

Is Comics a Branch of Contemporary Art?

In this final chapter, we are going to leave the domain of semiotic or narratological analysis and move onto the terrain of sociology of art, art history, and cultural history. It would undoubtedly be worth developing the following reflections into a full-length essay. However, it seems appropriate to include them in the present volume, since, as we shall see, they will ultimately lead us back, by another route, to the question of narration.

In general terms, the art world and the comics world have long kept their distance from each other, to the point of seeming irreconcilable. And in high-cultural circles, comics has often been reproached for not keeping in step with the history of other arts in the twentieth century, for not being, in other words, contemporaneous with contemporary art.

The historian Pierre Couperie took an opposing view. In his concern to promote the legitimacy of comics, he set out to demonstrate that the medium had not remained untouched by the evolution of other art forms. In 1972 he wrote: “It is possible to distinguish within the development of comics, successive (or concurrent) tendencies that have marked the history of art from 1880 to the present day.” He supported this assertion by pointing to elements taken from Art Nouveau by McCay or Rubino, from Art Déco by McManus or Saint-Ogan, from Expressionism by Caniff and his followers (including Breccia), and so on, right up to the most recent artists, among whom could be found echoes of Psychedelic Art, Surrealism, Pop and Op art (from Peellaert and Steranko to . . . Carlos Gimenez).¹

Most of these examples are pertinent, but, in fact, they amount to little more than pastiche, quotation, or unconscious borrowing, which are an insufficient basis on which to base a claim that comics participated in any real sense in “the great formal rebellion that characterized avant-gardes, successive episodes in the upheavals of *modern art*.” It is safe to say that comics “was not (or not to a signifi-

cant degree) directly concerned with the breaks introduced by Fauvism, Cubism, Suprematism or Abstraction, at the time when these movements were happening . . .”²

8.1 THE HYPOTHESIS OF HISTORICAL BELATEDNESS

Jean-Christophe Menu maintains that comics now has its own avant-garde movement, albeit with a historical time lag in relation to “official” art. This avant-garde is, he claims, embodied by works produced in the decades since 1990, a period during which independent (or alternative) publishing houses have been a moving force, none more so than the Association, the publishing collective that Menu co-founded, and of which he ultimately became the sole director between 2006 and 2010.

Between January 2006 and January 2007, the Association published three issues of a theoretical journal called *L'Éprouvette* [The Test Tube], before “scuppering” it; the three issues nonetheless add up to 1,284 pages. The first issue included, in its preliminary pages (pp. 7–8), a kind of manifesto proclaiming: “Comics is an art form whose arrival was overdue. It’s a bit goddamn stupid. But, unlike some, it’s not dead. It might be full of shit, but at least it’s not full of postmodernism.”

In a text that appeared as a conclusion to the third issue (p. 569), Menu challenges the idea that this self-proclaimed avant-garde status was just a pose.

In this journal, we have published abstract painting, automatic drawing, body painting, comics embroidered on fabric, sixteenth century engravings, forerunners of graphic narratives . . . And all that has caused consternation in the small world of mainstream comics, in just the same way as Art Nègre or the art of the insane asylum, invited to trespass on the terrain of official art by Apollinaire, Picasso or the Surrealists, filled the bourgeois of the early twentieth century with consternation.

One could of course retort that the fact that an artwork causes shock or indignation does not in itself deliver a certificate of avant-gardism, nor does it guarantee the quality or significance of the work. And that, moreover, the reaction of the “small world of mainstream comics” to *L'Éprouvette* consisted mainly of complete indifference. And, finally, that the concept of avant-garde may simply no longer be very meaningful, either in the context of the period in which we now live, or in the field of comic art.

A few years earlier, Menu had already written in *Plates-Bandes* [Flower Beds/ Flat Strips] that the Association had been set up “as an avant-garde.” And had specified that “some of (its) ideas were deliberately and historically linked to the literary avant-gardes of the twentieth century, beginning with Surrealism. One could even say that the Association was, among other things, an attempt to extrapolate a few basic principles of Surrealism to comics.”³ These included, in particular, the recounting of dreams and the “exquisite corpses” technique.⁴

I note that the examples offered in *L'Éprouvette* in support of the avant-gardist claim belong clearly to the field (and history) of visual art, whereas *Plates-Bandes* had positioned the intervention of the Association as a continuation of earlier literary avant-gardes. This apparent contradiction must doubtless be read as a further sign of the irreducible doubleness of comics (Menu refers to its *equivocation*), of the fact that it is ultimately and inseparably both a form of literature and a visual art.

But it is the verb “extrapolate” that holds the key to Menu’s argument, and that shows the limits of the lineage that he lays claim to. His project may be resumed as the importation of literary techniques and the testing and verification of their applicability to comics. The creation of Oubapo [The Workshop for Potential Comics] in 1992 effectively demonstrated the same logic: it consisted of the extrapolation to comics of the aims and methods of Oulipo [The Workshop for Potential Literature], founded in 1960.

The Surrealists themselves had not been slow to extend the technique of automatic writing to drawing and painting. The first literary text produced by this method, *Les Champs magnétiques* [Magnetic Fields], by Breton and Soupault, dates from 1919, and the first artist to apply it to drawing was André Masson, from 1923 to 1927.⁵ And, in 1924, the first Manifesto defined Surrealism itself as a “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, *or in any other manner*—the actual functioning of thought” (my italics). This means that, when Menu drew an “automatic comics page” in 1993,⁶ he was essentially doing nothing more than perpetuating a long-standing and duly documented practice.

His innovation lies in the way that he respects the comics apparatus: his “automatic” drawings are contained within a space that is divided up. It is an automatic comics page, then, not an automatic drawing. However, Steinberg (with two sheets called *Comic Strip* in 1958) and Crumb (*Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernistic Comics*, three pages dating from 1967 reprinted on the opening pages of Molotiu’s anthology) got there first. And the result inevitably falls into

the category of infranarrative comics.⁷ It is indeed doubtful whether a series of drawings really can be completely and authentically produced “in the absence of any control exercised by reason,” according to Breton’s definition, when the drawings in question are framed and juxtaposed. We will leave this point aside. As an exercise for warming up or warming down, the production of an automatic comics page is by no means without interest. But does it constitute, of itself, an imperishable creative gesture that secures entry to the avant-garde? Is the “automatic comics page” not on its way to becoming a genre, rather like single-color canvasses in contemporary art?

We have seen, in the previous chapter, that some experimental work with abstract comics consisted mainly of “extrapolation,” along directions already explored by art films of the 1920s.

Not content with having “extrapolated” literary or graphic techniques into comics, Menu is now advocating the “extrapolation of comics into three-dimensional space”⁸ and urging comics artists to escape the confines of paper.

It seems clear, then, that for the author of *Livret de Phamille* [Family Record Book],⁹ the only way in which comics can catch up with historically more advanced art forms is to get involved in the import-export business, to absorb techniques from other media, and to become transposable onto non-paper formats.

One of the slogans of *L'Éprouvette* was the “gradual erosion of frontiers.” This was the title of one of the sections of the second issue (which was reproduced in *La Bande dessinée et son double*, p. 365), but by the third issue it had turned into the “gradual explosion of frontiers.” Eclecticism, recycling, hybridization, decontextualization—unless I am mistaken, this program fits right into the aesthetic paradigm of postmodernism, even if, as we have seen, Menu professes to abominate the word, if not the thing it designates.

8.2 HIGH & LOW: THE LICHTENSTEIN SYNDROME

Comics was for a long time a medium that had scant legitimacy, and was considered to be an impure mode of expression, a childish form of literature with no claim to any artistic dignity.

The 1960s, the decade in which its rehabilitation began, also happened to be the decade in which, in spite of its almost complete lack of symbolic prestige, comics became a major source of inspiration for certain artistic movements: Pop

Art in the United States, New Figuration in France. Roy Lichtenstein was the most emblematic artist of this period, and his case is symptomatic.

This “recuperation” of comics by official art has not been unanimously understood or appreciated. The art critic Pierre Sterckx believes that it was beneficial: “In my view, from 1960, the exposure given to comics by Lichtenstein was exceptionally valuable: he revealed the visual qualities, up until then a closely guarded secret, of comic art and juxtaposed it to works by Picasso, Léger and Mondrian.”¹⁰ The American critic Adam Gopnik went so far as to write that “Pop art saved the comics.”¹¹ He argues that the comic book industry, which had been declining since the end of the 1940s, had been completely reenergized after integrating elements of Lichtenstein’s style, such as irony or the rejection of realist details. He claimed that this applied particularly to the series produced by Stan Lee for Marvel Comics at the beginning of the 1960s.

So should Lichtenstein be credited with having simultaneously magnified comics panels and reinvigorated comic art?

The historian Pierre Couperie took the opposite view. In a reference to the 1967 exhibition *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative*, of which he was one of the curators, he declared: “We were reacting against Pop Art in general and Roy Lichtenstein in particular. At that period, comics was perceived only through the lens of his painting, he had shown up its vapidness and inanity . . . by taking the worst images and blowing them up to an excessive degree.”¹²

Two of the greatest American artists, Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman, have also expressed their low opinion of Lichtenstein’s work. Eisner is reported to have said that he was upset by Roy Lichtenstein’s work and by the arrogant snobbishness of his paintings.¹³ Without making specific reference to Eisner, the critic Bart Beaty offers an explanation for the hostility of part of the profession: “By reducing comic books to source material, Lichtenstein is accused of having made the legitimization of comic books—already a difficult task—that much more challenging.” A grievance that he extends, in fact, to the whole of the *High & Low* exhibition (to which I will return shortly): “Nowhere in the exhibit was there an acknowledgement of comics as an art in and of themselves. Like a kind of mutely passive muse, they can only inspire art, not create it.”¹⁴

Spiegelman’s criticism of Lichtenstein is, though, somewhat different. A comics page that he drew for *Artforum* in December 1990 addresses Lichtenstein thus: “Oh Roy, your dead high art is built on dead low art! . . . The real political, sexual and formal energy in living popular culture passes you by. Maybe that’s—sob—



Fig. 15. Art Spiegelman, *High Art Lowdown*, in *ArtForum*, 1990. Reproduced with kind permission of the author.

why you're championed by museums!" The author of *Maus* is also reported to have declared in October 2010 at the Cartoon Art Festival in Columbus, Ohio, "Lichtenstein did no more for comics than Warhol did for soup."¹⁵

In order to understand, not the "truth" of his art, but at least what Lichtenstein's attitude really was towards comics, it is perhaps best to seek a first-hand account from the artist himself (something both his admirers and denigrators usually disdain to do). In an interview recorded in January 1966 for the *BBC Third Programme*, David Sylvester asked him what he liked about comics images. He does, to say the least, express reservations:

Well, I think that it was the startling quality of the visual shorthand and the sense of cliché—the fact that an eye would be drawn a certain way [. . .] There is a kind of order in the cartoons, there's a sort of composition, but it's a kind of a learned composition. It's a composition more to make it clear, to make it read and communicate, rather than a composition for the sake of unifying the elements. In other words, the normal aesthetic sensibility is usually lacking. . . . [. . .] I don't care whether they're good or bad or anything else. But they are subject matter, and I'm only using them and I am re-interpreting them. [. . .] I both like and dislike the cartoons. I enjoy them, they're probably amusing in some way, and I get a genuine kick out of them, though usually only a few frames will be really interesting to me.¹⁶

What clearly emerges from these words is less any real regard for comics than a self-interested strategy of appropriation.

High & Low, Modern Art and Popular Culture, presented at MoMA in New York in 1990, was the first important exhibition to bring together comics—but also graffiti art, caricature, advertising images—and recognized artists representing official culture. In the introduction to the catalogue, Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, the two curators, explain the title of the exhibition:

We call all these areas of representation “low,” not to denigrate them out of hand [. . .] but to recognize that they have traditionally been considered irrelevant to, or outside, any consideration of achievement in the fine arts of our time—and in fact have commonly been accepted as opposite to the “high” arts in their intentions, audiences, and nature of endeavor. [. . .] Our goal is to examine the transformations through which modern painters and sculptors have made new poetic languages by reimagining the possibilities in forms of popular culture; and, as a corollary, to acknowledge the way those adaptations in modern art have often found their way back into the common currency of public visual prose.

The reader will have noticed the terms that are defined oppositionally by this quotation: painting and sculpture are regarded as poetry, while popular cultural forms, like comics, are classed as prose.

The exhibition demonstrated, among other things, that comics acted as a resource for official art in two different ways: on the one hand, by supplying it with themes, myths, characters, an imagery, and, on the other hand, by inspiring it on a formal level through its apparatus (seriality, the multiframe, the coexistence of text and image) and by the panels, speech balloons, and onomatopoeia designated by Gopnik as the “secondary machinery” of comics.¹⁷

The Spiegelman comics page quoted above was intended as a response to the exhibition (which had given rise to indignant reactions way beyond the milieu

of professional comics artists). He drew attention to the omission of numerous artists, who in his view, should rightfully have been there, the most glaring of which was the omission of Spiegelman himself along with all the artists whose work he had been publishing for a decade in *Raw*, the main “avant-garde” comics journal of the time. But the most conclusive objection to the preconceptions of the curators was put by Spiegelman into the mouth of Ignatz Mouse (a character from George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* series):¹⁸ in the view attributed to Ignatz, the question of high and low art is not a matter of aesthetics but of social class and economics. Instead, the exhibition reinforced the notion of an aesthetic hierarchy between high art and low art, the latter quite clearly treated as mass culture and entertainment, and, therefore, as alienating its consumers.¹⁹

During the two decades since the exhibition in New York, a dual tendency has been apparent: comics (or more precisely, *a certain branch* of comics) has moved closer to the preoccupations of “official” contemporary art; at the same time, painters (or *certain* painters) have moved back towards drawing and figurative art. There are now three annual exhibitions in Paris devoted to drawing. The art critic of *Le Monde*, Philippe Dagen, emphasizes that “ten years ago, it would have been hard to imagine this vogue for a mode of expression that the contemporary art milieu saw as being dated.” And he does not fail to note “the key importance and influence of press cartoons, caricature, comics and manga in this development.”²⁰

Comics has undergone a process of rehabilitation, and its cultural legitimacy is now more securely established—while the very notions of high art and low art have become diluted by the rise of entertainment culture (in France, this has taken the form of the ideology of “le tout culturel”²¹ that has been dominant since Jack Lang’s reforms of the 1980s).

Thus, it seems that for the first time we have reached a conjuncture where a certain number of necessary, if not sufficient, conditions have come together to allow for the emergence of a real dialogue between comics and other forms of contemporary artistic expression.

8.3 CONVERGENCES

Something new has happened: for the last fifteen years or so, some comics authors seem to be driven by the same ambitions as their colleagues in the fine arts,²² and have begun, consciously or not, to adopt the language of contemporary art.

The editors of *Art Press* duly noted this in the editorial to their special issue entitled *Bande d'auteurs* [Auteurist Gang/Strip] (2005):

The formal preoccupations [of comics authors and critics] coincide with our own (where to go with abstraction, sequencing, exiting the frame, etc.) as do their avenues for thematic exploration (autofiction, documentary fiction). Even our long-standing interest in pornography, or our more recent discovery of the virtues of acting the fool, find a certain echo . . .

Some current comics artists' work has hung in galleries, e.g., Jochen Gerner and Killoffer (represented by the Anne Barrault Gallery), Frédéric Coché (La Ferronnerie Gallery), and Frédéric Poincelet (Catherine Putman Gallery). We could add another name to the list: Pierre la Police, who (like others) is no longer producing comics for publication, but whose paintings have been shown in the Kamel Mennour Gallery, highly prestigious in Parisian art circles. We should also mention Stéphane Blanquet, for his installations and body paintings, or Benoît Jacques, who exhibits comics made of unusual materials: embroidery (done by Harizo Rakotomala, a Madagascan embroiderer), wood, metal, etc.

The Association's list now includes, outside any regular collection, books of drawings that go beyond the comics field, for example Killoffer's *Recapitation* [Re-capitation] ("pure drawing, neither illustrative nor narrative"), Jochen Gerner's *Branchages* [Cut Branches] ("a book of sketches done by telephone"), Kiki and Loulou Picasso's *Engin explosif improvisé* [Improvised Explosive Device] ("diptychs brightened up with texts and slogans"), or Thomas Ott and Gila's *La Grande Famiglia* [The Big Family (Italian spelling)] (photos and pinholes by Gila based on a graphic and narrative installation by Ott"; a "hybrid book, part drawing, part photographs, part thriller").²³

This "contemporary art" tendency appears even more pronounced in Belgium, as was amply demonstrated by the *Génération spontanée* [Spontaneous Generation] exhibition presented at the Angoulême Festival in January 2011. The *Tintin* and *Spirou* traditions have long been so preponderant in Belgium that the country seemed destined only to produce descendants of Hergé or Franquin. However, following in the footsteps of Joe Pinelli, Louis Joos, and Alain Corbel—all pioneers of independent Belgian comics—a whole generation of authors has begun to approach the medium in a spirit of experimentation, research, and openness to hybridization. Three publishers are particularly involved in this development: Frémok, which prioritizes the poetic and visual but also the social dimensions of comics, La 5^e couche, and L'Employé du moi, more

focused on autofiction and reflexive play on the codes of the medium. As Thierry Bellefroid, the curator of the exhibition, wrote, this new Franco-Belgian comics scene “is spreading through art galleries, onto stages where contemporary dance is performed, and into the streets.” And Thierry Van Hasselt, one of the founders of Frémok, spells the message out: “We’re often put into the comics box. But we define ourselves as poets and visual artists who use the comics form.”²⁴

With regard to the American context, I will confine myself here to the work of Jerry Moriarty. Moriarty was born in 1938 and began exhibiting his paintings in 1974, but was an active participant over the following decade in *Raw*, the comics journal founded by Spiegelman and his wife Françoise Mouly. His highly distinctive comics were brought out in book format in 1984 under the title *Jack Survives*. This book describes the daily round of the artist’s father, who constantly tries to keep up with a new era that he understands less and less. This comic, which stages everyday life at its most derisory, is impressive not only on account of its cruelty, but also because of a certain strangeness that arises out of silence and out of the often very tight framing that imprisons the protagonist in a world of material objects whose peaceful order seems to be disrupted by his presence.

Moriarty’s recent work achieves a synthesis between his practice as a comics artist and as a painter. The canvas (whose format is generally 130 x 180 cm) is divided into three sections that segment a scene from daily life into separate instants. A silent action is thus broken down into a sequence. Moriarty now chooses to describe himself as a “paintoonist”: part painter, part cartoonist.

8.4 INSIDE/OUTSIDE

Twenty years after *High & Low*, other exhibitions, particularly in France, have set out to bring comics pages into contact with the work of fine artists. I will restrict myself here to the *Vraoum!* [Vroom!] Exhibition held in Paris at the Maison Rouge during the summer of 2009, and the biennial exhibition of contemporary art in Le Havre, held for the third time in October 2010, taking as its title on that occasion *Bande dessinée et art contemporain, la nouvelle scène de l’égalité* [Comics and Contemporary Art, a Newly Equal Scene]. The thinking behind these events deserves closer examination.

David Rosenberg and Pierre Sterckx, the curators of the *Vraoum!* exhibition, state in the catalogue that they want to “show together, and on the same level, works from spheres that traditionally remain separated: on one side, low art with

its origins in popular culture, produced by ‘authors’, and on the other, contemporary art produced by ‘artists.’” They wish to acknowledge the fact that there is now “complete permeability” to outside influences in the practice of certain comics artists, and, correspondingly, the fact that for contemporary artists like Hervé Di Rosa, Gilles Barbier, or Bertrand Lavier, comics “is no longer deprecated as an inferior form of culture, but is perceived as the source of a reference system common to their whole generation.” And the two curators conclude that there is “on one side, comics, an art that is unaware of its own status as art, and on the other, artists mocking solemnity by using comics as a source of inspiration for work that will ultimately make it possible to see comics differently.”

These quotations are taken from the free visitor’s guide given out at the entrance to the exhibition. In the catalogue proper on sale in the bookshop, there is the further affirmation that the exhibition “celebrates the encounter of paintings, sculptures and drawings *with no hierarchy or divide*” (my italics). And Pierre Sterckx insists: the point is to “disrupt the categorization that separates these media and keeps them apart, and hierarchizes them at the same time.” He deplors the fact that comics has not until now been sufficiently “viewed as a major part of culture, with its own classic artists, schools and masterpieces.”²⁵

The sincerity of Sterckx’s interest in comics (and in particular, in a few masters such as McCay, Hergé, Moebius, Reiser, and Swarte) is not to be doubted. But good intentions are not enough. In spite of the declared wish to exhibit comics and contemporary art *on the same level, with no hierarchy or divide*, the conditions under which the two fields were brought into contact were neither convincing nor equitable. For one thing, why not allow *contemporary* art to dialogue solely with *contemporary* comics? Why were five or six successive generations of comics artists exhibited alongside just one or two generations of fine artists? In their desire to show that comics constitutes a major part of culture, the curators rounded up old masters like Outcault, McCay, and Saint-Ogan, thereby effectively skewing the comparison. Comics was insidiously portrayed as an undifferentiated whole, lacking any history. Furthermore, the exhibition layout was organized around *genre*: “Rascals and Scoundrels,” “Far West,” “Science Fiction,” “Superheroes,” or “Creepy-Crawlies and Creatures,” reinforcing, without acknowledging it, the idea that comics is simply *genre literature*. And among the different thematic sections, only one, called “Pictorial,” seemed to have the potential to open up a fruitful comparison with certain currents in contemporary art.

Moreover, it emerges very clearly from the quotations included above that comics requires the mediation of the fine artists whose eyes need to alight upon

it in order to magnify it, reveal it to itself, and allow it to claim its rightful place as art. In the end, this attitude is not very far away from that already evinced by *High & Low* (and is coherent with Sterckx's judgement on Lichtenstein, referred to above): "low art is not all that inferior, because it has been revalorized by high art, which has used it as a source of inspiration."²⁶

We will now examine in equal detail the introductory texts from the catalogue to the Le Havre biennial exhibition.²⁷ According to Linda Morren, the artistic director of the event, a dialogue with contemporary art has only become possible because of the profound evolution of comics, not only in terms of its formal qualities and artistic ambition, but also its status. She writes (on p. 5):

Authors like Robert Crumb, Moebius, Philippe Druillet or Enki Bilal succeeded in freeing themselves from traditional criteria, and initiated an important transition: *comics cast off its status as a "genre" and became a "format,"*²⁸ like painting or sculpture.

The latter part of this sentence (italicized by me) needs to be discussed at some length. It raises firstly questions of vocabulary: are painting and sculpture "formats"? What meaning can we give to this term? And has comics ever been a "genre"?²⁹ Why should this term be preferred to "medium," "language," "art form," or "literature"? There are three possible answers. Morren may consider comics to be a literary genre (but then why compare it to contemporary art?) or as a genre of visual art (like portrait, still life, etc.). Or she may see it, more precisely, as the *genre* literature that we referred to above. This third possible answer uses the term in the most pejorative sense. It corresponds to the definition given by Menu, for whom any artistic field that becomes inward-looking gets fossilized into a "genre," unable to evolve or renew itself.³⁰ On this reading, there was a historical phase when comics production retreated back to basics, and then a "modern" phase, characterized by opening up and hybridization.

We will let Morren's sentence remain ambiguous. What is really interesting about her affirmation is the alternatives it offers: are we to understand that comics, henceforth equal in dignity with contemporary art, can be exhibited alongside it on an equal basis, or rather, as the sentence seems to imply, that comics has itself become one of the forms of contemporary art?

Which alternative one chooses, in this dialectic between the same and the other, has important consequences. We must maintain either that artists can, henceforth, legitimately and *on an equal footing*, express themselves through painting,

sculpture, comics, or any other “format” (video, installation, performance . . .), or that comics and contemporary art, while remaining separate, can be mutual sources of inspiration. Unfortunately, the subsequent texts from the Le Havre catalogue fail to come to come down clearly on either side.³¹

This ambiguity of status is perfectly illustrated by the situation of comics in art education. For a long time, comics authors were autodidacts, but for just over two decades they have increasingly emerged from art schools offering specialized courses.³² In these colleges, “the students have the opportunity to come into contact with different techniques, like engraving, to encounter different areas of research, to develop, in other words, a wider artistic culture. [. . .] it is certain that many of the most innovative comics of the last twenty years would have been inconceivable if their creators had not attended art school.”³³

But, at the same time, an art school can too often also be the place where the watertight separation between the culture of comics and that of contemporary art is forcefully reasserted. Many comics artists who have emerged from the top French art schools, like Joann Sfar in Paris or Ruppert and Mulot in Dijon, have testified to the fact that comics are nowhere to be found, are banished from the programme of study, and that they had never been able to find a professor who was willing to engage in dialogue with them on the subject. As for art schools that do offer specialized comics courses, judging from my own experience of teaching the history and theory of comics at the *École européenne supérieure de l'image* (Angoulême campus), I can only reiterate the painful conclusion that I drew in 2006 in my book *Un objet culturel non identifié* [An Unidentified Cultural Object].³⁴ The graft of comics onto an institution previously dedicated only to the teaching of traditional disciplines (painting, sculpture, engraving) and various contemporary art forms (video, installations, digital art . . .) has not taken. Two cultures are cohabiting without ever meeting—in a climate that, too often, veers between hostility and indifference.

8.5 THREE ART WORLDS

The thesis I am defending here is that comics and contemporary art differ in their *essence*.

The works of visual artists, hung on walls, generally produce an effect of monumentality. Even serial or multiple works are offered to the eye as a visual totality.

Viewed solely in terms of their physicality, their objective characteristics, comics look very different: they are presented as a series of small-format, printed images. And the reader's attention is dispersed among the too-numerous and fragmented attractions of the page; the eye glides over the surface of a continuum, already enticed onwards by the next image, never stopping or lingering.

There is, of course, a further difference: in comics, the drawing never reigns supreme and does not pursue its own ends; since it serves a higher *design*, it is bound by a narrative project, by some kind of story.

I would like to refer here to the illuminating perspective of Chris Ware, as expressed in his preface to the catalogue of the *UNinked* exhibition at the Phoenix Museum in 2007. Here are the words of the author of the graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*:

Comics, with rare exception, are a visual language, one composed of pictures intended to be read and distributed as mass-produced objects, not scrutinized individually as one might carefully peruse a painting or a drawing. (. . .) they have more to do with the mechanisms of reading than of looking. (. . .) Comics are at base an art of visual storytelling, and as such, are resistant to the sort of emotional distance and reserve that characterizes so much of 20th and now 21st century art. (. . .) storytelling is simply 'not what artists do anymore'.³⁵

On film, the theorist Youssef Ishaghpour has written that “as a world of myths, images, passion, violence, stars and romance—of which *Gone with the Wind* was perhaps the chef d’oeuvre—[it] has little in common with the modern idea of art.”³⁶ When I quoted these words for the first time in *Un objet culturel non identifié* (page 51), I added that the same thing could be said of comics “as a world of dreams, comedy, epic, visual poetry” that sets out to narrate, entertain, move, bear witness, to stir the imagination. With the consequence that “to disqualify comics on the grounds that it has not conformed to movements in [modern and] contemporary art is quite simply to judge it according to criteria that are foreign to it.”

Comics is descended from a long tradition of caricature and cartoon drawing. Even if Töpffer and his early imitators published their first works in book format, it was in the press—and as a result of three developments—that the medium evolved. These developments were the liberalization of censorship, the professionalization of illustrators, and the progress of printing techniques. Before long, comics were mainly appearing in the form of serials published daily or weekly.

In France the “illustrés” were for many years intended for children; in America, comic books were aimed at a teenage readership. Even if they did not always achieve it, both aspired to a mass circulation.

Whether from the material, cultural, economic, or sociological point of view, the history of comics has little to do with that of modern art and contemporary art. That has not, of course, prevented a certain contamination *in the margins*; from the earliest days, for example, in the work of Lionel Feininger, whose series drawn in 1906–1907 for the *Chicago Tribune* abounded in graphic effects among which it is easy to discern traces of Art Nouveau, the influence of Expressionism, or even affinities with Cubism, then in its embryonic phase.³⁷ Sometimes comics has actually been in a position to anticipate artistic ventures still to come: thus, the extravagant productions of Gustave Doré, particularly in *Histoire pittoresque, dramatique et caricaturale de la Sainte Russie* [Picturesque, Dramatic and Caricatural History of Holy Russia] (1854), was many decades ahead of The Incoherents, an art movement that seems to have been inspired by it. But none of the innovatory artists whose names we could evoke here has ever changed the course of comics history.

Contemporary art and comics have to be considered as two different “art worlds” in the meaning given to this expression by the sociologist Howard S. Becker,³⁸ that is to say two different economic, cultural, and sociological systems. Two quite distinct art worlds, in terms of the conditions of production of the work, the networks that link the artist and other individuals involved in marketing the work, the criteria for reception, the way that value is added, and, ultimately, the aesthetic reference systems. These are all crucial factors that interact with each other and influence the form and content of works, as well as the way in which they get into circulation and become integrated into the cultural landscape of an era—and that, ultimately, perhaps, define the “essence” and the mission peculiar to each art world.

Several commentators have insisted on the fact that contemporary art has its own identity; it is not a simple continuation of Modern Art (from which it took over in the 1960s), but, in many ways, a different “art world.”

In the view of Nathalie Heinich, “a large proportion of the works produced after 1945 or 1960 are de facto excluded from what is catalogued as ‘contemporary art’, which itself must be recognized as a aesthetic category, analogous to what used to be called, in the days of figurative art, a ‘genre’.” In fact, she argues, just as was once the case for history painting, the contemporary art “genre” [. . .] “is

supported more by public institutions than by the private market, is at the summit of the hierarchy in terms of prestige and awards, and enjoys close links with academic and text-based culture.”³⁹

Contemporary art is too heterogeneous to fit easily into a “genre.” But it seems appropriate to see it as an “art world” in itself, in the sense that it is associated with a conception of artistic creation radically different from the one that held sway not only in the nineteenth but also in the first half of the twentieth century.

At the end of the 1950s, Yves Klein declared “long live the immaterial!” Since then, art has been characterized by “artificialization and the increasing dematerialization of the artist’s material.” Florence de Méredieu has offered a remarkable description and analysis of this tendency toward “factitiousness,” this novel situation in which “the proliferating world of forms seems more and more like a mental world.” Indeed, contemporary art has, in its most radical manifestations, replaced the work of the artist’s hand by the concept (the role played by conceptualization is so great that works and artists often seem to be a mere pretext for the theoretical ruminations of critics, philosophers, and other thinkers). Moreover, multiple techniques and modes of expression have gradually been integrated into the domain of the visual arts. The artist is no longer a painter or sculptor but a *plasticien* [visual artist], that is to say someone who works in any or all of these areas: performance art, video art, set design, photography, installation. In fact, “the artist is no longer expected to produce works, but art. That is to say to produce and exhibit the signifiers of art.”⁴⁰ In other words, any production, any object that a self-proclaimed artist declares to be art is by that token recognized as art.

Having followed on from Modern Art, contemporary art operates according to a logic different from that of previous avant-garde painters, but, as Chris Ware has convincingly argued, this logic is even less applicable to the world of comics.

8.6 MUST NARRATIVE BE RENOUNCED?

So, what does the “progressive erosion of frontiers” called for by the Association, amount to?

We have ascertained that it is under way in the world of galleries, and that it has inspired a small number of comics creators. However, no such erosion has affected commercial (“genre,” if you like, or “mass-market”) comics, a sector that

has never renounced its own conventions and practices, and that has never ceased to exist. But, fortunately, another kind of comics has become possible, and now co-exists with the mainstream. We can agree to call it “auteurist comics”—even though I am aware of the reductive nature of a polarizing vision of the comics world, and I do not believe it to be divided into two watertight sectors. Within what, for want of a better term, I am, then, calling auteurist comics, several tendencies cohabit. One of these is inclined towards formal experimentation and flirts with the categories and procedures of contemporary art, inciting the artists to leave the book behind and seek out other materials and other ways of disseminating their work.

It is important to distinguish, in this respect, research that seeks a redefinition of the methods, the aims, and the aesthetic of comics as such, and the ad hoc techniques that may be invented as a creative response to a request from a private or public gallery, in order to respond to the challenge posed by display on a wall to enable comics to “be hangable.”⁴¹ A reminder is called for here. Adventure comics have already had their “becoming cinema” moment back in the 1930s, when artists took their inspiration from the visual codes and the glamour of Hollywood. For the last quarter century, comics have been undergoing a “becoming literature,” with what is now termed the *graphic novel*. There is no reason why certain auteurist comics should not embark upon a process of “becoming contemporary art,” and, in so doing, revitalize the tradition of the artist’s book. Like other forms of expression, comics are enriched by a wide range of heterogeneous outside influences (one need only think about the importance of video games as part of the culture of the new generation of comics creators). And so I do not believe that comics is destined to become one of the “formats” of contemporary art. On the contrary, I can foresee the fatal, in both senses of the word—inevitable and lethal—outcome of any such evolution.

Alain Berland, the artistic advisor to the Le Havre biennial exhibition, maintains that a comics author “has a duty, if s/he wants to move with the times, to mistreat the medium by engaging in multiple hybridizations with other artistic disciplines.”⁴² What comes through in this declaration is the idea that comics can only accede to the status of “contemporary” (and so, we understand, artistic value) on condition of being “mistreated,” in other words by being made to run counter to its natural bent, and expelled from its own domain. How can it achieve this? Berland implies that it must “emancipate itself from narrative.” And it is in just this direction that the recent work of artists like Jochen Gerner⁴³ or Andrei Molotiu⁴⁴ has led.

It is entirely legitimate for certain artists to pursue this ambition. At the periphery of the comics field, there is room for experiment, for going off the beaten track in a direction that may lead to mutations of the medium. Nonetheless, I am certain that, from Chris Ware to Joann Sfar, many of the most exciting current comics authors would fiercely disagree with the injunction requiring comics to enter a post-narrative era. This is because, for comics, liberation from narrative and liberation from its own self would be one and the same thing. The curators of the *Vraoum!* exhibition were quite right to contrast fine *artists* with comics *authors*. In his day, Töpffer referred to “literature in prints”; and history has proved him right: it is indeed a literature that has come into being, that is to say a vast corpus of narrative works, structured according to genres, schools, collections, readerships. Harry Morgan, writing in our day, also recognizes this history and this artistic predisposition when he uses the term “graphic literature.”⁴⁵ If comics were to free itself from literature, this would be less a liberation than a disavowal.

The closing statement of *System 1* argues that in modern comics, it had been possible for form to become freer because narrative content had itself evolved, demonstrating the protean nature of the medium. In this new book I have aimed to offer an account of new kinds of expressive narrative devices in their rhythmic and poetic dimensions\ and stylistic variability. Far from deconstructing narration, or rendering it outmoded, these advances enrich it, and so fulfill the potential of comics as an art form that is both visual and narrative.