



STILL FROM *SQUEEZE*, 2010, DIGITAL C-PRINT, SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO INSTALLATION, TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 20 MINUTES, OVERALL DIMENSIONS VARIABLE.

MIKA ROTTENBERG by Judith Hudson

Video installation artist Mika Rottenberg creates mini factories, farms, tableaux, which produce products variously made by tremendously fat, tall, muscled, long-haired or long-fingernailed women. Women, who in their own lives commodify their eccentricities, are, in Rottenberg's films, featured as "bearers of production." To make their merchandise, the protagonists have to pedal, squeeze, cry, sweat, massage, dig, push, burrow, morph, cross continents, and use more than a bit of alchemy. Every detail and orthodoxy is taken to its extremes, turned upside down. You smell the flowers and sweat; you hear the sounds of breathing, nails tapping, sweat sizzling, milk hitting tin; you feel the breezes, and the squeezing of flesh, its bursting out of constraints. Yet Rottenberg treats the superabundance with such normalcy it makes me laugh.

—Judith Hudson

JUDY HUDSON To me, imagination is the most private and revealing aspect of a person. It's what attracts me to your work. You submerge people in your imagination. I feel as if you seduce the viewer with unconscious sympathies like fetishism or caged energies.

MIKA ROTTENBERG Right, things that tap into everyone's subconscious memory. We're pretty similar in our cores, more

or less. I have to tap deeper into this psychological vein, so then I can drag people with me. It's not just visual; it's energetic. It's about trying to locate feeling that has no shape. The whole thing is meant to fail on some level because you can't give shape to abstract emotions, sensations, memories, and smells.

JH How do your ideas germinate? They seem to spin out exponentially, reminding me of James Joyce transforming the unconscious into art. You must feel things very deeply—but I sense that when you're working, you have to be in complete control of your feelings, so you can organize all this chaos.

MR "Spinning" is a really good metaphor. I start the process by finding the core, and that could be a sound or a smell or a texture . . .

JH You actually start with something that simple?

MR Yeah, for me, even the smallest part of the work has these little tensions. So if I put a core detail in, say—the itch you feel in your nose when you are allergic to something—I then create a structure where you can throw in more details and spin those around. It starts from that feeling that doesn't quite manifest. Then it becomes a search for what manifests this thing that can never quite be manifested. I want to create this structure to fence these abstract sensations in, to give them shape and materiality. For example, in doing yoga, you put yourself into this rigid structure to liberate yourself. Otherwise you'd just get lost.

JH When you build the structure, whether it's a factory or a farm, you must have more than a germ?

MR There's a moment when I think: I have to be brave and just start building something. I know I'm probably going to panic, because I will forget why I've built this huge construction without even knowing exactly what I will do with it. *(laughs)* It also usually starts with "falling in love" with a "talent"—usually someone I meet online, for example, Raqui from *Dough*. I saw her on the website largeincharge.com and knew I wanted to work with her. The structure for the video was built to fit her big presence.

JH Do you introduce more elements once you're rolling?

MR I *reduce* elements. I start with something insane, something that's impossible to make. First, it's like diving in and throwing a lot of stuff out, designing a crazy structure that's physically powerful and impossible and has way too many elements and way too many loose parts. Then I start working with a small team: for example, in the last piece, I worked with Katrin Altekamp and Quentin Conybeare on set engineering, and with Mahyad Tousi on cinematography. I'm constantly refining rather than adding. It's like automatic writing. Then I go back and find the core logic. I go from being child to critic to child. First you let it all go, then you step back.

JH Because you want to remain open to any experience that's going to happen?

MR When it first happens, it's not about filtering anything; it's

putting words and shapes on paper. There's no way I'll start with a thing and have it end up to be what I started with. It's about starting, about putting myself in a situation where I feel *squeezed*, contracted.

JH You work with contradictions. A squeeze seems sexy and you depict it as visually sensual, but it's also oppressive. There's this duality.

MR There's a plurality to desire that ranges from being liberating to being oppressive, and its power is not always in your control. Or maybe it's a constant negotiation between controlling it and releasing it.

JH It seems to be a big element of your work, this liberation through confinement. You place your performers, all of whom have distinct physical features, in architecturally confining structures. Do you have a goal in mind?

MR I try to create a structure that will allow me creative freedom, but will still be bound to a logic. It's like inventing a new kind of logic. The goal is very set. I know I want a tongue to flick, a shelf to move, lettuce to get shoveled up. There's a linearity, but there's a lot of room between for accidents or providence.

JH I want to hear more about tongues and lettuce. Let's talk about your most recent pieces in order of their making: *Mary's Cherries* (2004), *Tropical Breeze* (2004), *Dough* (2005–06), *Cheese* (2008), and *Squeeze* (2010).

There's a ritualistic cherry popping in Mary's Cherries. Women pedal bicycles that power lights that grow Mary's bright-red fingernails that are then clipped and dropped through a hole one story down to Barbara. Barbara massages and flattens them, then drops them into another room where the big-breasted Rock Rose forms them into maraschino cherries, aka Mary's Cherries.

MR I read a story about a woman who had a rare blood type and she decided to quit her job and sell her blood. Her body grows its own stuff and she sells it. That idea morphed with a drawing of mine that showed a conveyor belt with fingernails and maraschino cherries. In *Mary's Cherries* I created a fiction to explain how maraschino cherries, a real product, are made. I wanted to make a system powered by gravity, therefore a vertical structure.

In the video Tropical Breeze, Heather Foster, who in real life is a champion bodybuilder, drives a converted truck; it's also a shop that packages sweat. Sweat forms on her brow and trickles down her cheek. Felicia Ballos, a dancer, is in the back of the truck pedaling a makeshift device. She picks up tissues with her toes, uses gum she chews to stick them to a clothesline powered by the bicycle, and sends them to Heather, who then wipes the sweat off her face and sends the moist tissues back to Felicia, via the same chewed gum and clothesline, to be packaged for sale. Everyone has the happy demeanor of 1950s TV, including a naked, muscular, male jogger Heather passes on the road.

JH What was the core and starting point for *Tropical Breeze*?

MR The action of sweating and in this case a horizontal movement. I wanted to create a sort of clock: a person works, takes a certain amount of time to create sweat, then there is a measurement of how much you sweat. The goal is set. I chose to make the truck the factory because of its horizontal structure. I also wanted to make the product as it's delivered, so it's always fresh.

One inspiration was my getting into Karl Marx's theory of labor and value as he describes it in volume one of *Capital*. I was attracted to the poetic way he describes a person producing an object, as this relationship between a subject and the external world. Marx's definition of labor is a process between a person and nature.

JH Where did you find Heather?

MR Heather Foster was online, she has a professional bodybuilding career, and her day job is being a personal trainer and physical therapist.

JH So you are selling *professional* sweat?

MR Her sweat has value. A product is created, "Tropical Breeze Lemon Scented Moist Tissues."

In Dough an enormous woman, Raqui, has pollen from flowers blown into her nose, causing her to cry. Tears trickle down, caress her body, go through a hole in the floor, and subsequently hit a hot tile on the floor below and evaporate. The tears sizzle and steam, making the dough rise. The dough is then elongated and pushed and pulled through holes into multiple chambers by a skinny, six-foot-nine woman, Tall Kat, who can stretch from room to room. Ultimately, a unit that measures labor is created.

MR I was attracted to dough because it is colorless, shapeless, and formless. I wanted a material that could take any shape. I played with it for hours like it was a big chunk of flesh. My neighbors could see in my window, they must have thought I was crazy. I wanted to build a system that would give each piece of dough a value, make each chunk into a unit of measurement. I was inspired by the unit of the calorie.

JH It cracks me up that you speak about your work in terms of clocks and units and value and timetables and calories, when you make these lavish pieces with gigantic, voluptuous women who cry and sweat. Where did you find Raqui?

MR I met Raqui on the internet. She has her own website, queenraqui.com, and she is the founder of the plus-size community website largeincharge.com. I questioned and doubted myself that it was too pat to have big, fleshy woman and dough, but ultimately I felt it opened up into something more.

JH The woman's flesh is certainly doughlike. She even looks leavened. The structure is more elaborate than your other pieces.

MR I took the structures of the two previous pieces and combined them in the shape of a plus sign. The entire structure works for me the way a child would imagine the inner

28 STILLS FROM SQUEEZE, 2010, DIGITAL C-PRINT, SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO INSTALLATION, TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 20 MINUTES, OVERALL DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. ALL IMAGES FROM SQUEEZE COURTESY OF MARY BOONE GALLERY / NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY.



SQUEEZE. PRODUCTION CREDITS: CINEMATOGRAPHY: MAHYAD TOUSI, SET ENGINEER: QUENTIN CONYBEARE, SPECIAL EFFECTS: KATRIN ALTEKAMP,
SOUND DESIGN: RONEN NAGEL, TRIM POSTPRODUCTION, PRODUCTION: ANDREW FIERBERG





workings of the body, this mysterious system with inputs and outputs.

JH It looks like those cross-sections of a body in a TV ad or an elementary school science book, where you see the pill traveling around and around until it gets to where it's supposed to go. You have said the constructions are tailored to the bodies of the actors.

MR I create the general structure, then recast and rebuild it to fit the actors. I'm not trying to make them fit my architecture; I'm trying to make my architecture fit them. I met with Raqui before I started building the structure. By the time I was building the structure, I knew more or less whom I was going to cast. That's maybe why it's not oppressive, because I'm making the system fit them.

In Cheese women milk their floor-length hair to make cheese. Rottenberg fictionalizes a real story of long-haired women (the Sutherland sisters) from the 1880's who made a hair tonic for bald men. Cheese takes places in a bucolic little farm Rottenberg created: roosters crow, goats bleat, women in virginal white dresses run around herding the goats into a maze. They milk the ground, funnel mist from a waterfall, magically sneeze rabbits, play with their hair, and ultimately milk it.

JH For the screening of *Cheese*, you built a mini-barnyard in the Whitney Museum. The audience entered a makeshift barnyard through a cattle-chute-like structure to watch the video.

MR The structure was a real starting point for me. I try to make the installations more and more minimal and architectural. You enter into the installation and then start watching the film, and hopefully at some point, you become aware of the space that you're watching the film in and your own body in it. I want the structure to trigger your thinking about the labor behind the whole construction.

For the video, I went to Florida and rented a piece of land from this guy who owned a petting zoo. That's where I built the set, it was only me and another artist friend, Deville Cohen, that came to help me out. I wasn't really sure what it was going to be. I started with a circular fence that surrounds half an acre of land, and inside that circle is where I started to think about exactly what I wanted to do. I was starting from a sound or a sensation, and also wanting to make a sculptural set, using the soil to grow stuff as part of this sculpture. Most of the wood used was the surplus from a sawmill that cuts down trees into two-by-fours, which links back to my interest in the process of creating units out of a natural resource.

JH Long-haired women are also producing a product.

MR I am interested in the limitations and expansiveness of one's own body. The subject-object relationship of hair and person. It really is a by-product of a person, a surplus.

JH Are you interested in the mythical beauty and powers attributed to hair?

MR I'm more interested in what your body grows and produces, in what can be commodified. Of course hair is

mesmerizing when it bounces and jumps and has movement of its own. Part of my interest is this instinctual attraction to material. On a more psychological level, you can look at hair as the ultimate transitional object, something that functions as a link between you and the external world and helps you locate your subjectivity. Milk is also part of the body and can be made into objects, such as cheese.

JH I don't know how you manage to get smells in there, but you do. And sweat. And there's often a breeze. There's a lot of enchantment. How influenced are you by fairy tales, mythology, and folklore?

MR I can't say I'm influenced by anything except life, really. I see a lot of magic in so many mundane moments.

JH So fairy tales come from the same influence that your pieces come from?

MR Exactly. I'm more interested in drawing back to where fairy tales come from. The fairy tale is the filter. When people ask me what my influences are, I could name specific works, but I think it's more the essence of things, before they take shape as works of art.

JH I love the sound of the milk hitting the tin. You do strange things with sound in all your works.

MR It's some kind of quirky, funky rhythm that I hear. I'm always scared of being too surreal and too out there. Sound has a very manipulative effect on the viewer. In the language of film, you can draw someone's attention so easily, so I try to leave space. In *Mary's Cherries* there are gaps where nobody speaks; actually, since they only say three words, most of the video is a gap. In *Dough* the only words are "I see it," and "Hello." I'm very precise with dialogue. (*laughter*)

In her new video, Squeeze, Rottenberg has expanded her world and gone global. In one room, Chinese women dressed in viridian robes reach through portals in order to massage Mexican woman working in a lettuce field in California. Meanwhile, at a rubber plantation in India, trees are tapped for their milky latex. A woman's abundant breasts and cheeks become pink when they are squeezed by compressing walls; "blush," a powdery substance that references both a physical sensation and a makeup product, falls off. The blush, lettuce, and rubber latex are all mixed together to create a magical object. The entire production is managed by Bunny Glamazon and Trixter Bombshell, a Buddha-like woman on a turntable, who gives directions via telekinesis. The final art object produced by this collaboration will never be physically present; it will ultimately be stored in an offshore safe.

MR I started with a vision of a three-dimensional shape, like a kid's game. It has one shape, you twist it and it has another shape; you turn it in half, another shape. Each of the five pieces from the last five years had its own basic shape, like I mentioned before: *Tropical Breeze* is a horizontal line, *Mary's Cherries* is a vertical line, *Dough* is a plus sign, *Cheese* is a circle. I feel *Squeeze* completes this body of work by combining all these shapes in a single kinetic sculpture. You move

part of the structure and another part is revealed. Holes in the floor line up with shafts, creating portals to other spaces—and eventually entrance points to the external world. I integrate real productions with my own imaginary ones. A very real sweatshop in India is combined with the making of this useless goofy “thing” that combines latex, lettuce, and blush.

JH What elements were ruminating in you for this one?

MR It was rubber—scratching a tree and producing rubber, and also this feeling of getting squeezed. And a “choose your own” salad bar.

JH It’s amazing that you can scratch a tree and get rubber.

MR Yeah, right? It’s like the blood of a tree. They milk the trees; they take their blood out. They also chop down big parts of the natural forest to create these plantations. The latex is so white and stretchy; they go to great lengths to extract it. I was told by the tappers they use this pure latex to make bombs. A few elements are my guides throughout. The one solid, almost intuitive, guideline was a feeling of both expansion and contraction.

JH Which is the prevailing feeling/imagery in your work.

MR It’s just like life and breath. I want to give breathing shape. For me, the “squeeze” thing is like being born, the first experience. Although I was a Cesarean, so I don’t know. Maybe it’s the primal squeeze that I miss. (*laughter*)

JH Where did the lettuce farm come from?

MR I sat next to someone at dinner who was a lettuce broker. I learned that the price of lettuce is in constant flux, hourly. I am interested in how value is created. And how the price of iceberg lettuce is determined.

JH *Squeeze* brings into play quite contemporary issues about labor. You use migrant workers, Indian, Chinese, and Mexican. Mexican lettuce pickers get massages from Chinese women in beautiful green dresses.

MR On one side they’re picking lettuce, on the other they’re performing a service. It’s a crisscrossing of cultures and realities, a juxtaposition of reality and fiction. In *Squeeze* race is the friction that moves the whole system. There’s constantly a racial clash or tension.

JH You can expose that?

MR Yeah, in the same way that the friction of an engine creates the combustion to make the whole thing move. Every actor, or performer, is chosen because of their uniqueness. Bunny Glamazon, the blond woman who plays the manager, comes from Indiana and is a fetish worker. She does wrestling and role-playing. She has a website. It’s not like any white woman could have fit her role; she was very specific. Your brain wants you to form Bunny into a stereotype. You want to see all of them as stereotypes but you can’t because their personalities go beyond that.

JH Bunny’s makeup was perfect.

MR She did it herself. And Michelle, the large black woman, a.k.a. Trixter Bombshell, she’s from Pittsburgh. She was introduced to me by Raqui from *Dough*. They are colleagues, and make a living by renting out their bodies to model and to sit on people—it is called *squashing*. It took a long time to find her. She’s the main magnetic force in the film. She’s the one who has a telekinetic power; she moved the whole enterprise with her meditative energy. I’m riffing on this stereotype of the mystical female “other;” I have to admit, I’m also seduced by it.

JH You made this noise in the video, was that the sound of her thinking?

MR It’s her energy. Her “zzzzzzz.” Her vibration.

JH How did you cast the source of the blush? Did you look at people for their rosiness?

MR For big cheeks, for squeezable ones. The source of the blush is Rock Rose. She’s a fantasy wrestler, and does fetish role-play and she is a model as well. She is told by the client whether to win or lose when she wrestles.

JH You take us as far as possible from the idealized white male or female as you can. In another juxtaposition in *Squeeze* bodies are bisected, and butts protrude into another room.

MR One side crushes the raw materials that are going into the sculpture. It’s happening in a small, hot, confined space. On the other side the butts are being sprinkled with water, it’s the cooling system. It divides the body in two parts, multitasking . . . that fragmentation repeats when the lettuce workers’ hands are getting massaged.

JH It’s like those magnificent churches where everybody is obsessed with the carved gold box in the annex room. In that box is an carved ivory box, and in that box is an enamel box, and in *that* box is a fragment of the fingernail of a saint.

MR (*laughter*) I love that! The always absent and unmanifested is so much more desirable than any attainable object. That’s why the sculpture produced in *Squeeze* goes to an offshore safe.

JH I like the tongue in the wall giving directions.

MR I wanted the walls to be alive. The room reacts to the main operator’s body heat or Bombshell’s meditating. It all seems like it’s alive.

JH There is no separation between the internal and external world.

MR It goes back to the early state of child development, when you experience no separation between you and the world. Everything is connected and seems to be one. *Squeeze* is about chopping the entire body: cheeks, breasts, everything gets packaged. There are different kinds of production.

Lettuce is a basic product that comes from the ground, with no processing. The next step in production would be latex, obtained by tapping into a natural resource and processing it to make a final product. Blush makeup is highly processed. Massage is a service: movements of one person being sold to another, translated from one body to another. These products represent degrees of processing. You have an extractive economy on one end and a service economy on the other. Finally, they do *not* provide a thing. The ultimate product in *Squeeze* is a cube made of freeze-dried lettuce, rubber, and blush that's going to be stored in a safe in the Cayman Islands. Only shares can be purchased, with a picture of one of my dealers, the iconic art-world figure Mary Boone, holding it—my own Ponzi pyramid.

JH You have made an analogy of the industrial revolution up to the present. We haven't talked about the political themes in your work. One big question for me is that assembly lines usually imply capitalist repression and dehumanization, but the people in your videos are too special to lose their individuality. When 300 pounds of lovingly photographed flesh is squeezed, or cheese is milked from eight-foot-long hair, or cheeks alchemically shake off sparkles of essence that turn into "blush," or a woman's tears make dough rise, or fingernails make cherries . . . I feel like the women are more magicians than chattel. You emancipate them. At least there is a duality.

MR The assembly line is more of a metaphor or departure point. I want to find immaterial labor and how that can be made into units and a valuable commodity. It's a sad reality. It is ambiguous. Yes, we are looking at an oppressive system, but within that system there is this sick idea that maybe these women can be emancipated because they own their means of production. In their cases, the portal to liberation is through oppression, in their day jobs they rent out their bodies and talents but they are very much in charge it seems. They all have personal websites; they don't have pimps, they have their own savviness. They own their own bodies a hundred percent. Going back to the woman who sells her own blood, the inspiration for *Mary's Cherries*, she is selling the juice of her own existence; she owns her means of production. I'm interested in people who sell their body in one form or another. Do you really own your self? Just the fact that I'm talking about a self as something that could be commodified points out something about the reality we live in.

There are always systems that are more powerful than you as an individual. The other issue is that the current economy is no longer centered around selling physical things but ideas and stock in ideas. So the product is dematerialized.

JH Sounds like art.

MR Yes, it's why the last piece is a cube you can never completely see.

JH Could you expand on how your performers distinctive personalities and forms empower them?

MR I think these people who work for me empower themselves by renting out their oddities, like the long-haired ladies from *Cheese*. I usually use a verbal contract that is based on trust. I have a lot of respect for the people I hire, for example,

the ladies from *Cheese*. But, on the second day of shooting *Cheese*, it was really hot and their hair got a little messed up. I thought it was still really beautiful, and mesmerizing, but they went on a strike, because they wanted to wash their hair. Which meant that we would have to stop shooting for twelve hours. That's a lot when we only had five days. They formed a union against me, saying that they were ambassadors of the long-haired community. So we negotiated and in the end came up with an agreement, which was also a solution, of when *exactly* each one could wash their hair; another stipulation of the agreement was that every time I mention them to the press, I have to use the words *beautiful* and *mesmerizing*.

JH They're empowered by their hair?

MR In one way they are, in other ways they become handicapped because of it.

JH They're also somewhat enslaved by it?

MR We're all trapped inside this box we call our body. I'm interested in cinema's quest to represent internal things visually. In porn films, the "money shot" is a way to represent the material evidence of male pleasure. What would be the other ways you could visualize desire or pleasure?

JH Isn't that what you're doing—manifesting the internal?

MR I thought about emotional architecture and the emotional space that video allows. Often in cinema, there's no separation between internal thought and the external manifestation. It's about this attempt to translate a sensation.

JH Hair, fingernails, and blush all seem to me to be about female power and mystique. That's not the way you see it though?

MR Maybe female mystique, but not necessarily female power. Generally, my work is just about being a person, your "subject position." But because I'm a woman, usually my subjects are women.

JH So it's not specifically a feminist statement?

MR I am not sure, and maybe my work is about investigating what a "feminist statement" in 2010 will be. Sure, I want to look at systems and capitalist production from a female point of view—I am a feminist, and I believe that there still isn't equality, and these are ideas that I think about. I have this claustrophobic feeling that I am physically trapped inside my body, inside my sexuality, inside my gender. I want to try to spit that out, and package it. Maybe there is a way out from oppression to liberation, when you are able to observe it—to look at it as an object.

JH But there is more, there seems to be a celebration of exceptional and extreme bodies and the products these bodies produce. But when you think that rubber comes from milking a tree and a fingernail is an object of worship . . .

MR Whenever anyone tells me how absurd my work is I think, It's not nearly as absurd as what's actually going on.