

**Amsterdam Comics Conference, “Drawing Yourself In
and Out of It,” 15-17 November 2018**

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Review

Amsterdam Comics Conference, “Drawing Yourself In and Out of It,” 15-17 November 2018

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The second international conference by Amsterdam Comics, titled “Drawing Yourself In and Out of It,” hosted by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, brought together three days full of vibrant panels and keynote lectures. Opening with a seductive quote from comics creator Miriam Katin, the conference’s call for papers encouraged those who are “inside” a story to “try and draw yourself out of it” (qtd. in “#4 - Fall 2018”). This epigraph set the overall tone for the conference, and allowed interested parties to submit presentation proposals that would discuss what Amsterdam Comics themselves described as “an engrossment in and an examination of a politics of affect” (“#4 - Fall 2018”).

One of the most prominent themes, and one explicitly brought into the conference’s fray via two panel titles, was the presentation of comics practice and academic research as mutually beneficial, specifically in the role of comics (creation) as educational material and/or as a medium that is potentially useful in the practice of medicine. Simon Grennan presented his work, *Parables of Care*, and explicated on its role as an educational guide to those caring for people living with dementia, the work itself a remediation of first-hand experiences offered by other caregivers. His emphasis on both research and practice demonstrated the generative relation between these forms of knowledge production, and further underlined the importance of more non-normative genres of education and innovative perspectives on contemporary health care.

Bridging the gap between depictions of illness and comics as a route for educating a mass audience was comics practitioner Viivi Rintanen. Her work depicts

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stories of people with mental illnesses and the subsequent societal disenfranchisement they experience in her native Finland. The narratives that are central to her work are supplied to her via e-mail. The results, worked on by Rintanen with her subject-collaborators, are aesthetically engaging: her use of color and shape attempt to show the sense of outsider-ness described by her collaborators, while the narratives do not shy away from the harsher lived realities of people living with psychological disorders. *Mielisairaalan kesätyttö* (2015), the title of her debut work, is discussed by the artist in an interview that can also be found in this special issue of *Digressions*.

If there was one thing hindering the (international) participants' engagement with Rintanen's work, it was that few of them could speak Finnish. This highlighted the lack of translations of important, award-winning, and yet non-English language comics work being provided for foreign markets. The Spanish-language texts discussed by Maria Fernanda Díaz-Basteris (such as *Septiembre: zona de desastre* by Mejía and Hernández) and Marmela Artime Omil (*El convoy* by Lapierre Torrens), or Portuguese language texts like *Procurando São Paulo* (author(s) unknown), as discussed by Tânia Alexandra Cardoso, provide powerful examples of both the sociopolitical importance and popularity of comics outside of the Anglophone-world.

The problematization of the comics canon was highlighted by Nina Mickwitz in her keynote lecture, "Graphic Encounters: From Ellipsis to Excess." Although Mickwitz's talk focused on arguing that documentary, journalistic, and advocacy comics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century "can be understood as belonging to a broader cultural paradigm of witnessing," in the in-between comments during her lecture she considered that the turn of Comics Studies towards autobiographical work is intimately intertwined with the individualism of contemporary society. While there is a diverse array of comics available for research, as conference participants had demonstrated earlier during the day, the dominance of memoirs such as *Maus* (1977), *Persepolis* (2000), and *Fun Home* (2006) in classrooms and at conferences gives weight to Mickwitz's observation. Moreover, the popularity of Kate Evans's *Threads* (2017), Sarah Lightman's *The Book of Sarah* (2019), and Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk about Something more Pleasant?* (2014) throughout the conference suggest that this thematic focus will persist.

Joe Sacco continued on the theme of witnessing during the Friday evening keynote interview. Questioned by comics creator Aimée de Jongh, professor of Popular Historical Culture and War at Erasmus University Rotterdam Kees Ribbens, and co-founder of Amsterdam Comics Rik Spanjers, Sacco discussed his creative

process behind the production of his critically acclaimed catalogue, addressing topics such as the definition of “journalism” in the context of comics, the selection of subjects he has depicted, and his own role as a character within the narratives. When asked about the influences that led him to become known as a pioneer of comic-journalism, the Maltese-American cartoonist explained how a wide array of cultural elements – ranging from *Mad Magazine* to the paintings of Bruegel the Elder – inspire him. It was by mentioning writer Hunter S. Thompson and Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977) that Sacco highlighted his development as a gonzo-artist, conceptualizing his practice as something attempting to be “cutting to the chase” and “breaking the traditional structures of journalism.”

Sacco’s hand-drawn stories and photographic reportage are often compared, and both raise the question on whether the act of aestheticizing causes “true” narratives to become beautified. As Susan Sontag said, “people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance” (26). Sacco is realistic about the limitations of reporting in comic form, and although he takes into account that “drawing is a mediation, a filter,” he considers himself a regular journalist, striving for truthfulness by basing his work on visual references, direct quotes, and months of research before and after a trip.

“I don’t do sketches. Only when it’s inappropriate,” says the author jokingly, referring to those situations where a camera cannot be raised, such as at military checkpoints. For him, violence is “a disgusting thing to draw” and having to recreate scenes observed in war torn regions can be an excruciating experience, to the point where Sacco considered quitting journalism after his return from Gaza. Sacco explains that: “You gotta be careful with drawings,” because “you can always draw the mortal moment.” An awareness of the tension between the subjective and the (perceived) objective is, according to him, the only way to balance the artist’s ambitions and the reporter’s obligations. Sacco constantly negotiates between stylistic choices and moral dilemmas, which are due to the fact that subjectivity is essentially unavoidable; a message reminded to the reader by the persistent presence of the narrator, the cartoon-me Sacco, in all of his work; “I [am] the thread connecting random stories.”

“Drawing Yourself In and Out of It” was an exciting and diverse three days of discussion on this burgeoning field, with a focus on advocating, documentary, and autobiographical works that promote a drawing-out of the creators themselves. While it may be useful to not be unquestionably in awe to those genres, as Mickwitz reminded us, the comics medium has proved and continues to prove a fertile ground for exploring the perspective of creators and audiences alike.

Works Cited

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