Exhibitionist

By Karen Green

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Nearly a year in the planning…long anticipated…as beautiful as it is functional…

No, not the iPad—even better: my graphic novels exhibition! Here, at Columbia! In Butler Library! (That iPad reference was a lot timelier when I first wrote this…)

I spoke of the exhibition a bit in a previous column, when it was still in embryo, but now it has sprung forth fully grown from my brain, like Athena. Or a migraine.

The date of conception for this miracle birth was June 11 2009, when Janet Gertz, our head of Preservation, and the gatekeeper for library exhibitions in our eight 3rd-floor display cases,
emailed me to ask if I'd be interested in doing an exhibition on graphic novels for Spring 2010. Because I had never in my life planned an exhibition, and therefore had no idea how unbelievably difficult it was, I of course said "Yes!" The following week Janet told me that her announcement of the news at Management Committee—a weekly meeting of all the highest pooh-bahs in the libraries—had been met with "Ooooh!"s. Good sign, right?

So I had nearly seven months to come up with something that would fill these eight cases (there are four on each side of the circulation desk).

I started noodling around with ideas—something that built on my MLA talk, perhaps? A little history of narrative in sequential art, maybe an evolutionary dateline of newspaper comics, comic books and graphic novels? I wasn't sure. I felt uncertain. I decided I needed an academic advisor.

Jeremy Dauber, the comics-friendly tenured professor who organized that Al Jaffee talk in December, met me for lunch to talk it over. "No, no," he said, "you're being too defensive. You don't need to educate people about what these materials are; they should already know. What you want to do is show them how to use the collection." And I believe that's when he uttered the magic word, "Themes."

Jeremy suggested I come up with a series of themes and illustrate them with examples from the collection. Because I wasn't entirely willing to relinquish my historical introduction idea, I decided to begin each theme with an image from traditional art. I wanted to get people,
especially faculty, thinking: "If I were teaching a course on this topic, I might well use this image as a text to be 'read;' and if I were going to use that traditional image, I could just as easily use these comics images..." Jeremy and I looked at my sketchy list of historical images and started spinning themes around them...."Perceptions of War"...."Gender and Sexuality"...."Race and Ethnicity"... I wanted to keep Hogarth's cautionary print series, but wasn't sure what rubric it would fit under. Jeremy suggested "Didacticism." Sweet.

We started throwing around comics examples, too. Sentences. G.I. Joe.Captain America and Hitler. But I knew I wanted all the comics examples to come straight out of our collection, and most of these didn't. I didn't want to tease people into using materials in research or courses and then not have it available.

I kept consulting experts: Danny Fingeroth. Dick Bulliet, who was my original faculty support for the collection. Dick looked at my list and made some more suggestions. We devised some new themes. Actually, we came up with too many themes. Some themes I couldn't fit into my Procrustean bed of traditional art + comics art. Some themes didn't resonate. (I tossed out "Religion" at the last minute, despite having a decent lineup of comics options, because I just couldn't make it gel. And I tossed out "Reportage" and "Cultural Transference" because I couldn't conjure up traditional art that gave me the punch I wanted.)

And then there was the logistical aspect! I had to figure out how many images I could fit in a case. The options were lining items up on one shelf, two shelves, or letting them simply hang against the backdrop. Using actual library materials was verboten—five months in the heat and light of those cases isn't book-friendly—so I figured that as long as I was using images, I'd just hang them up along the back. There might be room for four or five images.

But wait—what size?? How to make them big enough to read but not too big to fit comfortably? How much room would the captions require? How much space should be left around the perimeter of the images so that it didn't look cramped?

Kids: this is HARD. There are people who do this for a living, and here I was trying to make it up as I went along.

I knew I wanted to kick off with the theme "Heroes and Antiheroes," because I was jonesing to start with images of Christ and Antichrist, forces in opposition whose origin stories are closely linked. When push came to shove, though, I didn't know what images I wanted to use. I started Googling "medieval and manuscript and antichrist"—really embarrassing searches like that. Embarrassing for a reference librarian, that is. But I hit a JACKPOT:
How fabulous is that? A twelfth-century illumination from a manuscript known as the *Hortus deliciarum* ("the garden of delights"), depicting Hell with the Antichrist cradled on the lap of a chained, enthroned Satan in a perfect inversion of Madonna and Child iconography. After that, it was just a matter of finding a good Madonna and Baby Jesus, and bingo, a lovely contemporaneous one:
But then—ooops. What next? I wanted to come up with heroes and villains who had that same kind of linked existence. Only I'm so utterly superhero ignorant (I know! I'm SORRY!) that I couldn't think of anyone other than Batman and the Joker. And here's where it gets even more humiliating: my Batman/Joker knowledge is formed more by Tim Burton than by DC. Now, I really wanted to use the Joker because Jerry Robinson had done undergraduate work at Columbia, a factoid that was definitely going to make it into the caption. So I pulled out my copy of The Killing Joke, looking for the part where the two stories converged in an alley outside a theatre...only, as you all already know, it wasn't there. But it was copacetic, because happily I found a page that conveyed their intertwined identities anyway:
DO YOU UNDERSTAND? I DON'T WANT TO HURT YOU. I DON'T WANT EITHER OF US TO END UP KILLING THE OTHER.

BUT WE'RE BOTH RUNNING OUT OF ALTERNATIVES... AND WE BOTH KNOW IT.

MAYBE IT ALL MINGES ON TONIGHT. MAYBE THIS IS OUR LAST CHANCE TO SORT THIS BLOODY MESS OUT.

IF YOU DON'T TAKE IT, THEN WE'RE LOCKED ONTO A SUICIDE COURSE.

BOTH OF US, TO THE DEATH.

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO END LIKE THAT. I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT WAS THAT BENT YOUR LIFE OUT OF SHAPE, BUT WHO KNOWS? MAYBE I'VE BEEN THERE TOO.

MAYBE I CAN HELP.

WE COULD WORK TOGETHER. I COULD REHABILITATE YOU. YOU NEEDN'T BE OUT THERE ON THE EDGE ANY MORE. YOU NEEDN'T BE ALONE.

WE DON'T HAVE TO KILL EACH OTHER.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

NO, I'M SORRY, BUT...

NO. IT'S TOO LATE FOR THAT. FAR TOO LATE.

HAHAHA. Y'KNOW, IT'S FUNNY... THIS SITUATION. IT REMINDS ME OF A JOKE...
Who else? I wanted conflicted heroes—troubled souls who combined hero and antihero in one. An obvious choice was New York City mayor and failed vigilante superhero Mitchell Hundred, from Ex Machina. It was just added value that it was a New York story, which was part of my justification for the collection in the first place. And, for the final image, a hero whose very creation leads inevitably to his own destruction: the Golem. At first I was hoping to find some cool, eye-popping early-modern eastern-European graphics, but then I realized James Sturm's The Golem's Mighty Swing worked even better.

Here's what it all looks like together:
But let me try to give you a sense of what it's like with all the captions in place. I'll use the topic "Visual Rhetoric" which isn't a theme like "Society in Crisis" or "Gender and Sexuality" but which I wanted to play with in order to get viewers thinking about the grammar of the comics page. Now, full disclosure, the first image is not the one I use in the actual show. The director of our art history library was concerned about copyright issues if I were to start uploading the images I took from books in that collection. But I will come up with an approximation—and it's from a place you've seen before.

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**VISUAL RHETORIC**

Comics artists use a variety of techniques to guide the reader's eye around the page, many of which the reader employs almost unconsciously.

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Giotto. Life of Christ (Scrovegni Chapel, 1305). 

Frank O. King. "Gasoline Alley." PN6728.G3 K59 2005; see also NC1426 .M34
Comics historian and artist Paul Karasik has compared viewing Giotto's chapel frescoes to "walking into a comic strip." The artist used borders to create the kind of panels comics readers will find familiar. Similar scene divisions may be found in the Bayeux tapestry, using towers and trees, and in any number of medieval illuminations and altarpieces.

"Gasoline Alley" began its daily run in 1919 and still continues—although King retired from drawing it in 1959. The earlier, Sunday strips, especially, featured artistic experiments with movements such as Surrealism and Fauvism. Unconventional layouts, such as this Sunday page from 1931, invited a reading experience both sequential and simultaneous.

Art Spiegelman. "A Day at the Circuits"
PN6727.S6 A6 2008

Richard McGuire. "Here"
(RBML AP101 .R38)
Spiegelman has remarked that the presence of arrows that direct the reader’s eye to the next panel represent a failure on the part of the artist. To highlight his point, in 1975 he created this page in which the story changes depending on which arrows the reader chooses to follow. RAW Magazine – the 1980s-era alternative comix anthology – included this 6-page comic by Richard McGuire in issue 2.1 (1989). McGuire forces the reader to imagine a single point in space through a nearly infinite span of time.

One of the nicer aspects of the timing of the exhibition, incidentally, is how it coincides with Will Eisner Week, the annual celebration of All Things Comics that honors the creator of The Spirit, the popularizer of the term "graphic novel," the originator of the comics industry's most prestigious award, and the genius loci of the profession. Libraries and institutions all around the country are presenting programming and exhibitions to raise awareness of this incredibly rich medium, and my exhibition is just another piece of confetti in the Will Eisner Week exploding balloon.

So, come by! The exhibition is up all semester long, until Memorial Day. If you want a personal tour, let me know, but don't be shy about coming by on your own because I’ll be out of town from February 12 through March 7. Butler Library is at 114th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam, but the entrance to campus is right by the #1 train stop at 116th Street and Broadway. When you enter Butler, go in the first door on your left, which is our Library Information Office, and show them a driver's license; they'll give you a pass and tell you how to get to the third floor. Don't miss the fabulous mural at the base of the stairs that lead to the third floor, especially the Empire State Building and Hayden Planetarium under Athena/Columbia's shield. Take the stairs on your left to start on the east side of the third floor and work your way west. Let me know what you think!

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