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This article discusses play and playfulness in Lynda Barry's autobiographical comics/instructional work *What It Is* (2008). The term 'playfulness' is commonly used in two primary but distinct ways, namely in a phenomenological sense concerning a free attitude accompanying a given play activity, and referring to a frame-breaking form of disruption. I refer to the former as play/playing, and reserve the term 'playfulness' for the latter, while also suggesting that playfulness implies a form of disruptive attitude or intent. Playing is a central concept in Barry's work, one on which the author draws in terms of formulating the creative process. Barry's insistence on the phenomenological or experiential aspects of playing both reinforces and is reinforced by the stylistic aspects of *What It Is*. Thus, assertions of playfulness based on elements of Barry's work that subvert convention, often via a form of ambiguity, are consistently countered by Barry's emphasis on process. It is therefore argued that if *What It Is* displays a form of playfulness, it is primarily in terms of the way that it occupies the border between immediacy and authenticity, on the one hand, and constructedness, on the other. The article first establishes the approach to playing adopted by Barry throughout *What It Is*, based on the work of D. W. Winnicott, and links it to other conceptualizations of play/playing, before drawing a distinction between playing and playfulness. Following this, it examines how Barry's delineation of the creative process as play, as well as the author's approach to style, achieves a perceived form of immediacy and authenticity. After this, following consideration of the playfulness of the collage pages, the article considers how *What It Is* occupies the border between immediacy and constructedness.

***What It Is* (2008)**

Since *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), Lynda Barry's first extended autobiographical comic, Barry's comics-related works have featured instructive elements, containing activities and/or advice that encourage the reader to make work of their own (*What It Is* [2008]; *Picture This: The Near-sighted Monkey Book* [2010]; *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor* [2014]; *Making Comics* [2019]), while also often retaining autobiographical elements. *What It Is* was Barry's first sustained instructional project of this kind. In an interview with Tasha Robinson for the *AV Club*, Barry notes that she "wanted to do a companion book for *One! Hundred! Demons!* to show exactly the process [she] used to write it" (Robinson 2010). *What It Is* thus concerns Barry's creative method, which is largely based on play. The work is loosely structured and is split roughly into four sections. The first section features autobiographical comics pages detailing the author's development as an artist, interspersed with series of collage-based essay questions, with which they overlap in terms of theme. The second section is activity-based and contains writing exercises based on the *Writing the Unthinkable* workshops that Barry teaches across the U.S. The third section explains how to build a writing kit, while the fourth and final section is a form of

creative diary, serving as a record of Barry's notes while creating *What It Is*. The following discussion primarily focuses on the first (autobiographical comics pages/collage-based essay questions) and the fourth section (creative diary/notes).



Figure 1: *What It Is* (Barry 2008, p. 11).

Playing and Playfulness

On an early page of *What It Is*, a young Lynda stares up from her bed into an imaginative world of various creatures (see Figure 1). After informing the reader that when she was young, she would play a certain staring game that used items from her room as prompts, the narrating Lynda notes:¹

I believed there was another world that would show itself to me in the smallest ways. The gray kitten in the picture by my bed would accidentally blink his eyes. The girl in the picture would breathe. I believed there was another world—but I only noticed it when it became harder to get to. There had been a time when a toy elephant was as alive as a real rabbit in the grass. I didn't know there were different kinds of aliveness, and two worlds contained by each other. (Barry 2008, p. 11)

In the center-left of the page is a picture of a girl with two kittens (one gray), corresponding to their mention in the narration. This picture is surrounded by more schematic drawings of the girl's face and kittens (along with other creatures), standing for the young Lynda's imaginings, and denoting the different kinds of "aliveness" (Barry 2008, p. 11) mentioned. The lack of panels/frames separated by gutters also allows the elements of the page to commingle, implying that the young Lynda is neither fully inside, nor outside the imaginative world depicted, suggestive of the "two worlds contained by each other" (Barry 2008, p. 11) that are also noted. Forging a link between this early imaginative practice and more broadly cultural activities, on a later page, having previously referenced the mere paper-and-ink basis of her old imaginary friends, the narrating Lynda suggests that paper and ink "have conjuring abilities of their own. Arrangements of lines and shapes of letters and words on a series of pages make a world we can dwell and travel in" (Barry 2008, p. 38). She adds that "[stories] can't transform your actual situation, but they can transform your experience of it. We don't create a fantasy world to escape reality, we create it to be able to stay" (Barry 2008, p. 40).

The autobiographical segments noted above are representative of Barry's approach to play, which, in turn, are based on those of British pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott.² In *Playing and Reality* (originally published in 1971), Winnicott posits a "third area" (2005, p. 72) of experience or "potential space" (2005, p. 55) "to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (2005, p. 3). This third area is in direct continuity with the "play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play" (Winnicott 2005, p. 18). Playing, for Winnicott, is an extension of the initial relationship between infant and primary caregiver, the latter of whom, meeting the needs of the child, allows them to experience the illusion that they have produced what has been provided for them. After this, a "transitional object" (Winnicott 2005, p. 2), such as the corner of a blanket, a stuffed toy, or a bedpost serves to enable the infant to cope with separation and to further produce illusions. Like the stuffed elephant referenced in the autobiographical segment noted above, the transitional object "must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own" (Winnicott 2005, p. 7). In time, the transitional object loses meaning for the child and the interweaving of inner and outer reality that it served to engender becomes diffused or spread out over "the whole cultural field" (Winnicott 2005, p. 7), including play, and the creation of/engagement with works of art and literature.

Winnicott draws a distinction between the noun ‘play’ and the gerund ‘playing’ to stress process and experience. In a statement that echoes Friedrich Schiller’s suggestion that “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*” (Schiller 2004, p. 80), Winnicott writes that “it is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (Winnicott 2005, pp. 72–73). This self refers to what Winnicott calls the “True Self” (2005, p. 137), a proposal that is less essentialist than it may appear.³ In an earlier work, Winnicott notes that there is “little point in formulating a True Self idea except for the purpose of trying to understand the False Self, because it does no more than collect together the details of the experience of aliveness” (1990, p. 148). This False Self is typified by a state of compliance and the absence of “creative apperception,” which Winnicott suggests leads to a sense of futility where the world is experienced as “something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation” (2005, p. 87).

While Winnicott’s approach to play is intrinsically linked to a therapeutic context and play’s effects on the “phenomenological self” (Ruti 2010, p. 361), his distinction between play and playing also hints at a more common distinction between play as an activity and playfulness as an often idealized⁴ attitude or mindset assumed of a player, to varying degrees, when engaging in an activity (see Bateson and Martin 2013; De Koven 2014; Makedon 1984; Salen and Zimmerman 2002; Stenros 2014). Much of the time, this attitude is characterized by a willingness to act spontaneously, often in a state of absorption, with a lack of regard for concerns outside of an activity itself. In this sense, Johan Huizinga’s notion of the “play spirit” (1949, p. 51), from his influential *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, is exemplary:

[T]o dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension—these are the essence of the play spirit. Tension adds to the importance of the game and, as it increases, enables the player to forget that he is only playing. (Huizinga 1949, p. 51)

In Huizinga’s case, the tension of play stems from the uncertainty of its outcome, and something similar could be said for Winnicott’s suggestion that playing is “precarious” (2005, p. 70), owing to its liminal position between subjectivity and objectivity (as individually conceived), and tendency toward “formlessness” (2005, p. 74; see also Lenormand 2018). Winnicott links playing to the free association that takes place within an enclosed therapeutic environment, in which a “non-purposive state” (2005, p. 74) is encouraged, as is a lack of the necessity to “organize nonsense” (2005, p. 75). Winnicott’s playing may thus be aligned with what Roger Caillois called “*paidia*,” a form of play characterized by diversion, turbulence, and improvisation, rather than the corresponding “*ludus*” (2001, p. 13), or rule-governed activities, which—for both Caillois and Winnicott—limit the potential danger of playing.⁵

Winnicott suggests that there is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, from playing to shared playing, and then to “cultural experiences” (2005, p. 69), including the creation of/engagement with works of art and literature. However, it is not entirely clear how this transition is facilitated, beyond a recognition of intersubjective experience. Nor does this broad suggestion account for the different types of experience works of art and literature provide, the different ways that works

are structured, and the extent to which they might offer opportunities for the formlessness noted. One potential explanation is what Gregory Bateson termed “metacommunicative messages” (1972, p. 178), or the idea that play is also a message about itself. For Bateson, all play carries the message “this is play” (1972, p. 179), whether consciously or implicitly acknowledged. Play is thus “a phenomenon in which the actions of ‘play’ are related to, or denote, other actions of ‘not play’” (Bateson 1972, p. 181), but such actions do not imply or denote what they would usually. The message ‘this is play’ serves as a shared psychological frame for participants. For Bateson, play is also paradoxical in the sense that the uses of term ‘denote’ above feature different levels of abstraction, but are treated as if they were synonymous. Bateson suggests that these paradoxes of communication provide an evolutionary benefit, allowing life to go beyond an “endless interchange of stylized messages, a game with rigid rules, unrelieved by change or humor” (1972, p. 193). Hence, while the framing is likely to be consistent in many structured play activities, metacommunication may also be used to subvert established interpretive frames.

In the case of art and literature, the term playful is often used in conjunction with phenomena that subvert interpretive frames in such a manner. Brian Sutton-Smith has proposed that playfulness might refer to “metaplay” (1997, p. 147), which he defines as

that which plays with normal expectations of play itself, as does nonsense, parody, paradox, and ridiculousness. Playful would be that which plays with the frames of play [...] the key is that the playful is disruptive of settled expectations. It is the genre of comedians and tricksters, of wits and dilettantes. (1997, pp. 147–148)

This is an attempt to allay the ambiguity of the terms ‘playfulness’ and ‘playful.’ Sutton-Smith acknowledges that the distinction between play as an activity and the mindset often referred to as playful is not fixed, because that mindset is often assumed to be part of play proper. Sutton-Smith’s conceptualization of playfulness as metaplay may also account for uses of the term play in a broader sense, often associated with postmodernism. This play goes beyond the control or will of the player and focuses on the shifting contexts surrounding individual play. From the player-focused perspective, Sutton-Smith writes, this use of the term play may be thought of as “merely a metaphor for some other process of variability, randomization, or chaos” (1997, p. 144).

One such source of variability is the play of signification that has been suggested to be constituent of all language use, Derrida’s notion of “freeplay” (1970, p. 248) being the most radical example referenced by Sutton-Smith (1997). Here, it should be noted that despite the reference to comedians and tricksters, the notion of playfulness as metaplay does not allude to an attitude in the same way that the phenomenological view of play does, but rather to activities or phenomena that play with expectations and break established interpretive frames. As Sutton-Smith’s focus is on the various rhetorics surrounding play rather than play *itself*, his definition of playfulness is inclusive of the way that play in the broad sense deemphasizes the player or locates play outside of the individual. Yet, the suggestion that “a play of text without some kind of human presence is like that falling tree in the forest” (Sutton-Smith 1997, p. 145) and Sutton-Smith’s seeming favoring of Bakhtin’s (1981)

intersubjective account of “multiplicitous meanings” that “occur within the imagination as well as in the interactions between people” (Sutton-Smith 1997, p. 145), implies that playfulness, as manifested in a communicative context, involves a form of assumed disruptive intent⁶ on the part of the player. Thus, while communication may always be susceptible to play in the broad sense, the playful would be more in line with instances where the player/producer of a message appears to lean into or attempt to facilitate that play for disruptive ends.

As this approach to playfulness involves the subversion of settled expectations of play, playfulness does not simply concern the play of signification in general and would instead be based on a specific communicative context. In terms of comics, playfulness will likely be based on the invocation and subsequent disruption of interpretive frames in a work in terms of narrative, genre, conventional features of comics, including the use of paratextual elements, an author’s approach(es) to style, as well as related discourses surrounding an author. On a high level, *What It Is* necessarily subverts expectations regarding comics via its combination of disparate sections.⁷ In the only monograph on Barry to date, Susan Kirtley suggests that *What It Is* and its companion volume *Picture This: The Near-sighted Monkey Book* “expand the boundaries of comic art as instructional manuals, as evidenced by the difficulty many stores have in shelving the books” (2012, p. 186). Comics theorist Bart Beaty has suggested that, to the extent that Barry’s work is perceived to expand such boundaries, it participates in an “aesthetics of difficulty that is commonly venerated by scholars” (Beaty 2017, p. 180). This might imply a conscious or calculated working against boundaries to facilitate such difficulty, but in *What It Is*, this subversion of convention is largely framed as the product of playing in the experiential sense noted above. There thus needs to be a distinction between playing and playfulness in *What It Is*. The former, in Winnicott’s terms, is unstructured/improvisational and is primarily concerned with the disruption of the “psychic rigidity” (Ruti 2010, p. 361) that occurs via the compliance associated with the pressures of one’s environment. As noted above, this can be linked to other theories of playing via the spontaneity, absorption, and detachment from concerns outside of an activity generally assumed of playing. In this sense, subversion of expectations/convention would largely be a byproduct of playing, and not the result of sustained/calculated intent. This is opposed to playfulness as the willful subversion of readerly expectations. Throughout *What It Is*, assertions of playfulness are effectively countered by Barry’s focus on the experiential nature of playing, which will become clearer once Barry’s process has been outlined in the following.

Barry’s Creative Process as Playing

The most direct account of playing with regards to process in *What It Is*, outside of the activity section, is found in a well-known segment titled “Two Questions” (Barry 2008, p. 123), originally published in *McSweeney’s* (Barry 2004). This segment is noticeably distinct in terms of style from the looser, full-colored approach of the autobiographical pages produced specifically for *What It Is*, and features pronounced use of hatching/crosshatching, as well as added drawings and other elements in the margins.⁸ Regarding the two eponymous questions, “Is this good?” and “does this suck?” (Barry 2008, p. 123), the narrating Lynda notes:

I'm not sure when these two questions became the only two questions I had about my work, or when making pictures and stories turned into something I called 'my work'----I just know I'd stopped enjoying it and instead began to dread it. (Barry 2008, p. 123)

Both questions speak to the expectations attached to realistic or academic forms of drawing, which can be aligned with the compliance noted by Winnicott. The segment sees an adult Lynda engaging with two anthropomorphized versions of these questions, who hold a part of her work hostage: the spontaneous, improvisational element represented by the Magic Cephalopod, introduced on one page of *What It Is* as "the pathfinder" (Barry 2008, p. 138), an avatar of creativity/formless potential.

Toward the segment's conclusion, after the creatures have agreed to restore what is missing from Lynda's work if she can identify what they have taken from her, Lynda notes that 'thinking' did not help her solve the riddle. She then admits, despairingly, that she does not know the solution, and the scornful creatures in the bottom right corner of the page ask her who told her the correct answer (see Figure 2). This answer is something that she will periodically forget, as the text surrounding Lynda suggests, she "[h]as no memory of having solved this problem before" and "[n]o idea she'll have to solve it again and again and have total amnesia each time" (Barry 2008, p. 134). Having solved the question this time, however, embraced by the Magic Cephalopod, Lynda is able to work with zest again, the "strange floating feeling of being there and not being there" (Barry 2008, p. 135) having returned. The narrating Lynda concludes, "to be able to stand not knowing long enough to let something alive take shape! Without the two questions so much is possible" (Barry 2008, p. 135).

As Barry's method involves relinquishing control and a lack of preconceived intent,⁹ it is in line with the "free drawing" (Milner 2010, p. 5) of Marion Milner, a friend and colleague of Winnicott, and another figure Barry lists as an influence. Milner, reflecting on her process, writes that free drawing offered a "pliant and undemanding" means of creating that "did not stridently insist on its own public nature," and was thought to offer something of a corrective to "the bias of a too docilely accepted public vision and a denied private one" (2010, p. 136). The primary forms of intention while drawing for Milner were to keep her hand moving, to not fall into simple daydreaming without the accompanying physical action, and to not be "seduced by objectivity" (2010, p. 135) by forcing the line to take a recognizable form. Thus, the method involved a dialogue between "ideas and action, thinking and making" (2010, p. 86). For Barry, this reciprocity has a more explicit component than the element of daydreaming noted by Milner: the 'image,' which is only loosely defined throughout *What It Is*. The most direct explanation is provided by a page titled "What Is an Image?" (Barry 2008, p. 14):

At the center of everything we call 'the arts,' and children call 'play,' is something which seems somehow alive. It's not alive in the way you and I are alive, but it's certainly not dead. It's alive in the way our memory is alive. Alive in the way the ocean is alive and able to transport us and contain us. Alive in the way thinking is not, but experiencing is, made of both memory and imagination, this is the thing we mean by 'an image.' (Barry 2008, p. 14)

Thus, Barry considers the image to be central to Winnicott's playing and its links to transitional objects, which, it should be noted, may include pictorial forms that might

otherwise be referred to as images. Images also seem to entail a form of quasi-perceptual experience, often attributed to the contested notion of ‘mental imagery,’¹⁰ which is not limited to ‘visual’ phenomena, but of which visual images are the most discussed (Thomas 2021). Thus, the “strange floating feeling” (Barry 2008, p. 135) that drawing produces for Barry is likely to be the result of the reciprocal process between attending to images, the hand in motion, the drawing being produced, and the way they feed back into one another in the dialogic relation noted by Milner.



Figure 2: What It Is (Barry 2008, p. 134).

Immediacy, Authenticity, and Constructedness

Barry's emphasis on the movement of the hand implies a form of 'immediacy.'¹¹ The notion that the drawn line has an indexical quality with regard to the author's movements is largely traceable to Philippe Marion's (1993) suggestion (summarized in Baetens 2001) that the lines, contours, and colors of a drawing, as well as the lettering employed bear traces of subjectivity, or are indicative of the "idiosyncratic gesture" (Baetens 2001, p. 147) of the author. Similarly, Jared Gardner has suggested that even though we are likely to be aware that the line refuses unmediated access to the body that produced a drawing, "we cannot look at the graphic narrative and imagine that the line does not give us access to the labored making of the storyworld we are encountering (and participating in crafting)" (2011, p. 64). For Lukas Etter, the notion that the line implies a link to the act of drawing leads to the conclusion that, in comics, artistic style, which goes beyond questions of the line, can be studied in terms of two opposing forces, the immediacy of the drawn and written elements and the "evidently structured and planned composition of the panels and other elements" (2016, p. 98), which Etter terms "constructedness" (2016, p. 93).

Barry's work in *What It Is* and elsewhere is committed to those aspects that Etter refers to as immediate, namely hand-produced drawings and writing. Given that Barry's delineation of her process encourages the perception of immediacy, the linked notion of 'authenticity' is also implied. Elisabeth El Refaie proposes that

a viewer's willingness to see an image as authentic seems to be much more closely associated with the narratives surrounding the circumstances of its production than they are with its visual style, except to the extent that the latter can sometimes appear to provide material evidence for the supposedly authentic production process. (2010, p. 170–171)

Accordingly, in the case of *What It Is*, such authenticity in terms of process concerns the extent to which the book appears to have been produced in the way advocated by Barry.

Because of the gap between the production and reception of a work, it is, however, difficult to gauge which aspects of *What It Is* are the products of the process that Barry outlines. The autobiographical segments would, one assumes, need to be planned to some extent, given the *Künstlerroman* structure they adopt overall, and the way the layout choices appear to reference Winnicott's playing. The "Two Questions" (Barry 2008, p. 123) segment, for example, would also seem too self-conscious to be characterized fully by the freedom Barry's method implies, with its explicit focus on process and somewhat claustrophobic use of hatching/crosshatching, which seems to render the compliance Barry's method seeks to avoid. In a more general sense, as it has been suggested that, in comics, "the reader's attention is spontaneously oriented toward narrative curiosity" (Groensteen 2007, p. 120; see also Baetens 2011; Dittmar 2019; Fisher Davies 2019; Lefèvre 2011; Stein and Thon 2013), it is likely to be those elements that appear most extraneous to the more central elements of the narrative that strike one as the best candidates for a lack of preconceived intent, or rather those aspects that one might be inclined to call 'doodles.' David Maclagan has referred to the doodle as "marginal in every sense" (2014, p. 19), owing to its history in the margins of manuscripts¹² and the absent-minded nature of its construction.



Figure 3: What It Is (Barry 2008, p. 5)

However, it is unclear what constitutes a doodle in *What It Is*; the various patterns and repeated creatures found throughout the work are not always marginal in terms of position or function. These elements sometimes occupy the margins of the page, with little apparent connection to the more central elements beyond a general evocation of latent/active creative powers. At other times, they hover on the edges of the page, inviting the reader to make connections between them and the more central elements. This occurs, for example, on the first autobiographical page of the book, in which the marginal elements, which appear to have subsequently been

added, correspond loosely to the list of environmental factors blocking Lynda's creativity (see Figure 3). In the staring game segment referred to above, the schematically drawn creatures stand for the content of the young Lynda's imaginings, while in the "Two Questions" (Barry 2008, p. 123) segment, similar creatures take the form of anthropomorphized questions with whom Lynda interacts, with similar drawings also operating in a more decorative manner in the newly added margins. These drawings thus seem to represent a free creative process, while also serving as evidence of that process. Via this ambiguity, Barry's drawings mark a tension between immediacy and authenticity, on the one hand, and constructedness, on the other—a tension which might itself be considered playful, as we will see later.¹³

Playfulness and Barry's Use of Collage

The tension noted above is also apparent in the collage pages, which otherwise provide the most overt candidate for playfulness in terms of a calculated subversion of expectation and disruption of the reader's efforts at meaning making. Elza Adamowicz, with a focus on Surrealist collage, suggests that collage involves

a dynamic process of multiple meanings and hovering significations constantly reactivated, eliciting both the addressee's cultural competence in decoding iconic and textual signs, and her openness to the free play of collage. (1998, p. 25)

Adamowicz draws a distinction between two approaches to collage on the part of the reader, the "detective" and the "dreamer" (1998, p. 122), the latter of which is linked to the openness to free play mentioned earlier. As a detective in Adamowicz's sense, the reader rationalizes the incongruous elements by "finding [a] point of intersection, thus retrieving a hidden, or articulating a possible, narrative" (Adamowicz 1998, p. 104), but collage often resists such efforts; "the key is diffuse or discarded and the text is left in suspense" (Adamowicz 1998, p. 104). This leads to the suggestion that collage favors local meanings over the global. It should be noted that if playfulness is that which plays with settled expectations, it is not enough to posit collage itself and those who produce collage as inherently playful; attention must be paid to the context in which it is employed. The notion that collage is a technique that privileges local meaning making is also tempered somewhat in *What It Is*. Most of the collage pages feature overarching questions on topics related to Barry's process (e.g., imagination, memory, experience, etc.), framing the interpretation of each page. The majority of the collages are positioned after an initial page titled "Essay Questions" (Barry 2008, p. 13), at the bottom of which is a handwritten note that says "P.S. We don't know the answers" (Barry 2008, p. 13). Beyond this explicit acknowledgement, the collage pages also actively hinder attempts to answer the questions, at least in an academic or instrumental manner (which Adamowicz [1998] aligns with the readerly role of the detective). Barry doesn't offer conceptualizations of the topics included, and the tentative answers to the questions that are provided on each page often involve the topics of other questions. Frequent additional questions also deter fixed interpretations of the main ones, which are further destabilized by the interactions of the heterogenous elements of each page. As many of the collage elements are repeated across pages, further links are suggested between the topics under discussion. As such, Barry seemingly aims to demystify the creative process to an extent, while also leaving it fundamentally enigmatic.

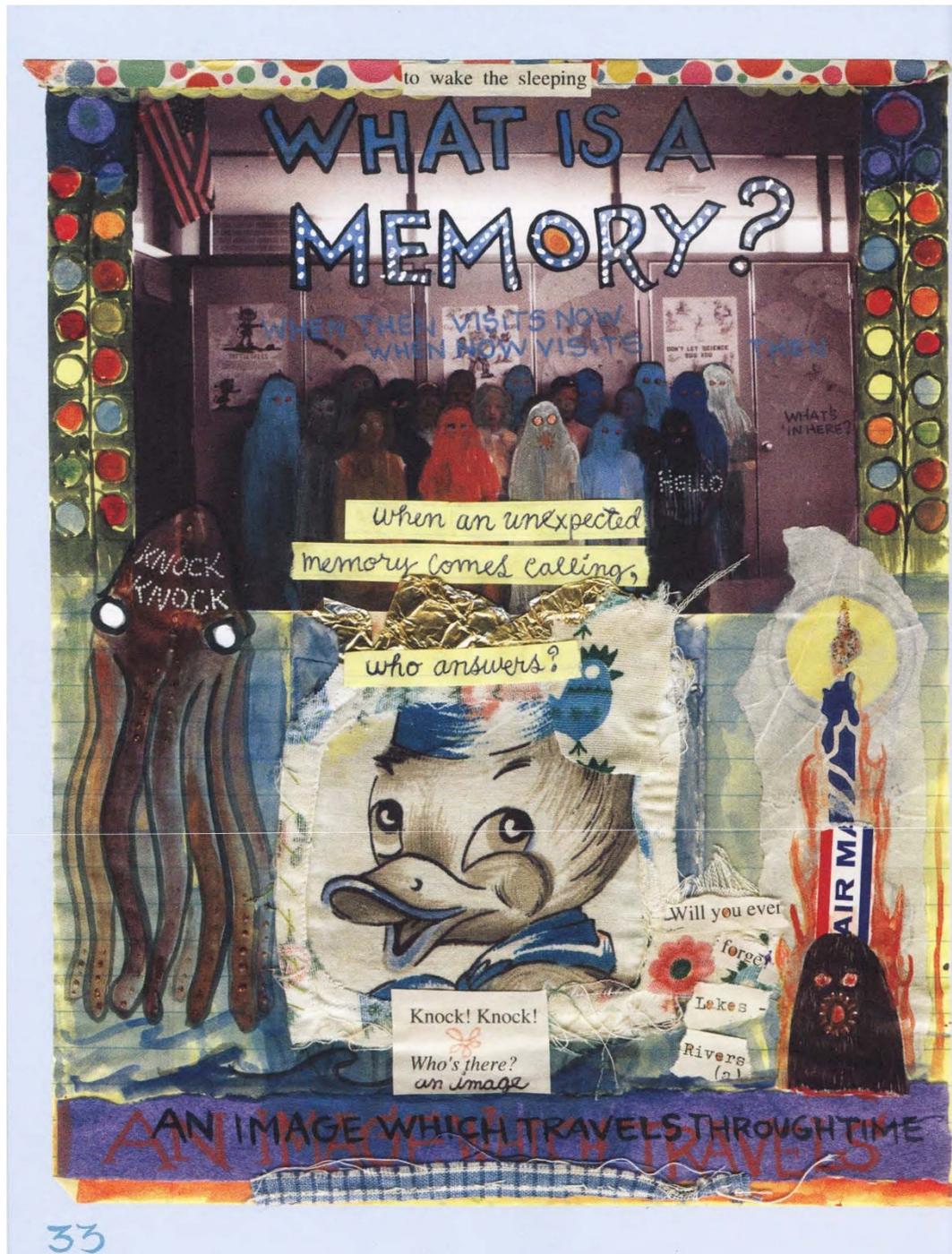


Figure 4: What It Is (Barry 2008, p. 33).

For example, on the page that asks, “What is a memory?” (Barry 2008, p. 33), the linked question “when an unexpected memory comes calling, who answers?” (Barry 2008, p. 33) is found in the center of the page (see Figure 4). Some comically incongruous results occur when different elements of this page are considered in dialogue. One potential answer to the latter question is the picture of a smirking Donald Duck printed on fabric below. A rectangular piece of paper at the bottom of the page says, “Knock! Knock! Who’s there? An image” (Barry 2008, p. 33). Given the proximity to Donald Duck, we might take him as the source of this joke. A

variation on the joke can also be articulated via the Magic Cephalopod, this time with “knock knock” (Barry 2008, p. 33) inscribed on its forehead, and the other elements noted. Another candidate for who answers might be the creature on fire in the bottom-right corner of the page, variations of which are featured throughout the collage pages, including pages on the topic of imagination. The legible word “air” (Barry 2008, p. 33) above it (part of the logo for Airmail) is evocative of a plane crash, perhaps indicating an unpleasant involuntary memory, but above the snippet of the logo there is visual continuity. The combined effect is that of a candle, which has historically been used in instances of remembrance. The most apparent candidate for an answer to the overarching question of what a memory is, besides the somewhat opaque “when then visits now, when now visits then” (Barry 2008, p. 33) directly underneath the question, is found at the bottom of the page: “an image which travels through time” (Barry 2008, p. 33), behind which the phrase is repeated, suggesting an echo. Given that an image was said to be a blend of memory and imagination, this might imply a recursive form of image with no original occurrence, stressing the interrelation of images and suggesting that who, or rather *what*, answers when an unexpected memory comes calling is yet another image.

While the collage pages thus appear to be intentionally disruptive of the reader's attempts at meaning making, it could be argued that they serve to engender the same play of thought that animates Barry's own process¹⁴ and are thus broadly representative of that process. Such potentially benevolent aims are not incompatible with a playfulness typified by constructedness/manipulation. That being said, this seems to apply more to the inclusion of the collages in the book than the circumstances of their production, as Barry's comments on collage suggest that they are not simply to be considered in the above terms. For example, Barry has said that she makes collages “for no real reason, mainly to be making them the way you go for a walk in order to walk, not to have a walk you can show someone afterward” (quoted in Spurgeon 2008, n.pag.). Barry has also noted that she considers collage, writing, and drawing to be similar activities (Schappell 2006), or “different hand puppets” (Barry quoted in Kellner 2008, n.pag.). This suggests that the apparently mediated use of fragments of found materials is, for Barry, simply another means of producing images.¹⁵ This idea is encouraged through the presence of hand-drawn/written elements alongside the found/appropriated elements.

The immediacy of the collages is also encouraged via the final section of *What It Is*, which includes the notes Barry made as she was producing the work. At the beginning of this section, Barry writes:

While I work, I always keep a blank pad beside me that I work on all day, turning to it when I get stuck. Instead of stopping to think, I keep my brush in motion by moving it to my notepad. I don't plan a path for my brush. I just move it until my other brush calls me back. (Barry 2008, p. 190)

This section is thus framed as an intermediary space, explicitly involving a lack of sustained intent. These pages also contain elements of collage, one example of which is particularly instructive (see Figure 5). In an entry from 2 November 2006, titled “Little Women” (2008, p. 200), Barry features some collage-like figures she produced for a Penguin edition of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*.

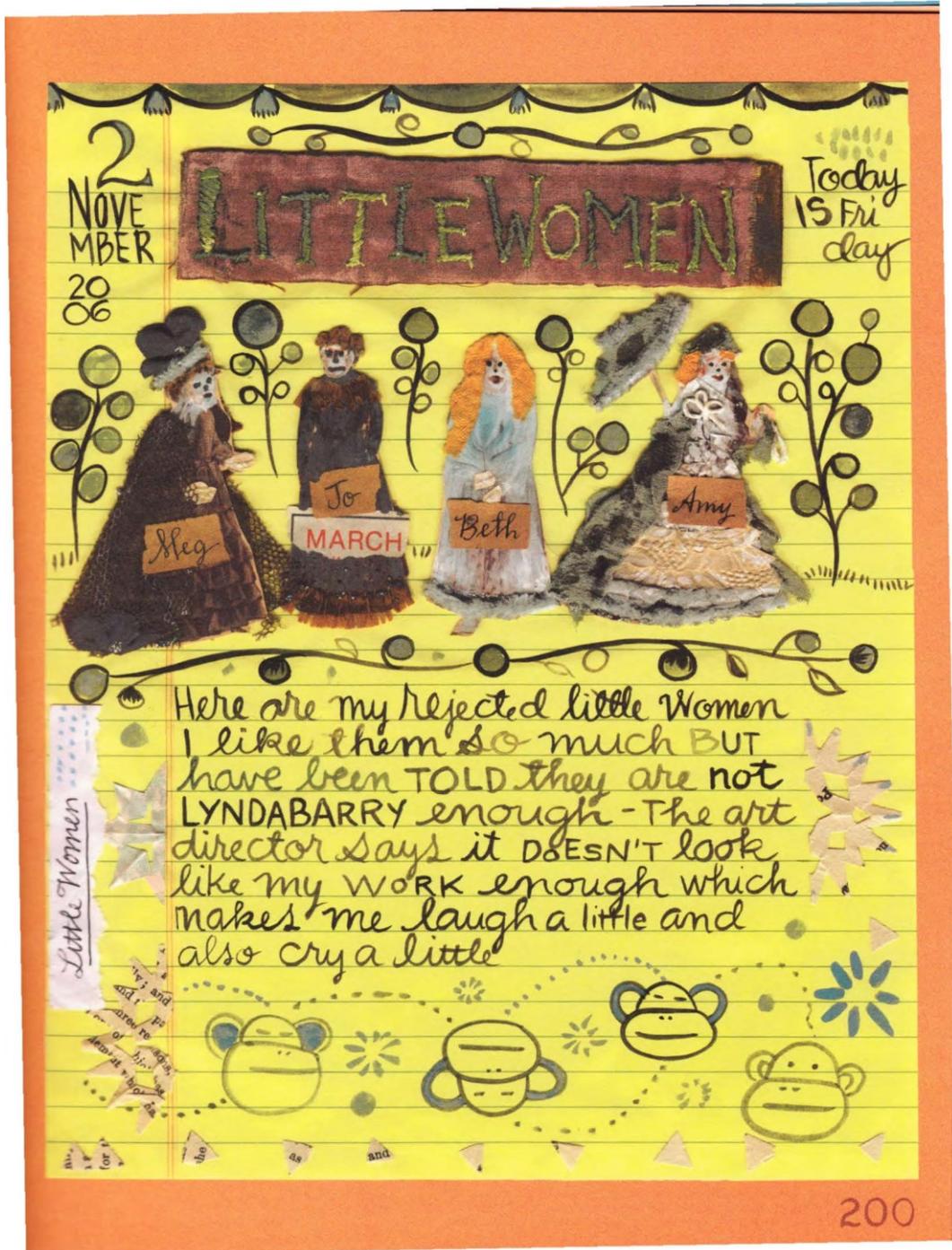


Figure 5: What It Is (Barry 2008, p. 200)

Barry writes:

Here are my rejected little women. I like them so much but have been told they are not Lynda Barry enough—The art director says it doesn't look like my work enough which makes me laugh a little and also cry a little. (Barry 2008, p. 200)

Susan Kirtley has interpreted this page as speaking to Barry's willingness to share her failures with her readers and to make it clear that "she proselytizes this process not for commercial gain, obviously uncertain even for recognized artists and authors,

but for more personal satisfaction” (Kirtley 2012, p. 183). However, these little women, now included in *What It Is*, could not be more ‘Lynda Barry.’ In positioning these figures in her second pad, along with various presumably improvised figures and patterns, decorative scraps of paper, as well as the mild incredulity suggested by the handwritten component, Barry reinforces that this *is* her authentic style, which—as the rest of the book testifies—is inherently linked to an improvisational process.

Conclusion

This article has focused on playing and playfulness in Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, adopting a distinction between playing as an activity accompanied by an attitude characterized by spontaneity, absorption, and detachment from concerns outside of the activity; and playfulness, as the willful subversion of convention/interpretive frames. Barry's delineation of her process in terms of the former was shown to be complemented by stylistic features within the work that speak to a high level of immediacy/authenticity. In the case of the autobiographical pages specifically produced for *What It Is*, this includes the prominence of hand-produced elements, such as the various drawings/‘doodles,’ free-flowing narration, and divergence from conventional layouts. This immediacy extends to the reworking of Barry's previously published/produced work, which leads to the suggestion that the book is itself a collage of sorts, pointing to a form of spontaneity in addition to that assumed of the original work, and implying a consistent ongoing process of thought and practice.

There is thus little acknowledgment of the more deliberate processes assumed to be necessary to produce a book. Rather, the work's loose structure and somewhat haphazard placement of various elements¹⁶ suggest that the construction of the book itself, rather than simply the various sections that comprise it, involved a level of improvisation. Yet, the collage pages were suggested to be playful via the constructedness of their inclusion in the book, if not their production, through an apparent attempt on Barry's part to encourage the reader to adopt a state of mind akin to that of her creative method. We might similarly assume that the inclusion of the different sections was motivated by their supposed provision of instructive value, but as the “Little Women” (Barry 2008, p. 200) page demonstrates, this also allowed Barry creative freedom and the space to shape the perception of her working process.

Overall, there are aspects of *What It Is* that could be received as intuition-based and spontaneous in each instance where one would assume that planning or sustained intent would be necessary. It is Barry's focus on playing, as a process, that most encourages the interpretation of these aspects as residual signs of spontaneity. We might say, then, that *What It Is* exploits the idea of the experiential nature of playing itself. Given that the gap between purported method and realized design involves an ambiguity leverageable on the part of the author, the emphasis on improvisation and a lack of sustained intent in the face of more seemingly constructed elements might be considered playful. However, this is a suggestion that is consistently thrown into doubt by Barry's positioning of her process as playing and the immediacy and authenticity it implies.

As a final note, as playfulness entails a disruptive attitude on the part of the player, it is likely to be the case that subversion of convention more often overtly appears to be the result of careful planning. Thus, the discussion of playfulness might be expanded to the work of artists exhibiting such constructedness. One prominent example is Chris Ware, whose work displays a more labored approach to comics storytelling that is notably at odds with Barry's, and features elaborate experiments with page/book design. Another example might be Sonny Liew, whose *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2016) features a highly intertextual blending of fiction and nonfiction, methodically adopting many different styles, but attributing them all to a single fictional comics artist.

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Notes

- ¹ The narration in *What It Is* generally features a mixture of cursive and block capitals. For simplicity's sake, this will not be reflected throughout this article. The choice does, however, contribute to the sense of spontaneity highlighted throughout. For a more detailed discussion of the centrality of handwriting in Barry's work, see Chute 2010.

- 2 Thomas Ogden has noted that the intuitive quality of Winnicott's writing has led his ideas to be "entrapped" in the language in which they are written, preventing "systematic exploration, modification, and extension" (2015, pp. 122–123).
- 3 Mari Ruti suggests that, while "there is little doubt that what Winnicott means by the True Self constitutes a certain kind of essentialism" (2010, p. 360), "the Winnicottian True Self is actually in many ways the very antithesis of what constructivist thinkers mean when they talk about a fixed essential self," as the True Self "has no fixed content beyond the fact that it articulates the subject's sense of aliveness" (2010, p. 361). Adam Phillips also notes that the True Self "cannot strictly speaking be defined because it covers what is distinctive and original about each person. It is simply a category for the idiosyncratic" (1988, p. 135).
- 4 The "idealization of play" (Sutton-Smith and Byrne 1986, p. 305) tends to lead theorists to exclude more coercive or destructive forms of play. See also Schechner on "dark play" (2013, p. 118) as well as Stenros on "transgressive play" (2019, p. 14).
- 5 For Caillois (2001), unlike for Winnicott (2005), this potential destructiveness results from an unchecked play impulse that does not respect play's conventional separation from "ordinary life" (Caillois 2001, p. 43).
- 6 This assumed intent does not refer to the *actual* intent of the author. The proposal is more in line with hypothetical or constructive intentionalism, whereby a reader informed of relevant contextual factors aims to construct the "most plausible communicative intention for the author in relation to a given work" (Levinson 1996, p. 207).
- 7 The question arises as to why 'comics' should be a primary interpretive frame for *What It Is*, given the presence of disparate sections atypical of comics. The inclusion of collage and instructional content was not without precedent in Barry's comics work prior to *What It Is. One! Hundred! Demons!*, of which *What It Is* displays an "intensification" of "themes and formal concerns" (Chute 2010, p. 127), introduces its various autobiographical vignettes with pages of collage, and features a brief turn to instruction at its conclusion. *What It Is* was also published by Drawn & Quarterly, a publisher specializing in comics, as was *One! Hundred! Demons!* following its initial publication with *Sasquatch Books*. While the autobiographical segments in *What It Is* deviate from the more 'regular' layouts of *One! Hundred! Demons!*, the pages in these segments progress sequentially, feature an interplay between text and pictures (including conventional formal features such as speech balloons), as well as recurring characters. Furthermore, as these comics segments are presented alternately with the collage pages (which, together, amount to roughly two thirds of the book), they are quite clearly meant to be considered in tandem.
- 8 It should be noted that the literal margins of each page are consistently empty and make use of a single color.

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- ⁹ In an interview in *Tin House*, regarding her process while creating comics, Barry notes that she doesn't plan her work beforehand, seldom pencils anything in, and rarely has "a single idea" (quoted in Schappell 2006, p. 56) before she starts working. She adds that "there is something about just grinding the ink and moving the brush around that makes a comic strip come" (Barry quoted in Schappell 2006, p. 56).
- ¹⁰ While few deny the experiential or quasi-perceptual quality of images entirely, one area of contention is the notion that mental imagery implies picture-like phenomena in the brain. Another area of dispute is the potentially primary role images play in thinking, of which Wittgenstein's arguments to the contrary have proved influential (see Thomas 1999, 2021).
- ¹¹ For more on the perceived immediacy of drawing in comics, including a chapter on Barry, see Szép 2020. It is also necessary to note that this art-historical use of the term 'immediacy' differs from its well-known use by Bolter and Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999). For Bolter and Grusin, media are subject to, and oscillate between, the "twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy" (1999, p. 5). The former attempts to conceal or suppress the process of (re)mediation by making the medium invisible, while the latter calls attention to the process of (re)mediation by drawing attention to the medium itself. For the authors, these logics are united by a desire for authentic experience. *What It Is* would appear to be more in line with the logic of hypermediacy. However, the authors' suggestion that rock music videos, for example, often achieve a form of authenticity and apparent spontaneity following editing is quite removed from the suggestion that the traces of an author's hand are present (or at least implied) in published comics.
- ¹² Maclagan (2013) suggests that doodles are historically rebellious, as the manuscript served as a symbol of authority. He notes that "the authority of this system was not just institutional (monastic or commercial) or societal (class or rank), but was embodied in a whole cluster of rules governing the proper execution of different kinds of writing and the respective roles of writing and ornament" (Maclagan 2013, pp. 54–55). Maclagan extends this authority to print, noting that "its mechanical uniformity is something that invites a more 'hands-on' interference" (2013, p. 12). Barry's aversion to the mechanical/uniform is well documented (see Chute 2010; Kashtan 2018) and is also on display throughout *What It Is* via the prominence of hand-produced elements, such as free-flowing narration with apparently arbitrary switches between cursive and block capitals.
- ¹³ This ambiguity is exacerbated by the suggestion that Barry would periodically forget her method throughout her career. Another example where ambiguity leads to tension can be found on the acknowledgements page at the end of the book, where Barry thanks Kevin Kawula (Barry's husband) for helping to watercolor the work, but does not specify which parts of *What It Is* this acknowledgment refers to. This suggests that the final 'hand' that was present before the work was finished might not have been Barry's in some segments of *What It Is*, complicating traditional notions of 'singular' authorship.

- ¹⁴ Susan Kirtley suggests that *What It Is* may be viewed as an example of what Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin term “invitational rhetoric” (1995), which the authors posit as an alternative to persuasive/argumentative rhetoric that attempts to change the views of its audience. The suggestion that the answers to the essay questions in *What It Is* are unknown, for Kirtley, means that the book “frees the reader from anxiety about having the ‘proper’ solution” (2014, p. 350). She adds that “these are simply queries or mysteries, presented in hopes of stimulating a response or inviting a dialogue, but not begging for one particular answer. There is no opposition or competition, and there are no right answers; the reader wins if he or she chooses to play along. Every reply, including no reply, is completely acceptable in this environment free from recrimination and censure” (Kirtley 2014, p. 350).
- ¹⁵ Donald Kuspit offers an account of collage consistent with this view. In a manner that might link the use of pre-existing materials to the playing described by Winnicott, he notes that “objectivity is no longer a categorical imperative, but can be creatively conceived” and that a “sense of spontaneity arises, in part, from the resistance of the self to its own unconscious categorization of the world” (Kuspit 1983, pp. 133–134).
- ¹⁶ For example, collage pages occur prior to the page framing them as essay questions, as well as within the activity book section. The spontaneity of the book's construction is also implied by the inside covers of *What It Is*, which contain various casually placed scraps of paper featuring handwritten notes Barry made while teaching and preparing for the book.