Performative authorship in zine, self and micro-publishing

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Abstract. Zine, self and micro-publishing has seen a spectacular resurgence in the last decade, with individuals within tight communities pushing the boundaries of the practice in terms of form, content and process.

This paper will examine ways in which this reinvestment of illustrative authorship has been stimulated by the iterative and performative aspects of zines, self and micro-publishing, through the discussion of varied publications' genesis with their illustrators – including my own self-published book *The House*.

This paper will consider how performance underpins both the motivation and creative process of such publications so as to highlight potential contributions of the scene to wider illustrative authoring practices.

Keywords: Zines, Self-publishing, Micro-publishing, Performance, Authorship

Introduction

A new generation of illustrators has recently invested the zines and micro-publishing scene with a rich and assertively visual approach to publication, taking advantage of the easy access to image-making and book-publishing processes and facilities. Young graduates and semi-professional enthusiasts push the boundaries of the genre, gaining visibility through a dynamic online activity and at major illustration fairs such as the alternative comic forum of Angouleme festival [1], establishing new illustrative practices.

It seems that 'the liberating force of self-publishing', noted by Robert Klanten, in his study Behind the zines: Self-publishing culture [2], not only 'allows for more differentiation on all levels: in terms of content, distribution, and editorial say' but has also paved the way for image-makers to position themselves as editors and authors. A large number of currently active, European micro-publishers such as Breakdown Press (UK), Nieves Books (CH), Colorama Print (DL) started as collectives of artists keen to get their own work visible and moved on to publishing others' work with the same attitude of minimal editorial intervention.

Micro-publications referred to in this paper are predominantly visual with a strong emphasis on drawing that, in opposition to conceptual and process-based practices, appears often 'narrative-led, associative and subjective' [3]; they denote a strong attraction to abstraction, from Alexis Beauclair's *LOTO* series [4] to Sammy Stein's sequential *Pyramid*

[5]. Their limited edition and consequent inaccessibility positions them as collectible and desirable items, a feeling heightened by the repositioning of the book as an object.

These are books whose experimental nature testifies of their authors' drive to test the boundaries of illustration as a visual language, and to re-examine illustrative authorial practices. They present texts whose genesis results not only from exploring new ways of writing, but also from the authors anchoring their practice in their own aesthetic needs, and leanings. 'I just try to create something that I'd like to read or look at, that doesn't already exist.' [6] This stands a far cry from the prominence of 'the brief', the 'exterior request' of traditional illustrative practices [7][8].

More importantly, these publications do present most of the features that Klanten attributes to the second-wave of self-publishing: reflective, diverse, and immediate – 'exercises not destined to survive a lifetime of aesthetic scrutiny, but to document a particular stage in time, and state of mind.' Not unlike Instagram posts, these books and zines are ephemeral, small offerings left to drift in the flow of production that testifies of the worth and steadfastness of their authors' endeavour.

'It's about exchanging ideas by swapping a zine for a zine' writes Gloria Glitzer [9]; 'Show me yours, I'll show you mine' sums up Klanten. In a small world of dedicated fairs and digital platforms, zines and comics operate as both keys to access and tokens of belonging to a community of practice [10], which, in turn, is defined through the creation and exchange of such publications.

This paper intends to investigate the relation between the genesis of these texts, and their social dimension. It will focus on micro-publishing' iterative and performative underpinnings through the lens of Bourdieu's game and action theories [11] so as to define zines and micro-publishing as a specific field of illustrative practice, before examining its authoring practices based on Della Pollock's essay, *Performative Writing* [12].

Seeking to understand the dynamics at play in the creative process, this paper will also reflect on my own practice, grounded in the making of *The House*, a self-published book presenting a fictional, sequential wordless narrative centred around two characters, a woman and a child, and their relation to a home. It also builds upon interviews, both verbal and written, conducted with illustrators and publishers – players who constitute a community of practice, and who have been kind enough to share some light on their motivations and practices.

Zines, self and micro-publishing as a community of difference

The double purpose of these publications - visual-telling and belonging - relates them to statements 'in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something' [13], statements that can be qualified as performative. Considering these texts as such allows us to examine their making in the context of their audience. It also helps understand the motives driving this area of publication (and my own text), and how potential stakes influence forms and content.

Performativity, as a social inquiry, has opened a wide range of subcultural texts (such as these publications) to scrutiny, on different scales. Goffman and Marsh [14] point at the

structure of social interactions – how performative, communicative behaviour results in a 'constant negotiation of positions' within and outside communities; how the production, distribution and reading of cultural texts 'function to communicate group identity, as well as 'pieces of self-representation'.

As highlighted by Simon Shepherd [15], Barthes' semiotic reading of cultural texts in relation to dominant discourses and ideologies [16] suggests that subcultural texts, such as fringe publishing, are 'speaking back against dominant society, 'deliberately enacting their difference'. This, in effect, translates into challenging visual languages and processes, in direct response to wider publishing practices.

Mainstream publishing has overwhelmingly positioned Illustration as the illumination of a text, negotiated by illustrators with writers, editors and publishers [7]. In this context, visuals are created step by step, alongside an intense verbal exchange of interpretations and opinions. Even though illustrators might increasingly pitch in design concept, their images have to conform to industry norms, under an economic pressure that ultimately positions their practices in relation to the demands and aesthetic preferences of a wider audience.

The market-driven model of the industry, with its set of expectations and rules, has isolated authorial illustration to niche areas within specific sectors such as children's picture books, indie comics or mainstream Bande Dessinée. In short, there is very limited avenue, within traditional structures, for the decisively individual and experimental approach of self and micro publishing. This, in turn, has led authors to self-publish, to connect through bespoke platforms for distribution – creating a fringe movement with texts at the heart of its identity.

In Bourdieusian terms [11], the micro-publishing scene appears as a specific field of shared interests, a social space inseparable from its agents or players (zine authors, comics authors, publishers, collectors, readers) which, as an avant-garde, is a reaction to structures imposed by the overlapping, larger field of mainstream publishing. Success, as an outcome of the field practices ('the game'), is achieved in symbolic and material terms. The precarious economic model most micro/self-publishing relies on [2], results in an emphasis on cultural and social gains, namely in terms of belonging and recognition of one's contributions – and thus one's importance – to the field.

The aspiring ziner or the experimental comic-book author enters or inhabits the field with symbolic capital and his capacity, or 'habitus' - a feel for the game. Whilst producing his publications, he or she learns or outsmarts the codes of the game - a performance that is to be evaluated by other players through his texts - and will be given a legitimate status within the field. Consequently, it is a certain valuable type of writing which will be rewarded, content and practices that, as mentioned earlier, allow their authors to 'deliberately enact their difference'.

This valued type of writing appears to overwhelmingly favour innovation and uniqueness, and to explore critically notions of visuality and authorship. Being different means, in illustrative terms, parting from the clarity of contextualised, communicative images that

answer an external, commercial request, and to probe instead the potential held by the manipulations of genres, forms and ways of authoring.

There is thus a double movement at play, with the performative act of creation being part of a larger, performative process of being part of a community defined by difference. The two aspects are linked, and stand in distinction to mainstream practice. Making avant-garde comics and zines seems to be both a ritual of belonging, and a self-reflective, critical form of writing, with the former steering and stimulating the latter.

Performative aspects of illustrative authorship

In order to examine illustrative authoring through the lens of performance, I will use the six aspects Della Pollock outlines in her essay *Performative Writing* [12] as entry points into the writing process. Pollock's endeavour seems to revolve around the question 'How to mean', around the vitality and function of the act of speaking/writing, as well as the relation between author subjects, reading subjects, and subjects written/read.

The 'consequential' aspect of performative writing, Pollocks explains, relates to the 'logic of function and effects' that pervades it, in its reverberating and creative dimension. The 'evocative' relates to the relation writing has with experience, of both readers and authors. In the 'metonymic' section, Pollock notices how writing tends to replace, or obscure the very subject it represents. The 'citational' aspect engages with self-reference and the construction of worlds composed in, and as repetition and reiteration. The 'subjective' examines the self in its enunciation, from positioning to shaping relations with other subjects; whilst the 'nervous' aspect of performative writing hints at its capacity to operate in a genealogical, yet 'discontinuous recurrence of disciplines and practices'.

Della Pollock provides a rich framework for discussion. Interpreting those aspects as an illustrator, I have looked for resonances, for similar approaches within my own practice; I have expanded on these beyond their field of application and, meanwhile, may have transformed their initial meaning.

Ultimately, these facets offer inroads in which to consider the birth of these visual texts. They have inspired conversations revolving around what I termed as genesis, visual utterances, ways-in and ambiguity, limits of representation, agency of format, authorship, and responding to responses – pointing at possible ways in which performative self and micro-publishing re-invigorate illustrative authorship.

Genesis and the Inner Text

Drawing for *The House* was, in effect, close to a translation exercise that aimed to give shape to the formless, that tried to articulate the undefined sense of direction that is the intention behind *The House*; I called this drive the inner text. It differed substantially from an idea in that it revealed itself through its shaping, its enunciation, remaining till then elusive and vague.

Without a predetermined story to tell, I assumed that focusing on a place in which I had lived would provide a fertile ground for a text to emerge. There was a tension between the inside and the outside of the house that needed exploring, eventually through characters.

If, as Joana Quental argues, 'an illustration is also a drawing, but it is a drawing that fulfils an intention' [8], I had kept that intention deliberately obscure so as to get the drawing itself enlighten it. This inner text, thought in an interior language that encompasses both verbal and visual codes [17], needed to be externalised and articulated visually.

I noted the changing nature of the inner text whilst drawing in successive waves, each exploring settings, characters and actions in different ways. In turn, these images shaped the inner text as their concrete nature enabled me to better understand its key features - like someone needs reflective objects to see himself or herself.

This echoes the practice of Pia Melissa Laroche, who says [18]:
'There are no words at the beginning, only images, quick sketches. There are usually nearly no words in my comics either. There may be an idea at the start, but the story emerges often as I draw, with regular checks between the beginning and the end.'

'At the start of a project, it is a vision that guides me. An image that would feel like a concept, a narrative climax or a specific atmosphere. I then let myself be steered by this image that becomes the beginning, the middle or the end of the book, depending on the visual structure around it,' adds Alizée de Pin [19].

The inner text appears as a shifting, fluid pull, anterior to verbalisation or visualisation, far from the certitude of the auteurist author's intention [20]. It allows for a greater visual exploration, an anchoring of ideas in drawing and visual shapes, as verbal articulation might be circumvented altogether.

'For *Inframonde*, the story started through an unexpected image that appeared while I was colouring another comics, *Muances*, which I finished recently. It was a face, with the top part of the head missing. I kept this image and observed it many times, seeing possible narratives around it. (…) What I am most interested in is, in fact, how can a narrative unfold with a minimum of verbal language.' [18]

Visual Utterances: Drawing as Crystallised Speech

'Writing that takes up the performativity in language is meant to make a difference, 'to make things happen'. [12] This consequential dimension of zine publishing is brought out on multiple levels, investing drawing, storytelling or reading with effects that reverberate beyond the initial trace.

In *The House*, the delineation of objects, spaces and characters came across as utterances [13], whose forms were, in essence, attempts to capture and shape fleeting visions and intuitions. In the initial series of drawings, each image was conceived in isolation and therefore its meaning is self-contained. Few elements are presented within a drawing, and they do articulate a single statement. As such, these images operate as units of meaning that simultaneously communicate about and create a lasting world.

Images were also produced as building blocks for a narrative construct - whilst enunciating, I considered how to mean, how to refer to the text, how to create a structure that is the text. Each sketch seemed to hold potential, as 'the drawings all have their secrets to tell, and we don't know what they mean' [21]. By drawing each image and evaluating its

meaning in the light of the inner text, I was not only telling a story, I was also examining and sharing an alternative strategy to build a narrative.

Sammy Stein is a prolific self-publishing illustrator whose residency at the Galerie 126 in Rennes exemplifies the way in which the production of a zine reinvests reading contexts so as to maximise the effects of its message. He recalls the genesis of *Galerie 128*:

> 'I offered to talk about the beginning and end of their place in a 24-pages book. I appropriated the space and took it into fiction as Galerie 128, in which I talk of a Golden Age, before the fall of the gallery, before it got abandoned. (…) I re-drew the destroyed house. I searched, I manipulated, I wrote, I re-wrote from this raw material (…) I also made an installation in the gallery. It was about reproducing what was described in the book – I thus recreated a ruin, as if the place was deserted 100 years ago.' [22]

Alongside his thematic exploration, Stein put the publication at the centre of a social and experiential event that transcends its fictional form to question ideals of commitment, culture and civilisation. Exploiting the making of a book's 'capacity for political, ethical agency', he brought together the image and its object, meaning and reference, presence and absence 'in order to perform a social function'. [12]

It is in this immediate rapport that his world becomes a possibility for the reader, that he offers ways into notions of loss and decay. By providing contexts for reading, the authoring of a book can encompass conditions of its reception, and inspire a reflective engagement.

Embracing Ambiguity: Drawing as an Evocative Practice

Evoking and alluding instead of describing, riding alongside experience instead of recreating it; reinvesting authorship means exploring ways-in for the author, as well as ways-in for the reader, 'to bring him in contact with 'other worlds' (…) otherwise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect and insight' [12]. It is sometimes the effacement of the author, the surrender of his decision-making power to the reader that is the condition for the latter's involvement.

Although I grounded the space and the mood of *The House* into memories, the visual language of the book was kept as simple as my initial drawings, isolating the few elements that narratively mattered, and omitting the rest. As a result, depicted objects were sparse and stylised, presenting a low modality [23] that left literally and figuratively large gaps for the reader to fill.

Similarly, characters shed distinctive individual features to instead function as archetypal figures: the Feral Child and the Longing Woman, both embodying unfulfilled desire, and mirrored by their capricious environments. The use of metaphors allowed to conjure a world vivid enough to appeal, and loose enough for others to recognise in it their own experience in that 'understanding is always personal, even idiosyncratic, and it is an outcome of recognitions and deferrals that are not simply linguistic.' [24].

The narrative arc was left open with the characters' fates still unresolved for the reader to give meaning to the text, make connections and provides for what has been left empty. This move echoes Laroche's approach to narrative, who explains:

'The interpretation of an image, or of a series of images, is always more interesting when it can take varied directions. I like stories that are loose enough, or rather open enough to get the reader build up his or her own interpretation' [18].

However, in many other instances, it is the assertion of the author's position, through signature mark making, aesthetic or thematic stylistic features that allows the reader to own the text. These recognisable elements mark the author's presence, which, in turn, reinforce the figure of the author as a symbolic term in the process of reading, allowing 'the spectator to give up his position within the fiction without losing possession of it. I admire (or criticise) from outside the fiction' [20].

Playing with the Limits of Representation

'I must have secrets when I draw' says Stefano Ricci [25]. Not all things should be told, or showed – but they can be substituted, or displaced. The 'inadequacy of evocation' of the 'edge of referentiality' mentioned by Pollock, motivated instead a desire to play with history, starting with its settings, a house - and give it a new course, *The House*.

Féral clarifies the process at play in performative practice: 'In terms of the artist's relation to his [sic] own performance, that is not that of an actor to his role. Instead the artist is 'a source of production and displacement' [26].

Focusing on the woman at the window and on the unfolding of her pivotal present, de facto erased the need to refer to whatever happened in the real place. Instead, it displaced that very question towards the fictional world as a 'what had happened to her?' Freedom from expression meant a greater attention to the visual qualities of the text, and relying on intuition to hint at underlying meanings.

Joe Kessler, publisher of Breakdown Press and author of the Windowpane series emphasizes the little role played by reference to real-world situations.

'I play a lot of sports –and there's a joy that I feel that comes across, the experience of galloping around. Otherwise, there's not much stuff directly feeding into my work, or not necessarily consciously… I don't think too much of realism, I just look whether it flows well on the page, and where it does come from, comes in hindsight.' [27]

Surrendering to the Agency of the Format

Against the discursive urge, the agency of the format. Most illustrators appreciate the manipulation and testing that comes with it, and the accidents that potentially disrupt, and enrich meaning and narratives. [28]

For Vincent Fritz,

'the format sets the limits, and basically edits the content by design. Narration/story is not the end goal, as opposed to simply committing to an exercise in comic composition and seeing what comes of it'. He continues, evoking the process of creating his Tower series: 'Typically, it is the "tower" format, four square panels juxtaposed vertically. From there it is a matter of rummaging through scraps of sketches and notes, and then testing spatial/rhythmic properties, (…). Even outside of the "tower" format, the aforementioned components remain the backbone of most projects I work on, but form itself (strip/page design) is more often than not the North Star.' [29]

The House's visual utterances, as an endogenic process, had to give space for a narrative closure. The units-drawings were juxtaposed and sequenced so as to simulate the reading of a book. The coherence of the space and of the visual language offered rhyming clues with which to establish rules and motifs. Reusing earlier patterns and compositions allowed for pace and visual cohesion.

'Reoccurring character designs are often cited over and over again - mostly as an easy way to unlock, or construct ideas', explains Fritz, whose satirical work relies on repetitions and variations. 'Mystery, geometry, cultural affinities and detritus, comics history, personal preferences, media noise, silence/tranquillity, optimistic nihilism - those are some of the things I think I tend to refer to more than anything' [29]. The 'citational', self-referent aspect of his practice allows him to build a layered yet coherent universe, whilst a cohesive, intertextual set of references reinforces his identity as an author, grounding his presence and the tone of his texts into established centres of culture.

Authorship
My drawings, as standalones or in sequences, had been regularly presented to my peers in order to hear what they received from such reading, so as to access another text – this one verbal, that of the reader. Interpretations went often wilder than my own, and at every turn I did appropriate suggestions and ideas. The final, visual text benefitted as much from conversations as it had from the haphazard accidents of the enunciation, the sequencing and the formatting – disruptions meant to reveal and enrich an otherwise faint inner text.

This attempt to circumvent the dominance of the author, the clarity of his intentions, and to probe the necessity of his figure by negotiating accidents and displacements, is found in instances of collaborative writing such as the tensed *Brace Brace* of Alizée de Pin:
'We wanted to work on the theme of urgency, and we wanted to mix, on all pages, our three specific iconographies. We defined a process where each of us would produce 2 full page images, 5 or 6 fragments and a few graphic signs, which we ultimately arranged together on Indesign before printing.' [19]

Searching for enrichment in others' interpretations and disruptions is essentially a way to test the auteurist notion of the author as a single, static source of the text - but this took place, in the case of *The House*, in a meek, measured way, that kept all the final decision-making close to my chest. This was perhaps, in retrospect, a sort of passive authoring, with my main contribution being the triggering of internal and external inputs, and the subsequent editing.

Indeed, not all enjoy the potential of others' infringement, and prefer to work 'without oversight from anyone else; the process is long and not efficient because you work alone. It's very self-indulgent.' [27]

This reflects the ambivalent attitude of zine and comics writers towards authorship; which perhaps mirrors the tension between the self-representation – driven by a fiercely individual, authorial stance – and the representation of a group which, as a fringe movement, take authorship as one area of mainstream practices that needs to be challenged.

Response to Responses

Making *The House* was very much a rite of passage, the proof that I was able to produce original images within a scene that valued edgy, trendy, fringe content - being a consumer was not enough! I had to produce the things I loved, and my visual choices were influenced by the return of the hand-made visible on Instagram, and inspired by minimalist, experimental fictions like *Windowpane 3* [30] that I bought in zine fairs. I did focus on exploring new ways of building a narrative, but my format of choice, a wordless picture book, was similarly spurred by the micro-published *Queen of Spades* [31].

Joe Kessler acknowledges the importance of community and cross influences:

'This is all a massive social thing - my main social group is people who make comics, which legitimise my obsession with the genre. (…) Some of my works are in conversation with other comics, responses to other artists that I like, and who do the opposite of what I do. I developed a looseness in response to Chris Ware, who is very disciplined. Recently, a lot of things out there engage with feelings, and people make comics out of that – but it feels like sneaking on someone's private diary. I try instead to keep comics fictional while making things a bit more intimate' [27]

The 'nervous' nature of this writing process relies on 'constituting knowledge in an on-going process of transmission and transferal', giving birth to new meanings and discourses, 'a sequence in which each successive text integrates or destroys the text which went before.' [20]

All throughout production, I was also posting images online, receiving feedback, or discussing the project with other makers/publishers. Through participating in the game, I was learning its rules and making connections.

Conclusion

In conclusion, performative authorship is at the centre of the self and micro-publishing community, as a dynamic and essential force in both production of texts and construction of identities. The performative aspect of creation within the production process is an essential part of the performative process of joining and being part of a vanguard community. This process is visual, intuitive and critical, and engages audience and peers in an iterative process that is also self-reflective.

There is indeed an unresolved but productive tension between the romantic notion of individual creation and the potential offered by an emerging, different, fluid authoring.
In fine, it seems that zines and experimental comics authors have found ways to reconcile the establishment of their identities as recognisable authors, and the exploration of the possibilities offered by the displacement and disruptions of the author's function.

Far from the set framework of traditional illustration that ties illustrative practices to the illumination of a given text, these authors exploit a variety of circumstances, contexts and motives for writing so as to produce 'different' texts, probing, expanding what can be conveyed and how. Performative authorship, as explored by the self and micro-publishing scene, is a celebration of illustration's potential and offers exciting authorial practices to the wider illustrative community.

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