

Feminist (and/as) Alternative Media Practices in Women's Underground Comix in the 1970s¹

Abstract: The American underground comix scene in general, and women's comix that flourished as a part of that scene in the 1970s in particular, grew out of and in response to the mainstream American comics scene, which, from its "Golden Age" to the 1970s, had been ruled and construed in accordance with commercial business practices and "assembly-line" processes. This article discusses underground comix created by women in the 1970s in the wider context of alternative and second-wave feminist media practices. I explain how women's comix used "activist aesthetics" and parodic poetics, combining a radical political and social message with independent publishing and distributive networks.

Keywords: American comics, American comix, women's comix, feminist art and theory, media practices

Introduction

Toughly mainly associated with popular culture, mass production, and thus consumerism, the history of comics also intertwines with the history of the American counterculture and feminism. In the present article, I examine women's underground comix from the 1970s as a product and an integral element of a complex and dynamic network of historical, cultural, and social factors, including the mainstream comics industry, men's underground comix, and alternative media practices, demonstrating how the media practices adopted by female comix authors were used to promote the ideals of second-wave feminism. As Elke Zobl and Ricarda Drüeke point out in *Feminist Media*, "[u]sing media to transport their messages, to disrupt social orders and to spin novel social processes, feminists have long recognized the importance of self-managed, alternative media" (11). I argue that by reacting to and building on the varied American political, social, and cultural landscape of the 1970s, women's comix managed to successfully adopt alternative media practices, spreading the feminist message.

The article is structured in such a way as to facilitate the understanding of not only women's comix, but also the general context which influenced, and at times conditioned, their development. First, I discuss the history of the so-called mainstream comics industry, demonstrating how the business model adopted in the 1930s and the 1940s, as well as the notion of "comics for girls," led to the rise of the underground comix scene in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Next, I locate the counterculture comix scene in the context of second-wave feminism, discussing how the misogyny of male artists forced women to actively create their own comix. In the following sections, I examine women's comix in the double perspective provided by Chris

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Atton's typology of alternative media practices, distinguishing between the process of creation/production and the product itself, locating this model within the larger framework of feminist practices. I explain how, respectively, women's comix used specific editorial, publishing, and distribution strategies and how they used parody for the sake of radical political and social critique.

(The Business of) Comics and “Comics for Girls” in a Historical Perspective

The American underground comix scene in general, and the feminist media practices that flourished as a part of that scene in the 1970s in particular, grew out of and in response to the mainstream American comics scene, which, from its “Golden Age” to the 1970s, had been ruled and construed in accordance with commercial business practices and assembly-line processes. The Golden Age of Comics, which lasted from the 1930s to the 1950s,² laid down the foundations for production, and distribution policies that continued to define the comics business for decades to come. While, as the label “Golden Age” suggests, this era has often been romanticized in comics history as the time during which the most famous superheroes were brought to life, it should be more appropriately dubbed “The Commercial and Assembly Line Age.” As Chabon writes in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, the American comic book was a curious amalgamate of “dreams” and “pulp”:

[The American comic book] aspired to the dimensions of a slick magazine and the thickness of a pulp, offering sixty-four pages of gaudy bulk (including the cover) for its ideal price of one thin dime. While the quality of its interior illustrations was generally execrable at best, its covers pretended to some of the skill and design of the slick, and to the brio of the pulp magazine. The comic book cover, in those early days, was a poster advertising a dream-movie, with a running time of two seconds, that flickered to life in the mind and unreeled in splendor just before one opened to the stapled packet of the coarse paper inside and the lights came up. (74)

The cheapness of the actual product was counterbalanced by its promise of a “dream” reality—the world of “funnies,” superheroes or adventure. The first comic magazine produced and distributed on a mass scale, *Famous Funnies*, came out in 1933 (Kodman 24). The combined appeal of cheap price (10 cents) and gags worked and the comic became an instant success. “The Great Depression was at its height, times were tough,” Shawna Kodman writes, “comic books were affordable, and unlike radio and film, they constituted a possession” (25). Classic superhero titles followed. Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics* 1937 and Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* in 1938. Apart from the superhero genre, other generic comics publications included western (*Western Comics*), science fiction (*Incredible Science Fiction*, *Space Adventures*), crime and horror (*Detective Comics*), and romance (*Young Romance*). In short, comics “satisfied the demand for entertainment from an audience that had more

2 Specifically, until 1954, which was the year in which the Comics Code Authority was formed in direct response to the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*.

money to spend at a time when the possibility of purchasing consumer goods was severely restricted” (Gabilliet 197-198).

Comics were supposed to be produced on a mass scale—quickly, efficiently, and within a rather conventional thematic and artistic framework, shaped by the “centralizing, homogenizing needs of the financial economy” (Fiske 23). As Will Eisner, the legendary graphic novelist and the creator of *The Spirit*, observes:

I got into the comic-book business very early, and I think I was the first to sort of mass-produce comic magazines. I was running a shop in which we made comic-book features pretty much the way Ford turned out cars. So perhaps the reason that the Register and Tribune consented to distribute *The Spirit* in the first place was because I had demonstrated an ability as a producer—and after all, turning out a 16-pager (which at that time it was) every week for newspaper distribution, with no tolerance for delivery, where you had to make a scheduled delivery every week, did require some kind of respect from the people who were going to handle distribution. (Benson 2011)

The comparison between Ford's assembly line and the manner in which comics were manufactured is particularly poignant. The “comics assembly line” was made up of five main “workstations,” scriptwriting, penciling, inking, lettering, and coloring, which, understandably, erased the “personal” from both the process and the final product (Gabilliet 121-122). It was only in the late 1980s, with the changes in the mainstream comics market brought about by the underground scene and the rise of the graphic novel, that questions of creativity and the personal style became relevant in the mass production of comics.

The history of comics in the wider context of mass media business practices is important for a number of reasons. For one, it gave rise to strict gender divisions in comics production and readership. The question of female authorship and readership from the 1930s to the 1970s is indeed a curious one. Commenting on the role of women in the comics business in *Pretty in Ink*, Trina Robbins observes that comics targeted specifically at girls and women, including romance, action, crime, adventure, and superhero comics, enjoyed immense popularity in the 1940s (110). Indeed, Wonder Woman first appeared in *Sensation Comics* in 1942. And even before the iconic Amazon princess, as Michele Ann Abate points out, girls featured in a number of successful comics and strips, including Little Orphan Annie, Little Lulu, Little Audrey of the Harvey Girls, and Li'l Tomboy (4-6). In the 1950s and the 1960s, however, the titles manufactured for women declined in numbers. Respectively, the comics business did not offer women many career opportunities—they were only offered “manual” and low-paid positions in inking and coloring, while creative positions were exclusively held by men (Robbins, *Pretty* 110). It was also in the 1950s that, as Trina Robbins observes in *From girls to grrrlz* (47-78), a number of generic comics which reinforced (almost to the point of ridicule) traditional gender roles were published, including “career girl” comics (*Tessie the Typist*, *Millie the Model*, *Nellie the Nurse*; as the titles suggest, women were supposed to aspire to such positions as typist, model, or nurse), “advice-for-teenage-girls” comics (*Patsy Walker*), “dumb blonde” comics (*My friend Irma*), and romance comics. They propagated not only the ideal 1950s woman in the social and economic sense but also a certain visuality and view of female body and

“femininity” in general. In the face of limited career and publication opportunities which had been present in the mainstream comics business from the 1950s to the 1980s, it came as no surprise that many women, both artists and readers, sought alternative comics outlets for their art. The rise of the underground comix scene in the US in the late 1960s and the early 1970s seemed to provide them with such an opportunity.

“Gender Trouble”: Feminism and the Rise of the Comix Scene

Indeed, both the functioning of the comics business and the roles available for women within it, played a role in the formation and reception of the underground comix scene in the US by female comics authors. As could be expected, at first, many female authors believed that the comix scene could provide them with creative opportunities (both as authors and readers of comics) that they had so far been denied. However, the actual gender dynamics on the underground scene are more complex, as demonstrated in both primary sources and the subsequent “codification” of its history.

Originally, the American underground comix scene developed in a straightforward opposition to the mainstream comics industry. The letter “x” in “comix” was meant to indicate the X-rated nature of the works and the fact that they were an experimental “mix” of word and image that both documented and contributed to the development of the American counterculture, embracing such taboo topics as drugs, sex (including its explicit representation), religion, and politics. The first comix, Robert Crumb’s *Zap Comix#1*, was published in 1968 in San Francisco during The Summer of Love (Gabilliet 65) and combined the parody of corporate lifestyle (“Whiteman”) with psychedelic imagery (“Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernist Comics”) and LSD-inspired “spirituality” (“Mr. Natural Visits the City”). In an explicit protest against the censorship imposed by the Comics Code Authority and the general infantilization of the mainstream comics, Crumb included a “warning” on the cover of his comix, which read “For adult intellectuals only!” As such, it marked the beginning of what Hillary Chute refers to as “auteur comics,” i.e. “comics shaped by the artistic vision of a single person” (*Why Comics* 16-18), a decidedly new trend in the era of “assembly-line comics,” as well as a radically critical, though funny, view of contemporary American politics and society. The underground cartoonist, on a par with the beat poet and the civil rights activist, shocked and shook the US. Jay Lynch launched *Bijou Funnies* (1968-1973), Robert Crumb continued to publish *Zap Comix* (1968-2014), Denis Kitchen self-published *Mom’s Homemade Comics* (1969-1972) and later founded the underground comix press Kitchen Sink Press (1970), and Justin Green published his autobiographical comix *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* in 1972. Other famous comix artists of the era included Gilbert Shelton, Frank Stack, and S. Clay Wilson. And while the comix scene was dominated by male authors, many women also joined, or at least tried to, join the movement.

Unfortunately, the predominantly male comix world did not accept women as equal artistic partners. What is more, many comix in its pursuit of breaking taboo extensively focused on the representation of sex, including sexual violence against women, with Robert Crumb’s pornographic visions being just one prominent example. The history of American comix reflected these developments and increasingly became

the history of its most prominent male creators. The two most important publications on the subject, Mark Estren's *A History of Underground Comics* and Patrick Rosenkranz's *Rebel Visions*, focus on and foreground the role of male artists. Estren only briefly comments on women's contribution to the movement (284-297), while Rosenkranz, in a curious mix of male-dominated vision and feminist pangs of conscience, writes about only one female comix artist in more detail, Trina Robbins (40-41), but also includes sections on "Chauvinism" (154-155) and "Equal Opportunity" (196-199) in the comix world. He quotes Trina Robbins who openly states that she was not allowed to contribute to comix created by men because she "objected from the very beginning to all the sexism, to the incredible misogyny. We're not talking about making fun of women. We're talking about representation of rape and mutilation, and murder that involved women, as something funny" (155). It quickly became clear that the opposition towards the mainstream comics industry and the ideals of the counterculture were understood differently by female comix artists.

Many women who wished to establish their voice in the comix world did so because of their interest in the civil rights in general and women's rights in particular. In opposition to the conservatism of the previous decade, the 1960s and the 1970s witnessed the rise of women's liberation movement, later referred to as second-wave feminism. Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, The Equal Pay Act was Passed in 1963, The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in 1966, the iconic book *Our Bodies Ourselves* was published in 1970, and the U.S. Supreme Court made a historic decision in the case of *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973. As the mainstream comics either ignored or ridiculed the feminist voice (e.g. Stan Lee created a comic story entitled ironically "No Man is My Master" in 1971 in which the beautiful female protagonist betrays feminist ideals, choosing her macho boyfriend instead), female artists decided to draw feminist comics as part of the alternative scene. Unfortunately, as noted above, the comix movement did not welcome them either. As Trina Robbins observes in *The Great Women Cartoonists*,

Sadly, most of the male underground cartoonists understood as little about the new women's movement as the newspapers did, and reacted to what they perceived as threat by drawing comix filled with graphic violence directed mostly at women. People—especially women people—who criticized this misogyny were not especially welcome in this alternative version of the old boys' club, and were not invited into the comix being produced. (85)

This notwithstanding, the 1970s witnessed a boom in women's comix, including *It Ain't Me, Babe* (1970), *All Girl Thrills* (1971), *Wimmen's Comix* (1972-1992), *Tits & Clits Comix* (1972-1987), *Come Out Comix* (1973), *Abortion Eve* (1973), *Dynamite Damsels* (1976), *Wet Satin #1* (1976), *Twisted Sister* (1976-1994), *Dyke Shorts* (1978), and *Mama! Dramas!* (1978). Differ as women's comix may in their poetics, style, and themes (including inequalities in the workplace, stereotypical view of women and their bodies, abortion, sexuality, motherhood, reproductive health in general and LGBT rights), alternative media practices were at the center of the rapid development of all titles in the 1970s.

Dismantling the Comics Assembly Line: “Activist Aesthetics”

While, as many women artists point out, women’s liberation played a crucial role in the questions raised in underground comix, feminist (and/as) alternative media practices specifically influenced how the respective titles were produced and distributed. Essentially, “anarchistic, counterculture rock-and-roll world of... underground comix” was combined with the ideals of second-wave feminism (Robbins, *Great Women* 86). The concept of alternative media practices, essential to the understanding of both the counterculture in general and the feminist movement in particular, help illuminate how feminist comix functioned on the American market and how they influenced their readers. In *Alternative Media*, Chris Atton thus defines the alternative media “product” (points 1-3) and the alternative media “process” (points 4-6):

1. Content—politically radical, socially/culturally radical; news values
 2. Form—graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics
 3. Reprographic innovations/adaptations—use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers
 4. ‘Distributive use’ (Atton, 1999b)—alternative sites for distribution, clandestine/indivisible distribution networks, anti-copyright
 5. Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities—reader-writers, collective organisation, de-professionalisation of e.g. journalism, printing, publishing
 6. Transformed communication processes—horizontal linkages, networks.
- (27)

While certain adjustment need to be made, as the typology designed by Atton is also inclusive of contemporary (i.e. digital) media, most points aptly describe second-wave feminist media practices, as exemplified by the production and distribution of independent newspapers, newsletters, and other print publications. I propose to structure the discussion of feminist (and/as) alternative media practices drawing on Atton’s model, distinguishing between (i) the editing, publishing, and distributing process and (ii) the “radical product.” Ultimately, both the alternative “process” and the “product” were an inherent part of the feminist movement, which rejected, closely intertwined, patriarchy and capitalism (Fraser 99).

As regards the “process” of feminist (and/as) alternative media practices, the 1970s feminist print culture adopted such strategies as collective editing and local/grassroots presence linked with networking potential, self-publishing and self-distribution (Zobl and Drüeke 2014, Harker and Farr 2016). Collectively, such strategies could be referred to as “activist aesthetics” (Beins 2017). As Agatha Beins and Julie R. Enszer point out,

Feminist print culture during the 1970s and 1980s was a vibrant site of feminist activism and continues to be an important and powerful legacy of the WLM [women’s liberation movement].... While offering insight into the politics, practices, and ideals of feminists in a particular place, print cultures also reveal

the dynamic and wide-ranging networks that were vital to sustaining feminism as a movement and political identity. (187)

In opposition to mainstream publications, feminist underground press was not concerned with making profit but with activism and raising awareness. “White patriarchal capitalism” (Fiske 24) was meant to be challenged by the cultural products created by feminist, diverse, and non-hierarchical agents, as postulated by, among others, Betty Friedan in her critique of popular women’s magazines. Friedan criticized both the articles such magazines run and the advertisements they were supported by, pointing out that it was the (mass) media that created and solidified the myth of the “feminine mystique.” In the 1997 edition of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan emphasized that the “feminine mystique” was “coming at us from the women’s magazines, the movies, the television commercials, all the mass media and the textbooks of psychology and sociology” (18). Feminist alternative media in the 1970s, including newspapers and comix, were supposed to challenge the mass media message but also question the production processes involved in their manufacturing. Grassroots presence, networking, and collective action stood in opposition to capitalist practices. Such an approach was also directly related to the kind of “product” feminists wanted to produce—“non-essentialist” and reflective of the complex nature of femininity. “[T]he difficult process of building a movement connected by difference” (Mann and Huffman 60) lied at the heart of this process.

The 1970s witnessed the rapid development of independent local feminist organizations which began to publish alternative bulletins and newspapers, including the revolutionary *Ain't I a Woman* (1970-1974), Berkeley Women's Liberation's *It Ain't Me, Babe* (1970), *Everywoman* (1970) with the prominent “Herstory” column run by Ann Forfreedom, *Tooth and Nail* (1971), and *Off Our Backs* (1970-2008). The majority of alternative feminist newspapers were edited by an editorial collective, i.e. sometimes only the name of the organization that was behind a given periodical was listed; at other times, only the first names of the editors were provided (Beins 26). The editorial collective, though often small and locally-based, nevertheless firmly emphasized the importance of establishing wider political connections with other women’s organizations (Beins 27). Feminist editorial collectives thus acted in keeping with the motto that “the personal is political” and at the same time questioned the oversimplified notions of leadership, because “feminist identities are usually achieved, not given.... Feminist identities are created and reinforced when feminists get together” (Mansbridge 29). The power of the feminist collective oftentimes propelled the publication process.

Nevertheless, in their attempts to challenge capitalist models, many alternative feminist titles faced substantial technical challenges connected with printing and distribution. In 1970, Robin Morgan famously professed in *Sisterhood is Powerful* that “[t]his book [was] an action” (xiii) since it was in its entirety created by women. However, she also admitted that “the process broke down for the first time at the printer’s, that industry being one of the man which are all but completely closed to women” (Morgan xiii). Many publishing houses and companies either refused to publish feminist titles or asked that they should be censored. It was only in 1976, as a result of a collaborative action made possible by the first Women in Print Conference,

that the publishing market became more open for feminist authors and titles (Harker and Farr 6). This notwithstanding, thanks to ongoing technological advancements, such as offset printing and the availability of the stencil duplicator, the DIY method of self-print emerged as an affordable and effective alternative to the mainstream media.

Similar technical and logistical problems were connected with distribution. Traditional ways of selling books, either in mainstream bookshops or through wholesale, were not available for feminist alternative titles at the time. As Julie Enszer (67) points out in her discussion of sales and distribution practices of alternative feminist books and newspapers, while specialized feminist bookstores were established in the late 1970s,³ feminists had developed a number of other strategies that allowed them to survive on the market until then. These included producing catalogs which featured published titles (Enszer 68-69) and independent feminist publishing houses “doubling” as distributing agents, often selling their publications directly to the interested readers (on campuses, during feminist conferences, etc.). Shipping and storage were also problematic for small independent feminist publishing houses that often struggled to come up with and sustain a successful business model but such problems were usually resolved thanks to the sheer dedication of the staff. However, most independent feminist publishing houses often failed to make a profit (Enszer 75), calling into question the viability of a socially responsible business. And while “feminists negotiated feminism and capitalism, using multiple, creative strategies during the 1970s” (Enszer 77-78), ultimately, many business failed and went bankrupt in the 1980s.

The alternative “process” of the feminist print culture in the 1970s, including collective editing and local/grassroots presence as well as independent publishing and distribution practices, was also at the heart of women’s underground comix movement. The majority of women’s comix from the 1970s were established and functioned either as collectives or creative “joint-ventures.”⁴ The emphasis was on collaboration, sisterhood, and “articulat[ing] the challenges and goals of specifically female cartoonists” (Chute 20). The discussion of editing and business practices of three flagship women’s comix, *It Ain’t Me, Babe* (1970), *Wimmen’s Comix #1* (1972), and *Tits & Clits Comix* (1972), will exemplify the dynamics of the women’s underground comix scene.

As listed on the inside front cover, *It Ain’t Me, Babe* was created by “Trina [Robbins], Lisa Lyons, Carole [Kalish], Michele [Brand], Willie Mendes, Meredith Kurtzman, and Hurricane Nancy [Nancy Kalish].” Most authors are referred to by their first name only or by their nickname, which, on the one hand, corresponds to the slightly informal nature of this collective (as evidenced by the photograph on the inside back cover; the women are standing and sitting, quite relaxed, among greenery), but also emphasizes the notions of sisterhood and creative collaboration. The comix was “conceived by Women’s Liberation Basement Press” (*It Ain’t*, inside front cover). On the inside back cover, the artists directly ask the reader to take action and support the feminist movement:

3 Carol Seajay first published the Feminist Bookstore News in 1976 inspired by the discussions at the Women In Print conference. In 1977, Seajay featured 94 feminist bookstores in the newsletter (after Enszer 70).

4 The only exception were *Come Out Comix* (1973) and *Dyke Shorts* (1978) created by Mary Wings and Roberta Gregory’s self-published *Dynamite Damsels* (1976).

AND NOW FOR A *COMMERCIAL* (emphasis in original) ANNOUNCEMENT
 If you liked this comic, you might be interested in the more serious side of women's liberation. *It Ain't Me, Babe* is a newspaper devoted to national women's liberation news, articles, commentary, and poetry about women by women and featuring the only feminist comic, the adventures of Belinda Berkley.

The readers are urged to either subscribe to the *It Ain't Me, Babe* or distribute it directly. “[A]ccredited women’s groups” were offered special discount prices. The comix originally cost 50 cents. Every dealer who ordered a minimum of 25 issues received a forty percent discount. Since *It Ain't Me, Babe* was the first feminist underground comix published in the US, the understanding of how it functioned paves the way for the understanding of how the women’s underground comix developed in the 1970s. As can be seen, originally the creators treated feminist comix as a “less serious” outlet for the feminist message. It is indirectly implied that the “funny” comix was originally meant to draw attention of the general reader who should then ideally subscribe to the feminist newspaper *It Ain't Me, Babe*, boosting its sales. This notwithstanding, the distribution of both the newspaper and the comix relied on feminist activism and direct sales, as evidenced by the “advertisement” on the inside back cover. Despite its “secondary” importance to the newspaper, however, *It Ain't Me, Babe Comix* became very successful—it had been reprinted every three weeks for a year (Robbins, *From girls* 87). The commercial success of the comix meant that other feminist comix titles could be published (Robbins, *A Century* 141).

Similarly to *It Ain't Me, Babe*, *Wimmen's Comix #1* (1972) was designed as a “collective” with no leader and a rotating editor. Established in San Francisco, the group originally included 10 artists: Michele Brand, Lee Marrs, Lora Fountain, Patricia Moodian (editor of the first issue), Sharon Rudahl, Shelby [Sampson], Aline Kominsky, Trina [Robbins], Karen Marie Haskell, and Janet Wolfe Stanley. They were listed on the inside cover of the first issue and depicted in a black-and-white drawing above the list (fig. 1). The women may be seen sitting relaxed in a big room—similarly to *It Ain't Me, Babe*, the informal and relaxed atmosphere of the group seems to play an important role. As Margaret Galvan observes, the fact that children are included in the image means that “[b]oth this room and this collective have ample space where the women can work while also attending to their personal responsibilities” (32). What is more, in the spirit of sisterhood and creative collaboration, the drawing was executed collectively by all the contributors who each drew their self-portrait (though all self-portraits are black and white, the differences in drawing style are distinct). The artists formed a collective but also maintained their individual voice and style. They were also open to other contributors and ask interested women to “send xeroxes of artwork” (*Wimmen's*, front inside cover). Over the years, more than one hundred women were published in *Wimmen's Comix*.⁵

The first issue of *Tits & Clits Comix* published in 1972 also exemplifies the collective spirit at the heart of the majority of women’s underground comix. Unlike

5 Unfortunately, as Margaret Galvan observes in her article “Archiving *Wimmen*: Collectives, Networks, and Comix,” due to the organizational system of certain archives and libraries which do not reflect on the collective nature of the project, the input of some artists is “on the verge of being lost” (29).

the previous two titles, however, it demonstrates that operating on a smaller scale, with just two contributors, was also possible. The comix was created by Lyn Chevli and Joyce Sutton who not only drew their own original stories but, in the issues to come, also collaborated on a single story, drawing it together. Similarly, to *Wimmen's Comix*, other artists were also invited to draw for the comix over the years.

As regards publication and distribution strategies, women's comix were either self-published or published by small independent comix publishing houses that were often created *ad hoc*. Similarly to some independent feminist publishers, they did not always manage to survive on the competitive publishing market. Founded in 1970, Last Gasp, the publisher of *It Ain't Me, Babe* and *Wimmen's Comix*, continues to operate to this day, though, as the company states on its website, in the 1970s, it was forced to "distribut[e] titles published by other companies, simply because [they constituted] payment for Last Gasp's publications" (*The Origins*). Kitchen Sink, established in 1969, the publisher of *Wet Satin #1*, went out of business in 1999 (*Denis*). Nanny Goat Productions, the only *exclusively* feminist comix publishing house founded by Lyn Chevli and Joyce Sutton, the authors and publishers of the first two issues of *Tits & Clits Comix* and *Abortion Eve*, ceased to operate in the early 1970s. Interestingly, with the exception of Nanny Goat Productions, most women's comix were published by "general" underground publishers and not by specialized independent feminist publishers. While women artists openly stated that they were creating comix within the greater intellectual and political framework of feminism, the realities of the publishing world demonstrate that the affiliation with the comix underground nevertheless often proved stronger than the affiliation with the feminist press. Strictly commercial issues must have played a role in that development. Already struggling with their sales, independent feminist publishing houses often could not afford to invest in the production of comix. Even underground rates for a single page (penciled and inked, uncolored) varied between 25 and 75 dollars (Robbins, *A Century* 143). Also, as Trina Robbins acknowledged in one interview, unlike male underground comix artists, the publishers did not discriminate against women – "they just wanted to publish a good artist.... They never shut me out. Only that little clique of guys" (Dueben). Still, whether specifically feminist or not, the comix publishing houses were also recognized for their distinct local presence, be it Berkeley (Last Gasp), San Francisco (Last Gasp), Laguna Beach (Nanny Goat), or Princeton, WI, similarly to independent women's presses.

As can be seen, feminist (and/as) alternative media strategies adopted by women's comix artists in the 1970s demonstrate that "feminist identities [are] not to be revealed by feminist media production, but the latter to be part of producing them" (Gunnarsson Payne 66). The notions of the creative and editorial collective, as well as the business strategies of independent printing and distribution, correspond to the notions of sisterhood and the critique of patriarchal capitalism. The "processual" aspect of comix as alternative media found its further realization in the drawn "product."

Drawing Women's Liberation: Parodic Poetics

While, as alternative media products (Atton 27), all comix were radical in their message, often employing humor and political parody, women's comix used these



WIMMENS' COMIX #1 COPYRIGHT 1972 BY (ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT): MICHELLE BRAND, LEE MARRS, LORA FOUNTAIN, PATRICIA MOODIAN (EDITOR), SHARON RUDALL, SHELBY, ALINE KOMINSKY, TRINA, KAREN MARIE HASKELL, & JANET WOLFE STANLEY ★ WORLD RIGHTS RESERVED • ANY SIMILARITY TO PERSONS LIVING, DEAD, OR IN TRANSIT IS COMPLETELY COINKINDINKAL • ☆ THIS BOOK MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED IN WHOLE OR PART WITHOUT PUBLISHER'S PERMISSION • DEALERS ARE INSTRUCTED TO SELL ONLY TO ADULTS & FOR NOT MORE THAN 50¢ • SEND XEROXES OF ARTWORK OR MANUSCRIPTS WITH A SUFFICIENTLY-POSTAGED, LARGE-ENUFF ENVELOPE (WE CANNOT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR UNSOLICITED ORIGINALS.) TO **WIMMENS' COMIX EDITOR (WE ROTATE) 96** OUR PUBLISHER: **LAST GASP-ECO FUNNIES INC. BOX 212 • BERKELEY, CA. 94701**

Fig. 1. The inside front cover illustration from *Wimmen's Comix #1*.
 Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books (www.fantagraphics.com).

strategies with a particular goal in mind. The mainstream was not the only “target;” female comix artists made fun of both mainstream and alternative comics, but also of themselves and, at times, feminist stereotypes. They were thus “doubly subversive,” but nevertheless committed to feminist ideals. Women’s comix and their creators meet three feminist-defining criteria postulated by Karen Offen, insofar as

they recognize the value of women’s own interpretations of their lived experience and needs and acknowledge the values women claim publicly as their own...; they exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalized injustice (or inequity) toward women as a group by men as a group in a given society; and they advocate the elimination of that injustice by challenging, through efforts to alter prevailing ideas and/or social institutions and practices, the coercive power, force, or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture. (152)

Still, as noted above, instead of publishing serious manifestos, women's comix predominantly relied on humor. In a telling juxtaposition of styles, tones, poetics, and points of references, the mainstream *Ms.* magazine used the mainstream (superhero) comics icon on the cover of its first 1972 issue—Wonder Woman, towering like a giantess over the main street of an American town, may be seen fighting for peace and justice. The accompanying slogan reads “Wonder Woman for President.” The overall message is definitely one of “serious” political activism. The cover of the underground *It Ain't Me, Babe* also features Wonder Woman, albeit surrounded by other comics characters, including, Olive Oyl, Mary Marvel, Little Lulu, Sheena, and Elsie the Cow. The “activist aesthetics” is still palpably present, but the emphasis is more on the collective action and sisterhood. Also, while “anger over institutionalized injustice” is clearly visible on the faces of the comics characters, the furious faces of Olive and Little Lulu, two rather endearing characters, openly oppose the conventions of the mainstream.

In this final part of my article, I will once again focus on the three flagship comix, *It Ain't Me, Babe* (1970), *Wimmen's Comix #1* (1972), and *Tits & Clits Comix* (1972), discussing the (visual) strategies of parody. Parody is a complex phenomenon and, as Linda Hutcheon points out in *A Theory of Parody*, it relies “at the level of strategy, [on] decoding (recognition and interpretation) and encoding” (34). It also involves “irony as the major means of accentuating, even establishing, parodic contrast” (34). As such, parody is “an important mode of self-reflexivity” (Hutcheon 34) in all cultural texts, including comics, be it mainstream or underground. The power of parody also lies in the fact that it forms may vary, depending on the intended goal. “Serious criticism,” “playful, genial mockery,” “admiration,” and “ridicule” all belong to the domain of parody (Hutcheon, *Modern Parody* 97). In the context of the analyzed phenomenon, parody allows women comix artists to

[explore] the ways in which *ideologies of femininity* are produced and reproduced in media representations. These representations offer pleasures—the pleasures of self-recognition, of finding women placed centre-stage in a ‘woman’s genre’, of participation in a shared ‘women’s culture’—but simultaneously act to contain women within the accepted bounds of femininity. (Thornham 7)

Indeed, women's comix artists use “parodic self-reflexivity” to expose and question dominant ideologies of femininity by making fun of advertising aimed at women and stereotypical representations of women in popular media, very often reclaiming and/or subverting “the male gaze” inscribed in such images. It is no coincidence that the concept of the “male gaze” has been present in feminist art theory since the 1970s, with classic texts such as John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Laura Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), and Mary Ann Doane's “Film and the Masquerade” (1982), pointing to the implied “objectification” of the woman as an “image.” Additionally, as Linda Steiner observes, “the central assumption of the early, essentially second-wave, feminist media theory was what could be called the three Rs: depictions of women (and girls) result from, reflect, and reproduce dominant ideologies” (361). Comix, as a visual medium created by women, challenged the male gaze through the parodic tactics of shock and breaking the taboo. The woman's body

and her sexuality, including images of abortion, menstruation, and vaginal infection, became a powerful visual weapon, allowing women to break free from “the accepted bounds of femininity” (Thornham 7).

When viewed in the context of *Wimmen's Comix #1* and *Tits & Clits Comix #1*, *It Ain't Me, Babe* appears to be the most timid in its tactics of shock. The themes of liberation and emancipation are explored in reference to comics and pulp fiction. The reader is expected to “decode” the visual and verbal intertexts “encoded” (Hutcheon 34) on the cover and in the respective stories. The two opening stories play with popular genres and visions, including the fantasies of pioneer life (“Oma”) and the story of Tarzan (“Monday”). The “parodic contrast” (Hutcheon 34) is achieved through introducing strong female characters into both stories—the pioneer woman may be seen riding naked on a white horse (though she eventually falls into an abyss; the image may be interpreted as both a “warning” for independent women and a corruption of a sexualized male fantasy), while the Tarzan is female (though it is also clear from the beginning that this vision is in fact the dream of a female secretary). The central story in the comix, “Breaking Out,” expands on the image on the cover. Popular female comics characters, Little Lulu (together with Witch Hazel), Juliet Jones, Betty and Veronica, Supergirl, Petunia Pig, rebel against male comics characters and join “feminist rebellion,” “take acid,” and free women from female prisons (*It Ain't*). With the exception of Little Lulu and Witch Hazel, who were originally rather rebellious characters, all of the other ladies were either associated with “dominant ideologies of femininity” and “woman’s genre” (Thornham 7), i.e. mainstream comics for girls (Juliet Jones, Betty and Veronica) or superhero comics for girls (Supergirl), and thus embodied stereotypical views of women. “Breaking Out” comes close to functioning as a feminist comix manifesto. The repressed heroines break free and conspire together in a garden shed on which they wrote “No boys allowed!” Considering that female comix artists often described the male comics and comix world as a “boys’ club” (Robbins, *Great Women* 85), this final image in the story appears to be a critique of both “woman’s genre” and the comics and comix scene. In any case, what makes *It Ain't Me, Babe* interesting is the manner in which the visuals were actively used to convey the radical, feminist message. In order to understand the comix, the reader/viewer had to “construct a second meaning through inferences about surface statements and supplement the foreground [i.e. the image, M.O.] with acknowledgment and knowledge of a background concept” (Hutcheon 34), which involved the history of comics, “comics for girls,” and comix, both at the level of form (drawing style, female body types used, sexualized images of women) and content (popular scenarios and roles assigned to female characters).

Women’s comix published after *It Ain't Me, Babe* expanded and built on the poetics of parody, exploring and questioning the images of the essentialist femininity. As such, they also built on what Peg Brand refers to as “a specific subcategory of women’s art known as feminist visual parodies (FVPs)” (166). While Brand explains the functioning of parody in a manner similar to Hutcheon, as a process based on recognition of sources and acknowledgment of the new context, she also clearly states that feminist visual parodies do not refer to any given image, but openly expose the conventions of men’s vision of “the essence of ‘woman’” (167). In their parodic

endeavors, female comix artists were thus exploring themes and strategies used concurrently by Judy Chicago, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Kiki Smith, albeit in a different medium, conditioned and constrained by its own history and conventions. Women's comix, within the greater framework of feminist (and/as) alternative media practices, make the reader/viewer realize that

visions of woman are contaminated by male-defined notions of the truth of femininity. This is true not only of the negative cultural images of women (prostitute, demon, medusa, bluestocking, vagina dentata) but also of positive ones (woman as nature, woman as nurturing mother, or innocent virgin, or heroic amazon...) Rather than expressing the truth of female identity, then, art becomes a means of questioning identity. (Felski 182)

Wimmen's Comix #1 and *Tits & Clits Comix #1*, in particular, explore the themes connected with the female body and sexuality, questioning the images of the promiscuous, or simply sexually active, woman.

The cover of *Wimmen's Comix #1* is a parody of the covers of "comics for girls." A beautiful girl may be seen kissing a very attractive man (which is supposed to embody every woman's ultimate goal), while an "ugly feminist" watches them, thinking "Except from being fat, ugly, pimple faces, bad tempered and selfish, you'd think he'd see I'm a much better choice!" The idealized vision of femininity perpetuated by "comics for girls" is thus juxtaposed with the stereotypical image of a feminist held by an anti-feminist. The cover reads as a truly subversive text. Only the reader/viewer who was familiar with the women's comix scene, and the role feminism played for its authors, could correctly "decode" this image as supportive of women's liberation. In fact, so powerful was the comix's feminist message that over time the word "wimmen" in the title was replaced by non-standard "wimmin," "womyn," and "womon" in order to "claim a female identity that was linguistically distinct from man and men" (Beins 104). The first issue addressed different questions connected with women's sexuality and the view of women as sexual, including teenage abortion ("A Teenage Abortion;" the comix was published in 1972 and the decision in *Roe vs. Wade* was made in 1973), sexual harassment at work ("All in a Day's Work), and coming out as lesbian ("Sandy Comes Out"). What made the stories particularly interesting was the ironic tone. For example, "A Teenage Abortion" was a parody of a specific type of "comics for girls" that concentrated on the "he-doesn't-love-me issues." However, instead of a broken heart, the teenager has to deal with a more serious problem. Respectively, *Tits & Clits Comix #1* addressed such "taboo topics" as menstruation and menstruation products ("The Menses is the Massage") and vaginal infection ("Vaginal Drip"), thus, quite literally, reclaiming the female body and its representation. Blood and other bodily fluids were drawn explicitly and expressively. The female body was not represented seductively and the woman was not controlled by "the male gaze," in a manner similar to the artistic strategy used by Judy Chicago in *Red Flag* (1971). Such a visualization of the female body is particularly important because, as Elizabeth A. Grosz points out, patriarchy often "found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not

under conscious control” (13-14). The concept of the female body is not simply limited to the discussion of biological functions and/or differences between men and women, but often makes the woman the other, and, at times, the monstrous. *Tits & Clits Comix #1* focuses specifically on the “unruly” and the “unreliable,” female bodily fluids and bodily changes, quite literally breaking the thematical and visual taboo.

While the three discussed comix differ in the “intensity” of the shock tactics adopted, with *It Ain't Me, Babe* and *Tits & Clits Comix #1* at the opposing ends of the spectrum, most, if not all, titles relied in parody in their “efforts to alter prevailing ideas and/or social institutions and practices, the coercive power, force, or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture” (Offen 152). From rebelling against the “boys’ club” which governed comics, through openly addressing the topic of sexual harassment at work, to discussing the issues connected with female sexuality, women’s comix used humor, ridicule, and irony to effect feminist change.

Conclusion

The creators of women’s comix openly acknowledge the importance of women’s liberation in their artistic endeavors. However, the history of second-wave feminism in America rarely acknowledges the presence of women’s comix. Books, newsletters, and newspapers constitute an integral part of the movement. Comix, perhaps because of their, rather unwanted affiliation with the world (and the business) of comics, seen as the embodiment of patriarchal consumerism, have been marginalized in feminist theory and criticism. As I have tried to demonstrate, unfairly so. Women’s comix in the 1970s grew out of the specific historical, social, and economical circumstances, challenging the misogyny of both mainstream comics and underground comix. They adopted feminist (and/as) alternative media practices, including “activist aesthetics” and parodic poetics, combining a radical political and social message with alternative publishing and distributive networks, enriching the feminist movement.

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