

The potential of hybrid research in fine arts applied to the comics field

A practical perspective

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As a part of a postdoctoral research project supported by Vigo University in Spain, I have spent the last two years as a guest researcher at Kyoto Seika University's Graduate School of Manga. This specific institution stands out among its peers in Japan for its highly internationalized research group—including PhD and research students from not only Japan but also nearly fifteen different nations around the globe—and the multidisciplinary of those researchers, from fields such as aesthetics, Japanese studies, literacy, comparative literature, sociology, history, narratology, philosophy and manga and anime studies. A major goal of this project is to explore new research methodologies, departing from what is generally taught and tested in the field of fine arts; such new approaches could be successfully applied in art projects and general curriculum for master's and PhD students in the fine arts in Spain. Moreover, as a part of this research project, my concern is the potential contribution from the fine arts perspective: what an art-based research perspective can provide for comics studies. In this article I will address the issue of whether the practical, theoretical and scientific research methodologies used in recent fine arts studies can be successfully applied in comics studies. I would also like to emphasize the particularities of this case study, both within the Spanish university system and in relation to my personal experience, not only as a researcher but also as a teacher and an artist. This goal ultimately coincides with a catchphrase of the Comicology International Conference, namely “probing practical scholarship.”

In order to do this, I will first discuss two examples that present a complementary approach. Using those two examples as an starting point, I will address some of the research methodologies typically applied in fine arts academia and attempt to answer the following questions: Why should we think about comic studies from the fine arts perspective? How can we develop academic studies of comics in Spain from that perspective?

ACADEMIA IN SPAIN: THE CURRENT SCENARIO

Since this article will primarily focus on the state of academia in Spain, I believe a quick overview of fine arts studies at Spanish universities and the role comic studies play within the fine arts in Spain will be useful for further discussion.

1 The 7th International Scholarly Conference: “COMICOLOGY. Probing Practical Scholarship” took place between September 25th and 27th, 2015, at the Kyoto International Manga Museum.

Spanish universities are public, and university expenses remain far cheaper than in other countries. While a large number of youth continue with university studies after finishing high school, in 2014 only 31% of the population in Spain had studied at a university (according to the OECD),³ which could be a result of underdevelopment and economic struggle during forty years of dictatorship.

In this regard, Spain still ranks low in terms of percentage of the population with university studies (ranked 18th worldwide), especially when compared to 46.6% of Japan (3rd), or 43.1% in the US (5th). Spanish universities have long exhibited an excessive polarization: on one hand a highly “academic” and theoretical orientation, and a lack of emphasis on practical skills that can be employed in the workplace on the other hand.

Fine arts has been a degree field in Spain only since 1978.⁴ Fine arts is a mere newcomer with no academic tradition or research background. Of course, Spain has a very important art tradition that provides art schools with a very solid historical foundation, but there is a significant difference between independent art schools and fine art departments at universities in terms of how art is taught. In this regard, the fine arts departments in the university system emphasize study based upon academic research and art experimentation (as in Germany or Italy) rather than aiming at studies oriented toward applied art (as in the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries or the United Kingdom).

Comics studies as a research field is quite rare in the Spanish university system, generally distanced from standard curriculum, which is far different from the cases of Japan or other countries with greater social and commercial ties to the national comics industry. Nevertheless, some graduate courses or subjects focused on comics are being taught (especially after the recent boom of the Spanish graphic novel, which appeals to a broader, non-traditional audience), but they are designated as elective courses extraneous to the standard curriculum, tangential to other academic fields (journalism, history, sociology and so on). Thus, not surprisingly, there are no faculties dedicated to comics in Spain yet. Within the general panorama, comics studies is small and lacks recognition as a legitimate field of study. Nevertheless, there has been growth in journalistic activity on the subject, such as the ACDCComic (Association of Critics and Promoters of Comics).

TWO EXAMPLES OF FINE ARTS & COMICS INTERMIXING

I will briefly introduce two Spanish artists as examples who personify the main ideas of this article, respectively: Miguel Cuba’s (Lugo, 1982) work demands scholarly treatment, and Francesc Ruiz’s

2 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

3 Francisco Franco’s Dictatorship or Francoist Spain refers to the period of Spanish history between 1939 (end of the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939) and 1978 (Spanish Constitution and democracy).

4 The first fine arts departments in Spain were founded in 1978, with the arrival of democracy, when the former Royal Academies of Barcelona (1775), Madrid (1752), Bilbao, Seville (1771) and Valencia (1768) were adapted for or substituted with the modern university system. Belonging to Vigo University (Universidade de Vigo), Pontevedra’s fine arts department was born in 1990.

5 Being in Germany: Kunsthochschule/ Kunstakademie and Universität; in France: Ecoles Supérieures; in Italy: Nuove Accademie di Belle Arti and Università degli studi; and so on.

6 There are not solid statistics available on the professional activity of former fine arts students. However, according to some figures provided by different Spanish universities—as collected in the *White Book of Fine Arts* published by an official agency of the education ministry in Spain—former fine arts students in the early years of the 21st century represented a scarce 0.8% of comic artists. Source: *Libro Blanco: Títulos de Grado en Bellas Artes/Diseño/Restauración*. ANECA (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación), p.219.

(Barcelona 1971) work treats comics within an artistic praxis, engaging gallery and museum art exhibitions. While numerous artists emblemize distinct perspectives, I have chosen these two specifically since they are wholly representative of the core ideas I address here: two very different and yet complementary artists who approach comics from a fine arts perspective.

Miguel Cuba defended his PhD thesis in December, 2015, at the fine arts department at Pontevedra (Vigo University in Spain). Miguel Cuba is a young researcher, but he is also an artist and comics author. His opera prima was published in 2011; *Punto de Fuga* (“Vanishing point”) is a ‘slice of life’ graphic novel that mixes fictional everyday experiences with the early stages of the Spanish economic crisis. The main character is a flaneur, based on Cuba’s artistic *dérives* and closely related to the main topic of his PhD thesis. Entitled «Caminar, dibujar. El cómic como cuaderno de viaje: interacciones, estrategias y posibilidades» (“Drawing, walking. Comics as travelogue: interactions, strategies and possibilities”), Miguel Cuba’s thesis successfully combines a solid theoretical background with his professional comics career. Cuba’s project explores the relationship between comics and travelogue, and he theorizes that the travel comic is the true heir of the travelogue, looking at the formal similarities and differences between both mediums. He also explores how travel comics can address the transitory experience that has been so long sought after in other art forms, especially in contemporary art, such as video performance, artistic *dérives*, artist books, or even painting series and other serialized works, each an attempt to materialize time and movement. He states that “In a time when autobiographical comics hold an important market share, the topic of travel appears as fertile ground for formal and narrative experimentation, as well as a natural way for the author to express her or his inner world” (2015, p.16).

Cuba builds his ideas upon this solid conceptual framework and combines them with his artistic activity. His PhD thesis includes two graphic novels soon to be published and several artistic projects that have materialized into various exhibitions. Cuba claims that his research is rooted in a strong theoretical background and art foundation, including his own practical experience as a comics artist: “I believe research in the fine arts field should be necessarily done within the fine arts, and therefore the way to do it is through one’s personal artistic activity” (2015, p.23). Regarding Cuba’s statement, I do not necessarily agree that it is the only way. However, in order to integrate artistic activity into scholarly research, it will be necessary to encourage fine arts to find a place within academia, otherwise fine arts as a academic field will be continually caught in between two worlds.

My second example is Francesc Ruiz, a Spanish transdisciplinary artist specializing in expanded field comics. Ruiz usually works with installations, using either comics’ visual language or cross-references from this medium. The notion “expanded field” comes from the highly influential 1978 essay by Rosalind Krauss, who used the expression “expanded field sculpture,” and the term has recently been applied to other artistic mediums to convey a transdisciplinary approach that is ‘outside the limits of the frame’ (expanded field painting, expanded field graphic art, expanded field video and so) in a broader, more abstract sense. Krauss explains:

The expanded field that characterizes this domain of postmodernism possesses two features that are already implicit in the above description. One of these concerns the practice of individual artists; the other has to do with the question of medium. At both these points the bounded conditions of modernism have suffered a logically determined rupture (1979, p.42).

In brief, expanded field comics can be understood as those art works which go beyond the traditional format, combining comics with other artistic representations, such as wall-based exhibitions (painting, mural, etc.), sculpture (installation, interactive, performance, etc.) and so on, all while using the familiar language and conventional properties of comics. Alternatively, Cuba offers this definition:

[...] graphic narratives that also include within their creation process the performance, art practices close to the Situationism movement, relational aesthetics, etc. They [expanded field comics works] are artworks at the edge, on the verge of different mediums, in the crossroads of multiple artistic disciplines (2015, p. 292).

Francesc Ruiz understands expanded field comics as comics beyond the panels, filling gallery showrooms and exhibition halls, or interacting with attendees through a recreational approach (Torres, 2012). In this regard, Ruiz explores expanded field comics in multiple ways, addressing myriad issues such as the city, identity, media, politics, social inequality. Francesc Ruiz “makes art in an expanded comic-book format that exploits the radical potential of cheap printed matter—and words and pictures—to forge stories and survey the construction of gay identity and the contemporary city” (Andrews, 2012, p.115). It is important to highlight that Ruiz is a comics artist; when compared to other creators who simply appropriate the visual look of comics (Roy Lichtenstein a globally known example in this regard), Ruiz gets the most out of the assets and particularities of the medium itself (Cuba, 2015, p.293). As a comic enthusiast, Ruiz is also quite knowledgeable in regards to different visual styles, which he alternatively uses in many of his installations, such as *La visita guiada* (“The guided tour,” 2008), *The Yaois* (2011), *Les Esses* (“The s’s”), and many others.

Francesc Ruiz takes comics as a starting point, as his conceptual, narrative and aesthetic substratum, but also as the historical and operational material of his artwork. Applying comics as a container or description of reality (through creation, alteration, restitution or assemblage, among other means) he creates stories that reveal the mechanism through which individual and social identities, sexual identity or even the identity of the city are built (Pérez, 2015).

I would like to explore a specific artwork of his, because of the message it conveys addressing comics as a medium. His work *Comics de la Revolución* (“Comics of the revolution” or “Revolutionary comics”) named after McCloud’s book, *Reinventing Comics*, known in Spain as *La revolución de los cómics* (literally “Comics’ revolution”), is a 2,000 copy installation: each book is a *détournement* of the original book, filled with revolutionary slogans and propaganda, depicting comics as social game-changers (Galería Estrany-de la Mota, 2010). This work touches on content manipulation, copyrights and copyleft, utopia and revolution, and the city. However, Francesc Ruiz’s installation also follows along the line of Marshall McLuhans’ famous quote “the medium is the message” (1994, p.7).

7 *La visita guiada* (“The guided tour,” 2008), hosted in Silos Abbey; Francesc Ruiz edits a comic-book with the same title which provides a visual guided tour of his own exhibition. In the exhibition room he also displays several Bibles filtered by a visual prism of different comic styles, including manga-esque style and U.S. superhero comics style, among others (MNCARS, 2008).

8 In *The Yaois* (2011), a solo exhibition held at the Estrany de la Mota art gallery in Barcelona, Ruiz displays interrelated Internet pictures from comics and artists or politicians photoshopped into homoerotic images, in a similar fashion as the circles displayed in the Comiket catalogues (Torres, 2012). Andrews (2012) states in regards to this exhibition: “Ruiz’s series ‘The Yaois’ (2011) fused comics’ capacity for *détournement* with a riotous examination of the iconography of homoeroticism, from the Tijuana Bibles to Tom of Finland and The Smiths album covers. *The Yaois* comprised a moral melee of 23 panels made up of six-by-six grids of numbered A4 sheets of Internet-sourced images and Photoshop collages. One suite of panels juxtaposed butchered pop imagery through a jocular flow of innuendo and infringement, from the Tintin sex-tourism parody *Tintin in Thailand* to a narcissistic Roy Lichtenstein with a Robert Rauschenberg buddy fantasy, to phallic pictograms that deride Julian Opie, to Dan Graham pavilions posited as locations for anonymous sex.”

9 Also available from: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/mcluhan.mediummessage.pdf>.

In *Comics de la Revolución*, Francesc Ruiz uses comics to explore the inner potential of comics themselves. He avoids using comics as a pretext for art but rather talks about comics as art from the comics' perspective. For Ruiz, comics are not only a means but the corpus of his artwork. This installation also talks about potential for criticism: critical thinking in comics and critical thinking in art. He addresses society and art in an analytical manner and simultaneously, he seeks to reflexively highlight the critical potential of the comic as a medium. Ultimately, Ruiz uses expanded field comics in art to criticize art itself, by suggesting that in the contemporary world, comics have a bigger critical potential than institutionalized art, due to their constituent features, their greater flexibility and their capability of reaching a larger audience. As Spanish curator and art critic Rafael Doctor points out, Francesc Ruiz "highlights the omnipresence of the image and its infinite reproducibility in contemporary daily life. Besides this, he stresses out its specular and spectacular functions, with huge panels that engulf the viewer in an overwhelming, metaphoric—and yet easily recognizable—world" (2011, p.130).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES IN FINE ARTS ACADEMIA AND COMICS STUDIES

With these two examples in mind, posing Miguel Cuba's and Francesc Ruiz's different and complementary approaches to comics within art, I will proceed to list some of the current research methodologies most commonly adopted in fine arts academia and how they could be largely applied to comics studies.

One of the most distinguishing traits of fine arts academia has been referred to as "creative methodology," seen as a transdisciplinary approach combining methodologies from other humanities and science fields. Lacking a scholarly tradition, Spanish academics are still attempting to define 'what fine arts research is,' this "creative approach" or "creative methodology" is convenient, as it borrows from other fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literature, history and art history and so on, acquiring criteria and point of views from such different disciplines.

A second distinguishing methodological feature is the hybrid system commonly applied in fine arts academia, combining theoretical and practical research and most importantly, practical results. Theoretical and practical research is common to other fields, especially in the science sphere. However, in fine arts the hybrid system does not only apply to process but also to results and how those results are displayed: the art praxis is both part of the process and the conclusions, and fine arts researchers sometimes use the visual language in art to communicate. A fine arts research project often can take the form of a theoretical article, but it can also be an art series, an artist book or a solo exhibition.

Usually categorized within the humanities field, research in fine arts also provides a technological perspective, often similar to studies in science and engineering, bringing a successful hybridization between humanities and applied science. Another distinctive trait is the means of dissemination: the art world provides an easy environment for dissemination through multiple artistic channels: traditional written volumes, exhibitions, performance, catalogues and net.art, among others. Ultimately, the last important feature in fine arts academia is the dialogical model: open seminars and public presentations play an important role in fine art's curricula, and this very same dialogical model is frequently used in academia, with even book chapters and articles adopting a dialogue format and presenting results as conversations between different agents.

THE WHY & THE HOW

There has been a change of perception in Spanish society, from comics as entertainment/subculture to comics as art/culture. The rise of the Spanish graphic novel in recent years has sent ripples through society not only at a market level but also at a political and cultural level. This shift in public opinion is also related to the broader movement of “national branding,” called “Marca España,” not dissimilar to what “Cool Japan” means to a Japanese consumer. Endowed with 20,000 Euros, the National Comic Award (Premio Nacional de Cómic) has been granted by the Ministry of Culture every year since 2007 to the best comic by a Spanish author. The role of comics in Spain within Europe must be taken into account: it remains small when compared to other markets such as in France, Italy or even Germany, but it is growing steadily. In this regard, comics in Spain are considered via the artistic prism (‘the ninth art’), closer to the European paradigm of bande dessinée rather than to the American or Japanese point of view. This together with the aforementioned research methodologies make the study of comics from a fine arts perspective highly attractive.

The interest students have in comics before they matriculate in fine arts, and the fact that many enroll due to this very interest, makes fine arts a suitable candidate for the development of comics studies in Spain. Apart from its theoretical potential (related to research methodologies), we should not forget that the fine arts field is also a great starting point for those students interested in practical training, considering there are no university degrees in comics studies in Spain. When it comes to education and academic curriculum, we should also acknowledge that several basic skills required for comics artists can be acquired through practical training in traditional art techniques: drawing and painting, knowledge of human figure and sketching, color and composition, as well as digital techniques and drawing software.

Comics studies are still seen as amateur by some traditional scholars and academics in Spain. They obviate the critical potential and repercussions it carries. On top of that, the accessibility comics have for a broader part of society is sometimes seen as a weakness and symbolic of a lack of professionalism, rather than as a strength (as a means of reaching a broader substrata traditionally outside academia). National art should easily reach a broad variety of people from different social strata through multiple channels, and comics have huge critical potential, often unseen or downplayed. Art also provides tools for critical reading, and because recent artists are expected to show this criticality (sometimes with no regards to form while, paradoxically, form itself can hold strong critical potential), it could be successfully applied to comic studies.

The lack of comics studies in Spain can therefore understood as an exceptional opportunity for scholars to rethink how they can be developed, and as my academic background is in fine arts, I believe this field has the tools and the environment to do so. I do not intend to claim a sole approach within fine arts but rather a transversal and multidisciplinary one. It is important to realize the suitability of fine arts studies as a starting point for the foundation and development of comics studies in Spain and how they may be applied on a global scale. The aforementioned multidisciplinary approach evolves into

10 In 2007 the award was granted to *Hechos, dichos, ocurrencias y andanzas de Bardin el Superrealista* (“Facts, sayings, jokes and adventures of Bardin the Super-realist”) by Francesc Capdevila, a.k.a. Max (published by Ediciones La Cúpula); in 2008 to Paco Roca’s *Arrugas* (“Wrinkles”), published in Spain by Astiberri; in 2009 it was awarded to *Las serpientes ciegas* (“The blind snakes”) by Felipe Hernández Cava and Bartolomé Seguí (published by BD Banda); in 2010 to *El arte de volar* (“The art of flying”) by Altarriba and Kim (Edicions de Ponent); *Plaza Elíptica* in 2011 by Santiago Valenzuela and published by Edicions de Ponent; in 2012 to *Dublinés* (“Dubliner”) by Alfonso Zapico (Astiberri); Ardalén (Norma Editorial) by Miguelanxo Prado in 2013; *Amarillo*, from the *Blacksand* series by Juan Diaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido (Norma Editorial) in 2014; in 2015 the National Comic Award was granted to the graphic novel by Santiago García and Javier Olivares entitled *Las Meninas* (published by Astiberri).

transdisciplinarity and thus helps to promote comic studies in other fields.

The professionalization of the comics studies field in Spain can be strengthened by orienting those studies to both a highly theoretical foundation (linked to academia) and praxis (linked to close fields). To professionalize also means to understand the medium itself and what surrounds it (society, industry, economics, politics, etc.). Besides developing the academic field, comic studies can also give a boost to close fields and industries in entertainment, advertising, design, teaching, and journalism on a practical level (as opposed to the purely theoretical, which is an entirely different thing and does not convey immediate utility). This would enable a higher degree of versatility in comic studies through its relationship with close fields (cinema, design, advertisement, education) but also regarding contemporary art, with movements such as the expanded field comics previously addressed. I believe comic studies would enrich fine art studies (as well as other fields), as it provides new perspectives and unveils different readings: how comics affect contemporary art manifestations (such as expanded field comics, installation and other manifestations) opens a new area of research full of possibilities.

Therefore, we should now inquire as to how to apply these methodologies in teaching comic studies within fine arts and how to professionalize this field in Spain. At this point, the question arises of how we can develop academic studies of comics in Spain from a fine arts perspective. In order to do this, three proposals should be taken into consideration: first, encourage a hybrid research-model along with cooperation among teaching staff and doctoral students from related fields (history, philosophy, anthropology). Second, employ a dialogic approach, since it is frequently used in class; the dialogue between professors and students, open presentations, group seminars and exhibitions are an essential part of the curriculum in fine arts faculties. Finally, comics as a means of transdisciplinarity should be encouraged by enhancing the transversality of contents, both for teaching (compared to the highly isolated model of separate faculties) and research (as opposed to the atomized research groups).

Since the mid-1990s a debate has ensued regarding what constitutes research in fine arts, how it should be approached, what doctoral theses should look like and, ultimately, how the research in fine arts finds its place within the academic system and organizational structure of the Spanish universities. Until recently, doctoral theses in fine arts were often approached in a similar way as other humanities fields, putting the artistic praxis outside the strictly academic verbal theorization. Theses in fine arts studies were—and still are—thick theoretical compendia, not far from other fields of knowledge such as history, philosophy, anthropology or aesthetics. Since the fine arts only became part of university curriculum in the late 1970s, there is no tradition of academic research in fine arts, which therefore often draws on other disciplines. When it comes to the theoretical background, fine arts scholars tend to rely on other humanities fields.

When applied to comics studies, many of these research projects deal with issues regarding fandom or pursuit of a historical approach rather than a critical analysis of the medium itself, not engaging with comics which are the raw material of their research. As Berndt effectively summarizes, manga [comics] is addressed “as a mere material (not an end in itself)” (2015, p.15). However, this transdisciplinary approach (combining methodologies and resources from different humanities fields into one) has recently been considered less as a weakness than as a strength, leading researchers to speak on the “creative approach” previously mentioned.

The aforementioned hybrid research model has gained momentum in the last two decades, as ‘practical scholarship’ (so referenced in the International Conference’s motto) in fine arts has grown into a balanced blend of both practical research and theoretical scholarship. Fine arts is a young research field in Spain, and comics studies is still in its initial stage. Notwithstanding, in recent years the number

of practical theses is rising, specifically those involving artistic practice. Such theses materialize not as thick theoretical volumes, but rather take shape as the physical result of the artistic praxis for which the inception process involves a solid theoretical background.

The problem is that some scholars (or artists within academia) question the maturity of artistic projects submitted by doctoral candidates, or the suitability of such projects to prove research proficiency. Therefore, a hybrid model combining both a theoretical core (that presents the conceptual basis) and art praxis is being successfully applied to doctoral theses and research projects. This approach may not be new for many scholars from other countries, but it is relatively new in Spain, and up to this point it has been exclusive or nearly exclusive to fine arts studies. In this regard, I believe comic studies from a fine arts perspective can highlight the critical potential of this medium, through scholarly studies and a transdisciplinary approach, such as expanded field comics and other artistic works.

BEYOND THE FLATNESS

For a fine arts scholar, understanding artistic practice as academic research comes naturally, since the overall processes involved in both activities are very similar. Whether an art project or a research project, it starts with a hypothesis or a previous background upon which a hypothesis is formulated.

Both activities rely as well on scientific method, field work, lab tests, or a solid theoretical core built upon previous research and bibliography. The main difference usually lies within the language used to communicate or disseminate the results of this research. Instead of using the verbal/written language, visual language (Cohn, 2013) is used in the fine arts.

In the last few years, visual language has been used seamlessly in both the artistic practice and academia, as an alternative/complement to verbal language. Essentially, it is about using the medium to conduct the idea, the artwork being the idea itself. Consequently, if visual language can be used to address a theoretical thesis in the fine arts field, it is logical to think that similar means can be applied to visual language in comics studies. Both in fine arts studies and comics studies, scholars tend to emphasize medium specificity, article writing, theorizing, and researching, but they hardly ever explore the medium though the medium itself. When it comes to comics, it's quite rare to do research on comics using comics as a tool instead of relying on the classical written dissertation.

McCLOUD'S SEMINAL WORK *Understanding Comics* is one pioneering example. While some of the statements made by McCloud are debatable in comics studies, it is undeniable how highly influential this book has been in academic circles, despite not being a purely academic monograph. Yet many tend to approach McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as a purely theoretical book, neglecting its comics form.

Nick Sousanis' PhD thesis on education, entitled *Unflattening*, is an important example of academic research using the visual language of comics. Published in 2015 by Harvard University Press and critically acclaimed, Sousanis' book debuted as the first thesis written entirely in comic format—which also talks about the comic as such. *Unflattening* is a true benchmark for comics in academia. Moreover, *Unflattening* has also been addressed as a book that can act as a bridge between scholars and non-scholars, being equally attractive for a broader readership (Jenkins, 2015). On a visual and structural level, Nick Sousanis takes McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as a starting point for his own, but *Unflattening* is also full of references to Alan Moore's visual-verbal metaphors (Hodler, 2015), including *The Watchmen*. On a conceptual level, Sousanis talks about complex, non-linear works that

11 Sousanis states: “*Understanding Comics* is an obvious thing to point to as precedent when making the argument for my own work—as I hope *Unflattening* might be for scholar-artists to come” (Jenkins, 2015).

cannot be explained through verbal/written channels but only through a multimodal medium such as comics, pointing to the source the critical potential of comics. However, Sousanis also upholds the idea that comics can reach a broader scope and somehow break down the walls between academia and non-scholarly readership.

Unflattening—both the book and the concept—is talking about multimodality, about interdisciplinarity, about image-text, it's both public and scholarly (Hodler, 2015).

The title is a reference to 1884's Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, a depiction of the "the inability to understand that there might be more than one can immediately perceive" (Wolk, 2015). It also connects on a philosophical level with Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), as Sousanis explains (Jenkins, 2015).

Sousanis goes one step further in the regards to the aforementioned hybrid-model with a fully visual PhD thesis in which comics are addressed in comics form. While some scholars still defend the necessity of handing a textual section with practical research (that being sculpture, installation, painting, or comics indistinctly), it is not clear whether this is meant for non-fine arts scholars, for the tradition within academia, or because some projects simply work better that way. As Sousanis explains in Timothy Hodler's interview in *The Paris Review* online magazine, while working on his PhD thesis he was asked whether he should hedge and have a text section to explain it, "and if I had any hesitation, that was the last time, because I said: No, it's either its own thing, or it's not" (Hodler, 2015).

On the back cover of *Unflattening*, it is referred to as "an insurrection against the fixed viewpoint. Weaving together diverse ways of seeing drawn from science, philosophy, art, literature, and mythology, it uses the collage-like capacity of comics to show that perception is always an active process of incorporating and reevaluating different vantage points" (Sousanis, 2015). This description fits nicely with the 'creative methodology' previously referenced, as a means of transdisciplinarity in fine arts academia. While this quality is not unique to the comics medium and could largely applied to arts in a broader sense, it shows the possibility of using the complex, non-linear approach long sought in fine arts research. The synopsis on the back cover continues as follows: "while its vibrant, constantly morphing images occasionally serve as illustrations of text, they more often connect in nonlinear fashion to other visual references throughout the book" (Sousanis, 2015). At this stage, the subordination of the images are exposed again in a more subtle way, one of the weaknesses of the book (that I will address later), but it also connects with this idea of complexity—of connecting dots—in regards to the 'creative methodology' that has been widely discussed throughout this article. Sousanis himself briefly addresses *Unflattening* as not only an academic comic, but also¹³ as a non-narrative one (Jenkins, 2015d); what non-narrative means in this regard is yet to be discussed. Perhaps Sousanis means non-linear as in that of a

12 In this regard, Nick Sousanis explains during an interview by Henry Jenkins: "Even if we had known comics can handle serious stories for a long time now, I wanted to say with this work—comics can handle anything in any domain." He adds: "a way to describe what comics could do, and how they could fit more density of information than seems possible in a small space and offer an expansive dimension for communicating ideas." (Jenkins, 2015).

13 In an interview conducted by Timothy Hodler in *The Paris Review*, Nick Sousanis talks about Alan Moore's *This Is Information*—a six-page comic he made with his wife Melinda Gebbie—and his own book, as he says: "There's a narrative, but it's not a story—it's the text telling the image what to do, and form matters more than anything else." Therefore, it is not clear what notion of non-narrative Sousanis was applying in his later interview with Henry Jenkins (Hodler, 2015).

complex model, as non-linear connections seem to emerge from the visuals. However, since *Unflattening* is rendered in a classical, logical codex format, its non-linear potential is limited. In this regard, in an interview by Henry Jenkins, he quotes Sousanis himself: “perhaps, in comics, this amphibious language of juxtapositions and fragments—we have such a form. A means to capture and convey our thoughts, in all their tangled complexity.” Jenkins reminds Sousanis about the potentials of interactive and nonlinear digital media to express those ideas that do not fit within the limits of traditional text (Jenkins, 2015c). Non-linearity is an inherent feature of the notion of hypermedia itself. The potential of comics for convening on complex thought is undeniable, but it might be biased not by the comic form but by the limitations of the printed format, which ultimately leads to how to define comics as a medium (or whether such a distinction is really needed).

Beautifully illustrated, Sousanis displays a collection of images sequentially rendered but subordinated to the written language. Despite Sousanis claims about *Unflattening* being a balanced collage in which visuals and text work together seamlessly and¹⁵ on an equal degree of importance (“the two are inextricably linked, equal partners in meaning-making”), images without the text boxes do not flow and the general narration may be difficult to understand. Text and illustrations might be together, but they do not flow together. Over the course of the interview with Jenkins, Sousanis states that “in comics, the effect is multiplicative—text speaks to image, image influences text and meaning is compounded. And you most certainly could not remove the images and retain the meaning” (Jenkins, 2015d). Nonetheless, it is my opinion that in Nick Sousanis’ *Unflattening* the removal of the images would entail an undeniable loss of nuance, but the meaning would yet remain. *Unflattening*’s importance to the field is not in any way diminished, but Sousanis attempt to claim that comics is a way to express a sophisticated complex thinking backfires. As for this, I would like to quote Neil Cohn apropos review:

Despite arguing for an interdependence between text and image in their expressive capacities, I found it ironic that only until late in the book does text not lead this dance, and not for long. The images throughout are certainly not negligible, but they mostly enhance, supplement, and enrich the message beyond what text could serve on its own. The text still provides the primary weight of meaning throughout. Rarely are there comprehensible portions of images where the text could be omitted entirely, but the same does not seem to be said for the text (at least, not until the last three chapters). However, I would expect this from a more expository and academic work like this, so it’s less of a criticism than an observation (Cohn, 2015).

TOWARD A POST-MEDIUM DISCOURSE

Throughout this article I have made strong statements in favor of the artistic research as opposed to other trends that postulate that art has no place in academia or that deny the inherent critical potential of art itself. On the opposite side stands an entirely different trend that concludes that due to ‘artist research,’ scholars in the humanities field are no longer needed, because artists can create their work in a more accessible form to begin with. The latter supposition displays a biased logic, since fine arts studies are

14 Sousanis states: “I’m keeping the reader adrift through the image by the placement of the words—they’ve become an essential visual element” (Jenkins, 2015c).

15 On the book’s back cover: “But what if the two are inextricably linked, equal partners in meaning-making? Written and drawn entirely as comics, *Unflattening* is an experiment in visual thinking. Nick Sousanis defies conventional forms of scholarly discourse to offer readers both a stunning work of graphic art and a serious inquiry into the ways humans construct knowledge” (Sousanis, 2015).

built upon the theoretical background and research know-how of many other fields, the so-called “creative method” previously addressed.

That said, in what regard is this new knowledge more productive, revealing or innovative than traditional text-based argumentation? I believe the fine arts model is not more productive or innovative, but merely different. One model is not meant to substitute for the other but rather complement it. The traditional text-based argumentation is completely valid nowadays. The hybrid-model or the fully practical model I have discussed throughout this article are valid choices as well, since they expose a different approach not available through the traditional model, and vice versa. The highly specialized focus that most branches of humanities usually explore is difficult to apply in fine arts due to the lack of academic tradition and the lack of specialization despite the practical track. Therefore, the combination of a “creative systems” which successfully takes a transdisciplinary approach, including art praxis, leads to a right answer for fine arts research and at the same time helps to expand perspective within the humanities. Ultimately, through this post-medium discourse, we might discard the designation of comics as a ‘medium’ but rather just ‘art,’ and we should apply it for a broader potential audience. Perhaps this might save manga and set a foundation for the future of comics.

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