

Artist and researcher Ilan Manouach invites futurist, fintech entrepreneur and comics artist Lex Sokolin for a conversation about the upcoming paradigm shifts that will shape the comics industry in the future.

WHAT ARE THE FUTURES OF COMICS?

HOW THE NICHE STORYTELLING MEDIUM SHOWS THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

By Ilan Manouach & Lex Sokolin



Compared to most sectors of the entertainment industry, comics as a form of artistic expression depends on very little for its production. Indeed, posting one's own 'relatable comics' online, setting up a mail-order for a serialised zine, or printing one's own graphic novel on a print-on-demand basis sets the entry barrier low compared to other visual arts. Therefore, it is natural that for a few artists, comics can be a Petri dish of experiments and a safe playground in which one can explore the ways artistic practices and experiences are shaped by the ongoing mutations of the increasingly technological, financialised, global production flows.

Recently, an international class of little-known comics artists and collectives have been pushing the medium to uncharted territories. They are a socio-demographically diverse class of practitioners located far from the global epicentres of comic book production. Counter to their colleagues, they are interested in contemporary art and feel comfortable with tools and knowledge(s) coming from postcolonial critique, gender studies, epistemic accelerationism, and financial technologies. Their works are located at the crossroads of different media, practices, and sensibilities beyond disciplinary, formal and compartmental media terminology. Their goal is to reinvent comics as an industrial form of experimentation, outside the traditional scope of regular literary and artistic practices involving text and images. Such characters provide the inspiration for the following exchange between artist and comics researcher Ilan Manouach and futurist, fintech entrepreneur and comics artist Lex Sokolin.

COMICS AND BOTS

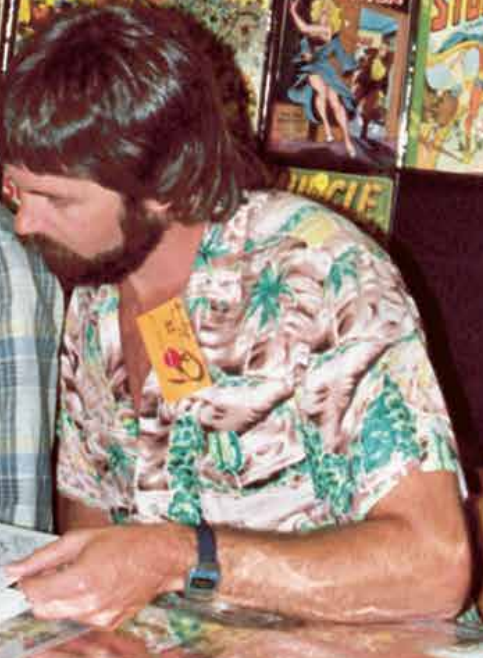
Ilan Manouach: Digital labour markets leverage the abilities of an unprecedented number of people via the web to perform complex computation. These *microworkers* search, select, and complete a variety of small units of works in a virtual assembly line designed by third party contractors looking for a freelance, flexible, and often unskilled labour force. Often, these tasks require human intelligence for which no efficient algorithm has yet been devised. Microworkers find themselves in an important moment in the history of labour; a stepping-

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stone to Artificial General Intelligence's exponential acceleration of technology that promises a new era in social and economic abundance. Microwork relies on distributed (human) deployment, BRICS-outsourced, platform-mediated, zero-hour contract regime with all the perks of minimal transactional frictions and absolute circumvention of applicable minimum wage laws. It is a *cheap AI*, which has been dubbed *Artificial Artificial Intelligence* (AAI). Now, some of these Microworkers are programmers. They program bots that are made to scan the cheaply secured labour platforms and perform tasks such as image classification, database aggregation, massive registrations, massive sign-ups, and of course, a galore of likes-follows-and-shares. *They simulate human Microworkers, themselves simulating AI.* Microworkers call them *blind hunters*. They carry a weapon that can only kill a single species in a vast ecosystem. Their chances of succeeding are meagre. Instead of flagging and blacklisting their ill-targeted, semi-inspired spam, they could author a comic book produced through the orchestrated labour of hundreds of globally distributed unskilled art workers that occupies a semantic textual field of what seems to be *Artificial Artificial Artificial Intelligence* (AAAI).

Lex Sokolin: When you apply the idea of artificial intelligence 'upskilling' workers to the arts, the result is truly bizarre. Where does authorship reside? In the case of AI trained on a large set of visual imagery, it resides in the twilight of mathematics and the underlying dataset selection. GANs [Generative Adversarial Networks; where two neural networks generate content by competing in a game, ed.] hallucinate things in a space defined by human potential, even if the journey across the latent space is unusual to us. But to give human workers instruction on the repetitive robot tasks of finding collage bits for the GAN to put together – this is truly unnerving. We quickly could get to a place where the AI is better at both the aesthetic and emotional result, if human judgment or emotional feedback are inputs into its collection. We still retain our creative capacity for context switching, moving from the Renaissance to Parametric Art, for example. But there are plenty of novelty seeking algorithms that could be pointed at the arts, at comic storytelling, at finding humour and surprise as we define it. Worst of all, we might be very happy doing these micro tasks if they are framed as pursuing the beautiful sublime at the behest of an AI.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

Lex Sokolin: As machine learning develops further, people come to expect hyper-personalised experiences across all their platforms. Increasingly, entertainment and media can extract insights – like emotion, political leanings, earning power, health, and fitness – from individual data. Comics have always been a medium for the niche, and the next step from manufacturing a generic mainstream through Blockbuster movies is to build mass-customised graphic narratives for local populations. With the cost of flexible displays going to zero, comic books are becoming made from screens them-

selves, in whole or in part. Each one comes embedded with tiny Amazon-built cameras, which inform the book of the reader's predispositions and manufacture a rendered comic story in real time that fits the personality of the reader. This atomisation creates meaningful reconciliation issues for creative corporations, who must staff up with thousands of human writers to generate all potential universes of storytelling to train the machine. Eventually, comics' micro preferences become one the most valuable sources of personal emotional data, similar to the decision choices video game characters undergo in role playing games.

ECHO CHAMBER'S 'CURATED DECAY'

Ilan Manouach: As the market for vintage and rare comics reaches astronomical prices, comics collectordom has its own mechanisms to assess the condition and value of a print. An entire industry-specific dictionary was put in place in order to mitigate the risks of investment. One can find a rich jargon of terms such as 'deacidification', 'oxidation shadow' and 'quinone stains'. Every wear and tear mark has a name. Every name reflects practices of mishandling. Every name represents a tangible asset liability. For comics collectors, whatever is outside a heavy duty 4-mil acid-free Mylar sleeve is as good as dead. All this changed when Echo Chamber, a small organisation based in Brussels, decided to address deterioration not as a logistical problem, but as an opportunity. The organisation's *Curated Decay* portfolio targets wealthy collectors and offers a variety of derivatives for those that are willing to entrust them their valuable possessions. Their underlying business idea is that decay, an inevitable fate for paper products, can be programmed, even artificially accelerated in order to reflect the collector's idiosyncrasy and ultimately contribute in raising the price of the item. Some of their previous commissions include cases of expedited disintegration where *Bone's* first issue from a Dutch client was buried along long-term Organic Carbon sequestration in tidal marsh sediments along Scheldt's estuarine salinity gradients in Belgium, or a highly entropic environment where a mint copy of *Tales of Suspense #39* laid in monitored exposure to microbial detriogens and macrofauna such as tubeworms and bivalves in the company's Pacific Lab.

Lex Sokolin: With the explosion of digital content, the materiality of the object on which the content is delivered becomes increasingly important. How do we think differently about a story when that story is told through paper, plastic, TV, iPad, VR, or song? Why is one medium and its physicality worth more than another? Why is licensing and reproduction of content in some cases worth less than the first time that content was generated and put to canvas – consider an original Picasso, or Jack Kirby's sketches. There are several potential answers. First, the physical object has a quality of time to it, demarcating where it stands sequentially to other discoveries. Originality and speed matter. Second, physical objects hit other senses than just the visual. We remember our childhood

"As the market for vintage and rare comics reaches astronomical prices, comics collectordom has its own mechanisms to assess the condition and value of a print"

through the texture of book covers and smell of new comics. Last, the object has a uniqueness, creating scarcity and commercial value through supply and demand. Perhaps future generations will find blockchain-based authenticity and iPad animations to hold the same nostalgia.

AUGMENTING THE VISUALS

Lex Sokolin: Part of the appeal of comics is the independent press, which has led to the decentralisation of storytelling and publishing. In response to the over-produced comic creations in the mainstream, individual creators have started using augmented reality to graffiti 3D-rendered stories across abandoned environments, combining elements of '80s counterculture, Pokémon Go, and Ready Player One. As AR and VR hardware becomes more powerful, young people begin to tag locations the way artists used to tag subway cars. The stories are digital and interactive, built out of the comic medium but leveraging modern technology to generate cutting edge appeal. Some of these comic programmes are time-bounded, communicating political messages like those of the Hong Kong protests or anti-Trump sentiments. Others involve authentic crypto collectible characters and objects or turn into interactive games.

Ilan Manouach: New technological affordances, such as geolocation, AR gear, and biometric devices, could allow designers of digital comics to monitor user access in order to enhance participatory identification. Some of these new works could be explored only in specific GPS coordinates (a comics story that helps the reader locate an illegal rave party), or in specific moments (a traditional storytelling from the Toro tradition that can be read only the day of the coronation of Rukidi's successor in modern Uganda) or under specific mental states (an app that unlocks graphic narrative content when readers demonstrate acute theta brainwave activity occurring only in states of deep meditation or profound sleep).

COMICS AND DEEP LEARNING

Ilan Manouach: Some of the most creative bits of comics art are happening today at the junctions between technologies and different professional disciplines, some of which are artistic. Applied Memetic is a small start-up based in London. It has the mission to produce the first graphic novel entirely made with AI. The organisation examines the different moments in history when technological innovations disrupted the art market, redefined the work and ethics of artists, and re-addressed art's political role in the sphere of the commons. Their research culminates in the recent advances in machine learning and especially deep neural networks and synthetic media content such as GANs and deep fakes. These technologies weaponise user creativity and allow for an unprecedented degree of authenticity and realism. In addition to that, a) the online abundance of digitised media content awaiting to be harvested, b) the convenience of programming language frameworks and machine

learning libraries, c) the secularisation of knowledge through e-learning and d) the plummeting prices in specialised hardware, are certainly going to put online vernacular expression in 'hyperdrive mode'. Applied Memetic's bet is that it's rational to expect that machine learning will ultimately contribute in reshaping comics and their readership(s), market(s), reader's sensibility, and practitioners' artistic ethos.

SMOOTHING OUT THE WRITERS

Lex Sokolin: As superheroes have become mainstream, one attribute that has become exposed is that different writers have different takes on the same personality. While this may work as a way for writers to differentiate against the industry, now billions in revenue are at stake. As a result, AI combining image recognition and natural language processing can become trained on the full dataset of superhero stories. The result will be a manufactured mythology and personality for each culturally notable character and their parable, defined and policed by software. The algorithm can then be extracted and instantiated as a hyper-realistic avatar on social media. These avatars would be blockchain-anchored for authenticity, such that the seal of authenticity becomes equivalent to a legal license around all derivative content created by the account. With increasing social interaction on media platforms directly with fans, the avatars become examples of massive, community taught software. They are then channelled back into traditional media".

Ilan Manouach: Mainstream comics production has always been riddled with conflicting personal interests and ambitions of several operators distributed throughout the chain of signification-production. Additionally, the comics market is in the centre of a very competitive entertainment industry where customers increasingly expect a personalised, interconnected experience across a wide number of end-products and channels. The comics industry already depends on a variety of social formats of engagement, through readers' columns, corporate-led fan-clubs, alternative conventions, mimeographed zines, specialised fora, price guides, and academic conferences. Readers and fans have occupied a constitutive part of the comics industry and their activities opened doorways for the market favouring the emergence of new forms of content. The idea of comics superheroes, developing in an ecosystem of distributed trust undergirded by blockchain technologies, is a very powerful one. One can only think what can happen in one of the most fascinating genres in the world of comics: the D jinshi: An unregulated market of self-published comic book derivatives that develops side-by-side and is competitive to the regular market. D jinshi are products of unauthorised fanfiction where popular comics characters live parallel and quite surprising lives. Which bespectacled white suburban fanboy would accept to carry records for a spin-off of Captain America living a life of an Iraqi teenager exploring her identity and fluid sexuality? ■

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