

San Francisco Cinematheque presents

KEES KINO

The Film Work of Weldon Kees

Guest Curator Jenni Olson In Person

Presented in Association with The Poetry Center, San Francisco State University
Sunday, June 11, 2006 – Yerba Buena Center for the Arts – 7:30 pm

Harry Weldon Kees

(February 24, 1914 – July 18, 1955)

Weldon Kees was only 41 years-old when he became the official 88th reported Golden Gate Bridge suicide (or perhaps the 89th since there were two cars found abandoned at the North end of the Bridge that day). He was last heard from on July 18th, 1955. Leading up to this fatal date, Weldon had been a veritable 20th Century Renaissance guy. In his time he was recognized as an accomplished poet; short story writer; film critic; music critic; art critic; book reviewer; abstract expressionist painter; musician, lyricist and composer; curator and event producer; newsreel screenwriter and documentarian. The list goes on. The actual details are even more fascinating than the laundry list could possibly convey.

For anyone interested in learning more about Weldon Kees, the place to start is James Riedel's book, *Vanished Act: The Life and Art of Weldon Kees* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003). It's a terrifically detailed page-turner sketching out the brief, jam-packed life of a man who has long been considered a cult figure and who continues to earn fans today. All the quotes here (and the majority of the basic factual information) are from *Vanished Act* unless otherwise indicated. Mr. Riedel also provided direct access or shortcuts to all the sources of material in this program.

About The Filmmaker

Weldon Kees's love of film was manifested in many ways. An avid film fan since his early childhood in Beatrice, Nebraska he made pretend movie magazines as a teenager. He grew up to become a film critic for *Time*, wrote screenplays for Paramount Newsreels and worked on wartime documentaries for the Astoria Signal Corp.

At the time of his death he was in the midst of an ambitious variety of film-related projects. He was making a documentary about the lighthouse at Point Reyes (for which he had shot eight rolls of 16mm footage which are now in the collection of the Lincoln Public Library). He had been co-hosting a KPFA radio show about current cinema, called "Behind The Movie Camera," with his friend Michael Grieg (featuring a young Pauline Kael as a regular guest). He and Vincent McHugh were developing a script for a spy movie, to be set in San Francisco, called *Gadabout*.

He had also embarked on a project called The Film Workshop, which would teach film production classes. He was ahead of his time as usual, and the venture failed for a lack of enrolment. Most ambitious of all, was his plan for a film production entity, to be called San Francisco Films, which would: "concentrate on the production of full-length features and shorts for mature American audiences."

About The Films

As a filmmaker Weldon Kees was particularly influenced by the work of street photographer Helen Levitt (*The Quiet One*), and he wrote thoughtfully about the conventions of documentary filmmaking and the idea that the filmmaker should be made visible. He described his film work at Langley-Porter Clinic as “anthropologicistic-psychiatric.” We’ll see two of these films tonight: *Hand-Mouth Coordination* (made with Gregory Bateson in 1952) and *Approaches & Leavetakings* (made with Jurgen Ruesch in 1952).

Hand-Mouth Coordination (depicting the daily routine of a one-year old boy) was described by Kees as: “one of the few pure ‘documentaries’ ever made. Our picture is so damned documentary that the cameramen (Bateson and me) are always getting into the picture, partly to emphasize that it is a picture about people being photographed, and not something ‘spontaneous’ that just happened.”

Anyone familiar with *Nonverbal Communication: Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations* (University of California Press, 1956) the pioneering volume that Kees co-created with Jurgen Ruesch, will recognize many of that book’s concepts and ideas on view in *Approaches & Leavetakings* as it offers a quirky exploration of mundane routines shot with a hidden camera on the streets of San Francisco.

Kees’s wonderfully bleak yet whimsical short, *Hotel Apex* (1952) was described by his distributor, Kinesis, Inc. as: “the first motion picture which has not a trace of any attempt to lend literary meaning to its material.”

The avant-garde techniques of *Hotel Apex* may no longer seem quite so cutting edge (having become, after all this time, conventions themselves), but the film remains truly original—full of its own kind of poetry, with an astute eye for mundane details and infused with nostalgia and melancholy.

Weldon’s score for James Broughton’s *The Adventures of Jimmy* is a true joy with his twinkling piano providing the perfect accompaniment for Broughton’s autobiographical tale of a small town boy in the big city.

William Heick’s *The Bridge* (narrated by Charles Levy) sets the rhyming, mythic language of Hart Crane’s poem (about the Brooklyn Bridge) against the Golden Gate landscape. The most poignant moment of the film is Kees’s brief appearance—climbing down a hill, tripod in hand, preparing to set up a shot. Just a few months later he would leap from the span into the Bay, his body washed away with the tides. Finishing the film after Weldon’s death, Heick’s choice of voiceover for this section evokes a powerful image of his lost friend:

But now, draw in your head, alone and too tall here.
Your eyes already in the slant of drifting foam.
Your breath sealed by the ghosts I do not know.
Draw in your head, and sleep the long way home.

About Tonight's Program

One of the most wonderful things about this Cinematheque program is that all of the films were shot in and around the Bay Area, featuring terrific location shooting from the early 1950s. We'll see North Beach and UC Berkeley in *Approaches & Leavetakings*; Point Richmond in *Hotel Apex*; Skid Row in *Adventures of Jimmy* and, of course, the Golden Gate Bridge in *The Bridge*.

We'll also be hearing some rare recordings of the music of Weldon Kees, a few readings of his poems and some additional audio excerpts including the Weldon Kees Memorial program that was broadcast on KPFA Radio on July 23, 1955 (with Michael Grieg and writer Nathan Asch).

This is an eclectic program offering up a range of Weldon Kees's film-related talents and interests. Unfortunately, we were not able to obtain any examples of the many Paramount Newsreels for which Weldon wrote screenplays from the end of 1943 through mid- 1945. Although many of the titles of the newsreels he penned sound as conventional as others of the era (*Paramount News Presents Report From Normandy, The Hitler Gang Holds On, To The Shores of Iwo Jima*), he was commended by his contemporaries for his unusually intelligent approach to this otherwise predictable genre. For a detailed description of his job as a newsreel scriptwriter see Robert E. Knoll's *Weldon Kees and the Midcentury Generation* (University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

The Adventures of Jimmy (1950) by James Broughton; 16mm, b&w, sound, 11 minutes, print courtesy of Canyon Cinema.

Hand-Mouth Coordination (1952) by Weldon Kees and Gregory Bateson; 16mm, b&w, sound, 11 minutes, print courtesy of James Reidel.

Approaches and Leavetakings (1952) by Weldon Kees and Jurgen Ruesch; 16mm, b&w, sound, 14 minutes, print courtesy of James Reidel.

Hotel Apex (1952) by Weldon Kees; 16mm –shown on DVD, b&w, silent, 11 minutes, DVD courtesy of The Lincoln City Libraries/ Jane Pope Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors.

The Bridge (1955) by William Heick; 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes, print courtesy of William Heick.

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Thanks to James Reidel, Anne O'Toole at Monaco Labs, The Lincoln City Libraries/ Jane Pope Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors, William Heick, Canyon Cinema, Barry Thorpe, The Gertrude Stein Gallery (gallerygertrudestein.com), The Poetry Center at San Francisco State University, and Maia Cybele Carpenter for their generous assistance in making this program possible.

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