

Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*:
Materials and exhibition

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When Allied bombs fell in the German city of Hannover in 1943, a significant work of environmental art was lost forever. Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, a sculpture that took over the artist's home and studio, would ultimately gain iconic status in the eyes of later generations, even though little evidence of its existence survived; even Schwitters saw his own work for the last time many years prior to its destruction. The few photographs that were taken, along with accounts from those fortunate enough to experience this unusual work firsthand, described it to be an extraordinary *gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art. Schwitters' relative secrecy surrounding the *Merzbau*'s construction, however, has led to difficulties in interpreting it. Photographs and descriptions reveal elements of Dadaism, De Stijl, Constructivism and surrealism alike in the *Merzbau*'s form, causing ambiguity in its stylistic categorization, such that none of these movements could alone contain it. Its combination of sculptural and experiential qualities and the limited audience to which it was shown have raised many questions about the true intent of its exhibition. So unusual was this sculpture that it could only be contained within a category invented by its creator. All that is for certain in the discussion surrounding this unique construction, is that the *Merzbau*, like Kurt Schwitters himself, belonged to Merz.

On meeting Berlin Dada founder Raoul Hausmann for the first time, in 1919, Schwitters introduced himself saying "My name is Schwitters, Kurt Schwitters. I'm a painter, and I nail my pictures."¹ He was referring to his recent experimentations with collage, and because of an affinity he felt for their techniques, Schwitters had reached out to Hausmann hoping to gain acceptance into Club Dada. However, it was apparent that he identified more with Dada's methods than with its philosophies or message, and for that reason he was ultimately denied

¹ Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, trans. David Britt (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1965), 137

membership in the group. Unlike other artists identified with the Dada movement, Schwitters had no socio-political agenda in mind as he worked. His good friend Hans Richter, one of the Berlin group's members, later recalled that "Schwitters was absolutely, unreservedly, 24-hours-a-day PRO-art. His genius had no time for transforming the world, or values, or the present, or the future, or the past; no time in fact for any of the things that were heralded by blasts of Berlin's Trump of Doom"² The trumpet blasts Richter wrote of were anti-art sentiments, the challenges to the art establishment that laid the foundation of Dada's philosophies. It cannot be assumed that Schwitters held the same views as the Dadaists toward the establishment, because if he did, he never expressed them as such. However, he certainly shared the Dada group's views on method. He produced and performed nonsense poetry and songs, and created images and collages that fit with Dada style. As another Dada member and close friend of Schwitters, Tristan Tzara, wrote many years after the fact, "the participation of Schwitters in dada ... has a particular nuance; it is perhaps by the very reason of his specific nature that a certain independence, which in any event dada expressly demanded, prompted him to create his own movement: MERZ."³

Merz represented for Schwitters the material element. Though Schwitters was a prolific and multifaceted artist in life, working in a variety of two- and three-dimensional media and performative methods, posthumously he is most widely recognized for his collages. The earliest of these works appeared in 1919 with Schwitters *Das Merzbild* (Fig 1), a work that would ultimately be displayed by the Nazis' exhibition of the *Entartete Kunst*. The term Merz, a nonsense word-fragment, can be found for the first time in print in the center of the work. In this

² Ibid., 138.

³ Tristan Tzara, "Kurt Schwitters: 1887-1948," in *I is Style*, ed. Rudi Fuchs (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2000), 147.

and the hundreds of *Merzbilder*, or *Merz pictures*, that would follow, all material was of equivalent representational value, from bus tickets and beer mats to pram wheels and buttons, playing cards and wire... and all were included in his collages. In his first writings to define his developing method, Schwitters wrote “The word ‘Merz’ essentially means the totality of all imaginable materials that can be used for artistic purposes and technically the principle that all of these materials have equal value.”⁴ Unlike Club

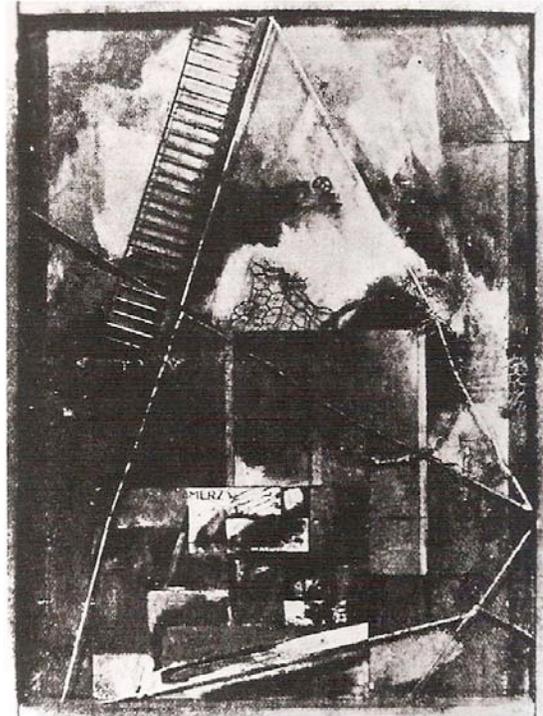


Fig. 1 *Das Merzbild*, 1919

Dada, whose members collaged in reaction to and in mockery of the art establishment, Merz was for Schwitters solely a means to an end, spurred by the immediacy of expression without the preoccupation of using traditional materials. As Schwitters wrote in 1920, “...Hulsendadaism [referring to the influence of Berlin Dada leader Richard Huelsenbeck] is oriented toward politics and against art and against culture. ... As a matter of principle, Merz aims only at art, because no man can serve two masters.”⁵ In short, while Dada was a movement against art, Merz only facilitated Schwitters production of art works.

Schwitters’s introduction of the term Merz in 1919 applies the term specifically to his Merz paintings. By the time of his writings the following year, though, his definition of Merz had

⁴ Kurt Schwitters, “Merz Painting (1919),” in *I is Style*, ed. Rudi Fuchs (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2000), 91

⁵ Kurt Schwitters, “Merz (1920),” in *Dadas on Art*, ed. Lucy Lippard (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 102-03.

expanded to encompass performative works, evidenced in his concept and drawings for a Merz stage, designed for the purpose of performing a Merz drama. His plans for this theoretical work describe a composite work in which text, music, stage, light, space and surface are all fused together and inseparably bound.⁶ This appears to represent Schwitters's first vision of a totally experiential and environmental work, anticipating by years the evolution of the *Merzbau* that was now in its trial stages in his studio. His words at the end of the article allude to his environmental aspirations, and indicate that his conception of Merz was maturing rapidly. His definition of material had expanded and was now all-encompassing. "At some future date perhaps we shall witness the birth of the Merz composite work of art," he writes. "We cannot create it, for we ourselves would only be parts of it, in fact we would be mere material."⁷

Schwitters's *Merzbau*, or Merz-construction, began as a columnar Dadaist structure assembled from the objects rapidly overflowing his Hannover studio in Waldhausenstrasse 5 at some point in 1919, the year of his first written musings on the meaning of Merz. Artist and Schwitters' friend Kate Steinitz has provided the earliest account of the work:

One day something appeared in the studio which looked like a cross between a cylinder or wooden barrel and a table-high tree stump with the bark run wild. It had evolved from a chaotic heap of various materials: wood, cardboard, iron scraps, broken furniture and picture frames...Kurt called it a column. The column-like structure was hollow. Later, when it began to rise like a tower, some irregular divisions of platforms divided into stories. The inside walls were perforated with entrances to caves - more or less dark, depending on whether the electricity was functioning.⁸

Author John Elderfield doubts that Schwitters was truly aspiring to an environmental work at this early stage in the *Merzbau*'s development, though he acknowledges that the scale and character

⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁸ Gwendolen Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 210-11.

of the work were unlike any of the artist's contemporaneous experiments with three-dimensional collage.⁹ In many respects, the column's form resembled other works of the same period, most notably Berlin Dadaist Johannes Baader's *Das grosse Plasto-Dio-Dada-Drama "Deutschlands Grösse und Untergang,"* (Figs. 2 and 3.) but it was clear that Schwitters' work differed greatly in its intent. Elderfield describes this initial incarnation of the *Merzbau* as an autobiographical depository for Schwitters's associative fantasies,¹⁰ considerably more personal than similar Dadaist works.

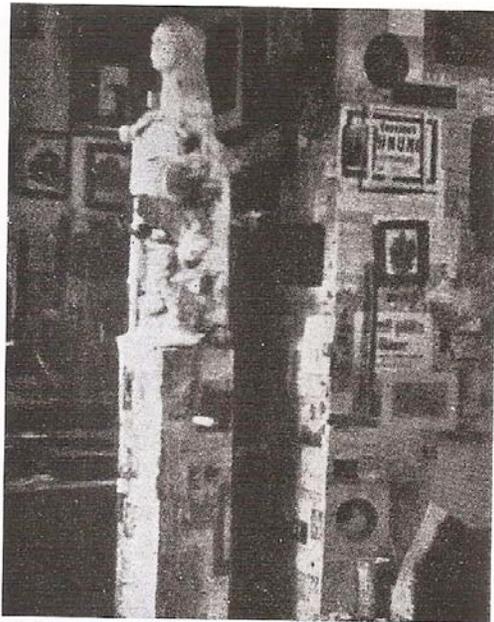


Fig 2. *Merz-column*, ca. 1920



Fig. 3 Johannes Baader, 1920
Das Grosse Plasto-Dio-Dada-Drama

The personal nature of the *Merzbau* was reflected in Schwitters's incorporation of various themed grottoes into its construction. By the time Dadaist and Schwitters's friend Hans Richter was first invited to view the work, in 1925, the Merz column had outgrown his first studio at

⁹ John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 144,147.

¹⁰ Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 146.

Waldhausenstrasse 5 and had been moved (in 1923) to a back room of the house. Richter witnessed at this point a plaster sculpture that reached almost to the ceiling, comprised of hollowed and inflated forms, each with a specific narrative purpose. Each of the hollowed areas, the *Merzbau*'s legendary grottoes, contained found or pilfered objects which characterized the grotto's occupant. Shoelaces, drafting pencils, cigarette ends, dental bridges, and even a bottle of someone's urine characterized for Schwitters the likes of Hans Arp, El Lissitzky, Ludwig Mies van de Rohe, Schwitters' wife and son, and even Richter himself. On his visit, Schwitters cut off a lock of Richter's hair and placed it inside his grotto to mark the occasion. "...This was more than a sculpture," Richter later recalled; "it was a living, daily-changing document on Schwitters and his friends. ... Schwitters gave some of us several holes each, as the spirit moved him... and the column grew"¹¹

The constant growth and evolving character of the *Merzbau* are key elements of its construction and are the very reasons why its has become so difficult to describe, even by those who witnessed the work firsthand. Gwendolen Webster, perhaps the leading contemporary Schwitters scholar, points out that there is no standard version of the *Merzbau*'s history, and that any accounts that do exist are often so rife with inaccuracies and misconceptions that it that it would be next to impossible to write one. Having conducted extensive interviews Schwitters contemporaries and Schwitters's son Ernst, Webster has traced the true beginning of the *Merzbau* proper to sometime in 1923-24, claiming that any other accounts prior to 1923 describe other various columns and sculptures, unrelated structurally to the later *Merzbau*. She attributes much of the early confusion about the *Merzbau*'s early development to the fact that neither Schwitters

¹¹ Richter, *Art and Anti-art*, 152.

nor his wife, Helma, made any reference to the work publicly or in writing for about the first 7 years of its existence.¹²

Richter continues on his account of the work to write that three years after his initial visit, this time in 1928, the *Merzbau* was completely different in nature. The associative grottoes he had witnessed earlier could not be seen, having been entombed inside of the growing structure.¹³

(Fig. 4). Like Schwitters's life

experiences themselves, the structural and aesthetic elements of the *Merzbau* were never destroyed or removed after their incorporation, but encased within and built upon. By this standard, the sculpture could only ever continue to grow, it could not logically shrink.

Richter describes a column that, at that point in time "had, as it were, burst the room apart at the seams" to the point that the tenants upstairs at

Waldhausenstrasse 5 had to be evicted in order that Schwitters could expand the column upward.¹⁴ Webster disputes this account, calling it out as part of the *Merzbau* mythology. She acknowledges the spread of the *Merzbau* to other rooms over time, but discounts stories of

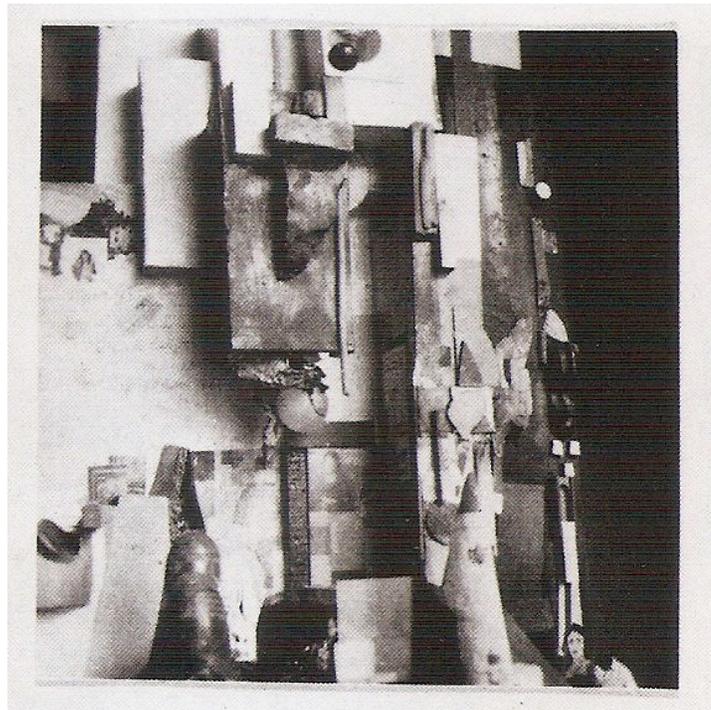


Fig 4. Hannover *Merzbau*, ca 1928

¹² Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 208-09, 212.

¹³ Richter, *Art and Anti-art*, 153.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

evictions and ceilings being torn out, finding no hard evidence in her research in support of such claims.¹⁵

Confusion and conflicting accounts of the *Merzbau*'s content, extents, and timeline were primarily the result of a visitor experience tightly controlled by the artist. Because the work was so biographical, so personal, it was not a work for a visitor to view so much as to be shown by the artist. The *Merzbau*'s location in his home and studio made viewership entirely reliant on one being given a guided tour by Schwitters himself, and as a result it is possible that no one, with the exception of Helma, ever saw the work in its entirety. Schwitters felt that very few people were capable of grasping the meaning of the work, and as a result gave tours to only a select few from his inner circle. In fact, Schwitters once wrote that only Hans Arp, Sigfried Giedion and Herwarth Walden could truly comprehend the *Merzbau*, a fact which Webster posits demonstrates that Schwitters "was sending out a message about how he wanted the *Merzbau* to be judged by posterity."¹⁶ She sees Schwitters as having named these three specifically for their focus on form in art over content. Although content was a crucial aspect of the development of the work, it seems that Schwitters hoped that future consideration of the work would judge it based on the form it would ultimately take. When Schwitters's friend Kate Steinitz once questioned him over whether the personal nature of the *Merzbau*'s grotto content, was not, in fact, the major defining characteristic of the work, Schwitters sought to deflect the focus onto the *Merzbau*'s form. He responded that "The caves are only minor matters. mere details. You will see. Finally the column will stand with ten other columns as gigantic forms in space."¹⁷

¹⁵ Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 209.

¹⁶ Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 222-23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

Schwitters's increasing concern with form over content likely explains the evolution of the *Merzbau* from Dadaist collage, to Constructivist / De Stijl architecture and the total environment. Karin Orchard attributes his association with the Constructivists and De Stijl artists as heavily influencing the transition of Schwitters's studio from a Merz demonstration space to a singular architectonic form and autonomous sculptural work.¹⁸ Initially interested in the interrelatedness of the separate Merz pictures and sculptural features in his studio, Schwitters explored their relationships by physical means, first by tying strings between works, then replacing the strings with wood, and ultimately plastering over the wooden structure.¹⁹ In this



Fig. 5 Constructivist form in the Hannover *Merzbau* ca. 1930

exercise, which apparently lasted for most of the later half of the 1920s, much, but not by any means all, of the the *Merzbau*'s autobiographical cataloguing was encased inside a more stark and angular interior. (Fig. 5) Influencing this evolution were Schwitters's associations with Russian constructivist El Lissitzky, who had translated his Proun style into a room-sized environment (his *Prounenraum*) for a 1923 Berlin exhibition, and De Stijl artist Theo Van Doesberg, who (with Cornelis van Eesteren and Gerrit Rietveld) was developing

¹⁸ Karin Orchard, "Spatial Growths," in *Kurt Schwitters: Merz - A total vision of the world*, eds. Annja Muller-Alsbach and Heinz Stahlhut (Bern: Benteli, 2004), 34.

¹⁹ Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 147-48

theories on a new union of art and life by means of architecture.²⁰ However, it is the very personal nature of the *Merzbau*'s content that prevented it from ever truly achieving the purity of De Stijl or Constructivism. "Schwitters's ambition to transform the 'literary content' in the Merz Building into 'pure form' is one he does not really manage," Orchard claims. "The mementos dominate too much for that."²¹

As Elderfield explains, De Stijl theories clarified a distinction between a personal and individual 'Art' that mirrored life, and an impersonal and social 'Style' that sought to transform life. "Art was individual media," he states. "Style was the *Gesamtkunstwerk*".²² For Schwitters though, claims Elderfield, this Art-Style polarity was unworkable. Schwitters believed in both the *gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, and in a personalized art. As a result, he could not distance himself far enough from content to achieve purity of form. Schwitters could not deny his earlier influences in either the work or in his own artistic evolution. The work, therefore, mirroring his life experiences, incorporated and built upon earlier forms. Where other artists associated themselves with new styles by exploring new, separate works to convey newly developed sets of artistic ideals, Schwitters never discarded or destroyed earlier elements of the *Merzbau*, rather building upon earlier experiences and influences by adding to its exterior.

Fearing for his life at the hands of the Nazi Party, Schwitters left Hannover for Norway in 1937, shortly after his inclusion in the *Entartete Kunst*, the Nazis' exhibition of degenerate art. Before leaving, he and Ernst photographed the *Merzbau* for the last time, as Schwitters would never return to his home or see the work again. Allied bombs damaged Waldhausenstrasse 5

²⁰ Ibid., 152.

²¹ Orchard, "Spatial Growths," 45.

²² Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 149.

beyond repair in 1943, and though Schwitters hoped to make an attempt at salvaging some of the work, with the funding of New York's Museum of Modern Art and the support of Alfred Barr, the funding never came to fruition, and the *Merzbau* was too heavily damaged to resurrect. In Norway, Schwitters began a second *Merzbau*, in an effort to continue developing his life's art work. However, in 1940 he was again forced to flee the Nazi's advance, this time to England. (The second *Merzbau* was later accidentally burned to the ground in 1951, and no photographic record of it remains.) In 1946, after stints in refugee internment camps in various locations in Britain, Schwitters began yet a third architectural Merz environment, this time a *Merz Barn* in Elterwater in the northern-English countryside, where he lived out his remaining days. His health failing by this point, Schwitters only ever completed one interior wall of the *Merz Barn*.

(Fig. 6) The work differed in character from his earlier Cubist-Expressionist forms, tending toward a more organic-Surrealist style, primarily sculpted in clay. Fortunately, this last snapshot of the final stage of Schwitters's life and art was rescued in the 1970s and is now preserved in a

Newcastle museum. Schwitters passed away in 1948 in Ambleside, England, having never returned to Hannover to the site of his masterpiece.

Now generally recognized as one of the pre-eminent environmental art works, the *Merzbau* began to

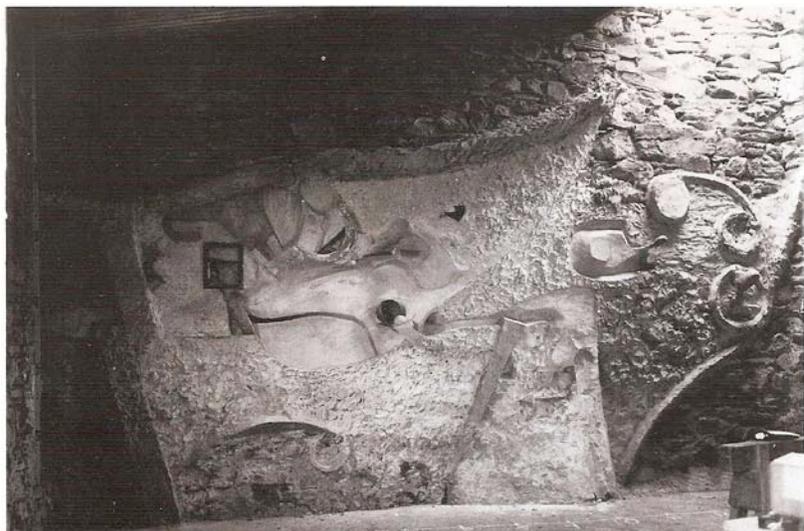


Fig. 6 Elterwater *Merz Barn*, 1947

achieve mythical status beginning largely in the late-1950s and into the 1960s. Ironically, though it had evolved far past the style of Dada trash by the time Schwitters was forced to abandon it, the very personal nature of the *Merzbau*'s earliest incarnation most heavily influenced the environments and Happenings staged by Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg and others in New York. "The path to Happenings and performance started with collage, it then led via Action Painting to assemblage and lastly to environments," states author Susanne Meyer-Büser. "...The resulting aesthetic focussed on urban waste and valueless materials, which the young artists then explored in their assemblages. ... The *Merzbau* and Kurt Schwitters's collages thus became models for junk art."²³ Likewise, the 1962 exhibition *Dylaby* is accepted as an evolution of the concept of spatial collage, featuring a series of walk-in environmental installations which Lucy Lippard, in her definitive 1966 work, *Pop Art*, first highlighted as "total of synaesthetic art recalling Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* construction."²⁴

Though the dynamism and inability to reach 'completed' states acts as a distinct point of commonality between the *Merzbau* and environmental works that followed it, notions of what constitutes 'public' and 'private' when discussing environmental art works and exhibit spaces gives us cause to reconsider the true intent of the *Merzbau*, particularly in regards to its exhibition. Schwitters's work can be immediately distinguished from both the New York Happenings and from the *Dylaby* exhibition by nature of its location in Schwitters's studio. There are varying opinions surrounding how the *Merzbau*'s location should affect our interpretation of the work. Ulrich Krempel writes of the *Merzbau* as being in the spirit of 19th-

²³ Susanne Meyer-Büser, "On Disappearing in Space: Walk-in collages from Schwitters to the present day," in *In the Beginning was Merz - From Kurt Schwitters to the Present Day*, eds. Susanne Meyer-Büser and Karin Orchard (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 276.

²⁴ According to Meyer Büser, "On Disappearing in Space," 277.

century bourgeois artists' studios: "public" in a sense and as much for the purpose of work as for the purpose of self-representation and self-promotion. However, he acknowledges that this assessment is potentially complicated by the introspective nature of the *Merzbau*'s content, as well as by the limited audience with which Schwitters shared it.²⁵ Meyer-Büser is less concerned with the *Merzbau*'s limited audience, choosing instead to focus on the viewer as an activating factor in the space. In essence, the audience may have been limited, but it was an audience nonetheless, and one over which Schwitters had complete control to reveal or conceal elements of the works as he wished.²⁶ Orchard tends to agree with Meyer-Büser's assessment, but expands the *Merzbau*'s significance even further, in 2004 viewing the work as a precursor "of activities of recent years such as mapping, LKW (*Lebenskunstwerk* [life artwork]), performative installation or social practice."²⁷ She writes that "the Merz buildings were not inanimate matter but living and enlightened architecture, an active space. ... the users of these spaces are an integral element of the concept of the Merz Building."²⁸ For Orchard, the *Merzbau* represents the coincidence of Dada trash and the artist's studio addressed by Krempel in 'the symbiosis of happening and work.'²⁹

It would seem that the components necessary for the *Merzbau* to succeed in exhibition as a 'total work of art' were: the actual structure and content of the work, the viewer to experience it, and Schwitters himself to reveal or conceal elements of the work as he judged them

²⁵ Ulrich Krempel, "'Atelier Merzbau' - The Merzbau in the tradition of artists' studios and the problem of its reconstruction," in *In the Beginning was Merz - From Kurt Schwitters to the Present Day*, eds. Susanne Meyer-Büser and Karin Orchard (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 261-62.

²⁶ Meyer-Büser, "On Disappearing in Space"

²⁷ Orchard, "Spatial Growths," 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

appropriate according to each individual viewer. Given the necessary interaction of the component factors in this particular work of environmental art, it seems appropriate at this point to briefly address some of the issues surrounding a modern-day, full-scale reconstruction of the *Merzbau*, housed in the Sprengel Museum in Schwitters's hometown of Hannover. In 1981,

Swiss stage designer Peter Bissegger was commissioned by curator and art historian Harald Szeemann to reconstruct the main room of the *Merzbau* for inclusion in a traveling exhibition titled *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*. (Fig.7) The work was eventually purchased by the Sprengel Museum and remains there today for visitors to walk through and experience.

According to Karin Orchard, in a paper for a Tate symposium on art replication, Bissegger worked from black and white photographs and the few drawings and plans of the *Merzbau* that survived at the time, consulting primarily with Schwitters's son Ernst, who had last seen the work over forty

years prior.³⁰ Complex geometric calculations allowed Bissegger to piece together dimensional information on the angular structure of much of the work, while lighting and color was based on



Fig. 7 Bissegger reproduction of the *Merzbau* Currently installed at the Sprengel Museum, Hannover. 1981-83

³⁰ Karin Orchard, "Kurt Schwitters: Reconstructions of the *Merzbau*," *Tate Papers*, 8 (Autumn 2007). <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/07autumn/orchard.htm>

Ernst's memory, and the content of the grottoes, unable to be reproduced, was replaced with enlargements of original photographs.

In the symposium article, Orchard voices some concerns over the Bissegger reproduction, primarily surrounding visitors' ability to discern which elements are reproductions and which, as in the case of the grotto photographs, are replacements for lost content. She is further concerned with the possibility that the work could be mistaken for either contemporary installation art or for the actual work of Schwitters himself.³¹ Though Orchard's concerns are valid, one has to assume that Bissegger and the Sprengel Museum have put forward their best efforts to communicate clearly their methods in reconstruction to potential viewers, and in doing so to clarify the nature of each of its component parts. It seems, though that several more pressing issues surround the true value of reproducing such a personal and dynamic work as the *Merzbau*.

Of first concern is the reproduction's omission of the *Merzbau*'s defining characteristics of constant change and evolution. "The *Merzbau* was a work in process and, if Schwitters had had his way, would never have been finished," states Meyer-Büser. "The perpetual reorganization and realignment of the materials meant that there was no final, fixed meaning."³² This sentiment is echoed by Krempel, who considers the Bissegger model, reconstructed from the 1973 photographs, a simplified still-frame glimpse of only the very final stage that Schwitters's work reached. Of additional concern is the absence of Schwitters's mountains of artifacts coating floors and surfaces. The *Merzbau* was not only the work-in-progress, but the studio workspace of a habitual collector, and absent is any evidence of his craft. What remains is the building shell of an artists studio, unusual for sure, but unoccupied nonetheless.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Meyer-Büser, "On Disappearing in Space," 276.

The final concern surrounding the value of the *Merzbau* reconstruction is the absence of Kurt Schwitters himself. Schwitters looked forward to the birth of the Merz composite work of art, of which all elements would be simply materials. In the *Merzbau* work, Schwitters had become material, as much docent as exhibit. Therefore, while a scale model of the *Merzbau* may give viewers an indication of the work's scale and parameters, without grottoes full of cigarette ends, dentures and locks of hair, without buttons, bus tickets and pram wheels littering the floor, without Schwitters himself giving the guided tour, without, as Schwitters wrote, "the totality of all imaginable materials," questions surface about the extent of its reconstructive value.

Further Reading

While I have attempted to provide a condensed, yet comprehensible overview of Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* in this essay, I freely admit that I have only scratched the surface of a topic worthy of volumes being written on the subject. John Elderfield's *Kurt Schwitters* contains extremely comprehensive descriptions of the *Merzbau* in its various forms, complete with extensive photographs and ample information about Schwitters's development of the Merz style. Gwendolen Webster's *Kurt Merz Schwitters* contains the most thorough contemporary scholarship and analysis of the artist's life and work, to date.

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