

Jon Kessler In Conversation with Katie Stone Sonnenborn

The Brooklyn Rail, February 2006

Jon Kessler's exhibition at P.S. 1, *The Palace at 4 A.M.* is anathema in the current state of art. Raging and fierce, his elaborate kinetic sculptures directly address the current socio-political state of the world through the eyes of an American. Incorporating images from Iraq, Afghanistan, reality TV, luxury cars, fashion magazines, airplanes, and the White House, as well as museum visitors who are caught in the cross-fire of his closed-circuit security cameras, Kessler provides an incisive critique of twenty-first century systems of representation and communication. On a rainy evening in early 2006, Katie Stone Sonnenborn visited Jon Kessler at his Williamsburg studio to talk about art, politics, and what lay behind their union in his powerful new work.

Rail: *The Palace at 4 A.M.* at P.S. 1 is an elaborate expansion of a new body of work shown last year at Deitch Projects for the first time. It is markedly different from what viewers might remember from 1980s, and I wanted to begin by hearing how that change came about.

Kessler: The shift was pushed by using video. It freed me to think of the machines as events and the image created as the spectacle. They are trying to complete each other, which is impossible and there is a continual attraction and tension between them. This way of thinking helped me to be looser with the machines in their constructions, much like prototypes.

Now the surveillance cameras, coupled with the cutouts, create a puncture. Because they are in the work, literally, no two people saw that show in the same way. They're either experiencing each other or some other person who's not going to be there a second later; they are simultaneously completing the work and, also, disturbing it. .

Rail: When was surveillance introduced?

Kessler: 2002. The first piece I did with a tiny camera was "One Hour Photo," which has postcards of the World Trade Center that revolve and as they come towards the camera the image produced appears to be like the view from the cockpit. After 9-11, I couldn't get that image out of my mind, so I decided to recreate it. I went to a store on Canal Street that sells spy stuff. I didn't know anything about using video so it introduced a whole new skill set that I had to learn.

Rail: It says something about the time and place that you're living in that the first piece of video equipment you used were tools of espionage. Do you save the footage you record?

Kessler: No, but the exhibition is now streaming live on the web, which is an interesting extension of a show about surveillance. I wanted to completely encapsulate the confusion and the complexity of the experience not only with cameras in the galleries, but also cameras trained on the outside bringing the world into the work even more. The live web

cam further expands the surveilled subject and questions the disturbance and comfortability that we feel with being surveilled.

Rail: It's probably the most important and extraordinary thing about the show at P.S. 1. I haven't gone into an exhibition and felt so alive and invigorated, maybe ever. It seems to capture, without being didactic or simplistic, the way it feels right now to be in New York or to be in the world, really, and to be constantly aware of the cameras around you and when you're not aware of them – aware that they might be there.

Kessler: At P.S. 1 I wanted to give the viewer an experience as they are lead through the space. People have said they feel under attack like there is gunfire in the room. And I call these pieces “Snipers.”

Rail: A sensation that is intensified by the sound. The first experience of your work is auditory; the sounds outside the gallery are almost like a metronome. And then you walk through the gallery, and it's so hot with all the monitors.

Kessler: Yes, and the smell of rubber and circuitry...

Rail: Senses unused to being attacked in a museum its disorienting and chaotic.

Kessler: I wanted to evoke the systemization of production and discipline

Rail: Like a chain gang?

Kessler: Yes.

Rail: One thing I was thinking about with “Theater of Ideas” was that it depicted a chronology of the postwar era. Two “Others” present in the American psyche—Asian culture and Arab culture—intermesh with a series of panels that seem to relate to recent moments in art, namely abstract expressionism and minimalism. Because you do reference art history a lot, I wondered about that here...

Kessler: Well the whole piece is based on Moholy-Nagy's “Light Space Modulator.” That was a performative machine that projected shadows and patterns. The machine itself was not actually the thing to look at; it was what was being generated by the machine. There's also a Tatlin reference with the interlocking structures. I think you got it right with the imagery happening in that piece. To me, it all starts in the center with the guy with his pants pulled down—the Abu Graib reference. With the red paint, Jackson Pollock is there, but I was thinking of Kurosawa or Tarantino when blood splatter is used as a way of aestheticizing violence...

Rail: All of which happens ultimately with the screens, right? Which become this kind of extraordinary kaleidoscope that's totally beautiful, and content is, in a sense, obliterated as it goes through.

Kessler: Which goes back to what Susan Sontag said about war photography. I used Kabuki to signify a scary other—maybe from the perspective of a soldier from Kansas going out on a night patrol. “Suzie” is the ceiling piece with an image of an Iraqi girl with holes in her cheeks, wearing a blond wig—democracy coming in the form of Jessica Simpson. It’s vulgar. I think there’s a part of the show that’s raw and irresponsible, and maybe the difference between the work from the eighties and now is that it’s more punk now. I’m not afraid to be...incorrect or in disagreement.

Rail: It feels really liberated. It feels like what’s happened in the last four years has given you a language to deal with a lot of the things that have been really repressed in society as a whole. It’s an interesting coincidence that The Drawing Center also has a show about representations of war. Several of Martha Rosler’s photo collages from her series of the Vietnam-era Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful are included.

Kessler: When I saw the Rosler collages again I traced them backwards through assemblage, and Dada—also a reaction to war. I was reminded of her work as I made the Swans, and the Dadaist, Hanna Höch and her representations of women. In the Swans the viewer is actively completing the image.

Rail: How does that work about beauty relate to your more political work?

Kessler: Do you mean besides the image I have of Osama in his cave watching Nip/Tuck via satellite? Celebrity culture and infinite access to images are moving us closer to what Virilio calls a Visual Crash. To me, it’s happening in reality shows, those being an example of a kind of democratization of voyeurism. “Gisele and the Cinopticon” at its most superficial is about this girl I want to fuck, but on a deeper level, it’s about that idea of one person watching many, many people watching one. Time and imagery are conflating in a way that is new for the civilized world. The “real” has been franchised.

Rail: How about “Modern Vision”(2005)? Its subject is MoMA, and there’s a model of your sculpture “Modern Vision” installed inside that’s being attacked.

Kessler: When the piece started out, the idea was that there would be a smart bomb rushing through the museum and destroying my piece.... As the piece evolved it became about the self-aware, solipsistic moment of “I am being filmed thus I am real” affirmation of it’s own existence. That piece is not like the other pieces in the show. The viewer doesn’t pierce this work, and it doesn’t necessarily engage tele-visually anything else that’s happening in the room. It’s very, very narcissistic and very solipsistic.

Rail: And it’s geared towards a specific audience that the rest of the work broadens out from.

Kessler: Because it’s MoMA?

Rail: Yes, and because it's New York, because it's art about art, art about your art. I thought of Jean Tinguely's destroying machine, "Homage to New York," from 1960 that he made for the MoMA sculpture garden. Another kinetic sculptor.

Kessler: Who I adore. When I first started showing kinetic work in '83, there weren't a lot of immediate role models. *Experiments in Art in Technology* was influential, and the artists involved in downtown scenes like "9 Evenings." In a funny way it is the most philosophical piece for me, I had to really slow down because I couldn't make the piece until I made the piece. It was very META.

Rail: But whereas Tinguely's "Homage to New York" was really a performance that ended when the piece had destroyed itself, your piece perversely pulls back at the last moment. You save yourself.

Kessler: Yeah, I guess it tries to. That piece is technically complicated and as it turns out it's trying to destroy itself too. (Laughter)

Rail: Are there other kinetic artists working today that you resonate with?

Kessler: Tim Hawkinson and Paul McCarthy do beautiful kinetic pieces. What's happening now is that there are a lot of artists who use kinetics in their work, but don't necessarily privilege mechanical work unless they find that it's useful... Tom Sachs is a good example of that.

Rail: McCarthy also frequently uses toys...

Kessler: I've used toys in my work since I began, and when I stopped using toys the work got too serious and I think that was a real problem—because that was always what allowed me to play. In 2002 the cameras were the new toys that got me playing again—I can't tell you how important that is to my work, the endless time I spend in my studio fucking around with stuff. I never know what the sculptures are going to look like beforehand, and they change constantly as I work based on that play that includes chance and mistakes.

Rail: Your work responds to a tragic world reality. I thought about artists in postwar Japan, the Gutai group in particular. Their work was aggressive, bodily, and tinged with humor. Atsuko Tanaka's electric dress is terrifying, yet also very playful and childlike.

Kessler: That's another art form that deals with the body and a reaction to technological upheaval. This collision of high and low tech is a constant interest for me. Bringing buildings down with box cutters.

Rail: Was it cathartic to make this work?

Kessler: It's very reactive work; I got in touch with my rage. I can't believe people are not pissed off right now. It's shocking that we've gone through the last four years and

people are not rampant in the streets. I make art, it's a visual language, it's not politics and I'm not even sure what political art means. I just had to re-invent my own work for myself. I can tell you that Hans Haacke's work isn't an interesting experience, and so I've tried to deal with it on a much more personal level and make my own narratives—a trip up the river, to a psychotic, scary place I would never want to tell the viewer what to see, or what to think, or how to react once they get out of the show. It's not didactic in any way.

Rail: But you create narratives that aptly reflect that narratives – or fictions – are made up all the time. The exhibition triggers this real sensation that all one's doubts about the media are warranted. So it's not didactic in that it doesn't provide an answer or a solution or even a course of action, but in a way it's like coming home, you enter a consciousness that is very familiar. I think it's important that you extend outward into the environment in and around P.S. 1, particularly with the pieces that incorporate the neighborhood like the red fire burning over Long Island City. They kind of hit home, and there's a real sense of urgency.

Kessler: I made this show really fast. I proposed it in May, and they said “you can either do it in three years or in three months.” I said I want to do it in three months. So I cancelled all of my summer plans and worked my ass off. And there was this kind of urgency, you know, tear an image out of a book, and glue it on aluminum, cut it, weld it...

I did feel almost more like an embedded journalist having to get this news back home.

Rail: I read recently that after September 11th people were willing to give up civil liberties related to the government accessing their personal information, but have recently become increasingly protective of their privacy.

Kessler: I think shit's gonna go down with Bush over this privacy issue, and Gonzalez and all the clowns. People are going to be upset – I think something is going to happen.

Rail: It's possible. You're optimistic, and it shows in the work.

Kessler: I'm basically optimistic. It's not ironic work.

Rail: You show the mechanisms at play. Without that demonstration, the work would lose its sense of self and become very dry and standoffish. The images would be no better than anything we might buy off the newsstand.

Kessler: Exactly. I think it is Brechtian in its sly playfulness, showing all the sides. Manipulating imagery and being manipulated by it.