

**Review of Two Exhibitions by Mika Rottenberg: *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*
Andrea Rosen Gallery: May 7 – June 14, 2014
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, February 14 – June 8, 2014**

It is the Spring of 2014, and two unusual constructions abound in the Atlantic North-East: one at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in Chelsea, and another at the Rose Museum at Brandeis University. At both locations, one enters and finds a potted plant seated on an air-conditioning unit positioned just above eye level. On the ground below, an empty frying pan sits on a hot plate, searing a water drip that falls periodically from the air-conditioning unit above. Is this global warming as seen through traditions of aesthetic nonchalance? Or is it time as a Baudelarian scorch-drip induced by our faulty mechanisms? Whatever the intended register, this compact ready-made turns out to be an appropriate epigram to the work of Mika Rottenberg, an artist whose abilities are uniquely hinged between the tectonic and the cinematic – or between space as it is assembled and action as it is rendered in time.

In both of Rottenberg's exhibitions, a central cinema is encased by its openings, exits and curated surroundings. We enter the space and see a photograph, a storage document, and a number of sculptural citations from stories that we will only hear and see together within these darkened viewing rooms. Once entered, the cinema then proves to be a conduit to a much more substantial set of dimensions. The films introduce us to imaginary spaces that have been collaged together from factual locations and from situations constructed within a studio set environment. In the work titled *Bowls, Balls, Souls, Holes (Bingo)*, for example, a view of Harlem is contracted to a vertical zig-zag. Starting with the moon as it is glimpsed through a watery break in a Hotel ceiling, we follow a Bingo Hall attendant as she travels a short distance on a blue scooter, and descends into a basement Bingo Hall that is itself an upper chamber to a sub-set of

mechanically animated intersecting rooms. For just under 28 minutes, all action is tightly shaped and constrained by these surroundings. Similarly, in *Squeeze*, the architecture suggests a figure of global capital, where the expanses of an Indian latex forest and an Arizona lettuce farm are linked by arm-holes to a subterranean factory centre. In both cases, a series of actions are tightly bound to these constructed environments – such that the narrative, if one can call it that, begins to assume the rhythms of a fixed-track machine.

These films make use of what George Méliès, writing in 1929, described as the *transformational* capacity of cinema, employing that trick which “allows the supernatural, the imaginary, even the impossible to be rendered visually.”¹ For Méliès, the ultimate pleasure attached to these artistic tableaux was reserved for “those who understood that all branches of art contribute to their realization.”² We want to be tricked, he says, but also to be complicit in the trick; we want to register an ingenuity that has evolved from multiple directions. This is, in fact, one of the great pleasures of a Mika Rottenberg exhibition - i.e., that one is able to put together, concurrently and retroactively, how various parts are held together within the logic of the whole.

This co-dependence of parts and wholes produces the sensation of collage at multiple levels. In spatial terms, again, the architecture is cut and pasted between the site and the studio – a process that is accentuated by the various fragments that have been isolated for display within the gallery setting. But the collage also operates chronologically, where various movements and actions are cut up and re-pasted back together. Sometimes, the action belongs to a full-bodied human character: a large woman rotating in a starry chamber, a Bingo hall attendant restless amongst her own

¹ Georges Méliès, “Cinematographic Views,” *October* 29, (1984): 31.

² *Ibid.* 31.

domestic contraptions. And sometimes the activity belongs to humans that have been structurally divided into part characters or character parts: human arms reaching through arm-holes, and human tongues flicking through drywall.

In these demarcations of human activity, there is an acknowledged re-assertion of a familiar Marxian critique; the artist mimes the conditions under which human processes can be made into a thing-like entity.³ Yet a critique of this kind is capable of taking shape under multiple aspirations, and the tenor of Rottenberg's work – where its stress falls – seems to embody a mode of artistic production that I hazard to call Brechtian. This comparison seems predicated on more than stylistic parallels – the pervasiveness, for example, of a certain sprezzatura (a studied carelessness) of wood on pulleys and quickly painted walls. And even more than the rhetorical consequences of such blatant theatrics, what Rottenberg's work seems to share with Brecht is a certain energizing through production, a sense of freedom achieved through the act of building, un-building, and building anew.

At stake in this comparison is the way that collage operates for Rottenberg, not just as a technique for cutting and pasting, but as a kind of limbered play within the structures of contemporary life. Consider, for example, that all of the narrative action in “Squeeze” is oriented towards the production of a cubic square foot of compressed latex, cosmetic blush and iceberg lettuce. In the cinema and its surrounding exhibition, we follow these raw materials as they are farmed internationally, then crushed by women in an imagined factory, photographed in the hands of Andrea Rosen, and then shipped into an offshore cold storage facility in the Cayman Islands. In one sense, this trajectory presents a gallows humor from an artist who knows exactly what conditions the work of art does not escape. And yet, amazingly, the work transcends its own cynicism. It

³ Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, (London:Verso, 1999), 58-60.

liberates, not by positing any outright alternatives to the contemporary situation, but rather by re-purposing human talents, re-structuring the spaces of their interaction, and re-inventing possible outcomes.

What we have then is a reconstruction of a built environment that is synchronized with a dramaturgical prompting of new forms of action. This latter stress distinguishes the work from practices whose critical potential is defined by analysis alone – borrowing here from Frederic Jameson the same terms he uses to distinguish the figure of Brecht, historically and philosophically, from the younger and more hermeneutically inclined Walter Benjamin.⁴ For Benjamin, the emergence of film photography provided new means of isolating and analyzing moments of human experience, though always under the aegis of socio-historical diagnosis. With Brecht, by contrast, the stress of artistic activity falls not on the analytic loosening of human actions, but on their malleability under new terms, decisions, relations. “Between an ethics of production and an emergent constructivism,” writes Jameson, “the distinction of Brecht is to energize more than reveal hermeneutically, metaphysically.”⁵ Fearful of drawing too straight a parallel, something of this expression feels accurate to the sum of intentions recalled from *Bowls*, *Balls*, *Souls Soles*, and *Squeeze*. One leaves the space of the work with something more than a new understanding of the present moment – as we do, for example, in the work of photographers such as Jeff Wall or Taryn Simon. Upon leaving a Mika Rottenberg piece, one feels oddly energized – I don’t know what other word to use - by a set of processes shoddily but cohesively aimed at a new social imaginary.

And while the contemporary moment in art seems filled with artists that are only too willing to present such imaginaries, Rottenberg’s work is sober enough to restrain

⁴ Ibid. , 61-63.

⁵ Ibid., 60.

itself from the utopianism so often self-proclaimed under the name of relational aesthetics. Her designs take shape, not as fantasies of frictionless human exchange, but as artistic recompositions of the structures that bind us together. Consider, for example, that once an initial idea for a work has been established, the artist recruits her “talents” online, finding people whose unique physical attributes have yielded equally unlikely commercial prospects: e.g., a woman who is paid to sit on men, a woman who is paid to wrestle men, a man whose skin disease allows him to pinch his face with the World Record amount of clothespins.⁶ Rottenberg then customizes her structures to fit the particularities of each of these talents, re-purposing their commercial oddities within a loudly audible fixed-track machine. While critics may be right to ascribe these technological dimensions to the artist’s miming of F. W. Taylor’s modernization of factory workflows, it seems that the more deeply Taylorist insight is a managerial one – where the artist herself becomes the overseer of one large operation held together within the space of a single work.⁷

On the one hand then, it is the work – in its compactness as a distinct conceptual-sensorial entity and as an exchangeable commodity – that provides a framework for a cohesive system of meaning to take shape from multiple sources and collaborations. And yet it is also the work, as Rottenberg has reinvented it, which allows for its own undoing, from wholes back into parts, in the space of the exhibition. In this two-part movement, an accordion rhythm of building and un-building, there is a re-purposing of old methods to answer new questions. About commitments still tenable within the tradition of the work, and about the invention of new relations still tenable within those traditions. As structures both opened and closed, it seems that these are benevolent traps.

⁶ Mika Rottenberg, “Interview with Mika Rottenberg,” *Bomb* (Fall, 2010), 26.

⁷ For an example of such a Taylorist reading, see: Claire Barliant, “Mika Rottenberg” *Artforum* (April, 2006). For an account of the managerial (as opposed to mechanical) implications of Taylorism, see: Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, (New York, Monthly Review, 1974), 45.