

## JON KESSLER

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Jon Kessler at Luhring Augustine

With few exceptions, kinetic art (as it used to be called) is currently in disrepute. If we want a piece of sculpture to assume an evocative and equivocal relationship to the world of science and machinery there now seems little compelling reason to make a work of art that is a machine itself. A machine is, after all, a demonstration of cause and effect, a sort of narrative. The kinetic object originally opened up the modernist esthetic by providing extra-formal comment while at the same time allowing for a certain (otherwise forbidden) decorative embellishment. But as the machine age waned (and the restrictions of classic modernism relaxed), the opposition of static and dynamic began to lose its dialectical edge. Movement was embodied less in the work of art, more in the artist, so that performance and Conceptual art took over much of the vitality of kinetic sculpture.

There has always been, however, a theatrical side to kinetic art. When tempered with irony, kinetic art is capable of effecting a highly charged conjunction of the literal and the pictorial. The '80s saw a flowering of ironic work that was at once kitsch-laden and operatically pictorial. Like Rebecca Horn's skittish and irritable art-making apparatuses, Jon Kessler's acid-tinged forays into Rube Goldberg-inspired orientalism appeared to make the most of kinetic art's remaining--or renewed Possibilities.

In recent years Kessler seems to have divested his work of the nightmarish aura of cheap Chinese restaurants and gift shops, and has moved into more well-mannered territories. The irony and calculated sentimentality characteristic of his art are still in evidence, but a tendency towards the warmly anthropomorphic takes the edge off some of these new pieces. [Arts et Métiers](#), the biggest work in his recent show, is a monstrously complicated and funny device, featuring a huge set of 17th-century French bellows blowing air through a barrel and out various tubes and registers. It huffs and puffs like a giant in a fairy tale, but for all its fearsomeness, it seems to be expending a great deal of effort towards no appreciable end. Similarly, *Stayin' Alive*, a tall steel construction "wearing" a pair of rubber wading boots, spends all its time making a small drawing. It's a rather nice drawing somewhere between a Newman and a LeWitt and it makes us wonder at all the complications that inevitably seem to surround the creative act.

[Birdrunner](#), although simpler than these other examples, seems closer in spirit to Kessler's earlier work. Here a stuffed and armed bird in a plastic helmet rides up and down on a lighted column in front of an inverted photomural of New York City. The title is a play on the science fiction film *Bladerunner*, and as in the film there is an overwhelming sense of disorientation, mutation and implicit violence to this choreography. The looping self-referentiality of the bird's repetitive movement, its virtual autism, separates the kinetic element from the rest of the work, giving it a harshness and disjunction that is welcome.

Playing with an ostensibly played-out form is a risky venture, but Kessler has gone a long way towards injecting vitality back into kinetic art. He should take care, though, to keep a critical distance. Work of this kind is seductive, both to the maker and to the viewer, and it's all too easy to slip into the kind of handsomeness and "creativity" that can only vitiate the enterprise.