POETRY AND COMICS

By Chrissy Williams

There are more similarities between the construction of poetry and comics than first meet the eye, and this download is designed to get you to engage with a few of them. It consists of three exercises which build towards the creation of a poem, hopefully learning from comics to offer a new perspective on the way in which poets might lay their words on the page.

Exercise 1 - Thinking about how much Information can be contained in a single image

Image © Edward Ross (http://edwardmaross.blogspot.co.uk)

✠   Write a paragraph to explain what's going on in this picture. Spend 5-10 minutes writing everything you can think of, from shape to colour to atmosphere to scene composition. (You'll be using this text as raw material for a later exercise so write as much as you can,
100 words at the very least!)

Exercise 2 – The importance of juxtaposing image and text

Look at this sequence of four comics panels, shown with empty caption boxes under each image. What kind of story do you think is being told? Print off a few different copies of this and have a go at filling in text underneath each image to tell each one of the following five stories.

✠   a love story
✠   a ghost story
✠   a personal tragedy
✠   a political story
✠   a story about your parents

IImage © Tom Humbersttone (http://www.ventedspleen.com/blog/)

How did the text change with each version? Which did you prefer? Which worked best? The key here is to see that the artwork can be a visual metaphor, in the same way that you might use a simile or metaphor in the text of a poem. The words can reflect the artwork, or rub against the artwork, but they don't need to illustrate it.

Exercise 3 – Writing a poem

Now use all these ideas and observations to think about a poem.

1. Take the raw notes you wrote from the first bit of exercise one.
2. Pick a theme from exercise two to work into your notes (love, ghosts, personal tragedy, politics, your parents) which is meaningful to you.
3. Start with the title "Instructions to the artist".

Use these three elements to start drafting a poem. Bear in mind the following things:

☐ effectiveness of line
Comics (poems) are most successful when the maximum effect is produced by every line.

☐ economy of line
Panels on a comics page (lines in a poem) will be unsuccessful if they squander their potential with

needless repetition and/or an absence of meaningful content. Think about every single element and ask yourself: "Does it need to be there?"

☐   the reading process is one of interpretation rather than perception
Comics (poems) offer a series of static images to be read in sequence. Meaning is partly constructed through what is understood to have happened between panels (lines, words). The reader sees the individual parts but interprets them into an understanding of the whole.

Variations

☐   Write a poem where each line is a different imaginary comics panel.
☐   Write a poem based around a four panel grid as per the birds above.
☐   Write a poem based around two panels only. What happens between them?
☐   Write a poem whose lines which start alternatively with the words TEXT: and IMAGE:
☐   Write a poem based around a single image which contains only one word.
☐   Write a poem as instruction to an artist who only draws dogs.
☐   Write a poem as instruction to an artist to draw a dream you have had recently.
☐   Write a poem as set of counter-intuitive instructions designed to frustrate an artist.
☐   Write a poem based on something which is undrawable by an artist.

If you want more inspiration on this strange area that lies between poetry and comics (or to contribute any ideas), have a look at www.poetryandcomics.tumblr.com.