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**National College of Art and Design**

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**MERZ; KURT SCHWITTERS AND THE ART OF COLLAGE**

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## **CONTENTS**

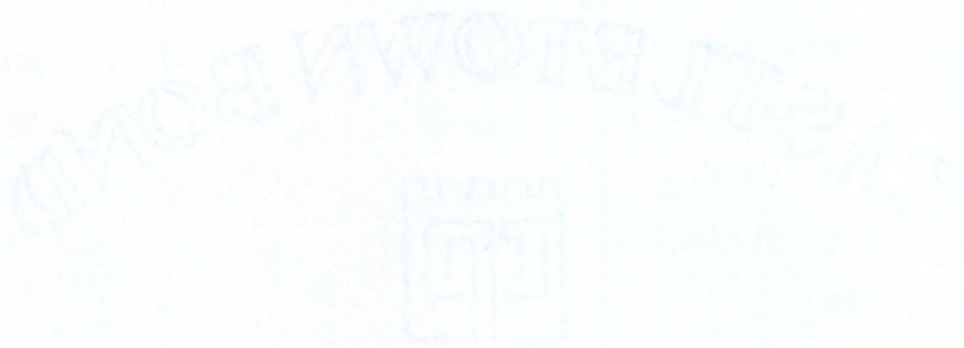
- 1. Introduction**
- 2. The Invention of Merz**
- 3. Merz; Commerce and Currency**
- 4. Merz Poetry; Crossing the Boundaries**
- 5. Architectural Construction and Collage**
- 6. Merz and the Fourth Dimension**
- 7. Merz and the Cathedral**
- 8. Conclusion**



## LIST OF PLATES

1. The Undpicture
2. Rossfett
3. Mz 387 Kaltensundheim
4. Hansi
5. Miss Blanche
6. Redpen for Lisker
7. Cigarren
8. Composed Picture Poem
9. Gedicht 25
10. The Critic
11. Die Scheuche (Scarecrow)
12. Mai
13. Oskar
14. Mz 134 1927
15. With Violet Velvet Mz 1926
16. Hanover Merzbau Gold Grotto
17. Hanover Merzbau Blue Window
18. Study for the Interior of the fourth Dimension -  
Max Weber
19. Interior of Hanover Merzbau
20. Haus Merz
21. Hanover Merzbau
22. Section of Merz Column
23. KdeE







## Introduction

Schwitters work as a whole has been described as a "panoramic collage", "a personalised collection of borrowing on the grandest scale , full of oddities and contradictions" (2, p. 238). Schwitters made wide ranging use of collage in all the different areas of his work.

Schwitters created his own brand of art "Merz" under which all the collage activity occurred. Merz can be considered as a unifying principle which could be applied to painting, typography, sculpture, poetry, performance and even architecture. An examination of Merz's multidisciplinary approach will demonstrate it's blurring of the boundaries between art forms which leads to the concept of a total artwork.

Collage can be considered not just as a medium but also as a method. The argument may be advanced that collage in it's constructive process is analogous to architecture. This will be viewed in relation to the collages and also in relation to the Merzbau. The Merzbau will also be looked at in relation to the idea of a total artwork and its' symbol the Cathedral. The Merzbau will also be examined as a purely plastic construction and it's relation to the idea of a fourth dimension.





Fig,1,The Und Picture contains a mixture of materials which includes a horseshoe ,a newspaper ,tickets ,nuts, bolts and nails .



## The Invention of Merz

" I felt freed and had to shout my jubilation to the world. Out of parsimony, I took whatever I found to do this because we were now a poor country, one can even shout out through refuse and this is what I did nailing and gluing it together. I called it Merz", (14, p. 32).

Merz became the guiding principle behind Schwitters' work. The main changes which it represented in his visual art were : an abandonment of the realistic representation of nature and the freedom to use any material which he saw fit. Most of the materials he used were not traditional art materials. He used anything he could find (see Fig. 1). Tickets, toys and rubbish were equally as valid as oil paint. In fact, although he continued to use oilpaint, the found materials began to assume more and more importance.

"In Merzpainting, the boxtop, the playing card, the newspaper clipping become surfaces; string, brushstroke and pencilstroke become line, wire netting becomes over painting, pasted on wax paper becomes varnish... " (14, p. 94).

Schwitters was not alone in his use of non traditional materials. The cubists had already made use of "real elements" in their collages and papier collées. The Dadaist Tristan Tzara spoke in 1918 (the year of the invention of Merz) of the new painter as a painter who rejected illusion and instead worked directly with the





Fig.2. Rossfett 1919 uses the rough texture of the materials to build up a painterly surface.



real materials of the world, wood stone and tin. This idea accepted so gladly by Schwitters prefigured the international constructivists and mirrored the experiments of Russians like Tatlin.

For Schwitters who had formerly painted expressionist pictures (which seem quite crude in comparison to his collages), Merz and it's process of collage represented an "advance on mere oil painting, for in addition to playing off colour against colour, line against line, form against form. I play off material against material.. wood against sackcloth" (14, p. 94). Schwitters used the formal and tactile qualities of the found materials to build up a rich "painterly" surface (Fig. 2). The use of "real materials" was the start of a new freedom for Schwitters. Collage set him free. As Werner Schmalenbach has pointed out, Schwitters although "artistic to the core" was "something other than a painter" (14, p. 89). Collage became for him a personal language, a means of expression which enabled him to broaden his artistic activity and to reach artistic heights, he might otherwise never have attained.

Merz was a rebirth, a new art form constructed from the refuse of a revolution. "Everything had broken down in any case and new things made out of fragments" (14, p. 96). Merz came to impose order into chaos to sweep clean the debris. Merz was an art form which was open and which could change with time, it could as an art form assume any identity, Merz was whatever Schwitters wanted it to be.



"The word Merz had no meaning when I formed it. Now it has the meaning which I gave it. The meaning of the concept Merz changes with the change in insight of those who continue to work with it" (10, p. 59).

Merz was a collage of ideas. Merz was collage pushed beyond the confines of being a medium. Merz was a collage method which could be used in any number of situations. The material necessary for Merz activity was infinite.

"I take any material whatsoever if the picture demands it" (10, p. 59).

Merz could use any means to reach its end; art. Schwitters stated that most important to him was the actual process, the forming: "Essential is only the forming" and "that the adjustment of elements (in painting) is the aim of art" (10, p. 59). Schwitters talked also of "evaluation"; elements were evaluated against each other and adjusted so as to fit into the composition. Collage elements were adjusted according to colour, form and material. He speaks of the way in which collage elements were transformed by their inclusion in the composition; "These things are inserted in the picture either as they are or else modified in accordance with what the picture requires. They lose their individual character by being evaluated against one another by being dematerialized they become material for the picture" (14, p. 94).

Schwitters spoke of ridding fragments of their "eigengift" (which



translates as *eigen*= own, *gift*= poison/essence). Schwitters wished to erase the personality poison, the particularity of a fragment and this was done by the fragment's inclusion in the overall design of the picture. This transformation or disassociation was reinforced by overpainting, overlapping, cutting, distorting and concealing. The idea of *eigengift* could relate to the associative power of a fragment but this seems unlikely. The collages do not work on a purely formal level, however much Schwitters may have wished for this. It would have been naive of him to imagine that he could ever eradicate the associative power of a fragment. His collages hovered somewhere between the associative and the formal.

Schwitters evaluation was based not only on the formal aspects of a material nor its' qualities but also on the associations and the manner in which they are played off against each other in the collages. His collages were not just formal but they were also associative as all qualities of the materials used in the collage were exploited.

"Merz takes all data into account this is its' meaning in theory as well as practice. Merz is as tolerant as possible with respect to its' material" (14, p. 94).

The *Eigengift* could simply have been the banality of the collage elements, which needed to be banished to make the ordinary seem more wondrous. This would need to be done so that the romantic and formal power was intensified by their interaction with other elements. Merz acted as a condenser, a focusser which



through the composition of the collage concentrated the visual, the verbal and the associative interactions of the collage elements. The composite nature of the collage integrated all data.

The process of evaluation will be looked at again in relation to Merz and commerce and also in relation to pictorial architecture.

It would be a mistake to think that Merz activity was a very slow calculated process. It was in fact an extremely intuitive and even a relatively rapid process. Merz painting aimed at "direct expression" by "shortening the interval from the intuition to the realisation of the work of art" (14, p. 94). It was a hands on process, the very items which inspired the intuition could be used in the picture, worked in directly, a piece of wire, a toy, all could be affixed directly to the canvas. Paper could literally be used to "paint" with in its creation of blocks of colour. The evaluation does not seem to have been a long drawn out process, but was based on intuition: on what the picture demanded. A friend of Schwitters described the creation of one of his collages:

"He spread flour and water over the paper, then moved and shuffled and manipulated his scraps of paper around in the paste, while the paper was still wet, with his fingertips he worked little pieces of crumpled paper into the wet surface.

In this way he used flour both as paper and paste" (2, p. 85).

This demonstrates the physicality of Collage but also explains the delicacy and subtlety of Schwitters' collages. The smaller works (some of which are no larger than a postcard) are extremely





Fig.3. Mz 387 Kaltensundheim ; a small delicate collage which uses only paper.



subtle and pure (Fig. 3). There is little if any use of paint and the composition always seems just right, to move any one piece or element would upset the stability.

Schwitters' approach was intuitive and free. It had a primitive character which was dadaist, he stated:

"Merz stands for freedom from all fetters for the sake of artistic creation. Freedom is not lack of restraint but the product of strict artistic discipline" (10, p. 59).

This may sound paradoxical but it highlights Schwitters commitment to intuition. This was the notion of intuition not as a passive or anti intellectual stance but rather intuition as an active way of thinking. Intuition demanded a certain amount of discipline it included and transcended logic and was developed through continuous involvement in the creation of art. It required the discipline to resist the temptation of too rigorous an approach at control which would hamper the creation of a genuine and primordial art. Schwitters believed in an art which was not under his direct control, he knew not the why, but only the how. This primitivity and idea of the artist as a medium was similar to the ideas of Arp. Schwitters was committed to a life of art constantly looking and collecting. Merz became more than an art form it became a way of life, so that Schwitters could write.

**MERZ=SCHWITTERS**



## Merz Commerce and Currency

The word Merz functioned like a brand name for Schwitters output. It differentiated him from others and it gave his overall production a unity. Merz had a close relationship with commerce. The word is derived from Kommerz (commerce) , in fact it is the tail end of this word. Merz traded not in gold but in its opposite, viz. rubbish. Merz traded in the waste products of commerce and so relied on it in a perverse sense for its existence and development.

Merz was a sub-commerce with its own index of value. Rubbish and its' evaluation were the key to its pictures. One could labour a point and say that Merz laundered the waste products of commerce, because after all Schwitters' rubbish is remarkably clean. John Elderfeld says that Schwitters used to actually wash pieces of rubbish before including them in his collages. "Objects taken from the world had to be purified before their inclusion in a work of art" (2, p. 237). This sanitisation process may explain the bleached or washed out impression evident in some of his collages.

Schwitters Collages were created partly for economic reasons his first Merz pictures were created out of "parsimony" because Germany after the war was in the throes of an economic crisis. Schwitters collages with their use of paper numbers and letters reflect a society obsessed with commerce where prices had become inflated and the ordinary trappings of life had achieved the status of luxuries. The collages could be investigated from a



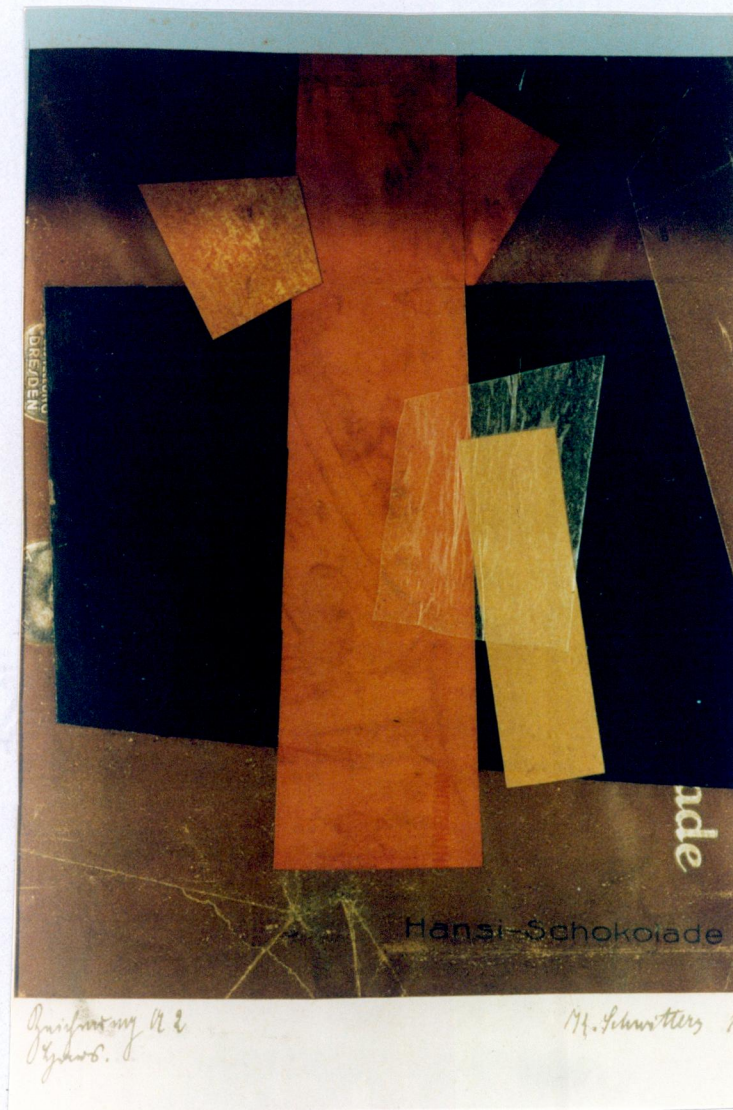


Fig.4. Hansi ; a homage to chocolate .



point of view which borders on the archaeological. In her essay Rethinking Kurt Schwitters; An Interpretation of Grünfleck (8). Annegret Nill looks closely at the material of Schwitters collages. She isolates elements which relate directly to the economic situation in Germany. She sees the use of fragments associated with such colonial goods as chocolate, coffee and tobacco as significant. These goods suddenly had an inflated value, because of the scarcity resulting from shipping blockades. The price of these commodities soared. As a consequence even the wrappers came to have a particular value for Schwitters; his sub-commerce (Merz) echoing the real Commerce.

Chocolate appears in a number of collages. The collage Zeichnung A2 Hansi (Fig. 4) refers to a brand of chocolate, Hansi which was reputedly Schwitters favourite chocolate. Fragments of the word chocolate appear in a number of collages. The German word for chocolate is Schokolade which appears in the Hansi collage. Fragments of this word appear as "ade" "Kolad" in a number of collages as do fragments of the word CaCao (Cocoa). These small distinctive fragments of the words would have been enough to evoke wistful sensations in people who had not been able to afford or acquire chocolate for a long time.







The collage Miss Blanche (Fig. 5) from 1923 refers almost exclusively to tobacco. Two small advertisements for cigars and cigarettes appear in this collage. Both names are exotic and romantic: Miss Blanche and the Caravellisfreres (brothers). There is a small picture of the Pyramids on the cigarette packet, with a flowing river and also the Sphinx. There are also what appear to be Dutch tickets. The collage is a warm sand colour with some white and a little blue. The collage refers to travel (the tickets) ,to wealth (Geld), to the exotic (Pyramids) to luxury ( fine, superfine) and to pleasure.

The cigarettes and chocolate are elements which refer to pleasurable activities. In other collages of this time there are also references to coffee and even Bier, see the beermat in Merzzeichnung 280 Redpen for Lisker (Fig. 6). The references to coffee are made by the inclusion of small paper doilies which are commonly put under coffee cups in german cafés. These references to coffee, tobacco and beer could refer to the cubists who in their still lifes of winebottles, newspapers and cigarette packets which related to french café society.

Tickets are a favourite material used to convey the notion of travel. Tickets are a permit to travel and travel would have interested Schwitters a lot after the ending of the war. The blockades on the ports meant that travel would have been something on everyones minds and his inclusion of tickets in his work could have represented the expression of a common wanderlust. For a time after the war, travel was confined to the







immediate environs, because of the poor state of the trains, people could not move about as much as before. Streetcar tickets are very common in his work and could have been chosen for their dimensions, but also for the idea of urban travel.

According to Steinitz, Schwitters travelled everywhere by bicycle, the tickets could represent the journeys of his imagination, unreal and never really embarked upon. Schwitters wrote:

" By traffic with the world we become that which we could become as attentive inhabitants of the world more and more related to the world" (2, p. 137).

Travel could have been used as a visual metaphor in his collages for he believed that:

"Every form is the frozen instantaneous picture of a process. Thus a work of art is a stopping place on the road to becoming" (2, p. 137).

So the whole art process could be viewed as a journey. A journey on the road of becoming each picture was just another stop (representing a freeze frame view of a continual and evolving process).

Schwitters collages were directly inspired by urban life, even the angular structure reflects architectural composition. These were works taken from the flux as frozen instantaneous pictures of a process. These fragments were preserved or fixed in the aspic of



glue. Glue was the vital conserving fluid( having the properties of a mordant or fixative). Hans Richter described what glue meant to Kurt Schwitters:

"What nectar and ambrosia were to greek Gods, glue was to Kurt Schwitters" (14, p. 90).

The collages of Schwitters are fragments of the real world taken and compressed into the form of a collage.

"They were even at the moment of their creation records of an expedition in urban archaeology" (2, p.92).

### **Merz Poetry Crossing the Boundaries**

Schwitters, like the cubists used words in his painting. Cubists were interested in words mainly as a means of playing off the visual against the verbal and the real against the artificial. For the cubists collage involved placing real fragments into an artificial environment (the painting) and playing around with the idea of artifice and trompe l'oeil. For them collage was a form of visual punning. Schwitters interest in words went deeper than that of the cubists, his was a more poetic use of words. He was interested in words for their associations, for their power to evoke sensation, memory and imagination.

Schwitters wrote poems under the influence of the expressionist poet, Stramm, where words were used for their emotive power. The expressionists were obsessed with strong sensations,



Cigarren  
 Ci  
 garr  
 ren  
 Ce  
 i  
 ge  
 a  
 err  
 err  
 e  
 en  
 Ce  
 Cel  
 CelGe  
 CelGeA  
 CelGeAErr  
 CelGeAErrErr  
 CelGeAErrErr  
 CelGeAErrErr  
 ErrEEn  
 EEn  
 En  
 Ce  
 i  
 ge  
 a  
 err  
 err  
 e  
 en  
 Ci  
 garr  
 ren

Cigarren (Der letzte Vers wird gesungen). [The last line is sung]<sup>2</sup>

Fig.7. Cigarren; a picture poem using the visualization of language



with passion, anger, love. In these poems, short lines were used containing sometimes two, three, or even just a single word. The words are spliced together in a disjointed way, a typical example can be seen in the poem Greenchild of 1918.

"Blood

Fear

Chase

Fly

Scream

Blood grins yellow bright yellow "

The juxtaposition of the words creates a staccato rhythm which is a precursor to Schwitters later more obviously or pronounced collaged writings. The later writing uses similarly expressionist themes but is interspersed with what Schwitters describes as "banalities". These banalities because of their mundane nature serve to deflate the drama. These banalities were taken from a number of different sources, they consist of pieces of unrelated text which are interspersed with the narrative. The text was lifted wholesale from overheard conversations, cheap novels, manuals, street signs, newspapers and collaged into the poem. These word collages aimed neither at harmony nor stability (unlike Schwitters other works) but rather at disruption. They were written in the spirit of Dada.

Schwitters poem "The Onion" makes ample use of these banalities. It tells the bizarre story of a man's self organised butchery and his involuntary reassembly.



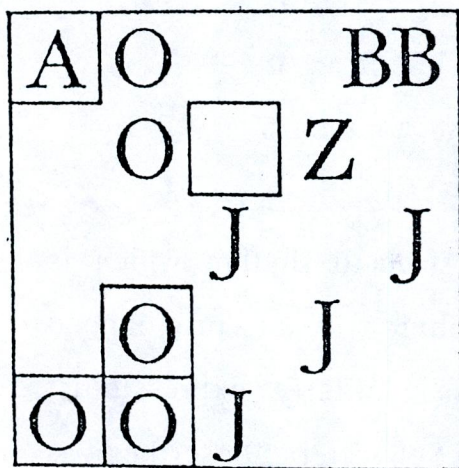


Fig.8. Composed Picture Poem

## Gedicht 25 [elementar]

25  
 25, 25, 26  
 26, 26, 27  
 27, 27, 28  
 28, 28, 29  
 31, 33, 35, 37, 39  
 42, 44, 46, 48, 52  
 53  
 9, 9, 9  
 54  
 8, 8, 8  
 55  
 7, 7, 7  
 56  
 6, 6, 6  
 56

Fig.9. Gedicht 25



"The fragments of my skull flew together; I was  
so to speak back in one piece again (sweet moment)  
You aint et your fritters and the pickles is too  
greasy. The theatre as a matter of fact exists  
solely for humans who in fact are inhuman  
Delivery on receipt of payment, the book is richly  
illustrated. It was an odd sensation being alive again"

The tale of butchery and reassembly is similar to the Merz process where fragments are ripped apart and reassembled as a new whole. The collage method could be used for literature as well as visual art. In fact Schwitters used poetry as a means of crossing the boundaries between art forms.

Schwitters began to construct poems according to word sound and form. He developed an interest in the visualisation of words. He transformed text into an optical formation so that it became similar to drawing. In his poem Cigarren (Fig. 7) the words are arranged so that they look like a long swirling column of smoke. The whole poem plays around with the word Cigarren (cigars), the word Cigarren is dissected and the components rearranged and repeated. It is a picture poem which balances pictorial values against sound values and diffused literal meanings. It is a weighing of words; an "evaluation".

Schwitters constructed some poems which are concerned with the purely abstract presentation of words, the structure and the arrangement of the words is more important than their meaning.







Words are used for their purely plastic values. In Composed picture poem (Fig. 8) Schwitters evaluates "the letters" A, B, J, O, Z. He uses the same process of evaluation as he does in his painting. This poem is a demonstration of the sign not its' meaning, hence Schwitters use of letters which have no real meaning on their own. In Gedicht 25 (Fig. 9) he uses only numbers. This is Schwitters poetry at its most abstract.

Schwitters concentration (or almost obsession) on pure form, on signs meant that the poems may be seen as merely interesting exercises. But they function as part of a journey they were "the frozen instantaneous picture of a process" (2, p. 137). They were on their way to something else, they were a developmental stage in the metamorphosis of word into picture.

Schwitters also attempted to transform his pictures into visual poetry. He used words for their form, their concreteness in his Rubber Stamp drawings, amply illustrated in The Critic (Fig. 10). These rubberstamp drawings represent a form of concrete poetry and the same can also be said of some of his typography e.g. Die Scheuche (the scarecrow), (Fig. 11), which combines illustration and type. Schwitters was attempting to eliminate the distinction between literary and visual arrangement. The integration of words into his collages transformed them into a form of visual poetry. the visualisation of the languages is the central principle. The collage Mai (Fig. 12) is made up entirely of words with only muted colours. This is a collage which is drawn with words.

The titles of some of Schwitters collages have a poetic quality and





Fig.12.Mai.



Fig.13.Oscar.



a romantic power. Many of them use words which evoke pleasant ,even mystical sensations. The Cherry Picture, The Red Heart Church, The Heart Goes From Sugar To Coffee, HerzKlee (Heartclover), The Stars Picture, Radiating World, Rossfett, The Springdoor, Construction for Noble Ladies. Some of these titles are almost poetry in themselves. Some of them are similar to the titles of expressionist pictures, they reflect a romanticism. His use of hearts, churches, stars is reminiscent of the type of motif used in german folk culture. Other pictures have more ordinary minimal titles but even something as simple as just plain Oscar (Fig. 13) has a type of poetry. Titles of the works were often taken from a single word which was prominent in the collage.

Schwitters saw the picture poems and the poetic pictures as a means of bringing the art forms into a closer dialogue so that they could eventually be joined together to achieve his ultimate goal the total art work.

“My aim is the total artwork ... I have pasted together poems from words and sentences so as to produce a rhythmic design, I have on the other hand pasted up pictures and drawings so that sentences could be read in them. I did this so as to efface the boundaries between the arts” (10, p. 62).

### Architectural Construction and Collage

"Everywhere one hears of constructing pictures, an architectural idea lies behind this expression which must not be taken simply as a metaphor but which corresponds to architectural thinking in



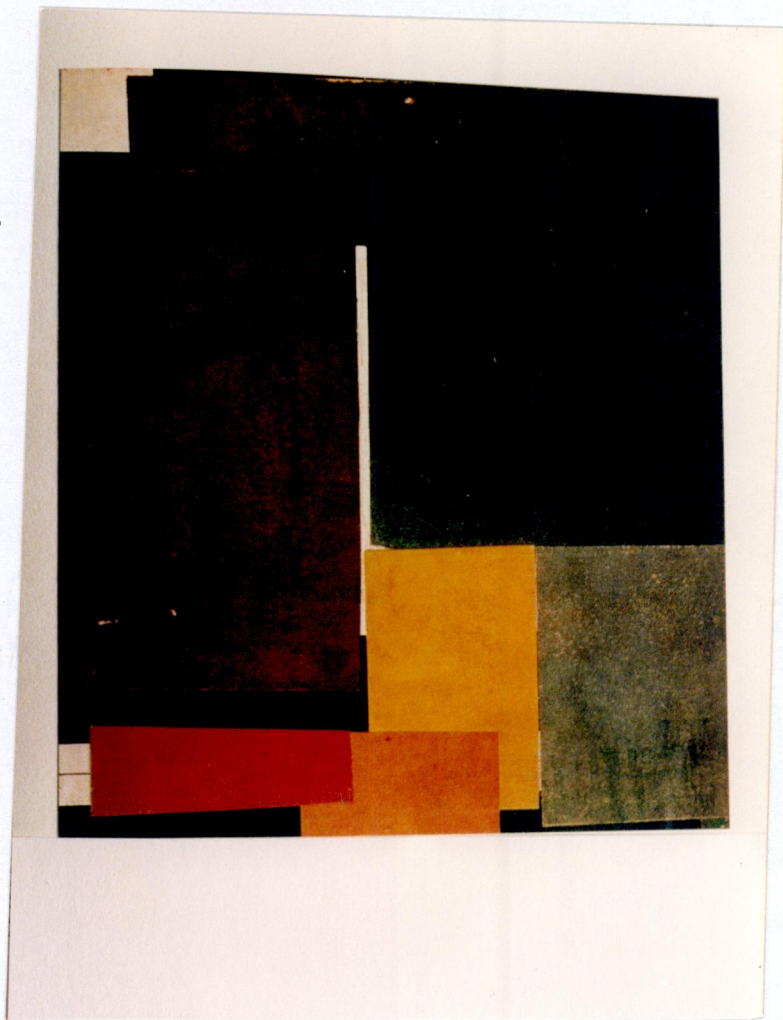


Fig.14. Mz-134 1927; a picture constructed block by block.



the simple sense of the word. A secret architecture goes through all these works and holds them together" (4, p. 97).

The idea of pictorial construction can be linked to Cezanné and his famous statement about

"interpreting nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone" (12, p. 17).

Cezanné's pictures have a solidity which is architectural in its conception. This solidity stems from a process of careful, almost architectural construction. He uses flat facets of colour to build up a picture surface, which works as a whole, but which is constructed from fragments. Cezannés use of flat facets of colour in an architectural way could be compared to one of Schwitters collages. Cezanné like Schwitters used planes of colour as fragments which work together towards a unified composition.

The overall integration of the picture was the most important aspect. This was also Schwitters concern particularly in his more abstract collages. Cezannés pictures were built literally block by block and this led to their concentration, their density, which is also true of Schwitters collages (Fig. 14). Cezannés justification for this method of construction was that it "was a good method of construction" (12, p. 19). Herbert Read states that "Cezanné discovered that solidity or monumentality in painting depends just as much on such patient masonry as on the generalised Architectural conception" (12, p. 19).



Cezanné spoke about modulation whereas Schwitter spoke of evaluation. Modulation was the "adjustment of a material (in this case paint) to a certain pitch or intensity" (12, p. 16). It was a forming or tuning which is echoed by Schwitters "adjustment of elements (in painting) is the aim of art" (10, p. 59). Modulation was a means of reconciling the disparate elements of a motif into a picture of overall unity and stability. It was a freezing of movement, it was aiming at something beyond the particular, a timeless monumentality. Schwitters in his collages was trying to reconcile the disparate. Collage elements were by their very nature disparate. They might have nothing in common but by being juxtaposed one against the other the fragments begin to work together. Collage was a transforming process which for Schwitters aimed to get beyond the particular to a level of the almost primal or archetypal. Collage with its process of transformation could be seen as mirroring cycles of regeneration and of life and death.

Cezanné too, wished to get beyond the particular to penetrate beneath the surface to a consistent and eternal reality which also implied a primal or archetypal structure. When Schwitters spoke of ridding collage material of its eigengift (individual poison or essence) he was speaking of the particularity which needed to be subsumed so that the collage material could enter into the overall composition of the picture. The collage elements by being included in the collage lose their particularity, they become an element. The elements still have associative symbolic power but this power now works in conjunction with other collage elements. Thus the collage is an associative symbolic and and formal expression



which can be three or even four dimensional in its workings.

“What the material signified before its use in the work of art is a matter of indifference, so long as it is properly evaluated and given artistic meaning in the work of art” (14, p. 94).

The evaluation is all important and the evaluation must take "all data" into account.

De Stijls Towards Collective Building, Commentary on Manifesto V states that one of the basic laws of the Modern Constructor is that “he brings to light not the relationship between things themselves but the relationship between their qualities” (11, p.67.). This again reinforces the ideas of artistic evaluation. Schwitters was in close contact with De Stijl and its leader Van Doesburg. During the twenties he espoused their ideas concerning an international style, but their commitment to a universal impersonal style proved unworkable for Schwitters, who could not deny himself the pleasure of a personal art.

Collage is in its very method a constructive additive process. It is architectural in that like a building it is made up of particles, it is a composite. It is built piece by piece out of real materials. It is an architecture built in the spirit of the bricoleur, it confirms that one does not need wondrous materials to create a thing of beauty. The spirit of collage is confirmed in a treatise on Gothic Architecture by a frenchman quoted in Goethes article on Strasbourg Cathedral:



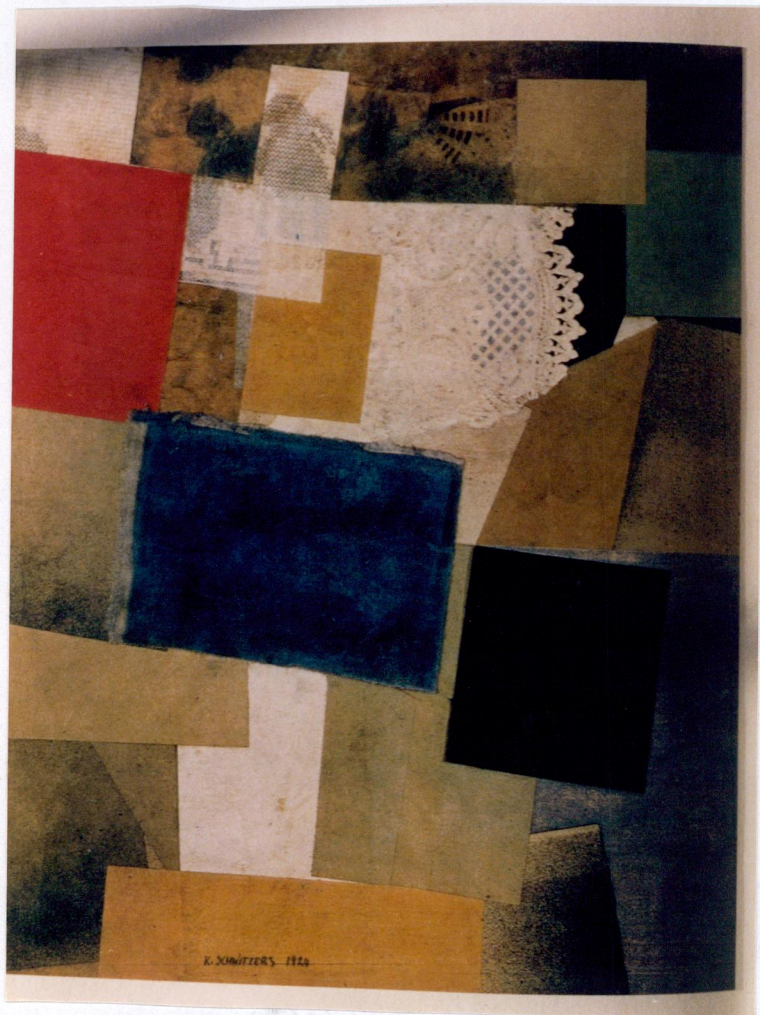


Fig15. With Violet Velvet Mz 1926



Fig.16. Section of the Hanover Merzbau  
The Blue Window

These small photographs of sections of the Hanover show how closely linked it was to the composition of the collages.

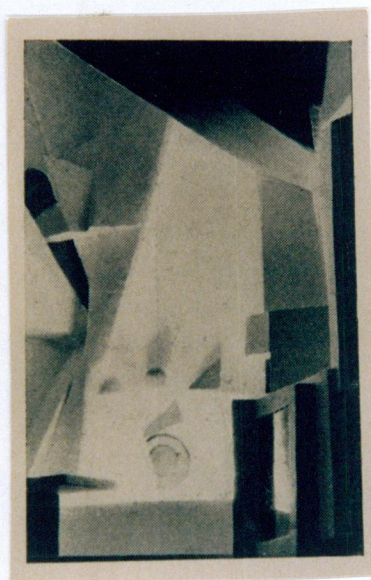


Fig.17. Section of Hanover Merzbau  
The Gold Grotto



"I maintain that beauty which derives from measure and proportion has no need of precious materials ... but rather shines out and is manifest among the confusion and disorderliness of both these materials and their treatment " (5, p. 118).

Schwitters own "Cathedral" the Merzbau was begun in the spirit of evaluation as a process of ordering. According to Schwitter's son Ernst, Schwitters became interested in the inter-relationships of the pictures and sculptures in his studio.

"His pictures would decorate the walls, his sculptures standing along the walls. As anybody who has ever hung pictures knows an inter relation between the pictures results. Kurt Schwitters with his particular interest in the interaction of the components of his works quite naturally reacted to this. He started by tying strings to emphasise this interaction. Eventually they became wires, then were replaced with wooden structures which in turn were joined with plaster of Paris. This structure grew and grew" (2, p. 148)

Merzbau was the making solid of the relationship between the pictures, sculptures and later still found objects. The Merzbau was not just a casual accumulation, there was a definite system to its construction. It was constructed in accordance with imaginary lines and interconnecting planes which Schwitter drew in the air using string and later wood and plaster.

The Merzbau was constructed in a similar way to his collages. The structure of the Merzbau as seen in the photos (Fig. 16, 17) of



sections of it are similar to the collages but on a larger scale, but whereas the collages were resolved and finished, this was impossible with the Merzbau. The Merzbau consisted of multiple compositions in space. Because of its size and three dimensionality it was in a process of constant change. The Merzbau took Schwitters concern with the actual process of forming to an extreme "Essential is only the forming." It was in a process of continuous evaluation and evolution, parts were being continuously covered over hidden and concealed." "In this process things which are entirely or partly obsolete remain as proof that they have lost their value as independent elements of the composition" (2, p. 154).

The Merzbau was directly related to and influenced by Schwitters life. The Merzbau changed stylistically from what we can gather quite a lot. Merz was after all a flexible concept which could change. The Merzbau had a diaristic and autobiographical nature, it was more than just sculpture:

"It was a living changing document on Schwitters life and friends" (2, p. 152).

The Merzbau was like a storehouse, a lumber room, a cabinet of curiosities a three dimensional scrapbook. It housed many things from the bizarre to the banal. Schwitters was not above stealing things to put in it . One anecdote relates how when Sophie Tauber came to stay he robbed her brassier and put it in merzbau. Hans Richter describes how each part of the Merzbau had a meaning:



"Especially the concavities besides one for his wife and another for his son, there were grottoes dedicated to Mondrian, Arp, Gabo, Van Doesberg, Lissitsky, Malevich, Mies, Van der Rohe, Richter and Werner Graf. He cut off a bit of my hair and put it inside the Richter grotto" (14, p. 133).

Schwitters would have had close contact with most of these people and so would have been influenced by them. Mondrian for his spirituality, Arp for his primitivity and his concept of the primordial, Gabo for his constructivism. Van Doesberg and Schwitters did a joint performance tour in Holland which according to Schwitters was a great success.

The Merzbau was a collage not just of objects but also a collage of styles. These styles were chosen, stolen, borrowed evaluated and later even rejected in the same way as other Merz elements.

" Then a day comes when I realise I have a corpse on my hands - relics of a movement in art that is now passé . So what happens is I leave them alone only I cover them up either wholly or partly... making clear they are being downgraded" (14, p. 130).

The structure of the Merzbau was an unusual hybrid, "a bizarre offshoot of the cathedral of the future" (2, p.115) which was inspired by constructivism and yet was filled with the guts of its antithesis Dada. It was a truly time based piece of work from its



dadaist expressionist beginnings, it became at one stage severely geometrical but then later mellowed and became more organic in its old age softening with the march of time.





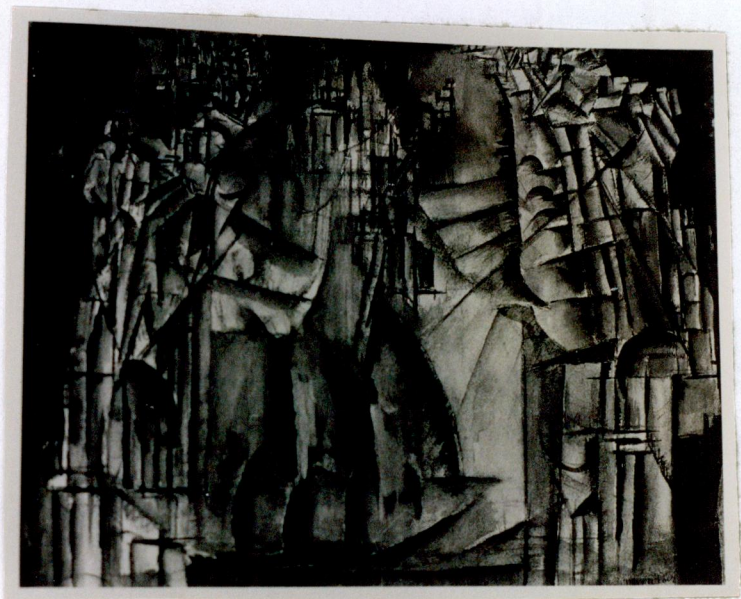


Fig.18.Study for the Interior of the Fourth Dimension.Max Weber



## Merz and the Fourth Dimension

The structure of the Merzbau is reminiscent of Rayonist pictures. Rayonism was a synthesis of Cubism, Futurism, and Orphism. Lavionov stated that their style was "concerned with spatial forms which are obtained through the crossing of reflected rays from various objects and forms which are singled out by the artist" (6, p. 138). Rayonism was confined to painting but its interest in spatial forms and the idea of imaginary rays emanating from objects may have influenced Schwitters in his construction of the Merzbau. In 1936 he wrote to Alfred Barr hoping to persuade him to commission a new Merzbau in America. He described his proposal as an abstract cubist sculpture which people could enter. He described how:

"From all directions and movements of the constructed surface there emerge imaginary planes which act as directions and movements in space and which intersect each other in empty space" (2, p. 156).

This concept reminiscent of the Rayonists was able to include the interaction of people, people were to be a part of the composition.

This was to be an entirely constructed space. This idea could be looked at in conjunction with Max Weber's idea that a fourth or "ideal dimension could be created entirely through plastic means." Max Weber's drawing (Fig. 18) of a study for the interior of the fourth dimension is reminiscent of the structure of the Merzbau



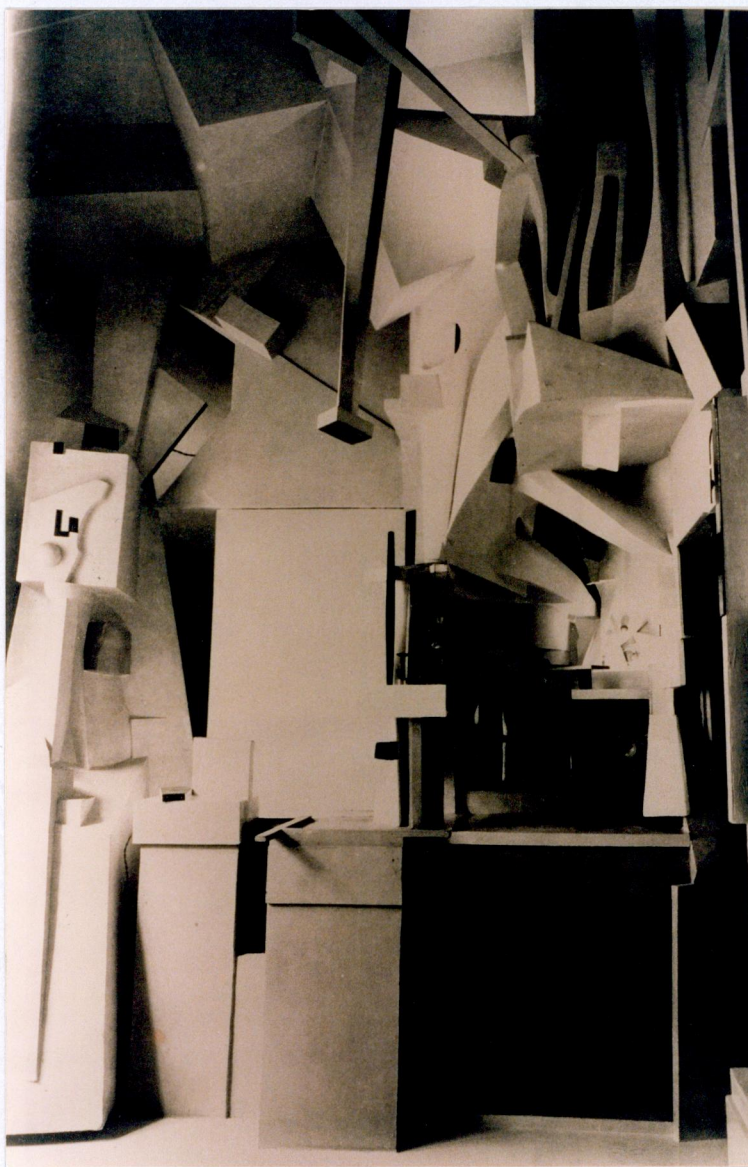


Fig.19. Interior of Hanover Merzbau.



(Fig. 19). Weber's visual treatment of the fourth dimension differs from others in that it is more cubistic. Weber believed that the fourth dimension was palpable, that it could be felt in and around objects.

"The fourth dimension is real and can be felt. It exists outside and in the presence of objects and is the space that envelops a tree, a tower, a mountain or any solid; or the interval between objects or volumes of matter, if receptively beheld it arouses imagination and stirs emotion" (16, p. 224).

Perception of the fourth dimension involved an empathy with the objects of the real world a projection of the self into matter. Many of the theosophists believed that perception of the fourth dimension involved the union of self with matter.

"It is not merely that the object is seen by the eye or touched by the hand, but it is felt at the same instant from within as part of the ego and this seeing and touching awake an infinite response a reverberation through all the chambers of being" (16, p. 224).

The idea of the identification of self with objects has significance for the art of collage and assemblage as a whole and in particular for the Merzbau. In the Merzbau objects which related directly to Schwitter's daily life (as a scavenger and collector) were included in the Merzbau almost as emblems of himself. These objects were "Merzed", possessed and changed, so that they became almost an extension of Schwitter's ego.



Weber saw even thought as matter, he saw architectural constructions as the realization of dreams through concrete means.

"Dreams realized through plastic means are the pyramids and temples, ... Cathedrals and decorations ... these dreams are all of matter in space both in one and inseparable" (16, p. 221).

There was a strong element of fantasy in the Merzbau. It was similar to a dream in its form but also in its function. It acted as a release for repressed urges, which was similar to a dream. The macabre aspect of the Merzbau will be discussed in connection with Expressionism in the next chapter.

The fourth dimension has also been looked at in relation to time, and the Merzbau was a continuously evolving structure. More importantly the Fourth Dimension has been related to the idea of infinity. Ouspensky believed that one of the first steps towards the consciousness involved the sensation of infinity. After the infinite was apprehended there would be an "impression of utter and never-ending illogicality ..." a constant and continuous dissolution of everything" (16, p.220).

In the realm of the fourth dimension there was neither left nor right up nor down and objects could be viewed from all sides at once. The attraction of such a theory to the dadaists was obvious. It was also attractive to the cubists with their pictures which attempted to convey objects in the round as multi-faceted and multi-planar.







The Merzbau defied gravity, forms were suspended in the air, up looked like it could just as easily have been down (Fig. 19). The Merzbau was the making solid of a multi-faceted approach; it was a cubistic composition in the round. The Merzbau was a composite of multiple compositions (Fig. 16, 17). The fact that the overall composition contained smaller compositions (Merzpictures, assemblages and small environments) heightened the sense of the infinite. The Merzbau was a composition which because of its scale could never be resolved, it was to be constantly reconstructed.

A lot was written about the fourth dimension and there were differing interpretations all of which were united by a deep spirituality. The fourth dimension was more a frame of mind than a strict doctrine. For Mondrian it represented infinity and universalism. For Malevich, use of white was significant. White is not only pure, it is the absence of colour, the void, the infinite. The Merzbau was mainly white with coloured cabinets, collages, grottos and a blue window suspended in the solid white space.



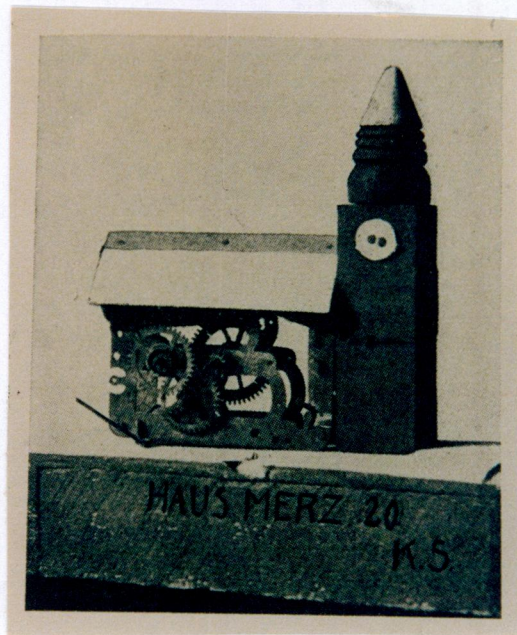


Fig.20. Haus Merz  
an architectural model.



## Merz and the Cathedral

In Germany the cathedral had strong symbolic significance. For a romantic artist like Friedrich it was a symbol of spiritual transcendence, of the sublime. For Goethe the gothic Cathedral came to represent something essentially "germanic", a source of national pride, he renamed gothic architecture, german architecture and wrote a number of articles on "german architecture". For German expressionist architects of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst the cathedral became a symbol of the total art work, a unity of the arts in the "creative conception of the Cathedral of the future". It became a symbol of a future utopia and an imagined idealised past.

Schwitters would most certainly have been aware of these ideas. The Cathedral appears in his early expressionist paintings, as a motif in small drawings and more importantly in a number of small sculptures, some of which he described as architectural models, an example can be seen in (Fig. 20). The Haus Merz looks like a dadaist sculpture yet it is described as an architectural model. Schwitters described it as his first piece of Merz architecture and quoted with approval in an article in Merz what his friend Spengemann had to say about it.

"In Merzhaus, I see the Cathedral not as a church, no this is art as a truly spiritual expression that raises us up to the unthinkable absolute art. This Cathedral cannot be used, its interior is so filled with wheels there is no room for



people..that is an absolute architecture, it has an artistic meaning and no other" (10, p. 62).

The idea of a truly spiritual architecture could have been a response to ideas which had been current in expressionist architectural ideas. Taut pleaded that :

"even architecture can free itself from utilitarian aims" (4, p. 92). Spengemanns extract on Merzhaus also reads suspiciously like a parody of the type of manifesto used by members of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst where architecture is described as:

"the expression of religious feeling as aiming beyond the earthly,toward some indefinable goal" (4. p.92).

The problem with citing Schwitters and in this case citing him citing Spengemann is that it is difficult to know how seriously he actually meant what he said.Yet Schwitters was committed to a spiritual art and it was his emphasis on "art" which led to his rejection by the Berlin dadaists and Huelsenbecks description of him as the Caspar David Friedrich of the dadaist revolution.

The Merzbau was the Merzhaus on a larger scale. It was a piece of improvisatory irrational architecture which could be seen as the literal enactment of Gropius plea to creative people to:

"smash the frames of salon art " and to "go into the buildings, bless them with fairy tales of colour, chisel ideas into bare walls and build in imagination unconcerned about



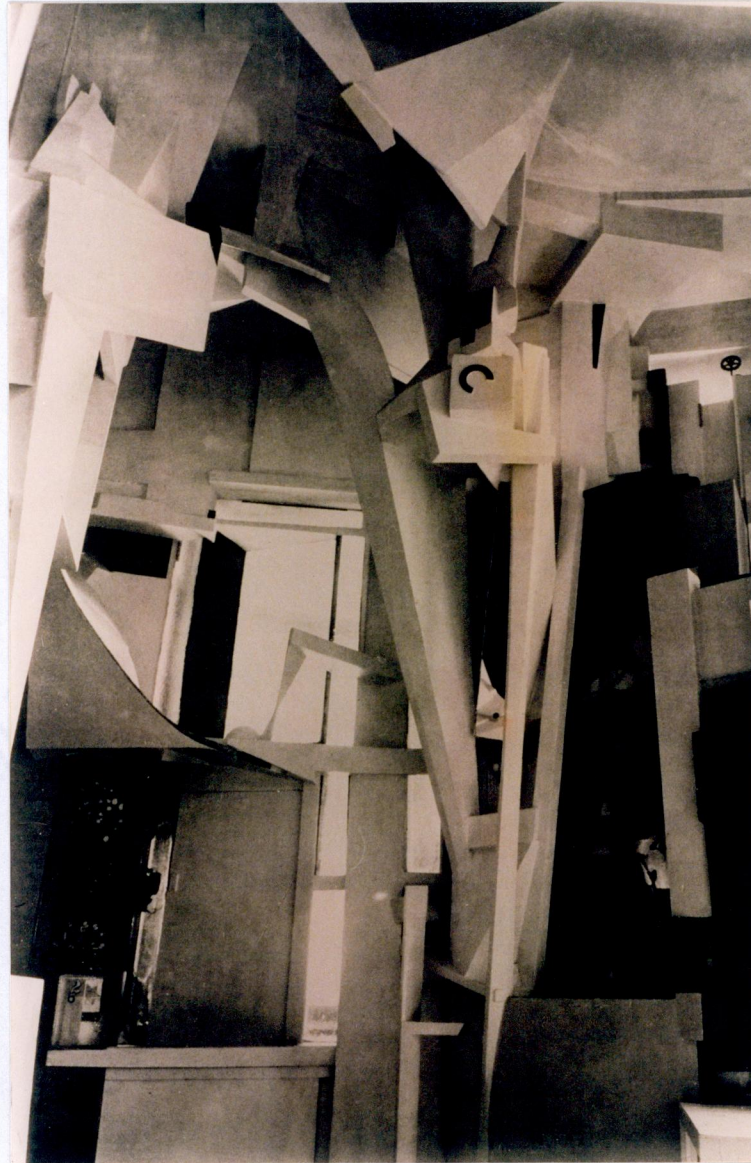


Fig.21 Hanover Merzbau ;The Blue Window .  
The central structure is reminiscent of a cubified  
gothic vault .



technical difficulties" (1, p. 46).

The Merzbau had no real architectural function in the normal sense, it was not a social architecture but what differentiated it from sculpture ?. Appollinaire believed:

"that a structure becomes architecture and not sculpture when its elements no longer have their justification in Nature" (12, p. 98).

The Merzbau was inspired by nature and Schwitters declared that it imitated nature in its growth process. It was an art form which was more internally related to nature than an imitation could possibly be. Its elements may have been influenced by nature but formally it was not an imitation of nature. It lay somewhere in the realm between sculpture and architecture but was probably closest to architecture.

The structure of the Merzbau could be seen as echoing the crystalline structures of the Cathedrals of the future which appeared in the exhibition of unknown architects. It differed from these however in that it was an interior architecture, it resembled an inversion of these cathedrals. It was as though the crystal structure had been turned in on itself.

The Merzbau built on the expressionist concern with a spiritual architecture but pushed it to an extreme where it became





Fig.22.A section of the Merz Column.



obsessive and almost unhealthy. It was an introverted "Cathedral of the future" which had a very macabre aspect.

One of the starting points of the Merzbau a column is called KdeE (Kathedrale des Erotischen Elends = Cathedral of Erotic Misery) but Schwitters claimed that the name had nothing to do with the content.

"The name KdE is merely a designation, it touches the content not at all... The overall impression is reminiscent of... say gothic architecture (not a bit)" (14, p. 104).

The fact that the Gothic Cathedral<sup>is</sup> mentioned at all confers some significance on it. The names given to some of the grottoes in the Merzbau such as The Big Love Grotto, The Cave of Murderers, The Cave of Heroes, The Sexcrime Cavern read almost like a parody of the idealist names which were planned for some of the Cathedrals of the Future such as "Towers of Joy" and "Pantheons of Humanity".

Here is Schwitters description of The Big Love Grotto:

"Two children greet us and step into life, owing to damage only parts of a mother and child remain. Shiny and broken objects set the mood. In the middle a couple is embracing, he has no head; she has no arms: between his legs he is holding a huge blank cartridge: The big twisted around child's head with syphilitic eyes is warning the embracing couple to be careful. This is disturbing but there is



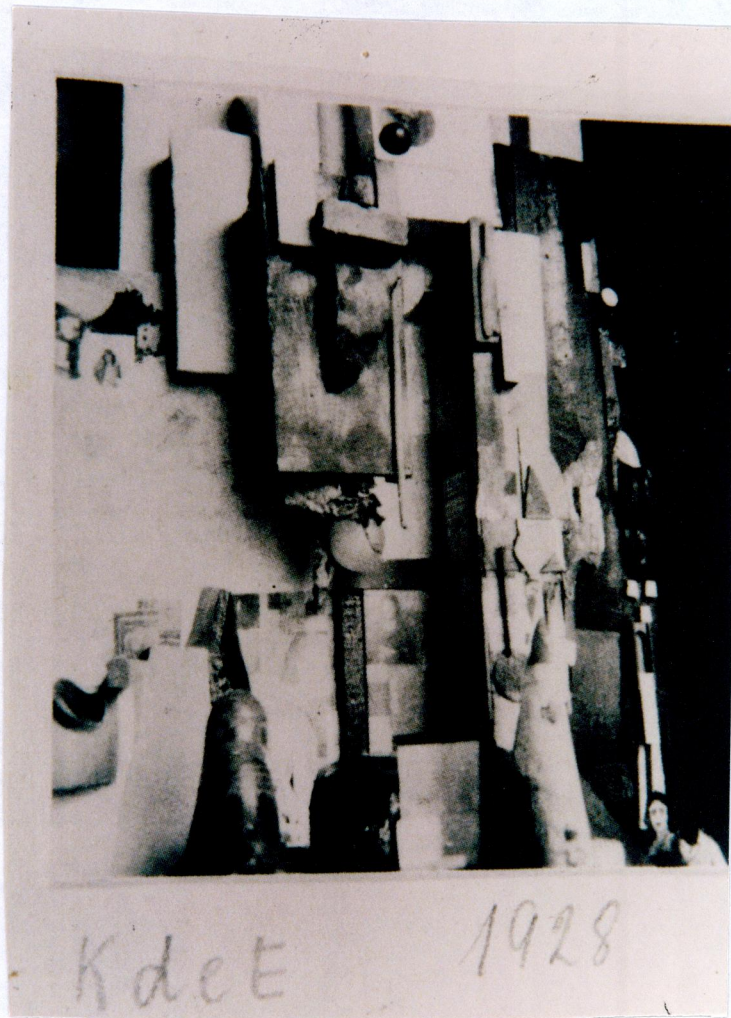


Fig.23. KdeE:

This picture shows the quite miniature contents of  
the Merzbau .



reassurance in the little bottle of my own urine in which immortelles are suspended" (2, p. 159).

The portentous mood of his tableau is reminiscent of a medieval danse macabre. This element of the grotesque comes close to the idea of gothic grotesque which manifested itself in expressionist films such as the Cabinet of Dr Caligari. Whereas the expressionist architects looked to the medieval period as a golden age of harmony, the expressionist filmmakers concentrated on "gothic" sense of grotesque. Expressionist films with their concentration on violence, madmen and sex and with their jagged and distorted sets are echoed in the Merzbau.

According to Schwitters the literary content of the Merzbau was dadaist but it also appears to have a close affinity to expressionism. The narrative is larger than life and one imagines the scale of the whole tableau to be similar, but the protagonists of that particular narrative were probably quite small in scale. The Big Love Grotto was part of the KdeE column which appears quite indistinctly in a photograph (Fig. 23). The Big Love Grotto took a quarter of the base of the column but even from the indistinct photographs one can see that by and large the contents are quite miniature and hardly seem to fit in the huge horrible narrative. Perhaps Schwitters was merely trying to be provocative or else his constant evaluation and concentration on formal values meant that he repressed the more revolting side of his nature and that he released it through his writing and into the Merzbau.



The term KdeE while referring to one particular column has also been used to refer to the Merzbau as a whole. In 1930 Schwitters described KdeE as everything which was important or unimportant in my life during the last seven years. .. an evolution into pure form (2, p. 115). Does this mean that even the bizarre, the grotesque and the banal can be transformed into pure form and cleansed in the process. Kate Steinitz says that:

"The Cathedral harboured much more than his erotic misery which perhaps was rather complicated, but not as tragic as the struggle for pure form which finally conquered the chaos of the darkest erotic caves the entanglements of historical caves and the complexities of the caves of friendship" (15, p.92 ).

The Merzbau may have had a therapeutic and restorative effect, art was for Schwitters a means of escape a means of ordering the complexity of experience, art was "a spiritual function of man which aimed at freeing him from lifes' chaos." The inner darkness of the Merzbau was whited over and masked so that it became hidden deep within.

The content of the Merzbau was not all grotesque. It housed many things, it was like a series of shrines, some of the things were encased in glass behind secret panels which could be opened or closed. There was a part of the Merzbau dedicated to Michelangelo, shrines to Schwitters friends and even a special part of the Merzbau built in collaboration with Moholy Nagy housed



Schwitters guinea pigs. The latter was called the White Palace and was according to Kate Steinitz the only part of the Merzbau which was still habitable. The Merzbau also had a literary content it referred to Goethes' *Die Niebelungen*, it had a caricature by the german folk writer Wilhelm Busch, it even had a Luther cave which was later covered over.

The Merzbau was the closest Schwitters came to the romantic ideal of a Gesamtkunstwerk (total art work). In the Merzbau he attempted to combine the various literary and formal strands of his art in one structure. It was architectural in its conception, it connected art and life and encompassed his struggle for pure form, and a unity of sculpture painting and architecture.



## Conclusion

Schwitters was consistent in his use of the collage method. It was a method which typified the concept Merz. Merz was extremely important as a means of unifying Schwitters varied work. Merz used the collage method not just in a formal way but also conceptually - various art movements and ideas were treated in the same way as collage material. They were taken and transformed for Schwitters own use. He was committed to a dada primitivity which relinquished the idea of absolute control in the art process. Instead he stressed the primacy of form and a belief of higher order in the chaos. He stressed intuition not as passive but rather as active. He believed that art did not have to refer to anything outside itself, but if it did, that was just part of the data that had to be evaluated. Evaluation was central to his conception of art.

His aim was the total artwork, an idea espoused by the Romantics, the Expressionists, the Bauhäusler and the Constructivists. Merzbau was his ultimate total artwork, an art which despite its architectural conception remained a very personal work. The concept of Merz comes close to the idea of total artwork, Merz blurred the boundaries between the artforms and encompassed a number of artforms under one word.

Schwitters had a love of nature which linked him to the german Romantics, while creating completely abstract works, he continued to paint from nature which was paradoxical for a committed







modernist. He remained close to Romanticism and its successor Expressionism in his use of evocative materials and the subject matter of poems and pictures. He was an old fashioned modernist who never gave himself over to dreams of an idealistic future. Merz was an artform which even in its innovation looked to the immediate past.



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