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Performa Playbill: Mika Rottenberg and Jon Kessler

brianoucher 11/07/11

Seven, by Mika Rottenberg and Jon Kessler, premiered Thursday night at Nicole Klagsbrun Project Space on 24th Street. A Performa commission, the work combines Rottenberg's surreal videos, often focusing on repetitive labor, with Kessler's complicated mechanical sculptures.

Upon entrance, visitors were quietly offered a brightly colored vodka drink in a test tube; in an anteroom several performers sat dressed in fluffy white bathrobes, as if at a spa.

They were professional actors, awaiting their turn in an elaborately choreographed 37-minute piece that connects New York and Africa and synchronizes live performance with video. The seven performers each represent one chakra—bodily energy centers, in Hindu thought—and come from various ethnicities, loosely representing all the world's peoples. They take turns pedaling a contraption that causes a potter's wheel to rotate inside a glass booth. Another performer sits on the spinning wheel and sweats profusely—the temperature inside the booth is over 90 degrees.

The sweat drips through holes in the platform where the performer sits, and is collected and pumped via rubber tubes into a beaker across the room, where a lab-coated "scientist" proceeds, via a contraption the size of a small room, to act out a multi-step distillation of the sweat into brightly colored liquid—"chakra juices," which are deposited in test tubes. The process is replete with flashing colored lights and cartoony sound effects, including the sound of a dentist's drill that is bound to make your muscles tense up.

On numerous screens throughout the space, meanwhile, Rottenberg's lushly colored video shows a small group of people in rural Botswana. Moments after the lab-coated scientist drops the chakra juices into a rice-cooker-like device, they pop up in Africa in the video, seemingly by magic. Once all seven colors are assembled, two men act out a ritual, pouring the juice into a hole in the ground, resulting in a volcanic explosion of colored liquids, represented in an animation.

"I was in Rottenberg's studio two years ago," Performa founder RoseLee Goldberg told *A.i.A.*, "when she was working on the video *Squeeze* [2010], and I thought, 'What would she do in real life?' When she told me she wanted to go to Africa, as the words were coming out of her mouth I was e-mailing a friend outside Johannesburg to make it happen."

During the first preview performance on Thursday, most spectators sat respectfully still, but in later iterations, people moved around, as is encouraged, and struck up quiet conversations. Rottenberg, who was born in Buenos Aires and lives in New York, described to *A.i.A.* what happened after she arrived in Johannesburg: "I went on to Botswana. The people in the video are locals, who live at a cattle post that is way out, far even from the middle of nowhere, so we had translators. There's no power, no nothing—though there are lots of lions and giraffes. For two weeks we stayed in tents. Many of the locals had never even seen a television before, never mind a camera crew. They must have thought we were completely crazy."

Asked a simple question—why send the chakra juices to Africa?—Rottenberg hesitated. "I don't want to narrow it down *too* much," she said, "but there are two basic reasons. First, so many materials are extracted from Africa—for example, most of the world's diamonds come from Botswana, where we shot the video—and this piece is partly about the idea of giving back. And it's the cradle of mankind."

She thought for a moment. "And," she said, "because it's funny."

Entry to the performance is timed. Admission is free and is first-come, first-served. Check the Performa website for further details. Photo courtesy Performa.

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