

A Critical Reading on Spatial Narrative in Abstract Comics

mimari temsil
temsilde deneyim ve zaman
özgürleşen seyirci
soyut çizgi roman

**architectural representation
experience and temporality in representation
emancipated spectator
abstract comics**

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Bu çalışma, soyut çizgi roman üretimlerinin mekan anlatısı üzerine eleştirel bir okumadır. Soyut çizgi roman olarak tanımlanan temsil biçimi, kullandığı tekniklerle seyircisinde bir tepki yaratan anlatı dizileridir. Çalışmanın amacı, ele alınan temsil biçiminin seyircisi ile kurduğu iletişim göz önüne alınarak; seyirciyi özgürleştiren, temsili duyumsamalara açık hale getiren potansiyellerini vurgulamaktır. Seyircinin temsille iletişim kurabilmesi için, temsilin temsil edilen mekanın özneye dair deneyimi ve zamansallığı görünür kılacak izlere sahip olması gerekir. Geleneksel mimari temsil üretimlerinde eksik olduğu düşünülen durum, temsil edilen mekanın özneye sunduğu deneyimin, temsilde karşılığının bulunmamasıdır. Deneyimlemek eylemi zamana tabidir; bu yüzden temsilde zamansallığın görünür hale gelmesi, seyirciyi de temsile dahil edecek aralıklar açacaktır. Zaman kavramını temsilin olanaklarıyla okunaklı hale getiren ve bir iletişim aracı potansiyeli taşıyan soyut çizgi roman, mekansal deneyimi gözle görünür kılacak bir temsil biçimi olarak değerlendirilmiştir. İncelenen soyut çizgi roman temsillerinin 'soyut' olması, temsili duyumsamalara ortam sağlayan ve seyircinin düşleriyle yeniden ürettiği bir deneyim alanına çevirir. Zamanın okunaklılığı ise, seyircinin ardışık üretimlerin tekil birimleri olan paneller arasında neler olduğunu ve paneller dışında neler olabileceğini hayal ettiği katılımcı bir iletişim ortamı sağlar. Bu çalışma, soyut ardışık sanat olarak tanımlanan üretimler üzerinden mekansal anlatının seyircisiyle kurduğu iletişimi incelemektedir. Deneyimin zaman ve duyumsama kavramlarıyla ortaya çıkan bir temsilde gözle görülür olmasının altını çizmesi ve mimari temsilde zamansallık konusunu tartışmaya açması anlamında değerlidir.

This study is a critical reading on the spatial narrative of abstract comics. The form of representation, which is defined as an abstract comic, is a narrative series that creates a reaction in the audience with the forms and techniques it uses. The aim of the study, considering the communication between the spectator and the representation, is to emphasize the potential that emancipated the spectator and made the representational form open to sensations. The represented space must have traces that make the subject's experience and temporality visible in order for the spectator to communicate with the representation. The experience that the space provides to the subject is thought to be lacking in traditional architectural representation because it does not have a counterpart in representation. Because the act of "experiencing" is temporal, the visibility of temporality in representation will create gaps that will include the spectator in the representation. Abstract comics have been evaluated as a form of representation that will make the spatial experience visible by making the concept of time legible with the possibilities of representation and having the potential to be used as a communication tool. The fact that the abstract comic book representations examined are 'abstract' transforms the form of representation into a field of experience for the spectator, providing a setting for sensations. On the other hand, the readability of time provides a participatory communication environment in which the spectator imagines what happens between the panels (singular units of sequential productions) and what might happen outside the panels. This study examines the communication that spatial narrative establishes with its spectators through representational forms defined as abstract sequential art. It is valuable in that it underlines the visibility of experience in a representation that emerges with the concepts of time and sensation, and opens the topic of temporality in architectural representation to discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the architectural representation of space and the subject as a spectator can be explained by the spatial experience that emerges with the presence of the subject. Since the spatial experience is shaped by the experiencing subject, it is far from static. The representation of the experience must also have different expressions for each subject. This variability will cause the representation of experience to become "abstracted". Abstraction arises not from the inexpressibility of the experience, but from the fact that it has more than one meaning. Reading the parts first in order to perceive the whole creates a situation that ensures the legibility of the representation of the experience, just as the legibility of a sentence is formed from letters to words and from words to a sentence. This technique is similar to the use of montage by W. Benjamin to have the reader solve his texts as if they were puzzles (Benjamin, 1995). To understand the whole of the narrative, the reader must piece together what he wants from thousands of small parts and include himself in the narrative while doing so. Abstract values such as "experience" must be

divided into understandable and readable parts and brought together in order to be represented and visible.

Spatial experience spreads over time as a transforming action. From the moment the subject enters a space, the subject's experience begins to form. This state of being is temporal as it indicates a process. The encounter with a work of art, as Bourriaud points out, creates a time period rather than a space. There is a period of direction, comprehension, and decision-making that extends beyond the act of "rounding off" the work by looking at it (Bourriaud, 2002, 59). As a result, while the experience is being represented, the readability of time provides intervals for including the subject in the representation. Given this relationship between subject and representation, can a form of architectural representation be composed of letters and sentences in the manner of a spoken common language and become readable? Or can it be recreated with the voice of each reader?

Architectural representation can be defined as participatory and experimental when it becomes a common space where multiple subjects communicate.

The first example that comes to mind when considering the functionality of representation as a means of communication is "language." The images that comprise the representation, like the words of a language, must correspond to human emotions. A representation method that generates new meanings in the part-whole relationship, such as word combination and sentence formation, has the potential to be used as a communication tool.

Concentrated states become sparse and ordered so as to be transferred. This process is an equivalent of trying to form sentences. There are three ways to express the concepts in the human mind. These are creating sounds, body movements and producing images. According to Jackson, any of these ways becomes a language when it creates a canonical set in itself. As sequential sounds create speech, sequential hand movements create sign language; sequential images also form a visual language (Cohn, 2007; Jackson, 2009, 6). Since sequential productions have the potential to establish their own language, they are essentially a means of communication as a method of representation (Fig. 1).

The representation of the part-whole relationship in

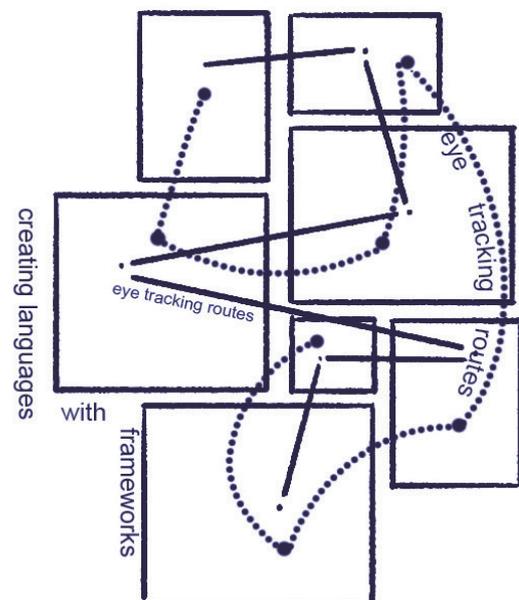
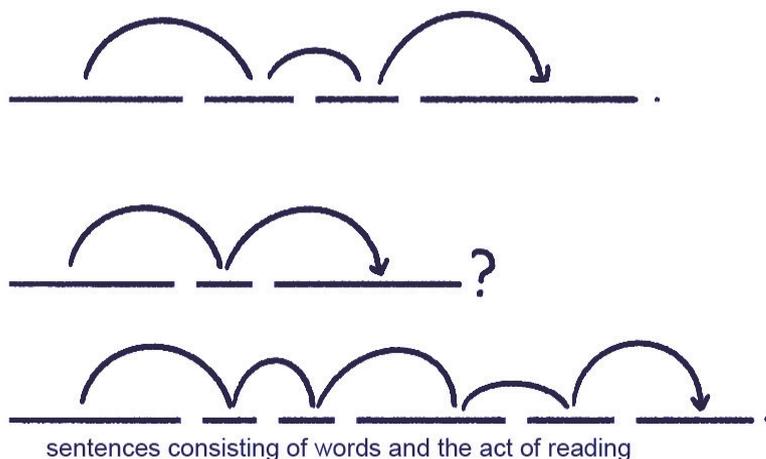


Fig. 1 – Diagram of "creating languages with frameworks", 2022.

comics also includes narratives comprised of panels, similar to the transformation of the words into sentences. The undefined spaces created by the gaps between the panels in comics, i.e. the "gutter" in a comic's language, are the gaps that are filled by the spectator's imagination. Comics, as a form of sequential art, are actually paper films. However, they differ from motion pictures in which they are voiced by the reader and the story is completed by the reader outside the panel and between the panels (Jackson, 2009, 5-6). This potential allows the comic readers to interact with the comic. The narrative in the panels of "Abstract comics", a different production form of comics, consists of abstract images together with gutters, and gains meaning with the spectator's perceptions. The intervals at which the spectator participates in the representation will be increased as a result.

From this point of view, the "experience" can be visible as its different meanings that are achieving temporality in the eyes of the spectator. The temporality and openness to sensations of the abstract comics are evaluated as a form of representation that can transfer experience with its potential to emancipate the spectators. Within the scope of the study, the Abstract comics are discussed and investigated in terms of their ability to represent time and experience in space. They are believed to achieve this through intervals that allow the spectator to infiltrate, complete, personalize and reproduce the narrative. The motivation for exploring new representational forms of spatial experiences stems from the ability of architectural representation methods to provide a dialogue with the subject. The research focuses primarily on the potentials of the 'abstract sequential art' productions as a tool for conveying spatial experience. The designers' methods for including the spectator in the

representation are then examined using sample works. Each designer's method of opening the representation to the sensations allows the spectator to re-read the representation through his or her subjectivity. Can representation become a field of experience when the architectural spatial experience is also represented as in the examined examples below?

DIALOGUE WITH THE SPECTATOR IN ABSTRACT COMICS

Australian photographer and painter Kym Tabulo defines the abstract sequential art as: "Abstract sequential art refers to a number of sequentially juxtaposed abstract images that focus on form and technique, which may elicit from the spectator an aesthetic response, a notional sense of narrative and/or a possible theme." (Tabulo, 2013, 30). When sequential images are combined, they become more readable because of the new meanings they establish, and a

narrative emerges in which the spectator can become involved with sensations. The spectator reads the narrative by connecting the images on the panels with their own interpretation (Fig. 2). Reading, as Bachelard puts it for poetry, is "dreams flowing along the lines" and "dreams moving along with the lines in motion." (Bachelard, 2018, 20).

Hovering over lines or words, the eye attempts to comprehend the whole by combining the parts and filling in the gaps in his or her own mind. Reading, understanding, and interpreting indicate that the spectator is engaged with the work they encounter and is not apathetic to it. According to Renciere, the acts of reading, understanding, and interpretation, that is, associating and separating, joining and separating, indicate the spectator's emancipation (Ranciere, 2010, 22). *The emancipated spectator* assumes an important role in allowing the representation to be open to reproductions



Fig. 2 – Personal archive, 2022.

and the use of the productions examined within the scope of the study as a communication tool. The emancipated spectator's dissociation of the layers concentrated on a single moment also defines the method of sequential art. It is necessary to allow encountering and making sense of its parts in order for a multi-layered narrative that contains a situation, event, or emotion to be intelligible for a subject other than its narrator, and for the whole to be comprehended. In sequential representations, the pieces lead the spectator to a meaningful whole.

Abstract sequential art productions contain time as they are sequential and prompt sensations as they are abstract. The common feature of abstract representations is that they contain multiple meaning possibilities rather than being meaningless. With each spectator's own dream, they become communication tools that are re-read, voiced, and gain a new meaning (Jackson, 2009, 5). Sensation emerges in the abstract representations as a result of the images in which the interpretation is left to the spectator. The spectator recognizes the idiosyncratic one among the various meaning possibilities. When the spectator begins to think associatively, the dialogue between the representation and the spectator becomes stronger. The spectator takes on a role that gives voice to sequential production, fills in the gaps, that is, participates in it; *"the displacement of the subject and the object, their transformation into each other"* is proof of the emergence of sensation (Avci, 2016). When a design becomes open to sensations, it transforms into an experience area where the designer's message is communicated to the spectator. To clarify an abstract concept like "experience," the subject's layers of imagination, recollections,

memories, and sensations must be broken down into readable pieces. In this way, panels that are pieces of the representation of the experience, become the experience itself.

REPRESENTATION OF EXPERIENCE IN ABSTRACT COMICS THROUGH CASE STUDIES

The features that will support the dialogue with the subject are sought while looking for traces of experience in representation. As a result, the following characteristics are investigated in the samples examined:

- Having frames that have become a communication tool and convert the representation into readable pieces,
- The reciprocal relationship and continuity of the images in the frames for the representation of temporality,
- The various meanings provided by abstraction, which opens the door to sensations

The layers of the experience expand and spread with the frames, making them more uncluttered and readable. In this way, the spectator will be able to establish connections across the layers of the experience in their own subjectivity and complete the intervals (i.e. the gutters). Connections established across the frames are the expression of an event. The continuities of the whole captured by the connections express temporality. The spectator will be able to complete the gutters by establishing connections across the layers of the experience in their own subjectivity. The expression of an event is the establishment of connections across frames. The connections express temporality by capturing the continuities of the whole. The multiple meanings of the abstract

images provide an increasing number of possibilities for the spectator's relationships with each representation (Fig. 3).

Abstract comics' production goal is to elicit an aesthetic judgment in the spectator and to create spaces that emancipate the spectator. To communicate with the spectator, each designer employs their own form of representation. In the case studies examined, representation includes movement, transformation, and time, as well as the methods of working that designers employ. As a result, the possibilities for emancipating the spectator grows. The abstract representation of the event and time allows the spectator to sense the experience. With this approach, the possibilities that emancipate the spectator provided by the representational forms have been investigated by considering the abstract comics productions of Rosaire Appel, Derik Badman, and Andrei Molotiu.

Rosaire Appel is a New York-based visual artist. She describes herself as an artist who investigates the relationships between reading, looking, and listening. Her work is primarily comprised of graphic novels, abstract comics, asemic writing, and asemic music. Appel claims that "since her language is visual, it is international".¹ Rosaire Appel mentions that she is more interested in possibilities than results when describing her productions. Her works, which she leaves on the verge of completion, transform into fields of experience with countless possibilities (Babcock, 2010). Although Appel's images do not replace any object as an abstract production, they do cause sensations when they find a response in the spectator's dreams. A running line between panels can convey spatial continuity, while the gradual disappearance of an image through the running panels can convey temporal sensibility. All of

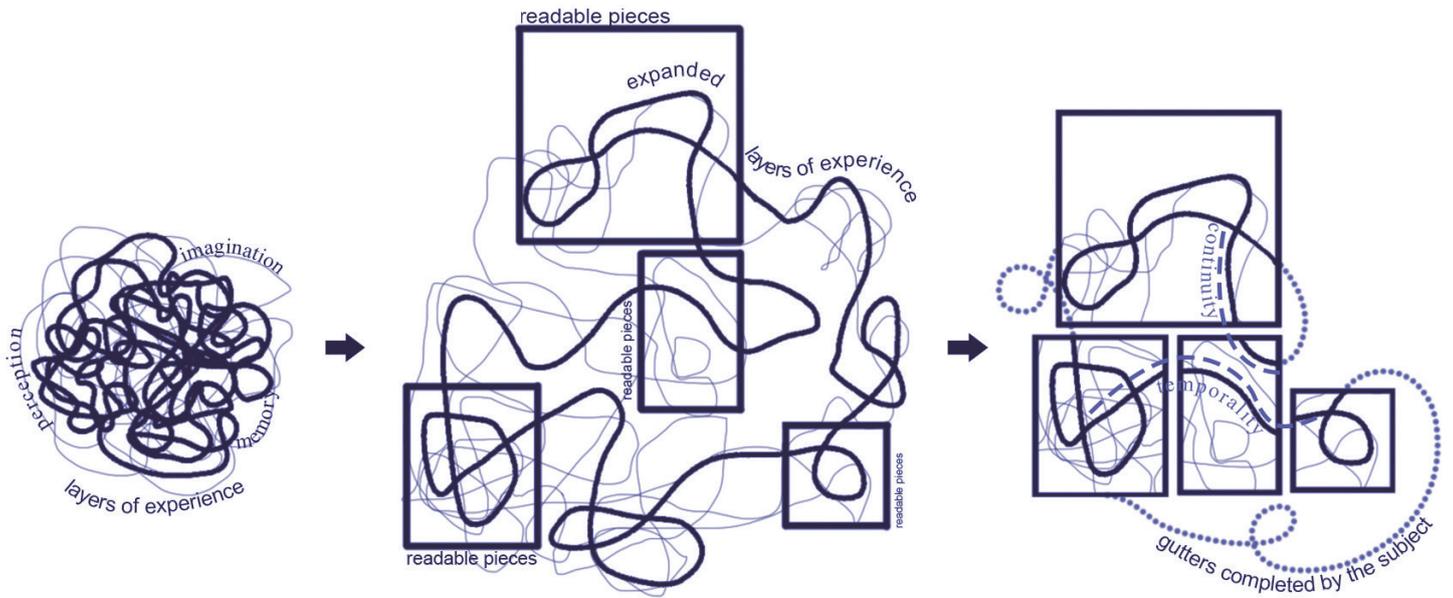


Fig. 3 – Diagram of “readable layers of experience”, 2022.

these interpretations are based on the sensations revealed by the audience’s own subjective approaches. The situation that the artist considers valuable while creating her works is “these possibilities that multiply with the spectators”.

Appel’s work is an abstract sequential production in which she interferes with the story and the spaces by distorting and disorganizing them. In this example, Appel inserts the story line without a word, disrupting the sequential production method and interfering with the panels. All of this is done by the artist in order to broaden the scope of sequential arts (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – “Disturbances”, R. Appel, 2016 (copyright Rosaire Appel 2022)

Appel describes her works as follows: “In this book, both stories and locations are disturbed - interfered with - disarranged. The result is a sequence of pages that are like rooms unhampered by customary furniture through which a non-verbal story is woven...”. She mentions in her statement that she emancipated the space and technique alongside the story in order to emancipate the narrative. It accomplishes this by deviating from tradition (Appel, 2016).

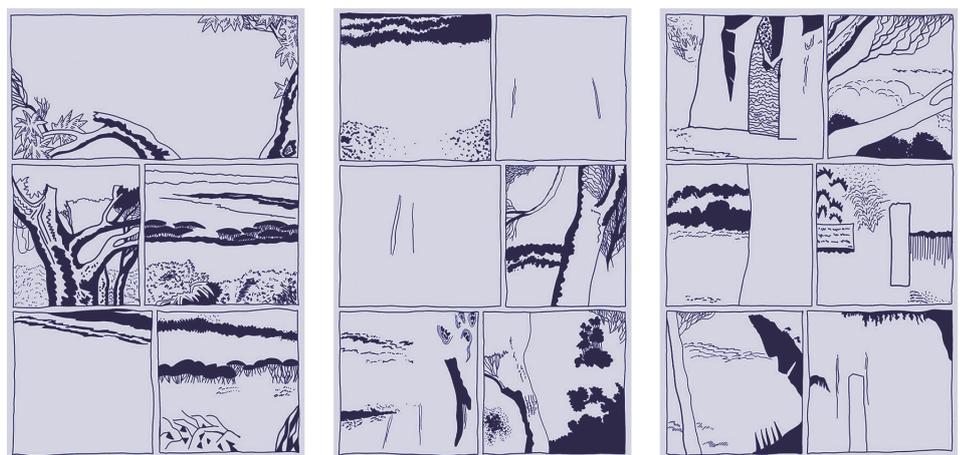


Fig. 5 – “Flying Chief”, D. Badman, 2009, copyright Derik Badman 2022.

By removing the subject from the focus of the comics, he demonstrates the potential of the “background” in many of his works. He reveals what he is interested in and wants to express with the abstract and poetic

power of the comic.² Here, it has been examined by Badman’s work titled “Flying Chief”, which distorts traditional methods in a manner similar to Appel’s emancipation of technique by destroying comic book panels. The artist

Derik Badman is a web developer from Philadelphia.

emancipates the technique in his experimental work by disrupting the subject/hero-oriented aspect of traditional comics and manga productions. In the form of a traditional comic book production, he removes the figure and its text balloons, titles, and sound effects, leaving only the backgrounds and panels (Fig. 5).

By interpreting the work and abstracting the remaining background images, Badman writes the story. Although there is no detail about the subject's figure, some shapes in the background expressing the subject's movement draw attention. The gaps in the panels and the background composition make the subject feel the position before it disappears. *The space transformed with the subject* continues to contain clues shaped by the subject's actions even though the subject as a figure has disappeared. By removing the figure of a finished story and creating a new story that is unfinished and waiting to be completed, Badman has also abstracted the remaining images from the figure and turned the representation into a field of experience that the spectator can read in their own subjectivity. Badman's method that opens his work to the senses is to allow the spectator to fill the void that has been created by eliminating the subject. The spectator can fill in the gaps with their imagination by determining the leading role of the narrative. Badman's *extraction method* emancipates the spectator, makes the narrative open to sensations and awaits completion.

Andrei Molotiu is another designer who incorporates the spectator into the representation. Molotiu is an art history senior lecturer at Indiana University Bloomington. He wrote *Fragonard's Allegories of Love* (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007) and edited *Abstract Comics: The Anthology* (Fantagraphics Books,

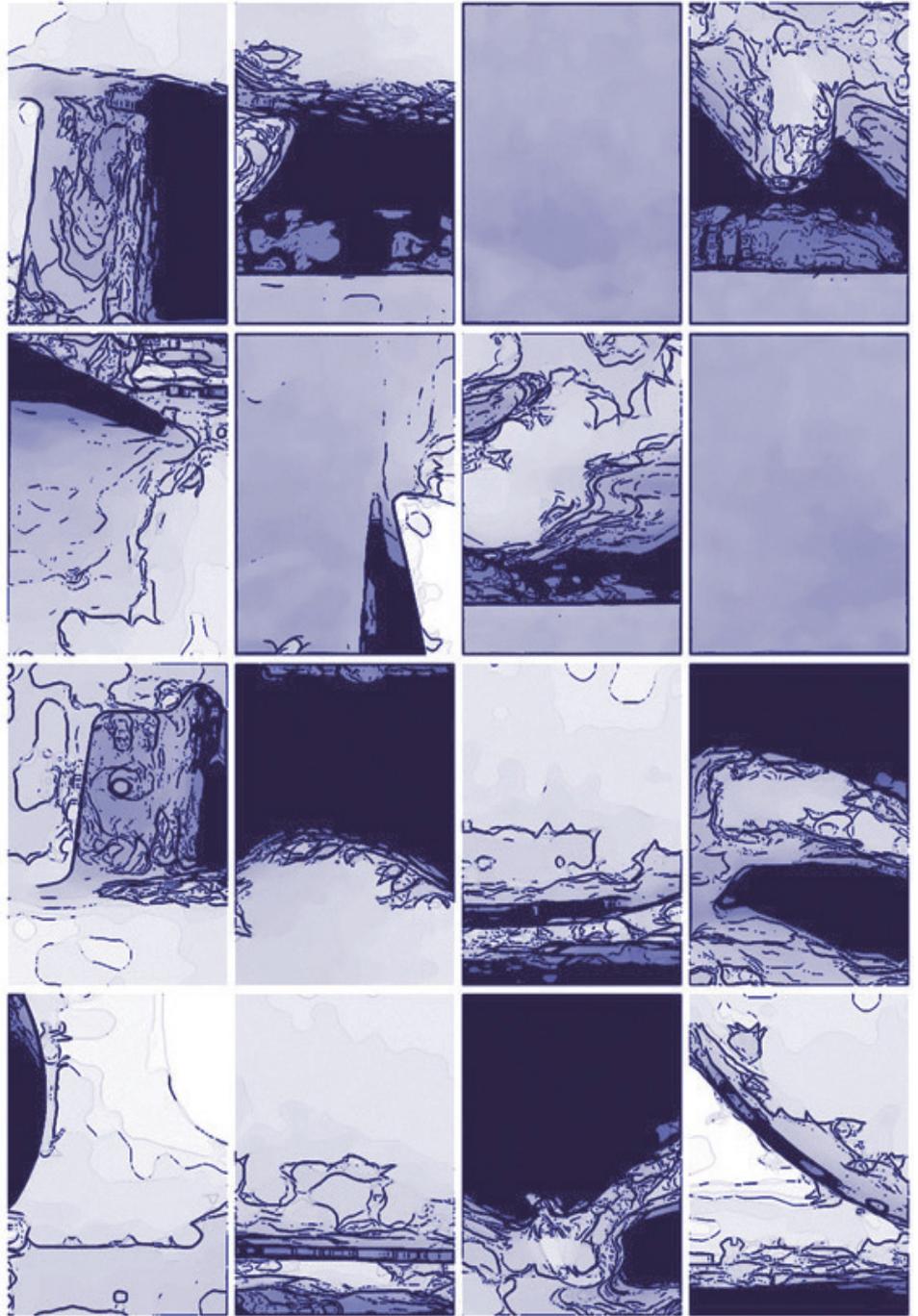


Fig. 6 - "A Day by the Ocean", A. Molotiu, 2008, copyright Andrei Molotiu 2022.

2009). He has been involved in comics studies for over a decade. His interests include 'eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art, critical theory and art philosophy, and the history of comics'.³

Another way to engage the spectator is to give a title to a completely abstract drawing, as Molotiu does, so that the lines can capture a commonality in each spectator. As an example, Andrei Molotiu's "A Day by the Ocean" is examined.

The artist conveys the ocean's

stillness and movement by abstracting its movements. We can feel the ocean's stillness or the rising waves. There is, however, no linear time between panels. What Deleuze said about time being a mental movement in space comes to mind here (Tanju, 2008, 7). Molotiu divided the confusion of each ocean state in our minds and made it readable. He renounced linear time in his abstract panels, which include reminiscences of a strong spatial narrative (Fig. 6).

Because abstract

representations of intersubjective common experiences have intervals that can be shaped by each spectator's own sensations, such as feeling the ocean waves, the spectator becomes a participant in the representation. Molotiu's drawing of the ocean is reminiscent of the familiar experience of instantaneous, hazily unfolding scenes, such as recalling a memory. It embodied the unforgettable experience of watching the waves of an ocean by combining memories of water's instantaneous sensations.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the possibilities of making the representation of a space open to the spectator's experience and investigates the visibility of temporality in narratives that are constantly restructured and interpreted through experience. The temporality of a spatial narrative is not linear but rather based on the subject's recollections. Sequential productions that break apart concentrated moments to make them readable are used to represent this temporality. When the lack of temporality in traditional forms of architectural representation forms is supported by sequential productions, then representation turns into a field of experience in which the spectator establishes the part-whole relationship based on their own sensations and produces their own discourse. In this way, the emancipated audience can read the representation within the temporality of the representation. The panels, which will elicit memories that differ for each subject but share commonalities, have now evolved into a common language and communication tool that the audience can interpret.

The methods used by the designers in these analysed comic artworks, allow the audience to read the representation in his or her own subjectivity,

open to the senses through the intervals in the representation. Appel values the countless possibilities that arise through the presence of the spectator, leaving her work unfinished. By breaking the strict rules of traditional comic technique, narrative, story, and technique are emancipated. Badman extracts the probabilities that Appel obtained by leaving them halfway. When he removes the subject figure, which is the focal point of traditional comics, the design he reinterprets becomes an experiential area awaiting completion by the spectator's senses. Unfinished works have opened up new possibilities for the spectator. In Molotiu's work, however, certain moments from the spectator's recollections come together and gain temporality. All of these examples have one thing in common: they open up the designer's narrative to new interpretations, along with allowing access for the spectator's feelings. As the spectator's gaze moves through the panels, the representation transforms into a space of experience.

As observed in the case studies, sequential arts enable the condensed meanings of abstract concepts to attain intelligibility. Panels, which are parts of a larger whole, have become a tool for assisting in the construction of sentences that are interpreted by the spectator's senses, such as the formation of sentences from words. The space narrative has been able to transform into a communication tool, where the experience is seen in the relationships between successive panels, emancipating the spectator at this point. This open-ended character of spatial representation subject to personal interpretations in the context of experience and temporality is inspiring in re-questioning the finished, terminated, and diminished forms of traditional architectural representation.

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