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Article

'Is This the Real Me? What Is the Real Me?': Deconstructing Authenticity in Aline Kominsky-Crumb's *Need More Love*

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Abstract: In spite of being a central figure in the underground comix scene, a trailblazer in the field of female-authored comics, and one of the progenitors of the graphic memoir, there has been relatively little scholarship on Aline Kominsky-Crumb. For much of her career, she was in the shadow of her husband, Robert Crumb, an iconic figure of the counterculture, and any attention she has received for her own work tended to be marred by condescension or predicated on the naïve assumption that, as Susan Kirtley claims, it 'showcase[s] a raw, unvarnished authenticity'. It also tended to ignore her writing, focusing almost exclusively on her artwork. In this essay, I analyse her anthology, *Need More Love*, paying particular attention to the nuances of its uses of text, to argue that Kominsky-Crumb's work might be read as a sustained, self-reflexive interrogation of the idea of authenticity.

Keywords: Aline Kominsky-Crumb; Robert Crumb; graphic novels; graphic memoir; authenticity

In spite of being a central figure in the underground comix scene, a trailblazer in the field of female-authored comics, and one of the progenitors of the graphic memoir, there has been relatively little scholarship on Aline Kominsky-Crumb.[1] For much of her career, she was in the shadow of her husband, Robert Crumb, an iconic figure of the counterculture, and any attention she received for her own work tended to be marred by condescension[2] or predicated on the naïve assumption that, as Susan Kirtley claims, it 'showcase[s] a raw, unvarnished authenticity' (Kirtley 2018, p. 272). The notable exceptions are Hillary Chute and Tahneer Oksman, both of whom have written sensitively and insightfully about the complexity of Kominsky-Crumb's work. Yet even Chute and Oksman revert at times to formulations that reinforce the idea that Kominsky-Crumb's art is characterised by what Chute calls her 'commitment to the comics page as uncensored autobiographical space' (Chute 2010, p. 38) and Oksman her 'conflicted, raw, and often painful autobiographical representations' (Oksman 2016, p. 1). For Oksman, Kominsky-Crumb is a pioneer, who 'set the stage for women and men who would use the graphic medium to reveal their darkest secrets and explore their neuroses' (Oksman 2016, p. 18)[3]; for Chute, her 'uninhibited self-revelations' (Chute 2010, p. 55) reflect 'the texture of lived life' (Chute 2010, p. 35). These readings are persuasive within the parameters they set themselves, but they provide a partial view of Kominsky-Crumb's work. Firstly, their focus on what is 'painful' and 'dark' in her oeuvre is potentially misleading, since it obscures the fact that its prevailing tone is mischievously playful, impious, irreverent and (self-)satirical. Secondly, their representation of her work as 'uncensored' and 'raw[ly]' autobiographical risks simplifying its nuanced negotiations of the vexed relationship between life and art. As Oksman herself points out, paraphrasing Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson,[4] it is problematic that 'women's autobiographical projects are often viewed as transparent renderings of their life stories, instead of carefully constructed interpretations and performances of their memories and experiences' (Oksman 2016, p. 26). If, as I have argued elsewhere, 'even the most ostensibly uncensored, authentic account of autobiographical experience is a mediated, selective, constructed version of that experience' (Brauner 2014, p. 144), in Kominsky-Crumb's case, this process of mediation, selection and construction is foregrounded, so that her work

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might be read as a sustained, self-reflexive interrogation of the idea of authenticity. Finally, in common with all the critical discourse on Kominsky-Crumb's work, Chute and Oksman privilege her art over her writing. In this essay, I am particularly interested in the role of text in Kominsky-Crumb's work.

On the one hand, Kominsky-Crumb's magnum opus, *Need More Love*, a 'unique blend of comics, art, photographs and memorabilia' (Kominsky-Crumb 2007, n.p.), encourages the belief that Kominsky's life and art are inseparable, if not identical. On the other hand, it subverts this notion. The inner flap of its front dustcover announces that the contents of *Need More Love* will draw on a body of work spanning four decades featuring 'her self-effacing character Bunch' (n.p.) but concludes with a 'promise' attributed to 'Aline': 'I am packing this book with sordid details from my real life, I don't have to make up anything!' (n.p.). Even before the main body of the work, then, the tension between self-exposure and self-erasure is evident. Aline[5] claims that *Need More Love* is a work of non-fiction, offering uncensored access to her 'real life', 'sordid details' and all, but at the same time, we are introduced to a 'character' named 'Bunch'—a comical abbreviation of 'Honeybunch' that gestures towards the expressionistic aspects of Kominsky-Crumb's art. To those unfamiliar with the Bunch, as she is more usually known (the definite article accentuates her status as a fictional construct, imposing a further distance between author and protagonist), the term 'self-effacing' here might be interpreted as a synonym for 'modest', but it is difficult to reconcile this with the relentless self-dramatisation of the character as Kominsky-Crumb represents her. So is it being used ironically? Possibly, but it also seems to me that the word is being used more literally, to suggest that the character's apparent transparency—as a thinly veiled portrait of the artist—actually occludes the very self it appears to reveal, or, more radically, raises the possibility that the very existence of an authentic self is an ontological mirage that vanishes on close inspection. If the Bunch needs to be read as part of a complex discourse of self-mythologisation, rather than as a straightforward surrogate for Kominsky-Crumb, then Aline, too, should be understood not simply as the author's mouthpiece but rather as another of her fictional (dis)guises.

Like the dustcover blurb, the introduction to *Need More Love* draws attention to the ambiguities of its author's strategies of self-representation. On the one hand, it seems to reinforce Aline's 'promise', announcing that '[t]his book is my chance to flaunt my accomplishments in one intense volume that says it all!' (p. 11). Beneath the text of the introduction, extending over a double-page spread, is an ink drawing of a woman sprawled on the floor, with her back to the viewer and her bottom prominently displayed in lacy panties, so that the term 'accomplishments' takes on the quality of a sexual innuendo.

Taken in conjunction, the vow to 'tell it all' and the titillating image suggest a willingness, or perhaps a gleeful impulse, to bare everything, literally and metaphorically. Yet what appears at first to be an act of self-exposure—the drawing of Kominsky-Crumb in her skimpy underwear—is beset by questions of authenticity. Firstly, it is unclear if the drawing is a self-portrait. If it is, it must have been done from a photograph, or from imagination, since the subject is represented from the back. The use of shading and the provocative positioning of the buttocks might suggest Robert Crumb's hand[6], but the presence of a cursive signature—'aline kominsky crumb'—situated between the end of the writing and the start of the sketch—seems to claim authorship of the image as well as the text. Finally, there is a box in the bottom left-hand corner of the facing page containing the words: 'ALINE RELAXING AT HOME' (p. 11). This suggests that the drawing has captured a moment of domestic intimacy, providing a glimpse of the private lives of Kominsky-Crumb and her husband, Robert Crumb, in much the same way as their long-running, co-authored comic strip, *Dirty Laundry*, purports to. Yet the pose adopted by the female figure is very much that—a deliberate pose, alluding archly to Diego Velazquez's celebrated, controversial 'Rokeby' Venus painting. Like Velazquez's nude, the sketch of 'ALINE' both objectifies and idealises its subject. Like viewers of the 'Rokeby' Venus, readers of *Need More Love* are placed in an uncomfortable position of complicity with the male gaze, if that is what it is. Yet, just as the Velazquez painting also hints at autoeroticism, since its subject seems to

be admiring herself in a mirror held for her by Cupid[7], so the 'ALINE' portrait contains a sly suggestion, through the positioning of the left arm and the term 'RELAXING', that its subject might be in the process of, or about to begin, an act of self-pleasuring. If this is a self-portrait, is it parodying the male gaze, or staging it within the frame of a female subject performing, but also concealing, her own self-sufficient sexuality? If we are voyeurs, questions remain as to the identity of the objectified female body. Is the figure identified as 'ALINE' the same as the author who identifies herself through the signature 'aline kominsky crumb' on the same page? If so, why the use of the lower-case, full name for the former and the first name only, in capitals, for the latter? Are either of these identical to the real-life author? Ultimately, these are unanswerable questions. The real-life author remains elusive, unknowable, inviting identification between her comics personas and her existence in the unwritten world, while at the same time playfully drawing attention to the performativity of the protagonists of her written world[8], whether named as 'ALINE', 'aline kominsky crumb', 'Aline Kominsky-Crumb', 'Aline Ricky Goldsmith Kominsky Crumb'[9], 'Tuffy Kominsky'[10] 'Goldie'[11], 'the Bunch', 'the Young Bunch', the 'Bunch-Child'[12], 'Coach Bunch'[13] or 'Mr Bunch'[14].

This tension between the naïve promise of full disclosure—access to an authentic self—and a knowing postmodernist deconstruction of the very notion that an authentic self might exist, is at the heart of *Need More Love*. Two-thirds of the way through the volume, in a four-page strip entitled 'Merci Areewahr Ameriker', attributed to 'Love it or Leave it Benedict Arnold Bunch', Kominsky-Crumb considers the pros and cons of leaving the US for France. Although the reference to Arnold is humorous,[15] it anticipates the terms of the internal debate Kominsky-Crumb dramatises in the strip. As well as asking herself whether she can 'really desert a sinking ship?' (p. 238) and abandon the 'swell regulah folks' of her community (p. 239), the strip also takes a 'slight diversion' in which a female figure with the Bunch's familiar red hair but more delicate, demure features, announces: 'Boys & men . . . this is what I really look like!', adding by way of clarification: 'That other hideous me is just how I feel about myself!' (p. 239, ellipsis in original). Who are the referents of the personal pronouns 'I', 'me' and 'myself' here? If the 'other hideous me' is the Bunch, then, by implication, the 'I' who distinguishes herself from this other me would seem to be the author herself, dispensing with her fictional mask(s). However, this begs further questions. Why does this authorial figure address 'Boys & men'? Additionally, why does she punctuate her statements with exclamation marks?

Like the portrait of 'ALINE', this episode seems simultaneously to accommodate and to satirise, the idea of a male readership whose interest in the artist's avatars is primarily erotic. Kominsky-Crumb seems to offer a dichotomy between a figure who represents her authentic self ('what I really look like!') and an inauthentic version of herself distorted by self-loathing ('just how I feel about myself!'). Yet, the exclamation marks with which these statements conclude suggest that they might be at least partially ironic, a self-scepticism reinforced by the context offered at the top of the panel: 'A cute young cartoonist came to visit me recently & he suggested this is supposed to make me feel more positive about myself!? Hmm!' (p. 239). Once again, the male gaze is invoked here: this self-portrait has, in a sense, been commissioned by the 'young cartoonist', who has suggested that representing a more 'beautiful' self-image on the page will improve Kominsky-Crumb's self-esteem (p. 239), the implication being that he shares the author's sense that the Bunch is not visually appealing. Yet, the fact that he is described as 'cute' complicates the dynamic between the two artists, problematises the relationship between the 'beautiful' and the 'hideous' versions of the authorial self, and draws attention to the subjectivity of such aesthetic judgements. Exploiting the ambiguity of the word 'cute' (which is both a slang term for good-looking, when applied to an adult, and a word connoting charming innocence when applied to a child), Kominsky-Crumb objectifies and patronises the young artist (he is, by implication, both a boy and a man, a symbolic representative of the imagined readership of 'boys and men' whom the 'beautiful' avatar addresses). Moreover, the terms in which she reports his recommendation—'this is *supposed* to make me feel more positive about myself*!?*

Hmm!' (p. 239, my italics)—contains an implied critique of his own patronising, albeit well-intentioned, advice. Taken cumulatively, these signifiers encode the 'beautiful' self-portrait as parodic. They also raise further questions about whether it is either desirable, or possible, to represent the self authentically; or indeed whether such a thing exists.

At times, *Need More Love* makes unequivocal claims to autobiographical 'truth'. In the title panel of a strip, titled 'More of the Bunch,', the titular protagonist announces: 'It's all true, no shit' (p. 124), a declaration that is echoed on the title page of 'Limp Dick!' comics that is reproduced later in the volume: 'non-fiction—no shit—I didn't make up any of it' (p. 148). Kominsky-Crumb's use of the common colloquial phrase 'no shit' (meaning 'I'm not lying') is grammatically redundant, part of her habitually informal, conversational idiom. However, it also invokes an earlier strip from *Need More Love*, which similarly begins with the headline 'It's true!' (p. 24), before depicting a baby standing up in her cot, smearing faeces on the wall, accompanied by the caption 'The bunch's first creative effort' (p. 25). This image is reprised later as a full-page spread in a very different style (p. 63), with the infant artist happily repeating the syllable 'Da' (representing the pre-linguistic sounds made by babies, but also a play on the Dada avant-garde art movement of the 1910s/20s). This is a characteristically scatological joke, but it also signifies in other ways. It ironically recalls the strip that immediately precedes it in *Need More Love* (although the events it depicts take place much later in the chronology of the Bunch), when Arnie, the Bunch's father, irritated at how long she is taking to put on her make-up, tells her that 'ya can't shine shit!' (p. 60), suggesting another meaning for the syllable 'Da' (short for 'Daddy'). It also represents a literal rebuttal of the metaphorical claim that there is 'no shit' to be found in the narrative, and hence, by implication, is a symbolic reminder of the messiness of art, and of the impurity of all narrative, whether represented as fiction or non-fiction.

In an episode from 'Euro Dirty Laundry', the Bunch asserts that 'I was just tellin' my real life story' (p.250), but elsewhere the key terms here—'real life' and 'story' (which seem to be in tension with each other)—both come under significant pressure. 'Wiseguys', a strip about the underworld connections of Kominsky-Crumb's father, begins with a variation on the claim to autobiographical fidelity: 'A true story [I think]' (p. 32). The caveat in square brackets here is explained later in the strip when Aline confesses to Robert that events from her childhood that seemed 'ordinary' at the time 'seem weird now', leading her to conclude that 'I'll never know what was really going on?!' (p. 33). Later, Robert asks Aline whether 'we can get your mother to corroborate some of your stories' (p. 39), to which she responds: 'Nah, she's into [sic] total denial' (p. 39). This might appear to be a malapropism[16] (a mangling of the phrase 'in total denial'), but it is actually another of Kominsky-Crumb's plays on words: that Aline's mother has a long-standing predilection for self-delusion is evident from her (strategic?) absence from the episodes in which Aline is abused by Arnie (pp. 58-59). It is even more conspicuous in her wilful ignorance of her daughter's work. This ignorance is flaunted in the same strip that depicts Arnie's sexualisation of his daughter, 'Growing up as Arnie's Girl' (a title that features another of Kominsky-Crumb's puns, 'girl' here meaning both 'daughter' and 'lover'), which ends with the revelation that Aline once gave up a baby for adoption. The panel in which Aline confesses this to Arnie (years after the event) has a footnote addressed to readers, informing us that her mother 'still doesn't know & won't unless she reads this . . . or you tell her!' (p. 60). In *Crumb*, Terry Zwigoff's prize-winning documentary about Robert Crumb, when Kominsky-Crumb is asked what her mother makes of how she is represented in her daughter's art (the mother's comics self, named 'Blabette', is usually depicted as a grotesque figure, both in appearance and character), the artist claims not only that her mother has never read any of her work but that she doesn't even know—or pretends not to know—that she is a professional cartoonist (Zwigoff 1995, 1.07.58).

In contrast to this estrangement between mother and daughter, Kominsky-Crumb's own daughter, Sophie, is often conscripted to provide the very 'corroboration' of the authenticity of her mother's work that Kominsky-Crumb's own mother is unable to provide.

In a strip entitled 'Aline, Bob & Soph', credited to all three artists, when Aline and Bob ask Soph her opinion of a strip they have been working on, she responds: 'That's just what you're like in real life' (p. 270). Once again, this apparent verification of the verisimilitude of Kominsky-Crumb's work raises fundamental questions about the very authenticity it seeks to reinforce. On one level, the referents of the pronouns 'you' in Soph's statement are the 'real-life' authors, Kominsky-Crumb and Crumb. On another level, however, they are the 'Aline' and 'Bob' of the strip itself, who are, arguably, as much fictional constructs as any of their authors' other protagonists, and who, in this sense, have no 'real life' outside the pages of the art in which they appear. If this seems to be a pedantic distinction, consider the final panel of the strip, in which Soph instructs her parents: 'don't print this!' (p. 270).[17] The publication of this plea not to publish draws attention to the fact that the characters who appear in it are not identical to their creators: Sophie Crumb has depicted 'Soph' (the abbreviation of her name implying that she, too, should be understood as a fictionalised version of the real-life Sophie Crumb) making a request that she herself has ignored.

Kominsky-Crumb herself recognises this distinction in her preface to an interview with her publisher, Zaro Weil, entitled 'Unlocking the Kominsky Code' (a humorous allusion to the popular Dan Brown novel of the time, *The Da Vinci Code*), that kicks off the final chapter of *Need More Love*: 'Now that you've read about all my adventures over the years, my publisher . . . thought it would be a great idea to interview me . . . so I can talk about what's happening with the REAL me right now' (p. 326). Here, Kominsky-Crumb draws a clear distinction between what she calls 'my adventures'—the comic-strip narratives that make up the bulk of *Need More Love*—and what she calls 'the REAL me' (p. 326). Yet, the identity of this 'REAL me' is itself problematic: the capitalisation of 'REAL' imbues it with a force that paradoxically hints at a fragility, as though the author is protesting too much, or as if she is only too aware that even this 'me' is a mask of sorts. In the interview itself, Kominsky-Crumb elaborates on this sense of scepticism about the possibility of locating an authentic self, explaining that her compulsion as a young girl to 'chronicl[e] everything' derived from a sense of being 'one step removed from myself'; a feeling that she was a 'witness' to her own existence; an 'actress' 'inventing [her] life' as a way of providing material for her art, material on which she would then become a 'commentator' (p. 338). The very proliferation of these terms—'witness', 'actress', 'commentator'—suggest that Kominsky-Crumb conceives of herself as taking on a series of shifting roles, rather than occupying a stable subject position. Moreover, she sees the relationship between her life and art as dynamic and symbiotic. As a confessional artist, she is 'willing to expose myself and provoke a reaction in both life and art' (p. 341), but for Kominsky-Crumb, '[l]ife is an art form' (p. 104), and art is a form of life. This circular self-reflexivity is both the method and subject of *Need More Love* and nowhere does it manifest itself more vividly than in the text's representation of its author's own status as an artist.

In the introduction to *Need More Love*, Kominsky-Crumb confronts directly what became in many ways the central challenge of her career: how to construct an artistic identity that might exist alongside, and in collaboration with, but at the same time distinct from, that of her husband, Robert Crumb: 'Living with a more famous artist has perhaps affected the public's perception of me as a serious artist, but it hasn't touched my drive or inspiration to produce "Ahrt!"' (p. 11). Here, Kominsky-Crumb stakes a claim to be seen as a 'serious artist', while at the same time undermining such pretensions by placing the word art between quotation marks, accompanied by an ironising exclamation mark, and deliberately misspelled, to reflect her own Long Island accent and to parody the popular trope that the artist must suffer for her art (the 'ah' suggesting an expression of pain). This ambivalence towards her own status as an artist pervades *Need More Love*: the whole book is both a *magnum opus*, designed to demonstrate the full range and richness of Kominsky-Crumb's body of work, and a haphazard miscellany of work with a scrapbook aesthetic; both what Oksman calls 'a fully fleshed out, if whimsical, archive of the self' Oksman 2016, p. 36) and an odd hodge-podge of comic strips, (reproductions of) paintings, photographs, interviews and anecdotes.

At one point in the 'Merci, Au Revoir' strip from the 'Euro Dirty Laundry' series, Robert is depicted scrutinising Aline's artwork, exclaiming 'Jeeziz . . . your approach to inking is so tedious and unprofessional!' (p. 254). In the following panel, Aline responds defensively, insisting that 'I'm a fine artiste . . . I have a sensitive quivering line quality!', while a thought bubble discloses an alternative, unspoken response ('crass commercial artist!') (p. 254). Undeterred, Robert offers to 'white-out' Aline's 'mistakes', provoking a more indignant reaction: 'Yeah, why donch yew just white out the whole drawing? Or maybe you should just white out my whole career?' (p. 254).[18] Once again, there is an unspoken counterpoint to Aline's verbal response, this time in the form of a box with an arrow pointing to her crestfallen face, containing the text: 'Giant ego easily deflated!' (p. 254).

Robert's critique of Aline's art in these three panels reflects Crumb's own ambivalence towards his wife's work, as is clear from a section near the end of *Need More Love*, titled 'Praise From the Husband', which actually comes perilously close to damning with faint praise. Crumb begins by recalling his first impressions of Kominsky's artwork as 'raw, primitive and unschooled', before realising that 'within the apparently crude drawing and blunt text, there were nuances, subtleties' (p. 368). Similarly, later in the piece, he frames his appreciation of the 'real art' of his wife's work in terms of its 'homely drawing and artless storytelling', a paradigm that risks reinforcing the very prejudice it is supposedly refuting (p. 368). Crucially, the confrontation between Robert and Aline in 'Merci, au revoir' suggests that Aline has internalised the criticism and condescension that her creator's work has received, not just from Crumb but many other quarters.[19] The disparity in this episode between what Aline actually says, and what she thinks and feels, vividly dramatises the cognitive dissonance that characterises Aline's representation of her own art: her simultaneous conviction of her value as an artist and her persistent fear that she is, as she puts it in the first panel of the next page, 'not accomplished at anything' (p. 255). Once again, Aline's self-doubt is expressed not just semantically but typographically. When Aline poses her rhetorical questions to Robert ('why donch yew just white out the whole drawing? Or maybe you should just white out my whole career?'), her words are rendered phonetically, investing them with a naivety, just as, when she refers to her own creative work, she often uses the self-deprecating term 'ahrt', rather than the conventional spelling of 'art'. Similarly, she refers to herself as an 'artiste', a term that denotes a professional entertainer, rather than the more elevated term, 'artist'. Elsewhere in *Need More Love*, in a brief prose piece entitled 'Discovering Wimmen's Comix', Kominsky-Crumb denigrates her skills as a draftswoman ('I . . . draw, erase and scratch out some tortured looking image that clearly shows how much I am struggling with the medium') but at the same time stakes a claim to a place in the history of canonical fine art ('My work is . . . in the George Grosz/James Ensor tradition') (p. 135).[20]

This debate over Kominsky-Crumb's authenticity as an artist—is she an 'artist', an 'ahrtist', an 'artiste', or all of these?—is intimately connected to the proliferation of the different authorial personas who populate *Need More Love*. In another of the testimonies to Kominsky-Crumb that punctuate the book, Diane Noomin, the co-founder, with Kominsky-Crumb, of *Twisted Sisters*[21], observes that her friend 'used herself as a character, which seemed very brave to me' (p. 157). Yet, this claim simplifies the complex relationship between Kominsky-Crumb's authorial 'self' and her comics protagonists. Her early work features an anti-heroine named Goldie who is partly a caricatured portrait of the artist as a young woman and partly a vehicle for a scathing satire on the sexual politics of the day. This duality is suggested by her name, which Kominsky-Crumb has claimed she appropriated from her father's nickname (an abbreviation of Arnold Goldsmith's surname), but which I suspect is also an ironic allusion to the glamorous actress, Goldie Hawn, whose fame was at its height at the time. Kominsky-Crumb's Goldie is the absolute antithesis of Hawn—a 'neurotic woman' (p. 140) living in a 'sleazo' apartment who calls herself (and draws herself as) a 'giant slug' (p. 143)—but Kominsky-Crumb and Hawn were near-contemporaries: Jewish girls growing up in the 1940s who made their names in the 1970s.

Later, Kominsky-Crumb invents the Bunch, whose origin story she tells in an untitled strip that begins with a brief account of her first marriage and her experiences in art school and concludes with an epiphany sparked by her discovery of Justin Green's confessional comic, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972): 'Hey this is heavy shit . . . this kid's got problems . . . and so do I!' (p. 111). In the penultimate panel of the strip, the Bunch resolves to 'make a comic like this', declaring that 'I need a character', before coming to the realisation that 'I'm a character' (p. 111). In the final panel, she is depicted working on a comic with the title 'The Young Bunch', subtitled 'an unromantic nonadventure story', while thinking 'I'm the Bu -unch!' (p. 111). The tension here between the recognition that the Bunch is 'a character' and the claim that this 'character' is also the artist herself is amplified by the fact that the protagonist is *already* named as the Bunch throughout the strip, so that the thought bubbles in which she realises that she can use herself as material for her artwork (I'm a character!") before identifying herself with/as her newly named protagonist ('I'm the Bu-unch!') take on an unsettling metafictional quality. Typography is again important here: the fact that the name of Kominsky-Crumb's protagonist is split into two syllables reflects her excitement at her (self-)discovery but also hints at the abiding distinction between artist and protagonist, who in this panel share, and yet do not share, the same name.

Elsewhere, Kominsky-Crumb plays further variations on the name of the Bunch. For example, the cover of issue 139 of *The Comics Journal*, reproduced in the 'Back home and totally alienated!' section of *Need More Love*, promises an interview with Aline Kominsky-Crumb titled 'Confessions of a Sex-Crazed Housewife', and features portraits of what look like Sophie Crumb, Robert Crumb and Kominsky-Crumb. However, the last is identified, by virtue of a text box with an arrow pointing towards her, as 'Yoko Buncho' (p. 233), while a speech bubble attributed to her poses the rhetorical question 'Am I a genius or what?' (p. 233). The implied analogy between Kominsky-Crumb and Yoko Ono signifies on a number of levels. Ono was widely represented in the media as exerting a malign influence on her husband, John Lennon, and was infamously accused by many fans of the Beatles of being responsible for the break-up of the band. Much of the abuse aimed at Ono was tainted by racism and sexism. Similarly, Kominsky-Crumb was the subject of vitriol, at times inflected by antisemitism and misogyny, directed towards her by male fans of Robert Crumb who seemed to feel that she was compromising, or contaminating, the work of their idol.[22] Yoko Ono was, of course, also an artist—an intellectual whose expansive cultural hinterland unquestionably broadened Lennon's horizons and influenced their collaborations—but her own work was generally either ignored or derided. Kominsky-Crumb's work has also often been overlooked, or belittled by assumptions that, as Crumb puts it (in order to rebut the charge), she is 'only getting published because of my influence, riding on my coat tails' (p. 368).[23]

As ever, Kominsky-Crumb's self-representation on the cover of *The Comics Journal* is complex and multi-layered. Renaming the Bunch as Yoko Buncho is a satirical acknowledgement of the myth of the parasitical wife feeding off, and depleting, the creative energy of the genius husband, the myth that connects her to Yoko Ono.[24] That this version of the Bunch—who is depicted, uncharacteristically, in a style more reminiscent of Kominsky-Crumb's paintings than her comics—proclaims her own 'genius' similarly invokes the myth of the male genius in order to subvert it. Yet, by giving (or at least consenting to the decision to give) her interview the title 'Confessions of a Sex-Crazed Housewife' Kominsky-Crumb plays with, and perhaps up to, the perception that her art is amateurish; that it relies for its power more on its sensational confessionalism than its skill; that she is a 'housewife' who produces comics rather than a comics artist who is also married. Furthermore, Kominsky-Crumb's inclusion of her husband and her daughter in the cover image suggests that she wants her 'genius' to be understood in the context of her relationships with the other members of her household; relationships that are professional as well as familial. These artistic collaborations with her husband and daughter in themselves deconstruct the

conventional notion of genius—and the idea of a singular, authentic vision that underpins this notion.

In their introduction to a collection of essays on *Art and Authenticity*, the editors of the volume point out that 'the art market . . . particularly values works that are autographic and thus can be securely attributed to a particular artist' (Aldrich and Hackforth-Jones 2012, p. 9). The same might be said of the field of literary criticism, where the dominant paradigm has always been the analysis of work that supposedly articulates the unique aesthetic of a great (usually male) writer, notwithstanding Roland Barthes's declaration of the death of the author and the attendant post-structuralist scepticism of the idea that the meaning of art is determined by a unique creator. The collaborative nature of Kominsky-Crumb's work subverts this model of autographic authenticity. Although Robert Crumb claims, in his tribute to his wife's work, that their spousal co-productions are unprecedented in the history of comics, Kominsky-Crumb had in fact developed the model of comics co-authorship long before she and Crumb embarked on their collaborations, producing a series of strips entitled 'Didi 'n Bunch' with Diane Noomin, featuring Noomin's authorial persona, Didi Glitz, interacting with the Bunch, an example of which, 'Hot Air', is featured in *Need More Love* (p. 161).[25] The question of the authorship—and hence the authenticity—of Kominsky-Crumb's work extends beyond her published comics strips with Noomin, Robert Crumb and Sophie Crumb. There is an episode in *Crumb* in which Robert Crumb is filmed on a visit to an ex-girlfriend, Kathy Goodell, flicking through a sketchbook which he tells her he is selling to a museum in Germany. As he turns the pages, Goodell points to some of the drawings, claiming that she had produced them. Crumb responds: 'No, Aline drew those . . . that's Aline' (Zwigoff 1995, 56.50). This suggests that the attribution of art produced by Kominsky-Crumb and Robert Crumb during the years of their relationship is a vexed one: if they are habitually drawing in each other's sketchbooks, working on strips together and exchanging ideas, is it possible to determine who is responsible for each doodle, each line, each concept?

At one point in her ground-breaking book, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*, Hillary Chute discusses a panel in Kominsky-Crumb's anthology of comic strips, *Love That Bunch*, where Kominsky-Crumb 'draws multiple selves [exclaiming] . . . 'I can't stand myselves' (Chute 2010, p. 52). Chute argues that this panel 'presents as impossible the choice of who among the many pictured selves is the "real" self; they all are' (Chute 2010, p. 32). Given the insistent emphasis in *Need More Love* on the contingent constructedness of 'the self', however, and on Kominsky-Crumb's restless reinvention of her various personas, one might equally say that none of them are. In an interview with Andrea Juno quoted by Tahneer Oksman, Kominsky-Crumb observes that '[t]he character that I draw is fictional . . . [i]t is me but it's not completely me' (qtd in Oksman 2016, p. 29). However, of course there is not just one 'character'; arguably, each time Kominsky-Crumb draws the Bunch, or one of her other numerous protagonists, she is reinventing that character. This may be one of the implications of a panel in the strip 'aline 'n Bob in our lovely home', in which a box appears containing the text 'It's a weird experience to keep drawing yourself over and over again', with arrows aimed at 'aline' and 'Bob' (Kominsky-Crumb 2007, p. 223). Oksman argues that Kominsky-Crumb's 'comics personae, which are exaggerated or distorted versions of the "real" thing, are paradoxically the depictions that allow her to reveal her deepest secrets and expose herself, in ways she cannot with photographs or other, more "realistic" modes' (Oksman 2016, p. 33). Yet, Oksman's use of scare quotes around the words 'real' and 'realistic' betray the problem here, which is that the 'real thing' is unlocatable, perhaps even illusory.[26] Oksman uses the same typographical caveat later, when she claims that '[t]he force of Kominsky-Crumb's work emerges from the creation of characters on the page who reveal themselves as somehow a part of, or attached to, the real-life author, but who are also distanced, exaggerated and made-up versions of the "original" (p. 37). In fact, as we have seen, Kominsky-Crumb's work mischievously gestures towards, and problematises, the notion that there is an 'original' author of whom her protagonists are imitations or 'made-up versions'.

Oksman is on much firmer ground when she observes that Kominsky-Crumb's 'works themselves draw attention to the performativity and deliberateness of her autobiographical depictions' (Oksman 2016, p. 26), and that, in her work, 'identity as invention is a recursive, open-ended process that precludes the possibility of closure and elicits continual investigation' (p. 52), providing 'an optimistic space for play, even within the confines of her personal and communal histories of self-imagining' (p. 66). However, not even Oksman has done full justice to the extent of this 'play' or to the role that text in Kominsky-Crumb's work plays in her compulsive (re)invention of her (characters') multiple identities. At one point in the 'Merci Au Revoir' episode of 'Euro Dirty Laundry', Robert is represented doing a double take (a classic example of what Scott McCloud describes as a 'visual metaphor')[27], as he registers that Aline has abruptly altered her appearance: 'Hey! You changed your outfit from the last panel . . . ' (Kominsky-Crumb 2007, p. 255). Aline responds that 'today's another day and I'm wearing a new outfit in real life', while Robert continues to fret over this disruption of 'continuity' (p. 255), before Aline confesses that she had been considering 'drawing a page of all the different ways I draw my face' before 're-read[ing] this story' and rejecting the idea (p. 256). Thematically, this exchange dramatises the divergence between Robert's respect for the conventions of comics narratives (ironic, given his reputation as an iconoclast) and Aline's irreverent disregard of these conventions. Formally, however, Kominsky-Crumb and Crumb are literally and metaphorically on the same page, blurring the lines between 'real life' and art by investing their comics personas with a retrospective awareness of the very strip in which they appear. This metafictional self-reflexivity typifies Kominsky-Crumb's approach to her art. Rather than conforming to the idea that comics narratives can represent a 'real life' with mimetic accuracy, she exposes the artifice of the conventions that are paradoxically designed to sustain an illusion of realism. Rather than reifying the idea of a unified self, she deconstructs the myth of an authentic identity ('Is this the real me? What is the real me? [p. 228]), preferring instead to present a series of provisional, fluid versions of what Philip Roth called 'improvisations upon a self'.[28]

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Notes

1 To cite perhaps the most egregious examples of this critical neglect, there is only one passing reference to her in *The Jewish Graphic Novel* (Baskind and Omer-Sherman 2008) and no mention of her at all in *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (Batens and Frey 2015). Even in the 677-page *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* (Baetens et al. 2015) she appears only briefly, on a few occasions.

2 For example, in an interview with the artist, Peter Bagge tells Kominsky-Crumb that her contributions to her collaborations with Robert Crumb are 'OK because you're a perfect sex slave for Crumb' (qtd in Chute 2010, p. 51).

3 In a similar vein, Kominsky-Crumb has referred to herself as the 'Grandmother of whiny tell-all comics' (qtd in Lightman 2014, p. 12).

4 Oksman is referring here to Smith and Watson's book *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (2005).

5 For the sake of clarity, in the rest of this article I will refer to the author herself as Kominsky-Crumb and her comics authorial persona (in those instances when it is not explicitly identified as the Bunch or one of her other names) as Aline. Likewise, I will refer to her husband as Robert Crumb and to his comics persona as Robert.

6 Crumb is infamous for his sexually explicit comics, which often represent women erotically, or pornographically, depending on your perspective.

7 There has been much debate about the anatomical (im)possibility of the placing of the mirror in relation to Venus's gaze, but whatever the technical aspects of this might be, it seems clear to me that the painting is representing a female gaze, framed by a male gaze.

8 I am borrowing the terms 'written world' and 'unwritten world' here from Philip Roth, who in turn borrowed them from Paul Goodman (see Roth [1985] 2001, p. xiii).

[9] This is how Sophie Crumb refers to her mother in an interview in *Need More Love*, incorporating her middle name and maiden name (p. 371).

[10] As she is named by Robert at the end of an unnamed strip in *Need More Love* narrating a surreal dream in which the protagonist dreams that she has 'a hole in my soul' (pp. 334–35).

[11] The name of Kominsky-Crumb's first protagonist, a precursor to the Bunch.

[12] Variations that Kominsky-Crumb uses at times when representing her protagonist as an infant or young girl.

[13] In an episode in the strip entitled 'Euro Dirty Laundry', in which Aline appoints herself as Robert's 'personal trainer', she is depicted wearing a tracksuit top with 'Coach Bunch' on it (pp. 258–59).

[14] The name Kominsky-Crumb gives to a portrait of a figure whom she refers to as 'my male alter ego' (pp. 165, 167).

[15] Arnold was a senior officer in the US army when he defected to the British imperial forces, since when his name has become a byword for betrayal. It may also be significant here that Arnold was the first name of Kominsky-Crumb's abusive father.

[16] Elsewhere, Robert accuses Aline of 'talking like an immigrant' when she refers to him as a 'natural treasure' rather than a 'national treasure', but here again I wonder if the joke is on Robert, the apparent mangling of the proverbial phrase serving to puncture the Crumb mythos, as Kominsky-Crumb does elsewhere (p. 251).

[17] This moment (perhaps self-consciously) echoes a moment from probably the most celebrated of all graphic memoirs, when Vladek, the Holocaust survivor whose experiences are at the heart of his son Art Spiegelman's Maus (1986), asks Spiegelman's authorial persona, Artie, not to include details from his life that we have just read about in the narrative. Art Spiegelman makes a cameo appearance in *Need More Love*, in an excerpt from 'Self-Loathing Comics' which depicts Aline (pencilled by Spiegelman himself) welcoming to her home comics versions of Spiegelman and another comics creator Charles Burns (drawn by the authors themselves), with a characteristically metafictional thought bubble ('oh boy . . . here's two talented cartoonists I can drag into this comic!) (p. 275).

[18] In another comic strip in *Need More Love*, entitled 'aline n' Bob in Our Lovely Home' there is a text box with an arrow pointing at Aline's face, containing the text: 'Robert had the nerve to touch up this face' (p. 223).

[19] For example, see Bagge (1990, pp. 50–73); Kominsky-Crumb et al. (1993, p. 4).

[20] Grosz was a German expressionist artist best known for his grotesque satirical representation of German life in the years leading up to the Nazi era. Ensor was a Belgian painter and printmaker whose early work in the late nineteenth century was often regarded as scandalous because of its rejection of conventional standards of good taste.

[21] An underground comic that grew out of an ideological split between Trina Robbins, the prime mover behind *Wimmen's Comix*, and Noomin and Kominsky-Crumb, whose work didn't conform to the brand of feminism that Robbins and other contributors to *Wimmen's Comix* espoused.

[22] For example, Hillary Chute quotes Crumb citing a letter from a disgruntled fan, telling him that '[s]he may be a good lay but keep her off the fucking page' (qtd in Chute 2010, p. 31).

[23] As part of *The Guardian*'s celebration of Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb agreed to answer questions from subscribers to the newspapers 'Unlimited' service. One of the questions she fielded, from a reader identified only as 'Roger', was 'How does it feel to live with a genius?' (Kominsky-Crumb 2005). Her satirical response hints at the frustration she felt at this sort of idolatory of Crumb, at the expense of recognition of her own work: 'Robert is the best dishwasher I've ever met and he's fun to talk to at the breakfast table. He always laughs at my jokes and is my best fan. And that's what it feels like to live with a genius to me' (Kominsky-Crumb 2005).

[24] Kominsky-Crumb also refers to this trope in the introduction to *Draw Together*, a volume that collects her collaborations with Robert Crumb: 'recently on a blog someone called me "a talentless parasite"' (Crumb and Kominsky-Crumb 2012, n.p.).

[25] *Need More Love* also reproduces full pages of artwork by Phoebe Gloeckner and Carole Tyler from *Wimmen's Comix*, presumably to reflect the fact that these comics anthologies, in which her own work also appeared, were fundamentally collaborative projects (pp. 144–46).

[26] The claim that photography is a (more) 'realistic' art form is also highly contentious and has been debunked by numerous famous studies such as John Szarkowski's *Looking at Photographs* (1973), Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980). Hillary Chute argues that Kominsky-Crumb's work contains 'details that move towards realism and yet are not realism' (Chute 2010, p. 41) and that her 'non-fiction' has a 'surrealist sensibility' (Chute 2010, p. 43).

[27] See McCloud (1993, pp. 128–29).

[28] This formulation is used by Roth's authorial persona, 'Philip' (who has a similar relationship to the real-life author as 'Aline' does to Kominsky-Crumb) in the novel *Deception* (Roth [1990] 1991, p. 94).

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