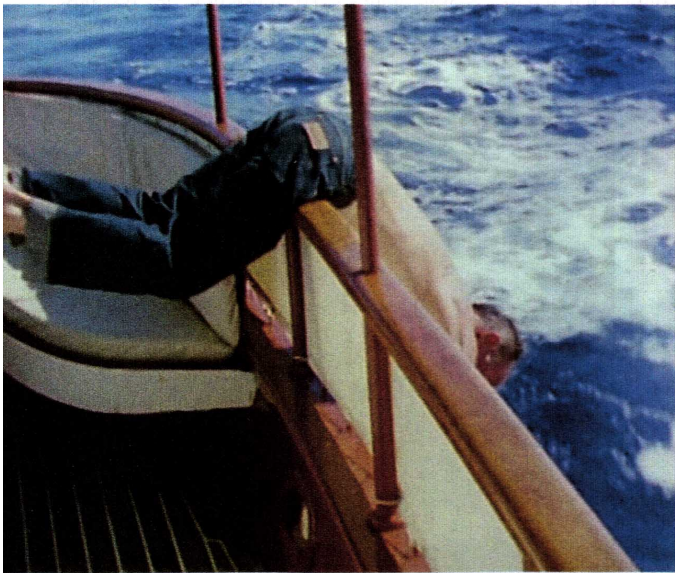


ODDS & ENDS

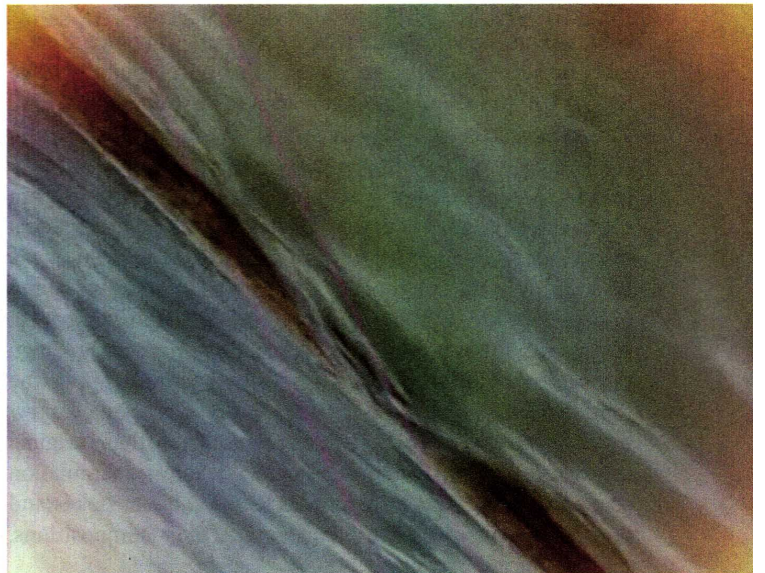
by EDWIN ROSTRON



We begin in the clouds. Guitar strings are strummed as if warming up, a bongo drum beats and a man starts to speak, hesitatingly introducing his subject: "I'd like very much to tell you about... erm, jazz and uh... uh... poetry or uh... mixing... uh spontaneous kinda music with... uh... with poetry..."

As he talks we are plunged into a dizzying stream of imagery. Two shots of animation, then a glass of champagne. Flashing coloured shapes. Sky. We are inside a boat. Someone is leaning overboard. Now we are upside down, on the surface of the water, looking up at the clouds, at the horizon, sideways. Pebbles. Organic forms. Palm trees. A strange green texture pulsates. A circle scratched into it grows and contracts. We veer over some foliage and see the horizon in the distance, upside down...

Odds & Ends
Jane Conger Belson Shimané (1959)



The film swings wildly between the recognisable and the abstract, between animated shots and live action footage. Meanwhile the voice continues, speaking about reaching the public through jazz and poetry, then changing tack and proposing that poetry and jazz are in fact “utterly opposed,” then offering contradictory ideas of how they differ. By the end of the film he has digressed into conjecture on spontaneity versus preconception and the appetite of the public for “having a good time” before finally dismissing the whole idea of jazz and poetry “because the two don’t mix!”

As the few who have written about *Odds & Ends* all point out, the film is a spoof, a joke, aimed at the scene within which it was made. In 1959, San Francisco was an epicentre of bohemian culture where jazz, poetry and underground film were all flourishing. Beatniks and bongos, anti-establishment poses and stoned, meandering self-indulgence: the clichés of the avant-garde were ripe for satire. The narrator is a humorous caricature of a pretentious artist trapped in a cycle of thought and counter-thought, but there is more to the film than just a simple parody or gag.

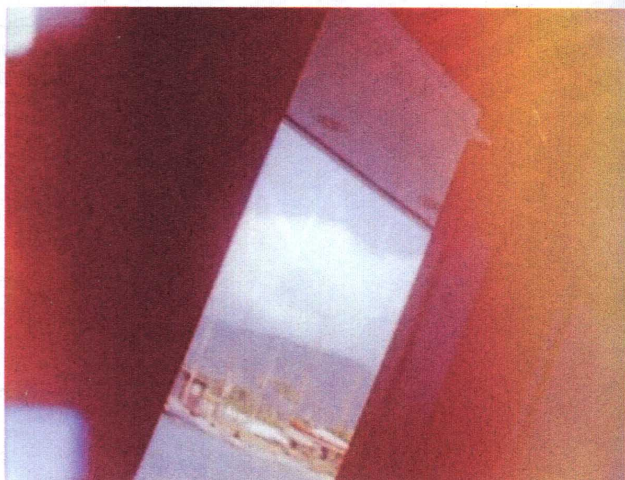
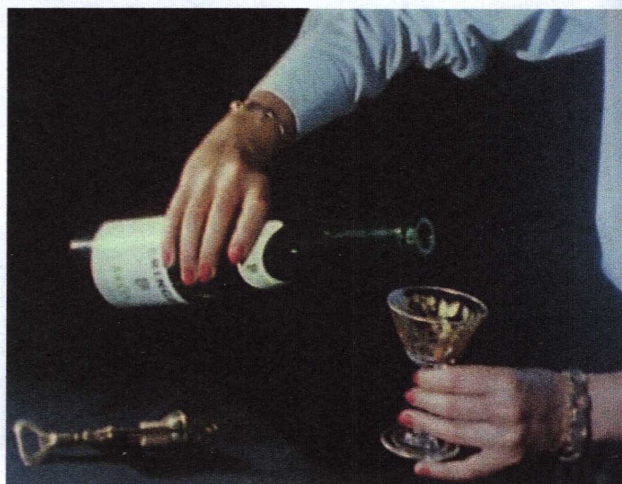
It might initially seem that there is no real connection between the voiceover and the chaotic flow of images; indeed, some have assumed that this incoherence is precisely the point. Looking further, however, one can see patterns and rhythms running throughout the work, which relate to the parodic narration in different ways. The film is certainly about poking fun, but within its dense, visual complexity is a playful exploration of the idea of play itself.

Relatively little has been written about *Odds & Ends* and still less about its maker, Jane Conger Belson Shimane.¹ Facts surrounding Shimane are scarce. She was born in Missouri in 1927 and died in 2002. She studied at the San Francisco Art Institute and briefly appears in Christopher Maclaine’s first film *The End*² (1953). She is only known to have completed two films: *Logos* in 1957 and *Odds & Ends* in 1959, both of which were made in San Francisco while she was married to the experimental animator Jordan Belson. In 1960 she won a Creative Film Award for *Odds & Ends*. On accepting the award she is said to have commented, “I just got high and put it together.”

Odds & Ends is put together out of discarded footage from a local film lab and Shimane’s own animation sequences. The majority of the found footage appears to be from a travel film, shot on an unknown tropical island. We see beaches, palm trees, coconut shells, wooden huts, women in bikinis, but only in passing glimpses and fragments. These moments are from the end or beginning of usable shots, when the camera is being moved around or put in position, and are often at an angle, upside down, facing the floor, sometimes whizzing round or suddenly jolted. Many are hazy and overexposed, fogged, or have multiple white dots descending irregularly down the screen.³ These incidental marks and movements of the filming process have a language of their own, presented anew by Shimane. By divorcing these offcuts from their original context and editing them together with her own animation sequences, she inverts their status as unusable mistakes and reveals the abstract formal qualities of their compositions, movements and colours.

What might not be obvious upon first viewing is the care and attention Shimane seems to have put into the placing and editing of shots. Many of the animated sequences contain colours, shapes or patterns that correspond with the found footage sections they adjoin. The orange fogging in one shot matches the colour of the painted animation in the next. A textured black background cuts to flickering reflections in dark water, then to patches of light and shadow, each shot mirroring the last. This happens throughout the film, too many times to be coincidental.

Shimane also plays with repetition and rhythms in the editing, sometimes quickly repeating a shot upside down then flipping it back. This visual inversion evokes a sense of pattern in space and time, and heightens our awareness of the film as material. There are moments when the picture cuts in sync with the syllables of the narrator’s voice, or corresponds in a general way to what he is saying. More generally, the narrator’s rambling digressions mirror the unpredictable energy of the image. But these elements of harmony are subtle and fleeting. The film’s rapid pace and the many opposing and unexpected images prevent us from relaxing into thinking we know what we are seeing. The visual anomalies are perhaps



Odds & Ends
Jane Conger Belson Shimane (1959)

more immediately apparent than the aspects which connect, and at first they might seem to be included for the sake of randomness. In fact, whilst their incongruity is essential to the effect of the film, each also relates to the overall scheme when examined more closely.

One such apparent anomaly is the other portion of found footage. We see recurring shots of champagne being poured into a glass, seemingly out-takes from an advertisement. These shots contrast starkly with the hazy travel footage, however a sense of glamour and exoticism connects both sources. Drinking champagne and sailing to a tropical island are typical fantasies of leisure, and this idea of an escape from everyday working life connects with Shimane's exclusion of the functional and predictable parts of a shot. The film's narrator discusses the problems of the poet making a living, the possibility of grant subsidies and not having to have a job. His contradictory thoughts connect with this imagery and, in their satire, to the sense of play that runs through the construction of the film. This playfulness is felt in the way the camera moves, the way the shots are edited and in the imagery of the found footage, but perhaps even more so in the animated sequences that Shimane intercuts throughout the film.

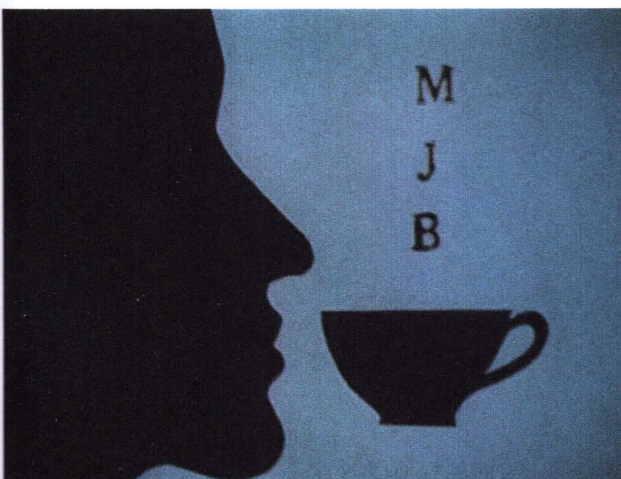
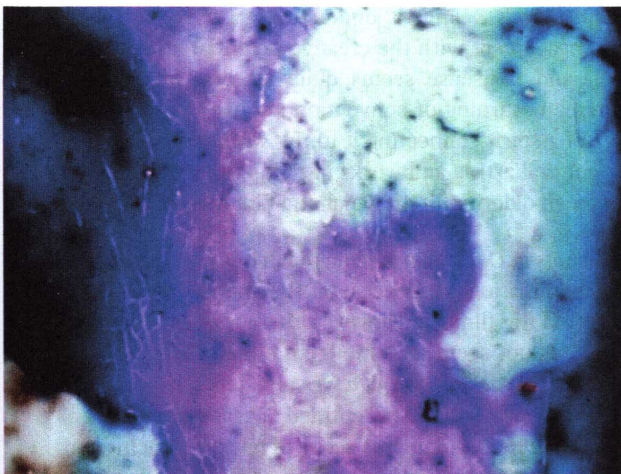
Improvisation and experimentation appear to have played a significant part in Shimane's animation process, and we might assume from her words on collecting the Creative Film Award that the film was assembled in a non-planned, intuitive way. We don't know if the animation sequences in *Odds & Ends* were made especially for this film, or if they were tests or offcuts themselves. Terms such as these are perhaps not particularly relevant in any case when discussing animation practices rooted in experimentation. In such a way of working everything has the potential for use, and mistakes and accidents can be the greatest successes. Whether the animation sequences were made consciously for this film or not, there is a sense that, like the found footage, they too possess an independent life of their own whilst also having a place within the film.

The animation in *Odds & Ends* is a mixture of direct, painted-on-film sequences and stop-motion animation using cut-out paper. The painted sequences indicate a free flowing, experimental approach, with layers of colour painted across lengths of filmstrip and marks added onto individual frames. Shapes and symbols have been drawn into the wet paint, at times creating short sequences such as circular marks transforming into an eye, or organic forms growing and contracting. Whilst earlier animators such as Harry Smith and Len Lye also worked with paint and dyes applied directly onto film, Shimane's distinctive approach to this method has a looser feel than their works and conveys a strong sense of natural forms.

The cut-out animation sequences employ a number of different approaches. Shapes reminiscent of the snowflakes children create by folding and cutting paper recur throughout the film, layered over each other or rapidly changing from one design to another. In these sequences Shimane uses colour and simple movement filmed in stop-motion to great effect. According to William Moritz, "cut-out mandalas" like these also formed the basis for *Logos*;⁴ Shimane's only other completed film. In addition to these "mandala" animations there are a number of other sequences which use different kinds of cut-out animation. Some are like tiny films within films, such as one featuring silhouettes of a face in profile and a teacup. This scene, reminiscent of the work of Lotte Reiniger, is quite unlike any other part of the film. There are several other unique sequences including one with rapidly flashing areas of colour, recalling the work of Robert Breer.

There are more general echoes of Breer's work in Shimane's intercutting of live action elements with animated shots, but the majority of her animation is quite different to Breer's. One can also see some parallels between *Odds & Ends* and the roughly contemporaneous work of Fred Mogubgub in New York and Jeff Keen in Brighton, UK, but there is no reason to believe any of them were aware of each other at the time. Len Lye had combined live footage with animation in the 1930s, but like other, later artists such as Bruce Conner, Pat O'Neill or Jane Aaron, he explored it to considerably different effect.

One contemporary artist whose work shares something of the spirit of Shimane's is American experimental filmmaker Jodie Mack, particularly in the character of her animation. Mack's films, such as *Dusty Stacks of Mom* (2013) and



Odds & Ends
Jane Conger Belson Shimané (1959)



Undertone Overture
Jodie Mark (2014)

Undertone Overture (2014), explore the relationship between abstract animation and psychedelic kitsch using found materials such as tie-dye fabric and posters of pop cultural icons. Whilst there are differences between the two artists' work, they both make abstract animation akin to what is often termed *visual music*. However, the showiness or self-importance sometimes associated with visual music is frequently undercut with humour and by drawing attention to the physical properties (and limitations) of materials, including the film itself. A sense of the cosmic, which so much visual music aspires to, is present yet challenged by an acknowledgement of the mundanities of reality. Shimane was indeed married to one of the foremost creators of visual music at the time of making *Odds & Ends*, Jordan Belson. It would be speculation, however, to suggest any link between his work and the targets of *Odds & Ends*' satire. At the time Shimane made her film Belson was Visual Director for The Vortex Concerts at San Francisco's Morrison Planetarium, a series of pioneering multimedia events combining electronic music with visual projections. Belson's collaborator and musical curator on the Vortex Concerts was a man named Henry Jacobs, and it was Jacobs who performed the voiceover on *Odds & Ends*, under the anagrammatic pseudonym of Rheny Bojacs.

Henry Jacobs was a composer, sound artist, satirist and filmmaker, fascinated with improvisational theatre, humour and *musique concrète*. His work defied categorisation and spanned numerous media, perhaps most notably in the 1950s in the form of radio broadcasts. He approached all of his work with an irreverent sense of fun, and spontaneity and improvisation were fundamental to his creative process. One of his most famous creations was *Shorty Petterstein*, a beatnik jazz musician whose encounters with various squares were featured on an LP release and in the 1961 cartoon *The Interview*, directed by Ernest Pintoff. According to Jacobs, this character began on a tape recording with collaborator Woody Leafer and was made up completely on the spur of the moment.⁵

This was typical of the way Jacobs worked. He was defiantly opposed to planning and scripting, so it might be fair to

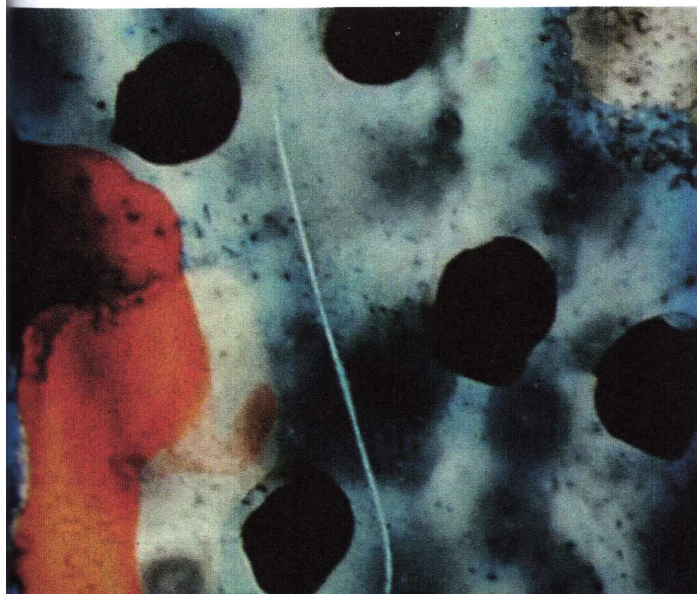
assume that his rambling voiceover for *Odds & Ends* was also improvised. Certainly this seems apparent in the manner of his speech. We do not know if Jacobs performed the narration specifically for the film, or if Shimane selected her friend's skit from material he had already recorded. Jacobs' Rheny Bojacs has a clear crossover with his shticks as Shorty Petterstein, but the humour and satire of *Odds & Ends* is somewhat subtler than that found in *The Interview*. Later, in 1972, Jacobs would co-create a TV series for San Francisco public television entitled *The Fine Art of Goofing Off*, which combined diverse animated sequences with surreal and philosophical sketches, themed around leisure and inactivity. In its form and content there is a clear link to *Odds & Ends*, especially in its never-quite-comedy, never-quite-serious tone.

The joke of Shimane's film is not simply a ridiculous send-up, as one might describe *The Interview*. Rather, it is less obvious than that, starting in a semi-serious manner and increasingly spinning into digression, contradiction and the brink of nonsense. Jacobs was a humourist and a prankster, but he was also an artist with a great understanding and appreciation of the music, art and film of the avant-garde. Shimane was a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute and a contributor to the Vortex Concerts. They were both active and accomplished artists, and the scene they were satirising was very much their own. Whilst *Odds & Ends* is undoubtedly a parody on one level, its engagement with the creative potential of mistakes, accidents, and nonsense seems quite sincere. Its humour and anarchic upturning of convention are just one aspect of this, part of a spirit connecting it to the work of many other counter-cultural artists and works of that particular time, but also to a much older tradition which the film itself alludes to.

All of the shots in *Odds & Ends* seem to fall into two categories: Shimane's animation sequences or the found footage she acquired from the film lab. However, there is one shot in the film that does not seem to come from either source. About three quarters of the way through we see a detail of a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, entitled *The Peasant Dance*. Painted around 1568, it depicts a scene of revelry, dancing and



Odds & Ends
Jane Conger Belson Shimané (1959)



Odds & Ends

Jane Conger Belson Shimané (1959)

drunkenness. The detail in the film shows a man passionately playing the bagpipes while another man is drunkenly poised beside him. There is an obvious link with the narration at this point in the film, which is discussing the importance of the public having a good time. But the inclusion of this image is more than just an illustration of one particular line. This painting, as with much of Bruegel's work, is concerned with the split between two sides of societal behaviour at the time: religious observance and unrestrained hedonism. This contrast is depicted quite literally in Bruegel's 1559 painting *The Fight Between Carnival And Lent*. The festival of Carnival involved a temporary inversion of the *natural* order, where social roles were turned upside down and a *King of Fools* was elected. The basest appetites of the people were celebrated and indulged by the church, but only for a short, controlled period, in order to let people let off steam and ultimately retain control in the long term.

This *carnavalesque* spirit has a long, rich history in art, from Bruegel through Dada and Surrealism, to the work of Paul McCarthy and Rachel Maclean. In its own way *Odds & Ends* can be seen to form part of this wider tradition. Shimane literally shows us a world turned upside down, a world on holiday, a world drinking champagne and lounging on a yacht, a world poking fun and talking rubbish, a world laughing at itself and everyone else, a world of rotating paper fancies and moving doodles. She makes the recognisable world look more unfamiliar, and creates abstract moving patterns that are always obviously made of paper or paint. She combines a sense of the cosmic with the frivolous and the everyday. She undercuts the seriousness of her own work and inverts the seriousness of Art and avant-garde film. *Odds & Ends* has a lightness that marks it out from many other avant-garde films of its day, and a very particular sense of experimentation and play. Without its recent preservation and inclusion on the *Treasures IV* DVD, Shimane's film might have remained an "absolute obscurity."⁶ Its rediscovery is to be celebrated.

Thank you to Herb Shellenberger, Mark Toscano, Larry Cuba and Dominic Angerame.

 ENDNOTES

1. By far the most informative source being the uncredited essay accompanying the *Treasures IV: American Avant-Garde Film 1947-1986*, DVD box set booklet (NFPF, 2009).
2. According to fellow cast member Wilder Bentley II, cited by Brecht Andersch in *In Search of Christopher Maclaine 2: The THE END Tour – A Work in Progress 1* (Open Space, SFMOMA), the image from *The End* on the front cover of the *Treasures* DVD box set shows Shimane in sunglasses.
3. These white dots are holes punched into the film itself, forming numbers and letters that correlate to the film's batch and emulsion numbers. More info at: <<http://www.undergroundfilmjournal.com/solving-the-mystery-of-underground-films-white-dots>>
4. 'History of Experimental Animation' by William Moritz, from 'Absolut Panushka' website, partially republished at: <<http://www.iotacenter.org>>
5. 'One Man Goofing: A visit with legendary Zen humorist Henry Jacobs' by Joel Rose at: <<http://www.arthurmag.com>>
6. Ed Halter at: <<http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/archive-fever-20090305>>

 EDWIN ROSTRON

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