

Dawn Kasper

FROM DEAD OBJECTS – TO RECREATE LIFE

Interview by Rosanna Albertini

Today Dawn Kasper seems to discover the value of “being in acceptance,” after presenting herself killed in violent scenes for over six years. She questioned death as a friendly complement to life and laid still for hours, each time transformed into a different character, almost incrusting in the character she had built: her body inseparable from her art. Art, on the other hand, for a limited time was separated from the terrors of life. The *Evil Series or Death Scenes 2001-2007* are a body of work in which photographs and sculptures integrate the live performances. It was followed by the series *Clues to the Meaning of Life (date)*, *The On Series* (still ongoing performances) and, recently, by the *Nomadic Studio Practice Experiment*.

Each performance manifests the exact state of mind of the moment in the artist’s life. The blurring of art and life in all of them recalls Allan Kaprow’s lifelike art, rather than conceptual operative systems. Not rationally, mostly guided by instinct, Kasper might have seen “art emptied of everything except ourselves — who became art by default.” (Allan Kaprow, 1983)

Her initial, silent language of anger has moved to the new challenges of a spoken language still violent at times, but able to include self irony, and understanding. Some other times, words are obliterated by body language or by overwhelming sounds of darkness. Her thinking is nothing but movement through the action. She often emerges from the effort branded, bruised, wounded, the very portrait of failure. And yet, she exposes the power of human struggle when there are no guidelines, no safe edges, no idealism, for the soul is so lonely, so deserted in the task of living, that humor steams out of her body, and laughter and tears bring the spectators into the same tragicomic disorder.

How do you search for the meaning of art?

I realized there is no meaning to the meaning of life. We are here, the actions we take are the best practice, being in the moment, trying to be present. The scariest thing is to remember past feelings, or to manipulate the present in order to achieve something in the future.

My friend Jason Rhodes, who was also my mentor, told me: “Just keep doing what you are doing.” I did not think that it mattered at that time. Now, it is what I try to achieve within my own day-to-day practice.

Are you revisiting your and other artists' experience?

With *Claim* and *On Moving and Motion*, both performances of 2011, I looked for inspiration from inside; it was almost a way of owning, owning as a way of understanding or paying homage, or invoking. I wanted to channel Vito Acconci and Spaulding Gray, to respectfully channel them.

How are you affected by your own performance?

I get onto a trance when I perform. I feel it, I hope for it, but it's a blurring line. After, I can look at the way I expelled my energies — it's a calculated process — and try reviewing what happened. It's hard to perform, and I love it, but even harder to look at myself after. I don't know why, in the moment, I am unconscious of what I am doing. I was on the fence, still am. I have recreated, revisited my own artwork: all the scarification work, tattoos and brandings on different spots of my arms, and my left leg. I have cut a heart into my chest twice.

And?

It has showed me where I am and how to deal with time. I can dwell on a potentially negative experience. For example, after losing my job and not being able to afford having a studio I decided to make work about not having a studio. I made my performance my studio practice. A few performances happened. For the inaugural opening at Human Resources in Chinatown, Los Angeles, I exposed the process of making a drawing (*On Drawing*, May 1st 2010); with *Repeater or On Inertia and Anger* (June 2009) in a street of Chinatown, I made a sculpture in my truck with all the broken pieces of my life, mashing up the topics of anger and inertia. Then, slowly, I turned such failures around, used that inadequacy to my benefit. "Expose that vulnerability, keep exposing it like a raw nerve, face that fear" — I told myself. It was a gift to lose my job and my studio. I feel the most free I ever felt in my life. I am the poorest that I have ever been, and the happiest. The collaboration with other artists and friends (16 musicians) and the renovation of my childhood home brought me to *Music for Hoarders* at Honor Fraser Gallery, in Culver City (2010). I wrote a visual score, made objects, and created a two-hour performance.

Do you still consider yourself an object maker? In the past you were making yourself an object, impersonating so many dead-broken women on the floor ...

The point of my art practice was and is to recreate life out of dead pieces. They can be characters, costumes, furniture or TV shows. The most recent piece I've done was *On School*, in New York, one of the many events organized by The New Museum in an abandoned Catholic school, May 2011. The space was a classroom with one chair and a small teacher's desk. After seeing the space, and thinking about the performance, I remembered how much I hated to be a high school student. While on the train I read Andrea Fraser's essay, *Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry?* Recommended to me by one of my best friends. I really related to it and it inspired me. I used a quote from the essay and made the performance in part informed by this quote. The idea was that no growth is possible without failure; no matter how low you get, you can only go up from there. I tried to approach the storytelling with a point of order and cadence with the language of a comedic punch line. I hated school so much that in the end I cut the desk into pieces and used them to make a sculpture. Andy Kaufman's storytelling inspired my timing and delivery of speech. I came to terms with my feelings on school; I destroyed them so as to rebuild a new experience. I am moving on.

How do you feel about your studio objects, now that *The Nomadic Studio* series has begun?

Very precious, very familiar. I realized that all these objects are meant to be together — they are a story — do not want to be individualized. It's all one story. Each performance has so much in it, and afterwards it's like air, fumes of a firework ... but we can still feel that the fireworks happened, and we do know what a firework is, even if each of us relates to different events. Maybe the performance makes a new resonance around you, maybe your body will remember, like muscle memory or a scare from an injury.