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by Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett, with essay by Joseph Tabbi

The Prairie Gallery, Alberta, Canada, 2010

48 pp., illus. N/A

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*Superman, Batman, Spiderman, The Legion of Superheroes, Archie*—as a child I was a lover of them all and held on to my vast collection of comics until it was sold without my permission at a family garage sale while I was away at college. (For a long time I harbored a grudge for my brother for selling my original Batman comic at that sale.) Now, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Watchmen, Fables* keeps me faithful to graphically enhanced books, whether they be comics or graphic novels. Aficionados like me liken Scott McCloud to a god for legitimizing comics in the lofty world of academic scholarship and believe the women behind New Radio and Performing Arts should be canonized for promoting the art form with this commission for *Grafik Dynamo* by Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett.

First, a few words about the project from which the “book” under review originates: In 2005 New Radio and Performing Arts, under the direction of Jo-Anne Green and Helen Thorington, commissioned Canadian artists Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett to produce a work for its *Turbulence* website.[1] Their work, *Grafik Dynamo*, experiments with social media, dynamic systems, and storytelling in a way that challenges our general assumptions about narrativity. Specifically, for three years Armstrong and Tippett took live images from *LiveJournal* and combined them with “narrative fragments . . . dynamically loaded into speech and thought bubbles and randomly displayed,” and produced what some have erroneously called a “random comic strip generator.”[2] Actually, it is more, which I will get to in a moment, but the term does help to explain the process in a very simplistic way. The work is still available but, now, draws its images from Flickr.

In preparing for this review, I revisited the site and watched as the triptych of panels randomly changed one at a time or, sometimes, two in close succession. A black and white close up of a man with short cropped hair and glasses’ temple curling around his ear, for example, had the caption: “He had taken a horrified interest in the doings of the court.” The panel to its left showed a collage of food and stoves with the bubble stating, “Surely it is the problem of faith!” and its caption below telling us “but the prostitute had some startling news.” The panel to the

right was black with no image, the bubble announcing, "The Earth's splitting!" Watching the work long enough reveals that the words produced by Armstrong remain stable, finding their way as captions or bubbles while the images themselves constantly change. Thus, the challenge in "reading" this dynamic graphic novel lies in making sense of the three panels together and individually as they shift words with random images. Where is the story?, one may be fooled into asking.

Here is where Joseph Tabbi's essay, "Graphic Sublime: On the Art and Designwriting of Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett," provides some guidance. This essay and examples from the work comprise the book—in reality, an exhibit catalog—published by The Prairie Gallery, the gallery where the work was shown from April 1-June 30, 2008. Tabbi, in discussing the "habits of attention" we use when engaging with digital works (10), reminds us of our inability to avoid coherence, and "the sense of a narrative, the impression of history in the making, [that] persists in what we see" (12). Alluding to Thomas Pynchon, Tabbi tells us that "[t]echnology and information, in the worlds of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Grafik Dynamo*, each can inflict its own violence on the texture of everyday life, but each is also capable of evolving . . . [Comics, graphic novels, the "Funnies"] are ways that people learn to live with technological violence" (15). Clarifying this statement further, he says:

"Now that technologies facilitate the viewing of atrocities, deaths, events that occur at every instant worldwide, the call of narrative is no longer to locate such events in our own lives. What is required, rather, is a space where events can be written, not as commentary or analysis, but as affective outbursts, capable of combining but only randomly, never through authorial purpose or intention." (22)

Thus, the shift *from* reflecting upon the world to reflecting on our feelings about a world overly exposed to human misery lies at the heart of what *Grafik Dynamo* addresses about narrativity, according to Tabbi. The "sublime" referred to in the essay's title showed up twice in Armstrong's captions and bubbles when Tabbi examined the work. This repetition led him to see it not in the way suggested by Romantic poets as the "presence of nature," but rather in the context of violence and techno-culture as the absence of "what is *not said*" (author's emphasis, 24), what perhaps we do not want to face. "McCloud's work is not criticism, and Armstrong/Tippett's work . . . is not narrative," he says, "[b]ut these works have the virtue of letting us know, sensually, what it is we're missing—in an era that systematically denies the development of critical and narrative experience" (27).

For those of us invested in media art, visual rhetoric, and digital storytelling, the book, funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, is well worth hunting down for the essay and full-color reproduction of 16 pages of panels from the live site. Its comic book style presentation and unique way of referencing sources make it a lively and informative take on this area of media art. It is also a compelling invitation to visit the original work, which, mentioned

earlier, is still available for viewing.

References:

[1] Armstrong, K. and M. Tippett. *Grafik Dynamo. Turbulence*. <http://www.turbulence.org/Works/dynamo/>. Accessed May 26, 2011.

[2] "Grafik Dynamo." *Poor Mojo Newswire*. <http://www.poormojo.org/pmjadaily/archives/002836.php>. Accessed May 29, 2011.

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