

This is not a Book: the Anti-Pedagogy of the Movable Book

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ABSTRACT

The pedagogic instrument par-excellence, in their modern history, books have been the instrument accompanying educational and, in particular, school education paths, year after year. In this context, the book is the object that responds to the definition we can find in any good dictionary: “A continuous series of printed sheets of the same size, stitched together with a cover, etc. etc.”. For at least 4 centuries, books have maintained this same structure, while adapting to all technical and cultural modernization processes. Book is a synonym of reading, thus of attention, order, patience, even when a book is chosen freely: reading has its own “ritual”, indeed its own “sacredness” if we consider that learning books is neither spontaneous nor natural, but comes through initiation.

Play is what breaks down the book structure; we talk of play not as a “game”, but rather as an attitude that looks to a certain reality from a different viewpoint, “putting it into play”, thinking how an object can be as it is, but can also be something different from what it is. This “being different” does not destroy or deny the object itself, but de-forms and trans-forms it, changing its form and, inevitably, its very identity. Thus, a book becomes “other than a book”. For this to happen, it must lose all its connotations, almost to the point of not being recognizable as a book, thus paving the way for new practices of reading and discovery, which take place in real time within the relationship between the person and the (non)book.

KEYWORDS

Imagine & word; Creativity; Animation; play

CITATION

Farnè, R., “This is not a Book: the Anti-Pedagogy of the Movable Book”. JIB, 1 (April 2022): 104-110 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57579/2022JIB009RF>

Book or not book

In 1926, René Magritte, one of the most representative artists of the Surrealist movement, painted one of his most famous works, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (The treachery of images) **Fig. 1a**. The title is written in the painting, the writing is elementary-school style, and the work represents nothing other than a realistic copy of a pipe. Proposed again by the author later in his career, the work is a semiological and linguistic visual provocation. The image in the painting had no need to be named; it is clearly a pipe but writing that it is not a pipe refers to the relationship between objects and the representation of objects. Magritte was saying that it is not a pipe, because a pipe can only be a real object, used for smoking. It is a play on words, images and objects, and as such paved the way for conceptual art. In the same way, and with greater emphasis, came the installation by US artist Joseph Kosuth, *One and three chairs* (1965) **Fig. 1b**, a chair with, alongside it, a life-size photograph and an enlarged dictionary definition of the word “chair”. Here, the reflection falls conceptually (philosophically) on the idea of a chair, underlining the issue of ambiguity in language and in its functions. Transferring this idea to movable books, we could easily state that what we call a “book” is not actually a book. Looking up “book” in the on-line Oxford English Dictionary, we find seven ordinary definitions, including:

- A written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side and bound in covers.
- A literary composition that is published or intended for publication as a book.
- A main division of a literary book of the Bible.

Talking of movable books, we can say that they have the semblance of a book but are not a book, and in fact, throughout the long history of these products, in very many cases they do not satisfy the manual and intellectual actions that generally respond to the typical concept of “reading” we expect from a book.

Another process may help us to understand this phenomenon even better: this is the relationship between pertinence and impertinence. The first demonstrates a direct, coherent relationship between an object, its name and its function in terms of use or common understanding, or in the case of an answer, which may be “pertinent” to a question. In cognitive psychology, we refer to “convergent thinking”, which is what school teaching is usually based on. The concept of impertinence moves on an opposite plane, diverting



Fig. 1 a || René Magritte



Fig. 1 b || Joseph Kosuth

the current meaning of an object, looking at it from another viewpoint, different from its mere “value in use”. Some Dadaist artists, and other artists from 20th century avant-garde movements, Figs. 2 a, b, c did this by taking everyday objects or waste, placing and assembling them in contexts demanding the observ-

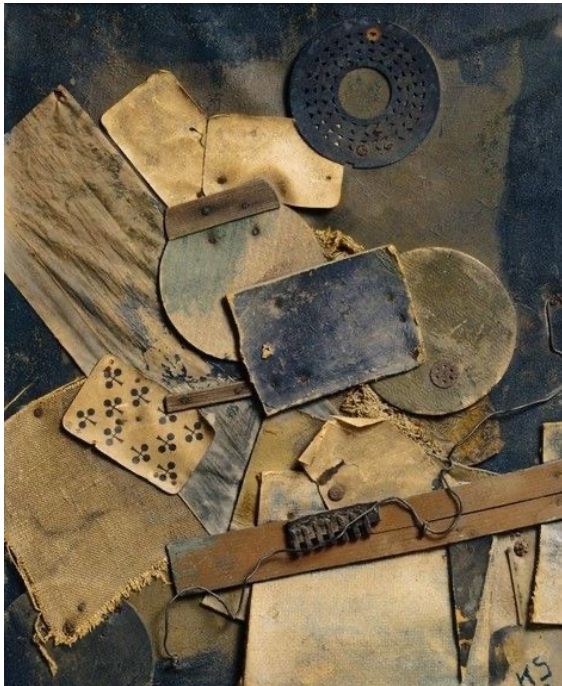


Fig. 2 a || Kurt Schwitters



Fig. 2 b || Bruno Munari



Fig. 2 c || Pablo Picasso

er's reading and interpretation, inviting them to be given new meaning (Schwitters, Munari, Picasso...). Underlying this process is the principle of play, understood in the meaning defined by Roger Caillois (1958) with the term *Paidia*, play as an attitude that freely, without pre-ordained rules, deconstructs, and destabilises, a given reality (objects, materials, sounds and so on) to re-form them. It is the game that refuses to follow the “rules of the game” (the game that is *Ludus*, following Caillois' categories, based on rules and discipline...), but dismantles them, offering free movement, creativity, re-invention, driven by the force of the imagination and aesthetic and kin-aesthetic pleasure. Provocation and impertinence are part of this type of play.

This perspective allows us to see movable books as works that redefine the very concept of the “book”, changing its connotations. Opening the pages and seeing what they contain is not linear, orderly writing, but figures that explode in three-dimensional forms; pages on which there is nothing to read but much to do, turning wheels, pulling threads, tabs, unfolding flaps that make the elements and figures below appear and disappear; or again, the very shape of the book that forces the “reader” to understand that what they are holding is not a book, and must therefore be re-interpreted

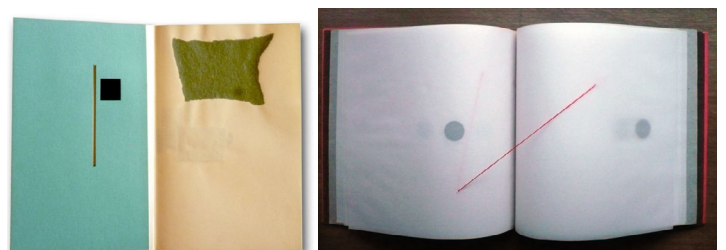
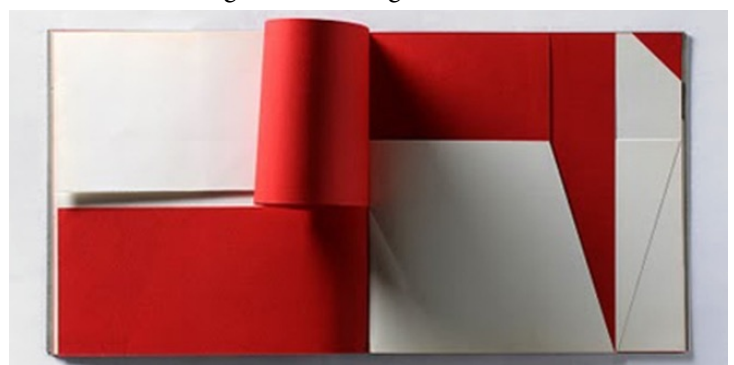
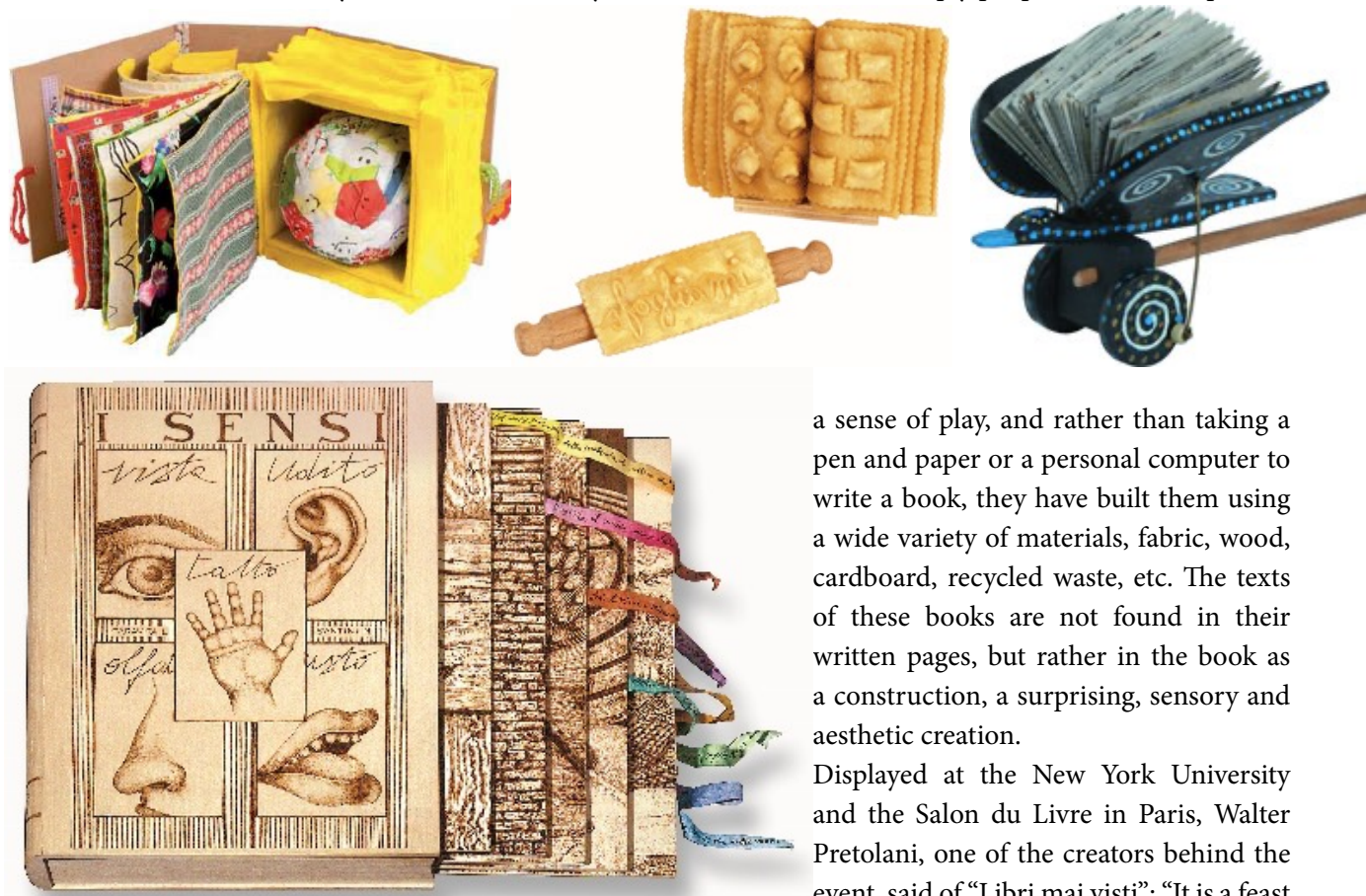


Fig. 3 || Bruno Munari, *Unreadable book*

as a non-book or, finally, that what appears to be a book is in fact a game, that is, in current pedagogical terms, the opposite of the action that books should demand, i.e. reading. “Unreadable book” Fig. 3, the oxymoron that is the title of one of Bruno Munari’s most famous works, aiming to identify objects that have the form of a book but are not meant to be read, is I believe one of the intentional indicators that have marked a certain history of the book that is not “the book”.

To close, I would like to recall what I think is a very interesting experience: that of the “Libri mai visti” (Never seen books). This initiative was started in the province of Ravenna in 1995, by the VACA (<https://www.vaca.it/>) “Vari Cervelli Associati” (Various Associated Brains) cultural association, and its 22nd edition was held in 2020 (Figs. 4 a, b, c, d).

Among the many activities of this creative and productive laboratory, the association promotes the creation of books which are extravagant objects, alluding to the form of the book but without being able to read them. The works are by authors who in many cases are not artists, but simply people who have kept alive



Figs. 4 a, b, c, d | VCA Vari Cervelli Associati

a sense of play, and rather than taking a pen and paper or a personal computer to write a book, they have built them using a wide variety of materials, fabric, wood, cardboard, recycled waste, etc. The texts of these books are not found in their written pages, but rather in the book as a construction, a surprising, sensory and aesthetic creation.

Displayed at the New York University and the Salon du Livre in Paris, Walter Pretolani, one of the creators behind the event, said of “Libri mai visti”: “It is a feast of the senses, where the unexpected feels at home: it swings between deep thoughts

and light fairy tales; complex technologies and tiny, wonderful masterpieces.” (Pretolani 2019).

Continuing to see the book beyond its objectively defining publishing context, but also beyond the “impertinent” forms we mentioned earlier, we find that movable books have counted for, and still count for, the most significant quantitative and qualitative production of this idea. Although non-books, in as much as they do not correspond to what we may properly call book-objects, even though in many cases they come close, and allude to them, movable books are not unique works, they are published for the market, for the purpose of dissemination.

Historically, movable books are one of the most interesting developments of that “ludic and educational

engineering” that has represented the concrete sign of an investment in children’s culture and education. They also represent one of the most ingenious attempts to “invade the field”, offering a contamination between the publishing sector and that of play. It is worth remembering that the production of children’s books and games, in the two fields on which the modern “children’s culture” is based, began in parallel and to a significant degree between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly in France, Great Britain and Germany.

In other words, the idea that the book could become a pleasurable play object concerned not only its software made of entertaining stories and enchanting narrations, and iconographic supports encouraging children to dive into the imaginary from the springboards offered by the figures, but also its hardware, the book as a physical object. The rigorous historical, critical and philological studies by Gianfranco Crupi (2016), Mara Sarlatto (2016), Pompeo Vagliani (2019) describe the extraordinary wealth of publications whose roots lie in the very history of books, making their name in the modern age through the development of paper-engineering collections able to “animate” the form and contents of the book in surprising directions, putting reading “into play” as a process that can trigger active and interactive thought.

We are used to thinking of “education” as a rhetoric register of educational communication, which makes a given object or topic boring, unattractive and in some way “anaesthetic”. This is what we think when, commonly, we use the term educational as an adjective, for example, referring to an educational film, an educational television programme, an educational toy, etc. In these cases, it is as if the product has suffered a kind of qualitative impoverishment that is necessary for the purpose of education. Generally, but however linked to this, the neo-idealistic culture and its pedagogy have always denied that a visual or narrative product for children can be recognised as “artistic”, as the fact of being “for children” would lessen its creative quality. The pedagogical sensitivity of Walter Benjamin (2006), a rigorous observer of the culture of childhood, made of picture books, toys, alphabet charts and theatre, to which he devoted much philological and critical attention, was destined to remain isolated for a long time.

This prejudice began to wane only from the second half of last century, and authorship in different fields of children’s culture (literature, illustration, theatre, cinema...) was finally recognised and enhanced within their own categories. Movable books are the demonstration of how education and the culture of childhood have become fields of research and expressive innovation precisely due to the fact that they target a specific audience, as well as the fact that they develop unconventional communication methods. Today, following the research developed in parallel in different fields of culture and education sciences, we can finally recognise the value of these productions, which have made history in both publishing and educational fields.

Animation

As in the history of the cinema, *animation* is not a cinematographic “genre” within that history but rather another type of cinema, with its own history and its own evolution (Rondolino, 1974; Bendazzi, 1988). The same can be said of the puppet theatre in relation to the history of the theatre (Allegri, Bambozzi, 2012; Brunetti, Pasqualicchio, 2014), and equally within the history of books, *movable books* have their own material, cultural and functional history. Or again, just as animation was one of the most significant fields of experimental cinema (Mitry, 1974), and puppet theatre has progressively been defined as a theatre of research, in the same way movable books can be considered the products of experimental publishing seeking unusual methods of expression and communication in the book. Not by chance, children are a privileged audience of both puppet theatres and animation films as well as movable books, not because these products are exclusively addressed to children but because they are the subjects who are most willing

to “play the game” of animation, feeling pleasure and amazement in the pretence and trying to find out how it works.

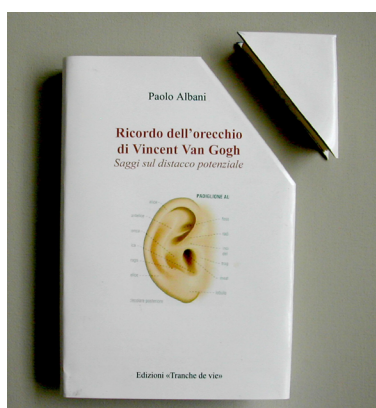
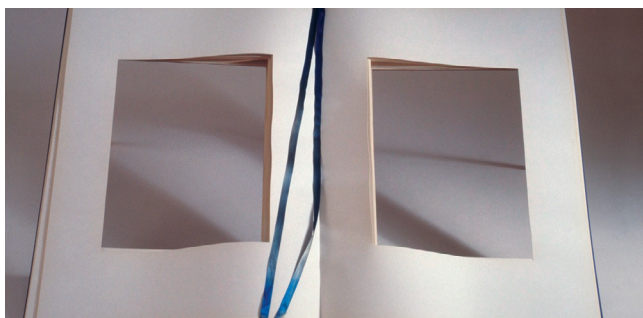
In my opinion, three categories make movable books particularly interesting for childhood and education. The first relates to the category of *movement*, as play is essentially movement; whether playing a ball game, chess (where the player moves the pieces on the board) or toys that are animated by the child, moving in the physical space available and in the space of imagination. While the practice and posture demanded by conventional books are based on the static position of the reader’s body and the book-object¹, movable books mean that the book is an object in motion, reading implies a series of actions to animate the pages, moved to let texts and figures emerge from behind other texts and figures, or emerge three-dimensionally. The second category is *aesthetic* assuming with this term its original meaning referred to αἴσθησις (aisthesis) which means “sensation” with reference to sensory experiences as routes leading to knowledge (and the construction of categories that we call aesthetics). Not by chance we say “make sense...” to attribute meaning to something. Movable books are, to all extents and purposes, aesthetic objects; they stimulate above all visual and tactile dimensions, although some examples of movable books are also characterised by elements of sound. Exploring the book becomes significant on sensory terms as it fixes sensations: children re-discover them repeatedly, even when they know the contents and surprises hidden within the pages, in the same way as they re-discover their favourite toys every time they play with them, even though they are always the same objects.

The third characteristic is educational, but we may also define it as “ludiform”. A prerogative of education is to explain. The Italian “spiegare” literally means to “unfold”, and therefore to open and reveal, make a subject or concept more comprehensible. The same applies to the term “illustrate”, so illustration is no more than a device that illuminates, gives light and therefore makes visible (and understandable) something that the text describes but does not show, something it alludes to but hides. Pictures in books, above all educational and children’s books, have always aimed not only to make the book itself more attractive and enjoyable, but also to enhance its educational function (Farné, 2019). Observing the evolution of movable books, we can see how the educational purpose is one of the most important aspects of the design and production of these books. Movable books tell us that mere illustration is not enough: to discover the complexity of the human body, or the body of a ship or a mountain, even in the reduced and simplified forms of educational representation, we have to enter the anatomy of those bodies.

Children’s inborn curiosity to find out what is hidden inside or beneath something, is skilfully and didactically put into play in movable books, where children lift or move figures or parts of figures, prompting them to look for details and discover connections by working the mechanisms in the pages. Illustrated pages are lifted and overlapped, figures graphically “explode”, transparencies and parts slot into each other. Paper engineering mechanisms serve a publishing project that aims to lead children into the discovery of a book, in which the appeal lies perhaps in showing itself as a non-book.

And so, we are back to where we started. Movable books bring books into play in their form and format, they change their physical connotations, underlining the textual organisation and disrupting the reading process. It is a game which, we might say, starts from questions such as: how many things can be hidden among the pages of a book and under its figures? In how many different ways can we “open” or “browse” a book? What can we do with a book apart from read it? A kind of “Grammar of fantasy” applied to books, which leads us to Gianni Rodari (1973), whose birth centenary was celebrated in 2020. Books make fun of themselves (Figs. 5 a, b, c), freed from their “rules” yet finding others to enhance their intrinsic, indestructible vitality.

1 The reference is to Italo Calvino’s enchanting narration at the start of his novel in 1994: *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, in which he meticulously describes the actions and state of mind with which a person prepares to read a book.



Figs. 5 a, b, c | a. Vincenzo Agnetti, *Libro dimenticato a memoria* (*Forgotten Book by heart*), 1969.
b. Jodi Harvey Brown, *The treasure island*.
c. Paolo Albani, *Distacco potenziale* (*Potential detachment*), 2002.

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