



Ken Jacobs
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FILM

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- Ed Halter on Ken Jacobs's *Anaglyph Tom*
- Melissa Anderson on Olivier Assayas's *Summer Hours*
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Tom Tom Club

05.12.09



Ken Jacobs, *Anaglyph Tom (Tom with Puffy Cheeks)*, 2008, stills from a color 3-D video, 118 minutes.

A MAD PROFESSOR OF VISUAL PERCEPTION, Ken Jacobs has produced decades of work investigating the underpinnings of optical experience. After shooting madcap romps with the likes of Jack Smith, Jacobs embarked on his analytic projects with *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969–71), created in the thick of the structural turn in North American avant-garde filmmaking, when artists like Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, and Hollis Frampton discarded visual poetics in favor of a more rigorous investigation and reconstruction of film form. *Tom, Tom* takes as its starting point a one-reeler of the same name from 1905 based loosely on the nursery rhyme, complete with purloined pig; the original was shot by cameraman Billy Bitzer for the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. Produced a decade before D. W. Griffith's expansion of cinematic grammar, Bitzer's film uses an archaic, theatrical mode of presentation, crowding its actors into a single shuffling heap against an obviously painted backdrop. Via optical printer, Jacobs rephotographed the original in a multitude of ways, distending the eight minutes of its run into more than a hundred. He enlarges elements within the crowd that could have easily eluded viewers the first time around—curious faces, subtle gestures, costume details—revealing heretofore unexplored narratives swirling around the central tale of porcine theft. At points, he zooms in so closely that the images dissolve into inky clouds. "I wanted to 'bring to the surface' that multi-rhythmic collision-contesting of dark and light two-dimensional force-areas struggling edge to edge for identity of shape," Jacobs wrote in an early description of his film, "to get into the amoebic grain pattern itself."

In the past ten years, Jacobs has turned from film to video, taking on a whole host of cameraless tools that have allowed him to tinker anew. One of his most recent efforts is *Anaglyph Tom (Tom with Puffy Cheeks)* (2008), a return to the original source material of *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* using anaglyphic 3-D, the red/blue-glasses system once reserved for eyes-a-poppin' monster movies. Jacobs is no stranger to the third dimension: A number of his videos, like *Pushcarts of Eternity Street* and *The Surging Sea of Humanity* (both 2006), strobe images from turn-of-the-century stereograms to create ersatz visual profundity, based on similar mechanical procedures created for his live "Nervous System" performances. Less a sequel than a remake, *Anaglyph Tom* employs a wide array of digital techniques to once again dissect Bitzer's footage: picture-in-picture, split screens, flipping and twisting, various visual filters. But if *Tom, Tom* was about the investigation of narrative, *Anaglyph Tom* is more about an accordion-like expansion of photography's Z-axis, using 3-D to separate the crowd out into flat figures positioned in a series of overlapping planes. Jacobs provides innumerable permutations of this scenario in the course of *Anaglyph Tom's* roughly two hours, pushing the anaglyph system to distort and subvert normal binocular clues, creating impossible spaces and unnatural colors. While wide-ranging, the results remain a twenty-first-century coda to Jacob's initial deconstruction. But by returning to an artifact from cinema's primitive first decade, Jacobs suggests alternative histories to the technology, forking paths that point toward undiscovered possibilities.

Anaglyph Tom plays at *Anthology Film Archives* in New York May 15–21. Director Ken Jacobs will be present May 15–17 and May 21. For more details, [click here](#).

— Ed Halter

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