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CONVERSATIONS

Silence is not neutral: Kevin Beasley

Kevin Beasley in conversation with Francesco Tenaglia.

Sport/Utility is Kevin Beasley’s second solo show at Casey Kaplan in New York. Beasley uses sports, cars, headgear, and more to produce complex and allusive stories that speak to black histories and realities in the United States. Here he discusses recent works and latest concerns, from Cadillacs to du-rags to Detroit to activated air conditioners.

Francesco Tenaglia: A couple of years ago I left work late, hungry, and went to a pizzeria near my house in Milan. There, the TV was showing—with the volume turned off—a game of a minor foreign soccer league. I sat there, eating alone while watching the game, and started to think about how sports are the major entertainment industry on the planet, but if you just watch the basics and don’t have any cultural or social involvement, you can see it as a very formalized, non-narrative, hyper-regulated spectacle in which little unexpected is likely to happen. For me your Casey Kaplan show is interesting because it operates the other way around: by taking the side of exuberant cultural references and taming them, making them formal. Are you interested in sports yourself? And how do you use sports in the pieces in the show?

Kevin Beasley: I was an athlete until my final year of high school, but I never really thought deeply then about how sports operate in society. That was something that gradually came along within the development of my artistic practice, and it provides me with a way to ask deeper questions about sports’ political, social, and cultural relevance. I have discovered that I’m interested in bringing these issues back home—or, rather, recognizing them as existing on a daily basis. Not that the reality of certain conditions experienced on the field aren’t important, but I feel the need to connect to, as you have described, these encounters as we watch them in our homes. As an example, Colin Kaepernick’s protest against the US national anthem became a lightning rod for discussing police brutality, race, and nationalism, while also literally bringing the issue into every sports fan’s living room.

The exhibition is laid out like the interior and exterior of a home. As you walk into the gallery, you are outside and all objects pertain to being outdoors—the back of the air conditioning unit, the golf clubs with the police enforcement billy club and American football helmets—all revolving around an exterior bodily trauma. As you proceed, you enter the driveway/garage where the car is located, and the interior of the home is where the NBA jerseys are used as elements of sound control, the face of the AC unit projects an audio of blowing air, and the du-rags—intended to be worn inside and overnight—hang among other objects. So I'm using sports as an entry point to some complicated issues we're all struggling with: race, police brutality, power.

FT: You've used du-rags in a consistent way in various shows. For readers who aren't familiar with their history, can you explain them, and your interest in them?

KB: Alright, bear with me on this, because I'd like to give some context. The du-rag is a hair-care product – one of many that are not only used to style and condition black hair types, but are also at the center of both establishing empowerment and reconciling repression. The history of black hair and how society has made it its business to say what it should be and look like runs deep, so products like the du-rag, although they've been in use for centuries, are politicized in order to destabilize the individuality and strength of black culture. Many people favor straight hair over kinked and curly, so there has been an active effort to reverse that perception. From Marcus Garvey to Angela Davis, cornrows and afros didn't just pop up as a trend over the past twenty-five years—they were strategically worn for several decades to give rise to an empowerment movement and keep folks alive. So images of black bodies have been under constant attack, down to the way we treat our hair. There are very recent instances where, under the law, the wearing of natural hairstyles is not protected from discrimination. For instance the case of Melba Tolliver, a television news anchor in the 1970s who was fired for wearing an afro while covering a high-profile wedding.

The history is vast and appalling, and I would be lying if I claimed to understand it in its entirety. In any case, these gestures of using the du-rag in my practice became an entry point for me and hopefully others to better understand the implications of the multiple behaviors, attitudes, reactions, and declarations surrounding a black aesthetic. The du-rag was banned by the National Football League and National Basketball Association in America in the late 1990s / early 2000s, and I am asking why. Because when you ask everyone why, there are a million different answers that either address respectability politics or refer to its relationship to criminality. As if the du-rag was a cause and perpetuator of violence. In the end, it's worn to protect the hair and condition its texture. It's similar to hair rollers, which are rarely worn outside, but black folks are creative like that and asked, why not? It became subversive, and the powers that be have been trying to shut it down ever since. And this is why, for the show, the du-rags are entangled with neckties because they represent opposite ends of the spectrum, yet both are used to present an image. The dichotomy is that oftentimes, black men are caught in between, which presents certain fragility and vulnerability in the male construction, which I think is very important to expose and confront.

FT: I love how there is a form of mineralization, of becoming detritus or an archaeological find, in some of the works in the show. Would you explain your interest in this, and your process of manipulating ordinary objects and materials for your sculptures?

KB: It's a way for me to process and crystallize the way I am thinking about these objects culturally, socially, and politically. To form them, mold them, shape them, and recognize time. It is a way of making sculpture that allows me to pack what I'm thinking about into the work. This might happen literally, or it might be a matter of what I'm thinking about—imbuing a form with a sense of purpose just by allowing my concerns into the studio.

I made the billy clubs while at the Rauschenberg Residency in Captiva, Florida, so there are artifacts such as seashells and debris from his estate in that work. In some strange way I wanted the work to feel crystallized in its current state, as if it has been that way for ages. My hands literally rub and touch every surface, and that kind of contact is important to me in order to transfer something into the objects that maybe a more fabricated process cannot achieve. Dipping the objects in resin or pouring foam over them is an important part of the process—especially rubbing the material into the pockets and crevices—because there is a transfer of information.

FT: You studied as a car designer in Detroit. Is there an influence or a direct reference to that background in the work Sport/Utility (2017)?

KB: I studied automotive design for almost two years and decided it wasn't where I wanted to put my creative energy for the rest of my life. But because I love Detroit and the people there, I've always been apprehensive of creating work that directly references my time there and/or the conditions of that city—really out of a profound respect for the complexity of its situations. But when this project came around, I was deeply thinking about Detroit and my relationship to that city. What brought me there? The racial tension that I felt there—what was that about? How do I process its economic and social class problems? All of that is not exclusive to Detroit but became a real experience for me during my time there and could be addressed through the automotive industry.

Cadillac became the most complex narrative for me to address because there are so many layers to unpack. The Cadillac brand is the most luxurious American automotive brand one can buy, which translated into it being one of the most desirable for the black community over the past century. It was quite frankly the most valuable purchase a black family could make, besides a home, which was largely prohibited for the black community. It was interesting to discover how Cadillac fostered discriminatory policies by literally not allowing dealers to sell to potential black owners. So this is a reflection of the institutional racism that not only prevents advancement and self-worth, but also creates traumas that extend from generation to generation. Of course I can own a Cadillac now, but the knowledge that my ancestors couldn't at one point pervades my gesture with another layer of possibility and resistance.

I contemplated buying the Cadillac from Detroit, crushing it there, and having it trailered to New York for the show, but that didn't feel right to me. I don't think I was ready for that kind of gesture, even though conceptually it would make sense for me. I was so invested in living with the Escalade. I have a deep interest in automobiles, and there is also a profound criticism I carry in regard to energy, class distinctions, gender marketing, race, and so much more. It becomes an object that can hold a lot of discussion about these issues, and it becomes utilitarian in its abundance of stimulation.

FT: You have worked with sound as a sculptural material in your responsive installations and performances. In this exhibition sound is used in a subtle way, disguised behind an air conditioner shell. Can you speak some about this?

KB: This is a very important work, because it enabled me to exercise my interest in sound and its multilayered effect on a space and the people within it. It is a very subtle work, but also a relentless container for a lot of major problems society has been coping with. To get back to this idea of interior and exterior: the sound is a two-channel audio projected in two separate rooms. You hear it throughout the entire exhibition, but experience it differently in each space. I worked hard to create a three-dimensional sound, not because it would be fun, but because it needed to be that in order for the object to be perceived as an air conditioner, at least initially. I wasn't trying to fill the space with sound but rather present the many faces of audio from the object.

There is a reveal within the work, spatially and content-wise, that is increasingly important to me. This is where all of the audio from political protests, riots, interviews with black victims' parents, and so on becomes essential. All of this content that I had been seeing and collecting had a home within an object that could literally condition the room, and that conditioning demands visibility, recognition, justice, and equality for those who are consistently marginalized for unjust reasons. It is not a happy work, and it doesn't quite produce comfort. This is a subversion I am interested in.

FT: Again with respect to Detroit and sound, you've used in one of your performances a track by Theo Parrish, an innovator and cult figure of the Detroit house scene, who lamented recently the genre's practitioners' lack of support for Black Lives Matter, given how this art form was birthed in struggle and rooted in reactions to racism. What, in your opinion, are the most effective roles and tactics for people operating in culture to address such complex political and social issues?

KB: Techno and house have evolved significantly in productive ways, but have also been used in very regressive ways, in my opinion. This won't be an answer solely about music, but it's an interesting lens to look at how social and political content is dealt with by artists because some folks choose to, or choose not to, engage with it, while others can't avoid it. Political movements, resistance, and revolutions are typically formed and propelled by language, oratory, phrases, and words, so it makes sense that the kind of music that uses poetry and various kinds of verbal language becomes our most revered political music.

Looking at why techno music came into existence, one can conclude that it was almost solely based on a disadvantaged social and economic situation for black people in Detroit. Simply because the music is celebrated and digestible doesn't mean it isn't politically situated. For many marginalized groups of people who are oppressed, discouraged, and/or neglected, insisting on one's existence or "a seat at the table" is a political statement.

That said, there isn't a single brushstroke that can determine how every practitioner should address their relationship to political and social issues. Silence is not neutral, especially when you have the ability to speak. So I prefer that we focus on being ethically situated human beings first, so that the art can express and question the complications and nuances of those varying ethics. I encourage a holistic approach to living and making so that we are building relationships in real ways, not just through aesthetic signifiers and gestures.

FT: What are you working on these days?

KB: I am working on quite a few projects that have been in the works for years, and some that will take even more years to fully realize: installations, sound compositions, performances, many many sculptures. I have been visiting more of Europe this spring and summer, particularly Rome and Athens, so as a sculptor and materially sensitive person these places have been invigorating. How do I consider this energy within my own world, and vice versa? On another note, I feel like I'm on the cusp of an LP release, as many ideas keep surfacing that I need to work out through a recording. I'll keep listening to this intuition, and we'll see what happens.