



IN HARRIET "HARRY" DODGE and Stanya Kahn's short video *Let the Good Times Roll*, 2004, a depressive, effusive woman named Lois sits in a motel room telling an unseen cameraman about a party she once attended. Initially she'd been reluctant to go out, but the hosts looked just great in these "little black shorts" and "rubber boots," she earnestly explains, adding that their names were Wolf and Dandelion, "so right off the bat I'm feeling at ease." Lois gets stoned, mingles, and then Dandelion asks if she's ever done an anal douche: "'Oh sure,' I say, which must have been the grass talking." After a contretemps involving a shower nozzle and a bit of confusion over "just how high" she's supposed to turn on the water, she finds herself face-down, receiving an Ecstasy enema.

If comedy in contemporary art seldom appears without qualifiers like *deadpan*, *concrete*, or *conceptual*, Dodge and Kahn's shared comic sensibility belongs to its own idiosyncratic genre, closer in tone and caliber to the artists' cited

RACHEL KUSHNER ON HARRY DODGE AND STANYA KAHN

influences (Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin, and Lenny Bruce) than to the art world's site gag or idea-based sorts of humor. Gestures a posteriori designated as comedy—John Baldessari singing Sol LeWitt phrases, for example, or Richard Prince putting a bar joke in quotes—are not gutturally so, while Lois (a recurring character in Dodge and Kahn's work) is immediately, heart-stabbingly funny, her monologues as hilarious as early *Saturday Night Live*. But just as Kafka's friends laughed until they cried when he read aloud from *The Trial*, so it is that art audiences uniquely and all too painfully relate to Lois's various episodes of alienation, her hyperanalytic attempts to decipher cultural absurdities, and her brave, pathetic optimism in the face of failure.

Lois was born in 2002 when the artists, studying at Bard College in upstate New York (where they both received MFAs in 2003), heard José Feliciano's "*Feliz Navidad*" on the radio one afternoon; it triggered a sudden shared

vision of Kahn dancing to the song with unabashed glee in her own music video. They never did end up making the piece, but the conditions of possibility had emerged for a character who would transmit empathy and discomfiture. Kahn, until then, had worked mostly in performance, appearing at such venues as PS 122 in New York. Dodge, who also makes drawings and sculptures, played a supporting role in John Waters's *Cecil B. Demented* (2000) before codirecting her own award-winning feature with Silas Howard in 2001, *By Hook or by Crook*. Fans of each other's work since they'd met in San Francisco a decade earlier, Dodge and Kahn began collaborating. The videos capture the surface electricity of live improvisation, and they traverse context: Screened in exhibitions at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum in LA, and the Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York, they have also been hits at the Sundance Film Festival.

Played by Kahn with the self-styled dorkiness of a Carol Burnett character, Lois brings to mind artist Michael Smith's "Mike." But whereas that ultrabland alter ego hopelessly pursues individuality, Lois is afflicted by it. She always appears wearing the same pleated Windbreaker zipped up to the neck—a style that might coincide with "retro" fashion, but only inadvertently, in the manner that a broken clock is right twice a day. In *Winner*, 2002, Lois wins a cruise as a radio station giveaway and is supposed to say "thank you" on camera for a television ad spot. Instead, she shows the cameraman her "sculptures," which Dodge made but Kahn hadn't seen until they began shooting. Forlorn objects coupled in a separated-at-birth sort of logic—a rictus-faced baby doll taped back-to-back with a rictus-faced pro-wrestling action figure, for example—Lois's artworks are reduced parodies of Dodge's own sculptural practice and interests in abjection and the *Informel*. Kahn holds up a throw pillow with a plastic potato resting in its quilted button and riffs so seamlessly you'd never guess she's improvising. "I'm not big on naming things, but this one is *Sad Nugget*," she says. "And *Sad Nugget* I think speaks to [being] alone in the nursery: They've just cleaned you up, but it's not time to go to Mama yet." Lois could be describing herself: exposed, semipresentable, and hoping to be claimed by some—any—communal resonance. She says that "a couple people" have seen the sculptures, but it seems more likely no one has, and that this minor social interaction is a rare event for Lois.

"There's something embarrassing about video," Kahn says in an interview, explaining why the artists prefer it to film (apart from the obvious issue of cost). "Watching soap operas as a kid, I always expected sex to happen. The camera seemed too *right there*." More than "right there," the camera in each Lois piece is an explicit element of the plot. In *Winner*, the radio station is documenting her; and in *Good Times*, she begins her tale of the epic party after meeting a cameraman en route to a concert, thus allowing for performative reciprocation. Lois can acknowledge the cameraperson (played by Dodge) as she would a live audience. By enfolded the video

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in *Good Times*, Yvonne Rainer, who was a visiting artist while Dodge and Kahn were at Bard, exclaimed, "They're exploiting that poor stoner!"

Not *vérité* and reflexive but classically cinematic, filmed in seamless pans and golden-hour light, Dodge and Kahn's *Whacker*, 2005, is the antithesis of the Lois series. Here Kahn mows dead weeds on an empty lot, chewing gum and wearing a halter dress, heels, and *CHiPs*-style sunglasses. On the surface, it's classic femme-fatale territory. After all, truck-stop glamour + rotating blade = castration anxiety spectacle par excellence. But *Whacker* is not simply a play on stereotypes; the video proffers an empty chain of narrativizing and scopophilic signifiers, with no underlying character per se. In this respect, the piece recalls Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" of the late '70s, in which armatures for filmic staging and mythification—rather than pointing to actual films through reenactment—effectively pull staging apart, dismantling its psychic and structural affects. Kahn doesn't acknowledge the camera, speaks no lines, and despite the suggestion of "type," leaves no remainder for speculative projection. She's a mirage of conflicting codes: Her "work" (pointless, masculine, and active) and her look (opulent, feminine, and static) conspire to prevent any coherent signification. Strangely, when the camera swings around to reveal her perspective, what she allegedly sees—the intersection below the empty lot, a passing car, a pedestrian crossing the street—suddenly looks grainy and raw, like anonymous video surveillance. Any attempt to assert the protagonist's interiority would, it seems, dissolve the film's fragile system of codes, exposing her gaze as an empty placeholder.

It's a singular departure from Lois, who fluxes pure interiority, and whose own willfulness structures her appearances in the videos. In *Winner* she controls the length of the interview by stalling, ever-reluctant to give a sound bite thanking the station for the cruise. With Cassavetean persistence, the camera lingers over Lois's silences and drifts of anxiety. She sings the refrain from "Thriller." She does a chin-up and a series of goofy calisthenics. Saying the words *thank you KCLU* will bring her Warhol moment—her opportunity for an observed existence, a reprieve from obscurity and loneliness—to a close. But her existence is *only* observed, and "that poor stoner" seems to understand the devastating implication, that the end of the film is the end of *her*. This is dialectical believability as Artaud might have it: Lois is not merely fictive, but a symptom. Through the perils of her impulsive chatter, she retrieves from someplace in Kahn, the woman playing her—and reveals to an audience of Dodge, the person filming her—one obscure kernel that goes by two names: "hilarity," and also "dread." □

RACHEL KUSHNER IS A LOS ANGELES-BASED WRITER.

Opposite page: Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, *Let the Good Times Roll*, 2004, still from a color video, 15 minutes 37 seconds. Lois (Stanya Kahn). Below: Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, *Whacker*, 2005, still from a color video, 7 minutes 7 seconds.

