

This page and opposite: **Three** stills from Charlotte Prodger's *Stonemollan Trail*, 2015, digital video, color, sound, 43 minutes.

OPENINGS

CHARLOTTE PRODGER

ERIKA BALSOM





BEDROOMS, BATHROOMS, Samuel R. Delany. Scotland, public sex, emails from friends. Blogs, lesbians, pissing. Glasgow-based artist Charlotte Prodder peppers her single-channel videos with such constellations of people, places, and things. Prodder's attraction to taking inventory—whether in a screen-printed compendium of her recent addresses or in a voice-over recitation of the deity Bridgit's many names—stems from a drive not to forcibly impose an order or hierarchy, as such acts often do, but to be attentive, to stay close to the rumble of things and not overlook small variations by letting a few stand in for the many. Seriality breeds difference, not sameness. The lists that appear within Prodder's diaristic videos speak to her larger practice of autobiographical accumulation, as she charts affinities and encounters led by desire and inscribed by power, bringing together all the things that make a world. She moves from the intimate to the distant, from social media to nature, embedding the production of images into her everyday rhythms, creating a chronicle of a life lived otherwise.

In recent years, many artists with established practices in single-screen filmmaking have sought the expanded possibilities of multiscreen installation. Prodder represents a rare case of moving in the opposite direction, having made a decisive shift to the single-channel format with *Stonemollan Trail*, 2015. Before making this forty-three-minute video, she had produced sculptural installations, working with 16-mm film for many years before temporarily adopting the Hantarex CRT monitor as her signature form. Her preoccupations have remained consistent across these material displacements, as has her interest in technological specificity—an interest perhaps inspired by the still-lingering legacies of British structural film. But it is in the more recent videos, with their commitment to duration and projection, that Prodder has produced an important rearticulation of the emancipatory possibilities of personal filmmaking, one

desperately needed at a time when the atomized, optimized, authentic self is everywhere a commodity for sale.

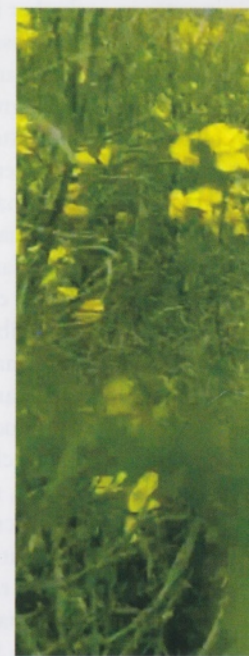
Stonemollan Trail takes its title from an old path in Scotland once used to transport the dead to the nearest consecrated land. In the video, Prodder blends personal and media history, combining scenes from MiniDV tapes she shot between 1998 and 2014 with HD and iPhone video. Its first quarter alternates between landscape scenes drawn from Prodder's archive—offshore oil rigs, snowy tree-lined trails—and images of a room of CRT monitors accompanied by audio of a male voice reciting an inventory of what appears on the tapes. These descriptions exceed the images presented: “Katy in baseball cap on mushrooms, massive pupils” is never seen, for instance. Some of the tapes have degraded, introducing blocky visual disruptions. This foregrounding of mediation grows during the voice-over passages, when Prodder can be seen in the reflection of the monitor or in front of it, pacing amid the gear and playing test patterns, as if to incorporate the form of her previous installations into the video. From this opening, *Stonemollan Trail* establishes a tension that is fundamental to the artist's practice: The immediacy of individual experience, particularly as it concerns queer life beyond the metropolis, jostles with the effects and affects of technological capture, which at once distances and preserves.

The screen prints of Prodder's former addresses appear interspersed throughout the video, stylized like graphic company insignia and superimposed on views of Glasgow shot through windows. Their industrial smears recall the television-station logo that momentarily masks Nancy Holt's face in *Boomerang*, 1974, a video in which Holt narrates the sensation of hearing her voice transmitted back to her in a slight delay as she speaks. Quotations from Holt appear later, offering another list, this time of all the workers who partici-

pated in the construction of her *Sun Tunnels*, 1973–76. There are dump-truck operators, ditchdiggers, engineers, an astronomer, and more: Many professions are implicated when the artist turns subcontractor. If Prodder invokes Holt as an inspiration, she does so equally to signal a break with the interventionist gestures of Land art and its dependence on a labor-intensive mode of production. A female voice narrates Holt's words, repeating them numerous times, multiplying the capital investment and creating a striking counterpoint to the image on-screen—a handheld shot taken by a supine Prodder, looking out at the sea through tall grasses. The artist's leg, clad in Adidas track pants, anchors the bottom of the frame. Between sound and image, the work presents a study in contrasting modes of production and relations to the land.

Prodder works alone, but she is no solitary artist facing down the expanses of nature in Romantic contemplation. Though she eschews the large crews and budgets that are increasingly common in artists' moving-image practices in the United Kingdom, she infuses her videos with community and friendship. The names, stories, and voices of loved ones recur. Emails from artists Jamie Crewe and Ian White are read aloud in *Stonemollan Trail*, while in *BRIDGIT*, 2016, Prodder builds a portrait of her life through remembered interactions with others. There are strangers kind and less kind, anesthesiologists, lovers, authors, and even animals.

Prodder shot *BRIDGIT* entirely on her iPhone, an object she has referred to as a prosthetic device. As in *Stonemollan Trail*, the camera is often held close to the flesh, at times producing almost imperceptible movements, following the rise and fall of the artist's breath. The thirty-two-minute video weaves images of private spaces and of the wilds of Scotland with personal stories—of teenage acid trips in Aberdeenshire, coming out, having an unspecified surgery. Prodder recounts



tales of being mistaken for a man and of knowing other women whose girlfriends were mistaken for sisters or daughters. In these voice-over vignettes of identification and misrecognition, the assertion of the self and the fading of the self are entangled. Prodger opens by asking the viewer—or perhaps herself—to imagine a scenario of personal scrutiny: “There’s this huge event. A group of people are focusing very closely on you. The minute details of you and also the macro. It’s all women. They’re totally in control of you.” The external gaze, which forms us all, can be a vector of domination as much as of care, and can align with one’s view of oneself or contest it; *BRIDGIT* navigates this uncertain passage, poetically and patiently tracing how we are made and unmade, how we make and unmake ourselves.

If traditional forms of autobiography seek to endow the subject with consistency by organizing the messiness

of life into a coherent narrative, *BRIDGIT* takes a different tack, opting for a fragmented dispersal across institutional interpellations, altered states of consciousness, and the individual proclivity to fashion one’s own existence. Stability and legibility are not Prodger’s goals. Rather, she probes how bodies, identities, and interiorities shift without ceasing to be themselves. Her “I” is capacious, containing many, and yet something remains constant. Prodger finds a precedent for this careful negotiation in the neolithic period, its traces still visible in Scotland’s ancient stone circles. In recalling the changing appellations of the deity Bridgit, she resuscitates an embrace of fluidity that began to wither with the codification of names as personal descriptors, a practice dating to the 1086 Domesday Book, a land survey commissioned by William the Conqueror and the oldest surviving public record in

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Britain. In the monumental standing stones of Bridgfit's epoch, Prodger locates an enduring presence that never yields to total comprehension. Mythic and material, these icons of permanence have seen their meanings mutate over time, with the motivations for their creation and location remaining a matter of speculation. When, in *BRIDGIT*'s final shot, Prodger superimposes a computer-animated grid on the image of a menhir, the lines stretch until they disappear, their modular regularity unable to contain such weathered singularity.

Near the end of *BRIDGIT*, Prodger mentions Sandy Stone's writings on technology and embodiment, citing her idea that mediated, "low bandwidth" interactions, such as those facilitated by digital devices, allow us to engage "more deeply, more obsessively" than do their "high bandwidth" counterparts, such as face-to-face meetings. Absence and limitation fuel desire; immediacy leaves nothing to long for. In her next major work, *LHB*, 2017, Prodger explores the relations between these two modalities as they concern the act of hiking, with her iPhone—both imagemaker and image receiver—as the hinge between them.

Many of *LHB*'s images extend the artist's established concern with landscape. First, the camera moves through a field of tall yellow flowers, the thick vegetation hitting the lens and registering percussively on the soundtrack. Later, framed from the knees down, a series of women variously piss on moss, rocks, and snow, appropriating the typically masculine gesture of marking territory in images that stage an elemental meeting of body and terrain. But these performances of communing with nature are not the sole focus of *LHB*; they are placed in dialogue with Prodger's accounts of her internet use—her obsession with tabbing back and forth between gay male pornography and the blogs and Instagram accounts of queer women on the Pacific Crest Trail. Never pictured, these low-bandwidth experiences are anatomized in a voice-over dripping with fascination.

While she does not necessarily side with Stone in championing cyberspace over immediacy, Prodger does claim these online encounters as sites of desire and identification—they are in no way secondary to the video's depictions of landscape, but are in correspondence

with them. In its double-sided inquiry into practices of self-documentation, *LHB* foregrounds the pleasure of collapsing the space between here and there, between the consumption and production of traces of personal experience. Not unlike Holt in *Boomerang*, Prodger situates herself within technology's feedback loop: She constitutes and is constituted by image flows. In Holt's disoriented stutter, it is possible to hear an early, allegorical premonition of the pressures exerted on the self as it is coercively remade to suit the imperatives of neoliberal existence. These pressures are ubiquitous today, and they are painfully present in the technologized performance of personal identity—the action at the heart of Prodger's practice. Yet rather than denounce the banalities of selfie culture or retreat into offline existence, Prodger dramatically redirects the energies of self-display, inventing mediated ways of relating and being that exist beyond quantification and competition, beyond heteronormativity and aspirational urbanity. □

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