

acazINE

the academic zine for comics research

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Artistic Research in Comics

Experimental visual storytelling
by humans who draw comics for humans





acazine.

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Detail from "What if...?" Leporello (2014)

Welcome to **acazine**

the new academic journal dedicated to
international comics research.

Peer reviewed by our growing academic network, published by much, Malmö University Comics Hub edited by Jakob Dittmar and Oskar Aspmann for a start with the circle widening as we get along, issue by issue.

Acazine is an academic journal in the form and spirit of zines: Published physically in small quantities as well as digitally for open access by much, the Malmö University Comics Hub. It provides a platform for and contributes to comics research.

It's zine-nature prevents it from being petrified by typical anthology-challenges. Digitally it is open access, no money goes towards publishers that ask astronomical fees and bleed our libraries dry. It will be flexible, and quick. It will change and develop. It is in English but not Anglocentric – for most of us, English is a second or third language, a means to reach a wider audience. Issues of acazine will differ in form and content: they can consist of one text or of several contributions around one theme. Formats can be different between individual numbers with whatever sizes and forms in print, while the digital versions will be adjusted to the limitations of the screen.

Artistic research in comics

Jakob Dittmar

Introduction

Artistic research in comics is branching into many fields and practices. For example, diverse computer-based methods of production are currently quite the thing. Others are concerned with what specific details in the process of drawing do to the drawing person. This text is not discussing these approaches but focuses on the visual information produced on the page (analog or digitally) by humans that draw sequential pictorial stories for humans to read.

While a published comic is as it is, of course, quite some of the design choices in individual images and in the composition of individual pages are heavily influenced by the medium itself: each image needs some room on the physical or digital page, and its size restricts the amount of detail possible to be shown in it. Also, every image interweaves with the images in immediate juxtaposition as well as with other images and image-elements further afield

within the same comic – or possibly even in previous and future instalments of a series of comics.

As with all other narrative media, every comic can be analysed in depth without knowing much about its author, illustrators, or generally the people involved in its production. Comics studies can replicate exactly what film and literary studies have already established as routines in media analysis. Where analysis and reflections are concerned with given material and its expression and storytelling, this restriction is perfectly fine, as we know from the established routines in literary and film studies.

Practical reasons for design choices and style decisions remain hidden where the analysis of a comic is not aided by knowledge of comics production practice. But knowledge of just these practical restrictions and options in designing and laying out images and pages allows for understanding and appraisal of artistic expression in comics analysis, while it also fosters and supports the development of narrative abilities of comics writers and artists in general: the more examples and variations in expression one knows and understands to work in what specific way, the better one can do one's own comics.

A context to artistic research: theory and praxis

Comic analysis in the tradition of literary studies works fine as it is, it allows readers to understand and decode any visual and textual narration at hand and describe and reflect on the individual perspective and artistic expression that is forming that comic. On the pictorial plane comics are built from graphic representations that mark the distinct individuality of the auteur and/or graphic artist – be it one person or a collective of people. Their style¹, their specific view is expressed in the execution of each image

1 style is central to art historical engagement with material, as well. In the context discussed here, the particular individual expression provided in a particular body of work is relevant, not the art historical consideration of techniques and styles.

and page design (size and placement of panels on each page): "its 'graphiation', that is, the presence, within the very act of storytelling, of its maker" (Marion 1993 after Baetens 2001, 146–150). There is plenty of artistic voice, of individual expression in particular line-work executed with particular drawing tools or their digital equivalent (on graphiation s. Dittmar 2026).

For comics, the way in which each panel is drawn can change what it means. Therefore, individual expression matters a lot in the way things are shown and how actions can be marked in the ductus of brushes or pens, in the use of colours or also in the very balancing of black and white or light and dark areas in every image and on each page. The depiction of figures, objects, places might adhere to genre-specific expectations but might as well prove in its execution how fluid these very genre-conventions are. Individual visualisations can be reduced to their most crucial markers, as in caricature, or full of details and shades that add information and atmosphere, not only in a photorealistic manner but in many other styles as well, be them painterly or stylised.

As with all analytical work, cultural contexts are of decisive influence on interpretations that influence the production as well as the reading of comics and other media, Stuart Hall's concept of encoding and decoding proves again and again to remain fully valid: pop-cultural and other references might have been intended or only come into existence in the eyes of the readers and can change the meaning of some visual element or narrative strand long after its creation. These changing frames in the sense-making are what keeps works relevant or confines them to be of historic relevance only. The understanding of these aspects is best treated as established in the diverse schools of media and literary analysis.

Without being aimed at the education of visual artists, understanding of specific forms of visual narrative can of course inform authors and artists about options and restrictions and the changeable nature of the messages found in visual and other literature. And in this, it does not matter if these practitioners are one or many collaborating on the development and production

of new comics, this truth applies to auteur-comics as studio-productions and ought to influence their work.

Obviously, the education of comics authors and visual artists gains substantially where systematic artistic research is interwoven with the analysis of existing visual sequential storytelling. But the advantages in understanding these practical backgrounds to comics production and design choices in comics narrations are valid for analysis and understanding of individual examples of storytelling in comics that is not aimed at comics practitioners but all readers and theoreticians.

Like with all storytelling, solid knowledge of ways in which others have designed and narrated similar situations helps to express one's own story, helps to understand the advantages and disadvantages in individual design choices, objects from art history

IMAGE 1:
*preparatory scetches
testing different drawing tools
in approximately the same style
of figure drawing as well as
adding colour.*
Jakob Dittmar: *How did
we get here?* 2026.



are treated as potential references in no difference to other, more current motifs and themes: It is part of the visual language of a comic to illustrate some situation similar to specific other comics or in reflected and distinct difference from these other designs. Likewise part of the ongoing negotiation of cultural relevances in ongoing semiosis is the composition of individual images or entire pages in reference to some classic piece of art: every distinct choice of a point of view, every segmentation of some development or action into individual images creates a particular view and atmosphere. It paces the narration as well as it creates and sustains particular moods and atmospheres that are important for the narration's progression (s. Clavier; Dittmar forthcoming).

Individual compositorial decisions that are visible in each image and each page, executed in a distinct drawing style using specific tools, define each comic's expression and voice. Active choices in scripting and designing, and of course executing individual moments within a comic's narrative, allow for expression of individual visual and narrative style, for individual narrative voice and individual visual expression, the so called graphiation that is recognisable and can be specific for one particular auteur, artist, or studio. If not limited by extremely detailed rules that safeguard uniform design in large productions (like e.g. Disney comics), all graphical aspects of a comic can be used for artistic expression as well as for individual ways to create narrative development, to place and interweave images on a page and beyond. Individual narrative styles become not only recognisable but also reasons for reading the newest work by an artist or team: Their ductus, or linework that creates figures and places in each image, or their specific way to compose intricate pages as visual units within the larger narrative are reason enough to read their next comic.

To understand how things can be expressed in visual communication and art and to be able to understand the strengths and weaknesses in some particular work, it is necessary to analyse others' work and how they have communicated / expressed their perspective on things. Otherwise, the individuality in some comics'

visuals, texts, and storytelling as a whole cannot be understood or discussed fully. Entire catalogues of options can be developed for specific narrative contexts in this way – and this is what theory is good at, obviously.

To understand actual production and communicative limitations better, an advantage is given where comics- and character design-research is enhanced by actually producing and learning from producing. With focus on comics and pictorial storytelling, all kinds of combinations of text and image, mostly picture stories and comics, allow to understand better why a specific way of expression might have been preferred, what effects are given on the textual or on the pictorial plane. Also, how page formats and style choices in drawing, writing, colouring, etc. do influence the actual production process and final product. It needs to do comics to learn what practical aspects apply in the flow or break of sequences. The understanding of some comics narratives is helped considerably by having experienced how page-formats do influence or even dictate the placement of individual images within the space of a comic, for example. How the visual perspective used in one image is dominating or less dominating an entire scene depending on the placement of that very image, etc.

Comics-based research

Bucken-Knapp emphasizes the benefits of comics-based research in this context, where comics can be matter of research as well as the medium of expression, of communication about research methods and results alike (Bucken-Knapp 2025), a position propagated by O’Sullivan, who connects his argument in much detail to the way, comics tell and readers complement development into the differences between images, etc. (O’Sullivan 2024). Their argument does not differ from the description of comics-based research provided by Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower, and Sousanis, with the marked difference that they emphasize comics-based research to be neither method nor research methodology, but

rather an emerging field of practice (Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower, Sousanis 2020, 197), that promises to reach out to a wider and much more diverse audience than established academic writing (ibid, 200). Their paper traces the development of the academic and didactic arguments for comics-based research, before they explain in detail crucial aspects and strategies for visualisation in narrative sequences. While it is too early to say if a distinct difference between comics-based research and comics research as such will become established, for the moment, there are indicators in the approach and focus that can lead to a distinction between the two, with comics research remaining a wider umbrella for all kinds of research on and around comics and comics cultures. The crucial indicator in this is that the approach decidedly includes comics production. Focus is not on the ways in which comics material expresses and narrates issues but on the complex social realities that are explored in research. Comics are for example understood and reflected on as pictorial note-taking during research, helping to express issues that are difficult to verbalise while researching or at the conclusion of some specific research project. While individual comics-based research is reflecting on its visual expression and drives forward experimentation on just that visual expression, the majority does not.

Comics-based research can be artistic research as well, but it does not have to! Research that includes producing comics is not artistic research per se but rather practice-based research if it is not knowingly going further than repeating existing design solutions in variation, if it is not aiming for artistic expression – and communicating the findings from these applications of practical knowledge.

Artistic research

Didactically, artistic research can easily be compared to strategies for lifelong learning as defined – for example – in the context of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF 2017). In this comparison, it is on par with the abilities of skilled craftspeople or masters of trades who experiment with diverse solutions to a

problem to advance their understanding further and be even better teachers of their trade: By means of advanced training, practitioners systematically acquire and increase their knowledge, cognitive and practical abilities and skills, their social competences, and their personal independence enabling problem solving and self-management in project work. Duly, artistic research in comics can be described as self-organised project learning focusing on problem-solving to grow one's own artistic and reflective competences. These reflections again allow and ask for being communicated to contribute to the discourse that grows practical skills and theoretical knowledge of the field.

The individual learning of how things can be expressed and narrated in comics is not constituting artistic research, necessarily: To learn the routines and standard options in constructing a sequence of images to communicate some content might be a personal, individual journey of discovery, but it does not add variation to the language of comics, so to say. It allows the individual learner to understand the composition and pacing, the placement of individual images etc. in existing comics better, indeed, and as such contributes a lot to possible analyses of comics.

Knowledge of possibilities and routines in the execution of comics allows for artistic experimentation, not only to express oneself differently when showing some situation or development, when creating and manipulating the atmosphere in a comics narrative, or the mood within a section of a comic. New forms of visualising, of telling and showing perspectives, of interweaving strands within a story, of adding or reducing complexities to the very act of storytelling, all depend on experimentation with the medium, like e.g. the blending of maps with comics to place a story and show movements (s. example on cover of this issue). They can be artistic research but are not always. This restriction is based on the differences and conflicts between descriptions of artistic research that are used in artistic education (for a short introduction see Gansing 2020).

Where a comic falls back on tested routines to tell its story, it is ideally a product of applied professionalism in visual communication or graphic design. Where some completely new way to execute

a situation, scene or story has been tried, this in itself is artistic experimentation, but depending on which idea of artistic research is applied, this either is artistic research already – or becomes so only after reflections on the experiment have been communicated publicly, ideally in writing. Writing here includes publication in the form of academic comics, interweaving the practices of comics-based research and artistic research further.

If a professional visual artist or graphic designer produces material that is aimed for visual expression of some message, it can be a run-of-the-mill production that adds to the experienced routines of the producer but adds no new knowledge or understanding. A reflective practitioner (see Schön 1983 for details) can easily design and produce visual communications and even visual art without challenging her/his/their routines and without expanding abilities. Any systematic learning, be it in an apprenticeship or in whatever comparable educational development of knowledge and abilities, grows a repertoire of routines for doing the work, starting with easy assignments that in the course of advancing abilities become more complex or specialised (see Sennett 2008 and Crawford 2009). After having successfully finished a specific education (e.g. an apprenticeship), continuous work asks for and allows to grow more knowledge and abilities, as new tools and materials, new contexts are encountered. At what moments in these developments a person can reflect on their routines and methods and in response develop new approaches, depends on contexts and individual abilities. A craftsperson, designer, artisan, or artist who sets her/him/themselves new challenges, grows their toolbox and repertoire for future work, obviously. This development can stall, but it does not have to. But it might not be artistic at all.

Where does artistic research start?

In the field of visual communication, which is the frame for comics research, it is partly impossible to define the point at which artistic research begins as it is impossible to always define what is needed or at what point the reflective practitioner starts to do artistic research. It can be in the process of search and experiment that is integrated in a production that tries to expand on given

routines, maybe. With absolute certainty, it has happened when it is expressed in communication about the processes and experimental / researching aspects in the production. But at what moment the reflection triggers and drives artistic experimentation might remain impossible to determine even when reflecting on that very process, for example Gareth Brookes' considerations (Brookes 2026) are process-relevant but often not so for the resulting comic: the embodiment of the artist in creating a comic remain mostly inconsequential to the reader. The finished and published comic is of course shaped also by aspects of movability, ergonomics of hand-held tools and the specific or generic line qualities these tools produce but the process is not the product.² These aspects remain individually different and of interest in regard to production-processes but seem not generalisable. Also, the finished narration is not necessarily showing how and if individual creators were affected by bodily aspects, the published final version usually does not show the process, really.

It is certain that artistic research has happened where specific results are communicated. Working on a specific visual expression demands for experiments that deviate from or avoid narrative routines outright. Some things need to be done to know if they work or not because theoretical reflection on how their visual qualities work on the page remain hypothetical until they are applied and tested.

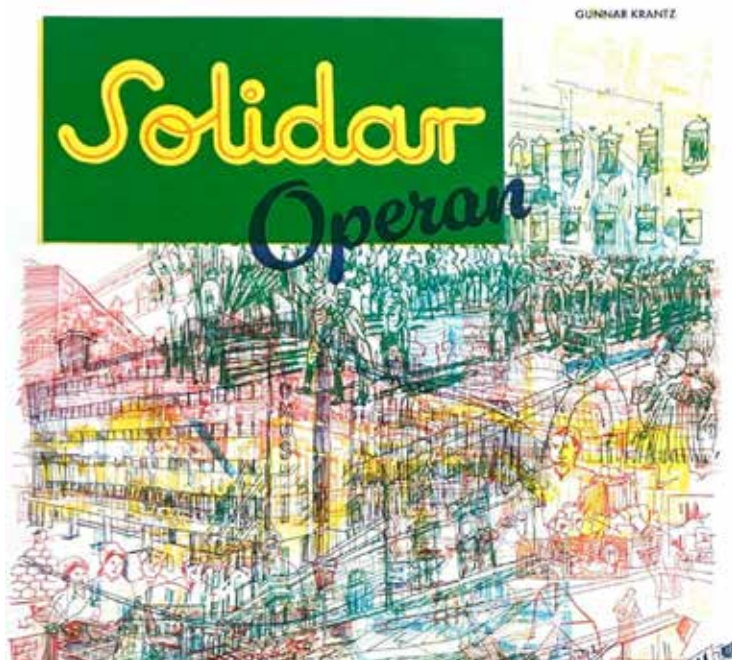
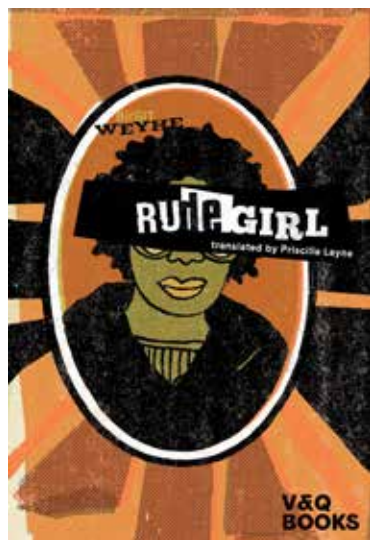
Examples for artistic research

To illustrate what artistic research in comics can be, let us look into three recent examples: Birgit Weyhe's *Rude Girl* (2024), Gunnar Krantz' *SolidarOperan* (2025), and my own *How did we get here?* (2026).

While the first provides straight forward comics-reading, the second demands patience and close reading from its readers, readability seems not to be its concern as it breaks with reading habits - sequences

² For example: the extend to which Joe Sacco expresses gratitude towards his chiropractitioner in the editorials of his more recent comics signals the amount of pain involved in his work at the drawing board. His pain under production is so far not made visible in his comics, though - it is kept out of the graphiation and narrative other than in those afterwords.

of images are partly not only juxtaposed but also superimposed on each other. This placement of images in stacks and in juxtapositions is driving experimentation on the placement of images and sequentiality to the extreme. The third demands much in its blend of visual references from diverse cultural contexts.



Birgit Weyhe: *Rude Girl*

Birgit Weyhe's *Rude Girl* tells the biography of a female black professor of German, Priscilla Layne, the child of Caribbean immigrants to the USA.

While the chapters circle around her childhood and formative years in which she negotiated her identity and belonging, each ends with several pages of comic drawn by Birgit Weyhe in slightly different colour-settings. These document Priscilla Layne responding to the chapter's narrative and visual expression, adding details and also correcting some details or criticising the visual expression or strategy used by Weyhe, beginning with reflections over the question of how to show the skin colour of non-white characters in comics. Each new chapter then applies the results from these reflective discussions, growing the visual language that the readers have been made aware of just before. And while the comic tells the biography of Priscilla Layne, it is the visual language of Birgit Weyhe and her decisions on what to include etc. She frames the biography with her own reflections and explanations for what she is doing, not least in response to accusations of appropriation at the very outset of the comic (Weyhe 2024, 10).

Weyhe is of course the author as well as the artist visualising these segments in her particular style and visual expression, i.e. it is specifically her graphiation. The representations of herself and of Layne are shown in discourse about the story they are elements of. In this way, additional thematic framings are set and negotiated without these taking over the main narrative (on frames and framing in this context, s. Schmid 2021).

In *Rude Girl*, the framing narrative by Weyhe explains her reflections and considerations, her respectful care in full knowledge of ongoing debates about race, representation, and identity constructions: The artistic experiment is reflected on publicly to explain not only her own choices in visual language but also to allow others to benefit from and continue on these and their motivations - it contributes substantially to the debate on visual representation and character design in comics. This sets an example for how biographies based on interviews can be told in this artform executed by a very accomplished practitioner.

Artistic research is reflected and expressed in these reflections on different attempts and options and in their development in discourse, they go beyond the reflections of the practitioner as they develop specific aspects in reflection over discourse about these experiments. The comic includes criticism of its own artistic experimentation while these reflections motivate ongoing adjustments in the representation of characters and the narrative: a masterclass in visual representation and on the responsibilities of comics artists towards their subjects and readers at the same time!

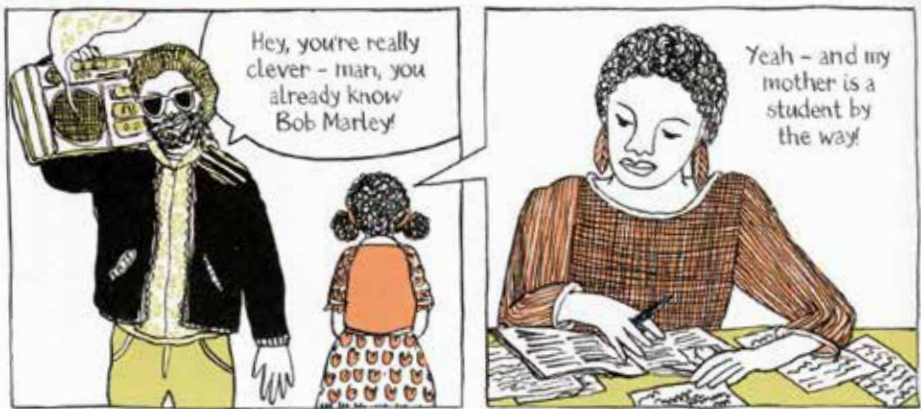


IMAGE 2 a - c: excerpts from Birgit Weyhe: *Rude Girl*, 2024, p. 52 (top), p. 60 (right/next page), p. 86 (bottom).

Birgit Weyhe shows the process of developing the visual representation of blackness with the help of shared reflections on her previous work. The reflection itself is summarised in sections between chapters (on the right), the approach in the chapter before (image above) and the conclusion drawn for the following chapters (image below).



We can't look past the division
in society.



That's why I think it'd be better if
you made skin color clearly visible
in the comic.



But I don't want you to color people
completely black, like in your early
comics.



Then their
facial expressions
are restricted and
it reminds me
of blackface.



I like when you combine two colors, like
you've done in other comics. That's
actually the best solution.



What do you
think?

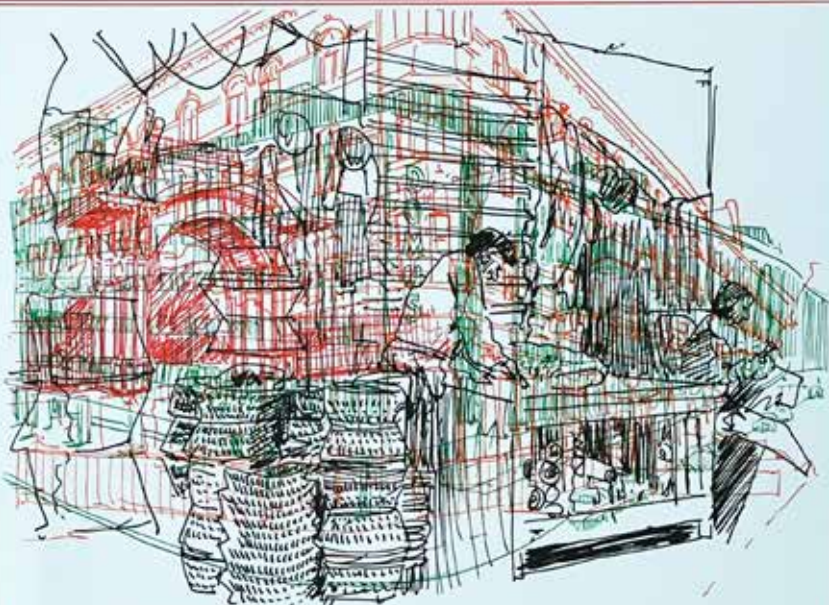


Gunnar Krantz: *SolidarOperan*

Our second example experiments on the placement of images in sequence. It does not include reflections on these experiments, these are provided in other places. In *SolidarOperan* (2025), Gunnar Krantz shows the history of the Swedish Kooperativa förbundet's [the Swedish consumers' cooperative] stores in Malmö, Sweden. It combines historic advertising, images and text-excerpts about the cooperative and their stores. The complete story consists of 95 pages in A2-format, printed with a risograph and collected into massive folders containing the loose pages, that remain unbound into a book-block.

It shows individual places and tells of their history before and after the existence of these individual stores, connecting the local to the national collective memory. The way in which places are shown and the narration is developed is far from the usual: while *SolidarOperan* is printed in many colours, these are used systematically with one colour for each individual strand of material within the narration. Chapters are mostly dedicated to individual quarters of the city, different aspects of these built environments are depicted, references to relevant historic eras are made in sequential images and texts. But the sequences of images are not always placed in the usual way: images consist of line drawings with images in the same colour placed in juxtaposed sequence over the pages while images in different colours are superimposed on each other, they are printed on top of each other within the same space of the page (see image 3, a section of the page is shown in larger scale in image 4, further below). This strategy creates partly very calm pages but also very densely filled pages that are sequences of juxtaposed image-stacks that need careful separation. Gunnar Krantz is not the first who places images in this way, but within the context

IMAGE 3 (to the right/next page): *Chronology of place and sequentiality in the places and space of the comics page: Black in the lower two images shows historic strike action. Red shows Malmö's municipal parc with two busts of leaders of the workers' movement. Orange: images of house facades. Green shows a store of the cooperative on site.*



of this paper this is irrelevant to compare. It remains a very unusual form of sequence composition, for the considerations here the specific graphiation realised is what matters.

The idea behind the approach is influenced by double exposures: the pages show not only two but mostly many more images simultaneously - on top of each other, their lines interweaving on the very same area of the page. While the idea is referring to analogue photography, the technique and result in drawn comics reminds of sheets of colour-coded sewing patterns (e.g. in magazines by the company *burda*). These need de-scrambling to become useable for sewing: From the one sheet with all superimposed outlines, the individual pieces of the sewing pattern are traced onto separate paper and then transferred onto cloths. The difficulty with tracing individual shapes is the danger of becoming misguided by other outlines in similar colours. While *SolidarOperan* uses many colours with some being quite close to each other on the colour spectrum, it asks readers to de-scramble the information on each page by reading the individual images superimposed on each other in sequence (see image 4). This demands to concentrate and to get close to the page for some images while others are more easily recognisable when looking at the page from further away.

Usually, comics storytelling is provided in sequences of images and texts placed in juxtaposition. All content of a comic can be understood to be layered in these sequences with separate layers for narrator's texts, speech balloons, thought balloons, etc. while the images show figures acting in environments (s. Dittmar 2026). The content of the layers is synchronised so that texts are placed within the picture they belong to etc. as any encounter with a miss-print illustrates. We see the images on the same page of a comic at the same time, our reading constructs the relation between them, in time-sequence or as a sequence of aspects to the situation etc.

Opening the pages of a comic shows the full page or double page as a visual unit, all images are seen at the same time, synchronous, before the sequence of images and development of the narrative is discovered by readers as they zoom in and read these images one after

another, diachronous. *SolidarOperan* is read in the same way, but the page as visual unit is negotiated more knowingly in the process and provides a colourful backdrop to each of the images, while the moods conveyed by these compositions are created in the synchronicity of the colours that combine into a light, open, and friendly mix of colours.

The example's extreme experimentation on sequence-construction in comics challenges the reading habits for the medium comics. It tests an alternative approach to the placement of the individual images on the page, but not by collaging, but by superimposing and interweaving their lines. These stacks usually constitute aspect-to-aspect sequences that contribute to the representation of a specific place, while action-to-action sequences and other are developed in juxtaposing images shown in the same colour and placed next to each other, some on the same page, some on consecutive pages. The resulting narration is not easy to read and demands the reader to include many images for which the relation to the narrative is not explicitly given.

Gunnar Krantz does not explain nor does he steer the reader through the narration, instead his comic invites readers to follow the narrative stands they discover, to botanise from the visual abundance of motives, themes, and references: in this, and across the colour spectrum, the comic offers many narratives, all are possible, but not all of them were intended by the artist - in this, the comic truly represents the construction of a place and its history from its elements. Conventions of composing and reading comics are challenged in this format, but the definition of what comics are is not put into question.

IMAGE 4, see next spread: (Detail from IMAGE 3), Gunnar Krantz: *SolidarOperan*, 2025. *Layers with differently coloured lines are more or less dominant and need the reader to read the stacked images carefully - here layers in red, orange, and black can be differentiated.*



STREJKANDE VID AV.



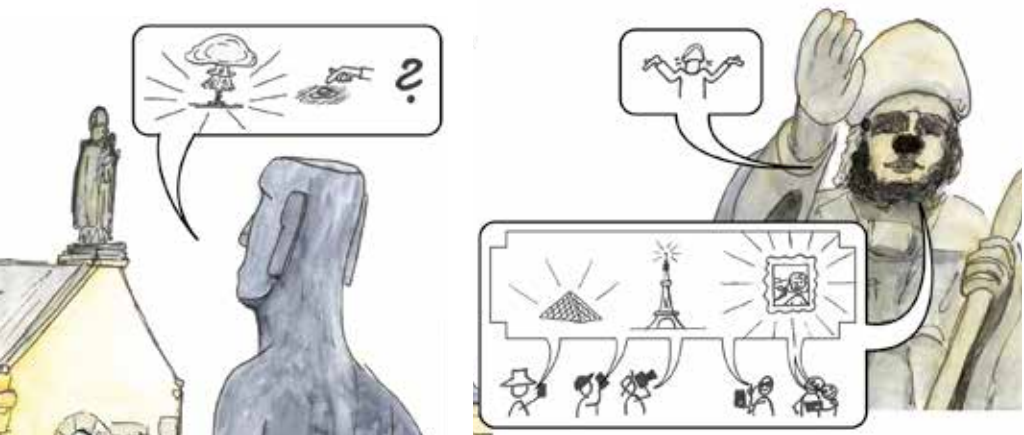
NILSSONS FABR.

1926-1927



Jakob Dittmar: *How did we get here?*

The comics-album *How did we get here?* experiments mostly on construction of its narration, while it develops two strands of events – a fictional underwater journey from Easter Island to Paris and its counter-narrative centred on historical facts and museal conventions. Thematically, the colonial past of Polynesia interweaves with environmental concerns and aspects of cultural memory. The quadrillage, the composition of the comic pages, organises pages and double pages in different layouts to emphasize the narrated situations. It is a calm comic, the visual style is reduced but realistic with its colouring in watercolours providing a distinctly unthreatening atmosphere, the narrative development is calm, with brief sequences of more physical action. Thoughts and speech by the figures is represented by images in balloons, not by text. Duly, the pictorial references in speech mainly use symbolic reduction, but remain dependent on cultural and historic knowledge. The strands of the narration are joined to develop the comic's argument for the need of cultural memory in the images of the comic: as with all comics, the pictorial elements depend to be recognised to be contextualised in specific discourses about history and/or memory. And in this regard, the experiment shows its limitations: referring to objects and settings that are not well established currently and duly not easily recognised by mainstream-readers, the re-appearance of figures and motifs within the narration are easily decoded by most



readers but not the thematic references to discourses hinted at in the narration.

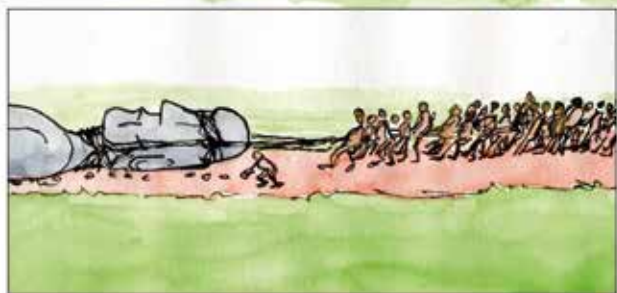
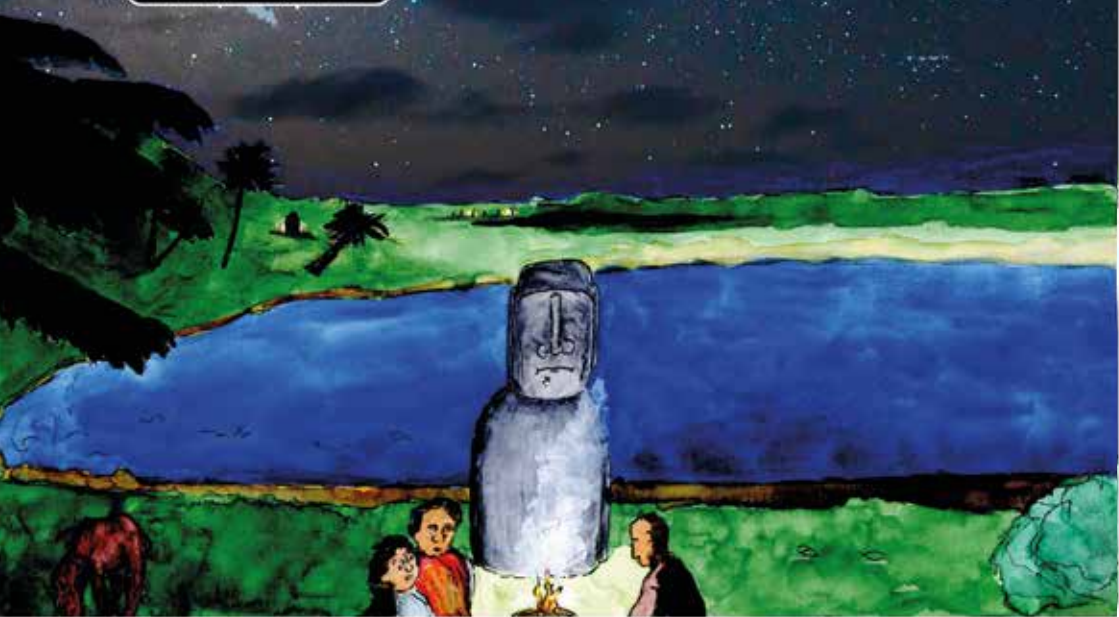
A surprising but worthwhile side-effect of publishing this album and corresponding with readers is their response to the used visual language: references in text to atom tests at Moruroa are more easily understood than visual references even though the foundation myth of *greenpeace* is firmly connected to this place and event. Textual abstraction seems understood easier than visual depiction, maybe because visual references to the place and events are no longer part of the general visual canon.

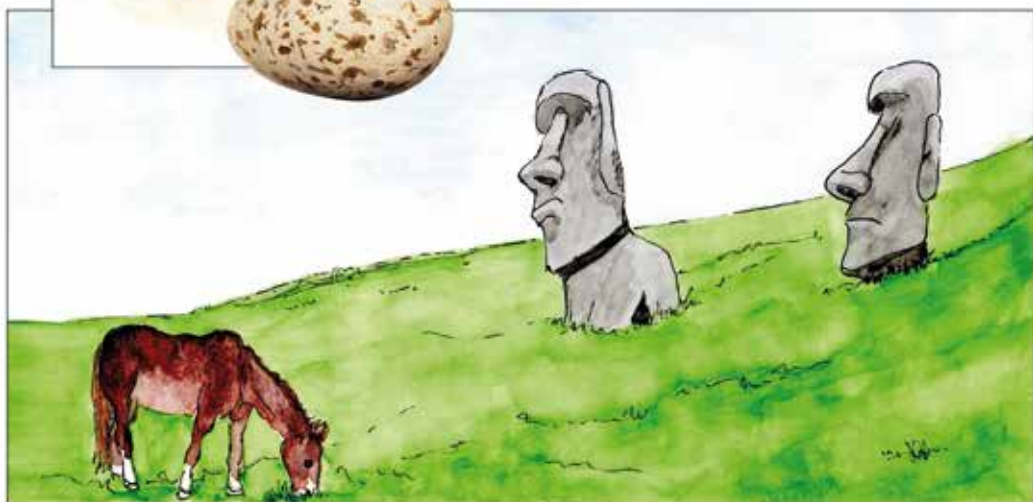
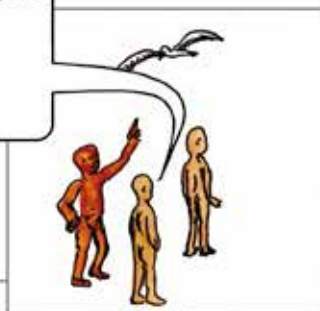
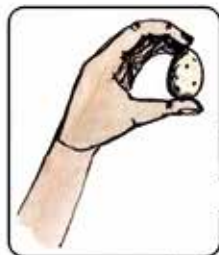
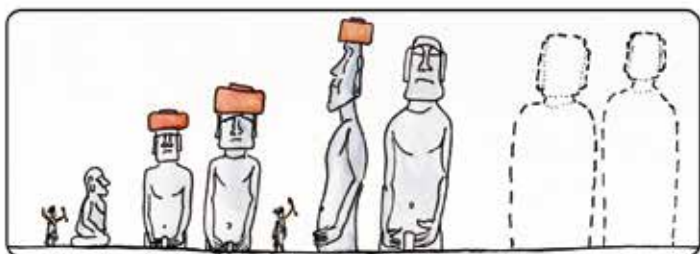
While the narration intends to create an understanding for the importance of the *Memorial for the Victims of Atomic Tests* that was erected and might still be placed in Papeete, the narrative references to these tests on the Moruroa Atoll that were generally recognised and used in posters and murals are no longer recognised quickly – the events behind them are by now outside of general recognition. Equally outside of easy recognition are references to deep sea-exploration and Heyerdahl's anthropological theories as well as experimental archeology on Easter Island. Also, and that might be a bit more surprising in the light of recent numbers in cultural tourism and its location in close vicinity to the Eiffel Tower, the readers reached so far with the comic do not recognise the *Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac* as the French museum for anthropology, duly are the comic's intended comments on

IMAGE 5 a & b (to the left/previous page): Detail from Dittmar: *How did we get here?* 2026, p. 42. *Speech represented in reduced visual language using not only established icons or symbols.*

IMAGE 6: (next spread): Double page from Dittmar: *How did we get here?* 2026, p. 6f
References to Heyerdahl's theories on Easter Island cultures are integrated in the narration without differing these from other theories and findings on the matter. As knowledge on the moaï, their production and cultural contexts is more limited as anticipated, these do not carry the narrative on cultural production as intended.

Rapanui, a long time ago





past practices of museal acquisition and cultural imperialism not understood. Despite these restrictions it is worth pointing out that the narration's confrontation of facts and fiction in the museal context are understood as comments on historiography and constructions of cultural heritage.

Examples: reflection

The examples demonstrate the bandwidth in artistic research-led comics production, Gunnar Krantz applies a very different approach from the example by Birgit Weyhe. *Rude Girl* is composed to lead the reader through its narration, it drives the biographical narrative forward to add detailed reflections on aspects of that very storytelling. It includes and reflects on experiments in Weyhe's visual expression without breaking the flow: the clear composition of the narrative ensures that readers focus on content and the visual expression of selected aspects, how Birgit Weyhe graphiates these details and the overall narration.

For *SolidarOperan*, Gunnar Krantz expects the readers to know how to read comics and a willingness to test these conventions. The page layout is based on the usual juxtaposition of images in reading-order, only with various images provided superimposed on each other instead: the empty space of each image provides the room for the placement of other images in different colours. For more fluent reading his visual narration depends on knowledge of the places and their history. Alternatively it depends on cultural knowledge that allows readers to relate the particular in the images to the generic frame of the story illustrated by the images.

And while the composition of the narration in *How did we get here?* is not challenging, its use of visual references demands a somewhat dedicated cultural knowledge of past conflicts that evade current general understandability: the album includes depictions that refer to incidents and symbols that are not generally understood while its narration depends on readers' understanding of these objects and buildings in their referencing to distinct cultures and practices. And while details from incidents like the atom-bomb testing at Moruroa with its consequences for e.g. the bird populations in the region, as well as symbolic protests by

sailboats entering the military perimeter etc. were part of general discourse in the author's youth, they are no longer recognised immediately.

Conclusion

Sometimes, we need well-established routines in media production to accommodate for highly experimental work on specific aspects within such a production. For some communications, experimentation is out of the question – successful communication of the message is central and must not be jeopardised by experiments in visual communication. Some topic can be quite challenging in itself, it might be better communicated in a very established form: established visual narrative routines are best used to express a story and negotiate a topic far from the everyday experience of the intended audience.

While research in natural sciences and engineering often remains secretive until some resulting process or product is patented, research in the arts works differently: While artistic abilities are at the heart of a professional artist-persona, details of artistic method or production might be guarded as fiercely. But this regard is closer to the logic of the art market and mythmaking around some specific artist and their work than it is about artistic research. Where an artist wants to impress audiences with their abilities, details of artistic research processes will not be communicated, as that can endanger the artist's aura (or rather *habitus*) and standing (as well as marketability), this approach seems rather in tune with an understanding of the artist as genius and magician. In academic contexts, artistic research is aimed at other goals and objectives as it is based on sharing results and methods so that these can drive understanding forward and can be tested and reproduced by others.

Artistic research in comics can develop new insights into specific functions of particular elements of a comic but it could also test the fundamental logic of sequential pictorial storytelling if some experimentation would lead that way. If artwork, a comic for example, invites readers to understand how it works and what it does differently from other comics, it allows for continued experimentation and testing of the claim made in that very work.

If the initial idea, the process, or resulting stages of work are explained and reflected on by the experimenting artist, they are artistic research that contribute to academic learning.

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Artistic research as knowledge production

Oskar Aspman

The requirement to communicate research is not only a condition imposed on artistic research from outside. It is not only a bureaucratic threshold that separates legitimate research from private experimentation. It is the same requirement that applies to any field of inquiry. Knowledge that remains private remains implicit, internal, untested. It can of course be the foundation for new insights. The question then becomes: how will we know if we just reinvented the wheel if these insights do not meet resistance, until they are tested in application, in material production, or in discussions with others? Knowledge needs to become collective, or part of the collective, to actually gain velocity.

What is specific to artistic research then? One thing I've been thinking about is that within what we call artistic research the communication is not merely a report of findings produced elsewhere, it is instead a sort of looped knowledge that lives in the classroom together with the students, in the body of the practitioner, in someone who does not yet know what they do not know and also in the communication of how we make. What

I mean by *looped* here is that when we communicate, the act of communicating produces knowledge that the making alone cannot, and that this new knowledge folds back into the next making. The making informs the communication, the communication changes the making, so that the next making starts somewhere different from the last. What looks like repetition is how the knowledge evolves in time and space.

In my own practice I often start my work just like the malicious portrait of a conspiracy theorist. I will be randomly looking at things that might interest me to set my inner world in motion, to find the hidden truth. I can see an image of a jetty in a lake, and the image is fine as a picture, it creates a nostalgic longing for lost times of my childhood but does nothing to jolt my imagination. I can see an image of a mountaintop, and that is also fine as a picture, in all its natural beauty. But when I hold them both at once, some engine starts whizzing and clanking in my head. I start

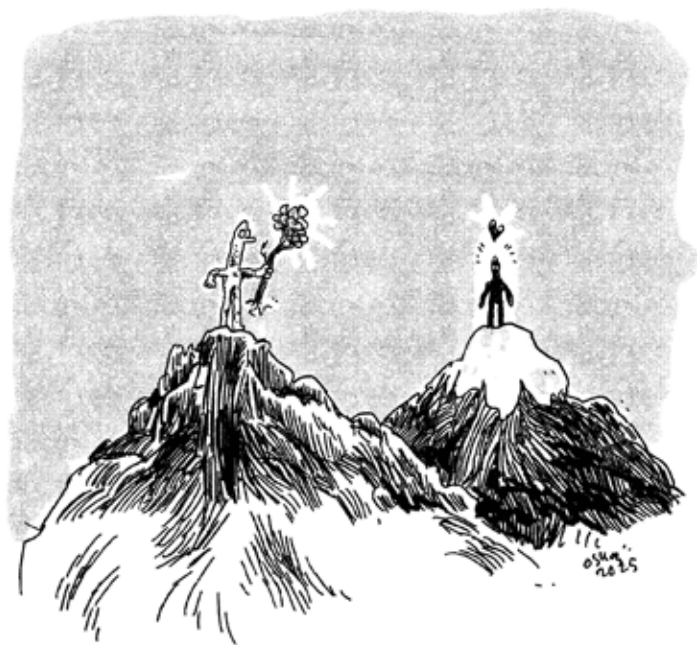


IMAGE 1:
*Did they build the jetty
on the mountaintop?*
Drawing by Oskar
Aspman

to randomly connect dots that really weren't meant to connect, I start wondering: how do you build a jetty on a mountaintop? How do you get the timber up there? Who climbs it, and what anchors the planks? How does a boat reach a mountaintop at all? Are we waiting for Noah's ark, or for an airship?

From that collision, worlds build themselves if I just follow that burst of ideas. One of the things to learn is when to follow the flow and when to find somewhere new to go. When to add another image to the pile, when to stop and research what trees actually grow at that altitude, what houses look like in the cultures that have lived at the top of the world. The reflective practice at this stage is rarely explicit. But it is there, and it can be made explicit the moment someone asks: why did you go that way, and not the other?

In the classroom that question often comes from students. Because they do not yet possess the knowledge to understand which questions are too basic to ask. And that unawareness is a resource. Those answers have since long settled into my hands and the muscle memory after having drawn countless pages, after having sat beside students working through the same exercises in their own ways. What feels self-evident to me is not yet visible to them, so they ask. But here it is necessary to be clear: the gain is not only theirs. When a student asks why something works the way it does, I need to find the words for what my hands already know, and in doing so I often discover something I did not know I knew. Not because it happens in an academic setting, but because the insight that emerges could not have come from reading, or from working alone. It becomes research-in-action. It could be something about how they learn. It could be something about what is specific to comics as a medium. What is evident though is that the encounter is not one-directional. It produces knowledge in several directions at once.

The act of drawing is itself a *different* kind of knowledge again. For me sketching is intellectual work. In the sketching process I need to consider, in the moment, about what each element will



IMAGE 2 (top):
Honest to god, that is the original sketch.

IMAGE 3 (bottom):
I again questioned my sanity when starting the hatching, but am happy with the end result.

communicate later. How does this composition hold together? Where will this page sit in a printed publication, what will be its companion on the spread (I always consider my work to be published in a printed format). In that sketching process I cut and paste, resize, and move panels around. What guides those decisions is a combination of things: the accumulated experience of having *seen* many solutions and felt as a *reader* which ones worked, the experience of having *made* them myself, and, as with all types of design, the good old gut *feeling*. But when I ink (or finalize my sketches, be that with ink or whatever), something shifts. Because in that stage of drawing I need to trust my hand to know how to turn a scribble with an idea into something extant. Sometimes I trace my sketches neatly. And sometimes the line goes somewhere I did not plan for. It affects what comes after, and if I follow that in-the-hand-living-knowledge the page is usually better for it. The lines work with each other rather than with my original idea. Sometimes I realize mid-page that if I do these small careful strokes in one corner, I have committed to doing them everywhere, thousands of individual marks, one after another. I put on music and let the same record play on repeat for days, because breaking the flow means losing something that cannot easily be recovered. Sometimes I can see this while it is happening, sometimes I only understand it when I put the pen down. I can *see* the the time spent. It becomes physical work like carrying stones, or chopping wood. Carrying one stone is just cumbersome, building a jetty is impressive. One can see the hours spent. Not because more strokes are objectively better, quite the opposite. To make the hatches be more effective, they have to have the contrast of white space, the intentional nothing. How the tension between a heavily worked area and one left completely empty can guide the reader with ease. The page looks the way it does for a reason, even if I have a sketch I could not have told you how it would turn out before I drew it. This is knowing-in-action in its most literal sense: the hand knows something the head has not yet formulated, and the only way to find out what it knows is to let it work.

And this is why I ask students to document their process, take photos of sketches, take screenshots, etc. As a way to keep a record of the choices they made before they knew they were making choices. That they shouldn't just do it because documentation is a formality, but because the writing of their reflection is, in itself a cognitive event. They discover what they decided in the act of describing it. The bookkeeping produces knowledge the making could not.

What I also notice in both the students work and in my own is that the research, the project, the comic is not finished when the drawings are done. It is not even finished when the pages are assembled. Something clarifies in the submission to print, in the act of saying: this is what I made, what do you make of it? Errors appear the day after that were invisible the day before. The requirement to be understood by someone else forces a precision that working alone does not.

To rehash: This logic operates at every level of knowledge production. The student who documents their design process in writing does not merely record decisions already made, they discover what those decisions were. The maker who prints and distributes does not merely communicate a finished work, they submit it to a feedback loop that becomes the first act of the next project, we just need to find that first. Wait a minute, let me have a look through these pictures.

Call for Papers

Acazine provides contributions to comics research.
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SUMMARY:

This text looks into artistic research as a method to understand better how storytelling in comics is working on the pictorial plane. The focus of artistic research is partly driven by experimentation on visual qualities, clearness of expression or conveyance of narratives are not always most central to experiments. Some is about readability while others experiments are not concerned with readability of their images or narratives. On a general level artistic research in comics is quite established by now, but as soon as we look into distinct examples, contradictory directions become apparent. Also, the opposition remains between experiments that seem rather to be art for art's sake and concerns and experiments on readability of visual communications.

Three examples are discussed to illustrate the bandwidth of artistic research in comics, they are described in reference to the established positions on artistic research. Main differences between artistic research and concepts like comics-based research, praxis-based research, or the reflective practitioner are briefly explained in this context to substantiate the need for communication of research processes and results in artistic research.

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