

A FEW THINGS I LEARNT FROM YOGA,  
JOHN CAGE, JOSEF ALBERS, BRUNO MUNARI AND BRIAN ENO

( This essay has been published in *Quaderni di Meditazione*,  
edited by Andrea Maragno, published by RCS with Corriere della Sera )

Just like any designer used to working at a desk behind a computer, my first yoga lessons were rather embarrassing. The lack of flexibility compared to the rest of the group brought home the physical concerns of our line of work. Nonetheless, yoga teaches us that only by practising daily, without forcing our body, can we hope to achieve our flexibility goals. The instructors continuously reinforce the same idea:

‘One day you will reach your toes, but you don’t know when so you need to keep practising without worrying about it’.

However, the real goal is not to reach a perfect position, rather the small changes you achieve through the practice. At the end of each yoga session, the instructor encourages the class to listen to what has changed in their body and to practice gratitude for what they have achieved.

The creative work of a designer is similar to the daily patient exercises of a yogi, but instead of stretching our muscles, we stretch our curiosity, creativity and mind. Yoga has taught me that every day we should be asking ourselves what we have learnt, what has changed inside us and to be grateful for having had the opportunity to practice. This approach of becoming positively aware of the here and now is in stark contrast with the anxiety of the future, inherent in western culture.

Bruno Munari was familiar with Zen. He likely came across the discipline during his numerous trips to Japan. His work and his stories certainly encompass the irony of Zen paradoxes. In his book *Design as Art*, Munari collects a series of publications from a newspaper, most of which are simply an exercise of observation and creativity. In one chapter, he analyses the shapes of the myriad of chairs on the market and in another, the endless variety of cutlery that can be found, meticulously describing their shape and function. For Munari, art, design and creativity are all part of a daily practice, a constant exercise to learn to see, to express oneself and find pleasure in what one does. I don’t think Munari did yoga, but his approach to design and life has much in common with the discipline.

I don’t know if Munari knew John Cage either, but we can assume he did since they were both close friends of Umberto Eco. What we do know for sure is that just like Cage, Munari used chance as an instrument of creativity:

‘In many ways, chance is an indispensable condition because it goes beyond logic. Through logic, therefore through technology, you can prove something you already think exists. Meanwhile, thanks to this causality referred to as Zen in Asia, through intuition, imagination and creativity, we approach reality differently in a way that allows us to discover other qualities which lead to knowledge, as opposed to a practical result’.<sup>1</sup>

Brian Eno, the musician who invented Ambient Music, resolved his creative blocks by designing a deck of cards called *Oblique Strategies*, each one with a suggestion on how to resolve any issue that emerges. These cards should be used in the same way as the

I-Ching oracle, relying on chance and opening the door to possibility by integrating them into one's daily creative practice. Brian Eno was also close to John Cage and his ambient music is nothing more than music without ego, free of the protagonism of western rock stars. As Eric Satie envisioned, Ambient Music is furnishing music on the same level as the other objects that populate and circulate in our daily lives.

It's not by chance that Zen, yoga and meditation spread across the West from the second half of the last century, alongside the economic boom, mass society and the affirmation of the culture Max Weber defined in his book *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The search for an internal space, the philosophy of living in the moment and to feel gratitude toward our daily practices are necessities born directly from the cultural conditioning in which we were brought up. Often, in moments of stress and anxiety, a good habit – apart from the yoga technique of deep breathing – is that of Googling the faces of Cage, Albers and Munari. The peaceful open smiles of those who have learnt to deal with anxiety and creativity always bring me immense inner peace.

1. From an interview by Claudio Cerritelli Dialogo a proposito del rapporto tra arte e scienza, in the catalogue for the exhibition *Elettronica*, Università di Bologna, 1992.