

## WEEK 5

### THE DEMOCRATIC GRID

By “democratic,” I am referring to a grid of panels that are all exactly the same size, from which we can infer their equal weight and value in the “grand scheme” of the page. We can also think of this type of grid as an invisible template; it does not call immediate attention to itself, but invites us to an unimpeded narrative flow, acting as a living “calendar” of events, sweeping or microscopic. The democratic grid need not be uninteresting or undistinguished; with a spirited approach, it can be the apotheosis of elegance, simplicity, and sophistication.

We humans intuitively divide our existence into “evenly spaced” units of time (not coincidentally, these are rooted in the cyclical patterns we see in nature: in the night sky, the tides, birth and death, our very heartbeats). At the same time, these units are constructions of our minds. Is there really a division between one moment and the next, independent of our perception (and therefore conception)? Is life not in a constant, ineffable flux? Any given instant is the effect of all that has come before it and simultaneously the cause of all that will come after it. We can no more separate the two than we can come up with an absolute dividing line between “order” and “chaos.” Is there a threshold point where the random becomes orderly, or vice versa?

We experience the comics page both as a whole and as a sum of its parts; moreover, “form” and “content” are not just inseparable, but actually originate interdependently. If we share an anecdote with someone, the minute we begin to tell the story we have content, and at the same time we have form (even if sloppy or incomplete), i.e., that which we perceive as an “anecdote.” The biggest mistake we can make is to separate form from content. We are then left not with comics, but with illustrated text. Worse

yet, we might be grafting a macabrely severed face onto another being's malformed visage, or trying to play a Deep Purple song on a spinet piano.

Thus far, we have been limiting ourselves to drawing panels of the exact same size, so that we may strengthen our ability to compose, always being aware of the "frame," the edges of the panel (and by extrapolation, the page). The panel is content is form is a rose is a rose.

### Exercise 5

Start at the top left corner of your sketchbook page. Draw a simple head in profile (include only an eye and nose). Moving slightly to the right, draw the same head again, but with the addition of an eyebrow. Again move to the right, drawing the same head (same size) with the same eyebrow. Do this without thinking too much, and draw quickly. Keep moving rightward, drawing that same head, same eyebrow. When you get to the rightmost edge, start another tier and repeat the process. But now gradually allow yourself to vary the eyebrow from head to head. Try many different eyebrows. Let the previous eyebrow suggest the next one. Every so often, try again to draw a series of heads with the same eyebrow. Then go back to varying the eyebrows. You will eventually have an entire page full of simple heads expressing a sequence of emotions.

Note that minute shifts in the eyebrows, whether or not intentional, subtly alter the emotion expressed. More importantly, note that even without drawing one, a democratic grid is implied. It is the natural inclination of the mind to seek order and structure. Note also that a "story" is suggested. Here we are seeing the cartooning language in its simplest form: we are "reading" the pictures.

### HOMWORK ASSIGNMENT 5

Draw a simple page, using 12, 15, 16, or 24 panels of equal size. Black and white. You may draw the original at any size, but make a photocopy and reduce it to 8½ x 11 inches. Optional: include a title, drawn by hand (do not typeset it). If you decide to use a title, place it outside the grid of panels (i.e., at the top, bottom, or side of the strip).

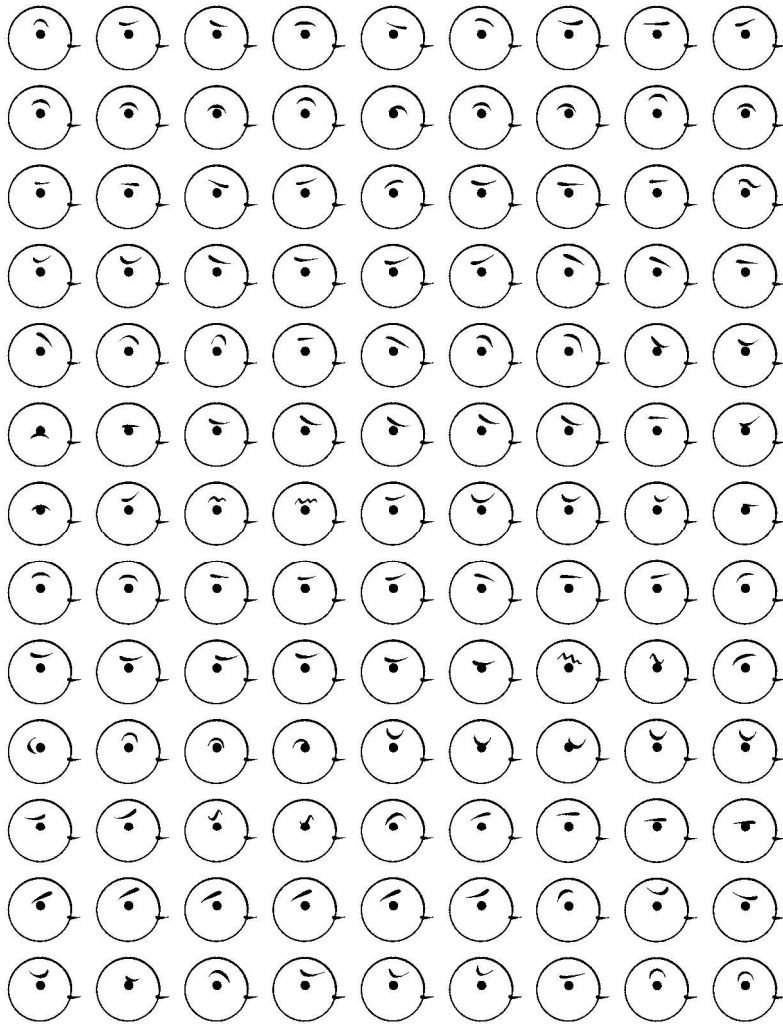


Figure 5. The "eyebrow-to-eyebrow" transition, an idea shamelessly stolen from Chris Ware.

The subject of this week's assignment is something with which we all have experience: childhood. The story can be fictional, but base it on experience and observation. To get started, doodle in your sketchbook, or write a few words. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear "childhood story"?

Perhaps you can begin by drawing your old bedroom. We can remember a surprising amount of detail once we let our minds wander. Was there a television in the living room? What was a typical dinner like? Did you have a favorite toy? Was there a playground at your school? What did the classroom look like? Or feel like? Can you see your old desk? A house you walked past every day? A pet? Your friends? Enemies?

Quite often, a story takes shape by visualizing a place, maybe a room, and someone in that place. Then a sound, a smell, or an emotion. Start with one strong image and move from there: forward, backward, wherever that image takes you.

## WEEK 6

### THE HIERARCHICAL GRID

We can liken drawing a comic to creating a miniature reality on the page, or, as Chris Ware has said, “dreaming on paper.” Let us consider the dream: is it autobiography or fiction? On the one hand, dreams are leaps of imagination, evidence of the plasticity of the information stored in your brain, recombining in sometimes fantastic, startling ways that you could never imagine in waking life—thus a form of fiction. At the same time, that fiction could come only from your own particular brain and the stimuli it has processed and retained. Every character in your dream is basically... you. Or an extension of you. The dream is all about you, its unconscious author. In the end, autobiography and fiction are not a dichotomy but a polarity, a continual tug and pull that can never be precisely pinned down and measured.

A comics page reflects the way the author remembers his own experience of reality, the flow of time, the importance of people, places, and things. In comics, the number and relative sizes of panels, the scale and density of the information within the panels, any shifts in the viewing angle, even words themselves are simultaneously visual and literary tools. Think deeply about the concepts of “relative size,” “shifting scale,” and “point of view,” for in comics they are both literal (drawing-wise) and figurative (writing-wise) and thus an inextricable part of the narrative rhythm. We must take care not to jar the reader out of the narrative, inadvertently severing the reader’s identification or empathy with the character(s) or story.

The architecture of the comics page can be austere yet playful; it can draw us in or keep us at a distance. Once we begin reading, the panels walk us through the structure deliberately, at a certain pace. Furthermore, as with moments in time, each panel exists, in a latent state, in all the other

panels—a mutually inclusive whole. As we shall see, there is no great mystery involved in page layout, only common sense. But first, an exercise.

### Exercise 6.1

This is mostly a thought exercise, but you should write down your impressions in your sketchbook and perhaps even make some sketches if you are so inclined. Bear with me, and relax; there are no wrong answers here, only dishonest ones.

Imagine you are walking in the desert. Can you see it in your mind? OK, now, after walking for a while, you come upon a cube. Describe that cube.

Suggestions: How big is it? What is it made of? Is it hollow or solid? Is it on the ground or floating? A part of the desert or detached from it? How do you think it got there? What is your impression of it? What are your feelings about it, if any? Do you touch it? Can you hold it? Do you? Is it impenetrable? How does the desert affect it? Are there any openings? Is it large enough that you can go inside it? Do you? Do you interact with it in some way? Record your feelings about the cube. Why do you think you reacted to it as you did? Are you able to discern its history and makeup, and if so, how? Do you care? How do you think most people would react to it if they saw it? Can anyone other than you even see it? And so on.

Record anything you can about this cube and the impressions it conjures up within you.

### Exercise 6.2

Figure 6 shows a comic strip of the author's cube. Note that the decisions made in the layout of the page imply a sort of "hierarchy" to the panels and their flow. While a democratic grid could suggest a sort of invisible structure, perhaps even objectivity (if such a thing exists), a hierarchical grid asserts itself, introducing new levels of narrative complexity. Used carelessly, it lumbers or pompously swaggers and huffs, oblivious, insensate, and irrelevant; used with consideration, it radiates dignity and generosity of spirit and communes—empathizes, even—with the reader.

Layout is staging, and it follows narrative function. A larger panel accommodates more space and possibly detail. A close-up focuses on and emphasizes something important to the narrative (e.g., a facial expression). A downward view is used when we need to see something interesting

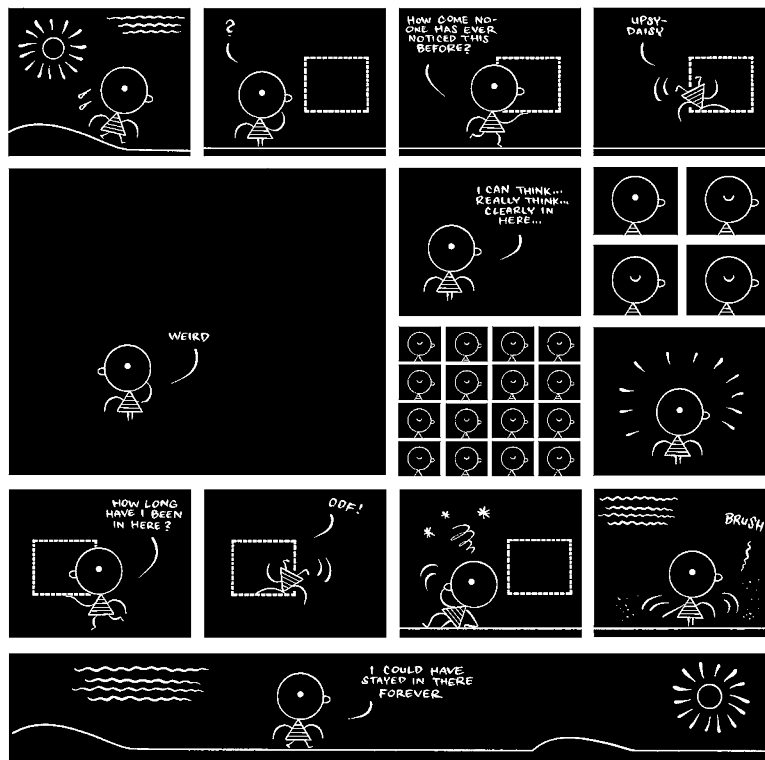


Figure 6. The author unwittingly reveals himself. When we describe the cube, we really are talking about ourselves, how we see ourselves, how we feel about ourselves: the size of our ego, level of detachment, relationship to our environment, etc. Any disingenuousness is tantamount to lying to ourselves; in the end, we all have to "face our inner cube."

or important from “above.” A series of smaller panels can slow down time, while a series of thin, narrow panels can create a rushed sense of fragmentation. Small, cramped panels can feel claustrophobic or myopic, while large, open panels can feel expansive, more “aware” of a larger world. And so on. But note that all of these expectations can be flipped for a sense of tension or disorientation.

#### **HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT 6**

Draw a one-page story, with any layout and any number of panels, as long as there is at least some variation in panel size. Include a title. Reduce the original to 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 11 inches. Black and white.

This time, the story should be about a relationship, or relationships (yes, in the “romantic” sense). It could be about the beginning, middle, or end of a relationship (or all three), the lack of a relationship, a crush or unrequited love, a fantasy, a speculation, an anecdote about a past or current relationship, your general musings on “love,” or anything along these lines. As always, use your own experiences and observations (or even a story someone told you) as a starting point, taking the narrative in whatever direction you wish.