

introduction

by Andrea Juno

Art can often be found lurking in the unappreciated shadows as fertile pockets left undisturbed by the self-conscious glaring lights of mainstream respectability, fame or money. The maligned and denigrated “lowbrow” arts often are unmasked as powerful prognosticators of rich social, aesthetic and political comment, often not appreciated in their own era, placed too close to the contemporary lens for proper critical focus. It takes distance, either by time passing or other cultures passing the wand of acceptance to turn these frogs into princes of respectability. It took the French in the ‘60s to say Film Noir and Jazz were Art; now they’re an unassailable part of America’s canon. This obvious observation still remains true, especially with this book’s subjects, graphix and comix, the bastard children of the art world. They are populist works linked by their use of narrative, either contained in a singular frame or by the use of sequential panels.

Taking a cue from the groundbreaking early ‘80s journal *RAW*, a “magazine of graphix and comix,” this book looks at a slice of artwork and artists which on first glance might showcase dissimilar work but upon a wider viewing expose integral connections, staking out unique and creative contemporary territory.

Even though the dominance of abstract expressionism is on the wane, mainstream galleries are open to many more “narrative-like” artwork and literary houses sneak in a few graphic novels, the appellation that can still condemn any artist is “illustrator” or “comic,” consigning them to the lowly rungs of the commercial arts and *Garfield*.

Comics and cartoons exist in our culture as loosely defined, vaguely conceived concepts. With few exceptions, very little formal theory and almost no academic research has been produced on the history or the formal issues of the medium. It’s usually left to the motivated cartoonists themselves to investigate. Two very learned sources I found in my own research were Art Spiegelman, a self-professed historian of the genre, and cartoonist Scott McCloud (*Zot!*), author of the outstandingly brilliant book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, who uses the medium of the comic to analyze the form. This book is a testament that comics can contain extremely complex ideas and present them in ways unlike any other form—refuting any prejudices that comics are an infantile or limited medium. On the surface, it’s an analysis of how comics work, but it expands into subjects of how we understand and cognate the icons we store in our head to a history of visual art and perception.

A cartoon is a self-contained panel, and the comic is the stringing together of panels to produce a story combining text and illustration. Contrary to popular misconception, even amongst cartoonists, the cartoon and comic have a very short history and trace their rise not from the infancy or dawn of art, such as cave-man paintings or Egyptian hieroglyphs (which have very different structures and reasons for their existence) but instead to the era when the visual arts had reached a very sophisticated and self-referential culmination. The cartoon’s first appearance paralleled the rise of the printing press for mass reproduction and was used primarily as sophisticated political and social satire. The comic’s first appearance is the work of Rodolphe Töpffer in 1830 which slightly predates the invention of photography (1846). Töpffer’s mar-

velous whimsical satires of bourgeois pretensions [see pages 28–31] are shocking on a formalist level with his devices of recording motion: the marriage of time and space on the surface of a page. They anticipate the first film storyboards with crosscuttings and multiple actions spanning simultaneous time references with different spatial locations.

The excitement of seeing an attempt to replicate filmic devices on the printed page was one of the first things that lured me to comics. Even though I grew up with *Mad* magazine and spent my adolescence with *Zap*, *Weirdo* and underground comix, it wasn’t the sex or subversion contained in them that sustained my interest (although that was an added bonus) but the exciting discovery of a medium that was able to formalistically distort perspectives and reinterpret time and space, creating a world close to what I’d experience in a dream, on an LSD trip or watching film. My interest in language as consciousness led me to study film and peaked my interest in semiotics. I’ve speculated that film was the advent of a new language system which will, and has, changed how we perceive and create ideas of self and other, just as the advent of writing and the mass replication of printing has changed consciousness. (As an aside, when the Internet, Web and other computer technologies progress, similar changes in consciousness will emerge as they also reinvent language.) A comic as a union of writing and drawing, unlike a film, has its own built-in pause, rewind or fast-forward button. You can linger on a panel at your own pace, going backwards or forwards, or view the entire page with all the panels simultaneously presenting past, present and future. The very best comic artists inventively use this built-in technique. Film, which can replicate the uncontrollable river-rafting processes of thought and dreaming, is difficult to stop midstream for self-reflection and analysis. You are taken on a ride and later, through adjustments in memory, you sort out what happened and regain possession of yourself, which can easily be lost in the film’s characterizations and emotional events. Through many of comics inherent devices, they force the reader into an active participation, unlike film or TV. This has many ramifications on how we are socially and politically controlled and conditioned.

As with any art form—literature, film, music, etc.—it is a small minority of artists that propels the medium further toward its own exploration and self-reference and in its ability to presciently manifest the zeitgeist with superior artistry. Comics and graphics are no exception. This book is decidedly *not* about championing *all* comics, cartoons or illustrations, but ferreting out the hottest flames that raise the rarefied bubbles to the top. Great art-work fires and rewires our neural pathways by expansive ways of looking and thinking not previously experienced.

Comics are one of the last bastions of exploration and discovery of formalist methods in the arts. As a result of comics’ late arrival to the art world’s Darwinian food chain, the form is enriched. As many of the other art forms have peaked and atrophied or are sinking in a leaky boat of too much money and self-consciousness, comics benefit from being historically ignored. For example, Chris Ware’s work implodes any preconceptions of what a comic is. It’s an intellectual delight weaving narrative displace-

ments, verbal punning and imagistic twisting which changes your perceptions and emotions. That's the promise and expectation of art, whether or not it's appreciated in its own time, that it de-habituates how we see, know or think about our mundane reality, the world or ourselves. Truly groundbreaking art delivers on that promise.

Comics, with their potential to achieve lofty highbrow aesthetics, also remain grounded to a tradition of populist narrative that can serve many functions such as political and social criticism. The emergence of the "underground comix" of the '60s added confessional autobiography to the comic repertoire. This is now well-trod territory for independent comics. But unlike a written memoir or a TV docu-drama-of-the-week, the very medium of the comic, as noted above, imposes a simultaneous distance. Comics, painstakingly executed and planned, condense text and art in controlled panels, restraining the form from straying into an episode of *Oprah*. In the hands of the best artists, comics navigate the tricky boundaries of emotional documents of human life without falling into victimizing maudlin memoirs. There's a built-in mechanism of the medium to move on, like a policeman with a baton preventing loitering in the parks of bathos and sentiment. It's hard to wallow in a comic. Layers of distance and irony accompany the work of the best comics. Phoebe Gloeckner deals with autobiographical issues of sexual child abuse, drugs and living on the streets. She says, "While I'm telling a story, it might be a sad or depressing tale, but the medium allows me to be slightly ironic. It allows me to put humor in, and rise above projecting myself as victim. The medium has been used for humor, but you can use it as well to tell sad stories, and feed off the expectations people have of reading something funny. The form of a 'comic' sets up a tension." Chester Brown's autobiography of his teenage years and his guilt of masturbation become stripped of self-pity and self-aggrandizement by his panels floating in black. A winged, older version of himself as commentator raises what would otherwise be simple teenage angst to a dimension of unsentimental detachment. Dan Clowes, a master of the genre, weaves his autobiographies and imaginal musings with the driest of sarcasm and viscous wit that burns all traces of sentiment. His slogan, "Maintaining an icy distance between reader and audience since 1989" is well deserved and appreciated.

In the hands of Art Spiegelman in *Maus*, a topic as horrific and incomprehensible as the Holocaust veers away from being yet another pigeon-holed item on society's laundry list of abuses to be filed away. The reader is implicated by the techniques inherent to the comic. The story weaves from the present to the past atrocities of Poland and Auschwitz, to the narrator Art and back to his father. The reader is continually interrupted from slipping into the horrors of a long ago past. One can't file it away like *The English Patient* as historical sentiment with a feel-good cry or a horror movie scream that imparts absolution. In *Maus*, there is no absolution. One is lured into involvement with this stain on history; no one escapes untouched.

As Scott McCloud notes: "Today, comics are one of the very few forms of mass communication in which individual voices still have a chance to be heard." With almost no investment except paper and pen or pencil and access to a copy machine, an individual can directly record, with words and images, the visions swirling in their imagination (even more directly than a film can), or the way they live, from the mundane to the dramatic, or deal with social and political issues. Many comics are borne through the fanzine's network of distribution.

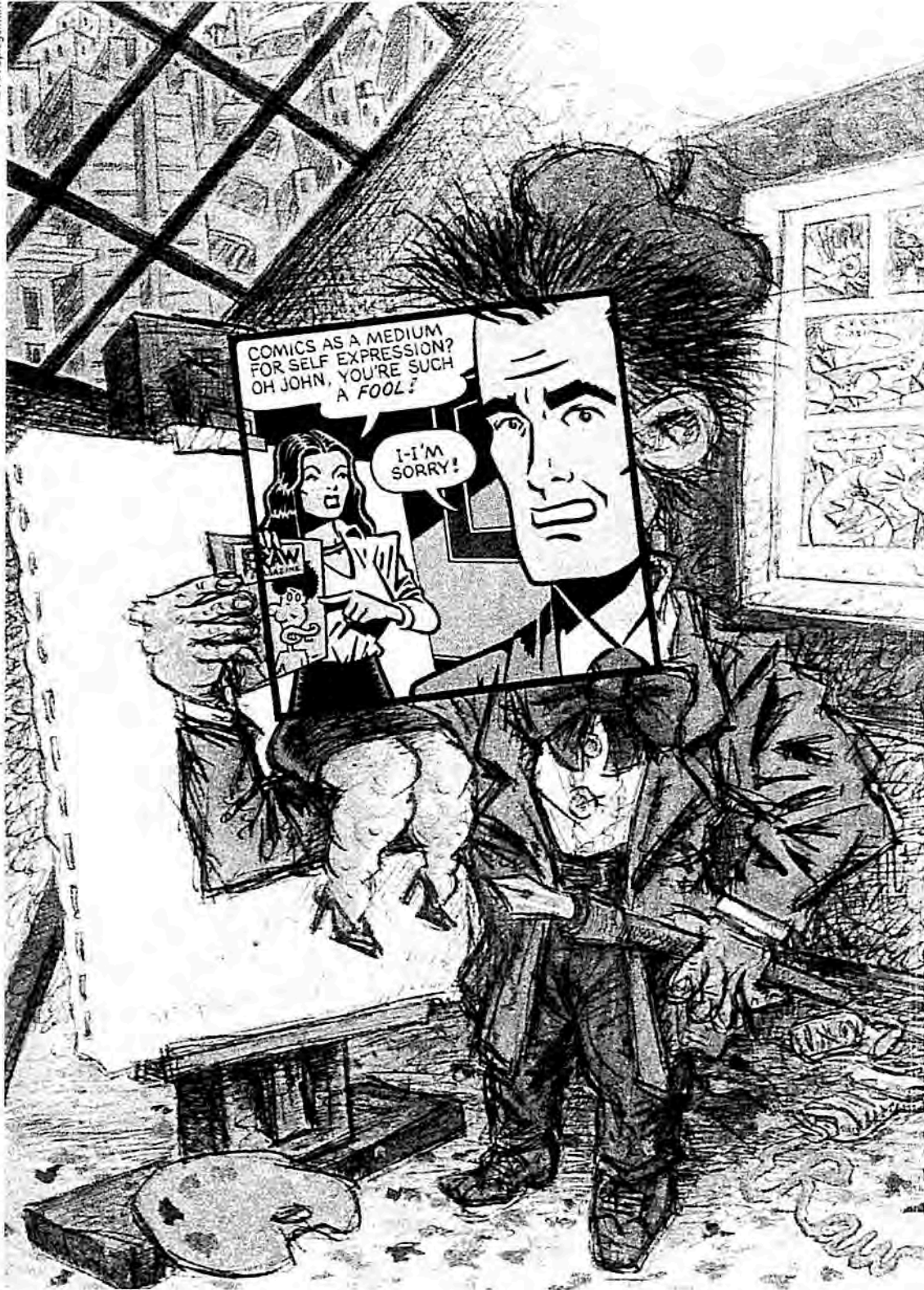
My litmus test for art that touches the nerves of its time is the power to make social and political issues spark in ways that make



Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (continued page 220).

people think without resorting to prevailing temporal dogmas, rhetoric or safe platitudes. A square of lines imparting a narrative has the power to disturb: from Eli Langer's sensitive, sketchy, fluid lines that landed him in court, to the self-professed "pornographer" G.B. Jones, who creates a world with her pencil of powerful, sexual, ruling lesbians—inverting the usual power signifiers. Illustrator Matt Reid deals with political issues, but meanders away from one-dimensional stereotypes and explodes his images with multiple layers of irony and surreal references from popular culture, comics, music, and literature that one writer described as "blackadelic visions." Subversion is alive and well in these arts.

This book is by no means a complete survey. Many very talented and inventive cartoonists, illustrators and comic artists are not included merely by the vagaries of chance and the necessity of having a book that isn't the size of a dictionary. However, the search for them can be exhilarating. ▶



Back cover illustration by Art Spiegelman of *Read Yourself Raw*, a compilation of RAW issues #1, #2 and #3 edited by Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly (1987).

art spiegelman

was born in 1948 and lived in New York with his Polish parents. He graduated from the High School for Art and Design in New York and then attended classes at Harpur College (State University of New York at Binghamton) until he was committed to a mental hospital in 1966. In 1971, he moved to San Francisco and began to publish in a variety of underground comic publications. He co-edited an extraordinary book called Whole Grains: A Book of Quotations (1972)—a contemporary take on Bartlett's Quotations. In 1975, he and Bill Griffith co-founded Arcade, an influential comic revue that published many of the now legendary comic artists including R. Crumb, S. Clay Wilson and Justin Green. His early work was reprinted in an anthology called Breakdowns published in 1977. It is a brilliant, urbane and witty collection in which he explores a variety of complex narrative and formal experiments that show the wide range of styles he is capable of rendering.

In 1980, Spiegelman and wife Françoise Mouly created their own "comic & graphic" magazine RAW, which showcased emerging new aesthetics in comics and graphics and was highly influential in forwarding cartooning as an intellectual art form. RAW introduced European and Japanese cartoonists and artists and published for the first time many Americans such as Gary Panter, Chris Ware, Mark Beyer and Charles Burns. He supplemented his income by making up Wacky Packages and Garbage Pail Kids for the Topps Gum Company, where he started working in 1966.

Maus, Volume 1: A Survivor's Tale (1986) and Maus, Volume II (1992) comprise the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel which began in 1971. It's a masterful story of the Holocaust in comic book form as seen through the recollections of Spiegelman's father, Vladek. It is also the story of the tortured relationship between father and son as well as the son's tortured relationship to art. The powerful narrative is laced with textual and pictorial metaphors and irony. It has garnered more critical acclaim than any other comic work.

Spiegelman is currently involved with a variety of projects. Among them are covers for The New Yorker, comic strip journalism, writing projects and lecturing. He lives in Manhattan with his wife, Françoise and his two children.

ANDREA JUNO: I read in an article that you wanted to "confound and implicate the reader." Because comics are a multi-layered form and you have to synthesize picture and text, I think it has the ability to confront the reader. Its seeming innocence can be a transmission for subversion. Do you think that's inherent in comics?

ART SPIEGELMAN: It can be, but I don't know if it's implicit to the medium. In the early 20th century, you have something that takes place in comics—they start to get associated with the lower classes. They're the part of the newspaper that's luring in people who are semi-literate—the new immigrants to America. Urban immigrants are flocking to the papers, and the kind of things they laugh at are looked down upon as vulgar by the more genteel classes. And that's where the early comics energy comes from. You have this strip called *The Yellow Kid* which takes place in a slum in New York City with kids being thrown out of windows, torturing animals, making fun of minorities. It's real popular, and pretty quickly social uplift groups are coming around trying to squash this stuff. A reaction happened even *within* comics, a reaction which keeps happening, and is interesting to watch between the vulgar and the genteel. Both the Pulitzer's *World* and Hearst's *Journal* were vying for *The Yellow Kid*. They both start to carry it, drawn by two different artists. The original creator did another comic strip called *Buster Brown*. Buster's this Edwardian-dressed kid who lives in the suburbs with his dog—his mischief is spilling ink, not spilling blood. There's also *Little Nemo in Slumberland* which again offers an upper middle-class suburban fairyland dream, as a response to the mayhem of the "vulgar" comics. I think this tug is still going on in comics. I'm not sure what side of the tug I'm on.



Spiegelman sitting under a framed page of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* with a statue of Yoda on the left and his children's drawings to the right (1997).

AJ: It's complicated when you win a Pulitzer.

AS: It is. Certainly, I knew I was doing something for an audience that would read books. I wasn't necessarily trying to talk to the people who were reading *Batman*.

In the mid-'70s, Bill Griffith and I edited a magazine called *Arcade*. R. Crumb did most of the covers. Crumb and I had interesting arguments about the whole "genteel versus vulgar" tension of comics. After *Arcade*, he went off and edited *Weirdo* comics. I went off and did *RAW* magazine. *RAW* was doing a *Little Nemo* trip. It was definitely tugging things toward a more elegant presentation, selecting work by people who were conscious of themselves as artists. That's very different than *Weirdo*, a good magazine, but more interested in printing the jokes that were on toilet rolls as their fill-in material whereas *RAW* would print Gustave Doré. I must admit, it's more glamorous to be on the vulgar, *Weirdo* side of the argument. The tug probably has to do with the comic's association with subversion of social norms, with vulgarity, and a kind of immediateness and energy. What makes comics highly charged is the fact that they get to fly below the critical radar. People don't have any expectations when they approach a comic strip; thereby it's allowed to grapple with things very directly, it doesn't have to get past a lot of baggage.

AJ: People associate the form with something infantile and lowbrow—

AS: It looks cozy when you first come up against it.

AJ: And cuddly.

AS: Concerning the formal issues of comics it's worth noting that they recapitulate the way the brain works. It's primitive, not in the sense of cave-men, but like the early development of language. My kids could recognize the "Have A Nice Day" smiling face way before they could talk. I think we're wired to understand simplified pictures. In other words, when you're remembering someone you don't conjure up a hologram of them, you conjure up a caricature. Comics are also an art of condensation. Even a

text-heavy strip has fewer words than a short essay.

AJ: Then why do so many people have difficulty with comics? They find it demanding to simultaneously read text and look at pictures?

AS: I've heard that, and it probably reveals a cultural bias against the form. Philip Roth told me that. He said, "I really love your work but I can't look at it and read it at the same time." On the one hand it sounds really humble, like Gerald Ford's not being able to walk and chew gum at the same time. On the other hand, it's a little bit snooty, like saying, "I don't own a television set."

AJ: Didn't you start your work with trying to push the formal limitations of cartoons?

AS: In terms of my own development, in the early to mid-'70s, I became very interested in how narrative a comic strip had to be for it remain a comic strip. Could one create an undertow that dismantled the narrative while appearing to deliver one? How many obstacles could you put in somebody's path before the reader just caved in and couldn't handle it anymore? That was interesting to me for a few years. In comics, formal energies hadn't been tapped, although they had in all the other arts—literature, painting, sculpture, music.... Here was this young medium that, in a sense, was the last bastion of figurative drawing. As a result, nobody had become preoccupied with the issues that preoccupied modernist art elsewhere. This was a time [early '70s] when comics were spiraling into new territories by opening up sexual content and being much more overtly transgressive than they'd been before. They were exploring various kinds of content, and reviving certain earlier drawing styles from the 1920s to the '50s, but it seemed that the formal terrain just wasn't being plowed. I became interested in that, and found that everywhere I went, I was making discoveries, and that was fun. These discoveries weren't interesting to a wide audience. I was interested in the fact that comics were a mass medium. That's

not something that I turn my nose up at. I think it's great. I think it's amazing that you have a mass medium which can be produced economically. After I put together a collection of strips which had some of those formal issues at their core, I wondered, "What can I do next?" Those questions gave me a good pocket of energy to work from. I was also inspired by looking at underground or independent film. I don't mean low budget Miramax films, but—

AJ: Experimental non-narrative films like those by Stan Brakhage?

AS: Yes. I became very good friends with Ken Jacobs and Ernie Gehr when I was living in Binghamton, after my student years at SUNY. Although at first I found their work totally opaque, I eventually found my way in enough to understand what they were doing. It opened up a lot of possibilities for me. In comics, I was working out ideas that were inspired by their work. Since part of my definition of comics has to do with work for reproduction (by printing), I reached a point where I wouldn't need to reproduce my work because almost nobody knew what the hell it was about. So if I wanted to make work for print, I figured, "OK, I'm going to have to move around and deal with narrative more directly."

AJ: So your earlier work follows in the tradition of deconstructionist literature and film—explorations of how far one can take the narrative. What led you to do *Maus*?

AS: It just seemed to me that most stories had been told. Therefore, one could do another variation on the same story, or poke around elsewhere. Since I work slowly, it wasn't easy to say, "OK, I'll do a detective story." I mean, gee, it seemed like there were enough detective stories. In 1971, somewhere in the midst of all the other strips, I'd done a three page strip called *Maus*. I realized that *that* was a story worth telling. It had a lot of emotional charge and risk for me. There was an allure to trying to understand the story, and trying to figure out *how* to tell it. When I started to expand it, I didn't realize it would turn into a 13-year project. There wasn't a mountain of literature. I was able to do all my research in about three months. There just wasn't that much to read.

AJ: You mean about the Holocaust?

AS: Yes. At that time, especially, it seemed like a story worth telling. I felt I could devote whatever skills I could muster toward this story, and not feel like I was just doing some empty weaving.

AJ: *Maus* not only explores the Holocaust, but also your father's life in Poland

What makes comics highly charged is that they fly below the critical radar. People don't have any expectations. A comic strip is allowed to grapple with things directly, it doesn't have to get past a lot of baggage.

RAW magazines edited by Spiegelman and Mouly (left to right): *The Graphix Magazine of Postponed Suicides* issue #1 (1980), *The Graphix Magazine for Damned Intellectuals* issue #2 (1980) and *The Graphix Magazine of Abstract Depressionism* issue #5 (1983).



cover artwork © Art Spiegelman



cover artwork © Jooste Swarte



cover artwork © Ever Meulen-brussels



RAW issue #7 *The Torn Again Graphic Mag* (1985) where every cover's right corner was ripped off by hand (top). The piece was then taped to the first inside page (below) and labeled: "Damaged Goods Handle With Care" (design by Mouly).

and the strained relationship between the two of you.

AS: Yes, so much was connected to it, through my family. I also wanted to do a graphic novel which was a hazy notion being muttered about in certain circles. There were no examples of it. I liked the idea of reading a comic book that you could put a bookmark into; a book which wasn't just a quick hit. I was also working on *A Life In Ink*, a story about the history of comics, but *Maus* had more difficulties, and I figured, "OK, take on something impossible. Otherwise, why bother?" It really was as basic as that. It had to do with turning 30. With *Maus*, I found I had to subsume many of my formal interests. I was still intrigued with what happens on a page, how pages are structured, how they fit together. But instead of trying to see how I could trip the reader up, the goal was to get people moving forward, to get my eye and thought organized enough so that one could relatively, seamlessly, be able to become absorbed in the narrative.

AJ: Didn't "The Prisoner of Hell Planet," the strip about your mental breakdown, precede *Maus*?

AS: The three-page version of *Maus* was done in 1971, and "Hell Planet" was done in 1972. "Hell Planet" was inspired by Justin Green's comic book, *Binky Brown Meets The Holy Virgin Mary*. Justin has the distinction of being the first real confessional autobiographical cartoonist in the history of comics. He did a comic strip about sexual Catholic guilt. I was living in San Francisco at the time, and actually moved into his apartment just as he was moving out. That's where I started working on "Hell Planet." It was basically my memories of the events surrounding my mother's suicide in 1968. I'd more or less forgotten about her suicide, and when I remembered, it all came back in a rush, and I started trying to note down what had happened and put it in the form of a strip. I wasn't even sure that I was going to publish it at the time. I was trying to find a graphic approach that was appropriate to the subject—a visual analog to the content. Every strip I did looked different from every other strip I did. "Hell Planet" was done in a woodcut German expressionist style—distorted and emotional drawing. It was about my getting out of a mental hospital, and my mother killing herself shortly thereafter. In the years since, I'd say that autobiography has become the primary mode of underground comics—like what superheroes are for the other branch of the comic family tree.

AJ: What do you think about this?

AS: In principle, it's fine. In actuality, it seems like everybody's telling the same story: "I was a lower middle-class guy who grew up in the suburbs and was nerdy and didn't have many friends and I picked my nose and masturbated." It's actually a better story than the superhuman being who comes down from the Planet of Argon, but it's ultimately as constricted a genre, unless somebody has extraordinary insights.

AJ: Well, what do you feel about your own confessional about your mother's suicide and your mental breakdown?

AS: I was dealing with extraordinary events in a life. I wasn't really—

AJ: This is not typical suburban teenage angst.

AS: Well, it was my suburban teenage angst. I'm a bit cynical about the genre of autobiographical comics, though there are good things being done within it. For me, *Maus* has an aspect of autobiography interwoven with other components. "Prisoner on Hell Planet" was a misguided attempt at catharsis.

AJ: How?

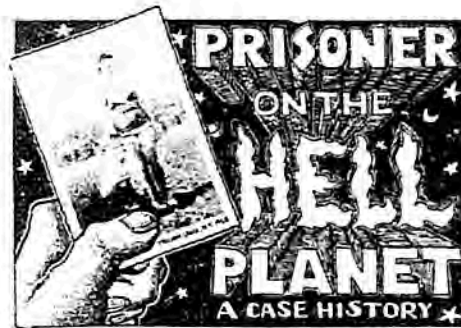
AS: Catharsis doesn't happen. At that time in my life, it was useful for me to lay out particular events in my life, and try to understand them. But there wasn't that rush of liberation that I associate with the idea of catharsis.

AJ: Did you get that with *Maus*?

AS: No, of course not.

AJ: Of course not?

AS: I have a funny "anecdote" about this subject. When *Maus* came out, I suddenly found myself in a very sharp spotlight. I was about to run away, and then *Good Morning America* (I



© Art Spiegelman

I COULD AVOID THE TRUTH NO LONGER—THE DOCTOR'S WORDS CLATTERED INSIDE ME.... I FELT CONFUSED, I FELT ANGRY, I FELT NUMB! ... I DIDN'T EXACTLY FEEL LIKE CRYING, BUT FIGURED I SHOULD!....



© Art Spiegelman

THE NEXT WEEK WE SPOKE IN MORNING... MY FATHER'S FRIENDS ALL OFFERED ME HOUSING, MONEY IN WITH THEIR COMPANIES...



...BUT FOR THE MOST PART, I WAS LEFT ALONE WITH MY THOUGHTS...



I REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I SAW HER...



© Art Spiegelman

SHE CAME INTO MY ROOM... IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT...



...I TURNED AWAY, RESSENTFUL OF THE WAY SHE TIGHTENED THE LANSBUCK CORD...



© Art Spiegelman

Selected panels from "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" (1972). The second panel is reminiscent of drawings by one of the first comic artists Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846) [see pages 28-31].

think that was the show) called. I'm going, "Oh, I don't know....what the hell! This is *ridiculous*. I'll do it!" The day before I went on the show, I talked to a fairly intelligent interviewer for hours. He interviewed me about my whole life. A few hours later, he calls back, and says, "Here are the five questions that Kathie's going to ask you, and here are your answers." (I think it was a woman named Kathie Lee. I was on a couple of those shows.) The whole interview was scripted; I was told what pictures would be shown while I answered. I had to wake up really early for the show, but I went in there pretty prepared. I meet Kathie Lee, and she's trying to make small talk with me before the show. She's obviously never read my book, but she had seen an article on me in *People* magazine. When the interview starts, she asks me question number one. Duck Soup—I'm with her. She asks me question number two, I'm with her. I mean she didn't have a hard job. Somebody else did all the planning. All she had to do was read off a fucking teleprompter. But somehow, she missed question three. She asks me question number four, and I know that the pictures that are about to come up are related to question number three. I do my best to answer in such a way that I can make use of the illustrations. She asks me question five and flashes pictures from question four. It's getting harder! I sort of admired the fact that we'd gotten through it. We'd fucked up, but nobody would know. She realizes she's fucked up because she has 90 seconds of interview time left, and nothing to ask. At this point, she turns to me and says, "So how do you feel?" Now I was prepared for why the Holocaust, why mice,

why comics, but not *how do you feel*. She really threw me there. [laughs] I didn't know how to answer. I said I felt all right, but it was a little early in the morning. I realized that wouldn't get us through, so I pretended that she had asked me whether art was cathartic or not. I answered that question. I don't think she even realized she had been on the edge of an abyss. She's lively. She went on.

AJ: Can I bring up a quote?

AS: Yeah.

AJ: In an interview I read in the book *The New Comics* [Berkley Books], in response to why the subtitle of *RAW* #1 was called *The Graphix Magazine of Postponed Suicides*,

you answered with a quote from Nietzsche: "The thought of suicide is a great consolation: with the help of it one has got through many a bad night." You continued, "To think about suicide isn't necessarily to commit suicide. It's to acknowledge the possibility and to acknowledge the precariousness of being alive and to affirm it."

This sort of goes back to the catharsis issue—as an alternative to conceiving that somehow art is a process where suddenly the big light shines and everything is resolved.

AS: It's just something to do. Thereby you have to postpone this other thing, which might be suicide. The work has its own problems to solve, problems which the artist gets involved in. I'm not sure that it's the same as catharsis. I associate "catharsis" with coming or blowing your nose. It's a clearing out. I don't think I've ever had that sensation from doing comics. It's just too labor intensive and slow. Instead, there's a useful accretion of thought, but it's not the same as having a good cry. Because it's a synthetic medium—you have to draw and write and put those two forms together in a fairly organized way—it doesn't provide the rush of energy that abstract expressionist painters like Jackson Pollack might experience. With comics, you're cobbling together little things and carefully placing them. It would be like the catharsis of making a 100-faceted wooden jewel box. It's highly crafted work. The mere fact that you've got to draw the same figure 30 times, walking through a door, lying in bed, jumping out a window....

AJ: How long does it take you to draw a page?

AS: I've done one in a couple of days, but it's not unusual for me to spend a couple of months on a page. With *Maus*, once I figured out the basic premise, I was able to do a page in about eight work days. Over a week; less than two weeks was typical.

AJ: So let me ask you the Oprah question.

AS: "How do you feel?"

AJ: [laughs] I don't believe in catharsis, but you have taken your own life as material, your father, your family, etc., and I wonder what the consequences of that are?

The ramifications [of *Maus*] have really slowed me down as a cartoonist.... Even though I would like to be reabsorbed into a long comic project, I find that I get in my own way. That has more to do with expectation.... Part of the pressure goes away for me when I don't have to work on comics.... I don't have that 2,000-pound *Maus* chasing me.

Was there a growth?

AS: A growth? I think of it as a large wart. [laughs] Well, there's change, but you know, if you don't change after 13 years, you've got to be made of stone.

AJ: But I would argue that many people in our very unhealthy culture don't grow. Creative expression is not encouraged and most people become more encrusted as they get older.

AS: I can't figure out exactly what happened because my father died in the course of my making the book. That alone is such a major shift. I can never know what his death would have been like if I wasn't making a book about him at the time. Certainly thinking about him for the years after he died was a way of internalizing him differently than if I hadn't been making that book, and that was useful to me in rudimentary poppsych ways. But the book has had its own life now which has caught me up in its undertow. I have relationships to it other than the pure one that existed while I was making it with very little expectation. I wanted to work on a mass medium, but I thought a mass medium was 7,000 copies. I would say that the response to *Maus* has left me kind of dizzy.

AJ: How many copies has it sold?

AS: I'm not sure. I think, in English, each volume is up in the 400,000 copy zone. I don't keep good track. But without any major pushing, it still sells about 20-plus thousand each year. It's still selling enough so that I know it's out there in the world. Part of the sales come from the fact that the book is used in colleges, in courses on everything from the Holocaust to post-modern literature to the dysfunctional family.

AJ: What's your take on that?

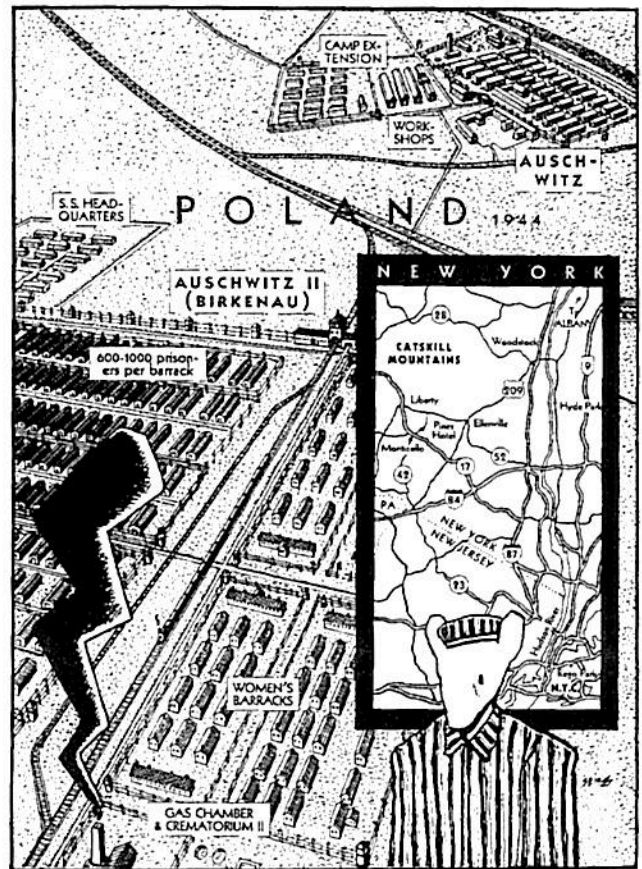
AS: Well, good—it stays in print. But because *Maus* has actually entered into the world in a certain way that became grafted onto the book, I can't separate those things anymore. It's a complex problem for me. It's not the problem of genocide, or the problem of becoming one's father, but the problems just have to do with the all-American story of success, and it's weird. The ramifications have really slowed me down as a cartoonist, not because I've got to go out and be interviewed, but because I feel timid about making comics now. I'm more comfortable doing other kinds of work. Even though I would like to be reabsorbed into a long comic project, I again find that I get in my own way. That has more to do with expectation—it's much easier to work with no expectations. When I did *Maus*, I'd set up an ecosystem that worked. I was getting my money from one place, and creating something else.

AJ: You had—

AS: Bubble gum.

AJ: Topps.

AS: Yeah, I was in the bubble gum industry. For many years I worked for Topps, and I put in a couple of days a week making up Wacky Packages and Garbage Pail Kids. It brought me a five-day week for myself. So that was pretty clean. Now, I don't have to work with the bubble gum company. I could go ahead and do another comics project without having to earn a living elsewhere because I'd have a contract just waiting for me to dive



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Selections from *Maus*, Volume II the 13-year project by Spiegelman which explores the plight of his parents in Poland during the Holocaust.



Cover of *Breakdowns* (1977), an anthology of Spiegelman's strips from 1972–1977.

in. But I've tried several things and haven't been comfortable working on them. Part of it is just knowing that the way I work is like contracting for an almost fatal disease—signing on the dotted line means I'm in for anywhere from seven to 12 years. It makes me wary of saying yes. I've been doing a lot of shorter things, as holding actions and exploratory probes. *The New Yorker* was a useful job to come along for me; it allows me to do cartoon graphics for their covers. Part of the pressure goes away for me when I don't have to work on comics. It allows thought to develop more freely because I don't have that 2,000-pound *Maus* chasing me.

AJ: All those eyes looking at you.

AS: I keep brushing them off my shoulder: "What comic is *he* going to do next?" It's unpleasant to have to think of myself in the third person.

AJ: Your situation brings up the 20th century dilemma—should an artist be a star? Were they better off when they were considered as low as whores and pimps?

AS: The situation of fame is certainly not something I want to sit here and whine about. Economically, it makes things a lot easier than they were. Now, if I get some nutty notion in my head, there's usually a way to implement it. Before, I'd just be looked at cross-eyed. The down side has to do with the objectification of myself, an objectification that just isn't useful to me. Some cartoonists handle it very well. Matt Groening doesn't seem to have any problem with this stuff at all. Lynda Barry told me, "You don't understand—when you were in high school, you were the class creep, and when Matt was in high school he was the class president."

AJ: So he knows how to be politic.

AS: He knows how to deal with people and he's just not—he doesn't have these conflicts. Crumb thoroughly freaked out over what happened to him in the '60s. His way of dealing with it was to head for the hills. Run. That's probably a very intelligent response.

AJ: He went to France.

AS: Eventually. But even before that, there was an insane flurry of activity over *Fritz the Cat*. He rejected it all. My response has been more complicated. I haven't rejected it and I haven't been able to live with it. My problem is microscopic compared to what some people go through, but it's enough to already have thrown me. It didn't take much. [laughs] I'm lucky I haven't dealt with film or TV; that's where the fame machine kicks in. Crumb's had to face it again, because of the movie made about him. Without TV or film exposure, cartoonists stay in subcultures. There are many wonderful cartoonists who are known to hundreds of people. In some ways, I find their situation very enviable.

AJ: Your books have spawned a growth of their own that has nothing to do with the original intent.

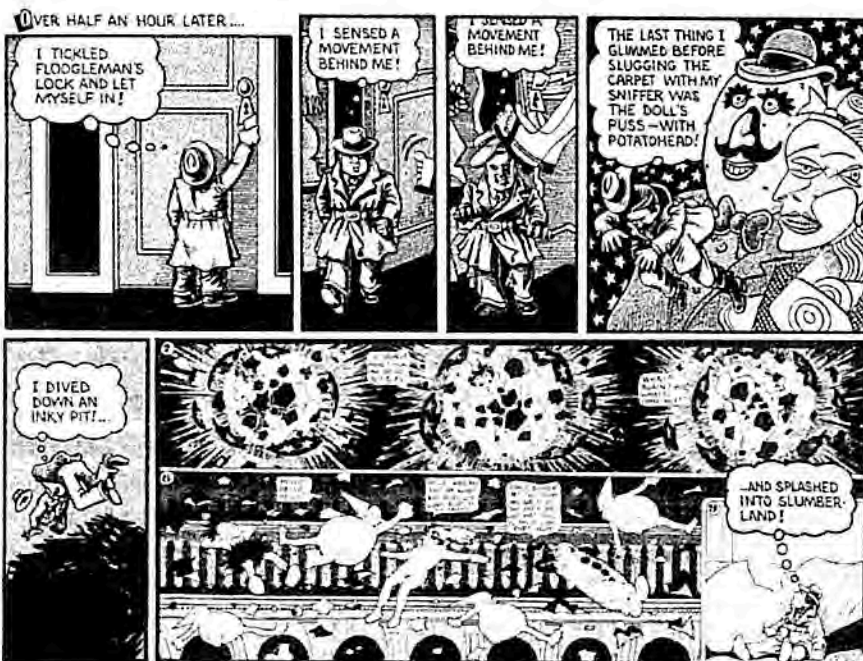
AS: God, there was a stupid article in the *LA Times* "Lifestyle" section about "Generation J"—the new Jews interested in their roots and heritage. They profiled a woman with a shaved head and concentration camp imagery tattooed all over her body. And she's citing *me* as an inspiration. I can't be responsible. I don't have the money for a shrink who could get me out of that one. So yes, work has unforeseen consequences when it goes out in the world.

AJ: You said that when you started *Maus*, it took three months to learn about the Holocaust. What do you think about the present deluge of literature?

AS: I think what you might be asking me about is a subject that is a cause of concern—the fact that *Maus* shows are frequently requested by Jewish museums. I don't want *Maus* to be shown in Jewish museums. It's not out of anti-Semitism. It's out of malaise and unease with the idea that the single binding mechanism for Jews should be the Holocaust. I have no strong interest in any religion, Judaism included. I'm very interested in the cultural condition of the diaspora Jew.

AJ: Could you explain that?

AS: Stalin pejoratively referred to the "rootless cosmopolitan." I actually like the idea of not being at home anywhere. "Rootless cosmopolitan" is an accurate description of life at the tail



Selected panels from "Ace Hole Midget Detective" (1974) from *Breakdowns*.



TIME TO REHEARSE: IF YOU WANT MORE POTATOHEAD STORIES, IT CAN BE ARRANGED...

end of this century. It's an appropriate adaptation to a world where nationalism is crumbling. I don't really associate it with Jews anymore; it's just like we live on the subway that goes from Tokyo to Paris to Bali to New York, and you can get your McDonald's food at every stop. I take pleasure in that kind of borderless culture, and Jews have practice at it. They've got their own lingo that they take from country to country. The self-deprecatory Jewish humor seems like a good survival technique. But I'm not comfortable with the idea of people finding their Jewishness by identifying with mass victimization of other Jews just because they were Jews.

There's something a little bit wacky about the Holocaust becoming a weird badge of honor for Jews, and I don't want to lend my work to it. It caused my breakup with my gallery. I spent a year and a half getting out of my contract, so I could have more control over where the work is shown. I've begged Jewish Museums to do community outreach programs. I want the work to be presented to as broad a community as possible. I prefer that the work be shown in other kinds of museums, other kinds of gallery situations, at universities. A few years ago, when I had conversations about having a *Maus* show at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., I indicated I didn't like this idea. The Holocaust Museum didn't need *Maus*, and *Maus* didn't need the authority of the Holocaust Museum to make itself understood. On the other hand, I'd be game to curate a show about Bosnia. I actually acted as a catalyst to get a show about Bosnia, a show which, to me, was a justification of that museum's existence. Unfortunately, I got kicked out as curator fairly early on.

AJ: Why?

AS: I wanted to call the show "Genocide Now" and that's where we ran into trouble: "Does it have to be called Genocide Now? Got a better one? Can't we just talk about atrocities in former Yugoslavia?" Well, if the situation in Bosnia looks and smells like a genocide, it probably is. They were still against the title, and the best alternative I could come up with was: "Never Again and Again and Again." They didn't like that title either, and that was about the time I checked out. But they pursued it, and I'm glad that a museum could put on a show that didn't have connections to the current identity politics which have consumed America.

AJ: I know it's thorny territory.

AS: It is, and I feel like I'm speaking out of both sides of my *Maus*—my mouth—because *Maus* has been a beneficiary of identity politics. *Maus* is still alive and well in college courses partially because you've got to read one Chinese author, OK, Amy Tan; you've got to read one black author, well, let's see, Alice Walker; you've got to read a Jew, Philip Roth—uh, maybe a comic book would be more fun for the kids. *Maus* is on these kind of lists, and it's symptomatic of things gone terribly, terribly askew.

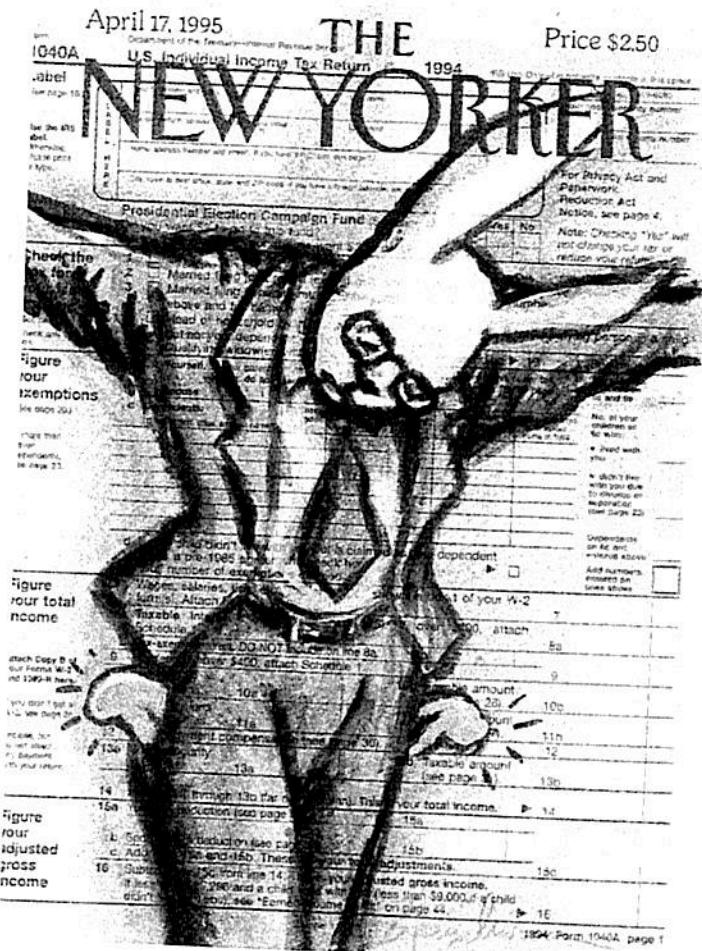
AJ: There's a frightening identity politics of the victim.

AS: I ran into some interesting versions of this with *The New Yorker* covers. I've learned to stay under cover more because there were too many crazy problems between me and the magazine, and the magazine and the rest of the world. But, at first, it was so much fun to do these provocative images—like the Valentine's Day cover of a black woman and a Hasid kissing. Some people were upset, but it worked out fine. I was naïve; I didn't understand why. Because I'm Jewish, and still of the tribe, I was allowed to make the comment. On the other hand, when I did an Easter cover depicting an Easter Bunny taxpayer crucified on a tax form, there was no end of negative comment. *The New Yorker* lost advertising. That cover really got me in trouble. The real offense of it was that I was a Jew commenting on Christians. Nail him to the cross one more time. I got much more hate mail for that than for anything else I ever did—pencil-scrawled "we'll get you" letters.

AJ: Did you get hate mail like that after *Maus*?

AS: Relatively little, most of the hate mail was from jealous cartoonists. There was nothing like the letters I got from anonymous crazy men about *The New Yorker* cover. I didn't feel well backed up by *The New Yorker* because they were willing to apologize as soon as somebody took offense. I found the response amusing, and thought it should be treated as amusing. I was lecturing in Germany when the cover came out, and I had to fly back to respond to the flak. I went on a TV news show with this Reverend. He's the head of some kind of Christian Anti-Defamation

The New Yorker showed me that an image can still have power. The negative response was overwhelming. It made me feel like I wasn't on the same planet. It's like when someone told me the enormous amount of records Whitney Houston sold. I started asking around, and not one person I know owns a Whitney Houston record. Nobody.



cover artwork © Art Spiegelman



cover artwork © Art Spiegelman

Controversial covers by Spiegelman for *The New Yorker* (top: April 17, 1995; bottom: February 15, 1993).



Spiegelman in his office. In the background are some of his covers for *The New Yorker*. He is pointing to a statue of Alfred E. Neuman ("What, Me Worry?"), a character from *Mad* magazine.

League. He talked about "Christian bashing." The idea of Christian or Catholic bashing was funny to me because they're the majority culture. WASP bashing.

AJ: Which is really in vogue now.

AS: Yeah, and I *really* feel sorry for the poor beleaguered upper-income executives who have to suffer that. [laughs] This Christian organization managed to create a flurry of attention around itself by protesting the movie *Priest*. When *The New Yorker* cover came out, they were on a roll and were not about to give up. The TV reporter asked me, "How would you respond to Reverend so-and-so who says that this illustration is very offensive to all Christians?" And my response was to stretch my arms out and say, "*Mea culpa*." I thought that was pretty good. But I was told by the publicity department of *The New Yorker* that I shouldn't make anybody mad. So I felt like I was being undercut.

AJ: Were you that surprised with *The New Yorker's* response? It's not like they're a bastion of radicalism.

AS: I was more surprised by the intensity of response, but I was also very pleased by it, because it showed that an image can still have power. In a world of photographic images, the fact that a drawing can still provoke a response is encouraging. There were people who liked it—I met them; I received letters. But over all, the negative response was so overwhelming. It makes me feel like I'm not on the same planet. It's like when somebody told me the enormous amount of records Whitney Houston has sold. I started asking around, and not one person that I know owns a Whitney Houston record. Nobody. That means everybody I don't know has two Whitney Houston records, and all of them found me by the mailbox after *The New Yorker* cover came out.

AJ: You said earlier that your interest in *Maus* stemmed from a belief that most stories have been told, and *Maus* was one of the few—

AS: I certainly found a story that I had an interior compulsion to deal with, and I haven't really found anything else as compelling, although I do go to movies and sometimes read novels. They're fun, it's just that I wouldn't want to have done them. There are people who are able to make wonderful things with the notion that a story's just a coat hanger, an armature on which you can drape a lot of ideas. And that works swell, I just haven't been able to figure out where to drape yet. And I'm not even sure to what degree I'm interested in making up a story rather than working on a found object, working on something that happened. I know that I'm more prone to read nonfiction than fiction.

AJ: What do you read?

AS: Well, it depends what I'm researching. There's books there and books here; various different piles. In this pile, there's *Among the Thugs* by Bill Buford, *The Arrow of Time*, a book on eugenics, a book on chaos theory, one on narrative theory, a biography of Philip K. Dick.

AJ: Are you a fan of his work?

AS: Yes. There was a time when Philip K. Dick was the only writer I wanted to meet. We actually corresponded for a while, and I eventually met him. When I was in college, he was the only person describing accurately the same border problems I was having—not being able to figure out where I ended off and everybody else began—not being able to figure out what I was causing and what was being caused onto me. And so, of course I took a leap into infinity and figured out that I was God...and four days later I figured out that I was God in a strait jacket, you know. Going into the nut house had to do with getting the bends—coming up for air too quickly from a very claustrophobic home environment by going away to college. Over the years, nothing's changed except I've managed to keep it under control better. I have a stronger sense of what other people's sense of reality is. It's like that TV show, *Family Feud*. Two teams play against each other, and they're not trying to figure out the *right* answer, but the *common* answer. For

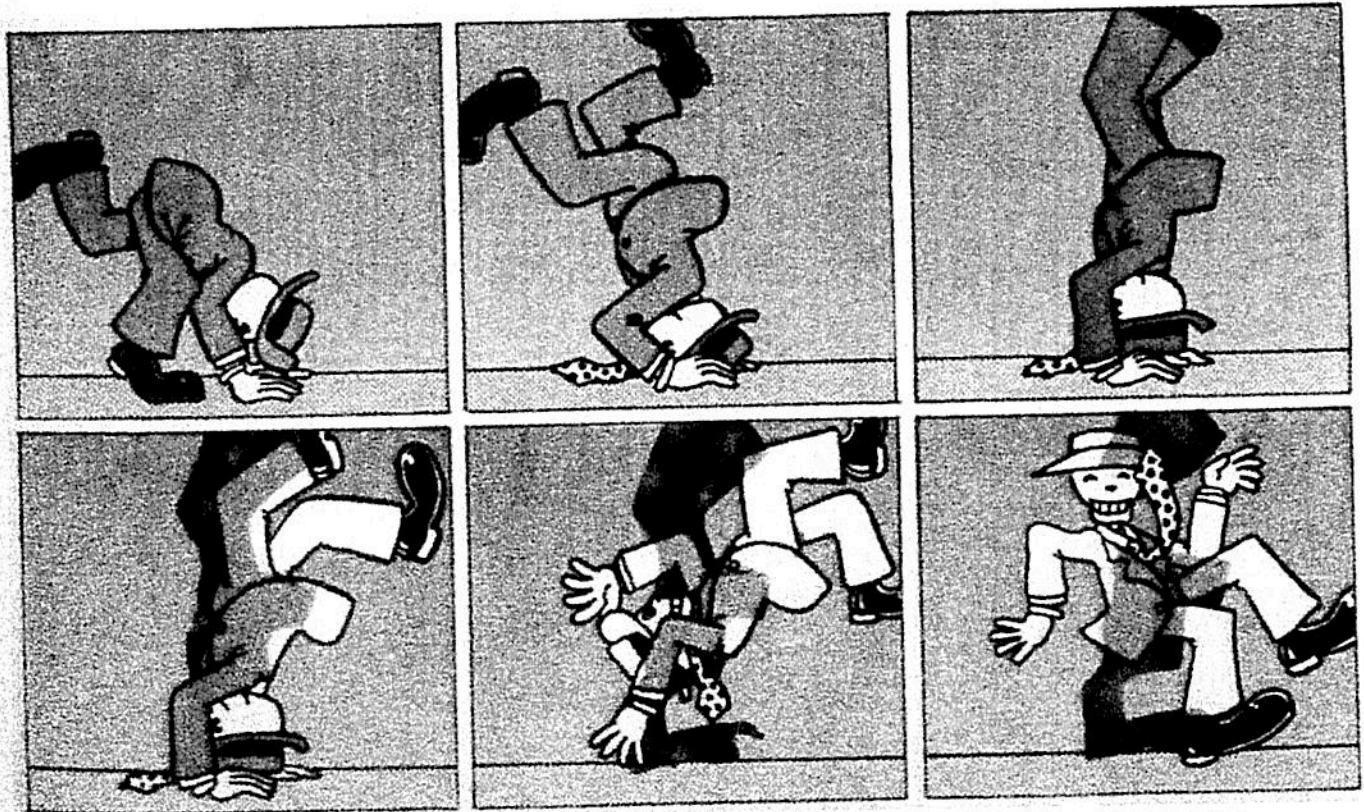
instance, the host will ask, "What items are in a refrigerator?" Now, in my fridge, you'll find Kodak film and some obscure brand of yogurt. But that's not the right answer. The right answer is milk, butter or eggs—whatever their demographic testing has told them is the most common item. If you get those answers, you win. That's the game. You're rewarded for knowing what everyone knows. Well, it's not just on *Family Feud* where you're rewarded for knowing what people know. In life, you have to know what people expect you to know. Otherwise, you end up in the nut house. Now, it's easy, because I've had practice at it. But, when I was 20, I'd had no practice whatsoever. I wasn't aware of the conventions, and that was a problem. I think that's often described as schizophrenia—that's what I was diagnosed as. My inner landscape is not that different than it was when I was being dragged away, it's just gotten more nuanced. These are issues that Philip K. Dick describes even though he's one of those great examples of a great novelist who's a terrible writer. Or great writer who's a terrible novelist.

AJ: So you actually met him?

AS: Yes, In 1966 or '67, I found a book of his called *Zap Gun* on a drugstore shelf. The blurb said, "A world gone mad and only a cartoonist can save them." It was one of those messages—I thought, "I was meant to buy this book." The second book of his I read, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Aldridge*, really freaked me out. Halfway into the book, I barricaded my door, wouldn't let my roommate in, and spent the next two days foraging for crackers and not wanting to deal with the outside world because it was way too scary to have it in a book. I wrote him some letters, didn't get an answer, and left it at that. But when I moved to San Francisco, someone in the community of underground cartoonists had met him at a science fiction convention, and said he knew who I was, that my name came up in conversation. At this point I had gotten his address and when I was in Los Angeles, I thought I'd look him up—I figured, what the heck, I'll drive out to his house. His phone had been disconnected, but he was there. I went in, we started talking, I stayed for three days without sleeping very much. It was very electric.

AJ: Did you have an immediate rapport with him?

Selected panels of the strip "Skinless Perkins" (1972) from *Breakdowns*.



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INTRO

"If the author of this little volume is an artist he draws poorly, but he has a certain knack for writing..."

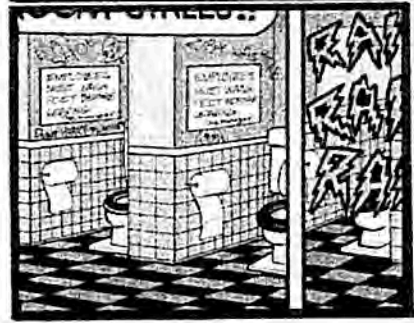
"...If he's a writer he's just middling, but to make up for that he has a nice little flair for drawing."
-Rudolphe Töpffer, comic strip artist, 1837



My dictionary defines COMIC STRIP as "a narrative series of cartoons."

A NARRATIVE is defined as "a story." Most definitions of STORY leave me cold.

Except the one that says: "A complete horizontal division of a building... [From Medieval Latin HISTORIA... a row of windows with pictures on them]"



Top: selected panels from the introduction (1977) of *Breakdowns*; bottom: "The Malpractice Suite" (1976) from *Breakdowns*.



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AS: I think so. Although I've since learned that Phil had immediate rapport with lots of people; he was good at having rapport. He was a very charming, entertaining person. We talked about a range of stuff that I've been talking to you about the edges of: what it was to go nuts, talking about his work, how he did it, what it was. I just wanted to know what his thing was. Then it wasn't as clear to me as it is now, how his work is a very thinly transposed autobiography, even though it appears as science fiction. It's amazing just how prescient a lot of it was. Technological and social possibilities that he couldn't have possibly known in the mid-'60s.... I saw him again, just before he died. We talked all day again, and then the next day, he totally clammed up. His wife Tess told me, "Don't take it personally; Phil's been in the middle of a six-month depression. Yesterday, was the first time he's spoken to anybody."

AJ: Schizophrenia is obviously a pretty meaningless term and our society has no ability to differentiate "altered states of consciousness." Chester Brown has a wonderfully eloquent comic strip essay that addresses the complexities of the misunderstandings and willful political control that surround that medical term "schizophrenia." He also mentions some of my favorite theorists such as R. D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, and Stanislav Grof who I think are very valuable [see pages 130-147]. There's a paucity in our language to describe these states which makes someone like Philip K. Dick very useful.

It seems to me that unlike Dick, you obviously have other apparatuses in your personality that allow you to be functional. I've observed that one can lose boundaries but it depends on what other parts of your personality can at least—

AS: Make up for it. The compensating mechanisms. Well, for one thing, I don't have to function in real time very often. When you have a deadline you have to keep yourself pretty much reeled in and then between them it's OK to sprawl, to go into a fugue state. As a result it's possible to accommodate. But it's also possible to get lost, so it's dangerous. I've tried to set this up so I have something like a bunker. Earlier we were talking about the problems with the aftermath of *Maus*. A lot of demands were being made on me fairly continually and I wasn't good at continual. It's OK if you have time to fall apart and then regroup. I don't understand it, I just know that some of the time I can't answer the phone, not because I'm too busy but I just can't figure out what on earth it is. This thing rings. I want to answer it as soon as I can figure out how it works. So—just let it take care of itself.

AJ: Then again, it can be a poetically healthy reaction to the intrusiveness of telephones.

AS: I don't know. I think what happens is after a while you just get the rhythm of the ways in which you don't function well—you get used to them. You just bear with it, get veered off into another dimension, but you know you'll be back and you can cope again. It's why I couldn't do a daily comic strip and Bill Griffith can. He's got a tighter mechanism. His breakdowns only come once every 15 years, not every 15 minutes. Right now, I'm actually just coming out of a miserable two or three months where I really was in an almost permanent fugue state. During the day, I'd rally for half an hour so I could do something like bring a child home from school.

AJ: What do you think then of the pharmacological use of—

AS: I haven't taken any drugs besides caffeine and nicotine and a little bit of alcohol for a long time now. But I don't rule it out. It's just that it's hard enough to stay focused.

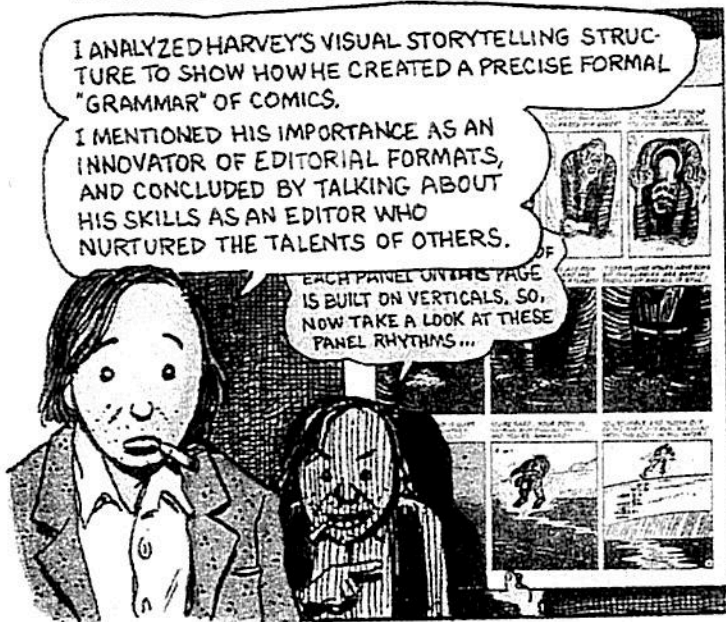
AJ: Actually, I was thinking about the medical establishment's use of drugs from Prozac to—

AS: I don't do that. No, I'm much more interested in the other drugs. I don't medicate myself much in either direction except for the caffeine and nicotine stimulants which are socially acceptable. Drugs like Prozac just seem to be maskings. I'm not interested in masking it, I'm interested in riding it. Actually, I have a predisposition to think well of psychedelic drugs which unmask things. On the other hand, since my main issues have to do with reeling enough of myself back in to get something done, I'm not interested in figuring out how I can reel myself out past that point. But I miss it. I mean, do you do this sort of thing or—?

In life, you have to know what people expect you to know. Otherwise, you end up in the nut house.... When I was 20, I'd had no practice...I wasn't aware of the conventions, and that was a problem.... My inner landscape is not that different than it was when I was being dragged away, it's just gotten more nuanced.



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 "Little Annie Fanny" © 1969 Playboy. All rights reserved.
 "Two-fisted tales" © 1952, 1979, William M. Gaines



Selected panels from Spiegelman's comic strip essay published in *The New Yorker* as the obituary for Harvey Kurtzman, creator of *Mad* magazine.

AJ: Not since the mid-'70s. Like you, I also want to produce creative work and, at present, don't have the leisure time it would take to regain my grounding. But back then I was studying the work of Stanislav Grof and had some very profound experiences with LSD and peyote. Grof was using LSD as a kind of microscope/telescope into the human (un)conscious, inward as well as outer expansion.

AS: One of my oldest friends, a cartoonist named Jay Lynch [*Young Lust*] had a very good one-liner. At some point when I was still having a lot of trouble with these boundaries, he said to me, "Of course we're all one, but don't spread it around." I thought it was a pretty reasonable attitude.

In the days when I was doing drugs of any kind, there was a brief period when I'd try anything. Just to know what it did. As I said, I was most interested in psychedelic drugs. What I wasn't interested in were the middle zone psychedelics like marijuana and hash because I wouldn't feel any pleasure. I'd mainly just get either thoroughly confused or crazy-paranoid-unhappy with my surroundings and myself. I wasn't able to see what the fun was. I never had that pleasant buzz that my friends had. But when I was totally

blowing my brains out by taking mescaline or LSD, it was genuinely interesting. I wouldn't put it in the category of fun, but fun isn't a meaningful distinction. When it was a bad time, it was such an intensely bad time that it wasn't even a bad time anymore. I have vague desires to just do more of this, even though for the most part, it's well flushed out of my system; we're talking about 20 years ago. But I suspect that it would just make it that much harder to get through a day. On the other hand, it's tempting.

AJ: Getting back to comics, what other forms interest you?

AS: Comic strip journalism is one thing. I did an obituary for Harvey Kurtzman, the creator of *Mad* magazine, in *The New Yorker* using the comic as an essay-like construction. When *Maus* came out, I went to Germany and my publisher took me to Rostok to a housing project where the "foreigners get out" types had burned down the homes of gypsy guest workers. I interviewed

the people around there, and did a comic strip about that for *The New Yorker*. I also did a story on the picture collection of the New York Public Library, and interviewed the one guy who seemed to understand the sorting system of this crazy collection. It's the kind of story that, ten years ago, would have been a prose piece in *The New Yorker*. It was reportorial, and involved distilling the best parts of a lengthy interview down to a four-page comic strip. There are some cartoonists who are doing it very well like Joe Sacco.

AJ: Yes, I like his comic book *Palestine*—

AS: Now he's doing something about his stay in Bosnia. But he's running into the same problem I run into, which is in an age of the camera, it's difficult to use illustration as your form of documentation. By the time you've figured out the material and drawn it, news is old because comics are very labor intensive. Still, I've been trying my best to get *The New Yorker* to pursue this type of reportage.

They've sent Bill Griffith to Cuba, Sue Coe to Liverpool to cover the trial of two children who had murdered another child, and Gary Panter to Waco. A few of those stories did appear, and it's an exciting way for a magazine to approach current events. When it comes to news, magazines have the same problem illustrators have. They can't be as current as CNN. Therefore, their best tactic is to be reflective about events that have taken place, to try and understand them. One of the ways events can be well understood is by combining short bursts of words and pictures. Sue Coe did a journalistic piece on garment workers for *The New Yorker* fashion issue, and it was a great piece, the best thing in the issue. It's great when powerful work like that can happen.

AJ: This brings up another issue—your role as an editor, namely of *RAW*, which was so influential and ahead of its time. How did that start?

AS: It goes back to my admiration of Harvey Kurtzman. He was a cartoonist, a cartoon writer and an editor—he was functioning in all those different areas. One of the things that Kurtzman was able to do very, very well, was ferret out talent. That was a model for me. And *RAW*, which I did with Françoise [Mouly, Spiegelman's wife]—

AJ: Both of you started it together?

AS: Um-hmm. After Bill Griffith and I both got ulcers from *Arcade*, I was smoking four packs of cigarettes a day. "Never again" is the only attitude to have to putting out a magazine. But somehow I got together with Françoise and that's what she wanted and there we were, doing it again. So in 1980, we started *RAW*.

It filled certain needs for us. Françoise wanted to get involved in publishing and originally wanted to publish books. The problem—Françoise's way—was that she went about it by deciding that she should learn how to run a printing press as the first aspect of being a publisher. So before I knew it, we had a printing press in our loft and she was learning to print. And after that—see, I'm unteachable, I know a few things and I've learned those things so I can function with them, but Françoise is more of a polymath type and likes learning curves that she can jump onto. She learned distribution, production, editing and all of the other facets—which makes her wonderfully overqualified for most normal publishing jobs. Then it became obvious that it would be easier to distribute a magazine. With a book, you have to build up a new constituency each time, whereas with a magazine you can gather an audience with common interests.

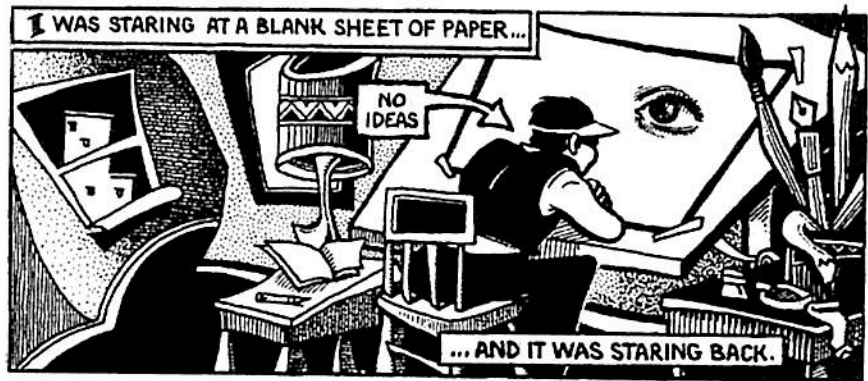
Around that time, I was getting hired by magazines such as *Playboy* and *High Times* as a consultant to help them with what they should do with comics in their magazines, but they would never take my consultation. It was very frustrating. I'd always be told, "No, no, we want comics about dope or sex." In *Playboy* they had writers that they were giving a great degree of latitude. Why can't they give the cartoonists the same latitude? So we did the first issue of *RAW* as a one-shot just to show what comics could and should be. We felt there was a *screaming* need—there was a vacuum that needed to get filled. The energy of underground comics had run dry. So *RAW* was done without any intention of ever having a second issue. But it was useful for the cartoonists and it sold out its print run—

RAW was able to present work by people who didn't have a home and weren't doing mainstream cartooning. Charles Burns was a case in point. Even though his work was very fully real-

Philip Roth told me, "I really love your work but I can't look at it and read it at the same time." On the one hand it sounds really humble. On the other hand, it's a little bit snooty, like saying, "I don't own a television set."



"A HAND JOB" © art spiegelman 1975



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Selected panels from the strip "Real Dream: A Hand Job" (1975) from *Breakdowns*.

ized, he couldn't get published in the undergrounds since it wasn't about dope and it didn't look like R. Crumb—it just didn't fit in. Underground comics had gotten fossilized.

We also thought there was a lot of energy in Europe that had been ignited by what had happened in America ten years earlier but nobody here was seeing any of that stuff.

AJ: Who were some of the people you published?

AS: Let's see. Mark Beyer, Winsor McCay, Kaz, Gary Panter, Bill Griffith. Very peculiar cartoonists like Ben Katchor, who had no place to publish. Mariscal, who since has become very well known for, among other things, inventing the symbol for the Barcelona Olympics. Jacques Tardi who's seminal in adult comics in France. The Bazooka group in Paris: Bruno Richard, an artist who called himself Kiki Picasso and another one named Lulu Picasso. They were doing very sophisticated graphics that were comics-inspired. Françoise did one comic strip page about never doing comics.... At the time, it was very fresh and exciting finding people that were odd bedfellows—the idea that Sue Coe and Drew Friedman should be in the same magazine is not obvious.

AJ: It also had its dark edges.

AS: I guess, but only slightly more so than *Arcade*. I think the main difference was that it was published by Françoise and I as "ruthless cosmopolitans." It didn't feel as all-American as some of the underground comics felt. We staked out this territory somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic that allowed a cross-fertilization to happen. I guess I'm really proud, looking back on the *RAW* magazines, of how many artists were first seen there. For example, choosing certain European artists that are now central pillars of their country's graphic culture but in 1980 they weren't.

One of the problems we ran into is that comics aren't that easy to edit. And cartoonists aren't that easy to work with. It's much harder to take a comic strip and dismantle it than it is to edit a manuscript. It was a lot easier picking work from Europe that had already been published, so we could know what to choose. And also, on occasion, one could "help" things along in the translation, let's say, that could otherwise be seen as an absolutely unforgivable tampering with people's language. But with the American work, it led to a lot of tensions because cartoonists

are an especially impossible bunch to work with, in that there's no money in this. Therefore, all there is is egomania. It's the currency of the avant garde. If you published the work, you were exploiting the people you were publishing; if you didn't publish them, you were denying them something. There was no winning. I just didn't have nerves of steel. The social tensions of *RAW* became impossible. It was inevitable. I couldn't be an editor *and* a peer. Ultimately, I wasn't that interested in being editor. I think now that *RAW* isn't happening, a lot of cartoonists are very wistful for it because it was useful.

AJ: There was something magical and exciting about *RAW*. It juxtaposed both high and low culture, using graphic art and comics.

AS: The genteel and vulgar smashing up against itself. It had a harder-to-define sense of what was interesting than just publishing comics. It had words and pictures and used pictures to communicate. But it also appeared so fully realized. It gave the impression that there was really a generation of people all working in tandem. That's hardly the way Françoise and I experienced it from the inside.

AJ: Then you are a good editor.

AS: I think a good magazine is greater than the sum of its parts but it should be made up of great parts. It wasn't a disposable magazine. *RAW* was trying to be more like a museum than a gallery—something that could be built to last. It took a lot of energy to do. Once we managed to do it twice a year. Once we did it in 2 years. So it was a biannual in both directions. Bill Griffith, when I was working with him on *Arcade*, was always prolific and is now producing a daily comic strip [*Zippy the Pinhead*], whereas, I was built to work on something for 13 years. I admire the other approach, it's just not what I can do. And I think *RAW* is a reflection of that particular impulse, of wanting to get it right no matter what it took, as opposed to wanting to get it out and build on your former achievement in the next strip and hopefully, over time, leave a trail of other pieces of work that got you there. I'm more interested in figuring out how you get to an entire continent and then burn all traces of the road that allowed that new continent to get discovered. *RAW* had some of those qualities of being fully realized territories. The advantage to it was that it got picked up on by people way outside the obvious constituency that would never look at comics. I think it changed the way the New York gallery and museum world viewed this kind of picture making. And it created a violent reaction against it on the part of other cartoonists who were very interested in keeping the cheesiness of comics alive and well. There were cartoonists who were really upset by the idea of comics aspiring to any kind of condition where it brushed shoulders with the other arts. All of which made it a useful catalyzing agent. After a while we ran out of energy.

AJ: What current work is exciting to you?

AS: I'm not as in touch with it as I was, but I would say that Chris Ware is one of the best cartoonists around. I'm glad that we got to publish him pretty early on. I like Dan Clowes, Julie Doucet, Chester Brown. In France, the work of Pierre Le Police is very good. I'm not as fully engaged as I was; I don't seek out the xeroxed self-published magazines to the same degree.

AJ: Why not?

AS: There's been a general withdrawal, withdrawal from the consequences of *Maus*, withdrawal from the consequences of *RAW*.

AJ: When *Maus* came out, there was a media frenzy about "adult" comics, and even in the book publishing world, there was a sense that comic novels would be a new genre.

AS: *Maus* was exempted from being a "comic" and the "graphic novel" category was created—*graphics* being respectable, *novels* being respectable. Booksellers probably decided that a double whammy of respectability would help make the stunted hunchback dwarf look better by dressing it up in evening clothes. The problem was that *Maus* took 13 years to do, and there wasn't another book that somebody had been working on for 13 years to put on the shelf next to it, and there certainly weren't another dozen to put out next to it. However, in the last ten

Drugs like Prozac just seem to be maskings....I have a predisposition to think well of psychedelic drugs which unmask things [but] since my main issues have to do with reeling enough of myself back in to get something done, I'm not interested in figuring out how I can reel myself out past that point.... But when I was totally blowing my brains out by taking mescaline or LSD, it was genuinely interesting.... When it was a bad time, it was such an intensely bad time that it wasn't even a bad time anymore.



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Selected panels from "Soap Opera Strip" (1975) from *Breakdowns*.

years, there have been several well realized, long comic books: Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby*; Seth's *It's A Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Ben Katchor's *Julius Knipl: Real Estate Photographer*. People have to accept that the category will establish itself slowly. It won't be an instant publishing phenomenon. It's similar to the way that when we were doing *RAW*, it was inconceivable to me that magazines like *The New Yorker*, *New York Times Sunday Magazine* or *Time* would run comics. But they all do now.

AJ: Do you think comics, in general, are still stigmatized?

AS: Younger editors carry less prejudices toward the medium. It's like there are these moles in various organizations: magazine editors who are predisposed to use cartoonists as illustrators, and, whenever possible, allow them to function as cartoonists. A publishing house hasn't opened its doors and said, "Let's do as much of this as we can." But, over a period of time, I think work accumulates, and as a result of that, there'll be a larger constituency. I must be in one of my upbeat days. Depending on where the hormones are on a given day, my other answer is, "No, print is dead. This is the last generation." I feel like the last blacksmith.

As technology and computers advance, I don't know in what part of the mix comics will be in a hundred years. I suspect it will be like a serious artist of today who's interested in the stereopticon or lithography. I think that as the march continues through time, these things get discarded and they're just left as toys for artists.

Presumably there'll be some people who are interested in what the specific properties of comics are but it's a rarefied activity. One of the arguments of why I felt it was worth making the *RAW* gambit was to move toward "respectable culture" which exists with a support system of museums and universities and, to a degree, publishing houses.

AJ: You mean intellectual—

AS: As opposed to the joy of Bazooka Joe comics. I think that move toward the cultural apparatus is actually useful in allowing a medium to survive. If it's not going to exist in that game sanctuary, it'll still exist. Most novelists and poets I know who aren't trying to write best-sellers are dependent on a university and grant system. Comics can be done without that and they are being done without that, but to the degree that it's available, it's useful. It's a tricky one, because

it has a big down side. It can fossilize and damage the work and lead to an academized form. But it was at least worth trying. And if it leads to pendulum swings, all the better. It's not like *The New Yorker's* the answer to anything; it's a mess and it doesn't use the best of what's going on. It uses some of the best by accident every once in a while. It's kind of this happy accident, and the more happy accidents, the better.

AJ: Like your controversial covers or Charles Burns doing a sideshow carnival cover—viruses entering into the system.

AS: I'm actually about to do something that's dangerous. I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing, but—some people came over from the Museum of Modern Art and wanted to buy my *Maus* sketches. It seemed reasonable since they'd shown some of the *Maus* drawings there. Fine. Then the conversation turned to my other comics. I said, "I could show it to you but I'd rather you didn't buy it." When we were putting the *Maus* show together I spent a lot of time in the basement of MOMA and saw all this great stuff that never gets out of there. Anything they would have taken from me would be the equivalent of burying it in a vault. I asked, "What other comic art do you have in your museum?" And the woman actually came back to me with this entertainingly crazy list. It was like, "Oh, we have a comic strip by Otto Soglow and four or five other very obscure works." It wasn't because they were the best obscure works—they don't have George Herriman's *Crazy Kat* in their collection. But it was what happened to get stuck to the back of a canvas when it was being donated to the museum. So I said, "There was a time when you didn't show Howard Hawks's movies or any movies at MOMA. I think there was a time when you didn't have a photo collection. Maybe you should consider comic strip art worthy of inclusion. But you'd have to understand it differently than just looking at it as if it was just a drawing that happens to look nice as a drawing. It's just an accident when it makes a nice drawing, it's not essential to it being a good comic strip." And the conversation expanded from there and turned into me giving a lecture to curators from various New York City museums in my studio next month. Comics 101, a slide lecture.

AJ: Why is it dangerous?

AS: For one thing, if I'm successful, it means I won't be able to buy the original art that I like and covet by other cartoonists of the past—I'd price myself out. And it's also dangerous for the aforementioned reasons that there's something great about the fact that comics manage not to have to deal with that world, and maybe they're better off for it.

AJ: It's also dangerous to privatize information.

AS: It's an inevitable meeting and I feel all I'm really doing is acting as an accelerator again. ☞

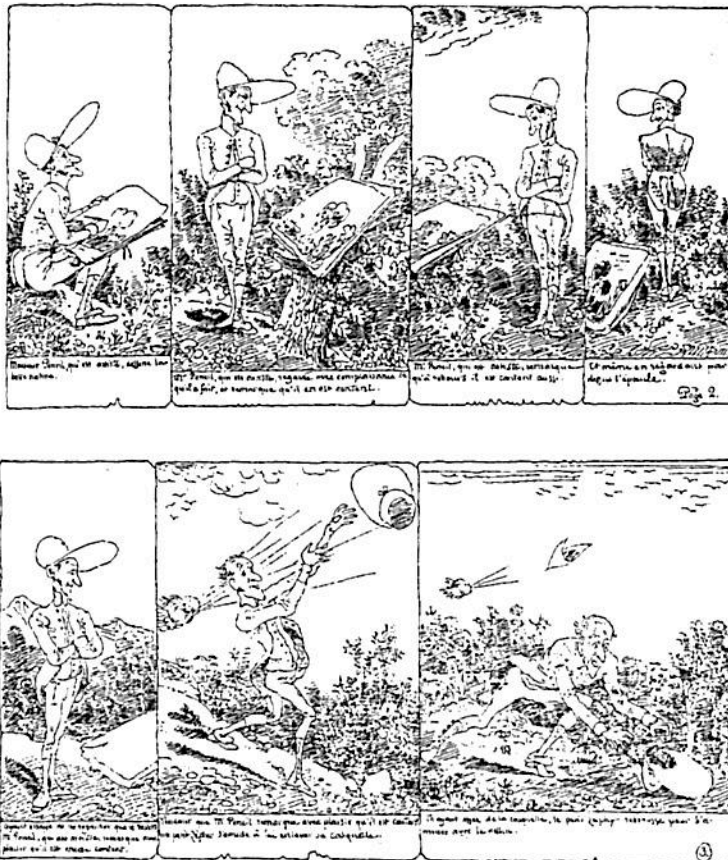
There's something a little bit wacky about the Holocaust becoming a badge of honor for Jews. The Holocaust Museum didn't need *Maus*, and *Maus* didn't need the authority of the Holocaust Museum to make itself understood. On the other hand, I'd be game to curate a show about Bosnia.

Two panels from the strip "Real Dream" (1975) from *Breakdowns*.

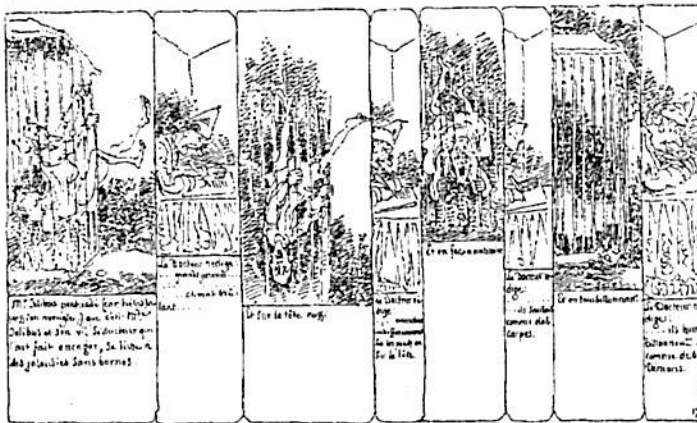


the very briefest taste of a part of the early history of comics

ANDREA JUNO: Adam Gopnik wrote an article in the *New Republic* (June 22, 1987) about the misconception people have about comics. They think comics have a primitive history and that they are some relic of the infancy of art. He basically opposes these notions, saying that, "Cartoons are not a primordial form. They are the relatively novel offspring of an extremely sophisticated visual culture." He goes on to talk about the development of the caricature among artists in Italy in the 1600s, like Carracci, and then to the late 18th century English use of the cartoon as a form of popular political and social satire. He writes, "Our mistaken beliefs about cartooning testify to the cartoon's near magical ability, whatever its real history, to persuade us of its innocence. Even though cartoons are in fact recent and cosmopolitan, we respond to them as if they were primordial.... That educated people don't know very much about cartooning just shows that we don't usually think it worthwhile to educate people about it."



Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846) drew eight picture stories in his lifetime, the first in 1827. These panels are from his story "M. Pencil" (circa 1830s). Top: 1) Mr. Pencil, who is an artist, draws the beautiful nature; 2) Mr. Pencil, who is an artist, looks complacently at what he has done, and notices that he is satisfied with it; 3) Mr. Pencil, who is an artist, notices that looking backwards he is also satisfied with it; 4) And even when looking over his shoulder; bottom: 1) Having turned the picture over, Mr. Pencil, who is an artist, notices with pleasure that he is still satisfied with it; 2) While Mr. Pencil notices with pleasure that he is satisfied, a little zephyr amuses himself by taking off his cap; 3) Having had enough of the cap, the little zephyr turns back to amuse himself with the drawing (translation by Françoise Mouly; reprinted from *Rodolphe Töpffer*, edited by Pierre Horay, Paris, 1975).



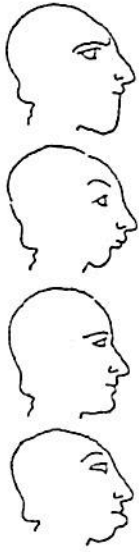
Sequence of panels from "M. Pencil" by Töpffer. This is an example of crosscutting predating the motion techniques used in film storyboards.

ART SPIEGELMAN: The nice thing about comics is that they have a relatively short history, so you can know their history in a way that you can't know world history, or even art history. If you're a painter, you're stuck with thousands of years or more of baggage. The Gopnik article is among the best I've read about *Maus*. But when he talks about the history of caricature and cartoon, he conveniently passes over the stuff that he considers lowbrow, which is comics. The cartoon has a related but different history.

AJ: Could you clarify the difference between cartoons and comics?

AS: A cartoon comes from the notion of the original sketch for a mural. The word actually comes from "carton," from board, drawing on a board. The cartoon is a schematic simplified drawing, usually involving exaggeration or distortion. Comics are clusters of cartoons strung together to indicate time. And that's what especially interests me.

I think comics arose out of the invention of the printing press. It's possible to trace the genealogy back to certain kinds of picture writing and medieval art, but I think it's the invention of printing that is related to comics. You're widely disseminating a picture to a semi-literate or illiterate audience, teaching catechisms and eventually spreading political and social propaganda and commemorating events and crimes in multiple images. I looked up the word "comics" in the dictionary and found out that it was a narrative series of pictures. Looking up "narrative" led to "story" which came from medieval Latin "*historia*," which specifically refers to the stained glass storytelling win-



Drawings from Töpffer's essay "On Physiognomy" where he experimented with facial elements (in this case lips and chins) as elements indicative of moral and intellectual faculties (reprinted from *Enter: The Comics* by E. Wiese, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1965).

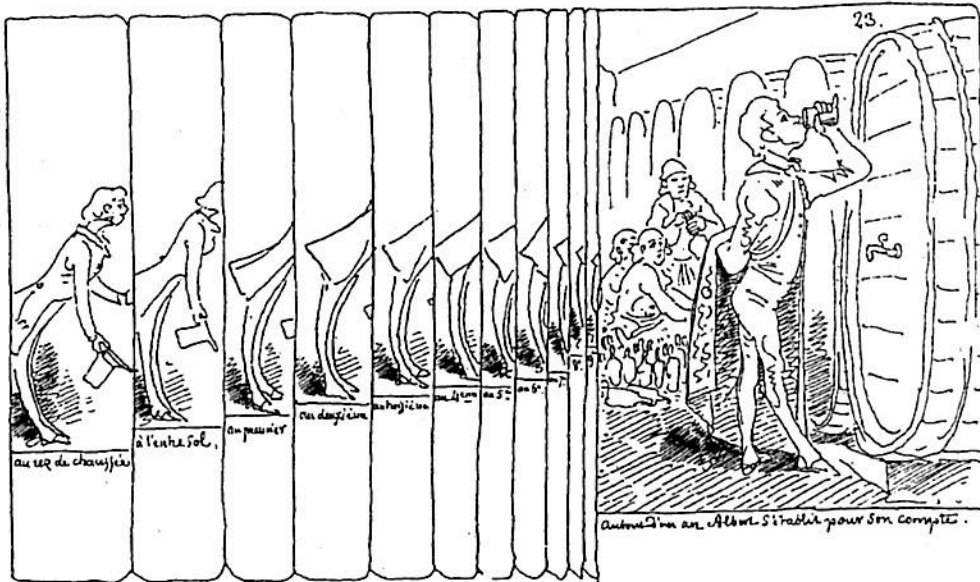
dows in churches. So the roots of "story" are related to the roots of "comic strip." I feel comfortable with this architectural notion of what a comics page is—a bunch of picture windows stacked together in a building to form a narrative.

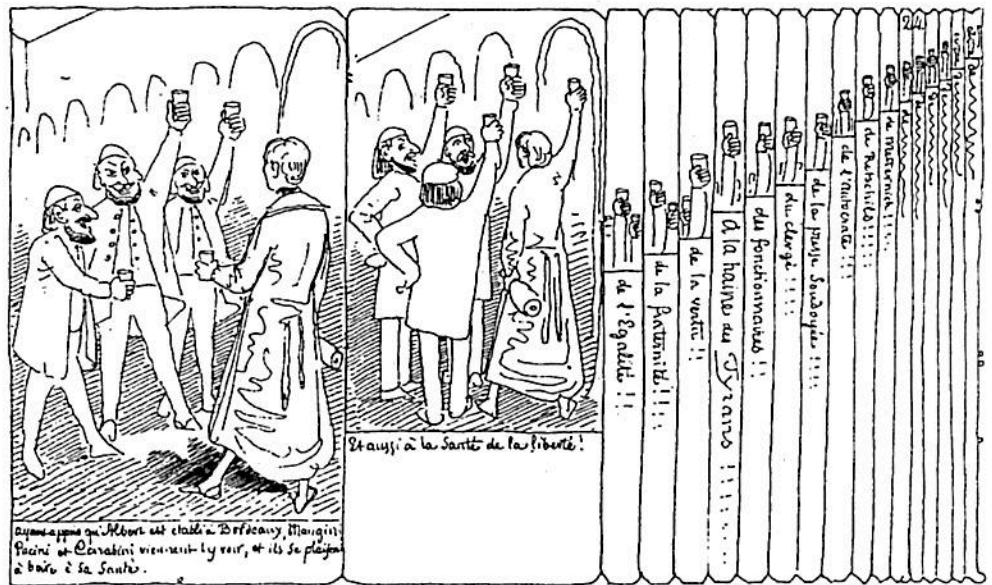
So I kind of have a schematic family tree in my head. Comics come from these 13th century medieval woodblock prints of multiple images to tell a story. The first real stopping-off point is William Hogarth who was telling stories in sequential scenes: "Scene of the Rake as a Young Man," "Scene of the Rake in His Dissipations," "Middle-Aged Man" or whatever. His highly impacted drawings would take pages to describe. They unfold like a play in seven scenes with various clues in each picture that refer back and forth to each other. As a structure, it's as tightly woven as a staged play.

But the first direct progenitor of the comic strip is Rodolphe Töpffer who worked around the 1830s. He was a writer who could also be considered the granddaddy of semiotics as well as comics. He wrote an essay called "On Physiognomy," which was a study of the classification of people through their facial structures—stupid people have small, low foreheads while smart people have high foreheads. He said physiognomy didn't make much sense as a science, but it did make sense as a sign system. He experimented with simple lines. The interrupted line still makes a recognizable image. He worked out very interesting notation systems.

He was a school teacher who really wanted to be a painter like Hogarth, but he couldn't draw very well so in his spare time, he'd do these comic stories. They were sequences which were very sophisticated for 1830. He used his theories of sign recognition in a way that he could draw something once so that the next time he didn't have to draw it as completely. He made basic discoveries: changing sizes and shapes of panels, clustering things on a page so that they have interesting design, accelerating and slowing down the reader's attention as he scans the page, having words and pictures communicate with each other while not repeating the same information so they complement each other.

Two panels from "Histoire D'Albert" (Albert's Story), the last story drawn by Töpffer in 1846 (below and following page). These panels demonstrate his innovative methods of indicating motion.





He was influenced by Laurence Sterne, the novelist who wrote *Tristram Shandy*, which had this loopy structure. Both Töpffer and Sterne shared a kind of whimsical interest in structure that reads like James Joyce but for different reasons than Joyce. Joyce was at the tail end of the novel whereas these guys were at the very beginning of their mediums. They were exploring what the medium might be for its own sake.

Töpffer printed his comics with a primitive kind of lithography which allowed him to make about 15 to 20 copies before the plate ran out. No one would have ever seen it except that one of the copies got to Goethe who said, "New medium, great thing, everybody should know about this." As a result, they have stayed in print ever since. This was my inspiration when we were doing *RAW*. It didn't matter how many you made, you just had to get them into the right hands.

Töpffer was amazing. In some sequences he anticipated cinematic crosscutting before there was anything like a movie camera. He was able to capture multiple moments of time. I would really like to know whether the drawing of multiple motions at once in comic strips precedes the invention of narrative photographs of multiple developments on a plate—like the work of Muybridge or Marey doing multiple exposures on one plate, like a horse running or a bird flying. I'm curious to know which happened first because it would tell me whether this was a cartoonist's invention or a result of a technological leap through the invention of movie—of cameras.

AJ: That's a fascinating question. I always had this intuition that artistic and technological leaps seem to appear at the same time, feeding off each other.

AS: As far as I can figure, this precedes any camera work.

AJ: Whether comics precede photography or not, this marriage of motion images brings up many issues of the development of our visual language and how we cognate, how we see—

AS: I'm pretty sure that comics come first. From the middle of the 19th century on, there's this impulse toward wanting things to move. The motion picture camera offered more satisfaction so its history got to travel farther and faster leaving comics on a stunted limb of the family tree. ☛