GARY SCHNEIDER & JOHN ERDMAN

INTERVIEW BY JOHN DOUGLAS MILLAR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEREMY LIEBMAN

I first met the photographic artist and printer Gary Schneider and his partner, the performer John Erdman, two years ago in Manhattan. On a warm October evening, we convened over dinner at a Venetian restaurant in Chelsea to discuss the life and death of their close friend, photographer Peter Hujar, whose biography I am writing. They were funny, moving, and generous company, full of rich anecdotes and the best kind of gossip. After dinner, I walked them to New York Live Arts on West 19th Street where they were attending the opening night of *HELLZAPOPPIN': What about the bees?*, the putative final stage work by their old friend Yvonne Rainer. I walked back to my hotel with an elated sense that I had come very close to the deep and personal history of a remarkable period of New York artmaking.

Over the years, the conversation continued in London, Paris, and at their home, a beautiful cottage in Brookhaven Hamlet on Long Island, where this interview took place. A former fisherman's shack, the cottage they have made their home since 2002, is a haven of art and a record of a shared life in culture and aesthetic consideration. It is both an archive and a living artwork. The walls are a constantly changing display of Gary's own photography and their personal collection, with prominence given to the Hujar editions Gary prints here in his adjacent studio. It was Hujar's wish that Gary, a master printer, be the only person sanctioned to make prints of his work, and these editions sit alongside works by David Wojnarowicz, Lorna Simpson, Elliott Puckette, Ugo Rondinone, Zanele Muholi, Lucia Moholy, and György Kepes. Their taste is chic without ostentation, and John's one-time history as a picker in New York has served them well; mid-century pieces by Charles and Ray Eames, Max Bill, Isamu Noguchi, and George Nakashima sit alongside classic vernacular mission furniture and a fascinating collection of personal objects. 'All of one thing bores me', says John, 'I couldn't stand one style of everything'. Outside, they have let the grounds go to meadow, with wild grasses, weeds, and wildlife in profusion. John is a very fine cook, and we talk over a series of delicious dishes, all accompanied by a steady flow of nerve-shredding coffee.

From 1981 to 2001, Gary and John co-ran the Schneider/Erdman Photography Lab whose clients included Nan Goldin, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, and Steven Meisel, amongst many others. The Schneider/Erdman Printer's Proof Collection was acquired by Harvard, followed by an accompanying show and book, *Analogue Culture*, in 2018. Gary and I are currently co-curating an exhibition of Hujar's work at Raven Row gallery, London, to open January 2025. He also published his account of meeting and learning from Peter Hujar, *Peter Hujar Behind the Camera and in the Darkroom*, in October.

apartamento - Gary Schneider & John Erdman

How did you first meet Peter Hujar?
John Erdman: I knew him from the late '60s. Gary met him through me much later when he moved to New York for good. The Stonewall was the only gay bar I would go to because it had a dance floor, which was against the law. Almost nobody had that. The crowd was all over the place. Most bars were one thing; you had the leather bar or the Ivy League bar, but this one, everybody would go. It was very mixed. I was in a raid there about a week or two before the riot, but I wasn't there the night of the uprising. I didn't read the newspaper, I didn't talk to anyone, and two days after the riot—with no idea it had even happened—I went down to go to Stonewall. I came out of the subway and walked right into a demonstration, a parade. It wasn't huge, maybe 50 people at most. I saw Jim Fouratt. He explained what had happened, and I noticed next to Jim this giant dressed like a Native American. Long hair in pigtails, a headband, buckskin jacket with fringe, and this very interestingly shaped face. Very high cheekbones. Jim introduced me to him, and that was Peter Hujar. And we just walked. They were trying to figure out what to do as the next action, and that was the beginning of organising the Gay Liberation Front.

And Peter was going to those early meetings of the GLF?
John: Only at the very beginning, to maybe two or three meetings. Peter and I were very close at this time. We would take long walks together. I think we dropped acid together, certainly smoked lots of marijuana, and we saw each other a lot. Peter was living with Jim at that time, and I helped them renovate the loft they were going to move into. It was a beautiful time.
I have an anecdote that says something about Peter then. I was losing weight like crazy. I wasn't eating well. The drug situation was complex. Anyway, my pants kept falling down as I was painting. I said, 'I have to get a belt'. And he said, 'No, you never have to buy anything. You can always find something to use'. So he went, and he found—just laying around—this scrap of rope and a bunch of coloured telephone wire. He didn't just make a utilitarian object; it was really wonderfully colourful and inventive. It was a whimsical act, but it worked, and it moved you. It surprised you. That was Peter, to me.

And the idea for the Schneider/Erdman Photography Lab first came from Peter?
John: No, it came from Gary.
Gary Schneider: I started out as an artist making painting, film, performance. My undergraduate thesis work was film, and I used to make prints to storyboard my films. I realise now that my prints were good. I had a real talent. By the late '70s, I was working for Klaus Moser's lab. It was a tiny space, and we were all crammed in there without good ventilation. It was quite dangerous, and I got very sick working there. But the lab was making a lot of money so, quite naively, I thought it must be easy. You do good work, you make lots of money.
John: Peter was very keen that the lab expand. He advised us to keep growing, which was a mistake. Gary was a perfectionist, and we weren't entrepreneurial at all.
Gary: John inherited money from his grandmother. We had a big, cheap apartment at the time, so we could have a darkroom in the spare room and the dry lab in the living room. I approached John as a silent partner because it was his money. I had this shopping list of equipment. In those days—and this is important—the photo world was very macho. I sent John to Lens & Repro to get the equipment, and they basically threw him out because he was gay.
John: They started asking me questions, and I panicked. I didn't know anything. I called Gary on the phone, and it was an intimate conversation while I was trying to get the information. They went crazy. They threw me out in front of people. It was very humiliating.
Gary: The thing to make clear is that there was a lot of homophobia in general in the photo world at that time.

At what point did Peter push the expansion?
John: Almost immediately, as soon as he heard the client list. We had Bruce Davidson. We worked for people he was impressed with, like Ralph Gibson, Gilles Peress.
Gary: He saw the possibility of it becoming a massive lab. What he didn't get was how you can't scale these things. It's about one person having assistants around who are also passionate about the quality of the work. You're making this great work happen, but you're not becoming wealthy.
Gary: He couldn't understand why it couldn't be larger. Eventually we gave Peter the op-

portunity to be a partner with us. He came to work in the darkroom, and he lasted half a day. I heard this scream, and he burst out of the door. Wrecked the darkroom.
John: He was eventually very apologetic.
Gary: He just couldn't bear working on other people's material.

But he served as a mentor to you, isn't that right Gary? Do you feel Peter's influence in your own photography?
Gary: Absolutely. Our work is completely different—polar opposites, in some respects. There's a wonderful contact sheet of the Susan Sontag portrait Peter made for *Portraits in Life and Death*. She's goofing around, and then there's one frame where she's not. Suddenly, something else is happening. That's the image. In my sessions with Peter, every single frame, I'm looking serious. I'm immersed in the dynamic between us. He draws me in, and I'm ready for it. So when I'm making my portraits, that's what I want to happen. When they are connecting with me, it's a very powerful experience. I'm drawing it out. It's durational.

You're using the light pen and making these exposures. The way duration works in your photography is so different.
Gary: Yes, I'm not choosing a moment at all. I'm collecting moments. And it is up to the person I'm photographing to bring those moments to me. It's not work on their part; it's the opposite of work. It's trusting that what I'm doing is gathering what they're thinking in time. So we share the trust that the people we are photographing will participate in the performance. But, yes, Peter was a huge influence from the moment I met him in the late '70s.

And were you working with Yvonne Rainer by then, John?
John: I was briefly at Brandeis University in Boston, and I saw a performance of Yvonne's there. It was actually the premiere of *The Mind is a Muscle*, but I only discovered that much later. Anyway, I go there, I see this thing, and I get it. It's totally different from anything I've seen before, and I just understand it. At the end, when there's lots of boos and hardly any applause, I was in shock. I was just gasping. It completely changed how I looked at the world. I stayed one more year in Boston, and then I just had to get back to New York.

What year is that?
John: 1968. When I got back to New York, someone I liked from college was coming to the city, and she said, 'Come to meet this friend of mine'. That friend was Tannis Hugill,

and Tannis was there with her boyfriend, the installation artist Peter Campus. Peter had just split up with Joan Jonas. I knew nothing then about Joan. I don't think she'd really done anything yet, actually. I told them about my experience seeing Yvonne. Peter knew who she was because Joan was a great fan. Anyway, he said, 'Joan is about to do this performance, and she needs people'. He gave me her number, and I did this performance with Joan.

Then at some point, Yvonne had a listing in the back of the *Village Voice* about a workshop, and I took that workshop at her loft on Greene Street. I was terrible because I was too self-conscious, but we workshopped this piece and ended up doing it out in New Jersey. When she first began to move away from the abstract, she picked me for a piece where seven people play a character. Then she picked me for something smaller—there were only three of us this time—and I was a wreck. My role involved me coming up on stage from the audience. I remember my legs were shaking. Gradually, I began to become interested in this experience of having people look at me, which had been my big horror.

Which is interesting, given all the performance work you've done. It didn't become easier?

John: It was always hard, but it did ease. Once we were travelling the same show, repeating it, it was really a joy.

Who else were you moving with in the '60s?

John: Charlie Atlas and I, we were inseparable. Everyone thought we were a couple. Kate Parker and I became very close too. She and I were working on a piece with Joan Jonas for six months. We didn't care if the piece got done or not. We were just enjoying it so much.

How was it working for Richard Foreman?

John: Foreman had just had a monster hit at Lincoln Center with Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. He really was the talk of New York. So *Pandering to the Masses*, which I was in, was packed. That was a very different experience from what I had gone through with Yvonne and Joan Jonas and other people.

How did that feel?

John: It was exhilarating, but odd that we had such big audiences.

Gary: We actually met through Richard Foreman. He ran open rehearsals, and I would go every night, taking copious notes. One night, he said, 'What are these notes that you're taking?' I was literally writing down

all of his blocking in some kind of shorthand I'd developed. I lied. I said, 'I'm doing a dissertation on you'. And he said, 'Well, why are you just sitting here? You can help with this if you like'. I helped with sound, then lighting. Eventually I became the stage manager. I was 21

And that's how you met John?
Gary: That's how we met. He fell off the stage prop.
John: That was the show that had this fence, and I fell off it. Gary looked after me. That's how we met. He arrived at my apartment one day, and he just never left.

And then, of course, the lab was established. Not long after that, it became evident that AIDS was emerging. There was the first article in the New York Times in '81, when it was being called GRID.
John: Because we'd started the business at the beginning of AIDS, we were never able to react fully to what was happening. We were aware of it. We were horrified.
Gary: John, we just weren't as politically engaged.
John: No, I don't think that's it. We were flat out. We had no time. It was a way of coping. We saw people as much as we could, but then I got sick, and we thought I had AIDS.

Gary: That was terrible.
John: I read the *New York Times* and saw it, and I was always hyperaware about medical issues. Charlie Atlas was the first person I told. Peter thought it was some anti-gay trick to stop people having sex, a morality thing. I began writing down the names of the people who had died, and the list grew and grew until a point where I could no longer write it. I remember the desperation of just working, working, working, and we would hear these terrible stories, and sometimes we could react, and sometimes we just couldn't.
Gary: Too many people believed every homosexual would die, and to have to deal with that… It was Peter's death—he really believed it wouldn't get to him, ever, so it was like a final, 'Oh fuck, this is really changing our lives in a dramatic way'. And it did, forever.
I really found Covid so hard. I had a PTSD reaction. It felt so similar to the beginning of AIDS, not knowing how it's transmitted, the lack of information. When this thing gradually—actually, quite rapidly—moves from the abstract into everyday life.

Who was the first person you knew that died?
John: We used to have breakfast at Veselka on Second Avenue often, and there was a dancer, John Bernd. He was the most wonderful, lovely

human being. Very sweet, very young. I remember the day he was at the next table, and I said, 'How are you?' And he said, 'The funniest thing happened. I was at the dentist the other day, and they couldn't stop the bleeding in my mouth. I couldn't stop bleeding'. I forget what else he said. But then I watched him deteriorate. The weight loss and the Kaposi, and he began to wear a veil when he was in public. That was the first person where I saw it.

Gary: What year was Eugene? I would say that was '84. Is that possible?

John: He was very early, might have even been earlier.

Gary: I hadn't seen him in a really long time—he was my partner before John. His agent came up with this brilliant solution of organising an exhibition for him in Paris so he could die at the American Hospital of Paris. We saw him in transit. He was overnighting at a hotel in New York, and it was—he was nothing. Skeletal. Kaposi. And for someone I knew so intimately, it was horrifying.

John: Very early on in it, I was on tour with Karole Armitage. I came back and almost immediately got a very high fever. Gary got me to the hospital. This was '82, I'd say. It was early, and I definitely had pneumonia. It took a lot of time to diagnose the various kinds of pneumonia, so they assumed I had AIDS. No one treated me. They left me in a hallway. I finally got into a room. They wouldn't change the IV.

Gary: There were all these signs: 'Don't go in', 'Go in fully masked'.

John: Finally, this very religious nurse—and I know she was religious because she pointed out her church out the window—took care of me. She changed the IV, which had backed up several times. It then took two weeks until they diagnosed that I had Legionnaires' disease, which I had caught in one of the cheap hotels on tour. People were terrified though. No one visited the hospital. No one would come near Gary. I know I wouldn't have survived if it wasn't for that nurse and Gary.

The thing about the work was there were really long periods where it was a case of, *just survive*. How do I get money to keep going? And I didn't do a good job.

When did you realise people were surviving?

Gary: It was all uncertain. The drugs began to emerge, but nobody really knew if they'd work.

John: It was maybe in the early 2000s that I stopped worrying that everyone was going to die. Mainly because David Wojnarowicz's partner, Tom Rauffenbart, didn't die.

I think it's important to say that your survival is political in itself. But how did the lab end?

Gary: It was 9/11, really. We'd been struggling for some time. Like John said, we weren't entrepreneurial, and I was—and am—a perfectionist. I went through a lot of materials. I never felt anyone needed to know how many prints I went through to get to a final, and it could be a lot. Also, photography was changing. The digital world was shifting things, of course.
John: We were in terrible shape for at least a year. We were just holding on by our nails and waiting for the corporate annual reports, which might support us for a year. They always came in any time between September and December. Then 9/11 happened. We

watched it on television, and at some point on the screen there was the scroll of all of the companies that were lost. We hadn't known the locations of our clients, and there on the screen were the names of these companies in the scroll. They were wiped out—like, 10 companies, just gone. I instantly knew it was all over.

Looking back, how do you feel about the lab's legacy? You had some famous clients early on. You were printing for Nan Goldin, weren't you?
Gary: Yes, I printed a whole exhibition for Nan. That was through Peter too. He called her the poet of the East Village. He really, truly thought she was magically brilliant. He told me about the early black-and-white work she made in Boston, and he said, 'She's going to come to you to print it, and you simply have to do it'. She came to us, and it was amazing. Halfway through, she got a show of the work in Paris with Agnès B, and I printed that too. Incidentally, I used my supply of the same paper that Peter printed on, which I had inherited from Louise Dahl-Wolfe.
John: Nan was the only contemporary photographer Peter ever acknowledged.

What about printing Madonna's Sex book?

Gary: Oh, this is a wonderful story. The publisher was Warner Books, and the photographer was Steven Meisel, who printed at Lexington Lab. Someone there leaked the images, so the non-disclosure agreement they had was broken, and Madonna pulled it. So I get this call from Nicholas Callaway. He was a publisher of extraordinary books. I get a call from him, and he says, 'I've got a project to propose to you'. We took it on. Nobody in the lab knew we were doing it. I was just in my darkroom printing all day. The staff would leave, we'd wash the prints, someone would come to pick them up, and then we'd shred everything.

John: We were terrified. Once you sign a contract with her, you feel like she's going to come and get you. At the end, there was a question over one of her bills. Liz Rosenberg, her famous publicist, called up, and I could hear this voice in the background. The questions were really good. I gave the answers, and she got it. I was kind of impressed that she'd waste her time with these small billing issues.

Gary: Meisel was very happy with the work. I get a call from his assistant from the limo they're in, and he says to me, 'Steven is interested in bringing all of his work to your lab'. That would have totally confirmed Peter's dream. We would have become very wealthy. I said, 'Yes, that would change my lab'. I said, 'There's one caveat: We've tried working with fashion, and the only time it works is if we can bill the studio'. If we sent our invoices to the magazine, we never got paid.

John: You never got paid at all because whoever authorised the job had always been fired or moved on.

Gary: So I never heard from them again.

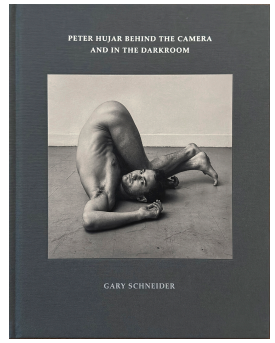
John: The old-timers paid, like Avedon. They always made sure you got paid. Irving Penn.

Gary: They paid directly.

John: Yes, even Mario Testino. When he was young, he paid.

Gary: We had heard that the queen of non-payers was Annie Leibovitz. She was going to make a black-and-white edition of her John and Yoko naked, and I was the person for the job. So the work comes in. We make it very clear we're a COD lab. I finished the work, all the proofing and everything. I never charged for proofs—I was an idiot in that regard. It's finished, the edition is done. The assistant comes in. I give him the transparency, but I'm holding the prints. I said, 'I've given you the bill, do you have a cheque?' He said, 'No, I don't have any money'. I said, 'Well, that's OK. You can just take the transparency and go and get the cheque and come back'. He said, 'Can't I take the prints?' I said, 'No, it's fine, you can take her original. I'm not holding it hostage. But if there's a problem with payment, I will just tear these prints up'. So, he goes away and comes back, and he says, 'We had to collect money from all the staff!' I mean, he was trying to guilt us.

John: Apparently she always referred to us as 'the crazy guys'.



Peter Hujar Behind the Camera and in the Darkroom by Gary Schneider (BookCrave Books, 2024).

Let's talk about some of the payers. Irving Penn.

Gary: So I get a call from the Penn studio asking if I will take on some work for Irving Penn. Obviously, I said, 'Are you kidding?' This is very exciting for me. The next day—and remember, we were a third-floor walk-up, and Penn was 10 years older than Avedon— Irving Penn appears at our door. I made the negatives for him of the skulls [*Cranium Architecture*]. I did a whole bunch of his stuff. But basically, what I did was his Clinique ads. He was just amazing. He gave us Christmas presents every year. Just really so sweet.

John: There were a lot of wonderful people who came through.

Gary: They were great.

John: Well, we got rid of the people who weren't.

You've lived through so much, witnessed so much art and global history. You've maintained such a rich partnership. How do you account for that? What kept you together through everything?

John: What keeps our relationship strong is that we share the same ethics. I feel that is the strongest thing. We're very different people, but we share that. It's about how you treat people. It's the basic stuff.

Gary: We had our problems for the first years, but we discovered that we work well together and have managed to keep that going since 1981, somehow. I have no idea what makes a relationship that endures, really, but ours certainly has. Actually, we became even more close during the lockdowns through Covid, so even now it develops and deepens and becomes richer and more strange. We support each other in everything, that's the bottom line. And we love each other.