

Two Schools of Cool – Orange County Museum of Art – Curated by Sarah C. Bancroft  
Exhibition Catalogue – Interview with Catherine Taft

# STANYA KAHN AND LLYN FOULKES *HAPPY SONG FOR YOU,* 2011

Stanya Kahn and Llyn Foulkes merge their mutual interests in performance, improvisation, sound making, the horrific, and humor in this collaborative project.

**CT:** You have both created work collaboratively in the past, with either a band or a partner, yet you eventually made a choice to create on your own. Now you are collaborating again, and I just had the chance to see the first videos you made together. I'm curious about how that process began. Did it take some time to get going?

**SK:** One of the things that is cool about our *getting to know each other* is that we relate artist to artist, but I also feel a generational difference. I find myself saying, "Stanya, shut up and listen because Llyn's got three times more life experience than you." As an artist, he's been making work so much longer than I have, and it's really good to be around someone who has thought a lot about process.

**LF:** Working with Stanya, I think about how I was thirty years ago, and those experiences are still coming back. There's a certain kind of energy and creativity that you have at that age that moves faster. And when you get old, you start thinking about life a little more, and I get into the deep things more now. Except when I'm playing on the Machine [Foulkes's sculptural instrument used in his one-man band]; then I can be really spontaneous, and I could even get up and dance. It's a place that brings me back to my youth. And when I'm off the Machine, I'm just this old guy. So yeah, there's a generational thing. And I think Stanya is really creative, and I like where she's coming from, and we can identify on that level.

**CT:** You are each so skilled with improvisation. When you began working, how much did you plan ahead—individually or together—and how much was improvised? When did that decision happen?

**LF:** Well, kind of at the same time. I saw some of her drawings of these masks, and we decided to make them. We went down to a wig place to get materials and look at stuff, and then it went really fast. Stanya spent hours sewing hair onto these masks, then we had to do our thinking right on the spot and go shoot with the masks. So it happened

at the same time. From the start, I thought I wanted to make a mystery. The idea of keeping a person wondering is always good. But we're still working now, so the piece is kind of a mystery already. [Laughter.]

**SK:** As part of our process, one of the main things we talk about is the different ways of working: the difference between making a map and setting out to execute it or finding it as we go. This is similar to how I've heard *you talk about your paintings, Llyn. You don't exactly make a big plan and execute it.*

**LF:** No, they usually just turn into something like faces. When I started to paint the big rocks back in the 1960s, I pressed rags into paint and saw heads emerge. So there's a connection there. I was intrigued by a film I saw of Stanya's and that the people in it become weird. And since she is a video person, I just let her lead me around.

**SK:** And you have quite a bit of input too. Remember the first day in the basement? Going down to the basement to shoot evolved out of our talking, but we both organically started seeing faces in objects down there.

**LF:** Yes, that went to my heart in a way. It was very cool. And we were talking about how sounds might come out of these faces.

**SK:** It was cool because we were seeing them at the same time. And then my brain—as a moving-pictures brain—started thinking about how we could get things moving outside.

**CT:** What I love about this footage is that at a certain point, Llyn, you come out with a dried, shriveled shark head, and you make that interact with the other found objects. Had you planned to bring that with you to the shoot?

**LF:** Yes, and a dried dead dog.

**SK:** It was great! So you brought creepy dead guys.

**LF:** Well, I've got a lot of creepy stuff.

**SK:** And I picked a "creepy dead guy" location in the basement, so it worked out.

**LF:** That was a creepy basement. There might be a body buried in that dirt. There's our mystery!

**CT:** It's interesting that you started out on this micro level, looking very closely, and then you stepped back and entered into the landscape with animals, vistas, and using your own bodies. Can we talk about your different notions of performance as it relates to your two practices?

**LF:** We're coming from different places.

**SK:** But what we share in common is that we both love a lot of physical comedy and comedians.

**LF:** And also an interest in the horrific. My concept of the horrific came from the wars and reflecting on man's inhumanity toward man.

**SK:** Mine feels related to that, but it also ties in to a personal sense of distress. I try to find a way of externalizing that with humor but still with some darkness and gore. I think we share a sense of personal disaster constantly mirroring back the big-picture disaster. I identified that in your paintings when I first saw them and I could relate to it.

**CT:** When I heard about this collaboration, it made sense to me. You both seem to construct representations of failure, although you do it in very different ways. Llyn, you make very clear critiques of American consumerism, and your songs are often about broken dreams. Stanya, it's much more subtle in your work, but it's there. You present wounded characters who just wander through these American wastelands.

**LF:** I'm a populist, and I've been through it. I've always been anticommercial. There's a whole structure that has to do with money,

and it's ruining our society. How do you get around that? I work through those ideas with my Machine. With songs like "I'm Afraid I'm Not Gonna Make It."

**SK:** Maybe we share the feeling that what society sees as failure is actually a productive space; it's outside of the standards and those categories of success or status. Yet I think my work is about resistance. My "characters" are resilient. They continue to form jokes and travel across the land when their exteriors are symbolizing the broken, the yucky and injured. They signify damage, but in that state they almost become free. And through a relentless joking, there's another machine that's running.

**CT:** Another connection I see in your bodies of work—and I think this relates to how you each approach performance—is the way that a "self" is created but also defaced.

**LF:** Sometimes it is me in my work. The first bloody head painting I made in the 1970s was me. It was called *Who Is on Third?* I had seen an autopsy where the scalp was pulled down over the front of a face. That was the feeling combined with Buster Keaton saying that he could throw a cream pie from the pitcher's mound and hit a man in the face running from second to third. But I've always identified with my work. As a little boy I was spoiled by my grandmother. I was the center of the universe, and that just played out. That's probably how I wound up being a one-man band. I had to control every aspect.

**SK:** I'm always displacing myself. You're not supposed to look at my work and say, "That's Stanya." Before I came to video, I was making one-person performances that I wrote, directed, and made sets for and did the sound, lighting, and costumes. I had total control. A lot of that content was drawn from my own experiences, but it was never recast to be an image of myself. And there was always some version of masking, whether it was with broken glasses or hats. There was always a displacement. The word

*self* is murky. My hope is always that even the person that I am on-screen is somehow relatable; I want the viewers to project themselves into that space somehow.

**CT:** But Llyn, it seems like you're comfortable letting your own psychology enter into the space of your work?

**LF:** My own psychology? I don't know. For this piece I just wanted to make a film and put music to it. There was some disconnect about how we would use sound. I wanted to play music on my Machine, but then Stanya found all of these electronic sounds. I know where she's coming from, but I know it's a computer program, and I have a certain kind of precious quality about making my own sounds.

**SK:** I feel similarly about how I work with sound. I'm not just only taking prerecorded sounds from an effects library online. I'm changing them and sometimes making my own sounds. I also have an old-fashioned work ethos about using sounds from material I made. For example, I recorded you walking through the grass yesterday, and to me there is integrity in using the particular sound that your body made. The disconnect might have something to do with this idea of displacing something farther or closer. I take normal sounds and turn them into another sound, just like I source from myself to create a different persona.

**CT:** What I hear you both saying—which is really interesting to me, and may result from a generational difference—is that you're both after authenticity, but it's two very different versions of the authentic.

**LF:** Yes. Stanya's taking her life and her sounds and making them flexible, as I am. I need a lot of control with my sounds because I am performing them with my whole body. Growing up, my idol was Chaplin. He directed his movies; he acted; he did the music. So maybe it makes sense that now I am a one-man band.

**SK:** Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Jerry Lewis, so many of the great comedians wrote, directed, and controlled their productions because they knew how they wanted them to go. They innately understood the timing of their own performativity and the environment they needed to make that happen. And I respect that. That's what's funny about us coming together and why we needed to start from scratch with our piece.

**LF:** Exactly. We're very alike in this way. But I would never want to be like those actors and do an hour and a half of makeup.

**SK:** But I do it for my own work. In my last piece I was totally bandaged with prosthetics. I had wood strapped to my leg and both hands bandaged. I was completely disabled.

**LF:** Did it have to be you?

**SK:** Of course it had to be me. Who else would it be? It couldn't be someone else playing Chaplin. He had to do it. Even the best comedians stay in control all the time. Lucille Ball ran her entire show.

**CF:** You both have a shared passion for comedy and these different tropes that exist in popular culture. I wondered if either of you has a conscious relationship to performing genres like comedy, horror, mystery, even the western?

**LF:** When I first started the Machine as a one-man band, I couldn't play it that well. So I dressed in a lot of different costumes, like the Lone Ranger or a soldier. People liked the costumes.

**SK:** I always feel a little confused when people ask me about genre, and they always do. Because I don't think I'd be good enough at that. I think John Waters does that. For me, I think it gets filtered through this other space as a maker. I actually don't like horror movies. It's something else I like—a morbidity? I don't feel adept enough at camp to pull off genre as an artist.

**LF:** Stanya, I don't know if you knew about my passion for comedy.

**SK:** No, I didn't at all. But I could intuit it from your work. When I saw your paintings, they struck me as familiar from a place of pathos and humor: the sad-funny-sad right next to each other, and that's just how I feel. Not humor as in tropes of comedy but a deeper humor. Just the gesture to make a 3-D space in a painting—there's levity to doing that and to breaking the rules of painting. It's funny to break rules, and it didn't seem pretentious. It seemed authentic.

**LF:** To me, comedy is a part of my life. As a kid I wanted to be a cartoonist and a comedian, so it's always been in me, and obviously it's in you too. And that gets combined with other things like dead animals. I can remember my first interest being in collecting animal skulls. Pairing those two things is not particularly normal. [*Laughter.*]

**SK:** I'm deeply compelled by the wild world too, and even when it dies. I'm constantly filming it, and for whatever reason, I project onto the wildness of animals and plants. This goes back to our discussion about failure and persistence. Animals are programmed to persist on an impulse level. The impulse to say, "Oh fuck it," and give up on life, that's a human thing. So I'm interested in that persistence. But who else persists? Comedians! That's what comedy is: joking your way through the worst fucking shit in a world full of people going, "Oh fuck it!"

**LF:** Comedians just have to let all this stuff out, and they feel comfortable doing it onstage. And I don't see that as any different from making music. It's a great thing to learn a craft—the way you get information in your mind, and you can just draw it out in any form you want.

**SK:** It's the same with any making, writing, connecting. These are all ways that people persist. And improvisation is that weird combination of the will to survive and the

agility to do so at a moment's notice. It's such an animal thing.

**LF:** And it's also about being one with something. When I'm on my Machine playing music, everything is happening at once. I can just play and talk and use my whole body and get into it. It took a long time, but like you say, Stanya, if you stick with something, it's going to go somewhere. It's when you give up and you rest on your laurels or just copy yourself again, that's when you're in trouble.

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Overleaf:  
Stanya Kahn and Llyn Foulkes  
*Happy Song for You*, 2011  
(installation view)