

# NO GO BACKS

a film by Stanya Kahn



***No Go Backs*, 33 min, color super 16mm, transferred to 2K Digital video with stereo sound.**

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**TRAILER:** [No Go Backs, trailer, new short film by Stanya Kahn ©2020 on Vimeo](#)



**Log Line:**

Teens leave the city for the wild on an epic journey that becomes an allegory for an entire generation now facing global catastrophe.

**Short Synopsis:**

A visceral 33-minute short film, shot on super 16mm with an original sound-score and no words, *No Go Backs* follows two sets of teenagers who leave the city for the wild, just haphazardly prepared. Featuring the artist's son (Lenny Dodge-Kahn) and his life-long best friend (Elijah Parks) and their friends (Serafina and Marisol Prietto,) *No Go Backs* is a quietly dystopian fiction grounded in real-world relations and the understated but persistent presence of contemporary catastrophes. In the haunted precarity of a collapsed world, the kids travel in

dreamlike states of distraction, malaise, and resilience. They cut an arduous path along sites of California's historic water wars, following the aqueduct north toward its source, through the monumental landscapes of the Eastern Sierra Nevada. Eventually encountering other kids along shared roads—and the prospect of camaraderie in facing the unknown—the film becomes a vision of tenuous survival and the astonishing power of the earth. Completed just a month before lockdown, *No Go Backs* appears as an uncanny premonition and an allegorical epic about an entire generation that must make a new way forward.

**Longer Synopsis:**

A visceral 33-minute short film, shot on super 16mm with an original sound-score and no words, *No Go Backs* follows two sets of teenagers who leave the city for the wild, just haphazardly prepared. Featuring the artist's son (Lenny Dodge-Kahn) and his life-long best friend (Elijah Parks) and their friends (Serafina and Marisol Prietto,) *No Go Backs* is a quietly dystopian fiction grounded in real-world relations and the understated but persistent presence of contemporary catastrophes. In the haunted precarity of a collapsed world, the kids travel in dreamlike states of distraction, malaise, and resilience. They cut an arduous path along sites of California's historic water wars, following the aqueduct north toward its source, through the monumental landscapes of the Eastern Sierra Nevada. Eventually encountering other kids along shared roads—and the prospect of camaraderie in facing the unknown—the film becomes a vision of tenuous survival and the astonishing power of the earth. Completed just a month before lockdown, *No Go Backs* appears as an uncanny premonition and an allegorical epic about an entire generation that must make a new way forward.

As in her earlier works such as *Stand in the Stream*, *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, *Sandra*, *Kathy* and *It's Cool, I'm Good*, Kahn grounds a constructed narrative with real-world relationships in *No Go Backs*. Dream-like, otherworldly— aesthetically informed as much by the rupture of trauma as by the play of time and timing in comedy, literature, music and the sub-conscious—Kahn's film/video practice reflects praxis in the world-at-large. The films—and the processes through which they are made—are imbued with recurring concerns about agency and power, about resistance, rhetoric, and creative refusal. Contributing ideas and even music, the kids were active participants in the creation of *No Go Backs*, at the same time that they were subjects dwarfed by

the film's massive subtexts: issues like capitalism, land occupation, climate collapse and a global rise in authoritarianism.

Working for the first time with 16mm film, Kahn returned to roots in 35 mm photography and a slower approach to recording images. In place of dialogue, Kahn created original music and worked with composers and musicians (Insect Ark, Alexia Riner) adding sampled and diegetic sound as well to build the film's unique aural design. Anchoring *No Go Backs'* melodic themes are Brian Eno's *Sombre Reptiles*, a track from his third album *Another Green World* (1975.) Slowed down, Eno's guitar, urgent and ambivalent like the anxious, languid time of adolescence, moves steadily across insistent percussion, the song becoming a road map for the film's overall score and driving its longest montage. Co-star Elijah Parks also contributes original music as eli.so.drippy. Riffs in homage to Lil Uzi Vert, XXXTentacion, A\$AP Rocky, and Tyler the Creator — who were seminal for the kids during the time in which the film is set — float in and out like audio ghosts signaling to other youth. In a surprise and fortuitous aligning of vision during production, Lil Peep's mother reached out and gave Kahn rights to use a clip of one of the late artist's songs, connecting even more poignant content for the cast, who were coming of age in a world that seemed to be dying, while brand new sounds emerged in the musical innovations of early Sound Cloud rap.

As with all her films, Kahn immersed herself physically, shooting, editing and designing in addition to writing and directing, operating the 16mm film camera (in challenging conditions!) with the help of cinematographer Consuelo Althouse and assistant camera Alisha Mehta. She shot *No Go Backs* primarily with a long lens in order to film from a distance and allow the teens autonomy and space, and to acknowledge that young people inhabit a unique state that can't be fully interpreted from outside. While the world alternately persecutes or ignores teens, while pilfering their inventiveness, Kahn wanted to hold them in view while dialectically sensing what can't be seen. The camera's proximity to its subjects also reflects Kahn's interest in the practice of mutual respect in general: to see and acknowledge difference without invading, assuming to know, or attempting to co-opt. Working without dialogue, Kahn wanted to make a film that could be quietly polemic, to allow the viewer more share of the discourse. Exhausted by daily word streams in the scroll of news and comments, everyone wrestling with position and rhetoric amidst the never-ending real violence of life in late capitalism, she wanted offer a break.

The camera often pauses, lingering to capture the magnitude of the earth. These scenes hope to be generous, offering a slowing of time in which rest, contemplation and self-awareness might occur, along with a sense of releasing the land from our grip. These pictures are also awestruck, and like the long shots of the kids, are enchanted recordings of the endangered.





**CREDITS:**

**WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/EDITOR/SOUND DESIGN:** Stanya Kahn

**STARRING:** Lenny Dodge-Kahn, Elijah Parks, Marisol Prietto, Serafina Prietto

**FEATURING:** Melissa Alonso, John Bello, Alexa Calderon, Dean Campo, Mae-Jean Campo, Angus Frazier-Herndon, Hollis Frazier-Herndon, Aero Greenfield, Ren Greenfield, Stephanie D. Kutsch, Dalia Lundquist, Kayla Parks, Gable Stinson, Kiana Wilson, Tynique Wilson

**MUSIC:** Alexia Riner, Inect Ark, Stanya Kahn, Eli.So.Drippy, Lil Peep, Brian Eno

**CAMERA:** Stanya Kahn and Consuelo Althouse

**ASSISTANT CAMERA:** Simon Gulergun and Alisha Mehta

**PRODUCTION ASSISTANT:** Chester Toye

**COLORIST:** Alexis McCrimmon

**ADDITIONAL FOLEY:** Will Ogilvie

**THANK YOU:** Lucy Zimmerman, Jennifer Lange, Kiersten Puusemp, Michael Light, John Wentworth, Benjamin Weissman, Liza Womack, Hal Kahn, Lenny Dodge-Kahn

Made with the support of the Film/Video Studio Program at the Wexner Center for the Arts and an Emergency Grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Art.

**Writer/Director/Producer:** Stanya Kahn



Stanya Kahn is an interdisciplinary artist working primarily in film and video with a practice that includes drawing, sound, writing, performance, sculpture, and installation. Kahn is a 2012 Guggenheim Fellow in Film and Video. She has written and directed numerous shorts and two feature films, *Don't Go Back to Sleep* (2014), *Stand in the Stream* (2011-2016). Her works shows mainly in galleries, museums and film festivals. Known for using improvisation and candid/real life scenarios in her films, Kahn reconfigures relationships between fiction and document, the real and the hyper-real, narrative time and the synchronic time of impulse.

Kahn's films and videos have shown at Sundance, Slamdance, Migrating Forms, Tell Me: Women Filmmakers/Women's Stories, Transmediale, and other film/video festivals and screenings. Her work shows predominantly in galleries and museums. Recent solo exhibitions include "No Go Backs," The Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH; "Stand in the Stream," MoMA PS1, New York, NY; "I can clearly see yer nuts," The New Museum, New York, NY; "Stand in the Stream," Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City, CA; "Stanya Kahn: Die Laughing," Marlborough Gallery, New York, NY; "Stanya Kahn," Weiss, Berlin, Germany; "Heatstroke," The Pit, Los Angeles, CA; "It's Cool, I'm Good," Cornerhouse, Manchester, UK. Select group exhibitions include The Gwangju Biennial ('18), Gwangju, South Korea; "Edens Edge," The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon," The New Museum, New York, NY; "Laugh-In: Art, Comedy, Performance," Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, La Jolla, CA; "Los Angeles – A Fiction," Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, Norway; California Biennial, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA. Her collaborative work with Harry Dodge has shown at Elizabeth Dee Gallery New York, NY; The 2008 Whitney Biennial, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Sundance Film Festival, Park City, Utah; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; ZKM/Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, among others. She was a contributing writer and actor in feature film *By Hook or By Crook* (2001). Her works is in the collections of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; The Goetz Collection, Munchen, Germany; among others.

## Director's Statement by Stanya Kahn on No Go Backs:

*"Dad says water now costs several times as much as gasoline. But, except for arsonists and the rich, most people have given up buying gasoline...It's a lot hard to give up water."*

—Lauren Olamina, 15, from *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler (1993)<sup>1</sup>

*"To think in film is to deal with the lack of security, of centers, of stable systems of thought. Filmic images call for supplements provided by imaginative minds, by a certain rage against injustice. They call for a conception of history as stories of transient and vulnerable beings, of unsheltered lives, minding the non-famous people and regarding oneself as mortal."*

—Ute Holl on Harun Farocki<sup>2</sup>

I wanted to make a film that was quietly polemic. Exhausted by word streams each day in the scroll of news and comments, all of us wrestling with position and rhetoric amidst what is the never-ending real violence of life in late capitalism, I wanted us to have a break. Full of rage and mind-racing perplexity, I made a slow film of vulnerability, love and fortitude. While this new generation carries a special weight—the earth's own ticking clock and a sweeping global rise in fascism not seen before—history hands down tools to use. Backpacks half full, savvy, and "born under a bad sky," the kids will re-configure the house we've left them.

I wanted to make a story that could linger between the real and the unreal, to offer an immersive mood that viewers could share collectively, through which they could perceive a world with high stakes, loss, difficulty and optimism. I wanted to make a film that would simultaneously use affect and distance to invoke feelings without dictating how, when or why. I wanted to create a kinetic state to inhabit, made from sound and images with no dialogue—psychological and intuitive, dreamlike and where threads of meaning could lace and unlace interdependently, where signals and references could rearrange themselves.

I shot most of the scenes from a distance with a long lens to allow space and autonomy. Teenagers inhabit a unique field of being that can't be fully interpreted from outside. And also the camera's proximity reflects a praxis toward mutual respect in the broader world: to see and acknowledge difference without invading, assuming to know, or attempting to coopt. Long wide shots of the earth are meant to be generous, to allow an expanse in which to consider, float, to be self-aware as a viewer/witness, while releasing the land from our grasp. These shots are also, of course, odes to the planet and a record of the endangered.

The sound is key, of course, as there is no dialogue. Using both natural sounds recorded on-site and sounds made re-worked and created in the studio, I wanted to create an uncanny ambient environment at once organic and industrial. Originally there were small clips of music from a variety artists popular with the kids, embedded as signals mostly only teens would recognize.

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, Octavia, *Parable of the Sower*, New York: Grand Central Publishers. 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Holl, Ute, *e-flux journal*, #59, November 2014. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61118/farocki-s-cinematic-historiography-reconstructing-the-visible/>



Due to licensing costs, most of those had to be cut except for Lil Peep, whose team reached out to me and generously provided the sample without complication. It is rare for me to use long sections of pre-made music but the Brian Eno songs from Another Green World were always in my head making this film and I feel fortunate to have secured the rights. Myself, Alexia Riner and Insect Ark made the rest of the music in a seamless round of collaborative file-sharing. They would send me stems and I would re-arrange, effect, add to them. I am so grateful for these incredible musicians and their openness to working with me in such an unconventional workflow.

*“But for my children, I would  
have them keep their distance  
from the thickening center; corruption  
Never has been compulsory,  
where the cities lie at the monster’s  
feet there are left the mountains.”*

*—from “Shine, Perishing Republic” by Robinson Jeffers, as quoted by Jeffrey St. Clair in Born Under a Bad Sky, Notes From the Dark Side of the Earth<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> St. Clair, Jeffrey, Born Under a Bad Sky: Notes From the Dark Side of the Earth, Oakland: AK Press and Counterpunch. 2008

## Co-cinematographer on No Go Backs: Consuelo Althouse



Consuelo Althouse is a Director of Photography, Artist and Documentarian. Consuelo has lensed narrative features, art installations and documentaries throughout the USA, Europe, Cuba, Japan, Russia, East and South Africa. Her still and motion photography has been screened worldwide. She received her MFA in Cinematography through The American Film Institute Conservatory in Los Angeles, where her thesis was nominated for the Student Academy Award.

In 2017, Consuelo was invited to give a TEDx talk in Valencia, Spain titled "Lensing Trust: A Cinematographer's Perspective."

Recent works include the feature documentary LAND OF THE FREE, which had its North American premiere at the 2017 Telluride Film Festival and earned the CPH:DOX Jury Nordic Doc Award as well as a 2018 Danish Film Academy Award nomination. She is currently shooting two feature documentaries, Crows Are White (dir. Ahsen Nadeem) and a film about Davendra Banhart, which she is also directing.

Originally from in Santa Fe, NM, Consuelo currently works out of and resides in LA.

## NO GO BACKS: Production Stills



No Go Backs, first day of filming, setting up first shot. PA Chester Toye, co-DP Consuelo Althouse, Second Camera Simon Gulergon



Co-stars: Elijah Parks and Lenny Dodge-Kahn





**Consuelo Althouse and Stanya Kahn**



**Alisha Mehta, assistant camera**







**Lenny and Elijah patiently waiting in a snowstorm**



**Alisha checking light**



**Co-stars Marisol and Serafina Prietto**



**Our four stars**





**Stanya shooting**





**Chester taking a break**



**Elijah**





Lenny



Super crew: Simon Gulergun, asst. camera, Consuelo Althouse co-DP, Chester Toye, PA





**Chester and Stanya figuring out some sound**



**Conci on the tundra**



**Simon touching one of the oldest trees on earth**



**Stanya in the lake with cliffs formed 3 million years ago by volcanic ash**





**Conci shooting wildflowers**











**Second production vehicle couldn't make it to this off-road location  
We left the boys and just took the girls to get the shot**











**Directing and filming my own kid was a dream. He cast all his friends in the film.**



**With the kids in the city**



A photograph of two people walking at night. The person on the left is wearing a headlamp that is illuminated, casting a bright light. The person on the right is also wearing a headlamp, which is also illuminated. They are walking on a path with trees and bushes in the background. The sky is dark, and the overall scene is dimly lit.

**Stanya Kahn:**

**No Go Backs**



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**Liz Roberts**

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## Director's Foreword

The Wexner Center is thrilled to premiere the latest project by interdisciplinary artist Stanya Kahn. Launching in the late 1980s, Kahn's practice has evolved from one based in live performance and improvisation to one that incorporates those activities into intricately conceived and edited films. No matter how elaborate those films have become formally, the situations they portray never seem to follow a predictable narrative. In fact, the point of these projects seems to reside in depicting how our lives today are caught between untamable forces. Human frailties, entanglements, and eccentricities are emphasized. The unpredictability and contingency of our surroundings are heightened—as are our attentions as viewers of her works. Kahn captures, in other words, something crucial about the tenor of contemporary existence.

One of the many visiting filmmakers we present each year, Kahn first came to the Wex in 2018 to introduce and discuss *Stand in the Stream* (2011–17)—an epic, intimate project that set home movies depicting her own mother's decline amid rapidly edited footage of online chat-room conversations, street-level political demonstrations, and stunning West Coast mountain ranges. Her new work, *No Go Backs* (2020), was developed with the support of the Wexner Center's Film/Video Studio, which assists production for some two dozen moving-image artists every year. Kahn's film obliquely but powerfully explores climate change, an issue addressed by the teenagers at the center of *No Go Backs* (the cast includes Kahn's own son)—a generation arguably more involved in the issue than elected officials. For this timely and resonant work I thank the artist and echo the acknowledgments of curator Lucy Zimmerman that appear later in this publication, adding my voice to the chorus of appreciation for Jennifer Lange and Alexis McCrimmon from our Film/Video Studio. I also offer my sincere gratitude to our trustees and steadfast sponsors for helping us provide a platform for such uncompromising voices as Kahn's.

**Johanna Burton**  
Director

## Notes from Stanya Kahn



**“Dad says water now costs several times as much as gasoline. But, except for arsonists and the rich, most people have given up buying gasoline ... It's a lot harder to give up water.”**

— LAUREN OLAMINA, 15,  
FROM *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*  
BY OCTAVIA BUTLER<sup>1</sup>

I wanted to make a story that could linger between the real and the unreal, with openings for not-knowing and the offer of an immersive mood viewers could share collectively to perceive a world with high stakes, loss, difficulty, and optimism. I wanted to make a film that would simultaneously use affect and distance to invoke feelings without dictating how, when, or why. I wanted to make a kinetic state from sound and images without dialogue to inhabit—psychological and intuitive, dreamlike, and where threads of meaning could lace and unlace interdependently. Signals and references could rearrange themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishers, 1993), 18.



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— UTE HOLL ON HARUN FAROCKI<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ute Holl, “Farocki's Cinematic Historiography: Reconstructing the Visible,” *e-flux journal*, no. 59 (November 2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61118/farocki-s-cinematic-historiography-reconstructing-the-visible/>.



**“But for my children, I would have them keep their distance from the thickening center; corruption Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the monster's feet there are left the mountains.”**

— FROM “SHINE, PERISHING REPUBLIC”  
BY ROBINSON JEFFERS, AS QUOTED  
BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR IN *BORN UNDER A BAD SKY: NOTES FROM THE DARK SIDE OF THE EARTH*<sup>3</sup>

I wanted to make a film that was quietly polemic. Exhausted by word streams each day in the scroll of news and comments, all of us wrestling with position and rhetoric amidst what is the never-ending real violence of life in late capitalism, I wanted us to have a break. Full of rage and mind-racing perplexity, I made a slow film of vulnerability, love, and fortitude. While this new generation carries a special weight—the earth's own ticking clock and a sweeping global rise in fascism not seen before—history hands down tools. Backpacks half full, savvy, and “born under a bad sky,” the kids will reconfigure the house we've left them.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey St. Clair, *Born Under a Bad Sky: Notes from the Dark Side of the Earth* (Oakland: AK Press and Counterpunch, 2008), 97.



# Road to the Point of No Return



In the midst of my writing this essay, the United States formally announced it would withdraw from the Paris Agreement, pulling crucial support from the first global attempt to curb climate change. A day after that November 4 pronouncement, the news agency Reuters published a further sobering report: of the 184 countries that had signed on to the agreement and pledged to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, only 36 were on track to reach the goal of keeping global warming under 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit above preindustrial levels.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, wildfires rage in California, pollution wreaks havoc on the planet, forests are being cleared rather than cultivated, and extreme weather is forcing climate migration and threatening delicate ecologies and biodiversity. A generation of young people growing up amid this frightening reality is left to wonder about their very survival as they navigate a world where mass shootings, police brutality, political corruption, and human rights violations are also routine.

They've chosen not to be silent, and their voices—filled with angst, anger, but also resolve—have lately been reverberating in my head. This rising tide of youth activists includes 18-year-old Jamie Saraf Margolin, founder of the student-led Zero Hour Movement, who wrote: “We had no power in creating the systems that are destroying our world and futures and yet we are and will be paying the biggest price for the older generations’ recklessness,”<sup>2</sup> and Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, 17, who addressed the United Nations recently with these cutting words: “You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.”<sup>3</sup>

In Stanya Kahn's latest short film, *No Go Backs* (2020), two teenagers leave the city on their bikes, haphazardly prepared for a quick departure. The precariousness of an endangered world haunts the quiet of this wordless film as the teens make their way into the deep wilderness and the earth itself emerges as a towering protagonist. In dreamlike states of adolescent distraction, malaise, and resilience, they cut an arduous path along sites of California's historic water wars amid the Eastern Sierra's monumental valleys, mountains, forests, and tundra.<sup>4</sup> More young people follow them, and their

journey—captured in this compressed, visceral film—becomes an allegorical epic for an entire generation that must make a new way forward.

The film's analogue materiality, Super 16mm film, and its elements of reality (the two main kids are real-life friends: Kahn's son, Lenny Dodge-Kahn, and their lifelong neighbor, Elijah Parks) ground the film in what the artist describes as “a conscious and physicalized imagining of agency and mortality.” The teenagers were active participants in the creation of the film: Lenny served as an invaluable sounding board throughout the process, and Elijah contributed his own original music. Kahn's editing and sound design craft a vision that is at once potent and open. Driven by care, worry, and wonder, she made *No Go Backs* as a gift to young people and an expression of hope for their future.

My introduction to Kahn's work was a video she made with Harry Dodge called *Whacker* (2005).<sup>5</sup> About six-and-a-half minutes in length with no dialogue, the video features a woman (Kahn) on a steep hill in a Los Angeles residential area. She wears a fitted, floral halter dress, Candie's heeled sandals, gold-rimmed aviators, and big hoop earrings. Backlit by the sun, her mane of curly blond hair forms a glowing, albeit unruly, halo around her head. At one point the wind blows her hair into her mouth as she chomps on gum, momentarily distracting her from the task at hand: clearing an unkempt, vacant lot with a Weedwacker. The woman exudes toughness as she digs her high heels into the hillside to secure her footing, looking up to survey her progress with indifference.

In all of Kahn's work, traditional narrative structure and tropes are eschewed. Essential to Kahn as a performer, improvisation remains an important part of her filmmaking. As a strategy for eliciting candid work from her performers, improvisation doubles as a process that demands acute listening and engagement in the world. The viewer is often thrown in at the midpoint of a narrative, during which an uncanny situation—a blend of reality and fiction—plays out. Humor and trauma are themes as well as dialectical tools used to disorient, and as Kahn has noted, blunt images and scenarios of death, disfigurement, or damage bring those watching nearer to that which is difficult to confront or comprehend.<sup>6</sup>

Kahn describes the subjects of her work not as characters, but instead as representatives of states of being. In circumstances that (subjectively) run the gamut from plausible to absurd to delusional, viewers bear witness to human fallibility, to impotency under the abuse of power and systemic injustice, to the body's agency, and to its limitations.

Kahn has made several documentary-style narratives exploring the humor/trauma dialectic, featuring people in her life who live out that symbiotic tension with resilience and charisma. One of them, *Sandra* (2009), is about the artist's mother and transpires as a meandering conversation between mother and daughter, a type of storytelling where one thing leads to another and another. Kahn gathers these strands and redistributes them via editing to both make meaning and question where it lies.<sup>7</sup>

*Sandra* opens to a black screen, and we hear Kahn's voice: “So wait, Mom, let me ask you one more thing.” She wants to know about her mother's end-of-life wishes, but Sandra cuts her off, laughing: “Where's my money? I have no money hidden in the garden!” Her daughter laughs, too, then asks more soberly, “Do you want a funeral?” Her mother outlines her wishes for an ecological burial; she doesn't want to be embalmed and poison the earth. She compares her corpse to a banana peel thrown in a compost bin and urges her daughter not to waste money on an expensive shroud that will go directly into the ground with her. “Take a quilt from my bed or something. Or a sheet,” she implores matter-of-factly. “Wrap me up in that.”

Humor and trauma reshuffle, abut, and overlap in the film, accounting for a life and preparing for a loss. Inserted between explications of burial arrangements are anecdotes from Sandra about her radical politics and experiences as a woman working for nearly two decades in the San Francisco shipyards, about the unions, strikes, unfair wages, and fellow shipyard workers who had accidents and died on the job. Sandra speaks of her long-time boyfriend who was a “lousy robber” and stole the .45 caliber pistol she had disassembled for cleaning one evening. He hid the fact that it was nonfunctional (Sandra indicates he had no idea how to put it back together) and held up a store clerk who had overcharged him for an apple. Sandra helped him get his charges reduced.

Kahn has made a number of other films since *Sandra* but returned to the footage and incorporated segments of it into her film *Stand in the Stream* (2011–17), which evokes her mother's revolutionary activist spirit. *Stand in the Stream* is a pulsating, fast-paced, almost frenzied experimental documentary made of an assemblage of video that was all filmed, recorded, or captured live onscreen by Kahn. The artist describes that the film:

**centers the immediacy of our bodies as we consume the daily image-world and as we are shaped, bent, or broken by capital's flows. It invites us into a world that is at once familiar and uncanny, and asks us to consider ourselves inside it: How do we watch? How do we act? How do we distinguish high stakes from low in a daily digital landscape that threatens to equalize everything in a currency of clips and clicks?**<sup>8</sup>

Amid a torrent of imagery—protests at Standing Rock, LAX, in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, and Cairo's Tahrir Square; passengers riding the subway; video

games; Chatroulette conversations; views of sweeping landscapes and close-ups of birds, bugs, flowers, and dead animals—Sandra Kahn cognitively and physically declines due to complications from Lewy Body dementia.

Sandra dies, and Kahn's son, Lenny, grows up. We see him marching and chanting alongside his mother in the streets at a protest against Donald Trump's inauguration. Kahn adeptly provides openings for interpretation in all her films. To say that *Sandra* and *Stand in the Stream* are exercises and inquiries into bearing witness as a citizen, daughter, parent, and artist to today's maelstrom of injustice and unrest is only one way to frame these works. *No Go Backs* could be read as the third work in an unlikely intergenerational trilogy. The film exists in an unknown temporality that could be now, the near future, or a time only imagined. Its quietude provides space for our own thoughts, our own words, as we try to comprehend the enormity of what we're viewing: our kids running to save themselves and the planet. But if words fail us, there are those of Greta Thunberg. They hold out hope while exhorting us to take action. “The world is waking up,” she warns, “and change is coming.”<sup>9</sup>

**Lucy I. Zimmerman**  
Associate Curator of Exhibitions

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**LUCY ZIMMERMAN:** Thank you, Stanya, for returning to Columbus to share your fierce vision with audiences here; it is truly an honor to premiere this stunning and timely film.

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Sincerest thanks to the following Wex staff involved with various aspects of the exhibition and the production of this guide: Johanna Burton, Megan Cavanaugh, Dave Dickas, Kim Kollman, Debra Lemak, Steve Jones, Mary Abowd, Ryan Shafer, Sylke Krell, Brandon Ballog, Kendall Markley, Dionne Custer Edwards, and Alana Ryder.

Stanya Kahn: *No Go Backs* is organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts and curated by Associate Curator of Exhibitions Lucy I. Zimmerman. Supported by a residency in the center's Film/Video Studio.

## SUPPORT FOR THE WEXNER CENTER



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IMAGES: *No Go Backs*, 2020 (film stills). Super 16mm film transferred to 2K video, 33:30 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Veilmetter Los Angeles. Supported by the Film/Video Studio at the Wexner Center for the Arts. ©2020 Stanya Kahn.

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Gardner, “Scientists Urge Stronger Paris Agreement Pledges to Curb Climate Change,” *Reuters*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-climatechange-targets/scientists-urge-stronger-paris-agreement-pledges-to-curb-climate-change-idUSKBN1XF26I>.

<sup>2</sup> Jamie Saraf Margolin, “Don't Underestimate 17-year-old Climate Change Activist Jamie Saraf Margolin—and Don't Call Her ‘Sweetie,’” *Assembly*, December 19, 2018, <https://assembly.malala.org/stories/jamie-margolin-zero-hour>.

<sup>3</sup> Greta Thunberg, transcript of speech at the UN Climate Action Summit, *National Public Radio*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>.

<sup>4</sup> The water wars were a series of political disputes over water rights between the city of Los Angeles and California's Owens Valley that began in the late 19th century and continue to the present. See Mark Wheeler, “California Scheming,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2002, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/california-scheming-69592006/>.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, *Whacker*, 2005, video, 6:25 mins., [http://ubu.com/film/dodge\\_whacker.html](http://ubu.com/film/dodge_whacker.html).

<sup>6</sup> Anna Gritz, “And I Stop and I Turn and I Go for a Ride: Stanya Kahn and Liz Craft,” *Mousse Magazine*, October–November 2017, <http://moussomagazine.it/stanya-kahn-liz-craft-anna-gritz-2017>.

<sup>7</sup> Stanya Kahn, *Sandra*, 2009, video, 31:04 mins., <https://vimeo.com/208042428>.

<sup>8</sup> Stanya Kahn, artist statement, [http://stanyakahn.com/files/Stand\\_in\\_the\\_Stream\\_statement\\_8\\_16\\_19.pdf](http://stanyakahn.com/files/Stand_in_the_Stream_statement_8_16_19.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Greta Thunberg, speech at U.N. Climate Action Summit, September 23, 2019.



# Another Gaze



By [Gabriella Beckhurst Essays, Reviews](#) August 20, 2020

## Against Inheritance: Stanya Kahn's 'No Go Backs'

Stanya Kahn's latest short film 'No Go Backs' (2020) opens with two teenage boys peeing into the grassy scrub with their backs to the camera as the Sierra Nevada looms large in front of them. A central component of Kahn's recently reopened exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts, the film follows two teenage protagonists played by the artist's son Lenny Dodge-Kahn and his friend and neighbour Elijah Parks as they travel through a California landscape assailed by sun, wind and snow. The teens move out from Los Angeles by bike and on foot via the hollow of the Los Angeles River through historic sites of California's Water Wars, a route that allows Kahn a range of opportunities to scrutinise the symbolic and material power structures that have shaped, if not sabotaged, the region. Touted as a "compressed allegorical epic" about the false inheritance of Generation Z, 'No Go Backs' uses Lenny and Elijah's journey to map, in reverse, the extensive network of diversions that redirected water into Los Angeles for much of the last century, diminishing agricultural prospects in the Owens Valley in the process. The scene where the boys float in the serene waters of Mono Lake conjures boyish larking, but the history of this ancient saline lake is more turbulent; after fifty years of systematic drainage by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, it has only recently been partially restored following an extended activist campaign. Likewise, the Sierra snowpack that acts as a compass to the teens' movements is more than backdrop, given that it is [a barometer of drought in Southern California](#). The current that pulls the film along is thus a study of inheritance both for landscapes inscribed by extractive technologies and for those who wrestle with the legacies, structural and representational, of life turned into conveyable and disposable assets.<sup>[1]</sup>



In the guide that accompanies the exhibition, passages from Robinson Jeffers' 1925 poem 'Shine, Perishing Republic' and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), a work chillingly recognisable in its prognosis of political leadership in the 2020s, introduce the abuses of racist, patriarchal and capitalist systems of governance. Like these bellwether texts, 'No Go Backs' muddies the line between fiction and actual events. When the kids veer off the road into protected wilderness sites such as Red Rock Canyon, it is the shot of a whirling helicopter overhead rather than any calculated dramaturge that reminds us that end-of-the-world fiction

needn't exaggerate present fascisms. Kahn continues with these inferences without drawing conclusive rings around them. Indeed, while the casting of Kahn's son and friend as proxies for Gen Z implies the ways in which such oppressions threaten the futurity of a younger generation, the specific circumstances that have brought Lenny and Elijah out into this landscape of extremes are never explicitly addressed in the film. Their haphazard preparations (revealed to us in a series of flashbacks in which we see them packing meagre provisions in their bedrooms) confirm that the boys are clearly no preppers, just teens who have been forced to think about this stuff. This emphasis on the piecemeal is a welcome departure from the all-out disaster exodus; during these scenes Kahn hones in on scattered figureheads of teenage hero worship – the Thor and Wolverine comic books, the gnarly pro surfer – that stage the aesthetic and cognitive dissonance of a Herculean resolve and its practical enactment. Wexner curator Lucy I. Zimmerman's description of the film as a compressed epic feels fitting here, but where classical tales of strife typically focus on triumphant gains, Kahn gives room to the makeshift ways that a younger generation might plot its own path forward.

Most of 'No Go Backs' is shot with a long-focus lens that instates physical distance between the filmmaker and her protagonists. Kahn uses this method to float a 'praxis' of mutual respect: "to see and acknowledge difference without invading, assuming to know, or attempting to co-opt."<sup>iii</sup> With this, she echoes filmmakers who have theorised distance in relation to their own practice, from Artavazd Peleshian's notion of "distance montage" to Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of speaking nearby rather than for her subjects. In 'No Go Backs', dialogue is absented in favour of the seesawing rushes of a soundtrack to which Lenny and Elijah contributed their own music and ideas. These aural sojourns operate powerfully in the film, with tracks by ELI.SO.DRIPPY, Alexia Riner, Insect Ark, Lil Peep and Brian Eno also scattered throughout. That the sound design shifts the pessimistic mood of postapocalypse to one of gradual possibility feels a significant part of Kahn's direction, as if meant to extend an sonic force field around the teens' passage forward.<sup>iiii</sup>



In its portrait of adolescent refusal, 'No Go Backs' has a sideways relationship to Kahn's *Stand in the Stream* (2011–17), a highly-saturated visual narrative that tracks the call to resistance between public and private spaces of participation. Unlike *Stand in the Stream*, which considers how certain moments gain a foothold in the informatic deluge of the internet, 'No Go Backs' is characterised by a thirst for transformation not yet pinned down in words. This likely explains why the teenagers are hard to read throughout, almost entirely opaque to viewers as subjects, but not to each other. As we scramble to rationalise some of the teens' decisions, they are always one step ahead, actively bringing about their future: shade sought out in the dry dust, seeds swiped from a dusty general store or the 'thirsty fruit' Elijah just about keeps alive. Throughout Kahn forms contemporary layers over historic land contestations: the boys travel by bikes instead of carts, northbound rather than along the southerly inroads formed by westward expansionism during the 19th century; they carry plastic water bottles that must be constantly replenished and skate the dusty half-pipe of the Los Angeles River over which surface waters scantily flow. Albeit subtly, 'No Go Backs' never loses sight of the fact that scarcity has been purposefully etched into this landscape.

Lenny and Elijah can only get so far on swiped Gatorade and corndogs, however, and eventually we see them beginning to cultivate their new world, even catching hares by hand. If Kahn's sequencing could be read as an pastoralising of non-urban regions, particularly for 'detached' city kids seeking reconnection, she confronts us with images that evoke the ways in which wild country has become a fractious metonym for the good life imagined elsewhere. Are the stuffed toys littering an abandoned weatherboard any more authentically 'found' than the sleek desert cabin the kids find unlocked? Kahn also refrains from overly romanticising the harshness of the Sierras, instead drawing the viewer into the pitfalls of idealised rusticity imposed when evoking nature as something stable and free-standing. That 'No Go Backs' has been read as [a postapocalyptic vision](#) isn't surprising given the disaster aesthetics it dabbles in. The symbol of the road is at its centre, typically configured as a confrontational site of survival in works like

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as well as the aforementioned *Parable of the Sower*. Yet 'No Go Backs' occupies its own space in the genre. The boys neither return to their warm beds by the end of the film nor are ravaged by exposure; here the unmooring performed by the road, whereby there is "no happy resolution, and certainly no return home",<sup>[iv]</sup> pushes us into territory that is difficult to recognise. The survival imperative of 'No Go Backs' should be understood within the present global swell of authoritarianism, but it is not concerned with its strident opposition in the form of energetic youth climate activists. Kahn makes no assumptions about a generation's response. Lenny and Elijah eventually do make contact with other kids who have similarly abandoned cities they had no hand in building, but when two other teenagers appear at the end of the dirt road, the pair's reactions are tentative, suggesting the desire for an alternative communality rather than automatic solidarity.

Given the film's Odyssean stylings, we might then interpret 'No Go Backs''s focus on teenagers improvising their way forward as intended to convey the situation of a generation largely disbarred from 'adult' conversations about life ahead at the same time as having their understanding of difficulty routinely patronised. For a generation that has grown up with widely-circulated images of racialised brutality and political corruption, violence is part of the normative schema of everyday life; as Kahn recently put it: "they're in it, they know it's an apocalyptic state".<sup>[v]</sup> The muted resolve of 'No Go Backs' needs to be seen within a context laden with inherited responsibility. And it is here that Kahn is most accountable: If she is practically unable to safeguard their futures as a parent, as a filmmaker she can give the teenagers space to propose their own version of events. She can, and does, resist the metastasising despair that dystopias ordinarily promise. Not going back, then, taps into something of the enduring premise of Butler's dystopic epic about camaraderie as essential to survival. The tenderness of Lenny and Elijah's friendship is the film's central motif but it is also its most elusive. When one warms the other's feet under their jumper against the biting cold it is impossible to determine the extent of Kahn's direction. Moments like this point to the stakes of making a film about generational legacies

without purporting to fix them, and so ‘No Go Backs’ is its most vital when we view the film as the suggestion that sometimes stepping aside is better than passing the buck.

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**Gabriella Beckhurst** is a London-based writer, researcher and PhD candidate at the University of York, where they work on artists’ moving image, photography and performance at the intersection of queer, feminist and environmental politics.

<sup>[1]</sup> On California’s water-marketing coalition see Mike Davis, ‘Water pirates and the infinite suburb’, in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 7:2, 1996, 81–84. <sup>[2]</sup> Stanya Kahn, ‘Notes from Stanya Kahn’, Wexner Center for the Arts, 27 January 2020: <https://wexarts.org/read-watch-listen/notes-stanya-kahn>. <sup>[3]</sup> See Artavazd Peleshian, ‘Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance’, trans. Julia Vassilieva, *LOLA*, 6: Distances, December 2015 (based on Pelechian’s *Moe Kino* (Erevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1988); and Scott MacDonald, ‘Going the Distance: An interview with the Armenian master Artavazd Peleshian’, published on *Moving Image Source*, Museum of the Moving Image, New York, 6 January 2012: <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/going-the-distance-20120106>. <sup>[4]</sup> Helen J. Burgess and Jeanne Hamming, *Highways of the Mind* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 127. <sup>[5]</sup> Zoom Q&A with Stanya Kahn and Wexner curators, Lucy I. Zimmerman and Jennifer Lange, 13 May 2020.

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# Art in America

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## TEENS WANDER A POSTAPOCALYPTIC WORLD IN STANYA KAHN'S NEW FILM

By [Travis Diehl](#)

May 14, 2020 12:26am



[Stanya Kahn](#)'s film *No Go Backs* (2020)—streaming on [Vielmetter Los Angeles](#)'s [website](#) through May 15—opens with a majestic, symmetrical shot of two teenage boys standing in the desert under a hazy sky, peeing into the scrub. For the first portion of the film, they appear to be the only people left alive in the world. They bike through a seemingly depopulated California, undertaking a journey that loosely traces, in reverse, the course of the aqueduct system that delivers water down to Los Angeles from the Sierras. They shelter in the shadow of sandstone spires. Conspicuously, they never speak. Instead, the narrative—if you can call it that—is driven by their desultory migration and the things they find along the way. They search abandoned structures, small buildings that, stripped to their studs, are barely buildings. They try on fake fur coats in a trashed homesteader cabin. One of the protagonists drags a fireplace poker out of the rubble covering the floor. Was there

even a fireplace? Was this ever a home?

Kahn has frequently portrayed contemporary civilization as a wasteland of images and objects in her work—which includes performances and photographs in addition to films—but *No Go Backs* may be her starkest, most atmospheric treatment of the theme to date. Her earlier films tended toward a humorous, even slapstick, feel. In them, loquacious characters, usually played by the artist herself, often wander the margins of LA, delivering monologues prompted by the abandoned or abject things they encounter. In a 2008 film Kahn made in collaboration with Harry Dodge, *All Together Now*, her character discovers a pair of dead kittens in an alley. She buries them, carrying out a tender ritual that alludes to the larger human project of making meaning out of the senseless. In the 2006 *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out*, also made with Dodge, Kahn's character happens upon a pile of ash sitting against a singed stucco wall. "Look, a person burned. Zoom in on that, man," she says, addressing the camera. "It's like some guy was just standing there, and then he burned. That kind of stuff happens." It does—and the greater truth, as Kahn suggests throughout her body of work, is that all of civilization consists of the singed remains of obscure past events.



In *No Go Backs*, the adults who made whatever mess the protagonists have found themselves in are gone, along with their ambitions, and the boys are too stunned, wary, or ill-equipped to pick up the plot that got aborted. Halfway through the film, other teenagers emerge, apparently following the same path as the boys. Their movement out of the city, along the Los Angeles River, against its flow, counters the expectation of progress their forebears had. Their escape route recalls the young misfits' path in Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), moving from civilization's discontents toward the dirty, splendid freedom of nature. In Kahn's film, however, the landscape is presented in a deadpan manner, unidealized and just *there*—a monotonous desert or tedious forest that you simply move through.



In fact, while a strong sense of nostalgia runs through *No Go Backs*, the longing does not appear to be for some vague return to nature. Flashbacks pepper the film: the boys skateboarding in a driveway, visiting a food truck. One of the protagonists is played by Kahn's son, and in one flashback we see this character sitting in his bedroom, with a photo on the wall of Kahn holding him as a child. The film's nostalgia, in the end, is for the world that we live in today, the one we seem determined to destroy.





Stanya Kahn: *No Go Backs*, 2020, super 16 mm film transferred to video, 33 minutes, 30 seconds. COURTESY VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES



## A Surreal and Eerie Look at Los Angeles Over the Past Decade

In Stanya Kahn's earlier films, Los Angeles seems ready to spark a revolution at any moment. But in the newest adventure, the urban sprawl creeps into the inhabitants' states of mind, and everything languishes.



Stanya Kahn, "No Go Backs" (2020), video still, 16mm film transferred to 2k video (color, sound), 33:13 minutes (all images © 2020 Stanya Kahn, courtesy the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles)

LOS ANGELES — In Stanya Kahn's newest film, *No Go Backs* (2020), two teenagers journey from sunbaked Los Angeles to the snowy Eastern Sierra Mountains. They take their mountain bikes across dry, concrete river beds and fiery poppy fields; they explore abandoned desert homes, and trespass into pristine, Airbnb-ready living rooms. The boys take an aimless path, the search for water their only driving momentum through the bleached, desaturated desert.

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA) presents a trio of Kahn's films in the exhibition *Stanya Kahn: No Go Backs*, which runs through January. In addition to the world premiere of *No Go Backs*, curator Jamillah James complements the film with *Stand in the Stream*, filmed between 2011 and 2017, and *It's Cool, I'm Good* (2010). The films capture Los Angeles

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[vielmetter.com](http://vielmetter.com)

throughout the last decade, a landscape that remains consistently familiar even as civil rights, climate change, and Kahn's personal relationships rapidly evolve.

Known primarily for her work in video, Kahn has used Los Angeles as a backdrop for at least a decade. Between her solo work and collaborations with Harry Dodge, Kahn has depicted the city as an eerie wasteland where people wander from boarded-up convenience stores to the blinding desert, all settings for her to reveal visceral discomforts and emotional trauma. She softens the subject matter with comedy, absurdity, and surrealism, often playing the role of the tramp, drifting from one slice of desert rat life to another.



Stanya Kahn, "No Go Backs" (2020), video still, 16mm film transferred to 2k video (color, sound), 33:13 minutes

All three films at the ICA dwell on injury, decay, and decline. In *It's Cool, I'm Good*, Kahn plays a protagonist recovering from a mysterious injury. Her head is completely covered in bandages and her hands, tightly bound in gauze, are clubs. Kahn hobbles to the beach, flies swarming her back, ready to feast. At a food stand, she tries to bite into a corn dog despite her lip being taped back and fragile teeth. She brushes off the state of her body with self-deprecating humor, "Do I look like the Invisible Man?"





Stanya Kahn, "It's Cool, I'm Good" (2010), video still, SD video (color, 5.1 sound), 35:25 minutes

*Stand in the Stream* is less irreverent and more gut-wrenching. Kahn documents her mother's last years alive, and over the six years of filming, her mother declines from a passionate storyteller to a gaunt figure in a hospice bed. An activist and union electrician, Kahn breaks up the film by kindling her mother's spirit of revolution, interspersing footage from the riots in Ferguson and of water protectors in Standing Rock, all juxtaposed against the Trump presidency.



Stanya Kahn, "Stand in the Stream" (2011–17), video still, HD digital video (color, sound), 60:50 minutes



But while *Stand in the Stream* and *It's Cool, I'm Good* operate with a sense of urgency, the teenagers in *No Go Backs* are ambivalent, restless, and bored. They take the scenic route, backfloat in a swimming hole, and laze against towering rock formations while watching a vulture glide in the air, searching for scraps. They live in a world without responsibility, awaiting future homes that are abandoned, scorched from forest fires. In Kahn's earlier films, Los Angeles seems static-charged, ready to spark into revolution or flames at any moment. But in the newest adventure, the insurmountable urban sprawl creeps into the inhabitants' states of mind, and everything languishes; there's too much ground to cover, too much time to kill, and not enough activity to spin into a distraction.



Stanya Kahn, "No Go Backs" (2020), video still, 16mm film transferred to 2k video (color, sound), 33:13 minutes

But Kahn's films are not without optimism. They show that building a community can stave off the malaise. Hope springs from a cluster of teenagers biking across the Los Angeles River, Kahn holding intimate conversations with strangers on the online platform Chatroulette, or her mummified body lumbering through the city asking passersby to help her pick up a corndog. In Kahn's world, we experience bleakness together, and that means we'll collectively discover joy.

Stanya Kahn: No Go Backs, curated by Jamillah James, continues at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1717 E 7th St, Downtown, Los Angeles) through January 10, 2021. The museum is open by appointment.

## Stanya Kahn's Communication Breakdown

At the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the artist's trio of short films explores the boundaries of language



Stanya Kahn's current outing at ICA Los Angeles consists of just three filmic works produced over a ten-year span. Anyone hoping to grapple with a greater breadth of the artist's considerable output, will have to wait. That said, the curatorial choices here are pointed and vividly bring to life the artist's core themes. Foremost among these is an abiding concern with the problem of language – that part of communication which structures human experience and renders it meaningful, yet by the same token can serve to limit, and even undermine existence as such. All three videos would seem to take their cue from an acute premonition of communication breakdown, which is seen to rebound, with mounting force, between continually marginalized human actants.





Stanya

Kahn, *It's Cool, I'm Good*, 2010, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Vielmetter, Los Angeles  
Working chronologically, we start with *It's Cool, I'm Good* (2010), which features Kahn as a convalescing patient just released from hospital with amply bandaged head, hands and leg, hobbling about LA on crutches. This near-mummified figure maintains a disjointed monologue throughout her perambulations, occasionally engaging passersby in baffling conversation, while, on all sides, disaster looms. Periodic cutaway shots frame various details of natural blight and a length of yellow tape drawn across a crime scene, while circulating patrol cars and helicopters intrude all around.

The connective thread between impaired self-expression and social crisis, only intimated here, is thrown into sharp relief in the epic *Stand in the Stream* (2011–17), a work that correlates, through Kahn's characteristically fractured yet fluid exercise of montage, her family's private battles with Alzheimer's disease with incidents of a more generalized, collective turmoil. In scenes of heart-rending, though staunchly unsentimental, home-movie *verité*, we observe the artist's grandmother and mother succumb, in turn, to dementia. 'I don't know where those words go to when they slip around up there', says the latter at one point. Meanwhile, as if by way of answer, Kahn's camera keeps pivoting toward her computer screen, which features news reports from the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the 2016 US presidential election, and the Ferguson uprisings sparked by the 2014 police murder of Michael Brown, attended by an exponentially multiplying torrent of media chatter. However, the

relentlessly disquieting tone of these proceedings undergoes radical tempering in the artist's latest video, *No Go Backs* (2020). Here, the action unfolds without a single word spoken.



Stanya Kahn, *No Go*

*Backs*, 2020, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Vielmetter, Los Angeles

A kind of ambient fairy tale, *No Go Backs* follows its two teenage protagonists – played by Kahn's son, Lenny, and his lifelong friend, Elijah Parks – as they venture out, beyond the watchful eyes of parents and the control mechanisms of urban life, into the depths of the natural world. Mostly, however, we see them simply at play or at rest: throwing snowballs, floating in streams, exploring abandoned cabins, huddling close together in sleep. Pretty much every resource still available to those without income is seized upon by these two, which lends the film a decidedly Edenic aspect.

What stands out, above all, is the boys' sense of intimate and easy-going racial equality (Lenny is white; Elijah is Black), which serves to foreground current civil unrest in the US precisely by glossing over it. Accordingly, any hope the film prompts that 'the kids will work it out' is instantly met with the implied rebuke: 'Isn't it a shame they need to?' In its climactic finale, to a soundtrack of Brian Eno's 'Another Green World' (1975), droves of skateboarders convene around the LA river. If some fantasy of regained innocence is being played out here, it steers clear of any *nostalgie de la boue* rhetoric of



primal communion. Rather, it begins with muting – a step back toward the embodied communication of the silent film as an autonomous zone, temporarily safe from forked tongues.

*'Stanya Kahn: No Go Backs' at ICA Los Angeles runs until 10 January 2021.*

*Main image: Stanya Kahn, No Go Backs, (video still), 2020, 16mm film transferred to 2k video (color, sound), TRT 33:13 min. Courtesy: the artist and*

*Vielmetter, Los Angeles*



# Portfolio by Stanya Kahn

*Pressurized states of being and strategies of survival.*



Still from Stanya Kahn, *No Go Backs*, 2020, color digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.

Stanya Kahn has always been politically engaged. Recently, on her Twitter and Instagram accounts, she has consistently posted and reshared vital information for people protesting police murder, brutality, and structural racism. Moreover, she and her son Lenny were out in the streets of LA protesting after the murder of George Floyd; and they, like many of the other protestors, were physically and mentally vulnerable in the face of a militarized police force.





Still from Stanya Kahn, *No Go Backs*, 2020, color digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.



Still from Stanya Kahn, *No Go Backs*, 2020, color digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.

Kahn generously allowed me to watch her new short film *No Go Backs* (2020) in her studio months before quarantine and the renewed call to defund the police. The film, which stars Lenny and his friend Elijah, is grand in scale and in its emotional heft, with no dialogue and only a haunting soundscore. Kahn follows the teenagers as they make their way through bleak and beautiful California landscapes—“Man” or “boys” against the elements—and trace a terrain pockmarked by more than a century of conflicts over water. Sometimes masked—as if perhaps they have fled a pandemic or have gone

incognito against a surveillance state—the boys’ epic journey is heavy with the weight of whatever they have left, while never pointing directly to it.

For me, a start to defining the politics of *No Go Backs* might be that every reviewer has forgotten or neglected the fact that Kahn is invisibly on this journey with Lenny and Elijah. She too is hot, cold, sore, bug-bitten, optimistic, bloodied, exposed, aware of the privilege of movement, and only partially protected by the camera. This kind of emotional and visual simultaneity is characteristic of all of Kahn’s work, most notably *Stand in the Stream* (2011–17), a documentary filmic collage of recent activist movements that also follows the deteriorating health of Kahn’s activist mother



Still from Stanya Kahn, *It's Cool, I'm Good*, 2010, color digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.



Still from Stanya Kahn, *It's Cool, I'm Good*, 2010, color digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.

In *It's Cool, I'm Good* (2010), we do see Kahn's wounds, though in this case they are fictionalized, and we do not know their source. Kahn, entombed in bandages, braces, and oozing prosthetics, clumsily (but charmingly perhaps) hits on her various nurses. At one point, the camera lingers on Kahn's exposed back covered in flies, as if she were already a carcass. Her intermixing of footage of police responding to some unknown crime on the ground and in the ubiquitous helicopters overhead suggests that any erotics associated with Los Angeles—freedom, hot lesbians everywhere, a yard, a car that can take you out of town, flirting in a desolate Wienerschnitzel parking lot, a liberal utopia—are bandaged, encased by airborne spotlights and Ford Crown Victorias. Those agents of motion, these agents of violence, as we have seen, as Kahn and Lenny saw firsthand, are as much a part of any portrait of Los Angeles as the land and the sunset.

—William J. Simmons





Stanya Kahn, *Alexa Play Fuck the Police*, 2019, ink and gesso on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.



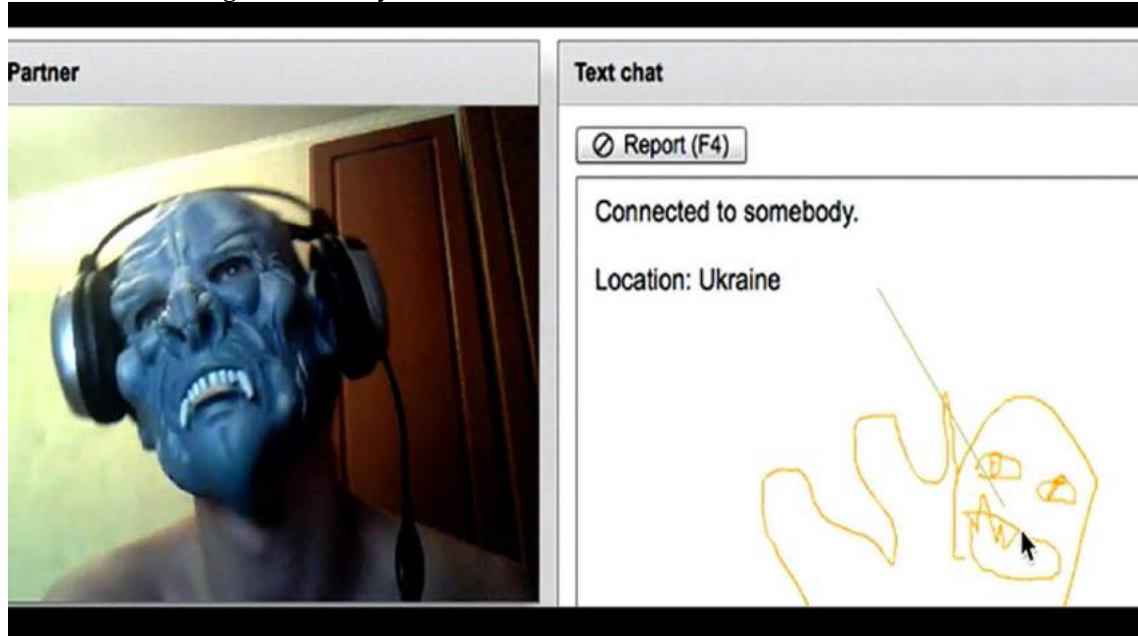
Stanya Kahn, *Besmirch and Destroy*, 2019, ink and gesso on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.

Stanya Kahn responds:

There's a way all three works are connected. They're each sort of dreamlike narratives with critical issues embedded inside them, from the more metaphoric *It's Cool, I'm Good*, in which a severely injured protagonist traverses the traumatized geography of LA, to the more dense, kaleidoscopic docufiction *Stand in the Stream*, shot over the course of six years and following shifts in political movements, digital landscapes, the raising of a son, and the death of a mother. All of them invoke pressurized states of being and strategies of survival, which is clearly what I'm most obsessed with. Ha, ha.



Still from Stanya Kahn, *Stand in the Stream*, 2011–17, color digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.



Still from Stanya Kahn, *Stand in the Stream*, 2011–17, color digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Stanya Kahn.

*No Go Backs* could be a quiet sequel to *Stand in the Stream*, and also circles back to *It's Cool, I'm Good*, albeit with less punk rock humor. Where *Stand in the Stream* shows us the state, capitalism, and resistance movements in vivid detail, *No Go Backs* lets the viewer assume those conditions as givens. Vulnerability, power, and resilience in the face of death or collapse run through all three films, set within the massive power (and increasing vulnerability) of the earth itself. And now the kids carry it forward.

[Stanya Kahn: No Go Backs](#) is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles until January 10.

*William J. Simmons is a writer and curator based in Los Angeles and New York.*





