

INTERVIEWS

# AUTUMN KNIGHT

Autumn Knight on the sweetness and terror of doing nothing

May 12, 2023 • As told to Madeleine Seidel



**Autumn Knight, *NOTHING#122: a bar, a bed, a bluff* at Performance Space New York, May 2023.** Photo: Rachel Papo.

*On a recent Friday night, Performance Space New York transformed from a theater to a club: a DJ played disco and R&B, drinks were flowing, and people chatted under neon lights as a feeling of electricity and potential lingered in the air. This was the setting for NOTHING #122: a bar, the first performance in Autumn Knight's residency at the East Village arts space. Knight and a cameraperson captured interactions between herself and audience members, inviting them to talk about themselves, feed each other food and drink, and act out various scenes—such as tying one another to a chair or mimicking each other's movements—that sparked a fleeting intimacy between strangers. Across three installments at Performance Space, Knight will explore the Italian concept of dolce far niente (“the sweetness of doing nothing”) and nothingness as integral to human relationships. Inspired by a 1994 interview between Félix González-Torres and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, NOTHING#122: a bed grapples with love and loss; the final work, NOTHING #122: a bluff, sees the artist all alone on the stage, reveling in the terror and possibility of solitude. Below, Knight discusses the series, audience dynamics, and approaching performance as an experiment in impermanence.*

**I GOT A CALL** from Jenny Schlenzka sometime last year. I was at the American Academy in Rome then, and she asked if I would like to do something at Performance Space. I don't know how I came to the idea of having three performances. *a bar* is an idea I've had for over a decade, but I never could figure out a place to do it before this series. It's based on a type of bar that exists in Japan called *kyabakura*, where people come and pay to have someone be their companion for the night—not sexually, but just really dote on them and make them feel amazing and well attended to.

For *a bar*, I wanted to create a buffet of attention. I'm riding a bike through the space, DJ Tara is playing music, there's lights and fog, and I'm interacting with the audience. Video screens are suspended from the ceiling, letting the audience watch moments between me and the performers. I'm only person miked up in the room: You might hear certain words when others are close enough to my microphone, but the point is not to necessarily hear the other person speak. You can let your mind fill in these conversations and have your own

fantasy about what's going on between us. Something about the incomplete story, the filling-in of it, is really interesting to me.

I had to get out into the audience and scan the bar: see who's out there, who's looking ready, and if I think I can persuade them to have a drink with me inside of my performance. I like making connections among audience members, and this is something I was trying to experiment with here. How do I set it up so that the audience wants to interact with itself? How do I get people to engage with the work and one another at the same time?

I began working on *NOTHING#122: a bed* during the pandemic as a video project for Shedhalle, Zürich. Here, I'm still thinking about intimacy, but from another perspective: how do couples rehearse the loss of our loved ones? *NOTHING #122:a bluff*, the last performance, is totally undefined. Two weeks out, and I don't know what *a bluff* will be. It's just a big, blank, open space in my mind because I have nothing planned for the performance. I'm excited about conceptually experimenting with that because I do improvisations, but normally, there's a bit of a framework set up around it—some mechanisms, a container to get things going. But I don't know. Maybe nothing will happen.

There are many different ways I'm thinking about the *dolce far niente* concept—ways that are still emerging—but some of it is driven by the movement to encourage rest and to get out of this relationship with hyperproductivity that we're in. It's about the possibility of having pockets of time to do nothing, to consider nothing, and to release yourself from the fear of doing nothing. In the context of this series, I want to resist the pressure of having to define myself in terms of what I make. I work improvisationally a lot, and that comes from a place of starting with nothing. I'm coming into space with the idea that I don't know what's going to happen. Nothing might happen; everything might happen. I think that's what is so frightening to people about performance: There is a fear and discomfort to witnessing failure, but that's the thrilling thing to me about this art form.

— *As told to Madeleine Seidel*

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