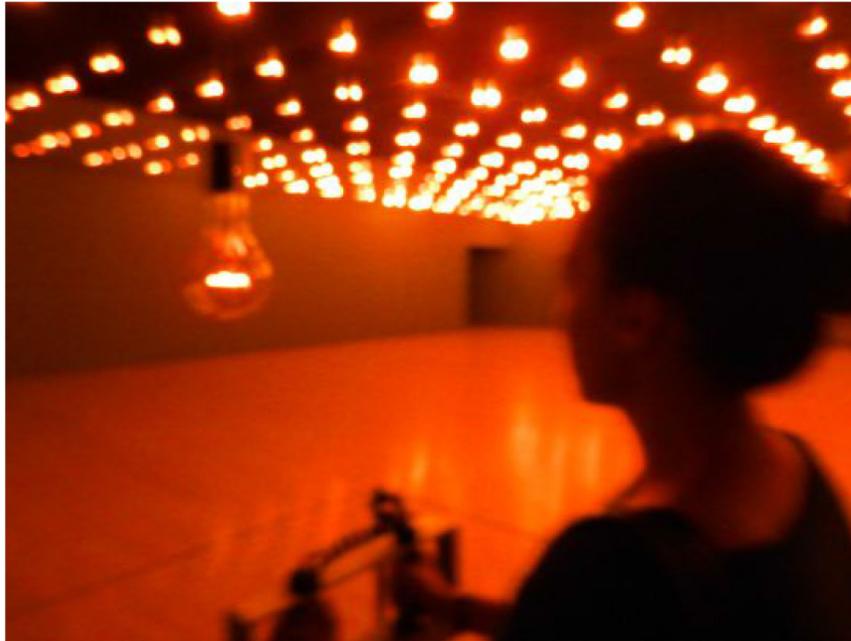
I watch it 3 times before I fall asleep. I wake and look around drowsily to see if I've been caught. Others are doing the same, drifting in and out of consciousness. I am experiencing the opposite problem that I normally have with video based artworks (confession): rather than checking my watch to gauge how long I need to stay in order to 'get it' (worrying that I'll miss something and feeling unsure about when it begins or ends, if that's even important), here I am worried about staying too long and start wondering if the gallery staff have a policy in place for politely ejecting loiterers. A few minutes pass and I sink back into my cozy bed, assured and relieved that I can stay as long as I like. In fact, it is clear from our collective lethargy that we all *need* this. Rist's work is excellent, its bold tactility and visceral pleasure creating an environment in which we feel safe, calm, and increasingly carefree. Unsurprisingly, her work uses principles of Autogenic Training, a relaxation technique developed by a German psychiatrist in 1932 to reduce stress. The frenetic pace of London's streets, the pressures of work, and the growing anxieties that are part and parcel (pun intended) of contemporary life, are taking their toll. If Christmas shopping has become a war zone, in this private gallery Rist has managed to create a safe haven.

Night falls as I emerge from the gallery and make my way back to Oxford Circus. I opt out of the Anselm Kiefer exhibition at the RA, finding I can't face its dark, complex windows into history after such a simple, and dare I say *easy* experience. I find myself wondering (worrying) if art is currently most effective as a form of escapism, designating precious little pockets for doing nothing together; spaces for reflecting, ruminating and reminding ourselves that as humans we share certain physical, mental and spiritual needs. Some of my most memorable encounters with contemporary art have been immersive and communal: Lee Bull's *Live Forever*, a room full of karaoke pods that lull the ensconced participants into a state of expressive extroversion, without the aid of alcohol. I left the gallery flushed and breathless after belting Radiohead's 'Don't Leave Me High' as I never thought I could, looking around at others to see similar levels of euphoria.

More recently, I experienced Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Room* on the floor of Montreal's Museum of Contemporary Art, sat amidst a large group of participants. Friends and strangers looked at each other aghast, watching our heartbeats collectively flash across the grids of lightbulbs above us, and hearing them pound in our ears and through the floor, amplified through a sound system. These are the artworks that stick in my memory, that stay with me, that fill me with wonder and hope. I think they offer far more than simple distraction or escape: they also have the power to bring people together in a way that seems singular, special, somehow authentic (if one turns a blind eye to art institutional agendas, of course); the kind of communal experience that is increasingly out of reach in public life.

I begin an aimless search for a quirky little deli to buy a gift for my gracious London hosts, who I am en route to see, but all I can find is a Tesco Metro. I don't own a smart phone, or an app, to tell me

where to go so I let out a deep sigh, steel myself, and enter. Desperately scanning the shelves for something meaningful, something real to give my friends, my mind returns to my snug little nest, among a sea of nests, all our restful faces basking in the lush colours and gentle light of Rist's videoscapes. If only I could wrap that feeling up, it would make the perfect gift.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, 'Pulse Room', Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014 (author's pulse included)