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## The Fibonacci novel

László Krasznahorkai's homage to Mario Merz

There is a picture in chapter 7 of László Krasznahorkai's novel *War and War*<sup>1</sup> of a hemisphere made of curved steel bars in a room with white walls. Although the name Mario Merz is not mentioned, the place of the object, which is shaped like an igloo and made of aluminium tubes and shards of glass, is given: Schaffhausen. One of Mario Merz's many igloos is exhibited in the Hallen für Neuen Kunst, Schaffhausen: the main character of the novel *War and War*, György Korim, flees New York for Schaffhausen. He decides to go there after having contemplated the photos of Merz's igloo at length and convinced himself that this "subtle structure" is the only place in the world where the four angelic figures of the manuscript he found in the Wlassich legacy will find some rest after their long journey in search of peace through several of the most promising scenes of human history, a journey which only led them to find over and over again that there was always an imminent war.

Mario Merz (1925-2003) exhibited his first igloo, the so-called Giap Igloo, in the tumultuous year of 1968, and he wrote on it the saying of General Vo Nguyen Giap of North Vietnam: "If the enemy masses his forces, he loses ground. If he scatters, he loses force." The sentence in itself exemplifies the nonsense inherent in the logic of war, but there is another deliberately constructed self-contradiction in the work, a contradiction between the archaic, pre-historic shape of the igloo and the words of a General written with curved neon-tubes. Writing as a means of memory, of human culture here belongs to the world of the annihilation of culture, a twofold annihilation, through techniques of consumer society on the one hand and rude, simple destruction on the other. Enemy, force and ground are conceived of as static, stiff, lifeless objects in this "General" sentence. There is a logic at work here that is ignorant of cultures and human relations. The '60s and '70s *arte povera* aims to shatter exactly this kind of logic with works that provoke perception itself: "They transgress social structures and strata by

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by George Szirtes. New York: New Directions, 2006.

altering perception itself. In this light, works like Anselmo's *Direzione*, Merz's objects run through by a neon tube, or Fabro's partially mirrored glass may be just as capable of inciting a paradigm shift as Situationist actions were.”<sup>2</sup>

The term *arte povera* was introduced by Italian art critic Germano Celant in his manifesto published in 1967. This movement included works of art that used everyday materials, often indigenous to the exhibition sites, like minimalist and situationist art, the difference being that *arte povera* aimed at freedom and independence from repressive social structures through the utmost identification between man and world - and world here means world: cosmos is the other word for it.<sup>3</sup>

Merz's first igloo was covered with little sacks filled with soil. The sacks are too tiny, too powerless for a bunker.

With his igloos, Merz transgresses the convention of hanging the work of art on walls or putting it on a table, and this simple igloo-gesture reveals – without wasting any word on direct criticism – that the previous “natural” forms of exhibitions in fact were controlled, elitist and repressive.<sup>4</sup> As always when social changes are at stake, the question is raised: how can the instauration of or even the propaganda for a new kind of repression be avoided? Because Merz avoids propaganda: the igloo is not another wall or another table, only in another place and in the hand of another subject. The igloo is a *curved* form on which things are not flattened or set high as in repressive, segregational ideologies, but enter different kinds of relationships with the frame of the igloo depending on their materials (Merz used soil, clay, wax, mud, burlap, leather, glass fragments, etc.). The hemisphere here represents the critique of the straight – horizontal or vertical – line from three points of view: it reveals that the line is an abstraction, the result of violating the concrete;<sup>5</sup> it reveals the dichotomy between the horizontal and the

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Mangini: “Parallel revoution”. *Artforum*, 2007. Nov.

<sup>3</sup> “social gestures in and of themselves ... formative and compositive liberations which aim at the identification between man and the world.” Germano Celant: *Arte povera: Appunti per una guerriglia. Flash Art*, 1967. Nov. – qtd. in Mangini, “Parallel revoution”.

<sup>4</sup> “I made the igloo for...overlapping reasons. First in order to discard the jutting plane or the wall plane and create a space independent of the process of hanging things on the wall or nailing them to the wall and putting them on a table. Hence, the idea of the igloo as the idea of absolute and self-contained space: it is not modeled; it is a hemisphere placed on the ground. I wanted the hemisphere to be nongeometrical, so the hemispherical shape created by a metallic structure was covered with sacks or shapeless pieces of material such as soil, clay or glass.” - Germano Celant: “Sphere of Influence”. *Artforum*, January 2004, p. 25.

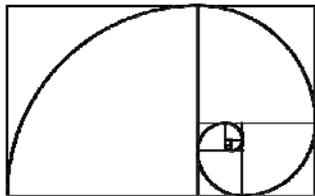
<sup>5</sup> “Space is curved, the earth is curved, everything on earth is curved.” (Mario Merz)

vertical by containing in its very form both verticality and horizontality, thus it realizes a non-hierarchic(al) space for the work of art; and, thirdly, by dealing with the pre-historic, non-discursive structure of organic growth, while this art does not destroy the discourse of continuity of art history, it nonetheless is not preoccupied by it.

In addition to putting together the pre-historic with the actual and representing a critique of consumer, elitist and ignorant society by means of *arte povera*, Merz's installations, according to Celant's interpretation, include a third feature that is in close connection with the concept of art in Krasznahorkai's *War and War*, embodied by György Korim and his manuscript *trouvé*: the nomadic perspective. The four angelic figures of the manuscript are wandering as nomads from one important cultural scene to another, but they cannot stay anywhere, as the institutionalized form of human stupidity and the boundless thirst for power, war, is always imminent.

Mario Merz's main charge against political formations of actual society is that they continuously produce wars. This critique could be neutralized by stating that being in opposition is in itself also built on the logic of wars. But these works present some hidden, pre-cultural forms and orders that in their "fragility and potential danger" (Celant) are celebrations of life.

After a while some numbers appear on the igloos, representing the regularity of different things of nature, such as cones, pineapples, sunflowers, etc. Merz is fascinated by the rule of the Fibonacci sequence, which also describes the surface of his igloos. The igloo is the three-dimensional representation of a spiral, and the spiral is the ideal imaginary representation of the Fibonacci sequence.



With his igloos Merz shows the continuously enlarging and growing structure of everyday life, for instance in his photo series about a workers' dining hall with tables in the form of a spiral around which workers are sitting by 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21..., or in his installation consisting of a spiral-shaped table covered in fruits in the Hallen für Neuen Kunst, Schaffhausen.

Jeanne Silverthorne wrote of Merz's works that they would be transcendental and utopian,<sup>6</sup> but in order to arrive at this conclusion we would need to forget that Merz's igloo is not the perfect, hidden, infinite refuge simply because it is never solid, but always open to its surroundings. The igloos' coverings deliberately do not fit one another's margins, so they are incapable of forming a compact surface. They are not for protection, they are incapable even of hiding someone. They show us that although we need protection, there is no such protecting entity: man, even if he/she is not aware of it, is always visible in his/her refuge. Merz's igloos expose the basic functions of transcendental utopia-constructions: the promise protection and shielding from the enemy without, and screen man from its realization within. In this way these igloos are protecting. They are the shared place of the pre-historic and the actual, an art that is "fragile and potentially dangerous" to repressive ideologies that prompt humans to annihilate one another.

The poor Hungarian (Eastern-European) historian György Korim brings the four fascinating figures from the manuscript, who fled the wars in vain, to the igloo from the museum of Schaffhausen. That igloo is made of materials at hand in contemporary life and its structure is built according to the Fibonacci sequence, where the elements relate to one another according to the golden ratio. It is a structure where the pieces are not built one upon the other, but they are added to one another:

$$F_n = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } n = 0; \\ 1 & \text{if } n = 1; \\ F_{n-1} + F_{n-2} & \text{if } n > 1. \end{cases}$$

and the proportion of two succeeding elements gives the golden ratio:

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{F(n+1)}{F(n)} = \varphi,$$

where

$$\varphi = \frac{1 + \sqrt{5}}{2} \approx 1.6180339887\dots$$

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<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Silverthorne: "Mario Merz's Future of an Illusion". *Parkett*, 1988, pp. 58-63.

Renaissance painters worked with this irrational golden ratio, this exact infinite. Three Renaissance paintings appear in Krasznahorkai's *Seiobo járt odalent* [*Seiobo Walked Down Below*, 2008]: the first is Filippino Lippi's painting of Esther's story on a side of a *cassone*, the second is Belliniano's *Christo morto*, and the third is Pietro Vanucci's (Il Perugino) *Madonna with the Child and four saints*. These three paintings appear in three different chapters of the book with no overt connection between them. Not even the golden ratio is explicitly named in the book. However, the golden ratio is an important structural feature of *Seiobo*, as its chapters are not numbered according to the usual succession of positive integers of the decadic number-system, but according to the Fibonacci sequence.

Only the first two elements of the sequence, the 0 and the 1 are missing. If we try to be consequential with the novel and our interpretation, we have to admit that the first two chapters of the book are missing, that is to say, the beginning is not determined, it is unknown – but we should not be surprised, as the end is also open, as the last chapter is numbered 2,584, after which there should follow many (in fact: an infinite number of) Fibonacci-numbers.

Krasznahorkai said in an interview that this novel is an homage to Mario Merz, the artist who was preoccupied for an entire lifetime with Fibonacci-numbers.<sup>7</sup> Merz shapes this arithmetical concept in a sensual way, as the basic structure of the living, non-discursive, pre-historical world. Krasznahorkai's novel is also non-discursive, but this feature is more unusual here than in the visual arts. We have 17 chapters with 17 different settings, 17 different ages, 17 different sets of people (or animals, or funeral statues). What we do not have is a narrative connection between these scenes. It would be too easy to say that here we have 17 short stories, although we indeed lack causal connections. What we do not have is the usual naturalized and imperial structure of the novel.

Krasznahorkai's earlier novels also show some resemblances to the merzean critique of the political system. Like Merz's *arte povera*, *Sátántangó* [Satan's Tango,

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<sup>7</sup> A jó kegyetlensége. ["The Mercilessness of Good"] Interview with László Krasznahorkai. <http://www.litera.hu/hirek/a-jo-kegyetlensege>

1985], *The Melancholy of Resistance*<sup>8</sup> and *War and War* also presented the perspective of poor, humble people on the periphery of society in long, infinitely precise and delicate sentences based on iterations, as if they were Mario Merz's always enlarging spiral. The self-identification of Krasznahorkai's narrators with loser-figures such as Estike, Valuska or Korim is a shifting of perspective that can throw light on the "false" universality of consumer societies<sup>9</sup> without criticizing it directly and without proposing a new, different social formation, even without proposing a utopia, a rescue given by art and aesthetics. Krasznahorkai, like the artists of *arte povera*, does not escape from the actual: his novels *reveal* the actual and present in this actual form: pre-historical and non-anthropomorphic structures.

*Seiobo* represents Merz's fragile and dangerous art in its structure. The link between its chapters is not even discursive, let alone causal. The first element of the Fibonacci sequence, the 0, is missing, just as the starting point of Merz's spiral is also ungraspable - as a point, 0 has no dimension. The second element of the sequence, the *first* 1, in my view is missing from the novel - I would suggest that the absence of 1 is in accordance with Badiou's thesis on set-theories, that 1 as such does not exist, there are only sets with certain conditions - so the subject is not 1, it is not a given entity, but it *becomes* a subject depending on its loyalty to the *events* of its life. *Event* is a basic category with Badiou; he names four fields capable of producing events in certain conditions: politics, science, art and love.<sup>10</sup>

In the first 16 chapters loyalty/disloyalty towards a given event is the decisive element in a character's life sequence. These characters do not have anything in common, they belong to different "sets", to different places, different ages, the single connection between them being the decisive role an *event* plays in their lives (needless to say, this event also varies from "set" to "set"). The gesture of the bird when it grasps the fish (1);

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by Georges Szirtes. New York: New Directions, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Alain Badiou differentiates the "true" universalism based on equality, on removing or demolishing genealogical, anthropological or social differences from the "false" universalism, the universalism of the liberal world-market, which relies on equivalence and therefore allows permanent reproduction of rival identities within its formal homogeneity. (Alain Badiou: *Saint Paul. La fondation de l'universalisme*. Presses Universitaires de France. Paris, 1997.) Étienne Balibar criticizes Badiou's universality-concept, contending that the simulacra are much more "real" than the so-called "original". - Étienne Balibar: On Universalism - In Debate With Alain Badiou. (English version revised by Mary O'Neill) <http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/0607/balibar/en>

<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou: *Being and Event*. Translated by O. Feltham. New York: Continuum, 2005.

Filippino Lippi's expression of the profoundest humiliation with the profoundest beauty (2); the infinite precision of the restorers and monks and their acknowledgment of fallibility when restoring a Buddha statue and putting it back in its place (3); the return to Belliniano's *Christo morto* of the man to whom once, long ago, the painted, Christ opened His eyes (5); the man who longed all his life to see the Acropolis (8), the master of Noh-masks, who carves a dangerous mask (13); the Romanian fugitive, who accidentally sees a sacred copy of Rubliev Troyka in Casa Milà from Barcelona, but although he had once the opportunity to see icons, he becomes frightened by the angels and buys a sharp knife (21); the life of a Noh-performer, who was saved in his childhood together with his family by a white, almost starved dog, and his father said prayers for this dog for the rest of his life (34); Master Pietro Vanucci, who keeps the secret of the most beautiful *vermiglione* but loses his interest in painting (55); the man in Alhambra, who does not understand anything of the monumental building, which is neither for defence, nor for rituals, nor for residence (89); Ion Grigorescu, the Romanian sculptor, who makes a running and grinning horse from the soil around the volcanic lake Saint Ana (144); the guard of the Louvre, who consecrates his life to the statue of the Venus of Milo (233); the architect who lectured in rural libraries on Baroque music, none of whose projects was ever built (377); Oswald Rienzi's passionate loyalty to his conceptual landscapes (610); the reckless curiosity to the rebuilding of the shinto sanctuary of a European traveller (987); ); and finally, the exiled, old master Ze'ami, with his young and beautiful face, who cannot play anymore, tries to carve a mask, does not finish it, and begins to write (1597).

Like the first chapter of the book, chapter 17 is not about human beings. Here, in the last chapter, Chinese funeral statues are crying underground. The requisites of human cultures: they tried, in vain, to keep out fear and death. This is the outermost circle of the spiral of Krasznahorkai's igloo: the ground of art, the ground of social criticism.

The chapters' Fibonacci-numbering bids the reader not to think in terms of a narrative that shows a temporal continuity bridging past, present and future, but to see each chapter as the result of the two previous ones. This form is between historicism and simultaneism: no story becomes past, as the following ones are somehow connected to it. To it, or to its structure-event. These stories are neither out of time, nor totally in

historical time – they are affected by the merzean pre-historical, non-anthropomorphic structures:

Fibonacci-numbers,  
the golden ratio,  
hunting,  
humiliation.

*Seiobo*'s chapters tell the story of artworks. They deal with fiction, with human creation. Krasznahorkai presents with great delicacy the act of creation, and so he presents the obstacles of creation as well: impatience and selfishness on the one hand, misery and humiliation on the other. Misery and humiliation – as this Fibonacci novel shows us – are capable of transgressing the conditions of themselves, impatience and selfishness are not. For instance, the guard of the Louvre or the architect lecturing on baroque music to 8 tired old people would be considered losers, but their state as losers is totally irrelevant from the point of view of their commitment to their event of life. On the other hand, being an artist represents no guarantee of anything: Ze'ami, Pietro Perugino and Oswald Kienzl are at the point of losing all their motivation to create. The only thing that matters is loyalty to a certain event. This is my first conclusion.

My second conclusion is that the *Seiobo* is a non-discursive novel in which the connections between the events are not guaranteed by certain characters with certain identities, but they may appear in the pre-historical structures of different works of art in different situations, even such intensely *non-existing* structures as Seiobo, princess of peace embodied and present on earth for awhile in a Noh-theater.

My third consequence coincides with the triplet sentence by “Al-Zahad ibn Shahib”, in fact a pseudo-quotation, that appears in the first chapter of the novel. I think it clearly shows the pre-historic structure of existence experienced in contemporary life:

“A bird is flying homeward in the sky. He looks tired, he had a hard day. He returns from hunting: he was hunted.”