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COMIC BOOKS:
RE-EVALUATING HIGH AND LOW

Using narrative in art has a long history. Using comic related narrative imagery in art is certainly nothing new as well. In the last century, comic strips and books have become an almost everyday element in our lives. Furthermore, hundreds of books, if not more, have been written arguing the importance of comics. A mere few condensed points will be discussed in this paper regarding some interesting features of comics, as well as their potential as objects of high art. A few examples each of standout contemporary comics (they've come a long way from *Mutt and Jeff*) will be provided. A re-interpretation of the traditional high art definition will be offered. An examination into comics' unique formal and conceptual potential will be gone over, as well as a look at comics' art historical roots. Finally, some examples of comics' incorporation into both the gallery space and academia will be given. There are numerous perspectives one needs to take into account when considering comics as high art. So rather than just picking a couple, and exploring them for pages and pages, included in this paper are several tiny samplings of various points of view on the subject.

The comic book, as we know it, originated in 1833 with *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, and in 1897 with *The Yellow Kid from McFadden's Flats*. The Yellow Kid himself is considered by most comic scholars to be the first comic character (fig.1).[1] The definition of a comic character is an individual whose successful recurring appearances led it to a certain degree of popular notoriety. There were of course individual characters in comics prior to the Yellow Kid, but they never achieved enough individual interest to become established comic characters
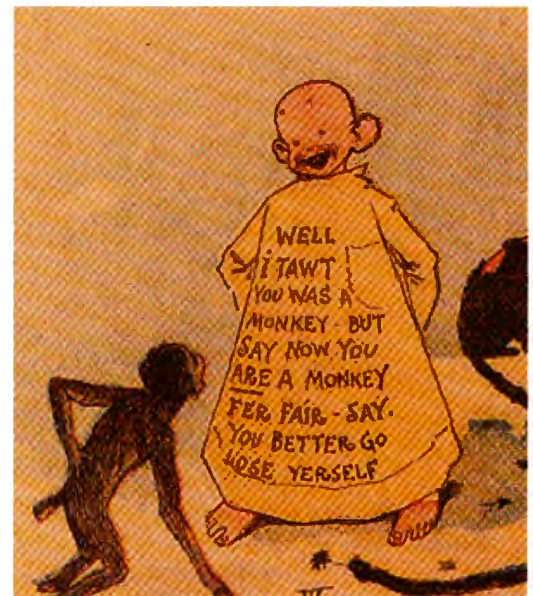
Figure1- Ricard F. Outcault. *The Yellow Kid*. 1896 Color tearsheet, 19½"x14¾". Richard D. Olsen Collection. The Ohio State University Cartoon Research Library, Columbus, Ohio.

[1] Harvey, Robert C. *Children of the Yellow Kid: The Evolution Of the American Comic Strip*. Los Angeles: Ultragraphics, 1998.16

as we know them. The Yellow Kid was the first successful comic strip character to

achieve popularity so great that he not only increased the sales of newspapers carrying

him, but he was also the first to demonstrate that a comic strip character could be

merchandised profitably. In fact, for these two reasons, the Yellow Kid and his creator,

R. F. Outcault, are generally credited with permanent establishing the comic strip and

making it a part of American society.[2]

First, regarding comics as high art, it is worthy of note to quickly bring up the simple observation that a lot of comics simply *look* like great pieces of art. Ranging from Bill Watterson's hilarious and insightful *Calvin and Hobbes* (fig.3) to Frank Miller's delightfully bleak *Sin City* (fig.2), these artist's work are stylistically diverse, expressive, and intriguing. Just as Kenneth Noland's painting credibility stands up against Edward Hopper's, there is a rich, fascinating,

Figure 2- Frank Miller. Panel from *Sin City: That Yellow Bastard*. February 1996-July 1996. Dark Horse Comics.

and

Figure 3- Bill Watterson. *Calvin and Hobbes*. 1985-1995. Daily comic strip, United Feature Syndicate.

[2] Harvey, 20.

varied range of comic artists to consider when re-investigating a common perception of the "funny books." A comprehensive stylistic and content analysis on comics could be done in a completely different project (or entire college course, for that matter), but for the purposes of simplicity, *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Sin City* are two quick example of contemporary comics that have a distinct and interesting visual, with rich and compelling narratives.

Additionally, Alex Ross (fig. 4) is a contemporary superhero comic artist whose tools are not only pencils, erasers, and pen nibs, but also the paintbrush. He has carved out a distinctive niche in the comic industry as being the first comic artist to use entirely fully painted compositions, from cover to cover. Ross creates thousands of these lavishly beautiful painted figures, and one can't help but ponder his possible influences, that could at a glance, range from Bronzino to John Singer Sergeant to Philip Pearlstein.

Figure 4-Alex Ross. Cover of *History of the DC Universe*. 2006. Painted comic art, DC Comics.

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It is also worthy of note to point out that the aforementioned Yellow Kid is the first comic character to utilize the iconic convention of the *speech bubble*. Before this, comics used captions above or below the images. Originally, however, the speech text was literally written on the Yellow Kid's yellow shirt (fig. 1). The Yellow Kid's shirt text would simply change from frame to frame. A few years later, the idea removing the words from the figure and into an imaginary space and form (the speech bubble) came to be.

The comic page was not the first place that the speech bubble appeared, as is the case with all comic symbols. A speech scroll, also called a *banderole*, is an illustrative device used to denote speech, song, or other types of sound. Developed independently on two continents, the device was used by European painters during the Medieval and Renaissance periods as well as by artists within Mesoamerican cultures from as early as 650 B.C.[3] While European speech scrolls were drawn as if they were an actual unfurled scroll, Mesoamerican speech scrolls are merely scroll-*shaped*, looking similar a question mark or S-shape (fig.5).
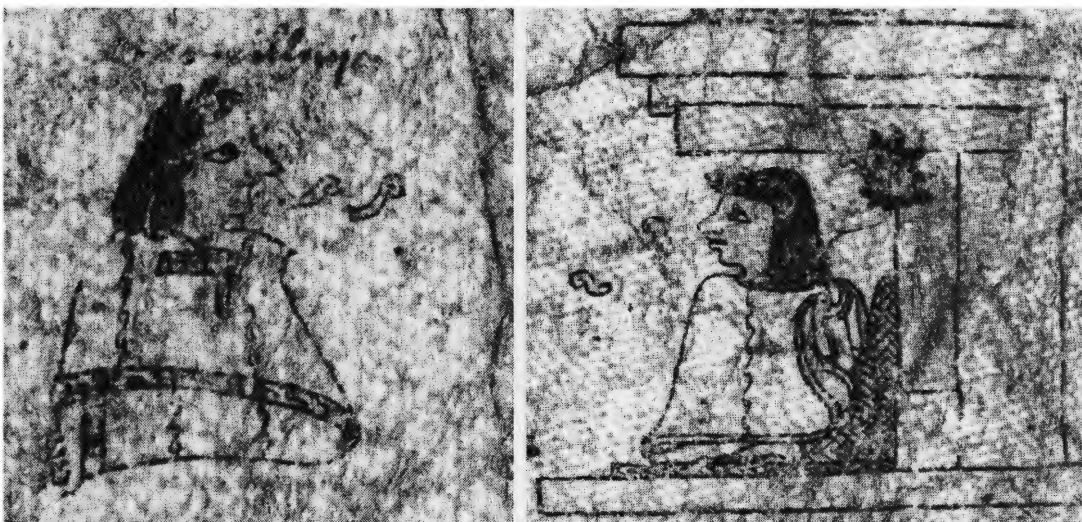

Figure 5-Aztec glyphs. Sections of the *Quinatzin Map*. Est. 15th century. Leaf three, column four. National Library, Paris.

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[3] Boone, Elizabeth Hill. *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982. 142.

Author Robert C. Harvey writes on the value of the speech bubble (also commonly known as the speech balloon):

> The importance of speech balloons in the art form cannot be overestimated. Speech balloons breathe into comics strips their peculiar life. In all other graphic represent-ations, characters are doomed to wordless posturing and pantomime-but in comic   strips, they speak. And their speeches are made in the same mode as the rest of the   strip-the visual mode. We see both the characters and what they say. Thus, including speech balloons within the pictures gives the words and the pictures concurrence-   the lifelike illusion that the characters we see are speaking even as we see them, just as we simultaneously hear and see people in real life.[4]

The power of the speech bubble is unique only to the comic. When these types of symbols get transferred to another medium, such as painting, they become something altogether separate. Vernon Fisher said of the speech bubble, "When symbols like that are used in painting, their meaning and importance become totally different things. But when they're in comic strips, they become invisible."[5] Fisher argues that because icons like speech bubbles are so closely identified with comics, that when they are utilized outside their environment they often appear displaced and alien. When they are back in their native medium, they blend in - or remain invisible.
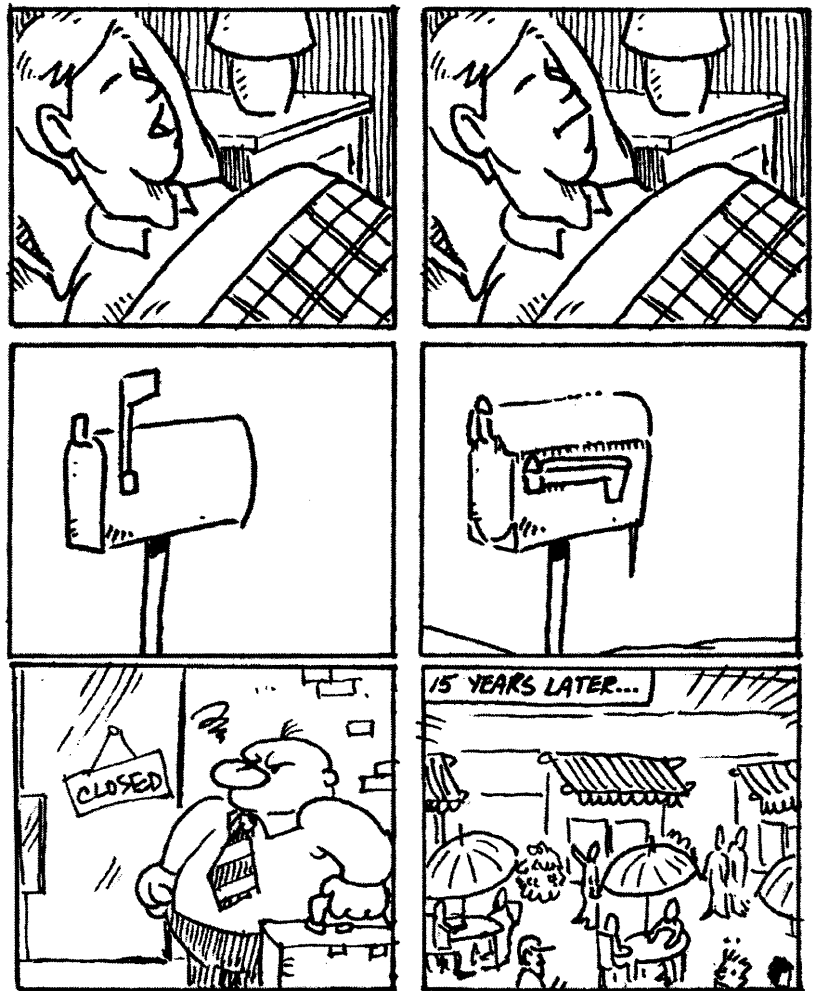
As stated earlier, comics of course utilize traditional design elements such as perspective, space, movement, scale, proportion, and so on. An explanation of some interesting formal features existing in the comic genre shall be explored. There can be no arguing the technical formal skill most comics demonstrate. Examples such as perspective and proportion are obvious. Let us rather emphasize a perhaps underestimated element of comic ingenuity - space. Comics have the rare ability to utilize special tension in ways that other art forms do not.

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[4] Harvey, 20, 27.

[5] Fisher, Vernon. Personal Interview. June 21, 2008.

The usage of space exists within the comic panels themselves. Figures and objects use positive and negative space like a painting might. What's more interesting is what goes on outside these panels, and specifically, what goes in between the panels. The spaces in between panels function on a different conceptual level. The usage of space in comic panels has the advantage of existing, in a way, outside these panels. This could be comparable to painting incorporating and using the gallery wall space, to emphasize a certain formal or conceptual attribute of the work. The little gap in between two comic panels is known as the "gutter."[6] Despite its unglamorous name, the gutter plays an important role in the synthesis of time and space in comics. In that ¼ inch gap between two pictures, the imagination takes two separate, sometimes similar, sometimes dissimilar, images and morphs them into a single idea. Nothing is seen in between them, but experience indicates to the reader

Figure 6-Personal Illustration. 2008.

that there is something there. Panels break figurative time and literal space, creating a rough rhythm of moments. Closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally

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[6] McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art.* 1st ed. New York: HarperPerennial Press, 1994. 66.

construct a continuous, unified reality. The sleeping man in the first section of figure 6 appears to experience a second's change, but it could be perhaps hours. The mailbox could appear to go through a month's weather change, but it also could be hours. The gutter space can be ambiguous regarding time as well as space. The third section in figure 6 apparently takes place 15 years later, but the location of the two images could take place on different sides of the globe, or that could be the exact same shop. The narrative could be related, or it could not.

Comics are typically continuous narratives. Masaccio's *Tribute Money* (1427), is a painted example of a continuous narrative, all existing simultaneously on the same surface (fig.7). Though the fresco doesn't utilize the convention of panels, the concept is the same. The story tells of three distinct events in the life of Saint Peter, just as three panels of Batman would tell of three events as well. He appears first on the left retrieving money from a fish's mouth, second congregating with Jesus, and third on the right paying the collector. Literal space and figurative time are illustrated both here and in the cartooned sequential narrative (fig. 8).

Figure 7-Masaccio. *Tribute Money*. 1427. Fresco, 8'1"x19'7". Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy.

As illustrated below, a comic narrative can create the same type of continuous narrative as *Tribute Money*. Using the segregating panel box lines, an entire scenario can be played out at the same time via both figure placement and textual content. Comics tend to create a displaced sense of time. This dual method of storytelling is a feature that comics effortlessly enjoy, and paintings have more trouble with.
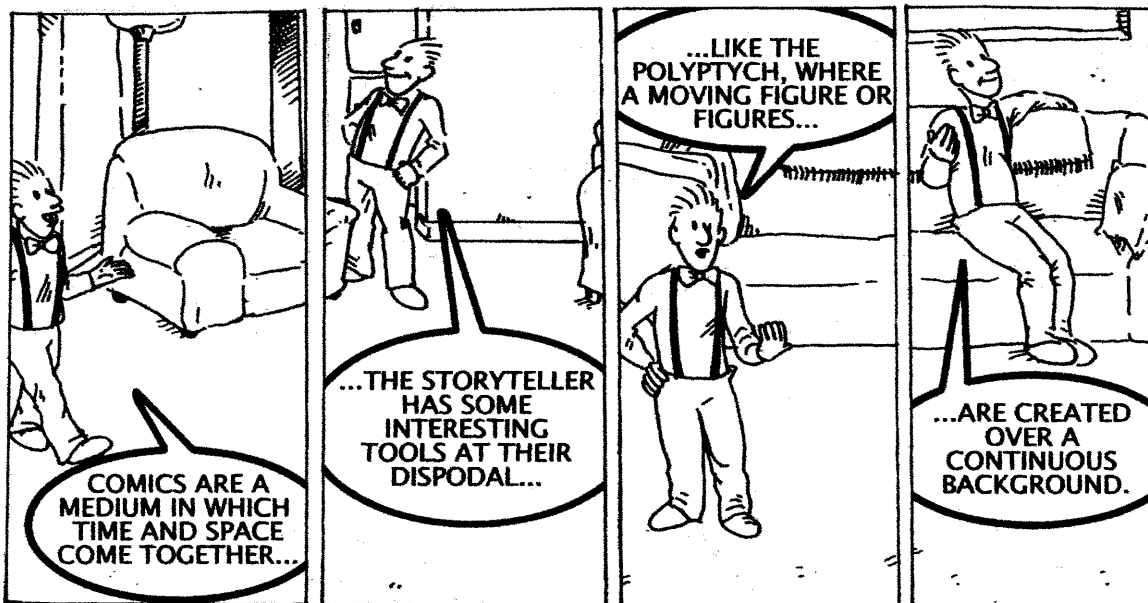

Figure 8-Personal illustration. 2008.

Several famous visual artists have been well known to enjoy comic strips and political cartoons. Eventually, it was only natural that they began incorporating the images into their own work. Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns are often seen as the initiators of this sort of amalgamation.[7] Warhol and Lichtenstein did it in the late 1950s, and comic related material consequently quickly became their calling cards. Lichtenstein stuck with comic imagery a bit longer than Warhol did, of course.

The usage of sequential pictorial storytelling (which is all comics really are) goes back much further than that, however. If one were to continue an investigation into sequential art itself, they'd find that the Spanish conquistador Hernándo Cortez

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[7] The Museum of Modern Art. *High & Low: Modern Art & Popular Culture*. Text by J.Leggio. New York, 1990.183, 187.

discovered pre-Columbian picture manuscripts in 1519. Before that, the French *Bayeux Tapestry* (est. 1476), illustrates the Norman conquest of England in 1066. One could look back even further to 1300 B.C., when Egyptians illustrated sequential visuals on walls, depicting the hunt or daily farming life. Sequential work has been a global continuous running thread all throughout art history.

However, all these examples feature narratives on numerous panels, in some way. But even the idea of presenting sequential art suspended within a single frame has been around for a while. The Futurists were extremely influenced by the new developments in technology, speed, and design in the early 19th century. Through sculpture, architecture, and painting they experimented and created works that captured a 2D illusion of movement through space. They began the systematic decomposition of moving images in a static medium. The Italian Futurist painter Giacomo Balla (1871-1958) expressed interest in the sensation of movement with his *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) (fig.9).

Figure 9-Giacomo Balla. *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*. 1912. Oil on canvas, 3'x3'8". Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

All art, and certainly all visual art, can be broken down into specific systems of signs. Comic imagery is no exception to this, and gains specific achievements unattainable in other media. A sign is something that stands for something else, to someone, in some regard. Signs can be interpreted as a distinct system of meaning that could use sight, smell, sounds, textures, and so on. Any and all ways in which a message could be passed from one being to another uses at least one sign. The term *symbol* can be seen as synonymous with the term sign. This is all known as *semiotics*, the study of symbols and signs.

Semiotics has traditionally been used across the humanities in the studies of language, culture, and the arts. Only recently, the application of semiotic theory has also been applied to the realm of comics. Comic strips and comic books have been previously thought of as an unattractive field of analytic study, due to common perceptions some people have with them. However, as a forum that is composed of image sequences and (not always, but very often) the integration of text, comics do appear to offer a wide range of possible insights, and expansions on, the sign.

In comics, the images are exposed in small panels. The words are exposed in speech balloons, in captions, and as expressive sound words (*Ka-Blam!*). The words must be read, but at the same time they are elements of the image, and they have a distinct connection. Words and images may be separate as signs, but as panels they are at a certain point inseparable. In comics, words and images exist in specific realms. What matters in these realms is the materiality of the signs itself, their specific position on the page, within the comic strip, and finally, in the panel.

Thierry Groensteen mentions that "The image is not only an utterable, but also a descriptable and an interpretable."[8] The image speaks in all languages. If this is so, then it could be seen as superior to all text. Coupled with (region-appropriate) language, an argument could be made that comic making is the most superior method of conceptual understanding (a child's picture book).

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) is well known for his model of language, and this model is a widely accepted method of understanding and interpreting how language operates with our mind.[9] According to Saussure, language is made up of signs. Every sign has two features:

The first is the *signifier*, the "shape" of an indicator. It could also be understood as the "initial glance." Joe opens a deck of playing cards and quickly shows Pete one. Instantaneously, millions of possible scenarios are eliminated within his mind. Pete understands from both the setting and initial context that what he's being shown is probably a playing card and not an elephant, dictionary, essay, valentine, or baseball card. The second is the *signified*, the rationalized component, the concept or object that appears in our minds when interpret that initial signifier. After another instant, after context clues are evaluated, and further inspection persists, Pete could ascertain that it is not just a card from the deck, but a four of diamonds specifically. The signifier doesn't necessarily come about through extended optical experience, but rather through controlled logical cogency - like the analysis of comic's usage of the gutter space.

Semiological study into the world of comics is a somewhat new endeavor. Only a few books have been written on the topic, and a comparatively few number of artists are really investigating its potentials. However, it is an innovative point of view on a very

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[8] Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. 1ᵗ ed. Mississippi: University Press, 2007. 121.
[9] Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Writings in General Linguistics*. London; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 94.

worthy subject. Comic imagery takes this idea of semiotic reasoning and flourishes in it. It has a unique ability to transition from the signifier to a remarkably unexpected signified.

There is a certain interesting semi-exclusivity to comics and some of their semiological icons. The examples are virtually endless. A few small cases could be; Signs such as word balloons, X's for eyes, certain types of jagged lines, and profuse leaping sweat beads – all these are recurring phenomena. Action lines express movement on a 2D surface. These have evolved in such a way that that comic author and illustrator Scott McCloud argues they could be seen as having a language of their own.[10] When a figure is dead or intoxicated, oftentimes their eyes will switch to large black

X's. This relates back to an altered Christian cross, signifying death, or the symbolic "XXX" on a jug of moonshine. Squiggly lines can represent various types of phenomena, like a bad stink or a pain. Large drop-shaped forms from a figure can indicate stress, fear, or excitement. Generally, if the drops are still on the figure it can suggest either that the figure is simply feeling warm, or is experiencing mild stress or fatigue. If the drops extend and leap out from the figure, the level of intensity is amplified (fig.10).
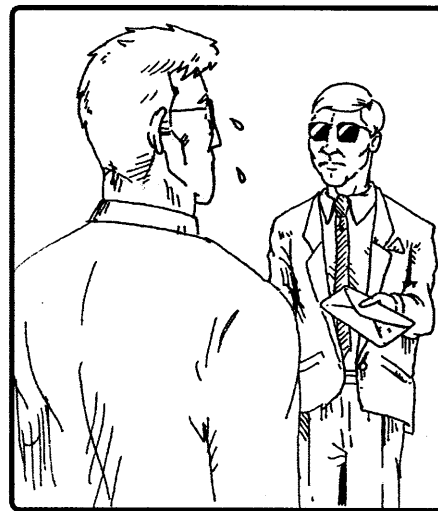
Figure 10-Personal Illustration. 2008.

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[10] McCloud, 134.

The idea of incorporating comic imagery into fine art is still relatively new. A few examples of contemporary artists who not only do that, but integrate comic related semiological icons as well are Roy Lichtenstein and Vernon Fisher. Lichtenstein's *Hopeless* (1963) (fig.11) uses that very familiar thought balloon as a method of narrative. The pieces' title functions as a text-based fiction in the piece as well. Vernon Fisher's *Crying Boys* (2006) (fig.12) also uses those stressful flying sweat beads, as well as a few "confusion spirals"- thin, tornado-shaped marks, indicating bewilderment or chaos.

Figure 11- Roy Lichtenstein. *Hopeless*. 1963.
44"x44", Oil on canvas,
Kunstmuseum Basel, Ludwig Collection.

Figure 12-Vernon Fisher. *Crying Boys*. 2006.
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 63"x75".
Mark Moore Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, California.

Clement Greenberg's (1906-1994) seminal critical essay, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939) definitely lumped comics into the classification of kitsch along with other everyday items like magazine advertisements and household trinkets.[11] Greenberg's reduction of the prior complex dialogue between modern art and popular iconography became a story of simple intimidating pollution. He established a principle that real art

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[11] Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In *Parisian Review*. 6, Fall 1939. 34-40.

was not to have any realistic imagery at all, and that there was to be an absolute

distinction between types of art objects. Abstract expressionism was Greenberg's only

way of the future, and this only set comics even lower. Comic imagery would be

permitted to return to art, but not until the late 1940's.

Low culture can be seen as a critical term for some forms of our culture. The term

is often encountered in discourses on the nature of culture. It has been said by culture

theorists that both high culture and low culture are subcultures. "High art" doesn't have a

definition that makes sense except for the practical definition: It is whatever enough

people say it is. It is whatever people create, receive, and hold in esteem. A work of art

can change categories from high art to kitsch to trash and back again as its audience

changes. The art scene is, and always has been, a product of social circles and social

posturing. A medium's capacity for high art is the same as its ability to create the right

kind of social environments for its audience. Crafts are called crafts and not arts because

they create a separate kind of social environment. That's the whole of the difference.

The segregation and sub-categorization goes on indefinitely regarding both what

constitutes art and what constitutes high art. Children's drawings, metal-smithing,

sculpture, interior design, illustration, cooking, video art and weaving have all been

thrown at some point into this argumentative

mix.

Author Brenda Jo Bright adds one

more creative link to this mixed up chain:

the lowrider. A lowrider is a car (usually

older model) that has altered suspension

that puts the body of the car no more than

Figure 13- Custom 1954 Chevrolet lowrider.

a few inches above the road (fig.13). Oftentimes elaborated painted and detailed,

lowriders have emerged since the 1960s as a unique method of self expression, typically

among Mexican-American communities.

Bright makes an interesting argument in favor of placing the Los Angeles

Mexican-American lowrider creation as a legitimate art form. Her account here of high

art's capacities are quite apt:

> To engage in this project means to suspend and challenge the humanistic
> premises most often attached to "high" art: that art is universal or that it
> communicates universal human concerns; that the art of "others" contributes
> something lost to Western civilization (be it spirituality or "community");
> that art is first and foremost the product of individual geniuses; and that art
> proclivities are "naturally" evolutionary. It means seeing these concerns as
> generated in specific historical contexts and not "naturally" attached to
> artworks themselves.[12]

Bright's charge against the traditional definition of high art is that high art entails

a universal quality. Her general taste of the issue is that it is a pretentious one-

dimensional attitude. Senses of spirituality or community are not lost, but consciously

excluded from the hierarchy. She points out that the opinion of high art is one that

appears to be displaced, self-elevated, and too far removed. She seemingly has an

affinity for low art, because it appears to retain essential conceptual art elements, and

doesn't get tied up on some ostentatious high horse. In her argument, of course,

lowriders embody these basic attributes, and it is my opinion that the same point of view

can be applied to comics, among others articles of artistic substance.

Bright points out in her statement that cars and car clubs have provided a means

for young Hispanic men to go beyond limited territories. She implies that due to their

nature of their society, a young Hispanic L.A. man will have two choices: either get into

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[12] Bright, Brenda Jo and Liza Bakewell, eds. *Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995. 7.

gangs or get into cars. As a form of popular culture, the practice of lowriding provides an important example of how cultural forms emerge out of contradiction and interrelated cultural areas. Bright's thesis is hinged on the fact that these young men are doing nothing different than what any young circle of fledgling artists might be doing. They are created a visual expression of their culture and society – just in an alternative gallery space.

With Bright's comparison of lowrider culture and its place in a recognized artistic community, she regards them as "An alternative cultural space for performance, participation, and appreciation, and interpretation."[13] Because of these points, Bright argues that the Mexican-American lowrider culture could indeed have its place in recognized respected art circles. The comparison is well founded, as this can be applied to all art. The 1960s were a time of artistic rebellion against just about any convention one can think of. Non-gallery settings for performance art gained popularity in the 60s through performance artists such as Vito Acconci (b. 1940) and Janine Antoni (b. 1964). Additionally, the creation of lowriders are often collaborative creative efforts that need numerous laborers, which could recall the work of Christo and Jean-Claude (both b. 1935). There is a sense of community found in both kinds of conceptions. The similar characteristics of the lowrider culture and those of high art are numerous. Of course, it could be said that lowriders function on a level of kitsch. Kitsch, slapstick, fantasy art, erotica, popular music and exploitation films are all typical examples of traditional low culture. However, in these postmodern times, the boundary between high culture and low culture has blurred. It's all become fair game. Warhol and Lichtenstein have been mentioned as artists who've embraced material from the low art class. Further back in art history, the same could be said for Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, (1917) the found toilet.

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[13] Bright, 91.

Fountain is perhaps the grand-daddy of low art appropriation. As a more contemporary example, the work of Jeff Koons (b. 1955) exemplifies the sampling of these low art tropes. Koons appropriates imagery and objects from pornography, popular icons, kitsch and more into Neo-Pop paintings, sculptures, and photographs.

Koons is just one example of a singular artist. However, Romanticism witnessed the reinterpretation and transition of classification of an entire genre. Romanticism was one of the first movements to re-evaluate low culture. With its revolts against Enlightenment ideals, Romanticism placed interest in shock, terror and wonderment. While the rest of Europe ushered in the new aristocratic intellectual social standards, Romantic artists like Delacroix and Goya painted ghastly shock and awe.

Additionally, the reproduction of artworks has a long art history. A few short brief examples might be replicas made by pupils in practice of their craft. It is a well known fact that many Renaissance painters had numerous assisting apprentices. A more contemporary example could be Damien Hirst's photographic editions of his jewel encrusted human skull, *For the Love of God* (2007). There is, of course, no real limit to the amount of prints a printmaker can pull. The idea of making mass printed multiples really isn't that much of a departure from what has already been done all throughout art history.

The creation of comics could, arguably, be considered an act of printmaking, which is undeniably a legitimate historical method of art making. An artist will carve or etch out a block or panel, ink it, and press out a certain number of editions. So if Francisco Goya created an edition of 150 for plate #3 from his *Disasters of War* (1810) series, and Marvel Comics presses 50,000 copies of *The Invincible Iron Man* #34, truthfully, what's the difference? Both tell a story, have multiples, and were done in hopes of selling each reproduction. That's not to say however, that the original drawn

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are hand created, one of a kind, 2D works that utilize perspective, value, proportion, movement, scale, and so on to create an artistic narrative.

It is interesting how the market for original comic art functions. An original comic page, though monetarily valuable, isn't the finished product in the way an original painting is. The printed copy of a comic book is the way the comic is supposed to be received. In photography the developed photos are the final works, not the negatives. They're just the templates. This is similar to the printmaking process, in that a hand carved wood block is not considered the actual work. The images that they create when inked up and pressed are. The original creation (the negative or carved block) is an anomaly. It can be thrown away, and its printed product will still be there in full. Throw away a painting, and the copies of the painting do not fill the void in this way. Sometimes the original exists as an illegible mirror image in a block of wood or a piece of metal. Sometimes, in the case of digital comics, it doesn't even exist at all. In comics, the copy is the original and the original is an elaborate sort of incomplete copy.

Comics have some distinct features that do not belong to many styles of art making. As stated, photographic negatives and carved wood blocks are not considered the final pieces. The images they yield are. Of course, occasionally a carved block crafted by someone like Albrecht Dürer will be on display in a museum, but these are meant as more of an educational and historical device for understanding, rather than to be considered art pieces wholly on their own. Comics, on the other hand, could indeed be considered to have *both*. The original pages of comic art are hand drawn, hand colored (oftentimes), and utilizes the conventions of anatomy, proportion, perspective, special placement, and so on. Given their exhibition history (page 19), no doubt these pieces could be considered works of high art. But, along with photography and printmaking, these templates are not envisioned by the artists to be the final works. They belong to a

more comprehensive system of narrative, of course. When combined with the other pages, only then is the true objective of the artist exposed.

If original comic art and the mass printed multiple can both be seen as high art, then this phenomenon could be even comparable to a musical experience. Going to the symphony and listening to a performance of Beethoven's *9th Symphony* or listening to that same piece on a home stereo through headphones are two completely different events. One is public and involved; the other is solitary and reserved. Both are perfectly legitimate ways of experiencing the piece, but distinctly function through two very different modes.

So if comics could be considered high art, could one expect to be seeing a framed copy of *The Incredible Hulk* #320 in the Denver Art Museum anytime soon? It is doubtful. Perhaps in a library's rare books collection we might find some comics that could have specific importance, like *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (featuring the first appearance of Spider-Man). That's about as close as it is going to get, for now. Though comics can be seen as pieces of high art, it seems that they cannot be viewed as such on their own steam, at this time. Perhaps if Jeff Koons appropriates a readymade custom lowrider (as he has done with vacuum cleaners and so on) and presented it in a prestigious art gallery, that lowrider would be seen in a new high art light. Korean artist Bin Dahn used old framed issues of DC Comic's *Swamp Thing*, and hung them as a sort of appropriation and readymade. Dahn used the shape of the comics, however, to spell out words, thus using the physical dimensions of the comics themselves as a vehicle for some other conceptualization. Though it comes close, this doesn't really count. However, it's not to say that appreciating comics as high art still couldn't be done.

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Over the last several years the comic art form has flourished, generating much interest from the literary, art and educational communities. Colleges and universities nationwide are adding comic related courses to their curriculum. Comic illustration courses began in 2005 at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Monroe Community College in Rochester, NY will start its first course in the spring. The University of Cincinnati began its first comic art course last year. Applications have increased by over 50% at the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, VT., which was founded in 2006 and won state approval this year for a MFA degree.[14] These are just a tiny sampling, and these additions are not limited to the art schools. The University of North Texas' Communications department is offering "The Mythic Rhetoric of the American Hero," a course focusing on parallels between superheroes and contemporary global figures.[15] The involvement of comics in high art academia is without question on the rise.

Comic-themed shows have been opening for over 60 years now, but strictly comic book art shows have been an exciting new feature for many art galleries this past decade. In addition to comics finding their way into college curriculum, comic-exclusive shows have been featured in prominent galleries and museums nationwide. The Zeitgeist Gallery in Cambridge, MA. exhibited its "Comic Art Show!" in 2003. Altered Aesthetics Gallery in Minneapolis, MN. put together "Comic Art" in 2008. In 2006, the "Masters of American Comics" exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles featured 900 original comic pieces from over 20 comic artists including R. Crumb, Jack Kirby, and Art

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[14] Cornwell, Lisa. "Schools Add Comics Art Classes." *The Denton Record Chronicle*, Sept 13, 2008.
[15] Breeding, Lucinda. "America Unmasked." From *Denton Time*. July 17, 2008.

Spiegelman.[16] In January, the traveling "Out of Sequence: Underrepresented Voices in American Comics" will come to the Lab at Belmar in Lakewood, CO. The opening of The Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art in New York City has enjoyed great growth and accomplishment. Of course, these are just a few samples of some of the comic art exclusive show that have been featured in traditionally high art galleries and museums in recent years.

Comics are in many ways the low art form of our century. They remain an escape, a diversion, and a pleasure. The comics entertain. Yet their stylistic and conceptual growth over the years, art historical roots, influence on contemporary art, their unique formal qualities and semiological correlations all give comic strips and books new appreciation and credibility regarding their addition to the world of high art. New comic-exclusive exhibitions are opening in museums and galleries worldwide, and accredited colleges and universities are adding comic related courses to their curriculums. The lines continue to blur between what is considered art and what isn't, and what is considered high art and what isn't. Comics aren't quite there yet, but they have a very promising beginning.

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[16] Burke, Anne and Steffen Böddeker. "Masters of American Comics Exhibitions." 1 December 2005. <http://www.spotlight.ucla.edu/programs/comics_hammer/> (accessed 8 December, 2008).

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