Radical Light
In Search of Christopher Maclaine—Man, Artist, Legend
Curated and presented by Brecht Andersch
Thursday, March 31 at 7 pm — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Wilder Bentley II and Lawrence Jordan In Person

In the 1950s, San Francisco Beat poet Christopher Maclaine made four films—*The End*, *The Man Who Invented Gold*, *Beat* and *Scotch Hop*. These films—with a collective running time of only sixty minutes—have largely been located at the margins of film history, the subject of rumor and speculation, largely unscreened and underappreciated. They have, nonetheless, exerted a strong influence on the language of cinema, profoundly influencing and anticipating the work of Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Robert Nelson and countless others. Entwining the ecstatic and the absurd to a delirious degree these films never fail to provoke audience excitement with their hallucinatory and apocalyptic visions. *Radical Light* features three essays on the filmmaker—who died in a mental asylum in 1975—including an interview with Stan Brakhage on Maclaine by SFMOMA Open Space columnist Brecht Andersch. Appearing with Andersch and to discuss their work with Maclaine are two of his collaborators on these early works—actor Wilder Bentley II and filmmaker Lawrence Jordan. Join us for what could possibly be the deepest exploration yet of the legendary artist described by Brakhage as "San Francisco's Antonin Artaud." (Brecht Andersch and Steve Polta)

If genius, as Kant suggested, has to do with the creative capacity for accomplishing something beyond all the rules, then indeed Maclaine exhibits an element of genius in The End. (J.J. Murphy, "Christopher Maclaine: Approaching *The End*. *Film Culture* 70-71, 1981)

People haven't been very fair to the Beat movement academically, but there Maclaine was [in San Francisco]—the center of it. I think what Maclaine's done in film is just giant. (Stan Brakhage, 1999)

Any expression of the human mind (soul? id? ego?) is to be valued, if not for its excellence, at least for its daring. (Christopher Maclaine, 1947)

He worked with a kind of dedication to madness. How intrinsic this was to his behavior can be seen in his films. He used to put it very simply by saying he fell out of a tree at a certain age and everything in his life had gone awry ever since. (Stan Brakhage, 1989)

Christopher Maclaine was born in Wapanucka, a small Oklahoma town, in 1923. He received an undergraduate degree in Spanish at UC Berkeley in 1946, and with Norma Smith (who at some point was temporarily his wife), from 1947 to '49 put out four issues of a poetry magazine entitled *CONTOUR*, which published poems by, among others, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia, Denise Levertov, Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Rexroth, and the Maclaines themselves. Whether Maclaine was always a dweller within the bohemian scene is unknown, but certainly by the early '50s he was the cyclone within the calm center of the nascent San Francisco North Beach Beat community. From 1948 to 1960 Maclaine published four books of poetry: *The Automatic Wound* (1948), *The Crazy Bird* (1951), *Word* (or *Words*, 1954) and, finally, *The Time Capsule* (1960). Around this period he also had poems printed in numerous magazines, such as *Neurotica, Tiger's Eye, Goad, Golden Goose, Broadside, Inferno*, and *Beatitude*.

In 1953 Maclaine premiered his first (and, at thirty-five minutes, by far longest) film, *The End* at Frank Stauffacher's *Art in Cinema* program at the San Francisco Museum of Art (which in 1975 became SFMOMA), where, according to Brakhage, it precipitated a riot among its audience of several hundred

Art in Cinema regulars. Whether Maclaine intended to provoke such a response is uncertain, but Maclaine was well on his way to having the local reputation of "the Antonin Artaud of North Beach," and like the institutionalized genius of French theater, as J.J. Murphy describes, "Maclaine assumed the pose of enlightened madman from a similar sense of moral conviction, (and) he approached his art with a messianic fervor." Despite the dismal response to *The End*, over the course of the '50s Maclaine turned out three other films, *The man Who Invented Gold* (1957), *Beat* (1958) and *Scotch Hop* (1959) and read/performed his poetry/proto-performance art in various North Beach bars and cafés. As alluded to in the title of his second film, there was an alchemical and profoundly mystical dimension to Maclaine's work—Lawrence Jordan described to Murphy how Maclaine thought of his films as "numinous, divine things to get done." Unfortunately, along with his interest in alchemy, Maclaine became enslaved to chemistry: similar to many others among the Beats, such as Kerouac and Joan Burroughs, Maclaine's *modus operandi* entwined the use of alcohol and methadrine, and he finally succumbed to a disastrous speed habit." (Brecht Andersch, adapted from *In Search of Christopher Maclaine: Man, Artist Legend*, published in SFMOMA's Open Space, 2010)

Stan Brakhage, a twenty-year-old filmmaker from Colorado in the audience at *The End*'s premiere, was completely floored by Maclaine's *magnum opus*. Years later, he wrote about Maclaine, including details of how he came to meet him a decade after his first encounter with the filmmaker-poet's work:

"Chris Maclaine was…very much a creature of his milieu. In San Francisco (and in some other cities and times of this culture), you almost had a 'gathering of the tribes' with the Beat movement… This was the early 1950s when the Beat movement was at its maximum intensity among the tribes that the art circles had formed in the late 1940s in San Francisco. By 1958 the Beat movement was old enough and done-for enough that it became the property of the mass media. The two men most often considered as the exponents of 'Beat' were Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Ginsberg had been to San Francisco and had written the great Beat poem 'Howl.' Jack Kerouac finally produced the great prose statements of the Beat generation with *The Subterraneans*, *The Dharma Bums* and *On The Road*. But this was all long after that fact. With Maclaine we are going back to the source of the Beats; He was the filmmaker who chronicled the movement as it happened and created a center of one of the aspects of the Beat myth seven or eight years before the grand epic of Beat became nationally known with Ginsberg and Kerouac… His whole generation had just returned from World War II (those who hadn't been killed in it); they had missed their adolescence. They had been taken suddenly and thrown abroad into a war when, in a saner world, a saner time, they would have been enrolling in college or passing through other civilized rites of adolescent passage. Crucial years of their growing-up were missing. This marked the generation that became the center of the Beats…

"I went back to San Francisco in the early 1960s, when the Beat movement, even in its decadent, nationally publicized phase, was dying out; and I was appalled to find that many of the filmmakers who had seemed so important in the early days of the Beat era were almost totally forgotten. They were forgotten for one reason: at that time everything in this country still had to pass through Manhattan Island; and the essence and genuine strengths of the Beat movement… never did get through that needle's eye of the east coast very comfortably.

"So Chris Maclaine was forgotten then. Nobody even knew who I was talking about. So I set myself the task of finding him.

"I knew the dives I would have to search, and I knew of some people who had known him on and off during the decade of my absence from San Francisco. Finally I found someone who told me to go to such-and-such a real estate company. 'Just walk through the office,' he said, 'and go out the back door, and don't pay any attention to anyone who yells at you. If you go into the courtyard in back and turn left, there are some rickety stairs, and about two thirds of the way up the stairs you'll see a window. Yell in that window, and you'll probably find Chris Maclaine.'

"These directions were pretty bizarre, but I'd known that I would never find Maclaine by following a straight line, so I went to the realty company and walked in. Immediately, a rather fat and balding man wanted to know what I wanted, and as I walked past him, opening the gate in the counter, he began to shout at me, 'Hey! What are you doing? What do you want?' I kept walking to the back door, and with

him yelling and screaming behind me that he wasn't going to stand for this anymore. Outside, I found the stairs, and nearly broke my neck on the first three. I tip-toed carefully upward and saw several windows. One of them was open just a bit. It was dirty and cracked, and I peered in and called, 'Mr. Maclaine?' No answer.

"By now I was beginning to think that maybe I had been put on, and I certainly didn't feel like going back into that real estate office to get out of here. So I started up the steps again. I had just passed the window that I called into when I heard a voice, 'What do you want?' I looked down and saw one of the most terrifying faces I head ever seen in my life—mean, stubble-bearded, desperate, eyes rolling, pupils dilated. I told him who I was looking for. He said he was Chris Maclaine and added, 'I knew you must be okay wearing those green pants.' He opened the window; I climbed down into the room and found that the window truly was the only entrance or exit to Maclaine's domicile.

"It was room filled with bric-a-brac—old door knobs, candlesticks, broken baroque and rococo plaster pieces that had once been carved into ornate shapes. Most of the stuff was metal, all highly polished. If I known as much about such things then as I know today, I'd have known immediately that Chris was on speed. He had polished every shiny surface in the place to such a sheen that even in the gloom they all glowed almost with lights of their own. He also had a vast collection of knives in the room, all sharpened to razor pitch, from the tiniest pocket knife to the largest of cleavers.

"I knew that Maclaine was about thirty-five to thirty-eight years old, but the man in that room with me looked more like 55. He was a man so reduced in circumstances—materially, spiritually, physically and morally—that I could barely believe I was actually in the presence of one of the filmmaking geniuses of the time. He was desperate in every respect." (Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End*, 1989)

"I snatched his films from certain oblivion. If I had gone to San Francisco the next year, it would have been too late. When I found his films they were just stacked—the originals and the prints—in a hot closet on the dusty floor. The lids weren't even on all the cans. They were in there with well-shined doorknobs and sharp objects that were intrinsic to speed." (Stan Brakhage interviewed in 1999 by Brecht Andersch and Timoleon Wilkins, published in *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000, 1945–2000*)

"Maclaine's continued involvement with amphetamines cut short his artistic career. The late fifties saw the introduction of methadrine to the drug culture of the Bay Area. Compared to benzedrine and dexedrine, its effects—unknown at the time—were considerably more harmful. As Maclaine began using methadrine in larger and larger quantities, his paranoia became even more pronounced. He was, at one point, arrested for possessing a very small quantity of marijuana. Although his incarceration was brief, it seemed to confirm his worst paranoid fears. The experience somehow broke him. When he returned, friends noticed a marked change. The poet David Meltzer describes it: 'Even his face was set differently when he came out. All these clichés: his eyes were not animated anymore; there was no quick wit; there was this very sort of solemn visage that just started becoming more and more withdrawn and more and more frail and (he) gradually started getting sick.'

"His deterioration—both physical and emotional—accelerated afterwards, finally culminating in a suicide attempt that landed him in the psychiatric ward of San Francisco General Hospital for a three month period in 1963. Excessive methadrine abuse, which causes hemorrhaging in the cells of the brain, had already begun its debilitating effects. Maclaine started to lose his equilibrium due to inner ear problems. He suffered from high blood pressure; his eyesight and memory began to fail him.
"Over the next few years, his condition eventually worsened to the stage where he could no longer take care of himself. He was admitted to Sunnyacres Convalescent Hospital in Fairfield, California in 1969. Virtually reduced to a vegetable state, he remained there for the next six years. His own end came on April 6, 1975." (J.J. Murphy, "Christopher Maclaine: Approaching *The End*. *Film Culture* 70-71, 1981)

Moods In Motion (1954) by Ettelie Wallace; 16mm, color, sound, 5 minutes, print from LUX

        In 1954, while working for the Kinesis distribution organization in San Francisco, Christopher Maclaine was introduced to a San Diego newspaperwoman, Ettelie Wallace, who had produced an abstract motion picture utilizing images created by her "kaleidolight" box, an affair composed of coloured lights and revolving plastic forms. Miss Wallace was looking for a composer to add a music track to her film, and Maclaine offered his services, composing a score for drum, flute, and human voice. (Robert Pike, www.lux.org.uk/collection/works/moods-motion)

Trumpit (1955) by Lawrence Jordan; 16mm, b&w, sound, 6 minutes, print from the maker

        "Stan Brakhage as a nervous young man confronted with the sexual power of Woman (Yvonne Fair)." (Brecht Andersch)

        "Maclaine… collaborated with Henry Jacobs of Vortex Concert fame, on an improvised soundtrack of assorted mouth noises for Larry Jordan's psychodrama about seduction, *Trumpit*." (J.J. Murphy)

Sausalito (1949) by Frank Stauffacher; 16mm screened as video, sound, 10 minutes

        "A serene bay-side town reveals caches of semi-Surrealism. Featuring Barbara Stauffacher" (Brecht Andersch)

        "He fell in love with a petite blonde dancer and moved into an apartment in Sausalito that overlooked San Francisco Bay. The romance, the waterside location, and the somnolent town itself prompted his most personal film, *Sausalito*, which expresses a rhythmic delight in the world and the joy of being alive to dance in it." (James Broughton, 1984)

The End (1953) by Christopher Maclaine; 16mm, color, sound, 35 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative

        Cinematography by Jordan Belson.

        "The poet Christopher Maclaine's first movie, produced when American soldiers were fighting in Korea and illuminated by the baleful glare of the hydrogen-bomb (first tested in the United States in November 1952 and by the Soviet Union nine months later) is a thirty-five-minute doom show bracketed by mushroom clouds and filled with assertions that 'the world no longer exists after this day.' *The End* is most simply described as the final hours, shown in fragmentary flashback, of a half dozen vaguely Bohemian San Franciscans. It also develops and embodies a self-conscious form of anticinema: Maclaine makes extensive use of disjunctive editing, absurd or paranoid coincidences, and a prolonged blank screen accompanied by a ranting direct address that continually reminds the audience that the characters they are watching are all condemned to die." (J. Hoberman "Focus: *The* End." *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000*

        "What is *The End* all about? It is not my business to tell you what it's all about. My business is to get excited about it, to bring it to your attention. I am a raving maniac of the cinema. Here is a great film before you. Here is a film that moves as art; as thought, as an experience. It successfully combines a number of different searches and drives of modern cinema; it explores and pushes its boundaries into new lands of experience.

        "No doubt the impurity of *The End* as cinema could be discussed endlessly. But who cares if this is pure or impure (both terms are completely irrelevant and senseless)? Whatever it is, it's there, and it does wonders, if you just let wonders happen to you (most people don't). No movie, no painting, no piece of music encompasses all that an art can do or be. Each work of art in a given period opens a different window to man's soul (psyche, being, It). MacLaine's [sic] contribution to this is an important one, his window is wide open and clear and full of wonderful light, and music of the spheres is coming in. One can feel behind the film's images and its sounds the movements of a complex and beautiful spirit, the movements which lead you to your own unexpected, exalted, chance discoveries. The beauty of *The End* is stronger than the crooked sillinesses of governments, the blabberings of sociologists and politicians. The job of beauty is to make us more aware of our own being and to beautify us (our souls, our beings, It). If the new art of the dying dinosaur called Europe is nothing but respectable, square,

stale entertainment, then *The End* is part of that new art, and it all comes from the American underground, which contains visions and movements of new life." (Jonas Mekas, *The Village Voice*, 1963)

The Man Who Invented Gold (1957) by Christopher Maclaine; 16mm, color, sound, 14 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative
Music by Christopher Maclaine and George Abend. Recording by "R.W. Emerson".

"The filmmaker Jordan Belson, who shot *The End*, shot part of *The Man Who Invented Gold* before he tired of Maclaine's antics and quit. Forced to operate the camera himself, Maclaine could no longer play the alchemist. His 'solution'—fully worthy of the maker of *The End*—was to have not one but two other actors play the lead. Further, while Belson filmed Maclaine in color, Maclaine filmed his actors in black and white, later intercutting color, black-and-white, and black-and-white negative images of the 'madman.' He also cut from one actor to the other as if they were the same man, even appearing to match motions across the cuts. Of course all these techniques undercut viewer identification with the alchemist, though they're entirely appropriate to a film by and about a madman. The narrator's references to alchemy are accompanied by cuts to abstract images, scratches made directly on the film or colored powders dropped on the floor in what look like abstract expressionist patterns—images that make it clear that destructive cutting can also transform." (Fred Camper, *Chicago Reader*, 1999)

"The alchemical transformations in *The Man Who Invented Gold* stem from the magical properties of the camera—the ones initially explored by Méliès. This is especially apparent in the sequence where the colored powders are sprinkled on top of each other at the end of the film. As *The Man Who Invented Gold* comes to conclusion, the powders are then shown in reverse, so that they fly up and out of the frame. The colored powders are the madman's ingredients for creating gold. The association is implied very early in the film by a cut that connects the powdered substance to the narrator's statement: 'Many men have labored believing they could find the formula for gold.'" (J.J. Murphy, *Chris Maclaine: The Man Who Invented Gold*, Film Quarterly, Winter 1979-80)

Beat (1958) by Christopher Maclaine; 16mm, color, sound, 6 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative
"A celebration/pastiche of the San Francisco Beat ethos made roughly around the time the movement hit international news." (Brecht Andersch)
"As one looks at his film *Beat*, one sees more of the humor of his camera movements. People are made to walk fast and look jerky in his films, and this is intentional humor; he was not content to shoot at eight frames a second—he skip frames so that people skip ridiculously in a way that rhythmically captures their intrinsic self-centeredness. They parade, like the woman in *Beat*. No more perfect metaphor for street life in North Beach at that time could be found than the woman in who behaves as though she were free and lovely (with an umbrella—she is Gene Kelly singing in the rain). But she is like a turtle trapped in a cage, going around the four corners of an intersection. One can look at this as humorous or as unbearably horrible. If you can regard it as both delightful and horrifying, you are close to the balance that makes Maclaine an artist. To me, *Beat* evokes that era to a T—beautifully, precisely, wittily and terrifyingly." (Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End*)

Scotch Hop (1959) by Christopher Maclaine; 16mm, color, sound, 6 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative
"Maclaine's last film is an ecstatic celebration of his Scottish heritage." (Brecht Andersch)
"Maclaine went to a Scottish heritage festival outside of San Francisco and films pipers, dancers, log-throwers, and the like—all kilted and tartan-ed up, argyle socks pulled high and proud. On a certain level my attraction to *Scotch Hop* is pre-artistic, irrational, resolutely personal. I can't easily resist the totemic pleasures of Celtic, especially Scottish, signs and allusions; my last name is Scottish, and though my heritage is probably no more Scottish than it is any number of Northern European nationalities (Irish, Norwegian, French, etc.) I 'feel it.' Or at least I think I do. The Powell-Pressburger

masterpiece *I Know Where I'm Going!* is for me essentially a dramatic articulation of my 'more civilized' ancestors or cousins drawing close to the mythic primordial north, with its (and 'my') inhabitants, that much closer to Ultima Thula (of course there's another Powell project: *The Edge of the World*, '37) and the sunless winters. The union of civilization and its wilder verso (though not its opposite), the dialogue brought to a conclusion through action, an event, a meeting.

"But 'totemic pleasures' are simply the tip of the iceberg for *Scotch Hop*, and the reason why is the union of 'civilization' (or control) and 'pre'- or 'sub'-civilization (or carnival). Maclaine expresses this union through disjunction—here is a great cine-poet of mismatched cuts, 'messy' editing, 'pointless' camera angles who ultimately proves through these his deftness with the medium. The bagpipes (white sun highlights on black pipes: a beautiful saturated non-color expression amidst the reds and greens and yellows) provide a music that drapes the entire film, and provides it with an aural skeleton. Dancers move in time to the music, but Maclaine has *sped up* or *slowed down* the film just so, so that they only appear to be moving in time to the pipes. A lie before our very eyes, but true, because Maclaine as well as any other cineaste I know has arrived at that fundamental truth of the film-image: the expression of its materiality, the full admittance of its illusory potential and properties, and the exercise of the medium's powers in total comfort with this 'confession.' Meaning: there are all sorts of tricks and devices and techniques that Maclaine uses in this film, in all his films, but they have moved beyond being tricks or anything else, except their own pure expression. Slow motion or fast motion, the *function* is above all to operate openly as itself, in time to music. No longer tricks, because they don't have to be disguised as anything, *justified* as anything, other than themselves. Maclaine is true to his materials and his tools, and in this truth to the celluloid and emulsion, light and shadow and color amidst the trace of five dozen cuts (or whatever), projects outward, revels, in a way that conventional filmmaking standards tend to shore up, suture, and direct our gaze away from…

"Stan Brakhage [in *Film at Wit's End*] writes of Maclaine's destructive behavior, his addictions and his wretchedness--but also his passion, his fleeting moments of happiness, the fleeting moments in which he'd inspire happiness in others. About *Scotch Hop* he praises the rhythmic properties of the film, as a 'pure masterpiece':

"*Maclaine did not accomplish the exquisite rhythmic sense of* Scotch Hop *by sitting down and figuring dry tables of numbers and rhythms or studying the formalities of composition and rhythm. Others may talk of the technical details of rhythm--the methods to attain it, its analysis and explanations--but they would not be able to make such a masterpiece as* Scotch Hop. *Chris Maclaine was able to accomplish what he did with this film because he loved what he was filming. He had his day—perhaps only one such day in his whole miserable life. He had a camera with him and he had worked with it for years, and he knew how to operate it so that it did not interfere with him. He danced with it.*

"Seeing *Scotch Hop* most recently, I was reduced to tears within moments (the film is only a few minutes long) and I was overwhelmed by this expression of affection and openness by a filmmaker, a person, eventually torn apart by his enthusiasms, his manic fears and passions. He was never to make another film again, never to turn his camera on another subject, never to edit strips of film into another expression of his profoundly consumptive love. No more moments where filmic 'truth and lie' fall into synthetic embrace. With Maclaine, as with so much (all?) great artistic activity, we are sooner or later, at one time or another, humbled and strengthened simultaneously, unable to pull apart the articulation from the matter being articulated, wherein the film is a performative utterance which constantly projects into time, space, and mind the indestructible first-last moments of its utterance ... where filming & screening are really one and the same, parts of the *same activity*, whose deepest individualisms will still be ultimately, ideally, bridges within social reality, among all people." (Zach Campbell, *Elusive Lucidity*, 2006)

also included on this program:
untitled footage of Christopher Maclaine (1957) by Dion Vigne; 16mm screened as video, b&w, silent, 4 minutes, video from total mobile HOME