

The Museum of Modern Art

MoMA ANNOUNCES THE ACQUISITION OF MORE THAN 200 FILMS AND VIDEOS BY KEN JACOBS, BECOMING THE MAJOR REPOSITORY OF HIS WORK

NEW YORK, May 31, 2023—The Museum of Modern Art has purchased 212 films and videos by the American artist **Ken Jacobs** (b. 1933). These join 14 titles by Jacobs that were already in the Museum’s collection, making MoMA the singular repository of works by one of the great moving-image artists of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Ken Jacobs has credited his discovery of the movies to his youthful trips to MoMA in the late 1940s, recalling that “The Museum of Modern Art plunged me, when a teenager, into the unexpectedness of art.” In the decades since, for more than 50 years, MoMA has presented Jacobs’s own moving-image work in nearly every context and format, from the theatrical projection of 8mm, 16mm, and 35mm films to cutting-edge computer technologies of his own devising, gallery installations, *Nervous System* and *Nervous Magic Lantern* performances, and screenings in the Museum’s Sculpture Garden.

The Brooklyn-born artist, who turns 90 on May 25, has devoted his seven-decade career to the aesthetic, social, and physiological critique of projected images, images that by turns mesmerize and assault the viewer as the artist manipulates them. A self-taught filmmaker, Jacobs studied painting with Hans Hofmann at the Art Students’ League of New York in the early 1950s before picking up a movie camera to make a series of New York City street burlesques with the legendary performance artist Jack Smith, including the once-censored masterpiece *Blonde Cobra* (1963).

In 1955, fresh out of the Coast Guard, Jacobs bought a 16mm Bell & Howell camera and began documenting his immediate surroundings, the immigrant streets and tenements of the Lower East Side and the Bowery that reminded him of his childhood in Depression-era Williamsburg. Jacobs purposefully avoided romanticism and satire in these early works, observing of his first film *Orchard Street*, from 1955, “I wanted to get Orchard Street, without commenting on it.” Over time, however, satire and lamentation became the hallmarks of Jacobs’s more political work, most devastatingly in his no-budget magnum opus *Star Spangled to Death*, a vision of American exceptionalism, greed, and intolerance that he built from found footage (Hollywood movies, cartoons, newsreels, and TV shows), jingoistic songs, and antic performances by Jack Smith and Jerry Sims, interwoven with his own mordant prose. The filmmaker began assembling this material in 1957, expanded and updated it over the next half century, and completed it in 2004 as a six-and-a-half-hour work.

Orchard Street has been restored by MoMA and will be presented later this year in the Museum’s Gallery 411, opening on November 3, 2023, together with more recent work, to form a primer of Jacobs’s career. Experimenting in these later short subjects with digital

technologies of his own invention, Jacobs blurs the worlds of two- and three-dimensional space, and in so doing creates his own brand of cinematic Abstract Expressionism. A master illusionist, Jacobs demonstrates that what is old is still new: cinema can still play tricks, can still dazzle and disorient, and so, too, can the Jackson Pollock and Joan Mitchell paintings that continue to inspire him. This is evident in another work that will be on view in Gallery 411, *Joan Mitchell: Departures* (2018), one of Jacobs's self-described Eternalisms, an otherworldly exploration of surface and depth, stasis and movement.

“As he celebrates his 90th birthday this month, Jacobs is one of cinema’s living treasures, a filmmaker who for the past half century—together with his partner and collaborator Florence Jacobs—has reawakened the sense of awe and mystery that 19th-century audiences must have felt in confronting motion pictures for the first time,” said Joshua Siegel, curator in MoMA’s Department of Film, who oversaw the Museum’s acquisition and who has organized numerous exhibitions of Jacobs’s work, including (as co-curator) the landmark 2004 series of live performances and screenings *Ken Jacobs: Illusions and Improvisations*. “In addition to exhibiting Jacobs’s films, the Museum has also restored several key works beyond *Orchard Street*, including *Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son* (1969), *Urban Peasants* (1975), and *Perfect Film* (1985). With this major acquisition of preprint elements, films, and digital works, MoMA will continue to preserve and exhibit Jacobs’s art for future generations.”

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