ROBERT BREER

Jim Trainor

The animated films of Robert Breer have established him as one of the major figures in the development of the avant-garde cinema. Perhaps more than any other animator, Breer has explored the very nature of the perception of form and motion. His works utilize a variety of styles and techniques, from rapid-fire collages of disparate images (BLAZES, FIST FIGHT) to gentle exercises in line drawing (A MAN AND HIS DOG OUT FOR AIR); from formal, geometrical abstraction (66, 69, 70) to, most recently, films combining representational action with stylized drawing and fractured continuity (FUJI, GULLS AND BUOYS, LMNO). What is perhaps most remarkable about his work is its airy, unpretentious quality; again and again Breer has shown that it is possible to create formal, structured non-narrative films without sacrificing wit, charm and humor.

This interview was conducted in October, 1979, by Jim Trainor.

JT: Would you say that your films are becoming less abstract and more representational?

RB: I guess that recently they've been rather representational but as the history goes, I move from abstraction to figuration to abstraction to figuration, cycling the idea. My first films were abstract because I was working from a painting aesthetic that was totally abstract—hard-edge neoplasticism that came out of Mondrian. I was a firm believer in that orthodoxy in about 1951, when I first started making films. The first films were abstract, resembling those of Hans Richter, although I didn't know that at first. Soon afer, I fooled around with a couple of collage films like JAMESTOWN BALOOS in 1957. The single-frame stuff, of course, is not abstract in that the content, the images involved, are frequently objects.

JT: Well, they're abstract in that they aren't composed of smoothly running images.

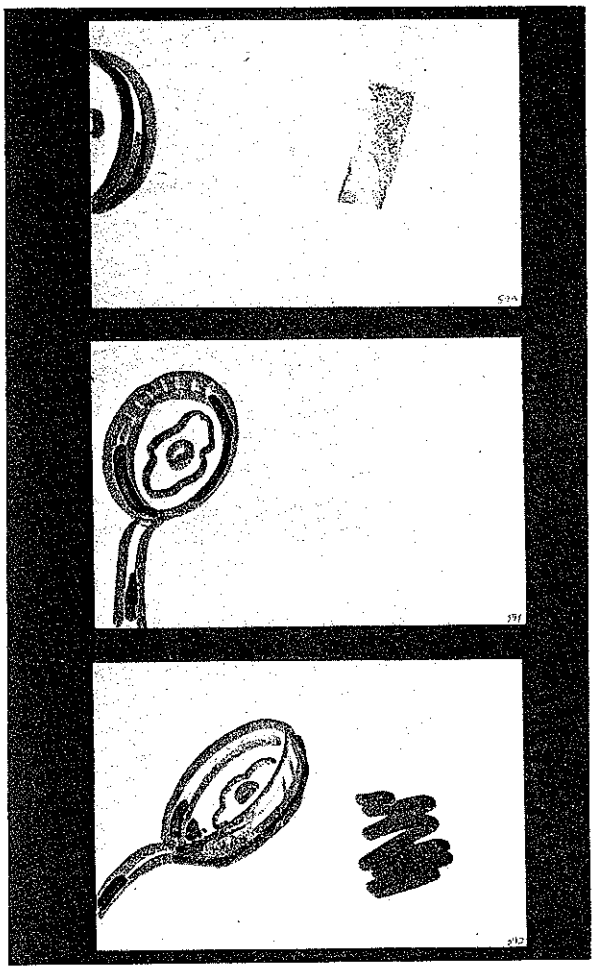
RB: Non-narrative, in any case. LMNO may have suggested a narrative. I think it does.

JT: I ask this question because I've noticed in some of your later films you've used rotoscope [a tracing technique derived from live-action footage].

RB I started rotoscoping in GULLS AND BUOYS in 1972, which was followed by FUJI, and then RUBBER CEMENT. Then I quit, and haven't used it since.

JT: Do you find an aesthetic problem with rotoscoping, as not being a pure animation technique?

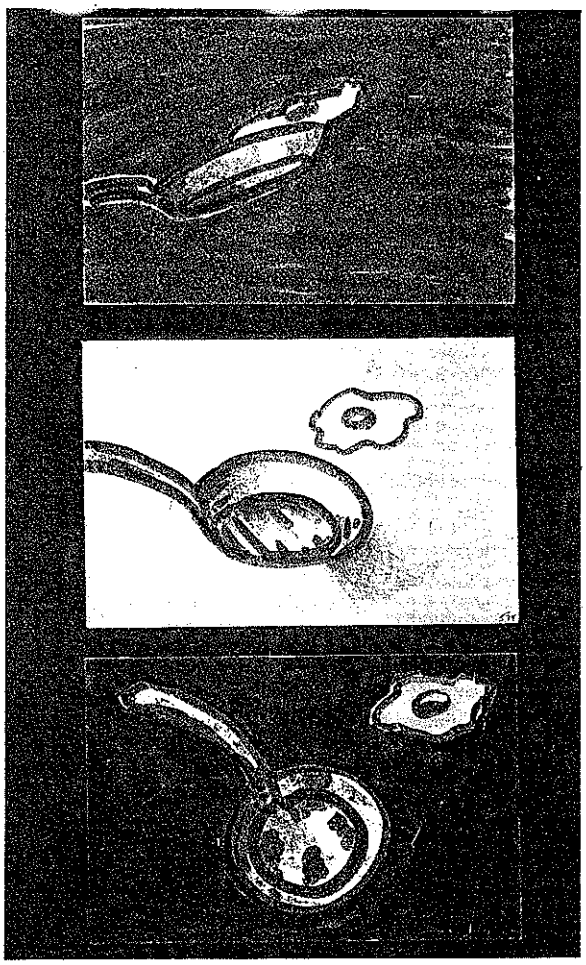
RB: When I was working on GULLS AND BUOYS, sitting over a light-table with a projector underneath, tracing the projected images, my 13-year old daughter came in and said, "That's cheating!" I tell this story quite often, whenever I go around showing my films. I'm always curious about the reaction from the audience towards rotoscoping—I figure that about half of them feel the same way, that it's cheating. I don't know if your question relates to this or not.



JT: Well, I'm not accusing you of cheating . . . .

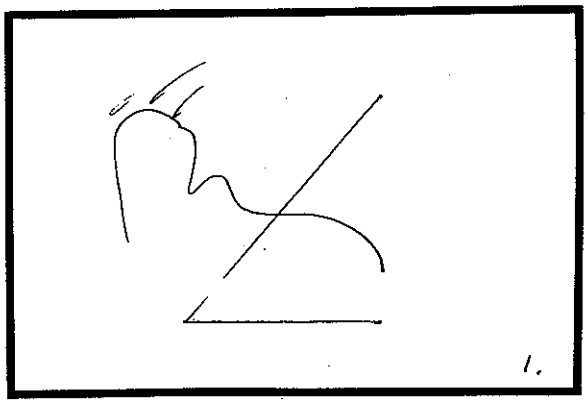
RB: The idea of using a photograph for a painting has been going on for a long time, ever since photographs were possible. Eakins comes to mind as a photographer/painter . . . obviously, it's an academic thing. If being academic is cheating, then I was cheating.

JT: I notice that the rotoscoping in your films is not as pure as what Disney used in SNOW WHITE, for example, where it really looks like a real person.
RB: You use the word "pure." Do you mean direct?
JT: Direct, or very close to live-action.
RB: Well, the problem with rotoscoping is that you get a suggestion of reality through all the clues other than the physical surface of the thing you're rotoscoping. Everything having to do with movement, of camera



movement, and the movement of the object suggests reality very strongly . . . what I think you're talking about is that in rotoscoping, we have so many clues to the origin of the imagery—we know it's a real image that's been screwed up somehow—that being impressed by how real it is, is undone by this, the fact that it's mechanically derived somehow. It's that predictability that makes it boring. Anybody who rotoscopes and congratulates himself on his animation skills is in a sense cheating. The aesthetic problem is that there hasn't been much human intrusion; therefore, it doesn't constitute enough alteration of reality to consist of what you might possibly consider as art. How's that for an answer? Pretty windy, I guess.

JT: You do your work on index-cards, right?
RB: Yes. For many years now I've used index-cards. They're stiff so you can flip them, or jam them right up against a stop: you don't have to use peg-and-hole registration, which takes time. Everything that takes time to manipulate a single image, when there are thousands of drawings involved, lengthens the process and makes it too unwieldy.
JT: How many drawings for, say, A MAN AND HIS DOG OUT FOR AIR?
RB: A MAN AND HIS DOG is, actually, a case for drawing on pieces of typewriter paper. What was good there was I couldn't really flip it very well and see what I was getting ahead of time, so it was a big thrill when it came back from the lab. Sort of delayed coitus or something. Let's see, A MAN AND HIS DOG, not very many. It's two and a half minutes, so maybe a thousand drawings. LMNO has got six thousand.
JT: Can you tell me a little more about how A MAN AND HIS DOG was concieved? It seems a little different from your other films in that it has un-interrupted flowing line.
RB: Well, there are some others like that, that perhaps you haven't seen. One of them is BREATHING, which consists of black lines cavorting around for a long time, sly references to representation, but very little. I think A MAN AND HIS DOG was done as an antidote to a lot of collage work before. I had just done JAMESTOWN BALOOS and it's very "collagey" with that kind of staccato, broken-up imagery I really did to a T after RECREATION. I wanted something that would stroke the retina little more.
JT: The way it impressed me, although it's composed entirely of swirling tangled lines, is that it gives the impression of walking down the street, breeze blowing . . . .
RB: Power of suggestion, I'm sure, comes in there. The bird whistling in the background suggests it, and the title. If you didn't have the title you'd probably not sit still for it. I'm aware of those ingredients.
JT: So it was intentional.
RB: Sure.
JT: I notice a lot of repetition in some of your films, like LMNO and also 69.
RB: Well, recycling is a kind of economy, but that isn't really my motivation. The kind of image I've chosen to make is very rapid-fire and fragmented. You only get glimpses of something, so I feel there's an element of tease involved, and frustration at not being able to see what you're seeing. So by repetition, I've persuaded



myself, I'm alleviating some of that frustration. I'm really interested in a very staccatto type of total image, and the price of that is comprehension on the part of the audience seeing the thing for first time. But the other real mechanism going on has to do with threading, making a web out of images. Their reappearance makes for a kind of continuum and breaks up the idea of narrative, because if you see the same thing you saw five minutes ago five minutes later, you get a sense of recycling time. I like that, because I want to avoid narration as such.

JT: Can you tell me something about your influences? You mentioned Mondrian.

RB: Oh, I didn't have any influence on Mondrian! Forget it!

JT: I meant the other way around.

RB: Influences, let's see. Well, something dawned on me recently, and I'm loathe to admit it, but once in Paris I got to know Man Ray—he was still around in the 50's—and we had him over for dinner, and told him to bring some of his films, and I'd show him some of mine, you know the kind of thing you do. With Man Ray it takes a certain kind of naivite to do that, but I was purely naive. And I saw that everything he had done I was doing over again and not as well. So I got a real comeuppance there.

Actually I think I've gotten, or stolen, more from Leger than from Man Ray. The people I would like to think influenced me are Jean Vigo . . . and Len Lye . . . And Emile Cohl. It was after I did A MAN AND HIS DOG that Noel Burch took me to see Emile Cohl . . . . Richter's first films had a lot of punch for me also.

JT: I also ask about your influences because every once in a while I see something very "cartoony" stuck in. Wasn't there a Felix the Cat once?

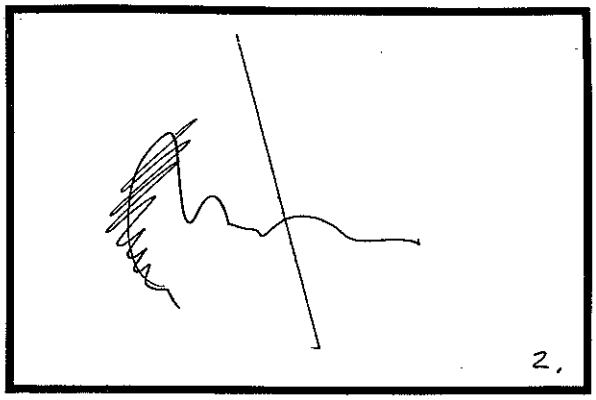
RB: Oh, I see. Well, recently I put Felix the Cat in RUBBER CEMENT as an homage to Mesmer's work. I love it, it's terrific—there's something there that I don't know he knows he's done, but it's marvelous.

JT: Also a little bit of a stick-figure person in LMNO.

RB: Well, that was a reference to Emile Cohl. My purpose is not to tickle a few film buffs looking at the thing so much as, I guess, to be all-inclusive. When I make these collage films I have a theory that everything goes, not anything, but everything. And so I've got to include cartooning.

JT: I had the suspicion that, since you are known for rejecting the standard techniques for animation, you would stick something like Felix the Cat in as a satirical comment, or as criticism.

RB: I'm ambivalent around that. I really had a total revulsion for some of the commercial animation, the kind of drawing conventions that they settled on. You know, the window reflections on bulbous shoes, the sort of redundant wrinkles around the knees . . . .



Because when I was a kid I was a cartoonist, and I went through a whole problem trying to find my style, and when I realized that the question was a much bigger one than just arbitrarily landing on a few tricks and then sticking with them as a sort of phony signature, I got interested in the whole problem philosophically. Then I became a quote "fine artist." . . . Matisse is the guy who really turned me on to fine art, and only after that, and getting into heavy serious abstract painting, I came back to film. When I came back to film I found that it lended itself to heterogeneity in a way that I was very deprived of in the orthodoxy of painting conventions. So that's when I began to throw in stuff, to release energy pent up from my old cartooning days, either snide references or straight admiring ones. Mostly admiring ones. There's no point in putting it down—I might hate the way Popeye's arm is drawn, but I greatly admire the way it's moved across the screen. I have problems dealing with studio animation, but I've come to appreciate it a lot more.

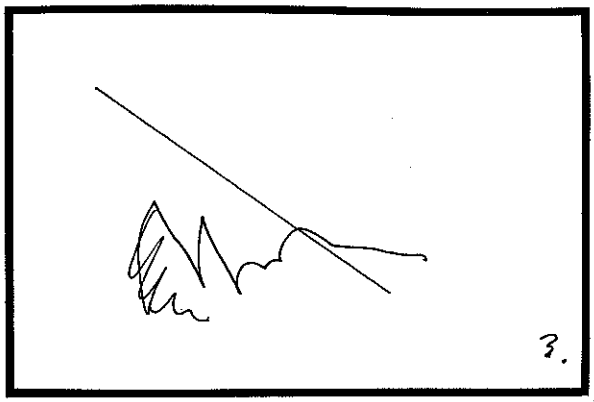
JT: Can you say something about modern animation—

RB: You mean contemporary?

JT: Yes. Do you have any affinity with someone like McLaren?

RB: He wasn't one of those I mentioned conspicuously in talking about influences, and I have to admit I have very ambivalent feelings toward him . . . . Aesthetically

he hasn't been a major influence by any means.
JT: How about Fischinger?
RB: Fischinger is the reason why, when I got into sound, I didn't keep it entirely dependent on the image, 'cause I was so put off by his studies in Mickey Mouse sound. I thought that if I was going to put sound in my films I sure as hell don't want it to be linked up like that. I don't want my images to illustrate sound, which Fichinger has been accused of, although he denied that it was ever his idea.
JT: Do you think there's an aesthetic problem in that, in having images very closely illustrating sound?
RB: Well, if you put down a rule to the effect that one shouldn't have this direct connection between sound and image, so-called Mickey Mousing of sound, and then somebody comes along and uses just that in a very positive way, it gives it totally fresh experience. So it's silly to have any rules like that. I was put off by Fischinger, but if I see his work contextually, at the time that he did those things, maybe he really had something going for him. They are pretty extraordinary. I read it as his images being in a slavish relation to the music, but that wasn't his idea at all, maybe it can be read the other way around.
JT: What kind of commercial work have you done?
RB: Very little. I haven't done any commercials, selling . . . .



JT: Soap or something.
RB: No, I have not done any. I don't want to be pious about it, but I haven't done any. I've been asked to, and have been tempted to when I get low on funds.
JT: The related question is, is it really possible to make a living off independent animation?
RB: Oh, certainly not, not for me at least. I've gone through a whole pile of grants, and I'm sort of at the end of those now, and I'm selling off artworks given to me by my friends. I also teach . . . . But I will say this: if you go see George Griffen, for instance, you'll get another answer. George and some of those young contemporary animators are finding work in the field. A group of them are working for N.B.C. right now, doing spots. I know George has done films on the side now for quite a while; that's how he got into making his own things I guess. It's a tough question, how do you save enough time for yourself to do your own work? I don't know. In my own case, I do fairly big traffic in my own films. But it's taken a long time, and I don't know how secure a market that is.
JT: What are you working on now?
RB: I'm trying to finish a film called T. Z. Another two letters of the alphabet, but they aren't consecutive now. It stands for TappanZee; I live near there. It's incidental, but it's a good excuse for a title.
JT: What does LMNO stand for?
RB: LMNO is just a way of using the alphabet without using ABCD, which has too many other implications, although I considered that as a title. I'm currently using letters instead of numbers in the title because there are representational elements, whereas the numbered series, 66, 69, and 70, was dealing with conventional abstract forms, geometry. Letters are more literary and therefore more representational. So that's another category of film. LMNO has a lot of punning possibilities, like "LMNO goldfish," and, as you know, there's a goldfish that appears on the screen. I can play with it that way . . . . Somebody called it "LIMNO" which suggests light; that wasn't my idea at all.
JT: I saw it misspelled "LIMO".
RB: Yeah, I look forward to the variations. The lab usually does a number on those. You know, they've changed all my titles . . . .

* * * * *

From May 14 through June 1, the Whitney Museum of American Art will sponsor a major exhibition of the works of Robert Breer, featuring drawings, mutoscopes, and screenings of thirty of his films, including his latest, T.Z.

Drawings on Pages 16 and 17 are from T.Z.; drawings on these pages are from an untitled animated sketch.