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## Animation Festivals

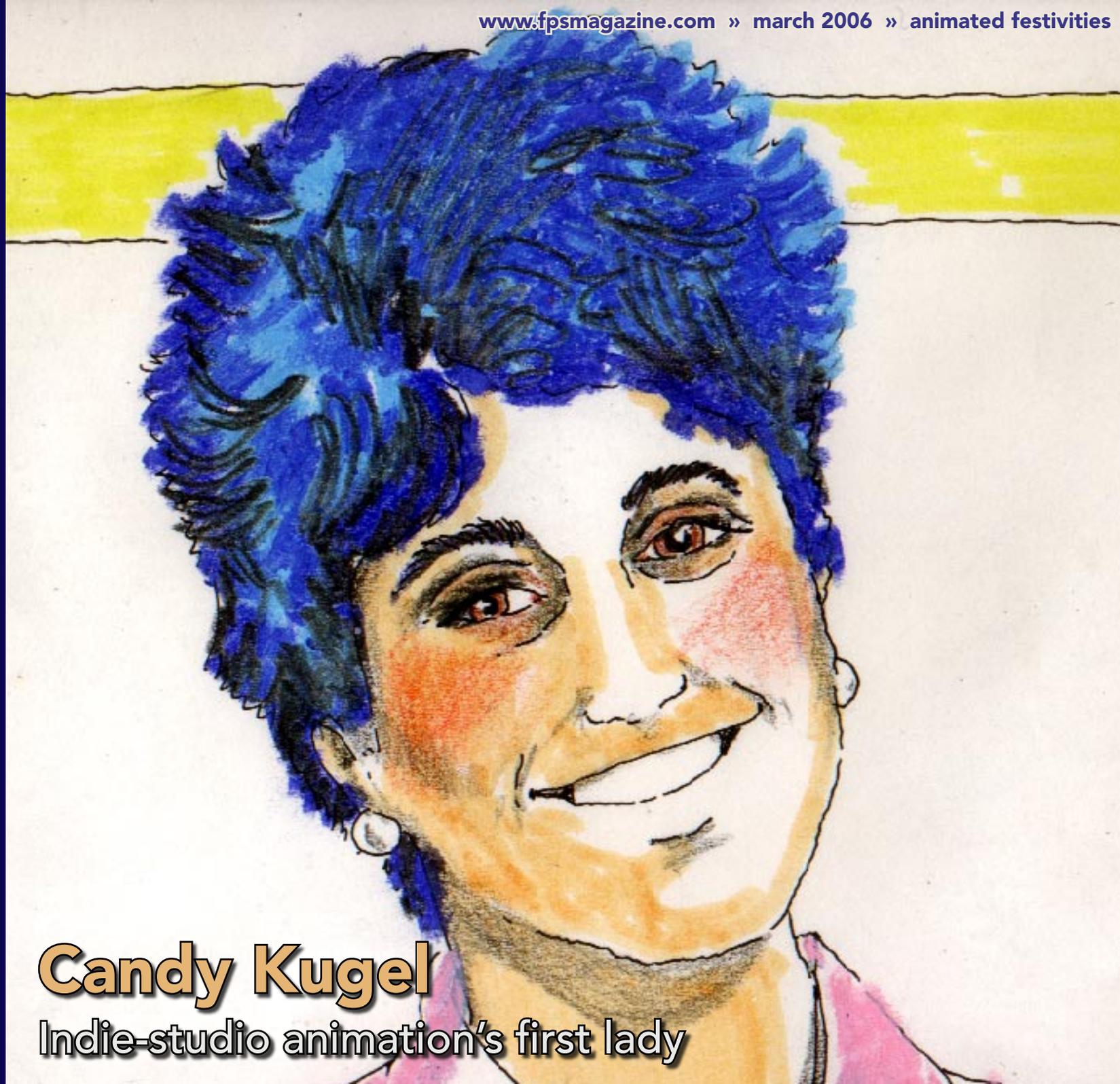
The ins and outs of  
navigating the circuit

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## Candy Kugel

Indie-studio animation's first lady

# The Reigning First Lady of Indie-Studio Animation

Written by **Jake Friedman**

**In the 1970s, animation was a moribund medium: there were no billion-dollar franchises, no prime-time television powerhouses, and few venues for independent animation. Few people would have suspected that the era would prove to be a breeding ground for the next generation of animation's leading lights. One of those leading lights was Candy Kugel, who has produced a varied and eclectic mix of independent short films—and, while she was it, produced the signature image behind one of the world's most recognizable media brands.**

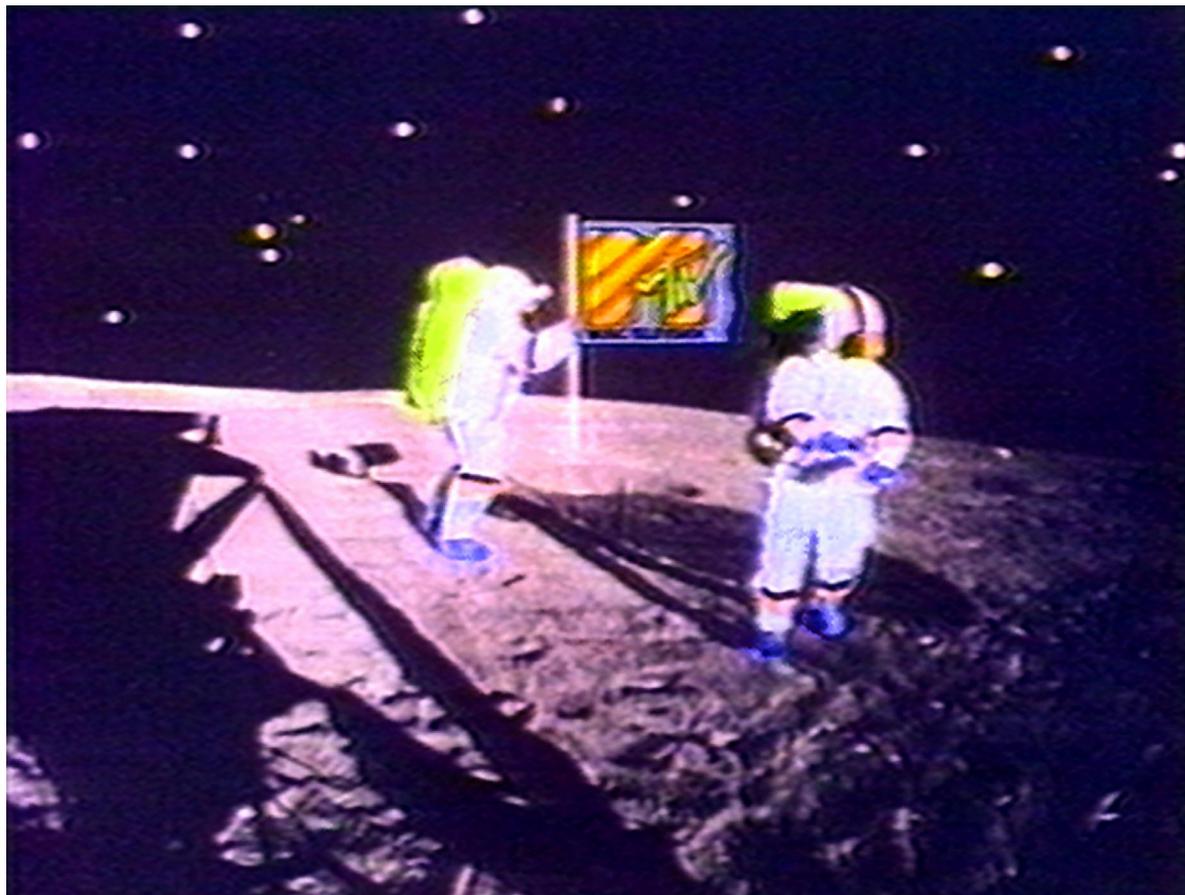
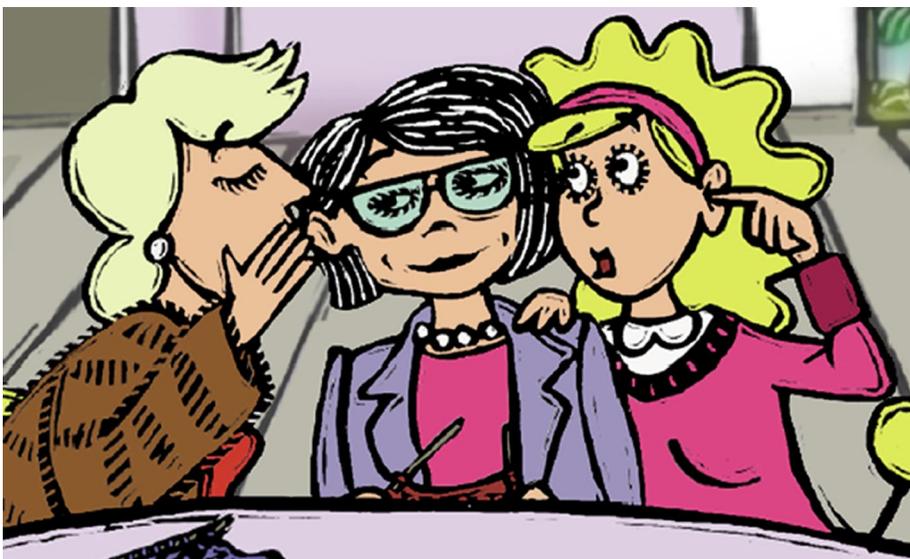
Of all the icons of New York's animation community, there are some who are recognized by one well-known piece, some by two. Candy Kugel has dozens. Being one-third of the brains behind the award-winning studio Buzzco Associates, as well as being a New York animation veteran since the male-dominated 1970s, Candy has produced pieces of animation that have built a firm place in popular culture. You might remember the widely-recognized *Sesame Street* clips (*It's Hip to be a Square!*), the commercials featuring Underdog and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, or the original MTV spots of the moon landing—not to mention her consistent track record of award-winning and critically-acclaimed short films.

"I was never interested in animation to do ink and

paint. I was interested in moving my drawings," she says simply, as we sit in the hallway outside her classroom. When she's not running a studio, Candy finds time to teach animation at the School of Visual Arts. I was eager to learn all the gory details of Candy's rise to a studio head.

Apparently, her determination goes back to her childhood. "I was a third-born kid," she says with a laugh. "I knew that whatever I had to say was valid [to me] and if you didn't believe what I had to say, then screw you. So I got to where I was by having my own path. I was marching to a different drummer." As a teenager, in the '70s, Candy worked in the New York theater community. "I was a substitute 'usherette,' and I have to tell you, with the women's movement





and everything, being called an 'usherette' was a sticking point... and I just so loved the theater, but at the same time I knew from the plays that I was in at high school that I had terrible stage fright—I didn't want to look stupid. And when you're an actor, you can't be afraid to look stupid."

Later, as an illustration student at Rhode Island School of Design, she went to a seminar by Jack Zander a one-time assistant to Chuck Jones while at Termite

Terrace. "You have to believe," says Candy, "That animation wasn't always as omnipresent as it is now. In the '70s, there was a real dearth of it. It wasn't being done except for kids' cereal, basically. And Saturday morning cartoons were all reruns from the old Warner Bros. and Terrytoons stuff. But [Zander] had a commercial studio and it was very exciting to me. All of a sudden it occurred to me that my drawings could act. What I couldn't do, I could make my drawings do."

Candy was pointed to the Perpetual Motion Pictures studio, where she began spending her summers learning all the ins and outs of professional animation, and finding mentors in artists like Terrytoons animator Doug Crane. Still, she was a self-proclaimed long-haired hippie girl in a man's field. "Back in the '70s there was a generation gap, a real culture clash, and so I was sort of scared... but I got [information] from each of the professionals, including the ladies at

ink and paint, [some of whom] were a little pissed off at me at the time, because I was doing a man's job."

Because of the scarcity of a female presence in the animation industry, Candy endorsed organizations like Women in Film. Although she contends that there was much more discrimination in LA than in New York, she has witnessed phases in the industry at large. "I have seen periods and styles where there is more and less animation on the screen, where there are more

**Clockwise from top left:** The many styles of Candy Kugel: *(It Was...)* *Nothing at All*; *Command Z*; the iconic MTV moon men; *KnitWits*.

**Following page:** *Talking About Sex*.

and fewer women. In 1976, the first Ottawa [festival], the best films that were shown were done by women. And it blew away the old establishment of the union guys who didn't know what women could do."

Most of Candy's support against the male-dominated industry really came from mentor and later business partner, Vincent Cafarelli. Even today in her classroom, Candy sees a microcosm of what she endured. "When I have a class that's predominantly male, it has a certain kind of skew to it, where the guys tend to overwhelm the female students. It's a *folie à deux*. I can't blame the guys, and I can't blame the girls. But what ends up happening is that the guys are much more aggressive about their vision, which then creates this kind of shyness among a lot of the women, who think that maybe their ideas aren't as good." Candy's response echoes Cafarelli's. "What I try to do for other women, especially those that are intimidated by their circumstance, is to help them with their confidence, see what their work is, show their strong points, [and] encourage them to do it."

This encouragement helped spur Candy to pursue her ambition after the mid-'70s. While producing a TV spot for KNBR at Perpetual Motion Pictures with co-workers Cafarelli and Marilyn Kraemer, she stumbled upon fate. "We did a commercial for a radio station in San Francisco that was just funky. I was taking xeroxes of 16mm film and juxtaposing it and coloring it, doing a

whole bunch of stuff with it, and it was the weirdest looking commercial. It only looked that way because, even though it was done at a professional animation studio, I got ideas from going to animation festivals."

This commercial caught the eye of the network that would become MTV. They contacted the studio, and with a week before airtime, commissioned them to do a spot based on NASA photos of Armstrong walking on the moon. "They said, 'This is the logo, look how weird it looks'—it was an 'M' with the 'TV' on it—and I said, 'You know we can't center the 'M,' because the 'V' would be outside TV safety.' So all of a sudden it got shifted, which was seismic in 1980, because you always centered the logo on the screen. The 'V' was not in balance with that big 'M.'" To animate that funky design we recognize so well today, Candy used techniques that, by our 21st-century standards, would be considered rather arcane. "It was thin white Japanese rice paper, and magic marker bottom-lit with mattes around it. It had to be a bottom-lit element to work easily with the transparencies within that fast time frame." Quite a task in a pre-Photoshop industry.

Perpetual Motion Pictures broke up in the early 1980s and producer Buzz Potamkin hired Candy and Cafarelli as his creative team and Kraemer as his assistant. By 1985, Potamkin had relocated to Los Angeles permanently and the three remaining formed Buzzco Associates. Today it's a studio that prides



itself on its indie feel. "The experience that we have in animation makes us invaluable to people who want to have old-fashioned type animation—who want to have character," says Candy, who now assumes the title of producer, animator, designer and co-owner. "And we can experiment too, but we need to have some craft behind the motion."

Their projects have found a wide audience in recent years; Candy's 1997 short film *KnitWits* opened the New York Film Festival in 1997, and two other more recent films, *Command Z* and (*It Was...*) *Nothing at All* have received high praise on the festival circuit. It's not just entertainment, either; Buzzco received a first place award at the 1997 Annecy festival for the educational film, *Talking About Sex*. "We use our films not just as an

artistic outlet," says Candy, "Because when we don't have work it's so much better than arguing—but also to try out new techniques." Currently, Candy is planning to make their next film on Maya as a CG piece.

In all, Candy appears to be an indie animation whirlwind at the top of her game. "I love what I do," she says, as she and I get ready to leave SVA for the night. I left that night feeling that without her passion for animation, the industry would be short one talented lady who did her part to push the doors open a little wider for other women about town. Animators today, in and out of the New York community, owe much to Candy Kugel. And I, for one, gladly give her a tip o' the hat. ■