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An Interview with Nick Sousanis

This interview covers a range of topics from Sousanis's creative process to how he conceives of himself as a scholar and artist.

S. Andrew "Drew" Stowe (DS): I wanted to start out by asking you about the beginning. Where were the earliest inklings of what got you interested into doing your dissertation in comics form? Or, what convinced you to do a graphic dissertation?

Nick Sousanis (NS): I think the thing is I didn't know any better. I didn't know it was a big deal. I didn't know it was groundbreaking, particularly. I was a comics maker as a kid. And in my case when I went to university, as someone who was very strong academically, I thought, "you go to school and you are supposed to study serious stuff." So I studied mathematics. Thus, after high school, comics were always off on the side. I returned to graduate school, where I did mixed masters in math and art. After my master's degree, I was highly involved in the arts in Detroit and was invited to be in a political art show. With only a few days to create something, I turned back to comics. I was really excited about how I could use visual metaphor and verbal metaphor to make powerful stories or narratives. After that, I created an essay in comic form for an exhibition on games and art that I co-organized. In this essay I talked about the mechanics and history of games and it ultimately served as a philosophical piece. Creating this demonstrated that I could do work that was sophisticated, complex, and dense but also very accessible because I could rely on the visuals to carry the conceptual matter.

When I decided to go get a doctorate, I did so with an understanding that I wanted to create comics. While I love the work that goes on in the academy, I wanted to make something that would reach other people. This is a way that I could make something that I could give away. It was very gratifying to me that I could hand out materials and samples of comics at conferences and people would actually read them. I did not start out with some goal of "revolutionizing scholarship" but I did want to do what I loved doing and I wanted to do something that people would read. As a scholar and as a comics maker I know that such works as Understanding Comics, Maus, and Persepolis comics have gained broader acceptance in educational settings, so I felt that the argument had already been won - but it hadn't (and hasn't) been completely. My goal was to do the work that I wanted to do, but I also realized that the political landscape of

academia required that I had to make a work that both did the thing and argued for the thing within itself. This was the genesis of my project.

DS: What kind of problems did you go through as you got started with this project?

NS: This is a question that I get relatively often and it has a disappointingly undramatic answer. When I came into the program I was very upfront about the work that I wanted to do and there were never many complications. I came in as a comics maker, so it wasn't like I was saying "Oh it would be great if I could do comics." From my first course, I made comics as part of my work. If I really needed to make the argument for my work, then it was made by the trajectory of where I was and what I did in class. On my committee I had Professor Ruth Vinz, who was in the department of English education. She was a poetry person and though not a comics person, she was extremely receptive to and encouraging of my project. She did a lot of work with narrative research, and in fact offered me the final chapter of the book she was writing on narrative inquiry to do in comics form. (A piece that elements from which made their way into Unflattening.)

Robbie McClintock was another member of my committee, though emeritus by the time that I graduated. He was just hungry for more and different kinds of dissertations than those that he had seen throughout his career. The third main force on my committee was Maxine Greene who was 90 years old when I first met her and a legendary figure. She was a philosopher of aesthetic education who believed that the arts offered transformative educational experience. Though she had little experience with comics, except for like 85 years earlier (probably), she recognized that this was right in-line with what she was doing so we had a really lovely time over the six years.

I think the only pushback I got, came at a conference from some senior professor who said something like "Look, I hear you want to change the academy, but why don't you go just do something else." And while I saw that a tiny bit, mostly, I just sensed that people seemed so hungry for something different and I had hit that right moment. Essentially, I Forrest Gump-ed my way into the situation. I did what I did, and I blogged about it, and I did all those things because that's what I wanted to do. I really did not have the kind of battles that some hear about except for some funny things about the office of doctoral studies, but they are not even that dramatic, they are just funny.

[One story that Sousanis alludes to here is an experience he had with the office of doctoral studies at his institution. Bearing mind that Sousanis's book is completed entirely in comic's form, except for one page (54), which is formatted in the style of a "traditional" academic essay. In this page of text a single figure was offset and labeled "figure 1." The school asked that Sousanis include a list of figures at the beginning in order to list this figure properly. It is the only figure included on this list of figures in a book composed of drawings - except for this page, which has the most text and is done in the most traditional format.]

DS: How do you feel that the Academy's relationship with popular culture in terms of consumers and the way that scholarship has a duty to create material that is A.) Accessible and then B.) Remotely interesting or graspable to a general audience? I think that a major part of *Unflattening's* power comes from the ability to communicate relatively dense theory in a very accessible way.

NS: I do not think that everyone needs to write accessible work. I think that I needed to write that way. But, if that's the way you need to work, then that ought to be encouraged. Obviously somebody's going to write something about the inner workings of a mosquito at some high level, and maybe that doesn't need to be read by the general population. But, I do think that Academia as a general force should be in the business of educating people. I don't think we serve people if we make education rarefied and isolated, which isn't to say some of it doesn't have to be. I heard science writer Carl Zimmer give a keynote and he made a point about the climate debate that scientists have a responsibility to be very clear about the facts or else they will be drowned out by louder (and less-informed) voices. I think that we, as an overall body, have some duty to convey what's going on to the broader public to educate them and then engage them with the ideas rather than the saying we know what's best and you don't.

DS: Well, I would walk back my usage of the word duty...

NS: I think you're probably right, but I think you're probably right that the academy as an institution does have a duty. I think this is more important for some than for others. It also has to do with the audience that is being spoken to. Does somebody at CERN have a duty to write something that *everybody* can understand? I don't know but it is definitely something that everyone should think about.

DS: In teaching and studying technical writing, I have spent a lot of time considering that technical writers function by interfacing between those who create technology and those who use technology. I think that the comic form of your book is very rich and allows and this allows for relatively complex communication to be communicated to a broad audience.

NS: I really like your point. In *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* Pirsig talks about his work writing instructional manuals. Thinking about this highlights the ways that making something clear and communicating it in a clear way does not mean that the content is being dumbed down.

DS: I'm interested in hearing about your creative process when you get an idea what is the substance of that idea how do you say end up manifesting itself?

NS: People frequently ask me when I make my comics, which comes first, pictures or words? I like to answer this question by saying "Yes!" I start my creative process by considering an idea. And from there, I try to explore the shape of the idea. For example, for the page I did on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the Rhizome, I wanted to get across the feeling of fragmented and yet all the parts connected at the same time. The page ended up having this non-linear sequence of images that can be read in a variety of ways. This all comes

through massive amounts of iterating through my sketches - finding ways to make the reading experience of the page embody this idea I'm working on. I was pleased that Harvard was able to reprint some of my process sketches in the back of *Unflattening* (and I've shared many more on my website) as I think that reveal gives people an insider's view on the process, and way to make it seem less like magic, and more like something they all can do.

[See citation at bottom for link to process sketches on Sousanis's webpage.]

My sketches and text come together in a cyclical process where I will sketch, write, and at some point, the sketch will require me to do some more research. So I'll go and learn more about the subject, which in turn triggers new drawings and new words. For me, it's an iterative process between drawing, writing, and studying. Throughout this I have to factor in spatial or other constraints of the format of the comics page. In composing comics I am dealing with a limited space and I have to work to make the ideas fit onto the canvas. To do this I think about the direction and layout of the comic and how a reader might read the text. In some comics the organization is very regimented, but in others they are not. The page on fractals in *Unflattening* [pg. 44] is probably one of the most unreadable pages in terms of knowing where to go. But, this is a product of thinking about how to construct a page that addresses the concept of fractals.

If you notice, throughout *Unflattening*, none of the compositions are the same. Nothing repeats in terms of each page's structure. It was important to me that each page had its own identity and structure. The structure of a comic's page is as significant to me as the individual drawings within.

DS: I'd like to hear a little bit about how the peer review process worked for *Unflattening*. What kind of criticisms did you encounter?

NS: I wish I had more of the peer review process. My process, itself in the feedback between research and art-making, in a somewhat mystical way, served as a collaborator and an editor.

DS: Interesting, this doesn't allow for meaning to be hidden by volume!

NS: My advisory committee offered some discussions of ideas, and some things that I needed to re-write. My editor also sent it out for peer review, and there were some suggestions made.

Henry Jenkins and Scott McCloud provided blurbs about the book. It meant a lot to me to have such giants in comics and education speak positively of my work. McCloud in particular, was such a model in my own Journey. It was great to have Scott speak as a comics maker and a theorist and also Henry as a media theorist and educator; it meant a lot to me to have both of those perspectives together.

The main part editing happened when my editor and I went through the work page-by-page, line-by-line to make sure that all of the text and images made sense. We cut out words and made a few tweaks to the drawing because I had

time to make the changes. In the finished dissertation that I submitted to the graduate school there were a few drawings in the last chapter that were not at the level that it is in the final book. Some were sort of scribbled because I had to get the project done.

DS: Recently I have been reading Walter Fisher's work on what he calls the narrative paradigm. This basically articulates the idea that stories are the most basic element of human communication. Throughout *Unflattening* you include some stories or examples about yourself and your life amidst the scholarship. Can you tell me a bit about how you blend your persona into your text?

NS: I'd love to read about that. My style is very different from many who create education comics because I do not use a visible narrator. The book does not feature me talking, I didn't use that trope. But, there are these little interjections where my dog, my superhero (which I created in jr. high), my feet, and my wife's commute all play a role. I feel like when there is all of this heavy conceptual stuff it helps to interject stories that ground it. In the case where I talk about and show tracings of my foot alongside others, it's a concept that everybody can relate to - which helps to take very abstract material and bring it down to a more personal level.

I have now talked about my dog and the ways dogs see (or rather smell) the world [featured in *Unflattening* on pg. 40] at every talk I've done. This resonates with people and makes my point very strongly. I could have done it more generally about dogs, but I made it about my dog. I'm not sure why, but it was true; and it was a lesson on perspective I learned from my dog. And maybe that's a key idea too - we take our learning not just from scholarly tomes, but also from our surroundings, our family, and our experiences of all sorts. Using your dog to make your point, deprivileges where learning must be found.

In another instance I shared an example about my wife's commute when we lived in Manhattan. My daily commute was pretty straightforward - out to school and back, or out to work at the tennis club and back. But my wife went to multiple destinations each day she was out, and those spots and the sequence never repeated. So she had a different view on the city, and an expanded perspective that allowed her to understand where different places were relative to other places - quite different from mine.

DS: A few years ago (October 2014), I attended a presentation that you gave. During your presentation you had everyone draw interpretively to somehow visually describe our day. Frankly, I had done little drawing in recent years. During this presentation you advanced the argument that doing things is generative. This notion has been fruitful to me; when I get stuck on writing something I have taken to doodling around and the idea comes to me. Based on this can we talk about how you perceive writer's block and how do you think this applies across different modes of creation and maybe even in your process of creating comics?

NS: Every page I create presents its own challenges. In my case, I wouldn't call this writer's block because It's not like I don't have ideas. The difficulty comes in

knowing which idea to run with. The cartoonist Lynda Barry talks a lot about constantly moving your hands and to keep moving forward - which I really like (though maybe don't practice enough). For me, I just keep making sketches, sometimes I might make a hundred sketches of a page before one of them feels like it works just right, and I settle on a structure for the page. And as I said earlier, this process of sketching often sends me back to the drawing board in terms of research I then need to do. I did a piece for the Boston Globe, ["Against the flow"] which took about five months to complete. (Some of this is due to having a toddler and a lack of sustained working time!) Five months on one page may seem like a long time but there were questions to be grappled with. There were always solutions that would do, but I just wasn't satisfied. More than writer's block, I just think that I have to work on the page until I am satisfied with where the comic is going. It's never that I don't have ideas, but it's that sometimes the idea's not right yet, or that It's not expressing what it needs to be.

DS: Earlier you mentioned that the content that you generated ended up being the taskmaster. It's interesting hearing about the relationship that you have with your text.

NS: I think that is very true. I think that the feedback process won't let you get away with a short cut and you can always take short cuts. Sometimes I will say "I just need to finish this page, so I'm just going to do this," but I also think that the constraint of time is worth considering. In another instance, I was working on a piece for *Nature* ["The Fragile Framework"](http://www.nature.com/news/the-fragile-framework-1.18861) and it was due in a week. I just *had* to find a solution. There were so many things that had to be jammed into the comic but there was no missing the deadline. Because of this solutions came. I don't think I ever have writer's block, but it's very difficult for me to be satisfied.

DS: I feel like sometimes writer's block is a way of saying that someone has not had the amount of time that they need to do the thing they want to do.

NS: I think that is correct. So many writers acknowledge that ideas come from doing something else. I have found that if I can't quite make something work, then I might go for a run. Then everything just kind of works out. It seems like something out there in the world triggers the last piece that is needed. I think that the act of physically moving is something we don't think enough about in academia.

DS: To continue talking about that, I think about knowledge formation as a synthesis of past experience and thinking and as you said, I think these conclusions often comes in unexpected ways. It seems that I always get ideas when I am cutting grass or going to sleep.

NS: One time at the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Conference these two women organized an impromptu presentation teaching those of us willing to join in some basic collaborative dance choreography. While not a formal part of the conference, it demonstrated an extremely valuable means of knowing throughout the gathering and more of this kind of work needs to be integrated.

DS: Can you tell me a little bit about your thoughts on the breadth of the reception that your book has received?

NS: It has blown me away. I expected comics people to be interested. Before it came out I knew that the digital humanities were interested in it. It's not like the book has hit Harry Potter sales numbers, but it has crossed a lot of boundaries. I intentionally tried to write the book so that it was uncategorizable. If you go to a bookstore in one shop it will be in Philosophy next to Spinoza, and in another it will be in the graphic novels next to Spiegelman. Sometimes people will send me pictures of where it is in their local bookshop and I like that it has many different neighbors.

I know that the book has been taught in high school philosophy as well as undergraduate history courses. It has been used in graduate arts-based research classes, undergraduate interdisciplinary studies, comic studies, rhetoric and composition, creative writing, and more, There's even someone in the Columbia business school who has used it as part of innovation seminars, and the designers have taken an interest in it.

I wrote this text in an intentionally ambiguous way so that different people could view it from different perspectives. To me, it is very much a statement about what is going on in education and higher education and the need for the introduction of other ways of seeing. But for other people, the text is something much different and that's really cool to me too.

The interest across disciplines has afforded me the opportunity to speak to a large array of different audiences. In two weeks I'm giving a keynote at an information design conference and the next day I will be speaking at an architecture school. Then, the final day of my trip I will be giving an address at a creative writing conference that is leaning toward comics but is thematically quite broad.

DS: Does the message that you deliver change when speaking to such different audiences?

NS: Sometimes I will highlight one part of the book over another. While I wrote this book about school and education, the book doesn't actually say "school" or "education" and information doesn't appear in its disciplines. To you and I, chapter two is very clearly about interdisciplinarity.

The book has been exhibited as artwork on gallery walls in Moscow and in university settings in Amsterdam. The work that has been done with alternative scholarship is very interesting. Recently I interviewed with someone from Colombia, and I have been interviewed several times by someone in Brazil who was mostly interested in my work to an educational audience. Many highlight my book as something that discusses visual literacy. *Unflattening* challenges me to be versed in enough areas that I can move through varied academic terrain though I'm not strictly a disciplinary scholar the way that some disciplinary experts would be.

DS: Though I know you through Interdisciplinary studies, I consider myself primarily a rhetorician, which is a discipline that concerns itself with discussing the discourse of other disciplines. So, I can talk about a certain phenomena in terms of rhetoric, but not actually touch on the given thing. Can you tell me a little bit about the title of the book and what it means to you?

NS: One could argue, I wrote this in some way to justify my own way of being. I am a former professional tennis player/coach who studied mathematics and then pursued art. I also studied Interdisciplinarity, whatever that term means at this point. I like to advance the idea that being able to approach an idea from multiple perspectives inoculates you from being stuck. It doesn't mean that you won't get stuck but you will be able to work through it. The reason that I call the book *Unflattening* and not "Unflattened" is because the minute you think you "have it right" then you have really missed the point. This book is my attempt to figure some things out and make some sense of them that I can share with others. I don't think that I've got any more answers. Reviewers of the book have noted that the book ends with questions. Maxine Greene always liked things that end with open questions and I think I have succeeded in doing that. I have raised questions and proposed a lot of ways for how we can see and for how we can think about our own thinking. But then people are just going to jump off of that and do what they are going to do. I think that when we are able to bring in multiple ways of doing things and when we are able to move (like your example of cutting the grass), when one is able to move outside of the thing that has caused you to be stuck, when you can see it in a different way. I think we can apply that to movement, and we can apply it to disciplines, and you know it just now occurs to me that this is something we could talk more about. It's really more about being able to move out of the point that you're in and you can do that by having two eyes but you can do that by moving your head and you can do that by jumping from here to here.

DS: I heard a bit from the comedian Mitch Hedberg, where he commented that comedians tell jokes, but that people will ask comedians if they can act. Then Hedberg observes that no one walks up to a chef and asks the chef if they can farm. Based on our discussion, and your book, you seem to wear a lot of different hats very smoothly. Based on this, how do you manage your professional identity, or ethos, or how do you position yourself in terms of your scholarship?

NS: Holy crap that's a huge question

DS: Yes, enjoy that mess!

NS: I don't even know where to start. In an interdisciplinary sense, a lot of people start with a disciplinary home and then bring something else to it. In my case I don't even know that I have a disciplinary home at all. I don't even know what you call the work I do. There's even the question of whether I make art or scholarship. There's really no easy answer.

DS: Would you be willing to take a stance on any of those issues? Even a tentative one?

NS: I think the answer is equally both. I do not think that my work would work if it was art but had poor scholarship, and I don't think it would work as good scholarship if it was badly drawn. I think I see myself as a chameleon. On one hand, I see myself as an outsider too. And this is not only about scholarship. At another time I was a tennis player who also had a math degree. With the work I get to go to Interdisciplinary studies conferences, but also I go to education, literature, and design conferences. In many respects I feel equally at home in any of them. I think my life has allowed me to be really good at this. I have always felt at home in these different worlds. I'm not sure whatever it is that makes this part of my personality but it has allowed me to shape-shift and to think this way is what allows me to do the work that I do. I'm so glad that I get to work this way because this is how I am comfortable. But I also totally get it if others want to say that I don't fit because I don't fit exactly in their home. You only get one life to live so I might as well do my own thing.

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NICK SOUSANIS is a scholar, art critic, comics artist and much else besides. He completed his dissertation in 2014 entirely in comics form at Teacher's College at Columbia University. His dissertation was published in book form as *Unflattening* by Harvard University Press in 2015. *Unflattening* has been well received across a number of disciplines and Scott McCloud calls it a "complex, beautiful, delirious meditation on just about everything under the sun." *Unflattening* won the 2015 Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Prize as the book of the year. *Unflattening* also won the 2016 American Publishers Award for Professional and Scholarly Excellence in Humanities- the first comic book to win let alone to be under consideration. Sousanis joined the school of Humanities and Liberal Studies at San Francisco State University in Fall 2016 as an Assistant Professor.

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