**ROY T COOK AND AARON MESKIN[[1]](#endnote-1)**

**Comics, Prints, and Multiplicity**

**Abstract**

Comics are a hybrid art form descended from printmaking and mostly made using print technologies. But comics are an art form in their own right and do not belong to the art form of printmaking. We explore some features art comics and fine art prints do and do not have in common. Although most fine-art prints and comics are multiple artworks, it is not obvious whether the multiple instances of comics and prints are (or can be) artworks in their own right. The comparison of comics and fine art prints provides a promising test for assessing how hybrid art forms develop more generally, and for assessing how they differ from closely related non-hybrid cousins.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The art of comics is a hybrid form descended from printmaking.[[2]](#endnote-2) Moreover, the vast majority of comics are made using print technologies.[[3]](#endnote-3) But comics comprise an art form in their own right; in particular, they do not belong to the art form of printmaking. In the first place, some comics (for example, webcomics) are not printed. In the second place, fine art prints do not belong to the critical contrast class for comics. That is, we do not standardly appreciate and evaluate comics in relation to fine art prints (nor vice versa). So we do not, in this paper, focus on the question of whether comics are prints; rather, our focus is on exploring some of the features art comics and fine art prints do and do not have in common. Thus, we investigate a somewhat different issue–one intimately related to something that the art forms of comics and prints obviously *do* have in common: the fact that examples of both art forms are typically multiple artworks.[[4]](#endnote-4) While it is widely accepted that most fine-art prints and comics are multiple artworks (that is, that they have multiple instances, where interaction with any appropriate instance is sufficient to count as a genuinely interaction with the work itself), it is less obvious whether the multiple instances of comics and prints are (or can be) artworks in their own right, rather than being *mere instances* of multiply instanced artworks.[[5]](#endnote-5) It turns out that answering this question is less straightforward than it might initially appear, but the effort involved comes with rewards, in the form of both novel insights into the connections between comics and fine art prints, and more general lessons regarding the nature of multiple artworks and their instances.

Our examination proceeds as follows. First, we delve a bit more deeply into the idea that some multiple artworks have instances which are themselves works of art, providing a more precise characterization of the phenomenon we are addressing and heading off some initial objections to the idea that either comics or prints could have such instances. We then examine whether comics, and prints, can have, or standardly have, instances which are artworks. Our preliminary conclusion is that fine art prints typically do, but comics typically do not, have such instances. With fine art prints, then, we ordinarily have *multiple* foci of artistic interest—print works (for example, the individual works that make up Goya’s *Disasters of War* series) and individual impressions (for example, Jasper Johns’s *Flags* I (1973) E.A.). On the other hand, except in very rare instances, the individual impressions of a comic (that is, its “floppies”) are not distinct foci of aesthetic interest. But when we extend our investigation to consider distinct *editions* of comics (which might be thought to count as instances in a broad sense) our conclusions are somewhat different. We argue that although the ordinary reprinting of comics does not produce new works of art, comics, at least under certain non-extraordinary circumstances, allow for distinct editions which are themselves distinct artworks. Nevertheless, editions of comics are not standardly works of art in their own right, and these insights are as a result somewhat limited. Finally, we draw some more general conclusions regarding what, exactly, these observations tell us about the connections between the arts of comics and prints.

**II.** INSTANCES AS ARTWORKS

For the sake of the present examination, we take it for granted that we can make sense of the distinction between multiple artworks (for example, films, novels, plays, most prints, and so on) and singular artworks (for example, paintings, carved sculptures), that we are reasonably reliable in marking this distinction, and that the standard account of this distinction, rooted in distinguishing between instances and mere copies or reproductions, is correct.

Our primary concern here is with a further distinction that can be made among artworks that allow for multiple instances: At a first pass, we can characterize this as the difference between multiples whose instances are themselves artworks (we shall call these *art-instances*) and multiples whose instances are not. It is important to note that whether or not a multiply instanced artwork allows for art-instances is a question about the multiply instanced artwork itself, not a question about its instances–after all, whether a particular instance is a work of art is a question that should be settled by a theory of art. Moreover–and this will help us get clearer on the relevant phenomenon–it is at least plausible that any object whatsoever (including any instance of a multiply instanced artwork) *can* be an artwork (for example, if it is appropriately designated as such by someone engaged in making readymades). This suggests that this initial rough characterization needs to be tightened up a bit.

Two relatively uncontroversial cases where multiple artworks can (and usually do) have art-instances are theatrical works and musical works. Thus, James Hamilton notes that “theatrical performances are artworks in their own rights”[[6]](#endnote-6) . And Peter Kivy argues that:

If we are to take the description ‘performing artist’ seriously, when it is applied, as it normally is, to at least the great and admired virtuoso performers of our musical tradition, then we seem to be compelled to treat their performances as ‘works of art’ in their own right, apart from the art works they are performances of.[[7]](#endnote-7)

On the other hand, there are also uncontroversial cases where multiple artworks do not typically have art-instances. Instances of works of literature (for example, token physical copies of a novel) are not, typically, works of art themselves, and as Noёl Carroll has argued, screenings of films neither typically are, nor typically produce, instances that count as artworks themselves.[[8]](#endnote-8)

A useful example is J.K Rowling’s *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, which was originally produced as a limited edition of seven handwritten illustrated copies, but was later published as a mass-market edition.[[9]](#endnote-9) Arguably, the hand-produced copies are artworks in their own right. But they do not show that *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* admits of art-instances in the sense at issue here, since the status of these copies as artworks depends on their particular (and non-standard) mode of production. In short, the seven hand-produced instances of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* are artworks, but they are not art-instances of the work of literature in question: their status as artworks is not rooted in characteristics of the work of literature of which they are instances, but instead depends on characteristics of the instances in question that, in some important way, go beyond what is required merely to be an instance of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (for example, their status as handmade).

Further, just as the presence of instances that are themselves artworks does not imply that the artwork or art form admits of art-instances in the sense in which we are interested, the mere lack of actual art-instances is, in and of itself, not evidence that the work in question does not allow for art instances, any more than such a lack is evidence that the work is not multiple. We can easily imagine a hand-written copy of a play that is never performed. Such a work would have no instances, and hence no art-instances, but (if sufficiently ‘good’ in the relevant sense) would still count as a multiple work, and as allowing for art-instances. These observations suggest that whether a multiple artwork allows for art-instances amounts to something like: whether actual or possible instances of the work can (or typically would) be artworks themselves solely *in virtue of being instances of that artwork*.

While this initial thought–that art-instances are instances of a multiple work that are not only artworks themselves, but are artworks solely in virtue of being instances of that work–seems on the right track, it is also too thin and too imprecise to be of much use. What is needed is a more substantial account of art-instances that explains where and why such instances might arise, an account that can be used to test particular cases of putative art-instance-hood. Here is one plausible attempt at such a fuller account, which underlies much of the discussion to follow: what is critical in determining whether a multiple work has or allows for art-instances are the practices of production and reception within which the work is embedded. For example, the reason that works of theater typically have art-instances is that the practices within which such theatrical works are embedded aim at producing artwork instances (so too with the other performing arts). This is why agents engaged in the production of instances in the performing arts are (legitimately) treated as artists in their own right.

This account supports the intuition that art-instances are artworks solely in virtue of being instances of the multiple work in question: If such works are created within practices of production and reception that aim at art-instances–that is, if the practices are shaped in the right way–then the instances will be works of art solely in virtue of being appropriate instances produced and consumed within such a practice. In short, if the practice aims are creating art-instances, and the instances are produced in a manner that is relatively standard, then there is every (defeasible) reason to think that the instances will thereby be art-instances.

Before moving on to our examination of the particular cases of interest here, it is worth noting that the account just sketched is at odds with some philosophical accounts of the nature of multiple works. For example, Stephen Davies claims that “a person who produces an instance of a multiple work by following the methods or instructions prescribed by its artist does not expect to generate a new and different work.”[[10]](#endnote-10) On the contrary, an agent producing (appropriate) instances in *some* art forms *should* expect to generate art-instances, if that art form involves practices of production and reception aimed at producing art-instances. Agents engaged in art forms that do not involve such practices, however, should not expect the fruits of their labor to count as art-instances.

Thus, some kinds of multiple works of art typically, or standardly, involve instances that are themselves works of art–that is, at least some of their instances are works of art merely in virtue of being instances of that work (and this holds in turn in virtue of the instances being embedded within practices that aim at art-instances), while other types of multiple works are such that their instances are not typically, or standardly, works of art. The examples used above to elucidate this distinction (i.e., music and theater versus literature and film) suggest an initially plausible, but ultimately incorrect, way to understand the distinction: perhaps the multiple artworks that allow for art-instances are exactly those artworks that are (or are intended to be) works for performance*.*[[11]](#endnote-11) If such an account of art-instance multiples were correct, then since neither prints nor comics are works for performance, neither could involve art-instance multiples.[[12]](#endnote-12)

While an account equating art-instance multiple works with works for performance does correctly characterize the examples considered so far, there are counterexamples: For example, consider Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings. These are instruction-based multiple artworks that are not works for performance, since the instances of this work are objects (the drawings), not events (the production of the drawings). Instances of the wall drawings seem to count as works of art in their own right, however, and LeWitt takes them to be such. As Kirk Pillow explains, “Multiple instances of many of LeWitt’s plans have been executed, and he considers each of them to be a distinct work of art. ‘Even if the same draftsmen followed the same plan twice,’ he writes, ‘there would be two different works of art.’”[[13]](#endnote-13) Of course, as we have already noted, individual paintings are not standardly art-instances (or standardly instanced at all!), so there is some initial tension in claiming that LeWitt’s works are art-instances–after all, aren’t they produced and consumed within the same practices within which other paintings (which do not typically allow for art-instances) are produced? The answer is “no.” Instead, LeWitt’s instruction-based installations amount to his having fashioned a ‘local’ manifold of production and reception practices that is aimed at producing art-instances. As a result, the wall paintings are art-instances, and we cannot equate an artwork allowing for art-instances and its being a work for performance.[[14]](#endnote-14)

While instances of LeWitt’s installations are not performances, they do have something in common with instances of works for performance, however: they are the products of *interpretation*. If multiple works that allow for art-instances must involve interpretation–that is, if art-instances must be products of (or embody) interpretations, even if this is not the case of all instances–then this would again throw at least some doubt on the claim that comics or prints could have art-instances, since in neither case do we naturally think of the production of instances as interpretive.

Are all multiple works that allow for art-instances works that are *for-interpretation*? Our paradigm cases–traditional Western musical works and theatrical works–certainly are, and LeWitt himself describes his wall drawings in exactly such terms: “The artist must allow various interpretations of his plan. The draftsman perceives the artist’s plan, then renders it to his own experience and understanding.”[[15]](#endnote-15) The results of different draftsmen carrying out the instructions for LeWitt’s wall drawings can (and in fact have) resulted in significantly different works (~~i.e.,~~ that is, instances with substantial, aesthetically relevant differences) and these differences depend, at least in part, on how the draftsmen’s different “experience and understanding” affects the way that they carry out the relevant instructions. Thus, LeWitt seems right that, in a certain sense, the different instances of his wall drawings embody distinct interpretations.

Nevertheless, this is a rather thin notion of interpretation, and is not obviously the same sense that philosophers of art have in mind when discussing the sort of rich interpretation required for genuinely interpretative work. The sort of generation involved in the production of instances of LeWitt’s wall drawings can plausibly be rather mechanical–it need not involve the sort of understanding of “what makes it [the multiple work] tick” that Kivy argues is constitutive of performance interpretation.[[16]](#endnote-16) Along similar lines, Jerrold Levinson argues that (with regard to music) a performance interpretation is “… a *considered* way of playing a piece of music, involving highly specific determinations of all the defining features of the piece as given by the score and its associated conventions of reading.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Let us call this more substantial notion *considered interpretation*, and the thinner notion at work in the LeWitt quote *simple interpretation*. With this distinction in hand, it is clear that the thought that comics and prints do not allow for art-instances, because the production of art-instances requires interpretation, rests on an ambiguity. If, by ‘interpretation,’ we mean considered interpretation, then LeWitt’s wall drawings suggest that the production of art-instances does not require interpretation.[[18]](#endnote-18) If, however, by ‘interpretation’, we mean simple interpretation, then the claim that the production of art-instances requires interpretation provides no reason to doubt prints can allow for art-instances, since there is no reason to think that fine art printmaking need be non-interpretational in this thin sense.[[19]](#endnote-19) Similarly, there seems to be no reason to think that mainstream comics cannot involve interpretation of this sort, or even that they cannot standardly involve such interpretation.[[20]](#endnote-20) Finally, there are sub-forms within comics (for example, the Do-it-Yourself handmade comic movement) where the sort of interpretation at issue is clearly standard. Thus, at least some comics are interpretational in this sense, and this is enough to defuse the argument that comics cannot allow for art-instances since they are not for-interpretation works in the relevant sense.[[21]](#endnote-21)

**III. COMICS, PRINTS, AND ART-INSTANCES**

The next task is to determine whether comics and prints allow for (or standardly have) art-instances. Both art forms are (standardly) multiple–so far, so good. It turns out, however, that they fare differently with regard to whether or not they allow for art-instances.

Let us begin with the easier case–prints. At first glance, it seems intuitively obvious that instances of prints–at least limited edition fine art prints–are art-instances. But let us recall our methodological maxim: art forms will typically allow for art-instances if the practices of production and reception within which works in that form are embedded aim at making artwork instances. Thus, the most fruitful way to determine whether fine art prints are (typically) art-instances is to examine the printmaking and print-appreciating practices within which the prints themselves are located.

Standard artworld practice supports the thesis that limited edition fine art prints are art-instances. Distinct instances of a print (within an edition, or from distinct editions) are taken to be distinct artworks: Printmakers clearly see themselves as producing many artworks, rather than a single work that will eventually (often due to the mechanical know-how of a separate master printer) have multiple instances. Dealers present prints as genuine artworks, rather than copies or mere (that is, non-art) instances. Purchasers of prints take themselves to have acquired real works of art, rather than merely instances or copies of such. And most tellingly, perhaps, critics and theorists interested in prints typically take different instances of prints to be aesthetically distinct (for example, good impressions are distinguished from poor impressions), and hence worthy of individual consideration. Thus, instances of fine art prints are embedded within practices that are aimed at the production and reception of art-instances (rather than mere instances of a multiple artwork).

Of course, aiming at producing and consuming art-instances is not the only way to explain these practices–there are also practical factors involving class, status, and finance that support these practices. But this merely means that reasons for the practices in question being as we find them are overdetermined. In short, regardless of the additional social and pecuniary reasons underlying the tendency to treat instances of prints as art-instances, we see no reason to doubt that these practices are genuinely, sincerely aimed at the production and reception of art-instances.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Before moving on, it is worth making two observations about a claim Levinson makes about this issue, as this may help further flesh out our understanding of art-instances. Levinson writes “individual impressions, castings, and so on are occasionally regarded as works of art in their own right, which may be appropriate where there are striking differences among authorized instances.”[[23]](#endnote-23) First, we take Levinson’s use of the word “occasionally” to be overly timid, both in terms of how often impressions, castings, and so on are actually taken to be artworks in and of themselves, and in terms of how often they should be so taken. Whether or not instances of a work within a particular art form typically are or are not art-instances is a feature of the form, not of the particular work or its instances. As a result, there are art forms such as printing (as well as, perhaps, some forms of cast sculpture, and so on) where the instances will be art-instances standardly, rather than merely occasionally.

The second point is more substantial. Levinson suggests (at least implicitly) that we should regard instances as art-instances if, and presumably only if, there are “striking differences between authorized instances.” In short, it is only instances that vary sufficiently much, and in appropriate ways, from one another that should be treated (or that are) art-instances. This seems wrong, since it entails that whether or not an instance is an art-instance depends on the existence of, and properties of, other instances (so, for example, no multiple work with a single instance could have an art-instance). The proper view of things is something like the following: Instances created within practices aimed at producing art-instances often (but far from always) result in art-instances that are “strikingly different” from one another (in ways relevant to our experience, appraisal, and evaluation of them as art). The reason for this is simple: Such art practices allow for (and often, as in the case of performance, encourage) such variation. The production and reception practices typically associated with multiple works that do not allow for art-instances, on the other hand, do not support or encourage such variation, since the primary purposes of such practices is not to produce further artworks, but rather to produce faithful copies or instances of the single unique artwork in question. As a result, the existence of instances of a work that vary from one another in appropriate ways is at best defeasible evidence that the works are art-instances (since such variation is defeasible evidence that the practices producing such works aim at art-instances). Further, the existence of two or more “strikingly different” instances of a work is not merely evidence (defeasible or not) that these *particular* instances are art-instances, but is evidence that *all* (or all sufficiently “good,” and so on) instances of that work are art-instances.[[24]](#endnote-24) Most important, none of this entails that the lack of sufficiently different instances is in any way evidence that instances of the work are not art-instances.

Our brief examination of the practices surrounding limited edition fine art prints supports the claim that these practices aim at the production and reception of art-instances, and this is evidence that instances of fine art prints are, indeed, art-instances. This adds further support to the argument given earlier that art-instances need not be performances, and that art-instances do not require interpretation–at least not in the substantial sense of “interpretation” we called “considered interpretation” above–since prints are neither performances nor products of interpretation (in this sense), but instead are mechanical reproductions of an impression or template. Comics, too, are neither performances nor considered interpretations, but are instead mechanical reproductions of an impression or template. Do these similarities provide any support for the claim that they too allow for art-instance multiples?

As was the case with prints, we answer this question by considering the practices of production and reception within which comics are embedded. At first glance, it might seem that the relevant practices are aimed at art-instances: Comics fans store and display their comics (for example, by bagging-and-boarding, or the controversial practice of “slabbing”) in ways very different from the storage methods associated with other art forms that do not allow for art-instances, such as literature.[[25]](#endnote-25) Further, comics producers themselves encourage the idea that comic books are collectibles and that as a result individual instances (that is, issues or floppies) should be valued in and of themselves, by releasing special embossed covers, foil covers, hologram covers, variant covers, and other promotions. This last observation is particularly resonant, given that we argued above that aesthetically relevant differences between instances is (defeasible) evidence that instances are art-instances.

Nevertheless, there are important differences between comics and prints, and these differences support an understanding of comics as an art form whose practices of production and reception *do not* standardly aim at art-instances. First, it is important to note that the production and reception practices mentioned above can be fully explained in terms of the collector culture that has grown around comics and comics fandom. Of course, as with prints, this observation is not incompatible with these practices also being intentionally aimed at producing art-instances, but it does lead to another important observation. The production and reception practices associated with comics are not aimed at–that is, they typically do not value–artistically *good* instances of the works as is typically the case with the practices of producing, valuing, and evaluating prints and other forms of art which admit of art-instances. Rather, these practices (like the practices surrounding many collectibles) focus on scarcity and other aesthetically irrelevant properties of particular instances.

For example, consider what is arguably the first superhero comic, *Action Comics* #1 featuring the debut of Superman.[[26]](#endnote-26) This comic originally sold for ten cents, and recently a copy sold at auction for one million dollars. Somewhere between fifty and one-hundred copies exist.[[27]](#endnote-27) The high value attached to issues of this comic stem from the combination of its scarcity and its important historical role in the birth of the superhero genre. The scarcity of the comic, in turn, is due in no small part to the fact that the standard production practices for comics in the late 1930s involved inexpensive ink, cheap acidic newspaper-grade paper, and rust-prone staples (in the 1980s both Marvel and DC switched to higher-quality, longer-lasting paper). These production methods were widely adopted because they were cheap, but also because (again, until the 1980s) comics were widely viewed as a *disposable* entertainment, and there was thus no pressure to produce a product with longevity. As a result, any account claims that issues of comics are art-instances, and bases such an account on the idea that art-instances depend on practices that aim at the production and reception of art-instances, will be saddled with the rather bizarre idea that the production practices of Marvel and DC comics (as well as their predecessors and competitors) were (at least until the 1980s) engaged in the rather avant-garde practice of intentionally producing *disposable* artworks via the explicit production of *disposable* art-instances. Attributing such revolutionary art-theoretic motivations to the producers of popular comics is somewhat implausible at best.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, viewing the collecting and valuing practices associated with comics as aiming at art-instances is in tension with the natural thought that the good instances of a multiple work (for example its good performances) typically have the best claim to be art-instances. *Action Comics* #1 has been reprinted numerous times, including a high-quality multi-volume archive edition series of hardback books reprinting the entire series.[[28]](#endnote-28) Comics scholars typically refer to these editions (or similar, recent reprints) when researching the origins of Superman (or other relevant topics), not the original 1938 printing.[[29]](#endnote-29) Of course, this is partially because these reprint volumes are hundreds of thousands of dollars cheaper than original copies of *Action Comics* #1, but there is another reason: The reprint volumes present these comics on better paper, with higher-quality ink and better overall production values. In short, these reprint volumes present aesthetically *better* instances of the multiple instance artwork *Action Comics* #1. As a result, the production and reception practices within which comics are embedded are not aimed at producing or consuming art-instances, since the instances valued by these practices are not the instances that have the best claim to being art-instances. Hence, ordinary instances of comics are not standardly art-instances.

It is possible (in fact, plausible) that *some* comics admit of art-instances, however. In a discussion of the ‘materiality’ of alternative and self-published comic books, Emma Tinker suggests that “the major advantage of self-publishing is complete artistic freedom over every aspect of the comic from title to paper color. Crucially, with many small press comics, the handmade quality is part of the appeal.”[[30]](#endnote-30) She goes on to suggest that "the finished, printed comics are often treated like original artworks".[[31]](#endnote-31) Of course it does not follow from the fact that certain instances of comics are treated like original artworks that they are original artworks, but we find Tinker’s discussion suggestive.

Nonetheless, our examination of the production and reception practices associated with fine art prints supports the claim that individual instances of such works are (at least typically) art-instances, while an examination of the practices associated with comics suggests that individual instances of comics are not typically art-instances (except perhaps in certain subtraditions such as handmade comics or comics produced within the alternative DIY (do-it-yourself) movement). Given that comics and prints are distinct art forms, the fact that there are aesthetically and metaphysically substantial differences between the two should not be surprising. Moreover, the fact that comics are hybrids, more specifically that they are descendants of literature as well as printmaking, provides some sort of explanation for this phenomenon: literature is not an art-form that standardly allows for art-instances, and comics inherit this attribute from them.[[32]](#endnote-32) But does it follow that when it comes to a comic, there is always just a single artwork in question?

**IV. EDITIONS AS ARTWORKS**

In this section we examine whether editions of comics, can be, or typically are, artworks. Instances of comics (that is, floppies, individual copies of collections, and so on) are, as we have already seen, not typically art-instances. Do editions of comics fare the same? Before answering this question, we need to say a bit more about what we mean by ‘editions’ of comics. Unlike the case of fine art prints, there is no pre-existing standardized notion of ‘edition’ within the production and reception practices associated with comics–at least, none that is appropriate for any sort of philosophical heavy lifting. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to provide at least a rough guide to what we mean here by ‘edition’.

First off, an *edition* of a comic (in the sense we are using the term here) must be, at minimum, a particular printing of a comic (thus, it must be an ‘edition’ in the rather thin, publishing sense of the term). In addition, there must be some characteristic of that printing that differentiates the edition in question from other printings of the comic. The practice of releasing multiple editions of comics with embossed covers, foil covers, hologram covers, variant covers–a practice rampant in the 1990s during the collecting boom –minimally satisfies this condition. Finally, however, we require that those characteristics that differentiate the printing from other printings be somehow minimally relevant to our understanding, evaluation, and criticism of (that instance of) the comic as an artwork. Thus, mere multiple print runs of otherwise identical instances of the comic, typical trade paperback reprint collections, and some ‘special editions’ such as *Marvel Treasury*, *Marvel Masterworks*, or *Marvel Tales*, do not count as editions in the relevant sense since they typically differ from the original or later printings solely with regard to the editorial information on the title page. Additionally, as a result of this third criterion, the aforementioned printings involving ‘special’ cover art might or might not count as editions, in the sense of the term used here, depending on one’s views with regard to the relation between cover art and the identity and content of the work.

This characterization of the concept of a comic edition is admittedly vague, but rightly so, since the practices of production and reception regarding distinct editions of comics are themselves vague. But, like most vague concepts, we can identify a handful of clear, definite and determinate cases of the concept in question. Two examples will suffice for our purposes.

Our first exhibit is the influential Batman comic *The Killing Joke*, written by Alan Moore, penciled and inked by Brian Bolland, colored by John Higgins, and released in 1988.[[33]](#endnote-33) In 2008 DC comics released a 20th anniversary *Deluxe Edition* of the comic, which was completely recolored by Bolland.[[34]](#endnote-34) In this new version Bolland renders flashback scenes in shades of grey, with occasional, symbolically resonant objects colored in shades of red or pink (contrasting with the standard, for the time, garish full-color renderings of these scenes in the original coloring by Higgins).

Our second exhibit is Marvel’s twelve-issue miniseries *Squadron Supreme*, written by Mark Gruenwald, drawn by John Buscema, and released in 1985 and 1986. Ten years later, after his death from a heart attack and per his wishes, Gruenwald’s ashes were mixed into the ink for the first printing of the trade paperback collecting the miniseries.[[35]](#endnote-35) While trade paperbacks do not, typically, accrue value within the comic collectors market ~~is~~ in the manner that original floppies do, mint condition first editions of the *Squadron Supreme* trade paperback typically sell for hundreds of dollars.

Are these editions distinct artworks? Since we have already argued that individual issues of comics in general (and hence issues of these comics in particular) are *not* typically art-instances, it will do us no good to look at properties inherent in instances of these editions. But we can make some headway on the question by comparing instances of these editions to instances of other editions of the “same” comic. Further, the reader is reminded of the crucial methodological maxim adopted here: that instances of a multiple work (including edition-instances) have the potential to be art-instances if and only if the practices of production and reception within which the instances are embedded are aimed at making art-instances.

With regard to *The Killing Joke*, the answer to this question is affirmative, and straightforwardly so. Tim Sale’s introduction to the new edition treats it as a distinct, and in fact superior, work of art when compared to the original 1988 version: “Bolland’s colors are characteristically thoughtful and restrained. They fit the work more completely than Higgins’s state-of-the-art job in 1988 and are a joy to look at.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Further, typical comics consumers seem to treat the two editions as distinct works. In particular, fans do not typically forego reading the 2008 version because they have already read the 1988 version–on the contrary, they compare, contrast, and argue about the differences between the two versions (recall our discussion earlier regarding the fact that “strikingly different” instances, or aesthetically relevant variation more generally, is evidence–admittedly, defeasible–that the practice is aimed at producing art-instances). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, comics critics reviewing the new edition typically treat it as a (partially) new work, distinct from the original 1988 version, against which it ought to be understood and assessed. Thus, the practices of production and reception within which *The Killing Joke: Deluxe Edition* was produced do aim at producing, and are understood in this case as having successfully produced, an art-instance.

There exist additional cases that function similarly to *The Killing Joke*, where later editions involve substantial changes that support the claim that a new work has been produced, while the new edition is nevertheless sufficiently continuous with older editions to support the claim that the distinct editions are nevertheless editions of the same work. For example, the 20th anniversary *Absolute Edition* of *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, and John Higgins, which was recolored by Higgins using computers (a technology unavailable when *Watchmen* was originally produced in 1986), is a prominent candidate for such an art-instance edition.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Nevertheless, clear-cut instances of distinct editions such as the 1988 and 2008 versions of *The Killing Joke* are few and far between. Thus, while the 2008 version of *The Killing Joke* demonstrates that editions of comics *can* be art-instances (and hence that the relevant practices of production and reception of editions sometimes aim at art-instances), the phenomenon is not general enough to support the claim that this is *typical* of editions of comics (or even the claim that such art-instance editions are not contra-standard)[[38]](#endnote-38). To further emphasize this point, it will serve us well to look at an example of an edition of a comic that is an artwork in and of itself, but not an art-instance: the first printing of the *Squadron Supreme* trade paperback.

The first printing of the *Squadron Supreme* trade paperback is, visually and narratively, for the most part indistinguishable from either the original, twelve-issue print run or later, non-ash-infused printings. Nevertheless, typical comics consumers do treat this as distinct from other printings, as is attested to by the high prices it commands. The question then, is whether the ash-infused edition of *Squadron Supreme* is, in fact, a distinct artwork from other editions (while remaining an instance of *Squadron Supreme* itself), and if so, whether its status as an artwork is due solely to its being an instance of the work that it instances (or to its being a particularly good instance, and so on) This question turns, as it has throughout this essay, on whether the methods of production and reception within which this printing of *Squadron Supreme* are embedded are aimed at creating an *edition* that is itself an art-instance. These practices were aimed at creating a work of art, and further, were aimed at creating a work that is distinct from other editions of *Squadron Supreme*. Gruenwald’s widow notes, in the foreword to the trade paperback, that “He remained true to his passion for comics, as he has truly become one with the story and blended himself in the very fiber of the book.”[[39]](#endnote-39) In short, Gruenwald’s intentions, and the intentions of his widow and the editors at DC Comics, ~~was~~ were to create a new work of art–still a version of *Squadron Supreme*–that elevated Gruenwald from author of the work (in the art-theoretically relevant sense of the term) to being, quite literally, a part of the work. Thus, the first printing of the *Squadron Supreme* trade paperback is not only a comic book, but is something like comic-book-as-(postmortem)-performance-art. As such, it is presumably a different work of art from earlier and later, more traditional printings of the comic. But is it an art-instance?

No. The ash-infused edition of *Squadron Supreme* is an artwork, and is plausibly a distinct artwork from other editions. But its status as an artwork is not due to the relevant practices of production and reception being aimed at art-instances (regardless of whether these practices do sometimes so aim!). Rather, its status as a separate artwork depends solely on contravening the standard practices of comic book production (via the inclusion of ashes within the ink). Thus, it is much more like the non-art-instance handwritten editions of *The Tales of Beedle Bard* discussed earlier: the ash-infused edition is an instance of *Squadron Supreme*, and this instance is an artwork, but it is not an art-instance of *Squadron Supreme*.

Where does this leave us with regard to the art-instance status of editions of comics? As the discussion of *The Killing Joke* makes clear, the practices of production, reception, and evaluation at work in comics are compatible with editions of comics being art-instances. Thus, an edition being an art-instance is not impossible, but it is not a standard feature either, as our discussion of the ash-infused 1996 edition of *Squadron Supreme* demonstrates.

**V. CONCLUSIONS**

Traditional comics are printed artworks. They are, then, prints in one sense and share many ontological features with them. But it would be misleading to infer that comics have all the features that standardly hold of fine art prints, since:

* Comics do not belong to the art form of prints.
* Some comics (~~e.g.,~~ for example, webcomics and certain non-multiple comics) have nothing to do with printmaking whatsoever.
* Comics differ from fine art prints with respect to whether or not they standardly have art-instances. Although some editions of comics count as works of art in their own right, instances of comics (unlike prints) do not typically count as distinct artworks, and those few that are artworks in and of themselves do not typically count as art instances.

Perhaps, however, these differences are not so surprising after all. As mentioned above, the art of comics is a hybrid art form: comics are the product of the intermarriage between popular satirical printmaking and various literary forms. Fine art printmaking lacks the ancestral relation to those literary forms that preceded and influenced the development of comics. This distinction is plausibly at the root of the differences we have sketched in this essay; the rarity of art-instances in the case of comics is a feature that the art form inherited from literature (an art form in which art-instances are decidedly non-standard). Thus, the similarities and differences between comics and printmaking–which are not limited to their multiplicity and the art-status of their instances–promise to provide a wealth of insights into the way in which hybrid art forms and artworks within these forms behave. In short, the comparison of comics and fine art prints not only promises to teach us much about these two art forms, but it also provides a promising test lab for assessing how hybrid art forms develop more generally, and for assessing how they differ from their closely related non-hybrid cousins. As a result, the observations and arguments given in this paper barely scratch the surface of issues that could be considered in this regard, and there is much more interesting and important work to be done.[[40]](#endnote-40)

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1. The work is fully collaborative; authors are listed in alphabetical order. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Aaron Meskin, “Comics as Literature,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (2009): 219-239. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985/1990), ~~p.~~ pp. 153-155. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Typically’ because some prints are non-multiple monotypes and some comics are also plausibly non-multiple. See Aaron Meskin, “The Ontology of Comics,” in Meskin and Cook, *The Art of Comics*, pp. 32-46. We shall not waste our time here arguing that at least some comics can be artworks and that there is an art form of comics. To paraphrase a point we have made elsewhere–anyone who doubts that comics can be artworks either has not read the right comics or doesn’t does not understand art. See Aaron Meskin and Roy T Cook, eds., *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Christy Mag Uidhir (“Unlimited Additions to Limited Editions,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 7, (2009) and “Photographic Art: An Ontology Fit to Print”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2011): 31–42) has argued that there need be no distinct object–‘the’ print–of which the individual physical prints are instances. We do not take a stand on this issue here, but we continue to phrase our argument in terms of a print artwork and the individually physical impressions that are instances of that artwork (for ease of formulation if nothing else). Nothing in the present paper hinges on this, however, and the arguments given here can be straightforwardly reformulated in terms of Mag Uidhir’s sparser ontology.

   Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the term ‘print’ is ambiguous, sometimes referring to the print artwork as a whole (either the distinct work of which physical impressions are instances on a non Mag Uidhirian ontology, or perhaps the mereological sum of physical impressions on a sparser ontology) and sometimes referring to individual impressions. One (somewhat awkward) solution would be to reserve ‘print artwork’ for the former notion, and reserve the simpler term ‘print’ for physical prints. We have chosen to retain the systematically ambiguous usage of the term to refer to both types of object, however, relying on context to disambiguate particular occurrences of the term. In addition to simplifying the formulation of the arguments given here, retaining this ambiguous terminology highlights the fact that a similar, and suggestive, ambiguity affects the usage of the term ‘comic’: that is, ‘comic’ can refer both to the artwork as a whole ~~(i.e.,~~ that is, *Action Comics* #1) and individual instances of that artwork (~~e.g.,~~ for example, your physical copy of *Action Comics* #1). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. James Hamilton, *The Philosophy of Theater* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), p. 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading: An Essay on the Philosophy of Reading*~~,~~ (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*~~,~~ (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See J.K. Rowling*, The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, Handwritten Edition of 7 (2007) and J.K. Rowling, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, Standard Edition (London: Children’s High Level Group, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Stephen Davies, “Ontology of Art”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, Jerrold Levinson ed.~~,~~ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 155–180, at p. 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Davies’s “Ontology of Art” pp. 165-168 for further discussion of the distinction between works for performance and works not for performance. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. We note the trend in Comics Studies arguing that comics are a sort of performance (for example, Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*~~,~~ (Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), Chris Ware, *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* #13: *An Assorted Sampler of North American Comics, Drawings, Strips, and Illustrated Stories*~~,~~ (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2004), and Jennifer Worth, “Unveiling: Persepolis as Embodied Performance,” *Theatre Research International* 32 (2007): 143-160) only to note further that we are ignoring this suggestion. For a brief criticism of such an approach see Meskin, “The Ontology of Comics,” p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Kirk Pillow, “Did Goodman’s Distinction Survive LeWitt?”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2003) 61: 365-380, at p. 369 (quoting LeWitt). LeWitt takes his wall drawings to be both individual works of art (that is, art-instances) in and of themselves, and instances of a single, multiple artwork. Pillow (p. 370) suggests, however, that LeWitt’s claim is incoherent (or, at the very least, metaphysically confused): “LeWitt has evidently said inconsistent things, since multiple executions are not ‘the same work’ existing in two or more places if they are different works of art, as he maintains in ‘Wall Drawings’.” Fortunately for both LeWitt and for the account developed here, there is no incoherence. Rather, Pillow’s argument rests on a simple confusion regarding the type-token distinction. Executions of LeWitt’s works are ‘the same work’ insofar as they are tokens of the *same* higher-level artwork but different works of art insofar as they are *distinct* tokens, hence there is no incoherence. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Of course, this example illustrates that a full account of art-instances would need to be much more precise regarding the nature and individuation of art “practices” (for example, Is the manifold of production and reception within which LeWitt’s works are produced a part of the more general production and reception practices of painting, or has LeWitt fashioned a separate tradition of production?). Since we are here interested primarily in comics and prints, however, we set aside this general issue for the present. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Pillow, “Did Goodman’s Distinction Survive LeWitt?”, p. 369, quoting LeWitt. Of course, there are different views regarding how seriously to take artists’ claims of this sort, but there seems to be no obvious reason to doubt them here, especially with so little evidence to work with otherwise. For further discussion of the significance of artists’ sanctions in the determination of artwork ontology, see Sherri Irvin, “The Ontological Diversity of Visual Artworks,” in Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones, eds., *New Waves in Aesthetics*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Kivy, *The Performance of Reading*, p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1996), p. 63, emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Another interesting case to consider is Grayson Perry’s recent set of six tapestries entitled The Vanity of Small Differences. These were produced in an edition of six (along with two artist’s proofs). It is plausible that each tapestry token is an art-instance, but since they were woven mechanically by computer-operated machines it is implausible that they are products of interpretation in any substantive sense. In fact, it is not obvious that their production involves interpretation in any sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Further, while works of both music and theater standardly involve considered interpretation of the sort discussed by Kivy and Levinson, it is not clear to us that the production of art-instances of such works requires interpretation of this substantial sort. For example, we see no reason to think that performance interpretation *must* involve considered ways of performing (see, for example, Davies’s “Ontology of Art”). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The intuition that comics do not allow for interpretation in even a thin sense might be the result of attending to particular formats and neglecting others. While the non-interpretational view might be plausible with regard to standard mainstream superhero comics, it is less plausible with regard to newspaper comic strips, which are often re-arranged in reprint volumes (and are sometimes printed in different arrangements in different papers), resulting in distinct interpretations in at least the thin sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. There is another interesting question lurking hereabouts: Whether multiple works that are works for performance or for-interpretation necessarily (or standardly) allow for art-instances. All of the examples of works for performance or for-interpretation works considered here do standardly allow for art-instances, but we currently see no argument for the general claim. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See also Mag Uidhir “Unlimited Additions to Limited Editions”. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics*, p. 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Note that by “strikingly different instances” we mean to refer only to cases where the differences result from the production of the instances, and not from later modifications/ wear/ damage/and so on to the instances. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. “Slabbing” refers to the practice of permanently embedding an individual issue of a comic in a sealed plastic casing in order to preserve its condition. The fact that this method of storage and protection prevents the comic instance in question from ever being read supports our argument that these practices are not uniformly aimed at producing and *consuming* art-instances. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Jerry Siegel ~~&~~ and Joe Shuster, *Action Comics* #1 (New York: National Allied Publications, 1938). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Very few of these copies are in good enough condition to command six- or seven-digit prices at auction, however. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, et al., *Superman: The Action Comics, DC Archive Editions, Vol. I–VI* (New York: DC Comics 1998–2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Of course, this is not true of all research. For example, a scholar interested in the advertisements and other non-narrative content included in *Action Comics* #1 might have no choice but to track down an original copy, since this material is often not included in reprint volumes. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Emma Tinker, “Manuscript in Print: The Materiality of Alternative Comics,” *Literature Compass* 4 (2007): 1169-1182, at p. 1172. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Tinker, “Manuscript in Print,” p. 1179. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Meskin, “Comics as Literature.” [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Alan Moore, Brian Bolland, and John Higgins, *The Killing Joke* (New York: DC Comics, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, *The Killing Joke*: *Deluxe Edition*~~,~~ (New York: DC Comics, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Mark Gruenwald and John Buscema, *Squadron Supreme* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Tim Sale, “Introduction”, in Moore and Bolland, *The Killing Joke: Deluxe Edition*, n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, and John Higgins, *Absolute Watchmen*, (New York: DC Comics, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See Kendall Walton, “Categories of Art,” *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334-367, at 338-340. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Catherine Schuller Gruenwald, “Foreword,” in Gruenwald and Buscema, *Squadron Supreme*, n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. An early version of this essay was presented at the Printmaking and Philosophy of Art workshop at the University of Houston in January 2013, and the final version benefitted tremendously from the insightful and generous feedback we received there. In addition, thanks are due to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on the penultimate version of the article. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)