

ART SY

What It Takes to Live as an Artist in New York

by Scott Indrisek
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New York City is mythical, heroic, cinematic, unbeatable, legendary. But it's also a place where real people have real jobs, and really struggle to pay the rent in a place that is gentrifying at an unnerving rate. Older generations of artists staked out the then-desolate neighborhoods of SoHo in the 1970s, or Williamsburg in the 1990s; they bought cheap real estate or stumbled upon capacious, rent-controlled studios that they enjoy to this day. Those pockets of scrappy, affordable bohemia are now few and far between, even in the outer reaches of the outer boroughs. At the same time, New York remains one of the undeniable centers of the art world, and proximity to its key players can be vital. Couple that with the ongoing professionalization of the art industry—in which a high-priced MFA degree can be touted as a prerequisite for success—and New York can suddenly seem like a dilemma without any clear answers.

Patti Smith might be fond of telling young people to get the hell out of town and move to Poughkeepsie, yet each year brings a fresh crop of bright-eyed artists eager to beat the odds. (Each year also brings the arrival of new corporate developments, like Amazon's HQ2, sure to alter the creative fabric of an entire neighborhood, not to mention its availability of affordable apartments and studio spaces.) Rather than idly surmising about the state of the metropolis, we decided to speak with seven creatives, at various stages of their careers, to get a better idea of what life is actually like for artists in New York City, circa 2018.

The performance artist striving to return to her favorite city
Dawn Kasper is a modern-day nomad, but she'd love a home base in New York

Part of Dawn Kasper's identity as an artist is that she isn't exactly rooted to one place. Her Nomadic Studio Practice Experiment, an ongoing project begun in 2008, has found her bringing her workspace into galleries and museums, where viewers are able to engage with her creative process in real time. She first established herself in New York in 2012, in advance of her participation in that year's Whitney Biennial. Over the years, she's lived in almost too many apartments to count—from Greenpoint to Bushwick, Chinatown to East Harlem. For a multi-month project that followed the biennial, she lived and worked out of David Zwirner in Chelsea. To stay nimble, "I was trying to avoid signing any leases," Kasper said.



Dawn Kasper, *the key* (performance) at Converso, Milan, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis.

Installation view of Dawn Kasper, *The Sun, The Moon, The Stars*, at the 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis.



Installation view of Dawn Kasper, *Cluster*, at David Lewis, New York, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis.

Installation view of Dawn Kasper, *Four Scores (From Zero to Nothing)*, at David Lewis, New York, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and David Lewis.



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Kasper received her MFA at the University of California, Los Angeles, and retains a strong affection for that city's performance art scene. While there, she also worked as a studio assistant for artists like Jason Rhoades, Mike Kelley, and Kaari Upson. But New York's history called to her specifically, she said, as someone who "grew up obsessed with early 1970s body art performance and performance art from the Lower East Side." She cited Vito Acconci's 1969 *Following Piece* as a particular example: "quintessential New York performance art."

As is the case with most young artists, institutional and critical acclaim—or even prominent placement in the Venice Biennale, in which Kasper participated in 2017—doesn't always translate into a frictionless career. Kasper shows regularly with David Lewis Gallery in New York, and says that she has been able to support herself based on her sales, in conjunction with teaching jobs. But she's yet to find a balance that would let her achieve her ambitions: a home and studio in New York, perhaps with enough income to pay a studio assistant.

At the moment, Kasper is bouncing between Philadelphia and Accord, New York, an upstate town a little over two hours north of the city. She spends the bulk of her week teaching at Temple University's Tyler School of Art, then drives back up to Accord, where she has a live-work space in a "tiny little cabin," complete with a woodburning stove, on a friend's property. Back in New York, David Lewis provides her access to a shared studio in the Bronx that she can use on a project-by-project basis. She currently has an exhibition on view at the gallery through January 6, 2019.

The self-described nomad would still love to get back to New York on a more permanent basis. The city, she explained, has sharpened her performances, and made her think harder about her practice. ("The New York minute," she mused. "There's only so much time—you don't want to waste people's time.") If, in her mind, Los Angeles was starting to feel like a comfortable outfit, she compared New York City to a bee that can sense your fear—and that's a good thing.