

## ART

# Leaping Dialectics In a Single Bound

By LINDA YABLONSKY

**T**HE movie ended and the theater emptied, but one man remained in his seat, watching the credits roll. And roll. And roll. The number of visual-effects specialists needed to bring the film, "X2," to the screen — roughly 200 — might have provoked a fit of envy in Luca Buvoli, the Italian-born New York artist taking it all in. But Mr. Buvoli quickly shrugged it off.

"My relationship to the superhero narrative is more through the comic books than the films," he said of "X2," the sequel to "X-Men," based on the Marvel comic book, which he read in the 1970's. Mr. Buvoli, 40, makes comic books of his own, drawing and binding each issue by hand before printing it in a very limited edition.

He also makes films, animated shorts in 16-millimeter black-and-white. Their quavering projections perfectly suit his protagonist, a masked blur of a caped crusader whose most distinguishing feature is paralyzing self-doubt. Mr. Buvoli calls him, simply, Not-a-Superhero.

Spider-Man and Daredevil, Mr. Buvoli's childhood favorites, transcended their mortal torments by acquiring impressive musculature, body-hugging costumes and superior perceptual gifts. Not-a-Superhero is desperately skinny and dresses in rags. As a "nothingness caught between being and becoming," he struggles to retain his identity within the surrounding maw of white space but sometimes disappears into his own words.

He can fly, however. That is why Not-a-Superhero believes that he was once an actual superbeing. In a ceaseless battle for the power to unify body and mind, he contends with such existential obstacles as Dr. Logos, a kind of deconstructed crossword puzzle who falsely promises supreme knowledge through language, the elusive Pattern Man, who disguises himself as wallpaper, and the terrifying Lord of Guilt.

"Growing up, I identified with the superheroes' desire for perfection," said Mr. Buvoli. "I had an intense longing to fly." That may have been partly genetic. The son of an Italian Air Force pilot attached to NATO, Mr. Buvoli spent his early years in Washington, where he discovered Batman and Superman on television. Back in Italy, he received his formal training in Venice, at the venerable Academy of Fine Arts, and returned to the United States on a Fulbright scholarship in 1988. (He has since become a permanent resident and settled in Manhattan.)

"It is difficult for me to separate the influence of the comic-book artists from that of Tintoretto and Leo-

nardo," Mr. Buvoli said, "or the bombastic tone of Marvel Comics' Stan Lee from Hegel's or Lacan's philosophical investigations." In conversation, Mr. Buvoli often quotes philosophers — his real-life heroes — even while browsing the shelves at Forbidden Planet, a Greenwich Village emporium dedicated to all things superheroic. He was looking for a Spider-Man anthology drawn by Todd McFarlane, whom Mr. Buvoli referred to as a "great Mannerist."

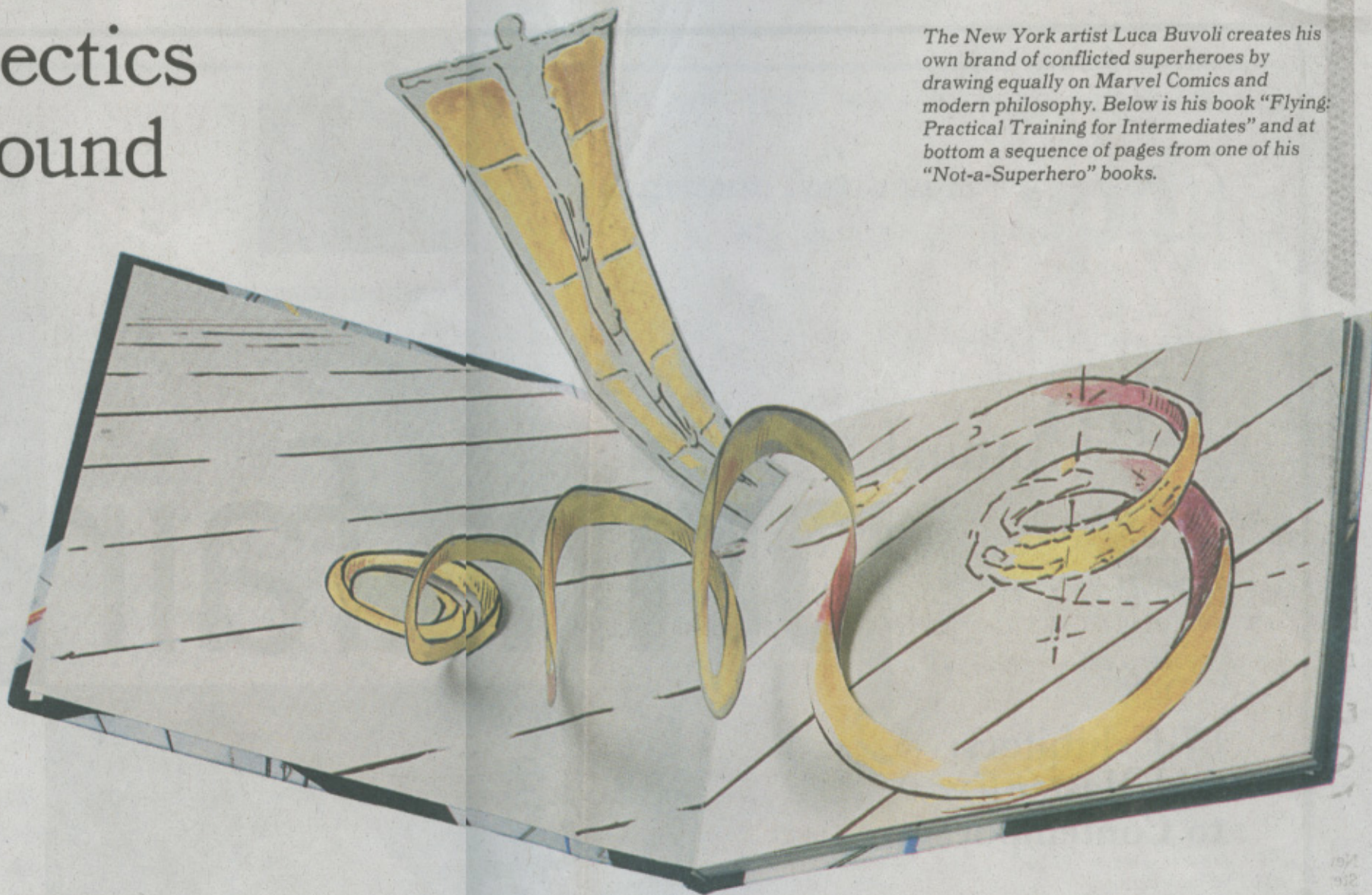
The store was crowded, but none of the patrons appeared to be under 25. Mr. Buvoli was not surprised. "In Italy," he said, "there was a cultural stigma attached to reading comics past a certain age, but here I met many people who never stopped." Coupled with the growing presence of the cartoon aesthetic in contemporary art, that was

enough to encourage his superhero explorations in sculpture and books. Otherwise, he said, Not-a-Superhero would have remained locked in his imagination.

For each of the 13 "Not-a-Superhero" books he has made since 1992, Mr. Buvoli has designed museum or gallery exhibitions that include his drawings, films, books and fragile, barely perceptible "action figures" made of bent wire, colored foil and bits of fabric.

Examples of these vestigial constructions are currently on view in a mini-retrospective of Mr. Buvoli's work at the Glassell School of Art, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Another show, "Adapting One's Senses to High-Altitude Flying," will feature a new film and related sculptures that include jutting, lightning-bolt vectors of pigmented resin as well as a massive kite that spells the word

The New York artist Luca Buvoli creates his own brand of conflicted superheroes by drawing equally on Marvel Comics and modern philosophy. Below is his book "Flying: Practical Training for Intermediates" and at bottom a sequence of pages from one of his "Not-a-Superhero" books.



"Flying" in sailcloth letters. It opens next Sunday at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, N.C., in conjunction with a statewide centennial celebration of the Wright Brothers' flight at Kitty Hawk. (One of Mr. Buvoli's books, "Flying: Practical Training for Beginners," presents his 33-step method for getting a human body into the air — without a plane — and is available from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.)

If aerodynamics preoccupy him now, Mr. Buvoli is not yet ready to leave the realm of comic books, at least not until his fragmented antihero pulls himself together. "Even if he never becomes a whole superhero," Mr. Buvoli said, "he's a positive figure who always survives his problems. Like him, we should look into what we can do without super powers." □

