

KuBus 63 - German Language Comic Book Art

00'00 BA

00'08 Original sound, Eckart Sackmann, comic book expert

"Germany is still a developing country as far as it's own comic book output is concerned."

00'22 Original sound, Reinhard Kleist, comic book illustrator

"Germany was always a tough terrain for sophisticated comics."

00'25

Trade bad comic books for good books' was the cry of the campaign against 'speech balloon literature'. Is that now all in the past?

00'32 Original sound, Dirk Rehm, Reprodukt publishers

"The medium was and is looked down on in Germany."

00'39

Despite the obstacles, the German language comics scene is small but very active, like the Gallic village that refuses to be conquered. Every two years international enthusiasts meet up in Erlangen at the 'Comicsalon'.

00'57

For 20 years the Erlangen Comicsalon has provided a forum for German language comics as well. 25,000 Visitors get a first hand peak at new developments in comic book art.

01'08 Original sound, Georg Tempel, Ehapa publishers

"The comics scene is very small. There are two major publishers, Carlsen and Ehapa. Then there are a couple of medium-sized and a couple of small ones."

01'16

...and they're mostly struggling to survive, because the market for German language comics is small.

01'22 Original sound, Eckart Sackmann, comic book expert

"Up to over 90% of our comics are imported."

01'27

Superman, Asterix, Mickey Mouse, Spiderman.

01'32 Original sound, Georg Tempel, Ehapa publishers

"Sales figures are certainly in the millions. A new edition of Asterix sells over 200,000 copies."

01'39

Sales figures that publishers of original German language comics can only dream of. So the major publishers stick to the proven imports.

01'49 Original sound, Georg Tempel, Ehapa publishers

"German comics make up only a small share of the bigger publishers' total program, perhaps 5%. The percentage is higher with little, independent publishers, but the number of copies sold is negligible."

02'00

Why's it so tough for German language comic books ?

02'04 Original sound, Eckart Sackmann, comic book expert

"The reason is certainly that, after the war, it was easier for the publishing houses to import than to produce new products themselves. Of course, there was a wealth of high quality material on the foreign market to fall back, so that a process that should have took place, just didn't. In the early 'eighties for example, there was a big comics boom in Germany but publishers like Carlsen didn't seize the moment and use it to produce something unique, rather, they continued to rely on a steady inflow of foreign products."

02'33

But not everyone is relying on this. We're now stepping into the world of German language comic books where we'll meet four of its leading artists.

03'00 Original sound, Uli Oesterle, comic book artist

"The title is: "Munich Underground" or: "semi-automatic insanity."

03'07

Munich illustrator Uli Oesterle, signs copies of his dark, cult comic book at the Erlangen trade fair. The hero is Hector Umbra.

03'17 Original sound, Uli Oesterle, comic book artist

"My comic book is really about friendship. It's an urban 'strip', set in the big city. The storyline follows Hector Umbra who is looking for one of his friends who's disappeared."

03'37 Original sound, Uli Oesterle, comic book artist

"Hector Umbra is able to see other people's hallucinations."

03'48 Original sound, Uli Oesterle, comic book artist

"He's actually a combination of detective and psychiatrist - he's also really a party person and a barfly."

04'00 Original sound, Uli Oesterle, comic book artist

"Hector Umbra is a little bit me - or maybe also how I'd like to be - but there is a lot of me in him. At the end of the day it's a vary autobiographical comic book and a lot of the characters in it are based on my friends. I won't name any names here, because they might not like that."

04'23 Original sound, Uli Oesterle, comic book artist

"It makes a big difference, I think, when the characters are at least partially based on reality - that way they're more authentic."

My comic strips are about people living on the margins, who've been dealt a heavy blow by fate. It might be that this has sent them off rails, maybe, or they're depressive or at the very least cynical or sarcastic."

04'52 Original sound, Uli Oesterle, comic book artist

"It's all not without humor, naturally – black humor - which is very important to me."

05'21

Berlin, the Prenzlauer Berg district. Here we meet Mawil. A successful young illustrator who submitted a comic book as the final exam project for his graphic design diploma. Titled "But We Can Still be Friends", it's about the lives and loves of young people in the city, based on the author's personal experience and observation.

With a light hand, Mawil mixes humor with melancholy.

05'46 Original sound, Mawil, comic book artist

"I was also very surprised by the success of the last book. People seemed to recognize themselves in the stories. I guess it's somehow also more appealing or more believable, when people know that these are true stories that really happened."

06'08 Original sound, Mawil, comic book artist

"My comics are all autobiographical. I think they're just more exciting that way."

06'21 Original sound, Mawil, comic book artist

"The things I've experienced, or the people I know, I just have a different connection to those things than if I were to think up some sort of superheros."

06'32 Original sound, Mawil, comic book artist

"I also used to draw fictional comics, with a hare and animals and all that, but they were still somehow realistic. The hares could speak, that was unrealistic. But they behaved, you know, like people."

06'48 Original sound, Mawil, comic book artist

"Nothing's harder to draw than a picture that looks like you just sort of spat it out."

06'54 Original sound, Mawil, comic book artist

"You can live from drawing comics, if you do it right. You've gotta be either nice and slick and mainstream, or you can also make a lot of money with good stuff. You just really have to be good, and you also have to know how to sell it."

07'24

A few streets away, we meet up with Ulli Lust in her studio. She and Mawil both belong to the artist's collective Monogatari. Six artists in all, they make comics based on precise observation of daily life in their environment.

07'38 Original sound, Ulli Lust, comic book artist

"We have this project together, comics reporting. It started back in school sometime. There are some in the group who are more interested in it, and others who just sort of get it over with, but it really holds us together."

07'57 Original sound, Ulli Lust, comic book artist

"We go to a location in the city and draw what we observe."

08'13 Original sound, Ulli Lust, comic book artist

"What we'd really like, through the Goethe Institute or something, is to go to China, Beijing, Brazil, whatever, and draw our impressions there in the form of comics, print comic books."

08'53 Original sound, Ulli Lust, comic book artist

"Berlin is reflected in my drawings, of course, because I always observe where I live at the time. I have a lot of curiosity and I'm really interested in the goings-on of daily life. Berlin is a rich source of material, and a rewarding motif."

09'16 Original sound, Ulli Lust, comic book artist

"Berlin is a very raw and grundgy city, and I like that a lot."

09'43

The artist Reinhard Kleist's comic strip is called 'Scherbenmund' - a mouth of broken glass. With a background in painting, his work is notable for its detail, complex coloration and somber lines. Here as well, Berlin is a central motif.

09'58 Original sound, Reinhard Kleist, comic book artist

"It's only logical that the city where you live and work plays a major role."

10'19 Original sound, Reinhard Kleist, comic book artist

"'Scherbenmund' is a trilogy that I've started together with the author Tobias Meissner.

We've invented a sort of Berlin, that isn't a real Berlin. It's also not clear what time period it's set in."

10'35 Original sound, Reinhard Kleist, comic book artist

"... This Berlin is governed by Vampires."

10'50 Original sound, Reinhard Kleist, comic book artist

"There's a rebel group fighting against the government."

10'59 Original sound, Reinhard Kleist, comic book artist

"The whole thing is a point of departure that we use to caricature political mechanisms.

The comparison with a totalitarian regime - which has so often existed in Berlin - is very obvious."

11'20 Original sound, Reinhard Kleist, comic book artist

"Most to the point are the bits about fascism, the communist government, and then now, most to the point is, of course, now."

11'42 Original sound; Reinhard Kleist; comic book artist

"So our story is very current and, although inspired by the history of the city, is directly related to our situation now."

12'00

We ask again: How does the future look for German comics,?

12'06 Original sound, Ulli Lust, comic book artist

"You can't draw comics in Germany if you hope to be published in Germany."

12'11

So nothing's changed then?

12'14 Original sound, Georg Tempel, Ehapa publishers

"Here at the 'Salon' you always hear: German comics are in a crisis - there was even a panel discussion: the end is nigh.

I think, a new beginning is nigh, because the publishers have changed their approach. They've begun to realize more projects in connection with other media - be it film, television, or music or even literature - in order to create a synergy in these areas."

12'40

The major publishing houses are full of optimism for the German comics market. Still, there's hardly a single comic book artist who can live from the work.

12'51

This is how a smaller publisher sees the development:

12'55 Original sound, Dirk Rehm, Reprodukt publishers

"Comic books are only a step away from finding a wider audience. The question is: how do we get these books into the shops? They have to be the right book shops, too, ones that really want to sell them

Crew list."

www.goethe.de/kubus