

In *Fotocronache: Photo-Reportage*, an amusing treatise on photography published in Italy in 1944, Bruno Munari staked out his position regarding the meaning of the picture-essay. Munari had been art director of the illustrated weekly *Tempo* from 1939 to 1943, and had mastered layouts for other Italian periodicals covering fashion, literature, and aviation; he was aware of the modern currency of photography and capable of engineering words and pictures on a page. “The camera,” he noted, is “nothing but a very quick paintbrush.” *Photo-Reportage* (published in English by Corraini in 2003) reveals Munari’s understanding of photography as a playful game of pictures directed toward visual communication. Replacing the news with whimsical jokes, it includes a series of improbable picture-essays that poke fun at photojournalism and describe the life of a taxidermist, a nonexistent island of truffles, the fantastic world of toys, the endless academic definitions of art and *isms*, and a sequence of snapshots in a story titled “Due mani non bastano” (“Two Hands Are Not Enough”)—about the frustrations of performing impossible tasks with two hands.

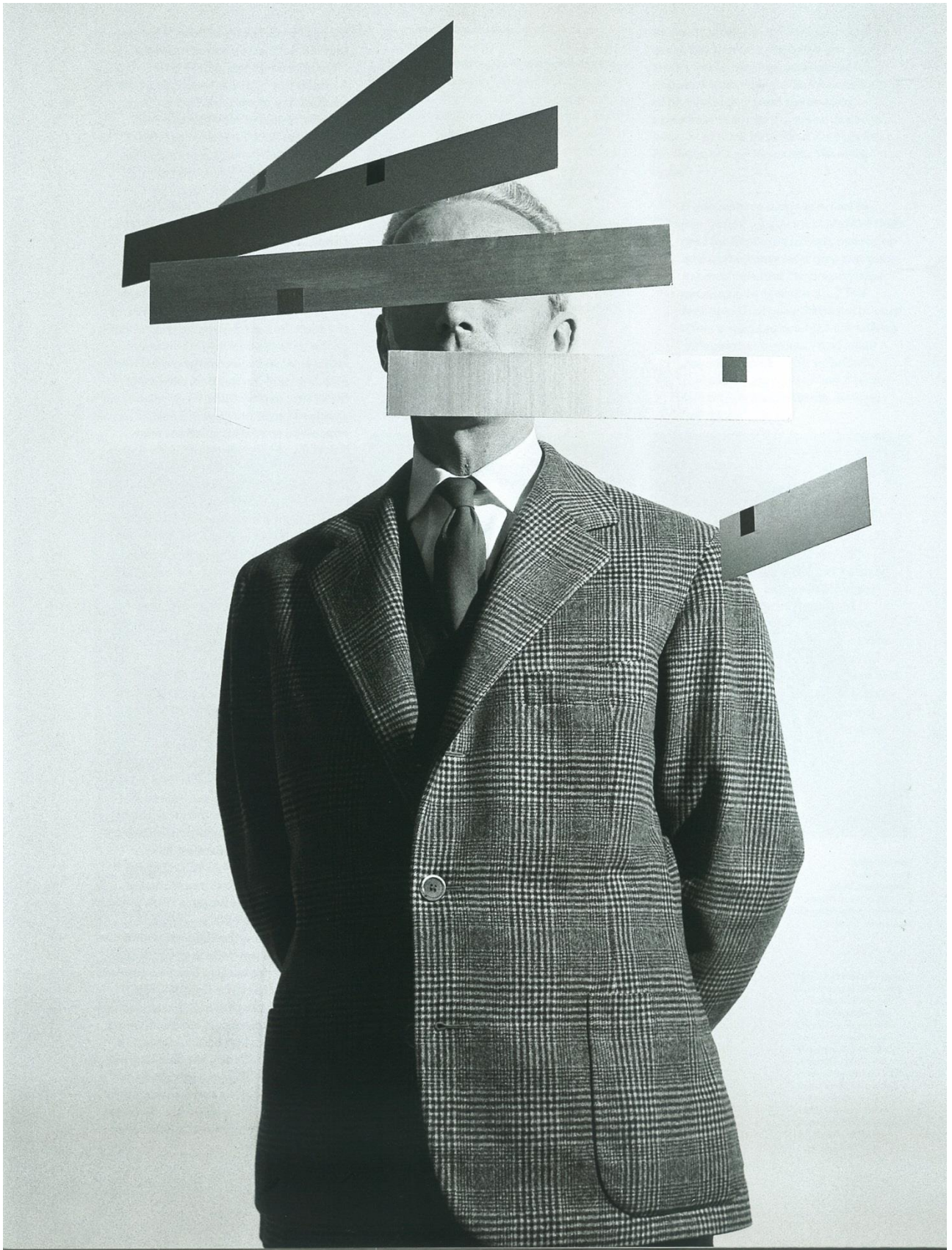
Photo-Reportage was Munari’s statement about the exhilarating freedom of storytelling with photographs, proving that he could subvert the rules of the magazines he knew so well. Concurrently, he published another hilarious essay in the design magazine *Domus*, featuring a clumsy performance that mimicked a man trying to sit on an uncomfortable chair, a tongue-in-cheek comment about traditional petty-bourgeois values imposed on interior decoration versus what he championed as art that was serially produced. Munari was the kind of artist who wanted to transform codified visual language. “How can this be done differently?” he would ask, arriving at unexpected and inventive solutions that exploited the possibilities of any given instrument—the camera, the projector, the brush, even a piece of paper thrown in the air. His name became internationally recognized in industrial design and for his prolific output of children’s books, but his art was much more eclectic and unpredictable than these projects suggest. One can argue that photography was the medium that fulfilled most effectively his pursuit of a democratic language, reaching out to people in ways that were both surprising and fun.

Munari’s involvement with photography began early in his creative life. Initially an abstract painter based in Milan, he joined the Futurist movement in 1927, alert to the city’s creative stimuli and artistic circles. At the Galleria del Milione, Munari was exposed to the work of Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky, and László Moholy-Nagy, among many others. In 1930 he opened a graphic design studio with a Futurist painter and friend, Riccardo “Ricas” Castagnedi, and this joint venture broadened his network across German, Russian, and Swiss graphic arts. These multiple threads converged into Munari’s pivotal research on space and time, and into his multiform involvement with photography.

Bruno Munari’s Light Games

Maria Antonella Pelizzari

Opposite:
Aldo Ballo,
Bruno Munari, 1956
Courtesy Archivio
Aldo Ballo, Milan

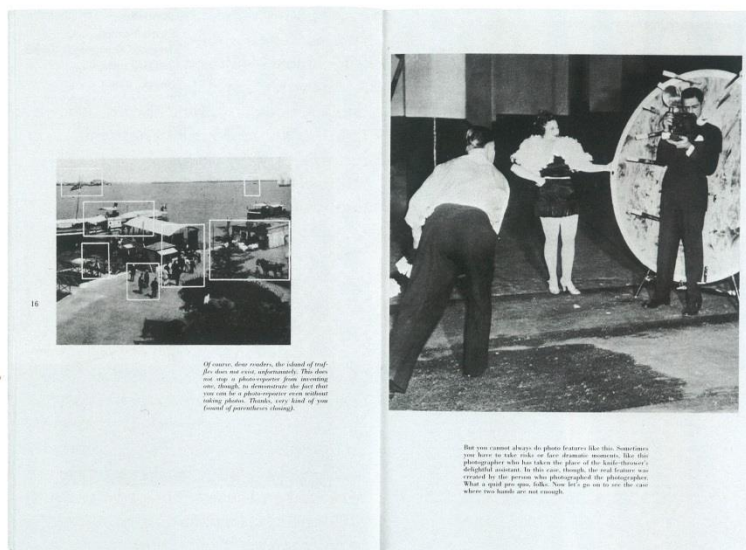




Left and right:
Bruno Munari,
Self-portrait, 1940
© Estate of Bruno Munari,
courtesy Archivio Fotografico,
Fondazione 3M, Milan

In 1934 Munari cosigned the “Manifesto tecnico della aeroplastica futurista” (“Technical Manifesto of Futurist Aeroplastics”), which proposed a new equivalence of machine and art. True to form, Munari contributed to this movement with “useless machines”: minimal kinetic sculptures made of light-weight materials—cardboard, glass balls, fragile wooden sticks, silk thread—that changed configurations randomly, depending on environmental conditions. These machines were “useless” because they could not be assimilated into the chain of consumer goods; they functioned as art because they created unpredictable shapes and shadows. Munari channeled this research on the invisible and the imponderable into quirky and spectacular experiments with light and abstraction. Along with his kinetic explorations, he produced a wide range of photograms and conceived spatial installations with colorful optical projections. Aldo Ballo’s portrait of Munari with his face deleted by his own creation, and Federico Patellani’s montage of the artist in his studio, drawing a shimmering curve with a flashlight amid his design work and photographic mementos, hint at Munari’s shaping of new worlds, working across media. Defined by one of his peers as “the magician of spaces,” Munari envisioned a cosmic dimension where space defies logic, generating unforeseen patterns.

The exploration of photography as abstraction went alongside Munari’s cut-and-paste work. Throughout the 1930s he contributed to periodicals several bizarre, at times subversive, photomontages that took on the politics of Fascism. One has to work through the artist’s visual puns and incongruent shapes to discover the hidden meanings and veiled satire of these works—surrealist divertissements, ambiguous and nonsensical. For example, one of his montages of the modern “new woman”—half-woman, half-plane—hinted at the bombastic mythologies of aviation. A series of self-portraits in which Munari performs for the camera became another way for the artist to be lighthearted. He seems to make fun of Futurism in these clumsy masquerades, in which he wears a baggy poncho that could double as a tablecloth and a floppy airplane that hangs around his neck. The exaggerated size of his baseball gloves and the long barrel of the gun he holds—like some deranged Mexican bandit—signify the ludicrous pretense of power.



Munari's ultimate creative aim was to break the barrier between artist and world. Performances, interactive art, and work with new media were hallmarks of his practice—from these early experiments to work created decades later. In 1972 he published *Xerografia*, his first book on Xerox art. There he noted:

If you want to achieve an art by everyone [...] you must find the tools that facilitate the artistic operation and at the same time give everyone the methods and the preparation necessary to operate. [...] The technological possibilities of our era allow anyone to produce something with aesthetic value. They allow anyone to destroy his inferiority complex in the face of "art," to put into action his creativity, so long humbled.



On October 24, 1967, his sixtieth birthday, Munari invited friends to a performance at Milan's Danese Galleria. Feeding a Xerox 914, he layered objects, surfaces, and lines on its scanning bed, demonstrating that the machine could generate fantastic, free, "original" images; hundreds of sheets of Xeroxed papers came out, demonstrating yet another form of writing with light. Munari's performance proved that a machine could produce unpredictable shapes, and it allowed his friends to participate, so that they might learn and marvel at their own discoveries; it was, in a sense, a summary of the reasons for his involvement with photography.

(Special thanks to Luca Zaffarano for his assistance with this article.)

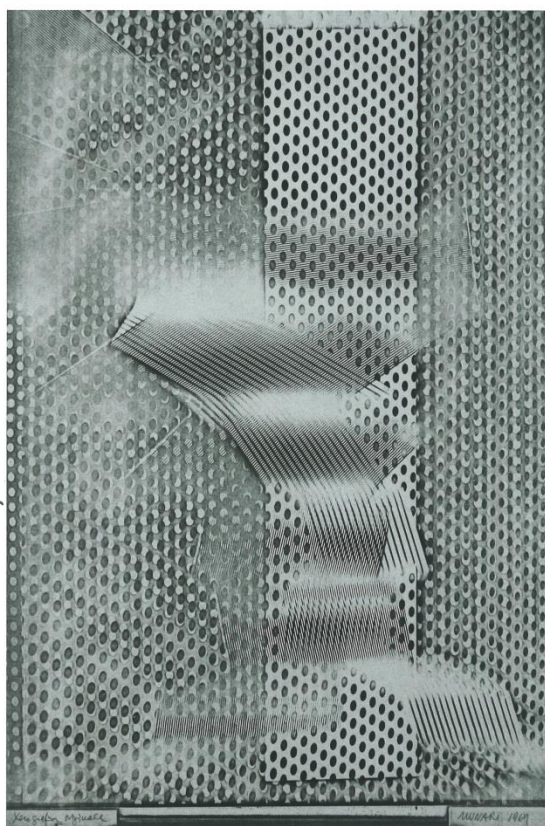
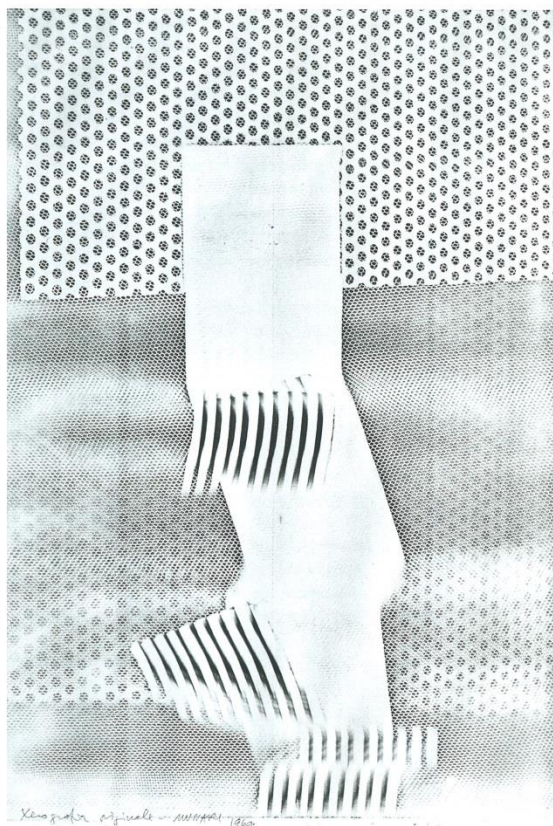
Pages from Bruno Munari, *Fotocronache Photo-Reportage: From the Island of Truffles to Quid Pro Quo*, Corraini Edizioni, Mantua, Italy, 2003 (first published as *Fotocronache di Munari: Dall'isola dei tartufi al qui pro quo*, by Gruppo Editoriale Domus, Milan, 1944) Courtesy Corraini Edizioni

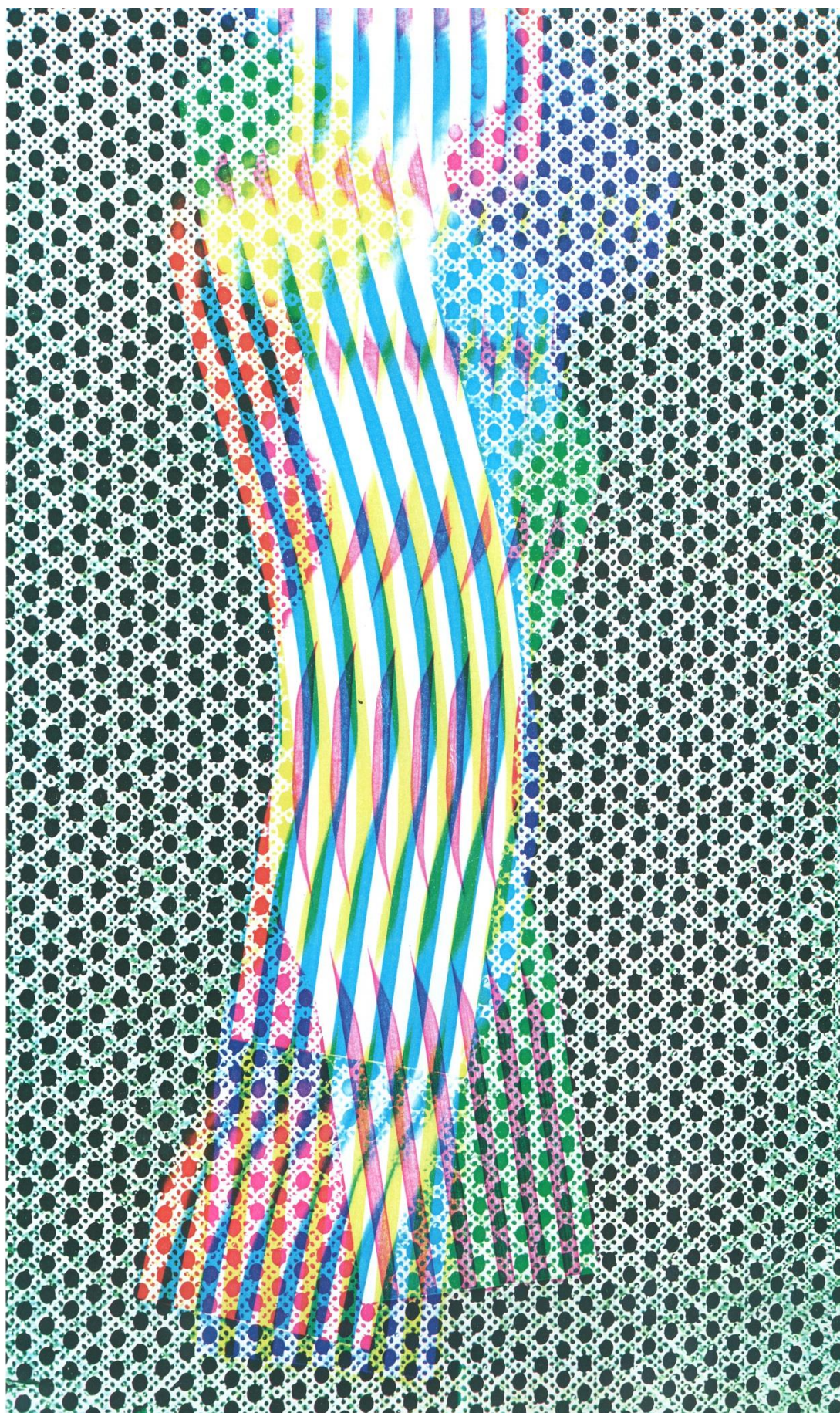
Maria Antonella Pelizzari, a professor of art history at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, is the author of *Photography and Italy* (Reaktion, 2011) and curated the 2012 exhibition *Peripheral Visions: Italian Photography in Context, 1950s–Present* at the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at Hunter College, New York.

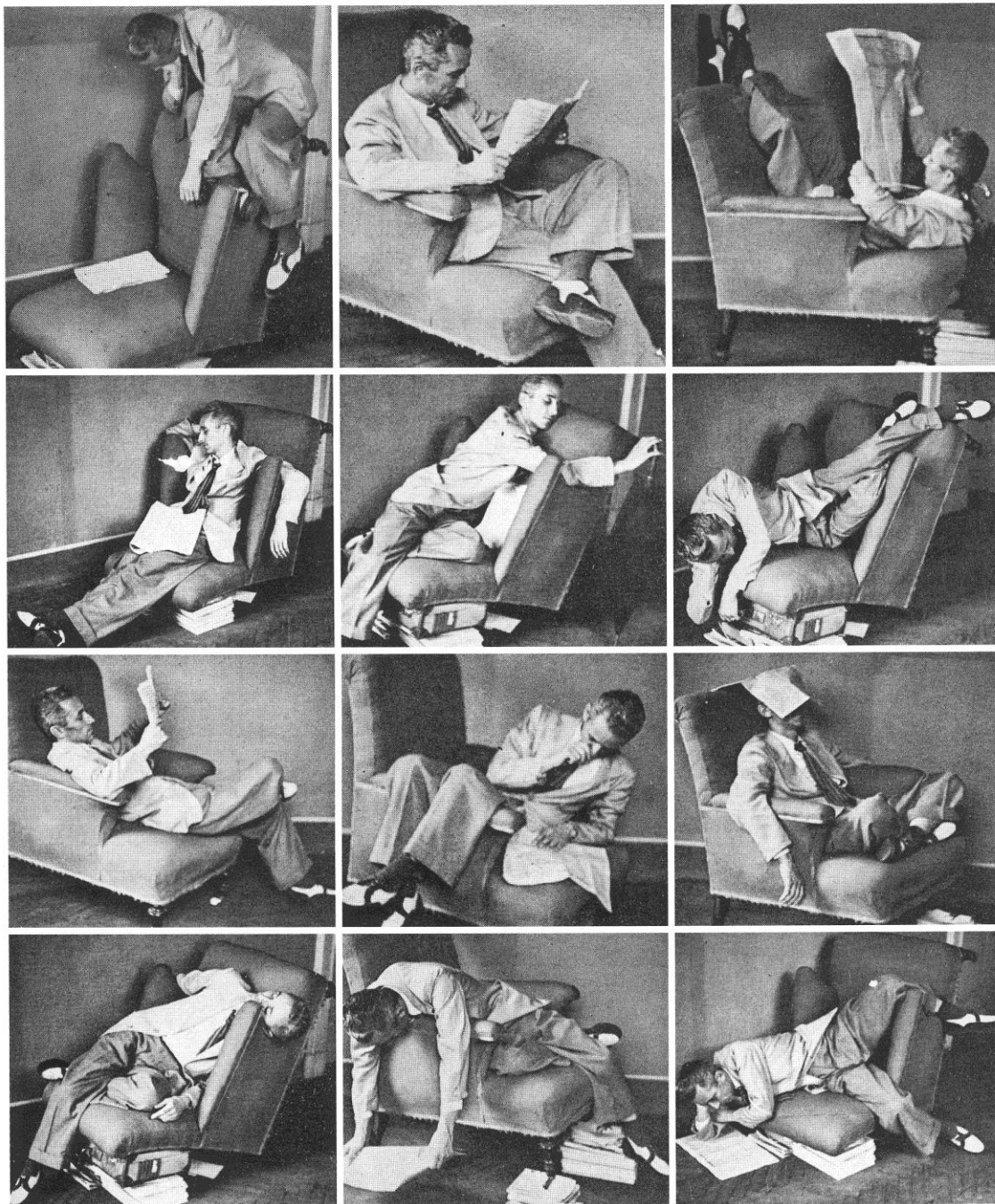
Left:
Bruno Munari,
Original Xerograph, 1969
Prestini collection,
Brescia, Italy

Right:
Bruno Munari,
Original Xerograph, 1970
Candioli collection,
Rovereto, Italy

Opposite:
Bruno Munari,
Original Xerograph, 1980
Gradella collection,
Brescia, Italy







Bruno Munari, *Ricerca della comodità in una poltrona scomoda* (Seeking comfort in an uncomfortable chair), Corraini Edizioni, Mantua, Italy, 2012. Photographs first published in *Domus* magazine, no. 202, October 1944. Courtesy Corraini Edizioni



Federico Patellani,
Bruno Munari, Milan, 1950
© Federico Patellani—
Regione Lombardia/Museo
di Fotografia Contemporanea,
Milan