



PALGRAVE ANIMATION

# New York Animation 1966–1999

A City in Motion

Robby Gilbert

*Foreword by* Linda Simensky

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# Palgrave Animation

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This book series explores animation and conceptual/theoretical issues in an approachable way. The focus is twofold: on core concepts, theories and debates in animation that have yet to be dealt with in book-length format; and on new and innovative research and interdisciplinary work relating to animation as a field. The purpose of the series is to consolidate animation research and provide the 'go to' monographs and anthologies for current and future scholars.

Robby Gilbert

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*Dedicated to Howard Beckerman — The animators' animator and the teachers' teacher.*



## FOREWORD

Each year, as I teach animation history to enthusiastic undergraduates, I begin by asking—who invented animation, and where did it all begin? They answer confidently that animation started in Hollywood when Walt Disney made *Steamboat Willie*. These students generally are surprised to learn that this is not correct. It's good that they're taking this course, I always think, because clearly, they're going to learn a great deal.

One of the main points I make on the first day of the course is that animation has many parents and is developed simultaneously in several different places. But in the United States, it originated mostly in New York, not Los Angeles. Animation in the United States developed through the intersection of several key advances and art forms: the presence of New York newspapers' comic strips and cartoonists, the invention of movie cameras that could advance one frame at a time, the popularity of vaudeville, and the uncomfortable influence of Blackface minstrelsy. Out of this came such important names in animation history as Winsor McCay, John Randolph Bray, Earl Hurd, Raoul Barré, the Fleischer brothers, Paul Terry, and Grim Natwick. Even Thomas Edison was part of the New York animation scene of the early 1900s.

Why don't the students know this? For starters, the New York animators didn't have time to write any of this down. They were too busy working to remember to set up research archives. And it stayed that way. The lengthy history of New York animation is colorful, dramatic, and filled with personalities as unique as the ones in their animated films. But

very few people have taken the time to document this history and make it available to researchers and film historians. Thus, the history of New York animation has remained a mostly untold story.

For years, that didn't seem to matter. In the 1980s, when I'd look in the animation section of my university's library, there were only a few books on the history of animation. When Leonard Maltin's *Of Mice and Magic* was published, it was a revelation, a history of all the big animation studios we had wondered about. Zines like *Funnyworld*, *Animato* and *Mindrot* and the writing duo of Jerry Beck and Will Friedwald picked up the slack with their detailed research. In 1986, Shamus Culhane published *Talking Animals and Other People*, an outlier as the one book that covered New York animation.

In the 1990s, the animation industry exploded, delighting animation fanatics and inviting new enthusiasts. With the popularity of animation on the rise, more books were written, but for the most part, these were books about studios and animators in Hollywood. If you only read these books, you would think that New York was a very small part of animation history.

Many important moments in animation history came out of New York, and not just in the early days. Felix the Cat, Betty Boop, and Koko the Clown were all born in New York. Thanks to the presence of so many filmmakers, American independent animation was headquartered in New York for many years, with animators taking the art form in new and important directions.

In the commercial realm, New York was the epicenter for animated advertising. By ordering short animated pieces, New York-based *Sesame Street* funded several decades of small studios and independent animators in the city. Douglas Leigh and Otto Messmer lit up Times Square with animation. When cable television came along, the New York advertising and branding agency Fred/Alan developed animated branding for several channels. Later, MTV made their brand-defining animated IDs though their New York offices, including the original Man on the Moon IDs produced by New Yorker Candy Kugel. In the same building, just one floor away from MTV, Gerry Laybourne created the groundbreaking children's channel Nickelodeon, which led to a new generation of children's animated shows on Nicktoons. And that was just the start.

As the first head of animation development for Nicktoons in 1990, I knew it would be significant to produce at least one series in New York, bringing production of children's animated shows back to the city from

Los Angeles. Luckily, we picked up the series *Doug* from Jim Jenkins, who was living in New York at the time. His company, Jumbo Pictures, moved into an office at Spring and Crosby Streets in Soho and got to work, hiring half of the New York animation community. Many other animators headed to work on MTV's *Beavis and Butt-Head* and their slate of animated series. New York was back! And the ASIFA-East membership surged. A screening could fill an entire SVA auditorium.

Over time, I moved to Cartoon Network to head up original animation there, and I continued to support New York animation, picking up John Dilworth's *Courage the Cowardly Dog*, *Sheep in the Big City* from Mo Willems and *Codename: Kids Next Door* from Tom Warburton. It was easy to make the case that we should produce these series in New York rather than Los Angeles. New York animators had unique styles, impressive talent, and a certain edginess to their humor, which I felt would benefit our programming.

When it came to documenting all this, however, New Yorkers didn't exactly rise to the challenge. A few animators like Shamus Culhane and Howard Beckerman wrote how-to books about animation. But other than Culhane's first book, no other local authors wrote about the history of New York animation. Certainly, no animation historians from Los Angeles showed up to pick up the slack. John Canemaker and Michael Sporn wrote articles for advertising-focused magazines such as *Millimeter*. As president of ASIFA-East in the 90s, I did my best to capture issues of local interest in the ASIFA-East newsletter. But very little was recorded for posterity and books on the history of New York animation never materialized.

Until now. In this book, Robby Gilbert has heroically taken on the epic and practically impossible task of capturing these New York people, studios, and films. It's a miraculous first! Finally, New York animation is going to exist for those students and historians of the future who might be wondering where the industry went after so many people hopped on trains to Los Angeles.

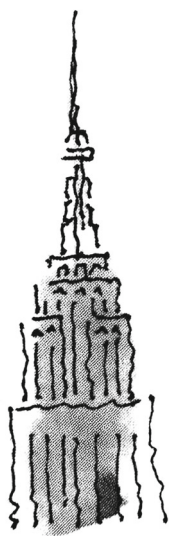
For those of you who are curious about what New York animation means, this book will get you started.

New York, USA  
November 2024

Linda Simensky

*Competing Interests* The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

ELECTRIC CITY: A CONVERSATION WITH  
R. O. BLECHMAN



I knew  
we'd come up  
with  
something!



I have a theory about New York.

*What is it?*

My theory?

*Yes.*

Okay — that is built on magnetic rock.

So, I think many New Yorkers are electrified by their environment.

There was a blackout in New York

—for some reason, the electricity was cut off—

and yet I just remembered it didn't affect us

because I think that the city is built on magnetic rock.

*When did you have that realization?*

During the blackout.

*So what does that electricity do?*

It gives people energy.

*What does that electricity give to a New Yorker?*

Well, it makes them more active, that's for sure.

And whatever field they're in.

Just a thought I had.

I mean, nobody has ever looked at it geologically,

with the literal foundation of Manhattan.

But I think it's built on magnetic rock.

You can feel that when you're there.

—R.O. Blechman in conversation with R.G. Gilbert. 2023

## ASIFA & THE INDEPENDENT FILM

In 1969 I was working as a Xerox operator (copying drawings onto cels with a gigantic stat camera) at Focus Design, a studio on Park Avenue that produced TV commercials.

Since I was the Kid, the designated stand-in, my duties also included cel-painting, inbetweening, messengering, and, between jobs, sitting around drawing flipbooks and caricatures. During this apprentice year I also began shooting experiments with a Bolex rigged up to a table in my apartment.

There was a lot of discussion at the studio about the “new union” that had been formed among animators and designers who looked to Europe for a model of a new sort of art cartoon. This was the delirious post-*Yellow Submarine* period when illustrators and designers flocked to character animation. Although it lost its bid to actually become a union, ASIFA-East survived as a kind of professional guild devoted to the art of animation as distinct from the realm of special effects.

In 1971, while still freelancing uptown, I poured my soul into a 25-minute cartoon, a political satire which unintentionally broke just about every rule in the book. It was the kind of cathartic ordeal which can best be called “ambitious.” Yet, because it had been a collaboration with a collective of ex-NYU film students who liked its radical “statement” (remember the 60’s didn’t really end until 1975), I was encouraged to enter it in film festivals, including ASIFA. Winning “2nd Prize for Music”

seemed deflationary enough but when I went to the “banquet” at a mid-town hotel a heady company of artists welcomed me into their midst (“the guy who made that long one” as Don Duga said to John Hubley and Fred Mogubgub).

Up to that point, “Independent Film,” “Cartoons,” and “Avant-Garde” or “Underground” films represented incompatible tendencies that many of us sought to reconcile. European work by Dunning, Lenica, and Borowczyk pointed to a kind of synthesis: personal, experimental, yet well-crafted statements which drew from graphic and comic art traditions. During the 70’s the ASIFA show became a showcase for this new generation of independent animators: Mary Beams, John Canemaker, Candy Kugel, Frank Mouris, Eli Noyes, Richard Protovin, Kathy Rose, to name a few. Though we were shunted off to the “non-sponsored” category it became clear that high-quality, imaginative animated films could be made by individual artists without resorting to traditional formulas. Toward the end of the 70’s a number of us who felt marginalized by the commercial orientation of ASIFA began meeting downtown, showing films in galleries, and generally agitating for a purely experimental form of animation (Candy Kugel describes this split in the January 98 Animation World Magazine). I vividly recall Tissa David scolding me for not showing my long, self-referential films at ASIFA, to which I snorted something about not pandering to short attention spans. By the mid-80’s this polarization tended to diffuse as more independents started doing commercials and the animation mainstream absorbed more experimental techniques and sophisticated attitudes. A personal turning point for me was returning to the disk and paint trenches as a producer for Bob Blechman’s “Soldier’s Tale,” the ambitious (that word again) cartoon musical that won an Emmy in 1985.

Calling ASIFA a “guild” points to its strengths and its limitations. Awarding films on a strictly democratic basis has kept us honest but has led many to judge work solely on the basis of craft, unconsciously keeping alive a notion of “good animation.” As an antidote to this conservatism I hope that impudent student and independent work, warts-and-all stuff which dares to be “bad animation,” will always turn up during the screenings to astonish, infuriate, and delight us.

George Griffin, NYC, 1999

## INTRODUCTION

Living in a van down by the river may sound like a depressing, far-fetched cliché, yet that is exactly how I started my career in animation. It was 1990, a time when animation, ignited by the success of *The Simpsons*, a Disney resurgence, cable television, and desktop computing, revived the industry after a decades-long downturn, marking the onset of a Second Golden Age of animation. Studios were hiring anyone who could hold a pencil, and I could at least do that.

My red and white VW bus was outfitted with a faux Persian rug, a sleeping bag, and a makeshift drawing table. I was dead broke and determined to get my foot in the door at just one place—Broadcast Arts, the busiest New York studio at the time...and probably the only animation studio I knew of. Howard Beckerman had taken our animation class there when I was a student at the School of Visual Arts, and as soon as we got off the elevator, I knew this was the only place I wanted to work. It was a beehive of creative energy adorned with stop-motion puppets, a bustling 2D ink and paint department, sound stages, ringing phones, a desk on roller skates, and a replica of the iconic man on the moon planting a flag from MTV. It felt like home. And for a time, it became my home.

Broadcast Arts, once referred to by a reporter as the “*Demented Toy Factory*,” emerged from a specific place and time in New York’s animation scene. Just north of Houston Street and located on Broadway in an old industrial loft a few blocks from SOHO, it was almost perfectly positioned between the East and West Villages. Clubs, galleries, and

eccentric characters were everywhere. It seemed like everyone smoked—something. Times Square was still a sketchy area lined with adult movie theater marqueees as far as the eye could see, and one didn't venture too far east of Avenue C. Rents were low. The city was dirty, and black was commonly worn by artists, not just as a stylish fashion choice. Black was practical, as it concealed the daily grime that settled on one's person while navigating the diesel fumes from buses, dripping water from air conditioners, pigeons, dog shit, trash piles, and airborne grease from a thousand restaurants, where a cheeseburger deluxe cost \$2.99.

In New York, one really had to hustle. Living out of a van and being broke, I often arrived at the studio first in the morning and left last at night... if I left at all. Directors George Englebrecht, Kim Johnson, Peter Rosenthal, and Steve Oakes must have thought I was dedicated because, having nowhere else to go, I was always there. For about three years, I was fortunate to be one of the many regular freelancers at the demented toy factory.

In early 1994, like many animators of that era, I moved to California. California felt like a different world. There wasn't much hustle. Paychecks were consistent, and the company brought in a massage therapist every Thursday. For the first time, I had health insurance, and during the long two-hour lunch breaks, people would ask if I wanted to play volleyball or join a drum circle. The contrast between New York and California couldn't have been more pronounced. That's when I first realized that the animation industry in New York was a completely different beast from California.

Fast forward to 2022. I was having lunch at a diner in Philadelphia with Peter Rosenthal, one of the founders of the defunct Broadcast Arts. We reminisced about the old days at BA, recalling the personalities—and immensely talented individuals—who passed through its doors. We both agreed that New York's animation scene during the 1980s and '90s was remarkable. It was a culturally significant period, and the creative atmosphere in the city influenced styles and techniques in animation that transformed the media landscape forever. We concurred that such a phenomenon could have occurred nowhere but in New York. But why? What set New York apart from California when it came to animation culture? And more importantly, why has no one written a comprehensive history of animation in New York during this era?

Part of the answer emerged when I began interviewing legendary New York animators such as John Canemaker, Howard Beckerman, Candy

Kugel, George Griffin, Lisa Crafts, Bill Plympton, Maureen Selwood, Emily Hubley, Ralph Bakshi, J.J. Sedelmaier, Linda Simensky, and many others who were central to New York's scene during this era. These individuals had not yet seen themselves as historical figures, as many remained active in the industry, including John Canemaker, who had dedicated his career to both history and animation. However, it quickly became evident that this period needed documentation.

The urgency of the task was heightened by the fact that we were beginning to lose some of New York's most influential figures in animation: Tony Eastman, Michael Sporn, Tissa David, and, during the writing of the book, Howard Beckerman. Firsthand accounts were needed and were collected through hundreds of hours of interviews.

Initially, the focus was on the 1980s, but the project expanded to cover the years 1966-1999 for several reasons. First, it became clear that discussing the 1980s animation scene in New York required understanding the context of the 1970s. From that point, it was evident that much of the work that emerged in the 1980s significantly influenced the animation boom of the 1990s.

I chose 1966 as a starting point for several reasons. First, it was the year that research and planning began for *Sesame Street* in New York, which aimed to enhance literacy in inner-city children and provided opportunities for many animators who had previously been excluded from the industry. Additionally, by 1966, Super 8 cameras began to enter the marketplace, granting amateurs access to single-frame film techniques for the first time and paving the way for a new generation of animators who employed methods well beyond the established cartoon paradigm, marking the beginnings of what would become the creator-driven era of the 1980s and 90s. 1966 was also the year Walt Disney died. His death altered the trajectory of animation worldwide.

In 1966, the two major production studios in New York, Paramount and Terrytoons, were still operating but were on the verge of closing. This created a critical crossover period during which older, traditionally trained artists—many of whom had worked during Winsor McCay's era—continued to remain active, influencing and teaching a new generation.

I chose to conclude with 1999 to effectively bookend this period. 9/11 likely represents the true bookend—the conclusion of the second golden age, when MTV Animation shuttered its doors and the city entered another economic downturn.

As the research and interviews progressed, it became clear that the last third of the twentieth century marked a significant inflection point for animation, much of which took place in New York. However, attention has mainly been focused on California studios and artists. Furthermore, many of the books about New York animators and studios appear to be more narrowly aimed at fans instead of capturing the broader significance of New York during this period.

This project is neither complete nor comprehensive. New York and its many animators represent a subject too vast for a single book. I am sure that many facts and artists have inevitably been overlooked. Therefore, these pages aim to inspire others to continue broader research on animation in New York—a captivating and worthwhile subject.

At the beginning of the project, it became evident that each person interviewed is deserving of a whole book dedicated to their work and experiences. The George Griffins, Tee Collins', Linda Simenskys, and Geraldine Laybournes of the world influenced animation as much—if not more—than anyone in the twentieth century. I hope future researchers can use some of the information in this book to continue the essential task of documenting this incredible art form during a time in New York when the city was the capital of the art world.

This book is as much about New York as it is about animation. During this period, New York was largely unencumbered by the demands of the California production system. As a result, stylistic experiments flourished, and New York re-emerged as an exciting hub for independent animators and studios, where artists intermingled, coming and going to contribute to what are now iconic studios and franchises such as MTV, Liquid Television, Pee-Wee's Playhouse, Sesame Street, The Ink Tank, Beavis and Butthead, Blue Sky, Buzzco, and Nickelodeon. New York offers a stylistic counter-narrative to Hollywood's mainstream production and the promotion of contemporary corporate values. These stylistic trends and iconic properties have influenced animation and transformed its trajectory, marking it as an inflection point for the field. Lurking just behind the shoulders of animators during this period was the promise (and threat) of the computer. The late 80s into the 90s ushered out cels, exposure sheets, and analog film techniques, while traditional animators were introduced to a wealth of new tools and markets, including CGI, interactive animation, and, shortly thereafter, the World Wide Web. Animation schools emerged in large numbers, and animation was finally recognized as a viable career path.

Animation production and innovation in New York, “the city that never sleeps,” has never slept. New York City is the birthplace of the American animation industry—full stop. Beginning in 1898, New York innovators established the foundational processes, patents, and techniques that shaped global animation production used throughout the twentieth century. To some, it may come as a surprise to learn that Walt Disney, often assumed to be animation’s progenitor, did not open his California studio until 1923, a quarter of a century later. Even then, he relied heavily on artists who had cut their teeth in the studios of the Big Apple. The unique conditions in New York City during this time influenced a generation of new artists who produced some of the most iconic and successful franchises recognized today.



I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to J.J. Sedelmaier, one of my first interviewees, whose enthusiasm for the project opened the doors to a wealth of essential information for developing this book. Special thanks also to Bob Coar, who has compiled and generously shared a remarkable treasure trove of invaluable information about this period. I further extend my appreciation to Jim Simon, Linda Simensky, Dr. Barbara Collins, Monique Moore Pryor, Krystle Lemo-nias, Howard Beckerman, Peter Rosenthal, Malcolm Cook, Caroline Ruddell, Paul Ward, Eric Dyer, Steve Oakes, George Griffin, Lisa Crafts, Frank Gresham, Eve Gilbert, Rick Clark, Candy Kugel, Doug Vitarelli,

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Robby Gilbert  
December, 2024

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>“The Industry Is in Trouble” Top Cel, The Union, and The Oxtoby-Smith Report</b>	<b>1</b>
	<i>Television</i>	4
	<i>A New Epoch</i>	6
	<i>United, We Fall</i>	14
	<i>Local 841’s Last Gasp</i>	22
<b>2</b>	<b>The Downtown Independents</b>	<b>27</b>
	<i>Manual Labor</i>	28
	<i>Bolexes, Super 8, and the Rise of the Auteur Animator</i>	29
	<i>Assembled in New York</i>	31
	<i>A Declaration of Independents</i>	34
	<i>Influences</i>	37
	<i>International Animation Festival</i>	41
	<i>Frank Film</i>	43
	<i>Independent Women</i>	45
	<i>A Carpenter’s Daughter</i>	46
	<i>The Lasting Legacy of the Downtown Independents</i>	51
<b>3</b>	<b>Animation on the Kitchen Table: A Shifting Technological Landscape</b>	<b>57</b>
	<i>Amateur Film Formats: 8 mm and Super 8</i>	59

	<i>Film Animation in the Classroom</i>	62
	<i>Young Animators and Their Discoveries</i>	65
	<i>Center for Understanding Media</i>	68
	<i>Kit Laybourne</i>	69
	<i>From Clubhouse to Curriculum</i>	73
	<i>Meanwhile, in Nearby Boston...</i>	74
	<i>Character Animation Education</i>	76
	<i>The New School for Social Research</i>	77
	<i>The School of Visual Arts and Howard Beckerman, the ‘Dean of New York Animation’</i>	78
	<i>New York Institute of Technology</i>	83
	<i>Let’s Go to the Video Tape</i>	84
	<i>Lyon Lamb</i>	86
	<i>‘A New Territory in Animation’</i>	88
<b>4</b>	<b>This Chapter Is Brought to You by the Letter “Tee.” The Enduring Legacy of Sesame Street and Harlem’s Animators</b>	95
	<i>From Harlem’s Streets to Sesame Street</i>	98
	<i>Public Broadcasting’s Effect on American Animation</i>	99
	<i>Joan Ganz Cooney</i>	100
	<i>The Role of Research in the Development of Animation and Educational Programming</i>	102
	<i>Animators in Education</i>	103
	<i>Tee Collins</i>	104
	<i>“A Just a Genius Like You”</i>	111
	<i>Animation and the Verrivistic</i>	113
	<i>Tee Collins: The Man Who Works Magic</i>	117
	<i>“It’s Still Unheard of to Have a Black Animation Director”</i>	121
	<i>I Can Remember</i>	125
	<i>People Want Their Magic</i>	130
	<i>Conclusion</i>	132
<b>5</b>	<b>The Digital Metropolis: From Computer Age to Ice Age</b>	137
	<i>Irene the Queen</i>	137
	<i>Hanging on the (Rotary) Telephone</i>	141
	<i>Compu-Babble</i>	143

	<i>The Second Epoch</i>	144
	<i>Automation in Animation</i>	147
	<i>Digital Harmony, Expanded Cinema, Expanded Minds</i>	148
	<i>Algorithmic Music</i>	149
	<i>A Painter in Times Square</i>	151
	<i>Breathing Life into Electrons and Light</i>	153
	<i>Picture This</i>	155
	<i>Animating at the Speed of Light</i>	158
	<i>Proceduralist Manifesto</i>	159
	<i>New York's Special Effects Industry Explodes</i>	160
	<i>Multimedia Superstars</i>	162
	<i>Computers, Animation, and Society</i>	166
6	<b>The Inventor, the Alchemist, and the Mad Scientist of the East Village</b>	171
	<i>Seeing with Closed Eyes</i>	174
	<i>Expanding Animation</i>	177
	<i>The Alchemist and the 'New Theoretical Center'</i>	179
	<i>The Tin Woodman's Dream</i>	183
	<i>Mahogonny (Mah-Ha-Go-Nee)</i>	184
	<i>The Mad Scientist of the East Village: M. Henry Jones</i>	188
	<i>Unframing the Boundaries of Vision</i>	191
	<i>On Brand: The Unknown Celebrity</i>	194
	<i>New York: A Place Where Anything Was Possible at Any Moment</i>	196
	<i>The Algorithmic Aesthetic and 9 Evenings</i>	197
	<i>Gregory Barsamian. The Philosopher</i>	199
	<i>Mining the Subconscious World</i>	203
7	<b>632 Broadway: Broadcast Arts—The Curious Journey of an Animation Playhouse</b>	209
	<i>Hustle Town</i>	213
	<i>I Go, Logo</i>	215
	<i>632 Broadway</i>	218
	<i>The Playhouse</i>	223
	<i>"Everything Was Changing Forever All the Time."</i>	232

<b>8</b>	<b>New York's Animation Boutiques: From Abrahams to Zander</b>	237
	<i>Martin Abrahams Films, Inc.</i>	241
	<i>Elektra Films</i>	244
	<i>Focus Productions</i>	245
	<i>Harold Friedman Consortium</i>	246
	<i>Jim Henson Productions</i>	246
	<i>The Ink Tank</i>	250
	<i>Phil Kimmelman &amp; Associates</i>	253
	<i>Noyes &amp; Laybourne</i>	256
	<i>Ovation Films</i>	257
	<i>Pan Productions</i>	257
	<i>Perpetual Motion, and Perpetual Animation, and Buzzco</i>	259
	<i>J.J. Sedelmaier Productions (JJSP)</i>	261
	<i>Michael Sporn Animation, Inc.</i>	263
	<i>Stars and Stripes Forever Productions</i>	268
	<i>Tele-Tactics</i>	269
	<i>Zander's Animation Parlour</i>	270
<b>9</b>	<b>Why Doesn't Someone Give Mogubgub, LTD. Two Million Dollars to Make a Movie? Feature Animation in New York</b>	275
	<i>Defining Features</i>	278
	<i>Fritz the Cat. 1972 Bakshi/Krantz</i>	278
	<i>Irreverence</i>	282
	<i>Tubby the Tuba. 1975 (NYIT)</i>	287
	<i>Raggedy Ann &amp; Andy: A Musical Adventure (Richard Williams)</i>	290
	<i>Circa 1980. The Works. Lance Williams and NYIT (Incomplete Film)</i>	293
	<i>The Tune. 1992, Bill Plympton</i>	294
	<i>1996 MTV Features: Joe's Apartment and Beavis and Butt-Head Do America</i>	300
	<i>Joe's Apartment</i>	301
	<i>Beavis and Butt-Head Do America</i>	304
	<i>Sunbow Productions, 1980–1995</i>	305

<b>10 The Empire State Strikes Back: New York's Cartoon Resurgence in the 1990s</b>	311
<i>Nickelodeon</i>	321
<i>MTV Animation Studios</i>	329
<i>Cartoon Network</i>	334
<i>A New Millennium</i>	339
<b>Bibliography</b>	343
<b>Index</b>	351

# LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Labor Day Parade. 9/5/1983 (Photo courtesy Michael Fleischman)	2
Fig. 1.2	Masthead of the inaugural edition of the Top Cel, December 1943	3
Fig. 1.3	Union rate sheet published in Top Cel, February 1966	7
Fig. 1.4	Remembrance by Howard Beckerman TOP CEL, February, 1967	8
Fig. 1.5	Informational section for the August 1967 TOP CEL	10
Fig. 1.6	The only known surviving copy of the Oxtoby-Smith Report (Courtesy J.J. Sedelmeier)	11
Fig. 1.7	List of non-union studios from TOP CEL in 1986	15
Fig. 1.8	Meeting of Local 841 6/23/1982. Judy Price, Doug Crane, Emily Hubley. Gerard Salvio, Jack Harrell (Courtesy Michael Fleischman)	17
Fig. 1.9	Candy Kugel's cartoon "At the Moviola" for Top Cel depicts the realities of client/studio relationships at the time (Courtesy Candy Kugel)	24
Fig. 2.1	Rate sheet for independent film rentals of Cecil Starr, Circa 1977	30
Fig. 2.2	George Griffin at a group meeting in 1977 (Photos courtesy John Canemaker)	31
Fig. 2.3	Front cover of <i>FRAMES</i>	32
Fig. 2.4	Letter to Potential Contributors to <i>FRAMES</i>	35
Fig. 2.5	John Canemaker in 1986 (Photo Courtesy John Canemaker)	38

Fig. 2.6	Contact sheet with notes of photos from the “Indy Animator’s Meeting” at John Canemaker’s Apartment, 1977 (Courtesy John Canemaker)	39
Fig. 2.7	Promo card for International Animation Festival featuring Jean Marsh	42
Fig. 2.8	Frank Mouris with his Oscar (Top) (Photo by Susan Meiselas)	44
Fig. 2.9	Sequence from <i>Frank Film</i> , 1973 (Courtesy Frank Mouris)	45
Fig. 2.10	Frame from <i>Desire Pie</i> by Lisa Crafts, 1977. Courtesy Lisa Crafts	48
Fig. 2.11	Lisa Crafts by a lathe in her downtown loft (Photo by Ken Brown)	49
Fig. 2.12	Susan Pitt on the set of <i>Asparagus</i> . 1979 (Photo by Ken Brown)	50
Fig. 2.13	Still from <i>Everybody’s Pregnant</i> . 1997 (Courtesy Debra Solomon)	52
Fig. 2.14	The last page of “FRAMES,” listing the contributors to the book (Courtesy George Griffin)	54
Fig. 3.1	The Unisphere. Created by U.S. Steel for the 1964–1965 World’s Fair in Flushing, NY	58
Fig. 3.2	Covers of <i>Super8 Filmmaker</i> Volume 1, Number 1. 1972 and Volume 1, Number 2. 1973	64
Fig. 3.3	Left: Kit Laybourne, 1972. Right: Geraldine Laybourne, 1984 (Courtesy Kit Laybourne)	70
Fig. 3.4	Cover for the first edition of <i>Doing the Media</i> , 1972. Edited by Kit Laybourne (Courtesy Kit Laybourne)	71
Fig. 3.5	Promotion for the Oxberry 8. <i>Super 8 Filmmaker</i> Magazine. Volume 1, Number 1. 1972	75
Fig. 3.6	Howard Beckerman (Courtesy Howard Beckerman)	79
Fig. 3.7	Backstage Column June 8, 1989. Howard Beckerman (Courtesy Howard Beckerman)	90
Fig. 4.1	‘Cosmo T. Bird on a Harlem Rooftop.’ Concept art for unproduced animation, “Mr. Cool.” 1972 (Courtesy Jim Simon)	96
Fig. 4.2	Jim Simon at his studio circa 1978 (Courtesy Jim Simon)	97
Fig. 4.3	Promo card featuring Tee Collins at his studio circa 1972	105
Fig. 4.4	“Hallelujah.” Tee Collins. Oil on Canvas (Courtesy Dr. Barbara Collins)	106
Fig. 4.5	Tee Collins’ early beer commercial layout sketches. UPA’s influence is unmistakable (Courtesy Dr. Barbara Collins)	108
Fig. 4.6	Tee Collins’ early beer commercial layout sketches. (Courtesy Dr. Barbara Collins)	108

Fig. 4.7	Logo for TKT Films, Inc. Tee Collins was listed as a co-owner from 1960 to 1963. JU 2- 2808 was a phone number where the JU stood for Judson, the phone exchange around Times Square. Two-letter phone exchanges were being phased out starting in 1960, lending this letterhead an approximate date. Tee Collins lists TKT Films on his resume from 1960 to 1963 (Courtesy Dr. Barbara Collins)	109
Fig. 4.8	Cel from Wanda the Witch. Tee Collins in 1967. (He signed it just before he died in 2000). Courtesy Dr. Barbara Collins and CTW (©2025 Sesame Workshop®, Sesame Street®, and associated characters, trademarks and design elements are owned and licensed by Sesame Workshop. All Rights Reserved)	111
Fig. 4.9	Wanda the Witch. Tee Collins in 1967. Courtesy Dr. Barbara Collins and CTW (©2025 Sesame Workshop®, Sesame Street®, and associated characters, trademarks and design elements are owned and licensed by Sesame Workshop. All Rights Reserved)	112
Fig. 4.10	Letter by Tee Collins to his daughter, Barbara (Courtesy Dr. Barbara Collins and The Schomburg)	114
Fig. 4.11	Note the observation of dancing in the above table, as well as the disproportionate measurements of active movement in general	116
Fig. 4.12	Fold-out promo material for T. Collins, Inc. Circa 1973 (Courtesy Dr. Barbara Collins and The Schomburg)	118
Fig. 4.13	Detail of promotional brochure for Tee Collins Inc. circa 1973. The Schomburg Institute	119
Fig. 4.14	Letter of recommendation by Joan Ganz Cooney. The Schomburg Institute	120
Fig. 4.15	<i>Mr. Cool</i> (Courtesy of Jim Simon)	121
Fig. 4.16	Still frame from <i>I Can Remember</i> . 1972 by Jim Simon (©2025 Sesame Workshop®, Sesame Street®, and associated characters, trademarks and design elements are owned and licensed by Sesame Workshop. All Rights Reserved)	126
Fig. 4.17	Jim Simon's business card circa 1990 (Courtesy Jim Simon)	128
Fig. 5.1	Jane Dickson's computer-animated Spectacolor Board on Time's Square (Courtesy Jane Dickson)	138
Fig. 5.2	Cover illustration by Robert Tinney for Byte Magazine, January, 1980 (By permission)	142

Fig. 5.3	A sample of ASIFA EAST's aNYmator newsletters shows the transition from Dick Rauh to Linda Simensky as president in 1992 Note the progression of focus on computer animation (Courtesy Howard and Iris Beckerman Library Collection, Rowan University)	161
Fig. 6.1	Opening title card to Tony Conrad's film, ' <i>Flicker</i> '	172
Fig. 6.2	Frame from the <i>Tin Woodsman's Dream</i> . Harry Smith. 1967 (Courtesy of the Anthology Film Archive)	183
Fig. 6.3	Harry Smith with his exposure sheet for <i>Mahogonny</i> . c. 1975 (Courtesy of the Anthology Film Archive)	185
Fig. 6.4	Still frame of animation from the four-quadrant projection of <i>Mahogonny</i> (Courtesy of the Anthology Film Archive)	186
Fig. 6.5	M. Henry Jones. Promotional Booklet (Courtesy Rachel Amodeo)	189
Fig. 6.6	Snake Monkey Studios. 10th Street and Avenue A (Photos by Robby Gilbert. Courtesy of Rachel Amodeo)	190
Fig. 6.7	M Henry Jones' Fly's Eye photography. A board comprised of hundreds of bubble-shaped lenses in which multiple views of a subject could be inserted, giving the illusion of dimensional depth as a viewer passes (Courtesy Rachel Amodeo)	191
Fig. 6.8	L. Harry Smith and M Henry Jones. Circa 1980 (Courtesy Alan Ginsburg Estate, R. John Klacsmann, Archivist Anthology Film Archive. Photo by Robby Gilbert)	193
Fig. 6.9	Brooklyn Subway Station platform looking through to the other side. It is easy to see how the gaps in the wall create perfect conditions for a zoetrope	195
Fig. 6.10	The Q train arrives at the Dekalb Ave Station in Brooklyn. Brand's Masstransiscope can be seen from the right side of the train between Dekalb and the Manhattan Bridge	196
Fig. 6.11	Greg Barsamian stands before his latest project in his Williamsburg studio	200
Fig. 7.1	The intersection of Bleecker and Broadway (Photo by Robby Gilbert)	210
Fig. 7.2	Steve Oakes in the 1980s (Courtesy Steve Oakes)	213
Fig. 7.3	Left: The crew at BA circa 1986. Top Right: Frank Gresham. Bot. Right. Glen Claybrook (Courtesy Frank Gresham)	220
Fig. 7.4	Aurelio Voltaire	221

Fig. 7.5	Left: Frank Gresham on set. Right: Bart Mueller and Kurt Swanson preparing a costume (Courtesy Frank Gresham)	225
Fig. 7.6	A fax to Curious Pictures. 1993. Self-explanatory (Courtesy Frank Gresham)	235
Fig. 8.1	Unpublished sketch by John Hubley circa 1941 (Courtesy Emily Hubley)	239
Fig. 8.2	Yvette Kaplan. First Woman to be credited as an Animation Director on a feature film in the U.S. (Courtesy Yvette Kaplan)	241
Fig. 8.3	J.J. Sedelmaier and Yvette Kaplan. Society for Animation Studies Conference at Rowan University. 2023 (Photo by Robby Gilbert)	242
Fig. 8.4	Asifa East Newsletter Supplement	248
Fig. 8.5	R.O. Blechman's classic everyman character. Courtesy R.O. Blechman	251
Fig. 8.6	R.O. Blechman in his Connecticut studio in 2023. Photo by Robby Gilbert	254
Fig. 8.7	Ruthie Rosenfeld and Edmund McCarthy with their Emmy Award for <i>Skyline</i> . Courtesy Ruthie Rosenfeld	259
Fig. 8.8	Left to right: Vincent Cafarelli, Candy Kugel, Jan Svochak (Photo courtesy Candy Kugel)	261
Fig. 8.9	J.J. Sedelmaier in his White Plains Studio, 2023 (Photo by Robby Gilbert)	264
Fig. 8.10	Michael Sporn in 1987 (Courtesy Heidi Stallings)	265
Fig. 8.11	Maxine Fisher Ottawa, 1976 (Courtesy Maxine Fisher)	267
Fig. 8.12	This notice of appreciation was printed in <i>Animation Magazine</i> in December 1987. The names represent a large cohort of the animation community in the 1980s and '90s	268
Fig. 9.1	Mural on side of building. MOGUBGUB LTD. 6 East 46th Street circa 1968. Fred Mogubgub, President. Courtesy ASIFA East	276
Fig. 9.2	Exterior Plymptoons in June, 2023. Photo by Robby Gilbert	295
Fig. 9.3	Sketch for ASIFA (Courtesy Bill Plympton)	297
Fig. 9.4	Bill Plympton in his studio. 2023 (Photo by R. Gilbert)	299
Fig. 9.5	ASIFA East Newsletter, ANYMATOR. February, 1997	303
Fig. 9.6	ASIFA East Newsletter, ANYMATOR. February, 1997	306
Fig. 9.7	<i>Market</i> . Ralph Bakshi. Courtesy Ralph Bakshi	308
Fig. 10.1	Linda Simensky (Courtesy, Linda Simensky)	313
Fig. 10.2	Cable installation scheduling card. 1973	320