

Amidst some paper ghosts

Jochen Gerner and the hauntology of comics

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Specters, ink black and procedures

Specters are haunting the work of Jochen Gerner: the specters of the age of mechanical reproducibility. Playing games of disappearance and reappearance of signs, one of Gerner's favorite procedures is the **covering** of papers (catalogs, postcards, books) with a layer of ink, which masks the reproduced images to create new signs and make apparent the meanings trivialized in prevailing speech. The typical comics technique of inking (after drawing) seem to be 'expanded' here to reach *other* effects. For example, in *Prospectus Box* (Éditions du Rouergue, 1998), an object book made of flyers are covered with Gerner's ink layers. The book's pages get interspersed with mentions to other advertisements and the magical thinking that goes with it: the fat-absorbing pill, the panegyric toothpaste, and more of the same 'never seen before'. The source material here are ads and leaflets, the industry's lowest leftovers that clog mailboxes. But for Gerner, what matters most is to observe the *formation* of these recurring images, which he cuts, disassembles and deconstructs, creating or evidencing interferences between war comics and Sol LeWitt, young adult fiction and natural sciences, literature and pictograms, infographics, architecture, conventional comics and visual arts.

Jochen Gerner was born in Nancy in the French Lorraine region in 1970. His father is an art teacher and his mother is a lexicographer: so from an early age on, Gerner got stuck between words and images. Gerner specifically works with the relationships between images and words: he is an illustrator, a cartoonist, a comic book author, a visual artist and a teacher. Another important procedure within his work is the work of **quotation**: Gerner lists words and images to observe what their juxtaposition *tells us*. This is not a careless procedure: the selection of quotations follows criteria that seek to bring together elements of age-old wisdom, popular imagination, or the 'classics' of the cultural industry – from comic books to other images, or even the high hierarchy of authors and authorities. Mainly working with pre-existing material, Gerner looks for well-known book forms and characters that will serve as the basis for his publication and exhibition projects: 'My work does not claim itself to arise *ex nihilo*,' said Gerner in an interview with Adrien Bugari and Olivier Sécardin in 2010. It is exactly the *relationship* between readymade signs, whether they are visual or verbal, that interest him. In his works designed for exhibition, he 'nourishes' himself with all kind of new images, accumulating disparate material and organizing its subsequent redistribution. In the act of covering, as described above, a certain accumulation of elements occurs, while Gerner's massive 'inking' is followed by a new positioning. In *Panorama du Froid* (L'Association, 2013) for

example, postcards are covered with ink and reorganized *as if* they formed a comic book narrative, and so provoke our reading of it *as if* it was a comic.

Further on, Gerner also selects very specific constituents, causing all the pages to suffer intervention or even to undergo the 'sacrilege' of images that are sacralized in our collective imagination. In 2016, Gerner became laureate of the *Drawing Now* art fair of Paris. In an interview with Brett Littman, Gerner explains how he began using the '**caviardage**' procedure, a practice used by censorship to erase records in official documents with black ink, which he experimented with on Hergé's *Tintin en Amérique* (1949) to produce his *TNT en Amérique* (L'Ampoule, 2002). Such 'sacrilege' could possibly offend readers, especially those who sold him the rare copies of Hergé's comic book. Gerner preferred to use those early (but expensive since looked for) copies since the most recent editions are printed on paper that doesn't absorb ink well enough... It is because of the *clash* between the first material (the Tintin book) and the act of intervening with ink on paper that one gets a *dialectical* reading of the signs involved. The result of this 'caviardage' procedure is a 'third form' in between comics and visual arts – which may be one of the foundational elements of what we will refer to as *post-comics*. In addition to the highlighting of violent elements that appear as repressed in the works of Tintin's author, Gerner points out how *clarity* becomes an element of propagation of a perverse ideology that *sheds light* to better hide the taboo. By contrasting the black of censorship with the apparent transparency of the *ligne claire*, Gerner highlights the Freudian slips of this enunciations so anchored in colonialist values. Gerner's quotations have the same value as quotation marks have for Roland Barthes (1994): they are graphic signs that can help to alter a fixed term, to announce its abrasion within speech, or even '[to keep] the frozen word from returning to a state of nature', evidencing the weirdness of stereotypical expressions or images that have been repeated so often that they became 'natural'. In short, Gerner *denaturizes* Hergé's commonplaces.

Chance plays an important role in Gerner's work, as with the randomly collected quotations of *Contre la bande dessinée* (L'Association, 2008), or in the works based on doodles and automatic drawings he made while being on the phone (*En ligne(s)*, *Branchages*, *Atelier*) or on his way (*Grande Vitesse*). Nonetheless, **chance** is being ruled over here, starting with criteria that will require constant calculation and vigilance. Gerner also calls himself an 'oulipian illustrator': as a member of OuBaPo or *Ouvroir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle*, he generally and explicitly takes *constraints* as a guide for his artistic process. One of these constraints seem to be his search for an 'original' as ground material. In both his work as a visual artist and as a comic book author, his quest for an original copy is imposed on ordinary materials such as American comic books, IKEA catalogs, comic strip albums or young adult literature. These kinds of publication are representative of the 'age of mechanical reproducibility' (Walter Benjamin) and Gerner's uses treats them as palimpsests. In the works on paper of larger size, the viewer can even notice the

specter of the material covered, which appears under the ink. This very aspect is barely reproducible in the printed book form, except by explicit mentioning of the source material. Still each work by Gerner is clearly haunted by another that preceded it, the 'specter of the sign', reminding us that no text exists outside its affiliation.

'Rereadings' or a post-comics oeuvre

I analyzed *Contre la bande dessinée* in my PhD thesis, which addressed the specific metalanguage of the book. In this publication, and like some of his contemporaries, Gerner splendidly demonstrates how comic books are not necessarily objects of mass culture: within comics self-reference can occur with aesthetic goals rather beyond the narrative, which is generally considered to be the 'essence' of the medium. Both 'post-punk' comic book authors and the hereafter mentioned as 'post-comics', present, the way I see it, *high aesthetic content* as opposed to the more conventional contents of fast consumption or day-to-day entertainment of traditional comic books, usually more concerned with the *communicative* axis of the page. Since the late eighties, post-punk affected the comics world, as remnants of the former zine and counterculture aesthetics, who were already avoiding the predetermined shapes of the Franco-Belgian comic book market. I bring up this notion of post-punk to put post-comics in comparison with **post-rock**, in which elements of various musical currents – including punk – compose a soundscape, where instruments are *facilitators* of timbre and textures. Although post-comics have some readability, it is the dissonances between the intertwined signs, and not the narrative (the melodic line of the comic), that are emphasized in such works. Just as in comic books beyond comic books, it is the instrumental, the *tools* of the comic book device that matter most to these artists, more than the narrative. These would be comics thought of as a concept, in the Duchampian sense of the word. But maybe some post-comics are better to be compared with dodecaphonic music, well known for the implosion of scale and classical notation.

Post-punk, in comic books, implies taking over the means of production, in which the *do it yourself* attitude of 'true punk' has been exported to micro-publishers who left control of the book in the hands of the author, and still oppose 'the system'. While being more present, major publishers tend to make authorship *invisible* for the sake of the character or its dolls and other transmedia objects: besides some 'fetish' authors, it is still the large-scale production, the accumulation of titles and the serialization surrounding characters that marks the mainstream. In post-punk, however, there is no complete escape from the punk. The post speaks of progression in time, not necessarily of a *dialectical* overcoming of the historical divide: it in fact presupposes a continuity with the counterculture without necessarily imagining a possible

rupture with it. I believe that post-comics - as we can notice for the authors here concerned - refer to a **transcendence** or **metamorphosis** of the format and the machinery of comics manufacturing. Like post-rock, post-comics is 'post' in the sense of an aesthetic that starts from the same *a priori*, in this case the same material content. Post-punk comics therefore represent an 'after' in time, while post-comics cohabit the comic book, but in *another* space, in another territory, which I will imagine as this *mezzo del cammin*, a form in the middle.

Gerner, for instance, conducts studies on the form of the comic book by using the device itself (*Contre la bande dessinée, TNT en Amérique*) and constantly makes allusions to it in his works of art. It's not the same movement as when artists like Roy Lichtenstein, Bertrand Lavier, or Rivane Neuenschwander deliver high art reappropriation of comics, making a nod or paying tribute to the comic book industry. As Gerner comments on the title of his book, *Contre la bande dessinée*, the preposition '*contre*' can either mean 'against', as in 'opposite' and 'contrary to', or the imperative 'below' as in the adverbial phrase '*tout contre*', in which the eclipsed '*tout*' turns the term into 'together', 'close to'. 'I clutch tightly at the comic book, almost in its womb.' Or otherwise: 'it means a kind of opposition at the same time it means "tightly together". It's being at the heart of comic books, and trying to understand how they work.' And even more, 'it is like whale hunting: the comic book (*bande dessinée*) is pierced by harpoons, harpoons of love and hate, and I create the typology of these harpoons [...]. So it means "what goes against it", but also "very close together", being lodged in its womb to better hear it.' Incidentally, when interviewing him, I asked Gerner if his *Contre la bande dessinée* wasn't in fact an 'upcoming' form of comics, since in this graphical 'tract' the citation and the study of comic books are built on pages that simulate a virtually **ideogrammatic writing**, where the alphabetic text is supplemented by pictograms, occupying the page in a justified fashion. He laughed and answered that the fact of juxtaposing those sentences helped him to make the hypertexts, links to other things, 'to show the invisible line that could unite them... and I loved the idea of starting with an universe completely different of comics, a kind of provocation, too.'

Gerner is 'bilingual' in comic books and in visual arts, and as he demonstrates in his 'Relectures' (*Arts* magazine, 2012), he is able to converge the two idioms into a new language. In the aforementioned interview with Littman, Gerner even talks of a 'synthetic writing', based on a sort of 'alphabet' made of the repetitive pictograms that arise from his covering of old maps and didactic posters. Gerner's is a project of perceiving a *certain* **intertextuality** – or rather, intericonicity – between objects of different orders: it is never purely subjective nor merely objective or analytical. There is a cataloging of elements on the pages of books and albums selected according to their historical relevance. Gerner seems to subtract them from different cultural sedimentation layers, hence maybe the recurrence of landscapes and other images of geological formations within the source material. The cataloged elements are mostly visual, like

in panoramas, and include almost imperceptible points or positions of characters. The reunion of the 'intersections' presented in a page evoke a comic book, in the 'gaufrier' model of early modern *images d'Épinal*: a panel structure of identical and evenly or 'correctly' distributed dimensions, producing panels of equal size. The framing serves Gerner as a visual metaphor for the quotation of his technical method of spelling out the reference.

The 'Relectures' series has been exhibited at the Erarta Museum of Contemporary Art in St. Petersburg, namely in the 'After the comics' exhibition (2014), held with Russian authors mainly.¹ Many of them came from the fine arts, and had created artistic homages to comic books in some way, especially revolving around characters. Apart from a video installation, in which some panels were moving, most works appeared as large canvasses fixed on the walls. The work of Gerner, the only non-Russian in the place, also stood out because of the absence of color and the simplified layout. As Elizaveta Shagina, curator of the exhibition wrote, 'Jochen draws in black ink over printed sheets and keeps only some vague colorful spots. But his abstraction doesn't negate the narrative essence of this genre.' Now, in the exhibited series for instance, or in most of Gerner's works, it is the **essay** rather than the narrative that is in evidence. (The 'essence' of the comic book wouldn't be purely narrative if we think of abstracts, for example, but that's a different story.) In rereading Jean Graton's *Le Grand défi* (1959), Gerner 'sees' intertexts of Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, Gérard Richter, subsequent to Graton's comic book, but also paintings by Claude Monet and John Constable, which preceded Graton more than half of a century. In this specific *relecture*, Gerner found that some of the references he noted were chronologically approximate and may in fact be real or a symptom of the zeitgeist.

Comic books & fine arts: afloat between two shores

The catalyst sentence in *Contre la bande dessinée* stems from Milan Kundera's book *L'Art du roman* (1986):

▲ If we move away from the issue of value by satisfying ourselves with a (thematic, sociological, formalist) description of a work (of a certain historical period, of a culture, etc.), if we place a sign of equality between all cultures and all cultural activities (Bach and rock, comic books and Proust), if art criticism (meditation on its value) no longer finds a place to express itself, the 'historical evolution of art' will have its meaning obscured, collapsed, and will become the vast and absurd deposit of works.

Kundera's statement involves an opposition between great authors (Bach and Proust) and manners of expression: isn't rock a musical genre and *bande dessinée* a kind of reading? The

¹ <https://www.erarta.com/en/calendar/exhibitions/detail/4de10515-7f5f-11e3-a668-8920284aa333/>

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Czech author articulates his reasoning using the names 'Bach' and 'Proust' as part of an equal category, a beacon of quality, against two generic words, 'rock' and 'comic books'. Through this semantic choice, Kundera allows the names of the authors to overshadow the common names, two fatherless, unowned words. Kundera's phrase, which expresses a more widespread concern about culture, is sided by Gerner's drawing of three closed 'boxes'. These **containers** refer to the context of the 'huge and absurd' deposit mentioned by the Czech writer. The boxes differ from each other: 'rock' is stored in a box with holes, like a wild, undomesticated beast or an endangered singing bird - depending on how one interprets the size of the box. (One might also see a home made radio in it, still obscuring its auditive content.) Bach and Proust are best kept in a vault, as the unvaluable, timeless cultural goods their names represent. The comic book, as a radioactive or infectious object, can only be examined with gloves on, as it is contained in a box for biochemical protection. In all three cases, and as Gerner graphically ironizes, 'different' spheres of cultural production are being 'objectified' and neatly kept in 'suitable' storing boxes. Signifiers (S1) are referring to other obscured or presupposed signifiers (S2), i.e. 'Bach' and 'Proust' for 'high culture', 'rock' and 'bd' for 'low culture'. Boxes are everywhere in this book, in many ambiguous ways. The main line is the aim of putting everything inside boxes – a matter of cataloguing, and dividing, as expected by Kundera. At the same time, the boxes cover many pages – remembering us of the 'canonical dispositive' of comics.

Contre la bande dessinée is part of the L'Association's *Éprouvette*, a collection of comics essays, which also contained a 3 volumes magazine. In the second issue of the magazine, French-Canadian Julie Doucet was interviewed about her artistic career, in a session called 'progressive erosion of borders'. Titling the interview '*Peut-on en sortir?*' ('Can we get out of it?'), publisher Jean-Christophe Menu asked her if it was possible to escape from comic books. Doucet was fed up with it, like so many others in this field, tired, mainly, of the many forms of **repetition** inherent to this profession: endless reiterations of form, of characters, of a medium that seems to feed only on itself. In *Désœuvré* (L'Association, 2005), a comic book in the same collection, Lewis Trondheim deals with a writer's block, and feeling 'aimless', he starts interviewing his colleagues about their professional fatigue. Doucet's 'tiredness' and Trondheim's 'blank' translated, amongst others, this feeling of entrapment within the ghetto of the comics scene in general. This rising nausea not only struck comic makers on the Old Continent. For example, Brazilian artist Lourenço Mutarelli stated in a television interview in the middle of 2010 that 'the comic book feeds on itself.' He was visibly annoyed by this all too self-conscious medium: Mutarelli was yet another author who had dropped comics for literature and fine arts, even denying that his last comic book was... a comic book. Doucet eventually returned to illustrating and making fanzines, but she kept her promise and never made 'comics' again. Like Doucet and Mutarelli, many authors who transited and have been transiting between

the various fields of the visual arts invariably comment on how comics and their authors have little dialogue with the other arts. Throughout his journey between fine arts and comics, Gerner also evoked this borderline position, a 'neither-nor' (neither one thing nor the other): an undecidability. And he recalls that the fine arts also cross little to 'the other side'.

On many occasions, Gerner comments on the mismatches between comics and fine arts, and wonders about the **reclusion** of the comic book itself that doesn't develop its own object towards other languages: 'I don't understand the closed groups. I don't understand the comic book when it spins in circles in its own cell and when it bites its own tail like a Moebius tape does.' (Gerner refers to the mathematician, not the comics artist...). He implies that the strategy of *artpress*, an art magazine that published a 'comics special' in 2005 (nr. 26), inviting comic book experts, was even more restricted to the typical audiences of comics magazine like *9e Art*. Instead of bringing the amateurs of contemporary art closer to the authors covered, *artpress* made these artists even more suspicious by grouping them in a special issue uninspiredly entitled '*bande d'auteurs*' ('gang of authors'). In addition to the anaphora repeating the phrases 'I don't understand,' and 'I like', Gerner's pamphlet is permeated with footnotes, eighteen in total, on just one and a half pages. Below the notes, an illustration by Gerner simulates a battleship game, several scattered 'submarines' and the inscription 'FLOTTE', which literally means 'floats' and 'fleet', meaning in the game that one is defeated. In an attempt to make comic books 'understood' by lovers of contemporary art, they would fail to use 'crossovers' between the two fields, as if communication were encrypted on both sides.

I would like *artpress* to get lost – alone and unaccompanied – in this terrain of image experimentation and narrative, the comic book.

I would like *9e Art* to open its windows and shutters – 'more air, more air!' – and get lost in this atmosphere of experimentation of visual and concept, contemporary art.

But floating is also drifting, being adrift between two artistic shores: a derivation or deflecting of a particular object by adding or removing elements to make it new (and yours). The sign becomes mobile, afloat. The word 'flotte' also presents itself as an *undecidable*: is it Gerner, you or I that 'floats'? At the same time, Gerner shows us his game, his bets, he illustrates his battle. In the image, only vertical and horizontal lines are articulated, forming the marks of the 'positioning' of the fleet, his game exposed to us. Would it be an invitation to play or to cheat to know the subject's field topology? It is on this **intersection** that Gerner situates his works, such as this supposed battle between those on 'the art side' and those on 'the comics side'.

The two planes then become interdependent and interpenetrate for a transparency effect. Two graphic enunciators that no longer fight in

the same space, but from their encounter an energy that structures a new image will be born, a tension that belongs to none but their friction. (Andrieu de Levis, 2019:233)

So, the reading that Gerner proposes of his 'specters' is in itself a study of their support, which is mostly the comic book form. Gerner is an archaeologist of forms, styles, and materials, applying his deconstructive method or a more subtle *détournement*. When he disassembles or darkens found material, he questions the role of women in an illustrated children's book as *Martine*, or the representation of war in many comic books. He doesn't do so by writing a critical text, but by performing an artistic **exercice**, provoking strangeness all along. Gerner consequently points out the ideological and affective layers of what is 'shown': the painted layers underline what we often forget to look at.

Do they need to step out?

As part of Pulp Festival (Noisiel, France, 2014), organized by French-German television channel Arte, the artist and comic book author Philippe Dupuy called on colleagues to create comic book installations at the exhibition *Ceci n'est pas une bande dessinée*.² Each one of the exhibited works occupied the niche or 'box' of a stable in an old farm. Gerner's book was shown on a pulpit in the first 'box'. As each box showed a piece of 'non-comic work', the visitor walked along the boxes like in a big comic strip... Illuminated by a small lamp, *Contre la bande dessinée* filled the center of its own 'panel', a darkroom: the book asked to be browsed by those who passed by. The empty room was also inhabited by the voice of journalist Antoine Guillot. His clear voice had the **didactic** intonation of a teacher. This voice could be heard all along the exhibition, covering the other 'panels'. Undisturbed by another voice further on the corridor (the author and artist Fanny Michaëlis singing the theme song of *Les Trois Fils*), Guillot kept 'teaching us' something, taking over the exhibition from the beginning to the end, reciting what this 'comic book' would be. *Ceci n'est pas une bande dessinée*: it wasn't simply comics any longer. However, the comic book form kept haunting all of the participating authors. Would it be possible to escape (the voice, the current speech, the niches)? *Peut-on en sortir?*

Gerner's art points to comic books in a tender gesture, showing us a way to read comic books and, from comics on, he tells us how to look at visual arts in general. He doesn't do so in a didactic fashion or with a teacher's voice: he invites us to play and desacralize comics by inking them again, reframing, reinterpreting them. Gerner offers a *sentimental* education. I believe that his work helps us reorganizing images of 'high' and 'low' art, composing a historiography of art

² <https://www.lafermedubuisson.com/programme/archives-programme-2013-2014/ceci-nest-pas-une-bande-dessinee>

that is made by **ruptures**. In the overlap resides a '*savoir-montage*', a so-called 'conjunction, a collision of heterogeneous temporalities' that Didi-Huberman speaks off when commenting on Aby Warburg's working method. In Gerner's case, and that of others, this might result in a third form called 'post-comics'. From a commonplace idea of what comics are – a banal language, simplistic and even *ugly* drawings, an impoverished vocabulary – Gerner elaborates a graphic device that contradicts what it exposes. There is an abundance of reiterations and intertexts; the apparent simplicity of his drawing style becomes a feature for blurring the boundaries between the image of the figure and the image of the text. The images Gerner articulates function like Warburg's project or Brecht's political montage, as Didi-Huberman points out:

Like poetry – or as poetry – the montage shows us that 'things are perhaps not what they are [and] that it is up to us to see otherwise,' according to the new disposition that the *critical image*, obtained in this montage, has proposed to us. (Didi-Huberman, 2009:77)

The montage Didi-Huberman writes about would be this heuristic procedure of redispersing – images, narratives, elements of work – to create a new contemplation, starting from this new disposition. Isn't much of the artistic thought throughout the twentieth century linked to **redispotion** and to the understanding of history as a constellation? Is escaping a status quo (the current order, the order of speech) not often a goal? Perhaps, in this intertwining between fine arts and comics, a new field is opening for the latter, a rejuvenation is given to the former. Post-comics place us in between two spaces, where each object acts as a middleman. Like Brecht, like Debord, montage and *détournement* act as elements of a political education. Gerner's didactics remind us that the image participates in a system whose excessive (re)production of images always attempts to naturalize ideas and consumer habits. In a certain way, post-comics confront us with a *hauntology* of comics, 'a thinking of Being', of the 'to be' of comics themselves, comprehending them, 'but incomprehensibly' (Derrida, 1994). Specifically in Gerner's work, ghosts are invoked to reveal hidden signs, to show themselves. By questioning the function and form of comics, by reorganizing the discursive figures elaborated in such a medium, this also allows us to reflect on what art does in its different contexts, without erasing the hauntings that populate our collective imaginations.



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