

Columbia College Chicago

Photography Department

Graduate Written Thesis

**The New Unconscious:
New Approaches to Surrealism in the 21st Century**

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Introduction

Over the course of my growth as an artist, the conceptual origins of my work have become far more interconnected than I initially thought. When I began my graduate work, my intent was to process the recent loss of a close friend through photographs. That early work ruminated on the way that memory functions and dissipates over time. I have always had a distressingly poor memory, and as my own memories of my friend faded with time, I felt desperate to cement my memories of her into my artwork. This sense of desperation seems to underpin much of my life and artwork, as I am living out my early twenties alone in a city, for the most part isolated within my apartment during a global pandemic, trying to balance artistic ambitions with at best shaky mental health and the overarching shadow of existential dread. In the face of these external pressures, I found that when the outer world makes less and less sense, turning inwards seems like the only remaining option.

Hoping to better rationalize my own artistic interests within the context of more concrete ideas, I researched the concept of memory as it has been articulated by psychologists and neuroscientists. At the same time as this research, I lost my motivation for that project about the loss of my friend. It felt too personal, too recent, and too emotional to pretend that it was more complex than just grief and a desperate attempt to make sense of a loved one's death through photographs. From that point forward, my conceptual horizons broadened to the subject of the mind itself. The interest now was not only in memory, but in the internal psychological mechanisms that are for the most part inaccessible yet so consequential to the conscious observant mind. In other words, I was driven by the question of how one creates artwork that illustrates the inner workings of the unconscious.

Coinciding with my exploration of the unconscious, I began working with video and sound when I was introduced to their potential as part of a course on video art. After learning the basics of video and sound editing software, I began to make videos that functioned experientially rather than observationally. The sound consists of layered found or created audio which I then form into an ambient track interspersed with moments of commotion or dialogue that further allude to an overall visual and auditory realm. Immediately the work shifted into something more substantial. The audio component contributed to a more emotional and sensory response from my viewers, connecting to the work in a more unconscious way. With video, too, the sculptural sets came to life and presented the viewer with a living, breathing, space as opposed to just a window into an imagined place. The work took on a newfound tension as the spaces changed from photographic sets to uncontained glimpses of a larger space. Under new circumstances and with newfound motivation, the work geared itself in a more multimedia-oriented direction, as it was clear that engaging my viewer in a multisensory way was the key to bringing them into my imagined world that simulates a tangible unconscious.

My work utilizes these approaches to guide the viewer into a psychological state where they can experience work that mimics the ebbs and flows of the unconscious mind as an opportunity for reflection on the unknowns of the human psyche. By surrounding the viewer with immersive media, my installations shift the audiences' perception and ability to locate themselves in reality or the imagined space of the videos. The act of presenting the viewer with a 'world' rather than merely an art object, enables a more engaged way of viewing art. Since my works represent an imagined world detached from reality, sensory immersiveness is important to their readability as experiential pieces. The combination of different mediums, namely video,

sound, and installation, further contribute to an immersive viewing experience best suited for explorations into an invisible psychological world.

My work takes inspiration from the visualization of the unconscious explored extensively by the surrealists of the early 20th century who, in following the theories of Sigmund Freud, sought to understand the human mind by blurring the lines between reality and imagination. As new artistic mediums continue to be born and evolve, new avenues of exploration reveal themselves as opportunities to improve upon the first wave of surrealism. My work also operates within the broader context of contemporary experimental artists like Pipilotti Rist and Mika Rottenberg who utilize multisensory artwork as a tool to expand upon the Surrealist movement's interest in visualizing the unconscious.

Inspirations: Surrealism, Tanguy, and Carl Jung

Inspired by theoretical developments in psychology in the early 1920s, Surrealism was the first movement in art to comprehensively investigate the newly termed 'unconscious.' Officially founded in 1924 by French writer André Breton, surrealism broke from what he argued was the destructive culture of pure empiricism, which became the dominant mode of thought following the Enlightenment of the 18th century. To Breton, the emphasis on reason was not only suffocated the human spirit but also enslaved the masses by keeping them locked in an intellectual cage.¹ Inspired by the writings of Sigmund Freud, Breton proposed a new strategy for unlocking the power of the unconscious. He defined surrealism formally as "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought. Dictated

¹ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972, p. 10.

by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.²” In painting, like in the work of Salvador Dalí and René Magritte, surrealism is known for juxtapositions of the everyday and the uncanny in an attempt to negotiate the two into a new ‘surreality.’

One of the preeminent surrealist painters, Yves Tanguy interpreted the creed of surrealism in an innovative manner and intuitively visualized the unconscious mechanisms of creative thinking. An associate of André Breton in the early years of the Surrealist movement, Tanguy’s paintings differed from his compatriots in the way that he depicted the unconscious realm as a tangible landscape. It is no wonder then that his work caught the attention of Carl Jung, who lauded him as a primary example of the beneficial nature of surrealist art as it pertains to uncovering unconscious mechanisms.³ Tanguy’s paintings feel like documents of the unconscious creative process. For example, in *The Extinction of Useless Lights*, the objects exist in an alien landscape, devoid of atmosphere or a clear depth of space (fig.1). The subjects themselves are amorphous, not quite humanoid and not quite solid either. The lack of substantial clarity lends itself to the painting as a depiction of a unique plane of existence that represents artistic creation in the unconscious.

² Breton, p. 26.

³ Karin Von Maur, Yves Tanguy, and Susan Davidson. *Yves Tanguy and Surrealism*. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001, p. 58.



1) Yves Tanguy, *The Extinction of Useless Lights*, 1927, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art.

Since Sigmund Freud, a major inspiration to the surrealists, first hinted at the significance of the unconscious at the beginning of the twentieth century, scientists and psychologists have continued to advance our understanding of the unconscious over the past century.⁴ One of his early collaborators-turned-dissenter, Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, was among the first to break from Freud's libido-centered view of unconsciousness, believing that Freud was ignoring other basic instinctual drives that affected human behavior.⁵ His own 'map,' as he called it, of the unconscious, was layered and consisted of complexes that guide the ego-conscious.⁶ While the

⁴ Freud first formally argued for the existence of the unconscious in his 1915 paper *The Unconscious*. Breton cited his 1917 essay, *The Interpretation of Dreams* as one of the main informants of his movement: Breton, p. 10-11.

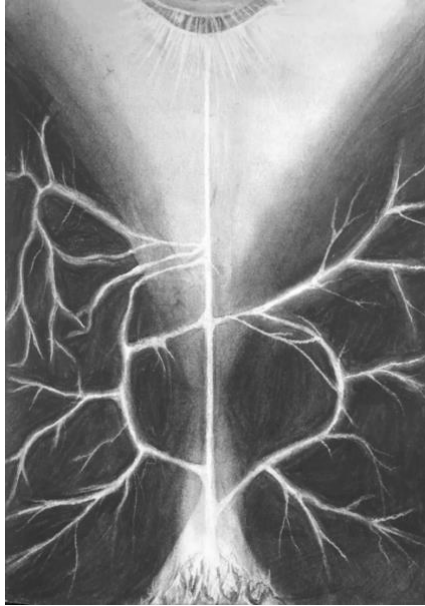
⁵ Murray Stein, *Jung's Map of the Soul: an Introduction*. Chicago: Open Court, 1998, p. 60-62.

⁶ "Complex: a feeling toned autonomous content of the personal unconscious, usually formed through psychic injury or trauma," Stein, p. 233.

specifics of Jung's theories tend to hold less credence in 21st century psychology, his approach to the unconscious continues to serve as an influence to many artists, most notably the abstract expressionists Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, as well as myself.⁷

Jung's emphasis on the different layers of the psyche existing within a metaphorical three-dimensional plane resonated with me as a strategy for imagining a truly immersive internal world. Guided only by free associations and intuition, I began drawing my maps of the unconscious realm partway through the process of creating this project as a way of reflecting on and informing on the specific aesthetics and symbolism in my videos and photos. The maps helped to reveal connections between elements of the work that were not visible before, as they were initially intuitive visual choices. Subsequent to the maps, the videos now represent the physical descent into the world, each video piece existing deeper in the imagined space than the one before, adding to the subterranean atmosphere of the work (fig. 2). The structures in the maps also place each video within a larger, three-dimensional landscape, where light, sound, and time all function differently depending on where within the map each piece resides. The additional layers of meaning that arose from the maps served to highlight the relationship between the unconscious acts of creation and the conscious effort of making sense of those choices. The existence of the maps then serves as a sort of bridge between unconscious creation and conscious revision of the same body of work.

⁷ Phyllis Braff, "Jung as Root of Abstract Expressionism." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 07, 1986.



2) Ali Georgescu, *Untitled Sketch*, charcoal on paper, 2020.

Further, Jung's theory of the shadow-self inspired me to explore darkness in my visual interpretation of the unconscious world. Jung described the shadow as "the rejected and unaccepted aspects of the personality that are repressed and form a compensatory structure to the ego's self-ideas and to the persona."⁸ Accordingly, he argued that we must acknowledge our own shadows and accept them into the conscious self before we can achieve psychological wholeness in a process that he called "individuation."⁹ An interesting idea enough on its own, Jung's description of the shadow-self ties back to the practice of theoretical alchemy which informed much of his theories on psychological archetypes. Most notably, his idea of the 'shadow' comes in part from the alchemical "nigredo," the primordial state of chaos from which everything

⁸ Stein, p. 234.

⁹ Stein, p. 122-124.

grows.¹⁰ This same practice of alchemy also informed the tenebristic qualities of the Baroque period, where darkness came to represent the precursor to spiritual enlightenment (fig. 3).¹¹ Caravaggio was the leading force of this type of symbolism, evident in his depiction of the scene directly before Christ's calling upon St. Matthew, one of his twelve apostles. A night scene swallowed by darkness, the light of Christ's presence is all the more evident, guiding Matthew out of a life of sin and into spiritual enlightenment. Caravaggio's use of darkness places it in equal if not more importance to light, being the neutral state only in which the light of God can be seen. Darkness and light function here and throughout the Baroque movement in a complementary sense. With these visual connections between art history and Jung's theories in mind, my work continues the traditional symbolism of darkness as the harbinger of spiritual and psychological enlightenment.



3) Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, oil on canvas, 1599-1600, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.

¹⁰ Matilde Battistini, *Astrology, Magic, and Alchemy in Art*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007

¹¹ Malcharek Rzepińska, "Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and its Ideological Background." *Artibus et historiae* 7, no. 13 (January 1, 1986), p. 103-104.

While Jung's theories were revolutionary for their time, the actual scientifically-backed, 21st century view of the unconscious has brought on a much more demonstrable general consensus on how the unconscious actually functions. Leonard Mlodinow, a researcher in the 'new unconscious,' a term used to differentiate the 21st century understanding of the subliminal mind from the early theories of psychologists like Freud and Jung, admits to Freud's impact on our understanding of the unconscious within the context of more recent, scientifically backed theories. Our understanding of the new unconscious is that it is not only a life-saving byproduct of evolution but also even more all-encompassing in regard to our thoughts and behavior than Freud's fantastical relation of the unconscious to trauma and repressed desires.¹² Still, despite these discoveries, there is yet to be a complete understanding of how exactly the unconscious self operates in relation to our conscious selves. Jung's map of the soul, despite being eccentric and more of a philosophical concept than a proper scientific theory, still has potential as a way to visualize at least the *structure* of the unconscious. Jung's broader definitions regarding the unconscious serve as a partial framework for my own visualization of that world.

Surrealism serves as an important example of the differences between scientific inspiration and proclamation. Breton never laid down precise guidelines for how surrealists were to go about tapping into the unconscious, instead he mainly saw the ideas of Freud as a new path for exploration. The very nature of surrealist philosophy lies in an embrace of pure impulsivity and free association based on developments in the field of psychology. The framework for surrealism as a movement is interesting due to the open-ended nature of psychology itself, which especially in its beginnings walked the blurry line between scientific inquiry and philosophical proclamations. The foundations of surrealism opened up a new line of inquiry for artists, while at

¹² Leonard Mlodinow, *Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior*. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012, p. 17.

the same time not seeking to draw its own conclusions. My work, too, exists in the same vein of open-ended inquiry.

Despite the revolutionary intellectual aspects of the Surrealism movement, it is important to note that surrealism's theoretical framework, namely Sigmund Freud, contributed to the prevalence of misogyny that already existed within the entire movement. Freud's theories of female sexuality existed only as a contrast to male sexuality, framing the very existence of women in relation to the existence of men.¹³ Women were generally relegated to be either 'muses' or objects in the eyes of the surrealist movement, such as in René Magritte's *Le Viol (The Rape)* (fig. 4). Magritte juxtaposes a woman's nude figure in place of her face, symbolically devaluing her personhood and replacing it with an invitation for voyeurism. Women here are defined only by the desirability to men and the mystery of female sexuality as Freud would describe it. This sort of literal objectification of women can be seen across the works of Dalí, Man Ray, Hans Bellmer, and virtually every male surrealist. The influence of Freud's theories on the movement was an invitation for many artists to visualize their misogynistic and predatory ideas of women under the guise of freeing the unconscious. Fortunately, contemporary scholarship and exhibitions have begun to shed light on the role of women in surrealism, reexamining the core tenets of the movement through the lens of lesser known female artists.¹⁴ This ongoing shift in focus has allowed artists like Pipilotti Rist and Mika Rottenberg, who will be addressed later, to approach the movement with a revived perspective.

¹³ Emily Zakin, "Psychoanalytic Feminism," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2011 Edition), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/feminism-psychoanalysis/>>.

¹⁴ Tess Thakara, "The Market for Female Surrealists Has Finally Reached a Tipping Point," *Artsy*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-market-female-surrealists-finally-reached-tipping-point>.



4) René Magritte, *The Rape (Le Viol)*, 1934, oil on canvas, Menil Collection.

Despite its moral shortcomings, several of the core tenets of surrealism are still influential on my own work. The most important similarity being that I share their interest in artistic fulfillment by means of engaging with the unconscious. That engagement manifests in an intuitive working method, creating my own landscape of the unconscious based on the shapes and sounds that come to mind whenever creating more of this realm. While my work does not depict dreams as that of the early surrealists did, it proposes a new way to approach issues of the unconscious by placing it into an intuitively built world that can be explored and experienced. Instead of approaching the world literally, my work is the outcome of making intuitive leaps from research to my own interpretations of those concepts.

My 2020 video *Tabula Rasa* is a set of interconnected videos that introduce the idea of departing from a world of rationality and descending into the depths of the inner world (fig 5). This world consists of echoes from the outer world, in the form of audio and visual breadcrumbs

like the voice of Carl Jung discussing his findings or the through line of shadowy forms encroaching on the viewer. The influence of Tanguy is also apparent here, where shadows are solidified as amorphous, tendril-like objects that reach out into the light of the negative space. My work is a constant push and pull between the inner-unconscious world, and the outer-conscious viewer. My work does not exist to further the words of Jung, Tanguy, or whomever else informed the imagery in my work. Rather, I am using their examples as a starting off point, keeping no particular destination in mind, only the journey itself.



5) Ali Georghescu, *Tabula Rasa*, video still, 2020.

New Mediums and Immersive Art

As one caveat to his surrealist manifesto, Breton insisted that the visual rested above all other senses. In his opinion, sight was the most immediate and primal of the senses, and thus that visuals had the purest connection to the unconscious.¹⁵ One might think that photography, then, arguably the purest form of visuality, would be the most popular form of surrealist art. Yet, both within the Surrealist movement and the immediate historiography about the movement in the

¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss, Jane. Livingston, and Dawn. Ades. *L'amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*. Washington, D.C: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1985, p. 20.

mid-twentieth century, photography was largely left out of manifestos and the first wave of art history. In surveying the history of early surrealism throughout museums and textbooks, photography is often glossed over in favor of painting. In the best-known Surrealist exhibit of the movement, the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, photography was far from the forefront of the show (fig.6). Filled with paintings and installed sculptures, the key photographers of the movement such as Man Ray himself played the part of either the lighting coordinator or documentarians of the event, scarcely displaying photographic work on its own.¹⁶ This minimization of photography's role in surrealism is all the more glaring because of the success of surrealists who utilized photography's unique relationship with the physical world to create uniquely uncanny images that played on photography's assumption of realism.



6) Main hall of the International Surrealist Exhibition, Paris, 1938. Photo: Roger Schall.

¹⁶ Bendetta Ricci, "The Shows That Made Contemporary Art History: The International Surrealist Exhibition of 1938," *Artland*, February 26, 2021, <https://magazine.artland.com/the-shows-that-made-contemporary-art-history-the-international-surrealist-exhibition-1938/>.

In 1981, art historian Rosalind Krauss broke with tradition, and surveyed the largely untapped history of surrealist photography and its centrality to the movement. Krauss argued that Breton contradicted himself several times throughout his writings on surrealist visuality, and in doing so made photography's esteem within the movement uncertain, as Breton on one hand hailed the primacy of the visual and on the other failed to acknowledge photography as the purest visual medium.¹⁷ Using Breton's own ideas on visuality, Krauss argued that photography actually offered something uniquely advantageous to surrealism: Photography's intrinsic connection to reality made it more believable than painting or sculpture, which lent itself to unifying the real and the uncanny together that painting had arguably failed to do. The medium's appeal to sensory believability allowed it to tap into the uncanny.¹⁸ For example, Raoul Ubac's work utilized the unique dualism of photography in both its believability and manipulability. *Portrait in a Mirror* (1938) shows a woman whose face seems obscured and decayed by the mirror on which her photo was captured. The photo at first glance seems like a darkroom manipulation, but upon closer inspection it is clear that the photo is actually just a trick of reflection, making the viewer second guess their own perception of reality (fig. 7). This is surrealist photography in a pure sense; collapsing the distinction between the real and the imagined.

¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism." October 19 (December 1, 1981): 3–34. https://i-share-col.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01CARLI_COL/14jps09/cdi_proquest_journals_1300038186, p. 13.

¹⁸ Krauss, p. 17.



7) Raoul Ubac, *Portrait Dans un Miroir*, 1938, gelatin silver print, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

If photography serves as an underappreciated course of surrealist exploration, then what is the potential of mediums that even further collapse the distinction between reality and imagination?¹⁹ In the past century, the technological advancement of video and the rising popularity of immersive installation art offer a new way of enabling surreality. The contemporary artists are discussed here, Pipilotti Rist and Mika Rottenberg, that have succeeded in bringing about a new kind of surrealism in the 21st century by utilizing the perceptual advantages of sense-engaging art forms. Both combine experimental video and sound with installation in ways that fully immerse the viewers in their own created realities.

New media philosopher Laura Marks explains the unique qualities of video in the context of *haptic perception*, a form of visuality that “is usually defined as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of

¹⁹ Krauss, *L'Amour fou*, p. 85.

and inside our bodies.²⁰” Marks makes the argument that the media of film and video allow for a more physically involved and multisensory act of viewing. Even more than photography, video as a medium invites the artist to challenge the limits of the screen. Marks argues that the multisensory aspects of video create a viewing experience in which the spectator sees the artwork less as an art *object*, like a still photograph might be seen as, and more as something “simply in their presence.²¹” The more intimate relationship between viewer and artwork leads to a more physical response in the viewer and allows them to feel immersed in a scene, collapsing the psychic distance between themselves and the screen. Photography can serve alongside video as a level of viewing, engaging viewers somewhere between the pictorial and fully immersive. It stands to reason, then, that the more multisensory an artwork is, the more entangled the viewer becomes in the piece, and the harder it becomes to separate their own subjective viewpoint from the reality the artist is creating. This aligns with the intent of surrealist art, engaging in the senses to provoke an immediate unconscious response, as Breton would argue only the visual can do properly. Video is an artistic medium that allows for a more dynamic relationship between viewer and artwork and invites experimentation with the limits of how far one can push the already intimate relationship between art and viewer. Furthermore, the tendency for video artists to display their work as an installation adds yet another element of engagement between the viewer and their constructed worlds.

The work of Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist is a prime example of an artist who engages in what Marks calls haptic perception. Her video work, psychedelic enough on its own, is often projected in spaces that incubate the viewers within her created realities. Her work, usually

²⁰ Laura Marks, “Video Haptics and Erotics.” *Screen* (London) 39, no. 4 (1998): 331–348. New York, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014. Print, p. 332.

²¹ Marks, p. 333.

consisting of naked bodies and oversaturated flora, exist in a sort of fairytale realm of Rist's own creation that she then invites viewers into. In her first career-survey, Rist's *Pixel Forest* occupied three entire floors of the New Museum in 2017 (fig 8). Consisting of her selected works from the past three decades, *Pixel Forest* is a series of sensory spaces that completely immerse visitors in the realm her videos reside. In one piece, which the exhibit is named after, the individual pixels of a video hang from the ceiling in the form of colorful, glowing orbs that the viewer then moves through. The perception of scale within the entire exhibit fluctuates relative to the viewer. From looking into peepholes to being at the center of the pixel forest, Rist completely breaks down the separation between viewer and work, and as a result breaks down the divide between her reality and everyone else's. Rist engages in ideas of repressed sexual desire, which the Surrealists were prone to do, but she is free of the misogyny and objectification of women rampant in early Surrealist work. The installation feels rather like a reversal of the objectifying depiction of female bodies, bringing the viewer *into* her experiences of sexuality and desire, rather than inviting voyeurism.

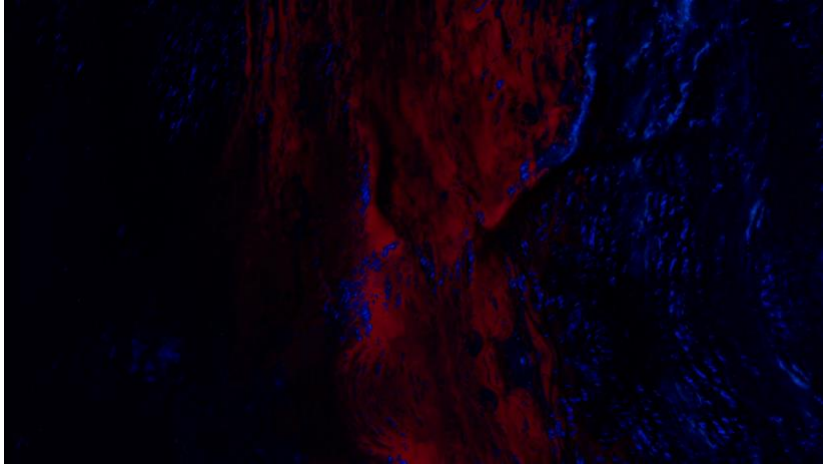
In the quest to undermine the traditional separation of viewer and art object in order to bring about a more primal, unconscious, and human experience of her work, Rist enables the viewer to have an experience of artwork that is 'primal,' immersive enough that the viewer abandons the hyper-analytical way in which art is so often viewed.²² In this way, viewers fuse their identities with the artist and simply live within the art.

²² "Pipilotti Rist: Pioneer of Video Art," YouTube video, 24:15, posted by "Bloomberg Markets & Finance," June 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCusgvPo5vM>.



8) "Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest," 2016. Exhibition view: New Museum. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio.

My work functions in a similar vein to Rist in the sense that it invites the viewer into an altered state of viewing and experiencing artwork by creating an ambiguity of scale and sound. *Binaural Chasm* is a short video piece of mine that functions almost like a sensory sedative, drawing the viewer further into my own imagined world (fig. 9). Visually ambiguous and unnaturally colored material drifts slowly towards an invisible vanishing point as the accompanying sound creates a strange balance of entrancement and unsettlement. As the directional sounds of footsteps and movement move through a seemingly flat space, and as Carl Jung's voice drifts through layers of a binaural beat and mechanical whirring, the audio feels more like it exists in the mind of the viewer and not the video space, blurring the line again between the viewer's reality and one of my own creation. By blanketing the viewer in washed out sights and sounds, they drift slowly further into the reality of the videos as they successively move deeper into the imagined space.



9) Ali Georgescu, *Binaural Chasm*, video still, 2020.

Mika Rottenberg's work serves as prime example of how video can be combined with other mediums to create an immersive experiential space. When Rottenberg speaks about her body of work, she describes her videos and installations as a multi-layered experience.²³ Her first solo museum installation, *Easypieces*, was exhibited at the New Museum in 2019 before traveling to the MCA Chicago and showcased a unique strategy of combining video, sound, and sculpture all into one cohesive museum space (fig. 10). The videos, existing in a constructed world of free-associations, themselves deal with intersections of labor, object hood and personhood, and collapsed distances between faraway places, connected by an underground tunnel system. If the videos alone, full of kinesthetic materials and hypnotic audio, are not immersive enough, the movement from place to place in the videos is mimicked by the sculptural layout of the installation itself. As the viewer moves through the tunnels running through the videos, they are also physically moving through echoes of the same structures. These portals are broken up by uncanny sculptural disruptions scattered throughout

²³ "Mika Rottenberg: Social Surrealism," *Louisiana Channel* video, 32:00, 2017, <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/mika-rottenberg-social-surrealism>.

the installation, which feel like inaccessible windows to even more pieces of the world Rottenberg has created. The videos, sculptures, ambient sounds, and ‘tunnels’ function as layers of world building that keep the spectator immersed in the uncanny valley her work resides in. In this way, the boundaries between the viewers’ reality and Rottenberg’s created one dissolve into a new surreality.



10) Installation view, *Mika Rottenberg: Easypieces*, 2017, MCA Chicago. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

Rottenberg’s work also addresses the complicated relationship of women and fetish. Her videos often involve female actors known for their unconventional bodies; i.e., bodybuilders, the extremely large, and individuals with physical anomalies. Many of these women commodify their physical differences by appealing to fetish communities, using the same features that have ‘othered’ them in the eyes of society to empower and profit from them. Rottenberg explores this reversal of objectification in her work, placing these women in scenes where their bodies are directly connected to labor and production, challenging the traditional objectification of unconventional bodies. The conflict of socially-deemed ‘grotesqueness’ and

the empowerment of the actors switches the traditional power balance of the act of viewing.²⁴ This, while related also a commentary on capitalist consumerism, is at its core a reversal of how female bodies were depicted during the surrealist movement.

My work takes inspiration from the ways in which Rottenberg communicates her ideas by engaging with the viewer's senses; simultaneously evoking intrigue and repulsion, to challenge the traditional aesthetics of art in order to break down the viewer's footing in reality. My video, *Under*, has a similar push/pull of sensory richness and grotesqueness as a means to unconsciously and physiologically connect the viewer and the video (fig. 11). Hands pick apart an icy sculpture, filled and covered with a mix of red liquid and wax, while the soundtrack emulates the sounds of a submarine straining under building pressure, drawing out a dis-ease in the viewer that draws them further into that reality. Furthermore, as I begin plans to display my current body of work, Rottenberg's strategy of mimicking the structures of an imagined world throughout the layout of an installation serve as an inspiration. Though not complete, my vision for this work as an installation is to use a combination of the video and photographs within an activated viewing space that calls back to my maps of the imagined unconscious. Like Rottenberg, I would like to utilize whatever sensory-engaging tools I can to create an uncanny and immersive viewing space.

²⁴ Emily Watlington, "Selling Sweat: on the Ethics of Renting 'Extraordinary Bodies' in Mika Rottenberg's Videos," *Another Gaze 02*, September 5, 2019.



11) Ali Georgescu, *Under*, video still, 2020.

Both Rottenberg and Rist engage in the surrealist vein by demanding a closer relationship between the viewer and the artwork by means of engaging with the viewers' unconscious. By creating their own intuitive realities and drawing the viewer into those realities through sensory immersion, they have set examples of how surrealist concepts can be brought to life through video and installation. Both of their works also reveal a desire to rid surrealist work from its misogynistic origins and redefine explorations of the self. While my work is not explicitly feminist, it aligns with other women artists who reject the misogynist exploitations of the surrealist ethos and work towards a new interpretation of its fundamental worth as a medium. My work exists under the call for contemporary art that renews the viewers' interest in and engagement with the unconscious, under new theoretical footholds.

Conclusion

Sometimes I wonder how surrealism as a movement would be different had Sigmund Freud not served as its conceptual masthead in the quest of unlocking the unconscious. What if our contemporary scientific understanding of the unconscious had guided the visual language of

surrealism and not a glorified confidence man whose work has been unilaterally debunked? Even Jung's work, eccentric as it is, would have offered a more open-ended exploration into something so much more intricate and rich than what the depths of the unconscious were understood to be in the first half of the twentieth century. What my work suggests is a reappraisal of what surrealism can be and what can be done in the 21st century that was not conceivable in the time of André Breton. In a similar vein to how Dada and Surrealism formed partially in response to the horrors of World War I, it feels appropriate that a similar style of art-making would emerge after the intense collective trauma of the past few years, culminating in the especially nightmarish 2020. As we are currently wading through the aftermath of an intensely traumatic time in history, there is no better time than now to revisit the topic of inner worlds, the topic that my own work is based around. Surrealism is open to many shortcomings, due to the fundamentally unknowable world that they are trying to tap into, and the problematic nature of their scientific inspiration; however, not only technological but also scientific and cultural developments over the past century call for a new exploration into its fundamental ethos: art made in the quest to understand the unconscious self.

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