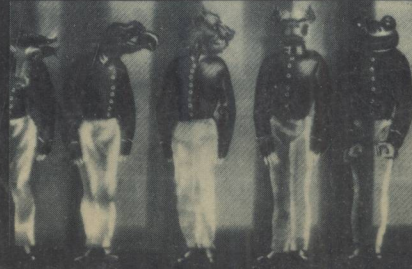
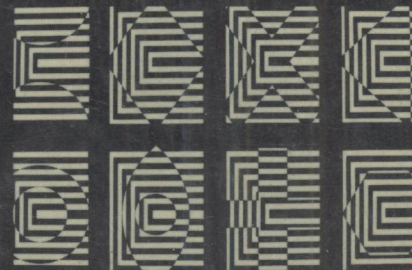


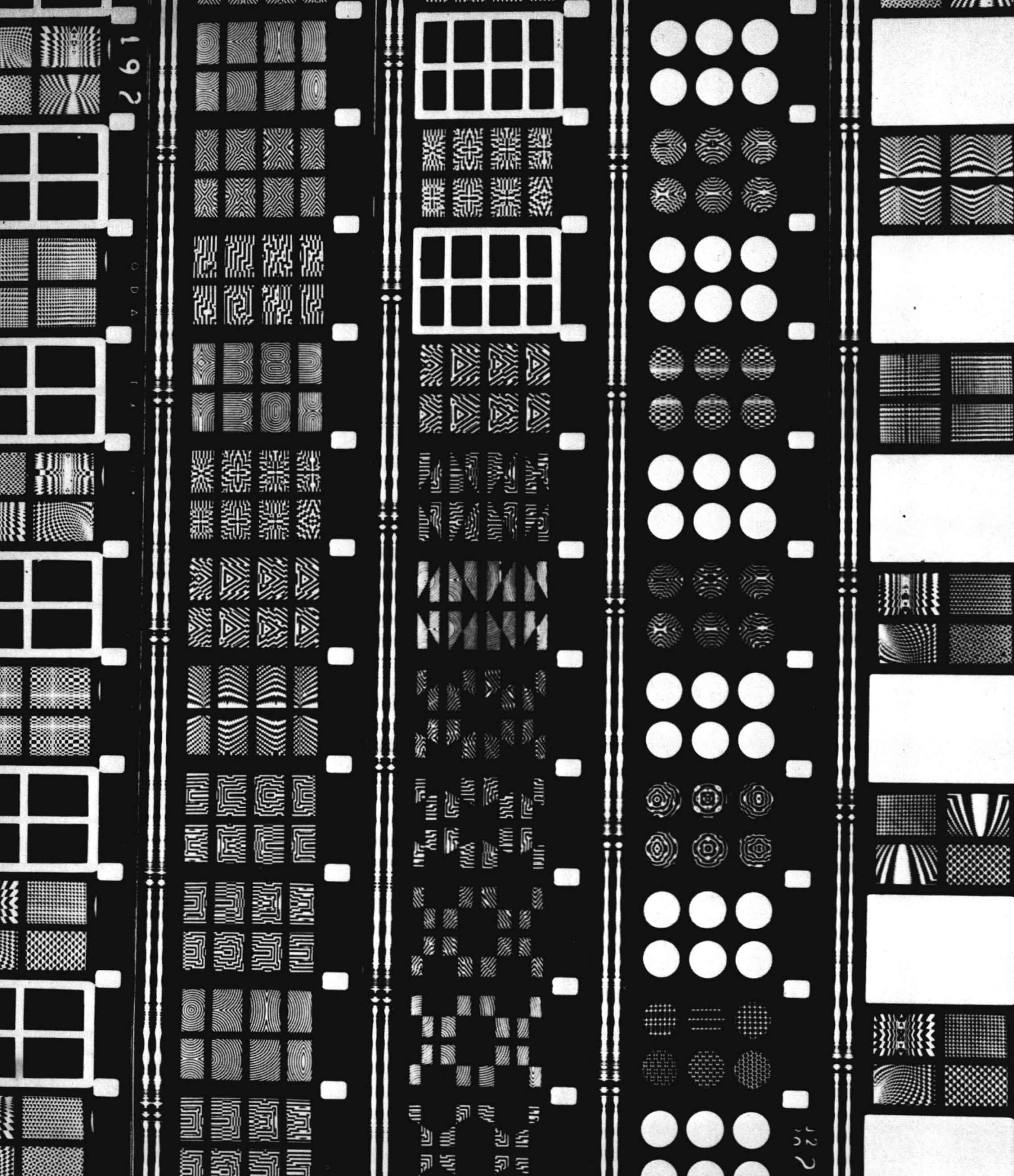
EXPERIMENTAL ANIMATION

AN ILLUSTRATED ANTHOLOGY

By Robert Russett And Cecile Starr



EXPERIMENTAL ANIMATION



Experimental Animation

An Illustrated Anthology

Robert Russett and Cecile Starr



VAN NOSTRAND REINHOLD COMPANY
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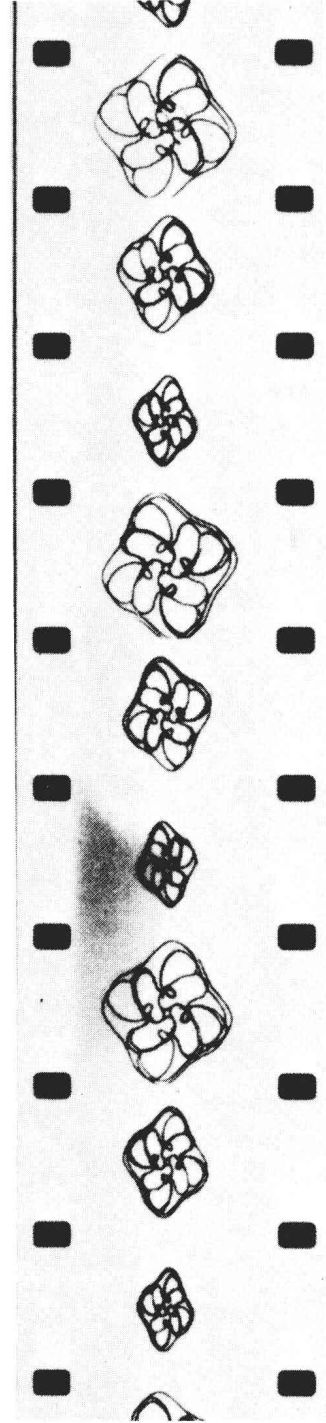
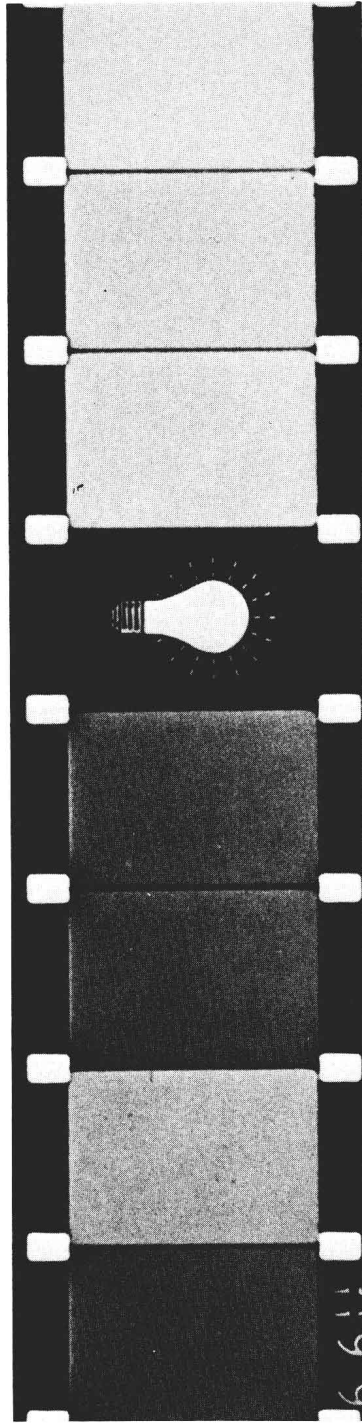
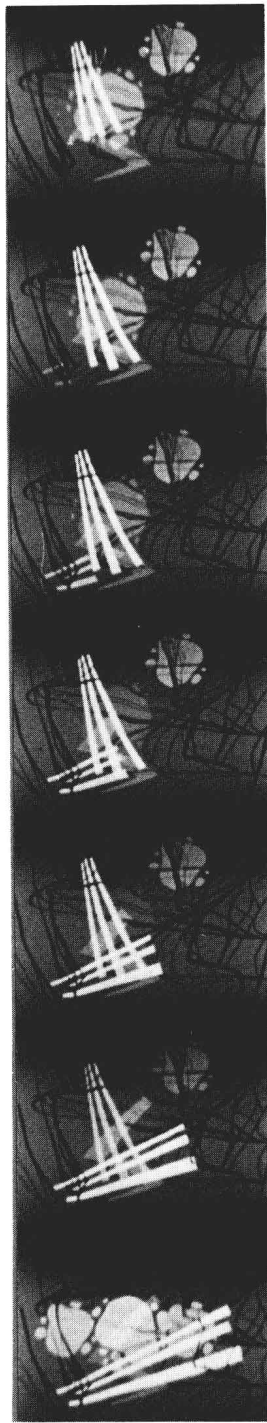
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From left to right: Strips from the work of Viking Eggeling in the 1920s, Dwinell Grant in the 1940s, Paul Sharits in the 1960s, and Stan VanDerBeek in the 1970s.

Preface

This book originated with Robert Russett, who, as an independent animator and artist, wanted to examine in detail the significant artistic and technical achievements of his predecessors and contemporaries. Finding no volume of this kind, he began collecting material on those aspects of innovative animation which he felt would be most useful to himself and other animators and artists, as well as to critics, teachers, students of film, and the interested public.

The publishers suggested that Russett be joined in his undertaking by Cecile Starr, whose work as a film critic and teacher had brought her into close contact with a number of pioneer animators over several decades, and who had made film interviews with several important animators and had released a number of classic animation films in connection with her earlier book, *Discovering the Movies*. They divided the work into two main areas, Starr collecting material for the pre-1950 sections of the book, and Russett for the later periods—with some overlapping and sharing of responsibilities. Their common goal was to create a readable volume of lasting value, with the best and most informative articles, interviews, illustrations, and other source materials, to provide insights into the work of as many animators as possible, and at the same time to give a dynamic overview of this brilliant but little-known kinetic art form.

They settled on the title *Experimental Animation*, for want of a better term, as the only one broad and elastic enough to embrace the extraordinary range of cinematic works represented in the collection. Despite the obvious limitations of the word “experimental,” the editors have

used it mainly to suggest individual techniques, personal dedication, and artistic daring. A remarkable number of the films discussed in the book rise considerably above these specifications, and many clearly can be called recognized works of art. So much the better.

Traditionally, experimental animators have avoided the standard animation stand and the production-line procedures of the commercial studio. One common bond among all experimental animators is that, in varying degrees, they personalize their equipment and techniques, as does any fine artisan or craftsman. Although the film-artists included in this book are primarily concerned with animation as a form of artistic expression, they also fulfill another important need by providing others with innovative and exciting technical directions. Many of the techniques described in this book are minimal and direct; they can easily be adapted to the efforts of amateurs and young children in informal settings, and to budget-conscious students and independent filmmakers on more advanced levels. On the other hand, some animators have gone far beyond the conventional mechanisms by building complex devices or by using sophisticated computer languages, which have vast potential in the commercial field.

Although experimental animation is a unique art form with a bold and exciting tradition that dates back over fifty years, it has remained relatively isolated and undocumented within an area of filmmaking long dominated by the comic cartoon. To help balance the situation the editors decided to limit this volume to noncartoon animation. For space reasons, puppet animation was not included.

Because little has been printed on the work of the current generation of young animators, the book includes representative statements selected from their written interviews conducted especially for this volume. Translations from French and German about the work of some European pioneers have required many revisions; frequently the writings employed a figurative vocabulary whose meanings and implications were not entirely clear (and still may not be) when translated into another cultural environment after a lapse of half a century.

Dates, which are always a problem in film books, are even more so regarding experimental films, which rarely have an official release. The editors have avoided giving great importance to those who were "first" to achieve various effects or styles; they regard each film as a constellation of values, not as a winner or loser of a race in chronological time. Wherever possible, the editors have attempted to clear up often repeated inaccuracies, some of which have been perpetuated, knowingly or not, by filmmakers about themselves and their colleagues. The recently published studies on Oskar Fischinger and Viking Eggeling, though not yet the full and spirited renderings to be hoped for, point the way for other detailed studies that will surely follow.

The editors are grateful to the many filmmakers, or their families, who have loaned important documents and picture materials for inclusion in this book. While not entirely in disagreement with Len Lye, who rejects the idea of still pictures as suitable "illustrations" of his moving pictures, the editors have made a special effort to obtain the best possible picture material, and they consider it an integral part of the book. Unlike publicity stills for theatrical feature films, which are posed separately and may differ significantly from the filmed scenes they represent, the illustrations of animated films are usually exact reproductions of the material in the films, or even enlargements of actual frames and strips of film. The absence of color in this book, a serious loss, is at least par-

tially compensated for by the inclusion of an abundance of illustrations in black-and-white, carefully placed as visual comments on many of the ideas and techniques explained in the text.

Ultimately, the only way to understand and appreciate the filmmakers is to view their films again and again, as one would hear a piece of music, read a poem, or look at a painting. In evaluating the works produced in the experimental field, it should be remembered that it is not only the film-artist who is called upon to confront new materials and to struggle with the continuing redefinition of art; the same responsibility, in another sense, falls upon the viewer. In order to fully experience these complex artistic works, therefore, the viewer must be prepared to constantly develop new standards of judgment and perhaps finally even new esthetic attitudes. Experimental animation, like other serious art forms, requires in varying degrees an active and empathetic response from its audience. In a world in which we are in danger of becoming passive receivers of processed and programmed entertainment, any creative activity which enables the viewer to function as a sensitive and discerning individual should be welcomed and encouraged.

Experimental animation, which is now enjoying a kind of renaissance, may have as much in common with music and painting as with commercial animation and film. Perhaps one day these films will be marketed through art galleries and "hung" in museums; perhaps they will be collected and played on home projectors and video machines, as long-play records are now heard on hi-fi sets; perhaps programs of these films will be presented in theaters and television, as recitals and concerts now are viewed with pleasure by mass audiences. The editors hope that this book will help its readers develop new and responsive attitudes and standards of appreciation toward the challenging and ever-changing concepts and techniques of experimental animation.

Cecile Starr and Robert Russett

1/A Rising Generation of Independent Animators

Robert Russett and Cecile Starr

INTRODUCTION

The young artists whose work is represented in this section form only a small sampling of the current generation of animators who began working within the last decade. Their selection was determined by two circumstantial factors: availability of published material about their work or their responses to written questions sent them by the editors.

The backgrounds of these young animators point out the importance of having first-rate facilities and equipment made available in a congenial atmosphere. Such surroundings have been found increasingly within college and university film departments in the United States, and in Canada, most notably at the National Film Board of Canada (see Chapter 5). Some of these young animators indicate that they made their first films in high school; they thus were ready for advanced work by the time they reached college or university level. Some animators have chosen to work in techniques that are as unsophisticated as the first animated films that were made, about 70 years ago; others are experimenting in highly technological areas that require considerable equipment and expertise. Most of these young film-artists also work to some extent in painting or graphics and some have made live-action moving pictures as well as animated ones.

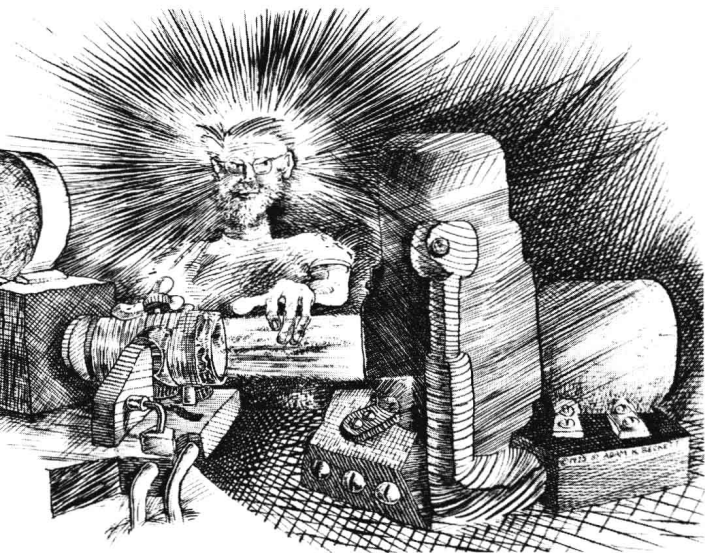
Unlike the generation of independent animators before them, they have often found audiences and some financial support, although usually only within modest terms. A number of their films, depending on individual styles and subjects, have been placed in commercial 16mm distribution and already have gained wide circulation in schools,

colleges, and public libraries. Several have been shown on educational television, or placed in theatrical distribution, with considerable recognition (including an Academy Award) but rather little financial gain. Since short films do not enhance box-office returns, they rarely make much money for their creators.

Museums and independent showcases in many large cities are showing the works of young animators more frequently these days. Through the Whitney Museum of American Art and the American Federation of Arts, both in New York City, animated films are being circulated to museums and other groups across the country in specifically organized and annotated programs. New animated films are frequently presented at film festivals here and abroad—ironically the prestigious New York Film Festival offers no compensation for the films, while a number of local groups (like the Sinking Creek Film Celebration in Tennessee and the Ann Arbor Film Festival in Michigan) offer token payments and small cash prizes as recognition and encouragement to the filmmakers.

Still, animation is not a ready source of prestige or financial gain for its creators. Their basic motivation is generally more personal—the fascination, often the compulsion, of seeing their entire creation take on life of its own, moving freely in time and space. Perhaps hundreds of young animators like those presented in this section of the book are now working on advanced levels; perhaps thousands are beginning to work as students or novices. With such growing interest in the field, future creations are impossible to imagine. And that, by definition, is the nature of experimental animation.

Adam Beckett



Adam Beckett, self-portrait in pen and ink (1975), drawn by the filmmaker for this book.

Adam Beckett was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1950. He attended Antioch College, and is currently doing graduate work at the California Institute of the Arts where he is studying animation with Jules Engel and Patrick O'Neill. As a student he has produced a number of artistically innovative animated films including *Evolution Of The Red Star* and *Flesh Flows*, which have been shown extensively in this country as well as screened abroad. Beckett, who this past year formed his own production company, Infinite Animation, Ltd., is presently in the process of completing his latest film *Life In The Atom*.

INTERVIEW WITH ADAM BECKETT

Q: How did you start making animated films?

Beckett: Throughout high school I had been drawing and painting as well as doing a little cut-out animation. Just before going off to Antioch College I saw some fantastic films done by James Gore which somehow enabled

me to make a connection between my graphic work and filmmaking. When I saw his films I thought I can do this too. So I did a film on my own at Antioch using full line animation. The drawing was done on typewriter paper and the images were held in registration with nails.

Q: As an art student at Cal Art you have made a number of outstanding films including your best known work, Evolution Of The Red Star. Exactly how many films have you made altogether?

Beckett: I have finished four films, namely *Heavy-Light*, *Evolution Of The Red Star*, *Sausage City*, and *Flesh Flows*. In addition there are two more films in the works. One is *Dear Janice* and the other is *Life In The Atom*.

Q: As a student, how has working in an educational environment affected your film production and what, specifically, do you feel schools can do to effectively develop the creative potential of student animators?

Beckett: Besides those impalpable qualities of talent and drive, otherwise known as inspiration and perspiration, there is one thing that every artist must have and that is a great deal of free and uninterrupted working time. Schools can help the student-artist in this regard by providing 24 hour access to facilities, flexible mandatory requirements, adequate living arrangements, and other similar kinds of conveniences. The teaching is probably best done by people who are professional artists themselves and who are so wrapped in their own work that they don't have time to interfere too much in the activities of students. They should be there primarily as examples of what it is to be a working artist in the field of animation. In a medium like animation, which is so dependent on technology, the best possible equipment and facilities are, of course, also extremely helpful. As far as I can see it is a matter of the most extraordinary circumstances and luck, when an individual manages to emerge from the educational system with the autonomy of spirit and knowledge needed for him to be an artist. Too much direction is probably more harmful than too little. Ideally, the school should be a place where one can develop the independence and self-confidence to make some headway against the incredible inertia that exists in the commer-

cial arena. I think we are at the beginning of a wonderful golden age of animation, now that the last nails are in the coffin of the big studios. Schools, I believe, can in the future be very important as production centers for animated films.

Q: Would you discuss the idea behind your film, Evolution Of The Red Star, and how it developed graphically?

Beckett: *Evolution Of The Red Star* was my first technically successful attempt to apply my one and only original film discovery—animation of a cycle under the camera. There are several films involving painting under the camera such as Oskar Fischinger's *Motion Painting No. One*, [see Chapter 2], and some of Norman McLaren's work [see Chapters 5 and 7], but to my knowledge this type of film has always involved the manipulation of a single image. *Evolution Of The Red Star* was made by photographing the evolution of a six-drawing cycle, or repeating image, over a five- or six-week period. During this period pen-and-ink lines were continually added to the growing formation. Once the complete image was drawn and filmed I used optical printing procedures to produce many color variations. Carl Stone did the music when the filming was complete, and the final editing of the color variations took place after his music was finished. The idea of a cycle has, needless to say, many obvious philosophical, esthetic, and scientific implications. Cycles occur in nature on all levels from the astronomical to the psychological. The filmic idea of cyclical evolution mirrors the anti-entropic process of biological evolution.



From *Evolution of the Red Star* (1973) by Adam Beckett. A unique form of cyclic animation is used.

It provides an escape from static repetition by a process of positive feedback or continual addition. Aside from all of this, it is great to be able to make nice, long, fully animated films from 6 or 12 or 48 drawings.

Q: Although Evolution Of The Red Star is a totally visual film it does, in an unconventional way, tell a story. Are you basically interested in creating non-verbal forms of narrative animation?

Beckett: I came to animation with a background in the graphic arts, and my main interest is still in the visual image itself. Although I do use a form of narration, I am basically interested in the problems of creating coherent and organic visual compositions in time.

Q: Which filmmakers, artists, or animators have most influenced your work?

Beckett: J. S. Bach, W. A. Mozart, Goya, Ingres, Rembrandt, Saul Steinberg, M. C. Escher, R. Crumb, B. Bartok, Walt Disney and company, Marcel Duchamp, Jordan Belson, Oskar Fischinger, Norman McLaren, James Gore, John Whitney Sr., Pablo Picasso, Dick Williams, Jules Engel, Robert A. Heinlein, Harry Smith, Goedle, Hokusai, and many, many others.

Q: What special attraction does animation, as a form of expression, have for you?

Beckett: It moves; it can be a one-man show or even a spectacle.

Q: What are you working on now and what are your plans regarding the future?

Beckett: I am trying to finish *Life In The Atom*, which I have been working on for nearly five years. It consists of some rather ornate animation of an attractive young couple and their activities. I am also interested in continuing my work with special effects. For example, this past year I did the main title for the 9th International Tournée of Animation. In the future, then, I plan to continue to make animated films, hopefully better ones than in the past.

(From a written interview conducted by
Robert Russett, November 1974.)

Laurent Coderre



Laurent Coderre.

Laurent Coderre was born in 1931 in Ottawa, Canada. He attended several Canadian universities and art schools, including the University of Ottawa, Ontario College of Art, Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Montreal, and the University of Montreal. During the years following his formal education he worked as an artist, designer, musician and medi-

cal illustrator. In 1960, under the auspices of Norman McLaren, he joined the National Film Board of Canada (see Chapter 5). His artistic activities at the NFBC have involved making titles, film strips, and educational films, as well as producing purely artistic forms of experimental animation. Coderre has created experimental works which have won special awards for animation at Cannes, Venice, and numerous other film festivals. Presently, under the sponsorship of the NFBC, he is preparing three new animated films, *Arabesques*, *Acrobatics*, and *Chanson*.

INTERVIEW WITH LAURENT CODERRE

...I could say that animation, being an extension of my being, does not require any equipment during the creative process, but simply a way of jotting down an idea which finds itself on the spur of the moment, during a clash of strong contrasts. To animate a dot or line, to the rhythm of our accelerated contemporary life, is perhaps life's truest mirror. What better way to reflect an explosive decade than by explosive lines or three-dimensional textures moving across the screen in a tempo of frenzy.... Coming to animation after having lived painting, music, and other artistic disciplines is like a rebirth, a renaissance...

My being in animation is pure accident, following a series of happy circumstances. It was mentioned that Norman McLaren was to give a short, concise workshop to half a dozen people. My interest in this field having been there for a long time, I joined the group. I became fascinated by the unusual unsophisticated materials which could be used to convey so much. It is then that I asked McLaren for one hundred feet of 16mm film, to see if I could animate. During a week, at nights, I shot a three-minute test, on a half-dismantled animation stand. McLaren recommended that I become part of the animation unit. So this is how I came to animation, which I consider a field of infinite discovery. *Metamorphoses* was this first test...

I was given a sponsored series to do for retarded children, so I spent some time meeting with these kids trying

to communicate and understand better their needs and their reactions. Then I made over half a dozen short films on problems to solve through their own initiative, within their limits. Some of these films were reduced to educational loops so the child could handle it himself. Problems worked on were: size relationship, color differentiation, categorization of shapes, identification of objects through metamorphosing shapes, counting, discovery of objects in their own world, and miscellaneous other problems. I was told by psychologists that these had broken a certain barrier in communication with the retarded, which helped them progress much faster because of their clarity in getting to the point in a way that talking, giving examples, or teaching could not do. Then there were complex mathematical problems for university students which were overcome in no time because of animated films. Further on, I enjoyed animating a technical film on electronic transducers for the fisheries department, to help fishermen with their catch on high seas. All of this was useful for discipline and training plus the satisfaction of knowing that they are serving some purpose.

...I have also experimented in several films (*Metamorphosis*, *Fleurs de Macadam*, *Zikkaron*) with control of shapes and forms to a simple rhythm; animating to words on a musical beat that seemed impossible; moving lines, dots, and masses to the pulse of life—all this

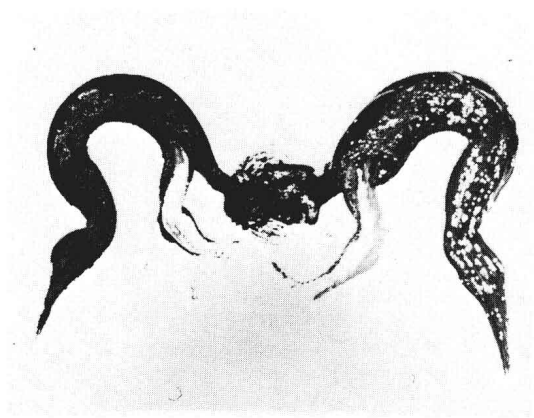
on relatively slim budgets so that I could see results quickly and learn from my mistakes, to go on to further, more precise projects. For example, in *Fleurs de Macadam*, I chose to make use of water color on cel instead of cel paint, to achieve very specific textures. While in *Zikkaron* I chose linoleum particles on black background, because to me it seemed for this film a better material to convey a certain dimension within the screen, that is, to draw and destroy the ephemeral state of things. That technique permitted me to concentrate more on content and movement.

I feel that my present films are to animation what sketches are to painting. But the unknown lies ahead....

(From a written interview conducted by Robert Russett, November 1974.)



From *Metamorphosis* (1968). Laurent Coderre's first film was made with animated paper cutouts.

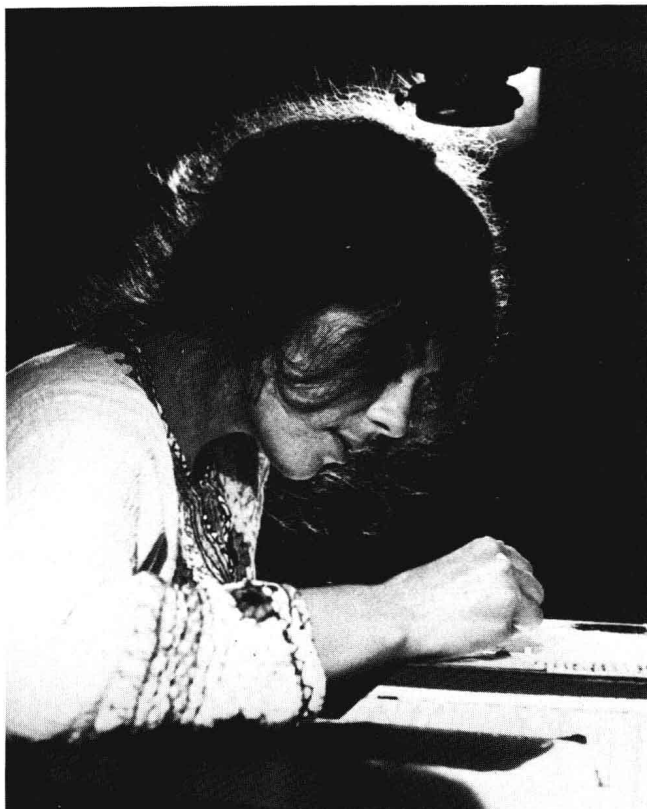


From *Les Fleurs de Macadam* (1969) by Laurent Coderre, an animated version of a popular French Canadian folksong.



From *Zikkaron* (1971) by Laurent Coderre. Small particles of linoleum were animated to create a statement about man and his environment.

Caroline Leaf



Caroline Leaf.

Caroline Leaf was born in 1946 in Seattle, Washington, and studied art at Radcliffe College in Boston. After receiving her degree in 1964 she worked as a free-lance animator for several years making and directing animated films for television. In the spring of 1972 she began to work for the French section of the animation department at the National Film Board of Canada. Leaf, whose best known works are *Sand, or Peter And The Wolf* and *Le Mariage du Hibou*, creates her organic and stylized

images by spontaneously animating textures and materials directly under the rostrum camera, without the use of prepared graphics or painted cells. Currently she is working for the English section of the NFBC, making an animated film based on a story by Mordecai Richler.

INTERVIEW WITH CAROLINE LEAF

I tell stories with my animation, and I have always worked directly under the camera, drawing, shooting it, changing the drawing, etc. To me it seems to be more alive than conventional cel animation, both to make it and to see it, for it is all made in one stage and the finished film shows my hesitations and miscalculations and flickers with fingerprints and quick strokes. . . .

My images and techniques come from the materials I use. My first film, *Sand, or Peter and the Wolf* is made with a technique I developed animating with fine beach sand. The sand is set on a piece of milk glass and underlit and manipulated with my fingers. The sand becomes black on the white glass. I found I could adequately describe a form by its silhouette. The only elements I had were black and white, figure and ground. When the options are limited, my fantasy is most creative to exploit them. I have made four films with sand and still find new things to do with it. Likewise, techniques I use, such as suggesting objects and environments with a few shapes as I need them, and then wiping them out, come from the nature of the sand. Presently I am working with colors and inks, and I handle them in the same way as the sand, smudging, wiping, using my fingers. . . .

I began to animate when I was a student at Radcliffe College. I like to control everything within my frame. I like the quiet of animation, though sometimes the length of time it takes to see a result from an idea frustrates me. I like to make things move. It is like making them alive.

I have wanted to tell stories with my films, and I used animal legends and myths, as you can tell by the titles: *Peter and the Wolf*, *Orfeo*, *How Beaver Stole Fire*, and *The Owl Who Married a Goose*, also known as *Le Mariage du Hibou*. Now I am working on more dramatic expres-

sion, dialogue, characters, and human problems. The film is tentatively called *The Street* and is an adaptation of a story by Mordecai Richler about the death of a grandmother in a poor Jewish family. Perhaps dramatic expression is not ultimately the best form for animation, but still, I do not try to do what live action can do better...

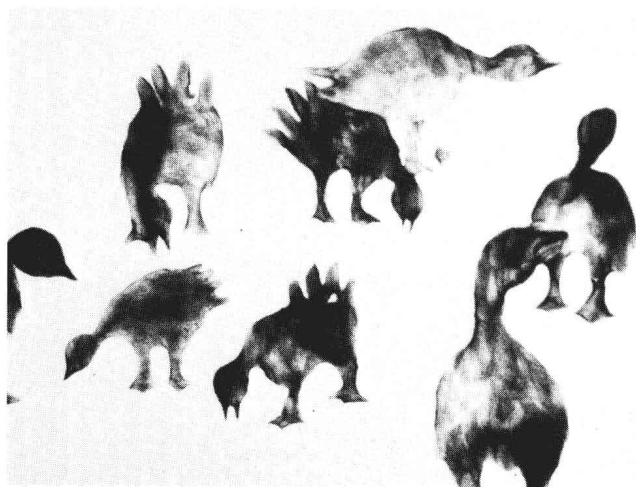
I believe every person's work is personal and therefore new. There are as many forms of expression as there are people. No one will do a thing in the same way as someone else. Therefore something new does not mean a world-shattering breakthrough of technique or idea. I find that when I am searching for new techniques, new materials to animate, I am usually barren of content ideas, whereas a content idea will take the shapes of the techniques I have at hand...

The strongest influence on me is from literature rather than film. Kafka, Genêt, Ionesco, Beckett, have affected me most with the depths of their visions and world views, and ways of breaking up time to tell a story...

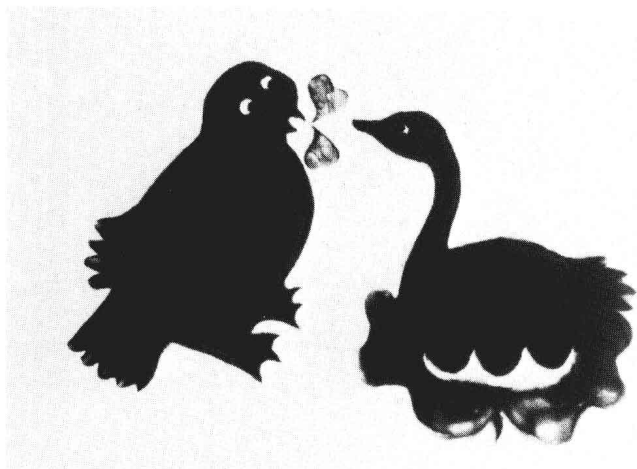
(From a written interview conducted by Robert Russett, November 1974.)



From *Sand, or Peter and the Wolf* (1969) by Caroline Leaf. Beach sand was manipulated to produce images and graphic effects.



From *Le Mariage du Hibou* (1975) by Caroline Leaf, an animated version of an animal table.



From *Le Mariage du Hibou* by Caroline Leaf.

Frank Mouris



Frank Mouris, about 1974.

In Frank Mouris's first film, one of the two narration tracks tells the story of his life in his own words. Here are a few excerpts:

"I WAS BORN IN KEY WEST, FLORIDA [in 1944], WHEN MY FATHER WAS IN A NAVAL STATION THERE AND I WAS THE FIRST OF FIVE KIDS AND IT WAS, I GUESS, A GOOD TIME TO BE BORN.... I HAD A VERY STRICT RELIGIOUS UPBRINGING, WHICH I FEEL HELPED ME IN MY WORK LATER. IT GAVE ME A KIND OF ASCETICISM, A CALVINISM, ALMOST A PROTESTANT WORK-ETHIC, EVEN THOUGH IT WAS A SUPER-CATHOLIC ENVIRONMENT.... WE LIVED IN RATHER COMFORTABLE, MIDDLE-CLASS SUR-

ROUNDINGS.... FROM AN EARLY AGE, I ALWAYS WANTED TO WORK IN MY FATHER'S GAS STATION.... THEN I HAD THE USUAL TEENAGE SEXUAL FANTASIES WHICH I WON'T GO INTO TOO SPECIFICALLY. I HAD A NUMBER OF CRUSHES ON GIRLS IN SCHOOL...AND, FOR THE FIRST TIME I STARTED RELATING TO PEOPLE OUTSIDE ME.... AND THEN IT WAS TIME TO GO TO COLLEGE. I SPENT MOST OF MY TIME STUDYING. I WASN'T EXACTLY SURE WHAT I WAS GOING TO DO. I THOUGHT MAYBE I WOULD WRITE LETTERS TO PEOPLE AS A PROFESSION—THAT WAS SOMETHING I ENJOYED DOING.... I HAD TO MAJOR IN SOMETHING, SO I STUDIED ARCHITECTURE....JUST BEFORE I GRADUATED [I] DECIDED THAT ART WAS THE ANSWER AND I WOULD BE A PAINTER OR A SCULPTOR, BECAUSE THEN YOU CAN DO THE THING ENTIRELY YOURSELF.... I DECIDED TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL AND LEARN SOMETHING VAGUELY MECHANICAL, THAT IS, GRAPHIC DESIGN.... THROUGH THAT I GOT INTERESTED IN PHOTOGRAPHY, AND THEN SUDDENLY THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY I GOT INTERESTED IN FILMMAKING, SPECIFICALLY ANIMATION, AND ALL OF A SUDDEN, THERE IT WAS... THAT WAS WHAT I REALLY WANTED TO DO, WAS TO WORK WITH ANIMATED IMAGES AND MAKE MY WORLD WITH THEM, AND SO FOR MY THREE YEARS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL I MUST HAVE PLAYED AROUND WITH DIFFERENT WAYS TO ANIMATE DIFFERENT KINDS...OF THINGS AND HOPEFULLY THEY WOULD BE THINGS THAT HADN'T EVEN BEEN ANIMATED BEFORE. SO THAT WAS ABOUT HALFWAY THROUGH MY GREAT SAVING-UP PERIOD OF ALL THESE IMAGES AND THAT LED TO MY FANTASIES OF WHAT WOULD HAPPEN WHEN...ALL OF THAT CAME TOGETHER AND I WAS SENDING MY FILMS TO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVALS AND WINNING AWARDS AND BEING A FAT CAT...AND THAT'S ABOUT AS FAR INTO THE FUTURE AS I CAN FANTASIZE...."

Since completing his multi-award-winning *Frank Film*, which took nearly six years from start to finish, Frank Mouris and his wife Caroline have finished two films: