

## 12 [CoCo]

### Conceptual Comics and Online Archives

*Benoît Crucifix*

As governments enforced various lockdowns to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, libraries, archives, and museums were brought to rethink, increase, enhance their digital offerings, catering to their home-stuck users. The digital delivery or lending of library material shook anew the issues of copyright and access that such institutions had been grappling with since the launch of digitization programs. In parallel, the online sharing of cultural and scientific productions through “shadow libraries” (Karaganis 2018) and “rogue archives” (De Kosnik 2016) took on a renewed relevance and visibility—just a few years after a lawsuit filed by the academic publishing company Elsevier against LibraryGenesis and Science Hub had brought public attention to issues of open access, intellectual property, and privatization of scientific knowledge. Online shadow libraries have circumvented and challenged traditional curatorial and archival policies, professional practices, and legal norms to collect, upload, and openly share materials that are otherwise left forgotten, limited in circulation, or kept behind a paywall. Such archives are generally maintained by hacktivists, free culture enthusiasts, self-assigned curators, or fan networks, collaboratively establishing their own practices and rules for preservation, access, and dissemination.

In 2018 at the Onassis Foundation in Athens, Ilan Manouach, together with UbuWeb’s founder Kenneth Goldsmith, co-organized a three-day cultural event in tribute of such online custodians. The Shadow Libraries symposium gathered artists, scholars, curators, archivists, and activists to discuss unofficial and amateur practices of digital preservation and distribution. The symposium set out to examine how such shadow libraries defy “current norms of intellectual property rights, market concentration and control of access” (Manouach 2022, 245). This curatorial, critical and theoretical framework underpinned Manouach’s curated collections of conceptual comics, which are precisely embedded within important shadow libraries for arts, media and culture at large. The world of shadow libraries is a tightknit one, for which workshops and conferences have played an activating role, imbued with the tradition of hacker culture and media lab (Dekker 2017, 219; Goldsmith 2020, 79). One year later, in April 2019, the shadow library and arts wiki Monoskop integrated a new page and collection devoted to

“Conceptual Comics,” curated by Manouach and compiling twenty works, fully digitized and largely representative of contemporary experimental comics. In February 2021, the collection was further incorporated to the UbuWeb repository, one of the earliest and longest-standing initiatives to freely host and distribute experimental material online, marking an important reframing of comics within the avant-garde.

This chapter turns to Ilan Manouach’s curatorial practice, and more specifically to the assembling and uploading of collections dedicated to “conceptual comics” within existing shadow libraries. For another way of curating experimental comics in different social contexts, see Chapter 9 by Moritz Küng. This anthologizing gesture contributes to situate and ground the self-proposed category of “conceptual comics” within an alternative history of comics, expanding its confines and integrating unexpected productions uplifted from other traditions. Beyond the assembled corpus itself, however, the technological choice to digitize small-circulation works through shadow libraries brings even more important questions of access, transformation, and cultural memory that this chapter hopes to survey.

### **Comics Archives and Digital Cultural Memory**

Reflections on comics memory and preservation tend to look backwards. Dealing with popular cultural material that—when not actively discarded or destroyed—was regularly lost or neglected, comics scholars, historians, readers, fans, archivists, and other actors have been well aware of the long-term consequences that come with a history of suppression and disregard (Pizzino 2016). This makes for a complex legacy, built on a certain resentment towards institutions typical of an underdog attitude in the comics world (Beaty 2012), narrowly intertwined with a history of grassroots archiving practices and with the standardization of collecting habits. As much as comics is marked by erasure and loss, this perception of loss has been correlated with a strong nostalgic desire to recover and collect past materials which, following the professionalization of fandom, evolved into its own kind of business (Beaty 2012, 153–182). The construction and shaping of comics collections within archival institutions have ceaselessly developed in dialogue with these grassroots initiatives and their standardization.

While systematic archiving of comics publishing is now regularly implemented within institutions of memory, as part of legal deposit programs and other archival policies, the valorization and indexation of comics collections often remains precariously positioned within institutions that are dependent on available funding and material constraints. They are often poorly equipped to compete with commercial dealers when it comes to financially valuable pieces of comics heritage; and the structure of the nostalgia market is strongly biased towards original art, first editions, and canonical authors, often leaving out swathes of archival material for the dustbin. If the long history of comics has left rather scarce archives, the current task of collecting recent

productions, albeit facilitated with comics' upward mobility, runs against other hurdles. The burden of overproduction, if not an exception in the twenty-first-century book business (Thompson 2010), has been a particular strong strategy in contemporary comics publishing and hampers comprehensive harvesting.

This results in a situation where a range of contemporary comics practices tends to fall under the radar of systematic archiving. This is for instance the case for the whole range of small-press publications that are defined by their circulation outside of the “official” distribution channels on which legal deposit programs usually rely (Habrand 2016). If some productions do make it onto library shelves, this archiving process is strongly dependent on the producers' willingness to deposit copies, which cannot be taken for granted within a publishing scene that cultivates an ethos of subcultural marginality. The ephemerality and the limited circulation of the small press is usually understood as an integral part of its cultural practice, and an important facet of its political thrust, as fanzine producers tend to be wary of the domestication of comics. A fanzine collection like *We All Go Down*, put out by the Belgian micro-collective Habeas Corpus (with whom Ilan Manouach holds multiple ties), is for instance premised on anonymity and ephemerality: no reissue, no creator names, no dates factor in its own opacity and oblivion. Perhaps as a result of their “dissenting” position (Dony, Habrand, and Meesters 2014), the archiving process for small-press, mini-comics, and zines has rather relied on grassroots initiatives and community-based practices of collecting and harvesting material. Some zine archives, such as the Fanzinothèque in Poitiers, have of course achieved a kind of structural stability premised on a local anchorage; but such strategic reliance on cultural funding goes hand in hand with the maintenance of a counter-cultural ethos. Given the importance of touch and contact within the social world of zines—both in terms of the haptic and physical aspects of objects but also in the networks of community relationships that support its distribution and circulation—such initiatives are closely interwoven with the rise of online self-publishing and yet regularly return to older “obsolete” printing technologies and handcraft techniques.

Another area of comics production that is relatively overlooked by current institutional preservation is exactly the case of born-digital comics, despite various kindling initiatives such as the Library of Congress' webcomics archive. The perils of digital obsolescence, its rotten links and permanent updating requirements, are well known, and there have been few ambitious programs to curate collections of early digital experiments in comics comparable to what has been done in the field of electronic literature (Moulthrop and Grigar 2017). As Darren Wershler and Kalervo Sinervo have remarked, nodding at Matthew Kirschenbaum's seminal work on new media, “scholars and historians interested in the history of digital comics are facing significant forensic work if they wish to reconstruct that history” (2017, 190). This touches on both the history of born-digital productions (Baudry 2018) and

that of digitized comics, which opens up its own set of questions. The two Canadian scholars have indeed carried out extensive research to illustrate the transformative role played by unauthorized scanners and pirates in the online circulation of comics, whether through peer-to-peer networks, channels, or file sharing sites (Wershler, Sinervo, and Tien 2013). As Sinervo suggests in another article, in the context of North American comics industries, the unauthorized circulation of comic book scans, although framed as piracy by proprietary and licensing companies, has not completely developed into a profitable opportunity for pirates, even though the overall work performed by fans and scanlators consists in a “free” digital labor that can lead to other forms of data mining and monetization. The focus of these bootlegging ventures relies less on economic motives than on a sense of audience participation in the circulation of serial products, but also a commitment to their archiving as scanners “perform a specific kind of preservation” (Sinervo 2021, 229). While comic book pirates and scanlators primarily engage with continuously running serial productions and ongoing narratives, there is also a significant chunk of rogue archival work done on comics heritage, from newspaper comic strips to comic book publishing. Fan scanning projects have run prior to—and now often feed on—the large-scale digitization programs initiated by bigger archival institutions, partly restrained by issues of copyright for open public access.

### **Make It Rogue**

The different artistic and curatorial projects led by Ilan Manouach are positioned at the intersections of these concerns in the field of contemporary comics and online archives. The lasting importance of grassroots collecting, amateur librarianship, self-designed collecting practices—but also the standardization, commercialization, and monetization of fan labor—are all dimensions that form a rich background against which Manouach’s curatorial and creative—or rather “uncreative” (Goldsmith 2011)—practices unfold. His curated collections nod to the online sharing practices of comic book pirates, scanlators, and other unauthorized scanners, but focus on the digitization and uploading of limited-circulation print artifacts, contrasting with the bulk of bootleg scans recirculating mass-printed comics. The conceptual comics digitized by Manouach dialogue more evidently with the critical, theory-savvy, and experimental framework of the host websites, Monoskop and UbuWeb. In his doctoral dissertation, Manouach nevertheless underlines commonalities between scanlation repositories and shadow libraries:

these websites [scanlating repositories] are aggregators that often supersede by a large magnitude the existing official and corporate efforts to encourage community engagement, but in reality they are not very different from existing shadow libraries such as aaaargh or Monoskop.

(2022, 16)

These various operations, as different as they may seem in their interests, are typical of what Abigail De Kosnik describes as “rogue archives,” encompassing anticanonical digital repositories maintained by amateurs who freely upload, share, and remix their contents:

What I call *rogue archives* are defined by: constant (24/7) availability; zero barriers to entry for all who can connect to the Internet; content that can be streamed or downloaded in full, with no required payment, and no regard for copyright restrictions (some rogue archivists digitize only what is already in the public domain); and content that has never been, and would likely never be, contained in a traditional memory institution.

(De Kosnik 2016, 2)

Developing the concept at hand of online archives of fan fiction, De Kosnik emphasizes the wide range of transformative, appropriative, and derivative practices—which she proposes to encompass under the umbrella term “archontic production”—that is part and parcel of such repositories, forming together “the twin strands of digital cultural memory” (2016, 276). Digital networked media have, in her view, unsettled traditional chronologies of production, reception, and recording, as “each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied and manipulated” (2016, 4).

The various works of *détournement*, remix, and parody consigned by Ilan Manouach—as eloquently analysed in various chapters of this volume—can of course be read alongside classic intertextual or citational lines (studying at a one-to-one scale the relationship between “source” text and its “derivative”), but this would amount to reducing the material and technological dimension of these practices. Such practices have everything to do with the momentous shift brought by digital networked media to archives and cultural memory. It also circumvents misconceptions about the tension between digital and print comics, their respective merits and specificities: as much as Manouach’s works are printed as physical objects, often designed with an acute feel for their materiality (a question analyzed in detail by Ana Matilde Sousa’s reading of *Cascao* in Chapter 3), they are rigorously produced by digital means and explore the arcana of the contemporary networked media economy. This appears particularly evident for more recent works such as *The Cubicle Island* and *Peanuts minus Schulz*, which both rely on crowd-sourcing and micro-working platforms to generate collections of copied, reproduced, reannotated, redrawn, and otherwise modified comics images by a global swarm of precarious digital workers. Manouach treats comics heritage in its different material manifestations as a large repertoire of forms and formats open for new usages, applying different methods and protocols to revisit, revision, and reassess this heritage.

In his different creative or “uncreative” works, Manouach displaces the traditional focus on craftsmanship to recalibrate other gestures as ways of producing comics: collecting, scanning, erasing, reprinting, tagging, distributing, querying, and so on—all “writerly operations that do not tell their name” to cite the title of a book by the conceptual poet Franck Leibovici devoted to very similar ways of writing in the digital age. Another promotor of this kind of “uncreative writing,” Kenneth Goldsmith has suggested how much the everyday activities of sharing, downloading, uploading on the internet have made of archiving a type of “new folk art,” drawing attention to the routine gestures of collecting, saving, and recording artifacts online (2016, 91). Similar to rogue archives, such approaches tend to blur the boundaries between making and archiving: the curation of an archive itself becomes a compositional gesture. In collaborating with UbuWeb and Monoskop, Manouach marks a particular choice that specifically aligns on avant-garde and experimental practices. De Kosnik describes them as “alternative digital archives,” aiming not at universal preservation, but rather trying to “limit their scope to targeted genres, and often serve as central repositories for emerging or degraded genres” (2016, 87). If comics are frequent in all sorts of fan archives, and are also taken up by some specific repositories (such as the Digital Comics Museum, which mostly collects North American public domain comic books), comics have remained a largely unrecognized territory for critical-artistic digital archives such as Monoskop and UbuWeb, even though Ilan Manouach’s works *Katz*, *Tintin akei Congo*, and *Noirs* were already integrated as downloadable PDF files uploaded to the “UbuWeb Contemporary” collection in 2015.

### **monoskop.org/Conceptual\_comics**

Founded in 2004 in Slovakia by Dušan Barok, Monoskop is a collaborative wiki for arts, culture, and humanities, which quickly evolved to a large-scale resource hosting freely available online material. Olga Goriunova, writing about digital archives as art and knowledge commons yielding particular subject positions, describes the subject of Monoskop as a “multiform bibliographer” (2021, 57). Part encyclopedia, part annotated bibliography, part multimedia archive, it is perfectly suited to wiki software, which relies on hypertext mapping, linked data, and collaborative authorship. Another important specificity of Monoskop is its motivation “to provide a situated nodal point in the globalized information infrastructures,” as the wiki has remained specifically committed to its original mission to excavate central and eastern European art and media history (Thylstrup 2018, 93). Overall, Monoskop thus underlines a bibliographic focus on comprehensiveness and affirms the situated and subjective curatorial choices. As Thylstrup further suggests, “Monoskop operates with a *boutique* approach, offering relatively small collections of personally selected publications to a steady following of loyal patrons who regularly return to the site to explore new works” (2018, 91).

The “Conceptual Comics” collection affirms the choice of personal curation and follows in the wiki logic of organizing and crosslinking subjects, connecting to other pages on Monoskop’s dedicated to avant-garde and modernist’s magazines, artists’ publishing, concrete poetry, zine culture, afrofuturism, digital libraries, code poetry, conceptual literature among other keywords. These connections display how the collection dialogues with existing resources on Monoskop and it embeds its topic within a particular field and taxonomy (literature). Each entry included in the resource follows a similarly hypertextual bibliographic description. The metadata attached to each item includes links to authors’ personal pages, publishers’ pages, extra resources, connecting users to resources outside of the website.

What is more striking or specific about the “Conceptual Comics” collection, however, is the particular emphasis on a visually striking layout, as the page opens onto a gridded gallery of images displaying the items included in the collection (Figure 12.1). The clickable, hyperlinked images allow users to navigate the interface in a non-linear way, typical for new media’s “database logic” (Manovich 2001), but which again underlines the image as a primary entry point—echoing the tabularity of a comics page. The items of the archive are otherwise relatively fixed, cannot be reordered according to particular criteria, but unfold as a scrollable list.

The importance of visual display appears further clear in the particular digitization protocol opted by Manouach. As many online custodians, sharing their scanning methods and tools in an open-source spirit, Manouach has built an overhead scanner specifically for this project, in order to provide

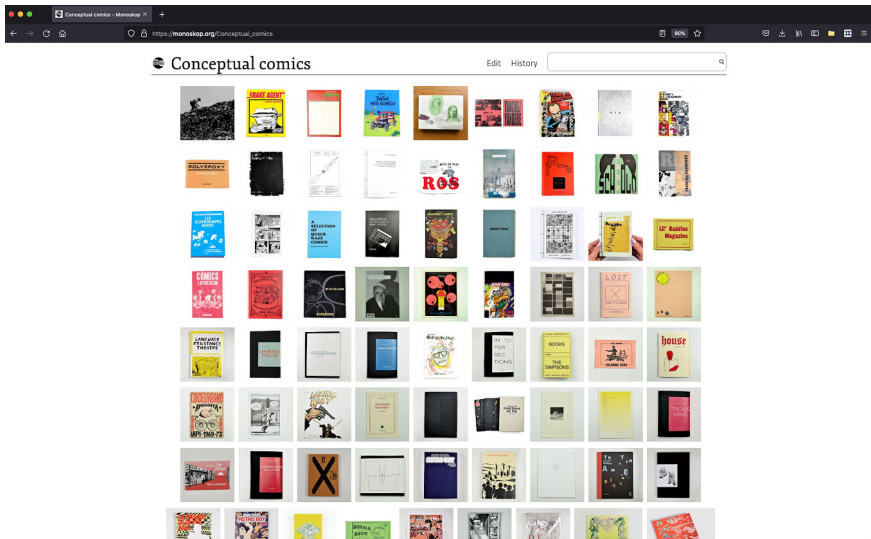


Figure 12.1 Screenshot of the welcome page for the “Conceptual Comics” collection at Monoskop, featuring a grid gallery of the uploaded contents, 2021.

high-quality photographs of the printed books and paper artifacts, collated into single high-resolution PDF formats. This contrasts with the more heterogeneous formatting of books and documents hosted at Monoskop, which alternately features publisher PDFs or EPUB books, scanned or xeroxed books, digital files harvested from archives and libraries, text copy-pasted to html pages, or links to documents hosted at other repositories. Contributing to the multimodality of the Monoskop resources, the [CoCo] collection opts for a consistent aesthetic and technological display that emphasizes the visuality and the materiality of the various books. The metadata for each item, accordingly, stipulates format, size, and mode of fabrication, stressing again the importance of material format and technical constraints for these particular comics.

To give one example: a small booklet by Jérôme Puigros-Puigener, consisting in four-color ballpen redrawings of war comics covers retitled “gone with the wings” (Figure 12.2), is presented as a 10.5 × 14.8 cm-sized, Xerox printed, 40-page booklet with Japanese-style binding. Given the thicker pagination for the relatively smaller format, the book had to be kept open by hand during the digitization process. The visible presence of the hands in the file is here not the same as the occasional misplaced fingers in GoogleBooks scans, which tended to invisibilize the manual labor required in the scanning process. Here the presence of the hands both offers information on the actual handling of the objects, but also bears witness to the human labor of digitization itself.



Figure 12.2 Excerpted image from the PDF file of Jérôme Puigros-Puigener’s *Gone with the Wings*, Brussels, Habeas Corpus, 2010.



By opting for a digitization procedure that emphasizes the materiality of the scanned comics, Manouach reflexively draws attention to the transformative process of digitization and dissemination. The choice is notably different from the medium-specific formats for comics, CBR or CBZ, commonly used by rogue archivists because of their ease of use, their capacity to compress multiple images, and their openness for further fragmentation and reuse. At the same time, such formats and their reading applications also focus on enhancing readability and, by extension, narrative immersion. If the PDF format “looks back toward the fixity of analogue print artifacts” as much as it “participates in the mystification of digital tools,” according to Lisa Gitelman (2014, 131), the actual use of the format is here geared toward recognizing the specific materiality of the scanned artifacts. Comics in general cannot be easily reflowed, and this is even truer in the case of experimental works in particular, which similar to artists’ books, tend to “sabotage the message function” (Stewart 2011, 102). At the same time, the wide margins, the presence of hands holding the objects, the variation in lighting all remind users of digitization as a situated work, presented as an act worthwhile and meaningful in itself.

By uploading works that, at a quick glance, could be thought to defy digitization, the curated collection on “Conceptual Comics” brings open visibility to a type of experimental comics that otherwise cultivate their own scarcity, as they tend to circulate only in relatively small circles, hand to hand, in festivals, and in a few specialized bookstores. Digitization, here, is not primarily a question of preservation but of making these items freely available and publicly accessible. This gesture has profound consequences, as Leibovici argues: “re-publishing is above all re-publicizing, that is making public again, having a question become public again, that is, producing a new public for this question” (Leibovici 2020, 108). In the case of Manouach’s curated collection, the aim is clearly announced by the introductory note: “This library is a resonating chamber for conceptual works and unconventional practices little known outside their communities and also a springboard for establishing the conditions for affective lineages among similarly minded practitioners” (Manouach 2020, n.p.). By curating a collection of works and making them freely accessible, Manouach contributes to produce a self-defined historical object—“conceptual comics”—and offers a framework to group together a range of diverse but affiliated productions.

At the moment of writing this chapter, the collection features in total 78 works, covering more than a dozen countries across three continents. The comics included in the collection cover a strikingly varied array of material formats, graphic styles, contexts, covering an international scope of experimental comics production, mostly seized from the last fifteen years, but also reaching farther out back in the past to include historical examples such as Luiz Antônio Pires’ *Cordel Urbano* from 1973—or recent reprints of older works such as Stefano Tamburini’s *Snake Agent*, originally published between 1980 and 1984. The inclusion of Tamburini’s work is telling of the

collection's interest in carefully chosen operational procedures and technologically minded productions: it is a comics narrative entirely composed from Xeroxed pages from a run of *Secret Agent X-9* comic strips, productively using the photocopying machine as a way of distorting the reproduced images.

Many of the collection items can be seen as a continuation of this kind of gesture, as it includes many comics produced according to uncreative protocols, relying on appropriation, republication, or tactics of redrawing and undrawing (Crucifix 2019). Several artists, such as Jochen Gerner, Francesc Ruiz, and Martín Vitaliti, have variously experimented with such acts of imitating, reproducing, remixing the comics archive. Their work is frequently presented in galleries and museums, and plays out the contrast between the mass-printed existence of comics and the physical space of the gallery. Ruiz, for instance, is an artist from Barcelona who primarily develops installation and exhibition projects in which he engages with comics as mass-printed objects, reprinting, duplicating, and creating pseudo-comic books to raise issues about the marketing and commercial circulation of comics. On Monoskop, one can thus find included in the collection a series of publications by Ruiz made in such curatorial settings, providing information on the specifics of the installation and on its original contexts.

Manouach also opens up a more speculative and prospective approach to the online archive, by including and documenting practices for which there are no publishing outcomes to link to. The collection indeed includes two micro-essays, respectively profiling Zou Luoyang, editor of a zine conscientiously produced for the landfill, and Inès Chuquet, a comics collector interested in the biological life growing on cheap print commodities. Both profiles, which one cannot link back to authority files, invite to speculative and theoretical forays into alternative approaches to comics preservation, as a counterresponse to the standardization and commercialization of “mint” condition copies in comics fandom. Manouach indirectly advocates for the kind of “post-preservation” approach to cultural heritage outlined by Caitlin DeSilvey for architectural and landscape monuments, and which explores “ways of valuing the material past that do not necessarily involve accumulation and preservation” (2017, 17). The rogue archival work done by Ilan Manouach, uploading and making freely available a range of otherwise scarce small-press publications, similarly opens up a critical space to explore alternative ways of engaging with comics heritage.

Finally, as much as the “Conceptual Comics” collection is a relatively personal and subjective curation, the wiki structure also potentially allows it to grow, in accordance with the open principles defended by Monoskop. Registered users can technically contribute information and deposit works, or copy the source code and easily reconstitute and reshare the entire collection elsewhere (Figure 12.3). Even if the history of brought changes does not compare to the most-debated Wikipedia pages, unsurprisingly, this technical structure does imply an openness in the anthologizing gesture that

Editing Conceptual comics Edit History

Advanced > Special characters > Help

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Ruiz_Francesc_Wasim_1995_2014.jpg|link=#Wasim 1995
Manouach_Ilan_Tintin_Akei_Kongo_2015.jpg|link=#Tintin Akei Kongo
Fossoul_Nikita_Goblet_Dominique_Chronographie_2010.jpg|link=#Chronographie
Hetamoe_Muji_Life_Yangire_Yandere_2015.jpg|link=#Muji Life & Yangire/Yandere
Sikoryak_R_Terms_and_Conditions_2017.jpg|link=#Terms and Conditions
Matthey_Pascal_978_2014.jpg|link=#978
Un_Faulduo_La_historieta_en_el_Faulduo_mundo_moderno_2015.jpg|link=#La historieta en el (Faulduo) mundo moderno
Joubert_Bernard_Polyepoxy_2017.jpg|link=#Polyepoxy
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CCCCC_Negros_Rojos_2017.jpg|link=#Negros Rojos
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Graham_VA_Eisenhower_JA_Scaffold_I-XLIV_2012-2015.jpg|link=#Scaffold
Henninger_Francois_RIP_2017.jpg|link=#RIP
Manouach_Ilan_Noirs_2014.jpg|link=#Noirs
Ruiz_Francesc_Comics_Meetings_Artists_Books_2013.jpg|link=#Comics Meetings Artist's Books
Ruiz Francesc A Selection of Queer Rage Comics 2019.jpg|link=#A Selection of Queer Rage Comics
Chak_Tings_Undocumented_The_Architecture_of_Migrant_Detention_2017.jpg|link=#Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant
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Summary:

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Please note that all contributions to Monoskop are considered to be released for a [a fair use](/Monoskop>About#Copyrights) (see Monoskop Copyrights for details). If you do not want your material to be edited and redistributed at will, then do not submit it here.

[Save changes](#) [Show preview](#) [Show changes](#) [Cancel](#)

Templates used on this page:

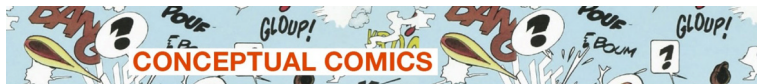
Benoit Settings Watchlist Log out  
Home Help Recent changes Recent files Batch upload  
What links here Upload file Page information  
About Monoskop

Figure 12.3 Screenshot of the edit function for the “Conceptual Comics” collection at Monoskop.

undermines a canonizing approach: the criticism of inclusion and exclusion is partly pre-empted by the fact that additions are possible and welcome, making the collection a potentially living and growing body of works. Less than two years after its debut on the Monoskop platform, the “Conceptual Comics” collection was also imported to the long-standing archive of avant-garde UbuWeb, formatted in basic html and maintaining an early internet aesthetics, and for which the banner includes an image excerpted from Manouach’s *Compendium of Franco-Belgian Comics* (Figure 12.4).

## Conclusion

The addition of a dedicated collection charting “conceptual comics” to UbuWeb is both a recognition and a cultural validation of avant-garde and experimental practices in comics, but also and most importantly a



UbuWeb



Terms and Conditions [PDF, 120kB]

Author: Robert Sikoryak  
 Title: Terms and Conditions  
 Publisher: Dimes & Quarters  
 Language: English  
 City: New York  
 Year: 2012  
 Pages: 109  
 Format: 17 cm x 24.5 cm  
 Fabrication: offset  
 ISBN: 978-1-77046-274-8

Description: "For his newest project, Sikoryak tackles the monstrously and infamously dense legal documents, iTunes Terms and Conditions, the contract everyone agrees to but no one reads. In a word for word 94-page adaptation, Sikoryak hilariously turns the agreement on its head - each page features an array of flags, confeder and hegemony visionary Steve Jobs juxtaposed with a different classic strip such as Mort Walker's Beetle Bailey, or a contemporary graphic novel such as Craig Thompson's Blankets or Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis. Adapting the language of the iTunes Terms and Conditions into another medium seems like an intractable undertaking, yet Sikoryak creates a surprisingly readable document, far different from its original, purely textual incarnation and thus proving the accessibility and flexibility of comics. When Sikoryak makes Kane Beeson's book a frequent guest on his comic with Steve Jobs discussing objectionable material or Homer Simpson as Steve Jobs warning of the perils of copyright infringement, Terms and Conditions serves as a surreal record of our modern digital age where technology competes with enduringly bronzed mediums." (from the publisher's website)



Rubb [PDF, 71.8k]

Author: Zou Luoyang  
 Title: Rubb  
 Publisher: Self-published  
 Price: FREE  
 Language: English  
 City: Hong Kong  
 Year: 1999  
 Pages: 0  
 Format: 21 cm x 14.85 cm  
 Fabrication: inapplicable

Description: In 1998, Zou Luoyang, chief editor of the inapplicable art one Rubb, controversially declared: "The future of comics is in the trash can." Fifteen years later, he addressed a consortium of publishing representatives at the San Diego Comic-Con with the following words: "It is a measure of your progress in regard to the ethics of the comic book industry in the last five years, that the 1998 remark no longer makes any sense. You are filling the shopping containers, trash cans, landfill dumps and incinerators with 100 billion pages of paper: printed magazines, graphic novels, comic book prints, newspaper supplements, promotional giveaways and funny papers, superhero novellas, shonen manga anthologies, comic weeklies related to protective subculture bags, temporary collectors space editions and now, slender low sets of colour volumes of serialized fiction. The happy day has arrived when nobody any longer considers comics too good to throw away. The sector shift had been successful, and disposability is now rationalized, partly thanks to you, the comics industry."

Luoyang was familiar with discarded studies that analyze in detail what disposable components say about our relationship with the world and the manifold ways social and economic values are reflected in what is thrown away. He even went so far to propose an extension, now called Rubb (comic translation on the emerging potential of trash, bringing in observations of a nascent branch of social sciences, rubbology (from the Latin rubra, waste), understanding the very nature of rubbish, Luoyang found in comics the embodiment of trash, a trash that you can not just dispose of (both in the sense of throw away and settle a matter), but a trash that you have to read through and confront as is. Luoyang already found in a diameter Michael Thompson's book Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value, a reading that specified his practice and reoriented his approach to distribution. In the book, Thompson proposes that for a turn-of-made object to go from something everyday and transient to something of great, durable value, it must first become rubbish. He looks not specifically at comics, but at objects, real estate, and dated books to make the argument that something can not move from the worthless to the valued without first transiting to waste with a cultural or social value of zero.

It was clear that Luoyang's interest in disposability was not about personally reaching into new processes and spaces in search of profit. Either about the industry's indifference to his ideas, Luoyang was committed to rebalance against the opposite end of the professionals, defending the time the unbalanced self-indulgence of the contemporary reader. In a personal exchange, running over the reader (his own capitalization and generalization) essential aporias, he adds, appropriately quoting Beal (at length): "Authors are slaves working like convicts to prepare the beautiful fastening emblems that allow us to believe in ourselves the means that torment the bowels of most men. Readers, on the other hand, obey a much simpler economy: they absorb and excrete and there is no doubt on which side I will opt for enjoyment." Luoyang, after years of careful examination and methods of dialectical response, embraced a design for Rubb, based entirely on planned obsolescence, the industry's way to artificially limit the use life of an object, leaving the shortening of replacement cycles. Inapplicable on cheap non-archival, non-acid free newsprint, Rubb with its modest print run of 200 (signed) copies, contributed its minor share to the landfill. Originally disseminated in landfills with its delicate copies covered under tonnes of debris, Luoyang invited readers to search for it by pinpointing targeted digging, and other methods at the margins of geospatial archaeology. Zou Luoyang's project can be understood as an exercise in accelerating a book's life cycle, displacing the reader from his comfort zone to a participatory psychogeographic exploration of suburban dumping grounds. Rubb, more than a pungent comment on late human labour, said more Luoyang will have unconsciously referred to the comic industry. Luoyang tries to make statements in simple terms, wanting to be intelligible broadly, wanting to be more widely distributed. But the intent is to acknowledge the emerging potential of trash. Rather than defying the benign side of degrading matter, for example, biological waste containing micronutrients for land fertilization, Luoyang claims for an unapologetic cultural production of toxicity.



Figure 12.4 Screenshot of the welcome page for the "Conceptual Comics" collection at UbuWeb.

vindication that there is an important and productive dialogue between the history of comics and the avant-garde as out-of-sync as they may seem (Crucifix 2021). By coining the term “conceptual comics,” Manouach not only seeks entry within the sphere of avant-garde productions and critical discourse, from which comics were traditionally excluded or derided as “kitsch,” but rather affirms a continuity with comics traditions and finds in the medium and its contemporary digital networks a means to extend and expand avant-garde and experimental approaches.

In uploading a curated collection of experimental works defined as “conceptual comics,” Manouach’s anthologizing gesture makes visible a community of creators and publishers who belong to different cultural, geographic, and linguistic traditions but who share a marginal positionality within the comics world. Manouach further theorizes the dearth of a critical discourse to situate such works (contrasting with the discourse-heavy context of the contemporary art world) as placing a specific demand on readers:

They operate on the margins of distribution and reception and their unrootedness in the medium’s spectrum is more than an abstraction: artists uncomfortable with entrenched roles invite readers, in the absence of critical discourse, to engage with the works in non-specified, at times forensic ways of examination.

(Manouach 2020, n.p.)

Manouach’s curated collection of “Conceptual Comics” can be understood as providing a new context and hence also providing a productive critical framework. In doing so, it effectively responds to the lack of attention for avant-garde productions in the field of comics studies. As Benjamin Woo has observed, “genuinely aesthetically difficult comics circulating in avant-garde art worlds certainly do exist, but they are rare among the most celebrated and canonical works of comic art” (2018, 38).

By acting as a curator of conceptual comics collections for shadow libraries such as Monoskop and UbuWeb, Manouach explores a way of building critical recognition for experimental comics that does not adapt to the canonizing and legitimizing mechanisms of contemporary comics studies, built on the foundation of the graphic novel. By incorporating comics within shadow libraries, Manouach adopts rogue archivists’ refusal of traditional canon-building, while recognizing the ubiquitous presence of selection and curation in a digital environment where the “pleasures of playlisting” has given rise to new forms of “transmediaphilia” (Collins 2017, 369) and where curation algorithms allow for the “data mining of taste” (Morris 2015). Manouach’s curated collections leverage shadow libraries’ “infrastructural maneuver,” explicitly bypassing copyright or tactically maintaining a legal gray zone (Thylstrup 2018, 97), to kickstart the archival preservation of a certain kind of comics works that still remains largely out of purview for traditional institutions of cultural memory. Final words to

the curator: “In an age where public libraries are an endangered institution, media collections run by amateur librarians emerge as new, vital topographies of sharing and a possible direction for an alternative of institutional reconfiguration in the comics industry” (Manouach 2021a, 129).

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# **Ilan Manouach in Review**

## **Critical Approaches to his Conceptual Comics**

**Edited by Pedro Moura**



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