

Comics as enchantment

For the sake of affect and imagination

Vicky Grube

ABSTRACT

A lot is happening at the drawing table. Children are busy inventing stories, reassembling their thoughts, gleaning knowledge and making decisions. This article digs deep to see what is going on the children's art-making through drawing and reading comics. In an after-school drawing club the author reveals how children are transformed through comic book drawing, realising their body's potential to use images to tell a story. Drawing from imagination, memory and inventing brazen story lines, the body steps out of the present and moves into the future, into 'What's next? The ownership of the seriated drawn ideas leaps ahead, using all kinds of memory- what the child has seen, experiences, and can imagine as possibility. This all entails choosing which decisions make the most sense, delighting in affect. I call this entanglement with tools and memory to build a comic material aliveness. As children move through life, they have a faint sense that affects are there. The act of drawing – a physical engagement with materials stretches thinking and allows for deep immersion with affects which develop empathy and self-compassion.

Keywords: affect, Massumi, Heidegger, comics, Room 13

I have a long history of doodling. As a child I drew on the back of envelopes, on my mother's grocery lists, in the margins of my school papers, wherever I found a blank surface. I looped spirals of blue ink on my white tennis shoes. I preferred to doodle with a ballpoint pen but was happy with a sharp dark pencil. Crayola markers had not yet been invented. However, my father had an indelible red marker on his workbench. I loved watching the red ink bleed into the wood scraps. My doodling appeared as little comic characters. I sketched a series describing the lives of these imaginary people. Using a three ringed notebook with lined paper, I drew families and maps of their neighborhoods. My ten-year-old self became fixated with these folks that were affected by the world around me. For example, my uncle subscribed to *Popular Mechanics*, a how-to magazine for the amateur handyman. In this magazine I discovered architectural drawings of interiors: floor plans and symbols to indicate windows, doors, interior walls. Soon my imaginary families had designed homes.

Hand in hand with this doodling was my passion for comic books. In the scorching summers, my brother and I rode our bikes to the pharmacy three blocks up the street to

buy the latest issues of *Fantastic Four*, *Beetle Bailey*, *Little Lulu*, *Spiderman*, *Richie Rich* and *Scrooge McDuck*. We loved riding bikes, moving under our own power, arriving at the little shop that offered ice-cold air, frosted sodas, and racks of comics. Our hair damp from the heat and plastered to our foreheads, bikes outside leaning against the dumpster, we flipped through the comics, buying as many as we could afford. Standing alongside my brother built deep body memories in me, and I often have quick flashbacks of these early comic collections. Most of all, this experience created a fond affection for my sibling.

Brian Massumi, in the book *Politics of Affect* (2015), described three types of memory. First, unconscious memory, in which momentary past events or sensory recollections pop up in the present: ‘This reminds me of the way my grandmother made peanut butter sandwiches’.

Next, past memory, in which the remembrance is integrated into a current life and embedded for a long time into the now. For example, ‘I live with an embedded fear of being hurt at night stemming from my childhood bedtime. My brothers and I were sent to bed, and we could be silly and loud. My father’s heavy footsteps climbing the stairs, meant he was angry, and shouting and spanking ensued’.

Finally, there is the felt memory of the future, imagining where history may repeat itself or where life may be headed. For example: ‘In the past I have always driven seven hours before stopping for the night. This trip I will plan to stop earlier so I don’t have to repeat that feeling of exhaustion’. Massumi says these different types of memories can happen at the same time, and usually do. My memories of childhood and comics fuel my desire to continue drawing and writing sequential narratives.

How do comics work to spin a story?

When reading a comic, your eyes go back and forth between text and image. Some comic panels are heavy with text, like in *Marlys* by Lynda Barry. Some graphic narratives have more images and fewer words. Either way, comics say what cannot be said only in words. For me, drawing images helps to fully explain my feelings. The comics bear fruit of my feelings. Drawing comics entails uncovering my how-its-been-going-for-me inner life.

My memories can stir up cruelties. But oddities seem to come out of my doodles, like the invasion of ogres who fart, scoop handfuls of oatmeal into their mouths, slather mayonnaise with their palms onto fat slices of bread. I am not always consumed by the macabre; the hodge-podge of all feelings that entangle within me in complex ways. Life is messy with the drama of contingency or ‘how we are touched by what comes near’ (Ahmed, p210). Emotions can be expressed with hand drawn images, feelings that surprise us, intrigue us and disturb us. Sorting out this complexity transforms

the artist, altering memories and how we know ourselves. Feelings can be studied, weighed, admired, mocked and/ or refused. In the thick of this making- art, we are always changing or becoming.

I find the entangled world we live in evolves, and we with it. The stories we tell ourselves are built on memories brimming with emotion. These narratives are everywhere – in the food we eat, the interactions we have with others, the weather we experience, and how we engage in the world. Through stories I reflect on my identity, what I know and what the stuff of the world means. My stories are all socially constructed and are wrapped in and out, like tissue paper streamers decorating the spokes of a bicycle, woven and overlapping. Like the bicycle passing by, wheels a blur of paper streamers of bright colors spin and I am reminded of fragments of memories that will later become comic narratives. These events reside in my mind and some eventually take the form of doodles and comics.

The action of drawing a comic brings to its sturdy frames, images borne from the social world. It is the dizzying interpretation of both personal memories and cultural knowledge in pictures and words. With pencil sketching panels and word balloons, I imaginatively weave a collection of sketches looking back to my own escapades. Of course, images don't *only* pop up from events but from knowledge I learn as a person living in this culture. Furthermore, feeling is attached securely to all knowledge. So truths, both believed and suspect, hold a plethora of emotions which shape the comic. My emotions are hand-in-hand with these truths. Readers of the finished comic might be transformed by reading comics. Viewers might be besotted, tantalised with a sketched silly event, worried about my images depicting the odd and quirky, or bored from yet another ogre rampage. I am transformed in the reading and drawing of comics. For example, the subject matter and my drawing skill are very different from the sketches made in my childhood. Drawing comics as a pup was great fun and games. I loved seeing my drawing ability become clearer. I thrived on having the power be in control of the lives of my comic people.

Regardless of my age, all of the comics I made, radiated an affect, as have the comics I have read. Certain graphic narratives, or autobiographical comics, fill me with empathy and wanting more. The kernel or the gist of the comic has the power to be a leviathan, unleashing a feeling the reader can inhale.

After-school Drawing Club

I am an art educator at a university in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. I run an after-school art club for children aged 7-13, modeled on the Room 13 child-led art program which began in the UK: (see <http://room13international.org>). Room 13, so named by the children who attended the first iteration of the programme in Scotland, is

now extremely popular and has sites worldwide. Children run the programme, electing from their peers a director, a treasurer, a librarian, an assistant director. They raise money for materials and hire an adult artist as a guide. In this revolutionary program children can make whatever they want. The works made by the children are very different from traditional art. The young artists use materials in an innovative manner. They make what they are curious about.

The children in the North Carolina after-school program love to draw. The drawing table is crowded with children extremely motivated to draw. I watch them drawing comics that are ribald and rich with emotion. Bird-like creatures drive to Fast Food Taco Stands and set the place on fire with some kind of automatic weapon. On the flip side of the paper a baby in the backseat of an SUV looks uneasy as the mother drives over a buzz saw, puncturing the tires. The SUV has a ski rack on the hood. The drawn landscape is a mountain; on the top edge is a giant patch of snow. These children live in a mountain community. Most grow up snow skiing. Perhaps, this explains the landscape, the ski rack and the mother's stocking cap. I find the drawn comics are fragments of a life and tell more than any child planned to tell. The drawing unravels. Like my own comics, these images are entangled with memory.

In the children's comics the artist creates an imagined reality. Imbibing the drawing with enchantment, relying on memory and cultural knowledge, the child builds an assent to life. What occurred in the past is drawn present in present time. This shift from past to present requires imagination to construct an organised viewpoint. The children have a lot to say. How the child had such brilliance to draw a person sitting behind a steering wheel, to invent car with a well-drawn baby seat behind the driver, calls for abstract thinking. 'How do I take a flat piece of paper and create a three-dimensional car, with a baby in the back in a car seat and looking worried? How do I draw a perplexed face? I have to recall all of these images before drawing them. How can I get this tool, the pencil, to make the correct mark? 'The imagination has the elasticity to pull into the mind's eye the pretend and the real, envisioning possibilities. I am enthralled with these stories. Even complexity can be enchanting. For the after-school artists, images recalled from imagination were memories both real and not real. Was the buzz saw real, the ski rack on the car, the mom driving, the taco fast food shop, or the chicken with the automatic weapon?

Perception is a form of pain (Plato)

When I was a very young child, I was sure the fibres in canned pears were really thin whorls of kite string that, once swallowed, would choke me. I imagined this strangling-by-pear-fibers a horrible way to die: a wad of fine filament clogging my esophagus. It seems the imagination ties your body to the human and the nonhuman. The baby is

connected to the SUV. The comic artist uses imagination, but so does the comic reader. The reader can become bound to this narrative and their imagination ignited. What the image and text convey are entangled with affects creating a worry, a dread, a dislike, a wonder, a crisis.

I am making a lot of assumptions. I imagine the child artist who drew the SUV getting its flat tyre has seen a buzz-saw in a movie, or a fresh Christmas tree cut down. The mountains here are known for their abundant crop of fir trees. Perhaps the car got a flat coming home from the day of skiing? Did the child remember his fretful baby sibling in the back seat? Was the window glass cold against his forehead? Was his mother anxious? These memories feed the imagination. The emotional relationship is the bedrock of that imagination and is affect. Affects are deeply felt in our bodies and I believe are the only evidence that we are alive. Affects are formed from fragments of a life as well as from full-blown episodes. Affects cause us to think differently and reflect on how feelings are made.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988) Deleuze and Guattari wrote about affects, explaining how they can be corporeal, changing a soul on the plane of sensations-senses reacting to an experience, such as eating freshly buttered toast. Affects can also dismantle thoughts to develop an attitude about something. By using physical tools to craft an object like a comic book, art works laden with affect make new realities possible. Anna Hickey Moody, in her text *Affect as Method: Feelings, Aesthetics and Affective Pedagogy* (2013), describes affect as what moves us. 'Affect is a hunch or a visceral prompt. Aesthetics teach us by changing how we feel... It is the stuff that life is made of' (p81).

Affects and feelings are basically synonymous, but affects are events, material, and when projected to others they unload a feeling. Affects like love and hatred, fear and bravery, fury and mildness, humiliation and bravado, kindness and unkindness, despair and outrage, are depicted in comics. For example, in an eight-year-old boy's comic, *The Stick Man and the Zebra*, the comic expressed happiness as the zebra and the man had lots of adventures: 'Once upon a time there was a stick guy and he had a zebra. He was happy and they went on a lot of adventures. 'During one of the adventures a sword was found, and the Stick Man ended up in a fight. 'Another guy came and said 'Sup?'. 'A frightening monster appeared. Bows and arrows were used' and 'The two men became friends after defeating the monster. They had fun'.

These comics, like all sequential stories made from little boxes, require the reader to use their imagination. What happens in one box stops at the border and the next box picks up what happens next. The reader must imagine what happened between panels. While not a film, yet similar to film, a little parade of boxes tells a story. A comic requires imagination to fill in what facial reaction or mini events the boxes skip over.

I have stacks of comics made by the children. Some have titles like *Band of Brothers*, *Diary of a Minecraft Zombie* (an unofficial *Minecraft* novel) the boy adds, *World War*

I: Everyone Versus One Man Starts, A Stick Guy and a Pet Zebra with pages of narrative, *Lightning Man and Spike, The Fourth Sector, Runt War- Second Landing, The Bully, I Woke Up Today*. Many comics have no titles. As I see the stack of work the children have produce, each comic opens the door to thinking and to imagine differently, both for me the reader and certainly for the young artist. 'Comics hold an array of the greatest hopes and the smallest challenges of human experience.' (Whalen, Foss, Gray, 2016, p1)

And then there is the Broken Neck Club

Four years ago, my doodles became comics depicting my own monsters and ogres that plagued me. They were totally irrelevant to the real world. The comics illustrated flashbacks to my rough childhood, a darkened time laced with physical, sexual and emotional abuse. My comics in tiny books 3½ x 5 had themes. Two little books illustrated Stalin's Regime which I had become absorbed with, reading book after book, stunned at the atrocities of his leadership. Other of my tiny comics are American scenes of terror, characters hiding in basements, lashed to trees, homes invaded, haunted attics, and an odd circus of performers who have an array of eccentricities. A main theme circulates in my comics: anxiety lodges in the body, resulting in a fleeting hero hiding a secret which is shaming and isolating. The materiality of the comics melds with the stuff of my life. These self-published comics are sold through Quimby's comic bookstore and Chicago Comics in Chicago.

For several years I attended a support group for women who had experienced trauma. I found the lives of these women remarkable. As each spoke, I saw some gush with words, others sit silently and cry, some looking inward as they sipped on coffee, others dazzling, telling hilarious events of the week past or a bit of good fortune. These women were all sizes and ages with an array of education. Some had tousled hair, little button-like teeth, hot swollen faces, fuzzy hair or delicate voices. I began a comic about this trauma group calling it *The Broken Neck Club*. This little comic gave me a place to sort out my sordid memories. I made the comic about my lack of confidence and great shame. I portrayed the club members to be brave, gallant and odd. Drawing these comics was like being immersed in quicksand, unable to free myself from this terror but finding the material heavy and soothing. Art enlarges my consciousness. I am consumed and never the same.

'Reading is a complicated, profound, silent, still very personal, very private, a very solitary yet civilising activity'. (Gas, 2018, p55) So I see this in my own experience making comics and reading graphic novels. The children making their comics are focused and take what they are doing seriously. I see an intensity in the making. Nonetheless, the children draw and entertain themselves and become animated when telling their comic tale to others. I hear fiendish chuckles while they are drawing and writing the text,

while they act their pages with arms flinging and eyes lit up. One giggles at another's comic enactment. The children are using their knowledge of materials, their awareness of the adult culture, and their senses, to create an affect. When I observe these children make marks, they seem to manifest the dedication and the precision of a piano tuner. Their marks are particular. Their lines matter.

The making of comics can be a performative act, like stitching pieces of a dress together, only partially finished when the little scraps and zippers and bobbins have done their work. The dress is put on and comes to life. The wearer makes the dress breathe; others perceive the clothing and give the dress a life. This materiality might take on a magical, exotic, splendid or perhaps ridiculous cast, an affect in the viewers' minds. The garment takes on these reactions, perhaps, fading, losing a button, getting a hem shortened. Like sewing a dress, the comic stories appear wayward until the last panel is made. Then, the reader says 'Ah ha!' However, again similar to the dress, the comic takes a further life in the action of the telling. The reader and creator are all affected in the telling.

When I am sharing my comics with friends, I take on the roles of all the goofy characters and even perform sound effects, as though I am living in my story. Crafting a comic and then acting the story for others can be invigorating. I feel this is like an assemblage, the putting together of various materials, tools, paper, ideas and forms to create an art object. All of the children engage in this play and sometimes write a comic strip with performance in mind occurring as the story is built. For example, in the child's comic, *I Woke Up Today*, whose narrative is as follows: *I woke up today* (we see him in bed), *I ate an egg* (we see what he sees: looking down at a black cast iron frying pan with a tiny white ball in the center), *I barfed up the egg* (we see the little figure throwing up), *I got hit by a meteor* (we see the floor breaking *before* the meteor hits), *fell through a panel* (we see the figure breaking through a comic panel no longer in a realistic world but acknowledging a comic world), *I made it to Room 13* (where the ink color changes to turquoise and the figure lands on its head back in the comic world). This comic had the dexterity to depict various points of view and was performed to the hoopla of the other children.

Decisions are made during the creation of the comic. Not everything in the scene is included, just what is important to the story. The goal is not to include every aspect of the scene but to be a crisp storyteller. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) have a philosophy of art that questions representational art and its meanings, favouring a definition of art that does not include a well-conceived accurate model but embraces art that leans to disrupt and question beliefs. The work of art is valued for what it does, how it moves the viewer, its potential to point out another's viewpoint. This position on art shows the essence of being human. In sum, the affect art exudes, not the literal interpretation, is what matters. The actions, feelings, energies, attitudes felt when viewing or making art is what art is.

Art, as a dynamic assemblage of vibrating movements, generates affects and intensifies sensations. It is a way of addressing problems, a creative becoming of the brain, an embodied knowing, which produces effects and transformations. Aesthetic experience, in such an understanding, is a form of thought (Golanska, 2017, p47).

According to Martin Heidegger art is not all about beauty and pleasure but ‘art is rather the disclosure of the being of beings’ (Heidegger, 1959, p111). Art introduces us to what a thing is - a subjective decision. Traditionally, art has been defined as a thing made from materials, with properties, which creates a unity of sensations and has a mass or a form. Heidegger takes issue. He believes art reaches beyond this definition. A painting of a bat and ball has materials, properties, creates a unity of sensations and has a form but, unlike a bat and ball, art is not created for any specific use. Art needs a viewer to exist. (Heidegger, 1975). Art, says Heidegger, is ‘the truth of beings setting itself to work’ (Heidegger, 1975, p36). Heidegger believes art is the ultimate truth of how people see the world working and their choices. Art is not simply materiality with a conscious inclusion of the elements of art. Art reveals the essence of things.

Heidegger writes that art is a lived experience. Thus, the role of art can shape and transform our basic sense of ourselves and of critical truths. All art, however presented, whether in museums or on computer monitors, whether as landscapes or portraits, whether via speakers or comic books, make us feel more alive. Bolt (2004a) writes that Heidegger found representative art, artwork indicating a static piece of work, likely to show a lack of affect. Work that disrupts and questions and celebrates is always living and is the *work of art*.

What are these comics capable of? The child, who has memories, desires, and an imagination, uses the material to produce an affect. The child learns to problem solve when the pencil tip snaps, or the paper runs out, or the ideas stop coming. These difficulties lead to various decisions and to innovative problem solving. Making a drawing is a hands-on existence. Bolt is an advocate for generating the affect in art, as against the goal of producing an accurate copy. Art in traditional schools often teaches children to copy a famous painting or to learn a craft.

Affect does not arrive to the drawing separately. (Bennett, p201) The sensations of the work of art ‘make thought possible ... [A work of art is] a creation of impersonal affects and precepts rather than purely representational activity.’ (Golanska, p49) In other words, the material collaborates with the child not to make an assortment of realistic symbols or the copy of a well-known painting: a rendition of a car, a still life, a *Bedroom at Arles*. Rather, it is the affect that makes the drawings art. The affect is shaped on the mood of the others at the drawing table, the emotions of the child, the pencil, the paper, the eraser, memories, the contemporary culture and the idea. Affect is deep and never predictable. (Bennett, 2001)

Here is a table of children drawing, experiencing affect and creating affect. It is this affect that makes these drawn stories *art*. The performative aspect of the art the children act with each other. They are entwined with the knowledge their drawings produce, and with each other. The comics connect the children through the pencil expressing affect. Affect is difference in movement, energy, a fluidity. It is material liveliness. 'Affect as shaped by the past, yet rooted in the body, and intertwined with discourse and materiality' (Reestorff, p210). Art as an event of affect is not the officer yelling 'Freeze!' but a handful of people roller skating. Some folks roll backwards, others push off, crunch in a ball rolling across the floor, to then stand up, arms out, while others can barely balance and crash into the walls. Art comes with innovative movement. This is important: art is a movement using sensations arising from the encounters with the world. The transformation for the comic artist emerges from the encounters, memories, imagination, the materials, and the other children.

The stuff of the making

Art cannot exist without materials. The materiality of the comic making is the choosing a pencil, sharpening the tip, selecting the paper (what size? color? texture?), the ideas that invade the captions, the environment of the art room. The young artists use their pencils as smearing tools, showing skids, kicks and floundering. Their erasers make lines through blackened lead patches. Colored pencils depict alien skin tones, blood, fire, walls, trees, blues and silver uniforms and blasts of poison. The children draw little squares and think of the page as an entire composition. The materials can be ideas, the body's rhythm, the memories. The materials have a wide range of use and the children glean the possibilities of the pencil by watching others and experimenting with the tools. The young artists are transfixed with what their peers come up with. These animated drawings do not signify a meaning as much as they assemble, do, create, and scramble across the page.

The children's comics are evidence of what art can do, *not* what it is. Key to this doing is what leads to the making of the comic. The children are 'actually making something, not describing something that could be made' (Gas, p644). This is very difficult. There is a physicality that is steered by the culture and the social relationships at the drawing table. What is left on the table when the drawing comes to an end is a vibrant evidence of the body becoming, an eruption from a clash with the body and a sensuous material.

John Dewey believed the work of art was not the piece hanging on the wall but the experience the viewer had with the art (Dewey, 1934). Art is not the configuration of things, the object with line, texture, perspective, composition, forms, but a transaction swooping up the senses, and producing affects questioning past knowledge. Art, with its life of affect, can teach us new knowledge. The ways we remember define us

in the present. I see the performative quality of these comics as an action, as being entangled in the world. When I look through the stack of drawings, is my attraction to the comics their affect? Are these comics treasured for my complex memories of the children imaginatively building stories or the new knowledge I have from experiencing the life of drawing with the children? Certainly, I was transformed. This is affect. Are my own comics valuable to me because the little pictures remind me of past feelings? Do these comic drawings help me come to terms with my past? Without the time for the making of self-determined art, not teacher assigned, children might not have the energy, compassion, desire or the inspiration to respond generously to humans and non-humans.

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Vicky Grube is a full professor of art at Appalachian State University. She lives in an old 1923 wooden clapboard house in the mountains. Vicky has seen bear skat in her yard. She hears owls and cats screeching throughout the night. Last fall she had her little old house painted periwinkle blue with off white trim. Her mail carrier loves the color.

grubev@appstate.edu