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PALAIS DE TOKYO : MIKA ROTTENBERG
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ERNEST PIGNON-ERNEST
DOSSIER : LE THÉÂTRE DOCUMENTAIRE
SALON DE MONTROUGE **EUGÈNE GREEN**
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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.

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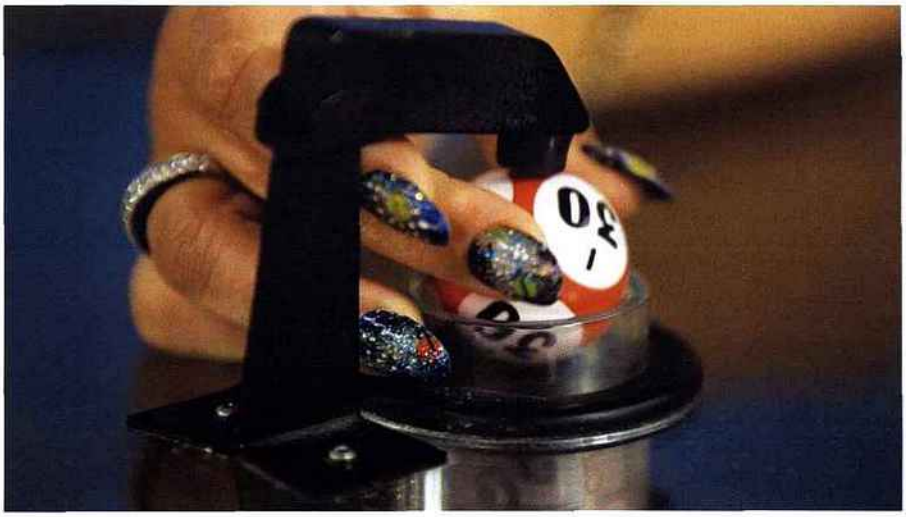
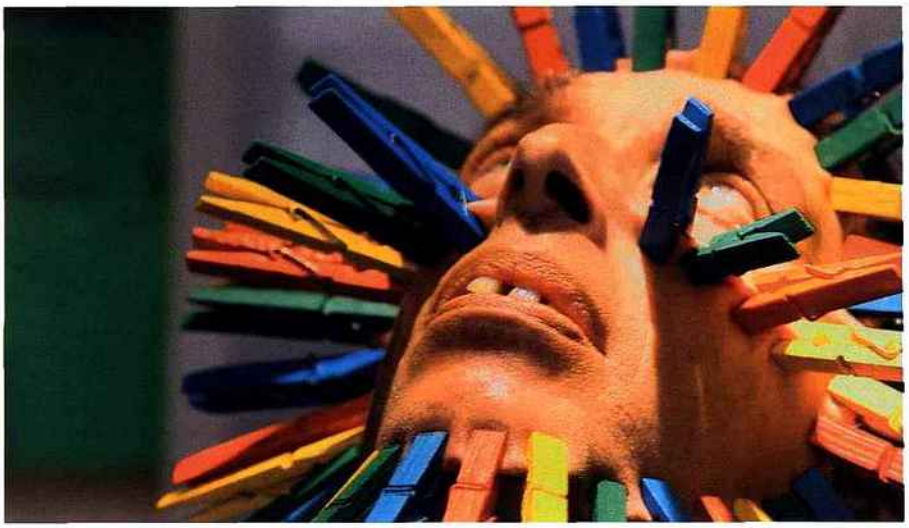
■ Dès l'entrée de l'exposition, les visiteurs de la biennale du Whitney de 1993 prirent de plein fouet les images, floues, d'une scène se déroulant la nuit dans une rue de Los Angeles. Cette vidéo, qui représentait le tabassage d'un Afro-Américain nommé Rodney King par la police, n'était pas une œuvre 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'entretiendront 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 20e 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 éloignée 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 excrétions 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 chevelures 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, bodybuildeuses 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).
Video 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 19e 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 accomplirons-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 a* 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 chanels*

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(1) Dans cet ouvrage, paru en 1978 aux Éditions de Minuit, Robert Linhart, membre de la Gauche prolétarienne, raconte son expérience d'établi, c'est-à-dire d'intellectuel qui a choisi de s'établir comme ouvrier dans une usine.
(2) Entretien avec Eleanor Heartney, *artpress*, n° 377, avril 2011.
(3) Slavoj Žižek, *le Spectre rôde toujours*, Nautilus.

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

Mika Rottenberg
Né en/*born* 1976 à/*in* Buenos Aires, Argentine
Expositions personnels 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 sprit 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

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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 perverse 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 Žizek, *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)

Down the Rabbit Hole or Through the Looking Glass?

Interview between Mika Rottenberg and Daria de Beauvais

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

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

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

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

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

MR — One of the first videos I made was with the back of a television—it was the late 1990s (before flat screens). I think it keeps reappearing as the back becomes the front. In the exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, I try to reverse the interior and the exterior, the façade and what is behind it. When you arrive you see this big wall with these things in it, it looks like it is the front of the show. Though once you go in you realize that the exhibition is actually inside and that what you've seen is the back of the works. In my videos, the characters or the performers are always very concentrated on what they are doing like if they were alone, but they are actually part of a bigger system which relates to this tension between private and public.

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

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

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

MR — Cinema has the ability to give shape to an internal space. It is fun to play with it. In the installations I try to make that physical "walking through space" cinematic. I lead you through the space the way I want you to interact with it. When I design the spaces with the 3D on the computer, I really look at what you see when you move through. I make the space thinking as if I had a video camera.

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

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

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

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

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

MR — I am interested in the spirit of things. It goes from the natural resources, the actual spirit of materials, combined with the spirits of the people who made whatever the object is; this is a funny spiritual reading of Marx. Through my work I try to awaken those spirits, release them if possible. For me that is part of art making, trying to capture this spirit into material but it's always going to fail as this spirit keeps on running away. I feel like a lot of my characters inhabit themselves, they have a strong spiritual power in the way they inhabit their bodies. I'm attracted to people like that. The spirit sits in their body well. I'm also interested in cosmology and energy, how it is all the same from the macro to the micro. You can think about yourself as a universe. Planetary systems are as or more important or relevant to me than political systems.

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

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

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

MR — I think about the five senses when making an artwork. If you take care of all the senses, it tends to be that the visual would take care of itself!

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

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

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

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

DB — Editing is a key gesture in your work

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

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

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

make things visible, bringing them to the surface.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DB — Can we say that your work is feminist?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1 "Mika Rottenberg in discussion with Christopher Bedford *(Sneeze)*," in *Mika Rottenberg. The Production of Luck*, (New York, Waltham, MA: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in association with the Rose Art Museum, 2014), 187.
2 "Mika Rottenberg in discussion with Christopher Bedford *(Dough)*," in *Mika Rottenberg. The Production of Luck*, *op. cit.*, 125.
3 Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Mika Rottenberg's Video Spaces," in *Mika Rottenberg. The Production of Luck*, *op. cit.*, 114.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Venice Biennale Features Mika Rottenberg's 'NoNoseKnows'

The artist Mika Rottenberg. Pearl cultivation is the focus of her exhibit at the Venice Biennale.
Casey Kelbaugh 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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#1

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."

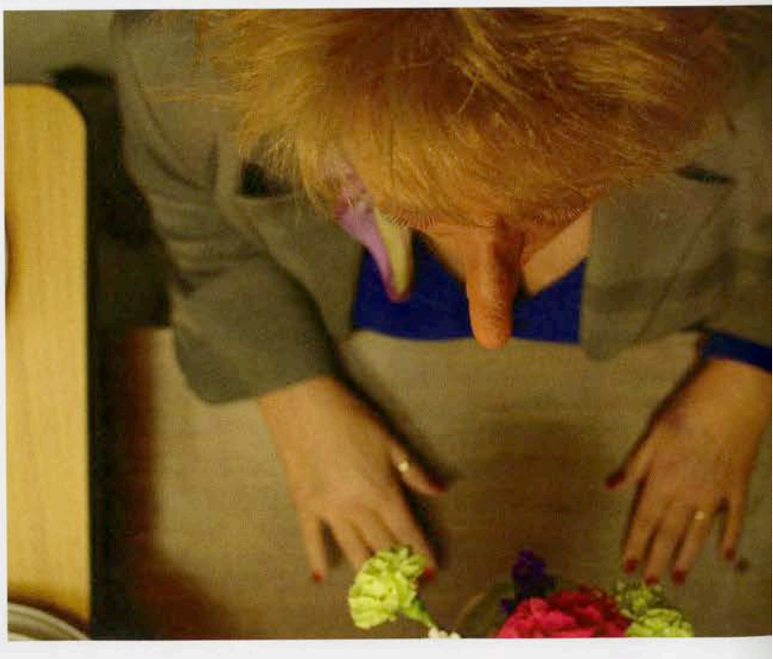
Mika Rottenberg is sitting at a computer in the bedroom of the Upstate New York home she shares with her partner and toddler, a rustic and secluded space filled with bright drawings and low-to-the-ground furniture. In the winter months, her desktop stands in for a high-ceilinged barn studio across the 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



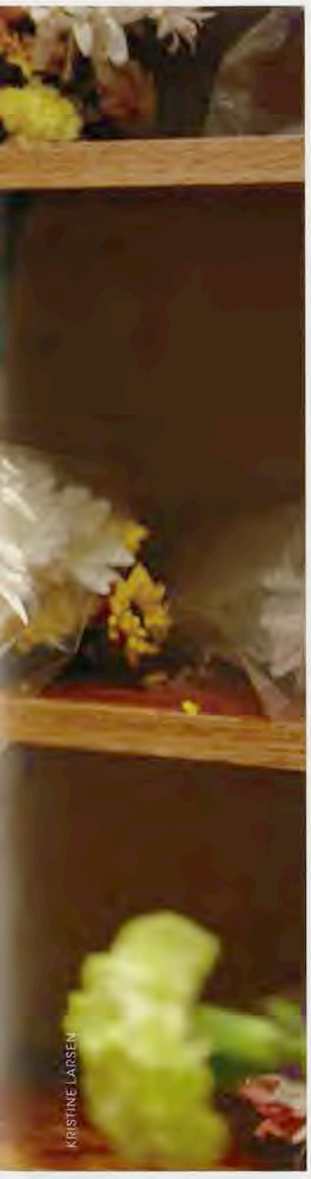
Born in Argentina and raised in Tel Aviv, Rottenberg has over the past decade and a half produced a colorful and intensely visceral body of work, operating in an immersive multimedia approach with film at its center. Her videos are often displayed among sculptural objects or in specially built environments; 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 ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

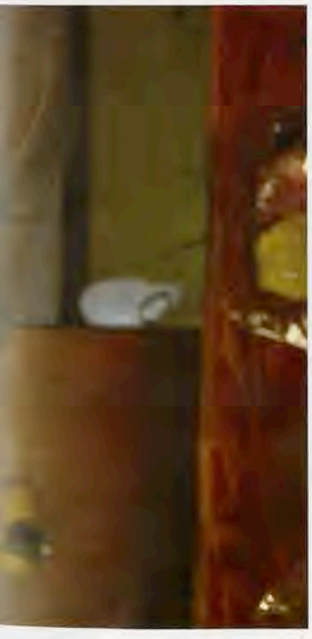
Stills from a rough cut of *NoNoseKnows*, 2015.



KRISTINE LARSEN

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

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



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

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

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

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

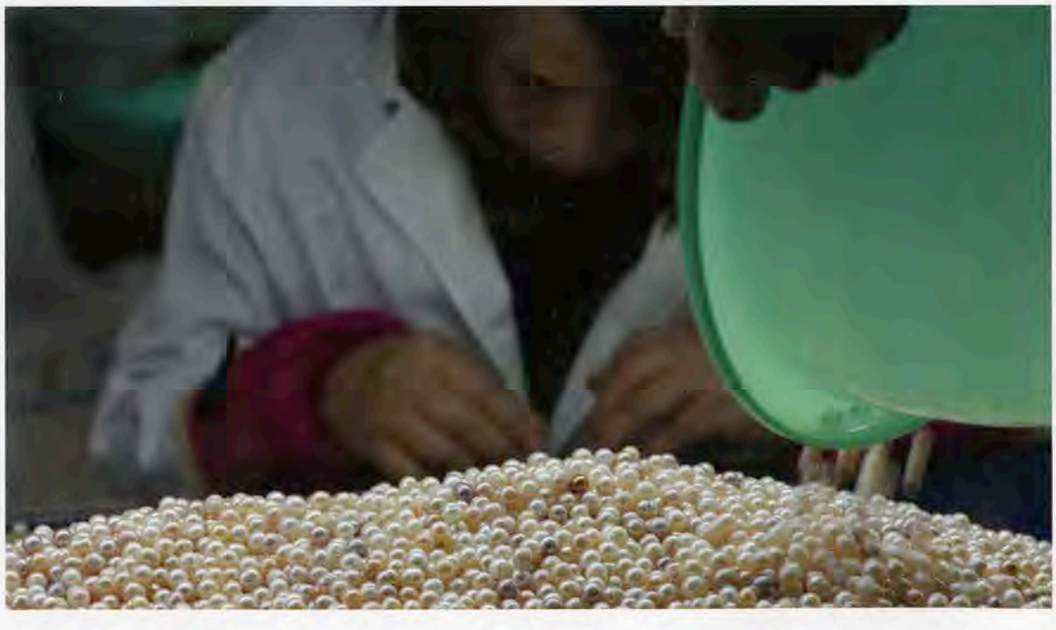
Describing the arc of her video output, Rottenberg turns to spatial metaphors. This most recent work in progress, she says, "has the overall structure of parallels or mirroring: between the buildings and the oysters, or the pearls and Bunny's allergy. The pieces always have a basic shape, but in an abstract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

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

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

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

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: MIKA ROTTENBERG AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY



Stills from *NoNoseKnows*, 2015.

The Boston Globe

Violence, politics expressed at Venice Biennale

By Sebastian Smee GLOBE STAFF
MAY 09, 2015

[EXCERPT]

…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.)…

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

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'

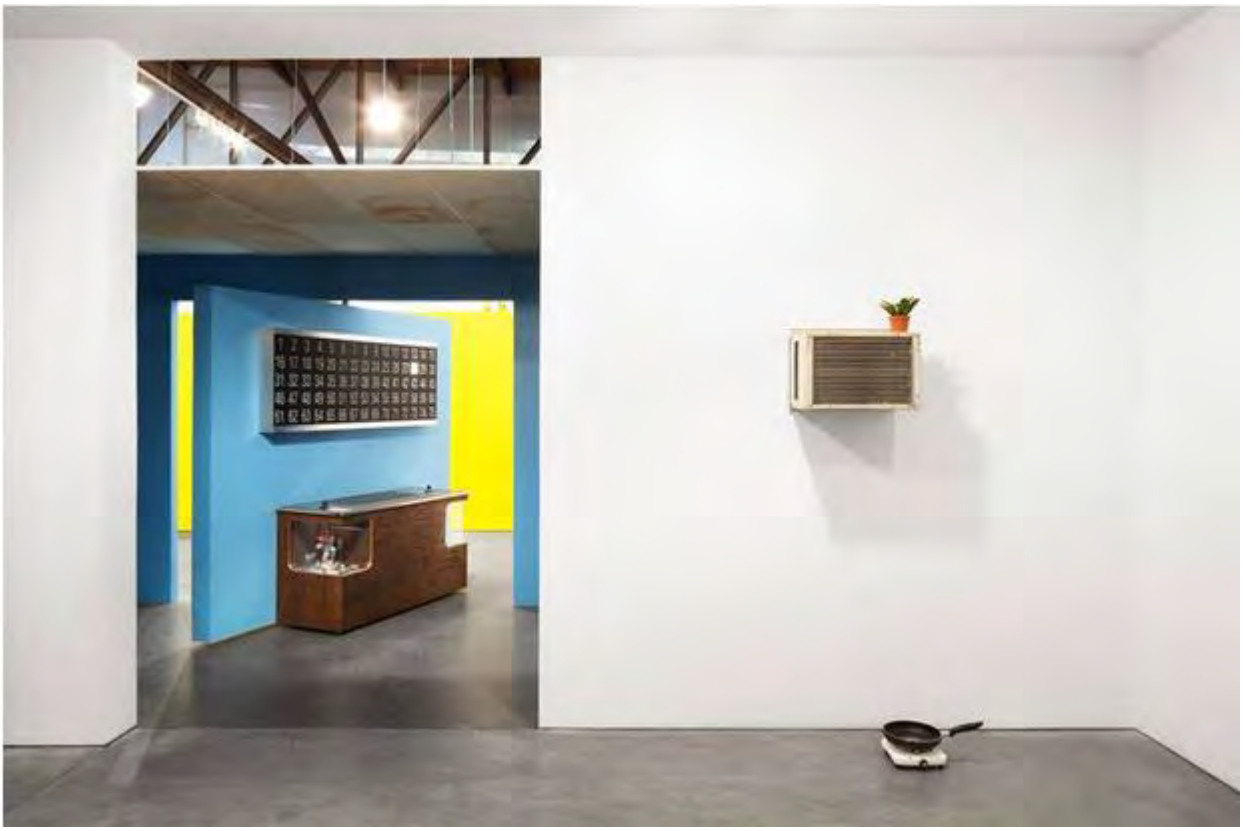
GUERNICA / a magazine of art & politics

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.

BLOUINARTINFO

Mika Rottenberg Games the System

BY SCOTT INDRISEK I MAY 05, 2014

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 bizarro 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.

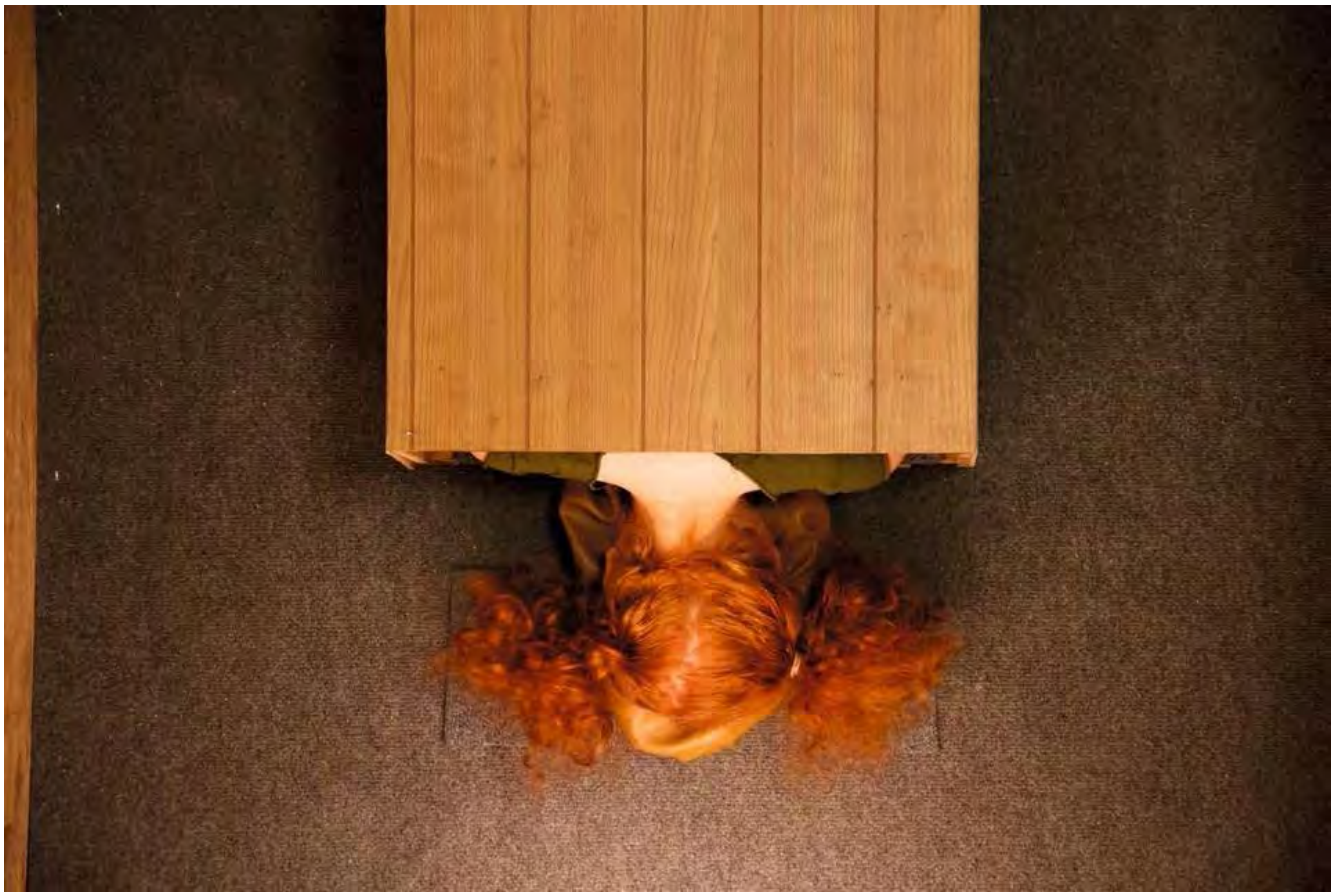
Most of the actors in the film are ordinary bingo hall habitues that Rottenberg met during her research phase, with notable exceptions. The "electrical conductor" in the video is actually a niche performer from the UK, Gary "Stretch" Turner, who holds the Guinness Record for putting clothespins on the 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."

The Boston Globe Theater & art

ART REVIEW

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

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 22, 2014



ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

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

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

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

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

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

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

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

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

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

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham 781-736-3434.
http://www.braindeis.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!).

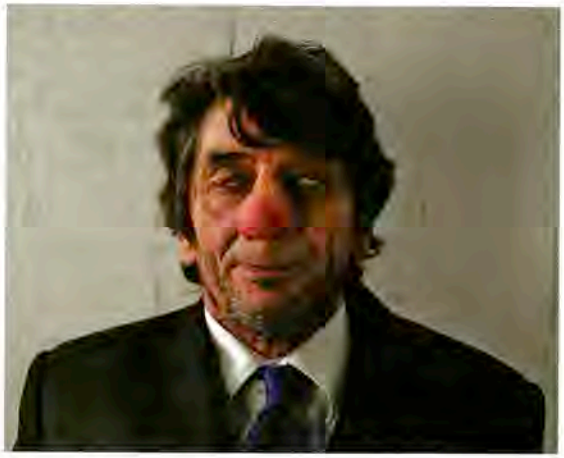
I can’t tell you, by way of example, what tremendous, futile labor went into that last paragraph which, to me, and probably to you, makes Rottenberg’s work sound duller than doing the dishes. But believe me, when you see her work, when you see what invention, what grossness, what beauty, and brilliance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

STOCKHOLM

Mika Rottenberg

MAGASIN 3

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



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

The farcically cyclical structure of *Sneeze* is embedded in all of Rottenberg's work; she is fixated on producing the pointlessly mundane—whether 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 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 carny 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

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 ricketiness 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, unconfinable 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 instrumental 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.

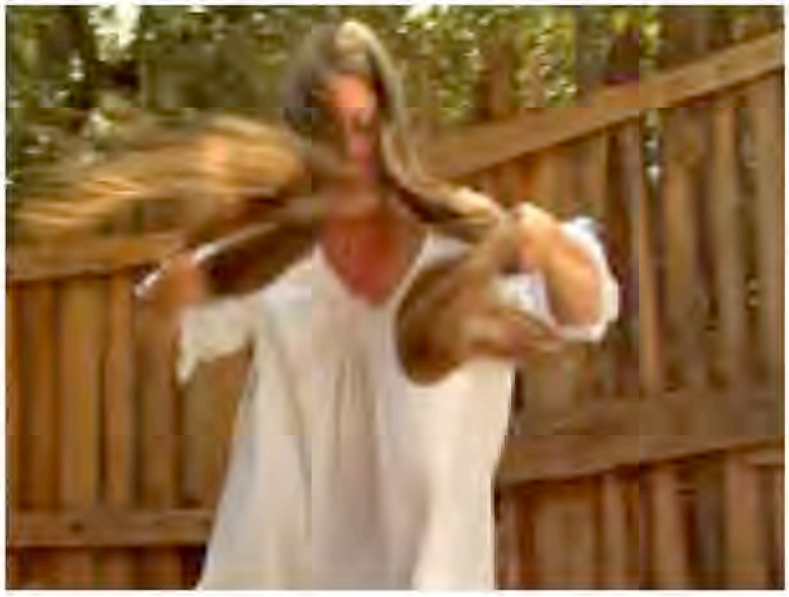
Mika Rottenberg, *Squeeze*, 2010, still from a color video, 20 minutes.

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



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