Ken Jacobs (b. 1933-)

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Jacobs’s career has encapsulated—and at times determined—some of the crucial turns of experimental cinema in the last half-century. Born and raised in Brooklyn, he studied painting at the High School of Industrial Arts in Manhattan, the Art Students’ League, and the American Art School before finding in Hans Hofmann’s private academy a suitable learning environment. He enrolled in Hans Richter’s filmmaking class at City University of New York in 1955 and, shortly afterward, made his first film, *Orchard Street*, a “city film” in the style of Helen Levitt’s *In the Street* (1948, 1953).

At City University Jacobs met two important early collaborators: Bob Fleischner and Jack Smith. Together they made *Star-Spangled to Death* (1956-60/2001-2004), for years a work in progress that seems to have finally attained closure. Part record of spontaneous performances by Smith and others, part idiosyncratic collection of found footage, it expresses an angst-ridden rejection of mainstream life and politics in Cold-War United States. Smaller pieces such as *Saturday Afternoon Blood Sacrifice* (1956), *Little Cobra Dance* (1956), and *The Death of P’Town* (1961), later gathered in *The Whirled* (1956-63), revolve largely around Smith’s performative gifts and deviant persona. And so did *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1958-60) and *Blonde Cobra* (1963, largely based on footage by Bob Fleischner), which convey, in addition, Jacobs’ radically off-center framing and fragmentary editing, strategies intended to destabilize vision and to solicit an active, embodied spectatorship. For their fusion of social and formal unconventionality, these films were regarded by Jonas Mekas emblematic examples of “the Baudelairean cinema,” and crucial underground titles. Collaboration with Smith also yielded “The Human Wreckage Revue”, a cabaret-style show developed in Provincetown in the summer of 1961 of which little documentation survives. During the course of this summer, Jacobs and Smith had an acrimonious falling out that virtually ended up their artistic partnership.

The various strands of Jacobs’ subsequent works are already anticipated in his early films. Titles such as *Window* (1964) *Air Shaft* (1967), and *Soft Rain* (1968) explore the affordances and limits of the filmic apparatus. *The Winter Footage* (1964) and *The Sky Socialist* (1964-68) are allegorical narratives that bring together historical and aesthetic concerns, filmed and edited much in the style of *Little Stabs* or the *Blonde Cobra*. And *Urban Peasants*, *Changing Azazel* or *Nissan Ariana Window*, among others, are inventive home movies. But perhaps Jacobs’s most influential and vigorous work arises from his manipulations of found film.

*Tom, Tom, The Piper’s Son* (1969) re-photographs a 10-minute Edison short stopping and starting the film, blowing up details filmed in long shot in the original, and tracing personal itineraries across the images. The result is an extremely detailed expansion of a found object that evinces at once its inexhaustibility and the ability of the film apparatus to reconfigure the given. For its rigorous investigation of the material surface of its object, *Tom, Tom* has been regarded an exemplary structural film, although for its dynamism and complexity the film clearly exceeds any particular explanatory label.

From the 1970s to the present, Jacobs has created various spectacles that revise the mechanics of standard projection, often using found films from the silent era. The events named “Apparition Theater of New York” combined back film projection against a translucent screen, light shows, and live performance. The many “Nervous System” (1975-2000) and “Nervous Magic Lantern” (1990s-to present) works involve the projection of two nearly identical images—filmed images run through two analytic projectors with a slight time lag between them, in the “Nervous System”; and still images in the “Nervous Magic Lantern”. During projection, an external shutter in the form of a propeller spins in front of the projectors, blocking in turn the image from each source and creating a visual stutter and a slight overlap that produce, in combination, a three-dimensional effect, at times enhanced with the aid of Pulfrich filters and anaglyph glasses. All types of “Nervous” performances have often been accompanied by live or prerecorded music and processed sound. In many ways, these rigorous, hypnotic works are direct descendants of the expanded cinema experiments of the 1960s, which Jacobs himself pioneered with his participation in the “Expanded Cinema Festival” at Anthology Film Archives in 1965.

Since 1999, Jacobs has also worked on digital video. Some pieces in this format seek to reproduce the optical stutter of the “Nervous” projections on a single screen; others subject found footage, often from the 1900s, to inventive reworkings that include mirroring, inversion, kaleidoscopic effects, and shifts from negative to positive. Some of these works have are available in DVD.

**List of Works (partial)**

**Films**

*Orchard Street* (1955), 16mm, color, silent, 12 min

*The Whirled* (1956-63), 16mm, color & b/w, sound, 440 min

*Star Spangled To Death* (1956-60), 16mm transferred to digital video, color & b/w, sound, 440 min

*Little Stabs At Happiness* (1958-60), 16mm, color, sound, 18 min

*Blonde Cobra* (1959-63), 16mm, color & b/w, sound, 33 min

*Baud´larian Capers* (1963), 16mm, color & b/w, sound, 25 min

*Window* (1964), 8mm transferred to 16mm, color, silent, 50 min

*The Sky Socialist* (1964-68), 8mm transferred to 16mm, color, sound & silent, 140 min

*Airshaft* (1967), 16mm, 16-18fps, color, silent, 4 min

*Soft Rain* (1968), 16mm, 16-18fps, color, silent, 12 min

*Nissan Ariana Window* (1968), 16mm, 16-18fps, color, silent, 12 min

*Tom, Tom, The Piper´s Son* (1969), 16mm, 16-18fps, color & b/w, silent, 115 min

*Changing Azazel* (1973), 16mm, b/w, silent, 4 min

*Urban Peasants* (1975), 16mm, color & b/w, sound and silent, 51 min

*The Doctor´s Dream* (1978), 16mm, b/w, sound, 23 min

*Perfect Film* (1985), 16mm, b/w, sound, 22 min

*The Alps And The Jews* [incomplete], (1986-present), 16mm, color, sound, about 90 min

*Opening The Nineteenth Century: 1896* (1990), 16mm, color & b/w, sound, Pulfrich 3-D, 11 min

*Keaton´s Cops* (1991), 16mm, b/w, silent, 18 min

*The Georgetown Loop* (1996), 16mm, b/w, silent 30 min

*Disorient Express* (1996), 16mm, b/w, silent, 30 min

**Digital videos**

*Celestial Subway Lines/Salvaging Noise* (2004), digital video, color, sound, 108 min

*Mountaineer Spinning* (2004), digital video, color, sound, 26 min

*Ontic Antics Starring Laurel And Hardy; Bye, Molly* (2005), digital video, color & b/w, sound, Pulfrich 3-D, 86 min

*New York Ghetto Fishmarket 1903* (2006), digital video, b/w, sound, 132 min

*Pushcarts Of Eternity Street* (2006), digital video, b/w, silent, 11 min

*Two Wrenching Departures* (2006), digital video, b/w, sound, 90 min

*Capitalism: Child Labor* (2006), digital video, color, sound, 14 min

*Capitalism: Slavery* (2006), digital video, color, silent, 3 min

*Return To The Scene Of The Crime* (2008), digital video, color & b/w, sound, 92 min

**Nervous System Performances**

*XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX* (1980), b/w, sound, about 90 min

*Two Wrenching Departures* (1989), b/w, sound, about 120 min

*New York Ghetto Fishmarket 1903* (1993), b/w with color filters, sound, about 90 min

*The Marriage Of Heaven And Hell* (1995), b/w and color, sound, about 90 min

*Ontic Antics Starring Laurel And Hardy* (1997), b/w, sound, about 60 min

*New York Street Trolleys 1900* (1997), b/w, silent, about 25 min

**Nervous Magic Lantern Performances**

*Chronometer* (1900), sound

*Crystal Palace (Chandeliers For The People)* (2000), sound

*Polemics On Ice* (2004), sound

*Celestial Subway Lines 2,3,4* (2004)

*Deep Silence* (2008)

*Into the Depths Of The Even Greater Depression* (2009)

**Bibliography and Further References**

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Pierson, M., D. E. James, and Arthur, P. (2011) *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schwartz, D. (ed.) (1989) *Films that Tell Time: A Ken Jacobs Retrospective*. New York: American Museum of the Moving Image.

Sitney, P. A. (2002) Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000. New York: Oxford University Press, 315-45.

**Paratextual Materials**

[www.nervousken.com](http://www.nervousken.com)

<http://www.starspangledtodeath.com/>