

Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930)

Writer, Poet, Draftsman, Composer

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Adolf Wölfli, a former farmhand and laborer, produced a monumental, 25,000-page illustrated narrative in Waldau, a mental asylum near Bern, Switzerland. With his own life story as a starting point, he created, in 45 self-bound volumes, a new past and a glorious future and personal mythology.

The complete narrative written between 1908 and 1930 consist of a complex web of texts, drawings, collages and musical compositions. In the first part of his writings, entitled „From the Cradle to the Grave“, Wölfli turns his dramatic and miserable life story into a magnificent travelogue. In 3,000 pages, he relates how, as a child named Doufi, he travels „more or less around the entire world,“ accompanied by the „Swiss Hunters and Nature Explorers Traveling Society.“ He eloquently depicts the travellers' experiences and adventures in an exotic world full of grandeur and progress. Entirely in keeping with the spirit of the turn of the century, the areas visited are thoroughly explored, measured, mapped, and inventoried. Suddenly occurring catastrophes keep threatening the order thus created as well as the story's continuity, but they are reliably defused and ceremoniously transformed into heroic stories by rescue operations, resurrections, or memorials. This imaginary biography and travelogue are illustrated with fictitious maps, pictures of scenes, portraits, and drawings of palaces, churches, snakes, speaking plants etc.

In the second part of the writings, the „Geographic and Algebraic Books“, Wölfli describes to his real nephew Rudolf how to build the future „Saint Adolf-Giant-Creation“: a huge „capital fortune“ will allow the planet discovered in „From the Cradle to the Grave“ - and, afterwards, the entire cosmos - to be purchased, renamed, urbanized, and appropriated. „Number pictures,“ in which Wölfli calculates his fictitious wealth up to the year 2000, accompany the text. New numbers like „Unitif,“ „Weratif,“ and, as the highest, „Zorn“ (rage) are introduced to express accurately the hugeness of his „Saint Adolf-Giant-Creation“. In „musical pictures,“ Wölfli begins to sing about and praise his new creation. In 1916, this narrative climaxes as Wölfli dubs himself St. Adolf II.

In the subsequent „Books with Songs and Dances“ (1917-1922) and „Album Books with Dances and Marches“ (1924-1928), Wölfli celebrates his „Saint Adolf-Giant-Creation“ for thousands of further pages, in solmizations (do, re, mi, fa...), sound poetry, songs, drawings, and collages. In 1928, he begins the „Funeral March“, the fifth and final part of his narrative. In the „Funeral March,“ he recaptulates central motifs of his world system in form of keywords and collages and weaves them into a continuous carpet of sounds and pictures, ending only with his death in 1930 - at over 8'000 pages.

Alongside this narrative, Wölfli also produced - at first occasionally, but regularly after 1916 - „single-sheet drawings.“ Unlike the writings, a whole which had to stay together, Wölfli could give these drawings to doctors, employees, and visitors, or even sell or exchange them for colored pens, paper, or tobacco. Because of them and because of Walter Morgenthaler's study „A mental malade as artist“, a study on Wölfli by his psychiatrist, Wölfli became famous beyond Waldau. The German poets Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé who read Morgenthaler's study were impressed by his work. Jean Dubuffet, the French artist and founder of the „Art Brut“, called him „le grand Wölfli“, and the Surrealist André Breton considered his work „one of the three of the most important works of the twentieth century.“ Wölfli's writings, which he considered his actual life's work, only began to be systematically discovered and transcribed in 1975. Since then, the year the Adolf Wölfli Foundation was created, Wölfli's work, including the very important black and white drawings of the beginnings, have been made public in a number of publications and exhibitions.

Because of his humble origin, his poverty, and his psychic illness, Adolf Wölfli was an outsider in multiple ways. He used the world from which he was excluded as a quarry for constructing a mental edifice complete unto itself: the „Saint Adolf-Giant-Creation.“ It was both a wish machine and the result of his obstinate reception and reproduction of turn-of-the-century ideas, values and phantasies. Wölfli created a work which was part of its age in terms of content but not part of that age's conventions. It gave him a new dignity while he was alive. It gives us an insight in a strange, fascinating, and personal world system which reflects our epoch in a particular, distorted but nevertheless terribly accurate way.

„As for that: I know an even longer word: For exemple, Con-stant-ti-no-po-li-tan-ner-tu-bac-whis-sa-pi-li-fab-ri-ca-tion-so-ci-e-ty-share-hol-der-mee-ting-res-taur-ant-fel-low-ship-fund-cash-clo-set-push-load-ing-com-part-ment-key-bar-com-fort-start-up-ap-pear-ance. Ha, ha, ha. This is a 52-syllable word, whose perfection is hereby, great-great-oligatorily, guaranteed. Honorabla signed and yours, the holy St. Adolf, Great-Great-God.“ (Adolf Wölfli, „Geographic and Algebraic Book no.12,“ p. 247, 1913/14)

Daniel Baumann