



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**



CAN 12,99 \$CA - USA 13,50 \$US
DOM 8,90 € - PDR CONT 9,80 €
BEL, ESP, ITA 8,50 €
CH 15 FS - MAROC 80 MAD



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MIKA
ROTTENBERGle réel
et le travail

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MIKA ROTTENBERG

le réel et le travail

Nicolas Bourriaud

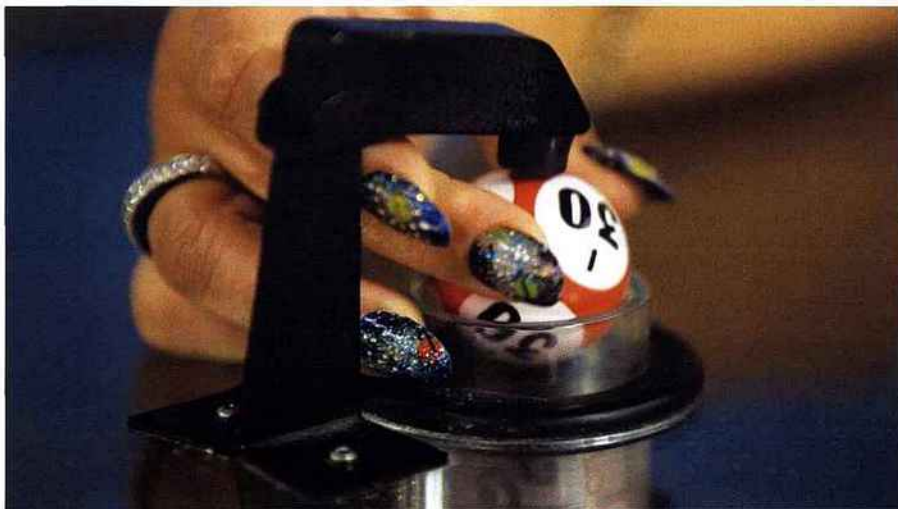


C'est un fait : l'économie de marché généralisée et l'économie numérique ont généré de nouvelles formes de socialisation et d'organisation, particulièrement dans le monde du travail. C'est un fait aussi que les artistes ont souvent tenté d'indexer l'art sur le Réel. Mika Rottenberg construit des scénographies 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 *Radicaire* : 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)

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Venice Biennale Features Mika Rottenberg's 'NoNoseKnows'

BY RAOUL BERGHOFF MAY 11, 2019



The artist Mika Rottenberg. Pearl cultivation is the focus of her exhibit at the Venice Biennale.
Cecily Kolbrough 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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MAY 2015

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IN CONVERSATION

WHO IS
LUTZ
BACHER?

*Fiona
Hall*
Marking
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**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.”

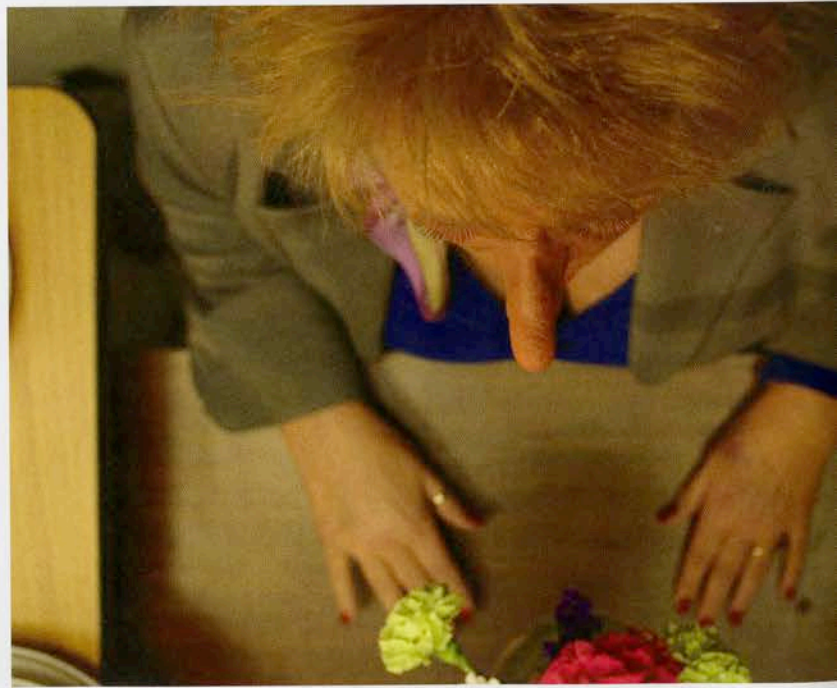
Mika Rottenberg
in her Tivoli,
New York,
studio, 2015.



“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.”



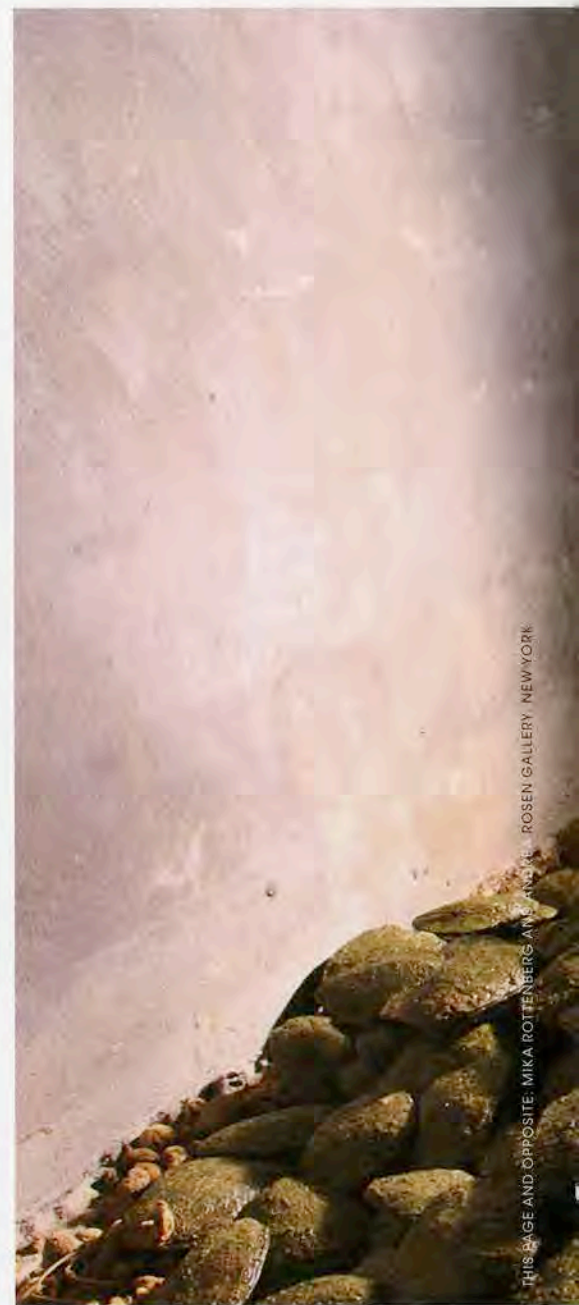
MIKA ROTTENBERG AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY



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.

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

"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."



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: MIKA ROTTENBERG AND ANDRÉ ROSEN 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, "Nympheas," 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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Sebastian Smees can be reached at ssmees@globe.com.

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.

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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!).

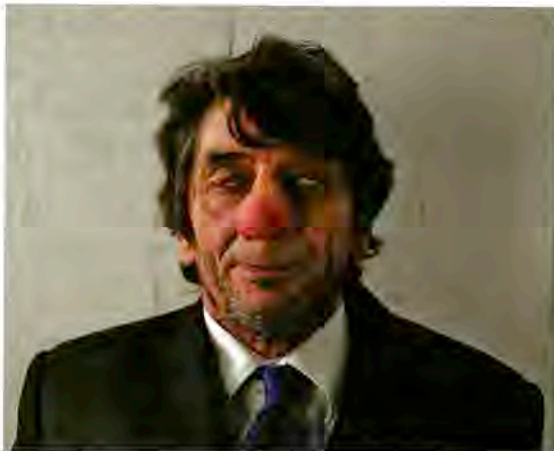
I can’t tell you, by way of example, what tremendous, futile labor went into that last paragraph which, to me, and probably to you, makes Rottenberg’s work sound duller than doing the dishes. But believe me, when you see her work, when you see what invention, what grossness, what beauty, and brilliance 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 Sneeze,” 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

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.



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. ✪



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.

ARTFORUM

JANUARY 2011

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

INTERNATIONAL
APRIL 2006

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 whirl 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.