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Interview with Jon Kessler

with Tara Lynn Ruth and Rachel Gladfelter

Tara Ruth: How did you find the initial experience of working with a collaborator in this setting? I'm wondering whether that created anxiety.

Jon Kessler: Anxiety was probably the only thing I did not experience. I had a strong sense that I was performing, and before a session I would have the sense of excitement and butterflies that comes with performance. The residency was a finite number of sessions, and each session was a finite time. We started at ten o'clock in the morning and we were physically exhausted by five or six. The sessions framed the experience of time in a different way than in my studio, where I feel an endless sense of time and there's no gun to my head. If I had that in my studio, I would probably go crazy. I need to have the feeling of endless time there in order to "get lost." I never really got lost here. It probably also had to do with working in a strange space and with a collaborator who in a sense is your producer. He or she is enabling you, pushing you onto stage. The work from one session lead into the next one. I would specifically try not to walk in and say, "OK, in the morning we are going to do this size, this color, and this thing." It was just sort of, "Boom, let's go."

TR: From beginning to end here, you interacted with the material in a way that was not premeditated. But what specific decisions were made? People don't talk a lot about where in their work intuition comes in, and whether that's built on experience and knowledge.

JK: I knew I had no interest in doing direct sculptural processes in this place. I didn't want to start making latex molds. The things that interested me, initially, were the masher [beater] and the press, which are instruments of torture, with enormous, excessive force and violence. I was like, "OK, I'm going to use those," because those were the instincts I was drawing on in my studio to make my kinetic sculpture. Otherwise, the intuition I've been drawing on here doesn't relate to my sculptural process, except for obvious things like using wire mesh and cutting into it. This whole new sense of the rip, the tear, the mash; thinking about the pulp as a kind of glue. My family and I were just in Nantucket, and my friend there makes these incredible chocolate-chip cookies where there's just enough dough to hold the chocolate chips together. That's how I thought of the paper



pulp—as a kind of connective tissue.

Rachel Gladfelter: It's not a substrate; it's all water.

JK: Hey, Dieu Donn  is *all* about water. I was always wet there in my rubber boots and apron; my hands were always full of colored gook. The floor has drains built into it and there was always a steady flow of intense colors circling around them. The pulp was like a post-Katrina, post-tsunami soup. Everything we were using had a fiber. The money, the hair, the photographs, each one of those things had a fiber with little fingers that were grasping on to the life raft. Sometimes I would press those things to flatten them down. Other times I started to really love the relief. And they were like loaded guns going into the press, I had no idea...

RG: There's a huge chance element.

JK: Huge. You impregnate these things with inks and pigments and then they detonate the press and go off.

RG: One of the first days, the primary thing was throwing these photographs into the beater and being intrigued about what would come out, then pulling the parts out of the beater and commenting on how forensic it felt.

JK: Yeah, but ultimately we stopped using the masher because it was turning everybody into giblets. But the initial instinct was a good one—we were going through body parts just like investigators. I remember you saying "Hey I just

found an eye!" In the earlier pieces you feel the influences of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield. Now I feel like the pieces are related more to the work of Mimmo Rotella and Raymond Hains. It's about a chance uncovering of layers, where I'm clawing into one layer thereby exposing another.

We would always start out the same way. Rachel would press a sheet, and then I'd be staring at the proverbial blank page. In order to start somewhere, I would attack it with pulp. It was rare that I would say, "I need a specific color." Normally I would reach for what was already mixed up for other people's projects. And then I would introduce image or text into that. Then we'd press it and see what we got. Sometimes I'd work into it again. In the end there wasn't much postproduction, except for gluing to make stuff stick.

RG: Yeah, there were a lot of inorganic materials like plastic bags. Everything was grabbing on to each other, but there was a lot of post-gluing and that sort of thing. Anytime we tried to premeditate that, it just ruined the process.

JK: That's right. We just cranked up the music and rocked. There was this sense of pushing forward, not looking back. We would hit a stride and not want to get bogged down with technical issues. Let's just do it and it'll figure itself out, or it'll be something different and lead to other stuff. It was a lot like playing music—jamming or improvising. It was a place that, for five, six hours, it just sort of went.

RG: Is that how you work in your studio? Do you crank up the music and just...

JK: I crank up the music. My sculptures take longer to make and the progress is not so evident. I don't have that sense that it's a session, like the way I think of Miles recording *Bitches Brew*—that's what made this experience very different for me.

TR: It seems like your nervous system is filtering a lot of things that are in the world, and that's coming back into the work.

JK: Well, I have really tried over the last four years to be much more instinctual.

TR: It's like you're engaged with materials, not thinking but having this sort of primal response.

JK: Well, a lot of that is coming from dark places, a reaction to my life and living in this world. And I express this in the

materials and how I use them. I'm reminded of something that Barnaby Furnas, who was one of my students, said. Someone asked him about the blood and how he paints it, and he told a great story about how he would take red paint, put it into a water pistol, and shoot, so it's not just representing blood, it was done as a performative, violent act. It's a simple idea, but I like that. I rely a lot on verbs, the Richard Serra verbs: throwing, tearing, cutting, pushing, pulling...

RG: I remember the first day of working with you and getting stuff ready, and I look over and you're sculpting stuff around your face [laughter]...and throwing, and you're diving right into it. It was really performative, and I wish we had videotaped it.

JK: That's also one of the reasons why I wasn't that interested in editioning any of these works- it would remove the work from the primary experience—that, and the fact that I was already making so much work. In your questions, you were asking whether this work led to other work. I started to make photographs based on my experience here. I take a twenty by twenty-four inch sheet of photo paper and crumple it up, cracking the surface of the paper. Then I expose it under the enlarger, again they're just faces, for the most part—sometimes I expose it multiple times, and then whatever is in the cracking or in the fold, whatever is underneath the enlarger, is white. Finally I throw chemicals on it in just the same way I throw the pulp. They're hard to look at and at the same time hard to keep your eyes off of. These really came out of the work I did here.

TR: And you have the sudden urge to cut your hair and—

JK: Yeah, I put my own hair in some of the paper works.

TR: You've kind of fragmented yourself in there.

JK: I didn't really think of it that way, but that's certainly the way it's functioning in the pieces with the broken mirrors.

TR: You're fracturing and distorting what you're seeing, so you get this odd feeling of recognizing a part of yourself, but not the whole self.

JK: No, it never really comes together. It's never complete. There are always different fragments trying to form a whole. This is what happens in my video pieces as well.





Silver Bomber, 2008
pigment, paper pulp, mylar and
digital print on handmade paper
60 x 40 inches

Exhibition

Jon Kessler

New Works

October 23–November 26, 2008

Reception: Thursday, October 23, 6–8 PM

About the artist

Kessler is widely known for his kinetic installations, employing video cameras and monitors to create streaming images in real-time. In immersive installations such as *The Palace at 4AM* (P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2005), the viewer simultaneously becomes the subject of a multi-channel video, participant in its making, and interpreter of the process. This exhibition traveled to the Louisiana Museum of Moderne Kunst, Denmark (2008).

Kessler received critical attention for work created during his residency at Dieu Donné, exhibited in 2007 at The Drawing Center and more recently at ArtUnlimited, Basel in *The Blue Period*. Kessler was recently included in *Everywhere Is War (and Rumors Of War)* at Bodhi Art in Mumbai, India (2008). This exhibition will expand on the artist's exploration of these themes and his enthusiasm for working in this new process.

Jon Kessler is included in the collections of many major public and private collections, including: the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Walker Museum of Art Minneapolis; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Eli Broad Family Foundation; and the Deste Collection.

Jon Kessler is represented in New York by Deitch Projects and in Berlin by Arndt & Partners.

Dieu Donné

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donné is a nonprofit artist workspace dedicated to the creation, promotion, and preservation of contemporary art in the hand-papermaking process. In support of this mission, Dieu Donné collaborates with artists and partners with the professional visual arts community.

The Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donné. Through this program, Dieu Donné intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field. Past participants in the program include: Melvin Edwards, Dorthea Rockburne, (2000); Jane Hammond, Jim Hodges, (2001); Robert Cottingham, Polly Apfelbaum, (2002); Glenn Ligon, Kiki Smith (2003); Jessica Stockholder, Arturo Herrera, (2004); Mel Kendrick, Kate

Shepherd, (2005); Tony Fitzpatrick, Do-ho Suh, (2006); Jon Kessler, Ursula von Rydingsvard, (2007); and E.V. Day (2008).

This is issue number 12 of the Dieu Donné Lab Grant Program publication series documenting the residency program for mid-career artists.

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Front cover

Susie Cream Cheese (detail), 2008
pigment, paper pulp, mirror, yarn,
and digital print on handmade paper
40 x 30 inches

Inside front cover

Me Hate, 2008
pigment, paper pulp, yarn, horse hair,
wire, cotton, plastic bags, US currency
and digital print on handmade paper
60 x 40 inches

Page 3

The Ecstasy Series #1-9, 2008
pigment, paper pulp and magazine on
handmade paper
24 x 18 inches each

Back cover

Doo Doo, 2008
pigment, paper pulp, yarn, US currency,
celluclay and magazine on handmade paper
60 x 40 inches

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