

Stanya Kahn

Practice
Performance, video

2010

California

Biennial

Curated by
Sarah C. Bancroft

Orange County
Museum of Art,
Newport Beach
California



Stills from *It's Cool, I'm Good*, 2010 — cat. no. 83

Interview with Grant Wahlquist

GW: Do you see yourself as portraying or constructing a “character” in your work, or do you understand what you’re doing differently?

SK: What people generally refer to as “character” in my work I see more as a “state of being,” a metaphorical state, a representation or manifestation of issues, feelings, ideas, signs. In a literary sense, the word *character* is not so far off. In literature I think the symbolic has more play in terms of where it can reside, and “character” is one of those places. A person in a novel can commonly be read as a vessel for all kinds of meaning. In theater, performance, and moving pictures, it’s much more difficult to maintain the conceptual construction in the foreground of the viewers’ minds because a moving, talking person in time and space always appears to be just that. A person. Not a set of ideas.

I include things that might foil the seamlessness or believability of character, I try to blur the line between myself and character, and I do a lot with sound and editing to try and break the spell of full cinematic or theatrical fiction. In some respects, “character” in my work is an amplification of certain aspects of self, without ever really being about me per se.

The “character” in *It’s Cool, I’m Good* is as much a Deleuzian desiring machine as it is a physicalized version of my own interiority doubled with a broader concern about trauma. We are a country traumatized by corrupted and nearly nonexistent promises of democracy and by our perpetration of trauma all over the world. Meanwhile, this “character” is based loosely on an ex-boyfriend of mine whom I nursed through a gruesome death from AIDS. And then from this base springs a “character” that is also a sign for the undisciplined (in the Foucaultian sense) citizen body exhibiting a kind of exuberance (albeit an ornery one) in the face of near destruction at the hands of the state. It is also an unruly fall guy for antidepressants—lonely and trying to go with the flow, hoping to get laid and find somewhere to plug in an excess of creative energy temporarily repressed by the effort it takes to make one’s way in the world. And I’m all those guys.

GW: In *It’s Cool, I’m Good*, the protagonist changes the explanation of their injuries from scene to scene. This is a bit of a lowbrow reference, but in the most recent incarnation of the Batman franchise, the Joker does the same thing. How are the shifting explanations related to the concerns of the piece as a whole?

SK: Funny you should mention the Joker. He never occurred to me as model for this protagonist, but I like that you offer the reference. He’s a perfect parallel. The original Joker character was born out of trauma. He starts out as a chemical engineer who quits his job to become a stand-up comedian(!) but bombs at the comedy club. Then his wife and unborn child die in an accident. Then he falls into a vat of chemicals and is severely disfigured. The shock of his lousy luck makes him insane. I like to think it’s the depth of his trauma that leads him to say, “My past? I always remember it differently. If I’m going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple-choice! Hahahahaha . . .”

In *It’s Cool, I’m Good*, I’m trying to deflect the viewers’ search for the “truth.” In part because trauma reorganizes truth, but mainly because with this work I’m more interested in how we *cope* with what has happened and less concerned with how or even why it happened. I want to confound the question of what happened so I can steer away from sentimentality and keep us in the visceral experience of surviving. I’m often suspicious of too much story. I want to stay in the speed of the body. In this case certain mechanisms take over in what might be an effort to stay alive: incessant joking, flirting, ruminating, recounting facts, exploring, driving, walking, being. This is exuberance; this is something like a cross between will to live and will to power.

Changing the story over and over is also a way to portray the emotional armoring that can come with trauma (hence the title). Which is funny because I recently tried therapy for the first real time. I said to the therapist, “Look I can tell you all kinds of horror stories, but the telling doesn’t seem to change my problems.” I start in with the stories, and by the end of the session she’s recommended a therapy called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, a neurological approach developed during the first Gulf War to help veterans cope with PTSD. As the brain remembers the bad feelings, it starts digging up past traumas. And as the old source traumas emerge—the big, bad ones—eye movements neurologically transmit the memories to a different part of the brain so that you can recall what happened but you don’t have to keep reliving the experience with the same level of fear and distress. Which is cool. I like my past to be multiple-choice too.

Another aspect of the post-trauma stage that interests me relates directly back to the issue of the Joker. His personal trauma shaped his social relationship to the world. It birthed a supervillain. I’m interested in the social aspect of what happens to us, how our personal experiences shape our responses to the world. We develop all kinds of neuroses, addictions, fears, phobias, antisocial behaviors. And doesn’t that in turn impact what we do in the world, what kinds of projects we make, what kinds of organizations we form, how we steer our politics, how we fashion entire infrastructures? And if we take Foucault’s position that madness is historically constituted, it makes so much sense that Joker in the 1990s doesn’t suffer from “insanity” but from “supersanity.” The protagonist in *It’s Cool, I’m Good* is, in that respect, “superinjured,” able to persevere beyond what’s reasonable exactly because there is no other choice. A sort of punk-rock PTSD supervillain ex-comedian but with no special powers and no enemies.

GW: Speaking of cinema, how do you understand or position your own work relative to the role that narrative plays in traditional filmmaking?

SK: I come to narrative via reading and writing more so than watching, and yet it’s the medium of film/video that allows me to privilege the experiential over the narrative arc. I do build story, particularly in my most recent work, braiding together strands for the viewer to follow. I want to provide some of the pleasure of story, but the pieces unpack more along psycho-emotional lines. The script is always punctuated by improvisation. Audio and visual information bear a significant load of meaning as well. Landscapes might function as double entendre.

In *It's Cool, I'm Good*, the desert is really the desert, replete with issues of water politics and sprawl, for example. But it is also a psychological space, in a Beckettian sense. Music and sound are integral as "texts" in their own right.

In live performance, you control almost everything with your body, timing especially and the rapport with the audience. I shoot and edit with the physical memory of what that's like. My live shows were driven in part by the desire to create an Artuadian catharsis and also maintain a Brechtian distance that would allow the audience to have autonomous, active consciousness. As a video maker, these concerns persist. The technology replaces the body, and I have to figure out how to make it "sweat." Vaudeville, stand-up, poetry, sermons, speeches, music all inform the way I'm trying to loosen up narrative structure. I'm getting permission from histories of experimental filmmaking, video art, and documentary at the same time that I'm stealing from Hollywood. Recently, I'm revisiting Marx Brothers' films and noticing a renegade disregard for convention. The films are surreal, almost druggy, because they were born on stage and then folded into film. Time, along with the fourth wall, is interrupted regularly for wordless physical skits, non sequitur speeches, songs, dances, and the magical moment when Groucho looks right at you and winks.

GW: Do you consider humor to be a theme or more of a strategy? Is it the idea of humor that you're trying to get at, almost as a subject matter? Or is humor a device that you're deploying to get at something else, a formal strategy?

SK: Right. Both. Especially in this most recent work, I'm trying to do both at the same time. Like a tattoo of a butt on a butt (as Beavis says to Butthead).

Humor has also been a central device in all the work I've made. I discovered its power in performance, specifically as a way to connect with the people. To establish camaraderie and give permission to laugh (because inevitably at some point the work also gets heavy). Once you're in, humor is freed up to start working on more complex levels as a strategy: upending expectations, disrupting norms, subverting meaning, interrupting hierarchy, critiquing the status quo. At its best, humor plays with lines of agreement while simultaneously relying on agreements: we laugh because we recognize. Freud says part of what gives us pleasure in humor is the experience of recognition.

In this recent work, I'm looking specifically at how humor functions as a survival mechanism and how it forms a language of its own, specifically in response to trauma. Here joking and humor are used likewise to mirror the way meaning is similarly upset by trauma. Trauma ruptures what we thought we knew.

Which leads me back to the earlier question about why my protagonist, like the Joker, keeps changing the story of the trauma. Kathy, the subject of my video *Kathy*, says that repeating stories of traumatic events can traumatize the listener. While the Joker can use this as a sadistic tool, I find ways to sidestep the direct retelling. I want to exorcise my demons just as much as the next guy, but I don't need to drag you down with me.

Boy, this is getting really unfunny. Which is exactly what Freud says will happen if you have to explain a joke. Part of a joke's pleasure is its innate economy, the compression of meaning. Which is why I really like fast shorties like: "What's brown and sticky? A stick." ■

Born 1968 in San Francisco; lives and works in Los Angeles. Kahn received degrees from San Francisco State University (BA, 1991) and Bard College (MFA, 2003). Her work has been shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Getty Center, and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; the Sundance Film Festival; the Center for Art and Media (ZKM), Karlsruhe, Germany; P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York; Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects; and Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York. She also participated in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. She has received grants from the California Community Foundation, the Durfee Foundation, and the International Fund for US Artists, among others, and has been nominated for numerous awards and fellowships, including a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship. She teaches as adjunct faculty in new genres at UCLA, California Institute of the Arts, and Otis College of Art and Design.

