

Copi

THE TIME OF MONSTERS

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05.11.2016 – 05.02.2017

[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE L'IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



‘The old world is dying, and the new world
struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.’

Antonio Gramsci

Like a letter of safe conduct, the name of Copi (1939-1987) has for years guaranteed entry to a club which is not necessarily restricted but certainly select, one for whose members the work of the Franco-Argentinian author is one of the most unusually radical reading experiences in recent decades.

Copi’s work combines cruelty and tenderness, the absurd and irony, aestheticism, theatricality and the subversion of genders and genres in a device presided over by serialisation, supposedly ‘bad’ drawing and unchecked vertigo. Filled with transvestites, women who talk to snails, rats that write letters, lewd little old women and chickens, his work tests our capacity for wonder, but also the borders between the artistic disciplines the author worked with—playwriting, acting, fiction, illustration and comics—and other borders which have no place in his work: those that exist between men and animals and animals and objects, men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, life and death, sleep and wakefulness. Copi’s stories are tales of monsters and fables with no moral or with an uncomfortable moral: that of his short stories, his novels and his extraordinary plays, whose origin, however, lies in the radical creative act of these comics.

Copi burst onto the pages of *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1964. He had settled definitively in France just two years before and since then had worked with the dramatic action group formed by Fernando Arrabal, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Roland Topor, he had sold his pictures in the streets and was witness to a radicalisation of ideas that would culminate in the student revolts of May 1968, but also in the persistence of an ‘old France’ that is insensitive to change. Returning to his work at a time which in some ways is so

similar means recovering his way of seeing, celebrating it and bringing back an author whose entry into the life of his readers is still not exactly a sneeze in the storm. It's the same storm, with thunder and lightning and the firemen running to put out the fire with a lorryload of petrol.

Room 1

Alternating shots as in film editing, frames with borders, depiction of the characters, onomatopoeia, narrative economy, conclusion: from the start Copi chose to forgo some of the most characteristic conventions of the graphic narrative to produce a comic in which unity of place and time shows the mark of the theatre. 'Theatre in pictures', the artist called it, and the seated woman is the best-known and the least self-conscious of its actors. This 'commentator without morals, possessed of a brilliant ignorance, who talks about sex with unusual violence', according to Copi, argues with chickens, pigs, snails, rats, extraterrestrials and children, in an endless conversation which is also a power struggle being waged to decide a view of the world and of authority, as well as the definition of everything whose very existence infringes them, anything that constitutes an anomaly and ought to be suppressed so that the seated woman is protected from the arrival of chaos, which nevertheless almost always defeats her.

Room 2

It's unusual for artists to achieve their principal aim, the creation of a style of their own, with an unmistakable voice, without first going through a period of learning which is, at the same time, and deliberately, a period of *unlearning*. In that sense, there's also a Copi before Copi—that is, an important production by him prior to the narrative and formal perfection of the seated woman and his other comics. Part of it is to be found in this room, in which the author's early influences—the American Saul Steinberg, the Argentinians Oski, Landrú and Lino Palacio—and the demands

of the magazines he published in—*Tía Vicenta*, mainly—helped shape a type of graphic humour that the author gave up on arrival in France: standalone, naïve, hieratic-looking, without the cruelty, the vertigo or the irony that was to dominate his 'French' work.

Room 3

Copi's characters inhabit a world of blurred outlines and unlimited combinatorial possibilities, a world whose unity and coherence are constantly being called into question by the acts of the characters, their statements, the arguments they get involved in, the fickleness and fluidity of their identities. In a world where people and things are only what they seem, the art of appearances and of deceit is vital if the characters are to succeed, and a wolf can pretend not to be precisely the grandmother but a large cat, and not aspire to eating the old woman but to becoming her lover and that of her granddaughter (as in one of the stories included in this room, a rewrite of Charles Perrault's theme), an ice cream can talk, a cloud can fall in love and a character can claim his or her rights as the protagonist of a fable with a moral.

Room 4

Copi created Kang for *Libération* in 1982. It wasn't his first serialised character. While still in Argentina he had conceived 'Gaston, the oligarch dog', for *Tía Vicenta*; later came the seated woman and in 1979 he was to create Liberett, a transvestite who was too radical for *Libération* and didn't last long there. His second assault on the publication was more successful and Kang, whose economy of means is even greater than in the case of the seated woman, stayed with the newspaper for years, generally in a confrontation with an egg or with Copi himself. 'I try to see what things look like and show them, I aim at an art of simplification', said the author in 1987. Part of this simplification consists in adopting serialisation, the procedure by which characters can be used over and over again on condition that neither

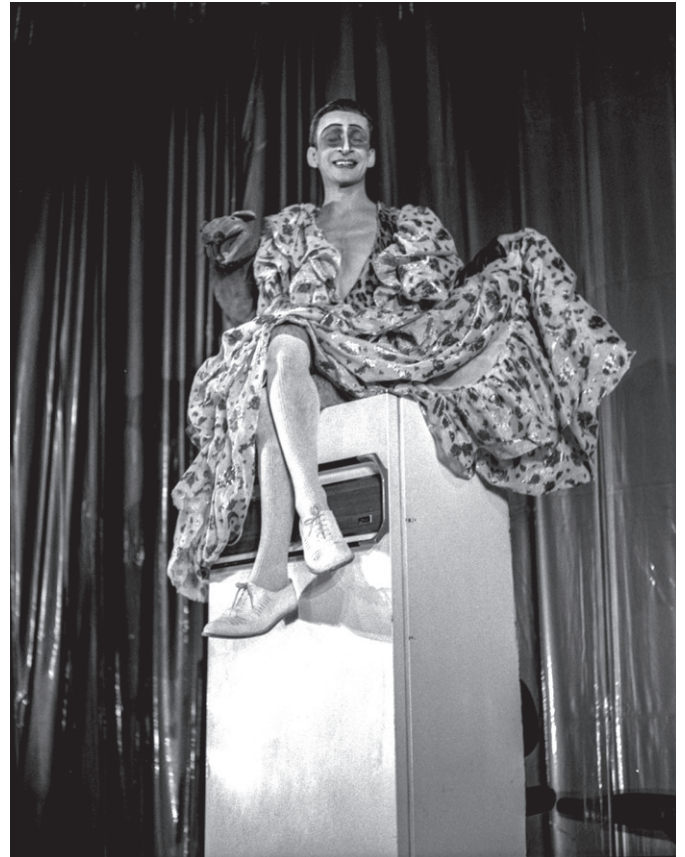
their appearance nor their situation vary substantially, in an art of contingency and repetition which Copi takes to extremes in the Kang stories, nine of which are exhibited in this room.

Room 5

Throughout the ten years she existed, the appearance of the seated woman hardly changed at all; Copi merely simplified her figure and rounded her off, putting the emphasis on her iconic nature. The unvarying graphic representation and the resort to one, and only one, initial situation—the woman is seated, someone approaches or is already beside her, a conversation takes place—constitutes, and still forms, the frame that allows the emergence of monsters, insofar as it represents the norm from which the anomalous subject strays. These sketches show how, as characters, motifs and formal procedures move from one literary genre or medium to another in his work, Copi saw the graphic aspect of his comics as a pre-established framework whose rigidity and stability were a guarantee of liberation from the restrictions imposed on the creation of worlds. Here, in fact, those worlds are blown sky-high.

Room 6

Despite having produced all his work in a framework of political activism and the conquest of sexual freedom, and counter to the opinion of Frédéric Martel, who claimed that ‘he possibly did more for homosexual imagination than the Homosexual Liberation Groups of the time’, Copi never felt the need to contribute to that liberation. As the stories presented in this room show, for his characters this liberation has already taken place and has been more radical than expected because it has meant the end of the borders between human and animal, between human being and object, between animal and object and between ‘man’ and ‘woman’. In Copi’s work identities and sexualities are fluid and defy categorisation. His characters belong to ‘camp’ aesthetics,



Copi performing *Loretta Strong* at the Saló Diana in Barcelona (1978). © Jorge Amat





understood as a 'postmodern perversion of gender categories'. In his peculiar narrative world, an effeminate wolf can be a lesbian, a vulva can be taken for a moon and a father can know nothing at all about sex.

Room 7

Unlike the exclusively 'masculine', 'feminine' and even 'homosexual' characters that appear in his work, Copi's transvestites are extraordinarily clever. The origin of their effectiveness lies in their talent for 'entering' and 'leaving' the gender and themselves, the fickle nature of their identity, which means they can adopt another when the occasion arises, thereby becoming invulnerable, and in their nature as images—the same sort of thing goes for his 'female' characters with 'male' names; they combine the attributes traditionally considered 'male' or 'female' and are the opposite of weakness. The transvestites in the story presented in this room are safe from recurring nightmares, dreams within dreams, the anxieties and fears of the characters in the other stories selected, because there is a world of representations within representations, a world that Daniel Link associates with 'a *trans* aesthetic: transnational, translinguistic and transsexual, in the sense that *trans* should be understood as the passage from the imaginary to the real'.

Room 8

'Behind [Copi's] disjointed, fanciful and iconoclastic writing, there is not just an apologist of the most radical homosexuality, but finely honed critical thinking, a kind of radiologist of contemporary culture', said the Argentinian writer Noé Jitrik. An attempt to assess human nature on the basis of Copi's presentation of its institutions, however, would inevitably give rise to concern. The family unit barely manages to contain the homicidal impulses of its members and is built around incest and verbal violence; prostitution is the only economic activity justified by need and there's no end to the characters' material ambition.

Although in Copi's narrative world sexuality is always associated with death and has its only satisfaction in it, this connection becomes even clearer in his last comics, whose subject matter is sociability and the homosexual practices of the time, the game of appearances, prostitution and sado-masochism. But also AIDS, the disease that decimated the author's friends and lovers with the same radicalism with which death appears in all his works. Copi was awarded the Ville de Paris prize for the best playwright three days before his death as a result of AIDS-related complications and while he was rehearsing his last play, in which an actor dies, also of AIDS. Until the last moment, he went on drawing everything 'as though he were learning, as a child, or, better still, as though he were a child' in the words of Jorge Montelone, as though death was just one more element in a game that can be played again whenever you like. On one occasion Copi said that he was so avant-garde that he had caught AIDS before anyone else; since then, his work hasn't stopped gaining followers with his proposition for a world within the world in which the monsters are, in fact, the others, the defenders of common sense, political correctness, normality.

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Annexe / Finding your way in Copi's bibliography

Except for the novel *La vida es un tango* (1981), his early graphic narrative and the plays *La sombra del Wenceslao* (1978) and *Cachafaz* (1981), Copi wrote all his work in French. This work also includes the novel *L'Uruguayen* (Christian Bourgois, 1973), *Le Bal des folles* (Christian Bourgois, 1977), *La Cité des rats* (Belfond, 1979), *La Guerre des pédés* (Albin Michel, 1982)—previously published as a feuilleton in *Hara Kiri*, the same as *La Cité des rats*—and *L'Internationale argentine* (Belfond, 1988), the books of short stories *Une langouste pour deux* (Christian Bourgois, 1978) and *Virginia Woolf a encore frappé* (Persona, 1983) and the plays *El General Poder* (c. 1955), *Lamento por el ángel* (1962), *Sainte Geneviève dans*

sa baignoire (1966), *L'Alligator, le thé* (1966), *La Journée d'une rêveuse* (1968), *Eva Perón* (1969), *L'Homosexuel ou La difficulté de s'exprimer* (1971), *Les Quatre jumelles* (1973), *Loretta Strong* (1974), *La Pyramide* (1975), *La Tour de la Défense* (1978), *La Coupe du monde* (1978), *Le Frigo* (1983), *La Nuit de Madame Lucienne* (1985), *Une visite inopportune* (1988) and *Les Escaliers du Sacré-Cœur* (1990).

All of his fiction was published by the Barcelona publishing house Anagrama, except for *La Cité des rats* and *La Guerre des pédés: El uruguayo* and *Una langosta para dos* in *Las viejas travestís y otras infamias* (1978; translation by Alberto Cardín and Enrique Vila-Matas); *El baile de las locas* (1978, translated by Alberto Cardín and Biel Mesquida); *La vida es un tango* (1981), *Virginia Woolf ataca de nuevo* (1984) and *La Internacional Argentina* (1989; the last two translated by Alberto Cardín); all of these titles have been gathered together recently in two volumes of *Obras* with prologue by María Moreno and Patricio Pron (2010 and 2012 respectively). The Argentinian publishing firm El Cuenco de Plata has completed the bibliography of Copi in Spanish with the publication of *La ciudad de las ratas* (2009, translation by Guadalupe Marando, Eduardo Muslip and María Silva) and *La guerra de las mariconas* (2010), translated by Margarita Martínez.

In 1982 Anagrama also published Joaquín Jordá's translation of the book *Les Vieilles putes* (Square, 1977); that same year Nueva Frontera published *¿Crisis? ¿Qué dice usted! / Yyo, ¿por qué no tengo banana?*, the translation of *Et moi, pourquoi j'ai pas une banane?* (Square, 1975); years earlier, in 1968, Jorge Álvarez had published *Les poulets n'ont pas de chaise* (Denoël, 1966) in Argentina, translated by Copi himself. (*Los pollos no tienen sillas*, *Yyo, ¿por qué no tengo banana?* and *La mujer sentada* have recently also been published by El Cuenco de Plata, the last two translated by Edgar Stanko and Silvio Mattoni respectively.) Copi's other comic books are *Humour secret* [Secret Humour] (Juliard, 1965), which won the Prix de l'humour noir in 1966, *Un libro blanco* (Milano

Libri Edizioni, 1970; Buchet-Castel, 2002), *Copi* (Union Générale d'Éditions, 1971), *Le Dernier salon où l'on cause* [The Last Living-room where People Talk] (Square, 1973), *Du côté des violés* [On the Side of the Raped] (Square 1979), *La Femme assise* [The Seated Woman] (Square/Albin Michel, 1981; Stock, 2002), *Kang* (Dargaud, 1984), *Salé crise pour les putes* [Dirty Crisis for Whores] (L'Echo des Savanes/Albin Michel, 1984) and *Le Monde fantastique des gays* [The Wonderful World of Gays] (Glénat, 1986).

During the author's life, Copi's comics appeared in publications such as *Bizarre*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Hara Kiri*, *Charlie* and *Charlie Hebdo*, *Libération*, *Paris Match* and *Gai Pied* (France), *Linus* and *Il Giornale* (Italy), *Evergreen Review* (United States), *Resistencia Popular*, *Tía Vicenta*, *Cuatro Patas*, *Confirmado* and *Gente* (Argentina) and *Triunfo* (Spain). In 2014 the French publishing house Olivius gathered a large part of the graphic narrative in two volumes: *Les Filles n'ont pas de banana* [Little Girls don't Have Banana] and *Vive les pédés et autres fantaisies* [Long Live Queers and Other Fantasies].

Continuing the publication of Copi's plays in four volumes by Christian Bourgois, but with important novelties, such as the inclusion of *Lamento por el ángel*, *La sombra de Wenceslao*, *La copa del mundo* and *Cachafaz*, El Cuenco de Plata has published all his plays in translation by various authors, among them Eduardo Muslip, who exhumed *Tango-Charter*, the play Copi wrote in 1980 in collaboration with Riccardo Reim, for the Argentinian publishers Mansalva and Santiago Arcos.

Copi's work has been translated into English, Spanish, Italian, Serbo-Croatian and German.

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