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Please, Don't Feed the Artist Dawn Kasper at the Whitney Biennial

by Penelope Green
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Dawn Kasper moved the entire contents of her home and studio into a room at the Whitney Museum.
Credit Robert Wright for The New York Times

ON most days, you can hear Dawn Kasper's installation at the Whitney Biennial before you see it. Bessie Smith or the Beatles or an episode of "The Young Ones," a British sitcom from the '80s, might be playing scratchily on one of her many devices, spilling out into an adjacent gallery and accompanied by a throaty guffaw from the artist, whom you might then come upon sitting cross-legged on a mattress, wearing a Hawaiian shirt, eating a sandwich and entertaining a few strangers.

In late February, Ms. Kasper, a Los Angeles performance artist, moved herself and the entire contents of her apartment-slash-studio into the Whitney, where it and she will remain for the duration of the show (it closes May 27), in a kind of living sculpture she calls the Nomadic Studio Practice.

Though she is only 35, she has albums on vinyl, as well as VHS tapes and cassettes; there they are, in stacks on the floor. This is partly because she has a fondness for old media equipment and partly because she can't afford to upgrade.

Indeed, Ms. Kasper's finances haven't allowed for a real studio since 2008, a common scenario in the life of an artist and one that generated this piece, which recalls the more festive aspects of Relational Aesthetics as well as a party

in the room of a particularly messy teenager. (Ms. Kasper has sublet the room she rents in a two-room apartment in Los Angeles to a friend.)

While Ms. Kasper spends her nights sleeping in a rented room in Greenpoint, Brooklyn – the museum won't allow her to sleep over – she has spent almost every day the Whitney is open in her reconstituted home, snacking, making collages and drawings, and chatting up the museumgoers who fill her room like shoppers in a cramped thrift store, squatting to sift through her records and paperback books. Small children will climb out of their strollers to dance. Ms. Kasper hands out markers and paper to the older ones; she has a stack of their drawings. Last week, two boys were convinced she was a robot, Ms. Kasper said, until she left her desk to draw pictures with them. Older patrons might sink gratefully onto a chair to rest.

Ms. Kasper has return visitors, and has traded drawings for dinners. The other day she traded a book on Jacques Lacan for a page out of a student's journal. There have been celebrity moments: Martha Stewart visited in March, and tweeted about it. "Where do you go to the bathroom?" Ms. Stewart asked her, as everyone does.

Since her piece is what's known as a durational exercise, we've been checking on her every couple of weeks. What does it feel like to live, for all intents and purposes, inside a museum?

Hearing about Ms. Kasper's adventures – the day an old girlfriend showed up in a rage and shouted at her in a stairwell; the week she had food poisoning from a bad hot dog at Coney Island and could only lie in fetal position on a packing blanket; the David Bowie debacle (more on this later) – we were reminded not so much of her performance art predecessors but of the spunky siblings in the children's classic "From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler," who hid out in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



It's not easy living in a museum (though Dawn Kasper does not sleep over). The air is dehydrating; the Friday crowd can be cranky; and the questions, which focus on bathroom issues, can be draining.
Credit Robert Wright for The New York Times

For unlike, say, Marina Abramovic, who once spent 12 days living on a series of high platforms in a Chelsea gallery, showering, napping and standing about in what Roberta Smith in The New York Times called "full-tilt endurance-art mode," above the heads of gallerygoers in nearly every way, Ms. Kasper is a boots-on-the-ground sort of person. She is a gregarious and gracious host ("Hi, I'm Dawn Kasper, thank you for coming!"), and a tireless art ambassador and booster, cheerfully explaining her work and answering the same questions over and over again, hundreds of times a day: "Are you sleeping here?" "Where do you go to the bathroom?"

For the record, Ms. Kasper uses the public restrooms in the basement, a spot she visits often. The museum's low-humidity atmosphere is good for artwork but dehydrates humans, as she learned early on. So she drinks liters and liters of water. "It's like airplane air in here," she'll tell you.

She has learned that museumgoers are crankiest on Fridays (it's something about it being the end of the week, the guards told her), but that in general they are curious and kind. "How are you holding up?" they'll ask her.

HER room is both an exercise in social anthropology and a behind-the-scenes look at the sometimes baffling world of the younger generation of contemporary conceptual artists, particularly those whose work is collected this spring at the Whitney: a mash-up of music, writing, photography and collaborative performance. Noting her paperbacks – Alan Watts, Camus – you see that Ms. Kasper is concerned with life's big questions.

She also makes little books out of folded paper that might say, "I have a short attention span"; she plays the drums. You deduce her roots in the D.I.Y., post-punk scene. But as Ms. Kasper, comically frenetic, scoots about her space, sorting cable wires, nailing a huge fragment of paper to the wall that reads "Too Available" in block letters or piling packing blankets in high stacks to make extra seats, an even older tradition emerges: she plays the fool like her hero, Buster Keaton.

Elisabeth Sussman, who curated the show this year with Jay Sanders, explained: "It's what we get to see on a studio visit. Out of that stuff is where the art is coming from."



Dawn Kasper.
Credit Robert Wright for The New York Times

Ms. Kasper's work is not all ephemeral. She has staged her own death in scenes inspired by horror movies and Weegee photographs, and then photographed those scenes. She has also photographed herself branding and cutting parts of her body (inscribing it with the word "love" or a heart shape). She saves the gauze with which she's blotted her wounds and tucks the bloodied fabric into Ziploc bags. All of these things are at the Whitney. The photographs are framed and hung on the walls. The gauze bags are in boxes.

You can see how fine the line is between archiving and hoarding, when collecting veers into sheer clutter. These are topics of interest to Ms. Kasper, who said her mother struggles with those issues. In an early proposal for Ms. Sussman and Mr. Sanders, Ms. Kasper conceived of an installation composed of the contents of her parents' garage.

"I wanted to help them, and help myself, by having a gaggle of things to organize," she said. (Ms. Kasper's performances often involve sorting through and playing with piles of stuff.)

To say that her parents were not on board with that idea is a huge understatement, she added. It can be hard to have a performance artist for a daughter, though her mother was tickled by Ms. Stewart's tweet, she said.

"Sometimes I think of my process as a used-car salesman," Ms. Kasper said. "I'm trying to get people to buy something. It's hard for people because it's stuff. It's my stuff. My activity in this context on a daily basis is making the contents of my material possessions a sculptural installation. But when I'm not there, you realize the car could be a lemon. It's just books and empty cassette cases."

One day, while we were there, Ms. Kasper went down to the restroom and left the room "open" – which is to say she didn't employ the velvet rope she sometimes uses as a barrier when she's away. As always, the space was packed. "When I'm 64" was crackling on the record player, and the mood was lively.

"Are you the artist?" folks asked us.

"Wow, this is one way to get to live in New York," someone else said.

But then the record stopped, and we were nervous about starting it up again. Would we be interfering with the art?

Just like that, the energy leaked out of the room. Patrons stopped making eye contact. The mood soured. One man asked tetchily, "I wonder how contrived this all is?"

"There's just something about the Friday crowd," Ms. Kasper said later. "People are a little more intense." The David Bowie incident was a low point, though it happened on a Thursday. "It was a lovely failure," she said.

In early April, the rock star was in the museum to attend a performance by Michael Clark, the Scottish choreographer. Ms. Kasper had volunteered to usher and was headed upstairs when she bumped into one of the organizers, who was looking for Mr. Bowie and enlisted Ms. Kasper's help. Then things got a bit frantic, she said, as she realized that he was on her floor, starting his tour of the exhibits there, though she was still far from her room.

"What if he sees it, and I'm not in it?" she thought to herself. Ms. Kasper raced back, fumbled in her record collection and in a flash of inspiration put "Space Oddity" on her turntable.

That turned out to be a big mistake. As Mr. Bowie's song filled the gallery, he retreated.

"I had it in my mind's eye he would hear his music and be drawn to it like a moth to light," she said. But "I could see him in the next room, and I heard him say, 'I don't want to go in there.' I took a risk that he would be offended, and I guess he was. For whatever reason, I got caught up in the excitement of it all. I didn't think about his potential reality."



Robert Wright for The New York Times

“It was a pretty significant turning point in the weirdest of ways,” Ms. Kasper continued. “It happens on a daily basis with the patrons – being responsible for my actions. I’m a human being doing a sculptural installation in a very public environment every day. Yesterday I did all this cable maintenance. Not very interesting. A friend stopped by, and I was very distracted. I wonder if people are satisfied with me organizing a rat’s nest of cables, if they get that it’s a performance of ridiculousness.”

On a recent Saturday morning, Ms. Kasper strode through the galleries on the third floor, greeting the security guards like the old friends they had become. “Good morning,” she called. “How are you doing?”

At her room, she unclipped the velvet rope and placed a plastic Duane Reade bag on a table. It was filled with supplies: Claritin, Advil, cough syrup and sanitizing wipes for her hands. “I meet so many people,” she said. Lately, Ms. Kasper has been bedeviled by allergies, and a persistent cough.

“You’re late,” a guard said, grinning.

The room quickly filled. Ms. Kasper took a deep breath, put on a Leonard Cohen record, and got to work.

“Hi, I’m Dawn Kasper. Thank you for coming!”

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