A chamber of echo

On the post-comics of Ilan Manouach

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So much stuff. There is an overabundance of things, objects, materials that crowd our houses, our libraries and archives, our trash containers. Not to speak of the accumulation of digital data in our computer files, on our clouds and hard drives, and the other material infrastructures of this virtual storage. Comics are, arguably, 'everywhere'; from general bookstores to city murals, from university libraries to peer-to-peer networks. At the same time, graphic novels last but a short moment on the display tables of independent bookstores, and webcomics quickly wash away in the daily flux of social media. There are too many comics competing for our attention, itself a space of experience increasingly subjected to monetization. (Citton 2017) Systemic overproduction, failing distribution circuits, and the precarity of creative labor have become major matters of concern in comics culture. (Thompson 2010) The notions of expansion, extrapolation, and deviation that connect the dots of the 'post-comics' constellation designate the tactics and strategies that contemporary cartoonists are imagining in this context. These are all necessary ways of grappling with these profound **transformations**, ways of rewiring a medium and harnessing it to social and technological changes. These changes might require the contemporary cartoonist to adopt new gestures: Ilan Manouach is such a figure whose main activities involve sifting through large corpuses, reusing comics and recirculating them in myriad ways, and investigating theoretical angles. Highly productive, equally at ease in avant-garde music scenes, critical theory books, and post-underground comics, Ilan Manouach is one of the rare heads in contemporary comics to advance a radically conceptual approach to comics in the post-print era. The outcome profoundly unsettles how we might think about the place of comics in times of overabundance and extinction.

A tactical withdrawal

Cutting through disciplinary practices, merging conceptual critique with practice-led experimentation, Manouach's work is not reducible to a singular authorial trajectory. His case precisely tends to undercut the *auteur* model of the graphic novel. If a cartoonist's path is often traced as a particular relationship to graphic style, Manouach's line of work is perhaps better described as a continuous process of *withdrawing* or *undrawing*, disengaging himself from the stylistic singularity that usually shapes the making and reading of graphic narratives. Born in Athens in 1980, he learnt to make comics at Saint-Luc in Brussels in the late 1990s, an art

school that adopted the pedagogic canon of individual style and personal vision as expressed in the imperative of 'finding one's style.' Drawing is **a laborious affair**, requiring time and practice, and developing an immediately recognizable signature style is also a commercial imperative for the alternative cartoonist to exist. Manouach's first graphic novels — with their particular elliptical storytelling consisting in loose series of images drawn in a dark graphite style, hovering between figuration and abstraction — evidently displayed the technical craftmanship to develop such a idiosyncratic approach to comics. (Manouach 2003 & 2005) And yet, rather than solidifying this graphic style, Manouach has otherwise chosen to explore modes of making comics without drawing, developing means of producing comics that put the human hand at a remove, acknowledging the presence of other agencies and letting the materials speak for themselves.

Manouach's first attempt at withdrawing, precisely opened onto an erasurist gesture: he selected a title of the Danish children's comic series *Rasmus Klump* (also known as *Petzi* or *Pol*) and withdrew all its characters safe for the one, lone-standing Riki the pelican, a relatively minor figure in the fixed cast of characters. (Manouach 2015a) The narrative becomes a strange and sad story of a funny animal talking to himself while passively observing how farm seems to build itself, how fields are ununderstandably plowed, and of course ending with the traditional but now strangely superlative pancake banquet. The pages of the comics have been carefully photoshopped so as to leave as little visible traces of the **graphic intervention**. And indeed, the book itself is faithfully reproduced in the editorial style of the Casterman albums. This first experiment settled a set of ground rules for Manouach's next projects, often published with Belgian editor La Cinquième Couche: the appropriation is minimal and carefully focused, it bears on a complete work that is reproduced in facsimile, it leads to a generative displacement of the work and its surrounds. The most famously controversial piece in this series of works was *Katz* (2011), in which Manouach and his peers reproduce Art Spiegelman's canonical graphic novel *Maus*, only replacing all animal characters with cat heads, blurring the ethnic codes of representation that the graphic novel installs. The book ended in a litigation with the French publisher, which led to the legally performative destruction of the entire stock of *Katz* copies, including its digital files. The case, amply documented in *MetaKatz* (2013), reflects back on what makes a work canonical, the complicated intricacies of Holocaust literature and book destruction, and copyright issues in appropriation. (Manouach 2011 & 2013)

While the case of *Katz* ended up driving most attention to the terms of the debates (reopening the discussions around the animal conventions set up in *Maus*) rather than its material outcomes (few copies of which survived), Manouach's *Noirs* (2015) opened up new avenues for

a more conscientious reflection on **materiality** proper. *Noirs* is a reprint of Peyo's 1963 *Les Schtroumpfs noirs*, an album in which a black fly wreaks havoc in the Smurfs village by biting the tails of the little blue cartoon characters, infecting them, turning them into mad black smurfs whose only obsession is to further spread the contamination — all of this heavy with racial subtexts, needless to say. Manouach's intervention this time again proceeds in an erasure, this time stretching further into the impersonality of the process by relying completely on the printing technology, filling in the ink toners of the four-color CMYK with but one single color, CCCC. Cyan takes over, eats all the other colors, makes the comics partly illegible. In doing so, as Pedro Moura brilliantly argues, Manouach's point is in the end perhaps less about the content of Peyo's *Les Schtroumpfs noirs* than it is a statement about or against expression, presenting an object that steps 'out of the realm of authorial expression, and even of human expression, in order to discharge lines of depersonalized expression, as it were. In this case, the expressivity of the very materiality of the album's four-color printing.' (Moura 2014)

In gradually withdrawing from the sense authorial presence that imbues graphic expression, these comics work out the kind of **'uncreative writing'** called on by New York conceptual poet, Ubuweb founder, and once WFMU radio host Kenneth Goldsmith, who incidentally described Manouach as a 'Hans Haacke of the comics world'. (Goldsmith 2016:199) His handbook reformulates the terms of our relationship to text: 'faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists.' (Goldsmith 2011:1) The uncreative poet's mission in the digital age requalifies a series of gestures that have otherwise been thought of as belonging to the peripheries of real creative work: organizing, distributing, disseminating, archiving, curating, framing, copying, displacing, and other acts that prioritize handling existing material rather than creating from scratch. An important lesson that comes from managing this thicket of available matter is the realization that a mere change of context raises unanticipated issues, foregrounds unthought-of possibilities, and hence generally speaks volumes about the text it transforms as much as its inseparability from a host of social, cultural and material assumptions. 'Context is the new content,' would be Goldsmith's elevator pitch. (Goldsmith 2011:3)

Jamming the iconotext

Gestures like this had been explored by conceptual artists throughout the twentieth century, since Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (if not earlier), signed from the name of a contemporary newspaper comic strip character. But one does not move, appropriate, and displace text in the same way as images or objects. And in turn, as an iconotextual medium where image and text

are meshed by technical reproduction, comics call for their own types of **uncreative proto-cols**. Comics indeed tend to mingle conventional ways of organizing the respective boundaries between arts of time and arts of space, between 'autographic' arts, where the distinction between original and copy matters, and 'allographic' arts, where the reproduction is not perceived as altering the status of the original.[2] Comics can but rarely do matter as original artworks, and yet, they are also 'site-specific' and tend to resist the kind of reformatting and reflowing that is the driving force behind literary production. (Chute 2013) This makes it a form where material expressivity comes to play a defining role in itself.

This kind of site-specificity is put at work by Manouach in his *Compendium of Franco-Belgian Comics*, a broader book that compounds 48 albums typical of the Franco-Belgian comics production, gleaned in Brussels' second-hand stores. This stockpile totaled to 2.304 pages that the artist scanned and detoured to establish a large set of samples of the most typical units that make the 'language' of Franco-Belgian comics. These samples are then layered *in situ*, according to the same spatial coordinates on the page. The result yields a compendium of prototypical fragments, each one evocative of its original context and yet reframed in a collage-like composition that disrupts their narrative function. The ensemble highlights the relative uniformity of Franco-Belgian comics, while advancing an implicit **material critique** of the semiotic perspective on comics as a grammatical language.

Producing opacity

In mapping the vernaculars of Franco-Belgian comics, Manouach's *Compendium* is a sort of companion volume to his *Blanco*, which 'merely' consists of a completely blank 48-page hardcover album, safe for the removable sticker that functions as the caption to this conceptual artwork. (Manouach 2018a) 'Blanco' in French means 'dummy', the print jargon for the blank prototype used by printers as a mock-up for testing the result beforehand, getting a sense of what the book will look and feel like, whether the binding will hold and so on. A dummy is generally needed for books that deviate from standard publishing norms: this is precisely what the comics album in France is *not*, given the level of format **standardization** in the comics industry. In producing a dummy for what Jean-Christophe Menu famously dubbed the 48cc (*quarante-huit pages cartonnées couleur*), Manouach puts on the market an object that reflexively calls our attention to the invisibility of material formats in comics culture. (Menu 2005)

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[2] This classic, although not unproblematic, distinction has been coined by Nelson Goodman (1968: 113.)

Even while *Blanco* displays none of the visible signs of comics, its sheer materiality is enough to immediately tell us we are dealing with a *bande dessinée*. Through its circulation in the various contexts and settings of the social world of comics, the blank object contrastingly becomes a sounding board and echoes everything we would otherwise pay little attention to: distribution platforms, book tables, online retailing paratexts, reviews, festival participants all become meaning-making agents imbuing *Blanco* with a particular function. The dummy, in this sense, performs knowledge work, accruing its meanings in the ways that it circulates and is used.

Manouach's series of conceptual comics shares a genealogy with a long avant-garde history of blank objects, 'illegible' texts, appropriations and found objects. While sharing affinities with the erasurist techniques common in the realm of artists' books, these 'bookworks' do not participate in the speculative logics of planned scarcity, unique editions, and limited runs. Nor does Manouach pursue the artisanal techniques, handicraft, and specialized printing processes that are so present on the European alternative comics scene... Rather, its reflexive use of materiality is one that highlight the multiple agencies at work, human and non-human, by staging the withdrawal of the loudest of voices. The extensive logic built into the notion of 'post-comics' here also bears on the technological uses, establishing productive overlaps with post-print and post-digital thinking – two notions that concur in a less binary narrative of technological change and that prioritizes an understanding of mediality across the board. (Hayles & Pressman 2013) De facto, Manouach's works trump the faultline between print and paper that has been continuously driving the debates around digital comics over the past decades. His printed books arise from **micro-gestures** of digital composition and collation required for the purpose of appropriation, processes that are mundane in the digital age. At the same time, Manouach has also extended this line of thought by increasingly relying on machinic processes (coding and programming are the contemporary cartoonists' required tools), maneuvering globalized digital networks to produce works reflective of these widespread changes in terms of readerships, circulations, labor. (Manouach 2019)

Micro-politics of the post-digital

In doing so, Manouach continues to inquire into what it means to read comics, who or what performs the work of 'reading' and how that activity plays out in the digital age. His latest projects involve the micro-reworking of comics by online laborers: compiling and assembling collections of images that are distributed to digital micro-workers through a **crowdsourcing** platform. This global cast of workers are remunerated on the basis of the very small tasks that

they perform online. Manouach thus breaks down existing corpora of comics into more or less minimal units that are then subjected to specific appropriation and transformation depending on the task assigned to workers across the globe, from Malaysia to Uganda. *The Cubicle Island* (2019) is an inquiry into this new form of digital labor, an attempt at catching its office culture, and an ode to the tactical behaviors of online workers. It is a heavyweight, 1000-plus-page collection of *New Yorker* desert island cartoons that have been uncaptioned and sent to thousands of micro-workers, expected to 'provide a funny text between 50-70 words for each of these cartoons.' The first anticipated results were disappointing and the captions rarely funny, as Manouach realized: 'Being a *New Yorker* cartoonist is after all no easy feat, I learned.' Even worse, the results were consistently spammed with irrelevant contributions, often realized by bots developed by astute micro-workers who, in order to try and increase efficiency, program bots to perform some very specific tasks on offer.

But that realization was precisely the starting point for this mammoth project: the point was no longer to try and reproduce an actual desert island cartoon (in which case one can indeed better turn to any collections of *New Yorker* cartoons) but rather to see what came up in the process of micro-working. *The Cubicle Island* thus binds together all of the results, juxtaposing the good puns alongside the spam. What emerges from this sea-wave of unsorted recaptioned cartoons is the messiness of a digital marketplace where human laborers and automatized machinic surrogates cooperate in ways that are sometimes hard to tell apart. Some cartoon captions are actual jokes, others vary between youtube links, illegible series of letters, found texts, extensive fragments excerpted from public domain novels, misunderstood guidelines, accurate descriptions of the cartoon image, social media profiles, and many other types of writing. And often times it is simply too hard to discriminate between these various options. *The Cubicle Island* is thus a collection that updates the kind of 'Xerox-lore' that was found in the office culture of the 1970s and 1980s, when employers would deviate the photocopying machines to other uses, whether it is reproducing cheap cartoons or photographing the impression of one's butt on the glass. (Gitelman 2014:104-6) Equally, it is a reflection on the anomie of this kind of labor, where the cubicle becomes an ever more solitary and isolated one, where work hours extend into the 24/7 regime of **late capitalist production** and where tactical behaviors are all that is left within an extremely precarious form of immaterial labor. (Crary 2014)

The various conceptual objects, briefly presented here, can be understood as 'post-comics' in many ways: but more than an expansion of or a departure from, 'post-' here might simply designate the practice of **appropriation** that in digital culture becomes proliferating. As Abigail De Kosnik argues: 'At present, each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its

release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, manipulated – a starting point or springboard for receivers' creativity, rather than an end into itself.' (De Kosnik 2016:4) Accordingly, it is not only that Manouach reuses archives of comics, but also proceeds to assemble and recirculate conceptual comics: his own works are hosted on the Ubuweb platform and he has curated a selection of contemporary comics for the Monoskop archive. These different activities tend to feed into each other, supporting a broader reach.

Resonance

It is telling that Manouach's various projects are currently subsumed under the header of Echo Chamber, a small-scale non-profit organization setting out 'to research, document and occasionally raise funds for the production of radical works and speculative practices in the field of contemporary comics.' (echochamber.be) The term **'echo chamber'** has become dramatically important in recent years, as a way of designating the social media algorithms that track and produce political patterns in a constant feedback loop. One of its first uses emerges from a lobbyist in the tobacco industry who, amidst the sweeping litigation debates that opposed US states to the largest tobacco companies, proposed an '"echo chamber" approach to advocacy' as an attempt 'to cause favorable information to resonate with and from various sources in order to increase its credibility with the target audience.' (Scruggs 1998) Internet culture, conspiracy theories and their proliferation – and what they tell us about how evidence, belief and truth are shaped – have long been matters of interest for Manouach and they were already organizing motifs in works such as *Écologie forcée* (2010). Commissionned by the Havre Biennial, the thin but large-sized booklet presents a series of captioned images, heterogeneous fragments of a narrative that can hardly be reconstructed but which are tuned into consistence by the sweeping logics of conspiracy theories. Manouach's work can be read as an attempt at producing echo chambers. Carefully constructed sites that are able to resonate and amplify sounds that few would otherwise be able to hear, without losing sight of the inevitable constructedness of these sites:

> In a way, the theory itself becomes the ether of a universe that remains to be deciphered and it is only through that theory that this universe can unfold. This desire remains in expansion because one never finishes to conspire and that we can always believe in more complicity. I am interested in the form of these conspirations, they are a monument to language, an ode to abstraction and to the artificiality of all natural spaces. I want to construct a space that is absolutely

artificial, where a unity is given to heterogeneous elements, by their physical contiguity, since the links of proximity are stronger dialectically and force them into being part of a larger whole. (Bovin & Manouach 2009 : 292 - my translation)

This fascination with the artificiality of natural spaces is clear in Manouach's resolute commitment to making visible the fabric of comics. Just as conspirators might endlessly speculate about the complicity of ever-expanding factors, the task brings its own theoretical expansion. In a context where conspiracy theories take on the clothes of critique, 'like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party' (Latour 2004: 30), the most urgent task is to revise one's 'equipment.' In bringing a series of uncreative protocols and micro-gestures to bear on comics, Manouach is clearly set out to re-equip the field.

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