

Conversations with a Whale





SYNOPSIS

In this love letter to artists, their art and its audience, one filmmaker is confronted with rejection after rejection until, at last a beautiful fig tree bears sweet fruits. "Conversations with a Whale" was created directly under the camera lens, using various analogue animation techniques.

ANNA SAMO /// DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Animation film making takes time - time and time. And it often is a very lonely endeavor. Once you are done with the film and crawl out of your cave, for a brief moment you might feel yourself as the king of the world. Now it is the time to show what you have accomplished and to harvest the love you deserve. As soon as people watch your film, they will find out what an amazing human being you are. In an instant everyone would want to become your friend. You start submitting your film to the festivals. The first rejection is painful, but you assume the success is yet to come. You wrap yourself into your own vanity, longing for applause and adoration. And when you finally find all your hopes burned to ashes, you discover that the fruits of your failure bring you closer to the essence of your work.

Conversations with a Whale grew out of the necessity to reinvent my own creative process. It is based on my experience of rejection and failure. Why do I make films? Is it the success I long for and depend on? Does anyone need what I am doing? And if no one needs it, do I still have the right to do it?

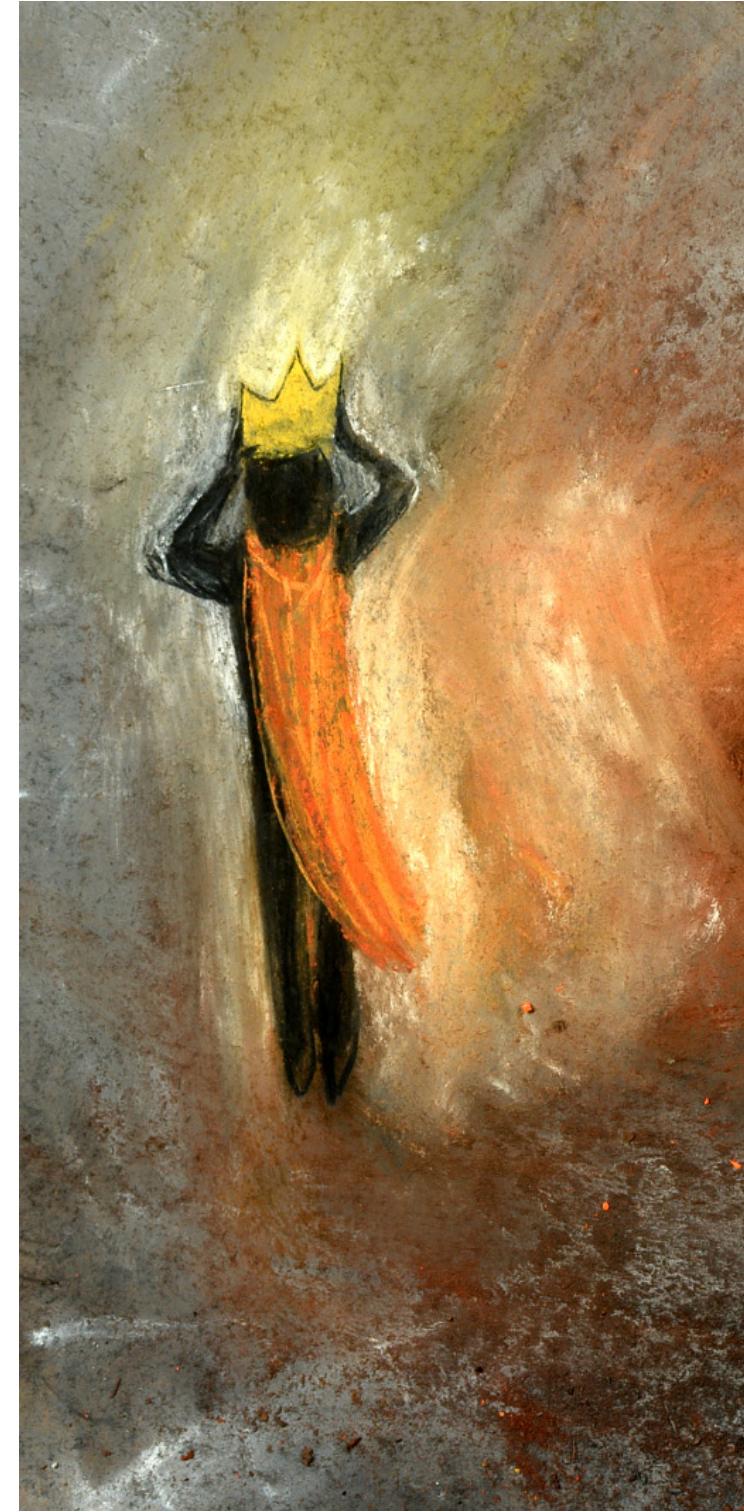
I realized that since I am spending so much time doing my animation, at least I need to make the process worth it. With this film I was trying to keep the creation more intuitive, allowing things to grow on the go. It was scary and annoying for me not to know exactly how the film would develop, but it also brought more excitement into each phase of the film making.

The collaboration with the sound artist Merche Blasco has become an important part of this project. Her soundscapes inspired me and influenced my storytelling pending between logic and emotion and the feeling of wonder.

This film is dedicated to all my friends who know the pain of rejection and self-doubt but keep going, because they love what they are doing and just can't live otherwise.

If you are a fig tree you have to bear fruits. If you are an artist you have to make art.

And even though my demon dog never leaves my side, I sometimes forget all about it astonished by the quiet appearance of the whale.





PRESS STATEMENTS

Anna Samo, or her animated alter ego in Conversations With A Whale has a charming appearance that evokes memories of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novella "The Little Prince": the crown, the cape, the essential questions surrounding one's own existence and a wee plant that is taken care of with lots of love are there. Not a rose though, but the tree of encouragement, as it turns out.

Marina D. Richter / UBIQUARIAN





ANNA SAMO /// VITA

Anna Samo was born in 1980 in Moscow, Russia.

On her first animation job in Moscow she scanned and colored hand drawn animation for director Ivan Maximov. For the first time she witnessed how thousands of separated drawings put together suddenly turn into a living character. She experienced the tickling feeling of surprise and wonder. This feeling has not left her ever since.

Anna studied animation in Moscow and Berlin. She was a master student with Professor Gil Alkabetz who encouraged her to create very personal work and to strive for her own authentic voice. As an independent filmmaker she uses a variety of analog animation techniques to create her own films.

With her husband and two kids Anna relocated to the US in 2013. Anna's films have been screened and won awards at highly acclaimed film festivals around the globe such as Berlin Film Festival - Berlinale, Annecy Film Festival, Stuttgart International Festival of Animated Films, Animafest Zagreb, Aspen Shortsfest, Sundance and Palm Springs, among others. Anna lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

ANNA SAMO /// FILMOGRAPHY

- 2008 **Hello Antenna** (together with Veronika Samartseva)
4:40min | cut out animation
- 2009 **Hokus-Pokus**
4:12min | hand drawn animation
- 2010 **white no white**
7:00min | sand animation
- 2012 **Little Plastic Figure** (together with Veronika Samartseva)
3:10min, pixilation, stop motion, clay
- 2012 **Eyes Closed**
6:00min | Animadoc | hand drawn animation
- 2013 **Fish**
2:00min | Animadoc | hand drawn animation
- 2016 **The Man is Big**
9:30min | paint on glas
- 2018 **OBON** (co-directed with Andre Hörmann)
15:00min | animadoc | hand drawn in TvPaint
- 2019 **The Opposites Game** (together with Lisa LaBracio)
4:00min | stop motion | drawing
- 2020 **Conversations with a Whale**
8:45min | stop motion, pixilation, cut out, drawing





A CONVERSATION WITH THE DIRECTOR /// ANNA SAMO

Can you tell us a little about the inspiration for your short?

My first film after graduation from film school did not do as well in the festival circuit as I hoped it would. Spoiled with previous festival success of my student days I was expecting things to be the same for my new film. However I found myself having to devour one festival rejection after another. At some point, completely overwhelmed by the amount of negative answers, I created a folder in my inbox with an intention to collect and preserve those rejection e-mails for later use.

Upset about my failure I was trying to understand the reasons for the scale of my depression and to find new motivation to continue to work as an artist and filmmaker.

'Conversations with a Whale' grew out of the necessity to reinvent my own creative process. I used to meticulously plan my animation, creating detailed animatics, knowing where the film was going to even before starting the process of animation. This way a big part of work – the animation itself would become just an execution of ideas that were born before and I would often feel myself a prisoner of the frames - animation would be an obstacle on the way to a finished film. When making 'Conversations with a Whale' I was deliberately trying to keep the creation more intuitive, allowing things to grow on the go. I did not have any storyboard, or animatic, only a rough idea, a feeling. For the first couple of months I was just exper-

imenting with different materials. The ideas for the film were born on the animation table, while making animation. It was scary and annoying for me not to know exactly how the film would develop, but it also brought more excitement into each phase of the film making.

When did you start working on it and how long did it take to make?

I started collecting the rejection letters in 2016 and did my first animation tests for the film in Summer 2018. The film was finished in September 2020. At the same time I have also worked on two other animation shorts OBON and The Opposites Game, that were released in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

Which animation tools did you use to make it?

Conversations with a Whale was created directly under the camera lens. I was drawing with charcoal pencils and dry pastel on kraft paper, used cut out animation and pixilation as well as objects I have built. I was mostly working on one layer, but sometimes I would have a second glass layer to add depth to the frame. I also made a good use of duplo blocks and white sticky putty to fix and hold objects in my animation. As for the software and equipment, I was using Dragonframe together with Nikon D800 camera and did editing in Adobe After Effects and Premiere.

How many people worked on it?

The main team consists of my producer Tom Bergmann, sound designer and composer Merche Blasco and myself. Later in the process we had David Jalbert and Benjamin Beladi from STAMP work on the sound post production and Will Cox from Final Frame who did the color correction.

What are you most pleased about it?

Making this film was like building a jigsaw puzzle and until the end I wasn't sure if I would be able to find all the missing pieces and put them together. I feel lucky it worked out and I am very thankful to many of my friends who helped me to put it together by watching my work in progress and asking the right questions.

What was the toughest part of the job?

Due to the pandemic we had to do the sound mix remote, which was a control freak's nightmare! I love being at the studio during the final stage of the process, working together with the sound designer on the finest adjustments that impact the atmosphere of the film. Here I had to learn to trust other people's decisions and it was a good exercise for me to be able to let it go.

How did you work with your sound designer?

Merche Blasco, who did the sound design and composition for the film, is a multimedia artist and composer based in New York. We both met in 2017 through some mutual friends and liked each others work in an instant. When starting *Conversations with a Whale* I asked Merche if she would like to compose some music for it. At the beginning I wanted to create a non-narrative piece and I thought it would be great to have some kind of musical composition that would give me a structure. We talked a lot about the origins of the idea for the film and about the 52 hertz whale – the loneliest whale in the world whose calls can't be heard by the other whales because it's pitch is higher than that of the others. We talked about similarities of that whale and artists that can't get their work seen by the audience.

Merche composed a piece around three minutes long and it already contained some elements that would make it into the final mix. For example she used the whale calls to create some layers of the ambiance and there was already the musical theme that we used in the film. I like that Merche is not coming from a classical film music world. Her compositions are more soundscapes than just instrumental music and the borders between sound design and music are blurred.



The first animation tests that I did were inspired by the atmosphere she created in that first composition. Later I would send Merche those tests and she would adjust her composition and so it went until there was a solid body of animation and sound that could live together. This way our work was a real collaboration we were inspired by each others work and it made me feel less lonely.

In your film you combine seemingly effortless several animation techniques. Can you talk a little about how you made those choices?

I wanted the animation to be as easy and fun as possible, but still look beautiful. At the beginning I was just drawing with charcoal pencils on kraft paper. After a while I realized that I am missing some colour splashes, so I added some dry pastel to it. I was constantly looking for shortcuts, ways to do less work and for the possibilities to keep the animation fresh. For me it is easier and more fun to fold a paper airplane and to move it frame by frame then to draw it new every time. This is also the reason why my hands became part of the film. I was about to animate a two second close up of the character's hand grabbing the airplane and even before starting the animation I felt bored with it. I imagined myself sitting there for the whole day drawing that hand again and again and became very upset. So I just painted my own hand black and did a pixilation with it. It took me only twenty minutes! And I was amazed to see that I could edit the animation of drawn character and my pixilated hand together. This little experiment gave me more ideas about using my own hands in a way that would serve the story and make it even more personal.

There are moments in the film where we can see animation painted on hands. How did you do it? Did you have a model, who would hold the hands into the camera and you would paint on them?

Those hands are also my own hands. I would hold the brush with my right hand to paint on my left hand and then I would switch and paint with my left hand on my right one. I would then put my hands back in the frame. Since I don't have a third hand I used my toe to push the button on the remote control of the camera to be able to make a picture.

What do you hope audiences will take away from the short?

This film is my love letter to artists, arts, its audience and in particular to animation. I hope that people who watch this film would feel this love and get the taste of magic happening, that I have every time my characters start living their own life.

Favorite animated films or series or shorts of all time?

My Neighbor Totoro and Spirited Away by Miyazaki, The Wolf House by Cristobal León & Joaquín Cociña, When The Day Breaks by Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis, The Street by Caroline Leaf, Tale of Tales by Yuri Norstein, Boniface's Vacation by Fyodor Khitruk, Repete by Michaela Pavlátová, Tango by Zbigniew Rybczyński to name just a few.

Best lesson you learned from this experience?

I learned to listen better to the feedback of other people and to accept the inevitability of change. I learned to trust the process and to welcome surprises. I also learned that even the most "unsuccessful" films can bring you to places and connect you to people you would not meet otherwise and I learned to value those connections.

FESTIVALS

PÖFF Shorts (Black Nights Film Festival) - Tallinn, Estonia
International competition, November 2020

Etiuda&Anima – Krakow, Poland
International competition, November 2020 – special jury mention

KABOOM Animation Festival – Amsterdam, Netherlands
Short docs competition, March 2021

Mecal Pro: Barcelona Int. Short and Animation Film Festival
Animation competition – Barcelona, Spain, March 2021

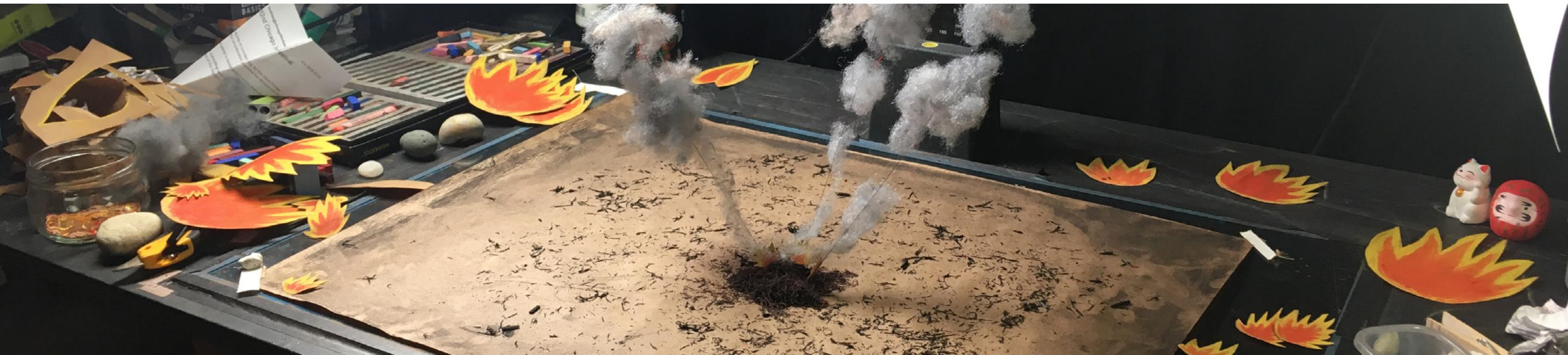
Tampere Film Festival – Tampere, Finland
International competition, March 2021

Seattle International Film Festival – Seattle, US
Short films competition, April 2021

Go Short – International Short Film Festival Nijmegen
Nijmegen, Netherlands – international competition, April 2021

Stuttgart Festival of Animated Film (ITFS) – Stuttgart, Germany
International competition, May 2021

Anecy International Animation Festival – Anecy, France
International competition, June 2021





CREDITS

art, direction and animation by

Anna Samo

produced by

Tom Bergmann

music and sound design

Merche Blasco

with the voices of

Lisa Labraccio, Merche Blasco

Jason Patience, Biljana Labovich

Jeremiah Dickey, Abdallah Ewis

Bethany Cutmore-Scott

sound re-recording mixer

Benjamin Beladi

additional sound design, foley and mix

David Jalbert

STAMP executive producers

Carl Vaudrin, Powys Dewhurst,

Benjamin Beladi

colorist

Will Cox

online editor

Kevin Caby

post production services

Final Frame

a production by

Tiger Unterwegs Filmproduktion

TECHNICAL INFO

8 min 45 sec // DCP // colour // English // 1:1,85 // Dolby Digital 7.1 //
other available formats ProRes 422 HQ and H264

Software

Dragonframe, Adobe Premiere, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe After Effects, TVPaint
Camera – Nikon D800 Lens – Zeiss 50 mm

Animation techniques

stop motion, cut out, pixilation, charcoal and dry pastel drawing





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