

Interview with Ken and Flo Jacobs.

Part I: Interruptions

David Phelps

ABSTRACT

In this conversation the author discusses with Ken Jacobs – in the presence of his wife, Flo Jacobs – different passages from his life: his childhood in Williamsburg; the revelation of his adoption by his father and the vicissitudes lived by his mother, reflected in the role of the woman in some films of the time – especially those by Frank Capra; classical and modern Jewish culture; the double bills he used to attend, with a cowboy and a Yiddish film; his education in a school of the Eastern District; his discovery of the screenings at MoMA and Cinema 16, the screening of *The Blood of Jesus* at Anthology Film Archives and the programme ‘Essential Cinema’ and the classes with Hans Hoffmann and his possible influence in some works by Jacobs, such as *Window*.

KEYWORDS

Ken Jacobs, Flo Jacobs, biography, *underground*, Jewish culture, ‘Essential Cinema’, Hans Hoffmann, Anthology Film Archives, Yiddish film, MoMA.

The Bicycle Thief on one shoulder, Betty Boop on the other, Jacobs' films work, I think, something like a *Luftmensch*'s peregrinations: an explorations into strange lands that can only unfold as a series of digressions from one place to another. A shaggy dog story for the eyes. So as we agreed, our conversation, our first of some to follow, would be open-air and open to sidetracking—whether our own wayward thoughts or people stopping by. On abysmal audio, I recorded the three of us—Ken, Flo, me—as we sat in the MoMA lobby before the première of new Ernie Gehr films, and then sauntered down to our seats. We started with childhood, and the rest, appropriately, is a sequence of interruptions.

David Phelps: Let's start—you grew up in Williamsburg?

Ken Jacobs: Yes.

DP: Which part of Williamsburg?

KJ: Near the water, Berry Street near Division.

DP: Do you ever go back there?

KJ: Oh, sure.

DP: Yeah?

KJ: I look at it and I mourn and I—

[First interruption. Telephone]

KJ: This is one of the great filmmakers. Jim Jennings. [Inaudible discussion of Jennings' *Train of Thought*]

[to Jim Jennings] We brought back something for you—so let's see you soon.

DP: We're talking about Williamsburg. What do you mourn?

KJ: Well, it was before my experience of middle-class upbringing.

DP: I read that. I always read about how you come from this working class life, but then I also read about how you went to country clubs when you were sixteen and all these bar mitzvahs.

KJ: Country clubs? Bar mitzvahs. Barely. But—the fact is I never knew my father. And this guy, who said he was my father, took me away from Williamsburg after my mother died. And only a few years ago did I realize he could not have been my biological father. A big relief.

DP: How did you know this?

KJ: I'd been told he was, so I believed it. It only occurred to me, I think at the beginning of the 2000s, that there's no resemblance whatsoever. And he had three kids who did resemble him. My mother first became sick, my grandmother told me, when she ran out of the house on a winter day with no coat to escape his brothers, who were calling her a whore.

She was nineteen when I was born. Very bright, a high school valedictorian, and pretty but I suspect a victim of the romance propaganda of the period. Dad I figure was Mister Hanky Panky. So she needed to marry and Joe then saw she was pregnant. They divorced before I was born.

DP: But also, then, this guy is responsible for her death.

KJ: Yes. Yes, with the gangster brothers.

DP: So he took you in out of guilt?

KJ: Guilt. No, he didn't know guilt. He never knew guilt. He and his second wife had a two-year old, and they didn't want to have any more kids, and I think she felt sorry for me because I was in the slums with my grandparents and they had made it to the middle class. So I think it was her idea to take me in. But that marriage didn't last very long either.

I didn't know Joe other than a few visits when he and my mother would shout at each other, I assume about child support. I didn't know my name was Jacobs and it's an uncomfortable fit to this day.

DP: So you don't think your name is Jacobs.

KJ: Well, it had been Rosenthal or so I'd thought.

[Flo interjects, something about his mother marrying to give KJ a father's name. Nearly inaudible.]

KJ: I think that was very necessary at the time—we've been watching movies from the early 30s, and many films are about women who have babies outside of marriage.

DP: Barbara Stanwyck, Loretta Young.

KJ: Yeah, one after the other. Lustrous victims.

DP: Which films in particular?

Flo Jacobs: One we just saw called *Young Bride*. And the reality—the real ending is almost always different from the happy ending.

KJ: Hollywood's achievement is the happy ending.

DP: Yeah, they show her dead, and then the next shot, they show her alive again.

FJ: She drops the poison—

KJ: She drops the poison—

FJ: -she was about to drink.

KJ: Barbara Stanwyck is *fantastic* in this early film by Capra,

FJ: A great one is called *Ladies of Leisure*.

DP: I haven't seen that.

KJ: If you're trying to understand how come the fame of Barbara Stanwyck—she looks terrible in her later years—here, she's incredible. Throws herself into her parts.

DP: So you watch these films and you see them as your parents' youth.

KJ: I understand how my mother... First of all, there's the powerful propaganda to make love. No thought of propagation, only love. You must find love, win a guy and give him all you can. And then, movie over, be occupied for a lifetime with the real-world consequences.

It saved capitalism. The poor monkeys were to be preoccupied with the romance built around the sex act, immediate economic concerns taking it from there. This was consciously done, the love-movie sidelining revolution until the next war, for which preparations were made by the action-movie.

DP: It's interesting how that makes—at least in the movies, how that makes for these really tough women, because even though they're dependent on men, they have to go out and achieve that. And they go through all these men who are useless to them in their quest. Which is not true of films today.

KJ: Joe Jacobs had reason to resent me in his mind. Many beatings, beginning age 7. He didn't call me by name until forced to by his third wife, it was Stupid and Moron until age 12 or 13. I left when I turned 16, returning to Williamsburg. It took years before my stammering let up.

So this is really something that TCM is making the past available to us.

DP: Your past.

KJ: Yes. Certainly what brought me into the world. So I even forgive Professor Dimples for being such a pain in the ass.

DP: Professor Dimples?

KJ: The guy who introduces the films.

FJ: Robert Osborne.

DP: With the official history of films you're never sure he's actually seen.

KJ: We don't listen—we're Robert Osborne virgins... And this morbid music they play before the show—I mean, really morbid.

DP: I'm always fascinated between the differences in the sets between the younger introducer's bachelor pad, and Robert Osborne, who's supposedly watching Loretta Young movies next to leather-bound books.

FJ: And the fireplace.

DP: Last time we were talking about *Man's Castle*.

KJ: Yeah—wonderful. I was one of the many who loved Loretta Young when I was young. And so married Flo.

DP: And her actual story, that she had this child with Clark Gable that she had to hide.

FJ: And then she adopted the child.

DP: It was a fucked-up era for parents and children.

KJ: So fucked-up. Those are the right words. Not just messed up, they're *fucked up*.

DP: We'll have to tell the Spaniards not to translate that phrase, since everyone knows it, and there's no good way to translate it.

KJ: Which tells you what a place it has in our lives. We don't know what to do with that sexual energy—look at all these people, they wouldn't exist, except for this unremitting sexual energy. It must be used; it must make other humans, other

creatures of its kind. This bountiful luck we have as beings is what allows all these wars to happen, that we can be so profligate with ourselves.

DP: I was reading that in Gaza right now, part of the reason there were so many children that were just killed in Israeli strikes was because over 50% of the city is children.

KJ: Now you're talking about Israel.

DP: Well—I do want to hear about the Jewish culture, since that's my father's background, too. But we can jump ahead to the modern Jewish culture.

KJ: I didn't know the world—I mean, when I understood that Jews were a minority, I thought, *what?* I mean, *everybody I know is Jewish*. But the bad lesson of World War II, for Israel, is that if you're weak you ally with and serve the biggest bully around. Then you can freely victimize.

DP: Do what was done to you.

KJ: Their experience conditioned them.

DP: It's a very fucked-up thing. It feels politically correct to more than half the nation to support Israel because now it's supporting the minority that was trampled upon in the Holocaust—

KJ: It's because of 9/11.

DP: Right, because now we have a new evil minority, which is the Muslims. We're told constantly that if you don't support Israel, you're anti-Semitic, which seems very anti-Semitic to believe that all of Jewish culture has to be co-opted into war culture, that all of Judaism is Zionism. The opposite side of that would be—

KJ: Betty Boop.

DP: Yeah! Yiddish, the Fleischer Bros. My father on the Lower East Side would have to buy his mother movie tickets because it was against the

Sabbath for her to buy them, so she would give him a present of money, and then he would buy her tickets and go home. And she thought she was the reincarnation of Queen Esther, so she would walk down the street and greet the fish-peddlers with a dainty wave in the morning. And where do you hear or see these things recorded in culture? When we talk about Jewish culture now it's all monolithic.

FJ: My mother said that she and all of her sisters would go to the Saturday matinee, and her father disapproved, but her mother just made sure that the father would not officially know.

KJ: How many children were there?

FJ: Eight.

KJ: Yeah, my grandmother had seven daughters and one son.

DP: And you have brothers and sisters—you have *fake* brothers and sisters, I guess?

KJ: Yeah, I have fake brothers and sisters. Two fake brothers.

DP: Do you talk to them?

KJ: Only one of them, Alan, and we talk maybe twice a year—he's very nice. And my father—Joe Jacobs—was very talented in sports. And he was coming up in the minor leagues of baseball [inaudible about The Giants], and he hurt his back, long story, ok. But obviously he played baseball after that, and he was always very, very impressive. And so Alan had this talent, this sports talent.

DP: Did you play sports when you were a kid?

KJ: Yeah, but I was regular, normal, I wasn't exceptional. I mean *this* was something else.

DP: But what were you doing for fun in 1940? You're seven years old and it's already World War II.

KJ: I was a normal kid.

DP: But is that a normal childhood for anybody?

KJ: No, but my grandmother was a great mother to me. And my grandfather was always too tired to be involved—but very sweet, very nice. He took me to the movies Sundays to see one cowboy movie and one Yiddish movie.

DP: Do you remember were they like the Ulmer films?

KJ: I remember one film where a man—I think we actually saw it years later—a man comes back to his home after he's been in prison, and the home is gone, and he sits on the curb crying.

DP: Like a pre-*Grapes of Wrath*.

KJ: So the films were often very sad, the Yiddish films, and the cowboy films were, you know, happily idiotic.

FJ: It was generous of him, since he wouldn't have known English.

DP: And they were double bills or in separate theaters?

KJ: No, no, double bills.

DP: And was there a big audience of people who didn't speak Yiddish going into Yiddish films and people who didn't speak English going into English-language films?

KJ: There was an audience—enough. I remember playing under the seats when, for some reason, different people were taking me to see *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

FJ: And also you said there was a Hollywood theater, is that right? The theater where you saw *Freaks*?

DP: You saw *Freaks* as a kid?

KJ: As a teenager. And it was *incredible*. It was at some little theater underneath the Broadway tracks in Brooklyn, the L, and it showed all the great films. I always went, *Who did this? Who had this idea?* All the Hollywood older films—great ones.

DP: So you start watching De Sica and Italian neorealism when you get to MoMA, but that's years later.

KJ: Yeah, but when I get to MoMA I learnt about Cinema 16, I learnt about the art theaters in New York. I'm still in Williamsburg at that time.

DP: But the Yiddish films are underground films in a way too—they're made for local audiences for nothing.

KJ: I hadn't thought of that. We loved one that we saw years later—a theater on 2nd avenue began showing old Yiddish films with a stage-show. And it was wonderful. And usually the stage-show was the old performers coming out and doing their stuff, their old routines—and young performers.

FJ: And the people in the theaters were all familiar with them.

DP: What year was this?

FJ: The Sixties.

KJ: And this became—the theater became—

FJ: The Fillmore East.

KJ: The Fillmore East. We were young, and big compared to the rest of the audience.

DP: Did you take the other avant-garde people to see these shows?

KJ: No, no I didn't. I tried to show—sometime after Anthology started, I pressed them to take a look at one of the black films, *The Blood of Jesus*, directed by and starring Spencer Williams. And

P. Adams Sitney was there, and after the film was over, he said, "we have to wash the screen now." I was really wounded by that—I thought it was a wonderful movie. And I tried to get Anthology to be interested in it as part of their Essential Cinema. Essential Cinema I think is one of the worst ideas ever. One of the worst ideas ever. It should be Jonas's essential cinema, or those people's essential cinema. Who decides what is essential in cinema? You know, it's essential to your life. And we have different lives.

DP: So it becomes bowdlerized when you do it by committee.

KJ: When you do a thing called "Essential Cinema," that's it—that's stupid. It should be so-and-so's essential cinema.

[Flo suggests we go downstairs to the theater. We go downstairs—everywhere there are sounds and images from speakers and screens, the whole floors converted into cinemas—then wait by the doors for the theater to open.]

DP: Maybe we should grab a stall in the bathroom—it's probably the only quiet place left.

KJ: The bathroom here used to be forbidden territory to me—it was a gay hangout. And so, one day, I had to go—and that's how I discovered that downstairs they showed movies. If not for a real need to pee, I might never have gotten anywhere. [Laughs]

DP: It was a fatal piss.

[Take seats]

DP: I guess we have to speed through your life—do the greatest hits.

KJ: When I got back to Williamsburg I went to Eastern District High School and the best thing that happened there was that they gave me a pass to the Museum of Modern Art. But I belonged nowhere. I didn't belong in the

middle class, the Jewish world, I didn't belong there anymore. My friends and I had diverged over the years and I was just very alone. I was thinking and writing about this just yesterday, and it put me in a terrible state. I was so fucking alone. I had a basketball and I'd go out and play by myself, or sometimes find someone to play with.

DP: How old were you at this point?

KJ: You know, 15 or 16. And I just stayed with my grandmother and uncle, I guess not more than a year or so, maybe a year and a half, and then I moved into a furnished room in Manhattan. I went to many different public schools—grammar schools and high schools—and I figured that by the last one, it probably makes a dozen, a dozen different schools.

DP: How did that happen? Joe Jacobs is moving around taking you?

KJ: No, he and the first wife divorced. And I just began living in different places.

FJ: With different aunts.

KJ: Crazy aunts.

FJ: You were going to high school.

KJ: Yes, I was going to high school, and living in places where they didn't want me and I didn't want them. It was awful. And then, he, uh—Joe succeeded in rebuilding, for a second time—it had been torched 2 weeks before we were to move in, this big house in West Hempstead. Moved in again with him and his third wife, but that just lasted about a year—and I was back in Williamsburg. I was able to keep my connections with Williamsburg through the years because I was living in Brooklyn just a half-hour trolley-car ride away, and so I was able to study for my bar mitzvah with somebody around the corner from my grandmother's home. So I was able to stay in touch with her.

DP: What was the bar mitzvah like in 1946?

KJ: Ludicrous. Yeah, 1946. And then Joe remarried the day after and I wasn't invited.

DP: Did you know he was gonna get remarried?

KJ: Oh yeah. But I wasn't invited to the wedding because I looked too old.

DP: Because you were now 13!

KJ: Because he was embarrassed to have this 13 year old son. I made him look too old.

DP: So he was a man of social appearances.

KJ: A forceful jerk.

DP: Where was the bar mitzvah?

KJ: Brooklyn. It was in the temple; it was perfunctory, but there was a spread of food in the basement—they had some kind of room for that. So it was no affair—and one of the most remarkable things that happened, was, that I had studied for some months to be able to say these Hebrew things, none of which I remember. The guy who taught me was very nice, one of the rare Jewish alcoholics. He had a tiny room overlooking the street, and I could watch kids playing, and he liked to have me drink some alcohol with him—it was nice. We could hardly speak to each other.

DP: He only spoke Hebrew?

KJ: Yiddish. My grandmother only spoke Yiddish, you know—so I must've spoke Yiddish as my first language.

DP: My father, too.

KJ: Yeah. So I'm there at the podium, whatever, at the beginning, and to my amazement, these guys who are officiating, hanging over me as I'm reading, pass me a phonetic English translation. It was *shocking*. I was shocked by it: it was corruption.

DP: It was profane.

KJ: You know, it really was. I mean here, we—

[Interruption by another man, who thanks Ken for lending him equipment]

KJ: So that was a shock. But you know, God, all these religious things simply fell away. I told you that when I no longer believed in the Easter Bunny, God went. I mean there was never a crisis or anything—it was simply outgrown.

DP: But I feel—I don't know—I feel like a lot of people are still religious without believing in God. They like the rites and the rituals.

KJ: Yes, well, I can understand that. Flo wants to celebrate Passover.

FJ: Yeah.

KJ: Why? [inaudible]

FJ: Don't you like the food?

KJ: I like it a bit, it's so—ridiculous.

[Interruption—someone asks if we're still talking]

FJ: Maybe I should put our jackets in the center—

KJ: No, no, we'll have seats. [Laughs] The avant-garde is not that popular.

[Flo takes jackets to claim seats]

DP: So what do you do for work after high school—you go straight into the coast guard? And you dropped out of high school or did you graduate?

KJ: I sort of graduated—I got enough credits. I didn't really graduate: I don't have a diploma or anything; I have a *certificate of attendance*.

[John MacKay comes by, asks about Hurricane

Sandy, which left the Jacobs in the dark for a week]

DP: I wanted to ask you what you were doing for work. You worked as a janitor at some point?

KJ: Oh, that came later—that was one of the great things.

DP [laughs]: Stable boy...

KJ: Yeah, I did work as a stable boy. And, you know, horrible, horrible, lowest, minimum wage jobs is what I did. Oh God, you're not gonna take me through that. We met in—

FJ: Provincetown.

KJ: —Provincetown, 2001.

FJ [laughs]: 1961.

KJ: Oh no, sorry, sorry. I'm confused because of what we're talking about. The period was horrible.

DP: Why were you in Provincetown for the summer? What was the reason?

KJ: Hofmann—Hans Hofmann—taught, and even though he wasn't supposed to, he actually was having classes—informal classes.

FJ: Though he had already retired then.

KJ: Yeah.

DP: So what are your days like when you start getting involved with Hans Hofmann? You're working days, or you're working nights? And you're going for a couple of hours to Hans Hofmann?

KJ: Yeah stuff like that. Well it was the GI bill which paid for school, and I was able to study painting—at a *bad*, bad school. With Raphael Soyer, who was a horrible teacher, for me, and then I went with a friend to the Whitney museum: they had an American exhibition of works—

FJ: Or maybe it was the biennial.

KJ: Biennial. And there was a painting by Hofmann that just knocked me out. My friend said he teaches in New York and often takes on people as monitors or whatever.

FJ: Wasn't it your friend Alan Becker?

KJ: Yeah, Alan Becker. And I put together a portfolio and went to see him, and he looked through it and said sure. [Laughs] And I never really had duties, but I was able to attend classes and study like everyone else. I don't remember being called upon to do much, you know.

DP: Do you remember his reaction to your work?

KJ: He—let's say this—he would come around, and very often he would tear up your work. He'd tear it up, and then shift things around.

FJ: He was known for that.

DP: It's just like what you did with Jack Smith in the subway.

FJ: Yeah... you'd tear up the subway posters.

KJ: Oh my god, I'd never related that. [Laughs] But it's true.

FJ: Our friend Max has charcoal drawings which—Hofmann had reassembled the picture by tearing and shifting sections.

DP: Did he ever do that for his own work?

KJ: I think that more than one person—I think de Kooning was using that method. Anyway, this one time, he came in and did this, he shifted things around—*this should go here, this should go here*—and then in the end, he stood back and said, I didn't mean to do that, that was a good drawing.

DP: He couldn't help himself.

KJ: Yeah.

DP: So he had a way of looking at art where he would rework it.

KJ: Yes. And he also liked my head. And one day he took hold of it, like it was a cabbage or something, turned it around, you know, looking at this plane and that plane. [Laughs]

DP: But his method of teaching is not that different from yours, right? You do similar things with films you find—you tear them apart, and put them back together.

KJ: That's interesting. Man.

DP: You don't think so?

KJ: No, I do think so. What you're saying surprises me.

DP: Because there's been so much that's been written about how you've been inspired by Hofmann's *art*, but not about how you were inspired by how he would teach...

KJ: That's undoubtedly true—oh my God. I'm shocked. You know, we do these things—

FJ: It stems from analysis too.

KJ: Analysis, true, but that was his analysis.

DP: It's just a whole different way of looking at art at that point?

FJ: Well, it has to do with dynamics. He pushed you to see space as dynamic within the four right-angled edges of the frame.

DP: Like an aesthetic of seeing what was there that you didn't think was there?

KJ: He'd say that very, very slight surface shifts can become enormous plunges in space. So he's always after the truth of the surface, ok, the fact

of its flatness—but indicating all kinds of spatial events, movements at odds with the surface. He's very attentive to the model: this is an architectonic structure one should be entirely regardful of, respectful of.

DP: Which could compare to something in your own work like *Window* (1964), where first it's the camera moving, but then it seems to be the building moving, but then it seems to be the screen itself that's moving, all of which depends on this idea that the screen is a stable plane within which objects can move—so the respect for the screen comes at the expense of the reality you filmed, and vice-versa.

KJ: Yeah, I'm an old Hofmann student. [Laughs] I owe him a lot.

FJ: You've been saying that ever since I met you.

DP: Do you see any real differences between your approach and his?

KJ: My approach is essentially Marx Brothers.

[Inaudible. Another interruption.]

DP: I guess we have to zoom ahead to the 60s, which is what we're supposed to be talking about—but there's so much, too many things.

KJ: My heart-breaking girlfriend, who committed suicide eventually.

DP: Oh boy.

KJ: Yeah.

DP: You're living on Orchard St.

KJ: No—no, I filmed *Orchard St.*—and while I did I lived a block east of it, Ludlow—in order not to have to come up with carfare. I was looking for a subject that would be contained, *contained*. I really had very little money. I would often walk from the Lower East Side to my grandmother's in Williamsburg in order to have dinner, and then I'd walk back; I could never tell her how broke I was. I did that for years.

DP: I just remember that shot where the car pulls out, and everyone just watches the car, and there's this idea that even someone just leaving this street and going to another street, even just a block away, is a big event—you know, that someone has a car and that they can leave the neighborhood even for a few minutes.

KJ: I learned a lot about filming in the world, that you just do it like it's your job—you know, you don't ask questions, you don't apologize, you don't mind the embarrassments.

[Next interruption. Jytte Jensen, MoMA curator—and my ex-boss. More talk about missed emails from the storm, and MoMA's 3D capabilities.]

KJ: Have you seen work by the openendedgroup? You must see it.... Beautiful.

[Another interruption—Gina Telaroli.]

DP: We haven't even gotten to the 60s... but all these people coming I guess is another kind of history—a living history. •

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