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Visual Animation:

Methods of Practice and Teaching

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Editorial

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hrsg. von Andrea Sabisch

Note/Preface

I dream in English, apparently I talk in my sleep in English, and my first thoughts when I wake up also come to me in English. Keeping all these factors in mind, it made sense to write the following text in English.

“The Art of the Interval”

‘Animation is the art of the interval. It all depends upon the eyes and the open mind of the viewer, the participation of each individual in the audience. It is a matter of spectatorship.’
(Carels, 2006:14)

As a widely known form of audio-visual entertainment, animation offers intriguing areas of investigation for art pedagogy students as it is closely linked to the world of youth culture. How can animation be approached in art lessons? Which aspects are relevant and why? What is animation? These are topics we will seek to address here, combining questions of animation theory with those of teaching practice in a productive way. This text results from a presentation held in early December 2014 in the Faculty of Art Pedagogy at the University of Hamburg as part of the lecture series *Visuelle Bildung II: Visuelle Animationen*. The questions raised in that forum included the following: ‘How can we evaluate animation methods between representation and effect, between figuration and visual representation and in which ways can we sound out and render animation visible in relation to art pedagogy?’

As a teaching practitioner in the field of visual communication design, I will reflect on my own practice as an educator in the hope that the resultant findings prove useful and relevant in relation to these questions. My aim will thus be to examine strategies of creation with a focus on various modes of interaction between individuals, courses, institutions, artists, teaching practitioners, academics, authors, industry partners and students. In short, I will be looking at animation as a collabora-

tive practice. When this process is pursued with an openness to unconventional collaboration-based approaches, projects emerge in which critical thinking through the practical art of making can be applied to test boundaries and to reach beyond them.

Instead of promoting a strictly self-centered individualistic approach, collaborative projects open discussion grounds for developing interdisciplinary models of moving image practice. Animation in its physical, virtual and hybrid forms stimulates and promotes critical debate. Thus, thinking and creating outside the field of mainstream animation can provide many excellent possibilities to 'workshop' beyond the frame. In this text, the term 'frame' will not only be used to define units of time, the border of a single image, the rim of a projection screen or the physical edge of film and video. It will also be employed to describe a certain state of mind (as in 'beyond the frame') that is open to interpretation and criticism. I consider this attitude to be crucial for my own production process. Therefore I embrace mistakes, glitches, even failures, allowing for a sense of confusion and misunderstanding as a means to design and test innovative opportunities and to define novel modes of engagement. Animated examples can be found on my website <http://martinabramkamp.com> in the moving image section.

How can we best begin to discuss teaching animation in the context of collaborative working methods? With the specifics of my area of practice in mind, I will focus on a variety of moving image productions to reflect on pedagogical strategies and to highlight learning processes. The work featured in this paper was only possible through joint efforts and open dialogue among colleagues, artists, curators, producers and students alike. Working together, these diverse actors were able to challenge received perceptions of animation and to sharpen their own audio-visual methods and skills.

But first, let us try to gain some theoretical and phenomenological foothold in the field where this practice takes place.

Following this discussion, I will present three examples that reflect collaboration in animation education to highlight requirements, failures and opportunities encountered in the process of production.

Ubiquity

From phone displays to public transport information boards, it seems at times as if we are ceaselessly surrounded by moving images. Overtaxing as this may sometimes feel, the rise of animation as a ubiquitous information transmitter in the visual communication industry opens up possibilities to explore and test alternatives of presentation and communication through experimentation. And these possibilities can also be brought into the field of education where we may evaluate and analyse various creative approaches. This is anything but simple. To emphasise the complexity (and the richness) of the situation we confront, I have drawn up a list of words in random order that – to my mind – describe, define, contextualise and connect directly to animation. This list serves as a personal reflection of an ongoing thought and discussion process. It can be seen as an invitation – at once figurative and textual – to join me in exploring a stunningly complex field that is constantly expanding and evolving.

illusion time slice movement pervasive perception mode technique full limited genre art form category style ascendant pure alteration digital cinema analogue 2D dream imagination television internet career entertainment hybrid experimental narration avant-garde graphic tablet render culture cartoon cel system transformation phi beta phenomenon theory research anthropomorphism traditional planar pegbar plasmatic fantasy purpose inspiration multiplicity persistence flicker fusion practice post production CGI magical trick audio visual stimuli wonder shock erasure lost paint sand claymation maquette manipulation 360 projection flux unrest signification workflow simulation social cross media shift debate immersion plot spectator practitioner experience virtual reality feature remix talent scratch enchantment naïve curious secretive realism formalism commercial computer program enterprise hyper aesthetics abstraction consumer underground company technology science metaphor pre-viz authorship screen series fold film making platform market dot pixel line colour layer model puppet Other theme composition squash stretch appeal past present future robotics discipline creation loop blur tracking memory medium team affect fact exposure critical engagement drawn GIF props language stereoscopic indexical articulation value truth fan base action shot communication rules inventor adaptation representation power treatment rhythm video content scriptwriter screenplay knowledge innovation personal generalist reflective timing sequential specialist frame information mediation games mapping arcs anticipation interactive promotion analysis power straight-ahead tradition advertising agency branch music target audience director set animatronics photography responsibility politics review moral broadcast standards concrete specific type strata-cut kinetic process privileged instance in-between rapid head mounted display device direct consecutive fleeting

palpable illusive object integrated thaumatrope space replacement method pinscreen gender artefact dynamic material moving image interpretation anime intervals optical toys physical kinegram inquiry encounter stroboscope response observer context topicality society studios anachronistic aura result freedom ethnicity background character design scenario exhibition foley artist augmented expanded effect heterotopia 3D rigging texture shading user collective interdisciplinary recognisable hidden data record discursive concept essence connection studies approach mash-up stop-motion capture borders rotoscoping academia multipurpose boil original applied craft vocational industry links workshop diversity feeling watching speed thinking education diorama argumentation vector staging ostranenie principles critical juxtaposition bitmap observation tension propaganda all-rounder profession footage network salary aim philosophy history speed dimensions apps presence protean reaction origin resolution causality heuritic emotion vocabulary story board field progression meme hand-made requirements generation collaboration mission reception skill imitation cut-out value qualification performance creativity mentor reader flip-book subject terminology boundaries senses focus visibility influence architecture worlds software environment hardware pipeline infinite variety mimesis diegesis uncanny distribution merchandising product sound pose-to-pose zoetrope phenakistoscope engagement praxinoscope curator impact access machinima artificial pixilation rubber-hose cycle mainstream show-reel tool live-action camera showcase montage structure recipient fiction awards symbolism project idea development glitch dialogue shapes empathy choreography identity conflict feminism code hierarchy criticism contemporary stitching atmosphere text synergy censorship copyright vision version participation exaggeration light

Animation

It is not easy to discuss ideas about a topic that in itself is so difficult to define. Previous attempts to develop a precise definition of animation reveal just how protean a field it is. One of the earlier key definitions of an established organisation in the field can be found on the website of the Association of International Film Animation (ASIFA). Here animation is summarized simply as not 'live-action': 'The art of animation is the creation of moving images through the manipulation of all varieties of techniques apart from live action methods.' (ASIFA, 2015)¹

From the 1960s onwards, a combination of several factors has contributed to a steady rise in the visibility, access, documentation and seriousness regarding all matters related to animation. Academic research and critical evaluation increased our understanding of the historical, cultural and social context of animation. In the mid-1970s, organisations like ACM SIGGRAPH (short for Association for Computing Machinery Special Interest Group on Graphics and Interactive Techniques) emerged, embracing specific fields of interest and organizing conferences with a focus on computer-generated animation. (Furniss, 1998:4)

In 1992 at the fourth Society for Animation Studies conference at CalArts in California, Phil Denslow challenged the need for a stable definition, as 'all definitions of animation have to be rethought in the context of changing technology.' (Denslow, 1997:2)

All this discussion opened up funding opportunities for further academic research while simultaneously increasing public interest. The number of international animation festivals and conferences grew rapidly over the past decades, establishing platforms for exchange and promoting extensive animation programs. As a result, the number of specific program categories in the field steadily increased as did paper presentations, publications, panel discussions and awards ceremonies.

Today, artistically, academically and commercially, the field of

animation is booming and there are a great number of well-established annual events taking place worldwide.

‘With the future digitalization of all media, all forms of production will perhaps be as much animation as anything else.’ (Denslow, 1997:4)

With the rapid rise of digital technology distinctions between animation and live-action have started to fade to such an extent that they are becoming less apparent. In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich points out that digital film should be regarded as the connecting link between animation and live-action. ‘Now we can finally answer the question “What is digital cinema?” Digital cinema is a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements. Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become one particular case of animation.’ (Manovich, 2001:302)

The visual effects industry makes use of the digital processes to simulate reality in such a manner that it is often no longer possible to clearly define the borders of what is filmed in live action and in real time in comparison to shots created and composed on an entirely digital basis. The production *The Third & The Seventh* (2010) by Alex Roman serves as a great example, since the film looks like a meticulously edited live action film recorded in real time in the first instance. However the ‘making of’ or ‘compositing breakdown’ reveals that the entire content has been composed and stitched together with image library material ‘found’ online and magically transformed in various post-production processes. In digital cinema ‘invisible effects’ create illusions of realism where every single image runs through a series of multifold manipulation processes that simulate traditional film language. As a consequence, traditional hierarchies in production processes are shifting. The gap that rendered live action filmmaking superior to animation is slowly vanishing as there is a clear and growing dependency in digital cinema on moving image processes that create illusions of reality.

Giannalberto Bendazzi, film critic and former visiting professor in animation history at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, summed up years of discussions on animation in his essay *Defining Animation - A Proposal*. This work bore the telling subtitle *Animation as a compromise between technology and mentality*.

‘Animation is everything that people have called animation in the different historical periods.

It refers to the attitudes maintained throughout the various time periods by specialists in the sector from all over the world – diverse in culture and political and social conditions, but in agreement in their opinions. This tells us that a language called animation exists as an autonomous form of art, with its own role and space. This also tells us that animation has its own place in history, just like any other relevant human activity.’ (Bendazzi, 2007)

This passage emphasises that definitions evolve in the same way as culture and technology. They are necessary to set parameters that are essential for evaluation and at the same time they feed directly into a continuously evolving discussion in the field. Thus it is important to keep a critical dialogue alive by continuing to ask questions which then makes room for new interpretations and speculations.

Visual Animation

In the context of the lecture series *Visuelle Bildung II: Visuelle Animationen*, ‘... animations are seen as procedures linking objects and imaginations. Visual animation stages movement in and between images. It guides our view, perception and affect. The spectrum of presentation techniques in animation extends from drawn series of image variations to hand-crafted three dimensionally arranged object compositions to edited film sequences. A unique feature of visual animation is its capacity to apply images and other modes of articulation, to combine visual transitions and possibilities of connections

and consequently to align subjects. Animations organise our viewing experience appropriately. While textual patterns of animation in the form of action-oriented narratives are already established, possibilities of combination, entanglement and shift through visual animation still have to be researched.’ (Sabisch/Zahn, 2014)

Animation’s increasing visibility and ubiquity through applications of new digital technology are provoking questions about the definition of animation, its constituents, boundaries, applications and influences. *Pervasive Animation*, a symposium at the Tate Modern in London, in part responded to this extraordinary growth in the animated image stating that: ‘... the uses of animation are no longer exclusive to cinema, and animation’s origins in pre-cinematic optical experiments through avant-garde experimental film continue to evolve in fascinating ways. 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 nano-worlds.’ (Tate, 2007)

Building on established narrative possibilities and traditional strands of animation, the future offers exciting possibilities of productions to explore alternative directions. Border cases of experimentation with focus on the in-between can activate radical ways of reading audio-visual information as every little dot; every discrete image and image component can be used consciously to manipulate the viewer’s consciousness.

Perception in Flux

‘Flux is the capacity for change’ (Chimero, 2013)

As the universe is expanding we are racing through space. The notion of movement is within everything. This is reflected in the proliferation of digital communication technology linked directly to the increased pace of consumerism. The amount and speed at which audio-visual content is uploaded, con-

sumed and shared online is intensifying as never before. Research analysis published in 2015 by Microsoft links decreases in the attention span of younger audiences with multi-screening behaviour and the use of shorter and more compact information formats. Under the title: *How does digital affect Canadian attention span?*, the report reveals a shift in viewing habits while highlighting effects on users based on the constantly increasing upload of information shared via social media platforms. (Microsoft, 2015)

How should we react to this situation? We have to remind ourselves that the self-reflective mind has always been in flux, analysing information and evaluating its own position in time and space. As we think in words, we picture situations in our imagination. By writing down selected words and phrases we are able to capture inner thoughts and feelings, while reading allows us to expand our field of inner vision. Through communication we are able to enhance knowledge, while the understanding and effective use of language enables us to shape the world that surrounds us.

The cliché that one picture is worth a thousand words reflects the power of visualising ideas through images. Images aid our understanding by presenting information quickly, clearly and concisely. Effective illustrations enable us to use fewer words than otherwise would be needed. Similar to active processes of thought, animation brings images to life.

Where time and space provide key aspects to explore concepts of movement, the audience's willingness to view and accept the presented audio-visual data as credible is essential. The moment of reception therefore can be recognised as a distribution of knowledge that hinges on some form of collaboration between the director and the audience.

In most cases we, as spectators, are physically distanced from the projection unless we explore the world of virtual reality through the use of headset devices such as Oculus Rift that enable the user to immerse themselves in artificial worlds. The moving image can be regarded as a physical but at the same

time 'virtual' event. We 'read' audio-visual information while our bodies relax in a realm of safe passivity, typified by a relaxed seated posture and a habitual awareness of the space which separates our eyes from the images on the screen. Although engaged with the physical aspects of watching all manner of projections on screens, spectators are never in direct danger and certainly not mortal danger, unless they succumb to the temptation to focus on their handheld devices instead of watching the road ahead while driving or walking outside with their headphones on. Still the profound impact of moving images on the human psyche can affect body and mind immediately and long after a given film has finished. In filmmaking specific editing processes can influence our reactions and emotions as much as the content of the images and the sound itself. Part of the attraction of moving image sequences lies in the vast possibilities they possess to entertain, engage and even manipulate the audience on physical and mental levels. In extreme cases this can lead to physical overreactions in the body, evidenced in increased heart rates and surges of adrenalin as viewers 'experience' excitement, anxiety, and fear, while, for example watching action or horror sequences. When we are presented with something that produces a confused state of mind we may also feel insecure. Often in reaction to such confusion, we may seek to reject the disorder by 'making sense' of what we see, trying to find some form of link, pattern or explanation that enables us to avoid getting lost while processing audio-visual information that would otherwise overwhelm us. We as the audience have the choice to disconnect by closing our eyes, turning away, walking out, or simply switching off the monitor. However, changes in technology and viewing habits make such decisions to disengage increasingly difficult. Accessing and watching moving image sequences on demand whenever we want and wherever we are is becoming easier and easier. Traveling through big cities with a mind that is open to the information displays one encounters reveals the intensity and scale of information we actually are exposed to while on the move. There is a bom-

bardment of moving images – from health and safety information displays in public transport facilities to commercial advertising endlessly repeating the same content on portrait format screens fleeting past the escalators. At times it feels like I am confronted with a real dilemma myself as I promote, teach and create work that feeds directly into this world of what I would call ‘passive stimulation exposure’. As members of a mindful, cooperative and social species, one assumes the majority of us should be aware, open and able to deal with these changes. But how can we effectively engage young talents in critical processes of thinking and making regarding developments that are constantly challenging and changing visual perception and verge on overwhelming us?

Speaking of Screens: Exposure

‘The typical modern human is characterized by life under the dictatorship of the screen.’ (Virilio, 1995 c:154)

The omnipresence of the screen was triggered by a technological shift from analogue to digital that enhanced the availability of the moving image in all areas of digital life, from virtual retinal displays to the vast extremes of Imax high definition cinema screen formats combined with digital surround sound systems to the sensory overload of 4d-effect simulations in custom-built theatres. As screen users take on the disparate roles of viewers, creators, manipulators and judges, their every move is simultaneously followed, recorded and analysed to create statistics of behaviour that are added to usage updates. Moving image success stories are reflected in the number of views and ‘likes’ attached to social media platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo and Twitter. Developments in stereoscopy, 3d projections and tangible holographic experiments reveal profound changes in the very nature of the screen itself. Despite being spatially absent, we are able to communicate directly with each other via linked digital devices. Immersion in cyberspace via virtual reality platforms enables computer users to

engage in communication and interaction by exploring space beyond the screen where digital bodies act as symbolic entities defying spatial distances and time shifts.

With increasing ease, we are exploring and navigating through a world where virtual objects represent the user as an avatar. At the same time, virtual personae – either in relation to gaming or as alter egos – reflect our increased interest in becoming part of the digital world that surrounds us.

In *Blinded by the (Speed of) Light* (2000) Scott McQuire points to Paul Virilio's argument "that the current "crisis" of culture is born of a fundamental loss of orientation, and, ultimately, a loss of properly human measure." (McQuire, 2000:146)

Questions arise as to what happens if we get lost in the space beyond the screen where communication and interaction rely on digital data representation.

In the following sections the focus will shift to the practical side of creation through participation in animation introducing working methods that hold potential for further research and use in art education.

Models of Collaboration

In the mainstream industry of animated feature film productions, TV series, advertising, music videos, games development and screen design, animation is generally regarded as a collaborative profession. Animators work in teams with other industry professionals such as producers, directors, art directors, designers, editors, writers, sound designers, actors, architects and compositing and special effect artists covering one specific or multiple roles to create work that will inform, enlighten, entertain, engage, challenge and at times frustrate the public. Regularly employed and freelance professionals work side by side in clearly defined roles hired by established animation companies like Disney, Pixar and Dreamworks or television channels like Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon. Established structures within animation and visual effects work

pipelines mirror hierarchic environments designed to increase efficiency in the industrial process of production.²

Factory-like scenarios with highly specific roles and division of labour contrast with smaller production houses, studios or collectives working on smaller budgets where each individual involved handles more diverse tasks.

The vocational position of the regularly employed or freelancing specialist is most starkly contrasted by the all-rounder – the one-man/woman band, individual animator or animation artist, who is in control and in charge of several or even all parts of the production process. The spectrum ranges from established artists like Bill Plympton, David O'Reilly, Julia Pott and Don Hertzfeldt, who support their own work through commercial or culturally funded schemes and internet platforms like Kickstarter to create their own visions with a distinct and often recognisable style, to another extreme, the animation enthusiasts, the 'prosumers', consumers who know how to use new technology in sophisticated, often semi-professional ways in their free time but who are not earning their main income from animation.

The emphasis in this investigation is on collaborations in the field of education that share this type of passion but are perceived as interdisciplinary in their nature. These are collaborations that combine different approaches of thinking and making with an interest in animation as the binding link to communicate ideas and to create visions through dialogues by challenging their audiences' perception and by pushing boundaries.³

When Kitten become Cats: Live Projects

'A deep and thoroughgoing analysis of the many contexts in which we can understand animation (and understand through animation) necessarily means examining how animation is taught as a practice and a profession, but also means exploring its theoretical, philosophical and historical foundations

and recognizing its essentially interdisciplinary nature.’ (Ward, 2013:335)

‘Live projects’ - collaboration with artists, industry clients and potential future employers - have become a core component of the curriculum for courses teaching animation. Whilst such projects create opportunities for students to work in a ‘real’ professional context, they also provide a framework of flexibility and innovation, which challenges young animators and facilitates experimental work. Live projects create dialogues between different generations of artists, producers and filmmakers where students have to make critical decisions, while facing up to clients’ and collaborators’ expectations. On this basis unique projects emerge where academic teams join forces with professionals to enhance students’ experience outside their comfort zones and expectations. To be able to realise these possibilities we as educators have to work around the curriculum by being spontaneous, inventive and not constrained by a system heavily influenced by formal, mark-orientated assessments.

Projects as such present great opportunities to challenge perception of established concepts of mainstream animation and create material that may be abstract or hard to explain, but at the same time be rich in content and provide fertile ground for further processing and improvisation. It is precisely through the co-operative participation and interactive engagement inherent in project work that testing, trashing and refashioning of moving images are enabled, indeed are necessitated. How do we approach and envision such forms of collaboration?

The following three examples of interdisciplinary collaboration projects will highlight different strategies of working with students based on my own experiences as a teaching practitioner. The focus will lie on a selection of moving image productions that demanded certain levels of openness and willingness to experiment and to embrace critical and innovative approaches to visual animation. In recounting these experiences, I will delineate the requirements, failures and opportunities encountered in the process of production.

First Example

expanded vision / translation of sound



'Roadrunner' Sinfonietta group project; Andy Baker, Daniel Britt, Asuza Nakagawa; Kingston University 2008

As part of the 40th anniversary celebration of the London Sinfonietta in 2008, 18 third-year students of the Illustration Animation BA (Hons) course from Kingston University were invited to explore composer John Adam's *Chamber Symphony*, in particular the last movement entitled *Roadrunner*, which was directly inspired by the energy of cartoon music. This project marked our third collaboration with the London Sinfonietta, a British chamber orchestra specialising in performing contemporary classical music. The brief was to create ideas for short animations, while working in teams and with a 'real' client. One visual requirement of this brief was to use three-dimensional structures, objects or surfaces onto which the moving images would be projected. This criterion reflected discussed strategies in connection with ideas of 'expanded cinema', whereby the space of perception is activated through physical intervention.

The brief called on students to think in terms of non-narrative structure, pushing the space of perception, applying pattern and rhythm, and challenging the audience. With an empha-

sis on performance, they were asked to create alternative perspectives of filmmaking by exploring live-action through documentation of rehearsals, interviews with members of the orchestra, and an in-depth investigation into the musical score itself. After pitching their ideas based on research that involved abstract, performative, theatrical and technical exploration of the topic to a committee of organisers of the event and members of the orchestra, five selected group projects went into production. Inspired by underlying mathematical equations defining the musical score, one group decided to experiment with simple animated loops being projected on tetrahedrons, three-dimensional shapes made of four equilateral triangles, as seen in the production still above. Further research led them to build an oversized model of a mirrored kaleidoscope in the moving image studio that allowed them to create and simultaneously record movement based on single frames of abstract forms reforming into unique unities of colour and shapes inside the object when spun on its axis. Individual sequences of animated loops in combination with filmed live action footage of extreme close ups of musicians were placed into a grid of triangular frames, replicating visual effects of a kaleidoscopic visions in the editing process with emphasis on repetition instead of linear events.

Re-filmed extracts of animated sequences from all five groups were incorporated in the live performance of John Adam's piece as it was performed in the Queen Elisabeth Hall in London in December 2008. Approximately seven minutes of experimental moving image work were projected onto three screens behind the London Sinfonietta Orchestra as they played the last movement of the *Chamber Symphony*. On the evening of the performance, members of the public were able to walk through installations of multiple projections of animation on three-dimensional objects in the foyer of the concert hall, while an outside projection of the student work running on a loop was clearly visible even from the north side of the Thames. The experimental nature of this project allowed students to think beyond commercial animation to concentrate

on challenging and risk-taking adventures. With this approach, they were able to push the boundaries of moving imagery with images projected on sculptures and exhibited in a performative way.

Second Example

art exhibition / motivation of a take-over



'undoubtedly light / unzweifelhaft licht' Kunstverein Kassel group project; Sher-ee Betz, Karolina Chyzewska, Evgenia Gostrer, Ilki Kocer, Nils Knoblich, Daniel van Westen, Fabian Koppenhoefer, Federico Martin, Maurice Quentin, Franka Sachse, Dennis Stein-Schomburg, David Voigt; Kunsthochschule Kassel 2011

In December 2010 *undoubtedly light/unzweifelhaft licht*, an animation compilation of 10 sequences, was created in the temporary exhibition *'undoubtedly/unzweifelhaft'* by Slawomir Elsner and Martin Werthmann in the exhibition space of the Kunstverein Kassel, which is located in the Fridericianum building in Kassel. 12 students from the visual communication design department at the School of Art and Design in Kassel agreed to be locked in the exhibition space over the course of one night and use that time to set ideas into motion based on and inspired directly by the exhibited work of the two artists. The students' backgrounds varied in years of study and subject orientation, including disciplines such as animation, photography, comic, film and new media.

The material for the three-and-a-half-minute long film was shot in approximately 8 hours. Long-exposure light drawings were created using long-exposure photography in digital SLR cameras. The process involves pointing light towards the camera or illuminating objects or moving the camera itself. Contours of abstract shapes, geometric forms, basic letters and simple objects are repeatedly traced for the length of several seconds in front of the camera. Torches, bicycle and laser lights guided by the hands of animators serve as key drawing or painting tools. This form of chronological working from one image to the next in the manner of a 'straight-ahead' animation technique relies on estimations of directions and actions involved. The key is to perform fast repetitive movements, with the aim of eliminating nearly all traces of human interaction and revealing only illuminated lines of colour caught on the monitor or display screen. Unique images are created that simply can't be replicated if lost in contrast to images drawn on paper, for example. This specific stop-motion technique requires concentrated teamwork and team spirit. It demands an inventive use of light sources in space while painting with light directly into each individual photograph.⁴ *Undoubtedly light* was screened in February 2011 at 'Trickreich 11' in Kassel and since then has been presented worldwide at various festivals. It serves as a great example of individual talents spontaneously joining forces in small groups to explore animation-specific processes of creation under time pressure in an unusual environment.

Third Example

visual translation / alternative routes of adaptation in literature



'The Brooms' Random House group project; Alice Shuaiting Chen, Linnea Haviland, Caffrey Minjeong Kim, Lauren Wolosczzuk-Veevers, May Johananoff; Kingston University 2015

In the autumn of 2010, Vintage Publishing as part of Random House Group joined forces exclusively with the Illustration Animation BA (Hons) course at Kingston University as a live project collaboration partner. The initial task was to produce a selection of one-minute animated short films on an annual basis that would be shown online to promote the launch of the book of an established author selected by the publisher. Since the start of this co-operation, students have been introduced to the work of world famous authors including Salman Rushdie, Misha Glenny, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Jonas Karlsson and Mark Haddon. Whilst such projects create opportunities for young talents to work in a 'real' professional context by meeting and presenting to 'the client', they also provide a framework of flexibility and innovation. This facilitates a variety of different work methods and has the particular benefit of allowing students to explore, test and challenge established forms of film narration. Since the start of this collaboration, the Random House live projects have developed concepts of adaptation by co-operatively validating, analysing and negotiating moving image in the context of written words. The adaptation of literary sources into audio-visual, time-based

moving image projects involves processes of editing and shortening to emphasize, question and enhance the meaning of the text. It also requires analytical thinking based on the evaluation of written information so that representative images can be created that reflect and challenge established forms of narration. Animation can be used to present quotations in title sequences and credits, for live recordings in lip-synchronisation or to explore alternatives in narrative storytelling and creative writing in short films. It can also expand into areas of new media through the inventive use of text in filmmaking, game development, and contemporary performance culture. Transfers of written and spoken language into moving image can be found in various established forms of practice in the fields of filmmaking and animation. A large percentage of narrative storytelling in animation is based on adaptations of fictional and non-fictional storylines. From folk and fairy tales and ancient myths to personal, autobiographical stories, the possibilities are endless. Exploring alternative routes of adaptation can also diminish resistance to what students often view as the ‘necessary evil of writing’ by opening up debates about the ‘translation’ of the written word into audio-visual information data. This involves taking a view of language as a system of codes and conventions that can be challenged and creatively transformed in the process of communication through animation. In the autumn term of 2014, a group of 20 third-year animators were introduced to an extract of the book *The Room* by Jonas Karlsson to be published in spring 2015. Doodles, scribbled fragments of information used in office environments, served as the key inspiration for one group of five students in reference to a specific section of the given text where a group of co-workers meets in the office kitchen to discuss the mental stage of the protagonist. In the final animation the action of loosely drawn and animated characters gets increasingly disrupted by an invisible hand-scribbling on top of the action and gradually covering the pictorial content with an array of fragmented information consisting of words, numbers and erratic lines as seen in the image above.

There is a general tendency for art and design students to draw and to concentrate on visual representation rather than on writing. Setting an existing source of written information into motion requires creative thinking and making (in the sense of producing). It also often requires an open-minded attitude for interaction and interdisciplinary modes of working. Most of all, it relies on the motivational drive to utilise somebody else's work as a source for testing boundaries of perception. The filmmaker takes on the role of an interpreter, exploring an external source of ideas to create his own vision. Retrospective reflection on the main objectives in this specific 'live project' revealed an increase in complex critical judgement, practical skills and intellectual breadth, which enabled students to question concepts of authenticity and to participate in debates about authorship.

The intention of the Random House projects is to reflect on the possibilities of interpretation of literature by encouraging students to explore and test the unexpected. By empathising with the authors whose work they promote, students influence their own and their peers' ways of working. They reflect on storylines and responding to each other's suggestions and visions until ultimately they take over the role of authors themselves.

Allowing students to think and act as 'authors' will open space for their own visions, to reflect their worlds and their experiences based on personal feelings and thoughts. We believe that you learn best by trying things out and experiencing them for yourself. We call this hands-on approach 'thinking through making', confirming Paul Ward's 'ways in which thinking through animation as a process plays a part in a truly interdisciplinary model of teaching'. (Ward, 2013:331)

This adventure of transformation from a string of words into moving images involves a kind of alchemy that can lift the spirits of both students and viewers. We animate to capture and filter interest. At the same time we discover new knowledge and develop further constructive criticism, diverting inter-

pretation into invention as we find ways to communicate our visions effectively by affecting each other.

Reflection

The three examples presented here reflect a wide diversity of creative processes that were only made possible through teamwork and constant rethinking and refashioning of strategies – in teaching and in learning – where alternative directions of working are embraced in the field of animation. We shift the focus away from an individualistic work attitude by encouraging young talents to connect through dialogue and joint decision-making processes while facing challenges together.

What similarities and differences can we see in these projects? As live projects, the Sinfonietta and Random House projects at Kingston University were aligned over periods of approximately five to seven weeks in autumn terms, supported mainly by two members of staff. As already pointed out, key aims of live projects involve engagement with outside forces, testing and applying abstract, experimental and non-narrative filmmaking techniques to explore alternative routes of moving image productions. On these journeys, social and cultural awareness and an understanding for developments outside mainstream expectations can be tested in the context of requirements, clients' feedback and the viewers' responses. Critical debates encourage students to improvise using animated tests based on loops, actions than can be played repeatedly with focus on fragmented movement and form rather than on the story itself. In weekly group tutorials and regular feedback sessions, key requirements to monitor and guide the groups and individual students through the processes of production are usually pursued through self-, peer- and tutor-evaluation. This form of monitoring enhances understanding of strengths and weaknesses in individual and group performances. Interim assessments serve as cut-off points, whereas in final critiques

the focus lies on selective research, visual judgement and decision-making skills in management and organisation of projects including critical, conceptual and aesthetic production issues. Students explore specialist roles within production processes that mirror industry procedures and simulate professional work scenarios. However, they are encouraged not to replicate structures of hierarchy but instead are guided to interact equally, each as artists in their own right, claiming common ownership of the work that is created. The final outcome is marked, judged and promoted by the academic team and live project partners. In student feedback sheets, comments regularly refer to an increase in professional competence and individual abilities when working in a group.

In contrast to these series of projects, the main material for the ‘undoubtedly light’ project produced at the School of Art and Design in Kassel was created in a period of a few hours. The overall production process from first discussion rounds of a possible collaboration to the final film edit covered a time span of less than ten days. As described earlier, the aim of this one-off project was to explore objects in a specific location over the length of one night. Students created short abstract sequences inspired by the exhibited artefacts through the use of one specific animation technique that relied heavily on collaborative working methods. The process of grouping was fluid and varied from smaller teams working in pairs to the entire group creating visuals together. Communication processes and dialogues evolved ad hoc. The main emphasis was on testing and pushing ideas based on simple contexts while working under time pressure outside the usual realm of the teaching studio. The ‘once-in-a-life-time opportunity’ spurred everyone’s enthusiasm. The successful ‘invasion’ was only possible because everyone involved worked hand in hand, creating sequences on the spot while simultaneously motivating the others in the cohort to push ideas further and make the most of the short time available. As instigator of this project, I worked in partnership with the cohort throughout the night. This form

of creative freedom and spontaneous exchange is rather unusual in the context of teaching as it relies heavily on improvisation. In this context, the key emphasis was not on marks.

In retrospect, all three projects flourished in similar ways by embracing peer learning, through constant reinvention and redefinition of divergent thinking and making, and through the use of open dialogues and professional communication processes. The key differences between the projects were found in the assessment and evaluation procedures that were used.

The power of communication lies in the exchange of energy while a level of trust is built guided by similar interests and curiosity. Difficulties encountered in the process reveal issues regarding organisation, communication, sharing of workload, responsibilities, role assignments with strong emphasis on evaluation procedures and the marking process. When it comes to the evaluation of individual performance, collaborative work assessment procedures can entail substantial challenges in academic fields that are highly influenced by marks. Students usually measure creative development as a reflection of their own personal journeys as realised in the work they have created in the learning process.

Animation students in Kassel are generally less focused on marks as they receive verbal or written comments and feedback rather than marks for specific projects or assignments. There is an emphasis on the final exam where they will receive one mark representing five years' worth of study. In comparison, the creative progress of Kingston University students is recorded and can be tracked via a detailed marking system throughout their entire study time on the BA Illustration Animation course. We have to remember that the cost of studying in Great Britain is based on an annual system where fees of £9,000.00 cover three terms when studying on a BA program. Although study fees in Germany are significantly lower, most students also rely on bank loans or part-time work while studying to cover costs. Substantial costs that accumulate into debts raise the pressure and expectations from all sides

involved, as students demand to get their money's worth of education while monitoring their own progress as reflected in creative outcomes graded in marks.

Marks given in assessments are based on specifically set module objectives and aims. In self-assessment forms, students reflect on project requirements and objectives, referencing different aspects they encountered along their journey such as professional requirements, in-depth evaluation of individual strengths and weaknesses and peer performance. Collaborative projects can challenge individualisation on many levels as the evaluation system based on marks influences expectations and aspirations. Problems can arise when group allocations or assigned professional roles within the individual groups reveal disparities in abilities or clashes of personalities. As a result, dynamics and work commitments within groups can shift quite substantially when envisaged measures or targets are not met. Although educational institutions vary greatly in their ways of marking and thus of evaluating the success or failure of the outcome, the real value of working collaboratively lies in the experience of taking part as an individual in a team endeavour. Student experiences in collaborative working situations can run the gamut from moments of confusion and tension to focused participation and real excitement when confronted by challenges. As a result, the dynamics within teams change in any manner of ways, taking students from points of total communication breakdown to the successful progression into professional career relationships that sometimes give rise to the subsequent formation of small studios or collectives like THISISIT Collective or Moth Collective while still at university.

The presented examples allowed most students to achieve highly technical moving image production proficiency while simultaneously developing 'soft skills' – teamwork, presentation skills, initiative – key requirements in professional communication processes and desirable skills that employers want. More important is the fact that after the completion of live projects, students find it much easier to identify their own individual

position within their fields of interest with a sharpened focus on forging careers as bright, hardworking and thoughtful future colleagues.

Obviously, constant reality checks are advisable as they may reveal the harsh reality of rather different scenarios, as it is very common for graduates to not necessarily straight away find their 'dream' jobs or preferred work assignments after leaving university. In an industry that is constantly evolving and is also highly competitive, most graduates have to rethink and reconsider expectations while exploring alternative directions and opportunities as they start their professional careers. At the end of the day, it is up to the individual to learn to honestly evaluate his or her own achievements and abilities. All of them will need to appreciate or consciously reject the power and the intelligence of the collective to find their way into the industry.⁵

In-between

'Animation, at its best, is one of the most interdisciplinary of the arts. It provides extremely adaptable tools for expressing complex ideas.' (Hayes, 2007)

Understanding requires sophisticated knowledge of the topic. Even more than that, however, understanding in connection with an artistic practice comes with repetition and with time that allows one to find a place in a given context. The initial idea for this essay was based on my own curiosity about sequential images, an awareness of the 'in-between' and the spectacle of setting ideas into motion. Leading by example to enable our students to know and to understand new things includes formalizing ideas of how to raise consciousness, engender self-reflection, instil determination and generate motivation. How can we teach with these high principles in mind? By embracing the 'in-between' that joins theory and practice. This rather loose formulation, situated somewhere between extremes, fits well in the world of animation as it describes a

visual element used to cushion the impact of movement connecting key frames while being inconspicuous in its appearance as an inter-mediator. When isolated or taken out of the context of a sequence, single static in-betweens can appear abstract or even distorted, but as soon as they are set into motion in the right order of sequences, they are the essential factors that bind the movement together convincingly. The concept of the in-between is applicable in a similar way when we look at the various stages and processes of making in production processes. They are all essential elements that, when they are combined, lead to the result but taken out of the context, will be difficult to position. It is rather rare that we are able to look behind the scenes, or can access making-of sequences that reveal an insight into production processes, as most of the time the processes of making, the journey from the first spark of an idea to the final result, stays hidden. As a consequence, physical and emotional impacts of energy and forces involved along the way of creation never fully reveal themselves in the end product.

I propose a strategy of 'active interest', where we as the audience take on the role of the creator by learning to understand processes instead of focusing solely on results, similar to Jacques Ranciere's proposal in which he challenges the role of the theatre audience as active observers in *The Emancipated Spectator*. 'In all those performances, in fact, it should be a matter of linking what one knows with what one does not know, of being at the same time performers who display their competences and spectators who are looking to find what those competences might produce in a new context, among unknown people.' (Ranciere, 2004:280)

But what happens when the psychological processes of filling-in, identification and recall get interrupted? It is the moment of being affected, this rare state of mind and body when precisely this gap between perception and action is overcome, that we should emphasize and nurture more in education. We need to seize this moment of impact, of sensation, sometimes even of

shock, reflected in one's gut feeling, visible in the uncontrollable honest subconscious reaction that shows on student faces in response to set challenges. We should recognise the state of wonder as another in-between, a link that increases divergent thinking and making.

'Because wonder demands a passive-active flexibility of our faculties: in addition to being affected it entails a capacity to step back from the automatic reaction, to pause, to linger and to follow a rambling sort of attention, to consider and to accept a state of indecisiveness as it occurs sometimes in the experience of art or in philosophical contemplation.' (Ott, 2014:13)⁶

As supporters of learning, teaching practitioners and academics should likewise embrace moments of wonder, reacting to new developments by testing and applying ideas in their own practice. We should be acting as innovatively as our students, embracing autonomy and invention in order to lead by example and encourage students to take risks themselves. In this way we take on roles as inter-mediators celebrating principles of the in-between. In my experience, this requires a readiness to promote and take part in critical discussion and to shift the focus towards innovative forms of professional practice rather than emphasising assessments and marks in the context of the academic institutions where we serve.

It is also important to be wary and vigilant not to fall into traps of 'soft' exploitation when selecting or being approached directly by potential collaboration partners. We need to avoid offers that are based on speculative behaviour of convenience in regard to cheap or even free labour, as well as covert intentions of training and recruitment. This is only possible through constructive discussions, open dialogues and by drawing up clearly defined project plans. These plans must explicitly identify the objectives, targets, philosophies and ethics involved so as to avoid any exploitation of students as they seek to find their way into a demanding industry.

Conclusion

The aim of this investigation has been to identify methods of teaching and learning in the field of visual animation by exploring innovative border cases of productions that involve teamwork in interdisciplinary collaborations. This text should act as a motivation to test and apply the presented ideas and at the same time to understand the content as another example of an array of in-betweens that connect streams of consciousness. As a visual medium, animation offers great creative potential for communicating complex and abstract ideas, stimulating dialogues and debates while questioning representations of interpretation. The discussed work examples show that innovative practical and theoretical approaches in education can have an impact on ethical and moral thinking processes, ultimately influencing behaviour and character development.⁷

Instead of nurturing an environment dependent on assessments and marks, we need to create space for thinking, discussing, testing, acting, creating, sharing and taking risks. We can do this when we embrace failures and mistakes and expand students' vision beyond expectations of the industry and mainstream developments to focus on the possibilities and strategies animation can offer as a model for future practices consciously challenging cultural and theoretical assumptions regarding narrative structures and established cinematic experience.

Dieser Text basiert auf dem Vortrag vom 9.12.2014, den Martina Bramkamp im Rahmen der Ringvorlesung „Visuelle Animation“ an der Universität Hamburg gehalten hat.

Endnotes

- 1 This statement reflects the founding principles of this organisation which, since its founding in 1960 in Annecy, France, has spread its influence worldwide through international groups that continue to operate in different chapters around the world today.
- 2 For further research regarding this topic I can recommend *Art, Animation and the Collaborative Process* (2010) by Heather L. Hollian, published online in the Animation Studies Online Journal, in which the author examines and analyses collaboration processes within the animation industry emphasising on the role of the individual artist.
- 3 Inge Hinterwaldner's essay *Semiconductor's Landscapes as Sound-Sculptured Time-Based Visualisations* serves here as a great source example for further research referencing two creative forces that explore scientific data visualisation through animation.
- 4 This project was made possible through the kind permission of the two artists, the enthusiastic effort of the students, and the support of the curating team of the Kunstverein Kassel.
- 5 I agree with Sebastian Dürer, artist and alumnus of the Kunsthochschule Kassel, that 'a new sensibility of openness has to be fostered, that provides the tools for making reasonable choices all while embracing our hybrid identity and declaring not a fear-fueled war against them but solidarity with all its components – the machine and the rest – on the one hand and everything else, both human and non-human objects in society on the other.' (Dürer, 2014:87)
- 6 In *Zurück auf Anfang: Bildung als Verwunderung*, Michaela Ott focuses on the concept of wonder and affection and how it can feed into learning processes. In her text she propagates a form of teaching that embraces strategies of possibility and even alienation to challenge established aspects of reality.
- 7 Possible directions for further research like Shaaron Ainsworth's text *How do Animations Influence Learning* reveal potential in regard to animation as a new form of representation in education that can influence learning. 'Whilst there is little doubt about the importance of cognitive accounts of learning with animations, more research is needed elsewhere as relatively little is known in comparison about expressive, perceptual, affective, metacognitive and rhetorical levels of explanation.' (Ainsworth, 2008:18)

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Martina has taught since 2002 as a Senior Lecturer on the BA (Hons) Illustration Animation Course at Kingston University in London. In 2008 she was awarded a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching from The University of the Arts London and achieved the status of Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA). In 2010 she was appointed Professor of Animation in the Visual Communication Design Department at „School of Art and Design Kassel“ in Germany. Based on her interest in animation in relation to fine art, new media and photography she widened her field of research and teaching with an emphasis on developments in experimental filmmaking, particularly ‘Expanded Cinema’.

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