Along came a Spider (Woman) – discussing connections between arts-based research and cultural criticism in comics online communities.

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As a proposal for a conversation circle, I am interested in discussing how arts-based research related practices circulate (often unknowingly or undeclaringly) within online communities of comic authors, bloggers and readers, and what is their role in discussing aspects (such as identity, gender and race), tied to readership and consumership practices in the current, evolving American comics industry.

Comic books reading and consumerships generate online communities of comics aficionados, where both creators and readers interact using the affective and representational value of characters as currency in cultural discussions that, in turn, reveal positions and social differences in a broader context. I am interested in evaluating how visual culture, visual literacy and critical analysis are integrated to both practices of authorship and readership.

Particularly, I will focus on how cultural critics and aspiring comics authors – many of them graduated from colleges in courses of Sequential Art and/or comic studies – include theoretical aspects of theory, such as feminist critique, in their interventions. How much of it filters into artistic practice? Which discourses inform visual literacy in drawing or using images for personal or political purposes? While still at its beginning stage, mine is an attempt to explore the different connections between communities of readers, authors, practices in comic making, theory, and higher education. I am therefore interested in exploring how memes, internet discussions, and "flaming" feature verbal and graphic interchanges, where graphic evidences become part of online debates about cultural values and social representations of comic books.

As contemporary research in art education demonstrates with its interest in informal practices such as fan art and cultural discussions in internet forum and communities (Manifold, 2009), online activity is fertile ground for cultural research. To explore those practices and politics, I propose a connection between arts-based research (Knowles & Cole, 2008, and Finley, 2008), which is often described as a critical and political practice; and visual culture – also a critical and political exercise in reception (Bal, 2003), that takes into account the politics of articulation (Mitchell, 2005).

As a starting point for discussion, I will propose Milo Manara's controversial cover of Marvel Comics *Spider Woman* 1 (2014). It is a fairly recent case, which generated heated online discussions, as well as having echoes on newspaper and noted magazines (see Dockterman, 2014). Amateur or semi-professionals authors and critics, often from a feminist standpoint, complained about sexist aspects of Manara's cover art, as well as discussing others works of comic book art – in some cases, using strategies such as parody, visual paraphrase and graphic bricolage to prove their points. This includes practices where part of the argumentative value comes from practices of image manipulation and even redrawing (see Charlebois, 2014), thus complementing verbal rhetorics with arts-based criticism. Choosing a number of relevant examples revolving around recent comic books, I will explore how arts-based analysis develops, and upon which values and theoretical framework is based. I also intend to contact bloggers and online commenters directly involved, to propose them a dialogue and ask permission for redrawing and/or reproducing part of their work. The intention is to present – at least as a work in progress – a sequential art essay.

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