

## Theoretical Discussion of Andrea Granchi's Artist Books

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There are serious reasons behind the decision to put on an exhibition of Andrea Granchi's books. Books are by no means mere light relief from more demanding artistic tasks, or a 'minor' artistic genre for this Florentine artist, who has such deeply rooted, personal and cultural ties with his native city, as the heir to a family tradition of sophisticated artistic craftsmanship. Granchi's ongoing activity in this field, which has now, in the new century, been adapted for teaching (he has set up a course on the "artist's book" at the Florentine Academy of Fine Arts) has much deeper significance and is well integrated into the rest of his work as an artist. His interest in book design and production denotes further reflection on his creative activities, and the time span involved, over the decades of the 70s, 80s and 90s/2000 stands out as a clarification-completion-commentary continuum concerning his work in painting, cinema, graphics and even sculpture. We are dealing with a kind of evolutionary process.

In all this the book has been particularly relevant for Granchi, considering its unpretentious, practical nature, though, at the same time, being profoundly conceptual, owing to its theoretical and narrative dimension, its "Homeric" origins in the theme of travel and discovery. It has provided the means for reflecting the themes of his work in a dimension of programmed (though, at the same time ironic and surreal) consciousness of self, dialectical advancement, and communication with the "other beyond the self" who, for an artist, is always his/her audience.

Books dating from the 70s, like *Carne e fuoco* (1970-71), where I find certain links (though Andrea tells me that he was quite unaware of them; they were the fruits of the "spirit of the times") with more or less contemporary work by Wiener Aktionismus, or *Il giovane rottame* (1972), or the series on the Artist (*Sull'ubiquità*-1975, *Dell'essere*-1975 and *Discorso teorico della pittura*-1974), or the even more typical *Le meningi della memoria* (1977)<sup>1</sup> came to life side by side with Granchi's work in the field of the artist's cinema. His "single frame" technique in the cinema was transferred by means of photographic prints to these books, which are box-containers of photographs and texts. The texts are either a transcription of the film soundtrack or a commentary or scenic description of the project. This operation belongs to the post-1968 spirit representing a strong group identity for our generation. Nothing expresses this spirit better than the opening words of *Il giovane rottame* : «That young man had nurtured great expectations, which were destroyed one by one by reality. He had tried faith, then optimism, even going as far as social engagement and things had always gone wrong, because he was unaware of the fact that others did not take matters seriously». These words provide the irreverent explanation for the temporary abandonment of the painter's "craft" - that of the brush and palette - within which Andrea was born and educated (actually the "craft" had not been totally overlooked even in this period of challenge to the establishment), and which the Artist series made fun of. We have, in short, the description of a "role crisis" typical of the period, for which avant-garde cinema and consequently the artist's book provided a language. Moreover, this "giovane rottame" (or young wreck) also has, by way of baroque, picaresque irony, an umbilical cord attached to the cultural history of his native city and the whole of the greatest Italian art, especially baroque allegory hand in hand with Savinio inspired 20<sup>th</sup> century surrealism, which either cannot be or is not intended to be cut.

These cultural traditions are deeply rooted in Andrea Granchi's genetic code and come to the fore, linguistically as well as in other ways, in the books dating to the 80s, dominated by a "return to painting", which in the book sector became a return to illustration, graphics, the material-chromatic quality of the book as an object. This is the case of the *Inseguitore di giganti* (or giant hunter) developed towards the end of the decade in several variations, all of them centring on the splendid neo-baroque image of the traveller crossing the Apennines along a picturesque route over the

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<sup>1</sup> A good example of this link between single frame in film and the artist's book is the single item *Le meningi della memoria* (1977), a book-box holding 62 photographs of a "chair dance", which, when flicked through the fingers in sequence reproduce the optical illusion of movement which is basic to the cinema.

shoulders of the colossal statue of a giant in the grounds of the Medici villa at Pratolino representing the Apennines.

In the early 90s, and the part of the first decade of the new century that we have been through, Granchi developed what he calls “expanding” or “variably shaped books”. We now have the basic form of the book as an object, a single copy, if it is drawn by hand, or a few numbered copies, if printed (printing of the highest quality). The high quality paper pages are covered with signs recalling the history of writing or traditional drawing exercises in a repertoire of the various possibilities offered to the sign, experienced as the a priori of any work of visual art, or any of its discourses. But these pages open up to a bizarre three dimensionality of sculptural developments, as if the original book form was to be widened in unexpected directions. These simulacra of the book, these material extrinsecations of the very symbol of the book, more and more frequently stand on figurative book rests or lecterns, delineating in wood the stylized human shapes typical of Granchi’s painting.

The most typical example of the formal repertoire of Granchi’s art, the *viaggiatore sedentario* – the reduction to essentials of a human figure in between the seated position and standing up to set off on a journey – in these works takes on the function specific to the book rest or lectern over the centuries, i. e. that of being a ritual support for the book. The result is a kind of liturgical celebration of the original book, which, in the very recent *Autobiografi sedentari* (2006) takes the form of a scroll, the archaic form of the book, in which the holy scriptures and the most ancient sources of classical culture have come down to us.

Thus, while, from the late 80s onwards, our writings ended up by turning, more and more frequently, into the immaterial entity known as the file, freeing themselves from the traditional material support of the book, Andrea Granchi was allegorically occupying the space made available in this way, placing the book in an aesthetic dimension, staging his own new liturgy recalling the centuries of written (and de-signed) culture within us. This is a confirmation of the dimension of autonomous knowledge of art, which, though practising self-reference, helps to rid our perception of the real of the waste and thin dust of daily routine, which risk obscuring our ability to gaze in perspective and, as a consequence, be conscious of self.

Roberto Antolini