



Page spread from *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

## FRAMED BY THUMBS: READING RAYMOND PETTIBON

By Matt Runkle

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Runkle is a writer, cartoonist, printer, and book artist. A graduate of the University of Iowa Center for the Book, he teaches workshops in letterpress, zines, comics, sequential collage, and other modes of writing for visual and material genres. His bookwork is featured in permanent collections including the F. W. Olin Library Special Collections at Mills College and the Newberry Library.

IN HIS 2012 BOOK, *Comics Versus Art*, Bart Beaty looks at the art world’s historical neglect of comics and argues that apparent twenty-first-century shifts away from this attitude are only surface level. His analysis of two comics-themed exhibits in recent years (at MoMA and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston) reveals a focus on fine artists influenced by the iconography of comics, at the exclusion of those who actually practice it in its sequential form. “With these kind of shows,” writes Beaty, “the gatekeeping function of the museum is very much on display, with comics allowed entry only once they have been appropriated, deconstructed, and abstracted by artists working in a fine arts tradition.”<sup>21</sup>

One artist featured in both exhibits is Raymond Pettibon. While not a self-identified comics artist, he engages with text and image in a way that, as Beatty says, is both appropriative and deconstructive. His work straddles genres, existing in the gray areas between text and image, and between linear narrative and a more immersive sort of poetics. When his drawings are codex-bound, they break down the divide between the serialized periodical and the more self-contained capital-*B* book, often leaving critics unsure whether to label them zines or artists' books. And the drawings' content is tonally liminal, confusing high and low culture, tragedy and comedy, genius and fandom, and sophistication and naïveté. Depending on the context, Pettibon's drawings could be called comics, poetry, short stories, fine art, literary responses, cultural critiques, or cruel jokes.

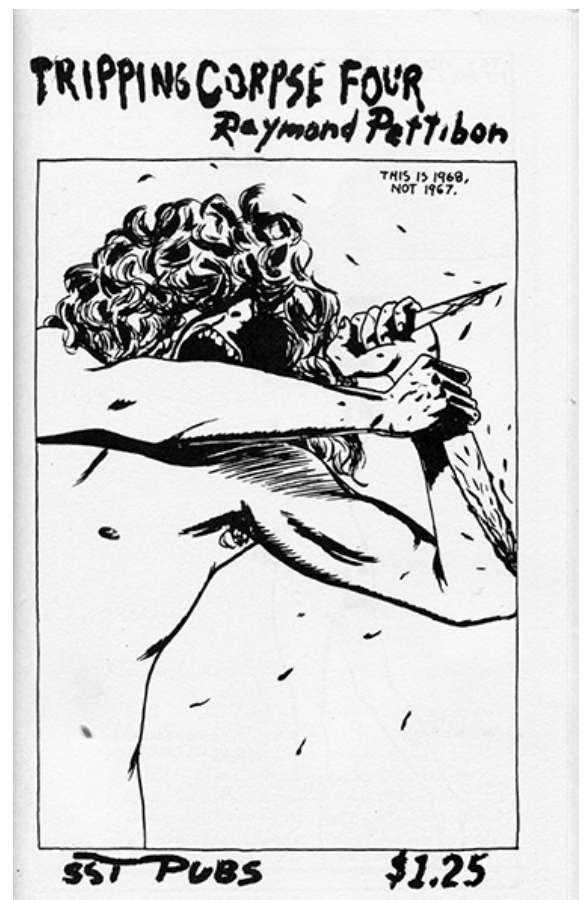
Because of their recurring book and comics associations, Pettibon's drawings, however, often demand a sequential lens. But although books and comics (and books of comics) are formats that invite linear reading, readers, it's important to remember, are just as likely to dip in.<sup>2</sup> Pettibon himself has discounted sequence as a motivating factor in how he arranges his drawings, whether in codices or gallery spaces. But several qualities common to Pettibon's individual works encourage the viewer-reader to create narrative links between them, thus implying a sequence—whether created through page turning, panel scanning, or walking a gallery's periphery.

First, as Andreas Hapkemeyer has pointed out, Pettibon's use of text and image demands an especially active role on the part of the viewer-reader. The gap between textual and visual meaning within each individual image can require some rather big cognitive leaps.<sup>3</sup> Second, the viewer-reader is encouraged to make connections *between* Pettibon's drawings, as the artist continually revisits characters and archetypes, weaving an intertextual universe for his viewer-readers to interact with and interpret. And these intertextual connections shift depending on their physical proximity, accessibility, and context. While the codex's haptic engagement lends a physical aspect to the viewer-reader's engagement with Pettibon's work, the wall displays also have qualities that conjure their own large-scale sense of bookishness.

Pettibon started out making punk zines in the late 1970s. Much of their content consists of captioned images—basically single-panel cartoons. These early zines were at first mimeographed and later offset printed or photocopied. The drawings often express disillusionment with the utopian 1960s, a common punk sentiment at the time. One zine in particular, *Tripping Corpse*, which was serialized, tends to focus on hippie culture gone terribly wrong. Charles Manson is a favorite subject, and even in drawings where he's not explicitly portrayed, his presence is felt (fig. 1). Far from purely reactionary, though, Pettibon's work from this time targets the underlying violence of American culture at large, with portrayals of corrupt police officers, classic teen angst, drug addiction, self-loathing, marital dissatisfaction, and the private lives of celebrities and politicians such as Joan Crawford and J. Edgar Hoover.

According to art historian Gwen Allen, *Tripping Corpse* also features interviews with Pettibon's brother's band, Black Flag, and articles about the LA punk scene.<sup>4</sup> Beyond their often decontextualized and deeply cynical drawings, these

Figure 1. *Tripping Corpse Four*, 1984. Photocopy, 28 pages (incl. cover), 8.5 x 5.5 inches (21.6 x 14 cm). Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.



early publications of Pettibon's also engage, to a degree, in fandom—which is what makes it difficult not to categorize them as zines. Because the zine is, when it comes down to it, characterized by its relationship with obsession.

The punk zine had its roots in the fanzine, a pre-Internet way for people with shared marginalized interests to connect outside the mainstream. Fanzines came into being in the early twentieth century as fan-based responses to comics and sci-fi magazines—some actually grew out of letters columns in these slightly more widely distributed pubs.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, despite fanzines' status as conduits for underground culture, many of their features are derived from the mass-culture magazine. The eclectic but reliable array of features that had been firmly established in mass-distributed American publications, or “slicks,” by the end of the nineteenth century—profiles of public figures, regular columnists (including advice columns and other sorts of instruction), event announcements (later embodied, for example, in the *New Yorker's* “Goings On About Town”), and op-eds—was adopted in a much rawer and more urgent form in fanzines.<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1960s, proto-punk rockers in turn took their cues from underground fanzines when they began making DIY pubs detailing their love of the music they were both making and listening to.<sup>7</sup> By extension, though, and perhaps in a sometimes deliberately parodying manner, they also mimicked features of mass culture. The op-ed piece, a mass-pub standard, was given a subcultural spin, not only in writings filled with cheeky praise of everything from bands to pop stars to everyday objects, but also in the form of rants.<sup>8</sup> As mass media became increasingly corporatized, and their editorials less potent, zines stepped up their vitriol, characterized by the snottiness of punk, proving that their origins as venues for fandom had a shadow side in their capacity for expressing spite. In the 1980s, when punk scenes started growing somewhat autonomously in different cities and towns around the United States, many zines began running scene reports—descriptions of shows and other events that both distinguished their localities and connected them to a wider punk network.<sup>9</sup> So, in addition to their democratic modes of production and distribution, zines were taking the mainstream publications' formulas and subverting them as they encouraged community and championed dissatisfaction with the mainstream.

Pettibon had strong connections to this musical subculture—his relation to Black Flag's Greg Ginn made him, in a sense, punk rock royalty. And the subject matter of many of his drawings paralleled some of the more satirical contemporary punk songs. He also designed flyers and album art for bands (probably the most widely seen images of his work), and as a noted producer of the subculture's art and literature, he influenced—and was influenced by—its music.

So in one sense Pettibon's drawings are thematically connected with, and operate in a similar mode to, the more typical zine features they appear beside—they co-opt and subvert images from the mainstream (many are actually traced from film stills rather than, as Beaty implies, comic books).<sup>10</sup> In his 1997 study *Notes from Underground*, Stephen Duncombe writes that zines are noted for their frequent use of “borrowed” material, “pirated from other zines and the mainstream press, sometimes without credit, often without permission.”<sup>11</sup> So Pettibon, like many other zinesters of the time, was appropriating and deconstructing long before he gained the approval of the fine art world.

And while his drawings from this era engage in cultural critique, they do so very obliquely. Pettibon is working in a more poetic mode, rare for the subculture at the time, in which fictional narratives are implied in an instant through juxtaposition of image and text, and in which, as in a collection of fiction or poetry, booklet-length sequences unveil themes rather than plot-driven narrative threads. “Pettibon’s texts—” writes Hapkemeyer, “in spite of their reliance on comic books and slang—are very difficult, if only owing to all the numerous levels of language on which they function.”<sup>12</sup> So while not wanting to forget these other contextual features—the interviews, articles, and at times serialized nature of his zines—it will be useful to examine how Pettibon’s drawings operate together sequentially in one example: *Capricious Missives* (1983).<sup>13</sup> Unlike *Tripping Corpse*, this title was neither serialized nor did it contain explicitly punk-scene-related features (although it did feature two non-Pettibon drawings, both by his nephew and frequent contributor, Alex F.). And while typical of Pettibon’s immensely prolific zine output of the time, *Capricious Missives* is also less thematically unified than the hippies-gone-awry *Tripping Corpse*—which makes it more challenging to view as a sequence.

Robert Storr observes that “Pettibon does not tell stories in strips—indeed he does not tell complete stories at all, though he may tell bits and pieces of several stories at a time.”<sup>14</sup> Taken individually, Pettibon’s drawings are what comics theorist Scott McCloud calls single-panel cartoons as opposed to sequential comics. McCloud discusses the way sequences are constructed through panels, using the term “closure” to describe the leap a reader must make between each. He categorizes six different types of closure, all of which imply temporality except for two: “scene-to-scene,” a way of changing settings, and “non sequitur,” where there is no logical relationship between panels.<sup>15</sup> Most of the transitions between images in *Capricious Missives* fall into the non sequitur category: its content lacks the temporality that characterizes the majority of transitions categorized by McCloud. Still, there’s no denying these images’ perception is influenced, first, by their being bound together under one title and, second, by their order. The following analysis is based on the zine as it was reprinted in full in *Raymond Pettibon: The Books 1978–1998*.

The zine’s cover features the caption, “Even toothless she can still bite off a boy’s head,” presumably referring to the pit bull depicted doing just that (fig. 2). While the image at first glance is one of violence, the position of the boy’s arms suggests a tender embrace. The dog’s implied toothlessness and the strange flowers in the background also soften the impact of the violence. And even as the pit bull devours the boy, the image could also be read as one of replacement: the dog’s head now exists where the boy’s once was. Reading the cover in this manner sets up themes that unfold in the zine’s interior: motifs of gender confusion and of masculinity being compromised and engulfed by a feminine threat.



Figure 2. *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Photocopy, 32 pages (incl. cover), 8.5 x 5.5 inches (21.6 x 14 cm). Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

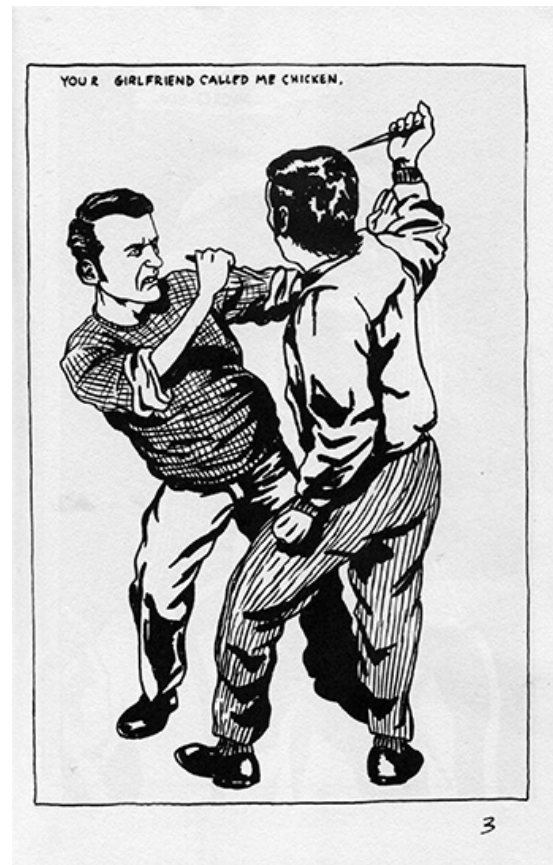
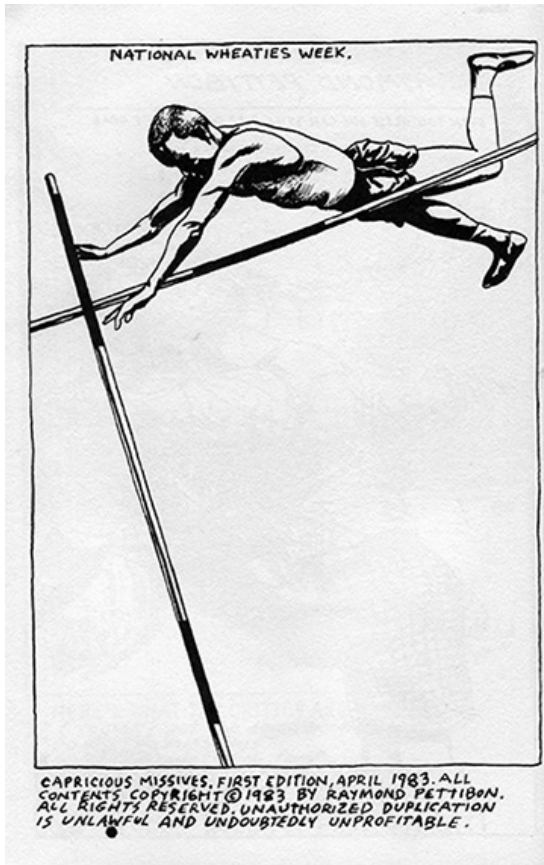


Figure 3. Inside front cover; *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

Figure 4. Page 3, *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

On the inside of the front cover is an image of a pole-vaulter in midjump, accompanied by the caption, “National Wheaties Week” (fig. 3). The positioning of this drawing—in the place you’d find an ad in a mainstream magazine—emphasizes its reference to the cereal’s marketing campaign. The image also sets up another recurring theme in the zine: that of athletes in the midst of personal crises. The pole-vaulter is depicted at his most vulnerable moment, suspended in midair. As with the boy on the cover, there’s a question of how much control he really has. The pole just leaving his grip, as well as the bar he’s attempting to clear, introduces a motif of tools and athletic equipment.

On the facing page, captioned “Your girlfriend called me chicken,” two men fight with knives (fig. 4). This struggle—instigated by a threat to one of the men’s masculinity—echoes the threat depicted on the cover: the unpictured “girlfriend” looms larger than the puny knives clutched in the men’s oddly proportioned hands.

On the following verso, a woman stands in a doorway, the position of her hand echoing that of the reader turning the page. The woman either says or thinks, “If I had a husband, I’d divorce him” (fig. 5). Her disdain toward men conjures both the pit bull from the cover and the looming, unseen girlfriend from the previous page. This image also sets up a thematic marital strife that will unfold in the coming pages. The woman is drawn in a stylized manner Pettibon later abandoned—when read in conjunction with the facing recto, the large size of her head and her grotesque features make her appear puppetlike.

The facing page features a rare uncaptioned image: a Punch-like puppet holding a knife (fig. 6). The weapon echoes the knife fight from the preceding spread. When read with the cover in mind, the sinister head of the puppet appears to be swallowing the hand that’s giving it life. Its weird proportions and malicious sentiment mirror those of the woman on the verso, even as the knife points toward her, implying a threat. At the same time, the verso’s dark background contrasts with this brightly lit recto in a weirdly sympathetic



polarity. This drawing, like its subject, soon took on a life of its own—perhaps even becoming Pettibon’s most iconic image—when a colored version of it was used on the cover of Black Flag’s 1984 album, *My War*.

The two sides of the following spread are much more explicitly connected (fig. 7). Both images picture heterosexual couples in bed, the first one captioned, “The soft, protective womb of sleep.” In this drawing, the woman holds a gun, a phallic extension similar to the knives and vaulting poles previously seen. It’s unclear whether her intent toward the man is devious or if she is on guard against unseen enemies and her wielded weapon, as the caption reads, “protective.” As on the cover, there is confusion between violent and tender gestures.

The facing page is even more visually reminiscent of the cover. A woman kisses a reclining man’s nose as he looks out unhappily from the corner of his eye. The caption reads: “I want to go to sleep for about a million years and wake up as a woman.” There is something almost predatory about the way the woman kisses the man’s nose, a gesture in keeping with both the facing verso and the capricious pit bull.

These two pages are not only united by their visual rhyme; they are joined by the way their captions center around sleep. The spread—when flipping through the zine—also represents a sequential breakthrough. Previous spreads have been thematically related, but it’s hard to wonder if this one is also related narratively. Are these two couples the same people? Is this a rare two-panel/page narrative sequence?

The following spread, however, shows no explicit narrative progression (fig. 8). On the verso, a life-sized thumb touches the corner of a baseball card depicting a man at bat. The card depicts mid-twentieth-century first baseman Ted Kluszewski, a player known for his power hitting. The caption reads, “My first orgasm.” The bat is echoed by the thumb that

Figure 5. Page 4, *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

Figure 6. Page 5, *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.



Figure 7. Pages 6–7, *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

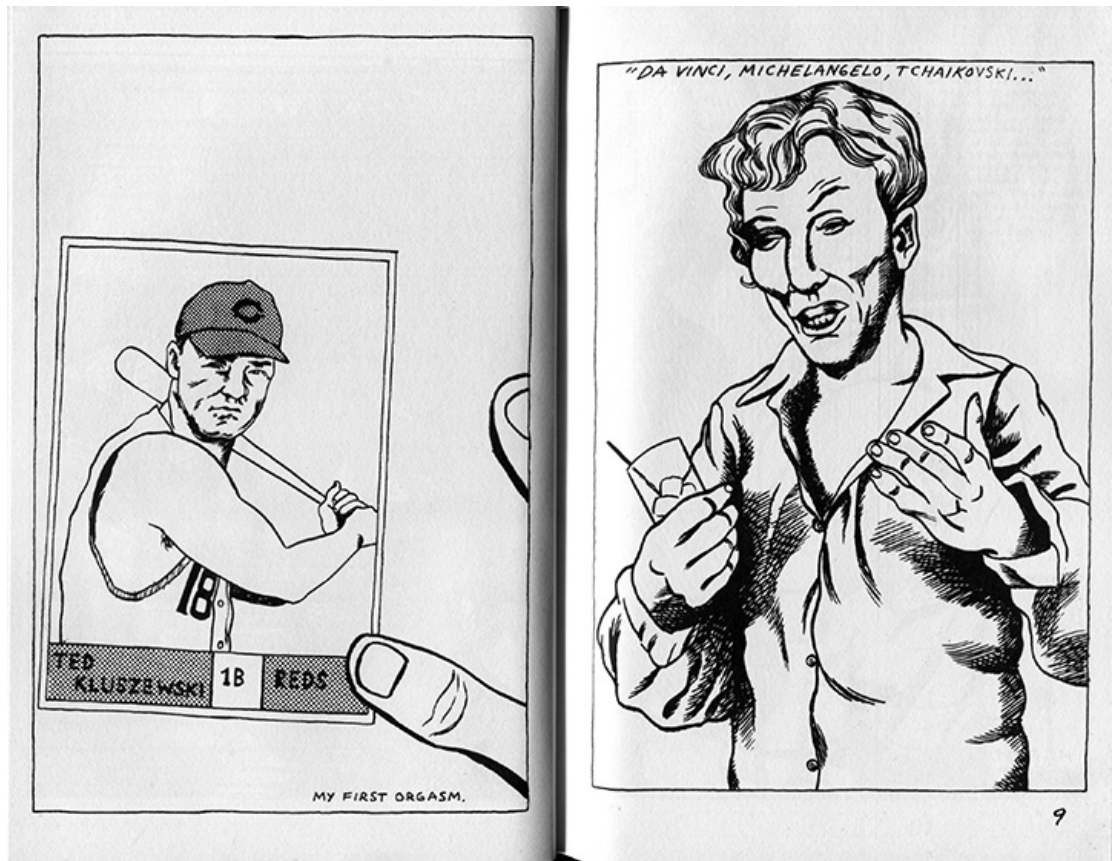


Figure 8. Pages 8–9, *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

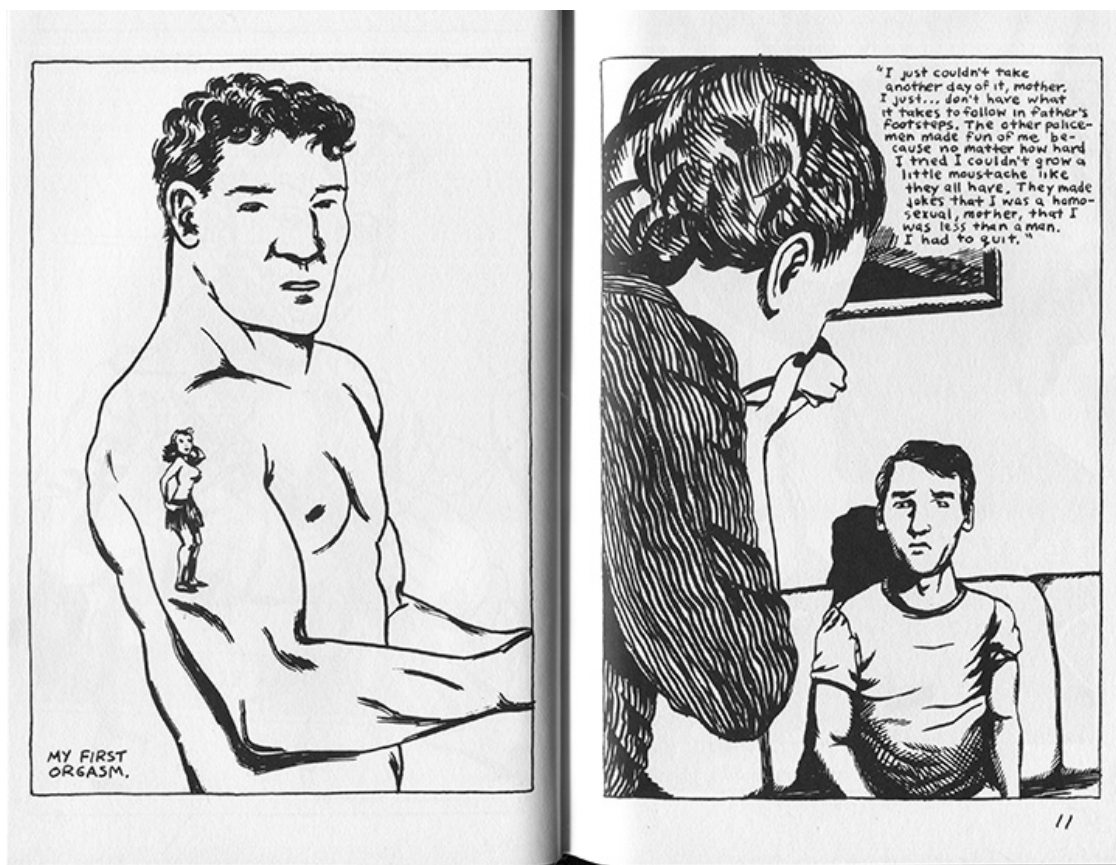


Figure 9. Pages 10–11, *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

frames it (which, in turn, echoes the position of the reader's thumb), and we return to the thread of introspective athletes and the sports fans who love them introduced in "National Wheaties Week."

On the facing page, a drunken fop lists off canonical artistic giants, and, startlingly, his facial features echo those of the puppetlike woman from a previous spread. He sloshes his drink as he recites, "Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Tchaikovski," raising questions around high and low art. This effete recital of names associated with aesthetic genius contrasts with the intimately held athlete on the verso—a tension furthered by the humbling fact that Kluszewski once played a game in a jersey with a mangled spelling of his name on its back.

The next spread explicitly calls the reader's attention to the images that both precede and follow (fig. 9). A beefcake model—the eroticized athletic ideal—flexes on the left, accompanied by a caption that repeats exactly the words from the previous verso: "My first orgasm." The homoerotic context of high-stakes masculinity depicted here is compromised by the woman tattooed on the beefcake's arm—a woman who stands in a similar pose.

On the facing page, a mother weeps as she listens to her son relate a tale of emasculation: "I just couldn't take another day of it, mother. I just . . . don't have what it takes to follow in father's footsteps. The other policemen made fun of me because no matter how hard I tried I couldn't grow a little moustache like they all have. They made jokes that I was a homosexual, mother, that I was less than a man. I had to quit." The scene is depicted from the mother's point of view, emphasizing her horror and disappointment at learning her son is a failed police officer and, by extension, a failed man.

On the following verso, an exchange takes place between two men, one of them in a police uniform (fig. 10): "I saw you orally copulate Officer Retzlaff behind the lockers. I'll swallow the news, but . . . why don't we both forget all about all those burglaries and coke deals





Figure 10. Page 12, *Capricious Missives*, 1983. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

when Internal Affairs comes along.” There is another implied narrative connection here as the reader wonders if Officer Retzlaff is the failed police officer from the preceding page. Whether the connection is narratively literal or not, the two images connect thematically: both address the way homosexuality is treated in the police force—and, by implication, the patriarchal culture at large.

Like so many images in *Capricious Missives*, this one presents a confused power struggle, in which it’s unclear who comes out on top. Which of the two men is speaking—or is the caption a non sequitur? Is the nonuniformed man a civilian or an undercover cop? The pair’s hands grasp each other in a way that makes it difficult to tell whose belongs to whom. Whether they are in the midst of a struggle or a sexual encounter is unclear, much in the way the cover image can be read as both tender and violent. The uniformed officer appears to be in the dominant position, yet he has a terrified look on his face. Is he the one being threatened? Racial dynamics further skew the power struggle and introduce a theme explored on the following page as the threat shifts from feminine to racial, implicating a society structured around racism as well as patriarchy. Despite his crumpled, submissive posture, the man on the right—who appears to be white—is likely in the position of power, and issuing a threat rooted in institutionalized racism. Immediately following this confused power struggle, however, is a horrifically racist caricature of a black man wreaking havoc on police officers dwarfed by his “angel dust”—fueled rampage. Such a bleakly propagandistic portrayal makes a stark contrast—as well as an unconvincing corrective—to the more ambiguous image that precedes it.

In its remaining pages, *Capricious Missives* continues to build on the thematic threads laid out in these first images, growing even more disturbing as it braids them visually and textually. A naked and mincing J. Edgar Hoover drops names of mid-twentieth-century political giants in a manner reminiscent of the drunken fop. Another man, his name change and nose job implying failed masculinity, self-deprecatingly addresses his dead father as both stare blankly. A straight couple is portrayed in bed, this time with a *Playboy*-

style gag: the woman holds a magnet over her much older bedmate's crotch. In a different image, a couple's picnic is sabotaged by a man digging a grave nearby as a rare typographic caption reads, "Make your work more interesting." The zine's final spread features a formatting device rare for Pettibon: two textless pages divided into four sequential panels each. Both are devoted to a theme established early in the zine: men fighting. In the first page, though, the cause of the conflict seems to be macho jealousy, while in the second a violently thwarted graffiti attempt ends in an indecipherable muddle.

One image in these final pages is particularly notable: a man sits on the edge of his bed as he somberly examines his extended hand and its missing pinky. The caption reads, "My alcoholic nightmare: I don't remember a thing." This severed appendage is especially relevant given the strange ways Pettibon depicts hands and fingers throughout the zine. Hands are difficult to draw, and as an illustrator lacking professional training, Pettibon accentuates this difficulty in the ways he portrays them and, just as often, in how he doesn't.

The headless boy on the zine's cover is also missing other appendages: his hands and feet are cropped by the frame. Later in the zine, the flexing beefcake's wrists are similarly cropped. Hand placement is conspicuous in other images of questioned masculinity: the drunken fop counters stereotypes by talking with his palm facing up, while J. Edgar Hoover embraces them by posing with hand on hip as he limp-wrists around. The struggle between the men in the Officer Retzlaff image is complicated by the confusing placement of their hands. Many of the zines' characters seem to be compensating for their extremities' shortcomings by the things they awkwardly hold: bats, vaulting poles, pistols, shovels, cartoonish magnets, knives. The knife-clutching hand puppet is especially notable: tension flashes in the puppet's face—something between an inanimate stare and a sinisterly newfound life force triggered by the hidden hand intersecting with the knife.

This image is emblematic of the zine's visual pattern of missing, distorted, and tool-wielding hands and fingers, often as consequence or in service of violence. At the root of this violence lie macho insecurities and the ways they are institutionalized and perpetuated through American mass culture. While the phallic implications of augmenting tools and severed fingers may now read as datedly Freudian, in images like the Ted Kluszewski baseball card such associations are difficult to ignore. The sexual nature of the drawing's caption ("My first orgasm.") connects it to the following verso, as does the placement of the image's life-sized thumb. As the reader turns the page, it mirrors her actual thumb before being replaced by the beefcake's cropped wrists. The codex format is key here: haptic engagement with it emphasizes the thumb's placement and thus intimately connects the reader with the zine's ongoing motif of absent and distorted extremities. Pettibon himself has commented on an aspect fundamental to comic books: they must be "framed by thumbs."<sup>16</sup>

When looking at the zine through McCloud's lens, it's important to keep in mind that the movement between panels is physically very different from that between pages: there is tactility in page transitions, as well as a temporal delay and a visual reveal. Each verso is visually joined to its recto but isolated from the rest of the zine's images. This isolation also makes it easier to remove the images from their original order: Pettibon's drawings have often been reprinted individually, in numerous contexts ranging from articles to art monographs to anthologies, giving many of the images independent lives of their own.

Because these images continue to thrive when removed from their original zine format, it might be tempting to see them as what book artist Keith Smith calls a “group.” Smith breaks down the ways images work together within a codex, asserting that each picture exists contextually as an implied compound picture, associated varyingly with other pictures through their shared formats, contexts of language, levels of meaning, and points of view.<sup>17</sup> He especially emphasizes the influence of environment, arguing that when pictures are physically compounded, they’re affected by the order of their viewing. In a group, Smith says, there is no set order of referral. He also defines two other categories: a series, where there is a linear narrative progression, and a sequence, where “several pictures react upon each other, but not necessarily with the adjacent picture.”<sup>18</sup>

Images form a group, Smith claims, when “referral cannot be made from picture to picture,” and “consequently, there is no set order of viewing.”<sup>19</sup> I would argue, however, that *Capricious Missives* works primarily, and much more complexly, as a sequence, where the structure is “contrapuntal. . . . A geometric progression, a montage.”<sup>20</sup>

“Contrapuntal.” “Geometric.” “Montage.” These words conjure something more poetic than chronological or plot driven, operating, as mentioned earlier, like a literary collection united by theme and mood. Still, despite this de-emphasis of time, implied narratives are at work. Each page hints at a much wider narrative context: words and images combine to make the reader ponder what happened before and might happen after the glimpse depicted. Every picture is a compound picture, after all. And narrative connections unfold within a work and intertextually between them—an argument that could be extended to single-panel cartoonists ranging from Gary Larson to Charles Addams. These artists, like Pettibon, revisit themes and archetypes in ways that make the reader wonder how they might connect. When Pettibon returns to celebrity characters like Joan Crawford, Charles Manson, and J. Edgar Hoover, he’s not only engaging with the fan culture traditionally associated with zines; he’s also building the figures’ personas in the way a fiction writer might (one could even compare this way of working to contemporary fanzine-inspired fan fiction). So while he may not unfold a start-to-finish narrative, Pettibon does a lot of storytelling.

“Some of the images are like recurring set pieces,” Pettibon has said,<sup>21</sup> and it’s notable that he talks about the subjects of his action-packed, mostly figurative drawings in terms of place rather than characters. It’s hard not to think, here, of McCloud’s two nontemporal categories of panel transition, especially the more narrative “scene-to-scene,” as opposed to the “non sequitur,” although McCloud himself questions whether any transition can truly be non sequitur. “By creating a sequence with two or more images,” he writes, “we are endowing them with a single overriding identity, and forcing the viewer to consider them as a whole.”<sup>22</sup> In this view, all connections between images begin with the viewer-reader.

And, indeed, Pettibon has discounted intentional ordering within his zines: the artist has called into question Will Eisner’s term “sequential art,”<sup>23</sup> and claimed he generally lets chance dictate how his drawings are organized and presented.<sup>24</sup> It’s worth noting here that Keith Smith differs from McCloud when he prioritizes “direct” over “random referral,” which he defines as associations made by the picture maker rather than the viewer-reader.<sup>25</sup> With Pettibon, however, randomness is key.

From the mid-1980s onward, Pettibon's drawings became much more explicitly bibliophilic in content, as he began to accompany them with quotations from classic literature. The amount of text in a typical drawing increased from one or two sentences to several conflicting textual elements, often pulled from multiple sources and manipulated. This requires an increase in active engagement on the part of the viewer-reader.<sup>26</sup> Hapkemeyer writes, "Instead of a couple of phrases or words, we begin to find whole blocks of text, at times in competition with others on the very same sheet of paper. . . . Such quantities of text necessarily determine a considerably slower reception of the work on the part of the viewer/reader, from whom the effort demanded for the perusal of an image is unusually large."<sup>27</sup> Pettibon's way of reading—a process he describes as dissection—is associative and involves interacting directly with more than one book. A level of confusion must be reached before sense is made. "I read as I write, write as I read," he said in an interview.

I'm usually reading a number of books at a time, and whether I get through an individual one is probably unlikely. I've lost interest in narrative. (*sigh*) . . . For me, reading has become more microscopic, more about dissecting the work. . . . A different context, a different language . . . you're just making these associations from one thing to another. I used to start out with a simple drawing that would begin as an idea, and then my writing would make some associations with something else. And then, you know, a day later, or a year later, or whenever, the whole page would be covered with small, finely written text. And it would become a lot of things that were meant to be just in one drawing, expanded into this while still part of my notes. Voluminous notes. You do actually get lost in that morass of associations.<sup>28</sup>

We can see here how important context is to Pettibon's creative process and how this process is inverted and unpacked by a viewer-reader approaching his images. Such interpretation is hard work: not only must the viewer-reader attempt to traverse Pettibon's cognitive bridge between image and text, he must also look to the artist's other works for cues to the logic of his intertextual universe. Hapkemeyer observes, "The distances between the drawings which hang beside each another [*sic*] in an exhibition are just like those between image and text, or again like those between various texts that may well appear in any given drawing, and they all demand a fundamental contribution from the viewer: 'filling in the blanks' means that it's left up to every viewer's personal creativity to set up connections that cross over distances which at times can be quite great."<sup>29</sup>

Such distances exist within and between galleries and codices: flipping through pages and circumambulating a room both involve spatial and temporal challenges. But the tactile nature of the codex allows for a haptic intimacy that closes the physical distance between the viewer-reader and the text. If nothing else, the book's portable nature, in theory, allows for settings and states more conducive to reading than those evoked by the public sphere of the gallery. "Whereas the reader of a book is fully prepared for the circumstances involved in reading," Hapkemeyer writes, "the museum or gallery viewer of visual works of art is generally in a frame of mind that's prepared for simple looking."<sup>30</sup> Buzz Spector's thoughts on the codex's innate intimacy echo Hapkemeyer: "We dress up to go out and look at art; undressed, in bed, we read. We seek greater comfort while reading than the furnishings of museums or concert halls will ever grant us."<sup>31</sup>

In a perfect world such observations would hold true. In reality, though, an initial hurdle of accessibility exists, for example, for rare and out-of-print books and zines, one that must be overcome before achieving such intimacy. There are economic barriers to the average viewer-reader owning a copy of Pettibon's now collectible early zines—an odd conundrum for a genre sprung from the ethic of the democratic multiple. Special-collections reading rooms, for all their stewards' valiant efforts, don't exactly offer levels of comfort and privacy conducive to reclining states of undress. So while, of course, sitting is more conducive to reading than standing, viewer-readers have to take advantage of opportunities to catch glimpses of Pettibon's prolific output when and where they arise—even if this means reading on their feet.

Despite his transition to gallery artist, Pettibon has continued to produce zines, as well as more substantial artists' books, although his codex-related output has decreased considerably since early in his career. In 2010 he collaborated with Arion Press to illustrate a Jim Thompson novel. Meanwhile, his gallery work has come to consist of wall-sized collages of drawings that he's described as resembling "a book exploded on the wall."<sup>32</sup> It's ironic that as his art became more explicitly literary in content, it also became less codex-centric in form as it moved to gallery walls. The tension between fragmentation and connection is interesting here: Beatty laments the diminishment of narrative that seems necessary for comics to receive gallery attention, but perhaps such venues may cultivate an alternative kind of sense making. The gallery's life-sized scale can foster unforeseen connections, both narrative and not, between images in Pettibon's expansive intertextual universe.

As the publishing industry continues to struggle through the information age, museums may, Pettibon has implied, now play the role of gatekeeper less than publishers do. "Comics are a book medium," he writes.

Comic Books on the wall don't pass as comic books. You couldn't flip through one if you tried—and that's a shame. They aren't hung right unless they are framed by thumbs on either side. . . . And yet an infrastructure of newsstands, drugstore racks—essentially, the major part of a distribution system that the healthy circulation of comics books should depend on—has been left to wither away. Therefore, the museum and gallery system is to be relied upon, in such a case, purely for its distributive mode.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, shifting market forces have made it difficult to experience Pettibon's zines in their original photocopied and stapled format. The only volume in which they have been reprinted in their original order, *Raymond Pettibon: The Books 1978–1998* (2000), is now out of print, and in recent years used copies have retailed for as much as \$625. Far more common are monographs where editors arrange, however they see fit, selections from his prodigious body of work—a practice not far removed from the way Pettibon himself now works. Such remixes highlight, like Pettibon's gallery collages, the shortcomings implicit in limiting sequential art to linearity.

While it's important to value the original sequential contexts of the artist's drawings, their continual recontextualization is just as fascinating. One especially adventurous book featuring his work is *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader* (1998). Released in conjunction with an exhibition organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, it intersperses selected Pettibon drawings with excerpts from

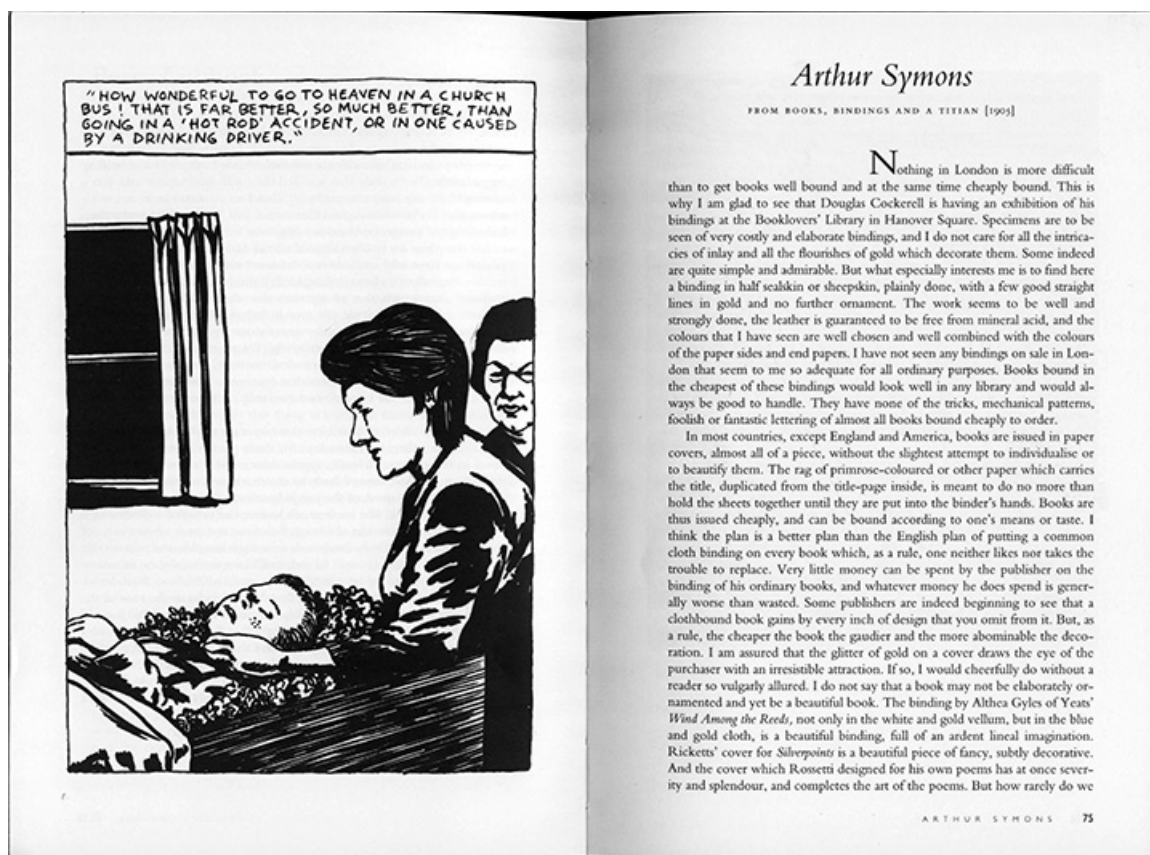


Figure 11. Page spread from Raymond Pettibon: *A Reader* (1998). Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

works by John Ruskin, William Blake, Thomas Carlyle, Marcel Proust, and many others. Inspired by Pettibon's use of literary texts in his drawings, this institutional juxtaposition of his drawings with high-culture authors helped position him as a gallery artist. The book's editors' note reads, "A bound book demands a linear order, but this does not prescribe how the reader must approach it. Connections form and then evaporate. The Reader reveals that all texts (whether paragraphs from a novel or complete poems or letters) are fragments of the universe of writing to which they belong."<sup>34</sup> This philosophy gives shape to a book as fragmentary as Pettibon's process: an appropriative *livre d'artiste*.

One page spread from the reader offers an especially emblematic glimpse (fig. 11). On the left appears a drawing taken from one of Pettibon's early zines, a pathetic scene of questionable transcendence. Its caption reads: "How wonderful to go to heaven in a church bus! That is far better, so much better, than going in a 'hot rod' accident, or in one caused by a drinking driver." The words appear to be spoken by a mourning woman who looks for solace by interpreting recent events through rose-colored glasses. A senseless freeway death suddenly makes some sense if you reframe the sequence: the victim was on his way to God already.

And on the facing page an excerpt from a 1905 treatise on bookbinding by literary critic Arthur Symons describes a common practice that, funny enough, might be said to presage the DIY, on-the-cheap zine culture that spawned Pettibon. Symons writes,

In most countries, except England and America, books are issued in paper covers, almost all of a piece, without the slightest attempt to individualise or beautify them. The rag of primrose-coloured or other paper which carries the title, duplicated from the title-page inside, is meant to do no more than hold the sheets together until they are put into the binder's hands. Books are thus issued cheaply, and can be bound according to one's means or taste.<sup>35</sup>

Symons's observations, while specific to a long-gone age, suggest a viewer-reader whose "means or taste" may influence the order in which her book is rebound, an idea that inadvertently rings true for contemporary observers of Pettibon's art, where sequence is left up for interpretation. Referentially both cartoonish and bookish, even his individual images carry echoes of the panel scanning and page turning inherent in both forms. Such contextual clues, which shift depending on whether they're perceived in a gallery or a codex, require an especially active viewer-reader, one willing to fill in her own gaps and to actively assert meaning.

Proximity affects this meaning, of course: the sense of touch influences interpretation, and images, once bound together, are hard to disengage. But with Pettibon, the spatial, interconnective potential of the book remains open. ■

#### NOTES

1. Bart Beaty, *Comics Versus Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 190.
2. See Matthew P. Brown, *The Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), where he looks at the varying ways colonial American readers approached devotional books. And see Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), for his exploration of what he terms "arthrology"; i.e., the many relationships comics panels have to one another and the resulting tensions readers face between the chronological and spatial aspects of comics.
3. Andreas Hapkemeyer, "Raymond Pettibon: The Pages Which Contain Truth Are Blank," in *Raymond Pettibon: The Pages Which Contain Truth Are Blank* (Innsbruck: Skarabaeus, 2003), 82.
4. Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 306.
5. Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* (New York: Marion Boyars, 2005), 95.
6. Richard Ohmann compares these features to the sections of a department store in *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 225.
7. Spencer, 185–86.
8. Stephen Duncombe, *Alternative Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Microcosm Publishing, 2008), 14.
9. *Ibid.*, 11.
10. Hapkemeyer writes, "It's mainly at outward levels that Pettibon's work relates to comic strips: in the style of the handling of ink and line, in the combination of text and image, and as well in the particular way in which he combines them. The work, however, is most directly based on photographs of various origin: newspaper photos, video stills, movie stills, and so forth. . . . While playing with the clearly and simply structured world of comic strips, Pettibon's works cannot themselves be said to belong to it" (74–75).
11. Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (New York: Verso, 1997), 14.
12. Hapkemeyer, 72.
13. Raymond Pettibon, *Raymond Pettibon: The Books 1978–1998* (Köln: Walther König, 2000).
14. Robert Storr, "'You Are What You Read': Words and Pictures by Raymond Pettibon," in *Raymond Pettibon* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), 45.

15. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 70–72.
16. John Carlin, ed., *Masters of American Comics* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 232.
17. Keith Smith, *Structure of the Visual Book* (Rochester, NY: Keith A. Smith Books, 2003), 41–42.
18. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
19. *Ibid.*, 45.
20. *Ibid.*, 46.
21. Max Blagg, “Raymond Pettibon,” *Interview* (December/January 2009): 193.
22. McCloud, 73.
23. Carlin, 248.
24. Grady Turner, “Raymond Pettibon,” *BOMB* 69 (Fall 1999), accessed online at <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2257/raymond-pettibon>.
25. Smith, 45.
26. Robert Storr’s analysis of a Pettibon drawing exemplifies this readerly engagement: “‘There is something in my storyteller’s art that wants to put the reader and writer on equal footing in the role of creator,’ Pettibon’s disembodied voice says in one drawing. On the other hand, queering the argument and reclaiming his artistic prerogatives the same voice or another adds the cryptic sentence ‘The hand that draws the Rorschach blots . . .’, in other words the hand of an artist who deliberately makes something which should come into being by chance and thus programs the information that promises the reader the privileges of free and open-ended interpretation” (67).
27. Hapkemeyer, 71.
28. Turner.
29. Hapkemeyer, 80–82.
30. *Ibid.*, 71.
31. Buzz Spector, “The Book Alone: Object and Fetishism,” in *Books as Art*, edited by Timothy A. Eaton (Boca Raton, FL: Boca Raton Museum of Art, 1992), 38.
32. Blagg, 194.
33. Carlin, 232.
34. Ann Temkin and Hamza Walker, eds., *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998), 3.
35. *Ibid.*, 75.

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