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Comic exhibitions in contemporary France
Diversity and symbolic ambivalence

Jean-Mathieu Méon

Centre de recherche sur les mediations (CREM)

Université de Lorraine

jean-mathieu.meon@univ-lorraine.fr

The cultural legitimacy of comics is discussed by creators, critics and academics alike. The social acceptance of comics seems to be established, as public debates on their potential harmfulness mostly belong to the past. But the relationship of comics with cultural actors and institutions remains more ambivalent. The inclusion of comics among the arts is still confronted with reluctance and ambiguous practices, as is observed, for example, by Bart Beaty (2012) or, in a French context, by Thierry Groensteen (2006, 2009a) or Eric Maigret (1994, 2012). Comic exhibitions can be an interesting ground to empirically shed light on such a debate, since they are, for various reasons, at the direct conjunction of the comic world and the cultural world.

Comic exhibitions can be defined as events presenting manufactured objects (such as books, merchandizing, artifacts, *etc.*) and/or original art, related to comics¹. They take place in various contexts, from comic festivals to museums and art galleries. This is an ancient and diverse phenomenon. The 1967 “Bande dessinée et figuration narrative” show at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs² is usually seen as a starting point for the development of comic exhibitions in France –even though many precedents can be identified abroad³ or in France⁴.

¹ In this article, we will focus on exhibitions dealing with comics *per se*. That excludes documentary exhibitions using comics as a pretext to present another topic (history, architecture, *etc.*) as well as commercial exhibitions organized to sell comic art and objects. Such exhibitions mainly relate to other mechanisms and purposes.

² *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, Apr.-June 1967.

³ The authors of the catalogue of the 1967 exhibition consider that the first comic exhibition took place in New York, at the Waldorf Astoria, in 1922 (Couperie, Destefanis, François, Horn, Moliterni, and Gassiot-Talbot,

Such exhibitions knew further developments in the seventies and the eighties, mainly in relation with fandom and comic festivals. They obtained some official recognition in the eighties, in a specific context of cultural policy renewal. That led to the creation of the Musée de la Bande dessinée in Angoulême in 1990. Finally, these exhibitions have known a new vogue since the beginning of the 21st century. Following the recent examples of the *Masters of American Comics* exhibition in Los Angeles in 2005-2006⁵ and the *Hergé* show in Paris in 2006-2007⁶, several exhibitions have taken place in important museums in Paris and other main cities in France (such as Lyon) since then.

Comments on these exhibitions mix acknowledgment of the new visibility they give to comics and doubts about the relevance of their methods⁷. The intent of this article then is twofold. First, we present here an empirical overview of comic exhibitions in contemporary France, based on a corpus of more than sixty exhibitions that took place since 2006 –that includes the main exhibitions of national significance (mainly in Paris museums and institutions) and exhibitions of the Angoulême festival in 2010, 2011 and 2012⁸. Second, this article offers an analysis of these exhibitions in relation to the comic book field, its structuration and its relationship to the wider and more legitimate cultural field. This analysis is based on a cultural sociology approach that gives attention to practices, judgments, institutions and fields, according to Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996) and to Luc Boltanski's analysis of the comic book field (1975).

The diversity of comic exhibitions

Based on our corpus, three main forms of exhibitions can be distinguished⁹. The differences in their presentation of the works relate to different kinds of interest in the comic form, be it

1967: 145). Brazil has similar claims on having organized the first international exhibition of this kind in 1951 (De Moya, 2001).

⁴ Professional associations of cartoonists organized several shows to promote their field in the twenties and the forties and educational associations used exhibitions of comics in order to criticize the dangers of comics in the fifties. Elements on these various initiatives can be found in Crépin (2011).

⁵ *Masters of American Comics*, Museum of Contemporary Art and UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, Nov. 2005 - Mar. 2006

⁶ *Hergé*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Dec. 2006 – Feb. 2007.

⁷ A foundational article on this topic was written by Jean-Philippe Martin and Jean-Pierre Mercier (both working for the comic museum of Angoulême) (Martin and Mercier, 2005). For a discussion of comic exhibitions from a critic perspective, see Groensteen (2006: 152-166). The French cartoonist and publisher Jean-Christophe offers another example of such comments (Menu, 2011: 139-169).

⁸ We also include in our corpus some exhibitions from the Swiss festival, *Fumetto*, in Locarno, in 2010.

⁹ This presentation can be compared to other typologies –such as the one proposed by Thierry Groensteen (2006: 152-166). But he presents three examples of exhibitions as landmarks and stages in the history of French exhibitions. Our presentation intends to show how various forms of comic exhibitions coexist *at the same time*

an aesthetical point of view, a narration-oriented interest or an attempt at pinpointing the specific features of comics. We present these models as ideal-types, which means some actual exhibitions may mix characteristics from different models. Yet, each form can be illustrated with specific and very direct examples.

Artistic exhibitions

These are exhibitions that are meant to contribute to the artistic recognition of the comics form or of comic creators¹⁰. The 1967 Paris exhibition at Les Arts Décoratifs is an early example and outline for such exhibitions, whose features it announced. There are two main modalities for artistic exhibitions. One deals only with comics or with comic creators: the exhibition showcases works from one comic creator or from a selection of comic creators, in direct relation with their comic output or with a broader scope including other forms of creation (*cf. infra*). Hergé, Moebius, Hugo Pratt, Robert Crumb or Enki Bilal, for example, are all creators that were featured in such monographic exhibitions of their works in the considered period¹¹. The *Quintet* show presented by the Musée d'Art Contemporain of Lyon¹² was a collective one –gathering works from Blanquet and Francis Masse (France), Gilbert Shelton and Chris Ware (United States) and Joost Swarte (Netherlands)– but its general organization was along the same lines as the other cited shows. The second modality is about organizing a dialogue between comics and other art forms (contemporary art, architecture...) in order to show how these art forms interact and influence each other and how they deal with similar formal challenges¹³. One room of the 1967 exhibition was devoted to contemporary painters from the *Figuration narrative* movement. In 2009, the private art foundation La Maison Rouge, in Paris, used the same approach in a more systematic way. Its *Vraoum! Trésors de la bande dessinée et art contemporain* exhibition consisted in the simultaneous

and how this coexistence should be interpreted. We first presented these three forms in Montreal in 2011 (Méon, 2011). For a longer presentation, see Méon (2015a).

¹⁰ Our analysis is based on visits of the exhibitions when possible and on the systematic exploitation of their catalogues.

¹¹ *Hergé*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Dec. 2006 – Feb. 2007 ; *Moebius Transe Forme*, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, Oct. 2010 – Mar. 2011 ; *Le voyage imaginaire d'Hugo Pratt*, Pinacothèque de Paris, Paris, Mar. – Aug. 2011 ; *Crumb. De l'Underground à la Genèse*, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, Apr. – Aug. 2012 ; *Mécanhumanimal* (Enki Bilal), Musée des arts et métiers, Paris, Jun. 2013 – Mar. 2014.

¹² *Quintet. Blanquet / Masse / Shelton / Swarte / Ware*, Musée d'Art contemporain de Lyon, Lyon, février – avril 2009.

¹³ This intent doesn't always avoid the classical legitimist pitfall of considering comics only as “raw material” or “inspiration” for the fine arts (Beaty, 2012: 188-190).

presentation of comic art and contemporary art pieces. A similar event took place the following year in Le Havre, during the art biennial¹⁴.

Comics-only or confrontational, these exhibitions share a common approach to the presented works. They tend to organize a visual appreciation of the works, as evidenced both by the ways the works are displayed and the nature of the works that are displayed. The scenography of the exhibitions and the display apparatus are indeed borrowed from visual arts tradition: the art pieces are framed, hanged on (white) walls at the height of a standing person, as paintings would be (fig. 1 and 2)¹⁵. This is consistent with a purpose of *showing* the art: in this context, works are meant to be seen more than they are to be read.

The works that are displayed are primarily original art pieces. The emphasis put on original art can be understood as an attempt at a “phenomenology of creation” (Martin and Mercier, 2005: 93). In this view, the original art is considered as a key to the comprehension of the creative process. But, most of the time, the art is presented in a way that detaches it from its intended final published form (no presentation of the magazine or book in which it appears for example). Then original art is presented mainly *for itself*, as if this stage of a production process destined to print was bearing the essence of the artistic gesture and intent.

An important consequence of this focus on original art is the dominance of an approach in terms of fragments. In 1967, the Arts décoratifs exhibition presented primarily black and white reproductions that were enlargements of details of pages: a panel, a part of a panel. This approach is still at play in contemporary exhibitions with original art. With few exceptions, the exhibited art pieces are fragments of a longer work: a panel from a page, a page from a book, a strip from a series of strips, *etc.* This fragmentation is partly rooted in practical difficulties to gather original art. But it contributes to focus the attention on the graphics rather than on the narrative, which almost necessarily remains incomplete.

Moreover these exhibitions include non-sequential art in their selections. Splash pages, covers, advertising illustration, sketches are important elements of these exhibitions¹⁶. There is a selection process that favors art that can “stand the test of the wall” (Rosset, 2009a),

¹⁴ *Bande dessinée et art contemporain, la nouvelle scène de l'égalité*, Biennale d'art contemporain, Le Havre, Oct. 2010.

¹⁵ There are of course variations of this mode of presentation. For example, the Moebius exhibition (Fondation Cartier, 2010-2011) presented the works in horizontal display cases, to more closely emulate a reading position. But this is rather an exception, the vertical display being the most common mode.

¹⁶ A counting can be made through the catalogues and press kit of the exhibitions. For example, *Le voyage imaginaire d'Hugo Pratt* (Paris, 2011) listed 133 notices of works, with only 33 related to comic art list (one notice referred to the complete *Ballade de la mer salée* graphic novel, consisting in 163 pages –even in this case, almost half of the exhibition was not sequential). A similar result can be given for *Vraoum!* (Paris, 2009): 173 pieces are listed for comic creators, of which 110 were sequential pages.

which means art dominated by a global motif that allows for a “tableau effect” (Peeters, 2003: 22-26 and 47-49).

Consistent with their presentation choices and their selection of art, the artistic exhibitions are characterized by a series of absences: absence of text on the art¹⁷ (or of translation of the text when present), absence of commentary on the narratives, very few mentions if any of the writers (scénaristes) and absence of books within the exhibition rooms. Thus key narrative elements of comics are ignored or left in the background. Here, the line and the graphic style are the main focus of the exhibitions. This is a form of visual or formal reductionism that relegates the narrative dimension of comics to a secondary aspect. Comics are presented and praised first or only for their visual appeal. The poster and the catalogue cover drawn by Joost Swarte for *Quintet* (Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon, 2009) (fig. 3) pleasantly synthesize the ambiguities of this reductionism: the exhibition visitors he draws admire, on the museum walls, books that are closed... and thus that cannot be read!

Exhibitions as a substitutive experience: to introduce, to commemorate.

“The spectacle-exhibition [...] tries to give the visitor a substitutive experience, of which the most spectacular aspect resides in the three-dimensional representation of what is, initially, only two-dimensional. Sound, light, videos, sculptures, mural paintings and projection are used to create something that’s more than a simple translation and that becomes a total experience which immerses the spectator into the very spirit of the work” (Martin and Mercier, 2005: 95). The main exhibitions of the eighties and nineties followed this pattern and comic museums such as the one of Angoulême took cue from such scenographies for some of their first exhibitions. It’s still common in present exhibitions, as can be illustrated with *Le monde de Troy* that was organized during the Angoulême festival in January 2011. A description of this exhibition underlines how “substitutive” should be defined in this context¹⁸.

Le monde de Troy was dedicated to the heroic fantasy world developed around the Lanfeust de Troy character. This character was created in 1994 by writer Christophe Arleston and comic artist Didier Tarquin. The original series was followed by many spin-offs, all published by Soleil Editions. The press kit clearly expresses the spectaculary intents of the exhibition: “a

¹⁷ This is not the most frequent occurrence, but in 1967 the text was sometimes purposefully erased from the art (Couperie, 1997).

¹⁸ We visited the exhibition during its presentation in Jan. 2011. Our analysis also uses press material released by the Festival.

total spectacle” for a “totally exotic exploration”¹⁹. *Le monde de Troy* presents “strong scenographic elements (reconstruction of settings, enlargements of characters, dialogue highlights), excerpts from the series (original art²⁰, reproduction of drawings and pages) and explanatory texts”. The exhibition indeed consisted of an immersive scenography, with sound elements (dialogues, battle sounds and various noises) and light effects (darkness, varying colors) creating different atmospheres (fig. 4). The exhibition was organized around the main axes of the Lanfeust narrative. The first room was a presentation of the quests the characters have to pursue, with reconstruction of artifacts (magic objects and weapons, for example). The second room presented the two central protagonists (Lanfeust and his nemesis Thanos) through a series of images and texts. The third room explained one of the special features of the Troy world, in which extraordinary powers can be gained. The following rooms were dedicated to secondary characters and narrative arcs. The last part of the exhibition described what was called the “Lanfeust planet”, i.e. the fictional world with its geography and its fauna but also the adaptation of the comic books in different media (such as animation). The final room was a shop, presenting collectors’ items (not for sale) and selling books, t-shirts and posters.

When calling, after Martin and Mercier (2005), such an exhibition a “substitutive experience”, we don’t mean to imply a direct equivalence between the exhibition and the book. The exhibition substitute itself for the book to evoke its fictional universe, through scenography, settings, statues and artifacts. But the exhibition doesn’t render the whole narrative of the comic series, that is the way it stylistically weaves the elements and events of its fictional world into a story. In that sense, the spectacle-exhibition has a sort of introductory function. Some texts of the *Troy* (fig. 5) exhibition clearly show the narrative is elsewhere –in the books that visitors can read inside the exhibition²¹ or that they can buy when exiting the exhibition.

“At the end of the fifth volume of the *Lanfeust de Troy* series, Cixi, daughter of Nicolède and in love with Lanfeust, disappears. She’s found again much later, as the mistress of Thanos in the daytime and as a dark shadow by night. What did she do between these two moments? That’s what Christophe Arleston decided to tell, in parallel with Lanfeust adventures, with the artist Olivier Vatine.” (One of the texts from the room devoted to the Cixi character and its series. It accompanied enlarged images of the character.)

¹⁹ We’re quoting, here and in the following sentence, the press kit that was released to announce the exhibition.

²⁰ On this point, *cf.* our remark *infra*.

²¹ A reconstructed troll village had a reading room, a hut with a table, chairs and *Troy* comic books.

The relation of the exhibition to the original work is complex: it's partly detached from its book format (its content could come from a movie or a novel) while still being in constant continuity with its fictional content (the narrative and its fictional elements). This continuity may vary from one visitor to another, depending on their previous familiarity with the comic series. This means the exhibition can function, upstream, as an introduction or initiation to the books or, downstream, as a commemoration or a celebration of the books. Depending on the visitor, the exhibition offers the keys to the discovery of the series or recalls its key moments.

“As a connoisseur of the Troy universe or as a novice, the visitor can be initiated to the major themes of the series or he can recognize its settings and make this universe more vivid in his imagination.”
(Excerpt from the press kit.)

This duality explains the place given to such exhibitions in comic festivals. Such exhibitions are consistent with the commercial dimension of festivals (the spectacle-exhibition promotes a book, a series) as well as with their fandom elements (the exhibition contributes to the celebration of a shared passion).

In *Le monde de Troy*, no original art was presented²². This is significant of the stance these exhibitions adopt on comics. The relation to the original media is loose and any other narrative-based media (animation, movies or novels) could be transposed in such exhibitions. Graphic art is not an issue as exhibitions put their emphasis on content (story or world-building) over form. The formal reductionism of artistic exhibitions is matched here by a form of narrative reductionism.

A comic-specific museum approach

The third modality consists of exhibitions that are not meant to be substitutive but complementary and explanatory of the comic works. There is a narrative-conscious approach that acknowledges the intrinsic limits of comic exhibitions. These exhibitions take into account the narrative and the narration but not as direct literary experiences: these elements are discussed in order to allow for a specific commentary of the presented art and objects. The

²² Despite what the press kit announced, we saw no original art when we visited the exhibition. There were only color reproductions of the definitive printed pages.

aim is to offer the tools for an informed understanding and appreciation of the presented fragments and of the comic form in general.

The Musée de la bande dessinée in Angoulême, in its present configuration that was first opened in June 2009, is the main illustration of this attempt at comic-specific exhibitions²³. Its direction tried to organize a museum presentation of comics-related works and objects in spite of all contradictions of such an endeavor.

“A comic museum: this association of words has to surprise those not familiar with them. Aren’t these words antinomic? [...] [Comics] are an art form that seems to be not so easily tamed to match any definition or classification. [...] To exhibit comics, what does it mean? [...] The museum has the same effect on original pages as it has on any other museum object: it twists it out of its initial function.” (Ambroise Lassale, then curator for the Angoulême museum) (Lassale, 2009: 10)

“To define comics only as graphic art would be ignoring half of its nature. Yet, whether we like it or not, this is this very dimension that is specially brought to light on the walls of the Musée de la bande dessinée or in this book.” (Thierry Groensteen, as author of the historical catalogue for the museum) (Groensteen, 2009: 321)

The organization of the central part of the permanent collection of the museum (“History of comics”²⁴) reveals how such tensions may be overcome. Reflecting the preservation collection of the museum, the exhibition presents both printed material (magazines, books) and original arts (pages, covers, sketches), with a few merchandising objects. Original art and its printed version are, when possible, displayed side by side (fig. 6). Most of the collection is presented in horizontal display cases. Throughout the exhibition, special areas (lounges that the museum calls “alcôves”) are arranged, with sofas and comic books, in order to allow visitors to read the books excerpted in the exhibitions (fig. 7). By presenting books, the museum reintroduces the usually relegated narrative in the exhibition space. Even when original art is vertically displayed, as paintings would be, the notices of the works mix esthetical comments with indications on the global narrative of which the page or the strip is a fragment. If need be, the writers are systematically mentioned.

²³ We base our remarks on our own observation of the exhibition during visits in Sept. 2009, Jan. 2010, Jan. 2011 and Jan. 2012, as well as on documentation (catalogue, institutional website).

²⁴ The complete permanent museum presentation consists of three separate sections. The first and biggest one deals with “The History of comics”. A second smaller one, “The Workshop”, is dedicated to the production process, from script to print. The last section, “The Lounge”, presents the masterpieces of the collection. For an official presentation, see Musée de la Bande dessinée. No date. “The comics museum.” Available at <<http://english.citebd.org/spip.php?article9>>. Accessed February 12, 2015.

“310 and 311 Will Eisner (1917 – 2005), *The Spirit : Showdown with the Octopus*
Pages 2 and 3. Episode 378, published on Aug. 24 1947. Ink and white gouache on paper.
Stamps, glue traces, 575 x 365 mm. Inv. 97.1.13 and 14

The Spirit is locked in with one of his most dangerous foe, known as “The Octopus”. Commissioner Dolan and his men are anxiously waiting. Who will come out alive from this fight? Time stands still and the reverberating sounds in the silence heighten the dramatic tension. As a master of chiaroscuro, Will Eisner signs one of his most famous pages, with this flashlight highlighting details (clues) from the setting before stopping on the famous crime-fighter and the prisoner he uses as a lure. T.G.” (Notice reproduced in Groensteen (2009b: 258).

Reading copies of books, notices offering summaries, horizontal presentation and juxtaposition of original and printed art: such are the features of this approach keen on presenting comics, as much as possible, for their printed narrative nature in an exhibition context. Yet, even with this specific attention, the Musée has one prestige room, called “Le Salon”/“The Lounge”, which offers a “majestic” access to its “most beautiful pieces”²⁵, by presenting them in a typical fine arts fashion (framed art on white walls). This shows the symbolic and social strength of the artistic approach we defined earlier.

The reflection of a structured and dominated field

The diversity of comic exhibitions can be better understood when considered through Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory. In this theoretical framework, a field is an autonomous social space, which is unified by the struggle between various agents interested in the same benefits (for example, cultural recognition) and trying to impose their own definitions of the field’s core stake (for example, the definition of art) and of its boundaries (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). The positions and the stances of these agents define oppositions that structure the field. Luc Boltanski described article how a comic book field began to emerge in France in the sixties (Boltanski, 1975). The structuring dimensions of the comic book field and its relationship to the cultural field contribute to the definition of the forms of comic exhibitions and to their variations.

Commerce vs. art, graphics vs. narrative

²⁵ We’re using our translation of the terms from the French online description of the Musée exhibition. Musée de la Bande dessinée. No date. “Parcours muséographique.” Available at <<http://www.citebd.org/spip.php?article4>>. Accessed February 12, 2015.

The tension between a commercial (large-scale production) pole and an artistic (small-scale production) pole is a common feature of fields of cultural production fields (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). It is also at play in the comic book field and this has indirect consequences on comic exhibitions. Indeed, the positioning of creators and works on the “commerce vs. art” axis defines different aspirations and different strategies of alliance. “Commercial” creators and works will tend to get closer to the market, specialized or not, and its events and institutions (such as festivals and conventions). “Artistic” creators and works will tend to get closer to the cultural fields and its institutions. Our corpus gives illustrations of this: a commercially successful series such as *Lanfeust de Troy* has an exhibition at the Angoulême Festival while alternative and “artistic” creators like Blanquet, Masse or Swarte are featured in a modern art museum (*Quintet*, Lyon, 2009). As we’ll see, these contexts allow for different forms of exhibition.

But it’s necessary to take into account a tension that is specific to the comic book field: the tension between a graphics-dominant (or formal and visual) definition and a narrative-dominant definition of comics²⁶. This is a central opposition for the field that engages esthetical differences and definitional stances but also power struggles and balance between creators²⁷, different artistic genealogies and alliances²⁸ –or different exhibiting strategies. The three forms of exhibitions presented in this article are direct expressions of this tension and the positions it defines. The narrative-based “substitutive” exhibitions and their content-over-form approach are the polar opposite of the artistic exhibitions and their visual reductionism. The comic-specific museum approach constitutes an intermediary form, related to the attempts, in the field, at defining comics as an autonomous form, grounded in both narrative and visual concerns but reducible to none of them. In that sense, the diversity of comic exhibitions is just one of the many forms of the definitional and dominance struggles in the comic book field.

The expression of a dominated status

²⁶ We discussed this structural dimension of the field in our analysis of the alternative publishing house PictureBox (Méon, 2014).

²⁷ This refers for example to the tensions between writers and artists, who have different professional opportunities, different production capacities and constraints, different forms of fan and social recognition, *etc.*

²⁸ An article in the special issue of the highbrow art magazine *Art press* dedicated to comics offers an illustration of this tension and its implications for creators and their relations to the other arts. For this article, the journalist Christian Marmonnier asked several comic creators whether they felt closer to the “visual arts family” or to the “literature family”. The diversity of answers shows how the graphics vs. narrative tension goes through all fractions of the field. (Marmonnier, 2005).

Our corpus includes exhibitions that took place in various contexts: from comic-specific events (such as festivals –mainstream like Angoulême or specialized like Fumetto) to public art museums (like modern and contemporary art museums in Paris and Lyon) and private art museums and foundations (Pinacothèque, Fondation Cartier, Maison Rouge, all in Paris). When considering these institutional contexts, a narrowing of the spectrum of exhibitions can be observed. The closer the exhibiting institution is to the comic book field (a comic festival for example), the more open are the possibilities for the exhibitions –which means the three kinds of exhibitions can be found²⁹. Conversely, the closer the institution is to the cultural field (art museums and art foundations), the more limited are the possibilities –which means only artistic exhibitions take place in such institutions.

This institutional limitation of the forms of the exhibitions shows the dominated cultural status of comics. In a cultural and institutional context, comics can only be considered through the dominant principles the cultural field uses for exhibiting works and for evaluating creators and works. In such a context, a comic exhibition must be first and foremost an art exhibition. This is the imposition of a set of values and practices from one dominant field to a dominated field.

A salient manifestation of this domination lies in the way artistic exhibitions present the comic creators³⁰. First, as we already said, the displaying choices are inducing a form of requalification, by emphasizing a visual appreciation of the works. This can be explicitly underlined by the exhibitions, as illustrated by this excerpt for the *Quintet* catalogue.

“When going through this *Quintet* [exhibition], each page, frontally hanged on the wall, needs first to be seen, asking the visitor to not limit himself to the conventions attached to the form (in particular, reading downwards from left to right).” (Christian Rosset, art critic) (Rosset, 2009b: 12)

The requalification is also effected in the presentation of comic creators first as drawers (dessinateurs). The praise goes to their graphic talent, as is exemplified here with Hergé for the Pompidou exhibition in 2006.

“This is Hergé as a drawer we want to exhibit, like any other major artist of the 20th Century. [...]”

²⁹ This is especially true for a festival like Angoulême, which due to its history and its size, is like an objectified expression of the whole comic book field and of its positions. At a more specialized festival like Fumetto, which is mainly dedicated to smaller and more alternative creators, only a fraction of the field is present –and the exhibitions reflect this, tending to be closer to our “artistic exhibition” model.

³⁰ Our analysis is based on texts that are present in the exhibitions as well as texts of the accompanying catalogues. For a more detailed presentation of this argument, cf. Méon (2015b).

Destination Drawing could be a sub-title for our project: to present in the best possible way the graphic genius of Hergé and the different stages of his creation [...]” (Laurent Le Bon, curator of the exhibition) (Le Bon, 2006:14)

The creator and his work are then considered from another context, in relation with the more general fine arts history. They’re measured against creators, works and values of this art history rather than the history of their own specific discipline³¹.

“Even though he firmly claims he belongs to the comic world he deeply transformed, Crumb largely explored the possibilities of drawing. The flurry of his *Zap* period is reminiscent of Brueghel’s scenes, his ability to express faces and expressions is matched only by Toulouse-Lautrec, his titanic *Genesis* expresses the same mastery as Gustave Doré’s one, with even more restraint and an unlikely attention to detail.” (Hergott, 2012)³²

Moreover, comic creators are not only praised as drawers but almost systematically also as something more, as versatile artists whose talent is expressed in various art forms. The enumeration of the creators’ diversity of activities is one of the most common remarks made in exhibitions, catalogues and press releases. The honored creator is “multimedia and visionary”³³, with “an unconventional and prolific career”, being “at the same time a comic artist, a sculptor, a visual artist, a musician and a film-maker”³⁴, and who “goes beyond the traditional limits of his discipline”³⁵. These are creators whose talent is considered as bigger than their (comic) art.

The institutions emphasize this versatility through their selection of the works they present. The exhibitions include works that are not related to comics and to their production but that belong to fine arts and contemporary art tradition such as paintings, sculptures, installations, videos... The *Quintet* exhibition (2009) is a perfect example of such exhibitions, offering a wide range of works, from Shelton’s comic pages and posters to Masse’s comics and sculptures or Swarte’s comics and design works. In a radical expression of this, the Pinacothèque exhibition about Hugo Pratt (2011) explicitly aimed at presenting his less-

³¹ Marc Singer presented a symmetric literary appropriation and redefinition of a comic work in his ICAF presentation about the critic reception of *Persepolis* (Singer, 2014).

³² Making similar observations, Bart Beaty underlines the difference between this artistic legitimist genealogy for Crumb and the artists Crumb himself would cite as influences (Beaty, 2012: 204-206).

³³ Remark about Enki Bilal, from the press release announcing his *Mécanhumanimal* exhibition (Musée des arts et métiers, Paris, Jun. 2013 – Mar. 2014).

³⁴ Remark about Winschluss (also known as Vincent Paronnaud), from the press release for the *Winshluss. Un monde merveilleux* exhibition (Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris, Apr. – Sept. 2013).

³⁵ Remark about Moebius, from the exhibition leaflet (*Moebius Transe Forme*, Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris, Oct. 2010 – Mar. 2011).

known watercolors rather than his more famous comic pages. To some extent, some of these works are specially commissioned for the shows by the organizing institutions. This is the case for example for two Bilal exhibitions, where he was asked, in one case, to produce original paintings with accompanying texts about some pieces of the Louvre historical collection³⁶, and in another case, to offer a new name and a new definition to mechanical objects from the Musée des Arts et Métiers collection³⁷.

The comic creator is recognized in such instances only if he can assert that he's "real" artist with a diverse output. He has to have the ability to perform in more legitimate genres and forms. In that sense, comic exhibitions don't organize an open inclusion of comics in the cultural field. They rather offer a selective recognition of individual "exceptions"³⁸. Instead of a legitimization of comics, this acceptance of individual artists can be the occasion for a reaffirmation of more traditional boundaries and hierarchical distinctions. The introducing text of the Pratt exhibition at the Pinacothèque is a very clear expression of such a limited acceptance.

"Like photography, comics reopen the old discussion on major and minor arts. Is a comic creator an artist? The real question should maybe be to know if he has the same status as a painter or a sculptor, *even though he distinguished himself in an industrial or at least "mainstream" art form.*

This question is even more commanding when considering a figure like Hugo Pratt. Nobody can deny him his artist status, it's inherent to him. *But his place among "real" artists will always be more difficult to earn because he is foremost a "comic author".*

This exhibition is organized today at the Pinacothèque *to place him among the correct Pantheon.* I can imagine our critics accusing us of taking the easy option to attract audience. Let them choke with fury: this is not our intent. *We want to show that the artist status comes from the qualities of the individual, not from the art form he practices. We are not going to start a series of exhibitions on comic authors and we are not following an apparently growing trend. Rest assured: Hugo Pratt and only him.*"³⁹

The dominated place which is allotted to comics in the cultural field is apparent here. Through such exhibitions, comics are mainly considered as a minor or derivative form of fine arts. Their value appears when they're presented and seen through standards that are heteronomous

³⁶ Enki Bilal, *Les Fantômes du Louvre*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Dec. 2012 – Mar. 2013.

³⁷ *Mécanhumanimal*, Musée des arts et métiers, Paris, Jun. 2013 – Mar. 2014. This museum is an important national institution dedicated to scientific and technical culture.

³⁸ Bart Beaty stresses out how some comic exhibitions describe the comic creators they present as "masters" or "geniuses" (Beaty, 2012: 195-196). This "genius argument" is another form of this selective recognition of creators.

³⁹ This text is by Marc Restellini, director of the Pinacothèque. It was presented as an introduction to the exhibition, in the opening room. It was also reproduced in the catalogue and press kit of the exhibition. We italicized what we consider to be its most significant elements for our argument.

to comics, such as a visual or formal judgment related to art traditions. This specific view on comics often entails a recognition that benefits the individual artist more than his art. Redeemed by his versatility, the comic creator can be redefined as an “artist”.

Exhibitions are a very ambivalent instrument of recognition for comics. Their diversity reflects the divisions of the comic book field, of which agents aspire to different forms of recognition for different aspects of their work (graphics or narrative). Moreover, if the exhibitions contribute to bringing closer the comic book field and the cultural field (through shared practices, places and references), they also reaffirm a legitimist hierarchy of the arts and its symbolic frontiers.

Still, this ambivalent form of recognition is made possible by the welcoming or at least the acceptance from some comic creators. For some, it offers long coming compensation for a traditional lack of consideration. For others, it creates opportunities for fruitful career turns. Or it may also meet already existing practices of creators with more hybrid background and positioning⁴⁰. The support from creators to this form of recognition can result from various motives. Yet, it's the strength of symbolic domination to generate support from those it objectively dominates.

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⁴⁰ The exhibition “Cartoon polymaths” (Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, New York, Feb.-Apr. 2011), curated by Bill Kartalopoulos, explored the versatile production of such multi-positioned creators

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Jean-Matthieu Méon is Senior Lecturer in media and communication studies at the University of Lorraine. He's a member of the Centre de Recherche sur les Médiations, for which he co-directs the Praxitèle research team dedicated to arts, culture and mediations. His researches deal with cultural issues and he has published extensively on censorship, musical amateur practices and popular culture (comic books, pornography). His works on comics explore in particular the institutional, professional and artistic dimensions of their legitimization. A list of publications can be found online: <http://crem.univ-lorraine.fr/meon-jean-matthieu>.



Fig. 1 A traditionnal presentation - Vraoum! (2009)



Fig. 2 Art installation (G. Barbier) and original comic art - Vraoum! (2009)



Fig. 3 Joost Swarte's illustration for *Quintet* (2009)



Fig. 4 Artifacts, immersive scenography and art reproduction - *Le Monde de Troy* (2011)

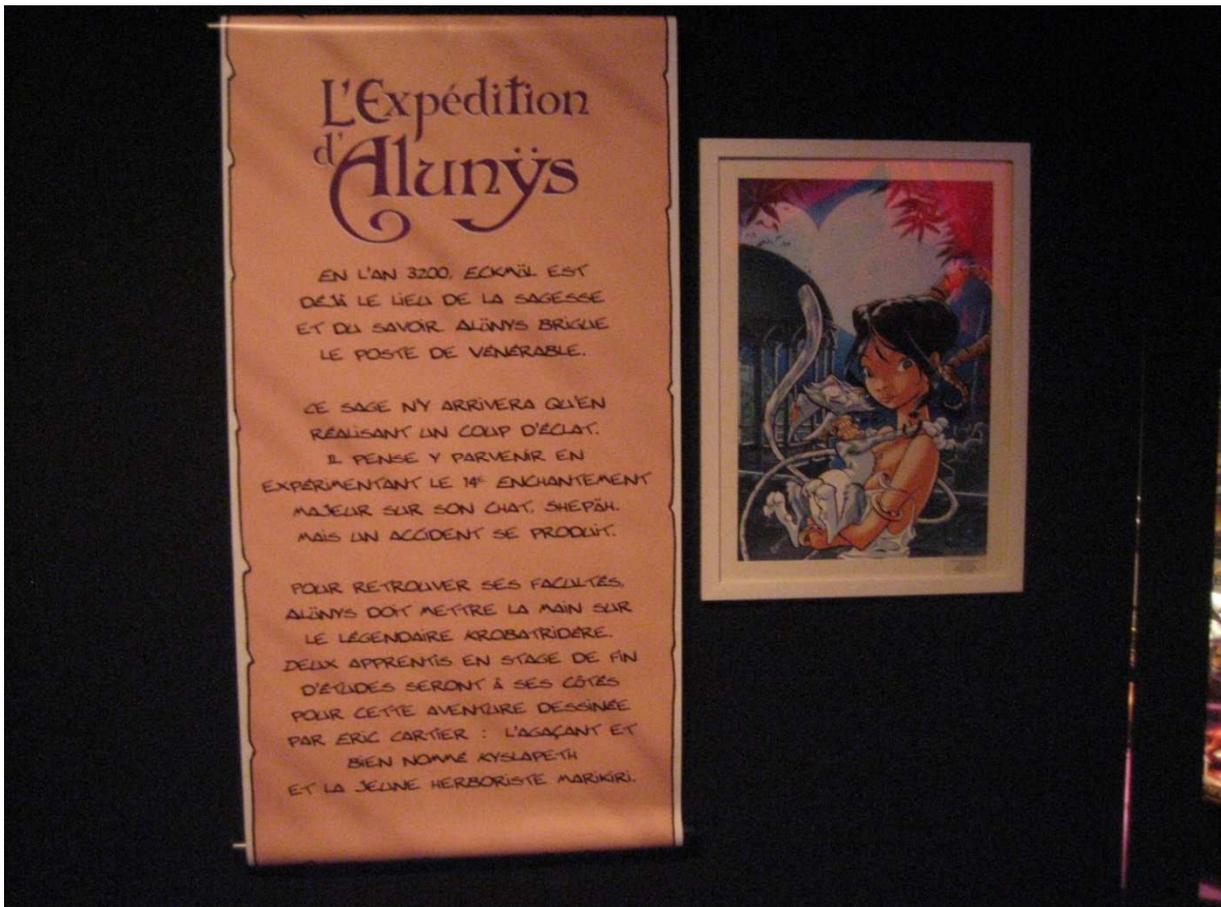


Fig. 5 An introduction to the narrative - *Le Monde de Troy* (2011)



Fig. 6 The permanent collection - Musée de la Bande dessinée (2009)



Fig. 7 Framed art and reading lounge - Musée de la Bande dessinée (Le Salon) (2009)