

Mika Rottenberg



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Breaking the Bubble: Mika Rottenberg's Industrial Attractions

by Amy Herzog

Morality teaches us to love work: let it know, then, how to render work lovable, and, first of all, let it introduce luxury into husbandry and the workshop. If the arrangements are poor, repulsive, how arouse industrial attraction?

— Charles Fourier, “Attractive Labour”¹

Breaking the bubble, or “Possible”: The bubble is the minimum number of balls required to complete the bingo pattern. This is the earliest point that any player could have a valid bingo.

— Standard Bingo Terminology²

A recent MIT study on the fluid mechanics of sneezing mapped the far-reaching impact of these “violent expiratory events.” The report revealed that the smallest drops of mucous and spittle within gaseous sneeze clouds remain suspended, and air-borne, long enough to be re-suspended and carried away by ambient air currents, “pathogen-bearing droplets interacting with a turbulent buoyant momentum puff.”³ Mobile sneeze puffs exist in a somewhat liminal state—both vapor and liquid, they are forcefully expelled from the infected body. Borne passively by the laws of physics and the whims of their environment, the puffs, nevertheless, are motivated to spread, to penetrate, to reproduce. The sneeze clouds can float high enough to enter and contaminate ventilation systems, spreading between seemingly closed spaces. They are imperceptible, yet decidedly material, forging connections between dispersed bodies, and operating in tandem with the architectures these bodies and flows co-occupy. The fallout of the sneeze’s turbulent buoyant cloud is both physically predictable—its reach can be anticipated and charted—and subject to chance—its direction can be diverted by an unanticipated breeze.

Sneezers populate Mika Rottenberg’s architectures. Yet Rottenberg puts their bodies to work, extracting not puffs, but material products from their expirations:

¹ Charles Fourier, *Selections from the Works of Fourier*, trans. Julia Franklin, with an introduction by Charles Gide (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1901), 166.

² Similar lists of Bingo terminology can be found in published and online sources. See “Bingo (U.S.),” Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bingo_\(U.S.\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bingo_(U.S.))) and Noël Powell, *Money Honey: Delivering the Sweet Ideas of Prosperity* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2013), 18.

³ Lydia Bourouiba, Eline Dehandschoewercker and John W. M. Bush, “Violent Expiratory Events: On Coughing and Sneezing,” *Journal of Fluid Mechanics* 745 (2014), 537-563.

bunnies, slabs of meat, light bulbs, plates of gelatinous noodles (as evidenced, for example, in *Sneeze* [2012], *NoNoseKnows* [2015], and *Cheese* [2008]). Rather than spreading imperceptibly, these sneezes fall to the ground with an audible thud. The bunny, the steak, the plate of noodles stare back at the camera, confronting us with their absurd and undeniable presence. They are the talismanic stuff of fairy tales or fantasy: I'm reminded here of Julio Cortazar's short story "Letter to a Lady in Paris," in which the narrator periodically vomits up rabbits, and the old witch in Jacques Demy's film *Peau D'âne*, who spits toads as she speaks.⁴ But Rottenberg harnesses and redirects the output of her sneezers. One long-haired woman in *Cheese* is interrupted in her work by occasional allergic fits, relieved only by the nasal expulsion of a fluffy white rabbit. These rabbits are apparently left to freely explore the pastoral green farmyard of the cheese-and-elixir-making commune. But other sneezing acts seem to be integrated directly into manufacturing loops. In *Sneeze*, for example, a succession of men in suits and ties sit before a wood laminate desk in a white cinderblock room. We see, in agonizing close ups, their bare, pedicured feet. Brightly polished toes stretch and curl against the pebbled beige linoleum as their bodies prepare for the pending action. And when the moment arrives, the men convulse, and their red, preposterously distended noses propel a steak or light bulb or rabbit onto the table. The men look slightly embarrassed, but the parade of rabbits, toes, steaks, noses, and light bulbs continues, unabated.

The context of these sneezers' work is not revealed to us, but a broader economic circuit is activated in *NoNoseKnows*. Here a fan blows across a bouquet of flowers into the face of a tall white woman sitting in a very small office. Her eyes water and her nose is reddened and raw, marked by the continual stimulation of allergens. Her sneezes, thus artificially produced, are an integral part of the manufacturing process. Small flashes of iridescent sparkle are occasionally emitted from that nose, which grows and pulses alarmingly, until the woman is struck by a full-blown sneeze. A plate filled with noodles drops to her desk, each drawn from a set menu of Asian or Westernized offerings (spaghetti with red sauce and meatballs, Lo Mein with wan snow peas and limp broccoli, etc.). We might imagine that this food is being produced to feed the Chinese pearl cultivators in an adjoining workspace and the young woman who cranks the flower-fan cable, but we can't be certain. The cart that holds the noodles is piled higher and never emptied. Most of the plates look as though they have been sitting untouched for quite some time.

How can an irritant be made productive? A mollusk defends itself against foreign particles by enclosing the offending material in a pearl sac, which is then coated by accumulating layers of nacre, the same calcium carbonate-based substance that constitutes mother-of-pearl. This natural defensive response generates surplus value based on the rareness of the chance encounter. But the process can be hijacked and instrumentalized. To cultivate pearls, a freshwater mussel is sacrificed. A strip of mantle is sliced from its interior, then cut into small squares that technicians delicately implant into live mussels. Multiple grafts are inserted, and the mussels are left to grow for several years before they are harvested by hand. Nature and chance are now integrated into the machinery of the system, adapting alongside

the bodies of the human workers, women who develop specialized abilities, sorting and evaluating mountains of pearls each day with their fingertips.

Rottenberg's factories are powered by auto-immune responses, irritants, and repurposed corporeal by-products. Sweat, sneezes, tears, pearls, fingernails, hair, latex sap, and milk are coaxed from the human and non-human bodies stationed throughout her constructions. The bodies suffer and strain. Their goods flow. The architecture of the workspace then directs these flows, using gravity, pulleys, fans, and trap doors to accelerate and transform their trajectories. The flows are put into contact with new bodies, spurring alchemical reactions. As with the movements of the turbulent buoyant sneeze cloud, dispersive mechanics seem to govern movement within Rottenberg's factories. She has constructed her assembly loops to account for and maximize predictable accidents (such as the goats that always escape their pen in *Cheese*, or the naked jogger in *Tropical Breeze* [2004], who never fails to stimulate the truck driver who passes him on her daily route). The architecture mixes bodies, objects, and flows. Lemon Rush drink plus Stay Awake Energy Booster plus heat plus naked jogger plus large body surface area plus towelette plus sweat makes Tropical Breeze Lemon Scented Moist Tissues. Hair plus funnel plus waterfall mist makes hair tonic. Rottenberg's preparatory drawings make explicit the degree to which her structures are sensitive to shifts in bodily and psychological states. Room A in her blueprint for *Squeeze* (2010) includes notation on its "emotional architecture": "as operator #1 gets hot, wall starts 'sweating'"; "telekinetic power helps with moving room."

Irritants generate responses, even when they operate beyond our perception. They mark points of connection between disparate bodies and foreign spaces. Drops of water, runoff from a leaky air conditioner or perhaps a polar ice cap, pool behind a chipped ceiling tile. They saturate, hang suspended, and then fall onto the shoulder of a sleeping woman in a bingo parlor. She awakens, bristling at the interruption. Her fingers curl back into clenched fists. Her passions boil like an immersion heater. She generates an energy wave. It bursts, then dissipates, and she slumps back into repose.

How can a dreamer be made productive? There are sleepers in Rottenberg's machines, too, like the Bingo Hall dreamer of *Bowls Balls Souls Holes* (2014). She is figured as the Moon in this constellation of cosmic operatives. Her psychic energy-bursts are suspended between material and immaterial realms. A pearl sorter in *NoNoseKnows* slumbers through her shift uninterrupted, even when her feet are misted by a co-worker in a conjoining room. The long-haired women in *Cheese* recharge on reclining mattresses between work cycles. And in *Squeeze*, a large African-American woman naps on a spinning platter inside a small compartment until her shift begins. She awakens, and focuses her paranormal energy, which sizzles like a space heater. The structure lurches into motion. She seems to be the engine for the entire operation.

The psychological and cosmic mechanics of this circuitry are not easy to grasp. The realm of the possible there, the laws governing cause and effect in these impossible

4 See Julio Cortazar, *Blow-Up and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon, 1985) and Jacques Demy, *Peau D'âne* (France, 1970).

spaces, come into contact with our world here, but the rules are not identical. Planetary projections and industrial afterimages surface as orbs on workers' faces, then fall out of view. Bodies expend themselves to their limits and disappear in a puff. Series of numbered balls are sucked into an air tube and invoked in a strange communal ritual. Bubbles hover and hum mysteriously in closed rooms, bursting into clouds of smoke in response to distant, ethereal triggers.

As the chambers of Rottenberg's impossible onscreen universe groan and shift into place, we become aware of our embedded status within them. Rottenberg builds us into her environments, compelling us to peer through peepholes and to pass through the same rooms we see projected. This has less to do with voyeurism and surveillance than with correspondence, resonance, and contact. If the cinema is a dream machine, Rottenberg has opened up its back, the employee entrance, and invited us in as affective laborers.

Fetish objects are fuel for dreams. They are the materialization of alienated labor in form of the commodity. Fetish objects are come-ons. They mark generic categories in sexual marketplaces, and serve as branding tools for body workers. They work for Rottenberg, too, as structural and sculptural motors. She takes the disembodied status of the fetishized body part an extra step, asking not what the parts can "do" for us, erotically, but more basely, what can they do? Mouths blow smoke and spit liquids in long arcs. Asses emit gas, are sometimes pocked by pimples, and can cool the body when they are misted with water. Ponytails register subtle atmospheric changes in cascading waves. Tongues wag, lap water, and dry out. In *Lips (Study #3)* (2016), we look through the parted lips of a mouth that looks as though it could have been excised from a love doll. Inside we see an ecstatic orgy of body parts and textured plaster reflected in a mirrored box, cheerily performing their tasks to the whir and thump of their mechanized drives.

If, then, dreams propel this machinery, desirability ought to increase efficiency. How can labor be made more attractive? The social theorist Charles Fourier offers one model. His vision of a utopian society recognized that the force of attraction that drives the universe on both the human and celestial levels is that of erotic desire. Fourier argued that civilization has alienated society from the "aromal fluids" that are generated both by astrological bodies and by the organs of human beings. Vestiges of these aromal liquids still cling to the Earth in the form of the aurora borealis, "a symptom of the planet's being in rut, a useless effusion of creative fluid."⁵ Fourier sought to create a new social order, Harmony, as a means of restoring Earth to its rightful place in the cosmic flow. Should Harmony be attained, the aurora borealis would enlarge into a crown of light, heating the polar cap to release the boreal fluids (the Earth's procreative juices). The Earth's axis would right itself, climates worldwide would become temperate and productive, and the boreal fluids would combine with the ocean's salt to create sea water that would be more conducive to new marine life (including amphibious animals that could aid shipping vessels), more easily desalinated, and flavored like lemonade.⁶

Fourier initially published his findings in 1808, under a pseudonym, to considerable ridicule. Fourier anticipated this response; he claimed this first book was in fact

a teaser, “a snare for snarling critics” who would exhaust themselves attacking the most eccentric aspects of his theory, ignoring “the pearl in the mud.”⁷ That pearl would emerge in his subsequent writings on utopian socialism, which were widely influential and inspired a number of experimental communes and cooperatives. Fourier was a vicious anti-Semite (he depicted Jews as the living incarnation of commerce) and frequently assailed the Chinese, the British, and any others he deemed barbaric in their treatment of women.⁸ Fourier’s economic anti-Semitism was part of a current of similar sentiments amongst Socialist thinkers at the time (see, for example, the writings of Pierre Joseph Proudhon).⁹ This antagonism easily spilled into ugly portrayals of Jews and ethnic “others” that went beyond an economic rationale, and leveraged gender equality as a justification for racial superiority. Race would assume declining significance in his Harmonians, but the sun of the new celestial order would also bleach the skin of the Earth’s inhabitants to a uniform whiteness.¹⁰

Yet Fourier did offer an undeniably radical take on gender, sexuality, life and labor, a perspective that was highly unusual for his time. For Fourier, attractive labor is achieved when a society organizes work according to the unique affinities and passions of its members. Occupations are divided between the sexes and generations such that everyone can find the task best suited to their abilities, and workers can shift between tasks eight times per day to sustain enthusiasm.¹¹ It is the release of libidinal forces that makes attractive labor possible, and thus a wide range of sexual practices were accounted for within the Phalanx community, which would carry over into pleasurable collaborations in various registers. He was particularly concerned with freeing women from the mercantile servitude of matrimony and the tyranny of domestic labor (“The extension of the privileges of women,” he wrote, “is the fundamental cause of all social progress.”¹²). All work in the new order is undertaken collectively, with the advent of roving amorous armies whose young recruits “will find the love affairs of Civilization so boring and pitiful they will not be able to bear to read our novels and plays.”¹³

Architecture was central to Fourier’s vision, creating traffic between workers, and between spaces of work and recreation. Within the Phalanstère, the structure built to house a self-contained community unit, workers would fulfill a dizzying

5 Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements* [1808], ed. Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson, trans. Ian Patterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 47.

6 *Ibid.*, 47-50.

7 Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 120-121.

8 See Edmund Silberner, “Charles Fourier on the Jewish Question,” *Jewish Social Studies* 8, No. 4 (Oct. 1946), 245-266.

9 See Proudhon’s 1847 note, “On the Jews,” in *Carnets de P.J. Proudhon* (Paris: M. Rivière, 1960), trans. Mitchell Abidor and republished by Marxists.org (<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/proudhon/1847/jews.htm>).

10 Nicholas Valentine Riasanovsky, *The Teaching of Charles Fourier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 235.

11 Fourier, *Theory of Social Organization*, introduction by Arthur Brisbane, trans. n.a. (New York: C. P. Somerby, 1876), 34.

12 See Beecher, *Charles Fourier*, *op. cit.*, 208.

13 Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, *op. cit.*, 175.

range of highly specialized roles (based around 12 principle passions and 810 character types). Living quarters were to be distributed across spaces to create a “fusion of the different degrees of fortune and of the classes that represent them.”¹⁴ Fourier’s notion of social organization was influenced by his interest in musical structures—the same laws that apply to music correspond to those governing the operations of the human body, the passions that drive the soul, the social order, and the planetary system that enfold them all.

Fourier offered “advice to the civilized about the coming social metamorphosis,” including a tip about the increased value of products that can only be attained through arduous labor: “The same will be true of objects extracted from the seabed with such difficulty, like pearls, etc.: very few people will undertake work of this sort, even once harmony has been completely established.”¹⁵ Rottenberg’s workers make it painfully clear that harmony has not yet arrived. We witness, in her constructs, a considerable amount of waiting, boredom. Workers shift between tasks by habit, but there isn’t clear evidence of sustained enthusiasm. The seas, as of yet, do not taste of Lemon Rush. Yet Rottenberg’s constructs gesture toward an exuberant, creative fluidity.

Rottenberg creates her own units of measure. She unlinks bodies and parts, rewires them, and maximizes their affective capabilities, unleashing not an end product per se, but *jouissance*, stimulation, productive irritation. Difference here is not bleached away. It is motorized and squeezed, it is juiced, its allergies are triggered, it is injected with libidinal energy, it floats away in a turbulent cloud. Work is reintroduced into its rightful dialogue with the passions, the humors, with cosmic flows, and orders we have yet to encounter.

Rottenberg’s architectures emphasize mutual care and the necessity of release as their primary purpose of their design. The blush-lettuce-rubber “Art Object” of *Squeeze* (a cube constructed of mashed-up lettuce leaves, raw rubber, and cosmetic tins) might reside off shore in the Cayman Islands, subject to conceptual speculation. But the installation and film shower far more attention on the butts of the workers that need cooling, the tongues that need misting, the cheeks that flake color, the precious pauses when the lettuce farmers and the rubber harvesters insert their arms into the ground for a massage. The interests of global capital, manifest in the cube, are ludicrous, their rhetoric is beyond comprehension. But we can easily read the wordless “tap-tap-tap” of the salon masseuses, who gesture in sync: it’s time (literally) to change hands. Distinctions of race, skill, geography, and scale remain central to this economy. But the cinematically and parapsychologically enabled flow of the workspace loops them together. Each body works, regardless of affinity or origin, each body suffers, each body deserves release and care.

This might be the height of attractive labor in a non-harmonic world. Mutuality and care, on a cosmic level, won’t necessarily be personal (the workers who tend to you might not actually care). But you can build caretaking into the architecture. Irritation, libidinal expenditure, sweat can function as new units of measure. Joy and luck can serve as the products of industry that works in the interest of another.

Seven workers, in Rottenberg and Jon Kessler's *SEVEN* (2011) take turns operating a stationary bicycle, lounging in a holding area, or sweating in swimsuits in a sauna, powered by the cycle, before a bright-colored light aimed at their individual chakras. We see, via video link, workers in Botswana walking to a distant field to extract clay samples that are placed into pneumatic tubes. Here, back in the sauna/lab, the chakra fluid extracted from the sweat-workers is funneled to a technician who pours the liquid into a pot made from the clay sent from there. The chakra pot is crushed, and the runoff is captured in a test tube. The cycle repeats. The seven life-force energy centers of the chakras are linked to color frequencies: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. The colors of the chakra correspond to frequencies of psychic energy, to functions of the body's organs, to the terrycloth robes of the workers in the holding box. The collected vials are packaged up and sent back through the pneumatic tube back to the clay gatherers. Here, the chakra producers slump back in their box, exhausted. There, workers load the test tubes into a circuited suitcase, then pour the liquid into the ground. An outrageous light-show ensues, a rainbow fountain of animated kitsch, complete with cartoon birds. The small audience applauds, entertained. The aurora fades. The audience and workers depart.

Here, and there, throughout Rottenberg's work, architectures are created to realize the outer edge of possibility, the magical, unique ordering of elements that can complete the circuit. The parts align, the attractions take hold, the pieces drop into place, resonance is generated, the bubble bursts. Chance, thus manufactured, dissipates, wafting into the ether in a particle-laden puff.

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14 Fourier, *Theory of Social Organization*, *op. cit.*, 95.

15 Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, *op. cit.*, 305.