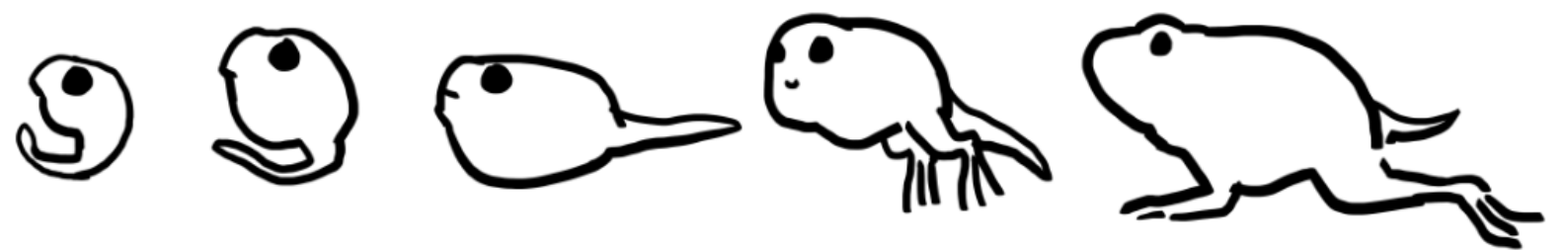


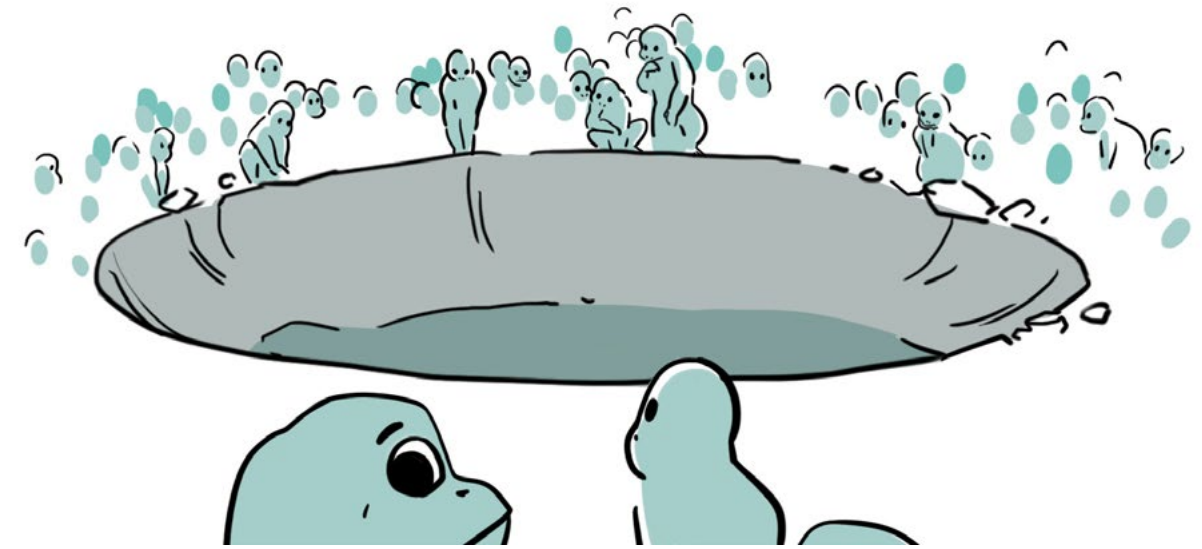
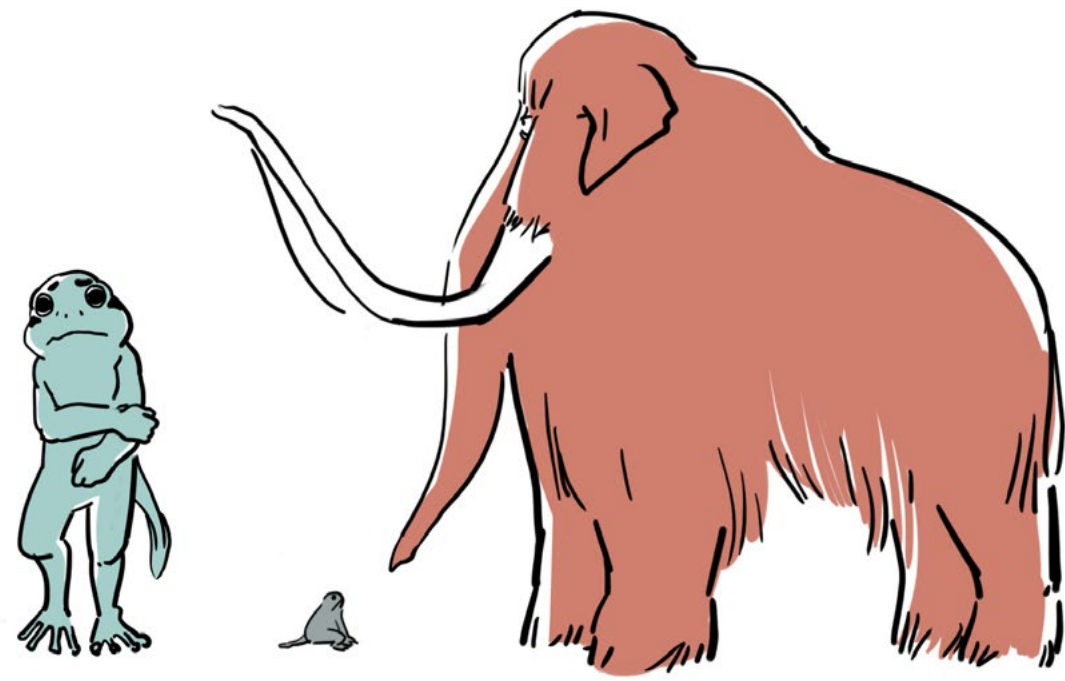
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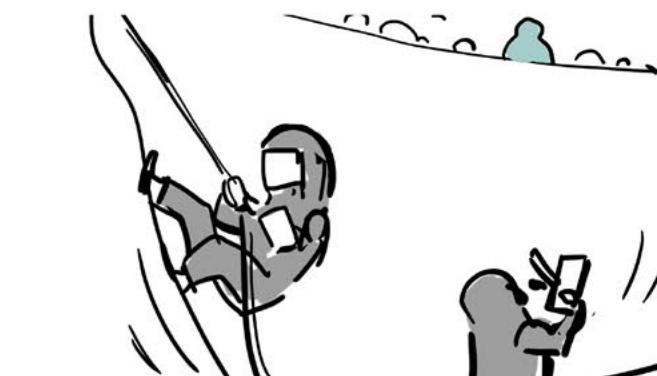
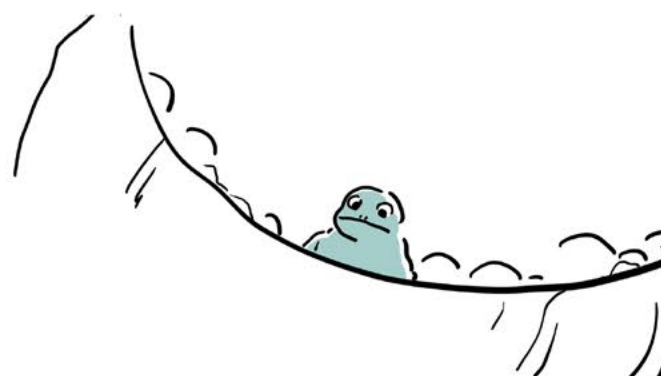
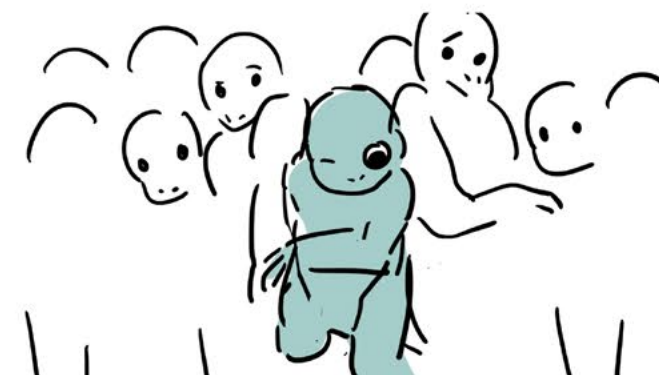
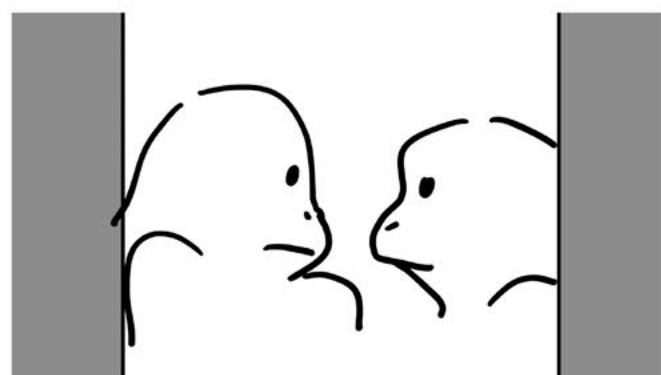
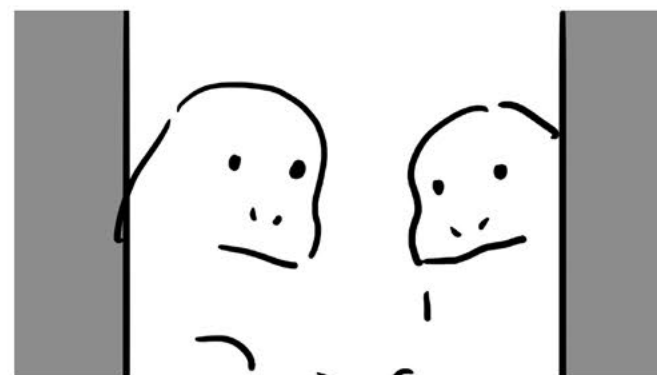
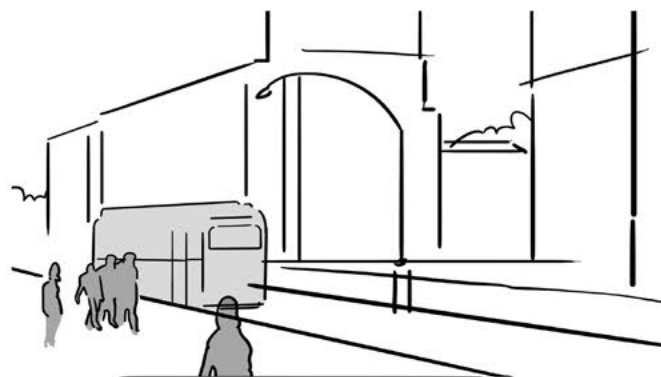
13 ways to finish what you start

KÄTHRINE VAN

(or some very honest thoughts on artistic practice,
combined with a case study on a short film animation production).







Introduction

The question **“How to finish what you start”** reevaluates personal methods and processes previously adapted from formal art education, as well as common practices primarily seen in the fields of animation, art, design and filmmaking.

This text questions whether the manifestation of artistic process through conventional writing/verbal methods (with a strong emphasis on documentation and collaboration) actually lends itself to a specific individualistic artistic (imagery and sound) outcome in a practical and time-sensitive way.

This is put into practice through the production of a personally initiated animated short, and by treating the development of this film as a case study set in parallel to the research and contextualisation that you may find in this piece of writing.

1. Keep your plans small!

(Don't bite off more than you can chew!)

“Make no little plans”.

As a self-proclaimed dreamer and notorious perfectionist, this quote has stayed with me in recent years. Admittedly, I've never really bothered to look up the origin and full extent of the quote, until just recently:

*“Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realised. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and our grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty”.*¹



This quote comes from the American architect Daniel Burnham, an obvious lover of grand things. Grand skyscrapers and grand moustaches too, apparently.

As emotionally attached to grand ideas as Burnham may sound, I am ready to question the correlation between a grand plan and *“noble [and] logical diagram[s]”*. How exactly is a small plan more likely to be short-lived (present in the memories of mankind) than a grand one?

Because if I were to translate what small plans entail in an animation filmmaking context, it may actually be more beneficial to your work process if you do decide to follow through with the idea of keeping your project short.

If you're really going to keep your short true to its name: do keep it short! A guy with an even more impressive facial hair getup than Mr. Burnham was Plato, whose facial hair presumably largely grew while he spent many hours thinking about mankind and its purpose in the universe. He mused that time is the wandering of bodies and movement.² If so, animation happens to be artificial movements stemming from a series of images: they don't come into existence out of thin air and no time. With that

1. Burnham, Daniel H. *Stirred By Burham, Democracy Champion*. Chicago: Chicago Record-Herald, Oct 15, 1910. 40-42
2. Plato. *Plato's Cosmology; the Timaeus of Plato*. London: New York, Harcourt, Brace, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd.; 1937.

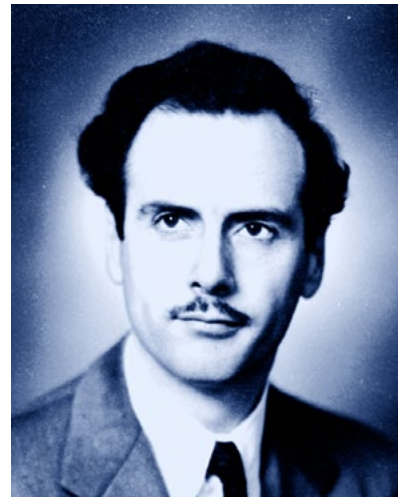
in mind, by keeping it short you'd automatically shorten the time duration required. Thus be honest and ask yourself: *how much time will it actually take me to produce anything?*

Remember that you can actually say a lot with little. Humans are good at reading between the lines. Use less "lines" and you might even find more readings in your own work. Embrace the multitude of readings! You can't adopt a singular reading, even if you dare try to stick to one. A man with a slightly wispier moustache than Plato and Burnham named Marshall McLuhan once said:

"The medium is the message",³

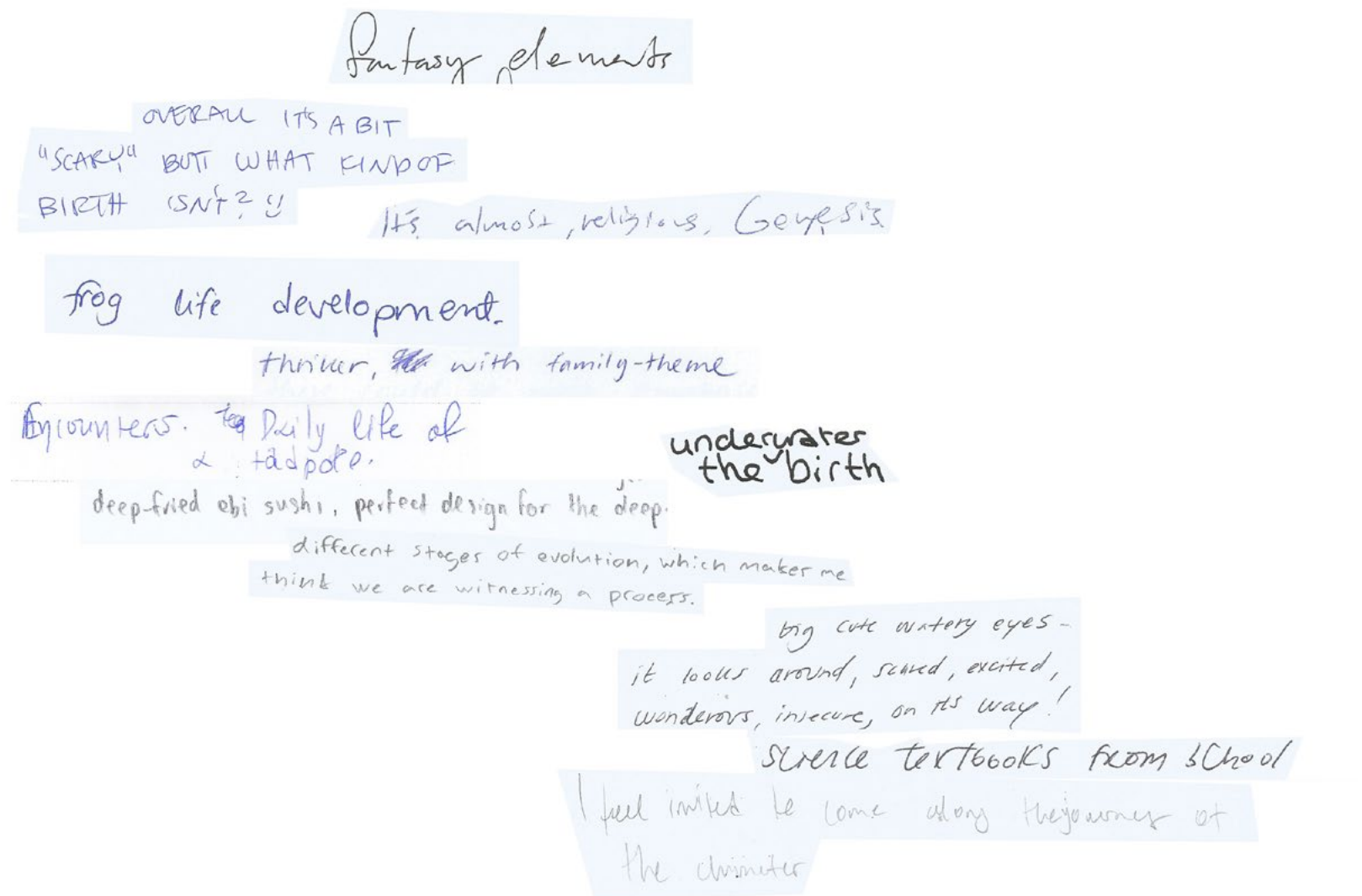
and so not only could you consider meaning as dispersed between the lines (content), but probably in the framing (context) of it too.

Grappling with defining a message and story, and to some extent the worth and motivation of making something as time-consuming as animated film, is something I have personally had to experience. During my earliest attempts of making an animated short, people suggested that I do a test screening. The idea was simple: present your idea and see if it is worth the attention and interest of your viewer. However, this was before I had even drawn a single frame of my animated short. While this piece of advice made perfectly good sense, it felt as if a large boulder had been dumped onto my path to animating a short. So much so that the idea never came to any kind of fruition in the end. I kept rewriting and redrawing, because I knew that whatever I made, it would simply not be "ready" to be seen or understood by an audience. I was convinced that it would not match what I wanted to communicate with the short, so I did not deem it worthy of showing anyone.



In hindsight, I kick myself for creating a target that was unachievable in the first place.

Fast forward a couple of years to my current second attempt, I decided that it was time to confront this big boulder head on. I did this by simply directly responding to the advice, and ignoring the nagging feeling of doubt and questioning of the relevancy of the test-screening. I drew up a survey regarding my current project's animatic, and this was then passed around to generous people who would be willing to give me their feedback. Here you can see how a very small pool of people can offer a rather large range of different readings of the same piece of work (even when it is at an "unfinished" state):



3. McLuhan, Marshall, 1911-1980. *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*. New York :McGraw-Hill, 1964. 9

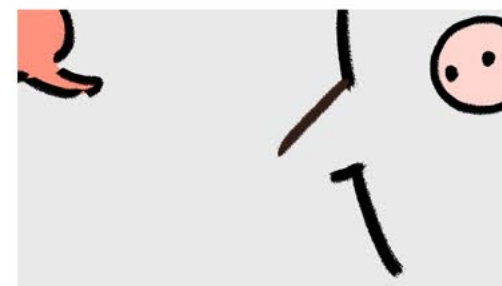
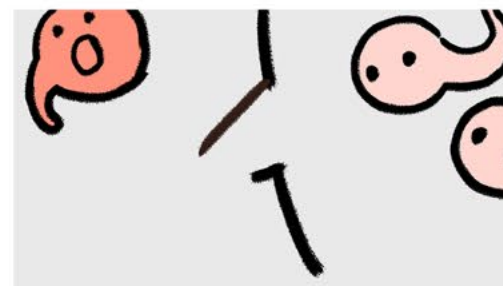
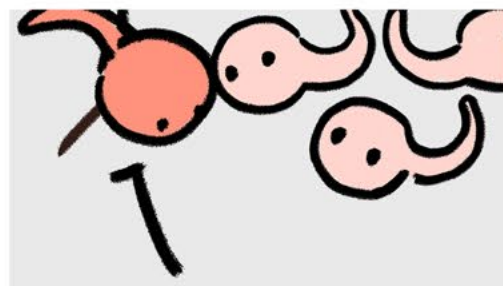
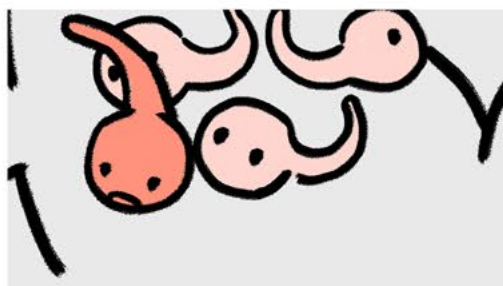
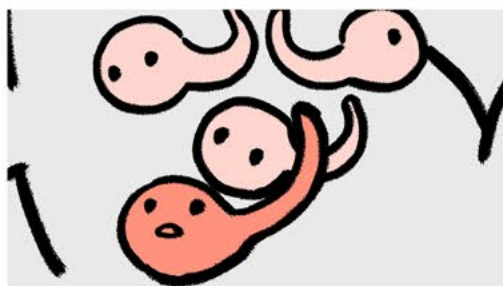
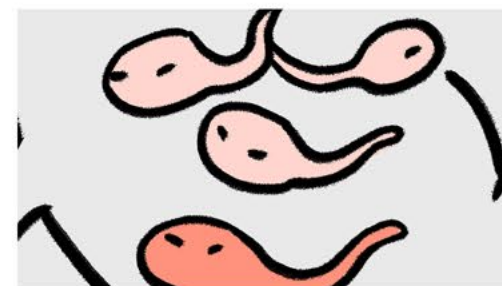
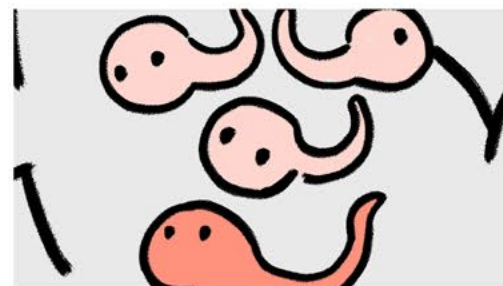
I am much more at ease now with the fact that a piece of work might be sitting on multiple readings. I am ok with a bit of uncertainty regarding what I am trying to tell with a film, and the lack of order or beacon (in reference back to Burnham's "*Make no little plans*" quote) doesn't frighten me as much as it used to in the past.

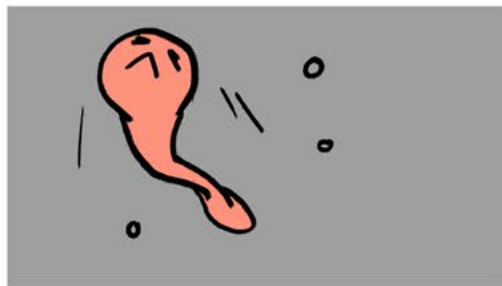
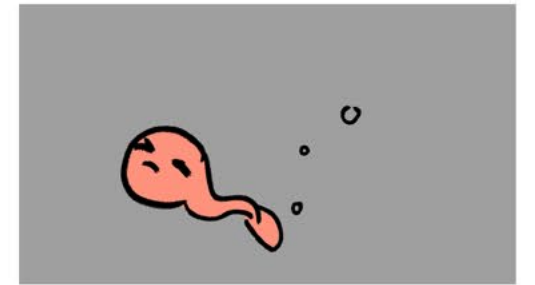
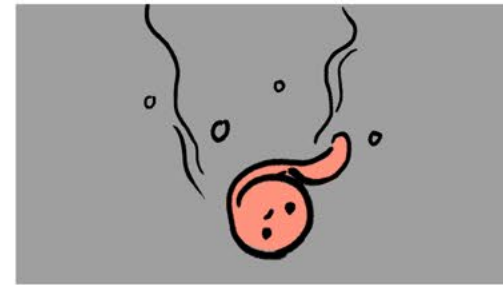
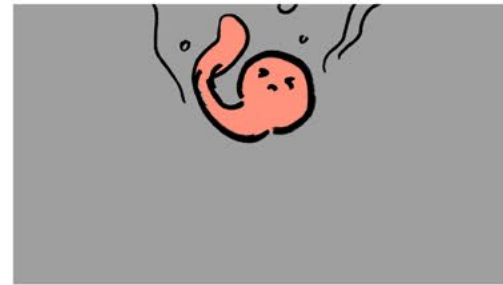
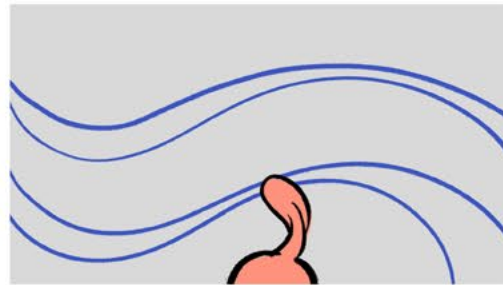
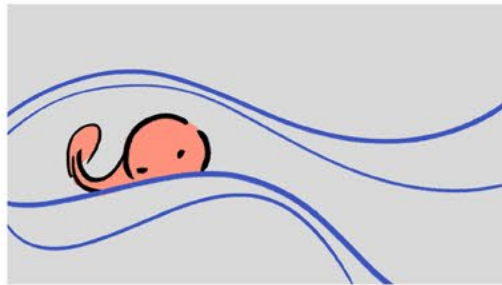
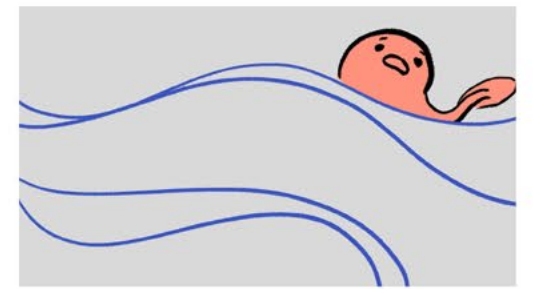
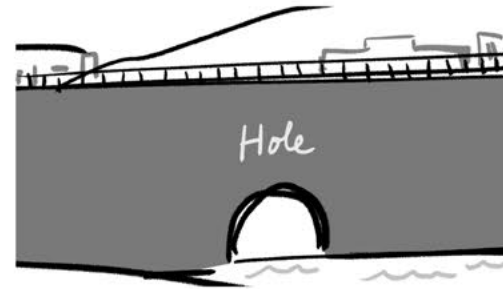
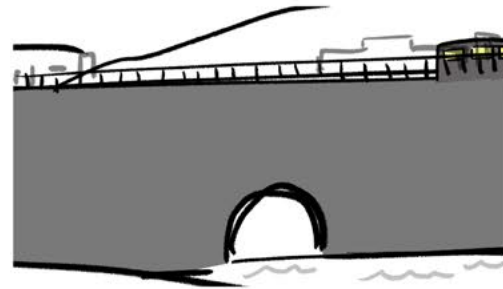
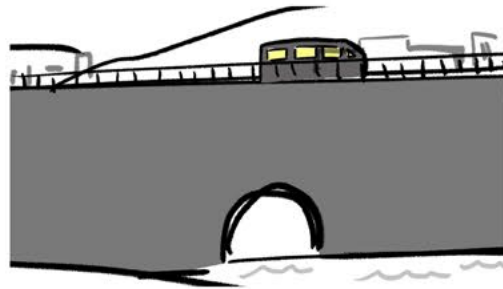
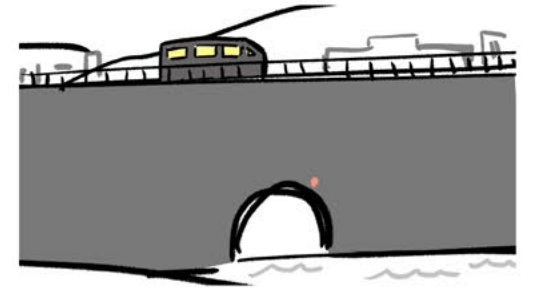
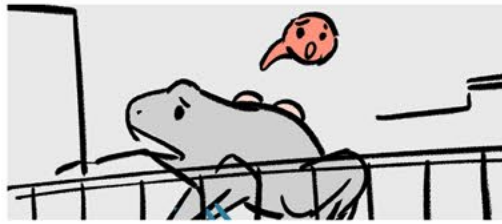
To sum it all up, I am encouraging you to keep your project *small*. This might all sound very self-deprecating and underwhelming. But if you were to embrace this method and play to its strengths, in a similar way to how sculptor Mårten Medbo approaches silence —

“[There is] bodily situated knowledge that does not let itself be captured in words. Sometimes this type of knowledge is therefore sloppily called “silent”. This silence is then defined based on the spoken and especially the written language. For me as a clay-based practitioner, my practical knowledge is anything but silent.”⁴

— then I believe this is a method worth trying out. And look at the bright side: it's such a *small* sacrifice to make!







2 Find someone to keep you accountable!

(but also please don't turn that person into your babysitter)

It's Monday morning

– Time for a scrum meeting!

It's Wednesday lunch

– Time for a brainstorming session!

It's Thursday afternoon

– Time for a quick touch base!

If there is anything that makes me anxious as an animator (or at least when I'm attempting to be one), it would probably be the social gatherings that require me to do some kind of reporting. Not only does it disrupt the flow of detail oriented focus (often required in an animation process), but it also forces me to spend time on the process of translating imagery and sound into words — something that is not equivalent to what I am actually doing while I am working.

With that being said, as much as I like to stay in my animation bubble, even I see the benefit of learning and

embracing the language of written and spoken words. For one, it takes time and energy to change the status quo. But also because in some ways it can play to the strengths of your project. One way I have found helpful is to find collaborators outside of your “set” workplace context.

By finding someone or something outside of your workplace context, you can be more assured that your collaborating partner is actually willing to work with you. Not out of obligation in the set milieu of a school or an office, but through mutual interests and needs. Of course synergy happens in classrooms and cubicles too — but I personally oftentimes catch myself getting lulled into the routines and frameworks of these constructed places that do not always keep a project moving forwards within a specific timeframe.

This is why my second tip would be to find someone to keep you accountable. I have slowly introduced myself to that idea, and reached a turning point in my own project when I started reaching out to musicians to collaborate with. I had never gotten to this point myself in the past because from what I could tell: most composers feel the

most fulfilled if they can work in parallel to moving imagery, and when they are part of the making process (and not just an “add-on” attached at the end of the process). Consequently I have always been afraid that I would not be able to match the pace of a music production. Now, however, I have come to a conclusion that this is exactly what I might have needed all along: a collaborator to keep me accountable. Not in the way where a producer is waiting on your work to be delivered to a client, but simply someone who might rely on your work as much as you might rely on their work.

What I am really suggesting, ultimately, is for you to find someone to work in symbiosis with, especially if the manifestation of collaboration doesn't have to take the shape of an assigned group of people in a white cube with post-it notes and markers ready in hand—feebly resembling open space offices and their failed promise of heightening collaboration.⁵

5. Bernstein, Ethan & Weber, Ben. *The truth about open offices*. Harvard Business review, November-December, 2019. <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-truth-about-open-offices>

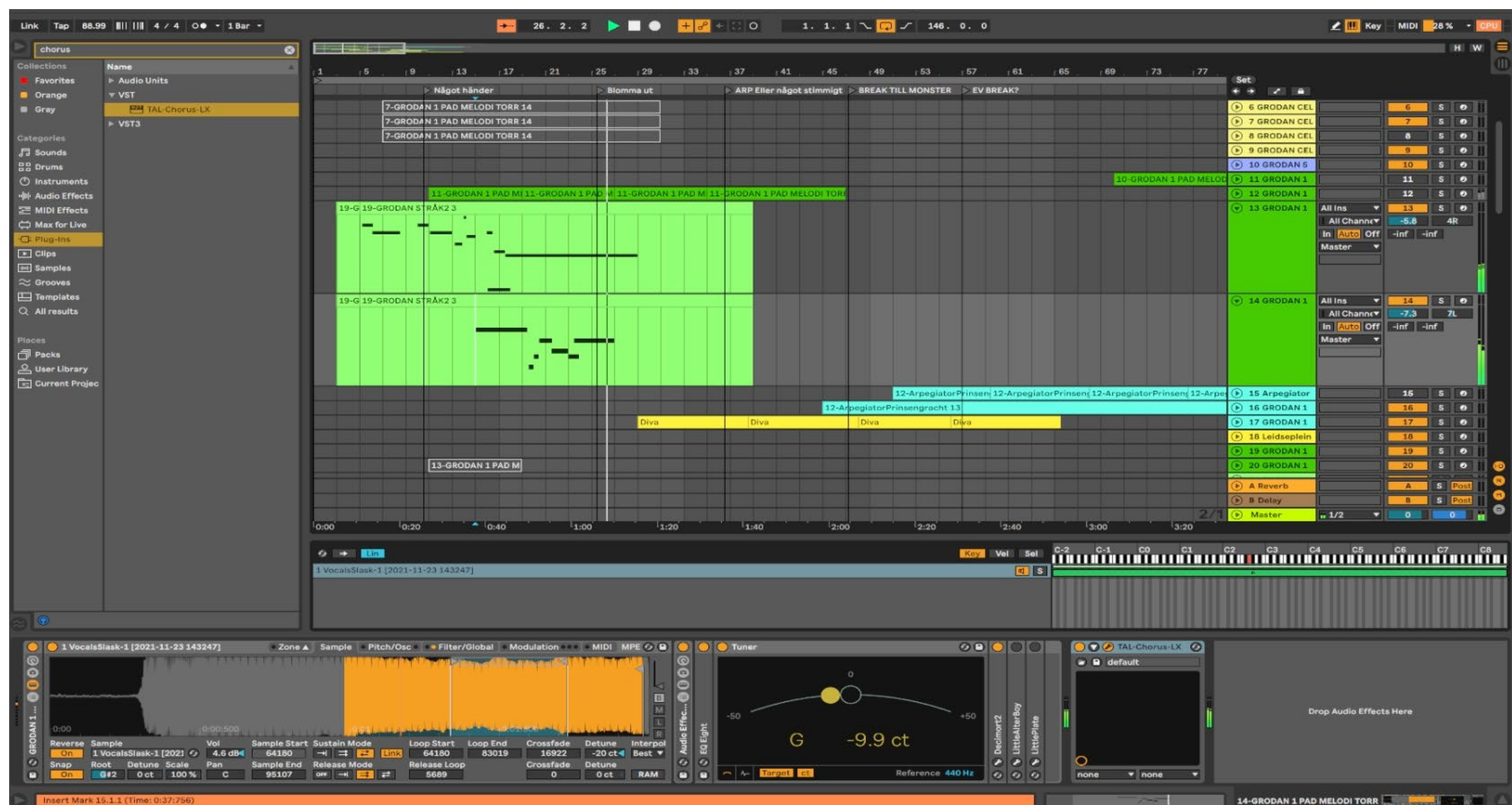
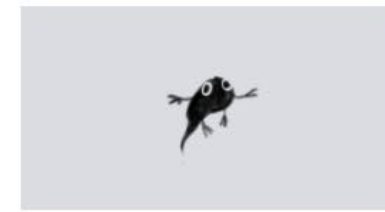
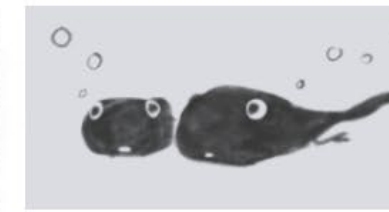
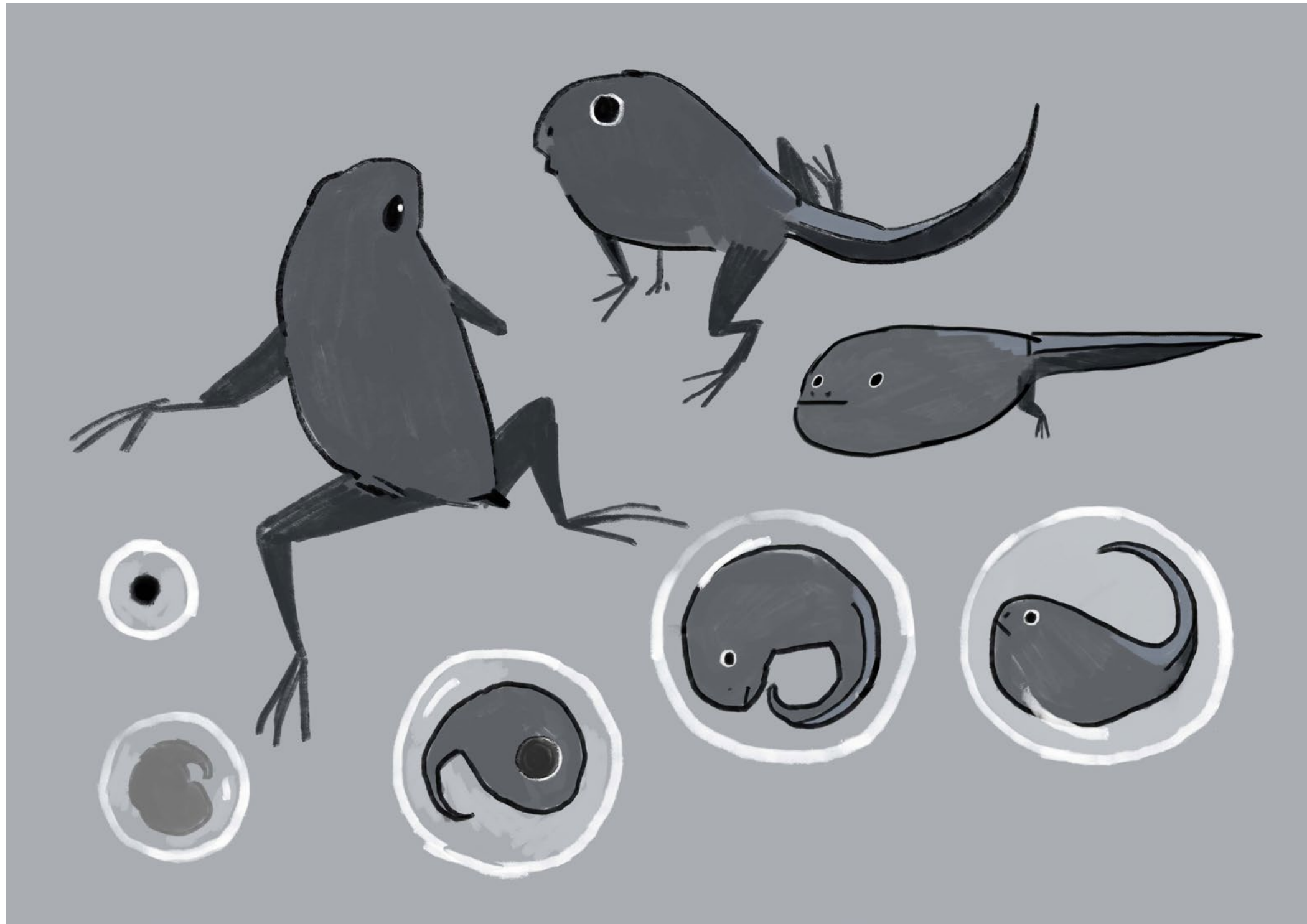


Image courtesy of Fabian Rosenberg.





3. Face Father Time early in the process

(but not too much and not too early)

Procrastination is far from an unfamiliar state for most people, so I'm not going to turn this into a lecture on how to do less of that. Go read a self-help book or open up a Ted talk on Youtube.⁶ What I have come to observe, however, is that even the most well planned scheduled and orderly work environment sometimes contains just as many mine-fields as working at home by your crammed kitchen table. Maybe the itch to wipe your filthy kitchen counter isn't so dissimilar from attending an open lecture on "*Professional development and productivity*" that your HR management sent you an email about.

Throughout the process of my own short-film project, I've realised that I tend to procrastinate by fiddling with the "*scaffolding*" of the thing I intend to produce. For instance; there's always another character design sketch I can make so that I can make my character look just *right*. Or there's always another theoretical perspective I can read about and apply my work to. All of this did make me feel like a busy working bee, but it didn't exactly drive me to the next important step that would actually move the project forward and closer to completion.

While I do think that I was also a little bit too worried about mitigating "*unnecessary*" time and risks (which reduced me to a crippling "*deer caught in a headlight*" scenario), it is hard to completely avoid any doubt when working on a personal project. The prospect of potential risks and failures always runs the risk of sinking you into a state of inaction, but that is also why rather than scrutinising and embellishing your time schedule to every minute detail, you might just want to give it the attention it rightfully needs and then move on. What kind of attention your project needs or doesn't need naturally varies, but what has helped me is to think of administrative/preparatory work as a feeling of bloatedness.

If you google the term "*administrative bloat*" it will most often be associated with higher education and the bureaucracy surrounding it. Although you might not be affiliated with an educational organisation, I think it shares many dilemmas that a creative project entails. To put it very simply: bloat happens when there is a misalignment in excess and size to what is performed. The causes of bloat are numerous and as such I won't be getting into those

in detail — but what I am suggesting is the ability to recognise bloat's presence early in the process before it eats away your time and resources.

So how does all this relate to procrastination? Briefly speaking, I've chosen to draw this parallel to administrative bloat because, like procrastination, it often-times comes in a well-intended disguise. I might think that it does me good, and it might feel good, that I'm actively doing something by perhaps filling in another self-evaluation form or adding another page of scribble in my process diary — but how much of it actually feeds into the actual artistic product? I encourage you to frankly evaluate your planning methods. This is not to completely disregard the function of theory and thinking — taking the shape of documentation, writings and discussions — but as communication researcher J. David Johnson puts it, on the topic of university prestige and measuring programs:

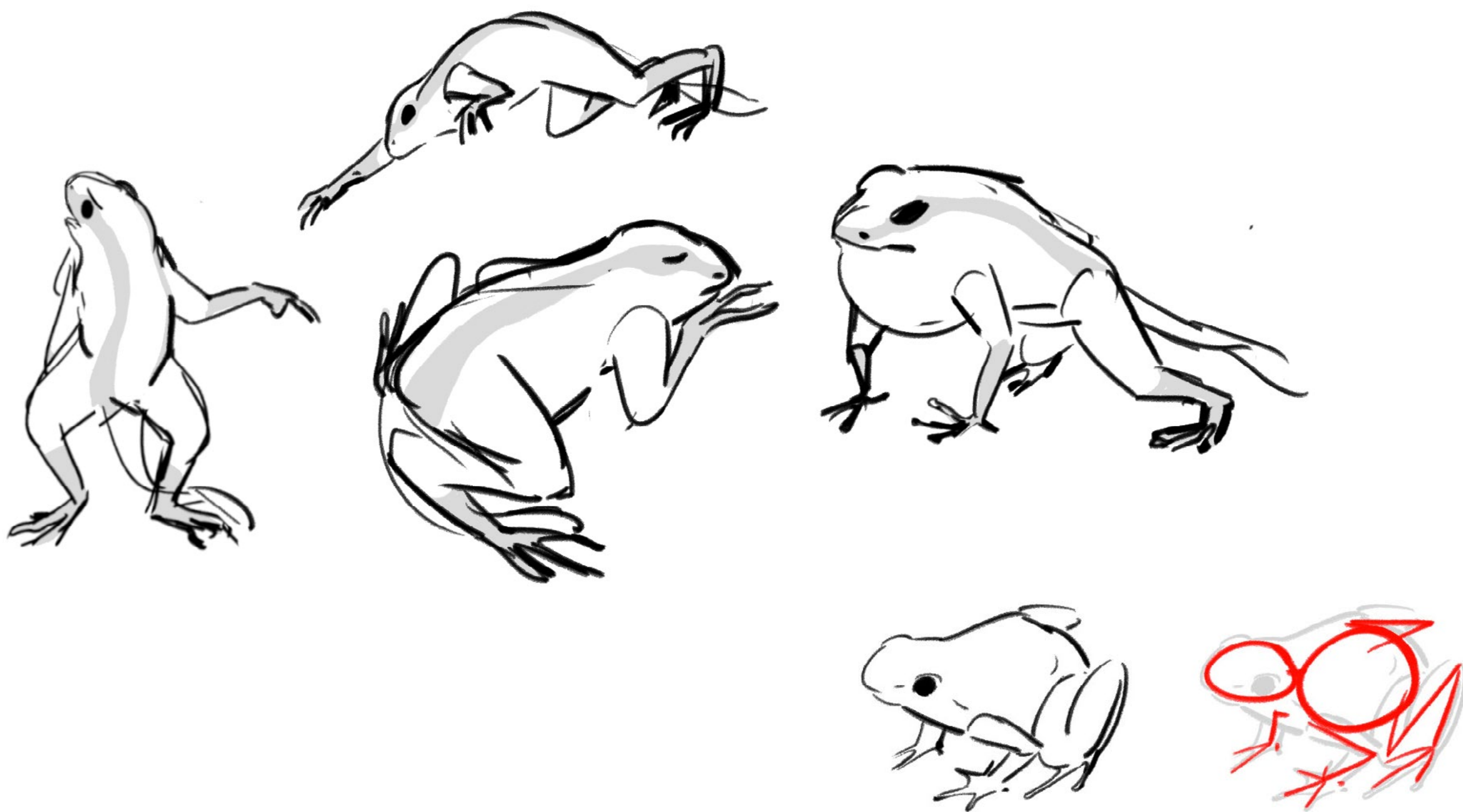
*"[...] (P)eople change their behaviour in reaction to being evaluated, observed, or measured."*⁷

If your changed behaviour corresponds with the final intended outcome, then by all means continue to engage with the outlines offered by offices, programs and facilities alike, but be aware of fooling yourself into thinking that it will automatically lead to compelling artistic work simply because you followed an approved "*industry standard*" and/or widely-accepted working method.

6. Urban, Tim. *Tim Urban: Inside the mind of a master procrastinator* | TED. April 6, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arj7oStGLkU>

7. Johnson, J. David. *Administrative Bloat in Higher Education*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. 9

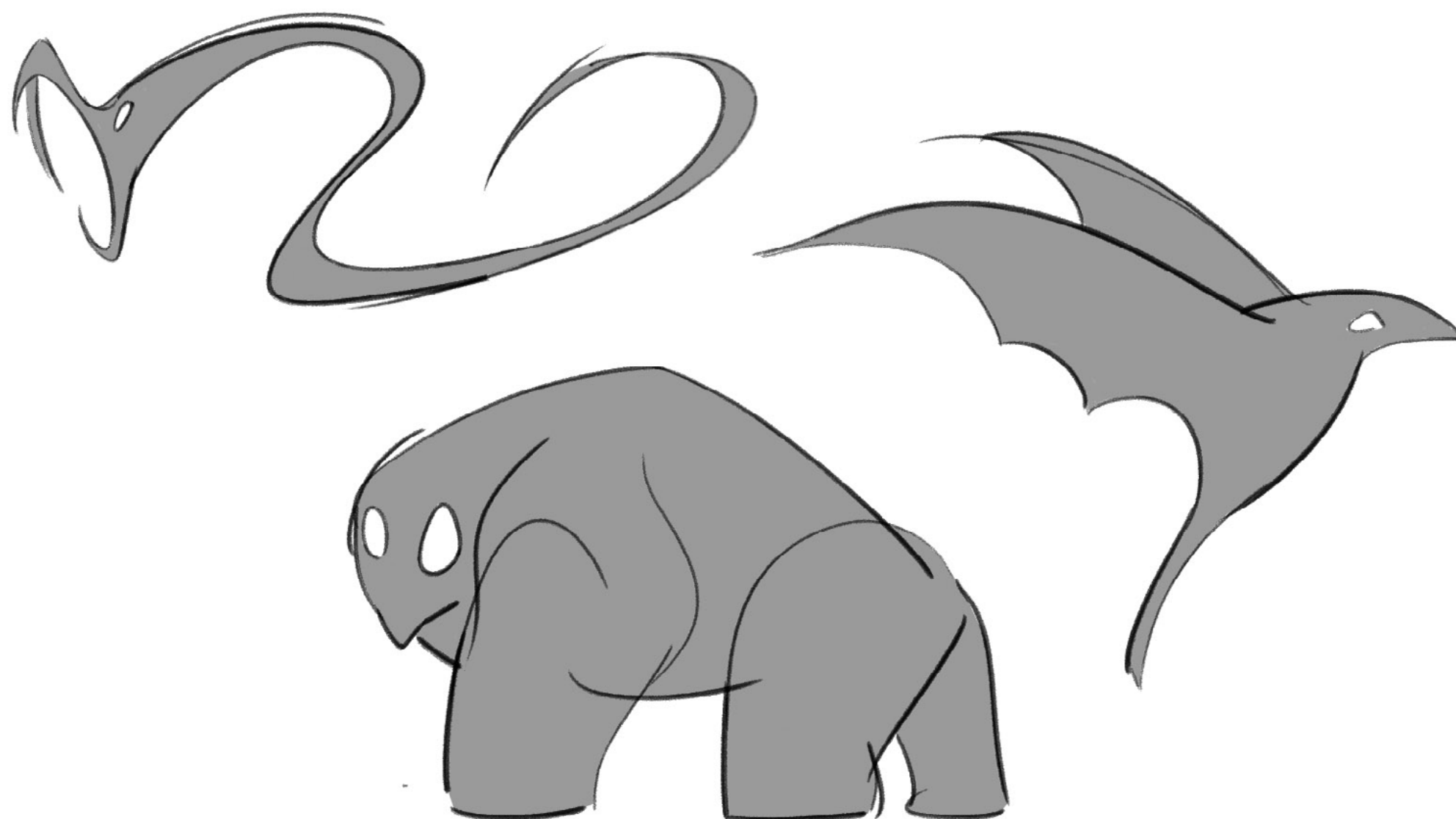


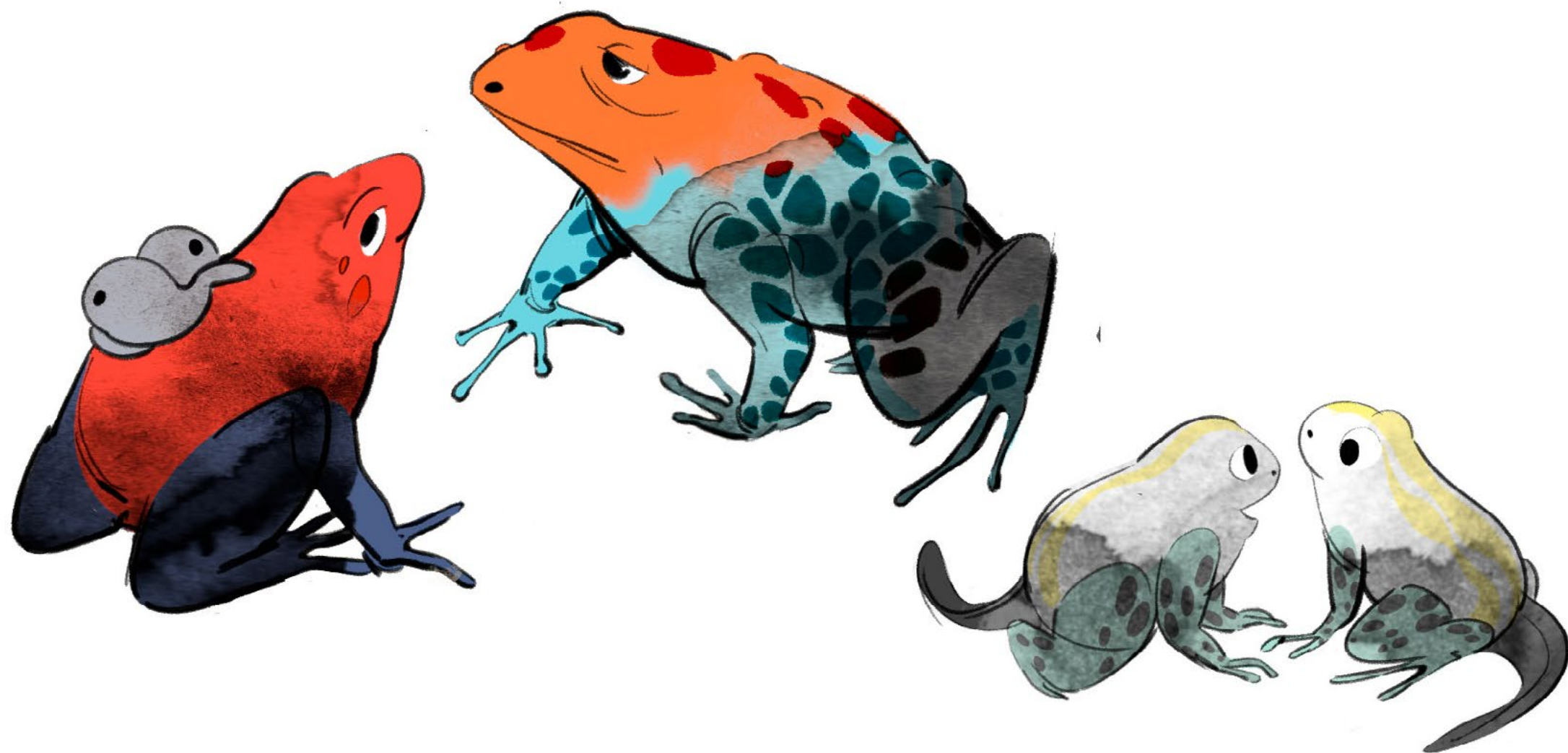


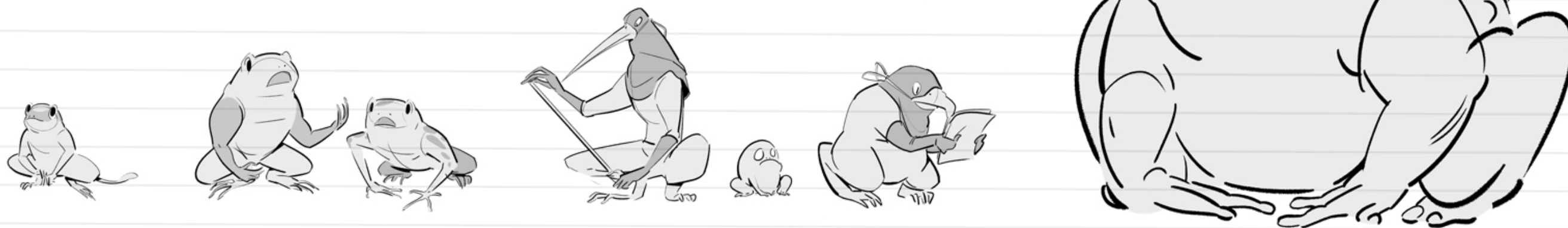














(Hold onto it and don't let go!)

In the previous tip I was adamant about questioning the itch of procrastination and the indulgence in blindly trusting “official” approval and methodology, so it may seem strange that the next tip I will be outlining here emphasises finding your flow and trusting your intuition.

To me, what mainly differentiates the feeling of flow and intuition from procrastination and “prescribed” work methodology is that there isn’t a constant pressure and silent promise of deeming your process “innovative” or “forward-thinking” enough. Don’t misunderstand me here: I’m not at all against taking risks and trying out new things. But I think we tend to put the novelty of an action itself onto a pedestal. Why reinvent the wheel when you have a perfectly good foundation to build upon? Why dwell on solely describing the innovative character or approach of your idea or theoretical answer, when you very well could spend the time on putting it into action?

Mårten Medbo believes there is so much more that lies beyond the academic world of text, word-based contextualisation and artistic purpose. In his thesis “Clay-Based

Experience and Language-Ness”, Medbo articulates this with precision:

*“Craft skill reveals itself in action. It is personal and thereby time- and place-bound. The existence of the knowledge is dependent on the existence of a leeway for it to act in the time and at the place where it is practised. If this leeway to act disappears, so too does the leeway for the knowledge. The leeway is dependent on the status of the knowledge and its function at the place and time it is practised.”*⁸

To me there is therefore a clear correlation between quality and craft skill. And this needs to be thoroughly cultivated across time. Across board rooms, many seem to stress the importance of ideation:⁹ generating innovative ideas and solutions for a greater tomorrow, at the expense of time needed to actually implement said marvellous ideas

— resulting in a less well-functioning outcome. We don’t have to look far to see where boundless ambition leads us: recent cases like *Fyre Festival*, *WeWork* and *Theranos* come to mind. Ironically enough, we also seem to love to dramatise and fictionalise these operational and strategical tales and the subsequent great downfalls, as all three of them resulted in multitudes of documentaries and TV-series.

I would like to argue that technical competence and concepts are often equally important, as both would be lacking in the absence of the other. Medbo’s ability to pinpoint the often nonverbal expression of craft skill certainly highlights the fact that it is a skill that is not necessarily any less difficult or less desirable to acquire as a good idea or concept.

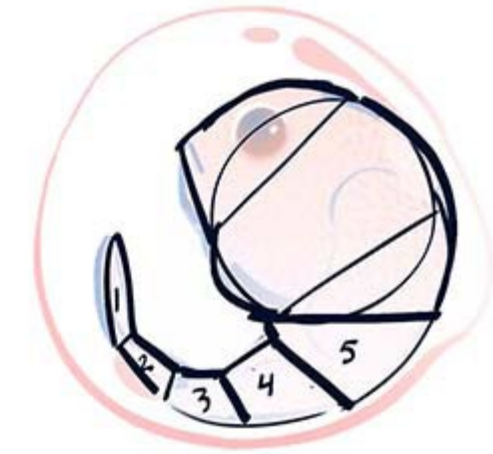
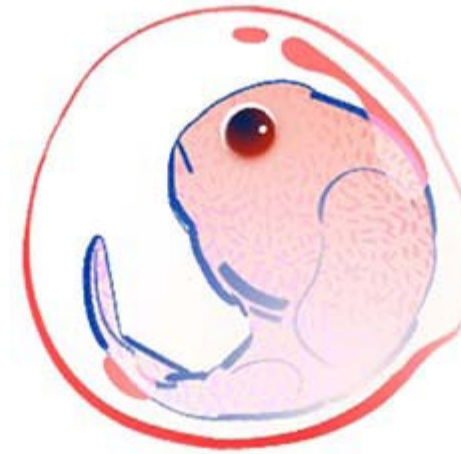
Finding a flow or intuition ultimately doesn’t have to be and arguably shouldn’t be a grand spectacle that is somehow unique to you. The experience of it can be personal but that is because you make it personal by actually doing it, even if that means executing repetitive and tedious drills and tasks that in isolation feel incredibly unoriginal and non-innovative. Intuition to me is therefore much like having mastered the grammar of the language that you’re speaking. As a native speaker of a language, you don’t even think much about the structure of your language so much as you “feel” it grammatically¹⁰, but that doesn’t mean that you don’t possess control of it or that the rules are completely non-existent. Again, a language, much like intuition, takes time to cultivate, and you only do so through repetition and learning your ABCs, so to speak (if we’re restricting this metaphor to the Latin language, that is).

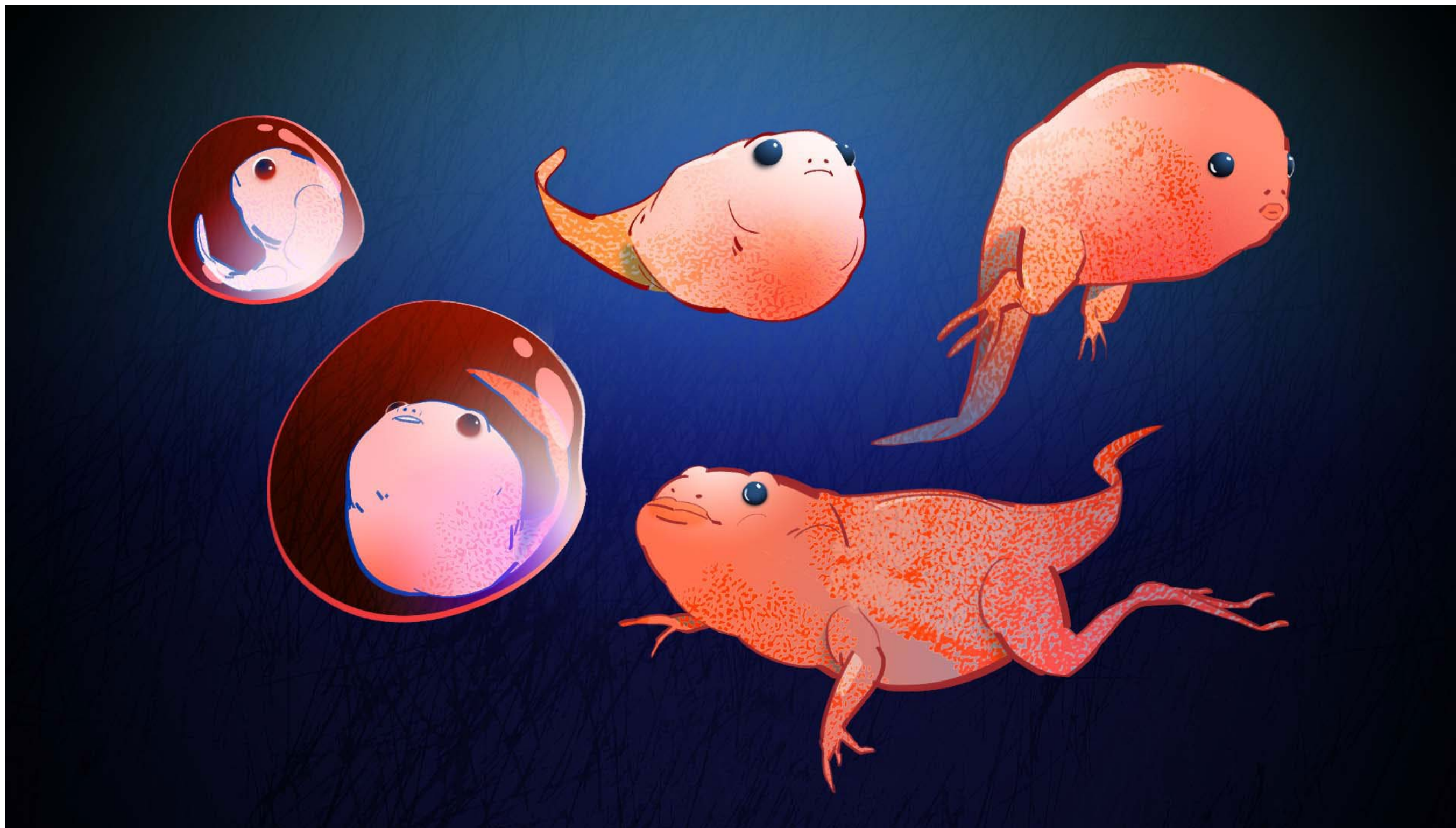
8. Medbo, Mårten. *Clay-based Experience and Language-ness*. Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 2016. 86

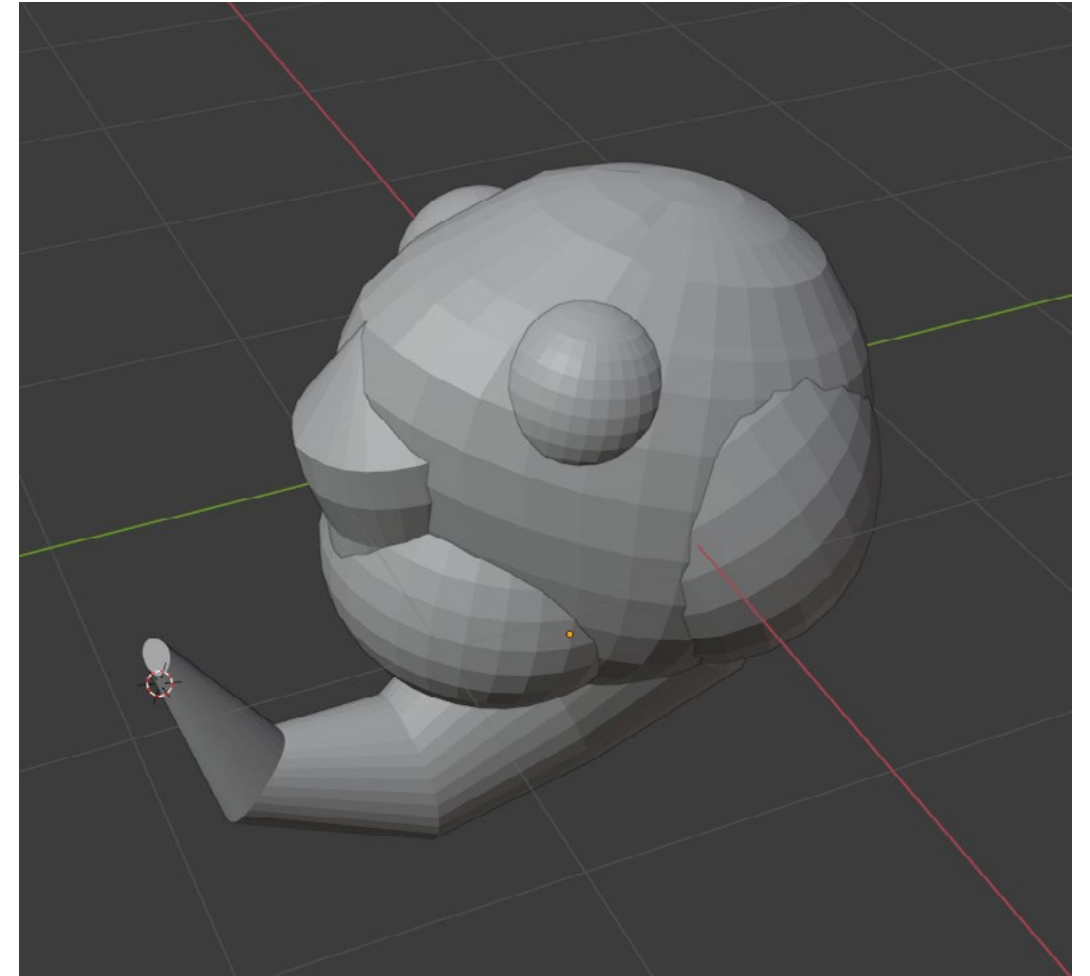
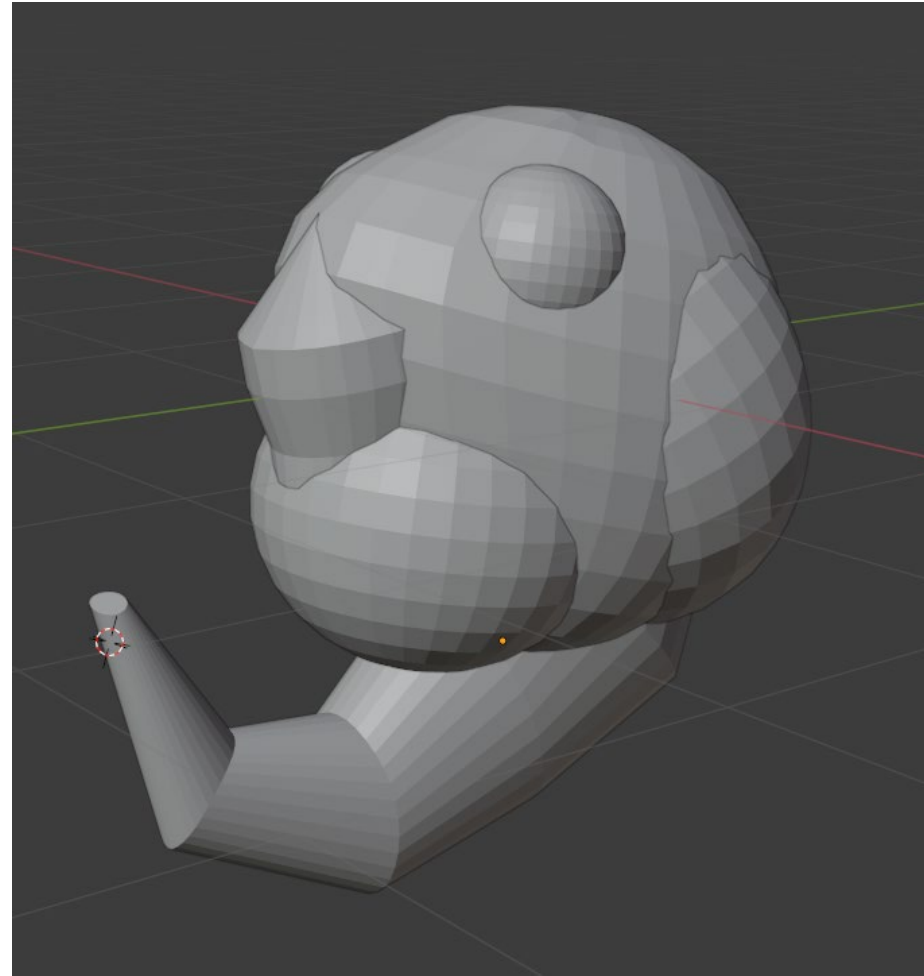
9. Agan, Tom. *Please stop ideating*. Harvard Business review, April 29, 2014. <https://hbr.org/2014/04/please-stop-ideating>

10. Krashen, D. Stephen. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. University of Southern California, Pergamon Press Inc. 1981. 8

Transformation 2
TADPOLE FEATUS







5 Situating your practice

(Start with the chicken or the egg?!)

My introduction to the 5th involves my inability to choose between the English proverb:

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”.

And the Swedish proverb:

“Taste is like buttocks: divided”.

I find it somewhat amusing that while these two proverbs pretty much describe the same thing: *“what is perceived and experienced is relative”*, yet one organ seems immensely more poetic than the other (I won’t say *“more attractive”* as that certainly isn’t always the case for everyone).

The conundrum I’m trying to articulate here is that—while you might spend a lot of time on defining what you do, where to begin and end, and how to contextualise it—someone else might always flip it on its head and turn a pair of eyes into butts. This doesn’t make it *“wrong”*, as the two metaphors really just mean the same thing! Sure, maybe you wouldn’t be very fond of the idea of some-

one turning your *“window to the soul”* into a derriere — but what can you do about it? And should you do anything about it?

Personally, as a nineteen-year-old experiencing art education for the very first time, it was a bit of an epiphany (or so I thought) to have the things we did referred to as *“work”*. Up until then, *“work”* to me was only something that could be defined as such if it equated to some kind of value (in particular, a kind of value defined by someone other than myself). I had a very similar feeling (although this time less innately) when a lot of encouragements from professors were about *“situating your practice”*. I think I understood the term *“situating your practice”* about as much as Joey from Friends understood the word *“moot”*.¹¹ Maybe I understood what it meant at some level, but I was still constantly reminded and filled with self-doubt that maybe I didn’t.

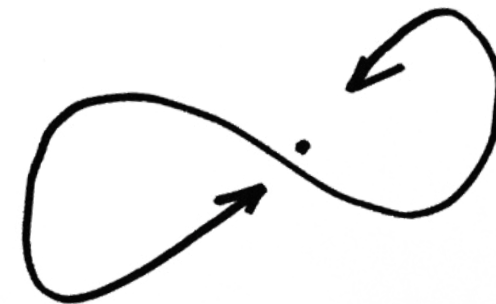
Nevertheless, after a few years had passed, I was suddenly facing the word *“practice”* once again, in a slightly different form, in the term *“artistic practice”*. Here, I found that I still had difficulties defining my own artistic research. Until

I knew what artistic research was, I first needed to understand how it is defined. What the heck does it mean to do artistic research? When is art classified as research? Can my *“art”* be called research? Is there any relevance to my work if it somehow belongs in the the artistic community and academic world? Is my art even *“artistic”* enough...?

Throughout this steady stream of confusion and questioning, one short-and-to-the-point description by the sociologist Lars Göran Karlsson, introduced to us in Efva Lilja’s text *“Art, Research, Empowerment,”* stuck out in particular:

*“Artistic research is research conducted with artistic practice as its base and artistic practice as its object”*¹²

If I were to translate into a visual image what I thought when I read this summary, I suppose my understanding of it would look something like this:



Yup, that’s an infinite loop right there.

11. Lin, Patty. Friends. The One Where Chandler Doesn’t like Dogs. Episode 7.08. <http://www.friends-tv.org/zz708.html> 2000

12. Lilja, Efva. Art, research, empowerment. Elanders Sweden AB. Stockholm 2015. 16.

Google the word “practice”, and you will find two definitions:

1. The actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it.

2. The customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing something.

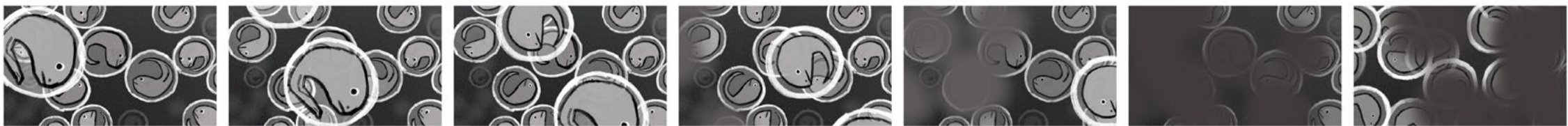
Simply put, an artistic practice — what you do by applying an idea in a repetitive manner — becomes artistic research if it is treated as the base and/or object of said research. Gaining this simple and straightforward personal understanding of how artistic research correlates to artistic practice, I have to admit it did make me more at ease. It helped me in drawing the conclusion that it would actually be OK to continue working with my original purposes and goals in mind, without needing to make up a completely “*new*” idea in order to put an artistic research label onto it. I’m telling you this so that you don’t have to spend time as much time as I did on a moot point.

By looking at my work through an artistic research lens, and by framing it in an artistic research context, I hope it invigorates my animated film project (instead of doing the opposite). A practical example: throughout my own process of finding the meaning of my animated short, I came across French filmmaker Jean Painlevé. Not only has his work made an impression on how I have chosen to contextualise the content of the film I have worked on, but I also find his take on documentary filmmaking particularly intriguing.

Nowadays, cinematic science and nature films are almost synonymous with David Attenborough’s comforting narration, and while we perhaps wouldn’t call the recording of a surgical demonstration “*cinema*”, the questioning that revolves around the definition of science film is most definitely still present. Such was the case for Painlevé, as he founded the Institute of Scientific Cinema (ICS) in the 1930s. From ICS it developed into the AICS (International Association of Science Films), and consisted of filmmakers and scientists from over twenty countries. Despite its very straightforward name, what amuses me is that even here the definition of “*science film*” was largely disputed. Painlevé himself would describe that some of “the discussions were endless, hours and hours spent quibbling and splitting hairs [...]”.¹³ This is again a sentiment that can be applied to the energy spent on finding the definition of “*artistic practice*” and “*artistic research*”. Past a certain point, at least as a practitioner I wonder if it’s really worth asking if the chicken or the egg came first, or if it’s all a “*moo*” point? Just start *practicing*?

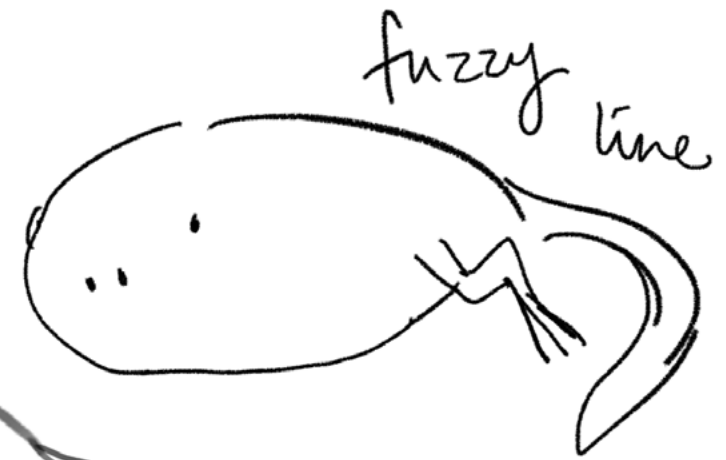
13. Bellows, Masaki Andy and McDougall, Marina, Berg, Brigitte. *Science is Fiction: The films of Jean Painlevé*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England. Bricolage Press, San Francisco, California. 2000. 36







hard shading



fuzzy line



tilting pencil

chinese brush



Dark line



ink brush



soft lead



pipe cleaner



Hazy line



Marker 2



6...But what does it all mean?

(Defining meaning and messages in your work)

My previous tips have been about trusting your instinct and intuition, and the fact that your practice will eventually find its place and relevance in an artistic research context, but what about the message you actually want to get across in and through your work? What about the actual centerpiece, as opposed to the surrounding framing?

I still stand by the notion that you can apply and find meaning during and subsequent to your production, and I will therefore encourage you to hold your ground on that if you (like me) still feel the nagging pressure to constantly pre-validate and question the value of your work, even when you haven't gotten a single step closer to actual production. This can also in fact be applied to the shaping of your work's content.

From the beginning I've mentioned that humans are very good at reading between the lines and interpreting meaning, and much the same could be said of storytelling too. American mythologist Joseph Campbell certainly thought so: he was confident in his belief that every fictional character pretty much undergoes the very same path and story pattern. I personally came across Joseph Campbell not

because of interest in improving my writing or storytelling, but solely because his book on myths that I found at the library had a very dramatic appearance (yes, I do judge a book by its cover).¹⁴ While I do see why his theory has also garnered criticism¹⁵ for being over-simplified and the result of some heavy cherry-picking, I can also see how the theory itself has become so influential and widely studied (so much so that George Lucas has been quoted directly referring to Joseph Campbell's writings and theories). After all, the circular pattern of his theory "*A hero's journey*" is as immaculately structured and memorable as the myths and stories that he is referring to.

14. Campbell, Joseph and Moyers, Bill. *The power of the myth*. Broadway. 1988.9. Agan, Tom. *Please stop ideating*. Harvard Business review, April 29, 2014. <https://hbr.org/2014/04/please-stop-ideating>

15. Bond, E. Sarah and Christensen, Joel. *The Man Behind the Myth: Should We Question the Hero's Journey?* 2021 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-man-behind-the-myth-should-we-question-the-heros-journey/>

In author Philip Pullman’s English version of the fairy tale collection “*Grimm tales*”, he goes very straight to the point that simplicity and swiftness is what makes a “good” tale:

“[...] characters have little interior life; their motives are clear and obvious. If people are good, they are good, and if bad, they’re bad.”

“They are flat, not round. Only one side of them is visible to the audience, but that is the only side we need the other side is blank. They are depicted in poses of intense activity or passion, so that their part in the drama can be easily read from a distance.”¹⁶

Since I’ve recommended the “*short length*” of your story and “*flow*” as pillars to “*Finish what you start*”, the strategy here I’m therefore suggesting is to find a clear and memorable structure to your story and/or content, and abandon the fear of making it flat. Nuances and meaning reside in the details, and a “*blank*” simply keeps you from floating away from the core message you have in mind. If I’m excused to be a bit poetic, let it evolve. Perhaps it is a little like how art curator Ralph Rugoff describes Jean Painlevé’s work:

“[...] in as much as life itself is defined by continual metamorphosis, it is only in its mad dance that meaning can reside.”¹⁷

16. Pullman, Philip. *Grimm Tales for Young and Old*. Penguin Classics, London. 2012.

17. Bellows, Masaki Andy and McDougall, Marina, Berg, Brigitte. *Science is Fiction: The films of Jean Painlevé*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England. Brico Press, San Francisco, California. 2000. 57



Once upon a time...

(Questioning narrative structures)

I've claimed that structure helps to create meaning, but what if that means your work becomes incredibly over-calculated and simply boring? Structure aids in predictability, and with predicability comes no element of surprise or mental exercise; neither for you nor the audience. I'm going to refer to Philip Pullman again, as he refers to what fairy tales might be lacking compared to our contemporary counterparts:

“The tremors and mysteries of human awareness, the whispers of memory, the promptings of half-understood regret or doubt or desire that are so much part of the subject matter of the modern novel are absent entirely. One might almost say that the characters in a fairy tale are not actually conscious.”¹⁸

Thinking back to my first experiences on attending lectures on filmmaking, I think I was initially really adamant (to a fault) about learning story structures and story arcs, and my stories as a result did end up rather stiff and con-

strained. Perhaps I didn't adapt the structures to become the helpful guideline they were meant to be, but it nevertheless really made me question linear narratives and in particular three-act structures.

My doubts in my approach arose in particular when I scrutinised what I was actually trying to make. Firstly, a short film; secondly, through the animation medium. Throughout these classes, the models that were introduced didn't spare a second (pun intended) on the length of the story or the animation form, and while they have certainly been helpful to me to dissect and understand storytelling as I spend my unspeakable hours on Netflix, maybe they have aided me less so in a practical sense.

So when I stumbled across the Youtube video *“How to write a short film”*, and when I revisited *“making-of”*/*“behind the scenes”* articles and videos by animators like Alex Grigg¹⁹ and Mikey Please²⁰ (just to name a few), it all felt less restricted. As Tyler Mowery articulates in his video:

“This is not the only way to build a story or a short film. Take what's helpful, leave what isn't. This isn't a formula.”²¹

Putting behind me my complex around following narrative structures, it became easier to study why and how I think animation aids a narrative through its form and medium. Animation filmmaker Satoshi Kon's mind-bending films and lucid editing style, combined with astonishing cinematography layered with fluid transitions and dynamic match cuts, made me feel a sense of eagerness once again to experiment with animation techniques, and trust that doing so will inform rather than distance me from the story process. Even cinematic abstractions by Walter Ruttmann, Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter and Oskar Fischinger²³, as well as experimental sequences by Norman McLaren²⁴ and linear fable stories by Evelyn Lambart²⁵, made me reassess what and how animated short film could actually look like. Sometimes these approaches come at the expense of strong narration, certainly; but it made me come to terms with the fact that a short film without this insistence on narrative structures was something that I could accept and enjoy as part of a film-making process.

18. Pullman, Philip. *Grimm Tales for Young and Old*. Penguin Classics, London. 2012. 8

19. Grigg, Alex. *Making Born in a Void*. 2017. <https://medium.com/@joybox/making-born-in-a-void-85e43d3376ec>

20. Please, Mikey. *The Uneven Crust*. 2011. <https://www.mikeyplease.co.uk/new-page-2>

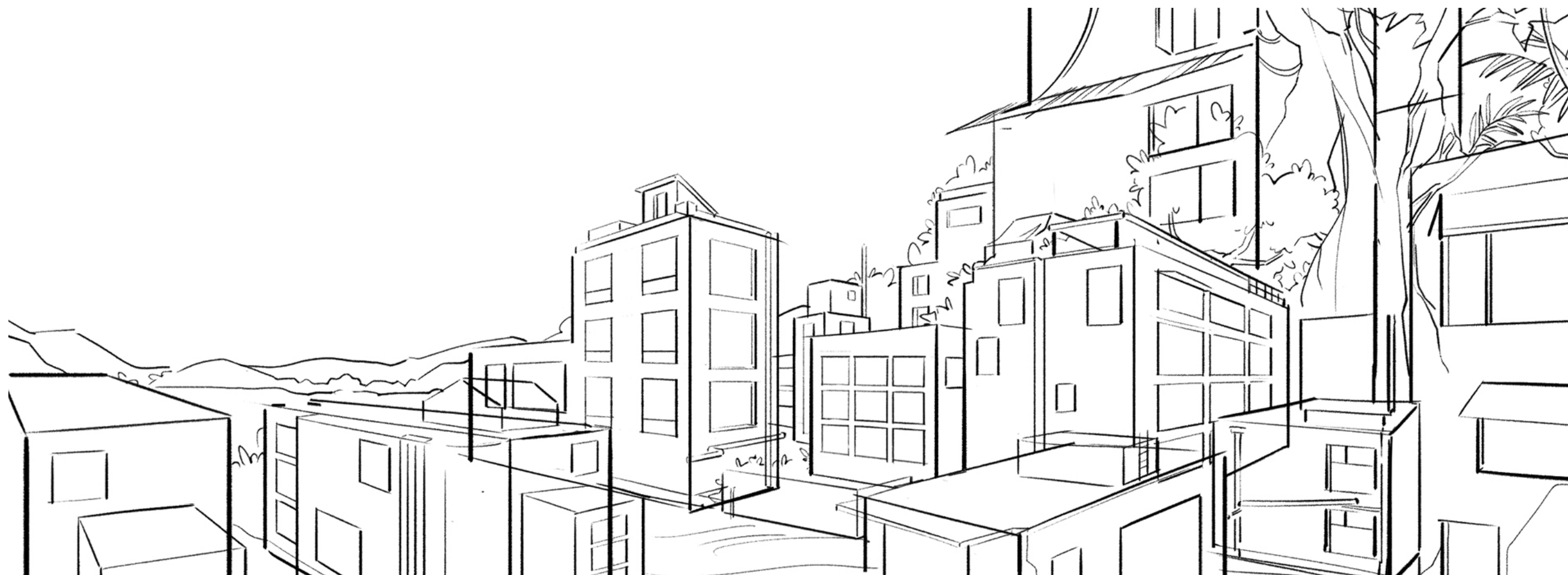
21. Mowery, Tyler. *How to Write a Short Film*. 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMqIQcTMLA0>

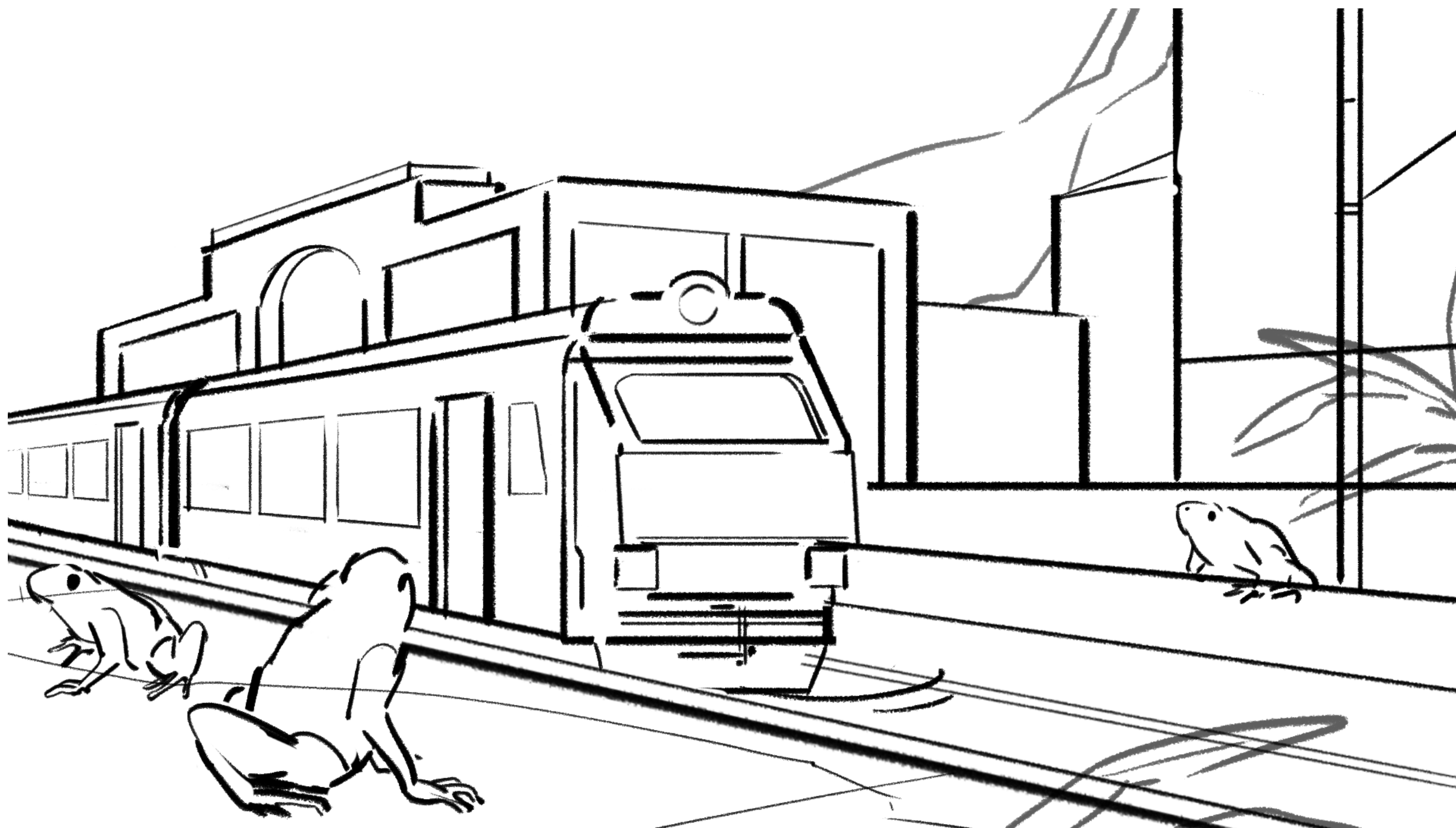
22. Escalante-De Mattei, Shanti. *Anime Director Satoshi Kon Honored in New Documentary*. 2021. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/satoshi-kon-documentary-1234598167/>

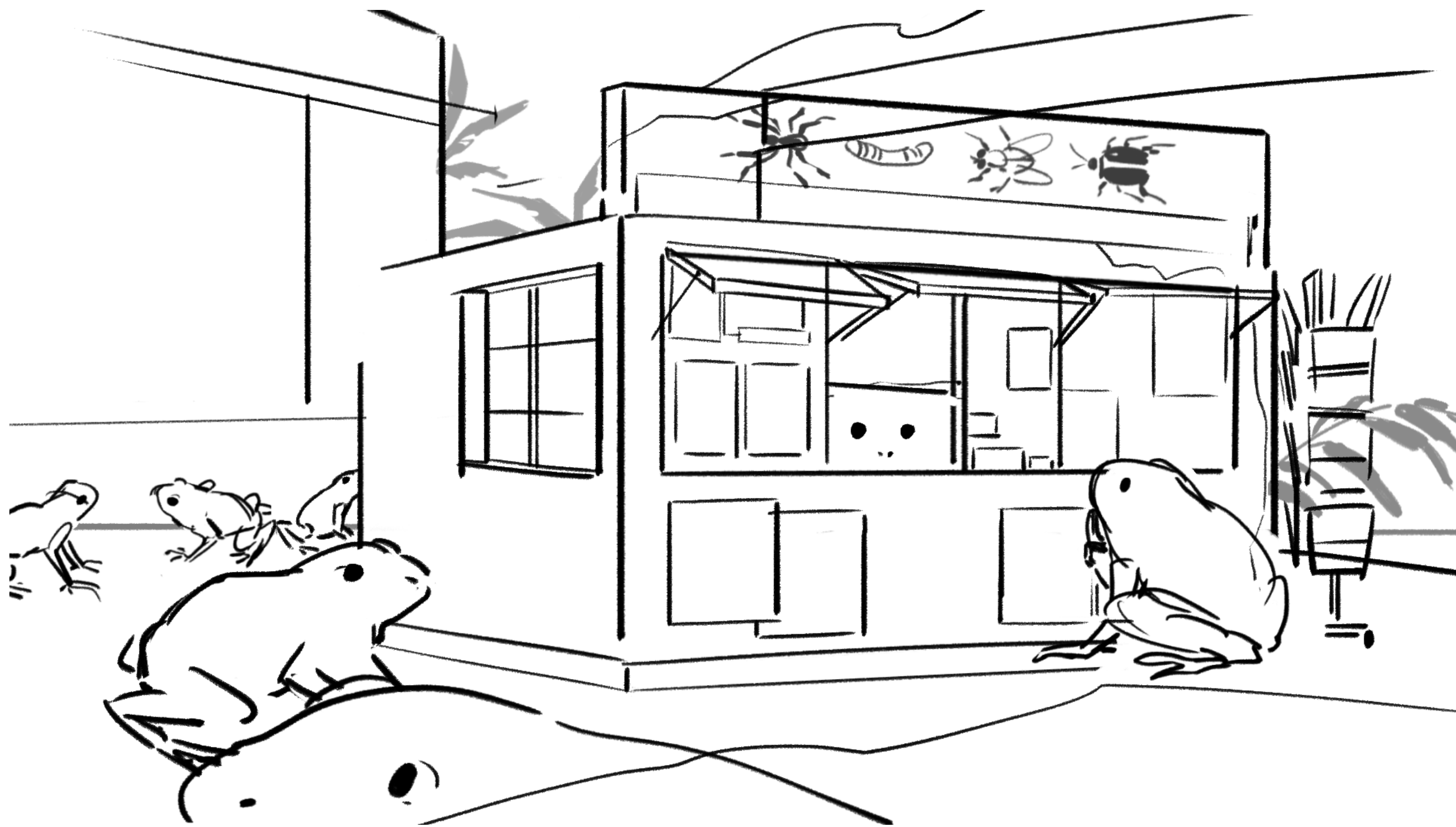
23. Keefer, Cindy and Guldemon, Jaap. *Oskar Fischinger 1900-1967 Experiments in Cinematic Abstraction*. Eye Filmmuseum, Center for Visual Music, Amsterdam. 2012-2013.

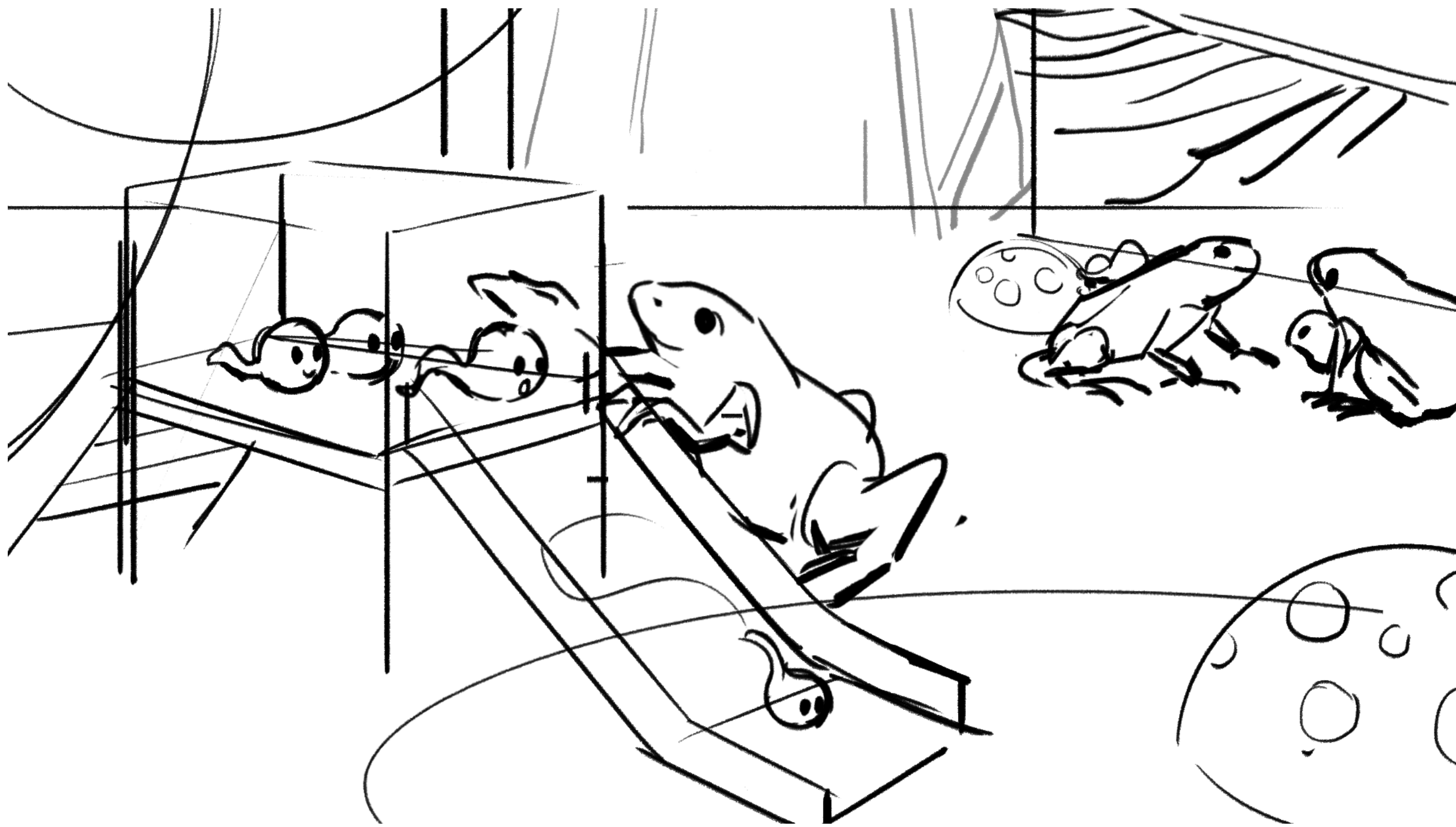
24. National Film Board of Canada. Norman McLaren. 2022 <https://www.nfb.ca/directors/norman-mclaren/>

25. National Film Board of Canada. Evelyn Lambart. 2022 <https://www.nfb.ca/directors/evelyn-lambart/>

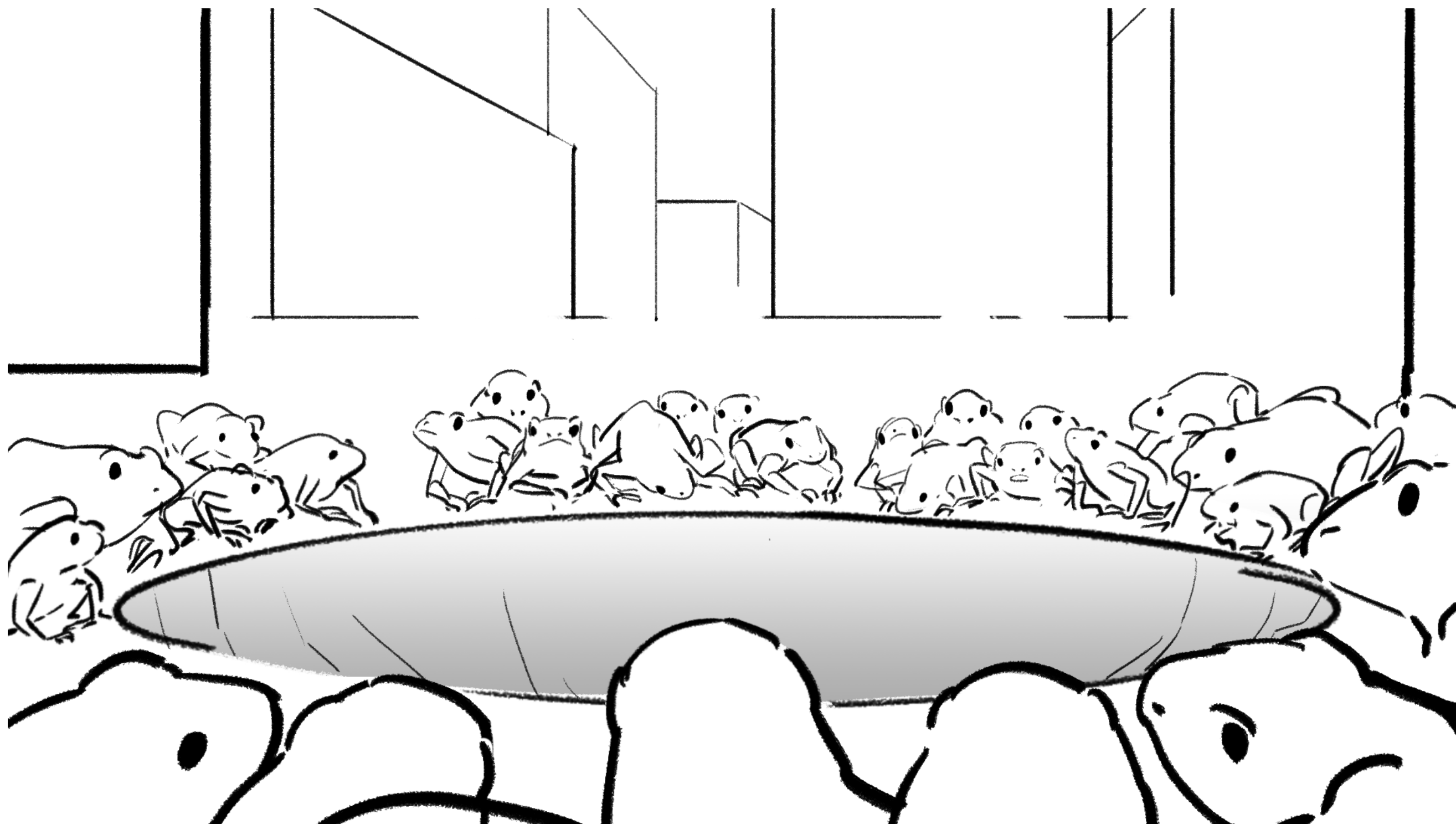












8. Ethical dimensions

(get ready for an existential crisis)

I have to admit that this tip came from the rather frequent appearance of the word “*ethics*” in discussions linked to artistic research, yet I have not encountered many questions amongst my peers that relate to “*why*” or for what purpose things get made and executed in the first place. Personally I think about this dilemma throughout the making of a project, and I suppose it by extension does relate to ethics. Perhaps there’s a tendency to entirely judge a piece of work on ethical grounds when it is yet to exist in a physical form? But then again, how do you motivate the existence of your project at all?

In “*Avant-Garde and Kitsch*”, art curator Clement Greenberg (twenty-nine years old at the time) criticises the avant-garde movement for their abandonment of revolutionary political thought in favour of a “*higher*” and “*absolute*” art form:

“It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at “abstract” or “nonobjective” art – and poetry, too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to

*imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.”*²⁶

When I read this critique it really struck a chord in me because while I understand that Greenberg is condemning the avant-garde movement for the supremely unethical act of presuming to mimic God and Mother Nature, I still feel an acute connection to the desire to create content free of the backdrop of trends and current debates. As I’ve outlined in my previous tips, this freedom is of course unattainable in its purest form — but that doesn’t prohibit me from feeling this desire to be free.

26. Greenberg, Clement. *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*. Partisan review. 1939. 5

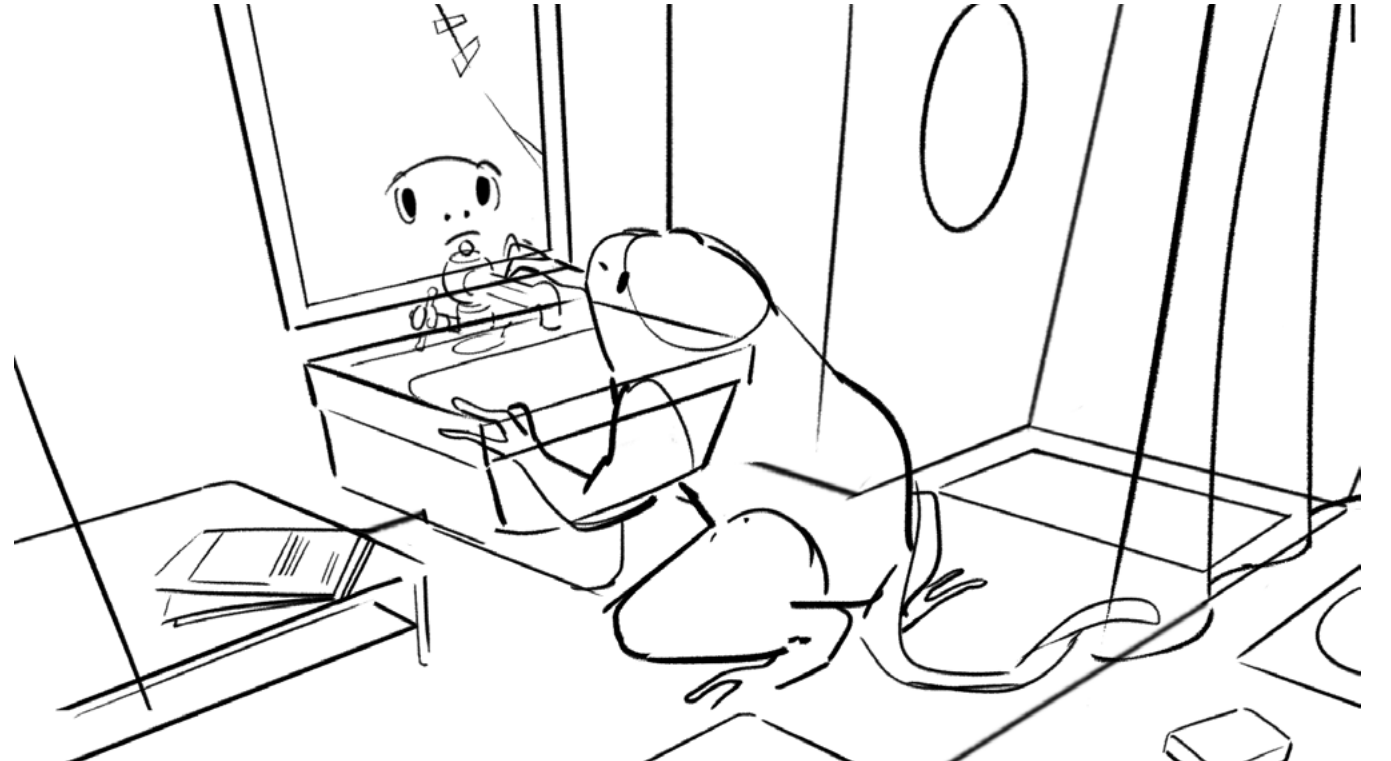
Conversely, in *Design as Art* published in 1966, and on the topic of *“What is a designer?”*, artist designer and inventor Bruno Munari²⁷ talks about “research design” as:

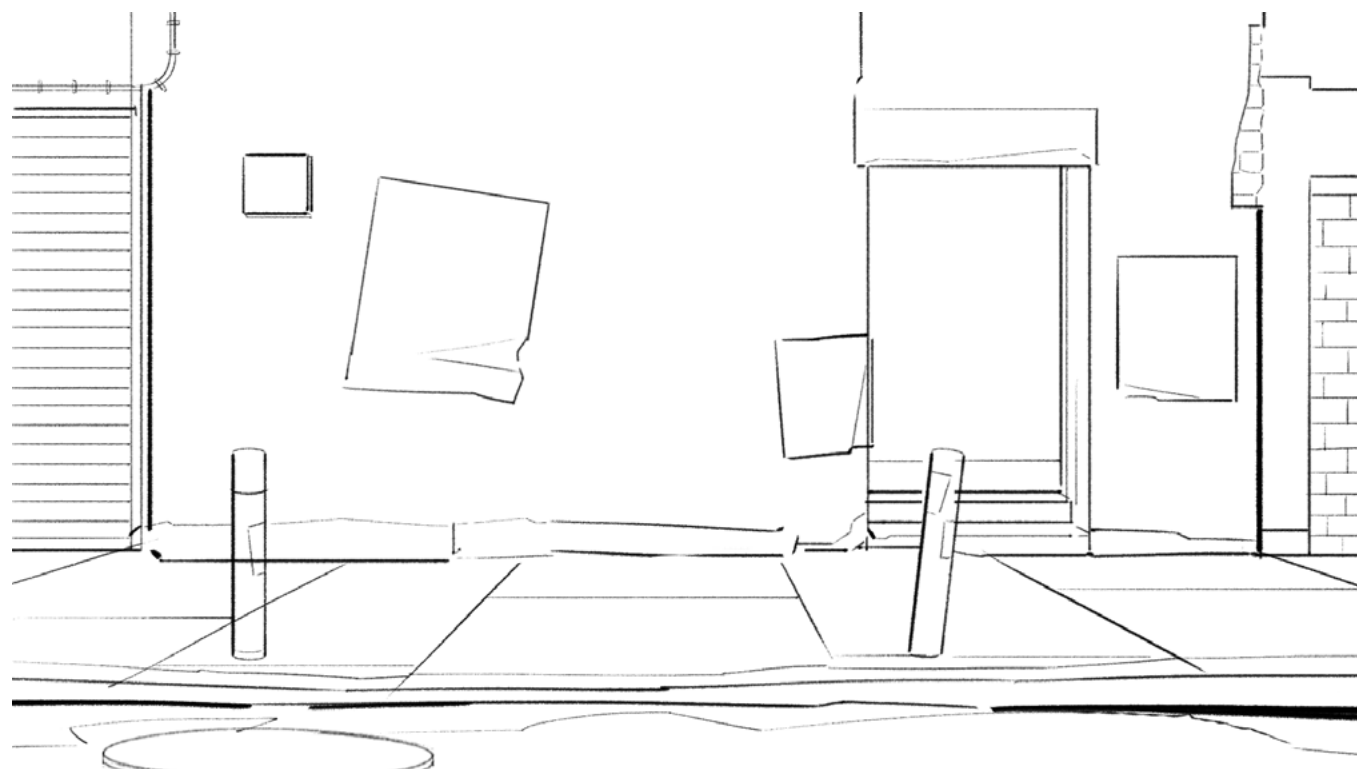
“Concerned with experiments of both plastic and visual structures in two or more dimensions. It tries out the possibilities of combining two or more dimensions, attempts to clarify images and methods in the technological field, and carries out research into images on film.

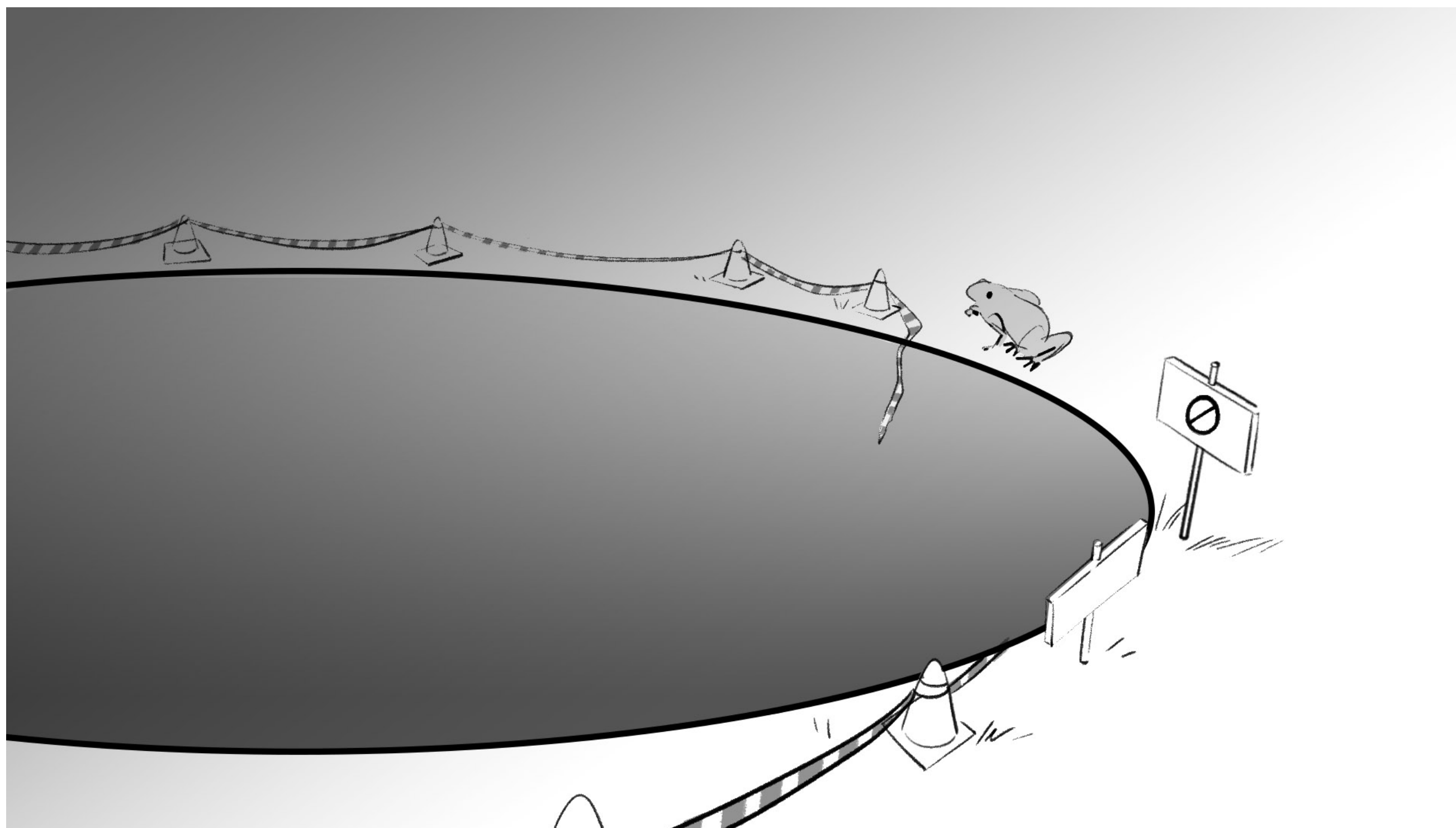
In the book, Munari has listed titles such as *“Iris”*, *“Growth and Explosion”*, *“Concave-convex forms”*, but also what seem to be “basic” concepts such as *“The Square”*, *“The Circle”* under the sub-title *“Research design”*. What I sense from his writing on “research design,” as opposed to “visual”, “graphic” and “industrial” design, is that “research” seems to entail some broader seeking and perhaps a more tentative approach. He doesn’t talk about the “fancy goods” that you may find at your local mall under the sub-title *“Industrial design”* in the same way that he passionately talks about the *“Glories of Nature”* and *“Home of the Future people”* under the “Research design” heading. So in a way, I understand his brief definition of “research design” as somewhat equivalent to what Greenberg criticized avant-garde for: a holistic, meta-reflective and transdisciplinary multi-layered approach on the one hand, yet at the risk of collapsing under its own weight and its “own terms”.

So where does all of this leave us? Damned if you do, damned if you don’t? Following your moral compass isn’t a straightforward ordeal, and so perhaps all we can do is to traverse multi-dimensions with caution..













Ready, set, GO!

(Questioning narrative structures)

“I believe the first draft of a book—even a long one—should take no more than three months, the length of a season.”

This is what author Stephen King²⁸ strongly believes, and no: those three months aren’t arbitrary. He argues it’s a good working method, as you begin to stall or prolong the initial spark, it might kill the project completely:

“If I don’t write every day, the characters begin to stale off in my mind—they begin to seem like characters instead of real people. The tale’s narrative cutting edge starts to rust and I begin to lose my hold on the story’s plot and pace. Worst of all, the excitement of spinning something new begins to fade. The work starts to feel like work, and for most writers that is the smooch of death.”

Embracing the draft or the unfinished state really makes a huge difference, and I think this oftentimes isn’t emphasised enough in creative processes. When speaking about *“embracing failures,”* I think it really makes more sense to draw attention to the definition of *“failure”*: here it refers to the actual imperfections and roughness in your draft and unfinished pieces. If growth through embracing failure really is about accepting the nooks and crannies of your impeccable plan, and realising that it isn’t so perfect after all, then perhaps it is more about embracing your imperfections? As stop-motion animator Mikey Please describes:

“Perhaps the problem with perfection is that it can’t be improved upon. It has nowhere to go, no potential for development, to evolve and to grow.”²⁹

I appreciate Mikey Please’s uplifting and humble thought on imperfections, since I oftentimes suspect that the actual dead-ends rarely get seen (unless it fits the apparent evolution of your process). Despite the numerous *“behind-*

the-scenes” available to study, perhaps it’s still hard to show your wonky ideas even if it indeed was the very seed to your magnum opus. Unless it all happened in your parents’ garage or was scribbled down on a napkin, your dead-ends just won’t make for a very compelling origin story or manifestation of a creative process.

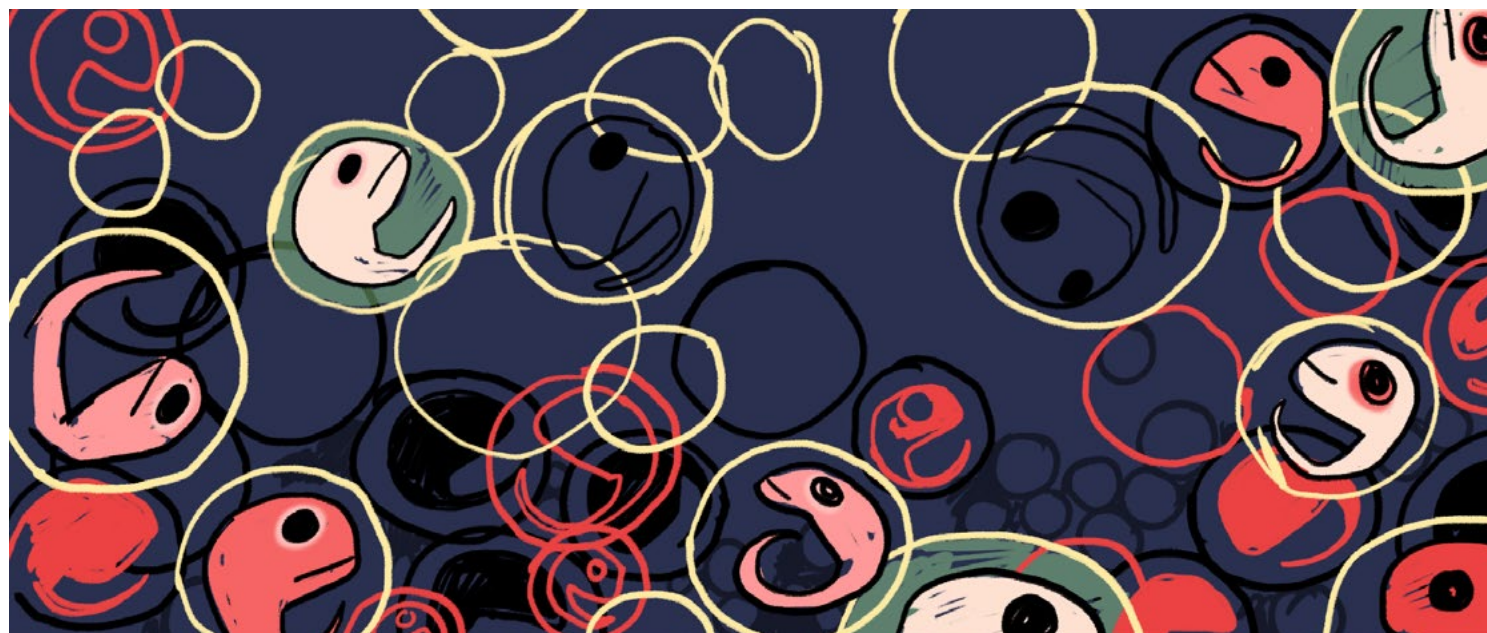
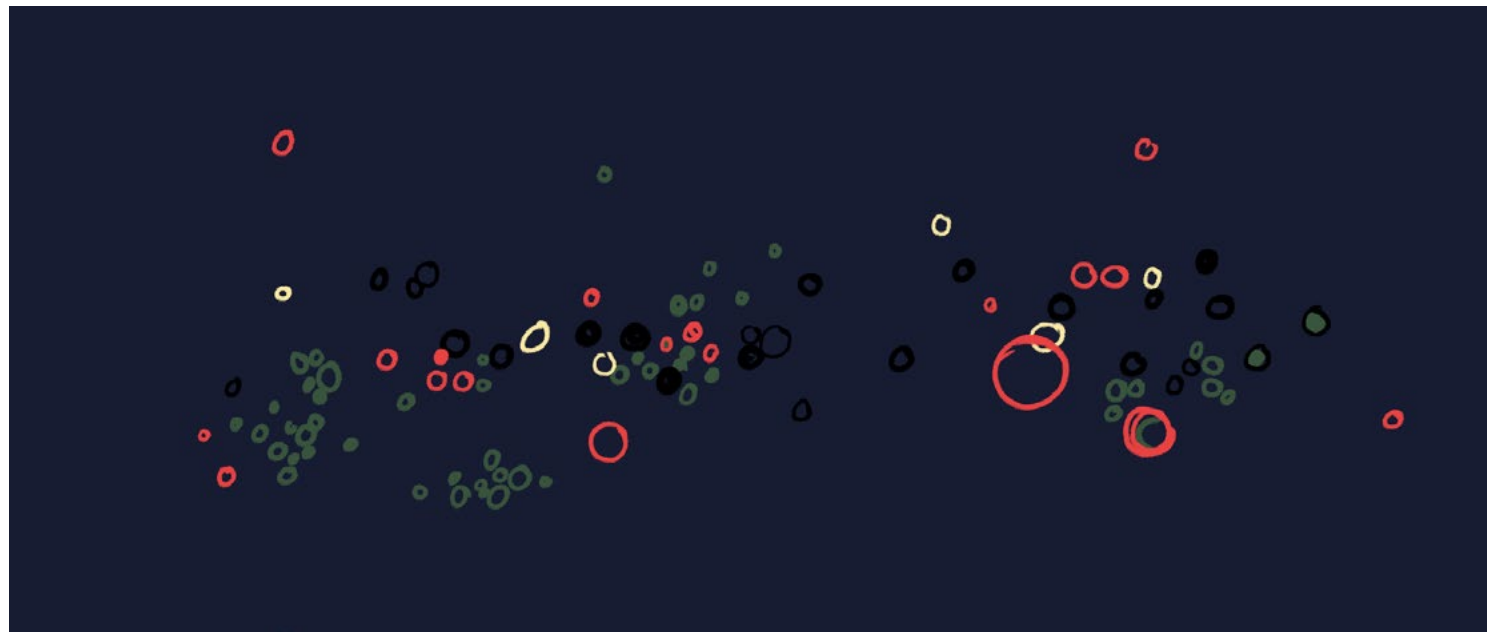
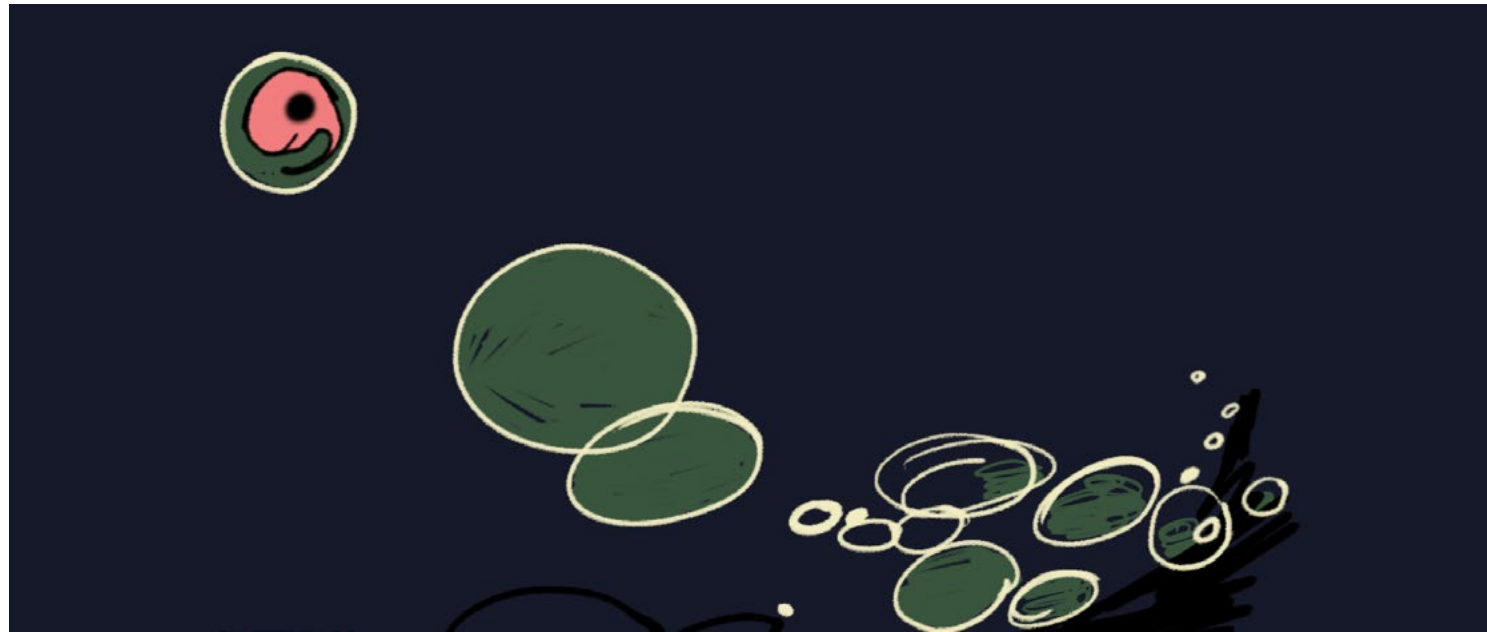
Perhaps this is especially true for the visual arts, as any book on writing and literature will encourage you to read more in order to improve your writing, but how many visual artists actually encourage you to go copy their techniques and styles? Sure, filmmakers will encourage you to watch movies, but I dare you to find more people that have a harder time watching movies than reading fiction. It’s just not a very high bar to sit still for two hours and let moving imagery consume you.

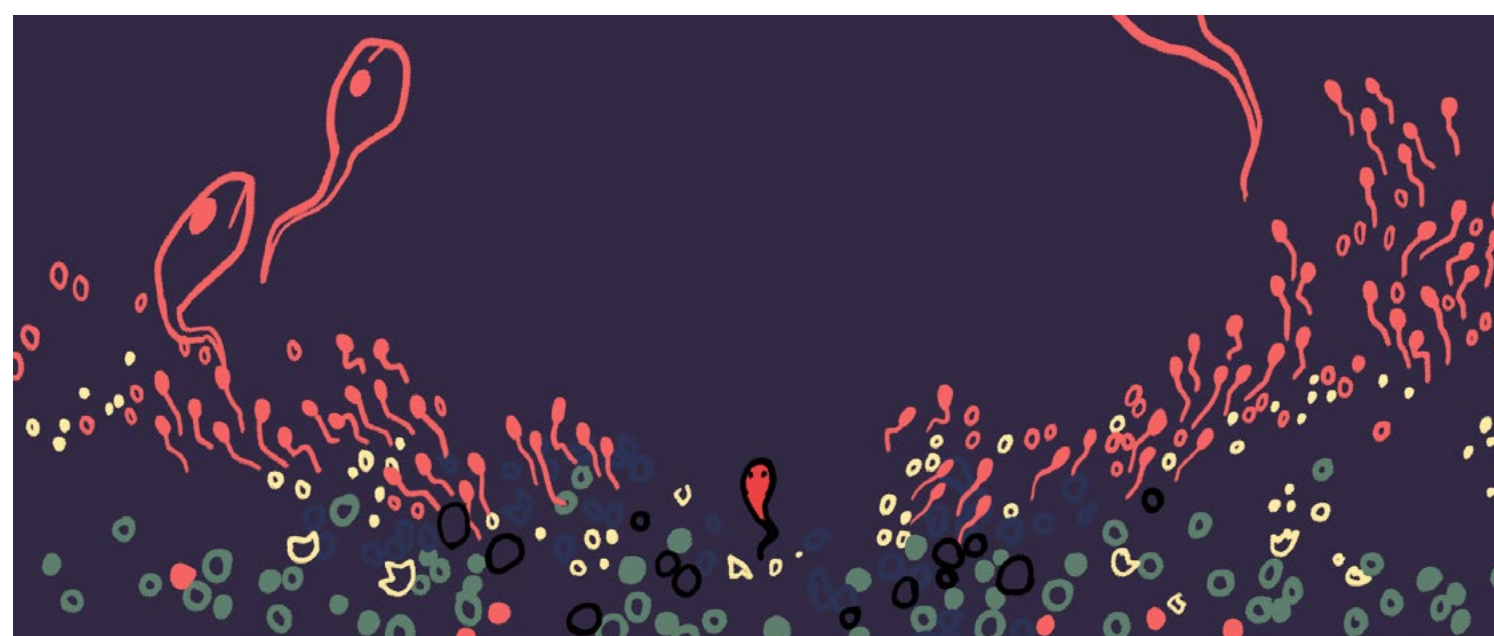
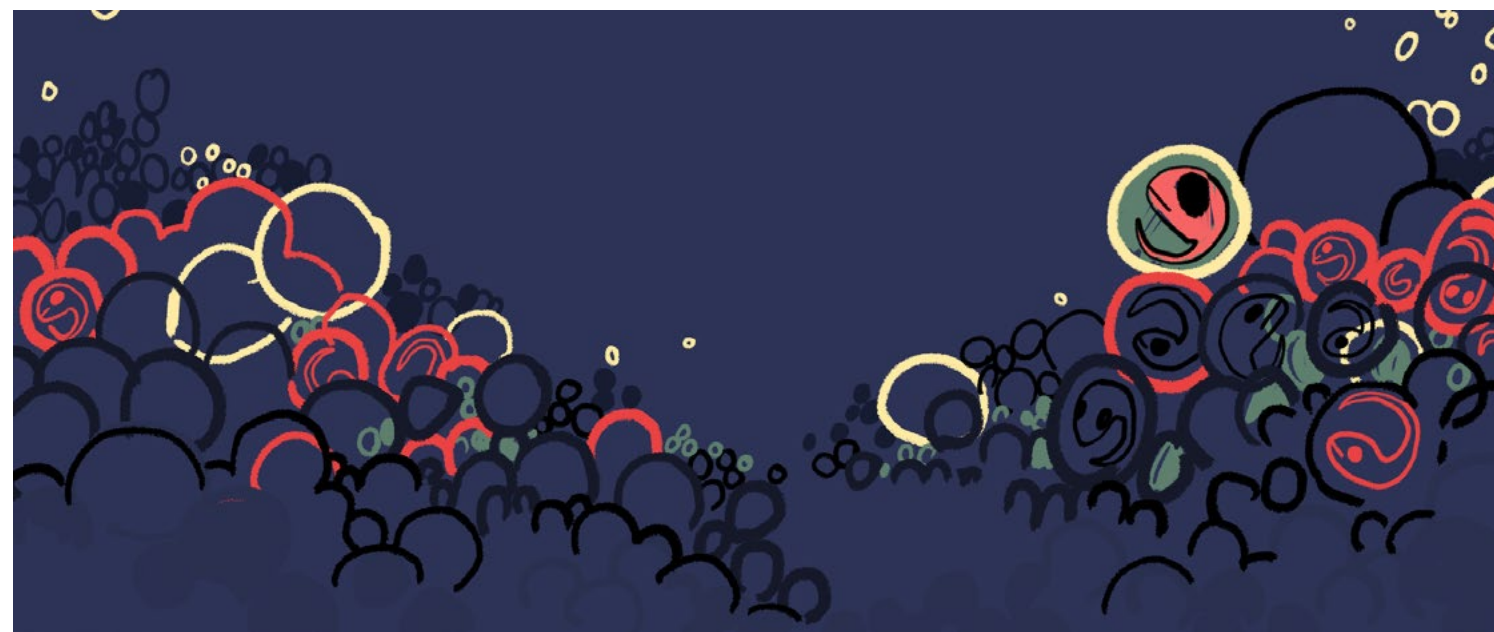
In animation, the process to a finished frame is a laborious one. When I look at rough keyframes sketches and their timing charts, the immaculate curves and circles of pencil marks, along with the sketched out numbers with dynamic line weight...it’d be a lie to say that it doesn’t make me obsess over the way my sketches look as if they’ve been through a meat grinder.

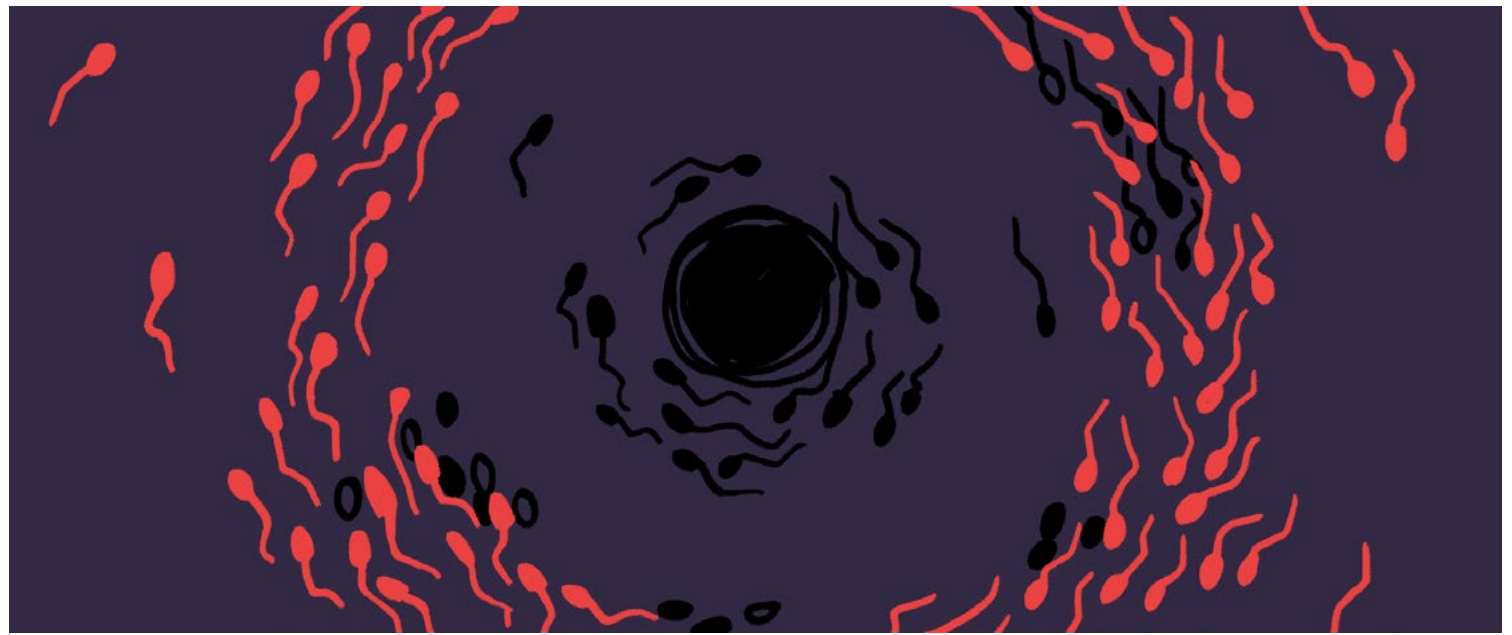
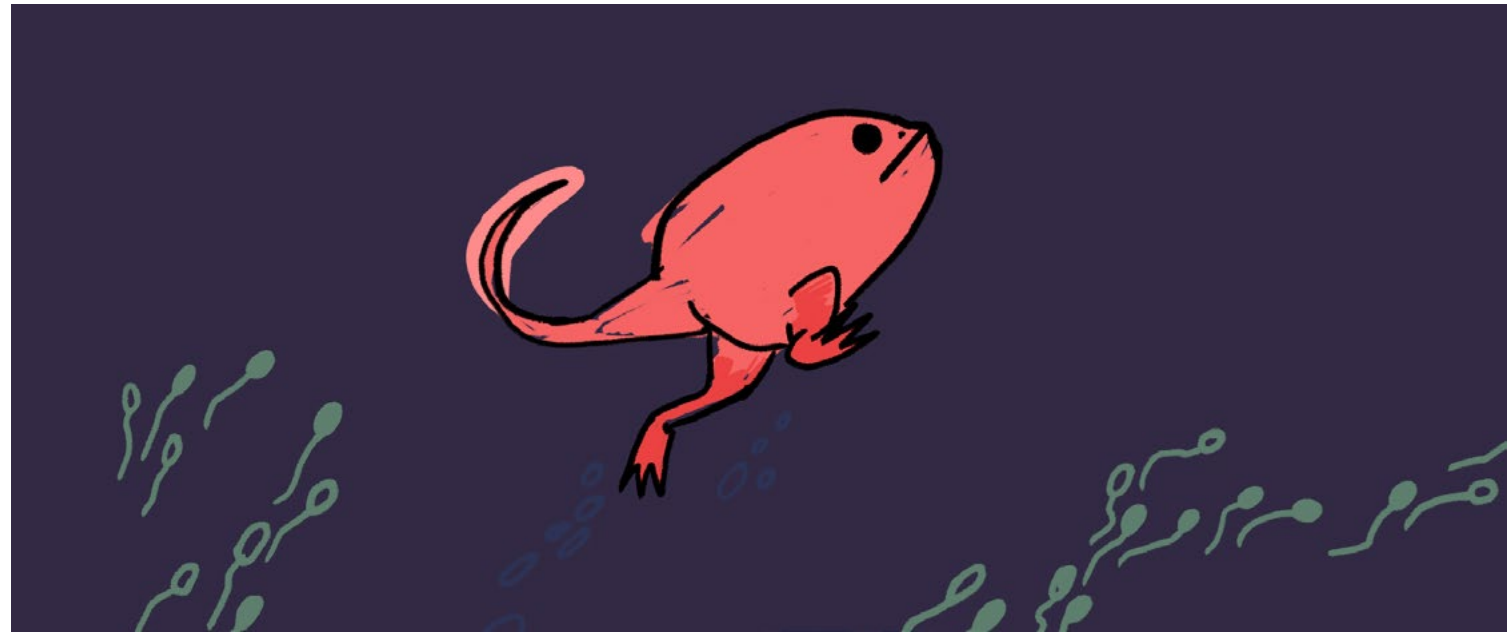
So minced meat isn’t a beautiful thing, but maybe a juicy burger is? The worst you can do is to let it go bad on the kitchen counter for too long and let it attract flies. This odd metaphor is my way of saying that your ideas won’t be dazzling straight off the bat. Embrace the wrinkly skin of your newborn and in time it will reward you with a face that looks less like old Yoda. Not everything is going to stay as immaculate as baby Yoda forever. OK, I think you get my point now.

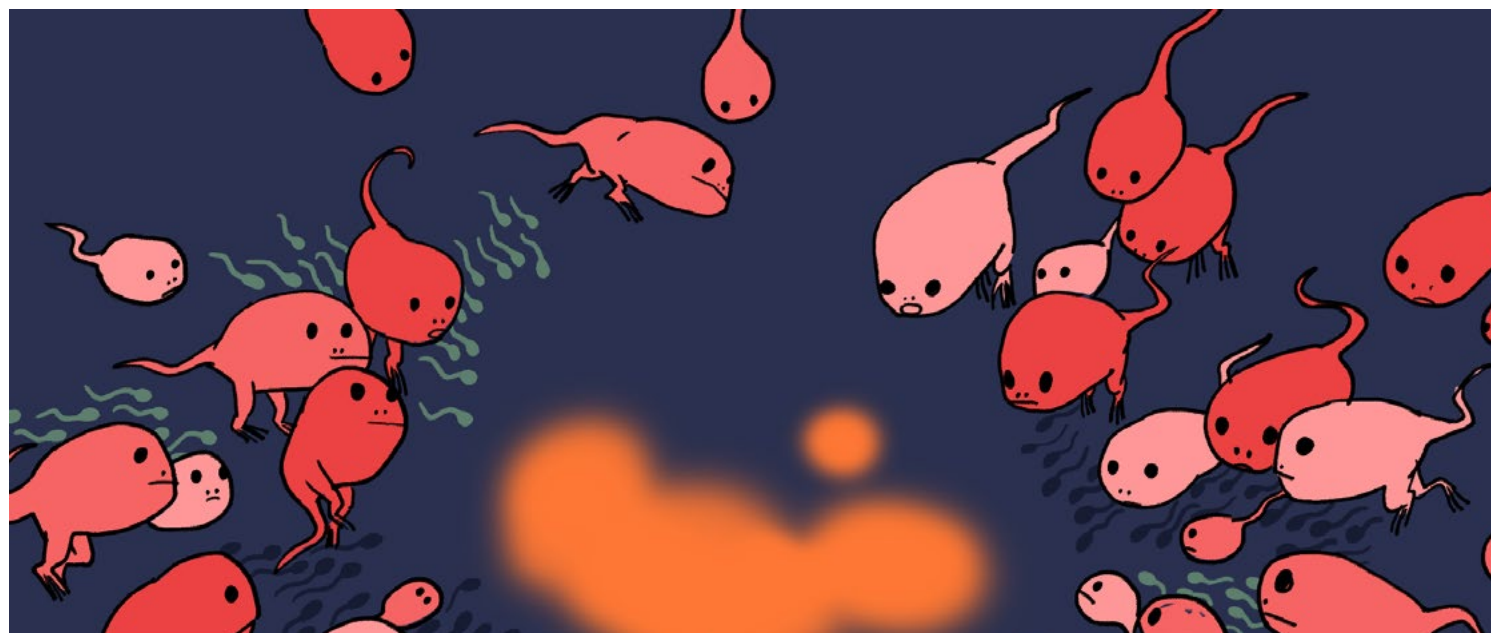
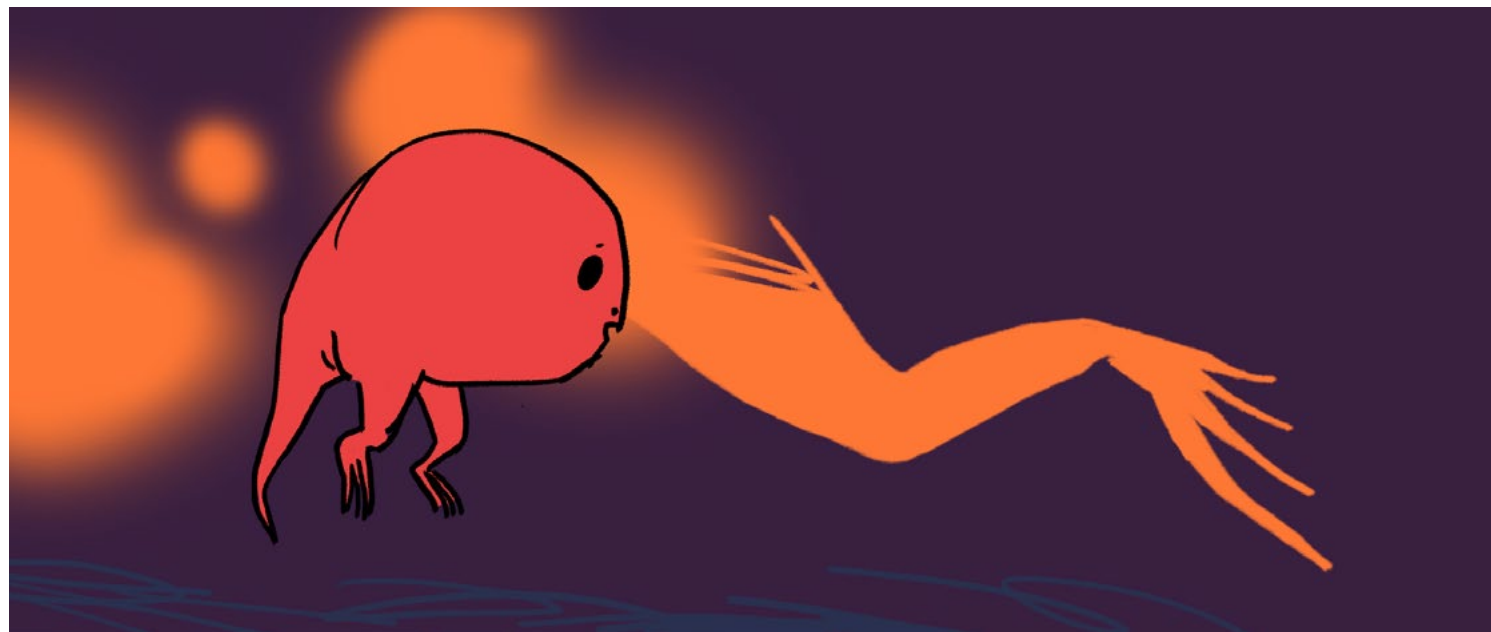
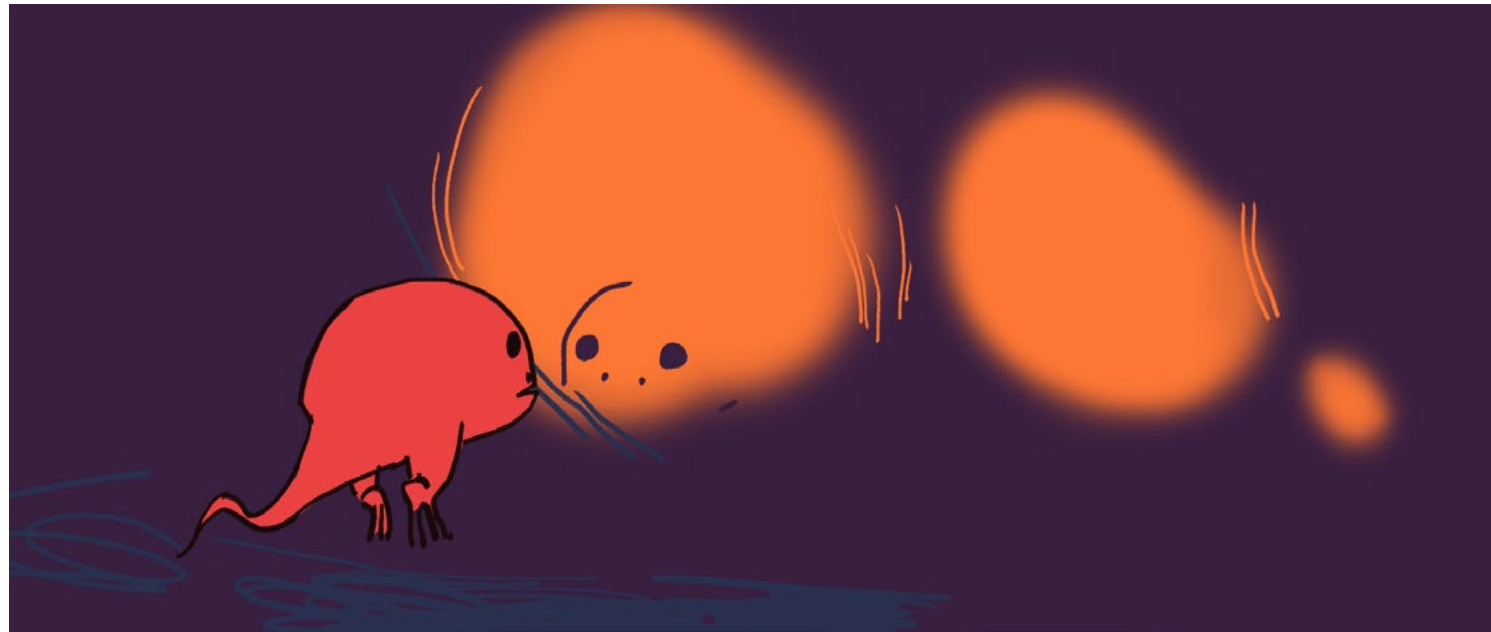
28. King, Stephen. *On Writing, a memoir of the craft*. Scribner, New York. 2000.

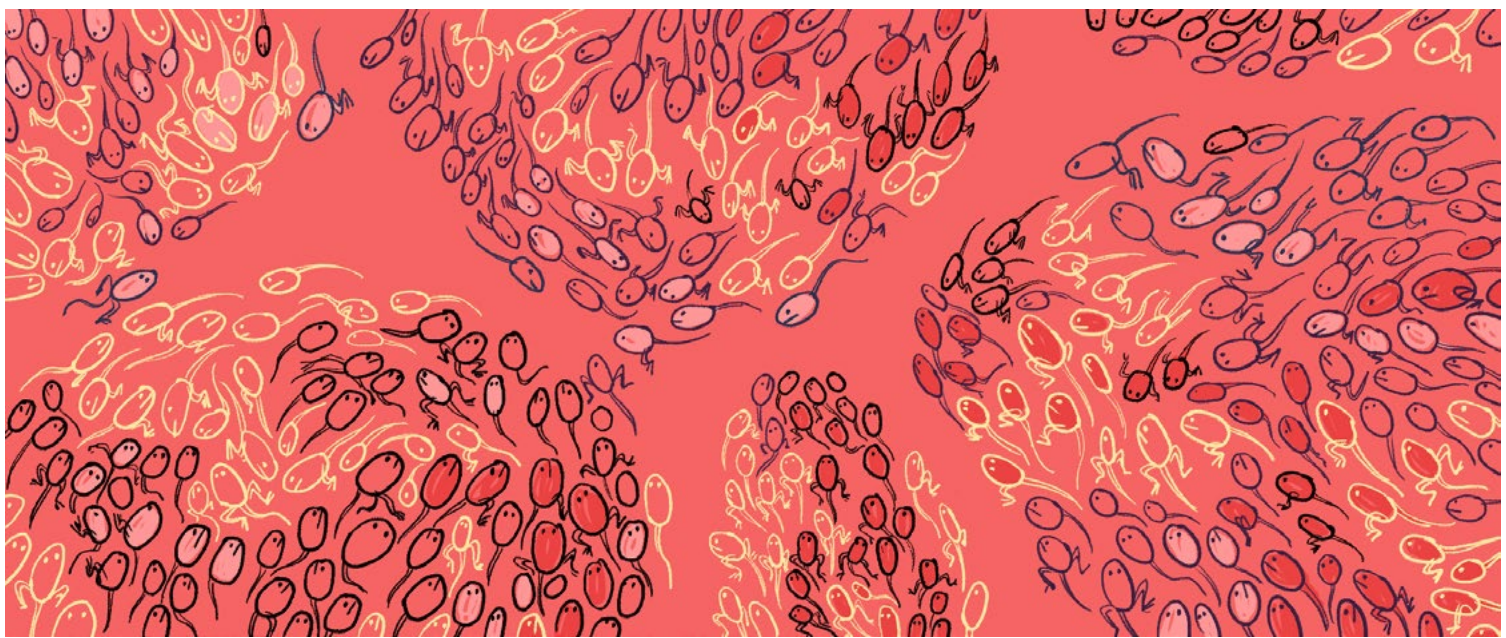
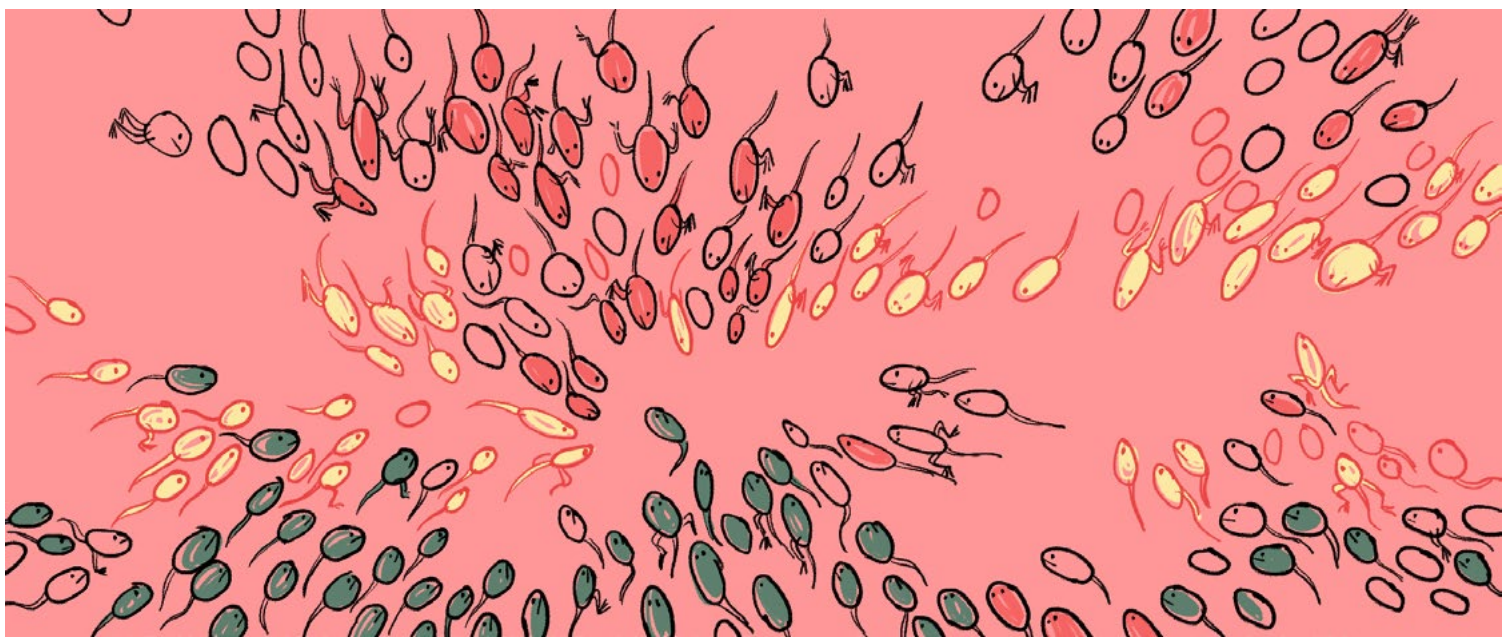
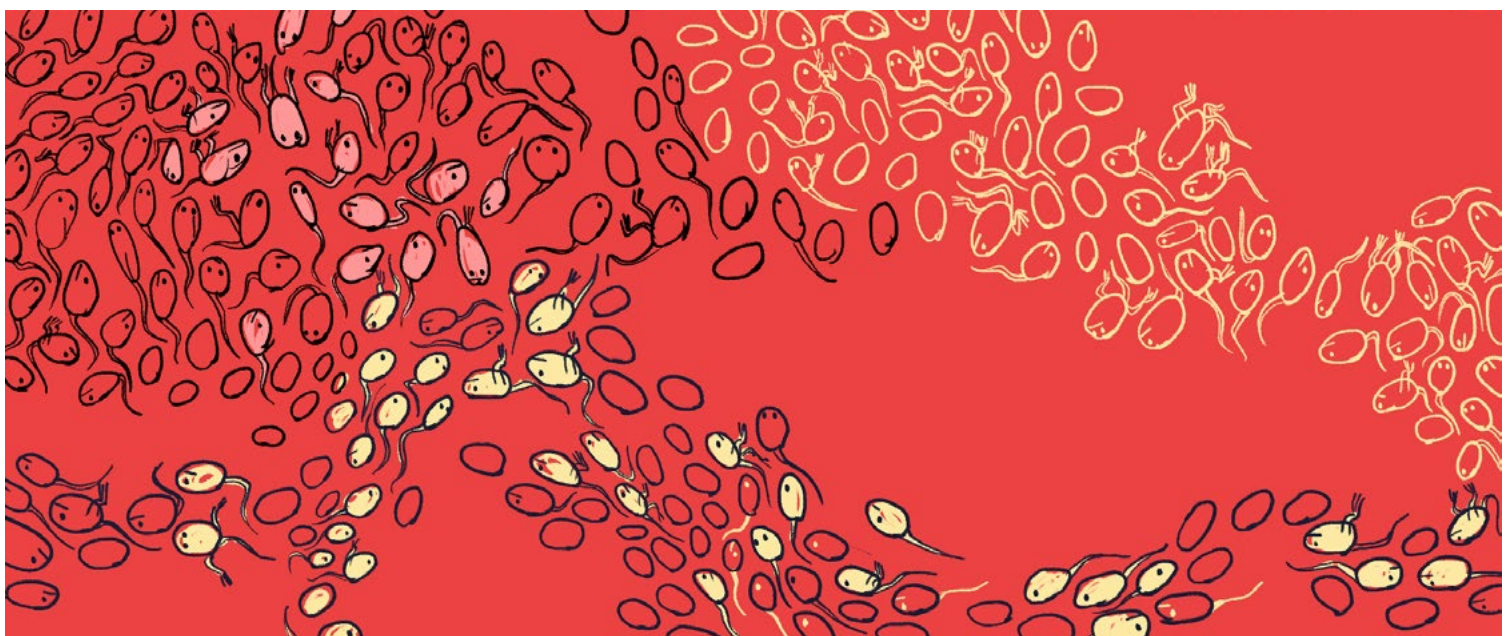
29. Please, Mikey. *The Uneven Crust*. 2011. <https://www.mikeyplease.co.uk/new-page-2>

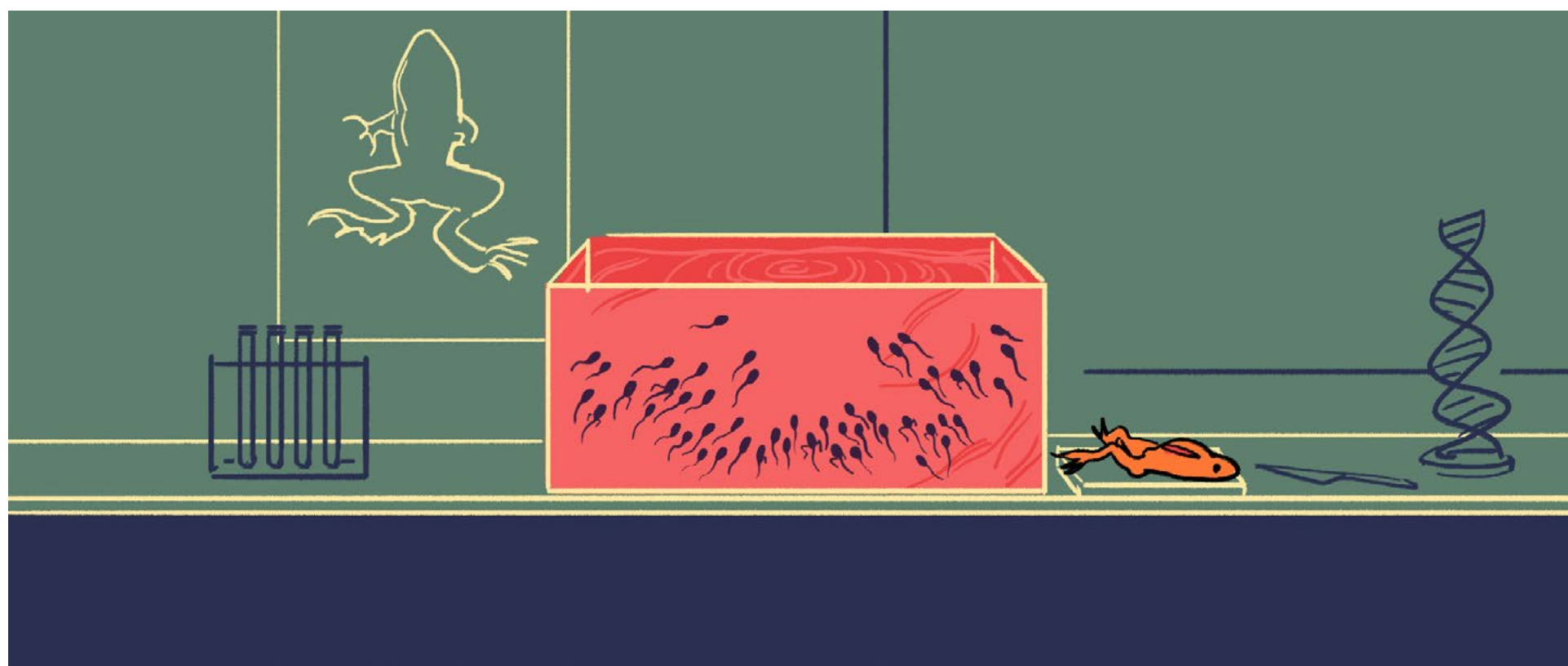












10. Identifying your audience

(Who is it for and why?)

I've already mentioned how — throughout the making of an animated short and navigating the meanings and the ethics of indulging in making one at all — I fell into the labyrinth of defining and finding an audience. Any audience really that could get something out of the thing I would be making. I got into the field of children's books and picture books in particular, because I saw it as a potentially more simplified way to approach a story that could be developed into an animated short film. Boy was I wrong though: children's book publishing exists in a realm of its own.

Bruno Munari's reflections on children's books may be slightly outdated, but his observations on children's publishing still bears some truth. At least I got a similar impression from nagging quite a few children's book literary agents over the years:

[Publishers] thinks that it is not children who buy books. They are bought by grown-ups who give them presents not so much to

*amuse the child as to cut a (sometimes coldly calculated) dash with the parents. A book must therefore be expensive, the illustrations must use every color of the rainbow, but apart from that it doesn't mater even if they are ugly.*³⁰

By no means am I trying to find fault with an entire book publishing industry, but the industry aspect brings (as with any commercial entity) a set of standards and rules designed to encourage consumption. In reality this might not be what you want, nor the audience for that matter. I don't see any harm in thinking in an entrepreneurial way, of course, but let's be honest here: you're hardly setting out with the goal of making a short film in order to bring in the bucks.

When attending an animation event in 2022³¹, I listened to the publisher of "Hilda" describe the path of how the comic for children developed into an animated series streaming on Netflix. In the publisher Nobrow's case,

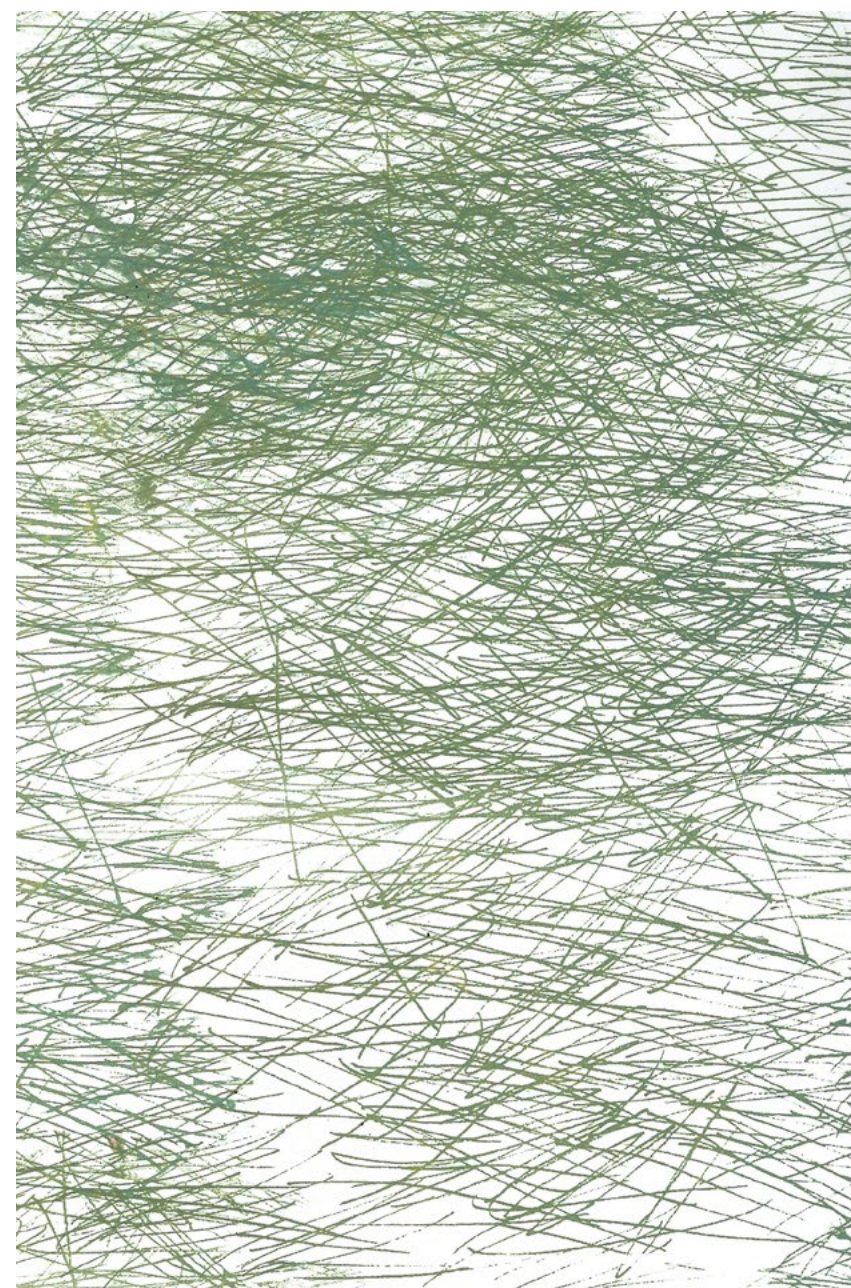
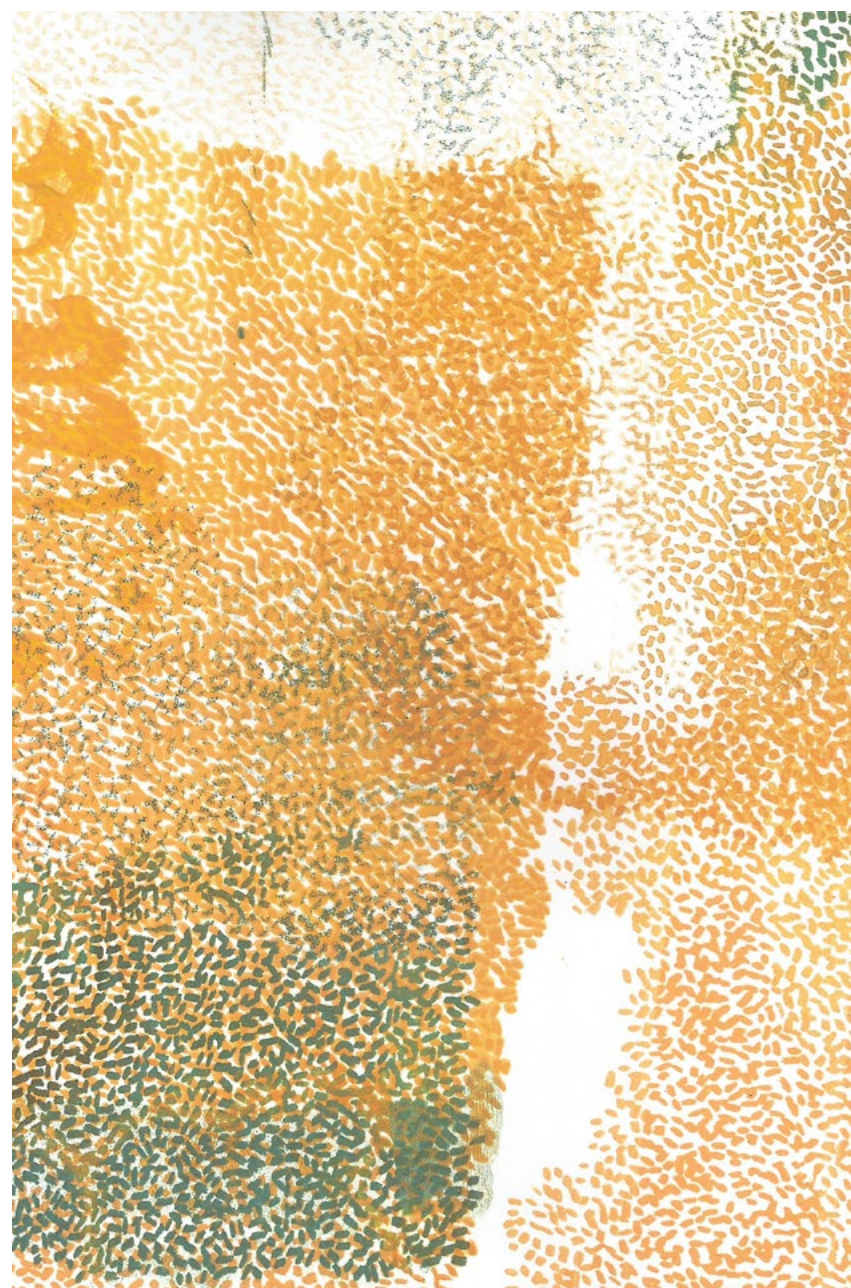
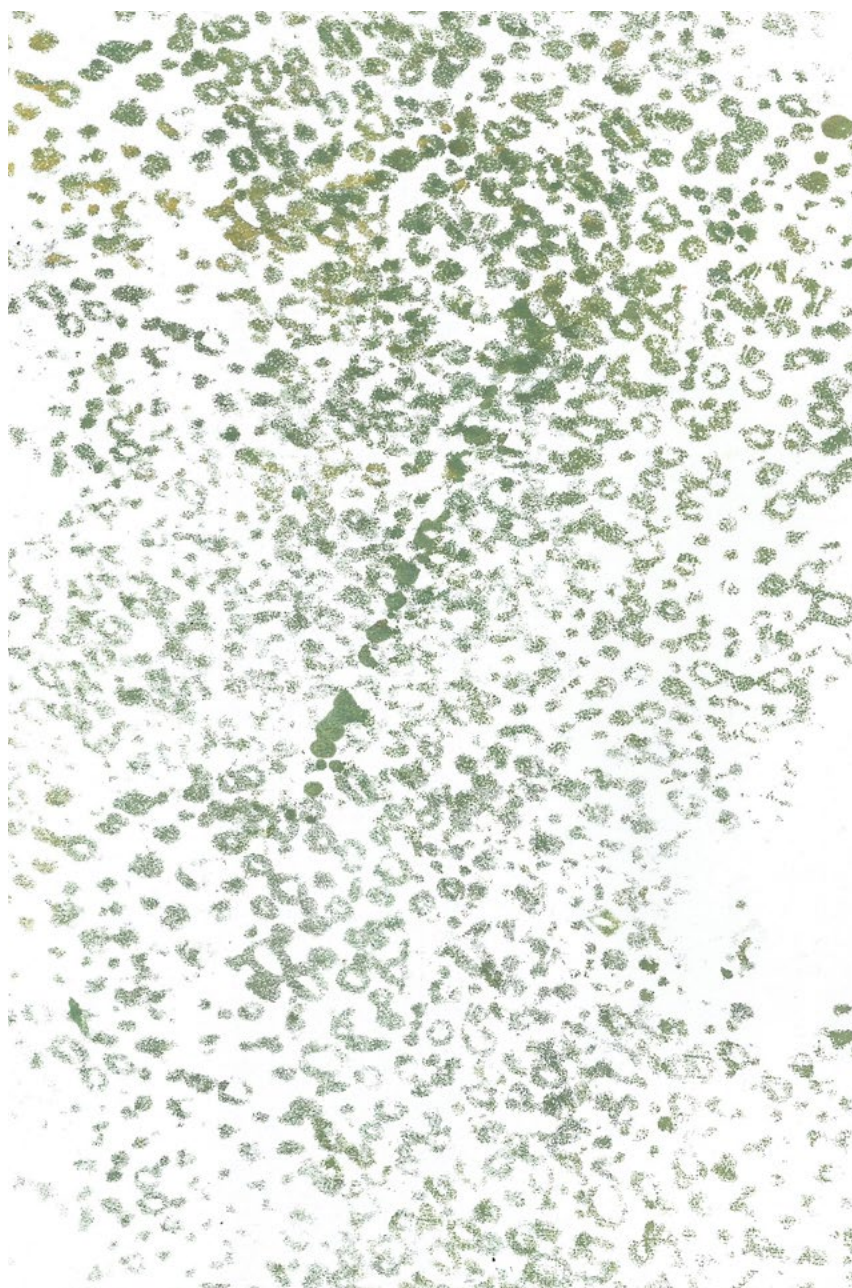
they even saw the necessity prior to getting the opportunity to venture into the animation world to create a specific "*children's imprint*", thus creating a separate publishing house called "*Flying eye Books*".³² One defining reason for this was because Hilda at the time published under the name of Nobrow would constantly be put onto shelves in the graphic novel sections, far far away from the children's book section.

So for what it's worth, my thoughts on finding an audience are: give it a try if you think it helps your process to move along, but don't dig yourself a hole too deep, as there are just so many ways audiences will and want to find their way to you. Also, why not spend that time and energy after you've finished the actual production of your work?

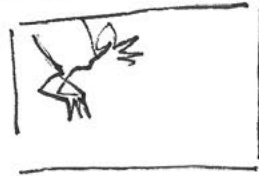
30. Munari, Bruno. *Design as Art*. First published by Editor Laterza. 1966. Published in Penguin Modern Classics 2008. 94

31. *Cartoon Movie*, Bordeaux 2022 <https://www.cartoon-media.eu/movie/>

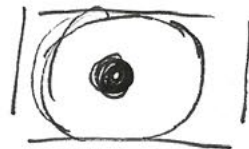
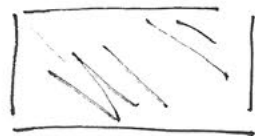
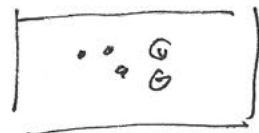
32. Nobrow Publishing <https://nobrow.net/about/v>



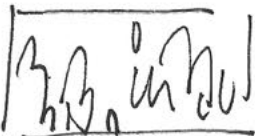
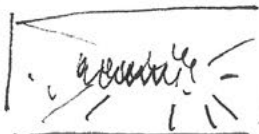
Scene 0



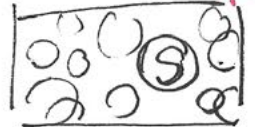
Scene 1



Scene 2

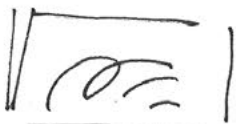


Scene 3



close-up
wipe?

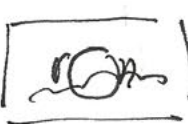
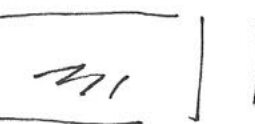
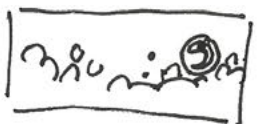
Scene 4



1 min

transition

Scene 5.





11. Stop expecting gold stars

(Questioning the notion of “learning outcomes” and “in-depth” studies)

As a kid, I thoroughly enjoyed filling my glossary-test book with gold stars. The star-shaped sulphur-aluminium coloured plastic films were as exciting as a flimsy ruled notebook could get, to an 11-year-old. It gave me a sense of routine (the glossary test would always occur every week on a Thursday) and satisfaction (who doesn't like collecting stickers?!). Given that this is part of the curriculum of a middle-schooler, I should have known that this feeling of routine and satisfaction would turn into nothing but a distant childhood memory. Certainly now, as an adult, and with the experience of awkwardly navigating higher education, a learning glossary isn't exactly deemed an “in-depth” or “experimental” learning device. Certainly not “collaborative” or “critical” enough.

My issue with this is that I find animation at times an incredibly difficult medium to be clad in theoretical and analytical weight. I can certainly apply a lot (as you could with anything, really) of cross-referencing and meta-analytical approaches to whatever I choose to do with the animation medium, but I don't think that it necessarily feeds into the practical aspect of animation.

One of the reasons for this is that depicting motion through animation doesn't translate well into real-life, and the actual physical energy required to execute a certain motion doesn't correspond either. For instance, in Richard Williams' widely recognised *“The Animator's Survival Kit”*³³, there is a whole section on how to animate a character walking. The section entitled “Walk” has 18 sub-sections. I'm not a neuroscientist, but I can confidently say that I don't use more than 1.8% of my brain to move my body anywhere — so why would you think that animation requires any more effort than that? Certainly if you've already grown out of your infancy and Bambi-on-ice stage, then surely we can also just move past the fundamentals of WALKING? Of course here I'm going to say no. It doesn't automatically get advanced and complex just because you skip the fundamentals. In *“Administrative Bloat in Higher Education”*, J. David Johnson talks about how in education:

*“Recent years have seen a growing focus on the strategically ambiguous, near Orwellian term, of Student Success.”*³⁴

Johnson also remarks on how traditional academic values are increasingly downplayed:

*“The academic success pillar touts the importance of advising and support services mentioning traditional faculty roles and classroom learning only in passing.”*³⁵

I certainly don't think the past was pure bliss, and this thesis most definitely won't be delving into pedagogic theories in education, but I do think that everything belonging to the past and old methodologies has a tendency to be slapped with a “traditional academic values” label, which therefore automatically deems anything old as less stimulating — this is certainly so in higher education. Instead, the more ambiguous conventions get a foothold, and “supervision”, “guidance” and “collaboration” become regarded with more urgency and importance.

33. Richard, William. *The Animator's Survival Kit*. Faber and Faber, London. 2001

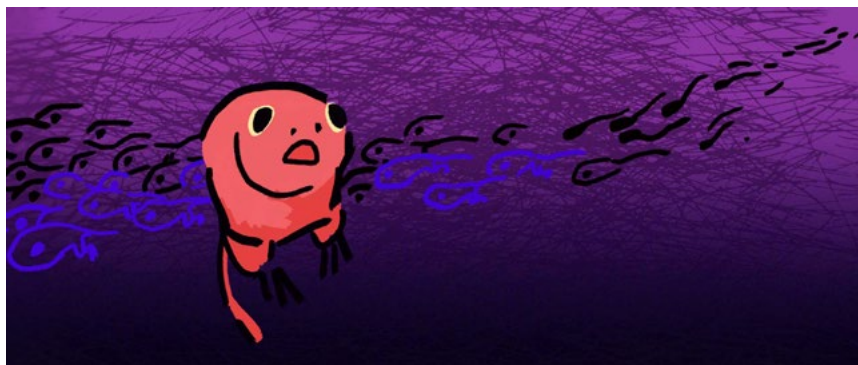
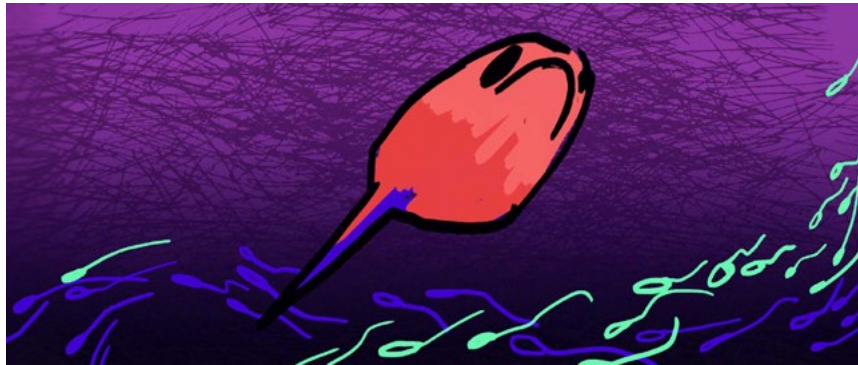
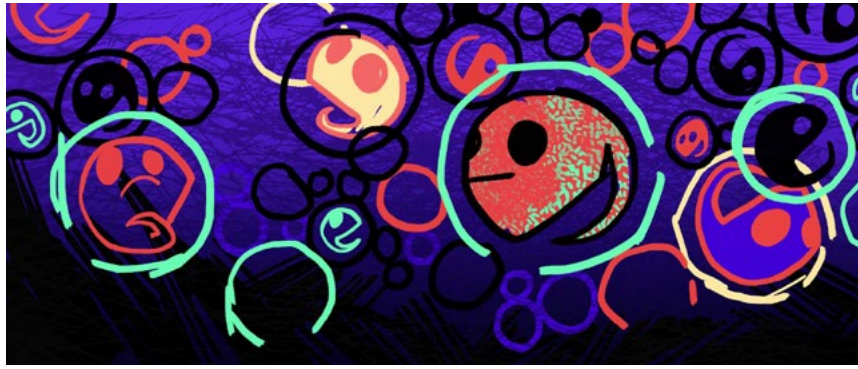
34. Johnson. J. David. *Administrative Bloat in Higher Education*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne. 24.

35. Johnson. J. David. *Administrative Bloat in Higher Education*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne. 26.

A rigid and “*traditional*” work methodology with heavy emphasis on the fundamentals hardly makes things automatically better (because yes, on the other hand I do understand that the idea of higher education is that you’ve already acquired the fundamentals), but I think we could be more open to the idea of incorporating fundamentals into in-depth and analytical approaches, as well as collaboration and interdisciplinary thinking. Fundamentals are after all called fundamentals for a reason. Look at the Bambi-on-ice sequence, for instance. The iconic scene almost didn’t get made until both Frank Thomas and Milt Kahl³⁶ (both known to be part of the legendary “*Nine old men*” group of Walt Disney Productions) got together and thoroughly discussed and sketched the animation staging and posing of Bambi. They worked together (guess what — collaborated!) to bring out a scene that was vital to the story and character development of Bambi. The scene is extra vital for the audience because we get to witness the perspective of Bambi taking his first shaky steps on ice. On paper it might just come across as a scene where “*Bambi walks on ice*”, but that sheds light on why that basic prompt or point of departure yielded something interesting. You can rest assured that if Milt Kahl didn’t spend hours on model sheets and observational drawings in isolated concentration — you wouldn’t have had the heartfelt and nuanced scene come to fruition.



36. Deja View. Bambi and Thumper on Ice. July 9, 2014. http://andreasdeja.blogspot.com/2014_07_09_archive.html



12. Embrace limitations

(find your school of thought)

I love ice cream. Nothing beats freshly scooped solidified cream and sugar out in the warm summer sun. The process of getting to that point is a whole different matter, however. Even before I spot the rows of colors that remind me of a neatly ordered and satisfying coloured pencil case, I've already started calculating in my head: *"I should ask for the vanilla last, since that will make a good palate cleanser... Oh, but maybe I should start with the vanilla flavour since the dark chocolate one will probably overpower the taste of vanilla... A fruity mango sorbet will go well in the middle... That coffee flavour looks really good too tho, maybe I should switch that one out for the vanilla..."* It's safe to say that by now everyone else would have already finished ordering their scooped ice-cream combos, while I'm still completely paralysed by my own indecisiveness.

Animation involves a lot of decision-making, and because of that it easily gets overwhelming (at least for me) when I set out to do anything that moves. There are just so many styles, genres and techniques you can combine (the possibilities would require all eternity to contemplate) that the act of sticking to something can be so darn difficult. In confusing times like these, I like to lean on the ideas of

other art disciplines like Graphic Design.

In *"How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul"* (very uplifting title, I know), author Adrian Shaughnessy talks about finding and defining a type of *"philosophy"*. An *"ethical base"* to operate in. I've previously outlined that finding an ethical standpoint can be an overwhelming task in itself, but in this context I believe Shaughnessy is referring to conventions that are manageable even for the faint-hearted. I.e. a *"creative philosophy"* supported by *"business ethics"* for instance. Sometimes that could be as simple as "be yourself", but he also mentions:

"[...] other types of 'philosophy' and other types of 'ethics'. Many designers believe in schools of design that come with inbuilt notion of ethical conduct. Modernism, for example, with its high moral tone of rationality and truthfulness; 'protest design', with its political and campaigning function; 'de-

*sign for social good", with its rejection of purely financial motives in favour of design that benefits society. Others believe in sustainable design practices: "green" issues such as the use of recycled materials of printing, and avoiding design that merely contributes to landfill sites, are increasingly preoccupying designers. I know designers who believe passionately in the democratising and participatory merits of interactive digital design. And I know designer who carry a sword for aesthetic standards in design."*³⁷

You can certainly critique what belonging to a *"modernist"* or *"green"* label does to your work, as well as whether these terms are even as precise in their definitions as they often claim to be, but I think it can bring a certain ease and comfort to be part of a school of thought — even if that's just a brief mental note in your own head. I look at it as a type of limitation that will allow you to take a break on the bench and make you ready to join the game when you're once again ready to get into action!

37. Shaughnessy, Adrian. *How to be a graphic designer without losing your soul*. Laurence King Publishing, London. 84.

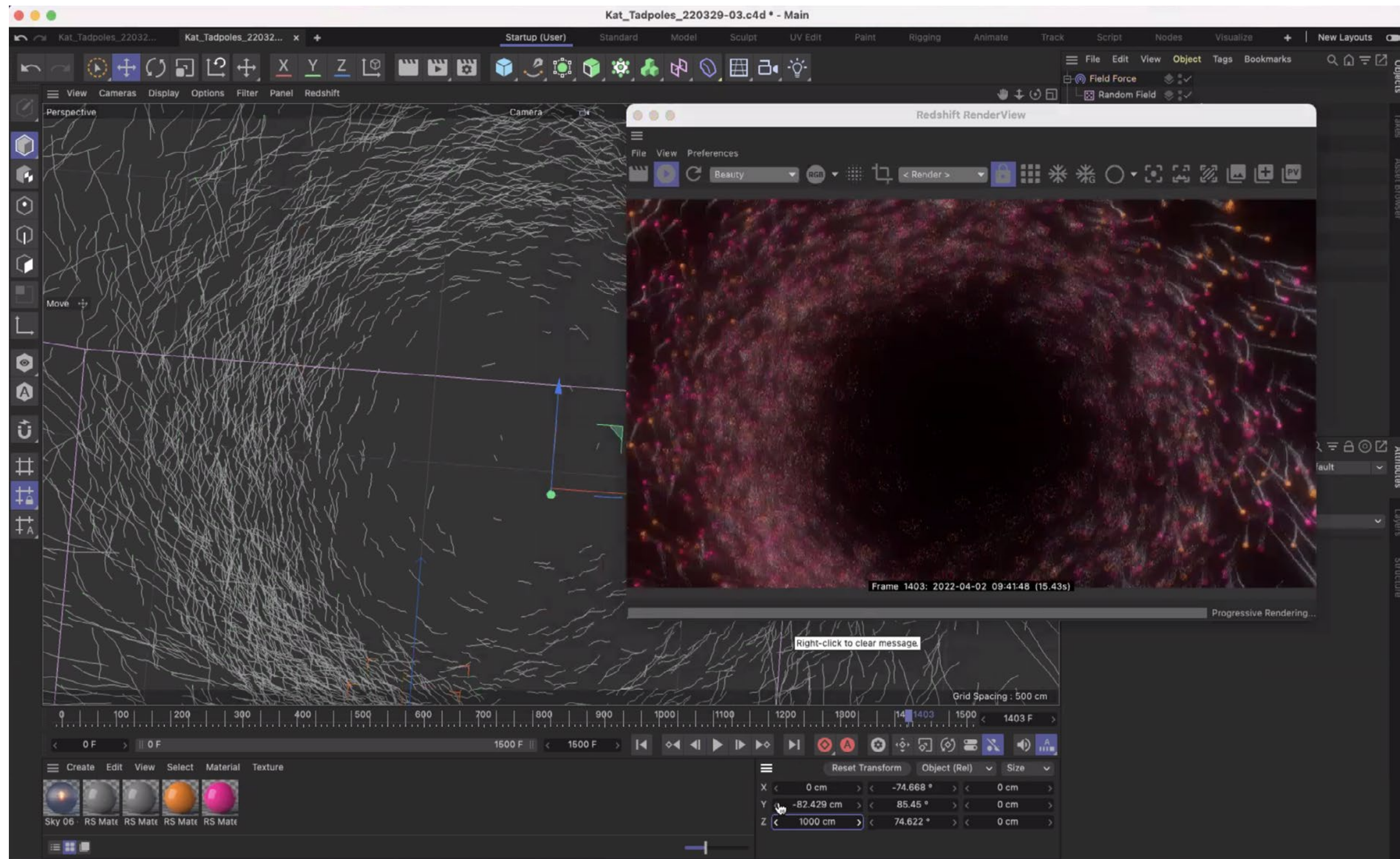
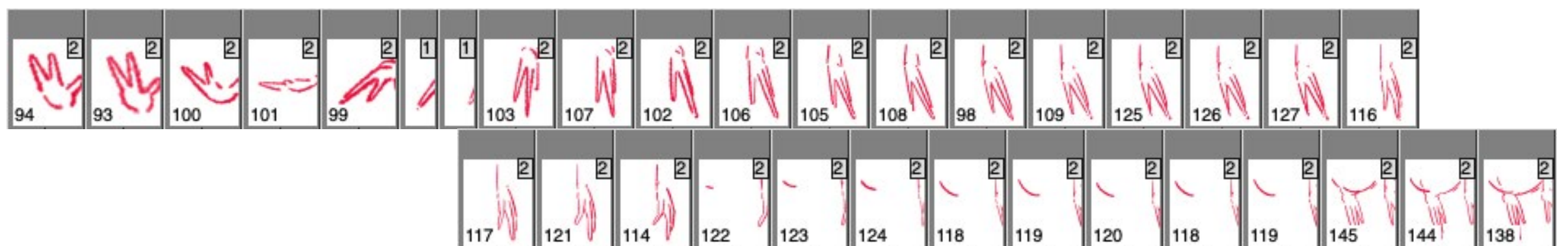


Image courtesy of Charlie Keeper.





13. Let's wrap it up!

(The End)

If you've made it this far I salute you. I've attempted to share tips and thoughts that hopefully aren't too specific to a certain task or goal, and that can applied to most things, with the ultimate intention to *"finish what you start"*. I've received comments that these tips are similar to *"coping mechanisms"*, and while this is a term that I don't exactly associate with control and conviction, I suppose it's apt. The effectiveness of coping mechanisms put into action depend on the time and context of when and how they are implemented. Perhaps I'm delivering contradictory thoughts here (but that's been a constant theme in my text, so I guess it's not a contradiction after all), but I think you can always find motivation for why you should or shouldn't do something, and therefore it does always pay off to be truthful and honest with oneself. When am I leaning on a piece of advice just for my own self-assurance and excuse for inaction, and when am I adhering to it because it will actually bring me closer to what I set out to do? These are questions that I repeatedly ask myself to answer, and perhaps that is also why I settled on this raw and giddy piece of writing. For what it's worth, I hope this ride has been entertaining to you, and that it will somehow push along your own endeavour and quest in finishing what you start.

"[H]armony essentially consists of diversity in motion."

