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What place for comics in museum exhibitions?

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Figure 1: Creation of Stéphane Blanquet for the exhibition Quintet in the Contemporary Art Museum of Lyon – Photographs by Bodoi and La Spirale

Introduction

[The works of Stéphane Blanquet] herald new artistic explorations of our psychic and mythic worlds (Dagen, 2009).

Like many artists, Stéphane Blanquet has created over the years an impressive and very personal universe. His work summons deep fears and nightmares often linked with childhood, and he broaches themes such as sex, food and death through resolutely organic depictions. Blanquet's creativity has led him to utilise different types of artistic practice: he started with fanzines and comics, but has also drawn on canvas and on naked bodies, and created several sorts of toys, dolls, videos and even scenery for theatre. Such a proficient artist is unlikely to go unnoticed for long, and several art institutions around the world became interested in his work. Many exhibitions resulted from this prominence, meaning that Blanquet got to have his work curated or to curate it himself numerous times. From a practical point of view, the idea of exhibiting his work raises certain questions—particularly that of how to transpose and condense such a rich and diverse universe into one place. Blanquet himself offered an interesting solution to this problem in the exhibition *Quintet* in the Contemporary Art Museum of Lyon. The exhibition brought together five artists—Chris Ware, Masse, Joost Swarte, Gilbert Shelton, and, of course, Blanquet himself—giving them each a room that they could arrange as they wanted. In his room, Blanquet displayed several of his works: illustrations, paintings, photographs, etc. He also created partitions to divide his space, and either painted them or sculpted them by cutting into the partition, enabling visitors to see through it to the other side (See Figure 1 above). Arguably, the most successful element was an installation Blanquet created specifically for *Quintet*: a ghost train. Visitors to the exhibition were invited to board small wagons on a railway constructed in a figure-of-eight loop, which then travelled through several rooms that the artist had created. The rooms contained different scenes constructed using objects, drawings, lights and sound, creating a deeply immersive experience. The exhibition successfully recreated the feeling of reading a Blanquet comic, whilst also managing to show the material variety of his work. Notably, the exhibition was not focused on comics as artefacts since there were only few comic pages displayed. Rather than simply hanging up original pages, Blanquet instead created a system of closely-interrelated artefacts in order to convey a specific atmosphere. Indeed, the effect on the visitor would have been very different if Blanquet had displayed nothing but framed comic pages. Does this imply that using comic pages to show the universe and the work of a comics author is a bad choice in the context of an exhibition?

Further, the exhibition catalogue stated that *Quintet* was “not totally a comics exhibition” (Musée d’art contemporain de Lyon, 2009). This raises many questions: Why is it not “totally” a comics exhibition? Indeed, what *is* a comics exhibition, if not an exhibition made by comics artists about their work? The comment would seem to rely on the popular idea that comics do not belong to art galleries, because of their status as “low art” (Beaty, 2012). The gallery and curators were, perhaps, trying to justify the existence of this exhibition by linking it with “high” contemporary art rather than “low” comics. Through his installation, Blanquet also raises questions about what a comic is, and what it can be. Can his photographs of body painting be called comics? What about the ghost train installation—after all, it offers a sequence of squared rooms that recall panels? Exhibiting comics is a complex task that raises practical as much as theoretical questions. This research aims to present an overview of these questions, and to answer some of them, focusing on the place (both physical and symbolic) of comics in museums. Comics can be exhibited in many places and the exhibitions taken on example will reflect this tendency, though the focus will be on museums because of their strong cultural symbolism and, as will be detailed, their role as an art institution. This dissertation will also focus on Western comic exhibitions (i.e. those situated within the cultural context of Western Europe and the USA). Though many very interesting exhibitions are created in other parts of the world. (Kyoto International Manga Museum, for instance, suggests that visitors take a book in their collection and read it in the space, rather than contemplating an artwork in a frame (Guilbert, 2009).), it seemed more relevant to focus on practices geographically and culturally closer, and thus easier to document. It should also be noted that a lot of work has been done in this area in French-speaking countries, most of which has not yet been translated in English. This dissertation will draw on these works, with the hope of bringing new arguments to the English-speaking comics community. The present dissertation will first focus on the symbolic and theoretical questions raised by the exhibition of comics in museums. It will go on to discuss practical solutions to the challenges of representing comics in an exhibition format, and, finally, will evoke the exploratory possibilities offered by the process of exhibition to the medium of comics.

Chapter 1: Comics and the Art Museum

Exhibitions can be organised in many different types of places, be they formal (libraries, galleries, universities) or informal (fairs, conventions, festivals). This dissertation interrogates the particular relationship between comics and art museums. This decision, which will be explained and developed further on, was provoked by the importance of museums in cultural life, as well as their referential role for the public. However, the small number of comics exhibitions actually taking place in art museums does not allow for such a narrow focus. This research therefore draws on exhibitions situated in a range of contexts, though this central question of comics in art museums is emphasised throughout.

Comic exhibitions: an international overview

To begin, let us take a quick overview of the history of comics exhibitions. The first significant comics exhibition is considered to be *Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative*, organised by an association of comics fans called Socerlid and curated by Isabelle Coutrot-Chavarot in the Museum of Decorative Arts of Paris, in 1967¹. The exhibition mainly focused on American authors and highlighted their artistic skills. It has been widely covered by the press, and became quite famous among comics readers and professionals (Baudry, 2011). It can be noted that most of the museum committee members were not really enthusiastic about exhibiting comics, and acquiesced only under the condition that the exhibition would also include paintings from the museum's collections (Groensteen, 2006). The Figuration Narrative style and its representative painters were selected for this role because of the style's popularity at the time. Its paintings were exhibited in a separated room and were not linked with the comics - a separation emphasised in the exhibition catalogue (Couperie, 1967).

Since then, comics exhibitions have been developed in countries where comics have a strong cultural presence, such as Belgium (with regular exhibitions in the Belgian Comic Strip Centre), France (with exhibitions such as *Masters of European Comics* in 2000) or the United States (with *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* in 1991 and *Masters of American Comics* in 2006, among others)². The United Kingdom has also hosted some significant exhibitions, such as *Comics Unmasked* (2014) and *Comic Invention* (2016). Other exhibitions are regularly held around the world; unfortunately, due

¹ This exhibition is considered as significant by scholars such as Escoubet (2009), Daures (2011) or Beaty (2012).

² Details about each exhibition mentioned are available in a dedicated section in the bibliography.

to the general lack of documentation about comics, it is difficult to gather information about them³. But it can certainly be noted that the work of comics centres, such as the *Serieteket* comics library in Sweden or the Finnish comics centre *Sarjakuvakeskus*, helps to develop more exhibitions and comics-related events.

Several tendencies can be noticed while studying the most well-known comics exhibitions. First, only few of them are organised in fine art museums. They can be in galleries (as in Glasgow), in libraries (in the British or the French National Library, for instance), and sometimes in other type of museums (Decorative Art, Design, etc.). This supports the notion that comics are easily associated with literature or craft art but not with fine art. A recurring theme can also be highlighted among the most popular exhibitions: the confrontation between comics and fine arts. The Whitney Museum's *Comic Art Show* in 1983 (co-curated by John Carlin & Sheena Wagstaff), *Comic Iconoclasm* in the Institute for Contemporary Art in London in 1987 (curated by Sheena Wagstaff), *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* in MoMA in 1990 or *Vraoum!* in the French Maison Rouge in 2009 (curated by David Rosenberg and Pierre Sterckx) are just a few examples. All of these exhibitions have in common the fact that they display both comics and contemporary art. Unfortunately, the dialogue that could have been created between the artworks was often limited. In *Vraoum!* for instance, comics were shown mostly as an iconographical source material for fine art, through works such as *The Hospice* for Gilles Barbier (See Figure 2). If Gilles Barbier offers a reflection on the superhero myth and everyday life, his intention is not to work on the comics medium in itself. The language, codes, narration, or structure of comics are not broached at all in this exhibition. In Figure 2, the scenography of the exhibition can also be seen: the comics are relegated to small two-dimensional forms in the background, far less appealing than Barbier's three-dimensional installation in the foreground. Deliberately or not, the exhibition strongly suggests that the fine arts are somehow superior to comics.

³ Especially regarding scholar and critic approaches, as shown by Beaty (2012).



Figure 2: *The Hospice*, Gilles Barbier, 2002, from the exhibition *Vraoum!* – Photograph by Marc Damage

While the number of comics exhibitions is generally increasing (Daures, 2011), comics are often still kept at a distance from art museums, and are not always shown favourably— especially compared to fine art. Comics have for some time been acknowledged as a complex and rich medium, thanks to the development of academic comics studies in universities (Murray, 2015), and the work of prominent cultural theorists, such as Roland Barthes, whose *Œuvre de masse et explication de texte* (1963), discusses the arbitrary divisions between "high" and "low" culture, and Umberto Eco, who tackles the conflict head on in *Apocalypse Postponed* (1994). Given all this critical and theoretical support, how might one explain the continued rejection of comics from art museums?

Are Comics Art ?

A common first objection to the inclusion of comics in museum exhibitions is that comics are not art and consequently they should not be in art museums. Such comments can be seen regularly in reviews or articles, and while this view is becoming more rare with the growing acceptance of comics, it is still common. Bart Beaty illustrates this tendency very well in *Comics Versus Art* (Beaty, 2012). Discussing various exhibitions of Robert Crumb's work, Beaty quotes articles stating that Crumb is not making art

because he makes comics (Siegel, 2005), or else insinuating that Crumb *is* making art, *unlike* every other comics creator, and that he is adding an artistic component that is otherwise absent in the medium (Kimmelman, 2006).

The definition of “Art” is of course a very complex question that this dissertation cannot properly answer. The traditional definitions are usually based on visual properties, and take into account the intention of the artists (Adajian, 2016). Rather than arguing that comics are an art form (a notion which is widely accepted now⁴), it seems more interesting to focus on one definition of art in particular, in hope of shedding new light on the the relationship between comics and art museums. This definition is based on the notion of the “Artworld”, as set out by Arthur Danto (1964). This notion refers to the network of people involved in art creation, appreciation, exhibition, and commerce: the whole context of art (Becker, 1982). Before Danto, art scholars and researchers tended to focus solely on the artwork itself; by expanding the field of enquiry, Danto's theory changed the focus of discussion. Following Danto and his theory, George Dickie offered an institutional definition of art (Dickie, 1974). For Dickie, a work of art can be defined as follows:

A set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the Artworld) (Dickie, 1974).

As Dickie himself highlights, there are four points in this definition: (1) acting on behalf of an institution, (2) conferring of status, (3) being a candidate and (4) appreciation. If Dickie gives an open reading of the two last points (any object can be a candidate, and the appreciation itself is a neutral act and is not necessarily dedicated to aesthetics, for example), the two first are more specific. This notion of *institution* is key here. As Dickie explains, an institution is usually seen as something formal, linked with legislation, though it can also simply be social. In this way, a king can confer a knighthood in a formal context or a school can confer a PhD in a social context. In the case of art, the institution is defined by its members: the core personnel, with the presenters (the artists, the museums, the gallerists) and the goers (the public), but also all the secondary members such as the critics or the philosophers. Together, they form the “Artworld”. On behalf of this group of people, anyone can offer an artefact as a candidate for appreciation, which will automatically define it as an art work, even before any judgment has been made on it. Museum and galleries are a strong symbol of this definition. As a space dedicated to the display of artworks, they are a place of choice where works are offered as

⁴ And talked about from many points of view, in books such as *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (McCloud, 1994), *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Harvey, 1996) or *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical approach* (Meskin and Cook, 2012).

candidates. Their role as a symbol of culture also contributes to their influence: indeed, Beaty defines museums as “cultural gatekeepers” (2012).

This definition brings a new perspective: are comics not integrated in museums because they are (supposedly) not art, or are they not seen as art because they are not integrated in museums, and generally not recognized by art institutions? Through his work Dickie illustrates the impressive influence of museum as an institution and prefigures Foucault’s focus on the power of institutions in society (Foucault, 1995). If the question of whether or not comics are artworks is irrelevant, other hypotheses could be made. Perhaps comics are seen as art, but belong to a type of art that is not easily accepted in museums, which would account for their non-recognition.

“Low art”, popular culture and the museum

Hierarchy and elitism are entrenched in the history of museums, both among mediums (painting, sculpture, etc.) and genre (scenery, portrait, etc.). Indeed, the idea of a hierarchy has been quite significant in art history. In the 16th century, the scholars and critics of the Italian Renaissance started to differentiate between artworks that used *imitare* to “render visible the universal essence of things” (which were seen as noble and intellectual) and those that used *ritrarre* and were a “mechanical copying of particular appearances” (Bass, 2008). While the criteria changed, the idea of a hierarchy of arts persisted in Europe, reaching its highest point in the 19th century, when painting was considered as the highest art, and among paintings several categories were also ranked, from historical painting to still life (Bann, 2003). The museum as an institution followed this idea when it entered the “modern age” and aimed to offer an intelligible and scientific view of the world by showing strictly classified artefacts (Bennett, 1995). The pressure to adhere to these distinctions was so oppressive that artists created their own exhibitions to escape this rigid hierarchy, such as the Salon des Refusés in France (Boime, 1969). The idea of ranking and ordering artworks and artefacts was strongly associated with museums for decades after this transformation. The genre hierarchy and the general classification has softened with the years and with the multiple transformations of art. But rather than fully disappearing, it seems to have instead evolved and found a new vocabulary. Rather than a hierarchy with clear ranks, terms such as “high art” and “low art” or “popular culture” are now employed to create a sense of difference between artworks. Comics are seen as a part of “low culture”

this idea is well-known,⁵ and has inspired a few exhibitions, for instance *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* in New York (1990).

If we are to find out why popular culture or comics are not integrated in museums on a permanent basis, we must first determine what is meant by the term “popular culture”. In *Popular Culture: A Teaching Object* (Bennett, 2010), Tony Bennett proposes four definitions of popular culture, to which John Storey has added another two (Storey, 2009). These definitions can be summarised as follow:

1. “Popular culture is simply culture which is widely favoured or well-liked by many people.”
- 2- “The culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture.”
- 3- Popular culture is a “synonym for mass culture.”
- 4- “The culture which originates from ‘the people’.”
- 5- A terrain of exchange and negotiation between “the “resistance” of subordinate groups in society and the forces of “incorporation” operating in the interests of dominant groups in society”
6. The sixth definition take postmodernism into account, and declares that “that postmodern culture is a culture which no longer recognises the distinction between high and popular culture.”⁶

These definitions provide an excellent overview of how popular culture is seen. There is a strong sense of elitism here, which presents itself in several ways. The first manifestation of elitism is the recurring use of the word “people”. Popular culture is the culture created for or arising from common people, which opposes it to the culture created by or for the “noble” people—the elites. There is also the idea that popular culture is a leftover from high culture (see second definition) that is therefore less worthy. Museums propagate the idea that the “high culture” inside museums is something separate from the rest of the world; it is a “chosen” culture that possesses a sacred aura. Museums are thus the materialisation of a sacred space.⁷ In his introduction to *Contemporary Museums*, Chris van Uffelen affirms that “museums are [...] temples of art” (Uffelen, 2011), and indeed there are the same notions of sacred respect in museum galleries and in churches (for example, the requirement of silence). Museums can be considered as heterotopias in the sense Foucault defines them (Lord, 2006). They are parallel spaces that are separated from the rest of society. Museums isolate artworks from the

⁵ And broached in numerous publications, for instance *The immediate experience: movies, comics theatre & other aspects of popular culture* by Robert Warshow (1962) or *Arguing comics: literary masters on a popular medium* by Heer and Worcester (2004).

⁶ This summary can be found in Holt Parker’s article *Toward a definition of popular culture* (Parker, 2011).

⁷ As underlined by Fabienne Brugères in *Le Musée entre culture populaire et divertissement* (Brugères, 2002).

outside world, placing them in large silent rooms without windows, with artificial light and white painted walls. The rooms are emptied of any objects from the outside world and focus solely on the artworks. The building's purpose itself is to create and emphasise this separation: "a museum building points out a collection well worth seeing, separates it from its trivial surrounding" (Uffelen, 2011). High culture is seen as something sacred that should be separated from trivial artefacts.

Popular culture is also closely linked with mass culture (see third definition).⁸ As defined by Simon Frith, mass culture is the culture arising from means of mass production (Frith, 2011). Comics are included in this definition since they are industrially printed. The art world that sees artworks as sacred artefacts is repulsed by reproduced objects. Jean Baudrillard wrote about this longing for authenticity and uniqueness: viewers look for tracks of creation, the impression of the hand, signatures etc. (Baudrillard, 1996). Original artworks do not give the same feeling as reproductions do. Walter Benjamin speaks about an "aura" that original works possess, and that gets lost in reproduction (Benjamin and Underwood, 2008). This does not mean that reproductions have less value, but simply that museums do not seem to be interested in the type of value they offer. A number of artists have explored and challenged this idea in their practices. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades and Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* are just two examples of artworks made using mass and reproduction that are recognised as legitimate art pieces. In light of this, it would seem to make little sense to deny status to an art object created through mass production. The sixth definition offered by Storey reinforces this idea: he considers that, living in a postmodern society, it does not make sense anymore to separate culture into different branches. If this statement seems accurate, the idea of a difference between the arts is still deeply fixed into the popular imaginary, and will probably take a few more decades to disappear.

If Storey and Bennett gather together the most common ideas about popular culture, Holt Parker offers an original definition that sheds new light on the problem. He defines popular art as "art that is not authorised by the art world" (once again, the notion of "art world" is based on Dantos work) (Parker, 2001). Popular art would then be art that is refused in museums (among other places). The most obvious and common reproaches to comics as a medium from art institution then become null and void: the question of whether comics are "art" or "popular culture" can only be answered by the art world—the museums—that create and maintain these distinctions in the first place. This suspicion from museums has more to do with the traditions and habits of the art world, particularly the privileging of original artworks and "high" art. Museums are closely linked with the nineteenth century vision of art, having played an important role in its development by providing ways to classify and

⁸ While the two notions are closely linked they are still independent. Fairy tales for instance are a part of popular culture (they are "well-liked" and "come from the people") but are not mass produced.

catalogue the world. It is understandable, then, that museums would hold on to the traditions that created them, even though it is clear that these traditions are now outdated. However, it is also important to note that some museums are beginning to modify their points of view (Keene, 2005). Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has proposed the idea of a “post-museum”, a museum that would be more open to a contemporary vision of art, and that would offer more digital or interactive content (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). If these changes continue, the integration of comics among permanent collections might become more common (and perhaps even unquestioned) in the future.

Comics and reputation

Popular opinions about comics can also tend to be rather negative, a trend which influences and reinforces the decisions of museums in to exclude comics from most of their collection. In *La Bande Dessinée: Un objet culturel non identifié* (2007), Thierry Groensteen has dedicated a chapter to the reputation of comics. He draws a distinction between French-language comics and English-language comics, specifying that the latter are often less likely to be regarded as culturally valuable. There are two factors contributing to this: first, the word “comic” itself, which seems to suggest that comics are an exclusively humorous or trivial medium; and second, the fact that material traditionally used in printing comics that is often of mediocre quality, which makes it more difficult to respect comics as artefacts. Groensteen specifically focuses on what he calls the “five symbolic handicaps” of comics that hurt the medium's reputation. These handicaps will be detailed and discussed below.

1) “Comics are **a bastard genre** resulting from the scandalous mixture of text and image.”⁹

This notion comes from the importance of logocentrism in today's society.¹⁰ Language is worshipped while pictures are despised (Mitchell, 1994), and the act of mixing the two of tends to be poorly regarded. However, comics are not simply an equal mixture of pictures and text—as Groensteen observes, they are in fact a “predominantly visual narrative form” (2007), as they can also be silent. Besides this fact, Groensteen justly points out that the ideal of a “pure” medium based on a modern vision of culture is now outdated, and cultural objects are now far more likely to be the result of diverse, hybridised processes, especially when digital media are used (Groensteen, 2006). Condemning comics because of their hybrid nature, then, is strongly inaccurate on several levels.

⁹ « [La Bande dessinée] serait un genre bâtard, le résultat d'un métissage scandaleux entre le texte et l'image » (Groensteen, 2007). All the translations for the “handicaps” are inspired by the work of Bart Beaty (Beaty, 2012).

¹⁰ According to Derrida, logocentrism is the idea that logos (Greek term for speech, thought) is the central principle of language and philosophy (Powell and Howell, 1997).

2) Comics are “**intrinsically infantile**” and adults read them only try to get back to their childhood.

This criticism is mainly based on a lack of knowledge, and especially historical knowledge about comics. Indeed, the exhibition *Comic Invention* (2016) in Glasgow successfully countered this misconception, demonstrating the relevance of the comics form to adult audiences. It achieved this in two ways: firstly, through the selection of works exhibited, which were primarily created for adults (from early comics such as Topffer’s to the work of contemporary creators like Frank Quitely); and secondly, through careful exhibition design, which offered detailed information and analysis of works that was clearly aimed at adults, alongside more general signage allowing visitors of all ages to create their own experience and interpretation. As exhibitions like *Comic Invention* show us, comics can, contrary to common belief, address any age group.

3) “Comics are associated with one of the most degraded branches of visual arts: **caricature**”¹¹

The association of comics with caricature is closer to the truth: the first comics did indeed use a humorous tone and simplified or exaggerated representations of the characters. Chapman (2011) directly links the creation of comics with satirical cartoons. While many more modern comics have moved away from this tradition, these elements can still sometimes be found (in the Belgian comics tradition, for instance). Caricature is often seen, in art-historical terms, as a “lower” art. As early as ancient Greece, the aim of art was to represent an ideal, and not the reality. Choosing to represent the reality, or to emphasise its ugliness or its funny nature was not seen as true art (Todorov, 2000). This idea persisted through the centuries: during the Italian Renaissance, for example, the beauty of a painting was in its conformity to an ideal, not its inspiration from reality (Todorov, 2000); and in the 18th century, as Lessing (1990) has noted, exaggerating the “ugly” aspect of reality was considered a “sad talent”. This third reproach toward comics, then, arises out of the historical tradition of considering art according to a hierarchy.

4) “Comics have **not** wanted to be **integrated in the evolution of the other visual art during the 20th century**”¹²

Authors like Thomas Inge have shown how comics have been influenced by the evolutions in art history, and also how comics have inspired various art movements, from Dadaism to Pop Art (Inge, 1990). There is actually a strong tradition of exchange between visual arts in general and comics, a fact obscured by the medium's lack of prominence in both artistic and academic circles.

¹¹ « [La Bande Dessinée] aurait partie liée avec une branche vile et dégradée des arts visuels : la caricature »

¹² « [La Bande Dessinée] n’aurait pas su ou voulu épouser le mouvement de l’histoire des autres arts au cours du XX^{eme} siècle »

5) *“The images produced are not worthy of attention as a result of their **multiplicity** and their **tiny format**.”*¹³

Groensteen develops this point into three sub points: the fact that comics use serialised images, are in a small format, and use a printed, reproductive medium. It has been shown above that the serialised aspect of comics meets with disapproval because of a visual art tradition which privileges unique artefacts. The small format of comics is also disturbing to visual art traditions. The referential figurative medium for fine art is painting, and paintings often use a much wider scale than a comic page. None of this means that smaller images are not worthy of attention, but simply that the general public is less accustomed to them. The use of printing can raise problems in the way that poor quality paper or ink can affect one's appreciation of the artwork as a whole object. However, this problem is by no means intrinsic to comics: firstly, it can easily be remedied by using better quality materials, and secondly, it should be noted that problems relating to low quality material support exist in almost all media.

Another “reproach” could be added to this list from the point of view of museums. Groensteen speaks about comics as “an art without memory” (2006)¹⁴. This comment is based both on the fact that comics are not highly regarded by the art world, and the fact that they are part of an industry. Indeed, publishing houses erase books from their catalogues as soon as they no longer sell enough to be economically viable. On top of this, they rarely re-publish old books. In this way numerous classics have become unavailable. Extant examples of these rare comics are not always preserved in the right way. Comics are difficult to preserve: depending on the type of paper and ink used, they can degrade quickly, and as such have to be kept in right conditions (Carter, 1990). Owing to either a lack of knowledge or resources (for private collectors) or a lack of interest (for public collections), such careful archiving is not always possible. This contributes to the erasure of comics from art history. Museums are art institutions that are primarily interested in the past and questions of legacy (Walsh, 1992). The material absence of a past for comics can pose problems for museums, both practical (the difficulty of finding artefacts to exhibit) and symbolic (a perceived lack of curatorial or scholarly interest in an art without a past).

These “reproaches” against comics, either from the general opinion or more specifically from museums are mostly based on a lack of knowledge or an outdated, traditionalist view of art. Exhibitions would actually be a great way to fix these misunderstanding and to show to the general

¹³ “Les images qu’elle produit seraient indignes de respect et d’attention, du fait de leur multiplicité et de leur petit format.”

¹⁴ “Un art sans mémoire”

public or to the art world that comics might not be what they think they are. A higher interest for museum could also help comics to find back their past and to raise more interest in their preservation. For instance, the exhibition *Comic Invention* (2016) in Glasgow was a great way to return to the origins of comics and challenge these misconceptions. Through the exhibition design and curatorial selections, the exhibition presented comics as an adult medium and countered popular suppositions about comics, such as their lack of integration with visual art (through the display of paintings, sculptures and illustrations alongside comics work), or their exclusive link with caricature (both through displaying other genres of comics, and through displaying other early works which mix text and picture without being humorous).

Another barrier: artists' mistrust of museums

But the reluctance of museums to integrate comics is not the only obstacle to the organisation of comic exhibitions. There is also an unwillingness from comic artists to be involved with “high” art. Beaty (2012) speaks about a “suspicion” that is justified by the historically dismissive behaviour of art institutions towards comics and their creators. This can be illustrated through the example of the Pop Art movement, and particularly the contribution of Roy Lichtenstein. Lichtenstein offered a reflection on reproduction and codes through his works, and to do so he picked comic panels and reproduced them by painting them onto large canvases. His works met with a lot of success, and have now a notably high commercial value. However, they are not well-regarded by many comics professionals and fans. “[Roy] Lichtenstein did no more or less for comics than Andy Warhol did for soup”, declared Art Spiegelman in an interview (Sanderson, 2007). Lichtenstein exhibited and sold almost exact reproductions of numerous comic panels. This offended many comic authors of the time, who had trouble earning a living or gaining respect with the exact same images, but in a different context (Sanderson, 2007). Another troubling point is that no credit or recognition was given to the creators of the original works. To fix this problem, David Barsalou has been working for almost forty years to find the source materials for Lichtenstein’s works and to make them public and accessible through his project *Deconstructing Lichtenstein*.¹⁵ This project is not always encouraged, especially by Lichtenstein admirers. The members of the Lichtenstein Foundation, for instance, “do not want to acknowledge that the comic book artists are real artists”, showing a clear disregard (Childs, 2011). The comic artist Dave Gibbons has parodied Lichtenstein’s most famous creation, *Whaam!*, by way of response (See Figure 3).

¹⁵ Accessible on the website <http://davidbarsalou.homestead.com/LICHTENSTEINPROJECT.html>

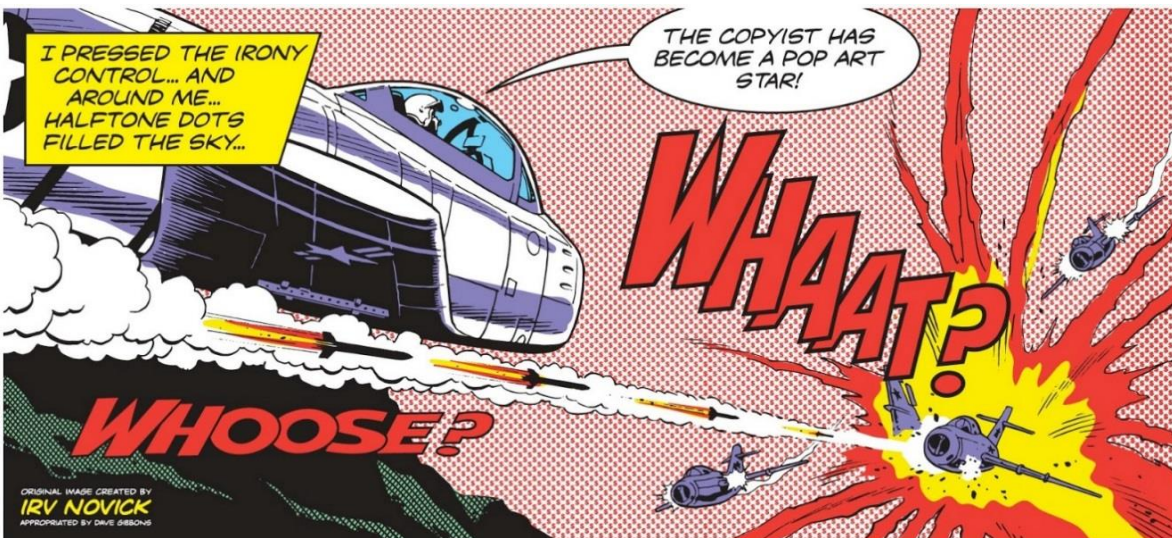
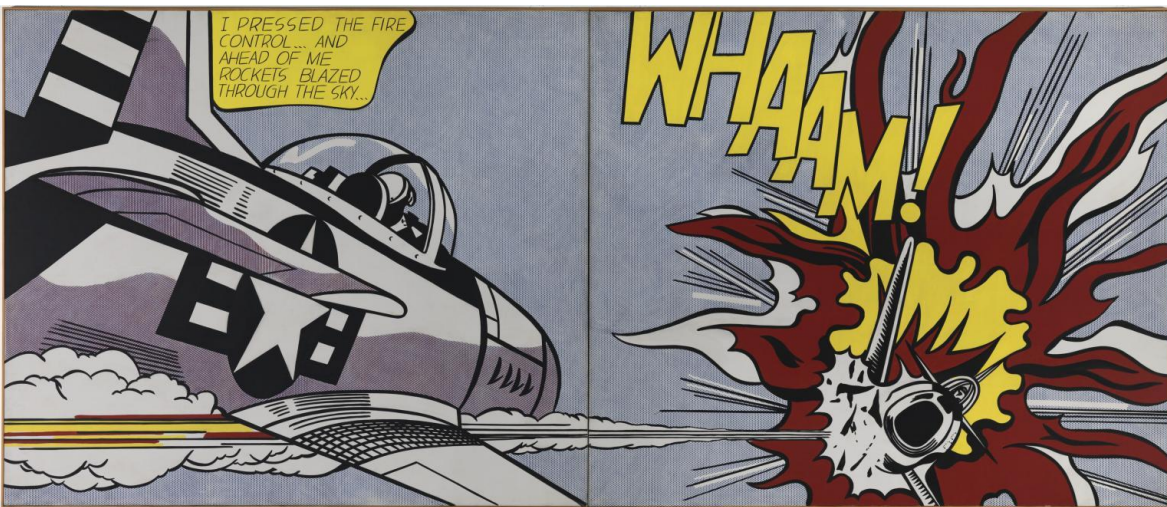


Figure 3: Above, from top to bottom: Excerpt from *The Star Jockey!*, by Robert Kanigher and Irv Novick, 1962; *Whaam!* by Roy Lichtenstein, 1963; *Whaat?* By Dave Gibbons, 2013.

Dave Gibbons' work is strongly ironic and mordant. In the captions, he talks about "irony control" and refers to Lichtenstein as a "copyist". The onomatopoeias ask the reader: "*Whose?*" and "*What?*", and the famous halftone dots popularised by Lichtenstein (Arrivé, 2013) are here transformed into dollar signs, a comment on Lichtenstein's commercial success, which, it is implied, was undeserved. It can be noted that Gibbons' creation is closer to the original panel in its composition and its representation of sound effects. Gibbons also names the original author, Irv Novick, and the painting itself clearly states that Novick's work was the inspiration for *Whaat?*. Gibbons sold *Whaat?* at auction, donating the proceeds to a non-profit association working to help comics authors in need-- especially those in financial need, such as the authors who created the original works that made Lichtenstein famous (Murphy, 2015). The frustration from the comics community toward "high" art was so intense that it created numerous reactions, as it is the case about Lichtenstein, for instance. *Whaat?* has also been exhibited in London's Cartoon Museum. This demonstrates that, while exhibiting in art museums (and being involved with fine art in general) seems to be problematic, an artwork from a comic artist is cheerfully exhibited in a specialised museum. This shows that it really is the art world that raises suspicions, and not exhibitions in themselves. Specialist comics museums are valuable and should not be disregarded, but the exhibition of comics in a new context, such as that offered by a more traditional art museum, could bring new possibilities to comics, and bring a new public to museums.

Organising comic exhibitions in museums is challenging at different levels. Firstly, curators must confront outdated traditions about what constitutes an artform. Secondly, they must be prepared to challenge popular misconceptions of comics and their relationship to the art world. Finally, they must understand and work to overcome the reluctance of comic artists. Museums, from their position of influence on the art world, could recast comics in a new light and challenge the negative opinions about them. Likewise, comics could revitalise museums by bringing something new to their collections, something which, according to Suzanne Keene (2005), is greatly needed. It seems that slowly but surely, the relationship between museums and comics is changing, and will hopefully offer great collaborations in the future (Daures, 2011).

Chapter 2: Exhibiting Comics

As we have established, comics legitimately belong in museums, and exhibitions dedicated to this medium would benefit both museums and comics. However, there remain practical questions about how to actually display comics in such an environment. The particularities of the medium can make it difficult to display. This is mainly due to the fact that, in many cases, comics artefacts were never intended to be displayed. This is where comics differ from fine art: the purpose of a fine art object is, generally speaking, to be part of an exhibition, and so fine artists create their work in a way that will make the most of a museum gallery setting. This is not the case for comic artists. Comic pages are small, two-dimensional objects that are perhaps not as appealing as installations or paintings in the context of a gallery. Comic pages are usually created to be looked at in a book. The reader, then, has a privileged link with the artwork through an individual reading and a physical proximity. In a museum the viewer may well be both confused by the way they encounter comics (often displayed in a way that is so different from their usual reading habits¹⁶), and disappointed by the way comics differ from what they anticipate finding in a museum (e.g. three-dimensional installation, or impressively large paintings). This chapter will focus on the practical ways of exhibiting comics, and look into the techniques and tools available to display them in a way that is enjoyable for visitors. Comics artefacts can be divided into two categories: the artefacts that have been made with the particular aim of being exhibited and those that existed prior to the exhibition, for other purposes. This chapter will focus on the latter, which are the more common of the two. The French scholar Pierre Laurent Daures has written an especially remarkable Masters dissertation under the supervision of Thierry Groensteen and Lambert Barthélémy. Daures focuses on the practical problems confronting comics exhibition, basing his work on visits to and study of seventeen French comic exhibitions. The next chapter will refer to his work at several points, and will also draw on new, original interviews with the comics curator and writer Paul Gravett, the curator Matthew Jarron, and the artist Damon Herd.

¹⁶ “Generally, one reads comics hung on a wall with difficulty,” explains J.C. Menu in his thesis *La Bande Dessinée et son Double* (Menu and Fresnault-Deruelle, 2011).

Pre-existing artefacts are usually numerous in comic exhibitions. The object that is the most often used is **the original page**, present in most comics exhibitions. Daures speaks of the “reign of the original page as an ideal candidate for exhibition”¹⁷ (2011), and Paul Gravett confirms that they are the most popular artefact for British exhibitions about comics (2016). Unlike the printed version of the book, the original page is unique and thus preserves the “aura” that interests museums. It also creates an intimate connection between the artist and the visitor: the latter can finally see all the sketches and pentimentos, the involuntary lines and the spontaneous doodles in the margin that were not meant to be public. It is a way to feel close to the artist by seeing their work in its most natural form. J.C. Menu speaks of a *supplement d’âme* (“soul supplement”), a special feeling that gives a huge sentimental value to the page (Menu and Fresnault-Deruelle, 2011). Displaying an original page in an exhibition can also have a great effect on the visitor. Using a vertical display when hanging a page, for instance, can offer a new point of view on the work. Not all comics, however, are suited to this treatment. Christian Rosset speaks about comic pages “holding the wall”¹⁸ (Rosset, 2015). Some of them “hold the wall” well in that they are aesthetically pleasing to look at while hung vertically. Other comic pages have an aesthetic or a structure that can be very interesting or pleasing in a book but that does not translate well to traditional forms of exhibition. Rosset gives an interesting example in *La Beautée*, from Blutch (See Figure 4). Blutch’s illustrations “hold the wall” very well: they are pleasant to look at even when hung vertically and viewed from a distance. Additionally, since Blutch’s aesthetic is closer to what viewers might expect from an artwork in a museum, there is no sense of dissonance with the space. That said, as Rosset points out, the classical “painting” display removes something from the work. Read as a book in an intimate context, *La Beautée* takes on another layer of meaning. The reader is alone, confronted by the sight of these women living private moments. The characters are not simply offered to the reader’s gaze: one has to physically act--hold the book, open it, turn the pages, etc.--in order to see them. The book recasts the reader as a voyeur, the revealer of secrets. In the context of a traditional exhibition, this part of the work disappears. The artworks are displayed so as to be highly visible and accessible, and they resonate with centuries of art history (with artists such as Ingres and many others). Something has been lost. “Holding the wall” is something to take into account in comic exhibitions, but it is not the only thing.

¹⁷ “Le règne de la planche originale comme candidat idéal à l’exposition” (Daures, 2001).

¹⁸ “Tenir le mur”



Figure 4: Excerpt from La Beautée by Blutch, 2008.

Another solution might be to display comics horizontally, in glass cases. In this way the viewer is less likely to compare comics with paintings, and with this difference in their expectations, the question of “holding the wall” will not matter anymore. A horizontal display emphasises the literary aspect of comics, since it is also the usual method of display chosen for exhibition books (Fleury, 1997). There remains, however, another problem. Original pages as artefacts still seem less attractive when compared to fine art installations. Comic pages are smaller, for one; but they are also two dimensional and often in black and white, as the colour is usually added digitally. The artist Damon Herd evokes this problem through his personal experience. As a fine art student participating in collective exhibitions, he found it difficult to make comics attractive among fine art pieces (Herd, 2016).

An alternative to the original page is the use of **printed reproductions**. While these lose the sacred value of uniqueness, their flexible qualities can make them easier to show. First, they are easier to obtain. Since comics have no “memory”, as Groensteen puts it, original pages are likely to be lost or destroyed (Groensteen, 2006). Even when preserved appropriately, they are often spread between different private collectors that may not want to lend them for an exhibition, especially when the exhibition is overseas (Gravett, 2016). Printed reproductions do not create this kind of problems: with

a simple digital file, curators can access every page of a given comic. Reproductions also offer the opportunity to manipulate pages and their format. For instance, in the 1967 exhibition *Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative* in Paris, the curators chose to use enlarged reproductions of black and white panels (the colours were removed artificially when necessary). It was a way to draw attention to the talent of the artists and their personal “line” used in their drawings (Julian, 1968). The aim was also to encourage greater recognition of comics as artforms by emphasising the technical quality of the artworks. The enlarged panels echo the classic format of painting; the exhibition catalogue makes clear that the curators wished to legitimise comics by emphasising the form's similarities to painting:¹⁹

Enlargement allows the extraction of comics from the small format that strangles it, and reveals comics in taking them in the usual artwork format that the general public is used to.²⁰

Faced with a multi-faceted artform like comics, this exhibition was selective, choosing to isolate and explore the visual aspect of the form as a means of convincing viewers of its value. This is one example of how to approach the problem of exhibiting comics. It also shows the possibilities that open up through the use of reproduced abstracts from comics in an exhibition.

Another approach is to directly exhibit **the book** form of the comic. This solution has been used in exhibitions such as *Comics Unmasked* and *Comic Invention*. Books can be displayed among the other artworks, either closed to show the cover or open to show the content. However, we are used to experiencing books as objects or artefacts in themselves, rather than as artworks, and it is difficult to properly enjoy their content when only the cover or a double page are accessible. Furthermore, exhibited books are usually kept in glass cases for preservation purposes, which prevent visitors from fully engaging with them. An alternative way to include books in a comic exhibition is to create a reading corner alongside the main exhibition, with a place to sit and a few books available. Visitors can then manipulate the books and read them for as long as they want in an enjoyable setting. Offering the comic in its final form can also show the artwork in a different form than that presented by the exhibition. In *Comic Invention*, for instance, the original pages from Frank Quitely that were exhibited were black and white and wordless, while in the books available in the reading corner they were shown in colour, with speech balloons and text, which changed them greatly. This approach also allows visitors to see the abstracted pages in their intended context, and to appreciate the narrative

¹⁹ This idea is developed in the work of Daures (2011) and Baudry (2011).

²⁰ « L'agrandissement photographique permet d'arracher la bande dessinée au petit format qui l'étrangle et de la révéler en la portant aux formats habituels des œuvres d'art auxquelles le public est habitué », Pierre Couperie (Julian, 1968).

element of the work. Some exhibitions (occurring outside museums) have exploited this link between original artwork and comics. In his exhibition *Strip Search*, organised in a library, Paul Gravett encouraged visitors to go and borrow comics and further explore the medium (Gravett, 2016). The presence of a comic corner also offers a different vision of exhibitions. As Matthew Jarron highlights, the experience of the exhibition does not have to stop when one leaves the exhibition space (Jarron, 2016). Enabling visitors to directly interact with the works, or even borrow them and bring them home, can be a good way to create an exchange between the artwork and the viewer.

Original pages, reproductions, and books are three types of objects displayed in comic exhibitions that use paper as a support. In this way they are close to the original comic form, the one that the visitor is used to. There are other types of pre-existing artefacts (i.e. not created especially for the exhibition) that can be displayed. Daures (2011) describes three of these artefacts (though it must be noted that his research draws exclusively on French comics exhibitions, and that, per Gravett (2016), these kinds of objects are less commonly used in other countries, such as the UK).

The first set of objects mentioned by Daures are **by-products and figurines**, which can be displayed in glass cases, on shelves, or simply on a stand if big enough. They are usually used to illustrate or evoke a comic or an author rather than as part of the exhibition proper. In the same way, Daures' second category, **the materials used by the artist**, are sometimes exhibited: either tools (pencils, paper; sometimes desk and chair) or research materials (articles, sketches, etc.). These objects impart information about the way the artist works, and also have, to some extent, the same sacred value as the original page--they have been in direct contact with the artist, and they have participated in the creative process. The last type of object is what Daures calls "**exhibition documents**".²¹ These provide general information about the artists, their life, their work, their professional relationships, etc. The documents displayed can be as diverse as letters, videos, interviews, articles, etc. Artefacts like these are used to give context and insight into the work of an artist.

Daures summarises his research in a table that shows the diversity of the objects exhibited, and their relationship to the published work (See Table 1).

²¹ "Documents d'exposition"

Objects not intended to be part of an exhibition.	
Upstream from the published object [the book]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The original page - The materials used by the artist
Downstream from the published object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The printed object and its reproductions
In weak rapport with the published object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The exhibition documents

Table 1: Excerpt from Enjeux et stratégies de l'exposition de Bande dessinée (Daures, 2011)

The functions and value of objects in exhibitions

Daures' typology shows us what kind of artefacts are usually displayed in comics exhibitions. What is essential to understand here is that these objects all have a symbolic value and function attached to them. Daures classifies these functions according to six categories: **narration**, **synecdoche**, **commercial and speculative**, **didactic**, **aesthetic**, and **documentary** (2011). Let us now look at these functions in detail.

Daures speaks of the **narrative function** included in the displayed artefacts. Narration is, of course, an important part of the comics medium. Many definitions of comics include narration in the required characteristics, from the earliest definitions (Waugh (1947), 1991) to the more recent (Harvey, 1994). But displaying artefacts that contain narration within the narrative environment of the exhibition itself (a narrative created through design, curation, scenography, etc.) can be problematic. The question of how to transpose the narration of a page is complex. Showing only one page from a comic takes it out of its context (both narrative and aesthetic) and makes it difficult to understand. But showing all the pages of a story can also be complicated, especially if it is a long story. The curators need to have access to all the pages, and to have a well-fitted space and appropriate display materials in order to exhibit them in a proper way. It has been done before in exhibitions such as *Co-Mix* (2015), which displayed the original pages from Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The pages were hung on a wall in a linear formation, with the different stages of each page displayed directly above or below the final version (See Figure 5).

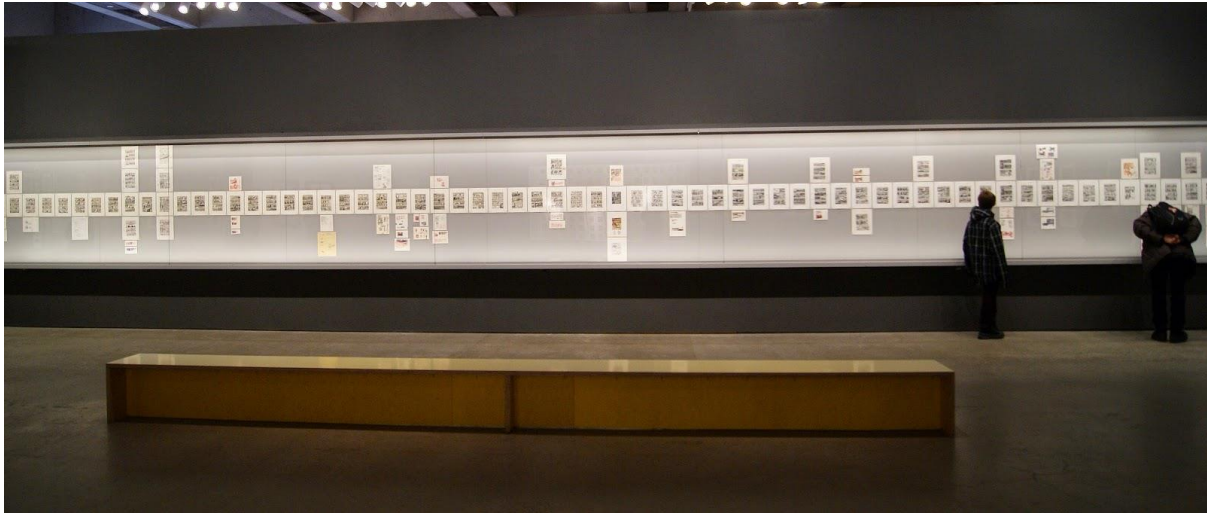


Figure 5: Display of *Maus II* in the exhibition *Co-mix* – Photograph by Melanie Ps.

Authors such as Menu (2011) consider an exhibited page necessarily difficult to read when hung on a wall. The context is so different from that in which readers would typically enjoy their comics: the distance from the page, the presence of other visitors, and the fact that the viewer has to remain standing are all factors that might influence the comfort of the reading.

Some curators choose to bracket the question of narrative, and opt instead to emphasise other characteristics of the work, such as iconography, technique, history, etc. The problem then becomes how to encourage viewers to stop focusing on the narration and to look instead at these other aspects. This can be difficult, as we are generally accustomed to encountering comics as narratives to be read, rather than objects to be contemplated. Curators have devised several solutions for this, one of which, as in the exhibition *Vraoum!*, involves displaying the page vertically (e.g. on a wall) rather than horizontally, to disturb the visitors' reading habits. For *Vraoum!*, Pierre Streckx and David Rosenberg chose to frame the original pages, suspending the narration and facilitating the observation of other characteristics of the work (Rosenberg and Sterckx, 2009). Framing a comic page acts to decontextualise it, reminding the spectator that they are in a museum observing artworks, and that they should take a different approach from what they are used to. The exhibition *Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative* went even further, completely erasing the text inside the speech balloons, forcing the viewer to focus on the visual aspect (Couperie, 1997). Another approach is to create a brand new environment for the pages to disorient the spectators and make them look at the work in a new way. This method was used during the exhibition *Hergé* in the Pompidou Centre in Paris. The entirety of the pages from *The Blue Lotus* were hung on a few walls, on top of each other, creating a sense of confusion and disorientation (See Figure 6). In this way, the aesthetic of Hergé was obvious, while it was difficult to get to actually read the story. As we can see, the narrative function is often at the

centre of the creation of a comic exhibition, simply because it is an aspect of comics that is challenging to deal with.



Figure 6: *The blue Lotus in the exhibition Herge in Le Centre Pompidou – Photograph by D. Pasamonik.*

The *synecdoche* function is also quite common for comic artefacts. Comics as a medium can sometimes be difficult to display. Curators might then use specific artefacts or displays to evoke the sense of a comic without showing the comic directly. This process is used in exhibitions of fine art as well: in a historical exhibition, for example, one painting can represent a whole period or movement. In the same way, Moebius' wide and diverse career was evoked in the exhibition *Moebius-TranseForme* (2007), which abstracted disparate elements from his different projects to represent his *oeuvre* as a whole. It is also for this purpose that by-products and figurines are usually displayed. According to Daures, the synecdoche function works better if the artefact exhibited is closer to the form the spectator is used to. For instance “a three dimensional Joe Dalton figurine will evoke more surely Lucky Luke than will a typescript script from Goscinny” (Daures, 2011)²². This idea makes by-products and books a sure way to remind the spectator of his reading experience and his knowledge about a comic. Menu goes further still, declaring that the original page itself has a synecdoche value:

The page is never shown as an end per se, but always as track and a representative for something else (Menu, 2011).

This gives the page the ambiguous status of an artefact evoking a work of art without being a part of this work of art itself (since the original page is different from the printed one). For Menu, the original page is a symbol and has no intrinsic value. This position is also held by some comic artists: Colin

²² « Une figurine en trois dimensions de Joe Dalton évoquera plus sûrement la série Lucky Luke que le scénario tapuscrit de Goscinny. »

MacNeil, for instance, does not keep his original works because he does not think that they possess any value (MacNeil, 2015). While the original page seems to be an unavoidable artefact in comic exhibitions (Gravett, 2016), there are a few authors and artists who question its validity.

The commercial and speculative value is now more and more present in the comic world. Comics have always been a medium appreciated by collectors (Beaty, 2012). The economic value of comics, while not new, seems to have been increasingly accepted by the general public during recent years. The sale of original pages for an expensive price is now reported in newspapers, and the idea that comics can be sold for an impressive amount of money is taken as given.²³ This idea brings comics closer to the level of recognition afforded to the fine arts (which are, of course, greatly economically recognised), even though the economic value of comics is still much lower in comparison. It is now ordinary for the audience of a comics exhibition to be interested in the price of the pieces exhibited, as is the case in fine art exhibitions.

The artefacts exhibited for their didactic value teach or demonstrate something to their viewers. For instance, a lot of exhibitions focus on showing the creative process involved in comics production. Demystifying the work of comics artists is important for many authors and artists (Gravett, 2016 and Herd, 2016). In *Integrity of the Page: The Creative Process of Daniel Clowes* (2016), an exhibition in the University of Chicago Library, original pages (a great artefact to show the different layers of creation of a page) and sketches were shown, as well as notes, scripts and drafts. Exhibition documents such as videos and interviews are a great fit for this function. Displaying the materials used by the author is also a good way to reveal the creative process behind a comic. Of course, other themes can be broached in a didactic way, such as comic history (with exhibitions such as *Les Maitres de la Bande Dessinee* or *Comic Invention*) or the discovery (or re-discovery) of an author as in *Moebius Trans-Forme* or the Art Spiegelman installation for *Co-Mi*).

The aesthetic function is also often emphasised in comic exhibitions. In many ways, this is perhaps inevitable: comics are a visual medium and their display in museums provides a good occasion to highlight the aesthetic aspect of the form. *Bande Dessinee et Figuration Narrative* provides an example of how careful curation can spotlight the artistic talent of comics creators. The artefacts chosen to perform this function can differ depending on the point of view of the curators and artists. For instance, Menu (2011) considers the original page as a step in a process rather than a work of art in

²³ It is the subject of an episode of the series *Community*, for example (Season 5, Episode 5: Geothermal Escapism).

itself. Based on this, a curator could decide that displaying a page from the printed version of the comic would make more sense from an aesthetic point of view. But others, such as Groensteen, think that the original page is the closest to the artist's will, and that printing and reproduction tarnish it (Groensteen, 2007). Following this idea, it would make more sense, from an aesthetic point of view, to exhibit the original work. The use of the aesthetic function in a comic exhibition, then, will mostly depend on the view of the curators, and can be used in many different contexts and through many different artefacts.

Finally, the **documentary function** seems to be used with less frequency, but still exists in comics exhibitions. Comics can indeed be a great means of gathering information and showing reality. Several authors have dedicated part of their work to this cause, such as Joe Sacco or Etienne Davodeau. This aspect of the work can be shown in exhibition. In this specific case, it would be less of an exhibition about comics themselves, and more of an exhibition using comics to broach another theme (work, for example, as in the exhibition *Etienne Davodeau, Dessiner le travail* in Nantes) using the medium of comics to make a broader point.

The original page

Among the artefacts most frequently used, the original page clearly stands out. It is one of the artefact most often present (Daures, 2011; Gravett, 2016), and it can be used for any of the functions Daures (2011) evokes: narrative (with the story on the page), synecdoche (as an evocation of the comic itself), commercial (original pages can command a high sale price), didactic (particularly to show the creative process), aesthetic (through its visual content), and documentary (through its narrative content). These many possibilities explain the continued interest of curators in the original page, though its omnipresence is by no means unquestioned. As Baudry (2012) notes, the original page is at the centre of many debates in the comics community. Beyond the question of the convenience of the artefact (is it comfortable for visitors to read?), the choice to displaying an original page in itself is already meaningful. Painting is traditionally the most respected visual art among the art world. Museum collections are usually dominated by painting, over and above other artforms, and paintings have long been the most respected type of art in history (Bann, 2003). Original pages happen to be the comics artefact that bear the closest relation to painting. As they are not reproduced, they possess the "aura" that Benjamin (2008) has described. The viewer can still see the hand of the artist; one can notice the texture of the material used to draw or paint, see the tracks of pencils, etc. Original pages allow us,

for a moment, to forget that comics are mechanically printed in editions of thousands, are part of an industry, and are a medium of mass culture. The modes of display often chosen for original pages are also very close to those used for paintings. Original pages tend to be hung vertically on walls, and are frequently framed. As Rosset (2009) observes, they are expected to create an aesthetic emotion in the same way that traditional paintings do. This imitation of painting is surely a way of further legitimising comics as an artform, serving to underline the common points between one of the most respected visual arts and a less respected medium. It is a valid strategy. But comics are now increasingly accepted as a serious artform. They are, as we have seen, recognised as such by major scholars, and are a growing field of academic study and research. Therefore, it could be interesting for curators to focus on other aspects of comic exhibition. In *Quintet* for example, the curators established that they did not wish to legitimize comics, and instead developed a highly original display with works such as the Blanquet ghost train--although they did not define their exhibition as a "comics exhibition" either (Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, 2009). The original page is maybe not the most accurate artefact to represent comics anymore. It is often used to justify the presence of comics in museums (by making comics look aesthetically close to painting) rather than showing comics for themselves. The comics artefacts available, and how they are selected and employed, are complex questions in comics exhibitions. As the Blanquet work shows, however, the ways in which exhibitions are designed is also important, and can offer a new perspective on the selected artefact.

Scenography: the atmosphere and aim of the exhibition

John Nicks (2002) defines scenography as the interpretation of a collection of artefacts. This simple definition covers a long and complex process, from the choice of a theme and selection of artworks, to the planning and designing of the exhibition facilities. Through scenography, the curator will present comics through a specific angle, and share their vision of the medium with visitors.

For instance, many exhibitions focus on expanding the recognition of comics. For curators Paul Gravett (2016) and Matthew Jarron (2016), this is one of the main reasons to exhibit comics. Curators can use different kinds of scenographic techniques to highlight the 'worthiness' of the medium in different ways. For example, there have been several exhibitions aiming to create a canon for comics. Every artform has its own canon, but as Groensteen (2006) has argued, readers and scholars of comics tend to appreciate and accept everything on the same level: a masterpiece and a minor work can be discussed in the same terms. This makes recognition more difficult to achieve, since interesting works

tend to be obscured by many average ones. Creating a canon would not be about having a strict hierarchy based on precise criteria (the obsolescence of this idea has been explained above), but simply about offering guidelines that point new readers towards the best works the medium has produced. Removing this barrier to engagement could help the medium to be viewed in a more positive light. Following this thought, exhibitions such as *Masters of American Comics* or *Les Maîtres de la Bande Dessinée Européenne* were created to respond to this need for a canon. These exhibitions focused on a panel of selected comic artists, and utilised a sober scenography that emphasised the information about the authors. This was, essentially, a repurposing of the same authorism that had brought recognition to the cinema and its *auteurs* (Andrews, 2013). These exhibitions also used fine art codes in the display, with framed original pages (and their “unique” aura) hung vertically on the walls. Another way to attract more recognition for comics is to focus on their context and history. It has been argued that the study of comics and their history is not developed enough (Groensteen, 2006; Beaty, 2012). This situation is evolving, and exhibitions are an effective way to spread information about comics, especially since the institutional status of museums can influence both scholarly/critical opinion and general public opinion. A few curators have engaged with these issues—for example, in *Comic Invention*, a whole room was dedicated to comics history, where the “first” comics were displayed alongside medieval books and their early use of picture and text in a narrative or illustrative way. Pre-comics such as Max Ernt's *Une Semaine de Bonté* are also exhibited, together with contemporary comics from Frank Quitely. Artworks from very different times were displayed all together in the same large window display. It should be noted that the exhibition labels were especially detailed, with information about the author and the context of the work presented alongside a pictorial analysis of some of the pages. Exhibitions can also highlight comic authors' technical skills, as we have seen with the enlarged panels of *BandeDessinée et Figuration Narrative*, and with the way *The Integrity of the Page: The Creative Process of Daniel Clowes* privileged the process and practice of creating comics. These are few examples of scenography for a given angle of approach, but many others are possible and remain to be explored.

Daures (2011) closely studied comics exhibitions taking place in France, and out of this, created a system of classification for comics exhibition. For Daures, there are three main approaches (any of which can be mixed in the same exhibition). **The didactic approach** is used in exhibitions trying to teach the visitor something (and can be linked with the didactic function of an artefact). Trying to encourage greater recognition for comics is included in this category: the aim is to teach the viewer how to appreciate comics and how to see their value more accurately. This approach can concern any topic, from the discovery of foreign comic cultures, to a particular period in comics history or a specific

genre of comics, as well as works by lesser-known authors. It can offer a complete discovery, can deepen a pre-existing knowledge, or can aim to correct a misconception (e.g. that comics are only for children). The following category is **the documentary approach**. This category has two levels: the exhibition can use comics as a support, and focus on the subject of the comic rather than on the comic itself (such as *Dessiner le Travail*, which used Davodeau's artwork to explore the notion of the professional world). The artefacts exhibited then have a documentary value. The other path is to document the comic itself: to show how it was made or to give information about the author and their career. This approach would typically show the working material of the artists, or make use of exhibition documents. Finally, Daures describes three ways to use **the aesthetic approach**. Here, curators try to offer an aesthetic experience that would replace the reading experience by giving access to the general visual imagination of the author, showing artworks in their context with several pages of the same comic, or magnifying a specific part of the artwork, among other solutions. The aesthetic of the comic is the focus of the exhibition. Daures' work is very interesting, though it is important to note that these categories are quite broad. While Daures' approach enables the classification of all types of exhibitions, another point of view could help us to understand comics exhibitions even better. Instead of focusing solely on comics and the comics world, we could engage with the other side of the story, exploring the museum idea of scenography and how it might apply to comics. In his general analysis of museum curation, Barry Lord (2002) focuses on the visitors and the ways in which they might apprehend an exhibition. This approach offers a new perspective on the notions of scenography and display. Lord asserts that there are four modes of apprehension, which can be summarised as follows:

Mode of apprehension	Type	Characteristics
Contemplation	Aesthetic	Individual perception of specific work
Comprehension	Contextual or thematic	Relational perception of artefacts in context or in relation to a theme
Discovery	Exploration – as in visible storage	Exploration of specimens grouped by category
Interaction	Live demonstrations; multimedia	Kinaesthetic response to stimulus

Table 2: Excerpt from *The manual of museum exhibitions* (Lord and Lord, 2002)

These categories have been created for any kind of artefact that could be exhibited (not limited to artworks), but they also fit with the different ways of exhibiting comics that we have explored above. The contemplation apprehension resonates with Daures' aesthetic approach, as does the comprehension type with the documentary and didactic approaches. The discovery aspect seems to focus on the discovery of "specimens grouped by category" but could easily be adapted to comics, as will be seen in the next chapter. There are many potential ways of using scenography to exhibit comics and comics artefacts, which promises some interesting evolutions in the near future.

Chapter 3: Showing Comics

The focus will now be on artefacts created specifically for exhibitions—the “original creations” in Daures’ artefact categories. These objects can vary in nature, from the creation of a simple comic on paper (as has been the case with *Toy Comix*, where artists created stories about the Museum of Decorative Art’s collections) to the building of a whole installation (as will be seen below). They can participate in any of the approaches enumerated by either Daures or Lord. For instance, in the exhibition *Un Vaste Complot*, pre-existing artworks are mixed with an original creation from Etienne Lécroart. Organised for the festival Bd a Bastia in 2011, the exhibition was focused on detective comics and was displaying original artworks from several artists (Talbot, Sokal, Lax etc.). Gradually, the visitor could notice notes doodled on the frames of the artworks or the walls. Lécroart created a detective story within the exhibition, creating a metanarrative that culminated in the top floor of the gallery. Here, he was exhibiting (with a lot of humour) his evidence that the artists displayed were plotting against the city. This type of creation offers an interactive and lively reflection on the plot process in detective comics and on the codes of the genre. It can help to create a “comprehension” approach to comics, in Lord's (2002) terms.



Figure 7: Pictures from the exhibition “Un Vaste Complot”- Photograph from BoDoi

While the possibilities for the use of “original creations” (Daures, 2011) are very wide, this chapter will focus on one particular approach to the question. The “discovery apprehension” proposed by Lord (2002) seems to be very accurate in the case of comic. Even though the author is talking about general exhibitions in his classification, his idea of a “discovery” can and will be adapted to comic exhibitions in this study, and will be examined from several angles.

Introducing comics

While comics are a popular medium, it does not mean that the numerous comics readers are aware of all comics-specific characteristics, features and qualities (just as people watching movies are not all cinema connoisseurs). Exhibitions can be an effective way to encourage the general public to discover comics language more deeply, and to underline a particular aspect of the medium. For instance, the French curator group Lucie Lom focuses on the atmosphere and the feelings created by a comic in their scenographies. Comics are often seen as an entertainment medium with little value²⁴, but Lucie Lom manages to highlight the creative and dramatic potential of the medium. The comic artist Marc-Antoine Mathieu, a member of the Lucie Lom, created with his team the exhibition *S.E.N.S.*, inspired by his book *Sens*, in 2015 in Saint Nazaire. In *Sens*, an anonymous character wanders in a labyrinth made of walls, doors, and arrows that disobeys every physical law. The exhibition was made entirely of original creations. To begin the exhibition, the visitor had to go through a tunnel that led to a dark room. There, without any context or sign, the visitor was left alone in a large room with soft (but troubling) background music. The room was almost empty, apart from a thick layer of sand on the ground, a desk and a chair, and a paper installation (See figure 8). Once their eyes had adjusted to the light, and after a little bit of exploration, the visitor could find an entrance to another room. In this room, several screens of various size and forms were hung, showing animations with arrows, labyrinths, and characters walking alone (See Figure 8).

²⁴ Little or negative, as illustrated by Robert Warshow (Warshow, 1967)

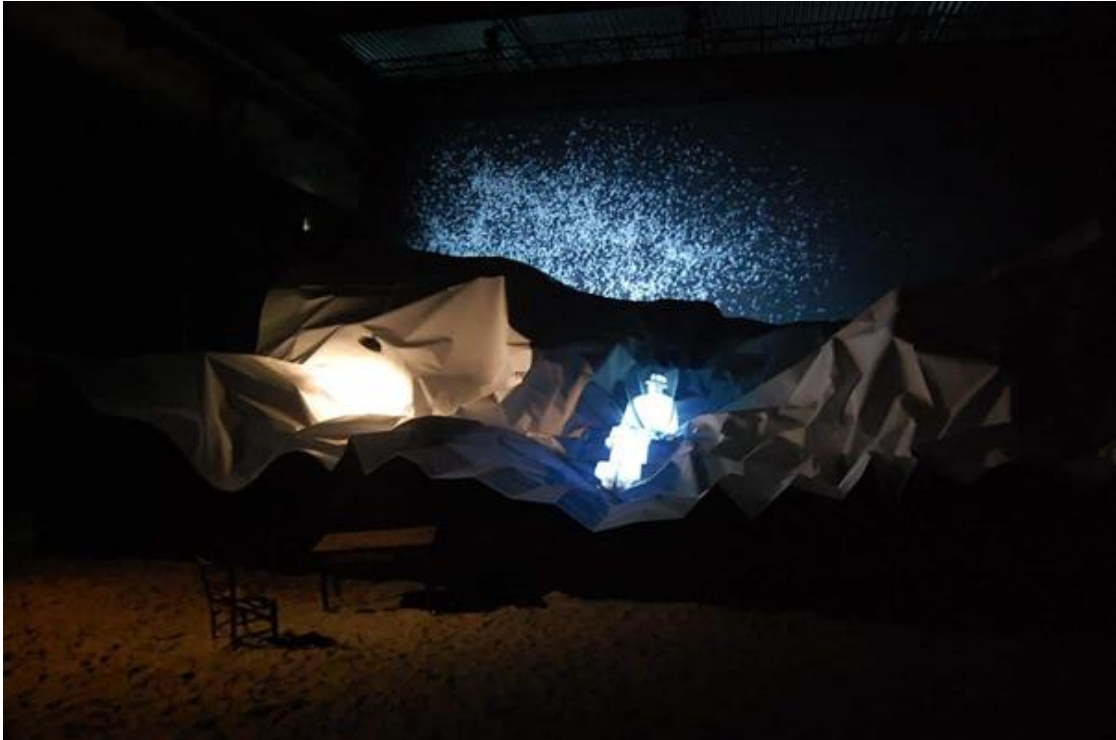


Figure 8: Photographs of S.E.N.S.'s scenography by Slate

Mathieu did not simply recreate the decor or the content of his book; rather, he created a whole new piece that continues his original work and offers another vision of it. Paul O'Neil (2012) stresses that

exhibitions require haptic, visual, and auditory relations to be successful, and this is what Mathieu achieved perfectly here. Using all the tools available, he managed to immerse the visitor in his world and to make them feel certain emotions (disorientation, perplexity, etc.) that connect them to the comic's world and story. Reading a comic is indeed an immersive experience: the reader can get caught in the work thanks to the complexity of the universe created, the brilliance of the plot, or the credibility of the characters. Mathieu offers a physical immersion that is based on different elements in S.E.N.S. There is an interesting meaning added to the title here: in French "sens" can mean "direction", and in this way the title of the book was referring to the fact that the main characters were lost. However, the word also means "sense", and indeed in the exhibition Mathieu invites the visitors' five senses to share in the atmosphere he created: the visitor has to physically move through the display to feel the atmosphere, and get involved through the stimulation of their senses (with the sound effects, the sand in their shoes, etc.). Through a clever use of various tools, the Lucie Lom team managed not only to highlight the atmosphere of Mathieu's comic and enable visitors to discover his world, but also to highlight the importance of atmosphere and immersion in comics.

Interestingly, this kind of exhibition relying on interaction and physical involvement has been very trendy in French-speaking countries, though it has not always been successful. Some curators simply recreate the scenery used in a given comic. For instance, in 1985 the Angoulême Festival created a life-size version of the spaceship from the series *Valérian and Laureline*, and displayed it in a 400m² space (Daures, 2011). While such a creation is entertaining and will certainly attract the general public, there is no proper scenography here: the organisers do not interpret the comic, they simply copy it and use the exhibition as a paraphrase for comics. The focus on comics' universe and atmosphere is still, when done well, a great way to highlight the possibilities of comics and allow visitors to discover new authors or works.

Exhibitions can also broach topics that are more technical. For instance, discontinuity between the images is an essential characteristic of comics. Scott McCloud broaches this topic in his book *Understanding Comics*: he calls it "closure", and speaks about "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud, 1994). The attention of the reader is usually drawn to the "whole", the story told in the entire comic, but as McCloud highlights, the simple passing from one panel to another is the result of lots of thought from the artists. Artists like Ruppert and Mulot have offered reflections on image discontinuity in their creations, such as *Le Petit Théâtre de l'Ebriété*²⁵, created for the Swiss comic festival *Sismics*. This installation mixes drawings on splash pages and phenakistiscopes to tell the story of a theatre group looking for a good actor to play a person being

²⁵ "The little theatre of drunkenness"

drunk. The phenakistiscopes are made of paper arranged in volume and stuck onto vinyl turntables that make them rotate. They are made in such a way that the viewer can clearly discern the “gaps” between the drawings. It is not an illusion of an animation that is shown here, but a series of drawings that complete each other and together show a complete action (walking, jumping, falling etc.). These phenakistiscopes are narrative: for example, in Figure 9 (below), the phenakistiscope shows a woman stepping onto a balcony and falling while trying to lean on the guardrail. The phenakistiscope is narrative in the same way that comics are: there are several actions happening at different times that are related to each other and together form a story. While the woman falls, the man on the balcony repositions the guardrail; the woman’s fall draws attention to the rest of the building and its occupants (a man smoking, a bird...), and she finally lands in a bin that a garbage collector takes away.²⁶



Figure 9: Excerpt from *Le petit théâtre de l'ébriété* by Ruppert and Mulot – Photograph by Fanzino.

Ruppert and Mulot draw attention to discontinuity, here. In comics, discontinuity is often ignored by the reader in favour of narration; the reader gets too involved in the story and does not notice the language used to build it. Discontinuity cannot be ignored in *Le Petit Theatre le l'Ebriete*; the use of the phenakistiscope highlights the presence of gaps in the story while still making the story understandable (as it is the case in comics). The use of illustrations to complete the phenakistiscopes is also meaningful: they are two very different media, one still and the other in motion, one showing a single moment and the other a whole action. The gap between them are quite wide but they are still connected, and so the use of these two supports makes sense with the story. Indeed, while the actors are pretending to be drunk the phenakistiscope makes their actions look difficult through the

²⁶ A youtube video showing the complete animation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYIAQfnxqrU>

sensation of jolting that people can experience whilst drunk; on the other hand, the members of the theatre company that are judging and picking the actors are shown in black and white illustrations with clear lines—they look sure of themselves and stable (See Figure 10). *Le Petit Théâtre de l'Ebriété* uses an original display method to highlight an aspect of the language of comics that is not often emphasised, and in this way it takes advantage of the exhibition form.



Figure 10: Poster of the event by Ruppert and Mulot.



Figure 11: Excerpt from *Le Petit Théâtre de l'Ebriété* by Ruppert and Mulot – Photograph by Fanzino.

Another example of an exhibition making the visitors discover underrated aspects of comics would be *10x10*, organised for the ten years anniversary of the Swiss publishing house Atrabile. The artists working with Atrabile were asked to create an artwork using post-its. Each artist was given a square made of one hundred post-its (ten by ten, which is where the name of the exhibition comes from) to create an artwork of their choice. This idea in itself already shows comics from an unusual point of view. The use of post-its evokes the idea that comics are ephemeral, an idea developed in Groensteen's work (with his formula "an art without memory" (2006), that as we have seen, also evokes comics' problems with preservation). The form of the post-its calls to mind comic panels, which are usually square or rectangular (Groensteen, 2007), but also draws attention to the structure of comics. Post-it as objects are independent of each other and are meant to be moved around, though in this context they happen to be put side by side. In this way, the use of post-its evokes the fragile balance between the "hyperframe", the page as a whole (through the sense that these post-its take once gathered), and the "frame", the panel as an isolated entity (through the independence of a single post-it that could easily be moved).²⁷ Two authors have illustrated this idea especially well in their work for *10x10*. First, the artist Baladi chose to show one large sized illustration that is spread across all the post-it, in the manner of a painting. The illustration shows a large sized character and a tree and few mountains in the background. A closer look reveals that some of the post-its can be isolated in groups and actually form short narrative sequences (See Figure 12): for example, the leaves flying from the tree. To come back to another of Groensteen's theories, comics are based on articulation ("arthrology") and on the role of space and placement ("spatio-topia") (Groensteen, 2007). This work accurately questions the role of these two elements by using them in an unusual way. It is indeed difficult to separate the different elements of this illustration, but the viewer can still feel that there is a "whole" on the one hand (the large sized illustration), but also parts that are independent, even though they participate in the whole image.

²⁷ Concept developed by Groensteen in *The System of Comics* (Groensteen, 2007)

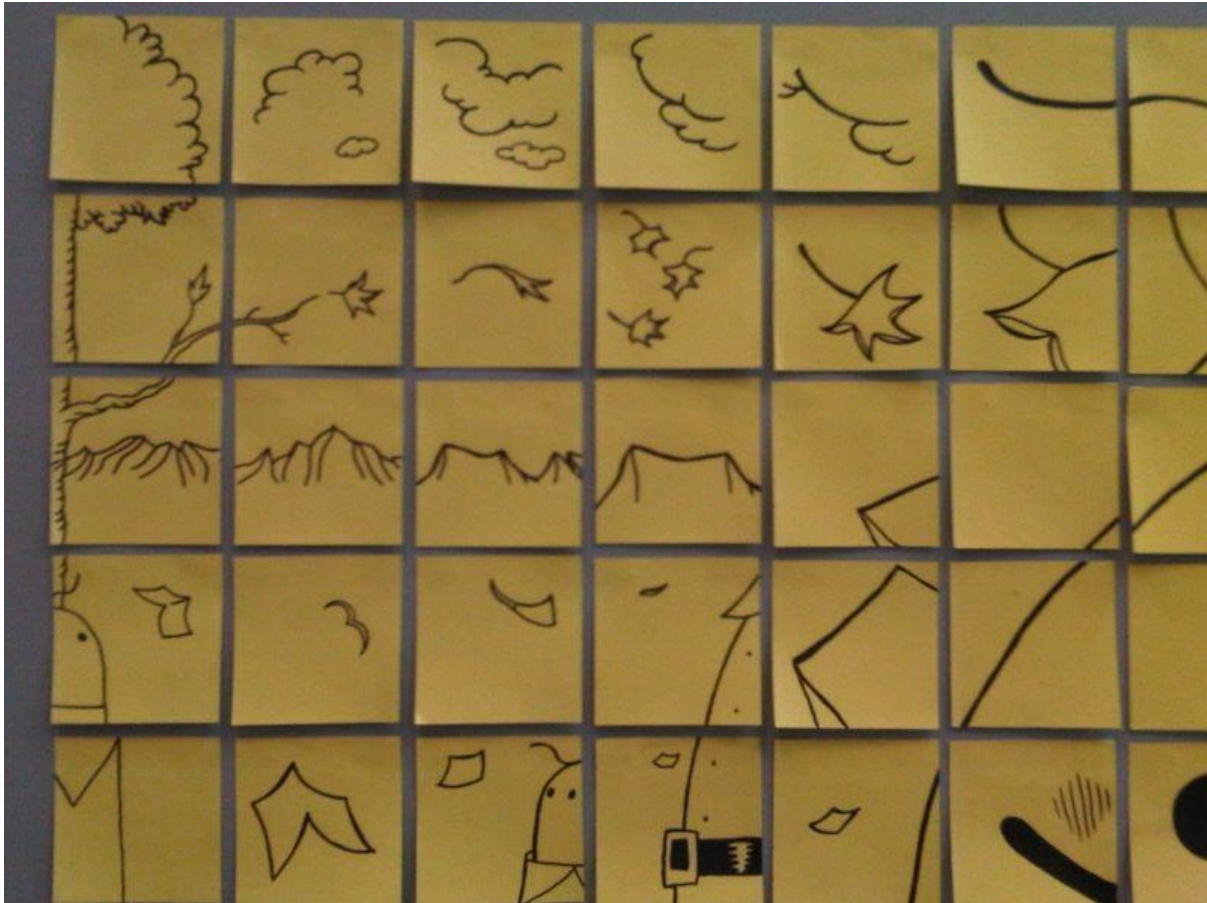


Figure 12: Excerpt from 10x10 by Baladi – Photograph by P.-L. Daures.

Frederik Peeters also questioned arthrology and spatio-topia in his creation for *10x10*. He created a comic that can be read in a “classic” way; that is, horizontally, in strips. But the last two panels of each line actually form another narrative that can be read vertically as well. The content of the comic is also shown through an original process, consisting in showing the characters and their surrounding in two different panels. For instance, if a character drives a car Peeters will represent them sitting in the air, then he will represent a car in the following post-it. Peeters use the idea of juxtaposition: juxtaposing characters and objects, but also juxtaposing different stories and different senses of reading. The post-it support almost makes it feel like a puzzle, as if Peeters intended to come back, take his panels, and simply change their order. This work also uses the idea of rhythm, with the two last panels giving a rhythm to the lines, and with the use of post-its of different colours. Peeters uses the post-it support to offer a global reflection about comic structure and layout. The exhibition context allowed these two artists to try a new format and make the most of their space and support to emphasise a technical aspect of comics that is not always foregrounded.



Figure 13: Excerpt from 10x10 by Fredrik Peeters- Photograph by P.-L. Daures.

Exploration of the comic medium

Besides helping the general public to discover comics from another angle, the new material possibilities offered by exhibition can help artists to rediscover their medium. They can explore new possibilities, stretch the limits of the form, and offer something new. Dave McKean's project *The Rut*, part of the *Hypercomics* exhibition curated by Paul Gravett in London (2010), offered a reflection on comics as a form, and especially its link to space and narration. In *The Rut*, Dave McKean tells the story of a teenager being stabbed. This work is autobiographical, and offers three different points of view: that of the victim, of the aggressor, and of a witness (McKean does not wish to reveal his role in this story) (McKean, 2012). In his creation, McKean combined framed panels (with illustrations and text) with objects, sculpture and paintings on several supports. The visitor could navigate through these different artefacts with the help of numbers, and by simply going to the nearest artefact. (See Figure

14: the pictures on the right are numbered from 1 to 4 since they were at the beginning of the exhibition).



Figure 14: Excerpt from *The Rut* by Dave McKean - Photograph by Cara Lambert.

McKean exploited the curatorial space as much as possible here: there were artefacts on the walls, but also on the ground and hung from the ceiling, and the windows were painted. The plurality of the artefacts used recalls the fragmentation inherent in comics through the use of panels, but also the fragmentation of memory, since it is an autobiographical story and memory is sometimes divided or unsure.²⁸ The fragmentation also echoes the plurality of the points of view in the story (victim, aggressor, and witness). This installation required a greater physical investment from the visitor than if they were simply reading a book. The visitors had to walk through the room to access the narrative,

²⁸ As Elisabeth El Refaie showed it in her book *Autobiographical Comics, Life writing in Pictures* (El Refaie, 2012).

and to put themselves in the character's place in a quite literal way through the use of masks. When "wearing" the masks (that were fixed on the ground with a metal rod), the visitors could access a part of the narration that was not accessible before: the mask isolated a fragment of text written on a three dimensional support, and suddenly rendered it comprehensible. This display recreated the restricted view that comics offer through panels (Groensteen, 2007). With this work, Dave McKean involved the "reader" in his story, and offered them a visual and sensory experience—though one very different to that offered by Lucie Lom. This is not an installation focusing on an atmosphere but a real comic, narrated using visual language and juxtaposition. This example shows one possibility among many others of how to use the exhibition support to explore new possibilities for comics.

Benoit Jacques also offered interesting possibilities regarding comic exhibitions. His work *Planches* is particularly relevant. This work, created in 2001, has been exhibited at several European comics festival²⁹. The artist created a small boat with comics carved into the planks used for the body and drawn onto the textile used for the sail. He also created many small objects (such as tablets or lucky charms) inside the boat (See Figure 15 for an example of the display) (Daures, 2011). Jacques explains his concept as follows:

[It] comes from the idea of somebody arriving from another planet, that would suddenly be surrounded by people creating comics. This person hear all this specific vocabulary. [...] They understand the words but they do not know the codes. And they start to produce a kind of automatic writing³⁰

²⁹ Bd a Bastia and Periscopages among others .

³⁰ "L'idée de base, c'était vraiment de partir de l'idée de quelqu'un débarquant d'une autre planète qui se trouverait subitement entouré de gens qui font de la bande dessinée. Il entend ce vocabulaire spécifique à la bande [...] Il comprend le vocable, mais il ne connaît pas les codes. Et il se met à produire une sorte d'écriture automatique", Jacques in an interview with Daures (Daures, 2011).

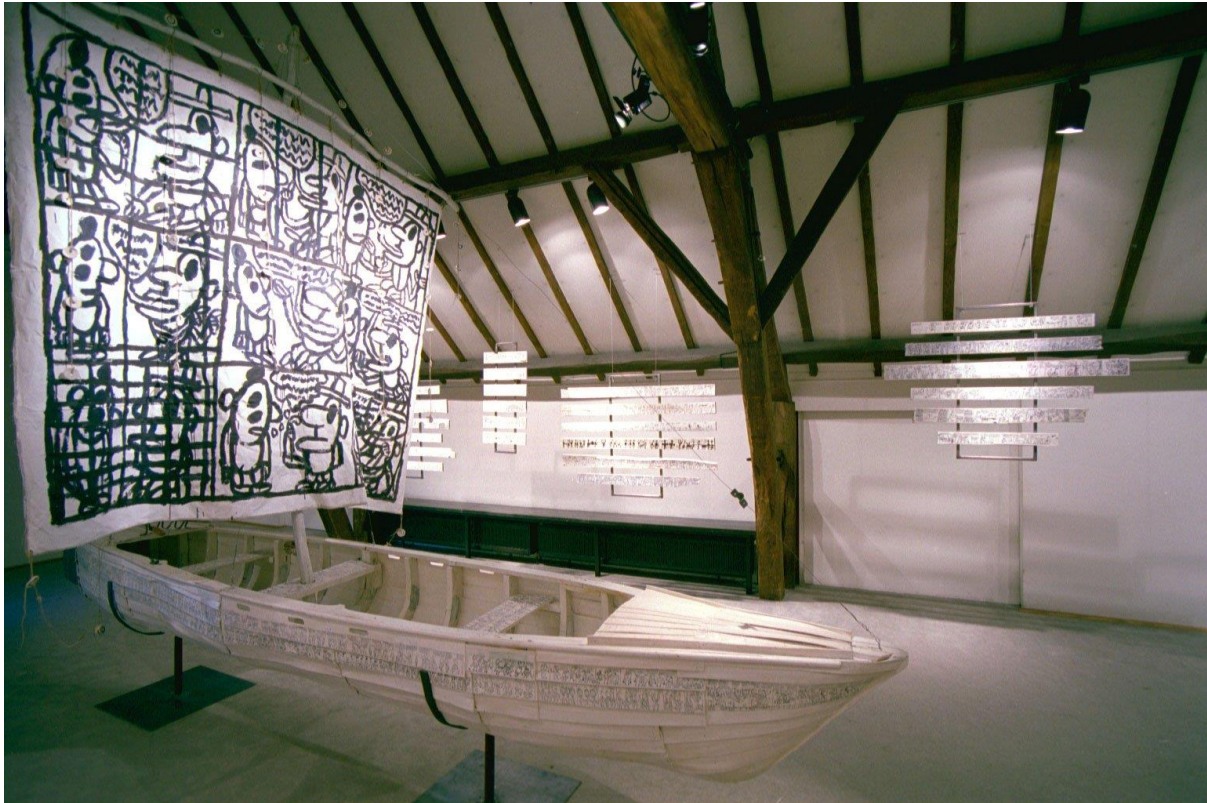


Figure 15: Planches by Benoit Jacques - Photograph by P.-L. Daures.

Several points can be underlined here. There is first a reflection on the support. In French, the term “plank” (“planche”) is used to refer to the comic page. Jacques uses literal planks as supports here, as a pun, but also to support his basic idea of somebody discovering comics and trying to understand them. Instead of using the traditional paper as a support Jacques opted for wood, textile, and clay, and traded the drawing technique for carving (except for the sail). The comics itself can be surprising. They have been created through automatic writing: Jacques uses the traditional visual language of comics (such as panels, speech balloons, etc.) but without aiming to create any story or provoke any feeling in particular. The speech balloons are filled with lines and do not use any kind of known spoken language. However, as the artist observes, willingly or not a narrative is created, and the viewer can interpret the panels as they want. Their habits as readers will influence them and make them “read” the panels anyway. The similarity between some of the artefacts and ancient historical artefacts can also be highlighted. The process of engraving icons calls to mind Egyptian hieroglyphs or Trajan’s Column, the length of the “fresco” on the boat or the use of the textile material recalls the Bayeux Tapestry. These few historical objects are sometimes contextualised as pre-comics (for instance in the permanent exhibition *The Invention of Comic Strips* at the Belgian Comic Strip Centre in Brussels). Through his creation, Benoit Jacques questions the limits of the medium. He explores the different supports that can be used for comics, as well as the use of visual codes and their influence on the readers. He also questions comics history and its link to contemporary comics. Creations such as *Le*

Petit Théâtre de l'Ebriété can indeed recall ancient works such as Trajan's Column, and the past might be more linked with the present experimentation than visitors or artists could think.

Digital solutions

For an accurate representation of contemporary comic world, digital tools have to be taken into account during the creation of a comic exhibition. Comics are created by hand less and less, and the use of a computer in the creation process can range from simply the lettering to the whole comic. Regarding the display of pre-existing objects, this evolution will change a lot of things: some authors do not have original pages to show anymore, since they work solely on computers. Curators can simply print the works, and they can also display them on digital devices. The physical presence of digital tools in the exhibition space is a good way to draw attention to the fact that comics creation is in constant evolution, and is definitely moving with the times. It is also an interesting new type of display to use. From a general point of view, it can add interactivity to the exhibition, at different levels. It can be simply a screen that gives general information about the exhibition or an artwork in particular (as in *Integrity of the Page: The Creative Process of Daniel Clowes*). It can also allow for manipulation of the artworks, perhaps for educational purposes. A screen with movable layers could show the creative process in an inventive and engaging way, and could detail the different steps involved (draft, ink, colours, lettering...). The use of augmented reality can also bring more content to an artwork. Ram Devineni created an exhibition inspired by his book *Priya's Shakti* that explored this concept.³¹ In his work, he raises awareness about sexual violence toward women in India, and tries to share factual information mixed with testimonies in a fictional story. In his exhibition layout, the printed pages of his comics are hung on the walls and iPads are made available to the public. Using these devices, the public can access added content: either animations or dialogue that are part of the story, or further information about the author or the context (See Figure 16). This device offers a deeply interactive experience, as some of the panels are available only on the iPad. This type of interaction brings something new to exhibitions. From a general point of view, it breaks the power of the museum over the visitor, subverting this previously "one way method of mass communication" and inviting them to participate (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). It also creates a kind of experience that is closer to the reader's experience: rather than being passive, in a "contemplation" apprehension of the exhibition, as Lord and Lord (2002) describe, the visitors interact with the artworks, just like they interact with comic books (in opening and closing them, taking them to another place, turning the pages etc.).

³¹ The exhibition is quite popular and is currently travelling around the world

Digital tools can also continue the interactive experience, even outside the exhibition space. Just as visitors can borrow books from other exhibitions (such as *Strip Search*, seen before), several exhibitions also offer an app to download on the visitor's phone. Once the visitors leave the exhibition, the information that is on the app stays with them. Again, the experience of the exhibition can be extended, and does not have to stop when the visitor physically leave the space. A lot of these tools are quite easy to access and to use, and have many functions that are interesting for comic exhibition—especially in terms of what interactivity can bring.



Figure 16: Excerpt from *Priya's Shakti* by Ram Devineni.

It does not seem that other tools have been developed specifically in the direction of comic exhibition and displays, though some digital tools used for other purposes could be linked with exhibition. It is this that will be considered in the following paragraphs.

Several comics are exploring the notion of space and articulation. Even in the 1960s, some comic artists were experimenting with volume in their pages. Francisco Ibáñez for instance, with his comic *13, Rue del Percebe* offered a new point of view in the use of space (See Figure 17). In his comics, Ibáñez showed the daily life of the inhabitant of a building; the rooms of the building were used as panels, and each panel would show one episode in the life of the apartment's inhabitant. The group Oubapo and especially Killofer worked on the idea of comics in "volume", the panels becoming faces of cubes (See Figure 18). The idea was also used in some of Bataillon's work, published in the popular *Journal of Spirou* (See Figure 19). There is a clear interest in using cube-shaped panels, and in work on the use of space within comics.

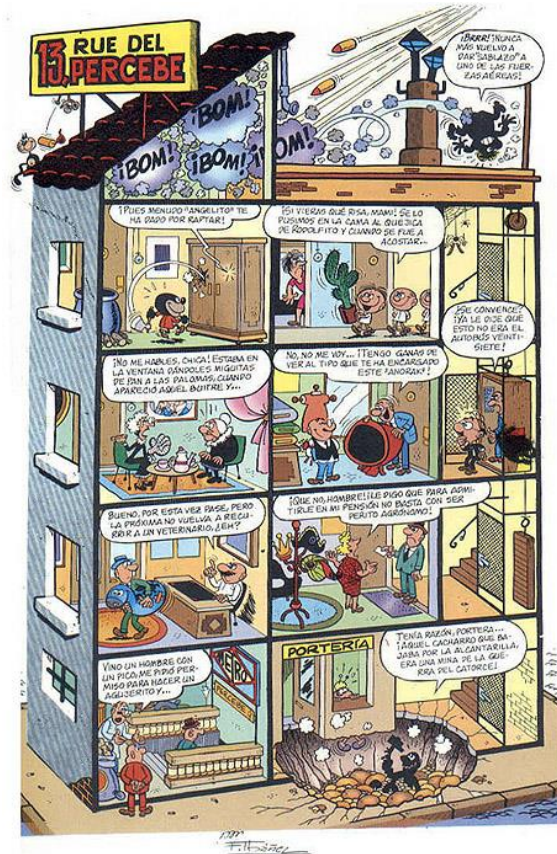


Figure 17: Excerpt from 13, Rue del Percebe by Francisco Ibáñez

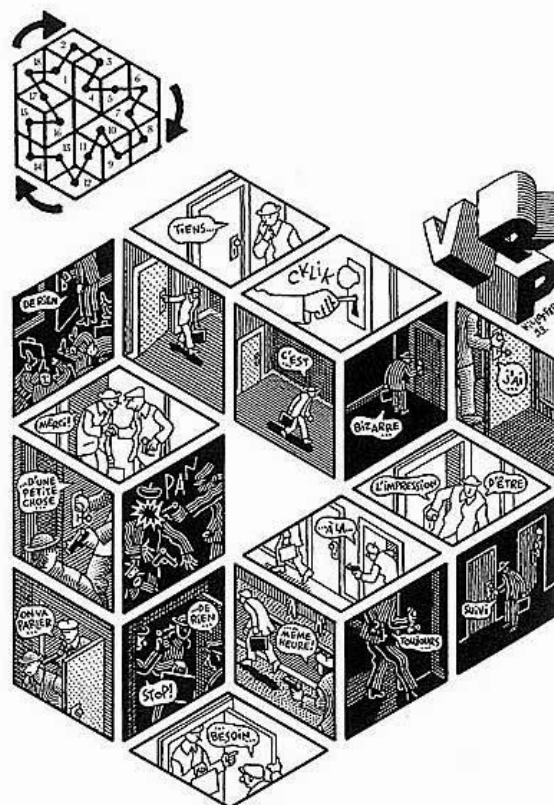


Figure 18: VRP, Killofer



Figure 19: Excerpt from L'Anniversaire de Miss Sophie from Bataillon

Julian Oliver has developed a game concept that would be very interesting to link with comics: the game *Level Head* uses two solid-plastic cubes, a camera, and a screen. The player has to position the cubes facing the camera to see their content on the screen. The cubes show different rooms and the aim of the game is to get a character to cross these rooms and find an exit. The game relies on the fact that the player has to move the cubes to see more of the room and find the exit (See Figure 20).

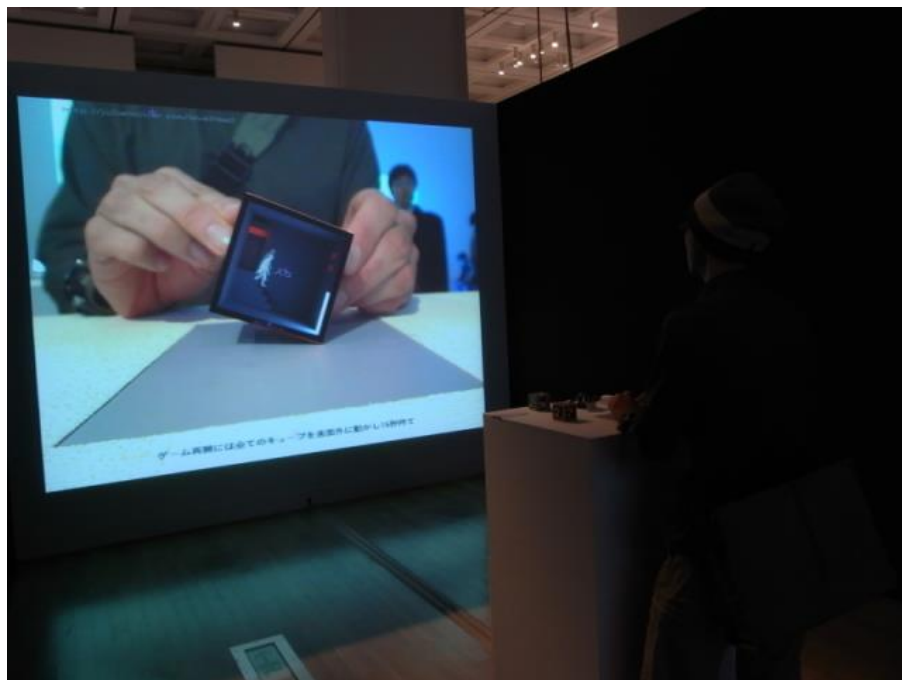


Figure 20 : Level Head- Photographs by Julian Olivier.

Using the faces of the square as a comic panel would make possible the creation of comics using space and juxtaposition in a new way. Another game concept could be linked with comics exhibitions. In *Video Games: the exhibition*, in La Cite des Sciences in Paris, one of the games created for the exhibition involved the participation of the visitors. The game was projected on a large screen (several metres high). The visitor had to come and face the screen and a camera would scan their body and integrate them to the game. The game in itself was a simple Angry Birds-like creation, where the body of the player would be used as a projectile in a slingshot. What was interesting is that once the player's

body was integrated in the game, the computer would decide where to place the player, and the player could not move from there, though the player could move their legs and arms and this movement would appear moving on the screen. This algorithm could be used to build an interactive comic: the “players” could be placed in different panels and choose to mime certain actions. Both these propositions are based on a concept originally created for video-games. This raises a question: is there a link between comics and games? From their very definition, comics are linked with “optical games”, as Filliot (2013) names them. Comics are made of optical illusions that make the reader see a third dimension where there are only two. Comics have also been associated with games through interactive structures such as the ones used by Bataillon in *Spirou* (that are often labyrinths), or through having been printed according to a game aesthetic, such as the creations from l’Association which mimic the appearance and use the rules of Scrabble, domino, or dice (Martin, 2010). To go even further, one could consider that comics have a strong ludic component. Walther considers that games are made of three things: absolute rules, contingent strategies, and possible interaction patterns (Walther, 2011). While the “contingent strategies” seem irrelevant here, comics can be considered as having rules. Walther highlights the fact that rule can be positively defined, and in this way comics follow the “rules of the reader” enacted by Daniel Pennac, that include rules in the form of possibilities such as: the possibility to skip pages, the possibility to re-read etc.³² “Possible interaction patterns” are of course included in the physical interaction of the book, but also in the way the reader will chose to read the book—readers can jump to the end if they are too curious, or can misunderstand a layout and go through panels in the wrong order, etc. There is a lot to explore in the link between comics and games. Numerous experiments have already been made, but digital tools could allow further exploration in the field.

Another technology currently developing could be interesting in comic exhibitions: Virtual Reality. The program Tilt Brush, for instance, allows the users to “paint” in three dimensions while immersed in a virtual environment. This possibility brings the idea of immersion to the foreground of the debate. Further than the mental or physical immersion offered by comics and exhibitions such as the ones from Lucie Lom, Virtual Reality offers a complete immersion of the visitor. The latter has no contact with reality anymore and can be fully surrounded by the comic universe. This new possibility seriously challenges the authority and the subjectivity of museums in their modern ideal of education and classification (Witcomb, 2003). It also gives many new possibilities for the creation of comics, since Virtual Reality allows for three dimensional creation that defies the laws of physics. For instance, an

³² See Appendix for the full set of rules

experiment inspired by Killofer's comics displayed above offers panels that can go in any direction (vertical, horizontal, up, down, side etc.) (See Figure 21).

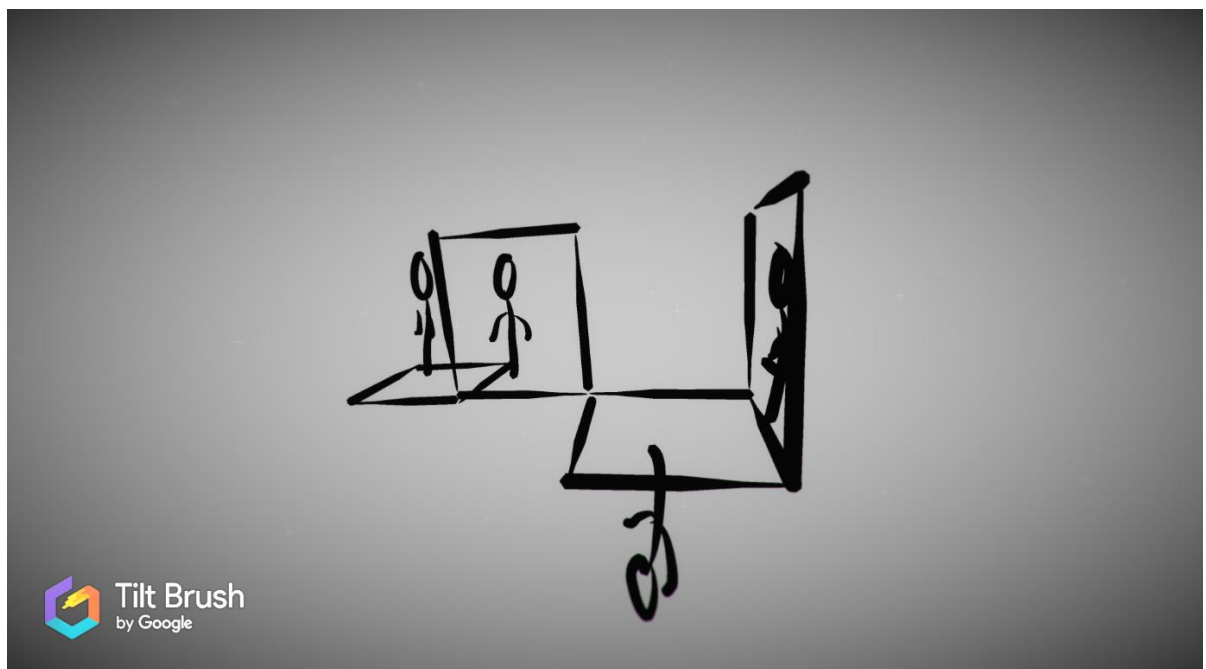
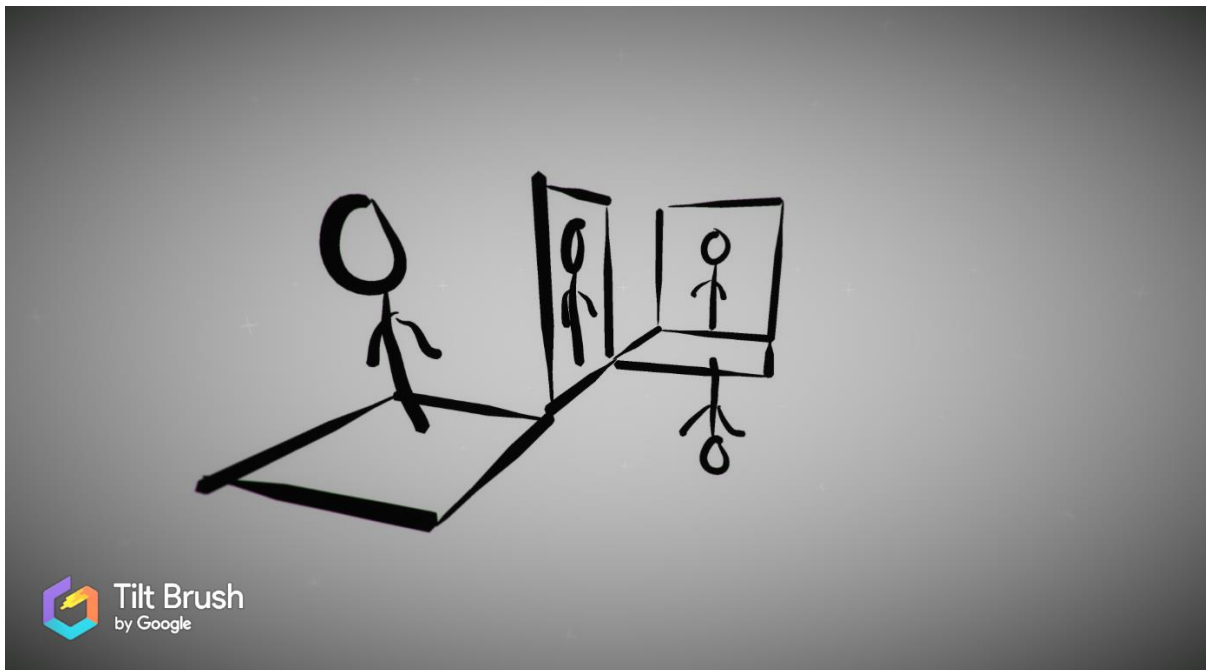


Figure 21: Example of use of Tilt Brush.

This program also calls into question the use of two dimensions; for instance speech balloons need to be in volume to make sense, using a round shape for instance (See Figure 22).

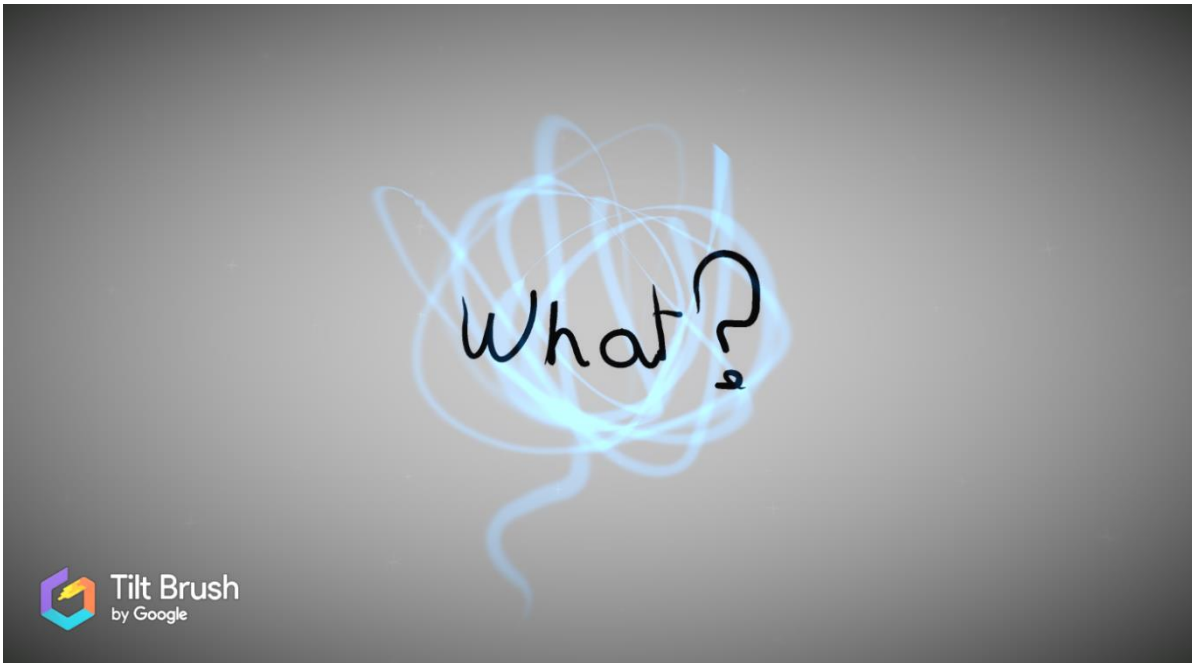


Figure 22: Use of volume in Tilt Brush.

Virtual Reality can be used to immerse the visitor in an author's work, but also to create an interactivity. Tilt Brush, for instance, is really easy to use, and visitors could use it to express themselves. Virtual Reality offers many new possibilities, both in terms of interaction and of immersion. A few authors have already embraced the idea. Marc-Antoine Matthieu, for instance, is already working on the adaptation of his comic *Sens* and his exhibition *S.E.N.S.* into a game using Virtual Reality.³³

³³ To discover on his website http://sens-vr.com/en_US/

Conclusion

This dissertation has tried to broach the main questions surrounding comics exhibitions in museums, namely the legitimacy of these exhibitions, the material details (with the artefacts exhibited and the scenography offered), and the artistic potential of such spaces. By involving philosophical, practical, and artistic insights, this work tried to give an accurate overview of the subject. The work cannot, of course, be exhaustive, and numerous points have been left aside. While the focus was on how to display comics in space, the questions of time and duration both in exhibitions and in comics themselves is just as complex and interesting. The exhibition catalogue as an artefact is also fascinating in the way it recounts the journey of a comic page, from a narrative book to a display in space, and back to a documentary book. The scope of the present dissertation, however, was simply to define what a comic exhibition could be, both through the study of the solutions offered by artists and curators over the years, and also through the proposition of other, newer solutions (especially those using digital media).

Comics exhibitions are caught in the middle between everlasting traditions and the desire of museums to embrace contemporary culture. *Quintet* is a good example of this situation: whilst offering a fascinating exhibition involving comics artists and their works (including a lot of traditional comics alongside Blanquet's contribution), the curators still felt obligated to clarify that it was not "totally a comics exhibition" (Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, 2009). Comics exhibitions have existed for over forty years now, and it is definitely time to accept comics as a valuable medium that deserves to be represented through exhibitions in museums. Debating whether comics have their place in museums or not is simply out of date, and while a few critics remain unconvinced, much of the art world agrees on this point (Daures, 2011). Similarly, using exhibitions as a means of proving the artistic value of comics, or enhancing their recognition is no longer necessary. This point is important to underline because the idea still underpins most comics exhibitions. It may have been useful in the case of the first comics exhibitions, and perhaps changed some minds at the time, but it is not necessary now. Comics are gaining gradual acceptance among both the art world and the general public, and comics exhibitions should reflect this tendency. The simple fact that curators continue to favour the original page as their main artefact most of the time shows that they are not giving a relevant representation of contemporary comics creation. Paper has been replaced by computers in the creative process and original pages give a false representation of the profession. Framed pages are also a way to seek legitimacy via a comparison with painting, though, as we have seen, this comparison is not relevant. Comics can and should be recognised for their own content and qualities.

The medium is rich and complex and has a lot to offer in and of itself. Matthew Jarron (2016) states very astutely that the notion of the art world despising comics may now exist only in the minds of comics stakeholders—that even though it used to be based on concrete facts, the acceptance of comics is not an actual problem anymore. Museums could host many more comics exhibitions if the two sides could collaborate efficiently. But curators would have to stop trying to justify their actions and simply focus on the comics themselves. Traditional exhibitions featuring the original page can still be relevant—when focused on historical representation, for example—but a lot of possibilities can be explored outside of this paradigm. Works such as *The Rut* by Dave McKean propose an incredible view on what a comic is and on how to use three dimensional space to tell a story. The few examples offered in the present work are merely an overview of everything that has been attempted and is still to be attempted in the field. Thanks to an increasing interest from comics artists, and to the development of new technologies, more explorations of comics through exhibitions can be expected in the future, and this idea is truly promising.

Appendix

Daniel Pennac's Reader Rules, from *The Rights of the Reader* (1992)

1. The right to not read
2. The right to skip
3. The right to not finish a book
4. The right to read it again
5. The right to read anything
6. The right to mistake a book for real life
7. The right to read anywhere
8. The right to dip in
9. The right to read out loud
10. The right to be quiet

One warning added: Don't make fun of people who don't read or they never will

Exhibitions quoted

10x10, curated by the publishing house Atrabile for the festival BD-Fil. Lausanne, September 2007.

Art Spiegelman's CO-MIX: A Retrospective, co-curated by Andrew Hunter and Fredrik S. Eaton. Ontario, Art Gallery of Ontario, December 2014- March 2015.

Bande dessinée et Figuration narrative, curated by Isabelle Coutrot-Chavarot. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, April-June 1967.

Comic Art Show, co-curated by John Carlin & Sheena Wagstaff. New York, Whitney Museum, 1983.

Comic Iconoclasm, curated by Sheena Wagstaff. London, Institute for Contemporary Art, January 1988 –February 1988.

Comic Invention, co-curated by Laurence Grove and Peter Black. Glasgow, Hunterian Art Gallery, March - July 2016.

Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK, curated by Adrian Edwards, John Harris Dunning and Paul Gravett. London, British Library, May-August 2014.

Étienne Davodeau : Dessiner le travail created for the festival Filming work. Poitiers, Espace Mendès France, January – February 2013.

Hergé, curated by Laurent Le Bon. Paris, Centre Pompidou, December 2006 – February 2007.

High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture, co-curated by Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik. New York, Museum of Modern Art of New York, October 1990 -January 1991.

Hypercomics, curated by Paul Gravett. London, Pump House, August-September 2010.

Integrity of the Page: The Creative Process of Daniel Clowes, curated by Ashley Gosselar. Chicago, Library of the university of Chicago, March 2016 – June 2016.

Invention of Comic Strips. Bruxelles, Belgian Comic Strip Center, permanent exhibition.

Les Maitres de la Bande Dessinée européenne, curated by François Payet. Paris, French National Library, November 2000- January 2001.

Masters of American Comics, co-curated by John Carlin and Brian Walke. Los Angeles, Hammer Museum, November2005 - March 2006.

Moebius Transe-Forme, curated by Nathalie Crinière. Paris, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, October 2010 – March 2011.

Quintet, co-curated by Thierry Raspail and Thierry Prat. Lyon, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, February-April 2009.

S.E.N.S., curated by Lucie Lom. Saint-Nazaire, Life, May-October 2015.

Strip Search, curated by Paul Gravett. 1991.

Toy Comix, co-curated by Dorothee Charles and Jean-Christophe Menu. Paris, Musée des Arts décoratifs, November 2007- April 2008.

Un Vaste Complot, Étienne Lecroart. Bastia, Centre Culturel Una Volta, March – April 2011.

Video Games: the exhibition. Paris, La Cité des Sciences, October 2013- August 2014.

Vraoum ! Trésors de la bande dessinée et art contemporain, curated by David Rosenberg and Pierre Sterckx. Paris, La Maison Rouge, May – Septembre 2009.

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