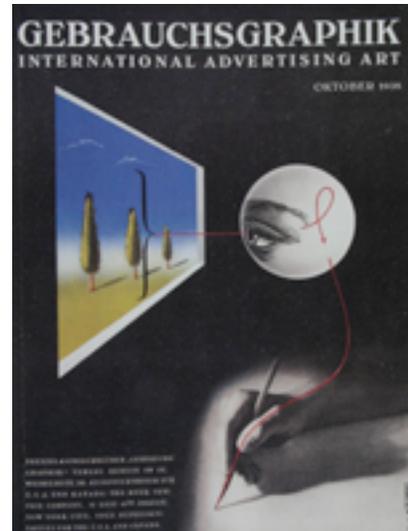


“The Anxious Pencil” *Trickraum:Spacetricks*, Suzanne Buchan and
Andres Janser, eds, Museum
Für Gestaltung, Christoph Merian Verlag, 2005.

THE ANXIOUS PENCIL



On the left you see a 1937 photograph of a hand. It holds a sharpened architectural pencil with a relaxed self assurance, balanced over a limitless white expanse. This hand may have belonged to the Bauhaus photographer, Herbert Bayer. There is a serene sense of professional order in the photograph, bordering on the spiritual: a technical apparatus composed of metal, glass, and gears has made an image of a handheld pencil, itself a maker of images, poised, ready to sketch a font, a sign or building, a human figure, or just a solitary horizontal line suggesting a boundary between earth and sky, or floor and wall, or perhaps nothing more than a squiggle. Bayer titled it “Self Portrait.”

MAKING AND MOVING PICTURES

Photography gathers light through a lens and instantaneously captures an image, a document of real space; drawing is a manual practice of marking; it invents virtual space. One is “mechanical” the other “artistic,” with all the burdens and preconceptions those words imply, yet both are bound together in symbiotic conspiracy. Animated film unites these two picture-making processes, each with its own domain of rules and materials, within the context of the cinematic apparatus, which collates and displays images. When we enter the room of animation we understand that our preconceptions about space and time will be challenged.ⁱ

To “pencil in” is to suggest a provisional state. A pencil drawing is a “draft,” an incomplete

sketch, a work-in-progress stabbing at a idea. A pencil stroke may be erased, smudged, scratched, overdrawn, reworked with limpid pentimenti: a discursive, ruminative practice, or a bold spontaneous gesture. Like speech, drawing is a combination of declarations and demurrals, components of a herky-jerky rhythm of communication.

REAL AND VIRTUAL

Architectural sketches embody a process of experimentation, trying out variations in design and point of view — a procession toward a final spatial realization, livable sculpture. Animators' rough sketches are efforts to place shapes within a dynamic temporal continuum. The two goals, indeed both practices, are not that far apart, particularly in their conclusion as performance. Real space assumes meaning when we observe, enter, and interact with it, just as animated film's virtual space and synthetic time come to life only during projection.

When Frank Lloyd Wright advised Walt Disney to use rough sketch storyboards as the design for his animation (instead of the slick inked and painted cel look perfected in the 1930's) he may have been a bit disingenuous. Even a genius knows that working plans need to be drawn and engineered with precision. Nonetheless, today we have Frank Gehry buildings designed to resemble a random, playful sketch, just as many contemporary animators have trashed illustrative conventions in search of more vertiginous spaces where figure, ground, and point of view constantly shift, where drawing itself is being redefined.

COLLAGE

Bayer considered his photograph a fine art object but also used it (see above) as an element in a collage, that 20th C. art form that grew out of the fractured and recombined picture planes of Cubism and underwent further refinement in the hands of Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy. Here the hand is assembled with a landscape painting and a crosshatched etching of an eye for the cover of an advertising magazine. The three floating elements are tied together by a vein-like red line suggesting both the biomechanics of perception and creation — the conceptual integration of diverse concepts to form a meaningful whole.

Animated film production has historically employed a kind of technical collage, or glue, by multiplying and dividing the picture plane into layers, cutting paper or painting cels to separate figure from ground. With few exceptions (like Disney's grandiose multiplane camera and the Fleischers' primitive composites of photography and cartoon) the intentions have been less innovative than expedient: to save labor while maintaining a consistent pictorial illusion.

Animators who followed the Bayer collage model (Breer, Vanderbeek, Glabicki) are often considered "abstract" not because their images are nonrepresentational, but because the relationships among the spatial elements of their designs don't support a conventional narrative. Their experiments into the mysteries of 2D collage have been expanded into real space by the

Quay Brothers, whose visionary work melds ancient theatrical devices, silhouettes, objects and deep-focus optics into a protean universe of the subconscious.

As collage reshapes pictorial space the construction of synthetic time lets animators build complex contradictions in narrative space. Frame by frame sequencing can produce a wide variety of rhythmic possibilities which affect us emotionally. And editing strategies can be linear, cyclical, random, or parallel to emphasize that fertile source of modern dislocation: simultaneity.

The poised, hand-held pencil has presided over numerous introductions to animations from the innocent vaudevillians Blackton, Cohl, and McCay, to the goofball surrealism of the Fleischers. Now, as technologies supplant each other with alarming velocity seeming to blur the distinctions between virtual and real space, our most radical tool remains the intuitive, scribbling extension of the hand. Bayer's insignia of self-reference still carries with it complex assumptions about plasticity and communication that impact much of the animation produced today.

TRICKRAUM/SPACETRICKS

To my anglophone ear this witty merger shoots both high and low by combining the two essentials of our art: the design of the frame, and the changes which occur over time, between frames, which induce the viewer to assemble a continuous, dynamic image. The ambivalence of "trick" connotes an abusive joke, a transaction with a prostitute, and the category of "special effects" into which animation is often marginalized. This neologism suggests the dimensional paradoxes at the heart of animation: a two-dimensional medium that represents both the third and fourth dimensions by an array of illusionistic techniques.

Drawing a picture, a two dimensional image, to represent three dimensional space is in itself a paradox, well tweaked in the "impossible" graphics of Escher. Conventional strategies of linear perspective, scale, shading can construct convincing illusions of depth. Even without obvious clues a figure drawn on white paper can be read as existing in existential limbo, on a desert, in a room, on a stage. Other strategies, as in FLUX, reject the illusion of depth and treat the paper surface as a flat, two dimensional plane.

Animating a picture places it within a temporal envelop where successive still images are fused paradoxically into a single moving image. By choosing the number of phases in a time signature, their length, order and direction, animators can shape a rhythmic performance of dancing lines, drunken skyscrapers, or a cat's tail that transforms into a question mark. The stationary horizon line hovering above the wily Felix indicates that he is grounded to the white area below, just as the white area above is the sky, and the line itself is the base for houses and trees. All is properly anchored until the cat eats too much, causing all assumptions about landscape and

architecture to be distorted into impossible geometries.

PICNIC

When we see a black and white still photograph of an urban scene being overrun by twitching mechanical lines, glowing like phosphorescent neon yet somehow suggesting a voracious architectural template, we are startled and curious, but we don't reject the spatial vision as wrong; it has simply become part of a common language of ambivalent, impossible space. Paul Vester's dark vision describes a dystopian urban environment inhabited by grotesque mutants who appear to be either boogying to the monotonous rhythm of the soundtrack or undergoing spastic seizures. In staccato bursts of frames we see photos of torture atrocities intermingled with bound sadomasochists. All the while encroaches a mutating, angular, cartoon blob, a kind of architectural virus, distinguished as an alien by its hard-edged graphic rendering. These serial horrors are made even more disturbing by intercutting to a quartet of chuckling potato-chip-headed men.

Vester's fidgeting life forms and saccadic editing strategy serve to sustain a mood of unrelieved urban paranoia — no picnic.

AT SEA, ON LAND, IN THE AIR

Speaking of simultaneity, consider Paul Driessen's cartoon triptych, an unhurried altar to sexual insecurity and minimalist nonsense. We see the frame divided vertically into three equal pictorial zones, which sometimes share a single horizon. The Driessen line is one of contemporary animation's unique pleasures: unbroken, uniformly thin yet gently undulating, forming bulbous protuberances and anorexic limbs defining characters of perplexing simplicity. The flat pastel palette adds a mark of elegance and emphasizes an innocent pictorial strategy of illusionist conventions, slyly indebted to Felix, Krazy, and the variations of Rube Goldberg. Interlocking narrative threads involving a slumbering oaf with a scrotal chin, a slapstick bird, and Noah's ark are illustrated in close up and deep space, toying with our expectations of scale and locale. Throughout, Our attention is directed to ambiguous vignettes of predation, personal hygiene, merriment (water-skiing elephants), weather change, and sleep, which at times link two or three zones into one picture before snapping back into exclusive universes.

In Driessen's antic mix&match universe we return to a fairy-tale vaudeville where trapped men wear stocking caps to bed and fire blunderbusses at chickens; where details are reduced to the absolute essentials so as to underline the similarities between salt shakers, bullets, and penises; where ultimately we demand and receive narrative and spatial integration before returning to a troubled sleep.

LEAFLUX

Chris Hinton's character animation always excels in its razor sharp comic timing, the art of knowing just how long our attention needs to linger in anticipation on a particular visual cue before being propelled into snapping, popping zings of illogic. With **FLUX** Hinton introduces two devolutionary regressions to a bittersweet life-cycle tale: discontinuity and flattened perspective. One requires the viewer to piece together seemingly incoherent smears and scribbles of inconsistent color into a portrait of a family bristling with needs and deep feelings for each other. The other invites us to imagine being both inside and outside the frame, where space is given form only by narrative necessity: the man grows a hand to grasp a doorknob, attached to a door, attached to a house which envelopes the man. This universe owes as much to native American maps and pictograms as to hierarchical notions of scale one finds in "outsider" and children's' art. A screaming head swells dramatically, threatening to overwhelm the picture plane; a shovel digs a diagrammatic pocket of a grave into the "ground"; and a couple's kiss produces a baby dangling on the end of an umbilical cord. All is pictured in a swarm of marks and strokes—a restless doodle of continual creation and destruction.

Caroline Leaf's work has always redefined the vast potential of direct, animated drawing (in which pictures are made, erased and remade in particulate or viscous media such as sand or oil). **ENTRE DEUX SOEURS** takes a bold leap into the cameraless animation pioneered by Lye and McLaren, drawing directly on the film plane. By etching INTO exposed (black) color stock, rather than inking ONTO clear film she creates lines and chromatic chiaroscuro from the layers of color pigment imbedded in the medium. Each frame is redrawn to create the pictorial space giving it a dynamic, oceanic feeling, particularly when stretching the limits of the medium through animated drawing to imply a sense of depth. The intimacy of the drawing technique (Leaf has literally touched and manipulated the image surface without optical intervention) is reflected in the intense tale of tension and dependence between two troubled, isolated women.

F
L I F E
M A S
T A N G O
W A K I N G
B L P
C R I
T

These are examples of cinematic recycling by which live action sequences, recorded at 24 fps, are altered through duplication, collage, and/or recomposition to produce new narrative or conceptual space. They illustrate how artists have over the past 25 years broadened the definition of animation beyond drawing and puppetry by appropriating film history, reinventing film technology, treating film as a material object, and not least by enlisting the computer to re-

imagine cinematic documentation.

BLOCK PRINT is conceived as a “structural” gallery installation, a kind of laboratory experiment where sound and dramatic pacing give way to an affectless, ineluctable order. Divided into 4 chapters of recording and duplicative processes, the film documents the circumambulation of a New York City block. A climax of sorts is accomplished when a mutoscopish contraption is wheeled around the original block, page by page, frame by frame, to engineer a compressed recapitulation — a melding of actual and virtual space. The film records the step by step creation of a flipbook of itself, as if to demonstrate that mediated observation is its own reward.

Rybczynski’s 1982 Oscar winner presents a plain, empty apartment room which becomes the stage for multiple human users who have been shot in real time and matted into the background through successive optical printing stages. The result is a complex dance of quotidian urban behavior (sleeping, sitting, eating, entering, leaving) by people who seem to be both inhabiting the space but also preternaturally detached from it and each other. Extending Zbig’s earlier multiple frame experiments in simultaneous action, **TANGO** constructs an astonishing *raum* of layered and synchronized motion whose virtuosity yet serves as a bittersweet comment on the human condition.

WAKING LIFE takes video footage of actors engaged in quirky, philosophical conversations and processes it through proprietary software to separate, colorize, flatten, and recompose pictorial elements. Instead of traditional rotoscoping which employs the intervention of a “Bayer Hand” to limn the contours of sequence photography (as in the “Lucy in the Sky” sequence of *THE YELLOW SUBMARINE*) Sabiston’s team of digital artists reduces the photographic values into compressed zones of color and intensity allowing some to continue along their established arcs of naturalistic motions while wrangling others into cartoony abstraction. The result is not what we traditionally mean by “animation” by constructing or re-sequencing time, but more a recomposition of space into a collage of floating image tectonics.

With **FAST FILM**, an awesome dream world of Hollywood clichés (the chase, the love interest, the transportation saga, the duel) is reconstructed by color copying each frame, then cutting, sawing or ripping to isolate and recombine significant detail. The result is a hilarious pastiche of cinematic drama, where the original intent of a celluloid fantasy is subverted and composted to create a crumbling, materialist concoction of raging wood pulp, where the art of seamless continuity (lighting, makeup, artifice) is highjacked by Post-Post-Modern vandals intent on revealing the violent, militaristic depths of the American psyche.

HOTEL ART

Three films take for their subject the role of the artist in a confusing contemporary world and if I didn’t know better I would be tempted to make simplistic connections to the nationality of their

respective authors: Estonia, a subjugated Baltic republic recently struggling with its emerging national identity; USA, home of untrammelled individualism, identity politics, and psychotherapy; Switzerland, the clockwork utopia of Olympian perfectionism.

HOTEL E

Pärn's allegory begins in a Platonic Cave of self-delusion, setting the stage for a quest for cultural truth as contained in two rooms of hyper-contradiction representing East and West. One is a scratchy, gray bureaucracy of tiny paranoid lunatics taking tea while frantically struggling to dodge a sweep-second scythe or avoid being consumed by a swarm of furies. The other is a pastel *soirée* of rotoscoped Peter Maxish consumers, idling away in stoned self-indulgence. One room assaults with horrid angular secrets, screeching at an impossible tempo; the other flattens space into an anemic slo-mo kaleidoscope. Take your pick: nasty, crippling intrigue, or stupid, soporific hedonism.

This rather stark contrast is tinged with sardonic repetitions, disastrous cross-cultural encounters, and Pärn's own arcane symbolism: purloined letters ("A," both serif and sans), the fly in the eye/ointment, predatory women, and the most subversive use of the EU supranational anthem, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," since Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*.

ASPARAGUS

Suzan Pitt conjures up a distinctive, passionate, hushed vacuum of sexual and artistic metaphor as we follow a mysterious woman on a journey from intimate toilette, to a longing gaze out her curtained window to a hallucinatory garden of totemic flora, to the theatrical projections of her visions to the amazement of a vast audience. That the (faceless) protagonist receives her glittering inspiration while performing oral sex on an asparagus stalk only points to the inadequacy of language to describe what is essentially a feminist dream of ruthless self-control. Her world is a baroque artifice of familiar items, lovingly shaded in pencil and watercolor, layered into impossibly deep space. The stage contains archaic spatial illusion machines for clouds and rippling waves. Yet when the artist opens her bag of tricks, out springs a swarm of translucent marvels, so real that they hover and dance in a magical space just over the heads of the grasping audience. Pitt skillfully folds multiplane cartooning, tabletop sets with puppets, and sophisticated bi-packing optical effects, into a *tour de force* rendering of a performance space as dream.

FUGUE

We see Schwizgebel's artist from the rear, sitting alone, pencil poised, gazing out an open door to a distant alpine view. Then begins a delirious cascade of strokes and smears describing a contrapuntal song of memory, reflection, communication, and loneliness. The constantly roving, overlapping point of view catapults the eye through arcs of perception, catching glimpses of a spiraling staircase, a child on a swing, a woman reading a postcard, scudding clouds — all

emphasizing a moodscape of departure and loss yet, at the end, the hope of communication as the artist is re-seen from the front with pencil poised to write or draw his message to a faraway family. Schizgebel's signature brushwork is scaled to invite the viewer into both the image and the medium, intimately shifting between the abstraction of gesture to the specificity of figurative representation. The hypnotic symmetry of the animation, offering mirrors and inversions, acts to fold the viewer into the ideas of intimacy and distance, and offers a fundamental calm at its resolution.

George Griffin NYC 2005

List of films discussed:

PICNIC, Paul Vester

ON LAND, AT SEA AND IN THE AIR, Paul Driessen

ENTRE DEUX SOEURS, Caroline Leaf

ASPARAGUS, Suzan Pitt

WAKING LIFE, Bob Sabiston

BLOCK PRINT, George Griffin

TANGO, Zbigniew Rybczynski

FAST FILM, Vigil Widrich

FLUX, Chris Hinton

HOTEL E, Priit Pärn

FUGUE, Georges Schwizgebel

“Self Portrait” photo by Herbert Bayer as reproduced on cover of *herbert bayer, the complete work*, arthur a. cohen. the mit press, cambridge, massachusetts, 1984.

front cover of “Gebrauchsgtapik” (Practical Graphics), 1938, designed by Herbert Bayer. Reproduced in *BAUHAUS*, Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend, eds. Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, Cologne, 1999. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn (BHA/Atelier Schneider)

ⁱ The psychologist James Gibson has posited essential distinctions between “chirographs”, images made by hand and photographs (amended by others as “technigraphs”), images made by machines such as cameras, computers, which depend on “global” manipulation (pushing a button). An interesting discussion on these distinctions can be found in the writing of Göran Sonesson, viz. http://www.arthist.lu.se/kultsem/sonesson/CV_gs.html