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# ‘C’est pas du tout ce que tu penses’: Improvisational Narrative Strategies in Ruppert and Mulot’s *La Maison close*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Improvisation and performance are not traditionally associated with the comics form, but experiments with them are increasingly found in the area of alternative, or small-press, comics. This essay analyses one example of improvisation in comics, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot’s *La Maison close*. The work was created by Ruppert, Mulot and several other artists for the 2009 Festival International de la Bande Dessinée (FIBD), in Angoulême, France. It was produced by cartoonists who improvised a narrative within a general framework provided by Ruppert and Mulot: a series of drawn settings representing a bordello. The resulting story played with conventions of autobiography, as worked out in alternative comics over the past couple of decades. *La Maison close* was first presented to the public at the FIBD, then was put online for a year, and now has been published in book form. The contrast between the book and the first version demonstrates the degree to which the original was innovative: the printed volume smoothes out the original, improvised story, forcing it into a more conventional plot.

Critical analysis of textual traditions rarely considers improvisational forms of creation. Yet improvisation, which has a rich and varied legacy in other arts, is an increasingly relevant mode of creative construction for comics as artists seek to expand the boundaries of the form. The incorporation of performance-based elements into comics challenges generic and formal boundaries in artistic creation, especially because the form is already a literary and visual hybrid. This essay will examine one such improvisational comic, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot’s *La Maison close* [‘The Bordello’].

The product of 31 cartoonists working together collaboratively, *La Maison close* is a series of intertwined narratives, termed ‘rooms’, that collectively depict a day in the life of a French brothel peopled by cartoonists. The work

<sup>1</sup> The quote in French [‘It’s not at all what you’re thinking’] is taken from the online version of *La Maison close*, now unavailable: [http://www.bdangouleme.com/maison\\_close/maison-close.hall.html](http://www.bdangouleme.com/maison_close/maison-close.hall.html) (consulted 15 November 2009). The autobiographical character who speaks this line is that of Florent Ruppert.



Figure 1: Ruppert (left) and Mulot (right) welcome contributors to a guided visit of the 'sets' for *La Maison close*. © 2009, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot.

was commissioned by the Festival international de la Bande Dessinée (FIBD) ['International Festival of Comics'] in Angoulême, and debuted as a physical exhibition at the Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image (CIBDI) ['International Centre of Comics and the Image'] and as an online comic published on the Festival's website. *La Maison close* is unusual within the comics world for its mode of creation, narrative complexity, and the visibility it was afforded by the FIBD. An examination of this work will open the possibility of considering performative elements within the traditions of the comics world.

Scholars such as Richard Middleton (writing about music) and Darrell Hammamoto (on television sitcoms) note that popular cultural texts are generally characterised by 'closed' forms and procedures.<sup>2</sup> Reactions against these closed forms are often characteristic of experimental tendencies. Comics are often erroneously assumed to be the example of popular culture *par excellence*, but cartoonists have adopted improvisational techniques in order to push the boundaries of the form and to align it more closely with art world practices than with those associated with the mass media.<sup>3</sup> In their book, *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, anthropologists Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold argue that improvisation is generative, relational, temporal and, most importantly, reflective of the very process of creation.<sup>4</sup> *La Maison close* fits neatly within these categories, which offers a point of departure for examining it as a work of improvisation, and understanding what that means for comics as an art form. We can see that improvisation, when applied to comics, is generative and innovative, insofar as it opens up new avenues for creative expression that exist in stark contrast to the traditions of the comics field. Similarly, improvisational comics are relational insofar as they allow for a transformation of the artist/audience relationship, as Ruppert and Mulot have done in many of their performances at comics festivals, or when they permit the development of new creative techniques between multiple creators, as is the case here. They are temporal when, as with *La Maison close*, they are created for certain events, including festivals, and within established temporal parameters (in this case, the work was created between 1 November 2008 and 15 January 2009). Importantly, the most common definitions of improvisation stress the simultaneous conception and performance of a work, often in public, in a process that does not welcome revision and that is particularly attentive to the present moment.<sup>5</sup> One reason that improvisation has been so little considered within the field of comics studies is that the temporal conflation of creation with utterance has found little purchase in approaches to the form that place so much emphasis on precomposition.

A consideration of improvisational techniques in comics carries with it the potential to situate the form more closely with the traditions of Dada, surrealism, futurism and abstract expressionism, each of which relied to varying degrees on improvisatory practices. Pointing to improvisation in music,

2 Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990); Darrell Hammamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

3 Some background details about this project were communicated to the author by Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot in an interview conducted on 19 November 2009. I am grateful to the authors for providing me these insights into the process by which *La Maison close* was assembled.

4 Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam, 'Creativity and Cultural Improvisation: An Introduction', in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 1.

5 Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1997), 3–5.

especially in jazz, and in contemporary dance underscores its close association with the performing arts, but at the same time raises the important question of whether or not comics can be regarded as a performing art. I argue that there is an increasing number of cartoonists who are interested in pushing the boundaries of the form to align it more closely with practices, including performative ones, in the art world than with media industries, thus reconceptualising their work. A range of diverse creative practices – such as Dupuy and Berberian’s integration of comics and live musical performance, Thierry van Hasselt’s contributions to the choreography of Katrine de Ponties, Alan Moore’s spoken word performances, and the chalk talks of Milton Caniff – have tied comics to live performance traditions through a model of intermedial hybridity. While *La Maison close* does not neatly align with live performance traditions, unlike several of Ruppert and Mulot’s other festival-based creations, it is my contention that the improvisational nature of the work, and its site-specific installation at the Festival International de la Bande Dessinée (FIBD) in Angoulême, situate it as an important piece in this transitional movement to bring comics squarely, and belatedly, into the embrace of the contemporary art world.

#### Five Contexts for *La Maison close*

Although I have chosen here to examine *La Maison close* as a particular instance of the incorporation of collaborative improvisation in the comics field, and, consequently, as part of a larger drive to align comics production with the traditions of the dominant art world, it would also be profitable to interpret the work according to other heuristics. In the interest of space, I will touch briefly on only five of these: as evidence of the rising importance of comics festivals as generative spaces; as the product of a particular publishing movement that has its origins in the 1990s; as an ironic commentary on contemporary autobiographical comics works; as an indicator of the increasing prevalence of art school ideas in comics; and as a significant work in the still nascent creative careers of its primary creators, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot. An awareness of each of these five rubrics is, I would suggest, necessary to engage fully with the logics of the text as it was initially presented in January 2009.

*La Maison close* is an improvisational work that was created over the span of ten weeks by isolated artists working in communication with each other, before its unveiling at the 2009 FIBD in Angoulême. Unlike many so-called ‘pure’ or ‘free’ improvisations that occur in real time, or what Hazel Smith and Roger Dean term ‘improvisatory time’, the work is more aptly regarded as an example of what has been called ‘applied improvisation’.<sup>6</sup> Applied improvisations are pieces that are often composed through ‘workshopping’ and other forms of pure improvisation, but without the possibility of interaction with the audience,

6 Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945*, 27.



Figure 2: Ruppert reminds artists that the bathroom mirror should include reflection. © 2009, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot.

who are confronted, in the end, with a 'closed' work. Significantly, therefore, the most important context for *La Maison close* was the FIBD itself. The largest and most important comics festival in Europe, it has been held annually in the French town of Angoulême over the third weekend in January since 1974. Each year the Grand Prix de la Ville d'Angoulême is awarded to a comics creator to honour his or her lifetime achievement in the form. The winner becomes the honorary president of the following year's festival, and is the subject of a retrospective art exhibition. In 2008, the Grand Prix was awarded, for the first time, to two creators: the tandem of Philippe Dupuy and Charles Berberian. These artists, whose careers have been defined by their creative collaboration, invited Ruppert and Mulot to fill one room in their exhibition at the Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image (CIBDI). This was intended as an acknowledgement of innovative collaborative comics-making by the next generation of artists. Thus, it would be inconceivable to think about *La Maison close* outside the tradition of the FIBD because, without the invitation to create

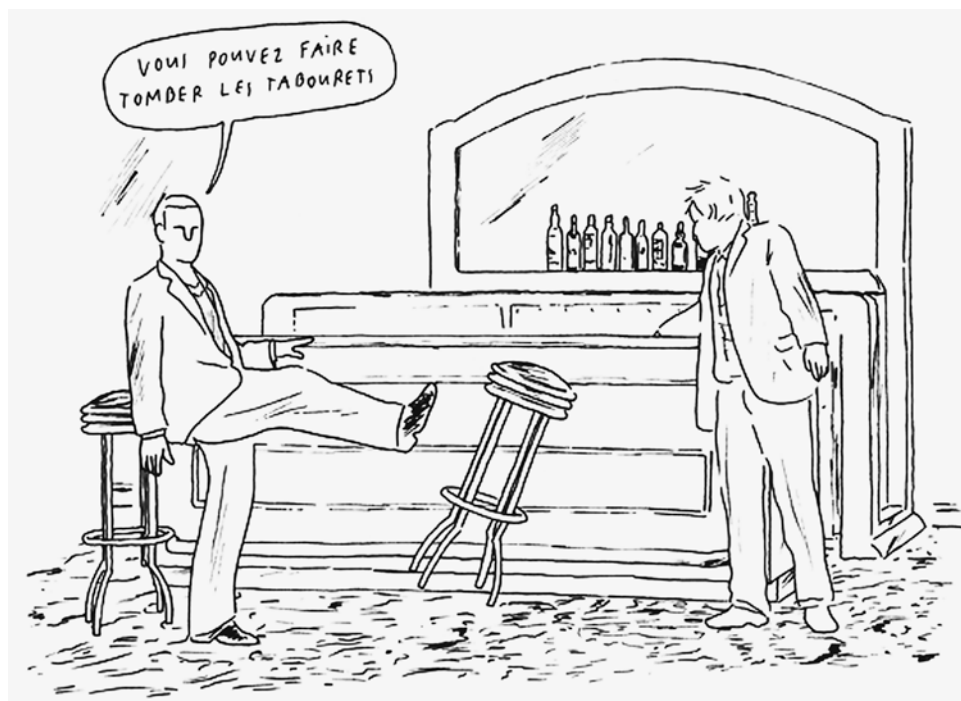


Figure 3: At the bar, the stools can be moved. © 2009, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot.

the work, and without the specific space set aside for it, the comic would not have been created. It is important to bear in mind that, unlike the dominant North American model of comics conventions that emphasise industry and fan cultures, the FIBD is both a market for publishers and a fully fledged art festival, with literally dozens of commissioned exhibitions and performances throughout the city. In this way, the FIBD, like music festivals and art fairs all over the world, comes to occupy a particularly rich generative space, one that facilitates the close interaction of artists who might otherwise spend much of their creative life in relative isolation.

A second important context for *La Maison close* is the tradition of small-press or avant-garde comics production, or, more generally, the phenomenon of ‘art comics’ that arose in Europe most strikingly in the 1990s. In France, as I have argued elsewhere, this cultural phenomenon is closely linked to, though by no means exclusively aligned with, the rise of the Paris-based publisher, L’Association, the publisher of all of Ruppert and Mulot’s books except, ironically, *La Maison close*.<sup>7</sup> The art comics movement has greatly contributed to the legitimating process in which comics have been invested for the past several decades, and has been particularly important in recasting the public perception

7 On the importance of L’Association, see Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), particularly 17–43.

of the art form. Taking its cues from the worlds of restricted literary production and the visual arts, L'Association has been at the forefront of the art comics movement, insofar as it can be conceptualised by such a restrictive term, by actively seeking to reposition comics as an art form through the rejection of the dominant generic tropes and industrial practices. In this process, the marketing device of the so-called 'graphic novel' has been particularly important in paving the way for a renewed image of comics as intellectually viable and culturally respectable. Moreover, this publishing strategy is now widely shared by an international array of small or boutique publishers, many of which publish the work of the creators involved in *La Maison close*. Significantly, Ruppert and Mulot have suggested that the most important comics precursor for this work was *Galopinot* ['Little Rascal'],<sup>8</sup> the improvised mini-comic produced by L'Association co-founders Lewis Trondheim and Mattt Konture.

The central genre in the quest for cultural legitimacy in the comics field has long been autobiography, which provides the third important context for this work. Strikingly, each of the more than two dozen creators involved in the construction of the final work has a recognisable autobiographical comics image, even if many of the artists themselves are not particularly known for autobiographical work. Following in the tradition of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*,<sup>9</sup> and continuing through the success of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*,<sup>10</sup> autobiography has become the hallmark of generic seriousness in the comics form. The close association of the quotidian and the confessional stands in marked contrast to the traditions of heroic adventure (in Europe), superhero action (in the United States), and humour that have shaped the popular conception of comics. At the base level, a great deal of the ironically self-referential humour in *La Maison close* is derived from the use of autobiographical self-images of the creators ('Ruppert et Mulot m'ont dit que ce serait bien pour redorer mon image de néo has been de la nouvelle BD de faire le videur ici' ['Ruppert and Mulot told me that it would help to change my image as the neo-has-been of the new comics movement to be the bouncer here'], says Lewis Trondheim). The use of autobiographical or quasi-autobiographical images of cartoonists for humorous ends has a long tradition in comics: for example, Lambil (Willy Lambillotte) and Raoul Cauvin's *Pauvre Lampil* ['Poor Lampil'] series, and the interventions of Marcel Gotlieb's double in *Rubrique-à-brac* ['Rubric-a-brac']. However, the context in which *La Maison close* was created is far different from that of those earlier examples. As I have amply demonstrated elsewhere, in the intervening years realistic autobiographical comics became a defining feature of the alternative comics movement in Europe. In *La Maison close* cartoonists associated with that trend ironically refract their autobiographical doubles in

8 Lewis Trondheim and Mattt Konture, *Galopinot* (Paris: L'Association, 1998).

9 Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (New York: Pantheon, 1986, 1992).

10 Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (Paris: L'Association, 2000–2003).



Figure 4: A variety of different kinds of liquor bottles are also available. © 2009, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot.

the defamiliarising narrative context of an improvisation within a bordello setting. It is therefore impossible to think through *La Maison close* outside the (new) traditions of autobiographical comics narratives that structure our understanding of the creators/characters in the work. In short, given the high degree of referentiality and irony employed in the text, it needs to be understood as one symptomatic response to the autobiographical turn that has dominated a certain sector of contemporary art comics production in recent decades.

A fourth context for approaching the work is the way that it intersects with the traditional conceptions of art world practices. Significantly, Ruppert and Mulot met at the *École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts (ENSA)* in Dijon, where Mulot was studying visual art and Ruppert was studying dance. At art school, each was trained in creative practices drawn from the traditions of the art world, including improvisation, and were educated about the history of twentieth-century art practice. Their creative partnership reflects a growing trend of art-school trained cartoonists who have chosen to bring techniques





*Figure 5: At the front door, Mulot acts as a stand-in for Lewis Trondheim. © 2009, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot.*

and approaches that are derived from artistic traditions generally held to be at odds with a 'popular' art form, and for whom hybridity and intermediality seem quite natural.

Finally, and in many ways most obviously, the work can be read in an auteurist fashion as an important contribution in the growing oeuvre of its primary instigators. Ruppert and Mulot began publishing comics professionally in a number of small-run anthologies in 2004, including *Bile noire* ['Black Bile'] and *Le Nouveau journal de Judith and Marinette* ['The New Journal of Judith and Marinette']. Their short story, 'Les Pharaons d'Égypte' ['The Pharaohs of Egypt'], brought them to the attention of L'Association's Jean-Christophe Menu, who would publish their first book, *Safari Monseigneur* ['Safari Monsignor'] later that year. Their second major book, *Panier de singe* ['Monkey Basket']<sup>11</sup> was awarded the Prix Révélation at the 2007 FIBD, adding to their already growing critical reputation. Their fourth book, *Le Tricheur* ['The Cheater']<sup>12</sup> was also nominated for a prize at FIBD. Significantly, the two artists work closely together on all aspects of their works. Both draw and both write, often simultaneously on the same page. Collaboration, dialogue and improvisation are among the signatures of their work, and are elements that have been greatly expanded upon in *La Maison close*. Additionally, they are well-known for their innovative book signings, or *séances de dédicaces*, in which they construct objects including picture frames and buttons out of the pages of their books. They have also created site-specific comics works for several festivals, including by employing audience members to engage in gladiatorial combat in Nantes, France in 2007, and creating improvised comics with audience participation while seated in a tiger cage at the Fumetto Festival in Luzern, Switzerland in 2008. Stylistically, their comics are defined by a minimalist aesthetic and characters with obscured or non-existent facial features. Their page layouts are often untraditional, with panels that do not flow in established linear sequences, and word balloons that stack upon themselves in long vertical sequences (which they term 'arborescence'). Narratively, their works have been defined by a high degree of irony and absurdity, with stories that are composed of short, seemingly unrelated incidents filled with extremely black humour, an approach that is particularly present in *La Maison close*.

### Entering *La Maison close*

Although part of *La Maison close* was published in a significantly altered book edition by Delcourt in January 2010, the work as initially presented at the 2009 FIBD was composed of two distinct parts, neither of which took printed form. Visitors to the Dupuy-Berberian exhibition at the CIBDI could experience the

11 Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot, *Panier de singe* (Paris: L'Association, 2006).

12 Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot, *Le Tricheur* (Paris: L'Association, 2008).

live and interactive version of the work in a small room located at the very end of the exhibition space. This room was completely empty except for padded red velvet that covered the walls. Confronted with a seemingly empty red room, some visitors were confused by the piece and walked away. Others noticed that some of the brass tacks holding the fabric in place were actually covered peep-holes. Visitors who looked through these holes, most of which required either kneeling or standing on one's toes, given their awkward placement on the walls, could see the drawn images of *La Maison close* projected on computer monitors that had been placed within the walls. Over the course of several minutes, the narrative(s) of *La Maison close* would slowly unfold on the monitors.

The second part of the project – which was much more viewer-friendly, although far less immersive – involved posting the entire drawn work to the FIBD website during the event and leaving it active throughout the following year. Web surfers encountering this site were presented with a welcome page set in the lobby of the brothel. The lobby and all of its furnishings, including a copy of Manet's *Olympia*, had been drawn by Ruppert and Mulot. On the various chairs and sofas arrayed throughout the room sat the autobiographical comics stand-ins of 11 of the most important contemporary female cartoonists. Pauline Martin's autobiographies *La Boîte* ['The Box/The Company'] and *La Meilleure du monde* ['The Best in the World'] have been published by Ego Comme X. Catherine Meurisse publishes humorous comics about literary figures in *Charlie Hebdo*. Lisa Mandel is the creator of *Nini Patalo* ['Nini Wetfeet'] and *Eddy Milveux*. Florence Cestac won the Grand Prix at the 2000 FIBD. Nadja is a children's book artist, who has published comics with Cornélius and Bayou/Gallimard. Anouk Ricard is the creator of *Anna et Froga* ['Anna and Froga'], and two-time FIBD prize nominee. Aude Picault created *Papa* ['Father'] for L'Association and *Moi je* ['Me I'] for Warum. Caroline Sury is the co-publisher of *Le Dernier Cri*. Anna Sommer is an illustrator and author of *Remue-ménage* ['Hullabaloo']. Fanny Dalle-Rive is the co-creator, with Anne Baraou, of *Une Demi-douzaine d'elles* ['A Half-Dozen of Them'] for L'Association. Lucie Durbiano's *Trésor* ['Treasure'] was nominated for a prize at FIBD in 2008. Finally, there was Charles Berberian, FIBD co-president, in a suit, blond wig and a beard. Clicking on the image of any of these characters opened a new browser window and launched a new chapter in the story in what the creators termed 'rooms'. *La Maison close* began with the selection of these cartoonists, each of whom was chosen for their strong graphic personality, keen sense of improvisation, ability to work quickly and spontaneously, and reliable internet connection.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, a small text box reading 'Introduction' appeared at the top of the image. Clicking on this link opened a 13th chapter, in which the

13 As material was created in isolation and shared collaboratively between artists over the internet, the technological requirement actually excluded the presence of certain authors who might otherwise have been involved but who are not online, notably Blutch.

characters of Ruppert and Mulot pitch the idea of the project to a very sceptical group of potential collaborators.

While each of the 12 ‘rooms’ available to the reader was numbered, there was no narrative reason to read them sequentially, and, indeed, the order of presentation was not particularly clear from the lobby page, nor were the rooms arranged in a manner that made logical sense from the point of view of a linear narrative. Significantly, the story’s ‘ending’ occurred in the sixth, rather than the twelfth, chapter. Each room in the story unfolded on its own, although elements, characters and plot points crossed over between some, though not all, of the rooms. Further, each of the rooms was presented as a series of comics panels that were presented one at a time (to be legible in the room at the museum), and unfurled in a vertically scrolling strip that read from top to bottom. The chapters ranged from a few dozen panels, in the shortest, to several hundred, in some of the longer sequences. Each made use of a series of ‘sets’ composed by Ruppert and Mulot, including an empty street, an alley with an automated teller machine, the front door of the brothel, the lobby, a coat check, a washroom, a stairway, a bedroom, and the view of the bedroom from outside the building. At the beginning of each chapter a male character was introduced, each drawn by a well known cartoonist (in order): Frantico is the pseudonym of a comics blogger widely believed to be Lewis Trondheim. Zep is the creator of the best-selling *Titeuf* [‘Lil’Egg’] and was president of the 2005 FIBD. Émile Bravo is the author of the *Jules* series. Guy Delisle has been widely acclaimed for his L’Association-published travel comics, *Pyongyang* [‘Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea’] and *Shenzhen* [‘Shenzhen: A Travelogue from China’]. Christian Aubrun is a childrens’ book illustrator who shares a studio with Bravo. Boulet is best known for the *Notes* series from Delcourt. Frederik Peeters is the creator of *Lupus* and the autobiographical *Pilules bleues* [‘Blue Pills: A Positive Love Story’] for Atrabile. François Olislaeger is the author of *La Régression* [‘The Regression’] for La Cinquième Couche. François Ayroles is an OuBaPo member and the creator of *Les Amis* [‘The Friends’]. Killoffer is a co-founder of L’Association. Tom Gauld is a Scottish cartoonist who regularly publishes in *The Guardian*. Olivier Schrauwen is the author of *Mon Fiston* [‘My Sonny’]. Sébastien Lumineau published *Le Chien de la voisine* [‘The Neighbour’s Dog’] under the pen name Imius. Finally, Morgan Navarro published *Skateboard et Vahinés* [‘Skateboard and Tahitian Women’] with Gallimard. In the course of events Peggy Adam, who publishes regularly with Atrabile, was introduced as a cleaning lady who aspired to become a prostitute, and who killed Florence Cestac and Héléne Bruller – the author of *Les Autres filles* [‘The Other Girls’], real-life partner of Zep, and grand-daughter of cartoonist Jean Bruller – who appeared at the end of the chapter involving Zep and Frantico. Lewis Trondheim, the president of the 2007 FIBD, was portrayed as the bouncer, and Philippe Dupuy was described on occasion as being in the cloakroom, although

he never appeared in the work save as the sender of a text message received by Trondheim. In addition, Ruppert and Mulot themselves frequented a number of the stories, serving drinks at the bar, working the coat check and generally resolving problems among the extensive cast of characters. In all, 31 different creators were involved in the production of the work, with the vast majority crossing over to more than one chapter or room.

Given the large number of creators involved in this improvisation, certain structures and rules were necessary to create a work that could be understood in a unified manner. As Smith and Dean point out, improvisations are not entirely self-generating, and improvisers often rely on a reservoir of personal clichés.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, *La Maison close*, as Ruppert and Mulot explain in the introduction, is what can be termed a 'referent improvisation', or a work that is based on a pre-arranged structure. Ruppert and Mulot had experienced success with this type of improvisation previously, notably with 'Le Championnat de bras de fer' ['The armwrestling championship'], an unfinished online comic that pitted 16 cartoonists against each other in a series of arm-wrestling matches in which the participants drew an improvised combat, only for Ruppert and Mulot to pronounce a victor at the end. The blueprint for *La Maison close* was a structured interaction around a limited number of sets, or background drawings, provided by Ruppert and Mulot to the other participants online as Photoshop files. These backgrounds, which spelled out spatial relations so that the participants would have a common reference upon which they could build narratives, were made available to the artists on a password-protected portion of Ruppert and Mulot's website as 'La Visite guidée' ['The Guided Tour'], along with essays on the topics of how *La Maison close* would be organised and how the artists would interact with each other. Bruno Nettle has argued that the success of improvisatory processes is tied to the identification of a 'point of departure' for the work that allows the collaborators to fall back upon shared assumptions (in music this can range from tunes to mere chord sequences, for example).<sup>15</sup> Ruppert and Mulot can be said to have 'authored' *La Maison close*, but only insofar as they established the structures, procedures and thematics in which the work could unfold collectively. That is to say, they authorised a space for collective creation of varying collaborative intensity, thematic density, and narrative coherence.

One thing that is imperative to bear in mind about *La Maison close* is that the entire work was composed collaboratively by email. Individual artists would download backgrounds and then insert their own images and text into these images. They would then return them to Ruppert and Mulot, who would post them so that other collaborators could download them and add to them. In the

14 Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945*, 29.

15 Bruno Nettle with Melinda Russell, *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).



Figure 6: The bedrooms, viewed at a distance. © 2009, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot.

directions that were provided to the participating artists, Ruppert and Mulot outlined a number of improvisational techniques that had proven successful in the past, notably on ‘Championnat de bras de fer’. That work was composed by a method that they term ‘ping pong’. The first artist would compose an image and text upon a background and send it to the second artist. The second artist would respond to the first image and also create (at least) a second one. This would then be returned to the first artist, who would respond to the second image and create a third, with the process repeating in this fashion until the story was complete. Nonetheless, the complexity of *La Maison close*, with scenes that often incorporated more than two characters/creators, necessitated other improvisational techniques. Notably, Émile Bravo chose not to work in a ‘ping pong’ fashion and supplied Ruppert and Mulot with a single drawing at a time. The result of this technique was that Bravo played the ‘lead’, akin to a musical solo, with the other characters reacting to him and attempting to follow along. Other creators opted for a different technique, in which the entirety of a scene would be worked out textually before anything was drawn. In Chapter 7, for example, Anouk Ricard, Lucie Durbiano, Nadja and Florent Ruppert all interacted at the bar. This dialogue was constructed through an exchange of email, with each artist emailing the others ‘in character’, before being edited and drawn in the form that it existed within the work.

*La Maison close* was not an improvisational work in the spontaneous, synchro-

nous sense of public creation in the moment. Indeed, it was not unveiled to an audience until it was completed, and its public display was only an interim moment in the process of its realisation, not its origin point. That said, what is important about the work's improvisational structure is that it was simultaneously textual and a performative act, with the artists performing their roles in the text and engaging in multiple levels of interactive play for an audience of other creators. This conception of play within the act of creation is particularly emphasised in two ways. First, the contributions of Frederik Peeters were especially playful in the context of the overall work because he began working from the completed pages of other contributors, inserting his 'invisible' body into the flow of their narratives and adding significant complexity to the work. Second, the entire conception of the narrative units as 'rooms' rather than 'chapters' is indicative of the way that the piece was elaborated along a primarily spatial, rather than a temporal, dynamic, which is much more characteristic of performativity than textuality.

### Reading *La Maison close*

Much of the curiousness about *La Maison close* stemmed from the competing interests of the various narratives. In one way, the combined efforts of the 31 creators conspired to tell a single story – essentially a day in the life of this particular brothel – through a dense field of interwoven trajectories. Yet, at the same time, many of the individual chapters could be read as stand-alone short stories that barely touched upon the meta-narrative of the brothel. To this end, the 12 main chapters, or rooms, of *La Maison close* varied a great deal in terms of intricacy, and could be arranged on an axis of relative complexity from low to high. Chapters could be judged as straightforward in the work only in relation to other chapters, as even the most elemental narrative was innovative by the norms of the comics field. For instance, the rooms with the lowest degree of narrative complication were the first, third, fourth, sixth, eighth and tenth, each of which was primarily focused on one or two primary characters. Nonetheless, each of these chapters was created by the interaction of no fewer than five (Chapters 1, 3 and 6) creators. For instance, the third chapter opened with Guy Delisle walking along the street and arriving at the *Maison close*, where he spoke with the doorman, Lewis Trondheim. The scene then cut to the washroom, where Catherine Meurisse and Lisa Mandel occupied two of the stalls, and Peggy Adam was cleaning the mirrors. Later, Mandel and Delisle met in the bedroom, and, while getting undressed, Delisle encountered – and then fought – a sumo wrestler drawn by Mandel. Even in this reasonably linear story, which was comprised of only three distinct scenes, six different creators contributed to the storytelling and the development of the tone and details of the sketch. In contrast, certain chapters carried much more of the narrative weight in the overall piece, and, as a result, involved a greater number of contributors. From

the point of view of total narrative comprehension, the two most important chapters in the work were the second, which, if read chronologically, served to establish many of the unresolved issues of the narrative, and the ninth, which provided most, but not all, of the resolution. The second chapter contained the drawings of nine creators, while the ninth included contributions from 13 different artists in a complicated plot that touched on nearly half the cast of the work as a whole.

The varying collaborative intensities meant that the narrative elements in *La Maison close* carried different significance and impact, with the narrative tending to be carried by the longer and more complex 'rooms'. At the same time, these chapters were not positioned in places that would be considered privileged in traditional narratives. As I have noted already, the conclusion to the narrative was presented in Chapter 6, at the midpoint of the work as a whole, while most of the pressing issues of the narrative were resolved in Chapter 9, with the final three chapters adding very little in terms of narrative closure. Another break from traditional narration stemmed from the temporal ordering of the chapters. The first image of the first chapter depicted Frantico arriving at the *Maison close*, where a sign on the front door indicated that he was welcome to enter. Later, in the second chapter, one witnessed Trondheim placing that sign on the door, whereas six chapters depicted Trondheim's interactions as doorman with the male artists who arrived before he decamped, in the second chapter, to the bar. Thus, the action in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 11 all began before the first panel of Chapter 1, although none were explicitly signalled as flashbacks, and, indeed, each chapter existed in its own narrative time despite the frequent crossovers between chapters. For the reader, the ordering of narrative elements in *La Maison close* was a challenging task, due to the extremely fractured continuity between segments, the way that characters appeared and disappeared in an irregular manner, and the very sporadic signposting of temporal cues.

For readers attempting to impose a linear sequence on events in *La Maison close*, the most important elements were a series of recurrent episodes. In several chapters, for example, Nadja, Lucie Durbiano and Anouk Ricard were depicted together at the bar, or Trondheim and Catherine Meurisse were shown together by one of the sofas. These scenes, in which the same drawings were used in multiple chapters, constituted one of the features that allowed narrative elements to flow across the work as a whole, uniting the piece and eliciting readerly interest by introducing seemingly inexplicable strands into the story, only to resolve them later. The placement of chapters was therefore not entirely arbitrary, because it included the scraps of a conventional narrative logic. For example, the fourth chapter introduced a great deal of narrative confusion with reference to the work's only consummated sex act. In this chapter, cleaning lady Peggy Adam killed Florence Cestac and assumed her place as a



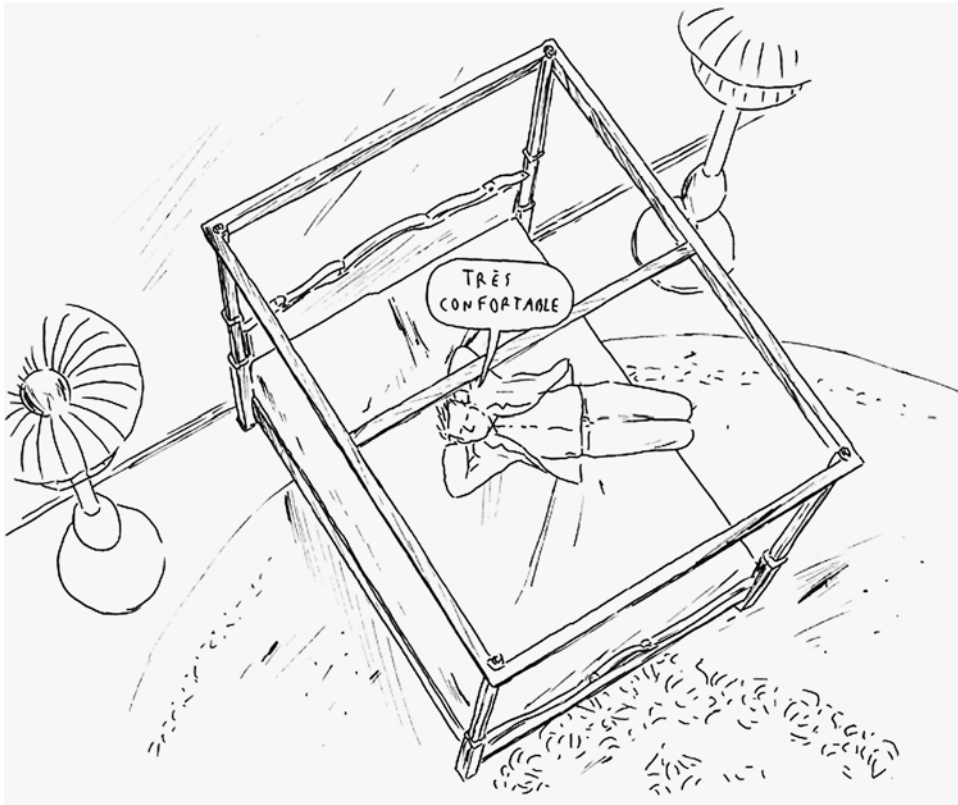


Figure 7: Mulot lounges on the bed. © 2009, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot.

prostitute. In her room, she humiliated Boulet, who retreats to the bar. Later, Adam was ravaged by a now monstrously drunken Boulet. In the midst of this scene, it was revealed that Adam was then actually having sex with an invisible Frederik Peeters, with whom Boulet was now also having sex, and the scene ended with Adam being literally ejected onto the street when Boulet exploded into a mass of bodily fluids. The reason for the presence of Peeters in the scene was left ambivalent until the ninth chapter, where he entered the *Maison close* as a naked invisible man. At that point, the entire sex scene was replayed with the same drawings, but with the addition of Peeters' outlined form and thought balloons. This recycling and repurposing of visual elements was one of the hallmarks of *La Maison close*, and particularly of its extremely fractured arthrology.

Throughout *La Maison close*, narrative elements that were introduced initially seemed nonsensical, but ambiguities and discrepancies were later resolved in a logical, if not entirely realistic, manner. At a very basic level, for example, *La Maison close* presented a murder mystery. In Chapter 2, Lewis Trondheim found the dead body of Florence Cestac behind the sofa in the main lobby area.

Although this could have been a point of great narrative interest – who killed Cestac? – it was actually dispatched in the work very quickly, as in the fourth chapter one witnessed Peggy Adam kill the sleeping cartoonist. Other points of significant narrative interest arose in the second chapter and were only resolved much later. Trondheim, seeking a drink, encountered a bottle, which mysteriously and inexplicably floated away from him, and also an unpleasant odour. These mysteries were resolved in Chapter 9 by the arrival of the invisible Frederik Peeters, who carried away the bottle while also passing gas. In this way, *La Maison close* worked to create a series of banal mysteries – what was that smell? or whose jacket was this? – that substituted for the more substantial narrative imperatives that one might anticipate in a work of its length. Moreover, narrative devices that are quite common to comics – the murder mystery, or the mad scientist introduced by Émile Bravo – were discarded with almost no thought or consequence. The collaborative process guiding the creation of the work was revealed, especially in Chapters 2 and 9, as having been structured around a series of key frames that had created the shell of a ‘proper’ narrative, even while the bulk of the work was devoted to more minor diversions akin to the lead solos taken by musicians in a jam.

### Beyond Narrative: The Ironies of Improvisatory Autobiography

One of the strengths of the first chapter of *La Maison close* was the way that it immediately opened up the ironic use of autobiographical representation. The work began with the image of Frantico, the author of the webcomic *Le Blog de Frantico* [‘Frantico’s Blog’],<sup>16</sup> and a comics industry figure widely assumed to be Lewis Trondheim. The uncertainty that surrounds the ‘true’ authorship of Frantico’s comics, which Trondheim has, at varying times, both claimed and disavowed, helped to establish the paradigm for the work through reference to past online comics projects. As Frantico moved into the brothel, he encountered Ruppert and Mulot on the stairway, discussing their concern that both Zep and Pauline Martin were unable to continue their participation in the project. For Frantico, this was not a problem: he reached into his bag and pulled out a drawing of Zep, which he proceeded to carry around for the rest of the chapter, and whose voice he began to imitate. This scene raised at least two substantive issues about creativity in the comics world. First, Frantico was a pseudonymous autobiographical character, whose presence in the work heightened the fundamental disconnect between the image of the cartoonist and the ‘real world’ author. The presence of the fictional character, in other words, violated what Philippe Lejeune terms the ‘referential pact’ in autobiography.<sup>17</sup> Second, the presence of this single recurrent image of Zep, recognisable stylis-

<sup>16</sup> Collected by Albin Michel, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

tically from his own autobiographical books, such as *Découpé en tranches* ['Cut into Slices'],<sup>18</sup> undermined his non-participation in the work, as his presence was made manifest by Frantico. Indeed, Frantico went so far as to suggest that he could even mimic the voice of Zep ('Bonjour les amis. Je suis Zep' ['Hello, friends. I'm Zep'], he said in the distinctive cursive lettering of Frantico, rather than in the clean lower-case lettering that Zep uses for his autobiographical work). When Ruppert noted that the 'voice', which we can here read as lettering, was 'un peu bizarre' ['a little strange'], Frantico, in a nod to the confusion over his creator(s), noted that he could also do the voices of Moebius and Trondheim. When Frantico and his faux-Zep eventually encountered the 'real' Zep in the bathroom, the latter was identified by a caption serving to verify the actual participation of the cartoonist for this single image. In this way, the core value of autobiographical comics, the relationship between authorship and iconicity, was thrown into disarray by the first chapter through motifs that repeatedly played with the connections between the cartooned image of a creator and the utterances of that creator.

These ambiguities highlight the extent to which *La Maison close* harnessed the creative possibilities that arose from asking cartoonists to create fictional work with their autobiographical self-images within the constraints of an imagined brothel as a social space for encounters. Chapter 8, which revolved primarily around the relationship between Tom Gauld and Aude Picault, is a case in point. Gauld was introduced to the narrative as a character who was uneasy with the very premise of the collaboration, reluctant to proceed, and uncomfortable with his inability to speak French. Picault was similarly reticent, telling Lisa Mandel that she was only participating because Mandel had talked her into it. Forced into a room together by the fast-talking Ruppert, Picault and Gauld schemed to deceive their hosts into thinking that they have engaged in sex, when in reality Picault had merely jumped up and down on the bed. Having completed his assigned duties, Gauld departed. In many ways, this was the simplest of the stories presented in *La Maison close* (Chapter 10, with Olivier Schrauwen and Anna Sommer falling asleep in bed would be a close rival), and one that had the lowest degree of interaction with the other narratives taking place at the same time. Moreover, this chapter had a very low level of intensity in terms of collaborative drawing because, with the exception of the panels in which Ruppert walked with his arm around Gauld or helped him to carry his suitcase, all of the characters occupied distinct spaces upon the supplied backgrounds. The interaction between Picault and Gauld, and between Picault and Mandel, was fundamentally limited to dialogue, which generated a certain collaborative distance between the creators that played out upon the image.

A very different sort of collaboration took place between Anouk Ricard and

<sup>18</sup> Zep, *Découpé en tranches* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).



Figure 8: Ruppert takes in the view of Angoulême. © 2009, Florent Ruppert and Jérôme Mulot.

Killoffer, cartoonists with strikingly different public images. Ricard, who works primarily as the creator of comics for young children and who draws faux-naïve anthropomorphic characters in a cute style, stands in marked contrast to Killoffer, whose *Six Cent soixante-seize apparitions de Killoffer* ['Six Hundred and Seventy-Six Apparitions of Killoffer']<sup>19</sup> depicted himself as a sexually insatiable narcissist. The collaboration between these two authors was the one of the longest and most notable of the entire piece. The image of Killoffer presented in the work was ludicrously hyper-masculine – he wore a caveman's fur and carried an enormous club, with which he knocked out Ricard and threatened the other patrons. At the same time the image of Ricard was entirely asexual, which seems appropriate because her comics are primarily for children, and therefore are largely devoid of sexual themes. It was the tension between these images – chaste and hyper-sexual, passive and aggressive – that played out in

<sup>19</sup> Killoffer, *Six Cent soixante-seize apparitions de Killoffer* (Paris: L'Association, 2002).

their interchange. More importantly, these exchanges privileged the very form of drawing, foregrounding the constructed nature of autobiographical representations in comics, as Killoffer attempted to construct a sexual identity for Picard through the use of a pen on her 'body', or her autobiographical self-image. In this way one of the two most sexual scenes in *La Maison close* devolved into self-parody, revealing itself to have little to do with sex and everything to do with the construction of comics and the process of collaborating within the form.

### Leaving *La Maison close*

More than any exhibition at the FIBD in recent years, *La Maison close* was a source of scandal and controversy even before it opened to the public. Members of the Association Artémisia, whose purpose is the promotion of 'bande dessinée féminine' ['women's comics'], opened a sixth important interpretive heuristic when they made public a series of statements by their members denouncing the work and its premises. Chantal Montellier, one of the most politically engaged of contemporary French cartoonists, wrote that '[p]ersonnellement je trouve cette maison close plutôt obscène' ['Personally I find this brothel rather obscene']. Anticipating the suggestion that the work was intended to be read ironically or humorously, she continued: 'Je trouve ce genre d'humour assez immonde' ['I find this type of humour quite revolting']. Political cartoonist Catherine Beaunez noted that the work played off a heightened degree of ambiguity around the question of who was speaking – the authors, their characters or their spokespeople – and suggested that this only added to the troubling consequences: 'C'est marrant, cette idée pour moi fait écho à un climat fasciste' ['It's funny, for me this idea echoes a fascist climate']. These condemnations were countered by some of the participants in the work, who suggested that the critics were interpreting *La Maison close* too literally. Boulet, for example, noted that 'personnellement je n'étais pas du tout à l'aise avec le thème choisi par Ruppert et Mulot' ['Personally I was not at all comfortable with the theme chosen by Ruppert and Mulot'] but that 'je pense que chacun a eu à cœur de désamorcer ce thème, et chacun a endossé le rôle d'un personnage' ['I think that everyone had the desire to undercut this theme, and that everyone adopted the role of a character']. Similarly, Nadja argued that 'ce qui est drôle dans cette histoire de maison close, c'est que le sujet permet à tout le monde de manifester quelque chose, c'est un prétexte pour se confronter chacun et chacune librement à un lieu commun' ['What is funny in this brothel story is that the subject allows everyone to express something, it is a pretext that allows each of us to freely confront a cliché'].<sup>20</sup> The

20 The statements by Chantal Montellier and Catherine Beaunez were published on the Association Artémisia website on 22 January 2009, one week before the opening of the FIBD. The responses from Nadja and Boulet were published in the comments section of the same site on 22 January and 23 January 2009, respectively. <http://associationartemisia.blogspot.com/2009/01/notre-case-ouverte-contre-leur-maison.html>

crux of the debate about *La Maison close*, which played out in online discussion fora and blogs, rested on its textual status. The complaints of critics derived from their ideological reading of the work: they argued that the very concept tended to devalue the contributions of women to contemporary cartooning by placing them in the socially devalued position of prostitutes. Defenders of the work, on the other hand, tended to argue that critics had overlooked the ironic play of signifiers within the piece, and had missed the central logic of the work as a whole. If *La Maison close* was read as a traditionally closed text, it was susceptible to denunciation on ideological grounds. However, if it was read as the result of an improvisational process of dialogue between creators, conclusions drawn about the work could be more open-ended or provisional.

Significantly, Ruppert and Mulot did not contribute to the online debate about *La Maison close*, opting to allow the work to speak for itself. This lack of engagement with the issues raised by the work neatly aligned with the dominant image of the artists presented in the work: coldly detached observers of the actions taking place in the narrative. For the most part, when Ruppert and Mulot did appear there, it was as facilitators, providing new props – bottles of wine, a suitcase full of sex toys – as spurs to greater potential creativity within the framework that they had devised. To some extent, the characters of Ruppert and Mulot tended to blend into the backgrounds that they themselves had created for the other artists to play upon, and their sole purpose within the text seemed to be to allow it to continue generating new improvisational experiences. Indeed, as the work unfolded, particularly as it neared its completion in January 2009, the organisers began to imagine even greater degrees of improvisation, including the possibility that the work would continue as an ongoing project beyond the scope of the FIBD. During the course of creating the work, Émile Bravo and Catherine Meurisse had toyed with the possibility of hijacking the entire project, using the virus that he had introduced into the narrative of Chapter 2 as a way of establishing a counter-narrative under their own direction, although they ultimately abandoned the idea as impractical. Similarly, the storyline in which Nadja escaped to the basement of the house only to find an art gallery featuring erotic images produced by the various participants in the work, was a side project that she developed on her own and for which she provided the backgrounds. Given the creators' openness to new forms of improvisational expressivity within the work, therefore, the debate about the work, particularly as it was enacted by cartoonists in public fora, became an important extension of the work itself.

One limitation of the ideological critique of *La Maison close* offered by the Association Artémisia is that, by reducing the work to a single component, it prevented the full complexity of the piece from coming into focus. Moreover, the criticism begins and ends with the conception of the work and its premise, without fully considering the often very critical interventions made by the partic-

ipants. To the degree that the ideological reading of the work depends on an interpretation of Ruppert and Mulot's intentions, it becomes inadequate to the task of accounting for the way that the actual comic unfolded in a much more collaborative and organic fashion, resulting in a work of unusual complexity in the comics form. The central issue raised by *La Maison close* was not the sexualised representation of women in contemporary comics, about which the work had much to say nonetheless, but rather the intricacy of collaborative creation under formal restraints.

Ultimately, the most interesting questions raised by *La Maison close* have little to do with the fixity of ideological interpretation, and much more to do with the process of collaborative creation within the comics field. A work such as this serves to highlight, in unusual ways, that the distance between comics and performative art forms is not nearly so great as has been frequently taken for granted. The participatory nature of the work is reminiscent in some ways of performance and conceptual art from the 1960s on, in which spectators became part of the performance. As I argued in *Unpopular Culture*, the importing of artistic concepts and practices from other media – for example, the formal artistic experimentation of literary modernism and of OuLiPo – into the field of comics can be genuinely innovative. *La Maison close* exemplifies the same dynamic today in regard to performance and improvisation in comics.

Interestingly, the atypicality of the work was significantly mitigated by its publication in book form by Delcourt in 2010. Re-arranged into a linear sequence with multiple panels per page, the book version of *La Maison close* abandons many of the innovations that I have identified here. First, the book does not contain the introduction in which Ruppert and Mulot outlined the project to the female cartoonists, which was the narrative segment that most undercut the potential sexism of the work by giving voice to the reticence of the participants. Second, panels that had appeared in the original work on more than one occasion, such as those involved in the Adam/Boulet/Peeters sex scene, appear only once and thereby are deprived of much of their formal narrative significance and complexity. Third, the clarification of the narrative and the addition of new transition panels have eliminated the inscrutability of certain narrative sequences. The reorganisation of the work for a more traditional printed format has significantly curtailed its improvisatory elements and has obscured its participation in the development of the art form. Conversely, the limitations of the printed work serve to highlight the contribution of the earlier versions of *La Maison close* to our thinking about the newly emerging relationship between performativity and comics.

# French Postmodern Masculinities From Neuromatrices to Seropositivity

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