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Ways of Seeing Comics: Art-Historical Approaches to the Form

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Abstract:

This chapter introduces Art History's distance from the development of comics scholarship as an interdisciplinary field and the impact this has had for Comics Studies, particularly in terms of the respective dominance of methods drawn from Literary Studies, Linguistics, narratology and semiology. It notes the 'hidden history' of art historians' contributions to the foundations of comics scholarship, and what the range of art-historical methodologies offers Comics Studies in terms of addressing overlooked aspects of visual style and form, aesthetics, perception, materiality, visuality and the image. As well as considering what Art History offers Comics Studies, including the questioning of some of its deep-rooted categories, concepts and procedures, it also appraises what comics and Comics Studies affords and asks of Art History. It outlines the structure and contents of the edited collection, and its focus, limitations and purpose.

Keywords: art-historical methodologies, Comics Studies and Art History, history of Comics Studies, interdisciplinarity, practice as research

This book draws together the work of a range of scholars applying art-historical methodologies to the study of comics. In one way or another as well as being researchers they are also practitioners - educators, artists, designers, curators, producers, librarians, editors, writers, and combinations of these. Some undertake practice-based research, and these pages carry much evidence of the value of comics making as a mode of research itself. Among them are many trained art historians, but several come from, have migrated into, or straddle other disciplines, such as Comparative Literature, American Literature, Cultural Studies, Visual Studies, and a range of subjects within Art & Design practice. Of the methodologies they employ, many have not previously been used in Comics Studies.

It is notable, given the interdisciplinarity of comics scholarship, that Art History has largely been aloof from its development. While it emerged from Cultural Studies, Popular Culture Studies, Education and Communications theory, in close dialogue with extramural practitioner and fan scholarship, and became more securely entrenched in academia in the 1990s via Literature departments, today the field includes voices from Law and Criminology, Medicine, Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, History, Geography, the Digital Humanities, and many more disciplines.¹ The relative absence of art-historical work on comics is similarly remarkable given the expansion of Art History's object of study to incorporate a broader range of media and material, firstly in response to the rise of Cultural Studies and Film Studies, and particularly in view of the challenge from - and under the auspices of - *Bildwissenschaft*, Visual Studies or Visual Culture Studies since the late nineties.

As Comics Studies sits on the threshold of securing institutionalisation as a discipline in itself, with a growing number of dedicated departments, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, alongside well-established journals, book series and annual conferences, it arguably needs Art History. Frameworks of analysis and theories of comics' form remain dominated by approaches drawn from Literary Studies, Linguistics, narratology and semiotics, with which the academic study of comics gained greater legitimacy. These methods became ensconced alongside the rise and celebration of the graphic novel, yet at the same moment a "turn to the visual" was observed among comics creators, many of them art school trained (Beaty 2007, p. 7; Groensteen 2007, p. 163). While there are oversimplifications and misconstructions aplenty in debates about words and

pictures, comics as a literary form and comics as visual art, comics scholarship has struggled to deal with aspects of image-making, graphic techniques, design and materiality, and the aesthetics, perception and interpretation of the visual.²

Chapters in this book demonstrate how art-historical approaches and methods can inform and develop understanding of neglected areas such as the effects of drawing style, colour, and material processes. They also demonstrate how Art History can enhance knowledge of how comics are read as images, how we interact with and experience them as images, how they perform, move and disrupt as images, and what images are and do. Applying art-historical methodologies also casts light on, and helps question, categories, concepts and procedures often taken for granted in Comics Studies - demanding critical reflection on models of authorship and intentionality, attribution and a growing emphasis on the authenticating mark, the exclusionary operations of the comics canon and archive, the essentialising of grid, gutter and page, and the social positioning of the researcher. The range of methodologies engaged in this volume further indicates the diversity of approaches within Art History, belying characterisations of it in Comics Studies that focus on its more conservative, traditional, or formalist strands. Drawing Art History into comics scholarship involves acknowledging the *intra*-disciplinary divergences, points of contention, and (often strident) debates over conceptual and methodological frameworks that can get flattened out in models of interdisciplinarity.

The dissociation of Comics Studies and Art History has by no means been absolute. Research, writing, cataloguing and curation by art historians contributed to the formation of comics scholarship and provided several of its foundational texts in the 1960s and 1970s. Art historian Pierre Couperie played a key role in the organisation of the 'Bande dessinée et Narration Figurative' exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris in 1967, and its catalogue which included some of the earliest attempts to identify a comics canon, the medium's stylistic development and formal elements. Gérard Blanchard's 1969 history of bande dessinée also sought to identify a comics canon and legitimise the form through examining its origins in earlier art practices by employing an iconographic approach. Writing by Ernst Gombrich on caricature and cartooning, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, influenced his PhD supervisee David Kunzle, whose *History of the Comic Strip*, published in two volumes in 1973 and 1990, remains a major work for comics scholars. While marginalised in the field, Art History has since shaped ongoing debates about comics' origins, formal structures, and relations to print cultures and movements in fine art. In the twenty-first century, art historians have become more prominent in Comics Studies, contributing for instance to the theorisation of abstract comics, and debates about the relationship between comics and visual art have drawn on art histories of the avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism.

We examine this 'hidden history' of art-historical comics scholarship in the companion volume *Art History for Comics: Past, Present and Potential Futures*, in relation to the shifts that took place within Art History over this period, as traditional approaches of stylistic analysis and iconology were challenged by cultural history and the social history of art. That book also moves on to explore how the approaches and frameworks underpinning these seminal works might be applied in contemporary Comics Studies in light of the developments and debates around them that have taken place within Art History in the intervening years.

Both volumes are intended to prompt and provoke consideration of what seeing comics through Art History and its varied methodologies can offer the study of the medium, particularly in addressing some of the oversights of Comics Studies when it comes to questions of visibility, materiality and aesthetics. At the same time, they aim to examine what Comics Studies offers art

historians. Chapters in this book explore overlooked intersections of the histories of art and comics, from the dialogue between women's underground comix and feminist fine art to the relationship between the schemata evident in Western narrative painting, caricature, cartooning and comics stretching back to Giotto's fresco cycles. They also open up resonant questions about the relationship between words and images in art-historical texts, connections between academic and popular writing about art, and the interactions of Art History and the museum in canonical feedback loops and systems of knowledge production. Furthermore, they intervene in urgent critical debates within Art History about decolonising the discipline, queering the archive, and how Art History can be a form of activism, particularly through curatorial practice and collaboration. They offer art historians models of how comics theory can be applied to the study of series, sequences and space, as well as ways to approach serialisation and media memories, humour, the narrative effects of depiction, the tactile experience of images and the benefits of thinking *with* and *through* rather than *at* them.

To support the further application of art-historical approaches to the study of comics, each chapter has a similar structure. They introduce and contextualise the methodology or methodologies at hand, providing references to, and critically evaluating, key theorists and texts. They then examine how these approaches have been applied to comics in recent research projects and / or use them to analyse a specific comics corpus, and finally reflect on the benefits and challenges of these approaches for Comics Studies more broadly.

The comics under consideration cover a range of genres, formats, historical periods and cultural traditions. They include work from nineteenth century American newspapers and British comics magazines, 1940s educational comic books and 1960s and 1970s Marvel titles, 1970s bande-dessinée adventure series and underground comix, 1990s alternative comics, and twenty-first century graphic novels, superhero comics and sport manga. They also include feminist comics and cartoons in journals, anthologies, albums and on social media, comics biographies and autobiographies, literary adaptations, and comics derived from and used in arts education. They examine work that pushes the boundaries of comics, most prominently in the form of augmented abstract comics and animation installation, as well as work in other media, notably photography, but also illustration, painting, sculpture, ceramics, film. This speaks to the way seeing comics through Art History opens up opportunities to examine coextensive, interacting fields and forms of visual art and image-making.

Chapters are grouped together in sections that roughly align with the development of Western Art History. We start with 'Old Skool Art History' and some of the discipline's earliest approaches. Tobias Yu-Kiener examines art-historical traditions of life writing stretching back to Pliny the Elder, and particularly inaugurated during the Renaissance by Giorgio Vasari and Carel van Mander, in relation to the artist's biography genre in comics, tracing the influence of, and challenges to, the art-historical canon, biographical anecdote, and life-and-work model. Michael Connerty focuses on methodologies of art connoisseurship, and particularly the approach of Giovanni Morelli in the nineteenth century, as a means of identifying and cataloguing an artist's work - in this case the strips Irish painter and cartoonist Jack B. Yeats produced for British comics magazines in a context in which comics were rarely signed. While these approaches have fallen out of favour in Art History, the final chapter in this section turns to a figure whose work has received renewed interest, Aby Warburg. Maaheen Ahmed adopts Warburg's *Mnemosyne* picture atlas as a guide to reading comics as collages, and combines his mapping of cultural interchanges with ideas of how media remember each other to examine comics both fictional (Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese: Les Celtiques*) and non-fictional (Manu Larcenet's autobiographical *Le Combat Ordinaire*).

Warburg's work can be seen to mark a turning point in Art History whereby in the twentieth century it became more influenced by psychology, sociology and anthropology. The following section 'Perception, Reception and Meaning', explores methodologies developed by art historians increasingly preoccupied by questions of how images are perceived, experienced and interpreted. John Miers deploys work on psychologies of perception, including Gombrich's collaboration with psychoanalyst Ernst Kris on caricature, as well as the writings of psychologist Rudolf Arnheim and philosophers Richard Wollheim and Kendall Walton on visual perception, to attend to the effects of drawing style with reference to his own autobiographical comic, *So I Guess My Body Pretty Much Hates Me Now*. Nina Eckhoff-Heindl engages with the aesthetics of reception approach advanced in the 1970s and 1980s by Wolfgang Kemp, Max Imdahl and Gottfried Boehm to examine how viewers interact with artworks, to explore the reception of Chris Ware's *Rusty Brown, Autumn* by its "reading-viewers". Christine Mugnolo draws on the work of Hans Belting and Svetlana Alpers that challenged how art historians considered the relationship between images and audiences in terms of agency, embodiment and affect, to appraise how Richard Felton Outcault's Yellow Kid engaged his readers. Finally in this section Barbara Uhlig applies art-historical work by Ernst Strauss, Lorenz Dittman and John Gage to one of most overlooked aspects of comics - colour, in a hermeneutical analysis of Lorenzo Mattotti and Jerry Kramsky's *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*.

From the 1970s onwards Art History faced substantial upheaval in the wake of Marxist and feminist approaches that challenged many of its deep-rooted frameworks, categories and assumptions, and institutional and ideological agendas. This was followed by strands of queer and postcolonial Art History, strongly influenced by structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, resulting in a set of approaches that themselves became institutionalised under the umbrella term 'the New Art History'. The next section 'The New and Newer Art Histories' turns to some of these methodologies. Margareta Wallin Victorin and Anna Nordenstam analyse what lessons the feminist Art History of Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, and particularly Pollock's discussion of various strategic positions from which to address the canon, holds for a multidisciplinary, feminist Comics Studies. This is grounded in extensive research into Swedish feminist comics, from strips and cartoons in second-wave feminist journals to contemporary comics using embroidery and collage both reproduced in print and shared on Instagram. Małgorzata Olsza's chapter also takes cues from Nochlin, Pollock and Parker, alongside critic Lucy Lippard, to contest the historiography of underground comix, and processes of canon formation and models of authorship in Comics Studies. At the same time, her examination of continuities between American women's underground comix, and feminist art, art criticism and Art History, enables titles like *It Ain't Me Babe*, *Wimmen's Comix* and *Tits & Clits* to "break in" to a more expansive understanding of feminist art practice in the 1970s. Ylva Sommerland turns to queer Art History and cultural theory to queer the art-historical archive by opening it up to the non-normative cyborg bodies of Takehiko Inoue's sport manga *Real*, drawing on Arnheim's concept of visual weight and Roger Callois' theory of play to analyse how the performance of bodies resisting gravity is visually presented, and how players both lose and find themselves in transition in the game and the "free unreality" of comics.

Chapters in the final section of this volume, 'Comics For / Beyond Art History' are less concerned with what art-historical approaches offer and ask of Comics Studies, than what the methods, frameworks and theories of comics and comics scholarship propose for art historians. Danielle Becker examines Afrofuturism and animism as methods for the decolonisation of Art History as a discipline, particularly with regard to African art, through an analysis of the Marvel superhero Black Panther. Jeanette Roan revisits the history of Visual Culture Studies' relationship to Art

History, arguing it better accommodates comics as an object of study and, as an interdisciplinary, provides a productive methodological model for Comics Studies. At the same time, in drawing comics and Visual Studies together she argues that Lynda Barry's pedagogically-oriented comics *What It Is* and *Syllabus* constitute image theory themselves. In a tradition of producing and communicating knowledge through the making of comics, Bruce Mutard presents a history of narrative pictures from Giotto's frescoes to Nick Drnaso's graphic novel *Sabrina* as the development of what critic and curator Susan Vogel calls the 'Western Eye', also drawing on Michael Baxandall's concept of the Period Eye and Gombrich's idea of schema. A chapter by the artists and researchers Alexandra P. Alberda, João Carola, Carolina Martins, and Natalie Woolf, who collaborate on the graphic medicine project *VAST/O*, reflects on how an activist art-historical methodology, as articulated by Astrid von Rosen, can be developed in the gallery. Analysing the way their immersive augmented abstract comics and animation installation affectively engages viewers with lived mental health experience, they pull on recent scholarship on gallery comics, space, affect and abstraction, alongside the work of Rosalind Krauss, in deconstructing the grid and gutter. The last chapter of the book by Michel Hardy-Vallée contends that comics scholarship fills gaps in art-historical interpretations of narrative pictures and pictorial sequences, particularly in attending to the situation of images in space and image-to-image syntax, inverting the structure of other chapters to apply the comics theory of Thierry Groensteen in an analysis of the photobook *Open Passport* by Canadian photographer John Max.

While there are affinities between the chapters grouped into these sections, there are also many resonances and points of dialogue across sections. Figures like Warburg, Gombrich, Arnheim, Boehm, Nochlin, Pollock, Alpers and Belting traverse chapters, as do themes of interdisciplinarity, visual culture, the canon, the archive, the body, performance, humour, narrative, drawing, and caricature. We have included internal references to suggest such points of correspondence between chapters and readers can also use the index to follow connections. As much as there are links and interrelationships, there are also margins, gaps and blind spots. This book is by no means comprehensive in its coverage of the range of methodologies developed within Art History, past or present. While chapters engage with postcolonial Art History, specifically Becker's, and address race, class, disability, gender, and sexuality, there is scope for much more work drawing on Art History in these areas, particularly Critical Race Art History, and examining their intersections. Also evident is the absence of more emergent art-historical approaches engaging migratory, network, and planetary aesthetics, biopolitics and ecocriticism. It should be noted that while aesthetic theories are referenced, and there are many crossovers, the focus is more on Art History than the philosophy of art. This book is also partial in terms of the comics analysed, most hail from the epicentres of production - North America, Western Europe, and Japan - which have dominated scholarship, although this has been challenged by work on Latin American, African, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, South and South East Asian comics, and comics from other areas of East Asia.

This is not the first attempt to examine the history and possibilities of art-historical approaches to comics. A key forerunner is the special issue of the *Konsthistorisk tidskrift / Journal of Art History* 'Writing Comics into Art History and Art History into Comics Research' edited by Ylva Sommerland and Margareta Wallin Wictorin, both of whom we are delighted have contributed to this volume.³ Like them we believe "there is huge potential for interesting comics research based on a variety of perspectives and methods from art history" (Sommerland and Wallin Wictorin 2017, p. 4), as demonstrated by the chapters in this book. We hope the avenues opened up for future research applying art-historical methodologies to the study of comics, and drawing approaches from comics scholarship into Art History, including practices of making comics as a means of art-historical inquiry, will be pursued.

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¹ On the roots and foundational works of comics scholarship, as well as its subsequent development, see Smith and Duncan 2017. This edited collection concerning *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies* includes a chapter by Ian Horton on The Historians of the Art Form.

² See for example, Jared Gardner's discussion of the challenges of the line and drawing style to narrative theory and narratological analysis (Gardner 2011). On the exclusion of comics from Art History, and antagonisms between the art world and the comics world, see Beaty 2012 (although more focused on art criticism than Art History). See also Roeder 2008. On the relevance and value of Art History for comics studies, see Sommerland and Wallin Victorin 2017, and Miodrag 2013 (particularly Chapter 8 Style, Expressivity and Impressionistic Evaluation, pp. 197-220). We should stress we do not disregard the value of narratological, semiotic, literary or linguistic approaches to comics, nor seek to efface comics' non-visual aspects – chapters in this volume engage with questions of narration, semiosis and language, and with the multisensory experience of comics.

³ Important conference interventions should also be mentioned, notably the 'Art History considers Manga' symposium at the 1998 Japan Art Society conference (see Watanabe 1998), the two panels on 'Comics in Art History' organised by Patricia Mainardi and Andrei Molotiu at the 2010 College Art Association conference, and the roundtable 'Learning To Look: The State Of Art History And Comics Scholarship' at the 2018 Comics Studies Society conference organised by Josh Rose.