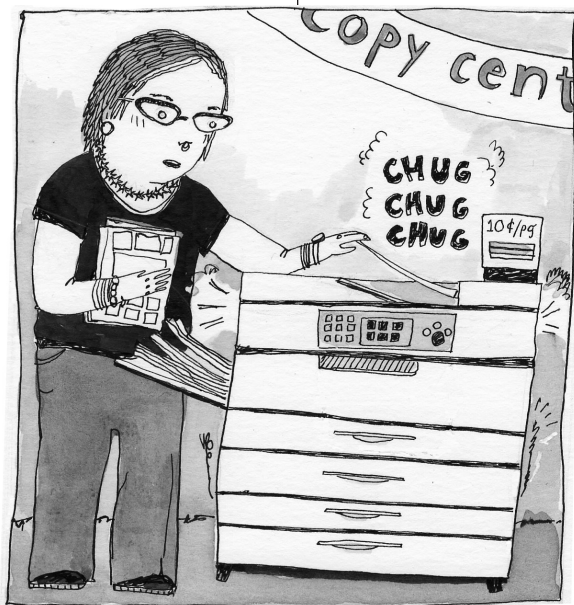


JAN DESCARTES

is a Brooklyn based artist who lives with two needy dogs. She received an Illustration and English BA from Syracuse University, an MFA from Carnegie Mellon University, and is currently pursuing a MA at CUNY Graduate Center, focusing on Women, Gender and Sexuality studies. She currently draws and co-authors the web-based comic, Heartland, with her best friend.

I am a latecomer to comics. I wasn't one of those teenagers avidly reading the new Superman, X-Men or Love and Rockets. I started to draw while an undergraduate student at Syracuse University, around the time that I became

6 hours, radical cheerleading squads across the East Coast cheered about social injustice and the WTO protests in Seattle were just about to explode. At the time, comics represented to me a way to disseminate these crispy new ideas in a wide-ly



politicized and involved with anti-capitalist and animal rights movements. To set the scene, it was the late 90s. It was before this Internet thing became a big deal, smoking cloves in coffee shops was a way to pass

accessible, democratic format. Sketch it, ink it, Xerox it, pass it around. This was an easy way to make my burgeoning political ideas accessible to the greater Syracuse-area cafes, record stores and emo shows

that I most likely followed my much cooler friends to.

It's almost 20 years later. The world wide web apparently caught on and seems to be here to stay, smoking is illegal in coffee shops and tsk-tsked everywhere, no one seems to have ever heard of radical cheerleading, footage from the WTO is warmly tucked into history books and bands like Nirvana and Heavens to Betsy are now classic rock. In the new millennium, I still have a fond love for those beautiful, flimsy, folded DIY comics, printed on copier paper. DIY comics, and DIY culture in general, fulfill a role of creating a space to share with community without the need of institu-

tional support or credentialing from degrees or professions; a means without a focus on the ends. To have the desire to tell your own story makes you the most qualified person to do it.

I romanticize work made outside of the professional world, art for art's sake. I imagine the creator working in their free moments between work/social/family obligations or perhaps an all-night affair- trying to get a story out before the ideas, feelings and motivations dissipate. Having the ability to put those feelings or ideas out into the world, a purge in the form of images and text, from my experience is empowering for the artist, and at present nostalgic for me, as a



reader. Spending time to craft a narrative, text and imagery in a fast-moving intersectional world where the individual and collective's attention is drawn to technology, news media, fear mongering and consumption, a comic is beautiful in its simplicity. Paper, ink, copier.

To draw our attention away from DIY comics for a moment, comics in general offer an agency to readers that I would like to consider briefly. DIY comics are accessible in terms of cost, as they are often of a low fee or free, and professional comics are also a relatively low cost form of entertainment that offer longevity due to the corporeal form of the book. Apart from cost, comics afford an agency of story consumption and readership. A written text leads the reader's eye from word to word, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph. In the case of a textual narrative, there is a deliberate walk, the author holding the reader's hand, leading them through the terrain of the author's knowledge. There are moments when reading a text that I feel an itch of irritation. The author's expectations smother me and I cannot enjoy my meandering through their words; there is a feeling of progress, pushing forward, getting to their point and their "ending": Ending of

sentences, paragraphs, chapters and ultimately the book. My eye is pushed from word to word in what I imagine is the hope that I will understand and thesis or narrative. Intro, Body, Conclusion, with variation between texts, of course (which of course the Reader may feel within this writing!). There are texts that challenge this linearity, but even a non-linear text depends on the tradition of reading – left to right in the Western style – beginning to end, word after word. A reader essentially has no agency when it comes to the consumption of text. A text is dependent on language. Even the anarchistic Dadaists, who created poetry by randomly picking cut up text and arranging it, are privileging language and the collective understanding that the viewer is reading the text-albeit in no specific order.

Comics are one of the few liberatory media that allow for more agency to the reader while communicating narrative. The eye has agency to ignore the text bubble if desired, to settle where it might on imagery. It can take in the images on the page, and decide what is the highest priority to read, skim or understand. As comics are a combination of text and imagery, the reader can choose to gain meaning

from text and imagery, just text, just imagery, or some sort of ragtag stew of both. The reader's eye maintains the ability for self-directedness to consume a narrative without privileging language-taking in the entire image, perhaps picking out language that is important, continuing on with the story or starting over to consume the particular details. The beauty of a comic is its assemblage-esque quality of being able to take parts of the page for the whole, visually ingesting as desired, and moving on.

Comics are egalitarian for readers, with the space that they create between image and text to allow for the under-

standing of a story at a pace and desired closeness of reading. I see no other medium, save for perhaps video games, which gives such agency to consume narrative and meaning as an individuated experience. There is a romance and sweetness in DIY comics for the artist, but I feel inspired by the liberation that comics can lend the reader. Comics offer a tactile and personal experience to ingest a narrative as one wishes or prefers. In this sense, comics have been and still continue to be a radical medium for artist and reader alike.

