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A Conversation with Art Spiegelman

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1 hour, 25 minutes, 15 seconds

Speakers: Art Spiegelman and Cristina Della Coletta

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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- Time Transcription
- 00:00 [Read Write Think Dream / The Library UC San Diego Channel /
www.uctv.tv/library-channel]
- 00:09 Erik Mitchell: Hello and good evening. My name is Erik Mitchell, the Audrey Geisel University Librarian. I'm pleased to welcome you to tonight's event featuring Pulitzer Prize winning artist, illustrator, and author Art Spiegelman. This evening's program is presented by the UC San Diego Library's Author Talk Series and the Holocaust Living History Workshop with generous support from Phyllis and Dan Epstein. The Holocaust Living History Workshop aims to broaden understanding of the past and future and preserve the memory of victims and survivors of the Holocaust. Now in its 14th year, the series is a collaborative effort between the UC [University of California] San Diego Library and the Jewish Studies Program which is located in the University's Institute of Arts and Humanities. I would like to acknowledge and thank my co-director of the workshop Deborah Hertz as well as its program coordinator Susanne Hillman for all the work they do each year to make this program a success. And I'd also like to extend my gratitude to our Author Talk Series sponsors and all of our library associates whose ongoing support helps us continue to host such talented authors like Art.
- 01:20 Erik Mitchell: So it's now my pleasure to introduce tonight's moderator Cristina Della Coletta, Dean of the UC San Diego School of Arts and Humanities and the Chancellor's Associates Chair in Italian Literature. Della Coletta was appointed Dean in August 2014 and in her role, she has overseen the development of the Analytical Writing Program, The Institute of Arts and Humanities, The Institute for Practical Ethics in the Suraj Israni Center for Cinematic Arts. Dean Della Coletta's research and teaching interests include historical fiction, Italian cinema and film adaptation, women's and cultural studies, and the use of technology in the humanities. And she's the author of several books including *When Stories Travel Cross-Cultural Encounters Between Fiction and Film* and *World's Fairs Italian-Style The Great Expositions in Turin and Their Narratives, [1860-1915]* and in fact, Dean Della Coletta is currently working on a digital project entitled *Turin 1911: The World's Fair in Italy* which she began during a fellowship at The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia. So Dean Della Coletta completed her bachelor's degree at the University of Venice in Italy, her Master's Degree in Italian from the University of Virginia and she earned her PhD in Italian from UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. And so please welcome me to the stage Cristina. Thank you for being with us tonight.
- 02:44 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Thank you very much, Erik. Thank you for this introduction and hello everyone. I am so pleased to join the UC San Diego Library for this special event and I am even more excited to lead tonight's conversation with award-winning artist, illustrator, and author Art Spiegelman. Art Spiegelman almost single-handedly brought comic books out of the toy closet and onto the

literature shelves. In 1992 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his masterful Holocaust narrative *Maus* which portrays the Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. *Maus II* continued the remarkable story of his parents' survival of the Nazi regime and their lives later in America. Tonight we will dive deeper into a number of themes that run throughout Art's work and life: the medium of comics, censorship, book bans, freedom of speech, and of course his seminal work *Maus*. Born in Stockholm, Sweden, Art Spiegelman immigrated with his parents in 1951 to the US [United States]. They settled in New York City in 1957 and he was drawing professionally by the age of sixteen.

04:08 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: While his parents encouraged him towards something more financially secure such as dentistry he attended Harper College to study art and philosophy. While there he began his decades-long work as a creative consultant for Topps bubble gum company creating Wacky Packages, and the Garbage Pail Kids, and other novelty items as well as entering the underground comics subculture and self-publishing world. After a number of years in San Francisco creating and editing various counter-cultural and transgressive works he moved to New York City meeting his future wife co-editor and publisher Françoise Mouly shortly after. They co-founded the acclaimed of vanguard *Raw* where *Maus* was originally included one chapter at a time. They went on to co-edit and publish a number of anthologies and comics for children. He spends, he spent a decade as a staff artist and writer at *The New Yorker*, served as comics editor of *The New York Press* and *Details* magazine, and his work has appeared in *Mother Jones*, *Harper's* magazine, and other publications. His anthology *Breakdowns* originally subtitled *From Maus to Now, an Anthology of Strips* opened the original three-page *Maus* strip and initially suffered poor distribution and sales when released in 1977. It was reissued in 2008 and expanded, is in an expanded hardcover almost doubling in length with an added autobiographical comics introduction and prose afterwards. What was once just a collection of early works now in its latest release as a deluxe paperback *Breakdowns* is, as Art put it himself, a manifesto, a diary, a crumpled suicide note, and still relevant love letter to a medium I adore. We're going to touch on all of this and more this evening so let's get started. Welcome Art.

06:29 Art Spiegelman: Hi.

06:32 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Hello. So, I'd like to get started with uh um comics as a medium, maybe the history of comic art. As I just quoted, you have talked about your passion for comics. You're such an expert and so this seems like a great place to start our conversation tonight. *The Los Angeles Times* quoted you as saying comics aren't made to be read, they are made to be re-read. If you only read them once they weren't worth bothering with. They're like a concentrated orange juice where your brain acts as the water. So Art, how do comics work? What makes a good comic strip?

- 07:19 Art Spiegelman: Well there's different - it's like saying what makes a good book. Uh, without pictures uh, there are many different kinds of books, some of them are romance Harlequin novels, some of them are Franz Kafka. Uh, for example, for me what makes comics important is - if you notice the way it was spelled on the cover of that book you just flashed - is to co-mix. To mix together words and pictures, and that's the key to what makes this a whole new medium, very supple. Uh, the text there says - comics as a medium for self-expression; oh John, you're such a fool - because that's what began happening with the underground comics and has matured uh through the *Raw* magazine we did, and through a lot of graphic novels that have come along since. When you co-mix words and pictures you get two different kinds of information simultaneously but that's like two times two. It's four times as much information and it has to be like concentrated orange juice, really concentrated images and bursts of thought in order to take advantage of all the possible ways these things interact. One thing my wife showed me uh from a science magazine while I was probably reading Donald Duck or *Mad* [Magazine] next to her was about how children can recognize a have a nice day emoji before they can recognize their mother's smile. We're wired to understand that kind of uh, cartoon stripped-down image and read it clearly. And that that's very powerful as an adjunct. So comics may be reduced to being a mixture of words and emojis perhaps but um it's suppler than if you just stick to the emojis.
- 09:02 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: You also called them an art of indication and the ability to distill. I love this uh, this idea the ability to distill because in a way there is so much in in a panel and at the same time it's incredibly distilled. Can you talk to that?
- 09:22 Art Spiegelman: Well yeah, because even um, a more illustrative comic style than the one I ordinarily use is already a distillation. It's not as uh rich as a Rembrandt [van Rijn] or um a painting. It's got to be stripped down so it can become a language element, a visual language element that can get taken into your eyes. And it's not just the single box; it's the boxes next to each other that make up a page when you're looking at comics that are part of what makes it, a medium so interesting to me. Because uh, basically a comic's page is time turned into space. You're seeing it next to each other but it's like reading sheet music, you know. You don't quite hear it until you inhabit it and with a comic, you're looking to the left if you're a Caucasian reader uh and then looking at the next panel but you see the whole page first and then as you go from the left-hand side to the next panel you're moving forward in time. So the whole page gives you uh, something that always has a past, present, and future built into the page itself. It's, it's why it was perfect for me to think about *Maus* and make that uh, in comics form.
- 10:39 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: I want to go now to to *MetaMaus [A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus]* and in the DVD that goes with it. We hear your father Vladek [Wladek] saying I am telling you what I have seen, not what other people

have told. And can you speak to that statement in relation to *MetaMaus* and perhaps even more to yourself as an artist?

11:02 Art Spiegelman: Well let's see. Starting with my father, it's why I wanted to make the book because I've never heard his story in its fullness or my mother's story fully. Uh, they tended to avoid talking about it. Uh, and my mother, with little bursts of anecdote or scene come through but not with any context so all it did was terrify me uh, the images. My father just said nobody wants to hear such stories. Uh, so he wasn't interested until I was an adult and returned to ask him again because I had the idea to do a long book like this, after the three-page *Maus* that you obliquely referred to uh, that was included in an anthology *underground comix* that just used anthropomorphic characters. And that was the first time uh, I thought of using that metaphor in relationship to telling the story of um Germans, Jews, the Axis, the the genocide that was World War II. Um, and to do that I had to reinhabit what he saw and what he was able to tell me. And that was um, so for me, it wasn't - at least this book wasn't - what you were asking in the second part of the question uh telling what I saw. What I saw was my father talking to me. And what I was able to see through that and through a lot of research around it was to inhabit those pictures and make them have some semblance to what he saw. It was a kind of transmission through this particular medium that I've read now is uh considered a valid form of um uh transcribed memorial writing.

12:51 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Well certainly *Maus*, you know, it's certainly your most most well-known title. It was described as the first masterpiece in comic book history. Uh, *The New Yorker* voted it as one of uh, the 125 most important books of the last of the last hundreds of years or so. And uh, and uh, you won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992; uh the first that has been given to a comic book I mean, among many other awards and and accolade. But I just wanted to go to an image which is uh in, containing the booklet that is in the Box edition of of *Maus* and uh on this is such a powerful image. On the left side, there is a branch of the Spiegelman family at the start of World War II. On our right side, we see it at the end of World War II. And what we see are a number of empty boxes. It's such a powerful image and in the face of these blank squares, your statement that that story needed to be told is all the more powerful. There is a sense of urgency in *Maus* as well as one of painful and certainly meticulous labor took to you 13, took you 13 years to create this book. Can you talk to us about what went into this 13 years? Uh, was any part of the book easier or harder to write?

14:34 Art Spiegelman: Well let's see, first I want to credit my uh 90 plus-year-old cousin Simon Spiegelman who became the family uh, archivist and genealogist, who made a rough version of this that I then cleaned up. Because, for me, it's actually more powerful than any two panels in *Maus* to see that full, rich family in one little corner of it, and then all those uh boxes five years later uh, that are all empty. Uh, as to what um, what was the hardest - I suppose once uh, the book got divided up

into two volumes while I was still working on the second volume, the second volume was incredibly difficult because first of all um, the first volume attracted a lot of attention and that was distracting and confusing to me. Uh, and it also made it harder to get back to work. So it, by the time I did get back to work I was now dealing with what happened after the last page of - or to almost the penultimate page - of *Maus I* which was the gates of Auschwitz. And somehow it was much harder to visualize life in a death camp. It just sounds like an oxymoron, uh so as brutal as the events in the first half of *Maus* are, they still have a distorted caricatured uh, an unhappy resemblance of family life. You'd be moved out of the home you were in and live in much more crowded conditions. People would come in uh, in uniform and drag part of the household away. Put him on a train to a camp. But somehow it still had those family relations that build up a society.

16:27 Art Spiegelman: Uh, that was not true once you got to Auschwitz. For the most part, everybody was separated and put into either uh, people who could live and work a bit, and those were immediately um, killed. So that was very hard for me to inhabit uh and it took a lot more reading. Originally I thought well the second part I'll draw it in a more sketchy style. The first part was done with sometimes 8 - 10 - 12 drawings for each little box on the page. And you can see those in the book you mentioned, *MetaMaus*. There's a scattering of those that explain the process. Uh, but they're just to try to bring the drawing into focus and what I wanted to do is make something that was a cross between handwriting uh and a type - a typographic letter. The clarity of type and the feeling of uh, sketching, of just finding. Uh, the second book I thought maybe I'd make it sketchier because I can't see it as clearly and instead what happened was I started looking at even more source material than I was reading for the first book, looking at as many pictures as I could find, including - very important for me - were the drawings made by inmates in the camps that survived, even though the people who drew them often didn't. And those showed things that couldn't be seen otherwise.

17:45 Art Spiegelman: There weren't cameras for the most part in Auschwitz uh, so it was the drawings that others made that I could sift information from. And as a result, by the time I was finished I was surprised, but the they, they were actually more definitive, more more focused as pictures than the first part of the book. Um, and in all of that, I should say also, I had to learn to draw very small because I didn't want to make - usually what happens like if you saw the originals of my underground comics including that three-page *Maus* they'd be quite large, like what one and a half, two times larger than the finished page. It was standard to do that because it makes the picture crisper and look more complete when it's smaller. And what I wanted, by wanting something that was a little bit like handwriting, I tried to draw it the same size it would be printed so it would be a kind of I/thou relationship with the reader rather than claiming the larger-than-life qualities of being able to draw that perfectly at a small size.

- 18:45 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: So, so given that you were talking about size maybe now it's a good time to ask a question that you've been asked many, many times. I - why, why um, mice? Why cats? Why pigs? Why dogs?
- 19:05 Art Spiegelman: Wow um, yeah. I've been asked that so many times that the reason I made *MetaMaus* was it was a book divided into three sections: Why the Holocaust, why comics, why mice. I don't know what order they were in. Built around interviews with Hillary Chute, who has a new book out of essays about *Maus* over the last um 20 years. [*Maus Now, Selected Writings*].
- 19:27 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: And see, there it is.
- 19:30 Art Spiegelman: Yeah, exactly. Um, but wow, I mean I don't want to go into that whole detailed version because then you'll be here for four days. Uh, but it started when I was invited into an anthology of underground comics that just required um, that I use anthropomorphic characters like Donald Duck or whatever. And that's what all the other artists in that anthology made as well. And at first, I couldn't figure it out. My first thought was maybe I'll make a horror comic story where it's a mouse that seems like a human, and when he walks out the door he gets trapped in a human-sized mouse trap and in a grizzly way is killed by the mouse trap. But that seemed like a long haul for a short slide. Then my good friend filmmaker Ken Jacobs uh was showing films in a film studies class he was teaching and I was sitting in on and he was showing Mickey Mouse cartoons. And he points out well you know when Mickey was a young mouse in like the 19 late 1920s when he was first being animated, he wasn't the square, suburban mouse that existed in the [19]50s [19]60s or [19]70s. And certainly not the corporate logo that exists 'till now. Uh, he was a Jazz Age mouse and he looked very similar to the race caricatures of uh, black-faced blacks that was ubiquitous in film - and in comics even longer than in film - but he had little round ears on the top of his head, but he had a white face, like the white mouth, and the cue ball black head. And he was a jazz singer in the first talkie cartoon.
- 21:03 Art Spiegelman: So I figured that's it! I can do something about race in America with uh, minstrel mice and with Ku Klux cats. And I thought, that's it; it's easy. And for a couple of days that was a good idea. And then uh, I realized it's not going to work. First of all, I'll either be seen as a racist - although there were a lot of underground comics that were perceived as racist even what they really were about was detoxing racism by uh, caricaturing it, satirizing it, and presenting it back but wouldn't fit in today's the sensibility for example. And uh, I just didn't know enough about the subject ultimately to do it justice. Even before we started inventing new phrases uh, like um, oh I don't remember the phrase right now. There's a phrase for what happens - appropriating - for appropriating somebody else's culture. So then for a day, I was despairing, after two or three days of feeling good about this uh, doing something about race in America, and then I realized there's a metaphor far closer to home, which was the uh metaphor offered by my

collaborator Adolf Hitler who described the uh Jews as vermin, as a race but not human.

22:19 Art Spiegelman: Uh, as also uh, by the inspiring Franz Kafka, who just came up a few moments ago in my conversation, who wrote a story called *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*. And it's easiest to understand that story as a little mouse singing the plaintive cry of her people, Uh, so more and more evidence accrued and that seemed like a much better way to go. I did a three-page strip for this anthropomorphic book. I realized I hadn't even scratched the surface and that's why about um six years later I entered into something that barely existed, the idea of a very long comic book for grown-ups that would ask to be reread as well as read. It was a hard thing to kind of navigate through, invent a language for, and make um - and in the bigger book it had various assets. Do you want me to stop here? Because this is a long, longish answer already.

23:13 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Oh no, I think I think you could keep going.

23:16 Art Spiegelman: So yeah, uh the big asset was these mice are really humans wearing masks. They're not drawn like uh, one would draw a rodent on the package of rat killer or something poison. Uh, they're wearing masks, sometimes very transparently like since uh the Poles are portrayed as pigs - but not all Poles are bad - I mean, not all Jews are good; not all Poles are bad. They're masks that people are wearing. And as the Ambassador from Poland told me when he had to give me a visa to go back and do more research he said, you know it's very upsetting to see the Poles drawn as pigs. Do you know that the Germans called us *schwein*? I said yes and um, they called us rats. Uh, so uh I got my visa. But nevertheless, these were animals that had very caricatural qualities. The cat, which is usually the friendliest of those three animals, was actually the worst predator as a species in this situation. But by having these masks on - and when my father is dressed as a Pole so nobody will recognize him as a Jew on the streets after that's not allowed anymore, or where they'd at least have to wear a Jewish star - you'd put on a Polish mask, a pig mask. And it was very clearly a mask where you could see the ribbon that was tying it onto his face.

24:32 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: On to the back, yeah.

24:35 Art Spiegelman: So, that allowed me to show these blank faces and allow you to project into those faces the individuals. If I try to draw each person that's represented in this whatever 300-page approximately comic, I'd get it wrong. I don't know what these people look like. There's no photographs of them. So I start out having to make a fiction, a fabrication. By putting these masks on it sets up a little bit of distance on the one hand, and it also sets up an intimacy on the other hand because the mouse heads are almost blank. There are little triangles with lumps for ears but there's a little patch of white paper wherever that mouse head is. And that's a little bit like - if you're old enough to know Little Orphan Annie as something

other than a musical but as a comic strip - it had big blank eyes on each character. Because I found that much more expressive than the more caricatural comics that had a lot of expression. But it was always too much, or too specific. By having these blank eyes you had to project the expression and it made Little Orphan Annie actually a very moving comic strip, even though I didn't agree with its politics. So those are the kinds of things I was thinking about and helped me through that whole project.

25:43 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Thank you. So as we, we dive into a little bit more into *Maus*, you depicted Vladek, your your father, in uh, in a very realistic way. There is uh um, there is no idealization there. Um, there is no development into a different human being. Can you talk about that?

26:16 Art Spiegelman: Well, first of all, I would kind of kind of disagree uh, with what to say where there's no development. I think there's a lot of development between the story he's telling me - which took place before I was born - uh, and the story that I'm telling which is my conversations with my father as they're brought to life through his language, Uh, and throughout his life he was very resourceful but he was a a much more dynamic person in his youth. When I show him as an old man he can't go on a ladder and do certain kinds of jobs himself. I show him not, being unhappy that I'm not willing to do the job, that he should get a roofer to do the job he's asking me to do. Um but in any case it was a complex relationship that I had with my father and his decline as he was an old man. Uh, I interviewed him and re-interviewed him from 1978 till he died in I think [19]82. So as soon as we'd finished I'd make him go over the story again uh, to get more details and I think he's shown as difficult, as a very difficult man. I'm shown as a not especially grateful child uh, of his. And ultimately it allows for a lot of human complexity. What I did not want to do, and what I've seen done in many movies and in other memoirs, is uh turn my father into a saint which is a very Christian notion, the idea that uh suffering ennobles. That these survivors -

27:46 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: That's exactly what I meant.

27:50 Art Spiegelman: Oh, okay. And uh that suffering somehow makes them better and all suffering does is cause pain. And it's not that the best people lived and the worst people died. It was random as I say in the mouths of a shrink who was helping me navigate all this, who had also gone through Auschwitz. Uh, and that sounds correct to me. Um, so I felt it was really important to keep them three-dimensional and human and as a result - I think in his own irascible way - kind of lovable.

28:21 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Yeah. Um, Anja - you pronounce it Anja, right?

28:29 Art Spiegelman: Yeah. It's really spelled in Polish a-n-d-z-i-a, I think. I was more likely to get the American audience. I never dreamed there would be 30 or more translations. Uh, the A and J is more likely to be pronounced Anja

Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Right. Okay. So let's run with Anja. There, there are, there is you know, there's void, there's loss, there's absence in, in *Maus*. Uh, there's absence of her physical presence after she committed suicide but one of the most poignant absences in, in the book is the absence of her diaries. And to me, that permeates the whole, the whole story uh, the absence of her voice through her written word. Um, can you talk to that?

29:23 Art Spiegelman: Well sure. Um, I did a comic strip in 1972. My mother killed herself in uh, 1968 and for the first four years if somebody asked what happened to my mother I'd say she killed herself but I wouldn't remember it vividly. I just knew that that was the fact that they were they needed to know, if any if they needed to know anything. Uh, and it all came flooding back in 1972. And at that point, I stopped whatever trivial comic I was working on to do a four-page comic of what I remembered from those few days around her actual death. And it's drawn in a very different style from *Maus*, like woodcut style - very anguished and expressionistic. Um, it seemed appropriate to that particular piece. I didn't even know if I would publish it afterwards. And yet, I don't think a comic is finished until it's printed, you know. So eventually I published it in a very obscure underground comic book. Uh, but when it came to trying to deal with her absence in the longer projects of the book either I had to redraw her death in the same style as the rest of the book or just say well she died - she killed herself - and move on. And it seemed better to me to include the four-page comic strip as a subsection of the book, to give you a sense of what that was and to show that the drawings are very consciously made. The styles are, the style of the sketchbook-style of *Maus* in general, that simplified style - but very claustrophobic - is not the style I always draw in uh, nor is that expressionist style that looks like woodcuts.

30:53 Art Spiegelman: Uh so it had that aspect. It also had the aspect of bringing what a *Maus* cartoonist using humans in the four-page comic strip that's inserted. And it was a way of making her absence thoroughly felt. If you hold the book on its edge and look at the edges of each of the pages of the book, you'll see that the pages that have the Hell Planet strip - it was called *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* - are black because I bled black off the edges so it makes a little black strip on the edge of the book. So it stands as an insert, as something separate, and it's something that affects the whole book around it. Ah, it's a horrible absence in that my mother when I was growing up showed me the diaries that she rewrote right after the war. She kept them during the war, was afraid to hang on to them because it would get her killed. She reconstructed them in Sweden and in America before uh, when she got here after the war. And uh, that was always meant for me. She said, you may not be interested in it now - she was telling me when I was uh prepubescent kid -

um uh, but you may be someday. And I was when I began doing this book. I kept asking my father about them and found out eventually the horrible thing of him, in a moment of grief after her death, seeing, finding them on a shelf said it brought back so many bad memories I burned them.

- 32:19 Art Spiegelman: And he didn't confess that right away. It's at the end of the first volume. And at that point I get furious and I walk off, yell at him, call him a murderer, then vaguely superficially reconcile and walk off. Well, the fact of the matter, while I was researching the book is I'll never really get her story uh, either told to me - because she killed herself - or through the memory that she left as language, written language, that way. So I only found little scraps of information from a few people who knew her before and during the war. That's actually included in *MetaMaus* on that disc that's now being reformatted to be a closed website when you buy the book. Because putting a DVD disc was a great idea whenever we did that book, like 2008, but now it will be like putting an Edison cylinder into every book. It's not what you can do. So it's that's being worked on now for future editions
- 33:14 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Excellent. There's, you, you, in an interview you said something that I thought, I need to ask this question. You said taboo-breaking seems natural to me. So look at *Maus*, if you look at *Maus* what are some of the taboos that you broke and why did you break them? In terms, you know, it could be in terms of the story, it could be in terms of of the medium you are using.
- 33:45 Art Spiegelman: Yeah, I mean in a way I touched on this already. Like I did say that uh, using animals to represent the people can easily be misconstrued but it was important and urgent for the project. Um, and using animal totems to represent people and make them all into a group is a stupid idea. It's Hitler's idea. You know, like mice can't cohabit and breed with cats but Jews and Germans did it all the time for example. And there's one little panel somewhere where there's a little mouse with cat stripes because it had a, there was a Christian mother and a Jewish father uh in that family. So the ways in which I try to make it a self-destructing metaphor. When the book first came out it was kind of shocking to people. Doing the comic book at all was shocking because comics didn't traffic in, in that kind of material. Uh, there was that emotionally fraught. Although I must say I was influenced by love comics when I saw a little girl reading them in my class when I was about in sixth grade and she was crying. And it never occurred to me that a comic could make somebody cry even if it was through such uh, counterfeit uh, story. Uh, so there was that.
- 35:03 Art Spiegelman: There was um, well that's that's enough for the comic. But I would say in general the transgression comes with my generation of cartoonists very consciously. The underground comics were meant to undo the uh censorious Comics Code of America that became uh, necessary for comic book to even get on the stands after there were comic book hearings in the early [19]50s about comics

and juvenile delinquency. And Congress didn't want to censor comics outright but they seem to agree the comics were a very very bad influence on kids. Uh, a psychiatrist named Dr. [doctor] Frederick Wortham uh was involved in whipping it up into such a frenzy. He had many good sides to him but he saw - a German immigrant from before World War II Jewish - he saw comics and other mass media as coarsening people and making uh them incapable of understanding anything because it's all visceral or mass media. And as a result, he was responsible for comic book burnings in the 1950s which seemed so amazing to me now in 2013 when there were literally comic book confiscations, comic book burnings in libraries, and in schools when comics are used there. So that the medium itself was transgressive with its horror comics, its crime comics, and so on.

36:26 Art Spiegelman: Uh *Mad* comics was a very, very important - the most important - influence on me, and *Mad* was by its nature transgressive. It said um, it said the whole adult world is lying to you and we here at *Mad* we're adults. Good luck kids. Figure it out. In their parodies and in their satire they were telling you that the surface mass media around you wasn't reliable as a way of learning the truth for yourself. Genius magazine and comic. And then my transgressions continued with the Topps bubble gum work that you mentioned in your introduction. Doing things like parodies of packages, giving my *Mad* lessons with Wacky Packs that you can almost see some three-dimensional Wacky Packs over my shoulder there on the shelf. Uh, and through another generation's Garbage Pail Kids that I worked on with a team of creators. Uh, then I'd worked for a magazine called *The Realist* which was a magazine of free thought, criticism, and satire. And it was really not distributed well because it was too shocking for people to have to deal with the material in *The Realist*. It's now archived online and you can see that. It, it's still shocking. It's still important and it's still relevant.

37:43 Art Spiegelman: Uh, and then, and then there was - phew - covers for *The New Yorker*. If I skip a bunch of other transgressive things like the underground comics - some of which would still shock anyone right now with those underground comics. But *The New Yorker* - I was doing covers like um, let me see if I can find one and just hold it up. This cover was the first cover I did for *The New Yorker* when I was invited in. That's the cover of a Valentine's Day [*The*] *New Yorker* without the logo on it. And that created as big a ruckus as you could have without Twitter. Um, it came out on Valentine's Day in the wake of riots in Crown Heights where there were race riots in Brooklyn between the Hasidic Jewish community and the black community. And that was still - we were living in the aftermath of that. And um, it seemed like an interesting Valentine's Day cover to say can't these people, who have a lot in common as well as a lot of differences, kiss, and makeup. That was just too much for people to stand and at the time I can't tell you it became international news. If you're in Italy at that time, you'd have heard about it there even though there was no Crown Heights in Italy um and it was a third rail to deal with blacks and Jews that way and at that time. Now, years later - that was in 1993

- uh people love that cover. And many mixed race couples try to find if there's a way to get a poster of it, you know. Because it, it's, it's amusing to them. So but that was very transgressive at the time. It was followed by many transgressive covers that moved *The New Yorker* away from nice suburban scenes of Connecticut, and simple cartoon drawings to ones that had a provocative charge. So my history of transgression was hard won, and hard earned over a lifetime of work.

39:34 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: So I want to talk about a different type of transgression and this is uh, actually you, you said in our - a few minutes ago - that a comic isn't finished until it's printed. And I want to talk about the last page of *Maus*. What I want to say is that, at a certain level it seems like there is, you know, such closure. The last uh, the last panel has the tombstone with Anja and Vladek's name and then at the bottom below it, there's your signature and the dates. So there there are dates everywhere that, that sign a beginning and an end. There are numbers everywhere except there is no number for the last page. So I was wondering is, there's almost, there almost a sense that the story continues. That there is, there is more after this.

40:37 Art Spiegelman: No. There's no *Maus*, there's no *Maus Three*. I'm sorry. The war ended. It wasn't a book that was meant to carry on uh, infinitely like comic strips from day to day, to day, to day for many years. Uh, but when you asked what was hardest in doing *Maus*, it was that second book - entering the death camps - and then it was finishing the damn book. It was so hard to find a way to end it. I had so many endings I had to discard over those years of working. There's one that uh, had to change - one thing that had to change - my father was no longer alive by the time I finished the book. Uh, uh there's, it was very hard to find anything that let the book land. And then, while I was blocked, I read something in uh - I don't remember who the conversation was with - but in a *Paris Review* interview some author that I admired was saying endings are very important. I had to say yes that's true. Uh, uh and said, he or she then said ah, in a book, in the last chapter every sentence has to double in weight from the from the sentence before. And in the last panel, in the last paragraph, it has to double in weight yet again from everything that came before in that chapter. So as a result I ended up with three endings for *Maus* that were stacked up above each other. In the very last page of the book - which you're right has no page number because it can't come below my signature at the end actually.

42:08 Art Spiegelman: Um, so what it is is the first ending is when Vladek and Anja both turn out to have survived the camps, they agree to meet back in Poland. It's a difficult journey but he eventually gets back. In those three panels, they meet again at the place they said they would meet if they both survived and they hug. And uh, Vladek says Anja, Anja., my Anja as they hug in front of a honeymoon that you saw in the earlier part of the book - a round circular panel that's used that way

several times. And he says more, I don't need to tell you we were both very happy and lived happy, happy ever after. A nice fairy tale ending. Which, of course, after having read the entire book it wasn't so happy uh that they lived either ever after or before. Uh, and then there's a second - that's ending number one let's say of the narrative. Second one is my father in bed and he says so let's stop please your tape recorder. I'm tired from talking Richieu. And it's enough stories for now. And Richieu is the brother I never met, that they had before the war, that was poisoned when he was about three years old uh, being given for safe keeping to a family member that had better conditions to live in than my parents did in their ghetto. And that was one of the big scars in their life and I grew up with that photo haunting me from their bedroom all the time and ultimately his presence because you know. he was a good kid. He died at three. He didn't have a chance to become a pain in the ass as I was. So the sibling rivalry with a snapshot. So the second ending is my father making that ellipsis as he's slipping off to sleep at, near the end of his life, and that out that all rests on a tombstone as if the entire book was one of those stones put on top of a grave to mark it in Jewish tradition. And then below that after you see uh, Vladek and his birth and death date and next to him Anja's birth and death date, just as it looks on their tombstone, uh below that is the signature of when I started *Maus* and the death date of the book, when I finished it. So it's, it's got its own closure right there. Phew, okay.

44:18 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: So I want to move on to a different topic now. And um in, I think it was about January of 2022 when *Maus* was notoriously banned from an eighth-grade curriculum of a school in Tennessee. And as a result, maybe by February *Maus* had reached the top of the Amazon's bestsellers list. So now, in Missouri, in across the country, libraries are being restricted from what they have in their collection and on their shelves. Can you talk to us about these banns and their consequences?

45:04 Art Spiegelman: Terrible thing. You know um, I never thought I would live to see something where America - which saved my parents after the war, it gave them a new start in life - could be tilted toward a new kind of fascism. And it's what I see everywhere I look now. I think it's more likely than not that it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. But you know the images of Nazis burning books in the [19]30s in Germany? Uh, you may not have seen but there were comic books burned during the [Senator Joseph] McCarthy era in the [19]50s as I just explained. And now comic books, some books are being burned in demonstrations, I haven't seen one of just comic books yet. But they're being thoroughly banned in libraries in the states you mentioned in Missouri, in Florida, and Texas, and in Tennessee, and probably more than I haven't kept track of. And they're, this, it's like destroying memory yet again. It's that when I called my father a murderer for murdering the written word, the diary. It's what we're doing to our entire culture by murdering the books, banning them, taking them off shelves. And in Missouri - and I think it's now spreading or to Utah, where they're taking the

same language to make a similar law - uh if a librarian, or any school person, or any person in the school gives a kid a book that's been prohibited from what used to be in the library comfortably - and still is in most states - uh, the person who gave them the book is liable to a two thousand dollar fine per uh, occurrence and up to a year in jail. This is insane, absolutely insane.

46:41 Art Spiegelman: And it's books that are not hardcore pornography. There are laws about pornography that uh, supersede whatever these state laws are doing. And the state laws really are about prohibiting thought uh, stopping Americans from understanding what happened in America from its very uh beginnings when Europeans came over to America and the genocide of Indians that took place after, to the introduction of slavery and uh, slavery that still bears the ripples and consequences of itself. And you're not allowed to teach that because, according to some of these fatuous statements made by school boards, and uh, [Rick de] Santis, and others um, it's kind of uh, they don't want to make any of their students uncomfortable. And if Grandpa was a klansman they don't want that kid to be uncomfortable in school, never mind black kids that are prohibited about from learning what their past actually is in an organized way, as they should in school. And the prohibitions are arbitrary if they can just be done by - in some of these situations, like in Texas, every book has to be vetted before it's out on the shelves. And anybody, not just a parent, can do that saying this book is no good. You have to take it off. They don't have to have read the book any more than the school board in McMinn County, Tennessee read *Maus*. It's transparent that they did not. So -

48:06 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Because the reasons - Why did they want to - It's, it's interesting to me too, why did they want to uh, to ban the book? The the reasons are kind of absurd.

48:19 Art Spiegelman: *Maus*? Well, they didn't say that it makes them uncomfortable. But I have a lot of theories about it because I've had to think about it a lot since that day last year uh, in the end of January where it happened. Because I didn't need the publicity. *Maus* has been selling just fine, thank you, over all those years since it came out first in 1986. But their reasoning was they don't want it in their curriculum because and then the reasons they gave were fig leaf excuses - it has uh naked bodies in it uh, it has some bad words in it. The words are bitch and goddamn. I think those are the only ones. Maybe there's a shit somewhere that I didn't see uh, which every kid at the age of 12 already has heard more than once. But all of those words are used in a way that subverts authority. And one thing you can tell about school boards, about Republican uh politicians at least, is they love authority. They love exercising it. So they don't mind making parents uh, in charge of the schools even though some of the parents, many of the parents, wouldn't want anything like what they're doing done. But they're protecting the rights of the

parents who might be offended by having to look at anything. So they used as their litmus test for *Maus* uh nudes, naked bodies.

49:41 Art Spiegelman: They said a nude body - it was my mother's dead body, seen from above in a bathtub, as a human, in the four-page [Prisoner from] Hell Planet comic strip - if that has any sexual titillation for anybody, the way it's shown, you should just lock them up. It's just, they're really dangerous to think that. But they really did it as a fig leaf, if that's the right word here because insofar as there's any law about how things do work in schools, you can do it for bad language and for naked bodies, but not for other reasons like uh, history. You can't ban a book because they don't, they're uncomfortable with the history. So that's one set of reasons. The other set of reasons is that um, I think I told you in passing that uh, originally I was going to do this about uh, uh, white people and black people. And that's vestigially in the final book because, once you put these masks on, it's about the oppressor and the oppressed. And it's what comes with that oppressor is a lot of uh wielding of deadly authority and I think on some level, probably subliminal but just by skimming through the book, they saw that there. And I think they saw their face behind those cat masks.

50:50 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: I think this goes into the next question very well because a cartoon is a powerful tool to speak truth to power. A cartoon can also be used to afflict the afflicted. You consider that the former is more aesthetically pleasing than the latter. Can you, can you explain to me what you mean there?

51:15 Art Spiegelman: Well let's say making uh a racist cartoon now with those black-face figures and white lips is appalling from our perspective now. But if somebody wants to do something like I get the urge to do this myself. I'd like to do a comic strip about how comics are built on caricature - just in their very, very essence. They're caricatures and race-caricature is a very potent caricature that's been used to hurt people over many many centuries. So it's not aesthetically pleasing to afflict people who are already suffering from the causes of those racist images, including the the hook nose Jew, and and there's a vocabulary of this in comics. Even in how to draw comics books, comic books from the past. They'll show you how to draw an Italian, how to draw a Chinese person, how to draw a black person, how to draw a Jew, and so on and so on. Women were just restricted to Madonnas and whores. And it's very, very reductive and it's worthy of analysis. And I'm trying to do something with that and I'm sure I'll just get canceled once I do it because the fact that it has an image is already the insult. You can only show the n-word. They want to take the end the n-word that's used in *Huckleberry Finn* out of *Huckleberry Finn* which is absurd to me because he wrote it at a certain time and that's just in there.

52:42 Art Spiegelman: Uh so anyway, all of this is to say that uh, it's dangerous. But it has to be done if you're speaking truth to power. And then the thing to do is to take the point of view of the afflicted because it's much more elegant to use comics as a

way of helping to rebalance the scales rather than to make it, make things worse. And that often means caricaturing politicians. And there used to be a law on the books in many states because politicians were insulted about how they were shown in political cartoons. There was an anti-caricature law. It got shot down by the First Amendment when people still believed in the First Amendment more fully, but that political discourse can include insulting a politician of course. So a nasty caricature of Teddy Roosevelt, of Rudolph Giuliani, of [Donald] Trump is just part of how one has to assimilate the information and, and, and work with it as a cartoonist. So is there anything I wasn't answering in what you asked?

53:44 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: No. I think you, I think you answered perfectly. And I think this is the perfect time. I think, to welcome back Erik Mitchell who will lead the Q [question] and A [answer] part of this program.

54:00 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Thank you so much Dean Dela Coletta and Art it's really been a pleasure, uh hearing your conversation. And we've been getting um just a flood of questions. And so, of course, uh, I'll remind our audience members uh to please keep those questions coming and we'll get to as many as we can uh tonight. And so, maybe I'll actually stay uh Cristina on the theme you were just on kind of talking about the, the impact of censorship. And um, I think Art you are speaking, you know, really uh, powerfully about uh, why you think uh censorship is so prominent. And so maybe Cristina, if you don't mind, I'd love to hear uh, your view and, you know, what are you seeing as the the Dean of Arts and Humanities. Is this beginning to impact students who are coming to our university?

54:49 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Well, you know, I think that that the right to freedom of speech is one of the founding tenets of American higher education, and not limited to public universities. And that is tied to another fundamental element of the university system, and that's tenure. And this day tenure is under attack uh, just as free speech is. In states such as Florida, North Dakota, Texas some law - lawmakers are advocating now for the elimination of tenure, which is also the elimination of uh, faculty governance, which is also an attack to freedom of speech, which is you know the foundation of our ability to um to take part in objective research and the pursuit of knowledge.

55:50 Art Spiegelman: Cristina one thing that's interesting is, I don't remember what state it was in, the woman who showed a painting of um Muhammad -

56:00 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Is that of *David*? The *David* by Michelangelo?

56:05 Art Spiegelman: Oh no that's, that seems [unclear]. It has a little zizi in the statue and that's a problem. But that's all part of being afraid of the image incidentally, which is part of the power of comics. It's what happens in a Protestant culture, a dominant Protestant culture. They're afraid of images. They're, they minimize. They have no crucifixions in their churches - they just have the cross - and pictures

are dangerous. And that's part of their power and why it should be used as part of communication. Uh, but there's somewhere else where a woman had a warning that she would do this but she showed a picture of Mohammed, a painting that uh, was from the - not sure which is which - the the Sunni. It was from the Shiite tradition. It's a Medieval painting and one student took exception to showing this, even though there had been warnings before it happened, and she got this woman, the teacher, kicked out of the school for uh triggering her. They were embarrassed when it became a national story. But she found a better job somewhere else. But this is a terrible thing to do to try to monitor teachers so closely that they can't do their jobs. The way to make our schooling better and make kids learn more is to pay teachers and librarians better, not to shut them up and make them fearful every day for their jobs.

57:19 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: I, I totally agree. I, I think that in my space, my, my job as as an administrator is certainly not that of determining what my faculty can or cannot say. My job is to to provide training and resources for the faculty and the education, and support to students to ensure that their their right to freedom of speech, as well as their right to dignity, safety, equal participation, equal contribution without fear, are protected. And, and this means balancing rights with responsibilities.

58:02 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Yeah. We've - a question we've gotten from the audience that really relates to this topic um - uh - I'll even read a little bit piece of what it says. You know, with the rise of book bans and the increase of antisemitic, antisemitic rhetoric, as well as anti-trans and LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning] movements the question really is about um, the impact of retelling history uh, and the impact on youth. And Art, you talked about this, of taking words out of books uh, in censorship and removing things from the classroom. Uh Cristina, would love to hear your thoughts on the Statue of David controversy. I'm just curious, if you if you play this forward, you know, if if this type of censorship continues and kind of the impact on education continues, where does this take our country? Where does it take our society?

58:51 Art Spiegelman: Well, I told you earlier, I think we're in for a fascist society unless things change around 180 degrees. This is really dangerous times. I never thought I'd see anything like this again uh, and it won't take exactly the same form but it's clear that as as Faulkner said uh, the past is not dead. It's not even passed. And uh, that informs all of this thinking. Uh, this is an image I made on that booklet that you were referring to before called *The Past Hangs Over the Future*. Uh, me as, me with my daughter-mouse Naja when she was very young and hang Jews hanging behind it. Now the thing about antisemitism that's interesting is, it's definitely escalated in the last few years. It's still far below the treatment of Asians, blacks, Muslims in America uh but the fact that that dam has broken is disturbing because I always thought - thinking back over my experiences in my life - that we

were just sort of honorary whites, you know, Jews. There was a period back in the freedom rider days when Jews and blacks co-joined to uh, integrate buses in the South and at uh, lunch counters. There was an alliance between um progressive Jews and uh, and the black people who were suffering under absolutely - it's hard to believe that those laws were in place still in the [19]50s and [19]60s - um and that's cracked. So there's this thing that's just sort of amusing. As long as we're taking recent headlines which is uh, Whoopi Goldberg. I don't remember how she got her foot in her mouth that time but on that show *The View* she did something of saying when - I don't know, they were talking about *Maus* somehow - and she said well but of course, the thing with Nazis and and Jews is it's not race. It's just man's inhumanity to man. And then she got jumped on by everyone saying no of course it was race. The Germans were considered, considered themselves the master race and they considered Jews an inferior race. And she wasn't quite buying it. She was forced to apologize and I was very unhappy. She did apologize and I think even understood it by the end of the day.

1:01:08 Art Spiegelman: But it's like because these people both had white skin how could there be any prejudice between them? It's just how she grew up uh rather than the culture that led to Auschwitz. But I think that it's interesting that she apologized. They talked about it some more - that should have been the end of it. Freedom of speech means being allowed to say something stupid. We say it every day. Every one of us says something stupid. If everybody jumps down your throat and shames you there's no way to easily turn around when your back is against the wall. She should have just been on the show next day doing whatever it is that she does uh, but instead, she was made to take a two-week timeout to think about what she had done. And that's not the way free speech works. It's like bad speech should be corrected by better speech, which is indeed what happened in the conversation that ensued. So, I don't know. I mean it seems to me that we're we're aiming toward uh something really terrible. It includes a dismantling public education altogether. These Moms for Liberty uh, these school boards, these governors of Florida are about making it so that public schools feel unsafe to the people who really want it to only be teaching the word of Jesus. Making it feel unsafe for anybody who doesn't agree with Moms for Liberty and therefore dismantling the school system and replacing it with charter and religious schools that can use the taxpayer money for a privatized education and leaving only the destitute in public schools. This is the opposite of what America needs of its upcoming population.

1:02:47 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Wow. Cristina, I'm curious if you've got a perspective on uh, you know - kind of from the Italy's perspective particularly. Just kind of thinking about the statue of *David* um, controversy which on the surface seems so absurd. That uh, again this kind of well-known work of art, that everybody should be aware of um, with any level of education, wound up being the center of this uh controversy.

- 1:03:11 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: It would be funny if it weren't uh, if, if - you know it's, it's humorous. Because it's not only comic. It's humorous because you laugh at first and then you wonder how can this happen and laughter dies. And you know [Luigi] Pirandello was saying that humor is, is a combination of laughter and thought. And that's exactly what what happens with situation like this. The first reaction is that you laugh because it's so absurd and ridiculous. And then it makes you, you think. And the enormity of it is very, is absolutely scary, especially for an educator because these are people who never saw a picture of *David* before. How, how is it possible? And it, you know, I'm not even going into being offended by it which is which is something I can't even wrap my mind around it's how can this be a novelty and what did we do wrong? So, you know, again from where I said I work in a public university my efforts are really uh are really focused on access, bringing more access to more students, low-income students, students from different backgrounds, students, non-traditional students. And you know we have a very successful program where we bring more transfer students into UC San Diego thanks to a Mellon Grant that we share with the local Community College District. More than 70 percent of those students are diverse students for different backgrounds and I think, I think this is the only way to push back on what Art rightfully said the specter of fascism. Again, the only way I can do it from where I said is via dialogue education and access access to um -
- 1:05:33 Art Spiegelman: You know, when you're talking about these kids, they all have iPhones. They've all seen much bigger penises than *David*, the statue. It's, it's just built into the uh, culture that no longer has the the safeguards around it. I'm sure it's part of what's panicking the Moms for Liberty, among their other fears. And on the other hand, it has to be dealt with not by trying to put out the fire by stamping out all images of sexuality and bodies. In fact, there's one interesting suit going on somewhere where - I don't remember where it was - somebody is suing the school for teaching the *Bible* because the *Bible* has stories of adultery, nudity uh, nude people, and so on. And so kind of trying to squelch it out is, is, it's like being an ostrich. You can't stamp it out. You can hide from it but you can't stamp it out. And certainly, when it's not there for lascivious purposes only there's no reason to stamp it out. Like certainly, a Renaissance statue is absorbed into our culture enough so that even a child will be able to withstand seeing that image.
- 1:06:47 Dr. Erik Mitchell: As I'm picking up, a question that came in just a few minutes ago um somebody asks, has Art worked in any other media besides drawing? Have you worked in painting, film, internet art? And if, if you haven't, do you have any interest in doing so?
- 1:07:03 Art Spiegelman: Well comics are hard enough. You know um, I've written essays. I've written a lot of uh texts, about comics mostly, and the implications of them which is some of, which is coming up even in our conversation today. I got seduced into trying to make a series for uh for Amazon Prime with a friend. and

with a producer who's a very close friend who's also involved in comics, Neil Gaiman. And by the time we were finished writing the pilot, I was so exhausted I never wanted to even watch a streaming series again. Because uh, it's the opposite of being creative. It's like having every sentence challenged in ways that make it less interesting. So I tried that. I've made a stained glass window for my old high school with a project called um Arts for Schools or something like that. It's a New York City project for art in public places. I've worked on a ballet believe it or not. Even though, when the people approached me I said you know, *The Red Shoes* is one of the things that made me averse to ever thinking about ballet again. They said no, we don't like it either. We're a different kind of dance company. And I made something called *Moving Still* and it was about where comics and dance collide. Because, when I said uh comics are time turned into space, ballet dancing - they weren't ballet uh dancers but they were dancers. - it's all about moving through time, very literally. I tried those mediums. I've done lithographs, drawing on stone. I haven't painted much since high school, junior high school, but I feel comics is such a challenging and interesting medium that I'm trying to stick to it.

1:08:52 Dr. Erik Mitchell: I think I've heard you answer this question before uh that we got in, but would you ever turn *Maus* or your other comics into a series, or a movie, or a streaming effort?

1:09:02 Art Spiegelman: Never. No. I got - my agents are uh, told to not even pass these things on to me. A very good director just approached them last week and I like his films. I don't think *Maus* should be a movie. I don't think there's any reason. You know, it's bad enough when I have to oversee a translation to languages I don't know just in book form. Like there's the Korean edition evidently does quite well but I have no idea if they turned the Germans into Chinese people. I have no idea what they did in in their translation and I'll never know. But that's already uh going quite far. I never want to see it - I'll probably be forced to change my mind before it's all over - to allow some kind of electronic book to happen. But I want you to see the book as it was meant to be which is those drawings that I said were done in very small scale - there is no scale to an ebook. You can look at it on a giant TV screen, on a tiny little phone screen and it's meant to be seen the size that it was made. It's part of the information that it's done that way. I don't think it can be successfully turned into a film. So what I've done is, I've told my kids that when I croak please try not to turn it into a movie, if you're not out on the streets, you know. I thought, I, I did, as a joke, have a glass shelved bookcase and I put a copy of *Maus* in it and said in case of economic emergency break glass. The only possible reason to do, because it would be a betrayal of the book. You don't, I don't know what everybody sounded like, as well as what they looked like. I don't know what everybody moved like and that would make a counterfeit reality that can't acknowledge its or its urzat's imitation. Where *Maus* is a language I understand, comics. So I was able to make it for the reader who really pays attention, to show what can be told, where telling has to stop because there's no way to tell anymore.

- 01:11:00 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Yeah I was, I was really fascinated with a description I heard you giving about how um, the, you know, that when you tell a story you describe a narrative and you can describe a version of reality. Creating comics is so much more in-depth, right? When you have to create that image. I think you were talking about um, understanding what the gate of Auschwitz looked like, for example, and wanting to get that exactly right. And just, all the details that are woven in uh and so I could, I could appreciate it.
- 1:11:29 Art Spiegelman: Of course, of course, I got things wrong. You know, I got like that gate is probably not the gate that Vladek saw. It explains years after I said like but wasn't there an orchestra playing by the gate? And he said no, I never saw any. And I said well, I'm reading all these books, they all have - even um memoirs by people who are in the Auschwitz Orchestra. And now I realize that probably what happened was once Vladek was brought into the camp, and Anja, they weren't brought through the main gate. They didn't come by train. They came by truck. They probably went in through a side gate so they weren't exposed to that front gate which is emblematic of Auschwitz. And I can live with it as the emblem. But it was after I drew it and had it published, that I realized I didn't get it quite right. He probably never heard the orchestra. He probably never went through that gate per se. And that's exactly why it becomes important to leave that kind of distance between reality and a son struggling to understand what his father tells him. And if there, if there hadn't, if I hadn't figured that out I was using that few panels - where my father's talking to me about he didn't uh see an orchestra - of having a quarrel with him, saying but it's, it's all demonstrated. Now if I, I use that as an occasion to talk about the difference between what he saw, what he thinks he saw, what I didn't understand that he saw, or when he got it wrong, or when I got it wrong, that there is that built into any kind of project of capturing memory. Memory is much too fugitive. It's much too limited to get it right but it's all we have.
- 1:12:59 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Cristina I know you've studied uh adaptations. Your uh most recent book *When Stories Travel* focused on this. Do you have a perspective on what's gained or lost as you you move stories between these different mediums?
- 1:13:13 Dean Cristina Della Coletta: Well I, I started off by really working on on novels and films that were extraordinarily different. The, the, the cover of my book has uh, has a painting by Salvador Dali that represent Hermes or Hermes. I'm not sure how you pronounce it in English. And, and the idea behind adaptation, that kind of adaptation, is really that of an encounter, uh hermeneutical encounter, an interpretive encounter across times, spaces, cultures. So I really am not interested in adaptation that are based on the fidelity principle. Basically, there is a derivative or secondary form whose value depends on how close it is to a precursor or an original text. I look at, at works say, I don't know, I worked on [Luchino] Visconti's *Ossessione* which is a film based on *The Postman Always Rings Twice* by by [James M.] Cain. And, you know, they couldn't be more different from Depression-

era California to fascist Italy in the, in the Pearl River delta. But uh, but the, the, the similarity there is that both authors used some foundational elements of classical tragedy and subverted them. And so, that's where the analogy resides. But that's, that's only there and so if Kane was demystifying the notion of uh self-reliance uh, the very American notion of of autonomy and self-reliance by presenting this story in, in the prime during the Depression uh, Visconti was doing a little bit of the same thing uh, addressing individual, the notion of the individual agency and responsibility during a dictatorship.

- 1:15:27 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Thank you. So, Art, I'm seeing a lot of questions come in around comics and graphic novels. And so, I'll pick a few questions here. So Brian asks uh, he says you've spoken and written about Bernie [Bernard] Krigstein's *Master Race* and EC [Entertaining Comics] comics *Impact* number one. Uh, can you tell us about a significance in the history of the comics medium?
- 1:15:53 Art Spiegelman: Okay. I mean, I wrote a paper about it which, I think, is what that person might have seen uh in a book of essays about analyzing comics. I took this story that was just uh, seen as a minor story, at the tail end of EC comics, which was in some ways the most sophisticated comics coming out before the comic book purge of the [19]50s. It was a painter who's just making his money as best he could to support his painting habit by working in comics. Then he got interested in what comics could be and he did astounding things. I don't know how you're going to find this story but I can't possibly go into the astounding things. But he found new ways of representing time turned into space because he had a page limit so he started making small panels and collaging with them. He found a set of references that weren't based on the cartoon symbolism so much as on modernist illustration. He changed his style for each piece of work that he did. And those were among the comic books - EC comics - were the ones that were most hated by the sensors uh of the [19]50s. And this was a story they made near the end of their publishing history.
- 1:17:06 Art Spiegelman: But it showed me that one could deal with the Holocaust somehow in comics and I just hadn't seen that anywhere. I've now, as I've grown up and started to look at other old comics, there are many that dealt with it really stupidly. Because I always thought that the horror comics like *Tales from the Crypt* and the *Vault of Horror* they were an American Jewish response to the Holocaust. They're about the dead coming back to life, about horror coming into your daily life uh, and but for the most part they're just [unclear] old stories. And one or two of them deal with every once in a while there's one that deals with uh the concentration camps, with the news that filtered out, but they're nothing as impactful as this story that appeared in *Impact* comic books. And it was important in me learning that there's a lot more to comics than I understood at the age of 13 or 14 when I saw when I found it.

- 1:18:00 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Wow. Actually, kind of building on your response, Stephanie asks who's, like do you have some favorite graphic novelists? And um, whether or not there's anybody writing today that you would, you recommend uh our viewers pay attention to.
- 1:18:18 Art Spiegelman: Comics artists? Now I can't keep up anymore. When I was uh, first formulating the kind of work I would do I was even reading um superhero comics which are among my least favorite genre in general uh because there wasn't much else happening. Now, even in any area you pick autobiography, superheroes, science fiction, manga-style, there's a flood of things that's really hard to keep up with at all these, so one chooses a narrow funnel. The artists who are working now and were working back when I did *Raw* magazine that was mentioned, that I did with Françoise [Mouly] uh, that was a magazine looking around the world to find people who are making comics who weren't like anything else. So the only criterion was to find people who are seriously engaging with the form and seeing what they made - from France, from Italy. And those artists, including the American ones, are the ones I still keep an eye out for. Many of them are still very active in doing some of their best work now, and that includes among my strongest influences I'd have to include Robert Crum and before that Harvey Kurtzman of *Mad*. Then after that it all burst open and some of the other underground comics artists who found their way into *Raw* like Bill Griffith who did *Zippy the Pinhead* but also a lot more experimental strips is interesting to me. In Italy, there's Lorenzo Mattotti, for example, if you know his work uh Cristina. There's uh an artist from Japan named [unclear] who invented a whole new kind of manga. It has a different word that I can't remember but they're serious manga, dealing with personal crises.
- 1:19:55 Art Spiegelman: In the world around me, Chris Ware's first work pretty much appeared in *Raw* magazine and he's I think the most sophisticated comics artist working now. He did a book called uh *Jimmy Corrigan: the World's Smartest Boy* [Jimmy Corrigan — the Smartest Kid] uh another thing called *Building Stories* that's, talk about uh stories as narrative and stories as a building. It's a kind of [unclear] like structure that holds stories in it, in a box that you can read in any order. He also did *Rusty Brown* as the first part of a longer work that he's on. Linda Barry is a cartoonist who still can make me laugh. It's hard to find that. But there's so many. Charles Burns. In the world right now I kind of was interested in an artist named Tim Hensley who I didn't know about but has been working for the last 20 years. But I can't even tell you why without going into a few paragraphs. So I, I've liked um Emil Ferris's work, if you know that, like *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*. It's too long a list and I don't know all of the lists in order to choose the ones that people would know.
- 1:21:08 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Yeah I think, I think you've given us a year's worth of reading just with that -

- 1:21:12 Art Spiegelman: Joe Sacco. Joe Sacco is great. Journalists turned comics artists who did a book called *Palestine*, did other things about uh, uh Croatia, about uh, the stealing of uh, land and rights from the indigenous people of Canada called - well if you look up Joe Sacco, it's his most recent book. It's worth finding. I can't remember the title right now. It's amazing.
- 1:21:36 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Thank you and, you know, we only have time for for one last question. So maybe I'll stay on the comics theme. We've gotten a couple questions asking about your views on the role of artificial intelligence in comics, and AI comic generators. Is this something you thought of at all?
- 1:21:53 Art Spiegelman: Well I've only been on it on um, one of those DALL-E for a couple of hours when it was still restricted and I was disappointed in what I saw. Then I hear that exponentially this gets more sophisticated every 24 hours. So I'd be interested in playing with it. But I understand the artists who are upset at being uh included as if they were a button in a drawing program, saying draw me a picture of um a mother and child, but do it in the style of Robert Crum. Robert Crum has copyright to those works. So there's issues there that have to be probably dealt with. But I believe ultimately anything that can be turned into a product is vulnerable to this new uh technological revolution. And it will upend many many things, you know. That uh same way the machine age upended lots of careers, as uh uh making horseshoes for horses. Those blacksmiths were made obsolete. But I think anything that can be turned into a product is something that can be handled by regurgitating existing products. So I think, for instance, this will make some people unhappy in the audience perhaps, but those Marvel movies are just ripe for AI. They're all built on a very simple set of algorithms. They're all like each other if you take two steps back.
- 1:23:15 Art Spiegelman: So a computer can digest those and make a script that's as good as anything that's being done by the human mind now. Maybe better because somebody could, sophisticated could add well let's put, make it a script like the last three Spider-Man movies, plus a little bit of the um um DC Universe, and then sprinkle in a little bit of Samuel Beckett. But keep the overall feel. So at that point, we can get there almost today based on what I've seen. And in a few years, or months, we'll be able to have Marilyn Monroe as the cat girl and Humphrey Bogart as uh um Superman or Batman or whatever. And um, we can cast it because that kind of simulated animation is also something that a machine can do quite well and is getting better at. And ultimately, you won't have to send people to see the resulting movies. You can just send your AI robots to watch them. What can't be, what can't be kept pristine and use, what is kept pristine and used are things that just are art, things that are um, are something new in the world. When somebody's doing what art has to do - which is, I have my own private definition, which is art is anything which gives shape to one's thoughts and feelings. So until AI has thoughts and feelings, it can't really make art - based on what I understand it to be

- 1:24:38 Dr. Erik Mitchell: Oh, well uh thank you so much Art, and thank you Dean Dela Coletta for being with us tonight. I really have enjoyed our conversation and really appreciate everything you've done. And so with that, again, thank you to Art and Cristina. And thank you to all, all of you for joining us tonight. Have a good evening.
- 1:25:00 [A Conversation with Artist/Illustrator and Author Art Spiegelman / with / Erik T. Mitchell / The Audrey Geisel University Librarian, UC San Diego / and / Cristina Della Coletta / School Arts and Humanities Dean, UC San Diego / March 29, 2023]
- 1:25:05 [Presented by / UC San Diego Library Author Talk Series / and / Holocaust Living History Workshop / With Generous Support From / Phyllis and Dan Epstein]
- 1:25:08 [Read Write Think Dream / The Library UC San Diego Channel / www.uctv.tv/library-channel]
- 1:25:12 [uctv / University of California Television / www.uctv.tv / The views, contents, and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the University of California / ©2023 Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.]