



PROJECT MUSE®

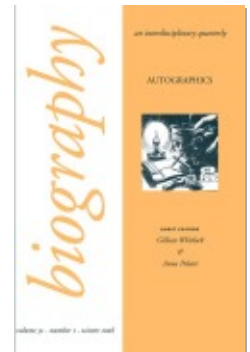
Self-Regarding Art

Gillian Whitlock, Anna Poletti

Biography, Volume 31, Number 1, Winter 2008, pp. v-xxiii (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.0.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/240299>

SELF-REGARDING ART

GILLIAN WHITLOCK AND ANNA POLETTI

Auto, n. self, one's own.

Graphic, a. 1637: Drawn with a pencil or pen; of or pertaining to drawing or painting; 1756: vividly descriptive, life-like; 1669: pertaining to the use of diagrams, linear figures or symbolic curves; 1866: Of or pertaining to drawing or painting; the practice that marks, records or portrays the life.

Autographics, n. Autográffiks. 2007: Life narrative fabricated in and through drawing and design using various technologies, modes, and materials. A practice of reading the signs, symbols and techniques of visual arts in life narrative. See also autobiography, biography, testimony, autobiographics, comics, self-portrait, avatar. . . .

“Autographics”: a neologism that demands to be represented phonetically in this introductory discussion, indicating from the first its attention to the multiple modes and media of autobiographical texts, and to the tensions between “auto” and “graph” in the rapidly changing visual and textual cultures of autobiography. This special issue of *Biography* devoted to exploring the potential of autographics as a concept and a practice is thick with illustrations, for graphic life narrative resists reduction to summary or translation into a single medium, and requires that we pause and explore the sight, the sounds, the sensational feel of autobiographical representations. Here text is approached for texture; for the “strange alchemy” of word and image on a three dimensional page. What happens when readers look at the face in cartoon drawing in the comics? How do the frames and gutters of the pages of the comics shape reading and looking, thinking and perception? How do the shadows and the deliberate imperfections of the photocopy in the zine become read as autobiographical gesture? What does the gifting and exchange economy of the zine trade connote for autobiographical interpretations? How does self-portrait draw upon the textures of gouache to represent trauma? Carolyn F. Austin’s remark, “in one way or another I always return to the materiality of

Leben? Oder Theater?” at the start of her discussion of Charlotte Salomon’s extraordinarily hybrid text is symptomatic of the fascination with surface, layers of textuality, and the thick description that characterizes autographics: “Salomon insists that signification is not transparent or independent of materiality, that the sounds and shapes of words, the weight of paint, the not-quite-smooth blending of colors, the heavy outlines that don’t quite match the body attest to the simultaneous inseparability and incommensurability of materiality and signification.”

Necessarily we represent the autographic visually by way of definition too. On the cover of this issue is an image taken from Justin Green’s graphic memoir *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972). In his short history of the “origins” of autobiographical comics in our first article, Jared Gardner identifies *Binky Brown* as one of the first extended autobiographical comics to emerge from the underground comix scene in the USA. A “Confession to my Readers” opens Green’s memoir, and it is an overwrought image of the naked and trussed body of the author himself, half blind and hogtied over an inverted sword of Damocles, forced to listen to “Ave Maria” while penning his memoirs with his mouth, and dipping into ink that is his life’s blood. The outrageous visceral and sacrilegious mix of Green’s graphic confession recurs in the art of the Philippine artist José Legaspi, the subject of our last essay by Michelle Antoinette, which draws attention again to the gendered and sexual obsessions that shape these fantastic bodies. This cover image hovers over this issue as the first of a series of confronting bodies that recur under the sign of autographics—some, as Julia Watson observes in her article on Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, drawn with Vesalian accuracy! Others recur in the deliberately blurred images of the perzine, where flawed layout and photocopy suggest the presence of the “hand” in “hand-made.” There is bodily tissue here too: the shaft of hair trapped in Salomon’s third gouache that becomes a relic and inspires Austin’s essay.

We also mean to be slightly extravagant and deploy Green’s romantic and overwrought self-portrait to suggest some of the challenges for those of us who grapple with the demands of autographics. Critics of life narrative are now called upon to develop more advanced visual and cultural literacies to interpret the intersections of various modes and media and the complex embodiments of avatar, autobiographer, and reader/viewer gathered under the sign of autographics, and these demands can make us too feel hamstrung and half blind, working in a dim light—though perhaps not in threat of castration! Articles in this issue repeatedly suggest that autographics emerges in and through specific attention to the phenomenology of reading these multi-modal cross-discursive texts, and this is accompanied by self-consciousness

about the process of interpretation that distinguishes this work of textual criticism. This deliberate attention to “what happens as I perceive this” marks autographical criticism, and it follows that the articles selected here frequently demand that you look for yourself, and that you enter the field of representation that is indicated not in a conventional quotation but something more substantial—a graphic specimen drawn from the body of the text itself. In an essay on Joe Matt’s *Peepshow*, for example, Dale Jacobs examines precisely how Matt signals the auratic complexity and multimodality of comics on the page. Similarly, Anna Poletti argues that the perzine draws attention to itself through deliberate amateurism in the production of the text; here too the reader is arrested and forced to recognize a “tactical use of technology which endangers concepts of authenticity and originality.” Even a cursory glance through the illustrations in this issue also indicates that autographics frequently involves the “graphic” in the sense of explicit and confronting images of bodies in pleasure and pain—this, too, is one of the demands that we are prepared for by Green’s naked and suspended form.

This issue will generate thinking about graphic life narrative—or graphics and life narrative—variously to establish the usefulness of the term to shape future critical work. “Autographics” is a neologism with a history, and several writers here go back to Gusdorf and Olney to trace the shape shifting that is occurring in autobiography criticism. The self-portrait and forms of self-representation that incorporate various media and materials are not new technologies, and the term deliberately signals its progenitors within itself: biography, autobiography, autobiographics. As Austin’s essay on Salomon and Antoinette’s discussion of Legaspi in this issue suggest, autographics implies an interpretation of self-portraiture that deliberately attends to textuality and texture. There is now more than ever a proliferation of the autobiographical in visual cultures and new media, and these intersections of various modes and media of self-representation produce some new issues for critical inquiry. The work of various disciplines and fields—literature, art history, visual culture, sociology, cultural studies, semiotics, and textual cultures—is relevant here, and a wide-ranging, eclectic, and interdisciplinary perspective is required. Comics lead the way in thinking about the cross-discursive practices of autographics, in general and in this issue more specifically, but we imagine new subjects and objects on the horizon in graffiti and in new media forms of auto assemblage at social networking sites such as MySpace.

The turn to what we now call autographics was signaled (not surprisingly) in a break led by Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith in an article that licenses extravagant claims for the field, and establishes a compelling metaphor for this expansion in the textual cultures of life narrative in this century. In “The

Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions” (and in the subsequent edited collection *Interfaces: Women’s Visual and Performance Autobiography*), Smith and Watson comment upon the extraordinary outpouring of self-portraiture in visual and performance media (such as contemporary painting, photography, artists’ books, and mixed visual forms such as collage, installations, quilting, and zines), and the ways that embodiment and subjectivity emerge in strikingly different terms in visual and performance media than in written narratives. In part, the subject of this article is Tracey Emin’s submission of autobiographical memorabilia to the Tate Gallery for the prestigious Turner Prize in 1999; it consisted of a collection of home videos, watercolor portraits, captioned drawings, a quilt collage, and the installation “My Bed”—a rumpled bed displayed with various “detritus of her intimate life” (3). Mulling over how critics of life narrative might respond to this installation, and reveling in the puns that emerge from these new “covers” and “material” of autobiographical text, Smith and Watson suggest that the embodied materiality of visual and performance media reframes “art” as a site of lived experience, and “literary, or narratively-based, theories of autobiography” may need to be reconsidered to inquire “into self-reflexive narratives that interweave presentations of self across multiple media, including virtual reality.” It is from this rumpled bed that autographics is born, responding to the question of how theorizing of the autobiographical can be “remade by contemporary practice at these ‘rumpled’ sites of the experimental, so that we may take account of changing autobiographer-audience relations, shifting limits of personal disclosure, and changing technologies of self that revise how we understand the autobiographical” (13). The metaphor of the rumpled bed suggests the embodied and the intimate in ways that are, we shall see, entirely appropriate for autographics as theory and practice now, and it also triggers the imagination that produces the sweep of this issue of *Biography* from the comics to self-portraiture, Bechdel to Legaspi, and, perhaps, to other forms of autography in practices of tagging and auto assemblage in new media software.

COMICS

Arguably comics are at the leading edge in shaping the autographical turn in criticism to date. Hillary Chute, in a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted to graphic narrative, suggests that autobiography is a hugely valuable focus for work on the comics, and this issue of *Biography* develops this point precisely. Charles Hatfield, in his book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, also acknowledges that autobiography has become a “distinct, indeed crucial” genre in today’s comic books—“despite the troublesome fact that comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious

challenge to the idea of ‘nonfiction.’ . . . They can hardly be said to be ‘true’ in any straightforward sense” (qtd. in Chute, “Decoding” 1017). Like Chute, critics in this issue regard this as an opportunity presented by the comics: here the complexities of discursive structures and how we understand them enrich autobiographical representations, and quite deliberately so for the leading exponents such as Bechdel, Spiegelman, and Satrapi. In his taxonomy of subgenres and historical movements within autobiographical comics, Gardner traces a genealogy that begins with the first extended autobiographical comic, Green’s *Binky Brown*, and includes *Wimmen’s Comix*, Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor*, Joe Matt’s *Peepshow*, and Art Spiegelman’s mighty *Maus* in two sequential volumes (a Holocaust narrative now reprinted many times, and a classic of contemporary literature and trauma narrative). This tradition of confessional autography that drives critical work on the comics now includes Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* in two volumes (a narrative of the Islamic revolution and its aftermath in Iran, originally published in French in the tradition of the *bandes dessinées*, and recently translated into film), and most recently *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, a queered story of father and daughter and homosexual desire, which, as Chute presciently observed in 2006, would soon become an important reference point in academic discourse on graphic narrative (“Interview” 1005). A focus on autographics and sexuality in the comics recurs in the articles by Gardner and Watson on *Fun Home*, and in Jacob’s discussion of the obsessions of the autobiographical avatar Joe Matt in *Peepshow*. Contemporary autobiographical comics generally include a narrative of trauma and crisis, yet at the same time, they share a humorous and ironic turn that is irreverent and, perhaps, confronting, given that they deal with contentious political and social issues and obsessions with sex and death “in person.” These comics are triggering innovative criticism that responds creatively to the demands of these “troublesome” cross-discursive texts with their unique autobiographical mix of the tragic and the comic.

Various anxieties circulate about the comics in general. Do the autobiographical genres of popular culture merit this serious scholarly work? Are the comics able to escape the stereotyping and racializing that is a feature of some genres? Do they reproduce US-centered and imperializing discourses? (Frantz Fanon and Edward Said differ on this question of the potential of comics to be anything other than propaganda.) The inclusion of textual cultures in the repertoire of autographics is an important point in addressing these questions. Comics, and indeed representations in general, need to be read with attention to their specific productions, and the locations and relocations of their reproduction and consumption. This is a lesson of the controversies of 2005–2006, the so-called “cartoon wars”¹: images travel far from their origins into very different communities of interpretation; their meanings are always

contextual, social, cultural, and political as well as aesthetic. Although the counterculture of the west coast USA may assume a prominent role in the taxonomy of autobiographical comics, global networks in the production and consumption of graphic life narrative are everywhere apparent. Marjane Satrapi works with the collective “L’Association” in Paris, for example, and Art Spiegelman has been able to find publishers and readers for his autographical work in Germany prior to the USA. Criticism that grasps the complexities of autographics will attend to the specific histories of production and reception of the comics as commodities, taking care to read not just between but also upon the covers—the epitexts and peritexts that carry the traces of complex textual histories. Autographics will also attend to the different aesthetic, political, and institutional traditions that are gathered together under the heading “comics,” for although the superhero is a popular genre in the comics, it is by no means definitive. Anxieties about the comics can be traced back to more wide-ranging concerns about the place of popular culture in general, and youth cultures in particular, in scholarly work, but it is clear that comics have a distinctive role to play in the contemporary cultures of life narrative, and they are to be taken seriously, and that youth cultures play an important role in the production and circulation of autographics.

Questions about the worthiness of the comics to figure in contemporary autobiography criticism in the academy are best answered by turning to the texts that are drawing critical attention, and the exacting demands they place upon readers. The articles by Gardner and Watson in this issue, for example, examine what is by any measure an extraordinarily complex text in terms of aesthetics and ideas. Bechdel’s *Fun Home* anticipates a reader with advanced literacies who can read the translations of photographs into drawings that draw on realist aesthetics, and which deliberately contrast to the cartooning style of the main text. The ironic play between the autobiographical avatar, Alison, who remains held within the frames of the comics, and the autobiographical narrator whose narrative proceeds through unboxed words, draws readers into complex intertextual memory work on every page. Furthermore, as Watson points out, there are pages where Bechdel invokes an uncanny mirroring of the hands of the reader upon the pages of the comics. These features all require attention to visual signs. At the same time, however, *Fun Home* draws on extended mythological and literary references that shape the autobiographical narrator’s richly intertextual framing narrative. There is classical mythology—the narrative of Daedalus and Icarus, which is both incorporated and strategically inverted—and there are ongoing references to Modernist literature, and most particularly to James Joyce and Marcel Proust. *Ulysses*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Remembrance of Things Past* are constitutive. So too are the classics of feminist and lesbian writing: by Collette,

Kate Millett, and Janice Rule, among others (it is fascinating to note how many books we see as objects in the pages of this tragicomic). *Fun Home* has been widely acclaimed since its publication in 2006, and the articles included here indicate why this is so. The expectations of autographers such as Bechdel and Spiegelman that there is a sophisticated and highly literate market for autographics is an interesting indicator of just how presumptive and condescending it is to collapse “comics” to the common denominator of “superhero,” and to characterize the genre in terms of a naive and juvenile reader and a serialized and regimented production process.² Attention to the rapid shifts in the readerships, audiences, and literacies being shaped in and through graphic artistry and new media emerges as a primary concern in any inquiry into the textual cultures of the comics.

Necessarily autographical criticism about the comics must also come down to the page, which is, as Bechdel points out, essential to the alchemy of the comics: “I mean, everyone is daunted by a sheet of blank paper, but when you have to wrestle a three-dimensional image out of it . . .” (qtd. in Chute, “Interview” 1010). In his essay on *Peepshow*, Jacobs draws on David Harvey’s approach to comics, and introduces the work of the New London group on the convergence of various media in contemporary cultural forms in general, and the usefulness of the concept of multimodality to examine comics as complex textual environments. Jacobs’s meticulous reading of the changing shape of word balloons, changes in fonts and type size, the use of line and white space, the plan of gutters and panels, changing perspectives, and the strategic use of close-up, suggests how many elements combine in the process of meaning making in comics. Linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial design elements interconnect in co-presence. Using the language of Design generated by the New London group, Jacobs explores the distinctive grammar of the comics in general and *Peepshow* in particular to suggest how this relates to theories of subjectivity in autobiography. One future trajectory for autographical work on the comics will include this kind of cross-disciplinary work that explores the semiotics of the visual image. We see this occurring elsewhere; for example, David Herman and David Lewis turn to Kress and van Leeuwen’s grammar of the visual image to read representations with the careful precision Jacobs brings to the pages of *Peepshow*. Herman draws on this approach to examine verbal-visual cues and the location of identities in time in *Fun Home* with precise attention to the role of word-image combinations and the construction of time frames in its self narration.

So how are reading communities emerging to engage with comics, institutionally speaking? Recently at sessions on graphic narrative at the MLA conference in Chicago there was some discussion of just how far criticism is lagging in the wake of the craft. Critics are being bound and dragged (back

to Binky!) into this field by the intellectual and artistic sophistication and popularity of graphic narrative. Tropes for reading narrative based on prose fiction—catachresis, *mise en scene*, prosopopoeia, synecdoche—are useful and adaptable, but probably not enough.³ There are relatively few good texts that specifically address the multiliterate capacities that graphic narratives demand of their critics. Apparently some undergraduate students find Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* and its successors condescending, yet these are surely seminal for reading the distinctive grammar of the comics. What McCloud offers us is the birth of the avatar autographically. With unwavering good humor across the three volumes of his autographic study of the comics, McCloud establishes the imperative of reading comics with due respect for their distinctive and complex grammar that cannot be reduced in translation to a single medium, and with a clear eye on changing genres and traditions. There is nothing parochial about McCloud's discussion of comics culture. Although his avatar appears to be comfortably established in middle America and introduces himself with a chummy "Hi. I'm Scott," his "nation" of comics is cosmopolitan and intertextual, a global industry shaped by Tezuka, Herge, Miyazaki, Tardi, Doucet—the list is extensive. Along with Will Eisner, Charles Hatfield, and R. C. Harvey, among others, McCloud insists on reading comics as a rich global cultural formation.

McCloud writes as a practitioner, especially in his recent *Making Comics*, with the autobiographical narrator strategically choosing specific visual styles. It is McCloud who alerts us to attend to the work of the hand on the page, in a technique used with sophistication and political intent by Satrapi and Bechdel. In *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home*, the hand on the page appears in a metatextual examination of how the techniques of Marji and Art and Alison emerge traumatically as an authentic representation of the experience of the avatar—the strategic drawing of the chador, for example, in the case of *Persepolis*, and also at the beginning of *Maus 2*, where Art is traumatized by the labor of sustaining his own creation. As we see with Binky Brown, stereotypical images of the tortured artist are translated readily into the comics! Perhaps the problem is that McCloud's geeky avatar lacks the extravagance of Green's tortured soul. He is not hogtied, and his genitalia are not at risk in his art, and in this way his self-representation harkens back to the stereotypical associations of the comics with juvenilia. It is also true that, as a practitioner, McCloud has little to say on the textual cultures of the comics—the intricacies of their circulation, reception, and interpretation in different social and cultural contexts remain unaddressed. It is the craftwork that McCloud's geeky avatar draws to our attention. The fact that graphic narratives now feature as a themed series at an MLA conference and as special issues of academic journals is one indication that the institutionalization of the comics in scholarly

work is proceeding apace, and the crossdisciplinary and interdisciplinary critical work we see now is a sign of emergence rather than exhaustion.⁴ Perhaps the idea that “serious” readers outgrow comics has been superseded by a realization that reading comics is a work in progress.

FROM BINKY TO BANKSY

More generally, autographics extends the forms and media of autobiography criticism, and this special issue of *Biography* sets out to speculate about some of the possibilities for autographics, and to establish an expansive field of textual cultures that are caught up in autographic display. Just as comics are now becoming acceptable subjects of academic inquiry, so too particular modes of graffiti have recently gained the attention of the art world, and the art market. The increased visibility and recognition of “street art”—championed by artists such as Britain’s Banksy, who now sells works for hundreds of thousands of pounds—has resulted in many cities seeing an increase in site-specific and visually striking interventions into the urban environment (Hattenstone). While produced through illegal activity, and still viewed by many as defacement of public and private property, the aesthetic impact of stenciled street art has gained mainstream recognition for its site-specific engagement with the urban streetscape (Sliwa and Cairns). There is one mode of graffiti, however, which remains resistant to this recent wave of respectability: the practice known as tagging, in which

surfaces are overtaken by endlessly repeated pseudo-signatures, standing in for absent persons. Described as pollution, dirt, deviance, criminal defacement, or, more benignly, folk art, tagging has also been variously theorised as a marking of territory; or an expression of, or an insistence on, identity. (Heddon par. 3)

As Deirdre Heddon notes, tagging is a kind of autographical intervention that strikes the everyday citizen as an egotistically driven pollution of the urban environment. Often illegible, tags seem written only for the gratification of the authors, who take pleasure in seeing their pseudonyms covering train carriages, bus shelters, public conveniences, shop walls, rubbish bins, and any other surface to which ink or paint can adhere. Yet in Heddon’s analysis of homophobic graffiti in Devon, England, the inscriptions are read as a means of performing and maintaining the heterosexuality of the author (par. 30), and also function to “produce the space in which they appear as a heterosexual space,” as the writing “stands in for the heterosexual body and continues to speak and perform a discourse of normative heterosexuality” in the author’s absence (par. 37). In Heddon’s argument, graffiti functions discursively and

spatially, as an autotopographical strategy for occupying and defining space. This autographic analysis of graffiti hate speech suggests possibilities for reading the activities and textualities of tagging, and points to further questions. How might we read tagging as autographical act? What are the potential meanings produced by the insistent repetition of the self—which is, as Heddon notes, akin to branding—when read for both its textual, visual, and physical qualities? How, and in what ways, do we function as the (unwitting) “readers” of these texts when we sit in a train carriage that has recently been “bombed”?

This last question is particularly relevant to the approach this issue seeks to initiate, as the convergence of the visual, textual, and material in autographic texts is commonly accompanied by a heightened awareness of the somatic dimensions of reading. Many of the articles included in this issue examine how the chosen texts—comics, zines, individually hand-painted pages, charcoal sketches, and sculpture—draw the reader/viewer’s body into the encounter. Watson reflects on the impact of life-sized hands drawn into the margins of the pages in Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, while Antoinette examines the importance of the dynamic of scale between artwork and viewer in José Legaspi’s installations. Like the impossible plentitude of tagging, these texts bring the reader/viewer into an embodied relation, which in the case of zines and Legaspi’s indecipherable script, places as much importance on the problematics and limits of autographic representation as on its potential to achieve strikingly powerful instances of life narrative. The importance of attentive and reflexive reading strategies, which are alive and responsive to the challenges and pleasures arising from the convergence of the visual, the textual, and the material, is central to autographics as critical approach. As we mentioned earlier, this attentiveness and “alchemy” brings individual readers, and their placement within wider textual cultures, into consideration. Many of the articles in this issue demonstrate how autographic texts often occasion renewed energy for interpreting the act of reading as situated in a nexus of affective and geographical, personal, and social influences.

AUTO ASSEMBLAGE

Such a nexus is evident in the use of the internet, and particularly in another medium with rich potential for autographic criticism: the practice known as social networking. Using software on websites such as Flickr and MySpace, people are creating autographic texts as a means of joining and participating in online communities. In Flickr, users continuously upload an array of original, found, and appropriated images, and order them through the contracted narrative possibilities presented by “tags” (single word terms which produce an index), sets (designated collections within the larger whole), and comments.

Here mundane descriptors such as “birthday” and “cats” sit alongside labels that are ambiguous and idiosyncratic to the point of illegibility (“baking day,” “greyhounds,” “cleaners”). Flickr sites have many functions—scrapbook, photo album, exhibition space—and essential to each is the dynamic between text and image as means of representing the personal through the process of assemblage. As with zines, the text one encounters is the result of ongoing selection and appropriation of content across several modes brought together into a constellation for the purpose of self-representation or life narrative. Many social networking sites—as well as certain styles of blogs—function as a kind of digital scrapbook where video, text, image, and sound files are imbedded into the page or linked, and where the disparate array of texts and references function as the individual’s online “presence.”

A component of this multimodal approach online is the new era of amateur self-portraiture heralded by the spread of technologies such as digital cameras and webcams, and software which streamlines the uploading and imbedding of images. Self-portraiture in this new media is central to a primary function of social networking software. To find people one knows online, visual identification is key to confirming one is “friends” (to use the Facebook term) with the intended individual. Reading these websites as examples of online autographics, we might well inquire after the kinds of self-representational limits and strategies this focus on visual identification produces: the emphasis on legible and consistent self-representations, the expectation that one “is” who one’s picture “says” one is. That self-representation and narration is now central to many people’s engagement with the internet suggests that identity and autobiographical representation are increasingly important—as both a means and an end—to how and why people are online. Like the photocopier, the very technologies which enable such uses of the internet threaten the authenticity of the texts they create: as those concerned about the use of MySpace by sexual predators continually remind us, no one need ever prove they are who they claim to be online, as the appropriation of image and text—through downloading and uploading—is done with ease. The construction of an alternative identity, of a different sex, race, age, and geographical location, is entirely possible within the world of social networking, with “autobiographical performance” becoming a means of acting as someone whose characteristics of identity do not match the reality. With such activities being forbidden by the Terms of Service and Codes of Conduct accompanying sites such as Facebook, coherent and “truthful” autographic self-presentation is a condition of participation formed in social and legal discursive fields. This raises a range of questions about the strategies used to fix, but also disrupt, expectations about self-representation through the deployment of images and text in the new domain of social networking. Again,

autographics emerges as a site where expectations of truth in autobiography are graphically complicated.

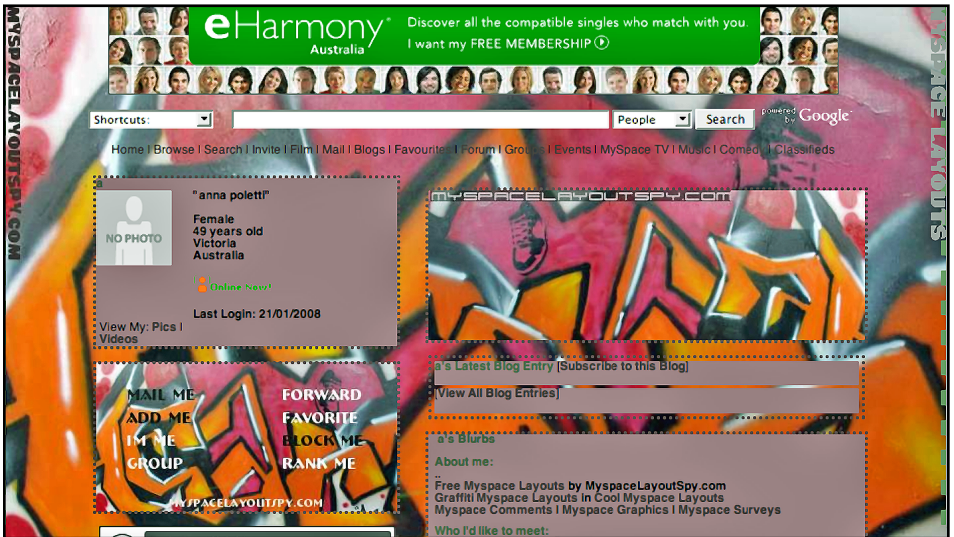
One point of interest critical to autographics arising from these uses of the textual and the visual in social networking is how the functionality of the software, in conjunction with the cultures of usage which develop amongst the communities of users, shape the production of specific autographic performances. If, as Sidonie Smith has argued, the autobiographical subject is constructed through the reiterative identity performances shaped by particular discursive regimes (109), then the predominance of the autographic as the constitutive practice of social networking presents a new mode of autobiographical storytelling, where the telling becomes a kind of shorthanded showing and telling. As work on the comics must confront the dimensions of the page, so too must precise questions about software become part of autographics. For example, there has recently been comment on visual and design differences between MySpace and Facebook; the former allowing for a greater level of customization by individual users, the latter restricting the visual presentation of personal information into more tightly controlled layout. Internet researcher danah boyd somewhat famously drew attention to some of these issues in her essay "Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace," where she suggested that there was an increasing class divide between the users of these two social networking systems which could partially be explained by differing class aesthetics. Boyd's article, based largely on anecdotal evidence, drew a range of responses from new media researchers,⁵ and highlights the urgent need for a contribution from the field of auto/biography studies regarding the divergent self-representational effects produced by the software functions and community uses of social networking. Autographics may well lead us to ask how, for example, we may use Smith's analysis of performance and reiteration to illuminate the layout differences between Facebook and MySpace, which are summarized by Jason Wilson as follows:

the ways in which the two services can be personalised appeal to different taste formations. The often "gaudy" nature of MySpace personalisation, arising from users' ability to insert large amounts of HTML into their profiles to create background images etc. presents a contrast with the essentially "modular" personalisation available with Facebook profiles, where users select from a range of options which do not disturb the given, "clean" colour schemes and layouts of Facebook profiles. (Wilson unpag.)

The "gaudy" and the "clean" returns autographics to considerations of how life narrative relates to particular theories of subjectivity, and their ethical and moral implications. That Facebook limits users' self-representational content creation to a specific and highly codified visual design raises questions



Anna Poletti's Facebook profile screenshot: 12 Jan. 2008 (Facebook image provided by, and used by permission of, Facebook; all rights reserved).



Anna Poletti's MySpace page screenshot: 12 Jan. 2008).

about the kinds of subject positions performed—and reiterated—through its use. Similarly, the messy, visually challenging, and highly idiosyncratic design of the MySpace page often reads like the indecipherable text of a graffiti tag. The subjectivity produced through what Judith Butler calls the “sedimented effect of a reiterative practice” is central to reading these texts autographically (10). Crucially, unlike many other texts, the autographic practice of social networking is temporally constituted: the texts produced in each user’s account exist through and in time, with photographs, tags, and comments continually being added and changed. The materiality of the individual’s online presence—layout, uses of images and text, connection to other’s sites through networking functions—is in flux. Indeed, it is the flux that keeps people returning, to see the latest uploaded image file or text update, to check the “status” of others. At the level of the communities of users then, research is also needed into how the audience—defined by Smith as “a community of people for whom certain discourses of identity and truth make sense” (110)—instantiates and insists upon certain modalities of autographic representation in the service of making the network functional and enjoyable. Here autographics as a critical approach might further the application of Butler’s theory by inquiring after the autographic subjects constructed through “a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms” regarding identity coherence and legibility (10). While many of us working in autobiography studies need to develop the skills to read these new multimodal self-representations sensitively, we should also embrace how our existing methods and interpretive strengths can make vital contributions to research and analysis already being undertaken in burgeoning fields such as internet and new media studies.

JUVENILIA

The textual cultures of autographics—for example social networking services, zines, comics, and graffiti—frequently invoke the specter of juvenilia. As Whitlock has suggested, the association with early reading experiences is central to the potential for specific dynamics between the reader and memory work in comics, and the requirement to think and imagine differently in time of trauma and censorship (“Autographics” 967). These forms also present narrative strategies reminiscent of adolescent behaviors and subcultures, such as experimentation with self-image, a heightened awareness of the potential for images to produce shock in the viewer, and a fascination with the power of social and visual performance in the construction of identity. Autographics proliferate in forms of media associated with youth culture. Early work on spectacular youth subcultures charted these issues in terms of the semiotics of style practiced in street-based subcultures, and a decade after his

seminal study of punk, Dick Hebdige observes that “Subculture forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is a hiding in the light” (35).

Several examples of autographics developing under the gaze of authorized discourses emerge in this issue: Gardner observes the impact of the Comics Code of 1954 on the early content of American underground comics, and the negotiation of personal memory in the public space of the art gallery is central to Antoinette’s examination of Legaspi’s engagement with homosexuality and the church. In both cases, the mainstream culture—as defined by the discourses of government and religion—is sensitive to representations of sex, violence, and “immoral” behavior which violate normative discourses of subjectivity, and these sensitivities are explicitly engaged, and provoked, in autographic narratives through the graphic depiction of sexuality, violence, and embodiment. As such, Green’s 1972 depiction of Binky’s naked male body as a subject of violence explicitly references the self-imposed limitations of content that constituted the Comics Code, and insists upon the reinsertion of the author’s body back into the text. Roger Sabin summarizes this strategy of the underground comics movement: “[if] the Comics Code meant, essentially, that a comic was prevented from saying anything meaningful about the real world, then by defying it this possibility was reawakened” (92). Legaspi and Matt take up the explicit implications of “graphic representation” in the vivid depictions of sexual fantasies and behaviors, as the images in this issue testify. In these cases, as in Bechdel’s exploration of her father’s closeted homosexuality, the subcultural strategy of “hiding in the light” is intertwined with the politics of the personal to address explicitly the censorship of particular mediums of graphic expression and human behaviors. In fact, many autographers dramatize the regulatory discourses of subjectivity, and quite explicitly so.

In the case of social networking services, boyd suggests that the “pimped” MySpace sites produced and utilized by marginalized youth, and until it was banned, members of the American military, reproduce the taste cultures of lower income Americans, while Facebook’s replication of the “‘clean’ or ‘modern’ look of . . . any poshy Scandinavian design house” aligns comfortably with the aesthetics of its aspirational users. In these instances the autographic strategy of hiding in the light is occasioned and codified by the expectations of one’s membership in a range of communities, on- and off-line. In attempting to account for these divergent practices, autographics pays attention to the discursive influences at work. As Hebdige observes: “Underneath the discussion of an issue like [aesthetic] ‘discrimination’, complex moral, social, even economic, options and strategies are more or less openly examined and

the issue of taste—where to draw the line between good and bad, high and low, the ugly and the beautiful, the ephemeral and the substantial—emerges at certain points as a quite explicitly political one” (47). As indicated in the case of comics, questions about juvenilia, class, taste, and visual cultures are essential to the textual cultures of autographics in new media, examining how multimodal texts instantiate and resist such politics of visual and textual aesthetics. The power of these sites to occasion autographic self-representation as constitutive of one’s capacity to be “socially networked” online is also an issue in need of investigation. As the comics extend the page, the avatars in online worlds such as Second Life and the auto assemblages of social networking extend the dimensions of the screen in the production of multimodal selves which, while occurring in new media, intersect with strategies and requirements of identity familiar from “the old media.”

The bold graphic interventions of comics and graffiti sit in contrast to the emphasis on materiality and intimacy found in personal zines and the work of Charlotte Soloman. In these instances the author’s body, traditionally removed from the text through the processes of mass production, leaves traces. The chunky gestural painting of words in Soloman’s narrative, and the visible editing of text in personal zines, evoke the authoring body, not through the spectacle of its depiction, but through shadow play. The “authorial I” permeates the text-object, and readers find themselves engaging with the interplay between the three dimensions of text, image, and object. As Austin argues, autographic texts of this kind remind us that “[w]ords and images are still freighted with the material that signification presumably banishes.” It is in these instances of autographics that we come into territory traditionally associated with the theory and practice of artist books, and work by researchers/practitioners such as Johanna Drucker offer exemplary vocabularies and interpretative strategies for reading how artisan and handmade text-objects can occasion complex investigations of materiality, identity, and language. One such example is Drucker’s analysis of Mira Schor’s painting *Personal Writing* (1994):

the issue of personal language is bound up in the difficulties posed by the hierarchies of power into which the female subjectivity must be placed. Inflecting acquired signs of handwriting with a personal character asserts the successful formation of subject position while acknowledging its constraints within the givens of the rule-bound order of both language and social domain. (61)

Similar to Austin, who deploys psychoanalytic theories of language acquisition to read the role of melancholia in Soloman’s work, this attention to the tensions of the discursive, performative, and reiterative components of the

social demonstrates sensitivity to how multimodal texts respond to and subvert expectations of legibility of self and text through autographics. While the visually graphic representations of sexuality and desire found in this issue typify an engagement with the (self-)scrutiny produced by discourses of normative heterosexuality, the experiments in materiality examined here trouble the longstanding binary between the perceived immanence of the visual/material and the transcendence of the linguistic, an argument taken up by Austin in her contribution to this issue.

This returns us one last time to “alchemy,” which circles unexpectedly round and about autographics. This early, unscientific predecessor of chemistry was concerned with enchantment and metamorphosis, with the power to transform the familiar and everyday into something new and powerful. In autographics, artists, critics, and readers work with self-representations that call attention to the relations between words and images, reading and looking, with elements that are transformed as they come together to strange effect and affect. Gardner suggests that it is no coincidence that we are drawn here again now, for just as the early 1970s is a watershed moment for autobiographical comics—the birth of Binky in fact—this first decade of the twenty-first century is another momentous time in the production and reception of graphic memoirs. Marianne Hirsch concurs, and in a discussion of the regulation and control of visual representations in the wake of 9/11, reminds us that the power of visual representations to produce “collateral damage” is critical at times of historical crisis, dissent, and censorship. Autographics conjures approaches to the autobiographical subjects which are emerging now in strange places and forms: graffiti tags, online avatars, the gutters of the comics. Now again, Binky is suspended over times when an engagement with the alchemy of visual representations and their effects is urgent and political.

NOTES

1. In September 2005 a Danish newspaper ran cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that caused outrage amongst Muslims elsewhere. See Chute and DeKoven’s Introduction to “Graphic Narrative,” the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006), which they edited, and Art Spiegelman’s “Letter to a Jury,” in the same issue.
2. Hillary Chute’s interview with Bechdel about *Fun Home* elicits some information about her reading and drawing that establishes the richly intertextual traditions that work across the taxonomy of autographics in the comics. Bechdel refers to the work of R. Crumb and Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Howard Cruse, and Spiegelman above all: “I couldn’t have done anything without *Maus*. . . . No one had addressed anything serious in comics before then. When I was trying to come up with the format for the book, I said, I’ll just make it the same size as *Maus*—so it’s exactly the same size as *Maus*. And I also loved Spiegelman’s chapters’ divisions. That inspired my own chapter structure”

- (1013). Marjane Satrapi also acknowledges the influence of Spiegelman on the crafting of *Persepolis*.
3. The subtext here is Susan Bazargan's paper "Narrative 'Embroideries': The Graphic Novels of Marjane Satrapi" that both used and considered the usefulness of Hillis Miller's narratology to read the comics.
 4. This issue of *Biography* began with a session at the Philadelphia MLA in 2006. There was a themed series at the Chicago MLA in 2007, and a session on graphics and autobiography is proposed for the San Francisco MLA in 2008. We hasten to add that this is not to privilege the MLA in the field; however, it is to use this conference as one sign of the increasing scholarly interest in graphic narrative in the Humanities.
 5. See for example the thread of postings relating to boyd's essay on the Association of Internet Researchers email list archive for June 2007 (<<http://listserv.aoir.org/pipermail/air-l-aoir.org/2007-June/subject.html>>).

WORKS CITED

- Bazargan, Susan. "Narrative 'Embroideries': The Graphic Novels of Marjane Satrapi." 123rd MLA Annual Convention. Chicago. 30 Dec. 2007.
- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- boyd, danah. "Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace." Apopenia Blog Essay. 24 June 2007. 10 Feb. 2008. <<http://www.danah.org/papers/essays/ClassDivisions.html>>.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Chute, Hillary. "An Interview with Alison Bechdel." Chute and DeKoven 1004–1013.
- . "Decoding Comics." Chute and DeKoven 1014–27.
- Chute, Hillary, and Marianne DeKoven, eds. "Graphic Narrative." Spec. issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006).
- Drucker, Johanna. "The Art of the Written Image." *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics*. New York: Granary Books, 1998. 57–75.
- Green, Justin. *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. 1972. San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1995.
- Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005.
- Hattenstone, Simone. "Something to spray." *Guardian* 17 July 2003. 6 Jan. 2008. <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,999712,00.html>>.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Hiding in the Light*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Heddon, Deirdre. "Autotopography: Graffiti, Landscapes and Selves." *Reconstruction* 23. 24 Jan. 2006. 10 Feb. 2008. <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/023/heddon.htm>>.
- Herman, David. "Graphic Storytelling and Narrative Theory." 123rd MLA Annual Convention. Chicago. 30 Dec. 2007.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Editor's Column: Collateral Damage." *PMLA* 119.5 (Oct. 2004): 1209–1215.

- Lewis, David. *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks: Picturing Text*. Abingdon: Routledge-Falmer, 2006.
- McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*. New York: Harper, 2006.
- . *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*. New York: Harper, 2000.
- . *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1994.
- Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. London: Phaidon, 2001.
- Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon, 2003.
- Sliwa, Martyna, and George Cairns. "Exploring Narratives and Antenarratives of Graffiti Artists: Beyond Dichotomies of Commitment and Detachment." *Culture and Organization* 13.1 (2007): 73–82.
- Smith, Sidonie. "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1998. 108–115.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002.
- . "The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 24.1 (Winter 2001): 1–14.
- Spiegelman, Art. "Letter to a Jury." *Chute and DeKoven* 783–87.
- Whitlock, Gillian. "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics." *Chute and DeKoven* 965–79.
- . *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007.
- Wilson, Jason. "Viewing American class division through Facebook and MySpace." Association of Internet Researchers email list. 28 June 2007. <<http://listserv.aoir.org/pipermail/air-l-aoir.org/2007-June/013858.html>>.