

Moving House

In 1919 the Hanover artist Kurt Schwitters experimented with making collages using waste materials, including bus tickets and old newsprint. Naming his new way of working ‘Merz’, a term taken apparently randomly from an advertisement, he soon applied the concept to sound poetry, sculpture and performance. Around 1923 Schwitters began transforming his studio in the apartment block where he and his parents lived into a structure that was part sculpture and part environment. He called it the *Merzbau* (Merz building), and over a period of fourteen years expanded the structure so that it eventually covered eight rooms. This construction – that he later attempted to remake twice – has assumed something of a mythic status in the history of modern art. Few people actually saw it but it became widely known as a distinctive and innovative piece of work.

The site of the *Merzbau* – Waldhausenstrasse 5, Hanover – was Schwitters’s home for over thirty years. His family built the house in 1901 when Kurt was fourteen, and took an apartment on the ground floor. With the outbreak of the First World War, Schwitters was exempted from military service owing to his epilepsy. In 1915 he married Helma Fischer and the couple moved into an apartment on the second floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5. Schwitters began his career painting figurative oils and exhibiting with local artist societies, and his parents converted their ground floor dining room into a studio for him.

In June 1917 conscription was extended to include those previously exempted and Schwitters was sent to an ironworks in Hanover to work as a draftsman. Confronted with the brutal mechanisation of war, and recognising that his naturalist oil paintings were outdated, Schwitters began to explore abstraction. The change in his work was noticed by the owner of Berlin’s Der Sturm gallery, Herwarth Walden. Der Sturm was the leading venue for the display of modernist art in Germany, in particular expressionism, a movement that focused both on spiritual content and the pursuit of the all encompassing, ‘total’ work of art. In Berlin Schwitters also came into contact with the leaders of the dada group of artists – Richard Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch – and became loosely associated with the new movement. Founded in Zürich during the war, the dada movement sought to reject the conventions and beliefs of a society that had allowed war, and included traditional art and museums among its targets.

In the autumn of 1918 Germany suffered a bitter defeat in the First World War, and this was followed by a period of political upheaval, including a failed socialist revolution that many had hoped would provide an alternative to imperialist rule. In this period

Schwitters was experimenting with abstract collages made from discarded bits of paper and materials. Looking back on this period, Schwitters wrote in 1930 that the experience of war and its aftermath had been critical in the development of his new way of making art:

In the war things were in terrible turmoil. What I had learned at the academy was of no use to me ... I took what I found, for we were a poor country ... everything was destroyed anyway and new things had to be made from the fragments.

In early 1919 Schwitters cut the term ‘merz’ from an advertisement for the Hanover Kommerz und Privatbank and incorporated it in his first Merzbild construction. For Schwitters, Merz was associated with, but distinct from, the world of ‘commerce’. With this nonsense word used as a label or brand applied to everything he made, Schwitters found a way of thinking about his work as functioning in a parallel realm, removed from the constraints and logic of capitalist society and yet not fully divorced from it. Composed of scraps of paper and discarded items, his collages created often unexpected and subtle beauty and aesthetic value from rubbish. By contrast, many of his fellow dada artists used collages to express a more obviously political message.

While making artworks that were, at least, related to pictures as conventionally understood, Schwitters began in his studio and home to create something quite new – an environment and living space that was itself a work of art and, it would seem, an aesthetic escape from everyday reality. He began to cover surfaces with not just his own artwork but also newsprint and images, and construct columns of assembled objects. Visitors to the studio recalled the sense of carefully arranged clutter in the studio. dada artist Richard Huelsenbeck, who visited Schwitters in 1919, remembered:

This tower or tree or house had apertures, concavities and hollows in which Schwitters kept souvenirs, photos ... the room was a mixture of hopeless disarray and meticulous accuracy. You could see incipient collages, wooden sculptures, pictures of stone and plaster. Books, whose pages rustled in time to our steps, were lying about. Materials of all kinds, rags, limestone, cufflinks, logs of all sizes, newspaper clippings.

Although Schwitters did not speak publicly about his studio constructions until 1931, it seems that they began to merge together as an environment around 1923, forming the start of the *Merzbau*. At the same time, Schwitters expanded his concept of Merz to include Merz performances and poetry. In 1923 he founded the journal *Merz* and in the following year established the advertising agency Merzwerke.

Things changed in March 1927 when Schwitters’s parents reclaimed their dining room and Schwitters’s studio was moved to a room at the back of the house. With this blank canvas, the artist began working on a new, unified, environmental construction. Clad with angular shapes, the walls and ceilings resembled those of a geometricised cave or forest. By 1930 the largely white structure filled the space, and Schwitters started referring to it as the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, though he said this was ‘only a name ... it does not fit the contents or only very slightly’.

The *Cathedral* was constantly changing and expanding. Areas were dedicated to members of the Schwitters family, well known figures, and to contemporary news stories: in one area he incorporated a pencil stolen from the desk of architect Mies van der Rohe, in another a pair of socks belonging to artist Lázló Moholy-Nagy. Schwitters asked fellow artists to make contributions to the *Cathedral*: the dealer Herwarth Walden and artist Hannah Höch had their own sections, as did artists Hans Arp and El Lissitzky. Schwitters's structure seemed to oppose every element of traditional artistic production: there was no single creator; it involved a blatant use of scrap and detritus; and it was an immovable structure that could never be sold or displayed. Yet these aspects only served to increase Schwitters's fame in avant-garde circles.

With the advent to power of National Socialism in January 1933, Schwitters realised that *Merz* would be classified as 'degenerate' by the authorities. Immediately all references to the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery* stopped; the first use of the more neutral term *Merzbau* was seen in a letter of April 1933. Significantly, he had the *Merzbau* professionally photographed (these photographs are now our only visual guide to what the space looked like). Schwitters was right to be concerned. In September 1933 his works were included in a Dresden exhibition focusing on artistic 'decay'; in December he was named in a newspaper article titled 'The Betrayal of Art'. Schwitters's epilepsy also made him a target: the condition was listed as one of the hereditary conditions the regime sought to eliminate, and the artist knew a public seizure would be grounds enough for arrest or worse. Although he continued to work on the *Merzbau*, Schwitters's public performances and exhibitions dwindled. He began to spend increasing periods on the Norwegian island of Hjørtøya, where the family had holidayed since the late 1920s. Around 1933 Schwitters rented a studio on the island, which soon became its own small scale *Merz* installation, its interior covered with collage.

Despite his difficulties in Germany, Schwitters's became increasingly known internationally. Having heard about the *Merzbau*, Alfred Barr, director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, visited Schwitters's home with his wife Margaret in 1935. In the 1980s Margaret Barr vividly recalled the visit: 'It is like a cave; the stalactites and stalagmites of wood junk and stray rubbish picked from the streets are joined together to fill the whole room from floor to ceiling and walls to wall, [we] are silenced. The effect is mesmerising.' Barr was clearly impressed, choosing to show five of Schwitters's collage works in the 1936 MoMA exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, and six photographs of the *Merzbau* in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* in 1936–7.

The position of modernist artists in Germany, however, continued to worsen through the 1930s. As friends and colleagues were forced into exile, Schwitters made plans to move his family permanently to Norway. His son Ernst was sent ahead in December 1936, and Schwitters followed in January 1937. His wife Helma remained behind to care for the couple's elderly parents, writing in March 1937, 'I can't leave three old people alone or they will be too lonely ... so for the time being I'm not going to Norway but just to visit my two now and then'. Schwitters later described the *Merzbau*

as he left it in 1937, ‘eight spaces were Merzed in the house. Practically my *Merzbau* was not an individual space ... sections of the *Merzbau* were distributed over the whole house, from one room to the next, on the balcony, in two spaces in the cellar, on the second floor, on the earth [outside]’.

In his absence Schwitters was represented by four works in the 1937 *Degenerate Art* exhibition. While other artists were derided by reason of their abstraction, their communist sympathies or their Judaism, Schwitters’s work was classified simply as ‘Complete Insanity’. Among his works included in the exhibition was his first 1919 *Merzbild*, known today only through black and white photographs as it was destroyed by the Nazis when the exhibition ended.

Exiled, Schwitters rented a house in the town of Lysaker, near Oslo, and almost immediately began work on a new version of the *Merzbau*, which he named *Haus am Bakken* (House on the Slope). The house burnt down in 1951 and there are no surviving photographs, but, according to Ernst Schwitters it was designed largely to echo the forms of the Hanover *Merzbau*. The only records of its layout are a series of drawings made by Ernst Schwitters, submitted to the Oslo planning department in 1938.

Schwitters had thought himself safe but in April 1940 Germany invaded Norway and the artist and his son made the dangerous sea crossing to the Lofoten Islands, at that time still under British control. They eventually arrived in Edinburgh in June 1940. Unfortunately for them, the British Government had just begun to implement a policy of arresting and interning ‘enemy aliens’, a policy that extended to refugees. As a result, father and son were transported to the Isle of Man, where they spent the next year at the Hutchinson Internment Camp. Here Schwitters found himself among a large group of émigré artists, writers and intellectuals. The highly educated inmates set about organising exhibitions, lectures and performances. Despite his twenty-year commitment to abstraction, Schwitters reverted to largely figurative portraiture during his time in Hutchinson (though he continued to execute small scale collages) and only contributed these realist works to camp exhibitions.

Schwitters was released from Hutchinson Camp in 1941 and set up home in London. Finding his abstract work unpopular, and maintaining a distance from the many émigré groups in the city, Schwitters became increasingly isolated. In 1943 he discovered that the Waldhausenstrasse house, including the *Merzbau*, had been completely destroyed by an Allied air raid. The same year, he found out his wife Helma, whom he had not seen since 1939, had died of cancer in Hanover. Schwitters only enjoyed one solo exhibition in London during the war, a show at the Modern Art Gallery in 1944. In the catalogue essay, renowned art historian Herbert Read defended Schwitters’s work. Schwitters was highly grateful for this support, and made a small collage called *Homage to Herbert Read*, using a photograph of the writer, but the show did little to bolster Schwitters’s reputation in Britain.

Kurt Schwitters 1887–1948

Merzbau, also known as the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery* c.1923–c.1937

Unable to build his career in London, Schwitters moved to the Lake District with his new British partner, Edith Thomas, in 1945. Although he settled into rural life, painting landscapes and portrait commissions for the locals, he became preoccupied once again with the idea of making a new Merz construction. In 1946 he wrote to contacts in America, urgently requesting funding for the reconstruction of ‘a studio, called *Merzbau* ... it was the work of my life ... I worked twenty years on it ... I fight for it in desperation, like an animal for its child’. His request for funds reached the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who made a grant for \$3,000 in 1947. In the summer of that year, Schwitters began work on a third version of the *Merzbau*, this time titled *Merzbarn*, in a farm outbuilding in Elterwater.

In a letter to his son Ernst, Schwitters described the *Merzbarn* as ‘even less dada-istic’ than the *Haus am Bakken* and, indeed, the photographs of what was completed show a very different type of work. By October 1947 Schwitters estimated that around ten per cent of the *Merzbarn* was finished, and that it would need at least two or three years to complete. But he fell seriously ill in the winter of late 1947 and died in Kendal hospital in January 1948. The final instalment of the MoMA grant paid for his funeral expenses.

With the loss of the original *Merzbau* during the War, and the destruction of *Haus am Bakken* by fire in 1951, we are now left to imagine Schwitters’s visionary environment from the 1933 photographs and associated remnants of buildings: the one completed wall of the Lake District *Merzbarn*, now preserved in Newcastle’s Hatton Gallery, and the dilapidated Hjertøya studio, which echoes the other Merz constructions. It was a sad, though perhaps fitting, end for a work that had sought meaning in the fragments of Germany’s destruction through war and its aftermath.

Text—

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