Introduction

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In an article titled 'Fantômandrake à St-Germain-des-Prés' published in *Giff-Wiff*, the French comic fanzine of the 1960s, the critic Claude Beylie promoted an exhibition of the work of the American artist Lee Falk being held at the American Cultural Centre on the rue Dragon (3–15 June 1966).¹ Beylie sketched in words a picture of the colourful tourist scene of St Germain, before going on to celebrate an exhibition that brought together drawings and archival images from the creator of the Mandrake and the 'Fantôme' strips. After adding some biographical details on Falk, Beylie concluded with the following witticism: 'Un espoir fou vous traverse: qu'un jour le Fantômandrake traverse la Seine, sur un tapis volant, et aille s'installer au Musée du Louvre, d'où il fera, d'un coup de baguette magique, disparaître la Joconde?' [A mad hope comes across your mind: that one day the Phantom and Mandrake cross the river Seine on a magic carpet and alight in the Louvre where, with the touch of a wand, he magics the Mona Lisa away].² Anecdotes and jokes tell us a great deal, and this is no exception. In his choice of words Beylie reveals a quite complex cultural context. The passage quoted above reveals his sense of frustration as an admirer of Falk that the present show is segregated from the masterpieces of French and European history, set up in the student district at a small exhibition space on the left bank. However, the same commentary also testifies to his hope that comics might one day reach the official temple of high art: joking about it is a coded way of making a rhetorical suggestion for the future. In putting his wishes into writing there is an assumption that maybe this is the next step to think about, however fanciful that may seem. Furthermore, the cover of the same issue of *Giff-Wiff* is indicative of the great possibilities being imagined among the circle of filmmakers, intellectuals, artists and writers associated with the editing of the

1 Claude Beylie, 'Fantômandrake à Saint-Germain-des-Prés', *Giff-Wiff* 21 (1966), 60.

2 Ibid.

publication. For example, the cover features a pop art-inspired blowup and assemblage of images relating to Dick Tracy, along with, four years after Lichtenstein's *Whaam* (1963), an exaggerated comics text, with the expanded graphic reading, 'CRACK'. This cover is not an example of the historical fine art of the Louvre's permanent collection, but nonetheless it is a design that reflects the fast-changing and challenging contemporary art scene. In fact, just months after Beylie's article, in 1967, the Musée des arts décoratifs at the Palais du Louvre hosted a major fine art and comics show titled *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative*.³

As this snippet of history shows, an analytical mapping together of the warp and weft of graphic narrative and fine art is a complex, nuanced business. Historical evidence tends to undermine theoretical categorisation, while assessments made about one time and one place do not necessarily hold true as elaborated totalising paradigms. The articles that comprise this guest-edited special issue of *European Comic Art* contribute to the current debate on the subject, much of which has been stimulated by the positions set out in Bart Beaty's *Comics versus Art*.⁴ They range in period from the 1930s to present-day practice, while geographically the attention of the issue shifts from Spain to France to the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, there are explicit and implicit conversations that connect the articles, which we will dwell on a little further in this editorial.

From Picasso's *The Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937) to the contemporary British artists engaging with the borderlines between comic art and the traditional artist's book, a nuanced set of dialogues link the art world to graphic narrative. As is well-known, thanks in part to Beaty's research, sometimes this relationship has been suffused with tension and rivalry. One thinks immediately of the treatment Art Spiegelman gave MOMA when it curated the *High Low Show* in the early 1990s.⁵ For Spiegelman the problem was that a so-called elite art field – MOMA – was too quickly claiming all the aesthetic credit from cartoonists, while jobbing cartoonists themselves were doing marvellous things with their panels, speech bubbles and funny animals. Conversely, it is clear from some of the material discussed in this collection of research articles that exchange, dialogue, mutual interest and shared practice have occurred on more democratic terms and with considerable success, albeit in quite specific contexts. To simplify, these articles indicate that fine art

3 See the lavish associated publication, Pierre Couperie, *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative* (Paris: Louvre-Serge Imprimerie, 1967).

4 Bart Beaty, *Comics versus Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

5 See Art Spiegelman, 'High Art Lowdown', *Artforum* (December 1990).

practice, first under the sign of modernism (working through assemblage and appropriation) and later as contemporary practice (searching always to challenge, to radicalise, to find the 'new'), has sometimes engaged more positively with the mass media form of comics, originally developed industrially for newspapers or for children and family entertainment. There are a rich number of ways through which this has occurred, and no single paradigm can easily capture the multiple, ambiguous, positive and negative encounters.

Thus, the contributions presented here pick up and explain in close readings and meticulously researched art historical contextualisation some cases of artists and art communities becoming drawn into thinking about and directly using comics. Michael Schuldiner's work on Picasso's *Dream and Lie* demonstrates fully that this famous work can be read sequentially, like the comic that it is, rather than in the classic tabular fashion. Addressing a different time and place, Gavin Parkinson's extensive art historical work underlines how through the 1950s and 1960s, surrealist, *lettrisme* and *figuration narrative* communities of fine art practice offered both critical and favourable responses to domestic Francophone and U.S.-imported comic strips. Taking a different angle, Dan Smith's discussion scopes out the way in which contemporary British art has taken on graphic narrative. Changing cultural location (from Paris to London) and setting (from the postwar to the contemporary period), he adumbrates the engagement of Olivia Plender with text and image to produce what many critics would call graphic novels. As he explains, her works are being published not through any of the conventional houses that promote graphic novels (e.g. Pantheon, Fantagraphics, Drawn and Quarterly) but rather via the fine art 'book' press Bookworks. This is an important case indicating how neither form nor content but rather the publishing and distribution context sets in place the likely readership community. The fourth piece included here, Alex Link's contribution, which associates the work of Alan Moore with the Situationists, differs significantly from the three other publications in that he discusses how a graphic novelist is influenced by the art world rather than vice versa. The article further stands out not only for its clever reading of Moore's work and the influences on it, but because it sets the stage for an appreciation that comics creators are not working in an intellectual or cultural vacuum, but rather borrow from multiple influences and gain perspectives from numerous different sites of visual culture. As the several biographers of Moore have underlined, with his sponge-like ability to appreciate 'everything', he

was as likely to be passionate about the underground comix that he dug out at the local market stall as he was about the poetry, contemporary art, performance and alternative music that were central to the 'Arts Lab' scene that functioned as an unofficial university for the young writer's development.⁶

In the European context it is also important to underline that the reception of comics in fine art practice is regularly framed by more general political attitudes and responses to the United States and the growth of mass media in general. Therefore, several articles presented here open a window onto aspects of that relationship. As we will discover, Picasso read *The Katzjenjammer Kids*, looking through news stalls for the U.S. press arriving in Europe; while twenty-five or so years later, Roy Lichtenstein's famous blow-up pages provoked debate and reflection across the Parisian art scene. Some of the responses to them were not only aesthetic, but were also shaped by antagonism towards the political context of the United States' deepening military involvement in Vietnam (by the summer of 1966, U.S. Air Force planes started bombing sorties against North Vietnamese targets). We glimpse too how Moore, his imagination saturated with the American superhero strips (and all the other references too), gives back to DC Comics a perfect new remix, *Watchmen*. Link's interpretation of that work suggests it to be a blurring of fanboy knowledge and ideas of the city found in Situationist theory.

It is also the case that the articles published in this issue illustrate the recurrent importance of place, not continental or national, but rather the local and specific. Across the articles, one finds graphic narratives responding to regional cultural influences and drawing deeply on existing 'vernacular' themes. For Picasso, awareness of local cartoon culture and existing propaganda materials went without saying. After the Situationists, such matters had gained new theoretical edge, taking the 'what went without saying' and making it a foremost theoretical aspect. Thus, it seems to us that the grid of the page so often becomes, if not literally, then metaphorically, the squares of a new kind of map; read from above for the bird's-eye view, but then also panel by panel, to find some kind of preordained path from A to B. And here, then, there is a fascinating tension with our suggestion made above on the issue of attitudes towards the United States. If one explores the examples in

6 See the two fascinating contributions, Lance Parkin, *Magic Words: The Extraordinary Life of Alan Moore* (London: Aurum Press, 2013); Gary Spencer Millidge, *Alan Moore: Storyteller* (Lewes: Ilex Press, 2011).

this collection as so many vernacular maps, treatments of place and site-specific history, or a navigation around the two, one is tempted to see this very stance as a critical response to the mass media exports from across the Atlantic.

Ultimately, each article has a lot to offer on its own merits, and finding patterns between them can be a disservice to the authors' endeavours and their independent research goals. What we think the issue really does show is that to read fine art and graphic narrative in separation from each other is to miss a great deal. The articles published indicate four intersections that are not only intellectually stimulating subjects in their own right, but also essential jumping-off points in the development of our knowledge of each of the fields.