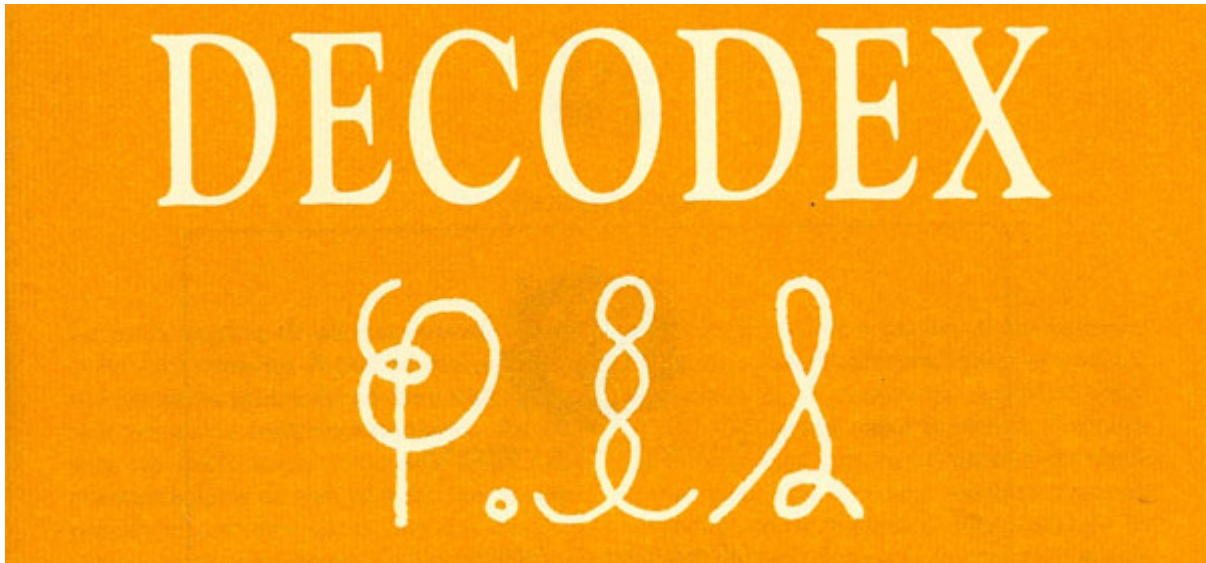




Decoding the Decodex: demystifying Luigi Serafini's Codex Seraphinianus



[On the inner back cover of the Rizzoli edition of the [Codex Seraphinianus](#) by Luigi Serafini there is a pocket containing a booklet called the «Decodex». I might have mentioned it [before](#) when i finally got my grubby hands on a copy, but it's in Italian & back then i didn't know any. But now that I finally know some & because it seems no one else has properly translated it into English, i figured it would be a good exercise to translate this Decodex. It's actually not a proper «decoder» so much as a a series of articles about the Codex Seraphinianus, a demystifier if anything. My comments are italicized in brackets & I've posted some more images, both from the book & of specific places around town mentioned in the Decodex. Incidentally, yesterday i was checking *Storie Naturali*, a new book that he illustrated for Jules Renard. Well not so new, they actually launched it in Rome the week we moved here, though unfortunately i didn't learn of the event until afterwards. I didn't find this book nearly as interesting, at least not worth it's 70 euro pricetag. [Jordan Hurder](#) posted some images from this new natural history book (the even more expensive first edition) if you are curious, as well as his «extraneous commentary».]



[The first thing you'll notice from the cover (above) is the word Decodex translated into the Serafinian «alphabet», though right away you can tell it's probably a syllabary (a syllable-based writing system). The opening frontpiece is then a letter from the publisher:]



(allegato ai volumi n. 27 e n. 28 de "I segni dell'uomo")

L'editore al lettore

Altri editori vantano nel loro catalogo il "Codice Atlantico" di Leonardo da Vinci; io sono molto orgoglioso di avere nella mia collana I segni dell'uomo il "Codex Seraphinianus".

Il "Seraphinianus" è stato disegnato e scritto da un amanuense di oggi, in una stanza di Roma, dal 1976 al 1978.

Mia prima intenzione era di proporre una glossa a scrittori condegni, da Borges a Calvino, ma mi avvidi che sarebbe stato un errore introdurre spiegazioni in un'opera di indole enciclopedica, nata essa stessa per spiegare.

Espugnato un convento, e soddisfatti i bisogni primari di cibo e di saccheggio, qualche Unno o altro barbaro ignorante di alfabeti sarà certo penetrato sino alla Biblioteca, e là avrà sfogliato con meraviglia un codice miniato.

Vorrei che il lettore sfogliasse il "Codex Seraphinianus" come quel guerriero; oppure come un bimbo che ancora non ha appreso la lettura, ma che gioisce dei sogni e delle fantasie che le immagini gli suggeriscono.

Ho talvolta pensato di ripubblicare, in edizione anastatica, gli undicimila volumi del "Ch'in-ting Ku-chin t'u-shu chi-ch'eng" ("Collezione di pitture e di scritti dell'antichità e del periodo moderno compilata per ordine imperiale"), ma temevo la frustrazione di quelli, tra i soci del mio Club, che ignorano l'antico cinese.

I due tomi compendiosi di questo "Codex Seraphinianus", scritto in un agevole corsivo di impronta semitica, saranno più facili e trasparenti per chiunque.

Come, vedendo due quartine e due terzine, non si fatica a riconoscere il sonetto, così il lettore non faticerà a riconoscere nel "Codex Seraphinianus" una metrica da enciclopedia, con un primo volume dedicato alle scienze della natura (botanica, zoologia, teratologia, chimica, fisica e meccanica) e un secondo dedicato alle scienze dell'uomo (anatomia, etnologia, antropologia, mitologia, linguistica, cucina, giochi, moda e architettura).

È evidente che il "Codex Seraphinianus" appartiene a quella ricca famiglia di imprese e di miraggi di cui fanno parte la "Naturalis Historia" di Plinio, il "De Rerum Natura" di Lucrezio, lo "Speculum maius" di Vincenzo di Beauvais, sino all'"Encyclopédie" di Diderot e d'Alembert, o alle più recenti e pregevoli iniziative dei miei colleghi Giulio Einaudi e Livio Garzanti.

Osservandone le partizioni, il lettore avrà forse l'impressione di ascoltare la musica senza parole del Sapere.

Nelle planches del "Codex Seraphinianus" si rispecchiano una scienza e un mondo insieme simili e dissimili dai nostri, come voci di una stessa declinazione.

Questo foglio volante non vuole essere una introduzione, ma una sorta di bolla d'accompagnamento. Bene farà dunque il lettore a stracciarlo, evitando così di contaminare con il morbo alfabetico le meraviglie mute dell'Orbis Pictus Seraphinianus.

Frontespizio della prima edizione del *Codex Seraphinianus* pubblicato da Franco Maria Ricci nel 1981.

[The rough translation (with the help of google translator)(hopefully good enough to at least give you the idea) of which is as follows:]

[COAT OF ARMS]

(attachment to vol n. 27 and n. 28 of "The Signs of Man")

The publisher to the reader

Other publishers have the "Atlantic Codex" by Leonardo da Vinci in their catalogs; I'm very proud to have in my collection the signs of man the "Codex Seraphinianus." The "Seraphinianus" was designed and written by a modern day amanuensis [*scribe*], in a room in Rome from 1976 to 1978. My first intention was to propose a "glossa" [*from the greek, tongue, or constructed language?*] to worthy writers, from Borges to Calvino, but I realized it would be a mistake to introduce explanations into a work of an encyclopedic nature, born to explain itself. Storming a monastery, meeting the basic needs of food and plunder, whatever Hun or other barbarian ignorant of language could certainly penetrate the library, and there he would unravel a wonderful illuminated manuscript. I want the reader flipping through the "Codex Seraphinianus" to be like this warrior, or a child who has not yet learned to read, but rejoices in dreams or the fantasies the images suggest. At times i've thought to reprint, in a facsimile edition, the eleven thousand volumes of "Ch'in-ting Ku-chin, T'u-shu chi-ch'eng" ("Collection of paintings and writings of the ancient and modern period compiled by imperial order") but I feared the members of my club would be frustrated, not knowing ancient Chinese. The two comprehensive volumes of this "Codex Seraphinianus," written in a smooth cursive of a semitic footprint [*'un agevole corsivo di impronta semitica'*], will be easier and more transparent for everyone. Like how, in seeing two quatrains and two triplets, it is not difficult to recognize the sonnet, the reader shouldn't find it hard to recognize an encyclopedic metric in the "Codex Seraphinianus," with a first volume devoted to the natural sciences (botany, zoology, teratology, chemistry, physics and mechanics) and a second dedicated to human sciences (anatomy, ethnology, anthropology, mythology, linguistics, cooking, games, fashion and architecture). It is evident that the "Codex Seraphinianus" belongs to that rich family of companies and mirages [*'impresa e di miraggi'*] which includes Pliny's "Naturalis Historia," the "De Rerum Natura," of Lucretius, the "Speculum maius" of Vincenzo di Beauvais, up to the "Encyclopédie" of Diderot and d'Alembert, or the most recent and valuable efforts of my colleagues Giulio Einaudi and Livio Garzanti. Looking at the pages, the reader might perhaps have the sensation of listening to music without words of knowledge. The plates in the Codex Seraphinianus reflect a science and a world both similar and dissimilar from ours, like items of one declination in itself. These pages do not need an introduction, but a sort of accompanying bubble. It would do the reader good then to shred it, thus avoiding contamination with the viral alphabetic mute-wonders [*'il morbo alfabetico le meraviglie mute'*] of the *Orbis Pictus Seraphinianus*.

Frontpiece of the first edition of *Codex Seraphinianus* published by Franco Maria Ricci in 1981.

[*This is followed by the regular text of the Decodex, the first page of which looks like this:*]

PEDEIC



Alessandro Riva

La forza segreta di alcune invenzioni sta nella loro capacità di persistenza nella nostra memoria profonda, anche contro la nostra volontà e indipendentemente dal trascorrere degli anni, e insieme nella vaga consapevolezza di non riuscire mai a comprenderle interamente o, in ogni caso, di non riuscire comunque ad abbracciarle del tutto, dalla A alla Zeta, ad archivarle nella nostra memoria come dato di fatto compiuto, insomma a farle epistemologicamente proprie – quasi che, di esse, non si potesse mai aver ragione del tutto, come di una forza che ci attrae proprio in virtù della sua capacità di sottrarsi, di sfuggirci costantemente, sorprendendoci, ogni volta, con nuove invenzioni, nuovi trucchi, o nuovi, inaspettati scherzi linguistici, che ci costringono costantemente a riesaminarne l'insieme, e ciò che esso sottende (il mondo che ci descrive con i suoi sistemi di valori, il suo linguaggio ecc.) con nuovi occhi, secondo una lettura parallela, seppure non alternativa, di cui in precedenza non avevamo tenuto minimamente conto. Una di queste è il *Codex Seraphinianus*, misterioso ibrido a mille e più teste, il cui fantasma da venticinque anni – da quando, cioè, fu pubblicato per la prima volta in Italia, per i tipi di Franco Maria Ricci¹ – si aggira con insospettata leggerezza tra appassionati, studiosi, bibliofili, critici, letterati, linguisti, storici, mistici, artisti, erboristi fantastici, scienziati, pseudoalchimisti, e poi esperti di occultismo, crittologi, esoteristi, complotologi, ufologi e così via, almanaccando e fantasticando, nel coinvolgimento trasversale di ogni aspetto – anche i più inaspettati – della cultura umanistico-scientifica, oltre che della cultura di massa, non esclusi quelli più strampalati e oscuri. Vedere, per

credere, le decine e decine di siti internet dedicati a questa creatura onnivora e onnicomprensiva, i numerosi *unofficial sites*, quelli dedicati al vano tentativo (seppure portato avanti con coerenza e determinazione pari solo alla loro assoluta e totale inutilità) di decrittarlo e di trascriverlo in una delle tante lingue conosciute², complici gli svariati depistaggi interni costruiti *ad hoc* dall'autore, quali la famosa (ma illeggibile) pseudosteletta di Rosetta piazzata, con perfido divertimento, all'interno stesso del volume. Da venticinque anni, infatti, le pagine del *Codex*, completamente sconosciute al grande pubblico, e parimenti (semi)sconosciute, nella loro reale essenza fisica, anche a gran parte degli appassionati, dei bibliofili e degli studiosi – a causa del carattere volutamente elitario e settoriale delle elegantissime, nonché costosissime edizioni di Franco Maria Ricci, e le rarissime edizioni straniere nel frattempo comparse sul mercato estero³ – hanno continuato a emanare la loro bizzarra e altamente straniante suggestione, attraverso il racconto di chi le possedeva⁴, o aveva avuto occasione di visionarle da qualche parte dal vero, o attraverso le foto presenti su internet, le rare riproduzioni su qualche catalogo, le ancor più rare comparse in esposizioni pubbliche⁵, ma soprattutto attraverso i testi, gli articoli, i saggi o le analisi che le riguardavano – dunque, di fatto, attraverso il paratesto del libro (sommo paradosso, per un'opera priva di un vero e proprio testo, se non, per l'appunto, quello, illeggibile, vergato in lingua serafiniana, l'esser conosciuta quasi esclusivamente attraverso il proprio paratesto) – insomma, attraverso quell'infinito tam tam che da sempre accompagna, in maniera disordinata e sommamente

[The first thing to note is more serafinian text along the top, which (based on the table of contents at the end) says «Introduzione», which confirms my

*suspicion that the serafinian text system is based on syllables. There is one character (looking like a twisted 3-looped strand) in common to both this & «Decodex», though in the word Decodex it stands for the middle syllable, **co**, whereas in 'introduzione' it stands for just: **o**. But if we parsed the word decodex as dec-o-dex, then we could perhaps say that this twisted 3-looped strand stands for the syllable o. And given the other words, including his name (as Jordan Hurder points out in the above article, though this doesn't have the correct amount of syllables) you might at least be able to come up with a map of serafinian characters to syllables spelled by the roman alphabet. Thing is, i'm actually not that interested in «decoding» Serafini's Codex—i think it's probably more interesting not knowing. Regardless, i'm curious enough to know what this Decodex has to say about it. So without further ado, here's my translation of the Introduzione by Alessandro Riva (note his run-on paragraphless style is his own):]*

The secret strength of some inventions lies in their ability to persist in our deep memory, even against our will and independently of the passage of years, and together with the vague awareness that one will never completely understand or, in any case, fail to embrace the whole, from A to Z, to archive in our memory as accomplished fact, in short, to make it epistemologically one's own—almost as if, to them, it could never have reason at all, as a force that attracts itself in virtue of its capacity to subtract, to steadily escape, surprising us, every time, with new inventions, new tricks, or new, unexpected plays on language, which constantly constrain us to reexamine everything, and what this implies (the world it describes with its own value systems, its language, etc.) with new eyes, according to a parallel reading, if not alternative, which we previously had not taken into account. One of these is the *Codex Seraphinianus*, a mysterious hybrid of more than a thousand heads, whose 25-year old ghost (from when it was first published in Italy, by Franco Maria Ricci's press) wanders with unassuming lightness between passionate, scholars, bibliophiles, critics, writers, linguists, historians, mystics, artists, fantastic herbalists, scientists, pseudo-chemists and even experts in the occult, cryptologists, esotericists, conspiracy theorists [*complotologi*], UFOlogists and so on, cataloging and fantasizing, with the involvement of traversing every aspect—even the most unexpected—of humanistic-scientific culture, as well as mass culture, not excluding the most bizarre and obscure. See, to believe, the dozens and dozens of Internet sites dedicated to this omnivorous and comprehensive creature, the numerous *unofficial sites*, dedicated to the vain attempt (albeit pursued with a consistency and determination matched only by their absolute and total futility) to decode and transcribe into one of the many known languages, complicit in the many false leads internally built ad hoc by the author, such as the famous (but unreadable) pseudo-Rosetta stone, with wicked fun, and of the the same magnitude. In fact, for twenty-five years the pages of the *Codex* have been completely unknown to the general public, and likewise (semi)unknown in their real physical essence, even to most fans, and bibliophiles and scholars—because of the deliberately elitist character and the exclusionary elegance, not to mention the considerable expense of the Franco Maria Ricci edition, and the rare foreign editions that have meanwhile appeared in foreign markets—they have continued to issue their bizarre and highly alienating suggestiveness, acquiring the story of those who have possessed it, or had the chance to see it in its true form, or through the photos on internet, the rare reproductions in whatever catalog, the even rarer appearances in public exhibitions, but mainly through the texts, the articles, the essays or analysis concerning it—so, in fact, through the paratext of the book (the supreme paradox, for a work without real and proper text, if not, precisely, that, illegible, penned in serafinian language, to be known almost exclusively through its paratext)—in short, through that infinite "tam tam" that always accompanies it, in a disordered and highly chaotic manner, and seemingly random, but because of this more branched—more to successively accumulate as fruit in an orderly direction (like what happens to items on Wikipedia, "The free encyclopedia" where by no accident the *Codex* has long since taken on a life of its own)—the emergence of some genuine "cases" of global reach.

At the beginning, Luigi Serafini even wanted to omit his name from the frontpiece and cover of the *Codex*: he wanted, according to the letter accompanying the work, in the writing of it to disappear, to leave only a trace of himself in the body and between the lines (illegible) of the work itself, like the anonymous author of the songs of Ossian, or, which the *Codex* is often compared to, the famous Voynich manuscript [see also [my take on Beinecke MS 408](#)], or the infinite herbariums and codices and medieval incunables, whose authors have vanished over the centuries without a trace. But the desire to be part of a work, to be literally camouflaged inside, far from being motivated by a snobbish

posturing of modesty or from one of those witty conceptual types often characterizing the biographies of artists more of the book page than actual life, this was in reality the first, and already firmly structured, manifestation of an attitude of inevitable distraction and disregard for what we call "real," of natural mimesis and confusion between life lived and imagined, between physical existence and mental experience, imagined, dreamed, between work and biography: what feature, even then, the inevitable destiny of the artist, in which, increasingly, the fragile boundary between what we call biographical reality and what we call, instead, literary (re)construction, psychological, fruits of the personal imagination inevitably tending to overlap and intersect unabated. They are testimony—even if worth something—biographies listing some of his (rare) catalogs or in some of his interviews, which state roughly thus: "Luigi Serafini lives between Rome and Milan, in an imaginary city where Via Condotti comes out in Piazza Cordusio" (but in certain cases the author has replaced "Via Condotti" with "Via del Tritone," thus remaining, as we shall see, closer to Rome of his childhood, and where the *Codex* was created, rather than the more traditional and canonical Rome: and we should perhaps expect to replace "Piazza Cordusio" with "Corso Buenos Aires," as an example of the Milan hybrid, chaotic and barely "Milanese", where Serafini not only has a studio but also where he set some of his recent works; Corso Buenos Aires as the "Spleen of Milan," as defined by the same artist: "the Sunday afternoon walk, 'window-shopping', looking without buying, ethnic mannequins, now lemon yellow, now chocolate black, the bars on the sidewalk," where "it's beautiful walk with others against the sun, seeing without being seen." [See also [my_pics](#) of Milan for a visual] Another biography, a bit less synthetic, saying instead: "Luigi Serafini was born in Rome in 1949. For several years he carried out various preliminary activities in Villa Borghese, in the area that goes from Pincio up to Parco dei Daini, and that includes the Museo Borghese and the Zoo. On October 6, 1955, while playing ball, he falls on glass and cuts his hand: so he now decides to start drawing. Between 1956 and 1958 he copies more than six hundred images from books, encyclopedias, lecture notes, newspapers. After school in a college of Scolopi [*Piarists*] now in decline, he enrolls in Architecture, where he became interested in pentominoes, golden sections and applied labyrinths. Between 1971 and 1973 he traveled to America, Europe, Middle East and Equatorial Africa. In 1976, after closing the doors of his house, he decided to write an encyclopedia that he inadvertently stopped in 1978. Since 1979, he lives sometimes in Rome and sometimes in Milan." "For Serafini, the artist who, as Vittorio Sgarbi wrote, "lives in a perpetual state of mirage," and his biography also becomes make-believe, of rumor, of legend, of fantastic reworking, a posteriori, as a function of alienating daily life and inversion (or by simply revisiting another point of view) of reality. For example, it reads as the artist telling of the moment of his birth, in an interview with Armando Adolgisol.



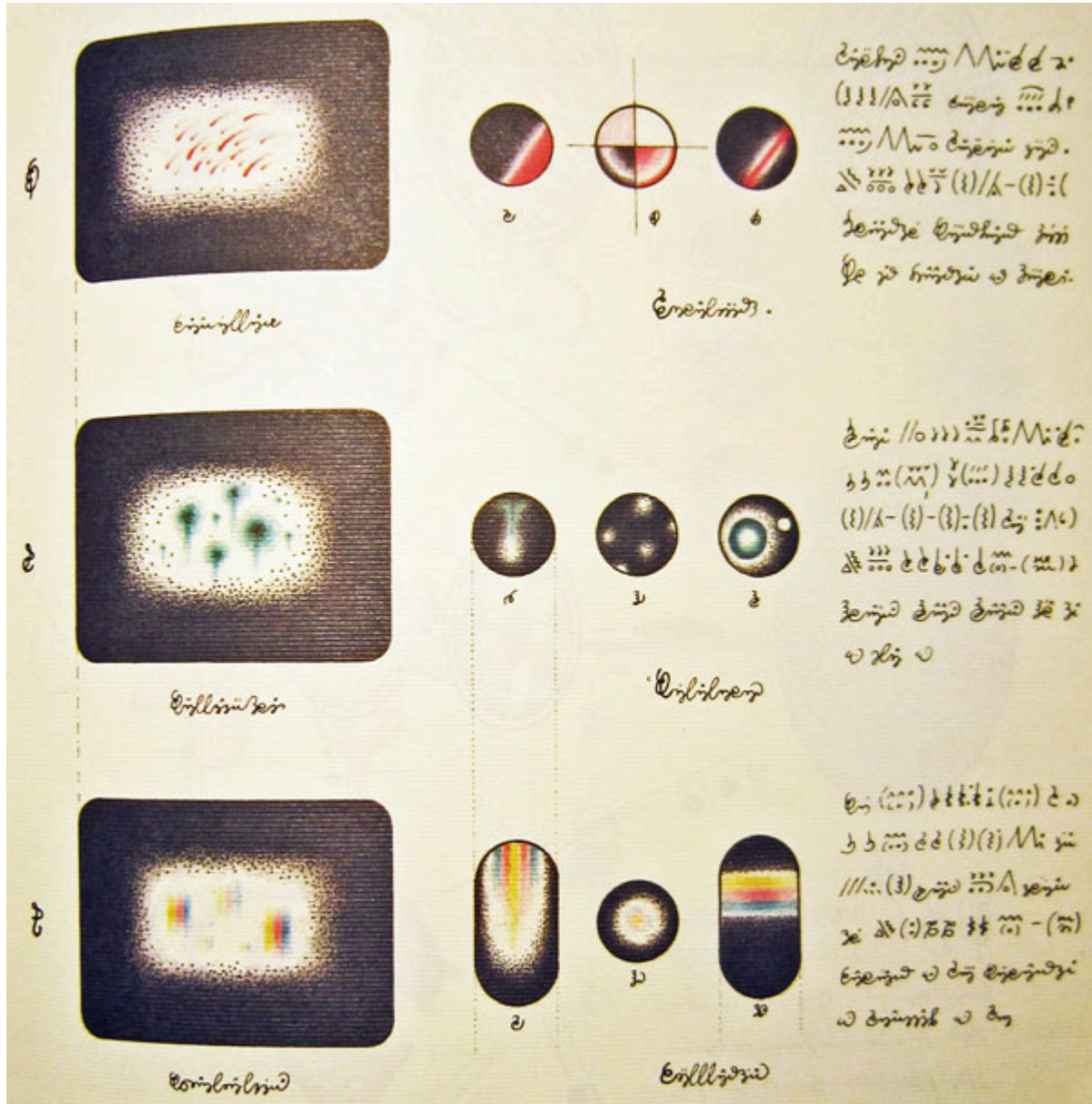
[perhaps a self-portrait of the artist inventing his text (note bits if Italian & French on the floor & easel!)]

The biographies are exemplary, in a general way, in trying to understand the image he gives himself, or wants to give himself as the artist: but in the case of Serafini, there is another reason for starting, even before the work, thus the serafinian "text," in a narrow view, from what is around you: biographies, yes, but also dedications, exergue, quotes scattered in various books and catalogs. Again, in short, they should be distributed, to understand the work, from serafinian paratext, you may as well say that sometimes you

speak more and more clearly when you don't speak of the—generally illegible—texts. Only the paratext in fact, constantly camouflaged the clues to the origins of his work, to his approach to the work and the same relationship with the real as with the formation of his poetic universe. "This work was realized with the conscious fiction that reality exists," it read at the opening of a catalog. "Therefore, any reference to imaginary people or events is considered to be by chance." It is no coincidence, then, that even a trivial fall playing football can be traced to the origin of his ability to draw, and even the act of coming into the world becomes the object of fantastic transformation and fun narrative elaboration. We are once again aware of the overthrow, and yet no less clearly hallucinating, in terms of what we would call, today, reality and fiction (we should remember this when we return to address question of the *Codex*). "Serafini, the artist, strives to upset conventions, to produce visual routes colliding between distant and alternative languages, to build a striking disorder of finds that first inhabited areas of cultural politely keeping distance between them," wrote Achille Bonito Oliva. "The eye of the artist sees and provides. Part of a statistical glance that then removes the paralysis of convention and introduces surprise and derision. The world is not seen as a frozen place, but as a space of imploded emotions, and therefore able, in whatever way, to produce alterations of high temperature glow."

To stay with the Serafinian paratext, it is still a catalog to read, by way of a final dedication: "In memory of my father, an engineer of dreams, who in 1953 built a TV in the room near the kitchen." This anecdote (I apologize to readers, and Serafini), is told fully, because it is very symbolic of that construction of Serafinian metareality, whose understanding is essential to understand the genesis of *Codex*. "My father," the artist explained some years ago in an interview, "built a television with his own hands. He built it at home with a cathode ray tube, screen and everything. I followed the construction of this mechanical monster, with trepidation and a bit of distress." "I literally saw the birth of the TV near the kitchen, when the vacuum tubes gradually lit up," he recounted in another interview, given to Patrizia Valduga. It was—it is worth emphasizing—1953 and the first experimental television broadcasts had reached the Milan Fair, then Turin, and Rome: the "television culture" had not yet stormed into our lives, with its cargo of the spectacularly cheap and the fictionalization of real. "I remember the first images when he finished installing the thing. They were reversed. So for a bit, we had to watch the TV backwards." This anecdote is indispensable for understanding the genesis of the *Codex*, since it has the unquestionable flavor of serafinian imprinting: it is in fact the (first) construction—or reconstruction—of a contradictory world, for the young Serafini: a world where reality and fiction confuse and chase each other relentlessly, but never meet, because one is the mirror (perfect and reversed) of the other; a contradictory world, therefore, inevitably suspended between reality and fiction, closed inside the screen of a television, yes, but—it's worth emphasizing—not really a TV: an artesian apparatus built by his father, "the engineer of dreams" (which, he tells us, also built a submarine in the house), which, like a novel [Cagliostro](#), appears able, in a child's imagination (but already inevitably serafinian) at will to reshape the real. After all, even today, all we can ask, like the Serafini child: which is the straight world and which is reversed? And where does reality begin and where do our private individual myths end, the our personal reconstruction of the world, of life, of reality itself? "How does he," Italo Calvino would write many years later about the *Codex*, "twist existing images and contort their genesis", thus creating an alternate parallel universe ("our" universe, in fact, made from impressions, and projections, and illusions, and fantasies compared to what we call real), different & speculative compared to that shared by others: a universe that, when the recognition is described or represented in another way (in this case becoming an "alternate" universe, a universe, in fact, always "parallel" but inevitably different in origin), every time it produces surprise, wonder, excitement (that happens in fact to all of us viewing the *Codex*), but also a subtle fit of anxiety—it produces a world not so much, Calvin also wrote, "different from ours, because of its similarity"—at least in its fundamental structures. Because it doesn't so much as try to deny reality, but to apply an alternate point of view, alienating with respect to the traditional view shared by us all. It is no coincidence, then, Serafini's love for certain extraordinary creators and assemblers of parallel languages, like the [Fanfole of Fosco Maraini](#), which can be found here and there cited and referenced in serafinian paratext (*Viaggiammo per millenni tra gli splagi/giu gui nei criptocorni stadinosi, /lontano sfiorivano gli Arcagi/i Mongi teoprenici e quidiiosi./Aiuto, orrore! I gastrici, gli smebri/s'aggrecciano sugli enfani druniti, /o calano bustrenici gli affebri/coi formici viturpi ed allupiti ...*). Is it not in the depths, even this, a perfectly understandable poetry, though written in an apparently eccentric language, with respect to ours? And is this language, serafinian, syntactically and structurally consistent,

in addition to being perfectly logical, any different from ours? It is only a matter of displacement: the displacement of point of view, precisely what we call real.



It is this creation (and as a consequence, recognition) of another real point of view, that is the fundamental question, that allows us to understand the genesis of works considered "visionary" (Calvin) "fantastic" (Sgarbi, Zeri), or "hallucinatory" (Peter Schwenger), like these we are dealing with. And this is what the story of the upside-down TV reveals—on a symbolic level—in understanding the genesis of the *Codex*: because it's the first representation of an alternate point of view that could possibly be real: it is the creation of a new world, built ad hoc, that shaped Serafini, the Serafini child that meanwhile studied diligently in college and spent his summers in the country home of a great-aunt, whose house was full full of memories and souvenirs from from exotic travels (the remnants of which perhaps remains in thousands of tiny, quirky alien and exotic iconographs of the *Codex*). And to this young Serafini, even then, perhaps, he began to not regret having a little anarchistic madness in his blood, very *fin de siecle*, eccentric yet highly inventive and above all *mechanical*—the kind of mechanical craft that was a bit fantastic at heart, in a period in which there more *inventors*, not just engineers that were a bit obtuse but that had credentials and degrees of specialization from abroad—in short, he'd already assimilated their DNA with a dose of bizarre and over the top madness that always mixed, as a karst river, his family. It was not an accident even then to the young Serafini—or the subsequent reconstruction of his childhood by the adult Serafini (in the end of little importance) that the everyday was a receptacle of all kinds of highly symbolic adventures, real or unreal, whatever they may be: "One day, as if by miracle, I came to the house of an aunt an American astronaut, accompanied by the Mayor of Rome, the exact home where he was born because it previously belonged to his

family. It was the living personification of history that, on a whim of fate, I looked out the dining room", Serafini now tells us, a testimony to this anecdote, apparently surreal (I imagine an astronaut with a space suit and helmet looking out of the kitchen, as in the children's film *Zathura, un' avventura spaziale*), the artist showed me, one day, the plaque remaining on the facade of his aunt's house on Via Tevere, in Ludovisi district [*not far from the equally serafinian Quartiere Coppedè which I blogged about [on Clusterflock](#)*]: "Here was born Michael Collins / intrepid astronaut / of the the Apollo 11 mission / first man on the moon." The childhood memories, for Serafini, unrolled like this, in a simple manner, with the naturalness of a great science fiction adventure, mixed with the "normal" childhood memories that, in their personal transformation, became history, myth, legend. [*here he starts mixing French in with the Italian, French translations in italics*] "He arrives on a reality too complex for written or oral transmission. Only legend can express it in a way that embraces the entire world," it reads in the epigraph of the serafinian catalog *Il teatro della pittura*. So, with remarkable ease and a touch of 'guasconeria' [*Gasconian (relating to the region of France) which i suspect after looking for other contexts on the internet, perhaps means parody*], the real and the imaginary seem to merge in Serafini's biography—in a sort of *vague terrain*, in a no man's land where it's difficult to retrace simple biographical data—historical anecdotes and reversals, all serafinian, in real terms.



house of American astronaut Michael Collins (referenced plaque on lower right)

He knew how to describe it very well, this continuous mixing of true fiction and imagined reality. Pino Corrias, in a beautiful article published in "La Repubblica" for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Codex*: "Luigi Serafini is neither in heaven nor on earth, but at the end of a black corridor, inside a room with green walls, where the chairs are hanging from the ceiling. He flips between alphabets, and plays in the clouds, like characters penned by Raymond Queneau, in *Fiori blu*. In a long surreal night, lasting thirty-months, he imagined a writing system that (perhaps) could not be read and a world that (perhaps) could not be seen, with men that become forceps, eggs that fly, upside-down trees, zoological plants, insects and crocodiles. He made a fantastic Encyclopedia, surprising

and useless, that appears to the real world like a dream of mysterious mirages." And, to decrypt this encyclopedia—the Codex, in fact—Corrias found a "key": "And the story of its story. The very entertaining adventures of Luigi Serafini. Born an architect of imaginary homes, but then he becomes an artist and traveler of three trips, like three waves of fate, America, the Orient, Africa"—and here I leave it for you to read later, [Corrias' article](#), which precisely tells the "very funny adventures" of Luigi Serafini by land and sea, that begins with a trip across America as he himself recounts he was searching for Utopia (Utopia a word that I saw for the first time with my own eyes during a long American trip in the early seventies. I saw the "organic" architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, as the inherent utopian dimension of American society, in the permanent swing between space and opus, nature and artifice. Since I learned how Utopia is a food, an essential nutrient" and we return later to the basic meaning of covers, for Serafini, the very concept of Utopia), and ends with Serafini's arrest by a troop of Congolese soldiers, until they released because they thought he was crazy: perhaps because they understood the later intuitions of [Giorgio Soavi](#), who when he for the first time saw the *Codex*, as he described in his "journal" as brilliant lapidary: "You could doubt him, but not his sparkling wit."

On the other hand, to trace, in this *tourbillon* of real madness and mad reality, the truth of lies, the plausibility of what is realistically adherent to life or known reality, as well as difficult, absolutely irrelevant: jackets are precisely this short-circuit between the real and imaginary, or rather between real adventure and the ability to look at that same reality from another point of view, an imaginative and alienating point of view, so to make them seem crazy, incredible, paradoxical, that is the secret of the creation of this typically serafinian meta-reality, where fantasy becomes, like a miracle, reality, and likewise reality seems to vanish and dissolve into thin air to become the stuff of myths and legends, becoming a vague sequence of factoids that taste strangely unreal.

What is certain is that Luigi Serafini start writing the Codex at age 27. It is 1976, and the artist is in Rome, in fifth-floor attic on a dirt street called Via Sant'Andrea delle Frate, number 30, in the heart of Baroque Rome, where even the streets and buildings have preserved the names and memories of the Popes' counter-reformation: the street crosses Largo del Nazareno, home to the Collegio Nazareno, where Serafini went from elementary to high school, and finally emerges, strangely enough, onto a large austere building bearing a plaque that reads: "Here lived and died / Gianlorenzo Bernini / king of art / who is bent / reverent / *Papi Principes Popoli*." Next to it, on Via Capolecase, there is the palace of the Propaganda Fide, and further down the Borrominian church, although incomplete, of Sant'Andrea delle Frate. Around there is a crossroads of streets that bear names and suggestions of a strange serafinian bestiary ('The names have to do with us, in the world that reacts with our subconscious,"the artist says later, not surprisingly, in an interview with Giacinto di Pietrantonio): Via del Tritone, Via della Salamandra, Palazzo del Bufalo, on the door of the latter, there still stands the head of a buffalo that seems straight out of a page from the *Codex*: that we expect to see detach, at any moment, from stone, and become flesh and blood and take flight.



Colegio Nazareno (Nazareth school where Serafini attended)



Luigi Serafini's house (black door in middle) at Via Sant'Andrea delle Frate #30



via Sant' Andrea delle Frate #24

From his attic, then, Serafini lorded over this crossroads reminiscent of his childhood (in the neighboring house, at number 24, he lived the rest of his life, and when he got married he moved next door: where he got the idea, that yielded material, physics, of travel if only as a mental displacement. In the meantime, Serafini got a degree in architecture and travelled around the world as we discussed earlier). From his attic then, and the roofs, where he sometimes brought girls to drink tea as in a wacky adventure worthy of Mary Poppins, Serafini dominated this crossroads: he could see the domes, many from 16th century Rome, but above all, and nearby, he saw the extraordinary [Borromini](#) inventions, the contorted Baroque domes of the church of Sant'Andrea delle Frate, in whose cloister he was baptized, and where on a series of lunettes (half-moon arches) still bearing traces of frescoes celebrating the life of St. Francesco di Paola: and one of these frescoes, you can still see today, seems to conjure a strange seraphinian iconography; representing in fact the saint on top a promontory and, in front of him, a herd of cows entering the water, and they head, swimming, toward the shore. [*The next quote translated using google from Latin ('ad collum suspensa ferunt tua iussa iuveni ut famuli, et celeres aequora longa secant.')*:] "They say your commands to steer your neck to the servants, the seas and swift cut long," states the inscription that accompanies it. A singular coincidence (but are there, then, coincidences? Or is even this herd of amphibious cows a figment, without knowing it, of the young Serafini's imagination?) between this image and obsession—born from one of the many "extravagant and valuable fantasies, labyrinthian and shiny" in the words of Giorgio Manganelli—of the adult Serafini towards the bovine breed: the transformed cow, hybridized, metamorphosed; made oviparous, plant, invertebrate, mollusc and whatever, in many of the later paintings and drawings, especially sculptures (the famous *Bovindi*, but also the

more recent *Holy cowburger in love*, a cow endowed with human hands and turned into hamburger, made for the Cow Parade in Florence in 2005 and later subjected to repeated vandalism). The iconography, of the cow and his male counterpart, the bull, that on the other hand has a long tradition, starting for example with Greek mythology: we think of the legend, or that of Europe, ravished by Zeus in the form of bull and transported by sea to Crete: what Europe brings to mind of our origins, albeit by mythology. At the time Serafini conceived of the *Bovindi* series, Europe had taken on a collective phobia, that of the so-called "Mad Cow," on which the artist played, jokingly and irreverently, (the public was invited to join in, like in an ancient tragedy, hiding behind a mask in the shape of a cow: bringing to mind that cow mask that Prometheus wore, when, tired of fleeing from the anger of Hera, screams all his despair to the heavens: "Can you hear me? I am the *giovinetta* you cry / I, masked with horns, a heifer!"). To get back to us, or rather to the Serafini anti-codex: it's here, then, from the fifth floor attic in Via Sant'Andrea delle Fratte—where for some time he established his architectural studies together with "an associate who in his spare time captures cobwebs and immobilizes them with the fixative on to white canvasses."—that on a Sunday in 1976, Luigi Serafini began to draw and write the Codex.

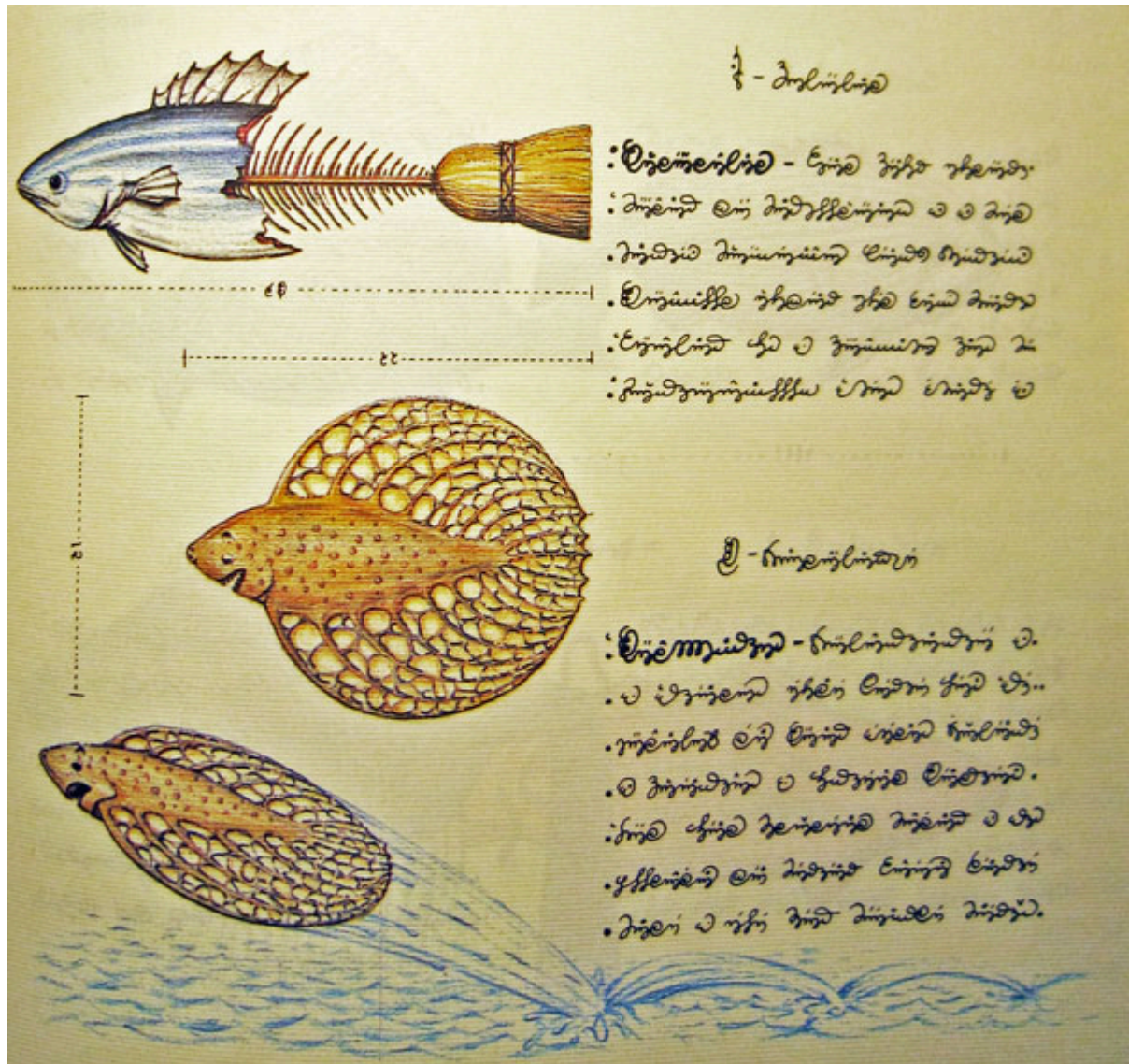


swimming cows in the half-moon arch of the cloister of Sant'Andrea delle Frate

He begins, almost by chance, to design and write the Codex, that undoubtedly will become his visual and philosophical *Grande Opera*, his poetic *summa*: this encyclopedia of the absurd, the fantastic, the impossible (but made with the "obstinacy of an amanuensis" as Giovanni Mariotti wrote, as well as with precision and accuracy of the detailed designs and a consistent internal logical syntax so that the set is absolutely and completely plausible in anyone else's eyes) this *Codex Seraphinianus*, this "vast encyclopedia of a hypothetical world somewhat similar to Earth, with many creatures that resemble humans on many levels, and other extremely weird creatures moving here and there" as the scholar (and Pulitzer Prize winner) Douglas Hofstadter wrote, commenting on the carefully annotated "meticulous and agile cursive handwriting, and (we admit) it is clear that we are always a hair from being able to read it and yet it escapes us with every word and every letter" (Calvino). "I remember the day and circumstance" Serafini told Pino Corrias about the birth of the Codex. "A friend called and told me he was coming to take me to the movies. And I, without knowing why, said: no, i'm going to rest at home, I need to make an encyclopedia. And when I put the phone down, I really begin to draw. It began with a man, then a screwdriver, a leaf, a gear. And I wrote row after row of imaginary captions, slipping into automatic: dancing signs and white breaks... One plate after another, without ever missing a day, for weeks, months." Thus, with the same ease with which the real world is transfigured, in the memory of the artist, in history, myth, legend, of his fantasy a world was born, yes, imaginary, crazy, utopian, distorted, sometimes a bit disturbing, "teratological" (Calvino), a world in which history has lost its natural way to find another, parallel and unstable, in perennial balance between paradox

and fiction, "in a climate of transfigured rationalism, invented, released by mental processes different than usual (...) in each spark there is invention, each flame one finds suggestive and disturbing" (Zeri), yet also "fully understandable and, so to speak, livable; not at all surreal, as might appear at first:" "a parallel universe, governed by its internal laws, rigorous and infallible" (Sgarbi).

Certainly, in analyzing the Codex, the first approach, the most obvious and immediate, is that it has the structure of a canonical Encyclopedia, i.e. "images from science books, chapters on anatomy of the eye, stomach, heart, or books on natural sciences and botany" as Sgarbi wrote again, or rather, as Zeri emphasized, a work that "resembles a medieval *Summa* in the division of subjects, classes and subclasses": the *Codex* tackles fact, in its rigorous structure, all the categories of knowledge, both in the field of natural sciences and in human terms—although, as we shall see, with continuous changes and contamination between one another, so as to talk of description of "another world", an "alien universe" or "parallel". Flora, fauna, physics, mechanics, anatomy, mythology, writing, food, clothing, architecture: every aspect of this mysterious parallel universe is gutted, described, minutely illustrated, and (albeit to a language unknown to us) analytically described in the Codex, in a surprisingly mixing continuum, relentless and comprehensive of all categories and all aspects the real: "Like Ovid (author of *Metamorphoses*), Serafini believes in contiguity and permeability in each area of existence," Calvin again emphasized. It is a world that is certainly bizarre, and equally surprising and unexpected, this of Serafini, where fish take the shape of eyes surfacing from the sea like submarine periscopes, where plumage can have three heads or tails the shape of a lance to pierce eggs (but in the subsequent development of seraphinian art, in which the simple design and teratological design gives way to creation, increasingly bizarre and metamorphic beings, but in three dimensions, the theory of strange birds pictured in the *Codex* takes the form of real rooster chickens, i.e. '*Galgalline*'—a neologism that we say is seraphinian one hundred percent, except that it also appears, unbelievable but true, on the road map a remote village of Belluno Cesiomaggiore, where via Galgallina appears alongside the more prosaic via Dante and via Foscolo—, volatile, this seraphinian, with two heads, one for just a cock and the other where the rooster would roost, the hen, and vice-versa), where the rainbow is not a natural phenomenon, but a strange world vision, perhaps of mechanical origins, maybe electromagnetic, or maybe who knows what devilry of heaven, complete with a mysterious flying machine capable of creating it; where men gradually take the shape of their homes, identifying completely, where the deer have leaves that grow on their horns, of course the head is always planted in a pot, where there are fish with a built-in diver and fish with ponytails, fish with bones in the shape of a broom and fish dishes to skip on water, and so on, and finally where machinery exists to construct anything, as long as it is completely useless.

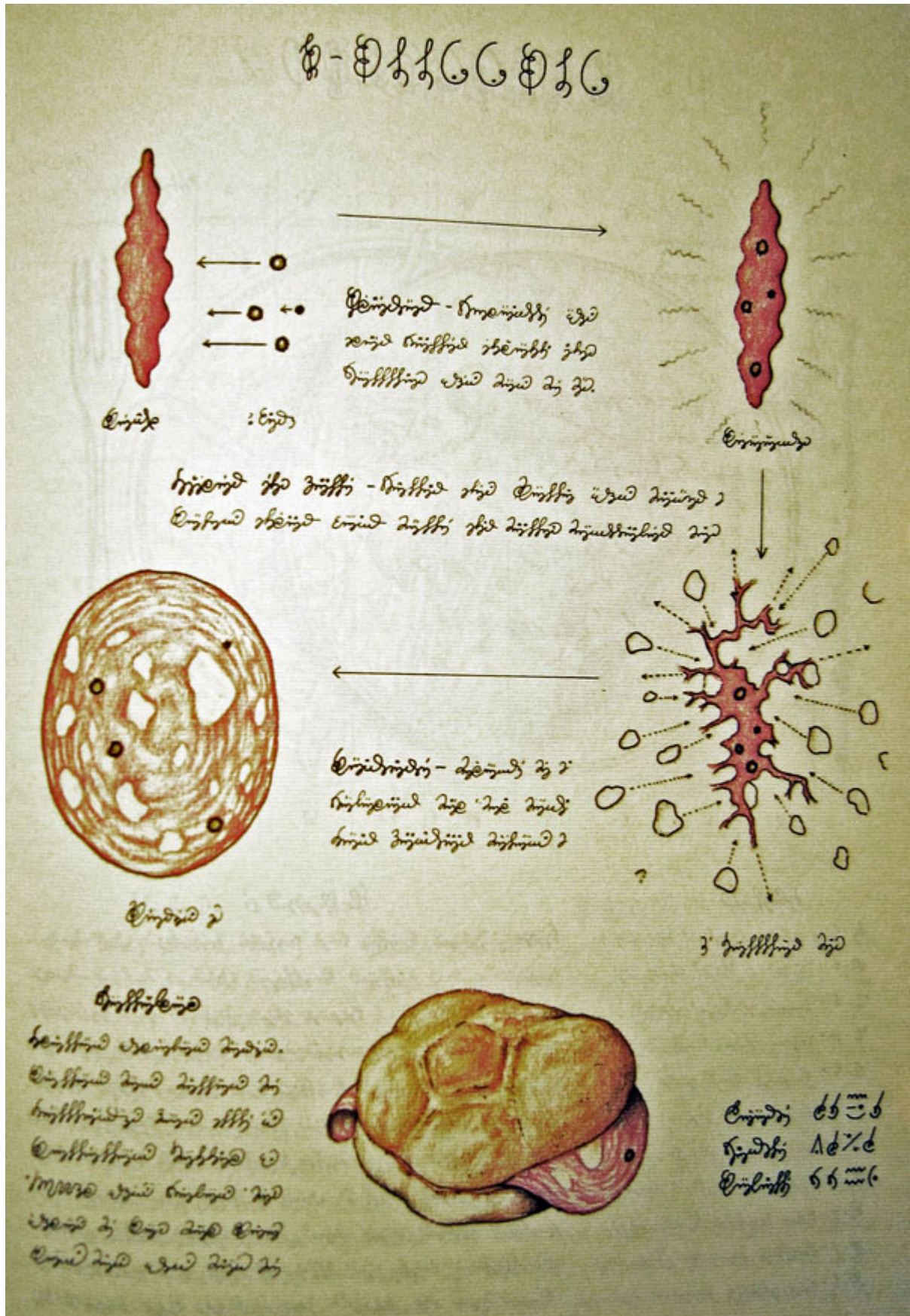


Serafini, in fact, perhaps makes the best self-organizing and complicated machinery, or sometimes animal-machines, or machine-human beings, whose complexity is always directly proportional to their uselessness, the emptiness, the stupidity of their end purpose: thereby forever diametrically opposed, in some way, compared to more recent creations, such as the absolutely unsightly machine, *Cloaca Turbo* by Wim Delvoye (a huge machine all to produce a tiny curl of real shit) and in contrast, in more of a light-hearted spirit, the famous *useless machines* of Bruno Munari [who i blogged about [here](#)], a lizard-driven engine for tired tortoises, a tail wagger for lazy dogs, etc. All machines with their own autonomous existence, of their own condition, we say, psychologically, like those seraphinians ("each has its own special personality," Munari said, in describing his useless machines: "One day they are lively and agitated, and the next day they fall into an incomprehensible hibernation": a phrase that might have come out of Serafini's mouth, likewise the comment that followed: "the rest of the useful machines are often boring with their uniform rhythm"). And it is not really going out on a limb to compare these machines, although, for now, only projects, by Serafini, with those of another mad creator of visionary and highly unnecessary machines, with all their kit conception, design implementation, and then the actual realization, and even promotion and publicity, or even a (fake) marketing launch, and so on: of the Finnish architect Alvar Gullichsen, highly visionary artist and at the same time rigorous in construction following the internal rules of his own universe, that in the late eighties created the *Bonk Business Inc.*, an imaginary company that for over a century would always produce (probably) fictions of the artist, dysfunctional and useless machinery, but with a true trademark of real advertising campaigns and true/false documentation of all types and kinds, with a strong visual and communicative impact.

Moreover, in his complex and absolutely useless machines (according to the rules of our universe: not according to his, that to us are, however, still completely unknown), Serafini was able to really be, as Sgarbi wrote, "in balance between Leonardo and Eta Beta, first possessing the hand and the talent, and second the impossible solution."

"Reflecting on it," Calvin emphasizes, "we would think that the peculiarity of Serafini's language is not just alphabetical but syntactic: the things in the universe this language evokes, which we see illustrated in the pages of his encyclopedia, they are almost always recognizable, but it's the connection between them that appear contorted, with their unexpected combinations and relationships." "Flipping through the Codex," echoes John Mariotti, "we see a reality that is mineral or botanical or faunal, mutating through stability and a joke, burling, combining with prefixes, suffixes and interfixes. In his fictional universe Serafini was able to give imaginary universes something they were sorely lacking: grammaticality.

Here then, this *Codex*, appears really like a big, inexhaustible, multilayered and complex anthem, not only of utopian dimension, of fantasy, of the creation of other realities parallel to commonly accepted ones, caused by simple shift of perspective on what we call real, a continuous and incessant remixing on many levels, generative and lingually ambient and scientific; but also a hymn to the infinite possibility of language—whatever it is—to reinterpret reality, to bend and shape functionally to its needs and to a proper vision of the world. Thus, under the banner of utopia (this utopia that over time Serafini learned to consider "a food, a fundamental nutrition") and ambiguity, the serafinian circle returns to close itself.



serafinian panino

"In some ways," Federico Zeri summarizes, "Serafini seems to propose, mixed in with the bulk, pieces of a giant puzzle, in which he tries, in a provocative way, to hide the true ultimate sense, masking it in a thousand ways, between the most absurd and unthinkable, perhaps to make the discovery more difficult (and enlightening)."

In his inevitably impossible to decipher language, in the midst of impossible to build machines of which no one will ever discover their hidden function, between animals never seen, marvelous flowers and peoples in which all characteristics and ethnicities of the world are mixed, beyond that ever seen in any world, and where human characteristics

dissolve into these animals, these animals into plants, these plants into machines, and son on to infinity, the utopia of Serafini slowly but inexorably takes form, it unfolds before our eyes with the naturalness of a great mythological tale or the great epics of the past, it invents forms, languages, syntactical and mathematical games that, from now on, will never be incomprehensible: they will be simply and undeniably serafinian: or belonging to the mad, mad world of the incomparable author of the *Codex*.

[... and that's about all i have the patience for translating for now. There's more (16 different articles on Serafini written by various other writers & scholars) that maybe i'll translate at a later date.]



your Decodex decoder drinking from the font across the street from Serafini's house (courtesy of j's hipstamatic)



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