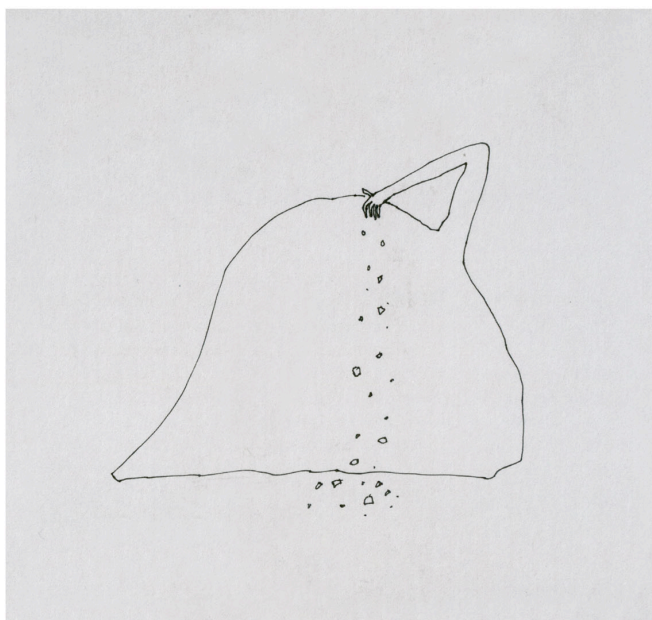


# CORNERHOUSE

STANYA KAHN: *It's Cool, I'm Good*  
Exhibition Catalogue Essay  
Cornerhouse Publishing,



## It's Cool, We're Good

Glenn Phillips

Stanya Kahn's characters have traumas that run deep. Their thresholds are in danger – under attack and under pressure – as internal distresses become bound up and exacerbated by the body's limitations. The central figure in Kahn's 2010 video *It's Cool, I'm Good* (played by Kahn herself) has experienced an unnamed, horrific accident. She wears thick bandages around her feet and hands and up her arms and one leg, and a comically lumpy set of bandages on her head, over her ears, around her chin, and down to her neck brace. She has a Band-Aid across her nose and splotchy, bruised makeup around her eyes and cheeks. A piece of Scotch tape pulls her upper lip away from her teeth, suggesting, with extreme economy, a busted mouth, while also laying bare the getup's artifice.

This character wants nothing more than to escape her situation, which she does repeatedly – both physically and mentally – throughout the video. At home in bed, she flirts incessantly, tells jokes and makes small talk with the cameraperson and a series of mostly off-screen caretakers. She browses the 'Casual Encounters' section of Craigslist ('because they're going to be less picky'), and tries to strategise how to find a companion: 'Just tell him I got a facelift, right? 'Cuz then

I'm just like *about* to be really *hot*.' Alternating with these domestic scenes, we see the patient fleeing her surroundings – on crutches, in a car, riding bare-assed on a motorcycle, hospital gown flapping in the wind. She traverses the outskirts of Los Angeles – the beach, the desert, the mountains, the highways, and a series of marginal urban landscapes. She buys corn dogs and sundaes at fast food stands; attends a depressing parade; follows an ambulance whose injured occupant is visible inside. She seems to be a constant witness to police activity. With quick edits freely cutting between more than twenty locations, traditional narrative breaks down. Instead, the patient becomes almost equated with the landscape, made part of the urban fabric. We're not just dealing with personal trauma here, but an overall state of social and ecological malaise. As such, Kahn's patient occasionally breaks out of her narcissism and speaks in parables about the destructive power of water, about home-building and ditch-digging, about the extreme efficiency most animals use in constructing shelter: 'Like some bats... they'll extend a little bit of energy, they'll like eat through a palm leaf, just enough to make it flop over, and they'll use that as their tent.'

From, *Stana Kahn: It's Cool, I'm Good*, 2012

How efficient are humans with their energy? Driving past snow-capped mountains and through fields of wind turbines, Kahn's patient relays some news: 'I guess yesterday they started dredging the Hudson River. They were like trying to remove 1.3 million pounds of PCBs – polychlorinated biphenyl. So they're gonna squeeze all the water out of the mud and then put the water through a chemical treatment plant until it's the quality of drinking water, and then they're gonna dump that water back into the river. Then they're gonna take the toxic mud and load it into train cars – so that's like 81 train cars, and it's like a mile long train – and they're gonna take it to Texas, and of course the people of Texas are worried, because there's a pretty good chance the PCBs will just sink into the aquifer under the ground and contaminate not only all the water underneath Texas, but the aquifer stretches for *eight states*.' In the next shot, back in bed, she notes: 'A piece of my brain fell out. You can probably tell. Did you ever hear the one about the bologna? We should go to Carl's Jr. again, that was awesome.' Like the PCBs en route to Texas, attempts to fix one problem can make another problem worse. Nearly every action by Kahn's patient might settle her immediate conscious mind but will further exacerbate her trauma and destroy her body.

*It's Cool, I'm Good* is the central work in a trio of related videos by Kahn. The other two videos, *Sandra*, and *Kathy* (both 2009) are a conceptually conjoined pair that both elucidate and serve as counterpoint to the ideas explored in *It's Cool* using a divergent formal strategy. Rather than featuring Kahn as a central fictional character, *Sandra* and *Kathy* feature real people – Kahn's mother and her closest friend – telling real stories. Yet the works are far from documentaries, as Kahn uses the same shattered style of editing to undercut traditional narrative and temporal flow, allowing her to make freer use of her subjects' words as she crafts poignant examinations of how we use language to negotiate trauma.

*Kathy*, featuring interviews with Kahn's best friend of twenty years, was filmed over a two-year period, beginning shortly after Kathy had given birth, via C-section, to her second daughter. She describes her mother's misguided attempts to be supportive following the surgery, coming out to visit with a terrible toothache, taking the Vicodin that had been prescribed to Kathy following the surgery, and demanding that Kathy cook breakfast, when (like Kahn's patient in *It's Cool*...) she should be in bed healing. Kathy does a hilarious impression of her mother: 'Honey, I think it's not good, you need to stay in bed.'

It's awful. But oooh, my *tooth*, it's really, oh it's so awful you went through that surgery. But you know *I* really had surgery *too*! A toothache, when they're pulling a tooth is surgery; that's surgery too... You *know* what they say, dry sockets are really like – well I mean *I* said it the last time I had a dry socket. I don't know if *they* say it, *I* said that – a dry socket is really just like labour pains.'

Kathy's surgical wounds do not heal properly, and she develops a thirteen-centimetre abscess that requires another surgery and an extended recovery period in which she must wear a wound VAC device that continually sucks fluids from the abscess, collecting them in a box one can wear like a purse. As if not to be outdone, Kathy's mother drives her car into a snowbank: 'Right now she's getting an MRI for possibly having had a stroke that she's blaming on *me* because I didn't call her enough when I was getting my surgery. She was worried sick, and so she was staying up all night worried sick, so she wasn't sleeping, so she drove her car into a snowbank [laughing] because I didn't call her [laughing] while I was having my surgery that she was worried sick about. And really now the doctor thinks that it might have been a stroke, so she *is* maybe dying after all...For 35 years my mother has been dying, and now it's finally actually happening, she thinks.'

Kathy lives surrounded by trauma, working at a home for women with mental illness and their children. Like all of Kahn's subjects, language has become a surrogate skin for her – a protective covering for emotional wounds, and a means of regulating traffic between things internal and external to the body. She describes several different treatment approaches that are used at her place of employment when dealing with various types and severities of emotional trauma. She makes passing references to a few patients – the woman who spread shit on her child; the woman who has decided her baby is a rapist – but notes that 'I've learned not to talk about it too much, because it actually hurts the listeners... hearing the anecdotes sometimes damages the people who hear the stories... Some of my clients were, as children, raped by an uncle and all the cousins; given HIV on purpose; gotten pregnant at 12; raped by every member of the family. Children that are broken that severely...it doesn't stop, they just become very broken adults who then are mistreated by the society that we live in – the abuse never stops, it just continues for the rest of their lives.'

Implicit in these discussions is the question of how do we raise our own children? How do we avoid the mistakes our parents made? How do we protect our families from the things that have happened to us?



Throughout the video, we see footage of Kathy's two daughters and Kahn's son growing up over the two-year period of filming. The children – looking happy and well-adjusted – play together, eat, read, and talk to their mothers, with their activities creating a frequent background chatter in the video. Kathy notes that her therapist has challenged her about her use of humour as a defence mechanism, 'a shield from the pain, the deep pain underneath.' 'I said I know that humour can be a defence mechanism, but actually I've been processing my mother for forty years, and I've been angry at her, and I've been really mournful about the fact that she's not really a mother, and I've been really depressed about it, and I've been – I've wanted her to die. I used to lay in bed thinking about somebody coming in and killing her, and I would hear them killing her, and I wouldn't leave my room to save her because it would really be a good thing. But I've kind of moved through that, and really the best thing for me to do at this point is to laugh.'

Kahn's own mother is the subject of *Sandra*. Like Kathy, Sandra is in a current state of stress while also being asked to recall past states of stress. The opening scenes of the video alternate between Sandra describing the ecologically-friendly burial arrangements she has recently mortgaged her home to pay for, and telling the story of a

past boyfriend who stole her .45 pistol and used it to commit armed robbery, and his subsequent arrest and trial. Sandra does not want to be embalmed when she dies and she does not want a coffin. She speaks with seemingly no sensitivity or fear of death. She compares her burial to taking a banana peel out to the compost. She worries the embalming industry will lobby to make the chemically-laden process law: 'You know I feel like I have to hurry up and die and have it happen, because in twenty years who knows?' She brings the same toughness to her humorous telling of the boyfriend's arrest. She laughs when recalling that he cried when the police handcuffed him: 'I'm like Oh my God what a *wuss!* ... Boy he was just a lousy robber. He wasn't any good at it. I said "Why don't you find another craft, this is not for you."'

Sandra describes other robberies the boyfriend committed, and her attempts to fix his messes. She describes her tenure working in the shipyards, including seeing people die on the job. She describes labour union struggles and political protests in which she was arrested. She talks about her first black eye: 'Buffalo threw a pan at me and it hit me in the eye, and I went to work the next day and the foreman said to me "What did you do, say no?"' She describes being an armed revolutionary: 'When we believed in armed struggle; that the

Rockefellers, for example, were not going to redistribute their wealth – we would have to take it. This was many years ago.'

Sandra is clearly capable of pushing through and overcoming hardships in her life. Yet many of the events she describes also happened during Kahn's childhood, though Kahn's presence during these events is often skipped over, or mentioned as an aside: 'Remember the time you kids were in the car and he hit an owl, and he said "Stop the car," and I stopped the car, and he went out and he cut off the owl's feet? And I said "But you don't even know if the owl's dead!" God, that was weird to me.' Kahn interrupts her mother: 'Do you remember what he did with the claw?' Sandra does not remember. Kahn continues: 'He made a pipe. An owl claw holding the burl wood, and then he put a tube in it and he wrapped it with leather and it was a pipe.' This is a brutal and strange event for a child to witness, and Kahn's memory of the event is clearly more vivid than her mother's.

Sandra practices Tai Chi in a park, unaware of a group of young teenagers who are flinging a skateboard back and forth in the background. The children sneak up on her, making fun of her and mimicking her movements. Nonplussed, she engages with the nearest boy, and begins teaching him about what she is doing. Taken off-guard and embarrassed,

the boy spends a few minutes learning. She takes a situation that could have been potentially embarrassing for her and turns it around into an instance of impromptu mothering. The incident enacts some of the same strategies we see implicit in her cool narratives of difficult moments in her life.

What remains unknown, however, in *Sandra* and *Kathy*, is the internal effects that such outward strength might inflict on the psyche. Kahn's patient in *It's Cool, I'm Good* exhibits many of Sandra's and Kathy's same defence mechanisms and humorous deflections of her traumas, but with disastrous effects that we witness as wounds on her body which fester rather than heal. Terrible things happen to us in our lives, and there are of course both constructive mechanisms and destructive mechanisms that we can use to defend ourselves against the fallout from these events. The danger, of course, is that it is so easy to confuse one mechanism for the other. And the problem, Kahn seems to be saying, is that it often takes a lifetime to learn the difference.