

JON KESSLER

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Jon Kessler at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center October 30, 2005 - February 6, 2006

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 massproduced 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."