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New Readings: The Comic as Artists' Book

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Artists' books consider every aspect of the book in the creation of meaning. How might reading the comic book through this context extend the possibilities of the art form? Can considering the whole book change the way creators and readers approach the comic? This article considers the space between book arts and comics, asking how they might fit together and considering the possible benefits of this expanded reading for the comic book as a form.

The past two years have seen a paradigm shift in the relationship between comic studies and book arts, in which a new reading has emerged: the comic as artists' book. This has been largely encouraged by isolated events and individual books, but has also found space in major exhibitions. This summer the British Library hosted *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK*, drawing together medieval manuscripts, Punch and Judy, and iconic names such as Alan Moore and Grant Morrison. In 2013, the New York Center for Book Arts put on *From Bande Dessinée to Artist's Book: Testing the Limits of Franco-Belgian Comics*, presenting key moments in the evolution of European (and particularly Franco-Belgian) comics, from the initial standardization of a dominant format (48 colour pages measuring approximately 11.5 x 8 inches, with a hard cover), to contemporary explorations into the book as three-dimensional object. Exhibitions of this nature bring new perspectives to the work on display, placing it in a strikingly different environment and asking audiences to reconsider their understanding of comics as an art.

New ideas and interpretations of this sort are vital to the development of any medium, and have paved the way to considering the comic as artists' book. We can look to three major artists' book collections in London to consider the possibilities now in play. The collections at the V&A National Art Library, the Tate Library and Archive, and at Chelsea College of Arts, are full of concrete poetry, conceptual art, photo books and much more. Of the 4,000 plus artists' books in Chelsea library there are only a handful of comic books. That there are so few is not surprising: the comic book is under-represented pretty much everywhere, in art and literature, in galleries and bookshops. However, that any can be found is an illustration that a fertile space exists between comic book and artists book, and we can now look further to consider the huge number of comics not included, those sold in comic book shops or displayed at conventions. Could they be considered book art, and if so how might this re-contextualization benefit the comic book?

What makes a book an artists' book?

To answer this, one must first understand what is meant by artists' book. Perhaps the most obvious definition is this: the artists' book is a work wholly or primarily conceived of by the artist and produced as an original work of art. Rather than say, a book containing reproductions of pre-existing pieces. This however raises questions:

What is an "original" work of art?
Does the term original exclude reproduction?
Does it have to be a unique work or can it be an edition?
What do we mean by "conceived of by the artist"?
Who is the maker?
Do artist and maker have to be the same person?
What production means can be taken into account?

Exploring these questions is important in establishing how well the comic book fits within

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Fig. 1. Chelsea College of Arts Artists' Book Collection courtesy of Gustavo Grandal Montero, Librarian.

the context of the artists' book, and in doing so starting to examine how this reading changes our understanding of the comic.

Considering comic books as artists' books

Arguably the most important consideration is that the work must be conceived of or controlled by the artist, something that can be challenging within the comic book industry. The constraints of mainstream publishers, pre-determined story lines or characters created by others prevent many comic books from fulfilling this criterion. However, there remain many works within both mainstream and independent publishing led by the artists. Successful titles from Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* to Mike Carey's and Peter Gross' *The Unwritten* (both published by DC imprint Vertigo) are conceived of and developed by the artists but created in compromise with mainstream publishing requirements. Comic book publishing is far more than Marvel and DC: independent comic creators have been part of the industry for decades. Small labels such as Image or No Brow and individual, self-publishing artists have long carried the baton of alternative perspectives on the comic. The Kickstarter website is a prime example of the prominent place self-publishing has in comics. Comics have their own subheading on the home page and there are currently 4,403 (08/08/2014) comic book projects bidding for crowd funding. If one of the key criteria for defining an artists' book is that the artists conceived of the work then these independently published comics could certainly be considered book art.

Consider next the question of an "original" work of art, another major element in defining the artists' book. How we understand the term "original" must be adapted in the context of books as reproduction has long been an essential part of publishing of any sort including both artists' books and comic books. The art within the pages of a comic is reproduced for publication from "original" paintings or drawings. However the book was always the intended final form, and thus the comic book fulfils the criteria of an original work of art. Many works considered seminal artists' books, for example

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Ed Ruschas' *26 Gasoline Stations*, require the same level of reproduction as the comic, using the same technology, for the same reasons. Reproduction is most often used when an artist wishes to create work in an edition or multiple, something that is one of the defining and appealing qualities of the book in any area. The chance to distribute your work widely, and at affordable prices, is as much part of the intention of artists working within book arts, as it is those working with comic books. These examples demonstrate some of the similarities between artists' books and comic books, highlighting the comic's capacity to sit comfortably within the context of artists' books.

Applying this re-contextualization to the study of comics also benefits us in narrative studies. In *Understanding Comics - The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud writes that comics are 'Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence.'[1] In highlighting not only the visuals at work, but also juxtaposition and sequence, McCloud draws attention to the importance of structure in creating, understanding and defining the comic book. Reading a comic book is a process of active and willing collaboration between artist and reader that relies heavily upon form and structure of the book. Analysing not only page design or visual sequence, but also the object in its entirety, develops our reading of the comic book.

As primarily a narrative medium, storytelling is more often than not the major intention of those artists working with the comic. Sequential imagery is almost unavoidably narrative, yet to make sequence clearly readable every element of the book's form and structure must work in service to the story. Comic book literacy has developed from this use of deliberate structure and formalized sequence, continuing to evolve. Creators once relied upon directional tools such as numbers or arrows to ensure the correct reading order was followed, but this is no longer required. The reader has come to understand how to decode the comic book's sequential structure with fewer guideposts, imputing their own imagination and so completing the construction of narrative. This understanding allows creators to explore and deliver ever more expressive and experimental layouts. These developments in structural language remain highly dependent upon the book's form, and by applying the questions asked of artists' books we greatly extend both the creator's and readers' engagement with the comic.

Book artists make conscious choices in designing the physical aspects of the book, understanding the role they can play in the development of meaning, from size to paper type and binding style. Many of these choices are taken away from comic book artists as they have become predetermined or standardized. Yet readers have come to recognise these standardizations, to read some element of comic within the scale of the book or feel of the paper. The importance of this comic-ness cannot be underestimated and should be taken into consideration when creating or analysing the comic. However, the importance of these standardizations does not prevent artists from experimenting. Rather, they provide a structure from which the comic book artist can expand, build upon and break free. Whether it is by rotating the pages, including fold-outs, changing size, type of paper or playing with colour, artists can affect a reader's construction of narrative, changing their interpretation of what a comic book can be, and their engagement with the book itself.

Two case studies

The power of the comic's structure and its role as a narrative medium play an important role in my work as an artist: the symbols, speech bubbles, visualized sound effects and most importantly the panels. Or, perhaps more accurately, the space between the panels, often referred to by comic scholars as the gutter. The comic book is a language of boundaries and pauses into which the reader may project, and through which narrative is constructed. These pauses and boundaries guide our reading order, create pace and imply time and space. Extending beyond the panel and gutter these boundaries and pauses rely on the object of book. The page is at once a boundary and a container. It holds the narrative depicted within the panels and the projections of the reader but it also hides things from us, allowing the narrative to shift and unfold with the physical act of turning a page. My own work *In the Gutter* takes apart these elements of the comic while retaining some of the expected standardizations such as the books size. By cutting away the panels the reader is left with only the boundaries of gutter and page. Looking through the holes of the panels we see everything the page would usually hide, each individual page becoming part of the next. *In the Gutter* removes the expected visual, leaving only the sequence of empty panels, yet the pages below interrupt even this. This work is an echo or skeleton of the comic where meaning is read only through our expectations of the comic book.

One of the most recent and arguably the most successful examples of formal and physical experimentation is Chris Ware's *Building Stories*.[2]

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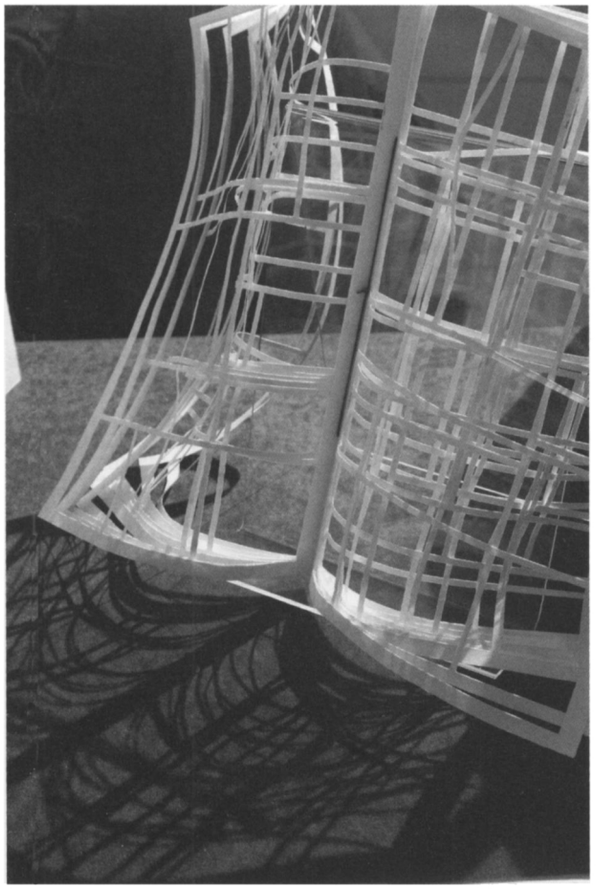


Fig. 2 *In the Gutter* by Rosie Sherwood As Yet Untitled Publishing, limited first edition of 5 ©2013.

Since its release, *Building Stories* has been sold in comic shops, bookshops and galleries alike, obtained by the artists' book collection at Chelsea Library and exhibited at the V&A. Ware's work has long had an affinity with artists' books, and with *Building Stories* his use and consideration of the book's form and structure is highly developed and expertly employed. Ware tells his story in a style that experiments with the expectations of both book and narrative. Comprised of 14 different books, from hardback to concertina, newspapers to pamphlets, *Building Stories* pushes the boundaries with comic book page design and the book's form.

Presented without a specified reading order, the unfolding narrative depends upon the choices the reader makes when approaching the work. Individual readers will gravitate towards different styles of book, and in doing so construct the narrative in a different order. This form-driven reading makes the experience of *Building Stories* an unusual one. Each style of book changes the way we construct that chapter of the story while the layout and page design plays upon the comic books usual structure. Ware's conscious understanding and exploitation of his media utilizes every possible aspect of both book and comic to create a compelling narrative. In doing so, he has pushed comic books and comic book readers to the limit.

Conclusion

I recently produced a seminar for undergraduates at the University of East Anglia discussing the importance of reading the whole book when studying comics. I began by asking a question I consider the final link in the role book arts might play in understanding the comic: *What is Book?* Not "a book" or "the book" but simply *Book*, an exotic entity or creature. The answers came slowly, this group more accustomed to studying literature: an object, a collection of pages, a container.

From this we moved on to a new question: *What is Comic Book?* The answers came more easily and centred on aspects of content and design: glossy pages, panels, images, sequence.

In asking *"What is Book?"* and *"What is Comic Book?"* I hoped to demonstrate that above all things both are designed objects whose physical forms and contents are part of the same reading process, and that a comic's reading centres on structure and design, remaining dependent on the object. By placing the comic book within the context of artists' book new ideas come into existence, becoming part of the ever-evolving comic book literacy. Blurring the line between comic books and artists' books, encouraging a space for cross-pollination, can then only benefit the comic book, its creators and readers.

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