Dawn Kasper paintings, photographs, performs, and creates installations. She grew up in a suburb of Washington D.C., where she frequented underground circles and played in punk rock bands. She later took up the study of sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University before moving to Los Angeles to take courses with Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, and Jason Rhoades. The fusion between art and life and the desire to sunder “the fourth wall” are at the heart of her pursuit. Her public scarification testifies to this. The Evil Series (or Death Scenes) are performances where she stages her own death in an overblown scenography, largely inspired by the photographs of Weegee, B films, and the costumes of Cindy Sherman.

In 2008, when she could no longer afford rent for her studio, Kasper invented the principle of “nomadic studio”: inhibiting the gallery space where her exhibition would be held. In 2012, she occupied a gallery at the Whitney in New York for close to three months during the museum’s Biennial. Invited to the 57th International Art Exhibition, she continued this nomadic practice in a new work titled The Sun, the Moon and the Stars, moving the contents of her studio into the Sala Chini of the Central Pavilion. In each one of the spaces she occupies, Kasper installs her work space, her drawings and photographs, as well as a multitude of accessories, musical instruments, costumes and cosmetics. Immersed in the crowd, the artist becomes a living sculpture. She works, writes and plays music, interacting with visitors, never refusing to answer the questions of the curious. Occasionally she gets up to perform, either alone or asking other artists to contribute. Using outdated record players, a laptop computer or percussion instruments, Kasper creates visual or musical performances, or tragicomic sketches, whose irony and black humour betray West-Coast influences, from Chris Burden to Mike Kelley. Kasper’s references to popular culture, counterculture currents, and California easy-living underpin her reflections on social codes, the way they condition us, and on life and death.

In Kasper’s art, the work and its process of fabrication, the preparation for a performance and its execution all interblend. “I begin my process for creating performance work much like writing a middle school science paper. I start by brainstorming ideas in order to create a hypothesis or a series of theories and or concepts. This brainstorming process is realized through collage and drawing. I then conduct experiments or ‘actions’ to prove or disprove my theories and or concepts. [...] This ‘middle school science paper process’ is used as a template to get to the root of what’s really happening, what’s developing underneath the surface of things, a base level steadfast approach that guides me safely through the descent into the void.” During her stays at various institutions, Kasper develops a practice conditioned by her environment, by such factors as opening hours, security procedures, number of visitors, and the time allotted to her installation: “The length of time varies and has an important impact on the realization of the piece. I managed to make it a point to create something from nothing and maximize the time there as studio practice. My time in process is very much an important part of my performance work, as is revealing that process publicly.”

M. S.

1 The idea of the “fourth wall” was formulated by Denis Diderot in his Discours sur la poésie dramatique (1758) to signify the imaginary wall that separates the stage from the audience in a theater.

2 Dawn Kasper, “This could be something if I let it,” 2012, artist’s website.

3 Ibid.
“To activate the start of my 3-month durational performance residency I performed sounds inside of the installation during the opening night of the 2012 Whitney Biennial. The 2-hour opening night performance was performed in collaboration with the all female LA based noise ensemble, Lady Noise.”

Dawn Kasper
My work emerges out of a fascination with existentialism, subjects of vulnerability, desire, and the construction of meaning. I critique the corporatized aspects of popular culture by examining the emotions most commonly manipulated by advertisers and mass media such as fear, panic, hate, envy, lust, and anxiety. Creating installations that double as platform for living sculpture, I perform in a structured yet spontaneous manner using props, costumes, comedy, gesture, extreme physicality, repetition, monologue, and sound.

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