

Treasures IV: American Avant-Garde Film

Wednesday, April 15, 2009 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Curated and Presented by Jeff Lambert of the National Film Preservation Foundation

The San Francisco-based non-profit National Film Preservation Foundation was created in 1997 by the US Congress to facilitate the preservation of the nation's film heritage. Through the administration of federally and privately funded programs, nearly 1,500 films of all genres have been preserved and made accessible to the public, including dozens of restorations funded by NFPF's Avant-Garde Masters Grant. Without the NFPF and its extraordinary support of film preservation efforts by such institutions as the Academy Film Archives, Anthology Film Archives, the Museum of Modern Art and the Pacific Film Archive, countless films might be lost forever. Tonight's screening celebrates the release of the latest in the NFPF's *Treasures from American Film Archives* DVD series—the two-disc, 312 minute, *Treasures IV: American Avant-Garde Film, 1947–1986* which contains the home video debut of twenty-six classics of American experimental filmmaking. (Steve Polta and Jonathan Marlow)

Go! Go! Go! (1962–64) by Marie Menken; 16mm, color, silent, 11 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative

Preserved by Anthology Film Archives

"New York City has inspired many a film portrait, but few have captured its dynamism with the buoyancy of *Go! Go! Go!*, by avant-garde pioneer Marie Menken (1910–70). Born into a Lithuanian family in New York City, Menken studied at the Art Students League. She worked as a secretary at the Gallery of Non-Objective Painting (which became the Guggenheim Museum) while struggling to make her way as a painter. In 1937, the artist married poet/professor Willard Maas and the two secured a spectacular rent-controlled Brooklyn Heights penthouse with views of New York Harbor. Some of *Go! Go! Go!* was later filmed from its terrace.

"A carpenter's daughter with practical know-how, Menken taught herself to use a camera and shot *Geography of the Body* (1943), a collaboration with Maas. Supporting the war effort, she designed miniatures and special effects for an Army Signal Corps movie unit. By the late 1940s, she was exhibiting paintings with abstract expressionists at the Tibor de Nagy and Betty Parsons galleries; her 1951 solo show at the latter directly preceded one for Jackson Pollock. Soon she was branching into mixed media and collage and making films on her own. Writing to P. Adams Sitney in 1962, Menken explained, 'There is no why for my making films. I just liked the twitters of the machine.... I tried it and loved it. In painting I never liked the staid static [and] always looked for what would change.' She made more than twenty short films, creating impressionistic profiles of artworks and artists as well as cinematic notebooks. She considered *Go! Go! Go!* her major film." (NFPF)

Little Stabs at Happiness (1959–63) by Ken Jacobs; 16mm, color, sound, 15 minutes, print from the New York Public Library

Preserved by the Donnell Media Center of the New York Public Library.

"The premiere of Ken Jacobs's *Little Stabs at Happiness* at New York City's Charles Theater, recalled filmmaker Stan Brakhage, was 'terrifying.' 'Half the audience liked it and were enthusiastic. The other half disliked it with equal enthusiasm, which resulted in one of those booing-and-applauding matches throughout the entire showing.... Many artists refuse to have any shows at all for fear of having to go through something like Ken went through that Saturday night.'

"A born contrarian, Jacobs (b. 1933) grew up in Brooklyn, the child of separated parents. After his mother's death, he shuttled between his grandparents and father, enduring a childhood he described as 'disastrous but typical, bequeathing me a social disgust and anger that I have cultivated, refined, monumentalized and am gagging on.' He joined the coast guard to avoid the draft and returned to New

York in 1956 to study film and take painting classes from Hans Hofmann. Virtually penniless, he started *Orchard Street*, about life on the Lower East Side, and then began *Star Spangled to Death*, a wild, epic assemblage—part allegory, part found footage, all social critique—that obsessed him for decades. *Little Stabs at Happiness* dates from these desperate years.” (NFPF)

Mario Banana (No. 1) (1964) by Andy Warhol; 16mm, color, silent, 4 minutes, print from the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library

Preserved by the Museum of Modern Art.

“The most famous American artist of the twentieth century, Andy Warhol (1928–87) never lost his fascination with Hollywood. In 1962, he started a series of paintings of movie stars—Marilyn Monroe, Natalie Wood, Warren Beatty, Elizabeth Taylor—and the following year he began making his own films, producing some 600 between 1963 and 1976, including many now regarded as avant-garde classics. Most ran a few minutes; the longest, twenty-five hours. With titles like *Sleep* (1963), *Empire* (1964), *Vinyl* (1965), and *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), Warhol’s works replaced the myths of Hollywood with something uniquely his own.

“*Mario Banana (No. 1)* employs an approach that is similar Warhol’s heralded *Screen Tests*. The single-shot color film records drag performer Mario Montez, done up in gloves, makeup and glittering headdress, in full-face close-up, head slightly inclined, as if propped on a pillow. Considered by Warhol ‘one of the best natural comedians I’d ever met,’ Montez took his stage name from Hollywood B movie star Maria Montez and appeared in at least nine other Warhol movies, as well as films by Jack Smith (*Flaming Creatures*) and Ron Rice (*Chumlum*), off-off-Broadway productions and the 1967 Miss All-America Camp Beauty Pageant. Here, with coy delight, Montez lingers over each finger and lip movement as he relishes a banana. In *Mario Banana (No. 1)*, as in the *Screen Tests*, Warhol makes no apologies: ‘I only wanted to find great people and let them be themselves.’” (NFPF)

Chumlum (1964) by Ron Rice; 16mm, color, sound, 23 minutes, print from the Film-makers’ Cooperative

Preserved by Anthology Film Archives.

“The film career of Ron Rice (1935–64) burned briefly but brightly. Rice burst onto the American independent scene with *The Flower Thief* (1960), a picaresque vehicle for underground poet Taylor Mead, that was shot on the cheap in San Francisco and has become a Beat classic. Restless and reckless, Rice worked on at least four projects as he shuttled between his native New York and Mexico over the next few years. *Chumlum* is one he brought to completion.

“*Chumlum* is a snapshot of New York’s underground at its most flamboyant. Flitting in and out in multiple roles are Jack Smith (sporting a mustache), drag performer Francis Francine, Mario Montez, filmmaker Barbara Rubin and Beverly Grant. Angus MacLise, the original drummer for the Velvet Underground, performed the score on the *cimbalom*, a type of hammered dulcimer used by Hungarian Gypsies; artist Tony Conrad recorded the music.” (NFPF)

Peyote Queen (1965) by Storm De Hirsch; 16mm, color, sound, 9 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives

Preserved by Anthology Film Archives

Storm De Hirsch (1922?–2000) was already a published poet when she completed her debut feature, *Goodbye in a Mirror* (1964), which traces the tangled lives of three women rooming together in Rome. The independent production screened at Cannes and won praise from filmmaker Shirley Clarke as the first ‘real woman’s film.’ Returning to New York, De Hirsch began the three-film, partly animated *The Color of Ritual*, *The Color of Thought*. *Peyote Queen* is a part of this trilogy.

“I wanted badly to make an animated short,’ De Hirsch explained to Jonas Mekas, but ‘had no camera available. I did have some old, unused film stock and several rolls of 16mm sound tape. So I used that—plus a variety of discarded surgical instruments and the sharp edge of a screwdriver—by cutting, etching, and painting directly on both film and tape.’ During the late 1960s *Peyote Queen* circulated as part of midnight movie shows and won a following. Covering a 1966 ‘Psychedelia’ program for the *New York Times*, reviewer Dan Sullivan faulted the technical presentation but applauded the film. In works like *Peyote Queen*, he wrote, ‘action painting may have found... a home that suits it far better than canvas ever did....

When the Cinerama people get hold of it—watch out.” (NFPF)

7362 (1967) by Pat O'Neill; 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes, print from the Academy Film Archive

Preserved by the Academy Film Archive of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

“A native Angeleno, Pat O'Neill dreamed of becoming an automotive designer and entered the design program at the University of California, Los Angeles. Through screenings at Raymond Rohauer's Coronet Theater he discovered the avant-garde, and with Robert Abel, he completed his first film, *By the Sea* (1963), before receiving his master's degree in art. Teaching photography at UCLA, he continued to make films while working on sculpture and assemblage. In 1970, O'Neill joined the founding film and video faculty at the California Institute of the Arts. Four years later he set up an optical effects company, Lookout Mountain Films, and applied the technology developed in his personal projects to commercials and Hollywood features.

“In his breakthrough film, *7362*, O'Neill took control of the behind-the-scenes technology of filmmaking. Acquiring a navy-surplus contact printer and laboratory processing tanks, he developed the film himself, achieving by hand a look of fluid modernity. As the filmmaker explained to media arts expert John Hanhardt, '*7362* had to do with hand-making, with being able to take something, do an operation on it, look at it, do another operation, and so on. It was a mechanical model, predating the electronic.' With this approach he 'could take a single figure and make a chorus line.' The film's name comes from the stock number of the high-contrast black-and-white Kodak film commonly used for titles and mattes. This Kodak film became the building block for *7362*'s special effects.” (NFPF)

Bad Burns (1982) by Paul Sharits; 16mm, color, silent, 6 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives

Preserved by Anthology Film Archives

“Film is a fragile medium, and some artists push its fragility to the breaking point. Paul Sharits (1943–93) was a pusher. 'I think of [film] as a sort of a primitive, vulnerable medium,' said Sharits. 'I know it's going to disappear, and I almost look upon it with a certain empathy.' He moved his films out of the theater and into the gallery, creating multiscreen environments that exploited the qualities that made film different from the other visual arts. The projectors, with their clatter and flickering light, became protagonists, and the strips of celluloid, agents of ephemeral beauty.

“Sharits explores these dynamics in the three-screen installation *3rd Degree* (1982). The work grew from a close-up of a burning match waved threateningly across a woman's face; the action escalates into the burning of the film itself. Sharits rephotographed the resulting footage and photographed it again. He then projected all three generations, each on its own loop, side by side. Wrote Sharits, 'The film is “about” the fragility of the film medium and human vulnerability. Both the filmic and the human images resist threat/intimidation/mutilation: The victim is defiant and the film strip also struggles on, both “under fire.”’

“*Bad Burns* developed from the outtakes. Sharits explained that the second-generation film 'was loaded in camera improperly, ...creating some rather amusing and mysterious imagery.' While most filmmakers might discard such material, Sharits delighted in the creation, calling the new work 'a made “found” object.' In the chance happening of his mis-take, he found something beautiful.” (NFPF)