My Tidal Wave Dream – Interview with Kara Hearn

By guest writer

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Post by Rachel Reese

Recess Activities, Inc. is a (relatively) new residency program located in New York City’s Soho neighborhood – a storefront space at 41 Grand Street. Committed to providing a free working and production space, Recess residencies are unique in that they are open to the public allowing for collaboration and accessibility to the artist’s projects. Kara Hearn’s TREMENDOUS is currently operating through June 12th.

![Video still of a guest participant hugging Kara Hearn (Kara in green spandex). Photo courtesy Nick Johnson](image)

Hearn’s project is viewer participatory and has an aspect of “let’s pretend together” to it. There is an “intake form” that serves as a jumping off point for participation; the public may choose their level of participation through either video recording, audio recording, talking and conversation, or simply silence and observation. The concept is that each participant can provide a moment that becomes part of the larger movie being built, scene by scene, at Recess. All of these clips that are videotaped and audiotaped are being compiled for one large video, the final edited version to be screened this Fall 2010. (See clips of videos.)
I recently had the opportunity to correspond with Kara about her working practice, her current project at Recess, and even her fears and dreams.

**Rachel Reese:** Hi Kara! I first came about your work through your re-enactment videos created from famous movies such as ET, The Gladiator, and Fight Club where you play every role in the scene. [Ed note: these videos were screened in Vox Populi's Video Lounge in 2007] Can you talk about how they came about?

**Kara Hearn:** The reenactment videos were a big surprise to me, a major shift. I was in graduate school and I had been making short experimental documentaries in this certain way for almost ten years. I was burnt out and really wanted to change my way of working but had no idea what to do, so I was messing around with sculpture and installation and doing very little video.

Around this time I took a workshop with Harrell Fletcher. For homework he asked us to do one of the assignments from his website with Miranda July, learningtoldyoumore.com. I didn’t have Internet access at home and the only assignment I could remember was “reenact a scene from a movie that made someone cry”. I had seen Harry Potter the night before and a kid in front of me was wailing when this one character (Cedric) dies. So in the half hour before I had to leave for the workshop I reenacted the scene from memory, playing all the parts, editing in-camera, and using whatever I could find for special effects. I was too scared to show the video to Harrell in class that day. I am kind of shy and have never been a performative or theatrical person. But I shared it with him at the end of a studio visit a couple of days later.
Out of all the work I had shown him he seemed most interested in this poorly made, poorly acted video that made me want to faint from embarrassment. He encouraged me to make more so as an exercise I did. I made one a day for a week choosing mainstream movies that had male expressions of emotion. This time I reenacted the scenes that made me cry. That's when I made E.T., Gladiator, Star Wars, Billy Elliot, Lord of the Rings and a few others. I liked the idea of keeping them absurdly simple and mundane so I kept the rule of using only stuff I had on hand. I guess I wasn't interested in creating any sort of cinematic illusion but wanted it to be only about the experience of putting on the characters, of pretending and really trying to believe it, at home, alone.

RR I recently attended a lecture on fear, memory, and the brain and learned that water and drowning are one of man's most primal fears. Oddly enough, I've never had a drowning dream.

KH I love that drowning, primal fear thing. I haven't had a drowning dream either but I have had a couple of tidal wave dreams that have made a big impression on me. Actually, one of them is serving as a touchstone for this project I'm doing at Recess right now. I'm really into the co-mingling of awe and fear. Doesn't it seem like most of us actually like or need to be overwhelmed even though it's terrifying? It's like we walk around with this craving to be erased by any flood of emotion we can get our hands on, good or bad. And what is really amazing is that we do so as much, if not more through mediated experiences (movies, tv, art, music, literature, video games, dreams, fantasies) than through actual direct lived experiences. And we still come out feeling like we're on some sort of heroic journey. What is that Mark Twain quote? "I've been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened." Whoa, this is being all serious. I just quoted Mark Twain.

RR So there's this very thin line between fear and bravery; maybe we're all looking to somehow ride that line.

Outside Recess in lower Manhattan. Photo courtesy Nick Johnson.

KH I am definitely walking the line over here at Recess. But I've also had a few and the line is getting blurry. So the thing about Recess is that you (the artist) are doing a residency in the space, making your work, doing your thing, but that residency is also on display as an exhibition from the minute you step foot in the place. So really, even though you may not want to admit it, whether you like it or not, whether it scares you or not, it's a performance you are doing the whole way through.

My tidal wave dream: I'm standing on a beach alone, maybe walking or looking at the sand or something. I am facing the shore. Suddenly a huge shadow moves across the ground engulfing me. I turn around to see what is casting the shadow and there is an enormous tidal wave right above me. I am terrified but it is coming so fast and it is so big that I know I am totally done for, that I will certainly die. But instead of panicking, instead of fighting I make a decision to let go. I take a deep breath, totally relax and it takes me.

This tidal wave dream is a vague but excellent (though not quite original) way to talk about this project at Recess. But first the logistics: I have compiled seven minimalist, neutral, domestic set/stages. They are indeed theatrical. People come in. They read a list of carefully curated options of ways to engage with me. It is all
meant to feel very safe. I like to think I specialize in shy people. We talk and usually, or about half the time we shoot something.

I have found that people for the most part want to contribute. They want to help. They want to be seen. And hopefully along the way I have the presence of mind to force some connection to the grand theme of being overcome (quietly or noisily) by something or another. They get a hand stamp that says “be brave” for their trouble. That’s an even trade, right?

Kara Hearn’s Intake form for viewer participation in her dramas, which are being videotaped. Photo courtesy Nick Johnson.

Maybe I should just say right now that I have no idea what is happening here. You can tell can't you? I am in way over my head. I probably won't know what this thing is about until the video has been edited and shown a few times. Ask me again in October. I may not even know then unless I am lucky, but I am, I think, lucky that is. I am counting on being lucky. Is that dangerous? Stupid? I don't know.

—Rachel Reese is an artist, curator and sometimes writer currently living in Brooklyn, NY. She recently released a quarterly publication of artists' writings called POSSIBLE PRESS, and concurrently directs the project space POSSIBLE PROJECTS with her husband Trevor Reese.

The next deadline for submissions to Recess is Fall 2010 – applications on website.

Tags: kara hearn, new york, rachel reese, recess activities inc