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# Bound to fail.

## Living and working conditions in the comics industry

Katharina Brandl and Anne Elizabeth Moore (Basel / Chicago)

### Introduction

Comics, particularly independently created books and stories, focus on (even revel in) breaking certain well-recognized taboos. Sexually explicit images, genre-defying narrative themes, or the address of a limited number of social injustices are common (think R. Crumb's constant *HUP*-era complaints about dumb jocks having too much power in society). Yet the taboo that tends to go undiscussed and often unacknowledged—the actually existing taboo—is how the creator came by the skills, time, and money to put out their »taboo-shattering« work. Exploring the taboo subject of the banal economic realities underpinning comics creators' lives is a task this essay can only begin, but the discussion that follows shows clear reasons why the inherently experimental form of comics offers such a limited range of stories. The taboo we focus on seems to be profane, but is nevertheless a tough one to break: to do so we will need to talk about the social, economic, and political conditions under which people can achieve any degree of success in the comics industry. What living and working conditions are possible in the chronically under-funded form? Do gender, race, sexual orientation, child-rearing, or health and disability limit contributors' opportunities in the industry? The title of our article, *Bound to fail*, reflects the degree to which working in comics is tied to precarious conditions for all but a handful of creators. The question we seek to answer: who is bound to fail and who, if anyone, is apt to succeed?

To find out more about the lived realities of people engaged in the comics community, Anne Elizabeth Moore designed a survey in cooperation with *The Ladydrawers of Chicago, Illinois* and *Femicomix Finland* at Villa Salin (FI) in November 2014. Between November 2014 and April 2015, the survey was translated from English to Finnish, German, Latvian, Spanish and Italian; and has since been translated into Swedish. In 2015

and 2016, the survey was distributed internationally; and in July 2016, with the support of Kone Foundation (FI), the data was analyzed and narrated in more than 50 pages of comics that were produced by an international consortium of comics makers and researchers at Saari residency in Finland (Katharina Brandl, My Eklund, Saskia Gullstrand, Laura Keninš, Verna Kuutti, Hanna-Pirita Lehkonen, Sheika Lugtu, Anne Elizabeth Moore, Ylva Oknelid, Johanna »Roju« Rojola, Elke R. Steiner, Fran Syass). Presenting the findings of the survey in comics form was a project aimed at ensuring that the results of the survey were understood by, and interpreted through, the creators whose lives we aimed to describe. Working in this way also sought to make the results of the research immediately accessible to those who are directly affected by the precariat of working and living in the comics industry, rather than primarily to a scientific community researching comics. To date, only a handful of the comics (and therefore also the results of the survey) have been published, for example the data set on censorship in comics in September 2016 by PEN America (Moore/Lugtu/Steiner/Syass). Alongside our paper, we chose to include three comics to accompany the research: (1) *The Joy of Creation* (Brandl/Kuutti/Keninš), which displays and narrates the results of the survey regarding the economic conditions of self-publishers, (2) *Cahier de Doléances* (Brandl/Steiner/Kuutti) that examines our survey methodology and our theoretical approach, and (3) *Under the Table* (Kuutti/Roju/Lugtu), a comic about sexual harassment in the comics industry. All of the comics were produced during the joint stay at Saari residency in Finland in 2016, and emerged from the findings of the survey created by Moore. In the essay that follows, to be read alongside these comics, we will (1) present the theoretical framework of the survey to (2) discuss the survey design in detail, and will (3) present key findings on the economic situation of our respondents.

### **Embracing involvement and subjectivity: Our theoretical framework**

Experts from the social sciences may spot a resemblance between our international comics survey and Karl Marx' seminal questionnaire *Fragebogen für Arbeiter* (1880), as well as a strong deviation from conventional survey designs. In the late 19th Century, Karl Marx designed a survey for workers comprising 100 questions that was published by the journal *La Revue Socialiste*, and an additional 25.000 copies were distributed via workers' associations (Marx, 230-237). Marx' survey consists of questions that are easily answerable—such as an individual's total working hours—but it also included questions that required lengthy answers, like details of previous strikes in the factory, of safety standards, or of union organization. The rate of return of the questionnaires was humble, and there is no record of the data having been analyzed (Knittler, 77).

Arguably, collecting data to objectivize workers' lives may not have been the goal of Marx' endeavor anyway: the survey was meant to be a political tool as well as a research tool—at least that is how his method was later understood by those who utilized it. Marx' *Fragebogen für Arbeiter* can be considered to be the template and first example of so-called *militant research* (e.g. FelS, Knittler, Malo de Molina, Russell). Or, in Sam Halvorsen's words: »The starting point for militant research is not an academic researcher seeking to further a particular strand of knowledge, but the context of political struggle« (Halvorsen, 467). *Militant research* does not refer to militancy in the sense of its German or English translations, but is better understood through the French meaning of the word, which lacks connotations of warfare. »Militant« is rather used to disclose the subjective, or activist (*militant*) involvement of the researchers and the distinction from conventional ideas of objectivity. We can draw a conceptual difference between two poles: conventional research with its *telos* of producing objective knowledge on one hand, and militant research that takes a political stance on the other. It is important to note that militant research always discloses its approach—it does not mask a specific, activist research interest behind the authority of conventional survey design; rather, it explicitly highlights the activist involvement and interest of the researchers. Militant research, to put it bluntly, is the intersection of academia and political change. That is, conventional survey design presumes a strict divide between question and answer, and between subject and field of interest: knowledge is derived from previous experience, with no capacity intact to account for change. Militant research presumes change as a constant, and that survey questions stand among the many forces that can influence it.

That work toward political change tends to be understood as ›activism‹ calls to mind the work of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, who in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* draws a distinction between »activism« and »verbalism«, and finds both lacking in terms of on-the-ground political effectiveness. Defining activism as »sacrifice of reflection« and verbalism as its opposite, »sacrifice of action«, Freire forwards instead a notion of praxis, where action and reflection are combined, further described by the equation »word = work« (Freire, 75). While these definitions do not reflect the popular usage of the term »activist«—or rather, reflect it only by accident—they figure strongly in Moore's conception of the survey and reflect a notion of political agency rooted in the Global South that deserves consideration in a project that crosses international borders. Indeed, Freire's description of praxis as »word = work« directly reflects the intention of the international comics survey.



Fig. 1: Cahier de Doléances (Brandl/Steiner/Kuutti).



Fig. 2: Cahier de Doléances (Brandl/Steiner/Kuutti).

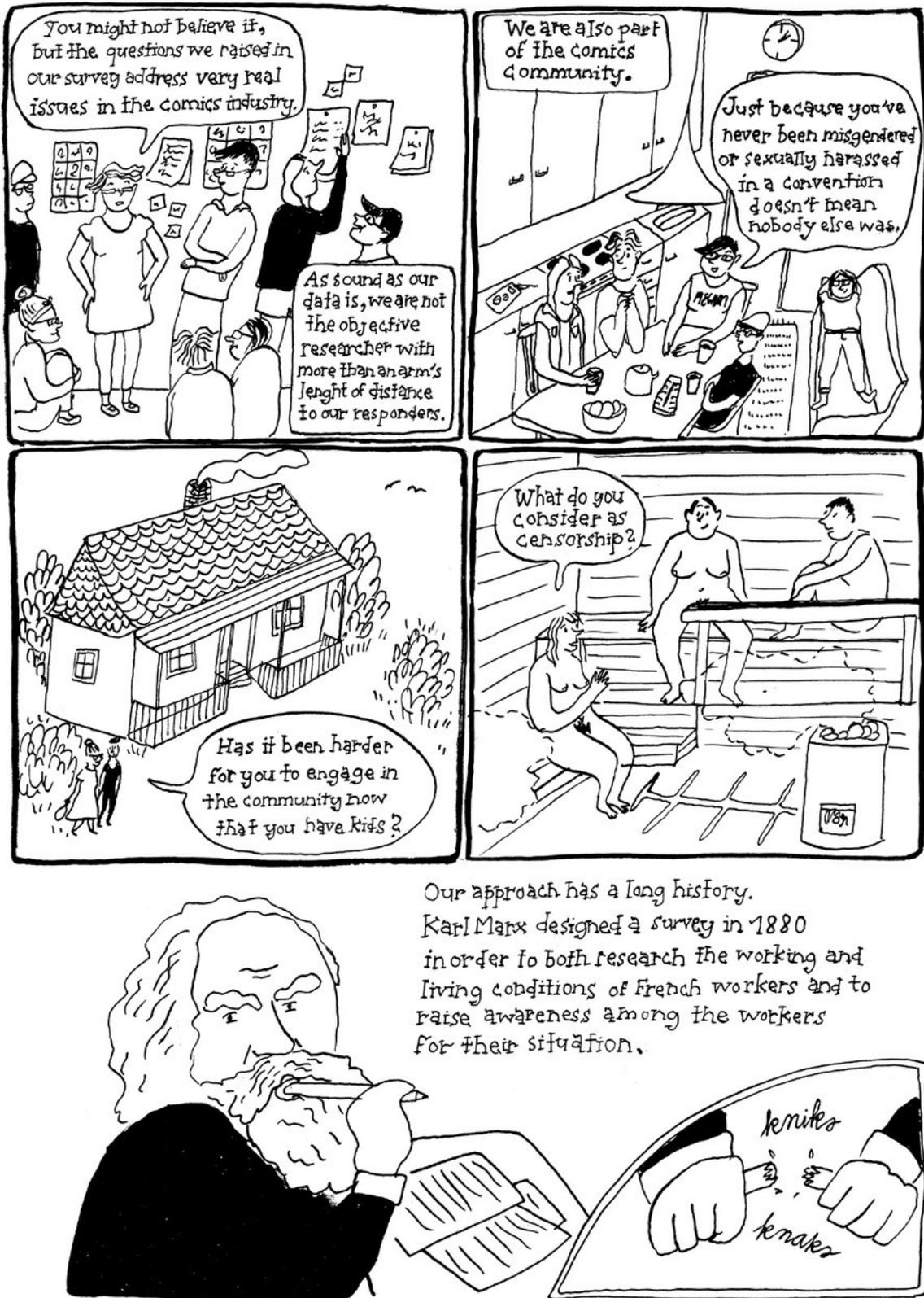


Fig. 3: Cahier de Doléances (Brandl/Steiner/Kuutti).



Fig. 4: Cahier de Doléances (Brandl/Steiner/Kuutti).

## Mituntersuchung

Due to the misunderstandings engendered by the term *militant research* in both English and German, we propose to use two terms that were coined in the activist adaptations of Marx' concept from the 1950s to the 1970s: *con-ricerca* (co-research, in German often translated as *Mituntersuchung*) and *témoignage* (testimony, witness report). *Témoignage* was used by the French group *Socialism ou Barbarie* in the 1950s, whose most famous proponents were Claude Lefort — better-known, later, for this contribution to political theory, especially theory of democracy and totalitarianism—and Cornelius Castoriadis, to describe reports from workers about their working conditions and their life outside the factory in order to find potential points for revolutionary intervention. The group did not use surveys like Marx' to trigger the reports, but suggested specific topics in order to trigger narrative reports from workers. Workers were considered as experts for their situation and their experience; the »proletarian experience« was deemed to be at the core of political action (Lefort).

*Con-ricerca* was coined by the Italian *operaists* (a neo-marxist group in Northern Italy of the 1960s) and the group around the journal *Quaderni Rossi* for their research in and with the mass protests surrounding the automotive industries in the north of Italy in the 1960s. What brings *Socialism ou Barbarie* and the Italian *operaists* together is their theoretical conviction that their contemporary communist parties understood the relationship between the working class and economics in an all-too mechanistic way (Panzieri). Class struggle is bound to the specific experiences of the individuals that make up the proletariat, so their counter-argument went, and a class does not only come about due to economic conditions, or its mechanistic role in the Marxist model of society, but also due to their everyday experiences. Economic conditions cannot be revolutionary, only people can be—to paraphrase Claude Lefort (7). *Socialism ou Barbarie* and *Quaderni Rossi* are important historical anchors for anyone interested in co-research and their work has been referred to frequently in recent years. To give some cursory examples that were strongly discussed in the German-speaking area: the group FelS (Für eine linke Strömung) did a co-research project at Jobcenter (the public employment service) Neukölln in Berlin from 2010-2013, artists Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann introduced the concept of co-research to the art field with their project *ExArgentina* at the beginning of the 2000s and *precarias a la deriva* worked with feminist self-research in the same timeframe (FelS, Creischer, *Precarias a la deriva*). Nevertheless, it should not go unnoticed that feminist research projects, as early as Käthe Leichter's work in the 1930s on women's living and working conditions in Vienna, adopted the method, as did feminist self-research groups beginning in the 1960s (Knittler, 76). In the US, Florence Kelley, an early translator of Marx's works into English, developed a similar survey methodology with the aim of correcting the conditions of women's rights and limiting child labor in the 1890s while at Hull House, Jane Addam's and Ellen Gates Starr's settlement house in Chicago.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 5: *The Joy of Creation* (Brandl/Kuutti/Kenins).

OUT OF 29 COMIC CREATORS WHO EARNED MONEY FROM SELF-PUBLISHING:



- 76% EARNED 1-10% OF THEIR ANNUAL INCOME
- 3% EARNED 21-30%
- 7% EARNED 100%
- 14% EARNED LESS THAN 1%

SO WHERE DO WE GET OUR BREAD AND BUTTER IF NOT FROM OUR ZINES AND BLOGS AND ANTHOLOGIES?

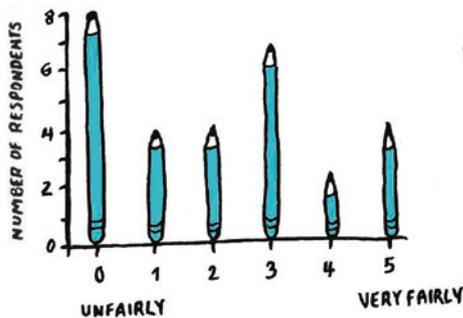


LIKE ME, SOME OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS HAVE JOBS RELATED TO COMICS.



Fig. 6: *The Joy of Creation* (Brandl/Kuutti/Kenins).

41% OF THE 29 SELF-PUBLISHERS HAVE NEVER MADE A PROFIT FROM WORK RELATED TO THE COMICS COMMUNITY, SO IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT 62% OF THE SELF-PUBLISHERS FEEL THEY AREN'T FAIRLY COMPENSATED.



"CONSIDERING ONLY THE HOURS YOU HAVE WORKED AND THE MONEY YOU HAVE PUT INTO THE COMICS COMMUNITY, HOW FAIRLY COMPENSATED HAVE YOU FELT FOR YOUR TIME AND INVESTMENT?" (ON A SCALE FROM 0 TO 5)

BUT HALF OF THE SELF-PUBLISHERS WHO HAVE NEVER MADE ANY PROFIT FROM COMICS FEEL THAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY FAIRLY COMPENSATED.



OUT OF THE 38 FINNISH COMICS CREATORS WHO HAVE PUBLISHED COMICS AND SOMETIMES EARN MONEY FROM IT, 11 EARNED NOTHING IN THE PAST YEAR.



YET THESE 11 CREATORS SPEND AN AVERAGE OF 15 HOURS A WEEK ON COMICS, SOME 40 OR 50 HOURS, WITHOUT REVENUE. SIX OF THEM FELT THEY WERE FAIRLY COMPENSATED.

\* ACTUAL SURVEY QUOTES

Fig. 7: The Joy of Creation (Brandl/Kuutti/Kenins).

DID I FEEL FAIRLY COMPENSATED FROM 160 HOURS OF WORK?



NEXT: ARE COMICS A LABOUR OF LOVE? ♥♥♥

Fig. 8: *The Joy of Creation* (Brandl/Kuutti/Kenins).

To come back to the main differences between conventional research methods and co-research, Käthe Knittler has summarized three key conceptual discrepancies: (1) the relationship between subject and object/researcher and the researched group(s) or individual(s) is drastically reconfigured, (2) the idea of neutrality or partiality is understood differently, as is (3) the relationship between theory and praxis (Knittler, 77). Firstly in co-research, the researchers are often part of the community that is examined and their knowledge will be acknowledged as expert knowledge. Secondly, co-research serves the surveyed group, it is research designed to contribute knowledge to the community and offer a handle for self-reflection within the community. This also serves as a reason why the results of the international comics survey were primarily published as comics, because of the direct benefit for the community. Thirdly, as the historical examples have shown, co-research stemmed from the idea of critiquing Marxist theory and therefore praxis that was understood as misguided. Data is gathered and knowledge is shared in order to not only learn about living and working conditions, but also to change them, while underscoring the lived experience of workers.<sup>2</sup>

Why, in the context of our international comics survey, gather data to be analyzed quantitatively when for example qualitative close readings of interviews with comics creators could also enlighten us about their social realities and their working conditions? Firstly, we do not know from other quantitative surveys how people in the comics industry work, how much they earn, if self-publishing is a viable option, if their gender identity has a significant effect on their reception as artists, or why they choose to use pen names. So, the lack of data explains the need to get a basic and overarching idea of the conditions of comics production and dissemination, which is achieved by quantitative data. Quantitative data also allows us to draw conclusions based on comparison by having larger sets of data than qualitative approaches. The high amount of open questions thus enables us to analyze some of the answers qualitatively and find patterns of individual reasoning and sense making. Furthermore, as mentioned before, the design of the survey and the formulation of the 125 questions was not designed to be analyzed via elaborate quantitative calculations, but rather to get an overview of the data by reckoning frequencies. And of course, we can identify at least three sources of potential biases (in the distribution of the survey, the language and its length), which are reflected below in their potential effects on the data sets. (Please see a selection of survey questions in Appendix A.)

#### (1) Distribution of the survey

The survey was distributed online via the networks of the two participating comics collectives (the Chicago-based collective Ladydrawers and Femicomix Finland), each of whom have international reach well beyond their shifting core memberships, as well as translators and researchers involved in the comics community—which, of course, biases the sample in favor of target groups similar to the creators of the study and respondents that have access

to online communication. Nevertheless, with 260 respondents internationally, the survey provides a comprehensive sense of the living and working conditions of people engaged in the comics industry. As a document that also came from known figures in the comics industry to a wide array of creators throughout the US and Europe, it was also more likely to be filled out despite its length. The length of the survey and the kinds of questions it presented engendered a self-selection among participants: respondents who saw some gain from answering questions and having information about the realities (which they share with a wide array of creators around the world) come to light were more likely to complete the survey—in particular, this meant that queer-identified folks, women and creators with disabilities were more likely than anyone else to complete the entire survey. We can see this by analyzing data of incomplete surveys, also captured by our online form; individuals who opted out of completing the entire survey tended to be male, white, heterosexual, and have higher incomes than the average.

## (2) The language of the survey

The survey comprised 125 questions, which indicates that the completion of the survey was effortful. It included open questions, questions that were answered on a scale, and multiple choice questions. Especially the open questions allow us to gain qualitative insights into the reality of the respondents. The language was deliberately inclusive and did not disguise a specific political perspective: for example in the socio-demographic data set, participants were asked not what their gender or their sexual orientation *was*, but how they *identified* it, and left space for further comments in case the answer »other« was chosen. The choice of language is important, because phrasings that address a specific group within the sample in their identity and in their language and may annoy another group of within the sample would be avoided in conventional research settings or conventional survey designs.

What does it mean that questions like that would be avoided? According to the »model of information processing in a survey situation« by Strack/Martin, survey participants have four tasks at hand when replying to a question: They have to (1) interpret the question, (2) generate an opinion, (3) format their response, and (4) edit their response. Not hiding a political motivation in the design of specific questions may lead to so-called context-effects on all four levels. When interpreting a question, the respondent draws upon semantic (what does the question, the terminology used etc. mean?) and pragmatic understanding (what do the researchers want to know?)(Porst). To state the obvious: On the level of pragmatic understanding, the respondent may get an idea of the activist research interest that he or she may or may not agree with and may opt out of the survey, or will answer in a biased way. Rolf Porst outlined the »Ten Commandments« of formulating survey questions, and design of the international comics survey deviates from at least two of the commandments of conventional survey design: (1) We could not ensure to avoid specific

context effects in respondents that resulted from not masking our activist interest, and furthermore (2) we did not avoid questions that targeted knowledge/experiences that a bulk of the respondents did not have (i.e. »Have you ever been misgendered, whether in person or online, during the course of your participation in the comics community?«; misgendering is not a phenomenon that most cis respondents are familiar with.) In conventional survey designs, context effects are as commonplace as in militant research, but researchers try to control them, e.g. by doing a pretest that allows them to adequately predict the bias involved (Porst). We did not pretest all possible context effects, because gathering flawless data was not the only intent of the survey. And indeed, there were respondents who complained about the questions being suggestive and oozing of »political correctness« in the open sections of the survey and via e-mail. However, as a trade-off, we were able to gather detailed information on the living and working conditions of comics creators that would perish in conventional survey designs. An individual, for example, who may earlier have identified as nonbinary, might later in the survey, prompted by our use of inclusive language, elaborate on the difficulty of attending a comics convention with gender-specific restrooms. (Since the design of the survey, it has become customary at institutions of higher learning in the US to begin classes by asking students to identify gender identities and preferred pronouns, a practice that was not yet standard at the conception of the survey.) The individuals who openly complained about the »political correctness« of our research remonstrated against both the language and the topics addressed by the survey; similarly, the detail of information we received from an extremely wide array of creators from diverse backgrounds speaks to the success of the occasionally elaborate methodology and language we used.

### (3) Length and level of detail

For a survey with 125 questions, online methods of distribution are not ideal, because chances are high that people stop in the middle of the survey. Ideally, the survey would be completed with an interviewer in a face-to-face situation. Not only would that have been impossible to realize, but the survey asks many questions that are of a private nature, like details of care commitments, gender identity, and questions about individual health situation—therefore the anonymity of online communication comes in handy. The survey comprised sets of questions in seven categories: (1) demographics, (2) questions relating to readership, (3) community engagement questions, (4) creatorship questions, (5) questions relating to economics, (6) publishing questions, (7) questions about attitude and visibility. The survey not only addressed comics creators, but also individuals with different roles in the larger comics-creating and -reading community, such as librarians, community organizers, funders, and publishers. It is important to note that this does not, in any way, dilute these findings as comics-specific: individuals were asked to distinguish between projects

funded by comics creation from other work, a distinction they would be the best to judge anyway. Additionally this solves some key problems in the identification of someone as a »comics creator« or not, since anecdotal evidence and our experience indicates that women, nonbinary people, and folks of color tend to adopt the label »comics creator« later and less frequently than some. Finally, someone who reads comics often also draws them, or used to draw them, or will eventually draw them, and the term »comics community« is intended to incorporate their work in all fields related to comics as well. Entire sections depended on the respondent's role in the industry: librarians for example could skip the set about creatorship. Not all of the questions applied to each respondent, although comics creators were addressed by most of the 125 questions.

#### (4) Presuppositions

Some (political) assumptions lead the research design and are informed by personal experience, because—as stated above—the researchers are in fact part of the researched community: (1) most of the work in the comics community is not fairly compensated through monetary means (i.e. an income that comes even close to a living wage), (2) data and knowledge about the living and working conditions of comics workers engenders visibility and is the primary step to changing them, and (3) some are more likely than others to make a living with comics or sustain themselves while producing comics or contributing to the comics community in other ways.

### **The survey**

#### (1) Socio-demographic summary

Out of the 260 respondents, 46% used the English version of the survey, 44% the Finnish one, and 10% the German version. 46% marked »Finnish« when asked for their nationality, 22% USA, 9% German, 3% British, 3% Canadian and 2% would not identify their nationality. In addition, there were respondents from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Curaçao, France, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Scotland, South Korea, Sweden, and Switzerland. Besides nationality, respondents also listed their place of residence and what they consider their homeland. As regards the self-identification of race, participants were less diverse than in terms of nationality: 83% identified as white, 8% as mixed race, 5% would not categorize, 2% described themselves as Asian, 1% as black / African-American / African-European and 1% Latinx. The majority of the respondents were active comics creators (including writers, inkers, pencilers, and colorists). Out of 260 respondents, 164 identified themselves as creators. In the section relating to the participant's role in the comics' industry, multiple non-exclusive answers

were possible, so 218 also claimed to be readers, 192 declared themselves comics fans, 50 were comics event organizers, 53 volunteered at comics events, 33 were booksellers, 35 editors, some (13) were librarians, 44 were teachers—and 65 altogether labeled themselves as »professionals«. 66% of our respondents identified as female, 21% as male, 6% as non-binary and 7% as other.

The distribution of genders among creators and among editors resembles the gender distribution in the overall sample, whereas two key groups for the production of comics (comics funders, or folks who back online comics projects or put up money for new offline projects) and the dissemination of comics (distributors and booksellers) have a significantly higher percentage of men when compared to the overall sample—the former could, of course, be explained speculatively by the gender wage gap and higher discretionary income among men, which makes becoming a funder of comics, or developing the resources to open a low-profit bookstore or distribution outlet, more likely.

The bulk of the respondents (56%) were between 24 and 36 years of age, with dwindling percentages with growing age. We can only speculate about the strong prevalence of young people among the participants, but one reason could be the (online) means of distribution of the survey, which favors people that are familiar with online communications. Another reason could be the precariousness of working in comics: While quite a few of the respondents explained to us that they cross-finance their engagement in the comics community with day jobs, investing a lot of energy into unpaid work is only accessible for those who don't have other unpaid obligations like care work. And frankly, it gets old with age. A *Lady-drawers* survey that was first published in *Bitch Magazine* in 2010 and republished in 2016 by the Finnish comics magazine *Kuti Kuti*, however, further suggests that women and non-binary folks may simply have shorter careers in the field; of a survey of 63 women-identified comics creators, 30% had been in the industry less than five years, and 37% between five and ten years; only 21% had been working in comics for between ten and 25 years and 12% for longer than that (4% had been working for less than a year). That a majority (71%) of women respondents in the field had careers of a decade or under is alarming; that half of the respondents indicated that they received only 25% of annual income from comics, and that 60% indicated they were likely targets of sexual harassment, seems to indicate potential reasons for such limited careers (Moore/Watson, 20).

Another finding indicative of gender-biases for career options in the comics industry was that 85% of our respondents do not have to care for kids at all, including any care provided for minors in the respondent's home (regardless if the respective minors are biological or adopted children, or if care is provided due to an informal agreement). This number can partly be explained by the dominance of a rather young age group in our sample, but again, it needs to be added that precarious working conditions usually do not serve as a strong motivation for starting a family.

# UNDER THE TABLE

WRITTEN BY VERNA KUUTTI  
DRAWN BY ROJU AND SHEIKA LUGTU  
AT 2016 SAARI RESIDENCY

THE HAPPY FINNISH COMICS FAMILY HAS GATHERED TO CELEBRATE THE END OF ANOTHER AMAZING FESTIVAL



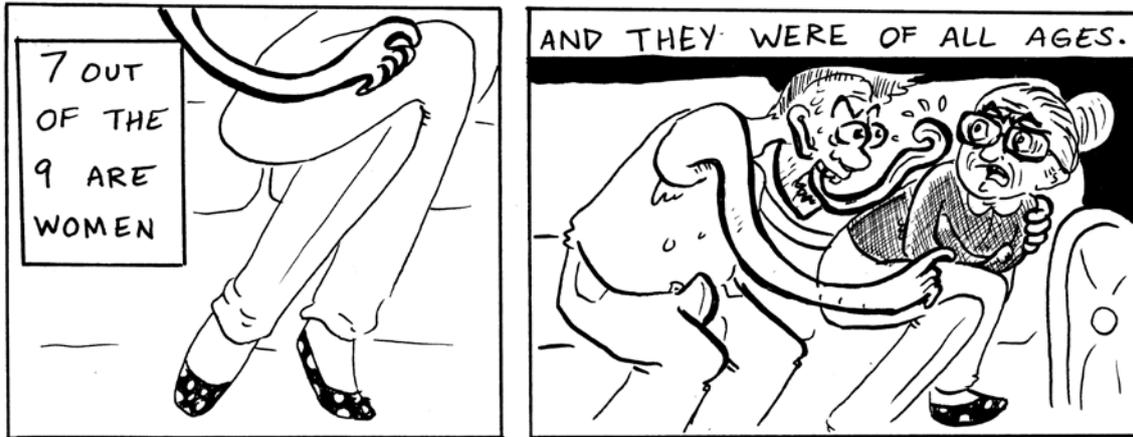
THAT'S 1 OUT OF 4 COMIC CREATORS WHO ARE HARASSED BY ANONYMOUS PEOPLE ONLINE, READERS, PUBLISHERS, EDITORS, AND FROM FELLOW WORKING COMICS CREATORS.



Fig. 9: *Under the Table* (Kuutti/Roju/Lugtu).



Fig. 10: *Under the Table* (Kuutti/Roju/Lugtu).



ENCOUNTERS IN THE COMICS WORLD ARE ALL TOO COMMON, ONLINE AND IN PERSON.



**24%** OF FINNISH-SPEAKING COMICS ARTISTS HAVE RECEIVED UNWANTED SEXUAL ADVANCES OR GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT, AND **63%** OF THOSE ARE FEMALE REPRESENTING A SPECTRUM OF AGE RANGES

Fig. 11: *Under the Table* (Kuutti/Roju/Lugtu).

## (2) Compensation

So, what do we mean to underscore by stressing the precarious working conditions that the comics industry offers to creators? Asked if they feel fairly compensated, 69% (80 of the 116 respondents who chose to reply) said no, while only 31% answered with yes.<sup>3</sup> The phrasing »fairly compensated« is deliberately vague, so that also non-monetary compensation can be included, which for those that see their contribution to the comics industry as a so-called labor of love, (meaning, a community service or unpaid hobby) might be important. Furthermore, it does not bind labor and monetary compensation together conceptually: labor stays labor even if you are not (fairly) compensated for it. To focus in on the issue of financial compensation, we asked if creators had ever earned back more money from work in the comics community than they have put into it: 58% of the participants never made a profit with their comics work. Interestingly, more than half of the people who checked »yes« when asked if they feel fairly compensated never earned money back from their endeavors in the comics industry—which may lead us to wonder if labor does not have to be financially compensated in the comics industry in order for a creator to feel fairly compensated.

To zoom in even more, we asked respondents to describe how well compensated they felt when only considering the hours and the money they have put into the comics community on a scale from 1 to 10. The results were shocking: the average rating was 1.87 (0 being the worst, 10 being the best). The participants who replied that they feel fairly compensated showed an average of 3.05—so money does not seem to be the means of compensation for comics labor. Additionally, in an open section we asked the participants to briefly describe the non-financial benefits they received from comics that sustain their engagement. 115 respondents gave us insights into their non-financial motivation for their commitment to the comics industry. Reviewing the replies, the prevalence of explanations referring to the comics community is striking. Engagement in the comics industry, it seems to be the case, is strongly compensated by strengthened social networks. Here are some examples of answers we received: »Community. You make a lot of friends and contacts. Fun. Beats working for a living«, one respondent said. Another declared: »The medium of comics allows me to integrate all of my skill sets, and it's always challenging. My peer comics creators are all smart, funny, and kind, and I'm very happy to have them as colleagues.« »I love the medium and will always find it inspiring. My comics career has brought me into a community that I value and helped develop my artistic, writing, and business skills in ways that directly benefit my illustration career. I love reading comics and learning about comics and that's a major passion for me.«

The motivation to tell one's story/stories or to shed light on the stories that matter to the creators was also a strong motive for many of our respondents:

I love storytelling. I don't quantify my gain on economic terms because if I count the amount of time, materials and energy put in its never equal to the returns I make. My professional career is in design and architecture too—so comics for me is not my source of income. I use it as a therapy and place to discuss my own concerns and an explorative space. It's lovely to be able to share this with other likeminded people.

Some also put their unpaid work in comics into perspective: »I enjoy making them, but I may have to quit if I continue to make only \$3-4 an hour in this profession.« Another recurring explanation for why compensation remained low was a framing of unpaid labor as an investment in a creator's future: You might start out not getting paid, but you will eventually earn money with comics, goes the line of thought. Unfortunately, our data does not prove that this is always true.

In stark contrast to the emphasis on social contacts and community bonds as occasionally more significant than financial compensation is the data on harassment in the comics industry we could analyze: 27% replied that they have been target of unwanted sexual advances, whether in person or online, during the course of their participation in the comics community. Only 1,7% of the respondents that replied »yes« to the question identified as male. 17% have been asked to address sexual topics or sexual issues that were not raised in their work (whether in person or online), 29% have experienced sexual or gender-based harassment (in person or online) in the comics community, and 54% affirmed that they have witnessed discrimination toward others during the course of their participation in the community.

Our data connects seemingly incongruent dots into a baffling picture: while the importance of a strong and vibrant community is stressed as a strong motivation to be part of the comics industry, the community seems to be not as respectful and righteous as initially expected. »Do what you love and love what you do!«, stated one of our respondents to explain the drive behind her commitment to comics, and we might add a word of caution: for some this mantra of our times might come true, but a great many who »love« this work do not receive compensation for their labor that allows it to be sustainable or sometimes even possible, and as an encore they may be harassed during a commitment made out of »love«.

Some numbers from an earlier US data collection may be helpful here. In 2012, as part of *The Ladydrawers Comics Collective's* ongoing research into barriers in comics publishing, Moore devised a survey to poll creators—even people who wouldn't have called themselves *comics* creators, since a lot of artists who combine text and image find the label to be gendered. We found that, of the folks we polled, only 54% identified as male, while 39% identified as female, and 7% identified as nonbinary, genderqueer, or other.

It gets slightly more interesting when we look at how respondents indicated their work came to be published: equal rates of women and men—slightly over 50% of each—submitted work to publishers that year, while only 37% of nonbinary creators did the same. Yet even more than that percentage of males—75%—said they'd been published, while female and nonbinary creators were published at precisely the same rates as they had submitted work (slightly over 50% for women and 37% for nonbinary folk).

What does that mean? It means that, in comics, at least in the US, the primary reason more men are published than anyone else is because work by men is being sought out by

editors and publishers—solicited, and not submitted. Male creators, therefore, are provably given opportunities in comics that women and nonbinary people aren't, and this adds up fast in financial terms. Of those who earned incomes from making comics in 2012, 92% of the creators who earned incomes over the poverty line were male, and only 8% were female, while no single nonbinary creator that we collected data from earned more than \$600 per year from comics. Putting these findings into more immediately graspable terms, for every dollar a man earns in comics, a woman earns twenty-seven cents, and a nonbinary creator earns three and a half cents.<sup>4</sup>

### (3) Sexual Orientation

As 48% of the sample identified as non-straight, we could gather sufficient data to analyze a data set on financial discrimination in the comics industry and its correlation with sexual orientation. To be specific, given the option to select multiple identities as well as write in their own terms, 45% of the non-straight respondents identified as queer, 18% as bisexual, 11% as asexual, 9% as gay, 8% would not categorize, 6% as omni- or pansexual, 2% as straight with tendencies and 1% as lesbian. Overall, and needless to say, some of the difficulties that the non-straight respondents faced in the comics community affect the community as a whole (e.g. the overall challenging economic situation). However, only 6 of the non-straight respondents earned the bulk of their income from their work in comics, and the most important source of income among this group were various forms of social aid (19%). Of the 94 non-straight respondents who make comics regularly, 47% earned no money from comics last year, contrasted with 8,5% who earned € 10.000,00 or more. So, it seems to be more difficult to »make it« as a queer comics creator. Additionally, only 45% of the non-straight respondents felt that their (published) work was well supported by the comics community, which is, compared to the overall sample (63%), significantly less. 65% of non-straight respondents claim to have witnessed discrimination, while only 54% of the overall sample did. The numbers on harassment are even higher: 37% of non-straight comic artists encountered harassment, compared to only 19% of all respondents. To come to the point: Person A, a creator who identified as non-binary and queer, named an example: »At Comicinvasion we had a table with two trans-persons and one femme. Visitors were first interested in our comics and then put them aside in an embarrassed way. We, the two trans-persons, were partly stared at. And misgendered. [...] I am being misgendered all the time, that's why I make comics«. Person B, a creator who identified as male, white, and straight from Switzerland claimed: »In my experience, the comics scene is very open and there is no discrimination.« He mentions that his work has never been accepted for publication due to any other reasons other than the quality of his work. Yet when asked the control question, he adds that »maybe due to networks« he has been invited to participate in publications and/or events.

## Bound to fail?

Many of the precarious working conditions for comics creators are endemic to the hybrid and underappreciated nature of the medium. Narrative sequential art, presented in the traditional published format we think of as comics, is only about 100 years old, and is often read as a visual form of literature, a static version of film, or somehow like painting but longer. Comics, in other words, tend only rarely to be examined as a mature form of art in their own right, and so remain understudied, underfunded, and underrepresented on gallery walls or in bookstores. This, in turn, has kept the comics publishing industry somewhat small, even as superhero characters gain worldwide attention in films and serial programs. Even today, relatively few schools exist that provide training in the medium itself, few museums stand to collect and display original works, and few critics are focused on describing, historicizing, and positioning the form as a vital, compelling practice.

Yet these tenets do not explain why certain creators seem to excel in the field—most of whom tend to share gender, sexual, and racial identities—while others struggle. In fact, a relatively low-stakes field like comics, where few boundaries for success are preordained, could conceivably be *easier* to navigate for folks who tend to exist outside of white, heteronormative, able-bodied society. Somehow, however, comics seem to entrench instead of repudiate a very traditional mainstream creatorship—speaking of the comics industry as a field with equal opportunities would be perverse.

Put another way, the comics industry duplicates, and even bolsters, key barriers to longevity, sustainability, and success for certain creators. Needless to add, anyone who wants to enjoy diverse comics or praises comics for their taboo-breaking contents or for their potential to give voice to a manifold array of identities, needs to reflect on the fact that the comics industry's structure is hardly fertile soil to grow the work of truly diverse subjects. To a great degree, the success of an individual in the world of comics can be determined not by the merit of their work, but by their ability to pass as, or their willingness to be pursued by, a heterosexual, white, able-bodied, cismale raising no children in the home. Everyone else seems bound to fail—or perhaps put more correctly, the comics community seems intent on failing everyone else.

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- 1] See her digitized archives in the Harvard University Library Open Collections Program: <<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/kelley.html>>. Accessed 05 April 2018.
- 2] Here are some examples of survey questions being a trigger for self-reflection: After being asked about the financial and non-financial compensation for their work in the comics industry, questions 64-72 name other factors with effects on income like child-rearing, healthcare costs. E.g. (67) What percentage of your income do you estimate you spent on childcare in the last year? (68) What percentage of your income do you estimate you spent on healthcare in the last year? (69) If you regularly require childcare, do you have access to quality, reliable, early childhood education, given your income and the resources offered you by the state? (70) Do you have access to quality, reliable healthcare, given your income and the resources offered you by the state? (71) Has your participation in the comics industry lessened due to health or family factors, including deciding to raise children, chronic illness or injury (your own and others'), or other factors? (72) Has your participation in childrearing or ability to care for your (or others') health needs lessened due to your work in the comics community?
- 3] Generally, the German speaking respondents were sensitive to being asked about money, actually those who do not earn money with comics at all, stopped answering any of the following questions.
- 4] Kuti Kuti: <<https://kutikutisf.wordpress.com/2016/05/23/kuti-40/>>. Accessed 10 July 2018.