

Giving Up the Artistic Aspect. The invisibility of comics made in extreme conditions of confinement: Charlotte Salomon, Karel Frans Drenthe and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro *

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Leben? Oder Theater? by Charlotte Salomon, *Krankzinnig Verpleging* by K. F. Drenthe and *Historia de Garabato y Florazul y de sus amigos* by Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro have long been ignored within the comics fields but were also created in the loneliness of isolation. Their invisibility is therefore two-fold. The present essay study them from this double perspective and analyse the tension between these two invisibilities. To this end, they will be considered through the concept of 'comicity' that Colin Beineke has forged and through what Jean-Christophe Menu has described as the "hors-champ de la bande dessinée." In doing so, the paper aims to question the reason of the fundamental choice made by the creators from outside the comics field to testify the isolation experience through a story in images. It will study their creation context and the possible influences within and without the comics field. The analyse will then show how their comicitous features are congruent with the urgent need of the authors to express oneself. It will also study the link between the conditions under which these works were made and their characteristics in terms of topics, graphic styles and narrative structures with the aim to establish what a poetics of comics made in extreme conditions of confinement could be.

Keywords: Art Brut, comics, confinement, dictatorship, psychiatry

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Leben? Oder Theater? (Life? Or Theatre?) by Charlotte Salomon (1941-1943) [fig. 1 & 2], *Krankzinnig Verpleging* (Views on the Lunatics) by Karel Frans Drenthe (1960-61) [fig. 3 & 4] and *Historia de Garabato y Florazul y de sus amigos pisoteados* (The Story of Garabato and Florazul and of Their Trampled Friends) by Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro (circa 1981-1982) [fig. 5 & 6] are characterised by a double invisibility. On the one hand, they were made in relative secrecy as their authors were forced to live reclusive; in some case these creations could have jeopardise them if they had been discovered by politic, military or institutional “power representatives”. On the other hand, despite their great similarities with the devices at work in comics, they do not have been integrated into the historiography of the medium nor having attracted much attention from the comics world – except for Charlotte Salomon’s work but this recognition came lately, more than sixty years after it had been made. To my knowledge, it is French comics author, publisher and critic Jean-Christophe Menu who has first consider it as comics in 2006 in the second issue of his journal *L’Éprouvette* (Menu 2006, p. 129-140) before being integrate by Paul Gravett into the 2011 anthology *1001 Comics You Must Read Before You Die* (Gravett 2011).

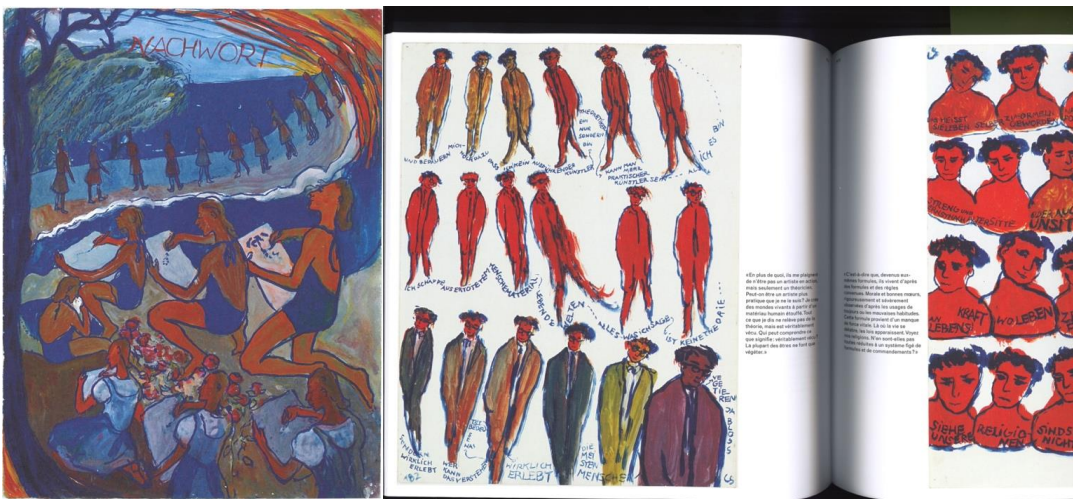


Fig. 1 & 2: Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater?*, 1941-1943.



Fig. 3 & 4: Karel Frans Drenthe, *Krankzinnig Verpleging* (Views on the Lunatics), 1960-61.

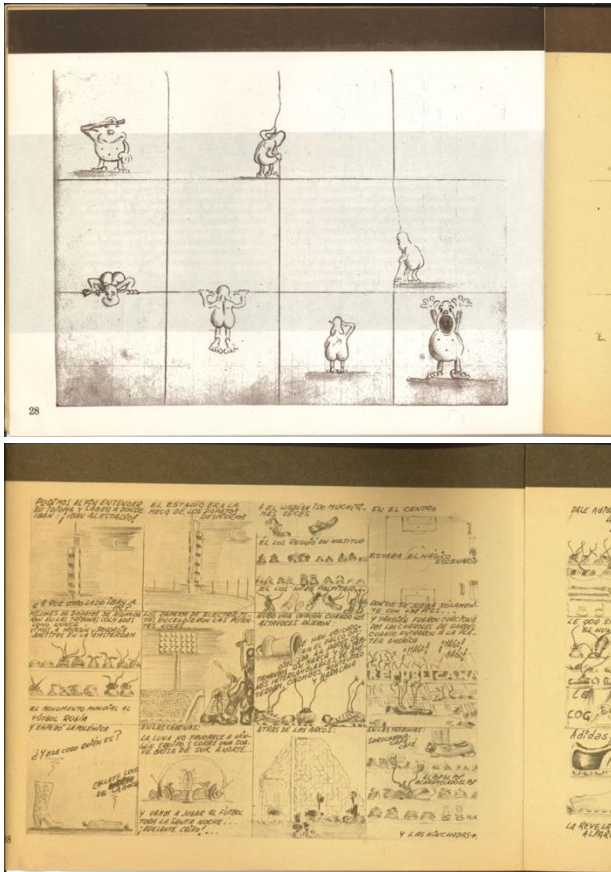


Fig. 5 & 6: Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, *Historia de Garabato y Florazul y de sus amigos pisoteados*, circa 1981-1982.

“Hors-champ” and “comicity”

These three works show simultaneously texts and images and, more significantly, they form a whole of images hinged together to produce sense. They comply with the concept of “iconic solidarity” that Thierry Groensteen considers as a central principle in comics: “independent images that, participating in a series; present the double characteristic of being separated [...] and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*” (Groensteen 2006, p. 18).

That said, one might question if they definitively belong to comics, mainly if we see them not only as a set of visual and narrative devices but also as we consider that they form a practice set in a particular social and cultural context. The works that are commonly considered as comics are part of a field of activities with its specific actors and institutions (publishers, critics, bookshops, festivals, prices...) from which Salomon, Drenthe and Fernández Huidobro have only been integrated very recently. If Salomon had been retrospectively added to this field, mainly thanks to Menu and Gravett, the artist herself had never described *Leben? Oder Theater?* as a comic in the testimonies that she left us. Excerpts from *Krankzinnig Verpleging* were showed in *Art Brut et bande dessinée*, realised by Swiss alternative comics publisher Atrabile (Dejasse 2022, p. 46-49). This book is the catalogue of an exhibition I have curated; I chose to show Drenthe’s work by considering

that its formal particularities and the conditions under which it was made fit perfectly with the exhibition's goal: showing how works kept in Outsider Art and Art Brut collections could fruitfully dialogue with comics. Fernández Huidobro for his part refers to *Historia de Garabato y Florazul* as a comic (Fernández Huidobro 1985, p. 22) but has up to now received no comments from that field and the book was published by a house unlinked with comics.

Obviously, determining if these three works are or not comics can only lead to a conceptual dead end. Once you consider that the uses of the medium are always evolving, there is no definitive criterion that allows to define it. The “hors-champ” and “comicity” notions, provided respectively by Jean-Christophe Menu and Colin Beineke, are here useful and complementary theoretical tools. The first one allows to enlarge the scope by integrating into the field of comics works that were invisible before and the second one offers the opportunity to analyse them without being blocked by *definitional quibbles*. Menu describes the “hors-champ” as “an entire corpus of works that undoubtedly belong to the field [of Comics] but that is not integrated into its History, and hence is not recognised as an integral part of the field” (Menu 2011, p. 432). He mentions as examples *Leben? Oder Theater?* but also the workbook of Villard de Honnecourt, master mason from the thirteenth century or *Poema a fumetti (Poem Strip)* by Italian novelist and poet Dino Buzzati. Beineke, for his part, has hammered out the neologism “comicitous” by analogy with “theatrical”, “cinematic” or “literary” to qualify a work that present features commonly associated with comics. He states that substantive “comicity” offers “a linguistic alternative to the binary discourse (‘this is a comic’/ ‘this is not a comic’) that plagues the definitional project [...] something more critically useful than drawing a formal bordering dividing comics from non-comics.” Moreover, the US scholar states that “the theories and methods of comics studies can be utilized in ‘non-comics’ disciplines” and then puts into practice his statement by studying comicitous works such as Andy Warhol’s series by using comics analysis concepts and principles from Thierry Groensteen seminal essay *The System of Comics*. In a related manner, the goal of the present essay is to study the three above mentioned works by showing how their comicitous features are congruent with the urgent need of the authors to express oneself and to consider the link between the conditions under which these works were executed and the aesthetic choices.

Charlotte Salomon

Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943) was a young German-Jewish woman who studied at the prestigious Berlin Academy of Fine Arts. In 1938, she fled to the South of France where her grandparents are already living to escape from Nazi’s extermination policies. She witnesses the suicide of her grand-mother and then learns from her grand-father that she is the last from a line of women who all killed themselves since three generations. Charlotte Salomon, who is six months pregnant, dies in 1943 just after she has been arrested and deported to Auschwitz concentration camp.

Between 1941 and 1943, she made a suite of some 850 paintings – almost gouaches – she named *Leben? Oder Theater?* The title could literally be translated by “Life? Or theatre?” but “Is this life or theatre?” is probably closer to the meaning she wanted to give as the book plays on the uncertain status of the world that is depicted; the main protagonist wonders about the tangible nature of what she lives and watches as it often seems to be unreal. Mixing drama with comedy, giving her characters imaginary names, Salomon yet describes her own existence. Moreover, it is also a reflection about the act of creation and its purposes.

In 1943, as she knows she is in great danger of being arrested and deported, she gives the original manuscript to a friend, telling him “This is my whole life!” The making of *Leben? Oder Theater?* appear to be the way to mentally escape from a psychologically unbearable situation, the only alternative to suicide (Menu 2006, p. 130). In two years, Charlotte Salomon made around a thousand paintings suggesting that during that time she has thrown herself headlong into the making of her book.

Nothing allows maintaining that *Leben? Oder Theater?* was inspired by comics. It is quite possible that the similarities are the result of a convergence phenomenon where the artists completely reinvent the codes of comics in a different context. Although, it is neither excluded that she had read or seen stories in pictures published till the end of World War II in widely disseminated German satirical journal: *Fliegende Blätter*, *Kladderadatsch* or *Simplicissimus* or maybe French bandes dessinées or translation of US comics... All this could have influenced her even in an unconscious way. That said, Charlotte Salomon’s work also present idiosyncratic characteristics such as music notes that indicate the tunes on which the words spoken by the characters are hummed. The musical dimension of the work is by the way very pervasive; it is significant that the book is subtitled *Ein Singespiel (An Operetta)*. She also often uses tracing paper covered with texts. These are captions or dialogues related with the drawings on the page put under; the picture can only be seen by transparency before being fully revealed when you turn the tracing paper sheet. Salomon varies the colours and the sizes of the letters and give them the form of elegant arabesques. When most of the comics use seemingly neutral lettering to not overload the visual devices, she enhances the graphic dimension of her calligraphies and thus creates a great homogeneity with the drawing. To use the formulation of Philippe Marion, texts and images are here more than ever “the interdependent extensions of a sole graphic impulsion.” (Marion 1993, p. 41).

Leben? Oder Theater? also present great diversities in terms of layouts: full-page images alternate with pages divided into frames or compositions that present a single background where the same character is repeated at different moments, similarly to some medieval paintings or illuminated manuscripts – this foreshadows the device Gianni De Luca will use in his *Trilogia shakesperiana (Shakespearean Trilogy)* some thirty-five years later. *Leben? Oder Theater?* also plays on the repetition of images. Among others, when she must represent a long monologue, she repeats the same visage again and again with the text put under each one. By doing so, Charlotte Salomon gives an obsessional presence to these faces in a quite similar way the monologues in Dave McKean’s *Cages* (1990-1996). She here implements a principle that according to Benoît Peeters strongly illustrates the high potential of comics: “Through this game of echoes and visual rimes, of tiny or more

pronounced variations, such images acquire a force they would not have if they were isolated” (Peeters 2002, p. 33). Sometimes Salomon – whose stylistic treatment is quite reminiscent of pictorial groups such as Die Brücke or Fauvism – progressively dissolve the repeated motives that tend towards abstraction.

As soon as he considers *Leben? Oder Theater?* as a work of comics, Jean-Christophe Menu’s excitement is easy to understand since it follows unlike any other his own aspirations as an author, publisher and critic. He describes Salomon’s book as “one of the most carnally entrenched autobiographical works” (Menu 2005, p.139) in line with the many texts he wrote where he insists on his will to highlight comics born of *inner necessity* (Menu 2005, p. 25). In his opinion, *Leben? Oder Theater?* is the antithesis of the products promoted by mainstream publishers, characterised by the endless repetition of the same formulas. It sees this work as the epitome of his own aspiration for comics that renew in depth their themes, graphic styles and narrations in comics.

K. F. Drenthe

Information about the life of KF Drenthe is very fragmentary. The few sources we can rely on are therefore very valuable: a short text from 1963 written by Drenthe himself in *Randstad* – a Dutch poetry journal – and an article from the daily *Haagse Post* published the same year that deals with the evolution of psychiatric policies where his experience of confinement is briefly discussed. According to this latter, his real name was Kees Drosse. His testimony in *Randstad* states that he was born in 1921 and was the very first child to play on radio shows in the Netherlands; he would have later worked as a tour guide, stenograph and pianist. Then, he has spent several stays in psychiatric hospital between the mid 50’s and the end of the 60’s.

Drenthe has devoted much of his time denouncing the conditions of his detention that he describes as inhuman. Among other things, he has written some 2000 letters addressed to Ministers, Judges, Public Health Inspectors... The article from *Haagse Post* mentions that in 1963, a period when he has been freed, the activity that mobilises all his personal energy is the writing of a two million words logbook where he seeks to reveal all the perversions of the psychiatric hospital system.

Krankzinnig Verpleging (Views on the Lunatics) for his part presents images with captions drawn during a year and a half between 1960 and 1961 at the Rijks Psychiatrische Inrichting (Royal Psychiatric Facility) in Eindhoven. Drenthe wanted to put them together in a book that should have been published after his death in four languages. The drawings have been numbered several times. We can therefore make the hypothesis that he has later reorganised the order in which they must be read. The Museum Dr. Guislain in Ghent keeps around hundred drawings from this series, but we cannot exclude that he had drawn more.

Maybe Drenthe was not aware of it, but this follows a long tradition of works that mixes images and texts made by people from insane asylums who denounce their conditions of detention (Jagfeld 2008; von Beyme & Hohnholz 2018; Slobogin 2018). These creations

often bring to the conclusion that the therapy is even more terrible than the illness. Moreover, in the few scattered texts which have come down to us, he considers that it is not so much the internees that are affected by a pathology but the psychiatric institution that is dysfunctional. Specifically, he denounces a tremendous injustice: holding him in prison-like conditions although he is not guilty of any crime. These issues are totally in tune with the writings of Michel Foucault and the doctors behind anti-psychiatry movement that emerge at the same time.

Drenthe's book project aims to show all what is happening "out of sight": straitjackets, electroshocks, forced baths... A patient whose head is covered by a fabric bag is brought to the bathroom, a sectional view of a cemetery shows regular alignments of encasements, a man sleeps on a table; under the drawing a caption: "during 16 years on a table". With a great economy of means, Drenthe describes the sordid reality of the everyday life inside the asylum. He admits: "Although, I am not a real drawer, I am only an amateur who draws by necessity" (Drenthe 1963, p. 101). Yet, the abruptness of the line, cold and disembodied, contributes to strengthen the feeling of malaise which emerges from these images. Drenthe uses a cringe humour when showing the visit of Saint Nicholas and Zwarte Piet under the doubtful eye of the internees or a man who plays chess alone passing alternately from one side of the table to the another.

Museum Dr. Guislain also keeps instructions he has written in view of the publication of *Krankzinnig Verpleging*, he precises that the text must be divided in short segments and put aside the images like in comics. However, each sheet generally presents one autonomous image although they sometimes show micro-sequences of two panels. Like Charlotte Salomon, K. F. Drenthe does not attempt to reuse the canonical codes and devices of comics but enriches his poetics with idiosyncrasies. In particular, he presents collages in some of his compositions that generally come from photographic self-portraits where he exhibits his bodybuilder musculature.

Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro

Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro (1942-2016), a bank clerk from Montevideo, is one of the founders in 1966 of the *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional – Tupamaros* (Tupamaros – National Liberation Movement), a left-wing guerrilla organisation. Because of his activities, he spent some fifteen years in detention centres of Uruguayan dictatorship where he was tortured. After the end of the dictatorship, as Tupamaros became a political party, he was later appointed as Uruguay Minister of the Defence within the government lead by the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition.

Fernández Huidobro never draw before being imprisoned. The book where his comics were published also shows sketches that are testimonies of his self-learning during his imprisonment. In *Historia de Garabato y Florazul y de sus amigos pisoteados* (*The Story of Garabato and Florazul and of Their Trampled Friends*), the characters are, according to their author, "looking for the only place where it is possible to live: the future. The swallows also

run away. You must not forget that this comic had been drawn by somebody without present. Here, I display a part of the past” (Fernández Huidobro 1985, p. 27). The first page shows Garabato – whose name could be translated by “Doodle” – a naked chubby character that plays with the “gutters” that separate each panel. He moves them like he was opening a curtain or clings on them to discover what is inside the frame but sees only empty spaces. The last panel lower right shows Garabato his hands up, wide open mouth as he emits a scream of pain although Fernández Huidobro did not add any letter nor draw an onomatopoeia in order to sonorise the scene. This gives the impression that no sound came from the character’s mouth. The page that shows a regular layout has two visual attachment points: the first and the last image. Between them, the sequentiality of the reading is quite perturbate and the reader’s gaze wanders rather than apprehending each panel in a predefined order. A priori, one would not expect that a work made in prison in constant fear of receiving violent treatments or even being killed would play with the codes of comics and use metanarrative devices. However, Fernández Huidobro offers here a very convincing metaphor of the confinement; the “grid” is, at the same time, the prototypical device of comics and a set of little cages from which you cannot escape.

Like Salomon and Drenthe, the extremely dramatic creation context does not preclude humour – in the present case, with surrealistic undertones. When the humans are sleeping, flying plates and shoes come to life. The drawer explains that in his mind the shoes were a way to talk about people that were trampled by the dictatorship (Fernández Huidobro 1985, p. 27). Obviously, using metaphors is a way to not put himself more in jeopardy if the guardians would read them. Fernández Huidobro never gives a direct testimony of the bad treatments he suffered in prison but though that as soon as he begun making his comics, he had already in mind that, in case he would once be released, this work could possibly be used as a piece of evidence during a future trial. Talking about *Historia de Garabato y Florazul*, Chilean researcher and poet Jorge Montealegre writes that “When you do not have the opportunity to physically escape, this desire is transformed into an imaginary escape through art creation. [...] the collective actions of the people lacking liberty, create a process of resilience that aids survival, thanks, in part, to the consolation brought about by imagination and the utopias it creates” (Montealegre 2009, p. 1).

One can only speculate about Fernández Huidobro possible influences, the fact that each page is self-conclusive with in many cases no background evokes a tradition of comics that do not tell an adventurous story but consists mainly of almost metaphysical monologues or dialogues such as *Peanuts* by Charles M. Schulz in the United States, *Mafalda* by Quino or *Clemente* by Caloi in South America.

The sequence where the rain produced by UFOs make people sleep and where all the shoes invade a football stadium is for its part clearly reminiscent of 1959 Argentinian canonical comic *El Eternauta* (*The Eternaut*) by Francisco Solano López and Héctor Germán Oesterheld. Retrospectively, this appears not only as a nod as both works are intimately linked with the context of their time: the political repression and state terrorism in South America during the second half of the 20th century. Having been assassinated in 1977 or 1978, Oesterheld is one of the 30 000 “desaparecidos” from the Argentinian military regime that took place between 1976 and 1983. Therefore, *El Eternauta* has later been

analysed through a political prism as a metaphor of the writer resistance against the dictatorship.

Making the invisible visible

The three works display a striking level of freedom regarding the plastic and narrative devices. All of them present, on the one hand, comicitous features which suggest that they are hidden germs from the “hors-champ” of the medium and, on the other hand, present idiosyncratic characteristics that sets them apart from the canonical forms of comics. By ‘canonical forms’, I mean uses that are present in most of the works that are regarded as the standards of the medium: suites of drawings accompanied by balloons that contain texts; the images are spacetime fragments hinged together in order to produce a plot.

However, nothing says that the common uses of comics could have been a point of reference for any of the three creators. Particularly, in the case of Charlotte Salomon who emphasises that she breaks with visual arts practices. In the text at the very beginning of *Leben? Oder Theater?* she makes her fictional double says: “it was necessary in a large part to give up the artistic aspect, which I hope people will forgive, taking into account the work accomplished to penetrate the depths of the soul” (Salomon 2015, non-paged). K. T. Drenthe for his part, states: “I am not a real drawer but just an amateur who draws by necessity” (Drenthe 1963, p. 101). Just as Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, he apparently did not have any visual art background and decided to learn to draw because he was driven by the need to give his testimony the specific form he wanted. Salomon has obviously renounced to get any artistic recognition with *Leben? Oder Theater?* when Drenthe and Fernández Huidobro have never had ambition in that field. Any judgement of taste from outside opinion does not count; the fear of not being recognised or the risk to put their artistic career in jeopardy becomes here insignificant in front of the absolute need to testimony, to keep oneself from sinking definitively into despair or even to survive.

In such a context, the issue of the respective limits between each art form does not appear any more relevant. Creation has long been conditioned – and to some extent is still conditioned – by the narrow divisions between the artistic disciplines inherited from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Laocoon*. Salomon, Drenthe and Fernández Huidobro not having to wonder about the specificities of the medium in which they are involved are inclined to opt for devices that mix several semiotic registers: texts, images – but also possibly music scores or collages. This heterogeneity naturally favours the creation of comicitous works.

In 1945, French painter, sculptor and wine merchant Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) invents the concept of Art Brut. Among the numerous definitions he has hammered out, the most famous one states:

By this [Art Brut] we mean pieces of work executed by people untouched by artistic culture, in which therefore mimicry, contrary to what happens in intellectuals, plays little or no part, so that their authors draw everything [...] from their own depths and not from clichés of classical art or art that is fashionable (Dubuffet 1967, p. 202).

This definition focus mainly on the intrinsic nature of the creators. According to it, Art Brut could only be made by people who are not part of the art circles, who have not received any art learning; the Art Brut creator is seen here as the antithesis of the intellectual.

Taking this into account, Charlotte Salomon, who had studied art at Berlin Academy, and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, who was fully integrated in the social and professional structures of his time and who has finally held an important position in the direction of his country, are indeed excluded from the Art Brut field. Because of the lack of biographical information, it is not clearly possible to settle if K. F. Drenthe could be definitively integrated into Dubuffet's category – among others, his collaboration with *Randstad* journal may suggest that he was in contact with the literary circles.

Both as an essayist and an art collector, Dubuffet has focus on creation made by marginal people, resistant to any form of social integration. Charlotte Salomon, Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro and, possibly, K. F. Drenthe could not be assimilated to the “common man” at the heart of Dubuffet's thinking. We can here observe an aesthetic rupture similar to what he has described. Creations made in dire circumstances could analogously give birth to “an art unfettered by cultural and social conditioning” (*History* undated).

These have long stayed invisible and have only recently – albeit modestly – emerged from that invisibility. The reason could not be understood without taking in account the evolution of the comics publishing structures since the end of the 20th century. Jean-Christophe Menu considers that those who are responsible for the invisibility of the ‘hors-champ’ as an integral part of the comics field are those he names the ‘microcosme BD’ (‘comics microcosm’) (Menu 2011, p. 432). The expression is used to designate several professionals he considers as agent of status quo. Critic and editor Henri Filippini, one of Menu's favourite targets, claims in 2001: “comics are above all a popular art whose aim is to entertain the reader. They must be easy-to-read and avoid messages or this kind of things. I consider the alternative productions, specialised in experimentation, as the exact contrary of what comics should be” (Filippini 2001). This kind of speech rejects de facto comics that do not adopt canonical forms. The rhetoric of Menu is precisely based on the rejection of this type of discourses and the editorial policies in line with them (Caraco 2016). Pushing back the limits of what is possible is an approach that underlies most of the actors from alternative comics: Menu but also publishers such as Atrabile who realised the catalogue *Art Brut et bande dessinée* or Frémok who created ‘Knock Outsider!’, a collection of books devoted to works made in collaboration with mentally disabled artists. As soon as the works of Salomon, Drenthe and Fernández Huidobro are viewed as comics, they clearly fit with the deepest aspirations of these actors and encourage to make them visible.

Biographical Note

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