SAUL STEINBERG AND ANIMATION

These two drawings of a man holding question marks, one signed "ST" and dated 1965, the other published in The New Yorker in 1961, are both by Saul Steinberg (1914-1999). They suggest the artist had no problem re-visiting an idea to make subtle alterations.

What do we see?

First, the line, rendered with a crow quill pen, contains distinctly hand-drawn artifacts, sketched spontaneously with pools, spatters, slight wiggles, and disconnected "mistakes," yet also without a consistent or idiosyncratic style, as if to suggest anonymity. This line defines the picture's totality: no illusion of depth through shading, scalar hierarchies, or layering. The line doesn't contain a shape to be filled with color which would emphasize its presence; the line IS the shape. Because it doesn't exist in nature, the line telegraphs its synthetic message through each minute nuance.

The man wears a business suit. He is pictured stiffly in full profile, a strategy that foregrounds his ritualized, iconic status, like an engraving on a frieze. His mask-like face contains three lines, a jagged nose/chin contour like a "w" in repose, a horizontal slit for a mouth, and a vertical oval for the eye. No hair or significant detail, the very "antithesis of expressionism." Without conventional clues from eyebrow and mouth the affect is blank; without a pupil the eye is ambiguous, perhaps inner-directed, shielded from social interaction: modern man caught like a deer in headlights.

What makes the drawing work as comic art, as opposed to being merely "artistic" marks on paper, is that it has a message, a joke, a punch line, a story. It is narrative art. With his two outstretched claw-

like hands the man is holding a huge lot (equal to his own mass) of question marks. He clutches them to his chest and face like holding a towering batch of groceries or laundry; he owns this stuff, but he doesn't know quite what to do with it. The curious problem with the drawing is that it cannot be easily interpreted; it's open-ended, caption-less, minimal, restrained, yet rich in associations. The no-answer man offers no clues to his inner state beyond slight bewilderment at his embarrassment of riches. We "get it" but are not sure why it, except to say, "That's Steinberg."

The almost identical drawings suggest the illusive conjectural possibilities of Steinberg and animated film. What if this stoic businessman had been depicted with many more drawings, each one slightly different from the rest, subtly sequenced in linear and cyclic progressions. Would the figure sway back and forth under the heavy load? Why heavy? Yugoslavian animators would have had a comic field day with this! Maybe the punctuations are lighter than air, feathery, volatile, kinetic, exuberant. Maybe the guy reacts with: pride, disgust, pain, joy, forbearance. Maybe the ground moves; there's an earthquake; he's drunk; what about those eyes; what if....

As I write (February, 2007), there are three Steinberg exhibitions on view in New York City, complemented by the publication of a handsome art book, rich in biographical content, which includes many examples of his early cartoon work.[i] This graphic wealth demonstrates Steinberg's unique position in the second half of the last century as the mercurial immigrant/translator between high and low culture, between the private life of the mind and the hubbub of public experience. Like Tocqueville, Steinberg brought a European sensibility, conservative but acutely perceptive, to create an extended portrait of an American culture he clearly loved, using drawing, as he often put it, as a form of writing.

Although he exhibited drawings and sculpture in galleries, he will forever be associated with The New Yorker magazine which published covers and innumerable line drawings from 1941 to his death in 1999 (and continues to publish them posthumously). His popular and often plagiarized cover, "View of the World from Ninth Ave," aptly demonstrates a comic truth about the parochial perspective of the city dweller, as well as it renders an architectural record of startling accuracy that seamlessly gives way to a reduced landscape of codes: multiple perspectives, bird's eye view, detail and vacant impression, all bound within a human line. His first collection of drawings, "All in Line" (1945), has a line drawing of a man drawing himself embossed on the neutral buckram cover: a bold emblem of modernist self-consciousness that signals the storm of invention to follow.

If Steinberg's genius can be outlined it might go something like this:

1. There is no Steinberg "look," no Steinberg line or flourish. His drawing style is so varied, as if invented for each concept at hand, that his work can be said to be "styleless," even about drawing itself. And yet one can always identify his work; it has a conceptual signature. It was, as he put it, "a way of reasoning on paper."
2. Steinberg asks us to look at things, then to look at our observing selves and our descriptive language. Automobiles, cats, war, businessmen, women, masks, cowboys, parties, the city, tourism, monuments, the artist, baseball, Mickey Mouse, the street, and above all architecture; don't forget maps, signatures, handwriting, rubber stamps. This partial list of subjects, squeezed through Steinberg's pen, becomes reduced, abstracted to essential, emblematic shapes, part of our all-consuming cultural river.

3. Steinberg is the only cartoonist whose work is *sui generis*, partaking in both fine art history and the vulgar realm of comics, never comfortable in either world. Primarily a doodler, he redefined cartooning from the satirical commentary of Hogarth and Daumier by using a Modernist scalpel to peal away illustrative ornament. But he could just as easily wrangle his vast repertory of technique (photography, collage, sculpture, mechanical drawing, caricature, painterly watercolor) to his experimental practice. If he had any need for a philosophical underpinning it would be existentialism, as filtered through Buster Keaton.

Saul Steinberg was a Rumanian Jew who emigrated to Milan to study architecture and publish satirical cartoons. Barely escaping fascist racial laws he landed in New York City during W.W. II, then did military service in China and Europe, before returning to the sophisticated world of mid-century art and publishing. Though he never had to forge his passport, the myth persists in his work, depicting authenticating documentation, signatures, postcards, and insightful psychological diagrams of "impostorship"—ephemera of the ultimate cosmopolitan traveler/refugee.

His intellectual milieu would seem to lead him toward a democratic, left-liberal critique of American culture. But, in fact, his work always retains a social reserve even while pushing caricature into formalist abstraction. A man drawn with a soft, ambiguous pencil might share a room with ink lined curlicued women whose faces resemble their pointillist dresses, or a crayon-scribbled baseball player, or an organization man with a thumb-printed face, all of them studying the same indecipherable abstract painting. We are never meant to think of them as members of a political party, having ideas about Communism or racial integration. Only after the disturbances of the chaotic '60s and the rise of underground comix do we detect a more disturbing Steinberg view of the city: monstrous women entirely composed of legs and head, screaming sirens, machine-gun toting mice, the menace of garish duplicity.

ANIMATION AND DESIGN
A condensed dialectic of animated cartoon history starts with Cohl's stick-figures and McCay's comic naturalism synthesized to Felix and Mickey, composed of hose limbs and abstracted body, easy for a studio team to draw. This metastasizes into a storybook illustrated "realism" in design matched by a "baroque" choreography of squash and stretch. This esthetic cannot endure market and labor stress, and thus evolves into hard-edged "modernistic" design and limited animation, the chief catalyst being UPA. So ends the first half of the last century.

Amid Amidi writes in "Cartoon Modern" that Steinberg was one of the chief influences on this new designer-driven animation in the late '40s and early '50s. He even designed two Jell-O TV spots for the UPA commercial unit in New York in 1955 . As the director of those commercials, Gene Deitch, recalls, just visiting Steinberg's studio and seeing his clocks and rocking chairs "set his young blood surging." The housewife-on-treadmill concept seems almost too literal for the mature Steinberg, but the unfilled linearity, disembodied hands, and screaming baby floating in domestic space, all suggest a fractured graphic style, radical for 1955. We may find the animation a bit generic, but don't forget this was the dawn of animated advertising, just barely removed from educational and industrial films.

Steinberg-inspired character design took many forms. The line became less curvilinear, more angular; anatomy became more abstract, more symbolic, more schematic. Hands could drop their silly paw-concealing gloves and assume all five digits, or even disappear altogether until needed. It became fashionable to reduce the figure to just lines and to place it in purely linear scene. Flat shapes of color or texture might float fore and aft to suggest depth, but the overall impression is kind of compressed anti-pictorialism. By denying a character any shading or color its line took on an increased burden of expression. It's no surprise that cartoonists like R.O. Blechman, Robert Osborn, Jules Feiffer, and William Steig, who inscribed psychological states through lines both subtle and flamboyant, came into their own in the '50s, a period of redefinition.

Even Disney designers felt the winds of change and sprang on board with the Oscar-winning "Toot, Whistle, Plunk, and Boom" and the earlier, less well-known "Melody," both "Adventures in Music" directed by Ward Kimball. These literal educational illustrations, complete with a corny voices, and overbearing, cute characterizations seem far removed from the austerity of a Steinberg vision but the flavor can be tasted in countless design touches. The opening titles, a Calder mobile, is the sort of modern interior that Steinberg would use too imply a kind of sophisticated wink to the middlebrow audience (like the textbook entitled "Freud"). The flattened main characters and stylized backgrounds are UPA-derived but in the various illustrations and wall charts, e.g. "Homo Sapiens" and chalk drawing stick figures, we see a diagrammatic linearity that builds to a tour de force climax of stylistic heterogeneity in the finale.

THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE
Animation (the business between the frames) and Design (the business within the frame) have always occupied an antagonistic seesaw. When cartoon studios were Taylorized in the '20s, both functions split up with directors positioned as arbitrators. And since character and background design weren't particularly dynamic or innovative during the "Golden Age," authorship tended to be attributed to animators and writers.

The new paradigm introduced by UPA, consciously referenced the world of art, literature, dance, and music. This shift reflected a broader change in the Post War visual environment of print culture as Bauhaus-influenced graphic design (Paul Rand, Herbert Bayer, Saul Bass, Alex Steinweiss) meshed with the hard-edged comic work of so many anonymous commercial illustrators like the Columbia record jacket artist Jim Flora. At UPA and other modern production studios animation as such took a back seat. Not only did repetitive cycles, held torsos, gratuitous pan backgrounds, and separated mouth actions increase the animator's productivity, this "limitation" was rarely seized as a creative challenge, to fashion a temporal equivalent to "angular" design. As a result many viewers, uninterested in design or underwhelmed by sophisticated subtlety, may have felt cheated.

As independent animators broke with the studio division of labor to meld design with the direct processes of sequence drawing and layering (collage, slashed reveals, and other paper tricks) we often consulted Steinberg's paired down vision: only backgrounds that really mattered, replace detailed drawing with a borrowed appropriation, and above all edit, edit, edit. Of course Steinberg wasn't the only model for cartoons drawn on one level, floating in white limbo, reduced to the barest essentials of ink and paper, but it helped to drop his name whenever a client wanted too much color, modeling, or decoration.

Did Steinberg hold the animator's art in as low regard as cartooning was in the art world? It is certainly no secret that cartoonists and illustrators, whose principal affinity is for the printed page, commonly have difficulty adapting to animation design. They often need to stop and examine a single arbitrary frame without respecting the demands of rhythm, tempo, and pacing. How many animators have watched a pencil test with a designer screeching "Wait! Wait! Stop! What's THAT?"

Would Steinberg have been any different? Aside from the Jell-O spots his brush with film was limited and problematic: background illustrations for the opening of Alfred Hitchcock's droll "The Trouble With Harry," abortive pre-production consultation on "An American in Paris" which ended in rancor, and an unrealized project by Charles and Ray Eames to animate Steinberg's panorama drawing, "The City" which was exhibited in the pivotal MoMA "14 Americans" show of 1946.

The first animated film to consciously translate a Steinberg design was also Candy Kugel's first independent film. "Inbetweening American" was based on a New Yorker cover illustration of 12 mythic American personae. When she showed Steinberg the workprint he seemed to like it and even suggested future collaboration (he insisted on seeing it several times, running the Moviola forward and backward, stopping often along the way) But when it was completed with music in 1977, he refused release permission, without explanation. Was he jealous? Did he hate it? Did he have his own plans for an animated film? Was he worried that it would somehow diminish the huge retrospective planned for the Whitney Museum later that year? By far the animated film most faithful to Steinberg's design, it was eventually released after his death 24 years later, and then only after Steinberg Foundation board members relented. Perhaps the curmudgeonly elitist egotism which kept him from working with animation was simply a part of his promethean creative engine.

STEINBERGIAN ANIMATION
More than being merely an interesting cartoonist whose designs or stories might be animated, Steinberg's work impacted the art of animation conceptually, indirectly, but profoundly, by broadening the grammar of cartooning, by portraying a new awareness of self-conscious psychology, and by constantly re-examining the codes and icons of our waking, living, modern world. He was a sponge and a filter, a condenser of cultural wisdom whose values meshed with both affluent snobs and low-life, boho/info wonks who saw his work as a kind of meta-parody.

The "View From Ninth Avenue," for example, boldly borrows a19th C. cartoon convention of the exalted urban viewpoint to tell a story of individual consciousness, of the delusion that our own place, our own particular utopian arcadia (or shopping mall), is the center of the universe. It's the hubris that denies the worth of the other, yet also confesses a self-conscious complicity with its arrogance.
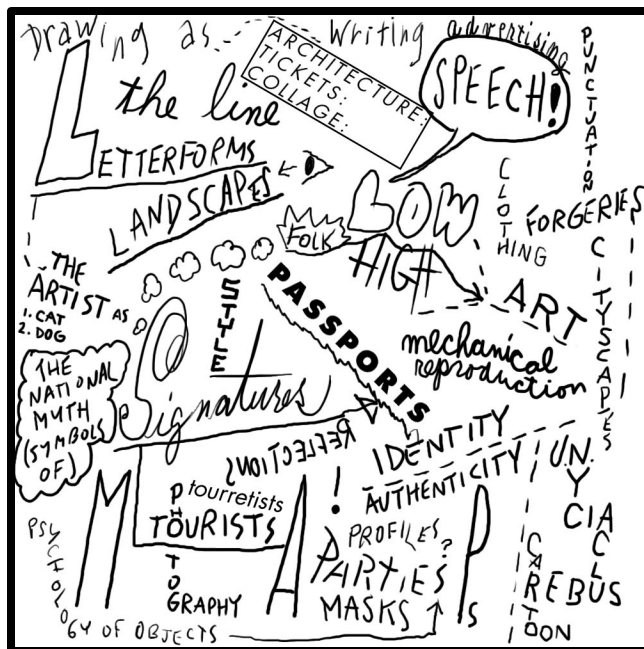
GG 2007

This random jumble of Steinberg themes and techniques to which he often returned, each time with a subtle accretion or rueful twist, could be re-imagined as a schematic diagram to be filled in with specific cultural referents that never seemed too topical nor too dated.

Though not an obvious influence, Steinberg is the artist I always cite as my primary inspiration, a habit formed early in life when I discovered what pictures caused my architect father to chuckle to himself. These were pictures of definitions and distinctions, where wit found parity with humor, where irony gently jostled the foundations of sentiment, where scribbles crashed the uptown party of gallery paintings. This was an alternate universe: a cat with a human face which never grinned, a building inscribed by its own formal language, a car in squiggly splendor owned by a wizened cowboy, a photograph of dressy party-goers wearing paper bag masks. Sometimes the simplicity verged on the childish (though his work would never be identified "for children," whom he often drew as wistful miniature adults). He said, "I don't set out to make art, but to be clear." He was a "draftsman of ideas" yet also a collector who re-cycled his vast trove of ephemera (ticket stubs, receipts, candy wrappers) as if to fill in the unconscious cracks in our visual culture.

Steinberg drew every day, keeping sketchbooks, mapping his quotidian routines with clever numerical notations, even tracing the architecture of his daily quest for morning coffee, newspaper and observations of his favorite tree in his Manhattan neighborhood. Jonathan Hodgson's 1997 "Feeling My Way" takes a hand-held, live-action walk to work, down bustling London sidewalks and lanes, and layers on drawing and text to compose a dense meditation on life, time, and space. That his workplace destination was Paul Vester's Speedy Cartoons adds yet another layer of significance to this travelogue.

Nedeljko Dragic' "Diary" (1974) is a record of his trip to New York. The spiritual affinity of a Balkan artist to that of a Carpathian may be too elusive or vague to argue, but it's quite clear that Steinberg's

immigrant view colored the Yugoslav's own impressions, with perhaps a touch of Fellini thrown in for good measure.

"Everything is a Number" is Stefan Schabenbeck's 1967 homage to the early Steinberg of linear, Pythagorian landscapes. Its ascetic monochromatism accents the spirit of menace found in much Polish animation of this period, as if the mysterious Schabenbeck were also channeling Kafka. Daniel Szczehura's early piece, "The Diagram" also plays with a human figure trapped in an oppressive maze of unreasonable, arbitrary linearity.

While Steinberg's tone was always cosmopolitan, skeptical, parodic, it lacked the particular feeling of dark desperation often found in Soviet-Bloc animation where "little men" were at the mercy of vast bureaucratic abstractions, voracious women, or pitiless fate. When the Wall showed evidence of crumbling, the gloom shifted and a more complex social critique began to emerge. Priit Paarn's "Dejeuner sur l'Herbe" could then be seen as more Steinbergian in its virtuosic shifts in style and hopeful elevation of art as a healing enterprise, even if artists were being censored. In retrospect, perhaps Steinberg appealed to Americans in the 50s precisely because he brought the mordant stain of European tragedy to our sunny shore, somewhat as Freud thought on his first trip to the States that he was introducing the "virus" of psychoanalysis. Steinberg then could be seen as the answer to Rotarian boosterism: writing pictures that said obliquely, "not so fast, Mack."

Even though Steinberg's essential mandate was that he "didn't have to be funny" his followers clearly had other ideas. One of the more prolific is Mo Willems whose personal and commissioned work show a strong graphic indebtedness, both directly and indirectly through the 50s mimics at UPA. "Another Bad Day for Philip Jenkins" (1994, 2:40) collages a spare set with actual newspapers as the hapless Jenkins (whose affectless face sports a distinctly un-Steinbergian nose) enacts repetitions of dead-pan disaster.

Pavel Koutsky's 1986 "Curriculum Vitae" extends a favorite Steinberg conceit of personal authentication via the grandiose document. A life chronicle is imagined in symbolic status icons which transcend culture. "The Doodlers," Kathy Rose's 1975 droll group self portrait of art class pandemonium, embodies the self-referential tendency of Steinberg without consciously imitating his style. It also shows how regression into children's art, particularly "play-acting," trying on a peculiar persona to see how it might fit, can demonstrate primitive emotional truths about the self-deceptions of identity.

Evert de Beijer's 1986 "The Characters" portrays a wacko couple madly pursuing their own frantic interests in what appears to be a medieval castle. But soon enough we witness these characters in surreal interactions with other "characters" of a distinctly Steinbergian provenance. One particularly lusty scene with a transparent (clear plastic?) "E" would never have made it through Steinberg's decorous self- censorship.

This particular devotion to good taste may have resulted from Steinberg's early dependence on commissioned work for mainstream media or even his innate personal reserve. But it is consistent with the flattened mysterious introspection of his "characters." Many of the films on this program would probably have horrified him as too broad, too active, too entertaining. We may need to wait for a new generation of shipwrecked animators or a new medium of meditative presentation to translate his vision

into graphic performance. His art rejected "graphology and false bravado" by creating meta drawings which achieved the privileged state of being slightly annoyed they were just drawings.

PROGRAM

"Busy Day" 1955. UPA-NY Directed by Gene Deitch, Designed by Steinberg.	1:00
"Everything is Number" 1967 Stefan Schabenbeck	7:45
"Another Bad Day For Philip Jenkins" 1994 Mo Willems	3:00
"Adventures in Music: Melody" 1953 Ward Kimball. Disney	10:00
"The Doodlers"" 1975 Kathy Rose	5:00
"The Characters" 1986 Evert de Beijer	7:00
"Diagram" 1966 Daniel Szczechura	3:30
"Diary" 1974 Nedeljko Dragic	10:00
"Feeling My Way" 1997 Jonathan Hodgson	4:30
"Curriculum Vitae" 1986 Pavel Koutsky	9:00
"InBetweening America" 2001 Candy Kugel	4:00

[i] "Saul Steinberg: Illuminations," by Joel Smith. Yale University Press, New Haven. The source of many of the quotes in this article.