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The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking

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deliver “the first, and probably only true history of the Company, from its surprising beginning with the Original Letterer, through the cultural revolution, up to the present day’s CEO and Chief Draughtsman, F. C. Ware.”²⁴ The emphasis on the “Letterer” is noteworthy, since Ware does, in fact, draw all of his fonts by hand and has won numerous awards for his lettering.²⁵ As Daniel Raeburn relates, Ware “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.”²⁶ In a sharp satire of mass-produced comics, Ware develops an exquisite contrast between the solitary and painstaking work of the individual letterer and the massive, bureaucratic edifice depicted in the comic. An impressive two-page spread offers the viewer a cutaway view of the company rendered in black and white, which is comprised of rooms of draughtsmen, thirty storerooms of comics, a printing machine, an art gallery, numerous dutiful secretaries, a tennis court, and an intimidating waiting room (where the unfortunate researcher has paced for hours, unable to gain admittance to the secrets inside).²⁷ This representation reinforces the impact of the “history” as a wry, self-reflexive gesture because the researcher is ultimately excluded from the “secret” comics experiments within, although the reader has access to them in the pages of the book. But how these experiments “work,” or what they might mean, is another question entirely.

The Mechanism of the Constraint

In 1997, Jean-Christophe Menu declared Ware an honorary member of Oubapo on the strength of his experimental work in *The ACME Novelty Library*: “Ware emphasizes the possibilities of the medium with as much brio as playfulness. In a sense, he is an Oubapien who, against all expectations, does not know it, because constraints (narrative or formal) seem always very present in the functioning of Ware’s work.”²⁸ Jan Baetens, a renowned Belgian critic, has also drawn attention to the importance of constraints in Ware’s comics and describes his work as a form of “multi-layered poly-sequential writing and reading in which the reader has no right to play freely with the author’s arrangement of material, but must scrupulously follow it to slowly discover the myriad relationships on the page itself.”²⁹ To understand how these relationships are structured, we need to understand the principle of the constraint and how it applies to the experimental aspect of Ware’s comics.

The innovation of Oulipo is that by inventing specific rules and limitations, or constraints, practitioners could open up new vistas in language and literature. As Marcel Bénabou writes, the constraint “forces the system out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal its hidden resources.”³⁰ One can make a parallel claim for comics as well, although the fundamental building blocks of the medium are different. For Oulipo, constraints operate at the level of an individual letter (like the lipogram novel, *A Void*), a word, a line (in Queneau’s sonnets), or a larger semantic unit such as a stanza, paragraph, or chapter. Since one of the defining features of comics is sequentiality, individual panels on the comics page can be reconceived as pieces of a puzzle that the artist can manipulate; thus, reshuffling the panels according to specific patterns is one method of creating Oubapo constraints.³¹ The other