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History
Northwest Animation: The Roots of Creative Variance

The Portland Story 1925-76

by Rose Bond

The cultural ecology in Oregon led to an incredibly prolific and creative period of art animation in the late Seventies and Eighties. The components to that ecology include early pioneers, technical resources, schools, showcases, and the early work itself.

———— Pioneers ————

Any discussion of the roots of Portland animation must reach back to the 1920's when a young newsreel filmmaker named Lew Cook created a film circa 1925 with clay characters called "The Little Baker." Cook's five minute black and white escapade of a piece of dough coming 'alive' would serve as inspiration for perhaps the world's best known clay animator, Will Vinton. "The Little Baker" shot on 35mm nitrate garnered little attention outside a small group of technical film guys but it was saved along with Lew's Webfoot Weekly Newsreels, highlights of Oregon history, in the film archives of the Oregon History Center when Lew Cook became the Center's film archivist.

Apart from the early pioneer efforts of Lew Cook, animation was virtually non-existent in Portland until the 1950's when several engineer/technicians built serviceable stands and began to animate local commercials. Vintage Portlanders may recall the ads for Stacey's Cleaners, Equitable Savings, and Big O Tires. The individual behind much of the work was a radio engineer turned filmmaker/inventor named Frank Hood.

Hood was an engineer by training. He was hired in the late Forties as the 24th employee of a start-up company called Tektronix. In the early 1950's Frank talked his boss into letting him make training films for the company — everyone in California was doing it. He quickly tired of the turn around time for sending his footage to Hollywood and set out to build his own processing machine in the basement of his home on N.E. 13th and Roselawn. By day Frank was a Tektronix employee and by night and weekend a filmmaker and lab technician. He dubbed his basement enterprise Teknifilm Lab.

———— The Lab ————

Frank Hood and Arlen Evanson built a respectable moonlight lab business with regular clients in Tektronix, KPTV, and all the high school football team footage. So in 1964 they decided to take the plunge and rented an alley entrance space in what was to become Portland's Film Row. Teknifilm Labs had a home of its own.

Where this story departs from many others is that Frank Hood never seemed to forget his experiences as a budding filmmaker. Teknifilm would always take the small jobs — the student with 12 feet of animation that took three weeks to shoot — even though as Arlen remembers, "We'd worry about losing the 12 feet in the dark." The lab gained local fame for two yearly parties: the summer Alley Party with live music and beer and the festive Christmas Party, which was also open bar. At these events Independents mixed with Industry types and everyone ogled at Frank's collection of antique movie cameras and projectors.

Frank Hood's generosity went beyond free beer and pretzels. As his son George recalls, "My father was so generous to carry people on credit for years and years until they got successful." The attitude at Teknifilm made it a gathering place with a great bulletin board for equipment sales, rentals, exchanges, or free use. Friendly and supportive, Teknifilm Lab played a big role in fostering community and offering entrée to many Portland film students and artists.

———— Non-Structured Structures ————

"Early cameras afforded many opportunities for manipulating." So speaks Jack Eyerly, inventor, visionary, and connector who influenced and fed the experimental film scene in Portland during the late Sixties. Eyerly had become knowledgeable of the avant garde films during the 1950's at the Colorado Springs Art Center where he programmed an experimental film series. In 1964 he designed an amusement ride for the Seattle World's Fair that was based on the writings of John Cage. His interests in motion and life converged with East Coast artists and innovators in a group called Experiments in Art and Technology. EAT, originally from MIT, was established to provide a collaborative space for artists and technicians. In 1968 he moved back to the Northwest and started two chapters of EAT, one in Portland and one in Seattle. Jack's approach to the EAT chapters was non-structuralist. As Jim Blashfield recalls, "He just seemed to call and mention that something was happening at eight that night and a bunch of people would show up." In Portland from 1968 to 1971 EAT became an on-going happening.

Low keyed and grounded on a belief in the importance of building art communities and exploring the connections between people, ideas, and technology, Jack Eyerly laid groundwork for more formalized institutions, like the Northwest Film Study Center, which was formed in 1971 by Brooke Jacobson and Bob Sitton. As Jack remembers it his idea with EAT was to provide "an open shelter that allowed work to happen, running parallel and overlapping." According to George Hood who was a student at the time, Jack's curated screenings, often booked from the independent distributor Canyon Cinema run by Edith Kramer. The screenings drew "students, teachers, and beatniks" to a variety of venues: from the Agora Coffeehouse, to Portland State's Student Center and on to artistically posh West Hills homes. "He was a magnet for artists. We'd show up with work too." Screenings would run on into the night. Set up in Portland without incorporation papers and with no rules, Jack says his only criteria for membership was "Come."

———— The Schools ————

Two institutions of higher learning played important roles in the founding of art animation in Oregon. Prior to any discussion of schools, it is important to recall that film, much less animation, was a relatively non-existent field of study in the Fifties and, in many places, even into the Sixties. David Foster, a native of Salem, Oregon, got his first taste of film in the undergraduate program at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Maholy Nagy and Man Ray influenced Foster's ideas of vision and motion. In Chicago's New Bauhaus film became yet another artist's tool.

In the 1950's David Foster returned to Oregon for graduate study and landed a teaching assistant position in the University of Oregon Painting Department in Eugene. There he was given the go ahead by Andy Vincent and Jean Kendall Glazer to experiment with film. Fascinated by the behavior of magnetized metal filings and the theme of conformity, he made his first film "Men of Irony." In 1957 he completed his Masters thesis at the U of O with the film on another of his visual fascinations — the similarity between Chinese characters and telephone poles. The film is called "1911." It is an example of the quick processing technique he taught using "homemade lab" and black and white high contrast film.

In a taped interview with Ken O'Connell in 1991, David Foster, then a Professor Emeritus at the University of Oregon, seemed proud that his classes, indeed his whole Visual Continuity Program at the University, was open to anybody. Clearly, his connections to art and experimentation were at the core of the program. Beyond that, he felt art needed to be meaningful. "It's important that people see they're not just doing art to exercise a talent that's clever but that they are purposeful and have a function and responsibility within society to use the tools and make them work."

Meanwhile in Portland, with the exception the fellows working in fledgling television stations, not much was going on in film when Andries Deinum, a blacklisted educator from USC, came to town in 1959. The Continuing Education Department at Portland State College hired Deinum to institute his Urban Mosaic Program. As a Continuing Education program Deinum's courses were open to all and their content was a far cry from the more typical film class taught as director, actor, set designer, etc. As George Hood recalls, "In 1965-68 everyone was taking one class - Deinum's night course on the 'Theory and History of Film' and it included animation."

Deinum's program continued to generate interest and enrollment. In the fall of 1969 the college brought an expanded version into the BFA program. With several rooms and a smattering of equipment the Center for the Moving Image or CMI was born above the South Park Blocks. Tom Taylor was added as an assistant professor and people such as Laura DiTrapani and Sharon Niemczyk actually began producing animation with the college equipment. Jim Blashfield, who took classes and taught at CMI, remembers Deinum's curatorial code as "films that reflect genuine human values." Deinum took the study of film seriously and made the distinction between the film and the movie. The latter was meant for entertainment and the former was an art form — one that reflected on life as humans experience it.

———— The Showcases ————

Apart from the experimental shorts programmed by Jack Eyerly at EAT affairs and the interesting, though generally feature oriented programming of Brooke Jacobson at the Portland State Film Committee screenings, the place to see on-the-edge animated films in the late Sixties was the Bellevue Film Festival. Founded by Carol Duke, Bellevue Washington became a Mecca for many Portlanders. Every summer Jim Blashfield would head north for three days of experimental film. Tom Taylor would bring his whole CMI class. Programming experimental classics along with juried shows of new work worked to enlighten and push the visual boundaries of the medium.

By 1971 the major art institution in Portland had begun to notice film. Largely due to the eye and contemporary sensibility of Rachel Griffin, who was Curator of the Portland Art Museum at the time, the 1972 Artists of Oregon, which had been a traditional painting and sculpture annual, ventured forward with the first showing of Oregon made films. Oregon Filmmakers 1972 ran through March at the Art Museum's Berg Swann auditorium. Edith Kramer, formerly of Canyon Cinema and then Curator of Film at the San Francisco Museum of Art was flown up to curate the recent work. A select committee (Jack Eyerly, Brooke Jacobson, and Tom Taylor) formed an invitational list of earlier Oregon works to round out the eleven programs.

Edith Kramer sums up the philosophy of the organizers in this excerpt from her 1972 Juror's Statement:

> Someone always asks how do you judge films, what criteria do you use? Speaking for myself, I can only say that there are no rigid rules or fixed standards against which each and every film can be measured. Each film must finally be taken as a whole, and the real test is … if it is a memorable experience; that is, if you are left with feelings and images you can't shake. If they work, you come away in some manner enriched.

———— The Films ————

Animated films created during this first stage or incubation period include a mix of non-traditional techniques. "Little Plastic Hearts" (1965) by Derek Muirden and George Hood (Frank Hood's son) employed green army figures and strong anti-war sentiment. Jim Blashfield experimented with cut out photos for the first time in a CMI class at Portland State. He went on to make his first cut-out animated film "Eddie's Tennis Shoes" in 1970. Will Vinton and Bob Gardiner, inspired by Lew Cook's "The Little Baker," tested their claymation style in "The Wobbly Wino" a precursor to their 1974 Oscar winner, "Closed Mondays." Another Oscar winner, Joan Gratz, who was architecture major at the University of Oregon and a student of David Foster, painted her first abstract animated film "AC-16" in 1971.

Jim Douglas and Bob Dvorak were two experimenters in abstraction. Douglas' "Eye Level" (1971) was described as a structural film providing an interesting visual experience. His "Mince Meat" (1968) is an inventive collage piece. Dvorak's "Sea Sound" (1970) preceded his highly energetic "Face Dance" which was drawn and painted directly on clear film frames. Jan Baross, who had worked with Karl Krogstad, animated a lovestruck computer in "The Computer Said" (1970). John Haugse shifting between painting and film made his "Home Movies A-Z" and "Push Button Movie" (1968-69) which were painted and sculpted home movies. Finally, Yale educated Roger Kukes, who was to make a tremendous impact on the Portland animation scene, completed his first index card animated film "Winterlight" in Portland in 1976.

———— Conclusions ————

Clearly the time period of the Sixties and Seventies in Oregon was one of great experimentation as artist/animators searched for style and voice. As Jim Blashfield recalls, "Portland was a good place to grow and develop as an artist. People could experiment and not just earn a living." Bohemian values were the norm in higher education and an unspoken expectation in the community. In pre-Reagan Portland it was OK to be an Independent. It was cool to make films

that honored low economic means. The early animators were generally viewed as artists. What they lacked in economics they gained in cultural capital. Their challenge and reward lay in pushing non-traditional techniques.

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