

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOON: THE WORLD OF ADOLF WÖFLI

Foreword from the catalog by Elsa Longhauser

The work of Adolf Wölfli was introduced to the public in 1921, in *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler* (A Mentally Ill Person as Artist), a monograph by psychiatrist Walter Morgenthaler. It was not until 1972, however, at Documenta 5, that Wölfli's work reached the contemporary art world. In that innovative and prophetic exhibition, organized by Swiss art historian and curator Harald Szeemann, a large selection of Wölfli's notebooks and drawings, as well as a replica of his cell in the Waldau mental asylum, was included with the work of other artists in a special section entitled "Individual Mythologies."

Born in Bowil, canton Bern, Switzerland, in 1864, Adolf Wölfli did not begin his remarkable artistic production until 1899, four years after he was committed to Waldau. There, he began to spin his highly individual web of fantasy, producing twenty-five thousand pages of prose and drawings before his death in 1930. Executed in both lead and colored pencil on single-size newsprint paper and then bound into books, the drawings provide considerable insight into Wölfli's inner life, incorporating imaginary travels, poetry, musical scores, landscapes, maps, philosophical discourse, scientific treatise, financial tables, and renderings of cosmic battles. As he worked, Wölfli developed a personal vocabulary of forms and ornamentation, fascinating in scope and diversity, which serves as a rich and densely filled dreamscape for his narratives. Even though Wölfli lived most of his life in a room in a mental hospital, he was able to explore realms far beyond the usual scope of the imagination. In the absence of formal training, he created his art out of the richness of his own imagination and from the limited sources available to him in the hospital environment.

Before his hospitalization, Wölfli's life was marked by severe hardship and deprivation. At Waldau, however, he was led and safe. Those who were sensitive to his extraordinary talents made certain that he was always supplied with pencils and paper and sufficient space and time to do his work. It was there, in fact, that Adolf Wölfli first met psychiatrist Morgenthaler, who, after treating Wölfli for several years, was inspired to write his revolutionary *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler*.

When first published, Morgenthaler's work was met with enthusiasm by artists and writers in particular, for they fully grasped the implications it offered for understanding the creative process. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the first to read the book, immediately recognized the importance of Morgenthaler's insights. In a letter to his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé, the psychoanalyst and disciple of Freud, he wrote: "The Wölfli case will help us someday to gain new insights about the origins of creativity and it also makes contributions to the strange, apparently growing realization of how many of the symptoms of the illness ought to be supported, because they bring into the open the rhythm through which nature is striving to reclaim that which has been alienated from it and bring it into a new melodious congruence."

The following year, in 1922, *Bildneri der Geisteskranken* (The Artistry of the Mentally Ill), by the German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, was published. From 1890 to 1920, Prinzhorn had been collecting the work of untrained artists confined to mental hospitals in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. In his book, he took the same approach as Morgenthaler analyzing and discussing the work of these patients not as curiosities but as art.

In the years between 1921 and 1972, several artists, particularly in France and Germany, found inspiration in the work of Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn. The most notable was Jean Dubuffet. In 1945, with the assistance of André Breton and others, Dubuffet founded the Compagnie de l'Art Brut, an association committed to collecting and protecting art created by persons who, either by choice or because of involuntary incarceration, remained isolated from society. But, even in a collection as comprehensive and significant as Dubuffet's (begun in 1948 and housed since 1975 in the Collection de l'Art Brut, in Lausanne, Switzerland), the curatorial mission, valiant though it may have been, was still to isolate rather than to assimilate. Not until 1972, in Documenta 5, was the work of Adolf Wölfli accurately set within the context of art history. Penetrating the sacrosanct boundaries of tradition, Harald Szeemann presented Wölfli to an international audience as artist not isolate.

Theodor Spoerri, professor of psychiatry and physician at Waldau many years after Wölfli's death, worked closely, with Szeemann in organizing the Wölfli material for Documenta 5. In his essay for the Documenta catalog, Spoerri addressed the complex issues of art and insanity and incisively analyzed Wölfli's art from both a psychological and an artistic point of view: Art and mental illness are neither mutually exclusive nor do they presuppose each other. To put it differently, one cannot speak of a mentally ill art; however, mentally ill persons can create art. The fields of schizophrenia and art, however, have moved closer together. For the schizophrenic person, the final configuration of the artistic object is not of decisive concern; he makes no preliminary sketches to be followed in the shaping of the resultant final object. What motivates him are his inner attitudes and the process of action, and he stops without 'finishing' the whole when what he wants has been accomplished—namely, to document the state of things that currently affects him. Similar tendencies are to be found in contemporary art; nonartistic realities become materials for art; and even actions, concepts and situations are incorporated in the expanded concept of art.

Theodor Spoerri's goal was to establish a complete archive of Wölfli's work so that the vast treasure could be properly conserved and studied over time. This vision was finally realized in 1975, three years after Spoerri's death, with the establishment of the Adolf Wölfli Foundation at the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland. The entire bequest of Wölfli's work from Waldau and the Morgenthaler collection were transferred from the asylum to the museum, where they remain under the expert supervision of curator Elka Spoerri.

Elka Spoerri was introduced to Wölfli's work through her husband, Theodor. An art historian, she joined the curatorial staff working to prepare Wölfli's work for Documenta 5. One of her first tasks as curator of the Adolf Wölfli Foundation was to organize a comprehensive traveling exhibition for circulation to major museums. The exhibition, organized jointly by Elka Spoerri and Airgen Gladsemer, curator of the Paul Klee Foundation also housed at the Kunstmuseum Bern, opened in 1976. For the next four years, it traveled to twelve museums throughout Europe, Great Britain, and the United States. The catalog published in conjunction with that exhibition presented, for the first time, in English-, French-, and German-language versions, an in-depth study of Wölfli's vast achievement, with perspectives ranging from the linguistic to the musicological to the scientific. The catalog of the current exhibition attempts to build upon that foundation with its analytical essays and its pictorial representations of the Wölfli material.

At the Kunstmuseum Bern, the work of the Wölfli Foundation continues. To date, Wölfli's autobiography, *Von der Wiege bis zum Graab* (From the Cradle to the Graave), has been transcribed and published in a two-volume German edition. In addition to, the organizing of numerous exhibitions and the compiling and editing of catalogs and books, the Foundation's ultimate task is twofold: to oversee the painstaking removal of Wölfli's writings and drawings—twenty-five thousand pages in all—from the bound volumes, to ensure their protection, and the transcription of the entire oeuvre for eventual publication.

In the past decade, the work of Adolf Wölfli has been widely celebrated in Europe, where it is accepted as a rare and monumental achievement. In this country; even without actual examples

to study, interest in the material has begun to grow. Wölfli's work has stimulated serious research, evaluation, and debate among critics and scholars, piqued the interest of collectors, and served as a source of inspiration for many artists, writers, and filmmakers, including Lyonel Miskin, Hermann Nitsch, Arnulf Rainer, and Jean Tinguely. Musicians such as Ingomar Grunauer, Per Norgaard, Wolfgang Rihm, and Terry Riley, among others, have interpreted Wölfli's work in the creation of operas, symphonies, choral works, and songs. In light of this, a final irony emerges: With the growing acceptance of Wölfli's work into the mainstream, art brut and outsider art specialists who once embraced Wölfli as an exemplar now tend to view him with suspicion. He has become too much the artist, too much the professional, and not enough the explosive, "case." Today, when the boundaries of art history are becoming more flexible, a reckoning with Wölfli is, at last, inevitable. With the problem of acceptance no longer an obstacle, we can now take the time to look.

Wölfli's work is a giant invention, a vast and extraordinary accomplishment. Within the twenty-five thousand pages of text and three thousand illustrations, bound by the artist himself into books, lies a complete world—diagramed, illustrated, and documented. There are the autobiographies of Wölfli the man and Wölfli the saint; scientific explorations, travelogues, maps of cities all around the world; an investment strategy with interest calculations, financial assessments, numerical charts; and long-range plans for urban development and social and political reform. There is war and reconciliation, catastrophe and rescue, transgression and redemption, a fall from grace and salvation.

In 1928, Wölfli began to write the *Trauer-marsch* (Funeral March). Although his health was failing, he worked persistently, knowing perhaps that this composition of writing and collage was to be his final work. For illustrations, he cut out reproductions from magazines, which he, positioned carefully on the page with his writing. One picture he chose was an advertisement for Campbell Soup—more than thirty years before Andy Warhol fixed this image in our consciousness as the ultimate pop art icon.

From 1895 until his death in 1930, Adolf Wölfli never left the Waldau; yet, with detail and precision, he created a complete artistic cycle. The Goldie Paley Gallery at Moore College of Art is proud to present Wölfli's work to American audiences. In this present postmodern climate, so open and receptive, the world of Adolf Wölfli may at last be explored.

In editing this catalog we have respected the wishes of the individual essayists in their references to the Wolfii source material. The only changes that have been made are in the extracts from previously published materials: British spelling has been altered to conform to American spelling. Wölfli's idiosyncratic spelling has been retained.

