



FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Ken Jacobs

***Towards The Depths of The Even Greater Depression*
A Nervous Magic Lantern Performance**

Mon Oct 12 | 8:30 pm

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$9 [students \$7, CalArts \$5]

West Coast Premiere

The revered avant-garde filmmaker Ken Jacobs kicks off *Ken Jacobs, Recent Youthful Indiscretions*, a weeklong residency in Los Angeles with a rare and highly anticipated live staging of his “Nervous Magic Lantern” performance at REDCAT. For 50 years, Jacobs has charted a uniquely artisanal and radical mode of cinema, creating an unrivalled body-of-work that includes scores of films, videos, sound pieces, live performances of 3-D shadow plays and light projections, and the written word.

At once mesmerizing and challenging, “pure cinema” and scathingly anti-capitalist, Jacobs’ work spans early guerrilla-style improvisations like *Blonde Cobra* (1959-1963) and the decades-in-the-making *Star Spangled to Death* (1957-1959/2004), that in its nearly seven-hour length is equally an epic of appropriative assemblage and cultural and political protest. (Both films incidentally feature a young pre-*Flaming Creatures* Jack Smith.) Early cinema has proven a particularly fertile fount for Jacobs. He has mined it as raw material for an abstracted, even hallucinatory cinema that requires active spectatorship. His seminal film in this vein, *Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son* (1969), was recently admitted into the National Film Registry.

Moving away from celluloid altogether, Jacobs has pioneered a “paracinema” (a term he himself is credited with coining) of “Nervous Magic Lantern” performances. The avant-garde master has a repertory of techniques to realize astonishing optical effects. In his live 3-D shows, he variously manipulates a film projector’s mechanisms, painted plastic cells and sometimes objects to summon otherworldly abstractions with vertiginous depth of field. “My self-constructed ‘Lantern’ utilizes neither film nor video,” Jacobs explains. “Abstraction can offer the opportunity to meet and grapple directly with risky situations, taking real chances instead of

identifying with some actor-proxy on a movie set. The viewer of Nervous Magic Lantern phenomena plunges, hovers, sinks and rises into illusionary deep space. The question of what we are looking at becomes of less urgency than from where in space we are viewing... where and of what consistency and shape and size is the mass confronting us at any one moment, and when and how did it become what a moment ago it was not. It might be best to think of what you and others see as a group hallucination." *The New York Times* describes the effect thusly: "Makes *Monsters vs. Aliens* in 3-D look as flat as an episode of *South Park*."

Jacobs will also screen *Disorient Express* (1906/1996, 30 min., 35mm, silent).

After his October 12 presentation at REDCAT, the filmmaker will appear with a program of his recent short digital works at the UCLA Film & Television Archive (October 15), and his new 3-D digital feature *Anaglyph Tom (Tom with Puffy Cheeks)* at LA Filmforum (October 18). CalArts will present two additional programs of Jacobs' short works on October 13 and 16 that will be open to the public. For information on the UCLA program, please visit www.cinema.ucla.edu. For information on the LA Filmforum program, please visit www.lafilmforum.wordpress.com.

In person: Ken Jacobs

Biography

Ken Jacobs was born in Brooklyn, NY, in 1933. He studied painting with one of the prime creators of Abstract Expressionism, Hans Hofmann, in the mid-'50s. It was then that he also began filmmaking (*Star Spangled to Death*). His personal star rose, to just about knee high, with the '60s advent of Underground Film. In 1967, with the involvement of his wife Florence and many others aspiring to a democratic – rather than demagogic– cinema, he created the Millennium Film Workshop in New York City. A nonprofit filmmaker's co-operative open to all, it made available film equipment, workspace, screenings and classes at little or no cost. Later he found himself teaching large classes of painfully docile students at St. John's University in Jamaica, Queens.

In 1969, after a week's guest seminar at Harpur College (now, Binghamton University), students petitioned the Administration to hire Ken Jacobs. Despite his lack of a high school diploma, the Administration – during that special period of anguish and possibility – decided that, as a teacher, he was "a natural." Together with Larry Gottheim, he organized the SUNY system's first Department of Cinema, teaching thoughtful consideration of every kind of film but specializing in avant-garde cinema appreciation and production. (Department graduates are world-recognized as having an exceptional presence in this field.) His own early studies under Hofmann would increasingly figure in his film work, making for an Abstract Expressionist cinema, clearly evident in his avant-garde classic *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) and increasingly so in his subsequent devising of the unique "Nervous System" series of live film-projection performances. The American

Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens, hosted a full retrospective of his work in 1989, the New York Museum of Modern Art held a partial retrospective in 1996, as did The American House in Paris in 1994 and the Arsenal Theater in Berlin in 1986 (during his six-month stay as guest-recipient of Berlin's DAAD award). He has also performed in Japan, at the Louvre in Paris, the Getty Center in Los Angeles, etc. Honors include the Maya Deren Award of the American Film Institute, the Guggenheim Award and a special Rockefeller Foundation grant. A 1999 interview with Ken Jacobs can be seen on the Net as part of the University of California at Berkeley's series of *Conversations with History*.

– from Ken Jacobs' website, www.starspangledtodeath.com

On Ken Jacobs

Ken Jacobs (b.1933) has been active as a filmmaker, performer and teacher for the past five decades. Rigorous and dedicated, his work is characterized by a keen eye for formal composition and a fierce political consciousness.

As a central figure of the generation that defined independent filmmaking during the post-War era, Jacobs contributed to the liberation of cinema from technical and ideological conventions. Beginning in the 1950s, he developed an "urban guerrilla cinema" out of poverty and desperation, shooting improvised routines on city streets. The early works *Star Spangled to Death*, *Little Stabs at Happiness* and *Blonde Cobra* feature a nascent Jack Smith, years before the renegade artist produced his own films.

Having lived in New York all his life, the changing character of the city has been a strong presence throughout Jacobs' work, from his manipulation of vintage street scenes in *New York Ghetto Fishmarket 1903*, through to the diaristic video *Circling Zero: We See Absence*, which observes the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center, a few blocks away from Jacobs' home. *The Sky Socialist* was shot in a deserted neighborhood... below the Brooklyn Bridge in the 1960s, and *Perfect Film* uses raw television news reports on the assassination of Malcolm X.

Found or archival footage is a source for much of Jacobs' work. In *Star Spangled to Death*, entire appropriated films contribute to an accumulative denunciation of American politics, religion, war and racism, whereas an analytical approach to reclaiming cinema's past was originated in *Tom, Tom the Pipers' Son* by re-filming selected details of a theatrical production dating from 1905. This same footage has lately been digitally excavated in *Return to the Scene of the Crime*.

The technique of unlocking aspects of film material that would otherwise pass unnoticed is the essence of the live "Nervous System" pieces that Jacobs has performed with two adapted projectors since the mid-1970s. Repetition and pulsing flicker teases frozen images into impossible depth and perpetual motion (demonstrated in *New York Street Trolleys 1900*), a process further developed by the Eternalism system of editing used in many recent videos. The previously

ephemeral live performances *Ontic Antics Starring Laurel And Hardy: By Molly!* and *Two Wrenching Departures* are amongst the works that take on new life in their digital form.

A contemporary of Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner and Jonas Mekas, Ken Jacobs is one of the true innovators of the moving image, who continues his radical practice in the present. Though his images frequently depict bygone eras, the works are resolutely contemporary, displaying a vitality and ingenuity that is rarely matched.

Jacobs has had retrospectives at the Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Modern Art, the American Museum of the Moving Image, the Rotterdam Film Festival, and recently on line with tank.tv. Noted scholar David James is editing a volume of essays on Jacobs that is scheduled to be published by Oxford University Press in 2011.

– Mark Webber, *tant.tv*

Selected Filmography/Videography

Anaglyph Tom (Tom with Puffy Cheeks) (2009)
Return to the Scene of the Crime (2008)
Capitalism: Child Labor (2006)
Razzle Dazzle: The Lost World (2006)
Krypton Is Doomed (2005)
Star Spangled to Death (1957-1959/2004)
Circling Zero: We See Absence (2002)
Flo Rounds a Corner (1999)
Perfect Film (1985)
Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son (1969-1971)
The Sky Socialist (1964-1965)
Blonde Cobra (1959-1963)
Little Stabs at Happiness (1958-1963)

Selected "Nervous System" Performances

(A unique double-analysis projector set-up, deriving 3-D from standard 2-D film, most often archival and other found footage)

Two Wrenching Departures (2006)
Ontic Antics Starring Laurel and Hardy: Bye, Molly! (2005)
New York Street Trolleys 1900 (1997)
New York Ghetto Fishmarket 1903 (1992)
The Impossible (1975-1980)
The Whole Shebang (1982)
XCXHXEXRXXIXEXSX (1980)

Selected “Nervous Magic Lantern” Performances

(Single projector utilizing neither film nor video)

Interstellar Lower East Side Ramble (2005)

Seeing Is Believing (2004)

Celestial Subway (2004)

Local Hubble (2003)

A Place Where There is No Trouble (2002)

Crystal Palace (2000)

Curated by Steve Anker

Funded in part with generous support from Wendy Keys and Donald Pels

###