



MIKA ROTTENBERG

Revue de Presse

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Museum of Contemporary Art

There's a lot going on at the Museum of Contemporary Art this fall, featuring both local and international artists such as Fatma Bucak, Yazan Khalili, Mika Rottenberg, Krista Belle Stewart and Michael Lin.

Commissioned by MOCA, painter Michael Lin's vivid archipelago island mural takes over the entrance floor from October to February as a direct response to today's social distancing practices. Palestine-based artist Yazan Khalili's unsettling work "Medusa" (Sept. 3 - Nov. 15) is also a timely response to facial recognition technology that was created before the pandemic, now presenting another layer of meaning in these masked times. The practices of Kurdish-Turkish Fatma Bucak and Krista Belle Stewart, a member of the Upper Nicola Band of the Nsyilxcen Nation in British Columbia, combine in "Arts of Erasure" (Oct. 1 - Jan. 3) to create a dialogue around history, heritage and identity as their distinct interpretations of borderline experience speak to similar themes. And, Argentinian-American Mika Rottenberg's first showcase in Toronto, "Spaghetti Blockchain" (Nov. 12 - Mar. 21), addresses "hyper-capitalism" through installations of film, architecture and sculpture, within an angle of sustainability. If you can't make it in person, check out MOCA's online platform, "Shift Key" (Sept. to Dec.), with video works that touch upon ideas of slowness, collective narratives and memory, as selected by independent curator, Daisy Desrosiers.

Current hours of operation include Thursday, Saturday and Sunday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Friday 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., with the first hour of each day reserved for seniors and those at a greater health risk.





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ROME - Cities - Catch Video Artist Mika Rottenberg's Solo Exhibit



Catch Video Artist Mika Rottenberg's Solo Exhibit

The installation at Chicago's MoCA is a choose-your-own-adventure look at materialism

Written by Natasha Wolff

This winter, the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) presents "Mika Rottenberg: Easypieces," a solo exhibition of the Argentine-Israeli video artist Mika Rottenberg. The artist's immersive installations use satire to explore issues of the material world and environmental and commercial concerns. Her kinetic sculptures that transform and invert objects and the absurdist environments of her videos are often disorienting. "The exhibition invites you into a surreal world that calls attention to the unseen labor and technology that sustain our global economy," says its curator Bana Kattan. "Mika really thinks about the experience of the visitor; she carefully considers how sound travels in the space, she often shows the visitor the back of the work, purposely leaving it looking unfinished. From the moment you arrive, you are prompted to choose your own adventure by picking one of the two different entrance paths into the exhibition. She plays with perspective, making you aware of the floor you are standing on, the walls that surround you, and even, the ceiling that looms overhead." Through March 8.

For more on Chicago, click [here](#).

Tags: [All Cities](#), [Art, Arts and Culture](#), [Chicago](#), [Cities](#), [Museum](#)





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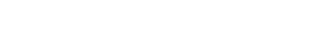
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Innovative Artist Mika Rottenberg Will Unleash Her “Social Surrealism” on New York This Summer

The New Museum will premiere Rottenberg’s darkly humorous work on June 26.

BY JULIE BELCOVE ON MAY 15, 2019

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Miro Kuzmanovic

Artist [Mika Rottenberg](#) has built an enthusiastic following for her subversive yet whimsical films and kinetic sculptures, and next month the [New Museum](#) in New York will assemble some of her most potent works in a solo exhibition that will no doubt be one of the summer's big draws.

Rottenberg, who was born in Argentina in 1976 and raised in Israel before moving to New York, has made her strongest mark with a succession of deeply strange films that are rooted in just enough reality to leave a searing impact—a style she calls “social surrealism.” Darkly humorous, the works often use characters with extreme body types and focus on the relentlessness and thanklessness of female labor. “I always find I come out of Mika’s exhibitions with a completely new way of viewing everything in the world,” says curator Margot Norton, who organized the survey. “Her work uncovers the bizarre aspects of the everyday.”

The New Museum marks Rottenberg’s first solo museum show in the city and will premiere her latest video installation, *Spaghetti Blockchain*, which Norton describes as a mashup of female Tuvan throat singers, a potato farm in Maine and the world’s largest particle accelerator, located at CERN in Switzerland. Rottenberg has been holed up in her studio this spring completing the complex piece.



A still from Rottenberg's video *Cosmic Generator*, 2017.

Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Wirth

Also on view will be a sampling of the artist's equally eccentric kinetic sculptures, plus several Rottenberg video favorites, including *Sneeze*, in which men with comically enlarged noses violently sneeze out a procession of rabbits, raw steaks and lightbulbs; *NoNoseKnows*, which conjures an absurd production line for cultured pearls, and *Cosmic Generator*, which slowly but surely links Chinese women working in trinket shops, the repetitious shattering of colored lightbulbs with a hammer, and miniature men in suits squirming on a plate of lettuce at a restaurant in a U.S.-Mexico border town.

ART+DESIGN MIKA ROTTENBERG NEW MUSEUM NEW YORK CITY

EN COUVERTURE

Les plus belles œuvres de 2019

De la biennale de Venise à celle d'Istanbul, de la Fiac à toute une constellation d'événements à travers le monde, jeunes talents et figures tutélaires ont illuminé l'année de leurs œuvres. Sélection éclectique de trois critiques d'art et/ou commissaires.

**Par Judicaël Lavrador,
Emmanuelle Lequeux & Hugo Vitrani**



EN COUVERTURE



Korakrit Arunanondchai

Né en 1986. Vit et travaille entre New York et Bangkok.

Un rayon vert et hanté

La démence sénile de sa grand-mère, des manifs anti-Trump, un anniversaire, un safari, la mort du roi... Le dernier film de Korakrit Arunanondchai unit comme en un rêve différentes séquences de sa vie et de celle de ses deux pays, la Thaïlande et les États-Unis. Le rayon laser vert de cet héritier du cinéaste et plasticien Apitchapong

Weerasethakul, qui connaît une ascension fulgurante de la biennale de Venise à celle d'Istanbul, relie deux mondes, l'univers réel et le royaume des esprits, dans une vidéo qui convoque des «systèmes invisibles». Influencées par les films que les soldats américains, en poste pendant la guerre au Vietnam, projetaient dans la jungle thaïlandaise, et dans la brume lumineuse desquels les moines voyaient les esprits, ses images hantées ne sauraient laisser indifférent. **E. L.**

«58^e biennale de Venise – May You Live In Interesting Times», exposition internationale
> À voir jusqu'au 24 novembre 2019



*No History
in a Room Filled
with People
with Funny
Names 5*
[détail], 2018

*Spaghetti
Blockchain,*
2019



Mika Rottenberg

Née en 1976. Vit et travaille à New York.

La louve des steppes

Comment pénétrer le secret de la matière ? Deux processus possibles, parmi mille autres : la magie du plasticien ou l'exploration scientifique du Cern de Genève, qui étudie la physique des particules.

Et si l'un et l'autre s'allient ? Cela donne le très étrange *Spaghetti Blockchain*, film orchestré par Mika Rottenberg dans le cadre d'une résidence dans le laboratoire de pointe. Dans une machine folle, compartimentée, l'artiste dispose des matières plus bizarres les unes que les autres, qui fondent, bouillonnent, brûlent, s'écrabouillent, aspergent. «Un système qui est vivant, mais qui n'est pas un organisme réel», résume la détonante plasticienne argentine, qui ne cesse de nous surprendre par ses coq-à-l'âne quasi quantiques. Dévoilé au New Museum de New York cet été, ce film de vingt minutes constituait l'une des plus belles surprises de la biennale d'Istanbul. Si l'on ajoute à cette impossible évocation des scènes tournées dans la steppe mongole, où des chanteurs de gorge s'adonnent à leurs incroyables mélopées, on comprend que la matière Rottenberg n'en a pas fini de retenir ses secrets. **E. L.**

«16^e biennale d'Istanbul – Le septième continent»



NEWS → [THREE TO SEE](#)

Three exhibitions to see in London this weekend

Mika Rottenberg's surreal world lands in London's newest space, Goldsmiths CCA, while the "king of cling" Azzedine Alaïa captivates at the Design Museum

[JOSÉ DA SILVA](#), [RIA HOPKINSON](#) and [AINEE DAWSON](#)
14th September 2018 12:07 GMT



Installation view of Mika Rottenberg *NonNoseKnows (Artist Variant) (2015)* at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Andy Keate; Image courtesy of the artist and Goldsmiths CCA

London's newest public gallery, **Goldsmiths Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art** (CCA), opened last weekend—to perhaps the wrong kind of fanfare—in a former plant-works building converted by the Turner Prize-winning collective Assemble. Its university campus location and labyrinthine space is the perfect ruse for [Mika Rottenberg](#)'s first major show in the capital (until 4 November). The show spans the Argentine artist's career to date, from her degree show work *Mary's Cherries* (2004), to recent pieces such as *Cosmic Generator* (2017-18). The exhibition gives us an insight into the development of the Rottenberg's visceral video works and installations that often immerse us in a world bordering on the surreal but anchored enough in reality to offer real bite. In the video installation *NonNoseKnows (Artist Variant)* (2015), the hand operated fan inducing the protagonist's noodle-making sneezes, is driven by a worker in a Chinese pearl cultivating factory. The surreal food production method juxtaposed with the dextrous but monotonous labour of the factory workers is mesmerising but also deeply disturbing.

[Azzedine Alaïa's](#) contribution to a ravishing new survey of his work, *The Couturier* (until 7 October), was cut short by his untimely death last year but the **Design Museum** and guest curator Mark Wilson have done justice to the great couturier's designs. The "king of cling" redefined the silhouette in the 1990s with the bodycon look (one floor-length black dress features a top-to-toe spiral of zips that traces the contours of the female form), but his work ranges from outfits based on the supermodel Naomi Campbell's proportions, elongated to resemble sculptures by Giacometti, to delicately dyed broderie anglaise and a dress rattling with tiny ivory-style teeth. The superb display features screens created by designers including Konstantin Grcic, while photographs by the artist Richard Wentworth, given rare access to Alaïa's atelier, line the walls. Whether you prefer seashell-barnacled bikinis or Velázquez-inspired voluminous gowns, any self-respecting aesthete would sacrifice a grandparent to own clothes like these.

The art of Arab cinema and literature are being brought together for this year's edition of *Safar* (until 18 September), a bi-annual festival of films from the Middle East. Hosted by the **Institute of Contemporary Arts** and the **Institut Français**, and organised by the Arab British Centre, the line-up includes a selection of 1960s film noir and contemporary films inspired by Arab literature from tales by Naguib Mahfouz to the classic story of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Many of the films have never been shown outside of the Middle East. This weekend you can see a selection of contemporary short films; newly restored versions of the classic films *Opium and the Baton* (1977) and *The Land* (1969); and the UK premiere of the Tunisian film *In the Land of Tararanni* (1973), an adaptation of Ali Douagi's book *Sleepless Nights* that captures the zeitgeist of the pre-independence period in the country.



Visual artist Mika Rottenberg. (Celeste Sloman for The Washington Post)

Opening our eyes

Nothing looks quite the same after you've experienced video artist Mika Rottenberg's work

By **Sebastian Smee**

Oct. 30, 2018

“It’s just really beautiful,” says Mika Rottenberg. “I always love to look at it.”

We are sitting at a table in her modest Brooklyn apartment on a hot afternoon in early October. Beads of sweat garland my neck as two fans circulate the humid air. A hamster sleeps in a little crib behind

Rottenberg, dreaming of treadmills, perhaps, or of the cradling hands of Rottenberg's 6-year-old daughter, who will soon arrive home from school. But right now, we are talking about ponytails.

"I guess the mechanical ponytail is funny to me because it's taking this free, hair-flowing-in-the-wind, accidental moment of beauty, and then trying to repeat it over and over again," says the 42-year-old artist, responding to my question about "Ponytail (Orange #1)," a piece she made this year. Installed in a gallery in London — part of her first major show there — it's simply a ponytail emerging from a wall, flicking convulsively up and down. The point is "to commodify it, so that it becomes annoying, absurd and stupid," says Rottenberg.

Mika Rottenberg: 'History is controlled by great artists — and maybe horrible people'



Commodification and absurdity are behind the work of Mika Rottenberg, whose 15-year career has helped to propel video art to new levels of sophistication. (Erin Patrick O'Connor, Sarah Hashemi, Ashleigh Joplin, Nicki DeMarco/The Washington Post)

Commodification and absurdity are, in fact, behind much of the work created by this diminutive — she's only 5-foot-2 — artist who, after a solidly successful 15-year career, is now poised to take the art world by storm. Rottenberg has taken video art — a medium often prone to excruciating longueurs, poor editing and cheap production — to new levels of

sophistication. Her films, which can be anywhere from a few minutes to half an hour long, are taut, visually seductive, intricately composed and suspenseful. They feature large-bodied women performing mundane work in tight, decrepit spaces. Chutes, shafts and tunnels connect them with lettuce farms in Arizona, an underground pearl-harvesting farm, or Chinese restaurants on the U.S.-Mexican border.

You could describe them as allegories about globalism and labor — particularly women’s labor. But they’re allegories that don’t quite add up. Increasingly, they’re about the mysteries of the universe itself. Rottenberg screens them inside elaborate room-scaled installations, often with kinetic sculptures nearby. (Apart from the flicking ponytail, she has installed air conditioners that drip into plants, and water droplets that fall from the ceiling onto hot electric frying pans, making a hissing sound — *tsss!* — as they turn into gas.)

What’s Next?

A [series](#) featuring the people, places and experiences that will shape the culture in the coming years. Other stories include: [Sports](#), [Movies](#), [Music](#), [Home](#), [YouTube](#), [Food](#), [Fashion](#), [Technology](#) and [Travel](#).

Nothing looks quite the same — not the lettuce in your fridge, not the nail salon down the street, not your pet hamster’s cage — after an encounter with Rottenberg’s work. “She alters your synaptic connections,” says Rottenberg’s former gallerist, Andrea Rosen. “You have to rearrange how you put information together.”

Rottenberg’s films have been featured in the [Whitney Biennial](#) , [the Venice Biennale](#) , and in museums and galleries worldwide. Her unique aesthetic continues to gain international attention: This year she has had solo shows in Miami; London; Bologna, Italy; and Bregenz, Austria. But she has yet to have a major survey in the United States. That will change in June, when New York’s New Museum will present a survey of her recent work. Margot Norton, the show’s curator, says that Rottenberg “has a keen sensitivity to the often-overlooked aspects that underlie the seemingly familiar.” She “opens our eyes,” Norton says, “to the peculiar and remarkable qualities of the everyday.”



A still from Rottenberg's 2017 video installation "Cosmic Generator." (Mika Rottenberg)

A R O U N D T H E W O R L D

Born in Buenos Aires and raised in Tel Aviv, Rottenberg has a warm, open manner. Springy ringlets sprout from her scalp. She has a thoughtful demeanor but breaks regularly into a mischievous grin.

In addition to her small Brooklyn apartment, she has a studio in Upstate New York, but she prefers to film on sets she constructs in rented studios and in far-flung locations. She has filmed in Iceland, on the border with Mexico and in the world's largest wholesale market, in Yiwu, China. She was on a potato farm in Maine in early October, and before that — a first for her — she directed a shoot among Tuvan throat singers in Siberia remotely: Without leaving home, she issued instructions to a Russian film crew.

All this footage feeds into films that can be beautiful one minute and repulsive the next, but are always mesmerizing. "Squeeze," for example,

imagines an elaborate process by which a sculpture is made from globally sourced lettuce, latex and cosmetic blusher. “Bowls Balls Souls Holes” is set in a bingo hall in Harlem and imagines links between luck, the laws of physics and climate change. In the multichannel video installation “Cheese,” six sisters milk cows and make cheese with a machine powered by their long, incessantly groomed hair.

For her latest work, she wants to return to the CERN laboratory on the border between France and Switzerland, where she had a residency over the summer. Scientists there are trying to solve the mysteries of the universe with the help of the world’s most powerful particle accelerator, the Large Hadron Collider. The lab, she says, “was amazing: it was so much like visiting a studio. You go into these giant hangars and they’re full of computer parts and wires and people working. The amount of cables that place has, it’s really crazy. They’re making these things and they’re not really sure what they are.”

For a while, Rottenberg wasn’t sure if there was anything at CERN she wanted to film. “But then I found this place, the antimatter factory,” she says, speaking with a slight accent, “and I thought, ‘This is it! I’ve got to film there.’” Antimatter consists of “antiparticles” — particles that have an opposite charge and properties to the particles that make up ordinary matter. It may not actually exist in our physical reality. But, says Rottenberg, “they’re making it! And in three years they’re going to know if it obeys gravity or not. That’s going to be this huge discovery.”

More and more, Rottenberg is interested in points of overlap between economic production and what science teaches us about the nature, the spirit, of matter itself. Just as Marx saw objects as embodying the labor that went into them, so stuff is not really stuff: It’s relationships — between elementary particles, energy, electromagnetic fields and more. “When we actually look at matter it’s amazing,” she marvels. “There’s no such thing as a still object. There’s literally kinetic forces and spirit and things constantly moving in it. There are no solid objects, it’s all just relationships.”



LEFT: A visitor takes a photo of Rottenberg's "Lips (Study #3), 2016" in Paris in October 2016. (Francois Mori/Associated Press) RIGHT: A closeup of the video installation. (Mika Rottenberg/Photo by Aurélien Mole/Andrea Rosen Gallery)

THE ILLUSION OF TRANSPARENCY

Rottenberg's father, Enrique Rottenberg, was a businessman who turned to film production. Rottenberg remembers being allowed on movie sets as a child. "I loved it," she says. "The energy. They filmed at night, and that was amazing for me — everyone really focused and making this thing. The production of the illusion, more than the film itself, was what really interested me."

Rottenberg's grandparents escaped from Poland just before Hitler's invasion. "They got a visa to Argentina just a few weeks before," she tells me. "Their parents and siblings and everybody else died. They were settling into life in Argentina when they got the news: Everybody gone. That, I think, was really hard."

Her family moved to Israel in 1977, the year after she was born. She attended art school in Tel Aviv, completing her master of fine arts degree at Columbia University in New York. She became interested in video almost by default. "I could never really paint," she says.

“She alters your synaptic connections. You have to rearrange how you put information together.”

Andrea Rosen, Rottenberg’s former gallerist



New York crystallized her interests and fueled her ambition. She is inspired by cinema (David Lynch is one director she cites) and by other contemporary artists, including Bruce Nauman and Matthew Barney (“the way he combined sculpture and video, and did it in this mega, unapologetic way”). But New York itself has been perhaps the biggest influence: “The aesthetic of it, the way things are patched together. The interactions of people, the busyness, the diversity.”

Rottenberg’s films are constructed like an assembly line, or algorithm. One thing seems to lead inexorably to the next. “It’s like a game of constructing logic and then breaking it down,” she says, “an illusion of transparency and understanding when in fact it doesn’t really make sense.”

For Rottenberg, the way things work in the real world is similarly opaque. “It’s so hard to understand our world right now,” she says. “I think it was always hard. But I think maybe 100 years ago you could see, Okay, this is how power is. Now it’s just overwhelming. Maybe through art, with its skewed reflection, you can attempt to give shape to things in order to try to understand it or relate to it.”

Rosen, Rottenberg’s dealer until she stopped representing artists last year, got to know her way of working better than most. “I think she’s a truly great artist,” she says. “None of her decisions about how or why things are a certain way are indulgent. She is both resourceful and savvy at getting to what’s necessary in the making of a piece.”

A B R E A K O U T M O M E N T

When Goldsmiths, the London art college, opened a center for contemporary art in a former Victorian bathhouse in September, the gallery chose Rottenberg for its inaugural exhibition. It was a breakout moment for Rottenberg in one of the art world's global capitals. Inside the gallery — a warren of scuffed, boxy spaces perfectly suited to Rottenberg's work — the curator, Sarah McCrory, told me that the first time she saw Rottenberg's work it made her “really angry.” I asked why, and she paused before saying, “I have no idea. I think I hadn't yet attuned myself to the feminist angle in Mika's work.” Later, in any case, she came to love Rottenberg's “ability to be seriously political but also funny and weird. That shouldn't work!”

'Squeeze,' by Mika Rottenberg



Clip from Mika Rottenberg's film, "Squeeze" (Mika Rottenberg)

The piece she saw was “Dough,” a claustrophobic yet visually lavish film suggesting affinities between expanding dough and outsized bodies. It stars Tall Kat, a 6-foot-9 woman who in real life “rents out her tallness,” explains Rottenberg, and Queen Raqui, a 600-pound woman who “makes a living from squashing people.”

Rottenberg finds Raqui beautiful. She has used her in several films. “She has so much pride in the way she carries herself, and it is very inspiring to

me,” she told Christopher Bedford, the former director of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, in an interview for an exhibit there. “She is a size-acceptance activist. People accuse me of basically hiring women’s bodies, but I don’t. These women own their own means of production.”

Goldsmiths has a long tradition of student activism. Rottenberg’s show there opened amid protests on behalf of the college’s cleaning staff, whose jobs were in jeopardy from outsourcing. The press preview was disrupted by blaring vuvuzelas and bedsheets turned into large signs asking: “Who keeps the cube white?”

The following night, the protesters’ numbers had multiplied. It was the grand opening, a celebration not only of Rottenberg but also of the new gallery, which had cost millions and been years in the planning. Guests had to cross a picket line, squeezing past signs showing black rats in silhouette and demanding “Justice for Cleaners.”

None of this had anything to do with Rottenberg — except that, of course, it did. Since her work is about hidden labor in a global economy, she could hardly stay above the fray. She issued a statement expressing “support and solidarity with the ‘Justice for Cleaners’ campaign.” She respected, she wrote, the protesters’ decision to use the opening night of the gallery as a way to promote the issue and urged the college to stick with in-house cleaners. She hoped, she wrote in a formulation that might have doubled as a wall text accompanying her work, that the protest would “help make visible the hidden labor and fragments of vital energy and exploitation that are embedded in everything we consume and produce.”



Rottenberg in New York. (Celeste Sloman for The Washington Post)

LABOR NEGOTIATIONS

Rottenberg has been embroiled in labor disputes of her own in the past. Filming “Cheese” in the summer of 2007, she found herself on a farm in Florida working with six women she had hired for their extremely long hair. There were also about 20 farm animals. It was extremely hot, and the women, says Rottenberg, “wanted to have time to wash their hair to make sure they looked good and not like witches.” But to wash and dry so much hair would have taken 24 hours, time Rottenberg could not afford.

“They formed a union against me and went on strike, and everything collapsed on the first day,” Rottenberg told [Border Crossings magazine](#). The parties negotiated and “found solutions that made everyone happy,” Rottenberg tells me now. “Unions,” she adds, “are a powerful tool!” For the rest of the week, she told [Border Crossings](#), the shoot was “an amazing experience. Part of the legal agreement coming out of the strike was that whenever I talk to the press, or give an interview, I have to say how beautiful and mesmerizing their hair is.”

“Maybe through art, with its skewed reflection, you can attempt to give shape to things in order to try to understand [our world] or relate to it.”

Mika Rottenberg



Rottenberg is often asked about her beliefs. She told Bedford that she likes that her work “gives space and a stage to women who don’t always obey gender and conventional beauty expectations. But my intention is to make an interesting artwork, not to serve a political agenda.”

Capitalism, she believes, has clearly gone haywire. “There’s something really wrong with the system.” Certainly, she says, it has had hugely positive effects. “It freed women and women’s bodies. It made a lot of people rich — and I don’t just mean the 1 percent. I benefit from it. But now, it’s just f----d up. You can argue different things about capitalism. But the fact that it’s destroying the ecosystem of our planet — you cannot spin that that’s a good thing.”

Our conversation is winding up. Glancing over at the sleeping hamster, I’m reminded that a lot of Rottenberg’s work shows women looking tired, yawning, falling asleep on the job. “Someone wrote about how the only thing capitalism hasn’t got to yet is your sleep,” she says. “That’s the only place you’re actually free — it’s the last frontier of freedom.” She laughs. “But I don’t know. You can also be dreaming about all the things you want to buy when you wake up.”

Sebastian Smee is an art critic for The Washington Post.



 5 Comments



ArtSeen

February 7th, 2018

MIKA ROTTENBERG

by Emily Watlington

The Bass Museum | December 7, 2017 – April 30, 2018

Readings of Mika Rottenberg's work nearly always herald it as Marxist (or at least anti-capitalist) critique. It's undeniable that her works address issue of labor, and that such a topic is imperative. But such readings of Rottenberg's work are too simplistic: taking on factory work does not a Marxist critique make, but moreover, such readings overlook her works' strongest points.

Take for instance the wall of air conditioning units dripping water into hot frying pans that serves as the entry to Rottenberg's solo exhibition at the Bass Museum. Titled *AC Trio* (2016), the installation is spectacular and disgusting, mesmerizing and repulsive. And surely the AC units might speak to class and consumption—they call to mind a New York City housing project with seemingly infinite stacks of units, rather than the constantly blasting central air units more common to Miami, where they are currently installed. Such units rack up excessive bills and carbon footprints. But the sizzling sound of the AC juice hitting the hot frying pan is more absurdist than critical, as is the similarly mesmerizing composition of gigantic ceiling fans that comprise *Ceiling Fan Composition #4* (2016), on view in the adjacent room.

The exhibition is sandwiched by two installations affixed to recent videos—*NoNoseKnows* (2015) and *Cosmic Generator (loaded #2)* (2017). The videos themselves are actually shown in traditional black boxes, rather than on monitors amongst elaborate installations that the artist used to exhibit earlier work. *NoNoseKnows* includes documentary footage from a pearl factory in China and shows women endlessly counting pearls and sorting them by color, quality, and size. The footage is interwoven with an absurdist narrative, wherein a white woman in middle management peddles a bike at a desk and sneezes out plates of Chinese food, while a large and seemingly heavy bubble floats but never pops in an adjacent room. The commentary is obvious—both in the sense that it is common knowledge and that it is legible in the work: factory labor has been outsourced to women of color.

This point is an important one, but this form of critique is, disappointingly, more literal and didactic—too on the nose, if you will—than the artist's earlier videos, which elegantly blended fiction and fact in



Mika Rottenberg, *Ponytail #2*, 2016 Hair, wood, acrylic tubing, mechanical system, nylon mono filament, ponytail holders, acrylic paint, Dimensions variable, Edition of 3 with 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris

more nuanced ways. This is perhaps the result of the artist responding to and internalizing what I characterized as simplistic readings of her work. In past works, Rottenberg regularly hired women who rent their extraordinary bodies to perform. *Cheese* (2008), for instance, features a group of real women with hair well past their toes modeled after a historical family—the Seven Sutherland Sisters—who marketed a hair growth product to men and who themselves had long hair. (Although *Cheese* has only six sisters). Rottenberg’s camera played voyeur to these exhibitionists. These earlier works bring up interesting and complicated ethical issues surrounding the commodification of bodies and the objectification of women. Among the actresses in *Cheese*, for instance, there are feuds amongst long-haired women who enjoy indulging hair fetishists and see their ability to capitalize on male desire as empowering, while others find the fetishists degrading. Furthermore, I don’t know that *NoNoseKnows* necessarily shakes up any conversation. Unlike *Cheese*, it gives form to facts art-viewing audiences are already likely to know.

The forms it takes, however, are incredible. Colorful, intricate, absurdist, and textured, everything the artist produces is recognizable as Rottenberg. But these forms do little for advancing a Marxist critique. Instead, they delicately and complexly negotiate the lines between attraction, fetish, objectification, and perversion—and, specifically, how these lines might be negotiated to feminist ends, or how women might image their own bodies while responding to the long and abusive history of representations of women by men. So more precisely, her work can be considered Marxist in as much as it looks at how critiques of the commodification of everything—including bodies—intersects with the objectification of women’s bodies, by the apparatus of the camera and the ways in which women choose to commercialize their bodies.

Moreover, I question what Marxist critique can even do within a world where even criticism itself is a commodity. Admittedly, this is not a problem unique to Rottenberg, but the women Rottenberg hired for *Cheese* went on strike during production because they felt the artist had not given them enough time to tend to their hair. While she makes work that speaks to pressures to conform excess and extraordinary bodies to capitalist demands for productivity, she herself apparently struggled to accommodate such bodies. This is analogous to the problem of women working to reclaim images of their own bodies in that both are complex conundrums that to this day remain unresolved. This is Rottenberg’s strength: throughout, she reveals the absurdist impossibility of capitalist critique (though the later video works take this critique more seriously and literally) and does not resolve the complex ethical lines it walks. Rather, it highlights them, leaving viewers simultaneously uncomfortable and mesmerized.



Mika Rottenberg, *Lips (study #3)*, 2016, Single channel video installation, mixed media, Dimensions variable, Edition of 6 with 1 AP, Courtesy of Jill Kraus

Also on view are Rottenberg’s *Ponytail* (2016) series, which features ponytails coming out of holes in the gallery wall. They are soft and beautiful, but motorized, retooled as whips. The works imply that there could be living bodies behind those walls. But hair is often beautiful and alluring, until it is removed from the body. This calls to mind Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, which describes that which is cast off as that which disgusts—hair is only gross when not attached to a head. In the lineage of Duchamp’s—and, later, Pipilotti Rist’s—peephole that demands the viewer becomes a voyeur, *Lips (Study #3)* (2016) is a video viewed through a pair of puckered lips protruding from the walls. Inside, ponytails, lips, and

butts come out of holes. Body parts are stripped from any subject, but it's clear that there are living subjects we cannot see.

Having only seen the ponytails in photographs previously, I was surprised to find that the ponytails whip constantly. I had imagined instead that they would appear still and soft, whipping only occasionally, allowing viewers to trust them as soft and alluring, only to be proven wrong. Nonetheless, the ponytails' subjectivity is an appropriately complicated one. They are literally objectified female body parts—and they have agency. Indeed, they could hurt you. Feminists have long debated whether intentional self-objectification can be retooled to empowering ends, even while it plays into patriarchal hands: a debate that is, to me, immensely uncomfortable and unresolved, and also elegantly captured by the divide amongst the long-haired women in *Cheese*. Rottenberg's work reproduces such a productive discomfort in the way that it attracts and averts. Although in the artist's own statements she sets out to justify the ethics of her actions (her voyeurism, for instance, has been questioned repeatedly), I find it so perplexing precisely because it revels in ethical ambiguity, foregrounding the disturbing complexity of the issues it takes on, rather than seeking neatly to resolve them.

CONTRIBUTOR

Emily Watlington

is the curatorial research assistant at the MIT List Visual Arts Center.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



Labor Costs and the Life of the Mind

by Samuel Feldblum

OCT 2016 | FIELD NOTES

On August 23, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) decided that graduate student workers at private universities may unionize and bargain collectively. The ruling ended a twenty-month wait for Columbia graduate students, who had petitioned the NLRB in late 2014.



To Signify Dreams on the Surface of the Body

by Michela Moscufo

FEB 2018 | ARTSEEN

Digging through tattered piles of mass-produced garments Rivkah Barringer and Amanda McGowan, founders of the fashion collective Women's History Museum (WHM), hungrily scavenge for evidence of past luxury.





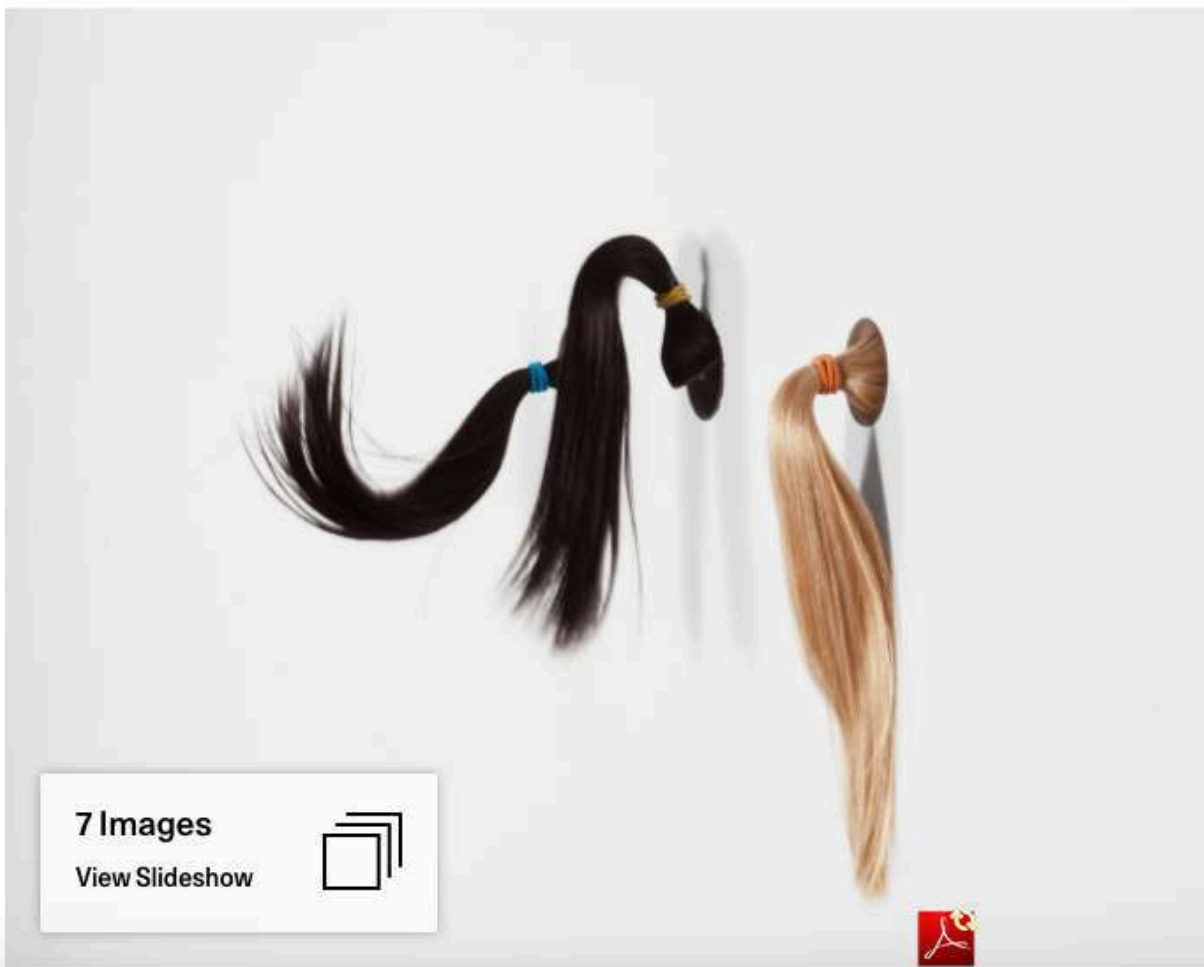
Art

The 20 Most Influential Artists of 2017

• By Artsy Editors Dec 15, 2017 5:51 pm   



Mika Rottenberg



B. 1976, Buenos Aires. Lives and works in New York

Raised in Israel, the Argentine-born and New York-based artist says her goal is “to make work that’s as accessible as possible, while being intelligent.”

Rottenberg, primarily a video artist and sculptor, squeezes thorny subjects (labor, globalization) through her distorted, technicolor lens. The resulting films and their whimsical, immersive environments are undeniably odd, cerebral, and fun, as evidenced by a standout installation at the 2017 Skulptur Projekte Münster. The centerpiece there was a film, *Cosmic Generator*, shot on both sides of the United States/Mexico border, as well as in China. As is her style, Rottenberg combined quasi-documentary footage with dreamlike sequences—like a scene in which tiny men, dressed as tacos, burrow through underground tunnels before arriving to be eaten at a Chinese-Mexican restaurant.

In December, Rottenberg opened an exhibition at the freshly reopened Bass Museum of Art in Miami, bringing her eccentric vision to the broad audience in town for Art Basel in Miami Beach. There, a new version of *Cosmic Generator* was joined by sculptural installations (incorporating emergency food supplies, ceiling fans, and inflatable palm trees) and a second video, *NoNoseKnows*, which debuted at the 2015 Venice Biennale. It imagines the globalized economy as a fleshy machine, powered by raw muscle (and mussels), absurd actions, and more than a few bodily secretions. Rottenberg cannily mixes footage of actual labor (women scooping and sorting pearls out of shellfish) with surreal moments (a drab bureaucratic office where a woman sneezes out plates of pasta).

Much like Pipilotti Rist or Ragnar Kjartansson, Rottenberg has earned popular acclaim while resolutely following her own passions and curiosity, which often involves engaging with communities other than her own. In an art world that might scoffingly consider “accessible” a dirty word, she continues to prove that brainy and big-hearted aren’t mutually exclusive.



Mika Rottenberg

Palais de Tokyo, Paris 23 June – 11 September

In the middle of Mika Rottenberg's meandering show at *Palais de Tokyo*, *Ponytail (Black)* (2016), a long, mechanically flipping, raven-coloured lock of human hair, springs from a mysterious hole that pierces a wall at head height. While this view is about as racy as a horse's tail swatting flies, the notion of a female jogger frantically bouncing in some secret room constructed behind it naturally comes to mind. Around the corner adjacent to the wall sculpture, the four rectangular windows of *Ceiling Fan Composition #2* (2016) open onto the hitherto hidden space. It is empty and split in half by a dropped ceiling, two spinning fans in the section above and two below. Too low and intricate for anybody to stand inside, this inaccessible installation makes the idea of an immured runner all the more twisted. She'd risk getting chopped by the motored blades.

Rottenberg's surrealistic works abound with partitioned-off spaces, which accommodate absurd human tasks that spiral into uncanny chains of events. Indeed, the Argentine video artist's characters – often played by people who do similar jobs in real life – contribute to the most ludicrous assembly lines, within which physical exertion almost never produces tangible goods, instead seeming to end in smoke. For example, the peephole of the video installation *Fried Sweat* (2008) lets prying viewers witness an evanescent grotesquery, staging a fiery trio's unusual attempt to produce human

steam. Next to a bodybuilder, whose dripping sweat boils over a hot frying pan, a martial artist breaks a thick pile of wooden boards bare-handed and a contortionist suddenly vanishes into thin air. Work-related accidents, the tragic vaporous conclusion of this video reminds us, happen in the realm of art too.

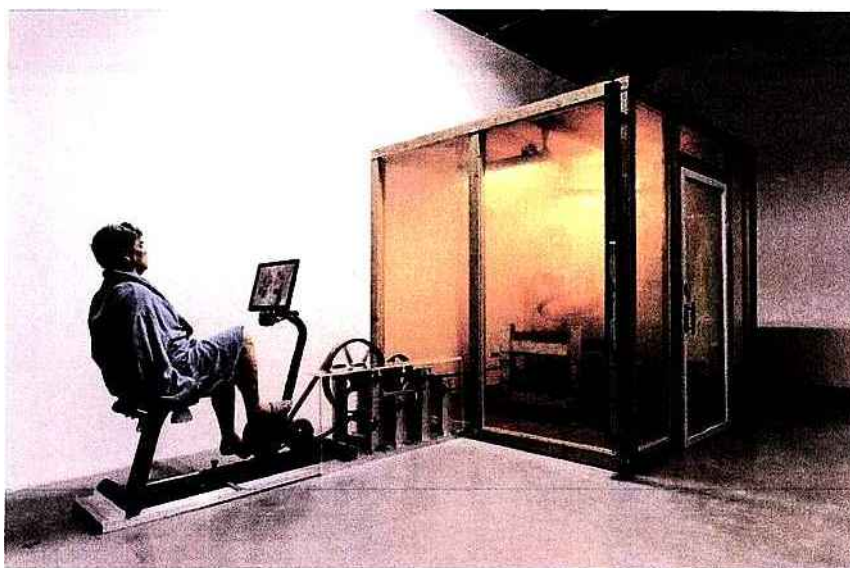
In the installation *Seven (Sculpture Variant)* (2011–16), realised in collaboration with Jon Kessler, the sweat of seven performers is collected inside a glass sauna, the latter heated by the pedalling of a stationary bicycle once a month during the show's run. Next to the equipment, two monitors document the fantastic production of 'chakra juice', supposedly out of the performers' perspiration. The first presents a mad scientist distilling the bodily essence, which is then sent to Botswana, where the members of a rural community – as portrayed in the second video – cautiously pour it into the arid ground of a desert. The Disneyesque cartoon spectacle of a splashy rainbow arising and two singing birds ensues.

The human body isn't the only matter that deliquesces in Rottenberg's bizarre aesthetics. Architecture melts too, in the video *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* (2014), which orchestrates a liquefied-snowball effect. Under a full moon, water from an air conditioner in a gloomy hotel room leaks through a crumbling ceiling tile onto a dozy woman sitting in a bingo hall, which awakens her abruptly. Frowning to signal her

displeasure, she clenches her fists tight, gathers psychokinetic superpowers and triggers global warming. Glimpses of throwing service superimpose over her angry face before she nods off again. During the exhibition, the three air-conditioning units of *AC Trio* (2016) also drip onto burning stoves, next to which tiny houseplants are slowly doomed to wither right under the viewers' noses.

In the video *No Nose Knows* (2015), a blue-collar Amazon doesn't bother watering the wilting plants decorating the interminable maze-like entryway of a factory, whereas once she reaches her office she is prompted to spray two feet curiously emerging from a basin. The pair belongs to one of many Chinese women sorting pearls on an assembly line below, while the former's labour consists of inhaling pollen from bouquets to trigger an allergic reaction. Spasmodic sneezes eventually make her expel an entire menu of noodle dishes which pile up on her desk.

Finally, in the video *Squeez* (2010), the conjoined effort of Mexican farmers, Indian pickers and Chinese masseuses produces a sculpture out of mashed-up lettuces, natural rubber and cosmetic tins. A shipping order, taped on a wall further into the exhibition, indicates that Rottenberg had this object consigned offshore, to be stored in perpetuity, thus protecting the real hard work that went into it from conceptual speculation. Isn't art the most invaluable human production? *Violaine Boutet de Monvel*



Mika Rottenberg in collaboration with Jon Kessler, *Seven (Sculpture Variant)*,
2011-16 (installation view) Photo: Aurélien Mole. Courtesy Palais de Tokyo, Paris



INSTITUTIONS

ARTISTS



13.07.2016



Anne Maniglier

Mika Rottenberg at the Palais de Tokyo: the dark side of contemporary culture

Artist Mika Rottenberg is a globetrotter. Born in 1976 in Argentina, she moved to Israel with her family the following year and attended the Hamidrasha school of arts in the suburbs of Tel Aviv, where she studied with video artist Guy Ben-Ner and laid the groundwork for her future career. She then moved to New York to further her education at Columbia University.

Since her debut as an artist in the late nineties, Rottenberg has managed to create an artistic universe of her own: since her seminal work *Dough*, (2005) she has retained this identity, even if her capacity to create has been opened up.

Her greatly acclaimed 2015 Venice Biennale exhibit, recreated a makeshift Chinese pearl shop, through which visitors accessed *NoNoseKnows*, the film component of the installation, commenting on the absurdity and the alienation characterizing the world of work — fitting perfectly with “All the World’s Futures”, the theme chosen by Okwui Enwezor, the biennial’s curator. This summer, Rottenberg is at the Palais de Tokyo for a major solo exhibition running until September. Happening met with the artist.

What are your biggest sources of inspiration?

The word inspiration evokes something positive — personally, I am more focused on the dark side of things and life, on the the downsides of contemporary culture. I think of my practice as a visual commentary that has less to do with art and its aesthetic premises and more with what is often forgotten and left behind, such as neglected and abandoned spaces...



Your videos often center on women and on the idea of work, with its absurd and surrealist side.

Yes, I often comment on the notion of work. As for women, they are not necessarily at the forefront of my artistic discourse, but they are often integral part of the performative side of the world of work, something which I play with and investigate. My pieces do not preach about morals and ethics, but my videos do focus on the notion of justice, and women are sidelined in most fields, particularly in the industrial sphere.

Do you write your own scripts? How does this work out?

Yes, I write a lot: pages and pages of notes, and by the end of it I am not even able to re-read through them. My method involves a lot of drawing, picture taking and redacting of notes, which takes a lot of time — a year at least to develop a story. When I try to speed the process up, the outcomes are often badly affected. My Venice piece *NoNoseKnows* (2015) was created in a relatively short time — a year, including post-production. I also enjoy the editing process and a lot of ideas come up whilst shooting.

Do you think of your installations as something altogether different from your videos? Or do you work on both at the same time?

They are very different — firstly because with installations there are no time constraints; they are cheerful and mischievous at the same time and they always link back to film, to create a balance of sorts.

Whilst conceiving this exhibition with the Palais de Tokyo, I was able to send over 3D plans of the installations, which they adjusted to: there were no issues; with museums that are worthy of their name, artists can easily work remotely.

The current exhibition was conceived almost as an architectural construction: it encourages visitors to roam around the exhibition space and its different rooms — to both surprise and challenge them. Freedom of movement within the exhibition space is fundamental for me: I do not want visitors to feel trapped — an exit is always at hand at my shows.

What would you like to do next? What are your plans for the future?

I would love to shoot a feature film, but I know that this will take another few years. I am attracted by cinema's ability to cater to such a large audience, to captivate and bewitch viewers. It is such a wonderful tool!





art press

JUILLET-AOÛT 2016 BILINGUAL ENGLISH / FRENCH

**PALAIS DE TOKYO : MIKA ROTTENBERG
MICHEL HOUELLEBECO
MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ INTERVIEW
ERNEST PIGNON-ERNEST
DOSSIER : LE THÉÂTRE DOCUMENTAIRE
SALON DE MONTROUGE EUGÈNE GREEN
ÉRIC LAURENT JONATHAN FRANZEN**



435

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mondialisation



MIKA ROTTENBERG

le réel et le travail

Nicolas Bourriaud

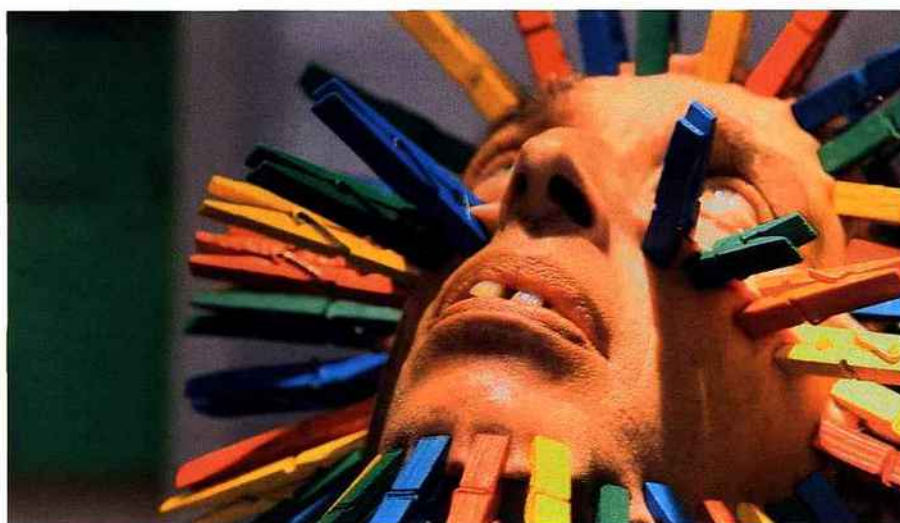


C'est un fait : l'économie de marché généralisée et l'économie numérique ont généré de nouvelles formes de socialisation et d'organisation, particulièrement dans le monde du travail. C'est un fait aussi que les artistes ont souvent tenté d'indexer l'art sur le Réel. Mika Rottenberg construit des scénographies qui révèlent l'immense chaîne de montage numérisée et immatérielle que constitue aujourd'hui l'activité humaine. Ses œuvres, des installations immersives, sont à découvrir au Palais de Tokyo, Paris, du 23 juin au 11 septembre.

■ Dès l'entrée de l'exposition, les visiteurs de la biennale du Whitney de 1993 prirent de plein fouet les images, floues, d'une scène se déroulant la nuit dans une rue de Los Angeles. Cette vidéo, qui représentait le tabassage d'un Afro-Américain nommé Rodney King par la police, n'était pas une œuvre d'art, mais un document filmé par un certain George Holliday – à ma connaissance, la première pièce à conviction jamais montrée dans le cadre d'une exposition. Et un événement qui pourrait bien constituer la *scène primitive* de l'art des décennies suivantes, ou du moins la clé – au sens musical – du rapport au réel qu'entreprendront les artistes des années 1990 et 2000. Car ce qui s'est joué dans cette exposition n'est autre que l'indexation de l'art sur le réel, voire un renversement du rapport entre le premier et le second. Le compte rendu de Roberta Smith dans le *New York Times* décrit d'ailleurs, avec un certain étonnement, ce qui sera par la suite monnaie courante : « Avec ses références persistantes au racisme, aux classes sociales, au genre, à la

sexualité, au sida, à l'impérialisme et à la pauvreté, les œuvres exposées touchent aux problèmes les plus urgents qui se posent au pays à l'aube de la présidence Clinton, et tente de montrer comment les artistes y font face. » Si les artistes avaient été jusque-là enclins à dépeindre le réel, à rivaliser avec lui ou tout simplement le créer, ils se voyaient désormais incités à le traquer, le révéler, voire se placer sous son égide. Une vidéo amateur filmée avec les moyens du bord, par un témoin caché et apeuré : est-ce là *le Radeau de la Méduse* ou *l'Enterrement à Ornans* de la fin du 20^e siècle ? Toujours est-il que cette simple captation du réel a représenté une conjonction inédite entre un événement et une forme emblématique, une réalité et un mode de représentation, qui annonce en fanfare les débats esthétiques ultérieurs. On verra ainsi cette pulsion documentaire dominer l'édition 2002 de la Documenta. Trois ans plus tard, je découvre le travail de Mika Rottenberg en visitant l'exposition *Greater New York*, au P.S.1. Son installation *Tropical Breeze* (2004) s'avère fort éloi-

gnée de l'esthétique documentaire alors en vogue : présenté à l'arrière d'un van, un film aux couleurs saturées montrait d'étranges procédures de travail, exécutées mécaniquement et en silence par des femmes au physique singulier. L'enchaînement désincarné des mouvements, les décors exigus et oppressants qui les abritaient, ainsi qu'une poisseuse intrication entre l'intime et le monde du travail, tous les éléments de *Tropical Breeze* créaient un malaise immédiat qui contrastait fortement avec l'ambiance pop et *corporate* manifestée par l'image. L'œuvre de Mika Rottenberg se présente ainsi d'emblée comme une voix sourde qui émanerait de l'intérieur d'un système – comme si un virus avait mélangé les rushes de la totalité des films d'entreprise existant, pour n'en laisser affleurer que les excréments et les déjections les plus minimes : du liquide, des gaz, des fumées, des boules, des billes. D'ailleurs, on ne sait jamais tout à fait ce que manipulent ou produisent ces fabriques dont nous suivons le fonctionnement pourtant pas à pas, salle par salle.



LES PRODUITS DU CORPS

Dans le récit de son expérience de travail à la chaîne, *l'Établi*, Robert Linhart (1) écrivait que « les usines Renault ne produisent pas des voitures, mais des relations humaines » : ce que mettent en avant les installations-vidéos de Rottenberg, ce sont des sécrétions corporelles, de la sueur avant tout (ce « jus de corps » qui représente pour l'artiste l'essence de l'être humain). L'objet *réel* du travail, c'est le corps du travailleur : sa déformation dans le processus laborieux, son inadéquation par rapport à l'univers physique qui l'entoure. La présentation de corps féminins hors-norme, clin d'œil à certaines artistes des années 1960 et 1970 comme Ana Mendieta, constitue également un commentaire grinçant sur le calibrage généralisé dont le monde du travail est le principal agent. Les femmes de Rottenberg peuvent peser trois cents kilos, ou mesurer deux mètres, ou encore arborer des cheveux d'une longueur inhabituelle. Mais ce sont leurs outils ou leur lieu de travail qui apparaissent monstrueux. « Je travaille, explique-t-elle, avec des femmes qui utilisent leur corps comme *moyens de production* – elles sont athlètes, bodybildeuses et catcheuses. [...] Mon œuvre les réifie : je les transforme littéralement en objets (2). » De ce point de vue, l'univers plastique de Rottenberg pourrait être considéré en regard d'autres artistes de sa génération qui

Cette double page /double page:

« *Bowls Balls Souls Holes (Hotel)* ». 2014.

Installation vidéo (27' 54") et sculpture. Dimensions variables. (Court. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York).

Vidéo installation, sculpture

confrontent féminité et normes supposées universelles, du modernisme aux représentations publicitaires en passant, justement, par le travail. La femme-objet, ce fut la figure cardinale du pop art, qu'il est passionnant d'aborder aujourd'hui à travers les contre-représentations qu'en ont élaborées des outsiders comme Marjorie Strider, Emily Waxell ou, de nouveau, Ana Mendieta. Sérialité féminine et fragmentation du corps, autant de figures par lesquelles les femmes artistes intériorisent de manière critique le regard masculin. Le champ de la performance, notamment, se voit ainsi remis à l'honneur par des artistes comme Lili Reynaud Dewar, qui explore des thématiques assez proches de celles de Rottenberg : un dialogue frontal entre le corps et l'objet, le métabolisme et les normes sociales. Toutes deux inventent des chorégraphies d'affrontement : l'une avec le travail, l'autre avec les récits historiques. Depuis les années 1990, l'univers professionnel a été le plus souvent représenté par les artistes sous l'angle de la cruauté, de l'humiliation, de l'absurdité ou de la mise en série du vivant. Santiago Sierra, le plus souvent à travers des performances documentées par des photographies, met ainsi en évidence de manière brutale la logique violente du capitalisme, celle d'une prostitution générale : payer quelqu'un pour faire n'importe quoi. Dans ce sombre tableau de l'exploitation, Sierra dessine en filigrane la figure de l'immigré, matière première de la *sweat factory* mondiale : elle imprègne la quasi-totalité des œuvres de Rottenberg. Définir le travail par le déchet, peindre l'être humain comme la victime du procès productif, autant de thèmes communs avec un artiste comme Paul McCarthy, dont on néglige trop souvent l'héritage beckettien : *Heidi*, une installation vidéo réalisée en collaboration avec Mike Kelley en 1992, contient ainsi les prémisses de l'univers de

Rottenberg. Avec son décor claustrophobe, ses personnages grotesques mi-humains, mi-marionnettes, accomplissant des actions absurdes et difficilement lisibles, *Heidi* fait figure d'exergue pour l'univers de Mika Rottenberg. La vidéo était d'ailleurs présentée à l'intérieur de son décor de tournage, tout comme elle montre les siennes à l'intérieur d'installations qui semblent mettre le regardeur en scène comme un personnage du film qu'il visionne. Mais McCarthy, fidèle aux principes de sa génération, se met en scène lui-même dans la plupart de ses travaux : il est avant toute chose un performeur. Plus déterminante est son obsession de l'excrément, des fluides corporels, du visqueux (que l'on retrouve, appliquée à l'activité artistique cette fois, dans la vidéo de 1995, *The Painter*), très proche de celle que déploie Rottenberg dans ses travaux.

LE TRAVAIL ET SON DOUBLE

John Miller a lui aussi exploré dans les années 1990 la dimension excrémentielle du commerce, à travers des œuvres dans lesquelles une myriade d'objets de pacotille se voyait agglutinée dans un *impasto* brunâtre. Se référant à la théorie de la valeur de Karl Marx, Miller expose entre 1985 et 1995 des peintures et des sculptures qui posent clairement la question de l'évolution perverse des rapports entre l'être humain et son environnement matériel. Prenant comme clé de voûte de son interrogation du monde du travail les temps de loisir accordés au salarié, Miller initiera à partir de 1994 la série *Middle of The Day*, qui documente, dans la ville où il se trouve, le comportement des gens pendant leur pause déjeuner. Ce thème des loisirs s'avère omniprésent dans l'art d'aujourd'hui, et ce n'est pas fortuit : il permet de montrer à quel point la séparation d'avec le monde du travail se révèle désormais poreuse, effacée encore plus par l'univers numérique. Pierre Huyghe a fondé en 1995 « L'Association des

temps libérés » afin d'explorer cette frontière en voie de dissolution. Dans ses récentes expositions, il fait travailler le vivant – chiens, abeilles ou bactéries – afin d'activer nos anticorps mentaux : si les normes du travail ont pris entière possession de l'espace humain, c'est par un processus d'activation du temps libre que l'être humain pourra récupérer son autonomie.

C'est le monde dans sa totalité qui semble se transformer sous nos yeux en une immense chaîne de montage immatérielle. Matrice visuelle et mentale, la structure de production théorisée par Taylor à la fin du 19^e siècle s'est désormais délitée, inondant l'ensemble des activités humaines sous une forme numérisée, liant consommation et production, loisirs et travail. C'est cette image que le travail de Mika Rottenberg s'évertue à capturer. Non pas l'appareil industriel en soi, mais sa dissémination dans les moindres aspects de nos vies. Les scénographies de Rottenberg insistent ainsi sur l'impossibilité de toute totalisation : à suivre le processus de production, on manque la finalité de l'ensemble ; et si l'on considère celui-ci, il est trop lacunaire pour mener à quoi que ce soit. Mika Rottenberg soustrait à notre regard l'objet autour duquel tourne la machinerie : elle cloisonne, isole, multiplie les fausses pistes. Le regardeur en retient l'idée d'une machinerie organique, d'un biopouvoir qui contrôle tout aussi bien ses sécrétions que ses gestes quotidiens, et d'une Cité constituée sur le modèle de l'usine.

Slavoj Žižek désigne le chômeur comme figure emblématique du prolétariat contemporain, mais il hésite à qualifier ainsi la catégorie du travail « immatériel » : « Faut-il insister sur le fait que seuls ceux qui participent au processus matériel *réel* de production représentent le prolétariat ? Ou accomplirions-nous le pas fatidique qui consisterait à accepter le fait que les *travailleurs symboliques* sont les vrais prolétaires d'aujourd'hui (3) ? » D'une certaine manière, le travail de Mika Rottenberg désigne chacun d'entre nous comme ce « travailleur symbolique ». Traînant son silence et sa solitude dans les grottes, caves, greniers et baraquements sinistres qui forment le décor de ses installations, Rottenberg représente l'être humain comme une sorte d'*objet* lacanien du monde contemporain. Autrement dit, comme une variable statistique, figure grotesque placée dans des aquariums grossissants. ■

Mika Rottenberg et John Kessler.

« SEVEN » (photogramme). 2012. Matériaux divers, vidéo (trois canaux), 36'08". Commande de Performa pour « Performa 11 ». © Mika Rottenberg
Court. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
et Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris). *Video, 3 channels*





(1) Dans cet ouvrage, paru en 1978 aux Éditions de Minuit, Robert Linhart, membre de la Gauche prolétarienne, raconte son expérience d'établi, c'est-à-dire d'intellectuel qui a choisi de s'établir comme ouvrier dans une usine.

(2) Entretien avec Eleanor Heartney, *artpress*, n° 377, avril 2011.

(3) Slavoj Žižek, *le Spectre rôde toujours*, Nautilus.

Nicolas Bourriaud, auteur notamment de *Esthétique relationnelle* (*Les Presses du réel*, 1998), et de *Radicant* : pour une esthétique de la globalisation (*Denoël*, 2009), est directeur de projet du futur centre d'art contemporain de Montpellier Métropole, et directeur artistique de la Panacée.

Mika Rottenberg

Né en/born 1976 à/in Buenos Aires, Argentine
Expositions personnelles récentes/*Recent solo shows*:
Magasin 3, Stockholm
2014 Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Rose Art Museum, USA; The Israel Museum, Jérusalem
2015 Jupiter Artland Foundation, Édimbourg
2016 Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris; BASS Art Museum, Miami
2017 Skulptur Projekte Münster

Mika Rottenberg: Work Stations

It's a fact: the generalized market economy and the digital economy have generated new forms of socialization and organization, particularly in terms of labor. It's also a fact that artists often tend to reference the real in their work. As for Mika Rottenberg, she constructs scenarios that reveal the immense digital and immaterial assembly line that human activity constitutes today. Her work will be on view from June 23 through September 11 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

As soon as they entered the show, visitors to the 1993 Whitney Biennial were hit in the face by blurry images shot at night in the streets of Los Angeles. This video showing the police beating an African-American named Rodney King was not an artwork but documentary footage filmed by a man named George Holliday, to my knowledge the first "exhibit," in the juridical sense of a piece of evidence, to be

shown at an exhibition. This event could be considered the primal scene of much of the art produced over the following decades, or at least the key, in the musical sense of the word, of artists' relationship with reality during the 1900s and 2000s. The theme of the Whitney show was a shift in the relationship between art and reality, with art now indexed to reality. In her *New York Times* review Roberta Smith observed, with a certain surprise, something that was soon to become the currency: "With its persistent references to race, class, gender, sexuality, the AIDS crisis, imperialism and poverty, the work on view touches on many of the most pressing problems facing the country at the dawn of the Clinton Administration and tries to show how artists are grappling with them." Whereas previously artists had been inclined to depict the real, enter into a rivalry with it or even just create it, now they felt obliged to track it, reveal it and even put their

« Tropical Breeze » (Felicia). 2004



work under its authority. An amateur video filmed haphazardly by a hidden and frightened witness—was that the *Raft of the Medusa* or the *Burial at Ornans* of the late twentieth century? It was certainly the case that this simple capture of reality represented an unprecedented conjunction between an event and an emblematic form, a reality and a mode of representation, which heralded the aesthetic debates to come. For instance, the documentary spirit was to dominate the 2002 documenta.

BODY PRODUCTS

Three years after that I first saw Mika Rottenberg's work at an exhibition called *Greater New York* at P.S.1. The aesthetics of her installation *Tropical Breeze* (2004) turned out to be the total opposite of the documentary values then in vogue. Screened in the back of a van, a film in saturated colors showed women with non-standard bodies doing strange sorts of work, mechanically and in silence. Their almost disembodied, repetitive movements and the narrow and oppressive spaces in which they worked, with beads of sweat symbolizing the imbrication of their personal self and their existence in the workforce, were elements that made *Tropical Breeze* immediately disturbing in a way that contrasted sharply with the Pop ambience and corporate quality of the images. From the start Rottenberg's work has seemed like a muffled voice emitted from inside a system, as though a virus had produced a mash-up of the totality of the footage from existing corporate documentaries, from which there emerged nothing but the most basic secretions—liquid, gas, smoke, big and little balls. We never know exactly what these workplaces are making, even though we follow the production process step by step in room after room.

In *L'Établi*, a book describing his experience as a production line worker, Robert Linhart wrote, "Renault factories don't produce cars, they produce relationships between human beings." (1) Rottenberg's video installations feature bodily excretions, especially sweat ("the body's juice," as the French expression goes), that for this artist represent the essence of human beings. The real object of work is the body of the worker, its deformation by the labor process and its incompatibility with the physical world around it. The presentation of non-standard women's bodies, an homage to the work of women artists of the 1960s and 70s like Ana Mendieta, is also an abrasive comment on the standardization imposed by the working world in general. Rottenberg's women may weigh three hundred kilos, stand two meters tall, or sport unusually long hair, but it is their tools and working conditions that seem monstrous. "I work," she explains, "with women who use their bodies as means of production—they



are athletes, bodybuilders and wrestlers. [...] my work objectifies them, I literally make an object out of them." (2). Seen from this angle, Rottenberg's visual universe can be compared to that of other artists of her generation who question femininity and supposedly universal norms, from modernism to their representation in advertising and, of course, in the workplace. Woman-as-object was the cardinal figure in Pop Art and the fascinating theme of the counter-representations made by non-mainstream artists such as Marjorie Strider, Emily Waxell and, once again, Mendieta. Mass-produced women and female body parts are figures through which women artists critically interiorize the male gaze. They are also a major theme in the performance art privileged by people like Lili Reynaud Dewar, who explores issues similar to those taken up by Rottenberg, a direct dialogue between the body and the object, the human metabolism and social norms. The work of both these artists is marked by a choreographed confrontation: Rottenberg with labor, Dewar with historical narratives

Cette page / this page:

« NoNoseKnows (Pearl Shop variant) », 2015.
Installation vidéo (22 min) et sculpture.
Œuvre présentée à la Biennale de Venise, en 2015.
(Court. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York).

WORK AND ITS DOUBLE

Since the 1990s artists have often represented the working world as cruel, humiliating and absurd with its assembly-line production of human beings. Santiago Sierra makes photos documenting performances that starkly bring out the violent logic of capitalism, a kind of generalized prostitution: anyone can be paid to do anything. The figure of the immigrant is omnipresent in his somber tableaux of exploitation, just as it is in Rottenberg's work. The definition of labor by its waste products and the painting of human beings as victims of the process of production are themes shared by artists like Paul McCarthy, whose debt to Beckett is too often overlooked. In *Heidi*, a video installation made with Mike Kelley in 1992, we also see basic elements of Rottenberg's world, such





as the claustrophobic settings and grotesque characters, half-human and half-puppets, performing absurd and difficult-to-identify actions. The figure of Heidi could stand in for Rottenberg's whole cast of characters. Further, the video was screened inside the same set where it was shot, just as she shows her videos inside installations where viewers feel like they have become characters in the film they are watching. McCarthy, following principles common among his generation, plays the parts himself in most of his pieces. He is above all a performer. But another thing he shares with Rottenberg is an obsession with excrement, body fluids and vicious liquids in general (seen once again in the painting process illustrated in the 1995 video *The Painter*).

John Miller has also explored the excremental dimension of business in his work in which a myriad of junk items is stuck in a brownish impasto. Basing himself on Karl Marx's theory of value, between 1985 and 1995 he showed paintings and sculptures that clearly pose the question of the per-

verse evolution of the relations between human beings and their environment. Focusing on the snatches of leisure time accorded to wage workers during working hours, in 1994 he began a project called *Middle of The Day*, documenting people's behavior during their lunch break in whatever city Miller happened to find himself in at the time. It's no accident that the subject of leisure is so common in today's art, since it allows artists to demonstrate the degree to which work is seeping into our off-hours, especially as digital technologies erase the boundaries that once held back the working day. Pierre Huyghe founded the "Association des temps libérés" (Freed Time Association) in 1995 to explore this phenomenon. His recent shows highlight labor performed by dogs, bees, bacteria and other non-human living beings in order to activate our mental antibodies: if work norms have completely taken over the human race, it is through a process of the activation of free time that human beings can reclaim their autonomy.



A FORMAL MATRIX

The whole world seems to be changing into an immense immaterial assembly line right before our eyes. As a visual and mental matrix, the organization of production as theorized by Taylor at the end of the nineteenth century has crumbled, inundating the ensemble of human activities in a digital form, linking production and consumption, leisure and work. That's the image Rottenberg seeks to capture. Not the industrial apparatus in itself, but its scattering into each and every aspect of our lives. Rottenberg's scenarios emphasize the impossibility of any totalization: if we stick to the production process we lose sight of its finality, and if we consider the finality, it's too lacunar to get us anywhere. Rottenberg does not allow us to see the object the machinery revolves around. She compartmentalizes and isolates; red herrings proliferate. The take-home for the viewer is the notion of an organic machinery, a biopower that controls our secretions as well as our everyday acts, and a Fordist society, organized on the model of a factory. Slavoj Žižek calls the unemployed the emblematic figure of the contemporary proletariat, but he hesitates about the category "immaterial" work. "Must we insist on the fact that only those who participate in the real, material process of production represent the proletariat? Or will we take that fateful step that consists of accepting the fact that symbolic workers are today's real proletarians?" (3) In a way, Rottenberg designates each of us a "symbolic worker." Dragging her silence into the caves, cellars, attics and sinister shacks that form the backdrops of her installations, she represents human beings as a kind of Lacanian "objet petit a" of the contemporary world. In other words, a statistical variable, a grotesque figure placed in magnifying aquariums. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff

(1) In this book, published in 1978 by Éditions de Minuit, Robert Linhart, a member of the Maoist Gauche Prolétarienne, recounts his experience as an intellectual who has chosen to become embedded in a factory as a worker.

(2) Interview with Eleanor Heartney, *artpress* no. 377, April 2011.

(3) Slavoj Žižek, *The Specter Is Still Roaming Around*, Arzin, 1998.

Nicolas Bourriaud, the author of *Esthétique relationnelle* (*Les Presses du réel*, 1998), and *Radicant*: pour une esthétique de la globalisation (*Denoël*, 2009), is project director for the future *Montpellier contemporary art museum* and artistic director of *La Panacée*.

En haut/top: « Sneeze », 2012. Still.

(Court. gal. Laurent Godin, Paris). *Single channel video*

Ci-contre //left: Mika Rottenberg.

(Ph. Jessica Chou)

Artist Mika Rottenberg Wants You to Know That Conventional Beauty Is Overrated

JULY 12, 2016

by MACKENZIE WAGONER



Artist Mika Rottenberg explores aesthetics in her work, currently on display at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

Photo: Gregor Hohenberg / laif / Redux

If you ask artist Mika Rottenberg, conventional beauty isn't actually as covetable as you might believe. "I don't think people are necessarily attracted to ideal beauty, otherwise there wouldn't be so many kinds of websites for very large women, very tall women—that's a huge subculture." She should know. The award-winning New York-based artist, who is currently enjoying a solo show at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, is best known for her video work driven by heroines with physical particularities, from extreme height to hair length. "For me, beauty is about how they own and inhabit their body. If you're conventionally beautiful, you constantly get approval. If you have an extraordinary body, you have to learn to feel comfortable in it—and it's always inspiring to be comfortable in your own skin."

Rather than trying to conform to an established ideal, her subjects take such pride in their idiosyncrasies that they are able to make a profit, and sometimes a living, off them. The exceptional human beings featured in the videos that pepper Rottenberg's self-titled show—professional bodybuilders, the uber flexible, and fetish wrestlers for hire—

have been cast from websites that commodify their physical attributes and ultimately allow them to take ownership of their own objectification. "I don't feel like they're trying to fit into someone else's system. I find that very powerful—it's kind of misbehaving in a way."

Now transposed in front of Rottenberg's lens, these same women act out surrealist plotlines, forming

human assembly lines in which imagined processes involving harvesting fingernails, washed hair, and tears result in the production of everyday commodities like maraschino cherries or dough. The series ultimately raises questions of the value of labor, physical boundaries, beauty, and ownership of the body.

It's not the first time Rottenberg has tackled the issue of aesthetics. In one of her best-known films, *Cheese*, five women with ankle-grazing waves shake their hair to herd goats, and use a collaborative

process of washing, wringing, and styling one another's hair to eventually create a mysterious bottled liquid. The concept is not as far-fetched as it sounds. The piece was inspired by the Sutherland Sisters, seven real-life gloriously maned American siblings who, in the 19th century, left their farm behind to hawk a family-made hair-growth tonic. Their own great lengths, which extended well past their feet, incited such envy in newspaper advertisements and drugstore appearances that the women were unable to walk down the street without being mobbed by fans, and their precursor to Viviscal netted a reported \$90,000 in a single year. "They were the first American supermodels, commodifying part of themselves to sell something completely unrelated [to their own physical bodies]. They're the first shampoo commercial."



The performance installation, *Seven*.

Photo: Aurélien Mole

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For all of the extreme hair, bold manicures, and bright lipstick that make an appearance in her work, Rottenberg admits that she doesn't wear makeup herself and does little to coax her curly hair from twisting however it pleases. The Argentinian-born, Israeli-raised, former resident of Spain has never exactly fit in, and she no longer feels the need to. "The definition of what's beautiful has really expanded since I was growing up. It's less defined. There's more room for rebellion. Even with conventional models, there's a lot more room for extreme." In other words, skin—in all its shapes and colors—just got a lot more comfortable.



Ponytail, in foreground.
Photo: Aurélien Mole

For all of the extreme hair, bold manicures, and bright lipstick that make an appearance in her work, Rottenberg admits that she doesn't wear makeup herself and does little to coax her curly hair from twisting however it pleases.

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Another view of *Seven*.
Photo: Aurélien Mole

LE QUOTIDIEN DE L'ART

PATRIMOINE

LA RESTITUTION DES
FRISES DU PARTHÉNON
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LE MUSICIEN ET ARTISTE
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BIOT 1954 : L'UTOPIE
À LA PÉRIPHÉRIE

ART D'APRÈS-GUERRE ▶ [PAGE 5](#)



**HELENA NEWMAN
DEVIENT PRÉSIDENTE
EUROPE DE SOTHEBY'S**

▶ Lire page 02



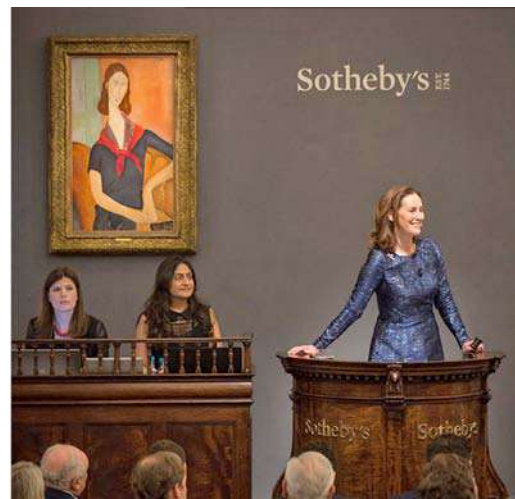
**LA MÉCANIQUE DES FLUIDES
DE MIKA ROTTENBERG
AU PALAIS DE TOKYO**
ART CONTEMPORAIN ▶ [PAGE 7](#)

PERTURBÉE PAR L'ACTUALITÉ TURQUE, L'UNESCO CLÔT SON COMITÉ DU PATRIMOINE MONDIAL

> Le contexte a été malheureux : quatre jours après l'ouverture de la 40^e session du Comité du patrimoine mondial à Istanbul, une tentative de coup d'État militaire en Turquie, le 15 juillet, a obligé l'Unesco à clore ses débats trois jours avant la date prévue. Malgré la gravité de la situation, l'organisation a annoncé avoir inscrit 21 nouveaux sites sur la liste du patrimoine mondial, sur les 27 qui concourraient. Le nombre total de sites inscrits s'élève aujourd'hui à 1 052, répartis dans 165 pays. Parmi les douze sites culturels distingués se trouvent, outre l'œuvre de Le Corbusier (lire *Le Quotidien de l'Art* du 18 juillet), le chantier naval d'Antigua et ses sites archéologiques associés (Antigua-et-Barbuda), les cimetières de tombes médiévales stecci (Bosnie-Herzégovine, Croatie, Monténégro, Serbie), l'ensemble moderne de Pampulha conçu par l'architecte Oscar Niemeyer (Brésil), le paysage culturel d'art rupestre de Zuojiang Huashan (Chine), le site de dolmens d'Antequera (Espagne), le site archéologique de Philippos (Grèce), le site archéologique Nalanda Mahavihara (université de Nalanda) à Nalanda, dans l'État du Bihar (Inde), le qanat perse (République islamique d'Iran), le Nan Madol, centre cérémoniel de la Micronésie orientale (États fédérés de Micronésie), l'ensemble des grottes de Gorham (Gibraltar) et le site archéologique d'Ani (Turquie). Six sites naturels ont été labellisés, parmi lesquels le Mistaken Point au Canada, le désert iranien de Lout, les parcs soudanais nationaux marins de Sanganeb et de la baie de Dungonab - île de Mukkawar, ou encore l'archipel de Revillagigedo, au Mexique. Enfin, trois sites à la fois naturels et culturels font leur entrée sur la liste, dont les Ahwar du sud de l'Irak, refuge de biodiversité et paysage relique des cités mésopotamiennes. Par ailleurs, l'état de conservation de 155 sites a été examiné, obligeant les membres de l'Unesco à inscrire sept nouveaux sites sur la liste du patrimoine mondial en péril. La Libye est au centre de l'attention avec les menaces pesant sur les sites des anciennes villes de Ghadamès, de Cyrène, de Leptis Magna, de Sabratha, ou de Tadrart Acacus. En revanche, un site en Géorgie a été retiré. La 41^e session du Comité du patrimoine mondial se tiendra à Cracovie, en Pologne, en juillet 2017.



40^e session du Comité du patrimoine mondial à Istanbul, le 17 juillet 2016. Inscription. Copyright : Unesco. Photo : Éric Esquivel.



Helena Newman.
© Sotheby's.

HELENA NEWMAN DEVIENT PRÉSIDENTE EUROPE DE SOTHEBY'S

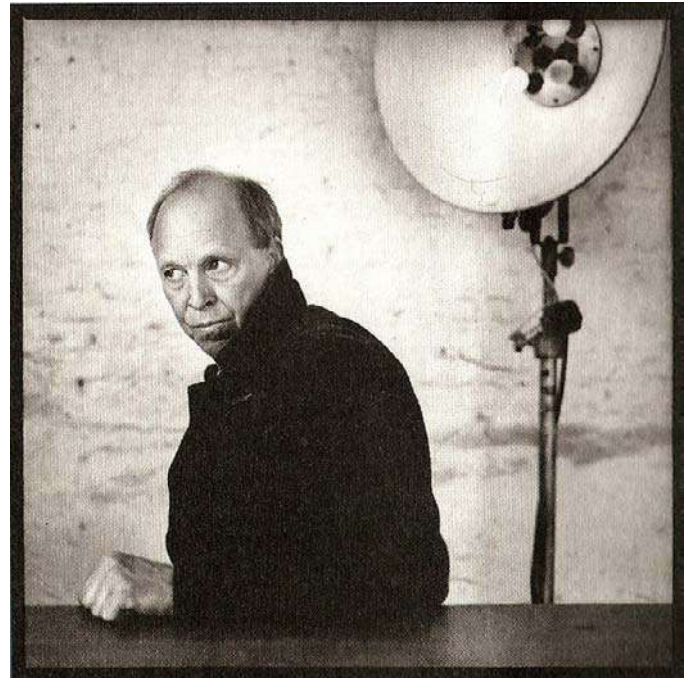
> Promotion chez Sotheby's pour Helena Newman : la codirectrice mondiale pour l'art impressionniste et moderne devient présidente Europe de la maison de ventes. Elle travaillera aux côtés d'Oliver Barker, comme elle basé à Londres, Mario Tavella (président de Sotheby's France) et Philipp von Württemberg (président de Sotheby's Allemagne). Tous les quatre occupent la fonction de coprésidents Europe et participent au conseil stratégique pour cette zone géographique mise en place en avril 2016 par Sotheby's. Helena Newman, qui cumulera donc deux fonctions, travaille dans cette maison depuis 1988. Sa nomination fait suite à la démission en mars de son prédécesseur à ce poste, Henry Wyndham, qui s'inscrit dans le plan de départs volontaires lancé par le PDG du groupe, Tad Smith.



DIRK BRAECKMAN REPRÉSENTERA LA BELGIQUE À LA BIENNALE DE VENISE 2017

> Le ministre flamand de la Culture, Sven Gatz, a choisi le photographe Dirk Braeckman pour représenter la Belgique à la 57^e Biennale de Venise, a annoncé le jeudi 14 juillet le M - Museum Leuven. À ses côtés, Eva Wittocx, coordinatrice générale de l'institution, sera chargée du commissariat du pavillon. Le projet sera réalisé en étroite relation avec le M - Museum Leuven qui en assurera l'organisation. « Dans les prochains mois, l'équipe du M et l'atelier de l'artiste collaboreront intensivement au concept de l'exposition, pour faire du pavillon belge une expérience totale exceptionnelle », a déclaré la commissaire. L'artiste exposera une série de photographies interrogeant la profusion des images dans nos sociétés, cherchant par là même à désamorcer les figures « spectaculaires » qui habitent nos écrans afin que « le spectacle se trouve dans l'image, dans l'apaisement et dans une certaine sacralité », a expliqué Dirk Braeckman. Depuis une vingtaine d'années, l'artiste cherche à travers la photographie documentaire à exposer la présence de sa subjectivité par le truchement d'effets de surexposition et de sous-exposition, et par la diversité des modes de tirages. Photographiant des nus féminins, des chambres vides, ou encore des vues d'hôtels abandonnés, le photographe explore aussi bien des mondes connus que des lieux en perdition. À l'issue de la biennale, l'exposition sera présentée en 2018 à Bozar à Bruxelles ainsi qu'au M - Museum Leuven.

<http://www.mleuven.be/fr/>



Dirk Braeckman. Photo : D. R.



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LE QUOTIDIEN DE L'ART

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LA RESTITUTION DES FRISES DU PARTHÉNON COMME MONNAIE D'ÉCHANGE POUR LE BREXIT ?

> Au Royaume-Uni, un projet de loi en faveur de la restitution à la Grèce des frises du Parthénon – conservées par le British Museum à Londres – a été examiné à la House of Commons, le 11 juillet, soit 200 ans jour pour jour après leur acquisition par la Grande-Bretagne. Ce texte de loi est porté par une dizaine de parlementaires britanniques, issus du parti conservateur et du parti libéral, mais aussi du Labour, du SNP et de Plaid Cymru. La proposition qui vise à restituer les sculptures – qui représentent la moitié des marbres du monument antique – dont Lord Elgin a pris possession en Grèce, alors sous autorité ottomane, est présentée comme une monnaie d'échange afin de faciliter les discussions avec les pays européens dans le cadre de la procédure du Brexit. Andrew George, président de l'association militant pour le retour des marbres en Grèce, a confié à *The Independent* qu'il serait dans l'intérêt des Britanniques de prouver que quitter l'Europe « n'implique pas que nous devenions introvertis, et xénophobes vis-à-vis de l'Europe, mais au contraire dignes de confiance et capables d'être généreux ». Alors que le gouvernement de David Cameron s'est toujours prononcé contre cette restitution, l'arrivée de Theresa May pourrait changer la donne. Le texte passera en deuxième lecture au Parlement britannique en janvier 2017.



Frises du Parthénon
au British Museum
à Londres. Photo :
Wikipedia.



LE MUSICIEN ET ARTISTE ALAN VEGA S'EN EST ALLÉ

> Le musicien, chanteur et artiste américain Alan Bermowitz, alias Alan Suicide, alias Alan Vega, s'est éteint le 16 juillet à l'âge de 78 ans. Avant d'être musicien, il fut plasticien, inspiré par l'école conceptuelle d'Ad Reinhardt – qu'il eut comme enseignant –, mais aussi par l'Arte Povera. À la fin des années 1960, il crée ses premières sculptures lumineuses. À la même époque, il donne sa propre réponse, moins élitaire, à la Factory d'Andy Warhol en créant *Museum: Project of living artists*, lieu alternatif ouvert 24 heures sur 24. En rencontrant musiciens et chanteurs, dont Iggy Pop, il bifurque de plus en plus vers la musique punk rock et sort en 1977 son premier album, *Suicide*. Il ne cessera toutefois de dessiner et peindre toute sa vie. Le musée d'art contemporain de Lyon lui a consacré une rétrospective en 2009. Il est représenté à Paris par la Galerie Laurent Godin.



Alan Vega. Photo : D. R.



Le Quotidien de l'Art

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VISUELS DE UNE

Fernand Léger, *Sans titre*, peinture murale sur fibrociment, 1954, gouache sur plaque de fibrociment, 223 x 119 x 0,5 cm, Biot, Musée national Fernand Léger, donation Nadia Léger et Georges Bauquier. © Rmn-Grand Palais (musée Fernand Léger) / Gérard Blot. © Adagp, Paris 2016.
Mika Rottenberg, *NoNoseKnows (Pearl Shop variant)*, 2015, vidéo (22 min) et sculptural installation, dimension variable. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery (New York).

L'ÉTÉ 1954 À BIOT. ARCHITECTURE FORMES COULEUR –
Musée national Fernand Léger, Biot – Jusqu'au 26 septembre

Par Sarah Hugouneq

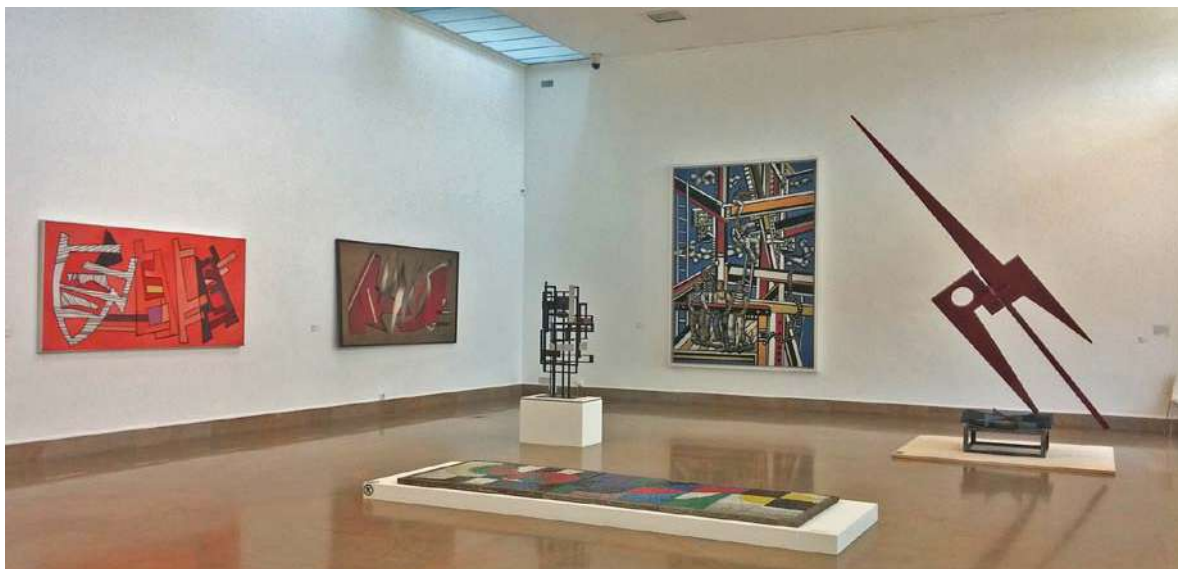
Biot 1954 : L'Utopie à la périphérie

C'est une exposition sous forme d'alerte que nous propose le musée national Fernand Léger, à Biot, à quelques encablures de Nice. Quelle est la place de l'art dans une société en ruine ? Si le titre de l'exposition, « L'été 1954 à Biot », ne nous ramenait pas à l'après-guerre, nous serions tentés de transposer la réflexion à aujourd'hui. Dans le contexte de la reconstruction, le groupe Espace, lancé en 1951 par un manifeste véhément, pense un cadre de vie nouveau par le truchement d'un art total. L'exposition en plein air à l'été 1954 cristallise ces réflexions en vue d'un nouveau modernisme pour les 50 années à venir.

« La dissociation des arts plastiques, peinture, architecture et sculpture est un fait déplorable », clamait le texte fondateur du groupe Espace écrit par André Bloc, éditeur et ingénieur, et Félix Del Marle, peintre théoricien. Dans cette logique de synthèse des arts, les catégories de peintre, sculpteur ou architecte tombent en désuétude, au profit du terme « plasticien » qui naît à cette occasion. « Qu'est-ce qu'être artiste ? » est l'interrogation qui sous-tend le mouvement. « En s'interrogeant sur la manière d'être au plus près de ce dont les gens ont besoin, d'être au plus près de son temps, Fernand Léger affirme la dimension sociale de l'art. Nous sommes dans le contexte de la reconstruction de la France, la place et l'utilité de l'art dans les campagnes d'édification sont centrales. Le groupe Espace est contre la vision techniciste de l'architecture qui est en train de s'imposer », explique Diana Gay, commissaire de l'exposition. Néoplasticiens, ils revendiquent « la présence fondamentale de la plastique » dans le quotidien du peuple. Mais comment éduquer à l'aide d'un art abstrait ? La problématique de la réception de l'œuvre d'art est un axe de réflexion important pour le groupe. Comme le montre le parcours, les tentatives de couper court à cette scission entre architecture et beaux-arts ont été légion. L'architecte Bernard Zehrfuss, coprésident du groupe Espace, invite Félix Del Marle à concevoir la polychromie extérieure et intérieure de son usine Renault à Flins. Mais, la réception chahutée de l'œuvre par les ouvriers conduit la direction du groupe automobile à effectuer des

LA PROBLÉMATIQUE
DE LA RÉCEPTION
DE L'ŒUVRE
D'ART EST UN AXE
DE RÉFLEXION
IMPORTANT POUR
LE GROUPE ESPACE

Maxime Descombin,
Oblique mobile, 1953-1954,
acier peint,
426 x 190 cm, Mâcon,
Musée des Ursulines,
donation Maxime
Descombin.
Photo : Pierre Plattier.
© Association pour
l'Atelier Descombin.



Vue de l'exposition
« L'été 1954 à Biot ».
© S. H.

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BIOT 1954 :
L'UTOPIE À LA
PÉRIPHÉRIE

SUITE DE LA PAGE 05 modifications substantielles. L'histoire de la collaboration de Fernand Léger avec l'architecture se révèle être une ambition ratée. Il réalisera des projets pour Paul Nelson, Wallace K. Harrison, André Bruyère ou Maurice Novarina sans qu'aucun n'aboutisse. Seule exception à cette utopie inassouvie, le dialogue entre les arts, moteur de Carlos Villanueva – architecte du campus universitaire de Caracas – qui invita en 1952 Léger, Arp ou Vasarely à contribuer à ce projet. Le lien entre l'art et la technique tel que le revendiquait déjà le Bauhaus est un vieux débat auquel les membres du groupe Espace ne répondirent que très marginalement.

Face à des interrogations aussi cruciales, pourquoi s'installer dans un champ à Biot, petite bourgade de l'arrière-pays niçois ? « La question reste ouverte et les réponses sont multiples.

Les liens d'André Bloc, fondateur du groupe avec le maire communiste Carpentier, sont une des clefs de la réponse. J'ai fait des recherches (sans succès) sur cet homme incroyable qui ouvre les portes à des artistes abstraits dans un champ d'olivier d'un village d'agriculteurs en 1954... La périphérie est peut-être aussi un moyen de tester la collaboration artistique entre les participants, qui pour la plupart ont été des résistants et se retrouvent ici. La périphérie comme moyen de transcender l'opposition esthétique est une piste. En choisissant Biot, ils cherchent aussi à se mesurer au plein air, sans limitation d'espace, sans frontière », explique Diana Gay.

S'il a inspiré le catalogue, l'esprit foisonnant de la commissaire qui a « beaucoup de questions mais encore peu de réponses », ne se retrouve hélas guère dans la présentation un peu monotone de l'exposition. Alors qu'un travail colossal a été mené pour déterminer – grâce aux archives – puis pister les œuvres exposées en 1954, ces dernières ne sont pas différenciées des autres pièces mises en contrepoint. Outre la très belle mosaïque de Sonia Delaunay du musée national d'art moderne ou les deux fibrociments de Fernand Léger du musée de Biot qui font l'objet d'une recherche au Centre interdisciplinaire de conservation et de restauration du patrimoine de Marseille, nombre d'œuvres ont été littéralement exhumées de lieux pour le moins improbables. Ainsi, la toile de Renato Righetti a été localisée *in extremis* et par hasard dans la cave du domicile de la galeriste Natalie Seroussi, qui en a fait don au Centre Pompidou en décembre. Les textes dans les salles restent très factuels, et estompent ce bouillonnement intellectuel dont Biot fut le théâtre. Au final, la manifestation de 1954 n'est pas abordée comme une exposition, mais comme un laboratoire d'idées et de pensées sur la mise en place d'un art nouveau, utile, social et synthétique. Elle est moins le sujet que le prétexte à une vaste réflexion sur l'art d'après-guerre et ses développements postérieurs. Plus de 60 ans après, l'exposition du musée national Fernand Léger se garde bien de faire le bilan de cette ambition de réenchanter le monde par un art absolu. Ironie du sort, le champ d'olivier qui servit de terrain à cette utopie est aujourd'hui occupé par un HLM construit en 1965...

L'ÉTÉ 1954 A BIOT. ARCHITECTURE FORMES COULEUR, jusqu'au 26 septembre,

Musée national Fernand Léger, Chemin du Val de Pôme, 06410 Biot,

www.musee-fernandleger.fr

Catalogue, éd. RMN-GP, 144 p., 29 euros.



Alberto Magnelli, *Panneau mural*, 1954, peinture sur fibrociment, 120 × 250 cm, Paris, Centre Pompidou, MNAM/CCI, dépôt au musée Magnelli, musée de la Céramique, Vallauris. Photo : Claude Germain-ImageART.

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FACE À DES
INTERROGATIONS
AUSSI CRUCIALES,
POURQUOI
S'INSTALLER DANS
UN CHAMP À BIOT,
PETITE BOURGADE
DE L'ARRIÈRE-PAYS
NIÇOIS ?

Commissariat :

Anne Dopffer,
directrice des musées
nationaux du XX^e siècle
des Alpes-Maritimes,
et Diana Gay,
conservatrice
au musée national
Fernand Léger à Biot.



MIKA ROTTENBERG – Palais de Tokyo, Paris –
Jusqu'au 11 septembre

La mécanique des fluides de Mika Rottenberg au Palais de Tokyo

Dans la droite lignée des *Temps modernes* de Chaplin ou de *Playtime* de Jacques Tati, la vidéaste d'origine argentine Mika Rottenberg pousse le capitalisme dans ses retranchements les plus absurdes au Palais de Tokyo, à Paris. *Par Roxana Azimi*



Mika Rottenberg,
*Bowls Balls Souls
Holes*, 2014. Courtesy
Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York.

— C'est l'exposition qui s'est fait cannibaliser par celle de Michel Houellebecq, dont la prestation très (trop) appliquée au Palais de Tokyo souffle la vedette au reste de la programmation. Et pourtant, l'univers que déploie Mika Rottenberg est autrement plus dévorant. Plus intrigant aussi. D'entrée de jeu, l'artiste argentine se plaît à nous déboussoler : sommes-nous à l'extérieur de son exposition, comme le suggèrent les meurtrières dévoilant des ventilateurs, ou déjà dans le vif du sujet ? Les deux, mon capitaine. Cette artiste qui sait si bien cambrer les corps et les espaces, a aussi le talent de ménager le suspense. Il y a du coup de dé et du hasard derrière le jeu de bingo qui semble actionner une porte à bascule : attention, la fenêtre de tir pour en franchir le seuil est courte. L'artiste impose son tempo. Si vous êtes trop lent, il faudra passer votre tour. De l'autre côté du miroir, des objets du quotidien s'animent dans les recoins, une goutte tombe sur une plaque chauffante, une queue se met à gigoter. On s'étonne de tant de vide et de blancheur qui sonne comme un contrepoint aux fictions de l'artiste, où une main-d'œuvre exclusivement féminine s'affaire dans des espaces cloisonnés et exigus. Nul dialogue dans ces saynètes, pas le temps de bavasser : la tâche de ces « petites mains » et corps encombrés est aussi spécialisée qu'impérieuse. Obèses ou excessivement musclées, ces femmes sont tour à tour outils et matières premières. Leurs muqueuses giclent ou exsudent le liant qui huile les rouages de ce taylorisme d'un genre nouveau. Leurs sécrétions humidifient et aromatisent une longue pâte qui s'étire de cellule en cellule ; leur musculature produit une énergie centripète et centrifuge. Anomalies ou allergies ont même leurs affectations. Et pourtant la finalité de tant d'énergie collective se révèle vaine. Ce labeur produit tantôt un cadeau d'entreprise des plus kitch, parfois

OBÈSES OU
EXCESSIVEMENT
MUSCLÉES, CES
FEMMES SONT
TOUR
À TOUR OUTILS
ET MATIÈRES
PREMIÈRES

/...

LA MÉCANIQUE
DES FLUIDES
DE MIKA
ROTTENBERG
AU PALAIS
DE TOKYO



Mika Rottenberg,
*Mika Rottenberg
Squeeze*, 2010.
Courtesy Andrea
Rosen Gallery,
New York.

SUITE DE LA PAGE 07 des jus de chakra. Ailleurs, des ongles couleur rouge sang donnent naissance à des cerises au marasquin. Le secteur tertiaire n'est pas en reste. Avec *Sneeze*, Rottenberg fait apparaître des cadres cravatés aux nez allongés, dont l'éternuement matérialise un lapin ou un morceau de viande. Cette mécanique des fluides caricature-t-elle le monde du travail ? Au contraire, elle s'y colle, au plus près. Prenez l'une de ses dernières installations, *NoNoseKnows*, présentée l'an dernier à la Biennale de Venise. Mika Rottenberg y montre des rangées d'ouvrières chinoises préposées à produire des perles de culture. Leur méthode ? Introduire un petit lambeau d'une huître malade dans des coquilles saines, greffe provoquant l'apparition de la perle. La routine est aussi aliénante qu'est cruel le geste consistant à irriter un organisme animal sain. En apparence, nous sommes dans une chimère dont l'artiste a le secret. Et pourtant, Mika Rottenberg a tourné en Chine, à Zhuji, plaque tournante du commerce des perles de culture. Plus macabre que drolatique, la réalité de l'esclavage moderne dépasse par son absurdité toutes les fictions.

MIKA ROTTENBERG, jusqu'au 11 septembre, Palais de Tokyo, 13, avenue du Président Wilson, 75116 Paris, tél. 01 81 97 35 88, www.palaisdetokyo.com

Et aussi jusqu'au 30 juillet, Galerie Laurent Godin, 5, rue du Grenier Saint Lazare, 75003 Paris, tél. 01 42 71 10 66, www.laurentgodin.com



CETTE
MÉCANIQUE
DES FLUIDES
CARICATURE-
T-ELLE LE MONDE
DU TRAVAIL ?
AU CONTRAIRE,
ELLE S'Y COLLE,
AU PLUS PRÈS



Mika Rottenberg,
*NoNoseKnows (Pearl
Shop variant)*, 2015,
vidéo (22 min)
et sculptural
installation,
dimension variable.
Courtesy of Andrea
Rosen Gallery,
New York.

AMELIA JONES

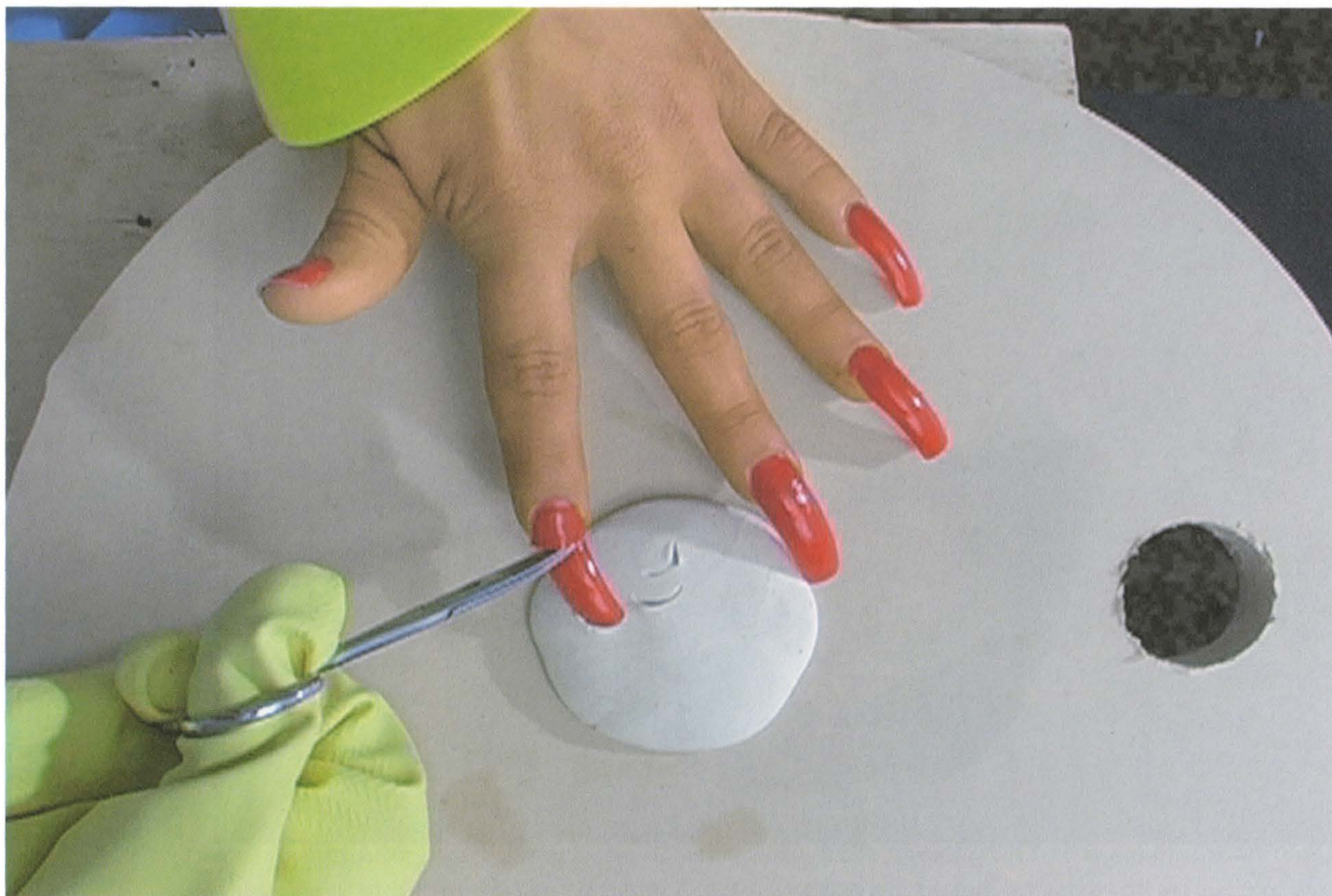
“Eww, Gross!”

As junior-high-school students in 1970s North Carolina, my girlfriends and I were enamored of the word *gross*, which we used to denigrate anything we found foul, disturbing, or unpleasant—either in a sensorial or emotional way. “Jean is going out with Vance” or “I dropped my lunch on the grass” would precipitate the comment “Eww, gross!” (often accompanied by a screwed-up nose). The world was a challenging place, and gross helped us order it into the palatable versus the disgusting. At the same time, what we viewed as gross was obviously not terribly disturbing to the order of things—it might even indicate something vaguely desirable because it was forbidden. But the melodrama functioned in an odd way as a mode of self-empowerment for girls seeking to be heard in a boys’ world—the shrieks and giggles accompanying the statement were part of the effect: Making the boys (or, potentially, other girls) notice as well as repelling them, we created our own world.

Not surprisingly, given this coalitional world-building effect, feminist artists have at various moments adopted strategies akin to this locution, most notably the so-called “bad girl” work of the 1990s, in which anger and humor combine to lambast, critique, and expose the effects of misogyny in the art world and beyond. These works are violent yet funny, both seductive and repellent. Sue Williams’s 1992 painting *A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE . . .*, which includes cartoonish renderings of rape scenes, and Sarah Lucas’s caustic *BITCH* of 1995, a table from which hang a fish and a T-shirt filled with oranges (which reads as a crude symbolic rendering of a stereotyped version of the female body, smell and all), exemplify this moment.

Mika Rottenberg produces similarly acerbic and funny—although less overtly angry—feminist works, complex video and installation pieces that, for me, evoke an “eww, gross” effect with their bodily excesses, exuberant energy, and cheeky sense of humor (so common among teenaged girls). They produce recognition among like-minded feminist viewers, encouraging a sense of solidarity in the face of the absurdities of the gendered and policed body. But Rottenberg’s practice relates not only to the bad-girl attitude of the ’90s; it also owes a debt

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Mika Rottenberg's Late Capitalist Feminism

MIKA ROTTENBERG, *MARY'S CHERRIES*, 2004,
single channel video installation, 5 min. 50 sec.,
dimensions variable / MARYS KIRSCHEN, 1-Kanal-
Videoinstallation, Masse variabel.





MIKA ROTTENBERG, *ROCK ROSE* from *MARY'S CHERRIES*, 2014, C-print /
ROCK ROSE aus *MARYS KIRSCHEN*, C-Print.

to earlier strategies of feminist art. Her work thus provides an opportunity to rethink these legacies and to explore more contemporary feminist frameworks and tactics in art.¹⁾

Feminist body art in its early days was largely about making use of the seductive qualities of an “ideal” (slim, white) female body, and feminist video art expanded this by playing with spectatorial expectations and desires. The early videos of Lynda Benglis—such as *FEMALE SENSIBILITY* (1973), in which two women ostentatiously make out for the video camera—are exemplary of both. Rottenberg’s elaborate video installations continue this legacy, but instead feature female bodies that are ethnically diverse and unusual: exceedingly tall, muscular, long-haired, or voluminous. Rottenberg’s actors seem to be extreme women for extreme times, and they are often powerful and sensual in their strength; they are not essentialized, like the “womyn” of the separatist phase of the second-wave women’s movement. They embrace their excess, and their bodies overflow—into copious sweat, as in *TROPICAL BREEZE* (2004); long fingernails, in *MARY’S CHERRIES* (2005); and superabundant hair, in *CHEESE* (2008). We might laugh, but in solidarity, as twenty-first-century feminists, fully aware of the raucous joys potentially offered by the movements and desires of the female body.

This is not to say that ’70s feminist works didn’t also play with bodily excess—think of Judy Chicago’s *MENSTRUATION BATHROOM* in the 1972 Womanhouse project in Los Angeles, in which the toilet sat next to a trashcan overflowing with sanitary napkins and tampons painted blood red. Artists celebrated those aspects of female embodiment that society viewed

with disgust and that escape the structures of objectification central to both capitalism and patriarchy. In Rottenberg's videos, however, even bodily excess is captured and sold through the mechanisms of late capitalism: Sweat becomes the dampness of wet wipes, fingernail clippings are turned into maraschino cherries, and long tresses are used to make hair tonic. If these transformations seem fantastical, however, note that Rottenberg's actors have themselves monetized their physical attributes: as models, wrestlers, bodybuilders, and "squashers" (fulfilling the desire of people who like to be sat upon by large women).

In the '70s, another chief concern among feminist artists was to make women's labor visible in the social sphere. Mierle Ukeles's "maintenance art" aligned women's work with underpaid labor, as in a 1973 performance where she washed the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, during opening hours. The previous year, Sandra Orgel performed the task of ironing at WOMANHOUSE, attacking wrinkles with a bored vengeance. As middle-class housewives were largely isolated in their homes at the time, feminist artistic commentaries on female labor focused on spaces literally or symbolically tied to the domestic. Most often a single woman (the artist herself, in the case of Ukeles and Orgel) labored before the audience, enacting the *ennui* of housework or menial labor as art in ways that disrupted both categories.

Echoing women's greater presence in the workforce today, Rottenberg's videos depict interdependent bodies connected via chains of action and reaction across elaborate spaces and Rube Goldberg-esque assembly lines. In TROPICAL BREEZE, for example, a lithe white woman (played by a very flexible dancer, Felicia Ballos) sits on a stationary bicycle inside a truck, pulling out tissues from a box with her foot and sticking them to a pulley with bubble gum, then running them forward to the driver, a muscular black woman (played by Heather Foster, a champion bodybuilder); the driver moistens the tissues with her sweat and then passes them back along the pulley ready to be sold as wet wipes (with the brand name Tropical Breeze). Rottenberg choreographs female bodies into Taylorized movements, underlining the repetitive gestures that result in absurd products.

The famous 1952 "candy factory" episode of the proto-feminist *I Love Lucy* television show comes to mind in relation to Rottenberg's humor, with its element of slapstick, always just restrained enough to prevent it from wreaking havoc. Lucy and Ethel's failure to wrap chocolates on the assembly line fast enough results in them stuffing their mouths with them—in a parody of female self-indulgence and failure to Taylorize. But if Lucy was buffoonish in her performed incompetence as a bourgeois housewife, the real Lucille Ball ran the show behind the scenes. In parallel, Rottenberg's laboring women, despite Sisyphean efforts, are also hugely effective, always successfully moving the production forward, if in tiny or incremental ways. They are affective as well, in their eccentric body types, their strength and agility, their simple extra-ordinariness—which asserts itself as confirmation of women's vast range of potential skills, modes of being, and ways of articulating our agency.

The epically obese woman played by Michelle (aka Trixxter Bombshell) in the 2010 video SQUEEZE is paradigmatic. While other women are shown toiling away, she sits in a state of dignified rest on a creaky rotating disk in a tiny cubicle set into the wall of a grotty, rundown room. Her torpor seems key in some mysterious way to the structures of production; indeed, the artist has explained that the character is giving directions "via telekinesis."² We are drawn into a coalitional appreciation of female power that accrues through action (even when it appears as inaction), not exhibitionism, as is so often the case in patriarchal cultures that subordinate women to the image.

MIKA ROTTENBERG, *CHEESE*, 2008,
multi-channel video installation with sound,
16 min., dimensions variable /
KÄSE, Mehr-Kanal-Videoinstallation
mit Ton, Masse variabel.



As feminism progressed into the '80s, Marxist feminist critique became central. Barbara Kruger's *UNTITLED/YOU ARE SEDUCED BY THE SEX APPEAL OF THE INORGANIC* (1981)—a black-and-white photograph of two unmatched gloves (one apparently male, one apparently female) shaking “hands,” a scene of displaced intimacy that is disrupted by the brazen text of the title in white over bright red—is a classic work of this genre. Borrowing a line from Walter Benjamin's 1930s critique of commodity fetishism, Kruger's work means business, and it tells you so. Rottenberg takes on the terms of this critique, but expands it through very different means. The humor in the grossness and excesses of her work overrides any sense of seriousness, and the videos are not dominated by a sense of political motivation, although the issues of labor and gender are ultimately strongly asserted across her oeuvre.

The acceleration and globalization of late capitalism—with the rich getting richer and richer off the backs of the working poor, often women—means that “women's work” is now a very different issue from how it was viewed by '70s feminists. Rottenberg's most recent videos expose the mechanisms of precarious labor across the globe, combining hired performers with actual workers in a mix of invented and real-world situations. In *SQUEEZE*, both Mexican women picking lettuce in a field in Arizona and Indian women in a rubber-tree plantation reach down into the ground to have their arms massaged by a row of Chinese women—all of these workers read as third-world laborers, anonymized by late capitalism. As their arms cross time and space in the vast network of globalized labor, they also change direction from vertical to horizontal planes of action.

These interconnections and disorientations are also seen in *NONOSEKNOWS* (2015), which focuses on the sweatshops of women behind the booming Chinese pearl industry. The large white woman who might be in charge of the pearl factory—and who mysteriously sneezes out plates of spaghetti from an ever-extending prosthetic nose—is linked to the Chinese women who plant irritants in oysters in order to stimulate the production of pearls: She periodically uses a spray bottle to mist a pair of feet that poke up from a bucket of pearls on the floor of her office; these feet are shown to belong to a worker sitting in the sweatshop below, which would mean that one of these spaces is upside-down.

The nadir of this activity is a woman sitting alone between a massive heap of mussels and one of cracked shells, taking the live creatures one by one, splitting them open, and squeezing pearls out of the no doubt stinky, rubbery flesh into buckets. The squelching and cracking sounds, the dampness everywhere (the woman wears rubber boots), the squalid ce-

ment room—everything conspires to produce a situation that is both radically disgusting and deeply sad. All of this waste of life and effort for piles of fetid garbage and slimy pearls, which will no doubt be used to adorn bourgeois and wealthy women in China and beyond. Here Rottenberg points to the ultimate grossness: the system of global capitalism.

However, by immersing working women in novel versions of their usual spaces and paces of work, narrating their labor through new relationships and spatial disorientations, Rottenberg emphasizes their agency. In her videos, women's bodies are shown to be poignant, funny, and powerful—as if the laboring female body of Carolee Schneemann's intense early works or Ukeles's performances had been passed through the leavening matrix of the bad-girl posture as well as the digestive tract of Paul McCarthy (whose work I consider to be seriously gender-critical and feminist in effect)—“eww, gross” meets the personal is political. We form coalitions over things that revolt and compel us: Girl power can be found in the enjoyment of, while simultaneously being creeped out by, the gross. Through such means we can accept excess as potential pleasure rather than acceding to the limiting positions allotted us by our culture and chafing against the boundaries created to keep us quiet. Maybe we teenage girls were onto something in the '70s.

1) On Rottenberg's relationship to feminism, see her interview with Christopher Bedford, in *Mika Rottenberg: The Production of Luck* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., and Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, 2014), 205.

2) Mika Rottenberg, in an interview with Judith Hudson, *Bomb 113* (Fall 2010), www.bombmagazine.org/article/3617/mika-rottenberg (accessed February 10, 2016).

MIKA ROTTENBERG, CHEESE, 2008, multi-channel video
installation with sound, 16 min., dimensions variable /
KÄSE, Mehr-Kanal-Videoinstallation mit Ton, Masse variabel.



Mika Rottenberg's

BACHELOR (ETTE)

Mika Rottenberg's installations shift from environment to video and back again. As the artist has explained, "In other mediums like sculpture or painting, it is obvious that a work has specific dimensions and light conditions; I think video should be treated in the same way."¹ The limitation, specificity, and irregularity of her spaces invite viewers to take in her work through not only their eyes but all their senses, an approach to visual narration that is at once biological, cerebral, psychological, environmental, historical, and sociocultural. Rottenberg's imaginary machines put bodies into action, both those of her on-screen characters and her audience, abolishing the distance between them: Our experience of our own corporeality increases our empathy with the video's subjects. This strategy is quite different from that of previous video artists, from Bill Viola to Matthew Barney, Isaac Julien, and Douglas Gordon, who placed the audience in front of their work, keeping the two separate. Rottenberg's logic of presentation is instead in tune with the work of other artists of her generation—such as Nathalie Djurberg and Ragnar Kjartansson—who establish a dialogue between

sculptural environment and moving image in order to turn a mental and visual relationship into a concrete experience.

Rottenberg's videos document employees, predominantly female, both fictive and real, in work situations. Typically, they carry out their duties in solitude and silence, laboring in a chain of individual cramped spaces as they operate convoluted pulleys and sheaves. Some of the characters' actions appear purposeless, of no apparent use apart from the surreal internal logic that informs the narrative. These assembly lines can be organized vertically (e.g., *MARY'S CHERRIES*, 2004) or horizontally (e.g., *TROPICAL BREEZE*, 2004). Fueled by human matter, such as red-polished fingernails in *MARY'S CHERRIES* and sweat in *TROPICAL BREEZE*, the machinery churns out commercial products: maraschino cherries and lemon-scented wet wipes.

Each video presents a working entity that functions as an autonomous organism, endowed with a life of its own, yet absurd—something like a "bachelor machine," as defined by Michel Carrouges:

The bachelor machine appears first of all as an impossible, useless, incomprehensible, delirious machine. It may not even appear at all, depending on how far it blends into the landscape surrounding it. The bachelor machine may

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MIKA ROTTENBERG, *MARY'S CHERRIES*, 2004,
single channel video installation, 5 min. 50 sec.,
dimensions variable / MARYS KIRSCHEN, *1-Kanal-
Videoinstallation*, Masse variabel.

MACHINES*



therefore consist of a single peculiar and unknown machine, or of an apparently heteroclitic assemblage. . . . The bachelor machine has no reason for existing in itself, as a machine governed by the physical laws of mechanics or by the social laws of utility. It is a semblance of machinery, of the kind seen in dreams, at the theatre, at the cinema or even in cosmonauts' training areas. Governed primarily by the mental laws of subjectivity, the bachelor machine merely adopts certain mechanical forms in order to simulate certain mechanical effects.²⁾



Carrouges identifies bachelor machines in the writings of Franz Kafka, Raymond Roussel, Alfred Jarry, and Jules Verne, but he takes the term from Marcel Duchamp and his enigmatic work *THE BRIDE STRIPPED BARE BY HER BACHELORS, EVEN* (1915–23), also known as *THE LARGE GLASS*. Made out of a sheet of glass that is traversed by objects and shapes drawn in perspective, so that they appear to be suspended in midair, *THE LARGE GLASS* places two entities in parallel: the Bride and her Bachelors. As Alain Montesse writes, “Structurally, a bachelor machine looks like a two-storey arrangement, the lower storey being occupied by a reclining man who is the victim of various torments coming from the storey above.”³⁾

In *THE LARGE GLASS*, the upper tier belongs to the Bride while the lower panel is the Bachelors’



MIKA ROTTENBERG, *BOWLS BALLS SOULS HOLES*, 2014, video with sound and sculptural installation, 28 min., dimensions variable /
SCHALEN BÄLLE SEELEN LÖCHER, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.

Domain, made up of nine “Malic Molds.” The relationship between the two parts is governed and activated by interacting mechanisms: bars, rods, pistons, cylinders, racks, gears, rollers, levers, rotors, wheels, flywheels, wires, faucets, cranks, and pulleys. Duchamp’s intention was to describe a relationship using a system that would not be corporeal and carnal but instead mental and mechanical. While the Bride is a new human being who cannot be defined in either physiological or psychological terms,⁴⁾ the Bachelors who occupy the earthbound domain below do not have the same energy and autonomy; they are guided by orders and impulses that they don’t understand. They represent a group like the factory or the crowd, destined to receive the secretions and humus that comes from above.

Even from this reductive and basic description, the analogies between Duchamp’s bachelor machine and Rottenberg’s assemblages are evident. The dimension of transit and interaction between THE LARGE

GLASS’s two zones regulates and plans the bachelor machine, as in Rottenberg’s work. The lower section of THE LARGE GLASS features a chocolate grinder, which produces an edible material; similarly, the lower parts of Rottenberg’s machines are a place of production: an image of modern and industrial society. However, Rottenberg explores a circulation that is no longer conceptual and theoretical, abstract and mechanical, and definitely male. Her goal is an interpretation of the machine of living that is not just intellectual and mental but carried out through physical and bodily feeling. Furthermore, of course, her machine is distinctly *female*.

Rottenberg’s recent work NONOSEKNOWS (2015), embraces additional modes of subverting and inverting the bachelor machine. While the artist continues to use the terms of THE LARGE GLASS, she extends them to include a vision of the real urban, social, and economic context in which the narrated events take place—a mixture of the real and fantastic that makes

the bachelor(ette) machine look more and more like a true expression of society.

The protagonist of *NONOSEKNOWS* is a woman of imposing physical stature, who suggests the Bride. Arriving at her place of work, she passes through a series of empty spaces with colored walls, animated by large soap bubbles, on her way to a brightly lit office, filled with flowers and dishes of uneaten food. Here her activity consists of sniffing flowers and sneezing, which produces a plate of noodles. On the lower level, corresponding to the world of the Bachelors, dozens of women labor in cold, damp conditions. Filmed at a pearl factory in China, these scenes show three groups of women: The first group places irritants in mussels to produce pearls; next, a single woman shucks a pile of mussels, scooping out their pearls with her fingers and pouring them into a basin; and finally, another group sorts the pearls.

These three spaces and work units represent the meticulous chain of capitalist exploitation—yet, in one of these rooms, a single female worker appears idle; she sleeps with her head on a table, and her feet buried in a bucket of pearls. Her behavior echoes that of the performers Michelle and Sakina, who play similar roles in *SQUEEZE* (2010) and *BOWLS BALLS SOULS HOLES* (2014). Moving between wakefulness and slumber, they are aware of their own autonomous power; they are integrated into the system, yet remain in communication with another world. The sweatshop worker might seem to be unconscious, but her feet reappear in the space of the dominant figure

on the upper tier, sticking out of a basket of pearls—now upside down, they represent the possibility of disrupting the system.

In the end, however, the system is not altered, and the Bride remains the mechanism that powers the universe of the Bachelor(ette) workers below. Toward the video's conclusion, the Bride's nose extends to penetrate a hole in the wall behind the flower bouquets. This intervention appears to pop the bubbles in the hallway, which vanish in a puff of smoke. Finally, just before she leaves the office, the Bride sprays water on the feet below her desk, bringing her various functions to a close: control of the passions and force of the Bachelor(ette)s as well as the system of production, and a cooling of their extremities—if not their extremism.

(Translation: Shanti Evans)

* This text is the result of a dramatic editing by Nikki Columbus of a 9,500-word text by Germano Celant that will be published in its totality in the near future.

- 1) Christopher Bedford, "Interview with Mika Rottenberg," in *Mika Rottenberg: The Production of Luck* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in association with the Rose Museum, 2014), 221.
- 2) Michel Carrouges, "Mode d'emploi," in *Les Machines Célibataires* (Paris: Arcanes, 1954). Transl. into English as "Directions for Use," in *Le Macchine Celibi / The Bachelor Machines*, ed. Harald Szeemann (New York: Rizzoli, 1975), 21.
- 3) Alain Montesse, "Lovely Rita, Meter Maid," in *Le Macchine Celibi / The Bachelor Machines*, op. cit., 110.
- 4) Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969).



MIKA ROTTENBERG, *BOWLS BALLS SOULS HOLES*, 2014, video with sound and sculptural installation, 28 min., dimensions variable / *SCHALEN BÄLLE SEELEN LÖCHER*, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.

MIKA ROTTENBERG, SQUEEZE, 2010, single-channel video
installation with sound, 20 min., dimensions variable /
QUETSCHEN, 1-Kanal-Videoinstallation mit Ton, Masse variabel,
(ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK,
AND GALERIE LAURENT GODIN, PARIS)



MIKA ROTTENBERG

JONATHAN BELLER

ROTTENBERG PEARLS

I suppose that here too it all depends on what Mika Rottenberg refers to in her own work as the “money shot.” Every serious piece of pornography has one. The meaning of the compound word is resonant as it unifies the pursuit of cis-male pleasure and market forces in a ritualized and carefully documented climax. Upon reflection, it suddenly seems that the money shot—in binding together representation, sexuality, and finance—describes an increasing number of ambient images today, not just the graphic trajectory of semen across the screen but that of all would-be iconic visual presentations designed to get consumers to shoot their wad: fashion photography, automobile ads, Instagram hotties, Trump sound bites, art. The idea traverses a complex array of social relations while posing a problem: How to show what you want, avoid the myriad censors, build it to a visceral climax, and cash in?

Indeed, it is arguable that in late capitalist spectacle, the money shot has become a synecdoche for the film/commodity/artwork as a whole. Somehow,

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in the world of the technical image, where, as Vilém Flusser tells us, every social practice aspires to the image, every image seems to aspire to money. Rottenberg is interested in the modes of production and the channels of distribution for many of the spectacular orgasms of commodity culture, in particular, those of art. Tasteful *and* sexy, I know, but really, consciously or not, these praxis questions are the practical concerns of any producer, be it of pearls, porn, art, or aesthetic theory. Rottenberg’s recent work explores the relationship between global economy, feminized labor, the aesthetic, sexuality, and the obscene in contemporary post-Fordist visual culture. As it turns out, in contemporary visual culture, representations designed to evoke pleasure and purchase function on a continuum with the uneven development and exploitation that provide this visibility’s conditions of possibility.

Emphatically, we find that what is central for Rottenberg is the role of women—a concern that some might erroneously consider specialized when in actuality every business depends upon the work of women in one way or another. In thematizing the fact, variety, worldwide distribution, unevenness of circumstance, and specialization of labor done by women,



MIKA ROTTENBERG, *NONOSEKNOWS*, 2015, video with sound and sculptural installation, 22 min., dimensions variable / KEINENASEWEISS, *Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation*, Masse variabel.

Rottenberg’s video and installation work represents what Hsuan L. Hsu has described as “the global art factory.”¹⁾ It also raises the complex question of product valorization in financial, political, and aesthetic terms. Rottenberg understands that the art factory is not a stand-alone entity but rather intersects with and depends upon what autonomist Marxism calls “the social factory,” in which society is subsumed by capital and everyday activities take on a virtuosic character, as increasingly specialized accommodations by ordinary individuals to the extraordinary protocols of capitalist production. The life-world itself becomes a factory, and the metabolism of the social is reconfigured by capital as labor. In targeting aesthetic production and creating her own money shots from the

relations therein, the artist at once enters into the generic space of the commodification of globalized post-Fordist labor, and endeavors, through her own sensate acts, to poetically redeploy its terms.

With a hyperbolic flair that, like psychoanalysis, finds its truth in exaggeration, Rottenberg’s video installations depict rigorously designed and rigorously absurd machines that manufacture impossible products via the unique capacities of mostly women, whose appearances do not fit into the iconic templates offered by those other sense machines known as Hollywood and the advertising industry. New products demand new production regimes demand new sensations and thus new senses; the artist too, if she wants to stave off the falling rate of profit, must



MIKA ROTTENBERG, *NONOSEKNOWS*, 2015, video with sound and sculptural installation, 22 min., dimensions variable /

KEINENASEWEISS, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.

decode and provide. Under the new regime, sense and sensibility no longer function the way they used to (or were thought to), as natural, human faculties relatively autonomous from market forces. Rather, as Rottenberg's work demonstrates on multiple levels, our sense-making faculties are re-structured by markets and intimately incorporated in production networks—they are, in fact, senses of global market forces. No wonder *NONOSEKNOWS* (2015) seems to follow loosely from "No Nose Knows," an episode of the highly attuned cultural indicator and cutting-edge disseminator of cultural scripts *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

Rottenberg's work self-reflexively embodies the conditions of contemporary *aesthetic* production in its ineluctable relation to capital, gender, globalization, and post-Fordist empire. It is aware of attention economies (the production of value through the extraction of attention) along with a generalized proletarianization of the senses (the putting of the senses to work for capital, as well as their alienation and dispossession from other mental activities). At the start of *NONOSEKNOWS*, a middle-aged white lady drives an electric cart through deserted streets,

enters a building, and moves through a series of rooms full of magnificent, seemingly sentient, floating bubbles. She goes to her office and, pushing aside a large restaurant dish cart full of haphazardly stacked plates of pasta, vermicelli, udon, and the like, sits at her desk to smell plastic-wrapped potted flowers. She smells them thanks to a breeze generated by a rickety fan connected by a drive belt coming through the floor from a room below, powered by an Asian woman turning a crank while seated at a table with approximately twenty other Asian women, who we slowly realize are inserting micro-slices of foreign oyster bits into small live oysters to force them to grow cultured pearls. With remarkable skill, these women are cutting and splicing oyster with oyster to create future aesthetic appeal; basically, they are editing life in what turns out to be a pearl factory in Zhuji, China.

We figure out that this process is pearl culture, and glean its analogy to video and art-making: Rottenberg's own method is analogous. While upstairs in her modern office the white lady—an imported actor and the only Caucasian in the video—sniffs flowers



MIKA ROTTENBERG, *NONOSEKNOWS*, 2015, video with sound and sculptural installation, 22 min., dimensions variable /

KEINENASEWEISS, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.





MIKA ROTTENBERG, *NONOSEKNOWS*, 2015, video with sound and sculptural installation, 22 min., dimensions variable /
KEINENASEWEISS, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.

with her steadily growing, highly specialized schnozz, we see also that in a wet kill room somewhere below her, the big oysters are being harvested in a series of (machete) cuts that slash their flesh in half, allowing a working woman in gloves and hat (we never see her face) to use her fingers to hungrily grab the pearls from the muck of gonads. The structure of relations that organizes diverse activities—spanning the gamut of scripted interactions from gonad to pearly aesthetic—is revealed gradually and understood retroactively. As we see another group of about twenty women, each using all ten fingers to sort huge piles of pearls into burlap sacks with incredible dexterity and speed, we realize that those big bags of what we might have thought was rice, previously seen randomly lying around the multiple rooms (or were they offices?) inhabited by those various bubbles, were actually full of pearls.

The documentary footage here of women doing the work of pearl culture is as amazing to those of us who only know pearls from earrings as the footage

from another Rottenberg work, *SQUEEZE* (2010), of lettuce workers in Arizona and of rubber farming in India is to people who only know lettuce from salads or rubber from . . . you get the point. The process of assemblage shown here, revelatory as it is, is also paradigmatic: Cut and splice decontextualized materials with specialized forms of attention in order to capture more attention through the production of commodity-images—what elsewhere I have referred to as the cinematic mode of production. Rottenberg's most recent and perhaps most extraordinary constructions create fantastic scenarios in which various sensual capacities are cut, mixed, ramified, and redeployed in production scenarios that are at once third-world and post-Fordist, crude, and futuristic. Like her previous work, *SQUEEZE* and *NONOSEKNOWS* depict Rottenberg's ingenious machines for the making of new types of outlandish and ostensibly useless products, but these are now combined with documentary footage of actually existing labor processes engaged in by women in the global South. In *NONOSEKNOWS*,

the Chinese pearl factory workers are not only shown to underpin the work of the white lady artist in all of her grotesque specialization but are literally incorporated into the product: Their work becomes part of the artwork. This literal incorporation of feminized labor into the artwork makes visible the generalized incorporation of specialized and feminized labor in the rest of commodity culture: from pearls, to beauty products, to nearly every commonplace item.

In a sense, Rottenberg's videos, which have been called surreal, are more realistic than most Realism. *SQUEEZE*, for example, with all its seemingly surreal watering of isolated tongues and butts, hand massages, lettuce and rubber farming, blush gathering, and machinic chopping of crap, combines its pieces through cutting and splicing to make both a video and a cube—the on-screen “final” product made out of lettuce, rubber, and blusher—that will simply be referred to as “an art object.” This art object, sold in seven shares along with the video, is stored in perpetuity in the tax haven of the Cayman Islands. Thus, as

commodities produced under conditions of globalization, Rottenberg's own works partake of the same disturbing incorporation and sublation of the labor of global South women as does your iPhone and indeed nearly all commodities today; but they also render that incorporation legible and somehow perverse rather than invisible and unremarkable. At least, Rottenberg pearls are not deracinated and ideologically sanitized, shearing off the history of the production process. Rather, they retain the temporality and signature of their mode of production to the point that the strange imperatives imposed on life and labor by the exigencies of universal commodification are apprehended as at once obscene and amazing. In this, the images are, to use an increasingly unpopular word, dialectical—the product of the entire process is grasped as at once a useless bauble that is part of the flotsam of lurid refinement and rarefied taste of the global bourgeoisie and its art world, and a lucid indicator of the conditions of inequality presupposed and indeed enjoyed by that very same world. In

MIKA ROTTENBERG, *NONOSEKNOWS*, 2015, video with sound and sculptural installation, 22 min., dimensions variable /
KEINENASEWEISS, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.



point of fact, the skill of these workers, like the skill of the artist, extends the very idea of what (post) humans, cybernetically intertwined with capitalized technologies, are capable of embodying, enduring, and/or enjoying. Exceeding the dominant ideals governing the normative forms of human beings and humanism, the worker-actors—in their singularity within a world committed to imposing standards, and their seemingly excessive presence within a world committed to effacing the visibility of labor—transmit the kind of fortitude, creativity, everydayness, and dignity with which those facing the conditions of so-called feminized labor (labor that redounds to women or that disempowers workers of any sex/gender conformation) confront the imperatives of the market.

Rottenberg's pearls show us first hand how capitalist production intensifies its processes of alienation. Having separated people from the land and from one another, it now ramifies bodies by isolating, separating, and specializing human capacities and senses and putting them to work. Wagging tongues stick out of holes in sheetrock, butts from walls, feet from buckets of pearls. But strangely, all of these separated faculties require watering with a spray bottle. These little acts of attention and care for fragmented human beings are part of the work necessary for a new distribution of corporeal organization and sense under a production regime that fragments organisms and utilizes their pieces as its own organs. As shown by the massages that take place within the machine of SQUEEZE—offered by Asian workers to the arms of field workers that appear through walls, in work reminiscent of nail salons—the demands of sensual labor (Marx's term for any kind of labor) require sensual care. A remarkable scene occurs when the portals between the visually disconnected spaces of SQUEEZE line up and the women of different worlds can see one another. It is a utopian moment that restitches the ordinarily alienated labor of the multiple forms of work and service to visually construct a kind of community. Here Rottenberg shows that the labor of caring is also part of the labor of labor; her work is also an extension of this care.²⁾ These are forms of recognition and valorization that to some extent invert the relations of commodification.

Nonetheless, the condition for the emergence of Rottenberg's work is not only third-world labor and non-normative female bodies, organized by the exigencies of work and the production of new needs, but the moneyed, glamorous, well-heeled, and indeed well-pearled world of the rich man's art market. As pearl culture indicates by standing as analogous to art culture through its elaborate process and seemingly sheer uselessness of the product, the entire art market and its world rests atop this sea of invisibilized labor—labor whose form and function, it is imperative to remark, is part of the history not only of hetero-patriarchy but of racism and imperialism. This labor, devalued and erased through patriarchy and racialization, is also the source of much of the world's wealth, including that of art patrons. This is no doubt why, when working on top of all those women of color, the white lady's nose gradually but inexorably grows erect beyond all proportion: To attain representation in the apex of the phallographic white supremacist capitalist spectacle (aka the art world), and to produce to its taste, it is imperative to go the way of Pinocchio. As even SpongeBob's starfish friend Patrick sensed when he longed for a nose like the rest of the gang, if you want to be acknowledged among the real boys, you have to grow a dick. Or, at least, get a strap-on.

It's noteworthy, then, that the white lady—who arrives at her office after a ride through street after street of empty skyscrapers, completed but lying empty as a result of China's speculative housing bubble—seems to occupy a mid-managerial position. Like the artist, curator, and critic—"smell testers" and specialized sense managers in their own right—her relatively cushy job in the industry run by (here) invisible men is to sniff hothouse flowers and discern some productive knowledge from their scent. She sniffs, her nose grows a few inches, and midway through the twenty-two-minute video comes the first wave of money shots. With huge splatting kerchoos, accompanied by the sound of ringing cash registers, she sneezes plates of noodles. If those climaxes don't satisfy, I suppose we (if you're still with me) can take some satisfaction from the fact that later in the video, when she sticks her nose—now grown to mind-bending dildonic proportions—into a secret glory hole

in a wall in her office, all those suspended bubbles pop. These *petites morts* are also money shots—reprises that are at once the aesthetic payoff and the visceral destruction of disembodied abstractions and speculative wagers. The seemingly sentient bubbles were beautiful, delicate, and otherworldly creatures, free-floating next to their bags of pearls, each in its (his?) own private office, but the Rottenberg penetrations burst their nearly immaterial presence and bring their bits of mucus down to earth. No doubt the consequence of the white lady's gender-bending non-conformity also refers to the bursting of the bubble in pearl prices, which, like housing prices in China, have been languishing due to overproduction. But it also, quite poetically, seems to indict the subjectivity that invests in the hegemonic aesthetics of luxury: The patriarchal markets and marketers, with their calculus of infinite expansion, their aestheticized ideas of women and their tastes, along with the invisibility of what has been organized as women's work, have perhaps miscalculated. They have created the conditions for their own destruction and now, at least in this utopian gesture of Rottenberg's work, they're getting fucked for it. That message to cultural managers and connoisseurs accomplished, we again see the catering cart full of sneezed ejaculate—chaotically piled, perfectly formed, artistically shaped plates of exotic noodles from around the world. Are they ready for the garbage . . . or are they for sale? We'll have to see what Mary Boone's pearl necklace has to say about that.

1) Hsuan L. Hsu, "Mika Rottenberg's Productive Bodies," *Mika Rottenberg* (New York and Amsterdam: Gregory R. Miller and Co. and de Appel Arts Centre, 2011), 113.

2) To Rottenberg's great credit—and in a way that would seem redeemable in a non-capitalist system of accounting (should such a system exist) despite her participation in the obscenity of the art market—she shows profound respect for the women with whom she works; she treats them as artists in their own right. In 2008, she created a photo edition with Alona Harpaz, donating the financial profits to build a new weaving center in the Indian village of Chamba.



MIKA ROTTENBERG, *NONOSEKNOWS*, 2015,
video with sound and sculptural installation,
22 min., dimensions variable /
KEINENASEWEISS, Video mit Ton und
skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.





MIKA ROTTENBERG, *NONOSEKNOWS*, 2015, video with sound and
sculptural installation, 22 min., dimensions variable /
KEINENASEWEISS, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.

JONATHAN BELLER

ROTTENBERG- PERLEN

Ich vermute, dass auch hier alles steht und fällt mit dem, was Mika Rottenberg in ihrer eigenen Arbeit als «money shot» bezeichnet: dem geilsten Bild. Die Bedeutung dieses zusammengesetzten, ursprünglich aus der Pornoszene stammenden Ausdrucks ist schillernd, denn er bezeichnet einen ritualisierten und akribisch dokumentierten Orgasmus und verknüpft dabei den zissexuell-männlichen Lusttrieb mit den Mechanismen des Marktes. Bei genauerer Überlegung erscheint es plötzlich so, dass der «money shot» – eben weil er Darstellung, Sexualität und Finanzen miteinander verquickt – zunehmend Bilder beschreibt, die uns heute umgeben, nicht nur die graphische Spur des Samenrinnials auf dem Bildschirm, sondern jene aller angeblich legendären Bildpräsentationen, die den Verbraucher dazu bringen sollen, seine Milch zu verspritzen: Modephotographie, Autowerbung, Instagram-Sternchen, Trump-Sprüche, Kunst. Die Idee durchläuft ein komplexes Feld sozialer Beziehungen, birgt jedoch ein

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Problem: Wie kann man zeigen, was man will, sämtliche Zensoren umgehen, es bis zur unwiderstehlichen Spitze treiben und abkassieren?

Man kann mit Fug und Recht behaupten, dass der «money shot», das geilste Bild, im spätkapitalistischen Spektakel zu einer Synekdoche für den Film / das Konsumgut / das Kunstwerk insgesamt geworden ist. Irgendwie scheint in der Welt des technischen Bildes, in der – so Vilém Flusser – jede soziale Praxis zum Bild strebt, jedes Bild nach Geld zu streben. Rottenberg interessiert sich für die Produktionsweisen und Vertriebskanäle zahlreicher spektakulärer Gipfelpunkte der Konsumgüterkultur, insbesondere jene der Kunst. Gediegen *und* sexy, ich weiss, aber eigentlich sind diese praktischen Fragen ein Anliegen jedes Produzenten, egal ob er Perlen, Porno, Kunst oder eine ästhetische Theorie produziert. Rottenbergs neuere Arbeiten untersuchen das Verhältnis zwischen globaler Wirtschaft, Frauenarbeit, Ästhetik, Sexualität und dem Obszönen in der heutigen postfordistischen visuellen Kultur. Wie sich zeigt, gehen in dieser Kultur Darstellungen, die Lust erzeugen und zum Kauf verführen sollen, Hand in Hand mit jener ungleichen Entwicklung und



MIKA ROTTENBERG, *SQUEEZE*, 2010,
single-channel video installation with
sound, 20 min., dimensions variable /
QUETSCHEN, 1-Kanal-Videoinstallation
mit Ton, Masse variabel.



Ausbeutung, die erst die Bedingungen dieser Visualität ermöglicht.

Wir sind überzeugt, dass die Rolle der Frauen für Rottenberg zentral ist – ein Interesse, das manche irrtümlich für speziell halten mögen, wo doch in Wirklichkeit jedes Unternehmen in irgendeiner Weise von Frauenarbeit abhängig ist. Durch die Thematisierung der Realität, der Vielfalt, der weltweiten Verbreitung, der Ungleichheit der Umstände sowie der Spezialisierung der von Frauen verrichteten Arbeit führen Rottenbergs Video- und Installationsarbeiten

vor, was Hsuan L. Hsu als «die globale Kunstfabrik» bezeichnet hat.¹⁾ Ausserdem stellen sie komplexe Fragen nach dem Produktmehrwert unter finanziellen, politischen und ästhetischen Gesichtspunkten. Rottenberg versteht die Kunstfabrik nicht als eigenständiges Unterfangen, sondern als eines, das sich mit dem überschneidet und von dem abhängt, was der autonome Marxismus als «die gesellschaftliche Fabrik» bezeichnet. Hierbei geht die Gesellschaft im Kapital auf und alltägliche Verrichtungen erhalten einen virtuoseren Charakter, da gewöhnliche Indivi-

duen zunehmend stärker spezialisierte Zugeständnisse an die aussergewöhnlichen Regeln der kapitalistischen Produktion machen. Die Lebenswelt selbst wird zur Fabrik und der gesellschaftliche Stoffwechsel wird durch das Kapital als Arbeit rekonfiguriert. Indem Rottenberg die ästhetische Produktion ins Auge fasst und aufgrund der darin wirksamen Beziehungen ihre eigenen «money shots» fabriziert, betritt die Künstlerin unversehens den allgemeinen Raum der Ökonomisierung der globalisierten postfordistischen Arbeit und sucht durch ihre eigenen sinnlich erfahrbaren Handlungen deren Bedingungen auf poetische Art neu aufzustellen.

Mit einem hyperbolischen Gespür, das – wie die Psychoanalyse – durch Übertreibung zur Wahrheit findet, stellen Rottenbergs Videoinstallationen streng durchgestaltete und konsequent absurde Maschinen dar, die unmögliche Produkte herstellen, und zwar hauptsächlich durch die einzigartigen Fähigkeiten von Frauen, deren Äusseres nicht in jene Kultschablonen passt, die andere Gefühlsmaschinen wie Hollywood und die Werbeindustrie feilbieten. Neue Produkte verlangen neue Produktionsformen verlangen neue Sinneseindrücke und damit neue Sinne: Auch die Künstlerin muss, sofern sie ein Fallen der Profitrate verhindern will, richtig lesen und liefern. In diesem neuen System funktionieren Sinn und Empfindung nicht mehr so wie bisher (oder wie man bisher dachte), nämlich wie vom Markt relativ unabhängige, natürliche, menschliche Fähigkeiten. Vielmehr werden, wie Rottenbergs Werk gleich auf mehreren Ebenen demonstriert, unsere sinnerzeugenden Fähigkeiten von den Märkten umstrukturiert und eng in Produktionsnetze eingebunden – sie sind in Wahrheit Sinneswerkzeuge der globalen Marktkräfte. Kein Wunder, scheint NONOSEKNOWS (KeineNaseWeiss, 2015) eine freie Ableitung aus *No Nose Knows* zu sein, einer Folge des hochsensiblen gesellschaftlichen Indikators und topaktuellen Multiplikators kultureller Skripte: der TV-Serie *SpongeBob Schwammkopf*.

In seiner Selbstreflexion verkörpert Rottenbergs Werk die Bedingungen der heutigen ästhetischen Produktion in ihrem unvermeidlichen Verhältnis zum Kapital, zur geschlechtlichen Identität, zur Globalisierung und zum postfordistischen Empire. Es

weiss um die Aufmerksamkeitsökonomien (die Wert-erzeugung durch das Gewinnen von Aufmerksamkeit) und auch um die allgemeine Proletarisierung der Sinne (indem man die Sinne für das Kapital arbeiten lässt und sie von anderen geistigen Tätigkeiten entfremdet und abhält). Zu Beginn von NONOSEKNOWS steuert eine weisse Dame mit Knollennase ein elektrisches Fahrzeug durch verlassene Strassen, betritt ein Gebäude und bewegt sich durch eine Reihe von Räumen voller wunderbarer, anscheinend empfindungsfähiger, schwebender Blasen. Um in ihr Büro zu gelangen, schiebt sie einen grossen Restaurant-Speisetransportwagen beiseite, auf dem sich wahllos Pastateller mit Vermicelli, japanischen Udon und so weiter türmen, darauf setzt sie sich an ihren Schreibtisch und riecht an in Plastikfolie gehüllten Blumen. Sie kann den Duft nur dank der Brise riechen, die ein klappriger Ventilator erzeugt, der von einem durch den Boden mit dem darunterliegenden Raum verbundenen Riemen angetrieben wird, welcher dort wiederum von einer wie wahnsinnig strampelnden Asiatin in Gang gehalten wird; Letztere sitzt an einem Tisch mit circa zwanzig weiteren Asiatinnen, die, wie bei näherem Hinsehen deutlich wird, winzige Stückchen fremder Austern in kleine lebende Austern einsetzen, um sie zur Produktion von Perlen anzuregen. Mit bemerkenswertem Geschick schneiden diese Frauen Austern auf und fügen sie wieder zusammen, um ein künftiges ästhetisches Produkt zu erzeugen; wie sich herausstellt, befinden wir uns in einer Perlenfabrik in Zhuji, China, und die Frauen basteln im Grunde an lebenden Kreaturen herum.

Erst allmählich wird klar, dass es hier um Perlenzucht geht, die Analogie zur Video- und Kunstproduktion ist unübersehbar: Rottenbergs eigenes Vorgehen ist analog. Während die Dame – eine ausländische Schauspielerin und die einzige Weisse im Video – in ihrem modernen Büro in der oberen Etage mit ihrem stetig wachsenden, hoch spezialisierten Rüssel an Blumen schnüffelt, sehen wir auch, dass in einem feuchten Todesraum irgendwo unter ihr grosse Austern mit einer Reihe von das Muschelfleisch durchtrennenden (Machete-)Schnitten abgeerntet werden, worauf eine Arbeiterin mit Handschuhen und Hut (ihr Gesicht bekommen wir nie

MIKA ROTTENBERG, *SQUEEZE*, 2010, single-channel video
 installation with sound, 20 min., dimensions variable /
 QUETSCHEN, 1-Kanal-Videoinstallation mit Ton, Masse variabel.



MIKA ROTTENBERG,
SQUEEZE, 2010,
 single-channel video
 installation with sound,
 20 min., dimensions variable /
 QUETSCHEN, 1-Kanal-
 Videoinstallation mit Ton,
 Masse variabel.

zu sehen) mit den Fingern gierig nach den Perlen grabst und sie aus dem Glibber der Keimdrüsen fischt. Die Beziehungsstruktur, die diese verschiedenen Aktivitäten regelt – und die gesamte Skala der planmässigen Interaktionen von den Keimdrüsen bis zur Ästhetik der glänzenden Perle umfasst –, enthüllt sich Schritt für Schritt und erschliesst sich erst im Rückblick: Erst als wir schliesslich eine weitere Gruppe von rund zwanzig Frauen sehen, die mit allen zehn Fingern unglaublich geschickt und schnell riesige Haufen von Perlen in Leinensäcke sortieren, wird uns klar, dass die grossen Säcke, die wir vorher in den vielen Räumen (oder Büros?) voller schwebender Blasen herumliegen sahen und in denen wir vielleicht Reis vermuteten, in Wirklichkeit mit Perlen gefüllt sind.

Das dokumentarische Filmmaterial über die in der Perlenzucht arbeitenden Frauen wirkt auf uns, die wir Perlen nur als Schmuck kennen, genauso verblüffend wie das Filmmaterial aus *SQUEEZE* (Quetschen, 2010) – einem weiteren Werk Rottenbergs, das Arbeiterinnen und Arbeiter einer Salatplantage in Arizona und einer Kautschukplantage in Indien zeigt – auf Menschen wirken muss, die Salat nur als Bestandteil ihrer Mahlzeit kennen und Gummi als ... Sie wissen, was ich meine. Der hier gezeigte Prozess des Sammelns ist ebenso aufschlussreich wie beispielhaft: ein Schneiden und Zusammenfügen von

aus ihrem Zusammenhang gelösten Materialien, die an sich schon eine besondere Form von Aufmerksamkeit wecken, zur Herstellung von Bildern von Konsumgütern, die noch grössere Aufmerksamkeit erregen – andernorts habe ich das als filmtypische Produktionsweise bezeichnet. Rottenbergs jüngste und vielleicht ausgefallenste Konstruktionen schaffen phantastische Szenarien, in denen diverse Sinnesfunktionen geschnitten, gemixt, verzweigt und erneut zu Produktionsszenarien zusammengefasst werden, die zugleich drittweltlich und postfordistisch, primitiv und futuristisch wirken. Wie Rottenbergs frühere Arbeiten führen auch *SQUEEZE* und *NONOSEKNOWS* ausgeklügelte Maschinen zur Herstellung neuartiger absonderlicher und offensichtlich nutzloser Produkte vor, nur sind sie jetzt mit dokumentarischem Filmmaterial von realer Arbeit durchsetzt, die von Frauen auf der südlichen Erdhalbkugel erbracht wird. In *NONOSEKNOWS* werden die chinesischen Perlenfabrikarbeiterinnen nicht nur in ihrer untermauernden Funktion für die Arbeit der weissen Künstlerin in ihrer grotesken Spezialisierung gezeigt, sondern sie werden zu einem buchstäblichen Bestandteil des Produkts: Ihre Arbeit wird Teil des Kunstwerks. Diese buchstäbliche Einverleibung der Frauenarbeit ins Kunstwerk macht die allgemeine Einverleibung spezialisierter Frauenarbeit in der übrigen Warenwelt sichtbar: von Perlen

über Schönheitsprodukte bis zu fast allen gängigen Gebrauchsgegenständen.

In gewissem Sinn sind Rottenbergs gern als surreal bezeichnete Videos realistischer als fast der gesamte Realismus. SQUEEZE etwa, mit all dem scheinbar surrealen Wasserlassen isolierter Zungen und Hinterteile, den Handmassagen, der Salat- und Kautschukproduktion, der Ansammlung von Rouge-

töpfchen und dem maschinellen Schrotthäckseln, verknüpft die einzelnen Teile mittels Schneidens und Zusammenfügens, sodass sowohl ein Video als auch ein Würfel entsteht – der schliesslich als «Endprodukt» auf dem Bildschirm erscheint, aus Salat, Kautschuk und Rouge besteht und schlicht als «ein Kunstobjekt» bezeichnet wird. Dieses Kunstobjekt, das in sieben Teile geteilt, jeweils einzeln zusam-



MIKA ROTTENBERG, NONOSEKNOWS, 2015, video with sound and sculptural installation, 22 min., dimensions variable / KEINENASEWEISS, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.

men mit dem Video verkauft wurde, bleibt auf ewig im Steuerparadies der Cayman Islands gelagert. So wirken Rottenbergs Arbeiten – wie alle Waren, die unter den Bedingungen der heutigen Globalisierung produziert werden – selbst an der verstörenden Einverleibung und Aufhebung der im Süden geleisteten Frauenarbeit mit, genau wie unser iPhone und fast all unsere heutigen Produkte; aber sie machen diese Einverleibung zugleich erkennbar, sodass sie irgendwie pervers wirkt, statt unsichtbar und unbedeutend zu bleiben. Zumindest sind Rottenbergs Perlen nicht entwurzelt und ideologisch sanforisiert, weil sie nicht

von der Geschichte ihres Herstellungsprozesses abgeschnitten sind. Vielmehr behalten sie ihre Zeitlichkeit und die Signatur ihrer Herstellungsweise so weit bei, dass die seltsamen Lebens- und Arbeitszwänge, die mit der allumfassenden Kommerzialisierung einhergehen, als ebenso obszön wie verblüffend wahrgenommen werden. In dieser Hinsicht sind die Bilder, um ein zunehmend unpopuläres Wort zu verwenden, dialektisch: Das Produkt des ganzen Prozesses wird als nutzlose Spielerei begriffen, als Teil des Treibgutes der grässlichen Veredelung und des erlesenen Geschmacks der globalen Bourgeoisie und

ihrer Kunstwelt und zugleich als deutliches Indiz der ungleichen Lebensbedingungen, die ebendiese Welt voraussetzt, ja sogar geniesst. Tatsächlich erweitert die Gewandtheit dieser Arbeiterinnen, wie auch jene der Künstlerin, die Vorstellung dessen, was (Post-) Humanoide im kybernetischen Verbund bei voller Ausschöpfung der technologischen Mittel zu verkörpern, auszuhalten und/oder zu geniessen imstande sind. Indem sie die vorherrschenden Ideale, die unsere normativen Vorstellungen von menschlichen Wesen und Menschlichkeit bestimmen, sprengen, vermitteln diese Arbeiterinnen-Akteurinnen – durch ihre Einmaligkeit in einer Welt, die so gerne Standards festlegt, und durch ihre unverhältnismässig starke Präsenz in einer Welt, die Arbeit so gern in die Unsichtbarkeit verbannt – eine Art von Kraft, Kreativität, Alltäglichkeit und Würde, mit denen jene, die mit den Bedingungen der sogenannten Frauenarbeit konfrontiert sind (einer Arbeit, die auf Frauen beschränkt ist oder Arbeitende jeglichen Geschlechts entwert), den Zwängen des Marktes entgegenreten.

Rottenbergs Perlen zeigen uns aus erster Hand, wie die kapitalistische Produktion die mit ihr verbun-

denen Entfremdungsprozesse verschärft: Nachdem sie die Menschen von ihrem Land und voneinander getrennt hat, greift sie nun in den Körper selbst ein, indem sie menschliche Fähigkeiten und Sinne isoliert, separiert, spezialisiert und arbeiten lässt. Zungen züngeln durch Löcher in Gipskartonplatten, Hinterteile ragen aus Wänden, Füsse ragen aus Eimern voller Perlen. Doch seltsamerweise müssen all die unterschiedlichen Funktionen mit Wasser besprüht werden. Diese kleinen Akte der Aufmerksamkeit und Fürsorge für lebendige menschliche Körperteile sind ein notwendiger Teil des Werkes, damit Körper und Sinne neu organisiert werden können im Rahmen eines Produktionssystems, das Organismen zerstückelt und deren Fragmente als eigene Organe nutzt. Wie die Massagen innerhalb der Maschine, die SQUEEZE darstellt, zeigen – asiatische Arbeiterinnen massieren die Arme jener, die auf dem Feld arbeiten und ihre Arme zur Massage durch die Wand strecken, wobei man sich irgendwie an ein Nagelstudio erinnert fühlt –, bedarf die Beanspruchung durch sinnliche Arbeit (und das ist bei Marx jede Arbeit) auch sinnlicher Zuwendung. Eine bemerkenswerte

MIKA ROTTENBERG, NONOSEKNOWS, 2015, video with sound and sculptural installation, 22 min., dimensions variable / KEINENASEWEISS, Video mit Ton und skulpturaler Installation, Masse variabel.



MIKA ROTTENBERG, *SQUEEZE*, 2010,
single-channel video installation with
sound, 20 min., dimensions variable /
QUETSCHEN, 1-Kanal-Videoinstallation
mit Ton, Masse variabel.



Szene spielt sich ab, sobald die Portale zwischen den visuell getrennten Räumen in einer Reihe stehen und die Frauen aus den verschiedenen Welten einander sehen können. Es ist ein utopischer Moment, der die normalerweise entfremdete Arbeit der vielfältigen Arbeits- und Dienstleistungszweige wieder miteinander verbindet und visuell eine Art Gemeinschaft herstellt. Rottenberg zeigt hier, dass soziale Zuwendung Teil der Arbeit der Arbeitswelt ist; und ihre eigene Arbeit ist eine Erweiterung dieser Zuwendung.²⁾ Es handelt sich um Formen der Anerkennung und Wertschätzung, die bis zu einem gewissen Grad die Marktverhältnisse auf den Kopf stellen.

Doch der Nährboden für Rottenbergs Werk besteht nicht ausschliesslich aus den Arbeitsbedingungen in Drittweltländern und nicht standardisierten weiblichen Körpern, die von den Arbeitsanforderungen und der Produktion neuer Bedürfnisse bestimmt werden, sondern auch aus der vermögenden, glamourösen, wohlbetuchten und durchaus reich mit Perlen bestückten Kunstmarktwelt der Reichen. Wie die Perlenkultur durch ihre Analogie zur Kunstkultur – aufgrund des raffinierten Produktionsprozesses und der offensichtlich völligen Nutzlosigkeit des Produkts – deutlich zeigt, schwimmt der Kunstmarkt und die gesamte ihm zugehörige Welt auf diesem Meer an unsichtbar gehaltener Arbeit, einer Arbeit, deren Form und Funktion, das muss in aller Deutlichkeit gesagt werden, Teil der Geschichte nicht nur des Hetero-Patriarchats, sondern auch des Rassismus und Imperialismus sind. Diese durch die

patriarchalen und rassistischen Verhältnisse entwertete und ausgelöschte Arbeit ist auch die Quelle des Reichtums eines grossen Teils der Welt, auch des Reichtums der Kunstmäzene. Zweifellos ist dies denn auch der Grund dafür, dass die Nase der weissen Dame, die über all diesen farbigen Frauen arbeitet, langsam, aber unaufhaltsam in die Höhe wächst und jedes Mass sprengt: um repräsentativen Charakter für die Gipfelzone des phallokratischen weissen rassistischen kapitalistischen Spektakels (alias Kunstszene) zu erlangen. Denn um deren Geschmack zu treffen, muss man zwingend den Weg von Pinocchio wählen. Das spürte selbst SpongeBobs Seesternfreund Patrick, als er sich eine lange Nase, wie alle andern sie hatten, wünschte: Wenn man zu den echten Jungs zählen will, muss man sich einen Schwanz wachsen lassen. Oder sich zumindest einen umschnallen.

Bemerkenswert ist ferner, dass die weisse Dame – die in ihrem Büro erst nach einer Fahrt durch eine endlose Reihe von Strassen mit leeren Wolkenkratzern ankommt, die zwar fertiggestellt sind, aber infolge der Immobilienblase in China leer stehen – eine Position im mittleren Management innezuhaben scheint. Ähnlich wie bei Künstlern, Kuratoren und Kritikern – die ihrerseits «Gerüche testen» und als spezialisierte Manager der Sinne fungieren – besteht ihre relativ angenehme Aufgabe in der (diesmal) von unsichtbaren Männern geführten Fabrik darin, an Treibhausblüten zu schnüffeln und ihrem Duft irgendeine nützliche Erkenntnis abzugewinnen. Sie schnüffelt, ihre Nase wächst um ein paar Zentime-

ter, und in der Hälfte des 22-Minuten-Videos folgt die erste Welle der «money shots». Mit gewaltigen, spritzenden Hatschis, untermalt vom Klang klingelnder Registrierkassen, niest sie Pastagerichte auf Teller. Wem diese Orgasmen nicht genügen, dürfte (falls Sie mir noch folgen) doch einige Befriedigung aus der Tatsache ziehen, dass etwas später im Video sämtliche schwebenden Blasen platzen, als die Dame ihre Nase – die mittlerweile irrwitzige dildoartige Ausmasse erreicht hat – in ein verborgenes Schwanzloch in der Bürowand steckt. Diese *petites morts* sind ebenfalls «money shots» – Reprisen, die zugleich das ästhetische Gelingen und die leibhaftige Zerstörung körperloser Abstraktionen und spekulativer Einsätze darstellen. Die anscheinend empfindungsfähigen Blasen waren schöne, grazile Wesen aus dem Jenseits, die, jede in ihrem eigenen Büro, frei über ihren Perlenböden schwebten, doch die Rottenberg'schen Penetrationen brachten ihre nahezu immaterielle Existenz zum Platzen und liessen ihre schleimigen Komponenten zu Boden platschen. Zweifellos verweist die Konsequenz der geschlechtsübergreifenden Nonkonformität der weissen Dame auch auf die geplatze Blase der Perlenpreise, die genau wie die chinesischen Immobilienpreise infolge der Überproduktion gefallen sind. Aber sie scheint auch ganz poetisch auf die Subjekte zu verweisen, die in die hegemonische Ästhetik von Luxusgütern investieren: Die patriarchalen Märkte und Händler – mit ihrem unendlichen Wachstumskalkül, ihren ästhetisierten Vorstellungen über Frauen und deren Vorlieben, kombiniert mit der Unsichtbarkeit der Frauenarbeit – haben sich vielleicht verrechnet. Sie haben die Bedingungen für ihre eigene Zerstörung geschaffen und werden nun, zumindest in dieser utopischen Stossrichtung von Rottenbergs Werk, dafür gevögelt. Nachdem diese Botschaft an die Kulturmanager und Kunstkenner angekommen ist, sehen wir erneut den Speisetransportwagen mit Bergen von hingerotzem Ejakulat – chaotisch aufgehäuften, perfekt gestalteten, künstlerisch angerichteten Tellern mit exotischen Pastagerichten aus aller Welt. Stehen sie bereit für den Müll ... oder vielleicht zum Verkauf? Bleibt abzuwarten, was Mary Boones Perlenkette dazu meint.

(Übersetzung: Suzanne Schmidt)

1) Hsuan L. Hsu, «Mika Rottenberg's Productive Bodies», *Mika Rottenberg*, Gregory R. Miller & Co. und de Appel Arts Centre, New York und Amsterdam 2011, S. 113.

2) Rottenberg zeigt – auf eine Art, die sich in einem nicht kapitalistischen Buchhaltungssystem einlösen liesse (wenn es ein solches System gäbe), und ihrer Partizipation an den Obszönitäten des Kunstmarktes zum Trotz – höchsten Respekt für die Frauen, mit denen sie zusammenarbeitet, und behandelt sie ihrerseits als eigenständige Künstlerinnen. 2008 schuf sie zusammen mit Alona Harpaz eine Photoedition, aus deren Verkaufserlös der Bau eines neuen Webereizentrums in der indischen Ortschaft Chamba finanziert wurde.

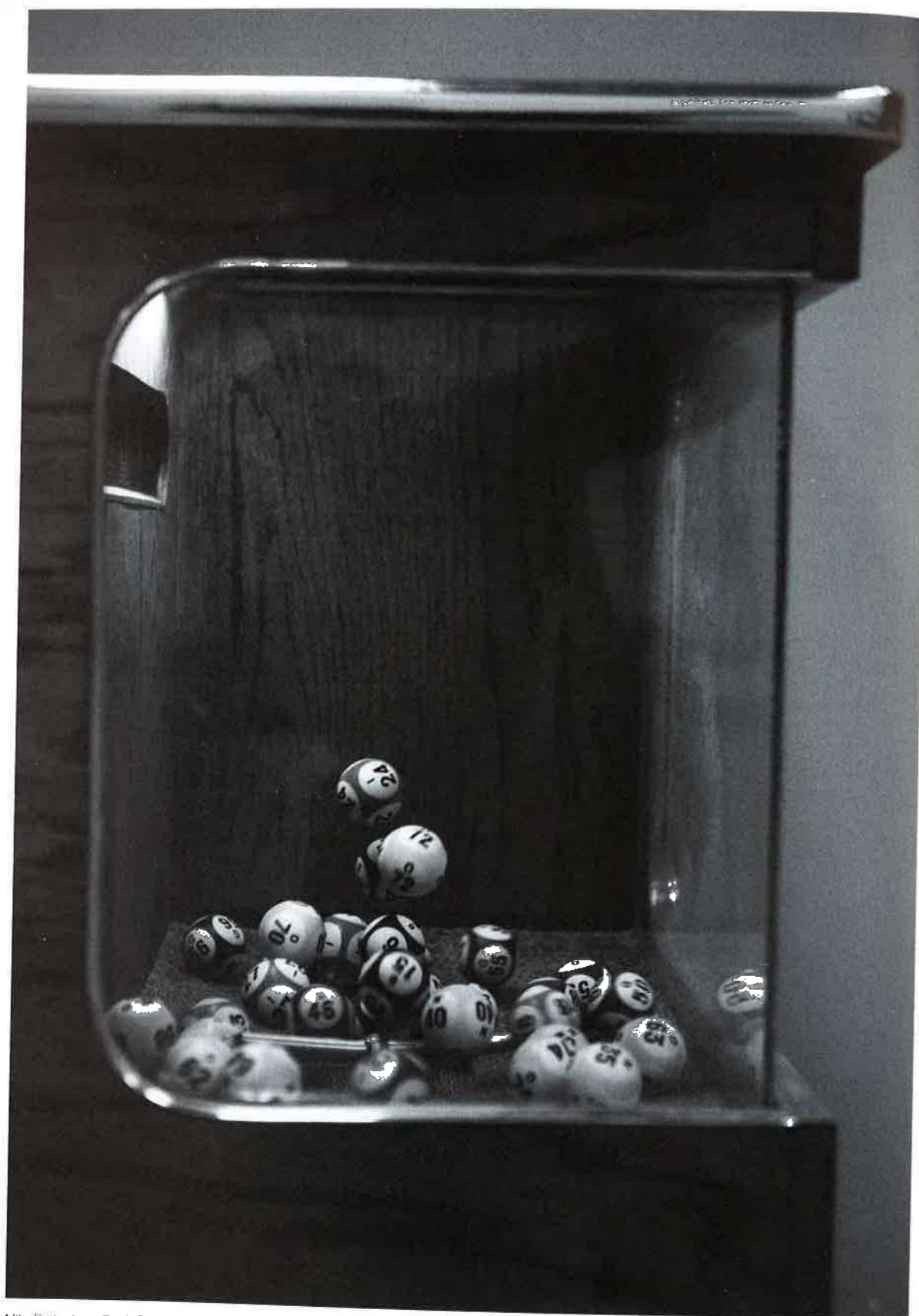
MIKA ROTTENBERG, *MARY BOONE WITH CUBE*, 2010,
C-print, 64 x 36" / *MARY BOONE MIT WÜRFEL*,
C-Print, 162,6 x 91,4 cm.
(IMAGE COURTESY OF MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK,
AND NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY, NEW YORK)



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Mika Rottenberg, *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* (détail), 2014, vidéo (27' 54") et installation, dimensions variables, vue de l'exposition «Mika Rottenberg», Paris, Palais de Tokyo, 23 juin-11 sept. 2016, photo © Sabine Mirlesse

Sabine Mirlesse

Une conversation avec Mika Rottenberg

Sabine Mirlesse : J'ai découvert votre travail à la faveur d'une exposition à la Andrea Rosen Gallery de New York. La pièce intitulée *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* (2014) m'a vraiment impressionnée.

Mika Rottenberg : Tant mieux, parce qu'elle diffère un peu de ce que j'ai fait auparavant. Elle représente un virage...

S. M. : Peut-être pouvons-nous parler dès maintenant de ce virage ? En quoi cette pièce est-elle différente ?

M. R. : *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* traitait de la production de la chance. Je pense que dans chaque œuvre, il est question de comprendre comment on crée de la valeur. Le chemin que j'ai suivi m'a menée vers une dématérialisation croissante. La pièce précédente la plus importante, *Squeeze* (2010), s'intéressait à la construction d'une œuvre d'art – ce cube qui fut ensuite retiré du site. Cette œuvre traitait de la création d'un objet qu'on ne voyait jamais. Elle s'intéressait au processus de production. La pièce précédente, *Cheese* (2008), traitait de la production des cheveux... et les œuvres d'avant étaient fortement axées sur le matériau, *Dough* (2006) par exemple, ou *Mary's Cherries* (2004). Aujourd'hui, il est plutôt question de la façon dont les choses fonctionnent – et de retirer le

matériau. Je m'intéresse aujourd'hui à des questions plus vastes, comme le mouvement de l'énergie et les états de la matière.

Cette pièce traitait de la production de la chance – la chance étant, bien entendu, impossible à produire –, donc elle est censée examiner le problème. C'était pour moi un virage. Je la trouve un peu moins tenue que les autres, du fait qu'elle ne trouve pas de résolution.

S. M. : Les autres n'en trouvent pas non plus.

M. R. : C'est vrai, mais elles comportent toujours un objet ou un matériau – or, dans celle-ci, l'objet est la chance. Et puis il y a l'utilisation du genre documentaire, et le mélange des deux. J'ai déjà fait ça dans *Squeeze*. Je continue d'explorer cette façon de travailler. La dématérialisation est, je pense, un virage.

S. M. : Vous ne pouvez donc pas produire de la chance ?

M. R. : C'est bien pour ça que j'ai réalisé cette vidéo. Je n'en suis pas encore certaine. Au fond, avec le bingo on produit de la chance.

S. M. : Y croyez-vous, à la chance ?

M. R. : Je pense que beaucoup d'entre nous – moi, en tout cas – vivons comme si la chance existait.

Je pense que les actes ont des conséquences, mais on ne vit pas vraiment en fonction de ça. Si l'on croyait vraiment que nos actions influaient sur des choses telles que le réchauffement climatique, on se conduirait autrement. Mais on ne le fait pas...

S. M. : Certaines personnes le font – elles font attention à leur consommation, aux déchets qu'elles produisent... bien sûr, j'imagine que ce n'est pas le cas de la plupart des gens...

M. R. : Je ne sais pas si je crois à la chance. Probablement pas. À la coïncidence? Au hasard?

S. M. : Était-ce là le propos du film? Rechercher si oui ou non vous y croyez? Étudier la chance?

M. R. : En fait, je sais déjà que je n'apporterai jamais une réponse définitive à cette question. Donc, non. Mais je voulais voir à quoi ressemblait ce processus. C'est ce que font les industries du jeu, du pari – ce sont des producteurs de chance.

S. M. : Quelle place tient le discours social dans votre travail? Est-ce que les sujets tels que la consommation, le réchauffement climatique, la race ou le féminisme – pour ne citer que certains de ceux qui apparaissent dans vos œuvres – y sont abordés de façon réfléchie? Ou s'agit-il de thèmes dérivés?

M. R. : Pour moi, être un artiste consiste, dans une certaine mesure, à observer et à questionner les choses – c'est sa façon de s'impliquer sans militer. C'est une façon de participer. Prendre part à des conversations portant sur des questions plus générales, même d'une manière non directement politisée. J'ignore à quel point l'art pourrait changer le monde mais il me semble qu'en tant qu'artiste vous devez avoir envie de croire qu'il le peut... encore que je ne le pense pas. Je pense que c'est une bonne motivation.

S. M. : Il existe donc une tension entre le désir de voir l'art changer le monde et une réticence à croire qu'il le puisse.

M. R. : Oui, mais je ne démarre jamais un projet en me disant que je vais faire une œuvre politique. Je ne sais pas encore très bien si mon travail est politique, ou s'il est simplement absurde et drôle. Mais il est clair que cette question m'a toujours intéressée et

frustrée tout à la fois. Vous savez bien que si vous voulez opérer de réels changements, vous devez militer ou faire de la politique. Ma manière d'investir ces sujets ne passe pas par là. Je peux être meilleure artiste que militante. Et puis, en tant qu'artiste, vous n'avez pas besoin de vous mêler de morale. Du point de vue moral, votre œuvre peut venir du mauvais bord. Je pense que toute chose est motivée psychologiquement. Et cela, je crois, m'a toujours attirée... les histoires qui portent ça en elles...

S. M. : Quoi donc?

M. R. : Le politique, le social, etc. Tout ça mélangé.

S. M. : J'ai lu que votre pratique a bifurqué dans cette direction après que vous avez lu Karl Marx; j'en ai déduit qu'elle était peut-être plus réfléchie?

M. R. : Il y eut d'abord une conversation à la fac au cours de laquelle quelqu'un m'a dit que la valeur des choses dépendait de la quantité de temps et de labeur qu'elles avaient nécessité. Cette idée me fascinait. Alors, mon ami m'a dit : «Ah, Marx, *Das Kapital* – lis-le!» Mon travail n'est pas forcément basé sur Marx, ou sur *Das Kapital*, mais je pense que lui et moi nous intéressons aux mêmes choses. Bien sûr, cela aide de lire quelqu'un qui a beaucoup réfléchi à ces questions.

S. M. : Avez-vous toujours voulu être une artiste?

M. R. : Oui.

S. M. : D'où venez-vous?

M. R. : Je suis née en Argentine et j'ai grandi en Israël. Je suis venue aux États-Unis quand j'avais 18, 19 ans.

S. M. : Avez-vous fréquenté une école d'art? Êtes-vous issue d'une famille d'artistes?

M. R. : Plus ou moins. Mes deux parents avaient des penchants artistiques mais aucun des deux n'a vraiment opté pour ça. Mon père a réalisé quelques films – j'ai donc grandi autour de plateaux de cinéma, et j'aimais l'énergie qui s'en dégageait. Un plateau de cinéma, ça me semblait le plus bel endroit au monde. Je le pense encore.

S. M. : Pourquoi? Parce que tout y est possible?



Mika Rottenberg, *Squeeze* (détail), 2010, installation vidéo et digital C-print, vidéo : 20', vue de l'exposition «New York! Mika Rottenberg» San Francisco, SFMoMA, 9 juil.-3 oct. 2010, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York

M. R. : Il y a là une formidable énergie. Tout coûte tellement cher – du coup, tout le monde travaille très dur. Même pour un film d'étudiant. Si vous disposez de huit ou quatorze heures pour faire ce que vous avez à faire, tout le monde doit être très concentré. Rien que ce travail d'équipe, c'est comme une opération chirurgicale. Chaque chose doit être très précise. C'est un travail collectif. J'aime, je crois, l'intensité qui va avec.

S. M. : Quand vous parlez de chirurgie, cela me fait penser au côté expérience scientifique de vos films – vous modifiez légèrement tel ou tel élément, ajoutez une mesure de ci, de ça, histoire de voir ce que ça donne.

M. R. : Oui. Vous faites une mise en scène sans jamais savoir au juste ce qui va en sortir. C'est toujours une expérience. Tout le monde autour la regarde, recule et observe à travers un million de lentilles. Vous voulez être surpris. Vous voulez que ce soit mieux que ce à quoi vous vous attendez. Il faut donc prendre un petit peu de recul.

S. M. : Vous avez toujours voulu être une artiste. Mais

en avez-vous eu la révélation? Y a-t-il eu un moment où vous avez décidé que c'est ce que vous feriez?

M. R. : Oui. Je ne me suis jamais vraiment dit que je pourrais être une artiste professionnelle. Ça restait un rêve. Je peignais en me disant que c'était quelque chose de concret, puis je me suis tournée vers la vidéo, ce qui était encore plus irréaliste qu'il n'y paraissait. J'ai donc pensé à beaucoup d'autres professions – vétérinaire, maquettiste, fabricante d'objets, antiquaire...

S. M. : Ah bon? Dites-m'en plus... Je pense que c'est un élément important du travail artistique – souvent, il faut être créatif et avoir d'autres sources de revenus quand on démarre. J'aimerais en savoir plus...

M. R. : J'ai exercé pas mal de boulots aléatoires. J'ai travaillé dans un café. J'adore les pâtisseries! J'adore faire des gâteaux, cuisiner. J'ai pensé un moment partir en Indonésie pour apprendre à fabriquer du tissu. Puis je me suis dit que j'allais consacrer pleinement – au moins tenter de le faire – une bonne partie de l'année à mon travail d'artiste professionnelle, et que si ça ne marchait pas, j'arrêteraient et je ferais

autre chose... mais après mes études supérieures, les choses ont commencé à s'améliorer.

S. M. : Juste après vos études supérieures? C'est quand même formidable.

M. R. : À peu près immédiatement. J'avais l'impression d'être dans un espace où je n'étais pas sûre que cela arriverait. J'ai été motivée très tôt. À 25 ans, je travaillais dur depuis près de dix ans. Peut-être que, vu de l'extérieur, ça semblait être allé trop vite, mais j'y travaillais depuis déjà une décennie. Cela dit, je n'aurais jamais imaginé pouvoir un jour produire de grandes vidéos et faire vivre ma famille de cette manière.

S. M. : Quel principal changement est intervenu lorsque vous êtes devenue une artiste plus établie et reconnue? Est-ce surtout l'augmentation des budgets dont vous disposez pour produire vos vidéos/films?

M. R. : Ils ont vraiment grimpé!

S. M. : ... ce qui vous permet d'être plus imaginative, dès lors que les contraintes budgétaires sont moindres? De réfléchir à plus grande échelle?

M. R. : L'argent reste une contrainte. À l'école, avec un budget de cinq cents dollars c'était difficile, bien sûr; mais aujourd'hui, s'engager dans une production avec cinq mille dollars apparaît tout aussi difficile.

S. M. : À cause de l'ampleur des projets?

M. R. : Mes moyens prennent eux aussi de l'ampleur. Il est toujours important d'exercer une certaine retenue. Je veux dire par là que si j'avais des moyens illimités, ce serait déroutant...

S. M. : Vous n'auriez plus à opérer des choix?

M. R. : Je réfléchis toujours aux budgets. Je suis très pragmatique. Tout vient ensemble. Imaginer ce que pourrait être une chose et envisager ce que pourrait être sa réalisation pratique. Je ne suis pas une rêveuse. J'ai besoin de savoir qu'il y aura un résultat concret.

S. M. : Vos vidéos ne sont jamais montrées de façon autonome, mais toujours au sein d'une installation

d'objets ou d'un décor construit sur le lieu d'exposition – tout cela renvoyant visiblement à la vidéo diffusée. Comment choisissez-vous les éléments et accessoires figurant dans vos vidéos qui seront insérés dans l'installation?

M. R. : J'ai toujours réalisé des installations. J'ai très vite compris, dès mes études supérieures, qu'il y aurait des installations, que l'œuvre ne pourrait se réduire aux seules vidéos. J'avais vu des vidéos traitées de manière si horrible – avec les pires sons et éclairages qui soient. J'ai décidé que j'exercerai un plus grand contrôle sur l'expérience visuelle – sinon, il me suffirait de vous envoyer un fichier à regarder chez vous sur votre ordinateur. Il a toujours été important pour moi d'utiliser ce que la galerie avait à offrir, son espace réel.

S. M. : Combien de personnes composent votre équipe? Est-ce une grosse production?

M. R. : J'essaie de garder un effectif réduit. Mon équipe de production actuelle ne comporte que deux personnes. Elles ont produit mon dernier film avec moi, et maintenant cette nouvelle vidéo. Je travaille en ce moment avec un cinéaste; le fonctionnement de la caméra que j'utilise nécessite deux techniciens, plus une personne pour les prises de vues et un éclairagiste. Je travaille aussi depuis des années avec Katrin Alterkamp – pour la conception des décors. C'est la première personne que j'ai rencontrée à New York, en 1998. Nous étions voisines. Elle m'a rendu service – comme elle était maquettiste, elle a participé à mon travail en construisant des choses; aujourd'hui, elle travaille pour moi à plein-temps.

S. M. : Voilà ce que j'appelle de la chance!

M. R. : En fait, je crois complètement à la chance!

S. M. : Le fait est que vos décors ont une telle allure – ils contribuent fortement à votre griffe en tant qu'artiste. Si vous n'aviez pas habité à côté d'une maquettiste puis collaboré avec elle, votre travail aurait peut-être un tout autre aspect.

M. R. : C'est certain. La chance, c'est aussi savoir ce que l'on veut et le réaliser quand l'occasion s'en présente. Et c'est aussi être né dans certaines cir-



Mika Rottenberg, *Squeeze* (détail), 2010, installation vidéo et digital C-print, vidéo : 20', vue de l'exposition «New York: Mika Rottenberg», San Francisco, SFMoMA, 9 juil.-3 oct. 2010, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York

constances. Avoir la chance de naître femme dans le monde occidental, par exemple.

S. M. : Pensez-vous qu'il faut de la chance pour devenir un artiste de renom?

M. R. : (Longue pause.) Oui. Il y a un peu de ça. Ou au moins échapper à la malchance. C'est aussi, je pense, une question de karma. Oui. Sans aucun doute. Même le fait qu'il vous soit possible de faire une œuvre parce que vous êtes né là où c'est possible. Ensuite, la chance intervient tout au long du parcours. Mais il faut avoir tout un tas de talents... avoir une vision ne suffit pas.

S. M. : J'aurais aimé que vous me parliez du retour répété de la roue dans votre travail. J'ai noté le mot «roue» en regardant de nouveau vos vidéos. Elle apparaît plusieurs fois. Vous venez d'évoquer le karma, qui est souvent figuré par une roue. Et puis quand on parle de chance, on pense évidemment à la roue de la fortune... Est-ce là une répétition voulue?

M. R. : Je crois que le cercle a été un motif. Le mouvement, les matières, les énergies et leur cycle.

S. M. : C'est aussi la deuxième fois que vous évoquez l'énergie. Avez-vous des croyances spirituelles?

M. R. : Je crois tout à fait qu'il y a une sagesse dans la matière. Il y a cette stupéfiante création dans tout ce qui nous entoure. Dans les atomes. Toute chose m'apparaît comme élément d'un système plus vaste. Les humains qui se contentent d'essayer de produire des formes, et d'attribuer des valeurs quantitatives, monétaires, hiérarchiques aux fictions qu'ils créent, c'est n'importe quoi. Je pensais aussi tout à l'heure, en roulant vers la ville (je vis au nord de New York), à la vitesse du temps qui passe. C'est insensé. Je vais avoir 40 ans – et ça me semble insensé. Dans vingt ans, j'aurais 60 ans, et je suis arrivée à New York il y a vingt ans. Le temps. Comme ça va vite! Je me disais que nous vivons bien plus dans le temps que dans l'espace. Les choses ralentiraient si nous vivions dans l'espace, parce qu'alors il n'y aurait pas de temps.

S. M. : Comment vivre dans l'espace sans vivre dans le temps ?

M. R. : C'est que vous y pensez comme à un changement. Vous êtes ici dans votre corps. Vous êtes dans l'espace plutôt que vous ne vous déplacez dans le temps. Notre société est tellement axée sur le temps. Il y a toujours des interconnexions, mais que se passerait-il si nous vivions un peu moins dans le temps et un peu plus dans l'espace – à quoi cela ressemblerait-il ?

S. M. : À vrai dire, vos vidéos nous en donnent une petite idée – beaucoup d'entre elles se situent littéralement dans des boîtes, sans connexion, dirait-on, avec le temps ou le monde extérieur, et elles présentent des actions répétitives qui font que le temps, en quelque sorte, s'évapore.

M. R. : Oui, vous avez raison, elles se situent bien dans l'espace plutôt que dans le temps. La vidéo est un médium basé sur le temps, mais là il s'agit d'une boucle.

S. M. : Les objets eux-mêmes – la machine à bingo dans *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*, par exemple – se situent aussi hors du temps, ils semblent n'appartenir à aucune époque exclusivement.

M. R. : Je suis entrée dans cette salle de bingo pour la première fois il y a cinq ans. Elle se trouve au deuxième étage d'un immeuble de Harlem, sur la 125^e Rue. Cet endroit vit dans un temps qui lui est propre. Il peut être midi et faire beau dehors, il peut être plus tard et pleuvoir, et les mêmes gens sont là à tamponner les numéros appelés. C'est bondé. Vous revenez le lendemain à deux heures de l'après-midi, et c'est exactement pareil.

S. M. : Quelles sommes gagnent-ils ?

M. R. : Pas grand-chose. Je crois qu'on peut gagner jusqu'à environ \$ 400, au maximum. Ils disent que l'établissement est toujours gagnant, mais je pense que les gens gagnent eux aussi, certains payent même leur loyer avec cet argent – ils le font travailler. Tous dépensent aussi une bonne partie de leurs gains sur place.

S. M. : De nombreuses femmes figurent dans vos œuvres. Pouvez-vous m'en dire un peu plus ?

Pourquoi plus de femmes que d'hommes ? Comment faites-vous vos castings, etc. ?

M. R. : Je suis attirée par la féminité et le pouvoir féminin depuis mon enfance. Bien sûr... je suis une femme. Toutefois, je pense que s'il y avait une majorité d'hommes dans mes vidéos, personne ne me demanderait si elles traitent de la masculinité. Personne n'y ferait attention. Comme si, dans les films, les hommes sont censés représenter tout un chacun, tandis qu'une femme se démarque comme une exception.

S. M. : Je vous assure que s'il y avait surtout des hommes, je le remarquerais aussi et je vous questionnerais à ce sujet. S'agit-il seulement d'une décision intuitive, non mûrie, de votre part ?

M. R. : C'est intuitif. Mais cela devient de plus en plus intentionnel. Si ce qu'on appelle la sensibilité féminine existe, c'est une question qui m'intéresse de plus en plus. Il y a la question de l'appropriation et du corps comme entité productrice, de l'objectivation et du fait de tirer un objet de soi-même, et de savoir si cela renforce, ou non, les capacités d'action. Pour ces raisons, travailler avec le corps féminin a du sens.

S. M. : Vous avez des enfants ?

M. R. : Oui.

S. M. : Vous avez donc vous aussi « produit », pour filer l'analogie.

M. R. : Oui, mais même avant, je comparais déjà le processus de fabrication d'une œuvre à une gestation suivie d'une mise au monde. Avant de devenir mère, je n'en savais pas assez à ce sujet pour faire la comparaison, mais à présent je peux confirmer cette idée. C'est un projet qui vous consume complètement, ensuite il sort et prend en quelque sorte son indépendance – et pourtant non, parce que vous devez encore vous en occuper au long du chemin. Mais vous devez aussi vous en séparer un peu. En tant que processus, c'est un peu comme devenir parent.

S. M. : J'ai lu que, selon vous, les artistes finissent toujours par se répéter, par refaire les mêmes choses encore et encore.

M. R. : Il s'agit plus, je crois, du fait de reprendre une



Mika Rottenberg, *Mary's Cheries*, 2004, installation vidéo, dimensions variables, vidéo : 5'50", collection FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon, vue de l'exposition «Mika Rottenberg: Mary's Cheries», 7 juin-29 sept. 2012, Montpellier, FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon, photo © C. Pérez



Mika Rottenberg devant son œuvre *Bowls Balls Souls Holes (détail)*, 2014, vidéo (27'54") et installation, dimensions variables, vue de l'exposition «Mika Rottenberg», Paris, Palais de Tokyo, 23 juin-11 sept. 2016, photo © Sabine Mirlesse

investigation encore et encore. De rechercher à quoi ressemble une chose – que ce soit une métaforme [metashape] ou un mouvement. C'est pour ça que vous réalisez l'œuvre. Pour découvrir en quoi elle consiste. C'est une recherche de ce qui est non-manifeste. De la manifestation du non-manifeste. Il existe une logique selon laquelle une chose conduit à une autre, et je ne cesse de demander s'il doit ou non en être ainsi. On peut devenir trop dépendant du langage, et un besoin se fait sentir d'explorer de nouvelles façons de parler à l'intérieur de ce langage. Un artiste utilise le langage qu'il invente. Je pense être constamment à la recherche d'un mouvement ou d'une forme, d'une sorte de puzzle à trois dimensions, presque comme les fractales ou l'ADN – vous le tournez dans un sens et il prend une forme, et ça paraît se répéter sans fin.

S. M. : Quel est le plus bel endroit où vous soyez allée ?

M. R. : La question, c'est de savoir comment on s'y sent. L'endroit peut être magnifique mais super humide – et comme j'ai horreur de l'humidité, ça sera horrible. Je suis allée sur une petite île près de Taiwan avec ma fille et Sean – mon compagnon, petit ami et père de mon enfant –, qui est lui aussi artiste : l'île des Orchidées. Mais on avait subi un décalage horaire de douze heures – j'étais là pour la biennale de Taipei. Quand j'y repense, on se sentait un peu comme dans un rêve, à cause de la fatigue. Je n'en ai aucune image, pourtant.

S. M. : Ce n'est pas grave, c'est probablement parce que vous viviez dans l'instant...

M. R. : À propos de vivre dans l'instant... J'ai connu un tournant spirituel... s'agissant de ressentir l'espace sans vivre dans le temps. De ne pas être esclave de ses pensées. Le cerveau est comme un muscle, il fait juste poum poum poum poum poum. Apprendre qu'il existait un autre endroit où l'on puisse revenir, en dehors de l'esprit-qui-pense – ce fut un colossal moment d'éveil.

S. M. : ... Trouver refuge dans son corps, peut-être, et séparer l'esprit du corps, aussi illogique que cela paraisse.

M. R. : Les gens croient en leurs pensées – ils croient que ce sont leurs mauvaises pensées qui les rendent mauvais. Nous avons tous d'horribles pensées, et aussi de vraies bonnes pensées. Mais elles sont comme des nuages.

S. M. : Notre esprit serait notre pire ennemi.

M. R. : Et un simple muscle.

S. M. : J'ai oublié de vous questionner au sujet de ces femmes très fortes qui jouent un rôle de premier ordre dans vos vidéos. Et pas seulement des femmes – des individus très corpulents.

M. R. : Ils sont mon alter ego ! Je plaisante. Tout d'abord, il est là une fois encore question de matériau. Si je travaille sur le corps, alors il m'en faut une grande quantité. Je travaille sur le fait d'exister dans un corps. Certaines de ces femmes sont aussi longues et maigres. Pour moi, les corps sont à utiliser plutôt comme un matériau. Ils ont une dimension sculpturale. L'histoire de l'art est pleine de ça. La fascination de l'excès. Il est aussi question de consommation.

S. M. : Comment choisissez-vous ces gens ? Sont-ce des amis ? Des inconnus ? Des acteurs ?

M. R. : Je les ai trouvés parce qu'ils proposaient leur propre corps à la location. La femme de *Dough* est une «écraseuse» professionnelle. Elle s'assied sur des gens. La femme très grande est aussi à louer, elle a un tarif horaire. Ce sont tous des loueurs de leur



Mika Rottenberg, *Dough (détail)*, 2006, installation vidéo, dimensions variables, vidéo 15'52", vue de l'exposition «Installations II: Video from the Guggenheim Collections», 3 mars 2009-17 janv. 2010, Bilbao, Guggenheim Bilbao, photo Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa © FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, photo by Erika Barahona Ede

corps, dans un sens. Ça a commencé comme ça. Je voulais travailler avec quelqu'un qui y soit disposé d'avance. Un parfait équilibre entre la voyeuse, moi, et l'exhibitionniste, elle. Le fait que ces gens découpent leur corps en tranches horaires de location, et que moi je les embauche, fait partie du spectacle. Par ailleurs, il était important pour moi de faire appel à des inconnus.

S. M. : Combien de temps vous faut-il pour réaliser une œuvre ?

M. R. : Un an. Ensuite, je prends un an de repos et de réflexion pour la prochaine pièce. Je suis convaincue qu'il faut prendre du temps. Ce serait dément pour moi de réaliser des vidéos tous les six mois. Il faut un an pour les produire.

S. M. : Certaines de vos œuvres ont des aspects cauchemardesques ; vos cauchemars ou vos rêves ressemblent-ils aux mondes que vous créez dans vos vidéos ?

M. R. : Je ne rêve jamais de mon travail. Je fais toujours des rêves d'anxiété lorsque je suis en train de produire une œuvre – en général des scénarios dans lesquels mes dents tombent. Cela dit, je n'aime pas considérer mon travail en cours sous un angle onirique.

S. M. : Le mot lui-même est chargé de connotations frustrantes – c'est un mot paresseux. À mes yeux, votre travail possède une dimension surréelle saugement imaginative, que vous pourriez rencontrer dans vos rêves ou dans vos cauchemars.



Mika Rottenberg et Jon Kessler, *SEVEN (sculpture variant) (détail)*, 2011-2016, installation avec vidéo, technique mixte, dimensions variables, vidéo : 36'08", vue de l'exposition «Mika Rottenberg», Paris, Palais de Tokyo, 23 juin-11 sept. 2016, photo © Aurélien Mole, courtesy Palais de Tokyo, Paris

J'aimerais que nous parlions du son dans vos vidéos. Cet élément intervient-il après coup, lorsque toutes les maquettes et prises de vues sont achevées ?

M. R. : J'ai travaillé avec les mêmes personnes au cours des deux dernières années. Tout se fait après coup. Il arrive que nous enregistrions un peu de son sur le plateau, à titre de référence en général. Tout le travail de conception sonore est réalisé en postproduction. Les sons et les bruits remplacent le dialogue qui est absent dans l'œuvre.

S. M. : Les montages sont particulièrement remarquables. Il y a une pression qui s'intensifie à mesure que les scènes sont assemblées les unes aux autres, comme balancées l'une après l'autre puis en sens inverse, qui donne l'impression que tout se déroule simultanément. Les effets sonores participent à cette cocotte-minute et à cette construction par couches. Avez-vous déjà effectué une longue prise de vues en continu pour envisager de changer ? Cela ne pourrait-il en aucun cas vous intéresser ?

M. R. : Non, parce qu'alors on entre dans des mouvements et des chorégraphies de caméra particuliers – à ce moment-là, on peut aussi bien faire une performance, à mon sens. Je trouve que ce type de découpage produit quelque chose d'infiniment plus

bizarre et authentique. La performance donne bien plus facilement l'impression du faux, tant du point de vue spatial que sculptural. Dans l'espace, le facteur temps entre en jeu. Insister sur le travail dans l'espace – par opposition au temps. C'est drôle, j'étais en train de rouler pour me rendre à cet entretien, j'ai eu cette illumination, et me voilà en train de vous raconter que la chose saute aux yeux partout dans mon œuvre !

S. M. : Je suis heureuse de bénéficier de cette illumination. Je me sens meilleure en interview, et je peux tenter de m'en attribuer le mérite. À tant parler d'espace par opposition au temps, je ne peux m'empêcher de me demander : êtes-vous claustrophobe ?

M. R. : Non, je pense que c'est tout le contraire. J'aime les petits espaces, les cagibis – vraiment.

S. M. : Par qui êtes-vous influencée ?

M. R. : Ça change tout le temps. Je viens de voir l'exposition de Peter Fischli et David Weiss au Guggenheim – j'y ai passé un merveilleux moment. Et je viens de revoir *Eraserhead* de David Lynch, un très bon film.

S. M. : Pensez-vous qu'il est important d'être actif, de visiter des expositions et de voir ce qui se réalise ailleurs ? Ou préférez-vous fonctionner en vase clos, travailler d'une manière plus solitaire ?

M. R. : Je suis une artiste de l'espèce qui travaille en vase clos. Je pense qu'il existe deux types. Je suis très absorbée en moi-même quand je travaille. Je crains aussi de prendre en charge des idées, que trop de choses ne relèvent pas de mon propre travail. De l'emplir de la vision d'autres gens sans avoir la mienne propre. De tout voler aux autres.

S. M. : Comptez-vous rester à New York ? La plupart des gens qui y vivent viennent d'ailleurs, mais dans chaque article que je lis à votre sujet, vous êtes avant tout identifiée à une sorte de « pièce rapportée », malgré le temps que vous avez passé aux États-Unis. Attachez-vous de l'importance au fait d'être argentine et israélienne ? Retourneriez-vous dans l'un ou l'autre pays ?

M. R. : Je n'y attache pas d'importance. L'autre jour, je

me demandais de quelle nationalité je me réclame-rais si je devais en choisir une seule, et je n'ai pas pu.

S. M. : *New Yorker* ?

M. R. : Même pas, parce que je vis maintenant à deux heures de New York, au nord, à Tivoli.

S. M. : Tivoli ! J'ai beaucoup entendu parler de cet endroit. La dernière colonie d'artistes de la vallée de l'Hudson ! Est-ce parce que Brice Marden y habite que quantité d'artistes s'y sont installés ?

M. R. : Je crois que ça tient plutôt à la cherté de New York, et aussi à la qualité de la vie. Mais si Donald Trump gagne les élections, je déménagerai à Paris.

S. M. : Nous serions ravis de vous accueillir parmi nous.

M. R. : Si je devais déménager d'ici, j'ai toujours dit que ce serait à Paris. J'ai une galerie là-bas. New York est totalement saturé. Et puis les Français ne sont pas désagréables non plus. Cela dit, j'ai sans doute une mentalité israélienne. Ou peut-être suis-je simplement une citoyenne du monde.

S. M. : À propos de Paris, pouvez-vous me parler de l'exposition au Palais de Tokyo ?

M. R. : Elle présente tout mon travail des cinq der-

nières années, spécialement installé pour l'espace du Palais de Tokyo. C'est aussi la première fois que j'expose une telle quantité d'œuvres.

S. M. : Transformez-vous vos installations pour les adapter à l'espace du Palais de Tokyo ?

M. R. : Oui. Cet espace comporte beaucoup d'éléments sculpturaux et architecturaux. C'est mon exposition la plus ambitieuse, jusqu'à présent.

S. M. : Qu'implique, pour l'artiste, de se lancer dans la préparation d'une exposition d'une telle ampleur ? Vous sentez-vous stimulée ? Nerveuse ? Par ailleurs, avez-vous réalisé des choses à Paris en vue de cette expo, ou avez-vous tout apporté des États-Unis ? Pensez-vous au public français – ou même spécifiquement parisien – quand vous appréhendez la spécificité du lieu d'exposition ? Ou ne vous souciez-vous que de l'espace mis à votre disposition par le musée ?

M. R. : Une partie de l'exposition a été réalisée sur place, mais tout le reste a été acheminé depuis les États-Unis. Non, je ne pense pas au public.

S. M. : Que ferez-vous après l'exposition au Palais de Tokyo ?

M. R. : Je prépare une nouvelle pièce en vue du Skulptur Projekte 2017 de Münster.

New York, hiver-printemps 2016
Traduit de l'anglais par Catherine Vasseur

Mika Rottenberg est née en 1976 à Buenos Aires. Elle vit et travaille à New York.

Sabine Mirlesse est une artiste franco-américaine qui vit et travaille à Paris. Elle est titulaire d'un master en photographie obtenu à la Parsons School of Design (New York) et est diplômée de McGill University à Montréal en anthropologie des religions et en littérature. *As if it should have been a quarry* est sa première monographie (Damiani, 2013) ; inspirée de l'éruption volcanique en Islande, elle a fait l'objet d'une exposition à la Galerie Particulière (Paris et Bruxelles) début 2016. Elle travaille actuellement à un nouvel ensemble sur la mythologie et l'acte de voir, qui l'a conduite en Arménie. Ses interviews d'artistes sont consultables sur le site sabinemirlesse.com



Mika Rottenberg

Palais de Tokyo, Paris 23 June – 11 September

In the middle of Mika Rottenberg's meandering show at *Palais de Tokyo*, *Ponytail (Black)* (2016), a long, mechanically flipping, raven-coloured lock of human hair, springs from a mysterious hole that pierces a wall at head height. While this view is about as racy as a horse's tail swatting flies, the notion of a female jogger frantically bouncing in some secret room constructed behind it naturally comes to mind. Around the corner adjacent to the wall sculpture, the four rectangular windows of *Ceiling Fan Composition #2* (2016) open onto the hitherto hidden space. It is empty and split in half by a dropped ceiling, two spinning fans in the section above and two below. Too low and intricate for anybody to stand inside, this inaccessible installation makes the idea of an immured runner all the more twisted. She'd risk getting chopped by the motored blades.

Rottenberg's surrealistic works abound with partitioned-off spaces, which accommodate absurd human tasks that spiral into uncanny chains of events. Indeed, the Argentine video artist's characters – often played by people who do similar jobs in real life – contribute to the most ludicrous assembly lines, within which physical exertion almost never produces tangible goods, instead seeming to end in smoke. For example, the peephole of the video installation *Fried Sweat* (2008) lets prying viewers witness an evanescent grotesquery, staging a fiery trio's unusual attempt to produce human

steam. Next to a bodybuilder, whose dripping sweat boils over a hot frying pan, a martial artist breaks a thick pile of wooden boards bare-handed and a contortionist suddenly vanishes into thin air. Work-related accidents, the tragic vaporous conclusion of this video reminds us, happen in the realm of art too.

In the installation *Seven (Sculpture Variant)* (2011–16), realised in collaboration with Jon Kessler, the sweat of seven performers is collected inside a glass sauna, the latter heated by the pedalling of a stationary bicycle once a month during the show's run. Next to the equipment, two monitors document the fantastic production of 'chakra juice', supposedly out of the performers' perspiration. The first presents a mad scientist distilling the bodily essence, which is then sent to Botswana, where the members of a rural community – as portrayed in the second video – cautiously pour it into the arid ground of a desert. The Disneyesque cartoon spectacle of a splashy rainbow arising and two singing birds ensues.

The human body isn't the only matter that deliquesces in Rottenberg's bizarre aesthetics. Architecture melts too, in the video *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* (2014), which orchestrates a liquefied-snowball effect. Under a full moon, water from an air conditioner in a gloomy hotel room leaks through a crumbling ceiling tile onto a dozy woman sitting in a bingo hall, which awakens her abruptly. Frowning to signal her

displeasure, she clenches her fists tight, gathers psychokinetic superpowers and triggers global warming. Glimpses of throwing service superimpose over her angry face before she nods off again. During the exhibition, the three air-conditioning units of *AC Trio* (2016) also drip onto burning stoves, next to which tiny houseplants are slowly doomed to wither right under the viewers' noses.

In the video *No Nose Knows* (2015), a blue-collar Amazon doesn't bother watering the wilting plants decorating the interminable maze-like entryway of a factory, whereas once she reaches her office she is prompted to spray two feet curiously emerging from a basin. The pair belongs to one of many Chinese women sorting pearls on an assembly line below, while the former's labour consists of inhaling pollen from bouquets to trigger an allergic reaction. Spasmodic sneezes eventually make her expel an entire menu of noodle dishes which pile up on her desk.

Finally, in the video *Squeez* (2010), the conjoined effort of Mexican farmers, Indian pickers and Chinese masseuses produces a sculpture out of mashed-up lettuces, natural rubber and cosmetic tins. A shipping order, taped on a wall further into the exhibition, indicates that Rottenberg had this object consigned offshore, to be stored in perpetuity, thus protecting the real hard work that went into it from conceptual speculation. Isn't art the most invaluable human production? *Violaine Boutet de Monvel*

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Venice Biennale Features Mika Rottenberg's 'NoNoseKnows'

BY SANDY BENNETT MAY 16, 2019



The artist Mika Rottenberg. Pearl cultivation is the focus of her exhibit at the Venice Biennale.
Lacey Kolbough for The New York Times

VENICE — Running across a shimmering pearl market smack dab in the heart of the 56th Venice Biennale doesn't seem particularly odd, given this city's history as the West's watery mall for the exquisite and the exotic.

But then you walk through the market into a sweltering theater and see this Rube Goldbergian hallucination on the screen: Rows of Chinese women using tools like knitting needles to insert tiny pieces of severed mussel tissue into the mantles of living freshwater mussels, which will transform these cannibalized irritants into cultured pearls; a large woman sitting in a flower-filled office beneath the production floor; a girl above turning a hand crank, making a fan spin in the world below, wafting scent into the large woman's nose, which grows long and red. The denouement comes when the woman sneezes explosively, causing steaming plates of Chinese food and pasta to burst from her inflamed schnozz, which seems to provide the pearl workers' sole nourishment; the process repeats, maybe endlessly.

This comic-macabre vision of labor and luxury comes from the studio of Mika Rottenberg, a video and installation artist whose work here, "NoNoseKnows," has become one of the most talked-about — and mobbed — of the Biennale, in a year when the fair's theme leans heavily on Marx to examine global commerce, suffering and humanity's future. For more than a decade, Ms. Rottenberg's work has been mostly about work, and about women doing it. But her pieces have come at the subject from surreal angles never easily pinned to any political perspective, making her a bit of an insurgent in the Biennale's main exhibition, organized by Okwui Enwezor, a prominent Nigerian curator and critic.

"I didn't read 'Das Kapital' until I was older, and I guess I've always read it as poetry, the way he writes about the spinning of yarn and measuring value literally by the amount of human life it requires," said Ms. Rottenberg, 38, who was born in Buenos Aires and grew up in Tel Aviv, where her father, Enrique Rottenberg, was a film producer. "But as an artist you're obligated to create good work and sometimes that doesn't have anything to do with morality, or even contradicts what's moral." She added: "Sometimes as a joke I say I'm going to quit and do something real."

Her pieces often envision candy-colored, fictional factories, staffed by women of wildly varying sizes, colors and body types, where real commodities are produced by absurd means: maraschino cherries made from women's clipped blood-red fingernails; cheese from the milking of Rapunzel-like locks of hair; towelettes individually moistened with the sweat of a hulking truck driver, played by the professional bodybuilder Heather Foster.

But more than a year ago, Ms. Rottenberg became interested in cultured pearls, an industry that

China now dominates. And what she saw in the immense pearl-making facilities of Zhuji, south of Shanghai, when she traveled there last year with her boyfriend and young daughter, was so visually staggering — stranger than anything she felt she could create herself — that she incorporated significant documentary footage into a piece for the first time.

“It was sick but also beautiful and amazing, the whole thing,” she said in a recent interview. “It kind of draws you in, even though it’s really pretty perverted what has to be done to a living thing to force it to create a pearl.”

She likened her interest in China to the feeling that first propelled her to the United States 17 years ago (she lives and works in upstate New York). “America is this kind of monster that you want to smell the breath of,” she said, “and I had that same attraction and compulsion about China, so much so that I almost wanted to suspend the idea of it and not even go there.”

The 21-minute “NoNoseKnows” video includes views of the seemingly endless beige apartment towers and manufacturing buildings under construction around Zhuji, a bleak landscape that is repeated up and down China’s east coast.

In the pearl facilities — in scenes that play like a mash-up of “Blade Runner” and “Un Chien Andalou” — women skilled in the delicate work of seeding pearls sit hunched over bowls with live mussels whose shells have been forced open with a caliper-like device. Later, a woman is shown hacking open mussels the size of salad plates and scraping out the pearls inside, of which only a handful out of hundreds of thousands will be of a quality high enough for sale to jewelers.

The large woman with the fecund nose — played by one of Ms. Rottenberg’s outlandish regulars, a 6-foot-4 fetish performer who calls herself **Bunny Glamazon** — comes off as a Western overseer even more enslaved by the system than the workers she outranks, like a queen bee locked into the heart of a hive.

Because it includes real workers, who are paid relatively little for such exacting, mind-numbing labor, the video and installation hold out a darker vision than Ms. Rottenberg’s earlier work, whose fictional factories seem to be engaged mostly in the production of Ms. Rottenberg’s visual obsessions. (Her pieces are in several prominent public collections, including those of the **Guggenheim** and the **Whitney Museum of American Art**.) The Dutch curator Ann Demeester has described such work as “contemporary fables in which both the moral point and the animal characters have been left out.” She added: “Or as Pastor Jon, one of the main characters in Susan Sontag’s favorite novel ‘Under the Glacier,’ by Halldor Laxness, would have it: ‘Everything that is subject to the laws of fable is fable.’”

Sitting last Thursday in front of her Venice installation, in the vast old rope-factory building that dominates the city’s Arsenale complex, Ms. Rottenberg said: “I think in my work I try to give shape to the way things are made and consumed, which has become so vast as to become unimaginable. If we actually comprehended the insanity of it, I think people would probably behave differently.”

At that moment, some people crowding around the installation were behaving quite badly, leaning over baskets heaped with ill-shaped reject pearls and trying to filch a few as Biennale souvenirs. “Don’t touch!” Ms. Rottenberg barked, policing her wares as if she were a real pearl merchant. “Don’t steal things!” But her mood was lightened by the number of people packed into the tiny theater, where the air-conditioning was suffering some kind of Italian malaise.

“I love that they’re all sitting in there and sweating,” she said, beaming. “That they’re having to suffer for their pleasure.”

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MODERN PAINTERS

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MAY 2015

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IN CONVERSATION

WHO IS
LUTZ
BACHER?

*Fiona
Hall*
Marking
Time

**MIKA
ROTTENBERG**
PEARL OF VENICE

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parallel logic

mika rottenberg uses
pearl manufacturing to
explore structures of creativity

by thea ballard
portrait by kristine larsen

“It’s a beautiful thing that is born out of irritation.”

Mika Rottenberg is sitting at a computer in the bedroom of the Upstate New York home she shares with her partner and toddler, a rustic and secluded space filled with bright drawings and low-to-the-ground furniture. In the winter months, her desktop stands in for a high-ceilinged barn studio across the driveway that is, on this February day, surrounded by a foot-deep moat of fresh snow; an extra dollop of pastoral charm appears in the form of a coop of laying hens, who seem even more hesitant than Rottenberg to brave such conditions.

Footage from her new work, *NoNoseKnows*, is playing on the screen, and we’re talking about pearls. It was an interest in the small iridescent objects (though on rare occasions occurring in nature, most of those in circulation are cultured pearls, farmed by deliberately irritating oysters) that led the artist to Zhuji, a Chinese city that’s home to one of the largest pearl markets in the world. Footage filmed in and around a pearl factory there serves as the backbone of Rottenberg’s newest film installation, which premieres as part of the Okwui Enwezor–curated exhibition “All the World’s Futures” at the Venice Biennale this month. But, retracing her steps to the project’s inception, the allure of pearls comes from a self-reflective interest in creative processes, shades of which can be found throughout her oeuvre. “So many ideas are born out of irritation. I like that idea, especially thinking about art and how I sometimes feel when I’m creating a piece,” she says. “It’s a funny thing, and a very feminine thing. It has all this mucus, all this grossness, and then it has something beautiful inside.”

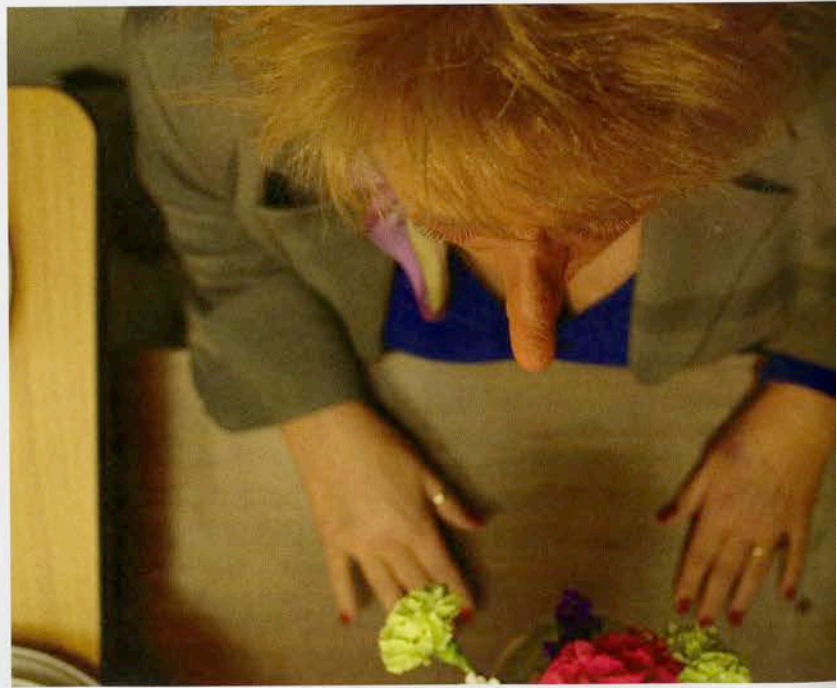
Mika Rottenberg
in her Tivoli.
New York,
studio, 2015.



“I want the spaces in the video to have a physical impact on the viewer. Once you enter a space that is a little awkward, you become more aware of where you are. You have a different relationship with what’s on the screen.”



MIKA ROTTENBERG AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY



Born in Argentina and raised in Tel Aviv, Rottenberg has over the past decade and a half produced a colorful and intensely visceral body of work, operating in an immersive multimedia approach with film at its center. Her videos are often displayed among sculptural objects or in specially built environments; in the case of this newest work, the film component will be entered through a makeshift “pearl shop,” housing something like 600 pounds of cast-off imperfect gems from the Zhuji factory. Women’s bodies are a recurring site of exploration—not quite in a political way, per se, but deployed as narrative tools and subjects of aesthetic curiosity. The characters in her videos are portrayed by nonactors with specific skills or extraordinary body types they have advertised online: Bunny Glamazon, for example, who has appeared in previous works and met Rottenberg in Zhuji to work on *NoNoseKnows*, her 6-foot-4-inch frame particularly out of place as she rides a motorized scooter around the city’s mostly abandoned streets. “The women in my films are, on one level, my inspiration: the way they inhabit their bodies, the way they make a living out of it,” she explains. “On the other hand, they are part of my tools, dimensions: There is a purple color, and then there is someone who is really stretched and long. On that visual level they are like textures, sound bites, or shapes.”

In addition to Bunny, who also features in typically hallucinatory interwoven sequences involving plates of noodles, a number of flowers, and an allergic reaction, shot on a set constructed by Rottenberg, *NoNoseKnows* uses footage of female workers harvesting pearls in the factory. As with her previous videos, fictional and documentary elements bleed into one another, scripted scenes adopting qualities of the real, and vice versa. “It was a little weird to work in the sorting factory,” she recalls. “It’s kind of a creepy place, but you have to be nice to the boss and the owners. I was wearing pearls”—she lifts back her sleeve to reveal a string of them around her wrist—“so I could be identified as a pearl lover.” And while she plans to remove the bracelet once the exhibition is completed, her fondness for pearls as symbols and as objects of adornment is wholly sincere. “There’s a fiction in what the pearl should be and a clash in what it is,” she says. “A pearl should be this beautiful gem. You see them at weddings, it has this kind of purity attached, both a fiction and a reality. I’m interested in the clash of where one starts and the other ends.”

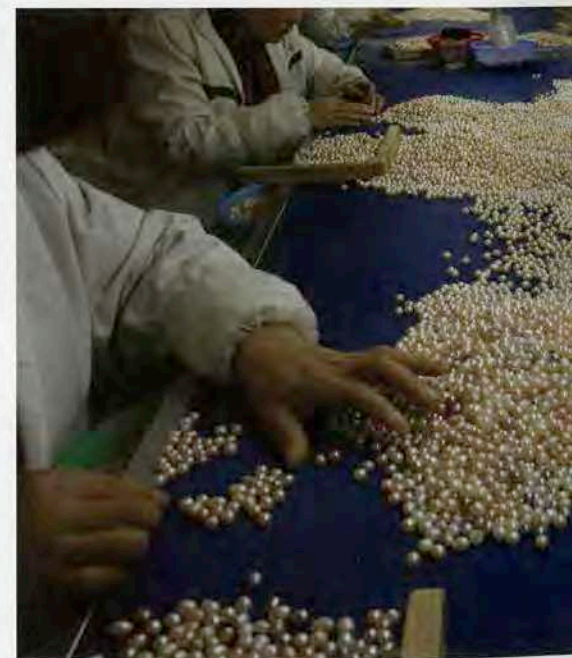
In Rottenberg’s hands, this material grows dense with metaphors and parallels. For someone who likens her own work as a filmmaker to surgery, “except instead of deconstructing



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: MIKA ROTTENBERG AND ANJAL ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK



Stills from a rough cut of *NoNoseKnows*, 2015.





OPPOSITE:
Two stills of
Bunny
Glamazon in
NoNoseKnows,
2015, and
a sketch
made during
the video's
production.

BELOW RIGHT:
Pearls from
the video
shoot in
Rottenberg's
studio.



**“It’s really
fun to
interfere
with systems
that are
flowing well.
Putting
toothpicks
in the wheels.
I get a kick
out of the
tension that
produces.”**

something, you construct it,” her imagery from within the factory feels particularly poignant. The labor she captures on film is odd, precise, and surprisingly delicate, with women stationed at wooden tables cutting into the pink flesh of open oysters with scalpels—also akin to surgery, “because these things are still alive,” she explains. In order to stimulate the reaction that produces a pearl, pieces of one oyster are inserted into a baby oyster, which is then returned to the water and left for five years. After this period, the oysters are opened—each yielding 15 to 20 pearls—and their output must be sorted, the majority of that production being imperfect. The artist’s clips of this process have a surreal quality, workers rapidly sifting through piles that, from afar, seem uniformly lustrous. (Though a perfect round pearl can fetch something like \$1,000, “I love the imperfect ones,” she declares.) There’s an easy link to be drawn between the process of farming pearls and the urban infrastructure that has developed to support this industry. “Zhuji is a huge city, but has areas that are like ghost towns,” she recalls of her travels. “They’re all built up, but in reality are just shells—like the oysters. It’s obvious when you look at the buildings that culture is not important, creating a community is not important. It’s about creating a community around architecture. It’s not an organically developed neighborhood; it’s quick and on steroids, in a way, which is the same as the pearls.”

Considering, as Rottenberg does, the creation of pearls as an analogue to human creativity and the development of culture, her approach to building a story or an environment seems to exist in subversive dialogue with the forms of mechanical imposition she encountered in Zhuji. Peppered with abstract-feeling imagery and jarring rhythms as they are, her films possess an inner narrative logic, albeit one that feels circuitous at times. “Everyone likes to ask why my films aren’t linear,” she says, “but they are very linear. I want to make art videos on a line that has this logic or progression. There is concern with telling a story.” Here, the interaction of biological and industrial phenomena—the fleshy live oysters, the mechanized processes, and the massive industry reliant on their still unpredictable output—provides an organizing system of sorts. But interested as she is in notions of value and production, clearly key in the weird world of the pearl market, Rottenberg seems less interested in evaluating, for example, how such an interaction might reflect similar interactions within flows of global capital. She instead zeroes in on the odd, even erotic space that is produced when nature and industry come



head-to-head. It's reminiscent of her 2010 film *Squeeze*, in which female performers exist within an architectural contraption that both compresses and electrifies their bodies—it's not a film about resistance or power, but the women's presence within the structure is undoubtedly powerful.

Describing the arc of her video output, Rottenberg turns to spatial metaphors. This most recent work in progress, she says, "has the overall structure of parallels or mirroring: between the buildings and the oysters, or the pearls and Bunny's allergy. The pieces always have a basic shape, but in an abstract way. Some have horizontal structure, like *Tropical Breeze*, where they are driving a truck and it's about these linear lanes. Some are circular, like *Cheese*. Some are vertical. The last one, *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*, was kind of a solar system, based on stars and magnetic fields and electrons and all of that stuff." As she runs through these narrative shapes, she delineates them with her hands, as if the information can really be communicated only through gesture, not words. For Rottenberg, spatiality and narrative are, in many ways, inextricable. Returning to the work at hand, she posits, "The actual structure of the entire piece is like a weird building that has these different compartments or ideas that buzz around each other. In a romantic novel, the course of events is motivated by emotion, whereas in my work, it's motivated by material behavior."

I point out that her spatially engaged process seems to counter the treatment of human bodies that occurs within built environments like the developments she encountered in Zhuji, taking on the viewer's body as a primary concern. This is, she says, related to a desire to cultivate a specific sort of attention, elaborating, "I want the spaces in the video to seem real, to have a physical impact on the viewer. Once you enter a space that is a little awkward, you are already more aware of where you are. Then you see spaces in the video and it brings you back to yourself, in a way, because you just experienced this spatial thing. You maybe have a different relationship with what's on the screen."

Still, what grounds not just her video works but her sculptural objects and bubbly abstract drawings as well, is a continued sense of pleasure in both creation and disruption—a fondness not only for the pearl but for the irritation the oyster experiences to produce it, and for participating in (and helping to generate) the bizarre fictions that float around both. "It's really fun to subvert or interfere with systems that are flowing well," Rottenberg says. "Like putting little sticks or toothpicks in the wheels. That's a thing I get a kick out of, the tension. I'm always interested in the perverted side of reality." MP

"There's a fiction in what a pearl should be, and a clash in what it is. It has this purity attached, a fiction and a reality. I'm interested in where one starts and the other ends."



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: MIYA ROTTENBERG AND ANDREA FOSSEN GALLERY





Stills from
NoNoseKnows,
2015.



The Boston Globe

ART REVIEW

Violence, politics expressed at Venice Biennale



AWAKENING/GETTY IMAGES

Adel Abdessemed's "Nymphaeas" at the Venice Biennale.

By [Sebastian Smee](#) | GLOBE STAFF MAY 09, 2015

VENICE — It all begins with Adel Abdessemed's flower bursts of machetes sticking out of the ground. Ironically titled "Nymphaeas," after Claude Monet's great waterlily series, they're in the same big opening room as Bruce Nauman's neon signs flashing "WAR" and "RAW," "EAT" and "DEATH," and — in a work called "American Violence" — "STICK IT IN YOUR EAR," "SIT ON MY FACE," and "RUB IT ON YOUR CHEST."

We're in the Arsenale, for centuries the locus of Venice's immense naval power, and now the main venue for one half of the enormous group show at the heart of the Venice Biennale, the world's most prestigious showcase for contemporary art. Apart from Nauman's lurid neon, there's no color in this first part of the show — certainly no soft Impressionist daubs. Only hard, implacable stuff, suggestions of unyielding machinery, rumbling violence. At the heart of the display is a gauntlet of two rows of small-scale, medallion-like sculptures by the great African-American sculptor Melvin Edwards. They weld together manacles, axes, and chains. They're brilliant.



LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART,
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Bruce Nauman's neon signs

There are also weapons. Lots of weapons. Walking on though the Arsenale, we confront clusters of chainsaws hanging threateningly from the ceiling (Italy's Monica Bonvicini), a giant cannon (made in 1965 from wood and scrap metal, by Pino Pascali), and an abandoned backpack twitching on the floor. Also, a knife implanted in a desk, bullets tearing through ballistics gel, and thrones made from decommissioned assault rifles.

Titled "All the World's Futures," this year's show — the most closely watched part of a vast archipelago of exhibitions scattered throughout Venice — was organized by Okwui Enwezor, a veteran of the international curator circuit, born in Nigeria and long based in Europe.

Along with violence, Enwezor's main themes are labor, inequality, and the possibilities of political transformation (and consequences — not all of them good). He has focused on artists from diasporas, and has openly revealed his sentimental feelings about Karl Marx: Live readings from Marx's "Das Kapital" will take place each day in the show's other main space, the International Pavilion.

I have a feeling Enwezor's effort here will be remembered well. It's unapologetically political, often confronting, and too big, but it's brilliantly braided together and has a powerful cumulative effect. There's much about it to regret — above all, Enwezor's weakness for pretentious academic gestures dressed up as meaningful politics, and the preponderance of very long videos and even longer performances. (What Enwezor calls "epic duration" — curator-speak for an unrelenting concatenation of videos and performances filling up more time than anyone could possibly devote to them — risks becoming epic punishment.)

But if Enwezor's deliberate emphasis on time-consuming work becomes absurd, his show nonetheless contains plenty of brilliant individual works, as well as loads of smart pairings and suggestive correspondences. The star of the show may be Mika Rottenberg, a young Israeli video artist based in New York. Her work, seen at the [Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University last year](#), appears in both halves of "All the World's Futures."

Rottenberg's brightly colored, tightly cropped, sexy/nauseous fantasy scenarios feel soberly anchored in both the numbing realities of repetitive labor and the economy of instant gratification. They're also hilarious. She taps into truths about labor, inequity, and consumer desire in ways that feel deeply artistic and smartly distilled.

In this sense she's the opposite of artists who may have deep political convictions, but lack the ability to turn them into real art. (Real art? It quickens your pulse, and sticks around in your head.)

Enwezor insists in the catalog that he is interested above all in the "state of things." And most of the best work in the show does indeed feel very present-tense. None is more successful in this sense than Chantal Akerman's multi-screen film installation, "Now," which conjures from very little a state of life-threatening emergency.

A phalanx of screens all show a rocky desert landscape as seen from a car traveling at high speed. The soundtrack makes it clear that we are in a war zone — and rushing to get away. We hear sporadic gunfire, a siren, various animals in states of alarm, and a curtailed cry of pain or fear. We could be outside Tikrit or Kabul, it scarcely matters. Everything is happening fast, fast. Your body shifts into high alert.

But we know nothing more, and as in many of Akerman's films, it's what we don't see and can't know that makes the experience so credible, so strong. Other films, mostly short — including Christian Boltanski's footage of a man coughing blood, Raha Raissnia's flickering images of destitute men, John Akomfrah's footage of nature in tumult, and Theaster Gates's film of African-Americans performing inside a dilapidated church to the mournful sound of the blues — are similarly blunt.

Yet at the same time, they're poetic, full of yearning and confusion, and they provide welcome antidotes to the show's more didactic or academically convoluted works.

If soft colors and beautiful flowers are in short supply at the beginning of the Arsenale show, they come into play elsewhere, mostly in lush paintings by black artists such as America's Kerry James Marshall and Gedi Sibony, Britain's Chris Ofili, and Australia's Emily Kngwarreye, the late-flowering aboriginal painter whose work in her home country is often compared with late Monet.

Where Abdessemed's explosive opening salvo, "Nymphaeas," gives Monet a violent twist, the big Kngwarreye painting gives him an indigenous, post-colonial tweak.

Color arrives too in the lurid hues of Katherina Grosse's spray-painted mounds, Georg Baselitz's quartet of massive, upside-down figures in thick, gestural paint, and the bright collage portraits of Kay Hassan. But providing a counterpoint to so much vivacity are powerful text-based paintings by Glenn Ligon and Newell Harry, and a new suite of figurative paintings in shades of black by Lorna Simpson.

All these paintings, along with a superb suite of skull paintings by South Africa's Marlene Dumas, have a political charge. But as mostly large-scale paintings, they have an imperiousness, a detached air, that stands in contrast to the many examples of more private, small-scale, and provisional-looking work made in the medium of drawing — often with words attached.

I liked this vein of the show greatly, and found myself developing crushes on artists like China's Qiu Zhijie, who has superimposed absurdist, poker-faced captions on a giant scroll painting, and Russia's Olga Chernysheva, who has added similarly droll but somehow more poignant captions to her own humdrum drawings.

I also liked Nidhal Chamekh's small-scale drawings of toppled political monuments, from the Vendome column, celebrating Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz, brought down by Gustave Courbet during the Paris Commune, to the notorious toppled statue of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Drawing and text come together in other interesting forms, too — including in the piles of desk graffiti made by hundreds of children around the world, collected by Colombia's Oscar Murillo; in the work of the Nigerian comic-style artist Karo Akpokiere; and in the elaborate drawings of fantasy war machines (weapons again!) by Sierra Leone's Abu Bakarr Mansaray.

Some work is old, some is new. A number of artist intellectuals and agitators, who seem to have been disinterred from earlier eras, appear in Enwezor's show, and it's nicer to see some than others. Hans Haacke's institutional critiques in the forms of

surveys of the political opinions and socioeconomic status of exhibition visitors feel pertinent in some ways, dismally patronizing in others.

Similar feelings accompany Enwezor's inclusion of installations (by Marco Fusinato) or performance-based works (by Rirkrit Tiravanija) that ask for donations that will go to various causes.

But with their intellectual restlessness, their gravitas, and their visual flair, the late Robert Smithson and the late Chris Marker are both welcome presences. There are many works here reflecting on the cruelty and boredom of repetitive, poorly paid labor — although none do it as brilliantly as Rottenberg (who anyway goes for something deeper, as real artists do). Japan's Tetsuya Ishida has a set of tightly controlled figurative paintings that depict Japanese workers with robotic arms and sorry fates, while South Korea's Im Heung-Soon has a documentary-style video that savagely indicts Samsung for asking its employees to endure what one worker calls a "living hell."

All in all, it's a show that feels well matched to our tumultuous times, and to our various shared but unevenly distributed troubles. It is complemented not only by scads of performance art and many outdoor sculptures — there is an exquisite display by Sarah Sze, the former US Pavilion representative, in the gardens at the end of the Arsenale — but also, of course, by dozens of national pavilions. The most established of these are in the Giardini, a short walk from the Arsenale.

The Giardini pavilions were mostly underwhelming this year. But my vote for the best goes to Poland, which presents a film, recorded in wide-angle and projected on a long, curving screen, by Joanna Malinowska and C. T. Jasper. Inspired by the quixotic questing in Werner Herzog's "Fitzcarraldo," it shows the live performance of a Polish opera in a Haitian village street before a crowd that includes descendants — follow closely now! — of the Polish troops that Napoleon sent to San Domingo to fight the rebellion of black slaves.

Those Poles wanted their own national independence, which is why they joined Napoleon. But in Haiti they decided to help the black insurgents, and some stayed on in that country. No need to say more — it's an incredible story, and the film is smart, funny, and surprisingly moving.



DOMENICO STINELLIS/AP

Chiharu Shiota's installation "The Key in the Hand."

Also terrific were Chiharu Shiota's overwhelming installation of bright red spider webs of string, two wooden boats, and thousands of metal keys in the Japanese Pavilion; Fiona Hall's slew of politically charged and brilliantly made sculptures and installations in the new Australian Pavilion; the Quebec trio BGL's hilarious conversion of the Canadian Pavilion; James Beckett's extraordinary robot "generating scenarios for clandestine building in Africa" in the Belgian Pavilion; and Adrian Ghenie's powerful paintings in the Romanian Pavilion.

There's even more to the Venice Biennale than all this. The city's museums and palazzos are filled with exhibitions — and its churches, of course, are filled with

Titians, Bellinis, Tintoretto, and Carpaccio. If you love art, it's a paradise. But even here, the waters are rising, and the "state of things" keeps rolling in.



DOMENICO STINELLIS/AP

Visitors looked at the "They Come to US without a Word" video installation by Joan Jonas.

Art Review

LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA — 56TH INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION

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Mika Rottenberg: 'Bowls Balls Souls Holes'

MAY 15, 2014



Part of Mika Rottenberg's exhibition "Bowls Balls Souls Holes," at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in Chelsea.

Mika Rottenberg, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Art in Review

By KEN JOHNSON

Andrea Rosen Gallery, 525 West 24th Street, Chelsea

Through June 14

Mika Rottenberg's exhibition affirms her stature as one of the most original and imaginative video makers working today. The centerpiece is a delirious 28-minute movie called "Bowls Balls Souls Holes." It's a mind-stretching trip through time and space, from the action in a Harlem bingo parlor to the melting of ice in a polar sea and from a seedy urban hotel under a full moon to the subterranean depths of a parallel universe. Yet, at every moment, things are seen with a cinematic lucidity and with an eye for detail that makes the preposterous seem plausible and the mundane magical.

In one of several intricately braided plotlines, a woman calls out numbers in the bingo parlor, using a machine that randomly selects numbered balls. Periodically, she drops a colored clothespin into a hole at her side. A series of mechanical devices moves the pin downward until it drops into the hands of a man in a chamber below who affixes it to his face. Eventually, his face bristles with scores of pins. Then he starts spinning faster and faster until he explodes in a puff of smoke, after which we see all the multicolored pins rain down onto black rocks at the edge of polar waters, an amazingly lovely image.

There's a riveting suspense at every moment. You feel that you're on the verge of comprehending a cosmic mystery. And yet, as in a Thomas Pynchon novel, no simple solution arrives. It's like real life.

A version of this review appears in print on May 16, 2014, on page C27 of the New York edition with the headline: Mika Rottenberg: 'Bowls Balls Souls Holes'

Number 7, a Slice of Heaven

By Alex Zafiris

June 2, 2014

In Bowls Balls Souls Holes, artist Mika Rottenberg imagines the hidden machinations of luck.



Installation view of Mika Rottenberg: *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* Photograph by Lance Brewer, Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Mika Rottenberg's immersive show at Andrea Rosen Gallery relies on our predisposition toward magical thinking: What forces are really at play behind chance? Born in Buenos Aires, raised in Israel, and now living in New York, Rottenberg has a great sense of humor and an astute eye, and over her career (with work in the public collections of the MoMA, SFMOMA, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney, among others), she has created video art that uses joyful, fictional systems to explain the unexplainable. *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*, the Manhattan

expansion of a current exhibition at Boston's Rose Art Museum, is her seventh institutional solo show in three years. It tackles what she calls "the production of luck," using the numerical and gambling components of bingo as catalysts. Those familiar with her style will recognize her kitschy, Technicolor world of fleshy women, handmade contraptions, nail art, and wry twists of logic.

The nerve center of the piece is a half-hour film that screens on loop in a viewing chamber in the middle of the space, but before you see it, Rottenberg is already directing you with sensorial and visual cues. The action begins right as you walk in off the street: affixed to the wall in your immediate sightline is a shabby air conditioner that slowly drips water into a sizzling pan on a hotplate; to the left, a revolving wall mounted with a bingo machine on one side and a large circle of tin-foil scraps on the other folds you into the main area.

Instinctively, you walk toward the recorded noise. The film begins with a full moon hovering over a rundown motel, inside of which we find a woman who is preparing to absorb lunar energy—lying on a bare mattress with tin-foil scraps held to her toes with colorful clothespins. She stares at a hole in the ceiling straight above her, and waits for the moon to move across the sky and align itself directly with the gap. Once satiated, she falls asleep. The next day, she gets up and travels via scooter to a vast, underground, yellow bingo hall. She works as a bingo caller, presiding over the spinning balls and reading the numbers to a silently playing crowd. Meanwhile, a mysterious girl in the corner of the hall attracts her worried glances. The girl is overweight, angry, and not playing. She sits slumped against the wall, under the air conditioner, which occasionally drips on her bare shoulder and causes her to sit up abruptly. The two women meet eyes, and a shift occurs. The bingo caller begins to pluck single clothespins from under her desk, dropping them through a round trapdoor that leads to another trapdoor, then another, then another, with gravity or a wooden mechanical device pushing each clothespin along until it falls into a small room and the hands of Mr. Stretch, a thin, fine-boned man who then clicks it onto his face.

We know that the bingo balls are dictating the action, but how and why is unclear, and it is up to us to piece together the sequence of events and chance.

And so it continues: the numbers are called, and Mr. Stretch amasses a full face of clothespins. Subplots surge and recede: the sequence of colors, the flashing bingo machine display, gusts of air from a spinning fan. Through circular graphics that act as portals, we visit the North Pole to witness it melting, and see that the clothespins are here too; although at opposite ends of the planet, the bingo hall and the ice caps are in sync. We know that the

bingo balls are dictating the action, but how and why is unclear, and it is up to us to piece together the sequence of events and chance. Gradually, we arrive at the first shot of the moon over the motel once again, and the cycle begins anew. Rottenberg's affinity for round shapes and their cinematic and experiential possibilities is endless. "In bowls, it's the circle in particular that leads the plot. I didn't plan it from the beginning, but noticed it as I was mapping out the shots," she explains in an email interview. "For example, the boiling glass in the hotel, the wheel of the scooter. Enid, the main performer, was wearing round earrings. When developing the piece, I was thinking about electricity and planetary movement and the globe—those are all circles. When I noticed so many circles in the actual things I was going to film, it created a grand circle between the concept and the material realization of the piece."

The third part of the show is the back room, in which you find three ponytails flicking mechanically, a glinting light bulb, jars with boiling water, and a round portal in the floor that leads to darkness. After seeing the film, these sculptures are not at all confusing or unfamiliar: they hail from the parallel universe Rottenberg constructed, and to which you now also belong, drawn in by her sonic and visual logic and your own desire to connect the dots. "I use cinema mainly as a way to create and link spaces," she says. "Like an architect who does not have to obey gravity or physics. With film you can also create psychological space. You can mesh the metaphysical with the physical, internal with external, or create space that operates as an extension of a person."

Rottenberg uses bingo to hone in on our willingness to accept cause-and-effect explanations for intangible concepts, our susceptibility to rationale (especially if the nudge is funny), and, in a wider sense, our connection to the earth's movements and systems. Fact is essential to her process—the bingo hall is on 125th Street, none of the featured players or staff were actors, and Gary "Stretch" Turner holds a 2013 Guinness World Record for attaching 161 clothespins to his face—but her impulse to give shape to the nothing is otherworldly, hilarious, and exhilarating.

Bowls Balls Souls Holes runs through June 14.



Alex Zafiris is a writer based in New York.

Mika Rottenberg Games the System

by Scott Indrisek 05/05/14 4:00 PM EDT

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Mika Rottenberg at Andrea Rosen Gallery before the opening of "Bowls Balls Souls Holes." (Photo by: Lance Brewer / © Mika Rottenberg / Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York)

"It was the icebergs, the moon, Bingo, the hotel, the clothespin guy," said [Mika Rottenberg](#), pondering the eclectic assortment of characters, objects, and spaces that inform her new installation of sculptures and video opening at [Andrea Rosen Gallery](#) on Tuesday. "The video is about how they connect. Because they don't. Melting glaciers and bingo don't really connect. But why were all these things in my mind?"

Like most of Rottenberg's work, it sparks with a sense of playful wonder, shot through with tinges of perversity — imagine if Matthew Barney and Wes Anderson collaborated on a film, and somehow managed to curb the other's worst excesses. The story, as such, involves a quasi-magical bingo hall in which the circulation of primary-colored clothespins has grand effects on the world at large. There's no dialogue other than when the game's numbers are called out by a woman — resplendent in a denim jacket and a lush bouffant of blonde hair — who Rottenberg cast at an actual bingo hall in Harlem. In the hermetic cosmology of the film, titled "Bowls Balls Souls Holes," the bingo caller is the Sun; a monumentally large woman who keeps drifting off to sleep in the hall is the Moon; and the bingo players themselves are the stars. They're all bound together by a mysterious man living in a subterranean room — the "electrical conductor," Rottenberg said — who catches the clothespins and affixes them to his face, creating first a mane, and then a cringe-worthy mask. Before they get to him the pins are dropped into a hole in the floor, where they pass through a connected, intestinal series of rooms — their walls painted in bright colors, with viscerally clumpy, rough surfaces that recall [Peter Halley](#) paintings. Once the clothespin-man has reached a critical mass of face-pins, he begins spinning rapidly in his chair, and then literally combusts, causing the pins to be flung out on some unpopulated Arctic expanse.

Admittedly, trying to describe the plot of a

Rottenberg video is a bit like relaying one of your own dreams: It doesn't quite work; the effect falls flat. They're more of a series of sensations, textures, odd objects: the slow passage of a full moon glimpsed through a hole in cheap ceiling tile; glacial water dripping and sizzling on prodigious human flesh; the Winner's Ink stampers used by bingo aficionados as they mark off their gaming grids, their movements as tireless and mechanized as factory workers'. As a viewer, the real joy is watching how Rottenberg connects the dots, most often with wild associative leaps. "I'm methodical — there has to be a logic," she said. The actions portrayed in her films are "pointless, self-contained. There's no real outcome; they become meaningful inside the system." The end result does possess an uncannily persuasive logic. Rottenberg's is a universe that is conceptually and physically flexible — within its borders everything jibes; the strangest incidents nuzzle each other, sending ripples beyond their control.



A still from *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* (2014)

"I always encounter things by chance, and then they become a whole piece," Rottenberg said. For the bizarre riff on agricultural production cycles, "[Squeeze](#)," 2010, that catalyst was a chance meeting with an iceberg lettuce broker. The seed for "*Bowls Balls Souls Holes*" was planted by a random walk in downtown Brooklyn. Rottenberg — whose studio was in the neighborhood at the time, though she has since relocated upstate, near Bard College — had taken a break from what she describes as a frustrating afternoon of drawing. She came across the Prince Hotel, an abandoned property that had been taken over by squatters. (In the film, this is where the bingo caller sleeps, kept company by a bowl of Siamese fighting fish, her toes covered in aluminum foil and clothespins. The hotel's facade, complete with battered neon sign, has a distinctively "Psycho" vibe.) Rottenberg ducked into the Prince via a side gate and took a peek at its interior: "Filthy," she joked, but intriguing, like "there had to be a portal in there somewhere." Thinking better of her quasi-illegal foray into the shuttered hotel, Rottenberg kept walking, and found a bingo hall on the same street. Gears started turning. Admittedly, she said, the disparate ideas for a film don't arise so handily, certainly not within the span of a single afternoon; she was fortunate, fitting given the film's theme, which is the "production of luck." Initially, she had more grandiose plans to tie some of these things together: a feature film about a gamer who wins a cruise. Treasure maps were involved. Those basic parameters were downsized for the new video, building on a previous Rottenbergian interest in gambling — specifically, off-track betting outposts that were prevalent in New York until 2010.

Two years passed between Rottenberg's productive Brooklyn walk and the actual shooting of "*Bowls Balls Souls Holes*." By that time the bingo hall she'd initially found had shut down, so the artist used a substitute location in Harlem. "I went there a lot," she said, "but I was so into the

machine, and the balls, and all that, that I couldn't play. People were really bugged by me not playing." Rottenberg was fascinated by the dynamics of the bingo hall — 95 percent women, she surmises, with many of the regulars coming every day, paying rent and bills with their winnings. She also loved the otherness of the place itself: "It's its own universe," she explained, sounding as if she was discussing her own work. "Time is completely different — you're outside on the street and then you go into this place and it has its own rhythm and sounds." That effect is replicated at Andrea Rosen, since gallery goers are first faced with a bingo machine, built by the artist's fabricator, and must enter the space through a revolving wall festooned with foil and gum. Other elements are also transformed into sculptures: a flickering lightbulb; a spinning contraption of clothespins; a series of six jars, filled with water that heats until it's evaporated and replenished by gallery staff each hour.

Most of the actors in the film are ordinary bingo hall habitués that Rottenberg met during her research phase, with notable exceptions. The "electrical conductor" in the video is actually a niche performer from the UK, Gary "Stretch" Turner, who holds the Guinness Record for putting clothespins on the face (161, if you're wondering). Rottenberg said that she was intrigued by the casting potentials via Guinness, which spotlights "maximized human potential." Turner has uncommonly pliable skin due to Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome — he can "pull his whole neck on top of his face" if he wants. Pondering this, she compared that tactile phenomena to the equally fleshy rooms that appear in the film. (This labyrinth of chambers was constructed in Rottenberg's barn-like studio in Clermont, New York.) "It's almost like the walls themselves become alive," she said of these vibrant, stucco-like surfaces. "I'm into that: There's no separation between yourself and the exterior world, like the space is alive." Is the end result claustrophobic? Are we in a dream, or a nightmare, when we put ourselves in Rottenberg's hands? "It's a fantasy," she concluded. "The walls become an emotional or psychological state. A little creepy — but uplifting."

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ART REVIEW

The Rose's gifts to us: Chutes, tongues, Erector sets

By [Sebastian Smee](#) | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 22, 2014



ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

A detail of Mika Rottenberg's film "Squeeze," from "Bowls Balls Souls Holes."

WALTHAM — Mika Rottenberg has two video installations at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University that will turn your stomach, twist your brain, and make your soul feel as if it has just fallen through a trapdoor.

Rottenberg, my new favorite artist, is a fan of kitchen infomercials, big-bodied extroverts, mechanical gadgets, and, as she put it in an [Art21 documentary](#) about her, "finding little solutions for things that are not necessarily a problem." Except that, in her hands, they become one.

Her sumptuously colored, intensely claustrophobic films (the spaces inhabited by her outsize characters are so tight they function like costumes) are full of contraptions, sliding doors, chutes, shafts, pipes, pumps, and tunnels. They also feature obese and sweating bodies, along with body parts — lips, tongues, buttocks — that protrude sensuously but sickeningly through holes in walls.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

Rottenberg's show, "Bowls Balls Souls Holes," is one of several first-rate exhibits that recently opened at the Rose. The salvo is a shot in the arm for the institution, signaling another step up in ambition, and serving as a reminder that you will find things at the Rose you are unlikely to find anywhere else.

Rottenberg was born in Buenos Aires but moved to Israel as an infant. She attended art school there and in New York. Now in her late 30s, she has been working at full throttle for a decade or more. She made a splash at the 2008 Whitney Biennial with a video work called "Cheese," and last year was the subject of a survey, "Squeeze," at the Israel Museum.

Amazingly, this is her first solo show at a US museum. It includes "Squeeze," a dazzling, 20-minute film about the making of an art object, which happens to be a vile-looking cube made from mashed together blush, latex, and iceberg lettuce. There is also a sculptural installation in two parts called "Tsss" (air conditioners drip water onto electric frying pans: tsss!) and a mesmerizing new work, "Bowls Balls Souls Holes," that was commissioned and funded in part by the Rose.



Mika Rottenberg: Bowls Balls Souls Holes, Chris Burden: The Master Builder, Rose Projects: The Matter That Surrounds Us: Wols and Charline von Heyl

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,
Waltham 781-736-3434.

<http://www.brandeis.edu/rose>

Closing date: June 8

More

- **Photos: New work at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis**
- **Critic's picks: Visual art**

You might easily miss it: To enter the darkened screening room you must first bend low to walk into a funky little bedroom, then push a wall, which becomes your portal, as a friend of mine put it, “to bingo dreamtime.” The film, which is partially set in a bingo hall, is a small masterpiece of remorseless fantasy logic, a weird amalgam of Wallace and Gromit, Fischli and Weiss, Matthew Barney, Charlie Chaplin, and the S&P 500.

It almost feels wrong to talk about what Rottenberg films might mean, or what exactly it is they allegorize — they are too mischievous, too gleefully experimental, and too intent on blowing open your brain to function as vessels of verifiable meaning. And yet as internally coherent works of art, they are in no way leaky or loose: The acoustics, the colors, the rhythms, the fastidious framing of each scene are all as taut and streamlined as a Shaker box, and endowed with similar surface tension.

But it might be fair to say that Rottenberg’s films are elaborate fictions about how products, including art objects, are harvested, packaged, distributed, and consumed (yawn); or, more simply (eye rub), about how strange and disturbing is the process by which we extract value from nature and human labor. They suggest to me (wriggle in your seat) how our bodies dramatize, almost hysterically, the weight of their own needs and desires, and force that drama — almost literally squeezing it — into the systems of labor and production we laughably call “economics” (there’s nothing economical about it: it’s baroque; it’s a blow out!).

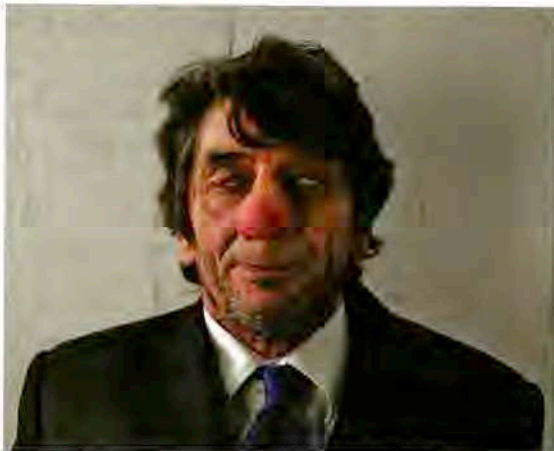
I can’t tell you, by way of example, what tremendous, futile labor went into that last paragraph which, to me, and probably to you, makes Rottenberg’s work sound duller than doing the dishes. But believe me, when you see her work, when you see what invention, what grossness, what beauty, and brilliance she puts into her fictions, you will think differently. Standing at the sink, brush in hand, you might find, as I did, your labor subjected to disturbing new imaginative pressures: spray, squeeze, suck, wipe, rinse, drain, repeat.

Mika Rottenberg

MAGASIN 3

Mika Rottenberg is a serial absurdist, as amply demonstrated by her recent exhibition “Sneeze to Squeeze,” which encompasses more than a decade of work. Take her most recent video, *Sneeze*, 2012. It’s a send-up, and simplicity itself: Three men in business suits, each with a farcically misshapen, pink-tinted nose, sneeze irrepressibly. These are men who have lost control, not only of their bodily reflexes but of the very substances their bodies expel. Each sneezing fit produces another unpredictable discharge: “Achoo!” and a bunny spews out; “Achoo!” and a steak emerges; “Achoo!” and a lightbulb somehow appears. The gag’s absurdist comedy has deep roots in literature and theater; Alice’s famous sneeze in *Wonderland* comes to mind, as does the oft-quoted rhyme from the Duchess, another Lewis Carroll character: “Speak roughly to your little boy / And beat him when he sneezes / He only does it to annoy / Because he knows it teases.” As usual, however, reality trumps silliness. Steaks and bunnies aside, Rottenberg’s pathetic creatures exhibit the symptoms of the autosomal dominant compelling helio-ophthalmic outburst (ACHOO) syndrome, which, believe it or not, was first observed by Aristotle in *Problems*, book XXXIII. (Look it up.) And yet this connection to reality, even real suffering—and perhaps poverty, since despite their suits the three men lack shoes—does not lessen the comedic effect. As Nell in Beckett’s *Endgame* reckons, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness. . . . It’s the most comical thing in the world.”

The farcically cyclical structure of *Sneeze* is embedded in all of Rottenberg’s work; she is fixated on producing the pointlessly mundane—whether she sneezes or, in other works, things like maraschino cherries or “units of dough”—under the spell of unmanageable nonsense. This production is often played out in preposterously complex architectural settings, where tedious and inefficient parodies of assembly lines lock her characters into hopelessly



Mika Rottenberg,
Sneeze, 2012.
HD video, color,
sound, 3 minutes
2 seconds.

repetitive scenarios. The characters, who often look as if they have walked out of a Fellini casting call, appear to have been chosen for their comic value as extreme physical types. There is Heather Foster, the professional bodybuilder in *Tropical Breeze*, 2004; Kathleen McIntyre, who at six feet, nine inches only barely fits into the set of *Dough*, 2005–2006; and the hard-wearing female wrestler Rock Rose, who in *Mary’s Cherries*, 2004, somehow forms the titular fruit out of clipped fingernails. An uncanny riddle about labor and consumption plays the tenor line in all of Rottenberg’s narratives; her characters’ useless efforts are pointlessly consumed to create an economy of pointless consumption.

Rottenberg shares a bit of rambunctiousness with the Bruce Nauman of *Clown Torture*, 1987, and *Carousel*, 1988, whose carnal sideshow shenanigans are as entertaining as they are unsettling. But with this exhibition, she takes an unexpected step beyond that genre of serious fun-making to subtly reinforce her art by paradoxically drawing your attention *away* from figures and bodies to nearly unnoticeable props, for example a cheap ceiling fan glimpsed through a horizontal opening in one of the gallery walls. The fan, interminably purring between four walls covered in a repetitive and rugged texture, is absent from the exhibition checklist; is it merely playing an uncredited scenographic supporting role to Rottenberg’s art? The fan might leave you wondering what else you missed. Closer attention to the gallery space reveals such interventions as a darkened passage leading nowhere, really, as well as flowers placed nearly out of sight atop low-hanging ceiling tiles. While flowers and tiles are both memorable from *Dough*’s set design, their identity here, sitting amid the art, creates an ambiguous no-man’s-land. Such props play a sort of Greek chorus to the absurd action of Rottenberg’s videos, commenting, in a subtle but collective voice, on the tortuously convoluted dramas unfolding with the very same dramatic techniques used by the original Greek chorus: echo and synchronization. Harmonized with Rottenberg’s art, this inconspicuous stagecraft subliminally sharpens its humor and exacerbates its absurdity.

—Ronald Jones

Brutal Reality



Alida Ivanov from Stockholm
14/02/2013

Mika Rottenberg “Sneeze to Squeeze”
Magasin 3, Stockholm
February 8 – June 2, 2013

Magasin 3 begins their spring season with the solo show *Sneeze to Squeeze* by video-installation artist Mika Rottenberg. She creates imaginary worlds consisting of claustrophobic factories, farms, office, and working spaces. Mostly obese, tall, muscular women with extremely long nails and hair inhabit these settings. The characters seem to live off their strange physical appearances and add to the claustrophobic feel of the work.

Mika Rottenberg was born in 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina but grew up in Israel, where she also received her degree in fine arts. Now, and for the last ten years, she resides in New York. This exhibition consists of artworks from the early 2000's and includes video-installations, sculptures and photography. The title *Sneeze to Squeeze* is what it actually is: the work *Sneeze* (2008), via *Cheese* (2008), *Tropical Breeze* (2004) and many other works right up to *Squeeze* (2010).

In *Sneeze* a man is sitting at a table. He has an enlarged and red nose, and alternates between sneezing and scratching his colored toenails on the floor. He sneezes out different objects, for example, light bulbs, and bunnies, but then changes his appearance (or maybe it's a different man with the same ailment) throughout the video.



Installation view from the exhibition at Magasin 3
Mika Rottenberg *Texture 1–6*. 2013. Polyurethane resin, acrylic paint. Dimensions variable
Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
Photo: Christian Saltas

The different works are accompanied by equally disturbing installations and sculptures. Walls plastered in the form of scales (*Texture 1-6* from 2013), boxes stacked on top of each other (a part of the work *Tropical Breeze*), a lonely AC dripping water into a warm frying pan (*Tsss* from 2013), a wooden farm construction, in which you have to walk in to can see the video piece *Cheese*. Hitting your head into something is a given and a way of directly interacting with the art. This is a physical exhibition in many ways: in the videos you see hands that work, scratch, feet that step, sweat dripping, tears. The sound of these activates are amped up so you feel every single one of them.

In the video-installation *Cheese* we enter a farm, which has been populated by longhaired women; a story based on the seven Sutherland Sisters who lived close to the Niagara Falls and were famous for their long hair. In Rottenberg's world there are six women in a pastoral, a utopic fantasy, where the women are combing and washing each other's hair, interacting with the farm animals. The women wear white gowns and milk their goats with utter care, to make cheese. You enter their world, you see where they sleep, where they live. The women become the epitome of feminine mystery; they are caretakers, beautiful and virginal, and for Rottenberg they become an investigation of femininity.



Installation view from the exhibition at Magasin 3
Mika Rottenberg *Cheese*. 2008. Multi-channel video installation. Dimensions variable
Courtesy Julia Stoschek Foundation e.v., Düsseldorf
Photo: Christian Saltas

The physicality of the works also opens up a question of labor. The characters can be seen as bearers of production. This is apparent in the works *Squeeze* and *Time and a Half* (2003). In the latter we see a woman behind the desk at a restaurant. The film is shot in slow-motion, a woman stands in front of a blowing fan, her long hair is a mess and she gets hit in the face with paper plates. She is smiling and tapping her long, manicured, tropical colored nails against the stone bar, while she's working over-time at her Mc-Job.

In *Squeeze* this theme becomes a bit more complex. In the film we see that the language has been taken from documentary films. It is shot in three locations: one on a farm in Arizona, USA, one from a rubber plantation in Kerala, India, and one in a factory-like milieu. Rottenberg then connects these places through a mind twisting and mysterious hole in the ground. A large woman makes the story evolve: another woman gets pressed into pink makeup, lettuce and rubber gets pressed into a strange cube, and so on. The work is based on expansion and contraction. It's a movement that can be associated to our own bodies. The contracted cube returns in the photo of the New York gallerist Mary Boone: *Mary Boone with Cube* (2010). The whole piece tries to capture the spirit and the energy of how things are made and then valued.



Mika Rottenberg *Felicia from Tropical Breeze*. 2004. C-print. 50.8 x 61 cm
Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery New York; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.
Copyright: Mika Rottenberg.

There is a common narrative in Rottenberg's body of work and it is based on acts that are condensed by many levels of illogical activity, but with a perfectly logical undertone. You need to accept this reality to understand it. The film's cinematic language is rather brutal and, in some ways, it is reminiscent of pornography: in the way the sound is amplified to the different movements of the people, and in the closeness of the camera. But, it's the brutality that helps you accept this reality.

In *Tropical Breeze* a woman is chewing on a gum in the back of a truck. She wraps the gum in a tissue, which she picks up from a pile of tissues with her toes. Then she sends it down the clothing line to a sweating driver, who pats the tissue with sweat. The driver then sends the infused tissue back for packaging and markets it as a "moist tissue wipe." The video was screened inside a crate like box; it becomes like a physical version of the video itself.

It's this play between the films' language and the objects' physicality, and *visa versa*, that makes the exhibition dynamic and invites curiosity. Many of the works create a feeling that is similar to a rollercoaster ride; you may feel nauseated and a bit scared, but you defiantly want to go again.

STOCKHOLM – MIKA ROTTENBERG: “SNEEZE TO SQUEEZE”
AT MAGASIN 3 KUNSTHALLE THROUGH JUNE 2, 2013

May 31st, 2013



Mika Rottenberg, Still from *Sneeze* (2008), via Magasin 3

Sneeze to Squeeze is the first solo exhibition of work by New York-based video artist Mika Rottenberg in Sweden. Exploring the themes of labor, production and contemporary body-image, this major exhibition captures the spirit of the artist's broad range of filmic work, while also offering a thorough, studied look at her work in installation and photography.



Mika Rottenberg, Still from *Squeeze* (2010), via Magasin 3

Mika Rottenberg was born in 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina but raised in Israel. Rottenberg has an M.F.A from Columbia University in New York and lives and works in the city since ten years back, her current studio space is in Harlem. Rottenberg was at a young age exposed to the art of filmmaking, her father was a film producer, and this may be a contributing factor to her skills in mastering as well as ability to experiment with the craft of visual storytelling through sound and moving image. All of Rottenberg's films are collaborative efforts, all characters she features in her films are professionals who have previous experience in showcasing their "oddity;" ranging from actors, body builders to exceptionally long-haired individuals.



Mika Rottenberg, Still from *Tropical Breeze* (2004), via Magasin 3

The exhibition title is a play on the titles of the works on view, underlining the comically referential titles of Rottenberg's numerous video works: *Tropical Breeze* (2004), *Sneeze* (2008), *Cheese* (2008) and *Squeeze* (2010), each approaching similar thematic and visual subject matter from Rottenberg's unique perspective and voice. An avid reader of Marx, Rottenberg's work is constantly informed and shaped by his theoretical approach to the rhetoric and values ascribed to labor and production.



Mika Rottenberg, Still from *Cheese* (2008), via Magasin 3

In each of her selected video works, Rottenberg's characters find themselves engaged in bizarre, unique rituals of production, creating goods through intriguing and repetitive actions. *Tropical Breeze* (2004), screened inside a wood crate, illustrates one such process, with a woman chewing gum, repeatedly picking up a tissues from a pile by her toes, wrapping the chewing gum in it and attaching it to a clothing line that is hoisted down to a sweating driver, who then pats the tissue with sweat. The tissue is then sent for packing and marketed as a moist tissue wipe. In *Sneeze* (2008), a large-nosed man sneezes and objects pop out of his nose. Rottenberg's latest work, *Squeeze* (2010), was first screened at Mary Boone Gallery, despite the artist's representation by Nicole Klagsbrun and Andrea Rosen, and returns to Rottenberg's familiarly odd characters and settings, engaged in the production of various commercial objects.



Mika Rottenberg, *Tsss* (2013), via Magasin 3

Cheese (2008) is a more complex piece, both ideologically and technically. It is a romantic exploration of the lives of six women on a utopian farm, shown combing and washing each other's hair, interacting with the farm animals, carefully milking their goats and making cheese. Rottenberg was inspired by the Sutherland Sisters who lived close to the Niagara Falls and were known for their long hair, part of a sideshow in Barnum & Bailey Circus at the turn of the century. Deconstructing the images of the feminine mystique through her images of cheese production and its contrast with her subject's flowing hair, Rottenberg creates new dialogues on the social imagery of food production and the female form. Other pieces on view include the onomatopoeic sculpture *Tsss*; a dripping air conditioner above a frying pan, and *Mary's Cherries*, another colorful piece depicting women working at roles intricately connected with cultural production and labor.



Mika Rottenberg, Still from *Mary's Cherries* (2004), via Magasin 3

Throughout the work, Rottenberg makes explicit the relationship between body and production, the human actor intricately wrapped up in the process of labor, and in the product itself. The method of production itself becomes the notable aspect of the work, moving beyond the consideration of the final product to examine the system that creates it.



Mika Rottenberg, *Cheese* (Installation View) (2008), via Magasin 3

Sneeze to Squeeze is curated by Magasin 3's curator Tessa Praun, who has a track record of organizing groundbreaking exhibitions at the institution with artists whose practice touches on the political and societal through film. Ai Wei Wei, Marijke Van Warmerdam, and Smadar Dreyfus have all been welcomed to Stockholm's premier center for contemporary art. The kunsthalle, founded by financier Robert Weil, is privately owned and headed by David Neuman. Since their founding in 1987 the institution has amassed a collection with over 600 works of art. Its current exhibition closes on June 2, 2013.



Mika Rottenberg, *Texture 1–6*, (2013), via Magasin 3

—M. Ekstrand

- See more at: <http://artobserved.com/2013/05/stockholm-mika-rottenberg-sneeze-to-squeeze-at-magasin-3-kunsthalle-through-june-2-2013/#sthash.sgGa4dUW.dpuf>

theguardian

Artist of the week 191: Mika Rottenberg

This Buenos Aires-born artist uses female grooming rituals to explore capitalism's cycle of production and consumption



Skye Sherwin
guardian.co.uk, Thursday 24 May 2012 07.40 EDT



Tracks of my tear ... Mika Rottenberg's Dough installation. Photograph: courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun and Andrea Rosen Gallery

Mika Rottenberg turns gym or beauty salon rituals into a wickedly funny metaphor for the menacing absurdities of global commerce and women's objectification. The workers in her videos have taken personal grooming to the max. They sport nails like painted shoe horns, or bedsheet-length hair. Flesh is equally outlandish: women might have muscles that look like beaten metal, or boobs, bums and tums that bulge extravagantly. Their extreme attributes aren't just for show, however; they play a role.

In Mary's Cherries, a long, red nail is clipped and passed through a line of labourers in beauticians' uniforms, where it is pummelled and then rolled to form a glossy glacé cherry. In Dough, women are squished alone into tiny compartments like boxed jewels or battery farm hens. With their cells linked by a system of tubes, shoots and holes, they all perform bizarre functions in a production line. This culminates with a teardrop drawn by sniffing flowers, which runs down a huge woman's dimpled legs and then drips off her toe through a hole in the floor to impregnate a lump of dough beneath, which is then vacuum-packed. It shows a neat division of labour in the creation of pointless products, with implications that reach way beyond the beauty industry, to capitalism's mindless cycle of production and consumption.



Imaginative stretch ...

Mika Rottenberg's Tropical Breeze video installation. Photograph: courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun and Andrea Rosen Gallery

Rottenberg's boxed-in workforce has much to say about a culture that at once idolises, fetishises and exploits women's bodies – from female sweatshop workers to the desirable distortions of pin-up girls. Works like *Dough* first made the Buenos Aires-born, New York-based artist's name in the mid-2000s. More recently, she's broadened her vision, tackling globalisation and a shrinking world.

Her latest three-screen video installation, *Seven*, presents a sauna, a laboratory and the African wilderness apparently interlinked by an arrangement of shoots, as though stacked on top of each other rather than in disparate locations. It's a story of supply and demand that follows a yogi meditating in a sauna, apparently monitored by an Asian scientist in a lab, as his "chakras" are harvested and then sent, via the shoots, as coloured liquids in vials to a group of Africans waiting on a grassy plain. Without ruining the surprise, it's here that the chakras offer a brief, bright display before, we presume, the whole process begins once more.

Why we like her: For her woozy, surreal work *Time and a Half*, a video she created while still an art student at Columbia University in 2003. It depicts a bored young woman standing behind a work counter, tapping her palm tree-emblazoned acrylic nails as her long black hair blows around her like ink dispersing in water.

Larger than life: *Dough*'s flower-sniffing, weeping woman is played by the 6ft 4in, 600-pound-plus female pro-wrestler, [Queen Raqui](#).

Where can I see her: At [Nottingham Contemporary](#) until 30 June.

Women beyond the fringe

Mika Rottenberg vividly explores sweatshops and closed communities, while Gillray's satire still hits the spot



Laura Cumming

**Mika Rottenberg/
James Gillray**
Nottingham Contemporary;
until 1 July

There is a stunning film by the New York artist **Mika Rottenberg** that shows a tract of snowbound wilderness in what might be Alaska, into which a woman strides without any shoes. She is gleefully unabashed by the cold. First she walks on her bare feet, then on her bare hands across this virginal snow beneath freezing white skies. Whereupon the camera swings upwards, the landscape inverts and she is suddenly hanging from the roof of the world.

The method is simple but the effect is exhilarating. A couple of minutes of shrewd camera work and much athleticism on the woman's part produce a spectacular vision. It touches deeply upon something we have all imagined, what is more: the world turned upside down and our own lives taking place on the ceiling.

This is not the kind of film that made Mika Rottenberg famous. Born in Argentina in 1976, educated in Israel, she moved to America as a teenager and has been one of Manhattan's art stars for almost a decade. A regular of the Whitney Biennials and winner of the inaugural Cartier award, what really made her name was a video called *Dough*, premiered in 2006 and shown here the same year in the Serpentine Gallery's chaotic anthology *Uncertain States of America*.

It's a grotesque but fascinating performance: a monstrous regiment of women stacked one above the other in makeshift plywood cells, passing the eponymous dough through an absurd production line that involves, quite intimately, sweat and tears. As the claggy white stuff is kneaded and massaged by the workers it takes on some of their characteristics – the largest woman kneads the most voluminous globs into long skinny ropes passed down through a hole into the tapering hands of a prodigiously elongated woman.

Dough and flesh become a central equation, along with the factory as literal sweatshop. One worker's perspiration keeps the dough moist, along with another's tears. A third woman keeps the place cool with her Sisyphian labours on a foot pump.

You can see *Dough* in Nottingham Contemporary's one-woman retrospective, part of its constantly inventive programme. The experience is complicated in unexpected ways. Rottenberg favours remarkably endowed women – body builders, contortionists, giantesses, porn stars – and scarcely any of the dozen or so works screening here can be watched without uneasy thoughts of exploitation, exhibitionism and labour; which is, I think, all part of their content.

In another claustrophobic factory, botched together from gaffer tape and cardboard, three women are somehow transforming red fingernails into maraschino cherries (think of Swift's *Lagadans* trying to extract sunbeams from cucumber). Personal touches – artificial flowers, lamps, towels – also suggest a spa day mordantly satirised. As the contraptions whirr, each stage of the process is signalled by a call from one uniformed woman to the next. A weird hybrid of brothel, beauty



A still from Mika Rottenberg's film *Cheese* (2007): 'There is a pervasive sense of amazement.' Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun and Andrea Rosen Gallery

parlour and assembly line is implied.

Rottenberg can be more or less explicit with her politics. A recent film takes the production of lettuce and latex and turns it into full-scale carnivalesque. Women mash lettuce and blusher into revolting cubes of detritus; others flay great mountains of rubber into lettuce-leaf thinness; still others massage the arms of their fellow workers in a roundelay of nonstop labour.

It becomes apparent that there is an above and below to this capitalism cycle, for those bare arms in India are descending through the earth into an underground labour camp in Arizona. Globalism has shrunk the world. The film is gruelling to watch, and lacking in the artist's characteristically eerie *Twin Peaks* humour, but it burrows under your skin with its Boschian fantasy.

The film is serenely performed as if it was usual to sleep in a coop and use one's hair to entice stray goats

Rottenberg's works are terrifically well presented inside what may be the very shacks and factories you see on the screen, and which certainly feel as claustrophobic as they look. Her 2007 piece, *Cheese*, is screening inside part of what appears to be an Amish farm, a maze of wooden rafters with a chicken-coop aesthetic.

The film is based on the 19th-century Sutherland Sisters, a family of women with Rapunzel tresses who performed for Barnum and Bailey and sold their own hair-growth formula, supposedly incorporating mist collected at the Niagara Falls. Rottenberg found their latter-day equivalent among a group of fanatics in the south, women whose crowning glory is so improbably long it takes hours to wash and comb, can be used for all sorts of bizarre purposes and has to be hung up on hooks overnight.

Or so her film conceives of such hair,

waving in the breeze like fields of corn, trailing like snakes upon the ground, worn in towering coils or rope-like plaits. She sees it as it is: alien, not quite part of the body.

And she is also contemplating the strangeness of closed communities, of the self-sufficient farm, of the religious enclave, of the all-woman shop (not to mention hair fetishists). Every minute of this day-in-a-life film is serenely performed as if it was usual to sleep in a coop, use one's hair to entice stray goats back to the fold, or divert the Niagara Falls through one's five-foot pigtails.

Rottenberg studies her subjects with awe, while simultaneously writing and directing their outlandish performances. There is a pervasive sense of amazement, which is as well communicated to the viewer as her ambivalence about employing their labour. Her bizarre productions may have their antecedents – David Lynch, Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle – but the vision she creates is distinctive, self-contained and occasionally unforgettable. It is rooted in the strangeness, cruelty and irrationality of this one but, at its best, approaches something more mythical.

Nottingham Contemporary is also showing 40 prints by that greatest of English satirists, **James Gillray**. It has some of the classics, stupendous images from the 18th century that have long since derided our culture. Pitt and Napoleon carving up the plum pudding of the globe with their sharpened knives and forks; 'Little Boney' stamping his foot like some deranged Shirley Temple. The French sans-culottes as raving hyenas, teeth filed to fangs; the Georgian fops parading their wasp waists, skinny as furled umbrellas.

It's a choice selection of political outrages – the French threat, the tax 'reforms', the hypocritical excesses of the government as well as the monarchy. It is also a fine selection of bodies: bulging breeches, towering quiffs, vast cake-holes, unfeasible girths and appetites. The plutocrat excretes his lunch of stolen gold as a worthless heap of nothing. The two shows are well matched, linking the centuries, ancient and modern.

Online

Mika Rottenberg
– in pictures:
observer.
co.uk/
new-review

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MIKA ROTTENBERG

[ARTIST]

“EVERY ARTIST IS A CONTROL FREAK.”

Effects of Mika Rottenberg’s video-installation “mini-theaters”:

Enhanced consciousness of one’s body in space

Prevention of escape

Claustrophobia and slight discomfort

In the wordless film *Squeeze* by Mika Rottenberg, a factory is abuzz with activity: workers spritz wiggling tongues with water, conduct electricity through meditation, harvest rubber trees, transcend space and time, and endlessly chop heads of lettuce. All this happens, it seems, to produce a cube of worthless, rotting trash.

The product is beside the point, but the process of its creation—the art of its labor—is a phantasmagorical spectacle. Repetitive tasks, the transformation of work into physical objects: these are the elements of Mika Rottenberg’s surreal, industrial films: *Mary’s Cherries*, *Cheese*, *Tropical Breeze*, and the recent performance-film combo *Seven*. In watching her films, viewers follow strange interlocking chains of logic until, every so often, a magical hiccup allows for a moment of the impossible.

The actors in Rottenberg’s films are laborers. They don’t act, *per se*, but carry out series of simple, physical tasks. For this reason, she casts individuals who use their bodies as sites of extreme production—bodybuilders, the highly flexible, the very long-haired. Most of her actors are women and her work is often seen through a feminist lens, though its preoccupations are wider than feminist ideology, from Marxism to fetishism.

Rottenberg’s films show in galleries and museums (Bilbao Guggenheim, the Whitney Biennial, Nicole Klagsbrun, Andrea Rosen) but not in theaters, an environment she considers inappropriate for her current work. Often she builds an installation to serve as a viewing room, its atmosphere and structure mirroring the film it houses. Some viewers wander in and out as the projections loop continuously, and others find themselves hypnotized by the artist’s circuitous logic, from beginning to end.

—Ross Simonini

I. BEHIND THE SCENES OF REALITY

THE BELIEVER: For you, what's the distinction between an art film shown in a gallery and a cinematic film screened in a theater?

MIKA ROTTENBERG: The most immediate thing that comes to mind is the whole ritual of going to the movies. You're going from the ugly "real world," and suddenly everything transforms: the carpet is brighter, the lights are brighter, the popcorn machine. You are being prepared to enter a different reality. In the gallery, it's more straight-up reality; you are not asked to forget about your physical body. In the film theater, you are asked to escape.

BLVR: You often make spaces, little sculptural houses for your films to be seen within the galleries. Is that a form of escape?

MR: They're video installations—I build my own "mini theaters" for most of my videos. I think about it as taking advantage of the fact I can control the shape and architecture of where my videos are being screened, making the way you experience them a part of the narrative. In contrast to movie theaters, I try to make the viewer more conscious of their own body in space, rather than allowing them to forget where they are. The spaces usually provoke a sense of claustrophobia and slight discomfort. I guess it's my way of not letting the viewer be completely immersed and escape into the screen, into another reality. In *Squeeze*, for example, viewers went through a mazelike corridor with a stained, dropped ceiling and gray office carpet—like you are going behind the scenes of reality—then encountered the small black box where the twenty-minute film was projected, but they were a bit disoriented. I wanted to evoke this feeling of going through a portal into another reality, where things seem very familiar yet don't make much sense. I build these viewing spaces as a way to deal with the problem of the format in galleries.

BLVR: What do you mean by that?

MR: Galleries are not structured to show works with a beginning and an end, so maybe it's not an ideal place to show

time-based work—or maybe it makes artists rethink and reinvent the format. In most cases, the loop makes more sense in that context. It changes the way you edit, and the narrative structure, because an audience can come and go at any time. Although my video installations are not as comfortable as movie theaters, and the technical equipment is not as advanced as in the movies, the sound and the light are very controlled and considered. One thing that's key for me: the size of the projection. That's one thing you can control in a gallery situation that you cannot control in movie theaters. It's a big difference if you see something from twenty feet or five feet, especially when the work is of a more sculptural or visual nature, rather than story-based.

BLVR: Because of the looping and because you can't expect people to sit and watch the whole thing, you can experiment with pacing a little, whereas cinematic movies always have to keep the viewer's attention.

MR: Yeah, it's a challenge for me to keep someone's attention, not to have them leave. Unlike in a gallery, in a theater it's a given that people will stay, unless you really bore them—then they'll walk out. So I try to get someone to stay for the entire loop, but without *forcing* them to stay. One main reason I like the format of the loop and exhibiting the work in a gallery is that my work is more based on space than on time. So for me, I think the key thing is that it's more like you're witnessing a space, an architectural structure. In "classic" films, you're revealing the narrative through behavior in time. I think I'm revealing the narrative through space, rather than a story line. The story is about the space or about materials and not about, say, an emotional drama.

BLVR: Could another word for the space be *sculpture*? Because it seems like some of these film sets are sculpture.

MR: Absolutely. It's not just that the sets are sculptural, the motivation is sculptural.

BLVR: And why do you think film is the way to show the sculptures, as opposed to a photograph or an installation?

MR: These spaces can't exist in reality. I use film as one of the architectural ingredients. So I use editing as a build-

ing block, or as the glue. Maybe it started because I didn't have money to actually build the spaces I wanted to describe, so I had to use "movie magic" in order to realize them, but it immediately turned into one of my main interests—to create spaces that can only exist in time, as films. If they were real spaces they would collapse, logically and physically—they do not obey laws of gravity and distance, and that's why they are films and not 3-D sculptures.

BLVR: Is cinematic film something you're interested in?

MR: The idea of making a full-on feature film scares me, but fear always functions as a huge motivator in my process. And the most important thing is that I think I have a good idea for a movie: it's about treasure-hunting. I just have to find the right writer. I need someone who will help me turn my sculptural sensibility into narrative film. It will still be guided by materials and will circle around a physical space.

BLVR: How so?

MR: If you think about it, in the most simple romantic comedy, there is always a cause-and-effect, right? But the cause-and-effect is not material-based, it's behavior-based. In my videos, the cause-and-effect is material-based. It still creates a narrative, but instead of "this person did that and then this person does that," it's "this material spills here and then that happens."

BLVR: Like a Rube Goldberg machine.

MR: Yes and no. Yes because of the cause-and-effect, but no because, unlike in his drawings, in my work things don't obey physical logic. Causal processes violate expectations of space and time, and, maybe most important, there is a psychological and sexual level that does not exist in his work at all. In the feature I will someday make, I want to make things happen because of people's behaviors and fate, but also because of materials and magic.

BLVR: How would you say making art films is different from making feature films?

MR: The process of making it. It's a lot more free from what I understand the process of filmmaking to be. You don't have a producer who sits on you. The budget is smaller, so there's less stress. I'm not trying to cater to everyone. It's obvious that we're making an art piece, that we're not going to try to *make* a wide audience understand.

BLVR: There's a certain lo-fi quality to video art or gallery films, but yours have the look of a cinematic film.

MR: Yeah, maybe. But because technology is getting cheaper, many art videos look less sloppy, and a lot of young artists are getting really good at using software like After Effects and Final Cut, for example, so there's this new look emerging, maybe more medium-savvy. So the lo-fi quality of some art videos becomes a stylistic choice rather than a given.

I work with a really good cinematographer, Mahyad Tousi, and he's always pushing to get the best technology affordable. But I want to keep a hands-on feeling to it, and I don't want it too epic or clean. There's something about a homemade quality I'm trying to keep. I want you to feel the hands behind it. The hand is never removed all the way. But I have access to technology and people who know how to operate it, like the Canon 7D with amazing 35 mm lenses, so I can get closer to the look I want.

Honestly, though, it is something I have a hard time with, because I don't like to overdictate a cinematic "look." I'd rather put the ingredients together—the performers, the set, the camera, the light—and then step back and let it create itself, including mistakes and glitches.

II. CHEERLEADER

BLVR: You use nonactors mostly, right?

MR: Yes, I find most of the performers advertising online, "renting out" their extraordinary skills or physiques.

BLVR: Why do you choose who you choose?

MR: I'm interested in issues of alienation and ownership. Most of my performers alienate parts of their bodies in order to commodify them. For example, TallKat—a six-foot-

nine woman from Arizona—rents out her tallness. I hired her as a factory worker who operates part of a machine in the video *Dough*, which exploits her tallness. This brings up interesting issues for me and makes the whole thing dynamic and more playful. Also, I don't want the performer to act. I choose people because their specific personalities or bodies fit the requirements. Instead of trying to shape them into the video, I try to find someone to work into that role who would just fit. And then they don't really need to do much besides just be.

BLVR: Do you direct them?

MR: I think I'm more of a cheerleader than a director. I give them tasks and then yell encouragements. I try to create a situation in which their body will have to react rather than act. I create the situation where it's obvious what they have to do. What are the tasks? What's the conflict? And then they'll automatically behave in a certain way that will serve the narrative.

BLVR: You began as a painter, right? What were your paintings like?

MR: My first instinct was to do these three-dimensional collages. I was never satisfied with just an illusion of space. It's a little bit like what videos are. It was a flat space that I would put objects onto. But I was never really comfortable with the space that sculpture takes, and the maintenance, and I wasn't satisfied with *just* painting. It was always something about the gesture or how I put the painting together that was more interesting to me than the actual painting.

BLVR: Do you remember when the painting-to-film transition happened?

MR: I used to use a lot of source material for the paintings, and I lost it all in an airport—all my slides and everything.

BLVR: You lost all of them at once?

MR: I moved them all at once. They were in a single bag and I lost the entire bag.

BLVR: Was that devastating?

MR: No, it was good because it pushed me to start doing what I really wanted to do.

BLVR: Were you in school?

MR: I was at SVA [School of Visual Arts, in Manhattan] in the sculpture department, and someone had a VHS camera, which actually took the coolest supersaturated images. It was this big VHS camera, and you put in the tape and you shoot and you play it immediately. I had a little puppet theater—all these mechanical animals, horses I got at the party store, fingers and cherries. I'd stage small sets and do some kind of *moving*—not really animation, not really stop-motion. That's how it started. Then I did my first video installation. One day I'm gonna do it again, because I still think it's a good piece.

BLVR: How did the film *Cheese* come about?

MR: It started from discovering online this product from the late 1800s developed by the Seven Sutherland Sisters. It was a hair fertilizer, hair tonic, and a cure for baldness.

BLVR: A snake-oil kind of thing.

MR: Yeah. They're supposedly the first American supermodels and celebrities. They grew up on a poor farm by Niagara Falls. And overnight they made a million dollars—in 1886, which is like a billion dollars today. Crazy life stories—seven women with floor-length hair.

III. FREAKS

BLVR: How do you feel about screens?

MR: I don't like screens so much. I like projections more than screens. I





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Scene from *Squeeze* (2010, single-channel video installation); Mika Rottenberg with actors during the making of *Squeeze* (photo by Henry Prince, 2009); film still from *Seven* (multichannel video installation and live performance, still courtesy of Mika Rottenberg and Jon Kessler); scene from *Cheese* (2008, multichannel video installation). Images courtesy of Mika Rottenberg.

like when the light hits something rather than coming from the back of something. I like when you can see the light, the way the light works. It feels less manipulative, more organic. The light is projected onto a surface.

BLVR: With projection, you have the dust floating in the air, the little artifacts of film.

MR: Yeah, because it is a reflection of the light, and when you have those touch screens, those flat screens, it's not a reflection of anything—it's a lot of little pixels that create an image.

BLVR: Do you watch movies on computers?

MR: I hate that. But I do it. I mean, I watch it on my iPad

now. But I don't like it. What really bugs me is the color on these light screens. It's just too cold. I don't like the finish. I don't like the texture. It's too smooth. The actual screen is so shiny, and has its own physicality that takes over the image. Again, that's the nice thing about art video—you can always control the way people see it. With a movie, there's a lot more letting go. You release it to the world and people watch it on their iPhones.

BLVR: Control is really a big difference between the two.

MR: I think every artist is a control freak. Because, as an artist, you're trying to control and create a new reality. You have to want to control the world, otherwise you just let reality be. You want to manipulate reality, even if it's just by documenting it, and that makes you a control freak. ✪

NYCU | Mika Rottenberg and the Amazing Invention Factory

February 1st, 2013 by Jonathan Munar



Artist Mika Rottenberg in her Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, home. Production still from the series *New York Close Up*. © Art21, Inc. 2013. Cinematography by John Marton.

The latest *New York Close Up* film is now available for your viewing: [Mika Rottenberg and the Amazing Invention Factory](#).

What are the stories we tell about objects? In this film, artist Mika Rottenberg considers a survey of her videos in which women work in factory-like settings to create handmade objects. Growing up in Israel, Rottenberg recalls not being exposed to commercials on television until she was a teenager; after moving to New York City, she encountered infomercials such as Ron Popeil's "set it and forget it" [Showtime Rotisserie](#) chicken oven. Fascinated by the stories surrounding these inventions, Rottenberg creates her own fabricated products as well as idiosyncratic fictions about the origins of objects. Populating her videos with women who have extreme physiques and who sell their services on the Internet—such as wrestling, squashing, and photo opportunities—Rottenberg's imaginary factories are run by people who "own the means of production." Throughout her videos Rottenberg draws the viewer's attention to the architecture of the body and the psychological dimensions of labor and value. This *New York Close Up* film features Rottenberg's works [Tropical Breeze](#) (2004), [Mary's Cherries](#) (2004), [Dough](#) (2005–06), and [Squeeze](#) (2010).

[Mika Rottenberg](#) (b. 1976, Bueno Aires, Argentina; raised in Tel Aviv, Israel) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Issue 150 October 2012

Image Games

FILM

For 35 years, **Ericka Beckman** has been making films which combine choreographed set pieces and 'designed camera movements' that anticipate the work of a new generation of artists



Ericka Beckmann, *Hiatus*, 1999, video still

Earlier this year, I visited Ericka Beckman's New York studio to watch some of her films. We began with *You the Better* (1983), which premiered almost 30 years ago at the New York Film Festival, co-billed with Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1982). Godardians were unimpressed with her 'punk post-structuralism' and hurled abuse at the screen.¹ Carrie Rickey reported in that December's *Artforum*: 'If the fate of all great art is to be at first misunderstood, then Beckman's film, hands down, was the greatest film at the festival [...] [it] was the only truly vanguard achievement and the only analysis and indictment of the competition that keeps the wheel of fortune spinning.'² In a practice spanning 35 years, Beckman's films combine choreographed set pieces and 'designed camera movements' that expose the logic of group sports and computer gaming in what she calls, 'the performance of the image'.³ And now, when technology-enabled image-exchange – think of 'sharing' your pictures on Facebook, Twitter or Flickr – is marketed as connective fun but sold as someone else's asset, her work is more relevant than ever.

In *You the Better*, a tower appears spot-lit and rotating at the

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by *Isobel Harbison*

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centre of the film's darkened frame. The tower is made of stacked white boxes, crudely rendered with the basic graphic details of a house. A flat yellow circle is suspended in the background like a flimsy makeshift sun. A weird, punchy chorus begins. In high-pitched, evenly enunciated syllables, two female vocalists chant from the tower's perspective, 'I see land out there stretching far and wide, I think I'll blow up and subdivide; subdivide; subdivide ...' At that moment the tower explodes into the rubble of single cells. In Beckman's stylized nether-city, suburbanization has begun. Roll on a faster animated sequence and an ever-more alien score; the tower becomes a rotating model of a suburban town. Suburban lay lines become the boundaries of a newly devised sports court on which a team of performers – led by artist Ashley Bickerton – plays against 'House'. White boxes become yellow balls (the yellow circle a recurrent icon of frail optimism). In a series of newly devised games, Beckman's 'players' are kitted out in quasi-Constructivist-style softball uniform, all primary colours and juvenile motifs. Pitching targets appear intermittently like holograms, geometric shapes animated between action sequences. The players' smooth early moves turn into stressful gambles and their confident communication deteriorates into paranoid anger; the omnipotent 'House' is fearsome and oppressive. In this culture of competition, sport turns into gambling, speculation becomes an oppressive control mechanism. 'House' wins.

Since the mid-1970s, Beckman has been based in New York where she moved to after studying at CalArts, Los Angeles. On the West Coast, she shared an interest in performance and early developmental activity with her peers, Allen Ruppertsberg and Guy de Cointet. In New York, she took this further. Her reading of Jean Piaget's 'genetic epistemology' and his practical tests measuring how repetitive children's activities generate or activate collective meaning, are manifested in the 'logical systems' she devises to structure her works.⁴ In her early films, characterization, action, costumes, sets and scores all emphasize a sublime connection between childhood and adulthood, achieving a scrambled effect of pantomime euphoria and Lynchian phantasmagoria. Around this time, she attended Julia Heyward's early performances of scripted monologue and a cappella singing, which inspired a distinct choral component in her works. Her chorus lines introduce persistent dark forces to the films' narratives; the voice of societal pressures ('House', the government, the employer, the capitalist) creates a creeping sense of panic and claustrophobia among 'players'. In 1975, Beckman herself performed in Vito Acconci's groundbreaking *Red Tapes*, a video exposition of the relationship between self and state, where she observed 'the construction of [his filmic] space as an expression of [his] identity'.⁵

Beckman's work begins with considerable research, informing set coordinates around which narrative, choreography and filming are ordered. Bold motifs and colours are drawn from the research too, which connect temporal and spatial sequences, reappearing in detailed props, sets and costumes – a loose unifying method borrowed from early surrealist painting and experimental film. Her casts have included her peers, from Bickerton in *You the Better*, to Matt Mullican and Paul McMahon in *Out of Hand* (1981) and Mike Kelley in *Cinderella* (1986). Her scores are collaboratively composed; Beckman has previously worked with David Linton and Sonic Youth. Her early works were all shot in her darkened studio where her props and sets were hand-painted and additionally spot-lit through coloured gels creating a vivid luminescence, a quality quite different to that achieved by digital treatment. (In this respect, Beckman says she is 'waiting for digital to work more like film'.)⁶ When filming, Beckman shot live-action sequences first and then rewound the same film stock

to shoot and integrate layered animation sequences in between. According to the artist: 'I keep a notebook where I draw each live-action frame and use that as a visual reference for the animation. I never see how any of this turns out until I get the film back from the lab [...] In my film *Hiatus* [1999] I shot up to 16 layers.'⁷

In 1980, Beckman contended, 'film is creating narrative through the makeshift. My films move backwards, using narrative structures, as does the mind of anyone trying to grasp the meaning of images in his memory.'⁸ And perhaps herein lies the distinction between her work and those of the 'Pictures' generation among whom it has been contextualized, most recently in 'Pictures Generation: 1974–1984', at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2009. Many artists associated with 'Pictures' took images from the media and edited, cropped or subtly morphed their subject so as to reflect back on their origins and the purpose of their visibility.

Beckman's approach is different, perhaps prefiguring those of a young generation working today: cross-disciplinary appropriationists repurposing the media-sourced image to expose our proximity and complicity with it. Back then images that appeared in the media had identifiable producers. Photographers, filmmakers and designers were commissioned for individual campaigns and often established reputations for themselves in the process. Now we are all photographers, filmmakers, designers: image producers and consumers – or 'prosumers' according to Don Tapscott's infamous coinage – and the Internet is the enormous repository facilitating this exchange. We upload our photographs onto 'sharing' websites, 'like' and 'tag' one another; these images are then speculatively browsed and bought by stock agencies, altered and sold to media agencies, only to be re-imitated and re-captured by us and uploaded once more. Our role in this economy is a new one.

Similarly, viewers are, in Beckman's work, characterized as 'players'. From conversations with Tony Conrad, Beckman says: 'I saw how I could manipulate this distance [between the image, the viewer and the viewer's memory] by taking the easily assimilated images from my childhood and my culture, and perform them differently.'⁹ Unlike many 'Pictures' works, which reveal the mechanisms and politics behind persuasive images, her work looks at the role of the viewer in assuming and reproducing these images and in doing so perpetuating the cycle. In this arena, players are rarely winners. Her very particular game-construction and player-choreography has taken different forms over the years, but chimes with many more contemporary practices. Beckman's works have rarely been shown *en masse* in the us nor significantly in any European institution to date, so I do not claim that her work has had direct influence on younger artists. However, aspects of it resonate so boldly with a broad range of recent works that it seems worth drawing some connections.

In Beckman's 'Super-8' trilogy of films (1978–80), how the human body copies its image is performed in a variety of ways. In *We Imitate; We Break Up* (1978), she assumes the role of 'Imitator', initially dressed in a minimal school uniform attempting to copy the movements of a wooden model of human legs. Reproducing these actions, her character 'learns that she can recall a sensory "image" of the jump if she forgets how to do it.'¹⁰ Ultimately she succeeds, but ultimately her own body 'breaks up' into an animated cluster of small objects. Here the image, as object, is physically imitated, repeated and learned, until it has become an oddly self-perpetuating thing.



Eddie Peake, *Amidst a Sea of Flailing High Heels and Cooking Utensils: Part 1*, 2012, performance documentation, The Tanks, Tate Modern, London

The human body's reconfiguration into an object through image is evident in a number of contemporary works too. Typical of her treatment of the human form's consistent allure, Anthea Hamilton's 'Manblind' series (2009–ongoing) reproduces black and white images of athletic male models on domestic blinds. Oddly, the men's physical prowess, shredded and stuck onto functional dividers, has little sway on the impression the images make. These 'real' men seem to exist almost indestructibly as affectation, image performed and seamlessly reproduced; an ideal is set in motion. Similarly, a recent performance by Eddie Peake at The Tanks, Tate Modern, London, *Amidst a Sea of Flailing High Heels and Cooking Utensils: Part 1* (the second part of which was performed at Chisenhale Gallery the following week), seemed to cannily expose the magnetism of the image's glossy surface. Eight lithe performers undressed to their underwear, or nude and painted gold, paraded around a darkened, smoky floor to the beat of a bass-heavy synthetic drum. Posing individually, then in pairs, then in threesomes, skin rubbed skin delicately, playfully, until five bodies writhed and fondled one another – dry, surface sex stuff – before breaking up and scattering, returning to a self-possessed co-ordinated sequence of poster-boy postures. The most disorientating thing about this very physical performance was its unconvincing 'liveness'. It felt like we were watching images of bodies rather than real ones. The most visceral element of this performance was not the rubbery, fluid-free sex show but the beat of the synthetic drum, and presumably this weird new sterility was precisely the point.



Anthea Hamilton, *Manblind No.5*, 2011, mixed media, 2.7 × 2.1 m

In *Out of Hand* (1980), Beckman casts artist and critic Paul McMahon as a nameless protagonist trawling through his memory. Using the film to depict the architecture of his psychic space, McMahon is seen dressed in a red and white playsuit, retracing the front steps of his childhood home and trawling through his bedroom toy box. After an animated sequence, reminiscent of pioneering German filmmaker Oskar Fischinger, McMahon retrieves a small, yellow rocking horse. As he grabs it, it morphs into a steering wheel and his position changes. He becomes a driver pointed toward a screen inside our screen where another film is projected in front of him, dozens of graphic magnets animated in free fall. The magnetic pull of the image is represented like a vehicle here, speeding McMahon around his memory superhighway and taking all kinds of unpredictable turns as he goes. Shot on Super-8 (the first work of its format shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1983), it shows how the image is experienced through technology. McMahon's profile, captured from behind in close proximity to the screen, exemplifies what Beckman calls 'the blotter effect', each new image dissolving the next, while slowly seeping into our consciousness.¹¹

In recent works by other artists, a similar formal device is employed. Screen-shot crops and browser outlines appear to frame or foreground traces of the artist within the scene. Berry Patten's **D* (2012) is a series of photographs of a white laptop, the browser of which displays images of a tropical coral reef. Balancing on its keyboard, a corresponding selection of sponges,

shells and stones are pictured within the frame. They have been spruced up by the artist with acrylic paint and seem appropriately makeshift souvenirs of her experience in the synthetic sub-aquatic. There is a funny melancholy to the work. What is nature mediated by technology, anyway? Elsewhere, Trisha Baga's video *Madonna y El Niño* (2009) positions webcam shots of herself next to, or superimposed onto, a pop-out screen with footage of the singer's live performances. The work concludes as film of Madonna singing 'Erotica' (1982), and the pulsing outline of Mac's solar screensaver are simultaneously projected over Baga's body as she moves to their rhythm. There is a degree of pleasure in watching how these icons coalesce in the artist's performance. Picturing themselves at the site of the digitally modified image, both Patten and Baga characterize the role of image-prosumer, the diversions and guilty pleasures it brings.

Imposing the logic of interactive gaming onto established social order appears early in *You the Better*, and again in Beckman's *Cinderella*. Filmed in her studio, the work takes key parts of the fairytale's original narrative and reworks them to appear like levels on a computer game: repeated sections through which action evolves. Beckman summarizes the work as 'an interactive narrative game for girls [...] modelled so that the linear storyline would intersect vertical indices where the story could pivot and change.'¹² The film moves back and forward between the cottage of Cinderella's captivity, to the prince's ball, to her midnight escape and beyond. As she passes through stages, Cinderella scores points correlating not to productivity and social mobility, but to her capacity to see and advance beyond these self-perpetuating logics. Beckman's indexical structure is also reproduced as a graphic latticed motif visible in several sequences from Cinderella's netted skirt (beneath an extraordinary green plastic dress), to a scoreboard floorboard, to a knotted fabric web, the surface of a hideout and a star constellation. Ultimately, Cinderella manages to take control of – rather than marry – her own destiny. Beckman's later *Hiatus* (1999) portrays a similar female protagonist, MADI, entrapped in a virtual reality 'identity game'. In 'reality', she's at home wearing casual contemporary clothing; in the virtual life, she's in her imaginary garden, dressed head to toe in a red fantasy ensemble, the corset and curls of some 19th-century wench. She encounters other virtual characters also playing out their fantasies. 'Player 33', for example, has come along as a blue cowboy. But this virtual escape soon becomes a virtual prison, as her fellow characters vie for one another's cyber-land and power. MADI must identify temporal and spatial discrepancies between the real and the virtual, in order to regain control. Whereas the gaming logic is potentially liberating for Cinderella, almost two decades later it limits MADI, merely reproducing the unsympathetic capitalist logic of productivity and competition. Returning to Beckman's explorations of the physical action in the perception and perpetuation of the objectified image, these particular game frameworks seem to foresee the quite specific problematics of identity construction in a digitally malleable image-world, and the competitive capitalisation of cyberspace.

Beckman's work has often employed the familiar emblems of the clichéd, gendered or historical image, using them to play out newly liberating narratives. There are many contemporary artists who seem to do the same, extrapolating entertaining or abject narratives from diverse photographic or pictorial sources, and in them bringing together real and fictive characters and creating sets, props, costumes and scores that resonate or clash stylistically in order to emphasize their critical point. Albeit beginning with very different images and animating different periods and experiences, recent film or performance ensembles by Mary Reid

Kelley, Mika Rottenberg and Jennet Thomas open up and parody particular kinds of images, the political and discriminatory rhetoric that they carry and the dangerous expectations they perpetuate. Reid Kelley's painted heroines perform a kind of North American black and white historical photography which typecast female protagonists in servile or caring roles, most recently in *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* (2011). Rottenberg's videos extrapolate their characters, sets and narrative frameworks from commercial stereotypes including the sweaty, sleazy, oozy women that make and promote *Tropical Breeze* (2009), a generic domestic cleaning product, and the blooming, busty, pastoral milkmaids whose fey rural gathering collectively produce *Cheese* (2009). An image of New Labour's Academy schools might have inspired Thomas's recent sci-fi musical and accompanying installation *SCHOOL OF CHANGE* (2012) depicting the memory-busting experiments carried out by the scientific 'sponsor' on a classroom of mind-numbed, singing girls in an east London secondary, a latent critique of the increasing corporatization of pedagogy disguised by the rhetoric of positive change.



Mary Reid Kelley, *Polyamorous Bride*, 2012, 23 x 29 inches, collage, acrylic and watercolour on paper

Since 2000, Beckman has moved to a more physical approach, using architectural contours to direct the camera. In *Tension Building* (2006–12) her lens glides around the curved steps of a sports amphitheatre. Later the film stock is animated with colour, combined with rhythmic, undulating percussion and infused with snapshot footage of American footballers playing and American cheerleaders cheering so that the film itself becomes a physical game. As a viewer, the effect is more like that of riding on a pinball, mid-ricochet, hurtling off the contours of its casing, than sitting before a durational Structuralist film. Like pinball, it is an exercise in speed.

This might represent a wave of filmmaking freed up by the readily available digital camera, playing with its chicanery, where life's productive pulse is most astutely expressed by moving images. In a performance by Ed Atkins at Tate Britain last year, *A Tumour (in English)*, the artist appeared on stage barefoot but dressed in a suit with his back to the audience. Images similar to those in his high-definition videos were projected onto a stage on screen, thrown onto his silhouette. This footage was of desolate landscapes with close-up shots of textured objects burning, running or dripping. Digital sound and visual effects were copious and emphatic. Live, the projections seemed to prompt Atkins's voice, filtered deeper, responding to the images that responded to him. Digital code became like a roaming, spectral presence

imposing on the human form, captured in silhouette from behind. Standing there, he seemed to be ingesting its surfaces and then throwing them back out, in particles of sound. Here, Atkins was in character as prosumer and the image-game was a two-way chase.

In recent correspondence, Beckman posed a question underpinning her earlier work: 'What makes a rule real?' If you switch her 'what?' to 'who?' I believe it's a question shared by many other artists who, in different ways, characterize the image-games we now play, and the ones we really shouldn't.

1 'Punk post-structuralism' was a phrase used by J. Hoberman to describe

Ericka Beckman's work in the *Village Voice*, 1 January 1979

2 'Popcorn and Canvas', Carrie Rickey, *Artforum*, December 1983

3 Ericka Beckman in correspondence with the author, Spring/Summer 2012

4 -7 Ibid

8 *Horror Pleni: Pictures in New York Today*, Padiglione d'Arte

Contemporanea, Milan, 1980, n.p.

9 Ericka Beckman in conversation with Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun,

October 2011, published in *JPR Journal*, issue 3, Spring 2012

10-11 Ibid

12 Ericka Beckman in correspondence with author, Spring/Summer 2012

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The New York Times Style Magazine

Now Showing | Mika Rottenberg

November 2, 2011, 6:21 pm

By [KEVIN MCGARRY](#)



A still from “Tropical Breeze,” a 2004 film by Mika Rottenberg.

Mika Rottenberg’s video installations depict dreamlike assembly lines that parse animal, vegetable and mineral elements down to their base materialities, and, through strenuous, ritualized monotony, catalyze the production of weird junk: relatable daily circumstances for most of the world’s population. The Buenos Aires-born artist, raised in Israel and based in New York, casts her workers for their unusual corporeal commodities — jumbo figures, endless hair, freaky joints — and they often seem to perform their tasks without the knowledge of why, or of their ornate connections to one another.

In “Dough” (2006), uniformed women of hyperbolically different statures occupy interlinking box-size rooms that compose a small factory. By butterfly effect, everything down to allergy-induced tears contributes to the menacing pile of rising bread dough below.

“Tropical Breeze” (2004) enacts a similar alchemy, with bodybuilders and a contortionist working to get lemon scent into lemon-scented wipes.

With “Squeeze” (2010), Rottenberg introduced documentary footage of actual laborers into her work; scenes from an Arizona lettuce farm and an Indian rubber factory collided with a fictional makeup workshop beneath the streets of New York.

Now, with [“7,” her Performa 11 commission made in collaboration with the artist Jon Kessler](#), she pushes her brand of fantasy further into the realm of the real, fusing a film shot in Botswana with a live performance geared around seven colored fluids that correspond to the body’s chakras.

Mika Rottenberg and Jon Kessler’s Seven, is at [Nicole Klagsbrun Project Space](#): 534 West 24th Street.

The New York Times

Art in Review

Mika Rottenberg and Jon Kessler: 'Seven'

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

Published: November 10, 2011

*Performa 11 at Nicole Klagsbrun Project Space
534 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Nov. 19*

[Mika Rottenberg](#) makes videos that involve women performing mysterious, product-oriented rituals in close quarters, usually with hilarious feminist overtones and not a little body heat. [Jon Kessler](#) specializes in kinetic sculptures that clank and gyrate in a mad-scientist sort of way, often with political implications. Apparently they had enough in common to garner a commission to collaborate on a live performance (the first for both) from Performa 11, the visual art performance biennial whose fourth iteration began its three-week run on Nov. 1 in New York.

The result is "Seven," a 37-minute piece involving seven live performers in an installation that includes video. The action centers on the transcontinental production of "chakra juice," a magic elixir, one assumes, distilled from human sweat. It comes in the seven colors ascribed in Indian medicine to the body's seven force centers, located at intervals from the bottom of the spine to the crown of the head. [Performed continuously](#) in a 37-minute cycle Wednesday through Saturday from 2 through 8 p.m., "Seven" combines the artists' interests to entertaining, if not completely seamless effect.

At one end of the assembly line is a New York-based laboratory (the gallery) where sweat is harvested after some typically Rottenbergian exertions by several performers, and reserved in vessels made of a special clay; the clay arrives from the African savannah through the kind of pneumatic tubes once common to department stores. The African side of the operation, conducted by the residents of a tiny, isolated village, appears on television monitors.

With colored lights flashing, things zipping back and forth across the Atlantic, and liquids and solids changing state and hue — all under the watchful eye of a lab technician who conducts herself with the aplomb of a skilled illusionist — there is quite a bit of firsthand action to follow, most of it in line with Ms. Rottenberg's aesthetic. But gradually the on-screen drama takes over; the savannah is not only mesmerizingly beautiful, it is also the juice's destination. The closing scene, a kind of performance within the performance, seems to be mostly Mr. Kessler's. It is unexpectedly dazzling, as, in a different way, is the realization that all this human effort we've just witnessed is for nature's benefit.

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REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Mika Rottenberg

MARY BOONE GALLERY

The Rube Goldberg contraption explored in Mika Rottenberg's video *Squeeze*, 2010, is simultaneously a single machine, a full-blown factory, and a global system. A literal sweatshop, this jerry-built structure is at once concrete, fantastical, and metaphorical, its ricketyness no contradiction of the grinding realities it indexes. Filmed in part in far-flung locations and in part on an elaborate homemade set, the work describes a peculiar processing plant, its layout ungraspable not just as a space with a certain footprint but as a site on the planet. For one thing, it seems to have portals on different continents, opening directly onto cool rubber-tree groves in India as well as onto the vast, sun-drenched fields of arable America. This *Phantom Tollbooth* quality is reflected when hands pushed vertically into holes in the earth by workers outside the plant emerge inside it, horizontally, from holes in the wall. Defying not merely geography but gravity, the plant's position nowhere, beyond dimension, logically also puts it everywhere, as distant as Asia and as nearby as here, unlimited in its reach, unconfined to one place.

The plant seems to be run by a female supervisor who occasionally munches on a white-bread sandwich and whose comfort is alternately catered to by a heater, a fan, and a footbath of ice. Beside her a large black woman sits like a sumo wrestler, in a spinning drum—I suspect she is the dynamo the system draws on, the energy source it sucks off. In a cramped space below, women use heavy pestles to stamp and squash materials that cycle in front of them: heads of lettuce, sheets of rubber, compact-case containers of blush. Here and there, hands and buttocks, lips and tongues poke through walls to be variously tended and moisturized—as machine parts are oiled—by makeshift devices, the supervisor, and a crew of Asian manicurists. Somewhere above, another woman, a robust blonde like the supervisor, is periodically squeezed in a mattress-lined press until she emits an apparently instru-

mental orange liquid. Between bouts in the press, she collects her sweat, which becomes an ingredient of the cosmetic blush that the pestle-wielding women will later mash. A factory's usual interaction of flesh and machinery is here extended, the two interlocking organically to become indistinguishable.

Outside, Hispanic workers load lettuce onto conveyor belts and Indian workers collect the milky sap of rubber trees and pass it to a chain of molds and scrubbers. Channeled and shaped at the plant through a cutely erotic sequence of holes and slides, these raw materials finally become an ambiguous product: an ugly cube of animal and vegetable derivatives, crumpled like waste. A nearly life-size photo in the gallery shows the art dealer Mary Boone (who produced the show in conjunction with Rottenberg's own dealer Nicole Klagsbrun), immaculately glamorous as always, cheerfully offering up this repugnant lump. Repugnant but precious:

According to a shipping slip roughly taped to the wall, the cube now lies in a storage facility in a notorious tax refuge, the Cayman Islands.

As visual experience the film combines grotesque yet precise imagination with surprising lyric touches, as in the views of the green grid of tapped rubber trees, each with a loose bandage of blue plastic. Matthew Barney is surely a predecessor; I also think of David Cronenberg and of, earlier, Jean Cocteau. What's special to Rottenberg is her sense of physicality—her insistence on fat and weight, secretion and sweat, and specifically on the female body, her central characters being all big women, unconventionally beautiful. A theme of her work is the disjunct between the conventions of beauty imposed on women, in part through the cosmetics industry, and the strictures imposed on them by the actuality of labor, by work and working conditions, the whole being here tied together by visual rhymes between rubber and cellulite, between a head of lettuce and a head of hair. At a time when virtual space rules, Rottenberg reminds us of our actual solidity, of the material stubbornness of the body and so of the systems it depends on for nurture. Her factory becomes a stand-in for these worldwide systems, an international network of traffic and trade whose realities are easily ignored. *Squeeze* is a rare fusion of politics and poetry.

—David Frankel

Mika Rottenberg, *Squeeze*, 2010, still from a color video, 20 minutes.



MIKA ROTTENBERG



Born 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina; lives in New York, New York Video installation artist Mika Rottenberg envisions the female body as a microcosm of larger societal issues such as labor and class inequities. In her short films, women cast for their notable physical features and talents perform perfunctory factory-line duties, manufacturing inane items worth less than the labor required to make them. Her homemade machinery and decor are functional but crudely constructed. These contraptions, operating by pedal, conveyor belt, paddle, rubber band, or string, are reminiscent of Peter Fischli and David Weiss's kinetic props, though the human interaction in her works adds a carnivalesque element to Rottenberg's environments, the physical comedy implicit in her narratives recalling Eleanor Antin's filmed performances. The bright colors of Rottenberg's self-contained sets don't disguise the close quarters in which her characters work or mitigate the sense of claustrophobia induced by a dead-end job. A blue-collar work ethic is conjured through the women's uniforms, ranging from diner-waitress dresses to jogging suits. Her cast often use several body parts at once, reminding the viewer of the feminine capacity for multitasking while it suggests an ironic futility in her sweatshop-like situations.

Three previous videos established Rottenberg's unique narrative approach, in which action is compressed into layers of illogical activity. In *Tropical Breeze* (2004), a woman in the back of a truck chews gum, wraps it in a tissue picked from a pile with her toes, and sends it on a clothesline to the profusely

sweating driver, who dabs each tissue with perspiration to ferry it back for packaging and sale as a "moist tissue wipe." Rottenberg's installations often physically echo her videos: *Tropical Breeze* was screened inside a crate-like box mimicking a big rig's trailer. *Mary's Cherries* (2005) showcases a trio of obese ladies pedaling bikes who, through a magical process of clay kneading and fingernail clipping, transform acrylic fingernails into maraschino cherries. In *Dough* (2006), one woman smells flowers to provoke hay-fever tears while another mashes a foot-powered bellows into foul-scented air that wafts onto dough, which rises as the moisture and air hit it. Dripping beads of sweat, women's grunting, and booming machinery dominate the audio, while close-ups of the women's bodies and faces highlight their resignation to an abstruse cause.

Rottenberg's newest film, *Cheese* (2007), conflates farm-girl imagery with the fairy tale "Rapunzel" into a story loosely based on the Sutherland Sisters, renowned for their extremely long hair. Floating through a pastoral yet mazelike setting of raw wooden debris cobbled together into a benign shantytown, six longhaired women in flowing white nightgowns "milk" their locks and the goats they live with to generate cheese. Shots of animals crowded in pens and the sisters' bunk bed-cluttered room visually compare the women to their ruminant allies. As nurturing caretakers, these women represent maternal aspects of Mother Nature. Here Rottenberg investigates feminine magic, the ability to "grow things out of the body" as she says, as the ultimate, wondrous physical mystery. **T.D.**

Stills from *Cheese*, 2007. Digital video, color, sound; approximately 12 min. Collection of the artist

The New York Times

Mika Rottenberg: Dough
Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery
526 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through February 25

In her New York gallery debut, and her third major piece to be seen in New York in two years, Mika Rottenberg continues to combine video and installation to create a claustrophobic, boxed-in space that feels like the center of an alternative but all-too-familiar universe.

In this world's often vertical, assembly-line-like compartments, women are enslaved and enshrined, serviced and exploited. Bodily functions are equated with capitalist production, and ideals of upper-class femininity are aggressively countered. The video centers on a kind of hive whose queen is an immense woman seated in cramped quarters. She guides a fleshy mass of dough from a hole in the ceiling through one in the floor. Below, other women intercept the extruded dough — which suggests both an intestine and its contents — breaking it into sections and ultimately vacuum-packing it in plastic bags.

Meanwhile, the large woman, apparently suffering from allergies, is also producing tears brought on by flowers that are grown within this jerry-built system. The tears run down one of her legs, drop through a hole in the floor and evaporate on a sizzling square of tile. It's an elaborate process undeterred by its futility. Sound familiar?

In addition to its rich social, physiological and sculptural metaphors, Ms. Rottenberg's work is distinguished by an elaborate interplay of hisses, plops and creaking. Conflating creation myth, sweatshop and beauty parlor, the work also combines real and video space. Viewers are confined to a small, tacky structure like those on the screen, yet we also move through the system with the all-seeing camera — like a parasite. On the way out, crossing a raised platform covered with linoleum, you may notice water falling drop by drop on a heated square, incessantly ceasing to exist.

ROBERTA SMITH

ARTFORUM

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Mika Rottenberg

NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY

The blood-chilling term *efficiency expert* was coined in the early twentieth century by mechanical engineer and management consultant Frederick Taylor, who famously timed factory employees to encourage them to work faster. Mika Rottenberg's videos of women performing mindless, repetitive tasks might do Taylor proud if they didn't also reveal his system's utter lack of humanity. In Rottenberg's latest video, *Dough*, 2005–2006, a six-minute loop, the eponymous product is manufactured via an obscure and complicated process that requires the use of a fluorescent lamp and an inhaler, as well as an endless supply of vacuum packs, gerbera daisies, and human tears.

As in an earlier Rottenberg work called *Mary's Cherries*, 2003, the factory is divided into seven chambers with holes leading from one to the next. The next-to-uppermost room is occupied by a colossally fat woman wearing a drab brown uniform monogrammed with the name *Raqui*. Raqui is a multitasker: Not only does she route the dough down to the other three women, but her tears appear to contain a magical catalyst that causes the dough to rise. Raqui kneads the dough into a rope (read: umbilical cord) and slowly lowers it to her colleague, who, not incidentally, happens to be almost seven feet tall

and extremely skinny. The dough is then guided gently past a fluorescent lamp before being passed to the two women on a lower level. This pair separates it into pieces on a conveyor belt. In order to generate more dough, Raqui sniffs a bouquet of flowers that kick-starts her hay fever (one of the women on the second-to-lowest level rotates a hand lever that operates a small fan, which apparently helps blow the pollen up Raqui's nose). As she sniffs, large tears roll down her imposing bulk through another small hole in the floor, and the steam that appears when they land causes the dough to rise. Raqui takes a puff on an inhaler, pauses a minute to regain her composure, and the process begins again.

Unlike *Mary's Cherries*, a rambunctious, absurdist romp involving the manufacture of maraschino cherries, *Dough* has a slightly menacing feel. The confines seem more suffocating and the women a little less cheerful, a little more resigned. But *Dough* is just as fast-moving and at least as engaging as the earlier work. Rottenberg is a masterful editor, cutting deftly from one room to another. The sound (produced in a recording studio) is also effective: We hear the buzz of a generator, the whir of a fan, the sizzle when the tears hit the hot floor. These seemingly throwaway details conspire to give the work the light touch of Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin (and indeed, Chaplin's classic *Modern Times*, 1936, seems like the most obvious precursor), while her use of props evokes Matthew Barney minus the ostentation.

Rottenberg's videos are projected within installations that reproduce elements of their sets. In the case of *Dough*, this means soul-sucking drop ceilings and fluorescent lights. In these close quarters, viewers are forced to think about their own relation to the women onscreen. Are we being put in the position of managers scrutinizing them for lapses in attention? The possibility leaves us feeling distinctly uneasy. Even as we delight in the antic choreography and jerry-built machinery, we are made uncomfortably aware of our own privileged status.

Two of Taylor's admirers, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (pioneers in the field of "motion study" whose efforts to Taylorize child rearing were immortalized in the 1948 book *Cheaper by the Dozen*), enthusiastically touted film as a way of measuring and monitoring work habits. Consciously exploiting our position as passive observers, *Dough* taps into the complex relationship between video technology and human labor, and the result is more than a little ominous. We leave knowing that the video will go on and on, without a break.

—Claire Barliant



Mika Rottenberg, *Dough* (detail), 2005–2006, two single channel videos, drop ceiling, fan, hot plate, linoleum floor, Sheetrock, and water, dimensions variable, 6 minutes.

The New York Times

ART REVIEW
July 16, 2004

ART REVIEW Summertime at P.S.1: Where Opposites Like Hands On/Hands Off Attract

By ROBERTA SMITH



Best of show, among the artists' projects, is Mika Rottenberg's hilarious video-installation "Mary's Cherries." The viewer sits in a small room whose walls are covered with plaster Dairy-Queen-dip curls (lifesize) and watching, on video, the goings-on in a stack of three similar rooms. Each is inhabited by a hefty woman of a certain age wearing a bright uniform suggestive of a fast-food worker or a washroom attendant, who sits pedaling on an exercise bike while performing tasks and passing things to the other women through holes in the floors.

Red fingernails are clipped, pounded into pulp, and passed along, only to regrow. Maraschino cherries are — pardon the expression — popped, then pounded and passed on. Hamburgers and damp washcloths arrive by conveyor belt and are distributed. As everything whirs along, each transaction is signaled by a call-out from one woman to the others above or below: Mary, Barbara, Rose. The sound is as good as the color. A strange mixture of sexual rite, beauty treatment and assembly-line labor is implied. If Matthew Barney's film epic doesn't come to mind — in particular the languid sylphlike flight attendants of "Cremaster 1" — you may be living in a different universe than I am.



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