

Shocked by Existence

Recent Video Works by Ken Jacobs

Tuesday, October 6, 2009 — California College of the Arts

presented in association with Microcinema International

Ken Jacobs In Person

A program of recent short videos, some of them animated stereographs of family and friends. These include *A Scorcher in Italy*, *Jonas Mekas in Kodachrome Days*, *Hot Dogs at the Met*, *Bob Fleischner Dying* and *Gravity is Tops*. *What Happened on 23rd Street in 1901* is an elaboration of an Edison short and “excerpt from *The Sky Socialist stratified*” is a digital revisit to an 8mm feature I shot in 1963/64. *Brain Operations* is a merciless plunge into op-tickle phenomena—and I mean merciless. And I mean plunge. Combining 2D with 3D is so wrong (don’t you think?), often resulting in an impossible and unholy 2 and 1/2D. “Avant-garde” used to mean “naked people.” Now one is actually expected to watch this sinful cine-miscegenation with eyes slightly crossed, as they are now while you read this. (Ken Jacobs)

A Scorcher in Italy (2009) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, color, silent, 8 minutes, from the maker

Movie-star Flo, Nisi the thoughtful young girl, and Aza old enough to trudge with the rest of us but still expecting to be pushed around on wheels. The sun doesn’t kid around when it’s a sunny day in Rome. But it’s a perfect day, when—as is said—nothing happens.

What Happened on 23rd Street in 1901 (2009) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, b&w, silent, 14 minutes, from the maker

It was a set-up. A couple walks towards the camera, a sidewalk air-vent pushes the woman’s dress up. Layers of cloth billow and she is mortified. The moving-picture camera, already in place and grinding away, captures the event and her consternation becomes history, now transferred to digital and shown everywhere.

In this cine-reassessment, the action is simultaneously both speeded up and slowed down. How can that be? Overall progression is prolonged, so that a minute of recorded life-action takes ten minutes now to pass onscreen. Slow-motion, yes? No. Instead, the street-action meets with a need to see more, and there descends upon the event a sudden storm of investigative technique in the form of rapid churning of film-frames, looping of the tiny time-intervals that make up events. Black intervals enter and Eternalisms come into play meaning that directional movements continue in their directions without moving, potentially forever (hence the eternal factor, something possible to cinema however inconceivable in real life). Further, the two-dimensional reality of the screen is contested. Are things now appearing in depth? Flat they are not. Can there be a 2 1/2 D?

The young woman steps past the air vent and laughs.

Jonas Mekas in Kodachrome Days (2009) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, color, silent, 3 minutes, from the maker

Jonas remains most famous for not acting famous. Here he can be seen away from film audiences, dawdling in the cosmos while history happens elsewhere (unless we are mistaken and the most meaningful and revealing moments are the moments “at ease”).

Bob Fleischner Dying (2009) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, color, silent, 3 minutes, from the maker

Bob allows his sick and fading image to be caught in stereo photography. A man of mystery, so banal in some ways, so unexpectedly “on” when the situation demanded. The cameraman for *Blonde Cobra* and much beloved by the next generation of NY film-makers.

Hot Dogs at the Met (2009) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, color, sound, 10 minutes, from the maker

Stereo photos from the 1970s digitally animated, 3-D effects to be seen without spectacles even by one-eyed viewers. Jonas Mekas and Peter Kubelka and families eating out, then returning home via NY subway. Flo Jacobs and Azazel appear. The computer, considering location, emulates painting technique.

excerpt from *The Sky Socialist stratified* (2009) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, color, sound, 18 minutes, from the maker

A digital visit in 2009 to where we, Flo and I, were in 1964/65. Young people, there's no exaggerating how vivid, of the moment, whizbang and splendidly new 1964 and 65 were in their time, take my word. True, I was entering my thirties but Flo, my child-bride, was not yet 23. Underground Cinema had gotten momentarily hot just as my 16mm camera was stolen. I recoiled from the throng pushing to enter the circle of cheap celebrity and switched to 8mm. ("regular" was all there was). I then filmed *The Sky Socialist*, a sunny feature during the time of US assault upon the Vietnamese—Why? Because they were there—and afterwards struggled to make a decent 16mm blow-up, yet to happen. The duty of cinema as I understood it then was to lie, in order to make history bearable. The lie, however, was to be obvious enough so as to allude to the truth; film was a lie that invited seeing through, it was like religion but with a more of a wink. Flo then became a stand-in for Anne Frank, The Muse Of Cinema flew to the rescue with a happy ending mostly because she knew doing so gave her a chance to look good. Our days were permeated with the transcendent music of Olivier Messiaen and Charles Ives and Arnold Schoenberg and so, naturally, was this perfectly self-indulgent film. For this visit some of Messiaen can still be heard, contending with the supremely hip sensibility of Michael Schumacher.

Gravity Is Tops (2009) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, color, sound, 10 minutes, from the maker

A stereo-photo of an ocean wave slowly turns and churns. The hidden forces of Cinema conspire with an instant of history to produce actions that never were or could be. 3D for everyone (one eye will do). Regarding the title, one hears on all sides (doing battle) that "God is great". I don't get it, seeing that no one is listening or watching or doing anything about what happens here. However, gravity surely exists, if only for now, until the universe dissipates further, and it clearly decides much—if not everything—that happens. Gravity is the result of momentum, Earth a flung ball issuing from The Big Bang, every species of life a mad effort to regain the once-totality, dismemberment of which made us possible. I don't suggest praying to gravity for what you want for your birthday but it is very palpable in this movie.

Music by Rick Reed.

Brain Operations (2009) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, b&w, silent, 22 minutes, from the maker

Title refers to the viewer's mental activities watching this movie. Op-Art had a short run in the Sixties and Seventies. I liked what I saw, it was sensory, where Pop Art was mostly a send-up of commercial banality, a smirky imagined superiority to the brain-rot of our time. This movie was inspired by our bathroom floor-tiles, in a similar way to my getting into 3D to begin with. When editing 16mm film, I had reached for a strand and closed my hand on nothing. Explanation: I had visually coupled similar-appearing frames popping them forward in space. It was a life-changing moment and we can only hope they get it straight in the bio-pic. So it's early morning and I'm staring down and the tiles come up almost to my nose. They're hexagons but the movie opts for squares and diamonds—tilted squares. I assure you, assistant Erik Nelson and I did everything possible to make seeing this movie normally impossible. We had first thought to instruct viewers in the convergence of sightlines in order to see compound images—areas over other areas—but it seems to happen naturally with nothing before one but squares of diamonds. Please hang in with this, it can really be dazzling, for which reason I'm requesting that it be screened last. The dazzle subsides and one has met with a direct experience, with different visual events for each viewer and at each viewing, and not something about, however valuable that can be. No, this is not the time to watch movie stars. You are the intrepid explorer voyaging into cinema-art and confronting unpredictable form.