



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 24/17 (2017-0024)

Project manager: Kristy Beers Fägersten

Project title: A multidisciplinary study of feminist comic art

1. Purpose of the project

The purpose of this project was to conduct descriptive and comparative analyses of feminist comic art and graphic novels from Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Russia. The international, multidisciplinary team of researchers was united by a focus on comics as political action and social commentary, looking specifically at the role of comic art in operationalizing a feminist movement. To this end, the project members have, in various publications and events, explicated how form, language, and materiality serve as vehicles for depicting female perspectives, sharing private trauma, addressing taboo subjects, exploring sexuality, or challenging gender roles. Furthermore, the team has investigated how feminist critique is communicated and made accessible - and how violent, abusive, discriminatory, or embarrassing experiences are rendered all the more disarming - when depicted in the medium of comic art and through a humorous framing, in particular via the use of satire and irony.

With the inclusion of works by creators from Sweden, its neighboring countries of Germany and Finland, and additionally from Russia, a transnational perspective on the feminist comics landscape of the Baltic Sea region has been adopted in the project. The transnational approach also acknowledges recurring strategies of visualizing and narrating female experiences, and similarities in aesthetics, materiality, and thematic content. An overall common focus on depicting the personal as political is evident in the source material analysed by the project members and collaborators. Significantly, the comic art in focus encompasses themes of gender, sexuality, power, vulnerability, assault, abuse, taboo, and trauma, often expressed with humorous undertones of nostalgia, anxiety, or social criticism. These themes are further substantiated through visual means, as much of the imagery is overwhelmingly characterized by overt corporeality, with bodies depicted as grotesque caricatures, often distorted, dismembered, or in sexually explicit detail.

Accounting for themes and materiality has required a multidisciplinary and intersectional approach. The investigation of feminist comic art and graphic narrative was conducted by a seven-member team representing the Baltic Sea region and the disciplines of linguistics, literary studies, gender studies, art history, and history with the aim of collaboratively exploring visual and verbal strategies in comics as a medium of feminist critique. Over-arching research questions included:

- In what way are feminist ideas and politics expressed thematically, visually, and linguistically through the comics medium?
- How are constructions of corporeality, sexuality, and gender called into question or renegotiated by the visual and material affordances of comics?
- How do strategies of verbal and visual rhetoric in comics encode resistance to or compliance with social and cultural norms?
- How do verbal and visual expressions of affect, emotion, trauma, and power constitute forms of feminist critique in the medium of comic art?



- What are the national characteristics, salient distinguishing features, and transnational commonalities of women's comic art and graphic narrative in the Baltic Sea region?

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them:

1. In many national contexts, the concept of “women's comics” prevails, threatening to undermine the value of the social and political issues addressed in feminist comic art. However, as the project demonstrates, the national dominance of Swedish feminist comic art (initiated by a few individuals but now attributed to many) has evolved to international recognition and has had transnational reverberations. In the Baltic Sea region, individual feminist comics artists have distinguished themselves, such as Kati Kovács in Finland, Varvara Pomodor in Russia, Wanda Hagedorn in Poland, and Anke Feuchtenberger and Ulli Lust in Germany. However, the success of the genre as a result of the Swedish market is translating to national and international success for more feminist comic artists, and ultimately for greater transnational recognition of feminist comic art.

2. Feminist comic art shows evidence of a transnational deployment of humor, specifically satire, as a rhetorical strategy. While the political and social issues addressed in feminist comic art include decidedly non-humorous issues such as gender inequality, gender norms, sexual abuse, discrimination, and trauma, their perpetrators are satirized, often scathingly, and often with a pedagogical approach that historicizes and contextualizes the issues, rendering them more accessible and serving to appeal to a wide(r) audience.

3. The surrounding society, with its political situation, gender expectations, legislation, and cultural norms, affects the kinds of feminist ideas that creators may choose to tackle in their work, but inspiration for their work has transnational roots. For many women in the Baltic Sea region, feminism was alien or inaccessible, particularly for those who have grown up in a communist state or have been exposed to state and church propaganda of patriarchy and misogyny. Encounters with feminist comic art, especially from other countries, serve to raise a feminist consciousness and have inspired creators from the Baltic Sea region, such that many creators cite each other as influences for their own comic art. Notably, the project has highlighted the need for international activities that 1) amplify the messages of feminist comic art, 2) support the comics creators and the dissemination of their comic art, 3) allow for creative exchange among feminist comics artists and comics collectives, and 4) promote research that highlights the impact and importance of feminist comic art.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline:

The project has aimed to explore how the relationship between comic art and feminism has been shaped by global, transnational, and local trends. While comic art is deeply enmeshed in local histories and contexts, the rise of graphic narrative genres in multiple national contexts may, at the same time, in itself be seen as an effect of cultural globalisation. Indeed, given that comic art has always been an international form, it is no surprise that comics should also create, reflect, and respond to trends of globalisation. Transnational connections, that is, aesthetic, social, political, economic, and cultural interaction reaching across national boundaries, can further shape the cultures of comics and graphic narratives. The project aimed to create transnational interaction between artists, audiences, and researchers, and to enable a transnational flow of ideas and narratives via collaborative



work, such as project participation at the Nordic Summer University (NSU) Winter Symposium, “Comics and Materiality” at Aarhus University, Denmark (2019); a project panel discussion at the Comics Studies Society conference “COMICS/POLITICS” in Toronto, Canada (2019); a project symposium, “Comics and Feminism,” co-organized with the NSU Study Circle, “Comics and Society: Research, Art, and Cultural Politics” and held at Södertörn University (2020); and the project anthology, *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives* (2021), comprising twelve chapters on feminist comic art in Sweden, Finland, Germany, Austria, Russia, and Poland.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The focus on the Baltic Sea region raises the question of whether it is possible to find a transnational common denominator for feminist comic art. Are feminist comics connected by certain aesthetic qualities or themes? Is there a shared conception of feminism that is recognizable in the comics produced in the Baltic Sea region? As much as there is an exchange of ideas and aesthetic influences between artists in different countries, there are local varieties specific to countries and individual artists. Furthermore, variations in contemporary conceptions of feminism seem to depend on varying historical conditions and experiences in the different countries. There is also a great variety of genres, media, and narrative styles represented in the feminist comic art of the Baltic Sea region. Thus, identifying or categorising feminist comic art can be considered an on-going exercise in recognizing variations on shared aesthetic, discursive, and ideological themes.

The project members specifically see the act of women drawing their bodies across pages and in panels as a radical gesture that has heretofore been under-theorized and should be positioned alongside similar strategies in contemporary feminist visual art to assess the role of comics in 20th and 21st century feminist art activism. Situating political interventions by feminist comics artists in the context of other innovations in feminist art, the project raises further questions of how such work can be put in dialogue with feminist movements in other media, ultimately demonstrating their position in the larger category of feminist artistic production and feminist art history. The form itself is theorized as a kind of feminist methodology, illustrating how comic art is particularly adept at representing – and often explicitly seeks to engage – feminist and gender studies issues, theory, and discourse. In this regard, the project also raises the question of how theories of pedagogy can be applied to interpret contemporary feminist comic art in terms of norm-critique.

Finally, considering the current state of the world, in which one crisis seemingly succeeds another, we can expect a variety of lived experiences, consequences, and commentary to be documented in many ways, including in the medium of comic art and graphic narrative. Feminist comic art, especially that which reflects the continuous flux between transnational and local influences, has the potential to proliferate, thus not only responding to but also creating political and cultural debate. The project has thus paved the way for continued transnational investigations which reach into the far corners of the world to shine a spotlight on lesser-known comic art and comics artists.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

The project’s point of departure is the comic art landscape of Sweden, where the history of feminist comics that explore the political through the personal has established comics artists as influential social commentators and powerful political activists. Many Swedish



female comics artists have garnered mainstream popularity and critical acclaim for their feminist perspectives and scathing but humorous social commentary. While positioned for comparison to their Anglo-American contemporaries, Swedish artists nevertheless deviate from the established aesthetic with similar yet singular styles of illustration and multimodal ways of interacting with materiality. These contemporary feminist comics artists can thus be considered pioneers with regards to their depictions of female experiences, and topics such as politics, class, gender, sexualities, and other issues of equality, and be credited with operationalising a feminist movement in Sweden.

When female creators started to become more common and visible on the comics landscape in the Baltic Sea region, starting in the 1980s but gaining momentum in the 2000s, there was a need to categorise their art as “women’s comics” in comparison to the decidedly established norm of male-dominated comics. The cultural conversation about the necessity of the label “women’s comics” has continued, and the label’s positive and negative connotations have been discussed. As the field becomes more diverse, the need for categorising comics based on the artist’s gender has become obsolete. Furthermore, when discussing feminist comics and their distinctive features, it is of utmost importance to consider the differences between genres, artists, and generations of artists, since both the cultural and political contexts for making comics change over time. Comparing Sweden to such Baltic Sea countries as Finland, Poland, and Russia, women cartoonists have had to defend their new place in the earlier male-dominated industry until just recently, now that women are no longer a rare sight among the readers, students, or creators of comics. Additionally, the ways in which feminism is understood has changed over time; debates about intersectionality, the rights of non-binary and transpeople, mental health, and body positivity have become more important and increasingly relevant topics, especially for many younger comics artists during the 2000s and 2010s. While this trend was set to continue into the 2020s, societal and political developments in parts the Baltic Sea region represent a threat to the claimed rights, which we predict will be thematized in continued feminist comic art.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Dissemination of the results of the project were ongoing throughout the duration of the project, in the form of:

- a project anthology (1) with chapters (6) from each of the project members
- collaborative and individually-authored open access publications (10)
- additional targeted or invited publications (5)
- invited public lectures (7)
- project-wide collaborative presentations at international conferences (3)

Additional project activity included (unplanned/fortuitous) collaboration 1) with research networks, such as Nordic Network for Comics Research (NNCORE) and The Comics Studies Society (CSS); 2) with research projects, such as the Nordic Summer University Study Circle, “Comics and Society: Research, Art, and Cultural Politics (2019-2021)”, “Visualities of Gender in German-Language Comics” (ongoing), and “Feminist Swedish Comics as Medium for Political Activism and Critique” (2019-2022); and 3) with additional research funding organizations, such as *Kulturfonden för Sverige och Finland*, *Wenner-Gren Stiftelsen*, and *Ottarfonden*.



The project had the very good fortune of completing its own planned conference just weeks before the pandemic rendered such activity impossible. The conference was organized by the project, but reflected a collaboration with the Nordic Summer University Study Circle, “Comics and Society: Research, Art, and Cultural Politics.” As project leader, Kristy Beers Fägersten took main responsibility for the conference, but each of the project members was involved, as were the leaders of the Study Circle, Anna Vuorinne and Laura Antola. The conference offered the opportunity to collaborate with comics artists such as Moa Romanova (Sweden), H-P Lehkonen (Finland), and Ingrīda Pičukāne (Latvia); with comics artists and publishers such as Sofia Olsson and Nina Hemmingsson; with publishers such as Kartago/Cobolt; and with the Stockholm comics library, *Serieteket*. The conference was subsequent to a call for papers for the project anthology, and as such it provided an opportunity for the project members and other included researchers to present and receive feedback on their chapter drafts. The anthology and conference were thus specifically planned as coordinated project activities. The conference was open to the public and the anthology will be available as open access as of 2024.

Project anthology (available as open access 2024; hard copy to be submitted):

Beers Fägersten, Kristy, Anna Nordenstam, Leena Romu, and Margareta Wallin Victorin (eds.). *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*. London: Routledge (2021).

Anthology chapters by project members:

- Alaniz, José. “Staring Back at History: Varvara Pomidor and Russian Comics.” In *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region*, pp. 239-253. London: Routledge (2021).
- Beers Fägersten, Kristy, Leena Romu, Anna Nordenstam, and Margareta Wallin Victorin “Feminist Comic Art: An Expanding Field.” In *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, pp. 1-13. London: Routledge (2021).
- Beers Fägersten, Kristy. “A Woman’s Place (in the panel): Positioning and Framing in Comics by Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg.” In *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, pp. 40-57. London: Routledge (2021).
- Classon Frangos, Mike. “Feminist and Queer Aesthetics in Tove Jansson’s Moomin Comics.” In *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, pp. 151-168. London: Routledge (2021).
- Nijdam, Elizabeth. ““What’s in a Name?” Anke Feuchtenberger’s Roses and the Mythic Methodologies of her Feminist Comic Art.” In *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, pp. 83-104. London: Routledge (2021).
- Nordenstam, Anna, and Margareta Wallin Victorin. “Swedish Feminist Comics and Cartoons at the Turn of the Millennium: Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall (Schagerström).” In *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, pp. 17-39. London: Routledge (2021).
- Romu, Leena. “The Narrative Complexity of Showing and Telling Sexual Harassment and Violence in Kati Kovács’s Comics.” In *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*, pp. 195-214. London: Routledge (2021).

Open access publications:

Alaniz, Jose. “‘We Are Here’: Queer Comics in Russia.” *ImageText* 13.1 (2021).
<https://imagetextjournal.com/we-are-here-queer-comics-in-russia/>



- Alaniz, Jose. Genocide, Armenian Comics and Mangasaryan's *Prior to the Auction of Souls*." International Comics Arts Forum 2020. Virtual Conference Blog. December 17, 2020. <http://www.internationalcomicartsforum.org/icaf-2020-virtual-conference-blog-posts/genocide-armenian-comics-and-mangasaryans-prior-to-the-auction-of-souls>.
- Alaniz, Jose. "ShUV, Death and the 1990s in Russian Comics." *All The Russias Blog*. NYU Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia. June 8, 2020. <https://jordanrussiacycenter.org/news/shuv-death-and-the-1990s-in-russian-comics/#.YU4ulrhKjb0>.
- Alaniz, José. "The Shoah, Czech Comics and Drda/Mazal's "The Enormous Disc of the Sun"." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 17, no. 1 (2018): 64-78. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14725886.2017.1382102?casa_token=I2A-iN36olAAAAAA:lzaPDC7cnb7Dw5RBZYLKPJXKGd-o4depheLYySGhqAkrCATHCkqbZr0m6D3WIXF17AxS9RyPsVw2
- Beers Fägersten, Kristy, Anna Nordenstam, and Margareta Wallin Wictorin. "Satirizing the Nuclear Family in the Comic Art of Liv Strömquist." *ImageText* 13.1 (2021). <https://imagetextjournal.com/satirizing-the-nuclear-family-in-the-comic-art-of-liv-stromquist/>
- Beers Fägersten, Kristy, Leena Romu, Anna Nordenstam, and Margareta Wallin Wictorin (eds.). "Feminist Comic Art is Spreading in the Baltic Sea Region." *Baltic Worlds* XIV, no. 3 (2021): 43-46. <https://balticworlds.com/feminist-comic-art-is-spreading-in-the-baltic-sea-region/>
- Classon Frangos, Mike. "Swedish Norm-Critical Comics and the Comics Pedagogy of Lynda Barry." *Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 11, no. 1 (2021). <https://www.comicsgrid.com/article/id/4042/>
- Classon Frangos, Mike. "Liv Strömquist's *Fruit of Knowledge* and the Gender of Comics." *European Comic Art* 13, no. 1 (2020): 45-69. <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/eca/13/1/eca130104.xml>
- Nijdam, Elizabeth. "Transnational Girlhood and the Politics of Style in German Manga." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 11, no. 1 (2020): 31-51. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/21504857.2019.1652664?casa_token=PXby4NrziH0AAAAA:G_uCoaidihNexSfwAm_glbgb9L-1kEstOIFH1Va387BxFH7O3V-23UjylKEF06HgXU7SE9nCx2S
- Nijdam, Elizabeth. "The Expressionist Aesthetics of Anke Feuchtenberger's Graphic Art." *ImageText*. Special issue: Comics and Fine Art, 10.3 (May 2019). <https://imagetextjournal.com/the-expressionist-aesthetics-of-anke-feuchtenbergers-graphic-narrative/>

Additional publications:

- Alaniz, Jose. "Survilo and Historical Trauma in Contemporary Russian Comics." *International Journal of Comic Art*. Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall/Winter, 2020): 5-32.
- Beers Fägersten, Kristy. *Language Play in Contemporary Swedish Comic Strips*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton (2020). (Chapters 1 & 2 were written as part of the funded research project)
- Beers Fägersten, Kristy. "Linguistics: Comics Conversations as Data in Swedish Comic Strips." In Matthew Smith, Randy Duncan and Matthew Brown (eds.), *More Critical Approaches to Comics. Theories and Methods*, pp. 145-159. London: Routledge (2019).
- Nijdam, Elizabeth. "A comics *Écriture Féminine*: Anke Feuchtenberger's Feminist Graphic Expression." In Frederick Aldama (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to*



Gender and Sexuality in Comic Book Studies, pp. 213-227. London: Routledge (2020).

Wallin Victorin, Margareta and Anna Nordenstam. "Meta Reflections on Studies of Swedish Feminist Comics." In Maggie Gray and Ian Horton (eds.), *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan (2022).

Wallin Victorin, Margareta and Anna Nordenstam. "Feminist Art History as an Approach to Research on Comics: Meta Reflections on Studies of Swedish Feminist Comics". In *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form*, edited by Maggie Gray and Ian Horton, 163-183. Cham: Springer Nature (2022).

Invited lectures:

Alaniz, Jose. "Talking About Disability in Superhero Comics." Parsek 1. Tbilisi, Georgia. 22 December 2019.

Alaniz, Jose. "Comics in Russia." University of Tampere, Finland. 9 September 2018.

Beers Fägersten, Kristy, Anna Nordenstam, and Margareta Wallin Victorin. "Satirizing the Nuclear Family in the Comic Art of Liv Strömquist." Visualities of Gender in German-Language Comics, University of Vienna, 14-15 December 2020.

Classon Frangos, Mike. "Feminist Comics: Popular Aesthetics and Cultural Critique." HUMlab, Umeå University, February 2018.

Nijdam, Elizabeth. "Comics as Performance Art: The Female Body and Transnational Feminist Art Histories in Comics and Graphic Novels." Visualities of Gender in German-Language Comics, University of Vienna, 14-15 December 2020.

Nordenstam, Anna, Margareta Wallin Victorin and Kristy Beers Fägersten. "*Satir, språk och samhällskritik i Liv Strömquists tecknade serier*." Retorikcentrum, Gothenburg University, 3 October 2019.

Romu, Leena. "The Narrative Complexity of Showing and Telling Sexual Violence - Kati Kovács's Comics as a Test Case." Keynote lecture, Nordic Summer University Winter Symposium: *Comics and Feminism*. Södertörn University, 19-21 February 2020.

Project conference activity:

- **Nordic Summer University Winter Symposium: *Comics and Feminism*. Södertörn University, 19-21 February 2020** (organized by the project).
 - Alaniz, Jose. "The Russian Comic Art of Varvara Pomidor."
 - Nordenstam, Anna, and Margareta Wallin Victorin. "Swedish Feminist Comics at the Turn of the Millennium: Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall (Schagerström)."
 - Nijdam, Elizabeth. "Anke Feuchtenberger's Comics Semiotics: Deconstructing Feminine Myths in 'Rosen' and 'No Roses'."
- **The Comics Studies Society: *COMICS/POLITICS*. Ryerson University (Toronto), 25-27 July 2019.**
 - Alaniz, Jose, Kristy Beers Fägersten, Mike Classon Frangos, Elizabeth Nijdam, Anna Nordenstam, Leena Romu and Margareta Wallin Victorin. Conference roundtable. "A Multidisciplinary Investigation of Feminist Comic Art in the Baltic Sea Region." (Roundtable to present the project; each project member presented their ongoing research.)



- Classon Frangos, Mike. “Pedagogy and Politics in the Comics of Lynda Barry.”
- Nordenstam, Anna, and Margareta Wallin Wictorin. “Satire as a Political Strategy in Swedish Feminist Comics.”
- **Nordic Summer University Winter Symposium: *Materialities of Comics*. Aarhus University, 20-22 February 2019.**
 - Beers Fägersten, Kristy. “The Case for Applying Conversation Analysis to Comics.”
 - Nordenstam, Anna, and Margareta Wallin Wictorin. “Draw the line – Swedish Feminist Comics Artists’ Material Contribution to the #MeToo Movement.”
 - Romu, Leena. “Dynamics of exclusion and inclusion – reflections on the discussion of gender inequality in the Finnish comics field during 1980-1990.”

Other conference activity:

- **International Comics Arts Forum. *Virtual Conference*. 4 February 2021.**
 - Alaniz, Jose. “Genocide, Armenian Comics and Mangasaryan’s *Prior to the Auction of Souls*.”
- ***Izotext International Comics Conference*. Russian State Library for Youth, Moscow. Zoom Conference, 6 November 2020.**
 - Alaniz, Jose. “Yulia Nikitina and Non-Fiction Comics in Russia.”
- ***Tampere Kuplii Goes Academic*. Tampere University, 22 March 2019.**
 - Romu, Leena. “Nauravat nartut – Huumori ja feministinen sarjakuva Suomessa 1990- ja 2000-luvuilla [Laughing bitches – Humor and feminist comics in Finland during the 1990s and 2000s]”
- **13th Annual Conference of the German Society for Comics Studies (ComFor): *Spaces Between – Gender, Diversity and Identity*. University of Cologne, 19 September 2018.**
 - Alaniz, Jose. “Trans*Siberia and Queer Comics in Russia.”
- ***Kulttuuripolitiikan tutkimuksen päivät 2018*. University of Turku, 08 November 2018.**
 - Romu, Leena. “Naiset suomalaisella sarjakuvakentällä – kamppailuja asemasta, käytännöistä ja esitystavoista [Women in the Finnish comics field – struggles about position, practices, and representation].”