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Dia-Logos: Ramon Llull's Method of Thought and Artistic Practice

by Amador Vega, Peter Weibel, Siegfried Zielinski, Editors

ZKM| Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona - CCCB, Spain, and
 École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne - EPFL, Switzerland

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Reviewed by

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Every so often a book comes along that stands head and shoulders above most others, this is one such book. A monumental work of scholarship, which is written in a highly readable style about an enigmatic, partly obscure genius who has greatly influenced numerous fields of investigation since the twelfth century!

This book investigates most aspects of the Catalanian philosopher and theologian Ramon Llull (c. 1232 - 1316). "Llull was a Christian mystic and a Neoplatonist. After receiving a vision [directly from God] on a mountaintop in which he saw the 'Dignities' of God revealed to him as elements in all creation, Llull devoted himself to developing a truly eccentric and original combinatorial system of letters and revolving wheels" (pp. 260 - 261). This system known as Llull's *ars combinatoria* was developed by him to prove the reality of universal Christian truths, he was obsessed with this feature of his *ars combinatoria* to convert Jews and Muslims to this way of thinking, which he believed could be 'proven' using his "machine", therefore irrefutable? He was a Christian missionary in the literal sense!

Llull was at odds with the clerical establishment and the Academy of the time, not interested in writing in Latin but in vernacular Catalanian so all people, even of little learning, could have access directly to the 'truth'. Having said that, his system 'machine' of alphabet letters and revolving paper wheels, with assorted diagrams, is extremely complex.

This book itself evolved as part of an arts project, "...it was a special variant of arts-based research, a formative evaluation that culminated in the exhibition project DIA-LOGOS: Ramon Llull and the ars combinatoria at the ZKM | Karlsruhe in 2018. In collaboration with the ZKM project, Amador Vega developed a first version in 2016 for the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona - CCCB, which bore the provocative title *Dia-Logos: Ramon Llull's Method of Thought and Artistic Practice*. The project revisited this title in 2018/2019 when the exhibition was realized in a concentrated version at the EPFL ArtLab, the space for innovation in art, science, and technology at the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne" (p. 10).

Consequently, this book is lavishly illustrated with photographs, diagrams, paintings and drawings of Llull's work, museum pieces, and very little viewed or known artefacts of the Lullian enterprise. After the Preface there are 23 chapters which cover an astonishing amount of investigation.

As mentioned Llull's Art has been enormously influential, the chapters cover all aspects of Llull's philosophy, obviously its efficacy and influence concerning religion but also as a forerunner to digital technology and binary logic. The arts, including poetry, are well covered, including the inspiration of such artists as Salvador Dali and John Cage. Other chapters look at the I Ching and Llull's effect on philosophers such as Leibniz and Jacques Lacan, and lastly the *ars combinatoria* connection with music.

Generative art relies on binary logic and algorithms, Bonner has used the word 'generative' to describe the Lullian system's ability to produce, through its operations, many different questions and statements, and he argues that the creation of "an Art that was generative was one of Llull's greatest achievements" (p. 242). Indeed, it seems Bonner is correct; however, that does not mean that Llull totally achieved his aims especially with the concept of a universal panacea for truth. "In all these disciplines, Lullists used combinatorial computation of predefined sets of elements (such as musical notes, letters, words, and

numbers) as an encyclopedial device. The aim was to exhaust the possibilities of permutation and combination and thus create complete generative systems for a languages lexicon or for musical composition. In practice, however, none of these systems lived up to this ambition" (p. 87).

From the 'blue pages' of this graphically rich, beautifully produced book I quote from the editors concerning the exhibition phase of this mammoth project:

"To discover new aspects in old things, and to watch the complex world of ideas of the past unfold within the contemporary artistic avant-garde, is an important concern of these exhibitions. Part of this is an intense dialogue between Llull's art of thinking and language and contemporary visual artists, architects, poets, composers, computer and media artists. The fascination exerted by Llull's radical ideas and poetics on different art genres still remains unbroken after more than 700 years." (p. 313)

I recommend this book to everyone. It will remain one of my treasured possessions. I could not put it down and will soon re-read it. I do not agree with Llull's Christian missionary zeal and his misguided approach to subsuming Islam and Judaism under the 'truth' of Christianity, but his visions, mathematical brilliance, artistic sensibilities, and 'digital consciousness' in the latter years of the 1200s is a 'mind blowing' inspiration.

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