

## Obituary: Robert C Breer (1926-2011)

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The experimental film-maker Robert Breer died on August 13th, 2011. As the notes for a showing of his work at the Whitney Museum, New York, state: 'The films of Robert Breer are the most sustained and inventive in contemporary animation.... Breer has pursued single-frame composition, collages, figurative and non-figurative animation within the context of contemporary aesthetic issues as a creative means to explore film's potentials and sources' (April, 1977). As an American working in Paris 1949-59 he fell more under the influence of Mondrian and Constructivism than Pollock and Action Painting. I first saw his *Reel 1* (1952-57) as part of a feast of experimental film shown at the Hayward Gallery, London, May 3rd-June 17th, 1977. In the brochure, David Curtis wrote that, 'like Richter and Eggeling, Breer's early works can be seen as a literal attempt to realise the potential for movement that he saw in his previous work as a painter.... The later series '66', '69' and '70' represent a return by Breer to complete abstraction, and illustrate the mature synthesis of his early interest in the interaction of colour and form, and the rhythms of single, double and five-frame groupings'. I contacted Mr Breer shortly after, while collecting information for a book on colour. He replied (from Palisades, New York, November 11th, 1977): 'To answer your questions: In "Form Phases IV", 1954 [4 minutes], I first systematically explored single frame alternation of color. I used strips of colored paper in a vertical-horizontal grid changing colors in varying series one frame exposure for each. The form stayed the same. Naively or not, I was surprised to see that the product of these changes was different from my experience in mixing paint. 'My next step was to find out what would happen if I changed form radically from one frame to the next. After various experiments with "loops", I produced "Recreation" in 1956 [3½ minutes], which I gather you saw as part of Reel I. In any case, this last experiment formed the basis for my subsequent film making. I use cinema, as much as possible, as direct expression and though I have inevitably drawn some conclusions from my experience, I haven't been very systematic in my explorations. Your question about color remaining uniform while the form is changed can be answered by saying that this takes place in almost every film of mine to a certain degree, and of course, always in the black and white films.... As for after-effects – afterimage, in a sense, film depends on retinal persistency to blend its images. However, for the afterimages you're describing, which is the complement of the preceding "burned in" image – I very deliberately make use of this in one particular film, "66" [5 minutes]. In this film, I hold one image for several seconds and then follow it with an image that is composed around the expected afterimage.... This works best if your retina has been softened up by an hour or so of my other films, first. In "70" [5 minutes] as in many others, I used figure-ground reversal in heavy doses and this accounts for the glowing effect. In other words, a red figure on green ground followed by a green figure on red ground, etc, one frame each.' I met Mr Breer later on at his 'complete retrospective in context', programmed by Simon Field for the ICA Cinematheque, London, September 20th-25th, 1983, and he invited me to present two lectures on colour at the Cooper Union when I next visited New York, on April 26th, 1984. Breer taught at the college 1971-2001, before retiring to Tucson.

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