



Maria Lassnig Film Works

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Animation as a Form of Art (1973)

Maria Lassnig

In New York I have a table picked up on the street made from a telephone-cable reel. There are various holes in its round, massive top, and in one sits a jar filled with pencils, ballpoint pens, and markers: my animation tools. Half the table serves for reading, eating, and writing; on the other side is my animation desk, which is two plastic books lying on tinfoil, between which is a longish light bulb, above it as a bridge a sheet of frosted glass with markings of strips of adhesive tape so the sheets of paper placed on it are always in the same position.

This is my improvisation of a “storyboard,” as I’m not yet able to buy a professional one. A professional “storyboard” consists of an angled light box, a desk in whose upper half is a frosted-glass window uniformly lit from below by a neon tube. Attached to the top of the glass panel are the “peg bars,” a metal plate with two to three metal pegs to which semi or completely transparent drawing sheets can be securely attached. This is most important, so that the unmoving, unchanged portions of the drawing are always copied at the same spot.

In New York’s art schools where animation is taught, they stress animation drawing more than photography skills for animation films. Though one is taught how to properly make a drawing move, one does not learn to properly capture it on film without help. A thick stack of finished drawings (one proudly counts two to three hundred) is handed over with a timetable to the cameraman, who then goes to work with a giant Oxberry camera (built by Oxberry specifically for animation) in a darkroom. The Oxberry camera is an enormous construction sliding on a vertical column and connected to a switch panel, something a private filmmaker cannot possibly afford. So I had to learn to use a camera myself, and after much frustration I’ve come to realize that for animation you need a reflex camera if you are not going to be forever out of focus; that the camera stand is very important, the tripod best screwed to the floor; that even then the camera gets shaken by street traffic so the film vibrates; and that you have to know that good drawings and imperfect camerawork don’t produce animation (I am continually aggravated).

“Kunstsparte Animation,” first published in German in Otto Breicha, ed., *Protokolle ’73. Wiener Halbjahresschrift für Literatur, bildende Kunst und Musik*, 1 (1973), pp. 45–51.

Now and again I am asked: *What is animation?* I prefer the English term over the German one, *Trickfilm*, as I prefer to deal with animation or creation rather than with the suggestion of gimmicks or “tricks.”

Animation is the creation of movement and action by way of film from such materials as photos and drawings, plasticine, clay, dolls, or objects like sticks, balls, buttons, wire, string, etc.

The most popular subject of the animated film is metamorphosis. Almost every animation student begins with an egg that bursts open from which a monster emerges and then turns into a machine. Metamorphoses are unavoidable, if only because a chair that one copies twenty times, no matter how precisely, becomes a few millimeters thicker or thinner.

The animated film is meant to tell a story, for that is what we’re used to. But to someone who suffers from a superabundance of ideas that’s a tiresome business, for at a speed of 24 pictures per second the creation of three seconds of movement requires between 36 and 72 different drawings.

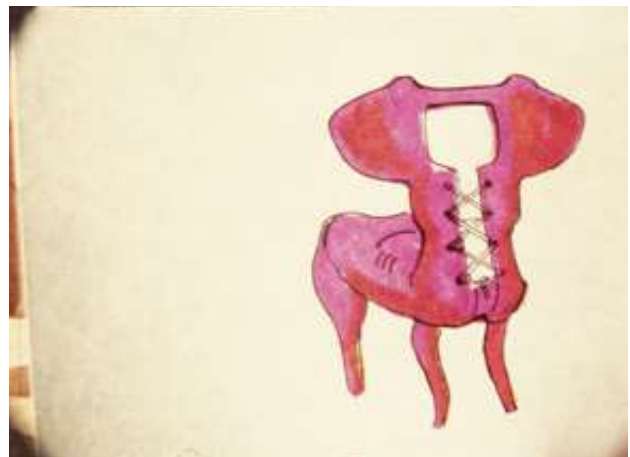
So repetition is one of animation’s vices. It would be foolish not to use it, as it is the reward for a great deal of work and guarantees that what’s shown will be remembered. Most of the McLaren films and those of Larry Jordan are made up of repetitions. Likewise the abstract animated films of Lowell Bodger or Standish Lawder’s *Little Dog*, which simply show small dogs running forward and backward.

There are artists who prefer to produce *idea fragments* that they string together rather than being forced into an actual story (and thus lose time for other pictorial ideas). One is Stan VanDerBeek, who strings together various metamorphoses, each of which is well worth watching.

When I started with animation I didn’t know what I wanted to set in motion. I would have liked to illustrate ideas about the women’s liberation movement, about my life in New York, or to have my friends appear as comic figures. But ideas are like mayflies, they come and go. The people capable of holding up under the tedious, boring process of creating animation are few and far between.

So from a flood of drawings I selected figures I had created over the course of the years with no future purpose in mind as my body awareness products, a heroic starting point for painting (to begin the challenge of deciphering myself with the most difficult thing and try to picture such complexities like body sensations). To be able to capture such body sensations with a pencil it is necessary to pro-

Chairs



vide structure to the merely vague (feelings are indistinct, and determining their location is uncertain). From the way the body braces itself in different postures concentration points emerge that are clearly felt. Lines connecting one concentration point to another form outlines, like a skin that stretches and shrinks, incorporating all intensities. Thus one can slim the “figure” down to the bones or expand it like a sponge, depending on if you’re focused on periphery or core.

Associations with the reality of the outside world cannot be excluded, yet similarities are not intentional and automatic: because one’s back feels like a board it may be that a chair-like person is produced (or a human-like chair).

Subjecting these drawings created through contemplation and understood through contemplation to film, the fastest of all arts, in which every second has its meaning, is a contradiction, as if a Buddhist monk were driving a racing car.

Why have a drawing that is perfectly content at rest engage in “gymnastics”?

Being forced to follow everything that moves is a regression to a primitive childlike state, like being astonished when a small rod begins to writhe like an earthworm.

The pleasure in creating something, known to every painter, continues:

It delights me if my self-portrait is gradually transformed into a Greta Garbo face (to suddenly become as beautiful as that!). *But it can only be done by means of animation.*

I feel the field is spacious enough, that film has room enough for a multitude of experimenters with new ideas.

