

Curating Comics Canons

Daniel Clowes and Art Spiegelman's Private Museums

Benoît Crucifix

Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman ('Art Spiegelman's Private Museum'), organized in 2012 at the Musée de la bande dessinée in Angoulême, and *Eye of the Cartoonist: Daniel Clowes's Selections from Comics History*, which took place in Columbus, Ohio in 2014 at the Wexner Center for the Arts in collaboration with the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, offer two fascinating examples of a specific kind of comics exhibition where cartoonists are explicitly invited to act as curators, providing 'their' own vision of comics history. This curatorial framework moreover functions as a valorization of the comics archives that are treasured within the institutions involved with both exhibitions: the cartoonist-as-curator makes a selection from the archive, from the larger memory of comics, reactivating its materials within the display space of the museum. This chapter looks at these cartoonists-curated exhibitions of comics history through the lens of the relationship between canon and archive, arguing that these exhibitions move away from an overt attempt to establish a canon but ground this act of canonization within cartoonists' own idiosyncratic look at comics history, emphasizing the individuality of these authorial canons. Examining the distinct strategies and layout choices, the comparison between both exhibitions further highlights a different relationship to a canon of comics and the way it is framed within the space of the museum.

Cartoonists as Curators

Curating has become today part of the “practice of everyday (media) life” (Manovich 2009) expanding beyond the confined art world institutions and permeating all areas of consumer culture, as users are increasingly invited to select, share, and reframe cultural items and build their own lists and archives. As David Balzer argues, “[i]f curators began to dominate the art world in the 1990s, they began to dominate everything else in the 2000s” (Balzer 2014: 121). This expansion of the curatorial to everyday life in the twenty-first century has given rise to a widespread “curatorial culture” transforming various media and cultural industries, from music (Reynolds 2011) to literature (Collins 2010) or TV (Robinson 2017), questioning the authority of cultural mediators and redefining traditional forms of connoisseurship. Situated at the margins of ‘official’ culture and presented as a “delinquent reading” (Pizzino 2015), more often prescribed against than for, comics have largely relied on their readers and fans to act as ‘curators’ of its history, collecting its fragments in scrapbooks, folders, and long boxes. The cultural memory of comics was long excluded from the preserve of institutions and museums, leaving the archival and curatorial work to amateur archivists, fans, collectors, hoarders. Among these vernacular archivists, cartoonists play no small part as they are often themselves obsessive collectors. As Jared Gardner argues, “[a]rchives are everywhere in the contemporary graphic novel, although almost inevitably not the ordered collections of the academic library or a law firm. These are archives in the loosest, messiest sense of the word—archives of the forgotten artifacts and ephemera of American popular culture, items that were never meant to be collected” (2012: 150). Embracing the ephemeral and exploring the inextricable links between past and present, contemporary cartoonists are attuned to the past of comics and committed to its archive, curating its history both through their own private collections and through their creative practice.

Even though, as Gardner indicates, cartoonists’ curatorial engagement with the past in comics form is distinctly suited to the “database logic” of new media, this curatorial culture is not only linked to the emergence of digital technologies. In fact, by contrast with the de-institutionalization of high culture, the place of curation in the context of comics has perhaps been most profoundly changed by its institutionalization and the growing role played by ‘high’ cultural mediators, the “newfound sociability” of

comics as Erin La Cour and Rik Spanjers (2016) have put it. This process has provided “a context in which the most powerful legitimizing institutions in the traditional art world have been able to incorporate comics, albeit in frequently vexed and vexatious fashions, into their work” (Beaty 2012, 13). This institutionalization of comics has gone hand in hand with a curatorial process of selecting ‘masters’ of the form, in an act of canon-formation that has been a capital bone of contention between comics and museums: “[t]he question of what, who, and how of commemoration processes has loomed large when major art galleries have mounted shows featuring comics and their history” (Baetens and Frey 2015: 225).

The *Masters of American Comics* show, held in 2005 at the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, coalesced the tensions and debates surrounding the appropriation of comics by art-world institutions. The show was an explicit attempt to “define a canon of comic artists in the traditional art historical manner,” as rigorously documented by Kim Munson (2017: page). The show thus reflected a growing trend in art historical and museological discourse, which has tended to specialize its canons according to specific sub-fields, “requir[ing] its own organization and hierarchy in order to convert information into usable knowledge and create a historic understanding of a particular tradition” (Brzyski 2007: 3): integrating comics into art history and establishing its canon thus appeared as a necessary preliminary step. Accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue, the *Masters of American Comics* exhibition relied on a narrow selection of fifteen (white, male) cartoonists elevated to the status of creative geniuses in a clear act of canon formation. Bart Beaty has underlined the ambivalences and tensions in the curatorial choices for *Masters of Americans Comics*, questioning not only its decision to establish a canon of individual artists, but also its exhibition layout, which “assents to the formal biases of its museum setting, displaying frustratingly partial stories in the midst of the white cube museum space as if they were paintings” (Beaty 2012: 198). Yet, the *Masters of American Comics* show and its explicit discourse of canon-formation, if momentous, has had few follow-ups. As Jeet Heer has suggested, “Post-*Masters* there is much more interest in looking at individual cartoonists as their own thing or part of a scene – the grand narrative of comics history seems too large. As artists like Ware, Spiegelman, and Crumb get canonized, they are seen as their

own thing and divorced from their comics contexts” (Heer quoted in Munson 2017: page). This observation tends to confirm Beaty’s critical analysis of the complex processes of legitimization and canonization, as both Beaty and Heer further suggest that the art world’s interest in comics is strongly selective, often uprooting a few canonical figures from their local anchorage in comics traditions to recontextualize them within art history.¹

In this context, it is important to pay attention to the larger framework of the two exhibitions, which is tightly linked to the canonical positions of both Art Spiegelman and Daniel Clowes. In both cases, their comics history exhibits were connected to larger retrospective shows devoted to Clowes and Spiegelman’s own work. *Modern Cartoonist: The Art of Daniel Clowes*, originally curated by Susan Miller and René de Guzman for the Oakland Museum of California, was hosted in Columbus in 2014 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, providing the opportunity for a collaboration with its neighboring institution the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum to set up *Eye of the Cartoonist*. Similarly, *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman* was organized for the 2012 International Comics Festival in Angoulême alongside the *Co-Mix* retrospective, following the graphic novelist’s Grand Prix award. While *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman* was a one-shot tied to the specific context of the Musée de la bande dessinée in Angoulême, the *Co-Mix* retrospective subsequently toured at several prestige institutions like the Pompidou Center in Paris or the Jewish Museum in New York City. In both cases, there is a manifest status discrepancy between the retrospectives and the comics history exhibitions, as the former clearly occupy the dominant position in terms of circulation and visibility. While the retrospectives are ambitious shows touring at various fine arts centers and art-world museums, accompanied by lavish art books (Buenaventura 2012; Spiegelman 2012), the comics history exhibitions are more modest one-shots that are more closely associated with specific institutions of comics memory. This distinction approximately runs along the dividing lines of the “comics world” and “art world” (Beaty 2012), showing the different visibility pull that each type of exhibition is akin to set forth,

1 It should be noted that Art Spiegelman acted as a consultant for the *Masters of American Comics* show but precisely refused to be further involved and credited as curator so as not to take on the explicit role of canon-maker: “I didn't want to be a curator per se, to decide who should live and who should die in that context” (Spiegelman 2011: 205).

as the comics history exhibitions function, to some extent, as peripheral sections complementing the ‘main’ retrospective exhibits by showcasing the authors’ influences.

It is undoubtedly the canonical position of Clowes and Spiegelman that gives ‘their’ histories a particular weight. In framing their own perspectives on the memory of comics, comics and art museums back up their role as historians and mediators of their chosen medium. As Henry Jenkins reminds us, “within the realm of comics, few exercise the amount of cultural capital Spiegelman commands, and thus, few have his capacity to transform yesterday’s ‘trash’ into the contents of a ‘treasury,’ archive or canon” (Jenkins 2013). In other words, some cartoonists’ histories of comics will fare better than others depending on the cultural capital of the individual as well as on the larger standards of greatness and criteria of value active in the field at a certain time (Beaty and Woo 2016). And so, in a sort of feedback loop, the museum both benefits from and relays the comics artists’ canonical status, while simultaneously putting the mechanism of canonization into the authors’ hand by inviting them to act as curators.

Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman and *Eye of the Cartoonist* thus hold a particular relationship to canonicity, based on its traditional principles of “selection, curation, and distinction” (Beaty and Woo 2016: 94-95) while affirming its subjectivity and contingency. Without catalogues, and thus relatively few public traces documenting them, the comics history exhibitions offer a ‘personal canon’ of comics that is all the more contingent given the ephemerality of its exhibition, contrasting with the canonizing effect and higher cultural impact of the retrospective shows. In this way, they contrast with the kind of top-down act of canon formation reflected in the curatorial decisions of *Masters of American Comics*. Rather than attempting to build ‘the’ canon, such exhibitions conspicuously emphasize the plurality and subjectivity of canons while backing up the institutions’ own memory-making role. Indeed, this specific curatorial approach is not a radical rejection of canonization as it also serves to valorize the heritage work performed by the Musée de la bande dessinée and the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum. Rooted in the comics world, both institutions have developed what Jean-Matthieu Méon has called a “comics-specific museum approach,” privileging “exhibitions that are not meant to be substitutive but complementary and explanatory of the comic works” (2015: 454). This discursive dimension reinforces the scientific and

patrimonial function of these museums, which are specifically dedicated to the preservation of comics as cultural heritage and have grown to be among the largest archives of comics. Clowes and Spiegelman's selections from these archives acknowledge this memory work, while proposing to activate its materials through the lens of their own pantheons.

Both exhibitions thus negotiate the relationship between canon and archive that, according to Aleida Assmann, embody two modalities for the presence, function, and usage of cultural memory: the canon, as the “actively circulated memory that keeps the past present,” and the archive, as “the passively stored memory that preserves the past past” (2010: 98).² This distinction is not a rigid one and what matters most is the dynamics it sets in motion: “the active and the passive realms of cultural memory are anchored in institutions that are not closed against each other but allow for mutual influx and reshuffling” (Assmann 2010: 106). Such reorganization of the comics canon is precisely what animates the two exhibitions under scrutiny, which, by showcasing comics creators' perspectives on the history of comics, explicitly highlight how the past of comics functions as a “cultural working memory” (Assmann 2010: 101) for contemporary graphic novelists.

In the case of the two exhibitions under scrutiny, this reshuffling of the ‘storage memory’ of comics happens in the space of the museum, activating it in a particular way. As the title of Spiegelman's comics exhibit makes clear, these exhibitions suggest to turn the museum into a “private museum,” emphasizing the double nature of their engagement with comics history – at once subjective and collective, personal and collaborative. Furthermore, the phrase coalesces the curatorial logics at work in the exhibitions, pointing to two different “ways of curating” (Obrist 2014): it positions the cartoonist in between the traditional museum curator, as a caretaker of the heritage preserved in the institution, and the curator as exhibition-maker, following the redefinition, in the 1980s and 1990s, of curating around the individualized “curatorial gesture” as creative work (see also Balzer 2014; O'Neill 2007). These two curatorial logics emphasize the growing

2 This dynamic is itself a subpart of the tension between remembering and forgetting. Processes of forgetting, of course, limit the idea of the archive as a total storage memory; since the archival turn of the 1990s, it is well known that archives are not unmediated and inflect our interpretations of the past (see De Kosnik 2016 and Giannachi 2016 for a comprehensive state of the art on archive theory).

contrast between the museum as a somewhat rigid institutional space, strongly regulated by traditional art history, and the temporary exhibition as a potentially freer play with those art-historical conventions (Damisch 2007). In the same way, while Clowes and Spiegelman's 'private museums' evoke the authoritative framework of the museum as a guardian of memory, their 'privateness' cues an idiosyncratic and thus contingent perspective on comics history. While helped by the institutions' own professional curators for the material and practical organisation as well as the designs, Clowes and Spiegelman's are invited to act as curators in order to frame their own comics canons.³

By enrolling artists as curators and inviting them to operate a selection from their archives, the institutions thus demonstrate their own role as sites of the cultural memory of comics while simultaneously encouraging an active engagement with this memory through creative practice. In doing so, they shed light on the role that cartoonists themselves play in the transmission of comics heritage. Reclaiming these cartoonists' perspectives to motivate a dynamic appropriation of comics heritage, the exhibitions themselves frame those histories in quite specific ways, relative to their material and institutional contexts. In what follows, I will thus examine more closely how institutional contexts, design strategies, and (para)texts participate in shaping the mutual relationships between canon and archive in both exhibitions, as these elements give different inflections to the cartoonist's personal histories of comics.

Art Spiegelman's Private Museum

Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman is based on a very specific appropriation of the museum space that is aptly described by the author in the introductory video screened at the very entrance of the exhibition: "it seems that I have been allowed to highjack the Centre of Bande dessinée Museum [*sic*] to replace what is primarily the Francophone patrimony of comics with my own perverse and private map of what comics are. [...] So this is the alternate universe, Bizzaro version of a patrimony." This statement directly emphasizes Spiegelman's idiosyncratic look on the history of comics and presents how

3 The cartoonists' appropriation of the museum space and selections from the archive also echoes the 'archival turn' in the contemporary art world (see for instance Giannachi 2016; Van Alphen 2014); however, the exhibitions here are not claimed or perceived as artworks or texts on their own and certainly have a peripheral status in the cartoonists' oeuvre.

the author was invited to take over the curatorial organization of the museum and ‘replace’ its contents with his own selections. While his own oeuvre was meant to become the object of a major retrospective during the International Comics Festival of Angoulême in 2012, after having received the Grand Prix award the year before, Spiegelman manifested early on his interest in showcasing more than just his own work and to be able to collaborate with the Musée de la bande dessinée.⁴ Constrained by the available space, the proposition of its curators was to offer Spiegelman a *carte blanche* to refashion the permanent exhibit of the museum.⁵ Hence, *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman* invested the space that is otherwise used for its permanent exhibition on the history of comics: Spiegelman’s ‘perverse and private map’ proposes to question and redistribute the otherwise ‘official’ version of comics history presented in the vitrines of the museum, which had only took its contemporary format since its re-opening in 2009.

While the origins of the Musée de la bande dessinée can be traced back to 1983 and subsequently to its first inauguration in 1990, it went through a major transformation and was reopened in 2009 in buildings renovated for that purpose. This transformation accompanied a profound museographical reflexion and a redefined patrimonial project, fine-tuning its comics-specific museum approach and strengthening its historiographic discourse (Moine 2013: 164). The main part of the museum accommodates the “Musée d’histoire de la bande dessinée” (the comics history museum) in one large room divided in four chronological sequences, featuring both European, American and, to a lesser extent, Japanese comics, organized according to periodizing criteria: the origins of comics from 1833 to 1920, the ‘golden age’ from 1920 to 1955, the emergence of ‘adult comics’ from 1955 to 1980 and lastly contemporary ‘alternative’ comics and *manga* since 1980 (see Moine 2013: 141-142). In the exhibition space, this history of comics is not only made visible through a selection of original art, but systematically combines original pages with the related books, albums, periodicals and other print artifacts, as well as derived products and other transmedial exploitations of comics, hence drawing attention to the variety of comics formats. This narrative of comics history is further echoed and

4 The *Co-Mix* retrospective of Spiegelman’s own work was organized separately, managed by different organizers and curators. It took place in the exhibition space of the Vaisseau Mœbius, facing the CIBDI across the Charente river.

5 Interview with Thierry Groensteen, January 23, 2017, Angoulême.

documented by the companion volume *La Bande dessinée: son histoire et ses maîtres* (2009) written by Thierry Groensteen and richly illustrated with original art from the museum's archive. Driven by a state-funded patrimonial mission and backed up by authoritative comics historians as Groensteen and Jean-Pierre Mercier, the Musée de la bande dessinée in Angoulême presents in many ways the official history of comics – and so the background against which Spiegelman's appropriation of the space becomes alternative and subjective.

The architecture of the Musée de la bande dessinée indeed orients and constrains the exhibition design of *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman* which, to a large extent, adopts and replicates its material presentation. Following the spatial organization of the museum, the exhibition is divided in six segments that, similarly to the permanent exhibit, leads the visitor chronologically through a history of comics divided in periods. Co-curated by Thierry Groensteen, who organized the spatial disposition of Spiegelman's selections,⁶ the exhibition follows a periodization that runs relatively parallel to that of the permanent exhibit, but that is more closely aligned with the history of American comics. The four sequences that segment the central room are split into four periods corresponding with pregnant moments for different formats:

1. "Comics and caricature, from 1830 to 1914" goes back to the 'origins' of comics from Rodolphe Töpffer to the *Yellow Kid*, with a particular emphasis on European caricature periodicals as *L'Assiette au Beurre* or *Simplicissimus*.
2. "The Golden Age of American Comic Strips" mostly covers the first half of the twentieth-century with canonical figures as Winsor McCay, George Herriman, Chester Gould or Harold Gray, as well as lesser known cartoonists such as Charles Forbell and Harry J. Tuthill. It also includes postwar newspaper strips as Schulz's *Peanuts*, Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* and Bill Griffith's *Zippy the Pinhead*.
3. "The Origins of Comic Books and E.C. Comics" focuses on a variety of comic books, from funny animals to horror comics with only a few references to the superhero genre. It gives a distinct place to Harvey Kurtzman's *MAD* and its collaborators, stressing its oft-cited influence on Spiegelman.

⁶ Interview with Thierry Groensteen, January 23, 2017, Angoulême.

4. “Underground and Post-Underground” catches up with Spiegelman’s own beginnings on the underground scene in the 1970s but foregrounds its transnational circulation by including many European underground comics magazines, such as the Dutch *Tante Leny presenteert* or the Spanish *El Víbora*.

These four segments build up toward more recent developments that have shaped the emergence of the graphic novel with which Spiegelman’s work is narrowly intertwined. The two additional rooms that make up the permanent collection of the museum are less used to present periods in comics history than objects with a particular place in Spiegelman’s career:

5. “*RAW*, or the Assertion of an International Avant-Garde” displays the cartoonists that Françoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman published in their groundbreaking magazine and features a video interview of Mouly to cast light on its editorial history. The selection represents both a variety of now-canonical figures such as Chris Ware or Charles Burns, but also emphasizes *RAW*’s role in translating European comics for U.S. readers.
6. “The *Binky Brown* Revelation” displays the forty original pages that made up Justin Green’s 1972 autobiographical comic book *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. It stresses the eye-opening influence that the book had on Spiegelman as an unprecedented exploration of the potential for life-writing in comics. The press release of the exhibition presents *Binky Brown* as a necessary step for Spiegelman’s *Maus* in a section tellingly entitled “The Justin Green Revolution: from *Binky Brown* to *Maus*.” Moreover, the fact that all original pages are exhibited indirectly echoes Spiegelman’s *Co-Mix* retrospective, simultaneously on show during the Angoulême comics festival, where the original pages for the complete *Maus* was exhibited original pages were being shown.

Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman, then, follows a relatively linear progression organized along periodical and material criteria, where the presentation of Spiegelman’s selections adopts the usual display used for the permanent collection of the Musée de la bande dessinée. The alternative cartography of comics history that Spiegelman presents is not exactly a kind of ‘Bizarro’ historiography in the sense of an alternative history-writing:

the museum design shapes his selections into a historical pattern that aligns with its usual layout, following the ‘official’ historiographic model developed by the institution and as mirrored in Groensteen’s *La Bande dessinée: son histoire et ses maîtres* (2009). Rather, Spiegelman is given a *carte blanche* to replace the contents of the permanent exhibition so that it reflects his own perception of the past of comics, giving it an American yet transnational twist and spotlighting his personal canon of great comics artists.

Spiegelman’s ‘highjacking’ of the museum, however, does not only go through the imposition of his own pantheon of ‘greats’ but also requires to import comic art otherwise unavailable in the holdings of the CIBDI. While the local archive furnished a significant part of the the displayed material, the author’s primary affinities with North-American comics required to gather and bring over many items from other collections, from the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum (for newspaper comics) as well as from a handful of collectors, such as Glenn Bray (for underground comix), Thierry Smolderen (for nineteenth-century cartoonists) and the Spiegelmans themselves.⁷ In this way, by bringing in new material into the space of the Musée de la bande dessinée, the exhibition spotlighted some of its inevitable blind spots and showcased comics otherwise absent from the museum. By extensively relying on the collections of Bill Blackbeard and Glenn Bray, *Le Musée privé d’Art Spiegelman* furthermore paid homage to the crucial role played by fans and collectors in preserving the memory of a medium that did not use to have an institution like the Musée de la bande dessinée. The exhibition features a display case specifically dedicated to the archival work performed by ‘obsessive collectors,’ containing Spiegelman’s short essay on collecting, “In Praise of Pathology,” as well as his obituary comics page in homage of Bill Blackbeard, “the collector who rescued the comics” (Robb 2009) by salvaging newspapers that libraries were throwing away in favor of microfilm and whose vast collection is now hosted at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum. In his introductory video, Spiegelman further declares his admiration for Blackbeard, presenting his ‘private museum’ not only as a homage to the history of comics but also to the passionate collectors who made that very historiographic discourse possible.

7 The breadth of choice from the CIBDI’s archive was further constrained by the strict conservation policy they abide to, which entails that each item that is displayed for three months needs to ‘rest’ in the archive for three years.

While the exhibition celebrates the memory work of these collectors, Spiegelman simultaneously takes distance from the perspective on comics history fronted by the first generations of organized comics fandom. In the same introductory video, he states that his own canon is neither the one dominant in the United States, nor that of the French *bédéphiles* of the 1960s and 1970s, who held a particular fascination for 1930s adventure comics artists like Burne Hogarth, Alex Raymond, Milton Caniff, Lee Falk or Hal Foster – names that represented a ‘golden age’ of comics for both European and American fans.⁸ While they are well represented in the archive holdings of the Musée de la bande dessinée, they are strikingly absent from *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman*, except for a single Caniff original. Similarly, the superhero genre is explicitly and deliberately kept at bay, safe for a few representative examples and the exceptional place given to Jack Cole – for whom Spiegelman’s fascination was already made clear in his long essay on the creator of *Plastic Man* (Spiegelman and Kidd 2001).

Featuring more than a hundred cartoonists, the exhibition reconfigures the museum following Spiegelman’s personal canon, giving particular weight to certain ‘masters’ of the form. The selection directly followed from Spiegelman’s version of comics history as he has been refining it since the very beginning of his career. The cartoonist has indeed contributed significant essays on comics history, notably his appraisal of Bernard Krigstein’s “Master Race” (Benson, Kasakove and Spiegelman 1975), and has reprinted ‘old’ comics from Winsor McCay to Basil Wolverton in the post-underground comics magazines he co-edited (*Arcade* and *RAW*). From 1979 to 1987, Spiegelman lectured a class on the history of comics at the School of Visual Arts in New York and recapped that material into a key article published in *Print* tellingly titled “Commix: An Idiosyncratic Historical and Aesthetic Overview” (Spiegelman 1988). Condensing Spiegelman’s interest for the past of comics in a few pages, this panoramic essay retraces a chronological but fragmentary history of the medium, as shaped by a pantheon of great cartoonists caught “in the crossfire” between the “demands of Profit” and the “demands of Art” (Spiegelman 1998: 78). Alongside this overview piece, Spiegelman would further pen down numerous prefatory essays on individual cartoonists,

⁸ The canonical position that these cartoonists occupy in fan histories of comics still guide the editorial line of patrimonial collections as IDW’s Library of American Comics.

often for reprint volumes: these essays have been collected in *Comix, Essays, Graphics and Scraps* and, taken together, offer a kaleidoscopic history of comics (Spiegelman 1998). Focusing on individual cartoonists with highly personalized styles, Spiegelman's comics history privileges, as Beaty and Woo (2016: 94-95) would put it, the "exceptional" over the "typical." As Spiegelman said about his lectures, "in teaching this thing I'm teaching supposedly the history of comics, but I'm primarily dealing with the aberrations in the history of comics" (Bergdoll 2007: 17). What emerges from this engagement with the past of comics is thus a personal canon that is aligned on Spiegelman's aesthetic interests and understanding of what comics are.

Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman directly draws on the artist's essays by making them available in French through an e-book version released as exhibition catalogue. In turn, the works that Spiegelman spotlights in these essays are given a privileged place within the exhibition by singling them out in specific vitrines, reproducing complete short stories, and adding detailed video commentaries (Fig. 1). Shot in the author's studio in New York, the videos portray him in his usual appearance – black vest and cigarette at hand – surrounded by his collection of framed original art, displayed objects and overloaded bookshelves, alternating with pans of the comics he comments and décor shots of New York City.⁹ Guiding the visitors throughout the exhibition, these videos intertwine this historiographic discourse with a process of self-exposure through which Spiegelman discloses his curatorial choices and explicits the role that certain comics have played in his own life and work, thus giving a certain relief to his version of comics history. While the entire exhibition features an impressive breadth of cartoonists from various traditions, a handful of cartoonists are also given a privileged place, thus spotlighting Spiegelman's personal pantheon. Lyonel Feininger's *The Kin-der-Kids* and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, for instance, not only get a dedicated spot, but their individual position and their place in Spiegelman's canon is further made clear in short videos screened next to the vitrines, in which the graphic novelist use their works to illustrate the tug-of-war between commerce and art that, to him, has been essential to comics.

⁹ The videos were shot, directed and edited by the Canadian comics scholar Jacques Samson (Lux Pictoria, Montreal).

The display of complete (short) stories, such as Harvey Kurtzman's 1952 war story "Corpse on the Imjin" and Justin Green's early autobiographical comic *Binky Brown*, has a different canonizing effect in that it pinpoints individual comics as masterpieces that can be read by the visitor in the exhibition context: this follows from one of the main concerns of the Musée de la bande dessinée, which has always tried to respond to the narrative challenges of exhibiting comics. The screened videos further guide the visitors in their reading by showing Spiegelman not only give context for the creation of these works, but also performing short close-readings, for instance when he details the intersection of content, affect and form in Kurtzman's "Corpse on the Imjin" by describing how its vertical and horizontal lines give it a distinct rhythm and visual power. Adapting comics to the museum context, the exhibition simultaneously underlines their visual, literary and narrative dimensions which allows Spiegelman not only to place an individual short story like Kurtzman's within its historical context but also to demonstrate and signal its continued relevance for today.

Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman demonstrates its author's second career as a comics historian and consistently couples this historiography with Spiegelman's own authorial image and posture. Following on *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), which enmeshes Spiegelman's double career as graphic novelist and comics historian by offering a 'comic supplement' of early-twentieth-century Sunday pages alongside Spiegelman's own pages (see Chute 2007; Jenkins 2013), *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman* further highlights the breadth of Spiegelman's 'canons': if it remains idiosyncratic and personal, the framework of the Musée de la bande dessinée doubles it as a patrimonial gesture. More than a strictly 'private' history of comics, the canonical position of Spiegelman himself has given 'his' history a particular resonance, given his "capacity to influence" (Grennan 2016) beyond the comics world. Considering Spiegelman's engagement with the archive of comics, Henry Jenkins has shown how the author's own understanding of comics history has helped stabilizing a certain narrative articulated around a few great cartoonists: "[a]s a critic, editor, and curator, he has been instrumental in shaping the emerging canon of his medium" (2013: 304). If Spiegelman's version of comics history is further adopted by cultural arbiters, *Le Musée privé d'Art*

Spiegelman both relays this version but also stresses its subjectivity by conspicuously associating it with the author himself.

Through Daniel Clowes's Eye

While sharing the same basic idea of inviting a cartoonist to act as curator to showcase his 'own' history of comics, *Eye of the Cartoonist: Daniel Clowes's Selections from Comics History* took place in a very different institutional context, that of a fine arts center collaborating with a comics museum and library, which made for a contrasting appropriation not only of the museum space but also of the archive. While Spiegelman transformed the Musée de la bande dessinée by bringing in material from outside of its collections, Clowes selects material from a single archive, the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, in order to curate an exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts in parallel with the *Modern Cartoonist* retrospective on Clowes's own artwork. The set-up for the exhibition is made explicit at the very entrance to the exhibition room, which welcomes the visitors with the following text:

The Wexner Center's proximity to the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum – the world's largest repository of original cartoon art – presented us with a wonderful opportunity. We invited American cartoonist Daniel Clowes (b. 1961) to curate a personal reflection on the history of the art form with examples culled from the library's one-of-a-kind collection, giving visitors an even deeper appreciation of his work. [...] The exhibition is not an exhaustive overview of comics history by any means, but it is a quite personal curatorial gesture that reflects both Clowes's tastes and his refined eye as a cartoon artist.

These lines delineate the specific institutional context that frames Clowes's perspective on the history of comics, situating his 'personal curatorial gesture' in the cartoonist's experience, his taste, skill and vision. Disavowing any pretense to an "exhaustive overview of comics history," the *Eye of the Cartoonist* exhibition does not primarily presents Clowes as a historian but rather as a cartoonist with a distinct eye for the history of comics as visual culture.

The exhibition leaflet similarly emphasizes the visual process of choosing and selecting the pages from the archive by including a large-size 'behind the scenes' picture featuring Daniel Clowes sifting through original pages in the stacks of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library, assisted by exhibition organizers David Filipi and Caitlin McGurk. The photograph and the description text give insight into the Billy Ireland

as a key institution for the patrimony of comics and frame the exhibition as a way to valorize the archive. Recalling Assmann's description of the dynamic relationship between storage memory and active, living memory, Clowes's selections from the stacks of the Billy Ireland draw out a kind of personal canon and thus animate the archive in a particular way. As Filipi and Jenny Robb remark in the leaflet: "enlisting an artist, one with a cartoonist's expert eye and appreciation for the medium's history is an illustrative and enriching way of activating a selection of the archive's holdings. This is one artist's quite personal take on comics history" (Filipi and Robb, 2014). The archive necessarily shapes and frames this activation, as does the exhibition context: the specific focus of the Billy Ireland on cartoons and newspaper comic strips reflects in the selection of original art, which emphasizes short comics forms that rely on narrative compression and brevity that thus adapt well to the 'white cube' of the Wexner Center for the Arts (Fig. 2).

As the exhibition title already suggests, Clowes's curatorial gesture lies not simply in the act of selection, but in a selection primarily oriented by the skilled eye of the cartoonist. It emphasizes *looking* at comics, immediately underlining an understanding of comics as visual objects. From the start, then, the exhibition subscribes to the idea, aptly worded by Svetlana Alpers, that the "museum effect [...] is a way of seeing" (1991, 27). The space of the museum repurposes its objects for an aesthetic of the visual and Clowes's choices follow this logic by foregrounding the visual and design elements of the comics he selects. The items are indeed chosen according to their capacity to "hold the wall," following expression of the French comics critic Christian Rosset (2009) to express comics is the potential of comics that can visually work when hanging on the walls instead of being held at arm's length. Along similar lines, Clowes follows Spiegelman's suggestion that "art museums won't necessarily want to hang the same works that might be studied in lit departments. It is not the same work that will live happily on a wall and in a book" (Mitchell and Spiegelman 2014: page). Adopting to the space of the white cube, the cartoonist's two-day process of sifting through a large quantity of original art and comics tearsheets pulled out from the archives was oriented toward 'what strikes the eye,' as Clowes described it: "looking for pages that had either an X-factor quality – something that would point out an odd specificity in the artist's work in an immediate, eye-catching way – or those that were perfectly emblematic of their best (or most visually interesting) work."¹⁰

¹⁰ Personal e-mail correspondence, September 12, 2016.

Prioritizing its visual dimension, the exhibition does not display the same kind of historiographic ambition as *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman*, which was aligned with the tenets of comics historiography upheld by the Musée de la bande dessinée. By contrast with Spiegelman, who often acts as “the face of comics to the cultural establishment” (Beaty and Woo 2016: 23), Daniel Clowes comes across as a different type of comics historian, whose mediation of the past appears less cohesive and more ambiguous. Although his work displays a keen understanding and obsessive fascination for the past of comics, he has often voiced his relationship to that heritage in ironical terms, harboring a cynical relationship towards comics criticism. In his preface to a reprint collection of Bushmiller’s *Nancy* strips, Clowes marks his distance towards both academic and fan discourse when he writes: “while I fully support even the most thorny-headed discourse on Sluggo and the Male Gaze, I have no such offerings to that vigorous body of thought, nor do I possess any ‘interesting information’ or ‘useful knowledge’ about The Great Man” (Clowes 2012). The preface demonstrates a disinterestedness in the academic (post-structuralist) and fan-historiographic discourse and instead focuses both on Clowes’s personal history with the strip, its minimalist drawing style and continued relevance for contemporary readers. We could also think of the comic book critic Harry Naylor appearing in Clowes’s *Ice Haven* (2005), whose pompous discourse is half-serious, half-nonsense, and further ridiculed by his graphic representation. Clowes’s own text on comics history in the pamphlet-like *Modern Cartoonist* (1997) adopts a similar discursive style, putting forward bold claims about comics history as driven by recursive fifteen-year cycles of innovation while stressing the ambiguities of the cultural recognition of comics. His ironical position appears as an example of what Christopher Pizzino has termed “autoclasm,” designating “the illegitimacy of comics not as a theme that can be safely contained, but as a reality inside which the comics creator must struggle” (2016: 4). This autoclastic tendency in Clowes’s discourse on the history of comics transpires through the systematic ‘self-breaking’ of his own legitimacy.

Accordingly, *Eye of the Cartoonist* gives less room to extended commentaries on the history of comics than *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman* and does not mobilize an overt critical apparatus. The exhibition design leaves out a direct juxtaposition of the author’s comments and the exhibited art works: instead, Clowes’s reflexions are neatly

laid out as a fold-out of the exhibition leaflet (Fig. 3), which includes short comments on each artist alongside a fragment of the exhibited item. The snippets reflect the curatorial focus on visually striking images, often praising the drawing, the line or the design elements of the page. Quite tellingly, even when including pages from the suspenseful adventure strip *Terry and the Pirates*, Clowes insists on Milton Caniff's chiaroscuro mastery: "I'm not so interested in these stories I must confess, but no one ever made more thrilling use of black ink on white paper." Furthermore, he frequently refers to the very process of selecting the pages, as when he writes: "The *Little Nemo* original in this show is one of those holy grail pages of comic art that you can't forget once you've seen it. I almost passed out when I opened the drawer and found it sitting there."

Just as the fold-out spreads the featured artists regardless of schools or periods, the exhibition setting similarly eschews the organization of its elements into a chronological sequence. Rather, it clusters the work of each artist and juxtaposes these clusters next to each other, unrelated of period or artistic affinities: the early-twentieth-century cartoonist T.S. Sullivant, for instance, stands alongside a *Buck Rogers* Sunday page from 1937 and original art from the 1960s by Henning Mikkelsen (*Ferd'nand*) and Gus Arriola (*Gordo*). Each frame is placed at a relative distance from the others, but the exhibition nonetheless favors a comparative experience of Clowes's 'selections from comics history' offering a kaleidoscopic view that does not add up into a narrative development. Nor the exhibition layout, nor Clowes's comments emphasize the situatedness of these cartoonists and works within a linear narrative of comics history and repeatedly appeal to their transtemporal value: Clowes calls Otto Soglow's strips "timeless, eternally truthful, and just as funny today as the day they were first printed," presents Al Hirschfield "the best caricaturist of all time" and states about Lyonel Feininger's *Kin-Der-Kids* that "these have to number among the most beautiful printed pages of all time." These shorthand notices speak out Clowes's fascination and attachment for these 'old' comic strips while simultaneously affirming their continued relevance today. Invoking the canon logic of curation, selection, and duration, Daniel Clowes draws attention to what speaks to his own practice in the past of comics in order to present what amounts to a personal canon.

Despite this canonizing logic and the highly legitimate setting of the museum, there is also an ‘autoclastic’ tendency subtly at work in Clowes’s curatorial choices: albeit never short of praising and celebrating the artists, the exhibition never monumentalizes their works and the curator’s comments consistently suggests what is worth remembering and why in only a few lines. Among the vast amounts of Winsor McCay originals in the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library, Clowes surprisingly selects only one *Little Nemo* page and includes five of his later cartoons, drawn towards the end of his career after his venture in animation was flailing. An unusual curatorial choice, Clowes explains that it is precisely the contrast between McCay’s art and the specific situations they are supposed to humorously illustrate: “I love his political cartoons, somewhat for the wrong reasons, but mostly because of how the absurdly inelegant and overt ‘gag’ ideas match up to the all-time world-class drawing in a way that makes them seem like intentionally ironic, well-concocted parodies.” Similarly, Clowes’s choices also foreground the works of lesser known artists, such as Henning Mikkelsen’s “unjustly neglected masterpieces of wordless storytelling” or Gus Arriola’s “really crazy, experimental (and often brilliant and beautiful) graphics,” in that they demonstrate the mastery of formal elements within the constrained context of the newspaper. As Clowes further writes of Arriola: “It almost feels as though he thought nobody was actually reading the strip, so he felt free to amuse himself.”

In fact, Clowes repeatedly connects the exhibited images with the craft, work and skill of their cartoonists, sometimes further connecting it to his own practice of cartooning: in this way, *Eye of the Cartoonist* does not only showcase his interests and tastes for comics history but demonstrates how Clowes is profoundly embedded in a tradition of drawing comics that is also a history of its *métier*, of its production and reception. Quite telling in this regard are the two drawings he includes by Elzie Segar and Wally Wood, which are not ‘proper’ works, comics, or cartoons, but doodles quickly brushed for fan readers: in his comments, Clowes thus emphasizes the act of drawing as something that extends to a specific relationship to the readers. These references to the culture of comics work and the constraints of commercial art counter-act the problematic importation of ‘old’ comics, as visual culture, within the white cube of the contemporary arts exhibition. A vitrine of comic books – from Virgil Partch and R.O. Blechman’s

cartoon books to DC *Jimmy Olsen* and *Lois Lane* comic books as well as the underground comix of Jay Lynch and Robert Crumb – recall the visitors that comics are readable objects, even compulsively read as their deteriorated covers suggest.

Ultimately, the exhibition also leads the visitors back to Clowes's own works which, just as the museum room allows for transtemporal juxtapositions, often mix dissonant styles drawn from the history of comics: *Ice Haven* (2004) and *Wilson* (2010), in particular, offer a compilation of various graphic styles that are more or less direct references to certain cartoonists. Yet, the exhibition also refrains from making those juxtapositions too evident for the visitor, allowing for Clowes's personal selections from the history of comics to work beyond their simple function as influences. Quite on the contrary, *Eye of the Cartoonist* invites the visitors to look at the history of comics with a new eye, uncovering new ways of looking and reading those familiar and less familiar works.

Exhibiting Personal Canons

Both exhibitions thus manifest different ways of exploiting the complex dynamic between canon and archive, showing the importance of both the institutional context and the 'curatorial gesture' of the cartoonist. The canon that emerges from these exhibitions is not the 'official' canon, be it the literary-oriented canon of comics studies (Beaty and Woo 2016) or the art-historical one defended by the *Masters of American Comics* show (Carlin et al. 2005), but one that is presented as idiosyncratic and subjective. Both exhibitions deliberately seek to present 'personal' canons. Distinguishing between 'memory as background' and 'memory as force,' Judith Schlanger puts forward the notion of a 'personal canon' that crystallizes a subjective, creative 'living memory' by contrast with the official canon: 'Personal affinities subvert the didactic canon, which would be the representative list of great books to teach and transmit, in favor of a personal canon polarized by admiration, a canon that is above all inspirational' (Schlanger 2014: 209; my translation). Along similar lines, reminding us that "there are many ways to constitute a canon (whether personal or collective) in the margins of the traditional 'official' methods of literary historiography," Jan Baetens and Ben de Bruyn

(2014: §26) further argue for shifting attention from ‘the’ canon, conceptualized as a list of great works single-handedly enforced by a dominant system and its hierarchy of values, towards canonization, as a heterogenous and diffuse phenomenon that involves various actors and crystallizes complex temporalities.

The case of cartoonists-curated exhibitions proves particularly understand to understand such mechanisms of canonization as they negotiate the relationship between the contingent, personal canon of the individual cartoonist as a subjective take on the comics history and the institutional framework of museums as guardians of memory. Enrolling cartoonists as curators, these institutions avoid the pitfalls of a top-down canon formation, as heavily debated for the *Masters of American Comics* show, and in the process propose a more flexible, relative act of canonization linked to the practice of individual graphic novelists. Instead of a didactic canon, the museums present ‘personal canons’ that tap into a living memory of the medium and help to draw connections between the past of comics and its present.

Going back to Art Spiegelman’s homage to Bill Blackbeard, featured in *Le Musée privé d’Art Spiegelman*, we can draw a parallel between the collector’s activities as comics historian and Spiegelman and Clowes’s roles as curators. Spiegelman presents Blackbeard dressed up as the Yellow Kid, with a scissor in one hand, his anthology *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (Blackbeard and Williams 1977), and newspaper tearsheets spread on the floor. The caption reads: “His vast archive of newspaper strips [...] has given us a usable past – and since the future of comics is in the past – has provided the medium with a future.” Spiegelman intertwines the importance of the archive – the vast collection assembled by Blackbeard and which now lays in the stacks of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library – with that of the canon – Blackbeard’s scissor clipping through the newspapers, not only to preserve the comics, but also and most importantly to compose his seminal anthology. *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* was a major influence on generations of cartoonists like Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware and Daniel Clowes (Heer 2010: 7): more importantly than pledging for the cultural recognition of comics, canonization has to allow the past to become usable for comics to have a future. Since Blackbeard’s anthology, comics have gone a long way and now that they have libraries and museums dedicated to the preservation and transmission of their memories,

Clowes and Spiegelman's curatorial acts might offer a comparable step in turning the past of comics into something usable for younger generations.

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