

Part Two: Defending the Sequential Aesthetic

Chapter Three: Institutionalism

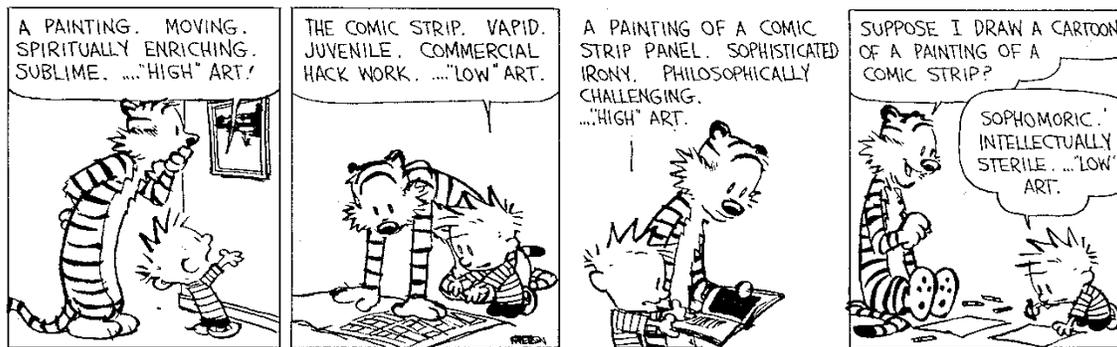


Figure 49: *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson, © Universal Press Syndicate

Religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin. Economics and art are strangers.

Willa Cather¹

There's something about comics being a printed medium which is really fascinating . . . In working for galleries, in being elitist, in doing an original work of art that can't be accurately reproduced . . . somehow it is so perverted.

Françoise Mouly²

In this last half-century, followers of the visual arts, especially, have seen an influx of pieces claiming the title of art, the likes of which had never been seen before – or rather, they had. Andy Warhol displayed facsimiles of Brillo boxes, Roy Lichtenstein painted images seemingly reproduced from comic strip panels, but on an enormous scale, and Marcel Duchamp, on the pinnacle of controversy, emblazoned a common urinal with the signature “R. Mutt, 1917,” and titled it *Fontaine*. The artworld, though piqued with interest, took the matter philosophically – literally so. Certain questions would arise time and again: How is it that common, everyday objects had suddenly been transformed into “art”? How are these artworks different, if at all, from their commonplace cousins? What is it, exactly, that we are calling, in these cases, “art”? Investigating these questions and others, the aesthetics community scrambled to find resolution. Reacting both to theories that claim the essential characteristics of art are perceivable (whether mimetic or expressive), and those that claim there are no essential characteristics of art, a third school for categorizing art emerged: The Institutional Theory. This chapter will focus on those answers proposed by Institutional Theory and its offspring, taking note of the myriad complications that arise when applied to the sequential art medium.

Dickie's Institution

Taking his cue from Arthur C. Danto's concept and essay, “The Artworld,” George Dickie proposed that art is defined not by some common exhibited property, but rather, by some non-exhibited property held by the work – that same property being held by all works classified as art. Essentially, Dickie's early theory proposes (it has changed some since, but not irrevocably so) that art must satisfy two conditions to be so classified: (1) it is an artifact; and (2) it is

¹ From “Four Letters: Escapism” in *On Writing*

composed of a “set of aspects” upon which has been conferred the status of candidate for appreciation by the artworld at large.³

What, exactly, Dickie means by “artifact” is a still ongoing debate, largely due to Dickie’s having changed his position on the matter a number of times. It seems that an artifact need not be manmade, nor physically altered by man (as evidenced by Dickie’s allowance of *objet trouvé* into the classification of art). It needs, however, to be an empirical thing (though not necessarily a physical thing, it would seem, lest the exclusion of music and performance as art – something Dickie does not at all propose). It would seem from the second criterion, at least, that it is a thing capable of containing within it a particular “set of aspects” suitable for further consideration. At least, then, it is a thing which can be experienced.

This “further consideration” due the artifact is the subject of yet more debate by Dickie’s critics. According to Dickie’s original account, for an artifact to be classed as an artwork, it must have conferred upon it the status of “candidate for appreciation.” This is not to say that it must be *actually* appreciated, for it is certainly within the realm of possibility that a work of art go entirely unappreciated, but the candidacy must be recognised. But by whom? I can appreciate my refrigerator, but I would not state that it is art. This is where the term “institutional” comes into play. The artifact has conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation within an institutional setting. Dickie himself compares this conference with the rites of marriage.⁴ In order for a marriage to be recognised, it must be performed within the bounds of a certain customary practice (within a church or other suitable system), and must be performed by someone with the authority to pronounce judgement (a judge, minister, etc.). Not just anyone can perform a legal marriage. This same, Dickie says, rings true for art. If I paint a painting, in order for it to be recognised as art (and not, say, as paint simply slathered on a canvas), it requires the institutional backing of the artworld. Some member of that social institution must, in a sense, nominate my work for the appropriate candidacy. But, we must ask, who is a member? Who has such authority? Dickie writes,

The core personnel of the artworld is a loosely organized, but nevertheless related, set of persons including artists (understood to be painters, writers, composers), producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters for newspapers, critics for publications of all sorts, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others. These are the people who keep the machinery of the artworld working and thereby provide for its continuing existence. In addition, every person who sees himself as a member of the artworld is thereby a member.⁵

² Quoted in Groth & Fiore, p.201

³ Dickie (1992), p.438; Dickie is speaking of “art,” he would be quick to note, in the “classificatory,” as opposed to the “evaluative” sense, the latter arising in cases where the word “art” is being used to validate (as opposed to describe) something. To *class* something as art is to propose that it satisfy certain conditions for membership; whereas to *evaluate* something as art, Dickie is saying, is something along the lines of, “Wow, that hairstyle is a work of art!” Precisely what Dickie means here is somewhat ethereal, but it seems that the evaluative sense of art is a commonplace way of saying that something is of a particularly high aesthetic quality, regardless of whether one might indeed class it as an artwork, proper. The evaluative sense of art, it might be shown, can be used ironically, where the classificatory cannot. For instance, I could be ironic in saying, “That hairstyle is a work of art,” but not in saying, “Warhol’s *Brillo Box* is a work of art.” Or, at least, if I am being ironic in the latter statement, I must have been using “art” in the evaluative sense when I was.

⁴ Dickie (1992), p.438

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.438-9

Sharpe notes, “[The artworld] comprises those who are genuinely and seriously concerned with the arts. They and they alone are empowered to ‘christen’ artefacts works of art and it is by their imprimatur that artefacts become works of art.”⁶ More often than not, it is the artist himself, Dickie notes, who performs this christening.⁷

How, then, can the average person (who was not present at the conferring of status) tell when such status has indeed been conferred? Dickie argues that the artifact’s continued presentation within the institution in which it was verified is a sure indicator of status. “An artifact’s hanging in an art museum as part of a show and a performance at a theater are sure signs [of its status].”⁸ At other times, though, he admits, one might never be sure. Upon meeting any man, how might we know if that man is married? Indeed, out of context, we might never know. Nonetheless, there are conventions which are fair indicators of his marriage status. Perhaps, for instance, he is wearing a wedding band on the ring finger of his left hand. While again not a sure sign (I wear a ring on that finger, yet I am not married), one could not be faulted for thinking it so. Just so, in the presentation of art, there are fair indicators of status; the gallery and the theater are two such examples. When a museum-goer enters a gallery, he has certain expectations of what lies beyond the front doors. The same is true of the theatre-goer, the reader of literature, the cinema patron, the concert enthusiast, and so forth. Each of these, Dickie notes, is a person who engages with the arts “with certain expectations and knowledge about what he will experience and an understanding of how he should behave in the face of what he experiences.”⁹ Robert McGregor maintains,

Some[conventions of presentation] have to do with the presentation of the work and concern mainly the environment of the work of art ... Others have to do with the behaviour of the general public ... And still other practices have to do with the behaviour of the critics.¹⁰

A theatre-goer, for instance, expects that the action of the drama will restrict itself (except for in extraordinary circumstances) to the stage. Further, he recognises, certain actions on the stage are not in fact ordinarily due aesthetic attention (the stage hands changing the set between scenes, for instance). The expectations of the audience are based on the conventions of the institution – not so much rules as regularities, such that one becomes accustomed to certain practices within the confines of the institutional presentation. “To be sure,” writes Catherine Lord, “a convention is not demolished if someone steps out of line.”¹¹ In a performance of a play, where apparent members of the audience turn out to be actors, a convention has been broken, perhaps, but not a rule. Breaking a convention simply leads to changes in the audience’s future expectations.

Notice the word “become” in Sharpe’s quote, “...artefacts become works of art.” The very idea that there is a change in the *nature* of a work upon its receiving the above status is the primary focus of Danto’s The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. “Learning that it is a work of art,” he writes, “means that it has qualities to attend to which its untransfigured counterpart lacks, and that our aesthetic responses will be different.”¹² In other words, the conferring upon the artifact the status of candidate for appreciation has brought about some ontological change in the artifact itself. Walter Benjamin notes,

⁶ Sharpe, p.32

⁷ Dickie (1973), p.26

⁸ Dickie (1992), p.439; In fact, in a later version of his theory, Dickie updates the second criterion to state that the artifact “must be made to be presented to members of the artworld” (Lord (1987), p.230).

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ McGregor, p.4

¹¹ Lord (1980), p.327

¹² Danto (1981), p.99

This is comparable to the situation of the work of art in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value, it was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art.¹³

Previous to its induction into the artworld (and away from the world of religion), the artifact was treated as if it were one type of thing. Following the conferment of the status of candidate for appreciation, it was treated as another type of thing altogether. This institutional act now seems more in line with the Christian rites of baptism than of marriage. The church holds that baptism brings about a change in the person, not only of status or context (as is the case with marriage), but of nature itself. The baptised is changed, fundamentally, in the eyes of the church (if visually indiscernibly so). And just so for art. Oswald Hanfling writes,

Left to lie on a scrap-heap, an object such as one of Duchamp's 'ready-mades' is nothing more than a piece of scrap. But once a certain treatment has been given to it, it is transformed into a work of art, something to be examined and appreciated as such by the public. It is, and yet it is not, the very same object that was lying on the scrap-heap.¹⁴

But what, if not the visual (or in the case of music, audio) aspect of the artifact, has been transfigured? In other words, of what is the artwork composed? Dickie argues that the stagehands in the above example do not compose parts of the work of art.¹⁵ Another example Dickie cites is the colour of the back of a painting.¹⁶ Sharpe argues that the frame is not part of the artwork.¹⁷ The frame and the stagehands are conventions considered (or rather, dismissed) by the aware audience as outside this "set of aspects" conferred with the status of candidate for appreciation. In other words, the frame and stagehands are not of interest to the appreciator of art. The back of the painting, meanwhile, while understood to be part of the container of the artwork (in this case, the canvas), is nonetheless understood to not be part of the artwork itself. In the case of Duchamp's *Fontaine*, though, what we are concerned with is still visually indiscernible from a common urinal. It might do some good to borrow a couple of terms from the last chapter: the "sur-face" and the "sub-face."

Fontaine, it might be argued, shares the same "sur-face" with the common urinal, but due to its institutionalisation (and, Danto would argue, change in nature), it possesses a different "sub-face." Perhaps Duchamp was making a comment when he presented *Fontaine* as art. The sub-face of *Fontaine* would be a subtle statement of the state of the artworld. Duchamp might be saying, "The traditions of art have brought us to this," using the urinal to make the statement for him. No common urinal in a common men's room could make such a statement. Only one in the institutional setting of the gallery could contain such a sub-face. The aesthetic interest of the audience is drawn to these features of the work *because* it is in the gallery. The visually indiscernible urinal in the men's room does not, and cannot, possess such a sub-face. An art enthusiast would look in vain for such features here. *Fontaine* and the urinal possess different features, different natures.

Perhaps the paramount indicator of an artifact's possession of the status of candidate for appreciation by the artworld is the presence of a title. Dickie claims,

¹³ Benjamin, p.227

¹⁴ Hanfling (1992), p.24

¹⁵ McGregor, p.5

¹⁶ Dickie (1992), p.440

¹⁷ Sharpe, p.32; though in some cases, such as Ford Madox Brown's *Work*, the frame might indeed be considered a part of the artwork itself.

An object may acquire the status of art without ever being named but giving it a title makes clear to whomever is interested that an object is a work of art ... any title at all (even *Untitled*) is a badge of status.¹⁸

Both Jerrold Levinson and S.J. Wilshire have focused on this aspect of the artwork. A title, Levinson claims (as Danto had, before him¹⁹), is an indicator that something is open to interpretation. It represents, in part, the artist's view towards his work. The title, he writes, "has a significant effect on the aesthetic face it presents and on the qualities we correctly perceive in it."²⁰ The title is not merely a name, an identifier, but represents the door through which the audience will approach the work. It is the vantage point of interpretation. One does not interpret a car, for example, regardless of the name applied to it: Miata, Stingray, or Mini. These add nothing to our experience of the car. The title of a painting or play or piece of music, however, does indeed have an effect on our experience of that work. Consider how different one's experience and interpretation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* would have been if he had titled it, *Brutus*; or if *Gone With The Wind* had instead been titled *1865*. Without question, the title composes part of that "set of aspects" considered part of the art. Indeed, it may hold a position unique to the work. Consider the thoughts of Wilshire:

We cannot read titles simply as parts of texts, since they belong both in and outside the literary work. We read literary works as entitled, and we refer to them, as written, by their titles. This duality is essential to the part they play between creator, work, and reader.²¹

The title is both the identifier, the name given in christening and the universal referent henceforth, and a part of the unified work itself, suitable for interpretation.

Certainly, these concepts are heavily intertwined and confusing. Dickie openly admits that his definitions of art, artist, artworld, and so forth, are circular, each depending on the others for its foundation. But this is the same with any institution. Richard J. Sclafani writes,

The concepts of 'priest,' 'minister,' 'christening,' 'relic,' etc. are intelligible only within a vast network of beliefs, attitudes, conventions, social practices, and historical happenings, i.e., only within the larger historical and ideological framework of the church. Surely the same must be said for the concepts of 'artist,' 'work of art,' 'painter,' 'painting,' etc.²²

Indeed, this same network of "beliefs, attitudes, conventions, social practices, and historical happenings" formed the basis for Danto's concept of the artworld itself, which would be instrumental in Dickie's theory. It would be advantageous to examine this world here.

¹⁸ Dickie (1992), p.440

¹⁹ Danto (1981), p.3

²⁰ Levinson, p.29

²¹ Wilshire, p.404

²² Sclafani, p.113

Danto's Artworld

Danto's artworld, from which Dickie would take his cue, was not so much a "loosely organized ... set of persons," but "an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art."²³ Without the history and theory of art, Danto argues, art would not itself be possible.²⁴ Indeed, without theoretical lenses, we would be incapable of seeing the *Mona Lisa*, much less Duchamp's *Fontaine*, as art. "Art is a kind of thing that depends for its existence upon theories," Danto maintains, "Without theories of art, black paint *is* just black paint and nothing more."²⁵ In order for an audience to see a work of art as representational, that audience requires a knowledge of the theory of representation (as discussed in Chapter One). In order for an audience to see a work of art as an expression requires some knowledge of expressionism (as discussed in Chapter Two). Without, for instance, a knowledge of conventions, those stars around a cartoon character's head, which we discussed in Chapter One, would be senseless. For that matter, we couldn't see them as stars. Nor the head around which they spin as a head. Nor spinning, for that matter. It would all be just a mess of lines. Indeed, without theory, those lines would not be art at all.

To say that for a viewer to see art requires a knowledge of theory is not to say that the viewer requires a complex knowledge of aesthetics. Rather, all that may be required, at minimum, is a comprehensive understanding of $A = B$. In order to understand what a painting is of, much less what it *means*, requires a very basic understanding of convention – mimetic, expressive, and otherwise. Conventions of representation were touched on in Chapter One, as was "seeing as," in Chapter Two. Each of these comes into play, at some level, in the viewing of works of art. For the most part, these ways of seeing are so ingrained in the human consciousness that we cannot help but see an image "as" something. Consider the "happy face" icon (☺); essentially, two dots and a curved line surrounded by a circle. But the mind sees something different: a face. McCloud writes, "There is no life here except that which you give it."²⁶ The intention of the artist to represent something pictorially is not enough. The viewer must be *capable* of seeing what the artist is representing, and further be *inclined* to see it. It is conventional to see the "happy face" configuration as a human face, however iconic. This much is ingrained in us from the day we are born. But, Sharpe argues, convention alone is not all that is operating here.²⁷ Pictures are not like words, arbitrary signifiers. If there were not some relation between the lines on paper and the figure represented, we could not pick out which of two drawings was the better likeness, for example. As such, the artist also relies upon things we see in the world: perspective, highlighting, and so forth. If I see a picture of two human figures, with a substantial difference in scale between them, I assume one is closer to the picture-plane than the other. But this was not always the case, for prior to the invention of perspective in representation, a viewer would have interpreted the scale difference as signifying something else completely.²⁸ Transplant someone from the 13th Century into our own, and show him what we take as a simple representational painting, and he would not likely know what to make of it. I have *learned*, essentially, that *A* (one figure smaller than another) depicts *B* (one person further away than another). The displaced 13th Century man learned something different, and would likely see the picture *as* something different.

The same may be maintained for expressive art. If I'm angry, I might be said to be "seeing red," but I see no such thing. Red, for one reason or another, conventionally refers to anger as an emotion. Green for jealousy, blue for calm, and so forth. Again, it might be argued, this is nothing more than convention. In Chapter Two, the theory of

²³ Danto (1992), p.431

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Danto (1981), p.135

²⁶ McCloud, p.59

²⁷ Sharpe, p.72-3

gesturalism was discussed. Here, the signifier (what is presented) and the signified (what is represented) were discussed in terms of the “sur-face” and the “sub-face”. The first reveals the second, but only to those in the know. When I see a face with furrowed brow, gritting teeth, and squinting eyes, I assume the owner of that face is angry. I assume as much because it is conventional that someone with that face is angry. This is to say, when, in the past, I have come across someone making such a face, I have almost always discovered the owner to be angry. Certainly I have seen actors make such a face without being angry, but they are relying, once again, upon my assumptions. An “angry” face makes for a more understandable representation of an angry person than a smiling face. This, in essence, points to the fact that we all share many conventions. The actor making the angry face, and the painter painting an angry face, all assume I share the same conventions of representation as they do. Thus, writes Sharpe,

The artist relies on his expectation that his public will read the lines he draws in a particular way; this enables them to pay attention to the object represented.²⁹

In most cases, the artist does not want the viewer to be paying attention to the convention itself, but to what is conventionally depicted – seeing *what*, not seeing *how*. Most viewers do not even understand the *how*, but can nonetheless see the *what*. Art does not typically require a viewer to understand *why* he sees *A* as *B*, but it does typically require that he see *A* as *B*. In this way, theories of depiction can be said to be “backgrounded” in the viewer, but if they are not present at all, the viewing experience will be sorely lacking.

Mimeticism and expressionism have each held some theoretical prominence at some point in the history of art, both for artists and for theorists. At a time when art was seen generally as mimetic, the artworld was indeed mimetically based – and indeed the art itself was mimetic. This was all the artworld allowed us to see. Later, when expressionism was introduced, the artworld took expressionistic theories into its fold as well. Each time a theory of art is expounded, and usually accompanied by a work, the artworld, this web of theory, takes it in and is the richer for it. A work might be described as representational or expressionistic. But further, we describe works as impressionistic, surreal, and so forth. The knowledge of each of these predicates allows us to potentially see another level to a work, or another work altogether. With each added predicate, the population of the artworld grows exponentially.

The greater the variety of artistically relevant predicates, the more complex the individual members of the artworld become; and the more one knows of the entire population of the artworld, the richer one’s experience with any of its members.³⁰

Additionally, with each predicate added to the artworld (e.g. “mimetic”), the artworld also envelops its opposite (e.g. non-mimetic). With each predicate, each theory, the artworld continues to expand. Hanfling notes,

Beauty, inspiration, skill and craftsmanship, the imitation or representation of nature – these are still important to the concept of art that we have inherited. But in the course of time these ingredients underwent changes, and new ones made their appearance or became more prominent.³¹

²⁸ In pre-perspective paintings, a larger figure was predominantly taken to signify a level of importance (e.g. Christ was always a larger figure than the disciples).

²⁹ Sharpe, p.73

³⁰ Danto (1992), p.432

³¹ Hanfling (1992), p.9

Indeed, the artworld is an evolving one. Just as one can never step in the same river twice, the artworld is never the same at any two points in time. At any one time, the artworld might not contain one particular theory or predicate, but at a later time, it might. As such, any one artifact might not be baptised into the artworld at the time of its creation (because at that time, the artworld did not contain such theories as would classify it as art), but might *later* be nominated as a candidate for appreciation (at some time coexistent with a theory which might categorise it as art). Duchamp's *Fontaine* was able to make it into the artworld population because, as Sclafani notes, Duchamp knew "what the artworld of the World War I era was and was not ready for."³² In short, because he understood the social practices and historical happenings within the artworld, he also knew how his art might be received.

When Dickie adopted Danto's artworld as his own, he took the various theories of art and placed them in a human population. From Danto's artworld, Dickie derived the institution into which the various works of art would be placed. Hanfling asks, "But what if I happen to be the person who must decide whether to confer the status [of candidate for appreciation]? On what basis am I to make this decision?"³³ The answer seems, apparently, on the basis of the theories held by the institutionalised artworld of which you are a member. "Christening implies valuation," Sharpe argues.³⁴ And indeed, neither Dickie nor Danto preclude such a possibility.

There are two sorts of divisions within the artworld which should now be given consideration. The first such division is Dickie's collection of systems of presentation which compose the institution. Dickie maintains that each of our recognised art forms (from dance to drama to painting to film, and so on) relies on an institutionalised framework in which a particular member of that art form might be presented to the public. Dance, opera, and drama have the stage, painting and sculpture have the gallery, film has the cinema, etc. And each of these systems of presentation has its own conventions (as discussed in the first section, above), as well as its own origin, history, and so on. Of course, even though a dance, an opera, and a drama might share the same stage on different nights, each has a separate (if overlapping) system of presentation, and separate conventions of presentation. If they did not, we, the audience, could not properly distinguish between them. This is not to say, however, that there is not some overlap between systems, with one art type existing in two, or several, systems. Dickie provides the example of plays, which may exist in both the system of the theatre, and the system of literature.³⁵ We may encounter it in either, and in each it will adhere to the conventions of presentation of that system. But in light of these systems, each with its own origin and conventions, how is it that a new art form can come into being? Dickie expands,

A whole new system comparable to the theater, for example, could be added in one fell swoop. What is more likely is that a new subsystem would be added within a system. For example, junk sculpture added within sculpture, happenings added within theater. Such additions might in time develop into full-blown systems.³⁶

In its infancy, the art form is part of another – a subsystem within that system. As it develops and receives attention, its conventions become so self-contained that it essentially breaks away from its parent system. The audience will henceforth approach a work presented in that system with expectations unique to that system. One should not, however, as William Blizek does, confuse these systems as artworlds unto themselves. He asks,

³² Sclafani, p.113

³³ Hanfling (1992), p.31

³⁴ Sharpe, p.34

³⁵ Dickie (1973), p.28

³⁶ Dickie (1992), p.438

Is there a music artworld, a visual artworld, a theatrical artworld, and so on? It does appear that there are such artworlds, each characterized by its own professional association, official publications and patterns of activities.³⁷

Each system could be said to constitute a practically autonomous institution. That much is true. But each is not an artworld unto itself, for each system adheres to the same web of theory which envelops the whole of the artworld. Each system equally allows for mimeticism, expressionism, and every other predicate adopted by the artworld as a whole. There may, however, be separate artworlds on a different basis. This is the second division that needs to be taken into consideration.

Suppose, for example, a member of the artworld confers the status of candidate for appreciation upon a particular artifact. According to Dickie's theory, that artifact is now art. But suppose, also, that another member of the artworld disagrees, claiming that for whatever reason, it is *not* art. Is one of them simply wrong? Is one of them not really a member of the artworld? What is the state of the artifact? Is this an impasse from which Institutional Theory is unable to recover? James O. Young proposes in "Artworks and Artworlds" that "Earth is populated not by a unified artworld but by a number of mutually hostile and suspicious artworlds."³⁸ This, he claims, is the only logical solution to disagreements within the larger artworld. The status of "art", he argues, is (at least, to a degree) subjective. What is art for one artworld is simply an artifact (if that) for another. "Already it is widely accepted," he argues, "that different works are artworks only relative to the artworlds of particular times."³⁹ Why not, then, accept the possibility of different artworlds within the same time, but varying between groups? Despite a certain appeal, Young's argument fails on two fronts. First, there are not, as we have seen, different artworlds at different times. Rather, as Danto shows, it is one artworld within which theories have a cumulative effect. The artworld may seem radically different from one period to another, but it is the same artworld, only more. In the same way, photographs of the same person in childhood and adulthood will seem quite different, but are in fact photographs of the same person. His comparison cannot work on this front. Second, the inevitable result, the *reductio ad absurdum*, of Young's claim would be that each person is an artworld unto himself. For me (according to my own personal theories), X is art. But for you (according to your theories) X is nothing of the sort. Young needs to recognise that there are communities of theory which bond individuals into a group. There needs to be a line. One such line which seems historically apparent, at least, is the division between the "High" and the "Low" artworlds.

Ted Cohen claims that the High/Low art division is philosophically both indefensible and indispensable.⁴⁰ Cohen argues for the existence of "affective communities" bonded by their unified feelings toward art. The High art community, he argues is connected by art that displays a narrow range of human connection. The Low art community, conversely, is connected by art that takes as its focus a vast range of human connection. Where nearly everyone with an interest in the arts can find interest in, say *The Simpsons*, few people can connect through the stories of I.B. Singer and Richard Stern. The fewer people that can connect through any one work, he argues, the more alike they are. Non-art, he claims, are those artifacts though which I can connect with none but myself, non-art being truly subjective. In essence, what Cohen is implying here is a hierarchy of elitist art communities with non-art on one end (a tiny community: the self), High art in the middle (an elite community), and Low art at the other end (a colossal affective community, including perhaps all people, bonded by the lowest common denominator). In this way, Cohen is able to equate High with "Fine" art, and Low with "Popular" art. These do not, however, seem to be different artworlds,

³⁷ Blizek, p.144

³⁸ Young (1995), p.335

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.334-5

⁴⁰ Cohen, p.151-2

simply degrees to which arts are appreciated by a range of persons. There is no division, with regards to persons at least, by which one might belong either to the High artworld, or the Low art world.

Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, in High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture argue that, because of the historical intertwining of “High” and “Low” art, there cannot be drawn any real line between the two poles:

Every experience of the art of the past hundred years reinforces the uncomfortable challenging premise that we cannot delimit the realm of art by any pat, a priori rankings among the categories of the circumstances, the materials, or the subjects in question.⁴¹

Yet if Varnedoe and Gopnik are correct in their assessment, how is it, then, that the art community (and the world in general) can hold onto this historical opposition?

Consider Stanley Fish’s concept of interpretive communities, discussed in Chapter One. Certainly we could consider two (or more) artworlds developing autonomously from one another, such that each is composed of certain theories of art which are different from those of another. As such, while one artworld might consider predicate Z a qualifiable characteristic of art, another artworld might not. Further, one artworld might contain all those predicates that another contains, plus more, thus giving the appearance of a hierarchy, where in fact none exists. The Low artworld, for instance, may contain in it all those theories which describe art also contained by the High artworld, but also contain predicates which the High artworld does not accept, thus accounting for its seeming “easy” nature, to use Cohen’s term.

Comics in the Artworld?

Will comics, then, find a unique home in the artworld of Danto and the institution of Dickie? First, we should ask, do they qualify under Dickie’s classification? Do comics qualify as artifacts? Considering Dickie’s own vagueness on this front, the answer seems undeniably, yes. Dickie’s concept of artifact seems to include anything under the sun, the sun itself, and a wide variety of things found nowhere in particular. The more important question may be, if comics qualify as artifacts, what “set of aspects” have conferred upon them the status of candidate for appreciation by the artworld community? Certainly not the physical comic itself, for there may be thousands or even millions of copies of that same comic I hold in my hand. Surely not each of these is its own work of art? Rather, the answer seems to lie in the same vein as that of literature and poetry: the type-token distinction.

From the Megatype to the Token and Everything In Between

Sharpe argues, with regard to copies of a particular poem, “As things stand the poem is a type and of this type the copies are tokens.”⁴² My copy of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and your copy of the same are both tokens of the type, *Middlemarch*. Each is equally *Middlemarch*. The type-token distinction is not the same, Sharpe argues, as the distinction between a universal and its instances, nor is it the same as between a class and its members. Instances of a universal may be radically different from one another, having in common only that they participate in the same universal. Lime green and hunter green are both instances of the universal, “greenness,” but one could not identify lime green with hunter green. The same rings true for members of a class. The bear and the antelope both belong to the class, mammal, yet there is very little they actually have in common. Unlike these two distinctions, Sharpe notes,

⁴¹ Varnedoe & Gopnik, p.409

⁴² Sharpe, p.15

“the type and the token of that type share all necessary and individuating properties.”⁴³ For instance, my copy of *Middlemarch* is essentially the same as yours, despite that mine is a first-edition hardcover set in a 12-point Roman font, and yours is the Penguin paperback edition set in 8-point New Roman. *Middlemarch*, though it is embodied in different forms, does not change. Each copy of the book is an instance of *Middlemarch*. Hence, Sharpe writes, “It does not matter if I begin [reading] with the paperback and end with the hardback.”⁴⁴ Our interest is in the aesthetic object, not in its particular embodiment – not in the particular instance. My *Middlemarch* and your *Middlemarch* are both tokens of the type: *Middlemarch*. Each token of the story contains exactly the same qualities, despite divergencies in the physical embodiment of that token. The book might be different, but the story remains the same. Like the universal/instance dichotomy, the token cannot exist outside its type. Unlike the universal, though, the type can be both created and destroyed. The same cannot be said for, say, greenness. If we destroy every copy of *Middlemarch* and eradicate every memorisation of the same, the type is also destroyed. In the same way, the type comes into existence (although there have been argued to be exceptions to this⁴⁵) along with the first token of that type. With greenness, however, if, in some bizarre cosmic accident, everything green simply ceased to exist, greenness itself would not do so. Years later, something green may arise again. Greenness still existed in the interim, despite the lack of green things.

Joseph Margolis creates a more structuralist account of the type-token concept in Art and Philosophy when he introduces a number of additional terms. Consider, for instance, a case of *Middlemarch* translated into Swedish. It cannot be said to be exactly the same as our English *Middlemarch*, yet it contains a very similar aesthetic object: the same story. Margolis argues that both the English and the Swedish edition of *Middlemarch* (each a type to which there are tokens) belong to the same “megatype.” Quoting C.L Stephenson, Margolis writes,

Two tokens will belong to the same megatype if and only if they have approximately the same meaning; so it is not necessary that the tokens belong to the same language or that they have that similarity in shape or sound that makes them belong to the same type. Thus any token of “table” and any token of “mensa,” though not of the same type, will nevertheless be of the same megatype.⁴⁶

In order to tell if two tokens belong to the same megatype, Margolis claims, we often need to refer to the “prime instance” of the work, often the signature manuscript of the work. If a token can be said to embody the same “design” (the same “meaning”), even if not the same language as the prime instance, then it is arguably of the same megatype. Margolis also notes the concept of the “notation,” being something from which the token may be made, but which, in itself, is not the art. The mold from which a sculpture is cast can be viewed as a notation, as can the silkscreens used in Warhol’s creation of *Brillo Box*. Margolis refers to the notation as a “sign of a work of art,” but argues, “When a piece of plastic art is viewed as a notation, it must thereby cease to be viewed as a work of art.”⁴⁷ As such, the translation of *Middlemarch* can be compared to the original English “prime instance” of *Middlemarch*, but then that prime instance is not being viewed as a work of art, itself, but as a notation for the megatype, *Middlemarch*.

With *Middlemarch*, then, what exactly is the “set of aspects” which has conferred on it the status of candidate for appreciation? It would be argued that both the English and Swedish editions of *Middlemarch* are the same work of art, *Middlemarch*. None would seriously speculate that the English *Middlemarch* and the Swedish *Middlemarch*

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.14-15

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p.18

⁴⁵ In particular, by Dale Jacquette (see Jacquette (1994)).

⁴⁶ Margolis (1980), p.54

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.58

compose separate works of art. Each is, simply, a token of *Middlemarch*. As such, the set of aspects considered must be composed of the megatype *Middlemarch*.

With all this in mind, then, let us consider the breakdown of comics. Each comic, we can say, begins with a design or a megatype, to use Margolis' term. It is the aesthetic object, the idea, which will be embodied in each token. In this, what we have is much the same as in any other art. Each must begin with such a design, or have that design integrated into the prime notation or instance. The prime notation for a comic, however, is another matter. Comics, typically, can be said to have two prime notations, the first being a notation for the next. Each comic, speaking generally, will begin with a script, which details the panel composition as well as dialogue, narration, and so forth. This script is the first physical sign of the megatype, and as such, would fit the definition of the prime notation in Margolis' view. The script does not serve as a notation only for the actual comic, however, but also for the "original art," though here, more in a manner akin to that of music or drama. The artist, especially if identifiably different from the writer, must interpret the script (as a notation, a signifier of the megatype, a set of instructions) in creating his art. Just as one director's interpretation of *King Lear* might be different from the next, so too one artist's interpretation of a particular script might be different from another's. The original art, as sketched by the comic's penciller, and embellished by its inker, serves as a notation for the final comic. It is also the first notation of the type, as opposed to the megatype, of which the script was the prime notation. It is that from which the finished comic will be directly produced. The original art should not be misconstrued as a prime instance of the comic, however, for its appearance is not precisely the same as that of the finished work. For one, a comic page in its original form generally also has on it rough pencil lines and notes made in non-photo blue ink, none of which will appear on the final page as reproduced in comic form. Additionally, any comic to appear in colour, unless hand-painted (which is rare), does not get the colour added until the actual printing process. As the colour can certainly be considered part of the set of aspects which make up the comic (while pencil roughs and non-photo blue notes cannot), the "original art" must be a notation, and not an instance. Further, like the script, it should be considered a "prime notation," being the first notation in visual, not just literary, form. Unlike the manuscript for a book, however, the layout of the original art will be reproduced exactly on the final comic page. As we saw in Part One, layout and composition combine as a very important convention of the presentation of comics, and as such, must be reproduced accurately in its tokens.⁴⁸ To an author of novels, it is unimportant whether a word appears in the beginning, middle, or end of a line. To the creator of comics, where a panel is to appear may itself be the crux of the entire story. Finally, the individual comic is completed, with the addition of the colour, and the non-reproduction of non-photo blue notes. The prime instance (the comic as it will appear in its final form) may appear first on the computer screen, when the colour is added, or it may appear first as a particular copy of that comic. The comic itself is the type, while each particular copy constitutes a token of that type. Is it the megatype of the comic, though, which composes that set of aspects upon which the artworld confers the status of candidate for appreciation?

Where, with music or drama, the megatype, being Shakespeare's *King Lear* or Handel's *Messiah*, is that which is considered the art upon which the requisite status is conferred, is the same true of comics? Consider Harvey Pekar's work, for one. Pekar has, on at least one occasion, had two artists draw different renditions of the same story. Each worked from the same script, yet produced very different works indeed. Were each of these simply visual interpretations in the same way that two directors interpret *Lear*, or two conductors interpret the *Messiah* chorus?

⁴⁸ The situation can differ slightly when dealing with comic strips. For Sunday pages especially, syndicates often require the artist to produce 'throw-away' panels, which may be discarded or kept in depending on the space requirements of the individual newspaper. The newspaper is given the freedom (to a degree) to rearrange and drop panels, depending on their needs. As such, an integral dependency on layout ceases in the Sunday page.

Differently performed interpretations of *Lear* and the *Messiah* chorus, we discussed above, were different types of the same megatype, each embodying the same essential “design.” With comics, however, being a complete amalgamation of the visual and the literary (one swallowed up by the other, such that neither can exist singly), each word/image combination would seem to be unique. Each is a work of art in itself. Whereas with drama and music, the megatype (e.g. Shakespeare’s *King Lear*) has spawned separate types (differently performed interpretations of Shakespeare’s *Lear*), can these separate types be said to constitute different works of art? Sharpe notes,

Musicians speak of ‘Klempere’s *Eroica*’, ‘Toscanini’s *Seventh*,’ ‘Guilini’s Verdi *Requiem*’ or ‘Solomon’s *Hammerklavier*’ as particularly celebrated interpretations. They become familiar and well loved and may be performed again and again, and probably recorded.⁴⁹

Certainly, different interpretations of a work constitute different types altogether, but they nonetheless embody the same essential design. They are embodiments of the same work of art via different interpretations. But could one argue that two differently drawn renditions of the same story, in a medium so dependent upon the inseparability of word and image, constitute the same work? When Pekar handed to the artists copies of the same script, he was not handing them notations of a finished work, but notations of a work yet to be completed. The script was missing a vital, essential element: visual art. The comic would not yet be a comic until it had been given the visual treatment. With Shakespeare or Handel, however, the artist (Shakespeare or Handel) left behind notations of complete works. It seems, instead, that each type (each drawn version) of the megatype (the design signified by the original script) may constitute a completely unique work altogether. Perhaps what we need to look at is how each enters the comic institution set up for the presentation of the work.

Where with drama, the institution for presentation is the theatre, and for painting and sculpture, the gallery, for comics, like literature, the work is presented in publications. In many ways, comics can be said to *rely* on publication for their existence. Most comics are published in serial form, either in periodicals called “comic books” or in newspapers as “comic strips.” A few are published in the as yet undefined (and previously discussed) “graphic novel” format. These are, in short, the established “showcases” for works of sequential art. It is in these forms, this institution, that comics see print, and are offered for appreciation by the public. Comic books in particular rely on the publication industry for financial reasons. Due to the amount of time it takes for a comic book to be produced, an artist must rely on the publishing industry with its distribution in order to make the book financially viable. Jim Steranko notes, “One of the most vital factors in a successful publication is distribution. Without good coverage even the best book will fold.”⁵⁰ A certain number of comics must be sold in order to pay for the manpower behind the comic, both the artist, and those involved in the publication process. “Underground comics,” writes Shary Flenniken, “unless they’re vastly successful, can’t support the artists.”⁵¹ This is because underground comics have, traditionally, relied upon self-publication and small-range distribution. When an artist attempts to publish his own work, which is perfectly viable, it is likely to suffer great setbacks due to the framework long since established by the comic book industry. As Wiater and Bissette note, “Since the birth of the American comic book in 1933, the medium has been fettered by the commercial parameters of the industry.”⁵² The same is essentially true for the publication of comic strips. Although the newspaper is the showcase, and artists must attempt to have their work recognised (i.e. have conferred upon their work the status of candidate for appreciation) by its editors, it is not the only potential obstacle in the effort to get one’s

⁴⁹ Sharpe, p.16-17

⁵⁰ Steranko (1970), p.61

⁵¹ Quoted in Groth & Fiore, p.261

work printed. Most newspapers, unless their comic strips are produced by staff artists, will not print a comic strip unless it is solicited by a newspaper syndicate. As such, the comic strip generally has the requisite status conferred upon it by two levels of the artworld: the syndicate editors and the newspaper editors. Again, if the strip is unable to show a profit, it may be terminated (by either the syndicate or the newspaper). As such, much of the criterion for the members of the artworld conferring status on sequential art is profit-based. In this way, sequential artists are both fettered by and reliant upon their institution. Fettered, because their work is seemingly at the whim of a profit-oriented industry. “Money has a tremendous effect on what is and ISN’T seen,” writes McCloud.⁵³ Newspaper syndicates dictate the dimensions, for instance, of the comic strip. Not only can the audience of the strip come to the strip with expectations of convention, but just so must the comic strip artist conform to those conventions. The conventions are regulated by a part of the artworld which does not include the artists themselves. The same is true of comic books and their length, as well as features that the publisher feels will sell the book. “Form follows profit,” we are told, “is the aesthetic principle of our times.”⁵⁴ Comic creators must deal with the censorship imposed (some would say self-imposed) by the comic industry, rules which detail what cannot be published by a company.⁵⁵ Of course, the readers who recognise the seal of a censorship board (most prevalently, the Comics Code Authority), enter the work with certain traditional expectations.⁵⁶ Further, comic artists must deal with the inevitability of advertising spread throughout their work. The audience, meanwhile, expects such advertising, and deals with it as a convention of the presentation of the art. Yet, as we have seen, unless a self-publisher is widely successful, his work may not survive. This does not preclude the possibility of an artist working without thought of profit (perhaps creating his work at a financial loss), but it does indicate the degree to which the system and the artists are intertwined in a symbiotic (if, at times, mutually hostile) relationship. The same, of course, is true of painters and galleries, dramatists and the theatre, and musicians and recording studios. Each relies upon the other. The presenter cannot be said to be parasitic upon the artist, for without the presenter, the artist would be alone with his work.

An interesting question surfaces when we consider the wide interest in the title of a work. The title, Danto tells us, is both the name (identifier) of, and an interpretive factor of, the work. But in its published form, which is the title with which we should concern ourselves? Which title, to be precise, indicates the work that has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation? Take a random comic book: *The Amazing Spider-man* Volume 1, Number 311 (January, 1989). Are we concerned with the series title (*The Amazing Spider-man*), the issue-title (*The Amazing Spider-man* #311), or the story-title (“Mysteries of the Dead”)? Each arguably serves as an identifier of the work.

The issue-title, we might argue, can be dismissed immediately. Although it is indeed an identifier, it will not help as an interpretation tool. It tells us nothing, with regard to interpretation, that the series-title cannot. Further, the issue-title simply denotes the physical thing, the comic book, *not* the aesthetic object with which the reader (and the philosopher) is primarily interested. It identifies the container in which the token is embodied, but not the token itself. *The Amazing Spider-man* #311 also contains twelve pages of advertisements, none of which are considered part of the artwork. Like the stagehands of a play, the back of a painted canvas, and the frame of a picture, the advertisements

⁵² Wiater & Bissette, p.xv

⁵³ McCloud, p.186

⁵⁴ Richard Rogers, British Architect, *The Times* (London, 13 February, 1991)

⁵⁵ The rules for the Comics Code Authority, “the most severe censorship applied to any mass media” (Inge, p.xiv), are outlined fully in Appendix 3.

⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Fiore argues, “It is unlikely that very many people pay much attention to the Code seal at all these days” (Groth & Fiore, p.5). It seems that recognised censorship is being lost as a convention.

compose parts of the conventions of the presentation of the artwork, but not parts of the artwork itself. They are not included in the “set of aspects” upon which the requisite status is conferred.

Then what of the series title? Though this particular title (*The Amazing Spider-man*) tells us very little about the story aside from identifying its main protagonist, the same is true of any number of great works of literature. Consider *Jane Eyre*, *Moby Dick*, *David Copperfield*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, to name a scant few. And, of course, comics series titles can be far more intriguing (*Life in Hell*, *V for Vendetta*, *Eightball*, etc.). Granted, however, that these such cases are comparatively rare, due to one factor: a series may run for many hundreds of issues, and as such, a common theme such as would be an interpretive element of the series title is difficult to tie down. As such, many series have taken the simple road and used as their title the name of the protagonist or other element that serves as the only tying bond between issues.

Compare the purpose of the series-title with that of the individual story-title. The series title serves as a touchstone for interpreting the series, whereas the story-title does the same for the individual issue. It is arguable that the story-title serves the same purpose as the title of any other work of art. It allows the audience a perspective from which to interpret that work. A series title, however, blankets all of those stories showcased in its various issues. And if the series is an anthology title, with each issue containing any number of stories by any number of creators (as is the case with *Love and Rockets*, *Eightball*, *Buzz Buzz Comics Magazine*, and others), the series-title also serves a blanket interpretive function in each of these. It might be argued that both the series-title and the story-title offer interpretive switch-points (to use a term of Derrida’s), each serving essentially the same function. Perhaps the story-title serves a more primary role, as it is more closely tied with the individual story, it being foregrounded in the mind of the reader, while the series-title is backgrounded. There is nothing untoward about a work having two titles, even if one serves a primary function and another a secondary one. Isn’t this the purpose of subtitles? The complication which arises is that if the story-title indicates a particular work of art upon which the status of candidate for appreciation has been conferred, what of the series-title? That a series has a title would seem to indicate that the series is itself a work of art. The solution for this particular complication, though, seems self-evident. Why should we not be able to consider “Mysteries of the Dead” as a work of art in itself, but also as composing a part of *The Amazing Spider-man*, to be considered a work of art all its own? Can we not consider *The Amazing Spider-man* as a “megastory” to the story “Mysteries of the Dead”? Bits of storytelling in “Mysteries of the Dead” might seem superfluous with reference to that story, but make perfect sense when considered within the context of the megastory, *The Amazing Spider-man*. The entire story itself may take on new meaning when considered within the larger context of the megastory. When Dave Sim began his series, *Cerebus*, he proposed it as a 6000 page (300 issue) comic book. Each issue is considered to be a story in and of itself, and as titled and published in the comic system, can be considered a christened work of art. But each issue also serves as a part of the greater story: the life story of an aardvark. One can look at each issue as a story unto itself, or as part of a larger story. The interesting bit of philosophical magic comes when we consider that, while only potential works of art in and of themselves (each a story), future issues of *Cerebus* (or any other series) already compose parts (albeit potential) of an actual work of art (the megastory). In that it has been published and christened, the megastory *Cerebus*, including its future episodes, has been given a blanket christening. Things, that is, which do not yet exist already compose parts of a work upon which the status of candidate for appreciation has been placed.

If we return to the example of Harvey Pekar from above, how then should separate renditions from the same script be considered? By placing the stories in separate series, each serves a different purpose in the megastory which constitutes that series. Each serves a different function, as an episode of the megastory, in service to that megastory. Even by placing the stories in the same series, or even in the same issue, Pekar will have given them a different function in service to the same megastory. Not only is each rendition arguably a different artwork in and of itself, as

discussed above, each also composes part of another artwork, or even of the same artwork. The context of the story, in part, determines the qualities of the story.

Certainly, it must be said, there seem to be exceptions to the publication industry as the proposed institutionalised system for the presentation of sequential art. What of all of those works which qualify under the definition of sequential art, but are not comics in the contemporary sense (comic books or strips)? What about the Bayeux Tapestry? What about a wide variety of stained-glass windows? Neither the Bayeux Tapestry nor stained-glass windows are presented, at least were not at first presented, in the form of literary publications. Of course, Dickie's theory explicitly allows for this very possibility without denouncing the sequential nature of these works. Like the example of junk sculpture, above, sequential art most certainly began as a subsystem within another system. In fact, it likely began as an overlap of subsystems between systems. Certain works of sequential art (e.g. the Bayeux Tapestry) began within the presentation system of visual arts. Others (e.g. stained-glass sequences) began within religious art. One could find a multitude of examples from a variety of systems. Even until very recently, comics have been considered an overlapping subsystem of literature and the visual arts. Yet, as we have seen, comics have established so many conventions of their own, with their audiences developing a range of specific expectations with regard to their presentation, that they have essentially broken away from these other systems to found one of their own. And while the Bayeux Tapestry and stained-glass sequences certainly belong to the systems of visual art and religious art (being that they are still presented within the framework of those systems of presentation), they might also be considered to belong to the separate system of sequential art, with the possibilities of being presented as such.

A Note on Auteurs and WACKOs

This notion of the interdependence of the comic art form and its industry begs a question which is as well asked here as anywhere else: Who possesses the creative power in comics? That is, if the industry (including editors, publishers, etc.) has this control over what will and will not appear on a comics page, who is really in the driver's seat? What at first seems to be a rather straightforward question becomes slightly more complicated when we take into consideration a theory which retains some predominance in film studies: *auteur* theory. Coined by Andrew Sarris,⁵⁷ this theory argues for the creative esteem in authorship to be placed on the head of the director of any particular film – that the director carries as much responsibility for the “personal expression” of a film as the author of the original script or screenplay, and usually more.⁵⁸ Despite notes by many theorists that *auteur* theory has yet to be fully defined (at least by any English-speaking theorist)⁵⁹, we can note its influence simply in the way we speak about movies as laymen: we remember Spielberg and Hitchcock and Cameron, but who speaks of the scriptwriters? According to Sarris, the director (the *auteur*) carries with him (or is expressed by him) the technique, the style, and the interior meaning which we associate with the film, and with the portfolio of that director.⁶⁰ These are his fingerprints, and can always be traced back to him. Alexandre Astruc argued that the director's camera was like the writer's pen, “through which the creative director could express his thought and sensibility.”⁶¹ The director takes the script and makes it his own.

But who is the creative equivalent of the cinema director in comics? In the case of most *strips*, the answer seems clear-cut: the “creator” or “creators” – that person, or combination of persons, who writes the story and draws the pictures. For *Peanuts*, Charles Schulz maintains whole creative control over the strip. He is writer, director, actors,

⁵⁷ Lapsley & Westlake, p.106

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.105; *Auteur* theory should not be confused with its estranged cousin, Montage theory, which places the mantle of creative control on the head of the film's editor.

⁵⁹ See Sarris, p.585; Lapsley & Westlake, p.106

⁶⁰ Sarris, p.586-7

set-designer, lighting-designer, etc., all rolled into one. Even the editors of the syndicate who technically own the strip can only veto decisions of Schulz's for publication reasons. They are not creators, but trouble-shooters. The situation becomes more complicated, however, when the creation process is split up. The vast majority of comic books produced today are created on an "assembly-line." We have already discussed (in Part One) the roles of the artist and writer. There are also, however, the editor, the publisher, the letterer, the colourist, and so forth, to take into consideration. Each of these plays his or her part in the overall creation of the book. Peter David maintains that, other than in exceptional circumstances, the writer is the creator of the work. Calling this the "WACKO" (Writer As Creative King/Overlord) Theory, David maintains that in nearly all creations of a new character (this being his primary focus), the writer is imbued with the title of "creator," while others in the assembly-line are titled "developers."⁶² His thoughts seem to run along, and are perhaps best developed along, the lines of a hierarchy of performative-type interpretations, as was discussed above. That is, the writer creates the character and the story. He then passes the written story to the penciller, who interprets it in a certain way in his art. Next, the inker embellishes upon the original pencil-drawings, interpreting again. The design is filtered down through a variety of notations, instances, and types, until the final product emerges. Each stop in this creative chain is permitted a certain degree of flexibility with regard to the finished product, but the authorship, creative vision, "design," and "personal expression" belong to the writer, according to David. In the same way, we can discuss an actor's interpretation of a character in a stage director's interpretation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but no one will deny that the play is Shakespeare's. The megatype, as we have seen, belongs to Shakespeare and Shakespeare alone. As was noted in Part One, however, the writer-artist relationship is not always so clear-cut. Let us consider an exception to the WACKO Theory which David himself brings up: A character called Cable is at the centre of the controversy. Bob Harris, editor of *The New Mutants* decided that the team in the series needed a new leader. Artist Rob Liefeld, following the editorial directive, drew and named Cable. Writer at the time, Louise Simonson, wrote the character into the story imbuing him with a (minimum of) personality. So, asks David,

Who created Cable?
Ultimately – insanely – the only answer would
seem to be: Marvel Comics.
There was no defining moment when Cable burst
from the head of a writer as a character. He burst from the
head of an artist as a visual.⁶³

The story of Cable was not put together in the usual "assembly-line" method. He was a corporate creation, and no one member of that corporation can justifiably claim to be Cable's creator.⁶⁴ These cases are not entirely uncommon.

What is unique in both comic books and comic strips is that, regardless of who is deemed to have creative control over the work, in the cases of corporate-owned characters and titles, creative control almost always inevitably returns to the publishers in another hierarchy – an authoritative (as opposed to authorial) one. Typically, in the case of comic books, the writer, artist, and the whole of the artistic team, are chosen to take on the work by the editor of the series. The editor is under the group-editor, or executive-editor, and so on, up to the publishers and presidents. If the writer produces a script, or the artist produces art, which anyone above him in this hierarchy deems unfit (however rare these circumstances), he may be asked to redo it. If he declines, he may be replaced. Ultimately, the company itself

⁶¹ Lapsley & Westlake, p.106

⁶² David, p.106

⁶³ *ibid.*, p.107

⁶⁴ This may be much to the chagrin of the creators, who, if one had created the character, could expect, legally, to be compensated with royalties.

maintains creative authority – the company decides what is fit for publication. The executives may not write the stories, but they maintain control over which stories are written and published. The same rings true for syndicate-owned comic strips. While it was stated above that the syndicate editors do not write the stories, they maintain the same mantle of control as the editors in comic book companies. They decide which stories are fit for publication, and which are not. And as the syndicate typically owns the strip and its characters, the syndicate retains the right (contracts notwithstanding) to replace the creator of a strip with another, or to carry on the strip with another creator after the former creator's death or retirement. Control, in any real sense of the word, in these (and most) cases, belongs to the company.

This seems, however, a somewhat pessimistic result. Where the cinema director, or "*auteur*," like the comic editing/publishing team, has control over the outcome of the work (including who will be included in helping to bring about that outcome: cameramen, actors, etc.), he also seems to possess a degree of creative input found lacking in the comic publisher. The director, unlike the publisher, retains a hands-on position in the creation of the work, directly manipulating what the audience will see. Comic publisher Denis Kitchen defends his position: "In many ways, being a publisher is creative, it's just on a different level. It's more like being the producer of a movie, rather than being the star or the writer or the director."⁶⁵ In other words, the publisher (as with the producer) chooses what work will see print, and thus serves the creative engine in an inertial, as opposed to compositional, function. It is the publisher of the comic (and incidentally, the producer of films), Kitchen is maintaining here, that allows the work, thus composed, to be seen at all. He is arguing for the same symbiotic relationship discussed in the last section. Mike Friedrich, a comic book professional, disagrees: "The bedrock of our medium is this connection between creator and reader. All the other stuff (publishing, distribution, promotion, retailing), as difficult and critically important as it is, is derivative."⁶⁶ The comic book industry (along with newspaper syndicates), while it may facilitate the mass production and distribution of comics, and in the position it is, maintain a modicum of control over what it will and will not produce, does not, ultimately facilitate the creativity itself. Quite the opposite, argues McCloud, "There are just so many filters between the creator and the audience, it's a wonder that anything ever gets created and read."⁶⁷ The creative input of the publishers, it seems, is a secondary one when compared with the actions of the artist, himself. While the comic creator does not require the comic industry and its various publishers in order to write and draw a comic book, he may require that industry if he wishes to mass-produce and distribute the same. The comic industry, as we have seen, exists in a symbiotic relationship with the creators, each depending on the other for the fruits of their livelihood. The balance does, however, seem unusually one-sided, with the publishing industry maintaining a sense of control over what it will and will not publish. Underground artist Frank Stack maintains,

It seems to me that there is now, as there always has been in comics, a significant difference between corporate and individual creativity. Regular deadlines and whip-popping editors may keep artists on their toes and eating regularly, but the grinding wheels won't encourage any new brilliance. The good stuff usually (I don't say always) comes when nobody has any idea of selling it. Bad stuff comes in just the opposite way. "There's a market for something! Let's make something and sell it."⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Quoted in Wiater & Bisette, p.94

⁶⁶ Quoted in Groth (October, 1997), p.17

⁶⁷ Quoted in Groth (July, 1996), p.82

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p.188

But, of course, the self-publishers of comics have broken down even this dichotomy, combining the two roles in one. The self-publisher is both creator and corporation, attempting to maintain a balance between art and commerce. The comic artist does not require reliance upon the industry, ultimately, but he does require the medium itself. The medium of sequential art depends for presentation upon publication. The artist must either submit to the demands of an outside publisher, or else publish the work himself. To publish, or not to publish, however, is not an option. Let us consider, for comparisons' sake, examples from other art mediums.

First, let us return to the cinema director. The director, we mentioned, maintains primary creative control over the film. Whereas the comic creator may have at hand assistants who perform menial (meaning, here, primarily supplemental or non-creative) tasks, such as colouring and lettering, he is not in a position to take the story for granted. The cinema director, on the other hand, is able to treat the story itself as supplemental, as a means to the end (the finished film). As with the comic creator, though, the cinema director, too, often relies upon another individual or corporation to facilitate the mass production and distribution of the final product: the producer. The producer, in turn, like the comic publisher, maintains a degree of control or authority over the output he facilitates, but cannot be said to be in a creative position, at least not in the same way as the director or comic artist. While the director and comic creator, like the producer and publisher, can hire and fire assistants (in the case of comics) or script-writers (in the case of film) to suit their needs – as tools for a job – they nonetheless maintain primary input of the “personal vision” imbued in the creative activity of the work. Each can be said to be the *locus* of creativity for the work. The same could be said to be true of the writer, but not the illustrator, of the illustrated children's story.

In the case of an illustrated storybook, which uses periodic pictures to help illustrate the story for the reader (as opposed to the picture-book, which combines the two, though not in the spatially juxtaposed fashion of comics), the pictures are in service to – are supplemental to – the prose. As such, to a large degree, the illustrator's work is supplemental to that of the writer.⁶⁹ True, the artist might add his own touches to the work. One can certainly see differences, for instance, between early and later illustrations of *Tom Sawyer*. Nevertheless, a co-dependence of word and image such as is possible in the medium of comics is rare, or at least unlikely, in illustrated prose work. Much of this is due, of course, to the authoritative hierarchy involved in the creative activity. The writer typically maintains creative control over the final work, and is, as such, entitled to expect the illustrated work to fall in line with his “personal vision” for the story. The illustrator becomes, essentially, a useful tool (the *corpus technici*) in helping to create a final work. The writer, like the comic creator and the cinema director, remains the creative locus of the work.

Finally, let us consider the more longstanding artistic tradition of the theatre. We might be reminded that the theatre itself has a long history of corporate sponsorship, of a sort. Even in Shakespeare's day (even Shakespeare's own company), theatre groups were hired by the court to produce, or to perform, works for particular occasions. At times, the court might have known already the work it was going to attend; at other times, it would be a surprise. The court might have suggested a work in particular for performance, or even changes to the work to be performed. We see this evidenced in the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*. The court is free to hire and fire the theatre companies it so chooses, and is also free to make suggestions as to which plays it would like to see performed. As such, it is fulfilling its role as the system for presentation of theatrical works. It is also free to make suggestions for changes to the play. But is this to say that the court thus maintains creative *control*? Certainly not, for the theatre company is equally free to refuse to work (under ideal conditions), to change its creation, and so forth. While the court may have sponsored the work, it was the Bard that created it.

⁶⁹ At least in a case where the writer and illustrator are different persons. In a case where the writer and illustrator are the same person, he must act, at different times, *as* writer and *as* illustrator (though here, of course, the single creator is logically most likely to produce a coherently unified work).

How then, in retrospect, should the comic artist (in whatever capacity) be considered? Can it truly be said that the publishers of comics maintain creative authority? Well, yes and no. Here, as we have seen above, we have two distinct, if inter-twined, definitions of “creative.” The first, that belonging to the artist or artists, is a compositional creation. He creates, in short, the art, in all its glory. The second, belonging to the publisher, is an inertial or substantial creation. He, in turn, sets the presses running, and produces the physical object, the comic book. In Margolis’ terms, the artist is producing the type, while the publisher produces the tokens. None can exist without the other. This is the circularity of Dickie’s original Institutional Theory. It is admittedly circular, but as we have seen, it is also fact.

*The Problem of Original Art*⁷⁰

Within the past decade, a number of galleries have opened, most of them in America, with their primary purpose being the presentation of the original art of comic book pages. Original comic art has even appeared in the Louvre on occasion. But what position do these artifacts hold in the artworld? We noted early in this chapter that the original art of comics, due to its position in the chain of creation leading to the eventual comic, was to be classified as a notation, yet here it is hanging in a gallery. And notably, *in a gallery*. Ken Sanzel, curator of Four Color Images Inc., a museum devoted to original comic art, maintains,

Our intent is to get people in off the street who would never think to set foot in a comic store. They come in because this is an art gallery. Hopefully we’re encouraging them to explore comics further.⁷¹

Perhaps, it seems, there is a bias against the very system of presentation for comics, or at least the retail market set up around this system. Perhaps the bias is based on the difference between the systems, that of comic books depending on the expenditure of money, where galleries typically do not. “Another fissure: art versus commerce, elitist versus fanboy,” claim Jones and Jacobs.⁷² Perhaps there is something seemingly corrupt in people trying to profit from art. This bias is blatantly unjustified, but what a tautology! Reitberger and Fuchs concur:

The reproductive technique of comics seemed to preclude any artistic claims; naturally only the original drawings were hung in museums and galleries.⁷³

Reitberger and Fuchs seem to be implying that galleries and museums are unjustified in not presenting to the public the finished work. As we have seen, however, to *do* so would be unjustified. Theirs is not the system for presenting published works. But if this is so, is theirs the system for presenting notations of published works?

Ian Ground writes,

We are, if we think about it, quite familiar with the idea that artists produce things which, one way or another, have fallen short of being works of art. We call them roughs or preparatory works. And, of course, sometimes people buy such things and value them more than they ought. Like other sorts of object which are not works of art, sometimes

⁷⁰ The term “original art,” it should be noted, refers to the pencilled and inked hand-made pages of the artists, as will be reproduced in the printed comic. See Appendix 1.

⁷¹ Quoted in Walls, p.36

⁷² Jones & Jacobs, p.310

⁷³ Reitberger & Fuchs, p.235

such things do end up in galleries and alongside works of art.⁷⁴

Would this be a fair summary of the situation of original comic art? No, it would not, but for a number of reasons. First, original comic art does not ‘fall short’ of constituting comic art. It was never meant to be such. Such pieces are not “preparatory works” or “roughs,” but notations of a final work, like musical notation or dramatic scripts. These serve a purpose in the creation of the final work. But also, like musical notation and dramatic scripts, we may be missing something crucial here in the ontology of these pieces. Consider for a moment, illustrated manuscripts like the *Book of Kells*. Essentially, the *Book of Kells* is nothing but the embodiment of a token of the Bible. Yet there is still something more to be said for the manuscript. The intricate lettering of the manuscript is of interest in and of itself, and is the primary reason for the book’s display at Trinity College in Dublin. The *Book of Kells* is not displayed *as* the Bible, but as a collection of (historically important) visual art. It is displayed from a different perspective than one would take in reading the Bible in and of itself. The same can be said for musical notation, wherein a page of notes and bars might be displayed (or at least viewed) as a work of art with regard to the calligraphy involved on the page. It would not be seen as a notation for music, but as a work of art in and of itself. With regard to dramatic scripts, some are taught as pieces of literature. One can go to the theatre and see a performance of George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, or one can read it in its printed form. The printed form is not perceived simply as a notation for directors and actors, but as a work of art *per se*. It is approached by its readers with certain expectations in mind which would not apply to the presentation of that same work as a drama within the framework of the theatre.

The same rings true of original comic art. Bess Cutler of the Bess Cutler Gallery in New York City states,

We’re more concerned with the aesthetic issues than the narrative issue ... If you ever see an original Walt Kelly’s *Pogo*, you can see the non-reproductive pencil underneath and the sketching.⁷⁵

To be sure, the readers of comics in their final form are also concerned with aesthetic issues, but they seem to be different aesthetic issues altogether. The reader of the comic book or strip does not want to see non-photo blue on his slick comics page. To the comic book reader, the non-photo blue does not form a part of the aesthetic object of interest. And while sketches have their place, it is not on the final comics page. The place for sketches seems to be within the presentation framework of the art gallery. It isn’t, in this case, as Ground has noted above, that we are treating something as art which does not deserve that title. Instead, we are treating what is a notation for one art form as a form of art all its own. We do this with dramatic scripts, so why not original comic art? The comic art is seen in a new light in this separate system of presentation (though perhaps a subsystem within that of the visual arts); it has different conventions, and a different aesthetic object altogether from that of the final comics page. The galleries are not presenting the works as notations, but as works of art in and of themselves. Further, being that they are presented within a different framework of presentation from that of the final comic books, they are quite different works of art from that of the published comics.

Comics on Canvas

This discussion of the presentation of sequential work within the fine art (gallery-oriented) world leads us naturally into another topic of discussion: Pop Art. Inge notes of this genre,

⁷⁴ Ground, p.2

⁷⁵ Walls, p.37

The pop art movement of the 1960s witnessed the wholesale appropriation of the forms, symbols, and style of comic art for the individual aesthetic intentions of a number of contemporary artists... They saw the iconography of comic art as an appropriate idiom for communicating their contemporary visions.⁷⁶

Here we have a movement in art which applied the “forms, symbols, and style” of sequential art to canvas, and presented such work in the same system which welcomed Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*, Munch’s *The Scream*, and Raphael’s *The School of Athens*. Clearly, Pop Art did not enter in the same way that original comic art has, as discussed above. But then how? And how differently did the work have to be considered to be christened here rather than in a publication as is conventional for sequential art? Consider three such “Pop” artists and their works: two from the height of the Pop Art movement, and one from the more contemporary period: Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Keith Haring.



Figure 50: Andy Warhol, *Popeye* (1961-62)



Figure 51: Andy Warhol, *Dick Tracy* (1960)

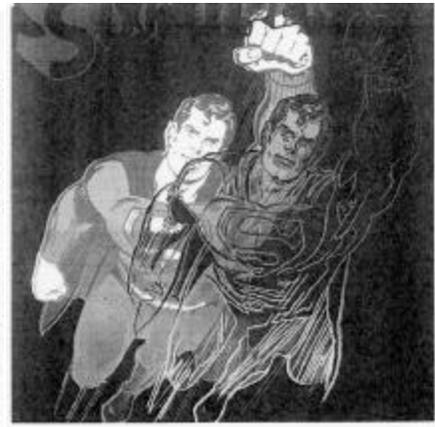


Figure 52: Andy Warhol, *Myths, "Superman"* (1981)

Andy Warhol is considered the father of Pop Art, so it seems reasonable to start with his work. Warhol concentrated in his work, to a large degree, on the quotation of recognisable imagery. His Brillo box replicants were mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. He may be most famous for his Campbell’s Soup cans, and his Marilyn Monroe silkscreens are unmistakable. Most importantly here, though, is that another of his reliable sources was the comic strip. Consider Figures 50 through 52. Popeye, Dick Tracy, and Superman are not merely recognisable images, but concepts that have so pervaded American and World culture that they have become mythic archetypes.⁷⁷ Anyone in Western culture, from eight to eighty, not only will recognise these characters, but has with them a personal history. “I want everybody to think alike,” the artist is quoted as saying, “I think everybody should be a machine.”⁷⁸ However seriously we should take this comment, it is noteworthy that to some degree, Warhol was counting on the fact that people already did think alike. These are images which hold a widespread personal significance for nearly all who recognise them. Russell Nye writes, “No popular art, whatever the medium, is so pervasive and persistent in American society as the comics.”⁷⁹ Warhol counted on this when he set about painting them on canvas. Warhol was taking from

⁷⁶ Inge, p.xvii

⁷⁷ Figure 52, one should note, comes from a series of works titled *Myths...*, which also included a silkscreen image of Mickey Mouse, another modern myth.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Chilvers *et al.*, p.529

⁷⁹ Quoted in Umphlett, p.73

the Low artworld and giving to the High artworld. Was he trying to give to the comics a legitimacy which they have so far been denied? Questions of intention are difficult to answer when the artist is unavailable for comment. What he was certainly doing was exposing to the general public archetypes with which they were already familiar, but in an unfamiliar system of presentation. This would have had the same sort of jarring effect on the aesthetic sensibilities as those who first viewed Duchamp's *Fontaine*. And this is important.

Not only were *Popeye*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Myths*: "Superman" viewed as something other than the comics from which they were appropriated, so too were they presented to that viewing public. In comic strips, these characters were used as ciphers for the stories in the newspaper pages. On canvas, in the gallery, they were used as recognisable myths. The token (e.g. Popeye) was the same, but the type (the meaning) was altogether different. Warhol was using comic images to comment on comic images, or more correctly, on how the general public thinks of comic images. This is called "metacriticism." Further, he was using the divergence between High and Low art, between different systems of presentation and our conceptions of them, to underline his comments. Carlin and Wagstaff claim,

By using a single image that covered an entire canvas, Warhol ... elevated it into an icon whose appropriation constituted both a comment and a transfiguration. In other words, Pop Art began as meditation on the nature of representation rather than on the representation of nature itself.⁸⁰

Simply because the image is the same, it does not follow that the meaning is the same. Any visual difference between Superman on the canvas and Superman on the comics page may be imperceptible, but the same is not true of meaning. By placing the same image in a different context (i.e. system), Warhol has given the art a new aesthetic face in the same way that Duchamp did with the urinal. The audience will see different things. This is true transfiguration.



Figure 53: Roy Lichtenstein, *Takka Takka* (1962)



Figure 54: source for *Takka Takka*, artist unknown

In much the same way as Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein entered his Pop Art phase by appropriating the images of comic and cartoon characters. He quoted Disney characters, Dick Tracy, and a few other stock figures. Eventually, however, he abandoned this treatment altogether, concentrating instead on the "style" or "method" of the generic comic panel. This isn't to say that Lichtenstein did not use actual comic panels as sources; rather, he simply avoided

recognisable characters. Thus, he drew from generic romance, war, and pulp comics from the period, none of which would be associated with any particular character or artist (as, at the time, most comics were not attributed to their artists). Carlin and Wagstaff maintain, "Quotation from anonymous sources allowed Lichtenstein greater freedom to draw on the formal aesthetic style that attracted him to comics in the first place."⁸¹ Lichtenstein, unlike Warhol, maintained the multi-panel and word/image relations integral to comics. As such, many of Lichtenstein's works from this period could be considered sequential art, whereas Warhol's could not. And because he was not working with stock figures, his audience would not be distracted from his interest in form.

Despite his apparent faithfulness to the form of the comics, however, one can notice in Lichtenstein's work (when compared with the sources from which he drew) certain indicators that he was trying to emphasise something additional. Compare Figures 53 (Lichtenstein's painting, *Takka Takka*) and 54 (the source for *Takka Takka*). Lichtenstein has made slight (though significant) editorial decisions in his appropriation of the narrative block. He has removed the place-reference (Guadalcanal), and has changed the subjects from marines to generic soldiers. Lawrence Alloway argues, "The changes are small but the cumulative effect is to generalize the combat and reduce the sense of narrative momentum, binding the words and images closer as a unified display."⁸² In essence, what Lichtenstein has done here, is turn a part of a story into a decontextualised image. Certainly, the painting points to a larger picture somewhere (as most of his paintings, and most paintings in general, do), but he has narrowed down the focus to give the audience a work capable of standing on its own. Reitberger and Fuchs note, "By the use of deliberate abstraction Roy Lichtenstein removes the existing 'commercial image' of comics, detaching the individual picture from its series, blowing it up and thus imbuing it with a timeless quality."⁸³ By making his image more static, in effect, Lichtenstein has removed from his work any residue of conventional narrative held by the original comic. He has adapted sequential art to an institutional system that has no place for the conventions of narrative. Gallery patrons do not generally expect to have to deal with narrative elements in works presented in the system familiar to them. Lichtenstein, to a degree, is compliant in this regard. Yet by maintaining the word/image interplay, he is nonetheless able to draw the attention of the audience not only to the style of drawing contemporarily generic to comics, but also to the particulars of form.

In creating his works by hand, and on such an enormous scale compared to the originals (*Takka Takka* is 56 x 68 inches), Lichtenstein is also able to draw the attention of the audience to a feature of the originals: their mechanically reproduced nature. Again, this is an example of metacriticism: comments on comics by using comics. Carlin claims, "The spirit of the comics pervades both fine art and the mass media, fusing the high and the low through absurdity and formal self-awareness."⁸⁴ In order to facilitate this, he made slight, but nevertheless integral, stylistic and compositional changes to his quoted images. His lettering, for one, is a good deal more perfectly done than in the original. It has lost its personal quirks, becoming standardised in a way which surpasses (while perhaps parodying) the conventionalisation of block lettering in the original. Further, he has also regulated the lines in a way not seen in the original. In the painting, straight-ish lines become perfectly straight, curved lines become round, and every line becomes a good deal thicker. The effect is like that of a stencil, and this radical stylisation gives a sense of two-dimensionality that far surpasses its source. An inevitable result of this desire on Lichtenstein's part was the necessary removal of the pictured hand from the original. Its appearance in the painting could only detract from the emphasis on cold, hard, mechanical two-dimensionality. One final feature of this same kind that is brought out by the enormous

⁸⁰ Carlin & Wagstaff, p.60

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.58

⁸² Alloway, p.31

⁸³ Reitberger & Fuchs, p.236

scale of Lichtenstein's work is his simulation of the Ben-Day dot. With *Takka Takka*, Lichtenstein used a very tight screen, dabbing paint through it in order to re-create the effect of the mechanically produced dots in the final printed comics. Where with comics, the dots go unnoticed as dots (simply becoming a field of colour), in Lichtenstein's art, they become readily apparent. In his later work, he would use screens which spaced the dots out even further, further defined their round shape, and further emphasised their standardised nature. Danto comments,

A *photograph* of a Lichtenstein is indiscernible from a photograph of a counterpart panel from *Steve Canyon*; but the photograph fails to capture the scale, and hence it is as inaccurate a reproduction as a black-and-white engraving of Botticelli, scale being essential here as color there. Lichtensteins, then, are not imitations but *new entities*, as giant wheelks would be.⁸⁵

Certainly, as we have seen, a Lichtenstein and its source *are* visually discernible, regardless of scale, but scale does allow for the appreciation (or at least recognition) of the mechanical, impersonal nature Lichtenstein attempted to bring out with the use of simulated Ben-Day dots. Danto is also correct in claiming the Lichtenstein and the original source are wholly different entities, but let us examine why this is.

What has Lichtenstein accomplished by drawing our attention to these mechanical features of comic books? Perhaps the primary effect is seen in his simulation of the Ben-Day dots. As was mentioned above, when one reads a comic book (wherein Ben-Day dots are utilised in the colouring process), one does not in fact pay attention to the dots. Instead, one simply sees a field of colour. Certainly, one *could* focus on the dots, but this is not what one ordinarily does when reading a comic. In the same way, one does not watch television keeping his attention on the pattern of coloured dots that compose the picture (nor is one mentally capable of paying attention to the one dot that canvases the screen thousands of times a second, leaving those coloured dots in its wake). By drawing the audience's attention to the Ben-Day dots, Lichtenstein is creating a new aesthetic face in the art. With comics, it can be said, the Ben-Day dots are not elements of the "set of aspects" upon which status is conferred, despite that colour is. This is to say that the audience does not aesthetically treat the dots as dots, but as a field of colour. The dots are merely a convention in the comic to be ignored (though their effect, colour, is rather important). In Lichtenstein's paintings, however, the dots are not conventions but objects of aesthetic interest in and of themselves. They help to emphasise this notion of mechanical nature Lichtenstein was advertising. As such, even if Danto was correct in stating that a Lichtenstein and its original, if at the same scale, were visually indiscernible, the aesthetic objects become quite different at different sizes. The gallery system is not conferring the status of candidate for appreciation on a comic strip or panel, but on a work of art which comments on comic strips or panels.

Artist Keith Haring, like Warhol and Lichtenstein, also used recognisable images (i.e. icons) in his work, but interspersed them among icons of his own. Originally, utilizing guerilla tactics in his art, Haring roamed the New York City subway system and, with incredible speed, would draw up a work on unused posterboards with chalk. "Haring and his sometime partner L.A.2 zip around the city like a hyperactive Batman and Robin, filling in the spaces."⁸⁶ Arrested a number of times for his "graffiti," it seems apparent that the New York City subway system does not constitute an artworld system for presentation. Nonetheless, Haring's work was recognised, and he was commissioned for a variety of works. Further, he produced works for the more conventional system of the gallery, while, it should be mentioned, continuing his raid on subway stations. Any works from the underground which survived were eventually

⁸⁴ Carlin & Wagstaff, p.15

⁸⁵ Danto (1992), p.428

⁸⁶ Carlin & Wagstaff, p.68

indoctrinated into galleries. Indifferent to media, Haring worked with chalk and paper, paint and canvas, ink and fibreglass, and even fluorescent lights. What he concentrated on was iconography.



Figure 55: Keith Haring, *Untitled* (1982)



Figure 56: Keith Haring, *painted vase* (1981)

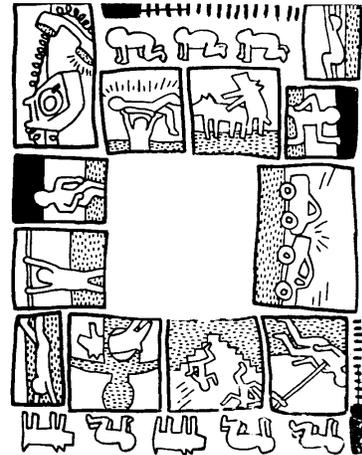


Figure 57: Keith Haring, *Untitled* (1981)

Carlin and Wagstaff notice, “Haring combines comic images such as the Smurfs and Mickey Mouse with his own characters, the Atomic Baby and Dogman.”⁸⁷ Figures 55 through 57 are all examples of Haring’s work, and his style is so unique it would be difficult to miss. Carlin and Wagstaff continue,

His work is close to that of the comic strip. He has learned that the repetition of symbols within narrative episodes induces a familiarity with what then becomes a glyphic vocabulary; this recognition makes it easier for the force of the message to get through.⁸⁸

He uses images like interchangeable flashcards, by which he is able to display a message. In essence, Haring has created a language using only a few images. His interests seem to have been primarily with power, energy, sex, and war, and the myriad relations between these factors. The difficulty (which is not to say problem) with Haring’s work is that it is not accompanied by a schematic legend. The reader (!) is forced to interpret the images with no frame of reference, and then to decipher the message made up of a sequence of these images. Haring is speaking in code. Presumably, commuters in the NYC subway would have grown familiar with the images Haring left behind, but would have to decipher them for themselves. Further, though, for many of Haring’s pieces, the sequences have no perceptible beginning or end. The sequences on the vase (Figure 56) circle the vase endlessly; the same is true of the sequences in Figure 57. The audience is given no frame of reference, no code, and no place to start. Haring is employing conventions without explaining them to his audience. He has taken the comic conventions of iconography and sequence to their extremes. He has utilised what audiences became accustomed to on the comics page such that those customs and conventions became the only tools audiences could use in the solving of Haring’s visual puzzles. Haring isn’t playing by the rules, he’s making new ones.

Warhol borrowed images, Lichtenstein borrowed style, and Haring borrowed method. Inge comments:

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.67

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

The comics are well and deservedly loved, but they should also be respected for what they have contributed to the visual and narrative arts of the world.⁸⁹

But Warhol, Lichtenstein, Haring, and the rest of the Pop artists were not simply influenced by comic art. The Pop artists, by utilizing comic images, styles, and methods, indicated to an elite artworld not only the differences between one system of art and another, but their inherent similarities and commonalities as well. By being christened within the gallery-oriented artworld system, the works of these artists have separated themselves from other systems (including comic publication), but by utilizing the elements of sequential art, they have illustrated the bridge that always exists between systems, but is largely ignored.

Comics as Commodity

One final topic that should be addressed with regard to Institutionalism and sequential art is the dichotomy of comics-as-art and comics-as-commodity. It was noted above that the institutional system of presentation for comic books is not based solely in the showing of art, but also in the *selling* of the same. One way to approach this topic is to ask what it is that the consumer is purchasing. If I purchase a comic book, what is it I'm paying money for? Two things: I'm paying money for the opportunity to read a story as many times as I want to. But I'm also paying money for the physical *thing*. The first may be considered an aesthetic interest, but the second is not. This difference becomes apparent when we consider the notion of reprints. A story may be reprinted any number of times, and has, as such, no physical nature. Any particular copy of the story, regardless of where it is printed, represents the embodiment of a token of the same type. Aesthetically speaking, one copy of the story is of equal value to the next. The same cannot be said of the physical object: the comic book. Consider this: in any number of places, I can find a printing of the first story in which the comic book character Batman first appeared. But a copy of the actual comic book in which this story was originally run (*Detective Comics #27*) sells for \$130,000 American.⁹⁰ Can we go so far as to place a value on the story itself?

"*L'art pour l'art*" or "art for art's sake" is a notion that stretches back centuries in aesthetic and literary theory. Essentially, it is an argument that art is to be taken at face value, as an end in itself, and not as the means to some other end. This, T.W. Adorno argues, is ultimately a futile concept. Instead, there are different ways of looking at the value of the same work of art. He discusses, in *Aesthetic Theory*, the difference between the Marxist aesthetics terms "use-value" and "exchange-value". Use-value is the value we put into (or get out of) a work of art – as that work of art (*l'art pour l'art*). Exchange-value, conversely, is the value we place in art for its ability to get us something else entirely (art as commodity). Adorno writes,

The concept of aesthetic enjoyment was a bad compromise between the social essence of art and the critical tendencies inherent in it. Underlying this compromise is a bourgeois mentality which, after sternly noting how useless art is for the business of self-preservation, grudgingly concedes to art a place in society, provided it offers at least a kind of use-value modelled on the phenomenon of sensuous pleasure.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Inge, p.xxi

⁹⁰ According to Overstreet's 1998 Annual Price Guide

⁹¹ Adorno, p.20

When one sells a work of art, however, one is not interested in the use-value of the work, but in its exchange-value. In Adorno's words, when sitting back and enjoying a work of art for its own sake, one is "consuming" its use-value, but when one sells it (or even displays it based on its monetary worth), one is "consuming" its exchange-value.⁹² Two ways, it seems, of evaluating the same thing. The work, Adorno seems to be arguing in this text, is sitting on a fence between art and commodity. The situation with the comic book, however, seems to indicate quite the opposite.

The art, in the case of the comic book at least, does not itself seem to have an exchange-value *per se*. Truly, it cannot be measured on this scale at all. When a collector of comic books purchases a book, he may have no interest in the art whatsoever. Consider the following:

Now, a new obsessiveness entered fandom as buying for investment became endemic. This has been an element of collecting since the beginning, of course, but now the practice developed of 'double purchasing' – buying one comic to read plus another to keep in pristine condition in a plastic bag for speculative purposes.⁹³

In the first comic bought in this 'double purchase', the buyer seems interested in consuming its use-value. He is buying it for the story. With the second comic, though, he seems much more interested in consuming its exchange-value. The collectors' market deals to a large degree with the condition of the comic (having developed an intricate grading system) such that a copy of the same comic in "mint" or "near-mint" condition is of considerable more exchange-value than one in "fine" or "good" condition. The same, naturally, is true of book collectors. A first-edition copy of *Dracula*, for instance, if it is in the same condition in which it was originally produced is worth, in exchange-value, considerably more than a first-edition that has seen better years. And naturally, it is worth more than the Penguin paperback edition that just rolled off the presses. In a collectors' market, it would seem, very little interest is paid to the story itself. As was mentioned above, the same story printed in *Detective Comics #27* has been reprinted elsewhere, yet the value of that issue is nothing near that of the former. For that matter, DC Comics Inc., could produce (assuming it still possessed the original art) a comic visually indistinguishable from *Detective Comics #27*, using the same paper, ink, colouring technology and so forth, and it would not be worth a fraction of what the original is worth. The paper and ink and colour are not the same as the story. The object is not the same as the artwork. The token is simply *embodied* in a publication, but is not to be *identified* with the same.

This is not to say, however, that the collectible and the art it contains are wholly separable. To some degree, *Detective Comics #27* has the exchange-value it does because it is nearly sixty years old. In pristine condition, any piece of newsprint that old will be worth something to someone. It was not a medium built to last. As such, very few copies exist. Despite that probably near a million copies were printed in the original run, only a few survive to this day, and exceedingly rare are those in mint or near-mind condition. On the other hand, to another degree, *Detective Comics #27* has the exchange-value it does because of the story it contains. Another comic book from 1939 would not be worth anywhere near what this comic is worth on the collectors' market. One of the primary reasons people are willing to value a comic at a certain amount is based on who created the story, and what the story is about. The exchange-value is ascertained with regard to both of these factors. The use-value, conversely, is gauged according to those theories which compose Danto's artworld. Adorno maintains,

Offering art for sale on a market, as pottery and little statues used to be sold in a marketplace, is not some

⁹² *ibid.*, p.32

⁹³ Sabin, p.67

perverse use of art but simply a logical consequence of art's participation in productive relations.⁹⁴

Perhaps the central reason for this is that one is not in fact selling the art, but the object that contains the art. The art, Margolis informs us, exists both in its token and in its type. While the token is embodied in the object for sale, the type (and the megatype) cannot itself be found anywhere in the world. It may certainly be indicated by the token which is embodied in the comic book, but it cannot itself be possessed.

⁹⁴ Adorno, p.336