

Jeff Preiss

‘Orchard Documents‘

03.03. – 21.04.2023

Clementin Seedorf, Cologne

„Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of „Green?“ How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color.“

*Stan Brakhage: „Metaphors on Vision“*

‘Orchard Documents‘ (2005–08) presents nine films made by Jeff Preiss. Eight will be shown at the gallery and one will be screened at Odeon cinema in Cologne later today. ‘Orchard Documents‘ are films made in and around the existence of the gallery Orchard in New York Preiss founded in 2005 together with Rhea Anastas, Moyra Davey, Andrea Fraser, Nicolás Guagnini, Gareth James, Christian Philipp Müller, R.H. Quaytman, Bennett Simpson, Karin Schneider, Jason Simon and John Yancy Jr., out of political despair after George W. Bush’s reelection in 2004. The gallery was only intended to last for three years from 2005 until 2008. It had a strong programmatic focus on political and conceptual practices. Its founders primary concern was to explore the relation of historical moments of artistic critique and politicization and its contemporary circumstances. The only condition set as “a rule” was a refusal to mount solo exhibitions.

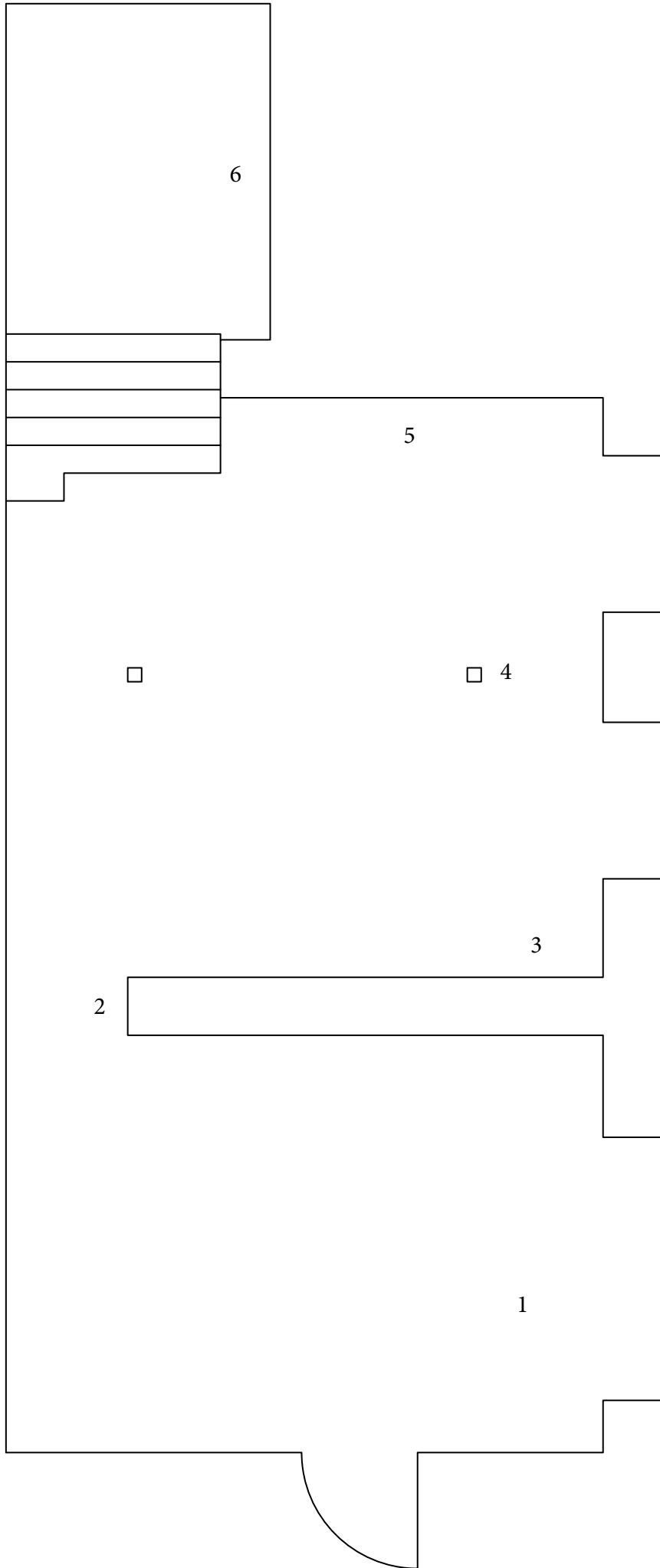
From the start it was Preiss’s intention to use Orchard as a studio and to document its three year course of existence with his Bolex camera. Out of this came a suite of films, mostly made in collaboration with other Orchard members, each concerned with the layers of what could be clinically documented and the phenomenologically intangible. He shows us performances like Andrea Fraser’s „May I Help You?“ or Anthony McCall producing a drawing as if it were a structural film. Preiss films fellow Orchard member Nicolás Guagnini convulsing on the floor as he practices a technique of Reichian therapy, he records a performance of Christian Phillip Müller leading a neighborhood tour in dialog with his selection of photographs by Zoe Leonard and Petra Wunderlich depicting the area’s vanishing shops and synagogues, all while underscoring this social activity with his personal filmic diary. In one of the ‘Orchard Documents‘ he collaborates with Moyra Davey by inviting their two kids to make a film in the gallery where they pretend to get drunk, dance and trash talk the work on display selected by their parents.

Preiss filmed this and all the mundane events of the day with a consistent apparatus-like left to right pan-rotation, encouraging an almost textual read of the space as a social relation. He manages not only to document different artistic activities as a means of archiving critical practices, but also to create moments of dizzying immersion. When he films Fraser performing ‘May I Help You?’ her monologue is not only directed towards the gallery visitors and the future film audience, but also to the abstract space produced by montage itself. He achieves this through his camera, which treats objects and people as moving forms, never fixed, but created through the relations changing between them. We are witnessing not only a recording of Orchard but are seeing the actual construction of Orchard through the physical relation of its members.

What we learn from this is not a complete overview of the activities of Orchard; we are not seeing a distanced, objective reportage, but rather a document of the communal relations fundamental in the production of artworks and the organization of the space itself. What Preiss is able to show is that Orchard functioned as an alternative model in multiple ways: it was a studio and a cinema, a site for exhibition and a place to conspire, a social nexus that was genuinely open.

While Preiss acknowledges the work of Stan Brakhage as a primary inspiration there is something diametrically opposite in their formal framework. Brakhage imagined a first person vision of infinite optical nuance, whereas Preiss sees cinema as parallel to the mode of projection whereby we form our identity through the imagination of being seen. By modeling these psychic loops, he records the relations of production and the interpersonal relations which made such activities possible in the first place. In this way Preiss not only transfers historical artistic approaches which self-reflexively critique the relations of production of art and the value creation within its market structures, but lets us actually experience alternative models of production and exhibition-making through the autonomous psychic space of cinema.

*Emma Bieck*



- 1 „Orchard Document: May I Help You?“ with Andrea Fraser (Text 1991) (2005), 14 min  
16mm to digital media  
  
„Orchard Document: Spring-Wound“ (2005–08), 109 min  
16mm to digital media  
  
„Orchard Document: Discharge“ with Nicolás Guagnini (2005–06), 8 min  
16mm to digital media
- 2 „Orchard Document: High school am over/gin crash“ with Moyra Davey, Barney Simon and Isaac Preiss (2008), 28 min  
Webcam to MiniDV
- 3 „Orchard Document: Five Minute Drawing“, with Anthony McCall“ (2008), 7 min  
HD video
- 4 „Orchard Document: Around the Corner“ with Christian Philipp Müller (2006), 112 min  
16mm to digital media
- 5 „Orchard Document: Light Club“ with Josiah McElheny (2008), 70 min  
16mm to digital media
- 6 „14 STANDARD 8mm REELS 1981-1988  
for...  
Zeena Parkins  
Leslie Thornton  
Peter Hutton  
Rebecca Quaytman  
Henry Hills  
Nayland Blake  
Saul Levine  
Abigail Child  
Chino Garcia  
Sharon Garbe  
Bob Fleischner  
Andy Minsker  
Bruce Weber  
Chet Baker  
Warren Sonbert“(2019), 88 min  
8mm to digital media

*Jeff Preiss interviewed by Saim Demircan, originally published by frieze online on January 13, 2022. Demircan included Preiss' 'Orchard Documents' (2005–08) in the group show 'Exhibition as Image' at 80WSE, New York, USA between November 16, 2021, and February 20, 2022.*

Saim Demircan: You were one of the founding members of the co-operatively run Orchard gallery along with Rhea Anastas, Moyra Davey, Andrea Fraser, Nicolás Guagnini, Gareth James, Christian Philipp Müller, R.H. Quaytman, Karin Schneider, Jason Simon and John Yancy, Jr. Started in New York in 2005, the gallery was programmed so that each member presented an exhibition of their own work and organized a show. As a filmmaker, you documented a number of these exhibitions in collaboration with other members for your 'Orchard Documents' (2005–08). How premeditated were these works when the gallery began?

Jeff Preiss: From the outset, Orchard was meant to serve more than one purpose. The idea of opening a gallery was actually the second or third to come out of a group formed in despair over [US President] George W. Bush's re-election in 2004. We set up an LLC called Art Sales and Services (or ASS) to hold the lease to 47 Orchard Street. My first intention was to use it as a studio and to film the space itself. The 'Orchard Documents' developed from this initial concept.

SD: The first works you made were Orchard Document: May I Help You? (Text 1991) (2005), with Fraser, and Orchard Document: Discharge (2005–06) with Guagnini, which were both filmed during the gallery's inaugural show.

JP: That exhibition included Andrea's performance May I Help You? (1991/2005), for which she welcomed every visitor as the gallerist, entrapping them in a lengthy monologue. She performed every day for a week, and I filmed her in short, silent bursts on 16mm with my Bolex. At the same time, I happened to be employed on a commercial project and had access to a 16mm studio camera, which I could use for sync sound. So, I borrowed that and some proper sound gear to make a movie of the performance. I consider it an 'Orchard Document' mainly because of the way it maps the space, but I was also working against the idea of an objective document by constructing an obviously false continuum in the edit. We shot sync sound with a small crew on the last full day of the exhibition.

SD: What's remarkable is the extent to which it reveals the level of acting in Fraser's performance. Yet, despite it being a composite of performances, the synched sound renders them indistinguishable from one another.

JP: Later that same evening, I filmed Nicolás undergoing Reichian therapy, which is designed to produce intense, unfiltered emotion. The idea of shooting such a private aspect of Nicolás's treatment came out of our discussion about the relationship between the language of film and the psyche. The exercise involves a phenomenological equivalent to camera panning: a back-and-forth eye movement and simultaneous rhythmic breathing that effects visual perception, flipping what's seen as subjective and what's fixed ground. Somehow, this reversal allows negative feelings to be discharged: in Nicolás's case, it was anguish. Although this film and Andrea's document could be seen as oppositional to one another, they eventually formed a triptych with my own Orchard Document: Spring-Wound (2005–08), which I placed between them for my show, 'Spring Wound', Orchard's closing exhibition in 2008.

SD: Orchard Document: Spring-Wound consists of 16mm footage that you filmed between 2005 and 2008. How did you develop this?

JP: The idea behind Spring-Wound was to observe the duration of Orchard. Because we had a three-year lease coinciding with the remainder of Bush's second term, this gave the project a time limit. I had just finished a film commissioned by the architect Rem Koolhaas (33 Chronological Sequences Spanning Four Trips to the Site of the Netherlands Embassy in Berlin, 2004) and had been working on the temporal and spatial particularities of camera pans, describing architectural volumes by relentlessly cutting between opposing camera movements that tracked the interior and exterior of the building in question. At the same time, I was keeping a personal diary of 16mm home movies. So, I set out to continue with both and eventually distil all the right-left-right pans that I had taken between the time I first set foot in 47 Orchard Street and the last time we turned off the lights there. I thought the mechanical back-and-forth of the pan gave the impression of time being ratcheted or physically dragged along the ground. Later, I added the sound of a slowly turning millstone from Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1932 film *Vampyr* to emphasize this sensation.

SD: What was your view of documentation at the time? To me, the 'Orchard Documents' present the possibility for alternative forms of historization to usually photographic, but also filmed documentation.

JP: It's hard to say, since I'm still not sure what documentation is. On the one hand, I am attracted to a classical tradition of documentary film; on the other, I find it full of irresolvable contradictions. I was shooting film every day over the course of Orchard's run, but I had been doing the same for almost ten years prior. I thought of the footage as an all-inclusive chronicle from which any part could be extracted as raw material and, for the three years of Orchard, much of it was framed as documentation or, more precisely, a failed effort to satisfy a desire to document. Of course, the desire is really something else, akin to the desire to project identity. I didn't realize that one of the documents would address identity specifically.

SD: Are you referring to Orchard Document: High school am over/gin crash (2008), which you made with Moyra Davey for her exhibition, 'Calendar of flowers, gin bottles, steak bones'?

JP: Yes. Moyra and I first got to know each other when our kids – Barney and Isaac – were small and, by the time we started Orchard, they had the kind of friendship that seemed to span back infinitely. We decided to oversee our kids making a film in which they pretend to get drunk and then wildly parade around the gallery in gleeful disdain of Moyra's exhibition.

SD: Isaac then uploaded this film to his YouTube channel, and you then re-shot the document from the browser. It's a detail that adds context by showing you something from beyond the frame of the exhibition.

JP: When it launched in 2005, YouTube seemed to offer a platform that had been previously unimaginable. For Isaac, it played a near mirror-stage role in his development. In 2007, aged 12, he started a channel called GLBTQ Community to document his own gender transition. Although he had already found a trans community online, there were few others his age publicly using video diaries. Isaac's channel was among the first to address transitioning that young. The film he and Barney made together was shot in Orchard on his webcam and uploaded onto his channel as an instalment of his transition diary. One of my favourite details is that, when it's over, YouTube automatically generates what's next on GLBTQ Community, and thumbnails of Isaac appear in intimate closeup, like frozen moments of his deepest self-expression. Of all the works produced at Orchard, this is the one I hold most dear.

Jeff Preiss on

## STOP

1995-2012 | USA | 120m | 16mm transferred to SD video | color | sound

STOP is a feature-length chronicle distilled from 2500 100-ft rolls of 16mm film shot between 1995 and 2011—organized sequentially by numbered lab rolls of camera negative into four half-hour parts.

It operates around the conventions of home movies: the images are of my own life and in classic home-movie tradition the alternating subjects of family, friends and travel are set by the filmstrip with absolute chronological certainty.

I took it as a self imposed rule to preserve this material chronology—in part to keep the reference to film literal after a digital conversion—but more essentially to find the cuts through a perspectival lineup of time, giving them an equivalent to the fated randomness that operates within a shot once the camera's engaged.

Subjects repeat in cycles while others form internal episodes: an investigation of architectural cinematography commissioned by Rem Koolhaas, the founding and three-year program of the gallery ORCHARD, the events of September 11 and the shocked atmosphere of the city afterwards. But as home-movie impulses dictate, the central subject is my child.

Among the stops referred to in the title, one was the act of assigning an end within the accumulating mass of my personal archive—so that a film could be possibly shaped. Many converging threads of ends and transformations were candidates: the nearing end of celluloid film and the end of the 4 x 3 video standard—or the end of an archival set as I approached camera roll #2500. But most evident was the quintessential end of nearly all home-movie cycles: the awkward end of my child's prepubescence—in this case hinging on a heroically decisive transformation of gender expression.

It was not until this particular end was in sight that I began to consider the possibility of illusionary synchronized sound. Maybe the spring-driven Bolex I used exclusively had made too convincing a case as the sole-silent technology—but now moved by the connection-disconnection of the two media channels somehow mirroring the fit/non-fit of the body, I started assigning alternating sections to be post-synchronized—and having on no occasion recorded sound along with the film, this required a process diametrically opposed to shooting's immediacy, one that was entirely fictional.

Just once did I have access to sound recorded simultaneously with the image. By chance a friend was shooting video alongside and later made a gift of the material. Only a few seconds of my kid speaking directly, as if to an audience, declaring the right of gender self-determination.