

Down the Rabbit Hole or Through the Looking Glass?

Interview between Mika Rottenberg
and Daria de Beauvais

Daria de Beauvais — Architecture has a strong role in your practice—especially ceilings, which are also a prominent part of your exhibition at Palais de Tokyo. Do you see them as a metaphor? A metaphor of the glass ceiling, of our potentially hopeless futures...

Mika Rottenberg — The drop ceiling is such a mysterious space mainly because of the space above it, and what it's meant to cover: the veins, the muscles, or the inside of the building. Many of my videos are about the process and what goes on inside the walls or inside the factory. I also think it's quite trippy because it's a passive place that you look at when you lie on your back. The drop ceiling is a very oppressive suggestion of space and it is usually too low, in a way it psychologically pushes you down. Architecture has always been interesting for me from a sculptural, political and psychological perspective. In general I'm trying to find shape for systems that are imposing everything we do and the way we move. I look at architecture as a manifestation of a bigger system and of power dynamics. The psychology of space is also important. I also like to think of the body as architecture, a space you occupy, and see how it interacts with a space someone builds

for you, like an office, a home or a bank. I have always been interested in neglected or abandoned spaces, like waiting rooms or American plazas by the side of the road.

DB — Your carefully crafted architectures not only work on the exhibition space, but also on our feelings as human beings trapped in apparently endless issues.

MR — The installations that I create have a psychological effect. Whenever I install a big show I try to engage with the viewers' senses, to create a sense of physicality about where you are and how you walk through spaces. Everything is brought to a certain extreme, maybe the corridor is a little narrow and too long. Hopefully, you become curious, your senses are a little bit awakened and you start looking at every little thing more carefully.

DB — The boundary between public and private space is also very subtle in your works. How do you plan on such a limit?

MR — One of the first videos I made was with the back of a television—it was the late 1990s (before flat screens). I think it keeps reappearing as the back becomes the front. In the exhibition

at the Palais de Tokyo, I try to reverse the interior and the exterior, the façade and what is behind it. When you arrive you see this big wall with these things in it, it looks like it is the front of the show. Though once you go in you realize that the exhibition is actually inside and that what you've seen is the back of the works. In my videos, the characters or the performers are always very concentrated on what they are doing like if they were alone, but they are actually part of a bigger system which relates to this tension between private and public.

DB — How do you reinsert in the physical or “real” space, the specific space-time relationship that one can find in cinema?

MR — The difference between my videos and mainstream cinema is that they take place in space rather than time. Cinema is usually about events happening in time, in an hour and a half you compress hours, days, months, years... Time is rarely manipulated in my videos. You're witnessing real time. It's using “meanwhile” as a thread. Cinema really fucks with time; it makes it a flexible thing. I try to make space a flexible thing.

DB — What about the physical aspect of your work? The films are mesmerizing but your installations as well. When you push the revolving door or when you enter the hotel room in *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* (2014), you feel almost like you're entering someone's mind.

MR — Cinema has the ability to give shape to an internal space. It is fun to

play with it. In the installations I try to make that physical “walking through space” cinematic. I lead you through the space the way I want you to interact with it. When I design the spaces with the 3D on the computer, I really look at what you see when you move through. I make the space thinking as if I had a video camera.

DB — How do you manage to imagine such extremely elaborate scenarios while keeping a “homemade” quality to your works?

MR — I usually try to find that one thing that would lead me through. It can be a sound, a texture or a smell. Then I let my head loose and I think about all these scenarios, take a lot of walks and stare at the ceiling. The options are endless, but there is this internal truth to the piece that I try to follow so I don't get completely lost. Part of developing my works is finding that internal logic and knowing how to make decisions according to it. It's always an experiment: when I put them together I don't know if all these things are going to create meaning for the viewer or if it is just going to be like “what the fuck?”. I like the “what the fuck?” but it needs to be about other things besides it. It is not a stream of unconsciousness that I just put into a video in a surrealist way. But I think the unexpected juxtapositions make sense suddenly. I remember the first juxtaposition I thought about was burgers and parrots. I don't know why but they looked so good together! It's hard to get this effect, when suddenly two things create this new thing that is not familiar but also very familiar and tells you a lot about our culture.

DB — Reality is very strong in your works, but always distorted by a fictional world, while fantasy and humor vie with weirdness.

MR — I am always attracted to the real. For me being an artist is a way to negotiate with reality and try to insert yourself into those big systems. The difference with activism is that what you want is to make a great artwork, not necessarily to change a specific thing, and your starting point or direction is not always moral. Maybe interacting with big systems as an artist is a way to break some of their illusory smoothness and create transparency, like a strange kind of subjective journalism. I guess I have a weird imagination so I make things that are a little weird but also reality is so much weirder than any kind of fiction I would think about. For me it is fascinating to actually go to places where there is that tension and that weirdness. Like going to a pearl factory in *NoNoseKnows* (2015).

DB — Several of your works spin between the physical and the metaphysical—how do you explain this?

MR — I am interested in the spirit of things. It goes from the natural resources, the actual spirit of materials, combined with the spirits of the people who made whatever the object is; this is a funny spiritual reading of Marx. Through my work I try to awaken those spirits, release them if possible. For me that is part of art making, trying to capture this spirit into material but it's always going to fail as this spirit keeps on running away. I feel like a lot of my characters inhabit themselves, they have a strong

spiritual power in the way they inhabit their bodies. I'm attracted to people like that. The spirit sits in their body well. I'm also interested in cosmology and energy, how it is all the same from the macro to the micro. You can think about yourself as a universe. Planetary systems are as or more important or relevant to me than political systems.

DB — In *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* this cosmology is very obvious. You see a physical and a spiritual link between what happens in the bingo parlor and in the world in general.

MR — My work is usually about production, and *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* is about the production of luck. I was playing around with the idea of spirit and magnetic fields, and trying to break the normal cause and effect relation. The woman who falls asleep and wakes up is like the moon or the black hole, she has this massive energy. The one who calls the number is the sun; she has this other kind of energy. We are a galaxy: we have our own patterns and movement like a cosmic constellation. I was also interested in how our everyday little actions might affect big things like climate change, and the impossibility of really grasping that. You're sitting playing bingo in one part of the world and glaciers are melting on another part of the world. It is all happening in the same time and on the same globe. I just bring that together.

DB — What role do you give to the visitor in your video installations?

MR — I think about the five senses when making an artwork. If you take

care of all the senses, it tends to be that the visual would take care of itself!

DB — Is this low tech aspect and DIY aesthetics a means to master the whole chain of creation?

MR — I don't make everything myself. I work with a small team. The raw quality I try to keep brings up the question of ownership. For example, if you look at an object and trace everyone that worked on it and touched it, you would question your ownership of it. Industry covers it all up and it becomes this new object that is just yours. I try to make objects that look more subjective and which actually function. Also I spend a long time making the sets and they are usually in my studio for a while. They have this organic way of developing that probably adds to their DIY quality.

DB — Some of your immersive installations tend to bring us back into childhood—they could be considered as fictional playgrounds for the visitors.

MR — Kids are my biggest audience. My friends are always telling me their kids don't want to leave my video installations and it's the biggest compliment. My daughter helped me edit my last piece: at 3 years old she has a similar attention span to an average gallery visitor since there is so much to see, so she is a good indication when to cut. Not that I think the work should be geared to people's laziness, but it is a way to draw people in. I want my work to be layered and speak to many kinds of viewers; it is not elitist.

DB — Editing is a key gesture in your work

MR — I work on the installation with a small team for the sets and for the sound, but editing my videos is one thing I do completely by myself. Editing is when the shooting is completely finished, then I sit in the dark for a few months and recreate it. It is a very traditional sculptural process I think. It's a quest for form. I look at all the angles, flip it upside down and inside out.

DB — Your works in a way talk about alchemy—about how materials are transformed, or “divergent” bodies take power.

MR — Artists are probably contemporary alchemists. Transforming banal material into a kind of gold, that transformation is interesting. In *Squeeze* (2010), I was trying to play with that idea: how can you make a piece of art, that object that has cultural value and monetary value, from just a pile of trash? Taking situations that are really harsh and transforming them into fantastical places has something to do with alchemy. When I shoot in a working place, like with the women working in the pearl factory in *NoNoseKnows*, I question, and this is an important part of my process: am I taking advantage of these very harsh situations and turning them into a beautiful fiction? Of course, the people who work in factories don't enjoy the alchemical process, they stay trapped in these systems... But I know the people I film are excited to be part of a “movie” and it does provide a break and visibility for them. Part of the alchemy is also to

make things visible, bringing them to the surface.

DB — It occurred to me that the architectures of your works are metaphors of the human body, what do you think?

MR — It is not so much like a parallel but an extension of the human body. Like in magic, you are able to control the external world with your mind. There is no separation between external and internal.

DB — The human body also appears in a fragmented and humorous way in your works.

MR — The notion of fragmentation is very relevant today. Our bodies are broken down: your fingers do something; your eyes do something else, while your mind is somewhere else. You almost have a hundred arms, doing all these things in different places. Everything can be packaged and commodified. That's hyper capitalism. You can rent out your smile; sell your voice or one of your kidneys. I think this fragmentation is about where our bodies end, and the consequences of our actions. Our bodies are being extended because of technology and hyper-economy.

DB — Experiencing your works make us very alert about our own bodies; as you said "I like to think about a body as a tool, a thing that is there to serve you and which sometimes misbehaves."¹

MR — Maybe it is about control again. I like to think about the body that way.

Your body is something you own since we sadly live in a time where everything is about what you own and what you can buy. The body is a natural resource. You do use it as a tool but it doesn't always obey. I am always interested in the slips in the machine, the wheels of the machine which don't go so smooth, and which squeak. That's more interesting than a well-oiled machine.

DB — Your films are mainly inhabited by women. Men are rare. What is the place of men in your work?

MR — There are some men in my works! But I am a woman and it's about alter egos. My alter ego is a seven-foot-tall, six-hundred-pound woman. The feminine from a masculine point of view has been over shot in culture, so I am interested in making works with a feminine aspect from a feminine point of view. I would want a gender fluid world where there are no women vs. men, and the feminine and masculine are elements that you can choose/use as you wish. We are not there yet, and then there is still biology and hormones that control your behavior... How annoying!

DB — Can we say that your work is feminist?

MR — If I go back to the idea of labor, feminism and art, the work of women used to be hidden in the domestic sphere. Now it's hidden in industry. Women in China or in South East Asia make so much of the world's crap. There is still need for visibility and art is a good tool for that. So maybe if the feminism of the 1970s was about showing

women's work by exposing the domestic sphere, now it's about exposing women in the industrial sphere.

DB — You have said: "I choose people because of who they are and how they carry themselves; I make the work around them."² Indeed the heroines of your films have bodies deploying various physical eccentricities, how do you cast them?

MR — My early works (for example *Tropical Breeze*, 2004; *Mary's Cherries*, 2004; *Dough*, 2006) were a lot about the characters. I was working around them because they were smaller films with no budget. The space was that of the Internet, connecting with someone that already offers her body for hire and then "employing" them. I was bringing reality in my films through this relationship. When I met Queen Raqui or Tall Kat, I wanted to bring their space into my space and mixing fiction in reality. Now my works are not about a single person anymore and I don't necessarily always cast in this way. In *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*, the announcer is the real woman who worked there but in *NoNoseKnows*, I brought Bunny, a 6.5ft-tall blond fantasy wrestler, to China. I'm still interested in casting people for what they are and not telling them how to behave. I set up the situation, and put people and material together. Then I say "Action!" and everybody does their thing.

DB — Your works have been defined as "Taylorist fabulations"³ and appear as metaphors of global capitalism. Don't you think that it also defines Art in itself?

MR — All my works are self-reflexive, they are systems that question the systems. They are systems that destroy their own system. As much as our economy is now based in a way on abstraction (intellectual property, stock markets, etc.) and as much as we're going more and more towards the virtual, we are more than ever obsessed with making objects, there are so many disposable products being made, stuff that gets to be used for a second and then goes to trash, so maybe I try to give these sad objects a second life.

DB — Workplaces are at the heart of your universe—how did you get so interested in their fiction potential?

MR — I was always interested in what work is and the differences between work, labor and play. The very basic action of taking formless substance and giving them meaning and shape, organizing and cataloguing, that very human activity is one of the bases for my thought. I think I grew up with the myth of work as a value and the images of socialist propaganda, like a very strong woman working in the fields. It was about work as a value and a power, the strong body at work as being a value. It is not the case today, especially in the USA, where

¹ "Mika Rottenberg in discussion with Christopher Bedford (*Sneeze*)," in *Mika Rottenberg. The Production of Luck*, (New York, Waltham, MA: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in association with the Rose Art Museum, 2014), 187.

² "Mika Rottenberg in discussion with Christopher Bedford (*Dough*)," in *Mika Rottenberg. The Production of Luck*, *op. cit.*, 125.

³ Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Mika Rottenberg's Video Spaces," in *Mika Rottenberg. The Production of Luck*, *op. cit.*, 114.

the less you work (especially with your body) the more successful you are considered. This nostalgic image of labor as value is something I explore.

DB — How did you add “real” workers to your films?

MR — *Squeeze* was shot in my studio in Harlem, in a lettuce farm in Arizona and a rubber farm in Kerala, in South of India; I worked with local people in each venue. This is true about my works since 2010. In the bingo too, for *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*, they were kind of workers in the luck industry.

DB — How did you get interested in the pearl workers for *NoNoseKnows*?

MR — I saw something about it on TV years ago, and it seemed so crazy. It was exactly the kind of object I would be interested in. I love the idea of a process that is based on irritation (cultured pearl is made by inserting an irritant and stimulating the mussels to make a pearl). It was so connected to my work for many reasons, like this combination between biology and industry. My work is about creation of value. Pearls used to be a rare thing and now you can just agitate a biological process, and expedite everything. By doing this you shoot yourself in the foot, because too many pearls are produced and they are not worth that much. Inserting something that creates agitation, which then creates a valuable beautiful object, reminds me of the art process. Hopefully art is the “agitator” that you can insert into the system to agitate it or disturb it.

DB — Do you see the visitor as a kind of voyeur—accessing what is usually hidden, the production line in action for instance?

MR — I think there is an element of voyeurism. Because you enter the space, you are also part of the work so this relationship between the exhibitionist and the voyeur is symbiotic, like between the master and the bondsman. Also maybe the viewer helps me to see the work. In a way I travel through the viewer’s eyes to be able to see it.

DB — In a way, you empower the visitor and frustrate him/her at the same time—some of your works being hard to access such as *Fried Sweat* (2008) or *Lips (Study#3)* (2016). Is it a way to let one’s imagination take over?

MR — Maybe it is like giving this little peephole into a world you can’t really enter, like wanting to enter the screen but wanting to keep the safe distance too. Again that’s the power of cinema. That border between yourself and the screen, being able to choose if you enter or not is key for the cinema to work. We live in this world where we work with these incredible machines and most people have no idea how they work. I think the mystery is important; there is a lot of mystery to everything around us...

Daria de Beauvais is a curator at the Palais de Tokyo. She curated Mika Rottenberg’s solo show.