Mika Rottenberg’s Video Spaces
Julia Bryan-Wilson

“Space is a practiced place.”
— Michel de Certeau

“Geography matters to gender.”
— Doreen Massey

ceilings
In *Dough*, Mika Rottenberg’s seven-minute video installation from 2005-6, long tubes of stretchy dough pass between hands through vertically stacked architectural spaces, as women at various “work stations” feed the stuff through orifices in the floor and coax it down from crude holes cut in ceiling tiles [Fig. 1]. *Mary’s Cherries*, from 2004, likewise features the transport of substances through small round passageways in floors and ceilings, as female workers wearing yellow visors transform fingernails into maraschino cherries through a series of manipulations and physical techniques [Fig. 2]. And in *Squeeze* (2010), a woman produces bright liquid that streams to the room beneath her as she is compressed on both sides by a creaking device, one of many moments in which the “above” and the “below” are connected units. Throughout her practice, Rottenberg provokes us to look up and imagine the ceiling not as a limit or a boundary, but as a porous membrane through which objects are delivered and scatological bodily emissions are conducted [Fig. 3].

This is true, too, of her walls, as they become permeable skins where a wagging tongue might protrude to await its periodic misting, or
where arms from another region of the world might abruptly appear, eager to be massaged [Fig. 4]. Rottenberg's architectures do not merely organize local spaces, but move beyond their self-contained coherence to become portals by which seemingly remote places are suddenly understood as adjacent, linked by the procedures of global capitalism. In her videos, Rottenberg creates specific environments in which her characters and their actions are sited, often building elaborate sets that include carefully designed components such as textured walls and patterned carpets, movable compartments and connected chambers. Within these scenes, figures proceed with their proscribed activities, duties, and labors according to temporal cues that remain somewhat opaque, but seem to be triggered by shifts in the built environment: work is frequently redirected as partitions slide open and shut.

In this regard, Rottenberg activates Michel de Certeau's sense of space as produced by "vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it." Approaching space with a feminist lens, she proposes that these vectors, velocities, and movements primarily congeal around the efforts of female body and its byproducts. As feminist geographer Doreen Massey proposes, "gender relations vary over space." She writes, "From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood."

To augment her gendered spatializing, Rottenberg constructs site-specific assemblages to contain, display, and frame her videos, ones that extend recognizable features from her somewhat otherworldly scenarios out into the literal gallery space to be encountered by the viewer. Though the criticism on Rottenberg's work has tended to account mainly for the content of her videos, not least their feminist and Marxist overtones and their Taylorist fabulations, the artist also critically foregrounds the form of video installation as a special situation of spectating. By highlighting the spatial conditions in which she both produces and circulates her work, she critiques the universalizing conventions of what de Certeau calls the continual rehearsal and practice of space, accounting for the unevenness and dislocations wrought by gender, race, nation, and class. Viewers watching Dough, for instance, at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, would find themselves under drop ceiling tiles that visually rhyme with those in the video [Fig. 5]. Rottenberg invites us to consider every surface within the space of reception. She has installed linoleum floors and walls with thick raised lick-marks, cobbled together rustic wooden forts (Cheese, 2008), gouged out peepholes (Fried Sweat, 2008), and stacked boxes within a modified shipping crate (Tropical Breeze, 2004) [Fig. 6, Fig. 7]. Rather than being projected in darkened rooms or played on monitors that are placed unobtrusively within an undifferentiated viewing area of the gallery, in many instances her videos unfold you, inviting you to peer through, to duck under, to crouch down and go inside.

With these material continuities, Rottenberg intimately situates her spectating subjects in proximity to the filmed bodies and their efforts on screen. "Are we being put in the position of managers scrutinizing [the characters] for lapses of attention?" queried one art critic, noting how Rottenberg's videos make us "uncomfortably aware of our own privileged status." We are made alert of our bodies as they are sometimes forced into less-than-comfortable viewing positions, even as the images captivate the eye and ear; as Efrat Mishori asserts, "To watch Rottenberg's works is to stumble into them; we are carried away by an oscillating force field and begin to move with it." To watch her videos is not only to enter into her intricate and absorbing narratives, but also to be made aware of the floor you are standing on, the walls that surround you, and the ceiling that looms overhead. In contrast to Brian O'Doherty's assertion that the ceiling is often effaced within modern art, in Rottenberg's videos ceilings (as tangible barriers and as metaphors for the limits of women's upward mobility, as in the so-called "glass ceiling") are particular places of concern. As O'Doherty wrote in his well-known argument against the apparent neutrality of the "white cube" gallery:

We don't look at the ceiling much now. In the history of indoor looking up, we rank low. Other ages put plenty up there to look at. Pompeii proposed, among other things, that more women than men looked
at the ceiling. The Renaissance ceiling locked its painted figures into geometric cells. ... With electric light, the ceiling became an intensely cultivated garden of fixtures, and modernism simply ignored it. The ceiling lost its role in the ensemble of the total room.8

Both within the internal logic of her tightly paced video-spaces, and within the built environments in which we view them, Rotenberg pays attention to all facets of the practice of seeing art within the “ensemble of the total room.”

ROOMS

From its earliest days, video installation has had a long history of incorporating viewers within various settings, providing a range of aesthetic and ideological contexts for reception. Nam June Paik embedded screens within unconventional or atmospheric surroundings, as in his TV Garden from 1974. Dan Graham’s pieces in the 1970s with multiple screens and dividers implicated the viewing subject within larger networks of surveillance and feedback, as well as reflected upon “the social order of public/private space and the psychological sense of self.”7 Mona Hatoum’s exploration of the visceral boundaries between inside/outside in her endoscopic-technology piece, Corps étranger (1994), stands the viewer inside an enclosed cylinder evocative of a medical imaging device looking down at a projected image as the camera moves inside the artist’s body, producing a relay between what is seen and how it is seen [Fig. 8].

These concerns with the spatial, dimensional, corporeal aspects of video display—video’s sculptural effects—locate it as a medium at a remove from both the televisual and the cinematic models to which it is often compared. Thus, while Rotenberg’s work has clear resonances with the animation of Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmajer, with his distortions of scale and merging of the organic and inorganic, her emphasis on unexpected architectural openings can also be fruitfully compared to New York Post-Minimal artist Gordon Matta-Clark. Matta-Clark orchestrated architectural interventions such as Conical Intersect (1975), a spiraling cut through two derelict buildings in Paris which re-oriented exterior and interior [Fig. 9]. And in Splitting (1974), he sliced a suburban house down the middle. Both Rotenberg and Matta-Clark reconsider how architecture demarcates spaces, and they seek to scramble the lines between public and private, exposed and enclosed. In Rotenberg’s spliced-together edifices, the public/private divide is further freighted with gendered notions about the domain of the domestic as “a woman’s place.”

Rotenberg’s rooms appear crowded, but they are efficient; by this I mean that every element within them serves a purpose. A crudely customized wooden holder might contain a spray bottle, conveniently at the ready to spritz waiting appendages. Small potted plants operate as signifiers of bare-bones “decoration” while also referring to personalized touches in office cubicles. Seemingly superfluous actions are productive, as when sparkling dust rubbed off a woman’s face solidifies into the compact circles of blush. Rotenberg is keenly attuned to how furniture and interior design—as well as dress and ornamentation like artificial fingernails—can powerfully signify gender and class, how quickly and effectively they can visually register economic status [Fig. 10]. Stained tiles, popcorn-style interior textures, pink and sea-foam green uniforms: these are trappings of the feminized working classes who perform services (i.e., rituals of grooming, bodily upkeep, and maintenance) as well as manufacture goods. Rotenberg has exhibited fragments of walls—enthralled “Textures”—as freestanding sculptures [Fig. 11]; their coarsely speckled surfaces bear a resemblance to Piero Manzoni’s achromes, the obsessive accretions of Yayoi Kusama, and the prickly wax-and-resin pieces of Lynda Benglis [Fig. 12].

In Rotenberg’s universe, production consists of low-tech but strenuous manual labor such as rolling, kneading, clipping, chopping, or excreting (i.e., crying and sweating). The bodies that undertake these tasks demand periodic care, as when workers from disparate places on the globe harvesting lettuce and rubber in Square stop and plunge their hands through the ground to receive applications of lotion by women who, widening the circuit of bodily miniaturizations, have their own asses occasionally misted. (Those asses are seated in cavities in the wall and protrude comically into a separate room.) The mingling and mutual constitution of her

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8. Mona Hatoum, Corps étranger, 1994
9. Gordon Matta-Clark, documentation of Conical Intersect, 1975
10. Still from Mary’s Cherries, 2004
11. Texture 1 & 3, 2013
12. Lynda Benglis, For Bob, 1971
spheres of service and production—however absurd the act of care or useless the final product—render them relational and interdependent.

Like the organs of a body, Rottenberg's spaces are dynamic and interconnected as they circulate matter to be processed. They form a system, and it is a system in which the viewer is understood to play a role, even if that role is primarily that of a voyeur who stands outside the action beyond the threshold of the “fourth wall.” Her constructed little ersatz factories, with bodies and furniture and equipment that are frittered neatly, just so, inside of them, are filled to near-bursting [Fig. 13]. Every detail is plotted, with objects and actors and rooms niftily nested together to suggest a dollhouse or diorama. As with the sculptures of Joseph Cornell that imbue everyday, found objects with fascination by virtue of being carefully selected, arranged, and framed, Rottenberg’s spaces are minor miracles of curation and compression. Like Cornell, too, she exhibits whimsy at the same time that she gestures to much darker registers, including alienation, isolation, and ceaseless toil; the sense of endlessness is especially strong given the looping nature of her moving-image work.

boxes

Rottenberg’s spaces are forged not through actual construction but through editing; our sense of how the rooms flow together is structured by the seamless flow of the video, as cuts between discrete areas are sutured within the viewer’s mind to create a credible, if incongruous, architectural whole [Fig. 14]. Though her fabricated sets do not operate the way they appear to, her meticulous sense of spatial continuity generates what feels intuitively to be a complete order. Yet it is an uncanny and unsettling order, one that is continually ruptured and reconstituted, by turns familiar and incomprehensible. Echoing a Surrealist ethos as well as the disjunctions that attend to late capitalism, Rottenberg presses together the peculiar and the mundane. Take the scenario for Tropical Breeze: a bodybuilder creates wet wipes by swabbing her sweat on tissues. She herself is fueled by an energy drink that helps create the tissues “lemon scent.” An assistant whisks the tissues from a pile on the floor with her extraordinarily agile

feet [Fig. 15]. The brisk tempo and florid colors of the video, mimicking that of an advertisement, establish this scenario as a paradigm of good-natured organization, in which no efforts, not even sweat, are wasted, but rather packaged to be bought and consumed. (In fact, Rottenberg tried to sell boxes of these completed wet wipes on eBay, expanding out from art world economies into other circuits of exchange, but she did not find any takers.)

Rottenberg has been compared to David Cronenberg, Jean Cocteau, and (most insistently) Matthew Barney; but she is also in dialogue with feminist predecessors such as the work of British conceptual artist Helen Chadwick. Chadwick created “architectural sound sculptures” like Model Institution (1982), a piece that reproduced governmental booths such as those found in postal, social security, and public housing offices and played audio about the nature of bureaucracy, control, and helplessness. A cohort of kindred contemporary video artists might include Los Angeles duo Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, who in their collaboration together explored performance-based video fictions, and Chicago-based Amie Siegel, who in her 2013 video Provenance traced Le Corbusier furniture on a backwards journey from a well-appointed townhouse in West London to its original site in Chandigarh, India [Fig. 16].

Siegel then sold her 40-minute video at auction and documented its sale in a separate film, Lot 248, acknowledging her own place within markets of art and design. This self-reflexive move recalls Rottenberg: a major component of Squeeze—one that conceptually frames how the piece is witnessed—is a large photograph of art dealer Mary Boone holding a condensed, quasi-minimalist cube of broken-up blush, lettuce, and rubber, which is the output of the machinations portrayed within the video [Fig. 17]. The cube, which resembles ground-up car parts mixed with digested flesh, was shipped to Grand Cayman to be held in perpetuity; the certificate of shipping accompanies the piece as part of its documentation. Linda Williams, in an excellent text, describes Squeeze as “a critique of commodification that is also a surreal imitation of commodification,” adding that “it is the brilliant culmination of Rottenberg’s ongoing exploration of female labor on grotesquely eloquent assembly lines.”

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9 Linda Williams, "On Squeeze," in Mika Rottenberg, p. 185.
In Cheese, Rottenberg has also produced a version of a pastoral landscape that gestures to life somewhat distant from this consumer world, though it, too, has its routines, its repairs, its end-product. Long-haired, white-gowned maidens awaken from their sleep, unwinding their hair from hanging loops that keep it out of the way during the night. Their life on the farm commences when one of the women sneezes out a bunny. She and her companions spend their day shepherding animals and tending to their tresses, only to have the cycle begin again with the sneeze and its resultant discharged bunny. (Sneezed-out rabbits are also at the center of Rottenberg’s video Sneeze, 2008.) Conventionally private moments of self-care are collectivized and made public and, in this instance, productive, as hair is milked and used to make large blocks of cheese [Fig. 18]. As this brief description indicates, Rottenberg wields humor strategically, as a defamiliarizing device, injecting funny moments to interrupt bleak or banal moments.

Rottenberg’s largely but not exclusively female cast, one that is racially diverse, has been widely commented upon (she has pointed out that if her cast were all male, it would likely not be considered remarkable). Her concern with gendered work, with the commodification of bodies, and with the global feminization of labor that brings into meaningful juxtaposition lettuce farming in Arizona and latex extraction in India, dovetails with feminist theories of space like those articulated by Massey and Gillian Rose. As with Rottenberg’s fractured locations that are nonetheless envisioned as part of a wider system, Massey calls for a sense of globalization that is “aspatial,” that is, one that does not conform to conventional contiguities of geography.

factories

Though Rottenberg’s videos lend themselves to explication using theoretical rubrics of space, labor, and gender, they are always, importantly, in excess of those theories, unable to be easily or simply boxed-in by totalizing interpretations. Rottenberg is an artist who develops, builds upon, and works through her theoretical and political interest by producing art—art that is fictional and allegorical rather than academic. Her videos generate their own surpluses, including the pleasure of her elegantly choreographed camera motions, the satisfactions derived from her precise use of sound, and the embodied comfort with their skins that many of her characters exhibit. The architectures of confinement that she presents exist in tension with her expansive sense of invention—her videos speak to the confining aspects of the workplace, as well as to its eccentricities, its intimacies, its small gratifications. In this, though her women might go through “typically Rottenbergian exertions,” they also have relationships with each other that remain unknown and unknowable to the viewer. If they purport to be surrogate factories, they are alternative factories of imagination, producing new thoughts about uneven development, work conditions, and habits. And for all their formal structure, at the heart of her videos lies the informe—fungible, goopy blobs like creeping dough that has been salted by tears or rubber in quivering sheets.

With her glooming gears and rapping wooden mechanisms—all those pre-industrial sliding drawers and cubbyholes—Rottenberg’s sets resemble a tinkerer’s workshop or an old-fashioned laboratory for bodily science experiments, where saliva, allergies, muscle power, and breath become part of her equations. By creating intentionally naïve (if complicated) hack-stories for common materials, she taps into the childlike desire to spin fantastic “what if” scenarios. Where does vacuum-packed, uncooked dough come from? How do maraschino cherries get made, anyway? Part of the perennial appeal of educational and how-to videos that take us through, step-by-step, the process of making things is watching how things are assembled before they appear, as if by magic, on store shelves. Rottenberg’s videos slow things down by embellishing, and making strange, the process of manufacturing, spinning narratives and open-ended stories within these fictional spaces.

The ability of video to decelerate—especially in contrast to rapidly streaming televisial time—has been utilized by feminist artists such as Dara Birnbaum, who commented about her own work and its “attempts to slow down the ‘technological speed’ attributed to this medium; thus ‘arresting’ moments of tv-time for the viewer. For it is the speed at which issues are absorbed and consumed by the medium of video/television, without

10. Amy Demeter, “Simply Fantastic (Biocentric): Mika Rottenberg Responds to FMPs and PFPs,” in Mika Rottenberg, p. 27.

15. Hsuan L. Hsu, "Mika Rottenberg's "Productive Bodies,"" Camera Obscura no. 75 (September 2010): 42-73, reprinted in Mika Rottenberg, p. 101. Hsu's article is a comprehensive look at Rottenberg's œuvre that compellingly thinks through her work in terms of biopolitics and immaterial labor.


examination and without self-questioning, which at present still remains astonishing."14 When Rottenberg, in Squerce, captures the "real" world of latex and lettuce with long sequences in near-documentary fashion, she asks us to measure the distance between this sort of work and that of her own artistic labor, which so differently gathers, cuts, and selects [Fig. 19; Fig. 20].

The actors in Rottenberg's videos are what she calls "talents," people who are paid, usually by advertising on the Internet, for their physical attributes such as their height, their flexibility, their long hair, or their strength. Hsuan L. Hsu remarks, "If some of these conspicuously abnormal bodies appear to allegorize the ways that physical labor distorts the worker's physique, they more literally inhabit a sector of immaterial labor far removed from the assembly line."15 These bodybuilders and size-fetish activists should not be conflated with the characters they portray in Rottenberg's videos; she casts them in part because they self-consciously understand themselves to be embedded in a social field of relations in which their physical oddities are spectacularized, sexualized, and valued. "I've been a product for some time now!" affirms the bodybuilder from Tropical Brave in an interview with the artist.16 Yet Rottenberg's economies are not entirely transparent; her camera lens presses up close to faces and hands to capture her characters' vexing emotional gestures, psychologically charged interactions, and expressions that hint at internal worlds we do not have access to. In Squerce, a large woman seated on a rotating platform appears to be the central energy source of the entire operation, her clenched hands and focused face wordlessly generating power [Fig. 21]. In an interview with Raqui, who plays this pivotal role in Squerce and is also featured in Dough, Rottenberg asks, "Did you trust me?"17 (Raqui's answer: yes, trust was built over time.) Trust is a vital, and tricky, terrain for both Rottenberg and her viewers to navigate, given that her videos circulate in a particular sphere of visual consumption—the art industry—that remains somewhat distinct from the multiple worlds inhabited by her paid "talents."

In her most recent work, Bowls Balls Souls Holes (2014), Rottenberg departs from her previous concerns with production to focus on temporality, waiting, the indeterminate zone between waking and sleeping, and the possibilities of fantasy. A bingo caller transitions from her home in a shabby hotel to her workplace, traveling by motorized scooter and descending down many steps to oversee a vast hall where the game clatters endlessly, as if being perpetually played [Fig. 22]. As with all of her video work, Rottenberg's exquisite sound design creates the connective tissue between disjunctive spaces; in this piece, she marshals the noises of late capitalist leisure. Fluorescent lights sputter and buzz. Air conditioners drip and whine. Fans whirl. Letters and numbers are called. Balls clack and roll as the camera slowly pans over women marking their gridded bingo cards: nobody ever wins. A woman with no card in front of her dozes in her seat, dreaming of distant, icy vistas. When she is awakened by a leak of water, she balls her hands up, reminiscent of the gathering-of-energies fist-clenching in Squerce.

Within this space of chance and gaming, Rottenberg inserts an incongruous vignette: the bingo caller occasionally drops brightly colored clothespins through a trapdoor at her feet, where they are shunted via a series of mechanical arms through other holes, ready to be received by a man who methodically fastens them to his face. (The bingo caller also uses clothespins on her feet as she rests, perhaps as part of a beauty or medical regimen, forging an affinity between the two characters.) In Bowls Balls Souls Holes Rottenberg returns to one of her most frequently used motifs, the crossing of objects between rooms via holes in ceilings and floors [Fig. 23]. Look up—what is secreted there? The ordinary ceiling tiles, so grimly restricting in other videos, here crack open to reveal a shining full moon [Fig. 24].