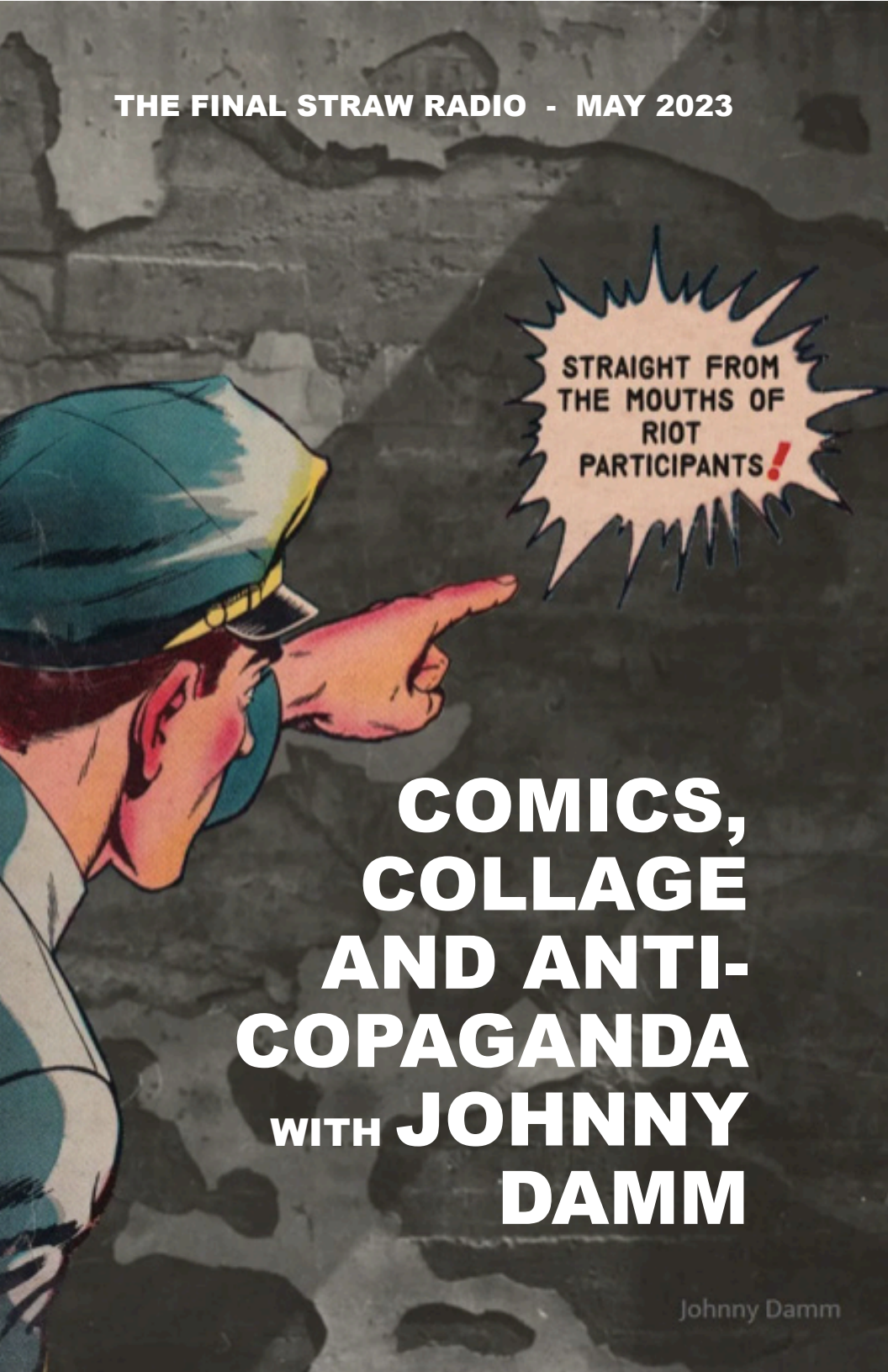


THE FINAL STRAW RADIO - MAY 2023



**STRAIGHT FROM
THE MOUTHS OF
RIOT
PARTICIPANTS!**

**COMICS,
COLLAGE
AND ANTI-
COPAGANDA
WITH JOHNNY
DAMM**

Johnny Damm

This week, a new contributor, Ian, talks to cartoonist and educator Johnny Damm about his recent releases *"I'm a Cop,"* featuring dialogue from Police Union speeches and *"RIOT COMICS: Tompkins Square Park,"* which explores the 1988 Tompkins Square Riot in which Police evicted an unhoused encampment in the park on New York's Lower East Side. They discuss the collage technique by which Damm assembles his comics, how his work dovetails with the larger work of abolition, and the role of propaganda in movement-making. Listeners can follow Johnny Damm on twitter **@dammjohnny** (with two m's) and on IG **@johnny.damm**. His website is **johnnydamm.com**

TFSR: *So can you say a little bit about yourself, including your preferred pronouns, and any organizations or affiliations you want to mention?*

JOHNNY DAMM: Sure, I'm Johnny Damm, he/him, and I'm an artist and a cartoonist. I previously published with a publisher called The Operating System who has recently ceased publishing, so I'm currently mainly unaffiliated.

TFSR: *Okay, so we are here today to discuss your comics work. Can you tell me a little bit about the process by which you assemble your comics? I'm speaking, in particular, about your recent releases: "I'm a Cop", and I believe the other title is RIOT COMICS: Tompkins Square Park.*

JOHNNY DAMM: RIOT COMICS.

My comics are all research based, and I guess you could say, along with being made, they're assembled. I start my comics looking for the materials that I'm interested in working with. Part of that research, in the voices that I want in the comics, because with both "*I'm a Cop*" and *RIOT COMICS*, they're entirely made of text from other people, from other voices. I'd say the first part of me making comics is finding those voices. I guess, before that, you could say the subject.

So with "*I'm a Cop*" I spent a couple of years paying attention to all the public statements I could find of US police union leaders. Once I'd amassed enough statements, I then began to think about how to make them into comics, and I came up with the idea, in that case, of making them into horror comics. I combined the text, the statements, with images from early '50s, sort of "pre code" crime comics, and some photographs. I put these together through collage. I think that's how I ended up assembling the final work.

With *RIOT COMICS*, I was using the voices of participants in the Tompkins Square Riot from the Lower East Side, New York 1988. In that case, I was combining it with imagery from depression era photography and "pre code" crime comics.

TFSR: *Okay, and just for any of the non comic book readers out here, can you just clarify what "pre code" means?*

JOHNNY DAMM: “Pre code” means before 1954. In 1954, comics mass-censored themselves. In doing so they really, really messed up the the medium and the industry. A good deal of the comics industry went out of business, and they had to stop publishing the majority of crime comics, pretty much all horror comics. And after that point, a medium which had been really widely read by adults, children, surprisingly diverse in terms of creators. After the code, comics were sort of forced to be appropriate for children for a time, and the diversity of the creators and the diversity of the readership really, really shrunk. So that’s the distinction and why I have a particular interest in “pre code” comics.

TFSR: *For those who don't know, in the venue of small press publishing, the typical ways to do it are either just straight self publication or by crowdfunding them. Now, if I'm correct, I believe that you self published this. Is that right?*

JOHNNY DAMM: Yes, both these comics were self published. I don't actually crowd fund just because I don't really like having to try to sell myself in that way. Like I was saying earlier, I'd published with a publisher for some years. I think a lot of the really exciting work that's coming out of comics often is in self published and mini comics.

So with “*I'm a Cop*”, I didn't want to wait for a publisher, among other things. And I also was sort of done with it. I didn't want to spend any more time studying police unions. So I put that out myself. That was my first self published comic. Now I'm sort of committed to putting out a couple of comics a year. That means I don't have distribution, which is a little tricky, but I have managed to still get it into a handful of stores worldwide. “*I'm a Cop*”, I would say, has traveled around quite a bit.

TFSR: *I believe you've sold upwards of 2000 copies, right? That's a pretty huge number for this kind of a release. Am I right about that?*

JOHNNY DAMM: Oh, yeah, I've sold just just over 2000 at this point. I'm not gonna lie, that was a total surprise. I mean, if you still pick up “*I'm a Cop*”, it actually says on the inside jacket that there was only 250 copies because that was my original run. Honestly, in the small press publishing world, it's the same thing with comics and books, typically people are only selling a couple hundred copies of things.

So in this case, I had posted about it on Twitter, and I'd done a thread on Twitter about it that really gained a lot of interest. So I immediately had to rush through to a new printing of it. It's sold quite a bit. I got contacted by stores. In the case of "I'm a Cop", I think the subject matter, maybe the concept, a little bit of the book, I think it also is really just about that people are interested in unconventional approaches to issues of policing in the US and criticisms of policing in the US.

I think that book, at least for my standards, really caught fire unexpectedly.

TFSR: *It's not presented in a way that people are used to consuming this kind of information. I don't know if abstract is the right word, but given that approach, I don't want to say it's a difficult approach, but it's an unconventional approach. What do you think, has allowed it to resonate so much with people? Do you think it's strictly the subject matter? Or do you think that your work frames it in a unique way?*

JOHNNY DAMM: That's an interesting question. One of the reasons it reads fairly abstract, I think, even as a comic, is that I have a visual poetry background, to an extent. I certainly have a comics background, and I'm thinking about it as comics, but I'm not trying to be literal in terms of my approach, in terms of how I present the material. I think maybe when you're talking about such, in some ways, hard to digest material as this, because in "I'm a Cop", the cops really say terrible things. It's ugly. Certainly people were interested in that. When I originally started talking about it online, people were interested in this as a way to present research, like alternative ways to present research. I think that was part of what made people interested in it conceptually.

The other part of it is its existence as a comic. I'd say the the great power of comics, is that we're trained to read them. We're all just so used to it from from childhood on, to read comics, that we find comics easy. We have this perhaps mistaken idea that a comic is easy. So it feels easy and that allows comics makers to put in really hard subjects in some ways. Formally too, people do really complicated things on the page, and the readers just kind of straightforward accept it. So presenting challenging material, political material, comics is a really natural form for that because there's an openness, I think, that comics readers bring to the page that other mediums don't necessarily have, at least to that extent.

TFSR: *Sure. So as a lifetime comic book reader, even now, when I think the reputation of comics are kind of the highest they've been, I still feel like it is a pretty marginalized medium. So when I think of comics that I find to be uniquely made or uniquely provoking, I like to imagine how they will be perceived by someone given no context, like someone who stumbles on it years later in a dollar bin. In what context do you think your work is at its most impactful?*

JOHNNY DAMM: Hmm, context. Now that's a really interesting question. "I'm a Cop" in particular has moved through various contexts. It was an academic who contacted me, actually two academics that contacted me who bought copies to teach in their classrooms. That was a surprise because I certainly never thought about the context of someone picking it up in a classroom and thinking about it in that way. But it's interesting, it's flattering, and it's an interesting challenge to think, "What is appropriate for a classroom?"

I would say sort of contextually, I would hope that it would be legible for anybody in any context. I love dollar bins. I love long boxes of dollar comics, or quarter comics, or 50 cent comics. They tend to be dollar comics now. But just randomly stumbling upon really interesting works. I would hope that that would be an ideal sort of venue for my work in many years. But I'm not entirely sure.

TFSR: *Okay.*

YOUR COMICS ARE HARD TO DESCRIBE, BUT AN OVERSIMPLIFIED VERSION WOULD BE: You have a figure from comics juxtaposed against the field of a photographic background. I feel like the figures you selected for both "I'm a Cop" and *RIOT COMICS* are static within the photographs that you selected. They also seem to be more focused on details of larger pictures than some of your previous work. If I'm right about that, would you say that that is a metaphor for the stagnant persistence of the issue? That it's kind of like a gridlock?

JOHNNY DAMM: Ah, I like that idea. I certainly think with "I'm a Cop", I meant "I'm a Cop" to read very statically. I'd say that formally, I was thinking of the comics panels as a grid, in some ways. I literally use comics as an overlay. I do this kind of strange thing, which is that I take old comics and scan them and cut out what's inside the panels, and sometimes I remake the panels a little bit, but then I overlay a photograph with the page with

the panels cut out. Then I begin to put in other elements, other collage elements, to make the page.

Certainly when I was doing it with the cops, something about the voice of the police, I meant each page as a static moment. I'm not thinking about in terms of narrative or really even sequence. So even though there is a movement of it, and in some cases there will be figures that you could say are sequential in one way or another. I didn't think of that in terms of a metaphor for how the issue is sort of immovable at this point, but I quite like that, and that works for me, and it certainly might have been somewhere along the way in the process.

RIOT COMICS, I think I was doing something a little bit different because in that case, I'm not always using a single photograph for the background. I do sometimes, but that one has a little bit more variety because in that comic, there's moments where I wanted it to capture the feel of an actual scene, like little bit of a sense of narrative and particularly of the sense of the rioting and the moments.

TFSR: *Absolutely. So you've spoken a little bit about the source material for the comic portion of the collage. I wonder if you could say a little bit about the photos that you use to create your work? Because there is, if I understand correctly, a consistency to where you're pulling these from.*

JOHNNY DAMM: Yeah, I actually have been pulling my photos from the same place, for all my comics actually, since an almost a decade. The photographs I use are old depression era, WPA, specifically Farm Security Administration photographs from the Great Depression. I started using those partially because I liked the idea of using them. They're literally ours. The government commissioned them, they were arguably designed to be about the state of the US. That's what they were documenting. So I originally used them, and in "I'm a Cop", I really just used tiny little details, often blown up. So there's no figures in the majority of "I'm A Cop's" photo backgrounds.

With *RIOT COMICS*, I decided, for really the first time in my work, I would use the same series of photos, in that case I specifically use the work of a photographer that I quite love named Dorothea Lange. I used quite a bit of the actual figures of people that she photographed because the majority of the people that she photographed during the Depression were unhoused, they were itinerant workers, itinerant farmers, sometimes flood refugees. I thought that had some interesting echoes and some interesting

resonance when putting those figures in discussion with the comics elements and in discussion with the historical events and various moments of crises that we're in now.

RIOT COMICS, in particular, deals with what set off the Tompkins Square protests, which turned into a riot, was the eviction of the unhoused community from that park. So I thought there was something fitting about pulling out these historical images of the unhoused in various areas of the US.

TFSR: *You mentioned that you've been working with this process for a decade. How did you first see the possibilities in this process? And how have you refined it over the course of your career working with it?*

JOHNNY DAMM: I come from outside of comics in some ways. I mean, I actually would say that in all my work, I've always been a minor figure in a variety of communities, is how I've put it before. So a minor cartoonist, a minor poet, and I'm a minor artist. So I've always approached things not really exactly from the inside. That was certainly how I came to comics. I've always been someone that was a lifelong reader of comics, like you said about yourself. A comics-obsessive, in a lot of ways. But I actually studied just writing. I studied art history, and I studied writing. I thought I was gonna write novels, honestly. But I just wasn't ever satisfied with the prose. I ended up finding myself... I wrote a whole novel that was about a comic book artist, and it's just in a drawer now. But one of the things that I did in the novel is I spent all this time describing what takes place in the comics. I became obsessed with this idea of trying to capture the feel of the comics page, like the actual composition, the actual panels, but doing it in prose. At some point, I was just like, "Holy crap. Why am I not just making comics?" That sort of began the process for me, of thinking about what I wanted in making comics. I am really interested in collage. I'm really interested in the iconography of "pre code" comics, in particular.

So I initially began playing with pages from old classics illustrated, which are adaptations of canonical Euro literature. I began just cutting them up and staging photographs and then making those into comic book pages. That was sort of the first step. I didn't end up liking how they turned out, even though actually quite a few of those works ended up in my first book. But at some point while I was working on that project, I began to realize that I wanted to approach every page as a physical object. So literally

every page I make I still have. They are physical collages, which the last step is I scan them in, and that's what makes it into the page.

What's been refined over the years, I guess, is just that I keep experimenting within this relatively small box that I've created for myself, which is that I'm using the same sets of old photographs, I'm using "pre code" comics, and I just keep putting them together in different ways. And I will say, I think like all artists, I think I'm better at it than I used to be, and I'm certainly more ambitious with the pages. But the big surprise for me, in a lot of ways, was just being willing to step into the comics community and being accepted by the comics community, when I'd come from comics from such a distinctive kind of unusual place. One of the developments of the last couple of years, which has been really meaningful for me is reaching out and becoming, I'd say still a minor member of the cartoonists community, but that's been meaningful for me. Both in terms of the refinement of the work itself but also in being able to join the larger community.

TFSR: *Okay, that's great. So in practicing collage, within the medium of comics, you are essentially imposing a grid onto a visual work. How do you think that those limitations of the grid affect your approach? I'm sure they're hindering sometimes, and they're helping sometimes, but I would like to know a little bit more about that.*

JOHNNY DAMM: So I think of the grid, and part of this comes from when I was in graduate school, (this is a very indirect way of something that got me into comics) I did my largest studies, when I was getting my doctorate, in the history of the avant-garde and particularly avant-garde poetics. I became really interested in what's often called "restraint based work" or "constraint based work," so the idea that that there's a power in setting limits for yourself. So the extreme examples of that, an avant-garde writer wrote a novel where he refused to use the "e". By limiting yourself and taking away some paths, in some ways it's freeing, and you end up having to make decisions that you wouldn't make otherwise.

I've found that's been enormously productive for my work. So the idea of using the grid is I'm always restricted. I tend to think about things on the level of a single page, opposed to thinking about this as larger canvases or larger pieces. I really try to think it out on a page by page basis. That panel grid restricts my choices, and by restricting the choices, a lot of times it means that I go to places that I didn't plan for. They get much, much more interesting.

I also think that one of the things that the panel layout does, particularly when you're using someone else's panel layouts, as I do because I'm using these old panel layouts, is that sets the rhythm of your page. There's something really interesting about trying to match what you're putting in those panels rhythmically for how the grid already works. So in some ways, I don't know if any of that comes across to the reader of the comics, but as a creator, in some ways, that's my absolute favorite part.

TFSR: *Okay, so, I'm taking a little bit of a leap here, but that's a very compelling explanation, and I wonder if that could be applied to organizing in general, organizing in the activist sense. I wonder if you have any thoughts on that?*

JOHNNY DAMM: I think that's a great idea. I mean, I haven't thought about it. I've thought a lot about the activist potential of comics. And the way in which comics have very infrequently been used, in some ways, as an educational tool that fits in to organizing. I'd say that much more than comics, in organizing, has been the longtime presence of zines, sometimes which have comics elements. Now, in terms of the constraint in organization... I mean, that's a great idea. I haven't thought about it enough to say anything coherent about it, in all honesty, but that's a leap in logic that I really like. If you have any ideas about it, I'd like to hear it.

TFSR: *Well, it just occurred to me, so I don't have any ideas about it.*

JOHNNY DAMM: What I would say is how comics have been used typically in the United States, which has been for promoting Imperial purposes, copaganda, and just being very politically conservative overall, opposed to the possibilities for comics to actually fulfill a role in much more politically radical activist circles. I think in US comics that's been really under-explored.

TFSR: *Okay. So that leads me pretty nicely into my next question. Do you think depictions of police are necessary in cop culture? I may be understanding, but I feel like there's a portion of the discourse that dismisses all or most depictions of police as copaganda. Especially when it comes to genre entertainment, I feel like the genre is meant to evoke the situations of real life. It seems sort of impossible to subtract that ever present portion of your life.*

JOHNNY DAMM: Yeah, I think about this myself because I'm deeply, deeply critical of the history of crime comics, while I also am a longtime reader of crime comics. Certainly, in film, I love a lot of old crime films. I don't automatically turn away from something if it features police officers in a way that doesn't match my politics. So I'm willing to give a little bit of credence to the idea of pulp literature working as fantasy, policing as tropes of that fantasy, etc. But the other side of that is the way in which US media has been weaponized by police and the US government, and these portrayals overall, have been used as propaganda, as copaganda, but also propaganda.

In World War II, literally the US government was working with comics artists to create propaganda against the Japanese and the Germans. In the '50s and '60s, the US government was literally making comics, anti-communist comics, which they were smuggling into places like Cuba to try to use comics to help overthrow the government.

In terms of policing in comics, I'd say that policing has been part of the overall good/bad binary of mainstream comics that has done a lot of damage. So I'm not saying that there can't be police in comics. But I do think that comics creators in particular need to step back and ask themselves what they're contributing to this really problematic, toxic culture. We get more and more policed every year. Absolutely crucial to policing, and there's more police murders every year, as we've just seen in 2022, absolutely crucial to this is that the cops are telling us over and over again that we're unsafe, and that we need to be afraid. Is our media, is our pop culture, is our pulp literature contributing to that? Yeah! I think that's okay. But if that's the only thing they are contributing, then maybe they really are being used as tools of copaganda. I think much, much of the history of US comics has, whether purposely or inadvertently, been weaponized to justify police states, to justify the military, etc, etc. So I think at the very least, we got to look really hard at that.

TFSR: *On the flip side of that, what role do you think that propaganda plays in movement making, movement building on the left?*

JOHNNY DAMM: Sure. Sue Coe, who's a printmaker, who sometimes is published in the comics world... She published in World War III Illustrated, which is a really important politically radical comic that's still being published. She's always said she makes propaganda. Right? I think, for me, it's propaganda... Propaganda maybe isn't the way I think of my own work.

I think it's important. I think we all have to get out our messages, and we gotta utilize all the tools we have to get out our messages.

My personal message is, "Hey, here's this thing that I think y'all should be paying more attention to." Right? You need to be paying attention to what the police are telling us about who they are fundamentally. If you pay attention to what they're fundamentally saying, then that probably will point you to considering defunding the police, considering abolishment of the police. I personally don't think about that as propaganda. But I do understand that it is part of the history of message-making.

Message-making's part of it. We are constantly being propagandized. The number one film in the country was whatever that Top Gun movie was, right? That's telling. So, yeah, there needs to be a response to that, right? That's the cultural playing field we're at. So I guess the short answer would be I don't think of my work explicitly as propaganda, my personal work, but I certainly do accept the idea that the left needs to use media, needs to use visuals in terms of education and propaganda.

TFSR: *Okay, thank you. So I feel like the seeds of both "I'm a Cop" and RIOT COMICS are most apparent in Failure Biographies. I'm not sure if that's your first or second work.*

JOHNNY DAMM: That's my second book.

TFSR: *Okay, so in addition to process similarities, I see a potent metaphor in the notion of building on failure as intrinsic to the slow work of abolition. Can you talk a little bit about that?*

JOHNNY DAMM: Sure. When Failure Biographies came out, the only thing in its reception that I was a little uncomfortable with is that a lot of people were like, "Yeah, failure. That really stinks." It's kind of like, "Ah, you're telling the sad stories of people who were failures." Where actually the book is much more like what you were describing, which is that it's in some ways a celebration of failure and the necessary work and failure.

Activism is based in failure. The idea of being able to say what you want and to imagine a radically different world. On your daily basis, you're not going to achieve that radically different world, right? The vast majority of everything you try, you're not going to get all the way there, you're going to fail at. So there's something really important about mapping... Jack

Halberstam calls this the “anti-capitalist space of failure.” That you’re not thinking about this in binary terms of success and profit. Instead, it’s about the slow work.

Abolition was a perfect example of that. As someone who considers himself an abolitionist, you have to be able to picture a world without police and a world without prisons. But if by the time I die, there is still police and they’re still prisons, that doesn’t mean that it’s all over, right? Like that is the slow work, of every step of the way is this combination, and if we don’t think so binarily about success and failure, we don’t think in these capitalistic terms, it’s much better for everybody. I think that’s part of the reason why Jack Halberstam says that we do need to celebrate at failure in that way.

So that was part of the idea, I think, of looking at it in *Failure Biographies*. I would say that in that book in particular, which is histories of various artists who have occupied spaces of failure. Several of the artists in there are actually quite famous. So it’s not like they are career failures, but there’s something in their works that have had a failure component.

I’d say the most crucial of those *Failure Biographies* for me, that led to my next works, particularly “*I’m a Cop*” and *RIOT COMICS*, is the story of this Argentinian art collective, called Tucumán Arde. Tucumán Arde really was trying something with their art, which is by design, impossible. Right? They were in Argentina, under a military dictatorship, like massive oppression, and they’re like, “We want to use our art to show people the world and by showing people the world change the world.” And they said, “That’s the only thing that’s okay, if it changes.” So they did a giant installation that was about this area of Argentina called Tucumán, showing all the oppression and all the terrible things that were going on there that was the exact opposite of what the government said about the region. So they did an entire installation with what they would say is the truth of how things actually were. In doing that, they were attempting to change the world. They failed, of course. Their particular failure was pretty bleak because a good number of them ended up being disappeared, some of them became guerrilla soldiers, a good percentage of that collective of artists quit art.

But to me, it’s such an amazing idea of how art can be used to show people the world. While you’re not going to literally change anything with that, the odds of there being a major change with that... it’s a nudge, it’s a bit of a change, and that’s the work of art. That philosophy, the Tucumán Arde

philosophy, is what I was attempting to do certainly with “*I’m a Cop*” and *RIOT COMICS*.

TFSR: *Cool. Thank you.*

JOHNNY DAMM: Sorry, for how long that was.

TFSR: *No, that’s perfect. So we sort of touched on this a little bit earlier. I don’t know if this figures into your use of materials, given the digital tools available, but the first part is how important is physical media to your process? There are plenty of supplies of old comics if you know where to look, but I wonder if you think physical media in general is correctly valued by people in comparison to the convenience of digital access?*

JOHNNY DAMM: I mean, in terms of is it valued enough? Is it fairly valued? That’s a hard question. I will say that I’ve found it enormously useful in my work to exist between both spaces. My work is inherently physical in that I am working off of old comics that I have, even though I don’t have the old photographs. Those I find entirely online through the New York Public Library actually.

The trick with the old comics for me, part of what I really value in the old comics, is their physicality. So I scan them, and I make them into something digital, and then I immediately print them back out. Then I scan them again. I have a really crappy printer. I have a really low cost scanner. I’m working with really degraded copies of these old comics because among other things, I don’t have the money to buy old comics in good shape. But in doing so, I think that my work actually ends up exaggerating, in some ways, the physical notion, the physical part of the comics themselves. So the color of the page, the aged page is part of my work. My work is definitely meant to then be remade into a physical object. I think there’s really something useful in that tension, between the physicality of it and the digital world.

In terms of how I want people to read my comics, I would say that I would prefer if they read them physically, but if they read them digitally, that’s fine, too. When people are overseas, if they can’t find a copy because shipping is so expensive, I always give them a link to where I’ve posted my comics online, and be like, “Feel free to read them this way.” But there is a different relation to the physical comic that I think it’s worth at least trying

not to abandon. I think that is at least part of the subject of my work in the weird way I make comics.

TFSR: *Your work seems to be drawing from a number of long traditions in comics, criticism, and politics. I was wondering if you could place your work into the context of your own experience, and maybe talk about what your history is with all of these various media, who are your influences, and do you see the medium of comics as a means to an end? Or are you genuinely a fan (which I think that you already kind of spoke to)?*

JOHNNY DAMM: Yeah, certainly I'm genuinely a fan. I'm a lifetime comics reader. Probably like anybody, when I was a little kid I was reading superhero comics. I think by the time I was like 10 or 11, I decided I was super punk rock and joined punk rock communities centered around music and going to see live music. Then superhero comics didn't seem okay to me anymore. At that point, I'd say I got into... '90s vertigo comics were probably the next step, stuff like Sandman and Hellblazer, Alan Moore, just stuff like that.

Then I found underground comics, and then I found the alternative scene. I'd probably say that, for me, the most formative... My all time favorite comics are *Love and Rockets* by the Hernandez brothers, particularly Jaime Hernandez' work in *Love and Rockets*, including to now, which I think is still totally fabulous.

When thinking about this in terms of the political content, I've been sort of looking back at all of these works now and thinking about how they approach things in terms of political worldviews, and it's interesting, right? I loved Frank Miller for a time when I was 11 or something, and Frank Miller's worldview is really disturbing. And then underground comics were really misogynistic. So that was a little bit of a problem too.

My direct influences are a little tricky. There hasn't been a whole lot of people who did comics collage. There was an artist named Jess, who did some really amazing comics collage work, in particular, he remade *Dick Tracy* comics into a comic called *Tricky Dick*, which I just love. There's a collection of his work that was put out by Siglio some years ago. Then there's not a ton, right? You can find collage... Jack Kirby has some I love. Actually, I will say, when you're talking about the lineage of the photographic background and using comics elements over photographs, you have to talk about Jack Kirby because that was something he did really well, and I think was quite an unappreciated within Marvel in the '60s and '70s. Will Eisner even did a little bit of comics collage. Certainly all that stuff is in my lineage.

It's definitely not a means to an end. Comics is what I want to do my entire life. In some ways, even though I feel like I am part of the comics community, I always feel like I'm still working to place myself in exactly where I am in the comics community, if that makes sense.

TFSR: *Yeah, that does make a lot of sense. I feel like of the mass media mediums, if that makes sense, comics have the most messy and diluted delivery. They always just seem messy, there's not ever a straight line to any kind of politics, necessarily. There are expressly political works, but in the way that they are released out into the wild, there's not a clear way that they're perceived, if that makes sense.*

JOHNNY DAMM: Yeah, I don't think there's a clear lineage of political works. I think that for the most part they pop up at various points. Even someone Spain Rodriguez, who's an underground artist, he was making explicitly political works in the late '60s and early '70s. But they were undercut by the fact that his works were also incredibly misogynistic. The worldview was not radical, even though he was placing his work in a radical context.

But even in the underground scene, he was just an outlier. He was part of that boys club. There wasn't anybody else who was really working like that. I think that throughout comics history, the political stuff comes and goes. That certainly has something to do with what you mentioned early on about, even in our moment where comics are so mainstream, the history of comics as a disreputable medium is still very much part of it, is still very much part of the medium itself. Right? How it was received as junk for so long has worked against it. It certainly worked against it having a coherent political vision.

A lot of the ways that people have talked about comics, particularly older comics like old war comics being jingoistic, old romance comics being hetero-normative and sexist, that's an oversimplification too. Because on the other side of that, there was plenty of old romance comics that were transgressive and had really interesting messages. There was plenty of war comics that were actually anti-war comics. But again, there's not a clear lineage of how that works politically or a clear line. Unlike there is an in many other mediums.

TFSR: *As a quick aside, have you seen the Spain Rodriguez documentary that was just released?*

JOHNNY DAMM: I haven't, have you?

TFSR: *Yeah, it's finally out on some streaming services. You should check it out if you get a chance. It was very good.*

JOHNNY DAMM: I will check it out. I've always had really mixed feelings about Spain Rodriguez, and pretty much the whole first generation of underground guys. But with that being said, I'm very interested in him. So yeah, I'll definitely check that out.

TFSR: *So, we're kind of winding down here. In some recent comments on social media, you characterized US comics as a conservative medium and an individual medium.*

JOHNNY DAMM: Yeah.

TFSR: *That resonated with me, but I wonder if you could extrapolate on that.*

JOHNNY DAMM: I think on one side of it, there's the history of how US comics have been used politically. Like I said earlier, it does have a history of... There's a great book by a guy named Paul S. Hirsch called *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism* that talks about how US comics have been used for imperial purposes historically. I've talked quite a bit about how the history of how crime has been depicted in US comics have served a distinctly copaganda function.

But the other side of that, in terms of a medium, is that, starting with underground comics, particularly where we're at, in terms of mini comics, in indie comics, there is a total focus on the individual. I would say that the default of indie comics for many, many years has been memoir. I think there's a lot of really powerful memoirs. I think memoirs can certainly have a political function in highlighting sort of underrepresented communities. There's certainly a place for memoir, but where are the US comics that think about us collectively, that think about us not in terms of the individual but as the whole? That is what an actually politically radical comic could be.

So the focus on the individual in US comics, and this is in the part of us comics that I think people sort of think about as "left," means that it

still very much ends up being quite conservative. I really try to push the idea “What would it be like if comics thought outside the individual and started thinking about the community and started thinking about us collectively?” It’s under explored territory in comics. And I think it’s the great challenge of our time to think outside of ourselves and to think in terms of the whole. This is the only way that we’re going to make it through. So why doesn’t comics sort of play a role in that too? If that makes sense.

TFSR: *Yeah, it makes a lot of sense, and I think that might be a good place to stop. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.*

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