

BOMB

BY MICHAEL SMITH

NUMBER 108 / SUMMER 2009

BOMB

HARRY DODGE & STANYA KAHN



The problem with most time-based work is that it takes time to watch. Years of television did not prepare me for viewing video art. But every so often, I see something that holds my attention and interest. Together, Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn have produced a group of funny, poignant, and sometimes quite disturbing videos that continue to engage me, even after repeated viewings. They are like intimate day-in-the-life portraits of mythical fringe characters wandering through segments of a magazine-format TV show.

Both Dodge and Kahn have backgrounds in performance, where they honed their improvisation skills before live audiences. A similar process shapes their videos and imbues them with a charged fragility, not unlike witnessing a vulnerable stand-up comic work the room. In their scenes filled with wall-to-wall talking, it's not always apparent how much the material has been edited and carefully reworked. But when viewed together with the videos emphasizing sound effects instead of conversation, one senses an incredible amount of time logged, both in the editing room and in their behind-the-scenes partnership, with a lot of back-and-forth, discussion, and lots of silence fueling their rich, layered narratives.

I met Harry and Stanya around 2002 at Bard College, when they started making videotapes together. They were partners back then, both earning their MFAs. At the time of our interview in Los Angeles, they were on hiatus, and working on their own projects. I'm pretty sure neither of them was getting ready for the next upcoming sitcom season. While editing this piece I was reminded of characters inhabiting their videos; neurotic people doing pedestrian things like waiting, walking, talking, paying the rent, or videotaping; individuals, alone and together, figuring out how to negotiate their place in the world.

—Michael Smith

Michael Smith: I have a feeling the community you come from is very different from the art context in which I first saw your work.

Stanya Kahn: We met in 1992 in San Francisco, where there isn't really a big, ubiquitous art machine. People created clubs in basements and there were a lot of fly-by-night spaces. It was a self-sustaining ecosystem of low-rent studio spaces and performance venues. That made it possible to have your main source of information and "training" happen in a community, as opposed to coming out of art school and tracking right into a gallery.

MS: When I arrived in New York in the mid-'70s there was an active downtown scene that operated like a vast network. There was public funding and artists opened a variety of small spaces, giving the scene the appearance of a big alternative machine, even though many spaces were lofts and storefronts where people also lived. In the '80s, there was a shift: venues became more specialized. I floated around, gravitating to where there was support. As funding to individuals dried up, spaces supporting dance and more theatrical work were able to hold on, but raw, process-oriented performance and video suffered.

Harry Dodge: I had almost no contact with broader culture except to protest it. The performance space I ran with some others called Red Dora's Bearded Lady Coffeehouse

and Cabaret was opened just as Macy's was trying to use ACT UP's SILENCE = DEATH slogan as a way to sell motorcycle jackets. Our goal was to achieve a sense of artistic excellence, whatever we thought that was. It's not that we just wanted to go out and entertain friends, even though there was a lot of that—Stanya and I share an interest in comedy, so we were drawn to each other's work and to being in communication with an audience.

SK: I would just jump in and add—

MS: —You guys are doing very well about not jumping in on each other.

SK: I'm really trying! I would add that there was an elaborate network of communities in San Francisco who were pointedly interested in developing a language to talk about being outside systems of legitimization. Some of the people who I learned to do performance and dancing and stuff with were also anarchists. They were running basement printing presses and record labels, being hardcore frontline activists, doing civil disobedience, and all kinds of sabotage. None of those things was disconnected. So the first performances I did were with big groups of people that amounted to protest—illegal occupations of public territory. I was cultivating relationships with people who were actively interested in being in a conversation that opposed what they saw as the establishment. And at that time, in our minds, the art

world was absolutely part of the establishment.

MS: It wasn't until the early '90s—with economic collapse and an incredible amount of AIDS-related death—that activism and identity politics entered the art world. Then the art market put language around it and figured out how to package it. You entered into the art world in the early 2000s, at a time when it was exploding. What were your expectations?

HD: What's your understanding of how it was exploding?

MS: Just in terms of money. Was it exploding in terms of ideas? I doubt it. (*laughter*) I wanted to talk about your community because I know from personal experience how the reward systems are very different in distinct communities. One doesn't normally differentiate between a performance art world and a video art world, but as long as I can remember neither video nor performance artists made money through art, so they must have been getting some kind of support.

SK: For me, live performance transitioned into making video, and I feel like I'm still fully living in both worlds. Moving through time and space across the screen is barely marketable in the art world. The relationships that have been the most significant for me, in the art context, have been with writers and other artists. That's been awesome. We don't necessarily experience a heavy market as videomakers—

HD: (*diabolical laughter*)

MS: What a shock!

HD: The move to video was a surprise, a revelation. I started a feature film right when the words "independent film" were blowing up. I thought I could get money directing and use the money to make more experimental stuff, like Cassavetes. I was not only naïve, I had energy to blow. But that industry is wrong-minded; I felt uninterested in commercial viability and the film industry's conventions. If I was going to have a good life, I was going to need to find a way to sell the stuff I really wanted to make.

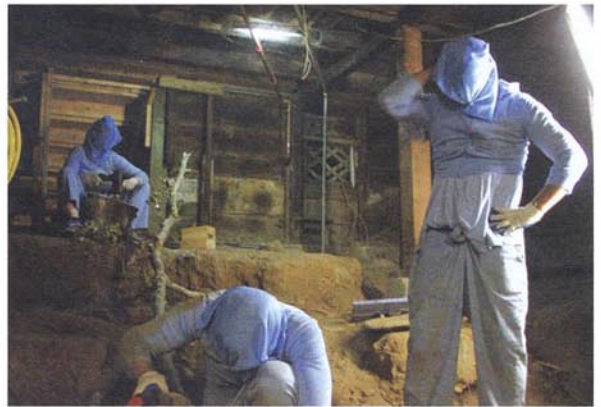
MS: I remember when I first started performing and used "avant-garde" as an adjective. I didn't understand the history and I wrote a ridiculous press release about doing "avant-garde humor." This critic really took me to task, and my immediate response was, Asshole! Now I have a better understanding of what avant-garde means. He was right.

SK: It was a spotty sense of history that made me feel like I needed to diverge from my insular San Francisco network. I moved to New York because I realized that my mode of working was stuck in some black-and-white thinking: there was an outside and an inside and that was that.

MS: It's interesting, then, that you deal with so much ambiguity in your work.

HD: Even though both of us were deeply passionate about our community in San Francisco, neither of us created work that was didactic in spirit or form. We shared the desire to twist issues, to address them obliquely, to traffic in gray areas or in-betweeness.

SK: Performance in particular was a form in which I felt I could expand past rhetoric. I was doing heavy academics as an undergrad and then filtering all this information through the body into kinetics, images, and language that was freed up from having to adhere to stable references.



HD: Here's a paradox: I felt like in our most recent piece, *All Together Now*, I gave myself permission to communicate with people who were already interested in art. I wasn't acting as a liaison to art haters, like I sometimes have.

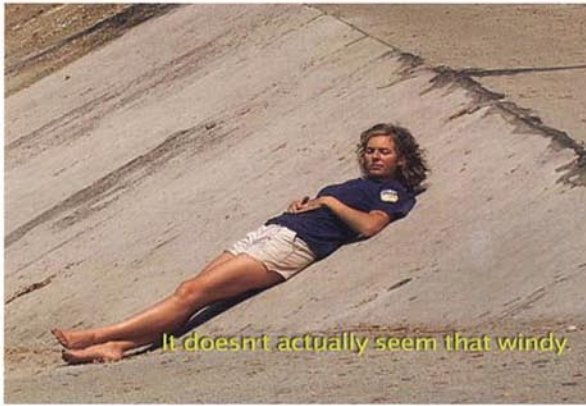
MS: That one had more of a narrative flow that I think people could relate to. They may be baffled or disturbed by the ambiance of the whole thing, but the structure seems relatable.

SK: That's funny, Harry is saying the opposite.

HD: You see that piece as more narrative than the others? Maybe it's our use of some conventional film grammar: shot, countershot, composition, light. As we edited, we wrested ourselves from an obligation to make bridges to audiences that weren't art audiences. We thought, It doesn't matter if this is entertaining, if it gets long and dry; this is how we want it to be.

MS: I guess what I mean is that one could look at it like a film. There's a stream-of-consciousness humor in the shorter pieces that *All Together Now* doesn't have. When I saw it I could imagine you guys working with a tight storyboard to develop the tone of the piece.

SK: That dovetails into a conversation about working



with the conventions of language and storytelling. People taking things literally when they're intended as abstraction is an ongoing challenge for us. I'm curious about how to make things understood the way I meant them to be. The word "character" comes up a lot; like for the Valkyrie in *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out*. It's a word that I don't assign to what I'm doing. I experience it more as a complex of symbols, experiences, and actions.

MS: What I really respond to in your videos is place: neutral spaces. Is it home or just some brown interior? There are a couple instances where people are in a motel room or just a totally generic empty space filled up by language, filled up by their personalities. Maybe you don't assign the word "character" to what you're doing, but I'm sorry, I see them as characters. Even if they are hooded, quiet, or ranting.

HD: That could be a semantic issue. The "characters" first exist as ideas. I'm glad you mentioned location. In *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out* it was a clear decision to have architectural spaces as functional cues—references, like characters.

SK: One of the things that's been exciting for me is finding ways to put the body in particular spaces to point to a broader set of social meanings. And then to mediate that meaning, performatively. In other words, it's not just this character standing in front of the dam. It's citizens next to infrastructure.

MS: It's a complicated organizational problem you guys must come up against, especially with so much improvisation during production. You've got these locations and storylines, and you fill them with jokes, sounds, or action. The question becomes how much to leave in during postproduction. Maybe this is a way for me to understand what you mean when you talk about abstraction. In the process of editing out an incredible amount, you leave a trace or hint of something, like a dam representing not only a place, but possibly a policy. I think my favorite tape of yours is *Whacker*. It just kind of *happens*: this ambient

portrait of a tough, kind of proud woman. Much of what is heard and seen in the background both defines and complicates what is going on in the foreground, not so much *who* she is but what she is doing and why.

SK: *Whacker* is a good example of asking with a performative scenario whether we can use literal references to create a *poetic* address of how we experience ourselves in this world. I never want people to just stop their interpretations at what *literally happens* in a scene.

HD: Mike's work does the same thing. Your props, costumes, sets, even the way you move your face, Mike. It all reads as symbolic or substitutive, like you're not intending realism or an escapist lapse into narrative entertainment. You're using all kinds of narrative conventions, but it's in those resistances and subversions that the message is sent out. I want to keep people on their toes but to also offer little gifts and pleasures—to engage without allowing passivity.

MS: Stanya, you were saying you don't like the idea of character or overt symbolism, and still you're using a mythic character like a Valkyrie, which allows the viewer to draw connections. Lois, this marginal fuckup in *Let the Good Times Roll* develops some sort of relationship with Dave, who, by the way, is *creepy*. (laughter) Him constantly lurking, always controlling the camera, is really unsettling.

SK: When I'm rebuffing the word "character" I'm rebuffing the self-distancing process implied by the traditional theatrical reading of that word. I see "character" as a metaphorical space, a state of being for myself.

MS: Is there a connection between all the characters? Is it actually one character and sometimes they're just having a better hair day? (laughter)

SK: You could say that they're one impulse. Maybe not one—they're a set of recurring impulses. A combination of social anxiety, personal melancholy, and this unending cycle of exuberance and enthusiasm for finding ways out of those things.

HD: This is what reminds me of your work, Mike.

MS: Yup, you'll find those conditions and feelings in my work. Can't seem to get away from it. Maybe now I'll be able to get more mileage with more of the same, with this recession.

HD: It doesn't seem like a stretch to insist that each thing in a film also functions on a metaphorical level, that there is a text and a subtext. If you're insisting that there

not even be a text, I could buy that, and that might be a weirder proposition. Another thing that occurs to me about the impulse of the personifications is that they have to do with concretizations of exuberance on the margin. A way to wield power without actually having it, to bombard a space with so much truth that power is the result. So while Lois is always saying, "Well, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know," she's also keeping the camera on her for hours. That's power.

MS: All of these characters have insightful moments—dignity, too.

SK: I've been reading Brian Massumi. He's a contemporary philosopher who's influenced by post-autonomia Italian anarchism. He describes this idea of being abducted by the moment: instead of trying to capture a moment with knowing and naming and concrete things, allowing yourself to be captured by the moment and to understand it experientially first.

HD: We've talked about that a great deal—working with the *is* of a moment, its present tense—how to find it, use it, hop on like a magic carpet.

MS: It really goes hand in hand with the idea of improvisation.

SK: That's why what he was saying resonated so much with me. Now capital has gotten into our every moment.

MS: That's my iPhone. (*laughter*) I don't know how to use it yet. I'm never sure if I'm getting a phone call, a text, or a low battery warning.

SK: That's what I'm saying. We have these hefty little wafers that come into our personal spaces. Our identities are constructed on where we go online, which products we plug into. It seems like we have no power left because capital has figured out how to move with our every physical potential. But Massumi says individuals can have power by being abducted by the moment and retracing it. Live the language and find a different way out.

HD: It's like a portrait of this force.

SK: Spaces that are undetermined and moments inside of power.

MS: I want to talk about inside versus outside. In *Let the Good Times Roll* there's all this improvisation that goes on between Lois, the camera, and Dave, the camera guy. It was interesting to see how their relationship changes with location. Once they were inside, they established a connection and it felt like we were outside, looking in on them, while also watching Lois through the lens of Dave's camera. The improvisation in your videos is really great: talking,

talking, talking, filling up space, busy, busy, busy. The outside eye records silently.

HD: There are also references to surveillance in *All Together Now*. But, there are also references to a more conventional film eye.

MS: I was on the plane coming here viewing your work, and the attendant came by and said, "What are you watching, looks interesting." To avoid a complicated conversation, I just said, "Video art." Recently I was on another flight and this guy across the aisle from me was watching a medical operation. I couldn't believe it—a gory operation, (*laughter*) something gynecological.

SK: Whoa.

MS: No flight attendant asked what he was watching. That says something about your work.

SK: Yeah, "video art" still doesn't explain it to people.

MS: I happen to come from a generation of artists that was interested in reaching people; people who grew up with the same cultural references as me. In fact, I thought I noticed an Elmer Fudd reference in your work.

SK: Really?

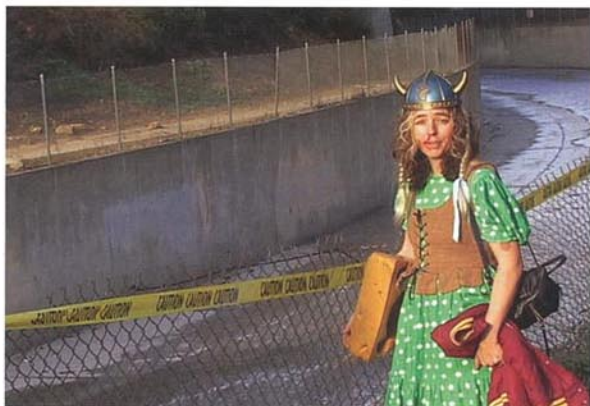
MS: Yeah, with the horns. You mean you weren't quoting when the Valkyrie was reading the poem in front of the hospital?

SK: No, that's an actual Viking Valkyrie poem translated from Old Norse, which doesn't even exist anymore.

HD: That shit is ancient.

MS: And channeled through Elmer Fudd?

SK: That's a really good reference point. There's a *Looney Tunes* episode where Elmer chases Bugs into the city from the country, but there are no cars around, just massive, mammoth buildings. And then they run into the theater, and perform, right? So Bugs puts on the helmet and braids to perform the opera, but there's no audience except for the pursuing Elmer, who of course becomes completely smitten. I love that it all takes place in an emptied-out city. Here, infrastructure is a ghost of power, leaving the toil of human desire in the foreground. In some ways we're like Elmer and Bugs, performing and engaging in this space where there's a question of whether a spectator is there or not. We're going to show the piece to the people, but during the process they're not there. So there's this cycling of energy between us—two people generating language and stories and trying to make meaning.



HD: *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out* was kind of a personification of a postheroic impotence about artmaking. It was a video question: what's possible if you're just hanging around with your video camera? We're specifically interested in making a character out of the camera eye. We announce the current of camera, its presence in the present.

MS: I thought it was great how you're waiting for something to happen.

SK: And the Valkyrie kind of ridicules it: "Oh, you mean like a Rodney King thing?" We're consciously—if trashily—borrowing from both cinema and video art and trying to make a third space, with the camera always in the frame, so to speak.

MS: The Bugs Bunny cartoon space? *(laughter)*

SK: No. Yes! As characters, I relate to them. Daffy Duck was deeply influential to me—the way he was struggling in every frame. Just really hard. Tons of stress right next to total enthusiasm; just full-on power, a willingness to do almost anything. At the same time, he's close to a nervous breakdown.

HD: Technology forms our performances as well. There was a lot of stationary camera at the beginning. Now with



the camera in the computer and all these kids and people all over the planet doing performances in their rooms, there's a different kind of film grammar.

SK: Also in *All Together Now* we had people holding cameras, viewing themselves and each other. There wasn't only surveillance but also self-regard. Sometimes I think it didn't quite do the things we wanted, which were to talk about people's relationship to technology, whether it's the little camera in your computer or the way people represent themselves on Facebook and MySpace, with a picture—people almost don't live without self-representation in image form anymore.

MS: By the way, I didn't mind being manipulated by the scene at the end of *All Together Now*. I was touched seeing these little kids dressed in white, looking innocent and pure, adding a little sense of hope to the piece.

SK: That's been a criticism of *All Together Now*. We struggled with its sentimentality while we were cutting it. Those kids are also wearing psychedelic flowered shirts, I just want to add.

MS: Very stylish ones.

SK: All the characters are stylish. Check out those blue

I WAS ON THE PLANE COMING HERE VIEWING YOUR WORK, AND THE ATTENDANT CAME BY AND SAID, "WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING, LOOKS INTERESTING." TO AVOID A COMPLICATED CONVERSATION, I JUST SAID, "VIDEO ART."

peeps. Check out the foragers in their jeans and purple shirts. Style is part of the strategy to upend something. Style is inherently cynical in some ways, and the willingness to go there is a little cheeky on our parts, in an intentional way. It says we are participating in a certain sign system like fashion and aren't pretending there's a way around it. And by doing so, we hopefully keep this distancing effect.

HD: One of the choices for understanding *All Together Now* was as a portrait of an organism. The foragers were supposed to be the lymph, the circulation. And then there were these generators—the builders, the people with the white masks—they were the red blood cells. The blue people were the annihilators, the break-it-downers, the fragmenters. The whole thing can be thought of as a portrait of fecundity.

SK: The white people were constantly filtering, like a bacterial fungus or something. So you could tease out this biological metaphor as a super-efficient system. Or you could look at it more literally as a community model, which is interdependent but mutually autonomous. Cells of people interacting, nonhierarchically.

MS: This brings us back to talking about collaboration. You're always presented as a duo, with Stanya in front of the camera and Harry behind it.

SK: I'll tell you, a pressure we've had to actively resist is having the focal point be either the performer or the person behind the camera. We've really pushed against those ways of delineating.

HD: We both perform, direct, write, find moments, unpeel the videos. And so much is done in editing, where we both labor a lot.

MS: I had a long history of doing solo work and because of this, became the face of many projects. You must have done a good job making it clear to the people showing the work that you were a team.

HD: We came to videomaking mainly through the lens of being performers. We acquired tools like camera skills and editing only when we realized we needed them.

MS: Maybe that accounts for your unique eye, especially for place. I came to video through TV, so I think of it as a fixed thing.

SK: We're coming to video not from the spectator looking at a proscenium space, but from the performer needing that space to be fully expanded—so that anything could happen. My own performative practice was steeped in

improvisation, and that means if people didn't think the joke was funny I had to pull something out of my ass that second to shift the energy. That's what's so different about television. Performance is a live body experience, and you're constantly recalibrating yourself to be in a relationship with other psyches in the room. You have to be in multiple states of mind at once: you're remembering your text, you're remembering your dance steps, here comes the song, but, uh-oh—those guys look a little stiff in the front row. So let me throw them a little something to get this jiving.

MS: We really work from very different places. I think one reason you captured people's attention so immediately is that there aren't a lot of good performers in the art context. In general, art audiences are incredibly open to unintentionally sloppy performances, with references and humor so inside that sometimes I feel like I haven't been invited to the party. You're really good at what you do and understand that it takes more than an idea to present something before an audience. You're also incredibly funny.

SK: Thanks, Mike. You are, too. A good collaboration has personal chemistry. Every now and then you find a person whom you feel not only understood by, but whom you can also make meaning with. The choices in our videos are specific, at least for me, to the social and chemical relationship we have with each other. Humor especially relies so much on shared understandings, especially jokes steeped in concept and language.

MS: In *Nature Demo* I can feel you trying to till this thing and get it going. I liked it. How about the scenes with you sleeping? I wasn't sure if you were giving up or attempting to become one with the embankment.

SK: That was me being tired and laying on the ground while we figured out the shot.

HD: We don't just shoot life and then edit it, though. It all comes out of a moment reserved for generating performative video. Yeah, we tape a lot but it's very crafted and prompted and repeated.

SK: Or it's like, I'm hungry, let's get donuts, but the camera is still running. So, in fact, I ordered donuts, but I was the Valkyrie.

MS: Did you eat all those donuts?

SK: I was really hungry. And I enjoy donuts.

MS: Impressive, lots of icing.

HD: Creating an energized moment is one thing, but then you have to somehow take it back to the editing studio and reinvigorate the moment with your editing choices. So the basic chunks of our process come from live performance, but are then filtered to death through this lens.

SK: Which is, ironically, the polar opposite of live performance, where everything is real, everything's authentic. Trying to reinvigorate the flat space of video and the moving picture involves a bunch of artifice in editing ... adding tons of sounds that were never there. The irony is that we try to recreate the feeling of live performance through massive artifice, sometimes removing all of the naturally recorded sound from the tape and rebuilding the entire thing from fake sound.

HD: Twenty layers of sound.

MS: Your soundtracks are great.

SK: There are birds chirping, there's a foot moving through dirt, a rock scraping. And time completely changes. Editing creates the timing; if you cut a gesture a second before the hand completes it, it's more interesting than if you let it flow.

HD: At first, when we started using jump-cuts, I thought, We're really fucking with convention; this is going to be totally disjointed. We wanted to make a smooth monologue, and we *did*, and no one knew that there were twenty edits in one minute of dialogue. If you do them right, edits disappear. I think that's really magical.

SK: Editing can actually be closer to the way a mind works. People are constantly making millions of edits in their minds, thinking about and looking at multiple things at once.

HD: Maybe the edit carves out that space of ambiguity or in-betweenness.

MS: I'm a little more elemental and concrete. Speaking of which, I've been thinking about brick-wall comedy lately. That lone figure in front of a wall, working the room, looking for one little nibble to play off and develop. Not so different from Lois in an empty space, yammering on and on, looking for her comfort zone as she makes sense of her surroundings. Going to comedy clubs was very important for me before I first started performing, especially in the early '70s in relation to the performance art scene. On one hand, you had the comedy club, a minimal setting with one lone comic desperately trying to fill it with laughter, and on the other, the white cube filled with gestures, actions, and/or language by artists examining their relationship to the audience and context. I know both of you were very much influenced by certain

comedians. Carlin, especially, right? Harry, you seem to share a certain body language; I see a connection.

HD: George Carlin is a huge influence. Mine ran from Liza Minnelli to Steve Martin to Gilda Radner.

SK: I'm always resisting making the list of the names, only because I always leave people out. Jerry Lewis, Madeline Kahn, Richard Pryor, Gene Wilder, Carol Burnett, the Second City Theatre, the whole first *Saturday Night Live* cast, Buster Keaton. See, this is why I don't do the list.

HD: I liked Bette Midler a lot—her nose and that she could sing so well. She was smooth on stage, a natural. I wanted to be that way. She was also foul-mouthed, which I still like in a person. It's important to swear and say ass-licker when you can fit it in.

MS: I worked in clubs a lot in the '80s. Only once did I do an open mic at a comedy club in New York. The late '70s. It was horrible. I did two minutes of my baby character. As they say in the biz, I was dying when the MC got up and said, "Looks like that baby ate too many paint chips," and without missing a beat said, "Now put your hands together for the next act!" Ugh. Did you ever perform in comedy clubs?

SK: Once, in New York. It was in this little shithole comedy club in the East Village called Mars Bar. I didn't come from the comedy context of performing. Comedy can be formulaic and I was too weird for it. But some comics did the things that I'm the most interested in as an artmaker, things with language and gesture, the device of the joke, pulling up the corner of the rug and showing the shit underneath.

MS: How about you, Harry, did you ever perform standup?

HD: I tried a couple of times. It was just insistence and absurdity—it was a no-go.

SK: That's partly why improvisation was so important for me; sitting around and thinking up jokes was such a frustrating process. The funniest things were when I could just respond in the moment.

HD: Weirder, bulkier, unexpected humor.

SK: Lately I've been listening to a lot of comedy records, and the thing that's blowing my mind is how I can listen to these records—all on vinyl—and just be dying laughing. I can't even see the guy. It's the delivery, and it's so beautiful. People who can pull that off on record, people who can *talk*—Lenny Bruce, Steve Martin, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin—I'm so moved by that; I'm really interested in what can happen in audio space.