

STRIP MALLS, HOOKERS & Dead People

SONGS OF THE QUICKDRAW ANIMATION SOCIETY

BY CHRIS J. ROBINSON

Their first home was in a strip mall. On the door was the image of a character named Mr. Pencil Poke, with a pencil stuck up his bum, alongside a note that said, "sacrifices daily." A few years later, they shared a building with hookers. Along the way, someone died in an apartment above their office, a body was found in a car and phone messages were written on the back of cat dissection manuals. Meanwhile, the members of Calgary's Quickdraw Animation Society (QAS) emerged as perhaps the most important producers of independent animation in Canada. Yes, Calgary, the most conservative city in Canada; the home of oil barons and raging righties like Ralph Klein.

In 1980, Greg Lucier, a medical professor (that explains the dissection documents) and animation fan, moved from Toronto to Calgary. Seeing no local interest in animation, Lucier, along with John Edstrom and Rita Egizii, started showing 16mm NFB animated shorts on Friday nights in an old medical building. Over time, a core group of



viewers was established and the trio decided to formalize the gathering. In 1984, QAS was born. "At the beginning," says Lucier, "we weren't really interested in a film co-op per se, we were just a group of like-minded people who enjoyed watching cartoons." The first meeting was held February 21, 1984. Over the years, QAS expanded from a gathering of animation enthusiasts to a production and education association. In order to get charitable status, QAS began offering community lectures and classes. "One of our milestone projects was in 1985 when we hosted Academy Award winner Jimmy Picker who came out to do a three-day workshop on claymation." NFB animator John Weldon also paid a visit to QAS and it was during his lecture that a man upstairs breathed his final breath.

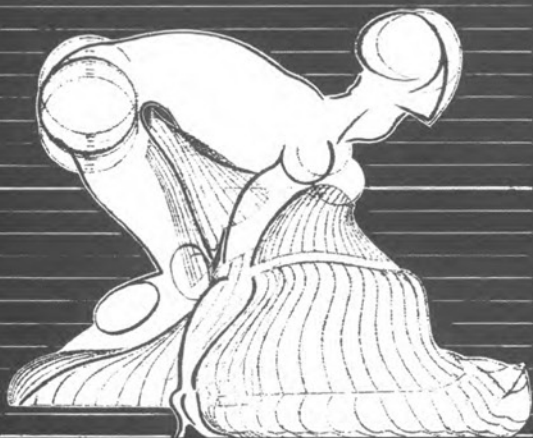
In 1987, Lucier and company left QAS and a new group of board members took over with a desire to start producing animation. The new members were primarily Alberta

College of Art students, a striking contrast to the founding members who were primarily research and science people. Being visual artists, the new board expanded the animation beyond commercial work (which was dominant in the early years) toward a promotion and celebration of alternative forms of artistic creation and expression.

Thanks to the contribution of operations coordinator Mandy Johnston, who was a key figure in raising awareness of QAS in the arts community, QAS used grants from the Canada Council, the Calgary Region Arts Foundation and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts to purchase equipment. One of the folks spearheading the production end of things was Kevin Kurytnik. He became a member in 1988 to take a course on animation for a patient-information video he was working on for a local hospital. He took over the class in 1991 and, with the exception of two years, has been teaching it ever since.

Kurytnik became president of QAS in 1992 and one of his first initiatives was to purchase a real animation stand. At the time, QAS had a "bolex camera strapped to a sewer pipe over a table with a peg bar taped to it, a professional video pencil-test machine and a 16mm gang sync." Mandy Johnston was instrumental in getting the new stand and Carol Beecher managed to secure a \$20,000 grant toward its purchase. The new equipment paid off when Wayne Traudt's *Movements of the Body* was accepted at Cannes and short listed for an Academy Award in 1994. Since then Richard Reeves (*Linear Dreams*), Kurytnik (*Abandon Bob Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here*), Beecher (*Ask Me*) and Don Best (*Raw*) have all had international success with QAS-produced films.

Movements of the Body



At the same time, Kurytnik had a conceptual vision of QAS. "I saw some kind of potential to do self-expressive animation after seeing work by the Brothers Quay, Jan Svankmajer, Norman McLaren and Harry Smith, and threw myself into the place as a reaction against the commercial." Kurytnik viewed QAS as not only a venue for self-expression but also collaboration, and he believed you not only

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made work, but you encouraged it. His views were shared by Beecher, who joined QAS in 1989, and became its first administrator. "The first impression I had of the place was that it was tricked out like a daycare centre with Care Bears and Disney posters everywhere, and the only tapes in the library were Disney stuff on Beta. I figured QAS should be different and out went the Care Bears and in came the 'weird' stuff," says Beecher.

Kurytnik was also largely responsible, along with Beecher, Reeves and notably Best for building the Society's resource library. When visiting QAS in 2000, I was astonished at the diversity and depth of its library. It contains videos, books and articles representing virtually every type of animation in existence. "Kevin and I like learning and teaching," says Beecher, "so naturally that became an important thing to share. The library is one of the big draws for QAS memberships and I think something of this scale is unique for an artist-run centre." The library is also unique in the sense that it enables QAS to maintain a dialogue between past and present. "We view films as living things," says Beecher, "no matter when they were created. Works by McLaren, Fischinger and Lye, for example, are not historical documents or monuments or oddities, but models for exploration and creation of filmmaking now."

Richard Reeves discovered QAS in 1990. "One day, during a quest for animation supplies in Calgary, someone mentioned something about a group of people who formed an artist-run centre and they were having a meeting the very next week. I had no way of knowing that the 300-kilometre drive to QAS and back (he lived near Banff) would become a way of life for many years to come." Reeves was instantly struck by the energy of the small group. Kurytnik mentioned that he was teaching an animation course, and Reeves signed up. By 1992, Reeves had become involved with the board of direc-

tors and started volunteering, presenting free film nights and instructing workshops. He was hooked.

By this time, QAS had moved to downtown Calgary and had expanded into three camera rooms, along with rooms for editing, classes, administration and screenings. Owing to fundraising initiatives, and accompanied by unlimited coffee and many sleepless nights, more and more equipment began to arrive. "QAS began to look more professional," says Reeves, "and the impressive studios would attract more independents to want to make their films here."

In late 1994, Reeves became the production coordinator. "The work was great, helping people, operating film equipment, building things, fundraising and seeing who can drink the most coffee." While QAS was open to new technologies, Reeves encouraged classical methods such as pixilation, claymation and paint on glass.

Earlier that year, Reeves received a grant to produce *Linear Dreams*, his first film. QAS offered him round-the-clock access to the production facilities. "You could go there at any hour and find somebody working. Without this access to special equipment, many of the films could not have been made." The cameraless, McLaren-inspired film, which also directly manipulated the sound stripe, became an immediate success, winning prizes around the world. To this day, it remains the most successful (in terms of festival acceptance) QAS production. More importantly, Reeves' success proved that QAS was becoming a force on the international animation scene and this encouraged others to produce films there.

One of the most popular activities of QAS are the children's workshops. Held every summer, Quick Kids (which was created by Mandy Johnston) attract children from nine to 14. There are two types of courses. One takes place on Saturdays and lasts 10 weeks. The second is a summer camp series with four-week sessions in July and August. The classes include drawn and clay animation. The kids all work toward a final film. "There's no real structure," says Beecher, "and the kids pretty much do whatever they want with story content." The work is finished on video using a Super-VHS system with a colour camera that the kids use. Last year, QAS began offering a teen camp. The classes have become so popular that some kids have taken the classes every year. "We call them 'repeat offenders,'" says Beecher. "We had one kid take the summer camp from the age of nine to 14, and then his younger brother started taking it too." QAS is the only media arts co-op that offers youth education at this level.

The Society doesn't just nurture home talent, it also attracts international folks as well. Tanja Huber was working at the Swiss Animation Festival, Fantoche, in 1999 when she saw a retrospective of QAS films. "Carol Beecher told me more about this artist-run society and seven months later I arrived in Calgary." While in Calgary, Huber worked on a number of short projects and returned home overwhelmed by her experience: "As far as I know there's no other place like Quickdraw. Quickdraw gave me a boost. I love the place



and I love the people there who were always ready to help. The only bad thing I can say about QAS is that it is too far away from Zurich."

Today QAS has 172 members (20 per cent live outside the province) and has hosted animators like Pierre Hébert, Preet Parn, John Weldon, Frédéric Back, Joyce Borenstein, Helen Hill, John Korty and Bill Plympton. QAS films have been shown at festivals in Ottawa, Annecy, Hiroshima, Switzerland, Norway, Vietnam and Singapore. As always with an association that relies on government grants and volunteers, the future is almost eternally unclear. "Quickdraw," notes Cyndy Ward, "is bravely both recovering and redefining the notion of 'alternative' that drove earlier production centers. Quickdraw is in the process of reconstructing the cultural imagery from which it has emerged. Hopefully, it will never finish."

Along with Carol Beecher, Richard Reeves remains the most visible member of QAS. On the back of the VHS box of Reeves' latest film, *One to One*, you see the QAS logo. I asked Reeves if QAS had financed or supported the film. He said no, but that QAS remains close to his heart. "I am a satellite member (he now lives in British Columbia) orbiting the earth. QAS headquarters is still mission control."

In many ways, QAS is what the NFB once was, an environment with limited material resources but a wealth of creativity, dedication, passion and generosity. QAS has emerged as the true successor to the giving, innovative spirit of Norman McLaren and serves as a beacon for the future of independent animation in this country. And if this little-engine-that-could story seems almost magical, it is. "Even now," says Reeves, "I click my heels together three times and repeat, 'there is no place like Quickdraw, there is no place like Quickdraw, there is no place like Quickdraw.'" TAKE ONE