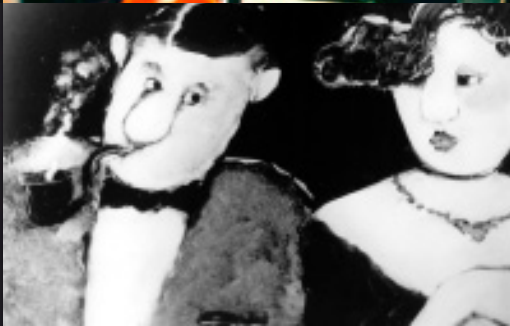


Strategies of the Medium I:  
**Animating Analogue**



**Strategies of the Medium**

Presented by Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT), this six-part screening series reflects on current and historical practices in the use of specific material and technical strategies in artist-based film production. The screenings and accompanying panel discussions complement LIFT's series of advanced workshops and production courses on the topics of animation, optical printing, the Bolex camera, photochemical processes, and 35mm artist film.

Part 1: **Animating Analogue**

Part 2: **Printed Light**

Part 3: **In 27 Seconds**

Part 4: **In the Dark**

Part 5: **Pieces of Eight**

Part 6: **Go Big or Go Home**

Part 1: **Animating Analogue**

*7pm, Friday, June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009*

*Cinecycle, 129 Spadina Avenue (down the alley)*

*Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

**Stills (clockwise from top left):**

*Rostrum Press: Materials Testing*, Chris Gehman; *Primiti Too Taa*, Ed Ackerman & Colin Morton; *Deadpan*, Rick Raxlen; *Walk for Walk*, Amy Lockhart; *The Visible Compendium*, Larry Jordan; *Tables of Content*, Wendy Tilby; *Nukie's Sermon from the Bottle*, Jonathan Amitay; *Frank Film*, Frank & Caroline Mouris; *Lost Motion*, Janie Geiser

**Cover still:** *Rostrum Press: Materials Testing*, Chris Gehman



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### **Strategies of the Medium I: Animating Analogue**

In this program LIFT reflects on current practices in film-based animation using professional animation stands, representing a wide range of styles and techniques. These animation stands—on which nearly all animation was produced pre-Flash and CGI—are remarkably versatile and complex machines. With a current complement of three Oxberry stands, both 16mm and 35mm, LIFT has remarkable resources available to filmmakers wishing to explore the world of animation. The screening will be followed by a brief panel discussion featuring Canadian artists who work with film-based animation. This program introduces and complements the upcoming season of creative and technical workshops devoted to film-based animation.

Panel discussion after the screening featuring Jonathan Amitay and Chris Gehman, moderated by Ellen Besen.

### **Panelist Bios:**

**Jonathan Amitay** was born in what was then Palestine (now Israel), and his childhood was largely spent surviving WWII and the Israeli War of Independence. His wartime experiences included Rommel's Afrika Corps near overrun of his country, drunken soldiers shooting into his family apartment, and rolling garbage cans in front of British Army tanks to halt their invasion. When the Six Day War happened in 1967, Jonathan decided he'd had enough and immigrated to Canada. He joined the CBC as an animator in 1978. His work for the CBC on *Sesame Street* won several national awards, and his independent animations have been broadcast in Canada and Europe and have been shown at countless festivals. *Oh Dad* and *Oh Dad II* won prizes at the Chicago International Film Festival, Vermont International Peace Festival, a "Lucca" in Italy, and numerous honourable mentions. He was honoured with a retrospective at the Ottawa Animation Festival in 2002.

**Chris Gehman** is an animator, curator and critic based in Toronto. His most

recent film, *Refraction Series*, premiered at the 2008 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), and won an award at the 2009 Ann Arbor Film Festival. Other films include *Non-Zymase Pentathlon* (1996), *First Dispatch from Atlantis* (1993) and the award-winning *Contrafacta* (co-directed with Roberto Ariganello, 2000). Chris was Artistic Director of the Images Festival from 2000 to 2004, and has also worked as a programmer for Cinematheque Ontario, TIFF and Pleasure Dome. He has written extensively on independent animation, and is the co-editor (with Steve Reinke) of the critical anthology *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema* (YYZ Books, 2005).

A former faculty member of Sheridan College's School of Animation (1987-2002) and infamous workaholic, **Ellen Besen** studied animation at Sheridan and has been working in the field for over 35 years. (35 years! Even she can hardly believe this.) Highlights of her career include directing award-winning films for the National Film Board of Canada, broadcast work on the topic of animation for CBC Radio and film curating for such

organizations as the Art Gallery of Ontario. Her films have been shown in multiple international festivals and at such institutions as MOMA, and her film analysis workshops are featured regularly at such festivals as the Ottawa International Animation Festival. She has written popular series for Animation World Network on various topics including animation and analogy, is currently creative director of The Kalamazoo Animation Festival International and continues to teach the principles of animation filmmaking on an intensive one-on-one basis. Her latest projects include a contribution to the animated-art project, *XI in Motion* (work in progress) and *Animation Unleashed*, a book of applied theory which encapsulates over 20 years of dissecting how animation communicates, published Fall 2008.

### **Animation as an Intimate Act**

Animation is increasingly ubiquitous today: our computers, cel phones and other digital devices employ animated interfaces, while video billboards carry animated graphics, and digital animation is commonplace not only in nominally “animated” movies and on the web, but is frequently (and sometimes invisibly) composited into live-action films as well. All of these animations are digitally generated, and can be produced and viewed only with the mediation of digital systems.

However, animation has a history that long predates not only digital media but the cinema itself. A variety of animation devices—“philosophical toys” such as the thaumatrope, zoetrope and flipbook—flourished in the 19th century decades before the first photographed movies were made. This fact suggests that animation employs a set of tools and methods that can be seen as distinct from live-action filmmaking, although they usually share most of the same technological means of production and exhibition (camera, film, projector, etc.). In this sense animation may be considered as a

broader set of techniques, with film as one of the possible technologies through which it can be realized.

Most of the finest animated films have not been generated using digital tools, but rather by the painstaking handwork of artists working individually, in small collaborative groups, or in large, industrially organized teams. Animation has proven particularly attractive to visual artists whose existing skills and studio practices are easily transferred to the production of animated films. Conversely, animation can also be the most accessible of filmmaking forms to those without formal art training, as anything that can be moved can be animated! Everyday objects and images on paper—even people—may be animated simply by making slight changes of position and filming one frame at a time.

The accessibility of animation is also related to its economical nature: although animated filmmaking can require an enormous commitment of time and attention, animators usually don’t shoot much more film than they use in the final work, so they can create substantial

works with little money and a minimal production infrastructure. More than one filmmaker—from David Lynch to Kon Ichikawa, Caroline Leaf and Frank Tashlin—has begun working as an animator and later branched out into other areas of filmmaking.

This program encompasses all these aspects of contemporary film-based animation. Each film is the work of individual artists working with very small budgets and simple materials, and each is a personal film in which technique, form and idea are inseparable. The techniques used include animation of three-dimensional objects (*Rostrum Press* and *Lost Motion*); animated typography (*Primiti Too Taa*); collage and paper puppets (*Frank Film*, *Walk for Walk*, *The Visible Compendium*); paint or sand on glass (*Tables of Content* and *Nukie’s Sermon from the Bottle*, respectively); and an eclectic approach to drawn animation (*Deadpan*). Among these films are established classics as well as new works, and the program highlights the intimate, personal aspect of this kind of cinema. Many of these films are directly autobiographical, or explore internal

states of mind; others work in a more materialist manner with their materials; and still others use refined techniques to tell stories in unconventional ways.

Although the films were not chosen in terms of thematic relations or stylistic similarities, taken together they do make a case about the way in which an animator's choice of materials and methods effectively form the substance of their work. Jonathan Amitay works with sand and fine silver chains that allow him to create a fluid, continuously shifting image, mirroring perfectly the paranoid stream-of-consciousness of his protagonist Nukie, the talking mushroom cloud. Amitay's subject is obviously political, but his expressionist films centre on the psychology of power and the irrational death drive manifested equally in religion and politics. By contrast, in the trance-like *Lost Motion* Janie Geiser takes advantage of the immobility and fixed expressions of her found figures, subtly developing their internal lives and the relationships between them using fundamental cinematic tools—montage, multiple exposures, colour, movement and music. Geiser's

narratives (like those of the great French director Claire Denis) are always elliptical in the extreme, presenting just the barest fragmentary information. The viewer must become intensely involved in order to piece together the larger story.

*Frank Film*, by Frank and Caroline Mouris, is also structured around the particular demands it makes on the viewer. The film is comprised of three continuous streams: the rapidly-changing collage images and two competing soundtracks, one of which is a plain statement of the facts of Frank Mouris's life to that point, the other a recitation of words beginning with the letter "f." *Frank Film* marshals the banal and ubiquitous images from mass-market magazines, primarily from advertising, alongside its two competing soundtracks, as one way into the mind and experience of the filmmaker and his society. Larry Jordan's exquisitely crafted *The Visible Compendium*, also animated mainly with paper cut-outs, makes use of strict Surrealist procedures aimed at unlocking unconscious energies and associations. According to Jordan, it was entirely improvised in front of the camera; the

filmmaker waited until the backgrounds and foreground objects seemed to suggest their own movements to him. Following the model of Max Ernst's collage novels, Jordan draws on a deep well of imagery found in the illustrated books and magazines of the nineteenth century. These representations, mostly from Victorian and Edwardian-era publications, combine a high level of artistic skill and beauty with a high level of social and sexual repression, making them ideal for Surrealist reinterpretation.

Amy Lockhart's funny and obsessive *Walk For Walk* also draws on commercial imagery, but in a very different way. The film's bright colours, its landscape and figures remind us of children's cartoons and advertising characters, but they inhabit another universe entirely, one in which the strangeness and menace implicit in that relentlessly cheerful world is made manifest. Similarly, Rick Raxlen refuses the idealization of childhood memories in his short *Deadpan*. Raxlen's best works are either overtly autobiographical or are composed using images that were part of the culture of his childhood, and here, us-

ing his characteristic combination of text, looping animated drawings and music, Raxlen evokes an uncomfortable moment remembered with humour from decades' remove. His animation vibrates with the energy of the situation described by the film. Wendy Tilby's quiet *Tables of Content* also focuses on a specific situation, also involving eating and drinking, and restricted to a closely limited space and time. But her film demonstrates that animation need not be especially kinetic or expressive to be effective. Instead, *Tables of Content* uses slight movements and small gestures to slowly build up a web of relationships and attitudes conveyed with subtlety and economy. It is a film of glances, sighs and awkward moments.

The first two films on the program, Chris Gehman's *Rostrum Press: Materials Testing* and *Primiti Too Taa*, by Ed Ackerman and Colin Morton, move away from narrative entirely, working with their materials as concrete elements in formal and conceptual constructions. Both films are directly related to other artworks: in the case of *Rostrum Press*, specific aspects

of two films by Michael Snow (*Breakfast (Table Top Dolly)* and a section from *Presents*). In this film the animation stand becomes an instrument of destruction, and a means for transforming a deliberate graphic composition into a composition determined by chance. *Primiti Too Taa* is an aural and graphic adaptation of a sound poem by the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters. Just as Schwitters constructs his poem from nonsensical language-like sounds rather than actual words, so the film animates the poem's typography rather than offering an imagistic visual interpretation. These first two films highlight a fact that is also true of all the other works on the program: that analogue animation always involves a play with materials as well as narration, temporal structure and the illusion of motion.

— Chris Gehman



**Rostrum Press: Materials Testing**

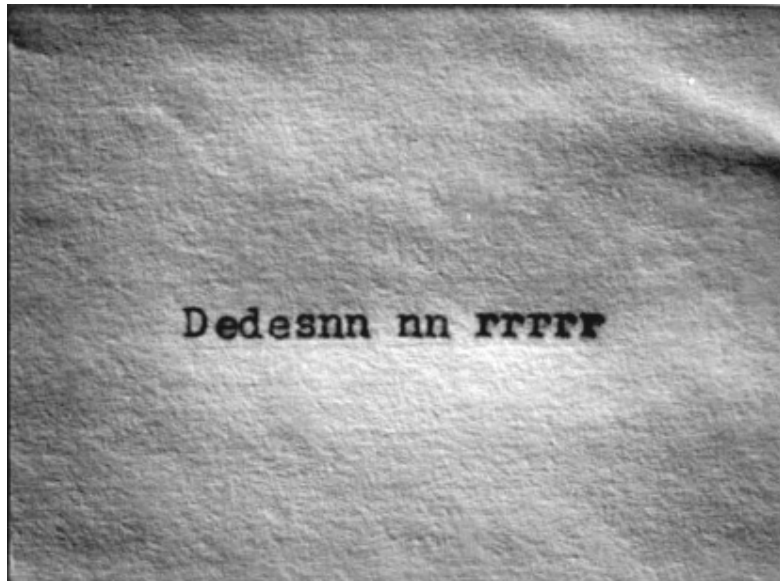
(Chris Gehman, Canada, 2008, 3:30,  
16mm, colour, silent)

Mikhail Bakunin proclaimed, “The urge to destroy is also a creative urge.” *Rostrum Press* proposes, conversely, that the urge to create is also a destructive urge. Here the 16mm Oxberry animation stand—a big, heavy machine—is transformed into a mechanism to test the response of a variety of objects and materials to downward pressure. From 3D to almost-2D in mere moments!

**Primiti Too Taa**

(Ed Ackerman & Colin Morton, Canada, 1986, 2:45, 16mm, b&w, sound)

Visually *Primiti Too Taa* is a concrete poem set in motion: choreography. Aurally it is a sound poem with a printed text: typography. Based on Kurt Schwitters's 45-minute sound poem "Ur-sonate (Sonata for Primitive Sounds)," the film is a larva in memory of Schwitters (artist & poet, 1887-1948), under the influence of Norman McLaren (animator, 1914-1987).



**Deadpan**

(Rick Raxlen, Canada, 2001, 6:00, 16mm, colour, sound)

Described as “the jauntiest meat-is-murder movie ever made,” *Deadpan* recreates dinner-table angst from the fifties. Anxiety reigns. Laughter is forbidden. Cow tongue is served. What to do? Awards: Funniest Film, Ann Arbor Film Festival, 2002; Jutra Nominee, Best Animation, 2001.

**Frank Film**

(Frank Mouris & Caroline Mouris, USA, 1973, 9:00, 16mm, colour, sound)

A funny, strange and dense classic that deservedly won an Academy Award for Best Animated Short, *Frank Film* is a sort of autobiography by way of postwar consumer culture and the letter “f.” Spanning the years 1945 to 1973, this wildly entertaining film expands beyond the story of one man’s existence to become a collective autobiography of its time. “A nine-minute evocation of America’s exhilarating everythingness” (Andrew Sarris, *The Village Voice*). In 1996 *Frank Film* was selected for inclusion in the U.S. National Film Registry (one of only a handful of animated films to be so honoured).



**Lost Motion**

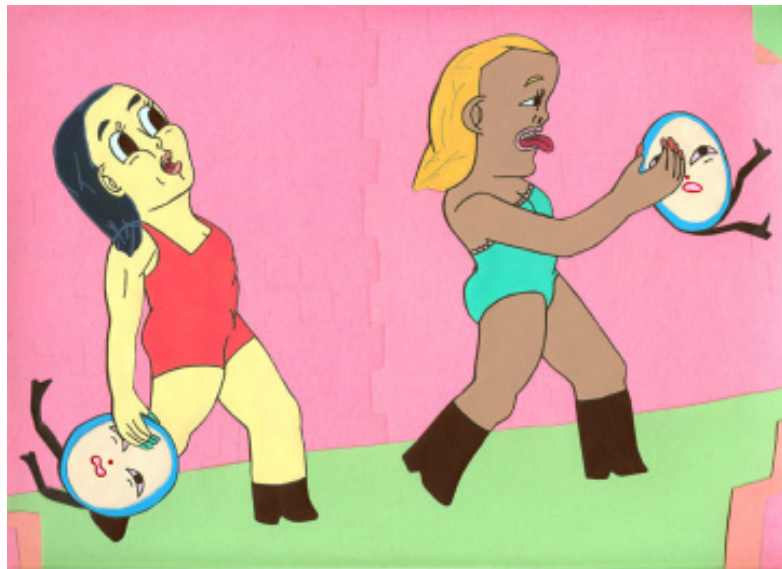
(Janie Geiser, USA, 2000, 11:00, 16mm, colour, sound)

Gothic, mechanized and faintly arcane, with a provocative erotic charge, *Lost Motion* uses small cast-metal figures, toy trains, decayed skyscrapers, and other found objects to enact a man's search for a mysterious woman in a forgotten landscape of derelict erector-set buildings populated by lost souls. Geiser's masterpiece suspends the viewer in a world of subconscious imaginings both seductive and disturbing. "*Lost Motion* is the sumptuously told tale of a failed search... [which] becomes intertwined with an essay on the way our lushest dreams fail by virtue of their very extravagance" (Fred Camper, *Chicago Reader*).

**Walk for Walk**

(Amy Lockhart, Canada, 2005, 10:00,  
16mm, colour, sound)

Lockhart's unparalleled understanding of the fantastic and grotesque combine with her original aesthetic sensibilities to inhabit an animated landscape where a seemingly endless parade of kooky little creatures walk themselves straight into trouble, but always find a way out. Enter the surreal, ever-changing world of *Walk for Walk*, a colourful, tripped-out animated landscape filled with catchy songs, eyeball kicks, goofball characters, and a whole lot of babies: Warm Baby! Mister Baby! Rich Baby! Created using more than 1000 hand-painted paper cutouts, puppets and backgrounds.



**Nukie's Sermon from the Bottle**

(Jonathan Amitay, Canada, 1988, 7:00,  
16mm, colour, sound)

In the second from his wildly satirical *Nukie* trilogy, Jonathan Amitay makes links between Cold War paranoia and fundamentalist religious Armageddon scenarios centred on the Middle East. Amitay's animated films are at once hilarious and seriously troubling, their ideas conveyed with extraordinary energy by his distinctive style of animation using sand and fine silver chains on glass.

**Tables of Content**

(Wendy Tilby, Canada, 1986, 7:30, 16mm, colour, sound)

Taking refuge from the night rain, a gentleman bides his time in an unfamiliar café. From behind his newspaper, he takes in with growing interest the sights, the sounds and the strangely assorted characters who surround him. Animated using paint on glass, this is a wonderful, little-known early independent film from Wendy Tilby, who went on to win an Oscar nomination and countless awards for her NFB short *When the Day Breaks* (with Amanda Forbis, 1999).





**The Visible Compendium**

(Larry Jordan, USA, 1990, 17:00, 16mm, colour, sound)

The master of Surrealist animation sums up four decades of radical experimentation in this magical film. *The Visible Compendium* attempts to engage the mind, and particularly what is unknown in the mind, rather than what has been seen and known a thousand times over. “It reaches farther than any of my other animations. It goes off in many directions... a compendium, as indicated in the title—a catalog of visible possible experiences, some at normal time, some speeded up or slowed down, some continuous, others broken up” (Larry Jordan). “A perfect counterpart... of the chores and diversion of the human world—lacerated by two meditations on War” (Stan Brakhage).

Since 1981, LIFT has been Canada's foremost artist-run centre for independent filmmakers, providing affordable access to film equipment, pre- and post- production services and education, in a creative and supportive environment.

**Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT)**

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Designed by Martina Hwang ([dash-dash.ca](http://dash-dash.ca))



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