

THE 'ANIMATE PROJECT' COLLECTION



The Animate mission is to select, fund and assist in producing six or more short animated films annually. The emphasis is on risk-taking, breaking new ground and pushing the imagination of artists and audiences alike. A project of this magnitude can't help but affect and alter the direction of the artform and, as such, the body of films contained within the Animate cache stands as a substantial testament to what contemporary animation is capable of achieving.

Its alumni is a virtual roll-call of British animation royalty, rogues, mystics and jesters. Phil Mulloy, Paul Bush, Run Wrake, Ruth Lingford, Sarah Cox, Jonathan Hodgson, Tim Webb, Chris Shepherd, Vera Neubauer, Tal Rosner, Kayla Parker and the Quay Brothers are just a few of the animators who have created films under the Animate umbrella.

Animate has provided a platform for the most experienced British animators to experiment; for young animators to make a vital transition up into the thinner air of the animation elite; and for otherwise shelved ideas to be given free rein and a chance to live forever on the screen. Animate's director, Gary Thomas, takes up the history, the importance and the future of Animate ...

MIAF: What is Animate? When did it start and how did it get started?

GARY THOMAS: Animate began in 1990 as the 'Animation Awards' – a collaboration conceived by David Curtis, then Artists' Film and Video Officer at the Arts Council of Great Britain, and Clare Kitson, Commissioning Editor for Animation at Channel 4. It was an open call for proposals for experimental animated films for television from UK animators and artists – both

established and emergent artists and for animators working in the industry who wanted to make personal projects. We always commissioned the filmmakers, not the producers.

MIAF: What, if anything, were the teething problems with the Animate model?

GT: There had already been Arts Council/Channel 4 schemes for artists' film and video, so the open call had been tried and tested. An ongoing issue was that both funding partners could only commit on a year-by-year basis, and never at the same time, but they did keep on re-committing.

For the first couple of years there were no restrictions on length or production schedule. It did have to become a bit less open over the years though, mainly with a view to getting a bit more prominence in the TV schedule, and tighter schedules and fixed film lengths (at a rough cut stage) were imposed.

MIAF: Dick Arnall took me under his wing when I was starting out in this field. His advice, guidance and encouragement had a big impact on what I was able to achieve until I learned to swim in the deep end by myself. I owe him more than I can ever explain and his sudden death was as big a shock to me as it was to everybody else. Could you explain Dick's role in the history of Animate?

GT: Dick was already something of an animation legend as an animation producer and because of the festivals he'd started. He was Animate's 'independent production advisor'. The Arts Council did the administration and Dick supported people in making their films. He was there to help realise visions and make the films the best they could be.

He took a break for a couple of years then from 2000 he took on a bigger role when Animate was 'outsourced'. By then, Animate had become more than just its films – there was a 'critical mass'. I don't think it's that it represents practice, there's other stuff going on, but I think it does offer an indication of a particular approach.

Dick began promoting the films more and we started to refer to Animate as a 'project', not just the scheme. The commissions became AnimateTV; there was Animate Live – events and programs with a range of partners – the National Portrait Gallery, music festivals. Dick set up the Animate Award at Encounters Festival in Bristol, the Animate Residencies at the London College of Communication, and built Animate's first website, animateonline.org, which had information but no films. By this time, I was Animate's main man at the Arts Council and, with Dick, we began to try and make more connections with the visual arts world and to talk about, and question – endlessly! – what we were trying to do. *The Animate! Book: Rethinking Animation* came out of that.

MIAF: It seems to me that Animate is one of the very few film and animation organisations that has really nailed down how to create a credible and worthwhile presence on the web. Can you give an overview of your history and experience with your web presence?

GT: Thank you! We set up Animate Projects following Dick's unexpected death in 2007. There was one round of AnimateTV commissions in production and another to get started. Since Dick set up animateonline.org, technology had moved on. We had commissioned nearly 100 films and it was our priority to get the films digitised and online. Animate makers retain ownership of their films, so we had to get permission and there were a couple of underlying rights we couldn't clear, but most of the AnimateTV films are there in their entirety, free to view and with background materials. We then started doing interviews and commissioning essays.

It just seemed obvious to us that we had to do this in this way. It's all about the work. And the important thing is that we show the work in a context. It's not like an animation YouTube channel because YouTube is that already – it's a 'space'. Just as we used to commission for broadcast, we now commission for online. The films always have lives in other spaces – festivals, cinemas, galleries – but they always exist online too.

MIAF: (tongue in cheek) Dude, where's my Oscar?

GT: When we announced back in January that we weren't getting Arts Council money we noted that Animate films had won awards, including one British Academy Award and five BAFTA nominations. Someone commented on our blog that one BAFTA didn't seem much for 20 years, but that's like asking why no avant-garde film has ever won an Oscar for best picture! (Well, except Norman McLaren's, which did win an Oscar...) But the films really do get out there and get recognised in all the right places! Animate films have won 11 British Animation Awards over the years. And Apichatpong Weerasethakul, an Animate director, won the Palme d'Or at Cannes for something we co-commissioned.

MIAF: How would you characterise the role that Animate has played in supporting the auteur animation artform within the UK? And how would you extrapolate that to the role Animate has played in promoting (or at least showcasing) British animation talent to the world?

GT: Modesty forbids! But when we announced that we might have to close, we were overwhelmed by messages of support. Animator Kayla Parker said we'd "established a thriving community of practice – a new space to engage with ideas about the animated moving image"; and Chris O'Reilly, founder of Nexus Productions (and an Oscar nominee!), noted that you can't have a cutting edge animation industry if you don't support its practitioners' most artistic endeavours, and that that has been Animate's role. I don't think it's a spectrum from the commercial A to the experimental A – Aardman at one end and Animate at the other – things are more fluid than that. Innovative animation happens in all sorts of places – art, design, commercial contexts. Animate has always aimed to be an interstitial organisation, working with artists from a range of disciplines to make great art.

There used to be other support for other kinds of auteur animation: Channel 4 had two other schemes and commissioned single films; there was the BBC Animation unit; and S4C in Wales. That's all gone and it seems bizarre to me that something the UK is so brilliant at, and for which we're internationally recognised, has been more or less abandoned. As for promotion, that's simply about how important it is that people get to see the work. That was a key ambition in the first place – getting it on television – and it's why it's important for us to respond to requests around the world.

MIAF: Another observation is that many Animate films have a fairly British-centric feel to them. Is this a fair observation?

GT: Unfair! AnimateTV was for UK-based people but that included UK-based people from the USA, France, Norway, Japan, and Germany. And of course the films often explore British themes but I don't think there's a single Animate film that only a British audience would understand.

MIAF: The stories we are hearing down here about the British arts and film funding environment sound grim. I know Animate has been caught in this but to what extent and what is your impression of what is happening in the film funding realm?

GT: It is grim and there is a critical lack of strategy – Arts Council England describes animation as a 'sub-artform' of the visual arts. When the UK Film Council was shut down this year, the production team moved to the British Film Institute so hopefully, now that is settling down, they may be looking to do something for animation.

It doesn't help that there isn't really any co-ordinated lobbying. The diversity of the 'animation' sector is its strength but it also means it doesn't have a voice. And frankly, we're all much too modest. We need to build an alliance and raise our voices.

MIAF: What is the near-term future for Animate?

GT: We have Arts Council funding to keep us going until March 2012. For our online exhibition program we've got some great work lined up and there'll be essays, interviews and some 'off-line' events. A strand of the program – Digitalis – will explore, question, subvert or confound our expectations of art and 'the digital'. As part of that, we've got the Animate OPEN, an online exhibition selected from an open call (though UK only this first time), and there'll be some small-scale commissions, supported by the Jerwood Charitable Foundation. The question is how we carry on beyond this year? We haven't got an answer to that yet but the search continues.

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Tad's Nest

UK, 4'48, 2009

DIRECTOR: Petra Freeman

A gorgeous paint-on-glass work, which takes us on an intriguing journey to that oddest of all little places where memories are invented.

The Life Size Zoetrope

UK, 6'33, 2007

DIRECTOR: Mark Simon Hewis

The celebratory life story of one man told via a one-take live-action shot of a spinning, human zoetrope.

The Emperor

UK, 4'20, 2001

DIRECTOR: Elizabeth Hobbs

A colourful tabloid tale of Bonaparte and his not-so bony part as his pickled organ goes under the auctioneer's hammer.

Stressed

UK, 6'30, 1994

DIRECTOR: Karen Kelly

Soft bodies, hard landings, tenement times – living ain't easy. Drawing our own conclusions about the city.

Rabbit

UK, 8'30, 2005

DIRECTOR: Run Wrake

The random justice of nature told with curious images from a distant childhood. When an idol is found in the stomach of a rabbit, great riches follow.

Dad's Dead

UK, 6'36, 2002

DIRECTOR: Chris Shepherd

A compelling story of friendship and denial told through a series of ghostly reminiscences and visual flashbacks from a young man's fragmented memory of the past.

Without You

UK, 4'50, 2008

DIRECTOR: Tal Rosner

A visual exploration of London's industrial suburbia following colours and surfaces into abstraction and revealing the complexity of apparently simple forms.

Feeling My Way

UK, 5'32, 1997

DIRECTOR: Jonathan Hodgson

What goes around comes around: the daily cycle of home-work-home illuminated in collage, Hi-8 and paint. A layered, luminous insight.

Careful

UK, 6'07, 2005

DIRECTOR: Damian Gascoigne

A seven-year-old girl escapes the attentions of her over-protective mother and flies off on an accidental adventure through a surreal landscape.

What She Wants

UK, 5'00, 1994

DIRECTOR: Ruth Lingford

A woman travelling on the underground is be-devilled with images of desire.

Sunset Strip

UK, 3'30, 1996

DIRECTOR: Kayla Parker

12-frame, half-second days and a year of sunsets. Stan Brakhage-style interventions directly onto film-stock in this recording of light and cloud. Time-lapse goes transcendent.

3 Ways To Go

UK, 4'16, 1997

DIRECTOR: Sarah Cox

A trinity of techniques trace a trinity of deaths to probe the mystery of the final moments. Potent and disquieting as it seeks answers to the great question.

Who I Am And What I Want

UK, 7'23, 2005

DIRECTORS: Chris Shepherd, David Shrigley

Some may say *Who I Am and What I Want* is a snapshot of the human condition. Others might think Pete is just plain weird.



Dad's Dead



What She Wants



Three Ways To Go



Who I Am And What I Want

