



Loaded Histories/ Real Experiences

A Conversation with
Kevin Beasley

BY AMANDA DALLA VILLA ADAMS

Your face is / is not enough, 2016. View of performance at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago.

TOM VAN EYNDE. COURTESY THE ARTIST. CASEY KAPLAN. NY. AND THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



I Want My Spot Back, 2012. View of performance with 39 processed a cappella tracks and sealed letter at the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

A multi-disciplinary artist whose practice includes sculpture, installation, sound, and performance, Kevin Beasley caught the attention of the art world with *I Want My Spot Back* (shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 2012), a work that remixed 1990s rap a cappellas. Steeped in hip-hop culture and art history, his work engages with issues of identity and the body. His practice is deeply rooted in particular places and experiences—family land in Valentines, Virginia; the American South; and adolescent travels between Lynchburg, Virginia, and New York City. Using found materials—Air Jordans, an antique cotton gin motor, clothing items, and spliced tape, which he often combines with resin, polyurethane foam, and other binders—Beasley critically unpacks historical and political narratives. His work is currently on view at the ICA Boston through August 26, 2018.

Amanda Dalla Villa Adams: *What took you from Lynchburg, where you grew up, to Detroit, where you earned a BFA at the College for Creative Studies? Your recent work seems to acknowledge your family roots and a rural environment.*

Kevin Beasley: As a kid, I thought of living in Lynchburg as a problem because I wanted to live in New York City. I had access to New York since my mom’s family is in Harlem and most of my father’s family is in Brooklyn. There was a constant back and forth. As I got older, I started to value the in-between. Being in Lynchburg was not quite as rural as the family property in Valentines, Virginia, where my dad grew up and where we have family reunions. I went to Valentines a lot and to New York a lot, so I saw that I have deep roots in both places. I felt like I was always in the middle; it left an impression on me because, through my family, I feel like I got the best scenario.

When I decided on college, I looked everywhere but Virginia. I also wanted to avoid New York. I didn’t want to move there unless there was something asking me to be there, and school didn’t feel like an adequate reason because I would still need

to rely on my family to live in the city. I went to Detroit to study automotive design at the College for Creative Studies. In the second year, I became more critical of the automotive industry, but it didn’t register immediately. Instead, I felt like I didn’t have creative control over my work and that the ethical concerns I wanted to address weren’t being supported.

ADVA: *Could you explain what the family property in Valentines means to you and your work?*

KB: That land means a lot of different things. Growing up, it was just a site of memories. It’s where I would see my cousins and my grandparents. It felt like a very particular place for a very particular activity. It has evolved into a site to consider and reconcile my working process. My experiences there have deeply informed the trajectory of the work that I am doing now—it’s a grounded place that I can visit to think about my work. I don’t want to designate it as a studio, but it functions in the same way, as a place for contemplation and conversation. It can be a productive place, where I have a certain level of autonomy and I can set the terms.

JULIETA CERVANTES, © MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/LICENSED BY SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CASEY KAPLAN, NY



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ADVA: *You have spoken about how you have made field recordings and created specific works on the family property. Does your work respond directly to the American South?*

KB: I’m trying to get closer to it, to understand more of what that space is really providing. Thinking about the South geographically, economically, historically—the mindsets and the range of considerations—it’s not just one thing. It’s a really complex place. I consider myself a byproduct of the South because of the number of people in my life who are from there and who carry a certain sensibility that has informed my existence. That also has a relationship to being in a city like New York and how those things touch. What does it mean when they can be recognized in the same location or when they happen simultaneously? It’s a level of processing and understanding in order to arrive at something very generative and human. It feels like the basic objective of my curiosity as a black person: Can we be civil? Civil rights is a nationwide battle, but it found an epicenter in the South.

I realized that I process the world through making art. I have a certain sensibility that allows me to understand things in complex ways through an artistic approach. The question becomes how that impacts other people. What is the context? The personal narrative

Chair of the Ministers of Defense, 2016. Resin, wood, acoustic foam, jeans, trousers, du-rags, altered t-shirts, altered hoodies, guinea fowl feathers, wrought iron window gate, vintage Beni Ourain Moroccan rug, kaftans, housedresses, Maasai and Zulu war shields, and vintage peacock rattan chair, 154 x 162 x 84 in. 2 views from “Hammer Projects.”

provides a lot of fuel for me to speak about things that I am undoubtedly invested in because I’m looking inward.

ADVA: *Do you think it’s a maturation process for you to deal now with loaded emotional material like a cotton field or a photograph of blurred black cows lying prone, which appear to be bodies on the ground?*

KB: It has taken time. Maturation is important because there is also the willingness to be vulnerable, to be deeply affected by things. I can’t control that. When I saw the cotton field, I just felt it. It was a moment when I was ready to begin to process things in a much more complex and direct way. I think that is what continues to push the drive to make the work.

ADVA: *Materials play an important role in your work—you want viewers to know that it’s a pair of Air Jordans, or a housedress, or guinea fowl feathers. How do certain materials function for you?*

KB: Specificity of materials is a center for the work. They carry weight because I know a lot about them, though not in an

If I was standing alone I wouldn't stand it at all, 2017. House-dresses, kaftans, t-shirts, du-rags, and resin, 99.75 x 53 x 53 in.

academic sense. There is a proximity or narrative attached to a material, the result of processes over time. I am constantly questioning the nature of the raw material. What matters, the mark in time or the number of human hands that have touched it? Or maybe it's the length of the process that it took to get here. I started thinking about these things with fabric and with planting cotton. You pick the cotton, separate the seeds, card it, clean it, filter it, spin it. Is the final canvas a raw product? I was thinking about this and the relationship between handling objects and the content and history surrounding that relationship. I want to have an understanding of where a material comes from and to shape the narrative. I become a conduit as I decide to leave something less touched versus heavily shaping and forming something.

In *Chair of the Ministers of Defense* (2016), the guinea fowl feathers are important because I remember when my grandmother kept free-range guinea fowl. We used to get ticks when we visited, but not after the guineas arrived, because their primary food consists of ticks. They're also a protective bird because their noises alarm anything foreign to the property, including the stray dogs that would come and eat my grandmother's chickens. In Africa, the guinea fowl is a sacred bird of protection, so there's an ancestral relationship with that species, which I didn't know as a child. When I read that, I thought, "That's the real reason my grandmother acquired them — she wanted to imbue the property with that energy." It was another layer that felt very rich to me. There's a lot of play with a material that results from the foundation of knowing its history and having a personal relationship with it.

I use a polyurethane resin in most of the works. I first used it for casting while I was in undergrad, because it was a material I could work with a little more freely. I could coat things in it or bond things together. It has allowed me to provide rigidity and think about mass.

Now, I'm giving space to the range of my works: from grotesque and grimy objects, like *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)* (2015), to ones with a bright color palette, like *Ministers of Defense*. People used to say, "There's no color in your work." There are colors, but in a different range — violets, blacks, grays, and blues. It's like going to the Rothko Chapel and saying there's no color. I've always been invested in color and the formal qualities of art-making. How does one redefine beauty for oneself or address a certain kind of condition? I like to emphasize different stages of conditions, how the surface of a material can change. I don't want to make work that always registers at the same intensity or at the same

point in the spectrum. I value highly saturated and graphic surfaces, objects, and materials just as much as something dilapidated and neglected. Both generate a series of pertinent questions.

ADVA: *In your practice, sampling is a methodology. Does this connect to DJing and, if so, does it play into the political?*

KB: *I Want My Spot Back* started with seeing a cultural shift in rap music. I had stopped listening to new rap when I was in undergrad. I didn't really like the changes in the genre. I began to realize its popular presence and felt like it was being diluted. Before graduate school, I started digging for less popular music. With every new music, there is a sociopolitical relationship based on the demographics of who is making it. Now we're seeing more rappers who identify as queer, which you wouldn't have seen in the 1990s, and that, among other reasons, has brought me back to rap. *I Want My Spot Back* was looking at the essence of those older voices, especially the male rappers, and



JASON WYCHE. © KEVIN BEASLEY, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CASEY KAPLAN, NY

how dark, loud, and aggressive they could be. I wanted to think about the core of the voice and the social challenges associated with that male, patriarchal machine. It has a real presence in blackness, which I wanted to dissect. DJing culture has its own relationship to that and its own problems rooted in masculinity.

ADVA: *There are overlaps in your practice, but then there are divergences. How do you think about the connections between DJing, sound art, sculpture, family narrative, and pop culture?*

KB: Searching for connectivity is part of the practice. I think that's why I needed to turn inward. If we pay attention to the experiences we have, we realize they're very disparate and myriad. I love thinking about maturation because, as it evolves, it brings more clarity. We can all process and understand the complexity of these relationships when things happen simultaneously. One moment I'm traveling to Alabama and meeting with a guy who ran a cotton farm, and the next moment, I'm DJing music sourced from New York and Detroit with producers who are queer identified. I think of my practice in conjunction with lived experience — we're experiencing and processing seemingly disparate things. I have tried to navigate and understand my position in the world critically, to identify and query those relationships.

ADVA: *It has been said that you sculpt with sound. Using sound to sculpt a space bears a history, for instance, John Cage's experiments in the anechoic chamber (1951), Iannis Xenakis's Philips Pavilion (1958), or La Monte Young's Dream House (1993). Does your work engage this history?*

KB: I think it's an extension of those ruminations, particularly because when you understand sound as a physical thing, everyone arrives at a similar understanding. There isn't silence, and sound moves through bodies, so there's a deep relationship to the body. Some architectural spaces are intended to move bodies or house a certain activity. Sound can also be employed to oppress, to contain, or to motivate. I am interested in the physicality of sound and how it relates to my lived experience and experiences that I'm pointing toward. I think about John Cage, but I also think about Cecil Taylor and black musicians or people who have a different cultural relationship to sound. What is that relationship rooted in, and how are we marking those historical instances? When I think about the body, what kind of a body are we talking about? Is it a black body? Is it a black male body? Is it even a gendered body? That became apparent in *I Want My Spot Back* because it was the first time I realized that my body, my presence as a black male, would be looked at, and there are implications to that. I can't just think about sound as some abstraction

TOP: JEAN WONG, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CASEY KAPLAN, NY / BOTTOM: JASON WYCHE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CASEY KAPLAN, NY



Above: *Untitled (Virginia Matriarch)*, 2015. Resin, wood, house dresses, down feathers, and television mount, 70 x 70 x 16 in. Below: *Roc-a-wears*, 2017. Resin, polyurethane foam, debris, altered pant leg, and altered Roc-a-wear winter boots, 10 x 17 x 12 in.





Left to right: *Untitled (Emerging Block 003.17)*, 2017. Housedresses, kaftans, t-shirts, du-rags, guinea fowl feathers, and resin, 58.75 x 16.75 x 17.75 in. *Untitled (Emerging Block 002.17)*, 2017. Housedresses, kaftans, t-shirts, du-rags, guinea fowl feathers, and resin, 58.75 x 16.75 x 17.75 in. *Untitled (Emerging Block 001.17)*, 2017. Housedresses, kaftans, t-shirts, du-rags, guinea fowl feathers, and resin, 58.75 x 16.75 x 17.75 in.

that exists in space. There is a direct connection to a person. The meeting of sound is coming from somewhere.

ADVA: *I can't help but consider your work in relation to Ta-Nehisi Coates's writing, which often addresses violence against black bodies, especially black male bodies. Can you explain the role of bodies in your work?*

KB: It's really tricky. I look at the shooting of Stephon Clark in Sacramento, and I can never forget about the potential that I'm implicated in that. My body is more than just a part of it; it is a target. It seems like you can quite easily become that person. When I think about my interest in Air Jordans, there was a point when I wanted Jordans, but my mom wouldn't get them because they were too expensive. That was a lived experience for me, for my cousins, my family, and others who might have encountered violence because of those shoes, which are high-level cultural objects. I was trying to unpack a lot from that relationship. The acoustic mirrors, some of which are titled *Untitled (Focus Black Boy)* (2015), also reference violence because they were used by militaries to listen to incoming enemies. My research led me to the mirror form, and I used it to think about a black body, but also as a call to speak to other

brothers. There's a moment of focusing that we collectively have to do that extends beyond our means.

ADVA: *How do you use history?* Chair of the Ministers of Defense, which you showed at the Hammer Museum last year, combines Bernini's *Chair of St. Peter* and an iconic photo taken around 1966 of Huey P. Newton, the leader of the Black Panther Party.

KB: There's a storytelling aspect to making the work, which becomes a way of cutting through loaded histories and getting to a real, direct experience or felt space. I'm invested in history, but it's also important to acknowledge the difference between telling a story from experience and recounting a history.

It's important to study paintings like *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne* (1806) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, which shows how an image of power is constructed. The brilliance of the Black Panthers is that they were able to construct powerful images by acknowledging a certain history and applying it in a political field, as did Bernini, who constructed a shrine out of St. Peter's wooden throne, which exemplified the penultimate representation of power and God. It's like outer space or something—accessing the celestial—by using these tools or techniques. The space at the Hammer

JASON WYCHE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CASEY KAPLAN, NY



Above: *Your face is / is not enough*, 2016. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Right: *Untitled (petrified)*, 2017. Polyurethane foam, resin, and Redskins 1937 throwback speed helmets, 12 x 12 x 28 in.

TOP: TOM VAN EYNDE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CASEY KAPLAN, NY / BOTTOM: JASON WYCHE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CASEY KAPLAN, NY

was important, because it was constructed specifically for Leonardo's *Codex Leicester* (1510), which had been owned by Armand Hammer, and it was meant to create an aura. There was anticipation that I would do a sound work because the space has vaulted, cathedral-style architecture. The moment I saw it, however, I thought that it had a different feeling. It is like going to a church knowing it's constructed for acoustics, but not talking about the sound; it's inherent—you need to be able to hear the preacher or the choir.

The installation is imbued with a certain kind of power that isn't owned by one individual. The narrative around the Black Panther Party is important. They provided services that functioned as social work for anyone under the poverty line. It became a movement for a particular class, and I'm thinking about it as a sort of economic social justice.

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