

3D Is Intoxicating

Ken Jacobs

First Man: Have I got a deal for you, an elephant for only \$500!

Second Man: I haven't the room, and what would I want with an elephant?

First Man: Okay, how about two for \$500?

Second Man: Now you're talking!

The fact is that the Second Man is no fool but is a 3D enthusiast and a magician of sorts. He plans on arranging his elephants so that a paying public sees the two as one, one to each eye. He figures that if the elephants are not in exact parallel but are only slightly shifted one to the other, viewers will think they're seeing one elephant *that's strangely distended*, a cross between an elephant and a dachshund.

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I feel almost at the point where I could forgive Jonas for putting down my interest in 3D and its paraphernalia in a review he wrote for *The Village Voice* in 1975. It was after the New York presentation of *Southwark Fair*, Chapter One of *The Impossible*. He wrote that the performance was much better seen without spectacles. It was the first Nervous System piece, performed with two film prints of *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* on two stop-motion projectors hand-triggered to pass very slowly, stop and go, one frame out of synch. The small differences frame to frame in the positions of things onscreen could be exploited to create depth events. *Crazy depths* appeared with foreground and background objects plumb forgetting their places. It was the Harpo Marx of abstract cinema. No, I think I'll wait another 36 years.

I'd taken the plunge into illusionary depth 6 years earlier. What had happened was that Flo sent me to the drugstore and next to the cash register was a card holding glitzed-up cardboard spectacles with the words See TV In 3D One Dollar. I smirked, naturally, normal person that I am, walked out, circled, paid the dollar, and never have seen the specs for sale since. We didn't have many dollars and Flo said, "More magic beans, Ken?" Yes! I can say to her now and she would leap to agree.

Strangely the same Jonas gave me a book that explained how the specs—sometimes—worked. *Eye and Brain* by E.L. Gregory described the Pulfrich Pendulum Effect, how an eye looking through a dark filter sent information to the brain an instant later than an eye meeting with no interference, meaning that it was possible to simultaneously be in two instances in time. (What?) If a visual object moved during that interval one could be given the equivalent of two perspectives. A pendulum swinging back and forth would appear to be circling, shift the filter before the other eye and it would circle in the other direction.

One could simultaneously see two frames of a normally projected film.

Depth-conscious from my painting studies with Hans Hofmann, this program begins with works from 1964 and 1965 that demonstrate this awareness creatively, but they don't enter into illusion and when *See TV In 3D One Dollar* got me into that I wondered would I be offending Hofmann. What was clear was the generally dismissive contempt for 3D in the wake of bad movies and careless projections; *headache* was the other word for 3D. If my 1969 filming of *Tom, Tom* was about the weirdness of human activity in a grainy black and white and 2D medium, those bothered by the film ("boring, boring") could now shunt me aside as a fellow totally off on another wacky bender. Yes, 3D illusion had grabbed me, visually and aurally, though not in the way it usually interests others; it wasn't so much fidelity to nature but *unnatural* depth phenomena that drew me on, the tricks that could be played on the mind when, as I put it then, one stepped between the eyes. And if infidelity to nature was the interest (coming from modern painting), the territory entered was virginal. With Flo's involvement many fresh paths were entered, 3D shadowplay being only one. It had been commercially presented in the 1920's, nudie cuties with balloons, but we did truly incredible things, in one instance plunging viewers into a forest of towering typewriter keys. A videotaped performance in Vienna is scheduled for presentation.

The Nervous System began with a shuttle between projectors and then switched to the exterior shutter when Alfonse Shilling discovered and urged me to incorporate it. The effect went from 2D forms placed in depth to voluptuous rounded forms in a delirious and drunken space. We've digitally rescued some Nervous System pieces from performance transiency and will rescue others. They can't help but change from what they were, sometimes to the point they must be re-named. After 25 years we stopped giving Nervous System performances sometime after *The Nervous Magic Lantern* evolved. I first ventured into it in 1990 for the intro to *New York Ghetto Fishmarket 1903* (dropped for making the work too long) and the piece *Chronometer* but then almost 10 years passed before returning to it. Only one projector is used with no moving parts other than myself and the turning shutter before the lens. Now, when invited to perform (mostly in Europe), it's what we do. *Time Squared* was first presented at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in January of this year.

One technique I've had to abandon is free-viewing. This is when left-right images are placed side by side, most often reading right-left and an observer joins the images with slightly crossed eyes. Effortless for me, difficult for most, impossible for way too many. Some of these pieces will be shown recomposed for anaglyph (red/green) viewing.

Avatar did a lot to make 3D less ridiculed. I liked and admired it, especially the story, but I don't see many of the 3D movies that have followed. Again, proper depth depiction is not really my interest. I love my Fuji 3D and Aiptek video-cameras. Before they came to market I was recording with two upright Vado pocket cameras mounted side by side and I still choose them for some situations.

My pieces almost always veer into and out of 2D. 2D is a remarkable invention, crazier than most anything that can happen in 3D. Imagine the world flattened to a single insubstantial plane, a mere surface reflection! I must look into it.

But can't.

Part Two: A Defense of Funny Glasses

Also known as stupid glasses. Not smart like sunglasses or the billions of aids to clear sight that we prop on our noses every day. Funny glasses only discriminate and separate two images thrown onto the same surface one to each eye so they can be related (by we who are gifted with two working eyes that can work together) in order to see depth. So that a flat surface reflecting light and hard put to claim any dimension at all for itself can almost magically afford us a moving picture of things in deep space. You think DaVinci would not have appreciated finding a pair of such specs in his mail? Isn't it our loss that Eisenstein and Welles never got to work in illusionary 3D as much as we see how they press the limits of the 2D screen? They may have preferred having that limit to press on, yes, and they might have discovered who-knows-what possibility beyond. I only wish I could see what genius would do in unlimited space and for that, at present, I would leap to put on a pair of stereo specs.

It's only a trick and so is all of cinema in all its aspects. Books are tricks then. Words conjure up things out of air and even the air. We are creatures of imagination and we enjoy exercising the faculty as we enjoy exercising our bodies. We even came up with God, short for good and this despite evidence to the contrary, surely an imaginative accomplishment of sorts. We delight in the trick once the spectacles are on, an enormous return for this very modest demand on our dignity. Who came up with this putdown? I'm betting the film-studios themselves, protecting their investment in 2D movies when it seemed they'd never get over the technical hurdles of 3D. Attempts at 3D were made from the start of the movies. Audiences who had grown up with the stereopticon expected no less. Charming personalities and marvelous stories distracted us in the meantime and we learned to *read* the screen as much for meaning as for spectacle. Those who value the movies as evolved fear general loss of the ability to read images in a relentless 3D environment so that even our finest films will be as discarded as the finest of silent films were. Some important cinema voices are now downplaying the 3D revolution; their arguments are specious which only means they'll be more irrational in defending them. Walter Murch is saying it's dangerous to be looking at the screen surface while shifting interocular distance to see other levels in imaginary depth. Oddly, *we can do it* and people did it without knowing they were daring calamity for the whole long life of the stereopticon and on into Viewmaster days. Emotions are involved—does Murch see 3D?—and as I once heard a gay activist say, there's no point in talking sense to emotion.

People who grow up missing a sense often perfectly make-do. *They don't know what they're missing.* Almost a fifth of people have problems seeing 3D and they like the movies as they are. Sorry about that but should there be no music because some of us are deaf? I see there are 2D versions being screened in some theaters and available on DVD. That should be enough. Let 3D be.

Do you respond to sculpture? To architecture? The woods and ocean? The true corporeality of the sexes? What could be better than a pert behind looming at you? as a visual treat alone, of course (I don't wish for images to replace actualities in our lives any more than they do now). The to and fro of intercourse, and what could be more important to any species? is spatially expressed, the original *comin' at ya*. Sports all happen in depth and are better appreciated when near and far can be readily determined. Ray 3D Zone of 3D comics fame

world picture 5

speaks of "spatial narrativity" and while we may enjoy the banter of comedians facing us on a stage, narrative action is best pictured in retreat and approach. A good 3D movie is dramatically expressive on the Z-axis.

The most derided viewing spectacles are anaglyph, with opposing colors pulling apart overlaid images. I'm composing new depth experiences for presentation via anaglyph which, unlike polaroid specs, do not require a metal-surface screen. Thou mocker of anaglyph, get off it! Use of anaglyph to see 3D goes back to the 1800s, it's a simple, inexpensive and brilliant technique. Observe a child approaching a pair of red/green glasses: no repulsion, no problem, only interest.

Oh, how about a movie where the wind blows in our faces....

N.B. These notes have been written for a weeklong screening of Jacobs's 3D work at Anthology Film Archives, May 13-19, 2011.

Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Ken Jacobs, was born in Brooklyn, NY, in 1933. He studied painting with one of the prime creators of Abstract Expressionism, Hans Hofmann, in the mid-fifties. It was then that he also began filmmaking (Star Spangled To Death). His personal star rose, to just about knee high, with the sixties advent of Underground Film. In 1967, with the involvement of his wife Florence and many others aspiring to a democratic—rather than demagogic—cinema, he created The Millennium Film Workshop in New York City. A nonprofit filmmaker's co-operative open to all, it made available film equipment, workspace, screenings and classes at little or no cost. His own early studies under Hofmann would increasingly figure in his filmwork, making for an Abstract Expressionist cinema, clearly evident in his avant garde classic Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son (1969) and increasingly so in his subsequent devising of the unique Nervous System series of live film-projection performances. The American Museum Of The Moving Image in Astoria, Queens, hosted a full retrospective of his work in 1989, The New York Museum Of Modern Art held a partial retrospective in 1996, as did The American House in Paris in 1994 and the Arsenal Theater in Berlin in 1986 (during his 6 month stay as guest-recipient of Berlin's DAAD award). He has also performed in Japan, at the Louvre in Paris, the Getty Center in Los Angeles, etc.