

San Francisco Cinematheque @ YBCA presents  
Avant-Garde History October 8, 2006

## Notes on Marie Menken

2006. 35mm. Color. 97 minutes.

A film by Martina Kudláček

Editor - Henry Hills, sound-Judy Karp, music - John Zorn

### West Coast Premiere

**Marie Menken, 1909-1970**, born Marie Menkevicius of Lithuanian immigrant parents. She was a collagist painter who became a filmmaker that intentionally eschewed metaphor, drama and literature in her creations. Menken met her husband, poet and filmmaker, Willard Maas at Yaddo, an art colony in upstate NY, married and turned their Brooklyn Heights penthouse into a lavish salon of artists, literati, and illuminati including Maya Deren, Marilyn Monroe, Charles Addams, Arthur Miller, Truman Capote, Edward Albee, Richard Wright, and artists interviewed in this portrait. Brakhage describes the penthouse as if "*The Flying Dutchman* had been shipwrecked on the top of an apartment house, and the various fragments of it fused together so that these two extraordinary people could inhabit it." Not only did Menken support their driven, totally creative lifestyle by working at Time-Life for 30 years but found time to make films and host lavish, wild parties. Her abusive lifestyle, excessive drinking, eventually destroyed her and in 1970, she died and 4 days later, Willard Maas died. Marie describes her process: "There is no why for my making films. I just liked the twitters of the machine, since it was an extension of painting for me, I tried and loved it."



### Martina Kudláček

Born in Vienna, Austria, She studied Theater, Film and Media Arts at the University of Vienna. She received an MFA degree in Documentary Film Directing at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague, Czech Republic. Many of her films, including experimental works in photography, Super-8, 16mm film and video, have won awards throughout Europe. Her feature length documentary, *In the Mirror of Maya Deren*, was her first international success. She also works as a researcher for the Anthology Film Archives, assisting in preservation projects with director and filmmaker Jonas Mekas. She is the recipient of the Anthology Film Archives Film Preservation Award 2004.

This thought-provoking introduction to a fascinating and unjustly-overlooked cultural figure of the 40's - 60's in NYC brings into focus Marie Menken, who is publicly known for her role as the protagonist in Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls*, which brought her a certain degree of fame, but obscured her important

role in avant-garde filmmaking. Not only did Menken make films and painting collages, she was central to a thriving creative community, formed her own distribution company, Gryphon Film, and was the catalyst for the formation of the Filmmaker's Co-op in New York. She was totally committed to creating new works and often used outdated stocks and discarded film ends from labs, neglecting to make prints as she never showed much interest in preserving her work. Eventually, she did go to a lab to make prints but her focus was on the creation, the energy between maker and subject. She emphasized the playful aspect of her engagement with the process of filmmaking and her deep feelings for her subjects. The film reveals her legacy and particularly, her influence and connection to Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas which is documented in both their writings.

Beginning with the excavation of Marie's rusty film cans, old photographs, and papers housed in a storage locker, Kudlacek brings Menken vividly back to life. Using a lyrical diary structure, she contrasts her own crisp black-and-white digital cinematography with lush color excerpts from Menken's 16 mm films.

In a powerful sequence that references celluloid's fragility and need for preservation, fellow artist Gerard Malanga winds through a rare clip of Marie Menken and Andy Warhol on a New York City rooftop. They are acting as matadors, in an artistic duel, each shooting with their respective 16 mm Bolex cameras. As Malanga hand winds the film through a Moviescope, we see a choreographed dance of embattled warriors that shines through flickering images of corroded film, decayed and luminous simultaneously. This is a moment only possible through the passage of celluloid, illuminated by light, moving at 24 fps through a device for viewing, a projector, a viewer.

**Next week, October 8, Cinematheque will present a retrospective of Marie Menken's films and a film by Willard Maas and John Hawkins, Valentine for Marie.**

Further info on Martina Kudlacek: <http://www.bombsite.com/kudlacek/kudlacek2.html>  
Film at Wit's End by Stan Brakhage. 1989. McPherson and Company.

**We are a membership organization. Please support experimentation and artists-made work and become a member.**