Building a Language

Chris Ware. Photograph by Tom van Eynde, July 2003.

In the 1820s, a Genovese school teacher and essayist named Rodolphe Töpffer began to write in an unspoken and unnamed language. At first it was difficult to say what exactly this language was. Because it was visual, Töpffer decided to call it a language of signs. These signs were hard to define but easy to understand. They were simple enough that all who saw them immediately understood them and anyone, even the untrained Töpffer, could "write" using them. Töpffer derived the internal logic of these signs by studying physiognomy, the then-fashionable practice of judging a person's character by inspecting the shape of their head. Although Töpffer found in this quackery no science, he did discover a mother lode of stereotypes. He drew a series of caricatures to demonstrate that these stereotypes formed the signs, and therefore the basis, of this picture language.

Töpffer was writing in what we now call the cartoon language, the set of culturally ingrained symbols he drew upon when he outlined his characters. Töpffer elevated his insight about caricature to an insight about language by recognizing that the stereotypes did not work alone but in combination. Just as mathematics is powered not by numbers but by equations, and writing is powered not by words but by sentences, Töpffer's "picture-stories" were powered not by individual signs but by combinations of signs working together in sequence.[1] By sensing these interrelations Töpffer detected the pulse of what we now call comics.

Play was the dominant force in Töpffer's art. The words and pictures in his stories did not merely reinforce each other, they also contradicted each other. It was in this lowbrow spirit, drawing with a "a brusque attack … a clumsy daring that jumps somewhat rudely, with all fours", that the schoolmaster dashed off the first few comics.[2] Before long, Töpffer's friend Frédéric Soret borrowed a couple of Töpffer's whimsies and with another acquaintance, Johann Peter Eckerman, presented them to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The dying colossus of German letters was bedridden, suffering from

The Algerines follow the Doctor. — The Live Stock run after the Algerines. — Ducks, Fowls, and Pigeons, join the pursuit. — And the Rats bring up the rear.

The Veritable History of Mr. Bachelor Butterfly
Rodolphe Töpffer
Tilt & Bogue, London, 1845

The popularity of Töpffer's *Histoire de M. Cryptogame*, which ran in the French magazine *L'Illustration*, inspired the London publisher Tilt & Bogue to publish this coloured and unauthorized edition, which they retitled *The Veritable History of Mr. Bachelor Butterfly*. In many ways, Töpffer's comics are more sophisticated than those of the present day; he narrows each successive panel to create the sense that time is passing with increasing rapidity and the animals are therefore moving faster and faster.

inflammation of the eyes and mourning the democracy that had infected his French neighbours. He was also grieving the death of August, his only son. Soret and Eckermann hoped that a couple of Töpffer's picture-stories might be just the thing to brighten the great man's last, lugubrious days. In the Christmas season of 1830 they presented Goethe with Töpffer's *Monsieur Cryptogame*. As Goethe read, his waning eyes glowed and he grew enraptured. Soret and Eckermann hurried to provide him with Töpffer's *Doctor Festus*. As Goethe digested the libretti he repeatedly said to himself, "That is really too crazy," adding, "He really sparkles with talent and wit. Much of it is quite perfect."[3] When Goethe finished relishing the comic books he proclaimed, "If, for the future, [Töpffer] would choose a less frivolous subject and restrict himself a little, he would produce things beyond all conception."[4]

Goethe's review and his prediction have both proved to be omens. Töpffer's art is still a little too crazy for most of his pedagogical descendants. When we compare comics to other arts that were once ignoble but that now wear the gown and mortarboard – the novel, for example, and film – it is obvious that something has retarded the medium's growth. The "comixscenti" insist that snobbery has played a major role in the damnation of comics but neglect to blame cartoonists themselves, who have by and large justified the prejudice

against them. After Töpffer, the majority produced comics that were bad beyond all conception. Only a handful have fulfilled Goethe's auspicious prognostication, and the most recent among them is our subject, Chris Ware.

Along with Daniel Clowes, Robert Crumb and the Hernandez brothers, Ware is a luminary among cartoonists of the so-called underground, adult, alternative or art persuasion. His irregular comics pamphlet, *The Acme Novelty Library*, is a smash hit by the subculture's standards, selling an average of 20,000 copies per quasi-annual issue and earning him every award a cartoonist can win: Eisner, Ignatz, Harvey and Rueben. In 2000, Pantheon Books collected his 380-page *Acme* serial, "Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth", and re-branded it not as the comic book it always was, but under the shrewd new rubric of "graphic novel".[5] This comic book, a mind-boggling polyphony of space-time hallucinations and emotional associations centring on loneliness and the birth of the modern world, has sold 80,000 copies to a worldwide audience, most of whom would never set foot in a comics shop. As a result of this marketing breakthrough, Ware has escaped the comics ghetto. He recently purchased health insurance for himself and his wife, Marnie, as well as a three-bedroom dwelling and a used Honda Civic. Given Ware's relatively young age (he was born in 1967) and the fact that he was in his twenties when he created most of the comics now bringing him acclaim, it is clear that he, as much as any other artist, represents the future of comics. But if Ware is the future of comics, he became this future by recognizing a paradox best summarized in the cartoonist Art Spiegelman's aphorism, "The future of comics is in the past."[6]

Take any Sunday funnies page from the 1920s, compare it with any one of today's, and you will see overall a near-catastrophic decay of craft, quality and style. The reasons for this decline are many, but again much of the blame must fall on cartoonists themselves. One of cartoonists' earliest blunders was trying to compete with the cinematic language on the cinema's terms. As the popularity of movies began to eclipse that of comics, more and more cartoonists began to ape a cinematic look and cinematic techniques. In doing so they neglected many of the unique strengths and possibilities peculiar to their own youthful medium, including typography, iconography and page composition. The result was comic strips, then comic books, that behaved less like comics and more like storyboards to a swashbuckling, superheroic action film. These action comics so

dominated the postwar news-stands that to this day they continue to fuel the near-ubiquitous misconception that comics are not a medium but a genre. It is not necessarily the adolescent content of these comics that irks Ware but their adolescent form. "The basic idea of comics is just slapping word balloons on top of drawings," Ware says. "That is so boneheaded."[7]

10   "Krazy Kat"
George Herriman
King Features Syndicate, 1938
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of King Features Syndicate

Ware has borrowed dozens of George Herriman's techniques of composition, but Herriman's greatest influence was thematic: Krazy Kat's unrequited love for the impish Ignatz Mouse inspired Sparky the cat head's tortured relationship with Quimby the mouse.
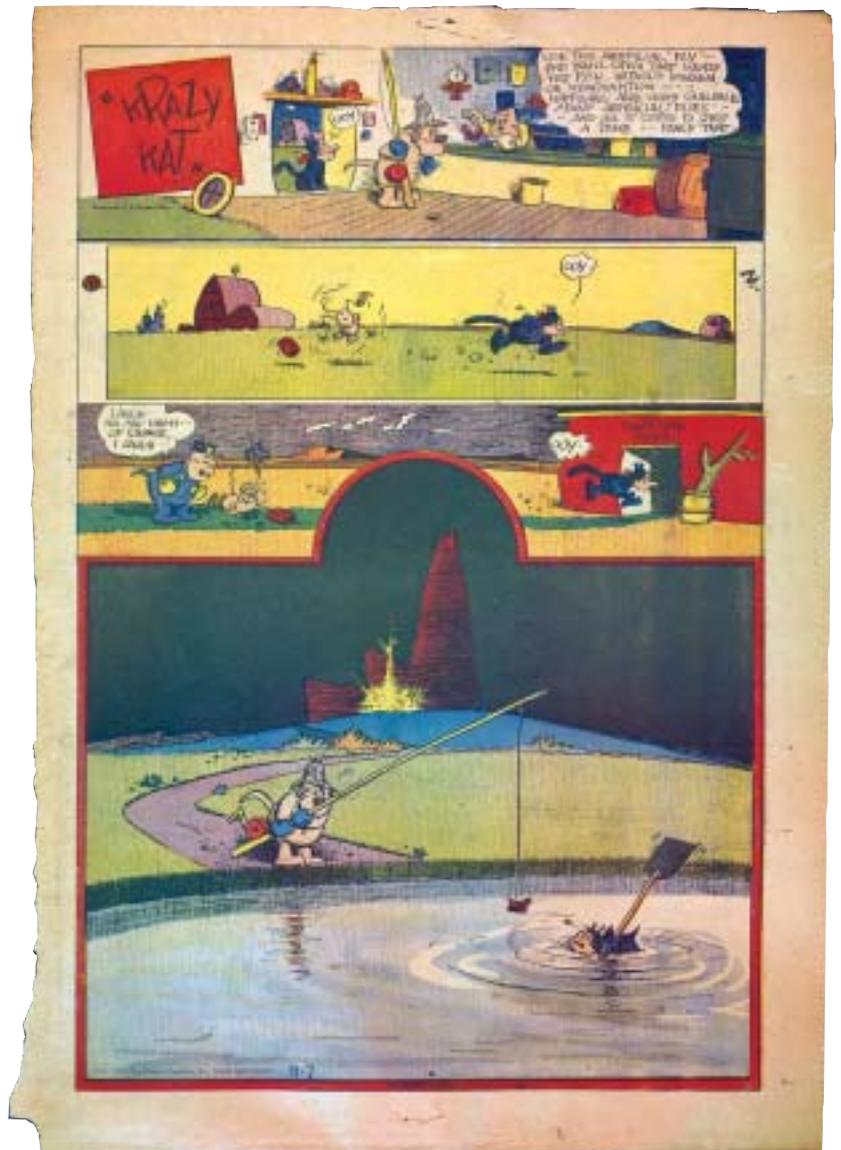
Ware saw the way out of this arrested development not by looking forwards but by looking backwards, before the wrong turns of the 1940s and 1950s. In the early years of the 20th century, artists like Windsor McCay ("Little Nemo in Slumberland"), George Herriman ("Krazy Kat") and Frank King ("Gasoline Alley") laid a broad foundation for the structure of comics, mainly because they were not yet limited by a conventional, concrete idea of what comics should be. Although each artist wrote in the comics language, each invented his own rules for using it, essentially building a visual grammar to fit his world view. "The earliest cartoonists each seemed to have an individual sensibility," Ware says, "an individual take on what they were doing and how they designed the page. The main thing I discovered by looking at the early comics is that there are infinite ways that one can do them."

More than any other young cartoonist, Ware has demonstrated these neglected, infinite possibilities. By recognizing that comics are analogous to a host of other disciplines – including writing, drawing, painting, typography, music, theatre and architecture – and by uniting these arts on the page by virtue of his skill as a graphic designer, Ware has made comics that are truly comic, not only in the humorous sense but in the linguistic sense. He uses Töpffer's strange language so well that he writes comics as much as he draws them, even when his comics contain no words at all. This comic literacy is clearly the result of Ware's intellect and relentless curiosity about the form, as evidenced by his nearly algebraic expositions of the comics language. But it would be unfair to dress our pictolinguistic expert in a black turtleneck and oblong eyeglasses. All of the midwestern fellow's theoretical acumen is the mere by-product of his humble, and more profound, emotions. "I rarely ever did a comic just for the sake of experimentation," says Ware. "Even when I did, I was always trying to get at some kind of feeling." If the comic strip is literally a map of time, and time is the distance between tragedy and comedy, Ware has used his comics to bring the two opposites painfully close. In doing so, he has closed the distance between his life and his art.

Franklin Christenson Ware, boy doodler, became Chris Ware, adult cartoonist, in the only way he could: alone. Because Ware does have a bachelor's degree and because he came within a horsehair of a master's degree he is not, strictly speaking, a self-taught artist. He is, however, a self-taught cartoonist. For reasons sociologists would do
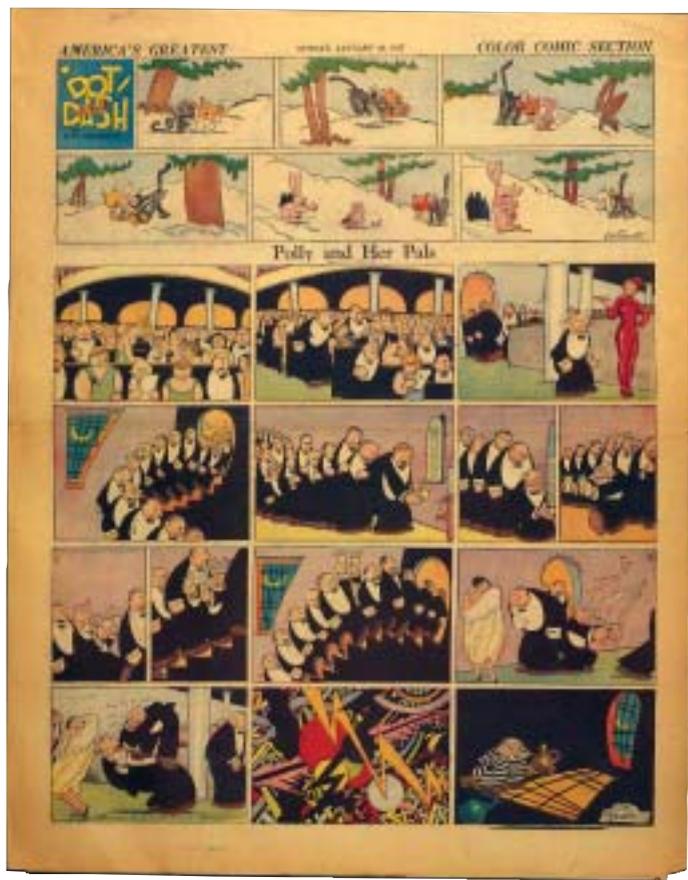
"Polly and Her Pals"
Cliff Sterrett
Newspaper Feature Syndicate, Inc., 1927
© reprinted with special permission of
King Features Syndicate

In his home Ware keeps a framed copy of
this page on display. He says that this strip
originally inspired him to draw comics in
general, and wordless comics in particular.

well to investigate, the cartoonist tends to develop in isolation.
Unfortunately for the health of the medium he is, with few
exceptions, a he and he is generally, like Ware, a nerd whom other
children would rather torment than play with. Rather than put away
his childish booklets, the injured cartoonist retreats deeper into
them, teaching himself how to draw by tracing caped gargantua and
mammiferous witches. After imitation comes adaptation, as the cub
cartoonist modifies these stolen techniques to fit his own peculiarities
and growing obsessions. In the absence of any atelier system or
influential schools he soon develops a unique and startling style that
has evolved in isolation, not unlike a species of fauna confined to one
of the Galapagos Islands. So it was with Ware. By the time he was 20
he had already worked out a recognizable style that prompted Art
Spiegelman to offer him a spot in his legendary comics anthology,
RAW. By the time Ware arrived in Chicago for his graduate studies at
the School of the Art Institute, he was artistically and emotionally
independent enough to ignore his teachers, most of whom
discouraged him from doing comics, and a few of whom openly
mocked him, at least until he dropped out.

   Ware continued to steep himself in the comics language by
becoming a tireless historian and curator. He has made his home into
a de facto museum, where he collects and archives the disappearing
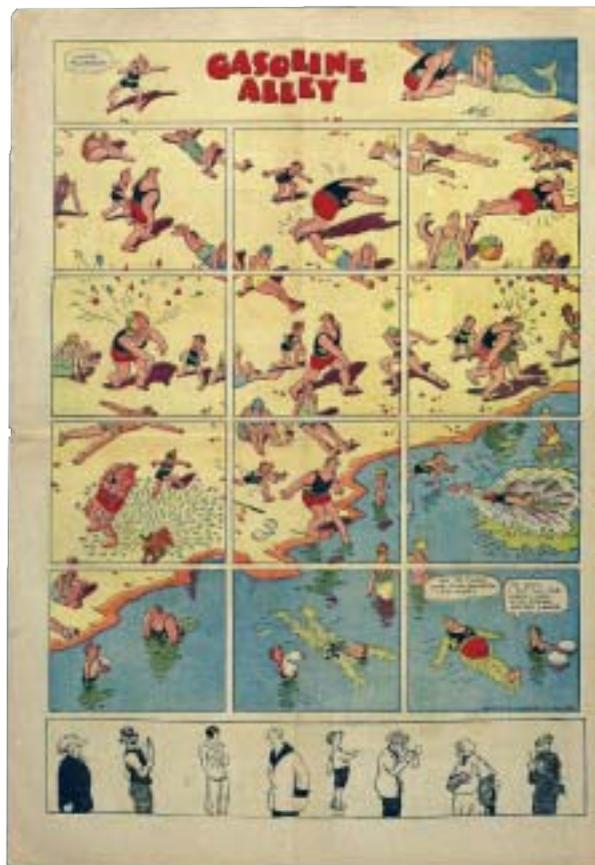
"Gasoline Alley"
Frank King
The Chicago Tribune, 1930

Ware has made much use of Frank King's method of dividing one scene into a dozen different "places" in time.

legacies of past masters, studying these antique comics and stealing shamelessly from them. Take, for example, George Herriman's "Krazy Kat", whose complete full-page strips Ware and Bill Blackbeard have laboured to rescue and reprint. From Herriman's strips Ware learned, among a thousand other things, how to compose an overall page, as well as the way permutations on a single, universal theme – in Herriman's case, a love triangle – can sustain a life's work. The future creator of wordless cartoons first grasped how to use pictorial rhythm to drive a story in a "silent" example of Cliff Sterrett's "Polly and Her Pals". He learned how to transpose space and time visually by swiping the multi-tiered, polyptych panel structure used by Frank King in "Gasoline Alley". "I've always been a parrot," Ware admits. "When I was younger I was always trying to find ways of working that came close to the feelings that I was aiming for. 'Gasoline Alley' changed a lot of my thinking about comics. It made me realize that the mood of a comic strip did not have to come from the drawing or the words. You got the mood not from looking at the strip, or from reading the words, but from the act of reading it. The emotion came from the way the story itself was structured."

As Ware learned about composition from reading other people's comics, he learned something about character from reading his own comics. In 1992, Ware created Jimmy Corrigan as a cipher meant to fit

Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth
New City, Chicago, 1 October 1992
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The *Jimmy Corrigan* book has appeared in
three different incarnations. Originally, it
was a weekly newspaper serial in *New City*,
a free Chicago arts weekly. Years later,
Ware serialized it in the form of chapter-
sized pamphlets in *The Acme Novelty Library*,
and almost a decade after that he compiled
it as one book between hard covers.

At each stage Ware made minor and major
changes to the story, as in this scene,
which he eventually deleted. One could
easily fill a book with the newspaper strips
Ware has never reprinted; unfortunately,
he is too critical of these abandoned
tangents and experiments to let them see
print again.

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any of his own many moods. In one strip he made Jimmy into an old
grouch; in the next, an irrepressible gee-whiz kid. At the time, Ware
was new to Chicago and had no money, no friends, no girlfriend,
nowhere to go and no way to get there even if he did. (Working late
one night at the School of the Art Institute, Ware broke both his legs
by jumping out of the window after the keepers of the building locked
him inside – a perfect metaphor for Ware's experience of art school.)
Basically, Ware was a lonely schlub on crutches, just like Jimmy. All
of Ware's characters began like Jimmy, as a joke that the legendarily
self-critical cartoonist played on himself. The frump from "Tales of
To-Morrow" parodied Ware's own sedentary pursuit of happiness in

an online consumer utopia; the roly-poly hoarders Rusty Brown and Chalky White lampooned his frenzies of toy collecting. Ware diagnosed this idiosyncrasy as his "Benny Hill" syndrome, because it appears as though one guy – a doughy, bald version of Chris Ware – is playing all of the major roles.

Because Ware cracked these jokes at his own expense, the characters had a reflexivity that soon imbued his stereotypical visions with a humanity he did not at first grant them. When Jimmy Corrigan hobbled out of Chicago to find his fictional father, marking the beginning of his novel and his life as a more fleshed-out character, he ceased to be a cipher and became instead an Everyman. Rusty Brown is no longer the odious flea-market hound but, in the book bearing his name, the same bullied schoolboy that Ware once was. Both Jimmy and Rusty became more specific, more like Ware and oddly more universal. "I don't understand how that happened," Ware says. "I think it's just my immaturity as a writer and an artist, but I'm not able to start out with a specific character. Any time that I start out taking a character really, deeply seriously, it's a miserable failure. Strangely, most of the mean-spirited gags that I've done have ended up being the characters that I truly care about." Ware may begin by caricaturing himself, but in time he turns his caricature into his character.

Art is supposed to imitate life, but in Ware's case the relationship also worked eerily in reverse. When Ware was a toddler his father abandoned him and his mother. Twenty or so years later Ware began to work in earnest on *Jimmy Corrigan*, which begins with Jimmy receiving a letter from the father who abandoned him. The letter requests that they meet. As Ware was midway through drawing out this fictional meeting, his father telephoned him and suggested a meeting. At first Ware thought it was a joke, but it was in fact his real father, and they did face each other, and their conversation was as pained as the imaginary one Ware had already written. The two finished their dinner and agreed awkwardly to meet again some day. Ware went back to work on his book and ended it, years later, with the death of Jimmy's father. Within one month Ware learned that his own father had just died. Ware appended to his novel a corrigendum in which he noted that the four or five hours it takes to read his book is the same amount of time that he had ever spent with his father. The book itself, he concluded, encloses the same quantity of physical matter as the urn holding his father's ashes. By equating his life's
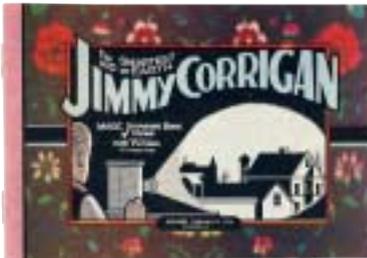
Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth, *Magic Souvenir Book of Views*
Self-published, Chicago, 1992

With the help of Fireproof Press, Ware self-published these tracts and then peddled them on consignment for $1.25 each in local bookshops such as Quimby's Qveer Store. The pocket-sized format is Ware's nod to the Tijuana Bibles, pornographic comics which were sold under the table throughout North America in the middle years of the 20th century, and the rectangular tracts of the underground Christian cartoonist Jack T. Chick.

work with these human ashes, Ware supplied a grave metaphor for
his art, his impetus for creating it and why we might be forgiven for
sometimes imagining art to be futile.

Except for a colony of carpers that feeds on internet message boards
and the acidic pages of the *Comics Journal*, the comixscenti hailed
Ware's singular style of cartooning with a chorus of huzzahs. But
cheers made little or no difference. As Daniel Clowes quipped, being
the most famous art cartoonist is like being the most famous player
of badminton.[8] Ware was still trapped within the endogamous comics
industry, which is still breeding superheroes and therefore failing to
interest normal bookshops, whose employees cannot decide where to
file comic books anyway. For seven years the purblind comic book
industry pinned its citations and ribbons on Ware – "best colouring",
"best lettering", "best comics-related product" – and every year
retailers shelved *The Acme Novelty Library* next to *Elric: Stormbringer* and
Nexus: Nightmare in Blue.[9] As a result of this ghettoization, Chris Ware
remained a cult author through the 1990s.

　　While a few graphic designers were among the first in the cultural
mainstream to extol Ware's strips – Chip Kidd and Steven Heller both
wrote substantial and perceptive appreciations of Ware's work in *Print*
and *Eye* magazines – most have been less perspicacious, the noxious
air of commercialism strangling their judgement. In 1994, a young
and literally hungry Ware wrote, designed and illustrated
a lucrative 45 r.p.m. record sleeve for the Chicago band 5ive Style;
the next year *Print* magazine bestowed on it one of its Regional
Design Awards, credited not to Ware – the "illustrator" – but to Jeff
Kleinsmith, a staff designer at Sub Pop Records. Ware tries to obviate
these sorts of misunderstandings by signing his strictly commercial
work with his pseudonym, George Wilson, and emphasizing his less
lucrative but self-initiated design jobs, such as his posters, ragtime
record sleeves, dolls and curios such as the Rusty Brown lunch box.

　　The hipper corners of the fine art establishment have from time
to time granted Ware their approbation, which is always welcome –
not least for fiscal reasons – but the commendation of the art world
invariably turns to sniffing. After the Whitney Museum of American
Art elected to include Ware in its 2002 Biennial, the *New Yorker*
accused the Whitney of "pant[ing] after the youth market" and
questioned whether Ware's comic strips were art at all.[10] Such priggery
may handicap the comic book's struggle to be accepted as art, but

comics do not belong under the track lighting of SoHo anyway. Comics may be a visual art, but they are an art of writing. Extracting a page from a comic book and putting it behind glass is like cutting a paragraph from a short story and framing it.

The comics language must be used to tell stories that are worth reading; demonstrating that principle is among Ware's most important achievements. The most obvious signal of this came in 2001, when the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK awarded Ware their First Book Award for *Jimmy Corrigan*. This was the first time that a comic book was officially judged on an even playing field against literature and found superior. By refusing to differentiate between comics and prose, the *Guardian* avoided the condescension implicit in the Pulitzer committee's "special" award in 1992 for Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and opened the door for cultural umpires to call comic books what they are: books.

But if comic books now compete with literature, the comics language has some catching up to do. Because slapstick men and action merchants stewarded the language for most of its life, its visual means for expressing emotion, such as shock waves, sweat beads and speed lines, are less like tools and more like clubs. Writing comics can feel like writing using only a hundred adjectives and a thousand exclamation marks. "Comics aren't really a literature," Ware says, "not yet, anyway, mainly because the tools for expressing yourself are still so limited. For example, if somebody wanted to make a film about their life, they probably could. It might not be any good, but because everyone grew up watching movies, everyone is steeped in the language of film, and they could muddle through the process of conveying their intentions. Or if somebody decides to sit down and write their memoir, they can do it. Just look at the size of an English dictionary: We have a huge vocabulary of words and the grammar to express our feelings with subtlety. But whenever you try to write about life using the basic received structure of comics the result ends up generally feeling like a sitcom. The only way to change this is to keep on making comics, again and again, so that the language accrues the means for conveying details and nuances."

Although comics are composed of words and pictures, they are both of these things at once and therefore neither. In his 1990 sketchbook Ware muses, "Comics are first a visual medium – but there's a big difference between 'seeing' and 'reading'." To illustrate this difference, Ware drew René Magritte's painting of an eye paired with

the word "eye". Although Magritte's pairing proves that the picture and the word are different, it also demonstrates that we read them to mean the same thing. Because we can equate them, we can interchange them. This rebus is a key to understanding the art of Chris Ware. Ware notes, "The difference that separates cartoons from visual art and from literature [is] something that is both seen and read simultaneously." He concludes his observation by asking himself, "How to blend these elements effectively?"[11] Ware's first step in learning to blend the two was, paradoxically, to separate them. He began by eliminating words from his strips and forcing his pictures alone to tell the story.

These early wordless strips – we might call them "silent" strips – are a map of the way Ware intuitively worked through the implications of purely visual storytelling. The first thing he learned was that if he were going to make his pictures do the work of words, then the pictures, like words, would have to obey the rules of typography. Just as setting body text in a less ornate typeface makes it more readable, Ware cartooned in a minimal style to make his comics more readable. His strip "Cat Daddy" is an example. The composition is dense, but the relative lack of detail within each panel keeps the readers from lingering for long on any one, enabling them to navigate the narrative maze in relative ease. Wordless workouts like "Cat Daddy" were best for the black-and-white newspaper Ware was then restricted to. Not only did his simple symbols reproduce adequately on cheap newsprint, they fitted into micropanels which gave him the space to run his readers through a longer range of dramatic peaks and valleys, and at a speed that made the ups and downs more emotional. And emotion is what comics are all about, at least for Ware. He rendered his cat and mouse not as drawings but as the barest of symbols to test the way cartoon icons largely bypass the readers' eyes and go straight to their brain, which reads the icons as it would words. In comics, the shortest route to readers' hearts is Magritte's eye for an "eye".[12]

"Fundamentally you're better off using ideograms rather than realistic drawings," Ware says. "There's a vulgarity to showing something as you really see it and experience it. It sets up an odd wall that blocks the reader's empathy." Imagine if for the cover of the fourth issue of his *Acme Novelty Library* Ware had substituted in place of his symbolically weeping cat head a finely detailed close-up of a yowling tabby with wet fur and quivering whiskers, and you see

immediately this wall. Realism is fine for telling tales about jut-jawed good guys in tights who sock dastards, but it is too explicit for anything emotional. It bullies the readers and their emotions, turning sentiment into sentimentality. Just as the old saw holds that in writing fiction you should show, not tell, in comics to show too much is to "tell" too much. Ware kept his pictolinguistic strips simple because his goal was not to depict emotion, but to create it.

As Ware was making pictures act like words he also made words act like pictures, most strikingly in his Quimby and Sparky strips such as "I Hate You" and "I'm A Very Generous Person". In the same ways that a typographer physically transforms the words in display and logo type to make them embody the meaning of the words themselves, Ware transformed the storylines of his strips into headlines, choosing colours, typefaces and the occasional rebus to symbolize the emotions warranted by the words. He then used these headlines to move the story forwards, using typography to tell not only the verbal story but also the visual story. He did this lettering by hand. For years he performed the exercises from old hand-lettering manuals and copied fruit, cigar and cosmetics labels in order to attain a proficiency, then a fluency, in the increasingly antique art of hand-lettering. This fluency is not an aesthetic end in itself; instead it is a way for him to fit more expression, and therefore more emotion, into his comics. "I've tried to teach myself enough about typography so that when I write a word or use a typeface I unconsciously choose a way of writing it, or drawing it, that reflects exactly the feeling that I'm going for," he says. "I don't want to think, Oh, Optima bold would work best here. I want to just start drawing it and have it come out with the right feeling. I want it to be a completely intuitive process. In the same way that when you're writing you search for the right adjective, and it comes up and feels just right – I want to do that with my type."

After separating the two halves of the comics language and driving his way through short strips using primarily one or the other, Ware began to restore a more traditional balance between them. He resumed writing comics such as "Rocket Sam", "Big Tex" and "Jimmy Corrigan", that were for the most part more detailed drawings with word balloons on top of them. But unlike photorealistic characters, who look like actors standing behind cut-out balloons with typed dialogue, Jimmy and company were still cartoony enough to be of a piece with Ware's hand-lettering. Ware was careful to make the word and the image equally legible and meet in the middle of the spectrum

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Madam Jones Hair Sparkle Oil
Artist, designer unknown
Valmor Products, Chicago Illinois, 1944

Madam Jones was a subsidiary of the Chicago-based Valmor family of African-American beauty supplies, whose typography and design Ware routinely imitated in the headers of Jimmy Corrigan's earliest serial instalments in *New City*.

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between them. That sweet spot is what makes reading his comics so easy, and making them so hard. Ware tries to hit that spot by again applying the principles of hand-drawn typography to his cartooning. "In order to work visually my comics have to fall somewhere between the general and the specific," he says. "They have to be of a syncretic whole in order for the comic to have any aesthetic conviction or emotional power. But the problem is, as with any form of writing, the richness and texture of the story comes from the specifics, from the details. So I use specific details, but I try to draw the details in a general way, if that makes any sense at all. That's why I 'draw', or cartoon, my comics the same way I do my type. I do all the curves with a brush, I do all the straight lines with a ruling pen. I try to get my pictures to read like words, so that when you see them you can't make yourself not read them, in the same way that when you see a printed word you can't make yourself not read it, no matter how hard you try." In other words, Ware tries to achieve visually what the cartoonist Ernie Bushmiller did with his strip "Nancy". As the legendary cartoonist's cartoonist, Wally Wood, said of "Nancy", it takes more effort to not read the strip than it does to read it.[13]

Then there is colour. For years Ware worked in black and white. After that he was restricted to whatever colours were in the cigarette or alcohol advertisement ganged onto the same printing signature as his *New City* strip. Since the mid 1990s his strips have been in full colour every week and one combination has proved dominant. Ware obviously likes red and blue. There is the red and blue of his Super-Man, or God character, as well as the women of his two comics-in-progress, *Building* and *Rusty Brown*. Now that Ware is married he apparently no longer needs to create each new character as a version of himself. The nameless, one-legged heroine of *Building* bears a remarkable resemblance to Marnie Ware, as does Alice White, the heroine of *Rusty Brown*, particularly because Ware clothes both of his wife's dopplegangers in the same red cardigan, blue school skirt and white knee-length socks his apparently patriotic libido demands. "No," Ware says, turning red. "That's not it. I try to keep all the secondary and muted colours in the background and colour the main character with primary colours. That way they have more vibratory intensity and more of a presence. It almost provides an implicit sense of movement. It's the cheapest trick in colouring." When *Rusty Brown*'s pretentious art teacher, not coincidentally named "Chris Ware", strikes poses for his class in an attempt to sneak a peek up

Alice White's skirt, it is colour that makes the lecherous pedant appear to move. By framing the Chris Ware character's entire figure within each panel Ware creates the same sense of puppet-like animation he achieved in his black and white "Quimby" strips. By adding the alternating background of magenta and orange he makes each pose leap to life.

As with every other tool in his bag of tricks, Ware uses colour not just for colour's sake but as a means to the one end. He is not after motion but emotion. He uses his muted, secondary background colours to warm up his otherwise rather cold, mechanical, typographic style of picture writing. The natural reds, browns and flesh tones give life to the skeletal, black and white structure, as evidenced in the way he builds his *Building* novel. Not only do the colours balance his stark visuals, they can work in counterpoint to his stark content. *Jimmy Corrigan* may be the most physically beautifully book ever written about loneliness. "The book is morose," says Ware, "but I tried to make the pages as beautiful as I possibly could. The colour was essentially an argument counteracting what was going on in the story, because there's no way to say, 'Oh, life is beautiful and wonderful' without sounding corny. You have to show it."

In sum, comics are a map of the fourth dimension, composed not only of the intersection of words and pictures but also of words that act like pictures and pictures that act like words, with colour and composition shaping the map with their own structure and emotional meaning. This requires Ware to be not only a writer, drawer and painter – an illustrator, if you must – but a calligrapher, typographer and, to tie the arts all together, a graphic designer. When we extend the demands of comics from actuality to analogy and consider for a moment that Ware must create a world and portray convincingly every character who inhabits it, it is fair to say that Ware's chosen art also requires him to be a casting agent, wardrobe artist, set designer and actor. In short, Ware has to work like a theatre director. Given that he also has to frame and crop our every view of this world, he also has to work like a cinematographer. He has to be a control freak.

One has to wonder why people shrugged off this confounding art as kid's stuff. One also has to wonder why Ware stuck with it. For 40 to 50 hours a week, every week, for nearly 20 years, Ware has sat at his scarred drawing table composing one page additions to this most disrespected of all mediums. He has done this work in relative

Sears Roebuck and Co. Consumer's Guide
Catalogue 110, Autumn 1900
Pages 266–67
Art, design and writing supervised by
Richard Sears

Chicago's massive, self-proclaimed
"Cheapest Supply House on Earth"
produced gargantuan catalogues featuring
every product imaginable. Ware has
swiped often from their elaborate,
Victorian hand-lettering and equally
elaborate, orotund rhetorical style. Even
the name of Ware's comic book is taken
from the "Acme" name Richard Sears gave
to his ubiquitous line of in-house products.

isolation, a part of no movement, no school and, until recently, for
almost no money. When we consider this grind it is impossible to
overestimate the role of grit in Ware's honing of his art. As early as
1990, Ware was bucking himself up with these exhortations: "DON'T
GET BITTER", "DON'T STAGNATE", "RESPECT YOUR OBSESSIONS"
and the quintessentially Wareian war cry, "VALUE YOUR
WORTHLESSNESS". Under these dictums he added, "READ A VARIETY
OF THINGS" and, as a final commandment, "DON'T JUST DRAW
COMICS!" To this he added, "Keep making stuff, too! Or the above will
not be able to happen."[14] Ware's latter two pronouncements and his
postscript are a key to his art. By working on arts and crafts that would
appear to have nothing to do with his art, Ware enriched not only his
own comics but also our understanding of what comics require.

Because comics are a language, drawing comics is just as accurately
described as writing comics. If we think of Töpffer's language of
physical stereotypes – the cartoon language – as the nouns of the
comics language, and speed lines and shock waves and their ilk as
verbs, structured by a conventional grammar of panel borders and
word balloons, Ware is writing something akin to poetry. Poetry is the
tired art critic's analogy of last resort, but the similarities between
poetry and comics are undeniable. A comic strip's physical properties
form its meaning in the same way that line length, line breaks and
onomatopoetic sound shape the meaning of a poem.

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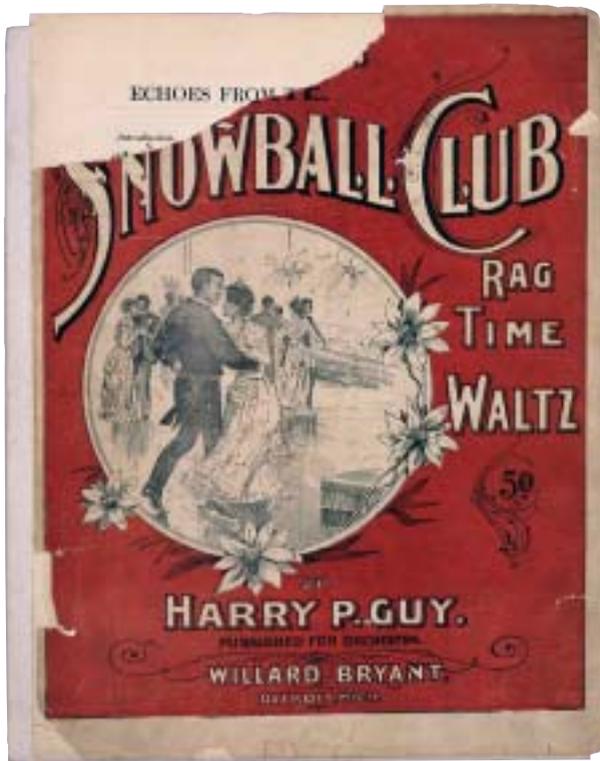
Echoes from the Snowball Club
by Harry P. Guy
Artist, designer unknown
Willard Bryant, Detroit, Michigan, 1899

The Rag-Time Ephemeralist, number 3
Self-published, Chicago, 2001

This issue of Ware's magazine contains
a 37-page article about the African-
American composer, Harry P. Guy.
By way of explaining the swipe, Ware says,
"I don't want the magazine to look like my
stuff. I want it to look like I have nothing
to do with the design of it."
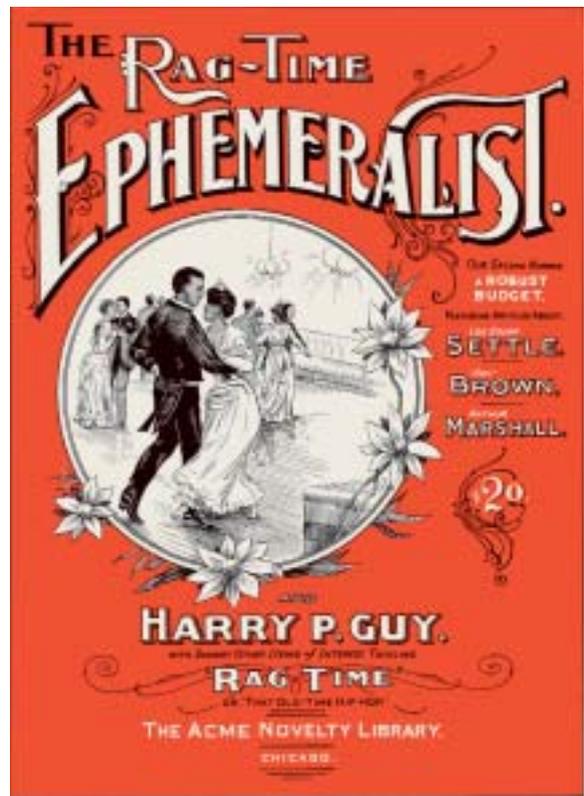
The comparison Ware makes most often is between comics and
music. Like music, comics are composed of divided time. The gutters
between panels mark these divisions and give comics what comedians
call timing, actors call beats and musicians call rhythm. We can
almost feel these silent beats as our eyes alight on panel after panel
and read the character's body language. This visual rhythm is most
noticeable in wordless comics, but if we ignore any captions or word
balloons and scan the pictures only, we can still feel the pulse. When
we do read the words their sound plays off this background rhythm
and creates a kind of melody, and the degree to which the two are
consonant or dissonant makes for a kind of synaesthetic harmony,
what we might call the music of comics.

It is no coincidence that Ware is an accomplished amateur
musician. He not only plays the piano and the banjo, and more
mellifluously than he protests, but he also studies turn-of-the-century
American music as assiduously as he studies early comics. The two
are more connected than one might assume. To date, Ware has edited,
designed and published three volumes of *The Rag-Time Ephemeralist*, his
substantial study of what he calls "that old-time hip hop". Some of the
similarities between comics and ragtime are cultural – both arts were
originally disrespected because of their lower-class origins and are
now ignored because of their later, more popular bowdlerizations.
Some of the similarities are structural, and it is these parallels
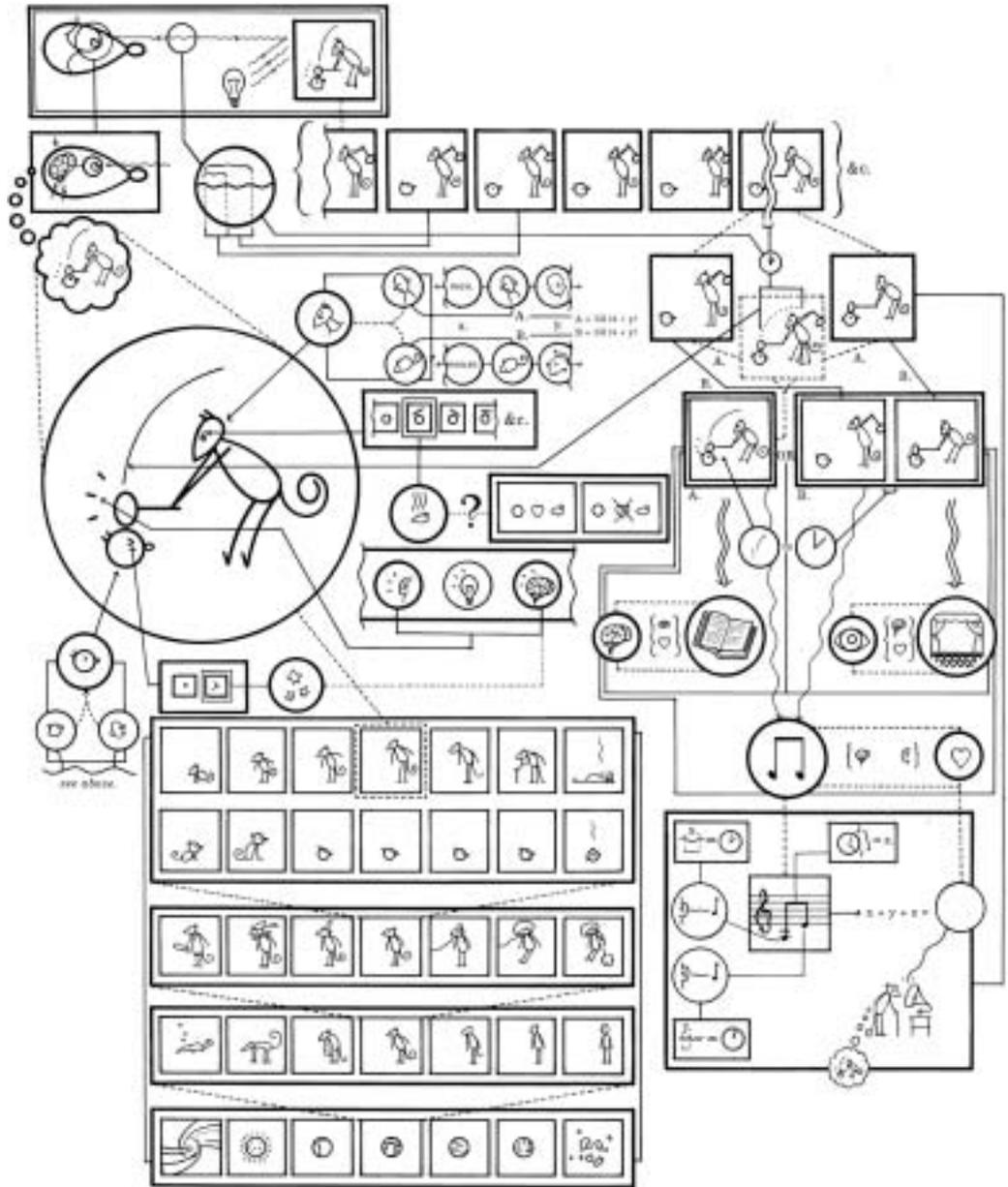
This succinct, almost algebraic dissection
of the comics language diagrams the
language's iconic, theatrical, temporal
and musical properties. At the same time
it also tells the story of Quimby's treatment
of Sparky and of his regret, years later,
for his cruelty.

between the panelled art and the syncopated art that moved Ware.
In the same way that "Gasoline Alley" taught Ware that the feeling
of a comic strip was best built into its structure, so that the mood
emerged from the act of reading it, the best ragtime musicians –
Joseph Lamb, Scott Joplin and James Scott – taught Ware that musical
emotion need not be expressed through performance but through
composition. "Ragtime was this way of composing and encoding
emotion," Ware says, "writing and playing these beautiful, crystalline
structures of feeling, which is really inspiring to me. What fascinates
me about it is that it actually can encode a feeling, which has got to
reflect in some way a natural structure in the universe, as goofy as
that sounds. There's some basic structure there, based on the way that
the world is ordered, that fits intuitively into the way that we see,
and interpret, and are disappointed by the world." Again, it is design
that knits these arts and these analogies together. "Ragtime is a music
of composition and comics are an art of composition," says Ware. "Or
design, since composition and design are essentially the same thing."

   Because comics, like music, are composed by dividing time, each
panel is like a window into time, and together these windows form
a map whose chain lets us see the story's beginning, middle and end
simultaneously, at least when the story fits on a single page. In a
longer story, Ware compensates for the page breaks in the composition
by deliberately placing recurring images and visual motifs in an
identical location on their page spread, visually linking parallel
emotions and events in the lives of the Corrigan men. Ware does this
to nudge the memory and help the reader see more of the book at
once. This points out what we might call the architecture of comics.

   "What you do with comics, essentially, is take pieces of experience
and freeze them in time," Ware says. "The moments are inert, lying
there on the page in the same way that sheet music lies on the printed
page. In music you breathe life into the composition by playing it.
In comics you make the strip come alive by reading it, by
experiencing it beat by beat as you would playing music. So that's one
way to aesthetically experience comics. Another way is to pull back
and consider the composition all at once, as you would the façade of
a building. You can look at a comic as you would look at a structure
that you could turn around in your mind and see all sides of at once."
Ware then murmurs that his explanation sounds "way too pompous,"
but he is, as always, modest to a fault. His architectural analogy is
based in fact. The word "story", meaning a narrative as well as the
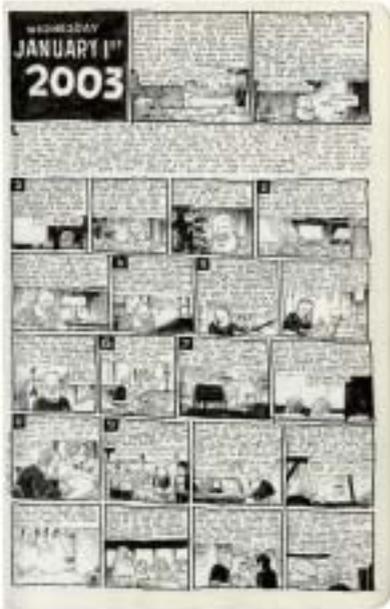
Diary
1–9 January 2003

Every day Ware records his thoughts in
this cartoon diary. This page, chosen by
Ware mainly for its nonvirulent nature,
shows Ware's dedication to his struggle at
the drawing board. The entry for 4 January
was drawn at 3 a.m., after Ware had
already worked for 19 hours straight.

storey of a building, is an etymological fossil that contains a missing
link between narrative art and architecture. As Art Spiegelman has
pointed out, "story" descended from the medieval Latin "historia",
which meant "picture" as well as the horizontal division of a
building. Latin users derived this conflation from the medieval
practice of placing a picture in each window of a building, especially
in churches.[15] A storey was literally a row of coloured pictures.

The germ of this architectural analogy came to Ware in 1995. In
a corner of his sketchbook he copied "ARCHITECTURE IS FROZEN
MUSIC." Beneath it he scrawled, "This is, I think, the aesthetic key to
the development of cartoons as an art form."[16] The author of this key
equation was none other than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the first
reviewer of the first comic books. An oddly synchronistic coincidence.
But it is no coincidence that Ware has chosen for his most recent story
the title of *Building*.