

Projects 32 : Art Spiegelman : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 17-January 28, 1992

Author

Spiegelman, Art

Date

1991

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/355

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art spiegelman

projects



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MAKING MAUS

After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric." Although later recanted by its author, Theodor Adorno, this much quoted dictum of 1955 has deep roots in public sentiment. How can a work of art compare to, much less prevail against, such monstrosities? And how can a single lyric voice presume to bespeak such massive suffering? Furthermore, how can art about genocide avoid the insult to the dead implicit in aestheticizing their slaughter? Judged by this standard, the idea of making a comic book about the Holocaust must be an infinitely worse offense. It sounds like a sick joke. That, however, is what Art Spiegelman has been doing for the past thirteen years, and more.

In its entirety a 269-page chronicle, *Maus* is composed of well over 1,500 interlocking drawings. The initial five chapters were published serially between 1980 and 1985 in *Raw*, the experimental "comix" magazine that Spiegelman co-founded and co-edits with Françoise Mouly. With a sixth chapter added to those original installments, the first half of *Maus* was published in book form by Pantheon, New York, in 1986; it was followed five years later by the second and concluding volume, which was issued by Pantheon in November of 1991. The completion of *Maus* is the occasion for this exhibition, which consists of all the original pages of the book, plus an extensive display of cover art, preparatory drawings, process-related and research materials, as well as graphic digressions from the central theme. The purpose is to illuminate the final entity — a mass-produced work — by showing its complex genesis in the artist's mind and on the draftsman's page.

Maus centers on the Spiegelman family's fate at the hand of the Nazis, as told by the artist's father, Vladek. The storyline shifts ground back and forth between the recent past, in which the formerly estranged son interviews his father about the persecution of the Jews in Europe before and during the Second World War, and the distant past of Vladek's vivid memories of courtship, marriage, military service, pogroms, life in hiding, forced marches, and the nightmare of the extermination camps. The book's subtitle, *A Survivor's Tale*, refers first and most obviously to the father, but the appellation applies equally to the son, who has inherited a dark historical burden and hopes to free himself by opening it up and examining its every detail. Fundamental to the latter's struggle is coming to terms with the reality that suffering does not necessarily ennoble the victim. The Vladek who responds to the cartoonist's persistent queries is often petty and manipulative. Worse, it is revealed, he burned the wartime diaries of his first wife, Anja, forever cutting their son off from his most direct access to that shattered and shattering period and to her (she is the mother mourned in the parenthetical chapter "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" — a much earlier, four-page comic inserted into the narrative — which describes her suicide and the artist's consequent nervous breakdown).

Book I, *My Father Bleeds History*, which recounts the onset of Nazi terror, closes with an image of Spiegelman cursing his father as a "murderer" for this act of destruction. Book II, *And Here My Troubles Began*, describes Vladek and Anja's internment, separation, and liberation, and ends with an image of the grave in which they are ultimately reunited. Under it appears the signature of the artist, who has survived the traumatic legacy they left him by dedicating himself to an unsparing but eventually forgiving record of their collective experience.

Other war-haunted stories of Spiegelman's age have responded to a similar compulsion to examine the Fascist era through imaginative reconstruction and so lay personal if still only partial claim to its moral dilemmas. Disconcerting and ironic play with the object of their horrid fascination is the common denominator of much of this work. David Levithal has photographed blurry scenes of the Blitzkrieg staged with plastic soldiers and tanks, thus eliding boyish bellicosity with a gritty Robert Capa-like realism. Anselm Kiefer has reenacted sea battles in his bathtub and Panzer-division maneuvers on empty studio floors as well as having himself photographed raising his arm in the Nazi salute in places Hitler's troops once occupied. Sigmar Polke has likewise been photographed goose-stepping with manic élan, and often incorporates symbols of the Fascist past into his pictures, as has the cartoon-inspired artist Jörg Immendorff. The Russian team of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid also belongs on this list for its pastiches of Socialist Realist history painting.

All of these artists have in one way or another appropriated "debased" artistic forms for use in fine art formats. Spiegelman is unique in having realized his project not only within the conventions but within the aesthetic and social context of his chosen models. A veteran of San Francisco's underground comix scene and of New York's cartoon industry — he was creator of the Garbage Pail Kids, Topps Gum Inc.'s gleefully impudent bubble-gum card rejoinder to the market onslaught of the cloying Cabbage Patch Kid dolls — Spiegelman is thoroughly at home with the "trashiness" that supposedly rots immature minds but definitely causes conservative brains to short-circuit when thinking about his craft. Moreover, he plays with fire even more aggressively than his previously mentioned contemporaries, aligning the stripes of a concentration camp prisoner's uniform, for example, with computer bar codes on the back of the boxed set of *Maus* or titling one of its sections "Auschwitz: Time Flies." Spiegelman's mixed feelings about the harsh ironies of his endeavor are summed up in a self-portrait that nonetheless insists on his satiric prerogatives. In it he slouches mouse-masked over his drafting table, at the foot of which bodies are piled as they were in the camps but also like crumpled waste paper. This is not a sick joke but evidence of the heartsickness that motivates and pervades the book; it is the gallows humor of a generation that has not faced annihilation but believes utterly in its past reality and future possibility.

Spiegelman's conformance to comic-strip structure is not just a matter of loyalty to his much condemned metier. The simple but readily reconfigured grid of the standard comic-book page permits a more orderly story progression and a higher density of visual information than any single surface tableau or montage could possibly accommodate. A collector of graphic serials of all types, from Sunday funny pages and pulpy Big Little Books to the wordless picture novellas of Milt Gross, Lynd Ward, and Frans Masereel, Spiegelman has cultivated an appreciation of how much any one frame or image can convey, and how little each within a sequence should at times vary for maximum narrative emphasis. Accordingly, when the plot of *Maus* unfolds in the situations where the artist plays a part, the pictures generally succeed one another at the ordinarily even pace of the present tense. However, when Vladek's memories take over, the intervals are generally more disjunctive, with oversized dramatic views, explanatory notes, diagrams, and tipped or otherwise irregular boxes frequently interrupting his discursive account of events and breaking this episode's usual eight-frame grid.

On occasion Spiegelman runs images of Vladek telling the story parallel to images of the story he tells, in which case the larger drawings of remembered events operate almost like thought balloons next to the smaller drawings of the conversation between father and son. An especially effective spread in Book II shows a scene of Spiegelman and his father sorting through old family photographs, overlaid with drawn facsimiles of those pictures which accumulate

at odd angles until their profusion fractures the vertical and horizontal template of the story frames and brings the confusion of past and present cascading to the bottom margin and into the reader's lap. In some instances Spiegelman unifies a page or part of a page by allowing a pictorial element from one frame to continue into an adjacent frame, effecting a kind of visual enjambment or run-on. For example, in the page following the one just described the image of Vladek slumped on the couch with photos scattered at his feet is pieced together in four abutted close-ups covering five-eighths of the whole. In other cases Spiegelman uses a dominant motif such as bunk beds or uniforms, or a consistent direction or density of hatching, to coalesce the separate sections of a given sheet.

Such overall conceptualization and varied phrasing are the essence of comic-book art. For *Maus*, it is especially crucial given the extent of research Spiegelman quotes. In his determination to "get it right" the artist became a practical scholar of his medium while pursuing every conceivable avenue leading to or from his focal point in Vladek's recollections. In addition to the graphic precedents already cited, the artist's referents encompass cartoons and gag photos gleaned from old magazines; that industry staple, war comics (including Nazi examples); snapshots taken by the artist when he visited his parents' native Poland; archival materials covering everything from how shoes were sewn to the look of buildings and cars during the war; and postcard portfolios and booklets of art made by the Nazi's captives.

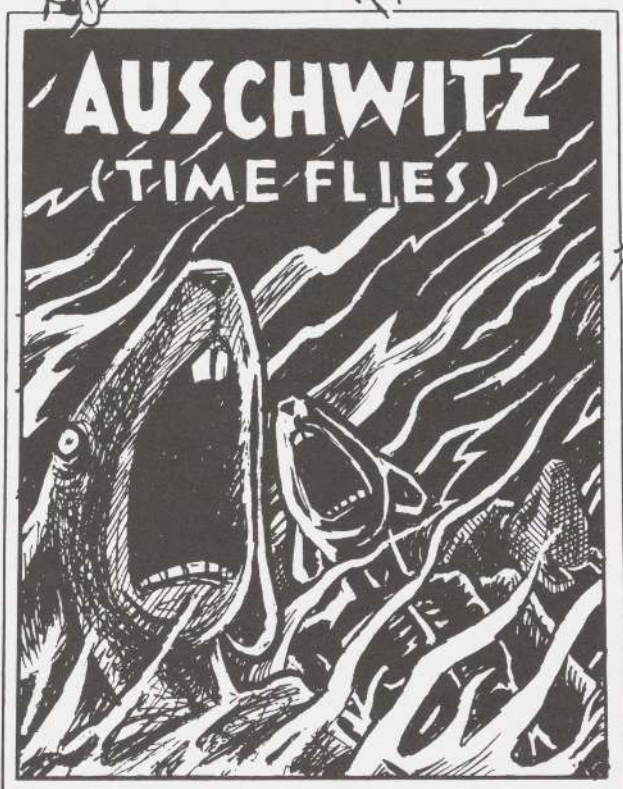


Seen in related clusters, the enormous quantity and variety of drawings Spiegelman has made and preserved document the distillation of *Maus's* diverse but interconnected components. Spontaneous warm-ups, meticulous revisions, overlays, and outtakes — a great many of them remarkable as individual works — testify to the painstaking work required to pack the book as full of information and insight as possible while retaining its overall coherence. Here novel adaptations of signature trade devices were indispensable to Spiegelman's visual syntax. The Dick Tracy "Crime Stopper" inserts, for example, are the acknowledged precursors of the boxes and medallions he uses to explain the Auschwitz exchange rate of cigarettes for bread, and to chart the floor plans of secret hiding places in the ghetto as well as plans of the crematoria, or to map the grounds of the camps or the rail-lines between them. Intersplicing macrocosmic views and microcosmic details, firsthand description and library finds, Spiegelman shows how a cataclysm befell the stable provincial society into which his parents were born and how a huge and hellish system was organized to consume their "small" lives. The agonizing incremental choices between escape into the memory or hope of normalcy and the conscious reckoning with the Final Solution's planned indignities and chance cruelties, heretofore best described in Bruno Bettelheim's analytic memoir *The Informed Heart*, have now been depicted by Spiegelman with unmatched completeness and concision.

Maus is presently on two best-seller lists — first as fiction and second as nonfiction. That dual status says something about its importance but also about its misunderstood nature. Although a Mickey Mouse muse no doubt looked over the artist's shoulder while he wrote and drew this book — a recent lithograph by Spiegelman shows Disney's character behind a mouse-cartoonist pondering his rodent model — *Maus* is not an entertainment, nor is it a modern Aesop's fable or an *Animal Farm* allegory of totalitarianism. It is a work of history and of autobiography undertaken in a revisionist period when the very idea that any history, much less a narrative one, has broad public value or a legitimate claim to the truth is under constant assault on several fronts.

Despite its seemingly eccentric, if not aberrant, match of form and content, *Maus* is a radically traditional work of art — traditional in its comprehensive understanding and innovative treatment of the medium's conventions, and traditional in its faith in art's capacity to accurately describe physical and psychological realities over time. Spiegelman's sober graphic manner — criticized by some as insufficiently developed or stylish and overlooked by others who "read" his pictures as if they were merely settings for the text — is a result of trial and error followed by a firm aesthetic decision. His other options are evident in his previous as well as contemporaneous work, and in the outside sources he called upon. Eschewing the psychedelic scratch-board buzz of "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," the problematic cuteness of his earliest versions of *Maus*, and the Fritz Eichenberg-





inspired chiaroscuro Mannerism of other proto-*Maus* experiments, Spiegelman also forswore the expressionism found in the most sophisticated of the concentration camp drawings, like those of Fritz Taussig (pen-name, Fritta), who ran the inmate studios at the "model" village of Terezin and left behind fantastic and frightful representations of that fake utopia's brief existence. If any one example most guided Spiegelman it would seem to have been that of the modest and unskilled sketch artist Alfred Kantor, whose post-liberation journal is an appallingly explicit composite of collaged "souvenirs," maps, and captioned vignettes of daily life and death in Auschwitz. The lesson Kantor teaches and Spiegelman confirms with greater scope — and in the face of much wider choices — is that one does *not* stylize horror. Not so much out of respect for the dead, but to communicate to the fullest possible extent the unrelieved actuality of the crimes committed. A signal achievement of the documentary genre and a prototype of what one might call "comix-verité" in honor of its equally prosaic cinematic equivalents, *Maus* underscores the easily forgotten aesthetic axiom that nothing is as difficult nor as artful as discretion nor as hard to imagine as the facts.

Robert Storr 1991



biography

Art Spiegelman was born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1948. He was creative consultant at Topps Gum, Inc. (1966–1988) and has taught the history and aesthetics of comics at the School of Visual Arts in New York (1979–86). He was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award for best biography in 1986 and received a Guggenheim fellowship in 1990. His work has been exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (1982), in the *Comic Art Show* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1983), in *Contemporary Artists: Jewish Themes* at The Jewish Museum, New York (1987), and most recently in *Devil on the Stairs* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Mr. Spiegelman's recent books include *RAW: Open Wounds from the Cutting Edge of Comics* and *RAW: High Culture for Lowbrows*, both published by Penguin Books, New York. Mr. Spiegelman lives in New York City with his wife, Françoise Mouly, and daughter, Nadja Mouly Spiegelman.

The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the Bohen Foundation, The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

On the cover: *Mickey Mouse, Maus, Mouse*, 1991. Lithograph. All other images are from the book *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* and appear courtesy of the artist.

