Films That Tell Time
A Ken Jacobs Retrospective

PROGRAM NOTES, FICTION, POETRY
AND DRAWINGS BY KEN JACOBS

INTERVIEW WITH KEN JACOBS

INTRODUCTION BY DAVID SCHWARTZ

ESSAY BY TOM GUNNING

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AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

FILMS THAT TELL TIME: A KEN JACOBS RETROSPECTIVE

October 20-November 15, 1989

Organized by David Schwartz, Associate Curator of Film

"Could do better," all my report cards summed me up. Quite right. I thank more than I can name. There are moments, after completing a work, I feel worthy of your good will. This retrospective I lay at feet of Flo, my lucky break.

--Ken Jacobs

Cover photograph: Jerry Sims and Bob Fleischner in Star Spangled to Death (1958-60)

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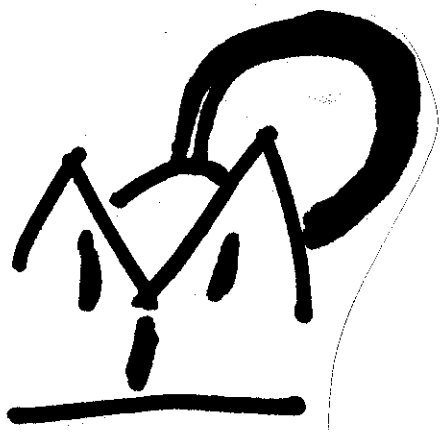

Catalogue edited by David Schwartz

All drawings by Ken Jacobs

INTRODUCTION

"These aren't mere images on a screen.
Life took place in front of a camera.
--Ken Jacobs

For the past thirty years, Ken Jacobs has used a remarkable variety of approaches to explore the fundamental nature of the moving image. Whether working with found footage, shooting spontaneous comic narratives, meditative visual studies and diaristic epic allegories, or creating projector performances with the Nervous System--his innovative 3-D apparatus--Jacobs' art has derived its fascination from a simple fact. All film, despite its ability to create the illusion of reality unfolding before our eyes, is a record of the past, of life that has passed in front of the camera.

In essence, Jacobs reveals film as a Frankenstein art. What is a movie but a celluloid corpse brought to life by the electrical spark of the projector? The still images awaken, creating a tantalizing semblance of life. Yet Jacobs' art demonstrates that despite the allure of the medium's ability to control time and space, it is impossible to exist anywhere but in the present. The key to approaching his work may be to know that he studied painting with Hans Hofmann, the abstract expressionist, in the 1950's. Here, Jacobs learned that vitality in artistic form comes from surface tensions. Everything that can be gleaned from a Jacobs film is right there, on the surface, in the film's play between 2-D and 3-D, stillness and motion, past and present, illusion and reality.

Jacobs has described his film Tom Tom The Piper's Son as a journey into the abyss. Rephotographing a 1905 Biograph one-reeler, Jacobs penetrates into the image, delving into each shot, zooming in on details, breaking down the "commotioning" frame into its basic elements. "Ghosts! Cine-recordings of the vivacious doings of persons long dead!" he once wrote of the film's eerie quality, with its myriad of human activities, of fleeting gestures fixed in time by the play of light against the chemical surface of the film. Probing deeper and deeper, Jacobs discovers that beyond the photographic grains in Tom Tom, there is nothingness. Speaking of this journey, Jacobs said, "The evanescent is exactly what is. I really think I come back to the surface in Tom Tom... it's about penetration to the sublime, to the infinite, to an abyss within the commonplace, and the joyful return and appreciation of the richness of the commonplace." For all of their formal play, Jacobs' films are about an appreciation that the present should be grasped and probed as deeply as possible. This is surely related to what Jacobs has called his "survivor mentality." Jacobs' films are intensely political, obsessed with the notion of what it means to exist at a certain moment in history. Jacobs was born in New York, a Jew, in 1933--a fact whose implications are central to his work. Jacobs has called himself "an earthbound escape artist." In his work, there is a tension between the desire to use art to create new worlds, and the understanding that it is impossible to escape time--and history.

Jacobs' work expresses a rapturous engagement with the material at hand--which, with film, means images of reality. His art is anything but abstract; call him a concrete filmmaker. Every image is rooted in the stuff of daily life. A

telling prologue to his career is his first film, Orchard Street, which records the teeming vitality of a Sunday afternoon on the Lower East Side in 1956. The film is not "about" anything, yet it is a vivid document of street life sketched through a prismatic accumulation of details. The camerawork is rich in pictorial play, with vertical panning shots that flatten space into a two-dimensional scroll giving way to compositions that extend deep into space. Yet despite the formal play, life always invades, foiling any chance for pure abstraction. As we admire the impressionistic flurry of Kodachrome colors, we are also absorbing human information, looking at the way people dressed, and at the pots and pans, dolls, and in one shot, underwear and pickles, that are being sold on the street. We see Jacobs kissing a woman; during a recent viewing, he laughingly explained that this shot was his way of "embracing the street." Whether he was joking or not, there is a sense of playful embrace in all of Jacobs' work, perhaps the sensuality of a painter for whom all that matters is matter, that which exists in physical terms and can be translated to the world of the canvas.

A Ken Jacobs retrospective is long overdue, but it is also inherently paradoxical. In his efforts to constantly probe deeper, to open up film to the most intense scrutiny, Jacobs has created works that are willfully and playfully incomplete. He constantly revises his works, allowing them to be affected by time. In Blonde Cobra, he incorporates live radio, so that no two screenings are exactly alike. There is an element of performance in all of his work, yet nowhere is it as strong as in the remarkable Nervous System pieces which are the centerpiece of this retrospective. "Advanced filmmaking leads to Muybridge," he once said, and the Nervous System returns film to its fundamental nature; that of a series of still images. In the exquisitely choreographed dance between film frames, each movement and gesture becomes an event. The very fact of motion suddenly becomes paradoxical; even the simple change in position of a hand from one frame to the next seems impossible. How did movement occur in these frozen moments? Manipulating space and time before our eyes, Jacobs is like a magician who shows how the trick is done, only to make the illusion more powerful.

The moving image is the most pervasive of all art forms; it has become so integral to our lives that we take it for granted, forget how to question it, how to remain aware of the enormous impact that it has on us. Talking about his work with found footage, Jacobs has stated that there are enough images in the world; our task should be to take them out for a good look, and probe them in depth. This retrospective provides a rich opportunity for just such an exploration.

--David Schwartz

There are two people, aside from Ken Jacobs, who were invaluable. As there are no boundaries between life and art for Ken, so are there no bounds to the influence that his wife, Flo, has had on his work. She has been vital to every aspect of this program. And Tom Gunning, whose eloquent essay follows, has provided guidance and inspiration in many ways, which can't be adequately listed. Finally, there is no Ken Jacobs retrospective without Ken Jacobs; thanks, Ken, for throwing yourself into this full force.

"FILMS THAT TELL TIME:" THE PARADOXES OF THE CINEMA OF KEN JACOBS

Tom Gunning

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> I love to go to the
> movies; the only thing
> that bothers me is the
> image on the screen.
> --Theodor W. Adorno

I. Ken Jacobs and the Inventing of the Cinema

When asked in 1899 to comment on the invention of moving pictures (which his experiments had made possible) the physiologist and inventor of chronophotography, Etienne-Jules Marey, declared, "What [motion pictures] show, the eye can see directly. They add nothing to the power of vision and remove none of its illusions. But the true essence of the scientific method is to supplement the weakness of our senses and correct our errors." As we begin the celebration of cinema's centenary, I believe it is time to take stock of this fin de siecle invention and ask Marey's implied question: has the cinema strengthened our vision and given us the means to overcome illusion? Or has it rather, as he seemed to fear, weakened our sense and understanding of sight and multiplied the possibilities of visual deception?

While the films of Ken Jacobs may not completely answer this question, they certainly lead us onto the proper paths for its investigation. For the past three decades, Jacobs has probed the nature of the cinema in a way few filmmakers have aspired to. And it is precisely the total body of Jacobs' work (rather than any specific film) that reveals the systematic and profound nature of his investigation. This retrospective allows us to discover the center of an oeuvre that is more fugitive than most, yet essential to a rethinking of the nature of film as it enters its second century.

I wouldn't load such freight on the back of Jacobs' work if I weren't sure it could take it, in spite of its unprepossessing appearance. Looked at over an expanse of time, Jacobs' work might seem disjointed. In a concentrated dose its unities emerge and its ambitions and successes are clarified. But these ambitions are couched within ironies and their most probing questions come as a still small voice rather than a whirlwind. The fragmentary and seemingly modest dimensions of this oeuvre are its riddle and secret challenge. Jacobs has never claimed the position of priest of cinema but rather describes himself as a sort of second-hand dealer in film's curiosity shop, his work bits and pieces showing the wear of time. But as in a 19th-century romantic tale, it is in this rag and bone shop that the greatest mysteries of film can be obtained, discoveries unavailable in the great halls of bombast and pretension.

On first seeing a number of Jacobs films, one might flip through the program notes to make sure these are the works of one filmmaker. The diversity can be a bit dizzying. To the extent that genres exist in avant-garde film, Jacobs seems

to cover them all: picaresque comedies (Blonde Cobra, Little Stabs At Happiness); diary film/home movie (Nissan Ariana Window, Urban Peasants); structural experiments in a single fixed-take (Soft Rain) or rephotography (Tom Tom The Piper's Son); metaphysical dramas with allegorical tableaux (The Sky Socialist); experiments in documentary (Orchard Street, Perfect Film). But If this succession of phrases describe something of the range of Jacobs' work, they also immediately obscure the films. None of these films can be so easily categorized, and seeing them as parts of a whole makes one aware of subterranean passages linking them.

Jacobs' films pursue the slippery surfaces of experience rather than the deceptive clarity of ideas. None of his films illustrate or grow out of theories, and there is no substitute for the hard won pleasures of sitting through them and puzzling them out while watching. He has specifically warned me of the dangers of trying to explain his (or anyone's) films, and the reader is hereby cautioned that this essay will be useful only if she has already threaded her own way through the Jacobs labyrinth. To delve into a Jacobs film requires getting one's hands dirty. What I hope to do in this essay is less to take an overview than to trace a series of paths along the corridors, well aware of the finger smudges on the wall and the sticky footprints on the floor. But from my perspective, more is at stake here than simply understanding Jacobs' films. The nature of cinema itself is the issue, a question that Jacobs explores with paradoxes rather than doctrines.

II. **The Paradox of the Perfect Film: The Discovered Image**

> All the arts are founded on the presence of Man; only photography delights us with his absence.
> --Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image"

The first and most apparent paradox of Jacobs' work is the fact that most of his films are made from material shot by other people with other purposes than his own. The sources are varied: footage from abandoned film projects by Jacobs' friend, filmmaker Bob Fleischner (Blonde Cobra); a 1905 chase film by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, shot by famous cameraman Billy Bitzer (Tom Tom The Piper's Son); a short film, probably shot for television, about the sacrifices of a country doctor (The Doctor's Dream); home movies from the '40s shot by a relative of Jacobs' wife, Florence (Urban Peasants); outtakes of news footage surrounding the assassination of Malcolm X (Perfect Film); and in the Nervous System performances: a documentary on the colonial history of the Philippines (The Philippines Adventure); combat footage from WWII (Camera Thrills Of The War); antique hard core stag movies (XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX); records of daredevil stunts (The Whole Shebang). These films consist almost entirely of found footage; bits of political documentaries, cartoons, and educational films also play important roles in Lisa And Joey In Connecticut, January 1965 and Star Spangled To Death, not to mention the many instances of "found sound," (old 78's, ethnographic recordings, how-to records, vintage jazz) that make up Jacobs' soundtracks.

In most of these films Jacobs works over the original footage, utterly transforming the material into a film of his own, either by re-editing it

according to his own schema (The Doctor's Dream), re-photographing it off the screen (Tom Tom The Piper's Son), or transforming it through a multiple projection system (as in the Nervous System performances). But in Perfect Film, one of Jacobs' most recent works, the transformation has been reduced to a minimum. Perfect Film starkly reveals Jacobs' paradoxical view of filmmaking as a process that doesn't necessarily require a filmmaker's conscious intentions to be meaningful.

Perfect Film is literally a found film. Jacobs, foraging through a second-hand shop on Canal Street, found the footage (as well as the film which he re-edited into The Doctor's Dream) in a bin of used film reels. The metal reels were on sale for a couple of bucks, with the films clinging precariously to them thrown in for free. Jacobs gave the footage a name and made a print, boosting the volume of one section. Otherwise the film remains as he found it. The paradox lies in the fact that nonetheless Perfect Film stands as an essential Jacobs film, and one that gains its fullest dimension when seen in the context of all his work. Perfect Film--a film that Jacobs neither shot, edited, or "directed," but only found.

Is Jacobs simply playing a dadaist game, signing his name to a discarded readymade? Rather than an action of brash egotism, commandeering the work of someone else, Jacobs' issuing of Perfect Film under his name displays a deep humility before the cinematic image and a devotion to its inherent fascination. In this investigation of the cinematic image Jacobs' lack of manipulation of the original footage is as important as a scientist's disciplined objectivity during an experiment. The film consists of what would generally be considered outtakes, unedited footage from news coverage of the assassination of Malcolm X. We see and hear multiple interviews of an eyewitness to the shooting; interviews with bystanders in Harlem; a statement by a New York City police official; silent footage of the Audobon Ballroom, where the murder took place, and its environs; close-ups of bullet holes in the floor; and briefly an image of Malcolm himself discussing recent threats to his life.

The event which motivates the film galvanizes our attention. But accustomed as we are to broadcast coverage, it is the unmanipulated quality of this unedited footage that begins to intrigue us, provided we are willing to let its powers of distraction overcome our impatience to get the story. The gathering of information brings us no closer to the horror of the actual event. In its multiple re-tellings we witness an act of murder become a story, then a news item, a bit which will be tailored to the format demands of television journalism. Even the sincere involvement of the eyewitness seems to be overwhelmed by the banality of the interview process. One's attention becomes diverted to odd bits of behavior (the eyewitness' jaw muscles seem to convulse; the bizarre and irrelevant behavior of bystanders, jumping to be included within the camera frame, attracted not by the event but by the camera). The film becomes an anthropological document, giving us the opportunity to observe human behavior in itself, not simply as a vehicle for information or ready made formulas of human interest.

Since this is raw footage, the awkward moments which would be weeded out before broadcast remain. These rough spots possess the greatest powers of revelation. The police official's demand that the filming be done his way reveals his insecurity and authoritarian stance, rather than his strength and control. Likewise the inarticulateness and clumsy responses of some of the black bystanders eloquently express the emotional dynamics of the moment. Besides

these bits of flotsam and jetsam of reality, the starts and stutters of film itself are retained. The film includes sections of blank leader, occasionally with wild tracks of sound. Shaky MOS pick-up shots of street signs and the exterior of the ballroom give a fragmented but strangely expressive feel of the place itself, the scene of the crime.

At one point the cameraman filmed a sign proclaiming that no cameras are allowed in the ballroom. This image, which simultaneously portrays the stricture against its own existence and the transgression of the rule, seems an emblem for the contradictory energy of the film. We see the periphery of an event of historic significance, strongly feeling that we are outside of it, insulated from its reality. If this footage had been edited for television it would have been given a sense of smoothness and narrative coherence, the manufactured intensity of "eyewitness news." But Perfect Film reveals such coherence as an artificial process, a trivializing of the event, aimed at producing a piece of easily digestible information. And this homogenized product would eliminate all the rough edges, the awkward clumsiness of events that speak so eloquently in the unedited version. It is through the uncontrolled moments, the glitches and inarticulate statements, that life appears in Perfect Film. These rough spots also reveal the seams in the constructed veneer of reality that most often covers our screens. Jacobs shows us how to begin to take that apparent coherence apart. By picking at the scabs, he both releases vitality and uncovers rot.

I am not sure that every viewer placed before Perfect Film would understand it in this way. And this is why its identity as a Jacobs film plays a key role. It is as though all of Jacobs' previous films teach us to see Perfect Film, training us to watch the moving image while remaining alert to the contingent and marginal, to subtexts popping out from behind the apparent subject matter. Jacobs not only found the film itself, he allows us to find many things within it. He abdicates the position of all-powerful creator, maker, fashioner of images, to assume that of witness, observer, investigator, and ultimately, analyst. His contribution to the film lies in the fact that if we have seen his other films we have learned to watch movies with a vision akin to both x-ray and microscope, uncovering what is concealed and paying attention to what is generally ignored.

Perfect Film is, according to Jacobs, perfectly revealing. And all Jacobs has to do is present it to us, having previously made us realize the need to re-center our viewing of images, to be alert for the action in the margins, to watch for the seams in the construction. In this way Jacobs reveals the perfection of film itself, its unique contribution to the arts--the ability to capture the unconscious by penetrating the disguises of the conscious. Perfect Film reveals things that the people on camera never intended to reveal. At the same time it also reveals things that the original cameramen (whoever they were) did not intend. In fact, the whole issue of intention becomes irrelevant. In uncovering meanings that were never intended to be revealed, Jacobs enters an uncanny dimension of the cinema akin to psychoanalysis. Perfect Film is cinema before secondary revision, before a rational sense has been imposed on the chaos of the image. Jacobs' role as filmmaker is not that of a demiurge fashioning a world in his own image. Rather, like a trained analyst, he stays in the background, mutely allowing the secrets to reveal themselves.

III. The Paradox of The Nervous System: Space, Time, and Image

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film, and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.
>
> --Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

> Mayakovsky's going to play a solo
> On a flute made of his backbone.
>
> --Vladimir Mayakovsky, "The Backbone Flute"

Writing fifty years ago, Walter Benjamin declared that cinema shared with psychoanalysis an ability to probe into realms of reality of which we were not previously conscious. The true power of cinema, one rarely tapped by the mainstream commercial cinema, lies in its exploration of an optical-conscious. Perfect Film does this so effortlessly, partly because the intensity of the historical event raises it to an unusual transparency. Jacobs' role as analyst is rarely so simple. More often he uses the basic tools of his filmmaking to fracture the overwhelming familiarity of the moving image, blocking our most ingrained visual habits so that something else could take place.

Freud discovered he could help his patients make sense of their dreams only when he re-presented the seemingly familiar but opaque dream to them cut up in pieces, isolating its elements from their apparent coherence. Jacobs also usually begins by breaking up some basic element of film continuity. In The Doctor's Dream he detours the onrush of narrative by systematically reworking the order to the film's shots. Instead of the original film's linear progress to resolution, Jacobs begins with the middle of the film and then alternates shots, one group moving towards the beginning of the film, the other towards the end. This does more than simply undermine the film's narrative flow. In true psychoanalytic fashion it unleashes currents of energy present, but disguised, in the film's original story: the sexual attraction between the country doctor and his moppet patient.

But Jacobs' most systematic and challenging transformation of our relation to the film image comes in the series of performances he calls The Nervous System. In the past decade, this ever-expanding group of works has absorbed most of Jacobs' filmmaking energy. These works are as vital and challenging as anything done in the history of avant-garde film. Their relative neglect comes partly from the exigencies of their presentation (they are literally performances--Jacobs must be present and operate the apparatus; therefore, unlike most films, they have no existence as canned goods), and partly from the intense offensive they mount against our viewing habits.

Jacobs' apparatus here is not the film camera, but the projector. The

projection apparatus Jacobs has devised is complex and is basically his own invention. Simply stated, it consists of two analytical projectors which can show the film frame by frame, or freeze it immobile on the screen. Each projector shows an identical print. Jacobs then controls the film's advance (or retreat) frame by frame, the two images getting slightly (usually no more than one frame) out of synch. A specially devised adjustable shutter in front of the projectors controls the relation between the images, at points keeping them separate, at other points overlapping them in a variety of durations. The shutter also creates a range of flicker effects and can even shape the projector light. Additional effects come from a platform which allows the projector to move slightly side to side, up and down, back and forth, and even tilt a bit. Operating the projectors himself at each performance, Jacobs plays on his apparatus like a musician. We watch the film unfold in retarded time, and process the slightly different images. By breaking the automatic whirr of 24 frames a second, Jacobs returns cinema to its prehistory in Marey and Muybridge's analysis of motion. But besides breaking down the illusion of motion, Jacobs also uncovers how dependent our sense of space in film is on this constant mechanical speed.

The slightly different film frames, diverted from an illusion of motion by the analytical projectors, begin to produce spatial illusions. It has long been known that film could produce an illusion of three dimensions by projecting two images whose deviation matches that of human binocular vision. The use commercial cinema made of this is the gimmick of 3-D movies with lions leaping from the screen. In mainstream movies 3-D has remained a fad that has never found a permanent place, but whose occasional resurfacing indicates some primal fascination on the part of film viewers. The projection arrangement of the Nervous System paradoxically produces an effect similar to 3-D movies, the deviation produced by motion between two film frames substituting for the binocular parallax (Jacobs uses polaroid lenses for some of his performances, and in others relies simply on the mind's power to process the images by itself). Jacobs is the only major filmmaker to consistently mine the untapped potential of 3-D illusion on the screen.

But if The Nervous System undermines the common 24 frames per second seamless illusion of motion on which almost all cinema depends, it never becomes a series of static images. The possibility of motion haunts these trembling images, and Jacobs uncovers a range of illusions of motion in the interstices of film frames. Not only is the moment of transition in human gestures or the sweep of nature agonizingly prolonged and probed, the miracle of transformation from still to motion takes place before our eyes. The Nervous System overcomes Zeno's paradox as motion is built up out of infinitely small increments. Further, manipulations of shutter and projector position often create truly paradoxical experiences of motion as the screen itself seems to rotate slightly or its surface becomes convulsed by a sudden ripple. These images flow and ebb before us, inviting us into their depths or looming out from the screen to meet us. The trajectory of motion pauses, reverses itself, breaks down and reconstitutes itself. Here, after nearly a century, are true <u>motion pictures</u> in which motion is never taken for granted but continually encountered in a flux and reflux of perception.

Jacobs' 3-D movies rarely aim at a lifelike illusion (although a few films, such as <u>Globe</u>, do invoke it in an ironic fashion). The Nervous System performances don't even use films originally shot in 3-D. Instead Jacobs creates a strange vacillating illusion of three dimensions through his projection process. Rather

than being subjected to an illusion, we watch the perceptual process itself evolve. A strange trembling image takes shape before us, seeming always on the verge of breaking into motion, or transforming into a steady three-dimensional illusion. But it hesitates, shivering before us, an seems to break down into the basic units of time and motion, space and objects.

The Nervous System plays on our nervous system. Jacobs not only operates his analytical projectors, he also hooks into our most primal processes of perception. Our basic ability to perceive figure and ground, movement out of stillness, to synthesize space and time are played with, as though we were hot-wired to the screen. Space, motion, time, and imagery dance before us, eternally breaking apart and coming together. The Nervous System makes great demands on its audience. It focuses our awareness on processes that are usually unconscious, on our own mental contribution to the images on the screen, synthesizing frames into motion and patterns of light and shadow into space. Never has the position of the film spectator been so perilous, the sutures holding the subject/viewer to the screen so radically unstitched.

Jacobs opens a window onto perception and calls into question the coherence of our position as viewers and masters of vision. The effect is both exhilarating and frightening. In becoming aware of our role in making the moving image we also realize the power the apparatus has over us. I have never watched a Nervous System performance without the vertiginous sensation that I was teetering out of control on the brink of some primal threshold. One begins to synthesize spaces that make no sense (the moments in all the films when foreground and background seem to change places), and to envision images that aren't truly there (the monstrous faces that seem to materialize in the flames of the "wall of death" stunt that opens The Whole Shebang).

This process of breaking down the film image into its basic elements (which Jacobs first explored in Tom Tom The Piper's Son through frame by frame projection and rephotography, combined with magnification of the image down to its grain) coheres with the central concerns of modernist painting. Jacobs began as a painter in the era of abstract expressionism, and both cubism and the ideas of his teacher Hans Hofmann exert a strong influence on the push/pull of space in the Nervous System works. But as important as modernist painting is as an inspiration (and, for those confused by Jacobs' films, as a sort of guide to the perceptual play he invites), the cinematic apparatus remains central. Jacobs never simply undermines the filmic illusion in order to reach a sort of neutral material. He is always making movies, dealing with the intricacies of illusion even as he unmasks them.

Likewise, although these performances uncover essential structures beneath film viewing, they are never merely abstract. Specific images anchor our experience, whether it is the marching American colonial troops in The Philippines Adventure or the spurt of orgasm in XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX. At the same time as he probes the illusion of the moving image, Jacobs uses his apparatus to investigate this record of human behavior. These films never rest on the level of phenomenal play but become profoundly historical works, aware not only of the celluloid surface of the original films, but of their place in history and culture as well. As with Perfect Film the events these films record are reclaimed by Jacobs' method, liberated from structures that were often meant to obscure them. In The Philippines Adventure, for instance, the official handshakes between American presidents and representatives of the Filipino people are revealed by The Nervous System as predatory gestures, their essential aggression unmasked by

the fracturing of motion.

IV. The Ultimate Paradox: Telling Time

> Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire.
>
> --Jorge Luis Borges, "A New Refutation of Time"

> The only thing that begins by reflecting itself is history. And this fold, this furrow, is the Jew.
>
> --Jacques Derrida, "Edmund Jabes and the Question of the Book"

While Jacobs derives inspiration from the push/pull of modernist painting, the dimensions of movement continuously propels him into the realm of movies and into a confrontation with the most essential yet slippery property of film--time. While the linear trajectory of narrative seems to exhaust the range of times available to commercial cinema, Jacobs offers a full temporal menu. The Nervous System performances, in their hesitation and prolonged stutter between frames frequently evoke a time struck in the groove, a nightmare of endless repetition. As if freeing themselves from some metaphysical mud, the figures in a Nervous System piece often seem caught in the cycles of the same motion. But in the midst of this repetition one begins to sense the moment of change as the returning flow of time becomes palpable. We skate on the intervals between moments, experiencing time's weight and its release as never before.

Equally important, Jacobs occasionally celebrates an empty, "sitting-around" time captured so eloquently in his Little Stabs At Happiness made up of 100-foot rolls as they came out of the camera. Jacobs once evoked in conversation the image of a cave family sitting around on a rainy Stone Age day peering out into the drizzle, as the type of essential human time history so often loses track of. While commercial movies seem designed to evoke anxious expectations of an oncoming ending, Jacobs hopes to tune his viewers into the richness of the times that lie between. A moment which promises neither climax nor delay, but which possesses its own weight and presence, provides a utopian image of happiness in a number of Jacobs films.

But time in Jacobs' films also involves a complex transaction between the immediate present moment of watching and the distanced past of the film image itself. Nearly every Jacobs film displays its pastness, whether by the actual marks of wear on the print (scratches and dirt particles on the original material play complex and paradoxical roles in the three dimensional illusions of the Nervous System films), or the sense of history they capture. As the Nervous System pieces and Tom Tom The Piper's Son demonstrate, time can be taken apart, our whole perception of it altered, but it can not be ignored. Jacobs lacks the romantic's thirst for eternity, and his films constitute a recurring critique of the attempt to deny time. Rather than a liberation, denying the many dimensions of time (or restricting it to only one) becomes an act of

oppression.

What Marey (a scientist seeking timeless principles and hoping to wrest a system from the apparent randomness of motion) could foresee about moving pictures was their eventual role as the memory of the 20th century. The relation between cinema and memory stands at the center of Jacobs' films and asserts its final paradox. Jacobs is well aware that cinema can be the enemy of memory as much as its embodiment. This paradox is ancient. Plato in The Phaedrus repeated the legend that when Thoth introduced writing as a boon to memory, he was rebuked by the kind of Egypt who recognized that, in fact, writing would bring forgetfulness, since men would now rely on the written reminder and neglect the living memory within them. In the 20th century the deluge of photographic images has deadened our ability to see, and the constant imaging of the past threatens our experience of memory at the root. Things are filmed and recorded in order to be forgotten.

But where danger is, there grows salvation also. Jacobs realizes that these images of the past need not serve only as inert matter, or as totalizing versions of the past. Unlike the written text, film images may be interrogated, not only to reveal their falsity, but to unearth their hidden truth as well. Jacobs crawls inside the images he finds, and reveals that the camera really did catch it all--provided we know where and how to look. Psychoanalysis too, involves an art of memory, the excavation of those things not only forgotten but repressed from consciousness. In both Freud and Jacobs the process of recovery never regains the full embodied presence that commercial cinema seems to deliver, but a fragmented story and a consciousness of loss. With this acknowledgement of loss the past becomes part of our conscious history, and the wounds of time are acknowledged, if not healed. The past exists only in remnants.

Jacobs once characterized his role as filmmaker as a dealer in remnants. He jokingly (seriously) described it as part of his ethnic heritage, becoming a retailer of other people's discards, recycling the garbage of the culture. Jacobs' wit here cuts in several directions. Referring most obviously to his use of found footage, this invocation of his Jewish identity resonates with multiple meanings. Forced into the peripheries of society, Jews have always found unexpected uses for those things the culture did not value. From the Orchard Street merchant in fabric remnants, to the turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants who invested in the disreputable movie business, to Sigmund Freud's valuing of the discards of conscious life (dreams and slips of the tongue), the Jew has survived by converting the marginal into the essential.

But for Jacobs remnants primarily speak of time. Remnants are the remains, what is left over, what has survived in a marginal state. Remnants are the traces of time past, of events passed on, the crumbs from the feast. But like the trickster in Jewish legend who makes soup from a stone, Jacobs understands the feast that can be made on what others discard. It is a feast to which he invites us all, freely. And so let us sit and eat. But be sure you have good teeth.

Many of the ideas in this essay grew from four-way conversations between Kenneth and Florence Jacobs, David Schwartz, and myself. However, I alone deserve any blame for their development which may not represent Jacobs' view of his films. The title for this retrospective, "Films That Tell Time," which I have borrowed for the title of my article, comes from Jacobs.

IS TOM GUNNING FOR ME?

By Ken Jacobs

I'll say.

But I can't say
how grateful I am.

To some extent we who make these things are making bids towards the initiating of a conversation. "Do you read me? Are you with me, I mean have you made it to where it is? I think I'm onto something, what do you think? Is it worthy? Am I contributing something on any kind of par with all that's meant so much to me? Or only kidding myself?" Do we ever let ourselves open, reaching out, going public (or attempting to), listening, extending, extending, anxiously off-balance waiting for a "yes," a go-ahead, some kind of affirmation; a sign from another: "Well, I see something..." Mere notice that we've made some kind of move, that we're in the game. And most of the time we're allowed to die on the vine. The answers are not forthcoming. Or, sometimes, something seemingly like an answer comes but so diffident or twisty or dead wrong you wonder if you'd be better off ignored, because taking the response seriously -and you're starving for response -could take you so off-course.

You bet I'm speaking from experience. And I'm, quotes, a name! The arts are a public foundling home with a lot of newborns withering and dying simply because they're never picked up. Unavailing appeals for attention with dimpled smiles, or bawlings, only gets you to wondering is absolutely everyone watching television? And, then, people too in need of attention become chintzy giving it out, see others as competitors for the precious manna. Very sad, indeed; destructive of the whole give-and-take process that is the arts.

I know some of you are reading this as the complaints of a rich man. I've been lucky, after all: I can think of six people profoundly responsive to my 3-Disms these last fifteen years. Flo, of course, but we do it together; she doesn't count. (If you believe that...) Fred Worden. Mark McElhatten. Lucia Lermond. Frank (Francis X.) Newman. Jim Jennings (and he's only got one and a half eyes! as pertains to seeing stereo). Richard Kruz, when he's not being crazed. Seven, John Hanhardt. And then there have been intense occasional responses from more than a few others. I feel chastened, having counted my blessings. I see I've, comparatively, as these things go, been rolling in approbation.

All the same, I can feel such a filling up from Tom's words. An eye-to-eye and heart-to-heartness. Now I can become a public menace -so charged am I.

Oh, Tom, did you articulate good. Much, much thanks. Take it from me (in answer to your last paragraph), YOU DESERVE NO BLAME! You're on. And David Schwartz, you've moved me (abetted by Bob Fleischner's and Jack Smith's passings) to so much recalling and figuring out. But just where are <u>you</u> coming from? with all the persistent interest--

Ken 10/11/89

PROGRAM NOTES

By Ken Jacobs

FILMS

Airshaft
The Alps And The Jews
Baud'larian Capers
Blonde Cobra
The Doctor's Dream
Globe
Jerry Takes A Back Seat, Then Passes Out Of The Picture
Lisa And Joey in Connecticut, January 1965: "You've Come Back!" "You're Still Here!"
Little Stabs At Happiness (and "Little Stabs At Happiness addenda:" Death Of P'Town, Naomi Is A Vision Of Loveliness, Orchard Street, Sat. Afternoon Blood Sacrifice: TV Plug: Little Cobra Dance, Reveling In The Dumps)
Nissan Ariana Window
Perfect Film
The Sky Socialist
The Sky Socialist: Flight
Soft Rain
Star Spangled To Death
Tom Tom The Piper's Son
Urban Peasants
We Stole Away
Window
The Winter Footage

NERVOUS SYSTEM (and other two-projector performances)

The Impossible: Chapter One, "Southwark Fair"
The Impossible: Chapter Four, "Hell Breaks Loose"
Ken Jacobs' Theater Of Unconscionable Stupidity Presents Camera Thrills Of The War
Making Light Of History: The Philippines Adventure
Two Wrenching Departures
The Whole Shebang
XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX
A Man's Home Is His Castle Films: The European Theater Of Operations

THE WIZARD OF OZ

Note for lecture and screening

Airshaft 1967, 4 mins.
In memory of Judy Midler.

Single fixed-camera take looking out through fire-escape door into space between rears of downtown N.Y. loft buildings. A potted plant, a sheet of white paper, and a cat rest on the door-ledge. Cinematographer fingers intercept, deflect, and toy with the flow of light, the stuff of images, on their way to the lens. The flow in time of the image is interrupted, partially and then wholly dissolving into blackness; the picture re-emerges, the objects smear, somewhat double, edges break up. Focus shifts between foreground and background planes, an emphasis of the shaft-space in between. The fragile image shines forth one last time before dying out. Booed at open-screening marathon of protest films, "For Life, Against the War."

The Alps And The Jews work-in-progress screening

We travel by train through the mountains of central and northern Italy, 3-D country; the Alps, there are a lot of them. Some great numbers accompany: "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes"... "Beyond The Blue Horizon"... but, also, spastic animations derived from caricatures of Jews, the rabid inkings of centuries. Over the mountains and through the ages.

Churchill explained away the decision to invade Europe by way of Sicily--which struck people then as balmy--as "attacking the soft underbelly of Europe;" this in face of the underbelly's horned spines, the Appenines and the Alps. An apologist line now is that Italy was the feint before the Normandy boffo. Nonsense. Eisenhower and Montgomery wanted to make that real move to begin with, but it would've ended the war two years earlier and strategy was that both Germany and the U.S.S.R. bleed to the maximum. The immediate national enemy and the long range ideological one. And so antique cities were wasted, as well as living people, as we looked busy and racked up "respectable losses;" the war meanwhile taking place elsewhere. That the Italian campaign would predictably ground out into the foothills of the Appenines was solid success. Russia could win the war. We'd cover ground at the very last. With an exhausted, ravaged Soviet victor, the peace--the post-war traumatized world--would belong to us.

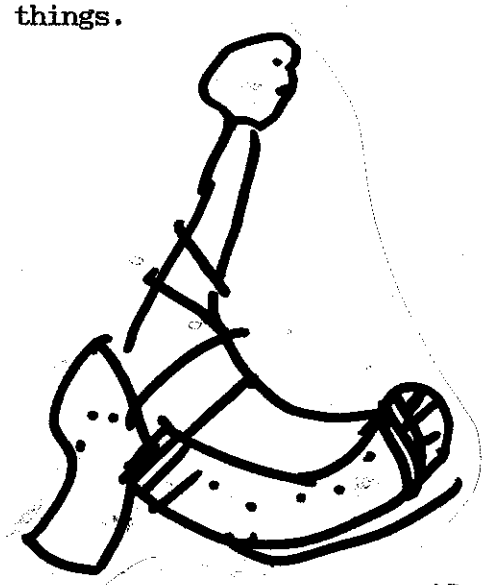
The Jews. First of all, they were not "abandoned" by the Allies. They were contained by the Allies, who knew everything, collaborating, allowing European Fascism to do its stuff--something like dust-pan and broom. Oil is only one of the reasons U.S. and Britain didn't want Jews who had had it with Europe to survive, but I think Allied Intelligence must've easily caught onto the crucial importance to the Nazis of their mythic, mystic, romantic, and imaginary sub-war with the Jews, the only one it was generally understood that they could win after the Russian winter of '42. Redeeming them! this transcendent win of the interior, and sustaining them in their drawn-out losing battle of the mundane periphery. The Jews paid for those losses. And this in turn kept up the costs of war to the Russians.

So there you have in brief The Alps And The Jews. And it sounded like a joke.

Baud'larian Capers 1963, 20 mins.

Bob Fleischner was an open and shut case. Utterly open, utterly unfathomable. It took awhile to fixate on him but then I got drawn in. Here begins a search that will extend to The Winter Footage, continuing on without Bob's immediate presence into The Sky Socialist.

Blonde Cobra and Flaming Creatures, the one portraying and the other by Jack Smith, premiered on the same bill at the Bleecker Street Cinema in 1963. Whereupon Jonas Mekas, writing then for The Village Voice, announced the emergence of a "Baudelairian Cinema," with Bob--cinematographer of Blonde Cobra--a prominent member of this new Baudelairian cult. All of this by way of lending some cultural prestige to the manifestations of mad Jack. Now if you knew Bob, gentle Robert, maddeningly phlegmatic pipesmoking sportsfan, friendly as a pup, sinister as a charlotte russe, shmendrik, chum, sweet sap, whose mind was paradisical in that no fact was forgotten and all met there on an equal standing, the idea that this hamisha guy who would become the next generation of New York filmartists' preferred uncle--as against the abrasive accidents of blood relation, that this wistful chivalrous loser in love, our two left-footed boy, the original Hymie of Hymietown, quite up to doing credible imitations of Fields and of The Count, whose biggest laugh was somehow completely silent, he who could get the most out of the least, where mostly people wouldn't dream an experience was available, describing on stage the adventure into the wilds of Queens to get a concertina strap repaired, who forever had his heart in the right place and yet could be so out of it, mystery fan mystery man, trailing the Bronx and beyond that the shtetl in his every gesture, so mild and so haunted, who had the taste to adore Helen Chandler and who sick as he was went wild over Edna Mae Oliver in the last movie he saw (The Penguin Pool Murder 1932, left in his VCR), who was who he was down to the bone, when emaciated and embedded in dialysis apparatus he could reach a mitt out, from within the thin transparent tubing circling about through which coursed his life's blood, to shake hands with and find the energy to genuinely ask the name of a new orderly (and, again, that name would stick) before drawing the guy, in the elevator on the way to Intensive Care, into that day's sportstalk, and who was planning a new film, and would expire (9.14.89) surrounded by young artists, the beautiful Chris Piazza holding fast to the hand of the frightened little boy she sensed within the embarrassed tortured wreck that'd been her exasperating friend, and so on and so forth, if you knew all this then the idea of this bird being Baudelairian was a scream! All the same, Jonas was right about a lot of things.



Blonde Cobra 1958-63, 33 mins.
Images gathered by Bob Fleischner, sound-film composed by Ken Jacobs.

Blonde Cobra is an erratic narrative--no, not really a narrative, it's only stretched out in time for convenience of delivery. It's a look in on an exploding life, on a man of imagination suffering pre-fashionable Lower East Side deprivation and consumed with American 1950's, '40s, '30s disgust. Silly, self-pitying, guilt-strictured and yet triumphing--on one level--over the situation with style, because he's unapologetically gifted, has a genius for courage, knows that a state of indignity can serve to show his character in sharpest relief. He carries on, states his presence for what it is. Does all he can to draw out our condemnation, testing our love for its limits, enticing us into an absurd moral posture the better to dismiss us with a regal "screw-off."

The Doctor's Dream 1978, 23 mins.

Original found material, a bland fifties TV movie. What's important to know is that, in recutting it, nothing was done to make a point or be funny. It was cut blind. That is, according to scheme. Unexpectedly, something was learned about how hot secret messages are smuggled through (social) customs. Sequential progression along conventional lines has the magic effect of disguising the real matter at hand from the observer. At the same time, it's what the observer is really drawn to. It's veiled, which allows the observer to have a powerful response to it and at the same time not feel guilty due to the taboo strictures of society.

Globe (formerly Excerpt From The Russian Revolution) 1969, 22 mins.

Flat image (of snowbound suburban housing tract) blossoms into 3-D only when viewer places Eye Opener before right eye (keeping both eyes open, of course). As with all stereo experiences, center seats are best. Space will deepen as one views further from the screen. The found-sound is X-ratable, but it is important to the film's perfect balance (Globe is symmetrical) of divine and profane.

Jerry Takes A Back Seat, Then Passes Out Of The Picture 1975, edited 1987, 11 mins.

In an earlier film, Star Spangled To Death, I demonstrated how the cosmos turns on the fact of Jerry Sims. I'd been attending his school-of-scuffed-shoes majoring in Simsism. One day scuffing midtown (or were we strolling on the capsizing Titantic?) the master was pulling choice items from pockets stuffed with obituary pages when we met his father. Popeye doesn't chance upon Pappy and let things pass. Jerry began to flail and spit, disassociatively screaming small talk at the old man, who, turning to politely aghast me, said, "Look at him. He had the brains of an Einstein. He could draw all the funnies. What happened?"

Olive Oyl might've replied, "If we knew the answer to that we'd know the answer to everything!"

Later I'd veer off just as the answer was coming to me. It'd taken on the shape of The Black Hole. A Black Hole approaches in a curious way, edges dropping away until it gets to you. I got the idea and I graduated.

Lisa And Joey In Connecticut, January, 1965: "You've Come Back!", "You're Still Here!" 1965, 28 mins.

I'm retrospecting filming in our loft a scene for The Sky Socialist of The Muse of Cinema (Julie Motz) In Movie Heaven with, as background, Alfred Leslie as Harpo, Arthur Cohen as Groucho, myself as Chico, the three of us in greyface makeup, naturally, since we were filming in color and everybody knows the Marx Bros. were not. We were mighty tight there for awhile with Alfred and Lisa, much laughter -- oh, the mortality of New York relationships, or is it art world, or is it the 20th century... This time I know for sure it wasn't me. So we suffered Alfred and Lisa's drawing apart, and that's the inside dope on this outwardly bouyant film.

Little Stabs At Happiness 1958-60, 15 mins.
Plus "Little Stabs At Happiness Addenda: Orchard Street (1956, unfinished); Sat. Afternoon Blood Sacrifice: TV Plug: Little Cobra Dance and Reveling In The Dumps (1957-64, 12 mins.); Death Of P'Town (1961, 7 mins.), Naomi Is A Vision Of Loveliness (1965, 4 mins.)

Nasty overstuffed clogged and airless American fifties. The few good Hollywood films after the Left-dumping, The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T, The Sweet Smell of Success, etc., are skyscrapers on the Mojave. Overwhelmed, hopeless, it was a good time for irreverence. In particular, for art film in the vernacular, like an amusing letter, me to you. Sketchy, airy, anti-precious, without a lot of geniusing at the audience. Slices of imaginative life, not choosing to hide a N.Y. specific economic reality but I can dream, can't I? Not anti-art, which my superiors, the critics of the period, assumed. To my bafflement. I had decided, with the examples of jazz improvisation and of action painting which would build on one impulsive stroke, and let things hang out--indications of wrong turns towards the emerging clarity, not to edit and doll up the 100-foot camera rolls. But to let the film materials show, the Kodak perforations and start and end roll light flares; to feature the clicks and scratchings of the 78 r.p.m. records I pirated for accompaniment. ("The Happy Bird" and south-of-the-border barnyard music I'd become attached to in Alaska in the Coast Guard). Camera sequence as determined impulse upon impulse by the cinematographer seemed sensible to me, and to be respected. The off-moments, vagaries, 'tis-human-to-errs, such beatings about the bush also delineated the bush; there was the example of Cezanne's outlines, groping for the contour. Follow the impulses, I thought, and let appearances fall as they may. That'd be perfect enough.

Nissan Ariana Window 1969, 18 mins.

Our daughter's name. Something to wrap up this obsession with homes, finding and making homes... their ephemeral quality, the believing-makes-it-so pathos of them, the crazy landslide terrain we desperate creatures stick them on for want of bedrock; bedrock! Flo and me used to go to a theater on Second Avenue that showed old Yiddish films with stage shows in which old Yiddish vaudeville cadavers romped with all the electric energy they once displayed to Kafka. One Polish movie, Without a Home, had a subsidiary character, a ne'er-do-well amiable scholar named Fedel. One scene showed him at his breakfast table in his sunny old-world poverty digs, cracking open his soft-boiled breakfast egg--this said everything--with a tuning fork, to which he then listened. Anyway, the film: We see both Flo and pet cat China pregnant. Expecting. Then a brief pause in darkness, for the movie magic to work, and there's the kid, and kittens. Not so easy to fix on film a picture of the little adventurer. No happier ending than our kitten in its catbox. Home movies are my favorite.

Perfect Film 1986, 25 mins.

TV newscast discard, out-takes of history reprinted as found in a Canal Street bin, with the exception of boosting volume second half.

A lot of film is perfect left alone, perfectly revealing in its un or semi-conscious form. I wish more stuff was available in its raw state, as primary source material for anyone to consider, and to leave for others in just that way, the evidence uncontaminated by compulsive proprietary misapplied artistry. "Editing," the purposeful "pointing things out" that cuts a road straight and narrow through the cine-jungle; we barrel through thinking we're going somewhere and miss it all. Better to just be pointed to the territory, to put in time exploring, roughing it, on our own. For the straight scoop we need the whole scoop, no less than the clues entire and without rearrangement.

O, for a Museum of Found Footage, or cable channel, library, a shit-museum of telling discards accessible to all talented viewers/auditors. A wilderness haven salvaged from Entertainment.

The Sky Socialist 8mm, 1964-65, 16mm version made in 1988, 90 mins.

The film is in sections to be shown separately; this is the central, longest "panel," within which the story can be said to be complete. It is a story of impossible love that emerges through the preoccupation with space and pattern shaping by way of camera-manipulations; my approach to film is that of a painter (abstract-expressionist) rather than dramatist. Other sections are asides, obsessions with details, excursions.

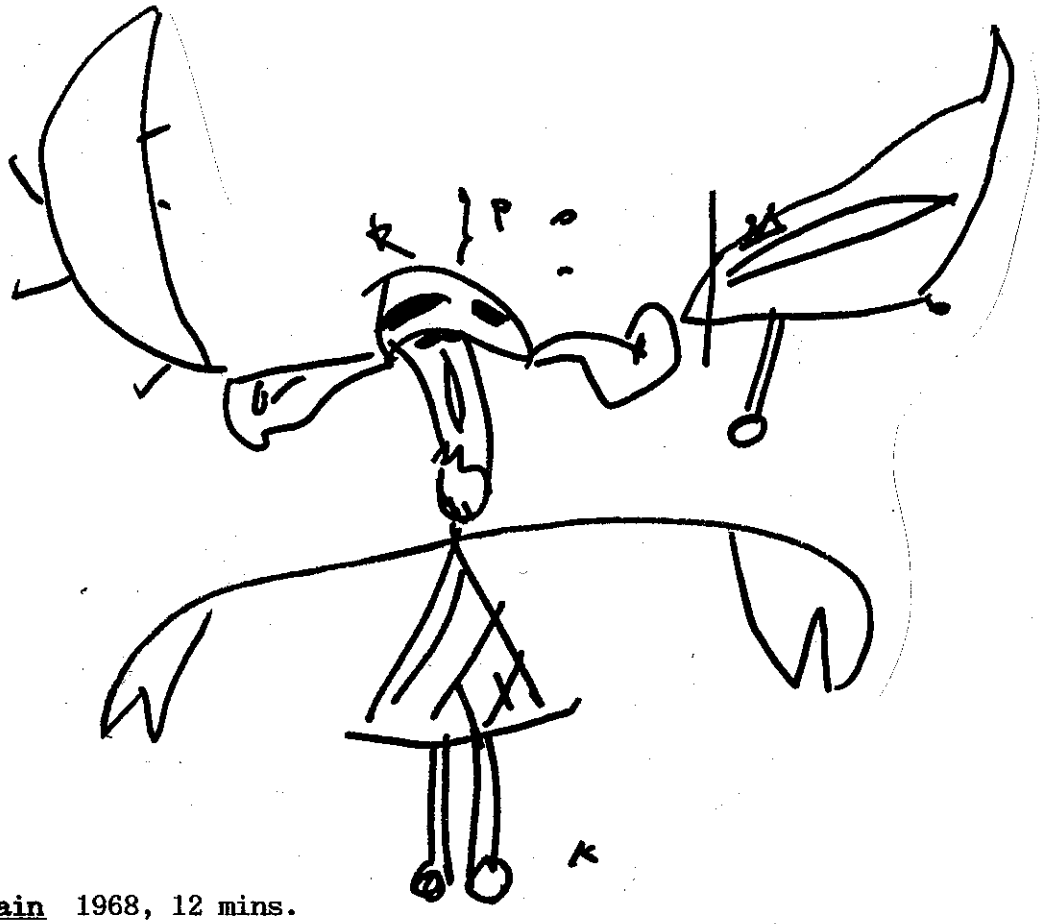
Florence Jacobs plays a miraculously spared Anne Frank; Dave Leveson stands in for the obscure thirties author Isador Lhevine, who emigrated from Russia to America to write grotesque novels, clear-eyed yet on the side of the revolution, and who died young, a suicide I suspect, at the onset of W.W. II; Bob Cowan: Maurice, the dragging force of Despair ever reminding Isadore of rotten history and the fragility of things; Joyce Wieland as Love's Labor, of which the great Bridge provides example; Mel Garfinkel plays Nazi Mentality... in his free time he stabs at microbes in the air; Julie Motz as The Muse of Cinema is terribly concerned with her looks and willing to fly-to-the-rescue, to vanquish fact with fantasy, given the opportunity to display herself. The acting is not intended to be "convincing," the approach is not illusionistic but allusionistic. It is a way to objectify the conflict for me of moving towards marriage. My friends lent faces to aspects of the conflict.

All takes place within a block to either side of the Manhattan landing of the Brooklyn Bridge, and the setting is at least of as much concern as the story. We lived here, and it was the first home I'd known since early childhood, and the profiteers of "urban renewal" were bulldozing it away along with 200 years of New York history.

In keeping with the fantasy character of the film, the title is intended to evoke a just God. Less mordantly it refers to the man who made the Brooklyn Bridge, John Roebling, emigre student of Hegel. (See Brooklyn Bridge by Alan Trachtenberg, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965).

The Sky Socialist: Flight
1964-65, 90 mins.

Further filming on the set (Lower Manhattan environs of the Brooklyn Bridge) of The Sky Socialist, but now, with the story told, all up in the air, its themes released like ticker tape. The subconscious version of the film, perhaps, or raw footage version. For persons made uncomfortable by orderly minds.



Soft Rain 1968, 12 mins.

View from above is of a partially snow-covered low flat rooftop receding between the brick walls of two much taller downtown N.Y. loft buildings. A slightly tilted rectangular shape left of the center of the composition is the section of rain-wet Reade Street visible to us over the low rooftop. Distant trucks, cars, persons carrying packages, umbrellas sluggishly pass across this little stage-like area. A fine rain-mist is confused, visually, with the color emulsion grain.

[From interview:] "This is definitely about the film world as machine product, and repeatable, the way life is not repeatable. And for me, it has an element of pathos. One, they're shlepping, these people in this very unnatural world, with these machines, this black abyss behind-or-in-front-of them, and they're all squished there on this two-dimensional flat screen, and they're repeatable, they're puppets. Of course, they don't know they're being photographed from a window a block away. They were simply passing, living their lives thinking other things, and their image was sucked into the camera and they're all at my disposal in some terrible way. A machine can repeat them forever. This 'lightning-portrait' caricature of their real lives is what stays."

Star Spangled To Death 1958-60, new version 1989, approx. 140 mins.
With Jack Smith and Jerry Sims

SYNOPSIS:

Part One:
The Two Evils (Bill Carpenter and Gib Taylor) are seen as abandoned children. Eventually, inspired by The Spirit Not of Life But of Living (Jack Smith), they learn to delight in action for its own sake.
Cecelia Swann mourns the passing of Mike Todd, "the man who had everything:" Elizabeth Taylor is reported to be "going to pieces."
Jerry Sims is introduced, performing his pivotal role to the world's celebration: Suffering.
Notes: The creatures are seen reveling in the dumps--some destroying, some fussing about with brooms, etc., seeing that every piece of rubble is in its place--when the doors of a huge cannister lying on its side opens and The Future (Jim Enterline) steps out. The visitation, however, is brief. One quick look around tells him the world's in no shape to receive him. The Spirit Not of Life But of Living, futureless, clings to the sealed doors sobbing, though mostly for the sake of appearances. The color sequence depicting the Spirit's waking and discovering of the paper flower was filmed by Bob Fleischner.

Part Two:
Jerry Sims suffers. He is unlucky, and lonely.
The two Evils interrupt and do not allow him even the tentative consolation he derives from hugging his toy dolls. Jerry struggles for their return, the commotion rousing The Spirit Not of Life But of Living.
Jerry appeals to the fellow-feeling of one Evil, reminding him of his own childhood attachment to his tricycle, but the Evil is only made bitterly mindful of the corruption, through time, of the object of his affection, and takes his disappointments out on Jerry. (A series of reaction shots follow, of The Spirit Not of Life But of Living witnessing the progress of Jerry's appeal to the momentarily weakened Evil.)
Great energies are released with Jerry playing his part in the scheme of things. But, he says, the unfairness is more than he can bear. He says he'll settle for less than justice: the return of his dolls would mean not just consolation for him but happiness.
Cecelia is moved to return the dolls and the film stops.
A conversation takes place in the dark in which Jerry must be convinced to play the game properly, to admit and accept that any real acknowledgement of the facts exclude the possibility of happiness for such as he this side of sanity. He graciously gives in and the film is allowed to continue and resolve itself, but only on condition that he be allowed to destroy the Rockefeller For Governor poster that's oppressed him throughout the filming.
He does so with Bob Fleischner looking on approvingly. A party for members of the cast and friends takes place on the set.

The Frankenstein monster is a work of art. Star Spangled To Death is a Frankenstein monster.

Tom Tom The Piper's Son 1969-71, 115 mins.
Cinematography assistant, Jordan Meyers. Negative matching assistant, Judy Dauterman. Florence Jacobs super-assisting throughout.

We had to work at night because of our skylight, but when Jordan wasn't asleep on his feet at the Victor, projecting at the rear screen over Flo-in-bed, his eyes were open. Thank you again, Judy, for perseverance and loving good humor, and for encouraging and helping with the addition of the sliding film section.

Original 1905 film shot and probably directed by G.W. "Billy" Bitzer (and returned from limbo, rescued via Kemp Niver refilming a deteriorated paper print filed for copyright purposes with the Library of Congress.) It is most reverently examined here, with a new movie almost incidentally coming into being.

Ghosts! Cine-recordings of the vivacious doings of persons long dead. The preservation of their memory ceases at the edges of the frame (a 1905 hand happened to stick into the frame... it's preserved, recorded in a spray of emulsion grains). One face passes 'behind' another on the two-dimensional screen.

The staging and cutting is pre-Griffith. Seven infinitely complex cine-tapestries comprise the original film, and the style is not primitive, not un-cinematic, but an inspired indication of another, alternate path of cinematic development, its values only recently rediscovered. My camera closes in only to better ascertain the infinite richness (playing with fate, taking advantage of the loop-character of all movies, recalling and varying some visual complexes again and again for particular savoring), searching out incongruities in the story-telling (a person, confused, suddenly looks out of an actor's face), delighting in the whole bizarre human phenomena of story-telling itself and this within the fantasy of reading any bygone time out of the visual crudities of film: dream within a dream!

And then I wanted to show the actual present of the film, just begin to indicate its energy. A train of images passes like enough and different enough to imply to the mind that its eyes are seeing an arm lift, or a door close; I wanted to "bring to the surface" that multi-rhythmic collision-contesting of dark and light two-dimensional force-areas struggling edge to edge for identity of shape... to get into the amoebic grain pattern itself--a chemical dispersion pattern unique to each frame, each cold still... stirred to life by a successive 16-24 f.p.s. pattering on our retinas, the teeming energies elicited (the grains! the grains!) then collaborating, unknowingly and ironically, to create the always-poignant-because-always-past illusion.

Urban Peasants 1975, 59 mins.

My wife Flo's family as recorded by her aunt Stella Weiss. The title is no put-down. Brooklyn was a place made up of many little villages; a near-shtetl is pictured here, all in the space of a storefront. Aunt Stella's camera rolls are joined intact (not in chronological order). The silent footage is shown between two lessons in "Instant Yiddish:" "When You Go To A Hotel," and "When You Are In Trouble."

We Stole Away 1964, 90 mins.

Were we a porno ring? We'd been caught publicly screening Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures. Between court appearances we made getaways to the Hamptons, where friends had steered us to a bargain bayside rental. My 16mm Bell and Howell stolen, I began working in affordable 8mm. Filming Flo, adorned in sailboats, clamdiggers, foliage. We'd been ordered to stay in New York State, and allowed that to justify our not going south to join the freedom marchers. Also, the New York Herald Tribune revealed, that summer, the entirely phony Tonkin Bay maneuvering that got Lyndon Baines Johnson the ticket he wanted in Vietnam; Congress would pretend to first acknowledge that murderous bullshit some ten years later. So we knew these things, and that's what we stole away from.

Window 1964, 12 mins.

The moving camera shapes the screen image with great purposefulness, using the frame of a window as fulcrum upon which to wheel about the exterior scene. The zoom lens rips, pulling depth planes apart and slapping them together, contracting and expanding in concurrence with camera movements to impart a terrific apparent-motion to the complex of object-forms pictured on the screen. Years of fascination with the window preceded the afternoon of actual shooting. The film is as it came out of the camera, excepting one mechanically necessary mid-reel splice.

The Winter Footage 1964, 55 mins., 16mm version made in 1984
With Bob Fleischner, Bob Cowan, Florence Jacobs, Dave Leveson, Storm De Hirsch, Louis Brigante, Dianna Bacchus, Murray Greenberg, Ken Jacobs

Camera movement enabled me to feel out my place among people and things. Lateral movement especially--because close objects appear to pass faster than distant--located things in a depth my newly acquired zoom lens could play into. Framing drew things together and flung them apart in ways they could never understand but together we achieved some animation. We lived alongside the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge, a ghost town on nights and weekends.

There were things on my mind, too, and certain persons, I found, could lend a face to them. For instance: Flo and I were marrying, slowly, with difficulty, and I looked to Storm and Louis (their domestic scene on the traffic safety island) for assurance that it needn't mean personality extinction.

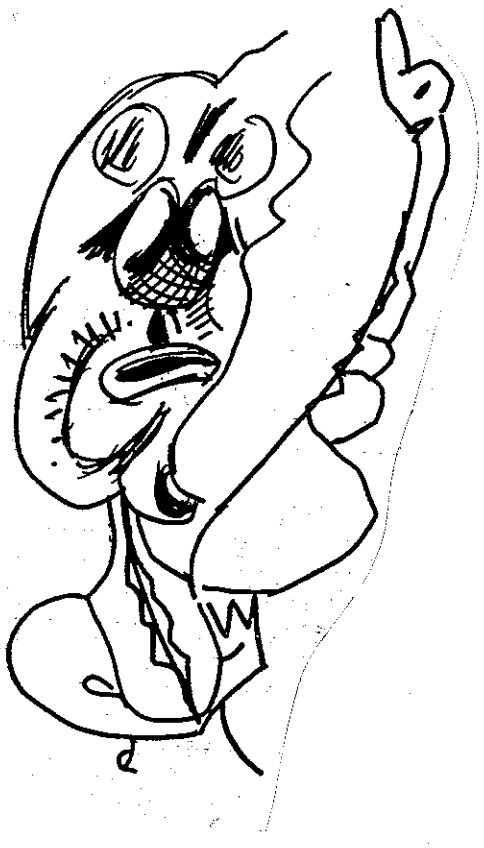
The impossible gathering about the fire of irreconcilable entities... I'd heard about a peace beyond understanding and I was trying for it (in real life I want no reconciling of Nazis and Jews). I needed a break from what I knew. I was interested in composing film only inasmuch as it served to compose me. It was my film, my wish-fulfilling dream.

Notes on The Nervous System

The Nervous System consists, very basically, of two identical prints on two projectors capable of single-frame advance and "freeze" (turning the movie back into a series of closely related slides.) The twin prints plod through the projectors, frame...by...frame, in various degrees of synchronization. Most often there's only a single frame difference. Difference makes for movement, and uncanny three-dimensional space illusions via a shuttling mask or spinning propellor up front, between the projectors, alternating the cast images. Tiny shifts in the way the two images overlap create radically different effects. The throbbing flickering (which takes some getting used to, then becoming no more difficult than following a sunset through passing trees from a moving car) is necessary to create "eternalisms:" unfrozen slices of time, sustained movements going nowhere unlike anything in life (at no time are loops employed). For instance, without discernable start and stop and repeat points a neck may turn... eternally.

The aim is neither to achieve a life-like nor a Black Lagoon 3-D illusionism, but to pull a tense plastic play of volume configurations and movements out of standard (2-D) pictorial patterning. The space I mean to contract, however, is between now and then, that other present that dropped its shadow on film

I enjoy mining existing film, seeing what film remembers, what's missed when it clacks by at Normal Speed. Normal Speed is good! It tells us stories and much more but it is inefficient in gleaning all possible information from the film-ribbon. And there's already so much film. Let's draw some of it out for a deep look, sometimes mix with it, take it further or at least into a new light with flexible expressive projection. We're urban creatures, sadly, living in movies, ie., forceful transmissions of other people's ideas. To film our environment is to film film; it's also a desperate approach to learning our own minds.



What I'm trying to do is shape a poetry of motion, time/motion studies touched and shifted with a concern for how things feel, to open fresh territory for sentient exploration, creating spectacle from dross... delving and learning beyond the intended message or cover-up, seeing how much history can be salvaged when film is wrested from glib 24 f.p.s. To tell a story in new ways, relating new energy components (words are energy components to a poet) in a system of construction natural to their particularity. To memorialize. To warn.

Notes on individual Nervous System performances:

The Impossible: Chapter One, "Southwark Fair" 1975

Sometimes, editing film, I'd reach for a strand and it wouldn't be where I'd see it, my fingers closing on air. I realized my eyes were angling incorrectly, seeing as one what were actually two similar frames some distance apart. Amused and curious, this led to a purposeful confusing of two images to the eyes. I saw strange spaces within the fused frames, not the logic of depth as we know it with its architectonic consistency of solids and voids, but warped and wacky exchanges of forward and back, open and closed. Neither organic development or manufacture determined apparent depth, but the discrepancies of placement of forms within one frame and another, force-fed to the brain now through close-up lenses. Helpless mechanism, the brain would simply process this optical misinformation turning out these bizarre depth-worlds. This eventually led to this, my first two-projector performance piece, utilizing polarized light and polaroid spectacles and stop-motion projectors to let audiences in on the madness.

The image is the first tableau of Tom Tom The Piper's Son, the set and costumes copied from William Hogarth's "Southwark Fair," on the grounds of which would take place Britain's first public motion picture screening.

The Impossible: Chapter Four, "Hell Breaks Loose" 1980

Another poring into the text of Billy Bitzer's 1905 Tom Tom The Piper's Son. (Rather obvious I'm not as cine-promiscuous as some think, for all my different approaches). Here we give the jitters to the great Breaking Down The Door scene. No polaroid spectacles for this and only very occasionally does flicker come in, but it is Nervous! Positively spooky, with rip roaring electronic music, a borrowed nightmare, hyping up the atmosphere, stopping hearts for laughs.

Ken Jacobs' Theater Of Unconscionable Stupidity Presents Camera Thrills Of The War 1981

With this found material, a 1940's home entertainment packaging of 16mm soundfilm of war's disasters (to evoke Goya's title), mostly air war, rather than pull out and order bits in a set sequence I maraud freely from performance to performance upon the entire 350 foot length. Seductive, troubling work. In which we are drawn into the relishing of "thrills," in this instance the pictorially satisfying horrors befalling other people. Should distance in time allow the events to appear quaint, less immediate therefore less real, only the slightest exercise of imagination should bring them home as much as would an on-site visit to the South Bronx or to South Africa, etc., etc., make real those fabled (distanced in space) places. Besides, recently on TV, an aeronautics history documentary was promoted for weeks with just such a trailer, a slick choreography of plumaged death. My moralizing ends there; the rest is raw moral predicament, the confronting of our sado-masochistic capacity. This piece especially gets into the beating on the optics of very disparate images, setting off Rorschaching often more ghoulish than the original images. We also get with this a Fleischer WW II Superman cartoon, and a song composed and sung by Charles Ives.

Making Light Of History: "The Philippines Adventure" 1983

The century turns. The Indians are dead from sea to shining sea. U.S. marches out, rescues the Filipinos. Japan reacts. MacArthur returns.

Two Wrenching Departures A Nervous Premiere, 1989

replacing the advertised An American Dance (Flash! Fascist Fallout! Naziboy Plugs Prez!)

9/19/89
Dear David,
Saturday the 16th on the Cape you and Victoria married and now I picture the two of you strolling, as advised, one empty Italian street or alley parallel to the tourist droveways. You cleared out just in time. Filmmakers are crashing to left and right here. On the 14th--heart and kidneys--Bob Fleischner. The 18th--AIDS--Jack Smith. Not possible two more different people, right? Neither was all there, nor did the limitations and excesses of one jibe particularly meaningfully with those of the other, and they hadn't spoken in years (we won't call that "speaking," Jack's murderous verbal attacking of Bob at the Collective for Living Cinema, 1975). Were they--were we three--actually friends? held together by film 1955 into the sixties. Jack and I hung around together a lot, for long stretches on a daily basis. But maybe it was more a vigorous trade between disparate entities, having worked out precarious diplomatic relations. How, after all, when he joined us, could utterly self-absorbed, entirely on-the-take Jerry Sims have been a friend? Reese Haire cared for us comical creatures, but then he went to see the new Cuba and got hepatitis and died. Explaining why the Sixties fell short. However, whatever, that was one trenchant period of my life. It was when we learned to assert whatever we were, when, you might say, we became us.

"One more to go!," the Sims is undoubtedly declaring, the choreography all set for his dancing on our graves. And I do feel a bit eviscerated.

David, I long to perform a new Nervous System piece, but to hell with Ronald Reagan. The living confession of our abdication of citizenship (say no to poverty, Nancy). Can't handle the assassination attempt footage, David; thought I could somehow contain/sustain those terrible images in a work but all exposure to them is virulent. It's an eruption I for one have to quarantine from mind.

And I'd much prefer another good look at Bob and Jack, as they were, while you go me all so retrospective.

The Whole Shebang 1982
(shown with Spaghetti Aza 1976, 2 mins.)

Phantasmagorical monstrosities pull from the screen. Time doesn't stand still but runs in place. A strident elegy to crazy people.

XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXESX 1980

An intensive examination and bringing to life of a very small amount of film material originally photographed circa 1920; selections from a French pornographic short.

Problem 1: If you have a mind for "pure aestheticism," with an appetite for flickering light, convulsive motions, delirious depth illusion, but would just as well transcend the realities of bodies and their functions, the explicitly sexual content of XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX may be too earthbound for you.

Problem 2: If you wish to attend solely in anticipation of a sexual turn-on, the art of XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX, its throbbing light as well as bodies, may send you up the wall.

[from interview:] "I wanted to see the parts of the body moving. I wanted to see the hanging testicles, you know, moving. I wanted to see the weight of the testicles and the rocking. Things like that."

From note on XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX by Mark McElhatten:

"The vital collision of film frames is at the heart of all filmic illusion. If this friction has always had an erotic physicality and connotation, in XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX it is literalized. Here space itself is voluptuous and shuddering, opening up in tumult, the landscape ripples and swivels and human figures are galvanized into a kind of epileptic dance. Unimaginable until seen. This results in a portrayal of figures in dalliance and paroxysm that recall some of the portraits of both Picasso and de Kooning. But, a nervousness is also imparted to us as viewers. Irresistible dilemmas revolve through much of Jacobs' 3-D work. We are presented with a preserve of history, with representation that is troubling. The original intent of these images is questionable and we question our relationship to them. Jacobs ravishes these images and makes them ravishing. In previous work, by endowing images with new formal dimensions, even the horrors of war could be made delectable. Jacobs brings this into account. Our defenses move down in response: as we open to enjoyment, we are implicated and our critical faculties sharpened."

A Man's Home Is His Castle Films: The European Theater Of Operations 1974, double-projector (not Nervous System) performance

"I use newsreel and combat footage of the Second World War, and show it in stereo, which to me is very perverse. First of all the material was never meant to be seen in stereo. It is a strange stereo, a strange space. It works along surrealist lines of strange dislocations; you find yourself in a world of flying fragments.

To me this is trivializing the Second World War and the European Theater of Operations. Trivializing it, I moved to do it not as any kind of verbal irony, but as an ironic action. In some way, to say "the Second World War" is almost camp today--it's nostalgia material. In the act of trivializing it, I'm pushing it to a point where there has to be a reaction, a realization that this is in bad taste. This should not be done. This is serious. It's a transgression to alert to the value of something. A desperate ploy to make it some kind of immediate experience again."
--from interview with David Shapiro, Millennium Film Journal, Winter 1977-78

The Wizard of Oz MGM, 1939, 100 mins.

Lecture: Ken Jacobs

Greetings to The Storefront Movie Tabernacle. Deacon Jacobs will read today, by light of laser, from MGM's The Wizard of Oz. You are expected to sit up straight, and be models of rectitude and sobriety. Even as our hearts are melting we must put our minds to understanding how and to what purpose was this film designed to engage its Great Depression audience just as World War II was looming. And how is it, despite its clunky staginess, fevered mix of confession and disingenuousness, its muffled screaming mimis regarding sex--in this tale of sexual as well as economic impotence--and its dismissal of the viability or desirability of democracy in an age of electric bullshit (for all the gumption its lead characters show), that it should remain myth-package supreme for Americans? Including that the official rite-of-passage for every American kid is to keep eyes open when the flying monkeys attack. One explanation for its staying power (based on the belief that the Great Depression has only lightly been built over, and the fault runneth deep) is that the movie promises... another movie next week. We can depend on the movies to be there. Dried up Miss Gulch may own the country but the movies will lift us free, over and over again.

INTERVIEW WITH KEN JACOBS
August 10 and 11, 1989

Tom Gunning, David Schwartz, Flo Jacobs present

KEN: My father was able to keep horses in Brooklyn for a while, so I had a really middle class war period.
FLO: He had his own horse in Prospect Park, and his father had a horse called Trigger.
TOM: What was yours called?
KEN: Bum. But Bum was an ironic name. It was a beautiful horse, and I was able to project all kinds of nobility on it. It had very beautiful gaits, very smooth. My father had this big, gross palomino called Trigger, which could carry his weight around. And, in Brooklyn, he would wear cowboy outfits, Roy Rogers outfits, and do cowboy tricks. The horse was trained to do all these servile, humiliating things that people would applaud. Like "Bow" or "Roll over, Trigger." The horse was 17 hands.
On a Sunday we'd go out, my father, brother Charlie, and myself, and look for a cowboy movie, movies which he said were stupid, but they had wonderful horses and we could look at the horsemanship.
I was thinking of something else, the Patio Theater on Flatbush Avenue, they would show every so often these ethnographic films, by those fascist Johnsons.
TOM: Osa and Martin Johnson.
KEN: Horrible, racist bastards. But the movies would be full of bare-breasted black women, so the people would go to the Patio Theater to watch them. I remember being up in the balcony, and my father saying, "Tits to the right of me, tits to the left of me."
And that's how I became interested in ethnographic films.
DAVID: Which leads to <u>The Philippines Adventure</u>.

--Ken performs Nervous System piece, <u>The Philippines Adventure</u>--

KEN: Whatever reviews there were (of the Whitney Biennial) didn't mention this. Including P. Adams Sitney. Not even to say it was bad.
I remember at the time, it was before the Marcos comedown...I thought things were pretty hopeless, and then I felt hopeful for a while with Corazon Aquino, and then hopeless again. At the time, for whatever reasons people came to see it, I gave a printout from a book on American policy in the Philippines, from the 1898 period, some low-down on McKinley. It was the first imperialist move outside of the continent, so it was very significant, unfortunately. So much has happened in direct response, including the war with Japan, ever since. Because I was so wound up about it, I remember writing something somewhere, offering to do it free. I would come and show it very cheaply or free. No takers. I literally couldn't give it away.
My head is kind of banged around right now, as I'm sure yours is. Not from the Nervous process, but from the retrospection.
Tell me what you saw that you never saw before.
DAVID: It did have a different impact than the other Nervous System pieces. There was an incredible sense of menace in every movement. You felt the sense of invasion in every gesture--the handshakes, everything, every smile.
KEN: Beasts...
DAVID: Also, there was a sense of menace about the camera being there, the presence of the camera. In the overhead landscape shots, there was something very ominous about the camera movement.

KEN: This thing of menace you mention, I've never thought about. But of course, as soon as I hear you say it, it's obvious. It's ominous...when you say that...we saw Cherries recently, and there's no way you can ascribe menace to that.
DAVID: It's amazing how there can be such a different feeling, and Cherries felt really different than The Whole Shebang.
TOM: The music seems to play a greater role in this than in any of the others.
KEN: Cherries has a lot of music in it.
TOM: Really? When I saw it...
KEN: Originally it had music in just two places. But piece by piece, things came in, and now...it's not constant.
DAVID: At the show at the Collective, there were some technical problems, so to fill the time, they had a violinist (Malcolm Goldstein) give an impromptu concert. And he plays in one section during the piece.
FLO: That's why he was there with his violin, because he was going to perform.
KEN: He's nothing like any violinist...If Paganini has seen this guy, his long hair would've fallen out.
DAVID: The Philippines Adventure has a strong feeling of narrative.
TOM: Yeah. Partly because you have the section that announces the story, and you see the story unfold after that, and it has the history, of Wilson and then Harding and then Roosevelt and then MacArthur.
The crowd scene--I guess there are a lot of them--the one that's on the longest, is just extraordinary. It's something that's true of a number of them. I'm astonished because I'm sure that I've gone totally into that space, and I look back and see that the borders are the same, and that I haven't actually...I really feel this zoom in.
KEN: There's such a huge variety of depths in one scene.
TOM: And relations between the different sides.
KEN: Flo is always concerned that I'm going to do it for two days.
TOM: Well, that becomes part of the terror of it, because it's...you do get frightened that you can't live in this crowd and have it change any more and know it's not really changing in the way that you think it's changing, so you have this hallucinatory relationship to it that's just extraordinary. You both want it to go on and not to go on. It feels dangerous. The hunger you develop for it begins to frighten you.
KEN: I honestly want an unhinging to take place.
TOM: The image of the marching soldiers is so frightening. Literally, what I saw was these lines of soldiers marching forward, jerking off. Their hands are moving with this constant masturbatory pointless energy.
FLO: And their rib cages--proper bearing.
KEN: Horrible. That's my music there, stuff I composed on the synthesizer. And the other stuff is all period.
FLO: Even "Sing, Sing, Sing" is a period piece.
TOM: The relationship between that music and the gun... what's so great about it is that when you think you get it at a certain point, it seems very satisfying and clever, and in fact I've never quite seen you use music like that, where it's almost easy, at first.
KEN: Mickey Mousing, it's called.
TOM: Exactly. But then the more you hear, the more you see, it becomes like the crowd, it's still got that satisfaction, but you're horrified, and you sink in deeper and deeper layers.
FLO: And also the piece at the end, it's such a display of cynicism. It's powerful and at the same time so crass and vulgar, it's incredible.
KEN: That little boy is the Filipino they designated to represent the country, a little pet. And look how they position him in this heroic fake photograph.

TOM: The men in the cane field, what happens there is just amazing. Literally you start reversing figure and ground, so you'll see the man standing, and then you'll see his shape, but it's cane. It's a real optical illusion, but you're making his figure out of the ground.
DAVID: Is it just afterimage?
TOM: It's a whole gestalt.
KEN: Nervous System manipulation. Did you see moments with the crowd where you had this kind of white porous material come forward, and the heads all became holes? On the left side. It's like a perforated white form comes forward.
TOM: I guess this is something that I feel with all the Nervous System stuff...
KEN: That's alright, I call it "stuff."
TOM: ...where you just feel yourself turned inside out. It's almost like those moments where for some reason you suddenly see the veins on the back of your eyes. And even though it's a very frightening moment--it usually happens clearly when you're getting an eye exam and they shine a light in there--but there's just this feeling that I am watching my own processes of making an image. And yet at the same time I don't feel in control of it. It's like something I'm doing, but who's doing it?
KEN: Much of what you say is true, but also, it's always done in concert with manipulations over there (pointing towards machine). I said to Flo early today that one more thing that gives me confidence in what I'm doing is the precision required. Tiny little changes in the various things I'm juggling make entirely other effects. I have to remember the combination, that if I do this and this with this, I get this. And if I don't do all those things, it doesn't happen. Something else happens, or nothing happens.
TOM: And that range of effects is symphonic. Particularly the points where something drops out, and it either becomes flatter or you don't actually have the alternation through the shutter, and it's breathtaking.
KEN: I recall doing, when I first saw this, I set it up so that the two shots of the sea were distinctly separate, spread so they were partly offscreen, and the audience saw them join and converge and start coming alive. One and one make one... another creature starts to writhe.
TOM: How'd you come up with the term Nervous System? It certainly says a lot to me.
KEN: I have a book called <u>The Nervous System</u>. (He looks for book). It has this bright green cover, and it says "The Nervous System," and I passed it, and said, "That's the title, that's what I'm doing." It was amusing, and I thought it was appropriate. What do you think?
TOM: Well, I think it's amazing.
KEN: No one's ever mentioned it to me!
TOM: I guess I just feel so totally like I'm being hot-wired into this film.
KEN: Well, first of all because of the jittering. I've discovered different things that it does, all along the way. The first thing that struck me was this trembling thing. One of the first pieces, <u>Hell Breaks Loose</u>, comes out of that. That piece has a lot of foreboding and menace.
DAVID: Each of the times I've experienced the Nervous System, it has a physiological effect. <u>The Whole Shebang</u>, probably because it was the first one I had seen, stayed with me; I felt an after-effect for a few days.
TOM: I find perception immediately afterwards very difficult, in fact a little frightening because I feel that it's gotten into my nervous system and somehow things that I do automatically, I'm afraid aren't going to be automatic any more. And could I decide not to...
KEN: I'm imitating your hand gesture, and how you might see it sustained on screen for a half-hour.
TOM: But also literally perceptual things, like seeing depth. I get frightened

almost, afterwards, that I'm not going to see it. It's like somehow all those things that I'm doing to tie the world together that I have a trust in, it's hit them in some way.
KEN: My own feeling is that when you see three-dimensionally, things have weight, and open space becomes blocky, apprehensible. It isn't just blur with nuggets of clarity. There really is a volume, and things connect to things, and you're really in chunks of space. The world has much more solidity and weight and color for me when I'm turned onto 3-D perception. So when you make this gesture, I see the moving around and reshaping of volumes, the interplay of densities. I'm sharpened by this too. Getting onto the seeing of depth can happen overnight. I remember strange moments where I could almost feel something stretch in my head, there would be a click, like a synapse just being established--and suddenly I'd see depth where I had only an idea of a somewhere before. I could see the open space itself, the air contained between things. I remember one day, in a car, I was suddenly able to grasp and encompass the space between myself and a lamp post in the distance. My realization of depth stretched maybe 30 or 40 or 50 feet. A 50-foot volume! Big. So I do remember the stages of my development of three-dimensional perception. And I don't expect people seeing it for the first time to get the measure of it, but to begin here and there to catch things.
TOM: I know the first film where this was really an experience with me was Cherries.
KEN: Did you see The Impossible: Chapter One, "Southwark Fair"?
TOM: Yes.
KEN: Because that was some kind of crazy depth. That's unlike anything else. It's a whole other phenomenon. It doesn't have a propellor, it doesn't have intermittent motion. I thought that was really fantastic. That was actually the first 3-D projector piece I did. I was at school, and Dan Barnett was there teaching at the time, and I said to him that I had this idea that I wanted to try, and it really should work out... I had been working in 3-D shadow play for a while, and I had this really crazy idea, and he helped me set it up, and there it was, it worked. I started out with the very same Tom Tom material; that went right into Southwark Fair. I'm saying this to you like these are important things that happened in the world. (Laughs). Momentous occasions.
TOM: I don't know that we can convince everybody, but at this table...
KEN: I'm either more realistic, or my spirit's broken.
TOM: In terms of the depth perception... To what extent do you think that there's a modern perception that's shaped by things like cars? I guess what I'm getting at is that I feel that there's a way that these films address something that is a 20th century phenomenon. Not just because they're made by 20th century machines--that's obviously integral to why this works--but they're also addressing the fact that we see the world and depth, and all those things, differently since, say, trains. Does that make sense to you?
KEN: Absolutely. It makes sense to me in the same way that when I see the Lumiere films, and so many of them have to do with machines, there's a sympathy from machine to machine. This machine of memory is now recording because these are machine people. The photographers are machinists. The people who are making films are also the people who made the camera, and know how to repair the camera. They literally were mechanics who went out there, and they're interested in machines, so they're drawn to photograph--with their machine--other ingenious new developments in machinery. And we get a lot of pictures, for instance, of streetcars pulling into the centers of towns all over the world. I'm very aware, especially now with solid state, that we're working with something like the Iron Age over here, boring into the mindset of

an earlier technology. And again I'm in sympathy with it. And I feel that although endless stuff can be done with television, examining history and the way it's been preserved on film through electronic means, I prefer to do it using the original clanking machine. I like the machine to look at what the machine has done. Where the machine has been. Where the machine mind has been. Where the mind affected by the mechanical conveyances of its time--in my case, not the jet, which gives you electronic music, but the train, which gives you boogie woogie. I work with clap-trap machinery like this over here, which is in keeping with the material I'm drawn to. I said this thing to David, advanced filmmaking leads to Muybridge.

[See addenda at end of interview]

TOM: There's this quote, and I'm sure you're aware of it, when Marey saw the Lumiere projections, and he said, "What's the point? The whole point of these inventions was supposed to be to show me something I couldn't see. You're just showing me something that's exactly like what I already see."
KEN: That's brilliantly wrongheaded. I hadn't heard that before. He's seeing it simply in terms of verisimilitude. He had no idea what the means of life-like illusion could bring someone to other kinds of knowledge, not available before.
FLO: And that the means of illusion is such an artifice. Involving tools. He's thinking that if it's so close to reality that it's normal, but it's really precious.
KEN: It's a brilliant remark. It's really coming from somebody who's thinking a certain way and seeing this absolute miracle as useless. Wonderful!
DAVID: One of the connotations of the title "The Nervous System" is that it exposes something that's integral to all film, but hidden. When I look at movement in the Nervous System pieces, I always think of the word "impossible." You see one frame, and a hand has moved in the next frame, and how did the hand get there? Nothing else in the frame has moved. When it's slowed down and manipulated...
KEN: Slowed down is a very tricky thing, because it's not slowed down. There's so much action going on. You think of all the movies where people talk to each other, and they ponder, and there are reaction shots. This is so eventful, it's really crazy with activity.
DAVID: Which is inherent in all film, but you never feel that.
KEN: I tend to think of it in a way that Dziga Vertov talks about it, as an expansion rather than a slowing down, as a magnification of time. Nothing has been actually slowed down, we're just finding more time in that time. There's much more time in that time than we ever imagined, in two frames. 16 or 18 or 24 frames per second, that's infinite time, and infinite motion is taking place, infinite numbers of events are taking place, and this begins to explore that. I've never exhausted the time bounded by two frames. I take some things I want and I continue, I skip so much that's possible in just two frames.
TOM: That's the terror of the crowd scene; one feels an overload, that you're never exhausting this image, that you're always seeing something more and it's like Sisyphus, you'll never get to the bottom of it, which is both liberating and gives you vertigo.
KEN: But that's our world condition, and the only way we get through it is by learning how to ignore the complexity of things and just go for what we want and select those things and ignore all that's inconceivable in every moment.
DAVID: Did the idea for the two-projector work come out of Tom Tom...
KEN: The two projectors come from Shadow Play.
FLO: He was first doing alternating lights in 2-D. In Thirties Man he would

have a light on both sides of the stage, lit from the back, and he could cast two different shadows, or alternate them at different times so that a form could switch from side to side of the screen, and then he figured out that with Polaroid he could use two light sources and get 3-D shadow play.
DAVID: I'm thinking more about finding a form...what Tom Tom does is make you realize that you can go on forever exploring this film, but Tom Tom is a finite film.
FLO: And I want these to be finite, I really do. I'm always grateful that you can see it, but I would like other people to be able to, and I don't think it's easy. If somebody could go at it 3 times or 6 times, maybe they could eventually see it...
DAVID: But the experience of it not being closed, of knowing that anything could be different at any moment is what's so great about it.
FLO: I think that that's true and I really value that, but what happens when Ken can't do it any more?
KEN: You'd appreciate anticipating certain things happening, because I do certain things in line, because I like them that way.
FLO: And one doesn't preclude the other. Live performance can happen while there's something in the can, and it can just be there.
KEN: If you knew at a certain point that somebody was going to make a gesture, although the scene would continue, though at this point in the gesture the thing was going to make a fantastic transformation...It's like music, you begin to anticipate. "Here we go, bang...", and the thing would happen. You'd get to like that.
FLO: Also, if the work was really live then I think the collision of the live elements remain alive even if it's reproduced, so it doesn't matter.
TOM: I understand that but it is funny, watching Tom Tom recently, it being one of the first films I'd seen, before the Nervous System... seeing it now, there was a way that it's--I don't mean to say it disappointed me--but there was something I was expecting from it that I realize didn't come from Tom Tom, it came from the Nervous System. One of the many things that I feel are liberated by the Nervous System is that sense of the film as endlessly reproducable, which is obviously one of its greatest strengths. There is suddenly this feeling that you can have a performance of a film.
KEN: You're hitting on something deep in my head--endlessly undefinable--which means not amorphous, but full of definite thrusts, like amoeba, not definable, not fixed. There's a problem, with a work like Star Spangled To Death, there's some crazy thing in myself that interferes with my just making it a film, which it could be. Although every time it moves that way I'm both gratified and unhappy.
TOM: It is so ironic, because I do feel this kind of tragedy that there's a limited number of times that people can see the Nervous System, and of course the horrible irony that something that's so rare becomes undervalued rather than overvalued on the market. Something that's rare should become more valuable, but in our situation, unfortunately, partly because of information, there aren't that many people who have seen it, and also it takes several viewings even for myself to understand it.
KEN: I've been up for grabs. I've never refused an invitation, even for very little money. I've wanted to present. There haven't been many takers. Flo said, yesterday--when we were going through it yesterday--she said "You wonder, are we crazy? We think this is fantastic, and hardly anybody else does. Are we nuts?"
DAVID: Morgan Fisher has a film called Projection Instructions which is one of the few films that are projector performances. There's an interview with him where somebody mentioned that you also have projector pieces, and he said that

your stuff is really different. He used an interesting word--he called you a "paleographer of images," and said your pieces are Ken Jacobs interpretations of the images, meaning that your presence and your active interpretation is part of the piece. In a funny way, it's like you have to be there performing it.
KEN: I would make a finite work, but that's a word that isn't fair, because a finite work makes you work out precise recipes for making impossible, extraordinary things happen. And finite only means that it is a strand of a certain length and it goes through the projector in the dark the same way. But the watching of it could be so complex and unpredictable in terms of your response to it.
TOM: Absolutely. I think that's part of film that people do not pay enough attention to. Any film has a performance element in the viewer. But your films address it.
KEN: One can be led to look at different parts of the screen. So as you go through it, that big screen in front of you, you can't see it all. You're usually looking from place to place. That means there are an infinite number of routes through the film that can actually be worked out when you're not looking at Ingrid Bergman's eyes.
DAVID: Perfect Film, I thought, was a great title for that film, for that reason. Because you're watching the film thinking "What's perfect about this?" You're looking at different parts of the frame, and you become very active.
KEN: You say, "That guy has such chutzpah." (laughs)
It's a very interesting thing. One has a problem of pointing--the photography points things out and also points you through it. People who make these precision entertainments know exactly where the audience is looking on the screen, and they're conducted on this path. There's ways, through light, of checking the eye movement. I really wonder to what extent people are making very similar eye shifts as they go through a movie, because they're brought from this object to this point on a screen. But in the more open fields, which I'm interested in, like Urban Peasants, and other works, Tom Tom..., it's something I once mentioned about Tom Tom..., it's the whole area, the whole field, commotioning, that really draws me. It's truer to life to me than following a line through the world; being given a path through the complexity of time, I don't want that. The house is unusually orderly right now, but usually the place represents my philosophy. Which is a problem, because you pay for this morass that you're comfortable in. Not being able to find where you've put your shoe.
DAVID: You started out studying painting, and I'm just wondering what the fascination in film was. Here is a medium where suddenly you have this element of time control.
KEN: When I was studying painting, I also got a projector. When I came out of the Coast Guard, and I had some money that I saved in Alaska, the first projector I bought, the one I wanted, was a silent analytic projector. That was 1955, 1956.
FLO: And that's what you looked at Rose Hobart with.
KEN: Rose Hobart, anything else I could look at. I was really interested in the stages from this to this. Where it came from, possibly, is Eisenstein's lions, moving from frame to frame. I think that knocked me out. The three distinct stages into which one somehow thought all the movement in-between, I think it comes from that. I'm another Eisenstein follower. That was so powerful, that given this and this and this, to somehow think I saw a stone lion rise.
DAVID: There's an interesting relationship to cubism, obviously.
KEN: Absolutely. I was tremendously interested in cubism. So I'm watching

these points of view, these intervals, and how they relate in space and time, and that's where things are exciting for me. Many things are exciting and interesting, but that, I didn't know what I could do with it except look at things, just look and look and look at things and feel the stuff in between. I didn't know how to make film that utilized it.
DAVID: At one point you said to me that you weren't very interested in narrative, you didn't like narrative films...
KEN: That's a lie, too, because stories are wonderful. I've said before, sometimes there's people who have a story to tell, and not just a story they concoct. Although even concoctions can sometimes be very artful and brilliant. And sometimes there are stories...there are all kinds of stories. There are stories that convey something and there are stories that just in their construction are so beautiful, are such marvelous patterns. And logics. Like Dashiel Hammett, there's really beautiful logic. The plotting. This person does that because of that and this, it's like, I once read that for some reason Eskimoes could look at an engine of a car, people who had never seen a car before, they could look--I don't think it's true of a contemporary car--they could look at the engine of a car and comprehend it, so the story goes, and repair them if necessary. And that to me means that there's an apparent logic, which is very beautiful. We get a great aesthetic satisfaction from a system that operates, where the parts all work. That kind of pleasure I can often get from narrative, among other things. But really I'm not as prejudiced--
DAVID: It was interesting, just the idea--
KEN: In terms of whatever kind of bias, where the areas of my brain have the most weight, it's not satisfied by storytelling, by acting. But I certainly can appreciate it. I'm going to be satisfied by things that take into account this working with weight and space and time, and allow me to be concerned with that and not just go "Will they rescue the baby from the fire in time?" Because it puts you into a state of anxiety actually, that makes you look through time. You're speeding, pushing through time because you want to know how it's going to work out. You're inclined towards a potential event. Will this person, who in some way you've invested in, be released, so that you can be released? In a certain way you're really in the throes of narrative and blind to existence. I'm always aware that when the rescue comes, the movie's over. There's no world to live in, unless it's one that's filled with anxiety. There's no living in the world, enjoying things and how things desport with each other. People have become addicted to these anxious fits they call the movies.
TOM: In talking about Eisenstein...in the essay where he talks about the lion and he's laying out the methods of montage, it's interesting, he gives as an example, theoretically, that every frame next to every other frame is a montage creating motion. The idea of actually breaking down a shot to single frames is implicit in what he's saying. He mentions it, but he never really pursues it--maybe only in the machine gun sequence, where he's actually editing on a couple of frames. A lot of avant-garde films, Anger, and various other people, came out of Eisenstein in editing, certain montage effects. Your films are about editing, but you took it in a totally different direction.
KEN: There's nobody I have more mixed feelings towards than Eisenstein. Positive and negative. I love him and I dread the mind control that he's interested in. When he's talking about pathos, that really turned me off. I was a teenager reading this guy about applied pathos. It was horrifying. I want sincerity, I want bumbling, I want the world. I don't want skillful design applied to my psyche. I don't want to make a Pavlovian response, or to make other people do it. We all know that the commercial is Eisenstein's legacy. It's ironic. He meant well. I think he's done some evil things. Including supporting Stalinist propaganda, that was really terrible. So I

don't want that kind of control. It was very alluring as a teenager seeing shots in movies of Orson Welles, where not knowing anything about the wide angle lens, I'd see a huge figure stride over my head. It was emblematic of Welles for me, working at being impressive, looming over the dwarfed viewer. By the time I was 18, that was exactly what I didn't want to do. Something like Little Stabs At Happiness is my effort to be lifesize and available as a person. And not to be super anything. To be vulnerable. Because everything is lost for me when that tyrannical relationship takes place between the filmmaker and the viewer. I'm just reminded now of seeing Spielberg. It's so horrible, so horrible. Kids eat it up.

TOM: In film, it is interesting that compared to painting or still photography, there's this concern with getting one idea across in a shot, really funnelling where you look as opposed--there are obviously films where this isn't true--whereas in still photography or painting there's no classic Renaissance painting where you only look at one thing. You're constantly looking at the edges. You may be led in a dance that brings you back and forth to the center.

KEN: Again, I'm coming out of painting, and bringing that attitude to film, what I want in film. Of course, it isn't everything. I 'm one of the people that actually sat through Straits of Magellan and the only way to make it through that film was to take one's eyes off the center and look around the edges and try to make as many movies of this thing as you could.

So death-involved a movie. I'm saying the obvious; the whole movie stinks of death, and offers an experience of death, finally. I don't think I was able to beat that film. But I may've experienced what anyone can consciously experience of death, with that movie. At the Anthology, once, Jonas showed the whole thing. I attended religiously, drove myself back. I made a contract with myself that I was going to see it through, and I did. It was excruciating. Necrosis set into cinema. You had to work with it. It did afford one that opportunity. The things that I learned to appreciate in painting are things that made those kinds of demands. I didn't know what to make of cubism, in the beginning. Cubism itself aims to offer, although it's become much softer and immediately giving to me over the years, but it aimed to offer a resistant surface. It made you work at the surface before expanding and doing all kinds of impossible spatial tricks, spatial convolutions and changes, which identifiable objects fixed in space cannot. But making a painting which affirms a surface and then breaks into depth, and then contradicts its depth because it isn't so determined to be loyal to the representation of objects, it can play with the momentary presentation of an object in a certain way, and then annul it, and do something else, and go through all kinds of crazy changes.

I treasured the resistance that Victor Shlovsky talks about, and a resistance that, for instance--that anti-Semite, I hate him--Cezanne. All these people I admire that would have killed me and my family! That was enormous resistance. What is this Cezanne, these ugly paintings, what do they do, what do they offer? Of course, it was thrilling when they began to expand, and enormously expand, and expand meaningfully because of the resistance, so it wasn't simply the fake picture window. But you worked and you won this chunk of space, and that chunk of space, you won this event and you won that event, by your own concentration and determined observation and mental labor. It was really an accomplishment for the viewer. I don't know if it was intended that way, but I felt accomplishment. I felt I got there, to what he was doing. I think I wanted to offer that kind of thing in film. I wanted to make that kind of event, from flat to depth, from nothing to something. To create that step. Rather than point with my marvelous knowledge of everything, give people good advice or point them in a direction I thought was correct for them.

TOM: There's this phrase of Walter Benjamin's that I always think is relevant to what you do, and which I think he actually invokes when he's talking about, I think it's film; it's at least photography. The optical unconscious. He says that cinema has made us aware of the optical unconscious.
KEN: It's a very evocative phrase. Except I wouldn't say it was unconscious, but subconscious. The problem, I think, is that we're led not to believe that the image itself is information. Rather than something that's to be analyzed in terms of its symbolic components that will then give off information. The whole thing is literally information. It's full, choked with stuff. Your word "stuff." And maybe the word should be, not meaning, but significance. It's just heavy stuff, loaded. And I think it's probably easier to get through the world if you reduce everything to language and then only acknowledge meaning that is conveyable by language. It probably has to do with those lousy religions that deny the value of the world--where you're supposed to just extract meanings, and the revelation of some real value beyond the dross of the world as they see it. They don't love it. They're oppressed by it, they want to see through it. And we see through the optical world in this search for verbally assignable meanings. It's no news that for somebody who is nourished by sight, by hearing without having to hear words, it's a huge loss. I would think. We have told you that we did not encourage our kids to watch Sesame Street, or to read very early. We didn't want them to start replacing the world with the symbols for things. Especially living in advertising. I'd rather them see the conmanship around us, the hammering and repetition of printed words, I'd rather have them see that as pattern, as insidious as that is, as colors, shapes, areas, and not explicit directives beating on them all the time. So we were trying to, sadly, retard their verbal skills. I guess that's coming from our prejudice.
I remember my argument with Sesame Street at the time, I felt it was too snappy.
TOM: It's based on advertisement, it's based on the one minute spot.
KEN: Sad. Kids can really spend time poring through things, but they're put on this very anxious tempo. Something's gotta happen next. The mainlining of thrills. All of it shrinking the attention span. How long are your classes?
TOM: Three and a half hours.
KEN: Great. I have three hour classes. When they're reduced for some reason or another, I'm very unhappy. And I also feel at the end of 2 1/2 hours, that I'm tilted over, I haven't balanced myself. I need that time. One of the things we're probably doing for people is getting them out of commercial tempo, into being able to enjoy a body of time, and of reflection, and of the weight of consideration. It's nice.
TOM: There's also, and I don't think there's any contradiction here at all, but I want to think it through. This way that you're discovering stuff in your films. It's not abstract filmmaking. Even in Tom Tom, where it becomes almost abstract. It seems to me to be very different, from, say, Len Lye. And The Phillipines Adventure is a perfect example. Even though we're dealing with very abstract categories of perception and motion, time, it's very important, literally, what we're looking at. And I guess that something that's always struck me that made me think of your films is that Vertov at one point said something like, if you film a bank president, the cinema will reveal that he actually has a robber's mask on. Of course, Vertov means that in a very particular kind of Eisensteinian way, that he can make a point. But it seems to me that there's also something, that you view the cinema like that. That one of the things your films do is reveal, unmask.
KEN: Reveal masks. Well, I agree with you. One of the things I say is that 24 frames per second is glib, and 24 frames is sleight of hand, it's a magician's

trick. Kubelka said something--what you said just now took me back to it... In a succession of frames, the shot, which is a continuous 24 frames per second sequence of exposures, makes for the weakest connection between frames.
TOM: There's a French woman theorist, Marie-Claire Auparre, at one time a friend of mine and I were talking to her and my friend was talking about a shot being a combination of frames, photograms, which is what they call them in technical French, and she said, no it's not a combination of frames, it's a suppression of frames.
KEN: That's very good. At the same time, the shot can be fantastic.
TOM: In things like Little Stabs At Happiness and some of the other films... It's striking, because even though you and Kubelka are people I would think about as being involved with the frame, it seems to me in a totally different way. Again, he's basically Eisensteinian, he's a montagist, whereas I don't think that's what you're involved with at all.
KEN: No, I'm not interested in geometric dynamics. Mechanics. Amorphousness is much more fascinating in many ways. Things that are, without giving away their structure. Still, one can structure an event, meticulously combine elements towards an explosion, evolve a recipe that will make something happen, its source apparent but itself undefinable, and I think Kubelka has done that. Study of the recipe doesn't quite explain the taste, the effect. Kubelka's recipes are magic potions. Some of this, and some of this, and it's all very neat, measured out, but then as a magic potion it makes something unexpected take place. So there's a place for measure and precision, which Eisenstein was about, in the evoking of mystery. But back then, as a younger person, I didn't see that very well. I was very leery of order and determination and measure. So monstrousness not only meant freedom, but life itself.
DAVID: A lot of it has to do with the role of the viewer. In these pieces, when you talk about being precise, it's only to allow the viewer to become more attentive and more active. And you're suggesting that there's something more going on in the frame. With Eisenstein, there's a kind of passivity, there's a specific message that you're supposed to take in.
KEN: Well, he's going to do it to you. He's going to lay it in. Bang, bang, bang, and now you've got it. A behavioral structure's in place. And you don't even have to understand you've got it, to then operate a certain way.
FLO: But we just saw a little bit of Ivan the Terrible.
KEN: That's very different.
TOM: I agree, and in Ivan it's very clear. His later writing is very, very different from his earlier writing. Particularly the stuff that's just coming out.
KEN: I think there was a hopefulness in the idea that people can be determined, and are mechanistic. There was hope for the world. The machines that the Futurists adored. If people are machines, then salvation is possible. If the universe is a machine, then we can be saved, we can order things and make things happier than they are. I think we've become more suspicious now of such approaches to mechanism.
TOM: Because the machine is out of date. Now people can focus on it, and they don't understand where the real threat is. Which I think is no longer the machine.
KEN: The whole idea of psychology, that the mind is a machine. If you are this, and this has been done to you, and therefore you do this, you can be offered a cure. A retooling. Because when a machine goes out of kilter, you can correct it.
TOM: Of course, what Eisenstein says, actually, although he says different things at different points, is that he wants the audience to follow through the same steps that he made as a filmmaker in order to reach his conclusions.

KEN: When does he say that?
TOM: He says that fairly early.
KEN: He's not doing that.
TOM: Maybe not in Potemkin, but I think he's doing it in some of the others.
FLO: In the stuff that we saw with the calf and the arch...Even if you say that he's directing the story, the thing is counterbalanced by the visual, which is almost in opposition to the story. It has 50% impact, that's where his energy is. There's a tension between narrative and visual power that he's thrilled with. That's what makes it so living, that rather than an organized thing that you say, I've seen it and I don't want to see it again.
KEN: I think he's vulnerable to being caught up in things, really falling in love with what he's doing, the thrills of things. And he stops being the mad scientist filmmaker every so often, the engineer of audience response. He just lets it go, every so often. He's really caught up in fantasy. The stuff with the boys at the end of Ivan, Part Two, he's just flying in homoeroticism. But what has that got to do with the audience? That's his fantasy. I think.
TOM: It seems to me, I've often thought to myself, that the greatest task I could ever set myself--or a great task I could set myself--as a critic would be to try to think why Tom Tom and the Nervous System films are absolutely by the same filmmaker who makes The Sky Socialist and Little Stabs At Happiness. I absolutely feel that one of the things that is most exciting about your work is this enormous variety, so that one could almost think that there were different filmmakers behind every film. There's never a kind of "Ken Jacobs" look. And yet at the same time I feel that there is absolutely a consistency of purpose, of project--purpose and project are the wrong words--but the same filmmaker made those films absolutely.
DAVID: To confuse it further, when we saw Tom Tom, we saw it with Perfect Film, and for some reason, seeing those together there were so many similarities in what they were trying to do.
TOM: It's obvious that the same filmmaker made those films (laughs).
DAVID: It's obvious that you made Perfect Film, but you didn't.
KEN: I must say, I don't want to repeat myself. I don't feel a need to repeat myself. If I feel I'm repeating myself it isn't worth it to me. So if there are things that are abandoned, it's because I don't need to do that any more. One of the reasons, perhaps foolish, that I don't film as much as I used to, is that I began to recognize my filming. And I felt I needed a concept that would break me free of skill. What's called skill, which is just habit, or a pattern. Well, I have an answer. You haven't stumped me, Tom. I have to think a moment.
In both cases one is looking at film in its manifoldness. Boundless, when one penetrates the story on top that's the agreed-upon cover. I get drawn in--it's "rapture of the depths." That eddy of repetition in Tom Tom is for me a sinking down rather than into. I feel into, test textures. Especially in the disregardable, the throwaways. Tom Tom was a throwaway. Perfect Film was literally thrown away. I must say that I'm Jew-obsessed, and this will sound nuts, but I think I'm drawn to examining refuse, as refuse myself. Of a people who were refused.
TOM: A dealer in remnants.
KEN: Right. You saw David Leveson in The Sky Socialist, a dealer in remnants. Also, I think, broken things, and the dismissed, are to some extent like the subconscious, or the unconscious. It's Freudian for me in that it's full of revealing stuff. What we disregard is what we are also denying. It's loaded. The front, our Sunday best, our best foot forward, all that, to me, is what's void and meaningless. That's really empty. Concern with what kind of impression you're making, what you're going to tell people forcefully because

you've studied the dynamics of communication, is without merit, without substance. So our garbage gives us away, and I'm drawn to examining it. The fabric of these films parallels the infinite complexity of the fabric of the world about us, but it affords one a chance to toy with it and play with it, to find things and make things. And this other thing, things that have been used are full of time. They evidence time. For instance, this dirty dish here has the remnants of this wonderful pie Flo made. It tells a long complicated story. I can, if I put my glasses on, see how the pie was cut, how it laid there, and that means that it had to be of a certain... I could do a kind of Sherlock Holmes. Or one can kind of resurrect in one's imagination something approximate to another present that existed, a poverty-row knockdown set replicating the real thing, and touch into it. I feel the poignant kindredness of one present to another. One fleeting present to another. One present can acknowledge another present. It's not the same thing as memory. A salute from one present to another.
TOM: How is it different from memory?
KEN: Only in that one is not trying to re-member something, put something back together again, but only acknowledging that there was another moment. It was unseizable in the same way that the moment you're in is unseizable, and the best thing you can do in this arrangement of the present is honor the once all-in-color reality of that one, that it was the present the way this is the present. Another sunny day, with terrible things happening.
TOM: So it's not recaptured.
KEN: That's impossible. It's an homage from one moment to another. This moment acknowledges that moment.
TOM: And acknowledges that it's gone.
KEN: Yes. Fossil fuel, and let's be grateful for that.
DAVID: You have this person on the screen, newsreel footage from fifty years ago, and at the same time, you are very aware of your present state, watching the film, and it makes you very disoriented. You start to question your experience of time. In so many ways, you become very aware of your presence.
KEN: But would you say that you become aware of your presence because you're brought up against the present tense of another moment? That these images--I'm making an effort, and you know that it's trickery, and you know it's a lie, that isn't the way things were--it's black and white, it's scratched, it's film--at the same time, there's some real reaching, impossible, and failed, as it has to fail, towards the presence of that moment. These aren't mere images on a screen. Life took place in front of a camera. There really was this Woodrow Wilson, they really did shake hands.
FLO: And also the people on the horses. You can really believe that these people's lives led them to ride on these horses, and how to ride on the horses. You can feel that they feel okay about what they're doing. It's not just an old image.
KEN: It's not decorative.
TOM: That's why you're not an abstract filmmaker. It seems to me that what your image always has as a content is time. Not just tempo, that it takes time.
KEN: Tempo I don't like. I used to think that I had no understanding of time, because I had such a problem with tempo. I felt its seductive qualities, and it's almost just that, it's seductiveness that I withdrew from. Broken rhythms give me time rather than take me through time. I say that but I sure can feel the allure of the beat.
TOM: But what's interesting in The Philippines Adventure in terms of the music is that the beat's very sinister. Seductive as hell. I've never felt a rhythm so intensely, because it's in the image, but I'm also absolutely clear that I'm

being told, watch out.
KEN: When the beat is happening, one is impelled through the imagery. With the crowd, I can just get into it and get lost, and remember every so often as Flo says, don't do this for two days, because other people can't stay with you like that. I guess just having free time in that area is more attractive to me than making time...
DAVID: I've had the experience a lot with watching your films where at some point I lose awareness of time. There was a point here where I said, have I been watching this for a few hours? Not in a bad way. But I also felt that this could go on for a few more hours and it would be fine.
TOM: Little Stabs is profoundly about time. Just as much as any of these later films. Not only in that section where you talk about it, which has always been extraordinary in that film, it seems so casual, and then you realize it's...
KEN: I once thought, wouldn't it be wonderful to be standing at the mouth of a cave on a rainy day with a cave family, and they have time on their hands, they're bored. Heavy, slow boring time, as it sometimes happens, when "nothing is happening." It would be so recognizable to us, it would create a kindredness with the cave people that I think is very hard to get, thinking of them with their dinosaur movie adventures, the way we imagine them. But they also were stuck sometimes with time on their hands.
TOM: Sitting around.
KEN: Saying, does anybody know a story I heard... Okay, let's start a fire and look at some shadows. Something. Little cave kids standing, looking out and waiting for the rain to stop so they could go out to play. In any case, some day, somebody will be able to look at these people sitting around in Little Stabs At Happiness in 1960-whatever, and say, I can recognize that state. Gee, then is just like now, after all. It's very hard to get that from movies. I think before Little Stabs you may have to go all the way back to Lumiere to see people captured in repose. Not being hysterical to the camera, or putting on a show to make everything grabbing from frame to frame.
TOM: Talking about that issue, why the same person made Tom Tom, and Perfect Film, it strikes me that in seeing Perfect Film as a Ken Jacobs film, you're not doing a Marcel Duchamp, you're not doing the provocative act...
KEN: It's been done.
TOM: But there's no question that it absolutely looks like a Ken Jacobs film. Can you solve that mystery for me?
KEN: I think that particular film has, for one thing, all the things that interest me, in its own way, proportion, repetition... In Blonde Cobra you have sound with image, sound without image, image without sound, and this does all those things, and it's wonderfully proportioned out in time, it's really satisfying. Also, it gives you work to do. It isn't all done for you to pick up and say, isn't this clever, and I get this and I catch that. It doesn't dole it out to you, you have to put in some effort, again you have to make the film happen for you through your own involvement.
TOM: And again, the content's very important, it seems to me. One could imagine a film with many of those elements that would be about a sewer main breaking in Brooklyn.
KEN: So many things are revealed. The way one acts in front of a camera, what it means to be on television. I'm telling you things you know, of course. The reduction of the importance of the event in relationship to the event of being on television. Language. Interest--the reporters don't give a shit. They are so disinterested. They're going out to get a story, and it's today's story. They're actively forgetting in the hearing. When they move the camera away from the guy, he ceases for them. They're so jaded. Technicians are recording the story in a totally uncaring way, it's amazing. It'll get a little airtime

and then be dumped. Used-up news.
DAVID: A lot of this has to do with the numbing effect of language that you were talking about before. In that film, the eyewitness develops his story and repeats it a few times, and it's like this event is being tamed by language.
KEN: That's very important. That eyewitness is very complex, so complex. He's an articulate black, and earlier in the film we have seen inarticulate blacks. He's different. But he's also somebody who, with this gift of articulateness, has actually moved it into a kind of freakishness. He doesn't wear it so gracefully. There's distortion, a strain from who he is and how he wishes to present himself.
TOM: You do get the feeling that he cares about the event.
KEN: He does care. At the same time, he's so confused. He also cares about the event of him being there at the event, and the only reporter there to be able to speak as an eyewitness. It's Pirandellian in a very, very rich way. I think.
TOM: The confusion about his name is so extraordinary, when everybody's calling him this name, and at the end he says, that's not my name.
KEN: The repetition. You can see he loses his cool at a point, with the repetition. But I'm very impressed with him. He does think on his feet. When somebody says to him, did anything else exciting happen there, and he hasn't quite gotten to the point where he can say, what a cheap way of thinking about this, but he's close to that response: "Exciting?" And then he says, "I've never had a more exciting event in my life." He's very close to awareness of the cheapening of event in terms of the coin of excitement, which is what the people are out to get. Will this be exciting? A foremost leader of these poor people has just been killed, by other people who are vying for leadership. It's amazing, absolutely amazing. And then the white Irish cop is so white.
FLO: And he doesn't know anything at all, he's so ignorant.
TOM: But totally in authority in the way that he's talking, and not just because he's a cop.
KEN: But that's also an act. You can see him trying to control his nervousness and embarrassment, and then he's on camera, and he's now playing the cop.
DAVID: He sets it up, he says, let's do this right, and then he goes into his speech.
TOM: That's certainly one of the unmasking moments that's one of the reasons it looks like a Ken Jacobs film.
KEN: At the time of Star Spangled To Death, if you asked me if I had a theory, or aim, I would've answered that I'm interested in the moment between theater and life, that there's a transition area that really gets me. I remember dwelling on the point at which the person backstage puts down their coffee cup and steps onstage and into the role, and it's that transitional period, from waiting and being yourself, and being unconscious of yourself, to being on. That is an interesting area. And this has a lot of that, between face and mask.
TOM: I remember once when you were talking about wanting a satellite dish, and you were saying that one of the things that would be interesting was the moment before the reporter gets cued.
KEN: That's the main reason I want it, to keep watching those moments again and again.
TOM: It's so fascinating, too, because the way, say, that the cop is unmasked in Perfect Film would be totally impossible if you cut that film in order to unmask him. If you know what I mean. You can imagine someone taking that material to make a documentary about racism in America and losing the meaning entirely by wanting to find it.
KEN: We have wondered, I must say, was this movie made by a genius. A genius

who didn't pay the rent, and his stuff was thrown out by the landlady, including this fantastic film, and he didn't sign his name to it.
I know that it was in a barrel of television news rejects, just garbage that came down. But is there a chance that this was done consciously? Someone once raised this to me, and I really don't know. Are these all magnificent chance coincidences, they way these things happen?
FLO: And if so, are they all like that?
KEN: Yes, that's exactly it. Is all garbage like this? Only waiting for the talented viewer. The moment that Malcolm sticks his head in the film--he sticks his head through a door, and into the film! It's perfect. And he says that these people have threatened his life, and immediately after we see the target countdown.
FLO: Maybe Bruce Conner?
KEN: Maybe Bruce Conner did it.
Part of what's led me to appreciate the immediate is knowing that the infinite is available to me. I really apprehend it all the time. It makes the immediate all the more precious to me and I don't feel like doing numbers on the immediate. I feel like acknowledging and respecting and loving and clinging to the immediate before it blows away. And it's the infinite in Tom Tom that I'm trying to make people alert to, and also for my own alertness, and also hugging and cherishing the immediate, the surface of things is not superficial to me. It's where we live, it's where we recognize things in each other and relate. The identity of objects is terribly important to me.
TOM: Partly because, it seems to me, if you take Tom Tom as an example... One of the poignancies that one feels in Tom Tom is both, here we have a house someone walked into in 1904, but also, we don't have it, it's gone.
KEN: The evanescent is exactly what is. If you can't make it in the evanescent, you'll never have anything. And that was learned the hard way. To scurry back from the infinite to an appreciation of the transitory, what actually can be apprehended. I really think, although I do it in Tom Tom...as I say, I come back to the surface in Tom Tom, and I really think it's about penetration to the sublime, to the infinite, to an abyss within the commonplace, and the joyful return and appreciation of the richness of the commonplace. Scared shitless from understanding that there's no way of relating within the infinite, and one just becomes dismembered. Parts of one's self just float away from each other. You become someone with a self-belief, as much of a fiction as it might be, but that fiction is real. For those within the story, the story is real, to the extent that you believe in and accord this reality to things around you.
So it seems...In the ecstasy and awe of things as they exist, who wants to bother with looking past the miracle of these existences to their use within a story. And I would say that most of the films that we look at, movies we look at, we are actually making into stills, we are breaking up in thousands and thousands of ways. I think we're seeing them as moments. The films are many, many flowers. We're not seeing them as a film story, we're not enjoying it that way, we're digging a myriad of marvelous connected moments. It's not that important for me to see a movie from beginning to end. A fragment is marvelous. One conglomerate of forces between commercials is plenty. You caught a few films on TNT without the ending? I would just sort of float out there, and say, that's swell...it stops and you just keep going.
DAVID: There's always that feeling that when you walk into a movie late, and you miss the beginning, there's an added energy until you start to settle into it.

END OF FIRST DAY

KEN: I just wanted to mention how important to me it was in Magellan when Hollis's hand reaches out from behind the camera and turns around this blackened half-skull. I think the brain is missing. I thought that was the essential statement of the film. In that the whole unhappy film was about the mechanization, in the worst way, of nature. In the same way that the hand finds and turns death about for examination, the camera deadens, and mechanizes, whatever it encounters. Whatever image it lifts from the world, it makes into a lifeless semblance. I felt that in a strange way this horribly dead film was right, was something I could respect, true to its central concern. Profound in its inertness. Cinema incorporating nature and making it mechanism. I wrote Hollis that it was beyond the pleasure principle.
DAVID: Do you think that it's because it's a machine... can painting do the same thing?
KEN: No. Because it's a machine. Although some painters are very mechanical. But that's a good question. A film can be a record of living impulses. That film is not. It's important to me for what can be seen as its failure, which offers me something. I don't want to see it again. I don't want to see that naked girl endlessly going through the permutations of movement within the field. Horrible. To imagine that an attractive girl would be turned into a monster through repetition. More and more and more, and going nowhere, no feeling for anything. Very ugly, but finally becoming something because of that. Did Hollis actually conceive it that way? I don't think so. I think he inadvertently spun into something, in someways like Warhol did, just tumbled into something. We were in the theater when Warhol's Sleep was shown. It was advertised as an eight-hour film, and it was really forty minutes shown over and over. I'm pretty sure it was done as a lark. Just the idea of it being an eight-hour film, of somebody sleeping through a normal eight-hour sleep. That is the gag, and the thing that did generate the writing and the attention. But to actually sit there and watch the whole thing, hardly anyone did, honestly. One curious thing happened. It showed for a week or two. In the beginning, Sleep played with a tiny AM radio in the balcony, with a little sound coming out. It was very clever. It was atmospheric, New York atmosphere, falling asleep with the radio coming from next door--people asleep with the radio on to remind them there's a world out there. I acknowledged that the radio offered that but I felt it was an error. I thought the film was actually very monumental, and this was reducing it to something else, it was almost sentimental compared to what the film could actually do once you began to get into its time. To watch this body laying across the screen breathing in slow motion, because it was actually projected at 16 frames per second, which is slower than it had been shot. So you had this slower than life of the breathing of the body, and against this slowness was the busy-ness of the grain. It was high contrast black and white that had been pushed, extremely grainy--I'm sure, not conceived of as part of the film. In this case, you really had a sense of a multitude of frames, each with its distinctive grain arrangement, making up this ongoing slow-moving photographic image, and the frames themselves, you could see the pixillation of grain frame to frame, so busy, teeming, this micro-crazy activity against this slow, sinking, heaving... it was great. But it might have been just something that an interested projectionist or theater manager might find, since nobody stayed long enough to find these things. He stopped the radio, by the way. Warhol came in at one point, asking questions. He could hear that.
TOM: In what we were talking about last night, about the extreme variety in

your films, I realized that one of the subcategories...
KEN: Before we do--it's a dangerous thing, the artist very often allows himself to work in a way where he or she cannot rationalize in words what's been done. And then a terrible thing can take place where other people, who are verbal people, assume the authority of putting things in words and saying what this person actually did without knowing it. Again, it's as if the artist is this ignorant person waiting for the word person to decide what's been done. And in that way, also, becoming the co-creator of the work by clarifying the creative gesture. It's very dangerous because in some ways its denegrating to, and dismissive of, the knowledge that goes into a non-verbal art because it isn't considered knowledge, it doesn't translate, it's not accorded the prestige of knowledge.
DAVID: When I saw the Warhol films I was surprised at how rich they were as an experience, because you always read about them and they sounded like they were conceptual films, and that there wouldn't be that much to the film, and that it was just an interesting idea to do it. And then to actually see them and realize how rich they were--it's kind of the opposite of how they were written about. They're always written about as being unwatchable.
KEN: There's a guy we met in Italy who's written a book about Warhol's films without ever seeing them. Their Warhol film expert!
Sometimes the films would be developed in the afternoon and shown in the evening. It was really astonishing, the films that would flit by, you wouldn't see them again. One of the works, the camera was set up, and this young woman was talking on the phone, but deep out of focus. And she would only come into focus as she approached the camera, and she'd do something on the table, so that a hand would come into focus. For much of the film, she'd be in the distance talking, and this superficial prattle would go on, and then something would come in front of the camera and pass in focus. Wow, that was something, if you were ready for that. But most of the audience would be talking through it. That unexpected cinematic kick wouldn't be picked up on. It's dangerous to tell people what to look for, I think. Also, this may just be something that is interesting to me...
TOM: The film that I wanted to talk about that seems to me to be very different, but it's absolutely clear to me that it's the same filmmaker as Tom, Tom and Little Stabs and the Nervous System...is Soft Rain. Because obviously there's a way that that's been related to structural films, and there are all these ways that it does share relations. But it also seems to me extremely different from what Snow or even Gehr were doing then. Although there was an important dialogue going between Snow and Gehr, and there was a lot of connection between you guys.
KEN: Well, there's a number of things. What's very important, of course, in the film is the black rectangle in the film, which sinks into the scene. And it's designed to do that. It was shot right over there, at that window, looking out. And I was very amused to make this three-dimensional scene fit so snugly into the frame. In some ways similar to what Ernie would do later on with Serene Velocity, where the hallway corner lines come right to the corners, and therefore the hallway comes up to the film plane, to the surface plane, the screen plane. It's a flat image, which then is really related to all my stuff. All my stuff with 3-D is involved with 2-D as well, and breaking from 2-D to 3-D. So that little film is not illusionistic, but it allows you to think that you're looking into deep space and that people are crossing at a distance on this little stage, in slow motion so they're really shlepping, they're weighed down, they're carrying packages, and there's many little rectangular spaces that are made between the cars...and you have these very strong diagonal lines going along the walls that push this little stage of the next street back in

depth. At the same time, it's clearly a design on the screen. This crazy black rectangle, when you allow yourself to think that you're looking into space, looks like a mysterious black crater that exists in New York City. It's backstage and so perhaps one can ignore it, and you allow yourself to think these absurd thoughts until actually by... I figured on the breeze to blow this little cardboard rectangle and make it move, and it wasn't doing it. The breeze died when the shot began, and I had to actually tap it outside the camera-view to alert people every so often that this is foreground, this is not out there, this is up here. So to me that's very consistent with my sensitivity to shlepping, and to the contradiction of depicting a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional plane!

TOM: It seems me that even though I don't think of you as often being involved with very pictorial compositions, it's something you do...

KEN: To be cinematic, which means to work in time, you have to watch out for stabilized compositions, for making stills, for just prolonging a still on screen. One has to find a way to make something that will achieve its shape or harmony or balance or effect in time. Is itself achieved over time. It has to make a move into time and remain off-balance until it completes itself and then the film ends. We mostly know that in narrative fiction, Hitchcock's suspense, something is suspended, you are suspended, something is off-kilter, impending, waiting for the move that will right it. A question is asked: who did it? And then the answer comes: he did it. Or: will they catch that person in time? Will the lovers get together? Or whatever it is, that question has to be resolved. The answer comes to meet it and the work is stabilized and it ends. The pyramid stands complete. Now to do that kinetically, do that visually, and not by way of photoplay means, that's really an interesting problem. It's done in music all the time, and it does happen in film.

TOM: Soft Rain is extraordinary, it's a perfect illustration.

KEN: But that's a plateau, that's sustained, that doesn't lean in time. It goes against this sensible dictum of making something that's off-balance from frame to frame to frame. It's static. Again, there is a cinema against the grain of cinema, like the Warhol portraits.

TOM: But at the same time the experience you have in watching it, of suddenly realizing, wait, that isn't deep, that's right there, gives that off-balance feeling.

KEN: Also the repetitions. It's three prints in a row, and after a while, you realize, hmmm...didn't I see that person before. Didn't I see that person holding that package step out in front of traffic before? Again, it's the film world as machine product, and repeatable, in a way that a semblance of life is repeatable, and life is not.

TOM: I found this advertisement for one of the first film projectors, a Jenkins Phantoscope.

KEN: I know what you're going to tell me. It was made to go forward and backward at whatever speed, and freeze.

TOM: Well, that's certainly true. But it was advertising also the films that it would show, which included street scenes, and it said, "Who has not been fascinated by the endless panorama of the streets?" And then it says, "Who has not said, I would like to see that again." Which is not what you usually hear about early cinema, that the point was that you could see it again. But this was saying, now you can see what you've always looked at in your life again and again.

KEN: I want a copy of that! You're pointing out something. Our kids, who learned to love film, but not like us when we were kids, we only had the theater to go to, and few films recycled. Gunga Din, King Kong. But they've learned to watch again and again...

FLO: And also, to go directly to the parts that they like. They don't have to sit through the whole thing.
KEN: Using the VCR. Aza just went to see The 5,000 Fingers Of Dr. T two nights running at Film Forum. Because he knows it by heart. And Nisi has seen Harold And Maude more times than anyone involved with the making of the film. But they're not unique. People are doing that now, in the same way they've listened to records over and over. And I think they would be astonished way if you told them they were watching it again. They're into it, period.
DAVID: How was the decision made to repeat the rolls in Soft Rain? Was it something you had in mind when you shot it?
KEN: No, not when I shot it. But almost immediately after I got it back. It was really, I must say, an experiment. On impulse. I could value all these things I'm talking about when I first looked at it, and decide that this is a film I'd like other people to look at.
FLO: I remember another reason, also. I think it's the second film you shot on your Arriflex and you knew that you could frame things accurately. So suddenly you could use...
KEN: I had a reflex 8.
FLO: It was still with a parallax correction.
KEN: There's something else, at the same time I made, and I usually show it together (with Soft Rain), Airshaft. Have you seen that? That's this side of our place. And that was also made possible by that zoom lens. While looking through, I could, with my hand, shape light. Remembering that we don't record objects, but light coming from objects, and we can interfere with the path of that light.
TOM: Bend it.
KEN: Yes, deflect it and do all kinds of funny things, and reflex allowed me to see what I was doing. I like that film. And also, we can talk about this for a moment if you don't mind... it's very related to painting, it's a balanced image that goes out of balance and returns to itself, and is allowed to again shine forth at the end in its completeness. But along the way many, many pictures are made from this one picture. Now this is shown over here, and this is isolated, not to mention that the dark shapes that I interpose are themselves shapes, are things confronting us to be looked at. I was making many, many pictures from one picture.
TOM: In some ways like Tom Tom.
KEN: Yeah! So if I have to say that this was made by the same person...you see I'm wily enough to figure out the connection. But this really is my thinking.
TOM: I have this memory from an interview with Gehr that there was a period when he and Snow and Joyce Wieland and you all lived on Chambers Street. Am I right on that?
FLO: The only time Ernie lived here was when we went to Binghamton, when we weren't here he lived here, and we came back to New York in the summer.
TOM: Or was it Frampton? But they were talking about "the Chambers Street boys" or something like that. Was that around the time of these films?
KEN: Yes. We saw each other a lot. We were very tight with Mike and Joyce at the time. And Ernie. And Hollis was a few blocks away.
TOM: It's actually your lens...or camera...that Wavelength is made with?
KEN: Right, and a number of Ernie's films, too. Community camera.
FLO: And they did Reverberations on the set-up that Ken was using for Tom Tom.
KEN: Tom Tom was shot here. We had a bed where the television set is now, and the screen and camera was on one side and the projector on the other side, going fast or slow as I recorded on the camera.
TOM: So it was all done off the screen...it wasn't optical printing.
FLO: Oh no, we could never afford that.

KEN: Not only that, I was interested in the character of projection.
FLO: Besides that, nobody would ever...I mean, he went into shadow play because it was cheap!
KEN: But the character of projection is very important to Tom Tom. When people talk about it as something that's done with the optical printer, it mystifies me. It's so much about projection. You see the projector light hitting you. Yeah. The shadow play saved money. And even the Nervous System was a way to not have to spend so much money. We had no money. We had two kids going to private school because of the disaster New York public schools have become, and that was it. That took the paycheck. I wasn't doing very well with grants. I was in a fury, early today, thinking about the disregard of The Philippines Adventure, and this morning in preparing to present something of Southwark Fair to you, Flo mentioned that this was presented at the Whitney Museum in 1975. I had to temper myself, keep from becoming bitter and crazy and angry. There's never been a word in print about that work. And at the Whitney performance there were actually a whole bunch of people involved with film writing out there. It was something John Hanhardt had put together about film investigation...
TOM: I was in that.
KEN: Oh really...so you're one of the culprits! No wonder I didn't talk to you for two years. (laughs)
TOM: There aren't people asking me to write things. Only occasionally. It's not as though anything I write will get into print.
KEN: If I forgive you I'll have to forgive them all. But it really is crazy-making, because I remember when I first began working with the Nervous System I was doing piece after piece, really boom, boom, one after the other, and I realized shortly that I was getting very top-heavy with inventory. It's hard to remember all these pieces... I understand Toscanini would conduct all these things without a score... but I'm not like that. So for me to remember all the connections in a bunch of pieces was very difficult, and after a while I thought, really, just let me retain these things if I can for the very occasional times that I get a chance to do them rather than keep making more things. I would have liked to have made more things. Of course, to be honest, we were also suffering the fact that we were making ephemeral works, and we were making some efforts to see if we could fix them in a way, as Flo was talking about before. Make something that could be put in a can. But I had a lot more ideas than I developed. It became pointless after a while. The shadow plays... I know you have other questions and I'm going on in my, what's it called, people have their litanies. My litany is that nobody knows, except other 3-D shadow play makers, of which there are none, what kind of work would go into the mounting of a shadow play, and then to do it only once or twice! We'd get no write-up, and no follow-up of performances anywhere. So I think that's one of the great losses, the Apparition Theater Of New York works that would have been done. Had there been a bit more picking-up.
DAVID: Do you have any ideas about why this stuff wasn't written about. There's always things that come along and seem to attract a lot of writing. Certainly you can find scores of articles about Tom Tom...
KEN: Well, people write about it. But they rarely ask me about it. I've never been invited to stroll over to NYU, where the film is part of the bible of independent cinema. Is it my personality? People find me abrasive, or are fearful of me, or so I've been told. Surely it can't be the divine Annette wishing me to be thought of as an idiot savant.
DAVID: Do you think there is something inherent in the work. With the Nervous System, the fact that it can't be reproduced.
KEN: The Nervous System is very tough on people, I know. Flicker. But the

Apparition Theater is lovely. It's all my positive, warmer, pleasure-making side. It really has to do with pleasure, and there's very little bitterness in it, and I don't get into this political grotesquery. Except in Thirties Man. It's full of beauty. One of the pieces we did was called, Slow Is Beauty: Rodin. It was beauty. Why wasn't it picked up on? We once read its been a big time for performance in America, but this wasn't picked up on. Occasionally people would see it and then love it. In Boulder in '82. There's a woman who wrote for the paper there who was wild about it. And the people who came loved it. Somebody on his own plugged it on the radio. And then nothing followed through. I don't know why. I guess a lot of it has to do with the fact that I don't promote, I don't write letters, I wait for the world to come to me, which is pretty infantile.

TOM: What would you want to come through?

FLO: I know. He'd like a theater. He'd like a storefront theater in which he would not have to teach, and he would be either showing films or performing seven days a week.

KEN: I'd like to become a little old Jewish man doing shadow plays in my storefront theater. Flo and I would sleep in the back on an iron metal cot.

FLO: And hope he'd make enough money to pay Con Edison and the telephone bills.

KEN: "Flo, who's at the door?" "Someone's come to see shadow play...quick, Kenneth, shake out the shadows, quick. Come in, come in. Yes, plenty of seats here." Living in New York means walking around and seeing empty places and intoning, "shadow play theater." There are three shadow play theaters in this neighborhood alone. Within a block. They're empty, for years now.

FLO: But we'll never be able to afford it.

KEN: It's probably that we live in New York. There's other places where we could afford it, find a space and set it up and perform in a steady way. John Hanhardt's wife, Eva, once tried to steer us into the real shadow play theater. I think I just collapsed after that disappointment. That was '81 or '82. A block or two away from P.S. 1, there was a synagogue that was defunct and the dead rabbi's wife was involved in selling it. And Eva told us about it and we went up there, and it was my theater. The Apparition Theater of New York. We had hopes of moving into it and making it a theater but also leaving it as an old synagogue that would now be a theater. It would clearly be what it was. We were not going to... what is that terrible thing they do... renovation, rebirth... it was not going to be renovated. It was going to be a synagogue featuring shadow play theater. We contacted the lawyer representing the rabbi's wife, and it was pretty cheap as these things go, thinkable. I told the lawyer I wanted to make a bid for the place, but he said, we're not taking bids yet. You have to wait. And I kept calling him, two or three times a week, and it went on and on, and for some reason, this guy was not going to take a bid from me. And at some point, from Boulder, Colorado, I phoned and he said it's been sold. To a fundamentalist Korean church. And I'm sure the guy got his own payment from the Koreans and blocked off competing bids. I was dissuaded from attempting a court fight, the cost. I'm not as dauntless as I'd like to be and I think that did me in.

A very funny thing with this. One more incident. This one's really crazy. George Maciunas loved my shadow play theater. I've had angels in the world... Jonas has sometimes been an angel, sometimes a devil for me. Stan, of course. And Flo is my lucky break. But George loved my stories, and my reading of my stories, and loved shadow play theater. And among other supportive things he did, he connected me with John Lennon and Yoko Ono. They were interested in doing some kind of group show with people doing different things with shadows. So George said that he told her about my shadow play, and she wanted to know the techniques and do it herself. And George lied and said

"He's patented the techniques" in order to protect me. And she then had to get in touch with me. With a bunch of my beloved 60's, early 70's students we did a performance here for them and they loved it. Loved it and they were very, very nice. Yoko set something up and she showed me something that she was also doing with shadow, very, very beautiful. And besides this group show involvement they were going to put some money into an extended presentation somewhere of Apparition Theater.

So this was going along, and we were working with students, and these were hot students. This was about 1971. Well, what happened was that the feds were trying to kick Lennon out of the country, and they became occupied with that, and after that, they just had to recuperate and stayed away from everything and that was the end of that. They were actually going to give us some substantial money and a real theater to present shadow play. And again, because I don't have healthy attitudes of resilience, I went into collapse. And then the next crazy thing dealing with this one. I'm in a cab and I hear some really interesting rock song. And I hadn't heard anything good in rock for years. Rock ballads, raga rock. Flaccid rock. This had energy. And then I'm startled to discover it's a new Lennon recording. Lennon is stepping out and they're seeing people again. And so I'm thinking maybe they'd like to pick up on shadow play again. So at some point I tell Flo, tomorrow I'm going to phone and see if they want to talk shadow play. And Flo goes down in the morning to take Aza to school, and comes back, and she's white. She comes up with the news that Lennon's been shot, he's dead.

He was very nice, by the way. At least to us. I haven't read his biography, but he was very, very sweet. And she was fine. Quite down home.

I have an answer to one of David's questions, and this has to do. You asked me this wonderful question about why wasn't something picked up on, and I said it could be my personality. I understand people have problems with it. But I know that a couple of things happened in New York. First of all, Jonas is a whole story in himself. In terms of these performances, one of his last Voice articles was a put-down of my two-projector works. He said something about how he likes a film that can be shown on one projector and goes through normally and this is what a film is for him, and he put down this involvement with 3-D. It was Southwark Fair that he put down. He said he took the polaroid spectacles off, and then it became interesting to see the rhythm of the changes. Of course that was totally defeating what I was doing. All the changes, the rhythm came about through what I was looking at in 3-D. As far as I know there was no rhythm that made any sense outside of the timing in connection with the 3-D event. So that hurt this whole 3-D two-projector enterprise. And the shadow play, why wasn't it picked up on? Flo, do you have any suggestions?

FLO: For myself, I think it's because what we always needed was a place to rehearse for two months, and whenever we did that then I think everything worked out really well.

KEN: There are a lot of moving parts...very complicated.

TOM: The performances were never more than one or two, right?

FLO: We had a space over here from the Idea Warehouse, which became part of P.S. 1, but we had this huge space for forty dollars a month and we worked all summer preparing this performance that we did for at least one month called Slow is Beauty: Rodin, we did it on weekends.

KEN: We were burnt out.

FLO: It was really, like a lot of students from Binghamton that were in the city that summer. It took days and hours, people would just go there after work and we would, Kenneth would just go through things and slowly the pieces would either come through or be dismantled. Slowly everything worked itself

into being and that's really what had to happen.
KEN: The only thing that was written about it was in the Drama Review and it came out after I no longer was doing the piece. We tried to get reviewed.
FLO: In a certain way, there's too much work. It's almost like a production that everybody's got to do without pay...
KEN: Well, work is what you want to do.
FLO: No, I don't mean that. In a way, what you do with a theater is a kind of thing that is like a big production. It starts out to be simple, but then it turns out to be, you need about ten or twenty hours of everybody's time to slowly get them to not be too this or too artificial.
KEN: There's a lot of education involved for somebody to be in a shadow play. I'm serious. This thing that you said about Dziga Vertov saying the politician would give himself away, boy if that's true in film it's also true in shadow play. Oh my. You really see the truth or untruth of gestures and shapes.
FLO: Thirties Man slowly developed here, too. We worked in this loft before Nisi and Aza were born.
KEN: You really had to get people out of bad ideas of what art and self-presentation is, in order to do something in a shadow play that isn't puerile. It's a lot of work.
FLO: So that piece took months also.
KEN: And it was so beautiful, so radiant.
FLO: Then you just have to go on things that you know and work things up, but you have to depend upon people. Let's say you have ten people, you have to know that these ten people are going to put in the time.
KEN: And then after they've put in all this time, and nothing is picked up on, and there's no other offers or invitations... you can't keep asking that much of people. So why didn't I get reviewed at the time?
DAVID: One thing I was wondering before, when I asked the question whether there was something inherent in your work that makes it difficult to be received... there hasn't been a retrospective before aside from the series in Berlin... Is there something about your work that has a quality of being incomplete, in a positive way.
KEN: Some positive and some negative. I think it's scrappy and incomplete and people don't know whether they're going to get something that's wrapped up or the projector's going to explode. Some of it's make-do and some of it... there's a tackiness which I care for and is inherent to what I want and then after that there are some real problems of non-professionalism, as people call it, which is something I also resist in both good ways and bad ways, and really in some ways just a penchant for disarray and confusion. So it's really been a problem for me.
DAVID: It's never been a problem that's made things uninteresting. Some films or filmmakers come along...
KEN: People are concerned with packages and the neatness and sureness of a presentation. Dishevelment or the threat of it may make them insecure, I don't know. I agree with you that it makes it interesting. It was my esthetic, entirely, for Star Spangled To Death.
DAVID: There must be something about you that resists that kind of packaging. In keeping the films open, and the fact that every film is going to be a different kind of experience. So there must be something positive in you that also makes it resistant...
KEN: Maybe I'm just neurotic.
DAVID: A comment that Steve Anker made in his essay in the Independent America catalogue was that you continue to do work that insures its own neglect... there was some phrase like that... he was saying this in a positive way and

saying that you were producing valuable work but that there's something inherent in the work...
KEN: This is really interesting in light of the thing I mentioned last night. Do I seek to be refused? Do I seek to create refuse? I don't know, I don't think so, but I have to wonder about it. I only know what I think on top. I know I've had a fascination with losers, and what losing qualities are. Although I don't think of myself as a loser type personality. You're really taking me into stuff that is scorching. You're putting me on the spot to explain the neglect of what I've offered. I don't know. It's been painful, I'll tell you that, and it's led to a feeling of what for, why bother? Also there's a lot of other things that compete for my time. Learning something. All these books here. And I'm a slow reader. So time goes into that. This is a study one might make: what do people go through after they've presented their stuff and there's hardly any follow-through, no comparable counter-energy to the layout. It's devastating. And you have to do a piece of healing or forgetting before you can get back into operation. I'm either not strong enough, or I don't stride with enough rhythm to simply dismiss dismissal.
TOM: If you want to shift the focus, I'll give you an out here. There's an incident that I only know about because of Mekas's diary films, where you and he went to a Flaherty conference, with Flo, wanting them to show Blonde Cobra.
FLO: And also Flaming Creatures. And we thought, this is so wonderful.
DAVID: This is in Lost, Lost, Lost.
TOM: Can you tell me a little bit about that? If I understand the point there, it was partly wanting those films to be considered as documentaries and that's a very interesting question to me too.
KEN: I told Jonas that I heard of an Italian documentary film festival, and I wanted to send in Blonde Cobra as a documentary. Jonas said, they won't understand. But I don't think that we went to Flaherty to present these as documentaries.
I think Jonas wanted them to consider this new cinema, this thing that was happening with film.
FLO: We got there and they treated us like we were lepers. And something worked out where they were going to show the film, but it was going to be late at night, after midnight, in a barn with no heating. And then there was no place...
KEN: One person came to the cold barn. Gerald O'Grady?
DAVID: Was this after the trial for Flaming Creatures?
KEN: No. Earlier. I expected nothing. It was an amusing adventure.
We escaped death twice on the way back, and it was the end of my hitchhiking. Especially with Flo. By myself, I had hitchhiked for years. The cold shoulder, we got, a cold night in Vermont. You can see it in the movie. Waking up out of these cars. We had wonderful morale. It was fun! We were on top of the world.
FLO: The craziest thing that ever happened was there was a Polish parade, in '63 or '64, this was the wildest, craziest, stupidest thing, and I think we had just met Tiny Tim, and we thought he was fantastic. I think Barbara Rubin knew him and I think Jack dressed him for the parade.
KEN: He spent the entire night being prepared by Jack (Smith). Who was also going to take part in the parade, but just collapsed.
FLO: One of the most incredible things that he had was Grecian sandals that were made out of masking tape that was wrapped around his feet to make it look like he was wearing real Grecian sandals. The point of this...
KEN: Oh, but those feet. Tiny Tim's feet. Huge feet, with these big thick black talons.

FLO: The thing was, we were going to get in the back of this Polish Day parade with a banner that advertised New American Cinema. Whoever knew what that meant. These people... they could have turned around and killed us, the looks we got, because we had no right being there, and boy were we in opposite worlds.
KEN: Little Polish kids would look at Tiny Tim and run screaming.
TOM: In fear?
KEN: In real fear. "What in hell is that?"
FLO: He was wearing some kind of long Grecian dress. And he was like 6' 5".
KEN: He really looked like the Wicked Witch. A real Wicked Witch. And of course, he's angelic. It was a wonderful makeup job. And I filmed it, I think. Jonas has a film of it somewhere. I was just cracking up filming and laughing, and in fear of attack. But it was a wonderful waste gesture at the beginning of the New American Cinema.
TOM: In the Flaming Creatures trial it was actually you and Flo that were arrested?
KEN: And Jerry Sims. I was managing the theater and Flo was selling tickets and Jerry was taking tickets at the door. And Jerry and his lawyer, he had a separate lawyer, and Jerry never admitted to knowing what was being shown inside the theater. And so they had to let him go. Clever. Flo unfortunately was approached by this very nice Irish detective who said, "What's a nice girl like you doing in this porno theater?" And Flo immediately defended the film, and said it's a beautiful film. And that's what he wanted. She admitted knowing what she was doing. And Jonas rushed over and said if you're going to arrest them, you've got to arrest me. We then got this high-profile lawyer.
FLO: But Jerry Sims' humble Lower East Side lawyer got him off.
KEN: He had a word for us after that, we were "the criminals." I never knew that 1964 was actually going to be 25 years in the past.
TOM: I remember I was 13 years old and I remember reading about the arrest in the Village Voice. The names didn't stick with me...
KEN: It was humiliating. Because we were given no voice at the trial. Media inquiries went to Jonas or the lawyer. So "we stole away" between court appearances to the Hamptons.
TOM: What was the final verdict? I've forgotten.
FLO: The lawyer who was defending us was very embarrassed by the film. He turned red.
KEN: It was screened in the judge's chambers, and he turned explosively red. He'd gotten into the predicament of having to defend what was unbearable for him.
FLO: The outcome was what they called "moot."
KEN: No, that's not true. On the Supreme Court level. But on the local level, we were guilty. I think that is one of the cases that affected freedom of speech in film. Which has made for all this wonderful pornography as part of the exercise in freedom. Freedom is not so wonderful when most people are just out for a buck, and it just gives them license.
FLO: But it never occurred to us that pornography was what was going to be the natural thing to follow.
KEN: When we say pornography, we're not talking about eroticism, which is what Cherries is--eroticism. But pornography, whoring through movies. Whoring with movies. Slavering and abuse.
DAVID: There was a sharp change in Warhol's career as a filmmaker when Chelsea Girls came out, and he realized that he could make films that were commercial, and he used that formula to make commercial films.
KEN: Those were Paul Morrissey films.

DAVID: Right, but...
KEN: I don't even think of that period. I think Paul's using some of the same people, and some of the same socially volatile stuff, but it's some kind of quasi-movie.
DAVID: But his interest was no longer in making films as films, but as commercial products.
KEN: That was out-and-out merchandising, and not what was done earlier.
DAVID: Sure. Those films aren't interesting like the early ones were. But there was a way that became fashionable. The underground became fashionable in the late sixties and it was because of this element of sex. And that's what could make money. Did you have any feeling about that while it was going on?
KEN: In terms of being "self-defeating," it happened that I converted to very chaste work as a response. I didn't want to feed into that. And I was really very interested in sex, and interested in the body, and interested in explicitness, but I didn't want to participate in that. Sex is tactile, anyway, that was something else.
DAVID: Well, you didn't want to feed into people's expectations.
KEN: One could say, why not, if I had this interest. But I didn't like the attitude that was usually evidenced when people came to see Flaming Creatures. It was smutty and insensitive.
FLO: We saw a mutilated print of Flaming Creatures in Geneva. Apparently what they're doing, there's a museum renting it out at a very high fee, like 300 francs, a stolen print with scenes cut out.
KEN: And other films that passed through the country, they copied, and now rent as their own. Europe has a lot of crooks. Actually, America, in some way, I have a feeling, believe it or not, in this land of opportunity, instances of honor may be more common. Excepting, of course, Claude Chamberlain, but that's Montreal. And that swine that died... no, I should take that back, swine are not bad... Rohauer.
Most film artists are not business people, and don't protect their property well. Intellectual private property's a contradiction to begin with, but as things are, you want to leave something for spouse, for kids.
TOM: A film that I wanted to talk about, because it's one that I love very much that I don't think people talk about too much, and I find it hard to talk about because I think it's so exquisite, is Nissan Ariana Window. It's again something that's very different. In some ways, something like Lisa And Joey is kind of related, but on a more profound level, I think they're more different. But it seems very different from things right about that time. Because it's early 60's, right?
FLO: No, '69.
KEN: Well, for one thing, I've long loved home movies, and from the very beginning of my teaching I would show people home movies and urge them to get their movies of themselves growing up and show them at school, and this to me is an artist's home movie. Brakhage named one work An Avant-Garde Home Movie. These are home movies by persons with, say, an unusual feel for the visual. I hoped for the same unaffected grace of anyone aiming simply to capture and preserve something they cared about.
FLO: Like Artie And Marty Rosenblatt's Baby Pictures.
KEN: Artie and Marty Rosenblatt were twins that we met in the very beginning, of the viewing of films, when people began to discover that there was someone other than themselves making films.
FLO: But they brought it over as admission. It wasn't their film.
KEN: Right. After the Charles Theater stopped, you may know this, we had a loft a few blocks nearby, next to the bridge, where The Sky Socialist was shot, and on Friday and Saturday night we had screenings there where admission

could be your bringing a film of your own, which is how we met Bob Cowan, and the Kuchar brothers.
FLO: It was also a way of filling out a program. Because Kenneth couldn't show everything of his own. He got stuff from the Donnell Library. Especially Mother Love he showed all the time.
KEN: Lower half of the bill to Star Spangled To Death. Baby monkeys, experiments in maternal deprivation. Science learns that babies miss their mothers. That's a whole conversation unto itself.
FLO: If people brought a film, they'd come in for free, and also, there would be more to the program. So it was a way of...
KEN: For the audience to provide the program, so you could make a little bit of money! And I'm still out to con people to pay to see what they already have, what they bring to the show; one thing the Nervous System can do is excite, elicit Rorschaching, especially Camera Thrills Of The War. The audience projects most of Camera Thrills. Anyway, I assure you, we made very, very little money, but we needed just that edge to survive on. Because you (Flo) were working. Anyway, Artie And Marty Rosenblatt showed up, and it was the most exquisite graceful home movie, and some of the early film programs, when Jonas got things going, Artie and Marty Rosenblatt's film was there, and it was also in the first Coop catalogue. And you've seen Urban Peasants. So this is my involvement in home movie making. The Sky Socialist was also a home movie, and although it's more complicated, it's personal, it's me turned inside out. Star Spangled is home movie, Blonde Cobra, literally.
TOM: The section of Nissan Ariana Window where the baby is crawling off the rug. Not only is it just wonderful in itself, but it really seems to me to be quintessential Jacobs. In a way it says it all.
KEN: Wonderful. How can I be so ungrateful to say that nothing has ever appeared in print about it? It makes me question myself. We think it's lovely, but then I wonder whether we're being sentimental. What's to be done? How will the little flowers get sprinkled with praise so that they can blossom exuberantly?
TOM: Does that make them blossom?
KEN: Usually helps. I know that inundation can drown people. It happened to Jack.
DAVID: Were you helped by the attention that Tom Tom got?
KEN: It was very helpful. It helped me get a job teaching. Please don't think more than three people have spoken to me about it.
FLO: You got a job before that.
KEN: That's true. The writing is sometimes on, and revealing to one's self, and helpful, and sometimes--the whole thing that came up with structuralism was wrong-headed in many ways--and the work gets taken over by people who have their own agenda, to the point where they can lose touch with the work, and then we get the forceful introduction that can derail people on the way to the work. It's hard for the sensory to get through words that wrap it up. I tell my students to clip and save reviews for after. I'm not happy when people are driven to see Tom Tom as some kind of illustrated lecture rather than the ecstatic pandemonium it is.
The major thing I did in the revision (of Tom Tom) was add the sliding part. The film slipping. Which I thought about earlier but hadn't done. And as we were working with a friend, Judy Dauterman, who had been a professional negative cutter, she had this wonderful ability to plod on, I described it to her, and she said, wonderful, let's do it, she was very game. Flo worked, the three of us did it together. The rest are subtle changes, delicacies of connection.
TOM: I've only seen the current version, but I knew there had been this

revision, but partly because early accounts of it never talk about the color sequences, I had assumed they might have been added. They are to me extremely, extremely important to the film. I think people are confused by them. I may be creating a bugaboo of my imagination.
KEN: That's the only thing that confuses them? They're not confused by the black and white?
TOM: I guess what I'm saying is that part of the way that film was received when it was first unveiled is that it was about removing illusionism. Which isn't incorrect, but it's incomplete, I think. And I think those sequences show that it's about something else too.
KEN: Well, those are about illusionism too. The color scenes, of course, were shot at that window. There's a flower, which is not a flower, but a flower pressed up against a screen. The screen allowing it... you can see the veins of the flower, it looks like it's there, but it's not there, it's on the other side of the window screen. And then someone enters and shakes the screen, and you see that you're looking at the shadow of a flower. It really is about what the film's about, the shadow of people. People are on the other side of time, so for me it's a respite but also parallels--also it's present day, it's now, and it was important for me to make that connection.
TOM: What's interesting for me I think is that for someone like Malcolm LeGrice who tried to understand the American films just purely as material, that what they were doing was revealing the material of film.
KEN: That was much of it.
TOM: Yes, but... in those sequences, to me, I guess what it was very much about was the love of shadows and the beauty of shadows. Whereas for some people it just looks as though you're deconstructing them.
KEN: That's the thing. This is not a destructive scolding taking apart of something. This is a love of the existence of things in their various stages of corporeality. That because something is porous, can condense or vaporize, it isn't something solid as you believe it is, but has more dimensions of existence, including... it's a love of the whole process. A love of the whole stretch from immaterial to material.
TOM: A love of shadows. That's what comes through so amazingly, which I don't think most people were writing about.
KEN: It's in Tom Tom too. Also, the Parker Tyler content of the film is enormous. This is a guy who turned me on as a teenager to the mythic content of film. It's just enormous, what the original film has, as I see it, what it has me seeing, my reading of it. It's a sexual rite-of-passage tribal tale, good-humored and celebratory. I was picking up on that--the white woman who is also of the sky, she dissolves into the sky. Her huge breasts. And the sexual thing with the well. It was not just something about film, not as purely cerebral as people seem to think. I don't plan that well. I respond, I have impulses.
TOM: There's a thing in all your films--your thing about the sky woman pricks it for me--there are these amazing metaphors that suddenly happen. As a simple example, in Lisa And Joey, when magically she appears from behind the bandana, but one of the things I find so extraordinary about those metaphors is that they seem to me absolutely almost the opposite of a Brakhage metaphor. Whereas Brakhage makes a metaphor, the sun and the bloodstream, or something, I always feel that you find a metaphor. I'm not trying to make an evaluation, pro or con, good or bad. But literally it's almost as though you would have very little interest in making a metaphor, you yourself, but you have an interest in seeing that the world was filled with them ready-made. Does that make sense?
KEN: It makes a lot of sense. And you're right, I wouldn't bother. Metaphors abound, but also one must remember that metaphors are a certain kind of

reading. Things are up for readings. You have to be careful not to bind them to that reading. My camera subjects may lend themselves to a metaphor but you always know they have their own... they're on their own feet. Each has its own course of existence. If for a moment they come into a kind of confluence that allows a metaphor to be read, the more important thing is that they remain things in their own trajectories through existence.

TOM: That's partly why Perfect Film is a Ken Jacobs film. Because you read it as a Ken Jacobs film, and you find all these amazing metaphors in that film, and then you also realize that in a Ken Jacobs film the metaphors are found. It's almost as though the films teach you a way of reading rather than read to you.

KEN: That's very interesting to me, because I'm inside Ken Jacobs. I'm always seeing things as Ken Jacobs does. But I can see that... the people I care for do that for me. God, I remember the time we first saw Stan's The Art of Vision. I was seeing a Brakhage world for hours and hours afterwards, maybe a couple of days. I was conscious of peripheral vision as I never had been before. It was a fresh envisioning of existence through someone's very particular bias. You talk about my films varying so much; I don't want to stay recognizable to myself. God. I'm telling you, I am examining myself in terms of the Jew obsession I spoke about and I really wonder how much that enters into it, enters into not being pin-downable. I can't tell you what fear I had going to Boulder the first time, because I would be so far from an ocean, and a quick getaway.

There's this melange of impulses going on in people, and one hesitates to understand an artist's work through psychoanalysis, but there's something to it. I could be all wrong about these things that spring to my mind as understandings of what I do, but they do spring to mind.

TOM: It's funny, I always feel, well, the first article I wrote, I more or less compare you to Freud. Not in the sense that I was so very interested in doing a Freudian analysis of The Doctor's Dream, but that in some way I feel that what you do with film is related to what Freud does with the psychopathology of everyday life. One could call your filmmaking the psychopathology of everyday film. It wouldn't cover everything, but I think there is that element.

KEN: Freud exposes metaphorical thinking. To wrest us from a medieval metaphor for the world, and that's really an insane delusion. You can't live in some mental scheme of what the world is. You have to let the metaphors come and go, the understandings come and go. Allowing things to be revived in their own right, in their multiplicity of meanings and beyond meaning, just their sheer existence, which is much more important than any meanings that might be ascribed to them. Meanings are all simplistic boxings-in of the complexity of real things. The inclination to mire in language.

DAVID: Throughout all of your films, you're always finding a different way to respond to the material. You can take a film like Perfect Film and decide that you're not going to do anything, except title it, and you would take the Doctor's Dream and decide to start in the middle, and come up with this scheme.

FLO: I think it has to do with the fact that people who were going into abstract painting wanted... they would start in the middle. They didn't want to do something that would be an illusion. They would take something that would be an accident, and from the accident they would ride with it and work it out, and I think that he's using, sometimes... like, say, I could take anything, and I wonder if he would take something he considered to be totally inert and dead, and see if he could...

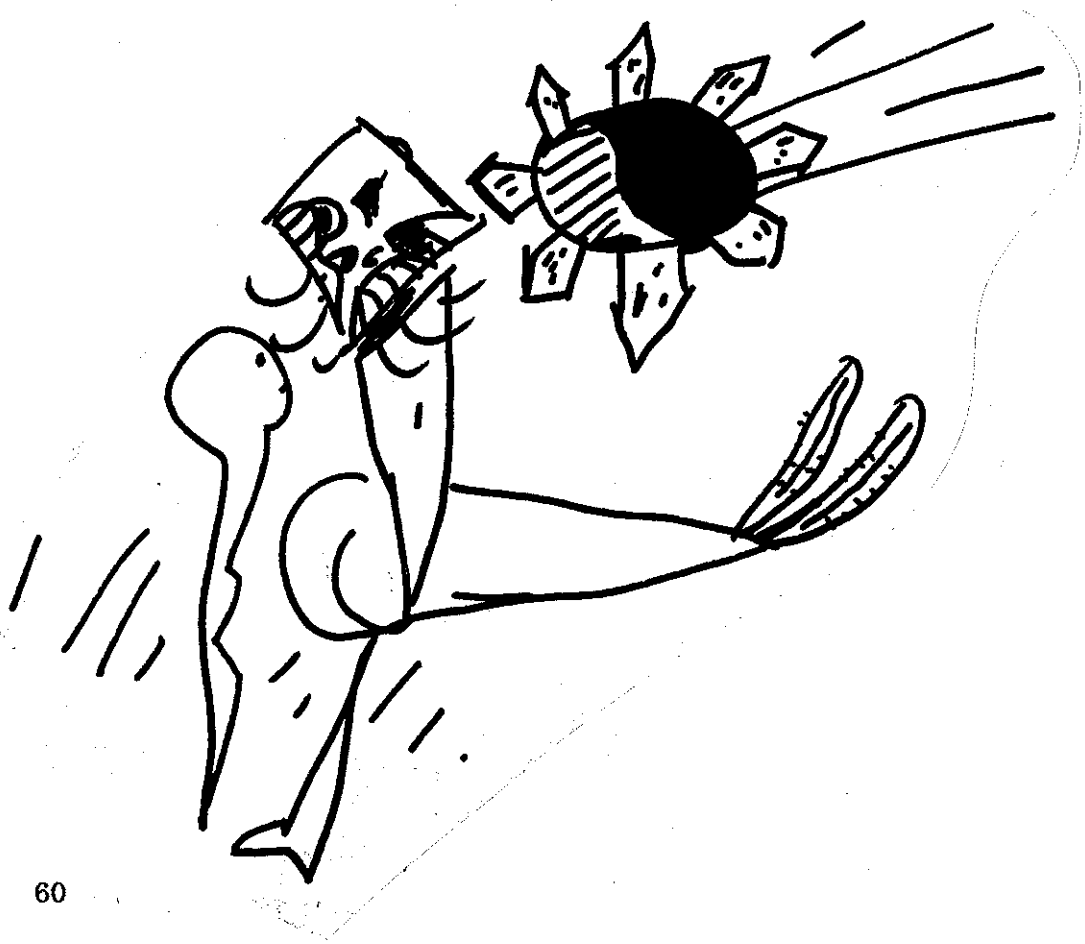
KEN: Who?

FLO: You.

KEN: Well, what do you think of The Doctor's Dream?

FLO: I don't think that's so inert...
KEN: Wasn't that the most inert movie to begin with?
FLO: I'm thinking of things that are so claustrophobic, like 50's stuff, inside of a vacuum, like a stage thing. At least this had some of those people left over, like the woman. There are certain things they're bringing from vaudeville. It might be inert, but we've seen inert stuff that you can't even take two seconds of.
KEN: Yeah, you're right.
FLO: Or could you take a commercial, could you start with a commercial and find... that's something that's been so divorced from life that the thing is 95% artifice, can you actually find anything to make life out of? I think it's involved with the way that abstract expressionists were excavating vitality out of an accident. Like you take the accident that you didn't do, and you find something, so that you didn't have total control. Whereas if you do the photography, you've already boxed yourself in with your own perception, and then you work on that to refine it.
KEN: Very much what I'm involved with is discovery. And discovery is something different from being a highly developed instrument, like Stan, with great rhythmic finesse, and bringing his sensibility and his ability to incorporate things in this rhythmic body again and again, whatever it is. That doesn't engage me. I can appreciate when someone else does it, but it's not what I want to do. Also, I have problems as I said before with inhabiting a wholly rhythmic work, with everything in place. I need discordancies, I need New York traffic noise. To be satisfied and interested in something, I need these spaces that visual noise opens up for me. I don't want to be in a controlled environment, which many works of art are. Totally controlled environments for the mind. I can visit them for a while, but I know my limits of tolerance for remaining in a totally controlled world of any sort. I need ruptures, hiatuses, I need New York. I dread a world which is a garden apartment complex, a model city, I dread that. And I dread that even in works of art, that are too much of a piece. Like all the things that are of a piece are predicated on certain givens. But one selects that given out of all possibility, and it makes for a completeness which actually is just built on one fragment taken as the truth. Like any religion. So, for me, the masterful sculpted completeness of a work can be suffocating. I need air shafts, provision for the unplanned. I like, as Stan does also by the way, the work of Ives, because some of the pieces, really, there are chunks of music falling on each other, there are really unpredictable spaces opened up from the collision, and it's very liberating for me. It's the spaces between elements that one breathes in, and just to have the elements all in line and everything done for you so that all there is for you as the viewer is to acknowledge what's been artfully done, it's not the happiest experience for me, as much as I can admire the feat.
DAVID: On one hand, you have an aversion to the idea of mastery. This image you had of Orson Welles... but on the other hand, it's very important for you, the idea of the personality of the artist being there all the time.
KEN: You have to understand that I spent my early years in a slum, and it was very beautiful to me. We had a little tiny backyard, tiny, and the fence of the backyard was made up of doors that had been thrown away, and the doors leaned every which way, and there were different colors and different textures, and even painted differently, and the different paint jobs corroded in different ways, and this created my standard of beauty. And I guess other people find it picturesquely interesting to see the confusion of a non-designed ad hoc environment. I find it very beautiful. And breathable. Order is a reduction, and reductions shrink... I can see the reductive essence of an

order. Eliciting a claustrophobic reaction.
TOM: There's a kind of way that Brakhage talks about... the Brakhage vision, and there was some point last night where you were talking about one of your films not being involved with having a vision. I know that all of your films are strongly involved with seeing and having a vision, or not having a vision, but they're about vision.
KEN: They're about vision, and they are vision. The "about" is inadvertent, because they are involved with various kinds of vision.
TOM: It seems to me that that's a fundamental difference from Brakhage. Again, what Brakhage does is extraordinary. I'm not in any sense criticizing it. But there is...
KEN: He does art, and I do garbage. I do New York City garbage.
DAVID: But garbage that a lot of work has gone into.
KEN: A lot of feelings are involved.
TOM: A lot of work and feeling... that's what garbage is. It's the remains of work and feeling.
KEN: Jonas had helped me with money for the lab, and I came up to the Coop, and in seven feet of space, screened Blonde Cobra and Stan came in while it was on, and after a big greeting from Jonas, he was kind of stuck there with this film going. And he watched it for a while, and it was clear that this was vile to Stan. Vile. Not in terms of what it was saying, but, what kind of film was this? What kind of feeling for rhythm was this? This was so ugly and brutal. I was impressed when Stan came around and found the expanse in himself to take in Blonde Cobra. I say take in, like a waif. (laughs)
One of the things that I think art does is create the mind. It's not even just a matter of utilizing resources which otherwise atrophy. It's literally the process of creating it. And you have people in science and outer space, who go way out. And in art, it's a thing for the mind to grow to.



ADDENDA TO INTERVIEW (see page 33)

I'm studying the evidence of fixed emulsion particles, and I want my tampering with the evidence to be evident. The magnetic image dissolves in magnetic flux, is poorly detailed to begin with and it's the details of details I'm into. The digital image is nowhere, an arrangement up for rearrangement anytime. With digital the field more than ever is the image--we get a moody display panel. No question we can think about and comment on the historic phenomenon of film electronically, but my inclination, as a film-artist, is to think with film, in film, the plastic ribbon and the machinery that conducts it, even if in some works I've removed it from the clockwork of the standard projector. The video game is where digital cinema properly begins. And the gravity-free super-performance of music-video zapism. Coiffures from outer space. Free at last, free at last.

Cubism was more profoundly futurist than Futurism, being less illustrative--not painting the figure dissolving into light, implying velocity with strobe repeats, but dissolving the figure into light and in such a way that the pictorial means propping up the appearance of the figure could be seen on closer inspection to be something else somewhere else. An elaborate spatial punning, so that a real velocity of changes was built into the works. Futurism publicized it but Cubism was the authentic first atom smasher. I can imagine the Futurists delighting in digital, these young people that had it up to here with their antique cities and custodial obligations. From which there's a direct line to Goebbels in his last journal entry crowing over Nazi success in bringing down to rubble old Europe. But for a cubist painting to work I think the weight of the figure, the gravitational pull of its presence must remain pulling at the shards in their light-play. That's its drama.

--Ken Jacobs

FICTION, POETRY, AND OTHER WRITING

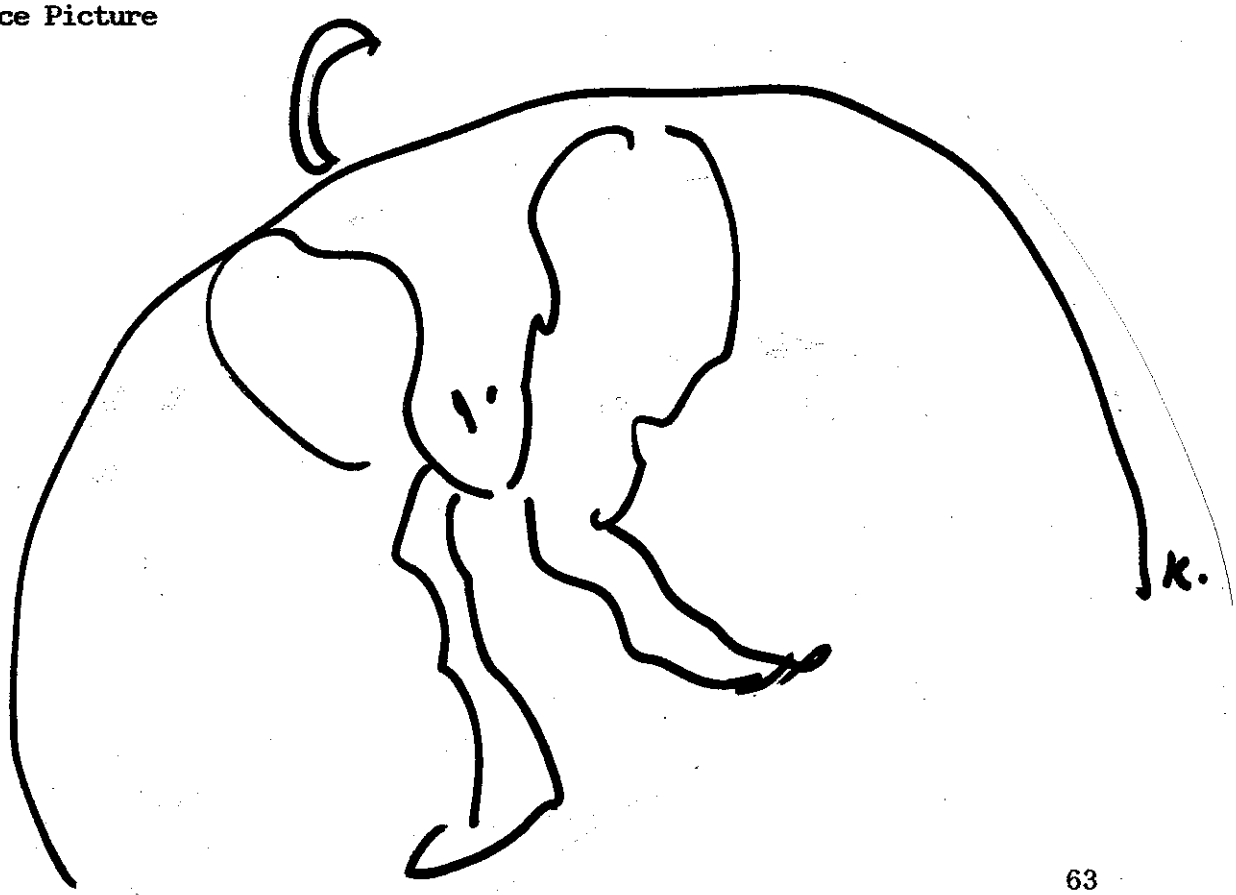
By Ken Jacobs

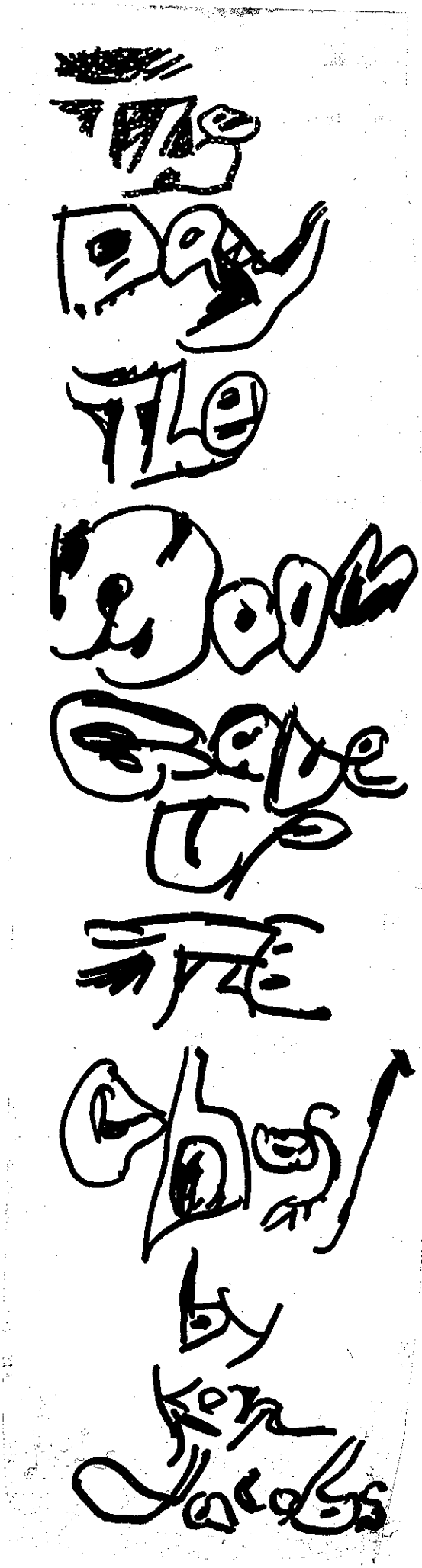
FICTION AND POETRY

The Day The Moon Gave Up The Ghost
Give Me The Moon Anytime
Routine
The Oi In Voice
Cracking Up The Absolute
Sunnyside Up
Hitler's Favorite Movie
Efficacious Ritual
Hot Property
two untitled poems
The Story Of A Devoted Couple

OTHER WRITINGS

Excerpt from program note for God's Step Children
Course descriptions from college catalogues:
    Cinema 285Y: Ronald Reagan
    Essential Filmmaking
    When The Stars Began To Speak
    The Race Picture





THE DAY THE MOON GAVE UP THE GHOST

Then

At that time

This one particular night I had ambled, airing my toy bull Grog who in contrast to myself is interested in everything, out! (fitfully, in dull fits and starts) to our starry city limits. Was it then? trampling the high crab grass of empty lots (it made me swoony) I suffered Grog to tug me onto a lit suburban street. Transparent broadcasts of 1930's late shows winged by. I yawned. What was there to say? as Grog's snortings pushed up and spread miniature clouds of road dust before us as we went. We moved with the fizz of the streetlamps past hundreds of sleepers I think, the shrieks were all combed flat here, and. Dead to the world as I was. The gradual leveling of our path, its. Directness. Truly a convulsive feeding of itself into a line of prodigous extent escaped me entirely. Perhaps an implication or two did catch up with me, the most singular aloofness could not prevent this when my animal (docile and predictable beast) all at once came to a halt. Stopped trotting along, stiffened and like some ornamental bootscrape stood. Tumescent with attention stood, until with a resumption of his awful breathing succeeded in making out a swelling of lights up ahead. It would've been a laugh had he missed it: (a) the road fell in a solid wedge to it, (b) the streetlamps and their brothers formed a mighty arrow pointing to it, (c) we'd been hustled along between the conducting thighs of a huge horizontal X marking the spot. I sneered predictably -while simple Grog allowed himself to be stimulated outrageously! A fine spray of spittle commenced to issue from between his wide-drawn lips. His tongue slipped forward and he gagged miserably. "He's croaking here on the road," I said, but then with an abrupt

fart he threw his puny weight against his tiny harness and, pushing on, sustained a momentum which caused me to walk mincingly. (To maintain balance now I had to lean back from my outstretched arm gripping its taut leash. My head leaned back stiffly and with my other hand I held my hat fast to my head.)

Our hard breathing, and the slap of my shoes against the pavement, fitted precisely into the rhythm of the spacing of the street lamps and we trundled along at a marvelous clip indeed. We were, apparently, making time, the little rise of lights that was our object reared a notch with every step; perhaps in fact we were approaching but, "Grog!," I managed to cry, "I grow... short of breath."

One eye, naturally, in this violent position to which I'd been forced, was set higher than the other. Angled thusly I could not believe we were not moving downhill. "Wait, my pet." Nor did the world pass me by now with its usual cool velocity but it jerked, and shook, and pieces of it overlapped themselves. What exactly did I see? Nothing of interest to me.

I saw of course the moon ("The Moon!," must've thought Grog) holding the night fast in place. It could've passed for a street lamp if it hadn't appeared so distinctly out of place but I cheered myself on saying, "What a charming touch of syncopation in the rhythm of the night." Also, now and again, a tree or the outline of a series of small houses would separate by a shade from the surrounding pitch and these silhouettes rippling past, pasteboard cutouts to either side, would pull back then converge upon our track and they made up another, longer rhythm. (Here I am in this pretense of motion held fast in tow by Grog and with boredom dogging my heels -ah, but if only you'd let me go on about boredom... I could tell you something. But you wont't so I can't so of course there can be no surprises.) I saw a certain tableau illuminated in a doorway. While the celebrants within met glances, and snickered I am sure, this man was stabbing his wife in the doorway. Does that interest you? There was also a glimpse in passing, where two edges of the scene met unevenly, into the land of the noodle people and a few slid the upper parts of their bodies out to grab a fast look at me.

"O, Grog! You make me mince. I resist your pull only to rush forward haltingly.

"Impetuous creature, you'll be sorry, you'll see, the moment it dawns on you how... comfortable it could've been, drifting here in the pale, (hanging, as it were, by our toes; trailing, as we went, just the tips of our toes along the surface of this earth) if only this relentless pace which you enforce would cease! The moon, my pet, now I know you like the moon. Consider... its calm unobtrusive ways. I've never told you, I've kept it from you, shyness, moon-shyness stilled me but now I will tell you the truth: I am one of its oldest admirers, the moon's, and its most steadfast (so hopelessly drawn am I to its elusiveness). The moon, indeed. What darling could offer such amusement? An observation that never pains me is how at night the world is without color, flat, and insubstantial as in black and white photography. And this is one of the moon's tricks.

"Yet the moonlight is never intrusive. And, o, how like the moon's surface is town's end in the moonlight. Listen to me. I have a leaning towards the moon -sour member, shallow cutout, weeper, dim appreciator of the least attention; friend to all suicides- and for this reason do I approve of these

streetlamps sliding by (Grog!), they are so wan, and sour, offer such dreary illumination, are so very moonlike.

"It saves money to wear seconds but you pay here and there in symmetry. The modest light of the moon, however, does not put a guy on the spot.

"Pale eminence. Dreamer. Take my breath away."

Suddenly there was a tremendous racket; a helicopter low overhead cast a beam from a hatch in its belly placing the spotlight, o, but a moment flush on the back of a massive woman in a tight bathing suit moving in an oblique line from me to the shore.

Do not imagine because I have no name I am unknown. I carry a lot of weight in Night City. I am the man, the man who... introduced the human touch into its commerce. Visit the Black Supermarket. Everything is sold that you expect. My innovation it is -and it is this that's made such a triumph of the establishment- when you go to pay, with your black money, for your black purchases, our cashiers tell you they love you and pinch your breasts with the points of one hand while ringing up sales with the other. People abandon their packages on the sidewalk and go rushing back for more.

"Names carry weight," Grog's expression implies (I am imagining his expression as he follows my thought because I can only see the back of his head). O, that is not true. Admitted, my business is shady... but in a place like Night City... this fact, I assure you, does not work against me.

Not massive/fat you understand... powerful. Experienced 35-year-old hips. Legs, let us say, that'd been around. A thoroughly functional body and the bearing, in brief, of one who knows the score. But why in a bathing suit? Isn't that a daytime pursuit?

The picture comes in a flash: she's someone's great passion, his imagination invests her with character, he teaches her to express herself in the English language. He goes to pains, bends over backwards for her. She turns to eye him, eyes shining, bent over drawn-up knees. It's there, God bless him, he spots the hole. After all, God made women so the holes could be found. I love the night.

(We've just passed from between the last of town proper. The silhouettes bordering the road slid back revealing still other more distant light swellings similar to the one we are approaching fanning out to either side. They are spaced around the city seemingly hinged to its outer rim, clamping, as it were, the city in space, and it is impossible not to think of them, and the lights spilling back from them, as harmonic chorus to this one enormously long drawn-out note we ourselves are... breathlessly scaling, for the road, this road, is surely itself a thing possessed, allowing no diversion now but implying movement only, this alone, and of a forward nature utterly. I, for one, find such straightforwardness appalling, don't you?) Ah, a chill in the air. I shall convince myself it's invigorating.

Ow, ow, ow. My arm!

You could see that the bowl of the pelvis was everything to her. She was carrying it, that is what she was doing; where she was carrying it never

entered her mind. How repellent! is unconscious self assurance. Night is the great embracer, and to be a dark jewel in night's crown, is that so bad?

Well, we "arrived." Our "destination" was upon us. We'd come running and the thing had swelled until looming ever so high as we got to it it split right down the middle disclosing its "mysterious identity" like a belch. I shot out my nastiest laugh and shaking Grog by his chains shrilled, "See, you dope, all there is to see?"

It was easy for me to laugh. I wasn't disappointed, I suffer no expectations, disciple of the moon that I am. You must understand: it's only boredom moves me, the accumulation of boredom time upon time until enough's consolidated to make that the material for an act: the gathering density of boredom moves me and that is all, Grog can bust.

Please let me tell you about boredom, let me! go on about the exquisite varieties of boredom I have known and attempt to describe the range of my indifference, I promise to make it absorbing -indeed, the very prospect of doing so opens before me such an ocean of boredom, such a dismal flat immensity in which to pull you in after me that I'd better not try it because it probably won't work. The failure of boredom is that it's never gripping.

Ah, but the night! was made for boredom.

Well, we arrived, exhausted, at the foot of a common bridge; yes; a bridge like any other, with one lane going and next to it one coming, of moderate length, of modest proportions, unassuming, inoffensive, a rising and falling as gently graded as a breath, a delicate span, a bridge, a wistful thing of stone and metal turned in patterns of impossible nostalgia; all in all a very minor leap of the imagination and in every way a bridge, a common bridge like any other. A good place to light up a smoke.

I must admit it was mildly satisfying to see the streetlamps mount the bridge in steady progression. As well as reassuring. I mean for instance. The rhythm of the night could've been disrupted.

It was a silly, banal little crossing and I, for one, had no intention of going up so as to have to come down and take my chances on the other side. "Confound you Grog, now perhaps, unless like people who take interest in stabbings you thrive on banality, this has taught you, this lesson in futility, Grog, to, in the future, when so seized and bent upon some imaginary future good, to instead divert your attention and see the sense in curbing..." The wretched beast, the insolent thing. Do you think I was allowed the courtesy

He had leapt onto the bridge, a tremendous leap, he'd obviously gone insane with enthusiasm, I was yanked both feet out of my dust and surely he would've pulled me clear over that bridge's magnificent vaunting bow onto God knows where if I hadn't managed there almost at its height to grab the railing and let the leash snap from around his throat letting him go on without me, alone, doomed certainly, in a torrential spray of tears.

My ruined arm. I touched it gingerly, consoling myself with a look down into the river. "Gee, I'm dying for a smoke," I thought.

It was The River of Changing Dreams. I recalled how it surrounds the city and

everything in it. "Tributary...tribulations...mm...musings ." I was still in Night City proper, I could see that, it looked bloody cold.

The bridgelamps fizzed, the river slapped, the projector whined. What a rush of misery it was. "Music! Music!" O, to be chosen for a death by music. To be so chosen. Camp-survivors mention such persons...their inordinate responsiveness to classical music -humming, nodding- to the exclusion of all else. The reverberation of masterworks hummed just under the brain soon affects a gentle disengagement of the mental components, allowing the person to slip out. "What? What was that? What?"

The blobs of light spaced below, reflections of the bridgelamps, skidded in place as the river heaved glistening by beneath them, curling their edges with cold.

Down below the blobs of light contract with cold but the relentless black current slashes them, breaks them up and when the pieces, remembering, leap to regather it shatters them again and it goes on like this until you're sick of looking.

A million tons of boredom rushing by per sec.

Moon, couldn't you dream a better night than this? Even I am galled and you know me. **Ordained to go your way and help spread your gospel of despair, "Calm down," I counsel, "forego care. And become as detached as the moon. The Damper Moon in the course of the night is kissed by every star in turn and does not care." I tell the people, "The moon is that rare thing, that fair thing that can enrapture yet leave no wound of poignancy. It's no fun to be rebuffed or be left clutching at a thing gone by (things die), best to be cool like the moon, give your heart to the moon, to keep always, an imperishable thing frozen and still. The moon is not heartless. Inside the moon like a giant peapod are rows of hearts, fast in place and as much at peace as peas in a pod. The sun, on the other hand, breeds maggots."** And is this right, such terrible forebodings? I had despaired! am I not to be spared...this? I go on, a suspicious character edging into conversations, handing around cards that read IT CAN WAIT. "Who," the people whisper, huddling, "is this creep with shopping bags?"

O gosh...but I never meant to hurt your feelings - Moon? O gee, me and my indiscriminate bitching - though I'm sure you've paid me no mind. After all what is it that supports me now as ever but faith in the fact of your indifference and the example of your high riding success. Yess. Ssssss...

I turned to go. Grog was gone, there was no excuse to linger (as it was it'd be hell finding my way home, not that the moonlight was waning but you know Night City, on an island without a center, who's to say when a street'll turn back on itself churning up and shifting the whole mess). I made to go, when, poised for a first step home, a rustling below seized my attention and I wondered did I detect (I may've screamed here) surely only a clump of tall nocturnals swaying in the meadow breeze. I moved only my eyes in search lest the perfect distribution of body-weights (for my first step home) go awry. Foolish me. It was nothing! A bag of blood held taut with bones, easily punctured. "Mr. Gladhand Rotgut, I presume. I am a man in a full dress suit." This statement issued from the figure as it came forward to stand with casual heroism at the insane river's edge.

"My many friends call me Biff. 'Biff, Biff!,' they holler, 'A game guy all the way! With a right and a left -he's dauntless!" He flexed. "My appetites function superbly." Roast chickens flew into his mouth. "Hey, Alice!" Implications galore were catching up with me now.

I spoke up. "The man is mad. Won't someone, quickly, administer the bullet?" My favorite movie is The Iron Tit.

"Your appearance is wavering," he commented. "Your wet and puffy babyface... are you a borderline case?"

Imagine my surprise to discover I was no longer standing poised but seated, removing my shoes and socks, airing my rotting feet. His appetites. His appetites. Perhaps the wisest employment of my remaining strength, I wondered, would be to sing, with my oddly melodious voice, a few quick choruses of The Rotten Song and then sign out. He is an appetite.

He is an appetite, all digestive juices, churning guts and burning gases, all working magnificently towards the production of exuberance. But only I am mindful, as he and the grasses heave the air to and fro between them, of the multitudes of floating spores and individually yearning microbes burnt alive with his every breath. The gentleman is still speaking... something about Alice's pretty parts, I got that.

Dirigibles, and tiny helicopters, at varying distances, would sometimes hover in the one unobstructed view of sky allowed us at parochial school. Biplanes would dogfight, lulling the children with slow motion loop-the-loops, soft dronings, and distant crashings. "Coming," Biff called.

"Coming," Biff called.

"Get him, boys!," I enjoined the dead. A skeleton army stood up behind him but he confounded them by tossing off his suit to stand there with his big stuff hanging. Then, while they were still limbering up with deep kneebends, he performed a full cartwheel -I was to be spared nothing- and dove directly into the WIFESTABBER I cried in almost perfect lip-sync but he was gone.

A bubble broke to the surface. Its pop released the following refrain: "I'm Biff! Biff! A game guy all the way (my heart is enormous); with a right and a left -I'm dauntless! And, besides, I've got my love to keep me warm."

In sufferable.

My spirits picked up. How could he make it? I don't generally like liquids but this stuff <u>was</u> impenetrably black and as cold (I was getting merry) as the moon and as ceaseless (jubilant!) as death. I did a little dance then and there in my rags.

The brute came up through the first reflection, arced and dove again, taking it with him. The lamp above me went out. I ran to the next. Misery. I ran, and stumbled, my asthma was killing me, on to the next the next. The dupe, he's attached to things, the weight of their impending demise should be enough to drag him down. My asthma was actually killing me. My arm was ruined, gallstones aggravated, teeth cracked, bunions bursting, hemmorhoids hanging,

eyes weeping, tongue lashing, liver languishing, leash dragging, hat swallowed MOON I threw myself inside out on the word, "I'm so black and blue I don't know which end is up. Now -haven't you caught on yet? Are you so powerless? Don't you care at all?"

"See here," I admonished myself, "The moon doesn't give a damn, do you have to be told that? and doesn't that put your feverish mind to rest..."; yet I winced as the dawn hit the railing. Biff was rising into it, working his way up the opposite bank (of this River Of Changing Dreams) astride the wide back of an enormous, snorting, pale blue bull and pulling after him... he'd passed one by one through each blot of light in turn and now hauled them out after him, crystallized now... in the air, a string of glowing pearls. And Biff then laid this treasure upon the staunch shoulders of his functional Alice as she stood there refreshed and beaming, an easy ten years younger, really a knockout, regarding her feet planted so solidly there in the blue. The mighty bull clambered on high as Biff sang Your Beauty, Alice, Fills Me With Delight followed by American Stars Cling To Your Lashes, Cluster About Both Your Beautiful Feet. Then she came back at him belting A Hard Man Is Good To Find.

And so Alice presented Biff with this wonderful baby and the scene was so brilliant now that my poor eyes slunk around the insides of my skull to hug each other shaking at the rear of my skull and while I chuckled ironically in my madness more and more of these terrific kids leapt from all her many wounds.

Someone must've been fingering the moon. It'd become unfixed, it was really detached now, and night was slipping back like the hood of a very big baby carriage, revealing the new day. Disrupted, utterly, any staid rhythms of the night. Space in full color opened out every which way as The Sons Of Morning ringing all about sang on the rise a song so complex it'd take all night to describe it but it's night, for the non, that is over, I am trying to tell you that. My skeleton army, left haranguing at the shore, whose appearance had been so formidable when contrasted against the night sky, was rapidly losing contrast. And my town, its false fronts fallen, crumbling, has begun to make way...for The City Of The Day.

Yesssss. And so where are we now, o moon, shot through with light, woefully embarrassed in all our transparency; or are you like me still just barely discernible, hanging on, as it were, by a fingernail? -all I've left to show for myself is a tiny moonsliver of dirt at the end of my fingernail, all I dared to claim of the bounty of this earth which you so cooly and so wisely taught me to despise. O, this is not meant as sarcasm. You have me. And if for the moment it strikes me that you've failed me, why, isn't this but the final proof of your superb indifference?

Alice's bathing suit thrown on ahead by Biff went flying over the river (posing now, all curly and genteel would you believe it, for the usual tourist snaps) to be transformed in the heart of their city to a lovely park, numerous private homes each of a piquant and amusing design, an economy based on just principles, and so on. And there goes Biff on his bull with his gorgeous wife and bunch of swell kids in his arms, leaping with them from out of the blue into his own.

I've decided to lay low. Lurking here, a little hook of dirt in the shade of this crack between the bridge and its railing, who will see me? who will mind me? When the bridge-traffic builds to its workday volume will sniffles be

heard? some little nobody eating his heart out?

Biff, I amount to so little in your scheme of things. But I think you should know... this won't end here.

I'll get you! I'll get you! I've got to rest now but it's only a matter of time. Your star is on the rise but I predict: it'll just barely hit its peak when it'll begin to slide. To slip! And then I'll inch my way - and I don't care what I have to go through, to get back to the heart of things - and once I am there, once I am there I'll poison the hearts of your people, fill them with lies, counterfeit the currency, dilute the milk, cripple the children; teach them despair! Yes, keep busy with your loving and build your dominion, it is... more than I can do. But what I can do is take over.

Soon, soon I'll make my move from out of my hole. Then, then I will hound, harass, plague and succeed in tripping up your smug bloated sun and send him swinging over and under the other end of this earth. I'll laugh then, enjoying his downfall exceedingly and crushed to the earth as I am, with your ridiculous sun helplessly stupidly staring back as he falls my shadow will stretch back so far and wide as to cover all your achievements, and make them mine! and where there was a center confusion will reign. As for your accomplice -that damnable bull- I've a special piece of ghastliness in store for him. To starve him! and thwart him! until his constitution's broken and he becomes a shadow of his present self, a dumb dwarf creature with imploring saucer-eyes. Then I'll take him for a house-pet, the broken thing -o, what pleasure! I'll derive from his sufferings! and only once in a blue moon will I take him out for an airing and then you can be sure it'll be tight on a leash.

I'll forgive nothing, forget none of this. I have my grudges.

And my darling moon will be there, my o, so sallow queen dreaming over the treasures I spread before her, dreaming, dreaming away the night again in a contagion of sick imagery while the dogs bay and the people fall upon each other and there is moonlight and the boredom settles in for the night, the boredom settles in.

But now I've got to rest. Biff's sun is still rising.

It's hard to rest with the happy family making such a thing of entering their city.

For a moment their tumult made me forget myself and I pulled an eye into shape to take a peek, from out of my dirt, in their direction. "Curses!," I imprecated, and jumped back into my hole, thoroughly distraught and consumed with disgust. Everything there was to see was beautiful.

(1961-66)

GIVE ME THE MOON ANYTIME (THE ROTTEN SONG)

O the moon is so wonderful, nothing happens there, it's dead. It's finished with suffering! It's cried all its eyes out, the tears dried and now all its sockets are filled with dust. Dust and dust. And it circles the hurrying earth, constant reminder of what we're hurrying to. O the moon is so wonderful; it features mountains and rivers and valleys all made of dust.

And it does its job.

Do you know how much light the moon absorbs in a year? o please! don't tell me about those rays that hang from its mouth like noodles; listen -the moon's got its own emanation. When you were a kid didn't you wonder where the night came from, and where the boogieman got the dust with which to fill the sleepers' eyes? Now you know! From the moon! I tell you the moon is pained... when word gets back to it of its reputation for moonlight; you take in oxygen and give off carbon diox, the moon's function is to shed... darkness!

It radiates darkness. And what is so luminous as a pool at night, or the shadowed eye of a murderer? It's the truth, I admit it: as far as I'm concerned the sun sets and rises on the moon, where it's dusty and cold and nothing lets out a peep.

And yet the moon is full of surprises. Inside the moon is a large bell softly pealing the earth's deathknell in subdued tones. Its shimmery vibrations subside in a tickling in our bones. Moans, phones, drones. Jones.

O but it thrills me to think of the dust on the face of the moon and the plashless way our little rockets plow into heavy, deadweight it. And so a few particles do achingly rise from the ruin; they hover -not long- the time it takes to regret it!

I like the moon because things are settled there. (1964-66)

ROUTINE

The six million wait in the wings.
They've been appearing all over town.
Unthinkable a Jewish affair
without their trooping onstage.
In a minute the rabbi
will say the word for them to rise,
shake out clothing, again
take the kids in hand and step out.

The images can be seen as two stereo images. Hold a fingertip on a plane about ten inches above the page and set focus, then withdraw the finger. Four images should appear, the center two in a restless, not quite resolved stereo.

THE OI IN VOICE

I'm an old man replenishing my energy, we hope, at a souvlaki stand on 7th Avenue. This is the big apple. We are all as gods here. All is appleness when even souvlaki sandwiches can confer a knowledge of a sort.

I stand on the street, her hand comes forward over the counter supporting a crescent in wax paper. Our thrilling exchange.

She'd slit open the pita and put in meat. Who am I to complain? that the hot gravy she poured in is already on my side sodden cold. It soaks through the bread and paper and as I lift my hand for a bite slides down my sleeve to coagulate on my arm. (A siren is ringing. It's alright, it's only a test.) I see she's thrown in an olive. Tipsy with fatigue I adapt to the streamlining of luncheon.

"Yes, Mr. Kaye. I've an opening on my left shoulder. Yes sir I mean no sir, I'll be off in a jif, you don't catch me lingering in the twilight." A fine gentleman. A snappy dresser and a tipper. He emcees bar mitzvahs at The Final Assimilation Country Club in Great Neck. How lovely, the entire avenue bows when he passes, as seen in reflection on his perfect, small, black lacquered dome. The crease under his seat, sweeping left and right in time to his stride, conducts the city symphony.

I'll eat, catch my breath, gulp and go. Thank God I'm employed again. Only divine inspiration could've given my employer the gimmick for this racket. Who could've known there were so many old Yids in obscure and impoverished retirement, champing to get back at the bit? I'm Shlepper 47 of the Alta Kaka Express. We wear over our little old men's suits harnesses with hooks on them. At timed intervals we're set walking up and down the fabled thoroughfares of this highlife city where our slow feeble shuffling makes possible a unique courier service. If we introduce an order, symmetrical and efficient, into the labors of the shoppers it is precisely because their pace is furious while we move at a creep. They have many things to do while we each have only one, and that largely spiritual, the scrupulous following of a line between two points that would otherwise not be there. Now they can hit the stores to left and right and as they pass load on their goods and if the day gets hot their coats, freeing their arms for more. They shuttle as we inch. To and fro they gather, each item a purchase on that more vivid world shown on TV, until they arrive at heart's content when there to meet them with all their stuff comes the Kaka lurching onto the curb. It's a smooth operation. Each hook is calibrated to meter the time and weight of its load. There's no need to fumble with change when credit cards can be inserted coming or going. Each sum chimes its own little tune, a delicate penetration by the transistorized Orient into our midtown traffic.

We die in harness, dissolve smiling into that last delirium, grateful because useful. Useful we know because still earning bucks. Money circulates through us, not enough to make gardens bloom in our deserts but even a little includes us in. We are money! The boss is making money from us, what's left of us, our savior, lest we die with constipated dregs. "My boy," surely clued in God, "there's gold in the old." Word reached us in our meanest digs: "Listen! you cardiovascular disaster: economic man is social man. However dessicated you are I can make money out of you." The alchemical process had come to him in a

flash: shlepping.

What manner of beast, or beasts, am I biting into? Shoo! Shoo! Food spooks flit.

At our last company picnic (there were muggers in the trees, may their batteries drain, entertaining prospects of atomic rubble to lord over) Boss led us in singing:

> His eye is on the sparrow.
> He doesn't miss a trick.
> Feathers, beak and gizzard are convertible to cash.
> All is exchange.

I don't like the way I'm leaning. I need a look at myself. May we exchange places? Quelle horreur! I see forces combining and contending where I am bending. I got One Bad Apple written on my sleeve. Reader, it is you who are godlike! yours the privileged perspective. Through you I begin to see why the Nazis were so mean. And America and Britain compliant.

A shlepper's outlook, after all, is narrow, a vertical strip of reality weighted on the bottom where puddles and pet droppings await the unwary. Consider such a view of World War Two: we get socialism with a twist, placating the people nationalizing some wealth by denationalizing its owners, Darwinism facilitating final release from love-thy-neighbor. On the other hand, smokestacks signal mutual understanding far and wide.

The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem smiles oilily. Churchill and Roosevelt trade knowing looks. They are being called upon by perfectly real and contemporary people, hummers of Fred Astaire songs, The Way You Look Tonight, S'Wonderful: help us, they cry. Save our children. Decisive figures, however, take chessboard measure of their moves: it would not be good oil politics to ruffle the Mufti. Indeed, with the enemy defeated no Jews left to come barging in where they weren't wanted, upsetting arrangements, would be excellent, virtuoso oil politics! Besides, take away the Jews and the Nazis might give up, there being nothing else, no other prospect of victory, however delusive, after their second Russian winter. This, then, becomes the time of heavy winks. It is determined that Western Strategy (hang back until Center and East consume each other) demands unconditional surrender, firebombing of civilians, and pinpoint accurate preservation of the last Nazi incentive. Churchill convinces Roosevelt to bottle troops below the Alps until it becomes necessary to check the Soviet sweep. All the same, there's disappointing oil news: an inconvenient number of Jews survive. Their situation on the Continent remains untenable, what with the swastika removed from display but not the crucifix. Lift your gaze, please.

The opening mouth! The approaching sandwich! The shrunken face of the proprietress wedged from this point of view within the crook of my arm motioning with her eyes to move on. Souvlaki is misspelt, and I see other signs spelt funny or with letters clustered or fallen away. It's the street giving me a message. It says, "We are in the future of the Old World. New York is only the first, biggest, and most impacted of the sedimentary deposits left by waves of Europeans on their way west to the spices of Asia. The confluence of cultures threshed away nonessentials releasing a pure culture of rapine. The Colonies didn't rebel against their purpose, only positioned

themselves for a bigger cut. Wealth is freedom! Ask the poor. America is the quest for freedom but Asia, after all, has its own plans and in the next chapter a different Europe watches Imperial Africa snap off Italy. This, then, is the time of ripeness. We must admit, despite appearances, you've been useful. This has been an elaborate test, you pass, we're letting you split the Golden Age with us. Signed, the Boss of Bosses." Included in the message is a vision of ultimate freedom, the planet, not so round, more like an apple eaten down to the core, but tossed loose of the solar system grind at last.

Thank you. That was a much-needed pick-me-up. See? I am doddering back into the flow of traffic. With every step I'm dropping dead when by marvelous chance two clients, perfect strangers, together lift off their bags punching in credit cards front and rear. (Muggers approach to relieve them of their burdens.) If Times Square is near can heaven be far? (1980)

CRACKING UP THE ABSOLUTE

We will install in your literary mind crematoria for Jewish jokes. "Two Jews were walking...," "Two Jews were talking..." -kaputt! Oi vay, you say, the opposite of brevity is talmudic, and indiscreet. But you will learn to take your history straight.

That noodle held hanging between you two sabras -out! Quick, it's breaking into its old routine and on our clean floor. It thinks the Red Cross is inspecting; "mother-in-law," it says and its elbows spring out when it flutters at the place where its bow tie used to be. Hang it by its borscht belt.

All those noses going out to sea. Let them go. Kneydlach memories spill from the slopes of our new fortress island. We are real. We are hard. We face the future head on. Hammer head. Hammer blow. Resounding to the four corners of the earth until the last atom rolls into its side pocket and not a creature stirs, not even a mouse.

The great big movie in the sky could fill the mind from ear to ear but there are no ears, nor eyes to read the title, the name in lights, THE INEXORABLE. "Kenneth." It is the poet's bride.

"Again with the doom bit? Do you know? that a young Irish lawyer [1] in Boston has brought to light an epistle of Paul's detailing how to get around embarrassing the Romans [2]. Do you know? a Rosa Parks on the streets of downtown Teheran tossed off her jabaliya saying, 'This is ridiculous.' Also, Hinckley's escaped. It's a new ball game."

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1 John Loftus, author of The Belarus Secret, Knopf, 1982

2 Implausible you say Jews made them do it stop ludicrous you say stop people will believe what's good for them stop any holdouts we'll break their nuts. (1984)

SUNNYSIDE UP

SUNNYSIDE UP 1929 STARRING JANET GAYNOR AND CHARLES FARRELL THE JOHN AND OLIVIA OF THEIR DAY IN THEIR FIRST TALKIE AFTER THEIR BOFFO HIT SEVENTH HEAVEN IN WHICH HE RETURNED TO THEIR SHABBY SEVENTH FLOOR WALKUP BLIND FROM THE WAR BUT THEN MIRACULOUSLY

The sleeping beauty awoke and spoke. Her thoughts and then some. Her delirious dreaming still came up in waves onto the sync-sound shore.

New at this she revealed more than she would. Her diction kept slipping exposing her regional and class feet of clay. We her devotees were touched and chilled by such mortal particularity. But she caught herself quick.

Strange our focus of desire should herself speak only of desire. "If I only had a talking picture of you," she burbled on a continuous performance basis. Sticky hands, seats, floor. Drowning balconies. Dripping walls.

The rich are foolish and bored but devoted to the success of their charity balls where they eat and drink and watch naked women Turn On The Heat! and generously display themselves, all for the poor. The defeated, on the other hand, are regular, reliable, proud. Above all else spunky. Prostrate. Yet grinning. Kicked in the head they reply, "I'm a dreamer. But don't blame me. Aren't we all?" They will not, will not, accept pity.

We queued up in the rain. We never missed a lesson. She taught us the twentieth century. (1980)

HITLER'S FAVORITE MOVIE

Tell me the story of King Shlong, Dad, lifting Beauty to phallic heights. Easy on the Nazi angle, how an entertainment industry (Jews) Depression-desperate reaches into the id to supply the masses with more wrenching release. DON'T whistle the fanfare of Tin Pan Alley jungle jazz introducing The Beast/ Supernigger/Irascible Pleasure Principle to the jaded of The Great White Way. You've explained: from containment in prehistory, idolized only by the backward

> whose cunts one presumes he tears and rends barring a penis on him that's laughable, while for white quim he rolls over like a pup, becomes tender, protective, is ennobled; the tragedy is he can't understand... disparities in size, species, or that he and Fay come from different backgrounds and although to the herrenvolk her effect, his aspirations appear perfectly understandable the King, the original wild child, must we must be hard go

he now threatens demolishment of Technopolis, great product of centuries of husbanded sexual energy, our sublim(n)ation. "Fuck and be pooped, or engineer a skyscraper and have something to show for it."

I want to hear about <u>her</u>! And her refusal to believe it was all a bad dream. (1985)

EFFICACIOUS RITUAL

I arrive as the moviehouse lets out. This crowd's been through the wringer. They come out bright, refreshed; freshly chastened. Insides thoroughly hosed down. Lucky people picked a movie that works, an expertly administered adrenalin flush.

HOT PROPERTY

Rhyming with gazelle he orders a bagelle. Bagel. It
fingers him, it's
enough to distinguish him
from other actors.
We hire perfectly American types.

We paid through the nose for the conflict: their baby
needs an operation
providing over a dozen
escalating moments-of-decision,
slots to slip in
ads galore,
based on experiments of Mengele. We think
it's the best thing
since Frankenstein got the criminal brain.

C STAR OF DAVID
H BLUEPRINTS A FORTRESS
O A FORT
O ACTRESS MISTRESS MURDERESS
S FORTRESS'D BE A MATRIARCHY
E INCLUSIVE EXCLUSIVE
A CHOOSY PEOPLE
AND I
WAS THINKING IT A CIRCLE
OF OPEN ARMS

In a homophobic society
Narcissus doesn't languish
above his reflection,
he dies
lunging at its throat.

THE STORY OF A DEVOTED COUPLE

Rooney and Boo Boo longed into their middle years for an issue to their union. When at last she proved fecund it was only to be delivered of a brown paper bag. After therapy reconciled them to the mixed blessing they invited neighbors, people with whom they shared an elevator and incinerator, into their kitchen where Buster stood open on the table amid party treats. "Where's the baby?", the guests insisted, considering the reply tasteless, and left disgusted.

Rooney, in white ducks, steps to the window. Away from the intense light of the kitchen dusk softens his twitchy features. He tries to think but in his mind, as in the small apartment, he is forever edging about -his words- "Boo Boo's big fat ass of love." He switches the window to night, then workaday gray, settling on a steady rain. Boo Boo, meanwhile, slumps in a kitchen chair, a woman unstrung -but starts when a late guest appears. At once sizing up the situation the latecomer is all apologies and commences to back out the door. Boo Boo springs up: "You mustn't leave empty-handed!", she screams, and scooping the slop chewy into Buster thrusts him upon the embarrassed departee. Oddly, when she sidesteps to the incinerator with the gathered bunting and other party remains, her now approving neighbors break into spontaneous applause.

Warm nights Rooney and Boo Boo sit swinging on the Brooklyn Bridge, holding hands. His angry fist of a face is turned away but, with her enormous stovepipe legs skimming the water below, she croons and chatters happily.

(1989)

Excerpt from program note for GOD'S STEP CHILDREN (Oscar Micheaux, 1937)

God's Step Children is tawdry, a morbid gleaning from the refuse heap of the popular unconscious. Let's be above the social stature thing. There's real blood here. An exposure of the whole nightmare trap of yearning to be white, the yearning that creates shame at the failure to be white and simultaneously guilt for wishing to be white; if only as indications of a social symptomology or as psychological relics preserved on film of the ego murder of millions of people, this breaking out of real pain through its own confused and mawkish self-portrayal deserves our most profound acknowledgement and compassion. (How emphatically white the one white speaking character in the film, the doctor, is! as if it was expected, were he black, that the audience would be putting Jimmy down for not being able to afford "a real doctor").

This all sounds heavy. It seems to overlook the film's funniness. Its embarrassing mind-boggling bluntness. And the film must be laughed at, at least on first viewing, or the brain will break. It's only hoped that the film and all it indicates aren't tossed off with a laugh.

The static quality of the film. Movies are generally made to move. One incident generates the next; the audience is hooked at the beginning and swept along to the end, but little of that carry-through seems to take place here. A million things occur each seemingly a spontaneous occurrence unto itself. Thing, thing, thing, startling incongruities... that make you stop and think; stilted acting that constantly reveals the persons acting; a brute employment of whatever means to tell the story, which only folk art and/or unconscious myth-making has the motivational force to dare; a multitude of cine-gaucheries reveal the film-making process, and the unsayable is said. A passion play is ceremonial, and the ceremonial is static! an implantation of a still point repeated at intervals to give a formal rhythm to the passing of time, the still point a fusion of elements documenting the essential structure of human experience for easy reference should one become scattered, dizzy. And yet that essence can only be interpreted in the context of the present. The ambience of black America, 1937, is so apparent in this film because of its particular interpretation of the story. Clumsy? Doesn't move? Trivial considerations as absolute standards in evaluating the great diversity of filmic phenomena.

Composed of lapses, abrupt turns, in a state of constant collapse, the effort to create a self-enclosed art work has failed. When art fails, life comes through. Life pours through God's Step Children. The film then is a marvelous example of a great neglected, discredited avenue of experience through film, it offers a wonderful series of eye-openers into another time and another taken-for-granted conception of the planet and how life is to be lived on it. The film yields more and more of these shocking disclosures upon continued re-seeing, its crudeness is not a limitation but one with its substance, the textural detail is to be savored. The viewer must be on to the objective contemplation of events to take in this richness, for there can be no movie-escape for us with God's Step Children (although one fears it could even now pass as morally instructional entertainment at many a Negro church social -the experiment should be made.) But for many, to confront it in earnest, really take its measure and not simply pigeon-hole it as an archive oddity, will be to begin to comprehend that mortifying self-devouring rage which in our time, perhaps as the first step in affecting a cure, has begun the turn outward. (1970)

CINEMA 285Y: RONALD REAGAN (Fall 1987, SUNY Binghamton)

The news keeps breaking into my old movies, my wattled face into my shiny, my deceptions into my honest fictions. Bummer. Like my critics don't know a mighty nation doesn't decide things at town meetings, and that an electorate-become-audience expects a show. Expects nothing really, but insists upon finesse, elevates finesse. Like when I wowed them in Bingamin, blowing their minds. Here was their host of Death Valley Days egging for the showdown. I said it all in body language, the Gospel truth, so why hold my words against me? With words I only embellish, it's my style. Challenge my sincerity? In my profession sincerity is what you sell! You learn to pitch it to where the customer lives. You don't see me on TV extending a think piece to a bunch of bananas with remote buttons in their hands, switching channels like parties or, worse, switching out. I keep people engaged in the kind of mild audience-participation that's evolved out of the democratic process. It was smart to call in a pro. As there's less and less voting there'll be more and more casting. Corporations will drop parties and sponsor fan clubs for office. Then everyone will look and act their part; be, that is, believable. It requires finesse. My Iran-Contra debacle, sigh. Could Jimmy Stewart have pulled it off? He always had the edge on me in finesse. What can I do but tell myself what I tell my critics: Smile, darn ya, smile!

COURSE DESCRIPTION: "Ronald Reagan" is understood as a generic of Hollywood heroism of the 30's, 40's, 50's. Unspecialness was his specialty. He figured among a category of actors thinkable in certain roles, usually the good soldier, a particularly (even quintessentially) American guy who unassumingly steps forward to do what has to be done when the situation requires. That he could just as well have played the Robert Taylor part in the 1952 Above and Beyond (a metaphysical rationalization of the atombombing of Japan) allows him to assume the aura of the role. And of many others, even Gary Cooper's in Frank Capra's Meet John Doe, although that's a thunder he's stolen (in our subconscious): Reagan was of a class that could only understudy a Cooper, not offer a replacement for him. But as the distinctive stars shaded off into the okay subluminaries, Reagan enjoyed the circle of light, is of it. Radiates it still. For people who lived the movies then, rejecting Ronald Reagan today is apostasy, a splitting within themselves from so much that comprises their ideational/emotional content. The myth of America is brought into question. We must consider myth, image and imaging, mass society, capitalism/communism, masculinity, messianic and apocalyptic delusions as we look for Reagan in his films, past and ongoing TV and radio appearances, his long public life recorded in print. His autobiography, and daughter's; studies of him, his milieu, backers, partners, underlings. His identification with Dirty Harry, Star Wars, First Blood. We can learn something of the situation allowing his rise if we don't kid ourselves we're above it. "Show business taught me to save the best for last," a remorseless Reagan warns.

ESSENTIAL FILMMAKING (Summer class, 1978, Colorado University, at Boulder)

Cinema can be a device of power or an instrument of thought. As the first it's long been systematized and applied on a world-wide basis, its techniques become the Esperanto of power. Essentially a form of poster art, curt or cajoling, it directs people. Not by informing, which would prompt thought, hesitation, unpredictable individual response. It stupefies. The 10- or 30- second spot pushing a soap or a candidate and the three-hour epic framing a national mythology only demonstrate a more-apparent-than-real shift in scale. Our casual or sentimental attitudes to our pastimes disarm us. While we who've been moved to discern the techniques of persuasion at work in this candy for the brain are helpless to protect even ourselves from subliminal, subaudible stimuli pitched to the subconscious.

The concern of this course of active filmmaking and reflective dialogue will be with cinema as instrument of thought, as a way certain thoughts or kinds of thinking for the first time became possible, realizable, and certain experiences, unique to the capacity of cinema, available. The basic mechanics of filmmaking will be made clear together with a sense of the infinite directions cinema can proceed from its simple, infinitely manipulable elements. Freedom will make things difficult. The supremely difficult task for each student as it remains for the accomplished artist is to work from necessity, to discover what is personally important and keep at it (it calls for brains, heart, courage, and luck--"the luck," Stan Brakhage says, "that comes to those who work hard").

CINEMA 285B: WHEN THE STARS BEGAN TO SPEAK (Spring 1988, SUNY Binghmaton)

"Did you ever hear a dream talking?" (line from an old song)

What was lost and what gained, crossing the great techno-divide between movie-pantomime sometimes as stylized as ballet, and an initially stagey yackety-yak? Film had been visual, fluid and rhythmic, with live music helping to transport audiences into The Bigger Than Life Beyond. The big deadweight soundproof box, containing both camera and asphyxiating operator, then fell on this dancing medium... flooring it. What would survive? What replace? And what become of the beloved genii of body-language, the clowns, drooping tragediennes, aging sweethearts? And--even more crucially--of highly developed and articulate camerawork and editing. The Depression was on, Prohibition a corruptive disaster, and the movie temples needed to quickly distract their idolator congregations from seeking economic/political solutions to their predicaments. Raunchy was still possible; the "Code" had yet to institute twin-beds throughout moviedom; Mae West became box office queen, and everyone bandied her lines. Distinctive talkers were in: Cagney, Robinson, Boop, Popeye. Tapdancers were in! The Marx Brothers stormed in with their deliciously clutzy first feature, The Cocoanuts. Black shoestringer Oscar Micheaux ingeniously stuck sound onto his unintentionally surreal Ten Minutes To Live. Talk, yes, but how? (I address those in particular who are interested in WORDS.) The movies weren't life, or stage-theater, or novel. (The Frankenstein monster, opening his mouth to speak, says, "Smoke... good. Friend... good.") The Muse of Cinema, caught between styles, exerts a special charm, with so much actuality showing through. Less avant-garde than off-guard, the movies were never more "dated" (transparent, that is, to the time and circumstance of their making), more vulnerable or touching.

CINEMA 285G. THE RACE PICTURE (Spring 1990, SUNY Binghamton)

"You mean it's possible, permissible in America, that a child is born poor?"

Looking at movies through the decades, and at TV, advertising, other mass media in terms of picturings of race and ethnic groups, however critical or antipathetic some of it is it's hard not to recognize a growth in dimensionality of group representatives, and an enormous pulling to centerstage of peoples previously dismissed to background flunkyism, or "colorful" supporting-role appearances, or worse, pictured unvaryingly as objects of dread or ridicule and repulsion (loveable old codger sneering at "them varmints"). One has to wonder - in the face of what seems a not-all-that-slow ongoing peristroika of American attitudes since the 1950's - whether attention gathering to the issue of racism (intellectually, an entirely discredited eugenics theory) isn't simply inertial error, open to opportunist hustling, but a ploy to evade the more unthinkable, far more radically challenging issue of vast economic inequity, afflicting persons of all races, structured into our economic system. I only see the middle classes of all backgrounds increasingly sharing similar culture styles, integrating as more and more they "speak the same language," and together distancing themselves from the "acting-out" of a desolate, abandoned, socially disorganized and often dangerous under-class - manifesting, on the streets, the symptoms of a larger crime. (Style of oppression changes going down the classes, the lower unable to afford remote controls.) King's real threat was in marching for all the poor. So we must investigate: is the hot issue really racism? or is it poverty -- and, beyond the dreary vying for advantage between groups, is the noisy grating of differences a lot less racial than we're given to believe, and more an antagonism of class-culture behavioral styles?

Yes, Bush rode into office on the fear of Willie Horton. But Bush would've lost, in these changing times, had he associated Dukakis with Bill Cosby.

Your participation in vigorous discourse (and that includes thoughtful listening to whatever gets said) is crucial to the success of this class (and to your earning of a good grade). There'll be films shown in their entirety, and TV to watch, Thursdays, followed by small-group talks when time's available. On following Tuesdays, film clips will be rescreened, and our main dialogue will take place. Films will range through the silents to what's playing now, and there'll be assignments to see films off as well as on-campus, and TV broadcasts to catch, sound-tapes to listen to, maybe a visiting lecturer or two to attend; a tour, perhaps, of the town of Binghamton; let's make use of this place. And you let me know when I'm loading too much on. Class concerns will not be exclusively Afro/Euro-American; for instance, there's a fine, rare instance of compassion for Native Americans I want you to see, Massacre, 1934. A Japanese film, Death by Hanging, exposes Japanese attitudes to their Korean minority. Of course, we'll be considering Hollywood Shuffle and Do The Right Thing, and we'll do some appraising of music-video imaging. I can't wait to tear into the Reaganite Little Shop of Horrors - how did that get by without being recognized for the racist killer it is? - and the obscenely anti-Semitic Sophie's Choice (I'll teach you not to be fooled by movies!) Space in our schedule will be left open for some films you suggest. You may be learning that more groups than you'd imagine have been wounded by, or have practiced, varieties or variants (like sexism) of racism, one excuse among others for robbing one's neighbor. Journals of class-notes and comments will be collected

and responded to regularly. Readings will include newspapers and other current periodicals. Three absences without medical excuse will lower a grade, as will repeated lateness; over three such absences earns automatic failure.

The class will have a motto: "If it's touchy -- we touch on it." And we don't have to agree. Prerequisite: It will be helpful if you've studied, or are studying, the subtler rhetoric of cinema beyond what can be said of story and acting, to the look and sound of the stuff framing issues, dictating points of view to viewers almost invariably oblivious to the fact that a film is (oh so contagious) a mind-set in itself. But I won't expect you as a student to know any more about cinema than the average college professor, and I'll explain, explain, point out, and explain. You bring a propensity for thinking and a talent for caring.