JUDAISM, ART & COMIC BOOKS

Design Degree Poject

Noah Berkowitz

04.25.2023

Problem Statement

In my personal experience as a Jewish man, a lot of exhibitions or museums about Jewish culture that I have visited have been centered on our people's trauma and the tragedies that have befallen us. I want to create a space where people can celebrate and learn about the art that Jews have produced. Many people are unaware that both comics and superheroes as they exist in the modern day, are a Jewish creation, and I would like to share how Jewish culture has impacted the overall zeitgeist of our times through comics.

Audience

The audience for this exhibition is somewhat niche. People who may be interested in this exhibition are Jewish people, comic book fans, generally nerdy people, and people who are interested in the arts. I can't imagine someone who isn't connected to the subject matter of the exhibition having an interest in attending, so it will be geared towards people who already have some exposure to these topics.

Advisor

My advisor for this project was Northeastern University professor Hillary Chute. Hillary Chute's work focuses on comics and graphic novels, contemporary fiction, visual studies, American literature, gender and sexuality studies, literature and the arts, critical theory, and media studies. She is the author of Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics (Columbia University Press, 2010), Outside the Box: Interviews with Contemporary Cartoonists (University of Chicago Press, 2014), Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form (Harvard University Press, 2016), and Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere (Harper, 2017). She recently co-edited the Critical Inquiry special issue "Comics & Media" (University of Chicago Press, 2014), and in 2006 she co-edited the MFS: Modern Fiction Studies special issue "Graphic Narrative," the first issue of a journal in the field of literature devoted to analyzing comics. Hillary and I met twice to discuss the content and themes of the exhibition. She also sent me articles and documentaries that I used as reference.

Determining Deliverables

I chose to produce three deliverables that could function together. I knew that my primary deliverable would be a visual representation of the exhibition itself. Exhibitions need promotional materials, so I decided that posters to promote the exhibition would make for an ideal secondary deliverable. I also wanted to work with video and motion graphics. As the exhibtion contained artwork and information about the artists who produced it, but no historical context, I realized a video detailing the history and importance of the exhibition could tie the project together.

Style

All of the elements I used and developed for this system are in some way related to comic books, drawing, or printing. I didn't want for any of the supplementary visuals to compete or clash with the comic book art on display, so I tried to keep things simple overall.

GALLERY WALLS

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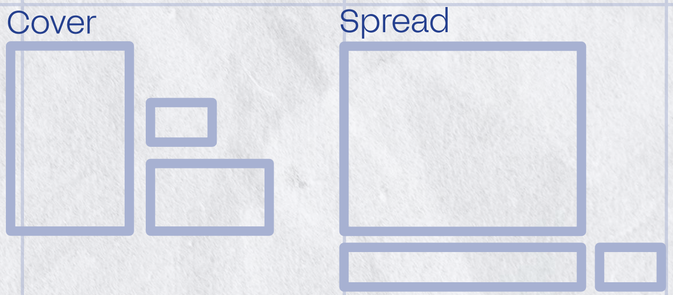
Visual System

This exhibition will be made up of 8 foot tall gallery walls. It will be divided into sections by artist. Every artist will have a halftone portrain painted larger than life on the wall. There will also be posters on display of covers, pages and spreads blown up to 3 times their original size to be visible from distance. With each poster, there will be a panel explaining how the work is relevant to the history of Jews or Comics, as well as a smaller panel with general info about the piece. All of the posters and information panels will sit between 3-7 feet off the ground to remain within the eyeline of the observer.



Determining Content

I decided that in order to complete this project within the prescribed four month timeline, I would feature three artists in the exhibition for now. I chose to represent the works of Jack Kirby, Will Eisner, and Trina Robbins. Jack Kirby was chosen to represent an earlier era of comics, as well as the superhero genre. Eisner was chosen for popularizing the graphic novel format, and for producing more adult oriented work. Robbins was chosen to represent the underground comic book scene, which differred greatly from the mainstream in terms of content. All three artists have clear examples of their Jewish backgrounds influencing their work as well.

For each artist, I chose to display works that were either incredibly influential to comics as a medium, were heavilly influenced by the Jewish experience or religious values, or both. Deciding on content took more research and time than I had initially thought it would, but it was important to me that the exhibition have a cohesive story.

RBY
on popular culture was
wish background and reli-
eatly influenced his work.
CAPTAIN AMERICA COMICS
MARCH No. 1
Released before America entered WWII, this depiction of an American hero decking Hitler was seen as controversial at the time of its release.
X-MEN
X-men asks the question, what if there was a group of people that was marginalized for having super powers? The series has long served as an allegory for the struggle for civil rights, with Professor X and Magneto being compared to MLK and Malcolm X respectively. Also of note, artist Chris Claremont would later write Magneto's backstory to reveal that he is a survivor of the Holocaust, which serves as an explanation for his motivations.
YOUNG SCOTT FREE!
After leaving Marvel in 70, Jack began to work on his seminal work, the Fourth World series. In this series, Jack drew from a wall of Jewish symbols, cultural references, religious themes, and even people, to turn to Izot, the Mitter Blot, unappreciated heroes, allowing for his only the Source. The Mitter Box looks just like the Tablis that Jewish people use in prayer, and the Source is a nice allegory for God.
TRINA ROBBINS
Trina Robbins was born in 1938 in Queens, NY to Jewish immigrants. Throughout her life, she was very involved in the distributive movements. Her first work was published in the Village Voice/Other, an underground newspaper in New York. In 1970, Robbins left for San Francisco, where she worked for the underground newspaper It Ain't Me Babe. That same year, she worked with Barbara "Willy" Mendes to produce the first all-women comic book, to Comix. Throughout the rest of the century's 60's movement of the underground comics scene, she would later collaborate with many of the same women from It Ain't Me Babe to produce the anthology series Wimmen's Comix. A devout feminist, Trina was very outspoken about her beliefs, heavily criticizing many of the popular men in the underground scene for the overt misogyny depicted in their work.
IT AIN'T ME BABE
WOMEN'S LIBERATION
In San Francisco, Robbins worked for the underground feminist newspaper It Ain't Me Babe. She worked with Barbara "Willy" Mendes to produce the first all-women made comic book, It Ain't Me Babe Comix.
Sandy COMES OUT
Robbins collaborated with many of the same women from It Ain't Me Babe to produce the anthology series Wimmen's Comix. The first issue of Wimmen's Comix featured Ro
strip "Sandy Comes Out," the first eve
strip to feature an out lesbian.

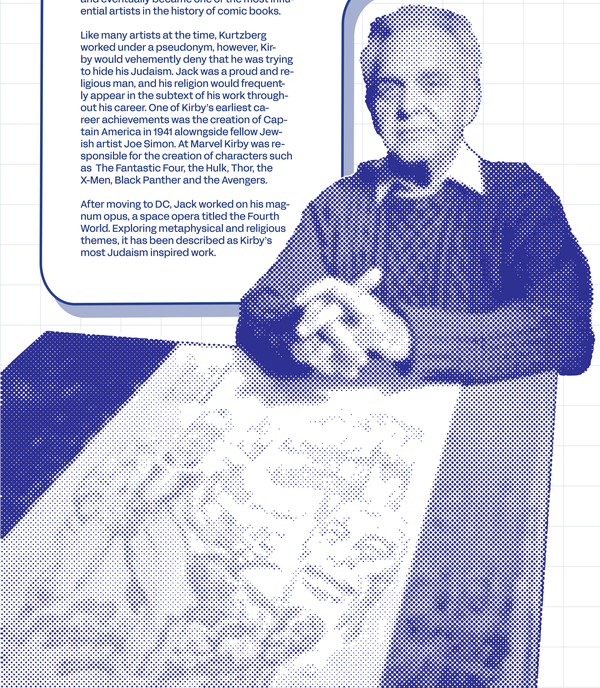
JACK KIRBY

Jacob Kurtzberg was born in 1917 to Austrian Jewish immigrants. Raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Jack had a famously rough and tumble childhood, often getting into street fights with other kids in the neighborhood. He began drawing as an escape, and eventually became one of the most influential artists in the history of comic books.

Like many artists at the time, Kurtzberg worked under a pseudonym, however, Kirby would vehemently deny that he was trying to hide his Judaism. Jack was a proud and religious man, and his religion would frequently appear in the subtext of his work throughout his career. One of Kirby's earliest career achievements was the creation of Captain America in 1941 alowngside fellow Jewish artist Joe Simon. At Marvel Kirby was responsible for the creation of characters such as The Fantastic Four, the Hulk, Thor, the X-Men, Black Panther and the Avengers.

After moving to DC, Jack worked on his magnum opus, a space opera titled the Fourth World. Exploring metaphysical and religious themes, it has been described as Kirby's most Judaism inspired work.

Kirby's influence on popular culture was broad, and his Jewish background and religious practice greatly influenced his work.

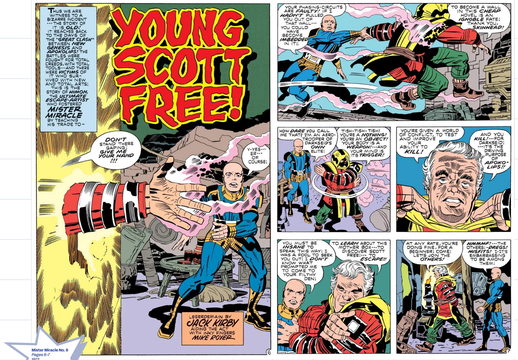


Captain America No. 1
Cover Art
1941

Released before America entered WWII, this depiction of an American hero decking Hitler was seen as controversial at the time of its release.

X-Men Volume 1 4
Cover Art
1964

X-men asks the question, what if there was a group of people that was marginalized for having super powers? The series has long served as an allegory for the struggle for civil rights, with Professor X and Magneto being compared to MLK and Malcolm X respectively. Also of note, artist Chris Claremont would later write Magneto's backstory to reveal that he is a survivor of the Holocaust, which serves as an explanation for his motivations.



Mister Miracle No. 9
Pages 8-7
1972

After leaving Marvel for DC, Jack began to work on his seminal work, the Fourth World series. In this series, Jack drew from a well of Jewish symbols, cultural references, religious themes, and even people. Himon's tool, the Mother Box, wrapped around his arm, allows him to tap into the Source. The Mother Box looks a lot like the Tefillin that Jewish people use in prayer, and the Source, is a clear allegory for G-d.

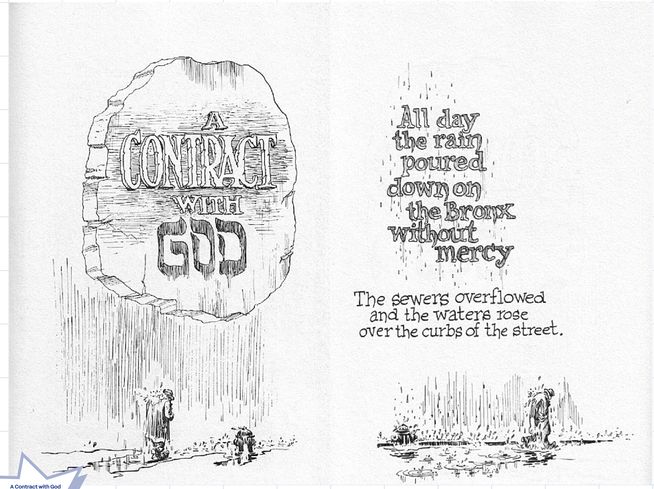
WILL EISNER

Eisner was born in Brooklyn to Jewish-American immigrants. He grew up poor, and the family moved frequently.Young Eisner often got into physical confrontations when subjected to antisemitism from his schoolmates.His family were not orthodox followers of Judaism; Eisner himself, while he prided his cultural background, turned against the religion when his family was denied entry to a synagogue over lack of money for admission.

Eisner began as a cartoonist at the outset of the comics industry, eventually founding one of the first comic book packaging companies, producing comics for publishers. He was a central figure in the industry in its early days, but after WWII, he took a hiatus from comic book publishing. However, he returned in the 1970s, inspired by artists working in the underground comix scene. Will published the first graphic novel A Contract with God and Other Tenement stories in 1978, revolving around poor Jewish characters living in a tenement in New York City. Eisner continued to publish stories in the graphic novel form revolving around immigrant stories, particularly Jewish immigrant stories, reflecting his own life experience.

The Spirit No. 18
Cover Art
1949

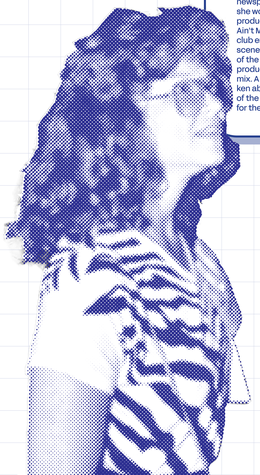
The Spirit is a fictional masked crimefighter created by cartoonist Will Eisner. The Spirit brought comics to a mass audience. No longer relegated to the realm of adolescent boys, The Spirit was in mainstream newspapers.



A Contract with God
Illustration
1949

A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories is is credited with popularizing the use of the term "graphic novel." The book's short story cycle revolves around poor Jewish characters who live in a tenement in New York City. Four stand-alone stories make up the book. The stories are thematically linked with motifs of frustration, disillusionment, violence, and issues of ethnic identity. Eisner uses large, monochromatic images in dramatic perspective, and emphasizes the caricatured characters' facial expressions; few panels or captions have traditional borders around them.

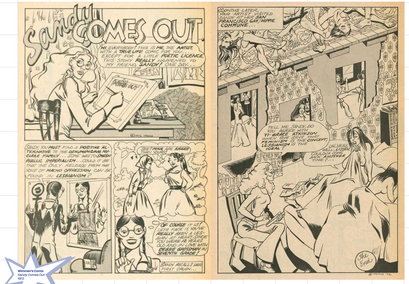
TRINA ROBBINS



Trina Robbins was born in 1938 in Queens, NY to Jewish immigrants. Throughout her life, she was very involved in counterculture movements. Her earliest work was published in the East Village Other, an underground newspaper in New York. In 1970, Robbins left for San Francisco, where she worked for the underground newspaper It Ain't Me, Babe. That same year, she worked with Barbara "Willy" Mendes to produce the first all-women comic book, It Ain't Me Babe Comix. Fed up with the boy's club environment of the underground comics scene, she would later collaborate with many of the same women from It Ain't Me Babe to produce the anthology series Wimmen's Comix. A devout feminist, Trina was very outspoken about her beliefs, heavily criticizing many of the popular men in the underground scene for the violent misogyny depicted in their work.

It Ain't Me Babe
Issue #3
1970

In San Francisco, Robbins worked for the underground feminist newspaper It Ain't Me, Babe. She worked with Barbara "Willy" Mendes to produce the first all-women made comic book, It Ain't Me Babe Comix.



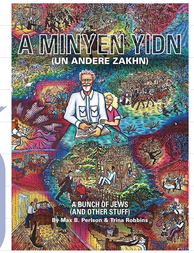
Wimmen's Comix
Sandy Comes Out
1972

Robbins collaborated with many of the same women from It Ain't Me Babe to produce the anthology series Wimmen's Comix. The first issue of Wimmen's Comix featured Robbins' strip "Sandy Comes Out," the first ever comic strip to feature an out lesbian.

The Legend of Wonder Woman #1
Issue #1
1986

Trina became the first woman to illustrate Wonder Woman in the character's 45 year history at the time. She only worked on four issues before DC passed it on to another man. Trina criticized the art-style of Wonder Woman in the mid-90s for the artists' overly sexual depiction of the character.

A Minyen Yidn (un Andere Zakhn): A Bunch of Jews (and Other Stuff), is a graphic novel based on Robbins' father's book translated from Yiddish into English. The original book was a slim collection of stories set in her father's native village of Duboy, Belarus, as well as his adopted home in Brooklyn.



A Minyen Yidn
Issue #1
2021

PROMOTIONAL POSTERS

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Recycling Assets

To maintain a visual system, I reused many of the visual motifs from the gallery walls, but altered their usage to fit a new context. I will explain this in greater detail later on, but you can see for yourself in the examples below.

ICA
May 3–15, 2023
JUDAISM, ART &
COMIC BOOKS
A celebration of the
Jewish artists who
built the medium of
sequential storytelling

ICA INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART / BOSTON

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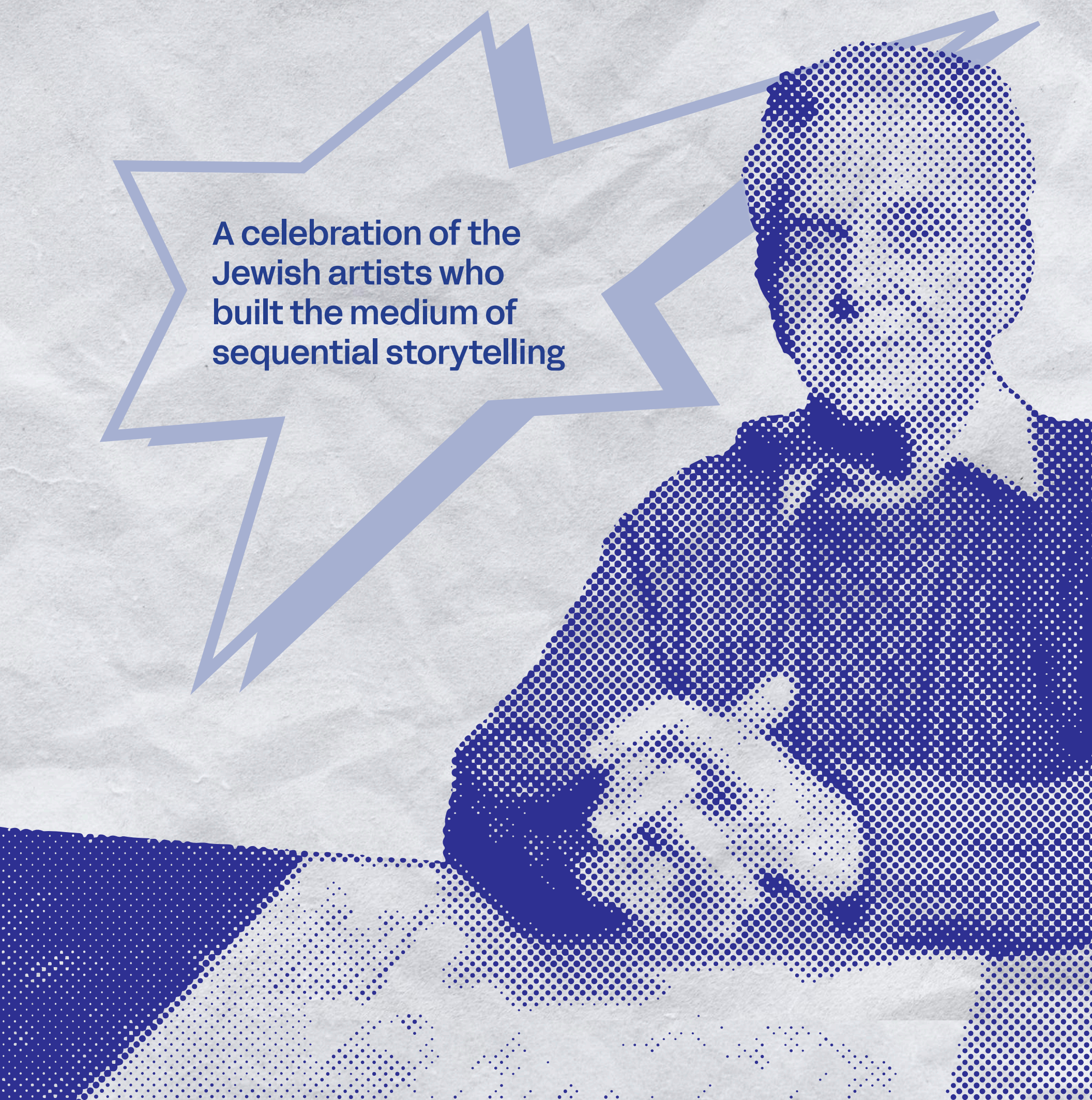

JUDAISM, ART & COMIC BOOKS

A celebration of the Jewish artists who built the medium of sequential storytelling

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ICA
INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART / BOSTON

VIDEO

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Adding Motion and History

Again, all of the same visual motifs visible in the prior deliverables appear here with new functions. This time, they have also been animated to add visual intrigue. Utilizing video also permits the use of audio, which allows for a new dimension of information. The video, intended to be played in the exhibtion space, provides additional historical context for the involvement of Jews in the industry in the first place, and gives the other elements of the exhibition new meaning.

VISUAL ELEMENTS

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Type

I chose Glaser Stencil as my display type. It was developed by Jewish designer Milton Glaser, who also created the first logo for DC Comics. Stencils are commonly associated with drawing, so I reasoned it would work within the system I developed. I also made the type three dimensional to echo the titles on comic book covers.

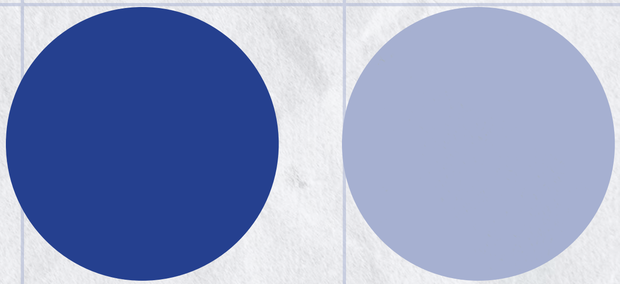
I chose Acid Grotesk as my body text because it is a very legible Sans Serif, and based on some of my earlier designs, serif typefaces did not fit in with the rest of the visuals of the exhibition.

GLASER STNCL

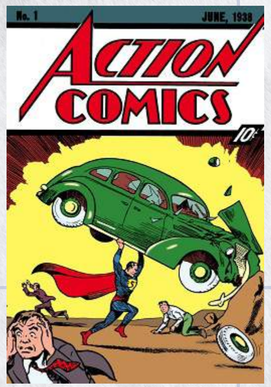
Acid Grotesk

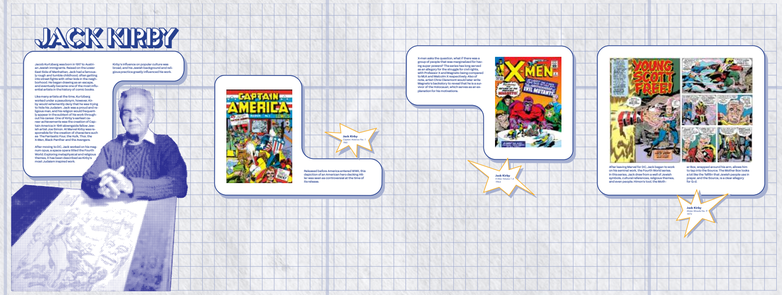
Color

As you can see below, I did a lot of experimentation with color. At first, I built two pallettes, one based on comic book artwork, and one based on the CMYK printing colors. I found that both clashed significantly with the artwork on display and were distracting in use, so I opted to go in a more minimal direction. I chose to stick with blue due to its association with the Jewish people and because it does not cause distraction from the artwork.



Color Experiments





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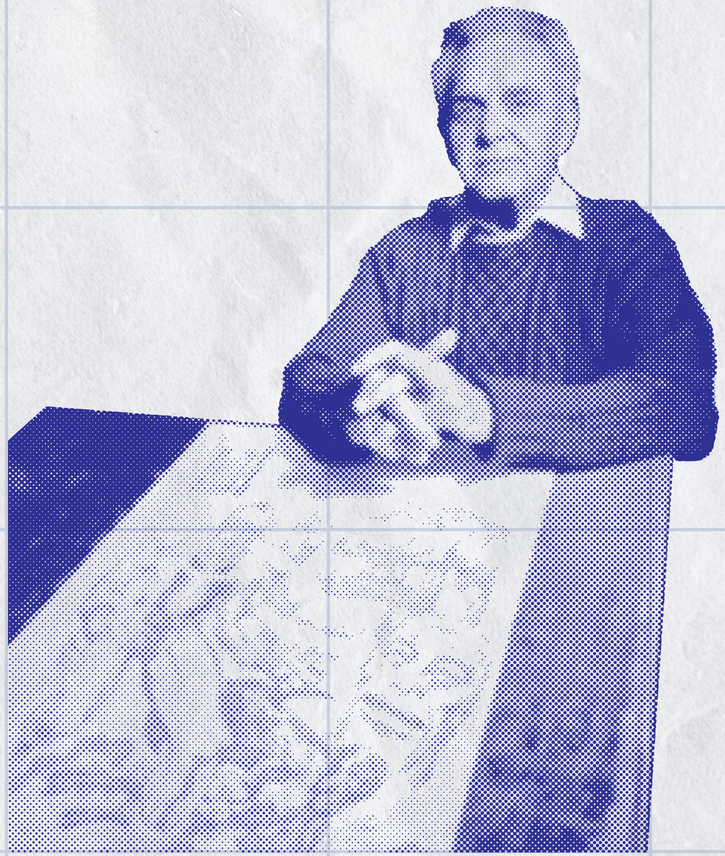
Paper Texture & Grid

I utilized a visible but light grid to ground the gallery walls I designed and add subtle texture to the background. I made reference to the grid in the promotional posters via line segments, however I utilized a paper texture for the background of the posters, again referencing drawing and printing. I utilized both the paper texture and the grid in the video I put together.

Halftone Art

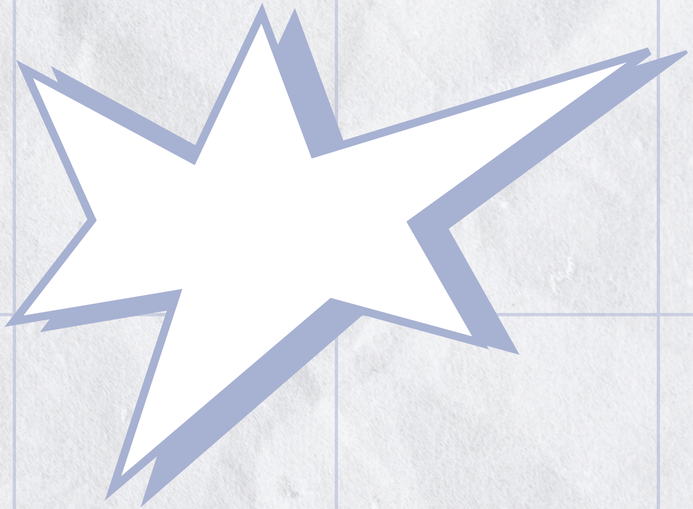
I chose to represent the artists in each medium via halftone artwork. This serves as a reference to printing, and is more visually interesting than black and white photography. I had to create a new version of each halftone piece for every medium to adjust for size. The art in the video also was processed completely differently so that it could be animated.



Rounded Rectangle

The rounded rectangle functions differently in each medium. Visually, it references the speech bubble often found in comics. On the gallery walls, it is used as an informational panel for each artist and piece on display. In the promotional posters, it is simply used to highlight the date. In the video, it serves as a window into the footage that was used.

Pow!



The “Pow!” callout is also utilized slightly differently accross different mediums. Visually, it is referencing the “Pow!” callout which is a famous motif in comics, and more subtly, it references the Star of David, with six points. On the gallery walls, it is small, being used to highlight basic information about the art on display, such as the title, issue number, and whether it is a cover, page or other illustration. On the posters, its size is increased and is used to highlight the description of the exhibition. In the video, it serves a similar purpose to its use in the gallery walls, being used as a lower third to introduce the interviewees. I found that this element calls for significant visual attention, so it must be scaled properly. If used as the main information panel on the gallery walls or as the window in the video, it is distracting. But on the poster, making it large draws attention where it is meant to go. In all cases, it is used in the lighter blue color to soften it.

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