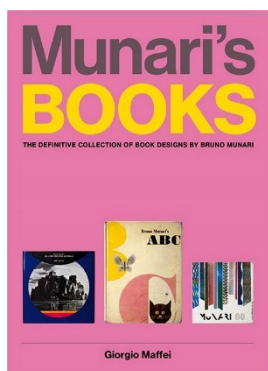


With Munari the Form of the Book Followed its Function

TIAGO SANTOS

CLP | *University of Coimbra*

FCT PhD Fellow



Giorgio Maffei, *Munari's Books*, New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2015. 288 pp. ISBN 978-1-616-89386-6.

M*unari's Books* by Giorgio Maffei, like its subtitles states, is “the definitive collection of book designs by Bruno Munari”, being “the first English-English monograph” about him. Bruno Munari was an Italian designer who lived between 1907 and 1998, and made a huge contribution to an understanding of the materialities of the book and its interdisciplinary functionality as we know it nowadays. He considered books the “best medium to communicate his visual ideas (...) and convey his creative spirit” and by his practices he created new perspectives about the possibilities inherent in bibliographic structures as forms of visual and haptic communication.

“Form follows function” is an architectural concept, first introduced by Louis Sullivan in 1896, in which the pragmatic use and the life of things has a direct influence on the final form of a building. Munari took the same approach to the book as his “experimentation was to use the very material of books as a visual language, after exploring all its literary, philosophical, social, and so forth communication possibilities to the full” (23). Munari was what Massimo Vignelli, another legendary designer, called himself, i.e., an *information architect* who is able to design a book by developing a “language all human beings can understand, as such this is the transformation of a seed into plant, flower, and fruit” (22). Munari knew how to take advantage of the

MATLIT 5.1 (2017): 117-119. ISSN 2182-8830

https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-8830_5-1_11

material as a means of expression making the content accessible “to all cultures and experiences” and making the “general public involved in works of art” (23). Handling his books could promote, much more than the idea of the written word, the idea of rhythm and sensations due to his design choices in creating a direct relationship between form and content or, in another perspective, through the creation of functional forms for communicating to specific audiences. This symbiosis is possible when the designer is simultaneously the author. Munari had “an all-encompassing idea of book production” (26), which meant that he was present at all stages of book manufacture and distribution. This is a major factor for innovation in book design that he brought about, as content and form were imagined together. This approach is still defended by several contemporary designers like Peter Biřak and Karel Martens.

Throughout the book, Giorgio Maffei describes how Munari modelled the materiality of the book as the main vehicle for signification. Paper, bindings, colours, textures, all these elements were used creatively to “entrust to the book” “the message”, allowing that “the invention of the story is left entirely to the child, who, working from the book, can construct games, stories, and inventions using his or her own powers of imagination and socialising” (26). According to Munari, this develops “flexible thinking, ready to adapt to experience and knowledge”, teaching individuals to “think, imagine, dream and be creative” (26). Munari defended that in order to be creative we should have “a mind free from any kind of preconceptions, ready to learn what it needs as it needs it and to change its opinions when a better one appears” (36). Munari also modelled the narrative bringing it closer to film dialogue, “the story began right on the front cover page” in a way “that children would understand it easily” (32). This was also a marketing technique. His books aimed to promote “doing as a means to understanding” (40) which by “genuine experimentation” (40) allowed the “creative individual” (35) to evolve and grow his “creative possibilities (...) as more up-to-date knowledge is gained in every field” (35).

This book allows us to follow Munari’s career closely as he faced several technological and cultural changes of the 20th century. In the same way, he implemented different ways of reading his books from one title to the next, he also had to follow and understand cultural, technological and communication paradigm changes. The survey of Munari’s work is very detailed and provides us with a glance on how he managed his career. The chronological list of works features his books from 1929 to 1990, underlining the perspective that the notion of collection was always present for Munari, allowing his works to be stackable by themes even for long time ranges. The most exciting thing about this book is its ability to show how Munari appropriated new techniques and included them in his work without ever changing his editorial philosophy of “doing as a means to understanding” (40). These new techniques and new technologies, accordingly to Munari, could be a medium to

democratize art (129). On his reflection about “XEROGRAFIA - Documentazione Sull’uso Creativo delle macchine rank Xerox” (1972) he states that “If we want to have art for everyone (...) we have to find some tools to make the job of an artist easier and, at the same time, provide everyone with the skills and methods so they can all work” (129). He further adds that “Grand Art (...) made by a genius for the enjoyment of a few elect, means nothing in the modern age. Art for everyone is still this sort of thing, at the lowest price, and still has the idea of a genius so everyone else has to deal with their inferiority complexes” (129). This statement is as true in 1979 as it is nowadays, as the inferiority complex comes from the idea that art is the product of genius and not of skills and methods that can be experimented with by everyone. Without talent, not even with the best tech tools is possible to produce something with aesthetic value. Nevertheless, easier access to these technological opportunities provides, to those “who has got rid of their inferiority complex” (129), equal opportunity access to artistic practices and to develop their creativity.

Munari argued for the experimentation of new tools, new techniques, new materials, new conjugations of techniques and materials, “with all the ‘tricks of the trade’ that makes things easier” (129) in order to develop the natural expressivity of the materiality of books. If Xerox machines “were designed to copy images, and now they can be used to make them” it is because of a deep sense of experimentation and irreverence that we could surpass the limits of the initial techniques. That is the legacy of Bruno Munari that Giorgio Maffei has surveyed in this book, which will inspire most of us.

© 2017 Tiago Santos.

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).