# DIDACTIC EPHEMERA

Some thoughts on my collection of books recently donated to the Prelinger Museum in San Francisco. George Griffin, 1/12.

For about 20 years, from the mid 70s to mid 90s, I collected out of print "how-to" books. Browsing through used bookstores, by now a waning retail form due to the internet market, I would home in on the art, photo, movie, craft sections where there would invariably be musty educational books for amateurs. They taught you how to do artistic projects just like the professionals, especially techniques leading to a commercial career. The essential spirit of this literature was the self-improvement ethos, the typically American, pragmatic ideal, as embodied in the public school and library systems. And it reflected a persistent aspiration toward democratic classlessness, Thoreauvian self-reliance. Or so it seemed to me then.

As a wannabe animator I initially searched for books dealing with any aspect of this kind of filmmaking. There were only two, which I have somehow lost: Preston Blair's "Animation," the large format Walter Foster cheapie that contained a wealth of cartoon tips and the modest Kodak pamphlet, "Basic Animation and Titling," containing diagrams and photos of camera stand construction which helped me to build my first rig. When I found an apprentice job at a commercial cartoon studio where I met an older generation of animators and began to consider the history of this art, I discovered an interesting tradition in the field. From its earliest days there has been a tendency toward revealing technique: from Emile Cohl's and Max Fleischer's "hand of the artist" to Winsor McCay's quick sketch routines (admittedly, contrived conceits). Even Disney presented behind-the-scenes segments on his TV programs. And there was also the tradition of skills generously passed from experienced animator to assistant to apprentice. Unlike fine art, there was no school, no textbook, just on-the-job training.
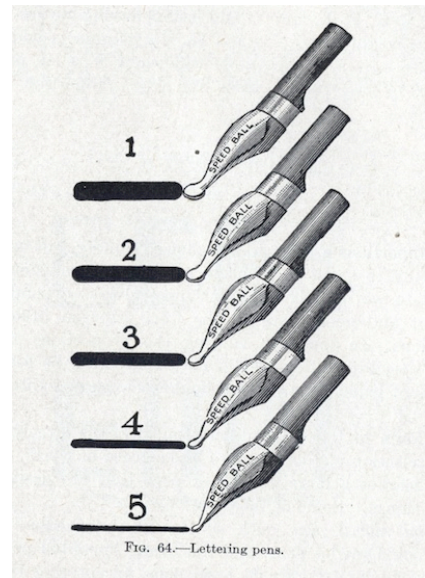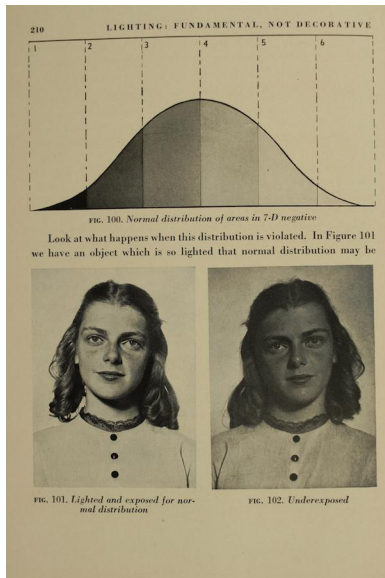
So, in retrospect, I was driven to search for books which didn't exist, and along the way picked up many others, like a dog picking up burrs in a meadow in pursuit of an imaginary rabbit. If animation books were scarce, there were many other, old, affordable educational texts on visual arts which were related to the arcane practice I had chosen. The exception to the animation book famine is E.G. Lutz's 1920 "Animated Cartoons," part of his 5-book educational series on visual arts craft. It covers history, techniques, and technology with a straight-forward delivery, "with illustrations by

the author." I was amazed to find it in the 1970s and am gratified to see that it was recently published in facsimile.
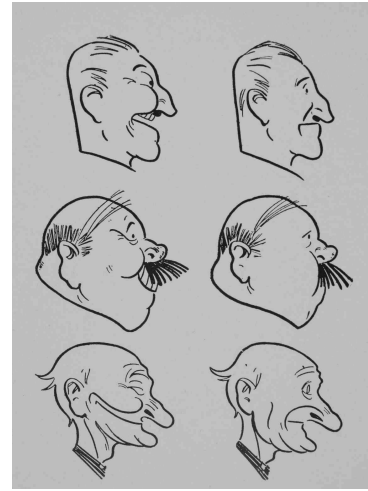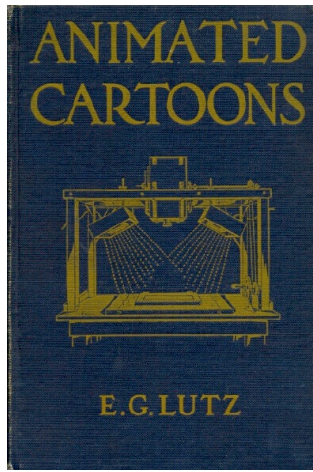
By collecting and perusing, skimming (rather than reading cover to cover) books that hovered on the periphery of animation I encountered topics that were to become critical to my practice. Photography and cinematography are just as important as drawing and design because the engine of synthetic motion is the cinematic apparatus. The tradition of the lightning sketch and chalk talk, crucial to the pioneering transition of Cohl and McCay, offered an example of the animator as performer, bringing drawings to life on stage. Books on mime, caricature, even gymnastics showed diagrams of "extremes." I also benefited from the relative absence of books on "inbetweens," specialized timing, and storytelling in animation. With no focus on the fine points of achieving smooth, coherent narratives, I could experiment with "bad animation": jerky, angular movements and limited, primitive cycles.

Ranging from late 19th century treatises on anatomy and drafting, gentlemen's photo journals, books about pictorial landscapes, studio lighting, and darkroom practice, through the enormous postwar explosion of family photography and home movies, these books comprise a portrait of the first half of the 20th century. They are a window into the generic world of middle-class men and their families — well-dressed, healthy and smiling white people engaged in wholesome recreation. They show diagrams of relationships between linear layout sketches and actual photographs, or numerous examples of the same subject rendered with a variety of lighting, drawing technique, film speed, aperture, media, and point of view. These books were often sponsored by companies that sold materials and equipment; or they were journals published by amateur clubs credited to a teacher, photographer, cartoonist, or illustrator, well-known in those days, who also offered a series of courses. All of these advanced the standards of acceptable styles and esthetics so the reader could grow from hobbyist to professional, not unlike the "Even You Can Become an Artist" ads on matchbook covers.

FIG. 100. *Normal distribution of areas in 7-D negative*

Look at what happens when this distribution is violated. In Figure 101 we have an object which is so lighted that normal distribution may be

FIG. 101. *Lighted and exposed for normal distribution*

FIG. 102. *Underexposed*

FIG. 64.—Lettering pens.

I was primarily interested in the books' graphic examples. Genre scenes of the ideal life: spare, linear illustrations of people demonstrating the necessary technical tasks; examples of the whole family basking in their photo-reflections; close-up technical illustrations of tools and process (e.g. how to hold a pencil, types of shading, the cornucopia of miniature cameras and accessories). The focus on process, serial variations, and the unrelenting repetition of the same evergreen genre scenes (with subtle esthetic shifts, via multiple editions of such titles as "How to Make Good Photographs") — these seemed perversely related to the devaluation of content implied by minimalism currently trending in the art world.

COLLECTING AND HOARDING

The difference between a connoisseur and a collector is based in the root *connaitre*, to be acquainted with, thus to make discriminating choices, especially in the fine arts. A collector doesn't make distinctions and tends to be a completist, hoovering up anything pertaining to the subject at hand, no matter how tasteless or superficial. At the pinnacle, according to Erwin Panofsky, is the art historian, the wordy connoisseur, constantly categorizing, scheming, and chattering about the value of the stuff. Then there's the lowly hoarder, the poor wretch who doesn't seem to have a rationale for his own aggregation; it has grown to such an extent that in effect it now owns him.

I made a conscious rule to never buy a book priced too high and not to consider them as investments. Unlike unique artworks they would never increase in value; they had to give immediate pleasure. I excluded books which dealt exclusively with art itself with little mention of technique. The engineering of animation claimed my attention; the art would follow in due course. By now animation has been accepted as an art form *sui generis* but it wasn't always so. The fundamental marriage of artist and machine long prevented acceptance of animation, as it had photography and cinema. There was an aversion to craft in critical writing, a suspicion and machinery trumped creativity to produce automatic works which lacked depth or personality, even if the design of a single hand-drawn, hand-painted frame might qualify as fine art. This paradox drew me closer to animation because of, not despite, its dependency on technology. Knowing how the cartoon assembly-line worked pushed me to sabotage it and return to basics

To be sure, I collected (and continue to be very interested in, if not collect) other kinds of books too. Almost no flipbook is too expensive, too dumb, too offensive. And there are massive, leather-bound 19th century primers, illustrated with engravings, that purport to educate the young man, no matter how lowly his birth or education, to become a gentleman by learning certain associated skills: rhetoric, penmanship, horsemanship, etiquette, bookkeeping, and quotes from classics and poetry for recitation.

A MANLY HOBBY

I also bought a few magazines devoted to the same didactic themes. Most deal with photography and home movies, with copious ads in the back pages often showing smiling cartoons to encourage purchases from manufacturers and retail outlets throughout the country. A recurring theme in the magazines is "art" photos of nude women, even in the mass market U.S. Camera, which was no doubt a major attraction for men in the 1940s and 1950s when the mainstream press was still puritanical. (Racier periodicals, like Swank and Wink, offered cheese-cake poses, quite innocent by today's standards, but too salacious to be read at home by family men.) Publications offered tastefully airbrushed, "statuesque" nudes, often accompanied by diagrams indicating lighting and camera specifications (f-stops, focal lengths, shutter speeds): pedagogical kitsch. Perhaps more shocking to the conventional male gaze were manuals from Europe, like Vivus, published in Zurich in four languages, depicting un-retouched models. Thus did the mainstream American hobbyist, Leica and lighting equipment at the ready, finally catch up with the Eakins-Muybridge school of realistic nakedness with its overlay of sober, scientific/artistic inquiry.
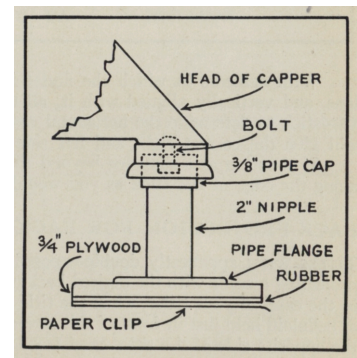
The example of our culture's bi-polar attitude toward sex and race also pervades the drawing and cartoon manuals which depict blatant stereotypes and prevailing ideals of gender, all rendered from the conventional male perspective: minorities, when they appear at all, are clowns or servants; women are generic sex objects or home-makers, men are broad-shouldered hunks with pomaded hair-dos. Speaking of attitude, even the great Richard Williams's recent manual of character animation contains a lot of silly clichés. But then maybe it's just these kinds of naïve conventions, filtered and transforming through the gauze of time, that caught my eye.

THE COLLECTION

The inventory has 9 categories (drawing, cartooning, photography, graphics, movies, animation, psychology of art, stage and other) and 9 columns (category, title, author, publisher, date,

condition, size, page count and notes). The dates range from 1883 to 2001, with 80% published before 1960. All are usable by anyone who understands that old books must be treated tenderly. They need to stay in the room where they are housed but opportunity for digital scanning should be available. Now that I no longer teach I have included virtually all of my animation textbooks, the very objects of my initial quest, which began to be published in the late 1970s, largely due to the demise of the craft guild culture of the studio system and the rise of independent, experimental animation in my own generation, which in turn influenced a pedagogical model at many schools today. They work well as introductions and often cover broad arrays of process, from classical character acting and movement to primitive, direct work with film and material.

The collection can be a source of information for a student, particularly one who wishes to delve into technique as such, or classical anatomical or basic caricature drawing, or old-timey photography/home movies. There is virtually nothing on computer generated animation. And, as with any incomplete aggregate, it is only a springboard to exploration, not a blueprint, much less a final word. Perhaps the most long-lasting benefit will be for those who find themselves wandering into an ancient tomb of lost art and attitude, who take more pleasure in the agents and intent of demonstration than the actual content of the lessons. They might stumble onto or reinvent a narrative of their own, the mark of a true auto-didact: "How-Not-To."

CATEGORIES

1. Animation is a small portion of the inventory, and is touched on as a specialty, especially in the Movie category. Most of these books deal with sequence drawing and cel animation, the dominant pre-digital technique, but a wide spectrum of experimental techniques are also covered. This has led to an erroneous assumption that there is an experimental film genre built on a set of particular techniques, like painting on film, or particular designs, usually abstraction. These works are associated with influential artists like Fischinger, McLaren, and Breer, but even they might have agreed that experimentation is only a starting point and useless if merely copied by rote. It became clear to me in the 1970s that cartoon drawing, conceptual strategies, even narrative itself, could be another branch of formal play, which is as close as one can get to a common ingredient of the experimental tendency in animation.

Preston Blair (1908-1995) wrote "Animation" in the late 1940s and it became the bible for every student who aspired be a character animator at a cartoon studio. It still is. It is still a cheap, over-size paperback series available at any art supply store. Cartoon examples were lifted and modified from Blair's work in various studios, notably MGM (under Tex Avery) and Disney where he had animated the dancing hippos in "Fantasia." His lessons include rough drawings, thorough introductions to timing, exposure sheets, even how to build a desk and the use of pegs. I wasn't put off by the corny examples (40s cutie-pie dancers, strutting chipmunks) because the advice on character advanced through body mass and timing could be applied to a wide range of action. Most famous were his examples of walking, running, etc, containing the essentials of exaggeration-codified and diagrammed with arcs of action and volumetric illusion. I bought my in the 1970s, lent out my only copy which sadly was never returned. When I bought a new edition (1994), re-titled "Cartoon Animation," it had been bowdlerized and cleaned up beyond recognition.
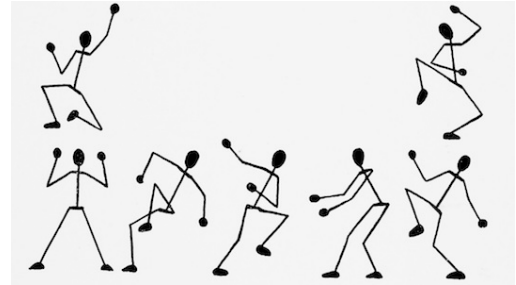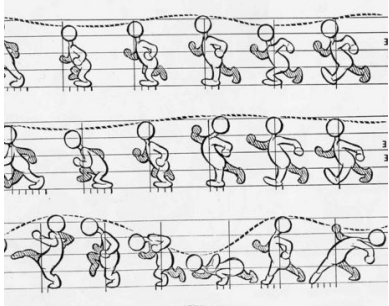
Also included are books on pantomime using stereotypical expressions and stick-figures. Gymnastics books were also illustrated with silhouettes and stick-figures of generic, uninflected poses. The anonymous, faceless examples illustrate robotic, affectless characters, quite alien to Blair's world of hyper-ventilating show-offs.

I currently use After Effects; many others use Flash. But I have yet to find a book or manual devoted to sequence drawing or character animation in depth in either app; most of them deal with "animation" as a technique of key-frame motion graphics and compositing: processes once handled by animation stands and optical printers. As a result the artists using these programs for animated cartoons have relied on experimentation, work-arounds, improvisation, and the oral tradition of apprenticeships and internet forums. Sound familiar?

2. Even smaller is the Cartoon category, though many examples of cartooning are to be found under Drawing. As a cartoonist I have collected quite a few books on specific cartoonists, along with the standard catalog and coffee table artist book. But the "How-To" genre doesn't include any famous artists. This makes them well-suited for generic conventions, just a few steps beyond the "anyone can draw" linear principles based on circles, rectangles and armatures. Examples often include gags, unfunny today, as well as two even more irritating conventions: hydrocephalic heads and inanely smiling faces. These appear to be the default cartoon style. The huge head allows ample room for telegraphing emotions as well as setting the figures apart from natural anatomy; we expect comedy first because of their deformity. The happiness factor derives from the American character ("I'm swell! How-wa-ya?"). Such early models as Lionel Feininger and Winsor McCay. And of course the naturalism of the contemporary graphic novel revolution does not appear here. Another style not to be found in the cartoon books is the idiosyncratic wiggly line (like R.O. Blechman, who was to appear later, in the 1960s). The closest these books come to a personal style would be The New Yorker school of soft line and wash.
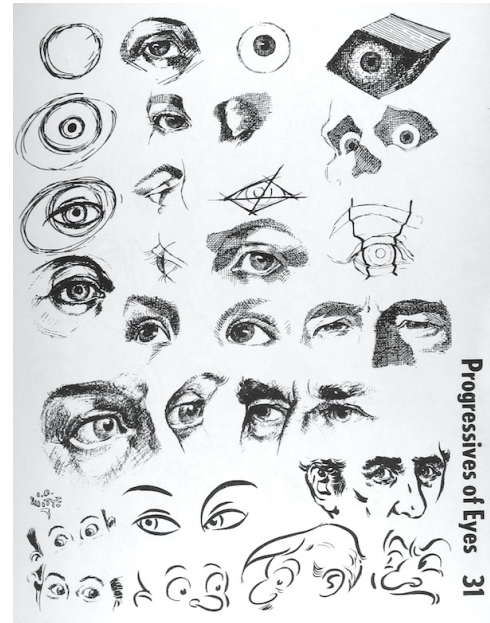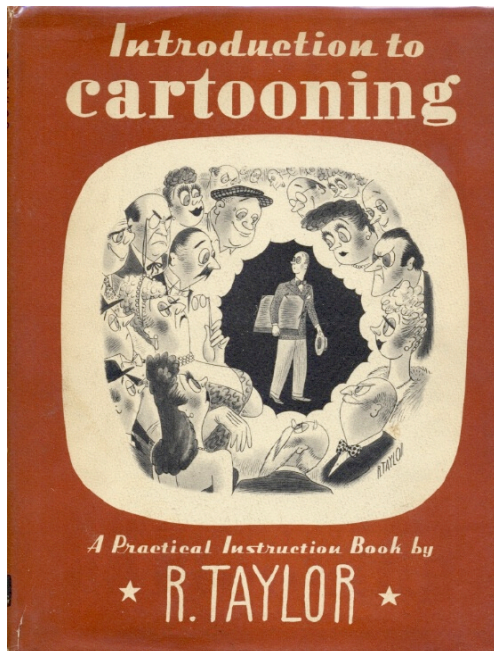
I was initially attracted to the extreme simplicity of these characters. Reduction is the first principle of drawing animation: who can hope to interpret the detail or over-worked line in motion without resorting to cut-outs, or enduring the bristling or wobbly effect of the marks seen in rapid sequence? This conventional wisdom led to a smooth, reproducible line containing character volume, while the undesirable, noisy lines or hinged cut-outs became marks of independent experiments. I have played around with many different modes of drawing, attempting to discover or invent a style sympathetic to the project. And the drawings tend to finish looking like drawings made by hand, yet without a consistent look.

The exception is my square man composed of a robotic, uniform physique: all rectangles, including the head with its face composed of 3 lines, no ears, no hair. The side view has one line for the eye, one for the mouth which can open to a slot for speech. This may have taken hold from masters such as Folon and Steinberg (who, in spite of his rich metaphorical imagination, eschewed what he called the "false bravado" of exaggeration). The context, as minimal as an unadorned horizon line, can imprint its own connotation, caption, or psychology. The mouth's single line can express a universe of emotion with each length, thickness, placement, and subtle micro-angle. Same with eyes. This style of "no style" is, and has forever been, the basis for primitive drawings of children. That makes it even now eminently suited to the imperatives of the eternal return to basics. Perhaps the most helpful book for a fledgling cartoonist is Jack Hamm's "Cartooning the Head and Figure" from 1967 which illustrates an encyclopedic taxonomy of features drawn in the same generic style but stretched and compressed into perfectly recognized facial exaggerations. Here are pages devoted not to a few examples of eyes or mouths, but scores of them, jammed together without explanation: a delectable menu from which to chose (steal).

3. Drawing is the basis of communication based on things, not action or speech. From primitive figures on cave walls or the early scribblings of young children, it is still the first conscious art-

making process. Unfortunately it is often hidden with the acquisition of sophisticated language and writing, just as cave art was forgotten until recently. Drafting proficiency is still regarded as the mark of a great painter, proof of real skill underlying the vagaries of style. Drawing is the avenue to a wide range of communication: maps, diagrams, plans, mechanical display. Thus, the category ends up a catchall, embracing freehand, life drawing, illustration, animal sketching (one by Alexander Calder!), anatomy, perspective, etc. Among my favorites are the ponderous examples of how to hold a pencil, posture, types of cross-hatching, etc. etc. etc. Drawing: A Logical Approach, Self-Expression with Art, The Natural Way to Draw are titles that announce the goal.
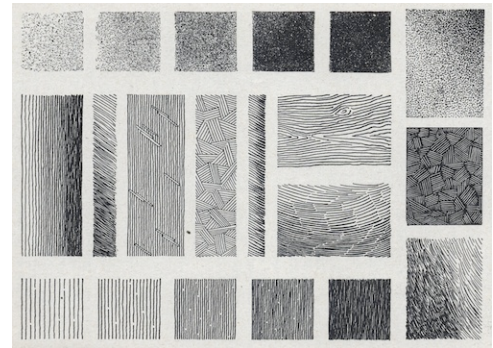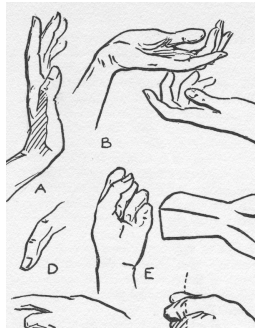

4. The category of Graphics/Technical is an even broader catchall comprising the printing trades (ink specimen books and pre-press technique), layouts and mechanicals, posters, lettering, typography. These are the basics of commercial and advertising print work even now. Though hidden from view they are embodied in digital graphic design and publishing. They intrigued me as an extension of my college experience in silk-screen printing for posters. Also, in the 1970s, while printing small editions of flipbooks, I gained an understanding of printing and binding specifications and how to communicate with the people who prepared the plates and ran the presses.

While working in commercial studios I recognized the demands for consistency, clarity, and simplicity. Practically every category of these books illustrates steps to break down a process, using line drawings in series, drawn without guile or ambiguity. They resemble storyboards, a narrative device still important in animation. Even if used to demonstrate how to make or assemble a piece of furniture or how to light a scene for a portrait, they need to be simple, logical, direct: the applied art ideal, made without pretension or personality.

5. The second largest category, Movies (not "film" or "cinematography"), refers to home movies, amateur movies, work made for love, not professional advancement. There are some titles which propose that this craft can be used for commercial ends ("Earn Money with your 8/16mm Movie Camera") but the amateur impulse dominates; the subject matter is assumed to be unexceptional familial affairs like birthdays, weddings and kids playing. Film techniques from the feature film industry are simplified. When these books were published, "the pictures" meant movies that opened each week, packaged with newsreels, cartoons and shorts: perfect forms for the hobbyist to copy at home. These books, in addition to shooting, editing, story-telling, titles, often contain a chapter on stop-motion (time-lapse, puppets, titles, special effects).

The "Basic Titling and Animation" pamphlet contained concise photos and diagrams for processes and, best of all, diagrams for building an animation stand with easily obtainable material. Of course the camera example is a Kodak Cine-Special, but I mounted a 16mm Bolex on aluminum tracks bolted to the wall with plywood levels below. By 1969, after a year of frustration I was ready with the aid of this small pamphlet to start shooting both drawings and objects. Unlike other studio-based artists (and following the example of artists like Breer and Vanderbeek) I had built and owned the means of production and could experiment, immune to the strictures of commerce or censorship.

Gadgets and tricks are recurring themes in movie books. Assuming the artist has a few power tools, a vise, and perhaps a backlog of Popular Mechanics magazines, all the necessary equipment, short of the camera itself, can be cobbled together. Think of gerry-rigged or jury-rigged, thrown together, kludged, finessed, make-shift, improvised, personalized.
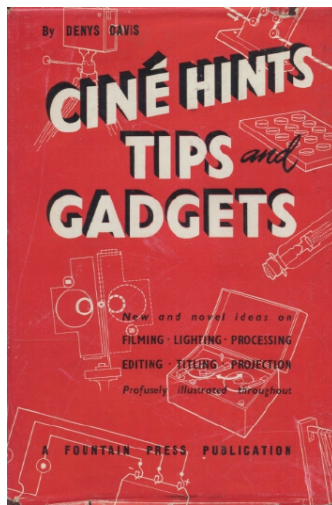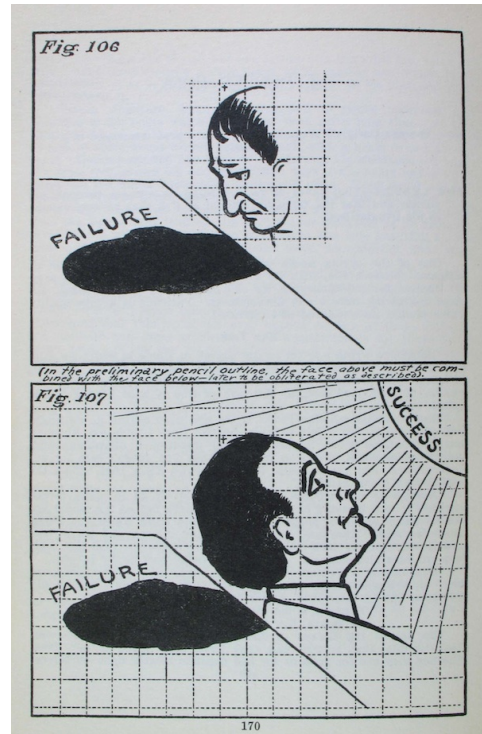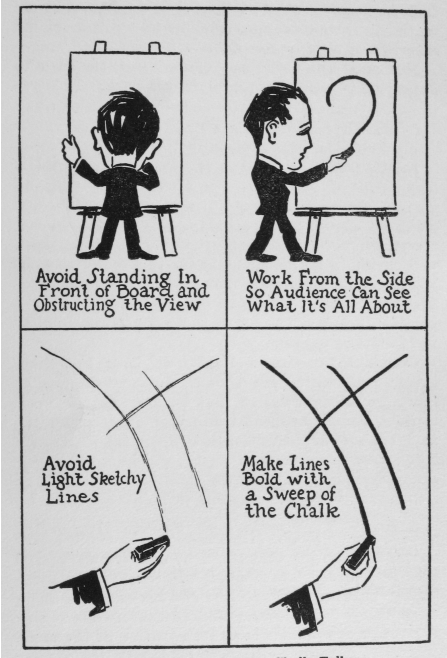

This enterprising, mechanical spirit was embraced by home-movie hobbyists and avant-garde filmmakers alike. To make abstract music and films in the late 1940s, John and James Whitney began building calculating machines based on pantographs and levers appropriated from military surplus bomb sights. The same spirit permeates all frame-by-frame projects, from Méliès to today, perhaps because it occurs under the radar, unaffected by the dominant entertainment industry and market.

6. Photography books dominate the collection. Given the present ubiquity of idiot-proof cameras, embedded in every hand-held device, encountered at every identification site, this trove of self-help material seems quaintly vestigial. But there is much to savor here. Arcane practice, large format work, primitive hands-on equipment like pin-hole cameras, darkroom process where tonal variations are combined with a wide range of support material. Even mistakes can be inspiring: the blurred, anonymous snapshot. With every advance of the digital tsunami (automatic equipment doesn't permit mistakes), there is still a cadre of contrarians who cling to the old ways, who love mistakes. These books offer glimmers of a lost popular methodology which perhaps makes them the most ephemeral.
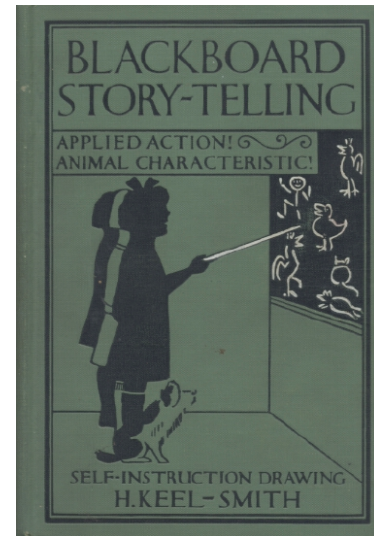
7/8. As the first animated cartoons were made by quick-sketch artists and presented as vaudeville acts, the small category for Stage presentation fills a special niche. It shows an antique world of theatrical art and reminds us that animation is a performance of inanimate matter. Here, the magic act is folded into virtuosic drawing to produce a stage illusion which has a direct hold on the audience. The subjects portray unconscious stereotypes of race and ethnicity, often as a tricky topsy-turvy or rebus, a precursor of the Droodles of Roger Price in the 1950s. The performance tradition grew out of two conflicting 19th century traditions: minstrelsy at its most raucous, vulgar extreme, and the religious self-improving Chautauqua meeting with its uplifting, moralizing chalk-talks. Thus I have included a minor category, Psychology, for books dealing with the social uses of performance and media, to interpret drawings as keys to personality development or aberrant behavior, or to instill good character, usually along Christian precepts.

16   CHALK TALK STUNTS

Avoid Standing In Front of Board and Obstructing the View

Work From the Side So Audience Can See What It's All About

Avoid Light Sketchy Lines

Make Lines Bold with a Sweep of the Chalk

Fig. 106

FAILURE

(In the preliminary pencil outline, the face, above, must be combined with the face below — later to be obliterated as described.)

Fig. 107

SUCCESS

FAILURE

170

BOOKS AS MACHINES

The pages of a book are analogous to frames of a film — up to a point. Unlike a linear series, pages are accessible by thumbing, leafing, riffling, skimming. Flipping illustrated books allows you to breeze though mountains of data and stop at any point that catches your eye. Flipping can be continuous, intermittent as with a flipbook or mutoscope (a round book controlled by cranking), forward or reverse order, with freedom to linger indefinitely at any page. No matter how it's done, the book can yield its visual treasure at random without plodding line by line through a swamp of data.

The printed page is satisfying as a tactile medium. The paper can be vellum, offering a supple, velvety feeling, or coated stock for greater contrast and finer halftone detail. The resolution depends on the printing quality, but even the lowliest printed page can bear closer scrutiny than a bit-mapped file, which eventually breaks up into jagged junk. This is old hat: Nicholson Baker is but one of many who decry the steady jettisoning of books and periodicals from our library shelves in favor of the Google juggernaut of the virtual volume. But, make no mistake, a future without the printed page, and by this I mean with words and/or pictures, would be grim indeed, without substance, tangent, or purchase.