

A dark, atmospheric photograph of two people walking at night. The person on the left is wearing a headlamp, and the person on the right is holding a flashlight. The background is a dark, hazy landscape with some foliage. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

Stanya Kahn:

No Go Backs

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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 BUTLER¹

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.

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



“To think in film is to deal with a 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 FAROCKI²

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 co-opt. The camera often pauses to try to capture the magnitude of the earth. These scenes are meant to be generous, a slow-down in which a person could consider, float, become self-aware as a witness, while releasing the land from our grasp. These shots are also, of course, odes to the planet and a record of the endangered.

² 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*³

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.

³ 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.¹ 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,”² 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.”³

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.⁴ 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).⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷

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?⁸

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.”⁹

Lucy I. Zimmerman
Associate Curator of Exhibitions

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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.

Debuting *No Go Backs* in Columbus would not have been possible without the Wex Film/Video Studio. I cannot begin to express how appreciative I am of Film/Video Studio Curator Jennifer Lange and Studio Editor Alexis McCrimmon for their unflagging support. I feel very fortunate to have such talented, dedicated individuals as colleagues, comrades, and co-conspirators.

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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.

¹ 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>.

² 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>.

³ 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>.

⁴ 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/>.

⁵ Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, *Whacker*, 2005, video, 6:25 mins., http://ubu.com/film/dodge_whacker.html.

⁶ 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>.

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

⁸ Stanya Kahn, artist statement, http://stanyakahn.com/files/Stand_in_the_Stream_statement_8_16_19.pdf

⁹ Greta Thunberg, speech at U.N. Climate Action Summit, September 23, 2019.

