

NECROPOLIS, AMPHIBIANS

IV INTERPRETATIONS

OF MUSIC BY
ADOLF WÖLFLI

& REPTILES



BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

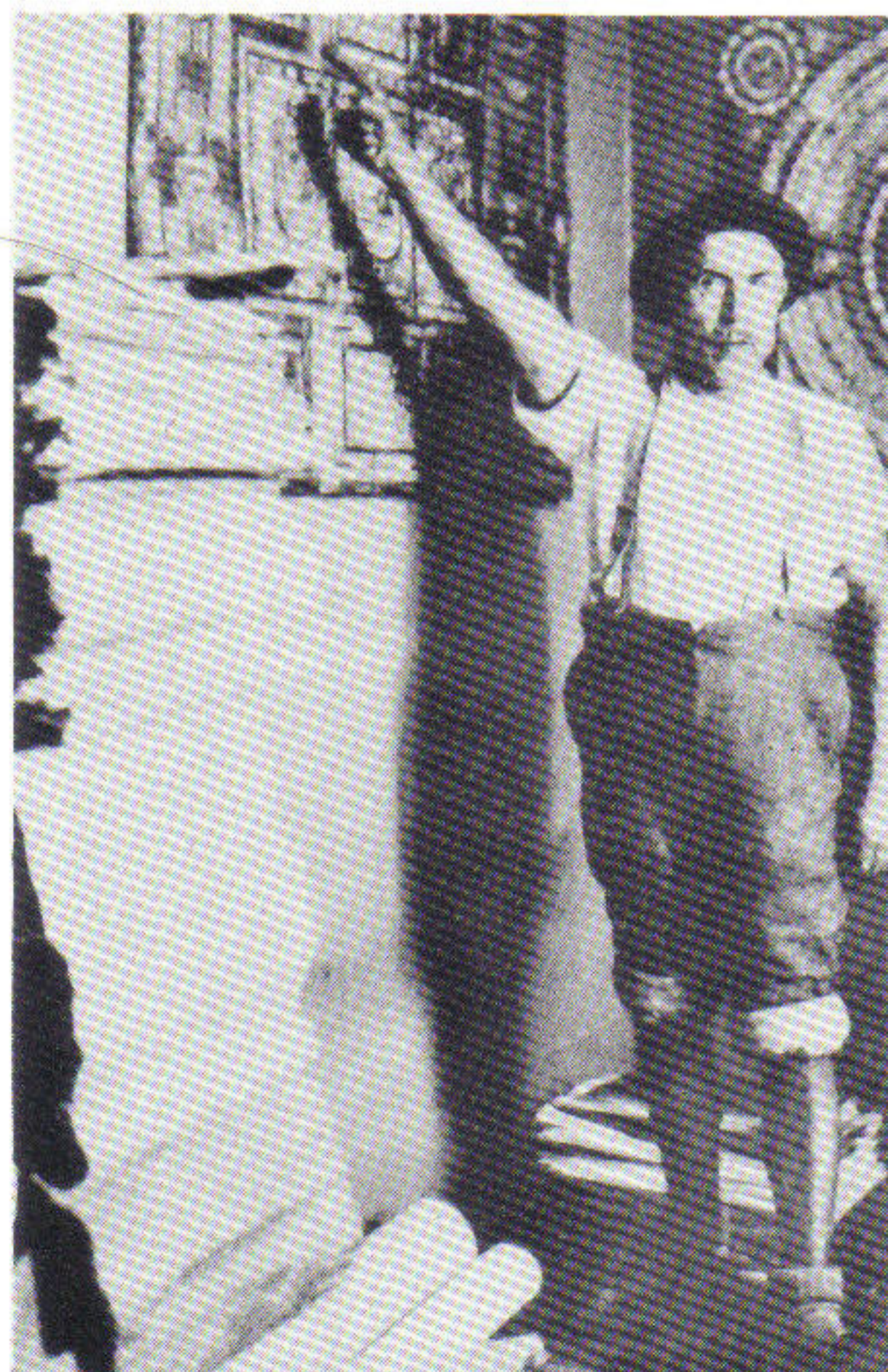
1864: born Bern, Switzerland. Father a stonemason, alcoholic, itinerant. Mother a laundress. Adolf and his brothers in community care from very young age.

1873: Mother died. From then he was lodged with a series of farming families, who abused and overworked him, and neglected his education.

1881: fell in love with a neighbour's daughter but the affair was halted by the girl's father. This deeply affected Wölfi, and he became restless and a petty thief, going through a rapid succession of jobs.

1888: he met a prostitute in the town square and instantly fell in love. They became engaged but never married.

1890: his delusions begin as 'voices' begin talking to him. Twice he molests young girls. He never carries out his intentions, but nevertheless gets a 2-year prison sentence.



Adolf Wölfi in his cell (1920)

1895: attempts to molest 3½ year-old girl. He is caught and incarcerated on October 23 at the Waldau asylum.

1897: owing to violence toward other patients he was locked up in an isolation cell, thus beginning a 20-year period in solitary confinement.

1899: one night he breaks up all the furniture in his cell and then the cell door and the window in the hall. In the morning he is found stock-still, pale and covered in perspiration; but having made no attempt to escape.

This same year he began to draw, write and compose music. He draws continuously and plays his music on paper trumpets.

1908: his work has been continuous, and now he begins to work on a fabulous autobiography entitled "From the Cradle to the Graave" He draws less at this stage.

1916: the drawings are now in colour and technique is developing. He is still very violent and complains of 'visions' imposing pictures on him. He composes march music as before.

1917-19: transferred to an ordinary ward from his cell. Works furiously, going through one pencil and reams of paper every 2 days. Often scolds his 'voices' and hums down paper trumpets for hours on end.

1920: now becoming recognised as an artist by others. Sells a lot of paintings and delusions of grandeur increase, saying he is the world's greatest artist. He is more sociable, but convulsions and hallucinations continue.

1928: never ceases to work and now begins work on his "Funeral March", his great work.

1929: he is very ill and tired. Operated on for pyloric cancer. Continues to work despite hardly being able to move. He never finished the work his heart was set on: the "Funeral March".

1930: Died on November 6.

THE EXTENT OF WOLFLI'S ART AND MUSIC

Paintings: extant in the collection are 41 black and white drawings, over 1460 colour illustrations included in texts, over 750 colour drawings, over 1560 collages, and the decorated cell in which Wolfli spent 20 years of his life.

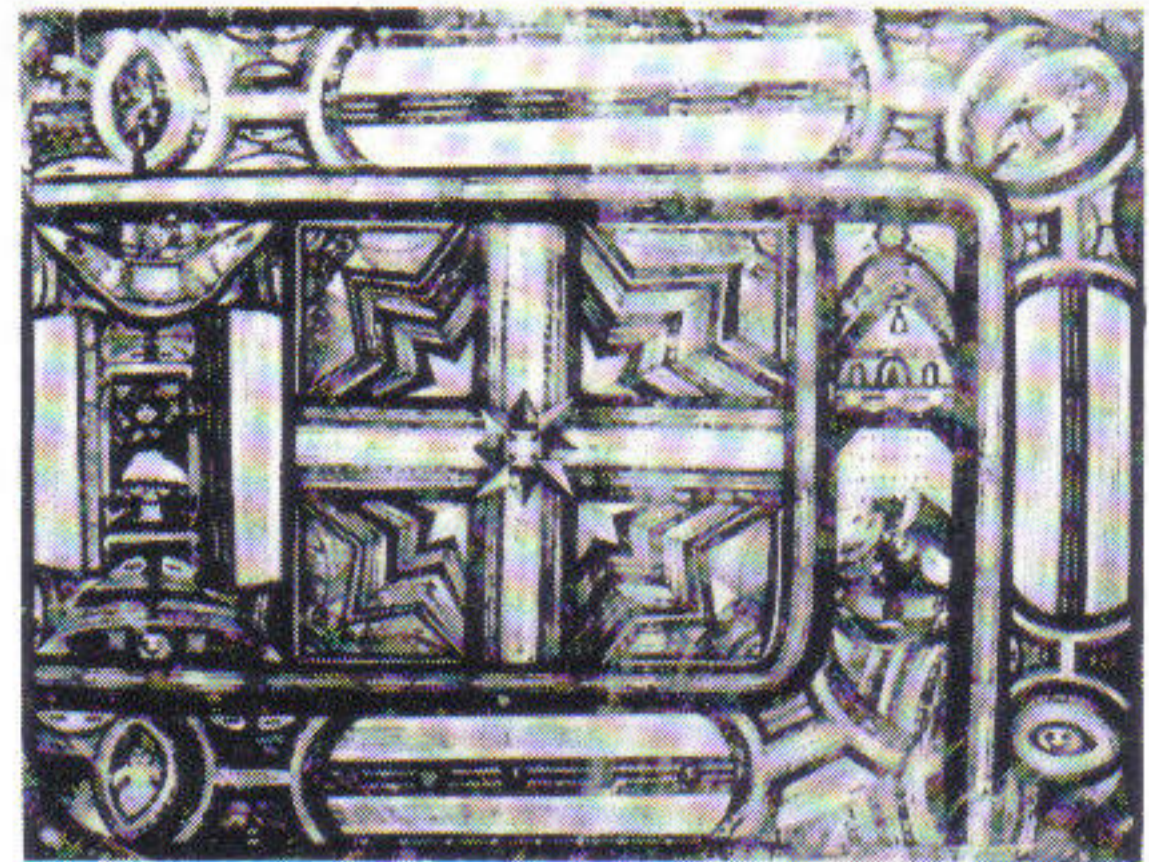
The most striking feature of all is that none of them is tied to representation. Even representative motifs reveal their structural function before they represent anything e.g. a snake becomes not object but subject of a frame—not a symbol but a structural principle of coiling or creeping. Further, there is a striking organic unity of composition (a type of mandala) everything being sequential/cyclical.

Everything is there, the whole world reflected back on itself by surfeit, the available space always being totally filled.

Some of the representative figures are symbolic, especially the “Vogeli” (little bird) which is an endless filler, representing sound, space, environment—a symbol of the generative figure, the ‘voices being directed by being positioned as writing/figure/music. For Wolfli the vogeli is his voices, urges, memories, guilt, threat, the generative principle of all his artistic production.

Text/Sound Poetry: beginning about 1920 began to rhyme creatively in a mixture of High German and Bernese dialect. At this stage, “Das grosse Lalula” of Dadaist Christian Morgenstern existed to be sure, but Wolfli’s work is not just the glossolalia well-known in schizophrenia, but a creative play with dialect e.g in poems written on an imaginary voyage to China he skillfully tries to get a chinese sound from Bernese:

“N-Ha-angs-ssi, Är ta-angs-ssi!! N-Ha-angs-ssi, witt Witt! . . . Schittara i da, Krina-lina! Gwittara bi da Fina grin.”

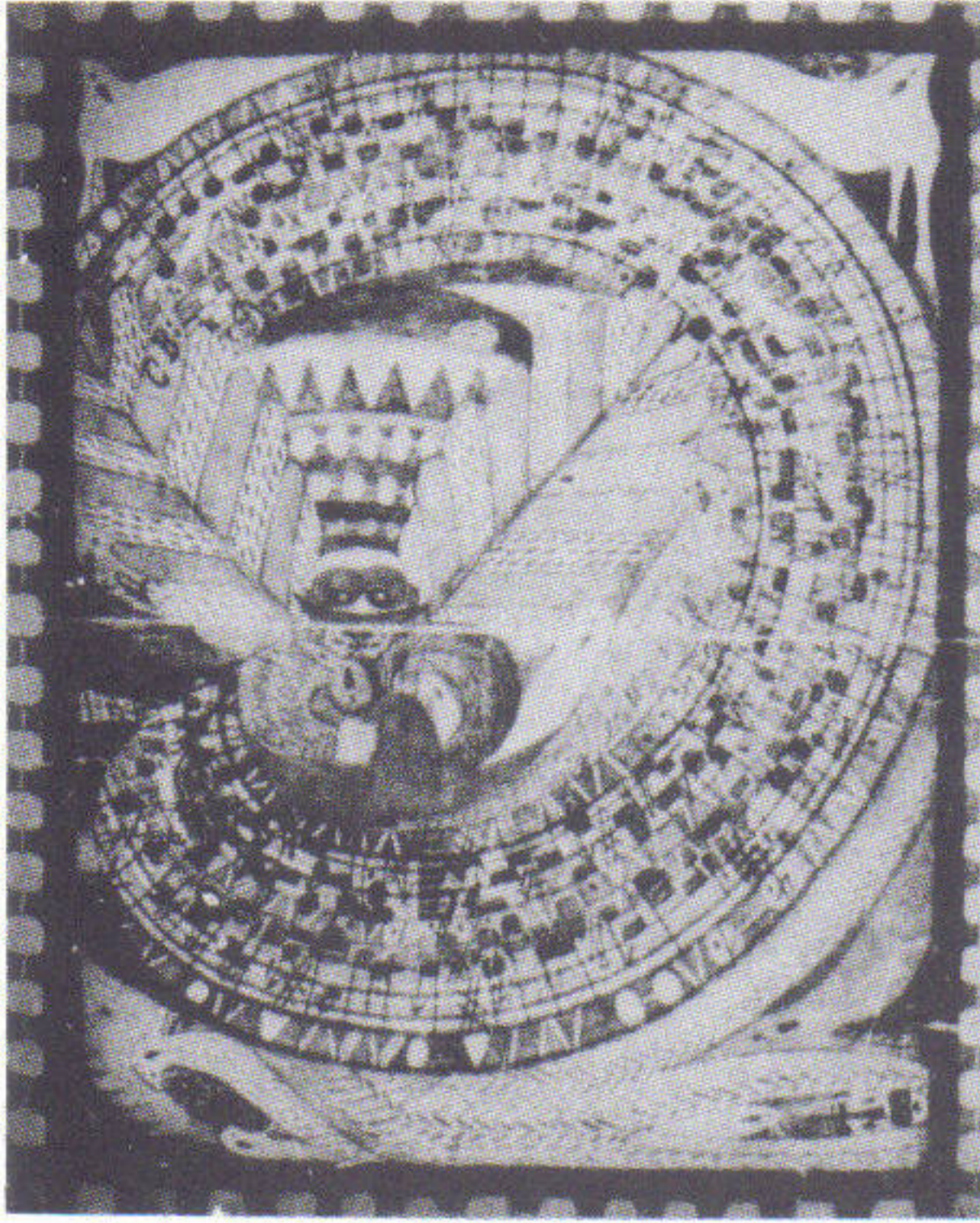


**Ebony Tower in the Orient.
Water-Fanfaare No. 1 (1904)**

Collage: starting in 1916, Wolfli began to incorporate cutouts with his ornamental and textual style. Prominent themes are women, beauty, domestic happiness, catastrophes, machines, world of technology, powerful political personages, artists-actors, musicians, painters, exotic “Giant-Animals-and-Plants”, mountains and glaciers, religious pictures etc., including a not-famous-enough example of Campbell’s Tomato Soup (1929).



Campbell's Tomato Soup (1929)



St. Adolf's Comet (1916)

Music: Wolfli was a self-titled "composer", his pictures, "pieces of music". He also gave many written indications as to how it should be performed, and as to which instruments ought to be used. Indeed he often played his own compositions on the only available 'instrument': the paper trumpet. He was conversant in some musical expressions and was also quite aware of what they signified, because he sometimes discovers and corrects one of his own errors. Furthermore, although he had no formal training, in the parallel development of motifs in treble and bass clef, one can discern deliberate musicality.

It seems best to do as Streiff and Keller in *Catalogue of the Adolf Wolfli Foundation* suggest, and that is to divide his music into three categories:

- 1) Pictures where the music dominates;
- 2) Pictures where music is only marginal or fragmentary, or the staves are empty;
- 3) those where the music is important but is not filling up the whole surface.

In interpreting any of his music then, one would most likely attempt to transcribe literally only those pieces where the music was the main purpose for the picture. This does not mean that the others can not be interpreted as music, but simply that the role of any written notes is more likely to be purely ornamental in these pieces. Indeed in the pictures of 1904-5, all the staves are empty but Wolfli often enough referred to them as music, to warrant their consideration as a valid expression, difficult as this may make their faithful interpretation.

Allgebrah: "that is, music in writing; self-invention" (A.W.) The distinction between music and Allgebrah is not so clear since both are part of this central process of self-invention, the cornerstone. But it was clear that the creation of a whole new numerical system was necessary to cope with the phenomenal excess of Wolfli's production. After trillions, quadrillions etc, he creates Regoniffs, Suniffs, etc, through 22 levels of multiplication up to One Oberon, "which should not be exceeded because same is a cat-tas-strophe. HM!!" But later on even Oberon must be eclipsed by Zorn which is the dissolution of the numerical into music and emotion. Allgebrah is music!

*"Allebrah Donn'r,-rollen!
Durch Gottes weite Welt!
Dein Schatz in Auss'r,-Nollen!
hat Heute gar kein, Gelt!
Reit Du auf einem, Esel!
Das Füllen ist ja mein.
Wihr haben's keine Schesel!
Für liebe Kinderlein."*

Imaginary Autobiography:

I From 1908 to 1930 Wolfli recreated his life, the world and eventually the cosmos in a massive series of works totalling more than 19,340 pages.

1908-12: "From the Craadle to the Graave." He sees his life as in need of recreation, by fictionalising his past ordeals.

1912-16: the "Geographical Hefte" begin his architectural and town planning schemes, thence his travels to imaginary places and finally, cosmic voyages.

1916-30: Wolfli becomes "St. Adolf II" which he sees as having been earned by 16 years of hard work. His recreations take on the character of a religious mission for himself.

1922-8: over 200 mandala drawings see Wolfli fully realising the role of archetypes, the cosmic egg of alchemy, in such a mission. Everything falls within its scope.

1926-30: 16 volumes of the Funeral March consist of a series of short or phonetic phrases separated by indications of rhythm. This song is interrupted by short geographical texts, prayers, or bible quotations. It is the world and Adolf Wolfli become One, a work of great complexity which is rivalled in its encyclopedic scope only by Joyce's "Finnegan's Wake." Never before published it is now in its final stages of preparation.

In his music, Wolfli uses two different kinds of notation:

- 1) traditional notes with staves, notes, keys etc.
- 2) a system of syllables indicating degree i.e. the French do, re, mi, fa, sol, ti. In the early drawings 1904 -5 there are only empty staves.

Yet the traditional system contains many oddities unique to Wolfli:

Staves are always of 6 lines rather than the usual 5, with many auxilliary or 'ledger' lines. The notes are usually quavers or semi-quavers, rarely crochets. The stems of the notes have 'flags' sometimes on both sides instead of the normal one. He uses the treble and bass clefs, time signature (usually 2/4), and a sharp (#) indicating key signature—possibly that of one sharp i.e. G major. Bars are used to indicate metre but in strange sequences. These defy reading in any traditional way, but are regular enough to suggest that they were meaningful to Wolfli.

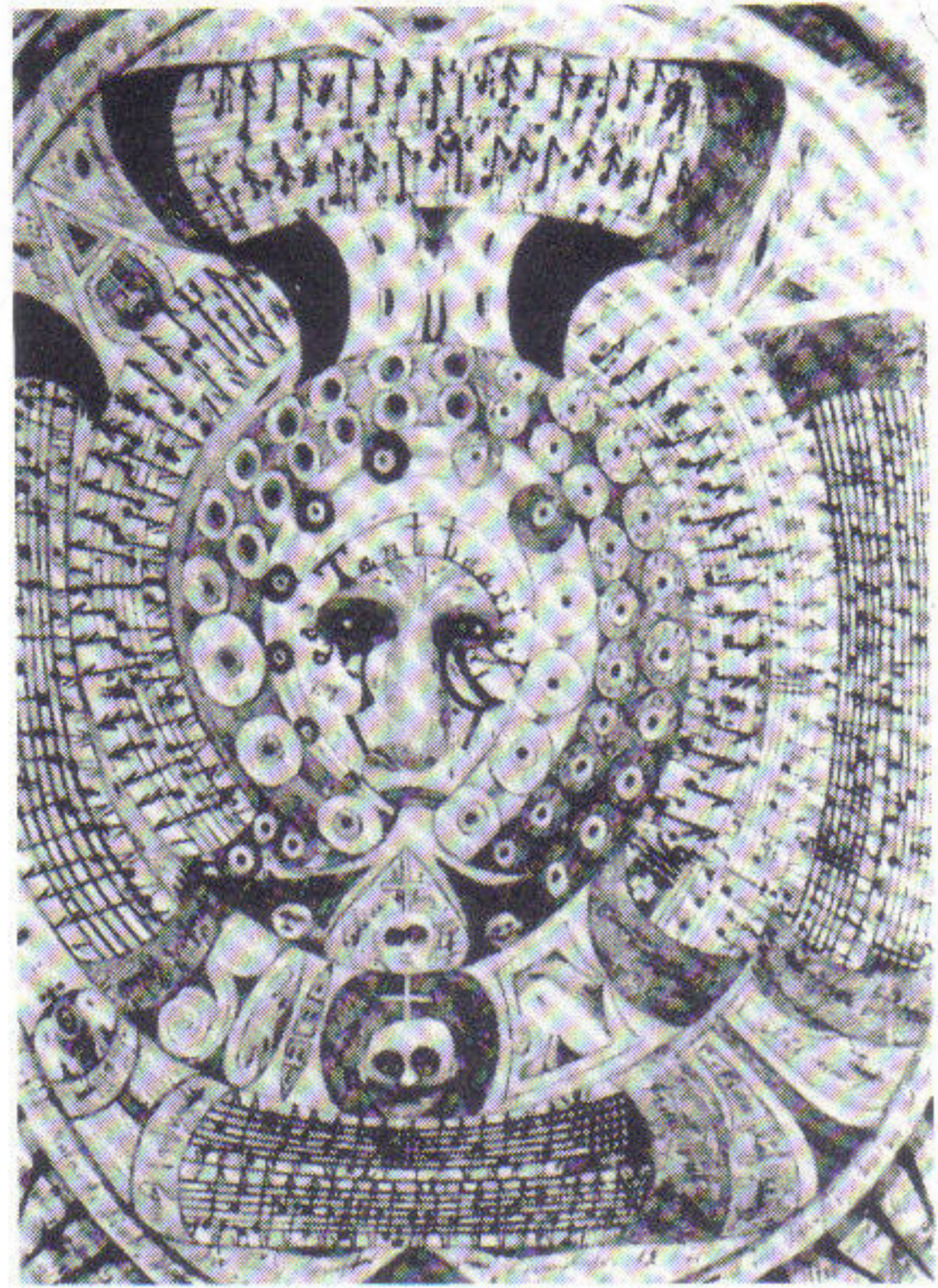
A number of other signs cause more problems: the use of the sign '9' at the end of bars, for example. The #sign is very often used other than as a sharp because it is not next to any particular note. In these frequent cases it seems most likely that it performs the function of a 'rest'.

The appearance of the figures 1 2 1 before and after bars is unexplained, as is the function of dots after note stems, unless they are a variant of the traditional dotted note. Diagonal bars linking stems may be interpreted as ties but there are otherwise no indications of dynamics or timbre.

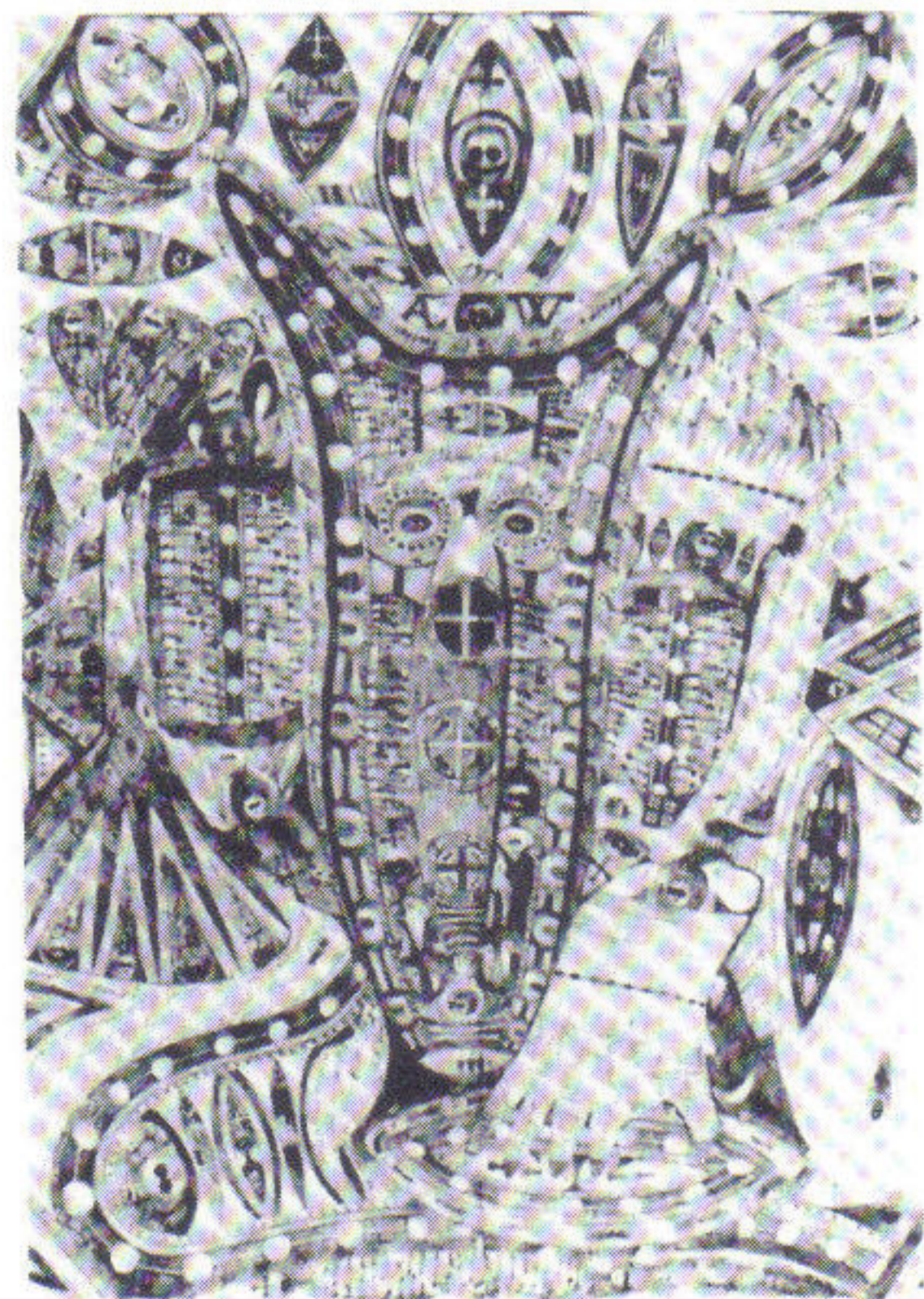
Streiff and Keller have suggested that where Wolfli employs staves in pairs, it seems reasonable to assume that the line he draws between them should represent middle C as in the traditional notation. Then the top line in the treble would be the extra 6th line (i.e. A) as would be the bottom line of the bass (i.e. E). And if the use of one sharp at the beginning of most pieces represents the key of G major then Wolfli's music begins to be readable.

We must re-emphasise however, that this is but ONE interpretation and the major importance of Wolfli's work is that its pictorial framing and peculiar formation render the possibility of many, if not unlimited interpretations.

The result of reading the music by this system is on the record and whilst in his time, if it had ever been performed, it might have sounded somewhat 'atonal', it certainly sounds quite melodic to a modern listener. No chords seemed 'unrealisable', and there are always interesting developments of melody, harmony and counter-point. Rhythm is a problem, however, and his numerical system remains a mystery.



Lea Tantaaria (1911)

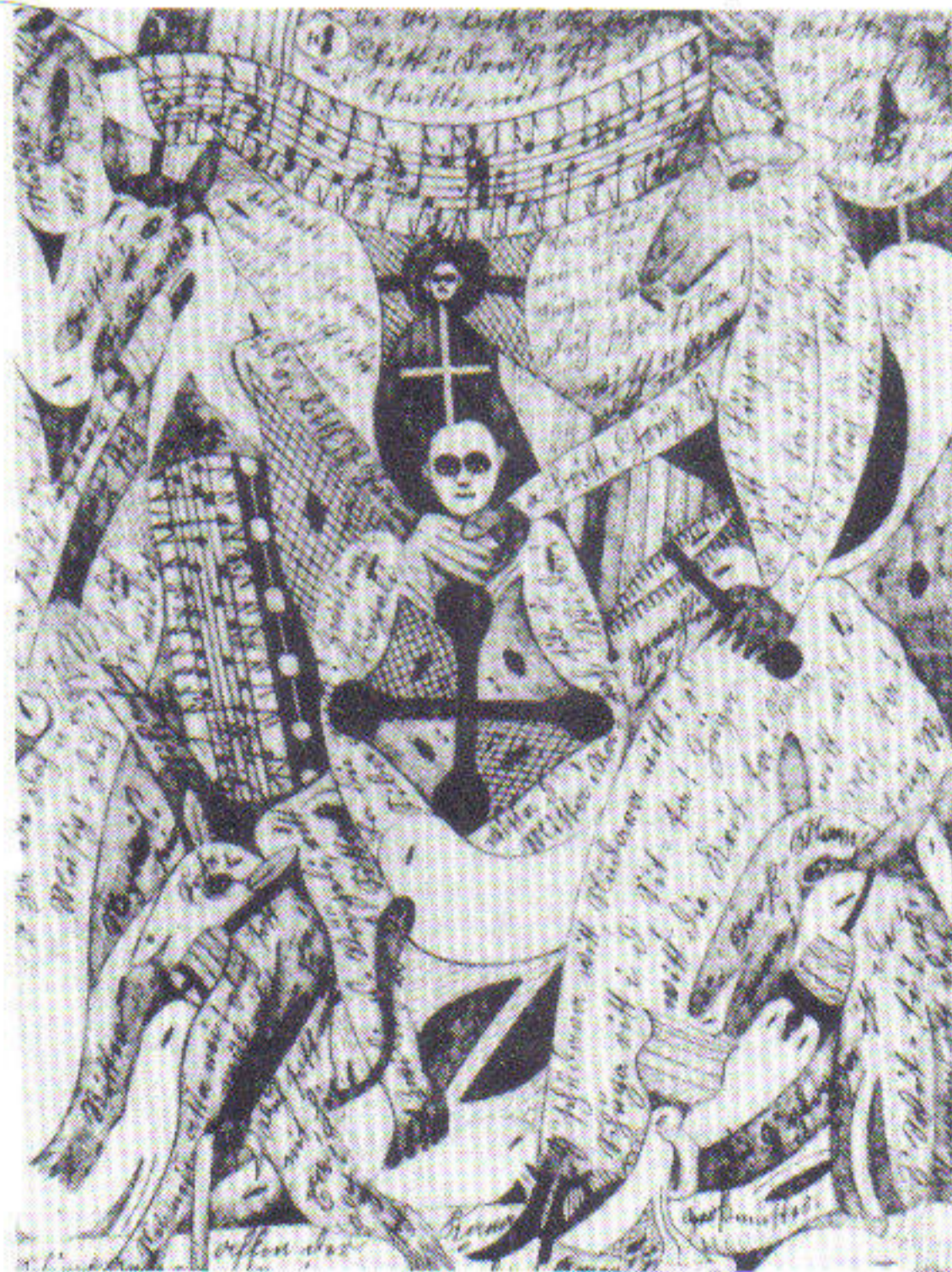


Naturelle Fhorm of the Holy-Light-Island in the Pacific Ocean (1911)

WOLFLI'S IMPORTANCE TO PHILOSOPHY/ANTI-PSYCHIATRY/ART HISTORY/MUSICOLOGY.



The Bälli (1908)



Chimpnags-Apes of the Union Canada: America (1911)

Adolf Wolfli was mad, of that there is no doubt. But it is vital not to categorise his art as separate—as mad, or ‘naive’. Wolfli, like all artists, is confronting the essential question of art, religion, philosophy: Original Sin, in the sense of man’s powerlessness to confront the Absolute. He sees himself as One: the sinner and the sinned against, and asks Why must humans suffer guilt, and some become insane as well?

Wolfli always spoke of art as ‘a beautifully rhymed curse’ which simultaneously endowed him with great power, but ultimately imposed its ineluctable limitations.

Madness, in the sense of dissatisfaction with accepted norms is always a-social and lies at the origin of all creation. Creativity is always a deviance, a transgression of accepted modes of thought. In fact art like Wolfli’s casts light on the origin of art in general, because the creative mechanisms behind it are often more visible than in that of the ‘healthy’ artist. In contrast, cultural (i.e. accepted) art is only a controlled madness, a **HYPERBOLE** which can only be indulged by constantly referring back to the yardsticks of its culture. Therefore instead of its being a supposed expression/symptom/result of an illness, art such as Wolfli’s must be accepted as ‘art’, and that is all. The ‘illness’ does not disappear, by reason of this acceptance, of course. But rather it exists alongside, affecting but not conditioning the creative process.

Wolfli’s **MUSIQUE BRUT** is thus neither an illness nor merely an aesthetic, but a challenge to the human condition, like any great *oeuvre*. It is process rather than product (a process of documentation); production rather than expression; creativity rather than communication, though of course it communicates a dimension beyond mere semantics.



Rahma-Margarine (1927)

Wolflí creates an 'individual mythology' (Barthes) which over-runs meaning: from the mythological/archetypal it becomes transcendental/formal; and thence beyond intelligibility to irrational/transcendental, a sphere of meaning which eventually appears as a metaphysical truth in the "FUNERAL MARCH".

*"A Water-Snake you shall become!
if you fall once away from God!
?how come: we see for sure,
today, on down:
before the dog's face all the
world is mocked.
... The world has now, delusions
of grandeur!
So don't you start from
the beginning all over!
MDCCCCXI"*

But he also wrote:
*"Some day, again—in the dark
wind—sweet childlike
innocence will come!"*

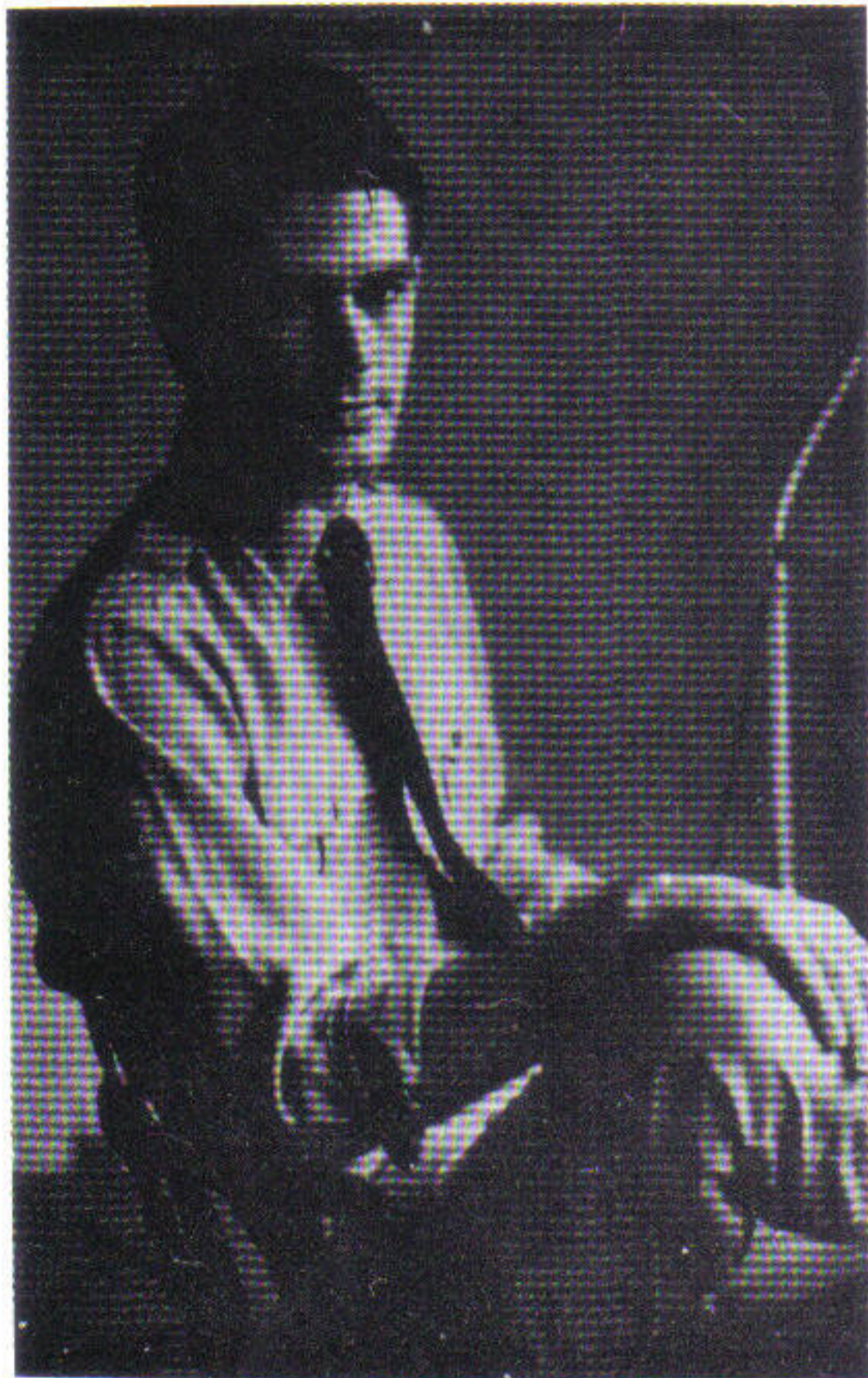
In the identity of art and artist, represented and representation, schizophrenia poses the central issue of humanity. (*Anti -Oedipus*, Deleuze & Guattari). The artist's work must be seen both as part of his time and also as something out of time.

Wolflí's work thus documents his time in much the same way as in modern art there has been an incorporation of actions, ideas, situations and materials. There is thus no real difference between Wolflí's "Campbells Tomato Soup" and that of Warhol, except that the latter is a bit late.

Musically we can learn far more about the process of musical creation from Wolflí's various methods of representation—ornamental, pictorial, symbolic, verbal—than we can by adhering to the accepted form of the time. In the twentieth century we have now explored many of these forms: e.g. the verbal indications of Cage as to instrumentation and duration in pieces otherwise governed by chance; the figurative scores of Martin Davorin Jagodic; the architectonic ideas of Xenakis, to name but a few.

Wolflí must be seen as both unique and of his time: a time where new forms were coming into being—Schoenberg and Webern on the one hand, Satie and Debussy on the other.

How might musical history have developed if Wolflí had been an "official" part of it?



GRAEME REVELL:

born 1955 in New Zealand, now resident in Australia.

Received some classical training but began his career in music while training as a psychiatric nurse in Australia. Formed the music/performance group >SPK< in 1978 and has since worked predominantly in Europe. Studied philosophy in France and also works as a writer, film-maker and producer. Established MUSIQUE BRUT in 1985 of which he is a director.

"In order to do this project the justice it deserves, I have tried to complete the picture of Wolfli the composer by reading his music in the classical sense (at least in 3 of my pieces). The other participants either chose not to, or could not interpret the scores in this sense, but many of his annotations suggest that this is what he had in mind at least some of the time e.g. this directive he gives as to the reading of the mandala piece "COUNTESS SALADINE" (1911) (Cf. P. 10):

"The inner circle is the sol-clef, the outer circle is the g-clef, beginning at the bottom."

Thus I gave to the COUNTESS SALADINE a straightforward pianoforte representation using the system outlined on page 5, and generating a consistent rhythm by treating Wolfli's own spatial arrangement of notes as its rhythm. It is quite remarkable how the resulting (a)tonality seems appropriate for its time (not dissimilar to Satie but pre-12-tone Schoenberg.)

For NECROPOLIS, AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES (1911) I took the fragmentary chord progression and expanded it using classical inversions etc. I used violin as the solo instrument because this is the instrument most often visually represented in his paintings. The other elements of the piece: rooks/toads/bells are all ornamental features of nearly all Wolfli's works. The EBONY TOWER IN THE ORIENT. WATER/FANFAARE #1 (1904) is a typical example of his early pieces which are purely ornamental but which he still always called "musical compositions". He had yet to develop the more standard notation—the 'music' being more a function of spatial arrangement. Hence this piece draws on the forms therein—circles (loops), bell strings (church bells), and of course the fanfare (french horns) and the oriental scale which derives, like the tower, from the Near Orient (perhaps Turkey, the Balkans . . .). I also deliberately affected a religious overtone which is in keeping with Wolfli's texts, populated as they are by saints (St. Adolf II) and religious symbols.

THE BÄLLI (1908) is a slightly later piece, and one of the first in which Wolfli employed his variant of standard musical notation. I have interpreted this piece in the spirit of his imaginary travels to far-flung corners of the world, repeating the fragmentary melody on the marimba.

For the last 3 years of his life (1928-30), Wolfli worked ceaselessly on his Funeral March, his most ambitious work and one that was most important to him. Unfinished, but numbering some 3080 pages, it consists of collages and text, the latter comprising short rhymes in dialect followed by word series or phonetic structures which are separated by time indications. This song, for in fact Wolfli envisaged these syllabic inventions as rows of tones (speech and music becoming one), may be interrupted by short prayers or bible quotations.

The underlying structure of the Funeral March is as follows: Wolfli picks out an object or a person from the collage picture and makes a rhyme including its name and the phrase "i d'r Wüiga witt." Thus a single symbol unites the real world and Wolfli's private world, connecting in effect, each series with every other. Imaginary words, creatures, places, and people, amalgamated and exaggerated from his own experience and from magazines, are omnipresent to an almost intolerable degree.

Interpretation of these tone poems remains an enigma, not least to myself. So I have combined an example with a funeral march for Wolfli, played in his favourite country brass band style, and inspired by an earlier painting which depicts well his fabulously overbrimming universe. CHIMPNAGS-APES OF THE UNION CANADA:AMERICA is a final homage to the joy and intense emotional contradictions in all of Wolfli's creation.



DEFICIT DES ANNEES ANTERIEURES.

DDAA comprises 3 French artists whose company: 'Illusion Production', specialises in a total design concept for each of its very different products (musical, textual, fine-arts). They were chosen as participants because none of them (like Wolfli) is a trained musician but they have a sensitivity to creative endeavour at the margins which is rare.

(Cf. their LP "Action and Japanese Demonstration".) (IP010)

DDAA interpreted 3 pieces:

St. ADOLF'S COMET (1916)

NATURLLE FHORM OF THE HOLY-LIGHT-ISLAND IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN (1911)

RAHMA MARGARINE (1927)

"When we received the proposal to create musical pieces from Wolfli's pictures, we experienced 2 difficulties:

—there was no question of us, paltry musicians, playing the decoded score; therefore we have preferred to 'play with' it, by using it as a sound reference.

—on the other hand, it seemed interesting to us, perhaps because of our artistic formation to reconstitute the pictorial dimension of the scores (whilst not turning it into some kind of sound 'illustration').

Our 3 pieces are therefore "constituted" from these 2 basic ideas; or better, "re-constituted", because it is in some sense a question of a musical archeology.

We tried to use a sort of sound "palette", limited to a few colours, and thus treat identically the 3 pieces (a method similar to that employed in painting.)

The special treatment adopted for this realisation derives from the idea of interference between the pictorial reality of Wolfli's music, and the fictional deviation of our pictorial approach. It is necessary to consider our reconstituted music as a "Phantom Echo" of Wolfli's painting. We call it "SUB MUSIC" since it is part of a historical deviation that one could include as part of a "Phenomenon of Subreality".

(The phenomenon of sub-reality is a resurgence in the world of appearance of a historical deviation after its diffraction into 'shadow' and 'echo' in the historic past.)

"the music, thus, descends with the ship . . ." (Gavin Bryars "sinking of the titanic").

NURSE WITH WOUND:

Formed in 1979 and centres around the work with tape, "found" materials and acoustic instruments of Stephen Stapleton. At present 'Nurse' also includes D. Tibet and D. Roger-son. They have an extensive discography, including:

'Chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella' (United Dairies 01)

"To the quiet men from a tiny girl" (UD3)

"Merzbild Schwet" (UD4)

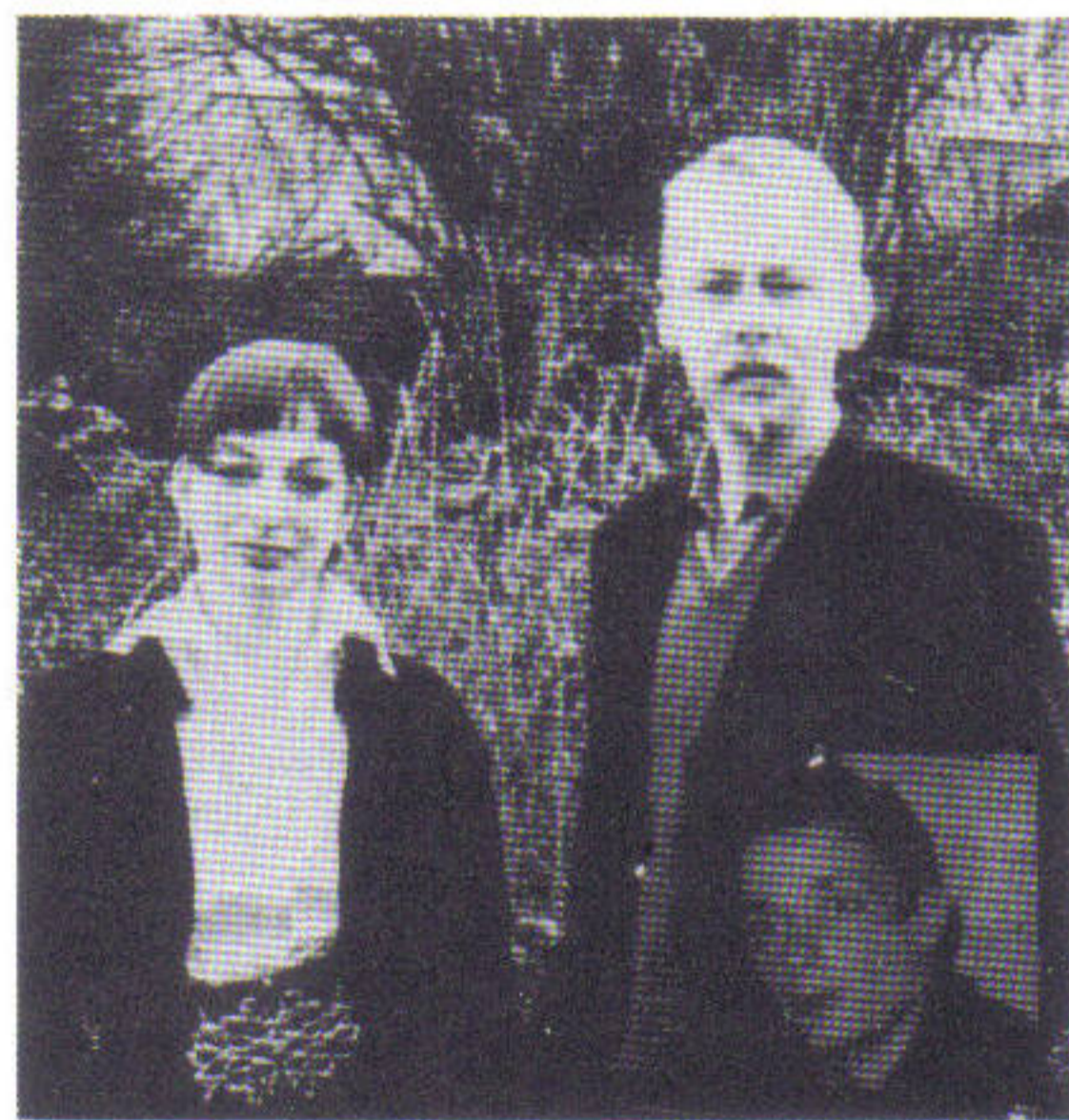
"Insect and individual silenced" (UD8)

"Homotopy to Marie" (UD13)

"Gyllenskold, Giejerstam and I at Rydbergs." (12"EP. Laylah)

"Brained by falling masonry" (12"EP. Laylah)

"The Sylvie and Babs Hi-fi companion" (Laylah)

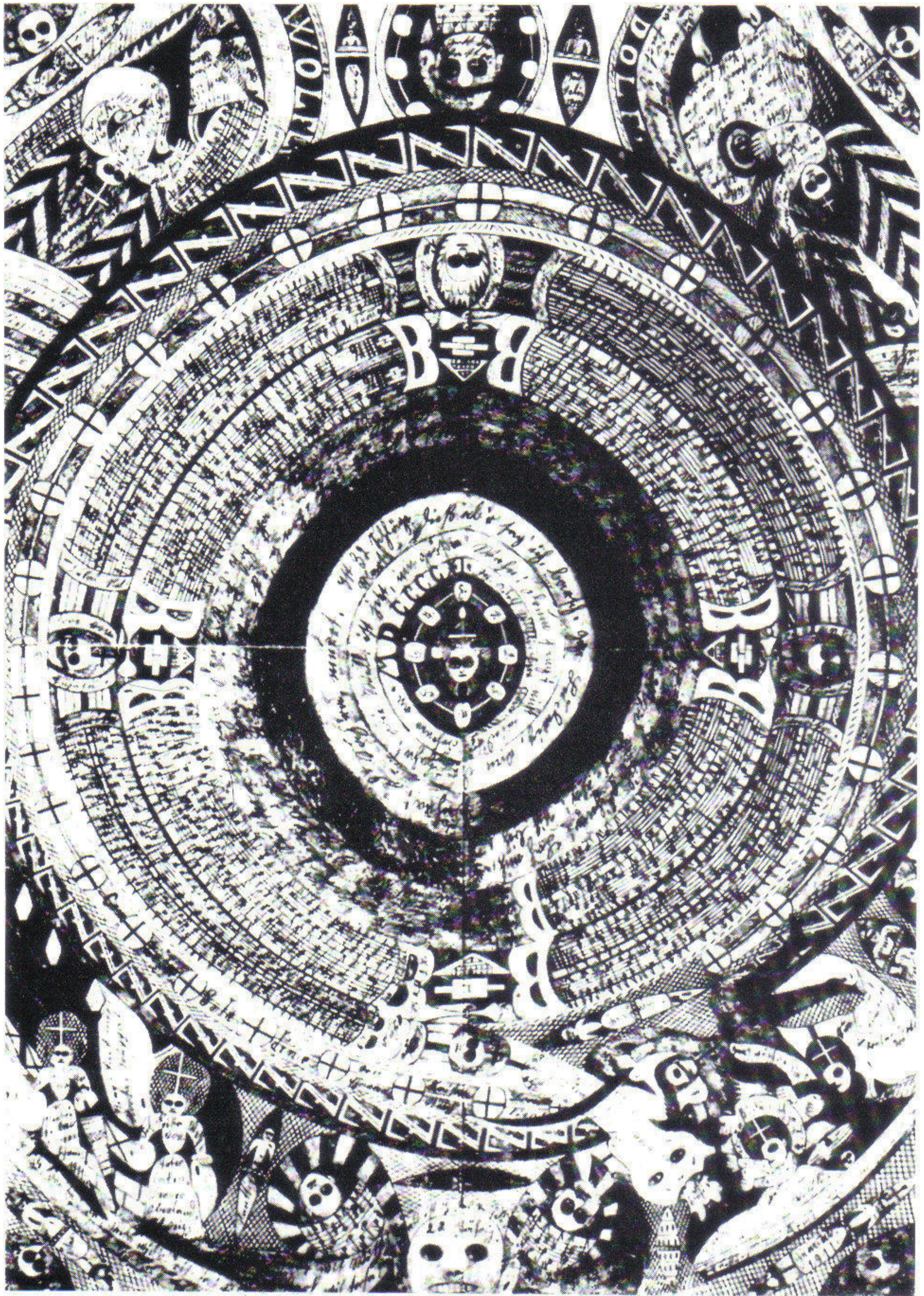


"It illustrates the folly of mankind and our history that the music we should be about to interpret was composed from a mental institution, when its holistic views and description is so similar to our own approach to work.

The inclusiveness of Wolfli's approach to music with its pictorial arrangements, symbolisms and musical notations, conjures up an Eastern influence. The refreshing overtures lend themselves more to an intuitive or 'free form' interpretation, rather than to a traditional reading of musical scores. We isolated several recognisable note clusters and played them simultaneously weaving them around the otherwise improvised structure. The tapestry of images and their arrangements lent the colour to our verions, especially in the second part."

'Nurse' perform:

LEA TANTAARIA (1911). and GREAT-GOD-FATHER-NIECES (1914)



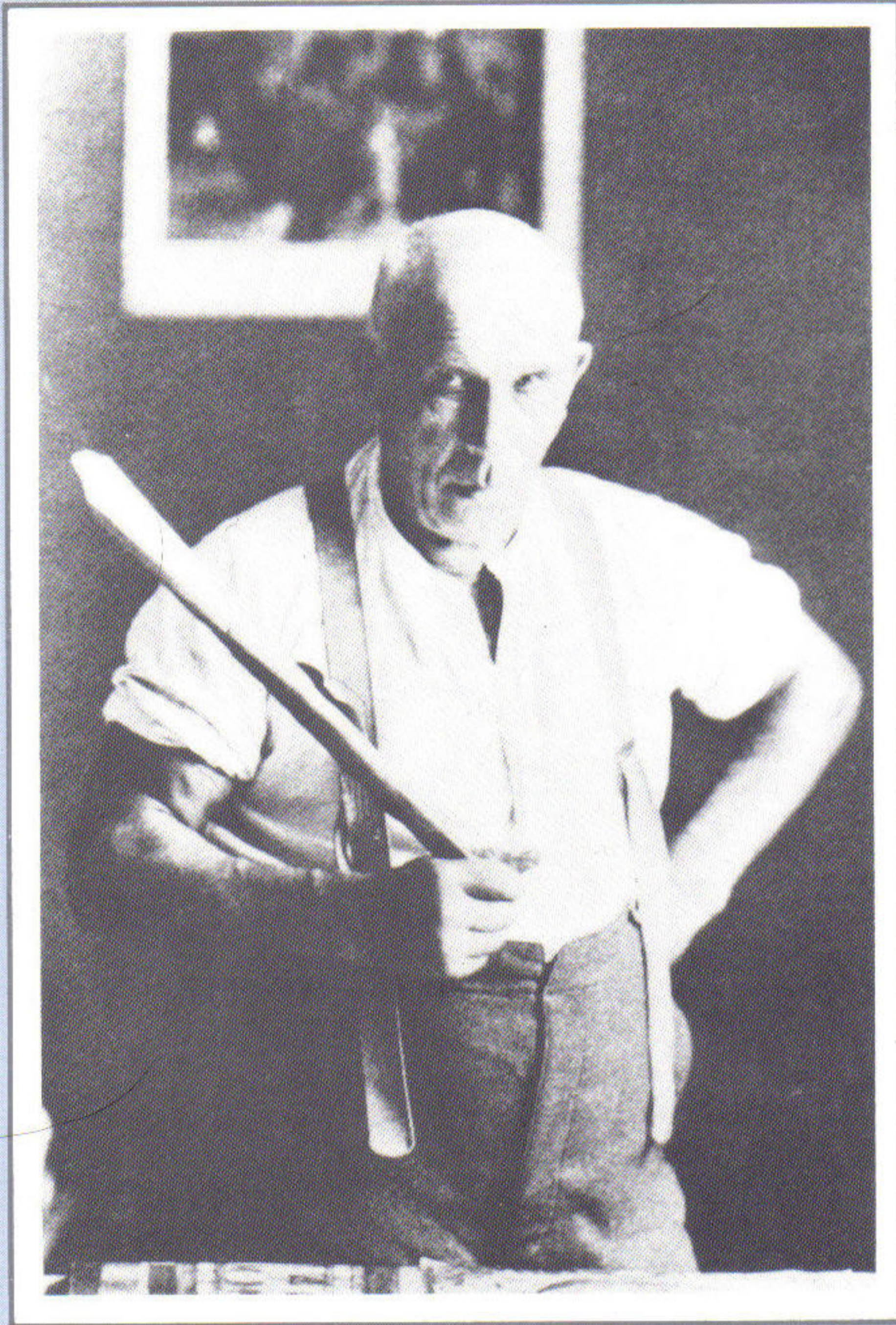
Countess Saladine (1911)

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Adolf Wölfli with paper trumpet in front of his working table (1925)

