

## A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH KEN JACOBS

Ken Jacobs is a master of avant-garde cinema. For more than 50 years he has inventively probed the nature of the moving image. “Ghosts! Cine-recordings of the vivacious doings of persons long dead,” he wrote, fascinated by the power of cinema to coax reality from the flatness of the screen. Finding new ways to delve into filmed images, Jacobs created the Nervous System, a live two-projector system with which he “plays” film, in the spirit of jazz improvisation. During a major month-long retrospective, Jacobs premiered the Nervous System piece *Two Wrenching Departures*, to mark the deaths of Jack Smith and Bob Fleischner.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue with Ken Jacobs following a screening of *Two Wrenching Departures* (November 12, 1989):**

DAVID SCHWARTZ: We’re going to see the premiere of a new Nervous System piece called *Two Wrenching Departures*. Originally in the schedule, Ken was going to do a piece that he had worked on, on and off, called *An American Dance*. About a month before the retrospective began, Bob Fleischner and Jack Smith, who people will know from Ken’s earlier films, both died within a few days of each other. Ken decided to do a piece using footage from his earlier films that he had photographed of them. I think it’s the first *Nervous System* piece where Ken is working with footage that he photographed. For people who don’t know the *Nervous System*, you can turn around and see the projectors which are two analytic 16mm projectors.

There’s our artist and his collaborator, Florence Jacobs. (Laughs) It’s basically two analytic projectors that work with this propeller which spins in front of them. What you’re seeing on the screen is an alternation between two images. And this propeller just makes sure that there’s only one image on the screen at a time, and the images are usually about a frame or two out of synch. So for people who haven’t seen it, it’s a kind of unprecedented and unique effect, and Ken will explain it afterwards. So—the world premiere now—of *Two Wrenching Departures*.

[Performance]

KEN JACOBS: There are two projectors that are analytic projectors, meaning that they are capable of freezing on a frame and advancing or going back one frame at a time, or in a pulse. I have two identical prints, and in this case, I’m using quite a bit of film for this kind of work. I’m usually only using a few feet of film, and this is actually almost 200 feet, so that’s a *lot*. And normally, that would go through a projector in about eight minutes. A little less. Actually, about five minutes. I’m varying the distance between frames. Whenever I show the identical frame onscreen, you just have a still image. As soon as I go out of synch one or more frames, other things, other kinds of movements are possible. Actually, there’s even movement possible with a frozen frame.

We had no accidents. Pretty often, my variations come from the sky falling down. But this didn’t happen. The propeller is what creates the intermittent motion, usually blocking off one image and releasing the other, so then you get these kinds of movements. But much more is possible, and much more is done than simply a simple change from one to the other—which was the first way I did it. I used a shutter and just went back and forth and blocked off one image and released the other one. But over here, there are many other variations besides a simple alternation. There’s actually, in one of the pieces where Jack frees the slave, you could see these superimpositions at the same time.

There's really a lot of variation that comes from the placement of the images over each other, and also the height of the propeller. It's on a tripod, which enables me to move it up and down. That means that the beams are hitting different places in the propeller, and different effects are derived from that. The two shapes: the middle shape introduces a flicker, and the flicker allows a lot of different phenomena to come into play. The outer—you can see there's, like, three blades on the outside. There's two openings in the inside and three openings in the outside. When I don't want flicker and I simply want a rather smooth moving back and forth from image to image, I lower the propeller and use the outside. It's not just for the rhythmic effect of flicker, but for a whole host of uncanny visual phenomena that come into play, including sometimes some very, very powerful spatial—I mean depth images, and a whole other kind of rolling. Like when Jack was on the ground, this kind of rolling motion that comes from using the flicker, but at a certain place in that propeller.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Where did you find the soundtrack for *Two Wrenching Departures*?

**JACOBS:** Oh, just at the very end. But that film... We learned of it years ago, and it was impossible to see it. It's an early Ramon Novarro sound film, like 1929, '30, with Myrna Loy. You may recognize her voice. A friend of our actually went, like, from New York to Pittsburgh because bizarrely, he discovered it was going to be on television in Pittsburgh, and he went down and taped the soundtrack. We never saw the film, but just knew it from the soundtrack, and walked around humming day and night. (Hums tune.) Then within days after Jack died, *The Barbarian* (1933), with Ramon Novarro, played on cable. So we got the whole film and the whole soundtrack from that; then I condensed it to this.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Does your soundtrack combine the audio from the two Novarro films?

**JACOBS:** No, just this one Ramon Novarro film, *The Barbarian*, which must have brought on the code single-handedly. (Laughs) It's really hot stuff; amazing. But you see; this is Jack's fantasy. He was deep into this. Sadly, the things that he got to care for—that woman, what's her name, Jack's woman—Maria Montez. Those forties films

are really domesticated—*safe*—versions of this. This was the hot stuff. This is picking up on *The Sheik* (1921), which is also about miscegenation. Hot. Rape. At some point in Jack's life, it really blew his mind, and that's where he stayed.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** How much of Jack do you have on audio tape?

**JACOBS:** How much of Jack?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Do you have a lot?

**JACOBS:** Oh no, no. We borrowed the tape recorder—we didn't have a tape recorder, neither he nor I—from someone who became very well known afterwards. Rene [Riviera]—what was Rene's fabulous name?—Mario Montez. So Rene had this dinky tape recorder. Jack and I had not been working together for a while, but some money came through from Jonas Mekas, from somebody else with money, and it became possible to make to make final prints of *Little Stabs at Happiness* and *Blonde Cobra*. So when the money was available, I contacted Jack and we had this truce. In about two days' time, we did all the sounds for *Blonde Cobra*. I originally used this in *Blonde Cobra*, and realized it was just too much for the film. The film went out of proportion. It's hard to think of a concern with proportion with *Blonde Cobra*, but it was. So here it is, the first time it has gone public since I guess the first screening, like 1963, the first screening of *Blonde Cobra*.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Did you construct this piece in the wake of Jack's... [?]

**JACOBS:** Right; that's what the notes are about. In the notes, I'm not explaining the piece; I'm just saying something about these two people who died recently [Bob Fleischner and Jack Smith]. For the people that may not know Bob Fleischner, he was the rich American in the beginning of the film who blunders into this dangerous territory.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What were the other pieces on the soundtrack?

**JACOBS:** The soundtrack is the *Triumph of Aphrodite*, by Carl Orff. It's the third section of this three-piece—which most people know by *Carmina Burana*, one of the sections. I'm pretty

sure that's what it is. So it's the *Triumph of Aphrodite*. When Jack is advancing on the benches, I always thought to use Wagner for that. But this was more appropriate, and there was somebody almost as anti-Semitic. No, the guy's name is Schmitt, Florent Schmitt. This is, again, appropriate to Jack: it's the *Tragedy of Salomé*. I'm glad you asked: from the triumph of Aphrodite, we have the tragedy of Salomé. (Laughs) All these underground meanings that only the people who put these things together usually know.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What happened to your relationship with Jack?

**JACOBS:** Well, one summer, in the summer of '61, as I usually do in summer, I tried to get a summer job and earn some money. I'd gone up to Lake George, and then I wasn't finding anything where I could save any money. I went, finally, all the way over to Boston to see friends, and earned some money washing the windows of this little museum they had. I then went over to Provincetown, because I just sort of had given up on earning money, so I went to Provincetown to be able to use my old painting teacher's studio. Hans Hofmann had a barn that he allowed people to use. Even though he was retired, he would come around and give spontaneous crits.

When I got there the first day, I had one dollar. I made a marvelous contact, to whom I've been married since 1961. Things looked very, very good—you know, my colleague... Things looked great, and so I sent Jack a postcard. "Living with two women. Come up, it's great. They've got the money." (Laughs) They were earning money doing portraits (or trying to), charcoal portraits in Provincetown. So Jack hitched up—I'm giving you too long a story, I'm afraid—Jack hitched up with this *huge* theatrical crate. What's it called? A huge wardrobe. He hitchhiked with this huge wardrobe box full of costumes, because I had my camera, and we were going to film.

It worked out very, very well for quite a while. We did this theatrical spectacle called *The Human Wreckage Review* (1961), until the local police, which were tied up with the Catholic Church, and the local powers—Provincetown's very strange—the church and the police stopped us. We were performing on the beach, and things like that, and

they even stopped us there. We were writing every day. We were doing lousy jobs; you know, minimum wage, sixty-five cents an hour jobs. But we were writing together and doing this kind of thing of tossing lines back and forth. I would say something, and Jack would... like a ping-pong game. At a certain point, Jack, who I sort of thought... it was easy to think that he was just asexual. I've since learned there's no such thing. I think the examples of people coming out in Provincetown moved him to do that; to really make an overt statement. Something happened and he was very resentful of some... I don't think it had anything to do with jealousy, but it was as if Florence and I were getting together *at* him. He became nasty.

After the summer, I went over to pick up the stories; he had the stories, or some of them. I asked him, "You know, I'd like to make a copy for myself." Things really fell apart that summer. I mention this story because after a while, instead of just taking the line and working with it, he would appraise the line. So it made for a very inhibited atmosphere. It wasn't fun to write with him anymore... and the stories were really fun. Well anyway, after pursuing Jack, going back and forth to—I think it was 4th Street he was living on—one day he finally opened the door and gave me a handful of ashes. These were the stories.

So that was the last time I chose to step into that one. Except, as I say, there was some tremendous kind of artistic discipline that he was capable of, and when it came time to finally make the track for *Blonde Cobra*, there he was! And we did it. But we couldn't keep it up afterwards. So it had been a really tremendous... I guess in large part, we were each other's college education. I hope you saw *Star Spangled to Death* (1957-59)... It was a lot of fun. No money. What's interesting is that Jack was the one that was able to get jobs. I'll never get over it. I was always fired. I couldn't get a job or I'd be fired immediately, and Jack would somehow be able to pass as a *normal* person. (Laughter) He was a good actor.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Where did you meet Jack?

**JACOBS:** Through Bob Fleischner. I got out of the Coast Guard and went to CCNY Film Institute to learn something about putting film together. I met Bob there; he was the only person alive in that

place that I met that had a sense of humor! (Laughs) I was very zany, and Bob was the only one capable of breaking into a smile or actually participating in hijinx. Then he told me about this guy Jack Smith that he'd met in another class. Jack had filmed this Oriental spectacle in a loft on 26th Street. We met soon after that happened. We lived just a couple blocks away. I didn't get him at first. I thought he was silly. The girl I was going with said, "No—this guy's okay. He's really very funny."

As I've told people before, one day—I was living on 5th Street, on the second floor. One day I'm working inside the house, and I hear this voice. It's Jack's voice. Penny [Arcade] can do his voice very well. (Laughs) I go to the window, and there's Jack down there. He's six-foot-three, whatever he is, six-foot-two, and he says, "Kenny, can you come down and play?" We're people in our early twenties; it was just done so well. "Kenny, can you come down and play?" I was charmed. But it was so good. I mean, it just cracked me up. Jack lived just a couple blocks away, I think maybe on 7th Street, in a basement which was very neat, but also had potted plants and it looked like a Dan Duryea movie, you know, from the post-war period. That was his fantasy. Across the hall—you can't call it a hall, really, just another basement apartment right next door—were two very, very overt homosexuals. Especially one of them was really a grand queen. It's something to say they were poor and they were black, and they were acting out. They were releasing themselves. They made a huge impression on Jack. He was very, very impressed with them, and very respectful. More often he was putting people down, but he was very impressed, at that time, with how they could live their lives. They could *live* it. They had nothing, they had no hope, and so they could just live. It made a big impression on him.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Have you made any color films?

**JACOBS:** No. I've experimented with color, and people ask me this very often, but I haven't gotten to anything I'm really satisfied with.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** So Jack had already been filmed before you...[?]

**JACOBS:** Yes. He had built, like a two-brick high pool in this loft on 26th Street (or 29th Street, whatever) and he had somehow given the impression of water in this thing. Then he had some poor, very unfortunate homely girl playing his Maria Montez projection. The movie was costly; it was elaborate—in a certain way, for people without money; it had a tremendous concern with color— although not very good color, really kind of raucous. What it had going for it was total sincerity. No irony, no humor. He was trying to make something very beautiful. And it was very ludicrous. It was really a mess. He had to come out of projecting to seeing what was actually there. That took a while, and then he really became a powerfully visual person. But at that time, I would say that he was involved with a fantasy of beauty. It didn't matter what it looked like, actually, as long as it was something that he could hang his fantasy on. I admired that. I mean, I thought it was ridiculous, but I really admired the intensity of his inner vision.

Long before *Flaming Creatures* (1963), you have the photographs which now become a play of a sense of what's really going on, and the fantastic aspirations, the dream. There's a tremendous tension between where people are and what kind of (usually banal) movie fantasies occupy their heads.

The only other creature I know of who was so permeated with persona that the smallest normal gesture became hilarious is W.C. Fields. He [Jack Smith] was swallowing personas at the time. He was really eating them up; gobbling personas; getting very fascinated with people and really *doing* them; absorbing them; making them part of his repertoire. But he had energy at the time. He was manic depressive, but he had energy. It was before drugs; Jack smoked cigarettes, but when I knew him he didn't drink. None of us ever thought of drugs. We found the hipster drug crowd ludicrous, very affected.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You say he was manic depressive. Is that clinically?

**JACOBS:** No, he saved himself by his involvement in art. He could easily have been. Same for myself, as a matter of fact. Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What happened to the film that he made? Do you know?

JACOBS: Well, I hope it's been found amongst the stuff in the apartment. See, I also had, for some years, a film he made called *The Saracens* (unknown), which he made at the age of fifteen with his mother—in a backyard in Ohio or somewhere. Did you ever see that? A beautiful 8mm film, with his mother doing the costumes—his terrible mother that he hated so much—sewing all the costumes for people. He never spoke about her except very disdainfully. I thought that Jack was trying to *be* his mother.

I want to tell you something about Bob's family, Bob Fleischner's family. Gary had the most dealings with him after Bob died. Once again, you have to measure someone by where they got to from where they started. Was it at sea level? Was it below? Were they on top of a mountain? What an underlying was his family?

So, Bob Fleischner was a wild success, huge, astronomical success, from the pulled down... And that was a bad mother. Even Jewish; they exist, too. Really terrible. Somebody who would

say to Bob—he'd be working on something and she'd say, "Oh, *your art*. Hmm. Like *you* can make art." And on like that.

Well, what are we doing now? I wanted to do this thing called *Black Space*, and I think, you know, I think it's too much. Next retrospective! (Laughter) Let me just let one other person, then we'll split. Anybody? This is it. Outside of standing in front of the crowd, I clam up. I'm only candid here. Okay.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Just *The Saracens*, you were about to say what [?] that.

JACOBS: Oh, I had it for some years, somehow. Then about '64, I think, going through my confusion, I found it and sent it back to Jack, hoping that he wouldn't destroy it. Because by this time, '64, '65, his sudden fame had taken place and I was hoping that he wouldn't be embarrassed by it and destroy it. It was really a very, very wonderful little film, about maybe 200 feet of 8mm. So maybe ten minutes long. A very ambitious little movie. You see the clotheslines. On the other side of the Kasbah were clotheslines, American clotheslines. Beautiful... See ya, thank you. (Applause)

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