

Stanya Kahn, left, and Harry Dodge in Los Angeles. Their new video, the 26-minute "All Together Now," will be screened at the Park Avenue Armory as part of the off-site programming for the Whitney Biennial.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

PARK AVENUE ARMORY
Park Avenue at 67th Street. The video is to be screened on March 17 at 7 p.m. as part of the Whitney Biennial; (800) 944-8639, whitney.org.



J. EMILIO FLORES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Unsettling, in a Funny Sort of Way

By JORI FINKEL

LOS ANGELES

ONCE the screen went black and the applause died down, the chorus of questions began. "Where did you get all the dead animal footage?" one viewer asked. Another asked, "Those blue people in the basement, what are they called?"

This was not your usual question-and-answer session after a film screening. The video artists Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn had invited friends and collaborators to their home in the Highland Park neighborhood to see the final cut of their new work, "All Together Now," which makes its official debut on March 17 in New York.

In the past they have hung a large muslin sheet in their backyard for such screenings. This time, because of rainy weather, these artists decided to take the show inside Ms. Kahn's studio, a former garage behind the house.

What they screened might be described as their most ambitious work to date, a 26-minute piece that took the better part of nine months to complete. It is also their most disturbing work, dispensing with dialogue and taking place in a burnt-out, post-urban version of Los Angeles.

It opens with Ms. Kahn, face bloodied and hair wild, bludgeoning something in a bush. The "blue people" who soon appear (wearing blue hoods over their faces, Ku Klux Klan style) prove surprisingly chummy, working on tasks like chopping wood together. But the imagery is unsettling enough that one guest that night, Julia Bryan-Wilson, said she was planning to add the work to her syllabus for a course at the University of California, Irvine, on the apocalypse in contemporary art.

This video will be screened at the Park Avenue Armory as part of the off-site programming for the Whitney Biennial. The artists' 2006 work "Can't Swallow It, Can't



Spit It Out" will play on a loop at the Whitney Museum of American Art. And "California Video," an exhibition opening on March 15 at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, will include two of their earlier pieces, "Let the Good Times Roll" from 2004 and "Whacker" from 2005.

Yet what promises to be an important year for the couple professionally is also a challenging one personally. After almost 10 years together, including a wedding ceremony and the birth of their son, the two separated last fall. Ms. Dodge, who was born Harriet but now goes by Harry and says she does not identify as "either male or female particularly," has moved a few blocks away from Ms. Kahn. They said they are "co-parenting" their 3-year-old son and plan to continue collaborating artistically too.

The two first met in 1993 in San Francisco, where they were both part of a low-rent, do-it-yourself, identity-obsessed and

queer-inspired performance scene. Ms. Kahn was in a solo show at 848 Community Space, when Ms. Dodge — a co-founder of a cafe-theater called the Bearded Lady — came to see her.

"She was so embodied," Ms. Dodge said. "One of the things I love is when a performance is so authentic and/or vulnerable that it pierces the skin, the air, the things that mediate between people. It has to do with finding energy in the moment, responding to the right now, the skin of right now, in a way that creates this massive spark or electricity. That was there the first time I saw Stanya perform."

More recently their goal has been to bring some of that electricity — the energy of live, intimate and improvised performance — into video art, offering an alternative to the slick production values of, say, a Matthew Barney. They began working together after moving to Los Angeles, by way of New York, in 2001.

Their first short, "Winner," features Ms. Kahn as Lois, a struggling artist who has just won a cruise through a radio call-in contest and is expected to give the cameraman who has tracked her down one good sound bite about how excited she is. Only it emerges that she was actually calling in to request a song, has no intention of taking the cruise and would much rather show him and his audience her lumpy sculptures, stored in the trunk of her car.

"Winner" was shot in a day, with video and sound editing finished within a week. It established the standard division of labor between Ms. Kahn, who typically performs, and Ms. Dodge, who typically serves as the male cameraman, staying out of sight but within earshot in a way that he too becomes a character. Otherwise, the two share usually share responsibilities, from costuming and concept development to video and sound editing.

Like many of their pieces "Winner" was largely improvised. "We had this idea of a guy doing an interview with a lady who kept sculpture in her car," Ms. Dodge said. "But it wasn't until we drove up to the parking lot to start shooting that we figured out he was from a radio station."

That the main character doesn't know what's coming next (she can't, for example, remember the call letters of the radio station) is perceptible, creating moments of real suspense and comic resolution. (Lively editing helps.)

"I don't mean in any way to compare our work to Andy Kaufman's," said Ms. Kahn. "But there's something Kaufmanesque about this desire to empty yourself out and put anything you want in that space."

The character of Lois returns in "Let the Good Times Roll." This time she sits in a hotel room in the desert, telling the loopy

story of a sex- and drug-fueled night that culminated in her receiving an Ecstasy enema. Glenn Phillips, a contemporary art curator at the Getty who picked it for the "California Video" survey, said it was the first piece he had seen by these artists. He has been finding ways to show it ever since.

"For starters, it's just hilarious," he said. "And I'm also interested in the way that humor for them is the mask for more philosophical ideas": whether it's an exploration of mind/body duality, the perils of social conformity, or the struggle of one individual to connect with another.

Or, as Ms. Kahn put it: "Entertainment is a way in for us. Our pieces end up not fully fitting any specific genres, but we have deep affinities to traditional entertainment, from vaudeville songs and dances to sketches, jokes, and stand-up comedy, from narrative filmmaking to live rock 'n' roll performances."

Mr. Phillips has also included their video "Whacker," which falls somewhere between punk performance and theater of the absurd, in the Getty exhibition. Seven minutes long, it features Ms. Kahn buzzing her way through an overgrown hill with an electric weed cutter. By the time she is done, if she is ever done, new weeds will surely have grown in her wake.

"It's about the feral — the persistence of the weeds, the wild grass that insists on growing," Ms. Dodge said.

Ms. Kahn added, "And a woman who is as tenacious as the weeds."

The artists' early videos made the rounds at indie film festivals before finding a home in the art world in 2006, when the New York dealer Elizabeth Dee gave them their first solo show. That was the first public screening of "Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out," which the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles included in its exhibition "Eden's Edge" last year and the Whitney also tapped for the coming Biennial.

Shamim Momin, one of the Biennial's curators, said she imagined that "Can't Swallow It" could become the "sleeper hit" of the show. "We chose it because it was their most resolved piece," she said, "in terms of pacing, dialogue, rhythm of the dialogue." She also said she hopes it will resonate with other pieces in the show that share "a sort of oblique or embedded politics, where the artist is responding to a sociopolitical situation without holding a protest sign."

The artists have described "Can't Swallow It," made during the third year of war in Iraq, as their "portrait of civilian anxiety in a time of war." Ms. Kahn plays a character they call the Valkyrie who wears a Viking helmet and carries a large foam wedge of Swiss cheese through a blighted Los Angeles landscape. Ms. Dodge is the videographer who follows her around, recording her paranoid imaginings, or memories.

Ms. Dodge said the concept grew out of a fascination with the uses of video today. "We always look at who is taking video, and ask ourselves why. And one function is the citizen watch, the idea that you can



STILLS COURTESY OF HARRY DODGE, STANYA KAHN AND ELIZABETH DEE

From top, a scene from the video "All Together Now"; "Let the Good Times Roll," from 2004; "Whacker," from 2005; and "Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out," from 2006, which will play on a loop at the Whitney Museum.

shoot something like the Rodney King video and change the world." So they came up with the idea of a cameraman perched outside a hospital who wants to capture some abuse of political power and finds the Viking character instead.

The artists warned against taking the character too literally. "We haven't resolved it," Ms. Kahn said. "Maybe she works at a local theme park or maybe she's homeless." There's also the "hazy possibility," the artists once wrote, that she is actually a Valkyrie who ushers the spirits of slain heroes to Valhalla.

This kind of ambiguity is amplified in their new work, "All Together Now," in which the characters' identities are anything but clear. Formlessness competes with narrative, noise vies with music and there are those obfuscating hoods in blue and white. The blue hoods are blank. The white hoods have crude faces drawn on them with tape.

Ms. Dodge described the hoods, which they have used on occasion before, as part of a larger experiment. "What is a performance without language? Without a face?" she asked.

This direction could be risky, considering the praise critics have lavished on Ms. Kahn's inventive storytelling in the past. "Harry and Stanya could have kept making narrative works without any lag in their career," Mr. Phillips said. "But here they are purging themselves of almost everything that people have found interesting — language, a certain kind of expressiveness."

It's hard to forget that the artists' relationship was disintegrating while the piece was being made. "Where I see sadness and darkness in the work, it's on a personal level for me," Ms. Kahn said.

But both said they see something hopeful in the video as well.

Ms. Kahn's character appears to live off the land, whether running river water through a siphon or dragging a plant root through her teeth. She sees foraging as a model for their creative process for this video, which was low on budget and high on resourcefulness. (For the animal scenes they made use of local roadkill.)

And "All Together Now" does offer a particular vision of kinship in the aftermath of society. The hooded people, however voiceless and faceless, work together like families. And you see still-hoodless children — including shots of Ms. Kahn and Ms. Dodge's son, Lenny — playing in the sand.

"Some people have said this is about a new kind of love," Ms. Dodge said. "I hope it is about that."

ONLINE: VIDEO

An excerpt from "Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out":
nytimes.com/design

Two artists work to bring the energy of live, intimate and improvised performance to video.