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Feminist Activist Comics

Comics can be activist: they can be activist in themselves and, beyond that, they can be linked to organized activism and feminisms.¹ Comics are drawn in various aesthetic styles, produced and published in different media, and also read and used in social movements such as women's liberation, #metoo, LGBTQIA+, Black Lives Matter, and the climate movement. In this chapter, comics are discussed in relation to feminist activism.

Activism, like feminisms, involves striving for change. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines activism as “the activity of working to achieve political or social change, especially as a member of an organization with particular aims” (2022a). Hence, activism can be regarded not only as an action within an organization but also as the intention “to create social, political, economic or environmental change” in other ways (Cox, Haq, and Trevor 2010, 8). Activism often includes direct protest, but there are many other forms of action intended to change individuals' behavior. The word *artivist* can describe “an activist looking to create change using the medium and resources of art” (8). According to art historian Nina Felshin (1995), activist art uses aesthetic means to challenge existing power hierarchies and create democratic change. She emphasizes that activist art is process-oriented and takes place in the public space, emphasizing the strategic importance of the use of mass media for the dissemination of the artworks (10, 15). When comics are the medium, *comics activism* is a useful term. In 2018, the *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* published a special issue on “using comics in various ways to communicate political ideas, trying to change the world with the power of words and images combined” (2). In its introduction, comics scholar Martin Lund gives an overview of the topic and discusses the concept of comics activism as “the practice of creating comics in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue” (42). “Activist comics” are defined as “comics that are created specifically and explicitly to present the creator(s)'s given politics on a specific issue” (42).

Feminist activist art strives for equality. According to Hilary Robinson, Professor of Feminism, Art, and Theory at Loughborough University, this kind of activism can be defined as, “firstly, work that is informed by feminist thinking; and, secondly, work which is intended to make interventions directly in people's lives and in social structures to effect change for the better” (2021, 64). In the study *Hoppets politik: Feministisk aktivism i Sverige idag* [The Politics of Hope: Feminist Activism

1 We use this concept in plural since there are many varieties of feminisms.

in Sweden today; trans. A.N. and M.W.W.] (2016), gender scholar Mia Liinason and sociologist Marta Cuesta argue that feminist activism can be regarded as a political practice. Feminist activism

creates narratives which are *performative*, i.e., narratives that drive change in the world. These narratives, produced by feminist activists through action, workshops, demonstrations, at meetings and festivals, in texts and talks, effect concrete change – in language, in pedagogical models, in legislation, in recruitment, and in cultural politics – while also transforming us as humans, in relation to other people and to society. (Liinason and Cuesta 2016, 15 [trans. A.N. and M.W.W.]

Activism allows for alternative ways of thinking and communicating, and contributes to concrete societal change. Feminist activism is associated with three central concepts at the core of relevant political action: power, emotion, and solidarity. Feminism is seen as the *politics of hope* in this context – hope constituting the driving force behind efforts to create a new, better world with regard to gender (Liinason and Cuesta 2016, 19). Linking feminism and hope as a foundation for possible change is an idea based primarily on an understanding of the importance of the struggle to shape individual and collective counternarratives and the need to “talk back” (37).

The many varieties of feminism and activism are based on collective work and practiced in social movements such as women’s liberation and LGBTQIA+ movements, as well as in networks. Dotterbolaget is a Swedish feminist women’s and trans-separatist comics artists’ network founded in 2005. The aim was and is to fight patriarchal structures in the comics world and to support women and transgender people. Its founders and initial members were students at the Comic Art School in Malmö, while the current network includes new members and has branches in other parts of the country. Dotterbolaget has had a tremendous impact on the comics field in Sweden with its flat structure (a common way of organizing feminist work), a common effort to strengthen the field for female and transgender comics artists through cooperation and support rather than competition, and by forming a professional platform for addressing feminist issues through comics. Regarding production and readership, Swedish comics were dominated by men until 2005 (Hinchcliffe Voglio 2019, 201). Since then, there have been many exhibitions, workshops, and fanzines. The network also published *Dotterbolaget* in 2008, an anthology with comics by thirty-two artists. Many of the best-known feminist comics artists in Sweden, such as Liv Strömquist, Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, and Sara Granér, are network members (Hinchcliffe Voglio 2019).

1 Activism in Comics

As Roger Sabin argues “there is no limit of what a comic can do other than that imposed by a creator’s imagination” (1996, 8–9). The comics medium has certain features that make it particularly well-suited to activism, where the goal is to capture the reader’s attention, create understanding of a concern, and elicit an emotional response. In an interview conducted by comics scholar Dominic Davies (2017, 2–3), artist Kate Evans asserts that the comics medium has the advantages of immediacy and accessibility, where one can identify with the characters in a story, read the text as one’s own words, and connect with the emotions conveyed through facial expressions. She claims that comics are an effective means for telling the stories of people who have had traumatic experiences and require anonymity, as names and faces can be changed, while people remain recognizably human. The storytelling in comics also facilitates the judicious use of humor to prevent the stories from becoming too dark (2–3). It is important to convey hope and generate energy when the aim is to contribute to change (Liinason and Cuesta 2016, 37). Lund mentions the comics medium’s “ability to convey a large amount of information in a short time” and the medium’s “power to connect humanity” (2018, 50, quoting Abdullah et al., 2015).

Activists target dissemination, and Felshin mentions the importance of utilizing the mass media (1995, 15). Comics have the potential to be published in many different media, such as printed albums and anthologies, daily newspapers, journals, magazines, social media (including Instagram), street art, posters, and fanzines. As Davies has related, the activist network Kadak Collective produces self-published comics, fanzines, analogue print, and digital publishing formats such as Instagram. Kadak is a collective of South Asian womxn who are dispersed globally, from India to the UK, the US, and beyond.² The collective promotes diverse gender and queer identities, and their projects challenge geographic, gender, and racial normativity by taking intersectional perspectives (Davies 2021). Their anthology *Bystander* is a collection of stories by fifty comics artists and designers from South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, who question whose voices are heard and whose are ignored (Kadak Collective). The volume was crowdfunded through Kickstarter and published both online and as a printed book (Kadak Collective). The advantages of digital publishing are that producers are not tied to specific circulations or locations and that it avoids the extensive costs associated with offline publishing, exhibitions, etc. (Davies 2021, 7). Members of the Kadak Collective also arrange work-

2 The term “womxn” is used as an alternative to “women” since it is regarded as more inclusive of trans and nonbinary people.

shops and activities. One example is Kadak's Reading Room, a traveling library of self-published comics, zines, and art (4).

2 Feminist Activist Comics

The following sections will present and analyze three examples of Swedish feminist activist comics. The first is a sequential story connected to the #metoo movement. The second is a single-panel comic, created specifically and explicitly to present the creator's views on the climate crisis, and the last is an example of comics craftivism published on Instagram.

2.1 *Draw the Line*

In 2017, the #metoo movement spread like wildfire around the world, first on Twitter and then in other media, after a male Hollywood producer was accused of raping and sexually harassing eighty-seven women (Case and Craig 2020, 196). Many women in the cultural and communications sector, particularly those in precarious working conditions, had experienced similar situations, but had not protested for fear of losing their employment. The movement also took off in Sweden, and professional women in many branches testified about their experiences in public campaigns, with the aim of putting an end to the phenomenon. Women in the comics field also wanted to contribute by drawing and publishing comics that could bear witness to their experiences. An activist project was organized by comics artists Malin Biller and Karin Didring (Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin 2020). A call to action was posted on Facebook and received a swift response, not least from members of the feminist comics collective Dotterbolaget. It resulted in a 2018 anthology on the issue of #metoo called *Draw the Line*, edited by Biller and Didring, and comprising eighteen comics by nineteen artists. The anthology was funded by the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, by several NGOs, and by donations made via Kickstarter. One of the comics in the anthology, by Amalia Alvarez, is the eighteen-page piece, "Basta," which tells the story of a migrant woman working in a dental clinic in Sweden. She is economically discriminated against and sexually harassed by her employer. In 2020, Alvarez published an online version of the comic with an English text and the title extended to "Basta! A Comic on Migrant Workers' Struggles in Sweden." A sequence from the English language version is shown here. Except for the language, it is identical to the version published in *Draw the Line*.

The sequence in Figure 1 is the middle horizontal strip from page 3 of the story. The first panel shows a woman with brown skin, dressed in a Latin-inspired dress,



Fig. 1: Detail. Alvarez, “Basta! A Comic on Migrant Workers’ Struggles in Sweden.”

ready to show her CV to a potential employer at a dental clinic. She occupies a low position, subordinate to the white man who is in charge here. He tells her that her visual appearance is more important than her CV. When a customer who does not like migrants enters, the woman is told to hide in the restroom. Her face expresses surprise and anger at the discriminatory comment. In the next panel the dentist harasses her sexually, touching her body inappropriately, and when she tries to avoid him, he barely lets her pass, pressing his body against hers. The last panel shows her trembling with fear, the unnatural dark-purple color emphasizing that feeling. She is afraid that he will abuse her and that she will lose her job if she defies his attempts. The story ends with the protagonist quitting her job in protest. It portrays the fragile situation that migrant women may encounter in the labor market, underlining the necessity of taking action against discrimination.

This and other stories from the comics anthology were used in workshops where the #metoo issue was discussed and personal experiences shared. In addition, an educational manual with twelve pages of images from the stories and suggestions for discussion topics was produced. The aim of the project was to provide information about unacceptable conditions, to create oppositional opinion, and to help exposed women by providing them with empathy, solidarity, and useful information. A contact list of supporting organizations was included on the back pages of the anthology. An exhibition of enlarged comics from the anthology was also organized and shown in several cultural centers in southern Sweden. The editors and their co-artists cooperated with NGOs to organize presentations and workshops (Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin 2020). This combination of producing and

publishing comics in conjunction with collectively organized activities intended to support women is an example of feminist comics activism.

2.2 The Climate Crisis

Comics can be regarded as activism in and of themselves when they are created to argue for specific perspectives on critical issues. Among the many varieties of feminisms, all intent on change, one branch has developed into *ecofeminism*, which links women's empowerment with concerns for the Earth through a variety of embodied and politicized perspectives and practices. Inspired by ecofeminism, scholars Martin Hultman and Paul Pulé have developed ideas from ecofeminism into theories on masculinities with relevance for climate issues (2019).

Sara Granér's single panel comic (Fig. 2) was first published in her album *Med vänlig hälsning* [Best Regards; trans. A.N. and M.W.W.] (2010) and reprinted in another album in 2015. The comic was spread through social media and has become well known. It focuses on the climate crisis by showing a conversation between two anthropomorphic figures. They appear to be caricatures of businessmen, with typical attributes like suits, ties, brown shoes, and briefcases. They appear angry and upset, and have been drawn with bright red faces, sharp fangs, and intense round eyes. The figure to the left says to the other, "Hello, who the hell put the Maldives in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with their highest point only 2.5 meters above sea level, when the ice is melting like butter in the sun?" The figure to the right answers: "Well, yes, how stupid can one be, eh?" (21 [trans. A.N. and M.W.W.]) Clearly, neither of the men take the climate crisis seriously, though they are aware that the melting ice and flood waters might well create a catastrophe in which the Maldives could disappear.

When related to the context of the financial sector and modern Western industrialism, these figures appear as businessmen – as a type – due to their attributes and opinions. This type can be interpreted as being connected to a certain kind of masculinity, even though the characters do not necessarily represent the male gender. The two figures can be interpreted as representatives of *modern industrial masculinity*, a concept proposed by Hultman and Pulé (2019). This kind of masculinity, they argue, denies the climate crisis, challenges policy reforms, resists social and environmental transformations, and hinders responses to perceived threats to global sustainability such as renewable energy production. Hultman and Pulé claim that the efforts of Western men have resulted in such phenomena as the continued erosion of biodiversity and widening gaps between the rich and the poor (44).

The angry bear-like figures with red faces contrast with the small, orange teddy bear figures sitting in a boat at the center of the image. These bears are fishing, the



Fig. 2: A single-panel comic. Granér, *Med vänlig hälsning*, 21.

sun is shining, and they do not seem to be at all aware of the impending situation that the others are discussing. The single-panel comic can be read as a warning about the acute climate situation, as an attempt to alert the reader to the crisis and get them to react. In this sense, the comic can be regarded as comics activism.

2.3 Comics Craftivism

Comics artists can use crafts such as embroidery to expand on the form of contemporary feminist comics. We have termed this phenomenon *comics craftivism* (Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin 2021). Here, feminist comics join the ongoing movement of *craftivism* – a term introduced in 2003 by artisan and writer Betsy Greer to unite the separate spheres of craft and activism. It can be described as “the use of crafts to challenge patriarchal and social rights, and promote the recognition of women’s traditional art forms” (Markus 2019, 2). Craftivism is connected to feminisms as well as gender and queer issues. According to art historian Rozsika Parker, the art form of embroidery has traditionally functioned as a way to educate women about the feminine ideal (e.g., to embroider in the private sphere rather than working outside the household). However, it has also been used as a weapon of resistance against the constraints of femininity (Parker 2019, ix). Swedish comics artist Lotta Sjöberg has praised the embroidery technique for its slowness and used it as a reaction to the ideals of constant efficiency and productivity in neoliberal Western society (*Dagens Nyheter*). In the 1970s, craft was able to evoke emotions – both positive and negative – within the women’s liberation movement, but more



Fig. 3: Embroidery published on Instagram. Sjöberg, “Suckcess.”

recently, it has been embraced by craftivists, who have launched a craftivist manifesto (on the web) as well as anthologies such as *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism* (2014).

Sjöberg’s work clearly exemplifies comics craftivism by Swedish feminist comics artists. For several years, she has been posting her embroidered comics on Instagram and also published a number of them in the comics album *Det kan alltid bli värre* [It Can Always Get Worse; trans. A.N. and M.W.W.] (2014). Figure 3 shows an Instagram post from 2021, with the word “Suckcess,” which – apart from spelling out the English word *suck*, which is already phonetically present in the word *success* and evokes an abundance of (colloquial) meanings – is an ironic neologism in Swedish. The first syllable, “Suck” is a Swedish word equivalent to the English word *sigh*. In Swedish, *suck* is an audible breath, a puff you let out when you are exhausted, depressed, or when you pass away. When verbalized, “Suck” followed by “cess” results in *success* – the same word and meaning in both languages. Sjöberg often uses irony, which is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as “the funny or strange aspect of a situation that is very different from what you expect” (2022b). The irony here is the combination of the two parts of the word in contrast

to the image of the white, middle-aged woman with all the luxurious possessions she could possibly desire. According to the neoliberal ideal, all this should make her happy and feel successful. But this fails. Surrounding her, we see a bottle of champagne, a high-heeled Prada shoe, a makeup palette, a handbag, a diamond ring, a lobster, Russian caviar, and a perfume bottle – small, embroidered details accompanied by the French phrase: “C’était trop bien” [It was too good; trans. A.N. and M.W.W.]. The woman looks sad, despite her possessions and despite the fact that she is dressed for success. The irony is conveyed visually and verbally through the contrast between the ideal – a happy woman – and the sense that she obviously is not happy in this society where the ideal is happiness (Ahmed 2010). The single-panel comic expresses criticism of societal norms through aesthetic form, connotation, and content. A classic gender issue, namely the comparison of the female body with the ideal, expressed here through craft, brings the artwork into the craftivism movement.

3 Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, feminist comics can themselves be activist, which is demonstrated by Sara Granér’s single-panel comic about the acute climate crisis and the use of a specific sort of masculinity. In addition, feminist comics can be intentionally connected to activist movements such as #metoo. The goal of Amalia Alvarez’s sequential art is to provoke reactions and feelings of solidarity with the harassed woman in the narrative, but also with abused women in reality. The story was part of *Draw the Line* – an anthology about sexual harassment and violence – drawn by female comics artists and disseminated through activities and exhibitions. Finally, comics can be related to the craftivist movement by expanding their material and aesthetic formal possibilities. Lotta Sjöberg’s ironic embroidery on Instagram is an example of radical comics craftivism, both in form and content.

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Fig. 2: Granér, Sara. *Med vänlig hälsning*. Stockholm: Ordfront Galago, 2010.

Fig. 3: Sjöberg, Lotta. "Suckcess." *Instagram*, October 18, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/share/BABY7XJ7HN> (accessed March 15, 2025).

