

The Becoming of a Graphic Novel: Teresa

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The following text summarizes the most important moments, considerations, and processes that took place during the “becoming of” our graphic novel *Teresa*. In the summer of 2021, we were given a clear brief: to develop a graphic novel with a group of participants from a range of disciplines that would address the much-needed energy transition away from fossil fuels. As a team, we had one year to produce the novel collaboratively, together with six experts selected from the arts, scientific research, and activism. We were allocated six double-page spreads in a future publication, as well as several preparatory online meetings, before coming together to attend, in June 2022, an intensive two-day workshop at the University of Applied Arts Vienna to develop the storyboard and main narrative.

As group moderators and an artists, we knew that before a rigid timeline with fixed milestones could be set up to guide the team we had to allow members of the group to get to know each other and become familiarized with the diversity of expertise and knowledge that each participant would bring to the project. Only then could we establish a context for possible content creation. As such, art historian **Amanda Boetzkes** from the University of Guelph outlined her research on the aesthetics of plastic that is informed by contemporary art history and theory. **Kinga Kielczyńska**, a multidisciplinary artist based in Warsaw, introduced her work on forests, sustainability, and considerations of the human-nature relationship. Reservoir engineer and head of the Department Petroleum Engineering at the University of Leoben, **Holger Ott**, shared his research on current technical developments and geological aspects of green energy technology. **Cleo Reece**, an environmental activist, filmmaker, and member of the Fort McMurray 468 First Nation based in Alberta, Canada, provided insights into her experience of the reality of Indigenous communities living in tar extraction zones. Researcher **Johannes Schmidt**, who focuses on sustainable economic development, presented his expertise on the transitions towards renewable energy systems in Latin America and their impacts on land use. And finally, **Janet Stewart**, a sociologist with expertise



Working group 3, discussion on main narrative and story board, Reflecting Oil Colloquium, University of Applied Arts Vienna, 2022

on visual culture, modernity, and the history of petroleum, introduced the group to historical narratives of human life entangled with petroleum.

From the fertile ground of differing perspectives, there emerged the first connections, questions, and contradictions between the participants and their various fields of knowledge. Indeed, it soon became clear that “productive tensions” would lead to fruitful conversations. After the initial presentations and discussions, a critical shift in terms of facilitating the group towards the graphic novel was instigated.

We felt it crucial to encourage participants to move away from disciplinary-bound expertise and initiate a phase of free speculative thinking and creative imagination. We did this in two stages. First, we opened up a free associative discussion on the dimension of time, connecting it to processes of transition and guiding it by asking questions such as “When did the transition happen and how long did it take?” and “What was the transition like for so-and-so...?”

Key associations thrown up by this conversation were used to build the framework of the graphic novel. In a moderated discussion round, we explored the story’s possible timeframe, whether it should take place in some distant future, say 200 years from now, or within a period of time that is closer to today. To set an approachable tone, the group felt the story should cover the lifespan of a human being and, given the novel’s six-page format, that it should be structured roughly

by decade. With this timespan in mind, the group then navigated questions like “What might or can happen within decades?” and “What are our assumptions about fiction, speculation, and reality?”

To bring these meta-discussions to a more concrete level, the next phase involved asking the participants to choose from a list of possible characters. These included a blogger, Marie Curie, a virus, a General Secretary, a Shell CEO, Greta Thunberg, a divine figure, a cyclist, an eight-year-old child, love, a dragonfly, an O molecule, Mark Zuckerberg’s daughter, a plastic cup, a guardian, a Nobel Prize winner, and a tree. The idea was for participants to use these tangible, if fictive, figures to free up their imaginations and further enhance their speculative thinking. As future protagonists in the graphic novel, the characters allowed members of the group to dive deeper into the subject matter and to connect it to their respective fields of interest or specialisms. Once selected, the participants were asked to endow these characters with traits.

In preparation for the two-day workshop in the framework of the colloquium, we accompanied the group members in developing their characters, asking them to sketch out some initial ideas about their chosen element’s qualities and the potential contexts they might appear in. Kinga Kielczynska explored the characteristics of the oxygen molecule, emphasizing its centrality to life as well as its ability to merge with and shift between other molecules. Holger Ott chose the plastic cup as an object derived from crude oil. He imagined its life in the headquarters of an oil company—a life hovering between deep depression and fleeting usefulness. Amanda Boetzkes picked the virus as a symbol and a force that is strongly intertwined with our lives and for its ability to create great structural change to our social fabric. Johannes Schmidt chose the eight-year-old child and brought his daughter on board to help amplify the character. Together they came up with a school girl named Teresa who lives in a rural part of Brazil and has three cats. Janet Stewart delved into the historical meanings and connotations of trees and their existence as centuries-old witnesses to life on Earth. Cleo Reece, for her part, picked the trickster figure Weesageechak as her protagonist, highlighting the ambivalent nature of this being, between faithful companion and protector, trickster and opportunist.

Equipped with all possible—and impossible—lines of thought and imaginings, we facilitated June’s two-day workshop with the goal of collectively producing a storyboard for the graphic novel. We chose a chronological narrative structure that begins, on page one, with six individual storylines (one for each character) that run in parallel to each other; these start to merge as the tale progresses until they are all combined in a single image that appears on the novel’s last page—the story gradually developing from today’s political problems to a potential hopeful future that speculates on the knowledge and wisdom that is yet to come.

The graphic novel is a fictional biography about the girl Teresa and her involvement with the other five characters. Told in six stages of her life, we see Teresa being confronted with complex challenges faced by society and deciding to be part of the solution. She becomes an activist and a scientist in order to help tackle these problems. Through knowledge and experience, she brings all the elements that appear in the story together, revealing their contexts, which finally leads to her thinking of the world as an interconnected whole. By taking responsibility and through effective communication, Teresa fights for change and publishes her ideas on the future of energy politics. The story dares to end with the optimism that we might just find a way to make things better. Although we cannot know what the world will look like in 50 years, it is the Teresas of today who give us hope and remind us that we should all act to be part of the solution.

The way in which the different elements interact in this novel demonstrates that it is not only scientific knowledge but also emotional and psychological qualities that allow us to define and reach goals. The drawings convey this by depicting a range of imagery and atmospheres, from statistical diagrams to sequences that are almost surreal, yet somehow remain concrete.

However, the storyline is kept ambiguous as it progresses, allowing for individual associations and narratives to develop.

The gaps that have intentionally been left, between the characters, the narrative combination, and the indeterminate chronological sequences, give the reader a lot of freedom to fill in, construct, and interpret the story for themselves. Consequently, readers take on the role of co-authors and contribute significantly to the story's "completion."

As an artistic medium, graphic novels are a type of "comic," but rather than being oriented towards comics they make direct reference to the "novel." The word "novel," which the Cambridge Dictionary defines as "a long printed story about imaginary characters and events," also implies a certain seriousness, scope, and narrative depth.

A central aspect and challenge of the entire graphic novel-making process was to ensure that both the content produced by the participants and its formal design were considered together. This was in order to create a sequence of images and a narrative that hovers between the concrete and the ambiguous—a condition that mirrors the current state of developments towards a green energy transition.

