

An American in Dijon

Williamsburg Artist Kim Kimball Performs in Dijon

by Sherry Thevenot

Williamsburg based artist Kim Kimball did a seven-week residency this summer in Dijon France that took him far out of his usual context. There for the summer solstice, he prepared an "occasional" performance, inviting street spectators to share in one of his interventions that called on his part for as much spontaneity as forethought. Some of the artwork he produced in France is included in his installation at Pierogi gallery (on view from October 11 until November 11).

Accepting a residency in Dijon was a challenge for Kim Kimball on many levels: communicating in a foreign language, being abroad for the first time in his life, absorbing enough French culture to create an appropriate piece, having sufficient time to complete a project (*Enthusiasm*, his installation with a video by the same title was prepared for Pierogi in September 2000 during the course of three years). Before leaving New York, he focused on doing an "occasional" performance, something he's done a number of times for birthdays and special events. This one in Dijon, entitled *That Which is Revealed was Once Hidden*, specifically related to the summer solstice, June 21st, with subtle references to the Sun King, the guilds of Burgundy, maybe even to the lack of sun since it rained for his first month in France.

It was a delicate endeavor for Kimball to perform before foreigners, mainly because word play is such an integral part of his art and it doesn't usually translate well in another culture. After talking about his work to students at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, he realized the communication obstacles he was facing. That got him to change his approach toward the planned performance. Rather than name a specific time or place, which would have implied an appointment to see a certain type of work, he preferred to focus on whatever audience would be at hand.

Much like his installations, Kimball's performances are constructed bit by bit around an idea that functions like a large frame (i.e. enthusiasm) and as the idea develops, he makes or brings in appropriate pieces of all sorts. Within the whole he sets up a continuous interaction of the various elements through a multitude of allusions, juxtapositions, and private jokes.

Rather than be tied to a medium, Kimball makes use of different ones. He's not a video artist, but uses video; he's neither a painter nor sculptor, but makes use of these disciplines. In fact, he is a compulsive maker of things of all kinds—from puns to paintings—that are sparked by his immediate surroundings. With the mind of an existentialist and the hands of a watchmaker, he channels many of his ideas and pieces into his various interventions (video, performance, installation).

Kimball spent most of his time in Dijon crafting objects (some for his current show at Pierogi) and props, which he does with almost obsessive attention to detail. For this "occasional" intervention he sculpted wands from silver coated papier-mâché and attached multicolored streamers made of glued bits of crêpe paper inscribed with text from handmade letter stencils (a reference to scrolls held by angels in 14th century

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paintings at Dijon's Musée des Beaux Arts). Hidden inside the carefully wound up bands were surprises—flowers, gold leaf, illuminated letters, text—that were revealed or scattered about for anyone to take home, again like souvenirs of a whole piece.

The intervention took place in the midst of the Fête de la Musique, an annual, highly animated music-in-the-streets festival that occurs all over the country. Kimball roamed Dijon's center city until he found an appropriate spot to perform. Masked, costumed, maneuvering his wands, he had the air of a medieval magician. Each streamer, containing a different message or commentary (for instance a dozen different names for money) was waved, cut up, burned, or ceremoniously given away (one, less 35%, to his gallery director Joe Amrhein who attended the performance). The display and use of color was as decorative as it was ecumenical: "to give each one a voice," says Kimball. It was a festive, strange, generous fanfare, full of references to, among other personal things, the peculiar characteristics of French culture.

Kimball views the French as emotionally undemonstrative (easy to see compared to New Yorkers) and naturally finds the pace slower ("Look at the two hour lunches.") He says that in France "...one feels the weight of tradition or history. After spending an afternoon at the Louvre, you wonder about your own work: where do I go from here? How can I possibly do better?" The French art world he grasped as pretty institutionalized. "That means that if the people running it don't like your work, you're out. And if they do, you better do what they want. So you're controlled from the moment you enter the situation. I wouldn't like that."

Certainly being controlled, pinpointed, and defined is not what Kimball is about. Part of the richness of his work relies on the many layers of visual and verbal meaning carefully invested in whatever he makes, from which the audience will take away bits: colors, messages, presents, or simply impressions.

More than once, Kimball declared that his seven-week residency away from New York was surprisingly good, mainly because the environment was so totally different it kept him in a comfortable mind frame. Being immersed in a place where everything was new, even every word he uttered to a shopkeeper was a discovery. In a way, the experience mirrored one of the basic concepts of his work: dealing with the here and now while it lasts.

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