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STRIPPED TO THE BONE: SEQUENCING QUEERNESS IN THE COMIC STRIP WORK OF JOE BRAINARD AND DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

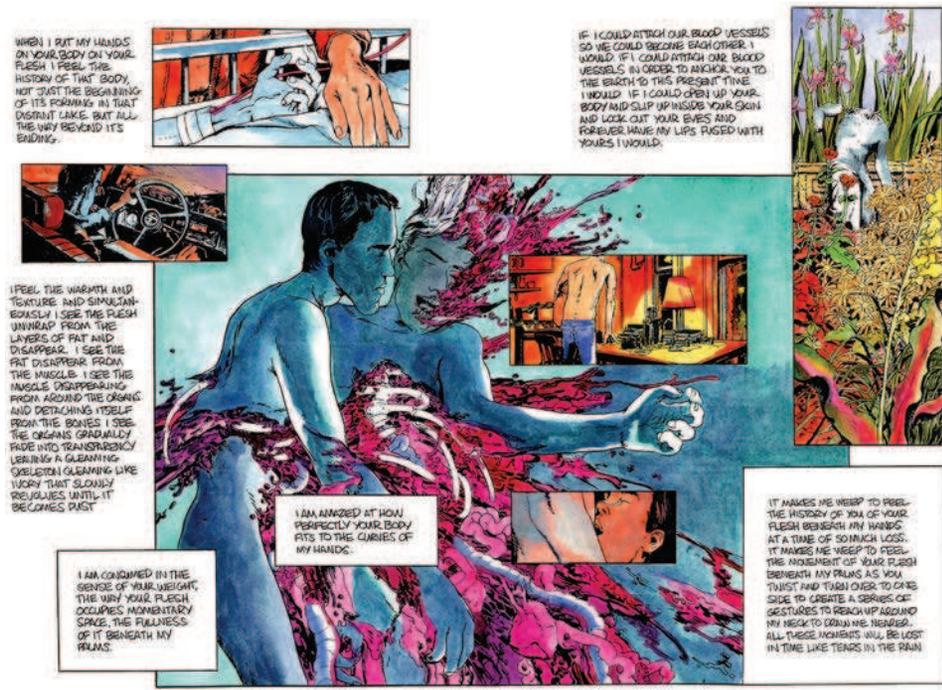


Figure 1. David Wojnarowicz (w), James Romberger (p), Marguerite Van Cook (c), "If I could attach our blood vessels in order to anchor you to the earth to this present time I would," 1996 [©2017]. Courtesy of James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook, and Estate of David Wojnarowicz.

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A visual spectacle: we see a full-color, six-panel panorama in what appears to be a graphic narrative. At the center, in the largest panel, an image of two

men's bodies exploding into one another. Blood, organs, bone shattering outward like a red and blue starburst. Or are the two melding together? Surrounding the scene, smaller panels depict moments of quiet intimacy: a man's hand on the dead body of his friend; a shirtless man making dinner alone; a man's face crying beneath the body of a lover. All presumably are the same man, the artist, writer, and AIDS activist DAVID WOJNAROWICZ (see fig. 1). In this penultimate scene of Wojnarowicz's comic strip memoir, *7 Miles a Second* (1996)—respectively drawn and painted by artists JAMES ROMBERGER and MARGUERITE VAN COOK—Wojnarowicz describes a desire to recuperate a queer intimacy, an impossible closeness to a former lover who has died from complications of AIDS. The narrative accompanying the image reads, "If I could attach our blood vessels in order to anchor you to the earth to this present time I would."¹ This attachment is rendered visually as a literal, and violent, enmeshing of two bodies' blood and guts that figuratively echoes the comic strip medium's often jarring representations of the visual collisions between images and text.

The scene asserts an answer to the question, "What can comics do for queer artists?" Moreover, it asks us to consider what possibilities the comic strip medium offers for representing queerness as an erotic intimacy, a political vision, and a way of life. Earlier in the narrative, Wojnarowicz claims, "I'm a prisoner of language that doesn't have a letter or a sign or gesture that approximates what I'm sensing."² Wojnarowicz's statement speaks to the broader struggle of artists to marshal aesthetic tools for the purpose of articulating the sensate or affective intensities of queer sex in representational forms. In this scene, comic strip form allows an inarticulable *affective intensity*—Wojnarowicz's conflicting feelings of rage and desire amid the chaos of the AIDS epidemic—to be conveyed through *representational density*. The thick agglomeration of a number of individual experiences captured in a frenzy of overlapping panels visually invokes the shared collective intensity of feeling that attends the loss of queer intimacies in the face of AIDS. The most visible organ spilling out of the two men's bodies at the bottom of the page is a human heart, that especially vital muscle carrying the trace of their shared erotic and emotional intimacy, now a line of flight hurtling toward the edge of our perception.

This essay develops a queer theory of comic strip forms that can account for such inventive visual experiments in representing the felt experience of queer sexuality. Such an approach considers not simply how queers and sexual dissidents of all stripes are represented in, or help create, circulate, and consume modern comics—itsself a worthwhile and necessary endeavor—but also how the aesthetic and formal codes of the comics medium lend themselves to creative experiments in theorizing varied understandings of queer or nonnormative sexualities at distinct historical moments. This requires us to ask how the specificities of nonnormative sex and sexuality at particular junctures in the development of contemporary American queer culture collide with and are articulated to the abstract, transhistorical forms that make up the comic strip.³ These forms include sequential organization, the visual framing (or squaring off) of disjointed panels, image-text combinations, and serialized narrative unfolding.

At first glance, any generative relationship between queerness and the comic strip may seem untenable: if queerness can be understood as *formless*—that is, a kind of open-ended social force that captures the vast range of intimacies, attachments, and relationships that break from the linear movement of heteronormativity (with its attendant sequence of monogamy, marriage, and reproduction)—then comic strip form’s seemingly rigid sequential organization and delimited frames arranged into narratives would appear antithetical to the amorphous and malleable qualities of queer sexuality.⁴ Against this perceived dichotomy, I interpret the sequential character of the comic strip medium—its formal organization into series

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of panels arranged in space to denote the movement of time—as a serialized unfolding of indefinite, open-ended possibilities. There is nothing *necessarily* linear, teleological, or goal-oriented about traditional sequential comic strip panels aside from the fact that they unfold one image after another. Certainly, there exist artistic traditions in the comics medium that have established particular organizations of comic strip panels as norms of narrative unfolding; this includes the six-panel sequence organized either in two or three throws as the sine qua non of the comedic gag strip that can be drawn to fit in one page and concludes with a visual punch line. Yet depending on how they are creatively

produced—and subsequently viewed by an individual reader—comic strip sequences can accrue numerous potential starting points, unfold in any visual or conceptual direction, expand to any length and size, and be perceived at multiple scales (from the individual panel, to a full comic strip, to a full-length graphic narrative or series). Seen from this vantage point, the unpredictable procession of sequential panels that constitute any given comic strip is ripe for articulation with queerness as a description of the unpredictability of all forms of sexuality, but most notably those that attach to nonnormative erotics and intimacies. I aim to illuminate how various artists have understood the formal qualities of comic strip sequence, including its serial unfolding and its self-conscious display of visually disjointed panels, as *enabling structures* or shapes that lend themselves to expressing and translating shifting understandings of queer sexuality across time and in different cultural and political contexts.

Toward this end, I explore two innovative uses of comic strip forms by the queer mixed-media artists Joe Brainard and David Wojnarowicz. Both artists were New York residents of lower Manhattan at key moments in the development of contemporary U.S. queer culture—gay liberation and the AIDS crisis respectively—and each persistently showed artistic affinity with the comics medium throughout their short-lived but prodigious careers in the 1970s and 1980s. Both artists made their own comic strips (whether hand drawn or produced out of mixed-media materials); both used comic strip materials cut out from newspaper and bound comic books in their collage and assemblage work; and both deployed some of the central formal elements of sequential comics—including seriality, visually disjointed panels, and the combination of text and image—across the range of their painting, collage, and mixed-media installations.

In the early 1970s, Brainard adopted the classic comic strip character Nancy in a series of over one hundred paper works collectively titled “If Nancy Was. . . .”⁵ Using a variety of materials including pen and ink, collage, colored pencil, gouache, and everyday materials such as Kleenex and stamps, Brainard depicted Nancy inhabiting numerous alternative sexual and social positions (as transgender, high on drugs, engaging in anal sex, acting in a porn movie, and much more). Through these imaginative permutations, Brainard used the serialized character of sequential comics to depict sexuality as a seemingly endless array of unpredictable installments. This practice gave material form to early gay liberation views of sexuality as a playful and open-ended performance of unfolding

erotic possibilities that worked against the consolidation of a unified gay identity. Little more than a decade later, in David Wojnarowicz's graphic memoir *Miles a Second* (1988–93 [published 1996]), the artist and his collaborators James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook used the visual disjoint between comic strip panels formally to dramatize the experience of social alienation and physical pain associated with being a queer person with AIDS. Their techniques included altering the visual orientation of panels across the page (with some panels diagonally bisecting, or stretching out across, entire pages) and vastly expanding the size of panels to symbolically capture the disorienting emotional intensities that accompanied the loss of loved ones and the violence of government neglect in the face of AIDS.⁶ Respectively, each of these works was produced at a historical moment when the definition, meaning, and enactment of queer sexuality in the United States was in flux, and each roughly coincides with widespread acclaim for, and critical reception of, these creators as gay or queer artists.

As artists who never *set out* to be distinctly gay comics creators, however, they nonetheless engaged queerly with the medium as much through formal innovation in the comic strip as through actual visual representations of LGBT identity, sex, and sociality. Ironically, Brainard's and Wojnarowicz's most prolific engagements with the comics medium occurred during a creative renaissance in countercultural and avant-garde comics production in the United States. A number of scholars have shown how independent comics in the 1970s and 1980s, including *Underground*, *Wimmen's*, and *Gay Comix*, took advantage of the medium's social marginalization as trash culture to express radical political views and fantasies of sexual liberation that would have been more readily censored or condemned in more "respectable" popular mediums of the time.⁷ I want to suggest that Brainard's and Wojnarowicz's peripheral relation to these countercultural and independent comics endeavors allows us to see something more broadly compelling about the comic strip medium than its mere social marginalization as a disposable

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The fact that the work of these artists could appear so stylistically different yet tackle similar conceptual questions in the same medium suggests the formal elasticity and productivity of the comic strip for queer artists. We might call this quality the medium's queer generosity.

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art predictably taken up by those who inhabit marginalized or oppressed social identities. The fact that the work of these artists could appear so stylistically different yet tackle similar conceptual questions in the same medium suggests the formal elasticity and productivity of the comic strip for queer artists. We might call this quality the medium's *queer generosity*: for Brainard and Wojnarowicz, the comic strip was one place where the seemingly isolating experience of queer sexuality—its irreducible distinctness alongside its perceived stigma—could be made spectacularly visible, not once but *over and over* in seemingly endless permutations, so that it might become an aggregate experience hailing countless queers who together made up something like a culture and a social force. A queer sequence if there ever was one.

“IF NANCY WAS . . .”

Between 1972–75, painter and poet Joe Brainard visually adopted the classic American comic strip character Nancy in a series of single-panel, paper works that functioned as enlarged comic strip frames.⁸ In these panels—each slightly larger than a letter-sized sheet of paper—Brainard depicts Nancy inhabiting myriad scenarios, shapes, materials, and aesthetic mediums. These visual permutations compelled viewers to imagine a seemingly immutable American comics icon as a potentially queer icon performing multiple nonsynchronous identities. Created by comics artist Ernie Bushmiller in 1933, Nancy headlined her own comic strip daily for more than five decades. In Bushmiller's world, she is depicted as a sly trickster figure who perpetually breaks rules, causes minor catastrophes, and pulls clever pranks on neighbors and friends. Drawn as a highly simplified caricature of a plump, homely young girl with a round, prickly mop of hair, a nondescript school-girl's uniform, and a flat nose and mouth, Nancy was at once eminently generic and utterly iconic.⁹

In his loving, and often perverse, appropriations, Brainard exploited certain generic qualities of Nancy's character—including her butch gender presentation, her mischievous pleasure in upsetting normative gender roles, and even her name, which referenced a classic epithet for an effeminate man, the “nancy,” “pansy,” or “nelly” boy—to show how they surprisingly magnetized elements of queer sexuality.¹⁰ Almost every image in the series is accompanied by a caption that begins with the words “If Nancy Was . . .” followed by a description of each permutation of Nancy's form. Consequently, in each entry, “If Nancy

Was . . .” functions as a counterfactual conditional statement, or a phrase that invites one to conceive, even if only hypothetically, what Nancy would or could be under other circumstances. The multiplicity of contexts and materials into which Nancy’s seemingly stable drawn form could be inserted, alongside the repeated, yet indefinitely open-ended phrase “If Nancy Was . . . ,” suggested the capacity of a serialized sequence of individual paper works to inhabit comic strip form for the purpose of articulating something queer not only about Nancy herself, but also about the comics medium as one that invites the play of multiplicitous desires, fantasies, and erotic identifications.

The mobility of potential queer pleasures and desires is particularly apparent in those entries in the series that explicitly reference queer sexuality and erotics, including “If Nancy Was a Boy,” “If Nancy Was a Sailor’s Basket,” and “If Nancy Knew What Wearing Green and Yellow on a Thursday Meant.” These three works, all completed in 1972, produce a powerful and erotically charged associational sequence that links various forms of queerness (gender nonnormativity and gay desire) to Nancy’s drawn figure; in turn, they collectively provide an optic or way of seeing all other images in the series as laden with erotic investments and possibilities, even when sex, gender, and sexuality are not explicitly referenced.

In “If Nancy Was a Boy,” Nancy appears at the center of the page lifting her skirt to reveal male genitalia (see fig. 2).¹¹ Brainard draws Nancy with her characteristic, generic smile as she playfully displays her body to the reader. Below

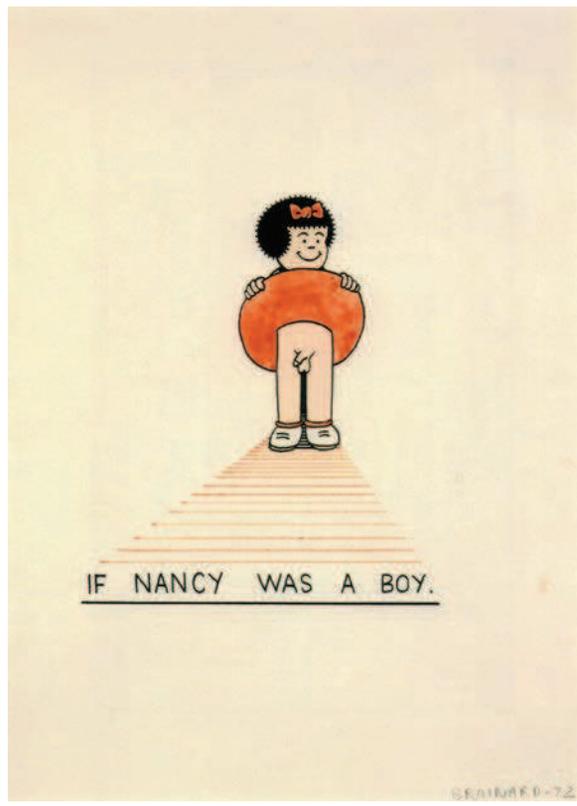


Figure 2.
Joe Brainard, “If Nancy Was a Boy,” 1972. Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, Ron Padgett, and the Colby College Museum of Art.

her exposed figure are the words “If Nancy Was a Boy.” A series of receding red lines connects this sentence to Nancy’s feet, as though to indicate where our eyes should move, up from the statement toward its final materialization in Nancy’s “male” form. The image surprises and titillates on multiple levels: first is the simple shocking bodily exposure of a mass-cultural figure traditionally thought of as lacking any identifying human physiology or sexuality. Here, Brainard grants Nancy a gendered body—but one opposite to our expectations—thereby rendering her accessible to a range of possible erotic and embodied desires. These might include the wish to be more than one gender, to present as female despite having male genitalia, or to occlude one’s femaleness altogether. By lifting her skirt, Nancy covers over what might be her breasts, so that any other physiological markers of gender are explicitly masked.

Second, Nancy’s wistful smile, traditionally representing her generic mischievous (even sadistic) pleasure in one gag or another, now comes to have specificity in relation to this surprising revelation: Nancy seems eminently pleased with her exposure. Brainard suggests that Nancy could have unpredictable and queer desires of her own, imbuing her not only with a gendered body but with a psychology of desire as well. Finally, the perspectival lines that recede toward Nancy’s lower half almost demand that we look at her exposed penis, drawn as a simple icon with no adornment. Here, Brainard’s own pleasures register on the page: his long history of drawing the male form, and of desiring men’s bodies in his own sexual life, are present before us in the fetish of the phallus. Brainard could have easily drawn Nancy with boy’s clothing; the choice to render “boy” as an index of biologically male genitalia not only directly references potential gay male desire, but also figuratively plays on the idea that a “nancy” or effeminate man is really a boy in girl’s clothing.

The image thus proliferates queer desire and pleasure across at least three locations: first, in the artist who imaginatively articulates Nancy in a range of queer fantasies, scenarios, and imagery; second, in the viewer who takes pleasure in Nancy’s various iterations and projects their own desires onto each of her queer performances; and finally, in Nancy herself, an icon who is not only placed into a variety of queer positions, but also seems to contain qualities that resonate with those positions, such as gender mutability and exhibitionism. Yet because the scene is presented with no context outside of the immediate frame, it is impossible to pin down or locate any singular expression of queerness—as gay, lesbian,

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or transgender identity—in the artist, the icon, or the viewer. For instance, on the basis of the single image “If Nancy Was a Boy . . .,” we could not prove that the artist is unequivocally “gay”; similarly, we could not say that Nancy is necessarily (or only) transgender, since the mere fact of her having a penis could have countless meanings including, but not limited to, transgender embodiment. In each image Brainard unfolds, desire instead becomes a moving target, both within the confines of a single page and across multiple, serialized pages in a sequence.¹²

The work of “If Nancy Was a Boy” in expanding the locations of queer desire becomes more apparent as a broader conceptual project of the series when placed in relation to other works that explicitly reference nonnormative sexuality. In “If Nancy Was a Sailor’s Basket,” the central image is



Figure 3. Joe Brainard, “If Nancy Was a Sailor’s Basket,” 1972. Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, Ron Padgett, and the Colby College of Museum of Art.

a cropped photograph or magazine image of an American sailor carrying his cap; a small drawing of Nancy smiling and waving is collaged on the sailor's crotch (see fig. 3).¹³

The image creates an association with "If Nancy Was a Boy" by visually and discursively referencing the phallus, but it appears as an alternative sequential possibility: in the first image, Nancy has a penis, while in the next image, she stands in for one. The potential pleasures and meanings of the scene abound. The picture of the sailor may very well come from a generic photo or periodical, yet it also makes reference to gay men's erotic magazines and the gay fetishization of the sailor as a sexual icon in the post-WWII period. And yet, Nancy's smiling visage both points us to the sailor's penis while obfuscating our access to it. Such subtle play on the visibility and invisibility of the "basket" in question opens up the possibility of numerous desiring positions for the viewer: the image might suggest the wish to be physically proximate to a sailor's basket (which could be both a gay or straight desire); alternatively, it could imply the

desire to *be* a sailor's basket (either in the sense of taking the place of his penis or, perhaps more uncomfortably, performing "the basket" sexual position, in which case Nancy would be the sailor's sexual object as a figure lowering herself onto his penis); or, perhaps, it merely pokes fun at the sailor's masculinity by suggesting that his basket is really just a fictional girl.

In such images the phallus—in the form of an actual drawn penis or a euphemistic "basket"—magnetizes various queer pleasures and desires without reducing them to a single gay male identity. Alternatively, in "If Nancy Knew What Wearing Green and Yellow on a Thursday Meant," queerness becomes unhinged from any given sexual organ and instead attaches to specific attire (see fig. 4).¹⁴ The image is based on the assumption that

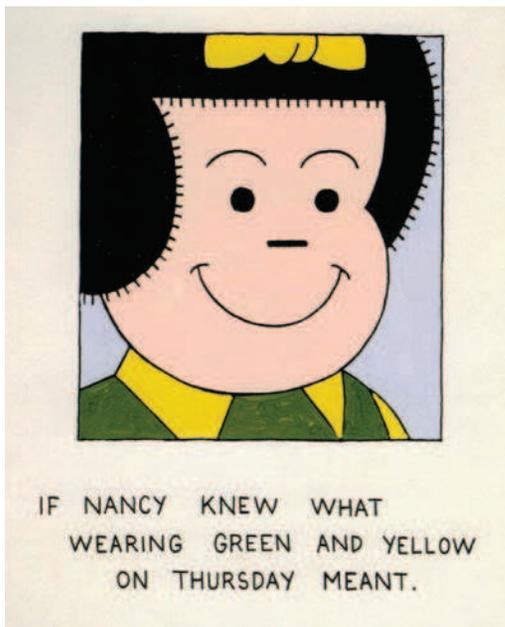


Figure 4.

Joe Brainard, "If Nancy Knew What Wearing Green and Yellow on a Thursday Meant," 1972. Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, Ron Padgett, and the Colby College of Museum of Art.

Nancy knows that wearing green and yellow on a Thursday means being gay—which was a bit of 1950s folklore used to identify potential “queers”—while her smile implies a mischievous pleasure in that knowledge, which may or may not be shared with a given viewer. In using a seemingly anachronistic reference, however, Brainard makes queerness available to different generations of potential viewers in the 1970s and after. For some, the reference might resonate as a childhood memory of the ways that gayness was policed and circumscribed in the 1950s; for so-called “liberated youth,” it might appear as a mysterious reference to something illicit about Nancy and her desires that is worth uncovering or inhabiting (after all, *she* seems to enjoy wearing green and yellow on a perpetual Thursday). The specificity of one kind of experience of gayness—Brainard’s childhood memories of learning how others jokingly identified and stigmatized presumed homosexuality—becomes available for multiple meanings across sexualities, genders, *and* generations. Here, Nancy also seems to be dressed as a boy, in a way denied to her in “If Nancy Was a Boy.” The boyish quality of Nancy’s attire, then, potentially associates her with butch lesbian identity (though also female masculinity more broadly), even as the implication of her color scheme points to *any* gay identity.

In these preceding instances, the construction “If Nancy Was . . .” presents a nonessentialist view of gender and sexual identity as something that can be “anything”: in various images Nancy is both male and female (or neither), both subject and object, both desired and desiring. In her essay “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” Sarah Ahmed suggests how this multiplication of queer subject positions might elicit a generous or welcoming stance toward moments of gender and sexual disorientation: “For me, the important task is . . . asking what our orientation towards queer moments of deviation will be. If the object slips away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, out of place, what will we do? . . . A queer phenomenology would involve an orientation toward queer, a way to inhabit the world that gives ‘support’ to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place.”¹⁵ Every iteration of Nancy in Brainard’s series represents an object—Nancy herself—that is “inverted, odd, strange, out of place.” And every subsequent entry encourages us to respond to such moments by demanding *more* permutations so that sequential form itself, far from producing a linear or teleological movement to “straighten” or discipline “queer moments of deviation,” fulfills a wish to extend them indefinitely. Brainard conceives of sequential panels, then, not

as mere flat repetitions or attempts to reproduce a gendered, sexual, or formal ideal, but as imaginative opportunities to perform, inhabit, or depict gender and sexuality differently, and nearly always with a smile.

Such multiplicitous inhabitations similarly extend to the range of physical materials Brainard uses in different entries. In “If Nancy Was Just a Used Kleenex,” Nancy’s smiling face is burned into a dirty, crumpled Kleenex tissue.¹⁶ Kleenex’s multiple associations with bodily fluid—its use absorbing tears and mucus as well as cleaning up men’s (or anyone’s) ejaculate—render Nancy a porous surface for numerous bodily emissions and sensations. By presenting Nancy as materializing out of this throwaway fiber, Brainard highlights how even seemingly ephemeral materials are laden with erotic and affective desires (that someone might *need* to reach for a Kleenex after viewing any of the images in “If Nancy Was . . .” also implies some of the possible embodied effect of its visual—and *symbolically* masturbatory—pleasures).¹⁷

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By making queerness mobile in this way, Brainard defies any immediate political narrative of gay identity, whether as a program for securing gay civil liberties or as an injunction to “come out of the closet.” The politics of the series lies instead in its form, namely the visual unfolding of its unexpected sequential panels, which structurally model the associational, freewheeling play of queer desire itself. Sexuality doesn’t figure immediately in all the images, and so it can appear fleeting or ephemeral, take on multiple meanings, or linger on from one image to the next. In “If Nancy Was a Building in New York City,” for example, Brainard draws the skyline of Manhattan in a long horizontal frame

that looks like a single comic strip panel (see fig. 5).¹⁸ Nancy's iconic pincushion hair appears as a physical interruption in urban space near the right end of the image. Easily mistaken for a rising sun, Nancy's hair emerges exactly where Brainard would draw the buildings of Manhattan's lower west side, which was coincidentally both his place of residence and the epicenter of the gay liberation movement at the same moment of his serial experiment in 1971 (presciently, the flagship newsletter of gay liberation was called *Gay Sunshine*). In this context, Nancy becomes an ebullient expression of queer difference exploding from the rigidly phallic New York skyline, representing freedom not in any single political program or manifesto, but iconically, as a kind of queer Statue of Liberty.

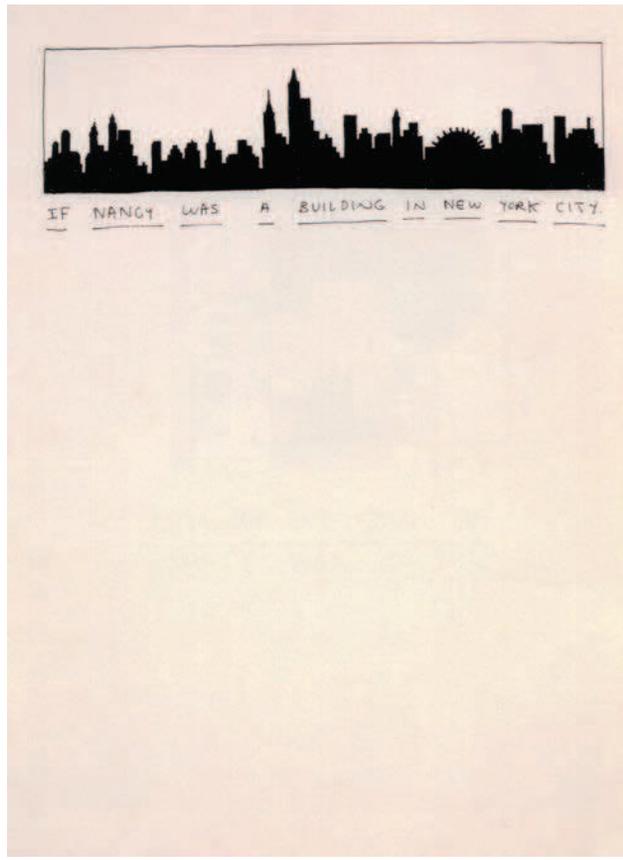


Figure 5. Joe Brainard, "If Nancy Was a Building in New York City," 1972. Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, Ron Padgett, and the Colby College of Museum of Art.

This radiant possibility captured in "If Nancy Was a Building in New York City" is the signal characteristic of the series as a whole: namely, its understanding of the imagination as a distinctly queer force that drives the unfolding of sequential images, rather than any predetermined hierarchy, teleology, or governing order. The very formulation "If Nancy Was . . ." functions as a seductive encouragement to fill in a presumably infinite number of erotic, aesthetic, affective, and conceptual possibilities that might complete the phrase, even if only ever provisionally. The use of the past tense of the verb *to be* in the

construction “If Nancy Was . . .” repeatedly suggests that we might imagine or construct Nancy differently, not merely in the present but also historically, or in the creative past. (In a number of the entries, Nancy infiltrates historically significant artworks, monuments, or aesthetic styles, from Leonardo Da Vinci’s sketchbook to Mount Rushmore.) In “If Nancy Was a Boy,” for instance, the revelation of what is hidden underneath Nancy’s skirt can be understood doubly as a literal exposure of unexpected genitalia and a symbolic exposure of a secret queerness that was, perhaps, always already there from Nancy’s creative inception. The image implies that maybe, just maybe, Nancy *always* had a penis under her skirt all those years we thought she was an ordinary little girl. To believe this is the case requires a leap of the imagination, not only projecting ourselves into the seemingly simplistic comic strip world of *Nancy* (and presumably under the skirt of its title character), but embracing the mutability of gender itself as well.

And in fact, Joe Brainard’s exploration of Nancy’s queer and gender transitive potential in the 1970s anticipates her explicit use as a lesbian and genderqueer icon in the visual advertising of the left-wing political action group Queer Nation in the 1990s (see fig. 6).

To imagine scenarios such as these necessitates the invention of new or alternate sequences that might unfold from the reality of Nancy having always already been a boy, or a ball, or a drawing by Leonardo Da Vinci, or a sexy blonde, or President Lincoln, or an interior decorator, or a sailor’s basket, or a building in New York City. Most telling about the series is the imagination it required for a white gay man from Tulsa, Oklahoma to identify with and inhabit the creative world of a caricatured, sly, 1930s mass-cultural young girl, and then to make her queer potential available for countless viewers

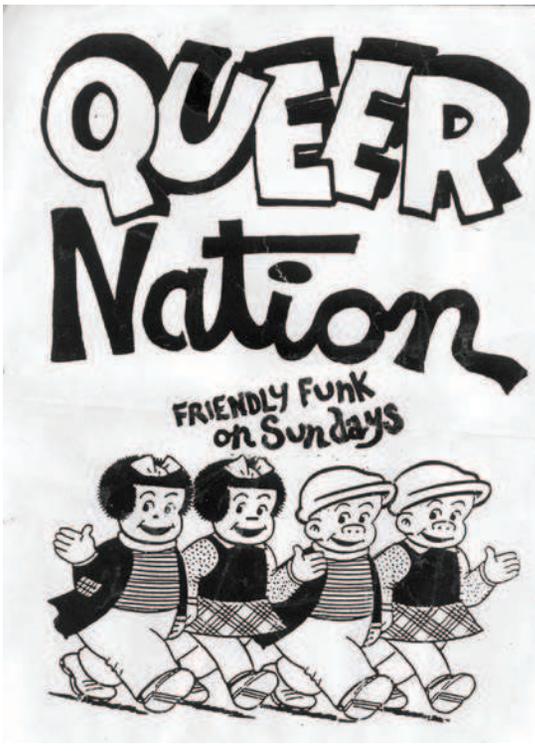


Figure 6. Queer Nation, “Queer Nation Friendly Funk on Sundays,” 1990. Poster for The Gardening Club in Covent Garden (a London-based wing of Queer Nation).

across genders, generations, sexualities, and artistic sensibilities. Taken together, the entries that compose “If Nancy Was . . .” represent a fabulous performance of queer imagination, the creative capacity to conceive of every identity category as a site of “trouble” and pleasure opening out into an indefinite but abundant future of possibilities.

STRIPPED TO THE BONE

In 1988, thirteen years after Brainard concluded “If Nancy Was . . .,” the mixed-media artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz would begin a five-year collaboration with James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook to produce a graphic memoir, *7 Miles a Second*. Completed sequentially in three parts between 1988 and 1993 (and published in 1996 by the Vertigo imprint of DC Comics), the text documents Wojnarowicz’s years as a preadolescent hustler in Manhattan, a homeless teenage runaway, and, finally, an AIDS activist and writer struggling to reconcile his failing health with his passionate desire to combat the murderous impulses of a homophobic culture. Like Brainard, Wojnarowicz and Romberger embraced the potential for associational sequences—sequences organized by affective resonances or shared references between entries rather than any linear narrative—to link the specificities of individual queer desire to broader historical and cultural phenomena. Yet unlike Brainard, these artists understood sequence as a rapidly accumulating series of images whose sheer volume could capture the felt intensity of queerness subjected to the stresses of homophobia, AIDS, poverty, and political neglect. The opening lines of the texts explain that “the minimum speed required to break the earth’s gravitational pull is seven miles a second. Since economic conditions prevent us from gaining access to rockets . . . we would have to learn to run awfully fast to achieve escape from where we are all heading.”¹⁹ Whereas Brainard’s unfolding series figured queerness as a playful energy that could magnetize countless desires across serial images, Wojnarowicz’s memoir depicts queer sexuality as a ferocious velocity attempting to outpace its impending destruction by a biological disease *and* a politically “diseased” society. Throughout the graphic memoir, the narrator consistently impresses upon the reader the necessity of developing physical and cognitive skills to make sense of and counteract the genocidal logics underwriting the AIDS epidemic. One such skill is the creative capacity to develop a range of powerful textual and visual metaphors to describe sexual dissidents’ experience of dislocation from societal norms.

This is vividly captured in the opening spread of the third and longest section of the graphic memoir, eponymously titled “7 Miles a Second.” This section narrates Wojnarowicz’s adulthood as an activist artist in a series of disordered vignettes that function as explosive flashes of traumatic memory, surreal fantasy-scapes, or hallucinations cumulatively reproducing the chaotic affective experience of living through the AIDS epidemic.²⁰ The inaugural sequence is composed of two extra-long rectangular panels layered atop one another that depict Wojnarowicz driving into a generic U.S. western landscape (see fig. 7).

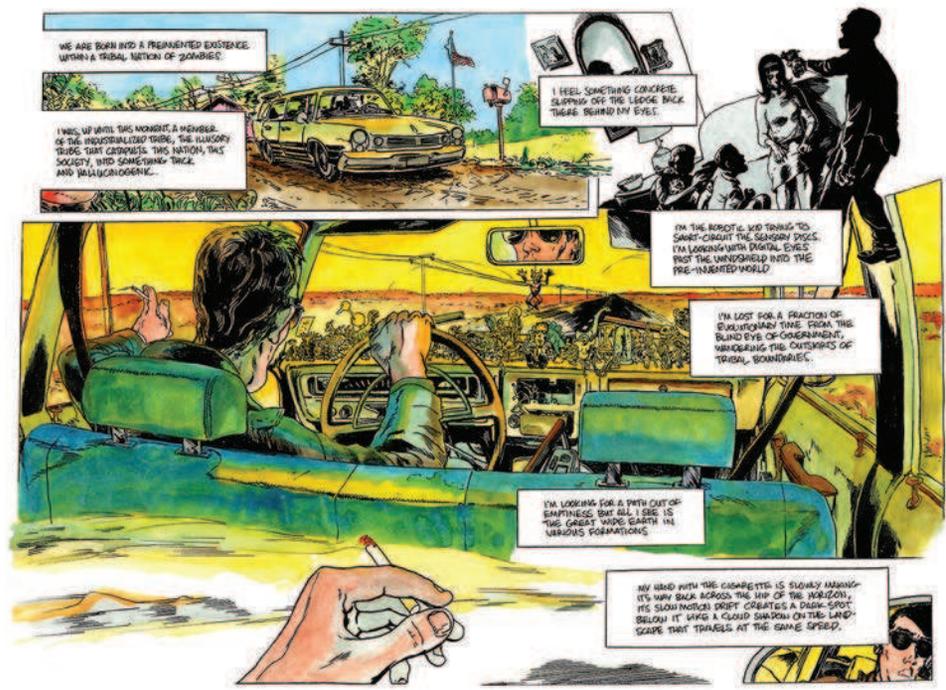


Figure 7. David Wojnarowicz (w), James Romberger (p), Marguerite Van Cook (c), “We are born into a preinvented existence within a tribal nation of zombies,” 1996 [Copyright 2017]. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook.

In the second and largest panel, we see the back of Wojnarowicz’s head to the left, while to the right a long, cluttered dashboard bisects the horizon line overflowing with cultural detritus including Mayan figurines, a Frankenstein doll, a snow globe with Lady Liberty inside, plastic dinosaurs, a Jesus figure, and a Mexican devil doll hanging from the rearview mirror. The dashboard

displays the countless cultural and aesthetic sources Wojnarowicz finds himself drawn to throughout his artistic career—religious, mythological, and fantasy iconography—but it also functions as a screen that partly inhibits his view of the open road. A series of free-floating text boxes circulate around the image, proclaiming,

We are born into a preinvented existence within a tribal nation of zombies. I was up until this moment a member of the industrialized tribe, the illusory tribe that catapults this nation, this society, into something thick and hallucinogenic. I feel something concrete slipping off the ledge back there behind my eyes. . . . I'm looking with digital eyes past the windshield into the pre-invented world. . . . I'm looking for a path out of the emptiness but all I see is the great wide earth in various formations.

At the top right-hand corner of the page, a black and white image depicts a harrowing childhood memory of Wojnarowicz's father pointing a gun at his mother's head in their family living room.²¹ The image extends past the borders of both long rectangular frames, as though it were a monstrous growth expanding outward from the present moment.

In this haunting sequence, Wojnarowicz's dashboard functions as a visual metaphor for a symbolic screen that society constructs between the self and a wider world. What Wojnarowicz calls "a preinvented existence" is the socially constructed package of goods—including monogamy, marriage, the sublimation of desire in consumer culture, reproduction, and the sense of entitled superiority that comes with white, heterosexual, middle-class life—presented to us as part and parcel of being a successful member of a normative society. To this end, the visual screen depicted in the panel includes the vast range of imaginary or "pre-invented" icons appropriated by institutions and structures of power to keep us squarely in our place: Christ figures, devils, statues of liberty and other fantasies of spiritual or national order that tether us to "the industrialized tribe." In the main panorama, Romberger elasticizes a traditional rectangular comic strip panel into an expansive wide-angle shot so that it takes in as much of the pre-invented world as can possibly be captured in a single frame. Concurrently, the artist visually asserts how Wojnarowicz's own childhood failed to accord with this "zombie-like" logic through the shocking image of his father's murderous

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Wojnarowicz’s and Romberger’s graphic work hinges on visually invoking silenced and repressed felt experiences rather than serial possibilities: in 7 Miles a Second, language functions as the site for the accumulation of sensory intensities that are viscerally described yet inadequately captured by words alone.

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matter of survival—while managing their own memories of the numerous ways that same society fails them. Tellingly, this latter image is placed directly underneath the text that reads, “I feel something concrete slipping off the ledge back there behind my eyes.” Wojnarowicz’s memory is the kind of reality that forces a shift, or a “slipping off,” of the pre-invented world. Consequently, his visually symbolic drive into an open field of possibilities grants him the opportunity to see more clearly, though not completely, past the “hallucinogenic” pall of normative society. Using evocative watercolors, Van Cook paints the entire scene, including Wojnarowicz’s tchotchkes and figurines, in hues of yellow, blue, and green so that the interior of the car looks like the watery depths of a lake, suggesting the feeling of drowning while one is in the very process of trying to escape the constraints of one’s society.

In Joe Brainard’s *Nancy* series, language works as site of possibility in the open-ended formulation “If Nancy Was . . . ,” and that potential is then rendered imaginatively in a range of visual scenarios that unfold serially. By contrast, Wojnarowicz’s and Romberger’s graphic work hinges on visually invoking silenced and repressed experiences rather than serial possibilities: in *7 Miles a Second*, language functions as the site for the accumulation of powerful sensory inputs that are viscerally described yet inadequately captured by words alone. Consequently, throughout the graphic narrative, images function as the release or explosion on the comic strip page of already existing but inarticulate somatic intensities.

rage against his own wife and children that hangs in the corner of the spread. The visual eruption of this jarring memory beyond the border of the two main panels suggests how, for the queer subject, such experiences of alienation from heteronormative family life repeatedly interrupt or spill over into the seemingly all-encompassing screen of a “diseased society.” In this instance, comic strip form visually describes the kind of cognitive work queer subjects must engage in order figuratively to widen their view of the social landscape that constitutes heteronormative society—that is, to understand and strategically appropriate its ideologies and icons as a

This tension is spectacularly rendered in a scene where Wojnarowicz imagines himself as a giant tearing down St. Patrick's Cathedral in protest of Cardinal Joseph O'Connor's murderous policies on AIDS (see fig. 8).²² This fantasy image is presented in a massive square frame that takes up two-thirds of a double-page spread, while a long block of text lacking any punctuation appears along the left-hand side of the panel. The text reads as follows:

And I'm carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg and there's a thin line between the inside and the outside a thin line between thought and action . . . and as each t-cell disappears from my body it's replaced by ten pounds of pressure ten pounds of rage. . . . and at the moment I'm a three hundred seventy foot tall eleven hundred thousand pound man inside this six foot frame and all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release.

At first glance, there appears to be symmetry between text and image. The text on the page describes the felt experience of being at odds with the limits

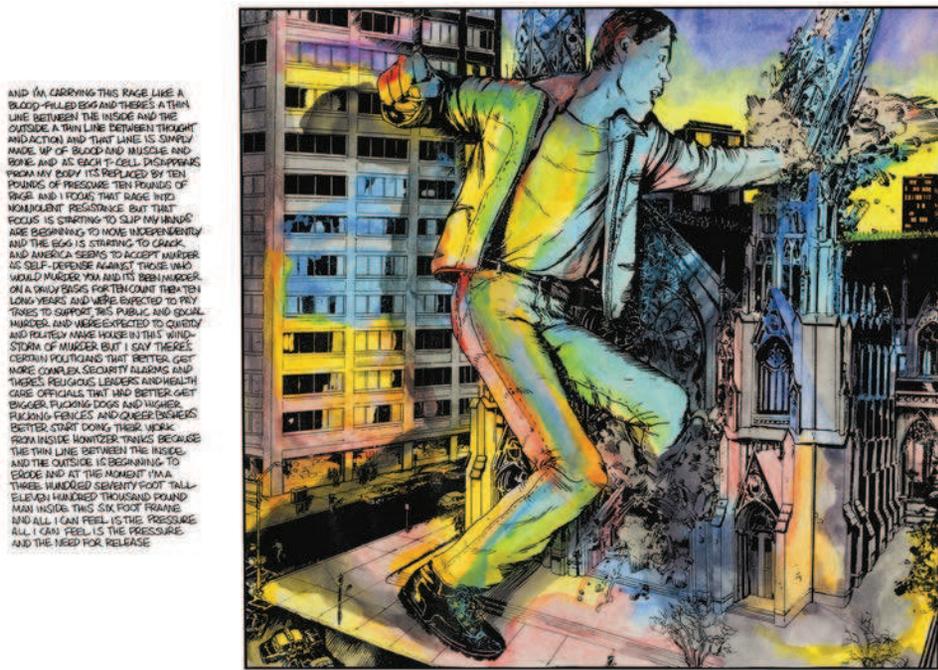


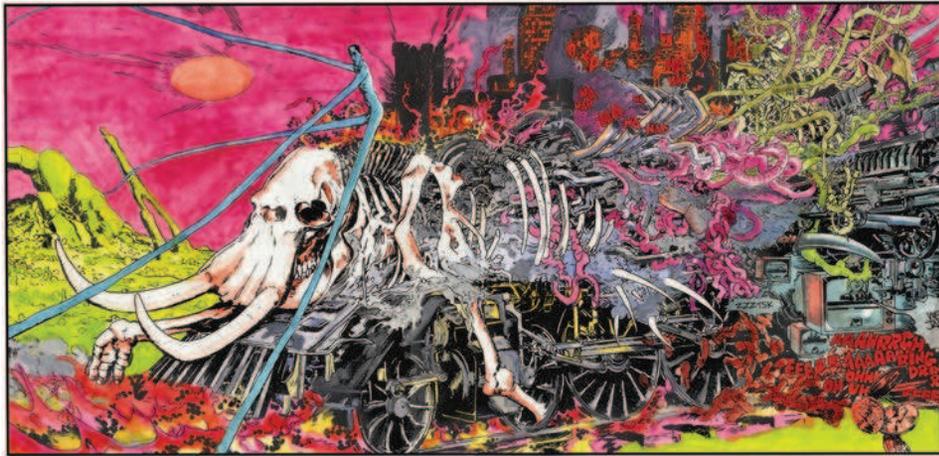
Figure 8. David Wojnarowicz (w), James Romberger (p), Marguerite Van Cook (c), "And I'm carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg," 1996 [Copyright 2017]. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook.

of one's own body, and this precipitates a fantasy of size and power enabling Wojnarowicz to fight the social forces working to oppress and murder people living with AIDS. Yet the radical disjoint between the text—which is set block left, completely unassimilated into the image—and the massive panel that accompanies it reminds us that words, no matter how powerfully crafted, cannot fully convey the intensity of queer feelings produced in response to institutional homophobia. The words drawn on the page accumulate a level of tension so high that they catapult the viewer into a visual spectacle of queer desire, figured as a kind of orgasmic velocity. Theorizing the concept of queer velocity, early modern scholar Jennifer Row claims, “In the realm of physics, velocity is . . . comprised of a magnitude (speed) and a direction. Velocity’s dual figuration thus allows both the temporal rhythms and the directional quality of sexual ‘ends’ to be signaled. I note the queerness of velocity when desires fail to conform to temporal norms, eliciting rushing or slowness that jars against prescriptive rhythms or deviates from hetero-reproductive ends.”²³ In Wojnarowicz’s jarring scene, the symbolically orgasmic release of queer rage is materialized in the physical destruction of an institution of violent normalization. In the frame we see police cars and pedestrians running from the scene, all made extraordinarily small in relation to Wojnarowicz as giant; the scene makes a gay man with AIDS physically and symbolically larger than both the Catholic Church and the police, suggesting that what is contained in the heart of one man could potentially out-scale those institutions of power that exist to discipline queer bodies. Wojnarowicz’s gigantic size also invokes the collective social body of people with AIDS and their allies, who had in fact swarmed and infiltrated the same cathedral in one of the most daring and documented AIDS activist actions in 1989 (and in which Wojnarowicz had himself participated): ACT UP’s “Stop the Church” campaign.²⁴

As its title indicates, *7 Miles a Second* repeatedly references the concept of velocity—the combination of speed and direction that moves a body through space—by linking technologies of motion (including cars, locomotives, and subway trains) with heightened emotional states. This emotional intensity is formally enacted in the continual movement between highly compacted sets of images that break the traditional linear organization of sequential panels and massive panoramas that consume entire pages of content. In both of these scalar modes, Romberger depicts forms of visceral carnage—including the unraveling of the human body and the physical destruction of material

objects—intended to invoke affective intensities in the reader that might approximate those felt by Wojnarowicz himself. Three scenes later, following the destruction of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, we see a double-page spread depicting a gigantic rectangular image of a locomotive hurtling across space carrying a chaotic assemblage of an ancient mammalian skeleton, intestines, thorny vines, television sets, gigantic pennies, and engine parts (see fig. 9). At the helm is a woolly mammoth skull, an emblem of the dead past moving rapidly forward, while atop it sits Wojnarowicz himself, a naked figure with arms and legs stretched impossibly in all four directions. Below this surreal image, the narrative intones,

I’m seeing my hands and feet grow thousands of miles long and millions of years old and I’m experiencing the exertion it takes to move these programmed limbs. . . . I am consumed by . . . the slow motion approach of the unveiling of our order and disorder in its ultimate climax . . . vibrating in the mist that exudes from its center a huge fat clockwork



I'M SEEING MY HANDS AND FEET GROW THOUSANDS OF MILES LONG AND MILLIONS OF YEARS OLD AND I'M EXPERIENCING THE EXERTION IT TAKES TO MOVE THESE PROGRAMMED LIMBS

I AM CONSUMED BY THE EMPTINESS LEAVING BEHIND IT AND EVERY ACTION I WITNESS OF COURSE AND FINELY EACH LITTLE GESTURE IN THE MOVEMENT OF THE PLANET IN ITS CANNONS AND ARCADES IN ITS SWIRLS AND CHIEFS IN THE MOTIONS OF WIND AND LIGHT EACH LITTLE ACTION CONTAINS THE SLOW FEEL OF SPARKLES, THE SLOW MOTION APPROACH OF THE UNVEILING OF OUR ORDER AND DISORDER IN ITS ULTIMATE CLIMAX BEGINNING WITH A SPARK SO SUBTLE AND BEAUTIFUL THAT TO TRUST IT IS TO TRUST OUR OWN STUPIDITY.

IT SPARKS IN THE INVASION OF WIND THEN FLOURISHES OUT MOMENTARILY IN BLACK PISTOLS OF SMOKE AND LIGHT VANISHING IN THE MIST THAT EXHALES FROM ITS CENTER A HUGE FAT CLOCKWORK OF CIVILIZATION THE WHOLE ONWARD CRASH OF THIS WORLD AS WE KNOW IT ALL THE WALKING QUARTERS IMPROVING CARTOON UNUSUAL LANGUAGE A MALFUNCTIONING CANNONBALL FILLED WITH BONE AND GRITTE AND WHITES AND BULLETS AND GROSS AND PASSION AND LIGHTNING SPARKING LANGUAGE AND MOTIONS AND SILENT AND ENTRALS IN ITS WINGS. IT'S ALL SHAKING IN EVERY DIRECTION CONULTABOUSLY

SO IT'S THESES GOING FORWARDED HERE BACKWARD NOT FROM SIDE TO SIDE SEPARATING SIDES BEHIND THE STILLNESS ONE WITNESSES IN A OCCUPING CORPSE THAT LASTS BILLIONS OF YEARS IN CONFRONTION TO THE SENSE OF TIME THE THING OPERATES WITHIN

Figure 9.

David Wojnarowicz (w), James Romberger (p), Marguerite Van Cook (c), “I’m seeing my hands and feet grow thousands of miles long and millions of years old,” 1996 [Copyright 2017]. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook.

of civilization the whole onward crush of the world as we know it . . . spewing language and motion and shit and entrails in its wake.²⁵

If the image of Wojnarowicz as a giant destroying St. Patrick's Cathedral seeks to capture visually the sheer scale and immensity of feeling that one man must contain in response to AIDS, then this image scales up even farther to the very movement of history itself, in order to account for the place of the epidemic in the longer arc of human existence. The scene implicitly references German philosopher Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" from his classic 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Citing Paul Klee's 1920 monoprint *Angelus Novus* (which depicts an angel hovering in mid-air, wings spread as though moving away from the viewer), Benjamin famously theorized "human progress" as the experience of an angel flying backward while being buffeted into an unpredictable future by the force of the "wreckage of history."²⁶ Reversing this figuration, Romberger depicts Wojnarowicz riding the *literal* wreckage of history while looking forward and away from its visceral carnage.

The image stresses the desperate need to resist the pull of history's countless mind-numbing ideologies—whether figured as nostalgic reverie for the bones of the dead, the lure of financial greed and accumulation, or the endless loop of mainstream media—even as one is "programmed" by these narratives in every fiber of one's being. The grand scale of the panorama, made possible by the representational expansiveness of the comics medium, grants viewers the perspective needed to steel themselves in the face of annihilation (symbolized by the long extinct woolly mammoth and the atrophying limbs of Wojnarowicz's avatar). In scenes like these, including Wojnarowicz's drive into the western sunset, the narrative emphatically underscores that every historical starting point is the inauguration of a sequence that will end with violent force—collision, destruction, and death—though simply at different rates of speed. While the image of the ferocious locomotive might indicate the sense of rapid movement toward death experienced by countless people living with AIDS at the height of the epidemic, the narrative below it describes the "slow motion approach of the unveiling of our order and disorder" as a universally shared experience from which there is no escape. This latter statement reminds us that despite the distinct stigmas associated with AIDS, the disease is merely one highly dramatized and accelerated expression of a banal entropic process endemic to all human existence. Rather than limiting possibilities for people living with

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The aesthetic technique of deluge apparent in the graphic text functions as both a description of the conditions of living in the historical moment of AIDS—overwhelmed by the force of mass death and flooded with medical misinformation, competing political narratives, and emotional turmoil—as well as a critical defense mechanism against loss of self in the face of such historical atrocity.

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AIDS, this view of sequence as a movement toward universal decay and unraveling equalizes the social playing field by reminding us that everything, every body, and every ideology, regardless of how dominant or repressed it might be, will ultimately come to ruin by the forces of time. Despite this seemingly apocalyptic reality, Romberger’s and Wojnarowicz’s frenzied proliferation of rebellious visual and verbal responses to the epidemic makes the forceful argument that the only appropriate response to “the onward crush of the world” is an incessant counterassault in the form of a tsunami of artistic production. For these artists, visually representing the reality of human entropy in as many ways as possible has the potential to mark all people with the physical vulnerability commonly associated only with those living with HIV/AIDS. Rapid-fire artistic production becomes one avenue for both dramatizing shared vulnerability and materializing affective bonds between people regardless of their HIV-status as they acknowledge, and consequently make collective meaning out of, the “slow death of ourselves.”

Throughout *7 Miles a Second*, Wojnarowicz, Romberger, and Van Cook deploy what I call a technique of *deluge*, or the intentional flooding of readers’ sensory experience by an onslaught of visceral language and imagery. In Brainard’s “If Nancy Was . . .” series, each entry’s visual sparseness leaves open interpretative possibilities by encouraging any potential viewer to fill in meanings, narratives, and desires that may be gestured toward in any given frame but never ultimately fixed by the manifest content. This interpretative openness expands the possibilities for erotic desire and pleasure by allowing the multiplicity of individual libidinal expressions distinct to each viewer to make themselves seen and heard within each image. Alternatively, in *7 Miles a Second*, the artists achieve a similar

expansiveness of interpretative possibilities, but through an additive approach of layering numerous images, objects, scenes, words, and memories atop one another to produce a deluge of meaning that formally corresponds to the lived experience of having cognitively to process more and more of a chaotic world in the face of impending death. The aesthetic technique of deluge apparent in the graphic text functions as both a description of the conditions of living in the historical moment of AIDS—overwhelmed by the force of mass death and flooded with medical misinformation, competing political narratives, and emotional turmoil—as well as a critical defense mechanism against loss of self in the face of such historical atrocity. Deluge appears in a variety of forms, including the visual accumulation of numerous images piled on top of one another; the display of massive panoramas exploding with visual detail; the insertion of long blocks of affectively charged text without punctuation; and the use of vibrant watercolors to depict bodies, objects, and scenes shown literally bleeding into one another or else (in the formal idiom of comics panels) bleeding off the page.

In an interview, painter Marguerite Van Cook corroborates this notion of “deluge aesthetics” in describing the conceptual vision behind her use of watercolors, which defies drawn borders and the “proper” coloring of objects:

On a very fundamental level, I wanted to break the rules. I felt this world of David’s, of ours, which existed outside of the mainstream society, should not be represented with colors that reinforced traditional expectations and norms. I allowed this impulse to . . . [disrupt] traditional comic book colors . . . at times showing exactly how something looked and other times entering into the delirium of the narrative and images. . . . I colored in the state of heightened perception that had become our daily experience.²⁷

Arguably the most powerful of these techniques is the invocation of the sensation of drowning, which is depicted figurally in a series of dream-like images that show Wojnarowicz about to be swallowed up by a tsunami, floating in a lake, overtaken by a trio of tornados, or standing next to scuba gear.²⁸ In moments such as these, the formal deluge of images, bodies, and concepts that characterizes the graphic memoir as a whole is made literal in representations of potential fatal immersion. These images of actual drowning, holding one’s breath, or impending submersion combine the viewer’s potentially frenzied cognitive state (as they attempt to take in all the visual and narrative stimuli in

front of them) with the actual visceral experience of possible death by drowning. Consequently, the slippage between formal and figural deluge—that is, between a flood of imagery and the actual representation of liquid submersion—makes the sequential unfolding of vignettes in *7 Miles a Second* materially felt on the body.

These kinds of hallucinatory images of submersion come to a head in a powerful splash page near the conclusion of the graphic novel, a scene that portrays Wojnarowicz in his apartment frantically completing an unfinished painting (see fig. 10). He wears a gas mask to protect against the fumes of the spray paint he is using to fill in the background of the canvas. The painting depicts a human figure looking into a microscope. The figure's body appears to contain the entire universe, including vividly colored planets, stars, and moons.²⁹ A string of text boxes cascades down from the top of the page:



Figure 10. David Wojnarowicz (w), James Romberger (p), Marguerite Van Cook (c), “I’m acutely aware of myself alive and witnessing,” 1996 [Copyright 2017]. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook.

I’m acutely aware of myself
alive and witnessing /
All behind me are the
friends that have died /

I’m breathing this air that they can’t breath /

Time is now compressed and every painting I do, or film I make, I make
with the sense that it may be the last thing I do and so I try to pull every-
thing into the surface of that action /

Cut straight to the heart of the senses and map it out as clearly as tools and growth allows.

Around this central scene appear other examples of Wojnarowicz's painting, sculpture and photography, including a faint tracing of a large-scale photograph of his former lover Peter Hujar on the wall above his workspace, one of the "friends that have died" keeping symbolic company with the artist. Echoing the tension between words and images displayed in the earlier scene of St. Patrick's Cathedral, here, the figurative waterfall of text boxes pouring from the top of the page visually gives way to a flood of artistic production: these paintings, sculptures, and photographs materially index the panels or frames (each a distinct work of art) that proliferate in the comics medium to capture sensory intensities that would otherwise be under-articulated by words alone.

This gripping scene depicts Wojnarowicz's art practice as a survival tactic that keeps him afloat amid the flood of death left in the wake of AIDS. The fear of *losing* one's breath—indicated by the textual reference to breathing air that others can't breathe but also in the visual depiction of Wojnarowicz wearing a gas mask—becomes an anxiety that motivates the necessity of learning how to *hold* one's breath long enough to leave a mark on history and to honor the deaths of loved ones. The desire to bring "everything into the surface" is, at core, a wish to recuperate queer forms of creativity, care, and intimacy that are drowned out by homophobia, disease, and death. Yet the image of "surfacing" implies that one can only counter one kind of deluge with another: the flood of artistic production that is Wojnarowicz's oeuvre as well as the flood of sequential images that make up *7 Miles a Second* itself.

The painting Wojnarowicz is working on depicts a figure made up of the ultimate deluge: the very stuff of the universe itself filling the receptacle that is the human body. According to Romberger, "it is an image of a scientist trying to understand the world, as [Wojnarowicz] did. . . . [I]t reflects his hope for a cure."³⁰ Seen from this perspective, the painting projects the idea that only a being porous enough to be flooded by the complexity of the cosmos can find such a cure. In the context of the actual graphic narrative we hold in our hands, that figure can be recast as any potential reader of *7 Miles a Second* who keeps turning each page, accepting the seemingly ceaseless flood of visceral images that might become equipment for living beyond AIDS. Each image from the larger sequence of *7 Miles a Second* links the embodied experience of queerness

to a range of scales, including the cosmic, the political, the national, and the intimate or everyday. Collectively, they give shape to a version of queerness understood as a force or velocity that makes waves, builds worlds, elicits passionate responses, and even has the potential to change the course of history.

“ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN IN A COMIC”

Joe Brainard and David Wojnarowicz are two queer artists responding to distinct personal and political understandings of queer sexuality through the formal possibilities of a specific medium, the comic strip.

Comic strip serialization allowed Brainard to highlight the conceptual relationship between comics’ unfolding sequential panels and sexuality itself as a form of “repetition with a difference.” Though Nancy traditionally appeared as a monolithic type in her original strips, Brainard maintains the use of traditional comic strip form while altering its figural content, so that Nancy becomes an emblem of queer culture’s proliferating social types, sexual positions, and deviant desires.

Alternatively, for Wojnarowicz, Romberger, and Van Cook, the seemingly ceaseless sequential movement of text and image within the comics form becomes an imperative to flood the world with scenes, icons, figures, and concepts that might collectively provide a lifeline for surviving the reality of social and physical death in the face of AIDS. The artists’ projects deploy radically different aesthetic styles. Yet in both, the medium of comics remains malleable or generous enough to function as a vehicle for expressing varied conceptions of queerness, wherein queerness can be understood, in Eve Sedgwick’s words, as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”³¹ In the comics works of these two artists, the aggregate of sequential panels never add up to a single or monolithic sexual identity, but rather accumulate a potentially limitless “open mesh” of erotic and affective possibilities.

By placing these two artists together, I aim to inaugurate a conversation about the ways in which the comic strip medium provided an alternative material

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[T]he medium of comics remains malleable or generous enough to function as a vehicle for expressing varied conceptions of queerness.

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and affective archive for the evolution of queerness in the late twentieth century. Such a conversation demands that we ask how comics might narrate the history of sexuality differently than do other media by virtue of the medium's capacity to rethink sequence as a site of open-ended multiplicity, rather than a linear or teleological form. This question is especially important today, as the last decade has seen a renaissance in queer comics production unparalleled in the history of American visual culture: alongside the mainstream success of long-time lesbian and gay comics creators such as Alison Bechdel and Howard Cruse, we have seen the underground emergence of numerous transgender, bisexual, and genderqueer comics artists (including the surrealist fantasy comics of Edie Fake and the butch aesthetics of A. K. Summers), the spectacular introduction of out LGBTQ characters in mainstream superhero comics, the publication of anthologies of queer comics (including Justin Hall's LAMBDA Award winning *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* [2013], *Qu33r* [2014], and *Beyond: The Queer Sci-Fi/Fantasy Comic Anthology* [2015]), and even the institution of an annual international "Queers and Comics" conference inaugurated by queer comics artist Jennifer Camper and black studies scholar andré carrington. Despite the exponential growth of this archive, queer studies has yet to produce a theory attentive to how forms unique to the comics medium facilitate the articulation of nonnormative genders and sexualities.³²

A theory adequate to this task requires a fully developed *queer formalism*. I use this term to describe, on the one hand, the range of tactics and strategies that creative producers deploy to materialize or represent gender and sexual nonnormativity in a range of mediums, and on the other, a method of interpretation that treats forms as enabling structures or shapes that powerfully articulate alternative genders and sexualities, rather than normalizing or "straightening" them. In his recent book, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*, art historian David Getsy innovates the concept of "transgender capacity" as "the ability or the potential for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders as mutable, successive, and multiple." He continues, "It can be located or discerned in texts, objects, [and] cultural forms . . . that support an interpretation or recognition of proliferative modes of gender nonconformity."³³ By conceiving gender transitivity not only as an identity or lived experience, but also as a formal capacity of artistic production, Getsy opens up the possibility of seeing queer genders and sexualities as legible in everything from aesthetic mediums to the specificities of a given art practice. Taking up

this call, I conceive of queer formalism as a feminist and queer analytic for identifying and making sense of those moments in culture when nonnormative or queer genders and sexualities, far from being repressed, oppressed, or negated, are *made present or legible* in complex ways, accessible to a wide range of potential viewers or readers. Through a sustained exploration of the queer capacities of the comic-strip medium, this essay has sought to provide one entry in the larger sequence that might compose a queer formalism.

In one his most self-conscious *Nancy* comic strips from 1947, Ernie Bushmiller depicted Nancy in four sequential panels (organized in a square) that begins with her strolling along a street and concludes with her walking upside down on the ceiling of her living room. The panels are held together by a single sentence whose individual components spread out between each frame: “Anything / can happen / in a comic strip.” The surreal presentation of Nancy capable of bending the rules of space to walk jauntily up the side of her living room wall reminds readers of the limitless imaginative potential of comics—a medium in which *anything that can be drawn can be believed*. This single strip can be seen as a conceptual template of Brainard’s “If Nancy Was . . .” series, providing both alibi and motivation for Brainard’s imaginative exploration of all the things that Nancy could be (which, of course, is quite literally *anything*). Yet it also cannily points to another largely ignored capacity of the comics medium, namely its ability to emerge from, or infiltrate, nearly every other visual form of the twentieth century.³⁴ Consider that a series of paintings, when placed into a visual or narrative sequence, can become a comic strip. A classic celluloid film reel composed of thousands of moving images is itself a comic strip. A series of photographs, with or without captions, can be organized so that they are transformed into a sequential comic. And television media appears as a serialized set of images combining verbal and visual elements. The conceptual and creative consequences of comics’ extraordinary adaptiveness have yet to be fully studied, but queer artists have fundamentally understood this quality to be one of the most useful capacities of the medium, for it allows a level of open-endedness that approximates the shape-shifting qualities of erotic desire and embodiment in all its forms—perhaps most presciently in those queer expressions that swerve away from the normative sequence of “proper” gendered and heterosexual development. With its uncanny capacity to inhabit numerous mediums, bodies, materials, and figures, the comic strip may be the closest creative form we have to sexuality itself. Like sexuality, its affective force is capable of attaching

itself to any body or object with unexpected results, for in comics, “anything can happen.”

/ Notes /

I would like to thank David Getsy for being my most challenging and thoughtful interlocutor throughout the process of writing this essay. The incisive commentary of David Hennessy, Amber Musser, Jonathan Eburne, Amy J. Elias, Jennifer Row, Damon Young, and the two anonymous reviewers helped me refine my arguments and readings to their highest level of precision. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Ron Padgett, James Romberger, and Marguerite Van Cook for taking the time to share with me rich insights about their distinct artistic visions, as well as memories of their beloved late companions Joe Brainard and David Wojnarowicz, respectively.

¹ David Wojnarowicz (w), James Romberger (a), Marguerite Van Cook (c), *7 Miles a Second* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, [1996] 2012), 60–61.

² *Ibid.*, 51.

³ Arguably the two most compelling scholarly contributions to the development of a queer theory of the comic strip medium to date are Yetta Howard’s “Politically Incorrect, Visually Incorrect: *Bitchy Butch*’s Unapologetic Discrepancies in Lesbian Identity and Comic Art,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 1 (2012): 79–98 and Darieck Scott’s “Big Black Beauty Drawing and Naming the Black Male Figure in Superhero and Gay Porn Comics,” in *The Porn Archives*, ed. Tim Dean, Steven Rusczycky, and David Squires (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 183–212.

⁴ The conception of queerness as an open-ended social force, worldview, or libidinal energy untethered from fixed identity or formal shape appears in the work of numerous contemporary queer theorists. For example, José Esteban Muñoz defines queerness as a “utopian horizon” or “ideality” that provides “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (*Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* [New York: New York University Press, 2009], 1), while Jack Halberstam argues that queerness functions as a distinctly rebellious “use of time and space” that “develops in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction” (*In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* [New York: New York University Press, 2005], 1). In “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ* 12, no. 4 (2006), Sara Ahmed frames queerness as a productively “failed orientation” that “gives support to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place” (560, 570). While highly generative, such anti-identitarian theorizations of queerness often underwrite a deep suspicion of forms or figures of order—such as sequences, lines, institutions, and schedules—that are understood to constrain or discipline deviations from normative sexuality.

⁵ Despite a growing body of scholarly writing on Brainard's mixed-media works, painting, and poetry, no published work to date provides a sustained analysis of the series "If Nancy Was . . ." To Brainard aficionados, the series may appear an idiosyncratic choice to represent his experiments with comic strip form, especially considering the volume of surrealist comic strip art he produced in the 1970s. However, "If Nancy Was . . ." is an exemplary model of Brainard's queer engagement with comics because it embodies his most conceptually daring extension of the formal logic of sequential comics into another medium: painting. Brainard understood comics not simply as a medium limited to the technique of drawing or to a distinct genre, but as a *formal logic of sequential pictorial unfolding* that could be translated *across* mediums. The infiltration of a traditionally high art by the logic of comics strikes me as an especially queer deployment of a so-called "low" cultural form. Key readings in Brainard's serial poetics and art include Richard Deming, "Everyday Devotions: The Art of Joe Brainard," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2008): 75–87; Andy Fitch, *Pop Poetics: Reframing Joe Brainard* (New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012); Nathan Kernan, "Joe Brainard: All Possible Colors," *On Paper* 1, no. 4 (March–April 1997): 26–40; Daniel Worden, "Joe Brainard's Grid, or, the Matter of Comics," *Nonsite.org* 15 (January 16, 2015), <http://nonsite.org/article/joe-brainards-grid-or-the-matter-of-comics>. With the exception of Fitch, nearly all of these writers side-step Brainard's sexuality as an important, if not defining, component of his oeuvre.

⁶ The original series was issued in 1996 by DC Comics' independent imprint Vertigo (three years after the initial project was completed). It was revised and expanded in graphic novel form for the 2012 reprinting by Fantagraphics Comics. Throughout this essay, I use the reprint edition as the basis for my analysis; though new images and scenes were added to expand the original text, these were conceived or drawn in the original planning stages of the 1988–93 collaboration.

⁷ See Denis Kitchen and James Danky, *Underground Classics: The Transformation of Comics into Comix* (Madison, WI: Harry N. Abrams and Chazen Museum of Art, 2009); Patrick Rozenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2008); and *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics*, ed. Justin Hall (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2013).

⁸ A curated selection of these works is collected in *Joe Brainard: The Nancy Book*, ed. Ron Padgett (Los Angeles: Siglio Press, 2008). All references to works in the series "If Nancy Was . . ." are from this volume. In 2008, twenty of these works were exhibited as an open-ended sequence at the Colby College Museum of Art.

⁹ In their now-classic essay "How to Read Nancy," cartoonists Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik identified the iconic spareness of Nancy's visual form, as well as the basic three-panel or four-panel sequence in which her storylines took place, as the defining features that made her available for so many comedic narrative and visual permutations. See Newgarden and Karasik, "How to Read Nancy," in *The Best of Ernie Bushmiller's Nancy*, ed. Brian Walker (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 98–105.

¹⁰ As a figure of childhood mischief, Nancy also stands in for a willful refusal to “grow up” or mature in the traditional logic of heterosexual development. In an interview I conducted with poet and Brainard biographer Ron Padgett, Padgett stressed Brainard’s attachment to Nancy, and her medium of origin, as an expression of the artist’s desire to imbue adulthood with the whimsical and joyful qualities of his youth. Consequently, in Nancy, Brainard seems to have found a figure through which to express the specificity of his own gayness as a more expansively understood state of permanent queer childhood: playful, creative, open-ended, and non-goal oriented. Ron Padgett, interview conducted by the author, digital recording, May 27, 2016. For a brilliant explication of Brainard’s affective and aesthetic investment in *Nancy*, see Anne Lauterbach, “Joe Brainard & Nancy,” *Joe Brainard: The Nancy Book*, 7–26.

¹¹ *The Nancy Book*, 30.

¹² According to Ron Padgett, Brainard’s sexuality was widely known and embraced by his artistic coterie in the New York School of poets and artists. In one interview, however, Brainard stated, “The only thing that ever bothered me about being queer was that I thought maybe people wouldn’t like me if they knew.” By diffusing queer desires across serialized panels, Brainard dispels the potential negative connotations that might accrue to the specificity of his own gayness by blurring the distinctions between his individual erotic desires and the potential desires of any given viewer of “In Nancy Was . . .”. This might be understood as a queer tactic of simultaneous camouflage and collective “coming out of the closet” that elicits joyful attachment to queerness (in other words, an aesthetic technique for warding off being “not liked”). On queer aesthetic strategies of camouflage, see Jonathan Katz, “Committing the Perfect Crime”: Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art,” *Art Forum* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 38–53.

¹³ *The Nancy Book*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵ Ahmed, “Orientations,” 570.

¹⁶ *The Nancy Book*, 55.

¹⁷ Perhaps unbeknownst to the artist himself, such uses of Nancy slide between the comedic and the nefarious by pointing toward the potentially exploitative nature of gender and sexual relations, including the ease with which bodies (including fictional ones like Nancy’s) can be manipulated or abused in the service of other people’s erotic pleasures.

¹⁸ *The Nancy Book*, 47.

¹⁹ Wojnarowicz, Romberger, and Van Cook, *7 Miles a Second*, 5.

²⁰ Despite Wojnarowicz’s extensive input and influence on all sections of *7 Miles a Second*, this final segment of the narrative was completed after his death on July 22, 1992 by his collaborator James Romberger. Romberger used Wojnarowicz’s elaborate notes and published writing, alongside his own aesthetic sensibilities as an avant-garde comics artist, to complete the project they had begun in 1988. In my discussion, I will attribute

the content of *7 Miles a Second* to both artists, while acknowledging the through-line of Wojnarowicz's aesthetic vision (as executed and influenced by Romberger).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

²² *Ibid.*, 48–49.

²³ Jennifer Row, "Queer Time on the Early Modern Stage: France and the Drama of Biopower," *Exemplaria* 29, no. 1 (2017): 58–81.

²⁴ This action is documented in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS Demo Graphics* (New York: Bay Press, 1990).

²⁵ Wojnarowicz, Romberger, and Van Cook, *7 Miles a Second*, 58–59.

²⁶ See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Random House, [1955] 2007).

²⁷ Marguerite Van Cook, interview conducted by author via email, May 24, 2016.

²⁸ Wojnarowicz, Romberger and Van Cook, *7 Miles a Second*, 20, 67, 27, and 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁰ James Romberger, interview conducted by the author via email, May 24, 2016.

³¹ Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

³² I am influenced in this endeavor by Hillary Chute's commitment to pursue "how comics texts model a feminist methodology in their form, in the complex visual dimension of an author narrating herself on the page as a multiple subject." See Chute, "The Space of Graphic Narrative: Mapping Bodies, Feminism, and Form," in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 200.

³³ David Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 34.

³⁴ Here, I build on W. J. T. Mitchell's insight in "Comics as Media: Afterward," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2014) that "comics is transmediatic because it is translatable and transitional, mutating before our eyes into unexpected new forms" (259).