

## From Loose to Boxed Fragments and Back Again Seriality and Archive in Chris Ware's *Building Stories*

Benoît Crucifix FNRS – University of Liège/UCLouvain  
benoit.crucifix [a] gmail.com

**Abstract** This article focuses on the dynamics of seriality, archive and collection in Chris Ware's graphic novel *Building Stories*, situating it within the larger context of graphic novel serializations. It argues that the dispersed serialization of *Building Stories* is key to understand its box-of-comics format as well as its fragmented narrative structure. In a self-reflexive homage to the material history of comics, Ware's graphic novel indeed appears as an archive of its own serialization, foregrounding a process of collecting/dispersing fragments.

**Keywords** archive, graphic novel, materiality, Chris Ware, serialization

'There's no writer alive whose work I love more than Chris Ware. The only problem is that it takes him ten years to draw these things and then I read them in a day and have to wait another ten years for the next one.' This praise from British novelist Zadie Smith about Ware's graphic novel *Building Stories* accompanied its release and was reused by Pantheon in its promotion of the book, popping up on the title description page of every online bookstore website. But is it a book really? Smith talks about 'these things,' and indeed, *Building Stories* is precisely a collection of *things* drawing attention to their own objecthood: instead of a standard codex format, Ware's graphic novel came out as an oversized cardboard box filled with fourteen different items printed and bound in various formats. What Zadie Smith points out in her praise, however, is not necessarily this physical materiality but the incredibly large amount of time that goes into drawing these things. Cartooning is, as Chris Ware himself has repeatedly stated, an extremely slow, time-demanding and repetitive kind of labor, a 'brittle, choppy process' (Ware 2004, 9). In comparison with the painstaking work of drawing comics, the time necessary to read them is considerably shorter: Ware himself has pointed out the discrepancy between the 'accumulated three or four

days of work' it takes to draw a short sequence and the 'eight to ten seconds it takes to read' (Ware 2004, 9). Smith's quote stretches this discrepancy to the logic of an entire graphic novel, playing it out on a ten years/one day ratio, highlighting the 'odd' status of the graphic novelist as a drawing writer.

Cartoonists, as Jared Gardner further reminds us, are 'on the short end of the temporal economies of comics creation and reading' (2016, 21). Given this difficult position, most comics artists aspiring to draw book-length comics have needed serialization to make their practice viable: according to Seth, '[s]erialization is still important [...] for the modern cartoonist in that you literally cannot build a career doing a ten-year book, releasing it, and then doing another ten-year book' (Hoffman and Grace 2015, 187). The same goes for Chris Ware: despite Zadie Smith's suggestion, you do not exactly have to wait another ten years to read Ware's 'things' as he keeps relying on serialization to create his comics. Smith herself is undoubtedly aware of that, since a short segment of Ware's ongoing 'Rusty Brown' series was first published in her edited collection of short stories *The Book of Other People* (2008), which featured contributions from both cartoonists and literary writers.

Yet, Smith's blurb foregrounds how the literary-novelistic notion of a finished unitary text keeps informing the reception of graphic novels within a literary culture that is nonetheless quickly adapting to a changed media ecology fascinated with seriality and media diversity (Collins 2013). The graphic novel has adopted one-shot publication as a conscious break away from serial models typical of cultural industries. Where comic strips and comic books had crucially depended on active readers investing the serial gap (Gardner 2012a), the graphic novel partly adopted to the literary-novelistic idea of the text as a finished whole.<sup>i</sup> This appears clearly in the indebtedness of comics studies to literary studies in its focus on the close reading of singular works; as Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo recently argued: 'comics studies today is much more structured around the study of individual "great works" than it is around significant authors' (2016, 28). *Building Stories* might not look like the usual graphic novel in terms of format, its paratext and reception do frame it as one: not only is the work labelled a graphic novel on the back of the box, but the way Ware's work was received in literary milieus and framed by high cultural tastemakers typically replicate the cultural status associated with the graphic novel discourse.<sup>ii</sup> history. In fact, the language of innovation and originality used by many reviewers often verged towards the infamous 'comics are

not for kids anymore' cliché by stressing the unconventionality of *Building Stories* as something 'unlike' comics, replicating the implicit break postulated by the graphic novel. Most reviews, as most scholarship on *Building Stories*, however, frequently overlooked the relevance of its serial origins, despite the atypical and highly fragmentary composition of Ware's graphic novel.

This article argues that the serialization of *Building Stories* is not just a matter of fact, a preliminary but necessary step for the completion of this great work, but that it takes an important place in its core reflection on memory and materiality. The box-of-comics format chosen by Chris Ware self-reflexively functions as an archive of its own dispersed serialization, collecting fragments that were previously disseminated in different formats across various venues and platforms. Playing on the dynamics of dispersion and collection, *Building Stories* explores new ways of serializing narratives in a context where the one-shot, 'novelistic' model of the graphic novel functions as the canonized format for alternative comics. In conspicuously adopting an archival, database-like structure, Ware's graphic novel explores modes of seriality in tune with the non-linear seriality of new media. *Building Stories* thus offers extremely interesting ground for a reflection on the place of serialization in the context of the contemporary graphic novel and the broader media ecology.

## Of Graphic Novels and (Dispersed) Serialization

The graphic novel – as long-form, 'serious' comics in book format – introduced a radical change in terms of how comics were thought of, not only as a benchmark for cultural legitimacy, but mostly because it brought comics inside the general bookstore and the literary institution. This change in format is not just a matter of marketing or packaging. Format, as Pascal Lefèvre argues, 'influence[s] the total concept of the comic' (2000, 98), from style and size to page composition, narrative and subject matter. Format defines the working horizon of the cartoonist and shapes the entire conception of the work; it also shapes how the work is received and analyzed, as implicitly shown by Zadie Smith's blurb. Following Baetens and Frey's 'nonessential, context-sensitive' and 'open' definition' of the graphic novel, this article approaches the term not just as a label but as a 'special type of comics' spanning form, content, format, production and distribution. The 'prototypical' graphic novel might often be the 'novel-like one-shot,' that aspect

alone, as Baetens and Frey remind us, cannot constitute ‘the critical or exclusive criteria for labeling a graphic novel a graphic novel’ (2015, 20-21). The example of *Building Stories* alone highlights how the graphic novel often breaks out from a restrictive definition and precisely navigates the complex relationships between serialization and one-shot publication, while experimenting with material format.

At the same time, it is important not to understate the institutional weight that the graphic novel as one-shot has taken as an editorial model. With the institutionalization of the graphic novel, the one-shot book increasingly became a new working horizon for ‘alternative’ comics that, growing out of the direct market of specialized shops, had relied on serialization in comic book format (Hatfield 2005, 25-31). The emergence of the graphic novel as a dominant format has brought about a profound change in terms of seriality and narrative span in American comics. The implications of this sea-change for American comics have been cleverly illustrated by Brian Evenson (2014) in his analysis of the serial development of Chester Brown's *Ed the Happy Clown* from mini-comic to alternative comic book to graphic novel: the multiple revisions that went along each material shift reorient the ‘total concept’ of the comics, from social-economic to narrative and aesthetic aspects. Each format is linked to a professional and artistic commitment, a particular readership, a specific narrative segmentation as well as generic characteristics. For the graphic novel version, Chester Brown had to revise the improvisatory ‘randomness and exuberance’ of the *Yummy Fur* comic books in order to trim and adapt the narrative for the book format, giving it a proper closure and a sense of direction (Evenson 2014, 105). The way American comics have progressively shifted towards the book format runs parallel to the analogous transition from magazine to album that happened over the 1980s in Franco-Belgian comics.<sup>iii</sup> This transition deeply changed the production and reception of comics as the magazine serialization was redefined as a prequel to the publication of the album. Previously, the weekly installments followed an open-ended seriality that was based on ‘[t]he frenzy of the improvised story, dragged along at breakneck pace’ (Capart and Dejasse, 315). This improvisatory quality and the organic relation between production and consumption were disrupted by the increasing dominance of the album as the final output, which standardized the size and nature of the narratives. Different formats make for different comics, and vice versa.

In the context of American alternative comics, the institutionalization of the graphic novel

has led to a gradual dissociation from serialization.<sup>iv</sup> While the direct market is no longer able to accommodate the serialization of alternative comics, independent publishers like Fantagraphics or Drawn & Quarterly now benefit from mainstream connections with the general book trade facilitating straight graphic novel publications (Hatfield 2014). Where, halfway into the 2000s, Charles Hatfield was writing that 'serialization remains one economically proven means of getting book-length comics into print' (2005, 162), he recently observed that 'the alternative comic has been decoupled from serialization' (2014, 72). To some extent, then, it seems that, over these two decades, alternative comics have finally found a business model more suited to their (non-)narrative ambitions. In her analysis of boredom in contemporary comics, Greice Schneider (2016, 127-129) observes how the explosion of everyday life comics partly worked as a challenge to the cliffhanger-based, action-packed suspense narratives of mainstream comics. By contrast, in alternative comics, '[s]erialization [...] is not at the service of suspense. Serialization here happens more for practical and economic reasons than narrative ones.' As a result, Schneider sees 'the (near) disappearance of floppies on the alternative scene, replaced by the book form [as] a clear sign that this particular kind of suspense – relying on the cliffhanger – is not the dominant mode in this genre' (2016, 128). And indeed, many alternative cartoonists, staples of the alternative comic book culture of the 1990s, have abandoned their practice of serialization into the new century: Chester Brown is a case in point (Evenson 2014), and so is Daniel Clowes.

Clearly, the alternative comic book is no longer dominant in the field and so is redefined as an obsolete object. As Clowes observed, '[t]he old-fashioned comic book seems like an affectation at this point, like some attempt to be cute or "retro"' (Parille 2010, 175). Tellingly, Adrian Tomine has self-reflexively built on this 'retro' quality of the alternative comic book. After having abandoned his serial comic book for several years, Tomine went back to publishing new issues, not only printed as 'floppies' but also featuring a letters page as well as one-page autobiographical comics that self-parody the author's own nostalgic posture. In one particularly telling gag, Tomine's paper avatar explicitly stages the obsolete aspect of the alternative comic book in the era of graphic novels and digital culture: 'I guess the days of the "alternative" comic book are really over. [...] I love a beautifully designed book as much as the next guy, but I'll miss all that throwaway, ancillary stuff from the comics' (Tomine 2011; Figure 1). Albeit nostalgic, Tomine's use of the floppy format is suited with his preference for short stories rather than long-form

comics: the serial periodicity of his comic book is not used to segment an ongoing narrative, but to encapsulate short-form comics, each drawn in a distinct graphic style. Here too, the suspense model of seriality is not what Tomine is looking for when he hearkens back to the comic book: rather, its appeal lies in its materiality, as an obsolete object bound up to a profound attachment to alternative comics culture.

The way Tomine frames the 'downfall' of the alternative comic book in material terms appears most obviously when he laments how Seth's periodical *Palookaville* has 'turned into a hardcover book' (Tomine 2011, 40). Published as hardcover 'graphic novels,' Seth's *Palookaville* remains a periodical in which the Canadian cartoonist serializes his ongoing 'Clyde Fans' story, while putting out additional material. The way Seth revamps his magazines in a way that exploits the book format runs parallel to Chris Ware's changing approach to serialization. Ware's *ACME Novelty Library* is renowned for its material heterogeneity, as each issue was designed in accordance to its specific contents. After the widespread success of *Jimmy Corrigan*, however, Ware slowed down the periodical publication of his series and adopted a hardcover graphic novel format. Shifting to self-publication in the mid-2000s, the later issues of *ACME Novelty Library* collect installments of the ongoing 'Rusty Brown' series into beautiful hardcover books that linger between the serial comic and the graphic novel. Published on a rather sparse basis, each issue provides a self-contained episode, either focusing on a particular period (Rusty's childhood in issues 16 and 17) or on a specific 'secondary' character (Rusty's father in issue 19 and Jason Lint in 20) and yet each issue is presented as being part of an ongoing series and a larger storyworld. Given this shift, some critics have noted a certain streamlining of his output, a 'temptation of the homogeneous' as Côme Martin (2013) put it: not only did the frequency of serialization dwindle, but the material heterogeneity of formats has tended to give way to a recurring oblong standard.

The overall impression is that alternative comics are increasingly 'disciplined' by literary standards as the graphic novel is taking stock. Yet, the book format does not do away with serialization per se. Seth's *Palookaville* has offered to the Canadian cartoonist a unique space to segment his ambitious *Clyde Fans* story, allowing it to continue its 'digressive narrative style' in ways that would not have been possible without serialization (Hoffman and Grace 2015, 186-187). And so, Seth's *Palookaville* and Ware's *ACME Novelty Library* are precisely examples of how contemporary graphic novelists, via the book format, find other ways of serializing their comics

that are not only different from popular seriality, but also from literary-novelistic norms. Framing this shift from comic books to graphic novels only as a change in material format overlooks the discontinuous dynamic of serialization that still characterizes many graphic novels. Despite the dwindling model of serialization and the institutionalization of the graphic novel, many cartoonists keep navigating this 'difficult balance between the one-shot policy of the graphic novel and the serialized forms common to mass media' (Baetens 2011, 1148), tapping into the history of comics while reinventing in various ways their approach to seriality. As is often the case when the 'end' of a cultural practice is declared, serialization is not so much dead as it is changing and becoming something else, together with the medium of comics.<sup>v</sup>

Just the same, '[t]he graphic novel is something that changes all the time, although not always at the same rhythm, and that is characterized moreover by strong cultural variations' (Baetens and Frey 2015, 21). If there is a drive to publish one-shot graphic novels, the way that Seth and Chris Ware are transforming their periodicals responding to that change shows how they embed the graphic novel as part of a larger practice of serialization: clearly, the graphic novel does not cut off the ties with serialization. It is not only a matter of keeping to magazine titles; other graphic novelists as Art Spiegelman or Charles Burns have reimagined a different relationship to seriality. Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, serialized in broadsheet newspapers, was an object diametrically opposed to what *Maus* taught us the graphic novel was (Chute 2007). Charles Burns has also revisited his own practice of serialization with *Last Look*, which before being collected into one graphic novel, was published over six years as three hardcover books designed in the style of Franco-Belgian comics albums. Besides the cohesive unity of the trilogy, reaffirmed by the collected graphic novel publication, Burns also spawned additional images and narratives that are grafted onto the same storyworld in various material objects interlinked by a dispersed seriality. *Last Look*, then, emerged from a rich serial life simultaneously steered by centrifugal forces— the narrative closure of the trilogy – and centripetal forces – dispersed fragments that remain at the margins of the graphic novel.

In similar ways, Chris Ware's *Building Stories* highlights a form of *dispersed serialization* that is no longer based on a traditional use of the comic book periodical but rather spreads itself across multiple publishing venues and material forms. Dispersed serialization contrasts with the regular, cliffhanger mode of seriality and so allows for the prepublication of the 'uneventful

narratives' so characteristic of Chris Ware's comics (Schneider 2016, 173-193). This serial dispersion within contemporary graphic novels further feeds into a 'new configuration of contemporary literature, where collections aspire to be novels, and novels masquerade as collection,' as displayed in the resurgence of 'novels that reject strong internal cohesion in favour of manifest fragmentation' (Audet 2014, 43). Rooted in this reconfiguration of narrative into a 'poetics of diffraction' (Audet 2014), the experimental box-of-comics format of *Building Stories* directly stems from Chris Ware's practice of dispersed serialization, self-reflexively mapping out the material history of comics while exploring ways of archiving seriality that tune in with digital culture.

### Collecting Fragments, Archiving Seriality

Contrasting with a tendency to delineate the collected graphic novel as the 'final' object, obscuring its serial nature, *Building Stories* is a collection of serial fragments that does not deny nor conceal its status as such. Quite on the contrary, Chris Ware definitely takes avail of the 'differentiality' of his graphic novel by adopting a box-of-comics format that foregrounds its *archival* aspect, highlighting the collection as a collaborative act of reading.<sup>vi</sup> A short digression on Chris Ware's very first graphic novel, *Floyd Farland* (1987), might cast an interesting light on *Building Stories* by delineating the stakes of archiving seriality. In the afterword, a young Ware reflects on the difference between the newspaper series and the graphic novel in terms of the reading experience they involve:

[T]he space between each page in the book you now hold represents a week of 'lapse-time' between the episodes as they originally appeared. Because of this transpositional distortion (strip to book), I had originally intended to suggest to the new reader that he ingest only one page of this work per week, effectively simulating the 'newspaper experience'; of course, no one would probably do this, and even if one tried, he or she would probably lose interest quickly. Nine months to read a comic book? So rather than suggest such a taxing endeavor, much of the story has been redrawn, rewritten, and reconstituted to provide you, the reader, with an uninterrupted narrative flow and unique cartoon experience (Ware, *Farland* 46).

Perhaps ironically, given Ware's emphatic repudiation of this early comic, his latest graphic novel



seems willing to follow the road-not-taken the cartoonist refers to. Incidentally, Ware was already working on a box-of-comics project around that time, as appears in an 1990 sketchbook drawing detailing a format that resembles very closely the published object (Figure 2). Strictly speaking though, *Building Stories* does not suggest the simulation of the periodical reading of the 'newspaper experience,' but nor does it provide the reader with an 'uninterrupted narrative flow and unique cartoon experience.' In its 'transpositional distortion' from serial installments to graphic novel, *Building Stories* retains something of the serial gap into the collection by producing a box-of-comics format that hints back to the long history of reading and collecting practices in comics culture, while presenting itself as an archive of its own serialization.

Ware's graphic novel recovers the rich and diverse material history of comics, bringing together many of their physical formats: broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, saddle-stapled materials of various sizes, traditional comic books, a hardcover graphic novel, posters, Little Golden Books, accordion strips. Ware's box of comics definitely works as a monumental homage to print in the era of digital culture. As Torsa Ghosal notes in her analysis of narrative progression in *Building Stories*, Ware's work urges a '[r]ecognition of the ephemeral printed forms and their history' feeding into a larger 'media archeological project that resists a teleological and linear telling of the past' (2015, 86). Since Ware uses formats that have been specifically associated with certain forms of comics from newspaper strips to pamphlet-sized comic books, *Building Stories* more specifically reads as 'a miniature pantheon of comic art, taking it out of the museum and off the computer screen and giving us all something we can hold on to' (Roeder 2012). While some of these descriptions sustain a reading of *Building Stories* as a 'museum-like' material object, Roeder and Ghosal are right in pointing out the 'portable' format and the non-linear retelling of the past and that is also where seriality plays a key role. Responding to digital culture, the museal gaze that *Building Stories* might invite to does not 'usher in the ossification [...] of what used to be a lively [serial] culture' as Daniel Stein remarks about the current surge of museum-books in contemporary superhero comics (2016: 9). Rather, *Building Stories* engages in a reflexion about ephemerality, collection, and dispersal that is key to the kind of serial culture that comics have explored throughout the twentieth century.

Before going into the details of *Building Stories* as a particularly interesting way of archiving seriality, it is important to note how the material and serial history of comics is itself

woven into the narrative of Ware's work, particularly brought into play with the surprising character of Branford the Bee. Evoking the funny animals genre, with a typically melancholic twist, Chris Ware gives Branford his own comic book, published as an actual comic book floppy in red, yellow, and blue colors (those of Superman, naturally), with a title 'Branford, the Best Bee in the World' that echoes Ware's first graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*. What is more interesting, though, is that inside this single item, Ware repeatedly hints to other formats and periods of comics history by embedding images evoking older material artifacts: a single page casting the bee's ancestor is drawn in a style reminiscent of late nineteenth-century comics, including captions running below the images, and is presented as a kind of facsimile insert (Figure 3). This style is used to situate the story in a different temporal setting, but it also uncovers a genealogical relationship between the various composite elements that make up the pamphlet and, by extension, the whole box of comics.

Another embedded image in the 'Branford the Bee' comic book indexes *The Daily Bee* newspaper, one of Branford's everyday readings. This reference serves to point to an actual item within the *Building Stories* box, since *The Daily Bee* is included as an actual physical object in its midst. On the back page, Ware directly references the typical layout of Sunday comics, including a classical grid, a smaller topper strip as well as a mock-up reference to syndication rights. The front page of the newspaper also shows a comics supplement, but inside the panels: a discarded newspaper comics page that temporarily serves as shelter for Betty. This tossed newspaper page is in fact a recurrent background detail throughout *Building Stories*: Branford lives in the yard next to the building, a yard filled with a trashed can, some other debris, and a newspaper comics section. While this detail usually works as background information, its presence is brought to attention here because of the microscopic scale of the bee story, in which background details become narratively significant items.<sup>vii</sup> In the miniature universe of Chris Ware's bees, small details and littered objects take on a dramatic importance. Naturally, the equation of the newspaper comics page with trash, points to the status of comics as ephemeral popular cultural artifacts, the very objects that collectors seek to salvage from waste, as captured by Jared Gardner: 'it is their ephemeral nature, their quality as waste products of modern mass media and consumer culture, that constitutes the perverse pleasures for those who collect, organize, and fetishize them' (Gardner 2012a, 150).

It is this archival dimension, ubiquitous in the contemporary graphic novel, as Gardner argues, that also underpins the box-of-comics format of *Building Stories*.<sup>viii</sup> This casts a slightly new light on Ware's oft-quoted inspirations for the box format of *Building Stories*, namely the shadow boxes of Joseph Cornell and *La Boîte-en-valise* by Marcel Duchamp.<sup>ix</sup> Both artists were obsessed with a certain practice of collecting: whether in poetic assemblages of bits and pieces gathered from the flotsam of the modern metropolis for Cornell, or in an attempt to collect his own work in a reflexion on reproduction and dispersion for Duchamp. Combining both dimensions, Ware's box of comics is simultaneously an homage to old comics as it is a self-reflexive collection of its own serial fragments. In this sense, it also refers to a third early twentieth-century box that strangely parallels the avant-garde experiments of Cornell and Duchamp, namely: *The Treasure Box of Comics*, a cardboard box containing bundles of famous serial comic strips published by Cupples & Leon in the 1930s, fulfilling 'the expressed desire on the part of their readers to possess their serial stories in volumes that could be owned, reread, collected' (Gardner 2013, 250). *Building Stories* appears as a modern remediation of *The Treasure Box of Comics*, as it collects its serial installments in a self-reflexive way, allowing the readers to reread and reshuffle the material.

The kind of collecting practice that Chris Ware calls up through his archival repurposing of outdated formats, however, does not answer to the norms of preservation and 'mint condition' that dominate both the art world and the comic book collecting market today.<sup>x</sup> The material objects that compose *Building Stories* are meant to be handled, manipulated, reshuffled. By contrast, comic book collecting seeks to avoid any tactile interaction that might 'damage' or 'degrade' the market value of the copy – to the extent that, as Ian Hague puts it, '[t]o the collector, touch is taboo' (95). In a box format that complicates this obsession with preservation, *Building Stories* proposes to embrace the tactile experience involved in its reading, following Walter Benjamin's oft-quoted phrase that 'collectors are beings with tactile instincts' (206) to recover the physical properties of outmoded comics formats.

This question of preservation and the activity of collecting as a 'struggle against dispersion' (Benjamin 1999, 211) is one that is not limited to past, outdated formats: while referencing the material history of comics, Chris Ware also conspicuously hints at the serialized and dispersed fragments that have constituted *Building Stories* years before the collected graphic novel edition. Reassembling its fragments within a box, *Building Stories* keeps important traces indexing its own

serial history. Indeed, the heterogeneous and diverse items assembled in the box are directly related to Ware's continued reliance on serialization: the graphic novel first appeared over ten years in scores of different venues, its bits and pieces scattered across various newspapers, magazines, books, anthologies, and even as a digital app.<sup>xi</sup> The material heterogeneity and fragmented narrative structure of *Building Stories* point back to this dispersed serialization history: the various formats echo the disparate material forms of its serialization, while the fragmentary narrative clusters are closely related to this episodic mode of publication spread over time.

The hardcover volume included in *Building Stories* is a perfect example of these dynamics. It is also the item that most conspicuously gestures toward its anterior publication, at it appears as an almost exact reprint of *The ACME Novelty Library* #18, except for the label on the cover and on the spine, slightly larger dimensions, and minor changes within the pages. This issue was itself a collection of the 'Building Stories' comic strips that were sporadically published in *Nest* magazine from 2002 to 2004 and in other venues. This disjointed periodical publication transpires in the book's narrative construction around the page and the double-page spread. Furthermore, Ware repeatedly alludes to this episodic structure by conjuring up a page-layout typically associated with Sunday newspaper comics, composed of a header and a conventional grid layout (Figure 4). Where the header usually states the recurring title of the comic strip, though, Ware subverts the convention by using this space to feature the beginning of the protagonist's monologue as it goes on to run through the thought balloons. While playfully displaying itself as a collection of episodic pages, hinting at a past tradition of comics, Ware also reuses the fragments in ways that explore the specificity of the codex book by productively drawing on its status as a 'paged multiframe' (Groensteen 2007, 30), that is, a set of pages that cannot be visually taken in at the same time and hence has to be leafed through. A particularly noted sequence unrolls over three right pages with each page functioning as layers that the reader gradually removes, slowly uncovering the protagonist's body from clothed, to naked, to x-rayed, which evinces a profound relationship between the body and the book (Ghosal 2015, 88-90). For the first collection of its serial material, then as a hardcover issue of *The ACME Novelty Library*, Ware repurposed the fragments in order to diegetically motivate the leafed materiality of the codex format, while keeping subtle hints to their previous serialization as discrete units. This single item from *Building Stories* thus already casts how multilayered Chris Ware's practice of serialization is, as the collected pieces subtly let their

own serial history shine through while their collection suggest new ways of reading the various fragments. The box-of-comics format, by contrast with the book though, allows Ware to reframe the 'Building Stories' issue of *The ACME Novelty Library* as a distinct fragment that is part of a larger, but also looser collection of items, one that is not sequentialized by the order of bound pages.

The small square book within *Building Stories* archives serial fragments in a similar way: it collects the weekly installments published in the 'Funny Pages' section of the Sunday magazine of *The New York Times* into a book, arranging the pages into a linear order that tunes in with the serial temporality of the original installments. The regular amount of time that elapsed between each weekly episode matches a one-hour lapse in the narrative it contains: each hour is indicated in the header, accompanied by a small icon representing the building and the weather at the given time. The strip ran weekly from September 18, 2005 to April 4, 2006 and its twenty-nine installments totaled to a full day in the characters' lives, from midnight to midnight, with five strips (those featuring the voice of the building) situated outside this specific time-lapse. In the book format, the original header is modified, with the date and hour in a sans-serif typeface evocative of some time-measuring device. This temporal organization yields a chronological but fragmentary story structured around episodic moments of everyday life. Writing about the representation of disability in the *New York Times* installments of *Building Stories*, Margaret Fink Berman argued that Chris Ware develops an 'ordinariness aesthetic [that], with its focus on the microprocesses of everyday life, enables a narrative structure composed of episodes whose meanings exist in dynamic tension with one another' (Berman 2010, 192). While insightfully pinpointing this close connection between Ware's focus on everyday life and the episodic narrative structure of the then-ongoing *Building Stories*, Berman implicitly portrays Ware's aesthetics of everyday life as the cause of, that which enables, the episodic narrative structure. Instead of this unidirectional perspective that grounds Ware's aesthetics as departure point, a more jumbled sense of multiple factors caught in a feedback loop might offer a more accurate description that pays closer attention to the role played by the material and serial context of Ware's publications. In other words, understanding Chris Ware's use of the fragment and the episode requires us to take into account his actual practice of serialization.

Serialization is a form of productive constraint, simultaneously limiting and enabling,

restraining and productive. As Hatfield reminds us, 'every serialized graphic novel represents a negotiation between short- and long-term aims' (2005, 162). With his complex reworking of dispersed serial fragments, Chris Ware turns out to be a cartoonist who carefully attends to the multiple transformations and republications of his comics, always with a keen eye for the shifting material contexts in which they appear. In this sense, and despite the many differences between the two artists, Chris Ware is not unlike Hergé. As Jan Baetens (2006, 169-175) has shown in a brilliant analysis of serialization as constraint in Hergé's *L'Affaire Tournesol* (known in English as *The Calculus Affair*), the Belgian cartoonist's approach to seriality is less dependent on a well-known use of the cliffhanger than on a careful balance between narrative and non-narrative and an understanding of the page on both linear and tabular levels. Hergé was quickly offered to reprint his magazine stories in album format, a guarantee that gave him 'the freedom to relatively neglect the commercial trick of the cliffhanger while exploring from the very start more complex of storytelling that exceeded the limits of the weekly instalment' (Baetens 2016, 82). The case of Hergé, then, can easily be translated to the context of the graphic novel as, in both cases, serialization might appear as a practice compelling the cartoonist to walk a tightrope between the installments and the graphic novel (or the album for Hergé) and to parcel out narrative and non-narrative elements in ways that are more subtle than simply building up a linear narrative suspense.

From this more nuanced perspective on serial narratives, Chris Ware's own micro-narratives – so different from the strong plot-oriented narratives associated with serial suspense – appears as closely intertwined with his practice of serialization: in ways somewhat similar to Hergé's comics, one finds in Ware's work a mutually generative dynamic between serial installments and graphic novel, material format and fictional world, non-narrative and narrative. Chris Ware's comics ward off linear, plot-oriented conceptions of narrative by conspicuously slowing down the rhythm of reading and by resisting narrative immersion (Banita 2010; Schneider 2016). Instead of an action-based plot, his approach to storytelling is one based on the jumbled and chaotic flow of thoughts, memories, musings of everyday life.<sup>xii</sup> As such, it embraces the fragmentary, the discontinuous, the processual, aspects that are often linked to the logic of seriality, as exposed by Baetens:

These temporal properties of comics, all but static, slip from the description of a work as an enclosed whole objected to analysis. They are rather on the side of the unfinished, truncated, imperfect, always already in progress and never completed aspects that characterize the reading of a certain type of comics that trigger and nurture a reading unfolding over time (Baetens 2010, §8; my translation).

Although Baetens writes about a more ‘popular’ form of seriality, as in newspaper strips, this messy temporal dynamic of serialization, based on its open-ended and ever-shifting character, seems to be also operative for *Building Stories*. Dispersed across a variety of publishing venues and material formats, Ware’s graphic novel collects its serial fragments in a material form that mixes up any sense of narrative continuity—a fragmentation that is further reinforced by the episodic construction of the various items, each its own collection of small narrative units based on the page and the double-page spread. From the jumbled pieces of its serialization, Ware does not recreate a sense of purpose. *Building Stories* partly refuses to order its serial fragments within the linearity of the book format, opting instead for the collection as a mode of organization that aptly represents the ever-shifting flux of memory and thought.

Within the spatial physicality of the collection, Ware’s box of comics thus leaves its serial fragments unordered, inviting its reader to assemble and connect them together, recovering the collector’s drive to track down the various dispersed items. As Jared Gardner argues, ‘[i]t is the compulsive need to fill in the gaps, to make connections between issues (the serial gap inherent to comic production, mirroring and complicating the gaps between the frames themselves) that drives the collector in search of missing issues’ (2012a, 173). This drive to reassemble the scattered fragments of Chris Ware’s comics appears visible in the efforts put by some of his readers into *The ACME Novelty Archive*, a collaborative fan website attempting to list and document Chris Ware’s oeuvre into an online bibliographical database.<sup>xiii</sup> Yet, spread across different platforms, the task is daunting and the dispersed serialization of Ware’s comics both trigger and thwart this collector’s drive, as David M. Ball put it: ‘Ware’s publications simultaneously seek to fascinate and infuriate collectors with their variable sizes, editions, serialized iterations’ (2010, 50). In the same way, the box-of-comics format, while suggesting an archival work of collection, also invites to re-disperse its fragments.

Indeed, while stressing the collaborative involvement required from the reader to 'complete' the narrative, *Building Stories* suggests at the same time that this drive to bring the pieces together will necessarily remain open-ended, fragmentary. At the back of the box, Chris Ware makes suggestions about 'appropriate places to set down, forget or completely lose any number of its contents within the walls of an average well-appointed home.' The isometric depiction of the protagonist's suburban house that features these suggestions draws another analogy between the reader's work of reading, and her engagement with the story of the main protagonist. Moreover, it is an invitation to return the fragments of *Building Stories* to their ephemerality, to integrate them into the space of the reader's everyday life, to open them again to new changes and other collections. In this sense, the balances between the 'archival' and the 'ephemeral' functions underlined by Henry Jenkins in his analysis of Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towards*: like Spiegelman, it could be said that Ware 'rejects the monumentalism that too often surrounds the archive and instead embraces an approach that explores the partial, incomplete nature of the ephemeral' (Jenkins 2013, 310). Between a 'keepsake box' that the reader is invited to 'hold on to' and the invitation to the dispersal of its contents, Chris Ware foregrounds his own comics as ephemeral artifacts, subject to the passing of time and to the whims of his readers: *Building Stories* is, ultimately, what the readers decide to make out of it.

### *Building Stories* and the Database Aesthetics of Comics

While showcasing a strong attachment to print artifacts from the past, *Building Stories* might be paving the way for the 'book of the future,' as Aaron Kashtan incisively argued in a piece laying out its hypertextual structure and its inspirations from digital culture. The connective, random-access and network-like modes of reading that Chris Ware invites his readers to perform are indeed fully in tune with the interactive acts of selection and navigation that digital media have rendered ubiquitous. Arguably though, Ware is not so much inspired by contemporary digital culture as much as he recovers aspects that have always been core to comics culture: the way *Building Stories* manages to reintroduce the serial gap into the graphic novel foregrounds how this media-archeological work reinvigorates modes of seriality akin to the database aesthetics of new media that, as Lev Manovich (2001) argued, has become the dominant cultural form. As an



archive of its own serialization and as an homage to the material history of comics, *Building Stories* embodies the 'structural affinities of the comics form with the "database aesthetic"' that, according to Jared Gardner, 'has contributed to the increasing visibility and relevance of the comics form in the twenty-first century' (2012a, 149). Gardner convincingly argues that comics often work as a 'visual archive for the reader's necessary work of rereading, resorting, reframing' (2012, 177), highlighting the 'heterochrone quality of the graphic novel' (Gaudreault and Marion 2015, 81) as an object that can be flipped through and reshuffled by the reader, manipulating time at her will. These practices, core to comics reading, are now increasingly present in contemporary culture, as the fascination for non-linear or non-narrative elements pervade both contemporary experimental and blockbuster cinema, and as the VCR and the DVD have provided film viewers with the opportunity of replaying, slowing down and stopping to analyze stills. As Gardner puts it, tongue-in-cheek, '[t]he DVD and the digital age has made us all comics readers now, even if we never pick up a comic book' (2012a, 183).

This changed media ecology has deep implications for seriality. As Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann (2013, 5) argue, 'serial forms and processes, as well as their underlying temporalities, are thus subject to radically new conditions of mediation': digital seriality eschews the traditionally linear, regular episodic narratives, as DVD collections and near-instant online archiving of series introduce a heterochrone dimension into the consumption of serial narratives.<sup>xiv</sup> If *Building Stories* does not rely on models of digital seriality, the way it collects its dispersed installments undoubtedly explores a nonlinear database aesthetic. In this sense, it invites us to rethink seriality in comics beyond a linear model of serialization, echoing Jason Dittmer's invitation to pay more attention to 'the temporality of what happens post-production, and the ongoing material existence of the comic book or graphic novel itself as part of a simultaneous archive' (2014, 134).<sup>xv</sup> *The ACME Novelty Archive* website, listing the serialized publication history of *Building Stories*, foregrounds this existence of Ware's graphic novel as a list of discrete items, fragments serialized in various material forms that constitute a kind of database for the reader to organize and sift through. Just as 'the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list' (Manovich 2001, 225), Chris Ware refuses to reorder these distinct serial items into a single collected graphic narrative, leaving its fragments partly rearranged, partly loose and putting the work of building its stories into the hands of the reader.

Tapping into the dynamics bound to serialization and collecting in order to splice narrative and database logic, *Building Stories* explores for comics what Ed Folsom recently called an 'archival narrative,' that is 'a narrative that is much more conscious of, attached to, and interactive with the mass of fragments out of which it comes and into which it dissolves' (Folsom 2016, 27).

Drawing from this practice of dispersed serialization, Chris Ware's remediation of the graphic novel format into a box-of-comics pertinently draws the reader's attention to the very processes of dispersing and collecting these fragments, as the reader alternately brings these bits and pieces to cohere, to form a narrative, while a centrifugal drive will disconnect them again, opening them up to new combinations, new assemblages. This archival narrative is powerfully at work in Ware's explorations of the characters' memories as they are intertwined with the places and urban areas they live in (Dittmer, 2014b). Moreover, Ware repeatedly stated that he was aiming, with this box format, at 'reflect[ing] the way we remember stories and the details of life,' more specifically focusing on how 'we can take them apart and put them back together again to perpetually retell the stories of ourselves and of others' (qtd. in Randle 2012). By relying on a database logic and reflexively using the temporal dynamic of serialization, Chris Ware explores new ways of narrative that are not only about representing mental memories in a way that allows various temporalities to jumble and mingle together, but also subtly about memorializing the very material iterations of comics and the changing history of the medium, making its readers' aware of their own entanglement with these objects.

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<sup>i</sup> On 'finishedness' as a literary norm, see Wallen (2015).

<sup>ii</sup> On graphic novels and cultural status, see Pizzino (2016); for a review of *Building Stories* that playfully highlights its various

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- readerships (the 'comics geek' and the 'literary-minded,' to put it bluntly), see Gardner (2012b).
- iii Describing this shift, some critics even talk of a "europeanization" of American comics (Gabilliet 2005).
- iv If print serialization is losing ground, one should perhaps add that new forms of seriality (for both 'mainstream' and 'alternative' comics) are emerging in the context of digital comics. Furthermore, digital modes of distribution have encouraged the development of a do-it-yourself culture through which many comics artists publish, serialize, and distribute their own works.
- v Following a dynamic perspective on media history as illustrated by the work of André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion (2015).
- vi 'Differential text,' according to Marjorie Perloff, are 'texts that exist in different material forms, with no single version being the definitive one' (quoted in Baetens and Frey 2015, 107).
- vii For a more general analysis of importance of details to the act of reading *Building Stories*, see Leroy (2014).
- viii On the archival impulse in contemporary comics, see also Jeet Heer's (2010) article on Ware's acts of canon-formation as well as Henry Jenkins' (2013) analysis of Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*.
- ix Benjamin Widiss (2013) and Ariela Freedman (2015) have respectively written on the connexions between Chris Ware's comics and, respectively, Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp.
- x Bart Beaty (2012, 152-182) and Benjamin Woo (2012) have both explored how comic book collectors have become less readers than speculators.
- xi On the conversion of the "Touch Sensitive" fragment of *Building Stories* from digital app to print, see Kashtan (2015, 441-446).
- xii About the centrality of memory in Ware's comics, see Sattler (2010).
- xiii Available at: [www.acmenoveltyarchive.org](http://www.acmenoveltyarchive.org).
- xiv Viewers and readers have now more and more control on how they access the serial material they consume, such as practices of binge watching or repeated viewing (Mittell 2015).
- xv Dittmer further goes on to point at the database logic (2014a, 35).