


1994

# Film Alchemy: Interviews with Direct-On-Film Animators

Leah Bosworth

*Rochester Institute of Technology*, rootl@geneseo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/library-research>

 Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Bosworth, Leah, "Film Alchemy: Interviews with Direct-On-Film Animators" (1994). *Milne Library Faculty/Staff Works*. 2. <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/library-research/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Milne Library at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Milne Library Faculty/Staff Works by an authorized administrator of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact [KnightScholar@geneseo.edu](mailto:KnightScholar@geneseo.edu).

Direct-on-film animation refers to any imagery created on film without a camera. An interchangeable term is "cameraless animation." Since the days of the direct-on-film pioneers Norman McLaren and Len Lye, the medium has evolved from a method of special effects to a broad range of artistic expression. The work of the four artists I interviewed illustrate the wide range of processes that can be considered direct-on-film animation from straightforward drawing and painting on film frame by frame, to altering the film's surface with chemicals.

Cecile Fontaine (b. 1957, Paris) is credited with "inventing" the emulsion lift technique. She accidentally discovered the technique at a job during her college years in the United States. She used the wrong substance to clean some Super 8 film, and noticed that the 3 layers of emulsion were separating from each other. Cecile decided to "refine" her discovery. To make her films, Cecile generally coaxes each emulsion layer off with a knife and rearranges them. She often lays down images from different films, mixes black and white with color, and burnishes them together with anything from coins to her fingernails. Some examples showing the limitless possibilities of her technique are a Color Movie (Super 8, 1983), and Overeating (16 mm, 1984).

Some of Cecile's works have an underlying story or theme. Cruises (16 mm, 1989) is mixture of color footage from a "Love Boat" style cruise ship ad from the 1970's juxtaposed with black and white footage of immigrants on board crowded ships, making for an eerie contrast. Cecile's works have been shown in several film festivals and experimental film houses around Europe and are held in collections in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Light Cone Distributors, Paris; and the Georges Pompidou Center, Paris.

Jurgen Reble (b. 1956, Dusseldorf, Germany) has been referred to as a "film alchemist" because of the destructive processes his films undergo. Jurgen uses his experience as a printmaker to aid him in his experiments with chemical reactions to film. In 1979, Jurgen helped found a performance art group, Schmelzdahin (literally, melting film). Some of the performances include Ein Harter Falter [The harder they fall] (1988) and Alles Kommt ans Licht [Everything depends upon the light] (1990). Each performance was a unique happening for the films "screened" were completely destroyed.

After leaving Schmelzdahin in 1990, he continued experimenting with the "semi-destruction" of film. He created Passion , (1990, 16 mm, B/W) a 15 minute long film utilizing found footage of church interiors and newscasts. Because of acid, some parts of the film curled to the point that the film could not be run through a projector. Jurgen flattened it out and printed it in such a way that one can occasionally see sprocket holes and film edges during the course of the film. His most recent film, Das Golden Tor [The Golden Gate] (1992, 54 minutes), uses chemical treatments of footage of insects, reptiles, and astronomical images. The accompanying soundtrack to the film represents cosmic static and hisses. Das Golden Tor was screened at the Montage '93 Festival of the Image at the George Eastman House, Rochester, NY, in July 1993.

Jose Antonio Sistiaga(b. 1932, San Sebastian, Spain). is an abstract painter who became renown for his large-scale works during the 1960's. His first direct-on-film work is Ere Erera Baleibu Icik Subua Arauren (1970, 35 mm). The title is composed of non-translatable Basque phonemes. The film was quite a shocker in its day, due to its length (1 hour, 15 minutes), lack of a soundtrack, and sheer largeness of its paint-spattered imagery. After Ere... and a couple of other works, Jose

took a hiatus from film for nearly 20 years. He reemerged in 1989 with Impressions from the Upper Atmosphere , the first 70 mm, 15 perforation painted on film of its kind. In 1991, Jose completed 2 more films, which were not painted directly on film, but were painted on animation cels. Impressionistic waves, shapes, and swirls dissolved into each other for both films, Paysage Inquietent , and En Un Jardin Imagine . Currently, Jose is working on a film he started in 1992, AN ["Sun," in Basque]. This film, which will be a companion piece to Impressions from the Upper Atmosphere , is also 70 mm, and will be shown in an upcoming retrospective exhibit of his work which will debut in December 1996, in Bilbao, Spain.

Ties Poeth (b. 1957, Breda, Netherlands) is an expert on sound-synching direct-on-film animation to music, as well as "slow-movement" animation. He completed his first direct-on-film animation, Tranquilizer during his senior year in college in the Netherlands. The recording was completely transcribed and the film was colored frame by frame synchronically with the sounds. This piece was the first of several Ties created that was an attempt to visually interpret music. Ties built a light box "cabinet" which allows him to accomplish precise and gradual drawing transitions across film frames. An example of "slow movement" direct-on-film animation is his award-winning film Mission Ville (1990, 10 minutes), which keeps to the slow pace of a hot-air balloon moving over a city.

Ties' films utilize other methods of animation as well, such as cut-out and pixelation, but often incorporate the sound synchronization technique. Two major themes tend to make up the content of his films the dislike of cities (Misson Ville, Amsterdamm ), and carnivals (Caravan , a 6 minute direct on film/music synch piece based on the song "Caravan" by Duke Ellington). His latest piece, Joelfest (The Carnival Shout), is to be released this year. The film utilizes black and white direct on film animation, puppet animation, cut-out animation, and live-action pixilation. It whimsically tells the story of the history of the world via a carnival procession.

These artists have contributed a wealth of diversity to the relatively new art form of direct-on-film animation. However, verbal descriptions cannot do their works justice; the films must be screened to be fully appreciated. Most of the artists' works mentioned are distributed through Light Cone, 75012 Paris, France, Phone 33 1 46-28-11-21; Fax 43-46-63-76