

## Interview : Carla MacKinnon

### Carla MacKinnon



**Profession:** Independent animator and animation director, producer, tutor at the Royal College of Arts (London)

**Nationality:** United Kingdom

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**Interviewed by:**

Eve Benhamou

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**Carla MacKinnon** is a British independent animator, producer and a tutor at [the Royal College of Arts \(London\)](#). She has produced and directed several shorts, including [Devil in the Room](#) (2014), which screened at numerous festivals and won Best Documentary at [Cineglobe Film Festival](#) (Cern, Switzerland), and [O, Hunter Heart](#) (2018), broadcast on BBC4 and winner of multiple awards. She has also worked as a programmer and producer of film events, and managed commercial film and technology projects.

**Eve Benhamou** is an Associate Lecturer at Université Paul-Valéry. Her recent publications include the monograph [Contemporary Disney Animation: Genre, Gender and Hollywood](#) (2022) and chapters for edited collections including *Feminine/Masculine: On Gender in English-language Cinema and Television* (Julie Assouly and Marianne Kac-Vergne, 2024).

**Eve Benhamou:** Can you first tell me a little about your background, education and jobs?

**Carla MacKinnon:** My first degree was in Fine Art. Then I did a Masters in Animation at the Royal College of Art, followed by a PhD, which was focused on animated documentary production in the UK. I'm currently [a lecturer](#) and a tutor

of animation at the Royal College of Arts, after having worked across quite a number of universities in part-time roles, a lot of which were sessional or hourly roles. Before that, I worked as an independent artist animator, and also as a curator and producer of events and education. Earlier still—we are going backwards here—I worked for about seven years as a producer in film festivals. I also worked as a production manager and a studio manager in production companies, and various other things freelancing.

**Eve Benhamou: You said that you were an independent producer and artist before you did your PhD. How have your experiences in the industry, in animation and in production, informed your teaching?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** I think one of the key things for me is trying to ensure that students have some degree of professionalism in terms of production management, particularly when they're working on actual projects that are expected to be brought to completion. This can involve scheduling; really understanding processes and workflows; knowing their timings; understanding where their final work may sit in the industry and in the exhibition landscape; or how to capitalise on the work that they're making. It is important to think about their education in relation to the world: how to pitch their projects and make them concrete. I think that's probably where a lot of my professional experience feeds in. Probably the diversity of my professional experience has given me the confidence to be able to say to students that there are many different ways to work, and that while some people may want to be working in commercial animation, for example, if for whatever reason that doesn't feel like the right route for you, there are a lot of other outcomes and very good careers that you may not know of at the point of graduation. But if you keep on following your path, actually the creative industries and the surrounding industries have so many opportunities that animation can lead you to. Overall, I try to encourage students to think about what they're doing as something that's connected to the world, and as an opportunity to connect with the world.

**Eve Benhamou: Since you have both industry experience (having been a practitioner) and teaching experience, seeing new generations of students that will go on becoming directors, animators and producers, what are your thoughts on the evolution of women's roles in the industry? What was your experience as an animator?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** Anecdotally, from my media experience, the first animation studio that I worked in, where I was just in a very low-level kind of production assistant role, was predominantly male. The animators were predominantly male; the production staff were predominantly female. I don't think that was abnormal in the early 2000s. One of the things that we do look at and talk about quite a lot in education is why in many animation courses, students are skewed female, but in the industry it does still seem to be skewed male. So what happens, you know, in between graduation and getting those professional roles?

That said, there's a great deal of noise and networks that now exist for female animators, like [Women in Animation in the UK](#), or [She Drew That](#), which is a really great informal grassroots network, pretty much run by one woman, [Hannah Lau Walker](#), who's just an absolute powerhouse. There's a lot more scrutiny on where, for example, public funding goes. So I think that the funders and people who are supporting emerging talent are more mindful now of the gender balance that they are supporting.

I mean, anecdotally and from what I've seen, and also what I've experienced in my own career, there seems to be quite a recognized path for women who are fairly good communicators and fairly organised to drift from the animating side—if they've been trained in animation, for example—into the production side, production management, those kind of roles. Which is not necessarily a bad thing, but I think that's probably traditionally been a slightly gendered route. And then, obviously, when you get into those roles, particularly because they don't necessarily have low ceilings, you can get pretty far in the industry and become quite powerful, but it can be very difficult to move back into technical or creative roles. So I've seen that happen quite a lot. Not necessarily something that the women whom that happens to regret, but it seems in my experience to be more of a common route for women than for men.

**Eve Benhamou: Since you've done some producing, but also animated and directed films, how have you navigated this yourself?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** I have taken a bit of a winding path where I have counter-balanced things I suppose, because I originally studied fine art, and then found it much easier to get roles that were organizational: film festivals, event management, event organisation, and from that into production management roles. But I was always working creatively as a hobby and as a freelancer. I was also doing creative education events, a lot of workshops with children. I think that I reached a point where it was very clear that the path was going to be producing, probably commercially, and working my way up in that area. It wasn't what I wanted to do at that time, so that was when I went back and did a Masters in Animation, because I had been working with animators and I felt quite jealous of what they were doing. I had not trained as an animator, but I had a strong feeling that I would prefer it. It was not simple for me [*laughs*], because I think that a lot of my skills are actually in production.

I ended up with a career that continued to balance those things. I was getting some work as an independent animator, and I actually loved animating, but I did not want to do it eight hours a day for the rest of my life. So that was why I realized: how can I not be purely on this kind of “pitching, budgeting, dealing with clients” production role? But also, how do I not end up just pushing buttons all day and doing in-betweens, you know? [*laughs*] For me, having a kind of a cobbled career has actually been quite good.

I think that, for a lot of people, that kind of career does lead quite naturally into academia, because academia allows you to continue to do lots of different things. I find the role a little bit like being a producer, because you're working with talent, you're seeing things get made, and that's really exciting. You also get to really engage deeply with things conceptually, stay involved in the research side of things, and you have a responsibility to continue to stay up to date with technology and with your own creativity. For me, that became quite a nice balance.

That was my personal journey through it, which I think may have been different if I'd been a man. I think that maybe culturally, I might have had different opportunities, but I may not have been given some of the opportunities that I was given.

**Eve Benhamou: Do you have examples of opportunities that you think you may or may not have had? In terms of funding, for example?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** Certainly. I've had a number of grants that were specifically for female artists, so I think that's worked in my favour. Whether there's been unconscious bias working against me at other points? I don't know. I sort of doubt it within the area that I work in: it's quite a female sort of animation anyway, the kind of highly independent animation that's linked to academic research.

It may have been different in the 1990s and 2000s. Certainly, when I was working in studios, it was often very male, but when there was a female [motion graphics artist](#) or lead animator coming in, everybody was really happy about it. I think that people wanted to be employing women. Not necessarily actively going out to recruit women, but if a woman appeared who had the skills, there was definitely a lot of positivity around that, like "This is great, we need more women in the studio." All the men were told they had to fix their behavior and not be as disgusting because there was a woman coming in. So it felt noticeable, but it didn't feel negative to me in my experiences. It felt like there was sort of a recognition that there ought to be a better gender balance, that having women in the creative mix might bring a different perspective. You know, there was a slightly sexist kind of assumption about what women were likely to be able to do. So, for example, when you've got a really great female coder in, everybody was like "Oh, my God, she can really code!" It was positive, but it also showed up an implicit bias that the assumption was that she wouldn't be able to.

**Eve Benhamou: Have you encountered instances of more open or overt discrimination?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** Yeah, definitely. I mean, there's a lot of stuff I remember from the 2000s, not in every environment that I worked in, but in some where there was quite overt and explicit sexism. At that time, it already felt very dated. *[laughs]* Like, really? I mean, I'm trying to think of some examples, but definitely comments on, you know, what you're wearing, skirts, heels, boobs, the smutty nicknames, a

lot of that kind of behavior. But that was all dressed up as banter. And when you're in a male-dominated environment, you kind of have two choices, particularly if you're the only woman working there. You either make it a full-time job to try to change the culture, which, particularly if you're youngish or young, is kind of hard: how do you do that while also getting the job done? How do you do that while also commanding respect, without sort of coming off as being very fragile or not having a sense of humor? Or you just kind of take it on the chin and tell people when they've really, really overstepped a mark. I think at that time, I'd grown up with a lot of friends who were constantly piss-taking about everything. It wasn't the first time that somebody I'm on friendly terms with had made sexist remarks, and I'd probably said awful things back to them. I did have a mode of communication which was fine for me at that time. But then, it wasn't necessarily fostering a good environment for the next woman who was coming into work there.

You know, it's also a cultural thing within those spaces. It's not just gendered. Every single person is having the piss taken for something: whether it's the length of their skirt, or whether it's that they're below average height, or they wear glasses, or they're from a different country, or they're not from a different country but they're from a different city... It doesn't even matter. Everything can be spun to become a running joke. So if you're the woman in that environment, then the easiest running joke becomes just the fact that you're a woman [*laughs*], which actually is quite helpful because you're like, "Well, at least you're not noticing any of the other things that you could say about me which might actually hurt." [*laughs*] Yeah, I think I did definitely get to a point... one of the reasons why I left jobs quite frequently at that time was just getting a bit bored of that kind of thing.

**Eve Benhamou: So it got to the point that you left jobs?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** Yeah, I wouldn't say it was just because of those kinds of cultural things. But there were definitely points where . . . it was like, there was no one checking it. These were quite young offices, and it just felt like there was no grown-up around to say: "That's just not acceptable." I don't think it'd happen now, you know. I think now there would be more people, even if it was young people, who would take that role and say: "This is not an acceptable way to be talking in a workplace." But yeah, I did definitely kind of experience overt sexism in the form of relentless banter.

**Eve Benhamou: I'm very sorry to hear that. I mean it's a shame, especially because there's that preconception about animation, about "friendliness"** [*Here, the interviewer is referencing a term used by [Samantha Moore](#) in her interview*].

**Carla MacKinnon:** What do we talk about when we talk about animation? Because some of these environments are not necessarily just full of animators, are they? You very rarely find a studio that's just animators. You've got people who work in production. You've got directors. You've got designers. You've got people who are working on the technical side. You may have people who work in development. I

think animation never exists, or very rarely exists in its own little bubble. I love animators; I think they're really nice, and part of the reason why I studied animation is because I liked animators, and they wouldn't talk to me when I was a production manager. But I've met some animators who are off the scale when it comes to bigotry and insensitivity to difference. Some attitudes that I found coming out of animators' mouths have absolutely astounded me.

**Eve Benhamou: You said that now there's at least an effort to have more gender balance. Do you think that this is linked to the #MeToo movement? Do you see a real evolution in terms of behaviors or recruitment strategies?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** Well, I think I've sort of culturally drifted into a different space, so my view on it has probably changed; I'm seeing something different. Anyway, I'm seeing the studios that want to reach out to academia, to work with the organizations that focus on women and animation. These are the things that I'm coming into professional contact with a lot more. So I'm not spending a lot of time in smaller studios that are just getting by day to day on producing media. But I think that people are probably more careful now.

I think back on some of the things that weren't really . . . Some of the things that came out of the #MeToo movement were just naming behaviors that people had previously experienced independently, had just seen as part of their life experience, and then sort of realizing that these things were industry-wide and cross-industry patterns which could be very exploitative and damaging. A lot of things got reframed during and after #MeToo, and I would hope that people who are going into things now are able to maybe spot red flags and flag issues that appear in workplaces.

**Eve Benhamou: You talked earlier about your work experience in the 2000s: production tended to have more women, whereas animation tended to have more men. Do you see that evolving as well, or are there still roles that tend to be more female-dominated or male-dominated?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** Again, I don't feel like I have such a long view of UK studios in terms of personnel breakdown to be able to comment on that. Some production offices have been exclusively female, but there have also been male producers, male production managers, male studio managers. Certainly, I think that production has traditionally been a space where women maybe find it easier to advance to powerful roles. And I'm unsure of why. I wouldn't like to comment on the reasons; there's been a lot of speculation about that. [*laughs*] I think that a lot of it is guesswork, and people looking at their personal experience.

Men that I've worked with have explicitly said that they think that women who come into the creative industries tend to be better communicators than men, and therefore are better to put in front of clients and better at managing people. What

they haven't said to me—but they may think—is that men are better at the more technical work. I don't know. I mean, no one ever said that to me.

I think that this may be changing, but certainly, when I was growing up, there were just some things that were culturally more rewarded in boys than in girls, like activities that really involved a lot of figuring out how things work, unpacking, taking the lid off things and tinkering inside, the old mechanic-type activities. Obviously, even then that wasn't exclusively boys' work, but I think that, as a woman, you had to find your way into that. That option wasn't one of many that were presented to you at the beginning. You know, you had to work out that you actually really liked doing that, and then work out how to do it, and how to get into it. I think that with most of these things, once you break through barriers, then what previously was a lack of privilege can become a kind of privilege, because suddenly you're an anomaly so you're more visible. If you can prove that you can do something, and it's been harder for you to get there, you almost reach this critical point, and it doesn't exactly become easier, but maybe the work starts flowing because people do know you and you have a sort of status, because you're not the same as everybody else. But I think that getting to that point is always hard.

I've worked in a lot of schemes in the creative industries, training schemes, labs, things like that, and there's always a diversity question. You know, how diverse is your cohort? And people always just kick it backwards. Whatever level they're working at, they say: "We're just not getting the applicants of the right quality from these demographics that we are supposed to be recruiting. People need to be working on this at MA level, BA level, college, high school, primary school." Responsibility of where this is supposed to happen gets pushed back and back and back. Obviously, it should be happening everywhere, all the way through that chain. But everyone is stretched and nobody wants to be the only person who's having to make these decisions [*laughs*] or having to do the work of actually trying to give people equal opportunities and equal education. And then, you get primary school teachers who are like: "Hang on, I'm doing my best!" [*laughs*]

But there are a lot of opportunities for women to skill up in things that they're underrepresented in. That said, I've applied to so many things over the years that are designed for that, whether it's coding courses, sound production, or XR, but I haven't got any places on the vast majority of them. So no matter how many of these opportunities for training there are, there aren't enough for all the people who want to be doing it.

**Eve Benhamou: Considering diversity in the way you worked as a producer and a director, how did you go about constituting a crew? How did you choose collaborators? Was the idea of hiring or working with women important to you?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** It depends a lot on what I'm working on. My own projects that I have directed and produced have been relatively small scale: independent works, short films, things like that. For the projects that I have produced or managed for

commercial clients and production companies, I'm rarely the person who's making the final call on who's getting employed, but I am involved in the recruitment process.

I mean, certainly, when I was working in quite male-dominated environments, I was pushing for more diversity, but it always comes down to the applicants you're getting. I can't remember what they call it, but when you're in an environment and you've got people from a certain demographic, you're just going to keep getting people from that same demographic because other people aren't going to feel like that's the place that they want to be working in, and that's not where the word of mouth goes.

[Devil in the Room](#) (2014)

A conversation I've had a lot with heads of companies—when I've been working in those sort of middle positions I often was in—was: “If we can get women in, that would be great.” But very rarely was it said: “I want you to go out and actively only look at women for this role.” You know, it was kind of: “It would be good if we could get one woman among these four directors.” Having said that, this is often the case for more commercial work, and I think that work that is publicly funded has a very different flavor, and will often go in the opposite direction where it becomes: “Okay, who have we got? Is this balanced? If it's not, how are we going to rebalance it?”

**Eve Benhamou: We talked about what happens behind the camera, but if we think about what happens on screen, what are your views on the ways new roles can be invented for women, and the ways female experiences can be portrayed? In your work, for example in [O Hunter Heart \[2018\]](#), female perspective is important. What are your thoughts on this?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** It's very interesting that you say that, because I wanted those characters to not be gendered, which was sort of a controversial decision. A lot of people said to me: “But you can't have a character that isn't gendered. They're either female, male, non-binary; they have to have a gender identity, even if that gender identity isn't a traditional one.” I was kind of like: “I just don't want to.” I don't know why that was important to me with those characters. I'd had them in my mind for years before I made that film. I'd written a lot about them and they never had genders. They came from my experiences, but also the experiences of the people I was going out with, the people who were in my life. It was interesting, because then I opened it out and I interviewed a lot of people: women and men, gay people and straight people, and people from a diversity of romantic relations and gender identities.

[O Hunter Heart](#) (2018)

So I didn't want to make one of those characters a boy and one of them a girl, and I didn't want to make them both boys or both girls. That didn't feel

somehow authentic to the project. So I'd be interested, did you see one of them as female, and one of them as not female?

**Eve Benhamou: Considering how the voiceover was connected to specific characters, I assumed at some point that the character that looks like an owl was male, and the character that looks like a cat was female.**

**Carla MacKinnon:** The voice overs might be arranged like that, if so I didn't notice it. The owl does wear a suit and tie, which does slightly gender it. My original mood board for the owl included Michael Douglas in [Falling Down](#) (Joel Schumacher, 1993), where he's got a shirt and tie on, but he has a breakdown and starts shooting everybody. But it also included some women who wear suits, like k.d. Lang. My main reference point for the cat – that I really wanted to be looking at – was River Phoenix in [Stand by Me](#) (Rob Reiner, 1986): this kind of boy adolescent, sort of feminine.

I mean, people read a lot of different things into that film, which I find really interesting. Even people who know me, they're like: "Oh, my God! So that was about, you know, them?" Not really . . . Maybe I didn't think it was. [laughs] I wanted to keep the specificity in people's voices, talking about their experience, but then I also wanted to keep the story quite archetypal and generalized in a way.

That said, my work when I was younger was definitely what my friend Becky used to call "girly period art." You know, like weird dolls, lots of horror crafty things. I think that my work comes from that place but I don't feel like... Actually, I did do a very gendered piece, which was a collaboration with Gazelle Twin ([Out of Body](#), 2015). That was very much that, that had a lot of like, horror periody stuff in it, lots of hair coming out of chickens. It was sort of about female puberty. I guess you make work that is fundamentally drawing on your experience, and if your experience includes being a woman, then that's going to come through in perspective and in ways that you're looking at things.

I've also done documentary work and if you're talking to women, they might say things to you that they wouldn't necessarily say if you were a man interviewing them, whether it's about relationships or whether it's about that kind of psychological inner life. When I was doing the film about sleep paralysis ([Devil in the Room](#), 2014), I interviewed people about these dreams they were having. A lot of them were quite highly sexualized, I might not have got that kind of information if I'd been a man. I don't know. I suppose those kind of interactions are always going to be colored by who you are.

**Eve Benhamou: Staying in the world of animation, commercial or independent, what are your views on the ways new roles have been invented for women in the past ten or fifteen years? Do you see any evolution or changes in terms of what is being shown on screen?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** Yes, I think that it has obviously changed a lot in terms of on-screen representation. Maybe not in animation but in live action. Fifteen years ago, it was always this idea of: “What if you took your script about a man, and you know, instead, made that character a woman?” Like Ripley in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), people still talk about that. I was watching the TV show *Yellow Jackets* (Showtime, 2021-) a couple of nights ago. The cast is not entirely female, but most of the significant characters are women. You don’t particularly notice that, you don’t go, “Oh, this is so odd, because it’s mostly women.” It’s just a show, a great show. Not sure that would have been possible without it being a thing, fifteen years ago. I think that it has changed a lot.

**Eve Benhamou: From a wider perspective, considering all the things we’ve talked about, what does feminism mean to you? What is your relationship to feminism as a person, and also as an artist, academic, producer, etc.?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** I was brought up with my mother talking about feminism very positively at a time when feminism was not something that was considered very cool or even very acceptable. I remember having conversations with my very good friends—who are incredibly intelligent women—as teenagers; they were like: “Yeah, but feminism just isn’t relevant anymore.” Of course, we’ve got the vote now; we can get jobs; we’ve all got these opportunities. There was an incredibly small-minded view of what feminism and gender equality meant in the 1990s still. I think that has changed. The conversation has broadened out. Unfortunately, I don’t think it’s become any less simplistic. Trying to sum up what feminism is in one line, without getting it wrong, feels like a risky business. But I suppose, for me, it’s part of a broader hope for the world, which has maybe more to do with being critically aware of the way that things work and power operates, than it has just to do with women and men. And that’s not necessarily ever going to be about one kind of privilege over another. It’s more about actually finding ways to look at how things work, hold systems to account, look at how things can be changed.

**Eve Benhamou: You mentioned that you are now working as a tutor at the RCA. Do you think you would go back to producing or animating?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** I still do that kind of work: I’m still producing work; I’m still animating. In the next year, I hope to be working on film projects again. I had a bit of time out when I was doing my PhD, and having my kids. Often, I get involved in consultant roles in production. I don’t think I’d go back working in a studio anytime soon, but that’s more to do with where I’m at with my life at the moment, and I really like teaching, feels like all the best bits about producing without the kind of grind of the actual production office. [*laughs*]

**Eve Benhamou: We’ve talked a lot about animation, but you’ve also been involved in live-action projects. Do you have any thoughts on your experience in the live-action world?**

Carla MacKinnon: I'm still quite involved in live action. My partner works in live action, so I do a lot of work with him on developing projects. He directed [Bring Them Down](#) (2024) last year, which I was an associate producer on, so I still have my head very much in that world as well.

You can map some of the same power dynamics and conversations across independent production on a very small scale, and production when a lot more money and very different audiences are involved. Things don't necessarily play out the same on every level: what levels are visible and what levels are not visible, what happens onscreen and what happens behind. And that's also to do with where people come from. Say, you might be increasing the amount of women working in an industry, but you might be narrowing diversity in another sense. So there needs to be a wide view on things.

But certainly, I don't think conversations that I was observing ten years ago could happen now, at least in public. I don't know if they're still happening in private. You know, things about what audiences will and won't go and see; what audiences are and are not interested in. I used to be a script reader for many years for different companies, and even just things as simple as the way that women are described in screenplays has changed hugely. I remember reading a script that introduced its protagonist as "Thirty-two but still attractive." And that was only ten or eleven years ago. That sort of thing was not uncommon. I don't think that would play very well now. [laughs] I think there have been huge changes in a very short time. In some areas that's been kind of forced, but it has been positive.

**Eve Benhamou: I remember hearing your paper at the BAFTSS Conference last year [*British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies, 2023*], presenting your work on animated documentaries. Going back to what you said about things you can see, and things that are not obvious: your work touched upon funding opportunities. Do you have any thoughts, reflecting on that work now that it is completed?**

**Carla MacKinnon:** One of the things that came out of my PhD research, which was into animated documentary, was that a lot of women seemed to find it to be a more comfortable space to work in. There were various theories suggested for that: Paul Wells described "the feminine aesthetic." I think that Wells is a great mind of animation scholarship, but you should talk to Annabelle Honess Roe and Caroline Ruddell, because they did a conference which was an answer or a response to this idea. Wells included documentary in this, as well as craft, handmade and independent work—more artisan work.

And it's kind of like, Well, you know, is that because that's what women are drawn to make? Or is it because women are feeling marginalised by other areas where they could be working? Or is it because there's a tradition of a certain kind of female artwork that women are finding themselves slotting into because that's how art works? That's how culture works: we slot into movements. Or is it because

there is a funding bias either against or towards women, or employment bias either against or towards women in different areas? You know, there are an awful lot of questions. Even if you could evidence that animated documentary is mostly female, which I don't think has been properly evidenced, although the research I did did indicate that to be true, at least on a small scale and independent level . . . but even if that can be evidenced as being true, then it raises an awful lot of questions that aren't just to do with, "Oh, well, that's just the kind of work that women want to make." Lizzie Hobbs talked to me about it being maybe a space that hadn't been colonized by men, you know, a relatively new space where your voice could be a part of something forming a subgenre.

I think it certainly raises questions, particularly when seen alongside the funding data. Even on that tiny study that I did, so many of those films were funded or financed in such an odd patchwork of ways with so much free labor going into them. Women often work with less available time than men, because they tend to have more familial responsibilities, so I'm not sure they should also be doing the free work. But who knows? [*Laughs*] It needs more study.

**Eve Benhamou: Thank you so much for your time.**