

INFORMATION MAN

David Joselit

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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.