

# **‘animation beyond animation’**

## **a media-archaeological approach**

“A kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness.” (Charles Baudelaire)<sup>1</sup>

### **the situation**

Writing at the dawn of modernity, Baudelaire used an optical toy as a metaphor. Meanwhile, a century and a half later, handheld electronic devices are bringing the whole world into the palm of our hand, ready to be activated, brought to life by a simple touch of a finger. Since Baudelaire first used his metaphor, the fractals have multiplied phenomenally, as we are adapting ourselves to more and more audiovisual interfaces. We now live in hyper-kaleidoscopic times indeed, concentrating for a large part of the day on pixel configurations on a multitude of media. Since the digital turn, our attention is constantly being solicited by electronic stimuli such as a smart phone, tablet, television, internet, often all at once. The media that allow us our sense of autonomy, to be in touch with other people and to access all possible information all of the time, are also the media that want to monitor our behaviour, steer our attention and manipulate our interests. Algorithms are designed to track all our everyday communications and actions. We are internalising globalisation, and at the same time outsourcing our own memory and personal life in metaphorical clouds through online activities and via all kinds of social media. The dynamic that visually accompanies and also technologically underlies all these actions, is animation. The movement of pixels, the creation of a virtual realm, the agency that both stimulates and steers our interests: the impact of animation is no longer a metaphor, but a method that affects us in more ways than we realise.

The research in this publication spans approximately the period between the conference *Pervasive Animation* in 2007 and the publication of the book under the same title in 2013.<sup>2</sup> As Suzanne Buchan stated in the introduction of the conference:

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1992, p. 116.

“Artists increasingly incorporate animation in installations and exhibitions, architects use computer animation software to create narratives of space in time, and scientists use it to interpret abstract concepts for a breadth of industries ranging from biomedicine to nanoworlds.”

In 2004, cultural critic Norman Klein had already phrased it in a more dramatic way:

“Today, a much expanded animation is arguably the primary story grammar for the Electronic Baroque era. Smart bombs are essentially monitored through animation. The desktop on your computer screen is animated. Computer games are animated. The broad principle of user-friendly software is animation – to bring algorithms to life, to anthropomorphize data.”<sup>3</sup>

The leap from the refracted coloured pearls in a cardboard tube since the invention of the kaleidoscope in 1817, to the myriad of digital applications in games consoles and on computers is huge. And yet it might be a relevant one, to offer us some perspective on the technophiliac craze that we are surrounded by. Constantly retrieving information, being aware of every publication over the whole world at any time, is changing research experience and academic culture as well. All the information is out there, but how much of it is processed, and how much actually becomes shared knowledge, an active memory?

## **the question**

Our constant readapting to new technologies is also reflected in the contemporary art world, although the response there is often a paradoxical one. Opening up to the frenzy of moving images, musea and galleries tend to favour older techniques over works made with state of the art technology. After a century of disregard, animation is suddenly,

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Buchan (ed.), *Pervasive Animation*, AFI Film Readers, Routledge, London, 2013. The *Pervasive Animation* conference took place on 04-05/03/2007 at the Tate Modern, and was co-curated by Suzanne Buchan and Stuart Corner. At the time, the latter was curator of film at Tate, and the former reader in Animation Studies and director of the Animation Research Centre at the University College for the Creative Arts.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*, New Press, New York, London, 2004, p. 247. During the writing of this introductory chapter in 2013, the whole world was made aware of the far-reaching invasion of privacy by the N.S.A. (National Security Agency), with the collaboration of popular on-line services such as Google, Facebook and Yahoo. At the same time, the monitoring of the Internet traffic and use of social media by citizens again increased substantially.

finally embraced by the museum world, with a symptomatic preference for new work made with a naive, old-fashioned look: some of the most celebrated visual artists in the gallery circuit are working with Plasticine puppets, charcoal drawing, shadow play, or even classic full animation in the style of early Disney. Over the last decade, large thematic exhibitions that blend contemporary art with historical artefacts and optical illusions have also proven their popularity around the globe. But what is really at stake when animation leaves behind the limited confines of the cinema screen?

This research takes the occurrence of animation in the visual arts as a frame of reference. When animation surfaces in the white cube, artists and musea no longer simply offer the viewer something to look at, but place him or her inside a space that incites exploration. More than purely a filmic practice, animation needs for that matter to be understood as the staging of an agency: the manipulation of intervals, that happens not only between film frames, but also between images and objects in space. As the nineteenth-century optical toys already demonstrated, the animated image could only occur thanks to physical action and physiological response, mediated by the observer. The history of animation should therefore not be dissociated from larger developments within twentieth-century art. Even the genealogy of the museum, the parallel evolution of both architectural and technological strategies of visualisation and presentation, can be considered part of the history of animation. The question then imposes itself to what extent the practice of animation brings in its own set of 'problems' or paradigms, and whether these are really new, twentieth-century paradigms (related to the beginning of film history), or rather rooted in a further past.

The word 'beyond' in the title of this study alludes to the fact that animation has left its traditional manifestations, in the form film or television. The linear format of the film as a product is now often replaced with loops and other types of dynamic or even kinetic works in the context of contemporary art practices, as well as in electronic media and games. This dialectic between art and animation however already started long before the invention of film. To conceptualise this move of animation 'beyond animation', I suggest to return to the moment before animation became animation film, the period when it was not yet conventionalised by the industry into cartoons and puppet films, to the time when all the potential of the method was already there, and the interaction with other artistic disciplines was still a normal affair.

## **the method**

In the most substantial chapter of this publication I go back to the artistic circles that have formed Émile Cohl before he made the step to the film industry, an influence that kept on resonating throughout his work. A thorough reconsideration of the various achievements by this acknowledged pioneer who prototyped animation, does not only throw light on the avant-garde film practices that have followed, but also urges us to understand Cohl in a more complex way, whereas his oeuvre has all too often been reduced to his first, albeit fantastic film *Fantasmagorie* (1908). This return to the moment where all the potential of a prototype is still in place, brings us also further back. The parallel manifestations of both animation as an autonomous art, and the thematisation of optical technologies as a form of exhibition practice were both happening at the time when the notion of a 'museum' first developed. Before and along with the development of the magic lantern, diverse types of 'scripted' spaces for exhibition were already animating their viewers in the seventeenth century.

Such revaluation (or 'relativisation') of the notion of 'invention' leads towards media archaeology as a methodological framework. As Jonathan Crary elucidates in his book *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*, it is indeed relevant to go back to the invention of the kaleidoscope, as the inauguration of a new visual paradigm, one that leaves the concept of the camera and its renaissance perspective behind. Next to the steady expansion of interest in Animation Studies, the field of media archaeology has also blossomed over the last few years. Both approaches are adding important new dimensions to the academic study of audiovisual media. Although media archaeology is still identified more with academic writing than with creating or curating art, most scholars agree that media archeology is as much a practice as it is a theory, and that it can better be executed than constructed as a narrative.

## **the trajectory**

As a researcher in the arts, my work as a curator has been my central activity, working with artists and producing exhibitions. This has also led to the publication of several texts, some of which are comprised in this publication. But the exhibitions are the most important statements, as they were all conceived as visual essays that deal with topics such as the agency of the image, the history of museology and the role of the viewer/visitor. My way to determine and possibly define animation as it is 'taking place' in an exhibition context, is an understanding of the medium, not from a framework that

is either exclusively technological, theoretical or historical, but above all from a cultural one. This understanding is based on specific practices of a manipulated, 'synthetic' time and space experience, through the creation and presentation of artworks that rely on movement and change in the relationship between the work and the physical viewer, with the curator as an in-betweenener.

Although my work as a programmer for the IFFR (International Film Festival Rotterdam) and as a freelance curator offered ample opportunity for testing my ideas and putting them into practice, the research was framed in particular by an agreement with the M HKA (Museum of Contemporary Arts, Antwerp). Not only did they offer me a platform to produce approximately one exhibition per year, they also allowed me to introduce artists to their so-called Vrielynck collection, a singular ensemble of antique cameras, optical toys, film posters and a large amount of other cinematographic paraphernalia.<sup>4</sup> This has led to me curating the interventions of three artists on the collection, by respectively Julien Maire, Zoe Beloff and David Blair. Further collaboration with the museum instigated a whole variety of curatorial activities, from monographic presentations (Chris Marker) to thematic shows (*El Hotel Eléctrico*), from co-curating (*Animism*, with Anselm Franke) to contributing to a cluster of exhibitions (*Not Nothing*, part of a city project), and from developing an exhibition in consecutive chapters and on different locations (*Graphology*) to programming occasional screening, lectures or performances (*Graphology, Reality of the Lowest Rank* a. o.).<sup>5</sup>

### the mediation

Each project brought its own complexities in terms of space, logistics and budget as well as historical and intellectual backgrounds. Every location has its characteristics that

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<sup>4</sup> In 2003, the MuHKA acquired the 'guardianship rights' for the private collection of the late Robert Vrielynck, which the Flemish Community purchased after his demise. Robert Vrielynck (1933-2000) was 'the man with the camera,' a notary from Bruges who also taught at a film school for many years. Next to that, he was a member of the film commission, wrote a book on animated films (*De animatiefilm voor en na Disney*, 1981) headed the Belgian Animated Film Center (BAC) and published the magazine *Plateau*. See: Edwin Carels, "Het Museum met de camera's" in Dieter Roelstraete and Bart de Baere (eds.), *Jubilee*, collection catalogue M HKA, Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, 2007, and <http://ensembles.mhka.be/ensembles/collectie-vrielynck/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Staring Back: Chris Marker* (Antwerp, 2008); *Not Nothing*, part of *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (Mechelen, 2009); *Animism*, co-curated with Anselm Franke (Antwerp, 2010); *The Reality of the Lowest Rank – a Vision on Central Europe*, co-curated with Luc Tuymans and Tommie Simoons (Bruges, 2010-2011); *Julien Maire: Mixed Memory – Vrielynck Collection 1*, (Antwerp, 2011); *Graphology*, an exhibition project in chapters (Antwerp, 2011, London, 2012, Essex, 2012); *Zoe Beloff: The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff – Vrielynck Collection 2* (Antwerp, 2012); *David Blair: The Telepathic Motion Picture of The Lost Tribes – Vrielynck Collection 3* (Antwerp, 2013); *The Plateau Effect* (Ghent, 2013); *El Hotel Eléctrico* (Antwerp, 2014). For more details: see the captions that accompany the images inserted in this anthology.

imply different challenges and that inevitably have an influence on the outcome of a show. The creative control of a curator may thus appear in many respects at odds with the position of an autonomous artist, since every presentation has a specific context, with parameters changing every time a work is made public. The biggest difference is that a curator is not only a producer, but also and above all a mediator, a cultural broker who explores the potential in the interval between artist and institution, theory and practice, singularity and complexity. There are always so many unpredictable aspects to respond to as a curator, that a trajectory over a period of six years was impossible to predetermine. Taking my cue from Émile Cohl's early experiences among *Les Incohérents*, incoherence also became a deliberate *modus operandi* in my process. The texts that make up this anthology are written in different registers, differ strongly in size and their approach is not entirely uniform.

When asked what the research was about, my short answer always was that I was hoping that it would write itself, just like Cohl's *Fantasmagorie* is a film that seems to draw itself. This effectively happened and in different ways. I could work on a rich variety of projects, go to conferences and write articles, catalogue texts and academic essays, at times alternating and at times combining these forms of activity. The *Graphology* project for instance elaborated on the notion of *écriture automatique* both in the gallery and in the form of a book.<sup>6</sup>

Making things public is the essence of what a curator does, the practice each time happens within an specific context, presented for an audience which is also each time different. Similarly, six of the eight texts in this volume (excluding the introduction) have already been published.<sup>7</sup> Due to their specific purposes, they diverge in length,

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<sup>6</sup> Edwin Carels and Kate Macfarlane (eds.), *Graphology. Drawing from Automatism and Automation*, Aramér, Gent; Drawing Room, London, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Carels, "Biometry and Antibodies: Modernizing Animation, Animating Modernity" in Anselm Franke (ed.), *Animism, Volume 1*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2010, p. 57-74.

Edwin Carels, "Lightning Sketches" in Carels and Macfarlane, 2012, op. cit., p. 16-40.

Edwin Carels, "The Productivity of the Prototype: On Julien Maire's Cinema of Contraptions" in R. Vanderbeeken, C. Stalpaert, D. Despestel and B. Debackere (eds.), *Bastard or Playmate? Adapting Theatre, Mutating Media and Contemporary Performing Arts*, Amsterdam University Press, 2012, Amsterdam, p. 178-192.

Edwin Carels, "From the Ossuary: Animation and the *Danse Macabre*" in *TMG – Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis*, Volume 15, No. 1, Rotterdam, 2012, p. 25-42 (online publication).

Edwin Carels, "Spaces of Wonder: Animation and Museology" in Buchan, 2013, op. cit., p. 292-316.

Edwin Carels, "Revisiting Tom Tom: Performative Anamnesis and Autonomous Vision in Ken Jacobs' Appropriations of *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*" in Frederik Le Roy (ed.), *Foundations of Science* (forthcoming).

style and frames of reference. This volume does not represent a chronological order of these writings, nor a linear argumentation. The opening chapter is offering a historical framework on several levels, where the eight autonomous texts can be grafted upon. These individual texts should however be considered as snapshots, taken at varying moments in the course of the research. One text was conceived six years ago and only written over the last year, another text was published in a first version five years ago and is now thoroughly reworked. The rest came at various moments in-between.

### **the style**

Underneath this deliberate incoherence – a stylistic strategy that we borrow from Émile Cohl – hides nevertheless a logical and thought-through order, and even a hint at a chronology or evolution, from the *danse macabre*, to magic lantern slides, to the digital h(e)aven of *Second Life*. The first two texts mostly deal with animation in its prototypical phase; the next two with the industrialisation of animation along with other forms of reproduction; the following two texts share a focus on the museum and spatialisation of animation into for example installations; the final two texts both deal with animation, the afterlife of images and the art of memory. Some texts mirror themselves in others, some ideas resonate throughout, some contextual information is only provided in the introductory chapter, preceding the eight texts. Thematically each text offers an exploration of the wider meaning of the concept of animation, beyond the specific format of film. Stylistically, the prime ambition of these texts is to be informative rather than polemical. In accordance with my work as a curator, I find it essential that my writing, like an exhibition, is generous, offering a lot of material. This preferably happens without imposing an all too strict, predetermined statement, and without foregrounding my own role too much. Beyond this lengthy introductory chapter, the writing therefore avoids the first person singular. The rhythm of writing alternates considerably between the respective essays, and in some of them the composition is also more layered, than quick and to the point.

Just like an artist's aim is never to produce a final, last piece, but always the next one, there is no conclusion or recapitulating chapter to this compilation either. The information is shared in order to allow the visitor/reader to become a researcher in his own right, and develop a personal trajectory throughout the configuration. This

anthology can thus be read in any order of preference. As a curator essentially makes combinations of existing material, this combination of texts provides the backdrop to a hopefully stimulating collage of quotations. As a 'cultural animator' I also hope that in the intervals between these various references a new dynamic, a new set of connections can occur.

A curator is not per definition an academic, his main impact is situated in a different arena. The research, the collaborations with artists, and the '*ars combinatoria*' involved in the exhibitions, have delivered a kaleidoscopic set of results, ranging from presenting for the first time unattested optical discs from the historical cabinet of Joseph Plateau, to commissioning new exhibition projects on the basis of a collection of artefacts, from discovering a lost Émile Cohl film to disclosing a film by Chris Marker that was kept away from distribution for thirty years, and from introducing unseen drawings from the earliest moments in the careers of Sigmund Freud and the Brothers Quay to inviting an established filmmaker like Ken Jacobs to explore the museum as a new territory.

## **the movement**

In the consecutive sections of the introductory chapter, I will further elucidate on the aspect of curating as methodology (B1). Next comes a consideration on the cultural status of animation and its current revaluation in the framework of big art manifestations and exhibitions (B2). This leads to a historical outline of the different connotations and definitions of the term animation and what could be its most determining characteristic. As the concept is so crucial to our study, this is the most substantial section in the opening chapter (B3). The choice of media archaeology as a methodological framework that involves different, even contradictory approaches is also contextualised, along with a supplementary focus on the application of Aby Warburg's iconology to the field of animation (B4). The adaptation or implementation of more general concepts to the specific practices concerning the domain of curating animation are distilled into five key notions (B5). This is followed by a short introduction to each article and its original purpose (B6). A final section deals with the formal presentation of the research, both in the shape of this book and in the exhibition *El Hotel Eléctrico* at the M HKA (B7).

In the end, as film historian Donald Crafton underlines in his most recent book on performativity in and of animation, that animation "exists only now, when I see it; yet I



cannot go to where its creatures are, for there is no access to its space from ours except through vision.”<sup>8</sup> Animation is indeed first of all something to be experienced, it only exists between the eyes. It operates in the invisible realm of the interval. The experience of an exhibition, a film, a performance of even a single drawing cannot be matched with words. As Tate-director Chris Dercon once stated: “The most beautiful thing is the motion of a dancer in a museum.”<sup>9</sup> This study is focussing on the framing of movement, not so much in its historical development within the realm of narrative film, but through an investigation into the parameters of animation, the creation of an artificial realm in time and space. This is a study about ‘time taking place’, animation manifesting itself not simply on a two-dimensional screen, but as mediated in the space that it shares with a viewer.

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Quote taken from an interview on *De Zevende Dag*, VRT, 21/04/2013. Consulted via: <http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/videozone/programmas/dezevendedag/2.27800?video=1.1609866/>.