

Somewhere in Line-land: The line is the thing

By Caterina Verde

I like a good line. A line pushing you across the page, perhaps pushing itself, you push it, it pushes you. It flops, languishes and then races ahead. It is violent, sensitive, twisted and so are you. The paper is rough, the line changes, angst marks hang on nooks and crannies, spreading across smears; a blur results and gives you speed. Smooth paper sends you on your way, picking up momentum, allowing for a lighter touch. A dotted line is good, too, because it's still connected to the main thing but directs you to a place, telling you to follow it.

Thought balloons, line balloons, context, conversation, sweetly and imperceptibly transport you through time and space. Maybe this is the afterlife revealing itself just a few moments early? But by now the next frame has appeared and new characters introduce themselves.

Saturday morning cartoons were “the thing.” They were the theatrical moment you waited for all week. You’d wake up and make your way down to TV land – your mind still filled with slow moving dreams of your own – where you’d stare mesmerized by Popeye’s pointy elbows and the anchor holding his arms together and the over-cooked spaghetti lines of Olive Oyl moving across the screen in a “Save me, Popeye”

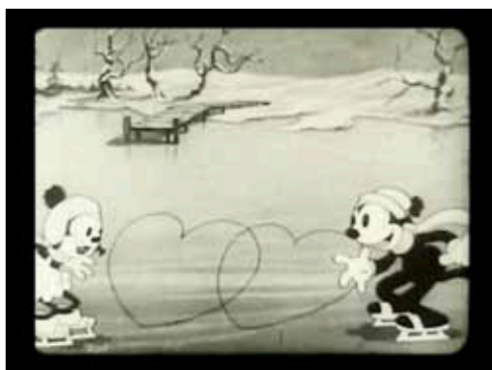
flailing motion. And here comes Brutus, coarse and savage like the lines containing him, giving him a rough and crashing form. These characters, who started out as comic strips in the funny pages became even more famous as they morphed across the 4:3 landscape at 24 frames per second.

Free falling into Alaska Daze, an insane 1932 Krazy Kat (sans Ignatz) looking like a ringer for Mickey Mouse, is featured in an animation about ice skating; this cartoon tells you so much about line. Moving across ice is about carving a line in space: You can still hear the sound of the blade on ice and you know that that blade is creating line.

The snow man about to melt with frilly lines tells you what’s happening – and what’s going to happen.

In 1924, art critic Gilbert Seldes called Krazy Kat, “the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America today.” The originator of Krazy Kat and Ignatz, which ran from 1913 to 1944, was George Herriman. A genius in his own right.

Alaska Daze was produced by Adolph Zukor and Max Fleischer, the famous animator who changed the face of



animation. Fleischer was a different kettle of fish than Walt Disney though they came up in cartoon world together. Ultimately, the competition between Disney and Fleischer was harsh, and one that Fleischer lost though he deserved the honors in his lifetime. His contributions were enormous. Working with his brother David, Max Fleischer developed the rotoscope, the cue meter, the stereo optical process and other important technology that advanced animation and filmmaking. A founding member of the American Academy of Motion Pictures, Fleischer produced Betty Boop, Popeye, Superman and Koko the Clown among others. The animators who came on board, Roland Crandall, Seymour Kneitel, Dick Huemer honed and refined the characters over time, working exclusively with Fleischer for years until his place was usurped by Disney.



Caterina Verde / Blam

These animators and early cartoonists created a new visual form. It was a miracle we all witnessed on the small and large screen. You might find something vaguely similar in a remote glyph-carved cave from pre-history, but up to that point the style of a line had never been used in quite that way.

What always took me away as a kid was the thickness or thinness of a line, how it ended, and how started up again. It was magical. Or perhaps a wavy line of perfect evenness pulled my eyes into its dance for a fraction of a second. It was a not-to-be-forgotten quantum moment. The line breaking up into a series of dots and then reconvening back into line form was hypnotic. The line then might be filled, colors emerging, and the form taking over but still, the line maintains itself holding it all together.

Background specialists were the animators who drew the interiors, exteriors – the landscapes, the skies and trees. The landscapes were often dreamy, with washes of color, allowing the mind to rest somewhere in

the land of sentimental revery while action lines flew across the foreground as characters grew from a mud puddle, invading the atmosphere.

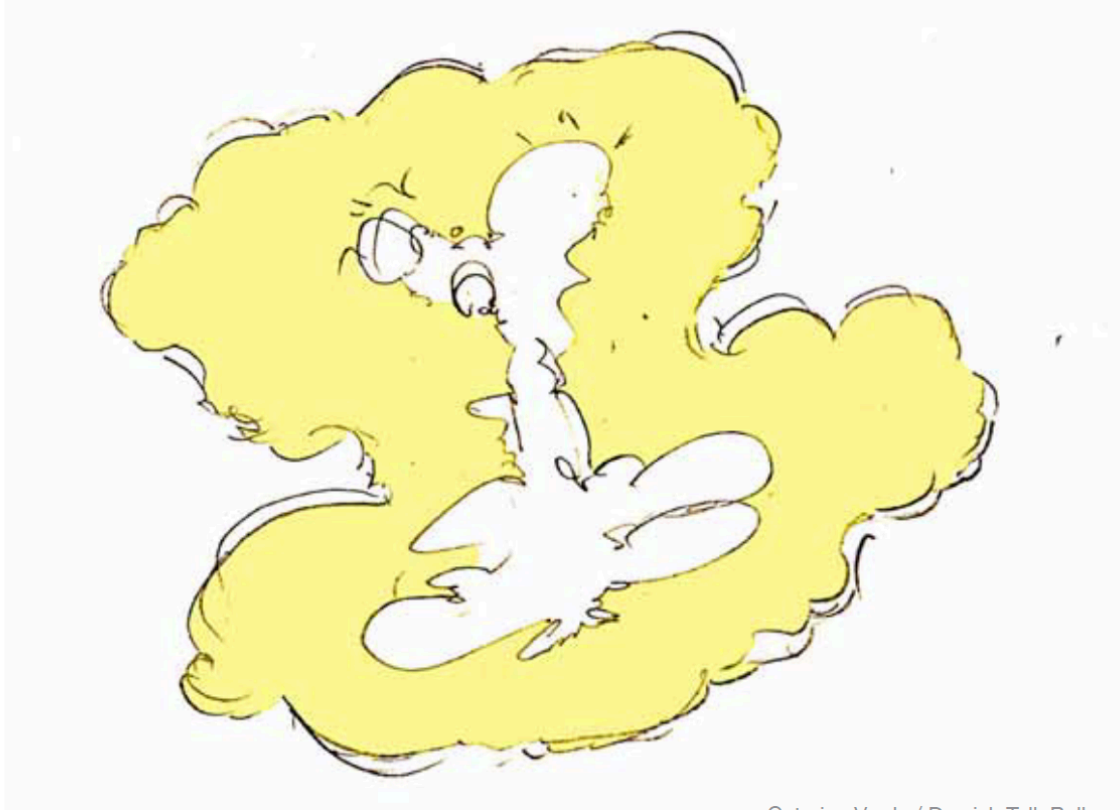
Betty Boop started out as a cute dog and later morphed into a leading female character. Interesting when we consider the term for a female dog; I wonder if that was even in the animators' own thought balloons since Betty was so sweet.

Typography is a great purveyor of the line. In these cartoons and animations, typography is used to

full magnitude to play with words, using puns and expressions twisted about to allow the characters full throttle abandon to indicate where this story might go, though surprise still seemed to be a primary element of these older animations.

One can see influences of cartoons and cartoon animation in the works of Sue Williams, Roy Lichtenstein, Joyce Pensato, Andy Warhol, Takashi Murakami, Raymond Pettibon, Kenny Scharf and younger artists like Kristen Liu-Wong and Tala Madani. The line is the thing.

You even see it in some of work of Salvador Dalí and Francis Picabia. Although who is influencing



Caterina Verde / Dervish Talk Balloon

who in this latter case may be up for cross examination – Walt Disney and Dalí met in the mid-1940s to work on *Destino* an animated short. (Dalí produced 22 paintings in 1946 for the project; 135 storyboards were produced. The result was 20 seconds of animation.) Ultimately, no matter the media or the medium, the style or the technique, the line is undeniable. Not knowing where it's going to go.

Drawing is the one art activity that reveals itself to me as I do it; rather than using my mind to shape, research and plan, with drawing, I generally do not know how or where it's going to go. I make a pact with myself to allow the drawing to be whatever IT decides IT wants to be. So I often end up making a number of different series; they seem to come naturally in packs, each quite different from the other. Some emerge from old kindergarten days, with a blend of other sidelined information pulled out from some forgotten cerebral archive. Others are more swarthy, others issue from high school, and still others are influenced by subliminal information my unconscious has gathered along the way. One thing I don't do is set rules for myself. When I'm being controlling and forget my pact, I think I know what "it" will be but if I'm totally honest with myself "it" usually goes in a direction I

hadn't anticipated. Sometimes I like the thing right away. Sometimes I'm thinking, "Edit this damn thing." But my arm refuses. At times it takes a while to appreciate it because I am thinking, "What is this? What does it relate to?" But it doesn't seem to matter what it relates to because the beauty of



Caterina Verde / Extended Brainstyle

drawing – for me – is in the not knowing. The pressing on the paper, the release, the speed, the graphite, or crayons or whatever I've got going in the moment is what excites me. At times, I torture myself by holding back and not drawing. But I always come back to the piece, because drawing is a bit like driving a car: you slow into the curve then speed up coming out of it and step on the gas on the straightaway. It's always a huge thrill in the moment.

Thought balloons: I like to think of the thought balloon as the containment – the embryonic moment to talk about the idea before it's really said. And I like to make thought balloons without words but action only.

High School Year Book: During the pandemic, I sat down and made several series of drawings. One in particular declared itself to be a High School Year Book. Beings shouted out to me from pencil and paper, presenting themselves fully dressed. Initially, I was kind of upset by them, but then acquiesced. I particularly like "Mike in One of

his Meltdowns" because of the changing nature of the lines. Sometimes sketchy, a few bold ones thrown in for his earlier years, and then he carries various half-baked images in his head with room for further development.

Morphing lines: A good morphing line is needed under a multitude of circumstances. That's why we have all those different pencil weights. We're not just sticking with the old number 2. We need to go into B mode and H mode. We need a bleedin' line, we need a hard line, and a good kick in the smudge.

Erasure: In the mid-1990s, I made a video with animation sequences called, Rhythms of Erasure. The work was built on the idea that no matter how many times you erased a line, no matter how hard you rubbed it, nor how good the eraser is once there the line remains there forever, however

Caterina Verde / Mike in One of his Meltdowns



imperceptible. It's a never-forgotten action in time. After all, you pressed down on the paper and that's not going away. In the beginning was the verb and, as such, the action. In the end though, I'm wondering, why do you need a stone marker to remind us of your existence when you've got a line. That's "the thing."

Caterina Verde is an artist living and working in New York. She is the curator of the art house edition collective Peat and Repeat. Her most recent group exhibition was "Potential Fields" at CR10 arts in Linlithgo, New York in August, 2022. You can find her work caterinaverde.com and peatandrepeat.org