

SPIN

The Exhibitionist: Artist Dawn Kasper Is a Piece of Work

The most talked-about installation in this year's Whitney Biennial isn't exactly a piece of art. But Dawn Kasper is a piece of work.

by Alyssa Noel
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L.A. artist Dawn Kasper has cultivated a reputation for bold, bizarre, and sometimes painful performance art – from branding the words love and truth into her biceps with metal letters and a propane torch to slumping over in pools of “blood” and playing dead in highbrow galleries. But when she found herself living hand-to-mouth and without a studio for the first time, she felt like her entire résumé had been erased.

Instead of resigning herself to plan B, Kasper, 35, pitched an idea to the curators of the Whitney Biennial that would solve her problem and earn her a coveted spot in the contemporary art show: setting up shop in the Manhattan museum, where she could work, interact with patrons, and store her belongings for the show’s three-month run. So far, “This Could Be Something if I Let It” has been a hit, even with her branding tools safely stowed.

I basically created a job: I come here every day the museum is open, and some Fridays I have friends come and we make music. This installation is a sculptural environment. People are encouraged to come into the space. Although these are my personal items, I interact with them to move around the installation. It’s constantly shifting.

It’s been amazing and weird. I got into a sort of drama yesterday – a friend confronted me and we had a fight in this [museum] space. She pronounced that I’d slept with her girlfriend; like, it was superdramatic, very serious. She created a scene. I wouldn’t have changed it for the world. It was like reality TV or something.

I applied for unemployment insurance, the first time I’d ever done that. It was like a stipend, it was meager. I have an education that was really expensive and I’m in debt because I had to take out loans to be able to afford school. I’m grateful I have a place to come to. A purpose. A job.

The installation is coming from a failure. It’s like, “Oh, I don’t have a studio. I’m not a real artist.” I think people can relate to wanting to be able to turn things around.

I want to change [the idea of art] from the inside out. What would it mean to put all my crap in a museum in a group show? I’m going to piss people off because I’m playing my music too loud and I’m having arguments, but the curators wanted that. They wanted something that was alive in this building. Something unexpected could happen.