



THE UNIVERSITY of
MISSISSIPPI
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Comics Machine: Abstract and Asemic Comics

Gene Kannenberg, Jr. (Northwestern University)

An exhibit to accompany: *Comicana: Comics and Graphic Novels Across the Humanities* (October 7-12, 2019)

Full conference schedule
[available here.](#)



Exhibit poster design by Blake King
University of Mississippi Libraries

COMICS MACHINE

Abstract and Asemic Comics by Gene Kannenberg, Jr., with other examples of these traditions

ARTIST'S STATEMENT: After two decades of studying and writing about comic art, including earning my Ph.D. with a dissertation about page layout in comics, I decided to try my hand at the form myself. After a few false starts, I drew a page of comics every day in 2015, quickly settling into the styles on display here.

Eschewing traditional narrative, these comics are abstract (using non-representational images) and often contain asemic writing (“text” which holds no semantic value).

These tactics allow me to explore the comics form as a sort of visual grammar, using the tools of comics (panels, word balloons, sound effects, juxtaposition, layout, etc.) as organizing principles, leaving me free to focus on design.

I've found that viewers often cannot help but try to assemble some form of narrative from the elements on the page. Their varied guesses, theories, and assertions — almost always far from whatever vague intentions I might have held in mind while drawing — have only confirmed for me the power of the comics form to communicate viscerally and instinctively.

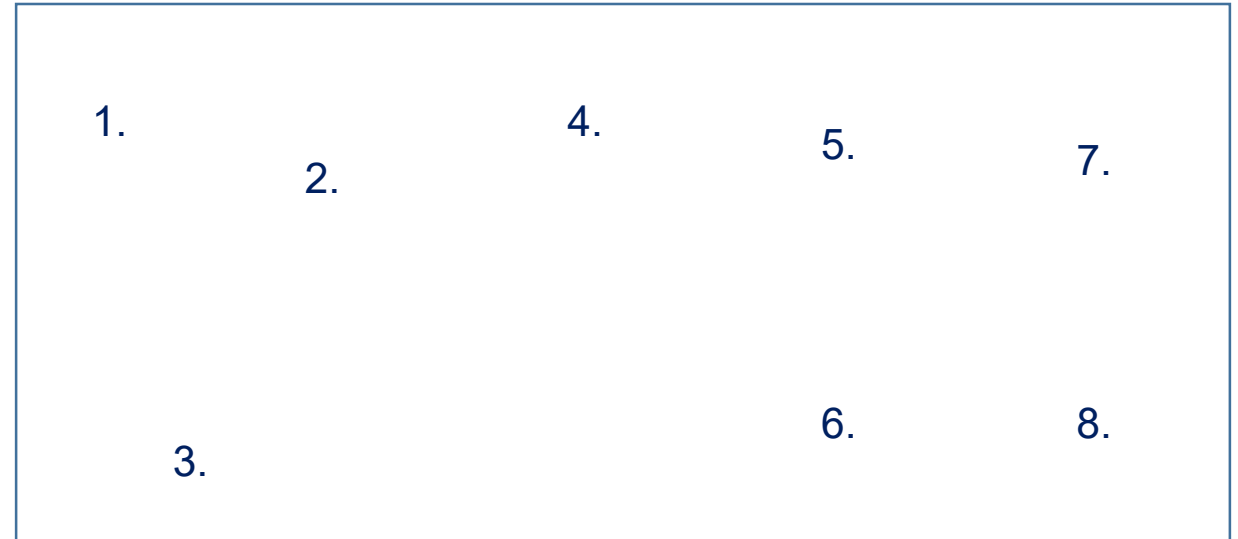
Gene Kannenberg, Jr., 2019

Case #1 (Left)



Case #1 Contents: Works by Gene Kannenberg, Jr.

1. Comics Machine #1 (August 1997)
2. Untitled (2014)
3. Comics Machine #2 (2015)
4. Asemic Wars (2016)
5. Space Year: 2015 (2016)
6. Qodèxx (2017)
7. Dynamic Abstraction (2014)
8. The Abstract Circus (2018)



Case #1 Descriptions by Gene Kannenberg, Jr.

- **Comics Machine** #1 (August 1997)

Photocopied

My first extended attempt to draw comics, during the height of the 1990s minicomics boom. I learned that I wasn't ready to draw regularly, or representationally.

- **Untitled** (2014)

Markers and pens on standard copy paper

An idle night's doodling led to this page, the first full-scale comic I had tried to draw for many years. After I posted it to Facebook, it was re-published at Prof. Andrei Molotiu's "[Abstract Comics](#)" blog, an honor for a first attempt.

- **Asemic Wars** (2016)

Ink and brush pen on paper; digital manipulation; public domain starfield photograph

Commissioned as the back cover for the [Star Jaws #11](#) (November 2016), a Star Wars parody comic book published in the UK by Robin Barnard's Barnstormer Comics.

- **Space Year: 2015** (2016)

Digitally printed pages, plus original artwork (ink and brush pen, markers, and pencil on Bristol board)

This book collects the comic strips I drew every Sunday in 2015 (hence the title). It uses repeated themes and techniques which suggest a narrative, although one not unlike the head-trip the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



Case #1 Descriptions (continued)

- ***Dynamic Abstraction*** (2014)

Markers and pens on Bristol board. Published in [Ink the Bink #1](#) (Houston, 2016), edited by Pizo Meyer

Another early piece, this time based on the classic [Charles Atlas fitness system advertising campaign](#), featuring skinny “Mac’s” transformation after having sand kicked in his face by a beach bully.

- ***Comics Machine #2*** (2015)

Digitally printed

The cover image is an homage to the cover of the 1996 Dark Horse Comics edition of [Jean “Moebius” Giraud’s *Arzach*](#), while the two interior pages feature stand-alone experiments in comics abstraction.

- ***Qodèxx*** (2017)

Digitally printed, with individual cover re-markings

- ***Music from Qodèxx***, Allison Felus & Brian Cremins (2017)

Original songs written as an aurally thematic soundtrack

A six-chapter abstract graphic novella, [Qodèxx](#) is blessed by a companion song-cycle. Allison, Brian, and I have performed *Qodèxx* live on three different occasions to date, but the [CD/Bandcamp music](#) stands on its own.

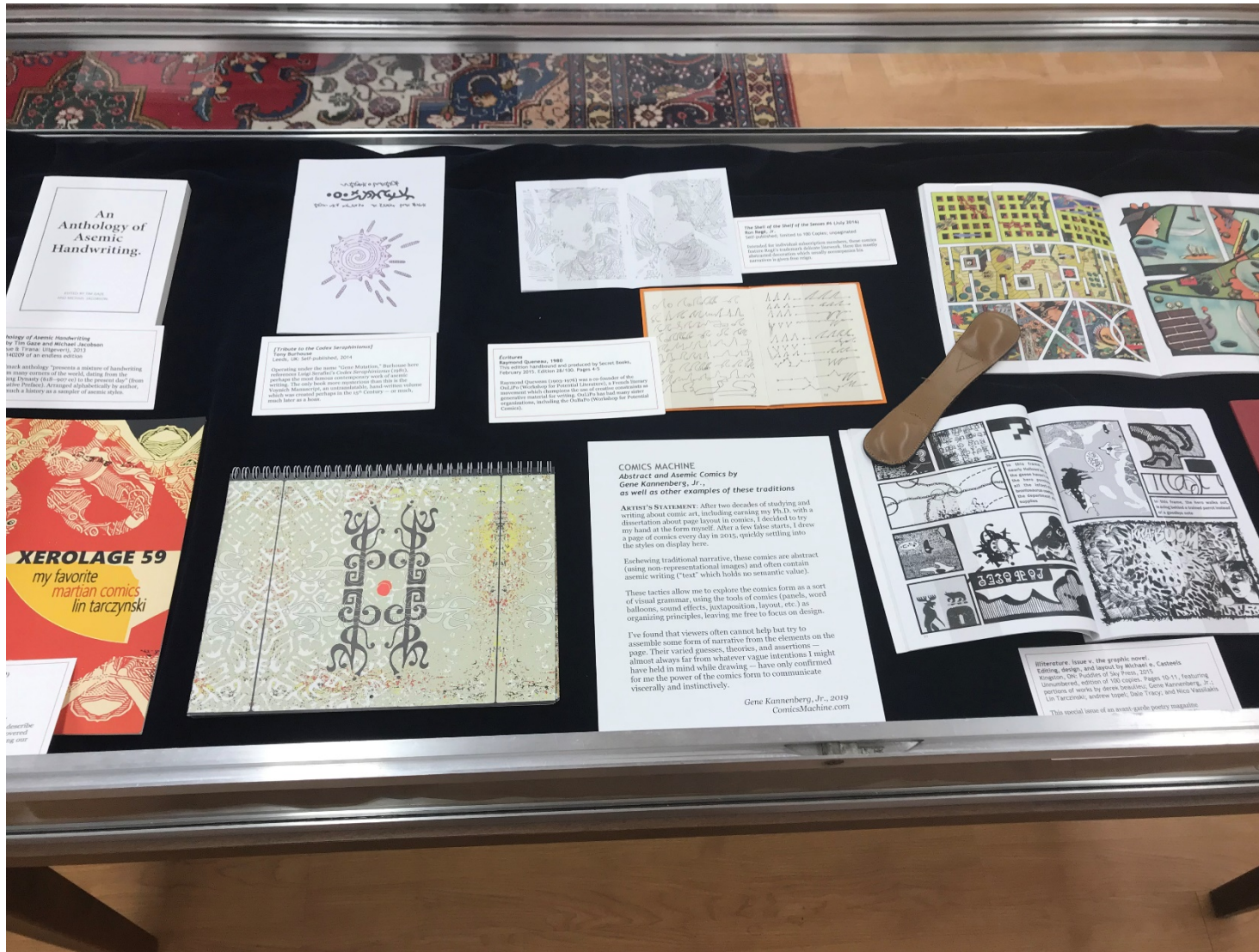
- ***The Abstract Circus*** (2018)

Digitally Printed

On particularly full days during my 2015 daily comics experiment, I would draw a small single-panel comic reminiscent of *The Family Circus*. This booklet collects the 30+ examples from that year’s work.



Case #2 (Right)



Case #2 Contents: Other abstract and asemic comics

- 1. The Anthology of Asemic Handwriting / Ed. by Tim Gaze and Michael Jacobson (2013)
- 2. My Favorite Martian Comics (Xerolage #59, 2015)
- 3. Tribute to the Codex Seraphinianus (2014)
- 4. SAMSARA 2017 Calendar
- 5. The Shell of the Shelf of the Senses #6 (July 2016) / Ron Regé, Jr.
- 6. Écritures / Raymond Queneau (p2015, c1980)
- 7. Artist's statement / Gene Kannenberg, Jr. (2019)
- 8. illiterature. issue v. the graphic novel / Michael e. Casteels (2015)
- 9. Samplerman (Secret Brain Comics #1) / Yvan Guillo (2017)
- 10. P'layout intrusions (Xerolage #56) / Rosaire Appel (2013)

1.	3.	5.		9.
		6.		
2.	4.	7.	8.	10.

Case #2 Descriptions by Gene Kannenberg, Jr.

- ***The Shell of the Shelf of the Senses #6 (July 2016) / Ron Regé, Jr.***

Self-published; limited to 100 Copies; unpaginated

Intended for individual subscription members, these comics feature [Regé's](#) trademark delicate linework. Here the mostly abstracted decoration which usually accompanies his narratives is given free reign.

- ***Écritures / Raymond Queneau, 1980***

This edition hand-bound and produced by [Secret Books](#), February 2015. Edition 28/100. Pages 4-5

Raymond Queneau (1903-1976) was a co-founder of the OuLiPo (Workshop for Potential Literature), a French literary movement which champions the use of creative constraints as generative material for writing. OuLiPo has had many sister organizations, including the [OuBaPo](#) (Workshop for Potential Comics).

- ***My Favorite Martian Comics (Xerolage #59)***

Xexoxial Editions, 2015

- ***SAMSARA 2017 Calendar***

Intaglio Galosh Studio Press, 2017; Cover and August illustration, **Lin Tarczynski**

I knew I had met a kindred spirit when I learned of Tarczynski's [My Favorite Martian Comics](#). I like to describe my own work as what might happen if Martians discovered Earth-comics and then created cartoon narratives using our comics grammar with their symbol systems.



Case #2 Descriptions (continued)

- ***illiterature. issue v. the graphic novel* / Editing, design, and layout by Michael e. Casteels**

Kingston, ON: Puddles of Sky Press, 2015; Unnumbered, edition of 100 copies. Pages 10-11, featuring portions of works by derek beaulieu; Gene Kannenberg, Jr.; Lin Tarczinski; andrew topel; Dale Tracy; and Nico Vassilakis

This [special issue](#) of an avant-garde poetry magazine accepted submissions from abstract cartoonists. Editor Casteels then used portions of those submissions to edit together a “collaborative” graphic novel.

- ***Samplerman (Secret Brain Comics #1); Samplerman (Yvan Guillo)***

Brain Dead & Secret Headquarters, 2017; Unpaginated

[Samplerman](#)'s hypnotic, hyper-kinetic style, exemplified in this two-page spread, uses small portions of old comic book panels as raw material. The insistent repetition and unexpected juxtapositions in his work will either melt your brain or train it to think in new ways.

- ***[Tribute to the Codex Seraphinianus] / Tony Burhouse***

Leeds, UK: Self-published, 2014

Operating under the name [“Gene Mutation,”](#) Burhouse here references Luigi Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981), perhaps the most famous contemporary work of asemic writing. The only book more mysterious than this is the Voynich Manuscript, an untranslatable, hand-written volume which was created perhaps in the 15th Century — or much, much later as a hoax.



Case #2 Descriptions (continued)

- ***An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting* / Edited by Tim Gaze and Michael Jacobson**

The Hague & Tirana: Uitgeverij, 2013; Version 140209 of an endless edition

This [landmark anthology](#) “presents a mixture of handwriting styles, from many corners of the world, dating from the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618–907 ce) to the present day” (from the informative Preface). Arranged alphabetically by author, it’s not so much a history as a sampler of asemic styles.

- ***P'layout Intrusions (Xerolage #56)* / Rosaire Appel**

Xexoxial Editions, 2013

[P'layout Intrusions](#) works as a meditation on layout as language. Appel describes her process this way: “The foundations of these compositions were blocks of newspaper text to which I added shards from my own commercially-printed book proofs. They’re collages of layouts — with additions and subtractions — suggestive, allusive.”

