

Kim A. Munson, ed., *Comic Art in Museums* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020). 386 + xii pp. ISBN 978-1-4968-2807-1 (\$30)

Showcasing the efforts of motivated comics creators who energised a re-examination of underpinnings in the art world, this edited volume brings to light and documents salient events that have marked the curatorial history of comic art exhibitions and that, in many cases, have had particular importance in the upward trajectory of comic art. Some recent exhibitions, it is also asserted, point to future profiles for access to comics. Frequently revisited is the ancillary question of ‘how comic art functions as an art object when framed on the gallery wall instead of in the pages of a book’ (8). Art historian Kim A. Munson is no stranger to this topic, having broached the general theme in an early insightful essay and subsequently having focused on the problematic attempt of establishing a comics art ‘canon’ for exhibition purposes.¹ In the expanded treatment afforded by this volume, of interest are the dynamics behind the constitution of publicly accessible (semi-)permanent collections and also temporary shows in notable museums and galleries and on campuses. Ample commentary is provided about initial curatorial hindrances and how they were overcome such that, in the words of eminent comics creator Art Spiegelman, ‘We won’ (354). Rather than a strictly structured comprehensive history, however, the reader is treated to a self-described ‘curated selection’ (5) incorporating a large number of reprinted essays (sometimes revised) authored by some of the principal players and critical observers, along with a few new essays and a selection of interviews: thirty-six contributions in all, by thirty different contributors, plus five interviews, accompanied by eighty-two mostly polychromatic figures.

While testimony on international exhibitions receive some attention (specifically Brazil, France, Japan, and United Arab Emirates), this volume very decidedly foregrounds developments in the United States. Indeed, the most extensive commentary devoted to any European show, in an essay by Benoît Crucifix, is centred on an exhibition held in 2012 at the *Musée de la bande dessinée* in Angoulême but devoted to the work of the American artist Art Spiegelman (324, 326–335).²

- 1 Kim A. Munson, ‘Beyond High & Low: How Comics and Museums Learned to Co-Exist’, *International Journal of Comic Art* 11, no. 2 (2009), 283–295; and ‘Forming a Visual Canon: Comics in Museums’, in *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies*, eds. Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith (New York: Routledge, 2017), 226–245.
- 2 Spiegelman, raised in a Polish Jewish family and Swedish-born, does indeed have European ties, but the United States has been his home since the age of three. However,

Understandably, the book's predominantly American focus matches the editor's own area of curatorial expertise. And arguably the story of the ascendancy of comic art in the United States is the most dramatic, transitioning from an adolescent's fantastical bedlam of superheroes and supervillains to a mature reckoning of good and evil in the path-breaking Pulitzer Prize-worthy *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1992 winner), and with a pivotal intervening episode—characterisable simultaneously as a co-optation and a gateway—via the advent of American Pop Art. Nevertheless, given their importance, developments on the other side of the Atlantic merit commensurate attention as well, beyond what is available in this book.³

To orient the reader of *Comic Art in Museums*, the editor has provided a helpful general introduction (3–10) and, at appropriate intervals, explanatory remarks serving as lead-ins to the various subgroupings of contributions. The sequence of subgroupings, laid out below with some highlighting based on this reader's impressions, provides an appropriately succinct outline of the volume's organisation and topical progression.

Highlighted in the 'Foundations' section is the impetus behind comics exhibitions, as rooted in the early initiatives of American artists such as Milt Caniff, Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Mort Walker, and Denis Kitchen, as well as other promoters and publishers such as Brian Walker (son of Mort), all of whom understood that properly construed exhibitions worked to advance the comic art medium and to foster its legitimisation by informing and educating the public. Essays by both Kitchen and Brian Walker comprise this section, along with reflections by art researcher Andrei Molotiu (Indiana University) on the contrasting aesthetics of printed comics compared to comics as original art objects on display.

The focus in the second section is on pioneering exhibitions from 1930 to 1967. Munson's valuable archival research allows her to fill in important lacunae in the curatorial timeline (66–88) and, among

he also has links to France via his wife and long-time collaborator Françoise Mouly, founder of *Raw* and a dynamic force in her own right in the world of comic art. Indeed, a contribution by her, perhaps bridging perspectives on both sides of the Atlantic, for she is singularly well-placed for such an assignment, would provide a fascinating read.

3 For pertinent commentary, including the proliferating commissioning of comic art albums by various art museums across Europe, often accompanied by exhibits, a phenomenon which to date has little parallel in the United States, see Michael D. Picone, 'Comic Art in Museums and Museums in Comic Art', *European Comic Art* 6, no. 2 (2013), 40–68; Margaret C. Flinn, 'High Comics Art: The Louvre and the *Bande Dessinée*', *European Comic Art* 6, no. 2 (2013), 69–94.

other things, points to Milt Caniff as playing an outsized role. An initial modest exhibition in Caniff's hometown of Dayton, Ohio, in 1939, morphed into attention-grabbing shows, including samples of his own work and the work of other cartoonists, at prestigious venues such as the Library of Congress in 1949, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1951, and the Smithsonian in 1966, all of which was facilitated by Caniff's co-founding of the National Cartoonists Society in 1944. Munson's contribution to this section is complemented by a reprint from 1942 of 'The Story of the Comics' by publisher Max Gaines (whose newsprint pamphlet introduced in 1933 was the direct precursor to the American comic book format) and by contributions from Alvaro de Moya (Brazilian cartoonist, scholar, and educator) on the first international exhibit, held in São Paulo in 1951, and from Antoine Sausverd (researcher and founder of the Töppferiana website) on the exhibit held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1967, which constituted a crucial curatorial turning point in France.⁴

The next section then turns to 'Comics as Art'. Playing important roles in the reaction to early Modernism and its influential New York-centred outgrowth Abstract Expressionism, American Pop Art and French *figuration narrative* emerged and, infamously via the work of Roy Lichtenstein in the 1960s (128, 155, 213), became the conduit for the introduction of an 'appropriated, deconstructed and abstracted' version of comic art into the high-art world.⁵ Ignominious though it was, this start, which was buttressed by interest in the emergence of American underground comix as social criticism (113), proved to be a turning point contributing to the blurring of boundaries between high art and low,⁶ which in turn, as reflected in curatorial choices, led to a post-1970 re-evaluation and promotion of comic art, henceforth displayable as 'art' in its own right (113–115). The founding of various collections and museums devoted to cartooning and comic art also ensued, as recollected by contributors Albert Boime (UCLA), Brian Walker, Cullen Murphy (*Vanity Fair*), Kenneth Baker (*San Francisco Chronicle*), and interviewee Joe Wos (cartoonist and founder of the Pittsburgh ToonSeum), with special prominence conferred on the Museum of Cartoon Art, founded by Mort Walker in 1974.

In 'Expanding Views', the focus is on thematic diversity, on one hand, and on the other, innovations and new departures that have surfaced in

4 See also Picone, 'Comic Art in Museums and Museums in Comic Art'.

5 Bart Barty, *Comics versus Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 190.

6 See also Laurence Grove, *Comics in French* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 208–214; Picone 'Comic Art in Museums and Museums in Comic Art', 43–44, 49.

some cases due to the curatorial event itself. The latter includes 'gallery comics' created specifically for gallery display, and 'hypercomics' embodying 'multilinear narrative and self-guided navigation' (169) which is only possible by abandoning the traditional bound format, as described by contributor Paul Gravett (London *Times*, comics researcher, and exhibit curator). However, this suggests a conundrum, namely that comic art must reinvent itself fully to conform to, but also optimally to exploit, gallery parameters; in other words, the exhibiting process itself becomes simultaneously destructive and creative in relation to the discipline of comic art. Regarding thematic diversity, in relation to adult comics, curatorial commentary is provided by Diana Green (Columbia University) and Craig Yoe (cartoonist and comics historian). In relation to African American artists and depictions of African Americans in comics, an insider's perspective is provided by Dwayne McDuffie (co-founder of Milestone Comics, the first African American-owned comics publisher).⁷ In relation to manga exhibitions in Japan, Jacqueline Berndt (Stockholms Universitet) explains that an altogether different opposition, namely East versus West, replaces high versus low, inasmuch as comics are viewed as indigenous, whereas art museums are largely viewed as an importation from the West (181). In relation to the Dubai Cartoon Art Gallery, the only institution of its kind in the Middle East, John A. Lent (*International Journal of Comic Art*) cites both successes and challenges in an ambiance characterised by little public awareness.

The section on 'Masters of High and Low' may qualify as the most interesting, inasmuch as it features two high-profile and, ultimately, controversial attempts at showcasing comic art in prestigious American venues. Initially, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, held at the Museum of Modern Art (NYC) in 1998, was criticised for repeating the offense of earlier exhibits where high art was the main focus and the inclusion of comic art was essentially a prop, a misstep which could have been averted, critics asserted, had there been appropriate prior consultation. With this criticism in mind, Brian Walker was enlisted as co-curator along with pop culture entrepreneur John Carlin, and with Art Spiegelman acting as consultant, to mount *Masters of American Comics*, held jointly at the Hammer Museum (UCLA affiliated) and

7 On the subject of depictions that incorporate stereotypical African American dialectal traits in American comics, see Michael D. Picone, 'Eye Dialect and Pronunciation Respelling in the USA', in *The Routledge Handbook of the English Writing System*, eds. Vivian Cook and Des Ryan (New York: Routledge, 2016), 331–346.

the Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles) in 2005.⁸ Though this time the curators were veterans of the world of comics, the exhibit was roundly criticised in some quarters for taking a cue from the high-art playbook and canonising ‘Masters’ of comic art for exhibition purposes, thereby aping the high-art notion of canon in order to lend respectability to comic art. At a basic level this approach is at cross-purposes with itself, insofar as the elevation of comic art automatically constitutes a challenge to the premise of a received canon in the art world. To make matters worse, the comic art ‘canon’ so established, like its high-art predecessor, was all but devoid of diversity. Seven contributions devoted to commentary on those two exhibits as well as others, seen as venues for a ‘dialog’ between high and low art (211), constitute the major part of this section, with pieces by David Deitcher (art critic and historian); Karen Green (Columbia University, curator) and Munson (their contribution includes an interview with artist and anti-modernist warrior Jonah Kinigstein); Michael Dooley (Loyola Marymount University); Art Spiegelman; John Carlin; Scott Timberg (art journalist); and Damian Duffy (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, graphic novelist). Two contributions complete this section by also taking up the related question of the diversity of representation: Leslie Jones (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and Trina Robbins (celebrated cartoonist, producer of first all-woman comic book *It Ain’t Me Babe* in 1970, and founder of *Wimmin’s Comix* in 1972).

In the section on ‘Individual Exhibitions’, essays and interviews keyed to various solo exhibitions by American cartoonists—nine contributions in all, three of which are interviews—round out the ‘curated selection’ which constitutes this book. Space limitations preclude a satisfactory accounting of each exhibition and how some constitute a ‘personal statement’ (289). The first interviewee, Gary Panter, one of the American ‘Masters’ featured at the Hammer/MOCA show, engages in a general discussion about the move away from such collective installations, which seem trapped in comics history, towards solo exhibits, which are not only conducive to greater presentational depth but also finesse the selective ‘canon’ problem alluded to above. Another interviewee, the autobiographical cartoonist Carol Tyler, provides an example of the

8 The American ‘Masters’ featured at the Hammer were Winsor McCay, Lyonel Feininger, George Herriman, E.C. Segar, Frank King, Chester Gould, Milt Caniff, and Charles M. Schultz; while at the MOCA were featured Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Harvey Kurtzman, Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, Gary Panter, and Chris Ware. All immensely talented, but all male and, with the single exception of Herriman, all white.

structuring of an exhibit as a personal statement. She eschews neatly framed ‘museumified’ exhibits (316) and prefers her installations to mingle pages of her comics with relevant personal items, often in disordered or kinetic arrangements. The final interviewee, Art Spiegelman, engages in a wide-ranging discussion touching on a number of exhibits and especially his self-curated exhibit launched at the Musée de la Bande Dessinée in Angoulême in 2012, followed by an installation in Paris and then, rebaptised *Co-Mix: A Retrospective of Comics, Graphics and Scraps*, in a number of sites in North America. Spiegelman’s exhibit, along with another crafted by Daniel Clowes, is the subject of Benoît Crucifix’s (Universiteit Gent) contribution to this section, where he addresses the advantages of engaging the artist as self-curator of a solo installation. The remaining essays in this section are devoted to exhibits featuring two giants of American comics. Essays by Rob Salkowitz (*Forbes*, pop culture researcher) and Charles Hatfield (California State University, Northridge) highlight Robert Crumb’s solo exhibits. Essays by Hatfield, Doug Harvey (artist, educator and critic), and Alexi Worth (artist and art critic) concentrate on installations devoted to Jack Kirby. *Comic Art in Museums* concludes with a list of museum venues featuring regular comics programming, biosketches for all contributors, and an index.

More than just curatorial history, Munson’s self-described ‘curated selection’ of essays and interviews, replete with orientational ‘section labels’ (in keeping with curatorial parlance), constitutes a kind of curatorial sourcebook. Each exhibit provides a useful case study for reflection not only on where comic art came from and where it is going in the larger art world, but also on the key, often hidden, role in this dynamic played by curatorial initiatives and choices. It is an informative and highly recommendable read for any professional or layperson pursuing art history, comics studies, or museology.

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Paul Fisher Davies, *Comics as Communication: A Functional Approach* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). 338 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-29722-0 (eBook: €50.28)

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