THOUGH IT SEEMS INNOCUOUS ENOUGH, THERE WAS A TIME WHEN SUCH A SIMPLE IDEA WAS RIDICULIZED.

EVEN TODAY, THERE ARE THOSE WHO ASK THE QUESTION, "CAN COMICS BE ART?"

"IT IS--"
"I'M SORRY--"
"A REALLY STUPID QUESTION!"

BUT IF WE MUST ANSWER IT, THE ANSWER IS YES.

ESPECIALLY IF YOUR DEFINITION OF ART IS AS BROAD AS MINE!
Art, as I see it, is any human activity which doesn't grow out of either of our species' two basic instincts: survival and reproduction!

Graah! Eek!

Example: Here's a prehistoric male chasing a prehistoric female with only one thing on his mind: reproduction!

So strong is this instinct that it governs his every move! Not one step is wasted in the pursuit of his goal?

The female—afraid for her survival—manages to hide. Now, deprived of his goal, the male stands indecisive.

And survives.

His next move might be to look for food (survival) or perhaps another female (reproduction).

But instead...

HPLPLP!!

Art.

Suddenly—!

RUN!

Now all of his thoughts and actions are focused on that other vital human instinct—survival!

Again, his legs propel him forward with maximum efficiency!

It's a happy fact of human existence that we simply can't spend our every waking hour eating and having sex! No matter how frantically we pursue our goals, there will inevitably be times when we just don't have a thing to do!
WHAT MAY LOOK LIKE A TRIBE OF WOODED, INACTIVE CAVES ATTACHED TO THE DIRT IS, IN FACT, A THRIVING ART COLONY.

TODAY SHE HAS A STOMACHACHE AND HER LINES ARE TIGHT AND ANGULAR. YESTERDAY SHE FELT BETTER AND HER LINES WERE OPEN AND CURVED.

FIRST, THEY PROVIDE EXERCISE FOR MINDS AND BODIES NOT RECEIVING OUTSIDE STIMULUS.
SECOND, THEY PROVIDE AN OUTLET FOR EMOTIONAL IMBALANCES AIDING IN THE RACE'S MENTAL SURVIVAL.
THIRD AND PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANTLY TO OUR SURVIVAL AS A RACE, SUCH RANDOM ACTIVITIES OFTEN LEAD —

AHEM!!!

AND OVER THERE A MAN BEATS A SIMPLE RHYTHM WITH A PAIR OF STONES. HE DOESN'T KNOW WHY, BUT THE SOUND PLEASES HIM.

NEARBY, A BOY KICKS UP PEBBLES AND DIRT AND PUMMELS THE AIR WITH HIS FIST.

TODAY HE LOST A FIGHT WITH HIS BROTHER, NOW ALL HE CAN DO IS DANCE AWAY HIS FRUSTRATION.

WHILE OVER HERE, A LITTLE GIRL SINGS HER SONGS OF YOUTH!

THIS FUNCTION WOULD ALSO BE PERFORMED IN LATER CENTURIES OF Sports AND GAMES.

ART AS SELF EXPRESSION: THE ARTIST AS HERO; FOR MANY, ITS HIGHEST PURPOSE.

ART AS DISCOVERY, AS THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH, AS EXPLORATION; THE SOUL OF MUCH MODERN ART AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY.

A LOT HAS CHANGED IN HALF A MILLION YEARS, BUT SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE.

THE PROCESSES ARE MORE COMPLEX NOW, BUT THE INSTINCTS "REMAIN THE SAME": SURVIVAL AND REPRODUCTION STILL HOLD THE UPPER HAND.

BECAUSE OF ITS INDEPENDENCE FROM OUR EVOLUTION-BRED INSTINCTS, ART IS THE WAY WE ASSERT OUR IDENTITY AS INDIVIDUALS AND BREAK OUT OF THE NARROW RULES NATURE CAST US IN.

OF COURSE, THE GENIUS OF 'MOTHER NATURE' IS SUCH THAT EVEN THINGS THAT SEEM TO HAVE THEIR LIVES FROM AN EVOLUTIONARY STANDPOINT.
Yet in almost everything we do there is at least an element of art.

Perhaps a little unnecessary choreography on the assembly line.

Or the personal style of a bicycle messenger.

Or just the way we sign our names.

But the ideal of the latter is alive in the hearts of many artists who may hope for success, but won't alter their work to obtain it.

The “fine artist”—the pure artist—says to the world: I didn’t do this for money! I didn’t do this to match the color of your couches!

“I didn’t do this to get laid! I didn’t do this for fame or power or greed or anything else! I did this for art!”

In some occupations, the latitude for self-expression is greater. Survival—making a living—goes hand in hand with creative desire.

I think it’s fair to say that some activities have more art in them than others.

Life is a series of minute decisions, some motivated by survival, some not, and proportions do vary.

But the latter is alive in the hearts of many artists who may hope for success, but won’t alter their work to obtain it.

In other words: “My art has no practical value whatsoever!”

“But it’s important!”

And sometimes it is, though it might take a century or two for the rest of the world to find out!

But to proclaim as so many so often do, that—

That’s not art!

Rare is the person in any occupation who expresses nothing.

And rare is the artist who cares nothing for success, i.e., survival.

“Pure” art is essentially tied to the question of purpose—of deciding what you want out of art.

This is as true in comics as it is in painting, writing, theatre, film, sculpture, or any other form...

...because the creation of any work in any medium will always follow a certain path.
IDEA/PURPOSE

FIFTH: CONSTRUCTING
THE WORK, APPLYING
SKILLS, PRACTICAL
KNOWLEDGE, INVENTION,
PROBLEM-SOLVING,
GETTING THE "JOB" DONE.

1 2 3 4 5 6

A PATH CONSISTING OF SIX STEPS.

1 2 3 4 5 6

IDEA/PURPOSE

FIRST: THE IMPULSES, THE
IDEAS, THE EMOTIONS,
THE PHILOSOPHIES, THE
PURPOSES OF THE
WORK, THE WORK'S
"CONTENT."

2 FORM

SECOND: THE FORM IT WILL
TAKE... WILL IT BE A
BOOK? A CHALK
DRAWING? A CHAIR?
A SONG? A SCULPTURE?
A POT HOLDER? A
COMIC BOOK?

3 IDIOM

THIRD: THE "SCHOOL" OF
ART, THE VOCABULARY
OF STYLES OR GESTURES
OR SUBJECT MATTER,
THE GENRE THAT THE
WORK BELONGS TO...
MAKE A GENRE
OF ITS OWN.

4 STRUCTURE

FOURTH: PUTTING IT ALL
TOGETHER... WHAT TO
INCLUDE, WHAT TO
LEAVE OUT, HOW TO
ARRANGE, HOW TO
COMPOSE THE
WORK.

5 CRAFT

BUT OFTEN IF WE BITE
INTO THAT SHINY NEW
APPLE...

6 SURFACE

SIXTH: PRODUCTION
VALUES, FINISHING.
THE ASPECTS MOST
APPARENT ON FIRST
SUPERFICIAL
EXPOSURE TO THE WORK.

IN ALL THE ARTS IT'S THE
SURFACE THAT PEOPLE APPRECIATE MOST EASILY,
LIKE AN APPLE CHOSEN FOR ITS
SHINY SKIN.

THE LATEST "FAN FAVORITE" OFTEN
LOOKS BETTER AT A GLANCE THAN THE
OLDER ARTISTS WHO HAD THE IDEAS
AND CREATED THE IDIOMS, BUT WERE
LESS INTERESTED IN SURFACES.

IT'S A CYCLE AS OLD
AS ART ITSELF.
IN COMICS, THE CYCLE BEGINS ALL OVER THE WORLD, AS YOUNG READERS DISCOVER COMICS FOR THE FIRST TIME AND IN A FEW CASES, BEGIN TO DEVELOP A LOVE FOR COMICS THAT WILL LAST A LIFETIME!

IN THIS EARLY STAGE, THESE READERS ARE EXPERIENCING THE CHARACTERS, IDEAS, EVENTS AND EMOTIONS OF THE STORY DIRECTLY. COMICS IS ACTING AS AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN STORYTELLER AND AUDIENCE.

BUT IN SOME, AN AWARENESS OF THE FORM BEGINS TO DEVELOP: AN AWARENESS THAT ALL COMICS ARE JUST INK ON PAPER:

-- THAT MAKING THEM ONLY REQUIRES CERTAIN SKILLS

-- AND THAT THOSE SKILLS CAN BE LEARNED!

ONE OF THEM—FULL OF BIG IDEAS—MAKES THE BIG DECISION.

I'M GONNA MAKE COMICS WHEN I GROW UP!

HE'S OFF TO A LOGICAL START: HE HAS THE IDEAS AND HE'S CHOSEN COMICS AS HIS FORM OF EXPRESSION. MAYBE NOW HE'LL CONSIDER WHAT TYPES OF COMICS ARE RIGHT FOR HIM.

BUT PROBABLY NOT.

MORE LIKELY HE POSTPONES HIS OWN IDEAS AND BEGINS TO STUDY THE CRAFT OF OTHER ARTISTS IN HIS ATTEMPT TO BECOME A PROFESSIONAL.

HE BUYS THE "RIGHT" BRUSH, THE "RIGHT" PENS AND THE "RIGHT" PAPER AND BEGINS TO PRACTICE.

EVENTUALLY...

LOOK, JACk! I CAN DRAW AS WELL AS A PROFESSIONAL!

HE BUYS SOME BOOKS ON ANATOMY AND PERSPECTIVE, STUDIES A VARIETY OF DRAWING TECHNIQUES AND PRACTICES, PRACTICES, PRACTICES FOR MONTHS.

BUT WHEN HE BRINGS THE WORK TO A REAL PROFESSIONAL AT THE LOCAL CON:

... ANATOMY IS VERY POOR... SEE HOW THAT MUSCLE CONNECTS... AND THAT PERSPECTIVE YEEES. DO YOU KNOW WHAT A VANISHING POINT IS??... AND AS FOR FACES...

SO HE BUYS SOME BOOKS ON ANATOMY AND PERSPECTIVE, STUDIES A VARIETY OF DRAWING TECHNIQUES AND PRACTICES, PRACTICES, PRACTICES FOR MONTHS.

1 IDEA 2 FORM 3?

SULP.
But somehow it never quite "clicks" for him. Maybe he just doesn’t have enough skill... maybe he loses interest, maybe life just gets in the way... but for whatever reason—

—he leaves his dreams of making comics behind.

One of them is now ready to take the next step! She's studied her craft all the way through high school and into college.

She's a good, hardworking student.

"I think I've really made a breakthrough!"

"This is very good."

But when she shows her work to a seasoned pro...

"You're a skilled scripter and drafterperson, but your storytelling isn't good enough. You have no sense of pacing. These layouts are very muddy... you have to compose your stories..."

But all over the world, others have undergone similar experiences and haven't given up yet!

But maybe this is enough for this particular artist enough to just be part of the art, business, and community of comics without necessarily calling the shots.

But elsewhere, another creator has been through the same sort of process and he wants more!

But... when, the creator has seen through the same sort of process and he wants more, he discovers that his favorite artist was actually just a watered-down version of an older, less-polished artist whom he had always taken for granted.

He learns to see beneath the crafts of draftsmanship and scripting to see the whole picture—pacing, drama, humor, suspense, composition, thematic development. And... soon they're all at his command!

He spends his every waking hour working out the difficult principles of comics composition and storytelling, the kind they don't teach in books!*

"This guy was God!"

They're all at his command!

"I've done it! I've learned all there is to know!"

"This time I'll get my own book! I'm sure of it!"

Well, okay, one book, perhaps again.

* This scenario is a play on the idea of a mentor who teaches the young artist how to tell stories effectively, and not just in the traditional sense of comics storytelling.
AND LET'S SAY IT WORKS! HE DOES LAND HIS OWN BOOK AND SOON IS ESTABLISHED AS A CREATOR OF GREAT SKILL. HE UNDERSTANDS COMICS STORYTELLING BETTER THAN MOST.

His work isn't particularly original. The critics don't pay much attention to him, but he makes a decent living for himself and his family and that's enough for him.

ENOUGH THAT FOR WHAT HE DOES, HE'S ONE OF THE BEST.

AND HE KNOWS IT! [Wow!]

BUT ANOTHER ARTIST HAS MADE IT THROUGH THE SAME SORTS OF HURDLES AND REACHED THE SAME LEVELS OF SUCCESS AND STILL ISN'T SATISFIED.

SHE WONDERS IF HER SUCCESS REALLY MEANS ANYTHING WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY OTHERS DOING THE SAME THINGS IN THE SAME WAY. SHE WANTS AN IDENTITY.

SHE BELIEVES THAT THERE'S SOMETHING MORE--SOME PIECE OF THE PUZZLE--THAT SHE STILL HAVEN'T FOUND.

SHE BEGINS TO INVENT NEW WAYS OF SHOWING THE SAME OLD THINGS. SHE DEVELOPS INNOVATIVE NEW TECHNIQUES AND STARTS DOING AWAY WITH THE SAME OLD THING ALTOGETHER.

BUT ELSEWHERE, ANOTHER CREATOR HAS MADE IT TO THE SAME PLACE AND STILL FEELS DISSATISFIED. HE FEELS THAT SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT HAS BEEN NEGLECTED...

AS SHE CREATES HER OWN PERSONAL IDIOM OF COMICS, SHE FINDS THE WHOLE OF HER WORK CHANGING TO SUIT THAT IDIOM.

AS SHE CREATES HER OWN PERSONAL IDIOM OF COMICS, SHE FINDS THE WHOLE OF HER WORK CHANGING TO SUIT THAT IDIOM.

LETS SAY THAT FINANCIAL SUCCESS AND THE RESPECT OF HER PEERS SOON FOLLOW.*

I WANT TO THANK ALL OF THOSE WHO HELPED ME TO ACHIEVE MY FULL POTENTIAL!

*WANTED TO REACH AND POETRY AND ALSO POSSIBLE, OF COURSE.

WHAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

SHE WONDERES IF HER SUCCESS REALLY MEANS ANYTHING WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY OTHERS DOING THE SAME THINGS IN THE SAME WAY. SHE WANTS AN IDENTITY.

YOUNG ARTISTS BEGIN TO IMITATE HER STYLE, BUT MOST OF THEM ONLY SEEM TO APPRECIATE THE "SURFACE."

WANT TO SHOW ME YOUR PORTFOLIO?

COULD IT?

SHE WANTS TO APPRECIATE THE "SURFACE."

WANT TO SHOW ME YOUR PORTFOLIO?

COULD IT?

SHE DEVELOPS INNOVATIVE NEW TECHNIQUES AND STARTS DOING AWAY WITH THE SAME OLD THING ALTOGETHER.

BUT ELSEWHERE, ANOTHER CREATOR HAS MADE IT TO THE SAME PLACE AND STILL FEELS DISSATISFIED. HE FEELS THAT SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT HAS BEEN NEGLECTED...

SHE BEGINS TO INVENT NEW WAYS OF SHOWING THE SAME OLD THINGS. SHE DEVELOPS INNOVATIVE NEW TECHNIQUES AND STARTS DOING AWAY WITH THE SAME OLD THING ALTOGETHER.

BUT ELSEWHERE, ANOTHER CREATOR HAS MADE IT TO THE SAME PLACE AND STILL FEELS DISSATISFIED. HE FEELS THAT SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT HAS BEEN NEGLECTED...

SOMETHING FUNDAMENTAL, SOMETHING AT THE CORE OF WHO HE IS AS AN ARTIST. WITH THESE THOUGHTS ON HIS MIND, IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE HE ASKS THAT ONE SIMPLE QUESTION.
AND NOW, THE BIGGEST QUESTION OF ALL: DOES THIS ARTIST WANT TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT LIFE THROUGH HIS ART OR DOES HE WANT TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT ART ITSELF?

PERSONALLY, I THINK WE ALL HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY TO THE WORLD.

THE REAL QUESTION IS "WILL ANYONE LISTEN?" AND UNFORTUNATELY THERE'S NO WAY TO KNOW THAT IN ADVANCE.

ASSUMING HE DOESN'T LET THAT STOP HIM, HERE'S WHAT THESE TWO CHOICES COULD MEAN...

ON THE OTHER HAND, IF HE CHOOSES THE FIRST STEP AS HIS GOAL, THEN HIS ART BECOMES A TOOL.

AND THE POWERS OF THAT ART WILL RELY ON THE POWERS OF THE IDEAS WITHIN.

NOW "TELLING THE STORY" (OR IN THE CASE OF NON-FICTION, "DELIVERING THE MESSAGE") TAKES PRIORITY OVER INVENTION.

BUT TELLING A STORY AS EFFECTIVELY AS POSSIBLE MAY REQUIRE SOME INVENTION, IT OFTEN DOES.

AND HIS ART WOULD NOT LACK FOR IDEAS OR FOR A PURPOSE.

BY CHOOSING FORM, HE'D BE SETTING UP TO BECOME AN EXPLORER.

HIS GOAL: TO DISCOVER ALL THAT THE ART FORM IS CAPABLE OF.

CREATORS WHO TAKE THIS PATH ARE OFTEN PIONEERS AND REVOLUTIONARIES—ARTISTS WHO WANT TO SNAKE THINGS UP CHANGE THE WAY PEOPLE THINK; QUESTION THE FUNDAMENTAL LAWS THAT GOVERN THEIR CHOSEN ART.

(IN OTHER ART FORMS: STRAVINSKY, PICASSO, VIRGINIA WOOLF, ORSON WELLES, ETC.)
This is the path of great storytellers, creators who have something to say through comics and devote all their energies to controlling their medium, refining its ability to convey messages effectively.

(In other art forms: Capra, Dickens, Woody Guthrie, Edward R. Murrow, etc.)

Fortunately, this choice never has to be permanent. It can change as often as an artist changes projects!

No work of art can be totally without "content" any more than it can exist without a "form." But it does help to set some priorities.

Hey, I'm driving!

No, I'm driving!

This is a problem in many "assembly line" comics where creative specialization has "scenarists," "pencillers" and "inkers" all working at cross-purposes in their attempts to get noticed.

This is a problem in many "assembly line" comics where creative specialization has "scenarists," "pencillers" and "inkers" all working at cross-purposes in their attempts to get noticed.

Not that we "creator/writer/artist" types never run into this problem...

Damn! Needed to have some more dialogue here, but I really want to draw that snazzy close-up!

But even if we take life's distractions into account, it's still amazing how much time and effort is spent by comics creators trying to get what they want out of comics...

Before they even know what they want!

Of course, not everybody takes the long way around. Some artists have no trouble setting goals and achieving them without any detours...

Here's a story I drew about my dog Buster!

...especially if their goals are modest ones.
In practice, ANY aspect of comics may be the one which first draws an artist into its orbit. Still, the learning process for most artists is a SLOW AND STEADY JOURNEY FROM END TO BEGINNING.

Any artist creating any work in any medium will always follow these six steps whether they realize it or not. All works begin with a purpose, however arbitrary, all take some form. All belong to an idiom (even if it’s an idiom of one); all possess a structure; all require some craft; all present a surface.

And all aspects of comics have the potential for self-expression. Even when economic survival is the artist’s main concern, there’s always room for a certain amount of ‘art.’

And it’s at the core of art that the most important question is finally asked: WHY AM I DOING THIS?

But the more a creator learns to command every aspect of his/her art and to understand his/her relationship to it, the more ‘artistic’ concerns are likely to get the upper hand.

When form rules the work, it may seem somewhat artificial at the core. But when brought together, they will always fall into place!

But such works don’t take the shape of art for granted and by questioning our fundamental assumptions —
--Can anticipate a world of unknown experiences.

Chapter Eight

A word about color.

Throughout history, color has been a powerful element of fine art, even for artists of that era. Yet in comics, the career of color has been, well, a bit "spotty." Some, like Georges Seurat, devoted their lives to its study.

There are many reasons for the complex relationship between comics and color, but most can be summed up in two words:

Others, like Kandinsky, believed that colors could have profound physical and emotional effects on people. Their yellow walls-makes unremarkable.

Color can be a formidable ally for artists in any visual medium.