
Outlining Conceptual Practices in Comics

Ilan Manouach

Abstract

This article examines how the shortcomings of institutional representation in comics, and the shifting role of existing institutions in the industry, can engender a new comics practice. ‘Conceptual Comics’ mobilise the historical legacy of conceptual art in its capacity for institutional critique, self-reflexivity, alternative forms of skilling, and the prioritisation of context over content, to renew comics making and reading. My case study, *Noirs* [Blacks] (2015), a facsimile détournement of *Les Schtroumpfs noirs* [The Black Smurfs], closely approximates the original, with the same cover, number of pages, and format, but replaces four different composite colour plates by four uniform plates of cyan, resulting in a monochromatic deviation. *Noirs* demonstrates how a form, when no longer conventionally operational, can foreground industrial fabrication normally intuited as a transparent and mechanic process.

Keywords: appropriation, *bande dessinée*, Conceptual Comics, Monoskop, Smurfs, Ubuweb

Context: Ilan Manouach

Ilan Manouach is an artist, a publisher, and additionally works as an editor and strategy consultant for Onassis Publications in Athens. He is currently studying for a PhD at the Aalto University in Helsinki, under the supervision of Craig Dworkin, where he is examining how this century’s frontier technologies such as AI, financial technologies, and globalised logistics are reshaping the comics industry. The topics of his research and artistic practice include Conceptual Comics, post-internet publishing, and synthetic media and AI. The Comics Journal called him ‘one of the most critical contemporary cartoonists and thinkers

working today'¹, and Kenneth Goldsmith described him as 'the most provocative, critical, and intelligent comic artist alive'.²

Since 2001, he has published more than thirty books exploring different perspectives on the comics industry. His upcoming books include *Fastwalkers*, a 512-page synthetic comic book entirely generated by AI, and *Peanuts Minus Schulz*, a work entirely composed through the distributed labour of thousands of art workers. He is also the co-editor of *Chimeras: Inventory of Synthetic Cognition*, a collective glossary on AI, with 170 contributors exploring a variety of epistemic perspectives on artificial intelligence: interspecies, crip, monstrous, feminist, distributed, and decolonial, among others.

Manouach is mostly known for Shapereader, a system for tactile storytelling built on a repertoire of haptic ideograms initially designed for blind and partially sighted readers/makers of comics that has been presented and discussed internationally in a variety of formats, contexts, and collaborations. He is also the founder of Applied Memetic, an organisation that focuses on the intersections of machine learning and graphic narratives, and the political repercussions of a new media-rich Internet literacy. For a fuller documentation on the above projects, the Brussels-based non-profit Echo Chamber has the mission to produce, fundraise, document, and archive Manouach's research and productions in contemporary comics. He is an Onassis Digital Fellow (2020), a Kone alumnus (2015, 2017, 2019) and is currently active as an appointed expert in experimental comics for the Belgian government and its national public funding program.

In 2018, along with Kenneth Goldsmith, Manouach curated Shadow Libraries: Ubuweb in Athens, a three day event that examined the uses of the archive in relation to artistic production and explored the conceptual consistency and the ethics of digital preservation and distribution in web libraries, through the lens of its users and makers. Manouach also heads Futures of Comics, an international, recurrent research programme that explores how comics are undergoing historic mutations in the midst of increasingly financialised and globalised technological affordances, and proposes to map the social, economic, racial, and gendered forces that shape the industry's commercial, communication, and production routines. Additionally, he is the Curator/Librarian of

- 1 Kim Jooha, 'Expanded Comics: The Conceptual Comics of Ilan Manouach', *The Comics Journal* 304 (Summer/Fall 2019), <https://www.tcj.com/expanded-comics-the-conceptual-comics-of-ilan-manouach/>
- 2 Quoted in Joe McCulloch, 'Peanuts Minus Schulz', *The Comics Journal* (May 20, 2021), <https://www.tcj.com/reviews/peanuts-minus-schulz/>

Conceptual Comics for Ubuweb and Monoskop and the founder of Topovoros, a publishing house releasing translations of works from Hito Steyerl, Craig Dworkin, Donna Haraway, Helene Cixous, Mackenzie Wark, Metahaven, Byung Chul-Han, and others.³

This contextualisation of Ilan Manouach's article was written by Fransiska Louwagie and Simon Lambert, and includes some information supplied by the artist.

Introduction

In 1959, Brion Gysin wrote that 'writing is fifty years behind painting'.⁴ Similar statements about behind-ness or ahead-ness in the arts do not seem to gain as much traction nowadays. More than sixty years later, the evolutionary race between different forms of expression/inscription outlined in Gysin's oft-cited quote seems to be a matter of evolutionary concern itself, and a vestigial relic in that regard. One factor might be the diminished conviction in traditional media categorisation, which can be justified only in market terms, and whose constructedness escapes conventional readings. This shift can be partly explained by the pluralisation of contemporary artistic practices and the increasing exploration of the interstitial space between different media along with the advent of categories that blur distinctions between different artistic forms and media. Gysin's own uncategorisable artistic production is a natural counterexample to the modernist dictum according to which artists should investigate, or to put it more bluntly, draw the boundaries and defend, their medium's 'unique and proper area of competence'.⁵ The media researcher and writer Jonathan Sterne urged us, already in 2003 before the tectonic shift of media convergence and the merging of mass communication outlets through digital platforms, to take a further distance from essentialist perspectives and 'consider media as recurring relations among people, practices, institutions, and machines'.⁶ The word 'recurring' challenges a definitional fixity that emphasises the media specificity of histories, communities, and signi-

3 The research on Conceptual Comics was generously funded by the Kone Foundation in 2016.

4 José Férrez Kuri, ed., *Brion Gysin: Tuning in to the Multimedia Age* (London: Thames and Hudson 2003), 153.

5 Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in *Modern Art and Aodernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (London: Routledge, 2018), 5–10 (6).

6 Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 223.

fyng potentials, and gradually shifts our focus towards a certain persistence, a repetitive occurrence. Unlike ontological categories and more like dynamic entities, media are hybrid, malleable formations where models, technologies, and arrangements, old and new, converge, evoke, thematise, or mutually shape each other. Cultural institutions and professionals that have established their reputations within a media-specific purview face the transformation of media ecologies both as a challenge and an opportunity.

Another factor that we need to take into account is that access to media content increasingly occurs in information-intensive contexts. Networked technologies have their own specific 'affordances', described by Sellen and Harper as the 'possibilities of action' allowed within a defined material setting and determined by an object's properties.⁷ The increasing access to online media content has contributed to the process of reconfiguring dated criteria of media hierarchy that have allowed a comparative developmental understanding of different artistic forms to take root. The Internet definitely changed how we produce, consume, and archive comics, in ways that are at once infrastructural, ubiquitous, and quiet. For instance, a paradigm shift in media access, whose critical impact still needs to be researched and weighted in the understanding of the comics industry's complex distribution and communications patterns and channels, can be found in something as 'mundane' as network neutrality; this is the open Internet's backbone, a single infrastructural technology that undergirds our networked experience. It is benchmarked to ensure that equal opportunities for unbiased access to media content are offered, 'regardless of the source and without favouring or blocking particular products or websites' (OED). Network neutrality still constitutes an important battleground between Internet Service Providers and media conglomerates. Although the Internet is far from being in practice a smooth, unstriated space where all media content, independently from its belonging to an industry, an art form, or a mode of address, is equally present to the user, comics are found to exist simultaneously and compete for attention with other forms of media content. The evolutionary competitiveness between media in terms of forms and histories has shifted to a race for attention that encompasses all media ecologies, an opportunity that comics professionals have been able to leverage in different ways.

7 Abigail J. Sellen and Richard H. Harper, *The Myth of the Paperless Office* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 17.

As the comics industry and its institutions are being reshaped by technological and networked affordances, I argue in this paper that an industrial understanding of comics can be the basis for the constitution of a comics practice, which I have called Conceptual Comics. In this article, I use the example of *Noirs*,⁸ part of an artistic research project that I have been conducting for many years with a dozen of different publications (see Fig. 1).

I would like to sketch how a work of Conceptual Comics explores its very substrate ‘not as transparent signifier, but as an object in its own right, replete with its own material properties, histories, and signifying potential.’⁹ Conceptual Comics mobilise the historical legacy of conceptual art in its capacity for institutional critique, self-reflexivity, the constitution of alternative forms of skilling/deskilling, and the prioritisation of context over content, to a novel notion of comics making and comics reading. Through an industrial-affective approach to comics, these works reflect the need for a new sort of institution that responds to rapidly changing media ecologies.

Works in Progress

The Internet’s attention economy and the need for new markets have greatly contributed in revealing the diversity of comics demographics. The global exposure for comics artists, scenes, and small publishers, provided by media platforms and online communities such as Instagram, Deviantart, and Tumblr, has provincialised once and for all the traditional, western epicentres of the comics industry. The stereotypes according to which comics makers are white ‘bespectacled fanboys, acned overweight misfits’,¹⁰ or ‘anal retentive, adolescent and emotionally arrested’,¹¹ naturally a critique that could have easily applied to the literary-on-high, is further corroded to the point of untenability; the Internet has contributed to revealing the real demographics of comics makers and fans: from an audience consisting predominantly of a white, young, and middle-class male population to steadily growing reading communities, extremely diversified in terms of ethnicity,

8 Ilan Manouach, *Noirs* (Brussels: La 5e Couche, 2015).

9 Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 9.

10 Aaron Kashtan, ‘The End of Comic Geeks?’, *The Hooded Utilitarian* (May 2015), <https://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2015/05/the-end-of-comic-geeks/> (accessed on 15 January 2021).

11 Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 68.

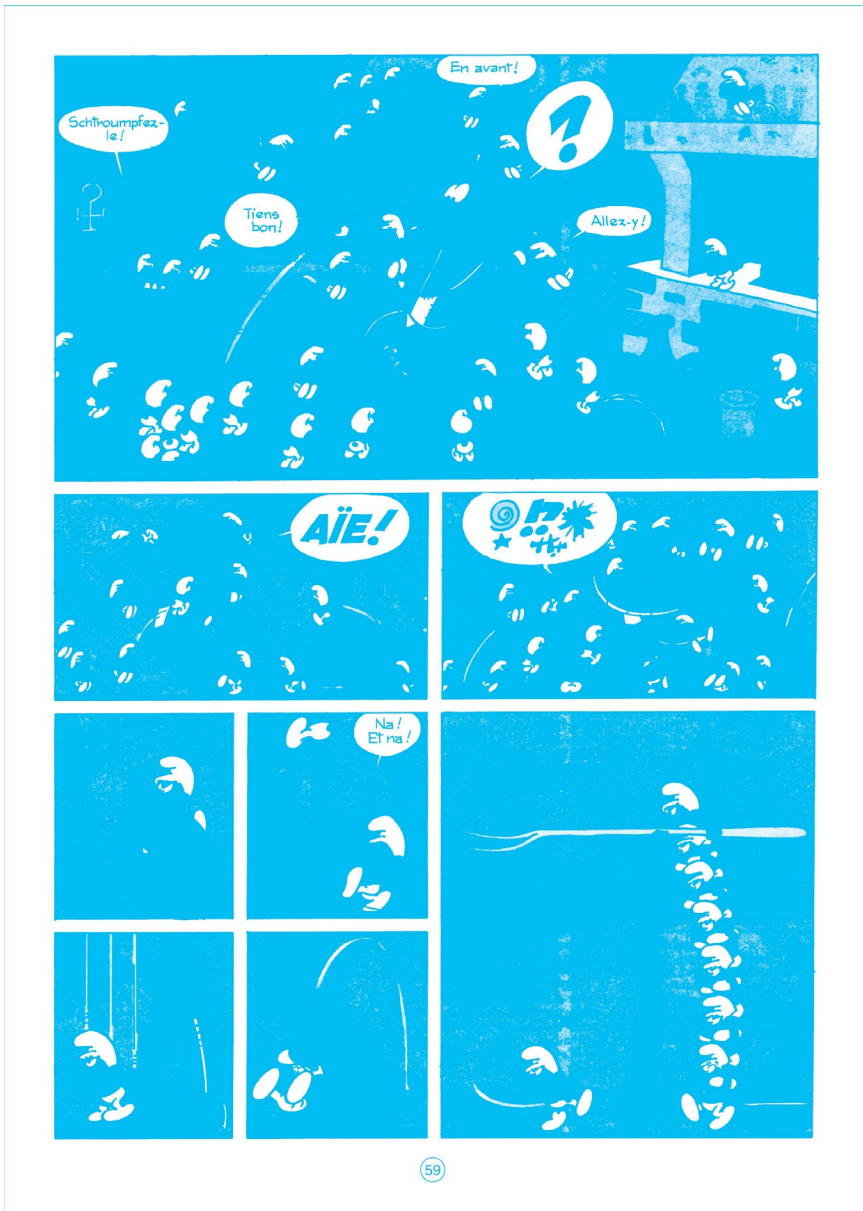


Figure 1. Ilan Manouach, *Noirs*, page 59.

gender, race, and sexual orientation. Comics communities, increasingly mixed, evolve beyond a passive acceptance of marketplace choices.

Makers and readers have used the Internet as an empowering technology that enables 'average consumers to archive, appropriate, annotate and recirculate media content'.¹² The Internet has contributed to the incentivisation of individuals who take an active role in discussing and distributing alternative, transformational, or derivative works, based on root-texts; for instance, *fanfic* (short for fan fiction), is a form of fan labour that has been rarely commissioned or authorised. According to Henry Jenkins, all participatory fanfiction works, such as the book I will explore in this article, involve some form of critical commentary. These works are generally construed by reader-writers as a response to the consensual and normative ethos of the industrial mainstream, especially by readerships who have felt under-represented due to gender, sexuality, or ethnicity. While these contributions are made with a degree of loyalty that fans feel towards the original creators, they still largely depend for their valorisation on the power/knowledge nexus put forward by mainstream comics publishers. Nevertheless, individual makers become increasingly independent from centralised channels and gain substantial control over the promotion of their content, and are able to address their audience with limited need for mediators. The traditional importance of gatekeepers such as publishers, critics, and the specialised press is certainly under reconfiguration, if not seriously eroded.

While access to online content through the emergence of media aggregators, subscription-based access, and RSS feeds has undoubtedly contributed to a certain diffusionism in the online distribution of media content and is partly responsible for further deconstructing well-established criteria of high and low brow in cultural stratification, one has to acknowledge at the same time the synchronous effects of an inverse and somewhat balkanizing force that is manifested in various forms within the comics industry. At a time when contemporary media art is conceptualised in terms of 'media convergence', 'partial remediation', 'embodied cognition', 'transitional' and 'hybrid textualities', comics stubbornly look, feel, and read the same. Despite the growing sophistication of the multiple, mostly digital ways of experiencing art in the twenty-first century, the comics industry is tentative in imagining new forms of perceptual and sensual engagement in the constitution

12 Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 1.

of a work or a practice. Concepts, tools, and terms that are assumed to be constructive for defining and situating contemporary artistic practices and trends seem to have little currency in helping us theorise and practise comics. An important reason is that for much of the twentieth century, a classbound, traditionalist literary industry and an academised avant-garde have persistently denigrated the extra-literary and artistic significance of the comics field. On the other hand, one could argue from the standpoint of professional craftsmanship,¹³ specialised presses, and the various programs in comics education, that there is limited use in framing comics praxeology within tools and concepts coming from other disciplines, some of which are artistic (contemporary art, design, choreography), and others less so (financial technologies, machine learning, systems theory).

Language is a terrain of constant negotiation, and its use and misuse has to be thought in relation to hegemony and how it foregrounds issues of legitimation, domination, or resistance. Jean-Christophe Menu, the ex-publisher of the Association, in an interview that inversely resonates with Gysin's introductory quote, celebrates the importance of comics belatedness in its maturity as an art form, and asks the question: 'puisque la bande dessinée est un art qui s'est développé en retard, est-ce qu'elle ne serait pas encore une avant-garde? est-ce qu'on ne serait pas encore dans la modernité plutôt que dans le post-moderne rampant, gluant, qui est partout ailleurs?' [Since comics is an art that developed late, does that mean it's still an avant-garde? Are we not still be in modernity rather than the rampant, clingy post-modernism that is everywhere else?].¹⁴ The terminological insularity of comics, and a certain resistance to transdisciplinarity could after all be a modernist fiction; the reverse side of an on-going institutional crisis brought by the combined effects of the hybridisation of media and maker/user empowerment to the detriment of traditional dissemination channels. It is symptomatic of a microclimatic attitude that accrues around comics and crystallises its conflicting relation with cultural institutions and academia, often characterised, as literary scholar Marc Singer observes in his book *Breaking*

13 'Craft', following Martha Rosler, should not be understood in its medieval sense, where associations of merchants were controlling the deployment of knowledge related to their practice, but as 'reinserted into the context of individualized, bravura production-commodity production in particular'. Martha Rosler, 'Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art "Survive"?', *e-flux* (January 2010), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/12/61338/take-the-money-and-run-can-political-and-socio-critical-art-survive/> (accessed 1 September 2021).

14 Jean-Christophe Menu and Xavier Guilbert, 'JC Menu', *du9* (11 March 2009), <https://www.du9.org/entretien/jc-menu/> (accessed 15 January 2021).

the Frames, by a certain defensiveness and anti-intellectualism.¹⁵ According to Philip Troutman, the position comics occupies today in research is very fragile due to its interdisciplinary attributes,¹⁶ and when not ‘scattered across disciplines’,¹⁷ its presence, as a research subfield, is largely due ‘to the largesse of English departments’.¹⁸ Artistic research in comics seems to be in a precarious position vis-a-vis the recent boom of theoretical and analytical studies in art education expressed by the profusion of MA programmes in art praxis,¹⁹ as opposed to the more conventional, technical, skill-oriented curricula of MFAs that are still popular in comics education.

A history that would trace the industry’s long and conflictual journey to cultural and institutional legitimacy would start from comics workers coming to terms with a legacy of a former popular entertainment, and here Bart Beaty’s *Comics Versus Art* is an important contribution.²⁰ A lexicon along these lines would include key cultural exhibitions, events, funding programs, conferences, public policies, and art presses that have addressed comics communities with a media-agnostic agenda or have expressly argued, as has Jean-Marc Thévenet, the Director of the Havre Biennale in 2010, for a ‘new scene of equality between comics and contemporary art’.²¹ Another section of this imaginary lexicon could focus on a long list of more or less successful attempts from comics artists, publishers, and trendcasters to hack institutional legitimacy by experimenting and appropriating canonical, certainly recognisable, often outdated forms of artistic expression. The narrative of the upward mobility of comics in cultural stratification is somehow coterminous with the diminishing importance of market share assessment as the single metric of a comics work’s cultural relevance, an achievement by comics workers. A similar challenge for poetry has

15 Marc Singer, *Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019).

16 Philip Troutman, ‘Interdisciplinary Teaching: Comics Studies and Research Writing Pedagogy’, in *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom: Essays on the Educational Power of Sequential Art*, eds. Carrye Kay Syma and Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: Macfarland and Co, 2013), 120–132.

17 Gregory Steirer, ‘The State of Comics Scholarship: Comics Studies and Disciplinarity’, *International Journal of Comic Art* 13, no. 2 (2011), 263–285.

18 Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo, *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time: Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books*, (London: Palgrave, 2016), 29.

19 Simon Grennan, ‘Arts Practice and Research: Locating Alterity and Expertise’, *International Journal of Art and Design Education* 34, no. 2 (2015), 249–259.

20 Bart Beaty, *Comics Versus Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

21 Thierry Lemaire, ‘Havre de légitimation pour la BD’, *ActuaBD* (October 2010), <https://www.actuabd.com/Havre-de-legitimation-pour-la-BD> (accessed 29 July 2021).

been expressed in the words of conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith as a ‘readership over thinkership’ question.²² Suffice to say that a symptom of this legacy might be a ‘performance of marginality’,²³ and the display of ‘intimacy, shame, and masculine melancholia [...] as a mode of readerly participation’,²⁴ that have become a predominant mode of address in many acclaimed works of contemporary comics. This list would also certainly include unsophisticated and ‘file under’ terms such as *graphic novel*, ‘heralded as literature due to their “serious” non-fiction storylines’,²⁵ but also subtler ones such as *nouvelle bande dessinée* (after the *nouveau-roman*, an acclaimed form of experimentation in literature that coalesced around Les Éditions de Minuit, a visionary publishing house), *OuBaPo* (after OuLiPo, a lab of writers-mathematicians who reflected on the multiple ways constraint-based writing can be directed towards generative processes in the making of a novel or poem) and ‘conceptual’, ‘serialist’, and ‘minimalist’ comics (following established traditions in contemporary art).

There is a need for a more complete understanding of the shifting role of institutions in the comics industry and how they can respond to these new challenges. How, for instance, does the historic, international comics festival such as the Angoulême festival, with its selective focus on globalised mainstream media culture, account for the increasing diversity of audiences, genres and industries? Or, in a different line of inquiry, how can the CNL [The National Book Centre], established under the aegis of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication to support the creation, research and promotion of experimental comics within the francophone publishing industry, respond to an increasing number of synergies, forms, nationalities, some of which are not based in France or do not use French, without becoming a tool of linguistic chauvinism? In short, how can older institutions adapt to an increasingly interconnected, globalised, and financialised industry and how can Conceptual Comics, as an artistic practice, map the social,

22 Kenny Goldsmith, ‘Conceptual poetics’, *Poetry Foundation* (9 June 2008), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/06/conceptual-poetics-kenneth-goldsmith> (accessed 15 January 2021).

23 Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda, ‘Special Issue: Comics and Media’, *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2014), 1–10; <https://doi.org/10.1086/677316> (accessed 15 January 2021).

24 Daniel Worden, ‘The Shameful Art: McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern, Comics, and the Politics of Affect’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no.4 (2006), 891–917; <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2007.0014> (accessed 1 September 2021).

25 Erin La Cour, ‘Comics as a Minor Literature’, *Image & Narrative* 17, no. 4 (2016), <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/1336> (accessed 1 September 2021).

economic, racial and gendered forces that shape the industry's commercial and production routines?

Nested Institutions

In his celebrated book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Vilém Flusser discusses how photography has redefined the world of image-making.²⁶ Photography, in contrast with other modes of inscription such as text and painting, is fully programmed, post-industrial, post-historical, and informational. It operates within a higher degree of abstraction; it produces information in a highly codified manner, following a program that is written in its very structure. Flusser goes on to expand on the idea of the camera as an obscure box, an informative empirical tool that 'simulates thought' and extends the human brain and eye by intentionally rearranging and inscribing symbolic meaning to cultural objects.²⁷ By acknowledging photography as something that extends beyond the camera's internal mechanical and photo-chemical operations, Flusser reveals the power interests that are materialised by photography through conspicuous chains of nested apparatuses. Rather than representing the world, photography represents and fulfils the program of these apparatuses themselves, be they corporate, political or military. The idea of content in photography is thus displaced and every single photograph becomes an artefact that needs to be decoded as an expression of these very interests.

Flusser shows photography to be a powerful metaphor. Because of its apparent transparency and immediacy of operation, photography has the capacity to establish a natural taken-for-grantedness. Not only is the camera the apparatus *par excellence*, it is also a veritable *mise-en-abyme* of black boxes, of *cameras obscuras* governed by functionaries, from the shareholders of a photographic empire to the military-industrial complex who impose their inscription on each and every photograph. With the advent of digital photography and its dependence on impenetrable algorithms and scripts, things become more obscure. Flusser introduces the concept of 'decoding' as a key feature of a new, radical discourse, an endless process that deciphers all photographic elements as discourse, as sets of programmed concepts and ambiguous combinations of symbols revealing 'a descent into infinite regression' towards

26 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 1983).

27 *Ibid.*, 83.

the true significance of the photograph.²⁸ The photographer's mediating role has therefore to be thought anew: more as a functionary, at best a networked performer who reconstructs the world into information. From *Homo faber* to *Homo ludens*, the photographer becomes a playful functionary operating as an integral part of a succession of social institutions that produce their own type of discourse, knowledge(s), and histories.

Flusser's double definition of the apparatus, as both an 'organisation or system that enables something to function',²⁹ and a 'plaything or game that simulates thought',³⁰ provides a starting point that can inform a conceptual approach to comics. The term 'Conceptual Comics' points to the works that thematise the industrial aspects of their production. They often embrace 'the messy state of media after the disruption occurred through the digitisation of their production, distribution and communication channels',³¹ and they can be thought as post-digital variants of older industrial forms of completion. Conceptual Comics are an attempt to deconstruct and rethink the fundamental elements of the comics industry. What are the methodologies and the social situations of the comics industry that sustain the 'apparatus-support-procedure',³² beyond the industry's apparent serial diffuseness?

A similar emphasis on the affordances of media in networked environments, and on the ways material histories shape the very conceptions of literary forms and formats can be found in Craig Dworkin's book, *No Medium*.³³ In this book, the author traces a genealogy of conceptual poetic objects, practices and literary interventions that usually resist the conventional tools of textual analysis, such as blank CDs, texts consisting solely of paratextual minutiae, silent feedback loops, or asemic poetry. Dworkin does not reify these works as operations that did not occur as expected, or as incomplete gestures and involuntary inscriptions. These works point instead to their own material

28 Vilém Flusser, 'Photo Production' (lecture given at the École Nationale de la Photographie, Arles, February 23, 1984), in Matthew S. Witkovsky, Roxana Marcoci and Mark Godfrey, *Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 120–123.

29 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 83.

30 *Ibid.*, 27.

31 Florian Cramer, 'What is "Post-digital"?', in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, eds. David M. Berry and Michael Dieter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 12–26.

32 Régis Debray, *Media Manifestos: On the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms*, trans. Eric Rauth (London: Verso, 1996), 13.

33 Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

properties, and to the way they are constituted by acts of inscriptions, informing artistic practices that are divorced from any transparent or 'natural' considerations. In *No Medium's* appendix, previously published under the name *Unheard Music*,³⁴ the writer focuses on works that explore the materiality of the substrate in music and sound art. Dworkin cites Christian Marclay's *Record Without a Cover*, which opens with a ten-minute silence. Sold without protective packaging, the album makes audible the wear-and-tear marks, as the different exchanges and handling of each copy are materialised as inscriptions on its surface. Every single one of the albums is thus individualised, characterised by its own historical trajectory, suffused with a layer of distinctly different degenerative noise. The substrate, what Dworkin calls 'the inescapable residuum of recalcitrant physical matter',³⁵ like Flusser's uncoated, desensitised, overexposed, or undeveloped hypothetical photographic plate, readdresses the medium as a set of nodes in a distributed system of relationships and dependencies, some of which (over)determine the information of the content layer of each work.

Whereas conceptual poetry argues for paratextual operations (whose inventory would include the activation/signification of epigraphs, prefaces, etc., which, according to Gérard Genette, occupy the threshold of the literary work),³⁶ Conceptual Comics would argue for a topographic consideration of the comics industry. Conceptual Comics insist upon the medium's affordances within localised nodes of articulation and the performative dimensions of the industry. They highlight the fact that 'what something *is* has to be understood in terms of what it *does*, how it works within machinic, systemic, and cultural domains'.³⁷ Conceptual Comics accomplish a journey from the drawing table to the dumpster, along a signifying chain of productive contexts, entanglements of relationships between authors, readers, publishers, production routines, and the book economy. The works of Zou Luoyang, whose fascinating distribution of his zine is informed by discard studies and rudology (the systemic study of waste management) and Inès Chuquet's idiosyncratic collectordom practice are just two examples of a radical topographic transformation in the constitution of an artwork. Both of these works are now part of the Ubuweb archive.

34 Craig Dworkin, *Unheard Music* (London: Information as Material, 2010).

35 Craig Dworkin, *No Medium*, 9.

36 Gerard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

37 Johanna Drucker, 'Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface', *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2003), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html> (accessed 15 January 2021). Paragraph 4. Emphasis in original.

In this respect, Conceptual Comics propose to shed some light on the Flusserian black box and examine the materiality of the comic book industry and its inscriptions within a network of signs and significations. What are the material conditions that inform cultural artefacts and how are these physically manifested with historical evidence ready to be deciphered within and beyond the space of the page, the format of a book, or the taste of a readership? How does the substrate of a comic book, rather than being a fixed, transparent receiver of content, turn out to be a dynamic form that can be artistically resignified throughout the entire chain of operations in the infrastructural backend of the comics industry?

Sequential Procedures

According to W. J. T. Mitchell, the term *imagetext* ‘designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text’,³⁸ that mutually determine and reinforce each other, inviting the reader/viewer to process the two elements simultaneously. In *imagetext* there lies the fundamental crisis in the belief in ‘unique modes of operation’,³⁹ as the term designates a multimodal construction implying a certain operability between text and image, that shortcircuits any claim for a comics medium-specificity at the level of content information. There are many ways for two signifying systems to be set in motion within a single work. *Imagetext* productions and other integrated mixed modes of text and images have disrupted traditional entrenched figures associated with the labour of production of discourse such as the poet or the painter, and have forged new ones. They have contributed to the reinvention of technologies and the shaping of tools to respond to that need. Rather than indulging in a pre-Raphaelite nostalgia where the artist supervised and was responsible for the entire production process of a making of a book, Conceptual Comics propose to trace a materially oriented genealogy of the comics industry.

An interesting example of *imagetext* can be found in the work of eighteenth-century artist and poet William Blake, who sparked Mitchell’s investigation into the multimodal interactions that were

38 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 89.

39 George L. Dillon, ‘Writing with Images: Introduction: *Imagetext*, Multiples, and Other Mixed Modes’, Washington University Courses, <https://courses.washington.edu/hypertext/cgi-bin/book/wordsimages/wordsimages.html> (accessed 15 January 2021). Paragraph 6.

explored in his first book, *Blake's Composite Art*.⁴⁰ Blake's work has naturally been reclaimed by comics studies, for the interest of its integrated modes of graphic and textual elements. Over and above the formal interest of its content, Blake's multidisciplinary approach is a historically unprecedented example of the signifying potentialities of the available technologies that can inform an industrial, labour-oriented historical understanding of imagetext or comics. Indeed, William Blake was driven by two separate aspirations: on the one hand as a poet, on the other as a painter. His workshop was equipped with both a letterpress for printing text and a copper-plate rolling press for his etchings. In order to allow decisions to be made at the moment of production, Blake needed to devise a technical process in order organically to compose his entanglements of illustrations and words on the same plate. His relief etching method involved writing the text of the poems with the very same tools of image making, a set of pens and brushes that used an acid-resistant medium. He referred to the revelatory aspect of the untreated copper dissolving in acid as 'illuminated printing'. In his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he describes it as 'printing in the infernal method by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid'.⁴¹ Blake's 'hidden infinite' and his 'infernal method' are the graphic expression of a multimodal discipline that can help us examine how the reconfiguration, transformation, and mutation of the workspace and its production and (pre)industrial routines can inform a conceptual practice in comics.

Sequentiality, in literary theories of form, and more recently in the field of conceptual writing, is often defined as the deliberate (or not) juxtaposition of pictorial and other elements, whose general meaning depends on the value of each element at each moment of the sequence. Sequentiality is a mode of distributing and interlinking information blocks, through ideographic, mnemonic symbols or other proto-writing devices. In early manifestations, predating the advent of writing, it can be found in the form of pictorial narratives encountered in cave paintings, Egyptian friezes, or early Christian codices and tapestries. In formalist literary terms, sequentiality describes the succession of events as they are narrated. Although the popularity of the concept often led many scholars into 'dubiously categorising diverse, historically distant

40 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

41 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975 [1790]).

artefacts as comics for reason of their sequentiality',⁴² sequential ordering is a recurrent feature of graphic storytelling and contemporary comics. I would like to argue that the sequential layout in comics that can be found since its early industrial period is more than an eloquent expression of narrative time. Instead of simply anchoring meaning through a linear, unidirectional succession of elements or events, sequentiality is the very same blueprint for a contemporary understanding of the multiple distributed levels and dimensions of comics production, such as the one that can be found in Blake's own production routine customisations. The concept of sequentiality makes it possible to anticipate and exemplify the industrial conditions and persistent Taylorisms (and the aftermath of Taylor in sequentialist traces) that increasingly define the production, distribution, and communication of mainstream contemporary comics. Here, one is reminded of Karl Marx's dictum: 'human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape',⁴³ which asserts the importance of embryonic traces in a teleological becoming. The simultaneous revelatory appeal of text and image in Blake's work is a rhetorical figure that 'subliminally' points to the industrial conditions of comics becoming. It is an industry that from its early beginnings has been symbiotically expanding with the development of printing, distribution, communication, and media technologies and an array of industrial processes of completion based on generalised automation, standardisation practices, and an orchestrated division of labour that are so embedded in the ways we understand and consume comics that they have become an essential feature for the conceptualisation of artistic practices in the medium. Comics is an industrial form of artistic expression.

Conceptual Comics

Sequentiality is more than a formal device or a compositional matrix that unlocks the narrative structure of the printed page. Sequentiality is the crystallisation of a signifying process that is expressed through the specifics, mechanics, and production routines of the comics industry. A typical production line of manga comics, for example, involves dozens of people handling specialised roles in a sequential ordering and in a quasi-Taylorist conveyor belt, often in ways that have been

42 Hannah Miodrag, *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 108.

43 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1858]), 105.

criticised for resembling a sweatshop. Similarly, distribution has increasingly involved massively digitised operations of logistics and global supply chains. The comics industry and its often-coercive workflow and 'just-in-time' management, Blake's own 'hidden infinite', are reified, therefore, in a second order sequentiality that stands for compositional, narratological relationships. The narratological instrumentalisation of sequentiality is one among other translational manoeuvres with similarly obfuscating results: 'spatio-topia',⁴⁴ defined as the distribution of narrative and semantic elements in the comic page and their relation to the whole, 'arthrology',⁴⁵ designating the set of relations inherent in iconic solidarity, 'closure',⁴⁶ the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole, or the 'infinite canvas',⁴⁷ defining the design strategy based on treating the screen as a window rather than a page. Here is not the place to argue that compelling perspectives can or cannot be generated by transversal readings. Nor that a formal and content-oriented understanding of comics in their literary dimensions cannot be productive given the fact that Comics Studies, as a general field of enquiry, is slow in responding to or often unable to account for radical forms of experimentation in the medium. Far from highlighting the medium's signifying potential and providing an understanding to its mechanics, these operations evacuate into the unconscious all representations that cannot be reconciled with the celebration of an authorial genius, the fictional construction of the comics artist, whose status is differentiated from the structurally collectively organized labour that is found in comics. At best they are a tacit form of compliant cryptomnesia that undermines the surfacing of repressed chains of signification in motion. Conceptual Comics seek procedures for unveiling these operations and draws attention to the very same conditions of possibility of meaning, which are often taken for granted.

Apart from a pithy mention of the printer's locality, typically placed in the end pages of the book, there is no space given to documenting the particular trajectory of a comic book through the different departments involved in the production process. What are the names of the offset operator, the second shift production supervisor, the controller of the lamination machine, the night porter and the fork-lifter? This 'second-order' labour in the making of a book is acknowledged only

44 Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 26–28.

45 *Ibid.*, 25.

46 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 63.

47 Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 220–229.

when it stops being operational; from the semi-automated calibration routines for offset printing to the manual operation of shrink-wrapping with a hand-held heat gun, the book functions as a device that conceals the ever-concentrated, underrepresented labour related to the comics industry.

The development of social, artistic and academic networks that have encouraged the production and preservation of specific discursive and labour economies in comics has often resulted in transforming comics practices into an insulated, experimental cultural laboratory with controlled and simplified inputs. In the relative absence of critical inquiry on the deployment of affective labour in the comics industry, how can one reflect, for instance, on the productivity-driven, hyper-caffeinated 24-hour comics sessions that have become a global form of mediated community engagement? Can we do so without the critical tools from contemporary art's understanding of affective labour, a situationist critique of the spectacularisation of artistic productivity or the subaltern politics of representation coming from postcolonial theory?

Without actually embarking on an argument but only suggesting a line of inquiry, it might be useful to consider the concept of perlaboration (work-through), referring to the repetitive labour that deals with unacknowledged, repressed histories.⁴⁸ In Freudian analysis 'working through' means returning to the same scenes until repression disappears and the patient achieves conscious knowledge of the history of his or her symptoms.⁴⁹ A caveat: only a few Conceptual Comics artists would claim that their work is a form of perlaboration with the conscious goal of exploring and thematising in their work the inhibited production strata and the industrial labour constituting the comic book industry. While most of these comic works coalesce through dry and formal experimentation, they implicitly acknowledge the industrialisation of the medium by exposing its systems of production. Works from artists such as Stephanie Leinhos, Alexis Beauclair, Sammy Stein or Jochen Gerner saturate the narrative space with a particular cognitive structure by creating a hypnotic spectacle. They provide a narrative equivalent calibrated on production routines, portrayed by simple geometric pictorial elements, unburdened by unnecessary narratives.

48 The term 'perlaboration' is a neologism created in 1967 by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis in order to translate the Freudian term *Ducharbeitung*. Elisabeth Roudinesco and Michel Plon, *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Fayard, 2011), 1165.

49 Louis Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 181.

Through the use of recurrences, expansions, contractions, and other sets of operational permutations, these works provide the blueprint for the visualisation of the industrial forces of production shaped by essenceless, mirrorlike repetitions.

Conceptual Comics are works that diverge from established conventions of comics as a medium and mobilise the aesthetic and political legacy of conceptual and post-conceptual art. They are produced by an international community of artists whose work is often under-represented in comics history and comics criticism. Their works operate on the margins of distribution and reception; they have a low visibility in academia, comics festivals, and exhibitions and are rarely reported by specialised press, blogs, or even included in reading lists. Conceptual Comics artists are often uncomfortable with the entrenched roles of production in the comics industry and often perform under multiple identities and capacities. They are usually present and partly responsible for the entire production and distribution chain of the book: self or crowd-funding, self-publishing, printing in a collectively owned risograph press in exchange for a lower print-run, doing their own distribution to book stores and following up with payments, renting a table and travelling to specialised book fairs, book swapping with fellow artists from other countries, distributing their fellow artists' books in their local networks and reviewing them for blogs and online reading lists. Given the scarcity of critical discourse, readers engage with Conceptual Comics in forensic, sometimes non-specified and exceptional ways. I argue that these conditions are not merely a minor drawback of an industry seeking legitimacy through established and canonical forms and that despite the fragility of their communities and the generalised precarity experienced by artists, they induce forms of social relationships that are industry-specific and need to be documented, archived, and to occupy some part of institutional memory in comics. I consider their conservation an important matter.

Conceptual Comics propose to examine how social and economic forces and their established commercial and communication routines affect the medium's modes of signifying meaning and signification. The rainforest of pulp production, the printer's studio, the readers' column, and the landfill do not simply represent geographies of the comics industry but are technologies of inscription in their own right. They are integral elements of a material language that actively shapes comics and challenges the reader to negotiate meaning through different distributions of transparency in its products.

Noirs, a Conceptual Comic Book

An impressive representation of the politics of labour and how it informs the structures of collectivities can be found in the *Smurfs* series. The Smurf village hosts a community that is organised in the form of a cooperative that has all the features of the totalitarian utopia of a work camp, at best a kibbutz: it consists quasi-exclusively of male figures, wearing uniforms, living in identical houses and addressing each other as ‘comrade’. They are the subjects of a benevolent patriarchal figure and show no traces whatsoever of alienation or exploitation: they own the means of production and operate in a money-free economy. However, no narrative, situated in an agrarian, conflict-free society constituted of barely identifiable characters communicating through an unambiguous Newspeak, could ever be engaging without the archetypical figures of discord. First, regarding the evil Gargamel: the greedy ‘capitalist’ figure, whose malevolent powers are directed towards the goal of capturing the Smurfs and turning them into gold. While it is debatable whether Gargamel’s name parodically implies a Jewish, biblical provenance, the fact that he is ‘old, balding with unkempt hair, big-nosed, hump-backed, and wears raggedy black clothes’,⁵⁰ and is drawn in the style of most antisemitic propaganda, should rest the case.

Then there is Smurfette, the only female character, concocted by Gargamel for the purpose of bringing disorder, envy, and jealousy to the Smurf village. It is interesting to read the Smurfette recipe,⁵¹ taking the words of Gargamel, and then to align these words with Peyo’s own comments on what Smurfette represents to the creator’s sensibility.⁵² It

50 Roi Ben-Yehuda, ‘Smurfs: Cute Little Blue Creatures Or Jew-hating Misogynistic Communists?’, *The Forward* (June 24, 2011), <https://forward.com/culture/139107/are-the-smurfs-anti-semitic-misogynists/> (accessed 15 January 2021).

51 The original recipe for the concoction of the only female character in the Smurfs series went as follows: ‘Sugar and spice but nothing nice... A dram of crocodile tears... A peck of bird brain... The tip of an adder’s tongue... Half a pack of lies, white, of course... The slyness of a cat... The vanity of a peacock... The chatter of a magpie... The guile of a vixen and the disposition of a shrew... And of course the hardest stone for her heart’. Curiously, the text of the recipe is accompanied with a footnote: ‘The authors will not be held responsible for this formula which is the sole property of MCPW INC (Male Chauvinist Pig Wizards, EST 1066)’. This happens to be a rather loose translation from the considerably less self-reflexive French credit: ‘Ce texte engage la seule responsabilité de l’auteur du grimoire “Magicae Formulae”, Editions Belzebuth’. Yvan Delporte and Peyo, *The Smurfette* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 8.

52 In his Peyo biography, Hugues Dayez relates a story from the negotiations with NBC for the upcoming Smurf animated series. Peyo apparently spoke little or no English. When the discussion turned to Smurfette, Peyo’s interpreter explains: ‘Peyo began by saying that she was “very feminine”. They asked him to be more specific, so he

seems likely that praise of the Smurfs series for its foundational moral qualities pertaining to children's literature was bestowed because of and not in spite of its naturalisation of sexist and antisemitic values. Rather than lingering on the content of a preindustrial patriarchal community myth, we could examine how labour has been redistributed towards the production and dissemination of a cultural product, which has expanded beyond any commercial expectations. It would be possible to append a history of the industrial-entertainment industry complex of postwar Europe by solely examining comics and their derivatives.

During the 1970's, Renault, National Benzole and BP garages gave away a PVC Smurf figurine with every full tank: this promotional strategy ignited a merchandising craze, historically unprecedented in comics collectibles. To the craze for figurines, produced in hundreds of millions,⁵³ there came a late and somewhat sour response, from a scare story, which revealed that the products, made in Hong Kong, did not align to Western quality and safety standards; the figurines were deemed unsafe on account of the toxicity of leaded pigment that they contained.⁵⁴ A safety marking was introduced at a later stage in order to differentiate the figurines that contained lead-free pigments and passed quality control from the rest: paint dots located on the Smurfs' feet were a pre-ISO sign of quality. These dots are more than a gimmick that can cause the price of a collector's item to fluctuate, which they certainly do. They are evidence that testifies to the different production stages and elements of a collectability frenzy: from the industrial pro-

went on to say: "She is pretty, blonde, she has all the characteristics of women...". Knowing the feminist spirit in the U.S.A., I diplomatically translated this as "all the qualities". I was banking on the fact that Peyo did not understand what I was saying (in English) and the others did not understand what he was trying to say. So naturally, they asked him to expand. So he kept on going with: "She seduces, she uses trickery rather than force to get results. She is incapable of telling a joke without blowing the punch line. She is a blabbermouth but only makes superficial comments. She is constantly creating enormous problems for the Smurfs but always manages to blame it on someone else". I did my best to minimise the sexist nature of this description, but one of the participants at the meeting asked: "Would she at least be able, when the Smurfs are in danger, to take a decision that can save them?" When I translated this to Peyo, he looked astounded. "Come on now, do they expect me to make her a (female) gym teacher?". I obviously did not translate this remark'. Translation by Valteron, in Hugues Dayez, *Peyo l'enchanteur: Biographie*, (Brussels: Niffle, 2003), 163.

53 Leo Cendrowicz, 'The Smurfs Are Off to Conquer the World—Again', *Time Magazine* (14 January, 2008), <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1703303,00.html> (accessed 15 January 2021).

54 The lead scare story motivated Jonathan King to release the song *Lick a Smurf for Christmas (All Fall Down)* under the alias Father Abraphart and the Smurps, a parody of the worldwide hit single, 'The Smurf Song' by Father Abraham and the Smurfs.

cedures and corporate strategies to local business promotion routines, from cross-continental treaties and national safety standards, to families and hygiene practices, these dots are elements of a material history of comics and its derivatives and an example of a conceptual approach to comics artefacts.

Les Schtroumpfs noirs by Peyo collects the first three stories of the acclaimed series of the *Smurfs*.⁵⁵ The *Smurfs*, by the Belgian artist Peyo, were initially featured as extras in the series *Johan et Pirlouit* as early as 1958, but their own first story, *Les Schtroumpfs noirs*, was published in July 1959. Since its original publication, the book has been translated and published in different languages. In the United States, Random House, which was initially responsible for the translation and publication in English of the entire series throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, excluded this title. It only became available much later, in 2010, through a different publisher, Papercutz, and under a new title, *The Purple Smurfs*.⁵⁶ The reason for this title change and delayed appearance of an otherwise multi-million best-seller, lies in the plot of one of the stories that is contained in the volume. The story synopsis goes like this: one day in the small mushroom village, one of the *Smurfs* is stung by a fly, causing his skin to turn black, and reducing him to the state of an inarticulate, primitive, evil attacker. Bouncing around, he gets to bite other *Smurfs* on the tail, propagating what seems to be an out-of-control epidemic that infects the entire community. One remaining *Smurf*, the Papa *Smurf*, still unharmed, and the only blue creature of an entire village turned black, discovers by chance that the cure is found in the pollen of a flower, which has to be inhaled by the contaminated *Smurfs* in order to revert to their original colour, and condition. In his effort to save the village from widespread contamination, Papa *Smurf* takes refuge in the lab and lets the large pollen jar fall into the fire, causing an explosion and the formation of a pollen cloud that descends, and gradually brings normality back to the village. Papercutz, the publisher of *The Purple Smurfs*, released a self-censored version where the evil *Smurfs* were recoloured (from black to purple). The publisher was aware that this book might be perceived as showcasing real-life attitudes with clear reference to the African-American population. The use of the colour black, beyond its endemic qualities standing for death, evil, or sickness, would have denoted a quite tangible demographic among the Papercutz readership that might feel directly addressed (see Fig. 2).

55. Peyo and Yvan Delporte, *Les Schtroumpfs noirs*, *Spirou Magazine* 107 (1963).

56. Peyo and Yvan Delporte, *The Purple Smurfs* (New York: Papercutz, 2010).

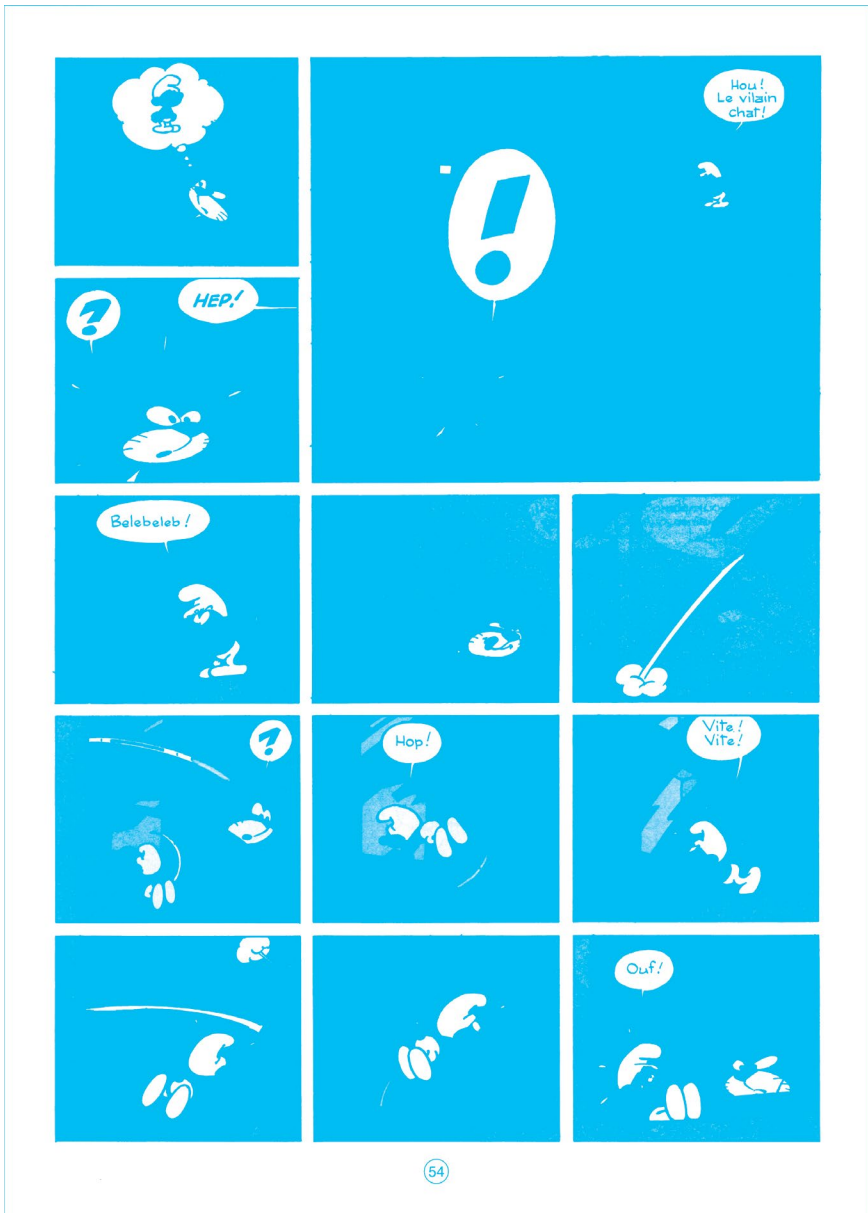


Figure 2. Ilan Manouach, *Noirs*, page 54.

The conceptual comic book, *Noirs*, that engages with the cultural industrial production and decision-making of the original *Les Schtroumpfs noirs* is a facsimile of the original edition: the same cover, the same number of pages and the same format. *Noirs* comes as close as one can get to the original edition, except for one single difference: its colour. Offset colour separation is the industrial standard for printing comic books, based on the act of breaking down a composite colour graphic into basic single-colour layers (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) that are printed separately, one on top of the other. In *Noirs*, the four different colour plates have been uniformly replaced by four plates of cyan, resulting in one single monochromatic composition. *Noirs* suspends the reading process for a moment. The book blurs the different stages of contamination of the characters of the original making the difference barely legible. By deprogramming the expedient efficiency of colour-coding, this facsimile edition argues for a state in which the distinctive category of 'contamination' and the fiction of normalcy become moot. In *Noirs*, reading and decoding mechanisms rely instead on features related to a contextual reading. The book follows Lennard Davis's concept of the 'deafened moment' in disability studies,⁵⁷ construing deafness, not as an essence but as a dynamic modality (contextualised) that occurs to everyone, in time: the author gives the example of the reader as someone that expresses this dynamic tension, stating that 'all readers are deaf because they are defined by a process that does not require hearing or speaking'.⁵⁸ Similarly, *Noirs* produces such a moment; a moment that transcends categories of health and sickness, not with the goal to rebuff or iron out the specifics of different conditions, but instead to reveal how many of our assumptions about what is normal are embedded with assumptions about attributes related to colour, race, and other majority identitarian features (see Fig. 3).

Noirs sheds light on the industrial fabrication of a book through the lenses of offset printing technology. Offset, a supposedly transparent and mechanical process, is revealed as a meaningful signifying device. By bottlenecking the different colours into one monochromatic composition, *Noirs* claims that the mere act of intervening in the printing process, exercising the most minimal amount of intervention possible, constitutes a craft in itself, not unlike the institution of deskilling practices in conceptual art. The goal of this endeavour, apart from

57 Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 100.

58 *Ibid.*, 4.

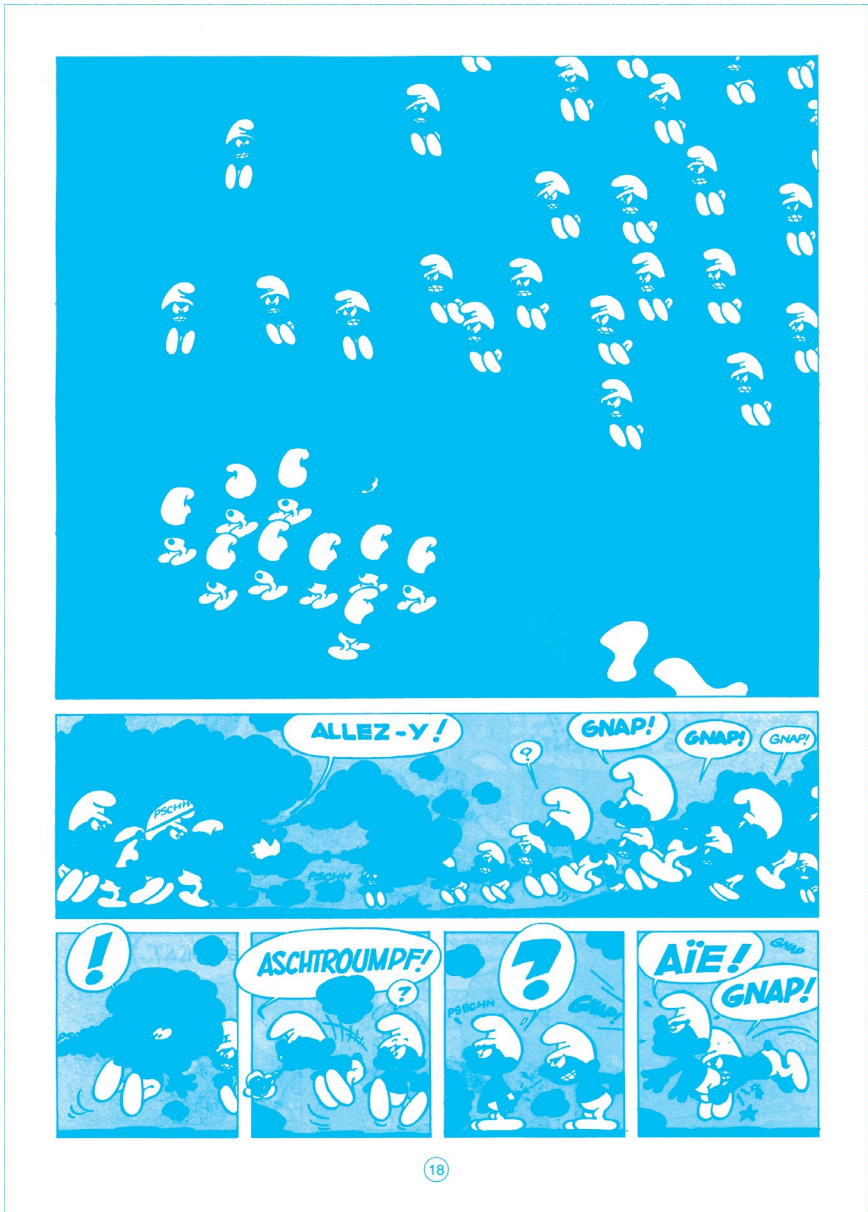


Figure 3. Ilan Manouach, *Noirs*, page 18.

reaffirming the toxicity of comics as traditionally addressing the lowest common denominator, is to problematise the apparently innocuous naturalisation of the ideological potential of colour through a formal experiment into a language (offset technology) that acts upon another language (the book's content). *Noirs* performs what Flusser has described as forcing 'the apparatus to somehow invert its program like a glove, and have it produce that which is unexpected from the point of view of the program'.⁵⁹

An Institutional Memory for Conceptual Comics

Our increasing dependence on networked technologies and the abundance of digital online media content has contributed to a shift in the importance of existing institutions and channels in the distribution and production of comics. The Internet has helped to give visibility to a new global and diverse class of individual makers, connected them and empowered them to create new works or to repurpose and resample existing works, and has provided them with unmediated access to their audience. The Internet has also transformed the conventional stratification of the arts and media and has provided an echo chamber for works that can leverage the new possibilities of its attention economy, independently from their media-specific ecologies. Traditional institutions and the education establishment have to respond to these new challenges and account for works, as in the case of *Noirs*, that reflect and express the industrial and technological affordances of comics through their form and content.

Works of Conceptual Comics occupy a very fragile position in institutional memory and, in general, they are usually little-known outside of their communities. A new form of institution that might provide a springboard for establishing the conditions for an affective lineage among similarly minded practitioners could be structured as a library or an archive. It would need to reflect the ways in which these communities interact, share, and experience comics artefacts. This archive would extend beyond existing comics genres, practices, and markets and would have to highlight the non-uniform consistency that makes room for a perpetual becoming of comics due to its industrial and technological affordances, always in flux. The archive would need to reflect the constituency of this global community in its diversity and emphasise

59 Flusser, 'Photo Production', 5.

how these different works, alternating between material self-reflexivity and critical exhaustion, share common issues and urgencies.

In October 2020, I was invited to curate a selection of Conceptual Comics for the online media collections Ubuweb⁶⁰ and Monoskop,⁶¹ popularly known as ‘shadow libraries’. Monoskop is an online ‘wiki for arts, media and humanities’ where editors upload, maintain, and discuss media collections with a focus on books and printed matter. Ubuweb is a web-based educational archive that was founded by conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith in 1996. It provides free and unrestricted access to a remarkable, idiosyncratic collection of film and video art, critical documents and essays, sound poetry, and art recordings, among many other unclassifiable strands of the historical avant-garde. In both Monoskop and Ubuweb, comics occupy a very marginal position and no systematic attempt has been made to form a comics archive. Nevertheless, these relatively marginal forms of institutional memory are a productive context for marginal practices such as Conceptual Comics. Ubuweb, for instance, was designed using very basic HTML templates and its media collection involved various degrees of compression and pixelation in order to respond to the low-bandwidth connections of the early Internet. It highlighted, through its spartan, resilient, and hard-coded web design, important questions regarding the relevance of the periphery in a soon-to-be-interconnected globalised world, a notion that is still very potent for the global communities of comics.

These two Conceptual Comics collections feature books and other printed formats that have been documented, and photographed from cover to cover, highlighting the materiality of the artefacts. Each book is presented along with metadata and a text from the publisher’s press release or a small critical introduction to the work written in order to provide background information for the needs of the collection. The collection proposes to embrace equally real, unclaimed, anticipated, and fictional practices in their perpetual materialisation. As a whole, it reflects on the specific sites of production and their potential to register meaning and organise discourse based on inscriptions of the material language of the industry. The materiality of their language challenges the reader to negotiate meaning through different distributions of transparency over opacity. Each element that expands in the material set-up around the comics industry, from the inaccessible stereotypes and industrial standards of printing technologies, such as in the pro-

60 <https://ubu.com/cc/index.html> (accessed 1 September 2021).

61 https://monoskop.org/Conceptual_comics (accessed 1 September 2021).

duction of *Noirs*, and their obsolescence, to legal minor injunctions and abusive contracts, can be activated to inform a conceptual practice in comics. In an age where public libraries are an endangered institution, media collections run by amateur librarians emerge as new, vital topographies of sharing and a possible direction for an alternative to institutional reconfiguration in the comics industry.