

**THE CENTER FOR BOOK ARTS**

28 West 27th Street 3rd Floor New York, New York 10001

## THE INTERNAL MACHINE

OCTOBER 6 - DECEMBER 16 2017  
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John Roach, Curator  
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Front and back cover: Brian Dettmer, *Compress Control*, 2017. Found book, acrylic varnish (detail)

The *Internal Machine* is a dynamic, multi-sensory exhibition that questions both the mechanics and form of the book, and exemplifies the Center's ongoing interest in showcasing contemporary artwork that has been influenced by the concept of the book. The exhibition is organized by interdisciplinary artist John Roach, an Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at Parsons School of Design.

The Center is pleased to present artworks by 15 artists in diverse media such as sculpture, print, installation, and photography...all informed by the mechanism of the book. The Center's recent exhibition history has included various forms of new media and video, such as *Once Upon a Time* (2014), organized by Rachel Gugelberger, which focused on advances of technology altering the printed text and vice versa, as well as exhibitions that explored book material for sculpture and installation, such as *En Masse: Book Orchestrated* (2017) by Osman Can Yerebakan. Both exhibitions explored the many ways in which contemporary artists have incorporated the book and its mechanics into their own artistic practice.

I must thank John Roach for his dedication, enthusiasm, and professionalism in organizing this exhibition. I must thank the

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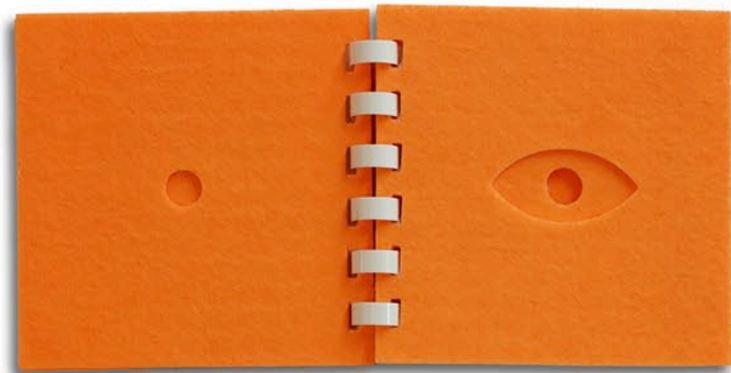
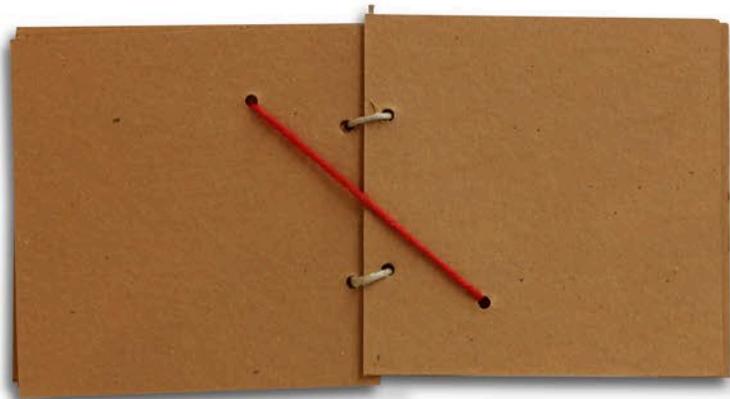
artists for lending their artwork as well as for their time to install their work. Without their willingness and confidence, we would not have been able to present these artworks to the public.

I am grateful to John Roach for the design and production of this wonderful documentation, the exhibition catalogue, and to Julia Blasius, 2017 Summer Intern, for her wonderful curatorial assistance in helping secure loans and images.

I am indebted to my colleagues here at The Center for Book Arts, especially Emilie Ahern, Outreach and Marketing Coordinator; Anne Muntges, Education/Studio Manager; Paul Romaine, Development/Membership Manager; and Theo Roth, Collections/Archives Manager. It is because of their constant efforts that the Center can present such excellent exhibitions and programs. I would also like to thank the Center's Board of Directors, Exhibitions/Collections Committee, Faculty, and Members for their continuous trust and encouragement of the staff to further the Center's mission.

Alexander Campos  
Executive Director & Curator  
The Center for Book Arts  
October 2017







## BIBLIOGRAPHIC MACHINES

Shannon Mattern

Today we're constantly reminded of the machinic nature of reading. Much of our news and narrative comes to us by means of glowing rectangles. And while these objects have few moving gears and levers, we find inside their slim bodies an assemblage of parts working together to transmit electricity into computing power into intelligence. These reading machines can break: they can overheat, their electronic components can wear out, they can be infected by a nasty virus. Our machines talk to other machines, and these machinic liaisons become most apparent when they, too, fail: when we confront paywalls and linkrot. Yet even when everything's working smoothly, and our search yields an endless library of relevant texts, we know – or *should* know – that that selection was determined by some proprietary algorithm, or perhaps informed by a machine-learning system.

Sometimes, when hacks and power outages and downed data centers befall us, we're also reminded that our tiny machines are part of big machines at the scale of infrastructural systems. Those reading-machines-writ-large also constitute the logistical systems that allow us to order print books (or Kindles) online and have them delivered, from a distribution center to our doorsteps, within 48 hours.

Even in previous machine ages, when moveable parts were the height of innovation, books were likened to machines. They were works of mechanical production, textual embodiments of machinic precision. Furniture makers crafted book wheels and spinning podiums, reading machines to mechanize and expedite the reading process. Then the great steel and glass libraries of the 19th century became architectural machines for the



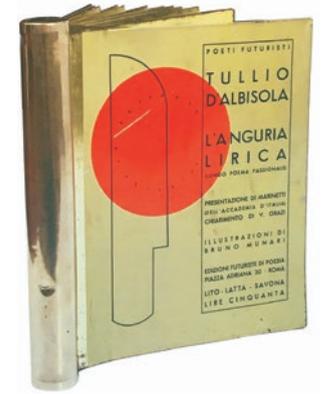


processing and storage of books. A few decades later, the Futurists arrived, promising to destroy the libraries, those romantic book-machines, and instead instill the spirit of the machine age into the book itself. Nuts and bolts fastened together Fortunato Depero's *Depero Futurista*, a mix of advertising, poems, and texts rehearsing *onomalingua*, his mechanical dialect.

A young Bruno Munari joined the Futurists in the late 1920s and took up the machine as his medium. It infused his sculptural and visual works and became a material for manipulation – in his functional furnishings and utilitarian objects and particularly in his “useless machines,” which, many historians say, emblemize his eventual break with the technofetishism of the Futurists. This aesthetic and ideological progression also characterized his development in the graphic arts and publishing: he started off working as a draughtsman for his engineer uncle, then contributed mechanical illustrations to magazines and worked as a graphic designer and animator in advertising. As his visual style evolved, his attention turned to the book form. He began by illustrating a poetry collection promoting Campari liqueur; then served as

art director and editorial consultant for a few publishing houses; and then, in 1934, collaborated with Tullio d'Albisola on the production of *L'anguria Lirica*, a “mechanical book” composed of 21 tin plates hinged to a tubular spine. After working in comics and photography and set design – his expansive resume could function as an index to the fine arts and creative industries – he became an author.

Through his books Munari explored the codex's many machinic modalities. His *Abecedario de Munari* (1942), a children's book, plays with primary color and blocky layouts that suggest a parallel between the book and a set of alphabet building blocks. *ABC Dadá* (1944) likewise represents each letter of the alphabet, and transforms each page into a assemblage/ collage featuring an embroidered golden letter (a dimensional “thing” itself), a typewritten label with an absurdist alliterative text, and an etched portrait; additional components include hand-drawn images, photographic negatives and positives, and a variety of everyday objects: thread, flowers, buttons, sticks, tiny gears. As Jeffrey Schnapp notes, *ABC Dadá* is more Victorian scrapbook than abecedarium; its



Tullio D'Albisola and Bruno Munari - *L'Anguria Lirica* (*The Lyrical Watermelon*). Rome, Futurist Editions of Poetry - Savona, Lito Latta, sd [1934]. Image: Liberia Pontremoli



Above: Bruno Munari, *Guardiamoci Negli Occhi*, 1969. Carraini Edizione 4th reprint 12/2015, Image of children with *Occhi* from <http://ilmiograndecaos.blogspot.com>. Right: Ada Ardessi, Bruno Munari, date unknown.

pages “do not aim to fully explode the world of writing or to reduce all language to graphic/acoustical/kinetic matter. Rather, they set out to explain and explore, approaching tasks of instruction with a gentle Surrealist-inflected Dada touch.” It’s a haptic teaching machine, for children and adults.

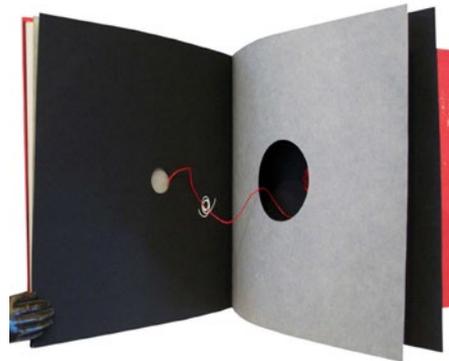
Munari experiments with paper as a book-machine component in *Nella Nebbia di Milano* (1968; trans. *In the Fog of Milan*), published in English as *The Circus in the Mist*, in which thin, layered translucent papers evoke the titular atmosphere (book as fog machine), and die-cuts offer glimpses of the circus’s vibrant colors, printed on thicker paper stock. *Nella Notte Buia* (1956), *In the Dark of the Night*, employs similar techniques. In *Guardiamoci Negli Occhi* (1969), *Look Into My Eyes*, cut-outs become eyes in the faces depicted on its 24 loose colored pages. Readers are told: “Only those who see things differently can tell people about something that will widen their field of view. So mix these drawings, change the colors of their eyes, and get used to seeing the world as other people see it.” This book is a machine for empathetic perception. Munari’s *La Favola Delle Favole* (1994), *The Fairy Tale of Fairy Tales*, is likewise

interactive; its loose pages, bound with two metal clips, allow children to re-order them and create their own stories. “Every child can have their own book,” Munari writes in the introduction. This fairy tale is a story-making machine.

Finally, his series of *Libri Illeggibili* (1949 – ) are called “unreadable” because there’s nothing to read: they’re meant to be manipulated, sensed and experienced, rather than decoded. Format, color, cut and fold are what these books are “about.” The form is the function, to paraphrase Louis Sullivan. “The books [are] tactile, sensory experiences that require the participation and creativity of the reader, with meaning derived through the act of turning



pages, from paying attention to rhythm and color and sound,” writes Kristin Hohenadel. In extending the human senses, the medium itself becomes the message, Marshall McLuhan might say (I can only imagine that McLuhan would’ve enjoyed Munari’s work).



Bruno Munari, *Libro Illegibile N.Y.I.* The Museum of Modern Art, 1967.

Munari experimented on multiple machinic fronts: through text, layout, color, material, binding, bibliographic architecture and even modes of distribution. His various bibliographic “tools” – and his later “open,” kinetic work with *Arte Programmata* – are (analog) analogues to all those dimensions of

networked digitality that characterize today’s reading machines. The projects on display in *The Internal Machine* bridge these analog and digital realms in exploring various generative machinic dimensions of the book: binding, printing techniques, storage equipment, research practices, ergonomics, sensory mechanics, interfaces for interaction, network architectures, digitization strategies, and so forth. Such bibliographic experimentation, from Munari’s Milan to contemporary Manhattan, highlights the myriad ways in which the book – as an intellectual package, an entertainment event, a technical tool, a physical object, a commodity – “processes” materiality and mechanics into meaning and experience. Books are, and always have been, machines – capaciously defined – for learning, empathizing, questioning, imagining. And particularly in this age of epistemological upheaval – of fake news and government hacks and an administration that champions paranoid “belief” above evidence – we, as critical readers and writers and book-makers, have to learn to skim through all the obscurantist fog and techno-fetishist fairy tales and understand how our machines of fact- and fiction-making function.

## Notes

1. Much of this historical material is drawn from Alessandro Colizzi, Bruno Munari and the Invention of Modern Graphic Design in Italy, 1928-1945, Doctoral Thesis, Leiden University, 2011.
2. Jeffrey Schnapp, “The Visible Hand,” In Bruno Munari – My Futurist Past, ed. Miroslava Hajek and Luca Zafferano, catalogue for show at Estorick Collection, London, (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2012): 84-96.
3. Kristin Hohenadel, “The Witty, Boundary-Pushing Creations of Book Designer Bruno Munari,” Slate’s The Eye (July 1, 2015): [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_eye/2015/07/01/bruno\\_munari\\_by\\_art\\_historian\\_giorgio\\_maffei\\_is\\_a\\_survey\\_of\\_the\\_great\\_20th.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_eye/2015/07/01/bruno_munari_by_art_historian_giorgio_maffei_is_a_survey_of_the_great_20th.html). I transformed this sentence to the present tense.
4. I wondered if McLuhan and Munari knew of each other’s work. Some preliminary research yielded no conclusive answers, yet their work did overlap in a few venues. In 1966, McLuhan’s “The Decline of the Visual” appeared with Munari’s “Variations on the Face” in the first issue of *Dot Zero* (designed by Massimo Vignelli), and both published pieces in *Astronauts of Inner Space: An International Collection of Avant-Garde Activity*, ed. Jeff Berner (San Francisco: Stolen Paper Review Editions, 1966).