

# What the Everyday Promises · Part I

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## Tony Côme

*We'd arranged to have our very first studio visit in the north of Paris. On the way there, I cross paths with a young boy holding a color-wheel with perplexing hues and contours. Is he there to foreshadow our discussions? The paint is still wet. For the middle schooler, it is a banal exercise in fine arts. For the two artists, it is a potential piece for their collection. Gaëlle Hippolyte welcomes me at the door. The loft windows are gigantic, the music exigent. Their work is spread out on the floor. Lina Hentgen unwraps some Kourabiedes from her trip to Greece.*

Hippolyte Hentgen We needed an accomplice to organize our work into a book. It is a real mess—or maybe we should say it summons a great variety of things.

So the title came about quite naturally, *Imagier*. L'imagier is the person that fabricates images, but also the pedagogical object that underpins this collection. It also references Alfred Jarry and Remy de Gourmont's "L'Ymagier, A Magazine of Engravings," a review that we love. It was published at the end of the 19th century, born from their interest in popular images and mixes typographic experiments, Épinal prints, references to peddling, coded pages, etc.

The fairly classic and identifiable 4-handed drawing techniques that we were using at the beginning of our collaboration gradually mutated into treating the image in the broadest sense of the word. Collages and cartoons drawn directly onto film then found their place. We still borrow from the same documents and iconographic sources, but now they are integrated more directly without being organized hierarchically. This actually kept us from being able to look at the quality and finesse of each of these singular sources.

For us, this collection of images is, in one way or another, a collection of drawings. Even when we paint, the imagery or the subject lovingly embraces the drawing. With this monograph, we'd like to shine some light on the eclectic content we manipulate, which is heavily linked both to pop culture and collective imagination.

Tony Côme You collect images intensively, almost compulsively. There's a marked interest in their materiality; whether amateur photos, press clippings, handmade works, industrial archives, comic book pages, etc. How do you put together and classify this very heterogeneous repertoire? When does one of these images imperatively become working material?

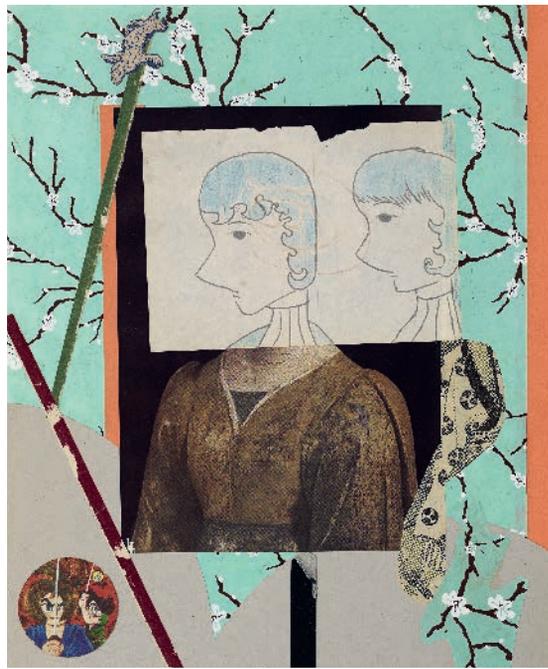
Hippolyte Hentgen We frequent garage sales and various clearance shops. Friends also give us things they've come across. We tend to buy documents that are worn-out and inexpensive, humble things that are not really aimed at collectors but which seem to have some potential to reinvest. We are looking for documents that are windows on "non-art", on the world and fulfill the documentary function (that teaches us something). They draw our attention for different reasons, but their nature/condition keeps us from fetishizing them. These documents shouldn't be confused with archives: they witness no truths, are open, anonymous, and able to be interpreted and re-interpreted.

Recycling is a central operation for us, taking into account the wear and finish. This is where the weaving of the work begins.

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Série Sanjo Dori, 2019

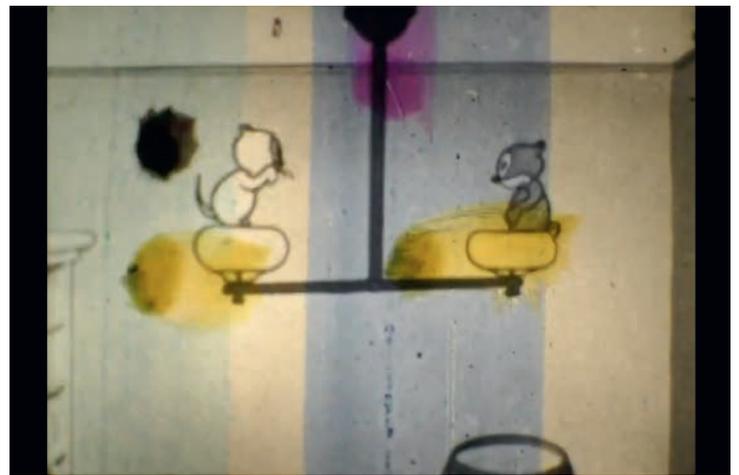


Série Sanjo Dori, 2019



Série Sanjo Dori, 2019

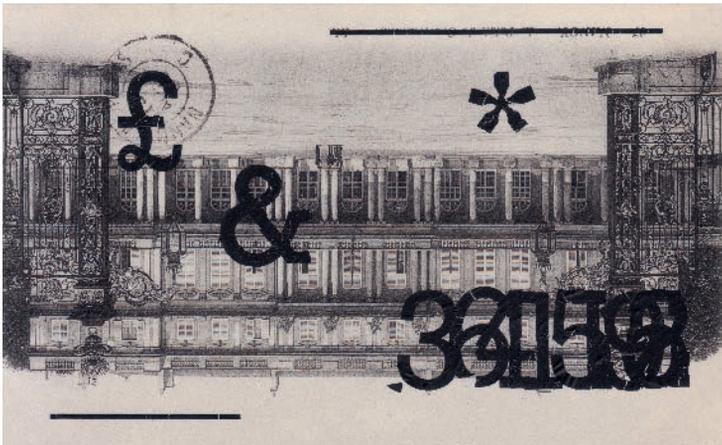
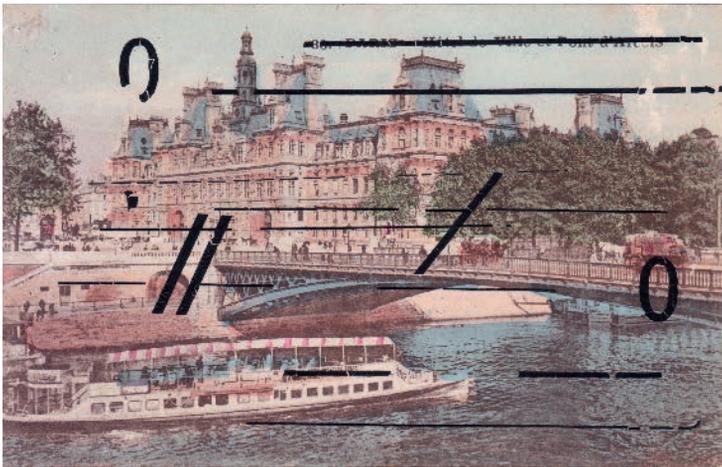
*Three Little Kittens, 2017*



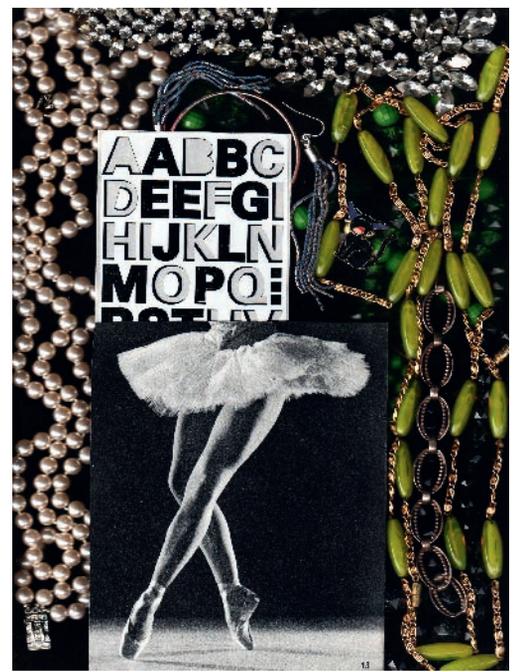


Vue du montage de l'exposition | View of the exhibition set-up *L'Archipel*. CRAC Occitanie, Sète, 2014

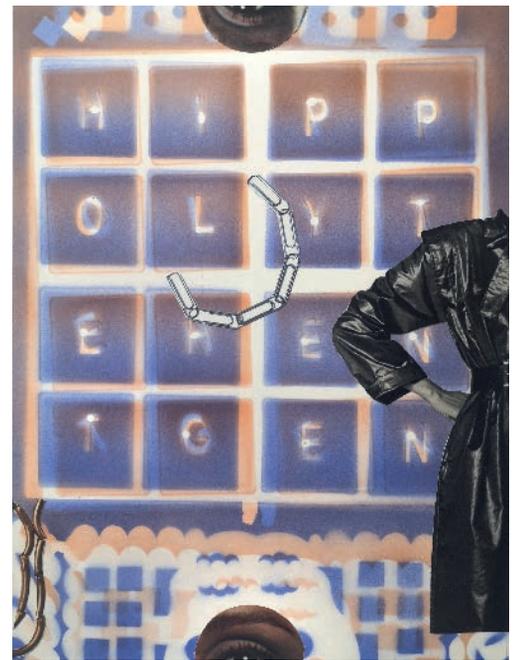
*Postcards*, 2017



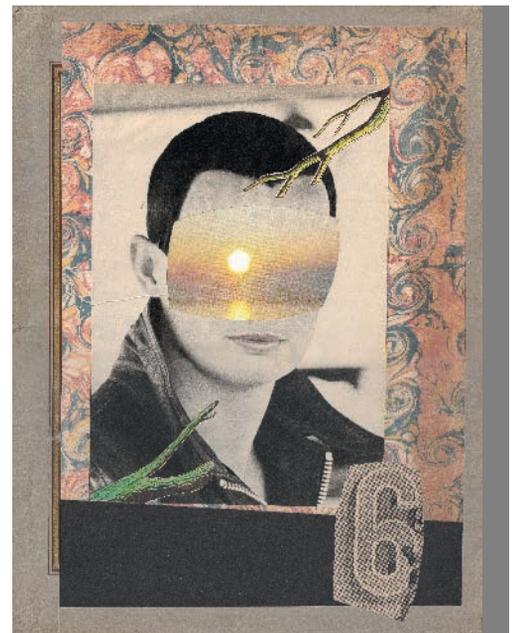
*Les Italiens*, 2022



*Ballerina*, 2021



*Sans titre*, 2022



*Série Cyclope*, 2022

In the studio, we dedicate some time to manipulating this big inventory of documents—to memorizing or describing them. We manage, but our system is far from scientifically rigorous. The documents are grouped into categories like: Work, Industry, Science, Education, etc. The nature of the images are different, from different time periods, with different formats—but they offer a kind of historical and social perspective around a subject, extending from the middle of the 19th century (our oldest documents) to today.

Even though the conditions in which the images were produced or the message they are likely to convey come up in our panorama, it turns out that didactic qualities and questions of legibility can create obstacles in our working process.

To change gears, we have a second image base, classified by country, by provenance. Things we found in Japan are organized in such a way as to highlight paper qualities, the recurrence of patterns and genre scenes. The Italian documents we collected are of a totally different register. They are more exuberant. It's the land of soft, light lines, caricatures and the pamphlet. Our finds from the United States led us to experiment with cartoons, 16mm animations and assembly-line drawings. This territorial prism works like a filter and brings a bit of continuity into a very heterogeneous collection. And lastly, there are a certain number of boxes with motifs, ornaments, scraps, margins, frames, typographic details (sort of in the vein of Roman Cieslewicz). These isolated little twigs are the only elements that manage to slide all over the place in our work.

Each series is a challenge in terms of assemblage. In general, we work on many drawings at once. Working from eclectic sources means using a methodical approach—drawing as a puzzle, an archipelago. Since there's the two of us, we don't have a linear approach to our choice of images and we rarely start from the beginning. Deleuze liked to say how grass grows from the middle, it emerges somewhere, then somewhere else, and so on...

By choosing an image, we give the drawing a direction; we appropriate a tool, a format.

It can sometimes be a very light and whimsical choice that comes from an exhibition invitation, collaboration and the like.

Tony Côme Talking about typographical details, what is your relationship to the letter, to type design? It is a universe in its own right, where leading designers, sign painters and anonymous neon manufacturers rub shoulders. A pop artist like Claes Oldenburg developed a real monomania for the alphabet. We could cite others. In your work, there are a few letters, sometimes words, some onomatopoeia cut from comic books appear a bit more often, but overall typography is quite marginal.

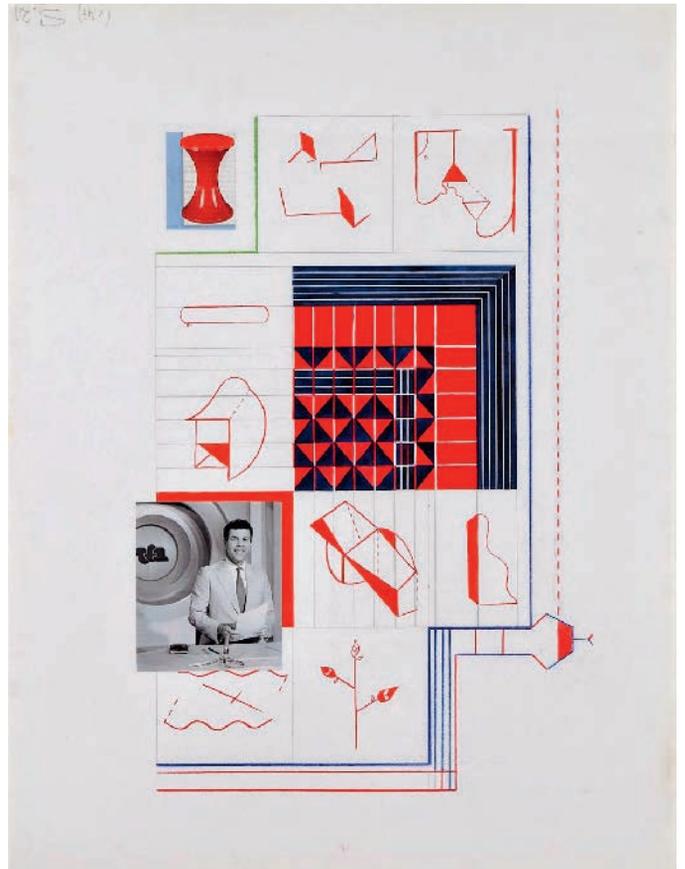
Hippolyte Hentgen There is an obvious relationship between drawing and writing. Drawing is a way of noting, of fixing elements from the past. It is a way of organizing our scattered times of immediacy, linearity and consequently of oversight with a certain kind of flexibility. Drawing every day is a way of constituting oneself, of expressing oneself, it is a way of "Self Writing" according to the expression of Michel Foucault.<sup>1</sup>

But writing is not typography... There are a few quotes in our repertoire, but we clearly operate more by visual citation. With images, there is no mark equivalent to quotation marks. We have to consciously control the degree of disclosure of the referent.

Some of our drawings use simplified forms (close to pictograms—visual alphabets of sorts). It's a way of raising the question of a shared reality, or the immediacy of the act of seeing.

A more direct rapport with words, letters or typography could perhaps come up one day in our work, but we have the impression that it can't be done lightly. It certainly seems like a lifelong undertaking. This is what many of the artists that we follow in this field lead us to believe (Mel Bochner, Cady Noland, Lawrence Weiner, etc.). That said, these artists

1. Michel Foucault, "Self Writing", translated from *Corps écrit* n°5 : L'Autoportrait, February 1983, pp. 3-23



Série *Lizzie Derriey*, 2014



Série *Lizzie Derriey*, 2014

don't seem to have the same needs or the same relationship to language.

*Illustrated magazines show people the world  
while at the same time preventing them  
from truly perceiving it.<sup>2</sup>*

2. Siegfried  
Kracauer in Thomas  
Y. Levin (éd. et trad.),  
Siegfried Kracauer,  
*Photography, in Mass  
Ornament. Weimar  
Essays*, Cambridge  
Mass., Harvard Unive-  
rsity Press, 1995, p.51

We are focused on the effect of ordinary forces and familiar habits that end up neutralizing, weakening, and watering down everything around us. We let ourselves branch out just the same and try out many methods—but still keep grappling with our main subject: the rapport between drawing and document.

On the other hand, we are working on something that could be an iconographic equivalent to what you were saying about crafts and trade.

We have been developing the Lizzie Derriey series for a few years now. For this, we work on original templates from the textile industry. There is an incredible amount of creativity and technique in these rigorous industrial motifs.

The Lizzie Derriey house, located on rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, employed around twenty-five textile designers between 1928 and 1994. Each pattern was made by hand and the original templates are numbered and archived, but there is no name associated with the drawings, no author. This collection fell into oblivion and was rediscovered in 2010 in the south of France. In our Lizzie Derriey inventory of about 100 templates, certain drawing habits come up: particular curves-of-line, recurring motifs, and a very inventive, sometimes eccentric, way of numbering the templates. We recognize some designers this way. It's not easy to draw a straight, framing line after a few years spent drawing swirls and scrolls. Memory becomes gestural.

These artisanal patterns bring up the question of the standard, of organic memory, of the plus-value of a body confronted with the logic of production and its expectations. We are really fond of this series of collective drawings. It allows us to emphasize that any artistic or artisanal activity brings together practical knowledge, know-how, physical engagement, gestural memory as well as a more passive form of contemplating beauty. We believe in the idea of a sentient common ground, without the line dividing humanity into two big "active" and "passive" blocks.

*It is no longer enough to simply oppose action to  
contemplation without noting that each of these activities  
—or suspension of activities—is itself inhabited by  
a hierarchy: there are those who see reality and those who  
look at shadows; those who take action and those who merely  
make things up; those who relish in leisure activities  
and those who simply take breaks between two energy  
expenditures; those who speak and reason and  
those who make noise with their mouths to express their  
well-being or illness, etc.<sup>3</sup>*

3. Bertrand  
Dommergue, "Où en  
est l'art? Entretien  
avec Jacques  
Rancière", [https://  
blogs.mediapart.fr/ber-  
trand-dommergue/  
blog/310815/entretien-  
avec-jacques-ranciere-  
ou-en-est-lart](https://blogs.mediapart.fr/bertrand-dommergue/blog/310815/entretien-avec-jacques-ranciere-ou-en-est-lart),  
August 31, 2015

That is to say, we think of drawing as a horizontal principle without hierarchy.

Tony Côme It's often forgotten, but drawing was first taught in primary schools for industrial purposes, to prepare people for working in factories, not for working in artists' studios. Though it was, as you mention, to get people "in line", to ensure that the rules—and the body itself and by extension the discipline—were very literally incorporated. Could you talk about what drawing does to your bodies? To put it another way, what physical engagement and techniques does your practice involve?

Hippolyte Hentgen It is a question of maintaining an eclectic and dense iconographic system, of bringing out these sources imaginatively without reducing things to a mechanics of gestures. The body is our main drawing tool. Its articulations, amplitudes, geometries and breath allow us to keep the promises of mark making. We avoid taking on too many habits. Frequently changing your relationship with the body is a way of resisting

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*Merry Melody (II), 2011*



*Série Les Solitaires, 2010*



*Série Les Solitaires, 2010*



*Solitaire I*, 2010

*Marble Canyon*, Centre d'art contemporain Les Capucins, Embrun, 2019



*Les Abattoirs*, Musée – Frac Occitanie Toulouse, 2010



*Vue d'atelier | Studio view*, Rome, 2021

repeated postures that get you ‘in line’ or off-kilter. It allows us to continuously measure and engage the way certain gestures embed a conscious and to handle each subject with newness. As a duo, the variations and challenges are always different.

We work on fairly long series and have time to experiment and feel what certain repeated gestures and postures do to the body. Some drawings are painful to make, but the pleasure that drives us in the studio helps us to keep going.

At the start of our collaboration, we worked on the *Merry Melody* series—a set of drawings at 1:1 scale (120 × 160 cm) based on a pin-up model. At the outset, we wanted the technique (and the relationship to the body that it implies) to say something about the image represented.

The pin-up is a female object, with proportions codified by cinema, advertising and mass media at large—a pure body-sign. In the United States, these images—literally to be “pinned on the wall”—were slipped into soldier’s sacks or covered the front of bombers. These groundless feminine models made to boost the morale of the troops, led us to think that pin-ups are to soft erotica what Muzak is to music. We saw an opportunity to transform this sanitized and functional image of the woman.

Our idea was to work on these fantasized bodies with an industrial technique, which implies distance. The airbrush deposits color by projection, using a small nozzle and a compressor. But how can you reintroduce the personal into the generic? It means going past the cliché—beyond this petrified expression—to reach something that will hopefully be singular and lively.

Contrary to our other drawings, we did our best to avoid touching the paper or leaving a trace. We used a meticulous series of masking calques to apply many layers of color that produced a many-veiled, intertwining of the pigments.

These drawings are quite heavy in material, with studied plays of light somewhat like a photograph. The phantasmagorical filter gives them a second life, and a disturbing sensation of a possible reality. The question of scale and treatment is decisive in this.

To work on this series, the paper must be on the ground, we must be able to look at it from our height, and then it requires many hours of work curled up performing a series of fastidious, physical operations that require discipline. It hurts a bit, but since we do it only periodically, it’s all right.

Tony Côme Should some of your images be considered as self-portraits? Here you can see two little witches, a brunette and a redhead, equipped with pallets; and here: two elegant, fashionable Parisian women. It’s hard not to see you appearing in the latticework. How does a duo-practice handle a self-portrait?

Hippolyte Hentgen First, there’s the case of Hippolyte Hentgen. Our name is perhaps our first self-portrait—hybridization without fusion. It is our body of debate, our visual commitment, and our two voices. As the name suggests, a chance association of our two last names made us more of a man. We like the gender ambiguity and the outdated name. He serves us as author and speaker. He is a socially and culturally identifiable character, thanks to the bank of documents that appear in the drawings that situate him. He is the practical author who allows us not to guarantee the authenticity of any story and who clears us from being guarantors of any one’s psychology. Hippolyte Hentgen is a double-emancipation that prevents work from withdrawing into itself and maintains openness and confrontation with the world. In fact, though Hippolyte Hentgen is always Lina and Gaëlle, we are not always Hippolyte Hentgen—as people who have crossed our paths would attest.

We believe that you must regularly start from scratch. We’re careful to adapt techniques to new contexts from the world as it manifests itself to us since that is where everything starts.

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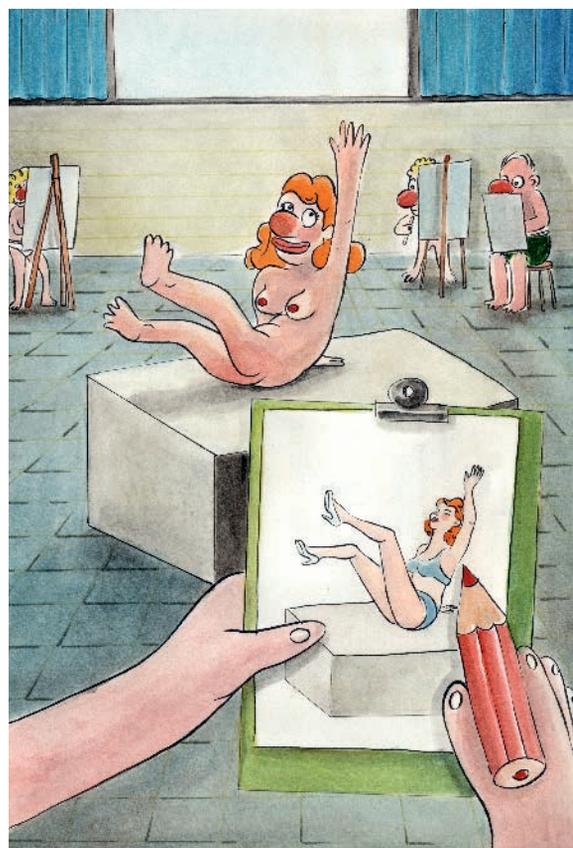
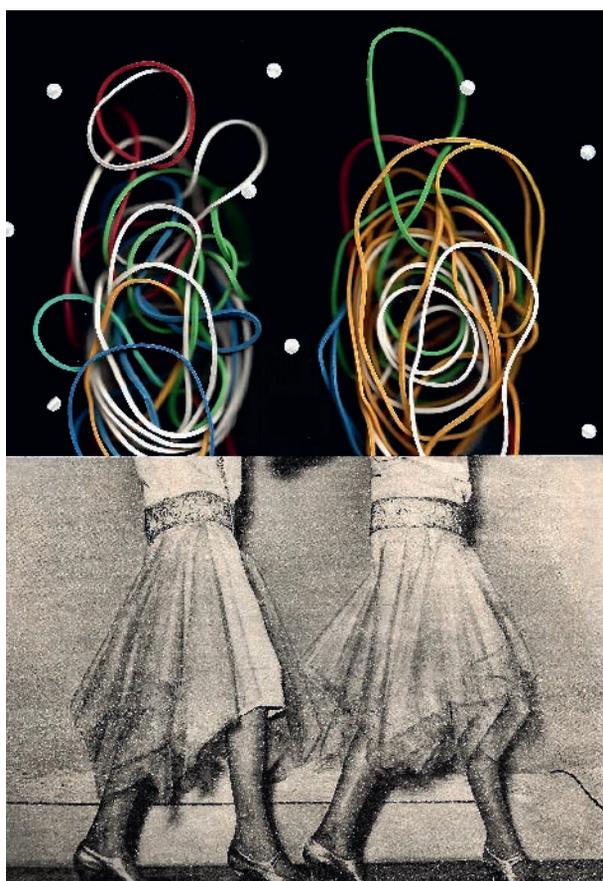


Série *Sentiments Adrift*, 2012



*Cabinet d'amateur*, 2012

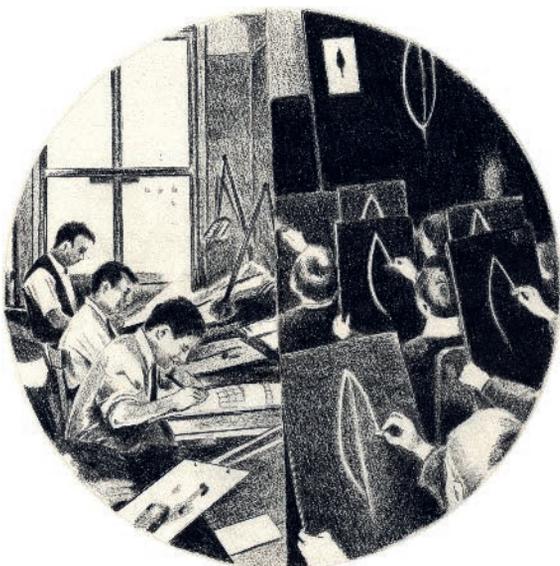
*Ballerina*, 2021



*Diaprès modèle*, 2012



*Au bonheur des dames, 2017*



*Série Sentiments Adrift, 2012*



*Salon de l'érotisme, 2012*

Self-portraits are often a starting point. For us, they are made for pleasure through friendship and complicity. But they are also a way of admitting that our attempt at reanimating these characters whose expressivity has been reduced or frozen by the picture industry is really an examination of our own condition as artists. Though they seem casual, these portraits describe a more melancholic assessment of our relationship with the world.

In our self-portraits, like the watercolor series *Les gros nez*, a lot of idiotic situations come up. These are fast and liberating images where we have fun recounting some of our experiences. In them, we make ourselves out to be mascots, products sold in twos. It's our way of laughing at our difficulty in saying "I"; of changing the world; of saying great things (or even new things) as artists.

We keep exploring this collective memory and its articulations, never admitting we are completely defeated. Year after year, we try to trace out what could appear as a small visual history (in the long term perhaps) of the struggles and flourishes, of the ebbs and flows—a historiography of the time in which we live.

Tony Côme You have depicted—and have represented yourself in—many academic, artistic scenes. I am thinking in particular of *D'après modèle*. Bad memories?

Hippolyte Hentgen Indeed, some art-school scenes come up and they're certainly out of affection. We were lucky in terms of our Fine Arts schooling and are still learning. So, no, there aren't really any bad memories. Our schools definitely delivered—also in terms of helping us emancipate ourselves and meeting people that are still important to us today.

We were also lucky to get to be part of these institutions that constantly put art-school pedagogy, their tools and its utility into question.

It's good that you brought up *D'après modèle*. It's one of our worst drawings. We like it a lot. Nude model drawing remains one of those unavoidable staples of drawing class. We didn't escape it either. A classic, but mostly a symbolic right-of-passage today that says: should you so choose, artistic life starts here.

We know that academia exists and we understand its function, but it's not part of our world.

What isn't learned is what's important to us—a taste for drawing without hindrance and from all walks of life. Technique obviously plays an important role. You have to take it into account and use it; but the more singular a technique, the more expressive it is, allowing you to account for everything you want to bring out.

We quickly thought of drawing as a broad means of taking notes—with its ductility and flexibility at the cutting edge of visual meaning. This intuition quickly gave way to a ravenous desire for an uninhibited and versatile drawing practice where everything is a pretext for discovery. It seems that a form of grace is inherent in drawing beneath the apparent lightness—it can be at once modest, serious and sometimes grave. We try to constantly pay attention to the heterogeneity of graphic codes (both scholarly and vernacular), which can coexist on a sheet, a wall, a frame, and, of course, under the same hand.

Tony Côme To what extent does your art school education at the Villa Arson (with a couple of years difference) contribute to complicity in your work and your mutual practice in the long term? In a way, couldn't you say that that "going to school" means encouraging the creation of duos like yours?

Hippolyte Hentgen We went to a few different schools, but the Villa Arson is really the beating heart of our collaboration. We were there from 1998 to 2005 between the two of us. Villa Arson is, first of all, Michel Marot's incredible architecture, which undeniably influenced pedagogy and offered incredible freedom for action. It's also an establishment that combines an art center, an art school and an artist's residency. To give you

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an idea: at the time there were 150 students on a 23,000 square meters campus, including 17,000 sq. meters of workshops, with a long central promenade and small squares and terraces overlooking the city. It had a view of the sea and abundant Mediterranean plants. A microcosm, a suspended vessel that is both brutal and marvelous.

The technical workshops were substantial and we had access to everything, beginning first year with tailor-made training. Christian Bernard had just ended his tenure as director of the school to found MAMCO in Geneva, but the innovative and brilliant pedagogical principles he'd initiated endured. Unlike the école du Magasin in Grenoble, which also "formed a school," the Villa has taught many important artists without having a really identifiable community. The processes, identities and practices surely corresponded to the myriad uses offered by this extraordinary place. Chance has it that, without knowing each other, we studied the same subjects, built up a common genealogy of artists, and made similar choices that our respective friends quickly pointed out. That's how we ended up hearing about each other.

We both took advantage of our school years. Classes, in both theory and practice, were of a really high caliber. We both worked at art centers, as assistants, helping with installation, communication, art-production or putting exhibition spaces back together. The art center was really, perhaps a second pedagogy for us and we remember this time fondly.

Our teachers were exigent and it helped us to ask precisely the right questions. We were able to do some exhibiting outside of school and that gave us a lot of respect and understanding for art and its relationship to exhibition spaces. There were a lot of debates and interesting arguments that came about, sometimes they were difficult, but we realize that it's a luxury to argue about art stuff—it helped to sharpen our convictions and our relationship to forms. When we met, this common background and our shared love of the studio didn't leave us hesitant for long and we quickly got to know each other by working together. It was a pretty risky bet that we've never regretted.

# What the Everyday Promises · Part II

## Tony Côme

*Second visit. Now I know the studio and have permission to let myself in. There's a draft in the building and a tornado in the studio as I enter. Heads from American comics, cut-out statues, some astronomical engravings and erotic images glitter around and settle like confetti. Gaëlle and Lina were working on a new collage and greet me with an accusatory air that they can hardly conceal.*

4. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D. F. Bouchard. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, p.147

*The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously thought immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; its shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.<sup>4</sup>*

Tony Côme The very dense family tree that you sketched out once is an interesting counterpart to the versatility of your practice, as you say yourselves. It almost makes you doubt the existence of a common core, towards which all these things converge. How to find one's way in such an imbroglio of tangled lines?

Hippolyte Hentgen In the first years after we started collaborating, we made a series of family trees in waxy colored pencils that played around with saturation—both technical and iconographical. The series was produced for the editorial *Particules*. This free journal published between 2003 and 2010 had really great and serious articles and interviews.

These drawings are teeming with references and works that we adore. We enjoyed comparing notes and looking at the correlation and the diversity in our tastes and affinities. It's our playground—a funny Who's Who? for the spectator. The series shows what brought us together (as well as our affection for bouquets of flowers, nice people, or Bernard Buffet's horrible and superb little owl).

All of our drawings use references to highlight that one of the great strengths of drawing is its ability to reproduce. These references are affectionate indications that point out the divergent connotations of the images we draw. You can recognize these citations or not. As we gain experience, we try to make sense of their various aesthetic statuses and the cultural and political meaning of their hybridization. Pop Art rarely cites its sources—that is a problem.

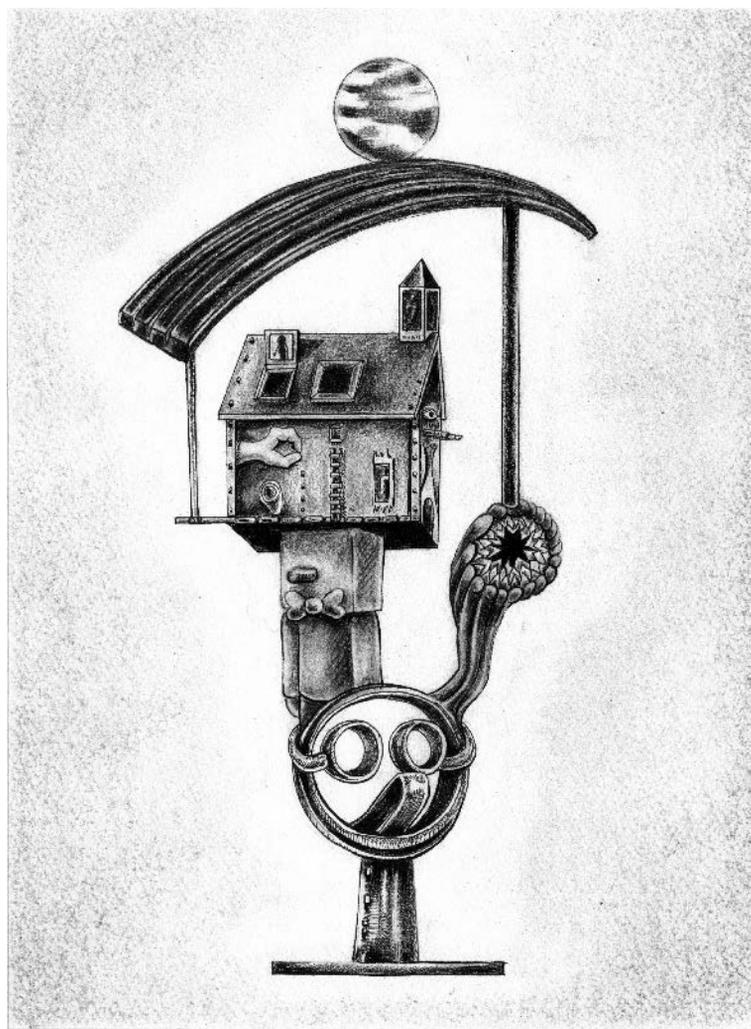
Tony Côme Do you have a problem with Pop Art?

Hippolyte Hentgen Pop Art is far from a monolithic movement, even though that is how it is often described in art school. Pop Art provided an important spark for our work—its apparent density intrigued us, it stimulated our curiosity, our 'critical minds'. It is tricky to discuss so quickly, but in general, this movement borrows images from popular culture and seems to limit itself to superficial questions—avoiding those dealing with the underlying structure of art and its power. Some artists within the pop legacy became brands. Shouldn't this be considered a problem? Not to mention anyone in particular, but there is a kind of conventional pop that doesn't appeal to us and which basks in an idea of sterilized luxury. It uses language as an alibi and—it should be noted—serves a

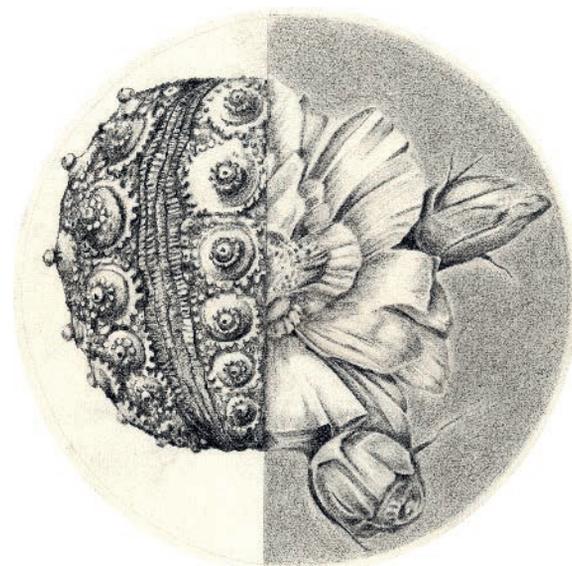
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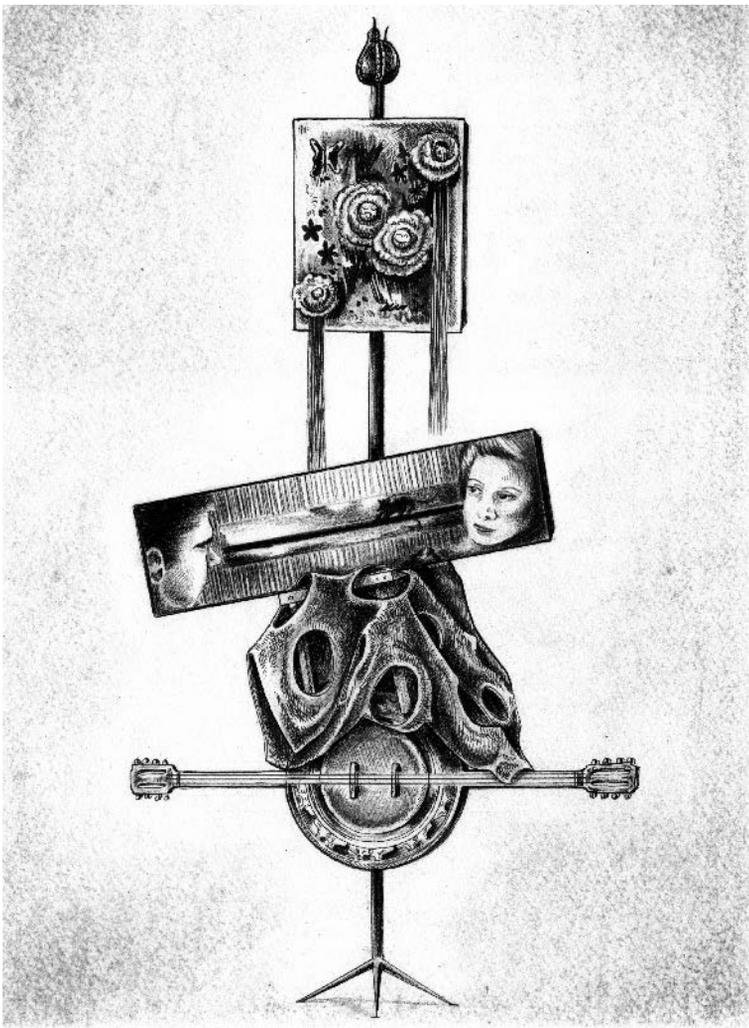
Série *Arbre généalogique*, 2009



Série *Idoles*, 2012



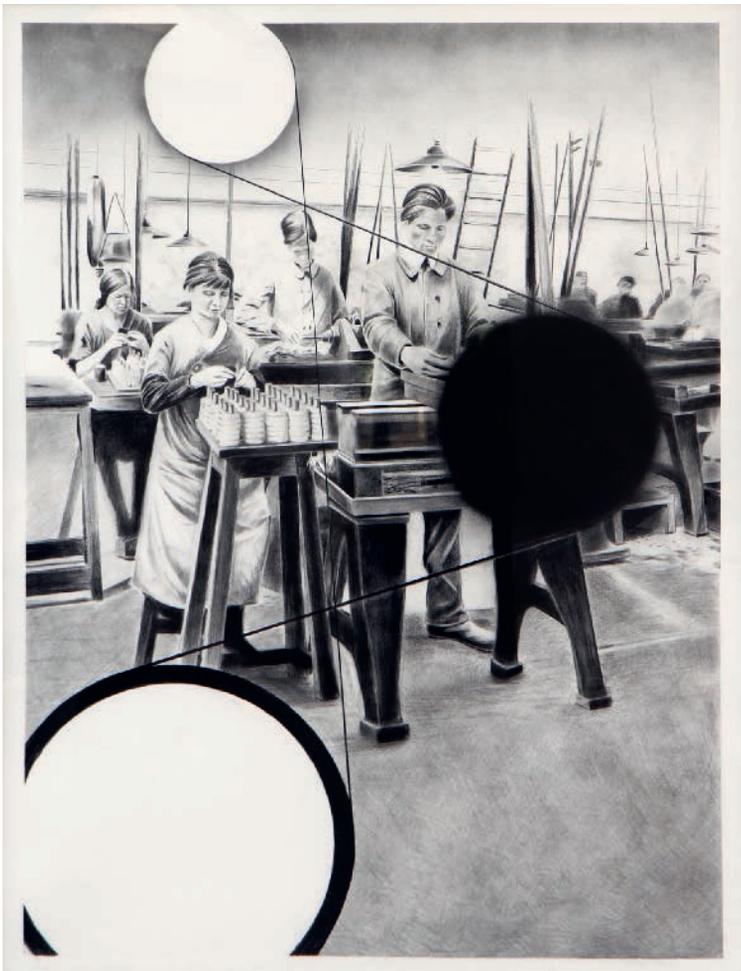
Série *Sentiments Adrift*, 2012



Série *Idoles*, 2012



Série *Arbre généalogique*, 2009



Série *Night Sound*, 2013

neoliberal ideology. Thankfully, there is another legacy of Pop that avoids commodification. That is the Pop-Art tradition that draws our attention and our affection.

There were even many audacious women in this movement (or close to it) that are really outstanding examples for us. They started getting the recognition that they deserved thanks to brilliant curators like H el ene Guenin, who made a point of recalibrating what history books had (for a very long time) never taken into account. As a result, Sturtevant was decisive in our training. Her work is part of what helped us to see the nuances in Pop by choosing to cite *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman in her work. This choice is naturally a political one—putting the ‘creolization’ of language in the forefront and offering a different point of view on gender ambiguities inherent in the cat-mouse-dog trio so present in this cartoon. With Sturtevant, the constant back-and-forth between popular imagery, references, repeated motifs as well as a consistent radicalism in her work allowed us to see pop art as a “critical” movement.

Under the big Pop umbrella, with its inoffensive (even mesmerizing) appearance, aren’t there some powerful political stakes—of domination or not—concentrated around popular culture?

Popular culture is different than mass culture (which is made for the people and not by the people). Pop culture doesn’t need to concern itself with the hierarchies of artistic disciplines dictated by history, the market, or dominant ideologies.

Doesn’t maintaining this hierarchy support the very possibility of social order or disorder, submission, or emancipation? Don’t the vernacular and the homebody define popular culture best? There are many examples of ignored artists and outsiders who have produced singular and innovative masterpieces.

What Cecilia Mangini, Kiki Kogelnik, etc. highlight is that popular culture shows and tells a story of solidarity, of living together, of changes in society—all with a great deal of humility.

Paid vacation, literacy, public transportation, and secularism are all directly linked to modern industrialization and working-class culture. Beneath the apparent levity, we don’t have such an easy job to defend: we cannot get rid of the intuition that stable and permanent forms must be shaken up. Modernity has left us with its notions and mobility, the means of a crossroads. Mobility it is disruptive; it can undo traditional authority and open up the field of possibilities: the loss of a predefined horizon, movement, and constant attention.

Tony C ome Indeed, and to shift back to your work, how do you deal with all these histories and the lineage that your many sources necessarily bring with them?

Hippolyte Hentgen Reproducing, citing, referencing is a way of acknowledging that artwork is never done alone; it’s made of *œuvres*, forms and experiences. We are working on a giant palimpsest where you have to constantly make, take apart and remake. Like the ghosts in Beckett’s *Quad*, we pace ourselves.

We’re always concerned about authorship and (from there) having something new to say. There’s a quote from Harold Rosenberg that’s stuck with us for quite some time:

*The artist today is offered a catalogue of styles and invited to choose. He knows, however, that the latest edition of the style book is already out of date. Everything that has been done in art opens another door, but the door faces a blank wall.*<sup>5</sup>

We like to think that the imagination gets worked out like a muscle. We imagine that to engage in this game without wearing yourself out, you can function by associating ideas—a bit like the card game *Oblique Strategies* by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. Introducing an affective genealogy into

5. Harold Rosenberg, “20. Keeping Up”, *The De-Definition of Art*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1972, p.223



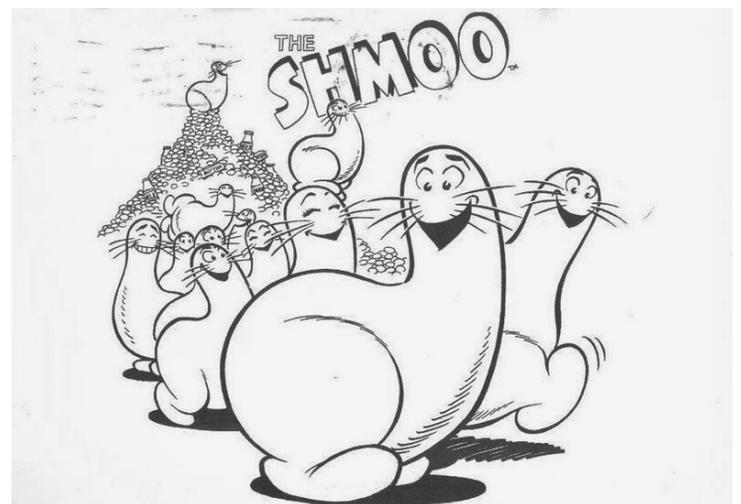
*Série Night Sound, 2013*

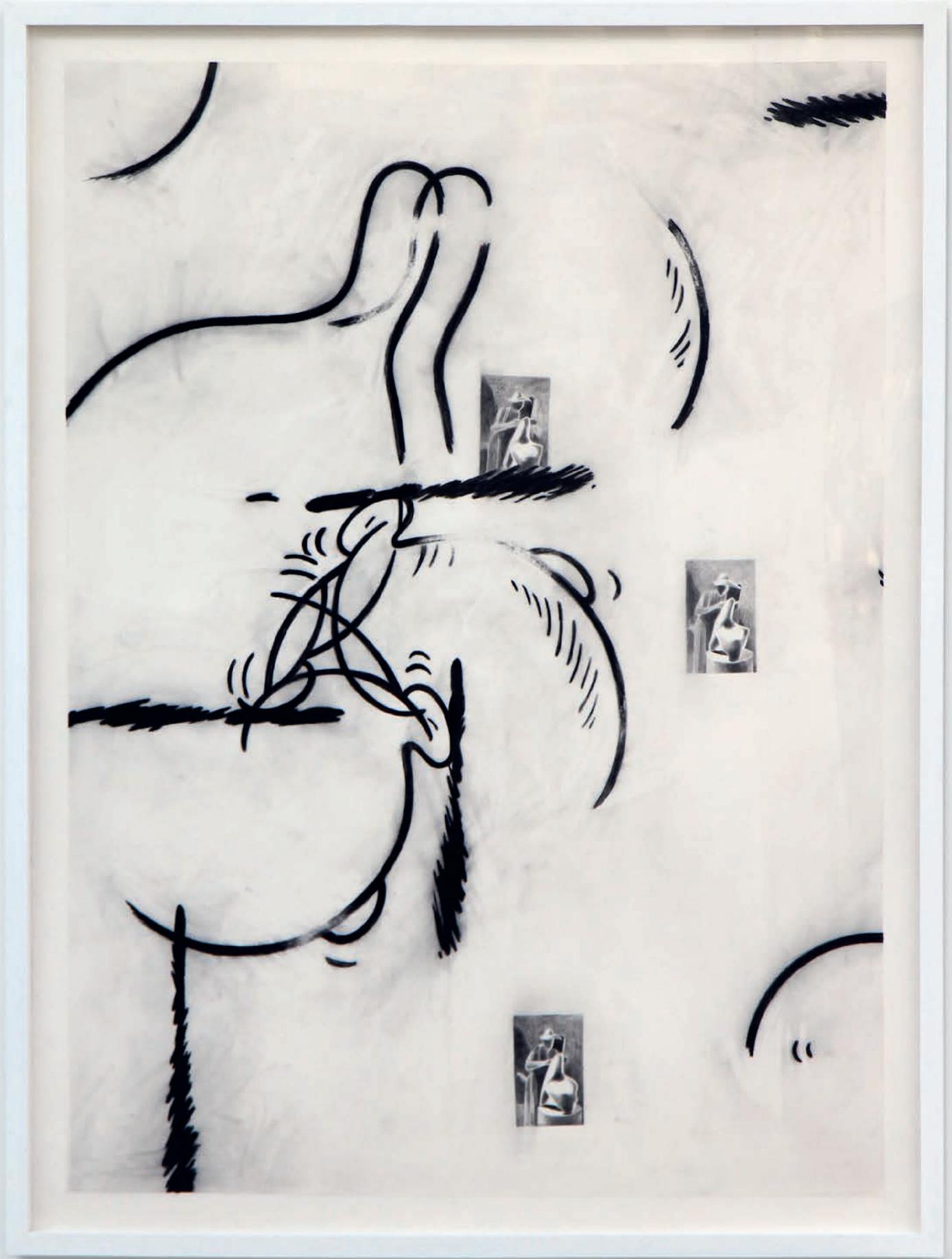


*Gjon Mili, Jean Arp, polissant une sculpture abstraite dans son jardin à côté de Paris, 1949*

*Gjon Mili, French sculptor Jean Arp, alone, polishing abstract sculpture in his garden near Paris, 1949*

*Al Capp, The Sbmoo, 1948*





*Série Night Sound, 2013*

our work opens up a huge field of possibilities. Since there are two of us, we don't need to force it; each of us comes with a chunk of history and we have to weave together a new form—operating in a back-and-forth between material and icon.

Tony Côme

Could you give a specific example?

Hippolyte Hentgen Take this drawing from the series *Night Sound* for example. The title designates scary sounds coming from a dark place, but between us (for practical reasons), we call this particular drawing “*The Schmoo*.”

It's drawn with a simple black colored pencil and a putty eraser. The paper format is human scale and so it engages the whole body. It's from a series of five drawings that were drawn simultaneously and function via a game of slippery associations, of formal analogies. The drawing references two distinct images: a small image of Jean Arp that we had in our archives and a cartoon. To choose images, we make descriptions—a very important and often revealing tool.

This image comes from the archives of *Life* magazine appearing for the first time on December 12, 1949. It shows Jean Arp, in the garden of his studio in Clamart, polishing a sculpture in the round.

Jean Arp looks like he is exploring the material, its capacity to bend to poetic transpositions of the unconscious. His works that explore and associate touch, sensitive manipulation and its relation to games of chance are well known.

Arp's hand is sensitive to the delicate balance of shapes that swell or hollow beneath his fingers. Besides the “mis-en-scene,” this iconographic image brings together different forms blending and completing each other, almost as if they were one single body in endless motion.

Then there is Gjon Mili's technique in creating an atmospheric photo that addresses the largest audience possible. The light and shadow, contrasts, and materials reveal the virtuosity of Jean Arp—and show his sculpture as an extension of his own body. It is then a question of mentally appropriating this cliché—of remembering *l'endroit donné* (“the given place”) to use Barthes' words.<sup>6</sup>

Our grotesque approach to drawing means always putting contrary associations together. Starting from two sources (with a formal link but that are fundamentally opposed), we try through play to historically put together “high art” and entertainment. In this case: the Shmoo.

The Shmoo is a character that appeared for the first time in the review *Li'l Abner* on August 31, 1948. It was a phenomenal success in the United States in the 1950s. Based on a popular legend, the character was used to market all kinds of consumer products, but it was Al Capp who penned the curious and satirical traits that characterize him today.

The Shmoo has a rounded pear-shaped body, smooth white skin, and a light moustache. It has no nose, no arms, and no ears. The Shmoo's feet are short and round but it is paradoxically able to get into a number of contortions. Its range of expressions goes from loving joy to a kind of bliss (signaled by a heart above his head).

The Shmoo reproduces and multiplies exponentially—but is asexual and only needs air to live. When human beings look at it with envy and greed, the Schmoo sacrifices itself and initiates the cooking, eager to be eaten.

The Schmoo is the dream animal of the food industry: it is hunted with a paper bag, produces eggs, butter and milk (already packaged). The Schmoo's body doesn't produce any waste; it has no bones and recycles itself entirely into objects ranging from dental floss to suspender buttons. To finish off this blessed portrait: the Schmoo is kind, helpful and always happy.

Tony Côme

What an expertise in the realm of description!

6. [...] “in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*”, Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York, Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 1982, p.76

Hippolyte Hentgen We could go on for a while, but we don't want to waste your time. Luckily, when one of us gets caught up indulging in lyricism, the other is always there in the next breath, to bring us back to a grounded relationship with the world.

Our drawing is organized into three registers. Putting the portrait of Jean Arp in tension with this cartoon character, which is then redrawn, blurred in, set back (this remains, however, our interpretative description).

We're making it into a potential dialectical fiction, an enigma that can be apprehended by discussion, deduction or reasoning. On the one hand, *Life* magazine's "romantic" photograph appears as a vignette, three times in the image. It is homothetic to the format of the sheet, and indicates a game of scales that invites the viewer to move around the page.

This repetition gives rhythm and the feeling of a possible drift. The triple image also recalls photographic and documentary contexts (both linked to mechanical reproduction). Then there is a question of transcribing details of the photo by simplification, by reducing the image to a few gray-scale masses.

This operation diminishes the photograph's poetic and sentimental drive, all the while unfolding the portrait of the artist and the archetypes that go along with it. It is not really about Jean Arp anymore, but about the portrait of an idealized artist with his straw hat, sculpting a familiar shape in calm and solitude.

Playful thick and round black lines also appear in the foreground. They match our body scale like a measuring tool whose articulations (wrists, elbows, shoulders) are like compasses.

These curves draw a truncated circuit whose overlapping lines attempt to move or express themselves through the addition of little brackets—an unequivocal sign of wonder and movement in comics. There you can recognize the Shmoo's pudgy foot, fumbling about looking in all directions for a way to appear, to come together in its animal shape, to affirm once more its docile function, its amorous nature. You could say that the abstraction the Shmoo is kept in is like a refuge. It's up to the viewers to "zoomorphize" it according to their wishes—the key of its becoming is in their hands. By being maintained in incompleteness, this figure gains a new existential depth.

Tony Côme Do you mean that you are attempting to put assembly line drawing, the comic industry and artistic drawing in relation—in tension with one another? Are you trying—paradoxically—to invent a new common ground for these practices?

Hippolyte Hentgen The process by which forms are simplified, which the drawing industry initiated, transformed our relationship to images. These flows of characters made of simple geometrical shapes gain in accessibility, circulate broadly, address everyone and keep moving with more and more ease. But this intense multiplication also has an over-simplifying effect, which stamps-out their singularity in reducing them to a few easy, elementary expressions. This creates a remarkable contrast, as opposed to what fine art drawings traditionally seek out.

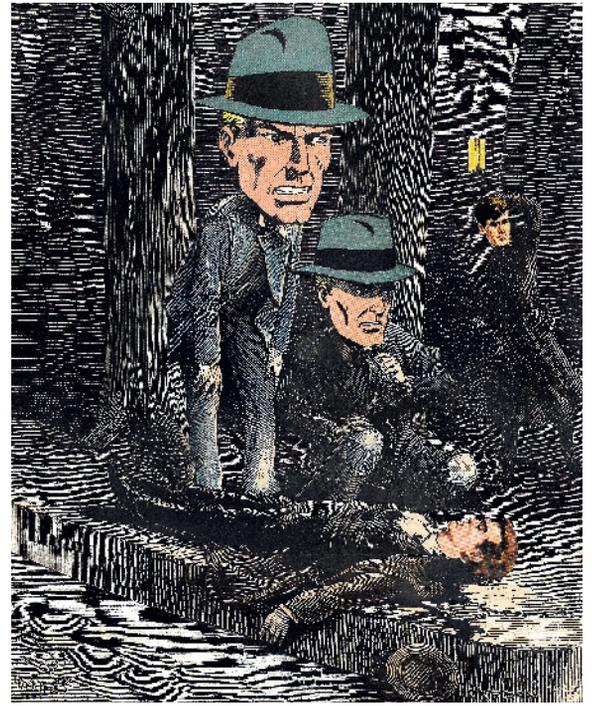
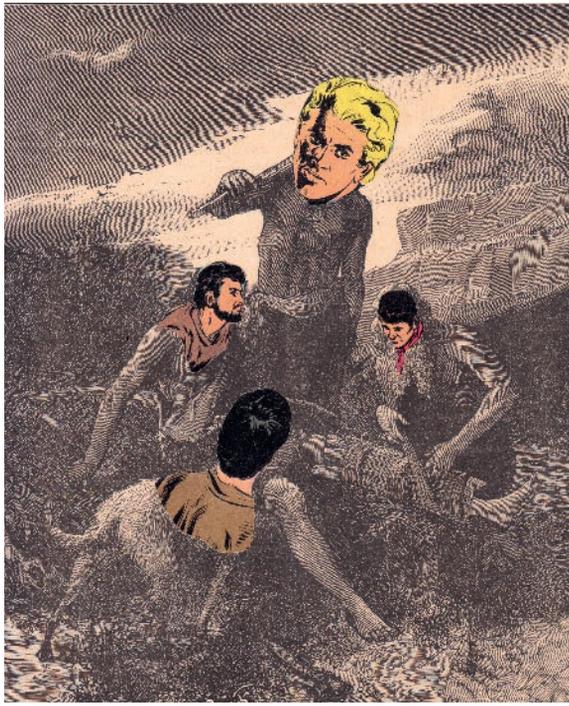
Our work consists in playing with the flexibility of the genres and trying to reintroduce or reconsider the author's "I", as well as the difficulty of being an author today. Again, these mascots are somewhat self-portraits.

What you see in the drawing is the Shmoo—a character that's empty and full—that can hopefully conjure a "self", a way to say "I". In its search, it resists, dismembers, and moves with substantial autonomy—a sort of burlesque motor that derails and gets carried away.

The link between document and referent is a fragile one. It rests solely on the viewer's curiosity and empathy—which by the way is not a problem. What you can't discern from just looking at a drawing can be sensed by looking at a collection of experiences underlying a work. As with Jean Arp's photo, it is a way of counter-balancing the media's saturation and bias.

Continued on page 135

Série Documents, 2015



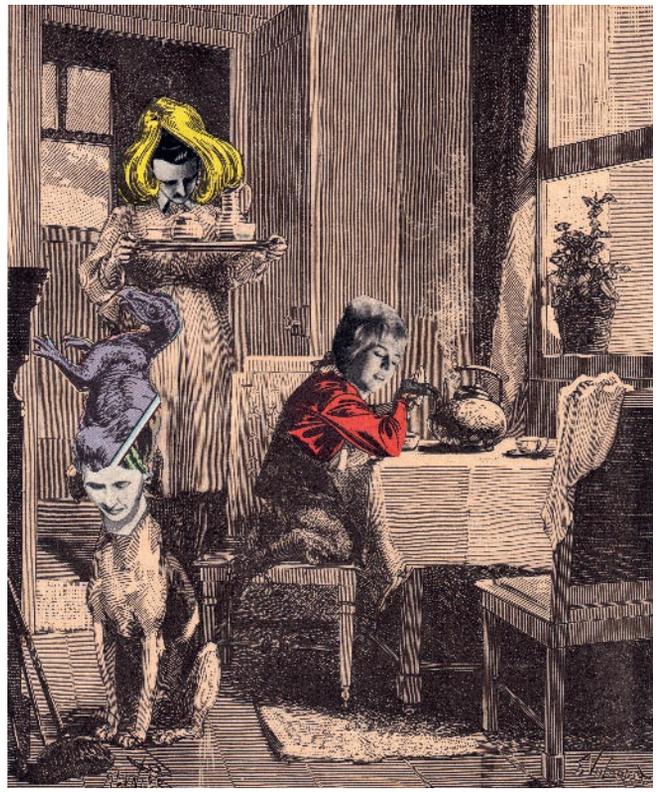
Coconino, 2020



Série Miss Fury, 2021



Série *Miss Fury*, 2021



Série *Documents*, 2015

Finally, a third register connects the whole; it is held visually by the white margin on the paper, previously covered with tape. The black pencil marks are at places pressed as hard as possible, as if testing the material's resistance as well as the deep waxy aspect of the black density. This pigmented deposit reveals hints of the outlines and their circulation. It is a question of erasing, of mixing up the body's multiple tensions and affects.

Through this tissue of choreographed circulations, the various references lose their impermeability. It is a game of equilibrium; we remove traces with one hand to better sketch out a history of the "traceless" with the other.

Tony Côme Even though their status has gained more respect, illustrators and cartoonists—and any drawing destined to be copied in large series—have often been marginalized, if not despised, within the artistic landscape—not to mention female drawers.

Hippolyte Hentgen While cartoons, comic strips, advertisements, textile design drawings have different backgrounds, they are all linked by their work with production companies, publishers, printers, and operators. At the beginning of the 20th century, and at the birth of these arts, authorship rights were often controversial. This kept designers anonymous, with a ridiculously low income compared to the sums collected by the companies they worked for.

The case of comics, a typically American art, and a natural extension of the icons of the Western world, is interesting. Comic history is complex and directly linked to political crises and conflicts that have shaped magazine content. How did part of drawing become an industry and what were the material and financial conditions of its expansion into the 20th century?

According to a study, in the 1940s, seventy million Americans read comics, that is to say half of the population of the time. Industrialization has been transforming drawing into mass culture. Legal proceedings were frequent between authors who claimed ownership over their heroes (becoming figures in contemporary myths) and the production companies who'd stolen them.

The comic book, as an industry, was born in the United States during the Great Depression of 1929. It was largely influenced by Pulp Fiction (novels printed on cheap paper with irregular edges) but also by biblical stories, photographs from bodybuilding magazines or pictures of acrobats. The heroes were dark characters, half-vigilante, half-criminal. Most of the comic book designers were young, hardly of age. At the time, it was a very masculine domain—except for Ramona Fradon or Tarpe Mills and her heroine, Miss Fury, few women were known.

We actually dedicated a series of drawings to Tarpe Mills. Female characters are always secondary characters, simple accessories, relegated to being capricious girlfriends. It wasn't until the 1940s—when women started helping out in the war efforts—that you noticed emancipation happening in feminine roles like William Molton's Wonder Woman. Immigrant children frequented drawing studios—Jewish Americans mostly, but also Italians, Hungarians, and Irish. For these boys from poor neighborhoods, comic books were only a transitional stage, for lack of more respectable (but too expensive) studies. Drawing for magazines was the only outlet available. The publishing community at the time was unquestionably flirting with the mafia, and these companies served primarily as a front for money laundering and score settling.

Some accounts from a (Franco-American) documentary directed by Michael Kantor, ARTE editions, 2014:

*The studio was situated at the heart of the building. There were no windows. It was dark as an oven—apart from the lights shining on the cartoonists sitting at their tables. Around three o'clock, things started picking up speed;*

Continued on page 137

*you could hear the valves setting into motion everywhere,  
erasers flying around. I would sneak in the back and keep up  
my drawing board as high as possible so as not to be seen.*

Ramona Fradon (born 1926), cartoonist and colorist, DC Comics.

*This domain was not taken seriously and I dreamed  
of becoming a writer and being published.  
I didn't want to have my name on comic books because  
one day my name would be on a great novel.  
So I shortened it. Stanley M.Lieber became Stan Lee  
—this way, my name was preserved.*

Stan Lee (born 1922), scriptwriter, DC comics, Marvel Comics.

*When I started, you would get five dollars a page.  
So to earn more, you would draw huge explosions that would  
take up many pages. By then, you knew that no matter what  
publisher you were working with, they would put their  
name on the copyright. Your price per page,  
that's all you could claim.*

Joe Simon (1913–2011), cartoonist, publisher and Comics author  
(DC Comics, Harvey Comics), co-creator of Captain America.

*When we would create a character,  
the company would take everything. We wouldn't get a dime  
for it but we'd work our ass off (pardon the expression)  
day and night like a sweatshop! Instead of needle and thread,  
it was pen and ink. That was our life.*

Jerry Siegel (1914–1996), co-creator of Superman.

Like the others, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster sold their legal property—they no longer owned the rights for Superman. They sued DC Comics twice and eventually got compensated towards the end of their lives.

For a long time, the exaggerated character of Betty Boop, whose first appearance occurs in the short film *Dizzy Dishes* in 1930 was—wrongfully—credited to Max Fleisher. Eventually, cartoonist and director Grim Natwick got the rights back. Last example, *Felix the Cat*—manifestly influenced by *Krazy Kat*—was signed for a longtime by its producer, Pat Sullivan. His assistant Otto Messmer, who authored the original idea, was not able to claim his rights until Sullivan's death.

## Tony Côme

*Our last meeting starts around a big cockatoo of colored pencils—ome tufting open as feathers and others scattered on the ground like claws. After digressing into the appearance of keratin, we pick up where we left off.*

6. Jean-Baptiste Thoret, “Double Psychose, l’original n’a pas eu lieu”, *Qu’elle était verte ma vallée*, Magnani, 2022, p.173

*Maniera takes its root from “main” (hand): the mannerist is someone who never wants to put their hand down. His strength is in isolating one (or more) detail(s) and having them proliferate indefinitely within the parental pattern.<sup>6</sup>*

Tony Côme In your work, you often take hands, so many hands: a hand borrowed from an actress; a hand-copied from a comic; a hand cut out from an advertisement; Mickey’s hands, mittens, gloves, etc. This is surely the most recurring motif in your production. Is it a way of showing, symbolically, that you do not work alone—breaking off with the romantic image of the isolated artist?

Hippolyte Hentgen The repetition of patterns and clichés offered up by history is the main subject we concentrate on. We try to explore these clichés’ different stylistic possibilities. B-movies, *Giallo*, and experimental films (which we watch closely) take on these questions and provide interesting insights—between modernism and postmodernism.

The hand motif makes us think of Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket* that made a big impression on us; we often go back to it. It has some similarities with Dostoïevski’s *Crime and Punishment* and Hitchcock’s *The Rope*. It is the cinema of hands, tactility, and fragmentation. We see ourselves in this world where everything comes bit by bit. All this is to say that questions of representation, of creating something new, of authorship are not so simple.

Marking the contour of your hand is one of the first drawings you make as a child. It is the moment when you learn about your self-image when you measure the impact of traces, imprints, and signs. It is a way of saying: I was there. From Lascaux to today, those signs are moving.

Experimenting with shapes in the studio is central to our practice. Working with our hands is a big part of this daily pleasure. The hand is a precise, multifunctional tool whose geography—palm, thumb, etc.—can be used to put down ideas and feelings.

Passing things from ‘hand to hand’ certainly signals our interest in the collective and play. It is a relay race, indicating possible developments while addressing the viewer. This recurrent sign allows us to highlight fragments and to give autonomy to sketched subjects and objects.

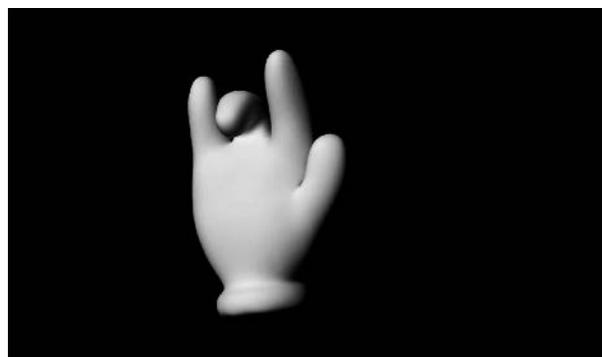
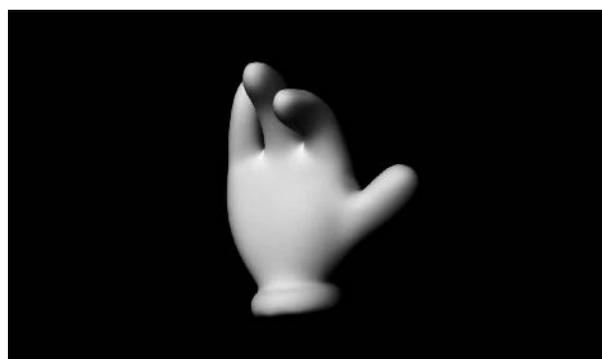
The hand is the central character in our exhibition *The Invisible Bikini* at the MAMAC (2019). The motif unfolded in the form of soft sculptures slumped on the ground and surrounded by a series of animated films—a corps de ballet. For this series of 3D animations, we replicated the choreography of Yvonne Rainer’s film, *Hand Movie*.

In 1966, following surgery, Yvonne Rainer made a film in her hospital bed: a rather complex choreography that keeps the tension on her hand. We wanted to adapt this minimal ballet for five fingers to the gloved

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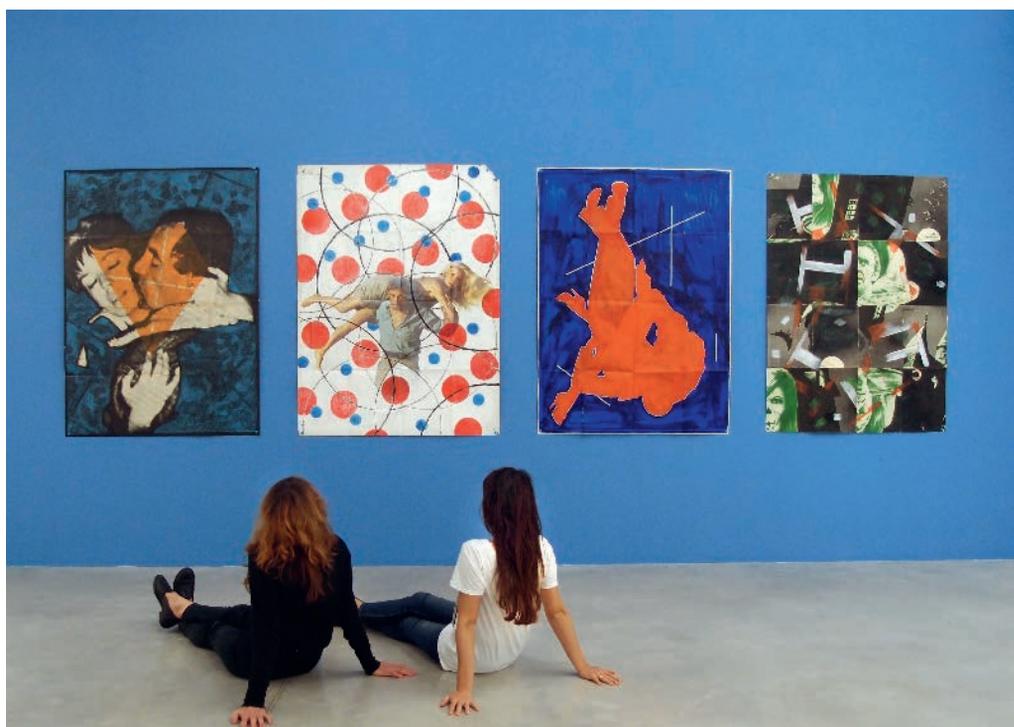


*Le bikini invisible, 2019*



*Hand Movie (d'après Yvonne Rainer), 2019*

Vue de l'exposition | Exhibition view *De la friture sur la ligne*,  
Galerie Iconoscope, Montpellier, 2017





Série *Le bikini invisible*, 2019

and archetypal hand of the toon. For practical reasons (and ease of reproduction), the “Mickey” hand has only four fingers. It is gloved, plump, and elastic.

It was a way of confronting the radical minimalism of *Five Easy Pieces* (no to spectacle, no to virtuosity), but with what could be its opposite: another simplified form—but simplified here in terms of practical usage. Here form takes on mechanized gestures, repetition, and wide accessibility which necessarily implies less affective traits. Then there is, of course, our hand-to-hand practice that delegates and calls into question the place of the author.

Tony Côme Many artists re-use cinematographic images today, sometimes contenting themselves with merely reproducing notorious photograms—with their own tools. What “ideas in drawing”, to use the expression of Deleuze, do you specifically draw from cinema—beyond the particular motif of the hand?

Hippolyte Hentgen There is an idea of the “mechanics” of the image that we like in cinema, and you find this principle in comics too. If we were to take elements from these stories frame by frame, it would entail a technical task of writing more than fascination or fetishism with the image cliché. For example with *Je t'aime, je t'aime* by Alain Resnais, editing comes directly into play as part of the screenplay. Claude Ridder, the hero, handles the question of editing in such a way that you cannot separate the filmmaker—who manipulates the film—from the narrative. For Resnais, reproducing, cutting, and pasting means making us travel in time, accelerating and retracting the apprehension of the story, the perception of space.

Then there is the ritual sequence, without linear scenario (almost without a story) of *Sayat Nova* by Sergei Paradjanov. He shifts the relationship between figuration and narration and the spectator is then faced with a set of *tableaux vivants*, to be deciphered, without apparent order, without ideology, without literalness. It's high class.

Lastly, Mario Bava makes you rethink the image's chromatic function. Colors are the central element—the bodies and places seem to be support material. We also watch it in the first degree, but when you can feel the director guiding you beyond the foreground, it is a stimulating, beautiful sphere.

One of our challenges is to find a balance between the quality of the image and its narrative content—supported by figuration. We feel that a thing is never seen alone and pay particular attention to works that integrate a ready-made form and then work this heterogeneous element into an identifiable perimeter of the action. This referential aspect, this landmark, places the viewer in a position where they can recognize the cited documents and can, in a way, follow the operational successions that we subject them to—integration, disintegration, smoothing, break, isolation of a pattern, etc.

Because we've been exploring and thinking about recycled forms and documents, we find images have new stakes, and so new and adapted procedures may need to come into play.

Tony Côme Should your shows, films and sculptures be considered as an extension of the domain of drawing as R. Krauss's “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”?

Hippolyte Hentgen Undeniably, we feel like *dessinatrices* (“drawing artists”)—drawing is a continuous daily practice, one that unites us. Then we dig into this great reservoir of colored shapes to compose the next steps leading up to the exhibition (where we use a greater variety of processes: paintings, films, installations, sculptures, etc.). For this second step, we move, rewrite, or assemble a primary idea. We “compose” what was first “laid out”.

These different forms come from a jungle of accumulated drawings that carries a whole arsenal of spontaneous ideas, involuntary pastiches, and even clichés with it—it's the immersed part of the iceberg. In joyful disorder, this large reservoir maintains an esthetic of the impure. It is a space of total freedom that also gives off something uncanny. In our

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Série *Tribus*, 2018



Série *Vallauris*, 2015



Série *Tribus*, 2017



*The Hound and the Rabbit* (d'après Rudolph Ising), 2015

Vue de l'exposition | Exhibition view *Sunday in Kyoto*, Semiose, Paris, 2019



exhibitions, we try to bring a bit of continuity by adopting a very defined angle. This provides a way for us to respond to the different places and contexts which invite us. In any case, it is always a question of images and fragments.

Tony Côme Speaking of compositions, I notice that each time we meet, there is a musical instrument within reach in your studio (this time an electric guitar) and there's music playing. What are we listening to right now?

8. <http://lyl.live/> Hippolyte Hentgen We are listening to a rerun of Entente Cordiale, a broadcast by Julien Bécourt on Lyl Radio.<sup>8</sup> A while ago, he invited us to share a selection of tracks that implicitly evoked our work. Both of us are fond of music—it's not conceivable to work or live without it. Here is the playlist. It's short and eclectic but still gives a good idea of our taste.

*Long Distance Runner* Alligator 2'11"  
*Baby* Ariel Pink 4'48"  
*Refonder* Sister Iodine 2'01"  
*Midnight* Fabulous Diamond 2'58"  
*Final Day* Young Marble Giants 1'48"  
*Midnight At The Oasis* Sun City Girls 3'36"  
*Hurdy Gurdy Man* Harry Plunket Greene  
 based on Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* 3'11"  
*In A Sweet Song* Supreme Dicks 4'32"  
*NOSFERATU* David & Jad Fair 1'43"  
*The Last Train's Come and Gone* Cindy Lee 3'38"  
*Ghost Rider* Alan Vega  
 (Psychobilly/Electro Punk version) 4'29"

There are associations of ideas that we cherish: high & low, with a Schubert adaptation that sounds like an ageless folk song; the flux and distortions of Sister Iodine, which unfold like drawn lines that raise you up; Cindy Lee, Patrick Flegel's alter ego as a drag queen (the guitarist from Women who degenderized a testosterone-loaded scene); marginal lo-fi, producing tons of inventive recordings and so-called "low definition" sounds (often qualified as impure in opposition to mainstream pop). We completely recognize ourselves in all of these. There is nonetheless a common backdrop, an idea of re-transcription, of an economy of means.

We also have each had numerous bands with other artists: Shrouded and the Dinner (Julien Tibéri, Astrid de la Chapelle, Sylvain Azam, and Adel Ghezal); Flesh World (Josselin Ligné); Kung-fu Cowboys (Elie Godard and Fabrice Croux)—bands made up of friends composing music with whatever is on hand. Otherwise, we always enjoy collaborating with musicians from all over the place. Notably, the Californian band Supreme Dicks or (in another register) composer Pierre-Yves Macé who created the soundtrack for our movie *The Hound and the Rabbit* (2015) and with whom we have been collaborating regularly since the very beginning. We also recently worked with Anne-James Chaton. Despite him not (exactly) being a musician, he has a very musical approach to reading and cut-up. We are currently preparing a collection of films linked to his new book's text, *Populations*.

Our curiosity and interest in the collective naturally lead us to consider a connection between our lo-fi drawings/collages and editing processes in avant-garde cinema or cut-up poetry—so we decided to give ourselves over to it.

*The man whose mask torments him will secretly make a kind of subculture for his own use: a world built up of trash gathered from the higher world of culture; a realm of junk, prepubescent myths, hidden passions—a secondary, compensatory realm. That is where a certain kind of shameful poetry, of compromising beauty emerges.<sup>9</sup>*

9. Witold Gombrowicz, "Préface", *La Pornographie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1995 (1960), translated by Georges Lisowski, p.12-13

Tony Côme     What are some unexplored domains that appeal to you today?  
Can you anticipate any new “shifts” on the horizon?

Hippolyte Hentgen     We let ourselves go with the flow according to our encounters and the (somewhat broken) world around us. Hippolyte Hentgen is a lifelong project. We want to take it as long and as far as possible.

Vue de l'exposition | Exhibition view *Femme pratique*, L'Artothèque, Espaces d'art contemporain de Caen, 2022

