Cheerful austerity

The story-images of Tom Lambeens

Aarnoud Rommens

Books are such weird things now. They seem so out of place in this age with its smooth, gleaming electronic screens that give you access to so much more information than any codex ever could. And yet they persist. And comic books are even worse! They just don't fit on those screens; reading them on a tablet is hopeless. But is it the format of the tablet screen, or that of the comics page that is all wrong? This is precisely where post-comics come in. Post-comics don't 'fit in' and are fully aware of their medial 'maladjustment' - none more so than the comics by Tom Lambeens. His work is punk. Paradoxically, *Arme Indiaan* (Poor Indian, 2008), *Front/Back* (2009), and *De Aanval* (The Attack, 2012) force us to unlearn some of the conventions of alphanumerical reading through a radical experimentation with print media, while implicitly reminding us that the seeming fluidity of the digital is grounded in matter (silicon, glass, etc.). It's as if Tom Lambeens cannot help but point out that our screens are never as transparent as we'd like: those pesky fingerprints, smudges of skin oil, and dirt are all part of our embodied engagement with cultural artefacts.

The felicitous ruin

The horror! The horror! Imagine finding one of your favourite books damaged by water! This would be a perfectly reasonable reaction, though perhaps a tad rehearsed and unoriginal - rather overcoded: there's not even any profanity... Discovering this unholy mixture of moisture and paper may lead us to the following conclusion: *The book is ruined!* But maybe this catastrophe is not as meaningless as it might seem? Take my copy of Tom Lambeens's *De Aanval* (The Attack, 2012), for instance (fig. 1). The stains of the rusted staples, that uninvited, ugly, disgusting faecal-brownish hue: it is the ruination of the carefully orchestrated interplay of blue and white, the meticulously crafted rhythms of horizontals and verticals. And yet, I cannot take my eyes off it. It speaks to me. Look how frail that paper is. Will those tiny pieces of steel keep the pages together? Will oxidation eventually wear the staples down, releasing the pages from the strictures of the book? The brown specks force a teachable moment: **materiality** shows itself, imposes itself, impacts our reading, confounds us. Corrosion spills over and has its own colour code, utterly indifferent to authorial intention, to design. Materiality matters and does so with a *vengeance* in the work of Tom Lambeens, and these blots reinforce this lesson. Rust stains: mementoes of matter, reminders of the workings of time. *Memento mori*?

The joyful diagram

In the following two paragraphs I present two terms, 'schema' and 'diagram', as contrary yet complementary principles. They are not intended as binary opposites, but as analytical tools to help thematize the tension field played out in Tom Lambeens's work.

The schema can be understood as a *visual* operation to render complexity intelligible through a representation that dispenses with 'excess' in order to model what is essential. From an art historical perspective, the **schema** can function as a means to trace formal continuities and modulations across centuries, where stylistic changes are seen as modifications within the bounds of the overall framework (the schema). Seen as a schematizing operation, hegemonic art history outlines a continuum where difference is a function of sameness. Artists give sensory expression to new realities, but these material, sensory impulses painted on canvas (or any other medium) merely register variations in schematic thought. From this vantage point, schemas are explanatory and merely re-describe what is already there. What is specific to the schema is that it presents itself as transparent, self-evident, non-material. Its visuality, its material aspect as drawing (*poesis*) is never at issue but serves to 'illustrate' a metanarrative. Such visuals are not catalysts for experimentation, but figures of orthodoxy. At least, this is how they are intended to be read.

In counterpoint, the **diagram** can be seen as the material, sensible agent of disruption latent within representational schemas (cf. Deleuze 1981). While the schema resides on the level of code and convention, the diagram names the a-signifying zone that unhinges pictorial cohesion to the point of *unrecognizability*. It maps a sensation that goes beyond existing codes, and intimates a new world, an alternate coding of reality, where new concepts will arise to give voice to these disruptions of sensible business as usual. Diagrams do not represent but are intensive, operative forces that undo representational regimes. The diagram makes an enigma palpable, engendering a sensation that demands thought but which cannot (yet) be put into words. It is the zone where utopian thought can take root, where revolutions are prefigured. It's the joy (and terror) of chance puncturing the everyday, the surrealism of a rusted staple.

Codebreaking is world-making

For all three works discussed here, namely *Arme Indiaan* (Poor Indian, 2008; henceforth AI), *Front/Back* (2009; henceforth FB), and *De Aanval* (The Attack, 2012; henceforth DA), Tom Lambeens creates compositional schemas. These schemas always run through a diagrammatic loop, making us move from

code to sensation and back again. The schema is a self-disruptive machine, making the smoothness of its appearance falter, stuttering as it does with diagrammatic **eloquence**. Chaos always breaks through, restoring the work of art as sensory zone to be experienced (un-coding), while it is being read (decoded). This movement is replicated in the comic books themselves: they instantiate the underlying compositional structure, while at the same time the code is made to flounder under the influence of the diagram.

For instance, the compositional image (fig. 2) of AI informs the pictorial logic of the comic (fig. 3). The image attests to the reduction usually associated with classical schemas: the matrix of AI bespeaks an *austerity* of visual means, with a basic figure reduplicating itself according to strict geometric mirroring rules. It is as if the image is a further **purification** (schematisation) of Descartes' diagrams of ocular refraction, and the ensuing tradition of optical schemata that visualise the workings of the human eye. In any case, the compositional image remains largely illegible to the reader, as it maps the work's productive constraints, and not its narrative deciphering: the schema does not work as a reading manual. And yet, there's one little detail in the compositional schema that catches the eye, and which turns out to have narrative potential, thereby overturning the structural coherence of the schema. Is that a cartoony little brown hatchet at the bottom in the middle? This tiny intrusion threatens to engulf the pictorial legislation set forth in the schema: the diminutive tomahawk, as Deleuzian diagram, breaks open the schema, ruptures the code. The figural intrudes upon the abstract integrity of the composition; the mirror cracks, and with it the laws of optical refraction that seem to inform the logic of the schema. *Ruined, again!*

The pathos between schema and diagram is transferred onto the comic, while retaining the poverty of visual means. However, through the sheer repetition of three basic forms, the interplay of black and white and observance of the compositional rules, **minimalism** snowballs into complexity, into a spectacle of 'special effects'. As maximalist formal drama, it is easy to overlook the basic referential aspect of AI, in which the forms relay the rhythms of a street with passing vehicles, stopping and starting at a zebra crossing with pedestrians walking or waiting, a scene of everyday city life. The comic can indeed be read as an abstract comic as well as a figurative one: like the duck-rabbit, both readings are equally valid. AI shimmers between abstraction and figuration, in a kind of anamorphic oscillation between perspectives, referring back to the ocular register of its compositional schema.

Because of his previous transgression in the compositional schema, the narrative exacts its revenge by having the Indian die a pedestrian death in the final panel. He ends up a hyper-cartoony blob, complete with bow and arrow, the archetypical Indian of comics of bygone eras, an anomaly within geometric rigour. He is a **codebreaker**, in a double sense: as schema, he is the exception to the code unaware of his exceptionality, unable to understand (decode) his own importance, simply undergoing his fate. As diagram, he has solved all codes, speaks all tongues, but is utterly indifferent, walking right into

the accident just to wreak semiotic havoc. Until the very end, the Indian remains steadfast – perhaps heroic? – in his imperviousness to codes, to become the butt of the joke (he does not understand traffic codes! Lol!) as well as the trickster figure, cunningly playing with our reading habits only to make us realise that the joke has been on us all along.

Printing is caring

The comics by Tom Lambeens are all made in anticipation of their printed form. This preparation involves endless **experimentation**, a process of intensive labour that remains largely unnoticed to the reader. The delicate pencil drawings and grains of coloured-in greys of AI are imprinted on the fragile texture of greyish newspaper, with its characteristic smell and feel. Materiality here underscores meaning: the tragicomic death of our eponymous codebreaking hero is hidden somewhere at the end of the daily news, buried somewhere in a tiny column, a *fait divers* not worthy of the front page, just like that poor sod of Greek mythology in Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560). Life goes on. The pages of the newspaper will turn yellow and fade over time, creases and wrinkles will form, the event relegated to forgetfulness.

Front/Back (2009) also evinces an unparalleled care for its existence as printed matter (fig. 5). Printed in A5 format, the white cover has the word 'FRONT' embossed at the top, while the black back cover has the word 'BACK' on the bottom of the page. The spine shows three coloured bands, announcing the protagonists of the work: yellow, red and blue, respectively. This sequence mirrors the progression of the book, in which three separate chapters explore the distinctive chromatic qualities of each colour through squares of different sizes, the latter again following a compositional schema. What is significant from a medium specific perspective is the use of paper, which was also part of a deliberate strategy in AI: each section of FB uses a different type of paper in order to further experiment with the differences between each colour. The **tactile** is central to the experience of comics and is explored to the full in FB, with touch and sight entering in an intimate dance throughout the book. Paper is not an inert substrate, but an active agent in the experience of reading and making meaning. It is a 'multi-media' in that it 'gets hold of us bodily, and through every sense' (Derrida 2005, 42). In FB, the yellow and red chapters use lighter paper than the blue chapter, allowing for the squares on the previous page to 'push through' and become visible on the current page. In addition, an 'aura' is created around the squares through an idiosyncratic printing technique: 'phantom' images arise from pressing the pages together on the facing pages while the ink was still drying, adding a subtle 'complimentary mist to the monochrome' squares (Lambeens 2013, 89; my translation). Both experiments with printing techniques endow FB with

a dynamic of rhythm and counter-rhythm, of negative and positive space, intensifying and adding further complexity to the rhythmic counterbalancing already activated through the chromatic play.

Printed in miniature format on thin white paper stapled together, the 14-page booklet *De Aanval* (2012) seems the most fragile of the three comics. The staples, choice of drawing tool and size evoke the tradition of the zine, of counterculture, of struggle, of resistance to dominant codes and narratives. Its pages register the movements of blue alcohol marker with fine point, where the white surface – traversed with ink on both recto and verso – is inhabited by the forms of the pages to come, as well those that precede, in a kind of otherworldly future perfect. Similar to FB, the distinction between past, present and future is put under erasure by simply allowing the paper fibres to fully absorb the weight of the blue, creating a subtle 'shadow play' of solids, lines, shades and afterimages where blue and white contend with each other. This temporal **compression** is familiar to readers of comics, since 'to read comics is necessarily to see past, present, and future at once, and to experience time not (only) as serial but also as simultaneous' (Gardner 2015, 22). Ghosts of the past, present, and future, indeed. This is visual free verse: fully cognisant of tradition, it reflects a stance determined to experiment on its own terms in order to find an equilibrium that looks back while moving forward, like an *Angelus Novus*. Utopia emerges from a ruinous present, like a rocket blasting off in a line of flight, so we can finally explore zero gravity, and find out 'what the body can do', leaving behind temporal and spatial horizons to create an anchoring point of our own.

Procedures for chance

Looking at the compositional schema of FB (fig. 4), we may well wonder what it is we are supposed to see. Indeed, the image is hermetic and needs discursive prompts to allow for glimpses of meaning. What is the code here? After consulting the artist, we may learn that every point of intersection serves as a corner for a square in FB, and that all these intersecting lines determine the dimensions and positioning of the squares in the work relative to each other. It is a **pictorial network** that gives graphic expression to the relations between the multitude of squares that populate the book. But how is this useful to us, unsuspecting readers? No use at all. This is simply because the schema is not analytical or an aid to understanding: it is but one element in a procedural chain informing the work as a whole. What distinguishes art from other types of making is that art operates with schemas that are **immanent** to the work, and that such schemata are the condition of possibility of chance to unfold, rather than structures that try and exorcize it. Art works with 'counter-schema', in the sense one cannot reverse-engineer a work of art on the basis of its schema, sketches, preparatory drawings, scripts or other supposedly 'secondary' elements. Art operates according to a different logic, and the movement from schema to work involves

aleatory discoveries, beautiful mistakes, moments of stupidity, dreaming, thoughtlessness, drifting – in short, diagrams. What is peculiar about this compositional image is that its diagram is complicit with its code: it is so dense, so coded, that it seems to counter clarity from the start. This is not an image of a 'composition'; it seems an image of **overdetermination** – it shows too much code for its own good.

How to boogie with *Case, planche, récit*

Tom Lambeens knows how to boogie: DA is irrefutable evidence. The Ur-text in comics scholarship on page layout and its signifying potential is undoubtedly Benoît Peeters's *Case, Planche, Récit* (1991), and has found its encyclopaedic culmination in Renaud Chavanne's *Composition de la bande dessinée* (2010). These schemas are fascinating to look at (fig. 6). They instantiate those 'classical schemas' that purport to explain **variations** on the basis of an originary template, namely the 'waffle iron' structure. Intellectual energy is spent on drawing empty grids from which the complexity of the original is evacuated, and somehow these schematizations are supposed to be insightful... As the inventory of such schemas must grow as the corpus of comics studies increases, the classification of variations takes on absurd proportions, and this enterprise becomes less and less informative. It just produces visual noise. It may lead one to the conclusion that every comics page has its own schema – Borges already foretold this in 'On Exactitude in Science' (1949).

DA is a parody of this mania. Not only does this comic have a compositional schema, it has multiple layers (fig. 7). Of course, the typology of page layouts is analytic in intent, trying to survey the field of comics to identify some of its essential traits. The schematic layering by Tom Lambeens seems like a visual transposition of the absurdity of such an enterprise of classification of the visual. Taken together, these layers are a diagram suggesting that a single page can be seen as the condensation of historical templates, as an interminable **palimpsest**. A polonaise of classical schemas is stretched, enlarged, cropped, and layered one atop the other in a delightful accordion out of which the comic book DA finally emerges. The overlaying of schemas creates movement, as if the completed comic were a flip book of schemas, a collection of still images distilled from an underlying dynamism of form, while the comic is 'animated' by the reading eye flipping through the pages. The schema interlaces the pictorial and narrative coding to engender diagrams instead of compositional schemas. Structure morphs from within the surface of the page itself, no longer depending on an external compositional schema.

Post-comics are comics and... they are not?

Post-comics are the radical experimentation with the material affordances of the medium of comics to arrive at something *amorphous*. At least, this is my hypothesis from reading Tom Lambeens's work; it is simply a working definition. Indeed, Lambeens's strange 'post-comic' artefacts pose a resistance to neat classification, as signalled by the compulsion to affix the prefix 'post' (the 'post-fix') to a word – not to mention the use of single quotation marks to highlight one's own ironic 'distancing' from one's own ignorance. But this non-knowledge is highly productive, exhilarating even: post-comics names something fresh and unexpected, something not yet codified, classified, beaten to death by names. As post-comics, the work of Tom Lambeens evinces a practice that **intensifies** the medium specificity of comics to create comics that confound our preconceptions of what comics are supposed to look like. For traditional scholarly discourse, it will elicit the hysterical *But are they comics???!!!!*

Lambeens's comics break codes by following them through to the point these codes start to dissolve. If comics are historical schemas, then post-comics are their diagrammatic **loosening**. Historical forms, materials and schemas associated with comics are taken up, pulled apart, and put together again to make something unexpected, weird, eccentric, hermetic. However, this intensification of materials, tools and practices is also marked by **subtraction**: Lambeens makes strategic choices from the arsenal of means of comics-making to arrive at this questioning of inherited cultural forms to create comics adequate to our times. In doing so, an expanded field emerges where comics, artists' books, graphic design, colour theory treatises, architectural drawings ('paper architecture'), conceptual art and so on become indiscernible: genres and media shift, fold into one another and engender new forcefields. Post-comics are an antidote to our so-called 'post-medium condition' (Krauss 2000), which sounds like a very serious affliction indeed. If all contemporary art is to be understood as a dematerialised communicative structure conveying the loss of medium specificity, post-comics exposes this tautological loop as vacuous. The dirty rust stains put our feet back on the ground: matter is where thinking takes off. Rather than effecting a dematerialisation through information patterning, the emergence of digital culture is disclosing unforeseen possibilities of analogue modes of making, while the persistence of print media reminds us of the sometimes-forgotten material reality of digitality. Post-comics are mutations highlighting how the digital and analogue are enmeshed in hybrid formations through a tactic of material intensification. These affordances of the materiality of comics is precisely what Tom Lambeens's weird objects explore. Not just any medium can be used to convey this poetics, this ethos of care.

Putting the aura in the algorithm

The comics by Tom Lambeens are opaque. They are figures of renunciation. It is extremely difficult to write about them – take my word for it. There's something stubbornly, disquietingly distant about them.

They possess what Walter Benjamin would have told me they can in no way possess: they have 'aura'! OMG! I have already written of the 'aura' of the phantom images in FB, those medium specific space-time anomalies that create multiple temporalities, a transversal meandering of after-images and mirages of the future. 'What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.' (Benjamin 2015:23) This 'tissue' or 'weave' makes itself felt in reading the work of Tom Lambeens, where there is an inhuman, unbridgeable gap, a fundamental inaccessibility which I breathe in by following it with the eye. The images and their sequences refuse the smooth transfer of meaning: a **counter-communicative** community of images pops up in this time of our all too social media, in the sense that major, proprietary platforms today thrive on the valorisation of the free affective labour we perform in the name of being 'social'. Lambeens's comics – and the experimental comics gathered in this volume – are cyphers of reticence, of a different type of 'sociality': an ungated community with its own algorithmic procedures of cultural (re-)production. They bring into being alternate protocols of reading, demanding readers to learn how to read once again, so that a different type of communication emerges, which we do not yet know how to name properly. 'Post' will do for now.

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Figures

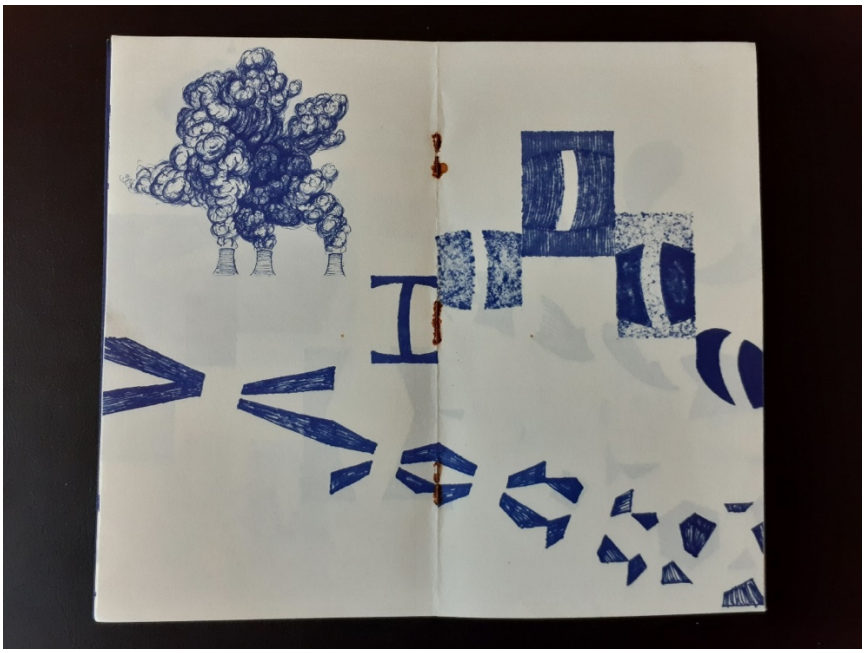


Figure 1. Tom Lambeens. *De Aanval*. Imprimitiv, 2012. pp. 7-8, with *staple rust-punctum*.

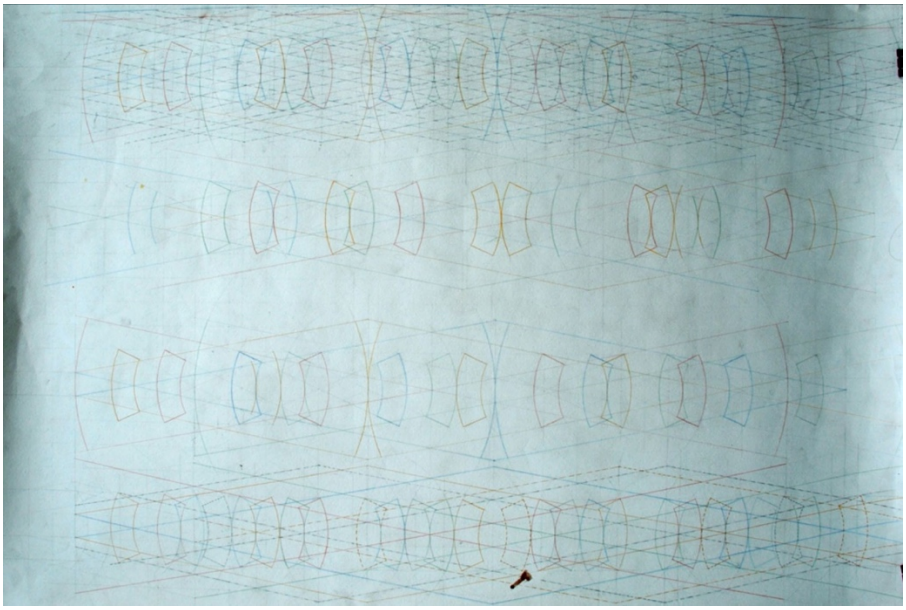


Figure 2. Tom Lambeens. *Arme Indiaan*. Compositional schema.

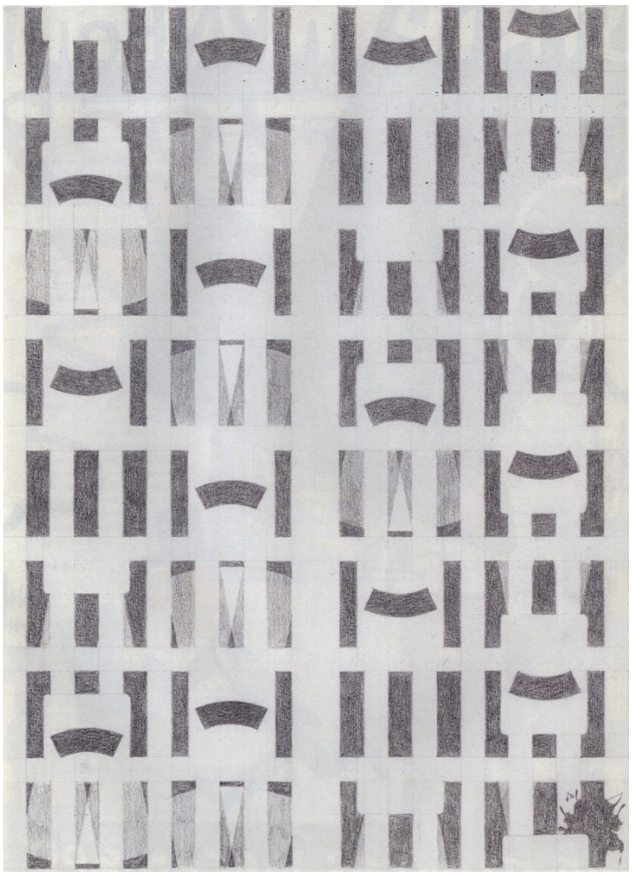


Figure 3. Tom Lambeens. *Arme Indiaan*. Imprimitiv, 2008. P. 14

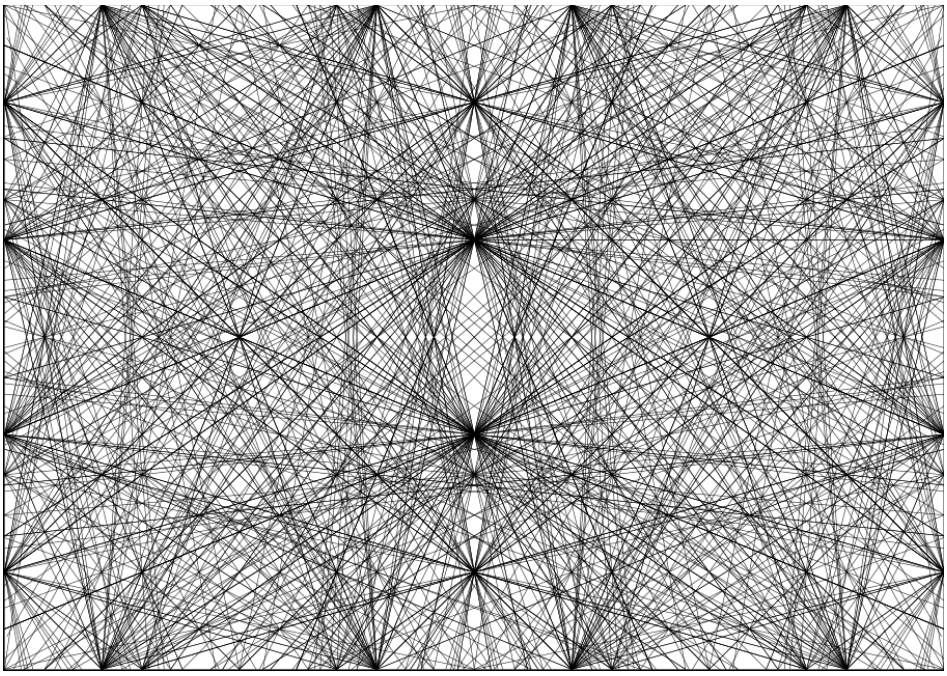


Figure 4. Tom Lambeens. *Front Back*. Compositional schema

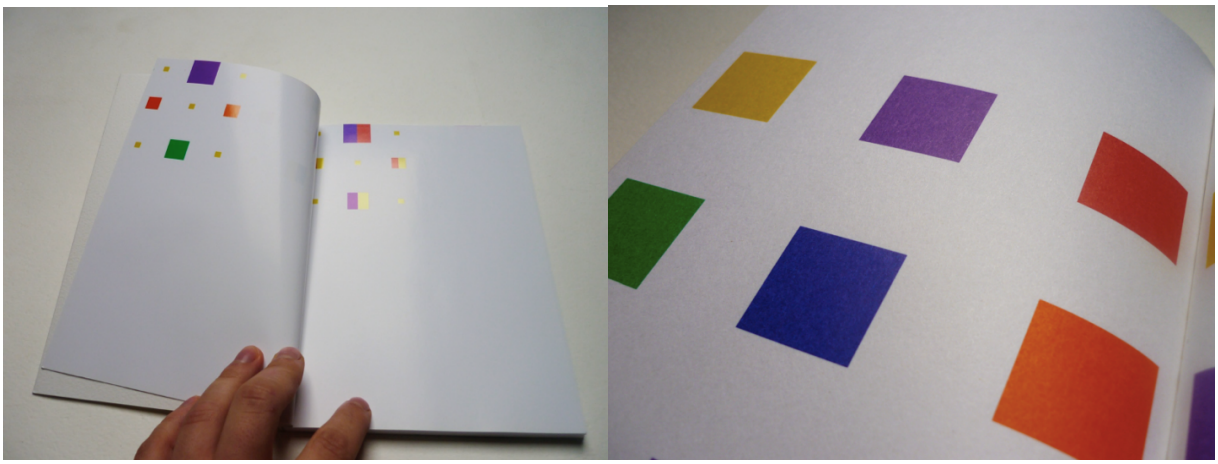
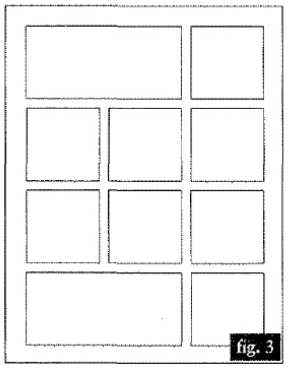


Figure 5. Tom Lambeens. *Front Back*. Imprimitiv, 2009. pp.



Une page typique
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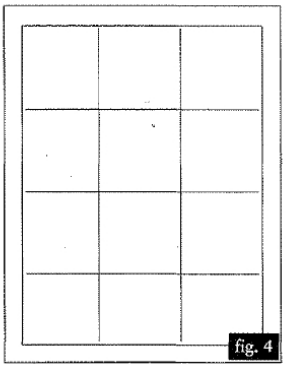

Une page typique
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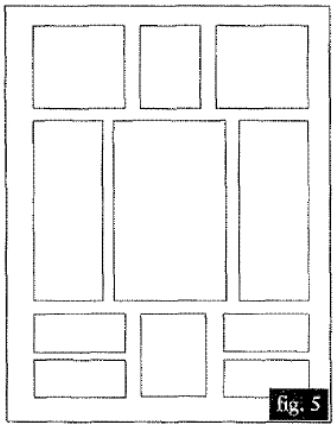

Philippe Druillet,
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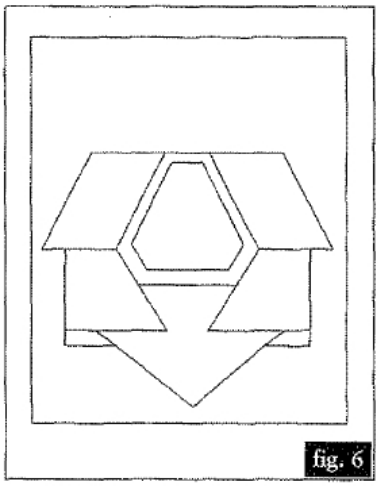

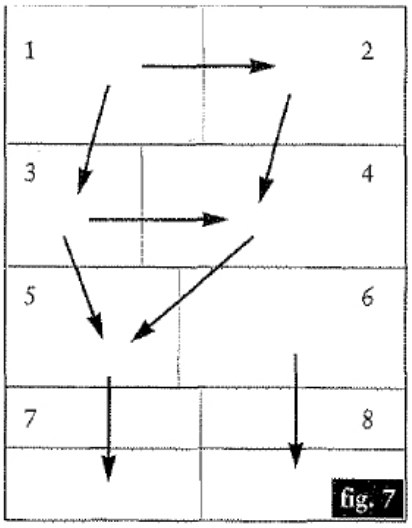

Possibilités de trajet offertes
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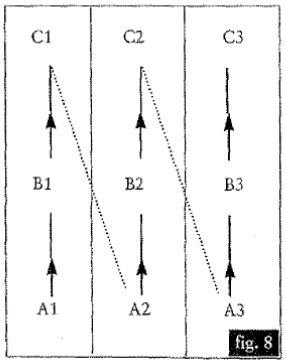
Premier parcours



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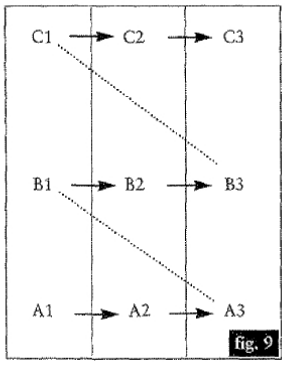

Figure 6. Benoît Peeters. *Case, Planche, Récit*, 1991. Page layout Figures/Schemas.

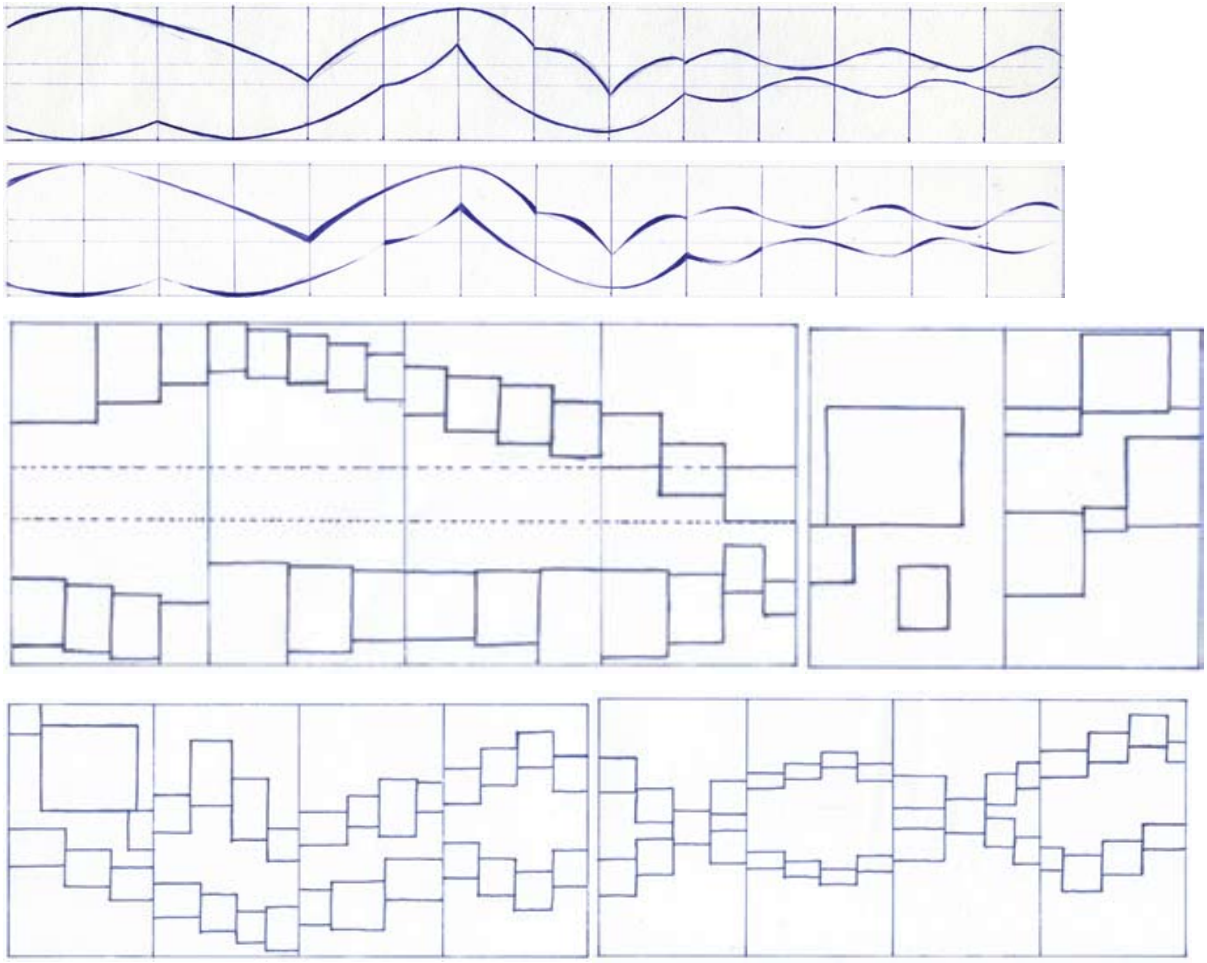

Figure 7. Tom Lambeens. *De Aanval*. Compositional schemas (layers 1, 2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, respectively)

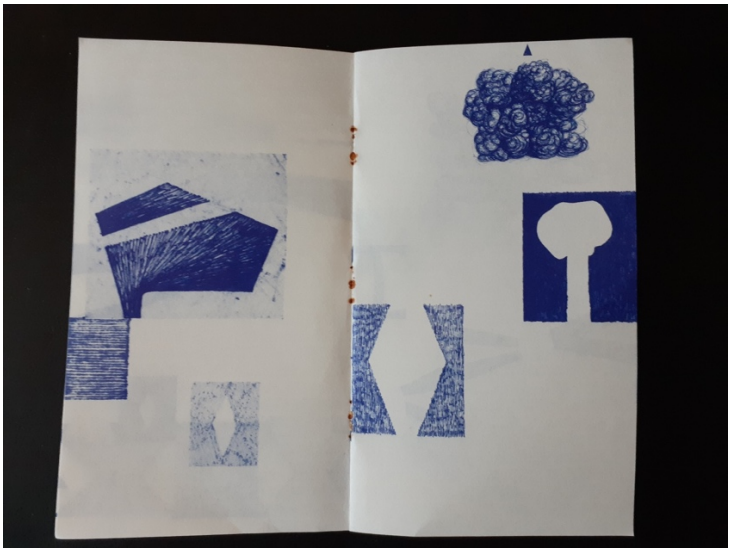

Figure 8. Tom Lambeens. *De Aanval*. Imprimitiv, 2012. pp. 5-6