The Graphic Expression of the Lives, Obsessions, and Objections of Small Press Sick Puppies and Scat (ology) Cats: A Short Survey of Some Aspects of Australian Alternative Comics 1990-2000

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This research began in the mid-1990s in a state of denial that Australia produced Small Press comics. While glossy, full color, action and fantasy genre comics from North America were noticeably available in Australia, there was little visible presence of locally produced alternative work. Rarely did specialty comics shops stock any Australian comics other than the local attempts to imitate the imported, overseas product. It seemed on the surface, at least, that there was no local comics industry. Explorations beneath the surface over a number of ensuing years, however, revealed an active and ongoing underground scene that was producing and distributing alternative comics, if somewhat resistant and suspicious to being uncovered, investigated and documented.

Ultimately, the research confirmed that there was indeed a discernible alternative comics scene in Australia in the period 1990-2000 and that the work produced displayed a plurality of approaches to narrative and graphic styles.[1] This article is selective and covers only a few of the creators and works cited in that research and so is by no means a comprehensive representation of it. In documenting the history and context of these locally produced, alternative comics, similarities were found to exist with overseas notions of previous independent and underground comics production, particularly in the U.S.A. and the U.K. although a sense of cultural cringe may also have been a motivating factor in initiating the local activity.

For the period under study, little scholarly or analytical material on Australian alternative comics was uncovered. It appeared to have fallen below the critical radar of Australian culture as represented in the mass media. But it had been attacked by Australian cartoonist Vane Lindesay for its plagiarism of the North American underground comics scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s and by Australian comics historian John Ryan for its alleged lack of artistic skill. On the other hand, Pinder praised the 1980s work for its negative attitude and approach to cartooning as a positive quality. From the comics produced in the 1990s, Kerr identified an inherently unhappy, self-reflexive theme. In contrast to Kerr's work, much of what little writing was found on the local alternative comics scene was written from a fan based rather than from a scholarly perspective. In his book on Australian comics history Ryan commented:

The Australian underground comix appear to have surfaced in the early 'seventies. Because their political-social context is at odds with the current mainstream their circulation is limited and it is difficult to establish a clear picture of the total volume and when they appeared (Ryan, 1979:141).

The North American underground comix movement may have influenced the appearance of the local product. Ryan points to the social context of the 1970s as a period in which a sense of national pride developed and led to a consequent interest in locally made culture, including comics. But it was not until the last decade of the 20th Century that a full-blooded alternative movement of independent comics flourished in the urban areas of Australia. I was able to identify more than 150 creators and in excess of 250 Small Press publications over the decade under study.

Fig. 1. Juxtaposed representation of the reality and fantasy of independent publishing and distribution from *Life Is Cheap* by Marcus Moore and Tony Single.

These creators, like their musical colleagues, tended to self-distribute to shops, doing the rounds and carrying small amounts of stock in their bags, or sometimes setting up shop on the street as buskers might do, in railway station pedestrian tunnels for example, rather than from a shop or office, as romantically lampooned in (Fig. 1). This research found that alternative record shops were supportive of the notion of selling alternative comics due to their perceived affinity to the notion of being an "independent." In fact I found my first examples of Australian alternative comics while browsing in Waterfront Records store in Sydney, a shop specializing in independent music. In a corner,

lmost on the floor, were some small black and white photocopied comics that ad been too hastily folded and stapled that resulted in a decidedly nprofessional appearance and pointing to their D.I.Y. production.
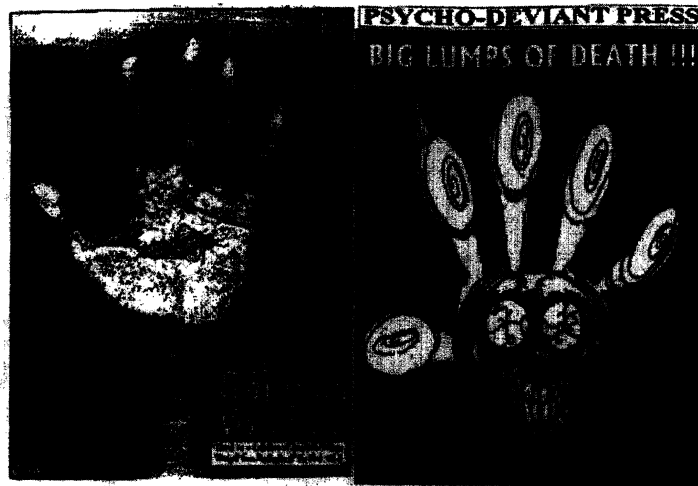

ig. 2. Punk influenced, oppositional attitude apparent in titles and design of lternative, Australian mini-comics *Satanus Vomitus* and *Big Lumps Of Death*.

DIY and the Influence of Punk

The notion of D.I.Y. publishing was an influence from the Punk music anzine movement in the U.K. in the mid- to late-1970s. The D.I.Y. approach emystified the publishing process and this enabled many creators to ndertake and produce work. The availability of cheap photocopying for the rinting of black and white artwork was also a factor in enabling the printing nd dissemination of locally produced comics. In addition to this, Punk music nd the fanzine influence of D.I.Y. methods of working, other legacies of Punk rere found in the names of titles of comics, in the oppositional attitude inherent ι the work of some of the creators, in the challenge to the notion of artistic xcellence, and in the taboo content often found in these comics. The ppositional attitude, together with a perceived difference in style and content rom mainstream comics titles, was appropriate to the nomenclature of lternative comics. It was also confirmed, as Sabin noted, that a crossover ssociation had developed between alternative comics and alternative music. ndependent record companies realized that consumers of independent music lso bought independent comics and so both products were stocked and sold ι independent music stores.

The titles of many Australian alternative comics displayed an attitude nalogous to the oppositional stance of Punk e.g. *Bump and Snore, Big Lumps*

Of Death, Comatoses Are Easy To Control, Comic Edge, Comic Messiah, Cruel World, Dopey Tales, Drivel, Electric Ferret, Groovy Gravy, Life Is Cheap, Modern Murder, Radiation Sickness, Satanus Vomitus, (sic) Bag, Sick Puppy, Small Intestine, Street Smell, Toe Jam, Wilnot and *Weird Stress Kittens* (**Fig. 2**). These titles of Small Press publications sat at odds with mainstream titles, denoting their position as an alternative, underground activity. The publishers' names reinforced this aloofness from the mainstream: Bad Art Studios, Cold Angel Press, Cowtown Comics, Crypto Graphics, Dead Numbat Productions, Dead Xerox Press, Metal Scarecrow Productions, Mung Bean Productions, Rat Race Comix, Spastic Monkey Corporation, Sticky Comics, and Radical Sheik Graphics. In terms of the graphic design of these mini-comics, the influence of the punk D.I.Y. approach to cut and paste, collage, and overall raw style and finish is evident. The content is also closer to realism and to the personal expression of life experience rather than to the fantasy world of superhero adventures.

Scale

Although not widely known, this production and distribution of alternative comics has been an identifiable activity in the period 1990-2000 in many parts of Australia, most notably in urban environments along the east coast and in Canberra. Smaller scale activity has been apparent in South and Western Australia and in Tasmania. There is much evidence of the use of the medium as an avenue of creativity and of personal expression. Autobiographically based material is common and there is more of a plurality of creative styles apparent in these publications than a formulaic approach to the medium. Similarly, this pluralism of styles was found to be evident in various cities rather than a perceived regional style and a consequent difference in regional style from city to city. Even in a small, close knit community such as Canberra, I found there to be more of a grouping of creators with individual styles than a particular regional style as can be witnessed in the Canberran anthology *Northbourne And Glory Bound* (2000) that was financed by the government-funded organization Arts ACT.

Expression

Many of the titles produced display examples of visual communication techniques used by creators to tell stories, express feelings and anxieties, and communicate with their readers. Australian alternative comics made use of the autobiographical and self-reflective genres, and the representation of subcultures and displayed a marked pluralistic quality in terms of both content

and graphic style. Contemporary Australian alternative comics also tended to express the personal viewpoints of their creators rather than to follow particular genres. They tended not to be formulaic. In instances where genres were employed, these tended to support the personal thematic approach e.g. autobiographical stories or individual approaches to genres such as action, horror, or sexual themes. Although variable in terms of artistic quality, they tended to provide readers with a rich experience of the various visual communication techniques employed in the comics medium. For the creators, the comics provided an opportunity to create local culture or critique imported visual culture. The creative culture produced, whilst often antagonising mainstream ideas, was at times indulgent, unrefined and naively drawn. It was in a copy of *Happiness Is Black* that I first set eyes on a portrait of a typical Small Press creator.
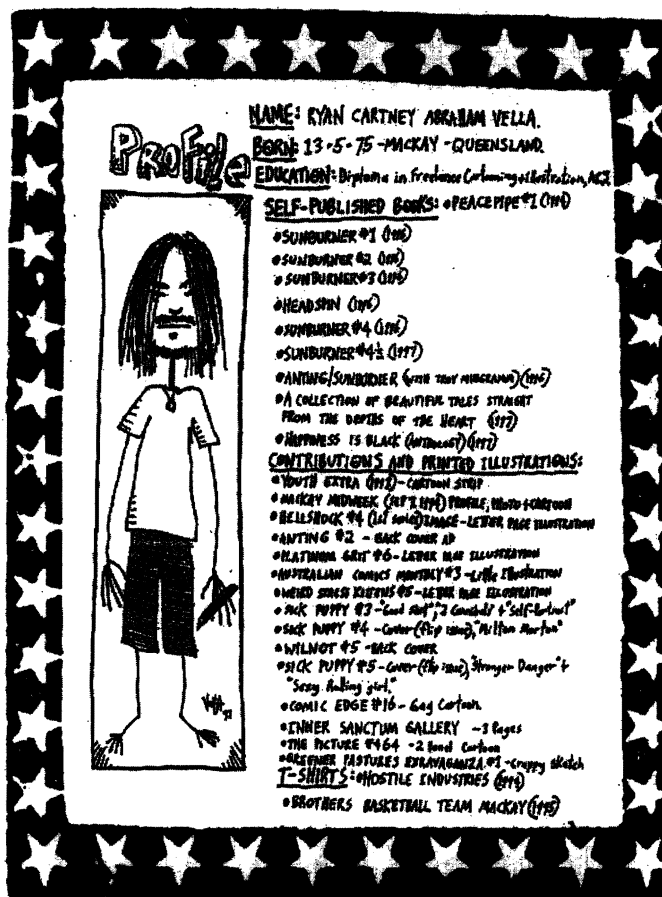

Fig. 3. Portrait and profile of Ryan Vella by Ryan Vella from *Happiness Is Black*.

Small Press Identikit

A rich vein of self-reflexivity is apparent. Themes of self-figuration and autobiographical based stories refer to life as a comics artist of the Small Press. An example of this is evident in the work of Ryan Vella. His self-portrait (1997) reveals the evolutionary effect of overdeveloped hands from the excessive amount of drawing required for comics production. His overworked hands are consequently much larger than his feet that are rarely called upon for any effort spending most of their time crushed under the weight of the near-dormant body seated in a sketching position at a drawing table (Fig. 3). His graphic persona also has shrunken, squinting eyes, a reaction to the many hours spent working under a planet lamp, and a Bohemian appearance, the fashion statement of the artist, and I am using Kerr's classification and argument here of the cartoonist as artist.

Fig. 4. A similar theme of respecting local culture rather than the imported variety is evident in *The False Impressionists*.

Local Influences

With no mainstream comics industry as such in Australia, other than the importation of North American, Asian, and European product, it is appropriate to point to the local aspects of Australian comics. So dominant has been the North American superhero form that any critique or rejection of it weakens the hegemony that it represents. In the local scene this rejection by these creators is also a sign of the diminution of the cultural cringe, which has been a feature of design and artistic practice in Australia throughout the 20th Century.

In *The False Impressionists* (1997) by Bernard Caleo and Tolley, the Australian landscape and its mythology, as well as some of McCloud's comics theory, is explored (Fig. 4). Two characters, Yell and Ole, meet up with three key painters from the Heidelberg School, a group of Australia's first Impressionist artists, Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, and Frederick McCubbin. If Australia had to have an Impressionist movement then at least these painters integrated local influences into their work. They tell Yell and Ole that they wanted to question rather than accept the European approach to painting, to establish an Australian form of Impressionism as it were, rather than to attempt to make their representations of the local landscape resemble scenes from Paris and the south of France. They begin with an assessment of the Australian light and note that no two moments spent in the Australian landscape can be considered the same in terms of the effect of the light. Their quote, "Two half-hours are never alike, and he who tries to paint a sunset on two successive evenings must be more or less painting from memory," taken from the exhibition catalogue for their group show *9 x 5* at Buxton's Gallery in 1889, refers to the adaptation of their Impressionist technique to the Australian landscape and is claimed by the art historian and critic Robert Hughes to be the first art manifesto published in Australia.[2]

From a technical point of view Caleo and Tolley experiment with a juxtaposition of visual styles, the backgrounds and the painters being represented in realistic, photographic form with the two characters, Yell and Olle, being presented in drawn, cartoon form. McCloud has cited the use of iconic style characters overlaid on photo-realistic backgrounds, as employed by Hergé in his *Tintin* comics, as a means of assisting readers to identify with characters and to believe in the settings in which they have been placed (McCloud, 1993: 42-43). In this case, Caleo and Tolley complicate this theory by employing both iconic and photographic representations of the characters, and of placing photo-realistic representations of the heads of the painters onto drawn bodies.

In addition to the difference in the light in Australia, another local characteristic was the available format of print production. Designed by the Germans, Australia has adopted the A, B, and C International paper size series, decidedly different in dimensions to the standard North American comic book.[3]

Auto-Bio

The autobiographical form of the alternative comic has several Australian exponents, including Kieran Mangan in his comic *URRGH!* which began as a personal visual journal that he did not intend to publish, and in which he documents his school days. It is one of the most intense examples. In a sports scene, he visually presents a moment of vulnerability about his physique:

There are a lot of generic things that happen to you as a teenager that just stick with you and they kind of hurt and I remember the phrase when I had to take my shirt off for basketball just someone saying 'you look like a fucking skinned rabbit' and that phrase just stuck with me for a long time.[4]

Fig. 5. Extract from *URRGH!* by Kieran Mangan.

The panel that illustrates this scene is both telling and poignant in its visual communication of Mangan's memory (Fig. 5). Beginning with two panels showing first the school bell and then the bell ringing, this economy of narrative is carried through the rest of the page. A larger panel shows the basketball coach arranging the teams. Team one is to wear "shirts" and team two is to go topless. Our protagonist expresses his discomfort in a panel showing his facial expression against a large word balloon, which reads "SKINS!" The background turns to bleak solid black as he removes his shirt and looks uncomfortably over his shoulder. With his arms folded across his chest, he has to withstand the verbal taunt from one of the other boys of "Fuckin' skinned rabbit!" His isolation from his team and the game is further underlined by a subsequent panel that foregrounds him in defined, linear form while the other boys are anonymously represented by roughly textured figures.
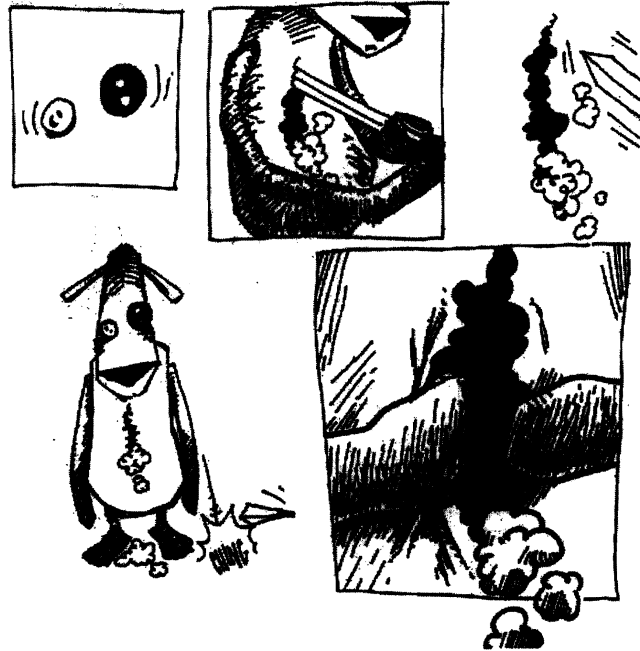
Fig. 6. Extract from *Onward* + *Upward* by Damien Woods.

Damien Woods is a Brisbane artist also working in an autobiographical vein. He has a strong interest in animation that surfaces in his 24-hour comic *Onward* + *Upward* that demonstrates this interest in the form of dynamic, sequential drawing (Fig. 6). Woods applies a filmic sensibility to storytelling in a series of panels, which resemble frames from a film. They range from close-up shots to distant long shots arranged with the intention of conveying emotion. The execution of the comic was, for the artist, a cathartic response to the end of a relationship, with the notion of being "gutted" rendered as visual metaphor.

Still in autobiographical mode but also moving into the subcultural area, Anton Emdin presents a form of dysfunctionalism in his comics. The "loser" or "slacker" figure is often featured in his. This figure is usually represented permanently attached to his Nintendo computer game machine and seemingly unable to disconnect from it and participate in life's other activities. This can be seen in his cartoon "Euthanasia" in which neither of the Nintendo playing participants are able to "pull the plug" and in which the company mascot Super Mario is represented in crucified mode (Fig. 7). Anton himself admits to this addiction and claims that it has cost him considerable time away from the drawing board.[5] In another of his stories "Hooked," this addiction, which many young Australians have also developed to computer game machines, is

highlighted against a background in which the mascot and game character Super Mario is portrayed as the Devil. In his comic *Cruel World*, explicit sex and strong violence are also common themes and he is able to convey these in a humorous manner. An autobiographical element is another feature of his work and he is able to communicate visually his past experiences in the music business as bass player in the band Strangely Brown and in his job as a supermarket check-out operator, as well as in his other life as an underground cartoonist.

Fig. 7. Extract from *Cruel World* by Anton Emdin.

Anna Brown is a graduate of the Canberra School of Art and creator of *G Force* and editor of the graphic novel *Northbourne And Glory Bound* (2000). The latter publication created a new model for contemporary Australian alternative comics by being published as a 150-page, trade paperback with an ISBN number and sold in bookshops rather than comics shops. The fact that it had a spine, which contained the title, meant that it had both visibility and presence when shelved sideways in bookshops. One of Brown's contributions to the anthology, "5AM Wednesdays" has an autobiographical basis (Fig. 8). It describes the weekly routine her family were involved in distributing community newspapers to the local neighborhood:

Its (the work) is getting more autobiographical, I think it's getting more and more the source. I really only ever get motivated to draw when something kind of unusual happens to me or there's something quite interesting or something I want to say.[6]
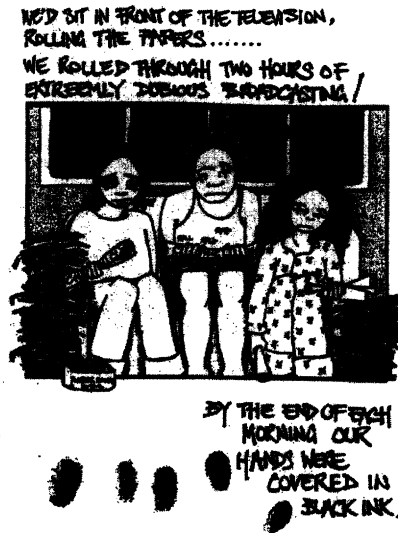
Fig. 8. Extract from "5AM Wednesdays" by Anna Brown.

Jo Waite, creator of the comic *One Sock* has been drawing since she was a child. Her parents reinforced her artistic activities by putting her artwork up on the refrigerator and around the house. She grew up in a political family, attended an alternative school, and began contributing cartoons to left wing political magazines such as *Arena*, as well as doing illustrations for community groups, before arriving in the alternative comics community. She notes that her work shifted from social comment to autobiography:

> Gradually my work has got less political and more personal. One Sock, particularly, is the most personal work I think that I've put out. I've always thought it was kind of like wimping out, you know. That's why I got into drawing things to publish. I mean I've drawn things for myself using my own symbolic language but when I draw things to go out into the world I thought well it has to be about something. It has to be making a comment on something public. There is an element of autobiography in it.[7]

Also in an autobiographical vein, *Street Smell* (1998) by Bruce Mutard of Bad Art Press presents a story set in a sex goods shop and provides some insight into the appeal of the sex industry to its customers (**Fig. 9**).

Clint Cure's (alias Q-Ray) work is marked by representations of self which are altered to prevent them being interpreted as accurate autobiography. Explaining the origin of the title of his comic *I Was A Teenage Religious Fanatic* (**Fig. 10**), Q-ray acknowledged a religious influence in his upbringing and its consequent appearance in some of his stories:

Fig. 9. Extract from _Street Smell_ by Bruce Mutard.

> I was taught by the Christian Brothers. I sort of want to get away from
> that (the religious theme) but I'm not really doing it. I suppose cos it's
> such a big part of my background that I just keep using that to refer to.
> It's what I know I guess. I know all those stories and I'm familiar with all
> that.[8]

The Christian Brothers receive a series of serious criticisms. Their weapon
of authority, the leather strap, made from six strips of leather sewn together,
the ritual of having to kiss the teaching Brother on the lips on his birthday,
and the full frontal body inspections in the showers are bitingly presented by
Q-ray as unhappy memoirs from his school days.

The comics of Mandy Ord offer the opportunity to analyze work which
is dramatic and humorous, graphically bold and autobiographically based,
and which contain a rich seam of artistic expression. She uses the medium to
visually communicate her feelings and emotions. Her introduction to issue #3
of _Wilnot_ (1996) sets the scatological tone for a comic beginning to establish
itself in the alternative press:

> greetings scum...well...here it is...Wilnot no. 3...I hope it doesn't make
> you heave, gack, yak, puke, barf, retch, woof, yuke, gag, boot, chuck or
> burp. This issue is dedicated to the beauty of using a lot of disgusting and
> offensive words in the one go. Cheers to you and your bodily fluids.[9]

Fig. 10. Extract from *I Was A Teenage Religious Fanatic* by Q-ray.

As each issue was published, Ord continued to develop her skills in comics production till she reached a stage of mastery of black and white art, storytelling and the visual communication of these, while developing her style that looks designed by the graphic love-child of Max Andersson and Julie Doucet, whose work Ord acknowledges has been influential on her own.

Fig. 11. Arriving for work at the pub from *Wilnot* by Mandy Ord.

Her experiences as a barmaid are drawn upon in *Wilnot* Issue #5 (1997) in a story called "Stupid Dumb Bloody Fucking Arseholes And The Art Of Being Subtle." One panel shows her arriving for work at the pub in her car (**Fig. 11**). A reflection of her face can be seen in the rear view mirror and the disappointed expression in her eyes indicates that she is not looking forward to going into

the pub to work that night. Next to the car, a man is lying on his back on the ground, simultaneously calling out a greeting to her and vomiting. In the background there are other figures waving, yelling, and snogging. The close-up shot allows the detail of a splatter of spit or vomit to be seen on the door, near the handle. This is followed by a panel showing the same scene from a wider angle which enables Ord to convey the subtle emotions of both the reluctance of her character at having to enter the premises and also her resignation at having to do so.

Below the Mainstream Radar

Because of its small scale, the Australian Small Press is able to take advantage of what is, compared to the mainstream print media, a relatively unregulated outlet of visual communication and content allowing free expression for the "larrikin" and "ratbag" element associated with Australia's past. Ryan Vella from Mackay in the north of Queensland uses a fluid drawing style to convey a mixture of humor and horror with a strong fixation on death. In his "Michael Hutchence Belts Out His Last Song," an interpretation of the singer's death by misadventure, the celebrity is derided and death is mocked (Fig. 12). This cartoon portrays the singer masturbating while hanging by his belt in a manner that could not be seen in the popular press.
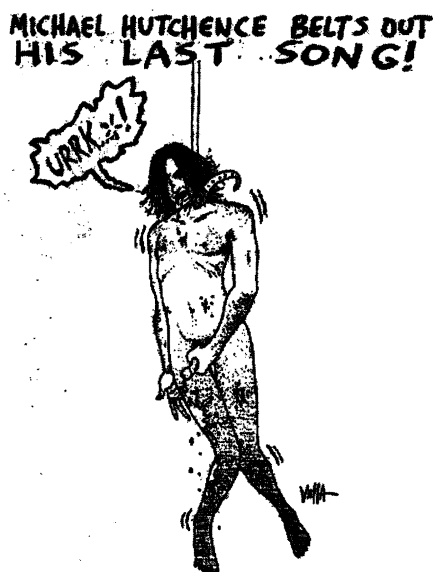

Fig. 12. Cartoon "Michael Hutchence Belts Out His Last Song" by Ryan Vella, *Sick Puppy Comix*.

There is also reference to death in the comics of Ben Hutchings who satirizes both North American popular culture and European fantasy mythology. In his mini-comic *Buckets Of Bile*, Hutchings mixes horror with humor, assembling numerous panels of grotesque violence, which are softened by their comic presentation. In "The Killer Foetus" this horror and humor combination is continued (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13. Extract from "The Killer Foetus" in *Buckets Of Bile* by Ben Hutchings.

One character is turned completely inside out and another is disembowelled. These scenes are handled in a humorous, schoolboy drawing style with resultant hilarity being communicated to the reader. He told me that "it was fun to draw organic things such as guts and blood and meat and stuff."[10] His explicit though humorous representation of violence makes a graphic comment on the more realistic depictions available in digital effects used in Hollywood films.

Subcultures

The influence of television cartoon shows, low budget cult movies, and European art film is apparent in the comics of Ross Tesoriero. Beginning with *Swamp Donkey*, Tesoriero has created several characters including "Ursula the Cannibal Girl" in his mini-comic *Radiation Sickness* that he named after a disease.
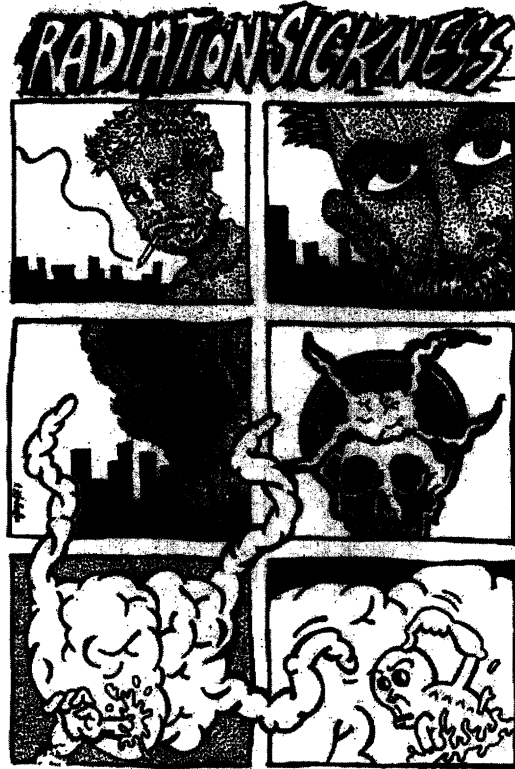
Fig. 14. Extract from *Radiation Sickness* by Ross Tesoriero.

Similar to a strain in Tesoriero's work (Fig. 14), a European influence is also in evidence in locally produced comics for the Gothic subculture. Several artists have demonstrated a leaning toward dark, graphic humor. Principal among these are David McDermott (alias Maccad) and Louise Graber.[11] Maccad has produced several issues of *GLITTER shy*, a collection of his comics, short stories, illustrations, cartoons, poems, and commentaries. His interpretation of the title of his comic is:

> A fear of all things cheap and worthless yet that make people happy, so into that you could shove things like fast food, a lot of aspects of pop culture especially music, bad movies, all those kind of things.[12]

Maccad's style, which in form is heavily influenced by Japanese manga, ranges along a continuum that has cuteness at one end and caricature at the other. His cute characters include a wide eyed, young Goth boy in cut-off camouflage patterned pants and *Korn* cap being ridiculed by a pair of older Goths who Maccad lampoons (Fig. 15). His child Goth character design is cute and Maccad utilizes his developing caricatural style to distort the facial

features of the older Goths to satiric effect through the exaggeration of their noses to a grotesque degree. This is contrasted with the virtual absence of the nose on the child Goth's face with a resultant cuteness. In distorting the older Goth's facial features, Maccad turns his cartoon representation of this character into a caricature, and in so doing, demonstrates that he is capable of criticizing the subculture to which he belongs. Acknowledging the autobiographical content of his comic, Maccad expounds:

> That is me and that's my room. It's very much me. It's not exactly me. I'm probably not that much of a loser but it's a lot like me. Although it does, I think, play on a lot of the stereotypes of the Goth subculture, it is very much like me.[13]

Fig. 15. Extract from *GLITTER shy* **by Maccad.**

Scatology

Evoking a different aspect of childhood is the work of Stuart Broughton (alias Stratu) who is the creator of the characters Shit Pete, Kurt Hurt, and Sick Rick, who appear in the anthology which he edits and publishes, *Sick Puppy Comix*. Shit Pete and his friends are drawn in a naive, elementary school style

Fig. 16. "Shit Christ" in *Sick Puppy Comix* by Stratu.

of art but located within a scatology context. In *Sick Puppy #6* his character Shit Pete comments on the "Piss Christ" art controversy with his own version of the piece titled "Shit Christ" (**Fig. 16**). A public row had erupted around an art exhibit titled "Piss Christ" by the artist Andres Serrano at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. The work featured a crucifix standing in a glass of the artist's urine. Following complaints from visitors to the exhibition, the work was withdrawn by the gallery director. The incident raised considerable discussion in the mainstream media about censorship in Australia. In Stratu's version, Pete defecates on a crucifix and constructs an installation from the resulting mess. He proclaims: "I am Shit Pete. And my religion is

SHIT!" The effect is both provocative and oppositional. As an anthology, *Sick Puppy Comix* displays a plurality of graphic styles in contrast to the commonality of its content, that ranges across the sex and violence continuum and frequently deals in a celebratory manner with the constant flow of bodily waste and fluids. While emphasizing humor, it adopts an avant-garde attitude and encourages its contributors to test both their own and their readers' personal boundaries of taste and creativity.

Regular *Sick Puppy* contributors Steve Carter and Antoinette Rydyr who, under the collaborative name of SCAR, an acronym constructed from their combined initials, consistently challenge the limits of graphic sex and violence. In their strip *Fartsack and Lardgutz* (1998), two of their regular characters reflect some of the public dissent prevalent at the time of the purchase of the Jackson Pollack painting *Blue Poles* by the Australian government. As well as lampooning the art market, the characters criticize the painting because it "looks like a technicolour yawn on a drop sheet!" before proceeding to create their own abstract work in Pollack's drip style using their bodily excrement in lieu of paint. Despite its experimental manifesto, *Sick Puppy Comix* retains a conservative streak in its treatment of sex themes through its absence of stories with gay and lesbian, and feminist content and an implied homophobic attitude.

The surfing culture is represented in comics by Mark Sutherland's *Gonad Man* (1996), the adventures of a nomadic, Australian male surfer. His mythology is established in the first issue. In addition to its visual descriptions of surfing life, the comic is a rich source of Australian slang and colloquial language. Australian world champion surfer, Mark Occhilupo, referred to simply as Okky, is portrayed as a male seeking refuge from the world and women. When asked by his girlfriend to a picnic he replies: "I'd rather poke mud crabs up my bum with a burning stick." To this end a sacred place is established where women are unwelcome and Gonad Man and his male mates are left alone to play pool and drink beer in a secure room that women can't enter. The escapist philosophy of the comic is summed up by Gonad Man when confronted by life's difficulties with the line: "You can all get rooted. I'm going surfing."

Stories of Subcultures and Shared Households

In terms of the number of titles published and the range and scale of distribution, Dillon Naylor has been the most prolific creator of alternative comics in Australia in the period 1990-2000. Naylor has described his comic *Pop Culture & 2 Minute Noodles* as "real + made up stories about sharehouse experience and a bunch of youth 'types' that interact."[14] A rear view of the backyard and the back of the house provides details about the characters and their lifestyle (**Fig. 17**).

Contributing to the scatology theme, the front cover of one issue shows the character Vic leaning against the back of the house and vomiting into the backyard as his four house mates look on in horror. Throughout his work Naylor demonstrates mastery of visual communication techniques through his control of the relationship between the frame and the narrative, and between the artist and the reader. By means of this careful control of the imagery on a basic and a symbolic level of visual communication, Naylor develops the storyline while directing the reader's attention.

Fig. 17. The backyard in *Pop Culture & 2 Minute Noodles* by Dillon Naylor.

Naylor has drawn on his own experiences of share-household living. He claims to have lived with approximately 50 different people in five houses, mostly in groups of five; however, the addition of live-in partners generally extended the population of each house to ten. This living experience has been used as the basis for the stories, although he claims to have altered genders

and changed or merged some personalities. In *Pop Culture & 2 Minute Noodles,* an interview process is normally used to select the new or replacement household members that will form the group, which will have to live like one "big, reluctant family."[15] This group will have to deal with an ongoing series of problems, such as "bill splitting" i.e. resolving the question of economic equity: "is a hair dryer on twice a day equal to a Playstation all night?"[16]

Drug and Music Culture

The work of Glenn Smith ranges from creative, autobiographical comics to commercial graphic design work for the Australian rock music industry, including the design and production of gig flyers, posters, and CD covers. He is both artist and musician, producing graphics and comics and exhibiting paintings as well as playing bass in bands such as Lawnsmell and Stitchface. Not surprisingly, music culture frequently features as a theme in his comics, sometimes literally as in the story of the fictional band Necrotardation, and at others times as a soundtrack to his characters' lives. Woven into his representation of music culture is his portrayal of drug culture. Both the music and drug themes are set against a backdrop of survival in Sydney in which he uses his own life-experiences as a basis for the stories.

Whether being humorous or passionate, the expression in Smith's work is intense. It contains no easily constructed images or typography. Instead the work gives the appearance of having been agonized and labored over. In discussing how he obtains or avoids this intensity, Smith pointed to the difference in effect of curved and straight lines, himself preferring the former variety:

> When you are talking emotionally and you have straight lines then it's just too intense. It's being intense all the time. I just find that when you're trying to show someone something about yourself which I suppose that comic (Cope) very much tries to do it's all about showing your guts.[17]

This manipulation of line to express emotion is an example of Smith's use of one of the formal elements of comics design. He also utilizes other elements including framing, typography, perspective, composition, layout, texture, and choice of materials. Line is a substantial component of Smith's art and he employs it not only to give shape and definition to his characters and their settings, but also to provide the effects of texture, light, and shade, the suggestion of movement, and even the typographic treatments of the words of dialogue and description which is generated by hand rather than by computer.

Creatively, the word organic seems appropriate to describe many of his

images and not surprisingly he uses this word to give an account of his approach to work. When developing stories he is prepared to let the sequences take shape on the page rather than finalizing things at the script stage. Commenting on his comic *The Sydney Morning Hell* (1998-2000) in general, and two images from it of characters waking up in Sydney, in particular, Smith acknowledged the role played by the reader in obtaining meaning from his work, and accepting whatever interpretation a reader might bring to it (Fig. 18):

> I wanted to do an image in every Sydney Morning Hell of just that Sydney morning hell, that spewing in the morning with the sun and the smell of the city and 'oh what did I do last night and who's this lying next to me?', that kind of thing. There's another one in the second one I think of a guy lying in the shower with ink all over himself, just lying there going uugghh! It's all sort of hung over mornings.[18]

Fig. 18. Waking up in Sydney from *The Sydney Morning Hell* by Glenn Smith.

Answers to questions of how the youth ended up on the floor of the shower, how he came to be covered in ink, and whether he may have even drunk some ink are left for the reader to determine. Acknowledging the role played by the reader in understanding comics, Smith provides no answers, even when questioned about them in interview: "I don't want to have to think about what the reader can think about. There's too many different sorts of readers."[18]

Visual Culture

Timothy J. Danko and his imprint, Dead Xerox Press, play in the postmodern domain of popular visual culture, appropriating existing images and cartoon characters, repositioning them in new contexts, creating new associations and having them speak with different voices. The resulting rearrangement of these elements of visual culture produces a critique of that culture and encourages the possibilities of alternative interpretations.

Jean and Rolly in "Rewritten Materials" is another comic strip found in *Wallpaper...Air-Scraped Through Darkness: 1986-1998* (1998) (**Fig. 19**). It features the use of other creators' cat and mouse characters combined in new settings. These appropriations are acknowledged with a line of creators' names. The comic strip consists of four panels, the first two feature mice, the last two feature cats, and in each pair, the main protagonist, the largest, is repeated alone in the second of the panels. In this case the principal protagonists are the Hanna-Barbera designed duo, Tom and Jerry. In the first panel, Jerry the mouse is accompanied by a thought balloon displaying the word "Remember!!" inside it. In the second panel this balloon changes from thought to speech and Jerry speaks the word "Re-Member!!!" Tom the cat is accompanied by a thought balloon in panel three containing the word "Remember??" Robert Crumb's character Fritz the Cat is staring at Tom, while in the background, George Herriman's feline character, Krazy Kat, looks off into the distance. In the final panel, Tom vocalizes the unpronounceable word "...??!?...." Lines from Lyotard and Barthes are used as foreground decoration, superimposed over the assembled collage of characters and employed as visual elements of the panels as much as text. The characters seem displaced and reflective, lost in this new space, again representing a major shift from their role as entertainment figures. When questioned about his use of other artists' images and the fact that he didn't necessarily obtain permission from the creators for doing this, Danko responded:

> It's a real weird kind of moral thing where I consider each individual thing. You know like I feel like I'm responsible if I'm using someone's work to do it properly and that's like a motivation to do a really good job and using it hopefully in a reasonable context...I suppose it changes

the meaning of their stuff so I think no one's going to be real happy about it. It's a bit like sampling, you know if their stuff's sampled without permission, music, they get really upset.[19]

Fig. 19. "Rewritten Materials" from *Wallpaper/Scraped Through Darkness* by Tim Danko.

In his comics Danko is concerned with the communication of ideas. This affects his working methods to the extent that the visuals follow and are constructed around his concept for the work: "I think I come up with what I want to say and then build the image around that."[20] He also endeavors to convey an expression of emotion in his comics as he explains in this comment about the potential feeling that reading a successful piece of visual communication can generate:

> To create the space between word and image where (hopefully) something indescribable can occur, where a meaning or representation that falls between the word and image can exist. When it works, it can be amazingly, serene, rapturous, ecstatic.[21]

Conclusions

The content of contemporary Australian alternative comics tends not to be formulaic but more motivated by the personal experiences and expression of the creator. These alternative comics present a wide range of graphic styles. The creators seem well versed in the area of visual communication, both as a graphic technique and a means of communicating ideas, and consequently their work provides readers with a rich menu of examples. The creative culture produced, while often attacking mainstream ideas and forms of visual representation, may at times also be indulgent, unrefined, and naively drawn. Interestingly, during a period of the development and accessibility of technologically driven new media such as computer games, digital animation, interactive CD-ROM, DVD, the Internet, and digital photography and video, there has been a curious flowering of hand-made comic art in the print media in Australia. Creators fascinated with natural media, drawing in ink on paper

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and producing comics, photocopying and distributing their work by hand and by post, have somehow survived during this simultaneous period of high technology development and contributed to Australian visual culture in a modest yet memorable way.

Note: Illustrations copyright of respective creators.

Endnotes

[1] The completed research can be found in the unpublished doctoral thesis, Michael Hill. 2003. "A Study of Contemporary Australian Alternative Comics 1992-2000 With Particular Reference To the Work Of Naylor, Smith, Danko And Ord." Macquarie University, Sydney.

[2] See Hughes: *The Art Of Australia.*

[3] Mathematically unique, no other size allows paper to be cut, or folded, in half and yet retain the same proportion.

[4] Interview with Kieran Mangan at the Goldberg Café, Newcastle, 1999.

[5] Interview with Anton Emdin at the Craven Café, Glebe, 1998.

[6] Interview with Anna Brown at Newcastle Young Writers' Festival, 2000.

[7] Interview with Jo Waite at Comic-Fest, Sydney, 2001.

[8] Interview with Clint Cure at the Goldberg Café, Newcastle, 1999

[9] Issue #3 of *Wilnot*, self-published by Mandy Ord.

[10] Interview with Ben Hutchings at Comic-Fest, Sydney, 2000.

[11] For a detailed analysis of Graber's work, see, "Australian Gothic: Black Light Angels, Fashion and Subcultural Style" by Vicki Karaminas, elsewhere in this issue.

[12] Interview with David McDermott at the Universal Café, Ultimo, 1999.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Interview with Dillon Naylor at the Universal Café, Ultimo, 1998.

[15] Ibid

[16] Interview with Dillon Naylor at the Universal Café, Ultimo, 2000.

[17] Interview with Glenn Smith at his home in Penshurst, Sydney, 1999.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Interview with Glenn Smith at my home in Glebe, Sydney, 2001.

[20] Interview with Tim Danko at the Goldberg Café, Newcastle, 1999.

[21] Answer to Small Press Survey.

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