

AUSTRIAN ANIMATION AND THE FINE ARTS

Maureen Furniss

California Institute of the Arts, Valencia. USA.

La Dra. Maureen Furniss es historiadora en animación. Es editora fundadora del *Animation Journal* y autora de *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* y *Chuck Jones: Conversations*, y está finalizando su trabajo en un libro sobre la producción de animación experimental. Su tesis doctoral, *Asuntos del Espíritu: Un estudio sobre la animación abstracta*, fue completada en la Universidad del Sur de California USC. Es miembro fundador y actualmente presidente de la Sociedad para Estudios de la Animación, y ha recibido un premio por sus contribuciones al campo de la animación del capítulo hollywoodense de ASIFA.

It is commonly said that animation is now ubiquitous in our world. This is not just true in terms of cinema, where animation has always played a part in extending the vocabulary of film, but also in terms of the arts, sciences, online communication, and so many other realms. In fact, animation is one of the most important identifying elements of our postmodern culture, full of blended practice and blurred borders.

At California Institute of the Arts, where I teach in a program called “Experimental Animation,” I have found it difficult to answer questions from potential students and parents, who ask me just what that term means. The closest I can get is to say that students take an ‘experimental’ approach, pushing boundaries, looking beyond surfaces, exploring unique ways of utilizing media, and establishing a strong artistic voice. Often this journey takes students into other art practices, such as performance or music. It may take them back in time, as they rediscover and reinvent such ‘low tech’ practices such as drawing on film, optical printing, and hand processing, sometimes in combination with digital media. A fair number of our students are moving the other way, firmly into the future, inventing their own technologies and programming digital media in developing an artist/scientist duality.

For many years, animation as a concept was far from the uniting force it is today; in fact, many people would have said it was isolated from other culturally significant endeavors by virtue of being conventional, highly industrial, and simplistic in form and content. I won’t stop to question that assumption; I’ll say only, having been in the field of animation studies for twenty years, I have seen a great evolution of common

perceptions. There are many factors that contributed to the shift in outlook, but to summarize simply, the growth of animation production in the 1990s and the concurrent development of the Internet, which widely disseminates varied content, were two of the most important factors.

Nonetheless, during the early 1990s, and really even today, the ‘old guard’ may remain suspicious of the term ‘animation’. In its place, we hear ‘visual music’, ‘direct cinema’, ‘installation’ and other descriptors that somehow legitimize the practice in the minds of long-term doubters. When I have interviewed artists for my books on animation, I have sometimes been met with a surprised response: “But I’m not an animator—I’m an experimental filmmaker!” It has happened to me quite often.

Personally, I believe the skepticism and lack of understanding of the broad scope of animation comes from a combination of inter-related factors:

- a lack of published work documenting the work of innovative artists
- a lack of scholars with enough in-depth knowledge to properly contextualize animated works
- and of course a very big problem: inadequate distribution, so the innovative work essentially ‘does not exist’
- The Internet has alleviated the latter problem, but it is still no substitute for a more formal distribution system, with sales of DVDs, for example. Short films, as animations usually are, do not easily find venues outside of film festivals.

And yet, we can see that experimental animation practices of many types have flourished under whatever names they have been given. This article discusses the fine art orientation of Austrian animators representing a diversity of experimental approaches, drawing on various art practices and media in their expressive animated works—artists who may be better known for their performance pieces, painting, sculpture, music, artist books, textiles, or other forms of art, and who have built upon their fine arts backgrounds in creating innovative animation.

The close link between the art world and animation is clearly illustrated in Peter Putz’s *TV Montezuma* (1987), which takes place at a desk

within an artist's atelier. A small TV is painted in various ways while artist materials move about and animated images appear on a canvas/wall behind the desk. The number and flow of images was expanded and moved into the 'real world' in Putz's *Mont Real* (1988/1989), a 20-minute production created a year or so later, while he was an artist in residence at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. This film combines live performance with a non-stop array of animated images, accompanied by three voice tracks: a computerized sounding English track, a female French track, and a male German track. The film creates a commentary on consumption and technology, including a jab at 3D animation, which at the time was shunned in the animation community. Images in the film are animated through pixilation, drawing and stop-motion, the performer wearing a wide range of masks that are also the site of animated imagery. Thus, the human becomes a point of reference to the real, but through costuming and pixilated movement is made alien to it. Clearly, the film grows out of Putz's varied background as an artist, allowing him access to a variety of expressive images through painting, sculpture, and the performing body—which is an important aspect of animation in many ways.

In all its forms, the aesthetics of animation is closely linked to the body and performance. When animation was first created, in the early 20th century, it was common for the animator to be seen, either within a live-action sequence or merely as a 'hand' that started drawing images at beginning of the film.¹ Within commercial animation, the body of well-known actors has been used as reference for character design. The body is also widely used within more experimental production, quite often to explore subjectivity in work that is diaristic in nature, so the material human figure becomes part of a conceptual exploration. In respect to Austrian animation, Vienna Actionism of the 1960s, which often featured quite violent or disturbing acts on the body (as the site of art-making), can be an influence in terms of the artist's presence and the use of the human figure. However, it provides but one of various histories related to the figuring of an artist, or bodies in general, within animation.

Maria Lassnig is a key figure within Austrian art world, not just because of her personal accomplishments, but also because she influenced many as an educator. During the early 1940s, Lassnig studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, living in Paris and establishing herself

¹ Thank you to Thomas Renoldner for his assistance with this paper. This history is detailed in Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898-1928* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1982).

as an artist before eventually moving to New York. There, at the School of Visual Arts, she took courses that motivated her work in animation and the later development of Austria's first animation coursework. Her "Studio for Experimental Animation" was established at the Academy for Applied Arts in Vienna, where Lassnig served as Chair and taught between 1980 and 1997. In Austria, it was for a long time the only place where animation was taught, and it has been a strong force behind 'New Austrian Animation' since 1980 (probably much like Jules Engel's philosophies shaped the experimental animation program he established at Cal Arts in 1970).

Lassnig's painting centers on "observation of the physical presence of the body and what she calls bodily consciousness"; she portrays "physiological sensations: a feeling of pressure when I sit or lie down, feelings of tension and senses of spatial extent. These things are quite hard to depict."² Thus, her paintings are documents of "inner sense" rather than outer presence. Lassnig's own body and personal experience is also central in her animation. Her ten-minute film *Iris* (1971) features animated bed sheets at the beginning, framing the emergence of her live body, which becomes the subject of the majority of the film.

In contrast, the two-minute *Chairs* (1971), made the same year, is dominated by drawn animation, with the live body introduced only at the end. *Chairs* is composed of sketchily rendered images of chairs that metamorphose continually, suggesting human forms and masculine and feminine contrasts. Accompanied by an 'old time' piano score, the film recalls the energy of the earliest animators, such as Emile Cohl, who explored movement for its own sake. As one of Lassnig's first films, it is likely that for her movement was also a significant attraction: a painter setting her work in motion. At the end of the film, Lassnig appears in an oddly comical pose, wearing a gas mask. A few painted images also appear in the film. Lassnig's *Self-portrait* (1971) is a diaristic film, dealing with beauty, the difficulty of day to day living, the loss of her mother, and other life issues. This film largely focuses on images of Lassnig's own head, as she speaks the dialogue of the film. The apparent 'quality' of the images—relatively rough, simple and immediate—may belie the significance of the work, and account for the fact that Lassnig's animation did not come into distribution until relatively recently. However, her animation is consistent with the larger body of feminist production appearing internationally beginning just when Lassnig was creating her early work—focusing on domestic spaces and literally

² "Maria Lassnig," Hauser & Wirth, online at <http://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/19/maria-lassnig/biography/>.

giving an authentic face to female experience. As such, and given her great significance as an artist internationally, these works are a very important component of animation history

After a flourish of animated filmmaking in the 1970s, Lassnig returned to create *Maria Lassnig Kantate* in 1992. The film again features Lassnig's real body (actually, her upper body and head encased in a kind of 'bubble'), but in this instance incorporated into her animated images, various settings in which she sings a song about her life and accomplishments. Her appearance is humorous, in contrast to the realities she describes: domestic violence within her childhood home, explaining to her mother that she would not lead a traditional married life, betrayal by various suitors, and more. Again, the film is an important one, for in this instance it also tells a story of female experience that transcends the artist, especially in representing an alternative lifestyle and the perspective that comes with age. The humor it presents is not borne of simplicity, but rather life lessons that ring true.

The animations of Mara Mattuschka and Renata Kordon also feature the body, though to a greater extent they work with its surface and external/general rather than internal/personal experience. Through their use of the body as canvas, both artists also expand their painting practices into the time-based medium of animation. Born in Bulgaria, Mattuschka studied at the Studio for Experimental Animation, and the quality of her work as a painter has been compared with that of Lassnig³. She states, "My paintings are not intended to be self-portraits. I am just the occasion for them. I make use of myself as a model, but it could readily be any body, any face. It could be anybody. I appear as a representative for humanity."⁴ Mattuschka is known for her painting, performance art, and animation, which intersect in her film *Parasympathika* (Parasympathetic, 1985), in which her body is painted half black and half white. She explains, "Using animated imagery, I let the juices which are stimulated by the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system, flow over the body: tears, sweat, sperm, vaginal secretions."⁵ Animation

³ "Mara Mattuschka's work of high quality is in the tradition of the best figurative painterly tradition such as that of Maria Lassnig, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, to name but a few, which she sets forth with a formulation appropriate to today." Dr. Andrea Domesle (December 2007), in Kontakt about Mara Mattuschka, Galerie Knoll, online at http://www.kontakt.erstegroup.net/events/2008-01_Knoll+Galerie_Mara+Mattuschka/en

⁴ Mara Mattuschka, "Extracts of an interview with Elisabeth Klocker, unpublished November 2007," in Kontakt, *Mara Mattuschka*, online at http://www.kontakt.erstegroup.net/events/2008-01_Knoll+Galerie_Mara+Mattuschka/en.

⁵ "Parasympathika" description, VIS Vienna Independent Shorts (2009), online at <http://viennashorts.com/en/service/artists-database/artists-m/mara-mattuschka.html>.

through pixilation, which causes distortions to naturalized movement, causes her body to take on a maniacal look and develop an ecstatic energy similar to what she describes related to her painting.⁶ Her film *Kugelkopf* (Ball), subtitled “Ode to IBM,” also involves the body and its fluids. In this film, the artist’s head becomes the equivalent to a roller ball in an old IBM typewriter, with the ink being her own blood, which is forcefully rolled against a glass plate to reveal its marks. This concept is set within a reference to the most famous scene of the Salvador Dalí/Luis Buñuel film *Le Chien andalou* (The Andalusian Dog), the eye slicing. In this case, the allusions are strong enough to make the viewer cringe every time the cutting tool gets close the eye, which squeezes tight (it knows what’s coming); however, the razor trims the hair and eventually cuts the scalp, the turning point of the film.

Renate Kordon is considered part of a number of accomplished animators to come out of Vienna during the 1980s.⁷ In *Buntes Blut* (Colorful Blood, 1985), she also uses the body as a site of the animated work, in a commentary on the adornment of women and the cult of beauty, more specifically in the use of makeup.⁸ The body is framed so only parts of it show, as though they were ‘cuts’ of meat, and painted in various patterns. When pixilated, the body movements suggest pain or struggle (maybe writhing from being electrically shocked), creating a violence that is psychological and therefore quite powerful. The film opens and closes with a finger that dabbles in paint, suggesting the complicity of the painted person in the process; it also recalls the ‘hand of the artist’ technique so common to early animation, where the animator’s own hand linked him to the content of the film, as the magician behind the magic of the animated, painted figures.

Many fine artists are attracted to animation because of this magical quality: they wish to manipulate live movement (as in the pixilated figures discussed already) or set their still images in motion. Figures that move through animation appear to be endowed with life, making them

6 “I don’t know if you know it – Painting is psychoactive, ecstatic. I often cry and laugh when painting - I hope that at least a part of these emotions materialises on the canvas. Or that they are transformed into kinetic energy, so that the paintings begin to float of their own accord!” Mattuschka, “Extracts of an interview with Elisabeth Klocker.

7 Others include Linda Christanell, Gustav Deutsch, Norbert Gmeindl, Renate Kordon, Wolfgang Lehner, Bady Minck, Bärbel Neubauer, Lisl Ponger, Johannes Rosenberger and Arnold Schicker. Mark Webber, “Counting the Waves: A Summary of Activity,” *Senses of Cinema*, online at http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/counting_the_waves.html.

8 “As She Likes It: Austrian Short Films by Women (17 June 1993)”. BAM/PFA Film Programs: Alternative Visions, online at <http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/film/FN9906>.

‘real’ to us even if they are abstractions or intangible images we cannot identify from our day-to-day existence. This ability makes animation the prime means of exploring dream states and the subconscious, and conceptual issues more generally. A series of films by Martin Anibas illustrates this ability quite well. In one of his first animated films, *60 Sekunden* (1989), Anibas compiles literally sixty ‘seconds’ of images: one-second sequences drawn directly on film, edited together to construct its total one-minute running time. These images range from abstract to figurative, and some sequences are linked through color and design to the next in the sequence. A strong percussion beat in threes connects the short segments, which race by but are nonetheless perceived. Two years later, the images of his films *am land* (In the Country, 1991) and *spinning bild 14* (Spinning Scene 14, 1991) move at a similarly rapid pace, but are connected via metamorphosis. The rapidly moving black and white ink drawings of *am land* intermittently suggest open flatlands and mountains, as well as human forms, while the crayon on paper *spinning bild 14* is restrained and contemplative, with more abstraction and grain in the image, and just the suggestion of a human form (its distributor describes it as “an assembly of reflections with no beginning and no end.”).⁹ One of Anibas’s last films, *Pique-nique* (2002) is created with full color, and constant, semi-cycling movement. Forms in this film are suggested in the way of a Rorschach test of inkblots, and the viewer drifts in and out of states of recognition. In this way, the painter is allowed to take the viewer into a state of consciousness that is semi-structured, allowing free association and a feeling of familiarity with images that are nonetheless not fixed or tangible.

Thomas Steiner’s animation deals with memory and perception as well, but sometimes using a different structuring principle. Anibas’s drawn and painted images are linked in continual metamorphosis, in what might be called linear structure, which creates its own sense of unity and accord, albeit in a relatively flattened space. In contrast, Steiner’s work is more often structured to depict energy that borders on chaos, exploring space more deeply. Ironically, he does so by using still photographic images, which are combined with painted surfaces and incorporated into an energetic viewing context—converting a documentary approach into a conceptual perceptual experience. This is well illustrated in *Zocalo* (1997), in which he layers photographs from his travels in Mexico with painted images.

⁹ “Spinning Scene 14,” SixPackFilm, online at <http://www.sixpackfilm.com/catalogue.php?oid=561&lang=en>.

Many artists find that animation becomes a testing ground for their art practices, as they expand their applications of painting, photography, performance art, or other fine arts they engage in. Tone Fink, for example, explores texture in media ranging from cut paper to scored clay and small objects in his short *Gepunktet* (1992) and a Falter advertisement (ca. 1996). Working as a fine artist in such varied media as paper (including drawings, skins, masks, clothes, objects, and books), painting, films, and performances, his experimental designs sometime become the subjects of other works of art.¹⁰ Much of his artwork is playful in nature, as when he displays various unusual sexual encounters in his film *Aus der Luft gegriffen* (1983), which features oddly imaginative drawings and cutout figures, or *Katjubato* (1984), a feature-length film that includes images of his 'family life' and art pieces he has designed, among other things. The film mixes live performance with animated sections that sometimes serve as test versions for objects he also creates. Fink was born in Vorarlberg, a small part of Austria located between Tyrol and Switzerland that is culturally isolated within the country. In *Katjubato*, he includes interviews with some eccentric people from his region, speaking in their own dialect, which most other people in Austria cannot understand. This material defines Fink as an 'outsider' to mainstream culture, which actually can be helpful when investigating the conventions that are often taken for granted as natural components of society—or of art making, as part of that complex.

At times experimentation delves into the most fundamental aspects of communication and language, and visual artists find themselves re-conceptualizing communication methods, identifying conventional patterns that structure language and attempting to expand the possibilities. In *Mao Tse Tung Band 2* (2001), written language provides Heimo Wallner's base for experimentation. For the film, he drew figures on pages from the book, *The Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung, Volume 2*—and these images he used in 15 loops, forming layers that become more and more dense as the film progresses. The film was shown as part of an installation that included related images. As a gallery description explains, the artist "manipulates body parts, actions, and expressions to create what he refers to as 'a vocabulary of emotions.'" The images serve as symbols for words representing a compendium of life's experiences. Body language becomes a means for expressing the emotions that derive from human interaction and individual struggle

¹⁰ Fink's patterns also have been successfully translated into high fashion textile designs by Josef Otten. "Tone Fink," MAK Textiles Study Collection online at http://www.mak.at/mysql/ausstellungen_show_page.php?a_id=736&lang=en.

or achievement.”¹¹ Wallner’s drawings have appeared as large silkscreen print wall installations, referred to as ‘wallpaper’ projects. Placed in a grid structure, the “compositions invite the viewer to search for narrative connections between events unfolding in each of the tiles,” which collectively can be compared to the ‘automatic’ works of the early Surrealists.¹²

Though each of the artists discussed here can be described as an animator, each defines the process of animation quite differently, drawing on a range of fine art approaches. Quite often animation is described by, on the one hand, conventions that have become established through industrial animation forms (short cartoons and popular features), or on the other, through notions of what ‘avant garde’ really means. The individuals discussed here sit in the middle, combining approaches, experimenting with processes, and further developing their artistic voices through this time based art, which is finding its way into every aspect of life, including the expressions of artists of all types.

¹¹ Lynne Shumow, “Heimo Wallner in Limbo,” Haggerty Museum of Art: Past Exhibitions, online at <http://www.marquette.edu/haggerty/exhibitions/current/wallner.html>.

¹² “Heimo Wallner,” LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies, online at <http://arts.columbia.edu/neiman/Wallner/>.