

“This Living Hand” : Fantasies of Handwriting in the Comics of Kevin Huizenga

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Abstract Using Kevin Huizenga’s short story “Glenn Ganges in *Pulverize*” as a case study, this essay argues for a reconsideration of the function of handwriting in North American alternative comics. For reasons largely having to do with cultural politics, comics scholars have held that in the alternative comic, handwriting functions as a privileged means of access to the author’s unique embodied subjectivity. By staging an encounter between handwriting and digital technology (specifically video games), Huizenga shows that handwriting is never about pure subjectivity’s embodiment—that there is always a gap between the author and his or her handwritten trace. At the same time, Huizenga suggests that what makes handwriting poignant is precisely the conflict between the reader’s knowledge of this gap and his or her desire for connection with the author.

Key words alternative comics; Kevin Huizenga; handwriting; video games

Alternative comics (i. e. comics published by firms such as Fantagraphics and Drawn & Quarterly, and reviewed favorably in forums such as *The Comics Journal*) are often understood as handwritten texts. The alternative cartoonist is commonly viewed as a figure who takes advantage of handwriting in order to leave a permanent trace of his or her self, a trace which is at once a physical object and an externalization of the cartoonist’s personality. I will argue in this essay that such a concept of the alternative cartoonist entails a misunderstanding of handwriting, and one which has been deployed at least partially because of its political usefulness. If some alternative comics critics and scholars have constructed the alternative cartoonist as a figure who writes by hand, they have done so in order to stress the similarity of comics to literature and thus to seek acceptance for comics in high-cultural and academic circles. In doing so, however, such critics have made handwriting in comics appear to be a less complex and poignant phenomenon than it actually is.

Through an analysis of Kevin Huizenga’s story “Glenn Ganges in *Pulverize*” (2008), I argue that alternative comics often provide, not handwriting itself, but a fantasy of handwriting, which gains much of its poignancy from the reader’s recognition that it is a fantasy. In this respect, alternative comics are less fully material, and have more in common with digital texts, than one might think – as we will see, Huizenga demonstrates this by staging an encounter between his quasi-autobiographical

avatar, Glenn Ganges, and a video game. It has already been argued (e. g. by Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty) that in producing an alternative comic, the creator does not simply reveal his or her authentic self, but also constructs a self which is partly real and partly fictitious. I argue that the same thing happens when the cartoonist presents that self through handwriting. In drawing a comic, the cartoonist does not simply translate his or her self onto paper. Handwriting produces a sense of proximity to the writer, yet it also reveals the profound and constitutive gap between reader and writer. It is precisely because of this ambivalence that handwriting is such a crucial trope in alternative comics.

Handwriting, including hand-drawing, involves producing signs by direct physical contact with the pen and paper. It records both the fact of the writer's bodily presence at the moment of writing, and the unique, idiosyncratic qualities of the writer's physical movements. According to the pseudoscience of graphology, popular in the early 20th century, the character traits of a writer may be inferred from his or her handwriting (Thornton 96 – 98). Graphology is now considered to lack scientific merit, but its basic premise—that handwriting is somehow intimately linked to subjectivity—remains widely accepted. Handwriting functions within North American culture as an important signifier of embodiment and subjectivity, and for this reason, the contemporary North American alternative comic has chosen handwriting as its characteristic method of production. The alternative comic is a handwritten genre. It typically is, or presents itself as, a handwritten artifact, and moreover, it does what handwriting is often understood as doing; it presents the authentic, innermost self of its creator. I would even suggest that the alternative comic often propagates a fantasy of handwriting. It enacts a fantasy in which, by means of physically engaging with artistic tools, one can literally write oneself into the world. According to this fantasy, when one writes by hand, one creates graphic traces which serve as the record of one's unique, embodied subjectivity, but which also have an independent existence.

Handwriting, understood in this way, is often believed to be in a state of crisis because of the advent of digital technology. Handwriting seems to be threatened by technologies like typewriting and word processing, which make it possible to write and draw without engaging physically either with the writing or drawing tools or with the surface of inscription. As early as 1938, a *New York Times* editorialist worried that “writing with one's own hand seems to be disappearing, and the universal typewriter may swallow all” (12). Yet even the typewriter still involves the production of letters by purely physical processes, whereas the computer seems to produce text ethereally, without reliance on any physical substrate. Computers seem to produce words and images devoid of embodied subjectivity. The ubiquity of computers creates a crisis for traditionally handwritten artistic genres such as alternative comics.

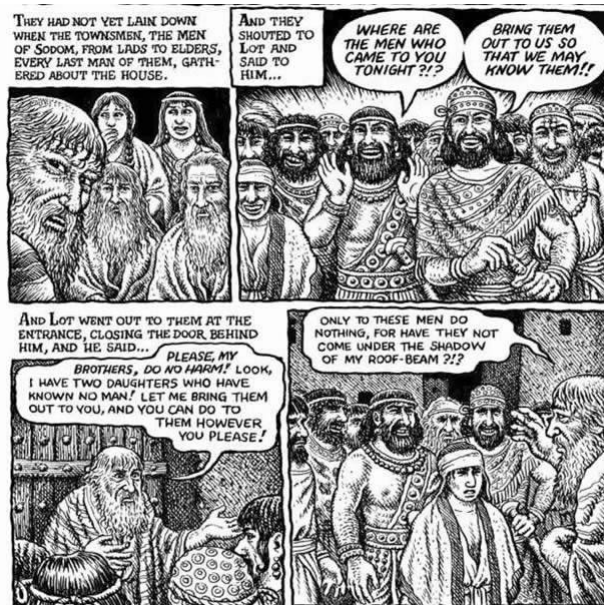
The American alternative comics movement is committed to the principle that the entire comic—script, artwork, lettering, and even sometimes printing and publication design—should represent the product of a single authorial hand. Nondivision of labor in comics is often understood as having inherent aesthetic merit, as Douglas Wolk argues:

[C]omics produced under the sole or chief creative control of a single person of significant skill are more likely to be good (or at least novel enough to be compelling and resonant) than comics produced by a group of people assembly-line style. . . . This naturally coincides with the observation that a comic owned by its creator is more likely to be stylistically adventurous than one produced on a work-made-for-hire basis. (31 – 32)

For Wolk, division of labor between writer and artist is acceptable only when one of the two figures is clearly dominant, or when the two creators work together so closely as to become essentially a single creative entity. Harvey Pekar is the exception that proves this rule: though he didn’t draw his own material, he exercised such creative control and collaborated¹ so closely with his artists that he deserves to be recognized as the author of his works.¹ For Wolk, collaborative authorship, no matter the quality of the individual collaborators, is less genuine or authentic than sole authorship. The alternative comics author is a singular author. This emphasis on sole authorship is of course also intended as a way to differentiate the alternative comic from the commercial comic, in which creative duties are often divided between several different persons (writer, penciler, inker, colorist, letterer, editor, etc.). Alternative comics critics often derisively refer to this division of labor as an “assembly-line” mode of production, categorizing it as a Taylorist-Fordist industrial process rather than a true creative labor.² Groth characterizes the mainstream cartoonist as a hack rather than a genuine artistic figure: “If we define a hack by his [sic] willingness to subordinate his talent to purely commercial dictates, we find that the comics industry has been dominated by hacks since its inception” (Groth and Fiore xi). By contrast, the 1960s underground cartoonist, the predecessor of the contemporary alternative cartoonist, “worked out of an inner need, from the social and cultural matrix, not the economic one” (xi).

An important way in which the alternative cartoonist demonstrates his or her sole authorship is through the cultivation of a unique style of handwriting. Alternative comics “privilege the distinctiveness of the creator’s hand” (Wolk 30, emphasis mine). For example, Seth’s panel borders “are not perfectly straight, and they don’t have a consistent thickness; they’ve got the same wobble as Seth’s other brushstrokes, so they declare that they were made by the same hand that drew the image within them” (132). This is a convenient summary of Philippe Marion’s theory that the artwork and the lettering in a comic can both be understood as traces of a single author-figure or authorial subject-position responsible for both, a figure Marion calls the *graphiateur* (Baetens 147). In comics produced by multiple creators, however, the *graphiateur* is a hypothetical figure, a sort of imaginary unification of the various personal styles involved, whereas in alternative comics, the *graphiateur* can be seen as more or less identical with the actual author. In alternative comics the similarity of writing to artwork, and the distinctive graphical traits of both, can be taken as evidence that one person produced the entire comic by means of physical engagement with drawing tools and a writing surface. Crumb’s distinctively shaky artwork and lettering, for example, serve (for knowledgeable readers) as proof that the comic in

question was the product of Crumb's unique body (Fig. 1).



(Fig. 1 Four panels from *The Book of Genesis* Illustrated by R. Crumb. Note the visual resemblance between handwriting and images. Copyright © Robert Crumb, 2009, all rights reserved.)

Independently of the actual style of handwriting, however, the bare fact of being handwritten—as opposed to typeset—is a significant distinguishing feature of the alternative comic. For Hilary Chute, handwritten-ness is so important as to represent a major difference between comics and novels:

I suggest, then, that what feels so intimate about comics is that it looks like what it is: handwriting is an irreducible part of its instantiation. The subjective presence of the maker is not retranslated through type, but, rather, the bodily mark of handwriting both provides a visual quality and texture and is also extrasemantic, a performative aspect of comics that guarantees that comics works cannot be “reflowed”: they are both intimate and *site specific*. Comics differs from the novel, an obvious influence, not only because of its verbal-visual hybridity but also because of its composition in handwriting. (11, emphasis in original)

For Chute, handwriting stands for embodiment, site-specificity, and instantiation—in a word, for materiality. Hence, original art pages are cherished collectors’ items because, unlike published comics, original art pages are one-of-a-kind objects which physically bear the stamp of the artist’s hand. Even published works of alternative comics, despite their mass-produced and non-unique nature, are often designed so as to suggest the presence of the artist’s hand. Alternative cartoonists frequently devote significant attention to the publication design and appearance of their published work, to the extent that, as Emma Tinker argues, “[t]he finished, printed comics are often treated like original art works.”³ Finally, alternative comics often explicitly reference

their own handwritten quality. For example, in Craig Thompson’s *Blankets*, the autobiographical protagonist masturbates while reading a letter from his girlfriend Raina. “Here, he is clearly making a connection between the flow of Raina’s handwriting, the pressure of pen on paper, and the body that made the marks; for Craig, the trace of the writer’s hand gives manuscript an erotic appeal” (Tinker 1176). Similarly, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* includes numerous handwritten documents and insists on the embodied nature of handwriting as opposed to typewriting.

In deploying handwriting in this way, alternative comics participate in a long-standing cultural tradition. Since at least the late nineteenth century, handwriting has been regarded in North American culture as a privileged signifier of embodiment, subjectivity, and authenticity. For example, the Romantic calligraphy revival was predicated on an opposition between the lovingly handcrafted nature of handwriting and the soullessness of machine-produced goods (Thornton 106). The pseudoscience of graphology claimed to be able to deduce a person’s character traits from his or her handwriting. The premise here was that because handwriting is unique to the individual writer, and serves as a trace of his or her idiosyncratic physical movements, it serves as a window into the soul. Handwriting has also sometimes, though certainly not always, functioned as a sign of the activity of the creative writer. Blake invokes the Muses to “Come into my hand / By your mild power, descending down the Nerves of my right arm / From out the Portals of my Brain” (96), and Keats “ha[s] fears that I may cease to be / Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain” (100). Handwriting is thus an appropriate trope for alternative comics to invoke, given their treatment of the comic as the expression of the unique self of the author.

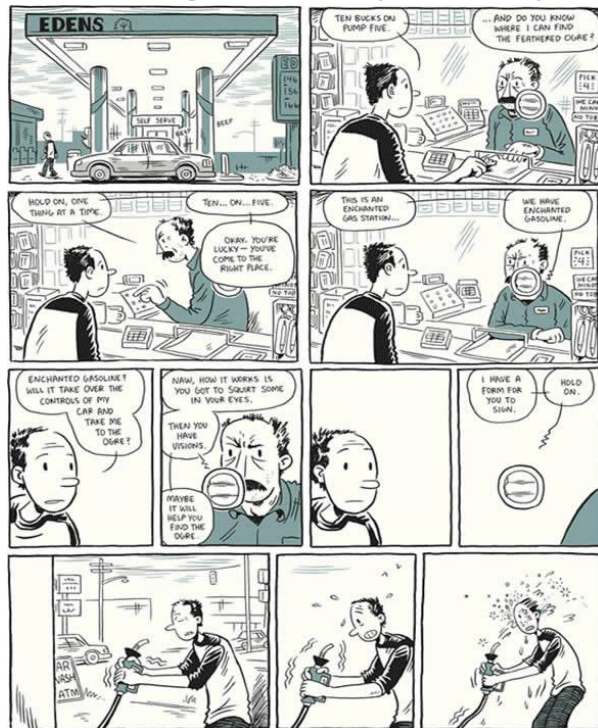
If we understand the alternative comic as a handwritten genre, then its polar opposite would be digital culture in general, or, more specifically, video games. In drawing an alternative comic, the artist seeks to provide a means of access to his or her authentic subjectivity. Ideally, in reading an alternative comic, the reader experiences an authentic intersubjective connection with the artist. As Whitman might have said, “Camerado! This is no [comic] book; / Who touches this, touches a man” [513]. Reading an alternative comic brings the artist’s self into contact with the reader’s self—a self which is equally genuine: in reading an alternative comic, I don’t forget who I am; instead, I implicitly compare and contrast the artist to myself, understanding the artist’s self in terms of my own self.

By contrast, the video game seeks to create an illusionistic presentation of an imaginary world. In playing a video game, the player enters that world and thereby steps outside his or her own actual self:

Comic action is customarily described as occurring within a separate, semiautonomous space that is removed from normal life. The French sociologist and anthropologist Roger Caillois writes that games are “make-believe,” that they are “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.” The Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga agrees, writing that play transpires “quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life.” (Galloway 6)

In playing a game, the player steps outside his or her actual physical and social location and enters a demarcated space of unreality—a space which game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, citing Johan Huizinga, call a “magic circle” (95). In entering the magic circle, the player abandons his or her usual self and takes on a second self, as literally occurs in video games when the player takes on the role of a fictional player character. Contemporary video games often present a fictional game-world which is rendered in three dimensions and with photorealistic detail, thereby seeking to make the player feel that in playing the game, he or she physically exits the real world and enters that fictional world. In doing so, the player also leaves behind his or her actual self and takes on the self of the fictional character whose actions he or she enacts. Instead of facilitating an encounter between two authentic selves (those of the writer and the artist), the video game replaces an authentic self with an inauthentic one.

My principal case study, the work of Kevin Huizenga, initially seems to support this claim of a binary opposition between the alternative comic and the video game. In an e-mail interview with me, Kevin Huizenga stated: “I fall in with the school of thought that cartooning is a kind [of] ‘handwriting’ or typography.”⁴ One reason Huizenga’s work fascinates me is because of the visual resemblance between his text and his images. In his work, words, images, and even other types of lines such as panel borders have the same line weight and the same degree of shakiness, so that all these lines can be identified as products of a single hand. [Figure 2]



(Fig. 2 Page from Huizenga’s story “The Feathered Ogre”. Note the similarity of all the various types of lines on this page. Reproduced by permission of the author.)

In terms of its physical form, *Ganges* #2, in particular, is a beautiful and lovingly crafted artifact; it’s significantly larger than a standard comic book and features a dust jacket. Though the book is obviously mass-produced, the use of hand-lettering identifies it as an originally hand-crafted artifact. [Figure 3]



(Fig. 3 Cover of *Ganges* #2. Reproduced by permission of the author.)

Almost every line of text in the book is hand-lettered. In short, the book presents itself as an example of a manual mode of production and as an object to be held and cherished. For a reader familiar with Huizenga’s previous work, it calls up associations with Huizenga’s hand-assembled minicomics.

The story in this issue is about Glenn Ganges’s time working at a dot-com startup company, Requestra.com, from 1999 to 2001. Requestra.com, which metonymically represents the internet culture of this period in general, is the acme of inauthenticity. We never find out what goods or services Requestra provides, what its revenue stream is, or what kind of work its employees do. The motto of the company—proposed after its CEO rejects a more technical proposal that Glenn intended to make—is “We don’t know and that’s a good thing,” which testifies to its lack of any genuine expertise.⁹ Early on in the story the narrator observes that “It was exhausting pretending that the dotcom buzz wasn’t really BS – as long as the money kept pouring in.”⁵ This all seems like a harsh condemnation of the dot-com bubble and the internet as a whole. The internet is here presented as a lot of flash concealing no substance. It lacks the authenticity we associate with handwriting.

After work each day, Glenn and his coworkers play *Pulverize*, a first-person shooter (FPS) computer game. (See Galloway 39 – 69 for a critical account of this genre) In playing *Pulverize*, Glenn steps into the magic circle. He takes on the role of a fictional character and enters into a gameworld represented in such photorealistic detail as to seem more real than the real world. Glenn’s experience with *Pulverize* be-

gins to seem like a prototypical experience of disembodiment, of severance from authentic selfhood. *Pulverize* becomes much more fulfilling than Glenn's work or even his life at home. Glenn lies to his wife, Wendy, telling her that he has to work late, when he is actually staying to play *Pulverize*. At work, he and his coworkers call each other by the names of their *Pulverize* characters. In his dreams, Glenn imagines that the gameworld of *Pulverize* has replaced the real world: "What's weird is that Glenn didn't dream about playing a video game. He dreamt as if he had really been running through the game's endless hallways. His brain was fooled by the game's first-person point of view." Even when awake, Glenn imagines himself holding a weapon from the game. [Figure 4]



(Fig. 4 Glenn imagining himself playing *Pulverize*. Reproduced by permission of the author.)

Glenn seems to have fully embraced the video game's promise to provide him with a false form of embodied subjectivity, replacing his real self. Here again we might see a critique of the way in which the video game offers a false, unreal form of subjectivity, in contrast to the more substantial, authentic mode of subjectivity that the alternative comic promises.

But this binary opposition starts to break down when we notice that *Pulverize*'s illusion of reality is based on constitutive gaps. Glenn is never completely fooled by the game's illusion of reality, and for the logic of the magic circle to work, he can't be fooled. During the first of two *Pulverize* playing sessions depicted in the story, the narrator observes: "As you fall, you see that the valley is really an illusion - it's a flat image of a valley that rushes up to you, growing more pixellated, and you even start to see the seams of the backdrop right before impact." As compelling as *Pulverize*'s world may seem, it can never present a fully seamless experience of the world; it is far from true virtual reality. The game's promise to replace the player's authentic self with an alien self is unfulfillable. *Pulverize* thus exemplifies "the fundamental paradox of immersion: if the viewer is able to marvel at the 'reality' of the immersive experience, she or he is no longer fully immersed" (Sandifer 139). In order to appreciate the way in which *Pulverize* absorbs the player into a fictional world, one must recognize its world as fictional and not real. The player must bear in mind the gap between the text's presentation of reality and the real world, and must not abandon his or her "authentic" self to embrace the alternative self provided by the game. Otherwise, the consequences can be disastrous. A fictional example of this is Yusuf's clients in the film *Inception* (2010), who spend all their time dreaming and never wake up. Glenn cannot not know that *Pulverize* is only a fake world, that his *Pulverize* avatar is not him. He understands that in a formal sense, *Pulverize* is the same game as

Spacewar (1962) (an actual game), where two players control ‘spaceships’ and duel on a black screen dotted with a few white pixels. Many years later, much more code goes into writing *Pulverize*, but essentially it’s the same thing – abstract combat. And when I realized that, I guess it didn’t seem so wrong to enjoy it as I did. Underneath, it’s just dots shooting dots at dots. Under the hood, *Pulverize* is the same game as *Spacewar*, and its superior graphics and sound serve only as cosmetic trappings. *Pulverize*’s promise to transform the player into another person is necessarily a fantasy—we might call this a “fantasy of immersion”.

Yet this fantasy is an appealing one, and it is disingenuous for Glenn to claim otherwise. The supposedly cosmetic elements of *Pulverize* are what make it seductive and affective. Glenn makes his above-quoted argument about “abstract combat” in a conversation with his wife Wendy, and as indicated by the words “I guess it didn’t seem so wrong to enjoy it as I did,” his intent is to explain away his disturbing addiction to the game. Wendy is not fooled, and instead offers another reason why Glenn might feel guilty about his enjoyment of *Pulverize*: she alludes to the Columbine High School massacre of 1999, suggesting that players of games like *Pulverize* may become desensitized to real-life violence. Glenn is visibly troubled by this idea, although he tries to brush it off. Glenn is in an ambivalent position of being seduced by *Pulverize*’s illusions at the same time that he understands them as illusions. Huizenga’s artistic presentation of *Pulverize* places the reader in a similar position. Huizenga represents the world of *Pulverize* in a highly unrealistic visual style, but it’s the same style he uses to depict Glenn’s real world. When Huizenga depicts a scene from *Pulverize*, we can tell that the scene takes place in a video game only because we already know.

[Fig. 5]



(Fig. 5 Scenes from *Pulverize*. Note the visual similarity to the scenes depicting “real life”. Reproduced by permission of the author.)

In a sequence where Glenn falls asleep and dreams he is inhabiting the world of *Pulverize*, the transition from real world to dream is signaled only by a change in the color of Glenn’s face. The end of the story reveals that the fantasy of immersion can also be deployed productively. In the story’s climactic sequence, Glenn and his colleagues play *Pulverize* for what they know to be the last time, since they know that

one of them, Bob Bilson, will be fired the next day, and that the company has been doomed by Stane's mismanagement and by the collapse of the dot-com bubble. The emotional power of the game is intensified by the knowledge that this is the last time the game can be played by this particular community. The poignancy of the game derives from Glenn's simultaneous knowledge that *Pulverize* is more stable and complete than real life, and that it's not real life. Glenn notes "the wintry morning light, which never changes, because the sky is a JPEG. Nothing is ever added to or subtracted from the zeroes and ones that make up the buildings or mountains, so nothing changes—time stands still. It's always a winter morning here." *Pulverize* improves on the real world in that it never changes, but this very fact marks *Pulverize* as an unsustainable escape from the real world. This ambivalence is precisely what makes playing *Pulverize* an emotionally fraught experience. If the *Pulverize* player is ambivalently poised between his real self and his fake one, then this ambivalence can even be used proactively.⁶ During the playing session, Matt Lewis, whose job is in no immediate danger, logs out of the game and logs back in under the name Candy pants, which is Bob Bilson's usual screen name. One by one, the other players do likewise, and for a moment "they were all Candy pants." Clearly becoming Candy pants in this way has no practical effect – the players don't become Bob in any practical sense, nor does their action save his job. But the affective resonance of this action is increased by its inauthenticity: "They all felt, as they watched another Candy pants explode into bloody chunks, a real affection and a kind of sadness." The action of becoming Candy pants is not practically effective, but perhaps precisely for this reason, the emotions it activates are genuine.

In an initial moment of playing *Pulverize*, Glenn is seduced by the fantasy of immersion; in a second moment, he recognizes this fantasy as a fantasy; in a third moment, he is forced to admit that this fantasy is nonetheless appealing (as in Octave Mannoni's famous formula "I know very well, but all the same") and can even be a source of productive engagement with the world. This, I now argue, is analogous to the way in which handwriting works in comics. I earlier described the conception of handwriting that I identified in alternative comics as a fantasy of handwriting. The term "fantasy" is appropriate because this conception is not in fact a factual account of how handwriting actually works in alternative comics. As Emma Tinker reminds us, "Comic art is made for reproduction. Although original artwork by famous comic book artists does sell for substantial sums of money, the original is not generally regarded in quite the same light as a drawing that was not made with publication in mind." The alternative comic, as encountered by the reader, is an always-already-reproduced text, predicated on an originary disappearance of the artist's hand. Jacques Derrida argues that this is true of handwritten documents in general. If the handwritten text is the sign of the presence of the artist, that presence is always already prior. Handwriting reveals that the writer was there at the moment of writing, but is there no longer (313).

But if any sort of handwritten text is founded on this constitutive gap between the text and the writer's body, in Huizenga's work this gap is even wider than usual. His comics often suggest the absence rather than the presence of a guiding authorial sub-

jectivity. As noted above, all the lines in Huizenga’s comics look the same, but this similarity doesn’t suggest the presence of a single cohesive author-figure responsible for all of them, as in Philippe Marion’s argument. What’s emphasized instead is the indistinguishability of one type of line from another, which results in a disorienting inability to distinguish diegetic from nondiegetic lines, or words from pictures.⁷ Similarly, Huizenga’s work initially appears to be autobiographical, but instead ends up emphasizing the gap between the autobiographical text and its author. Huizenga’s recurring protagonist, Glenn Ganges, has the same background as Huizenga, but turns out to be a mostly fictional construct. For example, in Huizenga’s story “The Feathered Ogre,” Glenn and his wife struggle with infertility, but at the time this story was written, Huizenga wasn’t married (Epstein). Even Glenn’s name, evocative as it is, was chosen randomly when Huizenga saw a road sign listing the distances to two Michigan towns called Glenn and Ganges. Even Huizenga’s artwork, which seems like an instance of pure handwriting, is inflected—we might even say contaminated—by the same digital technology that seems to represent the antithesis of handwriting. In an interview with me, Huizenga explained his use of Photoshop to edit his artwork:

I fix mistakes and fill black areas and even occasionally shrink a head or move a figure or something relatively drastic. It’s difficult to generalize about the drastic changes, because they tend to be unique to unique situations. Occasionally a page will need major surgery--panels changed and swapped out and rearranged. Other times the page needs only minor fixes. I don’t like to redraw, but I like to second guess myself and try out new ideas. Photoshop allows for pretty drastic editing, and I’d find comics making very frustrating without knowing I’m not trapped by what I’ve drawn (Huizenga, personal communication).

If Huizenga’s work carries the imprint of his hand, that imprint is not an indelible one. The idea of handwriting as an imprint of the artist’s body carries the implication that this imprint is unremovable; Birkerts argues that this is one of the virtues of handwriting (157). Huizenga, however, doesn’t want to be “trapped” by the permanence of what’s already been drawn or written. If his handwriting expresses his self, then this self is produced, not in a pure, originary moment of inscription, but only after a process of revision. A further result of Huizenga’s decision to use Photoshop is that his original art—which, as suggested above, might be seen as the ultimate means of access to the embodied subjectivity of the artist—doesn’t actually exist in physical form:

I’ve had people inquire about buying a page and I have to break it to them that the page only really exists digitally. The original art exists on several different pieces of paper, often with major mistakes, and the lettering sometimes is on the back of some scratch paper. Some artists are concerned about this, but I’ve made my choice in favor of speed and flexibility. (Huizenga, personal communication)

Huizenga's original artwork "only really exists digitally;" there is no material, handwritten original to which the reproduced artwork on the published comics page corresponds. Unlike in the classic fantasy of handwriting, his artwork doesn't proceed directly from an originary act of physical engagement with the drawing tools; instead, it represents an assemblage of a variety of fragments which might be either physical or digital.

And yet readers still think Huizenga's art actually exists; more, they want to purchase it. The former perception arises because Huizenga's artwork looks handwritten. His use of Photoshop is sufficiently well-disguised as to go unnoticed (compare for example the recent work of Scott McCloud, where the use of graphics software is immediately obvious). He plays upon the assumption that the comic is a hand-drawn text, that the published comic is indexically connected to an artifact that bears the mark of the artist's hand. This assumption creates a desire for connection with the artist, a desire to see and even to own that originary artifact. In the case of Huizenga's work, the unsatisfiability of that desire makes it all the more powerful. The fantasy of handwriting, as deployed by Huizenga, owes much of its seductiveness to the fact that the reader knows it to be a fantasy.

I don't claim that there's anything harmful or misguided about the fantasies of handwriting we encounter in alternative comics; only that these fantasies need to be recognized as such. Critics have already recognized that the creation of the self in alternative comics is the result of a complex and deliberate negotiation, rather than a pure act of self-revelation. The autobiographical cartoonist, for example, doesn't simply reveal his or her past, but also shapes the past and filters it through his or her personal lens (Hatfield 108 – 127 , Beaty 139 – 170). A gap exists between the truth of the cartoonist's past and the cartoonist's presentation of that past, and this gap is unbridgeable (we read *Fun Home* because we don't and can't know the truth behind Alison Bechdel's past; otherwise, the book would be redundant). We need to recognize that the same is true of the graphic presentation of the self in alternative comics via handwriting and hand-drawing. Just as the autobiographical comic exploits, but ultimately frustrates, the reader's desire to know the true meaning of the events it depicts, the handwritten comic appeals to, but can never satisfy, the reader's desire for connection with the body of the artist. As Chute argues, handwrittenness is a key element that distinguishes the contemporary alternative comic from the novel. If so, then comics scholars need to devote more attention to the way in which alternative and other comics play upon the reader's desire—and increasingly often, in the digital age, the reader's nostalgia—for the artist's living hand.

Notes

1. This is of course an oversimplification; see Hatfield 125 for a refutation of this reading of Pekar.
2. See, for example, Groth and Fiore 4
3. Incidentally, the same is often true of European art comics; see Beaty 4 – 5.
4. I'm grateful to Mr. Huizenga for kindly answering my inquiries.
5. Note that this comic book includes no page numbers.

6. Incidentally, “his” is correct here since all the *Pulverize* players depicted in the story are exclusively male; Requestra’s one female employee tries playing the game but finds it unappealing.
7. I will demonstrate this claim at greater length in a forthcoming book chapter.

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