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To cite this article: Pierpaolo Antonello (2019) Visible Books, Unreadable Books: Bruno Munari's Iconotextual Playground, Italian Studies, 74:4, 331-351, DOI: [10.1080/00751634.2019.1658919](https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2019.1658919)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2019.1658919>



Published online: 27 Aug 2019.



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ARTICLE



## Visible Books, Unreadable Books: Bruno Munari's Iconotextual Playground

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### ABSTRACT

This essay examines Bruno Munari's innovative picture books within the broader context of his 'major' artistic work. Specifically, it illustrates and discusses how Munari's production that is linked to Futurism, Abstractionism, or Concrete art, has been remediated in his books and activities for children. Munari's work is on this score an unparalleled example of the ways the visual language of experimental art could be translated into effective and meaningful visual experiences for lay people, including children.

### KEYWORDS

Bruno Munari; 20th century Italian art; children's books; futurism; concrete art; crossover picture books; artistic remediation

Bruno Munari has been increasingly recognised as one of the twentieth century's most important and eclectic artists, both in Italy and internationally. A true self-taught polymath, he has become a point of reference in fields as diverse as visual art, industrial and graphic design, children's literature, and art pedagogy. His eclecticism led to him becoming a kind of moving target for art critics who, struggling to tether him to any critical formula or to allocate his art to any aesthetic pigeonhole, produced a number of short-cut, and somehow anodyne, labels: the 'Leonardo of twentieth century Italian art', 'a total artist', or 'anarchic and heretic'.<sup>1</sup> Munari's eclecticism has led to a degree of marginalisation of his work in academic discussion on the grounds of its being too 'undisciplined'; too difficult, that is, to insert into the established lexicon of the various disciplines to which academics often make reference.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, over the years Munari has attracted a sizeable following that extends beyond the conventional bounds of artistic circles and art criticism. One reason for this is a particular type of his artistic output which has received widespread popular acclaim but scant attention from art critics: his books.<sup>3</sup> Throughout his career, Munari contributed, as author or illustrator, to almost one hundred and eighty books ranging from essays on art and design to experimental books, creative writing, didactic books, and

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<sup>1</sup>See for instance Pierre Restany, 'Un Peter Pan di statura leonardesca', in *Su Munari: 104 testimonianze, 152 inediti di Bruno Munari*, ed. by Beppe Finessi (Milan: Abitare Segesta, 1999), p. 254; Sandra Solimano, 'Futurismo e astrazione italiana fra le due guerre', in *Futurismo. I grandi temi 1909–1944*, ed. by Enrico Crispolti and Franco Sborgi (Milan: Mazzotta, 1997), pp. 58–63 (p. 62); Claudio Cerritelli, *Bruno Munari Artista Totale* (Mantua: Corraini, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>The only monograph on Munari available in English is the translation of Aldo Tanchis's pioneering book on the artist in Italian in 1986, which, published under two slightly different titles in the USA and in the UK a year later, offered a general overview of Munari's varied career: Aldo Tanchis, *Bruno Munari* (Milan: Idea Books, 1986); published in English as Aldo Tanchis, *Bruno Munari: from Futurism to Post-Industrial Design*, trans. by H. Evans (London: Lund Humphries, 1987) in the UK, and as *Bruno Munari: Design as Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1987) in the USA. However, there has been a recent resurgent interest at the international level, signalled in particular by a number of important academic contributions, which have started to explore Munari's production with some critical and historical depth, including Alessandro Colizzi, *Bruno Munari and the Invention of Modern Graphic Design in Italy, 1928–1945* (PhD Dissertation, University of Leiden, 2011); *Bruno Munari: The Lightness of Art*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello, Matilde Nardelli, and Margherita Zanoletti, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017); *Bruno Munari: Aria Terra*, ed. by Guido Bartorelli, (Mantua: Corraini, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>For a preliminary critical assessment of Munari's writing, see Margherita Zanoletti, 'Word Imagery and Images of Words: Bruno Munari the Writer', in *Bruno Munari: The Lightness of Art*, pp. 193–226.

children's literature, and even a multilingual guide to Italian hand gestures. In 2002, Giorgio Maffei produced an extensive catalogue of Munari's work as a writer, illustrator, and book editor, *Munari. I libri; a vade mecum* covering the entire range of Munari's books published between 1929 and 1999.<sup>4</sup> In this corpus, Maffei also includes the hundreds of book covers Munari designed for major Italian publishers, particularly in the post-World War II period, including Bompiani, Einaudi, Rizzoli, and Editori Riuniti, which established Munari's reputation as one of the key figures of modern Italian graphic design.

In this essay, I will focus on Munari's works that can be listed under the conventional but increasingly inadequate heading of 'books for children', which in fact account for half of his published titles and the majority of those translated into English. They are also considered one of his most enduring legacies, and consequently they have attracted significant academic attention from scholars in the field of children's literature and pedagogy.<sup>5</sup> Ground-breaking books like *Nella notte buia* (1956) have assumed cult status and become landmarks in children's publishing worldwide. Further, Munari anticipated and actively contributed to the visual revolution that took place in Italian children's book production in the 1960s and the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Other artists and graphic designers have similarly lent their trade to the production of experimental, innovative children's picturebooks, but what is truly remarkable in Munari's contribution is not only the range and consistency of his output, but also how ahead of his time he was in introducing ideas and inventions that have become staples of iconotextual experience for both children and adults. Munari's democratic idea of art was guided by a pedagogical principle of increasing 'visual literacy' and artistic creativity amongst ordinary people, with a particular interest in increasing such literacy amongst children, in direct contrast to the strongly text-based model of education that has characterised Western cultures for centuries.<sup>7</sup>

In particular, my interest is to explore and discuss the ways in which Munari's work travelled not only laterally through different artistic vocabularies, as has largely been the focus of art critics – from Futurism, to Abstractionism, to Kinetic art, or Programmed art – but also 'vertically' in a democratic and pedagogical dissemination of experimental, modernist artistic language, offering 'high art' to a wider audience that included children, through various forms of artistic 'remediation'.<sup>8</sup> In general, we could say that Munari constantly 'remediated' his own artistic research and experimentation, his own formal vocabulary, in a variety of aesthetic genres and across a range of forms of expression. Specifically, this essay aims to examine and discuss how the work he produced that is linked to Futurism, Abstractionism, or Concrete art, can be seen to have migrated into, and been remediated

<sup>4</sup>Giorgio Maffei, *Munari. I libri* (Milan: Silvestre Bonnard, 2002). English edition: *Munari's Books* (Mantua: Corraini, 2008; New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2015). See also Giorgio Maffei, with Luigi Di Corato, Marzia Corraini, and Riccardo Farinelli, *Bruno Munari. 70 anni di libri* (Prato: Centro Luigi Pecci, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>Both Sandra Beckett and Marnie Campagnaro underscore how Munari's clean lines, playful irony, and skilled use of simplification in creating picturebooks still continue to be elements of inspiration for authors such as Katsumi Komagata, Suzy Lee, Alessandro Sanna, and Mauro Bellei. Sandra L. Beckett, *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for All Ages* (London-New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 33–34; Marnie Campagnaro, 'Bruno Munari's Visual Mapping of the City of Milan: A Historical Analysis of the Picturebook *Nella nebbia di Milano*', in *Maps and Mapping in Children's Literature: Landscapes, Seascapes, and Cityscapes*, ed. by Nina Goga and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017), pp. 147–65 (p. 151).

<sup>6</sup>Loredana Farina, 'Creatività italiana', in *La casa delle meraviglie. La Emme Edizioni di Rosellina Archinto*, ed. by Loredana Farina (Milan: Topipittori, 2013), pp. 67–78 (p. 70).

<sup>7</sup>Munari invites this not only via the specific communicative strategies that are at the heart of his books, but also through active direct interventions such as the artistic workshops for children he organised in a variety of museum contexts, beginning with a pilot event at the Galleria di Brera in 1977. See *Il laboratorio per bambini a Brera*, a cura di Bruno Munari (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1981); *Il laboratorio per bambini a Faenza al Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche*, a cura di Bruno Munari (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1981). This attention was inspired by a political consciousness aiming at dismantling the rigid cultural and intellectual categories institutionalised by older generations, moving towards an expressive emancipation of the child. As he writes in *Da cosa nasce cosa*: 'Sappiamo tutti che quello che un bambino memorizza nella tenera età, gli resterà poi per tutta la vita. È così che possiamo aiutare a formare individui creativi e non ripetitivi, individui con una mente elastica e pronta a risolvere ogni problema [...]. Un individuo capace di capire ogni forma di arte, capace di comunicare verbalmente e visivamente, capace di comportamento sociale equilibrato'; Bruno Munari, *Da cosa nasce cosa. Appunti per una metodologia progettuale* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1981), pp. 242–43.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

for, his books and activities for children; and how the visual language of experimental art could be translated into effective and meaningful visual experiences for lay people. What is particularly compelling in Munari is the way his playful attitude, combined with his democratic outlook, was key to a strategy of putting his visual experimentation designed for an adult audience into dialogue with his output for children. Quite organically, this led to the production of seminal examples of crossover books that defy pigeonholing by genre or reader age group, and have become key exempla for the wide body of texts that Sandra Beckett has analysed in *Crossover Picturebooks*.<sup>9</sup> The books must therefore be examined within the broader context of Munari's artistic work and not as a separate form of production.

A key aspect of Munari's artistic production relates not only to the experimental nature of his works but also to the continuity and formal coherence running through them, irrespective of their varying expressive modes and genres. Munari did not put rigid distinctions between different forms of 'visual communication', regardless of whether critical or descriptive analysis sought to confine them within the boundaries of 'abstract art', 'graphic design', or 'children's literature'. Munari was constantly challenging critical and artistic conventions, trying to bridge the fault lines that too often divide different forms of artistic expression. For Munari, visual forms should be judged for their formal coherence and for their effectiveness at communicating specific eidetic information, irrespective of any intended audience. In his desire to overcome every form of subjectivism, Munari believed that the instruments of graphic design – form, colour, spatial relations, visual rhythm – should respond to a sort of 'sensory communication' understood as objective and universal, consistent with many of the programmatic points of Concrete art, and consistent more generally with a cognitive approach to the aesthetic experience.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the formal lexicon that we find in his graphic design output is also found in his experimental art works (without any intrinsic hierarchical trajectory of derivation); and similarly, the critical or theoretical categories that can be applied to the consideration of his industrial designs are also pertinent and productive in the analysis of his stories for children or experimental photography.

My focus in this article is, moreover, influenced by others important historical and critical factors, the first of which is an imperative to recover children's literature from the critical and academic discussion that has confined it to a paraliterature, along with a general critical disqualification that has relegated it, especially in Italy, to a kind of academic-critical ghetto interested primarily in pedagogical questions.<sup>11</sup> There is a growing recognition of the arbitrariness of compartmentalisation by genre, and the fact that picturebooks stand out as 'one of the most exciting and innovative contemporary literary genres'. Picturebooks offer themselves quite naturally to visual experimentation and to the exploration of their peritextual possibilities: they 'challenge the conventions, codes, and norms that traditionally governed the genre', both in terms of content, and complex narrative strategies like 'hybrid genres, polyfocalisation, metafictional discourse, intertextuality, parody, irony, and so forth'.<sup>12</sup> And it is this experimental or 'radical'

<sup>9</sup>This idea is shared by some key editors who published Munari's books, both in the United States and in Italy. For Ann K. Beneduce, former editor-in-chief of children's books at World Publishing, T.Y. Crowell, and Collins & World, Munari's books 'are more than just picture books – they are innovative works of art, yet done so freshly and simply and boldly that children are instantly attracted to them. They were almost the first modern books for children to use die-cut effects – holes and flaps and unevenly shaped pages – not as gimmicks but as an integral part of the story and the illustrations. They are handsomely designed and printed in gorgeous color'. Leonard S. Marcus, 'Invention and Discoveries: An Interview with Ann K. Beneduce', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 7 (1983), 47–63 (p. 51). Rossellina Archinto, founder of the historic publishing house Emme Edizioni, which in 1968 published *Nella notte buia*, affirmed in an interview that Munari 'non è stato propriamente un autore di libri per bambini'. Cited in *La casa delle meraviglie*, p. 71. Cf. Marnie Campagnaro, *Il cacciatore di pieghe. Figure e tendenze della letteratura per l'infanzia contemporanea* (Lecce: Pensa MultiMedia, 2017), p. 139.

<sup>10</sup>For the most systematic account of this perspective, see Bruno Munari, *Design e comunicazione visiva* (Bari: Laterza, 1968).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Giulia Zanfano, 'Chi ha paura dei libri per bambini/e? I presupposti della critica: una questione politica', *L'immaginario politico. Impegno, resistenza, ideologia*, ed. by Silvia Albertazzi, Federico Bertoni, Emanuela Piga, Luca Raimondi, Giacomo Tinelli, *Between*, 5.10 (2015), <http://www.Betweenjournal.it/> [accessed 15 July 2019].

<sup>12</sup>Beckett, p. 2.

nature that gives them appeal with adults as well as children,<sup>13</sup> providing exceptional opportunities to explore the boundaries and possibilities of books as material objects that go beyond the rigid and restrictive rules and canons of adult literature.<sup>14</sup>

## Children of the Avant-Garde

To account for Munari's production and the extent of his remediation strategies, we need to consider artistic antecedents and the type of experimental production that laid the ground for his innovations in children's books and with multimodal expressive strategies in general.

Early twentieth-century avant-garde movements were characterised by a political and democratic attitude and outlook. Simultaneously, a set of pedagogical perspectives was coalescing in philosophical discussions and educational practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, through the work of pedagogists such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Jean Piaget. Together, this focused attention on an imperative to develop specific strategies for the artistic engagement of children. In their famous manifesto *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo* (1915), for instance, Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero advocated the need to invent new pedagogical material and toys that would facilitate a more suitable physical and cognitive development of children.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the heads of the art classes of the German Bauhaus were invited to encourage the making of furniture, clothes, toys, books, theatre plays, and everyday objects for children.<sup>16</sup> A similar close focus on children and a children's aesthetic characterises the Soviet Avant-garde, which offered the first outstanding examples of this particular form of cross-fertilisation and adaptation of a distinctive modernist visual vocabulary for children books. The most famous example is El Lissitzky's graphic story, *Of Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale in Six Constructions* (1920), which incorporated formal suggestions from the work of Kazemir Malevich and also resonated with Vladimir Lebedev's opus.<sup>17</sup> It was published in 1922 by Theo van Doesburg, one of the fathers of the Concrete art movement in Europe and an influence on Munari's work. Lissitzky's book is 'a model of geometric abstraction that presents, with the help of brief captions, a symbolic, stripped-down, and concentrated image of revolutionary struggle and the remaking of the world'.<sup>18</sup> Another example of the period is *Die Scheuche: Märchen* [The Scarecrow: Fairy Tales] (1925) by Kurt Schwitters, one of the major figures of German Dadaism, also influenced by Constructivism and De Stijl, and a friend and collaborator of Lissitzky. Like Lissitzky, Schwitters experimented with new forms of typography and adapted his innovative ideas for a young audience.<sup>19</sup> In the same period, Joan Miró illustrated a tale by Lise Deharmé, *Il était une petite pie* [Once There Was a Little Magpie] (1928), with a dense surrealist style not

<sup>13</sup>One of the world's best-known picturebook artists, Maurice Sendak, has been claiming for years that 'we have created an arbitrary division between adult and children's books that does not exist'. Quoted in Beckett, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup>As Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario has written: 'Picturebooks offer an extraordinary opportunity to explore the boundaries and possibilities of books as material objects. Indeed, the genre is designated in part by its physicality [...]. The genre of the picturebook relies on a synergy of text, visuals, and texture. A cohort of picturebook creators exploits this synergy further, incorporating the materiality of the book into the narrative, in turn transforming the book with metatextual sleight of hand. In effect, the material book becomes the stuff of narrative.' Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, 'Consuming Books: Synergies of Materiality and Narrative in Picturebooks', *Children's Literature*, 40 (2012), 151–66 (p. 151).

<sup>15</sup>See the section 'Il giocattolo futurista', in Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo* (Milan: Direzione del Movimento Futurista, 1915). Tanchis affirms that in this Manifesto we find 'Munari in a nutshell'. Tanchis, *Bruno Munari. From Futurism to Post-industrial Design*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup>See Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009).

<sup>17</sup>See Evgeny Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades: Revolutionary Artists in the Early Soviet Children's Book* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); Sara Pankenier Weld, *Voiceless Vanguard: The Infantile Aesthetic of the Russian Avant-garde* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2014); Sara Pankenier Weld, 'The Square as Regal Infant: The Avant-garde Infantile in Early Soviet Picturebooks', in *Children's Literature and the Avant-garde*, ed. by Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2015), pp. 113–36. See also Beckett, pp. 25–27.

<sup>18</sup>Steiner, pp. 25–27.

<sup>19</sup>Beckett, pp. 27–29.

diluted *ad usum Delphini*. These works surely influenced Munari, who started producing books for children in 1942, with his famous *Le macchine di Munari*, published by Einaudi in its series 'Libri per l'infanzia e la gioventù', which were inspired by American cartoonist Rube Goldberg's comic illustrations of chain-reaction inventions, but which also bear traces of Dadaistic imaginative and formal vocabulary.<sup>20</sup>

## The Livre D'Artiste

Munari had been engaged in the processes of book production since the beginning of his artistic career in the late 1920s, contributing to the aesthetic and productive development of the so-called *livres d'artistes*, one of the key interests of Futurism and of the historical European avant-garde in general.<sup>21</sup> This was facilitated also by the fact that he worked outside the artistic field *sensu stricto*, by engaging from the start with applied art forms such as graphic design, advertising, and industrial design.<sup>22</sup> His eclecticism was fuelled by his initial affiliation to Futurism and the drive of the Futurists to experiment in all possible artistic and cultural domains, and by their utopian idea of 'taking art into the streets', towards a horizontal and democratic dissemination of art. The particular aesthetic and ideology of Futurism, with its emphasis on technology and innovation, the mechanisation of life and the human body, alongside the new materials of modernity (iron, steel, artificial fibres, and so on), would inspire the making of books that have entered into a sort of 'mythology' of modernist and avant-garde publishing. The most famous example is the so-called 'bolted book' by Fortunato Depero, *Depero futurista* (1927), a compendium of Depero's graphic output, filled with bold typographical experimentation and universally recognised as a landmark avant-garde example of the notion of the 'book as object', with its famous binding that consists of two large industrial aluminium bolts. A similar type of inspiration underpins the productive output of the 'Lito-Latta' tin factory in Savona-Zinola. Originally a mechanical workshop for the production of lithographed metal boxes and tins for preserving food, the Lito-Latta soon became a centre for the Futurist art group as a result of the insight of Vincenzo Nosenzo, and printed some of their most famous book-objects: *Parole in libertà futuriste-tattili-termiche-olfattive* by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1932), and *L'anguria lirica. Lungo poema passionale* by Tullio d'Albisola (1934), both constructed from tin sheets. The latter is a series of long poems organised in five sections and interspersed with eleven illustrations by Munari. Although his drawings for it were relatively conventional and characterised by an inspiration that brought together elements from Surrealism and Enrico Prampolini's cosmic painting, *L'anguria lirica* clearly testifies to Munari's early interest in challenging established typographical conventions and in exploring unusual materials and formats in the production of books, a feature that would constantly characterise his activity as author and illustrator.

Another example of Munari's early experimentation with book making and innovative graphic design is evident in Marinetti's *Il poema del vestito di latte*, which was published in 1937 by the advertising department of SNIA Viscosa, a company located in Milan that manufactured defence products, textiles, and chemicals. The book was meant to advertise the quality of lanital, a type of fabric produced from casein, a subcomponent of milk. The text was published in a lavish edition and it was a poetic and, to quote Jeffrey Schnapp, 'typographical tour de force, in which Munari employed his typical modernist style of the period with inventive and surreal photocollages'.<sup>23</sup> In

<sup>20</sup>Ara Merjian links some of Munari's imagery to Picabia's works, such as *Pensées sans langage* (1919); cf. Ara H. Merjian, "'On the Verge of Absurd': Munari, Dada, and Surrealism in Interwar Italy", in *Bruno Munari: The Lightness of Art*, 27–63 (30–31). For his later works, Munari acknowledges the influence of El Lissitzky and constructivism in general; see Arturo Quintavalle, 'Intervista a Munari' in *Bruno Munari: Il disegno, il design*, ed. by Gloria Bianchino (Mantua: Corraini, 2008), p. 36.

<sup>21</sup>For a general overview, see Riva Castleman, *A Century of Artists Books* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994).

<sup>22</sup>For a thorough account of Munari's graphic production in the first half of the twentieth century, see Colizzi.

<sup>23</sup>Jeffrey Schnapp, 'Rayon/Marinetti', in *Science and Literature in Italian Culture: From Dante to Calvino*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Simon A. Gilson, (Oxford: Legenda, 2004), pp. 226–53 (234).



particular, the book was enhanced by a series of brilliant graphic overlays and transparencies that brought a specific animation and dynamism to the act of 'reading', reconfiguring and recomposing the pages at every turn; a device described by Tanchis as one 'that "breaks through" the opacity of the page and makes it light and loose, like a line of verse set free among ninety-nine triplets'.<sup>24</sup>

## Transparencies

Experimentation with transparencies was a relatively new idea in the context of graphic design. An early example, which was left at the project stage, was *L'Almanacco dell'Italia veloce* designed by Oscar Fusetti in 1930, a sort of catalogue of Italian creativity in the fields of graphic design and advertising, which included works by Munari, Balla, Dottori, Prampolini, Diulgheroff, and Pozzo. In Giovanni Lista's words, the intention was to make a 'cinematographic book', by introducing two novelties in the context of Italian publishing: the insertion of 'pagine-disco' with the recording of poetic declamation and declarations, and the use of transparent sheets, that were previously used by artists like Balla or Rougena Zatkova, in collage works. Through the use of these transparent printed sheets, the artist would produce 'una "sovraimpressione" tipicamente cinematografica. La pagina stessa diventava così scomponibile a volontà giacché se ne poteva variare il contenuto iconografico voltando solo il foglio trasparente che vi era sovrapposto'.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the idea probably came to Munari as a result of his friendship and collaboration with the comic artist and animator Carlo Cossio, indicating the high 'porosity' of these technical and artistic practices.<sup>26</sup> Between the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, Cossio and Munari had collaborated in the production of some animated short films for the Italiana di Pubblicità Cinematografica (IPC): 'brief adverts animated in an artisanal manner, using figures cut from cardboard, fixed in place with pins, and filmed in a single cut'.<sup>27</sup> In the early 1930s, they discovered the cel (celluloid) technique, which allowed animators to draw the background separately and then animate the characters by painting on transparent sheets of celluloid (later cellulose acetate), with each cel corresponding to a single frame of the sequence.<sup>28</sup>

From an aesthetic standpoint, a contextual influence on Munari's work was the theorisation and the practical output of the Bauhaus. Beginning in the 1920s, László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers were teaching, experimenting, and theorising with the layering of colours that would result in forms of chromatic 'transparencies'.<sup>29</sup> This interest in transparencies and depth effect, that would challenge the established notion of a background/foreground dichotomy in traditional painting, was also key to Marcel Duchamp's use of glass for his famous *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (1915–1923).

Munari's use of a layering technique similar to Moholy-Nagy's is particularly apparent in his graphic work, as evidenced in his cover art for books including Einaudi's second edition of Anne Frank's diary, *Il diario di Anna Frank* (1958), and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1958); and in a more systematic manner by the six coloured silk-screen prints that accompanied Giorgio Soavi's book of poetry *Los Àlamos* (1958), a limited edition book, with just two hundred copies

<sup>24</sup>Tanchis, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup>Giovanni Lista, *Le Livre Futuriste. De libération du mot au poème tactile* (Modena: Editions Panini, 1982), p. 102.

<sup>26</sup>Tanchis, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup>Colizzi, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup>Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons. Il cinema d'animazione* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1988), p. 59. Colizzi, p. 25. See also Piero Zanotto and Fiorello Zangrando, *L'Italia di cartone* (Padua: Liviana Editrice, 1973), pp. 25–26; Marco Bellano, 'Una nota informativa: tangenze di Bruno Munari con l'animazione', in *Bruno Munari: Aria Terra*, pp. 180–82.

<sup>29</sup>See 'Transparency/Reflection/Motion' in Oliver A. I. Botar, *Sensing the Future: Moholy-Nagy, Media and the Arts* (Zürich: Lars Müller, 2014), pp. 129 ff. These issues were further discussed by Josef Albers in *Interaction of Color* (1963) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 106–21. Munari wrote the introduction to the Italian translation of Albers' book: Bruno Munari, 'I colori sono infiniti', in Josef Albers, *Interazione del colore*, trans. by Isabella Chiari (Parma: Pratiche Editrice, 1991), pp. 7–9.

produced.<sup>30</sup> The compositional technique is created through the overlapping of semi-transparent coloured sheets, printed with single colours or stripes of colour. The transparent sheets used by Munari to create the serigraphs for *Los Álamos* also evince other compelling methodological elements: the abstract compositions are the result of an overlaying of basic textures (a type of basic, abstract, pictorial alphabet); the artist need change only the order of the sequence to realise very different compositions.<sup>31</sup>

However, such pictorial transparencies were in some way too static, too bi-dimensional, and as such stand as a relatively isolated moment of graphic experimentation in Munari's works, mostly confined to that particular period. Munari's interest was more evidently drawn to new materials made available by emerging industrial production and print technology.<sup>32</sup> In addition to transparencies and translucent sheets, tracing and glassine papers became one of Munari's recurrent strategies to achieve an effect of depth: a true three-dimensional effect in a book.<sup>33</sup> Transparencies and overlays allow for forms of visual animation produced by the act of 'reading': an 'animation' of the text that is material, and not only a projection of the imagination, as with traditional storytelling. As Schnapp phrased it, 'these processes routinely mine the expressive potentiality of the 2d/3d border. They alternately spatialize the two dimensional and flatten out the three dimensional, looping back and forth between planar and volumetric geometries'.<sup>34</sup>

This indicates Munari's abiding interest in incorporating dynamism into the rigid canonical forms of visual communication from the inception of his artistic practice. In the 1930s, along with Alexander Calder, Munari pioneered what it is now known as Kinetic art with his famous *Macchine inutili*, born of his compulsion to animate abstract art hitherto too rigidly confined to the traditional limits of the canvas.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, suspended kinetic sculptures have become ubiquitous in schools, museums, and children's bedrooms, pointing to Munari's awareness of the basic perceptive and aesthetic processes activated in children without previous aesthetic education. Arguably, this hints at a sort of 'genetics of perception', consistent with the type of essentialist reductionism that characterises the development trajectory of Munari's art as a whole.<sup>36</sup>

One of the first examples of the remediation of these modernist techniques for children's books was *Il merlo ha perso il becco* (1940–1987), an illustration of an old popular Italian song for children about a blackbird who loses his beak. Based on a concept Munari first developed in 1940 and subsequently published in 1987 by Edizioni Danese,<sup>37</sup> this book clearly borrows the material and graphic strategy used for Marinetti's *Il poema del vestito di latte*. Various parts of a blackbird are printed on transparent sheets of PVC plastic, such that in the beginning the entire blackbird is visible but, as each page is turned, the blackbird loses first its beak, then its eye, its wing, its leg, and so on, until all that is left is its heart. Below every illustration is the text of each line of the song, and the chorus. In his preface to the book, the pedagogist Giovanni Belgrano points out that Munari's book has assumed new meaning in light of today's ecological problems: the blackbird

<sup>30</sup>*Los Álamos*. Poesie di Giorgio Soavi, tavole a colori di Bruno Munari (Milan: Officina d'artigrafi A. Lucini, 1958).

<sup>31</sup>See also Albers, pp. 120–21.

<sup>32</sup>Tracing paper started to become widely available at the industrial level in the 1930s, and by 1936, Germany was the leading European producer of tracing paper. The first English tracing paper mill, Chartham Mill, began production in 1939. Cf. Claude Laroque, 'History and Analysis of Transparent Papers', *The Paper Conservator*, 28:1 (2004), 17–32.

<sup>33</sup>Beckett discusses the use of transparencies in the work of a number of artists, including Munari, Katsumi Komagata, and Warja Lavater. Beckett, p. 49.

<sup>34</sup>Jeffrey Schnapp, 'The Little Theatre of the Page', in *Bruno Munari: The Lightness of Art*, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Bruno Munari, *Arte come mestiere* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1966), pp. 7–15. For a general discussion, see Pierpaolo Antonello, 'Beyond Futurism: Bruno Munari's Useless Machines', in G. Berghaus (ed.), *Futurism and Technological Imagination* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 313–34.

<sup>36</sup>As Sarah Pankenier Weld discusses with reference to the early-twentieth century Russian avant-garde, 'the practice of infantile primitivism and the development of the infantile aesthetic helped drive the Russian avant-garde's course to a profound minimalism and towards the achievements of non-objective art and trans-sense language'. Pankenier Weld, 'The Square as Regal Infant', p. 115.

<sup>37</sup>Bruno Munari, *Il merlo ha perso il becco. Povero merlo mio ...* (Milan: Edizioni Danese, 1987).



that gradually loses all its body parts can be seen to represent nature under threat. However, since the book can also be read from back to front, readers can reverse the game and ‘reconstruct’ the blackbird, ‘recomposing’ the harmonic balance with nature. The text of the song could be seen simply as a ‘pretext’; the book itself becomes an ingenious technology by which the reader can animate a popular song through the same sort of cel technique used by animators and cartoonists, furnishing the young reader with a formal understanding of how an illustration is constituted, that is, by the successive overlaying of parts, and how, technically, it is rendered mobile.<sup>38</sup>

Two of Munari’s most famous children’s books, considered landmarks of twentieth-century picturebook history, also use translucent sheets and tracing paper: *Nella notte buia*, published in 1956, and *Nella nebbia di Milano*, published in 1968.<sup>39</sup> They are tales of interconnected visual journeys across different settings. *Nella notte buia* initially takes the reader through the blackness of a very dark night, the way illuminated only by a distant firefly visible through a series of small die-cut holes in the black pages; then through a meadow alive with different insects imprinted on successive translucent sheets; and finally into a mysterious cave, its mouth a palimpsest of die-cut openings on grey pages, and wall graffiti resembling those of the late palaeolithic Cave of the Trois-Frères in southwestern France. Similarly, *Nella nebbia di Milano* is a journey through three different landscapes organised into sections: the milky opacity of a Milanese fog, rendered visually via tracing paper; the lively and colourful, almost Felliniesque, world of a circus, full of animals, bizarre characters, and nonsense tales (this might also be seen as a homage to *Cirque Calder*); and a last section consisting of a walk through a park, in which Munari once again locates the reader within the fog.

These books illustrate how visual experimentation and cutting-edge multimodal narrative strategies lie at the heart of Munari’s children’s books. Taking the semiotic distinction advanced by Groupe  $\mu$  between two intertwined dimensions or aspects of the visual signifier – the ‘iconic’, meaning the part of the image that can be lexically identified and labelled (the representational element of the image); and the ‘plastic’, which escapes lexical labelling (the non-representational or abstract element of the image, relating to colour, pattern, and form) –<sup>40</sup> Munari’s work particularly foregrounds the ‘plastic’, inviting the reader to recognise that the act of reading is multi-layered, and that aspects of a story or narrative artefact that may have become marginalised are relevant and can enhance both the pleasure and the complexity of the act of reading.<sup>41</sup>

Mostly, these books construct environments or settings for which Munari drew upon all the possibilities of a book (typography, illustrations, physical materials) to build a communication device that says more than words alone do. Each of these settings is physically suggested via specific materials and techniques, such as the transparent sheets for the walk in the meadow or the nebulousity of the Milanese cityscape; or the die-cut peepholes in the thicker pages of the cave section of *Nella notte buia* and in the circus section of *Nella nebbia di Milano*; sometimes accelerating, sometimes retarding the reader’s progress. Rather than complying with the expectation that picturebooks should be unmistakably legible and reliably populated with text, Munari instead combined graphics, words, and sensory

<sup>38</sup>This idea was extended to create the visual game *Più e meno*, consisting of seventy-two cards, each bearing a different image. Many of these images have a transparent background and can thus be superimposed to compose other more complex images and stimulate the child’s creative capacities; Giovanni Belgrano and Bruno Munari, *Più e meno* (1970) (Mantua: Corraini Editore, 2009).

<sup>39</sup>Bruno Munari, *Nella notte buia* (Milan: Muggiani, 1956); Engl. trans. *In the Darkness of the Night* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2017); Bruno Munari, *Nella nebbia di Milano* (Milan: Emme Edizioni, 1968. Reissued, Mantua: Corraini, 1996). Eng. trans. *The Circus in the Mist* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1969).

<sup>40</sup>Groupe  $\mu$ , *Traité du signe visuel: Pour une rhétorique de l’image* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p. 91.

<sup>41</sup>In reference to the presence of abstractionism in comics, Jan Baetens writes: ‘If we take this argument one step further, we might suggest that narrative, which can be taken as a sequential and hence more complex form of figuration, is a force that is both productive and destructive. It produces unity and coherence at a level superior to that of the individual images, yet at the same time it blinds us to a certain number of elements and techniques the perception of which might lead to a greater appreciation of the role of abstraction in comics.’ Jan Baetens, ‘Abstraction in Comics’, *SubStance*, 40.1 (2011), pp. 94–113 (p. 108).

interactive features to invite a closer, more intimate exploration of the worlds he created. Words interact with images in a dynamic and multimodal way. Word play, non-sense, or idiomatic expressions are used with irony to add semantic layering to the text-image interplay. For example, the caption ‘jugglers sometimes lose their heads’ appears as commentary for an image where the head of a juggler becomes indistinguishable from the balls that he throwing through the air. Moving against the imperialism of the written word and narrative concatenation, Munari’s story rendering resembles ‘tweets’ from a road trip rather than offering any inevitable narrative sequentiality. These stories have no plot, no dialogue, no character development. Indeed, Munari held that children’s books should not have a protagonist; the sole protagonist is the child herself, travelling through her own aesthetic and narrative adventure, encountering different characters and situations. As Marnie Campagnaro argues, ‘Munari’s children’s books are effective in playfully including the reader into the world of his visual narratives. Munari explored different ways of encouraging children’s engagement in the co-authorship process. His characters, for example, have no name, and in books like *Nella notte buia* [...], the first-person plural pronoun is used to pose questions to the readers’.<sup>42</sup>

The narrative progression of *Nella nebbia di Milano* can also be read in terms of a *flânerie*, a walk within an urban or a natural setting,<sup>43</sup> a sensory journey where the reader is never prepared for the sudden changes of scene and context. She finds herself unexpectedly immersed in a visual setting where her gaze is stimulated by different patterns, configurations, and forms, through a dialectic of ‘simultaneous contrasts’; for example, between the geometric and abstract shapes of both the urban landscape and the circus, and then the natural and organic forms of the final walk through the park.<sup>44</sup> The semi-translucent pages create additional effects in the combination of different images on recto and verso, effecting dilutions of images and colours; but also semantic inversions, as for example in the street signs which, read one way is NO, and another, is ON.

## Holes

*Nella notte buia* and *Nella nebbia di Milano* both foreground another strategy employed by Munari to ‘animate’ the page in graphic and tactile terms: the use of holes and cut-outs.<sup>45</sup> Modern mass production methods have multiplied the output of such ‘shaped’ books for active play, and holes and cut-outs feature in many children’s books, the most famous example being Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969), a board book that in its fiftieth anniversary year, according to publisher Penguin, has now sold over fifty million copies worldwide. Munari anticipated Carle’s technique by twenty-five years. In 1945, for Mondadori, Munari published a series of children’s books created with his own child, Alberto, in mind, as he had been unable to find anything he felt was suitable for the then five-year-old. With *Toc toc, chi è? Apri la porta* (1945), *Storie di tre uccellini* (1945), *Mai contenti* (1945), *Il venditore di animali* (1945), and *Gigi cerca il suo berretto: dove mai l’avrà cacciato?* (1945), Munari reinvented the concept of the children’s book, not just in Italian publishing but

<sup>42</sup>Marnie Campagnaro, ‘The Function of Play in Bruno Munari’s Children’s Books. A Historical Overview’, *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica. Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, 11.3 (2016), 93–105 (p. 98). She also points out that ‘*Il merlo ha perso il becco* [...] is characterised by the presence of the second-person singular narration to invite readers to freely explore the book’.

<sup>43</sup>Campagnaro, ‘Bruno Munari’s Visual Mapping’, p. 155.

<sup>44</sup>‘Una antichissima regola di comunicazione visiva è quella dei contrasti per cui la vicinanza di due forme di natura opposta si valorizzano e intensificano la loro comunicazione. Questi contrasti non sono limitati a elementi formali e materici, ma possono essere usati anche contrasti semantici.’ Munari, *Design e comunicazione visiva*, p. 355.

<sup>45</sup>Following Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, Campagnaro argues that Munari ‘chooses a direct frontal angle, because the frontal angle is the angle of maximum involvement. By using this graphic layout, it seems that objects and shapes move either backwards or forward in the viewer’s comfort zone, thus creating a sense of optical instability, depending on the different points of view’. Campagnaro, ‘Bruno Munari’s Visual Mapping’, p. 159. Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 145.

worldwide, by deliberately working with the material aspects of the book-object. Holes and flaps elicit a game of discovery for the reader; illustrations and short sentences chase each other across large colour pages and small hidden inserts.<sup>46</sup>

Maffei sees these books as a direct legacy of the Surrealist *boîtes*,<sup>47</sup> although in fact one of the first authors to use holes and shaped pages as a narrative device in his books was the American writer and illustrator Peter Newell. Known for his humorous drawings and poems for publications such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Scribner's Magazine*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, in 1908, Newell published *The Hole Book*: the story of little Tom Potts who, whilst playing with a gun he had no idea was loaded, shoots an unstoppable bullet that punches holes of comedic havoc through various scenes until it finally comes to rest in an unrelenting cake. It is unclear whether Munari himself was aware of Newell's book; Munari's idea of using holes and cut-outs in publishing most likely comes, again, from visual strategies and techniques he had devised and already employed in different artistic contexts and media. In the 1930s, Munari worked extensively as a graphic designer for magazines such as *Natura*, *L'Ala d'Italia*, *La lettura*, and *Tempo*, as well as in advertising. One of his favourite techniques at that time was the use of photo collage and photomontage. Key examples are a series of photomontages that he created for the *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani*, an annual publication designed to establish Bompiani's standing as a modern publisher by bringing trends and themes of contemporary art and literature to the attention of an expert audience. For the 1937 issue, Munari created photomontages for an insert entitled 'Udite! Udite!', in which quotes from Mussolini's speeches caption 'spyglass' graphics focusing on the Duce's face, rendering omnipresent the imperious profile. It was made with an unconventional and highly experimental cut-out method that was not technically easy to achieve at that time in Italy. Munari could have generated a similar effect by reproducing a photo of Mussolini on each page, but the die cut in the pages creates a physical interaction that carries both an element of surprise and disruption for the reader, as well as acting as a veiled political critique: the sequential placing of Mussolini's face in dissonant visual contexts renders his speeches meaningless, and the reader is simultaneously invited, by inserting her finger into the hole, to physically poke the Duce in the face.<sup>48</sup>

This multi-dimensional, haptic, and 'spatial' use of the book or magazine also seems to anticipate the ideas and techniques developed by one of the most distinctive artists of the post-World War II period: Lucio Fontana, the founder of Spatialism, whose art works intersected with Munari's at various points.<sup>49</sup> From 1949, Fontana started to produce his famous *Concetto Spaziale* series, consisting of holes or slashes on the surface of monochrome paintings. In his *buchi* (holes) cycle, Fontana punctured the surface of his canvases, breaking the membrane of two-dimensionality to highlight the space behind the picture, making the canvas a kind of three-dimensional sculpture. Although there are other examples of holes and perforations being used in art works (including in Moholy-Nagy's output, beginning with his famous *Light Prop*),<sup>50</sup> the proximity between Munari's graphic invention and Fontana's major works is compelling. This is

<sup>46</sup>In an interview, Ann K. Beneduce implicitly acknowledges Carle's debt to Munari: 'In those days, the early 1960s, Munari's books were unique. It took a lot of initiative to do anything so unusual [...]. Eric was not a new Munari, but someone working just as inventively as Munari.' Leonard S. Marcus, 'Invention and Discoveries: An Interview with Ann K. Beneduce', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 7 (1983): 47–63 (p. 51).

<sup>47</sup>Maffei, *Munari: I libri*, p. 26. On this, see Campagnaro, 'Bruno Munari's Visual Mapping', p. 151.

<sup>48</sup>The final sequence of three stacked images of Mussolini also seems to anticipate the *Supplemento al dizionario italiano* (Milan: Muggiani, 1963), a humorous book in which Munari catalogued a series of Italian gestures.

<sup>49</sup>The proximity between the aesthetic research of Munari and Fontana has been discussed by Anthony White. See: Anthony White, 'Bruno Munari and Lucio Fontana: Parallel Lives', in *Bruno Munari: The Lightness of Art*, pp. 65–88.

<sup>50</sup>See *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, ed. by Matthew S. Witkovsky, Carol S. Eliel, and Karole P. B. Vail (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2016), pp. 194–95. Another interesting example in the context of contemporary Italian art, which also intersected Munari's activity and projects, particularly in the 1960s, is Paolo Scheggi's Spatialist work, particularly with his *Intersuperfici curve*, monochromes featuring interlocking and overlapping canvas with gashes, holes, grooves and undulations that create effects of multiplied depth. See Francesca Pola, *Paolo Scheggi: The Humanistic Measurement of Space* (Milan: Skira, 2015); Luca Massimo Barbero and Franca Scheggi, *Paolo Scheggi: Catalogue Raisonné* (Milan: Skira, 2016).

not only because specific artistic experimental solutions would find procedural antecedents in 'lesser' art forms like books for children or cultural magazines, but also because 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; that is, formal inventions in the service of pedagogical projects, and not only part of an artistic research in the strict sense of the term.

In addition to their inherent 'spatiality', the different size of holes and contours on the page in Munari's books also creates an itinerary that is tactile. One of Munari's aims, indeed, was, to enhance the reader's consciousness of the material existence of the book as object: a 'toy', an object of playful haptic interaction, as well as a text. For Munari, a notion of narrative discourse or plot is both derived from, and constrained by, formal, material, and visual elements; the narrative goes against the textual hegemony and the general assumption and practice that illustration should be in the service of storyline. A child experiences a book in its visual and tactile dimensions prior to having a sense that there is a story or a linear plot at work in the object. In narratological and theoretical terms, in these books the hole is not just a visual gimmick but an intrinsic narrative device. Using their fingers, the children not only actively follow the story but also translate the words into a sort of pantomime, imitating the action through their digital exploration. Consequently, the reader has a stronger agency in the way she experiences the book and 'animates' the story.

For Munari, children's books are a playground also because they intrinsically subvert the established narrative sequentiality of traditional books. Margaret R. Higonnet has proposed that:

The children's book puts the hierarchy and order of encounter with these peritextual elements into question, for a child familiar with books as objects of play will often look at the last page, or check out the illustrations going from back to front, before entering into the narrative. Such subversive techniques short-circuit suspense and the tyranny of narrative concatenation; yet they are, paradoxically, valuable ways of building a normative sense of narrative form.<sup>51</sup>

Higonnet inscribed the techniques and narrative devices of the so-called shape book into the broad category of the peritext as defined by Gérard Genette.<sup>52</sup> However, the notion of peritext still implies a hierarchical order in the relationship between text and the non-textual apparatus that surrounds it. Clearly, in his books Munari not only subverts the typical hierarchical structure of the illustrated book, whereby non-verbal elements tend to be subordinated to the narrative and linguistic elements, but also makes non-verbal elements key to narrative progression and the narrative experience. More than merely possessing para- or peritextual features, these books could be considered examples of multimodal storytelling, in which non-linguistic elements are not to be considered 'extra-textual', but are, as Wolfgang Hallet has written, 'distinct visual and textual entities that form an integral part of the narrative discourse [...]. [T]he verbal narrative refers to them or addresses them more or less explicitly; [they] are artifact that are produced, used, and located in the fictional world of the [story] and are thus related to the characters' actions and perceptions'.<sup>53</sup>

## Concrete and Illegible

Differently shaped holes – round, square, with uneven edges – were also used by Munari in the first of the 'libri illeggibili' published from 1949 onwards, such as *Libro illeggibile n. 12* (1951), *Libro illeggibile n. 15* (1951), and *Libro illeggibile bianco e rosso* (1953), which again foreground

<sup>51</sup>Margaret R. Higonnet, 'The Playground of the Peritext', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 15. 2 (1990), pp. 47–49 (p. 47).

<sup>52</sup>Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 16–34.

<sup>53</sup>Wolfgang Hallet, 'Non-verbal Semiotic Modes and Media in the Multimodal Novel', in *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, ed. by Gabriele Rippl (Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), pp. 637–52 (p. 638).

the relevance of multimodality and extra-textual elements in Munari's work. In the same period that he started making his children's books in a more systematic way, Munari was also engaged with the post-World War II re-clustering of the Italian art world around new tendencies and aesthetic programmes, which produced a variety of groups and also tried to re-establish connections with the international context lost under Fascism and interrupted during the war. Alongside artists including Atanasio Soldati, Gillo Dorfles, and Gianni Monnet, Munari founded in 1948 the 'Movimento Arte Concreta', an artistic group that sought to promote and develop the theorisation and practices championed at the international level, starting from the early 1930s, by artists like Theo Van Doesburg or Max Bill. Concrete art wanted to move away from the type of abstractionism developed at the beginning of the century by artists including Kandinski, Klee, and, in Italy, Boccioni, Balla, Prampolini. The idea was to paint a type of image that could be universal, that would be exact and transparent, obeying objective laws of mathematical and geometrical derivation. The *libri illeggibili*, one of Munari's first and most significant productions in the context of Concrete art, represented an innovative and challenging convergence between visual art and graphic design. They were initially shown at the Libreria Salto in Milano in 1949, and afterwards, at an international level, at the Italian Book and Craft Shop in New York in 1953,<sup>54</sup> and then at the MoMA in October 1955 in the Mildred Constantine-curated exhibition, 'Two Graphic Designers: Bruno Munari and Alvin Lustig'.<sup>55</sup>

The first of the *libri illeggibili* were uniques; the first series, a hand-made edition of twenty copies, is *Libro illeggibile n. 12* (1951). Later editions of the *libri illeggibili* saw a more substantial print run, such as *Libro bianco e rosso* (1953), published in two thousand copies by the Dutch publisher Steendrukkerij de Jong; *Libro bianco e nero*, published by Grandi Magazzini Isetan of Tokyo in 1965; and the *Libro illeggibile N.Y. 1*, published by the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1967.

Munari's 'unreadable books' give up all pretence of textual communication in favour of pure aesthetics. Made from oddly-cut pages in bright colours, with different types of papers and textures, they communicate through data of form, colour, and pattern rather than the written word. Based on the varying shapes revealed by turning the pages, a different 'story' can be 'read', or different visual patterns created: 'Le forme e i colori sono [...] usati come personaggi che assumono una vita intima giocando o lottando fra di loro'.<sup>56</sup> Munari has described how his experience in publishing inspired the *libri illeggibili* by emphasising the importance of the spatial dimension inherent in a book:

osservando questo menabò senza testo, si scoprono varie cose: il libro è un oggetto che delimita un blocco di spazio. Per attraversare questo spazio occorre sfogliare le pagine dalla prima che sta dietro la copertina fino all'ultima. Ci si mette un certo tempo ed è come una passeggiata nella neve. Per entrare in questo spazio bisogna aprire la copertina, che è come una porta che permette l'attraversamento del libro.<sup>57</sup>

With the *libri illeggibili*, the reader is offered not only a series of abstract graphic compositions (which, for their communicative value, we can to all intents and purposes consider pictorial compositions), but also the 'technology' for their activation, via a method that mixes play, participation, and comprehension. The minimal structures that can be obtained recall the concretist lesson of De Stijl, dominated by geometric figures and primary colours, but also certain

<sup>54</sup>Aline B. Louchheim, 'Galleries Holding Round-ups of Art', *The New York Times*, 23 May 1953. 'Clever nonsense of this sort deserves a mention if only because it provides such a relaxing experience for the gallery-goer whose spirits are occasionally dampened by prevention nonsense elsewhere. Munari will make up a book by sewing together sheets of torn coloured paper and fussing with them in various ways. They may sound foolish but they are engaging.' Further: '[Munari] più che risolvere una superficie da guardare, inventa l'intero oggetto da guardare, e il modo di guardare'. 'Piccola rassegna di Munari', *Domus*, n. 317, April 1956, p.63.

<sup>55</sup>'Two Graphic Designers: Bruno Munari and Alvin Lustig', The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 18 October–27 November 1955. The exhibition included *Libro illeggibile*, 5 (1951); *Libro illeggibile* 21 (1953), and *Libro illeggibile* 6 (1951).

<sup>56</sup>'Libri illeggibili di Munari', in *AZ arte d'oggi*, II.2 (1950), p. 4.

<sup>57</sup>Bruno Munari, 'Libri senza parole' in Roberto Pittarello, *Per fare un libro* (Turin: Edizioni Sonda, 1993), p. 6.



angular asymmetry typical of Japanese pictorial conventions. The *libri illeggibili* resonate with Munari's other most important artistic series of the period, the *Negativi-positivi*: a series of abstract geometric works based on the ambiguous relationship between background and foreground, and on the perceptual instability established by colour contrasts.<sup>58</sup> If the relationship between foreground and background remains 'undecided' in the *Negativi-positivi*, becoming noticeable only through a gestalt shift, in the case of the *libri illeggibili*, background and foreground shapes are materially layered and can be distinguishable. However, the possibility of 'turning the page', reshuffling the order of coloured layers, enables the same mechanism of playing with the background-foreground dichotomy.

Munari also omits the traditional peritextual elements of the book – colophon, title, page numbers, index – and transforms the reading of the book into a quasi-musical experience, in which the turning of the pages is rhythmic rather than led by narrative. On the presentation page of the first exhibition at the Libreria Salto, Alberto Mondadori wrote: 'Questi libri illeggibili sono i primi di un nuovo linguaggio che ha strette parentele con il cinema e la musica e, credo, potranno diventare un giorno un "genere", così come a fianco della scultura, le "macchine inutili"'.<sup>59</sup>

The *libri illeggibili* function, then, as a fitting convergence between Munari's abstractionism and his children's books, applying the same principle of textual subversion and topological manipulation. Munari provides a series of compositional elements through the shape of the page, and the cut and the colour of the paper; but these elements do not generate a finished work: the reader is expected to construct their own sequence and their own composition. There is no single way to proceed through the 'reading'; the work is not read sequentially in the traditional sense, but its structural form can be freely interacted with, yielding different possibilities at different times. Nothing is prearranged; the colours and the structural forms of the pages are the independent protagonists of the book, which does ultimately become 'legible', in spite of itself.

The identity of the *libri illeggibili* as book-shaped objects without text has implications for the involvement they demand of, and the freedom they allow, to their readers,<sup>60</sup> indicating once more the democratic outlook that defined Munari's activity and approach. In the light of one of his favourite mottos borrowed from Lao-Tse – 'Produzione senza appropriazione, azione senza imposizione di sé, sviluppo senza sopraffazione' – for Munari it was essential to produce objects of visual communication that permitted a degree of freedom, inviting the reader to engage in the act of constructing a specific visual experience.<sup>61</sup> This constitutive, intrinsic indeterminacy of the artwork foregrounds a set of issues that would become key to the defined aesthetics and theoretical underpinning of the *Arte Programmata* movement, beginning in 1961, upon which Umberto Eco's *Opera aperta* (1962) is largely built, which discusses the intrinsic structural openness of contemporary works of art in which the artist deliberately leaves the arrangement of some constituent elements to the public or to chance. This approach, in fact, anticipates two major issues in contemporary literary theory: the question of multiplicity and plurality in art; and the insistence on literary response as an interactive process between reader and text. It also foregrounds the type of 'patterned representation'<sup>62</sup> through which these multimodal texts create their meaning via 'regulated improvisation', as Bourdieu would term it,<sup>63</sup> which allows for

<sup>58</sup> 'Questi oggetti (che non definisco pitture anche se sembrano quadri astratti) danno al colore una nuova vitalità ovvero una possibilità di "double focus" (come scrisse George Morris su *Magazine of Art*) [...] ma il suo interesse è nell'avanzamento e recessione di piani di superficie'. *Le cose serie di Bruno Munari*, Exhibition brochure. Studio di Architettura di Mario Brunati, Sandro Mendini e Ferruccio Villa, Milano, 9–29 febbraio 1958. <http://www.munart.org/doc/bruno-munari-studio-architettura-1958.pdf> [accessed 15 July 2019].

<sup>59</sup> Alberto Mondadori, *Libri illeggibili di Munari*, 11–25 febbraio 1950. Libreria A. Salto, *Arte concreta 1949–1950*.

<sup>60</sup> 'Da tutta l'attività di Bruno Munari si ricava, attraverso i libri illeggibili, il concetto del fare. I libri non contengono una "storia" né servono per spiegarla: i libri illeggibili e i libri prodotti nei laboratori sono stimoli all'azione, ad agire, a sperimentare tutte le possibilità combinatorie dell'arte come tale. Se poi una storia nasce, questa non è l'unica, ognuno troverà all'interno del libro la sua storia: il testo dipende da chi osserva il libro, ed è un testo immaginario e personale.' Finessi, p. 222.

<sup>61</sup> Munari, *Da cosa nasce cosa*, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), p. 157.

<sup>63</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 78.



flexibility, transformation, and creativity.<sup>64</sup> Central to multimodality is the concept of ‘design, of intentionality, which introduces a dynamic through emphasising both the social relationships of any communicative act and the possibilities for transformation as texts are constructed’.<sup>65</sup>

## Tactile Books

The *libri illeggibili* are clearly a compelling example (and a limit case) of ‘crossover picture-books’: addressing no specific target audience, they could be productively experienced by anyone, including pre-literate children and illiterate adults, since their model of communication rests on a visual and haptic lexicon. Unsurprisingly, their production became part of the various artistic workshops for children developed by Munari, continued later by art educators who embraced his methods, including Roberto Pittarello and Beba Restelli.<sup>66</sup> Munari himself commented:

Facendo conoscere ai bambini in quanti modi si possono mettere assieme dei fogli per fare un libro e come si può operare dentro il libro, sopra e attraverso le pagine col disegno, col colore, con il collage e, perché no, anche con le parole; ogni bambino può fare il suo libro e sarà un libro che comunica lo stato d’animo e la personalità del bambino, anche se non sa spiegare a parole perché lo ha fatto. C’è qualcuno che sa spiegare a parole, un brano musicale? <sup>67</sup>

Munari further extends and remediates these ideas in his *Prelibri*, books intended for pre-schoolers that foreground visual, spatial, topological, and haptic or tactile communication, and bypass the typical pedagogical approach to books that requires some degree of literacy. Published for the first time by Bruno Danese in 1980, the *Prelibri* is a series of twelve small books (10 cm x 10 cm), designed to fit into small hands, and available in many varied and unusual colours, and made from materials including wood, paper, cardboard, plastic, felt, and faux fur. Even the bindings are constructed from a variety of materials such as twine, string, metal, and plastic. The only peritextual element preserved in the *Prelibri* is the word ‘libro’ as the title of each little book, also printed on the notional ‘back cover’, so as not to enforce on children any hierarchical structure by which they should ‘enter’ the book: ‘comunque il libro sia preso in mano [risulta] dritto’, as Munari explains.<sup>68</sup> The books are designed to stimulate a variety of sensations and emotions arising from perceptions and images, visual, tactile, and also auditory; Book 9’s wooden ‘pages’, for instance, yield an acoustic dimension as they are turned. Techniques employed in other of Munari’s books are revisited here: sheets of translucent film in primary colours that combine to make secondary colours; holes ‘di diverse forme dove il bambino può introdurre le dita o guardare attraverso i buchi. [Il libro] di cartone cuoio ha un grosso filo di lana rossa che attraversa tutte le pagine in alto e in basso’.<sup>69</sup> This technology was earlier employed in *Libro illeggibile N.Y. 1* (1967), clearly with an ironic material instantiation of the idiomatic expression ‘seguire il filo del discorso’: the thread of the narrative that literally is found in the pages of the book.

The *Prelibri* adopt the methods and ideas Munari developed for his *Laboratori tattili*, from the 1970s onwards, which in turn stemmed from and were inspired by the Futurist experimentation with Tactilism. In 1921, Marinetti had published the manifesto *Il tattilismo*, producing in the same year his first tactile board, or *tavola tattile*, entitled *Sudan-Parigi*: the first concrete example

<sup>64</sup>Gunther Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>65</sup>Eve Bearne, ‘Multimodality, Literacy and Texts: Developing a Discourse’, *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 9.2 (2009), pp. 156–87 (p. 157).

<sup>66</sup>See Roberto Pittarello, *Libri fatti dai bambini per gli adulti* (Castelfranco Veneto: Scuola del fare, 1997); Beba Restelli, *I bambini autori di libri. Il gioco delle pieghe secondo il metodo Bruno Munari* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2017).

<sup>67</sup>Munari, ‘Libri senza parole’.

<sup>68</sup>Munari, *Da cosa nasce cosa*, p. 230.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 234.

of a work of art designed to be experienced not via visual contemplation or analysis, but by touch, through the direct tactile perception of the art object in its material constitution.<sup>70</sup> Munari himself composed several ‘tavole tattili’, beginning in the early 1930s. A likely common source of inspiration for this experimental interest in the haptic is Maria Montessori’s pedagogical methodology, centred on experiential learning and hands-on interaction with objects and material reality.<sup>71</sup> Munari’s aim was in fact to augment children’s literacy of the extra-textual elements of a book-object, in view of the cognitive salience of multi-sensory experiences and their importance in intellectual and cognitive development in children.

In common with the *libri illeggibili*, the *Prelibri* are ‘open works’, in which the invention of the narrative is left entirely to the child who, within the material parameters of the book, can construct stories and narrative inventions using her or his own power of imagination.<sup>72</sup> Nicoletta Gramantieri has suggested that readers become involved in the creation of stories through deploying such mental and cognitive processes as accumulation, subtraction, extension, prediction, repetition, variation, and discovery; and that they experience pleasure in the identification and recognition of such narratives.<sup>73</sup> The ‘illegibility’ of these books – or rather, the maginalisation of textuality – is, moreover, a strategy which allows for material modification of the book-object without such modifications suppressing or impeding the book’s ‘readability’: the tearing-off of a page, for example, does not change the essential system of the book itself: the basic principle is safeguarded even if some pages are missing. In this sense, the construction of meaning from the book is an open process, not prescribed by the author, but which emerges from the interaction between ‘text’ and ‘reader’, requiring the action of the viewer-reader-handler to take actual shape; that is, the same approach found in the theoretical premises and experiments of Programmed art.<sup>74</sup>

Other elements in these books provide a further bridge between the techniques and visual experiences of the avant-garde and Munari’s pedagogical interests, including, for example, format. Both the *libri illeggibili* and the *Prelibri* are square books: the format Munari adopted for many of his children’s books, from his first publication with Einaudi in 1942, *Abecedario di Munari*. This format was rarely employed by publishers at the time. In fact, the best-known examples are art journals (the Austrian *Ver Sacrum*, 1898, or the Dutch *Wendingen*, 1918–1923), or books on art and architecture, including the Bauhaus catalogue designed by Herbert Bayer in 1923, or Marinetti’s ‘litto-latta’ book, *Parole in libertà* (1932).<sup>75</sup> The *Abecedario di Munari*, moreover, was published during World War II, when many materials, including paper, were rationed. The

<sup>70</sup> See Pierpaolo Antonello, ‘Out of touch. F. T. Marinetti’s *Il Tattilismo* and the Futurist Critique of Separation’, in *Back to the Futurists: The Avant-garde and its Legacy*, ed. by Elza Adamowicz and Simona Storch (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 38–55.

<sup>71</sup> See Claudio Pogliano, *Senso lato. Il tatto e la cultura occidentale* (Rome: Carrocci, 2015), p. 125.

<sup>72</sup> Maffei, *Munari: I libri*, p. 31.

<sup>73</sup> Nicoletta Gramantieri, ‘L’albo illustrato e il suo lettore’, in *Ad occhi aperti. Leggere l’albo illustrato*, ed. by Hamelin (Rome: Donzelli, 2012), p. 218. Running a pedagogical research with children aged 27–39 months, Marnie Campagnaro shows the number of ways children interact sensorially with Munari’s *Prelibri*: by brushing, touching, pinging, going beyond, skirting, and blocking out. Marnie Campagnaro, ‘Do Touch! How Bruno Munari’s Picturebooks Work’, *Rivista di storia dell’educazione*, 1 (2019), pp. 81–96.

<sup>74</sup> With the help of Marco Ferreri, an architect and designer, in 1993 Munari also produced a playful variation on this set of ideas, the *Libroletto*. The title is a pun formed by the homograph/homophone ‘letto’, signifying both ‘read’ and ‘bed’ in Italian. Available only as a prototype in three copies and never published, the book is composed of large different-coloured pieces of padded fabric in the form of soft sheets to be used as pages or, alternatively, as a makeshift bed. It is a square, large-format book (70 cm x 70 cm) that can be transformed into a bed by detaching the fabric ‘pages’ and zipping them together end to end, in a model reminiscent of the mechanical metallic bookbinding used by the Futurists. In the design magazine *Domus*, Munari describes it as a ‘habitable book’. The short phrases of text printed on the border that runs along two edges of the ‘pages’ constitute a story, regardless of whether they have been joined to form a book or a bed. The story changes with each construction, making this book an exercise in combinatorial narrative of the kind with which the French *Oulipo* group experimented; in the case of Munari’s ‘libroletto’, it is left to the reader to construct the possible variations and combinations. Bruno Munari, ‘Libro letto’, *Domus*, 760 (1994), p. 57.

<sup>75</sup> An earlier example is a limited-edition album with illustrations on the popular Parisian performer Yvette Guilbert. Gustave Geffroy, *Yvette Guilbert*, illustrated by Toulouse-Lautrec (Paris: L’Estampe Originale [Andre Marty], 1894).

editor had proposed a standard format already in stock, but Munari insisted on the square format since the book 'è stato studiato per un formato quadrato e tutte le forme sono in misura armonica col quadrato; anche la copertina formata da nove dischi, è armonica se resta chiusa nel quadrato della pagina'.<sup>76</sup> His choice reflects the same aesthetics Munari adopted for his art work. Following Max Bill and other Concrete artists, Munari in fact adopted the square as 'visual frame' for some of his most important artworks of the post-World War II period, including the *Negativi-positivi* series of paintings, and *Curve di Peano*.<sup>77</sup>

Again, we could say that these types of books, both the *libri illeggibili* and the *Prelibri*, remediate established experimental art forms and genres like geometrical abstractionism and Tactilism, introducing an intrinsic dynamism into the reading experience previously constrained by traditional art formats and techniques. This has led to children being able to experience and enjoy the techniques and visual and haptic experiences of Modernism and the Avant-garde, advancing their visual and multimodal literacy: a concern central to our own contemporary education and pedagogical theory, and anticipated by Munari fifty years ago.

## Colours

Being a visual artist, Munari was naturally interested in colours. In particular, he was interested in the ways in which colour interacts with, and shapes, formal and visual perception following the experimentation of the Concrete art movement and Bauhaus-affiliated artists like Johannes Itten and Josef Albers.

Colour play is at the base of some of Munari's apparently more 'conventional' children's storytelling, such as his Little [Red] Riding Hood series. Inspired by Gianni Rodari's idea of 'favole a rovescio' in *Grammatica della fantasia* (1965) – and also reminiscent of Warja Lavater, who created experimental accordion-fold books that re-tell classic fairy tales with symbols rather than words (or even pictures), such as *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* (1965) –<sup>78</sup> Munari published three chromatic variations of *Little Red Riding Hood: Cappuccetto Verde* (1972), *Cappuccetto Giallo* (1972), and *Cappuccetto Bianco* (1981).<sup>79</sup> The Italian art critic Marco Meneguzzo described these books as a 'gioiello di arte concettuale incredibilmente comprensibile ai bambini'.<sup>80</sup> An element like the colour of the protagonist's cape that in the traditional folk tale seems marginal or decorative becomes central in Munari's version: framing, informing, and constraining both the narrative and the illustrations. Besides being completely dressed in green, Little Green Riding Hood brings her grandmother a bottle of mint syrup, some parsley and salad, and some green bags of mint tea. She goes on to be saved not by a hunter or a lumberjack, but by an army of green frogs.

<sup>76</sup>Maffei, p. 58. In fact, Juliet Kinchin writes that: 'At a time of severe material shortages and inactivity in the building industries, more modest undertakings such as construction toposes and children's books stood a better chance of being realised. These also enabled children to "build" free of real-world constraints, using their imagination and artistic intuition.' Juliet Kinchin, 'The Crystal Chain and Architectural Play', in *Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900–2000* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), p. 60.

<sup>77</sup>The square format was later adopted for a children's book series for Einaudi that Munari edited, beginning in 1972, called *Tantibambini*. See Anna Martinucci, 'A Little Square Revolution', *Strenæ: Recherches sur les livres et objets culturels de l'enfance*, 13 (2018): <https://journals.openedition.org/strenae/1928> [accessed 15 July 2019].

<sup>78</sup>Gianni Rodari, *Grammatica della fantasia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), pp. 56–61. Warja Lavater, *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* (Paris: A. Maeght, 1965).

<sup>79</sup>They were later collected in a single volume by Einaudi, with the inclusion of two versions of the original story by the Grimm brothers, and with the addition of *Cappuccetto Blu*, by Maria Enrica Agostinelli. *Cappuccetto Rosso, Verde, Giallo, Blu, e Bianco*, a cura di Bruno Munari (Turin: Einaudi, 1981). Munari's are the most famous of the chromatic reworkings of Little Red Riding Hood; others include: *Les petit chaperons de toutes les couleurs* (1976) by Fred Elmont; *Chapeuzinho Amarelo* (1979) by Chico Buarque; *Capurecita de colores* (1996) e *La Caputxeta Negra* (1996) by Carles Cano. See Sandra L. Beckett, *Recycling Red Riding Hood* (New York-London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 81–101.

<sup>80</sup>Marco Meneguzzo in Beppe Finessi and Marco Meneguzzo, *Bruno Munari*. Catalogo dell'esposizione, Milano, Rotonda della Besana (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editore, 2007), p. 25.

There has been an under-conceptualisation of the role of colour or lettering in multimodal forms of communication or expression,<sup>81</sup> but in Munari's series they have a specific and primary function. Colours are in fact integrated in the 'texturised surface' of the page that seems to extend the haptic and visual experiments made by Munari for his artistic workshops for children, in which specific attention was given to the study and exploration of textures.<sup>82</sup> The narrative proceeds through the employment of different techniques that are familiar to children, such as pad printing that creates a filling effect, as in the case of the forest leaves in *Cappuccetto Verde*.

In *Cappuccetto Giallo* (1972), Munari replaces the forest of the traditional story with a cityscape, with a jungle of skyscrapers and cars. To reach her grandmother, Little Yellow Riding Hood needs to face the congested traffic of a modern city, in which the wolf is a malevolent and predatory motorist. The yellow (or amber) of a traffic light here becomes the thematic focal point of the story. Munari uses various hues and shades of yellow that are foregrounded and explicitly referred to in the narrative: for example, Little Yellow Riding Hood's dress bears reflections of different types of yellow: 'è molto bello come colore perché non è un giallo limone e nemmeno un giallo zucca'. These tones also define the background and compositional elements of the story: 'è un giallo con dei riflessi di un altro giallo e molto morbido come le piume di un canarino'. As with the frogs in the green version, in the yellow version it is yellow canaries that save Little Yellow Riding Hood from the wolf by fluttering around the traffic light and creating traffic chaos, allowing Little Yellow Riding Hood to cross the road and reach her grandmother.

What is especially compelling in *Cappuccetto Giallo* is the use of Xeroxes to reproduce cars and buildings. Munari employs a technique he experimented with his *Xerografie originali*. From the early 1960s onwards, Munari used the first Xerox machines to produce so-called 'original copies': the result of an image that has been moved across the glass plate of the copier, so that it reproduces both the image and its movement. It does not consist in a mere copy but is in fact an original, obtained through a process exploiting the whole potential of the copier by subverting its intended function of producing exact replicas of given documents. This type of experimentation with photocopiers, which anticipates the subversive use made by Punk culture starting in the mid-1970s, and later the Copy Art movement,<sup>83</sup> also came to be part of the experiments in Munari's art workshops for children, again remediating a technique developed in the field of experimental visual art and repurposing it for children's books and visual activities.

Finally, in this series, *Cappuccetto Bianco* takes the idea to the extreme in a very playful and ironic way. It also further stretches the concept of the 'unreadable book' in that the suppressed element is no longer the verbal but the iconic and the chromatic. The book, in fact, features only textual captions at the bottom of a series of completely white pages that are devoid of any illustrations. Little White Riding Hood wakes up to find everything covered with snow:

<sup>81</sup> Cf. for instance: Nina Nørgaard, 'Modality: Commitment, Truth Value, and Reality Claims Across Modes in Multimodal Novels', *Journal for Literary Theory*, 4.1 (2010), 63–80; Hans-Jürgen Bucher, 'Multimodales Verstehen oder Rezeption als Interaktion: Theoretische und empirische Grundlagen einer systematischen Analyse der Multimodalität', in *Bildlinguistik: Theorie – Methoden – Fallbeispiele*, ed. by Hajo Diekmannshenke, Michael Klemm, and Hartmut Stöckl (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2011), pp. 123–56.

<sup>82</sup> Munari, *Design e comunicazione visiva*, p. 91. In the Zanichelli series, 'Quaderni di design', edited by Munari, Corrado Gavinelli published the volume *Textures* (1976), while Tonino Milite edited *Le texture* (1980) for the series 'Giocare con l'arte. Quaderni per l'educazione alla comunicazione visiva', edited by Munari between 1979 and 1992.

<sup>83</sup> 'Photocopying made its appearance just before the beginning of the mid-1970s Punk cultural revolution, which quickly and wholeheartedly embraced this new medium, for its particular aesthetic qualities as well as its properties as a means of communication [...]. Punk zines became an integral element of the Punk culture, making full use of the medium's black-and-white aesthetic, and with a playful attitude towards the photocopying process itself (for example, the shades and contrasts obtained by re-copying a copy, the ability to "photograph" objects placed directly upon the scanning window, and the strange effects that could be created by moving the original during the scanning process) – which would also inspire the later Copy Art movement'. Alessandro Ludovico, *Post Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894* (Eindhoven: Onomatopoe, 2012), pp. 43–44.

Mai vista tanta neve.

Stamattina ci siamo svegliati e, aprendo la finestra, siamo stati accecati da tanto bianco, la neve era caduta durante tutta la notte e aveva coperto ogni cosa.

Mai vista tanta neve!

Everything is so white that nothing can be distinguished any more: the woods, the houses, the white wolf – who in his turn can no longer see Little White Riding Hood passing through.

The book is dedicated to Remy Charlip and John Cage. Charlip was a director, choreographer, and theatrical designer renowned also for his twenty-nine children's books, the best-known of which is *Fortunately* (1964), a story about a series of unfortunate and fortunate twists and turns. In 1957, he published a book entitled *It Looks Like Snow*, composed of twenty-four white pages with captions at the bottom of the page and running onto the double spread ('If you look closely, you will see that it's snowing [...]. | It snows so hard up north that you can barely see a thing').<sup>84</sup> Conceived as a sort of 'White Christmas Greeting', Charlip sent a copy to Munari, whose later dedication acknowledges his debt to him and, via Charlip, to Cage.<sup>85</sup> Charlip's picturebook itself is in fact a tribute to John Cage, one of the leading figures of the post-war avant-garde American and international contemporary music scene. In 1952, Cage composed *4'33"*, a piece composed of no played sound and that consequently foregrounds the 'peri-auditorial' elements of a live musical performance.<sup>86</sup> Munari's express dedication to Cage also reflects a personal acquaintance initiated in the mid-1950s when Cage was working with Luciano Berio at the 'Studio di fonologia musicale di Radio Milano', established in 1955 in Milan by Berio and Maderna;<sup>87</sup> but principally, it points to an aesthetic consonance between the two artists. It was Umberto Eco who, with *Opera aperta*, implicitly delineated the points of theoretical contact between Cage and Munari, through questions linked to the indeterminacy of the artwork and its 'open' structure, as well as the influence of Zen philosophy,<sup>88</sup> with its concepts of self-emptying and the avoidance of self-centred or discriminative thinking. 'Pensare confonde le idee', as Munari reiterated.<sup>89</sup>

*Cappuccetto Bianco* could then be seen as a sort of Cageian experiment for children where, in place of everything being soundless, everything is colourless. This graphic work, with its emptiness and its blank spaces, also accords with the type of minimalistic approach to graphic design – characterised by simplicity, balanced use of voids, and harmonious geometrical forms – widely employed by Munari in his post-World War II cover art for some of the most important and prestigious publishers in Italy: Einaudi, Bompiani, Editori Riuniti; and that could be compared with the Japanese aesthetic quality of *ma* (emptiness and space). For Munari, as for Cage, whiteness, like silence, can be framed and formed, allowing the articulation of a perceptual framework through which the user can fill this 'emptiness'.

However, notwithstanding the monochromatic scenario of *Cappuccetto Bianco*, a witty and ironic inversion at the end of the story ensures that colours are reinserted into the narrative – but

<sup>84</sup>Remy Charlip, *It Looks Like Snow* (New York: Greenwillow Books, 1957). Charlip then anticipates Piero Manzoni's similar feat, *Piero Manzoni: The Life and the Works* (1962), a totally blank 100-page book. Conceived by Manzoni just before his death in February 1963, the book was published posthumously later that year by Jes Petersen. Without ever mentioning Munari, in Manzoni Germano Celant finds intentions which were very similar to those Munari had been proposing for years with his *libri illegibili*: 'Il libro di Manzoni elimina ogni filosofia della parola. È, come i suoi Achromes, la tabula rasa, serve per annullare la mistica personale e la carica esistenziale della parola, ed immettere il libro come nuovo valore artistico, come medium autosignificante, con una propria individualità e contestualità primarie'; Germano Celant, *Book as Artwork 1960/1970* (Brooklyn, NY: 6 Decades, 2010), p. 38.

<sup>85</sup>As a reciprocal homage, Charlip took inspiration from Munari's 'Ricerca di comodità in una poltrona scomoda' (1944) for one of his 'Air Mail Dances' (1971-), *Dance in a Wing Chair*. See Bruno Munari, 'Uno torna a casa stanco per avere lavorato tutto il giorno e trova una poltrona scomoda', *Domus* 202 (1944), pp. 374–75.

<sup>86</sup>In 1961, Cage also published a book entitled *Silence*, translated into Italian by Feltrinelli: *Silenzio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971).

<sup>87</sup>Luca Zaffarano, '1987. Interview with Bruno Munari', *Arshake*, 14 June 2016: <https://www.arshake.com/en/1987-interview-to-bruno-munari/> [accessed 15 July 2019].

<sup>88</sup>Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta* (1962) (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), pp. 218–23.

<sup>89</sup>Bruno Munari, *Pensare confonde le idee* (Mantua: Corraini, 1993).



in purely *verbal* terms, exploiting a series of Italian idiomatic expressions. Little White Riding Hood ‘diventa rossa’ (blushes, that is, goes red); then ‘diventa viola dal freddo’ (becomes blue with cold); the story becomes like ‘un libro giallo’ (a detective novel, named for its yellow covers), ‘che ci farà passare una notte in bianco’ (that will give us a ‘white’, that is sleepless night). Munari here adopts a paradoxical version of the established genre of *ekphrasis*, which defines a description of a work of art produced as a rhetorical exercise. A subcategory is ‘notional *ekphrasis*’, which is the description of an entirely imaginary and non-existent work of art, as though it were factual and existed in reality. In the case of *Cappuccetto Bianco*, the ekphrastic exercise refers to an image that is both actual (snow that covers everything) and imaginary, because the reader cannot in reality see the characters and the action described by the captions.

## Doodles

It could also be argued that the white pages can be seen as an invitation to the young reader to fill up the book with her or his own drawings, taking this picture-less book as a blank canvas. This idea is at the core of another example of Munari’s artistic and literary multimodality that remediates specific experimental art forms: his illustrations for Gianni Rodari’s books. One of Italy’s most famous twentieth-century children’s writers, Rodari was also a theorist who, like Munari, advocated an anti-authoritarian pedagogy based on creativity.<sup>90</sup> In 1960, Rodari published *Filastrocche in cielo e in terra*, illustrated by Munari: a book that initiated a collaboration between the two that lasted until Rodari’s death in 1980. The book is a collection of nursery rhymes written by Rodari in which the visual invades the conventional space of the textual. Munari’s illustrations are in fact not clearly separated from the text, but they frame it or are superimposed onto it, in a kind of colourful choreography that surrounds and interpenetrates the text.

Resembling a similar artistic intervention by Joan Miró for Paul Eluard’s *À toute épreuve* (1958),<sup>91</sup> Munari’s illustrations correlate loosely with the content of the poem but are mostly allusive or abstract. They consist of scribbles, doodles, geometrical forms, and colourful patterns. They clearly mimic the way a child would draw in a very simple and spontaneous manner, using intersecting lines, circles, loops, sticks, ‘knot of whirls’, stylised rough outlines of human forms or trees, and so on.<sup>92</sup> The use of crayons and primary colours also emphasises the allegedly ‘childish’ dimension of these doodles.

Although *prima facie* Munari’s may seem very simple and unassuming illustrations, they could be seen as a subtle and parodic gesture, in a completely odd or unexpected context, towards artistic episodes and art movements of the period. It was typical of Munari to create works that can be read meta-critically as an ironic taking-distance from contemporary artistic tendencies or particular aesthetic or cultural modes. On the one hand, these iconotexts remind us of the compositional hybridity of the Futurist’s typographical experimentation, such as Marinetti’s words-in-freedom and, more generally, of the early twentieth-century avant-garde which systematically produced these ‘marked texts’, as opposed to the unmarked, uniform, self-effacing, and allegedly neutral text that fills the text blocks of most books.<sup>93</sup> On the other, they seem to refer to one of the dominant art modes of the 1950s and 1960s, a mode labelled in various ways, including

<sup>90</sup>Anna Antoniazzi, ‘Tradition or Revolution? The Difficult “Turning Point” in Italian Children’s Literature’, *Strenæ: Recherches sur les livres et objets culturels de l’enfance* 13 (2018) <https://journals.openedition.org/strenae/1919> [accessed 15 July 2019] Maria Luisa Salvadori and Alessandra Asteriti Mathys, ‘Apologizing to the Ancient Fable: Gianni Rodari and His Influence on Italian Children’s Literature’, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 26.2 (2002), pp. 169–202.

<sup>91</sup>Paul Eluard, *A toute épreuve* (Geneva: Gerald Cramer, 1958).

<sup>92</sup>In *Understanding Children’s Drawings*, Michaela Strauss illustrates the development of children’s drawings, ‘from the first knot of whirls to the form of the circle, and from the first weaving pendulum swings to the form of the cross. It is a path leading from the free rhythm of dynamic movement to the abstractness of geometry, from flowing creation to drawn forms’. Michaela Strauss, *Understanding Children’s Drawings: Tracing the Path of Incarnation* (Forest Row: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2007), p. 28.

<sup>93</sup>Johanna Drucker, *Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art 1909–1923* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), pp. 94–95.



Abstract Expressionism, Action painting, *Art informel*, or gestural abstraction, and which was setting itself in open debate with Concretism, of which Munari was one of the principal exponents in Italy. A particular strand of *Art informel* was the calligraphic work of painters including Cy Twombly, an American artist who moved to Italy in 1957 and whose work was characterised by loose gestural marks or scribbles that elicit comparisons with both calligraphy and graffiti. In Twombly's work, writing and painting are often combined on the same plane, intersecting in a way not dissimilar to that seen in Rodari's book, also with the use of crayons and a childlike style of writing.

Munari seems to suggest that this type of gestural aesthetic is not breaking any new creative ground, but has already had existence in children's visual expression and a sort of zero-degree visual art form. Under this analysis, contemporary artists are simply appropriating techniques and methods that are already part of the kine-aesthetic sensibility of children. Jonathan Fineberg, in *The Innocent Eye*, observes that many of the greatest artists of the twentieth century, including Kandinsky, Klee, Matisse, Picasso, and Miró, possessed large collections of artwork by children.<sup>94</sup> Such artists had studied and imitated the spontaneity and the distortions of children's pictures as a source of inspiration. According to Ernst Gombrich, alongside psychoanalysis, this twentieth century aesthetic revolution was the driving factor in a new appreciation of children's drawing, doodles, and non-normative writing. The artistic avant-gardes were key to a re-evaluation of art made by children, by amateurs, and even by the mentally ill or psychopathic. According to Gombrich, this derives from the fact that contemporary culture identifies artistic activity with the creative drive rather than with dextrous ability or technique.<sup>95</sup> With the illustration for Rodari's *Filastrocche in cielo e in terra*, Munari takes these methods back to children themselves, empowering them by inviting them to explore their own innate visual language in a free and spontaneous way.<sup>96</sup> It is not by chance that the cover of Rodari's book features a series of 'childish' drawings framed as though they were a set of abstract paintings.

More specifically, Munari furnishes his readers with expressive possibilities located in the liminal territory between figuration and abstraction, commuting between that which resists full narrativisation, and that which can interact with the narrative potentialities of this particular iconotextual experience.<sup>97</sup> It also allows for movements of 'distraction' to the reader, in the same way in which scribbles and doodles can enact a centrifugal oscillation with regard to full attention and focus. On the other hand, this gestural and calligraphic intervention identifies the page as a subject of personal appropriation, of subjectivisation, and of emotional investment, through a form of spontaneous 'graphic focalisation'.<sup>98</sup>

Munari's intention might also be to create a sort of visual equivalent of the dynamics of reading a text where the emphasis falls not only on theme or content, but also on the structure and poetic elements such as rhythm, assonance, rhyme, and word play, as well as the 'expressive' or 'prosodic' aspects of language, including intonation, vocal contour, stress, volume, and other dynamic and expressive features that add emotional colour and meaning to an utterance, allowing the hearer to infer and respond to a speaker's feelings, motives, and other states that may not be expressed in words.

<sup>94</sup>Jonathan Fineberg, *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>95</sup>Ernst Gombrich, 'Caccia allo scarabocchio', in Giuseppe Zevola, *Piaceri di Noia. Quattro secoli di scarabocchi nell'Archivio Storico del Banco di Napoli* (Milan: Leonardo, 1991), pp. 7–18 (p. 11); see also Marco Belpoliti, *Doppio zero: Una mappa portatile della contemporaneità* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), pp. 75–78.

<sup>96</sup>Other artists and art pedagogues like Arno Stern and Hervé Tullet have extensively worked with this kind of approach and method.

<sup>97</sup>Discussing the relationship between the abstract and the figurative in comics, Jan Baetens writes that 'at the narrative level, what establishes the gap between abstract and non-abstract is not the presence or absence of figurative elements, but the absence or presence of narrative potential'. Baetens, p. 96.

<sup>98</sup>See Craig Fisher and Charles Hatfield's analysis of Eddie Campbell's *Alec*. Craig Fischer and Charles Hatfield, 'Teeth, Sticks, and Bricks: Calligraphy, Graphic Focalisation, and Narrative Braiding in Eddie Campbell's *Alec*', *SubStance*, 40.1 (2011), pp. 70–93.

Munari invites children to appropriate the space of the page and the book as a personal canvas; as a compositional space that can be used without overmuch concern for the 'sacrality' of the text. He invites his readers to disrupt the hierarchical order of the page; to see the text as a system of signs that could be paired with other forms of signs in a truly multimodal experience. Under this analysis, children should not be discouraged from marking, doodling on, scribbling on, or overpainting a book. In Munari's so-called children's books, there exists a direct invitation to any reader to illustrate their favourite books themselves, making the act of reading a truly dynamic, multisensory, multimodal experience.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.