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Performance artist Dawn Kasper moves all her stuff, and herself, into the Whitney Museum

By Jacob Osterhout

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Dawn Kasper (right) talks to museumgoers at her space on the third floor of the Whitney. (BRYAN SMITH FOR NEW YORK DAILY NEWS)

As a performance artist, Dawn Kasper has done many crazy things.

Most visibly, she once carved a heart into her chest and branded the word “love” on one bicep and “truth” on the other.

But nothing has been as taxing for the 35-year-old Greenpoint resident as her “Nomadic Studio Practice Experiment” at the Whitney Museum.

As part of the Whitney Biennial 2012, Kasper moved everything she owns into a 23-by-22-foot gallery on the third floor of the museum.

On display for three months, the exhibit, titled “This Could Be Something If I Let It,” not only features all of Kasper’s belongings, but the artist as well.

During museum hours (about seven hours a day, five days a week), she creates new art, holds studio visits, plays music, watches movies and even tries to nap.

“This is my full-time job right now,” says Kasper, a native of northern Virginia. “It’s an ongoing performance every day. In the museum context it becomes a fishbowl, except I invite people to come in and have an experience.”

According to the Whitney, the point of the exhibit is to create “both a theatrical space and a living sculpture.”

But being on display all day is no easy task.

“I’m used to doing something more immediate that gets the adrenaline flowing,” says Kasper, surrounded by Buster Keaton tapes, drums and art books. “This is the hardest thing that I’ve ever encountered because it takes a sustained effort.”

Throughout the day, a steady stream of museum guests stop by the exhibit to speak with Kasper and peruse her things, which can be overwhelming for the artist.

“If there are a lot of people in the space and they are all going through my things I get frustrated,” she says. “Kids especially like to touch things.”

Interactions with visitors range from mere seconds to hour-long art sessions. Most visitors are cordial, but not all.

“I had a heckler once,” says Kasper. “He was booing and calling me a monkey, but I didn’t get rattled.”

She also receives visits from friends.

“My friend Mimi came for a surprise visit and mentioned that I never returned a book she had lent me,” says Kasper. “So we started looking through all my stuff for it. I couldn’t find it that moment but discovered it later.”

Once a week, Kasper also hosts performances, often with invited guests. Sometimes she will project a film on the wall, other times she’ll convert her bed into a stage for concerts.

“Each day is totally different,” she says. “It has to be since there are no windows in here. The air gets stale so we’ve got to keep everything else fresh.”

Not that Kasper is complaining about basically living in a museum, which she calls “an incredible opportunity.” She is already on a first-name basis with the security guards and knows where every bathroom in the museum is located.

In a twist of fate, Kasper’s initial idea for the exhibit didn’t involve her stuff, but her mom’s.

“My mother is a hoarder and I wanted to move the entire contents of her house into the museum,” she says. “The curators loved the idea but my parents got really upset.

Then I thought, well, why don’t I put myself out there. And here we are.”

Despite all her eccentricities, Kasper is actually very conventional when asked which items she values the most.

“If there were a fire,” she says, “I’d probably take my hard drives.”