



ILLUSTRATION, COMICS AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT. CHRONICLE OF AN EXHIBITION IN MOTION

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This article describes an exhibition project that puts to value the relationship between graphic illustration, comics, and social commitment through numerous examples of commissions and personal works carried out by today's Valencian authors. Divided into eleven thematic areas or social causes, the exhibition offers a wide array of styles and poetics, focused on acting as speaker of the claims of various invisible groups.

Key words:

Exhibition, illustration, comic, social commitment, Valencian illustrators.

Graphic illustration and comics are inevitably linked to the world of books but specially to the concept of reading. It is not in vain that we speak of reading images in the same manner as we read words. Besides constructing our first approach to reading, comics and other illustrated books are the first museum, the first art collection we know, revisit and treasure from our childhood. That is why a strategic plan to promote books and reading could not set aside the unquestionable value of graphic illustration, both for its action as activator of other possible readings of a text as for their quality as graphic communication of ideas.

Thus, the commission on behalf of the *Fundació pel Llibre i la Lectura* (FULL) (Foundation for Books and Reading) to curate an exhibition that would highlight the value of the social graphics of authors of the *Comunitat Valenciana* (Region of Valencia) has resulted not only in a passionate challenge but also a necessary contribution to the *Pla valencià de foment del llibre i la lectura* (Valencian Plan for Encouraging Reading and Promotion of Books) fostered by the *Generalitat Valenciana* (Regional Government of Valencia). As if this were not enough, the topic of the project presents a won-

derful opportunity for providing a second loud-speaker for a great number of protests, criticisms, struggles of different collectives, often silenced or made invisible.

"Il·lustració, còmic y compromiso social" (Illustration, Comics and Social Commitment), an exhibition that is informative, didactic and familiar, will travel through different towns of Valencia, being lodged in City Halls, Houses of Culture or Libraries, that will show a collection of publications, graphic campaigns, personal projects and commissions of all types carried out by professional artists from Valencia, or artists residing in the region. It is a show of the last twenty years in which the *leit motif* is their common characteristic of protests and social and political commitment channeled through graphic illustration and comics as a tool of expression, awareness and demand.

After exhaustively researching existing work by more than six hundred professional artists, nearly ninety works complying with the project were selected. In all, more than one hundred and ten initiatives among campaigns, publishing companies, associations, public organisations or firms and about eighty publications among books, fanzines and magazines. In this way, the exhibition becomes a sort of route through a wide array of styles, techniques and poetics that will make the different social causes visible, trying to stir the conscience of the attending public, be it expert or novice, activist or dilettante.

The exhibition comprises printed panels and is structured on eleven topics, the physical exhibition is complemented with a web page with more examples and links to further information, reports, criticism, teaching guides, videos and other resources. At the same time, the exhibition could continue to grow thanks to the contributions the users might send. Also, there is the possibility of accompanying

the exhibition with a portable library to enable the public to consult, *in situ*, the referenced publications.

Each panel would have an introductory text and some of the most representative examples of each topic, giving priority to the graphic part so that the exhibition can be not only interesting but also aesthetically powerful and appealing.

Topics:

Political and ideological commitment

This panel will deal with those examples of authors and initiatives reflecting, in general, an ideological commitment - their manner of understanding the world in accordance with the democratic principles and respect for human rights and a political commitment of criticism of the model of state, how the institutions function, or the behaviour of those in government. As in the rest of the exhibition, this commitment is revealed from different points of view and with different intentions, from other projects exhibits, contests encouraging social graphics, campaigns for making visible collectives fighting for the common good, neighbourhood movements, personal projects arising from indignation and publications in a marked protest or didactic tone. Examples: the collection of *Libros para el mañana* (Books for Tomorrow) (Media Vaca), the fanzine *Arròsnegre* (Black Rice). The winner of the social graphic novel prize Fundación Divina Pastora, *Yes we camp! Trazos para una (r)evolución* (Dibbuku), *Somos Super* (We are Super) (Fundació Horta Sud).

The economic crisis

The economic crisis caused by the crash of 2008 with the bankruptcy of important financial institutions in the United States - for example, mortgage banks, insurance companies or investment banks - in our country, coupled with the bursting of the real estate bubble created by excessive building or the rescue of banks, had terrible consequences. These were economical and social, resulting in cutbacks of public services, evictions, increased unemployment, precarious work, loss of family purchasing power. The consequences of this, augmented by the impositions of the European institutions and the neoliberal trend of the Spanish government are still being suffered by millions of Spanish people. Examples: *El mundo a tus pies* (Nadar, Astiberri), *Crónica de una crisis anunciada* (Paco Roca, El País Semanal), *Crise Ibérica* (Mundo Fantasma - Porto, Portugal), *Las páginas salmón* (The Salmon-coloured Pages) (Omega TBS).

Sensitisation and social inclusion

Sensitisation about the situation of persons or collectives in risk of social exclusion, due to class, race,

purchasing power or medical reasons, is one of the most recurring motivations of the illustrators, fundamentally due to personal and family reasons or commissioned by graphic campaigns, publications furthering solidarity, citizen platforms and associations. This is a heterogeneous panel that illustrates concepts such as gentrification, racism or xenophobia, but also support for people affected that battle against different stigmatised illnesses that are not well known or hidden. Examples: *Yo no soy racista, pero* (Elías Taño), a campaign fighting prejudice against gypsies. (Sergio Montal), *Pídeme un deseo antes de dormir* (ASPANION), *Una posibilidad* (Cristina Durán and Miguel Ángel Giner, Astiberri).

Equality in gender and sexist violence

Violence against women is not evidenced only physically but also psychologically, economically, symbolically or at work and in the fact that men and women do not have the same opportunities nor the same consideration in all realms of personal and professional life. The feminist struggle is a struggle for equality: actual, real, equality for which we must all, men and women, fight, avoiding to reproduce anachronistic models of conduct and renouncing, fundamentally men, to maintain their unjust and unjustifiable privileges. There are many matters that affect women just because they are women in a society that has not advanced sufficiently. This is why many female authors and some male ones, have mobilised themselves graphically against reactionary laws, denouncing feminicide, or fighting for achieving visibility as authors, as professionals, without gender labels. Examples: the collective *Autoras de Cómic, Enjambre* (Norma Editorial), the graphic-sound project *Hits with tits*, the campaign against male sexist violence (Lina Vila), *Estamos todas bien* (Ana Penyas, winner of the FNAC-Salamandra Graphics Prize 2016).

LGTBI Collective (Lesbians, Gays, Transexuals, Bisexuals and Intergender persons)

Standardisation of the different identities of gender and sexual and emotional orientation of people addressed to achieve their complete acceptance is another of the topics dealt with in comics and graphic illustration. The works on this panel, results of institutional campaigns but also of the intention of their authors in breaking the rigid models of other cultural manifestations traditionally heteronormative, contribute to making visible some collectives stigmatised by conservative politicians and religious circles, and to denounce social, work and legal discrimination many people suffer because they do not conform to a supposedly correct model in their manner of living, feel-

ing, loving and enjoying. Examples: *Desanimado* (Emilio Martí, animated short film) *Altres formes de vida, altres formes de ser* (Carlos Corredera, Falla Na Jordana), calendar *Orgull LGTBI* (LaLalu-na gràfica). Anselmo. *Ocasionalmente veo Divas* (Fefeto, Edicions de Ponent).

Memory of the past

History is full of great lagoons, gaps, and Spanish history of the 20th century is no exception. After nearly forty years of dictatorship and another forty of democracy, there are many people of great interest, episodes, advances or cultural achievements that begin to emerge and become known to the great public, not just specialists and researchers, after decades of censorship, occultation and pacts of silence. In the last years there are many initiatives, especially in the realm of graphic novels, that vindicate or revisit the period of the Second Spanish Republic, the Spanish Civil War and their main protagonists. The same is true in similar episodes of these same years and of the II World War in the European context after some type of grievances – expressed through the oral memory of the people or the journalistic research work. Examples: *Dr. Uriel* (Sento. Astiberri), *Los surcos del azar* (Paco Roca. Astiberri), *Los días rojos de la memoria* (Ana Penyas, self-published), *Todo lo que nos contaron nuestros abuelos* (Cachete Jack, Ultrarradio), *Esperaré siempre tu regreso* (Jordi Peidro Desfiladero Ediciones), *El día tres* (Laura Ballesteros, Cristina Durán and Miguel Ángel Giner, Prize Ciutat de Palma 2016).

Defence of the Valencian language

When two languages coexist in a territory such as Valencia and a hierarchy is produced between them, the non-hegemonic language hardly survives, in a situation of disadvantage – including its persecution in some realms – and can run the risk of becoming a museum piece, slowly shrinking due to its little use by society, until it disappears. There are many actions defending the standardisation of the Valencian language as a tool for communication, a mechanism of social cohesion and a part of the cultural heritage being carried out since the end of the dictatorship. These initiatives – on behalf of the public institutions in compliance with the *Estatut d'autonomia* (regional constitution) of 1982, or through the private initiative of firms, platforms of civil society or personal activism – use graphic illustration and comic to extend this historical vindication. Unfortunately, the Valencian language continues, today, suffering attacks, discriminations and stigmatisation inherent to its political instrumentalisation. Examples: magazines such as *Camacuc* and *Xiu-*

lit, campaign *Llegir en Valencià* (Reading in Valencian) (Fundació Bromera) television program *Un país de llibre* (AVL, AEPV, Barret Films), fanzine *Ufa*, blog *llibreria il·lustrada*.

Environmental activism

Environmental defence, summoning social awareness to respect and safeguard nature, animal rights and human responsibility to seriously consider the ecologist motto of the three R's – reduce, recycle, reuse – is a fight that today is present in all institutional campaigns. It is also evident in exhibitions that consider animal mistreatment, in publications that spread the knowledge of concepts such as biodiversity, renewable energy, sustainability or that alert about global warming, and movements that battle to defend natural enclaves and the beings that inhabit them. Examples: exhibition *Vivan los Toros* (curated by Boke Bazán), campaign *Pla colonial felí* (Lina Vila), *L'acudit verd* (Txemacantropus, Samaruc digital), *Propòsits* (Clara-Iris Ramos, la Directa).

International human solidarity

This panel combines the work of diffusion of the cooperative development campaigns – normally commissioned by the governments and the non-governmental organisations that have projects in other countries – with those works that illustrators and comic artists develop to denounce extreme situations throughout the world such as war, humanitarian emergencies and other effects caused by political and economic interests. Projects that, aware of the communicative power of the image, using comic and illustration to promote economic donations, mobilising international help or simply bringing other realities and other cultures to light, of which we learn occasionally a very superficial and distorted manner. Examples: *Viaje a Bosnia* (Sento, self-published), *El coche de Intisar, Retrato de una mujer moderna en Yemen* (Nacho Casanova, EDT), *Viñetas de vida* (Oxfam Intermón), *Refugi il·lustrat. Entre el taut i la maleta* (Associació Professional d'il·lustradors de València – APIV)

Social and political satire

The use of satire as a tool for criticism and social vindication is often related with graphic humour: a type of illustration traditionally linked to daily newspapers and satirical magazines – from the beginning of the 19th century, magazines such as the French *Le Charivari* or *La Caricature*, the Valencian *La Traca*, right up to the most modern ones such as *La Codorniz*, *Hermano Lobo*, *El Jueves* or *Orgullo y satisfacción*, but also in books that collect panels



Ana Penyas. *Los días rojos de la memoria*, self-published (winner of the FNAC-Salamandra graphic Award).

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or comic strips and newly created illustrated projects. Since they have great public diffusion, greater in many cases than the other supports, and they center their jibes on political scandals, caricature of human behaviour and questioning those in power, they are often the target of attacks, acts of censorship and even, although it might seem something of an age gone by, removal of the magazine from the news vendors. Examples: *Barbaritats valencianes* (Lalo Kubala and Xavi Castillo, *Pot de Plom*) Ortifus, Juanjo Cuerda, Raúl Salazar.

Human rights, work rights and children's rights

Lastly, the exhibit closes with some examples of diffusion of historical initiatives that were drafted with the intention of guaranteeing human rights and those of children that are not always effective or respected despite their aura of great solemnity. On the other hand, there are also those campaigns that support vindications of workers, male and female, and denounce violation of their rights: from summons that call to strike to specific vindications such as making domestic work visible, from education. Examples: *Libres e iguals* (Media Vaca) Elías Taño, Luis Demana, Unió de Cooperatives d'Ensejament Valencianes, UCEV, Escola i família, petits y grans, junts perls drets dels infants (Lalalimola, UNICEF).

The exhibition is now in its development phase, planning the web and the graphic design of the exhibition – in charge of Elías Taño, great scholar and advocate of social graphic, illustrator and activist – and we do not know if it will have already been inaugurated when this number of EME magazine is published. In any case it will be inaugurated in 2017.

Just as it has been repeatedly pointed out in this “work in progress”, despite the fact that a great part the works present in the exhibition have been produced on commission, there are uncounted numbers of works of committed character that arise from the personal intention of their authors, male and female, and their ethical and political positioning: using the singular force of their work as a vindication of their role in the world, of its social impact and of its public function.

We hope that *Il·lustración, cómic y compromiso social* (Illustration, Comic and Social Commitment) contributes to develop the voice of those silenced and give images to the battle of those made invisible. A living example to cover as many places as possible and which will continue to grow with new contributions. That is, an exhibition in motion.

More information:
<http://www.llibresvalencians.com/>