

## MATERIAL TRAJECTORIES IN FILM

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Within the anthropology of art, a renewed interest in materials and objects has contributed to a new orientation which explores the role of artworks as active material components, suggesting that art has much in common with material culture studies.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will outline an anthropological approach to contemporary video installation art that draws on Alfred Gell's posthumously published book, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*.<sup>2</sup> For Gell, an anthropological approach to art by definition focuses on how artworks mediate 'social agency' and attribute significance to the context in which they are produced and received. I will be discussing the work of one contemporary artist – Mika Rottenberg – whose films are motivated by materiality, and will demonstrate the importance of materials and physical objects in film by bringing attention to materiality. I will begin by providing a phenomenological account of Rottenberg's most recent work at Andrea Rosen Gallery (New York), listing the materials and objects which form a relationship between objects and bodies in space. I will then discuss the power of material agency and the relationship between the film *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* and its installation counterpart. Thirdly, I will consider the role of the art object produced in the film *Squeeze*, as both a metaphor for the measurement of time and labour and as a superfluous industrial by-product. Lastly, I will focus on the material origins of Mika Rottenberg's films and her sculpture-orientated methodology.

Mika Rottenberg is a video installation artist currently working in New York. Rottenberg creates alternative realities where everyday mundane objects perform extraordinary functions: bingo balls act as portals to another world and clothes pegs activate cosmic phenomena. Her films connect geographical borders with absurd planetary forces – in *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* the narrative shifts from a Harlem bingo hall to the polar icecaps, and in *Squeeze* an elaborate and phantasmagorical industrial line connects lettuce fields in Mexico to a latex rubber plantation in India.

Upon entering Mika Rottenberg's most recent work, *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* at Andrea Rosen Gallery (7 May–14 June 2014), the first thing the audience encounters in the vast white space is *Tsss Tsss Tsss* – a work consisting of an old air conditioner, plant, hotplate and frying pan. To the left of the air conditioning unit is a large revolving blue door. On one side of the door is a large circle of tinfoil shreds and, on the opposite side, a bingo ball machine and flashing bingo board. Through the revolving door, past a temporary plywood room, there is a large makeshift yellow rectangular unit, approximately the size of a shipping container. The audience walk around the unit, through another doorway and down a long passage with purple-textured walls to the theatre which screens the video *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* (Bingo) (duration: 27 minutes and 54 seconds). The looped film is projected above an altar on the back wall, occupying the entire space. The viewer sits down to watch the screening. The film's three protagonists embody cosmic forces. The Moon (an overweight woman) becomes infuriated when a hole in the ceiling of the Harlem bingo hall drips water onto her face as she tries to nap in an empty corner. The bingo players are testing their 'luck' with The Sun (the woman announcing bingo numbers). As the game progresses, The Sun drops multicoloured clothes pegs down a chute to The Conductor (played by Garry 'Stretch' Turner, who holds the Guinness World

Record for having the world's stretchiest skin), who attaches each peg to his face in a circular pattern. The film ends as The Conductor spins around in his chair faster and faster until he combusts, like the sun burning brighter until it burns out.<sup>3</sup>

Outside the theatre, a series of works are installed on the gallery walls. Rotating and flicking, *Ponytails* is made from hair, wood, acrylic tubing, mechanical system, nylon mono filament, a ponytail holder and acrylic paint, and is mounted to the wall. The adjacent wall displays *One hour sculpture*: a shelf with plywood, stainless steel, glass jars, immersion heaters and an electrical system. A hole in the floor titled *Hole* is in fact a trompe l'oeil, made from laser-cut black fabric and acrylic paint. The bottom left corner displays *Untitled*, a small sculpture consisting of a porcelain lamp holder, 11-watt light bulb, electrical system, orange-peel spray texture, tinfoil, gum and acrylic paint.

The audience are led by sound and spatial devices through the installation which provides a phenomenological dimension to the work. Minute sounds and gestures are magnified – like the Tsss of a drop of water on a frying pan, or the flip of a ponytail – rendering extraordinary the mundane and ordinary.<sup>4</sup> The audience's physical experience of the work is determined by object placement and the organisation of space. The revolving door activates the space, and activates the audience when they walk through it. There is a symbiotic relationship between the video and the installation, which directly references the film's materiality: dimensions, architecture, sound, raw materials and objects correspond to those that are seen on the screen. The artwork mediates social agency;<sup>5</sup> for although the artist is the primary agent here, the installation and other inanimate objects are also agents in a secondary sense, acting as mediums through which the artist "manifest(s) and realise(s)" their intentions.<sup>6</sup> The video decodes the installation, which is otherwise only semi-legible, and this renders the film an object of agency. In Rottenberg's work there is always continuity between the video, installation, and constrained spaces of industrial labour, which she references in her films and forces the audience to experience. Her work is more than the sum of its parts; each component is essential for the work to function coherently.<sup>7</sup>

In *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*, Rottenberg draws connections between the chaotic randomness of bouncing bingo balls in the machine and planetary systems.<sup>8</sup> Rottenberg utilises round shapes for their cinematic and experiential possibilities: in the video, the balls and walls are moving in circles, and this reoccurring circular movement is integral to the work. We see this in the boiling glass in the hotel, the wheel of the scooter, the round earrings worn by Endid (the main performer), the electrical circuits, and in the inference to planetary movements. The film is motivated by objects and materials, following the principal of cause-and-effect. The first significant object in the video is The Moon, followed by tinfoil scraps, clothes pegs, a hole, a yellow bingo ball, an air conditioning unit, bingo balls, numbers, a flashing bingo machine, the boiling glass in the hotel and the circle.<sup>9</sup> Each of these objects and materials lead the plot and dictate the actions. Significantly, each one of these objects is reinstated in the installation.

*Squeeze* (2010) continues Rottenberg's exploration of the production of objects, time and value through cause-and-effect phenomena. In this film, women from across the world harvest and process materials required for the production of an art object. Although most of the artist's factory scenarios do yield manufactured products – a block of cheese in *Cheese*, a cube of rubbish made from latex, lettuce and blusher in *Squeeze* – the products themselves are superfluous – they are useless and distanced from the capitalist mode of production and exchange. In *Squeeze*, the absurd factory line connects different global locations. Mexican women working in a lettuce field in California are massaged by Chinese women through a portal from an unknown location. Simultaneously, trees are being tapped for latex at a rubber plantation in India. A woman's breasts and cheeks are squeezed by two compressing walls, becoming pink and creating pink blush. Lettuce, makeup and latex enter the structure and are combined to create a final art object: a large rubbish cube. Gell's theory of agency can be applied to the cube in *Squeeze*; the art object prompts the audience to make inferences about the dichotomy between the materiality of the process we see in the film and the immaterial manner in which the art market value of a work is constructed.<sup>10</sup> *Squeeze* is about the process of making an art object and about how value can exist in a pile of rubbish purely because it is an artwork. The rubbish cube that was produced in this work will never be seen as it was removed and placed in storage in the Cayman Islands. Collectors are able to purchase shares in the stored rubbish cube, but

are not allowed to physically see or own the art object.<sup>11</sup> The assembly line in this work functions as a metaphor; rather than a literal object of critique or representation. Rottenberg, talking about an earlier work, says "I suppose it really was based, somewhat literally, on Marx's theory of labour and value, but as more of a joke about surplus and product."<sup>12</sup> This reference to Marx's labour theory of value, and the inference that slow and endlessly repetitive tasks exaggerate the link that Marx established between labour time and surplus value, can also be seen in *Squeeze*.

In a recent interview (7 May 2014), Rottenberg discussed her fascination with infomercials, stating, "I like how they present a solution to things that are not necessarily a problem and make this whole narrative around this one little object."<sup>13</sup> Her own methodology is consistent, always involving a search for a solution to something that is not a problem – much like the infomercials – and the invention of something that has no real function. As Slavoj Žižek has remarked, "this feeling for inert materiality has a special significance for our age, in which the obverse of the capitalist drive to produce ever more new objects is a growing mountain of useless waste, used cars, out of date computers etc ... in these piles of stuff, one can perceive the capitalist drive at rest."<sup>14</sup> The very medium of video art, which she employs, is deeply embedded in the industrial process, not only because it relies on technologies manufactured in factories, but also because the neverending playback loop and the tedious task being depicted captures the repetitiveness of industrial labour.

Rottenberg's films are distinctly sculptural and her methodology consists of four stages. The first stage is drawing, which is an exercise in imagination rather than a structural plan. She then considers how to draw viewers in, and contemplates a sensory experience – touch, sound, smell and psychological state – that ultimately leads to the visual. In this way, her films become as tactile as they are visual.<sup>15</sup> Following this, she goes on to decide who she wants to work with – typically employing people who capitalise on their difference because they are, for instance, very large, or tall, or people who alienate and commodify parts of their body which they choose to rent. She has hired bodybuilders, a Guinness World Record holder, professional erotic wrestlers, and a group of women who all have two-meter long hair. Finally, the set is built and the sculptural environment is constructed, and Rottenberg begins working with the cast in the space. Following the logic of cause-and-effect, the sculptural environment (film set) presents a problem which is then resolved, with material properties and behaviours always triggering the next sequence. The cast are predominantly women who care more for the materials in their environment than for other people, and who are led by materials through a pseudo-industrial process.

I have argued that film can be defined by its materiality, and that the role of the art object can be defined by its capacity to infer the artist's intentions. Employing an anthropological approach, two key works by Mika Rottenberg – *Bowl Balls Souls Holes* and *Squeeze* – have been analysed. A phenomenological description of Rottenberg's video installation work at Andrea Rosen Gallery lists the significant materials and object agency in both the film and installation. The material ontology of Mika Rottenberg's video works offers a new methodology for approaching filmmaking.

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1. Eduardo De La Fuente, "The Artwork Made me do it: Introduction to the New Sociology of Art," *Thesis Eleven*, 103 (2010), 3, doi: 10.1177/0725513610381377 [accessed 13 Aug 2014].
2. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
3. Shannan Elinor Smith, "Mika Rottenberg's Planetary Game of Bingo," Opening Ceremony, May 2014, <http://www.openingceremony.us/entry.asp?pid=9590> [accessed 23 Aug 2014].
4. Mika Rottenberg, "Bowls Balls, Souls Holes", 2014, Andrea Rosen Gallery Exhibitions, [http://www.andrearosengallery.com/exhibitions/mika-rottenberg\\_2014-05-07/7](http://www.andrearosengallery.com/exhibitions/mika-rottenberg_2014-05-07/7) [accessed 20 March 2014].

5. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency*, 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 21.
7. Hsuan L Hsu, "Mika Rottenberg's Productive Bodies," *Camera Obscura*, 25 (2010)2,74, 41-73, doi: 10.1215/02705346-2010-002 [accessed 10 Aug 2014].
8. Smith, "Mika Rottenberg's Planetary Game."
9. Alex Zafiris, "Number 7, a Slice of Heaven," *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics*, June 2014, <http://www.guernicamag.com/art/number-7-a-slice-of-heaven/> [accessed 19 Aug 2014]. "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 colourful 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, 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. 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. Gradually, we arrive at the first shot of the moon over the motel once again, and the cycle begins anew."
10. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 27. "The index motivates the patients to make abductions about social agency."
11. Katie Kitamura, "Mika Rottenberg," *Frieze*, 138, April 2011, <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/mika-rottenberg> [accessed 21 Aug 2014].
12. Ossian Ward, "The Body Factory: Mika Rottenberg in Conversation with Ossian Ward," *db artmag*, November 2006, <http://www.db-artmag.com/archiv/2006/e/6/1/482.html> [accessed 19 March 2014].
13. Smith, "Mika Rottenberg's Planetary Game."
14. Slavoj Zizek "Not a Desire to Have Him, but to be Like Him," *London Review of Books*, 25 (2003), 13-14, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n16/slavoj-zizek/not-a-desire-to-have-him-but-to-be-like-him> [accessed 13 March 2014].
15. Smith, "Mika Rottenberg's Planetary Game."