

The Encyclopaedia of Nonsense:
The Paradox of the Codex Seraphinianus

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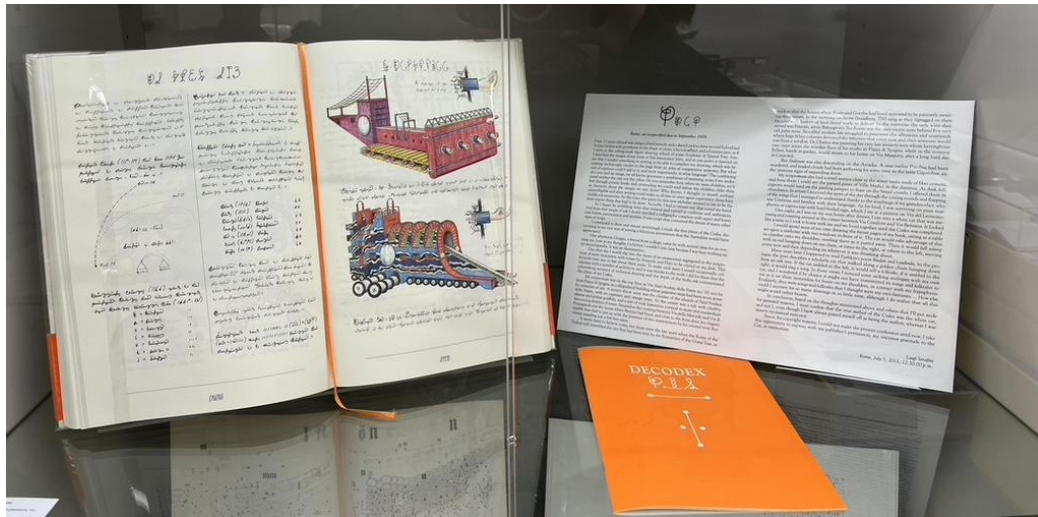
I have never encountered a space quite like that of the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts. Stepping into the Jack Ginsberg Centre, the space felt hushed, almost conspiratorial, like every piece of art was waiting for me to approach it, and discover its secrets. The air in the room carried the weight of craft; I got a sense that each work wasn't made to be consumed quickly, but to be encountered as an object with a pulse. I soon realised I had no idea what to expect before entering—the works exceeded anything I could ever hope to conceptualise myself. On display were delicate pop-ups, tomes, accordion folds, and sculptural pieces made from unexpected materials like wood, metal, and found objects; these weren't just books, they were artworks in their own right.

Early on during my wandering past each glass cabinet, I was struck by a rather large-looking book with a fascinating illustration on the cover. It was an image of a couple transforming in to a crocodile during what appeared to be intercourse. It's absurd, surreal and beckoned me closer with a crooked finger. Next to it were open pages from the rest of the book, decorated with the most ornate typography I have ever seen. I



couldn't stop thinking about the book while I admired the rest of the works in the exhibit. Later on, during the visit, David briefly mentioned that the book outlines an imaginary world, and is completely written in a crazy, made-up language that no one can understand—I was sold; this would be the piece I wanted to review. I have visited many museums in my time but never have I felt called to a piece like I was to the *Codex Seraphinianus*.

Created by Luigi Serafini between 1976 and 1978, the *Codex Seraphinianus* is an extensive encyclopaedia of an alien world, complete with hand-drawn illustrations done in coloured pencil and annotated in a curly, illegible script, all conjured up by Serafini. The monolith of imagination also comes with a *Decodex*: a much smaller, less intimidating book written by Serafini, and is translated in Italian, English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian, to explain his reasoning behind creating the *Codex*.



The Display at the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Art

Through encyclopaedic form and illegible script, the *Codex Seraphinianus* both frustrates and liberates the reader: it blocks semantic uptake while inviting us to participate in a more aesthetic, tactile, and imaginative form of meaning-making.



The 40th Anniversary edition of the *Codex Seraphinianus* has 416 luxurious pages, bound in a cream hard cover, and weighs approximately 2.6kg, which is pretty hefty for an artist book. Its grandiosity imposes a subtle ritual on its handler; it demands a scholarly performance, even as it brims with pure invention. Best approached at a table, it is no casual companion. When it was set before me, I didn't even notice my back straightening, my fingers growing delicate, and a mask of study settling effortlessly over me.

It is a very serious, authoritative-looking book, scientific in its form, however, its contents are surreal and utter nonsense. I was compelled to leaf through its pages, persuaded to believe its contents were credible, but my trust was whimsically undermined once I realised that with each new page came a new, more fantastical idea. The high-quality paper, vivid illustrations, and careful printing shift the readers from consuming it as a text, to experiencing it as a visual and tactile artwork.

The text and images appear to work together as in an encyclopaedia; each illustration is neatly paired with captions or blocks of script, which creates the illusion of unification. You would assume, if you could understand the script, that the blocks of text would act to

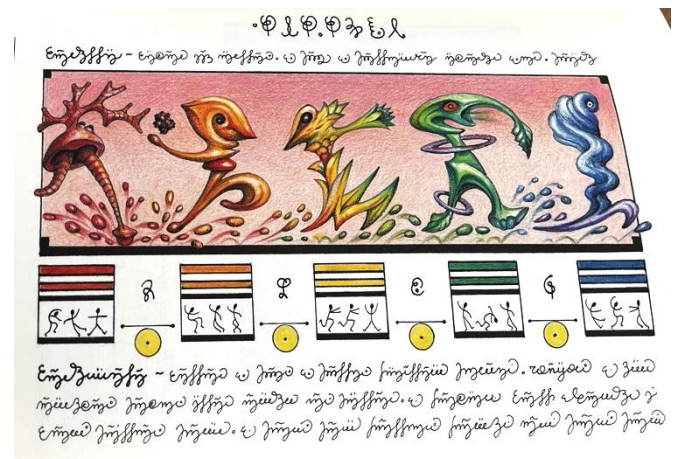


explain or annotate the illustrations, and the consistency of the format suggests a coherent, continuous narrative about this alien civilisation.

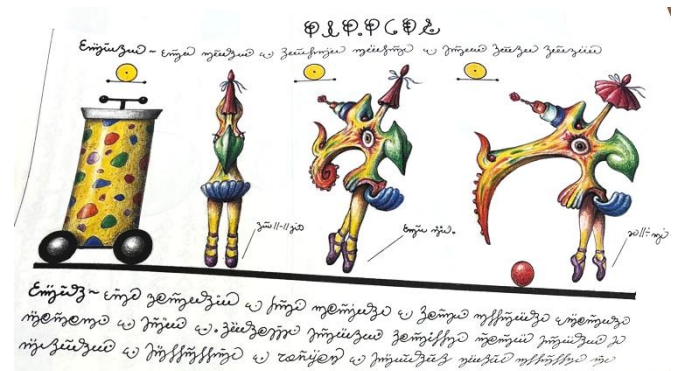
However, there is a tension that perhaps one cannot see with the naked eye—it needs to be scrutinised. The text is illegible, so the images seem to want to explain visually, but the reader is constantly withheld from the meaning. I imagine it as a person running into an invisible wall as soon as they get closer to some semblance of understanding.

Practically speaking, the illustrations do seem to dominate the work, since they are the only accessible channel of meaning, as

farcical as some of the images are, so readers may tend to build interpretations through the illustrations, treating the script as atmosphere or ornamental. One could even argue that Serafini began this work by sketching out the images and then followed it with the text. But I would like to think that the script itself is art just as the drawings are. The writing is “twisted and curled in curlicues and arabesques” that dance across the page rather than stomp, as I would imagine modern day written language to do (Serafini, 2013). It is more of an intricate patterning that turns the ‘language’ into a visual composition.

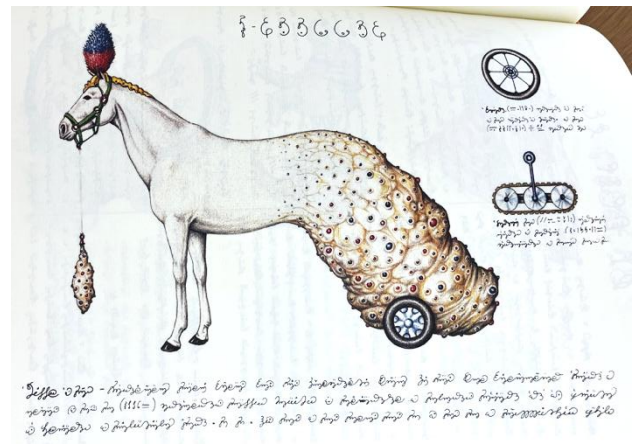


Some sequences of illustrations show transformations or processes, life cycles, and anatomies, so they form a loose narrative of alien species or concepts within the extraordinary world they depict, echoing how encyclopaedias tell stories of progress and classification. The work is also categorised into what seems to be sections based on plants, animals, rituals, people, infrastructure and whatever else needs to be detailed about this strange world. In this way, it follows a structured ‘narrative’, but not one that is characterised by characters, conflict or resolution.



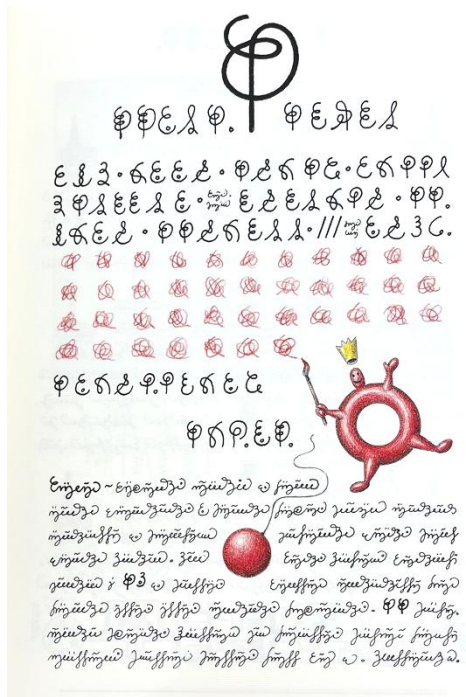


Transformation becomes a recurring motif throughout the work, indicating an instability of form, fluidity or flux, and with the addition of the vibrant colours used in the illustrations, one can also get a sense of playful evolution. A lot of the transformations also depict a hybridity or fusion, blending categories like organic material with mechanical structures, the natural with artificial, and human and non-human forms. Within these images, I think a theme one could identify would be defamiliarisation and the uncanny—the depictions of people, animals, plants, objects, modes of transportation, appear familiar but are distorted and abstracted, blurring the lines between what could be reality and the surreal; it's at the same time both recognisable and alien, which is wildly disorienting for the reader.



I would also suggest that a theme, not that I think Serafini had any intent on embedding the book with ‘themes’, would be the refusal of language. Serafini’s decision to create a new alphabet was “the most urgent thing that had to be done” and it needed to be one that “suited [his] hand”, it couldn’t simply be any language you can find on the street (Serafini, 2013). This suggests not only that the language accompanying the illustrations needed to be ‘special’, but it could also reflect the fragility or arbitrary nature of linguistic systems in meaning-making processes. It recalls poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida, who invented the neologism *Différance*, which captures the meaning of ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’ to show that language works through difference (words are defined against each other) and through deferral (meanings are always postponed, never fully present). Essentially, we might think that words give us the truth directly, but they actually lead us in endless chains of reference. By inventing a word that you can only see (because the ‘a’ is silent in the French pronunciation of the word), Derrida also proves his point: meaning isn’t stable and writing itself disrupts our expectations (1982). The *Codex* stages the very instability that Derrida describes in *différance*: its encyclopaedic form promises fixed meaning, yet its script perpetually defers it. Similarly, it speaks to Ferdinand de Saussure’s conception of the arbitrary relationship between the signifier (“sound-image”) and the

signified (the concept referring to the “sound-image”). Serafini, however, takes this to the extreme by giving a signifier with no possible signifieds; they are symbols that never resolve into meaning (1959).



This refusal of language aligns the *Codex* with asemic writing; a practice that has itself been a subject for debate. Asemic writing refers to marks that resemble language but have no linguistic meaning. Critics of asemic work, like Sam Woolfe, often point to the paradox that while it claims to be completely ‘meaningless’, viewers inevitably seek or impose meaning on it (2021). Similarly, Jim Leftwich argued that “there is no such thing as asemic writing” because nothing can be asemic; in fact, “everything is readable, ie., can and will be given meaning” (2011). I partly agree with these critiques: in the act of reading, we cannot help but search for

significance. Yet, in the case of Serafini’s *Codex*, what is blocked is semantic meaning; it does not deliver a message or conform to any recognisable system of writing. What it enables, however, is aesthetic and kinesthetic sense-making. Readers are invited to respond through imagination, through visual interpretation, through the bodily ritual of handling the book. In this way, the *Codex* refuses communication but provokes experience.

I’d also argue that Serafini’s refusal of language and the form of the *Codex Seraphinianus* itself, as mimicking an encyclopaedia yet being unreadable, undermines authoritative systems of classification and understanding. Encyclopaedias are, of course, sets of books that relay if not human knowledge in its entirety, then at least a fair amount of it. Usually compiled by experts and academics, they do not just state facts; they arrange them. They embody the illusion of complete and organised knowledge. Yet, one cannot understand the *Codex* and thus, it denies the reader any authority over knowledge.

This recalls other artists who have used asemic writing in their work. One example being the Argentine artist, Mirtha Dermisache, who was “an exceptional artist who allows us to rethink, from new angles, the relationship between painting and writing”, according to Fernando Bruno (2018). Like Serafini, Dermisache’s work adopts the appearance of formal communication modes, like books, newspapers and magazines, yet the content is utter gibberish. Both artists question the assumption that writing = meaning, showing how form

can trick us into expecting understanding, and they parody the way publishing and textual form confer legitimacy or authority, while simultaneously refusing to deliver it. In this way, the reader's own perception, imagination, and even bodily encounter with the book becomes part of the 'knowledge' process.



Diario n°1 Año 1, 1975, Mirtha Dermisache

Yet, this withholding of meaning does not limit experience. On the contrary, Serafini, in his *Decodex*, emphasises the possibility that we could return to a childlike imagination through our experience with the book. In the nonsensical nature of the work, people have compared it to how a child might feel when encountering language for the first time—flipping through the pages of a picture book, inventing meanings, enjoying the freedom of not understanding. The child does not yet need a complex understanding of a linguistic system to create meaning in what they find amongst the pages, just as we don't when reading the *Codex*.

I think this is also Serafini's intent in creating such a monstrous encyclopaedia: that "perhaps unintelligible and alien writing could make us all free to once again experience those hazy childhood sensations" (Serafini, 2013). When asked about the illegibility of his script, Serafini told Fabio Pariante that it is "meaningless writing that has evolved over time," and that it should be approached with the playful curiosity of a child (2023). This evasiveness may have frustrated some critics, but artists have responded in ways that reveal the generative potential of his work. One of my favourite examples is Philippe Découflé's trilogy of interpretative dances called *Tricodex*, which Découflé came up with after he came across a copy of the *Codex Seraphinianus*. It is complete with tentacles, mandibles, and strange creatures in a "series of scenes and images that are designed to provide you with dream material" (Découflé, 2005). It is truly a beautiful, embodied interpretation of Serafini's work and proves that the creative power of the *Codex* knows no bounds.

Serafini also mentioned in an interview with Business Insider that he didn't really know why he started the *Codex*, "...but at a certain moment in [his] life, [he] started making pages of [it]" (Kaye, 2021). It wasn't a matter of him trying to make a political statement

about the state of the world, nor was it about creating something that he wanted to be widely read; for Serafini, it was “a necessity” and described himself as being in “a state of trance”, as he said in an interview with Katerina Babkina at Bird In Flight in 2015. I think the more time I spent with the *Codex*, the more I began to appreciate it not only as a fun and crazy book, but as a work of obsessive art. Reading how Serafini treasures his work in the book, and knowing that he has pretty much worked on it every day for 40 years and continues to do so, gives the book a personal sentiment that enriches the experience of going through it. He even said that when he is too old to work on it anymore, he will have a competition to choose someone to continue working on the *Codex* (Babkina, 2015).

I think this is something about Serafini that I am coming to love more and more as I continue my research, and that I feel that we can relate to each other in a sense; he feels called to the work. I could feel that when I, too, felt called by the *Codex Seraphinianus*, like Serafini himself was calling to me, through his book, through the art and the intricate, swirling lines of his script.

I can't say for certain what Serafini's intention was with creating the *Codex*; I'd rather like to sit in the belief that he felt an otherworldly-compulsion that took over his hand and had him sit every day for 40 years, sketching away obsessively. However, Serafini did also say in his interview with Babkina, that “a network was [his] idea originally [...]”, this was a way for him to share this world with others, and that he did, in fact, want “to be heard and understood” (2015). He wanted to create an understanding that didn't rely on text to tell the reader what to think, hoping and needing to create “a more profound, personal understanding,” which he felt could only be achieved through creating the *Codex* (Babkina, 2015). And I do believe he did just that. Not only does one get a sense of perhaps who Serafini is, as a person, but I think in trying to create an understanding while reading the *Codex Seraphinianus* allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, too.

What one imagines while searching for meaning amongst the bright colours and delicate text might say a lot about how their mind works during the meaning-making process, what they're thinking about subconsciously, or even perhaps what they desire within the depths of their soul—it's like a psychological mirror, in a way. And I would like to think that if that is the case, then Serafini can be happy with the result of a lifetime of work.

(2520 words)

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