

- 1 'Robert Irwin: Overview', White Cube, available at https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/robert_irwin, accessed 9th October 2018.
- 2 M. Hudson: 'Robert Irwin: "my paintings were bad, I felt totally naked"', *The Telegraph* (10th October 2015), available at <https://telegraph.co.uk/art/artists/robert-irwin-bad-paintings-interview/>, accessed 5th October 2018.
- 3 R. Irwin, J. Turrell and E. Wortz: 'Documents from LACMA Art & Technology Collaboration: D. Statement (January 1969)', in M. Simms, ed.: *Robert Irwin: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*, Los Angeles 2017, p.31.
- 4 Catalogue: *Space Shifters*. Edited by Cliff Lauson, Dawna Schuld and Lynn Zelevansky. 216 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Hayward Gallery Publishing, London, 2018), £27.99. ISBN 978-1-85332-357-7.
- 5 J. Ure-Smith: 'The art of Robert Irwin and Dan Flavin', *Financial Times* (29th April 2016), available at <https://ft.com/content/144dd71e-064c-11e6-9b51-0fb5e65703ce>, accessed 5th October 2018.



Mika Rottenberg
Goldsmiths Centre for
Contemporary Art, London
8th September–4th November

by MARTIN CAIGER-SMITH

Central London art schools have in recent years been caught up in a spate of building expansion, consolidation, refurbishment and relocations – at times controversial, at others triumphant. Central St Martins' move to the vast new site of University of the Arts London, north of Kings Cross, the Royal College of Art's continuing developments in Battersea, London Metropolitan's new Holloway campus and the Royal Academy Schools' enhanced presence within the Royal Academy's major expansion project all point to a general desire to be seen more publicly, to assert or maintain a visible place for art at the centre of the learning community.

Goldsmiths, across the river in a workaday, unlovely area of South London, has never really played the glamour game: Michael Craig-Martin, as a young artist called to teach at the College in the early 1970s, described it – on his arrival – as 'generally considered to be the least interesting London art school', 'the stubborn underdog [. . .] liberal to the point of chaotically free'.¹ Much has changed in its reputation since then, not least due to the teaching revolution there of which Craig-Martin was part, and the ensuing rise of the generation

of Young British Artists that helped propel the London contemporary scene to prominence in the 1990s. Now a multi-disciplinary constituent of the University of London, Goldsmiths has added an impressive 'flagship' Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) to the mixed and muddled range of old and newer buildings on its urban campus.

The new gallery stands on the perimeter of Goldsmiths, close to a Victorian huddle of civic buildings around Deptford Town Hall, and part of the Laurie Grove public bathhouse and laundry, a red-and-white Jacobean-style building erected in 1898, closed in 1991 and acquired by Goldsmiths soon after. For the past twenty years the baths' lofty double-height space has been divided into makeshift studios; the new Gallery, in an array of ancillary spaces and elevated water tanks to the rear of the building, now presents a very different and more welcoming public face.

From an open architectural competition in 2014, and a shortlist of six practices, the jurors selected an 'outlier': Assemble, the locally-based, collaborative, community-minded and multi-disciplinary collective of artists, architects, designers and others, which caused waves when it made away with the Turner Prize in 2015. Although it might have seemed brave at the time, CCA's choice has proved wise. Assemble's unorthodox practice defines itself as progressive, socially engaged, learning-by-doing; here, their

30. *Cosmic Generator*, by Mika Rottenberg. 2017. Video and sculptural installation, dimensions variable. (© Mika Rottenberg; courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, and Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris; exh. Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London).

hands-on approach, at once respectful, improvisatory, inventive and playful, has transformed an unpromising ensemble and delivered an intriguing range of spaces that responds to the building's original function, trading heavily on its stories over time.

Entering the Gallery shortly after it opened, visitors heard sounds: the constant whirr of a fan, thump and scrape of hands at work, a voice calling; upstairs, the drip of water and hiss of steam; and, here and there, a loud sneeze. The inaugural show (closed 4th November) was the work of the New York-based Argentinian artist Mika Rottenberg: sculpture and video installations, some early (from

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2003), most recent, and three newly commissioned. As an inaugural show this was an astute curatorial decision; the gallery's tone and character lent itself well to the work, and the artist, in turn, disposed her works deftly across spaces on all floors. Rottenberg is well known on the international circuit. Her cinematic and sculptural language, and the narratives of her work, weave around the performance of remarkable non-actors ('talents', as she calls them) engaged in unremarkable and repetitive activities choreographed within constricted settings, some makeshift, others elaborately constructed (Fig.30). Artificial sounds, faux-material surfaces and heightened colours, metamorphosis and transformative processes, both organic and artificial, abound. The mode is absurdist, at times surreal, often unsettling; those repeated sneezes you hear emanating from Rottenberg's films produce, in one instance, a live rabbit, in another, plate after full plate of Chinese noodles. The works offer enigmatic yet pointed comment on the debased and devalued nature of labour (mainly that of women) and leisure in an equally absurd world of global transference and interdependence, in which realities slide, intercut and melt one into another, according to a sense that is, one feels, always to be grasped in the next room.

Secretions, tubes, tunnels and conduits, and a frequent slippage from body to architecture, point readily to

the testing narratives and contrived settings of Matthew Barney's films (Rottenberg acknowledges the artist as an early inspiration). The spaces in Rottenberg's films spaces have, in her more recent work, grown in scope and ambition, shifting from the studio set to the world at large (a Harlem bingo parlour, a plastic goods emporium in China). Their scenarios flow out, seamlessly, into the forms and materials of her physical sculpture and, it seemed, into the real spaces of the gallery (Fig.32), resonating with the architecture's conflation of present and past use.

There is no Mayfair slick or corporate sheen at CCA, no white cube, 'untouched by time and its vicissitudes', as Brian O'Doherty described the archetypal gallery of the late twentieth century. Three floors, a thousand square metres of space, seven hundred of it gallery: a series of adaptable, modest-scaled rooms opening one into another allow a choice of routes, up or down, around a double-height project and performance space (Fig.33). The original tall windows look out on abutting sheds and dreary containers; floor surfaces vary from raw concrete to original boards, new plaster walls run into expanses of ersatz exposed brick and patinated bathhouse tile. One is always looking across, and being observed from, other spaces and levels (including the working studios next door, overlooked from

the window of a new staircase landing). On the top floor there is the drama of rooftop water tanks turned into a dark-walled, high-lit gallery (animated in Rottenberg's show by the dripping water and hissing steam of her installation, *Frying Pans*) (Fig.31). Insistent remnants of the building's past life – lifting gear, retractable iron racks in the steam room – have been augmented by Assemble's own judicious if quirky insertions of material and texture. Too much 'event' for a contemporary gallery, or a fetishisation of past memories? Perhaps, yet it seems to work: although it affords a rather disjointed experience, and there's more floor than usable wall, the space offers possibilities, and there are good political points made here, by architect and client alike. The gallery acknowledges its environs and asks to be inhabited, resisting the call for grand gesture or spectacle.

Concurrently, the central performance space displayed a selection of ephemera, manuscripts, drawings and recordings from the archive of an absurdist of a very

31. Installation view of *Mika Rottenberg* at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London, 8th September–4th November 2018. (Photograph Andy Keate; courtesy the artist).

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different generation: Ivor Cutler, the Scottish poet, performer and tenor. Cutler was a local hero, often to be seen, badge-encrusted, cycling the London streets in the decades until his death in 2006. By allowing for this sort of elliptical programming link, both in its spatial architecture and its live links to the university, CCA appears to be both announcing itself as an international player and addressing an audience closer to home.

Museums, from their earliest days, have always been part of universities. In the United States, at least, there has been a recent upsurge of high-profile new university museum buildings by trophy architects, appealing to alumni, to donors, to their wider communities and, occasionally, to students. The Goldsmiths initiative is different. It comes from the art department; without a collection to display, the Gallery is effectively a blank slate and the curatorial programme, led by Director Sarah McCrory, remains determinedly autonomous. The CCA will, it claims, draw widely on the university's research strengths, although quite how far the opportunities it affords will extend to other departments of the university remains to be seen.

Endeavours such as this, modest-scaled projects with bold, even international vision, have been few, at least in Britain. Portikus at the Städelschule art academy in Frankfurt comes first to mind: a small, high-profile gallery with a renowned programme, which has seen a roll-call of eminent and emerging international artists over the last thirty years; the Wattis Institute at California College of the Arts, working closely and in depth with individual artists, is another. CCA's future programme promises a similar offering of the aspiring and established. The names of illustrious artist alumni loom large on the benefactors' board but apparently CCA is intended neither as a showcase for Goldsmiths's own emerging talents, nor its past best. There are links to its Curating MFA (students have successfully pitched proposals in open competition, and can apply for a Junior Fellowship on the curatorial team), but CCA clearly



33. Project space, Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London. 2018. (Photograph courtesy Assemble).

intends to face in all directions, addressing its local audiences both within and beyond the university as well as making its mark on a national and international level. Whatever the building's future may hold, it stands as a worthy addition to a re-energised south London scene (a short bus ride away is the South London Gallery, with its recently opened Fire House

extension, designed by architects 6a). If Goldsmiths CCA can maintain its level of funding support, and in so doing resist the siren lure of the most powerful dealer galleries offering their stables on easy terms, it is an exciting prospect with much to offer, on a number of levels.

¹ M. Craig-Martin: *On Being An Artist*, London 2015, p.141.