

MOUSSE

Dawn Kasper Interview

by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer
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Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer: What does it feel like when you perform and is that feeling what you are after in your practice—in life? Phrased another way, is the sensation, the thrill, the adrenalin of performance your reason for doing it? Or is there some urgent thing that needs communicating to an audience? Perhaps these things are inextricable.

Dawn Kasper: That's a good question. Hard to explain, truthfully, unless from inside a performance frame of mind. I have always acted out, I have always searched for something I may never find the answers to. I have often felt misunderstood and rejected. I'm sure this quest for meaning has led me to performance, or performance has led me to this quest for meaning. I've found it's the most immediate way to get my ideas across and the best way to let myself make mistakes and move forward through the mess. Performance allows me a voice. Otherwise nobody seems to care. Otherwise I don't care, or act like I don't.

I am beginning to realize myself into a trick or trick myself into a reality. It feels like I might never recover from performing. Its possible I will lose my mind. In fact I'm beginning to realize that I lost it a long time ago. I have no choice now but to perform myself, which sets me up for failure. I feel panic and a deep loss. I miss and long and desire. My performances are the only place I find reality. It is that sensation of 'fitting into' that keeps me returning. I want, I want, I want. Never to be fulfilled. The only time I 'feel' is when I perform or prepare for a performance, but in the last several years that is all I have been doing, either performing or preparing. I've been constantly in character, so to speak.

SLG: Do you specifically look to take a physical risks as well as psychological risks in front of a live audience?

DK: Yes, I decide to challenge myself in some way. Usually in a psychological way to get a better understanding of a given topic or interest. I attempt total identification with my subject of inquiry or I detach my physical body from my mind through, say, exhaustion and then enter a trance-like state of being to become more present within the environment. Less hung up, if you will, on an expected outcome.

SLG: Do you know what's going to happen in your performances?

DK: I do my best to not have any expectations of a specified outcome. Although I'll admit, as time passes, I can't help but develop ideas and muscle memories that can easily lead to expectations. I do not fear failure; I encourage it. I believe that mistakes are important in one's individual growth process. One cannot always control the environment or the viewer. I can attempt to steer but I do not expect anything from the viewer. If I develop an expectation then meaning is lost or contrived.

...You know what, this is really hard to respond to because I am in the middle of performing right now in front of a stream of viewers, as I type these words on my computer. I'm experiencing a complicated devotion to being present in my space and focusing on what's in front of me. To reflect and answer questions at the same time is awkward. Please don't take that the wrong way. I'm attempting to be honest and, well... I hope that maybe we can continue over the phone?

[Interview picks up later via video Skype]

SLG: It actually is really fortuitous and amazing that we are having this exchange while you are performing. Can you describe this new work and what it's like to be in the thick of it?

DK: It is a three-month, durational performance installation titled THIS COULD BE SOMETHING IF I LET IT. It's part of a series called the Nomadic Studio Practice Experiment. I proposed this piece specifically for the Whitney for this Biennial. My proposal was to have my studio in the museum. Otherwise unemployed, I basically created a job for myself: I come here every day that the museum is open to the public. I've been here since February 8 to install and the Biennial has been open to the public since February 27 until May 27, the closing of my floor.

During that time I'm doing performances and studio visits, making collages and drawings, listening to music, and making sculptures. I'm moving the space around, constantly shifting and reorganizing things. All that in the midst of lots of people coming by and interacting, touching things, talking to me, entering my space and walking around, looking at books or photographs of me as a child. Everything I own is currently in the museum. It took me a while to realize that a lot of what's happening right now is about identity—about understanding boundaries in different contexts. I've never done anything quite like this before. I've done versions, but at best for two weeks. I've never proposed anything for three months. So, I'm just trying to stay present. Yesterday I had a kind of difficult day. But, you know, Woody Allen once said, 99 percent of success is just showing up. Sometimes I have a plan or schedule for the day, other times I just try to get here and remember to eat and drink.

SLG: Are your experiences and interactions with museum visitors during the three months being documented in some way? Or is the piece about being in the present and having direct, personal experiences that can't be recorded?

DK: I'll move things around or make a collage or drawing while talking to people, and that puts me in a bit of a trance because I'm focusing on them but, you know, sort of multi-tasking too. In a way, I consider all of that an archive of my interactions. I don't find it necessary to document it in such a conventional audio or video recording way. Archiving also happens in the frame of storytelling—for example, I'll have an experience in the morning and then share it with someone else in the afternoon because it pertains to a new conversation and that sharing transforms the new interaction into an archive of the previous experience. Here's another example: a woman came in wearing a shirt that I own and used to wear a lot in the past. I had the shirt here in the studio so I put it on and we took a photo together. That became the archive of the interaction. We even had a bit of an email exchange afterwards. Or someone else came into my space. He sketched me and we traded drawings. I have his here, I'll show you, hold on...[Kasper holds up a ballpoint pen drawing to her computer's camera.] Actually a lot of people give me different things. He and his partner invited me to their home for dinner...that reminds me, I need to email him

[Kasper addresses the museum visitors gathered around her...]

You're welcome to come into the studio and look around. ...Hey, wow, how's it going? It's so good to see you, Hana [van der Kolk]. Do you know Sarah? We're skyping right now; having a little work meeting...

SLG: Hi Hana, now you're part of it.

DK: It's so good to see you. Thanks for stopping by.

Hana van der Kolk (dancer): This is great. I wish I could be here when you do your performance.

DK: Yeah, well... *this* is the performance. I'll be doing music later and other things, but this is it. Come to think of it, if you want to perform something here at some point that would be amazing.

HvdK: Yeah, that would be incredible.

DK: OK, let me get your telephone number. This is so great, I'm so excited. [Kasper addresses me again...] See this is all part of the piece, this is how a lot of it comes together—organically. I love that.

SLG: You once told me, when we were talking about taking risks in performance, that you do the things you do in performance (whether it be flogging drums, playing dead, branding and cutting yourself, monologuing, being naked, etc) 'so that others do not have to'. I've been thinking about this idea recently and wonder if you could expand on what you meant.

I feel like that was really part of my earlier, more intense performances, like Body Modification Work or the Evil Series or Death Scenes, which were experiments that had something to do with the idea of learning from your mistakes. But I don't know how I feel about predicating the work on being a mistake of some sort...

SLG: I guess I'm wondering whether or not the idea of performing 'so that other do not have to' implies that there is a fundamental human need to act out or even 'perform' that is generally ignored and repressed by most people in daily life and with your performances satisfy or fulfill vicariously (perhaps therapeutically?) for your audience.

DK: Lately, I've been reading over and over David Foster Wallace's *This is Water* where he talks about the default reality we all live of being at the center of your own universe...which is not necessarily a bad thing. But in hindsight, saying that I conduct actions so that other don't have to affords me the ability to let go of being the center, even though it might actually sound like the opposite, like I am making myself an example. I'm just asking questions that we're all asking—and I'm confused. The particular becomes universal.

Having this experience here in the Whitney Museum right now, even this conversation with you, is very intimate and it's challenging me. I need to be challenged. This opens doors of thought for me, but also for others who are asking similar questions. And, like the chicken or egg, I wonder if they are asking because I'm asking or is it because our current environment makes lots of people fed up—I'm not the only one who has lost my job and I'm not the only one that can't fucking afford space to work and can barely afford rent—these things are very real. It's like that movie, *Network*: We're sick and tired and we're not going to take it any more. I'm tired. I'm sick of moving all my shit around, packing it and unpacking it. I'm sick of performing and hurting myself and not having insurance to go to the hospital. My teeth are fucked and I can't get my teeth fixed. These urgent realities are freaking me out. My work is saying that I'm not the only one that's living like this. I'm not the only one that's wearing the same jeans for years. It's a performance of myself, but who am I performing?

My being here is a way of proposing that 'it', whatever it is, is possible. You know, this whole piece was predicated on me just wanting a fucking studio. I just want to work. I got an education I can't afford, that I'm still trying to pay back. This is about people being able to relate to people, essentially.

A lot of what I'm learning about now is being present; I really have to be available here. I'm learning subtle ways of drawing boundaries in a crash course kind of way. But this piece is also dismantling all my objects, which are all representative of memories that are representative of myself in the past. So in a way, I'm dismantling my attachment to my past; I can detach and then it's no longer so intimate, so important.

Now being in this public situation, I'm realizing that something else is happening that is opening me up to recognize that I don't have to make art. I don't have to have a studio, I don't have to make a product to be an artist. I don't have to be a performer, I don't have to be quantifiable. I—We can make art by having a conversation. I really, really, really fundamentally believe and value that.

I'm here for two more months and I'm sure I'll have more epiphanies, but, if anything, I think that choosing to be in the present is allowing me to relate to strangers who know nothing about me so we can talk for an hour and not even realize it. I walk away inspired. How are you going to document that? You can't. Maybe that's the point.