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## Corridor8 Interviews: Stanya Kahn

With Alice Bradshaw

**The first UK solo show of LA-based artist Stanya Kahn opens at the Cornerhouse, Manchester on 22nd June 2012 and features recent video work, drawings and a brand new commission. The exhibition *It's Cool, I'm Good* includes a new commission *Who Do You Think You Are* and will also include over thirty of Kahn's drawings.**

Kahn's video works use absurdity and dark humour to create stories in which characters, sometimes performed by Kahn, navigate mundane landscapes and situations. Fiction and reality are blurred with documentary techniques capturing interactions and observations addressing a range of concerns such as mortality, trauma and ecological responsibility. Poignant commentary on worlds part created by Kahn and part encountered generate engaging and often perplexing scenarios, questioning the very basics of existence and offering alternative perspectives.

**Alice Bradshaw: Your work seems concerned with processes and using film to capture these. What processes are involved in making your films off-camera?**

Stanya Kahn: I do a lot of writing, filming, drawing, making music, reading, talking to people, tracking my dreams. I improvise based on texts I've written, notes, sometimes borrowing from conversations I've heard. I make costumes sometimes, and then that has an effect on how everything feels and can generate more material. Sometimes a piece starts from an idea, sometimes the ideas evolve more experientially. And the body is usually engaged in some way. I get information from physical experiences that can't always be expressed with words but the intensity of physicality can show up as action, sound, gesture, sometimes words. It's like a process of distillation sometimes, other times a translation, other times a radiating effect.

**AB: The blurring of fiction and reality seems an important aspect in your work. Is there an element of autobiography in your on-screen performances?**

SK: There is in the sense that my body is present and I bring all that information, memory, experience to whatever state of being I might be embodying. Sometimes actual texts are borrowed from my actual life. But I'm never just 'telling my stories'. I'm usually interested in building something brand new that hasn't existed before. Something outside of real time or something in its own time.

**AB: The use of documentary techniques in your film work combined with a resemblance to comedic stand-up is an interesting paradox. How much is staged/scripted and how much improvised?**

SK: I guess I've already answered this above. Each piece is different. Some are more heavily scripted than others. Always there's some amount of improvisation because I'm always staying open to responding in the moment to wherever I am and whatever's happening, both externally and internally. It's funny how much 'real' situations (your reference here to the documentary aspects) offer up hilarious opportunities, mainly I guess because they're full of the unexpected. Entering the zone of the 'real' means I don't have control and it also means entering a two-way improvisation going on between the world and me. And that's usually funny. To me anyway.

**AB: Collaboration appears to be an important method of production in your work. How would you describe the nature of these collaborations?**

SK: I made a lot of video work with Harry Dodge and that was an important collaboration. We had a particular chemistry and shared most aspects of the work. We didn't divide labour in the traditional filmic sense. I've collaborated with other performers, writers, dancers. Collaboration is amazing because you have the alchemical mixing of more than one mind, one body, one set of memories and experiences. So the work never wholly represents one person's ideas. It's always an amalgamation. That's unique. It takes a lot of letting go, egolessness, power sharing. It's one of the hardest things, collaboration. But it's a deeply generative way of working. I have mostly worked in a solo practice, but tremendously value the collaborations over the years. Each one influences me, opens my mind to new things. Most recently I worked with the painter and musician Lynn Foulkes and it was surprisingly easy and organic.

**AB: Have you found any cross-cultural variations of note in perceptions and readings of your work, if it's possible to generalise in this way?**

SK: I'll be curious to see how the work is received in Manchester!

**AB: What other projects do you have planned or are working on at the moment?**

SK: I'm trying to figure out this long video project that's been on my mind for a few years. But it keeps shifting and changing, so right now I'm trying to come up with a way of making it that appetites for a lot of unknowns but has enough structure that I can actually start building. And my drawings. And writing.

*It's Cool, I'm Good* is on at the [Cornerhouse](#), Manchester until 16 September 2012.

*Alice Bradshaw is an artist, curator and writer based in West Yorkshire. She is founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Rubbish and University of Incidental Knowledge, co-founding director of Fundada Artists' Film Festival and Contents May Vary and co-curator for Holmfirth Arts Festival. Her website is [here](#).*