



"ONCE UPON A TIME, or maybe twice, there was an unearthly paradise," begins the Beatles's 1968 animated extravaganza, *Yellow Submarine*. As the opening line's turn on the cliché suggests, visions of other worlds—past, future, or parallel—have popped up repeatedly throughout history as the shadow expression of an era's collective unconscious. But these fantasies don't easily divide into categories of utopic or dystopic. From the radioactive monsters in cold war sci-fi novels to the Blue Meanies that invade Pepperland, the nightmare that threatens civilization is what generates the dream of saving it. People band together in order to survive. And, to grossly simplify, love—a newly grand, capacious kind of love—prevails.

Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's roughly twenty-five-minute video *All Together Now* (a name borrowed from the *Yellow Submarine* sound track) plays on the idea of a parallel world that has already collapsed, creating a radically restructured social order. If the aftermath that Dodge and Kahn depict is someone's idea of paradise, albeit a gritty and anarchic one, the place is in fact all too earthly: The resource-rich, technological ease of modern life has dropped away, and what we're left with is a barren and crumbling metropolis—Los Angeles (where the artists live and work) and its dwindled, cement-encased waterway. Indeed, the Los Angeles River, which in real life has become something of a trash-filled open storm drain, features as the main artery in Dodge and Kahn's imagined world, a sick zone teeming with natural

life. Dead kittens might lie by the side of the road, but ducks skim along the river and rogue parrots voraciously attack a persimmon tree. Meanwhile "foragers"—played by Kahn and poets Eileen Myles and Amy Gerstler—siphon water and collect old batteries, dead fish, and mulched soil, their faces sunbaked to an unhealthy burnt sienna, their mouths swollen from dehydration like Coleridge's thirsty mariner.

Slated to screen at the 2008 Whitney Biennial in New York, *All Together Now* is a work in progress as this article goes to press, but its meticulously crafted imagery feels astonishingly, even devastatingly complete. The sound track is a complex tapestry the artists built up after eliding every last bit of actual city noise, and the editing is fast paced, flashing from Kahn's character nailing an unseen foe with a golf club, to hooded creatures toiling in an underground world, to a winsome child rigging his own electricity in order to watch *Yellow Submarine*.

Dodge and Kahn propose a not-so-distant future that, depending on your taste, is either grim or an Elysian renewal of human capacities. Disaster, as Susan Sontag once wrote, is one of the oldest subjects of art—popular not only because we fear it but because we long for it. Not everyone is saddened by the idea that our world, and the systems by which we function and think, might have to be reconstructed: like the sound in Dodge and Kahn's tour de force, a new city built completely from scratch.

—RACHEL KUSHNER

1000 WORDS

## Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn

TALK ABOUT ALL TOGETHER NOW, 2008

**THE PIECE OPENS** with Stanya's character, "the forager," killing something. You see her hesitate, momentarily confused. She has never done this before and is socially trained *not* to. So she draws from how she has seen it done, a memory of a horror-movie moment. The scene introduces the idea that something might be chasing her. But more important, it acknowledges the violence of transition, and the idea of killing as a fertile act. That she's able to go through with it suggests a shift in her own emotional makeup. This lets the viewer know right away that we're following a different set of rules: The social agreements have changed.

It was interesting how many people, when we first showed a cut of the video last July at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, said, "Heavy. What a downer." And we thought, Really? It felt so full of life to us. The environment of the video is a kind of postplace, more symbolic than literal. If there's anything explicitly "apocalyptic," it's only a veneer, a vague proposal: *Imagine you had to erase*

*everything you knew*. What has the forager lost? Did she have a family? Is she postfamily? Is she postlove? Postlanguage? There's no dialogue in the video, and we wonder, Does the absence of language promise more direct experience? Or is language as intrinsic to feeling as action? We ourselves still don't know, or even agree with each other's interpretations most of the time. This is also reflected in our process—and important to it. We write a lot going in to shooting, but we don't script or storyboard. We shoot fast, and then spend months and months editing. Sometimes we tag-team edit. Or we'll each go off and start cutting the same footage as a way of exploring possibilities without sully the other person's vision. We're curious about each other's impulses and interpretations—they're different!

Our aim is a visceral exploration of the human relationship to materials, to resources. Pulling a root from the ground, for instance, and running it through one's teeth. We talked a lot about what kinds of objects to include—would she have a tape deck or

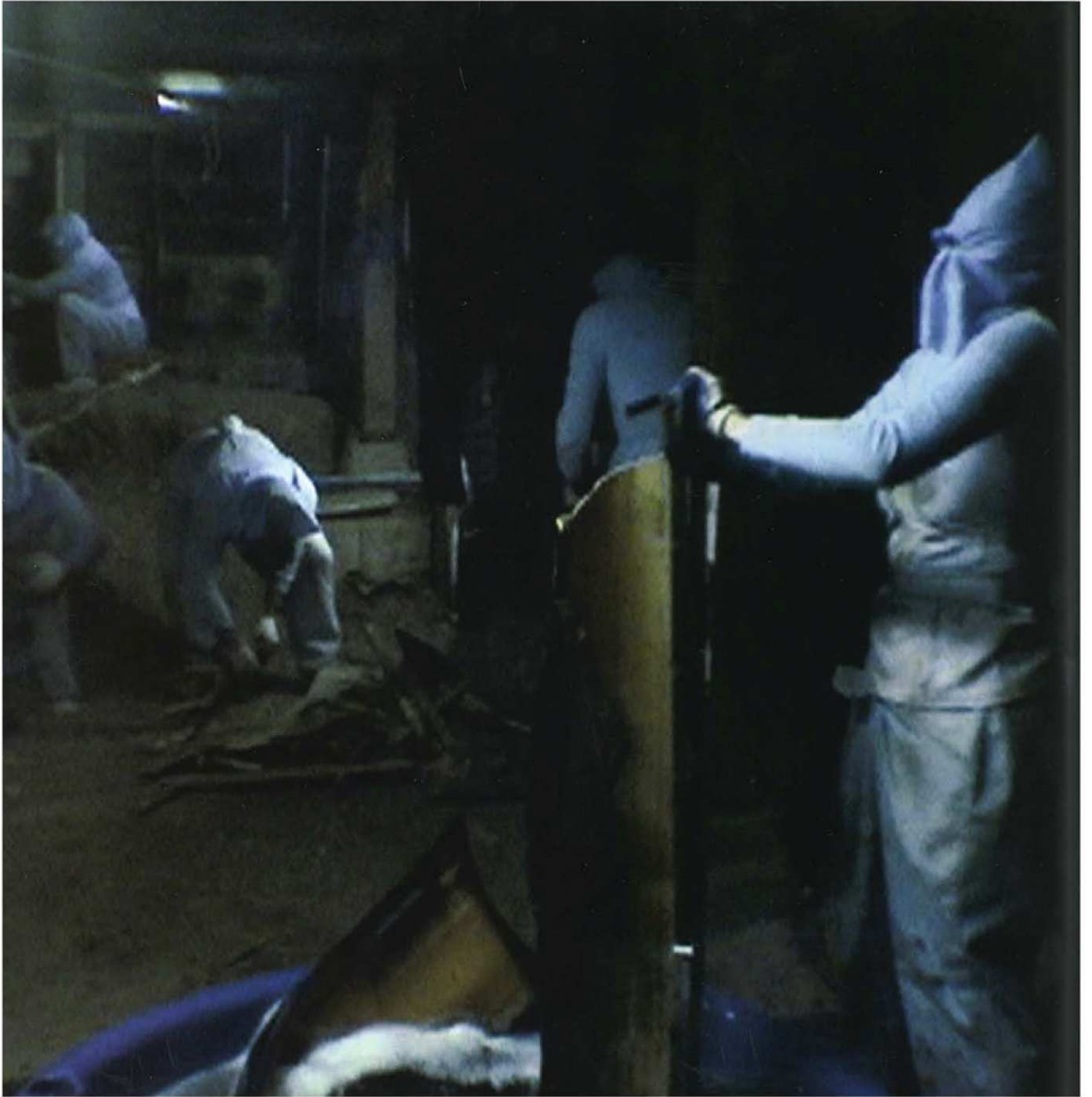
an iPod? We wanted there to be bits and pieces of recognizable culture, but we didn't want to flood the piece, pushing it in one direction or the other. There was an energy in simplifying. We address the alienation of consumerism but, we hope, in a poetic way, rather than in some didactic social critique.

All the wildlife, like the falcon eating a headless pigeon, we shot ourselves. We've been working on a feature-length project simultaneously, which has a lot of live cop footage (including police tromping through our yard with their guns drawn). One day Stanya heard sirens and helicopters and went out to shoot. When she arrived at the scene, all that was left of the police action was a taped-off area, empty except for a smashed squirrel in the road with his eyeball popped out. She videoed the squirrel, and that was the beginning of our collecting dead animal footage for this piece.

There are various clans in the video: the white-hooded people, whom we think of as generative; the blue-hooded people, who are fragmenters; and the

Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, *All Together Now* (work in progress), color video, 23 minutes 48 seconds. Production still. Photo: Stanya Kahn.

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foragers, whom we see as flow or betweenness, a meditation on the idea that people can thrive in a state of flux. The clans are proposals for new types of family and community. The matching outfits they wear are metaphors for social agreements and for the establishment of trust. The hooded people are not meant to be seen as people wearing hoods, but as people who simply have hoods as faces—we wanted to remove the specificity of the face. We know we're stretching it, but we're hoping viewers will go along for the ride. In our video *Masters of None*, 2006, each hood had a face painted on it, a word or pictogram for a thought or emotion. In *All Together Now*, we go a step further. The white-hooded people have crude pieces of tape as facial features, implying a kind of mutability, while the blue people are an experiment in total facelessness. By contrast, the faces of the foragers, in close-up, seem intensified, their features in super-relief.

We see all of our pieces as if they're part of one big body of water instead of totally separate projects. For instance, in *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out*, 2006, we were tapping on the social surface of things and prompting the question of what role the "citizen-watcher"—i.e., the regular person with a video camera—plays. Stanya's character teams up with an unseen cameraman (Harry) who is loitering outside a hospital emergency room, and she becomes his impromptu tour guide as they set off together in hopes of catching some kind of dramatic footage. In *All Together Now* we're returning to the same question, same places, but this time tunneling into them. We're trying to dip underneath language, into lived experience. We subtracted all the lingering sounds of civilization. We didn't want to hear Los Angeles. What would be the hum of a place that has no electricity, no cars? The main hum we use as ambience is actually an electronic sample of "snow blizzard," slowed down to eight percent.

The time is ambiguous—a now, or just after, in which many of the habits and accoutrements of contemporary life are gone, and yet our characters still have both the means and the residual drive to video one another. There's no television, nothing left to

watch; maybe the characters don't feel real until they see themselves on-screen. Self-documentation suggests reflexiveness about their own behavior, which adds another layer to their so-called labor. They're not just in a trance of work: They're aware of what they're doing, and the camera is what provides that sense. They're in a closed loop of doing stuff, videoing themselves doing it, and watching it on monitors—all in the same room. The hooded people work hard, but they work hard inventively, with verve. One person can stop working and skateboard a wood scrap down a Formica ramp, while some hump, and others break down pieces of furniture. It's the old anarcho-model of mutual autonomy/mutual respect. After we finished a first edit, we had friends in for studio visits. A frequent comment was that they wanted to see the fruits of this labor—what was all that work for, what were they *making*? And we were like, "No, this is about flow, the process, movement . . . there is no end point." They work in a kind of assembly line, which is an organic work form in the animal kingdom, as with ants or bees. We get excited about structures that start on a biological level and reappear socially. Composting, and the transformation of materials and energies, was a constant conversation. It has been a primary interest for Harry, and at home we've been experimenting with "humanure" and other decomposition projects. We are also obsessive collectors of junk. What the blue people smash was our own stuff—which was great because we needed to get rid of it anyway.

Locations like the river and downtown LA skyline are obviously recognizable and intentionally so. We wanted the foragers to rise up in front of the Walt Disney Concert Hall because it's so silly—in the scene, but also that building. Using the Standard hotel was something we struggled with. But we figured if people recognized it, they would be in on the joke that we squatted this dopey hotel. They charge a location fee of \$2,000 if you tell them you're going to film. So we pretended we were only renting a room and warned everyone who came up for the shoot to look supernatural. But we had so much luggage, it was suspicious. We had compost, and dirt, and smashed-up,

oily bottles, and all this camera equipment in these huge suitcases. We had suitcases that were crammed full of weeds and bushes. We were so worried they were going to bust us that we agreed on a story that we were on our way to New Zealand. Harry said, "They won't ask us any questions." But then we rolled up to the hotel in our funky-ass veggie-oil-mobile with our giant suitcases filled with dirt and junk. The bellboy takes a look at our load and asks, "Where are you guys from?" Harry answers, trying to sound casual, "LA." "You going somewhere?" "Yeah, um, New Zealand." "New Zealand's cool," he says, and tries to pick up one of our suitcases, which is just ridiculously heavy because it's filled with car batteries.

What we liked about the place were the stark white walls and those stupid orange couches, and the high stakes of the grubby foragers on the nice white Barcelona chairs. But when we got there, we realized it's a party hotel, with cigarette stains on the furniture—a nightclub version of a classy, modernist environment. We had to turn up the exposure and blast the light to hide the details of how trashed out it actually is.

We ended up spending the night there, after we videoed. In the morning, we realized we needed shots of the buildings downtown that Eileen Myles's character gazes at. Harry tried sneaking up to the roof with the camera and immediately got kicked off—"No filming up here." We returned with our son, and Harry watched him swim in the rooftop pool while Stanya tried to look like a tourist with a camera. It was eight in the morning, and there were four porn stars by the pool in tiny bikinis drinking these splits of Veuve Clicquot. Meanwhile, a Hollywood crew started filming a major gun battle on the streets below the hotel, with tons of artillery and giant explosions. It felt like, sure, we're here to make our own vision of the future, but we're also living in it right now. Helicopters were swooping over us, firing machine guns—*guh-guh-guh-guh! Kaboom!* The porn stars were flirting with our three-year-old, asking him to teach them how to swim, while this fake war was being fought twenty stories below, gunfire echoing off all the buildings. It was horrible. And perfect. □

Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, *All Together Now* (work in progress), stills from a color video, 23 minutes 48 seconds.

