JON KESSLER

Born in 1967, Yonkers, NY
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

Jon Kessler has had numerous solo institutional exhibitions, such as *The Web,* Swiss Institute, New York, NY which traveled to Museum Tinguely, Basel, CH (2013); *Sculptures from the 80s and 90s*, Fisher Landau Center for Art, New York, NY (2010); the Drawing Center, New York, NY (2007); his first immersive installation *The Palace at 4 AM,* exhibited at MoMA PS1, New York, NY, Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen, DK, ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, DE and permanently installed at the Phoenix Kulturstiftung/Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg, DE (2005); a retrospective of his Asian inspired sculptures, *Jon Kessler's Asia,* exhibited at Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover, DE, Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, AU, and Puerto de Santander, ES (1994); the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA (1991); the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (1987); the MCA Chicago, IL and Cincinnati Art Center, OH (1986). White Columns, New York, NY (1983); and Artist's Space, New York, NY (1983).

His work has been included in group exhibitions such as *L'Ennemi de Mon Ennemi,* Palais de Tokyo, Paris, FR (2018); *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today,* ICA Boston, MA (2018); the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2017; 1985); 20/20, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA (2017); *Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue*, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, IT (2014); *Contemplating the Void,* Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY (2010); and many others. Throughout the 1980s and 90s he exhibited regularly at Luhring Augustine Gallery in New York, Galerie Max Hetzler and Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, as well as Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris. In the 2000s he has held exhibitions at Deitch Projects and Salon 94 in New York.

Kessler's works are in the permanent collections of many institutions including The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; The Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY; The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; The Broad, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; The Aldrich Contemporary Art Musuem, Ridgefield, CT; Phoenix Art Museum, AZ; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON; Chase Manhattan Art Collection, New York, NY; Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Collection, Miami, FL; the Tinguely Museum, Basel, CH; the Burger Collection, Hong Kong, CN; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, NL; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY.

He is the recipient of several National Endowment for the Arts awards, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation award, a Foundation for the Performing Arts award, a St. Gaudens Memorial award, and a Creative Capital Grant. He is a Professor of Art at Columbia University where he has taught since 1994, and has lived and worked continuously in a former paint factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn since 1980.

Metal Magazine
October 2 2017

METAL

JON KESSLER

MULTIMEDIA ART AS POLITICS

Art is not politics, according to Kessler, but art carries politically engaged meanings that are capable of deeply question society at all levels. Jon Kessler shows us through his works how artists can address topics like war, surveillance and even digital innovation, stimulating not only viewers' minds but also their five senses through his immersive installations. Kessler's signature is represented by the structural complexity of his sculptures and installations. He is a master of the invention, a visionary builder of moving machines, like a contemporary Jean Tinguely, but less onanistic and more grounded into a political reflection over society.

Playing with the concepts of image obsession, technology, and the relation between what is seen and what is unseen, he has reached the highest peaks of the art world and his works have been on show in museums like MoMA, Saatchi Collection and the Whitney Museum, just to name a few.

Your artistic career started in the '80s, when technology and digital tools were not as important as today. How has your perspective on art and technology changed throughout the years?

I've been making mechanical sculptures since I began in 1983 and at that point I was just using lights and motors; I integrated some computers into the work – handmade computers – from 1985. But the work really shifted after 9/11 and at that point I started integrating video cameras, surveillance cameras, and monitors. So that's when the work took a dramatic shift: I turned not just on the materials but also on the ideas of the works picking more political and more social. So I've always been using hi-tech things like computers, which I mix with very low-tech fence, like simple mechanical apparatuses.

Your sculptures and installations are very complex and full of different elements and media. How do you assemble them and where do you find all the different components that build each work?

Yes, the installations are very complicated. My first installation is from 2005, and it is called *Palace at 4 A.M.* My studio is large but it's not large enough to see that work fully put together, so I built the parts but also ordered a lot of them. Now it's much easier to order things on the Internet, so I got a lot of them online. But back at that day I used to have to go to these electronic stores with my truck and buy all the stuff

Your works often reflect over the subject of image-obsession and its role in society. However visual art is based mainly on images. How do you approach this theme within your practice?

I've addressed it in different ways. In some of the works I do, I generate the images myself. Other times I steal images from books or from existing advertisement, so I get in the web with Apple ads, for example. Because I am coupling the cameras and the real with the meaning of them and of the represented, I create an unnerving situation where you don't completely trust what you are seeing. And I think that that's the situation where we are now, where you have what's real right in front of you but you are more comfortable looking at a screen, at image. As if you are looking at images that actually are in some way more comfortable. So I always couple the object with how it's mediated. And I think I leave the viewers decide for themselves where to look at. Hopefully they are looking at both, because both are completely necessary in my work.

One of your latest installations, *The Web*, commissioned by the Métamatic Research Initiative in Amsterdam, questions the massive use of smartphones and social media. What kind of reactions and thoughts did you want to produce to the viewers? How do you feel about this massive use of gadgets and social media?

I'm critical of the use of gadgets and at the same time I'm interested in exploiting their use. So I created a phone app that only worked for iPhones, because the work really was about Apple in some ways. And so I created a phone

app where, if you take a picture while you are in the show, it will then get used in the installation. I know I can't stop people from taking selfies, this is just what happens. So I thought: "Ok, this will catalyse on them, this will benefit from it". So I own now photographs that were taken using my app in my installation, and I'll do something with them. I don't know what I'm going to do yet, but I will use them at some point.

Do you think that the importance of the Internet and the digital devices is going to change the way we use and perceive art in the future?

Yes, I do. I think we are really in a transition point, where virtual reality becomes more viable and successful, and augmented reality becomes more ours. I think it's going to change the way artists create and make. I still think that paints will get made, I still think that traditional sculpture will get made. But I do think it will expand the artists reach in terms of how to connect with the viewer. I am in the Whitney Biennial right now, and there is a piece on that show that is a virtual reality artwork that is getting a lot of attention, and it's a very strong piece. So I do, I think we are just beginning to see how it can be used.

***The Palace at 4 A.M.*, with its sixty mechanical sculptures, three hundred video monitors and six miles of cable can be considered your most complex work to date. The references to 9/11, Bush and the hunt for weapons of mass destruction with the consequent invasion of Iraq represent a summary of the topics investigated by your artistic research. What did you want to evoke and suggest to the public through the installation? Would you consider it your masterpiece?**

'Masterpiece' is a really big word; I don't know if I would even use it. I always think it's better for other people to call something that you have done a masterpiece rather than me defining it as so. That is the piece that I consider my 'Apocalypse Now'. I was trying to come to terms just in a way Coppola did when he made that movie about the insanity of war. His war was the Vietnam one; mine is Iraq's. I was trying to deal with the progression of events from the election in 2002, the hunt for weapons of mass destruction, the invasion of Iraq, and then even on a national level Hurricane Katrina, which happened under the same president. So I wanted the viewer to come with me along this kind of journey. There wasn't one road, but many, many ways to see it. Every viewer saw something different and got some part or another of the story. And now there's a story I am trying to tell from 2000 to 2005.

"Art is not politics. Art is not environmentalism. Art is art. But art is full of ideas, and ideas can be challenging and they can change people's understandings about culture and the world."

***Ghosts* is a project made in collaboration with author Paul Auster. Can you tell us something about this work, how it started and what is it about?**

Paul is my brother in law and we decided to make a piece together, and Ghosts has always been one of my favorite books of his. In my wife's and Paul's wife family there are four girls, all of them married to guys. So I took the four main characters of the story – Mr. White, Mr. Blue, Mr. Black and Mr. Brown – and we (Paul, me and the other two) became them in the installation.

There are a lot of other details about the installation: the characters are kind of doing what they do in the book – Mr. Blue is the detective and he's got the binocular, Mr. Black (Paul) is actually sitting on the desk and he's writing, etc. And then there are pages from the book, writings, monitors, and video cameras moving very slowly along the floor. It's almost like the book is taken apart. I wanted to give the sense that the book had come alive and you were entering it.

War, surveillance, and politics are topics that are always present in your works. Do you think that artists can play a role in shaping social consciousness and maybe even inspire people to question and change their habits and believes?

Yes, I do. I think that art can have an incredible effect on the world. Art is not politics. Art is not environmentalism. Art is art. But art is full of ideas, and ideas can be challenging and they can change people's understandings about culture and the world. I like the idea that I'm working with this very challenging and kind of difficult subject, like surveillance and the use of surveillance to talk about surveillance. I'm exploiting and critiquing at the same time.

What do you have in store for the future? Are you currently working on something new?

I am working on a large installation called Flooding World, and it's about climate change and about the fact that the water level is arising and we are going to see massive amount of refugees. We are going to see storms like we have never seen before unless we really do something about it; we are going to see environmental disasters and that's the next large piece I'm working on.

Hyperallergic
March 2017

HYPERALLERGIC

An Omnivorous Tour of the 2017 Whitney Biennial

See highlights from the 2017 Whitney Biennial, which opens to the public later this week.

Benjamin Sutton March 13, 2017

Jon Kessler, "Evolution" (2016)

The New Yorker
February 26 2015

THE NEW YORKER

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

JON KESSLER

By The New Yorker

February 26, 2015

The New York sculptor is best known for his paranoiac, immersive, televisual installations, but since 1994 he has also been making much smaller works given as gifts. Most have kinetic elements, and look like things that Mark di Suvero might make if he drank ayahuasca: a seesaw that counterposes stones and a bird skeleton, a pendulum whose base is a Chinatown-sourced horse figurine, chains providing ballast for water glasses with flowers. Each one expresses Kessler's love, wit, and generosity. Through March 28.*(Salon 94 Freemans; Feb. 15–March 28.)*

Published in the print edition of the March 9, 2015, issue.

Hyperallergic
March 2014

HYPERALLERGIC

An Artist's Narco-Namaste Yoga Mat

Hrag Vartanian March 28, 2014

Jon Kessler's $80 yoga mat (via the artist)

Nothing says yoga quite like a mat that looks like a $100 bill with a razor blade, broken mirror, and lines of cocaine on it. One encourages relaxation of a certain type, while the other offers a more jittery variety of downtime that feels very much up.

A detail of Kessler's yoga mat

Designed by New York–based artist Jon Kessler, the object is part of a series of yoga mats by Grey Area, which includes versions created by Daniel Arsham, Wim Delvoye, and others.

The New York Times
April 11 2013

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Jon Kessler: 'The Web'

By Karen Rosenberg
April 11, 2013

Swiss Institute

18 Wooster Street, between Grand and Canal Streets, SoHo

Through April 28

With all his usual bells and whistles, as well as some new ones, Jon Kessler nimbly mocks the art world's techno-dependency in his kinetic multimedia installation "The Web." It's best experienced with a smartphone or tablet in hand, after downloading the related app, but anyone can stumble into the piece and become part of Mr. Kessler's "Matrix"-like dystopia.

As you negotiate a hive of whirring machinery, live-feed video monitors, modified Apple advertisements, robotic mannequins in hoodies and blue machine-knit fabric, you will see yourself and other visitors on various screens. You can control some of what you see with the app by taking photographs that appear in different parts of the installation, but you may find that your selfie pops up in some awkward places (there is a good deal of bathroom humor involved).

Throughout, rotating and sliding contraptions evoke the self-destructing machines of the sculptor Jean Tinguely — as does, perhaps, the periodic chime of a Mac starting up.

(The piece, commissioned by the Métamatic Research Initiative in Amsterdam, travels to the Museum Tinguely in Basel in October.)

There are two parts to Mr. Kessler's critique; one has to do with rampant photo sharing as a cultural experience, and the other is more about the art world's fidelity to the Apple brand and aesthetic. (Go to any art fair or museum and you will see phalanxes of iPads deployed for purposes commercial and educational.)

The Apple obsession drags "The Web" from satire down into parody; it's less trenchant, ultimately, than Mr. Kessler's antiwar, anti-surveillance masterpiece from 2005, "The Palace at 4 a.m." But the interactive element is remarkably effective; it's a kind of short-circuited social network in which shared images stay on-site instead of zooming around the Internet — the closest thing art may have, in this moment, to a captive audience.

Art 21 Magazine
April 4 2013

art21

On View Now | Welcome to the Pleasure Dome: Jon Kessler's "The Web"

by Max Weintraub | Apr 4, 2013

Jon Kessler. "The Web," 2013 at Swiss Institute. Courtesy the artist and Métamatic Research Initiative, Amsterdam. Photo: Daniel Perez.

Jon Kessler has built a remarkable career out of rather clunky mechanized sculptures. A 1996 Guggenheim Fellow and a professor in Columbia University's School of the Arts since 1994, Mr. Kessler has had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1986), the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh (1991), and P.S. 1 in New York (2005), to name but a few. Kessler's art often balances dark themes and political subject matter with a wry humor and mesmerizing modes of presentation. In 2009, for example, he debuted *Kessler's Circus*, a video sculpture that the Deitch Projects press release noted at the time "depicts the American military-industrial complex as macabre circus."

In *The Web*, Mr. Kessler's latest work currently on view at the Swiss Institute in New York City, the mediated scenes of modern warfare of *Kessler's Circus* have been exchanged for the sublime spectacle of consumer culture. Kessler turns to contemporary visual culture, and specifically Apple Inc., to examine the impact of popular and commercial imagery and products on society's desires and collective psyche.

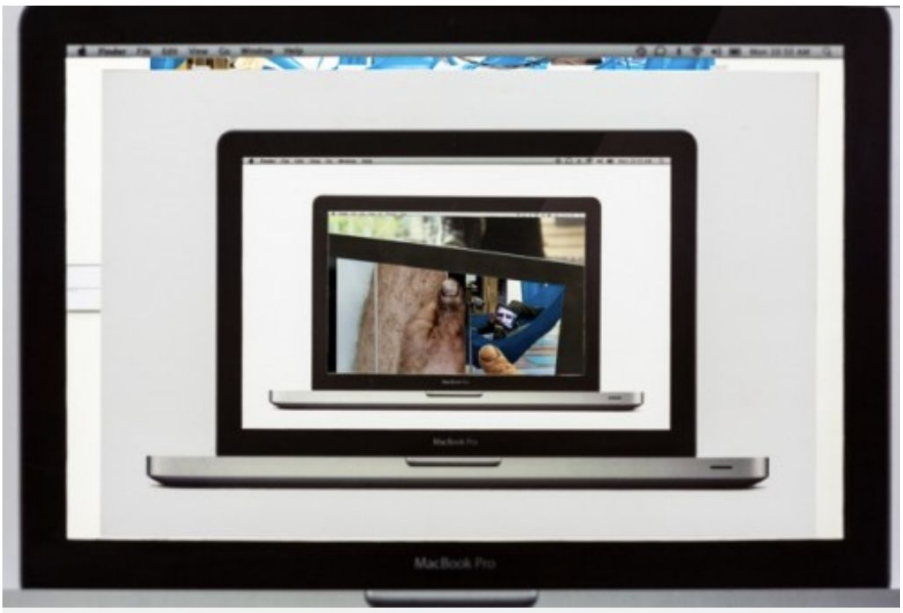
The Web is a colorful, kinetic installation filled with whirling objects and brightly lit computer screens housed within a sprawling wooden construction. Kessler has mounted iPads, iPhones, and other Apple hardware throughout the installation, while surveillance cameras rotate back and forth

on mechanized mounts. The quiet hum of the machinery is occasionally punctuated by the iconic sound of an Apple computer's startup chime played over loudspeakers.

A variety of security cameras positioned throughout the installation—including tiny spy-cams held by lifelike disembodied hands—stream real-time footage across the network of monitors and screens situated throughout the installation, where they mix with prerecorded imagery of earlier visitors and footage culled from commercial advertising. Visitors can also download an iPhone app while in the exhibition space that will upload the images from their phone onto surrounding monitors. The brightly lit screens and banks of stacked television monitors create a kaleidoscope of video imagery, and visitors could certainly be forgiven if they at first mistake *The Web* for a fun, interactive tribute to Apple.

Jon Kessler. "The Web," 2013 at Swiss Institute. Courtesy the artist and Métamatic Research Initiative, Amsterdam. Photo: Daniel Perez.

Before long, however, Kessler's mechanized sculptural environment devolves into a technological hall of mirrors, as the montage of live and taped video produces a confusing loop of people observing themselves and others while they too are watched. As images of people no longer physically present in the exhibition space appear on the screens alongside those who still are, one struggles to keep track of what is and is not happening in real time. It can be a somewhat bewildering and even a bit disorienting experience as the installation presents and re-presents live and recorded video feeds, with little differentiation between the two (fittingly, one section of the sculptural installation is titled "Infinite Regress"). What is more, commercials for iPads and iPhones play on monitors wherein you see a live shot of yourself on the screens of the Apple products in the advertisement.



Jon Kessler. "The Web," 2013 at Swiss Institute. Courtesy the artist and Métamatic Research Initiative, Amsterdam. Photo: Daniel Perez.

Adding to *The Web*'s hall-of-mirrors effect, visitors peer into different sections of the installation through cutouts of computer and iPad screens that Kessler has presumably culled from Apple advertisements and product packaging. In other words, objects of cultural consumption—commodities—often literally frame the visitor's visual consumption.

Within *The Web*'s restless visual field visitors encounter on three different occasions a man lounging in a hammock. Dubbed the "Global Village Idiot," this animatronic figure, whose features are based on Kessler's own, relaxes as the security cameras spin to and fro and computer monitors flicker with endless streams of images around him. He has a long beard and is dressed in what might be called typical "hipster" attire: a brown zip-up hoodie with "BROOKLYN" written across the front, olive-drab cargo pants and a tattered pair of converse all-star sneakers without laces. One "Global Village Idiot" swipes through images from the surveillance cameras on his iPad while another FaceTimes on his MacBook with any visitors peering into an iPhone located in a far corner of the gallery. The third figure, tucked away in the back of the installation, holds his iPhone to his ear with one hand while masturbating with the other.

The "Global Village Idiot" has been a recurring figure in Kessler's work for some years now. The moniker combines "village idiot" with Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, "Global Village," which McLuhan coined in the early 1960s to describe the integrated, global audience resulting from the instantaneous worldwide reach of new electronic technologies. In conjoining "village idiot" and "global village," Kessler apparently does not share McLuhan's optimism about technology's capacity to produce a globally unified community.

By mobilizing the conventional signs of what is popularly known as a "hipster"—a term generally used to identify a subcultural group that fetishizes seemingly authentic modes of being and living—Kessler's "Global Village Idiot" figure suggests a more insidious relationship between technology, commercial advertising and self-expression than McLuhan envisioned. In fact, the "Global Village Idiot" and the experience of *The Web* as a whole seems closer to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's ideas concerning the mass production of culture, which they called the "Culture Industry."

In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1947, Adorno and Horkheimer warn that seemingly authentic expressions of individual, even counter-cultural identity are increasingly filtered through a formulaic visual

vocabulary of stylistic artifice carefully crafted by corporate marketing. Unlike McLuhan, Adorno and Horkheimer saw an increasingly homogenized culture as a threat to individuality and critical thought. They believed that the capitalist ethos of corporate and media culture manipulated and prescribed consumer desires in order to then satisfy them with their products. Adorno and Horkheimer proposed that those areas in life where people believed themselves to be genuinely free has in fact been compromised by the streamlined system of capitalism in which corporations supply a demand that they themselves helped to shape.

Jon Kessler, "The Web," 2013 at Swiss Institute. Courtesy the artist and Métamatic Research Initiative, Amsterdam. Photo: Daniel Perez.

Kessler's hipster figure of the "Global Village Idiot" might be considered the embodiment of the Culture Industry's effects, where individual style is

expressed and a seemingly authentic sense of self is validated through an increasingly homogenized menu of options. Kessler's interest in the insidious relationship between mass production and mass consumption is suggested by the title of another of the artist's works, *Desert of the Real*, from 2009. "Desert of the Real" is a phrase used by the philosopher Jean Baudrillard to describe the proliferation of images in late capitalism and, perhaps more famously, a phrase uttered by the character Morpheus in the Baudrillard-inspired *The Matrix*, a film in which reality is revealed to be nothing more than a simulation designed by machines to keep people enslaved.

Kessler's use of iPhones, iPads and Macbooks in *The Web* seems particularly fitting to Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas, as Apple is one of the largest companies in the world in terms of market capitalization thanks in part to its selling itself as the cool, independent "outsider" option to the big bad corporate behemoths. Indeed, Apple has consistently and successfully branded itself and its products as signifying some sort of authentic and individual form of expression, from the famous "1984" commercial in the early 1980s—in which Apple Macintosh is positioned as the counter-cultural rebel to IBM's monolithic, even fascist corporate ethos—to their more recent ad campaigns in which a balding, suit-wearing corporate dolt represents the PC while the Mac is personified by a young, smart and composed guy in a t-shirt, jeans and sneakers.

With its surveillance cameras, "Global Village Idiot" and readymade commercial imagery of happy, beautiful people holding iPhones and iPads, *The Web* is not a celebration of technology in general and Apple in particular but a sober and sobering assessment of the technology and corporate aims behind our smartphone and social media culture. But perhaps *The Web*'s greatest feat is that its mesmerizing display of technology seduces as much as critiques. Rarely has a work of art attended so carefully to the beguiling seduction of visual culture, to which I willingly and enthusiastically succumbed by taking photos of *The Web* with my beloved iPhone 5. And as Adorno and Horkhemier (and Baudrillard) would probably tell you, that seduction is part of the allure of the Culture Industry.

The author taking a picture of his own image as it appears on an iPad screen within a "commercial" running on a flatscreen monitor in Jon Kessler's "The Web." Photo: Max Weintraub.

Hyperallergic
March 2012

HYPERALLERGIC

Paranoid Surveillance or Entertaining Voyeurism?

Allison Meier March 6, 2012

Jon Kessler, "The Blue Period" (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Don't go to Jon Kessler's *The Blue Period* at Salon 94 Bowery if you don't like to be watched. Actually, if surveillance makes you nervous, you should probably move to the remote landscape of Antarctica, because at least in Kessler's installation the cameras are visible. The thousands of CCTV units that constantly film us in the streets and buildings of New York are not. Yet beyond just reminding us that privacy is dwindling, we see that there's the trade-off in *The Blue Period* for enjoyable voyeurism.

Installation view of "The Blue Period"

The Blue Period is a disorienting spectacle. Once in *The Blue Period*, you quickly realize you are being filmed for the stack of televisions streaming footage from the gallery alongside film and TV clips of people painted blue. (Tobias in the *Arrested Development* TV serial, the Blue Man Group and the end scene of Jean-Luc Godard's 1965 film *Pierrot le Fou* make appearances.) But you are not the only star of the gallery show. In fact, it's rather crowded with young, ponderous people, life-size figures who are two-dimensional, but, through the flattening of the video screens and the tricks your eyes play, can be mistaken ov and over for the real thing.

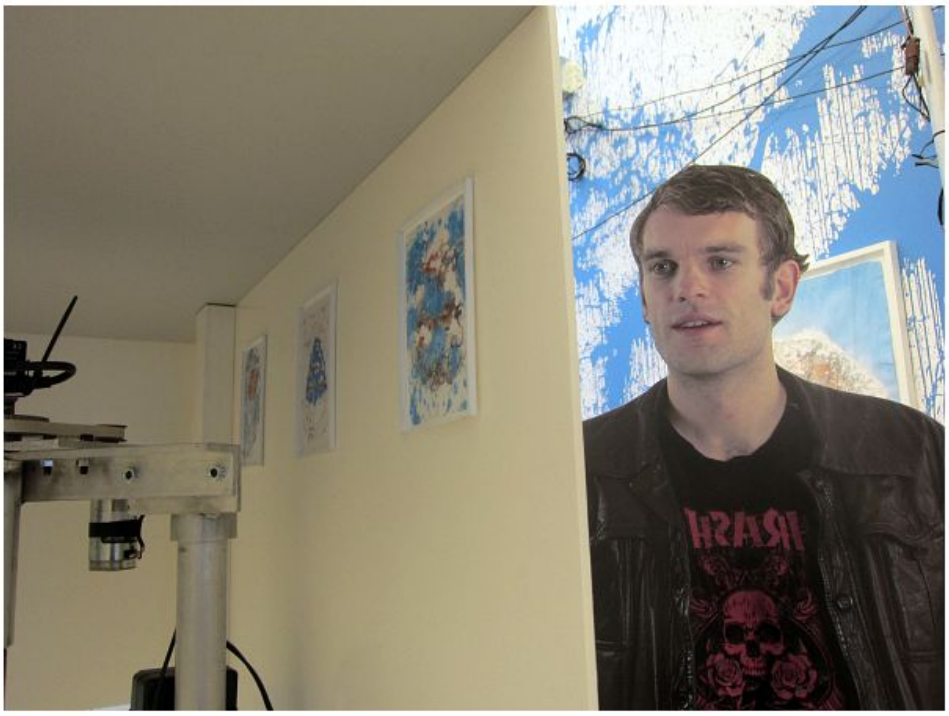
Installation view of “The Blue Period”

The two-dimensional figures were made from photographs of some of Kessler’s MFA students at Columbia University, where he is a professor, and they all are in the somewhat awkward poses of people who know they are being photographed and want to appear casual. It would be distracting, but since you are also trying to view the art while aware that you are being filmed by the twisting little cameras, the real and flat people make for a homogeneously self-conscious crowd. A few of the figures are smeared with blue paint below their eyes or over their mouths, which weakens the effect.

Two-dimensional people and face carousel in “The Blue Period”

The feral splatters of blue paint across the wall add to the sensory assault and seem like manifestations of the roving movements of the cameras that observe you around the gallery. A carousel of faces sliced from magazines offer another visual for the televisions, and another camera turns inside a miniature version of the gallery, which is lined with small versions of the two-dimensional works on the wall: collages slapped with blue paint. When you look closely at these collages, you find more faces ripped from magazines staring back. The sky-blue color serves to connect everything together into a singular piece.

If this all seems like a lot then you should know that being immersed in the installation and trying to take in all the stimuli is exhausting. According to Salon 94’s press release, “this video-drenched panopticon is the culmination of Kessler’s longtime interest in surveillance, alienation and spectacle,” and is “a spiritual descendant of *Society as Spectacle*, Guy Debord’s seminal 1967 critique of the ascendant consumer culture and the general passivity and isolation it engenders.”



Miniature gallery and two-dimensional onlooker in "The Blue Period"

Consumerism, surveillance, alienation and spectacle were also at the core of Kessler's 2005 show at MoMA's PS1, *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, which was another frenetic installation that used masses of television, pop culture finds and kinetic pieces. I wasn't able to see the installation at PS1, but from photographs, it appears to be more aggressive than *The Blue Period* (i.e., more images of graphic porn than non-threatening 20-somethings), and was maybe more successful at evoking the paranoia of surveillance, rather than the entertainment of voyeurism.

Fitting the act of watching and being watched, along with ties to the way we watch others through mass media and movies, into one gallery space is a lot, and *The Blue Period* can feel excessive. However, I suppose it's not that different from walking down the Bowery outside the gallery and passing below lamp post security cameras while glancing at strangers and advertisements that are pasted on walls and crown taxis. It's just that out in the "real world" you are letting those engagements permeate your brain without trying to keep up with them.

The Blue Period was previously installed at Arndt & Partner in Berlin, another city familiar with mass surveillance after the watchtowers that lined the Berlin Wall and Stasi secret police of East Berlin and a recent government wiretapping scandal. Whether or not you leave *The Blue Period* thinking seriously about the implications of surveillance on society is dependent on whether you already have those issues on your mind, maybe from current news on the NYPD's surveillance of Muslims in New York and beyond or if you've been catching up on your George Orwell readings. Otherwise, those implications aren't explicit in the installation, which creates an insular looping world of watching, only bringing in the outside world through commercial media, not current events. Yet it's impossible to leave without a heightened feeling of being watched.

Collage piece and two-dimensional figures in "The Blue Period"

Jon Kessler: The Blue Period *continues through March 10 at Salon 94 Bowery (243 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan).*

Interview
February 9 2012

Jon Kessler Celebrates the Blue People

By Brienne Walsh

Jon Kessler's current exhibition at Salon 94 Bowery, "The Blue Period," was inspired by the artist's trips on the subway in New York. "I realized that half of the people riding were operating some kind of handheld device," Kessler told *Interview*. "They were physically there, but not actually there." The experience, for him, read like a chapter in the sequel to Guy Debord's *The Society Of the Spectacle,* which critiqued consumer society in 1967, and the passivity and isolation it engenders. "We're not only on the path," Kessler noted. "We've exploded the curve."

"The Blue Period" is thus an attempt to recreate a world mediated by mobile technology within the space of a gallery. Consisting of wide variety of works that reference themes of alienation, captivity, confusion, and—given the presence of clips from Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965)—ennui, the installation includes large-scale collaged portraits made by the artist, flat-screen televisions that replay strings of anonymously attractive faces culled from media, along with footage of viewers captured by whirring cameras as they walk around the exhibition, a wall of monitors that replay scenes in which characters have blue faces (Tobias Fünke from *Arrested Development* makes an appearance, as well as the savages from *Apocalypto)*, and a small camera in the center of the room, which displays a taped version of the gallery... within the gallery. "You are physically in the space, but everything is destabilized," Kessler explains of the effect of the installation. "Even the gallery is questioned. You are forced to re-think the reality of the space itself."

Spread amongst all of the mechanics are cardboard cutouts of 15 of Kessler's graduate students, which look so jarringly realistic that at first, it appears as though the exhibition is packed with visitors. "You think you're with a crowd. But then, when you realize the cutouts are not people, you question who is actually with you in the space. In the process, you lose yourself."

Kessler named the exhibition less after Picasso's blue period, and more because of Chroma Key, a technique used in films that is more colloquially known as "Blue Screen." "The images are processed live, and then they are keyed out," Kessler explained of the technique. "The same effect is happening in the show."

Even though Kessler's show critiques our captivity by modern technology, he nevertheless checks his email first thing in the morning, like most successful people. "Something is being replaced by exceptional degrees of multitasking," he notes. "I fight against it. But it's really hard to avoid."

The New York Times
November 10 2011

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Mika Rottenberg and Jon Kessler: 'Seven'

By Roberta Smith
Nov. 10, 2011

Performa 11 at Nicole Klagsbrun Project Space

534 West 24th Street, Chelsea

Through Nov. 19

Mika Rottenberg makes videos that involve women performing mysterious, product-oriented rituals in close quarters, usually with hilarious feminist overtones and not a little body heat. Jon Kessler specializes in kinetic sculptures that clank and gyrate in a mad-scientist sort of way, often with political implications. Apparently they had enough in common to garner a commission to collaborate on a live performance (the first for both) from Performa 11, the visual art performance biennial whose fourth iteration began its three-week run on Nov. 1 in New York.

The result is "Seven," a 37-minute piece involving seven live performers in an installation that includes video. The action centers on the transcontinental production of "chakra juice," a

magic elixir, one assumes, distilled from human sweat. It comes in the seven colors ascribed in Indian medicine to the body's seven force centers, located at intervals from the bottom of the spine to the crown of the head. Performed continuously in a 37-minute cycle Wednesday through Saturday from 2 through 8 p.m., "Seven" combines the artists' interests to entertaining, if not completely seamless effect.

Throughout, rotating and sliding contraptions evoke the self-destructing machines of the sculptor Jean Tinguely — as does, perhaps, the periodic chime of a Mac starting up.

(The piece, commissioned by the Métamatic Research Initiative in Amsterdam, travels to the Museum Tinguely in Basel in October.)

There are two parts to Mr. Kessler's critique; one has to do with rampant photo sharing as a cultural experience, and the other is more about the art world's fidelity to the Apple brand and aesthetic. (Go to any art fair or museum and you will see phalanxes of iPads deployed for purposes commercial and educational.)

The Apple obsession drags "The Web" from satire down into parody; it's less trenchant, ultimately, than Mr. Kessler's antiwar, anti-surveillance masterpiece from 2005, "The Palace at 4 a.m." But the interactive element is remarkably effective; it's a kind of short-circuited social network in which shared images stay on-site instead of zooming around the Internet — the closest thing art may have, in this moment, to a captive audience.

Art in America
April 21 2010

Art in America

Jon Kessler's New, Fast Pace

By Sarah Stephenson

For the last few years, an exhibition of the work of **Jon Kessler** has entailed a whirligig installation of cutout and ephemera, with live-feed cameras and monitors that scoped out visitors in a paranoid maze. His current exhibition at **Pace Prints** focuses on works on paper, a medium which he has only used since 2007. Political threads run throughout—the primary content of the collaged prints is the bald eagle—but the strongest correlation to Kessler's better known works is the complex, time-sensitive process he uses to develop them. Here, Kessler discusses the difference in process, the financial crash, personal influences and natural history museums:

LEFT: WHITE HOUSE, 2009. COURTEST PACE PRINTS

SARAH STEPHENSON: Your first body of works on paper was exhibited at the Drawing Center in 2007. How has the format changed for you since then?

JON KESSLER: I'm still getting used to how different it is from sculpture, for which I typically work right up to the night before, or even sometimes the day of, the show's opening. My big installations take weeks. By contrast, I did this body of work last summer and then we did some post-production in the fall.

STEPHENSON: How did you begin working in the medium of prints?

KESSLER: What freed me was that my sculpture started to go off in different directions. When I started to bring mediated images into my sculptures, in around 2004, I started to screw with them: cut into them, paint on them, and manipulate them. That's what led to the works on paper. I was interested in works on paper having that same anger, energy and power as the sculptures, without going to the opening at Pace and worrying that something was going to be broken when I got there. "The Blue Period" at Art Basel [in 2008] and Kessler Circus at **Deitch Projects** [in 2009] both had works on paper in or surrounding the installations, and I've been trying to integrate them more and more and not just making them a separate body of work. In a show like this, however, the approach is very different. All the works are the same format and same size. I like that you can scrutinize these things. I'm always dependent on an active viewer to look up-close and follow the mechanics to see what's producing the image; this is a very different experience.

STEPHENSON: The works are heavy in texture and feel, but to achieve that effect, evidently you've had to produce them quite quickly, as the materials dry.

KESSLER: The works on paper are very material-oriented, which is what keeps me interested in the process. The flatter works were done in an almost performative way, where everything was thrown into a soupy mix and I only had a few seconds to work with it. I'm up to my elbows in guck trying to get this thing to emerge quickly. It's about as close to painting as I've come. Granted, they're fast paintings where I'm putting pigment directly into the water and, although allowing chance to play into it, there is a certain amount of control and I can go back in at the end to manipulate the color. It's really quite similar to my sculpture practice: I assemble the materials and manipulate and transform them.

STEPHENSON: You've used the bald eagle throughout, but to very different effects it appears. LEFT: KESSLER IN THE STUDIO. COURTESY PACE PRINTS

KESSLER: With the eagle, I'm pushing symbols that are very loaded. In most cases, it's portrayed as a tethered bird caught in a net with his feathers ruffled. The mighty eagle has gone through hard times. That's probably the most superficial reading. In the reliquary works, those with the heavier wooden frames, the eagle wears a men's striped business suit; in another work it's in a dollhouse scenario, where there's been a killing with a pool of blood and a small figure dragged across the floor. There's a Wall Street narrative going on here relating to the Madoff scandal, and in particular the French executive's suicide after he lost everything in Madoff's scheme. Another aspect I was interested in were the reliquaries made out of recycled plastics; I wanted to have these birds connected materially with plastics, nets, strings and beer cans. The pieces also had to be somewhat calm —the bird caught in a storm drain after a tsunami—to create a congested, controlled chaos with bits of flotsam and jetsam.

STEPHENSON: You've used birds in previous works [in the "Birdrunner" series in 1994 and "Hall of Birds" in 1995–1996] but as symbols those birds were always more naïve. These present birds are a lot more menacing.

KESSLER:Yes, but they have also become powerless. Except for a couple of them that still have their dignity, these predators have pretty much been emasculated. The work is definitely more overt than the early work; it's a lot more political. The show came to me when I went to Vienna on a stop over and I visited the Museum of Natural History there. It's probably the most insane killing spree I've ever seen, room after room of large, oak vitrines filled with every single species, like some kind of death orgy. That mode of presentation has become politically incorrect, so you normally find the animals taken out of their "cages" and put into some scenic habit for visitors so they're no longer presented as mere specimens.

STEPHENSON: How do you situate your works on paper in relation to Rauschenberg's *Canyon* (1959), with it's famous bird wings?

KESSLER: I'm always thinking about Rauschenberg, consciously. He's such an important artist for me. Even when I made the Birdrunner pieces, applying paint to the taxidermied birds, I knew I was treading on Rauschenberg territory. But those worked through history in different ways.

STEPHENSON: *White House* (2009) from this show also resonates with Martha Rosler's "Bringing the War Home" series. This juxtaposition of images of domesticity—dolls figures, magazines—is threatened by unseen forces above. Were you thinking about Rosler when you inverted the supposedly safe image of the house?

KESSLER: No, but I was thinking about Martha Rosler a lot for the installation, [at PS1, 2005–2006] "The Palace at 4 A.M." She was the patron saint of that collision of domesticity and warfare. So it has been something that I've considered in the past and she's definitely on my playlist.

PRINTS BY JON KESSLER ARE ON VIEW THROUGH MAY 1. PACE PRINTS IS LOCATED AT 521 WEST 26 STREET, THIRD FLOOR, NEW YORK.

The New Yorker
March 16 2009

THE NEW YORKER

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

JON KESSLER

By The New Yorker

March 16, 2009

"Kessler's Circus" (Mocking Calder? Why?) jams many motorized gimcracks, which satirize American military disasters and atrocities, into a barracks tent, with live video feeds to stacked monitors. Ghastly things happen to soldier and victim dolls in spinning, spurting, and clickety-clack sequences. Other works include destroyed photographs, angrily ugly collages, and an animatronic old man, hirsute and armless, making deranged faces—a derelict veteran, probably. Any felt tension between the show's sprightly mechanics and its generic politics is less than taut. Kessler is a terrific bricoleur but no threat to Goya. He's fecklessly cruel. Through April 4.*(Deitch.)*

Interview with Jon Kessler: with Tara Ruth and Rachel Gladfelter
Die Donne
2008

Interview with Jon Kessler
with Tara Lynn Ruth and Rachel Gladfelter

Tara Ruth: How did you find the initial experience of working with a collaborator in this setting? I'm wondering whether that created anxiety.

Jon Kessler: Anxiety was probably the only thing I did not experience. I had a strong sense that I was performing, and before a session I would have the sense of excitement and butterflies that comes with performance. The residency was a finite number of sessions, and each session was a finite time. We started at ten o'clock in the morning and we were physically exhausted by five or six. The sessions framed the experience of time in a different way than in my studio, where I feel an endless sense of time and there's no gun to my head. If I had that in my studio, I would probably go crazy. I need to have the feeling of endless time there in order to "get lost." I never really got lost here. It probably also had to do with working in a strange space and with a collaborator who in a sense is your producer. He or she is enabling you, pushing you onto stage. The work from one session lead into the next one. I would specifically try not to walk in and say, "OK, in the morning we are going to do this size, this color, and this thing." It was just sort of, "Boom, let's go."

TR: From beginning to end here, you interacted with the material in a way that was not premeditated. But what specific decisions were made? People don't talk a lot about where in their work intuition comes in, and whether that's built on experience and knowledge.

JK: I knew I had no interest in doing direct sculptural processes in this place. I didn't want to start making latex molds. The things that interested me, initially, were the masher [beater] and the press, which are instruments of torture, with enormous, excessive force and violence. I was like, "OK, I'm going to use those," because those were the instincts I was drawing on in my studio to make my kinetic sculpture. Otherwise, the intuition I've been drawing on here doesn't relate to my sculptural process, except for obvious things like using wire mesh and cutting into it. This whole new sense of the rip, the tear, the mash; thinking about the pulp as a kind of glue. My family and I were just in Nantucket, and my friend there makes these incredible chocolate-chip cookies where there's just enough dough to hold the chocolate chips together. That's how I thought of the paper

pulp—as a kind of connective tissue.

Rachel Gladfelter: It's not a substrate; it's all water.

JK: Hey, Dieu Donné is *all* about water. I was always wet there in my rubber boots and apron; my hands were always full of colored gook. The floor has drains built into it and there was always a steady flow of intense colors circling around them. The pulp was like a post-Katrina, post-tsunami soup. Everything we were using had a fiber. The money, the hair, the photographs, each one of those things had a fiber with little fingers that were grasping on to the life raft. Sometimes I would press those things to flatten them down. Other times I started to really love the relief. And they were like loaded guns going into the press, I had no idea...

RG: There's a huge chance element.

JK: Huge. You impregnate these things with inks and pigments and then they detonate the press and go off.

RG: One of the first days, the primary thing was throwing these photographs into the beater and being intrigued about what would come out, then pulling the parts out of the beater and commenting on how forensic it felt.

JK: Yeah, but ultimately we stopped using the masher because it was turning everybody into giblets. But the initial instinct was a good one—we were going through body parts just like investigators. I remember you saying "Hey I just

found an eye!" In the earlier pieces you feel the influences of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield. Now I feel like the pieces are related more to the work of Mimmo Rotella and Raymond Hains. It's about a chance uncovering of layers, where I'm clawing into one layer thereby exposing another.

We would always start out the same way. Rachel would press a sheet, and then I'd be staring at the proverbial blank page. In order to start somewhere, I would attack it with pulp. It was rare that I would say, "I need a specific color." Normally I would reach for what was already mixed up for other people's projects. And then I would introduce image or text into that. Then we'd press it and see what we got. Sometimes I'd work into it again. In the end there wasn't much postproduction, except for gluing to make stuff stick.

RG: Yeah, there were a lot of inorganic materials like plastic bags. Everything was grabbing on to each other, but there was a lot of post-gluing and that sort of thing. Anytime we tried to premeditate that, it just ruined the process.

JK: That's right. We just cranked up the music and rocked. There was this sense of pushing forward, not looking back. We would hit a stride and not want to get bogged down with technical issues. Let's just do it and it'll figure itself out, or it'll be something different and lead to other stuff. It was a lot like playing music—jamming or improvising. It was a place that, for five, six hours, it just sort of went.

RG: Is that how you work in your studio? Do you crank up the music and just...

JK: I crank up the music. My sculptures take longer to make and the progress is not so evident. I don't have that sense that it's a session, like the way I think of Miles recording *Bitches Brew*—that's what made this experience very different for me.

TR: It seems like your nervous system is filtering a lot of things that are in the world, and that's coming back into the work.

JK: Well, I have really tried over the last four years to be much more instinctual.

TR: It's like you're engaged with materials, not thinking but having this sort of primal response.

JK: Well, a lot of that is coming from dark places, a reaction to my life and living in this world. And I express this in the materials and how I use them. I'm reminded of something that Barnaby Furnas, who was one of my students, said. Someone asked him about the blood and how he paints it, and he told a great story about how he would take red paint, put it into a water pistol, and shoot, so it's not just representing blood, it was done as a performative, violent act. It's a simple idea, but I like that. I rely a lot on verbs, the Richard Serra verbs: throwing, tearing, cutting, pushing, pulling...

RG: I remember the first day of working with you and getting stuff ready, and I look over and you're sculpting stuff around your face [laughter]...and throwing, and you're diving right into it. It was really performative, and I wish we had videotaped it.

JK: That's also one of the reasons why I wasn't that interested in editioning any of these works- it would remove the work from the primary experience—that, and the fact that I was already making so much work. In your questions, you were asking whether this work led to other work. I started to make photographs based on my experience here. I take a twenty by twenty-four inch sheet of photo paper and crumple it up, cracking the surface of the paper. Then I expose it under the enlarger, again they're just faces, for the most part—sometimes I expose it multiple times, and then whatever is in the cracking or in the fold, whatever is underneath the enlarger, is white. Finally I throw chemicals on it in just the same way I throw the pulp. They're hard to look at and at the same time hard to keep your eyes off of. These really came out of the work I did here.

TR: And you have the sudden urge to cut your hair and—

JK: Yeah, I put my own hair in some of the paper works.

TR: You've kind of fragmented yourself in there.

JK: I didn't really think of it that way, but that's certainly the way it's functioning in the pieces with the broken mirrors.

TR: You're fracturing and distorting what you're seeing, so you get this odd feeling of recognizing a part of yourself, but not the whole self.

JK: No, it never really comes together. It's never complete. There are always different fragments trying to form a whole. This is what happens in my video pieces as well.

Artforum
May 2006

ARTFORUM

Jon Kessler

P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center

By Frances Richard

In the twilight of empire, in the spider hole where the masters of the universe have gone to ground with their simulacral weapons, reality gives way to violent phantasmagoria. This is not news. But it was the scenario described by Jon Kessler's multiroom installation at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, *The Palace at 4 A.M.*, 2005, and it packed a wallop, its physically overwhelming formal properties synced tightly with the simple, lonely rage that was its subject.

Kessler's first solo museum show in New York was also his largest show to date, filling a high-ceilinged hall and its side galleries. The title comes from Alberto Giacometti's 1932 sculpture, which looks like an abstracted desk toy. Kessler retained its atmosphere of idle amusement in the king's dreamtime. But his expanded scale turned playfulness to nightmare. Billboards obstructed the main gallery's entrances, and the space was hot and noisy with the energy of televisions, cameras, clip-lights, and homemade zoetropes spinning, humming, flickering, and clacking. Fragmented images in bad-TV color spewed from every technological orifice, and stacks of monitors loomed above head height, while cables festooned the ceiling and snaked underfoot.

Visitors picked their way through a jury-rigged, digital-dada sprawl of ads, fashion- and porn-magazine clips, and mad-inventor contraptions in which hybridized GI Joes in new clothing were made to act for live-feed cameras that sent their aggressively fake footage across the room, where it was instantly relayed onscreen. Other cameras captured audience members, adding their bemused faces to the toxic wash of stimuli.

Commodity-overload installation, in which a dense array of mass-produced objects is made to stand for a collective desire to be ecstatically engulfed, is almost a genre in itself. But while some artists work to redeem materialist delirium by the equipoise of their sculptural choices, and others celebrate violent or scatological mess for its own psychodynamic sake, the pleasure that Kessler evinces in his accumulations touches a deeper—or more exposed—nerve. He has said that the P.S.1 installation "turn[s] the world into another prop." But in so doing, it argues by negative example that the world is *not* a prop, that distant people and places are not screens for group fantasy, and that the will to flatten experience into brutal pictures recoils upon such icons' consumer-creators. A giant billboard showing George W. Bush's face scrawled with a bloodred war and an enormous blowup of Saddam Hussein's wrecked palace are overdetermined as references. But Kessler deployed them with wide-awake, personal fury. His installation was deliberately hysterical, but also methodical and coherent, marked by the mind and hand of a single agent who has fiddled the gizmos and wired the interfaces in order to build a bivouac in the desert of the real.

This assertion of independent agency was far from redemptive, however. If anything, the sense of private implicatedness made the ugliness worse, as in a moment where Kessler trained a live-feed camera on the skyline out the window, framing it in a cardboard cutout of flames so that the city seemed to burn under our gaze. The main doorway into the show framed a similar moment: One entered through an archway cut into a blank billboard, and only on looking back at the opposite side of the panel did one discover that the passage led through a monumental beaver-shot. “I do want viewers to be reborn when they enter my show,” Kessler remarked, “but not into a clean state.”

—Frances Richard

BOMB Magazine
October 1 2005

BOMB

ARTISTS ON ARTISTS

Jon Kessler

BY SAUL OSTROW

Gisele and the Cinopticon (detail), 2004, mixed media, 72 × 17 × 89 inches.

Mind Control (installation view), 2005, aluminum and found photo, 14 × 60 x 3 inches.

I'm writing this text based on inferences garnered over the years from numerous encounters with the work of Jon Kessler. These were reinforced during a whirlwind studio visit just a few weeks ago when Kessler showed me the scale model for his upcoming one-person exhibition at PS 1 in New York (*A Palace at 4 am,* Oct. 2005–Feb. 2006). This expansive affair will give us the first opportunity to be truly immersed in his image-world rather than be merely spectators. Given the aggregate nature of the Kessler enterprise, it seems that the firmest foundation for an introduction to it is a combination of fact, hypothesis and conjecture.

Kessler's work since the '80s has been aligned with the tradition of kinetic sculpture and assemblage that emerged in the early twentieth century—

such works as Marcel Duchamp's Rotoreliefs, Moholy Nagy's time/space modulators and Yves Tinguely's self-destructive machines are obvious sources—but filtered through the erratic, jury-rigged aesthetic of artists like Robert Rauschenberg and the improvised, makeshift special effects of B-filmmaker Ed Wood.

The Geneva Mechanism, 2004, mixed media, 80 × 48 × 62 inches.

Kessler's works refrain from celebrating the industrial sublime, demonstrating technology's aesthetic and perceptual potentials or even exposing the ridiculousness of our overarching desire to automate even the simplest tasks. Psychically confrontational and physically engaging, they draw their power from the metaphorical structures that form them,

rather than their explicit subject matter (which of late references the hysterics of terror and war). It is as if Kessler were imagining what Bertolt Brecht and Edward Kienholz might have produced if they had collaborated.

Hybrids of mechanical parts and digital technologies (video and closed-circuit television), Kessler's motorized assemblages are lo-tech both in construction and aesthetic. They employ what is by today's standards obsolete technology, producing near analog effects. Some of these machines plod along, while others whirl at high speed.

Maiden Voyage (detail), 2004, mixed media, 84 × 91 × 123 inches.

As both products and sites of production, Kessler's machines are decentralized, like today's industries. As such each work is an assembly plant producing collage-like images and moving pictures that come to be viewed in the context of their own making while stylistically mirroring the collage-like, jump-cut effects so familiar from action films and '60s independent cinema. The resulting real-time clips of layered imagery are either remotely viewed or are incorporated into the assemblage itself. The results are conspicuous visual displays and tawdry behind-the-scenes views of their own workings.

No matter how seamless or apparently "real" Kessler's composite images might be, they disassemble before our very eyes. As they fragment, they evoke responses that range from the analytic to the emotional to the pathetic. Given such mixed messages and transparency, each of these assemblages forms a network of information, mediation and appropriation meant to both replicate and unmask the ways mass media orders the disparate and disjointed images and experiences of our world.

Artforum
September 2004

ARTFORUM

JON KESSLER

By David Joselit

THE WAR ON TERRORISM is a war fought with information. As a May 13 *New York Times* article on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal declared: "Defenders of the operation said the methods . . . were necessary to fight a war against a nebulous enemy whose strength and intentions could only be gleaned by extracting information from often uncooperative detainees." The infelicitous phrase "extracting information from often uncooperative detainees" conjures a world of ruthless coercion and calls into question recent use of the term *information* by art historians and critics. In the domain of art, information is typically associated with dematerialization—it denotes the triumph of language and photo-documentation over the fleshier materials of painting and sculpture. But here, in the *New York Times*, and in the context of politics, such a position is persuasively rebutted: Information is acknowledged as the objective of torture; it is *extracted* from bodies that are submitted to extreme forms of humiliation. Indeed, for those of us in the art world, one of the messages of the heinous abuse practiced at Abu Ghraib may be that information art and body art should be understood as two sides of the same coin. Think, for instance of Hannah Wilke's hieroglyphic inscriptions on her body—her "starifications"—or Vito Acconci's perverse embodiments of the voice. Drawing such a connection between torture and art history may seem like a trivialization, but one of the most venerable traditions of modern art is its capacity to serve as a laboratory for politics in the realm of aesthetics.

The day after reading those provocative lines in the *Times*, I visited Jon Kessler's exhibition "Global Village Idiot" at Deitch Projects in New York. In eliding Marshall McLuhan's famous characterization of information society as a "global village" with the "village idiot," a figure of extreme and doltish embodiment, Kessler uncannily signals precisely the ethos of information extraction that underlay American policy in Abu Ghraib. And indeed, his sculptures are delirious machines for turning raw materials into streams of video information. Their "idiocy" lies partly in their nature as jury-rigged contraptions, often large tables or pedestals on which dioramas, appropriated pictures, toy effigies, and miscellaneous novelty items are animated through mechanisms that cause them to rotate or shake. These dramas are enacted for the sake of the camera (and in some cases for several mini-surveillance cameras), which circles the sculptures (sometimes spinning, sometimes stationary) or moves through them on tracks, relaying shots to adjacent monitors plugged into the whole ensemble umbilically. Kessler's sculptures have none of information culture's slick and frictionless aspect: They are roughly constructed with myriad brackets, exposed wires, and, usually, a rat's nest of cords. Information extraction is hardly dematerialized but sloppy and demented, recalling those staple scenes of science-fiction movies in which overflowing ashtrays and bags of junk food litter the computer nerd's workstation. The Global Village Idiot is the cybernaut eating a Big Mac.

Kessler's sculptures not only embody the supposedly disembodied video stream by juxtaposing it with the gimcrack devices that lie behind its production but also imagine representation as a carnal act—an instance of touch, and possibly even of rape. The latter association is made explicit in *Heaven's Gate* (all works 2004), whose video includes a flyover shot through a model city and into a miniature apartment where the camera zooms in on a tiny Macintosh computer screen (now congruent to the monitor itself) on which play three clips: a view of a doll's buttocks through a glory hole, a close-up crotch shot of a pornographic pinup, and finally the penetration of an artificial vagina by another camera that draws the viewer up to and through the surrogate body and then out the other side, ending with the prospect of the gallery and its occupants. This is a crude form of embodied information indeed, and yet somehow the dimension of misogyny does not seem its only valence. In a perverse power reversal, the body gives birth to the view. Such a reading is suggested metaphorically by another work in the show, *Gisele and the Cinopticon*, a complex apparatus that sets in motion a series of Dolce & Gabbana ads in which the voluptuous Brazilian supermodel was photographed next to various monitors displaying fragments of her body. Reminiscent of obsolete optical devices like the Phenakistiscope, this assemblage of spinning images establishes a situation in which the body is the occasion for, and the frame of, photography's procedures (pictures are literally viewed through monitor-shaped cutouts made in other pictures). The result is an infinite regress of women's bodies and information, referents and representations, still and moving images.

Kessler's understanding of photography as a kind of touch is chillingly rendered in *One Hour Photo*, in which a sequence of postcards depicting the World Trade Center towers revolves on a vertical conveyor belt so that at the bottom of its cycle each card brushes against a small stationary camera. The image produced over and over on the nearby monitor as each successive card approaches the camera is an unsteady zoom toward the towers. Optical obliteration results when the picture finally meets, and thus blocks, the lens. Kessler's blunt evocation of the terrorist's-eye view trained on a series of tourist-souvenir images does not sugarcoat the process of information extraction: Unlike our government, he refuses to disavow the intimate relationship between violence and representation.

David Joselit is professor of art history at Yale University.

Artforum
April 24–June 5 2004

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS NEW YORK

Jon Kessler

Deitch Projects

April 24, 2004 - June 5, 2004

By John Reed

A surveillance camera zooms in on a Cabbage Patch Kid. Another camera swings over modernist office decor; a third enters a latex vagina; a fourth surveys a ghostly New York City. On a screen embedded in a cardboard box, we watch it all. Titled *Heaven's Gate,* 2004, the work provides entry to Jon Kessler's "Global Village Idiot"—a group of kinetic assemblages that surveille themselves with the aid of video cameras and monitors. In his first New York solo show in ten years, Kessler documents, in live-action special effects, the illusions inherent to media consciousness. Watching the screen, we don't doubt the veracity of *Heaven's Gate*'s cityscape or even (inured as we are to pornography and to the falsifications of cosmetic surgery, airbrushing, etc.) of the plastic genitalia. The sculptures themselves are eruptions of clamps, tape, and bare lightbulbs; Kessler considers his works finished as soon as they're functional, and doesn't belabor the aesthetics. Furious, stark, without candy-colored shells, his mechanizations expose the inner CPU of transmitted perception.