

## The Fibonacci novel

### László Krasznahorkai's homage to Mario Merz in *Seiobo There Below*<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Arte povera against the logics of war

There is a picture in chapter 7 of László Krasznahorkai's novel *War and War*<sup>2</sup> of a hemisphere made of curved steels placed in a room with white walls. Although the name Mario Merz is not mentioned, the place of the object of an igloo shape, 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: there, the main figure of the novel *War and War*, György Korim, flees from New York. He decides to go there upon contemplating the photos of Merz's igloo at length, becoming convinced 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 would find some rest after the long journey in search of peace throughout several of the most promising scenes of human history, only to find out over and over again, that there was always and everywhere a war coming.

Mario Merz (1925-2003) exhibited his first igloo entitled "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."

This sentence in itself exemplifies the nonsense inherent in the logics of war, but there is another deliberately constructed self-contradiction in this piece of work: 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 recollection of

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<sup>1</sup> The essay has been published in *Philobiblon* 2014/1.

<sup>2</sup>László Krasznahorkai. *War and War*. Translated by George Szirtes. New York: New Directions, 2006.

human culture here belongs to the world of the annihilation of culture. A twofold annihilation - by techniques belonging to consumer society and by rude, simple destruction. Enemy, force and ground are conceived of as static, stiff, lifeless objects in this 'General' sentence. There is logic at work here that is ignorant of cultures and human relations. The '60s and '70s *arte povera* aims at shattering exactly this kind of logic by works that provoke perception itself: "They transgress social structures and strata by 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>3</sup>

The term *arte povera* was introduced by Italian art critic Germano Celant in his manifesto published in 1967. To this movement belonged works of art that used everyday materials, often indigenous to the exhibition sites, just as minimalist and situationist art, the difference being that *arte povera* aimed at freedom and independence from repressive social structures by the utmost identification between man and world – 'world' in its most estranged sense of the word.<sup>4</sup>

Merz's first igloo was covered with little sacks filled with soil. As a bunker, let not the sacks be so tiny. So defenseless.

Merz with his igloos transgresses the convention of hanging the work of art on walls or putting it on a table, and with this simple igloo-gesture it is revealed – without wasting any word on direct criticism – that the previous "natural" forms of exhibitions in fact were controlled, elitist and repressive.<sup>5</sup> As always when social

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Mangini. "Parallel revoution". *Artforum*, November, 2007.

<sup>4</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*, November, 1967. – qtd. in Mangini, "Parallel revoution"

<sup>5</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 places on the ground. I wanted the hemisphere to be nongeometrical, so the hemispherical shape

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, being the result of violating the concrete;<sup>6</sup> it reveals the dichotomy between the horizontal and the vertical, by its very form containing both verticality and horizontality, thus it realizes a non-hierarchical space for the work of art; and, thirdly, by dealing with the pre-historic, non-discursive structure of organic growth, this art does not destruct the discourse of continuity of art history, it is merely is not preoccupied by it.

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

Mario Merz's main charge against political formations of actual society is that they continuously produce wars. This critique could be neutralized by stating

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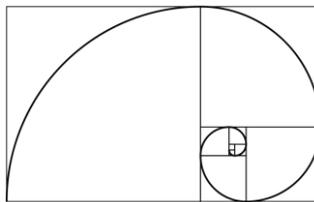
created by a metallic structure was covered with sacks or shapeless pieces of material such as soil, clay or glass." - Germano Celant. "Sphere of Influence". *Artforum*, January 2004, 25.

<sup>6</sup> "Space is curved, the earth is curved, everything on earth is curved." (Mario Merz)

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 the celebration of life.

## 2. The measureless sequence

After a while some numbers appear on the igloos, representing the regularity of different things of nature, such as cones, pineapple, sunflower etc. Merz is fascinated by the rule of the Fibonacci numbers 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 about Merz’s works that they would be transcendental and utopian,<sup>7</sup> but for reaching this conclusion we would need to forget that Merz’s igloo is not the perfect, hidden, infinite refuge, for the simple reason that it is never solid, but always open to its surroundings. The igloos’ coverings deliberately do not fit each other’s margins, so they are incapable of

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<sup>7</sup> Jeanne Silverthorne. “Mario Merz’s Future of an Illusion”. *Parkett*, 1988, 58-63.

forming a compact surface. They are not for protection; they are incapable of hiding someone even. 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 for protection and shielding from the enemy without, and screening man from its realization within. In this way are these igloos 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 set humans to annihilate each other.

The poor, enthusiastic local historian György Korim brings the four fascinating figures from the found manuscript, which 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 each other according to the golden ratio. It is a structure where the pieces are not built one upon the other, but they are added to each other:

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

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

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

where

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

Renaissance painters worked with this irrational golden ratio, this exact infinite.

### 3. Dynamized pictures

Three Renaissance paintings appear in Krasznahorkai's *Seiobo There Below*.<sup>8</sup> The first one is Filippino Lippi's painting of Esther's story on a side of a *cassone*, the second one is Belliniano's *Christo morto*, and the third is Pietro Vanucci's (Il Perugino) *Madonna with the Child and four saints*. These three appear in three different chapters of the book, with no overt connection among 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 consequent to the novel and to 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. We would not be surprised, if the end would be also open. The last chapter has the number 2584, clearly not the end of the sequence, there should follow many (in fact: an infinite number of) Fibonacci-numbers.

Krasznahorkai says 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>9</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

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<sup>8</sup> László Krasznahorkai. *Seiobo There Below*. Translated by Otilie Mulzet. New York: New Directions. 2013.

<sup>9</sup> A jó kegyetlensége. ["The Cruelty of Good"] Interview with László Krasznahorkai. <http://www.litera.hu/hirek/a-jo-kegyetlensege> Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> October, 2013.

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 just 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. *Satantango*,<sup>10</sup> *The Melancholy of Resistance*<sup>11</sup> and *War and War* also presented, like Merz's *arte povera*, 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>12</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 propose an escape from the actual: his novels *reveal* the actual and present, in this actual form, pre-historical and non-anthropomorphic structures.

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<sup>10</sup> László Krasznahorkai. *Satantango*. Translated by Georges Szirtes. New York: New Directions, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> László Krasznahorkai. *The Melancholy of Resistance*. Translated by Georges Szirtes. New York: New Directions, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Badiou differentiates between 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*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.) Étienne Balibar criticizes Badiou's universality-concept on the terms of the simulacra being 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> Accessed 13<sup>th</sup> October, 2013.

*Seiobo* represents Merz's fragile and dangerous art in its structure. The link between its chapters is not even discursive, not to mention causal. So to say, there's no narrative, no singular voice to link the events, although each chapter is written with outstanding rhetorics. The link between the chapters stands only on the structure of the book. In other words, there's no action in Krasznahorkai's art, as action would fulfill the fast proceeding of events. The slowness of Krasznahorkai's prose is not the mere negation of the action-drill; this slowness is about a subtle dynamics that is almost unnoticeable among the noises of everyday striving.

For example, the three Renaissance pictures mentioned above are not described in *Seiobo*, the narrator is not using the rhetoric of ekphrasis (this would mean the simple negation of action), instead we can read about the process of the creation of these works, the character of the painters, the age, the habits in those times. The pictures are *dynamized* in Krasznahorkai's prose, and this dynamization is surpassing the monotonous actions based on oppositions, finally, the monotony of wars. This is in some respects similar to Mario Merz's first igloo that unmasked the static character of the war's logics with exposing the hidden contradiction between the igloo-form and the used materials, between the archaic and actual.

The first element of the Fibonacci sequence, the 0 is missing from the novel, as the starting point of Merz's spiral is also ungraspable, as the point, the 0 has no dimension. The second element of the sequence, the *first* 1 in my view is missing also – I would say that this missing 1 is in accordance with Alain Badiou's thesis on set-theories, that 1 as such does not exist, there are only sets with certain conditions – so the person is not 1, it is not a given entity, but it *becomes* a person, depending on its faithfulness to the *events* of its life. *Event* is a basic category with Badiou; he names four fields capable of producing event in certain conditions: politics, science, art and love.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou. *Being and Event*. Translated by O. Feltham. New York: Continuum, 2005.

In the first 16 chapters the faithfulness/unfaithfulness 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 among 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); 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 to its place (3); the return to Belliniano's *Christo morto* of the man to whom once, long ago, the painted, closed-eyed Christ opened His eyes and looked upon him (5); the man who longed to see the Acropolis all his life (8), the master of Noh-masks, who carves a dangerous mask (13); the Romanian fugitive, who accidentally sees a sacred copy of Rubliev's Troyka in Casa Milà in Barcelona, but although he once had the opportunity to see ikons, he becomes frightened of those 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 dog almost starved to death, and his father prayed for this dog all 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 the Alhambra, who does not understand anything from the monumental building that is neither for defense, nor for rituals, nor for residence (89); Ion Grigorescu, the Romanian sculptor, who forms a running and grinning horse out from the soil around the volcanic lake, Saint Ana (144); the guard of the Louvre, who consecrates his whole life to the statue of the Venus of Milo (233); the architect, whose no project was ever built, and who lectured in rural libraries on Baroque music (377); Oswald Rienzi's passionate loyalty to his conceptual landscapes (610); the reckless curiosity to the rebuilding of the shinto sanctuary of a European traveler (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).

Chapter 17, as the first one, is not about human beings – here, in the last chapter, Chinese funeral statues are crying under the ground. The requisites of human cultures: they tried, in vain, to keep out fear and death. That's the outermost circle of the spiral of Krasznahorkai's igloo: the ground of art, the ground of social criticism.

### **First consequences**

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,  
golden ratio,  
hunting,  
humiliation.

*Seiobo's* chapters tell the story of art works. They deal with fiction, with human creation. Krasznahorkai presents with great delicacy the act of creation, and so presents he the obstacles of creation also: impatience and selfishness from one hand, misery and humiliation on another. Misery and humiliation – as this Fibonacci novel shows us – is capable of transgressing the conditions of itself, impatience and selfishness is not. For instance, the guard of the Louvre, or the architect lecturing on baroque music to tired, old people would be considered losers, but that losersness 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 or Oswald Kienzl are at the point of

losing all their motivation for creation. The only thing that matters is the faithfulness to a certain event. This is my first consequence.

The other first consequence of mine refers to the question of genre: *Seiobo* is a non-discursive novel, where the connections between the events are not guaranteed by certain characters with certain identities, but they may appear by 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 a while in a Noh-theater.

My third first 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 shows us perfectly where the constantly enlarging spiral leads us. The spiral, being a fractal pattern, doesn’t grow. It has no dimension, or, recalling the resistance to war by means of the art of *arte povera*: it has nothing to do with the monotonous thirst for action. Krasznahorkai’s triplet sentence turns in the constructed linearity of everyday sensations, and as Mario Merz’s igloos shows us, peace is where the very pre-historic structure of existence is experienced in contemporary life:

“A bird flies home across the sky. It appears to be tired, it had a difficult day. It returns from the hunt, it was hunted.”<sup>14</sup>

*Translated from Hungarian by Erika Mihálycsa and the author*

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<sup>14</sup> László Krasznahorkai, *Seiobo There Below*, 5.