

MICHEL ESSELBRÜGGE
hello laptop haha

HELEN STEFANIE
i didn't plan very much
because i thought we just
could talk and see what
happens

ME
we can see how it goes!

HS
One thing I want to talk about... What I'm interested
in because it was in Michels ICC (Institute for Contem-
porary Cartooning) talk is "character design". How you
approach it, cause I think we handle it quite differ-
ently.

ROBIN UEHRS
Character design...

HS
Yeah, especially how you do it Robin.

RU
Ok. First of all I don't make a character sheet.
I always begin with the eyes, I learned that in
elementary school. You start with the eyes and then
you construct the remaining body parts around them.

[all laugh]

RU
well, actually I start with one eye and then I
draw the shape of the face around it, which has to



fit proportionally to the position and size of the
eye. after that I add the nose and then the body,
which has no arms most of the time and is what I
would call 'spherical'... now it gets complicated,
because the character still doesn't have any arms
or legs and it becomes harder and harder to glue
them somewhere on this sphere. It's easy to glue
a head to a sphere, legs and arms are hard. There
was a time, when I drew my characters women dresses
instead of spheres, but I stopped doing that. It's
been a while since I last drew a dress.

HS
they don't actually matter, the dresses?

RU
yes - I thought it was kinda funny, that the dress-
es became part of the body ... the body became
dress-shaped. But now I dislike the drawing-move-
ment of drawing those dresses. They kinda looked
like Bart Simpsons haircut and to some degrees that
restricted me lol

HS
I always think that the bodies in your comics don't
really matter, because the face is always the focus,
and the body is an accessory to that. they are more
figures, that fulfill some function, instead of fleshed
out characters

RU
yeah, expressions are most important about a face.

ME
But you also drew the dresses because you didn't want to define if the character is male or female, right?

RU
on the other hand there are different tools for achieving this uncertainty. When I draw a character, it's always male at first. I have to explicitly decide to draw a female character.

HS
but that's weird too, right?

RU
I guess it's fairly normal for a male comic artist. I don't know, what about you? You always draw women, right?

HS
for me women are the default.

RU
And yes, there was a time when I drew female breasts on random characters. I quite liked that approach, maybe I should start doing that again. Recently my characters became more and more male ... but on the other hand I think who cares?

HS
i like when it stays vague with me it's always clear they are women, but maybe that's different. and for you michel? you are working on "langfinger und wackelzahn" [his graphic novel]

ME
Meh. In this comic everything is done very ancient, but ancient in a gross way. (I'm faking the ancient way of comic drawing with ink and dip pen, digitally, which is even worse.)

HS
but when you're sketching you're drawing these freaky...

ME
Yeah, mostly boys, end time boys, rotten boys. It's a bit stupid but it's maybe a version of...

HS
a version of you?

ME
Of myself? I don't know if that's true. That's a really terrible comic artist saying! "You always draw yourself!" I think it's really horrible.

HS
i do that, but i'm doing it on purpose

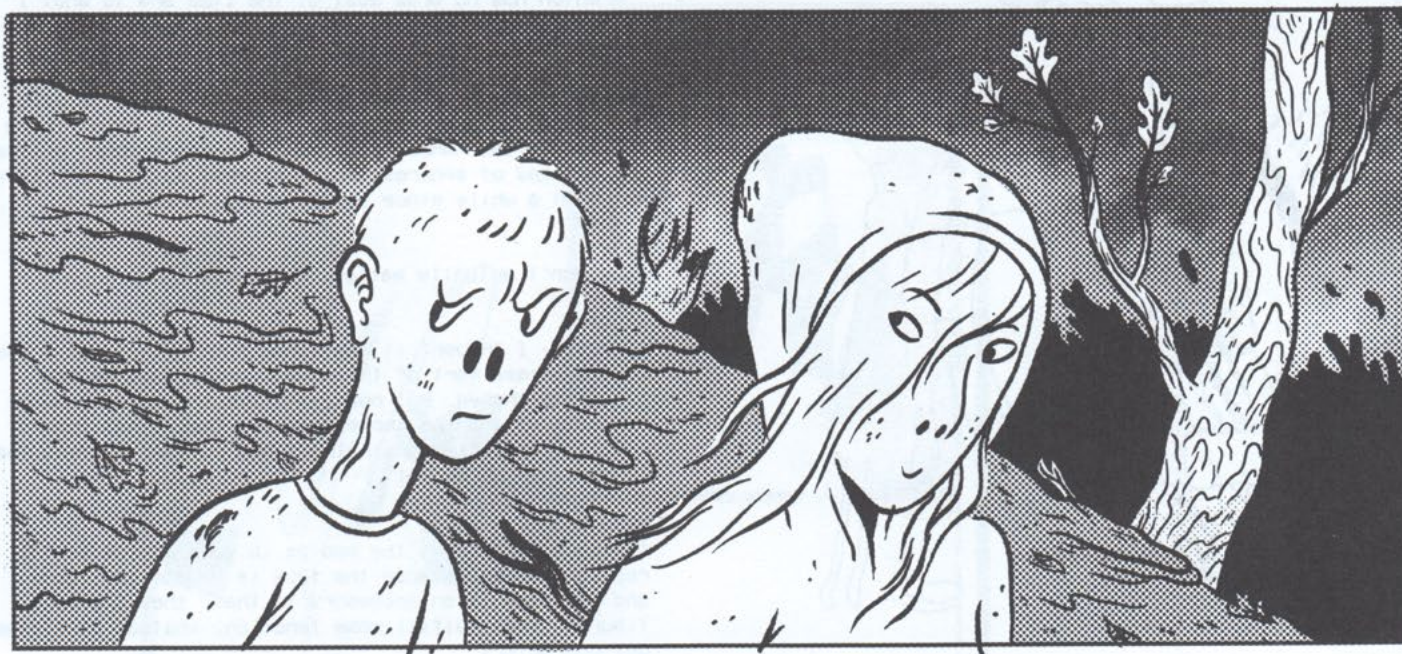
ME
Yeah, I do it but... no that's not me, that are just the things that I draw. They have the same hairstyle as me, but the face doesn't look like mine. It's more a standard face, a standard mask. The body proportions/shape are a bit similar to mine too.

HS
but there is a default character that just happens when you're drawing?

ME
Yeah, the standard boy, without boobs with big hands and big feet.

RU
I never draw hairstyles. I still have to grow an awareness on that topic, all my characters are bald heads.

HS
and a hairstyle is something special, because it marks the character. there is "the one" and "the one with the



hair”!

RU
Hairstyles are a quite handy tool to mark difference. Actually my character design is all about marking differences, so that the reader doesn't get confused.

ME
As orientation, not as attribute. Hm, but it is already an attribute when you say this person is different.

RU
Yes, but maybe they're supposed to be cardboard standups, which can be filled up by the recipient.

ME
But more defined drawings can also be filled. Maybe it's more restricted. But it's true you have more room for interpretation if you leave it that loose.

HS
but for example with “langfinger und wackelzahn” they are always “on model” in a way, but always a bit...

ME
Yeah, they look always a bit different. But I have fixed visual features like clothes, but sometimes that varies too. The Body Proportions vary too, and the faces. Sometimes they look so different, it depends on the mood of the character.

HS
do you think they're still recognizable?

ME
Yeah, I think so. And I really like it when that transformation is happening. Real persons look different all the time as well.

RU
that's important: characters should transform from panel to panel. I didn't do that for the most of my 'cartooning life', but recently discovered it. It has a beautiful impact on the story, when characters change in form and size and even lose all of their limbs to become just floating heads.

HS
for me it's always about repeating things, in my vague-steph comics a lot of things are repeated, copy-pasted, and a lot of signs are also repeated

ME
Often you repeat one drawing and the only thing that changes is the text.

HS
yes, but also the bodies, because they look so different. because it's all my character.

ME
That is you, right!

HS
that's me! Or a character that represents me. but i want to draw the character in a way that it's just a cardboard figure, or an empty shell. it should be clear to readers that it's an empty shell, but i'm not sure if that works.



RU
I think that works totally fine. They are very transparent and perforated.

ME
because they are drawn so quickly it gives them an openness, there is something that is impalpable, a bit diffuse too.

HS
there is always a body being defined, but i am also trying to undermine it through the repetition and strict definition.

HS
I don't know if it works.

RU
I think so!

ME
Body and comic!

HS
I'm also interested in that.

ME
Robin, in your comics body and clothes are the same thing. The characters don't really have a body underneath, right?

RU
Yes, most of the time I do it like that, but recently I often draw muscular men. That's a development that started when I discovered drawing with the smartpen on my phone. I noticed, that muscles are easier to draw that way.

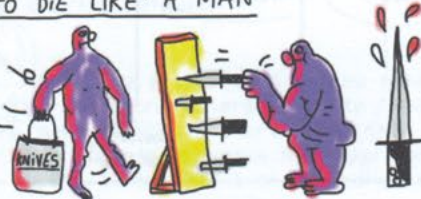
ME
Like, drawing anatomy right.

RU
No not anatomy, more absurd muscular arms and less.

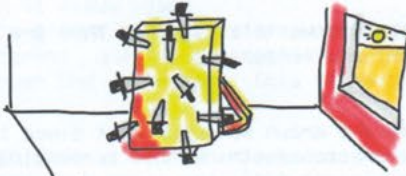
HS
Do they have a function?

RU
Well, the characters are really physically strong and it's often about deconstruction of masculinity. But that's something the character creates around itself ... like an aura. I always start my comics on the top left of the page and think of a character and then I think of a story about this character. Most of the time the outcome is a very masculine story, when you start with muscular bodybuilders. There is this one comic, in which the character wants to die like a man.

TO DIE LIKE A MAN



CREATE A KNIFE BACKDROP



DON'T MIND THE SUNSHI
TAKE THE PILLS YOUR CRAZY AUNT TOOK.



HS
Ah, i like that one a lot!

RU
Again that's a good example how tools form our work ... Hahahaha (troll laughter).

ME
I always draw the same kind of body types. They are...

HS
they're always "boys", right?

ME
Boys, and the girls are actually also like boys, except that they have boobs... and not a penis. But the figure is more...

HS
the figure of a pre-adolescent, or a teenager.

ME
Yeah a teen. The girls are actually boy-girls. I don't know if that is... it's just like that. Maybe I don't have to problematize that. My Comics aren't that diverse. Either I draw teenage bodies or freak bodies, i just have freaks. But there are also kind of little...

RU
Gnomes.

ME
More like little Dobbys, Goblins, Trolls.

HS
But there are no old people, for example?

ME
No, just teenager and freaks, that's what I draw. Weird.

RU
But in your comics there is a sudden switch in the tone of voice, when different characters appear.

ME
What do you mean?

RU
Well, when you draw a comic about those little freak goblins, it's a completely different tone of voice as in "Langfinger und Wackelzahn" for example.

ME
Yah, that's true, but those freaks didn't have a big role till now.

HS
They're like animals?

ME
More something in between. For example in little prisoners they are like action toys and in ancient flames they are so called fun slaves. Half object half something....

HS
Like Homunculus.

ME
They aren't humanlike but they aren't just objects either. Maybe they have something like a will or feelings. Anyway, in the comics they aren't marked as human.

HS
But the humans are the Protagonists?

ME
No, I think these objects are protagonists too. Objects can also be protagonists.

RU
I realized, that I have massive problems telling a humorous story when I draw human-like characters. It's hard to abstract yourself from human-shaped organisms and be funny.

ME
But you do draw human like characters?

RU
Some are more human than others. The muscle dudes are in some ways more human than others and so the stories around them become sadder and more realistic ... in relation to my other comics! My characters from a few years ago on the other hand ... [From his Webcomic "Enjambements"]

HS
They are totally abstract.

ME
Abstract? They were these dudes?!

HS
They were Webcomic-Dudes.

ME
Cardboard-Dudes.

RU
Yeahhhh.

ME
The one looks a bit like you... I wouldn't say that these comics are blank and abstract. They are quite concrete.

RU
You think so?

ME
Yeah, I really think so, the look alone - I don't really know how he looks- maybe like this (scribble) . Or like this. He looks like you!

RU
Well.



ME
Definitely, look at this curls and this nose. Really, that's not so blank, that's more like: "Look, that's me! The web comic dude! I draw comics about my life."

HS
Well that's often the way with funny Webcomics, that there is a character that represents the artist.

ME
I think that is you!

HS
Yes, i see you in him as well.

ME
It's terrible, but it is what it is.



RU
I actually never saw it that way.

RU
Yes, maybe that's my long term goal ... well, not my goal, but I'm interested in becoming more abstract and telling just funny stories. You are right, I'm always quite concrete, this really limits my possibilities

ME
The characters you drew after that, before you started Asterix 2015 and this stuff, they were much more reduced than the Enjambements-characters, not that human like.

HS
They are very human.

ME
For example Asterix and Obelix they are much more reduced, 'cause they are constructed out of geometrical shapes.

RU
The eyes are different.

HS
The eyes have much more expression.

ME
Maybe they are also little goblins.

RU
They are occupied in a different manner. They all look a little bit...



HS
... childlike...

RU
... childish. They have this fat mouth.

ME
and fat cheeks.

RU
and fat cheeks.

ME
They smile like this.

RU
They don't have to, but they do most of the time.

HS
Most of the time they are smiling, even when they're saying sad things.

RU
That's another problem about my old characters. They never smile.

ME
But it really fits to the comics, the characters stay the same and only the text varies.

RU
Yes, but deadpan is a one way road. Those blasé faces restrict you from a certain type of humour. You can't do specific things. This problem started to get on my nerves and that's pretty much why I ended the Enjambements project ... actually I just should've changed the characters.

ME
To ones who are always smiling.

RU
No, characters that are even more plain, just stick figures. But there are so many stick figure comics out there.

ME
But that's really ugly.

RU
it is the worst.

ME
It directly has this meme connotation, that's too much for me. Because everyone did it and still does it like this..

RU
I'm sure that there is something in between.

HS
I think a face is helpful in any case.

ME
But stick figures, eww. It looks automatically like a meme comic....

RU
Not when you make it in a clever way. Or maybe we SHOULD do meme comics. Maybe that's the smartest kind of comic. Rage comics. lol

HS
I dont know.

RU
As a matter of fact those are the comics that made me a comic artist. They seemed so easy. You don't have to be a virtuoso drawer, just draw stick figures. And so I started with stick figures.

HS
With enjambements?

RU
No, even before that.

ME
Oh, they are great! The ones on your old blog. I really like them.

RU
Yes.

HS
Hm. But they are more like vessels, right?

ME
But every character... hmm

HS
Well there are characters that are characters, and there are characters that are vessels.

RU
Aw, that's beautiful.

