The Royal College of Art's Animation Collection: Challenges and Opportunities of Archiving 40 Years of Student Animation

The Royal College of Art is, this year, celebrating 40 years of animation graduates. In that time, more than 800 students have graduated from the animation MA, with an extraordinarily diverse range of work. In this talk I want to share with you some of what my colleagues and I have been doing in the last two years around building a collection of the RCA films from the last 40 years. I want to discuss some of the challenges and opportunities that we have encountered while working on building an animation collection in an art school context, and I hope to offer a glimpse into the wonder, colour, and labour that this collection bursts with.

In this paper I want to touch on: What we wanted to do, what we have done so far, what we've seen in the work collected, what we hope to do next, and what questions have emerged in the process. And finally, I'd love to know what you are doing in your own institutions, and if there is a way we can share knowledge and learn from each other.

In his article on digital archiving at Kingston School of Art, Robert Knifton (2015, p.33) describes digital archiving as something that can link 'social practice, pedagogy, history and artefact in a performative dialogue that can bring the story of an institution […] to life'. This is an excellent description of the experience we are having with our work on the RCA Animation collection. As films, documents, artifacts and memories are uncovered, the history, or histories, of our programme have come to life in ways we could not have imagined. As my college Rory Waudby Tolley puts it: 'an archive is more than the sum of its parts' (Waudby-Tolley, 2025).

The collection was born from a desire among myself and my colleagues to collect and preserve the work made on the RCA Animation course over the last 40 years, but also to share it with the wider animation community, to use it as a resource for research and analysis, and for the curation of film programmes and exhibitions. This was becoming increasingly urgent for us as our student numbers have gone up significantly over the last ten years. It became apparent that if we did not find a sustainable and scalable way to track and collect the work now, the collection could become too vast and unwieldy to ever get a handle on.

A number of university employees and external supporters have been instrumental in building our collection, both in the last two years and before that, over the course of the last 20 years, preserving the work in various forms that could otherwise have been lost. I want to particularly highlight the contribution of Guy Nesfield, one of the technicians at RCA, who has collected and preserved much of our student work on hard drives, over more

than a decade. Nesfield did this preservation work largely independently of any managerial directive, from a personal sense of responsibility and respect for the students' work. As is so often the case, technicians are the unsung heroes of the archive.

In 2024 I was awarded internal funding by the RCA to bring together the disparate elements of our 'archive' into one, navigable and sharable, digital collection. With my colleague Rory Waudby-Tolley, I created a spreadsheet of all our alumni, listing each student's graduation film. We noted down which films we had on file, where, and in what format. The films were scattered over a number of physical and digital locations: some were kept as original film prints at the BFI's National Archive, some were accessible on Guy Nesfield's hard drives, others had been kept in cloud storage by the animation programme, others could be found on beta tape and DVD graduation compilations.

In the cases of many films from the 80s and 90s, we had only very low-resolution scans from beta tapes, or nothing on file at all, but found that original files were formally archived on film or tape in the BFI archive. Where possible we made improvements to the files we held digitally, with Guy Nesfield making new scans from many of the beta tapes. In addition to the graduation films, we discovered a wealth of other materials, including first year films, workshop outputs, and paratextual materials and documentation. We created duel storage systems: two solid state hard drives to house the high-quality files, and a google drive folder with viewing copies separated into graduation year. Our spreadsheet of items in the collection now includes close to 1500 films, and the now near-complete Google Drive collection contains films from every cohort going back to 1985.

As we collected the work, we also wanted to broaden our dialogue with the individuals and communities involved in making it. In November 2024 we held an Archives and Alumni symposium at RCA, in which presentations were made by me and by Waudby-Tolley, but also by other staff, alumni and associated contributors. These included Studio AKA's Philip Hunt, Ian Gouldstone, Dr Mary Martins, Dr Susan Young, BFI Animation Curator Jez Stewart, Dr Katerina Athanasopoulou and Dr Samantha Moore, all talking about their experiences of and at the RCA, or their work with archives in a variety of forms.

Joe King, who has taught on the programme for more than 20 years, took the opportunity to explore the collection with a focus on experimentation and process, looking particularly at use of light, and showing workshop outputs from across the decades as well as graduation films. Sylvie Bringas curated two screenings of films from the archive, while alumni Martin Pickles led a moving tribute to animator and RCA alumni Emma Calder, who passed away last year. Attendees included students, researchers and alumni, as well as previous academic and technical staff who returned to the RCA and shared their valuable

knowledge and context about the course history and films in the collection. In this symposium, the collection of films became a resource to show and explore, but crucially it also became a way to open and structure wider conversations about our practice as animators and educators, and about the identity and role of RCA animation – past present and future.

A number of questions about archiving arose in the symposium that are worth sharing. I cannot answer them today, but they are helping to steer my future direction of research in this area.

One question was, where do archiving responsibilities lie? Do we, as institutions, have a responsibility to preserve all student work? This question resonates with wider questions about the responsibilities of other institutions, commissioners, funders, broadcasters, and distributors… and, of course, the artist or filmmakers themselves, in preserving work.

In their 2023 paper on The Expanded Animation symposium at Ars Electronica, Hagler et al talk about how student participation in the creation and maintenance of archives holds both pedagogical and practical benefits. Moving forward, we are investigating ways in which students, alumni, and technical and academic staff can work together to build and maintain our collection and – through this – strengthen and develop cross-cohort communities of practice. This has become increasingly urgent as in 2022 the RCA's animation programme has moved from being a two-year programme in which first and second year students overlap and interact, to a one-year programme, with little to no built-in collaboration across cohorts. Mechanisms to instigate and nurture communication between different graduating years would be beneficial.

Alumni in attendance at the Archive and Alumni Symposium represented every decade of the programme's existence, and our current students were able to meet and build connections with alumni from the 80s, 90s, noughties and more recent years. I believe that engaging current and recent students in an ongoing basis with the work of collecting, managing, and curating the collection will also support the development of a strong and sustainable alumni network.

The question of how to archive expanded animation work, including VR, AR, installation, sculpture and performance, is one that we discuss on an ongoing basis. Currently expanded works such as Zuzanna Weiss's site-specific installation *Propellor* (2015) and Shan Huang's VR project *Restless Room* (2023) exist in our collection as well-produced video documentation that record the projects without fully capturing the essence of their experience. I hope to further research how other institutions archive non screen-based work, and to develop a more sensitive approach to our archiving of expanded work.

As we worked on the collection and the materials we were discovering grew, questions arose about what we should include in our collection and what we should not. How do we decide what offers valuable context to the work or wider picture, and what does not need to be kept? Additionally, what – if any -paratextual materials should we keep or create alongside the work itself? Synopses, directors' notes, and screenings and awards information are part of the data we are gathering in our documents, but where should the limits be?

Questions around appropriate formats and quality of files for our collection also come up, as we balance a desire to collect new student work in the best possible quality to futureproof it for future screening contexts, against the practical requirements of storage and file transfer.

Issues around restoring and enhancing archival work were also raised. Jez Stewart noted that experimental films using techniques such as direct animation can be complex to restore, as systems for cleaning up film may not be able to differentiate between intentional scratching and wear and tear. He also noted that there are increasing options for upscaling and enhancing standard definition and other low-resolution work, for example using AI, and that while archivists generally would not use this, it could be available for artists and institutions (Stewert, 2025). Indeed, some of the standard definition work screened at the symposium had been upscaled with AI, with the blessing of the filmmakers.

Finally, questions came up around the risks of archiving and collecting work, and around what if any work should be allowed to be forgotten. How should we archive work that is ethically problematic, or deemed to be of low cultural value? Where screening rights are shared between artist and institution, should an artist's desire for work to be deleted from the record always be respected?

I want now to quickly talk about some of the actual work in our collection.

As you might expect, we have a rich history of animation that works outside of traditional animation market genres. Relatively little is directed at children, although there are some family films in there. Experimental films, animated documentaries, hybrid live action nonfiction work, and socially engaged filmmaking is strongly represented. There is a spike in animated documentary work between 2018 and 2022, when the RCA offered a specific animated documentary pathway, but this kind of work is actually well represented from the 1990s onwards.

There have been surprises too. The early years of the course includes a lot more music videos, multi-student collaborative projects, and commercial and external collaborations than I had anticipated, which challenges ideas that even some of the RCA team held about what kind of films are at the heart of our history - *what we do, and don't do*. I love discovering work that disrupts assumptions and idealized narratives, and that helps us to reframe our history and identity.

It has also been notable how much high-quality work there is in the collection that many of us have never previously seen. As with any institution with a long history, each year produces high-profile "success stories" – usually films that play the big festivals and win awards. These films reflect well on the courses they emerge from, and the institutions promote them. We have our share of these, and to an extent they have formed our canon.

But we also have many other films – films that may not have hit that year's curatorial and industry zeitgeist, may not have won a BAFTA or an Annecy Cristal, but are equally as fascinating and revealing as the films that did. Those films show alternate histories of the Animation programme. They tell stories of experimentation with material, process, form, genre and technology, of boundary and community crossing, and of interdisciplinarity.

In her work on archiving feminist animation, Slava Greenberg (2020, p.71) describes archiving and creating access to animation as 'activist work to pave new paths toward future knowledge and to challenge older canons'. One of the questions I am asking, is what can the RCA collection tell us that we don't already know? Not only about the RCA, but about the wider fields of animation, creative production, and society? I can't wait to find out.

We have big plans for the animation collection. Waudby-Tolley has built a prototype website that presents the films in a navigable, searchable system including paratextual materials. This will take some additional investment to complete and futureproof, and of course all filmmakers will need to be contacted to secure screening permissions before anything is shared publicly. In the meantime, another website is already live, and offers a collection of RCA films that are already in the public realm on Vimeo or Youtube, so it's a great starting point if this talk has given you an appetite to see more. We are also working with several programmers on bringing curated screenings from the collection to festivals and other public audiences - more information on that will come soon.

I hope you have enjoyed this presentation, but more than anything I want it to be a conversation starter. I'd love to know about the perspectives, positions and experiences of other courses in preserving, sharing and curating work from the past, and planning for preservation into the future.

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