

Panel E2

Sala delle Colonne 1

At the Boundaries of Abstract Art and Animation

Tom Klein

Woody Woodpecker & The Avant-Garde: Émigrés and Counterculture in 1940s Los Angeles



Amidst the turbulence of the Second World War, artists, émigrés, and filmmakers found a sense of freedom and unexpected sources of inspiration in Los Angeles. The American Contemporary Gallery in Hollywood was a gathering place for a creative community with a shared interest in the aesthetic principles of modernist art and cinema. Among the attendees of a weekly film screening at the gallery was Shamus Culhane, an eager young director who had just been hired by animation producer Walter Lantz. Inspired by the innovative art and stimulating discussions at the gallery, Culhane began to experiment at the Lantz studio, slowly at first, but then with more audacity. He improvised with surprising avant-garde artistic references and film techniques that he brought into mainstream Woody Woodpecker cartoons. The results elevated Woody Woodpecker to his peak as a brazen character, embodying the shifting tenor of early 1940s cartoons. Very little is written or formally documented about American Contemporary Gallery [ACG], yet its influence was profound, considering the impact that its patrons (Oskar Fischinger, Jules Engel, Faith Hubley, the Whitneys, Kenneth Anger, among others) had on animation and Hollywood's emerging counterculture.

The first retrospective exhibit to display films and artwork, a curated selection of historical artifacts representing the cultural legacy of ACG, was mounted at Laband Art Gallery in Los Angeles last year. This presentation will give a virtual tour of the highlights of *Woody Woodpecker & The Avant-Garde*, which was open to the public from September to November 2016. From ACG's beginning, politics and the war crept into its programming. Works in a group show were described in a 1941 *L.A. Times* review as "politically left-wing and artistically rough." In June 1942, ACG featured Soviet war posters and window displays arranged by the Tass News Agency. By August 1943, the owner Clara Grossman had begun a Friday night film series accompanied by guest speakers. She borrowed films from the Museum of Modern Art's circulating film library, screening American classics and especially silent films, given to the renewed interest in them among avant-gardists. This was a conviction advanced by Maya Deren who, in addition to living just a short distance from ACG when she filmed *Meshes of the Afternoon* in 1943, asserted that sound was undermining the visual complexity of cinema.

Grossman eventually turned the running of the screenings over to the People's Educational Center, a leftist workers' education initiative. Faith Hubley, Carl Lerner, and Dede Allen, three young progressives just starting out in the film industry, were the organizers. Shamus Culhane wrote of seeing documentaries by John Grierson, Robert Flaherty and Joris Ivens as well as films by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Griffith, Lang and Méliès. The works of independent filmmakers residing locally, including James and John Whitney and Man Ray, were also featured. Culhane began to use Woody Woodpecker films as his personal canvas to explore modernism. This reached its peak in 1945, when he turned animated explosions in *The Loose Nut* into seven-second experimental flicker films packed with abstract art and contrasting colors. By slowing down the frames of film,

these examples of cartoon montage serve another purpose. They offer an inventory of his visual influences, a reflection of the modern art and avant-garde cinema he was exposed to at American Contemporary Gallery. This presentation explores this unlikely collision of artists, animators, political beliefs, and wartime efforts.

The Laband exhibit was critically acclaimed and received an enthusiastic write-up from the popular website Cartoon Brew: “Must-See Los Angeles Art Show: Woody Woodpecker & The Avant-Garde.” The *L.A. Weekly* offered a featured article titled “Woody Woodpecker Cartoons Were More Subversive Than You Thought.” Over 300 people attended the gallery opening and its three-month run attracted the Los Angeles animation industry, with the generous cooperation of the Walter Lantz Foundation and Universal Studios. For anyone who was unable to attend the L.A. show, this will provide the opportunity to see an encapsulation of that event, provided for members of the S.A.S. here at the University of Padova conference.

Biography

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Tom Klein is Associate Professor and the Chair of Animation at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He curated the recent critically acclaimed exhibit *Woody Woodpecker & The Avant-Garde* at Laband Art Gallery. He is a regular on-line columnist for Cartoon Research. His articles have appeared in such publications as *Animation: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, *Griffithiana*, *Animation Journal*, and *Animation Studies*, among others. He catalogued UCLA’s Walter Lantz archive and contributed to the Italian anthology, *What's Up, Tex? Il Cinema di Tex Avery*, published by Lindau. His chapter “Evoking the Oracle” appears in *Animated Landscapes*, edited by Chris Pallant. Tom served as the Director of Animation for Vivendi-Universal's educational software division, where he oversaw the creative development of the internationally best-selling *JumpStart* brand and its licensed products for Mac/PC, Playstation and GameBoy. He was also a consultant for Universal Cartoon Studios during the productions of *The New Woody Woodpecker Show* (FoxKids) and *From the Earth to the Moon* (HBO).