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Functionality and non-functionality in Bruno Munari's art and design: a translation semioethic analysis

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Abstract: During his extensive career as an artist, designer, and pedagogue, Bruno Munari (1907–1998) created a considerable number of highly innovative works spanning from visual art and industrial design to experimental books, creative and essay writing, photography and film, and nowadays is increasingly acknowledged as one of twentieth-century Italy's most significant and eclectic figures. This contribution focuses on the dialectics between functionality and non-functionality in Munari's oeuvre through the translation semioethic analysis of some of his most iconic works: his *Macchine inutili*, *Sculture da viaggio*, *Libri illeggibili*, and *Sedia per visite brevissime*. For Munari, design should aim at the realization of the category of functional correctness, according to the principle that, in the design field, “one never judges an object as beautiful or ugly, but as right or wrong according to its functions, including its psychological function.” In parallel, he conceived his artistic works as useless objects in which the rule welcomes chance, functionality submits to gratuitousness, utility gives way to futility, and logic opens up to fantasy. Through this dialogic reversal, Munari's artistic projects become experimental models of new educational, productive, and communicative processes, and place the aesthetic experience at the basis of social integration and the acquisition of ethical values.

Keywords: Bruno Munari; visual art; design; translation semiotics; functionality; semioethics

1 Bruno Munari and the function of non-functionality

Born in Milan in 1907, Bruno Munari was a designer and artist widely known for his research in a diverse range of fields and disciplines spanning from visual

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Figure 1: Federico Patellani, *Bruno Munari*. Milano, 1950. @ Archivio Federico Patellani, courtesy Regione Lombardia/Museo Nazionale di Fotografia, Milan-Cinisello Balsamo, Italy.

communication and cinematography to the visual arts, children's literature, and art pedagogy (Figure 1; Antonello et al. 2017).¹ During his life as well as after his death in 1998, various exhibitions of his work were held in Europe, the Americas, and Japan. Since his passing away, Munari, described by Pablo Picasso as “the new Leonardo,” has been increasingly recognized as one of the most inspirational creative figures of all time, both in Italy and internationally. At the same time, his eclecticism led to him becoming a kind of moving target for art critics and brought a degree of marginalization of his work in academic discussion on the grounds of its being too “undisciplined,” too difficult to fit the established lexicon of the various disciplines (Sammicheli and Rubino 2015; Zanoletti 2017, 2020). Nevertheless, over the years Munari has attracted a sizeable following that extends beyond the conventional bounds of artistic circles and art criticism.

¹ This contribution comes from my participation in the workshop designed by Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, entitled “Semioethics of translatability in presentday global communication,” held during the *Twenty-third International Roundtables for the Semiotics of Law-IRSL 2023*, May 24–27, 2023, at Pontificia Università Antonianum in Rome.

This contribution focuses on one specific facet of Bruno Munari's production, which, despite the growing academic interest in his work, so far has been considered only in a fragmented way by critics and scholars: the dialectics between functionality and non-functionality. This gap is particularly evident when considering that functionality is a fundamental aspect of design, on which Munari repeatedly insists in his nonfiction writing. In his book *Design as Art* (Munari 2008 [1966]: 30), for example, the author explains that the designer's task is to "give [the object] a form as appropriate as possible to its function, a form that one might say arises spontaneously from the function." For him, design should aim at the realization of the category of functional correctness, according to the principle that, in the design field, one never judges an object as beautiful or ugly, but as right or wrong according to its functions, including its psychological function. In parallel, Munari conceived of his specifically artistic works as useless objects aimed at pure aesthetic contemplation. In these works, the rule welcomes chance, functionality submits to gratuitousness, utility gives way to futility, and logic opens up to fantasy. As this analysis aims to suggest, through this dialogic reversal, Munari's artistic projects become experimental models of new educational, productive, and communicative processes, and place the aesthetic experience at the basis of social integration and the acquisition of ethical values.

The discussion that follows is structured into three main parts. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework that has provided the inspiration for this reflection, namely, Augusto Ponzio's and Miguel Benasayag's critique of functionality. Section 3 illustrates the methodology of inquiry applied to Munari's visual output, which combines a translation studies approach with a semioethical perspective. Section 4 contains the analysis of four projects: Munari's *Useless machines*, *Travel sculptures*, *Unreadable books*, and *Chair for very short visits*. The conclusion offers a summary of the most relevant results, emphasizing the dynamics between functionality and non-functionality as a key aspect of the socio-educational scope of Munari's creative endeavor. In the light of this dynamic, the artist appears under a new light: not only as an outstanding designer, but also as an intellectual interested in putting forward his own world vision to "respond to the human need of his time, and help people to solve certain problems without stylistic preconceptions or false notions of artistic dignity derived from the schism of the arts" (Munari 2008 [1966]: 32).

2 In praise of non-functionality

My first involvement with Bruno Munari's work dates back almost two decades, with the creation of a workshop for Italian language students based on his book

Supplemento al Dizionario italiano (Munari 1958).² In the following years, I participated in international conferences, collaborated in scientific initiatives, and authored studies on his work, including the first-ever collective monograph on Munari's art published in English (Antonello et al. 2017). My reflection on his oeuvre has always focused on the link between words and images and on translational issues, through an experimental approach based on the application of translation theories and methodologies to the visual realm.

This enquiry on the dialectics between functionality and non-functionality has been stimulated by two contemporary thinkers who criticize the notion of *functionality* in different but interrelated ways.³ Although their theories engage with Munari's work only implicitly, they raise, I believe, relevant questions about contemporary globalized societies, prompting new interpretations of his creative and intellectual legacy.

The first inspiring conceptualization comes from the Italian semiotician, linguist, and language philosopher Augusto Ponzio. Often in collaboration with Susan Petrilli, on several occasions Ponzio has devoted special attention to functionality from a sociosemioethic perspective, considering it as a negative symptom of the capitalistic globalized world. In this context, the word *functionalism* indicates the theory that all aspects of a society serve a function, and *functionality* indicates a quality pertaining to human beings as well as non-human subjects and objects. In *Elogio dell'infunzionale. Critica dell'ideologica della produttività* (2022 [1997]), however, Ponzio criticizes this view, proposing that “the right to non-functionality is the right to be valid for oneself, as an end in oneself, as a non-relative otherness” (Ponzio 2022 [1997]: 137; also: Petrilli 2025; Petrilli and Ponzio 2024a, 2024b).⁴ From his perspective, the non-functional coincides with the human: “the right to non-functionality means to have value in oneself, to be considered for nothing, to be loved for nothing, independently of one's usefulness, to be valuable in oneself. The right to non-functionality is the right to be considered for oneself” (Ponzio 2016: 23).

2 In *Supplemento al Dizionario italiano*, Munari examines the many ways Italian people employ for expressing themselves without using words, using not just hands but also facial expressions and bodily gestures. The author conceived it as a supplement to the Italian dictionary for use by foreign visitors (see Antonello 2021; Zanoletti 2017: 208).

3 The translation perspective adopted in this article does not engage with *functionalist* translation theories. It is worth mentioning here that functionalist approaches to translation are derived from the so-called *Skopostheorie* brought forward by Hans J. Vermeer between the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Drawing on action theory, functionalism lends itself to intersemiotic applications, building a bridge toward other disciplines, such as adaptation studies and transfer studies (see Nord 2023).

4 In Petrilli and Ponzio 2024b, the term “infunctionality” replaces “non-functionality.” While the two words appear interchangeable, I choose the adjective “non-functional,” because it is the term used in Ponzio's early works and because, unlike “infunctional,” it is featured in English dictionaries. Here and afterwards in this article, English translations are by the author of this paper.

And yet “human rights,” observes Ponzio, do not contemplate the right to non-functionality. Indeed, until the right to life is unrelated to the right to non-functionality, it remains within a vision of man as a means, reduced to a capital that is valued “for the entire duration of active life” (Ponzio 2022 [1997]: 139). The philosopher laments that “in today’s world of communication-production, development, efficiency, competitiveness ... are the fundamental values” and that, in such a consumerist system, “the right to non-functionality assumes a subversive character” (Ponzio 2022 [1997]: 137). His is a reflection of a semioethical nature, that is, concerning the link between signs and values (see Section 3.2).

Ponzio’s critique of functionality allows us to cast a new light on Munari’s visual work, calling attention to a fil rouge of his artistic production. Within Munari’s oeuvre, as we shall see in due course, the theme of non-functionality is a recurring motif always associated to a sense of subversiveness and provocation. His *Useless machines*, to anticipate one of the examples analyzed (see Section 4.1), are a parody of Futurism. They overturn and satirize the Futurist veneration of technology and progress as well as the myths of performance and utility. These “dysfunctional” works reflect Munari’s ironic critique of development, efficiency, and competitiveness (Antonello 2012; Pizzi 2019).

Echoing and complementing Ponzio’s reflections, the Argentinian philosopher and psychiatrist Miguel Benasayag stresses the undervalued importance of the non-functional at the intersection of biology and epistemology and offers insights that also resonate with Munari’s work. In assonance with Ponzio’s theories, in *Fonctionner ou exister?*, Benasayag complains that contemporary society is driven solely by the principle of functionality (Benasayag 2019: 61). In the Western world, technology and technique have become the new religion, the new source of hope, to the point that people perceive and judge themselves as *machines that must function* (Benasayag 2019: 23, 38, emphasis mine). The scholar writes that “today’s attraction for optimal functioning, fitness, performance, increase is rooted in and feeds on the fear in which our societies live. But giving in to fear and taking refuge in functioning presupposes the annihilation of the desire to exist, which is based on the fragility of the living, on the fragility of the existing” (Benasayag 2019: 101).

In the above passage, two details are striking. First, Benasayag explicitly associates functionality with machines, hence evoking Munari’s *Macchine inutili*. Second, he connects the desire to exist with *fragility*, a concept that is central in many of Munari’s visual projects. As will be argued later, for his creations Munari frequently selected fragile, humble materials, aiming to evoke a sense of vulnerability, transformation, and, ultimately, reversal/subversion.⁵

5 Reversal is listed among the key mechanisms of Munari’s creativity in Zanoletti 2020.

Another pivotal issue addressed by Benasayag's theory of functionality and reflected in Munari's work is children's education. According to the Argentinian thinker, today's education tends to focus solely on utilitarian learning, lacking cultural transmission and neglecting the development of the child's personal interests. This, he denounces, is a clear sign of a society driven by functionality (Benasayag 2019: 15). This theme is also addressed in *Les passions tristes*, written with Gérard Schmit. In this book, the two authors argue that in the contemporary world everything must serve a purpose, and this utilitarianism reverberates on the younger generations and shapes them. There is therefore a need to rediscover the joy of disinterested doing, of the utility of the useless (Benasayag and Schmit 2003).

Munari also believed that children's education should be connected to the nurturing of their personal inclinations with no immediate purpose. He created some of his works specifically to educate both children and adults. His approach to pedagogy was deeply influenced by the maieutic method, with a focus on enhancing visual literacy and artistic creativity, especially among children. This method directly opposed the traditional, text-based educational model that has shaped Western cultures for centuries (on this topic, see Antonello 2019: 332, 346; Zanoletti 2017: 201).

Benasayag (2019: 11) proposes that our existences and societies cannot be understood solely through the utilitarian perspective of functionality. He states that "every situation in our existence involves a transformation of what is given, a new roll of the dice: each situation reshapes us, reconnects us with different ways of being, new challenges, and other roles" (Benasayag 2019: 16). Echoing the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who viewed the world as in constant change, reflected in his phrases like *πάντα ῥεῖ* ('everything flows') and "no man ever steps in the same river twice" (Benasayag 2019: 66), Benasayag emphasizes that becoming is not just the context in which life unfolds, but an essential aspect of life itself, of being (Benasayag 2019: 84). Making reference to the concept of translation, the philosopher remarks that life cannot be predetermined by efficiency nor functionality: we are in a continuous state of transformation (Benasayag 2019: 70–71), which allows us to seek not a straightforward continuation of the original, lacking engagement (*translation*), but a harmonious relationship with it (*transduction*). Within this dynamic, transformative process, non-functionality plays a central role.

The above argumentations find clear correspondence in Munari's work, where the translative dynamism of a form and its representation is fundamental. In his art, everything is in a state of transformation, and the real or perceived movement enables the creation of multiple forms. For example, Munari's mobiles harness the wind and the surrounding light to keep his artworks in constant motion and change (see Section 4.1). Indeed, his entire body of work is unstable, always directed towards ongoing transformation and mutation (Zaffarano 2023: 15–18). From this perspective, it is essential to highlight that Munari, like the American musician John Cage, was a

follower of Zen philosophy, particularly drawn to its principles of self-emptying and the rejection of self-centered or judgmental thinking, as well as its emphasis on the necessity of relinquishing any sense of purpose, function, or intention. As Daoist philosopher Zhuang-zi stated, men all know the usefulness of being useful, but no one knows the usefulness of being useless. In a similar way that Zen Buddhism encourages meditation on emptiness, Munari asserts that *pensare confonde le idee* ('thinking confuses ideas'; Antonello 2019: 348).

3 A translation-semioethical approach to Munari's work

Drawing on Ponzio's and Benasayag's reflections and developing previous research focused on the link between translation and the visual arts (Vidal Claramonte 2022; Zanoletti 2011, 2012, 2013), my analysis integrates a dual experimental approach. On one hand, the perspective of *translation* offers a framework to explore the inter-semiotic and interepistemic connections between various media, genres, and meanings in Munari's production. This allows for a deeper understanding of how Munari's work transcends boundaries, seamlessly blending different forms of expression. On the other hand, the theoretical perspective offered by *semioethics* provides a model for reflecting on the relationship between signs and meaning, particularly in terms of their ethical implications (Petrilli and Ponzio 2003, 2010, 2024a). More specifically, the semioethical approach allows for an exploration of how Munari's work engages with social responsibility, considering how the messages conveyed through his art influence or challenge societal norms and values. By integrating these two perspectives in terms of *translation semioethics* (Petrilli and Zanoletti forthcoming; Zanoletti forthcoming), a fresher understanding of the complexity and depth of Munari's creative output will be attempted.

3.1 Translation beyond verbocentrism

The first fundamental concept employed here to investigate Munari's work is that of *translation*. In English, the term "translation" is primarily used to refer to the process of reformulating a verbal text from one natural language into another (Marais 2019: 4; Petrilli and Zanoletti 2023: 340–341). "Translation" is also the metaphor employed by Benasayag to refer to the mere replication of a source as to a process lacking engagement (see Section 2). This restricted meaning is still dominant in the field of translation studies, although increasingly challenged thanks to the influence of social

sciences, cultural studies, and semiotics (Petrilli 2003). When applied to Munari's oeuvre, the concept of "translation" is not necessarily linked to language. In its etymological, broad, semiotic sense, the term also implies:

- transformation
- moving or carrying something from one place or position to another
- inferring the significance of something (semiotic conceptualization)

As is well-known, according to Charles Peirce, the meaning of any system of signs is its translation into any other semiosystem. Meaning is creating relations between signs, and "translation" is a term that applies to all processes that involve meaning-making and -taking. From this perspective, translation is viewed as work performed on semiotic material to constrain the material to a particular difference that makes a particular difference (Marais 2019: 5–7). Intersemiotic translation triggers creativity through the work of new sets of constraints (Petrilli and Zanoletti 2023).

As is evident, in order to analyze Munari's creative work through the lens of translation, it is paramount to move beyond the verbocentric scope and consider translation as an inherent element of semiosis. From a broader perspective, translation becomes a cognitive operation that facilitates transformative processes, such as those involved in invention and design (Zingale 2016: 79). Creative and artistic practice itself can be seen as a form of translation for two main reasons:

- 1) it serves as a mediator, bridging a set of ideas or content and the viewer or interpreter, enabling access to meaning;
- 2) the new sign system that emerges is dependent on, or shaped by, the prior sign system: $SSS = f(PSS)$ (Zingale 2016: 88)

These arguments are reflected in Africa Vidal Claramonte's theory of translation, which emphasizes that in today's visual culture, verbal language is but one component of multilingual, multimodal, and multisensorial repertoires (Vidal Claramonte 2022: 1).

Assuming this enlarged, semiotic understanding of translation, the question is: *Are there elements of Munari's functional and non-functional work that, although not explicitly labelled as "translation," can be considered translational? Which aspects of his visual work involve a semiotic process of transformation?* Attempting answers to these questions can help unearth how Munari's creative processes align with the principles of semiotic transformation and mediation, even in instances where the term "translation" is not directly applied.

3.2 Signs and values in translation

The second fundamental concept employed to examine Munari's work is that of *semioethics*. Born in the early 1980s as a result of the research activities conducted by Petrilli and Ponzio, semioethics is an innovative perspective in the study of signs and sign systems that inherits the critical instance of the philosophy of language: the search for sense and meaning. Within this specific epistemological sphere, *translation semioethics* is a branch of interdisciplinary research across semiotics and translation studies, that explores the link between signs and values in translation (Petrilli and Zanoletti forthcoming; Zanoletti forthcoming). The term “semioethics,” a portmanteau of the two terms “semiotics” and “ethics,” indicates not a discipline in its own right, but an axiological orientation of semiotic studies, aimed at investigating the relation between ancient semeiotics and modern and contemporary semiotics, and between signification and significance, meaning and sense (Petrilli and Ponzio 2024a: 193).

From the perspective of anthroposemiosis, semioethics contrasts the non-functional with the ideology of functionality, productivity, and competition tied to social roles. Following Peirce's conceptualization of translation, Ponzio and Petrilli suggest that, given that the meaning of any sign (or sign system) is its translation into another sign (or sign system), it is necessary to acknowledge the logic of otherness and embrace the dimension of the non-functional, the unproductive, and the logic of the gift without expectation of return, as well as the logic of excess. These elements are fundamental to human semiosis and are an essential condition for a meaningful critique of communication.

In this study, translation semioethics provides an interdisciplinary perspective to explore the connection between signs and values as well as the interaction between creativity, ethics, communication, and responsibility in Munari's artistic practice. On such a basis, the question will be: *How does Munari's functional and non-functional work offer a critical interpretation of the world, and to what extent was it dedicated to seeking potential solutions and improvements?* Put differently: *In relation to the society of his (and our) time, which considers functionality an unquestionable value, how did Munari position himself?* Addressing these topics, I believe, will allow us to recognize the semioethical significance of Munari's work, an aspect of his creative legacy that to this date has remained unexplored.

4 Functionality and non-functionality in Munari's oeuvre

Having outlined the theoretical and methodological framework for this study, I now proceed to analyze four examples from Munari's body of work that illustrate the interaction between the functional and the non-functional: his *Useless machines*, *Travel sculptures*, *Illegible books*, and *Chair for very brief visits*. For each case study, the analysis entails five steps: the illustration of the historical context of production; the semiotic description of the project/work; the identification of functional and non-functional aspects; and the analysis of the translative elements. Following these steps, I aim to unveil the underlying dynamics that shape Munari's artistic approach.

4.1 *Macchine inutili* ('useless machines')

4.1.1 Historical context of production

Munari was especially active in Milan during the 1930s and 1940s. During this time, he experimented with and incorporated many of the innovations of the twentieth-century avant-gardes into his own artistic vision. He participated in the Futurist movement, yet with a critical stance, distancing himself from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's rhetoric, which glorified the machine solely in terms of power and speed (on this topic, see Antonello 2012).⁶ In an interview, the artist explained: "in my projects, the innovations of the greatest avant-garde movements merge with my personal ideas. Tradition is not the past behind us, but something alive within us. Art is not revolution, but evolution" (Zaffarano 2023: 13–14; see also Pizzi 2019: 254).

4.1.2 Description of work

Munari's *Macchine inutili* (Figure 2) derive from his abiding interest in incorporating dynamism into the rigid canonical forms of visual communication.⁷ Along with Alexander Calder, Munari pioneered what is now known as Kinetic art, born of his compulsion to animate abstract art. His series of mobile sculptures were initially made of cardboard or glass, painted in plain colors and held together by simple fastening devices: a slim rod segment, flimsy threads or wires. The components were

⁶ A contemporary example, mirroring Munari's case, of critical distance from Marinetti's Futurism in terms of visual production, is that of the Italian artist Luca Buvoli. See Zanoletti 2012.

⁷ On the influence of cinema on Munari's work and his cinematic production, see Nardelli 2017.



Figure 2: Bruno Munari, *Macchina inutile (per Bill)*, 1953 (1993). Wood, wire, plastic, and screen-printed forex. Ed. Corraini ex. 27/100. Private collection. Photo by Pierangelo Parimbelli © Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini S.r.l.

reciprocally proportional and harmonious, held together in a perfect balance (Munari 2008 [1966]: 15–23; Pizzi 2019: 255; Zanoletti 2020).

Munari named his mobiles *Useless machines* to pay homage to Futurist machines. However, his designs criticize the Futurist exaltation for mechanical automation, expressing an optimistic view toward man, the creator of machines, rather than toward technology (Pizzi 2019: 251).

4.1.3 Functional aspects

Munari's *Useless machines* reflect some of the principles underlying his creative design work. For Munari, the designer is “a planner with an aesthetic sense”

(Munari 2008 [1966]: 29). The chief mission of a designer is not to create beautiful objects, but rather to project functional works. Echoing a Bauhaus principle (“instead of cathedrals, machines for living”) as well as Lamarck’s principle whereby form must follow function, Munari proposes that a designer should make “instead of pictures for the drawing-room, electric gadgets for the kitchen” (Munari 2008 [1966]: 25). In his work, beauty is replaced by formal coherence (Pizzi 2019: 253).

This aspect is present not only in Munari’s design work, but also in his artistic production. For example, in his *Macchine inutili*, shape and weight of the object are functional to the structural balance of the composition.

4.1.4 Non-functional aspects

Munari’s *Macchine inutili* are defined by their sense of incompleteness, their continuous repositioning in both space and time, and their ever-evolving, unpredictable physicality. They possess a modular quality emphasizing changeability and ambiguity, which recalls Benasayag’s emphasis on becoming (Benasayag 2019: 84). Through these creations, the artist liberates the machine from its typical associations with technology, ideology, teleology, and functionality, ultimately questioning the very principles of rationality (Pizzi 2019: 257).

In his reimagining, Munari transformed the Futurist machine into a playful object – light-hearted, whimsical, and humorous (Antonello 2012; Pizzi 2019: 253; Zanoletti 2017: 201–202). He argued that modern machines should abandon their conventional roles as tools of productivity. Rather than serving functional or economic purposes, they should be idle, anti-functional, and purposeless, serving no material consumption or labor-reducing goals, nor contributing to the accumulation of capital. According to Munari, these machines would stand as a critique of the utilitarian nature of most contemporary technology, inviting viewers to reconsider non-functionality as a value, the meaning of objects and their roles in their lives (Munari 2008 [1966], 23; Pizzi 2019: 255). In semioethical terms, the artist celebrated such values as “the singularity, uniqueness, incomparability and unreplaceability of the each one” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2024b: 17–18).

Both the art market and mass taste failed to understand the intellectual and aesthetic value of his machines, treating them as ephemera (Munari 2008 [1966]: 15–16).

4.1.5 Translative aspects

In Munari’s mobiles, continuous movement is a phenomenon of structural transformation/translation. The concept of translation, in other words, is not related to

linguistic factors as much as to spatial and temporal categories. It is also interesting to observe how Munari translated the Futurist machine into a virtual paradigm of *legeresse* (Antonello et al. 2017: 5–8; Pizzi 2019: 257). While remaining conversant with the industrial, utilitarian machine, he aimed to explode it through senseless seriality, automatism, and collapse of function (Pizzi 2019: 254).

A further project testifies to the generative and transformative potential of Munari's *machines*. In 1942 he devised the illustrated book *Le macchine di Munari*, which presented a series of humorous machines including a mechanism to sniff artificial flowers, an appliance to predict dawn, a tail agitator for lazy dogs, and a sultana vending machine. These ready-made, portable, inexpensive, easily produced, and easy-to-handle machines could be used by children (Pizzi 2019: 256). These works also functioned as post-Futurist diversions, intended to observe technological progress with a degree of detachment.

4.2 *Sculture da viaggio* ('travel sculptures')

4.2.1 Historical context of production

The first edition of Munari's *Travel sculptures* (Figure 3) was circulated in 1958, as a gift to the customers of the suitcase-seller Valaguzza in Milan. Munari presented his works by writing short notes on the invitation card to the exhibition, which was also a small sculpture:

These travel sculptures have the function of creating a point of reference where the eye finds a link with the world of one's own culture, in an anonymous hotel room or in an environment where one is hosted. Together with the painting projected in

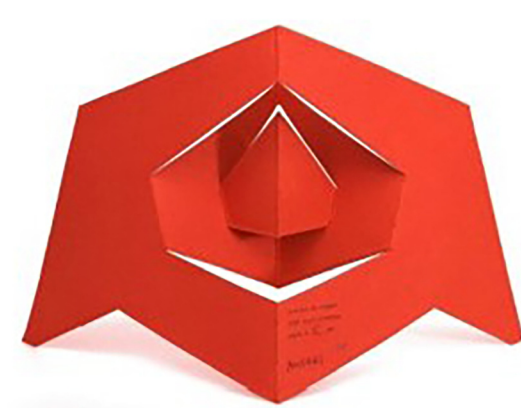


Figure 3: Bruno Munari, *Scultura da viaggio*, 1959. Two-color counter-collated, die-cut, and creased cardboard. Ex 2/300. Private collection, Turin. Photo by Daniele De Lonti © Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini S.r.l.

polarized light, they are part of a new type of art, better suited to today's life (Munari quoted in Zaffarano 2023: 23).

4.2.2 Description of work

The series was part of Munari's research on the miniaturization of the work of art. In the original explanation for them, written at a time when Munari was travelling intensively around the world, his *Travel sculptures* were conceived to be compact and light enough to be taken in a suitcase, so as to help the frequent traveler adorn an otherwise anonymous hotel room (Nardelli 2017: 280). Most were made with paper, just like Japanese origami, or the pop-ups created by today's paper-engineers. Subsequently, some of these foldable structures were made with wood, using leather pieces for the hinges, while some other were produced with metal. Later on, they were turned into sculptures five or six meters tall and made of steel.

The oxymoronic title *Travel sculpture* is descriptive, offering a clear explanation of a possible meaning of the object. Through this title, Munari sought to bridge the gap between high art and pop art, and between the artist and a wider audience, creating affordable art objects (Zaffarano 2023: 25–26).

4.2.3 Functional aspects

Portable, lightweight, and typically produced in multiples, Munari's *Travel sculptures* were designed for easy transport and replication (Nardelli 2017: 280). The artist also referred to these works as objects with an aesthetic function. While design objects are often characterized by a practical purpose, Munari viewed these "hybrid" creations – emerging at the crossroads of different disciplines – as primarily serving an aesthetic role. His mini sculptures, in fact, serve the young, modern traveler's most complex vital needs.

Throughout his writings, Munari consistently links high-quality aesthetics to cultural and pedagogical potential, emphasizing its regenerative impact on the individual. A relevant example, comparable to his *Sculture da viaggio*, is found in his popular book *Artista e designer*, where he describes the architecture of a traditional Japanese home. Despite its humble materials, such a dwelling embodies a fusion of functionality and aesthetic minimalism. Munari suggests that aesthetics has the power to transcend material poverty, rejecting luxury as either excessive waste or an expression of hierarchical power structures (Zaffarano 2023: 25–26). A similar view reflects a subversive attitude to dominant capitalist thinking and echoes Benasayag's critique of today's society, which defies efficiency and performance.

4.2.4 Non-functional aspects

Munari declared that, when conducting his research, he did not think about collectors, nor even about the preciousness of the materials employed. This was why, he wrote, “some sculptures are even presented in cardboard ... one is made of tissue paper, as light as a kite for air travel” (Zaffarano 2023: 23). Their fragility and vulnerability are evident, and emphasize a critique of functionality, competitiveness, even marketability. In this sense, Munari’s work evokes the semioethic perspective, which overturns the logic of productivity and efficiency on which contemporary capitalism is based.

4.2.5 Translative aspects

With his *Travel sculptures*, Munari reinterpreted and adapted the visual language of experimental art, making it accessible and engaging for a general audience. By doing so, he bridged the gap between avant-garde artistic expression and everyday experience, ensuring that art was not confined to elite spaces, but could be appreciated by all. At the core of this transformation was a reimagining of the traditional concept of “high” sculpture – typically associated with exclusivity, permanence, and high material value – into a more democratic, affordable, and widely available form. These sculptures challenged the conventional expectations of monumental sculpture, prioritizing portability, interactivity, and adaptability. Munari’s approach aligned with his broader vision of integrating art into daily life, blurring the boundaries between art, design, and functionality while promoting a more inclusive artistic experience.

4.3 *Libri illeggibili* (‘illegible books’)

4.3.1 Historical context of production

The first example of an *Illegible book* (Figure 4) was introduced in 1949 at the Salto bookstore in Milan, marking the beginning of a groundbreaking artistic exploration (Valecchi 2022: 331). This series, which Munari continued to develop throughout his lifetime, challenged conventional notions of reading and book design by removing linguistic elements and instead focusing on the tactile, visual, and material aspects of the book as an object. By experimenting with color, texture, transparency, and unusual page layouts, Munari transformed the book into a purely sensory and aesthetic experience, redefining the relationship between subject and object. His books remained an ongoing project, evolving in form and concept until his death.



Figure 4: Bruno Munari, *Libro illeggibile bianco, nero e giallo*, 1956. New edition Giorgio Lucini Editore, 2011, 29 × 22.5 cm. Private collection. Photo by Pierangelo Parimbelli. © Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini S.r.l.

4.3.2 Description of work

Visual experimentation and cutting-edge multimodal narrative strategies lie at the heart of all of Munari's books, including his *Libri illeggibili*. With them, Munari introduces animation and dynamism to the act of reading (Campagnaro 2016; Zanoletti 2020: 45). The artist intentionally allows certain compositional elements to be arranged either by the audience or through chance, emphasizing an open-ended approach to meaning-making and -taking. This aligns with the concept of the open work (Eco 1962), where meaning is not fixed but instead emerges through the dynamic interaction between the semiosystem and its recipients.

Munari's wordless books communicate by shapes and colors, sequences, and subject matter. Some semi-transparent pages may give the idea of fog, or smooth pages and rough pages, or soft and stiff pages. They are multi-sensory communication books, as well as visual ones. Made of paper and cardboard, these books take advantage of factors such as thickness, transparency, page size, color, gloss, matte, and folds; in the use of holes and cut-outs, the proximity between Munari's graphic invention and Lucio Fontana's major works is compelling (White 2017). Moreover, these books feature a predominantly geometric orientation free from any imitation or reference to the outside world, the absence of verbal and iconic code and multi-sensory communication relying almost exclusively on paratextual elements (Valecchi 2022: 329, 332).

The “legibility” the title alludes to is intended in the traditional sense of the term, i.e., as a deciphering of the verbal written signs (Valecchi 2022: 333). In fact, with these books the act of reading goes beyond the process of interpreting verbal signs, involving all the senses.

4.3.3 Functional aspects

As stated earlier, the structural form of Munari’s *Libri illeggibili* invites open and free interaction, allowing the viewer to engage with the work in a way that transcends traditional reading. Rather than following a predetermined sequence, the book’s form encourages exploration and personal interpretation, in which the arrangement of elements can be altered, shuffled, or experienced in various ways. This interactive approach challenges conventional notions of the book as a fixed object, transforming it into a dynamic, participatory art piece that reflects Munari’s belief in the fluidity of meaning and the role of the viewer, or the *other*, in constructing it. From a semioethic perspective, the emphasis is on participation, dialogism, and relationality to otherness as a constituent element of semiosis.

In Munari’s *Libri*, non-linguistic elements are not to be considered “extra-textual,” but as distinct visual and textual entities that form an integral part of the narrative discourse. They are functional to the reading experience.

4.3.4 Non-functional aspects

Munari’s *Illegible books* cannot be read sequentially in the traditional sense and encourage a sort of flânerie. Moreover, the “story” has no plot, no dialogue, no character development, no protagonist: readers are the protagonists. This sort of nonsensism can be interpreted as a form of non-functionality (see Zanoletti 2020).

The series encapsulates a deliberate tension towards aphasia, a state where communication becomes fragmented or inaccessible (see Zanoletti 2012). By intentionally stripping the book of traditional linguistic elements, Munari explores the limits of meaning and expression, creating works that challenge the conventional functions of language and text. This tension is not a failure of communication, but rather an invitation to reconsider how meaning can be constructed without relying on writing. Through this approach, Munari pushes the boundaries of how we understand reading and interpretation, offering a new way of experiencing visual and tactile forms of communication, where the absence of readable text opens up a space for personal reflection and subjective interpretation (Valecchi 2022: 331).

Non-functionality is also reflected by the fact that cut, an experimental technique that brought Fontana critical and commercial success, remained, for Munari, intentionally confined to formats and genres that could be diffused at low cost to a lay

audience. The unproductive and the logic of giving without expectation of return become part of his semioethic stance.

4.3.5 Translative aspects

Through his *Illegible books*, Munari initiates a process of intersemiotic translation, shifting from the conventional use of verbal language to a visual and haptic lexicon, drawing on elements of *tattilismo marinettiano* ('tactile sensation'). In doing so, he disrupts the traditional book structure, particularly by removing the usual peritextual elements, thus transforming the act of reading into something akin to a musical experience – an experience that engages the senses in a synesthetic translation.

The process of translation extends beyond the artist's intentions to involve the readers themselves. In Munari's interactive books, children use their fingers to trace and explore the content, effectively translating the book's visual and tactile elements into a physical pantomime. As they move their hands across the pages, they not only follow the story, but also engage in a playful imitation of the actions depicted, translating the visual language of the book into an embodied experience. This engagement allows recipients to actively participate in the construction of meaning, turning reading into a dynamic and personal act.

4.4 *Sedia per visite brevissime* ('chair for very brief visits')

4.4.1 Historical context of production

In 1945, Munari designed an innovative chair for the Italian furniture company Zanotta, showcasing his distinctive approach to art and design. The chair (Figure 5) became a symbol of Munari's creative vision, marked by its minimalist structure and modernist flair. Only nine copies of this chair were ever produced, making it a rare and exclusive piece. The artist in person signed each copy, further enhancing their value as unique works of art. Currently this chair is part of the Zanotta edizioni collection.⁸

With this work, Munari anticipates later conceptual design creations, where the furniture object is emptied of its traditional function.

⁸ See <https://www.zanotta.com/it/prodotti/edizioni/singer> (accessed 17 April 2025).



Figure 5: Bruno Munari, *Sedia per visite brevissime*, 1945 (1988). Walnut wood and aluminum. Ed. Zanotta ex. 6/8. Courtesy Repetto Gallery. Photo by Daniele De Lonti © Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini S.r.l.

4.4.2 Description of work

Does the frenzy that steals time, the speed of modern times, life lived on the run, make us lose the pleasure of meeting, chatting, listening over a cup of tea? With his ironic chair, Munari seems to ask this question and to suggest an answer: *sit down on this chair*. His *Chair for very brief visits*, inclined at 45°, ensures that those who visit us are induced to leave without having to tell them. It looks like a children's slide and therefore refers to the world of play and childhood. The materials are classic: wax polished walnut wood with inlays and an anodized aluminum seat.

The title *Chair for very short visits* plays an important semiotic role, because it provides a key to understanding the work. It reveals that there is no time, that the visitor is probably not welcome, that there is something else to do and the time spent in the meeting is valued as wasted.

4.4.3 Functional aspects

The chair is conceived as an aesthetically harmonious object. This limited production not only reflects the artist's commitment to quality and craftsmanship (in spite of its minimal and rational aesthetics, Munari's *Sedia* features many highly decorative handcrafted parts), but also highlights the artist's desire to create objects that are both functional and conceptually engaging, aligning with his broader philosophy of design as an art form.

Furthermore, it is immediately obvious that the function of the chair is to make the guest feel uncomfortable and push him or her to leave. In other words, Munari's criticism is directed toward boring guests who linger too long. Displaying such a clear purpose, Munari's *Sedia* simplifies the relationship between subject and object.

As an additional interpretation, one could observe that with this work the artist seems to emphasize that in today's society everything is fast-paced: there is no longer time to stop, sit down, and rest. An apparently decorative object becomes in this sense a "light," playful instrument of social criticism. By denouncing a social pathology, Munari's work has not only an aesthetic function, but also an ethical, pragmatic, and therapeutic one: in a word, a semioethic function (Petrilli and Ponzio 2024a: 152).

4.4.4 Non-functional aspects

With this project, Munari develops a research design that is useful only from an aesthetic point of view. His *Chair* is a humorous and irrational object.

Although Munari's chair appears welcoming, sitting on it is uncomfortable, almost impossible. This makes it dysfunctional compared to a conventional chair.

Another facet of Munari's project that is reflective of its non-functional character is the fact that the *Chair* was not (re)produced on an industrial scale, but only in a limited edition. As his *Sculture da viaggio* also suggest (see Section 4.2), competitiveness is not a fundamental value.

4.4.5 Translative aspects

With his *Sedia per visite brevissime*, Munari literally shifts/translates the sitting area of the chair, making it uncomfortable. This is, therefore, a translation in the spatial sense, not in the linguistic sense. Moreover, even though the shape of the chair is classic, its inclination translates this object into a purely aesthetic version of a piece of furniture. In this sense, too, the translational character is about moving from one creative field to another, rather than moving from one natural language to another.

5 Conclusions

As this analysis has shown, although Munari did not refer to his own work employing the term "translation," the creative process entailed by the production of his artworks involved translation on many levels. Through translation, he constantly remediated his artistic research and experimentation in a variety of aesthetic genres and across a range of forms of expression, moving between functionality and non-functionality.

In Munari's work, translation does not primarily underlie interlingual transformation, but rather communication and exchange between different generations, artistic practices, and discursive communities. From a semioethical viewpoint, his translation work implies a critical reading of contemporary society, since one of its aims was to search for alternative ideas, possible remedies, and improvements. From this perspective, aesthetics in Munari is strongly political and ethical: in his seemingly a-political work, everything is aimed at disrupting all cultural assumptions in order to translate/transform, at least to some extent, viewers.

Beginning with the *Useless machines* produced at the height of Fascism and his *Illegible books* conceived under the bombings of World War II, all Munari's projects appear to be united by his attempt to detach himself from the heaviness and sadness of the world, to lighten a burdensome life, and to be elsewhere, far from the events of history. At the same time, the interplay between functionality and non-functionality serves as a lens for analyzing and critiquing the present, offering a means of social intervention and a way to challenge a society obsessed with market production, profit, consumerism, and individual self-interest (Petrilli and Ponzio 2024b: 17).

With his *Macchine inutili*, Munari mocked any acritical, banal exaltations of technology. He operated an intergenre, adaptational translation, transforming the Futurist machine into a celebration of non-functional seriality and automatism. With the book *Le macchine di Munari*, moreover, he resemiotized his own ideal of the non-functional into a series of imaginary objects that could be appreciated by children and adult alike. With the *Sculture da viaggio* series, the Milanese author activated a transmedial translation, turning an expensive visual art format into visual experience affordable for everyone. With his *Libri illeggibili*, Munari translated synesthetically, turning the experience of reading verbal signs into the rhythmical experience of reading visual and tactile signs: the result is an open work which involves readers into using their fingers and exploring the book digitally. Finally, with his *Sedia per visite brevissime*, Munari operated a material, topological translation: he tilted the sitting area of the chair, translating this object into a purely aesthetic version of a piece of furniture, totally uncomfortable but thought-provoking.

Other noteworthy examples of Munari's creative interpretation of the interplay between functionality and non-functionality are his *Scarabocchi* ('Scribbles') and *Tempo libero* ('Free time') watch. In the case of *Scarabocchi*, Munari looked to the world of childhood with the desire to liberate images and words and to make us discover the pleasure of invention, imagination and creativity. His drawings are a starting point for inventing stories, allowing oneself to be inspired by the images. Similarly, the limited-edition *Tempo libero* watch, designed for Swatch by Munari at the age of 90, interprets and plays with the concept of time. In this work, twelve unruly discs suggest that it is not important to know exactly what time it is, but to be able to consider our time a *free* time, especially in today's frenetic lifestyle. In these two series, as in the four case studies examined in this article, the dynamics between functionality and non-functionality are structural, defining characteristics of Munari's work, and transform his creations into paradoxical critique of the ideology of productivity (Ponzio 2022 [1997]) making irony on optimal functioning (Benasayag 2019: 101).

At first glance, the concept of project may seem to contradict the idea of non-functionality. However, Munari intentionally integrated non-functionality into his own works, alongside elements like chance, change, and human interaction. For him, design was not only about achieving functional correctness, but also about embracing the unexpected. His artistic creations, though seemingly useless, embody this philosophy – where rules embrace randomness, utility gives way to futility, and logic makes room for imagination. Above all, the artist emphasizes that the goal of art is not the product, no matter how beautiful and harmonious, but the process of knowledge that a certain object or installation can stimulate.

I believe it is this continuous dialectic between functionality and non-functionality that contributes to enhance the originality and uniqueness of Munari's work. By employing a poetics of displacement, his art disorients viewers, capturing their attention and breaking them free from the ordinary and the familiar. With a touch of *lightness* (Antonello et al. 2017), his creativity reflects the desire to influence society, challenge the status quo, and ultimately improve the world by encouraging new ways of seeing and thinking. While this sense of responsibility says a lot about the social, political and, ultimately, semioethic value of Munari's creative output, much remains to be studied and discovered about this little-explored aspect of his outstanding work.

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