

Private Lives
Beth Custer Ensemble

and

the Films of Alexander Hammid

Thursday, October 21 at 7:00 pm — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
presented in Collaboration with SFMOMA as part of the *NOW PLAYING* series
supported by the San Francisco Foundation

Alexander Hammid (born in 1907 as Alexandr Hackenschmied, often referred to as Sasha) was a significant if underappreciated figure of twentieth century cinema, creating variously poetic personal “city symphony” films in the 1930s, anti-Nazi documentaries in the ‘40s and pioneering IMAX spectacles in the ‘70s. The spouse of Maya Deren from 1942–47, Hammid was a collaborator on perhaps the avant-garde’s most influential work, *Meshes of the Afternoon*. In celebration of this vastly underappreciated artist, the Beth Custer Ensemble (consisting of Custer, Jan Jackson, David James and Lisa Mezzacappa) tonight performs original scores by Custer to his earliest films, *Bezucelná procházka* (*Aimless Walk*) and *Na Prazském hrade* (*At Prague Castle*)—both extremely rare loans from the Czech National Film Archive in Prague—and his lesser-known collaboration with Deren, *Private Life of a Cat*. Complimenting the performance will be a screening of Martina Kudláček’s loving 1996 documentary portrait, *Aimless Walk: Alexander Hammid* and the seminal *Meshes....* (Steve Polta)

Beth Custer is a San Francisco based composer, performer, bandleader, and the proprietor of BC Records. She is a founding member of the notorious silent film soundtrack purveyors the Club Foot Orchestra the first band in the US to score and perform with silent era films. In addition to leading The Beth Custer Ensemble and the quartet of esteemed jazz clarinetists, Clarinet Thing, Custer is a founding member of the fourth-world ensemble Trance Mission and the trip-hop duo Eighty Mile Beach and has collaborated with artists from around the world.

Custer composes for theatre, film, dance, television, installations and the concert stage. With the Club Foot Orchestra, she has scored scenes from the CBS/Film Roman cartoon *The Twisted Tales of Felix The Cat* and the silent films *Pandora’s Box*, *Sherlock Jr.*, and *Metropolis*. In 2000, The Pacific Film Archive commissioned Custer to compose a live score for Kote Mikaberidze’s 1929 Soviet film, *My Grandmother*. She then went on to receive the Aaron Copland Recording Fund to record and release the work on DVD. Additionally, Custer has scored films by George Spies, Melinda Stone, Betsy Bayha, Karina Epperlein, Will Zavala Koohan Paik and Peter MacCandless.

In addition to her extensive work in live theatre, Custer has collaborated with musicians and artists worldwide, including Trimpin, Vladimir Kokolia, Billie Grace Lynn, Fred Frith, Miya Masaoka, Joan Jenrenaud, Amy Denio, Tin Hat Trio, Tango No. 9, Pamela Z, Will Bernard, Sex Mob, John Schott, Grassy Knoll, ROVA, Violent Femmes, J.A. Deane, Snakefinger, Greg Goodman, William Cepeda, Elaine Buckholtz, Mark Eitzel, Penelope Houston, Anna Homler, Ollin and Connie Champagne.

In 1998, Custer was the first Bay Area artist to receive a second artist’s residency at the Marin Headlands Center for the Arts. Other residencies have included those at Montalvo Arts Center, the University of Wyoming and Civitella Ranieri. She has also received the prestigious Meet The Composer New Residency and Commissioning grants, a McKnight Fellowship, two San Francisco Arts Commission Individual Artist grants, two Zellerbach Family Fund awards, a Gerbode award, an Argosy Foundation recording grant, and three American Composer’s Forum grants.

She holds a Masters Degree in Clarinet Performance from San Francisco State University and a Bachelors Degree in Musical Studies from the Crane School of Music at the State University of New York in Potsdam. She is also an Adjunct Professor of Composition at Mills College.

Bezucelná procházka (Aimless Walk) (1930) by Alexander Hammid; 35mm, b&w, 9 minutes, print from the Czech National Film Archive

“The City as evoked in *Aimless Walk* is devoid of the poetic glamour of the avant-gardist illusions of the 1920s. It is a city of stone, a living space with a memory and an enigma. Its proportions exceed the human scale and create a network for modern man’s fate of being cast into a social context that limits him further. *Aimless Walk* is not simply a documentary about Prague, nor is it a modernist version of urban civilization. The author constructs instead a world in its own right, an idea of living space, rather than reproducing any concrete social plane. [It] invites several comparisons [...] with the notion of urbanity in the contemporary ‘city symphony’ films of Walter Ruttmann (*Berlin, Symphony of a City*, 1927) and Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929).

“[...] In considering the historical context of *Aimless Walk*, we notice motives coincidental to the works of the European avant-garde, such as Joris Ivens’ *Regen (Rain)*, 1929), László Moholy-Nagy’s films *Grosstadtzigeuner* (1932–33) and *Marseille, vieux port* (1929) and the rhythmical elements of Henri Chomette’s *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse* (1925). However original and underivative Hammid’s poetics were, the films names above show to what extent *Aimless Walk* belongs to the aesthetic movements of the time, which were close to impressionism and social documentary, and therefore belonging to the genre of so-called city symphonies.

“[...] There is [also] something that partially links *Aimless Walk* to surrealism—the level of the ‘inner model’ as articulated by Czech surrealist theoretician Karel Teige in the 1940s. If we understand the inner model as an authentic creative impulse realized with the assistance of the critical intervention of the subconscious, then we can perceive *Aimless Walk* of 1930 as a realization of the concept *avant le letter*. It is born of spontaneity shaped by critical thought, unbound by any premises of theme, form or genre.

“In *Aimless Walk* the author tried his hand at determining to what degree he was able to express himself through the filmic image, and with what precision the filmic image could articulate his thoughts. The film therefore became the heart and the point of initiation from which Hammid’s entire later career was derived. We can speak of Hammid as an experimental auteur filmmaker if we have in mind his visual and compositional experiments with film language. This subversive examination of the film form, together with the element of ‘surrealism’ present in his signature style, is however the authentic expression of a creative spirit rather than an aesthetic intention. (Michal Bregant: “Alexander Hammid’s Czech Years: Space and Time of His Early Films.” Published in *Tribute to Sasha: The Film Work of Alexander Hammid* (2002). Michael Omasta, ed.)

Na Prazském hrade (At Prague Castle) (1932) by Alexander Hammid; 35mm, b&w, 13 minutes, print from the Czech National Film Archive

“In his second realized film *Na Prazském hrade*, all three of Hammid’s most prominent interests came together: photography, film and architecture. The sense of film structure and editing that would for many years become his main profession is for him both the spirit as well as the framework of the film. It is through its internal architecture that the film comes together as a meaningful whole.

“*Na Prazském hrade* shows the sovereignty of Hammid’s efforts in composition as the expression of a unique cinematic sensibility and talent. It could be said that from his very first steps in film to his late IMAX and multi-screen works of the 1970s and ‘80s, Hammid in his best films was above all the constructor of a filmic universe. The real model of the world loses importance—it becomes merely a descriptive of reality. His methodical control of the image and composition of film structure always guarantee that the resulting film would never fall into epicality and the description of the obvious.” (Michal Bregant: “Alexander Hammid’s Czech Years: Space and Time of His Early Films.” Published in *Tribute to Sasha: The Film Work of Alexander Hammid* (2002). Michael Omasta, ed.)

The Private Life of a Cat (1945–46) by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid; 16mm screened as video, 30 minutes

“Sasha, meanwhile, was beginning to feel discouraged. Their marriage started to tear apart, and his career may have been on the wane at the time; he was slipping a bit as the breadwinner. And he was not getting the attention for *Meshes...* or as a filmmaker that Maya was. So there was a quarrel between them in which he said that she got all the credit for *Meshes...*, and where did it leave him?

“So, as Maya told it to me, she said that they would make another film and it would be his.

“That film was *The Private Life of a Cat*, released in 1946. It is a powerful, explosive film, with as much tension—as much having to do with a struggling marriage—as *Meshes...*, perhaps more.

“Now, Maya and Sasha had no children. They did have cats; and their cats were their children. Everything that had to do with holding the household together was invested in those cats. So that was what they made the film about; the cats were the metaphor, the totem that they most happily shared in the midst of the dissolving marriage.

“The film was, of course, a collaboration; and we do see two distinct camera styles in it. Those who’ve seen *Meshes of the Afternoon* are easily able to spot Sasha’s pictures. They are immaculate—as immaculate as can be when the photographer is trying to catch an action down on the floor around the catbox. They bring all of his old-world, sophisticated craftsmanship to a beautiful pitch. Then there are an extraordinary number of shots in which the camera is ratchety, where it moves with a particularity of style that is as easily distinct from Sasha’s as a brushstroke of Van Gogh is from Rembrandt. It is my opinion that these are Maya’s shots. [...] At some point then, they decided to make the completed film, the final statement. And the result is that *The Private Life of a Cat* is, in essence Maya Deren’s first film—at least I am convinced of this after years of studying it. But of course it’s called Sasha’s. Which is one of the ironies of life, that *Meshes*, which was his and considered hers, led to *The Private Life...* which was hers and considered his.

Unhappily, ...*Private Life...* is shown very seldom. Even retrospectives of Deren’s work rarely include it. I think it is one of the finest films that has ever been made, for a number of reasons. One is as the final result of Maya’s and Sasha’s collaboration. The majority of images are by Sasha; but many of hers shaped his. There are those who disagree with me on the extent of Maya’s involvement with shooting this film, but in my opinion only Maya can be responsible, for instance, for those angularities of shot which go up to indicate the cupboard where the mother cat is looking for a place to have kittens. It’s only Sasha who could have made the image where the camera starts with the cat’s eye and lifts ...list as with the wings of Phoebus (or the very best of Hollywood dolly shots) up over a box and ends in a superbly crafted composition. [...] Each of them—both of them—were so concerned with making a good film, that there’s no singular egoistic style. And yet the final result, with the editing-in of the different styles of photography, of vision, says so much about him and her.” (Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit’s End*)

Meshes of the Afternoon (1943) by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid; 16mm, b&w, screened silent, 14 minutes

“Cut with Sasha, [Maya Deren’s] life as a filmmaker really began. Early in their marriage, she and Sasha decided to make a personal film; so in 1943, *Meshes of the Afternoon* was created. It was a one-of-a-kind film, and still is.

“Essentially, Hammid was the photographer; but the real force of the film came from Maya herself. In fact, it’s always been assumed that *Meshes...* was mainly her film; but from knowing her personally and from studying the film, I have good reason to know it is Sasha’s. *Meshes...* shows its European roots. For all the unusual things that happen in the film, its whole style of photography betrays the very slick, polished, penultimate craftsmanship of the old European sensibility for which Sasha was known. (Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit’s End*)

Aimless Walk: Alexander Hammid (1996) by Martina Kudláček; 16mm screened as video, color, sound, 48 minutes, tape from the maker and Six pack Film

“To make films in the way one takes a stroll is a goal of beauty and an enterprise of considerable difficulty. The apparatus and complex production processes often stand in the way of the whole idea of strolling and being receptive to every flicker of the world. But one is almost unaware of these difficulties in Martina Kudláček’s documentaries[...]. Camera and tape recorder register fleeting observations and minute details with the quiet exactitude that one normally finds in pencil drawings and fountain pen script.

As a portrait of an artist *Aimless Walk: Alexander Hammid* refuses to surrender either to mythologizing the chosen subject or to that flood of fact and information which turns many documentary films into hours of dry scholastic pedagogy. The film is interested in the apparently inessential in the life of photographer and filmmaker Alexander Hammid, who was born as Alexander Hackenschmied in 1907 in Linz, Austria. And it respects his wishes: ‘I don’t like to talk. I express myself always in images. Otherwise I like silence.’ The inessentials are Hammid’s essentials—the daily doings in his New York apartment; how he sews on a button, makes his own yoghurt or the long walks and subway journeys through Manhattan with echoes from his first film in 1930 *Bezúcelná procházka* (*Aimless Walk*) shot during the heyday of Prague avant-garde film and before his emigration.

Throughout the film, Kudláček associates her observations with beautiful passages from Hammid’s experimental films[...]. Splinters are knitted together in chains, threads of sound and whispering pictures become dense, that is the intonation of the film. (Alexander Horwath)

**Thursday, October 21 at 9:00 pm — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Beth Custer Ensemble: Kote Mikaberidze’s *My Grandmother***

My Grandmother (1929) by Kote Mikeberidze; 35mm screened as video, b&w, 65 minutes

Forgotten for a half-century, Kote Mikaberidze’s *My Grandmother* is a delightful example of the Soviet Eccentric Cinema movement as well as an irreverent satire of the then still-young Soviet State system. Noted for its anarchic styles—which include stop-motion, puppetry, exaggerated camera angles, animation and constructivist sets—the film unspools the foibles and follies that abound when a Georgian paper pusher, modeled after American silent comic Harold Lloyd, loses his job.

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