

Joseph Cornell: Films



Joseph Cornell: *Rose Hobart*

What Cornell's movies are is the essence of a home movie. They deal with things very close to us, every day and everywhere. Small things, not the big things. Not wars, not stormy emotions, dramatic clashes or situations. His images are much simpler. [...] The boxes, the collages, the home movies of Joseph Cornell are the invisible cathedrals of our age. That is, they are almost invisible, as are all the best things that man can still find today: They are almost invisible unless you look for them.

— Jonas Mekas, "The Invisible Cathedrals of Joseph Cornell," *The Village Voice*, December 31, 1970. Reprinted in Jonas Mekas: *Movie Journal*.

Joseph Cornell was an artist fascinated by the innocent yet profound spectacle of *The Movies*: by the pleasures and mysteries afforded by the trick-film, by the exotic travelogue and by the untouchable beauty of the Hollywood starlet. While this deep appreciation of cinema is reflected in his collages and otherworldly box constructions, Cornell's own work with film—largely unscreened during his lifetime—remains underappreciated to this day. Yet, with his childlike wonder, nostalgic appreciation for found footage, and sophisticated sense of montage, Joseph Cornell's film work has proven highly influential on later generations of filmmakers.

On the occasion of *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination*, San Francisco Cinematheque and The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art present *Joseph Cornell: Films*, a rare opportunity to see the film work of this master collagist in the broader context of his work.

Programs

Program One:

*Essential Cinema from
Anthology Film Archives*

Friday, October 12 at 3 pm
Friday, November 30 at 3 pm

Program Two:

*Essential Cinema from
Anthology Film Archives*

Friday, October 19 at 3 pm
Friday, December 7 at 3 pm

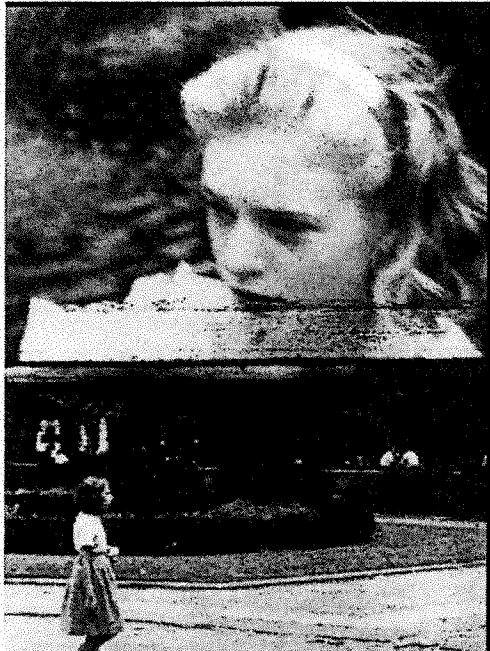
Program Three:

*Collaborations and
Cinematic Influences*

Friday, October 26 at 3 pm
Thursday, December 6 at 6:30 pm*
Friday, December 14 at 3 pm
*Lawrence Jordan In Person

*Special Thanks to Anthology Film Archives and
The Museum of Modern Art for the loan of archival prints for this exhibition*

Joseph Cornell: Films



Joseph Cornell: *Nymphlight*

Most people know Joseph Cornell as the enigmatic maker of beautifully detailed boxes and collages assembled from found and collected objects, but not many know that the artist Joseph Cornell was also a maker of films. Until recently these films have been notoriously difficult to see, and it is indeed gratifying to have them exhibited here at SFMOMA in their original formats and as an integral part of such a comprehensive exhibition. Aside from a brief but very influential exhibition period situated around Anthology Film Archives in the 1970s, Cornell showed his films only rarely: originally at Julian Levy's gallery in 1936, in 1947 at the Norlyst Gallery, in 1949 at the Subject of the Artist School, and in 1957 for the employees' Christmas party at the New York Public Library. After the creation of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Foundation, administered by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the films were restricted from popular distribution in an attempt to properly evaluate the film works within the larger context of the artist's oeuvre. Anthology Film Archives in New York continues to screen two programs of Cornell's films as part of their Essential Cinema collection, a rotating repertory of classic experimental films from their archives. These two programs are duplicated here.

Born in Nyack, New York on Christmas Eve, 1903, died December 29, 1972 in Flushing, Queens, Joseph Cornell lived nearly his entire life in the same house on Utopia Parkway with his mother and invalid brother Robert, to whom he was entirely devoted. By day he worked as a textile salesman and freelance editor for *Dance Index* magazine, sated his sweet-tooth in luncheonettes gazing at waitresses, and wandered dreaming through the streets and parks of New York City looking in shop windows and visiting libraries, museums, galleries, cemeteries, and pet stores. But by dark of night he worked in the basement studio with spirit, cunning and vision, crafting his elaborate artworks meticulously culled from a treasure trove of materials raw and refined. That alchemical dream of discerning a method for crystallizing ephemeral experience took place every night. And surely what more metaphysical medium to work with than film, with its magical silver, its material base which can be cut and recombined, its projected light beam, and of course its stars?

Among the barren wastes of the talking films there occasionally occur passages to remind one again of the profound and suggestive power of the silent film to evoke an ideal world of beauty, to release unsuspected floods of music from the gaze of a human countenance in its prism of silver light...

— Joseph Cornell, *Enchanted Wanderer: Excerpt from a Journey Album for Hedy Lamarr*

Cornell worked on his films in two distinct periods of activity: the collage films of the late 1930s, made by recombining found materials from his own film collection, and the directed films of the 1950s, on which he collaborated with cinematographers to create poetic documents of cherished New York locations. A third flush of film activity took place towards the end of his life with Lawrence Jordan assisting him, shooting film and helping to finish works begun and abandoned decades earlier.

His first and most famous work on film is *Rose Hobart* (1936), one of the earliest examples we have of an artist using found footage. The footage in question was a 16mm print of the 1931 Universal jungle drama *East of Borneo*, starring the actress Rose Hobart. Cornell's film-collage of Rose Hobart is essentially her cinematic portrait, in which nearly everything is excised from the film but for the scenes in which she appears. He originally projected this work at 16 frames-per-second, through a blue glass lens while

simultaneously playing 78 rpm records in place of the film's soundtrack. This type of projection performance is incredibly mutable, allowing slippage between all the variable elements, defying each attempt to fix it permanently and forever. The definitive print of *Rose Hobart* is now tinted a rose color, as per Cornell's mercurial instructions at the time of preservation, though the soundtrack remains separate.

Poetic and formally revolutionary, Cornell's cinematic masterpiece disabled cause and effect, enshrined actress Rose Hobart, mourned the death of the solar system, enraged Salvador Dali, and launched a thousand found footage films decades later.

— Mark McElhatten, Anthology Film Archives catalog notes, 2002

Rose Hobart was long thought to be the only film collage made by Cornell, but in 1968 instructions were given to Lawrence Jordan to complete three films started in the '30s but never finished. Now known as *The Children's Trilogy*, *Cotillion*, *The Children's Party*, and *The Midnight Party* are three serial films sharing source footage and editing strategies, in which vaudeville, trapeze and animal acts, ballerinas and bits of science interrupt a chaotic and hilarious children's birthday party. The films seem as though they are made for children and by children, with their delight in repetition, and their upside down and reversed images. Freeze frames are incorporated throughout, presenting the images to us as if behind glass; time flows and stops, turning the image ever so briefly into an object before our very eyes.

It was his sophistication that led him to create structures that would mimic the mental organization of a child.

— Marjorie Keller, *The Untutored Eye*



Joseph Cornell: *Bookstalls*

In the mid 1950s, Cornell experienced a renewed interest in filmmaking, directing lyrical documents of favorite haunts in the city. It is not surprising he would find as his main cinematographer the Swiss-born American photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt (1914–1999) well known for his keenly observed New York. The combination of Burckhardt's unaffected eye with Cornell's true and imaginary city of now and forever sets the tone for their many films together, including several exquisite fragments such as *Boys' Games* and *Joanne, Union Sq.* Their first film was *Aviary*, shot in Union Square Park in the winter of 1955. *Aviary* exists in both silent and sound versions, as well as in two or three different cuts. This theme-and-variation motif is a common thread among all of Cornell's artworks, and holds true for almost all the directed films as well: *Mulberry Street* is silent, while *What Mozart Saw on Mulberry Street* is Burckhardt's shorter cut with sound, and *Children* is yet a third variation made from the same footage. *A Legend for Fountains* was known as *A Fable for Fountains* until the addition of several minutes of footage in 1965. The two different titles in fact derive from two different translations of Garcia Lorca's poem "Tu Infancia en Menton." A soundtrack was intended, but prints were never married. *Nymphlight*, starring twelve-year-old ballet student Gwen Thomas, is a lovely blend of fact and fiction, using Bryant Park at the New York Public Library as a stage set for the fantasy inclusion of a certain nymph. But variant *Cloches a travers les feuilles* is *Nymphlight* without the nymph, and is named for a Debussy piece for piano which is exactly 4 1/2 minute long—the same length as the film! Finally perhaps the most perfectly realized film of their entire collaboration is the luminous *Angel*, a hushed reflective reverie shot in Flushing cemetery on, as Rudy Burckhardt remembers, "a real magic day in November." All of Cornell's suffused observations "on the mystery and elusiveness of experience" seem brought to bear among the statuary, fountains, and passing clouds overhead. The fleeting world conspired to exist in perfection for three minutes in 1957.

...love of humanity—no matter how much might be taken on film this urge might not be satisfying—there is always the thing that the camera cannot catch—still gratitude should be felt for the fine things done with film so far...

— Joseph Cornell

In the summer of '55, a young filmmaker named Stan Brakhage (1933–2003) who was later to become the prolific godfather of experimental cinema shot two films in Kodachrome for Cornell, to whom he had recently been introduced by Maya Deren. Both films were focused attempts to capture something on the verge of vanishing. The first, *Gnir RednoW*, had for its subject the Third Avenue El, which was about to be torn down. The title is "Wonder Ring" reversed; *Wonder Ring* is the name of Brakhage's film made from the same footage shot that day, but Cornell worked for several years editing the film—he turned it upside down, reorganized and added shots, had it printed tail-to-head, made an end title which reads, "The End is The Beginning" and retitled it to reflect these activities.

The second film, *Centuries of June*, is a haunted work evoking the evanescent fading spirit of a beloved old house in Cornell's Queens neighborhood. As Brakhage described it, "Joseph suggested we spend an afternoon preserving the world of the house." The title went through many variations, beginning with *Tower House*, *June*, *Portrait of June*, and finally *Centuries of June*, in homage to poet Emily Dickinson, demonstrating Cornell's intense involvement with poetry and the metaphysics of ephemera.

Joseph Cornell said of his art (collages, box constructions and films) that they were a natural outcome of his love for the city, and his life's experiences aesthetically expressed.

— Christine Hennessy, *Joseph Cornell: A Balletomane*

In 1971, the year preceding his death, Cornell made a gift of his extensive personal film collection to Jonas Mekas and Anthology Film Archives. These 150 films, all from the silent era, represent a lifetime of keen acquisition from other collectors and from his own habitual scavenging in junkshops and flea markets. Here we find a vast array of the many themes that drove his art: birds, science, and nature documentaries, goofy newsreels and exotic travelogues, early cartoons, slapsticks and melodramas, French trick films, and a few discreet features. A random sampling might include *Krazy Kat in Mousetrapped*, *A Detectives Tour of the World*, *Birds of the Seacoast*, *Glimpses of Picturesque Java*, films of Mack Sennet, Fatty Arbuckle and Laurel and Hardy, Lubitsch's *Sumurun* starring Pola Negri, and several works by Méliès and Feuillade. Joseph would project these films at home on Utopia Parkway for himself and his wheelchair-bound brother Robert, often changing the original films to create new surprise endings and uncanny juxtapositions for Robert's delight. The two brothers shared a deep imagination, and a devotion to the cinema.

Joseph made shadows for his brother Robert...(his) creations were from the beginning, a Rosetta stone to the hidden treasures that lurked in Robert's head.

— Tony Curtis, *A Joseph Cornell Portfolio*, Leo Castelli Gallery (Sandra Leonard Starr, ed.)

Several years after Joseph Cornell's death in 1972 researchers at Anthology Film Archives were inspecting the collection of cans and reels he had deposited there, when they discovered what appeared to be several works-in-progress: film-collage constructions edited from a variety of sources within the collection and left in various stages of completion, but clearly labored over. These films had never been seen before nor were they known about. It is important to note the difficulties the researchers were facing as they struggled to determine whether or not to declare these as newly discovered artworks. Cornell's editing procedures were unorthodox in the extreme, and probably incorporated accident as much as deliberation. In general there was precious little to go on. He was constantly reworking things, only occasionally added titles, shunned dates and was fairly obscure about the whole affair. But notes in his own hand remark on the usefulness of particular shots, reminders to cut certain scenes, and lists of material he had purposefully edited together remain extant. We find single frame intertitles meticulously spliced between scenes, a subliminal and crafty operation that defies normal perception. In the process of

creating the collage films, Cornell's main work was in the editing room: choosing the material; cutting, rearranging, and splicing images back together, often re-oriented; shaping and creating a form. Not surprising this attention to detail, the microscopic inspection of 16mm frames, those miniature translucent windows housing a face, a bird, a boat, an amoeba. This is the sculptor-as-filmmaker, constructing films with hands that planed the wood to build the boxes, creating singular worlds within them with moving parts seen through a windowpane.

The Anthology researchers, upon closer inspection, noticed how an edited roll of travel footage was "bookended" by two shots of a young boy browsing in bookstalls along the Seine. Then another roll that appeared to be a variant of *The Children's Trilogy* and which included a shot of Rose Hobart! Then a third where midway through the roll the entire film flips upside down, a favorite strategy of the artist. Some of that material had even been tinted at the lab. They were all lively, whimsical, moving, and incredibly diverse like the entire artist's output. The four collage films represented in this program were titled at that time as a means of identification. They remain: *Bookstalls*, *Vaudeville De-Luxe*, *By Night With Torch and Spear*, and *New York-Rome-Barcelona-Brussels*.

Only a collector of films could have made this kind of montage.

—P. Adams Sitney

Annette Michelson, in her 1973 *Artforum* essay "Rose Hobart and Monsiuer Phot: Early Films from Utopia Parkway," ponders the future "tenacious scholar-detective" who will exhaustively unearth and catalog all the sources, circumstances, and consequences of Joseph Cornell's life's work in film, "shattering the silence which Cornell himself had spun, like a bell of glass, about it." "Never to be shattered!" is perhaps the response; over thirty years have fled since that writing, and numerous lovingly detailed researches into the most intimate aspects of the artist's life have emerged; yet the mystery remains intact.



Joseph Cornell: *Angel*

Am pondering interest in my own work how it came about—am feeling that it always transcends "sources."

— Joseph Cornell

Jeanne Liotta

Autumnal Equinox, 2007—NYC

Jeanne Liotta lives and works in New York City where she makes films and other ephemera, including video, photography, works on paper and live projection performances. Her latest project *Observando El Cielo* takes place in a constellation of mediums investigating the cosmic landscape. It premieres at The New York Film Festival's Views from the Avant-Garde program October 6, 2007.

She was represented in the 2006 Whitney Biennial with her 16mm film *Eclipse* and her work has been exhibited at The New York Film Festival; Kunst Film Biennale, Cologne; The Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley; The Museum of Modern Art; and The Whitney Museum of American Art among others. She has been the recipient of awards from the Jerome Foundation, New York State Council of the Arts, and shared the Museum of Contemporary Cinema artist award with Taka Imura in 2006. She also maintains an ongoing research into The Joseph Cornell Film Collection at Anthology Film Archives and teaches widely and variously, including The New School, Pratt Institute, The San Francisco Art Institute, The Museum School, Boston, and is presently on the faculty at the Milton Avery Graduate School for the Arts at Bard College.

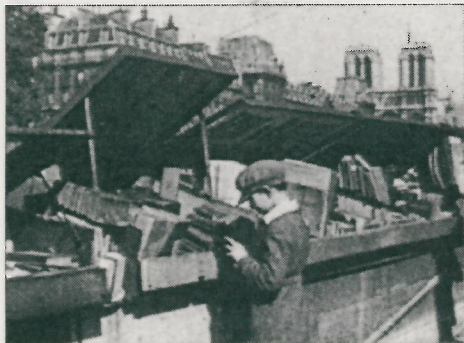
Joseph Cornell: Films



Joseph Cornell: *The Midnight Party*

Program One: Essential Cinema from Anthology Film Archives

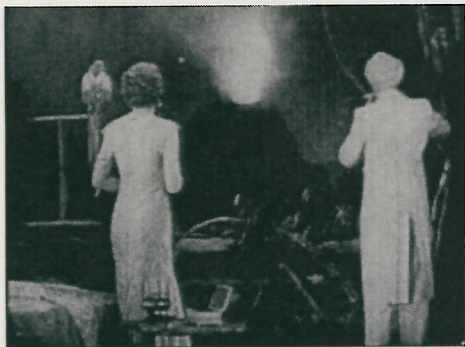
Rose Hobart (1936); 16mm, color, sound, 17 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
Cotillion (1940s–1969); 16mm, b&w (tinted), silent, 8 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema
The Midnight Party (1940s–1969); 16mm, b&w (tinted), silent, 3 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema
The Children's Party (1940s–1969); 16mm, b&w (tinted), silent, 8 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema
Aviary (1955); 16mm, b&w, silent, 11 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative
GniR RednoW (1955–1970); 16mm, color, silent, 5 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema
Nymphlight (1957); 16mm, color, silent, 7 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative
A Fable for Fountains (1955–1957); 16mm, b&w, sound, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative
Angel (1957); 16mm, color, silent, 3 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative



Joseph Cornell: *Bookstalls*

Program Two: Essential Cinema from Anthology Film Archives

Mulberry Street (1957–1965); 16mm, b&w, silent, 9 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
Bookstalls (c. 1940s); 16mm, b&w, silent, 6 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
Vaudeville De-Luxe (c. 1940s); 16mm, b&w (tinted), silent, 12 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
By Night with Torch and Spear (c. 1940s); 16mm, b&w (tinted), silent, 8 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
New York–Rome–Barcelona–Brussels (c. 1940s); 16mm, b&w, silent, 10 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
Children (1957); 16mm, b&w, silent, 8 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
Boys' Games (1957); 16mm, color, silent, 5 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
Joanne, Union Sq. (1955); 16mm, b&w, silent, 7 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives
Cloches a travers les feuilles/ Claude Debussy (1957); 16mm, color, silent, 4 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives



Joseph Cornell: *Rose Hobart*

Program Three: Collaborations and Cinematic Influences

While Cornell's best known films are collages of pre-existing material produced in relative privacy, Cornell briefly collaborated with filmmakers Stan Brakhage, Rudy Burckhardt and Lawrence Jordan, deeply influencing the work of each of these significant artists. This program presents a sampling of this collaborative work with a selection of recent works continuing Cornell's fascinations with film, the found object and the magic of the everyday.

The Wonder Ring (1955) by Stan Brakhage; 16mm, color, silent, 6 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema
 "...we see New York's Third Avenue El (since demolished) as though through the eyes of a child on a merry-go-round." (*Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalog 2000*)

What Mozart Saw on Mulberry Street (1956) by Rudy Burckhardt; 16mm, b&w, sound, 6 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative
 Assembled by Rudy Burckhardt from footage shot by him for Cornell's *Mulberry Street*.

Centuries of June (1955) by Joseph Cornell and Stan Brakhage; 16mm, color, silent, 11 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

This film comes to exist because Joseph Cornell wished, one fine summer day, to show me the old homes of his beloved Flushing. One of them had been torn down and another beside it was scheduled for demolition. In torment (similar to that which had prompted him to ask me to photograph the Third Ave. Elevated before it was destroyed) he suggested we spend the afternoon preserving "the world of this house," its environs. It would be too strong a word to say he "directed" my photography; and yet his presence and constant suggestions (often simply by a lift of the hand, or lifted eyebrows even) made this film entirely his. He then spent years editing it, incorporating "re-takes into the film's natural progress, savoring and lovingly using almost every bit of the footage. And *then* he gave it to me, "in memory of that afternoon." It was originally to be called *Tower House*, then *Bolts of Melody* (in homage to Emily Dickinson) and then *Portrait of June* and very often simply *June*. (Stan Brakhage)

Cornell, 1965 (1978) by Lawrence Jordan; 16mm, color, sound, 9 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

In 1965 I worked as Joseph Cornell's assistant on boxes and films. I filmed his work extensively, and as much as I could of him. Until 1978 I couldn't edit the film. When I finally learned it would be a kind of personal journalistic tribute to the man who taught me so much, it fell together. What you see are the close-up interiors of many Cornell boxes, some collages, and a few shots of Joseph. You hear the things he said to me (as I recall them) and the thoughts I think about it all. (Lawrence Jordan)

Our Lady of the Sphere (1969) by Lawrence Jordan; 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

The mystical Lady with the orbital head moves through the carnival of life in a Surreal Adventure. (Lawrence Jordan)

The Secret Story (1996) by Janie Geiser; 16mm, color, sound, print from Canyon Cinema

The Secret Story arose as a response to several beautifully decayed toy figures from the 1930s that were given to me as a gift. These figures, and other toys, objects and illustrations that I found from the period between the world wars, suggested a kind of unearthed hidden narrative which I have attempted to re-piece together, as if these figures were the hieroglyphics of a just-forgotten tongue. (Janie Geiser)

flower, the boy, the librarian (1997) by Stephanie Barber; 16mm, color, sound, 5 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

it's a love story, with the usual dashing figures and old habits of spelling, repetition and listing. (Stephanie Barber)

Rose Hobart (1936) by Joseph Cornell; 16mm, color, sound, 17 minutes, print from Anthology Film Archives

Oona's Veil (2000) by Brian Frye; 16mm, b&w, sound, 8 minutes, print from The Film-Makers' Cooperative

I know of only one film-record of Oona Chaplin (née O'Neill)—this screen-test made for a film in which she was cast and never appeared, having met and married Charlie Chaplin before shooting commenced. Some say that Chaplin himself directed her; history says otherwise. To hell with history. Hers was quite possibly the briefest film career ever. But then again, brevity is no obstacle to greatness.

(Brian Frye, wastebook.blogspot.com/2006/01/oonas-veil.html)

Her Fragrant Emulsion (1987) by Lewis Klahr; 16mm, color, sound, 11 minutes, print from The Film-Makers' Cooperative

Her Fragrant Emulsion is an obsessional homage to the '60s B-film actress Mimsy Farmer. The film's visceral collage images act as a metaphor for sensuality and move in and out of sync with the soundtrack to evoke the distancing and intimacy cycles that are common in love relationships. (Lewis Klahr)

What Makes Day and Night (1998) by Jeanne Liotta; 16mm, b&w, sound, 9 minutes, print from The Film-Makers' Cooperative

This 1940s artifact is coupled with music by Nino Rota to expose the existential skeleton in the closet: our perilous journey on the planet Earth. The quintessential travel film. (Jeanne Liotta)

GniR Rednow (1955–196?) by Joseph Cornell; 16mm, color, silent, 6 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema



Harry Roseman: *Back of Cornell* (1971)

Joseph Cornell: Films
is a co-presentation of
San Francisco Cinematheque
and
The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
presented in conjunction with SFMOMA's exhibition of
Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination

www.sfmoma.org
www.sfcinematheque.org

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