

# ABSTRACT VIDEO

THE MOVING IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART



EDITED BY GABRIELLE JENNINGS

FOREWORD BY KATE MONDLOCH

## GO WITH THE (UNREGULATED) FLOW

*Fluidity, Abjection, and Abstraction*

Trinie Dalton and Stanya Kahn

TD: At first I thought we should start with Kristeva because she gives a literal translation of abjection in terms of fluids, but when we were talking about projection and dreams, I was reminded of how we both translate the projection in a dream into a visual or narrative aspect, not literally but in a sensory or tonal or mood way. Projection is tied to abjection in terms of interior to exterior, right?

SK: Yeah, that makes sense to me. The kind of consciousness and action and psychic material that happens in dreams is in between kinds of consciousness, similar to the ways that Kristeva talks about the abject being neither subject nor object.<sup>1</sup> I'm really compelled by that. It's a radical space, a slippery space, and I also like how she almost anthropomorphizes this notion of the abject, where it becomes a wily creature that is both rebellious and persistent, uncanny and unnamable.

TD: Right. That's subject matter in both of our work. Even though we're not literally translating dreams.

SK: Right. Although sometimes I do.

TD: Do you?

SK: A lot of the drawings I've made in the past two years come from dreams. I had a dream where I was crossing a bridge over a bright green river and on the bank were two Sasquatches having sex. One of them was going down on the other one.

TD: Nice!

SK: They were roaring with pleasure. I couldn't tell their genders—there was just orange, shaggy hair, huge limbs. And in the dream I yelled from the bridge, "Hey, Yeti!" and tried to take their picture with my cell phone. (*Both laughing.*) Talk about the uncanny abject and not being able to capture it, right? We want to snap it, we want to Instagram it, we want to post it! But you can't snap a photo of the abject; it doesn't work. Or it's abject to try? Anyway so I made a few drawings of it (fig. 14.1).

TD: That's your snapshot!

SK: Yeah. Sometimes material in the videos comes directly from dreams too. Images, sometimes texts. Going further into ideas about abjection—this is perfect. (*Laughs.*) I had this dream in which I was trying to kill a rat; I was stabbing it with a screwdriver and every time I stabbed it, the rat would critique me: "Really? Don't you know where my heart is? Nope, that's not it." I recently used that in a new video I'm working on. Everyone in the piece is a medical professional. These two women break into an empty luxury apartment building to do a surgery on a fellow medical professional who's been injured . . .

TD: It's clean in there. Already disinfected.

SK: Exactly. They find a bottle of expensive mescal to clean his stomach and knock him out. And of course they start drinking it too. After the surgery they're all lounging on this huge white couch in a living room with massive panoramic views and I prompt one of the women to tell the rat dream. And she tells the rat dream as if it's her own, adding, "The rat goes, 'I thought you were a doctor. Don't you know where my heart is?'" (*Laughing.*) And the other one says, out of the blue, "I have this recurring dream every night about fighting a giant beaver with a fork." (*Laughs.*) It was an excellent surprise.

TD: Perfect. (*Laughing.*)

SK: The guy they've just operated on is nodding in and out while the ladies eat a birthday cake they found there, so they've all got icing on their faces and blood (*Laughing.*)

TD: Whoa, quadruple abject!

SK: Yeah. And throughout the film I prompt people to share their knowledge, and it turns out that he is into animal symbolism. So the rat-dream lady turns to him and asks, "What do beavers symbolize?" (*Laughing.*) And he goes (*slurring*), "Why would you want to kill something that builds things?" (*Laughing.*)

TD: Wow! Awesome response. He's bringing fertility back into it too.

SK: He's in a state of rupture; his whole abdomen has been cut open and operated on without anesthetic by these two people who were strangers to him. Which was a pretty abject scene itself. He is in some version of repair but it's



FIGURE 14.1

Stanya Kahn, *Hey Yeti 2*, 2013. Ink on paper, 14 × 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photographer, Robert Wedemeyer.

not clear if he'll survive, which recurs in my work. I like to hear what could be said on that kind of precipice of obsolescence, before you go. And it introduces the possibility of a corpse entering the picture. Which Kristeva has a lot to say about (fig. 14.2).

TD: That's perfect because thinking about animals as totemic ties into abjection manifested in the monstrous. My initial understanding of Kristeva was surrounding this monster that signified the in-between state—and how that is like narrativity or an idea or concept being translated into the visual. That's like a rough, jagged definition of totemism. Visual art is like that. What you were describing has so much narrativity in it, and the abjection happens in multiple ways.

SK: I don't immediately identify my work with more traditional notions of abjection in art. I had to consider it consciously for this conversation. So I thought about narrative as the way in, ways in which you can take story, whether it's in

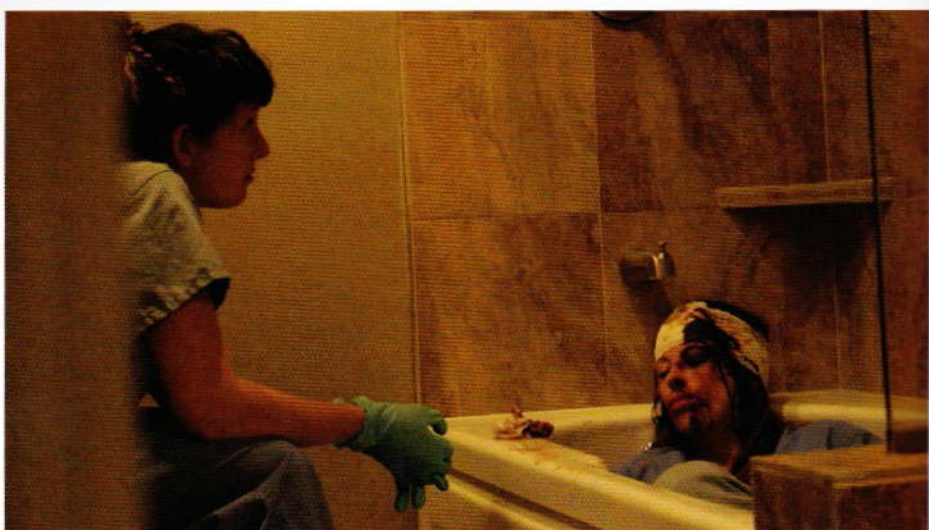


FIGURE 14.2

Stanya Kahn, *Don't Go Back To Sleep*, 2014. HD video with sound; 74 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

the fictional sense, or the Grand Narrative, or Histories, social stories, and you can pack as much of that information as you can into one image, or symbol—as in this totemic form you refer to, which so many cultures do, as a way to speak, a way to open up the language. In my drawings and also in the videos, everything has to carry some load of meaning, but also there might be an image or sound that doesn't particularly tell a discreet or legible story or offer a piece of information. It might just perform, on a visceral, energetic, or symbolic level. I also wonder if it's abject to maul the traditional story by combining the scripted with the improvised. It's what I do; I don't work in traditional story space; I don't make a beginning, middle, and end.

TD: I don't either. It's not an accurate reflection of life, which is the Surrealist's perspective. And that perspective actually derives from wanting to be realistic.

SK: I admire the people who can do it and I think that you can contain a lot of wildness inside a traditional arc, but it's just not my approach and not something I'm good at. After a recent lecture, a student asked me, "Can you talk about how you deal with time?"

TD: That's hard—yeah, and good.

SK: It's a good question. If we're thinking about in-between spaces and the ways in which subject space and object space function—we try to make them function in a logical way, but if you're in an abject in-between, where you have a wild,

undefinable thing that carries its own energy and is rejecting the norm and refusing to fit in, I think, well, that's in fact how time itself is in a sense. So I was trying to explain to her that maybe I'm thinking more in synchronic time than diachronic time.

TD: Me too.

SK: So in video, which is pure time, there's no materiality really, except of course for all the bodies and locations and places involved in the making, but once that materiality is gone and I'm editing, that is where I play with time and can create time and timing, and that's where I am trying to make a synchronic experience.

TD: Me too.

SK: And sometimes I loop back in time and forward and sideways and sometimes offer the illusion of very little time passing at all. I still love the pleasure of narrative and I try to leave threads of it for a viewer to grasp, but they won't be handles that will lead to one specific place.

SK: I'm sorry, the dog chewing his ass is so distracting. Stop. Stop.

TD: Poor Charlie.

SK: What would Kristeva say? "The dog chews its hind end, endlessly in its anxiety"?

TD: Yeah. (*Laughs.*)

SK: But what I was going to say is in that process, the maker is offering certain details but not others to stimulate the viewer to imagine and make meaning. I'm thinking about how much agency can I invite on the part of the viewer. I'm interested in the body of the viewer being activated and energized. This notion of the abject reminds me of ideas about what a revolutionary is.

TD: There is a politic behind the work. Open-endedness is the politic: you're inviting the viewer into the experience, and for me that's more like Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author."

SK: Sometimes it means making something that causes a disturbance or a disorientation and moments of feeling lost or alienated in, hopefully, a Brechtian sense. When viewers say, "No! That's impossible. What are you doing? This doesn't make any sense at all!" they reconnect with themselves as a person with agency. There's something about traumatizing the viewer that is important to talk about when we think about abjection though. It has to be productive. The pat term is "shock value," which I'm not interested in at all.

TD: Sure.

SK: I was listening to the radio this morning and they were playing a recording of Elaine Brown reading a letter [Black Panther] Ericka Huggins wrote when she was in prison and her husband had just been killed. Her letter was clear and

angry and impassioned, an articulate call to rise up against fascism and capitalism and patriarchy. She was able to so clearly tie that into the larger scale of loss that is ongoing. She was talking about health care and access to resources and institutionalized racism. I'm thinking about this ability to translate personal trauma into and always related to the larger social and cultural traumas. When someone says, "Oh, your work is scary" or "Your work is disgusting," I have to pause and think maybe that's because I've been in close proximity to trauma, confronting and processing it. I do think one's proximity to distress affects the syntax of one's work. For me, there's an early imprint of language and abruptness. Being raised around revolutionaries, not just thinkers (them too) but people who were armed and getting arrested and cops were breaking into our houses and people were dying and getting shot—it was heavy. And there was a rhetoric around revolution and change that was constant. "This is what is righteous. This is what we are fighting for, this is the goal." And then you grow up out of that and realize some of those movements failed and part of your association with the actions is the rhetoric, the language of it. You reflect and you internalize an understanding that something is not totally effective in the language and actions, maybe in language itself. It can let you down. Some of us gravitated toward poetics, to images, gestures, sounds, the body, punk rock to play with the power of communicating.

TD: I want my work to be more like a mirror or a device in which people can make their own changes within themselves. That's a more revolutionary position because it produces a myriad of experiences instead of all one collective experience, which is a problem with the rhetoric of revolutionary dialogue, you know?

SK: Yes.

TD: What you were saying about your characters in the new film and art sounds almost related to the ritualistic. In traditional ritual, there would be a clown, a character who, through comedy—and Brecht made me think of this—elicits self-reflection. Mirroring devices in the work allow comedy to become abject, and that's what can actually promote real change in the art or reading experience. The grotesquerie is not about shock value but rather about creating a clowning space or mimicry that can be disgusting, but the trauma is mediated by humor or moments of uncertainty or that uncanniness that you were talking about. Those are all methods to abstract the narrative. And in that, maybe abstraction and abjection are pretty close.

SK: They're very close, and this idea of fluidity, and not literally, but then also yes, because like you said, there is Kristeva and the actual fluids. She talks about blood and pus and her own personal disgust with the skin of milk. She talks about it touching the lips, and how her organs quiver and her groin churns and she has all these gross-out sensations throughout the body as the milk

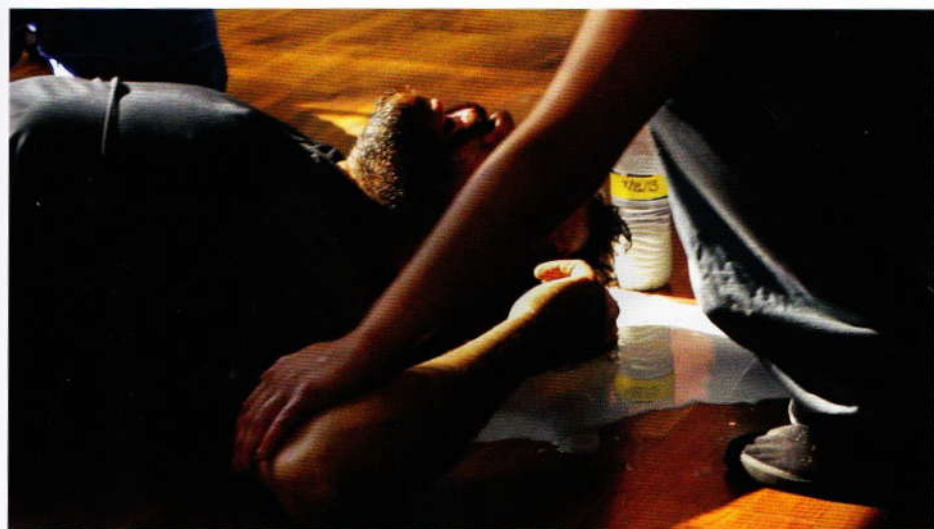


FIGURE 14.3

Stanya Kahn, *Don't Go Back To Sleep*, 2014. HD video with sound; 74 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

touches her lips. Coincidentally, milk and blood are featured heavily in my new film we've been discussing (fig. 14.3).

TD: Oh, that's right, there is milk in there.

SK: And there's improvisation, the ultimate flow of the unknown, and I use it to build types of narrative. And abstraction and abjection really come together in this process I think. Kristeva's definition of the abject includes something that disturbs identity or disturbs systems and order, right? The abject cannot be ordered or systematized, so I thought the practice of improvisation in relationship to the more conventional modes that civilized life is striving for, like control, foresight, planning, mapping, contracts, agreements. All those things are useful, but to improvise is to threaten that system a bit. I've been practicing improvisation for twenty years. It's not just like, "Oh, I'm just making shit up right now." It is, but that comes from a practice of building and developing sensory techniques for tapping into stored information, shaping it as it comes out. There's no such thing as being entirely thorough. We can't do it.

TD: Flow is an abject action then, right? It abstracts structures of communication, the way information is conveyed. Bataille's idea of formlessness echoes what you're talking about. It's not a free-for-all. This kind of flow is triggering wild surrealism or subconsciousness through shape and control—using techniques and systems. Formlessness is a system.

- SK: Right, and working with film or video, you actually are fully committing to a system in the end. In the end there's a closure. It's not a live performance or experience that can change every time. It will have an end and be rendered and mastered and output. I really like that dialectic of trying to source from uncontrolled spaces and states of being, to braid those with preconceived strands, into something that becomes a system—which the viewer then brings meaning to as well. My texts aren't cohered by one trajectory of story, and I shoot in small chunks with editing in between. I don't know thoroughly what's going to happen in each shooting scenario or in the piece as a whole. But I have visions, plans, and convictions. Plus impulses.
- TD: Oh, I didn't know you were editing in progress.
- SK: Yeah. Always. The work is alive as it's going. I'm never executing a preconceived screenplay. And this flow is inevitably in the editing process too. I get to respond in the moment to how one thing sits against another. Not to say that it's all just pure intuitive reactionary making. It's also thinking; it becomes another kind of writing. All of those stages of process become flow that is in some ways unregulated in relationship to convention.
- TD: Yeah, because there's no overall arc. Gordon Lish, in literary theory, coined this term *consecution*. One's not thinking of the overall story content but rather, editing each sentence as you go to direct you to the next.
- SK: That makes sense. But for me, there's a meta, a larger aggregate form hovering. While the fractured ways of working are about being more in the moment, they offer views into a possible bigger picture. They reflect me back outward as well. I think that's related to my broader interest as an artist and person: if there is no immediacy and lived experience inside a particular code or set of meanings that a person's making in the world, then it's not grounded in anything for me. So whether we're talking about revolution or having a politic or process, the involvement of being present in a moment necessitates the body and its information being involved; that's always the grounding point. I let that show me what the bigger picture might be. Because I do want a bigger picture. It just might not look like a traditional big picture.
- TD: I associate these mirroring elements with abstract film and video: the history of experimental psychedelic film—Oskar Fischinger, Jordan Belson, Bruce Connor, Harry Smith, Ira Cohen, their contemporary lineage . . . symbolic imagery that triggers archetypes. What you're saying about tapping into something larger feels related but different. They used symbolic imagery consciously—Harry Smith's alchemical imagery, for example.
- SK: Harry Smith is a great example of that process, incorporating micro and macro into constructed meaning. I joked to someone last week that I may have just made an hour-and-a-half-long trailer. (*Laughter.*) I've got so much montage in

this film and I wondered, what does that mean? I like to wonder if I can come up with some new structure that doesn't have a name. Something that combines so many unknowns. For example, I'm editing this long-form video using short-form techniques. What kind of experience is possible for the viewer in an extended experience of short-form techniques?

TD: New meaning gets made, and that's abstraction, the history of abstract language. It's funny that it's referred to as a language, but when I was at Yale doing visits last week, the painters I was visiting were saying, "Oh, this is in the language of abstraction." And I was like, "Oh, really?" But I guess it's a symbolic language, right? The symbols conjure up emotion or a sensibility or a read—

SK: That you can't control.

TD: Yeah.

SK: And that's the exciting part: you can't name it in relationship to the eye, to the self. I love when Kristeva says that the person faced with the abject is literally beside herself like another self. I read it to mean that you become partially disembodied. Sitting next to a corpse, you are shocked into facing your own end, and you can't name the abject thing; you can't pin down the response feelings. So you literally split. Maybe that relates to my willingness to throw props, words, images, actions, sounds into the works that are not easily metabolized by story or the traditional process. Which is counter to the convention that says you shouldn't include anything in your film that doesn't drive it forward, right?

TD: Right.

SK: I have a ton of things that could literally just slow it down to almost a standstill. (*Laughs.*) Sometimes I'm thinking, "Well, what if we just stop right here and open up another can of worms?"

TD: Yeah, exactly!

SK: But like with sex, it sets up this assumption, like the Grand Narrative—this expectation that there's a main thing that's coming, the main thing is *going* to happen. And to apply that kind of notion to the filmic, to the pleasures in filmic time and space—well, what are some of those tropes? It's like montage: "Ooh yeah, we love it when you make it seem like time is passing really fast and we get a bunch of information quickly so we can move to the next thing on our journey toward the *main* thing! Yeah! I'm gonna finally get the thing!"

TD: It's like a heroic quest. The picaresque.

SK: I have no heroic quest, except all of these little small quests and all the information that you need about the piece happens maybe seventeen times throughout it in different ways, cumulatively. And that's why I thought, "What if it's like a big long trailer?" What if we just do "foreplay" and never do it, then what are we doing? Some extended connecting that doesn't need a goal.

TD: It doesn't.

SK: It is what it is. Now of course, my work does have a goal. And trailers really work as selling agents, positioning the viewer as consumer. And that's the opposite of what I'm doing. On a larger level too, if you turn the project inside out: I invited nonactors who didn't know each other to be the people in this recent film [*Don't Go Back to Sleep* (2014)] (figs. 14.2 and 14.3). I put them into scenarios in which they had to speak as themselves but in contrived situations. They offer information and are in effect also creating the story as we go.

TD: In psychedelics, I learned to take the pressure off the destination. That's how I would define the word *psychedelic*. The pressure is off the productivity of an end result.

SK: "Let's not go anywhere. Let's just stay right here on the couch." (*Said in a spacey voice with laughing.*)

TD: That was a good lesson that came from trying those things.

SK: And if you bring material from the place where you had no control—your subconscious—into your conscious, controlled waking space as a maker and handle it like a material, you're making a thing you couldn't have made without the two spaces.

TD: I think that's what monsters are though: You give that feeling a face and some fur and some fangs. To rework the aesthetics comedically, or to make a new aesthetic.

SK: And those things actually become necessary if you think about it from a feminist perspective.

TD: Yeah.

SK: We have to have other material to work with as women, other than what's there or what's given or what's expected—otherwise uh-oh, right? We have to pull from *every* place. As a girl child in this culture, you grow accustomed to being resourceful because you learn so quickly, so young, that not only will you not have access to that which men and boys seem to have but also you won't be heard. Not only will your body be invaded, your language might seem garbled. You think you're speaking really clearly but it's not understood or it's not heard or you're told it's of no importance and you go, "Oh well, that didn't work." It starts early on, this gleaning. I really like Donna Haraway's idea of monstrous women, creatures constructed from multiple and various parts.<sup>2</sup>

TD: I do too.

SK: She embraces the cyborg, saying the idea of "woman" has been so reconstructed and overdetermined we are not whole or complete and never were. Instead of despairing in this postmodern, Frankensteinian position, Haraway embraces the monstrous power.

TD: Yeah, I think that's how montage really works here, as a structural form.

SK: In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari talk about the ways an activity can reach a "pitch of intensity,"<sup>3</sup> that a compilation of actions and interactions can seem to be leading toward a climax but there's no climax or dissipation, just a level of intensity that can be reached. I don't think intensity here has to mean freneticism. And they describe how this sustaining intensity can make a sort of imprint that can then be used in other activities, creating a network of intensities, connected by roots—rhizomes. Brian Massumi, who translated that book, talks about the body and affect in his own work, and I related so much to his thinking in terms of how I use improvisation, responding in the moment. He addresses the walking-is-controlled-falling idea as a way to talk about potential for reflection and volition in the moment of falling and catching oneself.<sup>4</sup> I like that as a metaphor for being out of control and having a moment to reflect or to catch oneself from falling completely out of control. Maybe in the moment of catching you reflect unconsciously and consciously simultaneously.

TD: That's when involuntary actions kick in?

SK: Exactly.

TD: We still have survival instincts, but they can be pretty hard to trigger. You're finding methods to do that?

SK: I'm trying to put people and myself in situations in which an automatic response is inevitable. Not only is it full of affective energy, but the process offers up new information that I couldn't have preconceived.

TD: Do you think technique-wise that's why you've been moving towards using different kinds of cameras?

SK: Yeah, exploring the relationship between doing and looking, action and regarding. How framing and point of view can bring the body of the performer, maker, and viewer into closer proximity to instigate flows of both empathy and productive alienation. Some of this is happening in the longer film *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, but more explicitly in the as-yet-unfinished *Stand in the Stream* (fig. 14.4). The title comes from a Brecht-Weill lyric: (*singing*) "Don't try to hold on to the wave that's breaking against your foot. / So long as you stand in the stream / fresh waves will always keep breaking against it."

TD: Cool.

SK: There are multiple lenses, screens, and windows in that piece. In *Speed and Politics* Paul Virilio talks about windows in cinema, that the original screen was a window.<sup>5</sup> And our eyes have developed retinal responses to viewing through windows and of course to frame rates. In *Stand in the Stream* I'm recording a lot of screens, live webcam interactions, etcetera, and in many ways this piece is much more about being a watcher, regarding—

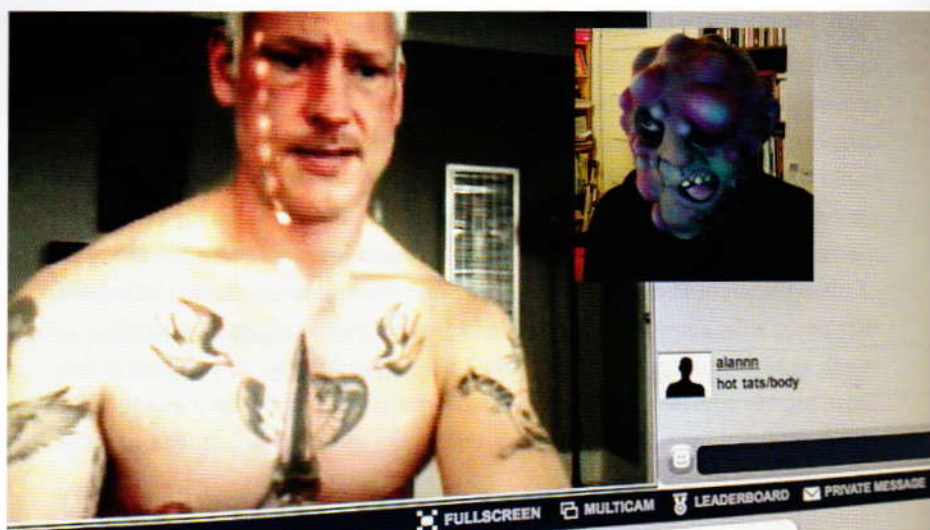


FIGURE 14.4

Stanya Kahn, *Stand in the Stream*, work in progress. HD video with sound. Courtesy of the artist.

TD: Laura Mulvey!

SK: Yes! And Mulvey and Kristeva seem to meet in the ways they talk about objecthood and in watching. Laura Mulvey talks a lot about the woman in traditional cinema as the object of desire who doesn't have language or land.<sup>6</sup> She is there for us to look at. It's the male figure who has mastery over the frame and also the physical space. He has terrain that's his, and he can name it and he can speak. In my work I speak and I command the language, and I have terrain. I'm moving through landscapes and multiple locations. I never thought about it consciously, and when Harry and I were working together, we didn't talk about Laura Mulvey, but when I reread Mulvey I think, "Oh yeah, I went and got some land and some language." Then I also obscured my body so I couldn't exactly be desired in a recognizable fashion. Like co-opting the space of the male lead to try on his brawn, his power. I'm more interested in that than in repeating tropes of the straight, hot, femme protagonist. I'm bored with that. What if that weird sort of nongendered protagonist could also generate its own hotness. And Mulvey points out that while the lead has land and voice, he doesn't always have information. She points out how in Hitchcock, the audience knows what's coming before the characters do (fig. 14.5).

TD: That's what I like about Dario Argento.

SK: Yeah, but it's the opposite in my work. I always withhold the information, the source of danger.

- TD: You often don't show the source of the trauma or what happened to the protagonist.
- SK: Yeah. I really like when Kristeva says, "The abject is the thing that can't be assimilated." She invokes the corpse. I'm bringing the corpse in. In *Don't Go Back to Sleep* three people die, and their dead bodies are present; they're in the room. The unassimilable, the impossible, a radical presence. I hope I'm wielding the corpse not to scare the viewers or to make them sad, but to bring in the presence of this figurative limit. Maybe the constant presence of the limit reminds us that we have to take action to survive. Does that make sense?
- TD: That makes perfect sense, and it's such a natural progression for your work to go there. There's a multidirectional finality to it, like the labyrinth with different roots of intensity. A finality implied in the corpse on first glance, but then it's subverted because once you cut the corpse open, there are even more operations in your new film. It's not about shock or disgust, and the grotesque is just one small facet of it. Recently I watched Brakhage's *Pittsburg Trilogy*—you know, the third one with all the autopsies? It's really intense but so abstracted and beautiful. So much red, and I love how he abstracts figuration. The autopsies become color and shape, materials.
- SK: Yeah, cadavers! And also I'm thinking about this obsession with the undead and the zombie state. It's really big again, which is funny. The cadaver is still clomping around. (*Laughter.*) Talk about abject in your face! "Face it! I'm here! I'm here to make you face it!" But the zombie itself can't actually incorporate its own limit. It's really hard to kill a zombie. "Why aren't you dead? Why are you still walking around?" So much unfinished business. One night I was watching *Omega Man* with Mike Kelley; he'd never seen it despite his having a huge collection of zombie movies, so I brought it over. And he said, "See, the zombies are the counter culture; the zombies are the hipsters! Because you can never truly be hip—the system will coopt it—so they're forever caught in between." He talked through the whole movie, which was cracking me up. And it was an incredible stream of erudite observations, quick and on point. He was the most astute viewer I've ever watched movies with, ever.
- TD: That's huge. We could probably talk for a really long time about that.
- SK: Yeah. Talk about unfinished business and a tremendous loss. Talk about being "beside oneself" with grief. Unspeakable.
- (PAUSE.)
- SK: (*Continuing.*) In *Omega Man*, the zombies are like a radical political cult: they're fighting the power but they're also being corrupted by their own power. And like Mike was insinuating, you can't quite form a rhetoric that doesn't become reified in a stuck totalitarian rhetoric. In other words, how can you establish a system of liberation? It's sort of oxymoronic. We are in constant



FIGURE 14.5

Stanya Kahn, *It's Cool, I'm Good*, 2010. SD video with 5.1 surround sound; 35 minutes, 20 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

pursuit to articulate a correct position, knowing that there are too many elements, too many locations in which power plays out problematically in our world to make an all-encompassing, defined stance about which way to go. So I've sort of chosen this path to play with rhetoric. I think that's another reason why the corpse shows up so much.

TD: I always thought you were reversing the Mulvey thing about the observer and the observed. Reversing the idea of the gaze, taking charge of the gaze. Giving the volition to the person in front of the camera. And giving voice to the person behind the camera.

SK: The motivated camera. That was something that Harry and I talked a lot about in those earlier works: to acknowledge the agency and gaze that the camera carries. I really like the way that Mulvey talks about visual pleasure in narrative cinema, bringing it back to the Lacanian mirror stage: the baby needing to look at itself in the mirror, and the image in the mirror appearing to be more adept and able-bodied than the baby experiences its own body to be. It's this early experience of projection. And cinema also affords this pleasure to the viewer by projecting on these able-bodied, hot, powerful people on the screen.

- TD: Right, vicarious experience. That's why one can come out of a film viewing feeling super-aroused.
- SK: Yeah. And Mulvey talks about the image of a woman in cinema as not only the object of desire, but she also represents possible castration because she doesn't have a penis.
- TD: I love that. I mean the idea, not castration . . .
- SK: (*Laughs.*) So, according to Mulvey, the male has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: Fetishistic scopophilia—to build up the physical beauty of the object to the point where it's just totally satisfying in and of itself as an object, fetishized. Or—and this is what is interesting about narrative—to punish that guilty object, so we hurt the female over and over again. She's guilty of possibly castrating us, so we're going to punish her. We know that one—yawn. Regarding the more sadistic, punishing option, Mulvey makes this interesting point about narrative: "This sadistic side fits in well with narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time, with a beginning and an end."<sup>7</sup>
- TD: That's totally what *doesn't* interest me about those types of sexual dynamics. Those power struggles are didactic. Are these the only two options? There's a dualism in that, yet there's a lot of possibility out there. Do you know Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine*?<sup>8</sup> It riffs on the Mulvey. There's a great chapter about vagina dentata in movies like *Alien* with Sigourney Weaver. Creed discusses a new mode in cinema that offered the woman protagonist a different heroic, co-opting the heroic role outside of sexualization.
- SK: The movie *Teeth!* directed by Lichtenstein's grandson, weird. Pasolini, John Waters, Lizzie Borden, Yvonne Rainier, Trinh T. Minh-ha—there have been so many filmmakers who offer alternatives. Too many to list here, which is good. But because cinema is so powerful and we're all suckled on it from a young age, I think that one of the consequences of patriarchy is that we've internalized those dynamics. And now people with their webcams are gazing at themselves while they're making a video of it. There's a whole generation of people growing up watching themselves on screen. I'm curious about the potentials and pitfalls of this.
- TD: Oh, like the Basic Bitch boy on YouTube! I clicked on him yesterday. That kid is cute.
- SK: Amazing. Adorable. These kids, they become hosts, announcers. There's maybe some power in that. Then there's "hauling" videos in which cute girls display their recent purchases: a crazy weird combo of subjects/objects showing objects/commodities.
- TD: It's more than narcissism, for sure.

- SK: It is more. I'm divided. There are some artists who are using the webcam eye. I think there's still a problematic with the girl framing herself, gazing at herself to be gazed at again. Does it change the dynamic? I want a change. It's another round of questioning that arose with women using their bodies in early performance art, but now an entirely different historical context. If the pretty girl is still so easily commodifiable, we have to think about to whom and how it's being framed and sold. I made a drawing of a lady zombie and she's missing a boob and she's talking on the phone about how her boob came off in this guy's hand, saying, "He said, 'I like it when you fall apart baby. It makes me feel like I can take care of you.'"
- TD: The roles returning to their original—
- SK: How horrifying for a woman in our culture, right? That someone squeezes your tit and it comes off? (*Laughs.*)
- TD: It's like castration anxiety in reverse.
- SK: Abjection relates to the objectification of women, commodities, market, and popular forms of culture and what's considered inside and outside. Counter cultures function to transgress, to question the norm. As the status quo continues to co-opt scary or radical things and then make them palatable for mass consumption, people have to keep finding ways to step outside. Film/video is not market friendly: it's not object based; people have to spend time with it. Maybe experiments in time-based media are innately abject because they exist in an in-between state. They're not objects or pictures or even objects in the sense of the traditional container of the cinema.
- TD: This parallels literature too. In narrative, people want linearity because it produces legibility.
- SK: I'm OK with existing both as a person and an artist outside of whatever the center is, and if that means always being more a part of an experimental, smaller community of makers, that's OK.
- TD: It's cool, you know, it's fine.

## NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
2. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: A Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
3. Brian Massumi, translator's foreword, in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), xiv.
4. Brian Massumi, "Navigating Movements," interview, in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*, ed. Mary Zournazi (New York: Routledge / London: Lawrence and Wishart / Sydney: Pluto Press, 2002–2003), 210–42.

5. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006). See also Paul Virilio, "Speed-Space," interview with Chris Dercon, trans. D. Miller, *Impulse* 12, no. 4 (1986): 35-39.
6. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.
7. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 14.
8. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993).