

# SNEEZE 乞嗝

Q&A WITH MIKA ROTTENBERG

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//SNEEZE 2012//

**Q1** There is such an odd assortment of objects being sneezed out. What symbolic connections or personal references are there?

**A1** The objects being sneezed out are a light bulb, a steak, and some bunnies. The choice has to do with their textures and appearance; they make visual sense to me because of their differences and nonsensical connections. In my work, I play with logic and structure—and with breaking that logic and structure, so there's a similar form of play here. The main motivation is to have these men excrete things from their bodies, and to foreground the work this involves, toying with ideas around feminine “labour” and masculine labour.

This video is also inspired by the first-ever recorded motion picture given legal status by copyright acceptance—Edison's kinetoscopic record of a sneeze in 7 January 1894, by Thomas Edison and his assistant Fred Ott (the man sneezing). In her book *Hard Core—Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”*, Linda Williams discusses Ott's sneeze and the request by one of Ott's funders to have a woman sneezing instead of a man. This interjection between science, knowledge, pleasure, and the cinematic [a connection articulated by Michel Foucault and applied to feminist film studies by Williams in this wonderful book] is of great interest to me; the ability to see the body in action through cinematic recording and the power and pleasure that arise from such a technology is fascinating to explore in video art.

**Q2** Editing—or the illusion created through editing—is a key methodology in *Sneeze*. How do you consider the use of tricks and effects in moving images?

**A2** I really enjoy “movie magic” and the ability to construct spaces that can only exist as cinema, as an illusion. I believe this echoes the way we live today, being connected to various spots on Earth while staying almost motionless in one place in front of the screen. I use editing as building blocks; even though video as a medium is considered “time-based”, I mould it to create spaces, like a sculpture. Going back to the idea of structure and its deconstruction, I enjoy playing with the suspension of disbelief—maybe it's a way to make people aware of the manipulation media can play on our psychic and primal understandings of space.

//SPAGHETTI BLOCKCHAIN 2019//

**Q3** You really pay particular attention to the texture (and the sounds connected to the texture) of the weird objects being rotated. How or why do you emphasise—or almost dramatise—this seemingly mundane element in your video? And what's the role of ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) in your work?

**A3** Materiality, materialism, and human attraction to “matter” are a core interest in my work. I've watched *endless* hours of the “most satisfying videos” compilations on YouTube; this watching of various materials being knitted, cut, squashed, squeezed, and oozed out seems very deep, even primal. It seems as though there is a lack of interaction with materials as I go about my life in this digital age: most surfaces I touch are smooth, like my phone and keyboard, or else made of glass or stainless steel. I suspect I crave a more enmeshed, “dirty” interaction with various materials and textures, and so the explosion of such material videos perhaps compensates in some ways for this. I also like the contrast between the smooth screen and the textures of the materials in these videos.

As for ASMR: when I first encountered these “pleasurable” ASMR videos I was floored! They felt a lot like what I've been trying to do with my videos since the early 2000s, before YouTube and everything. My video *Dough* (2004) has many ASMR moments, as does *Mary's Cherries* (2005)—but when I saw these kids making these videos online, I thought I should probably retire!! Jokes aside, of course my work is a bit more critical and examines the fascination with such images. Yet in the end my work is still very much motivated by this materialistic pleasure.

//NONOSEKNOWS 2015//

**Q4** What got you started in looking into factory production and factory workers? How much of this work (and in fact other works) is about shedding light on the alienation of labour and of production—how detached we are from the actual processes of production with the objects we consume, and from the actual people behind making such objects?

**A4** From early on, my work has revolved around labour and work, as well as the connections between the West and Asia; for instance, *Time and a Half* (2002) was set in a Chinese takeout restaurant in New York City. Over the last two decades, the bulk of material production in the world has taken place in Mainland China, and therefore it became a place I wanted to research and film in. When I first moved to New York in 1998, the United States was the global superpower; in some ways, my works in the 1990s and early 2000s have been made in relation to that. In the past decade or two, however, the power has shifted, and so has my subject; since I use my work to negate power as an individual, filming in China made lots of sense. When I was invited to the Taipei Biennale in 2014, I took the opportunity to visit Mainland China for the first time in order to research the production of cultured pearls; that initial visit ended up in *NoNoseKnows* and the following work, *Cosmic Generator*.

I believe that art can give shape to invisible processes. In my body of work, I have frequently been interested by hidden labour, whether in industry or in the domestic sphere. Starting with questions about ownership, you get to peel off the “skin” or all that “packaging” around commodities; underneath, what they are made of is exposed—people and their lives, as well as natural resources.

//COSMIC GENERATOR 2017//

**Q5** Could you give some insight to the process of shooting in Yiwu, China? How did the way you approach the subject matter change while and after you visited the wholesale markets?

**A5** I worked with a small production company in Shanghai who helped with contacting the market management as well as the shop owners and shopkeepers. Through casual conversation, they helped find out who wanted their shop to be filmed and who wanted to be filmed in it. The way they arranged the stores is great, like an art piece in its own sake—the different patterns, colours, similarities and differences in the shapes.

One thing made this shoot extra tense: we landed in Shanghai on November 9th, 2016 and learned of the US election results once we hit the ground in China. I did not get one hour of sleep the entire shoot, because of jet lag and politics. It was especially loaded because Trump immediately threatened a trade war with China—and that related to the Yiwu market in some ways (at least metaphorically since Yiwu is an epicentre of global trade).

**Q6** In some ways, your works deal with borders, albeit from the perspective that commodities can cross borders, while people don't (or at least not without difficulty). How do you see borders—of all sorts, national, transnational, class, language? Is your acute awareness of this a result also of your personal background? On the other hand, your work is never so directly about something specific or political? How do you see narrativity and absurdity?

**A6** I guess my work is a form of satire; it is political without being didactic, without telling people what to think. It comes from what I hope is an authentic experience of the reality we are facing. It is subjective, and it is my way of dealing with the world, feeling powerless in front of it all. It's not about what's right; it's about “what is”—through my perspective, as fantasy or nightmare, through my lens, my point of view, which isn't necessarily an altruistic one but hopefully an authentic one. It's not always pretty, and it's certainly messed up! Like everyone else, I am stuck in this massive, interlinked dysfunctional chain of systems of power; like everyone else, I am stuck on a planet that has gone bonkers. This situation is partly because of this mix of fact and fiction, the reach of media and the way we share this, the way to manipulate and create misinformation and invent fiction. These are notions I explore in my work, and it is my most effective way of participating in the world in a way that feels earnest. I tried being an activist! But I am terrible at that because I change my mind all the time about what to do—which works for an artist but isn't so great for an activist, so I'd better stick to my day job, haha, and attend other actions on evenings and weekends!

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//METHOD, CASTING, DISLOCATION//

**Q7** In terms of process overall: do you plan and storyboard videos meticulously? The craft of the visuals and the sounds in your videos seems so deliberate and precise. Or do you actually set things up so that there is an element of the random?

**A7** They are very planned. In these works I did not use one storyboard, but used many sketches, photographs, and charts to plan and get an idea of what the final work would actually look like. This process is very important, as I can “fix” problems and better understand the work before it's completed; it helps in developing the work.

**Q8** How do you cast your actors and actresses? What kind of instructions do you give them for their performance?

**A8** I used to cast online, working with people who already advertise themselves and their bodies for hire. When I can in real locations, I ask and look around and see if there's anyone who wants to participate in an art video. I almost never audition, since I usually cast people according to who they really are.

**Q9** In some ways, your works were created in a particular place (in Asia; in particular, *NoNoseKnows* and *Cosmic Generator*) and presented in another. And now they will be presented in Hong Kong, in Asia. How do you see this displacement of works? Have you noticed or observed how works gain new interpretations? What do you hope visitors will see?

**A9** As I said earlier, I make my work from my own limited perspective—and that is of a Jewish woman who lives in the West and consumes mostly products that are made in Asia. I am really curious to know how the audience in HK reacts to these works. I don't really expect or hope anyone to see anything specific, but it is very important to me to present the work in Asia.

**Q10** Will you ever make a feature film?

**A10** I am working on one right now!!! Coming out in late 2021!

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SOLO EXHIBITION BY

# MIKA ROTTENBERG