

Experimental Memoria, Part 2:

Robert Breer

(Sept. 30, 1926 – Aug. 13, 2011)

Visions in Motion: A Memorial Retrospective, 1954-2003

Wednesday, April 18, 2012

Northwest Film Forum

Co-Presented by The Sprocket Society
Seattle, WA

Experimental Memoria

A special series commemorating the work of three notable experimental and underground filmmakers who left this plane in 2011.

Experimental (*Adjective. First known use: 15th century.*)

1. (Of a new invention or product.) Based on untested ideas or techniques and not yet established or finalized.
2. (Of a work of art or an artistic technique.) Involving a radically new and innovative style.

Memoria (*Noun. Latin: "memory".*)

"The treasury of things invented." – *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1 BCE (attributed to Cicero)

One of five canons in classical rhetoric; the discipline of recalling the arguments of a discourse. While partly a means of perpetuating past knowledge, it is more than rote memorization. Rhetoricians viewed memoria as including a deep understanding and command of the material so as to permit improvisation, response to questions, and refutation of opposing arguments. As such, memoria is memory not just preserved but living, integrated, and interacting with the present.

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

George Kuchar

The Devil's Cleavage (1973)

Hold Me While I'm Naked (1966)

Wednesday, April 18, 2012

Robert Breer

Visions in Motion: A Memorial Retrospective, 1954-2000

16 short films

Wednesday, May 23, 2012

Adolfas Mekas

Hallelujah the Hills (1963)

Information:

<http://SprocketSociety.org>

<http://www.NWFilmForum.org/live/page/series/2088>

Series curated by Spencer Sundell and Adam Sekuler.

Rev. ed.

“In all my work I tried to amaze myself with something, and the only way you can amaze yourself is to create a situation in which an accident can happen.”

- Robert Breer, 1971 interview with Jonas Mekas

“Hurray for a formless film, a non-literary, non-musical, picture film that doesn't tell a story, become an abstract dance, or deliver a message. A film with no escape from the pictures. A film where words are pictures or sounds and skip around the way that thoughts do. An experience itself like eating, looking, running, like an object, a tree, building, drips, and crashes. A film that instead of making sense is sense. Because it's a picture film it might combine reason and kite flying and torpedoes and golf. People can talk in it. It can turn on and turn blue and turn off. ...A film on the level of the artist's imagination which stays there... A film that looks like the man who made it.”

- Robert Breer, *Film Culture* no. 27 (1962)

A Statement

By Robert Breer

Dated April 1959 and published in Film Comment, no. 29, 1963.

Single images one after another in quick succession fusing into motion...this is cinema. For the 60 years of its existence it has been used mainly as a recording instrument, and as an abstract painter I first came to cinema looking for a way to record the myriad form-color relationships I had encountered in painting.

Hoping somehow to preserve the formal purity of the fixed image in this dynamic new medium, I made several attempts to do so by simply imposing movement on the space relationships and the intrusion of anecdote in these early films forced me to explore deeper into the cinematographic medium itself.

In 1954 I made the following experiment: I exposed six feet of film one frame at a time, as usual in animation, but with this important difference – each image was as unlike the preceding one as possible. The result was 240 distinctly different optical sensations packed into 10 seconds of vision. By cementing together both ends of this film strip to form a loop, I was able to project it over and over for long periods. I was surprised to discover this repetition did not become monotonous because the eye constantly discovered new images. I am only now beginning to fully appreciate the importance of this experiment which has shown me a way finally to preserve the integrity of compositions in space while modifying them in time. *By simply limiting the viewer of a painting to 1/24th of a second I produce one unit of cinema and by adding several of these units together I produce a motion picture.*

Whereas the usual intention in animation has been to represent natural movement and to do this by gradual modification of forms permitting the eye to blend them into fluid motion. I began treating the single images as individual sensations to be experienced separately, more in counterpoint than in harmony. I find myself combining freely very disparate images and finally using continuous motion simply as a means to connect up the various fixed images. This technique tends to destroy dramatic development in the usual sense and a new continuity emerges in the form of a very dense and compact texture. When pushed to extremes the resulting vibration brings about an almost static image on the screen.

This Evening's Program

All films shown in their original 16mm format. Prints courtesy of The Film-makers' Cooperative (NY).

There will be a brief **intermission**.

Viewer Advisory: Many films in this program include or consist of very rapidly changing and stroboscopic imagery. This may adversely affect those with photo-sensitivity.

Part 1: *One Man Show* (1966)

Color & B/W, 50 min.

An anthology apparently prepared by the Film-makers' Cooperative, though it is unclear to what extent the director may have played a role in the selection. It contains the following seven films:

Jamestown Baloos (1957) color & b/w, sound, 6 min.

Award: Bergamo International Film Festival

"Breer's early masterpiece is a three-part film that combines animation and live-action, collage and photography, silence and sound." – Harvard Film Archive

"*Jamestown Baloos* is a frenetic, three-part stop-motion animation that features an army of everyday forms and figures — geometric shapes, a piece of string, newspaper clips, a pin-up girl, even Napoleon Bonaparte — flashing across the screen. Placed in increasingly compromised situations and choreographed to a jingoistic tune, the figures essentially become puppets of their former selves. Such unrelenting visuals recall not only Fernand Léger's early experimental film, *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), as Breer himself has mentioned, but also early twentieth-century Dadaist collage. Dada artists like Kurt Schwitters and Hannah Höch created witty, unapologetic works that reflected the chaos and violence of modern existence. *Jamestown Baloos* serves, as their works did, as a pointed indictment on the absurdity of war." – Kelly Shindler, Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

"*Jamestown Baloos*, I felt, was a turning point. It was a breakthrough for me. ...I think *Jamestown Baloos* was a film where I felt I was riding kind of high on that film and mixed in everything, every discipline I could think of, very conspicuously, and would carry it off just on the level of drive and euphoria, and it would work because I'd will it to work, that's all.

"It was a triptych. And I was actually thinking in terms of the triptychs that I had seen, I guess, in Germany. You know, they fold, they close, and I think there is one in a Northern German town (Lubeck), in a big church there...I don't know whose it is, maybe a medieval German artist — it's black and white on either side and color in the middle, and this was, I think, the basis for making *Jamestown Baloos* that way. Three parts. The color is silent, and the other two parts have sound on them. The idea was that it's a completely symmetrical piece of film, it has no real beginning or end, you could close the black and white things in...I think of the films as objects sort of, rather than continuities. You should be able to hold them upside down. But that is not true, you can't show them backwards, it wouldn't make any sense...I think of them as blocks of time, in which no time takes place." – R.B. interviewed in *Film Culture* no. 56-57 (1973)

Horse Over Tea Kettle (1962) color, sound, 8 min.

“Challenge, proudly flung against the bomb.” – Cinema 16 program notes, 1962

“[A]n atom bomb movie, one of his small wonders. The simplicity of his means, the effectiveness of his imagery, his humor (Breer is the James Thurber of the screen) is that of a great artist.” – Jonas Mekas, *Village Voice*

“In this witty animation of brightly colored doodles, things are not quite what they appear to be. Disparate elements are juxtaposed and objects transform themselves only to reappear in new disguises...all done to a Keystone Cops timing. The filmmaker writes that ‘the pretext’ for all these metamorphoses ‘is nuclear mayhem.’” – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

“In *Horse Over Tea Kettle*, he directly attacked the conventions of the cartoon while working within it. There he stuck to colored crayon drawings of a woman with an umbrella, a frog, and other easily identifiable creatures and objects. However, he transforms and moves these conventional figures within an intricate orchestration of expectations and surprises involving changes of scale, direction, virtual depth, and above all movement off the screen at all four edges.” – P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*

Blazes (1961) color, sound, 3 min.

“100 basic images switching positions for 4 thousand frames. A continuous explosion.” – R.B.

Breer has said that in making this film he imitated the chance collage operations of Dada artists Hans Arp, whom he befriended while living in Paris. The images were painted in gouache on individual 6”x4” cards, and then scattered randomly on the floor. He then gathered up the cards and flipped through them, making occasional adjustments based on how the different images interacted with each other. This final sequence was then filmed using standard single-frame animation, varying the timing, and interspersing it at times with sections of black film leader.

Pat’s Birthday (1962) b/w, 13 min.

“A day in the country with Claes Oldenburg and the Ray Gunn Theatre Players... includes such classic items as the haunted house, a gas station, ice cream stand, miniature golf, airplane noises, balloons. Things happen after each other in this film only because there isn’t room for everything at once. But really it’s really a still picture and time is not supposed to move in one direction any more than it does in another.” – R.B.

“Robert Breer’s ‘home movie’ documents the celebration of Pat Oldenburg’s birthday, with much of the surreal humor and absurdist theatrical qualities of her husband Claes Oldenburg’s sculptures. Scenes with no obvious interconnection are intercut: a man lying down on a bed of newspaper unbuttoning his jacket and shirt, people swimming fully clothed, others playing golf at a practice range in the pouring rain with strange objects as golf balls (a ball of twine, piece of pie). These visual oddities are brought to a climax in Claes’ construction of a birthday cake, made of found ingredients (tires, rocks, children’s toys), all painted white, set against a white background, and topped by a live white chicken. The entire creation appears to catch on fire as the party reaches full swing. The last image is of Oldenburg painting his hat white.” – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

Breathing (1963) b/w, 5 min.

Awards: NY Film Festival; London Film Festival; Tours Film Festival

“Breer’s unpredictable lines flow forth naturally with an assurance and a serenity which are the signs of an astonishing felicity of expression.” – A. Labarthe, *Cahiers du Cinema*

“[In *Breathing*,] Breer’s animation explores the theme and variation of the drawn line: a line in constant movement and transformation. With a very sketchy style, he demonstrates how a simple, abstract image can fill and satisfy the imagination of the film viewer.” – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

“I work in strange little rooms and places, I like to do that...to get myself a room someplace and close to the door and sort of work in there.... So, I had a sign for making *Breathing*, which involved making thousands of drawings over a period of a couple of months – and I had a sign which was going to be the title of the film, for a while – I’ll be damned if I can remember it exactly – I think it was: THIS FILM IS WHAT IT IS WHAT IT IS WHAT IT IS WHAT IT IS – and had the sign around and that was a reminder for me, as a kind of discipline that I didn’t refer to anymore after I wrote it, but it was there to remind me that I was making a really concrete film; I wasn’t going to digress; I was going to keep on making ‘direct’ film. So it is a kind of compulsion to define my limits.” – R.B. interviewed in *Film Culture* no. 56-57 (1973)

Fist Fight (1964) color, 9 min.

Music: from *Originales* by Karlheinz Stockhausen

Awards: NY and London film festivals; Special Mention, Ann Arbor Film Festival, 1965

“*Fist Fight* is a rapid-fire onslaught of images in which myriad animation techniques including collage, cartoon, and punched holes. Set to the sound of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Originale*, which combines ambient sound and disparate instrumentation, *Fist Fight* is a chaotic barrage of single frame images that combine in a humorously sly way. Unlike any of Breer’s other films, *Fist Fight* is also partly autobiographical. Breer scrambles still images – photographs of his family and friends – with fragments of cartoons, letters, fingers, mice, and other assorted objects. The film is articulated in bursts defined by sections of blackness, creating a strong tension between the lives depicted in the photographs and the brilliant explosion of imagery.” – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

“The personal material blends into the animations and fragments without assuming a privileged emphasis. At times it seems as if they were not personal pictures at all, but simply the most convenient photographs for a film intensely determined to explore further ambiguities of stillness and motion, painterly surface and illusory depth.” – P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*

Beginning in January 1964, Karlheinz Stockhausen spent six months in the US, teaching at the University of Pennsylvania and doing a concert tour. During his stay, he befriended the pioneering “Happenings” artist Allan Kaprow, who secured Stockhausen’s permission to stage a New York performance of *Originale*, so long as it “avoid[ed] a repetition of the style and effects of the première in Cologne [in 1961].” Kaprow recruited 45 people from the New York radical avant garde arts and music scenes, including Alan Ginsberg and several members of Fluxus (who had actually demonstrated against Stockhausen in front of earlier concerts in NY).

The event, described by one participant as “a big colorful circus,” was performed on several stage levels. It included barking sheepdogs and a dancing monkey originally intended for the original Cologne performances but not realized due to “opposition.” Percussionist Max Neuhaus

stripped down to his red stockings (“to roars of laughter”), Nam June Paik (who had participated in the Cologne premiere) “daubed himself with shaving cream, clambered into a tub of water and drank from his shoe.” Ginsberg chanted Buddhist mantras and, as he later recalled, “drank from [Paik’s] shoe – so we became friends.” On opening night, the painter Brown made a surprise appearance dressed in an “obscene” space suit, lighting a fire in a red pail that “emitted evil-smelling fumes” which sent many in the audience fleeing from the hall. Fluxus ring master George Macunias had supposedly smuggled him in to ruin the show, which was attended by the likes of Edgard Varèse and Stefan Wolpe.

“There are parts in *Fist Fight* that bothered me very much. But I learned not to go back and hack at it. ...[T]here are parts that I like very much and the rest I am indifferent to... I kind of like the parts that have to do with rather sparse structure. It’s hard to say that about a film like that, so full of imagery, but...

“What I don’t like are the things that seem more...they’re more amusing or distracting. You see, that film started as an autobiographical film and all the elements are photo-album-kind-of-memory-things and I just changed it into [the] *Originale* film, halfway through. Actually, it was done by that time. It was to be called ‘Cookies’, or something. So I used all autobiographical material, thinking that was the most neutral material I could use, because it was so personal that it was all loaded with emotional stuff, emotional references, that that material would cancel itself out; it was better than avoiding it, you know...

“[The soundtrack] was taken from five performances of Stockhausen. I had 15 hours of sound, I had long tapes, and I picked out stuff. I have sort of the feeling I’d rather have – in the spirit, I’d rather have *Fontana Mix* by Cage rather than Stockhausen. I am not a profound admirer of Stockhausen. I admire him, I guess, in a way, and I dislike him very much in other ways. But he saw it [the film], and I don’t know what his real feelings were, but he said he wanted to take all his own music and chop it up the way my film was, but he probably felt like burning what I did to his sounds. Which is reasonable.” – R.B. interviewed in *Film Culture* no. 56-57 (1973)

66 (1966) color, partly sound, 5.5 min.

“Abstract, quasi-geometric study in interrupted continuity.” – R.B.

“66 was very much a return to *Form Phases IV*...[which] was made in 1956 or something, and that was my last abstract film until the film 66... In between, I made those collage and animated cartoons and people films.” – R.B. interviewed in *Film Culture* no. 56-57 (1973)

“In 66, he made the single frame seem to move faster by injecting it into a static, long-held, geometric composition. ...In 66 Breer deals with the perception of color in terms of the problem of speed of perception. He made a series of colored cards by cutting and applying shapes of zipetone, a highly reflective plastic tape. When filmed, the zipetone colors create evener and more vibrant hues than photographed surfaces that have been painted or colored by crayon. Breer’s central strategy in this film was to place a colored shape with a white background on the screen for several seconds, then to interrupt it with another, usually smaller shape of a different color placed in what would be the background area of the initial image. The difference of color and the eccentricity of placement of the single-frame shot tended to cause a slight visual overtone when the first image reappeared.” – P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*

Intermission

Part 2: Selected Short Films, 1954–2000

Due to archival restrictions, we are not permitted to remove the head or tail leaders. For ease of projection we have spliced the films tail-to-head. Consequently, there will be a commensurate delay between each film.

Un Miracle (1954) color, silent, 30 sec.

Made in collaboration with Pontus Hultén, who went on to participate in the creation of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, where he served as its first director.

“Breer’s first collage animation is a humorous 30-second parody of Pope Pius XII as he stands on the Vatican balcony. In what Breer calls a ‘Kafka-like metamorphosis of a human being,’ the Pope juggles a series of balloons as well as his head. When he sprouts wings and flies away, a hand appears with a sign to signal the ‘Fin du Miracle.’” – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

Recreation (1956) color, 1.5 min.

Nonsense French commentary written and spoken by Noel Burch.

Award: Special Citation, 1957 Creative Film Awards (Creative Film Foundation & Cinema 16)

“A frame by frame collision of totally disparate images.” – R.B.

“*Recreation*’s rapid-fire montage of single-frame images of incredible density and intensity has been compared to contemporary Beat poetry.” – Harvard Film Archive

“*Recreation* and the loops I made before that were done really in a kind of deliberate feeling of wonderment: ‘What the hell will this look like?’ You know, that kind of thing, and “I don’t want to know, I can attach no value to it. I don’t know whether this is cinema or not, it doesn’t matter.” It was that kind of thing. Then I go back and try to incorporate some notions of control and construction, and so forth. ...I always like *Recreation*, but when I make my own programs, I wouldn’t show *Recreation* because I felt that it was contained in *Jamestown Balloons*, in the middle section, the same kind of film was in there, and I didn’t want to be repetitive. So those two kind of play again each other.” – R.B. interviewed in *Film Culture* no. 56-57 (1973)

“*Recreation* is a fast-paced collage that incorporates colored paper and numerous objects, including a mechanical mouse, the animator’s hand, and a crumpled piece of paper expanding outward. Accompanying this barrage of images is a pun-ridden, nonsensical French monologue by Noel Burch (who made *Correction Please, or, How We Got Into Pictures* [1979]). The chaos of the soundtrack complements the playful mix of the visuals.” – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

A Man and His Dog Out For Air (1957) b/w, 2 min.

Ran for eight months as the opening short for the initial NYC run of *Last Year at Marienbad*.

“[C]harts the quintessential New York walking-the-dog experience in an elliptical free-hand animation that mixes suggestions of gestures and fragmental sketches that the lucky viewer may complete.” – *Kinetica 3* catalog (iotaCenter, 2001)

“I can describe it as a sort of stew. Once in a while something recognizable comes to the surface and disappears again. Finally at the end you see the man and his dog and it’s a kind of joke. The title and the bird songs make you expect to see the man and his dog and it’s the absurdity that makes audiences accept what is basically a free play of lines and pure rhythms.

“...I did it to celebrate the birth of a child, and also because [my wife] Fanny was away in the hospital, I had a week of being alone. I worked very intensely...

“*Man and Dog* was made on regulation size 8x12 – or whatever – sheets of paper. The problem there was covering that amount of area in depth through several thousand images, it’s a lot of ink. I scratched film, too. But it’s really against my better judgment. I knew that the results would be limited to looking like every scratch ever made... So then I came to these [6” x 4”] cards, and I don’t remember how I discovered *that* as the way of doing things – it seems very simple-minded, but certainly it was the right scale for me, because they allowed me to work very quickly and eliminated a lot of the...Oh, there are so many advantages, I don’t want to go into it, but working on cards, it was a beautiful thing that happened to me. That, of course, makes the images look very direct, because of the scale – the line is blown up, it’s almost like a drawing on film. Is that what you mean by having that kind of presence on the screen? It does. But the thing is that working on cards, you can work through five images, relate five images together, you know, the light would shine through five cards. If you work on film, even 75mm film, at most, even with McLaren’s device of seeing, overlaying, you know, with the prisms seeing – two images one on top of other – you can’t do that.

– R.B. interviewed in *Film Culture* no. 56-57 (1973)

Eyewash (1959) color, silent, 3 min.

Organized confusion of live footage and animation. Original prints included hand-painted color. This was the last film Breer made while living in Europe, moving back to the US where he settled in New York State.

“A free flow from photography to geometric abstraction hand-painted by Breer.” – Harvard Film Archive

“Most of *Eyewash* derives from photography of actual entities rather than from collages, drawings, or flat photographs. ...*Eyewash* anticipates many of Stan Brakhage’s *Songs*, made a decade later, but it lacks the visionary coherence and passionate commitment that Brakhage with the advantage of 10 years of development was able to bring to his materials. More than any other film of Breer’s, this one recalls the strategies of *Le Ballet Mécanique*, especially when Léger moves out of his studio and organizes his glimpses of Paris into a chain of associations.” – P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*

An alternate version of this film made the same year was discovered in Breer’s studio during preservation work by the Anthology Film Archive. Radically re-edited, it is slightly shorter than the original. That version (along with the original) can be seen on the DVD set, *Treasures IV: American Avant Garde Film 1947-1986* (National Film Preservation Foundation, 2009).

PBL No. 2 (1968) color, 1 min.

A concise one minute cartoon history of the black American, commissioned by the Public Broadcast Laboratory and shown on the National Educational Television network (precursor to PBS). Several years later, Breer contributed short animated films to the PBS children’s program, *The Electric Company*.

“An imaginative cartoon in which a line becomes two opposing characters, one a red-nosed redneck and the other a black with an earring. They fight, the black character plays a drum, and the white character is transformed into symbols of his position: a US flag, a noose, a gun, and a dollar

sign. The dollar sign spews smoke into the black man's face, and in the end the enraged black rises up, triumphant over the cowering redneck." – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

PBL, produced by the Public Broadcast Laboratory and funded by the Ford Foundation, was the first regularly scheduled educational television program, airing on National Educational Television (NET) stations across the country. Premiering on November 5, 1967, the weekly Sunday program ran 90-120 minutes and anthologized "incisive reporting, examinations of the arts and sciences, live dramas, strong opinion and probing comment." Contributors included "the best minds in the academic world and public life, top dramatic talent and proven broadcast journalists." *PBL* ventured into subjects commercial television avoided, including automobile insurance, the Catholic Church, television political campaigning, genetics, utility companies, Martin Luther King, Jr., the influence of television commercials on children, economics, the Viet Nam war, and more. Some episodes were considered too controversial to air by some southern stations. In 1994, PBS donated its archives to the Library of Congress. Included were 53 *PBL* episodes and specials, most of them on 2-inch videotape, as well as microfiche documents containing episode summaries, interoffice memos, technical evaluations and newspaper clippings. More about the Public Broadcast Library can be found on the *Television Obscurities* web site at <http://www.tvobscurities.com/2009/11/show-spotlight-pbl/>

Fuji (1974) color, 8.5 min.

Awards: Oberhausen Film Festival (1975); Film-as-Art, American Film/Video Festival; Library of Congress National Film Registry (2002)

An animated train ride around Japan's Fujiyama district provides the basic material for this film which reduces the image of the mountain to its abstracted elements of visual pattern.

"A poetic, lyrical, rhythmic, riveting achievement (in rotoscope and abstract animation) in which fragments of landscapes, passengers, and train interiors blend into a magical color dream of a voyage. One of the most important works by a master who – like Conner, Brakhage, and Broughton – spans several avant-gardes in his ever more perfect explorations." – Amos Vogel, *Film Comment*

"*Fuji* represents an advanced stage in Breer's use of the rotoscope technique. The film is an abstract recreation of a train ride past Mt. Fuji in Japan, in which Breer characteristically mixes modes of representation. Besides rotoscoping imagery, Breer utilizes live-action footage and simple line drawing, and shifts between them with a fluidity that blurs perceptual distinctions. In abstracting the original photographic material, Breer emphasizes its compositional form. Mt. Fuji becomes a series of rectangles punctuated by the vertical lines of electricity poles. *Fuji* transforms the visual imagery of a train ride into an experience of kinetic geometry." – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

Rubber Cement (1975) color, 10 min.

"*Rubber Cement* employs a variety of formal techniques and modes – including live-action footage, line drawings, animated geometric figures, color washes and found material in the form of newspaper clippings and sales receipts. The soundtrack follows a similar collagist tendency, offering snatches of dialogue, music and natural sound. The film is divided loosely into sections – some involving representational figures and others presenting purely abstract imagery.

"It seems fitting that one of the central 'characters' in *Rubber Cement* is a bottle of film editing glue which collects and trails behind it a chain of colorful fragments. For through the collagist potential of frame-by-frame construction and the adhesive possibilities of the editing process, Breer

has created a highly eclectic and brilliant cinematic work.” – Lucy Fischer, *UFSC Newsletter*, University Film Study Center (Cambridge, MA)

“[A]n extraordinarily eclectic film in both form and theme. Like most Robert Breer films it is an aesthetic collage... The style of figure drawing in the film marks an extension of Breer’s use of the rotoscope process in *Gulls and Buoys* (1973) and *Fuji* (1974). His color technique, however, results from some new experimentation with Xerography. The space created in *Rubber Cement* is extremely complex. At various points shapes overlap or contain cutout windows through which other spaces are perceived. The iconography of *Rubber Cement* is equally complex. One segment (with titles like ‘Emily Plays Soccer’ and ‘Amos Chases a Stick’) is an animated transposition of the home movie genre. Another section offers advanced rectangles and squares reminiscent of Richter’s *Rhythmus 21* (1921). Breer’s artistic roots are in not only avant-garde animation, however; the film also contains an affectionate homage to Felix the Cat.” – *MOMA Circulating Film Library Catalog*

Bang! (1986) color, 10 min.

“*Bang!* reveals Breer at his most accomplished and most playful. It is also his most autobiographical film – the youngster paddling a boat is Breer as a boy and the pencil cartoon sequences were drawn by Breer when he was around ten years old...

“In *Bang!* he sustains ten dense minutes of collagistic mayhem that’s as potent as anything he’s ever done. Television images of a boy paddling a boat and an arena crowd cheering, plus film shots of bright pink and red flowers and a toy phone, are intercut with frenetic drawings in Breer’s trademark heavy crayon, principally of baseball games. Breer inserts a photo of himself with a question mark scrawled over his head, accompanied by the words ‘Don’t be smart.’ But he can’t help it – he is. When the words ‘Whazzat? Fade out?’ signal a possible end to *Bang!*, a barrage of violently colored drawings fly up as if to say aha, foiled you.” – Katherine Dieckmann, *Village Voice*

ATOZ (2000) color, 5 min.

“*ATOZ* is an animated alphabet. The illustrations for each letter of the alphabet seem to be arbitrarily chosen in most dictionaries. It is dedicated to my first grandchild Zoe.” – R.B.

“Breer uses humor – along with a frog, planes, and other shapes – to look at the impact of the ordered alphabet on a child’s awakening mind.” – Noguchi Museum, program notes for *The Animated World of Robert Breer*, March 15, 2009

What Goes Up (2003) color, 4 min.

Sound by Jason Burkhardt

“The richness and the impermanence of life are captured in this rapid-fire animation of images capturing the joys of family and work life, and of food, drink, nature, and love.” – Noguchi Museum, program notes for *The Animated World of Robert Breer*, March 15, 2009

“*What Goes Up*, cycles through several intervals framed by the drawn animations of an ascending plane and a variety of images that offer a succinct summary of the joys of being alive – photographs of the artist’s family, home and studio, food, drink, the changing leaves, and a drawing of a voluptuous woman. Breer gives us his personal take on the everyday in images that zoom past us like a flashback of a thousand perfectly lived moments rolled into one four-minute epic. The final scene of a derailed train provides a metaphor for the absurdity of the notion that a big, beautiful, well-lived life simply runs out.” – Carnegie International 2004-5 exhibition notes

Robert Breer

A founding member of the American avant garde, Robert Breer is celebrated as one of the most ground-breaking and celebrated animators in history, and achieved additional international acclaim as a painter and sculptor.

Born in Detroit in 1926, his father was an inventor, amateur 3D home-movie maker and engineer at Chrysler (designing the 1934 Airflow model), and his early passions reflected that influence: a 1935 BMW open cockpit racing car and stunt flying lessons in a bi-plane.

He also expressed interest in art at an early age, attending art classes at the Detroit Institute of Art when he was ten. In 1943 he went to Stanford to study engineering, but within a year changed his focus to the visual arts.

His studies were interrupted when he was drafted into the US Army in 1945, where he painted educational posters on subjects such as the dangers of syphilis. Returning to Stanford in 1947, it was during a trip to San Francisco that Breer was first exposed to the work of Piet Mondrian, whose work and theories had a major impact on him.

After graduating in 1949, Breer moved to Paris (with the help of the GI Bill) where he lived for the next decade, mingling with major modern art figures of the time and exhibiting his own paintings at the Galerie Denise René. During this period Breer developed his own take on hard edge abstraction, rejecting the stability and harmony of Mondrian's compositions, and introducing implied movement and free-floating lines into his paintings. His forms became irregular and wrestled against each other, appearing in a permanent state of unrest.

Developing the implied movement of his paintings, Breer also started experimenting with animation; first with flip books and then with film. In his first film, *Form Phases* (1952) the designs of his paintings were set into motion, morphing from one thing into another and shifting in colour and cinematic space. *Form Phases IV* (1954), a tour de force of movement and instability sees forms, colours, lines and actions burst, complement and contradict each other across every square inch of screen.

"I wanted to see some things I'd never seen before," he said in a 1973 interview. "For me, film was another medium that permitted mixing all this other extraneous stuff, ideas and words and configurative elements that I couldn't justify putting in paintings anymore."

Over the course of 43 films made between 1952 and 2003, Breer explored the interplay between abstraction and representation, using an unusually-broad range of techniques that included line animation, stop-motion, rotoscoping, cut-outs, live action (including) home movies and single-frame editing, often with audio collage – sometimes all in one film.

Another important body of Breer's work, the motion sculptures or 'floats,' were begun in the 1960s. These simple, minimalist forms move across the floor at a speed that is almost imperceptible before changing direction upon a collision. Recreating the motion and flux of his films in three dimensions, works such as *Zig* (1965), *Column* (1967) and *Sponge* (2000) surround the viewer, allowing form and change to be experienced in real time and space.

Breer was a co-founding member of the Film-maker's Cooperative in New York in 1962, exhibited at the legendary Expo 70 in Osaka, Japan; made short animated films for the PBS children's program, *The Electric Company*; and taught film for 30 years at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. His many film honors included the American Film Institute's coveted Maya Deren Award and the induction of his film *Fuji* in the National Film Registry in 2002. In 2008, major retrospectives of his newly-preserved film works were held by the Harvard Film Archive and the Los Angeles Film Forum.

A major retrospective exhibition of Breer's work in all media was mounted in June 2001 by the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (Gateshead, UK). He was present at the opening but fell ill after returning to his home in Tucson, Arizona. He died in August 2011 during preparations to move the exhibition to Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland. In June, it is said, he commented on the exhibition and catalog with the words "I feel very lucky."

Robert Breer Film Preservation and Distribution

Twenty-two films by Robert Breer were preserved by Andrew Lampert at the Anthology Film Archives in New York. Working at Colorlab, the 16mm originals were blown-up to 35mm, with the exception (at Breer's request) of the four films of the *Form Phases* series (1952-1954), his earliest animation experiments. These were instead preserved on 16mm. This preservation work was achieved with funding by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. The new preservation prints premiered in 2008, and have since been shown at the Harvard Film Archive, the Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley), and the Wexler Center for the Arts.

The 22 titles preserved on 35mm by Anthology are:

<i>Form Phases I</i> (1952)	<i>A Man and His Dog Out for Air</i>	69 (1969)
<i>Form Phases II</i> (1953)	(1957)	70 (1971)
<i>Form Phases III</i> (1954)	<i>Le Mouvement</i> (1957)	77 (1970)
<i>Form Phases IV</i> (1956)	<i>Eyewash</i> (1959) – both versions	<i>Fuji</i> (1974)
<i>Un Miracle</i> (1954)	<i>Blazes</i> (1961)	<i>Swiss Army Knife with Rat and</i>
<i>Recreation</i> (1956)	<i>Breathing</i> (1963)	<i>Pigeon</i> (1981)
<i>Motion Pictures No. 1</i> (1956)	<i>Fist Fight</i> (1964)	<i>Bang!</i> (1986)
<i>Jamestown Baloos</i> (1957)	66 (1966)	

The Breer estate's gallery representatives, GB Agency (Paris), transferred a number of the 16mm films to DVD for exhibition purposes, although this is not a suitable medium for long-term preservation. They are not for sale, and are available for loan only to museums and galleries.

Anthology Film Archives makes their prints (including the new Breer 35mm blowups) available only to qualifying nonprofit organizations. 16mm prints of Breer's films are currently distributed for public screening by the Film-makers' Cooperative (NY), Canyon Cinema (San Francisco), Light Cone (France), and LUX (Britain). The MOMA Circulating Film and Video Library (NY) has a substantial number of 16mm Breer prints in its collection, including several not otherwise available.

Sources and Suggested Reading

GB Agency (Paris) – The gallery currently representing Breer's estate. Their official artist web page includes a bio, a bibliography, a selection of downloadable press clippings (all post-2000), and more.

See http://www.gbagency.fr/#/en/40/Robert_Breer/

Robert Breer, "Statement," *Film Culture*, no. 26 (Fall 1962).

Robert Breer, "Robert Breer on His Work," *Film Culture*, no. 42 (Fall 1966).

Oral history interview with Robert Breer, 1973 July 10, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Conducted by Paul Cummings. Full transcript archived online at

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-breer-11951>

Robert Russett & Cecile Starr, eds., *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art* (Da Capo Press, 1988. Originally published as *Experimental Animation*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976), pp. 131-136. An outstanding book. Required reading.

Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (University of California Press, 1992) – Breer is among the various artists interviewed. Publisher's info at

<http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520079182>

Scott MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Temple University Press, 2002) – Includes a brief interview with Breer from 2000 (pp. 386-388) discussing his efforts to secure NY screenings in the 1950s. Other mentions occur *passim*.

Guy L. Coté, “Interview with Robert Breer,” *Film Culture*, no. 27 (Winter 1962-63). Also included in Russett & Starr’s book, *Experimental Animation* (op. cit.).

Film Culture no. 56-57 (Spring 1973) – Special double issue devoted to Breer in honor of his winning the Eleventh Independent Film Award. This issue is in the holdings of the University of Washington library. Two articles from it can also be found online:

- Interview by P. Adams Sitney and Jonas Mekas – Transcribed at <http://making-light-of-it.blogspot.com/2010/04/one-breer-please.html>
- Interview by Charles Levine – Transcript: http://www.ubu.com/papers/levine_charles-breer_interview.html
MP3 of the original audio recording: <http://www.ubu.com/sound/breer.html>

P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2002) – Third edition. Originally published in 1974.

Jim Trainor, “Robert Breer,” *Upstart* magazine (Barnard College/Columbia University), no. 4 (1980) – An interview. Available online via <http://blogs.saic.edu/cate/robert-breer-by-jim-trainor/>

Roland Wetzel & Laurence Sillars (eds.), *Robert Breer* (BALTIC Publications, 2011) 176 pp – Catalog for a major exhibition of Breer’s paintings, films and sculptures from the last 60 years, running 11 June 2011 through 25 September 2011 at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, UK and at the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland 26 October 2011 – 29 January 2012. Breer passed away soon after the exhibit opened. Available directly from BALTIC (about US\$50+ in British Pounds) via <https://www.balticmill.com/shop/ProductDetails.php?productID=996> and from publisher Keber Verlag (€35 + S&H – English & Deutsch editions available) at <http://www.kerberverlag.com/en/detailansicht/controller/Shop/action/show/product/1610.html>

Robert Breer: Films, Floats and Panoramas (Éditions de l’Oeil, 2006) – Illustrated catalog for the Breer exhibition at the Musée-Château d’Annecy. With essays (in French and English) by Brigitte Liabeuf, Laura Hoptman, Juliette Singer, Jionel Bovier, and Yann Beauvais. Photos of the book can be found on the designer’s web site at http://marieproyart.com/works/Films_Floats_Pano

Tim Cawkwell, “Robert Breer Interviewed by David Curtis, Cinema City, Norwich UK, 10 November 2007” – Actually a summary of a 90 min. Q&A, augmented with offline research. Archived at http://www.gbagency.fr/docs/RobertBreer_Norwich2007-1277560625.pdf

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Film: The Front Line 1983* (Arden Press, 1983) – Includes a chapter on Breer. Excerpted online at <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=28912>

Museum of Modern Art (MOMA, NY), *Circulating Film and Video Catalog*, Vol. 1 (1984) and Vol. 2 (1990) – These volumes include descriptions for 23 of Breer’s films, including a number quoted herein. In vol. 1 (edited by Ron Rollet and Herbert Reynolds), the American Experimental notations were written primarily by Herbert Reynolds and Lucy Fischer. Vol. 2 edited by Marilyn Mancino and Kitty Cleary.

Home Video

Screening Room with Robert Breer (WCVB, Channel 5, Boston, MA, 1976) – An episode of a TV series hosted by Robert Gardner, himself a filmmaker, author, and founder of the Film Study Center at Harvard. Includes an extensive interview plus the films *Recreation*, *A Man and His Dog Out for Air*, *69*, *Gulls and Buoys*, *Fuji*, and *Rubber Cement* – the only way to obtain these films on home video. DVD available direct via <http://studio7arts.org/index.php?/projects/screening-room-with-robert->

[breer/](#) An 8 min. excerpt can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSLLtYKkTQ> The University of Washington Library also has a copy. (Numerous other episodes of note from the same series are available via <http://studio7arts.org/index.php?/projects/screening-room/>)

Treasures IV: American Avant Garde Film 1947-1986 (National Film Preservation Foundation, 2009) 2-DVD set, w/ illustrated book – Breer's *Eyewash* (1959) and its recently-discovered alternate version are both included in this set, and discussed in the booklet.

New Order: A Collection (Warner Music Vision, 2005) DVD – Music video anthology includes “Blue Monday '88,” with animation by Breer. The video was also previously released on VHS (and, in Japan, on LaserDisc) on the *Substance 1989* collection.

Jennifer Burford, *Robert Breer – Recreation* (Re:Voir, 1999) 61 min. VHS (PAL format) – Anthologizes 10 films (1954-1997), plus a 150 page illustrated book in French and English. Born rare and now out of print, it is purportedly still available to educational and library institutions only (at a very steep price) via the Australian web site <http://artfilms.com.au/Detail.aspx?CategoryID=19&ItemID=2953> Caveat emptor.

Streaming Video

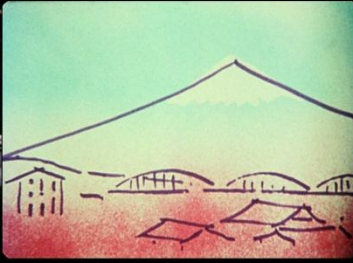
Selected films by Rober Breer, UbuWeb – <http://www.ubu.com/film/breer.html> – Streaming videos of eight films, 1957-1982. These are obviously no replacement for the real thing, but it's at least a way to get a sense of works otherwise unavailable on home video.

Adam Hyman (moderator), *Robert Breer Q&A*, Egyptian Theatre (Los Angeles), Los Angeles Film Forum, Nov. 16, 2008, approx. 48 min. – Recorded at the last of three screenings comprising the major retrospective series, *Moving Figures: The Animated World of Robert Breer*. The filmmaker attended each of the shows, which were also held at the UCLA Film & Television Archive and CalArts' REDCAT theater.

- Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4izIkbAIJeo>
- Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhmEwupo_NM
- Part 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UoCN9UpUSk>
- Part 4: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cwm3n6JlQoQ>
- Part 5: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itrLEpNsMEo>

Heinrich Schmidt, “Robert Breer Retrospective at Museum Tinguely, Interview with Curator Andres Pardey (Vice Director, Museum Tinguely), Basel, Switzerland, October 25, 2011” (VernissageTV, 2011) – Also includes extensive footage of artwork and the exhibit space. Six minute excerpt at <http://blip.tv/vernissagetv/robert-breer-retrospective-at-museum-tinguely-5688128> The full 17 minute piece can be seen (free site registration required) at <http://vernissage.tv/blog/2011/11/02/robert-breer-retrospective-at-museum-tinguely-basel/#more-15369>

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