Performative Autobiography as Design Attitude:
The Merz-World of Kurt Schwitters

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ABSTRACT

At the end of the First World War, middle class bourgeois Kurt Schwitters retreated into his studio in Hanover to literally nail together the ruins of a world that had fallen to pieces. In doing so, he produced one of the most controversial works of the early 20th century artistic avant-garde, the Merzbau. In my thesis, I argue that in the construction of the Merzbau, Schwitters put forth a novel design attitude, which I coin "performative autobiography," and whose workings, I aspire to activate, by revisiting his activity from a present-centric perspective and with a designer's onlook. I examine Merz as a design attitude of world-creation, according to which the designer transforms personal disposition into the order of the work, which I believe presents affinities with image and affect based modes of operation within what cultural theorist Gregory Ulmer coins "electracy" to describe the technological, ideological and institutional apparatus of the contemporary epoch. I argue that Merz prefigured currently emerging modes of being, thinking, and creating, and presents potential for thinking about and engaging in design praxis in a world saturated with recording and communication technologies. Also, I suggest the artistic technique of assemblage as launched by Dada and recast by Schwitters, as a productive descriptive framework for discussing being and making sense of the world of digital recording and communication technologies. The implications of these two associations that I make refer broadly to the questions of *who* designs and *what*. I argue that assemblage as practiced by Schwitters expanded these questions to include potentially everyone as a designer and reality as a design project. Merz transcended the atemporal and impersonal aesthetics of combination and suggested a procedural attitude of creating by including the onlooker as an active agent in the signification of the whole. We can all be designers, Schwitters implicitly suggested, assembling fragments of a world that is constantly being recorded and turned into bits, not as fixed elementary units but as products of a subjective segmentation, into new material or immaterial realities. In this spirit, I set out to retell the story of the Merzbau in terms of Schwitters' account for the whole world with the vision to provide an intellectual scaffolding that will enable contemporary designers to invent new worlds, by directing, augmenting and putting to work their own "performative autobiographies."

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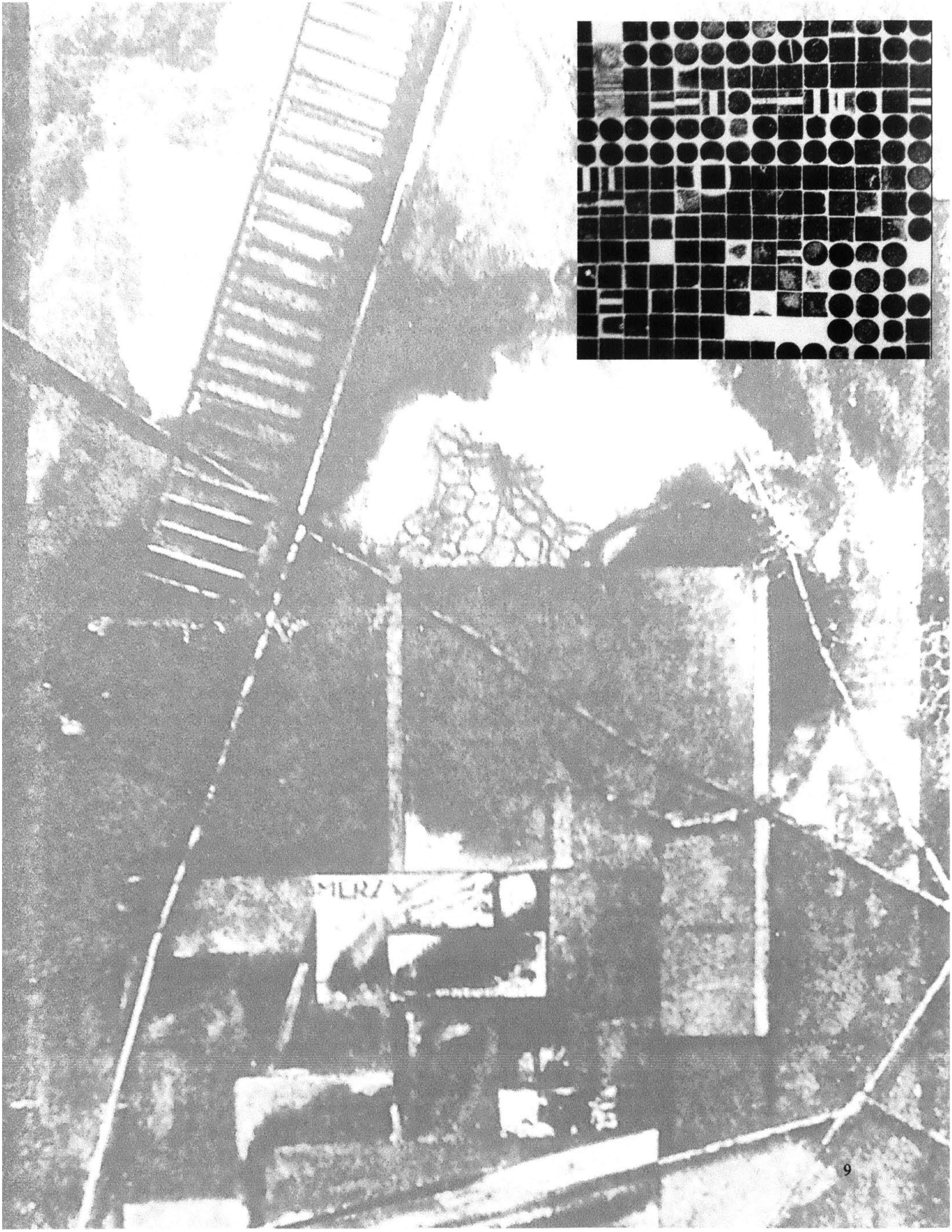
MERZ

1. Introduction

1.1. Who/What: Kurt Schwitters and the Hanover Merzbau

> I am sure that Schwitters didn't see in advance what he was going to do. It developed step by step. It was a sequence, and is a pity that it couldn't be recorded as a sequence. Architecture is this way. Science is also that way, and so on. And now another factor comes in: the process is emotional. It is not rational. We rationalize art. This might give a completely different approach to architectural objects as well. There is no final state, it is a long, ongoing process. In this ongoing process, everybody is participating, not only the architect.
>
> — Yona Friedman, 2005[1]

In 1981, art historian Werner Schmalenbach, an authority on Kurt Schwitters' life and oeuvre, proclaimed: "Duchamp and Schwitters, both these two ceased working before 1950, the first voluntarily, the second cut off by death; but without them the history of art since 1950 could not be written the same."[2] However, Schmalenbach added, when Schwitters died in England, in his sixty-first year, "the event went virtually unnoticed."[3]

Born a middle-class bourgeois in Hanover in 1887, Schwitters died poor and in exile, a "MERZ"-artist, in 1948. Even though today he is regarded as one of the "quintessential figures"[4] of the Interwar European avant-garde, during his life, his work was not equally praised, understood or accepted. Neither was he. Schwitters however, seemed to be aware both of the elusive nature of his personality and of the significant implications of his philosophy and work to the thought and practice of the next generations of artists and thinkers. "No, I am no fool, nor am I timid," he wrote in 1931, "I know full well that the time will come for me and all other important personalities of the abstract movement, when we will all influence an entire generation. However, I fear I shall not experience this in my lifetime."[5]

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[1] Friedman, Yona, "Merz World: Processing the Complicated Order." In *Merz World: Processing the Complicated Order*, edited by Adrian Notz and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. (Zurich: Jrp Ringier Kunstverlag Ag, 2007), 105.

[2] Schmalenbach, Werner. "Kurt Schwitters." In *Kurt Schwitters in Exile: The Late Work, 1937-1948 = Kurt Schwitters Im Exil: Das Spätwerk, 1937-1948.* (London: Marlborough Fine Art, 1981), 7.

[3] Schmalenbach also wrote: "When Kurt Schwitters died, an exile in England, at the beginning of 1948, not many in Europe took note of the fact. Few realized that a great artist had died in him, and there was no memorial exhibition in Hanover or anywhere else in the world." Ibid.

[4] In "The Sorrows of Kurt Schwitters," the founding editor of *The New Criterion* Hilton Kramer wrote: "Schwitters was, of course, one of the quintessential figures in the avant-garde which flourished in Europe in the period between the two world wars." The article was written with regard to the 1985 "Kurt Schwitters" exhibition, organized by John Elderfield, and shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from June 10 to October 1, at the Tate Gallery in London from November 6, 1985 to January 5, 1986, and then at the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, West Germany from February 4 to April 19, 1986. According to Kramer, the exhibition was "something of a landmark in the history of Schwitters' reputation." Kramer, Hilton. "The Sorrows of Kurt Schwitters." *The New Criterion*, 4 (October 1985), 1.

The first monographic exhibition devoted to Schwitters' work was held in Hanover, his native city, eight years after his death.[6] Soon, the neo-avant-garde of the fifties would discover the personification of the dadaist spirit in a man who had been excluded from the Berlin Dada group.[7] The neo-Dadaist trends that prevailed in America looked back at *MERZ*, Schwitters' personal philosophy of art and life, to discover that an artist who during his lifetime had been regarded as little more than an eccentric figure, in fact had already addressed many of the critical questions that concerned the art of their time: the immersion in the accidental and the relational, the cult of the found object, the search for order within total chaos. In the neo-Constructivist tendencies of the sixties, Schwitters' ideas on destruction and construction were also retrospectively acknowledged. In 1985, John Elderfield's retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York included over two hundred items of Schwitters' work.[8]

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[5] Schwitters, Kurt. "I and my purpose". *Merz*, no.21, 1931. Cited in Gunda Luyken. "Schwitters and America," in *Kurt Schwitters, I Is Style,* edited by Kurt Schwitters and Rudi Fuchs (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2000), 55.

[6] Schmalenbach recounts that the first great exhibition of Schwitters' world was held at Hanover in spring 1956 by the Kestner-Gesellschaft and repeated at the museums of Amsterdam, Brussels and Berne. Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 8.

[7] Schwitters' nuanced relationship with the Club Dada in Berlin will be further discussed in section 4.3. Community (Anti-bourgeoisie): Rejection from the Interwar Avant-Gardes, See pages 63-72.

[8] In his review of the 1985 exhibition, Kramer wrote: "Although the exhibition, which numbered well over two hundred items, was rather too large, I think, for the size of Schwitters's achievement, it had the great virtue of giving us a definitive account of that achievement for the first time." Kramer, *The Sorrows of Kurt Schwitters*, 1.

A misunderstood figure in the history of modern art, Schwitters seemed to attract misunderstandings. He was a middle-class bourgeois, whose appearance, according to Schmalenbach, utterly contradicted his style of life.[9] Unlike the other young avant-garde artists of his time, Schwitters never disavowed his middle-class origins. On the contrary, he tried hard to prove that he lived conventionally: he looked, dressed, and spoke like a bourgeois.[10] His friend and collaborator German-American artist and art historian Käte Steinitz recounted that in his attempt to stick to the conventional order of living, Schwitters clang to the Hanoverian dialect by deliberately adopting the idiomatic expressions of his region.[11] But because his "dada nature,"[1] as Tristan Tzara called it, made it impossible for him to live like a common man, he often had to fake conventional life. A staged photograph of him and his wife, Helma, around 1920, dressed like the bourgeoisie, sitting around the dining room table in his residence in Hanover, reading the newspaper, tells the tale of Schwitter's desire to look like a proper bourgeois.[13]

In defending his origins, Schwitters became the enemy of the dadaist avant-garde of his time that directed its revolt against the bourgeois mentality. An inherently paradoxical personality, Schwitters could speak perfectly all the languages of the artistic "-isms" of his time, yet was never accepted as an official member of any of them. A creative "genius"[14] carrying what

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[9] Schmalenbach, Werner. *Kurt Schwitters*. (n.p.: Köln, DuMont Schauberg, 1967), 13.

[10] Ibid., 12.

[11] Steinitz, Käte Traumann. *Kurt Schwitters, a Portrait from Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 17-18. Cited in Schmalenbach, *Kurt* Schwitters, 14.

[12] Tzara, Tristan "Kurt Schwitters 1887-1948." In Schwitters, *I is Style*, 147.

[13] The picture of Kurt and Helma Schwitters, taken circa 1920 is included in Schmalenbach's monograph. Schmalenbach, 33.

[14] In *Dada and Existentialism*, written in 1958, poet-leader of Club Dada Richard Huelsenbeck called Schwitters "a genius in a frock coat." Cited in Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 63.

Nicholas Wadley called "a devastating 'atomic' energy, hidden in the body of a 'little' man,"[1] Schwitters lived on the edge of convention and provocation. He was the *enfant terrible* of the city, of the local bourgeoisie, of the political avant-garde of his time. An *enfant terrible* by nature. An artistic rebel who struggled but failed to live like a common man, because "he simply did not have one conventional bone in his body."[16]

Schwitters was closely associated with Dada, but he did not subscribe to the dadaist spirit of negation and nihilism. With his work he aspired to produce a constructive mechanism of world-creation that would allow a new reality to emerge out of the debris of the collapsed world. This constructive mechanism was *MERZ*. Kurt Schwitters was, felt and lived *Merz*: a non-translatable word fragment that gave name to his personal and artistic revolution. The second syllable of the word "Kommerz," taken from an advertisement of the "Kommerz und Privatbank,"[17] *Merz* became Schwitters' one-word logic.[18] After his death, his son Ernst, wrote "a few ill-chosen words"[19] about him, in which he encouraged the unfamiliar reader, to "please read on to where Kurt Schwitters explains Merz,"[20] as no one could explain it better than he did. In

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[15] Nicholas Wadley "The late work of Kurt Schwitters." In Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 63.

[16] Steinitz, *A Portrait from a Life*, 17. Cited in Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, 13.

[17] In 1927, Schwitters wrote that Merz "originated from the Merzbild [Merzpicture], a picture in which the word MERZ, cut-out and glued-on from an advertisement for the KOMMERZ- UND PRIVATBANK [Commercial and Private Bank], could be read in between abstract forms. The word MERZ had become a part of the picture by being attuned with the other parts, so it had to stay there. You will understand that I called a picture with the word MERZ the MERZbild in the same way that I called a picture with "und" [and] the und-bild and a picture with the word "Arbeiter" [worker] the Arbeiterbild. When I first exhibited these pasted and nailed pictures at the Sturm [gallery] in Berlin, I searched for a generic term for this new kind of picture, because I could not define them with older concepts like Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism or whatever. So I named all my pictures as a species MERZbilder after the most characteristic one. Later I expanded the title Merz, first to include my poetry, which I had written since 1917, and finally to all my relevant activities. Now I call myself MERZ." John Elderfield. *Kurt Schwitters*. New York (NY: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 12.

[18] Merz accompanied all of Schwitters' activities. According to Dietmar Elger, "he produced Merz pictures, Merz drawings, Merz sculptures/assemlages, Merz poetry, and eventually Merz Architecture, utopian in character." "The Merzbau and Expressionist Architecture" in Adrian Notz, *Merz World*, 18.

[19] Ernst Schwitters. "A few ill-chosen words," in Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 17.

[20] Ibid.

the "Merz Painting" manifesto, written in 1919, Schwitters explained what Merz *was*: an intrinsically consistent art, entirely logical in its own terms. Schwitters was able to spot and extract with unparalleled mastery individual, often banal or trivial elements from a non-artistic context, and subject them to a process of disassociation through which they lost their individual character, their original use and meaning, and became *Merz*: material elements of equal value that could be used for artistic purposes.[21]

Merz corresponded at the same time, to a philosophical premise, a technical artistic principle, and a personal manner of working. At the end of the First World War, Schwitters resigned from his job as a mechanical draftsman, and retreated into his studio in Hanover to literally nail together the ruins of a world that had fallen to pieces. In the name of a restorative process that transformed chaos into a plan of creative action, Schwitters regarded all imaginable materials as elements of equal aesthetic value that could be used, as he said, for the construction of new worlds out of the ruins. The ultimate outcome of this generative method that abolished aesthetic inhibitions was the legendary Merzbau: a perplexing construction that grew unabated out of ordered refuse inside a perfectly conventional setting. The so-called "Pantheon of Dada"[2] grew inside what "could hardly have been more bourgeois,"[23] Schwitters' family home at Waldhausenstrasse 5.

In this thesis, I will argue that this enterprise, on the one hand prefigured currently emerging modes of being, thinking, and creating. On the other hand, I will discuss the potential it presents for thinking about and engaging in design praxis in a world saturated with recording and communication technologies. I argue that in the construction of his Merz-world, Kurt Schwitters put forth a novel design attitude, which I coin "performative autobiography," and whose workings, I aspire to activate, by revisiting his activity with a designer's onlook.

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[21] Schwitters, Kurt. "Merz Painting." In Schwitters, *I is Style*, 91.

[22] In "The Reception of the Merzbau," Gwedolen Webster refers to an article from 1960 in which the Merzbau was characterized as the "Pantheon of Dada," but without citing it. In most probability, she refers to Ferdinand Stuttmann's "Der Merzbau, Pantheon des Dadaismus," Vernissage, Sept. 1960. In Greek, Pantheon (Πάνθεον) means "consecrated to all gods." As it will be described later in the thesis, Schwitters constructed caves in which he collected findings and offerings that belonged to specific individuals. Many dadaist "gods" were honored with a personalized cave in the Merzbau. Gwendolen Webster, "The Reception of the Merzbau." Paper presented at the "Kurt Schwitters and the Avant-Garde" Symposium at the Sprengel Museum, Hanover, June 29 - July 1, 2007.

[23] Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, 13.

MERZ =
KURT SCHWITTERS

1.2. When/How: The Heuretical Perspective

On May 2005, the first of a series of "Symposium Merzbau" was held at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, setting itself the task of investigating the legacy of Schwitters' Merzbau in contemporary architecture, art, and society. Adrian Notz, curator and editor of the publication that accompanied the symposium, talked about "the snapshot of a research that has only just began."[24]

I aim for this thesis to participate in the contemporary discourse on Schwitters, inaugurated by Notz and Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2005, a discourse that does not discuss the Merzbau from the perspective of art history, but in terms of a "metaphor and module" for contemporary artistic, architectural, and social practices, as "a trigger" for dealing with contemporary complexity.[25] In this spirit, I suggest the Merzbau as a proposition to be emulated, rather than iterated in contemporary design practices, and raise Schwitters to the "image of thought" of an unprecedented design practice the creative potential of which, I argue, can be channeled into the present moment as a tutor for being, thinking, and creating in a world saturated with electronic media.

Schwitters is typically studied within the framework of the nihilistic Dadaist avant-garde.[26] Thus, at a broader level, this thesis is situated within, or rather next to the highly controversial, and at times inherently paradoxical, historico-theoretical rhetorics surrounding the so-called early 20th century "historical avant-garde."[27] However, in my thesis I will adopt a present-centric perspective that looks at the particularity of Merz, Schwitters' individuated path within the art of his time, in relation to certain modes of being, thinking, and creating that cultural theorist Gregory L. Ulmer discusses as prevalent in the digital era.

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[24] Adrian Notz, *Merz-World*, 6.

[25] Ibid., 5.

In my thesis, I address Merz from a broader cultural perspective of a shift in the base apparatus of thought. I inquire into alignments between Schwitters' Merz-activities and the technological, institutional, and ideological apparatus of the contemporary epoch, that Ulmer coins "electracy."[28] For Ulmer, electracy started with the Industrial Revolution and is in formation ever since. The world in electracy is no longer something to be understood and represented, but something that is being constantly manipulated and redesigned.

Without claiming that Schwitters consciously pursued the invention of electrate metaphysics, and by that I mean the validating framework of a specific conception of reality, I point to the evident desire of dadaist artists and specifically Schwitters, to equip themselves with new modes of operation that seem to prefigure certain traits that prevail or at least are applicable to electrate modes of thought and action, such as the use of the existing world as a workspace, a laboratory for constructing realities. My goal is to trace associations between assemblage as practiced by Dada and appropriated and modified by Schwitters and current ways of viewing the world, attempting to inform present practices by giving them historical depth. Within this framework in mind, I inquire into the Merzbau, the ultimate logical consequence of Schwitters' Merz approach to his life and art: an incomprehensible structure in a state of constant evolution.

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[26] Encyclopedia Britannica defines Dada as a "nihilistic movement in the arts that flourished primarily in Zürich, Switzerland; New York City; Berlin, Cologne, and Hannover, Germany; and Paris in the early 20th century." In "Dada and Surrealism." C.W.E. Bigsby argues that Dada is difficult to categorize because of the diverse personalities it accommodated. "There can be few movements, which lend themselves less to solemn exegesis. A movement which includes the nihilistic Walter Serner, the effervescent Tristan Tzara and the sober intelligence of Hugo Ball is difficult to categorize. Most of the Dadaists were young men united in a temporary alliance against the past but all were working their own way towards a personal response to art and a world in which personal maturity seemed to coincide with universal dissolution." Hans Richter, member of Dada, wrote that Dada was not an artistic movement, as it had no unified formal characteristics. Richter described Dada as "a new artistic ethic" from which "new means of expression emerged, according to the temperament of the individual Dadaist." Citations: 1]. The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Dada (art Movement)." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Accessed April 26, 2014. 2]. Bigsby, C. W. E. *Dada & Surrealism.* (London: Methuen Distributed in the U.S.A. by Barnes and Noble, 1972.), 3. 3]. Richter, Hans. *Dada: Art and Anti-art.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 9.

[27] In his Foreword of Peter Burger's "Theory of the Avant-Garde," entitled "Theory of Modernism Vs. Theory of the Avant-Garde," Jochen Schulte-Sasse underlines the "historical uniqueness of the avant-garde of the 1920's (Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, the left avant-garde in Russia and Germany.)" Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the avant-garde / Peter Bürger ; translation from the German by Michael Shaw ; foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse.* (n.p.: Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, c1984., 1984.), x.

[28] Ulmer, Gregory L. *Teletheory.* (New York: Atropos, 2004). Originally published in 1989 (New York: Routledge, 1989).

In this context, I will synthesize the written histories of Schwitters from a heuretical perspective, as opposed to a hermeneutical one. The difference is that heuretics, as introduced by Ulmer, orchestrates encounters between present ways of thinking and their early prefigurations. From this perspective the study of history becomes a generative device for the invention of new works, instead of an attitude that seeks to validate assumptions about the past.[29] The adoption of a heuretic-al approach is oriented towards *poetics* rather than interpretation, inventing rather than proving. For this reason, the "heuretic,"[30] inverts the historiographical modes of classification and proposes an alternative operation of logos: a theory of method.

My vision is to extract suggestive elements from the history of the Merzbau's production and reception, in order to discuss Schwitters' immersion in its synthetic production in terms of a design attitude which I coin as "performative autobiography" and which captures, in the case of Schwitters, a personal mechanism of dealing with chaos and destruction by embracing it programmatically.

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[29] Ulmer, Gregory L. *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994)

[30] Ulmer defines the heretic as the "one who practices heuREtics."
"Heuretics. Inventing Electracy." Last modified February 14, 2014, http://heuretics.wordpress.com

2. Perspective: Discussing the Singular in its Own Terms

2.1. Historiographical Interpretations

In 1933, Wilhelm Redemann, house photographer of the Hanover Landesmuseum, captured an instance of the Waldhausenstrasse atelier. Schwitters' ever-evolving dream had at the time already taken the form of a huge stalactite-like structure connecting the spatial elements that initially stood autonomously inside the artist's studio. Ten years later, the Merzbau was completely destroyed by Allied bombing raids over Hannover.[31] The only remnants of Schwitters' Cathedral are Redemann's photographs and some vague floors plans of the flat. There also exists a photograph that appeared in the journal *Abstraction-Création*, taken by Hans Arp in 1932, and a number of snapshots taken by the artist's son, Ernst, during the development of the Merzbau.[32]

Charting the growth of the Merzbau with any certainty seems an implausible endeavor. Among the many reasons are: the absence of any material remnants of the original substance of the work, Schwitters' circumspect accounts, and the complete lack of first-hand evidence for at least the first seven years of its development, as Schwitters did not make any references to it during the 1920's. For many decades, art historians struggled with what Gwendolen Webster calls "imprecise, patchy and frequently contradictory" visual and written evidence.[33]

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[31] Gamard, Elizabeth Burns. *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery.* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 1.

[32] See Peter Bissegger's personal website: "The Reconstruction." Original Photographs Showing the Merz-Building. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.merzbaureconstruction.com/reconstruction_e.htm.

[33] Webster, Gwendolen. *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau.* A dissertation presented to the Open University, Milton Keynes by Gwendolen Webster, B.A. in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, History of Art. Date of submission: 31 December 2007. (N.p., 2007), 2.

In her 2007 dissertation entitled "Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau," Webster set out to reassess the groundwork of Werner Schmalenbach, Dietmar Elger, and John Elderfield, Schwitters' three main biographers and the first art historians to undertake detailed investigations into the Hanover Merzbau.[34] Her vision was to contribute a revised interpretative framework and historical chronicle that would dissolve the complicated mythology around the Merzbau and distinguish fact from fiction. In "Hidden Meanings," a chapter of her book *Kurt Merz Schwitters*,[35] Webster attempted another interpretation of the Merzbau this time by classifying its separate entities into groups of associations and preoccupations, only to again conclude that "there is no standard version of its history."[36]

Eyewitness accounts of the Merzbau are anecdotal and mostly irreconcilable because of their subjective and often contradictory character. The narratives of the visitors who witnessed the transformation of Schwitters' atelier into a vast Merz-construction, are confused, and focus more on the experience of the work rather than a detailed description of the work itself. Reconstructing the history of the Merzbau has therefore been a challenging endeavor for the scholars who study it. Processing the existing histories of the Merzbau is an also challenging endeavor, as it requires dealing with paradoxes and discrepancies. Exposed to a sea of speculations and persisting uncertainties, the more one reads about the Merzbau, the more confused one gets.

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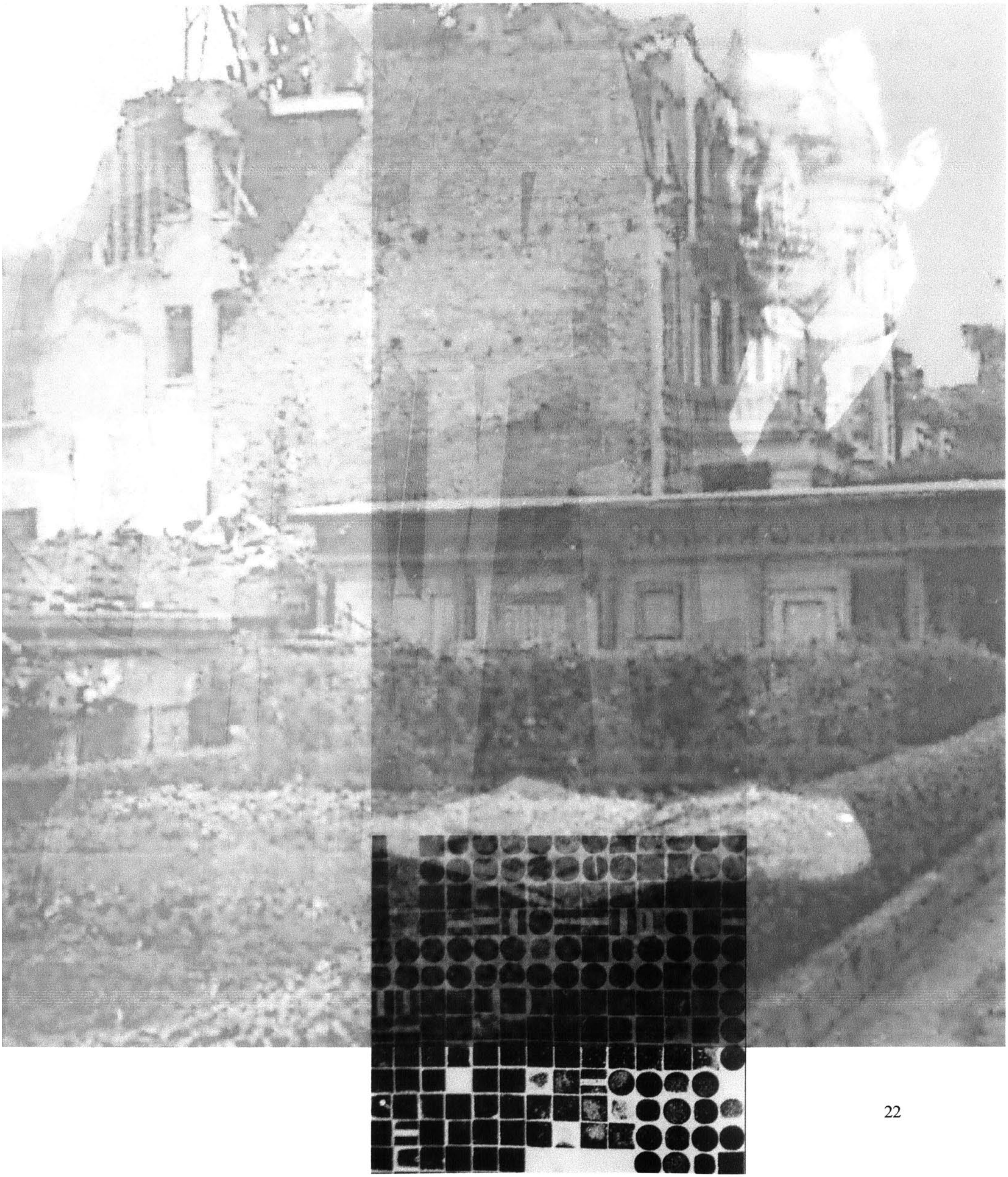
[34] 1] Schmalenbach, Werner. *Kurt Schwitters*. (n.p.: Köln, DuMont Schauberg, 1967), 2] Elger, Dietmar, and Kurt Schwitters. *Der Merzbau Von Kurt Schwitters: Eine Werkmonographie*. (Köln: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1999), and 3] Elderfield, John, and Kurt Schwitters. *Kurt Schwitters/John Elderfield*. (n.p.: New York, N.Y. : Thames and Hudson, 1985).

[35] Webster, Gwendolen. *Kurt Merz Schwitters: A Biographical Study*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 208-226.

[36] Ibid., 209.



2.2. Attempts at Reconstruction

In parallel to the rigorous attempts of historians to assemble the pieces of evidence into a coherent narrative of the Merzbau's evolution in space and time, another meticulous "interpretative" enterprise was initiated in the early 1980's and is ongoing until this very moment. This enterprise however, is a physical reproduction not a description, it has to do with the reconstitution of the form of the work. In 1981, four decades after the Merzbau's destruction in Hanover, Swiss curator and art historian Harald Szeemann, commissioned Swiss stage designer Peter Bissegger to build the first of, what would eventually be, a series of reconstructions of the original artwork. The challenge was obvious: how to replicate and exhibit a "proliferation that never ceased?"[37]

Despite his initial doubts regarding the validity and appropriateness of such an enterprise, Szeeman eventually gave into his long-held dream of spending one night in Schwitters' cave.[3] "Is it proper to reconstruct a myth? Is it possible to halt a permanently flowing creative process at a fixed state," Szeeman claims to have initially asked.[39] "These questions, turning and turning in my mind over many years, resolved themselves on the day that my egocentric wish as an exhibition organiser to have at least once entered and spent the night in the MERZ Building for myself gained the upper hand. In short, my inner Ludwig II, whose wishes always have to be fulfilled, broke through and sent desire on its long march," Szeemann confessed.[40]

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[37] Richter, *Dada art and anti-art,* 153.

[38] In our electronic correspondence on December 13, 2013, 04:36am EST, Dr. Isabel Sculz, head of the Kurt Schwitters Archive at the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, wrote: "You might know that the originally idea to reconstruct the Merzbau came from Swiss curator Harald Szeemann (1933-2005). He had this idea about 1980 in context with his exhibition „Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk“ (see the cat. ed. by Harald Szeemann, Kunsthaus Zürich, Aarau/Frankfurt M. 1983). Supposedly he dreamt of sleep one night in this room. He got the support from the artist's son Ernst and they commissioned the Swiss stage designer Peter Bissegger to built it. "

[39] Szeemann, Harald. "Die Geschichte der Rekonstruktion des MERZbaus (1980-1983)." In: *Kurt Schwitters 1887-1948.* Ausstellung zum 99. Geburtstag, exhibition catalogue, (ed. by Sprengel Museum Hannover, Frankfurt (Main)/Berlin 1986 & 1987), 256-257.

Bissegger took on the project of giving form to Szeeman's craving for a replica and construct what was agreed to be called "an attempt at reconstruction."[41] In personal correspondence, Bissegger argued that in opposition to my argument regarding the challenge of replicating a poorly-documented object, the Merzbau was "excellently documented by the three images from 1933 and other photographs, the memories from Ernst Schwitters etc."[42] Otherwise, he argued, he could not have constructed it true to scale. However, his descriptions of the project pointed to a fundamentally different process than the one that brought the Merzbau into being.

Bissegger's project was to construct a three-dimensional full-color model from two-dimensional black-and-white photographs. Not knowing the scale, the project was a great challenge. Bissegger explained that in order for him to fulfill his aspirations for precision and exactitude, the process of the reconstruction had to be divided to two clearly distinguished steps.[43] Each of these steps lasted for about a year. The first step he called "reflection, research, and drawing,"[44] and it included stereo-metric analyses of the photographs. He had to meticulously extract details from the existing data in order to provide himself with the basis for a

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[40] "The Reconstruction Of Kurt Schwitters' Merz Building." The History of the Merz Building Reconstruction (1980-1983) by Dr. Harald Szeemann. Accessed April 26, 2014, http://www.merzbaureconstruction.com/merzbauhistory_e.htm.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Isabel Schulz quoting Peter Bissegger, e-mail message to author, December 15, 2013.

[43] Bissegger, Peter. "Notes on the Reconstruction of the Merzbau." In *Kurt Schwitters: MERZ--a Total Vision of the World*. Edited by Annja Müller-Alsbach, and Heinz Stahlhut. (Wabern/Bern: Benteli, 2004), 66 - 67.

[44] "The Reconstruction of Kurt Schwitters' MERZ Building." Merz Building Reconstruction: Research. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.merzbaureconstruction.com/research_e.htm.

3D reconstruction.[45] The second step he called "translation,"[46] and he referred to the use of the measurements of the first phase in order to materialize the form in space. The work after the exact calculations of Schwitters' Cathedral was a matter of laborious, patient realization.[47] Schwitter's obsession for flux was replaced by the reconstruction team's obsession for precision.

The "attempt at reconstruction" is an entirely different project than the original Merzbau. The reproduction of a programmatically mutating form based on a photographic record that depicts one instance in its never-ceasing evolution seems to refer more to a process of bringing the specific photographs to life, rather than documenting the object itself, which is closer to a process rather than a form. The process of production was from any perspective antithetical to the prototype's construction. In the case of the reconstruction, the *telos* was a preconceived form, the materialization of an already existing image, the concretization of the Merzbau's instance in time.[48] In the case of the original, the *telos* was the process itself. The Merzbau was a constant process of fragmentation and assemblage, an infinite proliferation of material associating the Merz elements that stood out in the artist's studio between them and with the new materials that were brought in the working place to be integrated into the *Merz-World*. Within the Merzbau's transitional metaphysics, in the sense that the terms through which it was to be understood were constantly changing, truth (form) was devalorized and value could be found in the process of production as such. Meaning was elusive, as it appeared only as an instantaneous by-product of this never-ceasing process, to be immediately subjected to further re-signification.

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[45] Bissegger's basic handles in the attempt to represent the central room of the Merzbau, were: an object that appeared in two pictures, allowing for its stereo-metric registration, one point that appeared on all three photographs and therefore enabled him to calculate the three-dimensional model by giving a continuous sequence from far left to far right, and the fact that the standpoint of each camera could be analogously defined as a point within the other two pictures axiom of action. The cameras "could see one another simultaneously", as he said characteristically. The room itself was "only faintly discernible from the pictures" and its exact size was discovered only after D.Elger found a sketch made by Kurt's father, which was then identified by his son, Ernst. Supported by Ernst, Bissegger had to make complicated geometric calculations on the evidence at hand, after defining the type of camera and the aperture of the lens. "Eureka!", he cried, when he discerned that the camera was an extreme wide-angle Protar, with a focal length of 14,1 cm. Ibid.

[46] "The Reconstruction of Kurt Schwitters' MERZ Building." Peter Bissegger's Reconstruction of the Merz Building. Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.merzbaureconstruction.com/realization_e.htm.

[47] Bissegger described that the reconstruction as a "painstaking manual work executed with the aid of skilled craftsmen." The lack of objective proof was alleviated by a subjective but intimate knowledge of the building. The support from Ernst Schwitters was crucial to the reconstruction process. "He'd been ten years old when his father started building the Merzbau, and 17 at the end, and so naturally he knew the Merzbau inside-out. He had even helped a bit in the construction work," explained Bissegger. He also helped significantly with the colors and the lighting. Perhaps for Ernst Schwitters, this restoration process was not about an object of his youth, but a way of reliving his father. Ibid.

The replica was exhibited in the Zurich Kunsthaus in the context of the "Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk" (Tendencies Toward the Total Work of Art) exhibition in 1983. For the exhibition "Dada and Constructivism", 1988-89, at Annely Juda Fine Art, London, a practical "travel copy" of the Merz Building was made under Peter Bissegger's direction, which was then exhibited in Tokyo and Osaka (Seibu Museum of Modern Art, 1988), in Kamakura (Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989) and in Madrid (Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1989). The Merzbau-kit then traveled around the world to be exhibited and admired. From 1990 until 2012, it was exhibited in 27 museums worldwide.[49] At present, there is another reconstruction in preparation, which will be completed in 2014 and will be exhibited at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen.

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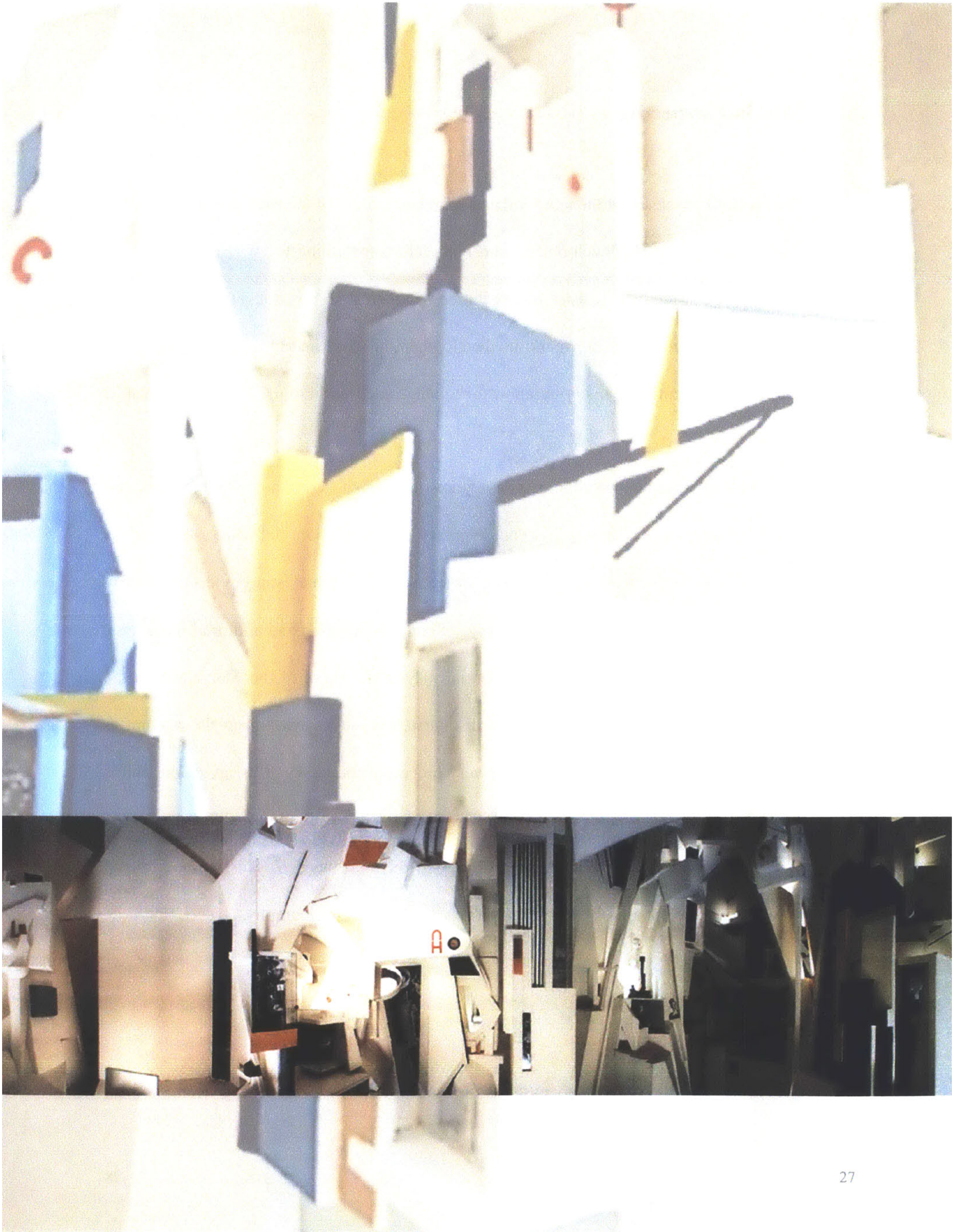
[48] Dietmar Elger described that while the 1983 reconstruction in Hannover is suggestive of what one may have encountered when entering the piece, its manifestation depends almost entirely on the later photographs showing the "constructivist" or "puriste" phase of development. Depending almost entirely on photographs taken at least seven years after the initial inception of the project, the Reconstruction did not incorporate the materials and artifacts that make up the "heart" of the Merzbau. At the time of the photographs, earlier developments were almost entirely covered over, contained within the white plaster walls, nearly eradicating the sense that the piece was originally an extended working studio, itself a large assemblage made up of revue and found objects. The rooms, cavities, and sculptural excrescences contained within the inner recesses of the Merzbau were mostly hidden at the time of the photographs, and were therefore inaccessible to the later indiscreet gazes of historiography and reconstructive practices. Elger, *L'oeuvre d'une vie,* 145. Cited in Gamard, *Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* 9.

[49] For a detailed list of the museums in which the Reconstruction has been exhibited, visit: "The Reconstruction of Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau." Museums Exhibiting the Merz Building Reconstruction (travel Copy). Accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.merzbaureconstruction.com/museums_e.htm.



2.3. A Shift in Perspective

The lack of consensus on the temporal and spatial evolution of the Merzbau is inherent in the non-linear character of its development, and is therefore something to be celebrated, rather than opposed. The Merzbau resists interpretation. I therefore do not attempt a better understanding of this convoluted form and its development in space and time. Instead I wish to surrender to the aforementioned historiographical challenge and raise it to the occasion for a shift in perspective.

I believe that what the Merzbau entails requires to be unpacked in a design medium, and therefore redefine the terms with which a contemporary discourse about Schwitters' lifework is to be articulated. I do not seek new criteria with which to analyze the existing evidence in view of a unified history of the Merzbau capable of crystallizing its meaning and authorial intentions. Instead, I propose the dissemination of the essentially dynamic nature of the Merzbau into the terms of discussing it. My goal is to propose a discourse that moves away from the attempt to interpret what existed and shifts the focus to the very processes and logics of its invention, and is in that sense heuretical. The value of such a shift can be understood from a design perspective, not a historiographical one. A different methodology is therefore needed. This methodology I find in Gregory Ulmer's apparatus theory and his new genre of mystoriography.

2.4. Ulmer's Apparatus Theory

According to Ulmer, an apparatus is a "social machine," including technological equipment which contains new modes of thought and identity experience and necessitates new institutional formations.[50] Ulmer argues that the contemplation of a media apparatus postulates a transformation not only of the equipment of communication, but also of institutional learning and subject identity: new behaviors, including collective versions, have to be invented in the context of changing technical and social conditions.

Based on apparatus theory, Ulmer's work suggests that the shift in base apparatus of thought enables a radical realignment of modes of being that ultimately leads to a profound transformation of societal and individual structuring and self-knowledge. Media studies are based on the axiom that there is an interaction between the way we record the world and the way we view it. Derrida proclaimed that writing is not a simple reproduction of speech. It is a recording device that produces ontology. Ulmer explains that image and sound-based recording digital technologies fragment the world into bits of audiovisual information, the same way that alphabetic writing fragments the world into concepts.[51] Digital technologies therefore affect the nature of knowledge itself. From concept-based alphabetic culture we have switched to the culture of image and sound reproduction.

2.4.1. Historical Apparatus Shifts

To explain literate thinking and reasoning, Ulmer described Plato's attempt to find a literate equivalent for the oral experience that Socrates had with his "daimon."[52] Making a leap back to the ancient Greek concept of "justice," Ulmer regards Plato's written dialogue of what justice *is* in its essence, not as the recording of an established practice, nor as a simulation of a Socratic interview, but as a transitional form, an invention. For Ulmer, thinking in a literate way is an act of "categorizing the world by means of properties of an entity, and then classifying everything according to whether or not entities share certain necessary features."[53] In Ulmer's approach, this new way of reasoning, was made possible by a technological equipment, alphabetic writing, but also included an institutional formation and its practices, Plato's Academy, and an identity formation, the self within a democratic state.

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[50] Gregory L. Ulmer's lecture entitled "Nemesis: the Pungentumami" in the context of the MIT Department of Architecture SMArchS Colloquium lecture series in the Fall Term of the academic year 2012-2013, available at: http://video.mit.edu/watch/greg-ulmer-12907/

[51] Gregory L. Ulmer, Interview by the author in October 18, 2013, available at the author's personal youtube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVmAR-ubtDA

Ulmer explains that when the Greeks invented alphabetic writing, they had to also invent the type of reality within which this technology is valid, in other words its metaphysics. The new metaphysics was propositional calculus. Thinking in a literate way means thinking in concepts. Plato's Academy became the institutional formation within which the practices of how to use alphabetic writing would be learned. Socrates became the conceptual persona that dramatized the new kind of thinking, which subsequently introduced "selfhood," the experience of the behavior of selfhood, associated with a new kind of politics: the democratic state.

In *Applied Grammatology*,[54] Ulmer proposed a working prototype for the rhetorics of the digital apparatus. In *Teletheory*, he introduced the term "electracy," to describe the apparatus of the emerging digital epoch that calls attention to the multidisciplinary nature of the invention process. He explained that the term comes from *electricity*, "the power running our equipment which we sometimes take for granted," and *trace*, a keyword in the Derridean philosophy that complexifies the theory of signification pushing it beyond signifier-signified mappings. For Ulmer, electracy started with the Industrial revolution, and has been in the process of invention ever since.[55] In order for us to invent electracy, we have to invent a new metaphysics, a different kind of hero, and a new type of institutional formation.

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[52] Ulmer, *Nemesis:the Pungentumami.*

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ulmer, Gregory L. *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

2.4.2. On the Question of Metaphysics: The Age of Design

According to Ulmer, for the same question on metaphysics, on how the world works, the oral apparatus is concerned with what is right and wrong, literacy is concerned with what is true and false, whereas the entire electrate social machine is concerned with pleasure and pain.[56] In an era where the dominant apparatus was orality, Ulmers explains, God(s) offered a means to accept and deal with what Lacan has called "ate"[57] – the inexplicable fate and cruelty of life. In the shift to an alphabetic apparatus, literacy established rationality to explain ate, and such rationality developed into science as a means of further addressing and preventing ate, both collectively and at an individual level. Self-reflexive reasoning and selfhood therefore displaced forms of religious faith.

In Electracy, the stability of the rational self becomes an active agent of creative knowing, and one sees a newly activated learning. We might invoke the term "design" to denote such active testing of a new apparatus and mode of being, far more restless and pro-active than the essentially analytic trope of literate self-reflection. And if such term holds, then the "age of design" does not simply replace the "age of science," just as science did not simply replace religion; thought it has displaced religion as the dominant modality.

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[55] From Gregory L. Ulmer's interview by the author.

[56] Gregory L. Ulmer's lecture entitled "Enlightened Environments (Apophatic Design)" in the context of the MIT Department of Architecture SMArchS Colloquium lecture series in the Fall Term of the academic year 2013-2014, available at:http:// techtv.mit.edu/videos/26227-gregory-l-ulmer-enlightened-environments-apophatic-design

[57] "Defining Electracy," http://pdurst.com/dtc4.html.

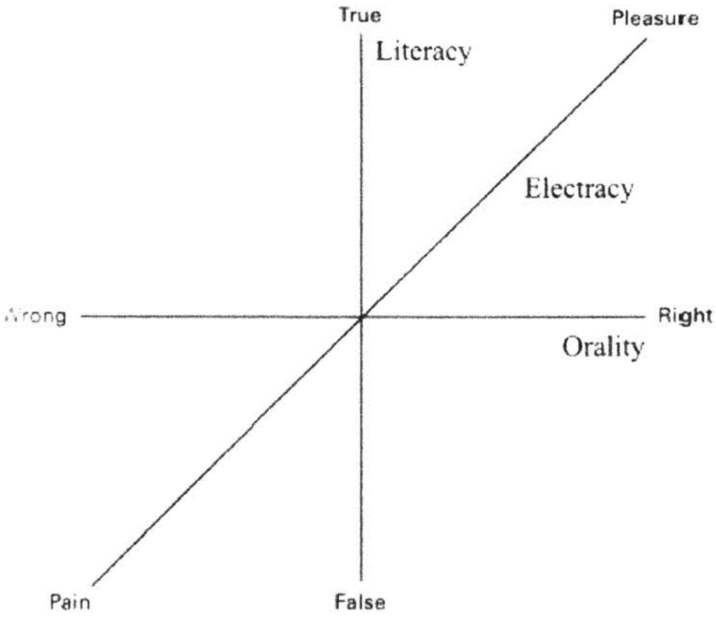
The skills and knowledge of literacy, rationality and propositional logic, are not "wrong", but they are not sufficient to access and manipulate the dimension of reality opened up by the new media apparatus: the age of design encloses the age of science. Electracy subsumes literacy. In this perspective, assemblage provides a relevant response to the quest for new modes of intellection, and my hypothesis is that in an "age of design," we are all assembling realities. The culture of the digital age is characterized by the shift from science to design, from describing to creating, from the actual (what *is*) to the potential (what *might be*).

2.4.3. Art as Ontology : The Case of Dada

According to Ulmer, the metaphysics of the electrate apparatus was already invented in the cabarets of bohemian Paris in the 19th century. For Ulmer, modernism emerged as the arts' response to the disenchantment of the world characterizing the experience in the industrial city. The avant-garde was a symptom of such modernism, accentuated by the violence of two World Wars. So in some sense a defense therapy, a cultural adaptation necessitated by the overwhelming experience in the industrial city. The individual, shocked and traumatized by the experience of moral and ideological collapse of humanist values, gave birth to the avant-garde as a response to art's social inefficiency. This has been theorized by Peter Bürger in his 1974

"Theory of the Avant-Garde" as the overhaul of autonomy and the sublation of art with life.[58]

Ulmer argues that "the trauma of anomie"[59] was healed in some sense by the Dadaists through their invention of new practices and poetics that sought to locate a new dimension for ontology within everyday life.[60] Art opened a new dimension within the real for the individual to construct what logic, ideology, and philosophy did collectively in literacy. Art therefore took on a metaphysical role. With the drive to merge art with life, Dada can be seen to have attempted the dissolution of the dominant forces of literate culture, and the rational and analytical management of the world that it dictated, in order to construct an expanded reality, accessible for experience and manipulation through art, not logical analysis and science (literacy) nor religion (orality). Electrate reality as anticipated by Dada is constructed out of the fragments of the real.



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[58] Bürger wrote: "With the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self- criticism. The avant-garde turns against both the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy." Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde,* 22

[59] Ulmer's interview by the author.

[60] In his 2012 "Nemesis: the Pungentumami" lecture at the SMArchS Colloquium, Gregory Ulmer proclaimed that "Dadaism formed the attitude that will underlie humanity for the next 200 years."

2.5. Ulmer's New Genre for the Study of the Past: Mystoriography

To approach knowledge from the side of not knowing what it is, from the side of one who is learning, not from that of one who already knows, is mystory.

-- Gregory Ulmer, *Teletheory*, 1989[61]

Grammatology is the scientific study and analysis of writing systems in terms of their typology, their structural properties and their relationship to orality. Ulmer's "applied grammatology" refers to the poetics of invention within our post-literate society. Ulmer manifests the need for new logics, new modes of thought and action native to our global communication society. He argues that present pedagogy is interpretive and not oriented to invention.[62] This means it focuses on the present state of knowledge and its verification, while neglecting the story of discovery, of how knowledge was created. For Ulmer, the practices of electracy should not be conceived in terms of linguistic complexity or extremity (digital literacy), but as a creative "W-rite-ing," that contains at the same time an *écriture* and a compositional practice in means of a multi-channeled performance (Action).[63]

Ulmer foregrounds Derrida's readings of literary or artistic texts, which he does not deconstruct, but *mimes*. As opposed to the philosophical work that is treated as an object of study, presenting discontinuity between what it says and what it shows or displays, literary or plastic texts are not analyzed, but are adopted as models or tutors to be imitated; as generative forms for the production of another text. Ulmer also discusses how the transition beyond current practices to new behaviors beyond a literate self can be achieved through this new creative method (procédé).

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[61] Ulmer, *Teletheory*, 131.

[62] Ulmer describes that the hostility of the literate apparatus to electracy is expressed as the near absence of art in contemporary schools. Literacy is based for Ulmer on the conventions of conceptual thinking and therefore the Arts are narrowly contained within the Academy. As religious dogmatism suppressed empirical inquiry, empirical utilitarianism suppresses aesthetic play. Ulmer, *Nemesis: the Pungentumami.*

[63] Ibid.

In the context of his project of inventing electracy, Ulmer suggests a new genre for studying the past, which he calls "Mystory."[64] This new genre is based on the assumption that each person has his or her specific history. It is a pedagogical device which seeks to bring together items significant to the writer, fragments that can be assembled into a history which is specific to its composer. It can be used both analytically and generatively, for studying the past and for creativity and imagination. The vision of a mystory is the discovery of anecdotal coincidental connections between memories and modes of thought. Instead of attempting to discern the past based on the classificatory properties of the person, for example whether they are a man or a woman, mystory is based on the assumption that general categories are of no use when looking back at the past, as the world is nothing else but singularities, singular lives. A mystory assumes that one's thinking does not begin from generalized classifications of subject formation, but from specific, historically situated experiences. According to Ulmer, mystory seeks to bring into relationship the three levels of sense: common, explanatory, and expert; to research the equivalencies among the discourses of: popular culture, science, everyday life and private experience.

Ulmer borrows the notion of "disposition" from the French apparatus theorists, in order to talk about the individual frame or setup that each person possesses and it both enables and restricts what is possible for them to think, do and make. A mystory constitutes a kind of personal periodic table of cognitive elements, representing one individual's intensive reserve. The concept of "mentality" refers to each individual person that is an opportunity in the world for something new to begin.

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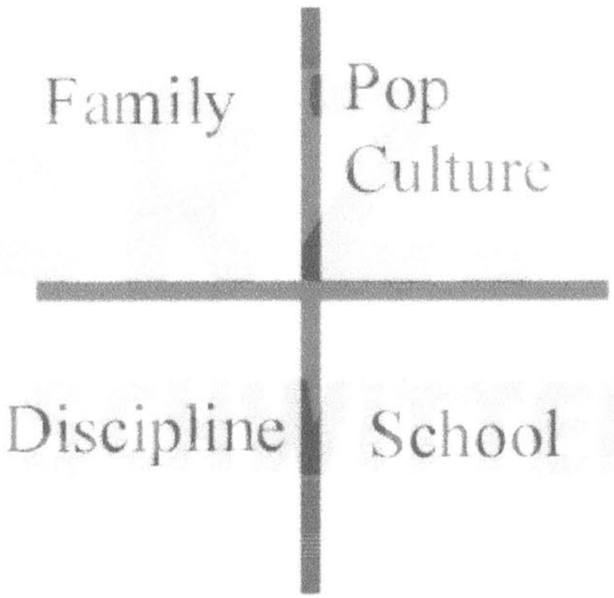
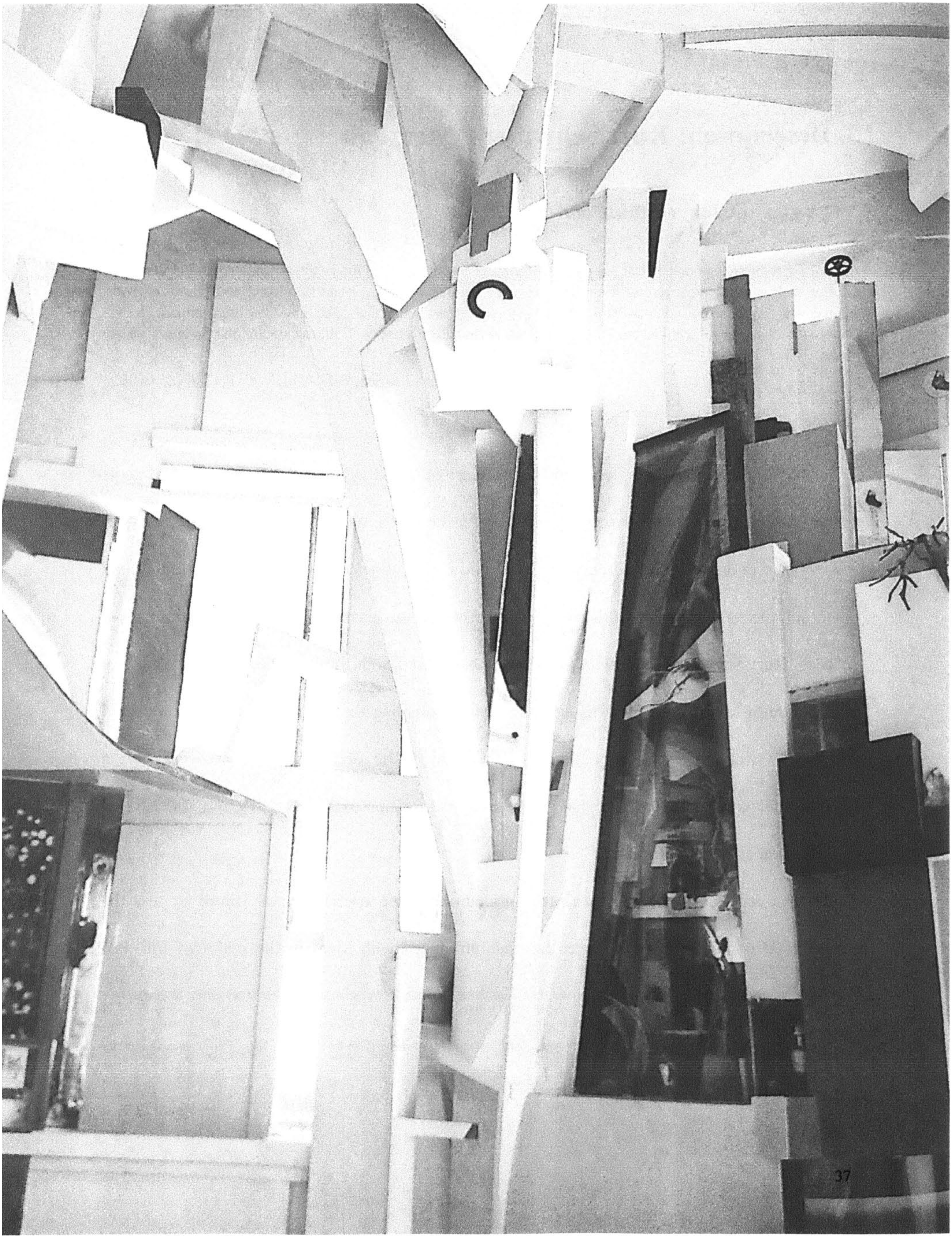
[64] Ulmer, *Teletheory,* 105-139.

According to Ulmer, a mystory brings into relationship three levels of culture that contribute equally to the cycle of invention: Personal, popular and disciplinary discourse. The first level of mystory (The Family Level) is related to childhood memories. It refers to a pattern, to something that has made it to the person's memory and its fascination is therefore captured, transformed into a disposition: into how the person wants the world to be, intuitively. The second level (The Entertainment Level) is related to mythology. The third level (The Community Level) is related to the positioning of the subject within a community. And the fourth level (The Disciplinary Level) refers to an existing question within a discipline at the time of the individual's activity.





3. Description: Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau

3.1. A gigantic labyrinthine *curiosity*[65]

> An inner core of collage material, a more or less formless accumulation of things discarded, and a hand fabricated exterior shell of clear architectural forms created with traditional building materials, wood and plaster of Paris, painted white with a few color accents, mostly red, scattered throughout. The controlled and structured shell contrasts with the chaos within, but is dependent on it because it grew with the accumulation of objects on the inside.
>
> -- Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters,* 1993[66]

In World War I, Kurt Hermann Eduard Karl Julius Schwitters, a middle-class bourgeois artist that was soon to be declared "degenerate" by the Nazis, retreated to his studio in Hanover and engaged in an obsessive activity of gluing and nailing together the ruins of a world that had fallen into pieces during one of the deadliest conflicts in the history of mankind. For almost two decades, Kurt Schwitters, the *enfant terrible* that shocked both the local bourgeoisie[67] and the avant-garde of his time devoted his art and life to assembling the bits of the world he collected into what Gwendolen Webster called "the most enigmatic of 20th century artworks:"[68] a stalactite/stalagmite-like structure that grew unabated from approximately 1919 until 1937 based on a constant addition of material.

The renowned Merzbau was the ultimate outcome of Schwitters' desire to test the fundamental compositional principles he had introduced with Merz in the realm of life. For

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[65] Webster wrote that the Merzbau "was far more than a gigantic curiosity." Webster, Gwendolen. *Kurt Merz Schwitters: A Biographical Study.* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 209.

[66] Dietrich, Dorothea. *The collages of Kurt Schwitters : tradition and innovation.* (Cambridge;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 164.

[67] Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters in exile,* 8.

[68] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 1.

Schwitters, the word “Merz” corresponded simultaneously to a philosophical premise, a technical artistic principle and a personal manner of working that he followed faithfully, even obsessively. Merz meant “the totality of all imaginable materials that can be used for artistic purposes and technically the principle that all of these individual materials have equal value.”[6] The artist therefore creates, according to Schwitters, by choosing, distributing and reshaping the materials.[70] Merz was the result of Schwitters’ desire to translate the chaos of the collapsed world into a plan of creative action. “Everything had broken down and new things had to be made out of the fragments: and this is Merz,” Schwitters later explained.[71] In this spirit, he did not propose an artistic style of expression, but a generative method, a process that abolished aesthetic prejudice and artistic inhibitions in the name of a simultaneously restorative and transformative process that constituted a new order out of the fragments of a dissolved one.

Determined to realize his vision of producing “new art forms out of the remains of a former culture,”[72] Schwitters explored the hidden associations between the things he collected, first in his collages (*Merz-bilder*), then in a number of sculptural assemblages (*Merz-säule*), and eventually in the mutating sculptural environment of his personal laboratory. The Merzbau was not a preconceived work of art, but an all-embracing structure in which Schwitters deployed the entirety of his artistic practices including painting, collage, sculpture and architecture. The labyrinthine structure that resulted from this dynamic play of associations, enclosed a mechanism

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[69] Schwitters, Kurt. “Merz Painting.” In Schwitters, *I is Style,* 91. Also cited by Webster, in Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 208.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 12. Cited in Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 26.

[72] Hilton Kramer quoting the artist. Kramer, *The Sorrows of Kurt* Schwitters, 3.

that blended art and life into one "inextricable entity,"[73] a Merz total image of the world (*Merz-Gesamtweltsbild*).[74]

Schwitters worked simultaneously at two levels: *inside* his atelier, assembling materials into Merz-pictures, and *on* his atelier, transforming the space into a complicated work of Merz that resists comprehension. Even though these two levels of activity constantly overlapped, the development of the Merzbau can be roughly divided, into two phases that correspond to those two levels of work. At first, in the 1920's, Schwitters engaged in an obsessive collection and addition of material to the so-called Merz-Columns. In this phase, his principle of using all imaginable materials for artistic purposes became literal: all sorts of fragments were collected and assembled into the themed dadaist sculptures that stood freely within the ever-evolving reality of his house. Schwitters started his construction on the mezzanine of his residence, but had to abandon this location by 1924, when his parents decided to rent it. He transferred his atelier to the back room of the house facing the forest.[75] It was in this tiny room that he would eventually "lay his defiant claims to unlimited space."[76]

The 1930's marked the more spatial, architectonic phase of Schwitters' artwork. During those years, the Merz-columns themselves became Merz materials for inclusion in a broader framework of associations that expanded in space and time, inside the atelier at

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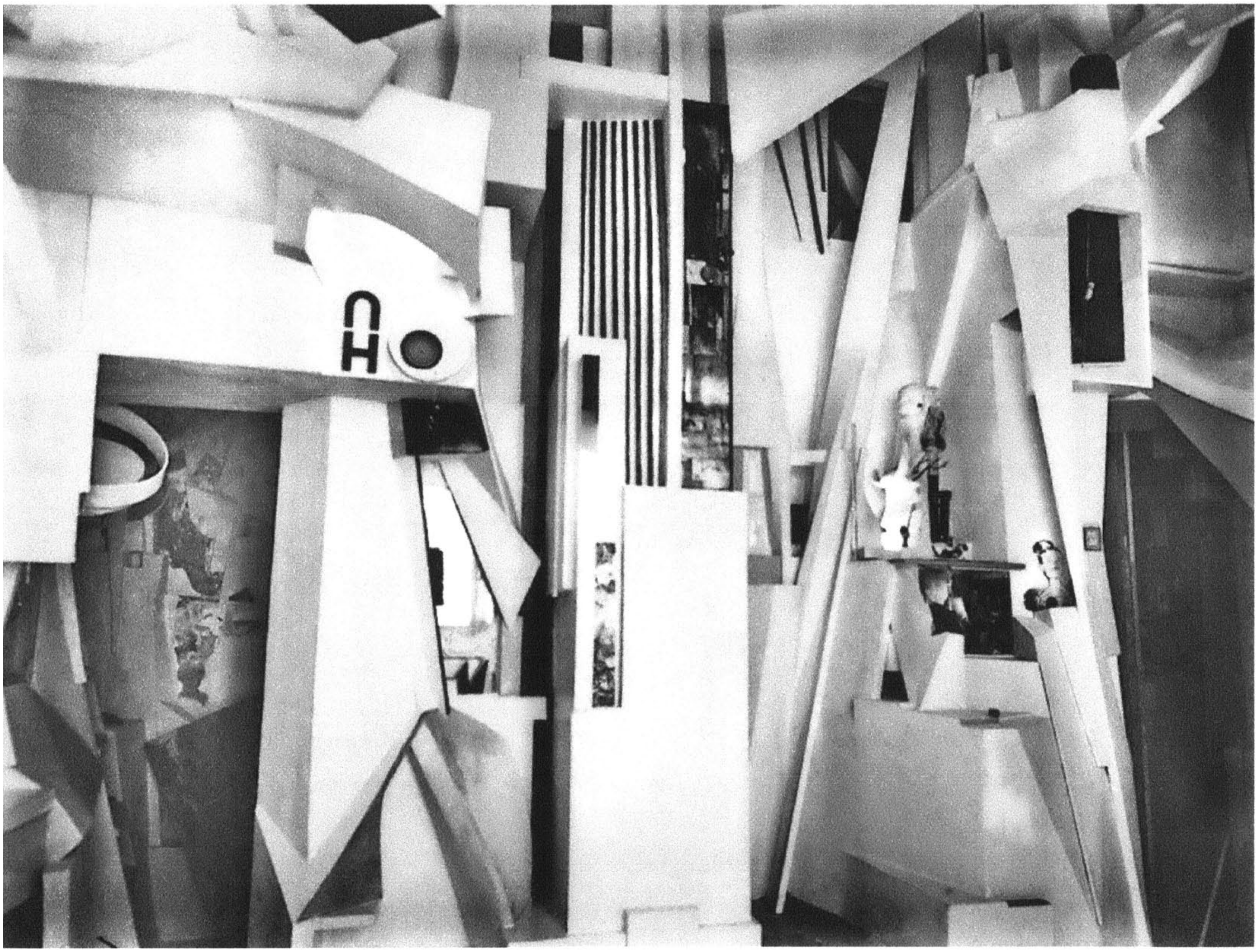
[73] Schwitters, Kurt. *Kurt Schwitters : Centre Georges Pompidou.* (Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux : Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1994), 147.

[74] In 1920, Schwitters had proclaimed: "My ultimate goal is the unification of art and non-art in a "Merz total vision of the world." Schwitters, Kurt, Annja Müller-Alsbach, and Heinz Stahlhut. *Kurt Schwitters : MERZ--a total vision of the world / [editing, Annja Müller-Alsbach, Heinz Stahlhut].* n.p.: Wabern/Bern : Benteli, c2004., 2004, 9.

[75] Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters : Centre Georges Pompidou*, 140.

[76] Gwendolen Webster quotes Bruno Taut in "The Merzbau as Gesamtkunstwerk." In Adrian Notz, *Merz Worlds*, 56.

Waldhausenstrasse. Schwitters engaged in the exploration of those associations:[77] he linked the Merz-Columns first by strings and then by wooden structures which were eventually plastered over. The Merzbau turned into a massive Constructivist construction that burgeoned in space, entombing the individual elements and assemblages.



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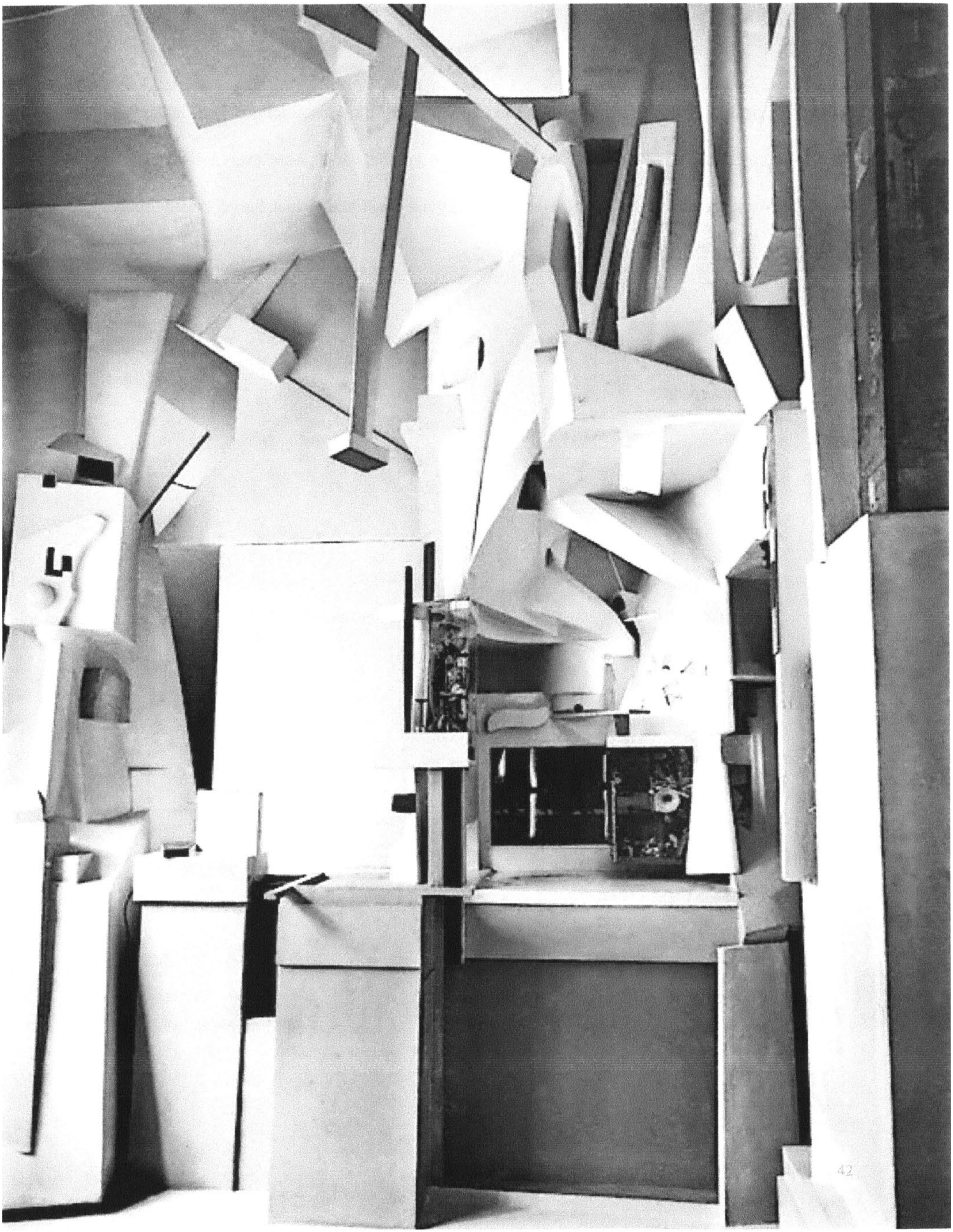
[77] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 209.



3.2. The *First Day* Merz-Column et al.

There is great uncertainty regarding the starting point, both in terms of date and location, of Schwitters' embarkment with the Merzbau enterprise. Ernst Schwitters talked about an "intuitive beginning"[78] of the project, recounting how his father tried to emphasize the interactions between the different components of his work inside his atelier between the pictures hanging from the walls and the sculptures standing along them.[79]

Elizabeth Gamard argues that a sculpture, entitled "Suffering" (*Leiden*) can be said to mark the origins of the project.[80] This column, which according to Steinitz appeared in the artist's studio one day in 1919,[81] looked like "a cross between a cylinder or wooden barrel and a table-high tree stump with the bark run wild," and was topped by a plaster bust of Schwitters' wife, Helma.[82] The *Leiden* Column, also referred to as "The First Day Merz-Column" (*Das erste Tag Merz-saule*), was significantly modified when Schwitters replaced his wife's bust with the plaster death mask of his infant son, Gerd.[83] In "The Cathedral of Erotic Misery," Elizabeth Gamard describes a later version of the Column, according to which, all sorts of artifacts were collected and assembled on the rectilinear base of the sculpture, providing a spire-like transition to the plastic head.[84] A framed collage, entitled "The First Day Collage" (*Der Erste Tag Collage*) and containing references to religious art, was later affixed to the base of the column, together with clips from an issue of Theo Van Doesburg's *De Stijl* magazine and the *Holland Dada* issue of Schwitters' *Merz* magazine.[85] The words "Merz" and "Dada" were also glued to the base overlapping with each other. The *Leiden* Column was joined by an assemblage, entitled "The Holy Affliction" (*Die heilige Bekummernis.*)[86]

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[78] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 94.

[79] Ernst Schwitters wrote: "His pictures would decorate the walls, his sculptures standing along the walls. As anybody who has ever hung pictures knows, an interrelation between the pictures results. Kurt Schwitters, with his particular interest in the interaction of the components of hi works, quite naturally reacted to this. He started by tying strings to emphasize 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 and eventually filled several rooms on various flood of our home, resembling a huge, abstract grotto." Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 148.

[80] Gamard, *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 87.

[81] Steinitz, *A Portrait from a life*, 90. Cited in Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 210 - 211.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Gerd was born in 1916 and died the same year, two years before the invention of Merz. Nündel, Ernst. *Kurt Schwitters in Selbstzeugnissen Und Bilddokumenten*. (Reinbek Bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981), 143-44. Cited in Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 88.

According to Gamard, by 1923, Schwitters had created at least three columns,[87] one of which he described with precision in 1931, in the only detailed account he ever wrote about the Merzbau, entitled "Ich und meine Ziele" (Me and my goals).[88] Schwitters referred to that column as the *Kathedrale des Erotischen Elends* (Cathedral of Erotic Misery). At times in his account, he used the same name to reference the whole, demonstrating on the one hand the importance of his "great column" to the character of the whole project, and perplexing the reader on the other. In "Ich und meine Zeile," Schwitters also noted that there were about ten columns at the time in his atelier.[89]

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[84] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* 90.

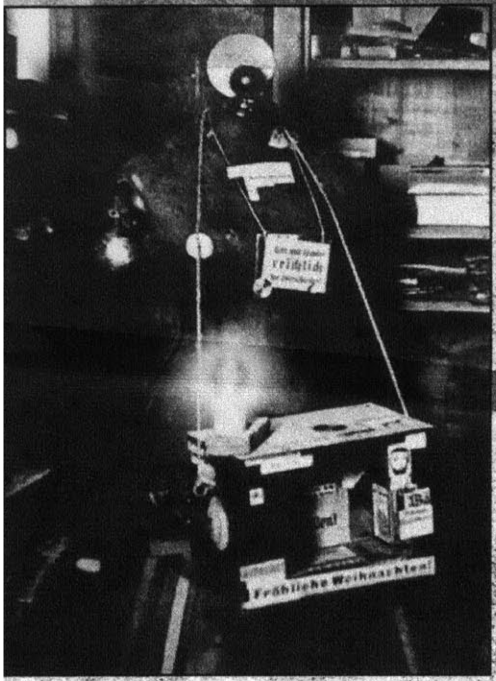
[85] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* 158.

[86] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters,* 210.

[87] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* 93.

[88] Schwitters, "Ich und meine Ziele" in *Das literarische Werk,* 5 (1931), 344-345. Cited in Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* 147.

[89] Ibid.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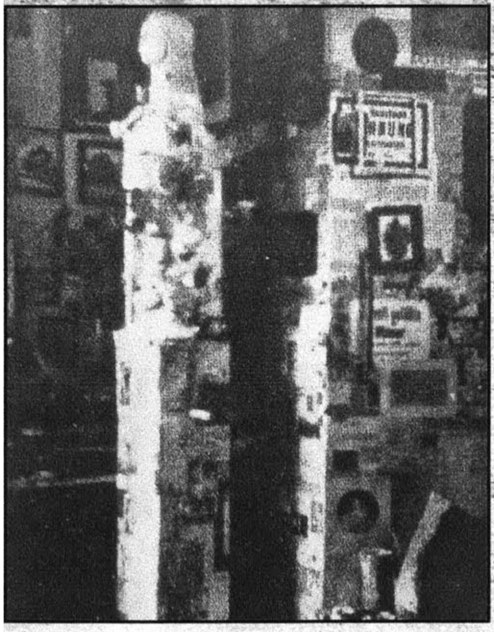

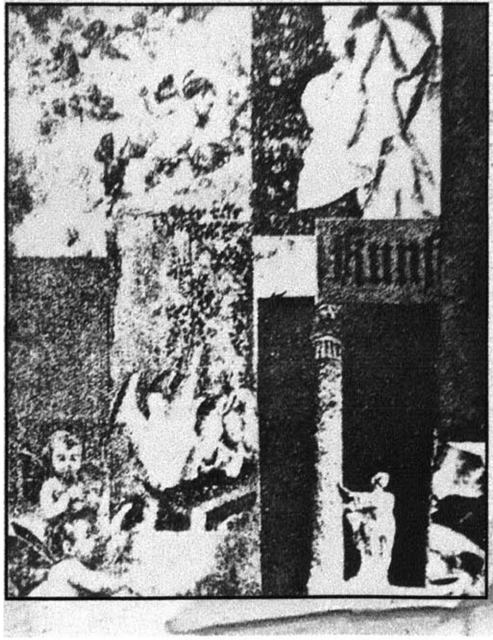
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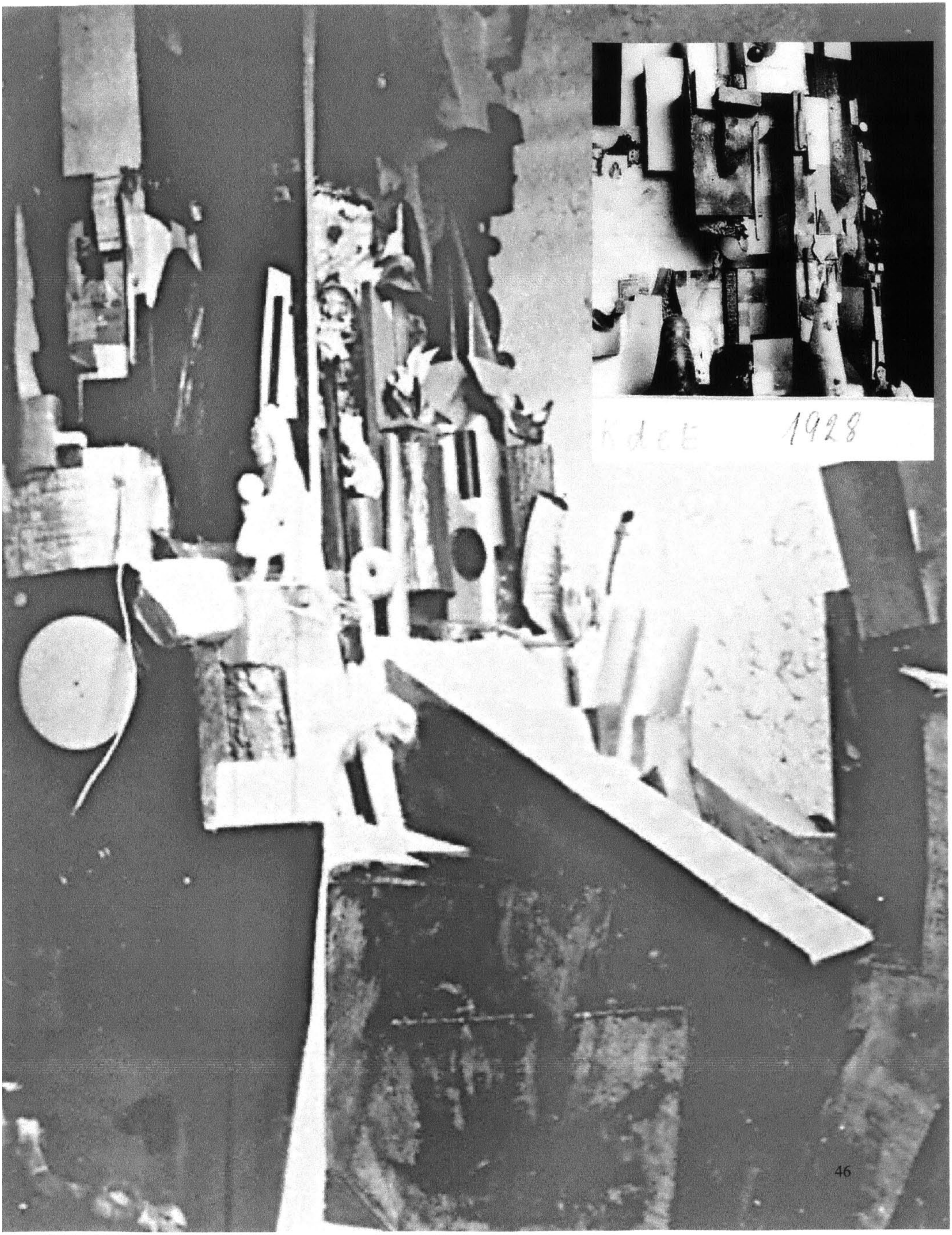
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3.3. Rooms, Hollows, and Grottoes

In the 1930's, the Merz-Columns served as "building stones" of a greater ever-expanding structure. The columns were linked to one another, and the cavities that emerged were filled-in with more Merz-materials. As there was no preconception of how the space would evolve, the cavities were very often overlaid by other parts of the structure. The Merzbau started growing, filling several rooms of the Waldhausenstrasse residence. As Webster described it, the Merzbau extended "down-wards, outwards and upwards to the basement, the balcony and the attic."[90] In the catalogue of the 1936-37 "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Merzbau, which appeared in the exhibition in photos, was described as "sprouting through the outer shell of the house (stretching finally) from the subterranean to the sky."[91]

In 1931, Schwitters wrote that as the structure expanded, valleys, hollows, and caves appeared, and that these spaces led a life of their own within the overall structure.[92] Three types of places appeared in Schwitters' *Kathedrale*: Grottoes (*Grotte*), Hollows (*Hohlen*), and Rooms (*Zimmer*). According to Gamard, there are at least forty different grottoes, caves, and rooms mentioned in published accounts of the Merzbau. She explains that what distinguished the three types was not the kind of space they referred to but their themes.[93]

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[90] There seems to have been a lot of mythology that was developed around the expansion of the Merzbau. Hans Richter described that "the column, in its overwhelming and still continuing growth, had, as it were, burst the room apart at the seams. Schwitters could add no more to the breadth, if he still wanted to get round the column; so he had to expand upwards. But there was no ceiling. Schwitters found the simplest solution. As landlord of the house, he got rid of the tenants of the flat above his, made a hole in the ceiling, and continued the column on the upper floor." Richter, *Dada Art and anti-Art,* 153. However, in her dissertation, Gwendolen Webster refutes such statements. She wrote that "in spite of statements to the contrary, no ceilings were broken through to accommodate its continually expanding structure." In "Kurt Merz Schwitters," http://www.stunned.org/merz2.htm.

[91] Barr, Alfred H., Jr. *Fantastic art, dada, surrealism, edited by Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* n.p.: New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1936., 1936.

[92] Schwitters, "Ich und meine Ziele", in *Das literarische Werk,* 5, 1931, 344-345. Translated by John Elderfield. Cited in Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* 161 and in Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* 98.

First, the "Rooms" referred to more general aspects of German history and culture. Gamard offers some examples: the *Biedermeier-zimmer*, the *Stijl-zimmer* referring to Theo van Doesburg's De Stijl movement, the *Luthersecke* or *Martin Luther's Corner*, the *Ruhr-gebiet* referring to an industrial region in Germany, the *Nibelungen-hort* referring to the "great German *Iliad*", and the *Kyffhauser*, including a stone table for the sake of political, social and economic transaction between the great mythological kings of Germany.[94]

Second, the "Hollows" or "Caves" were devoted to particular individuals, but also to particular groups or entities. Gamard talks about a cave devoted to modernist master Mies van der Rohe and another one devoted to head of the Bauhaus Walter Gropius. Other caves were devoted to constructivist artists such as Naum Gabo, El Lissitzky, and Moholy-Nagy. Others belonged to his dadaist friends Hans Arp, Raoul Hausmann, Sophie Tauber-Arp, Hannah Hoch (who was honored two caves), or to other close friends or associates, such as Piet Mondrian, Herwarth Walden, and Käte Steinitz. Goethe merited an honorary cave as well, which contained "one of his legs as a relic and a lot of pencils worn down to stubs." In addition to these honorary caves, Schwitters also constructed more abstract spaces that reflected, as Gamard calls it, "the darker side of humanity." There were for example the *Cave of the Murdered*, the *Cave of the Deprecated Heroes*, the *Caves of Hero Worship*, and the *Cave of the Sex Murders*. Schwitters described that the *Sex-Crime* cavern contained "an abominable mutilated corpse of an unfortunate young girl, painted tomato-red." (!) These almost surrealistic caves have been interpreted as Schwitters' "diagnosis" and commentary on the disturbing events of the First World War, but also the pathologies inherent in German culture in general.

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[93] Ibid., 96.

[94] All the references in the following paragraphs come from Schwtters' 1931 "Ich ind meine Ziele" account, as cited in Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 88 - 114, unless cited otherwise.

The various "Grottoes," as Schwitters described them, "took their character from some principal components." The thematic categories of these spaces, according to Gamard, reflected the main intellectual and emotional preoccupation of the artist. There were the grottoes of culture that incarnated the formation of nationalist ideologies, grottoes of current obsessions and social problems, grottoes of perverted sexuality and decadent love, and the grottoes of friendship. Among the various grottoes he constructed, two of them seem to have played a crucial role in the emotional state of the artist and subsequently the evolution of the Merzbau: the "Gold Grotto" and the "Great Grotto of Love." In the "Gold Grotto," he included all sorts of materials even the basest of all metals (dross) which he metaphorically transmuted into "gold." Children's toys and the relocated death mask of Schwitters' son, Gerd, appear here.

According to Gamard, the "Great Grotto of Love" reflected Schwitters' ongoing battle with love, death, sexuality, recreation and women.[95] According to Schwitters' own description, "this grotto alone takes up approximately one quarter of the base of the column; a wide outside stair leads to it. Two children greet us and step into life; owing to damage only part of mother and child remain. Shiny and fissured objects set the mood. In the middle is the couple embracing: he has no head, she no arms, between his legs he is holding a high blank cartridge. The child's head with the syphilitic eyes is warning the embracing couple to be careful. This is disturbing, but there is reassurance in the little bottle of my own urine in which *Immortelles* (*everlasting*

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[95] Gamard also describes that Schwitters had difficulties with his wife, Helma, and her family at the time of their betrothal. She also refers to his thwarted relationship with his childhood sweetheart, Else, and the tragic death of his first son during infancy. All these events are referenced in relation to his battle with love, death, sexuality, recreation, and women. Ibid., 99.

flowers) are suspended."[96]

Apart from these altars - the rooms, the caves, and the grottoes - there were also containers in which Schwitters stored up materials for future inclusion in his collages, columns, and the various constructions inside the Merzbau. According to Max Ernst, it was very often hard to distinguish between what was already part of the Merzbau and what was just a repository of refuse for later use.[97]

In the final stages of the construction, much of the original content was encased in wood and plaster or enclosed behind glass panes,[98] and the earlier phases of the project were covered with constructivist forms. The symbiotic relationship between the exterior shell and the interior "treasures" of the Merzbau, gradually gained more independence. Elements could be added to the external construction without necessarily filling them in with "findings." With the construction of the exterior shell, the character of the Merzbau shifted from mainly sculptural (the dadaist columns) to architectural (constructivist sculpture). The richness and mobility of its internal layers were obscured by the juxtaposed surfaces which gave rise to forms twisting in every direction, spiraling upward. There were passageways, sliding doors and openings at special places offering glimpses of the building stones of the construction, the Merz-columns, which were hidden behind the seemingly impermeable wall. The caves and grottoes were protected with glass enclosures, that according to Steinitz, made them look like "museum displays or shop windows," like artificial environments "displaying discarded commodities for contemplation."[99]

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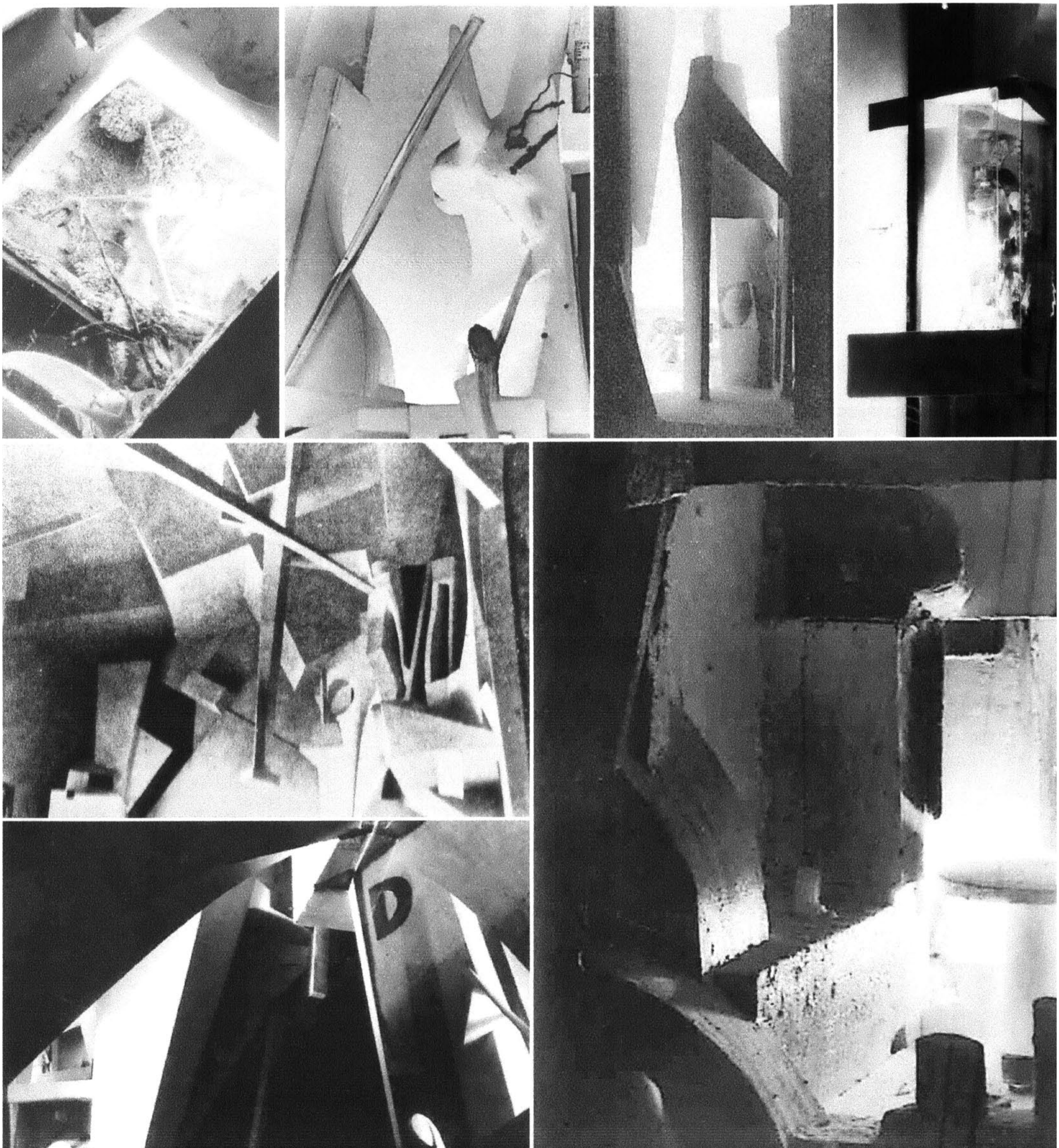
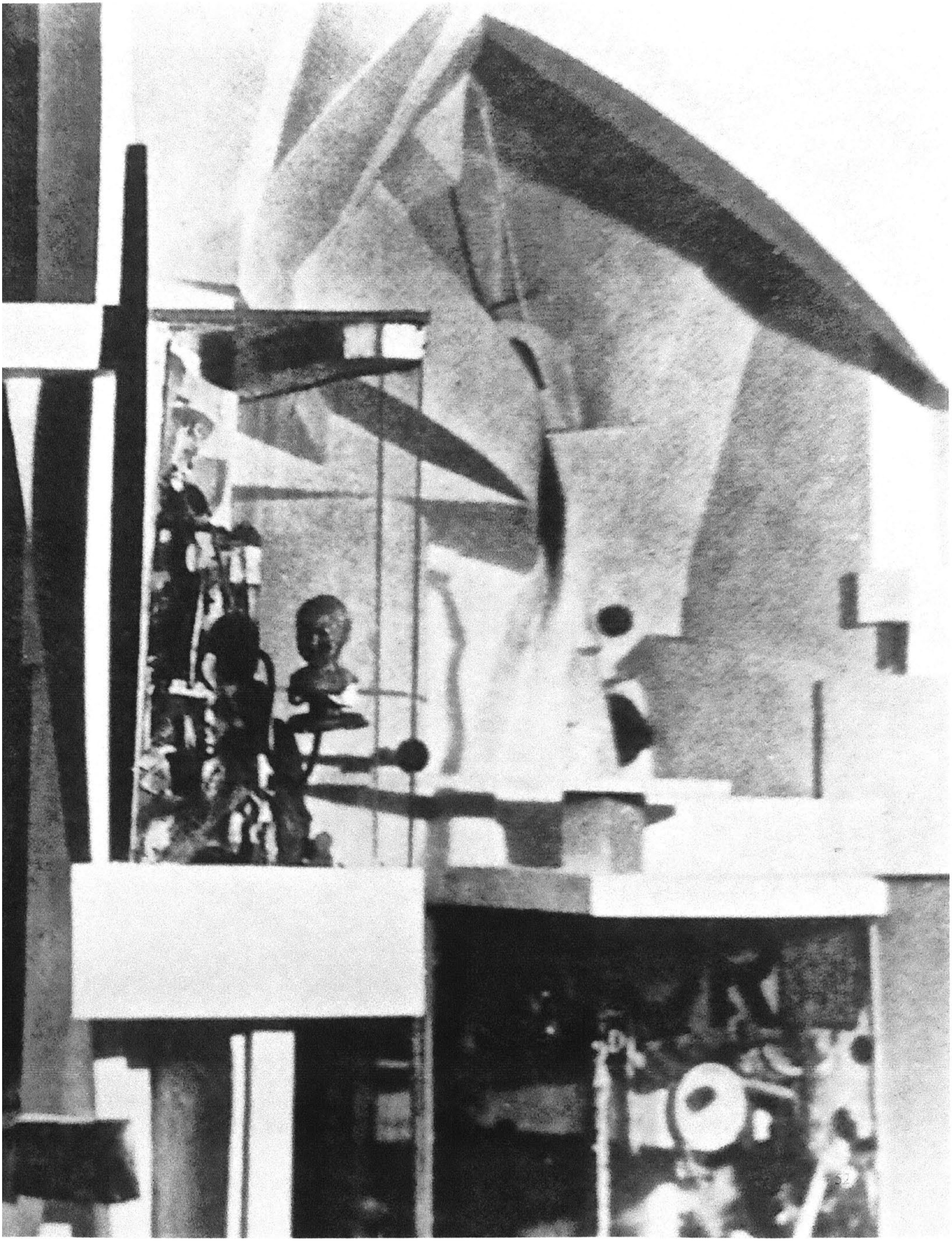
[96] Schwitters "Ich und meine Zeile", in Das literarische Werk, 5, 345, translated by Dietrich, *Collages of Kurt Schwitters*, 192. Cited in Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 99.

[97] Max Ernst visited Schwitters's atelier in 1920, and saw the column as a repository for *Abfall* (refuse). Gamard, 89.

[98] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 209.

[99] Steinitz, *A Portrait from Life*.





3.4. Witnesses and the Public Gaze

Gamard describes that throughout its development, the Merzbau remained "a largely private episode."[100] It was not destined to be moved, seen or exhibited. Its exclusive principle was to grow infinitely, establishing material and immaterial associations, "if possible between everything in the world."[101] However, two phases can also be distinguished in terms of Schwitters' experience of the Merzbau: a purely personal, private process succeeded by a shared experience. In the 1920s, Schwitters collected and ordered refuse. In the 1930s, having already built and secured his "obsessions,"[102] as Webster describes the contents of the Merz-Columns, he turned his gaze to the outside world, and made the Merzbau "a truly democratic work."[103] He started collecting "contributions" from his friends and visitors, and even sent out an invitation to artists to donate offerings to the Cathedral.[104] Among the caves of the Merzbau, there were some secret ones that were never to be seen and had never been seen by anyone else except from three men who, according to Schwitters, were qualified to understand them: Herwarth Walden, the owner of the Sturm gallery, Sigfried Giedion, architectural historian, and Schwitters' dadaist friend, Hans Arp.[105]

In 1931, Schwitters described that the Merzbau was completely hidden, occluded from external observation. He white-washed the windows from the inside,[106] and any glimpse from passers-by was impossible. Except from Helma and Ernst, very few people were allowed to witness the cathedral. Those few were mostly his trusted friends, who were also given the task of interpreting the work. Schwitters gave them extended guided tours into his cathedral. These tours could last up to four hours. Webster comments that these guided tours not only warded off questions, but also meant that Schwitters was able to reveal only the material he considered suitable, for there was much to be shrouded from public gaze.[107]

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[100] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 96.

[101] Gwendolen Webster, "Kurt Schwitters's Merzbau" in Schwitters, Kurt, Isabel Schulz, and Leah Dickerman. 2010. *Kurt Schwitters : color and collage* / edited by Isabel Schulz ; contributions by Leah Dickerman ... [et al.]. (n.p.: Houston, Tex. : Menil Collection ; New Haven, Conn. : Distributed by Yale University Press, c2010), 130. Cited in Schwitters, "Merz" (1924), in Lach, *Literarisches Werk*, 5, 187.

[102] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 222

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Schwitters, *Ich und meine Ziele*, 345.

Schwitters treated his cathedral as a cathedral should be treated, with religious respect. Visitors were made to wear slippers that Schwitters kept ready just outside the door, partly so that he didn't have to keep repainting the floor, but also to ensure that when they went in they did so "with all due respect."[108] German painter Rudolph Jahns also described that footsteps made barely any sound in the Cathedral: "absolute silence reined."[109]

The reaction of the individuals who witnessed the Merzbau at different moments of its evolution ranged from critical awe to the diagnosis of pure insanity. Hans Arp called the *Merzbau*, "an appalingly beautiful construction."[110] Museum director Alexander Dorner, who generally appreciated Schwitters as an artist, experienced his visit to the *Kathedrale*, as "a sick and sickening relapse into the social irresponsibility of the infant who plays with trash and filth," and talked about "the free expression of the socially incontrollable self who had here bridged the gap between sanity and madness."[111] El Lissitzky and his wife, also confessed they were unable to "draw the line between originality and madness."[112] More measured responses included Käte Steinitz's description of the Merzbau as "a miniature theatre of the absurd"[113]

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[106] For Gamard, the white-washing of the windows was indicative of Schwitters' persistent melancholy. Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 95.

[107] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 222.

[108] Adrian Notz, *Merz World*, 38.

[109] Rudolph Jahns, "First Encounter with the *Merzbau*" in Schwitters, *I is Style*, 142.

[110] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 212.

After the inaugural meeting of the group of artists called "*Die abstrakten hannover*," which took place in Schwitters' residence, Rudolph Jahns was personally invited to witness the Cathedral. In his "Notes about the First Encounter with the *Merzbau*" published in 1942, he described the ritual of the guided tours as a gradual climax toward an apocalyptic moment, an epiphany that brought him close to the "absolute" in art. "The site resembled a snail-shell and a cave" he recalls. "The path leading to the center was very narrow, since new sections and constructions, together with the already existing Merz-reliefs and caves, grew into the empty space. To the left of the entryway hung a bottle with Schwitters' urine in which floated *Immortelles* (everlasting flowers). Then came grottoes of different types and sizes, whose entries were not always on the same level. At the center there was a seat on which I sat down. After a few moments of immersion, I sat down to report my thoughts in a book deposited there on a wooden table. I was overcome by a strange sensation of rapture. This room had its own special existence. Just the shape of the grotto encircled me and allowed me to find words related to the absolute in art."[114]

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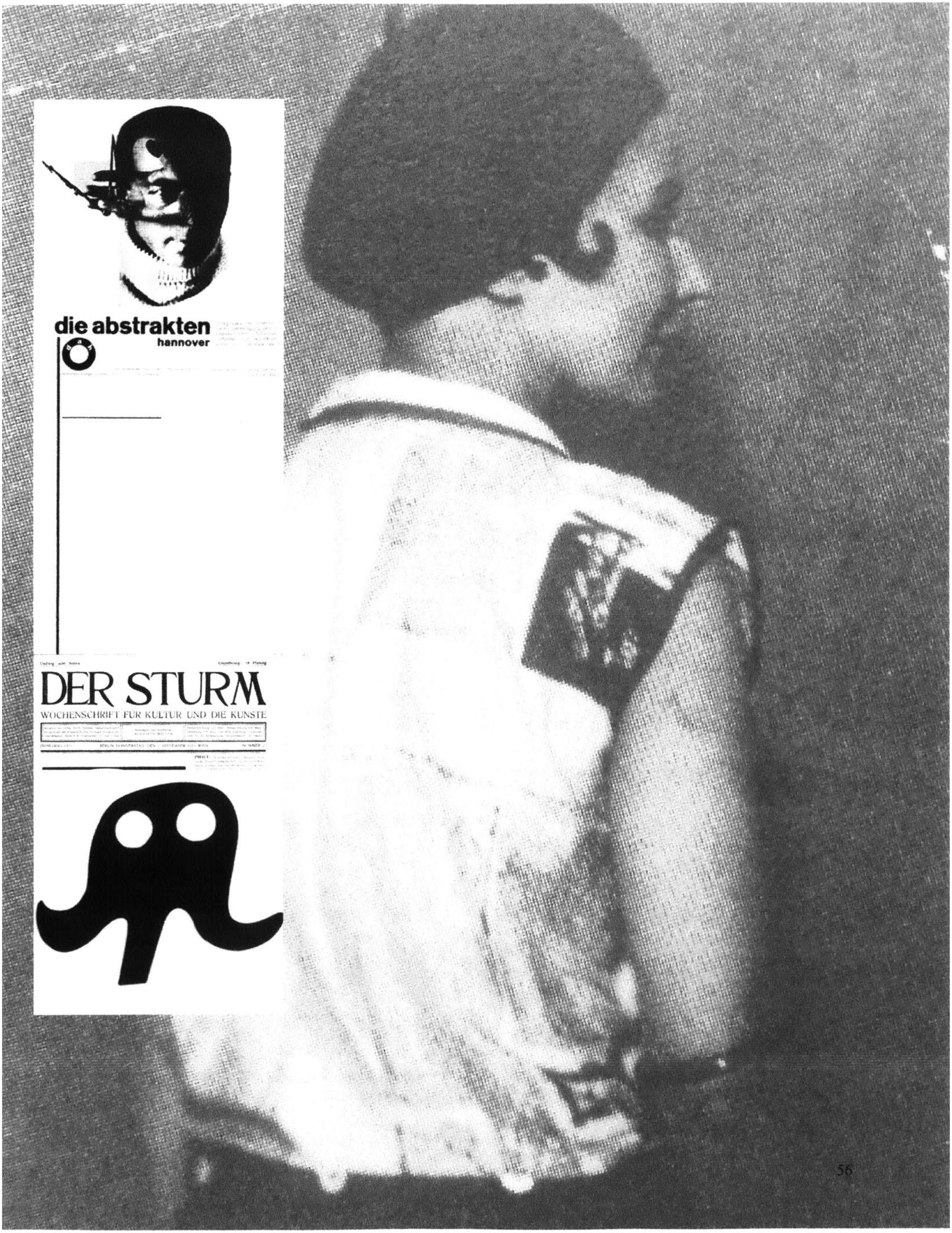
[111] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 162.

[112] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 101.

[113] Quoting Käte Steinitz: "a hallucinatory confusion of tiny fetish objects displayed like specimens in glass boxes: a miniature theatre of the absurd." Steintiz, *A Portrait from Life*, 90.

[114] Rudolf Jahns "Notes about his First Encounters with the Merzbau" in Schwitters, *I is Style*, 143.



die abstrakten
hannover

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Einzelbezug 10 Pfennig

DER STURM

WOCHENSCHRIFT FÜR KULTUR UND DIE KÜNSTE

4. Application: Collecting the Fragments

4.1. A brief timeline of Schwitters' life

In this chapter, I synthesize the existing historiography on Schwitters with a twofold purpose. I believe it is important for the reader to get acquainted with certain aspects of Schwitters' activity which will formulate a knowledge base facilitating a more fluent absorption of my next chapter's commentary on it as design attitude. Even though the vision of this thesis is not to create a definitive historical exposition of Schwitters' Merz-art, I filter the written history through three levels of discourse in order to examine their implications on my argument on Schwitters as an "image of thought" of electracy. First, I will focus on Schwitters' early personal experiences of the world. Second, on his attempts to align his activity with the avant-garde's of his time, and finally on the more abstract level, on the theoretical inquiries of the Art as a discipline, in his time.

A mechanical draftsman, son of Eduard Schwitters, a comfortably well-off shopkeeper[115] and his wife Henriette, Kurt Schwitters and grew up in comfortable middle-class circumstances. From 1908 to 1909, Schwitters attended Hanover's School of Applied Arts, the Kunstgewerbeschule. From 1909 to 1914, he studied portrait painting, genre painting and animal painting at the Dresden Kunstakademie. He applied to the Berlin Academy, but was rejected as "incurably ungifted" and "totally lacking in talent."[116] During the war, he served in the army very briefly, mainly doing paperwork. He had been judged unfit for active duty. In 1915, Schwitters married Helma Fischer. He lived with his bride on the third floor of the Waldhaussenstrasse 5 residence, the house in which he grew up, near the south gate of the city.[117]

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[115] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 12.

[116] Ibid., 30.

In 1917, he became a mechanical draftsman in the Wulfel iron works near Hanover. Schwitters resigned and devoted himself entirely to art after taking two semesters of courses in architecture. He released himself from academic principles and set about to discover new possibilities of expression for himself. He started his artistic career as a post-impressionist painter, and shifted later toward a more expressionistic style. His early work, before 1918, was dominated by the problem of expression, which he defined as "the relation between the external world and the personality and privacy of the artist."[118]

In June 1918, he joined Herwarth Walden's *Sturm* group in Berlin, which had at the time become a "cultural empire."[119] Two one-man exhibitions were held for him, in April 1920 and 1925. His work was also exhibited in *Sturm* exhibitions in Zurich and in New York. The reviews of these exhibitions were unfavorable to him, making him lash out at art critics whom he held in disdain throughout his life. His poems and reproductions of his works were published in the magazine *Der Sturm*, and in 1920 the *Sturm-Bilderbuch IV* was devoted to him. Schwitters never fully identified with the intensely spiritual and Expressionistic tone of the *Sturm* artists, and soon shifted towards Cubo-Expressionism, Abstraction, and finally devoted himself to assemblage, the language of the dadaist revolution.

The Club Dada in Berlin rejected him, and Schwitters rejected it back. Schwitters' work during his period of abstraction, was mostly held in disdain. Except from his poem *Anna Blume*, which enjoyed a real "sucess de scandale" and was soon "on everyone's lips,"[120] and the Merzbau that triggered curiosity to those who saw it or heard about it, Schwitters was at large rejected or berrated. He never fit in.

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[117] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 30.

[118] Ibid., 27.

[119] Ibid., 30.

After 1918, a financially hard time started for Schwitters and his family. Due to postwar inflation, his parents could no longer support him, and the collage images he made could not be a major source of income. He inherited the five houses his father bought after retiring from his business, and lived on the income from these until 1937, when the Nazi campaign against degenerate art reached their climax.[121] From 1937 until 1948, the year of his death, Schwitters lived in exile, suffering, earning his living by painting landscapes and portraits. He died poor, an immigrant in England.

4.2. Personal Discourse (Autobiography) : The Garden and the Palette

The wickedness of the world was brought home to me from the first. My basic trait is melancholia.

-- Kurt Schwitters[122]

Schwitters wrote little about his childhood. His limited statements however, revolve around the feeling of not quite belonging, of having to defend oneself against what he experienced to be "the wickedness of the world."[123] John Elderfield mentioned two stories by Schwitters published in the fourth issue of the *Sturm-Bilderbuch* magazine devoted to him and his work. The first was the story of his nurse being punished for breastfeeding him beyond the lawfully allowed time. The second event happened later in his childhood and was so intense that it cast a shadow over his whole life. As a boy, Schwitters had created a little garden in the village of Isernhagen near Hanover: "Roses, strawberries, a man-made hill, and an artificial pond,"[124] Schwitters recounted. "In the fall of 1901, village boys tore up the garden while I looked on. The excitement brought on St. Vitus's dance. I was sick for two years, totally disabled," he continued.

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[120] Ibid., 41.

[121] Kramer, *The sorrows of Kurt Schwitters,* 1.

[122] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, xvii.

[123] Ibid.

After the distressing incident that triggered the epileptic seizure, Schwitters suffered from the illness throughout his life. He had to stay home in poor health, for extended periods of time. It was after a long period of illness that he discovered his love for art and decided to become an artist. "As a result of my illness, I became aware of my love of art. At first I wrote couplets. Then I knew I had to be a painter," he wrote.[125] In his autobiography, written on June 6, 1926, Schwitters recounts another incident from his youth. He was studying painting under Gotthard Kuhl in Dresden, when one day Professor Kuhl physically sat on his palette and broke it in two. "Then he no longer wished to instruct me," Schwitters said. "The incident, however, inclined me to abstract art."[126]

Throughout his life, Schwitters was haunted by the feeling of not quite fitting-in. On July 1939, he wrote a retrospective note which he named "Short biography."[127] In two concise paragraphs, he captured his life. The last paragraph is nuanced with wit and irony. "Then I grew up to give pleasure to others, and all through my life it has been my aim to do just that. I can't help it if it sometimes upsets them. My schoolmaster was always happy when he had a chance to clout me over the head, and the whole school was happy when I left."[128] In another statement, he recalls an incident from his graduation from the Kunstgewerbeschule in Hanover. "On our way to commencement," he narrates, "looking like monkeys parading in top hats, my fellow graduate Harmenig observed: "Don't let this sour-faced Schwitters go first- people will take us for a funeral procession."[129]

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[124] Schmalenbach, 28.

[125] Original text in *Sturm-Bilderbuch IV: Kurt Schwitters* (Berlin: Der Sturm, 1920). Translated in Schmalenbach, Ibid.

[126] Schwitters, *I is Style,* 93.

[127] Ernst Schwitters, "A Few Ill-chosen words" in Schwitters, *Schwitters in Exile.*

4.3. Community (Anti-bourgeoisie) : Rejection from the Interwar Avant-Gardes

Schwitters's native city was Hannover. In his biography of Schwitters, John Elderfield called Hanover "the solid epitome of German bourgeois life."[130] In the same spirit, Werner Schmalenbach describes that in the years of Schwitters, Hanover was "a city of prosperous, respectable burghers."[131] He further explains that after the so-called *Grunderjahre*, the economic upsurge of the early 1870's, Hanover became a big modern city with important industries. However, in terms of intellectual and artistic development, it remained a provincial city, without a university or significant artistic activities. "It took World War I to shake Hanover out of its long lethargy," proclaims Schmalenbach. Even though in the years before the War, Berlin, Dresden and Munich were the centers of artistic innovation, during the war there appeared men in Hanover who according to Schmalenbach "thought differently." Hanover gradually turned into a center of intellectual and artistic activities during the war, and eventually became one of the liveliest cities in postwar Germany. Schmalenbach calls this period of intense artistic movement, *phantastische Jahre.*[132]

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[128] Ibid., 19.

[129] Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, 30.

[130] "Kurt Schwitters, Color and Collage" at the Berkeley Art Museum, http://www.examiner.com/article/kurt-schwitters-color-and-collage-at-the-berkeley-art-museum-1

[131] Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, 11.

In 1916, the Kestner-Gesellshaft institution was founded in Hanover under the direction of Paul Erich Kuppers, who from the very first moment made clear that the institution would be concerned with the development of modern art, opening its eyes towards the young and experimental spirit of the day, rather than embracing the habitual and the traditional.[1] According to Schmalenbach, the Kestner-Gesellshaft took on a perceptibly avant-garde character, including in its exhibition program artists such as Max Liebermann, Emil Nolde, August Macke, Paul Klee, and Georg Grosz.[134] Schwitters also appeared in the shows of the Hanover Sezession. The Kestner-Gesellshaft also organized lectures, which were at times held at Schwitters' residence in Waldhausenstrasse. The guests included poets, artists such as El Lissitzky, Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy and Itten, architects such as Bruno Taut, and a variety of performers.[135] The artistic, intellectual and publishing activities of the institution continued throughout the twenties, until they were restricted by the economic depression of the end of the decade, and after a few last sparks, "the society closed its doors" [136] towards the end of 1936, after a comprehensive Franz Marc show.

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[132] Ibid., 12.

[133] "For too long our eyes have been closed to the new, for too long we have turned our backs politely on everything that left the broad, well-trodden main highway of habit and tradition. [...] But not even the firmest, most narrow-minded resistance could halt the development of a truly modern art. Genius can stand up to the loudest rumblings of public protest. What was once cried down as madness or a bad joke turns into a solid cultural possession, and the revolutionaries of yesterday are the classics of today." From Paul Erich Kuppers' foreword to the catalogue of the second special exhibition (Karl Caspar and Maria Caspar-Filser) of the Kestner-Gesellshaft, Hanover, 1917. Cited in Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters,* 18.

[134] Ibid., 28.

[135] Schmalenbach recounts that besides the plastic arts, architecture, literature and music, a forum was provided for modern dance, photography, cinema, and design. Ibid., 20.

[136] Ibid.

In 1927, Alexander Dorner, director of the Provinzialmuseum in Hanover, in collaboration with El Lissitzky, created the *Kabinett der Abstrakten,* a new type of artistic display inspired by Constructivist principles and Lissitzky's Proun theory, which he had introduced in 1923. Schmalenbach's description of the *Kabinet* brings in mind the second Constructivist phase of the Merzbau. He explains that Lissitzky covered the walls with vertical metal strips and organized the space based on sliding panels, which could hide or reveal the exhibited pictures. This dynamic organization gave the spectator an active role. The *Kabinet der Abstrakten* was dismantled in 1937, the year of the Nazi's *Entartete Kunst* exhibition and of Schwitters' flight to Norway.

The circle of publishers, editors, and critics that gathered around the two publishing houses of the 10's and 20's, the Zweemann-Verlag and the Verlag Paul Steegemann, also contributed to the cultivation of the avant-gardist climate of the time. The artistic life in Hanover was accentuated by the accumulation of young artists, who brought with them a new avant-gardist spirit of expression: German Expressionism, the Hanover Sezession, "Die Abstrakten Hannover," the Neue Sachlichkeit, Dada, DeStijl, Constructivism.

In Hannover's vital artistic climate, Schwitters has been said to have "held high the flag of Dadaism in Hanover all by himself,"[137] but the truth is that he was never officially accepted by Dada. On the contrary, he was denied membership. Schwitters was not invited to the First

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[137] Bernstein, Eckhard. *Cultures and Customs of Germany*, London: Greenwood Press, 2004 : 168. In the same spirit, Hans Richter wrote back in 1965: "While Baader, Hausmann and Huelsenbeck in Berlin were taking the Globe itself under Dada's wing, each member playing his own part in keeping the prevailing anarchy alive, two less influential German cities, Hanover and Cologne possessed independent Dadaisms of their own, which were less noisy, perhaps, but no less important than Berlin Dada.: Richter, Hans. "Schwitters The Man." In *Dada: Art and anti-Art,* 137.

International Dada Fair in 1920,[138] one of the most important events in the history of Berlin dada, nor was he included in the 1918 Collective Dada manifesto, singed by Hans Arp, George Grosz, Marcel Janco, Richard Huelsenbeck, Raul Hausmann, Hugo Ball, and others. Schwitters had a "nuanced" relation with Dada, as well as with all the movements of his time.

In the summer of 1918, he joined Herwarth Walden's *Sturm* group in Berlin. The Berlin Dada group had just been established under the hegemony of Richard Huelsenbeck. Elderfield writes that Club Dada was established in Berlin by the coming together of two journals: Franz Jung's philosophical *Die freie Strasse* and the political *Die neue Jugend*, published by the Herzfelde brothers and Georg Grosz.[139] In his dada diary "Flucht aux der Zeit" (Flight out of Time) written in 1927, Hugo Ball described the formation of the Berlin group as a schism inside Dada, a separation rooted in what he regarded to be two opposed interpretations of Dadaism: Tristan Tzara's and Richard Huelsenbeck's. According to Ball, the tension between the two Dada leaders lasted for a very long time. In fact, in his afterword to the English translation of Ball's diary, Elderfield recounts that when Robert Motherwell wrote his anthology about the "Dada Painters and Poets" in 1951, thirty five years after the "Dada" moment, both men were still quarreling about the paternity of the word.[140]

In Schwitters' biography, Elderfield talks further about the mutations of Dada as it switched hands from Ball to Tzara and finally to Huelsenbeck. The original Dada group, founded by Ball in Zurich at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, was informed by the Blaue Reiter sources. Its members looked for what the Blaue Reiters were searching for as well: a spiritual renaissance. The original Dada was therefore both a reactive and remedial activity: on the one hand, it directed itself against rationalist and bourgeois values but at the same time, it sought to synthesize a new culture to replace the old one, and looked for the secret inner language of this new cultural spirit. With Tzara, Elderfield claims, Dada was "Gallicized."[141] It became a Parisian matter whose character was defined almost entirely by an attempt to shock and confuse. Under Huelsenbeck, Dada became a political affair. The German dadaist believed that cultural change would emerge only through a social revolution that would walk past the spiritual side of things and directly remodel life. In this perspective, the introversion of the *Sturm* group was perceived by Huelsenbeck as detachment, as social isolation. For Huelnsebeck, this "introvert asceticism"[142] was ineffective, and of course anti-Dada.

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[138] According to Schmalenbach, the Berlin Dada fair in 1920 was "the single most important dada occasion in Berlin." Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, 144.

[139] In "The Invention of Merz" Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 33.

[140] Ball, Hugo, and John Elderfield. *Flight out of time : a Dada diary / by Hugh Ball ; edited with an introduction and notes by John Elderfield ; translated by Ann Raimes.* (n.p.: Berkeley : University of California Press, c1996., 1996), 241.

"My name is Schwitters, Kurt Schwitters. I am a painter and I nail my pictures. I should like to join the *Club Dada*."[143] With these words, Schwitters introduced himself to Raoul Hausmann asking to participate in the activities of what he expected to be "a sympathetic artistic organization."[144] As Elderfield points out, "he was in for a rude surprise."[145] Schwitters' former alignment with the *Sturm* brought him into direct conflict with the Berlin dadaists who repudiated Walden's group. With the voice of Huelsenbeck, Berlin Dada whose initial declaration in April 1918 had been "You can join without commitments,"[146] denied Schwitters membership of their elitist group. At the same time, Huelsenbeck discovered that Schwitters had established associations with Tzara and the Dada group in Zurich, and according to Ball, he set about to break up this association. In 1920, he wrote in his *Dada Almanach* that his group "completely and emphatically repudiated Herr Kurt Schwitters' works and his celebrated *Anna Blume*."[147] In his chapter on Hanover Dada ("Schwitters the Man"),[148] Hans Richter describes Huelsenbeck's unyielding aversion to Schwitters.[149] He recounts that even after his death, he kept declaring how he could not stand Schwitters' "*Spiesser-physiognomie*" (bourgeois appearance). In his "Memoirs of a Dada Drummer," written in the late fifties, Huelsenbeck still referred to Schwitters as the "abstract Spitzweg, the Kaspar David Friedrich of the Dadaist revolution."[150] The tension between the two of them had even resulted in a public quarrel.

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[141] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 34.

[142] Ibid.

[143] In 1958, Raoul Haussmann recounted the evening back in 1918 in the Cafe des Westens, when he first encountered "the brown-haired, blue-eyed man with a straight nose, a some-what roundish mouth and a somewhat protruding stomach, named Schwitters." Hausmann, Raoul *Courier* Dada, Paris, 1958 : 109-110. Cited in Elderfield, 1985 : 35. The acquaintance is also included in Hans Richter's 1965 memoirs. Richter recounts that Hausmann and Schwitters established a long-term friendship. Schwitters, according to Richter, also got on particularly well with Hans Arp. "In many ways they spoke the same language, a kind of sophisticated schizophrenic dialect, a German raised above all conventions." Richter, *Dada Art and anti-Art*, 139.

[144] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 35.

[145] Ibid.

The members of Club Dada must have felt that Schwitters identified more with the method of assemblage as a device for artistic expression, rather than the revolted spirit of nihilism and irony towards the institution of Art that characterized their social revolution. Art was, for Huelsenbeck and his comrades, a medium for social change. They therefore raged against any kind of art that related to expression. Their intention was to overhaul the boundaries that separated representation from reality, art from life, and directly remodel life. Schwitters, on the other hand, as Hans Richter described, was "absolutely and unrestrictedly and 24-hours-a-day FOR art."[151] "You would never hear anything from him like "Kill Art" or "Non-Art" or "Anti-Art," he further explained. His whole-hearted devotion to art was anathema to the Berlin dadaists, and he could therefore by no means be accepted as part of the dadaist revolution.

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[146] Ibid., 36.

[147] Huelsenbeck quoted in Dada, Dickerman, National Gallery of Art, 2006, 161.

[148] Hans Richter "Hanover-Dada" in Schwitters, *I is Style,* 151.

[149] Ibid., 152.

[150] Richard Huelsenbeck in "Dada and Existentialism," written in 1957, Huelsenbeck, Richard. *Memoirs of a Dada drummer / by Richard Huelsenbeck ; edited, with an introd., notes, and bibliography, by Hans J. Kleinschmidt ; translated by Joachim Neugroschel.* (n.p.: New York : Viking Press, 1974., 1974.), 146.

Huelsenbeck disliked Schwitters, and vice versa. Richter explained that Schwitters' "genius" had nothing to do with "that which was being proclaimed with trombone notes in Berlin."[152] Ernst Schwitters described that even though his father used similar material and to some extent similar methods to those of Dadaism, "Merz was art, whereas Dadaism was consciously the antithesis to art."[153] In No.2 of his journal *Merz* in April 1923, Schwitters himself had written that "Dada and Merz are related only by contrariness."[154] He openly opposed himself to the political character of Berlin Dada, and manifested his concern that an essentially anti-art movement risked transforming itself into "one-sided political propaganda."[155] Schwitters' son talked about a pun that his father used in order to distinguish between what he called the "husk"-Dadaists and the "kernel"-Dadaists. On the one hand, the followers of Huelsenbeck ("hulse" is German for "husk") were political, oriented against art and against culture. In the *Ararat* of December 1920, Schwitters blamed Huelsenbeck for peeling off the originally unified inner nucleus of Dada and taking bits of the nucleus with him, which he then transformed into a political affair. This characterization was after all based on Huelsenbeck's exact statements:

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[151] Ricther, *Dada Art and anti-Art,* 138.

[152] Schwitters, *I is Style,* 152.

[153] Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile,* 22.

[154] Ibid., 23.

[155] Ibid.

"Dadaism is a German Bolshevik affair," he had written in his account of Dadaism published by Stegemann in 1920. He added that "Dada is carrying on a kind of anti-cultural propaganda."[156] On the other hand, Schwitters regarded himself as a likeminded friend of the a-political, purely artistic "kernel"-Dada, whose leader was Tristan Tzara. In *Ararat*, Schwitters stated that Merz greatly identified with what Tristan Tzara had written in his 1918 Dada manifesto: "Every man must create works of art in his own way." As a response to Huelsenbeck's repudiation of him and his work in *Dada Almanach*, Schwitters concluded his *Ararat* article with a similar rejection: "Merz completely and emphatically repudiates Herr Richard Huelsenbeck's amateurish and inconsistent views on art."[157]

Schwitters had once said that he was a dadaist without intending to be one.[158] In 1952, Tzara stated that the inner structure of Schwitters's personality was always "dada by nature," and that "he would still have been dada even if the dada call had not been sounded in 1916."[1] Schwitters' art and life incorporated multiple defining characteristics of the dadaist revolt. Apart from the use of assemblage, his activity in the Merzbau seems to paradigmatically raise the dadaist vision of demolishing art's autonomy from social praxis to the very mechanism of life. His art became a practice of life. His life an artistic pursuit. Even though Huelsenbeck and Berlin Dada denounced him and his art as esoteric because of his former links to Expressionism, with Merz, Schwitters manifested an unyielding artistic enterprise that included a profound desire for social transformation, for a new reality. He opposed himself to Berlin Dada, he officially recognized Tzara's views on art, and did not hesitate to write "anti-Dada" on the cover of his *Anna Blume* volume of poems, while stating at the same time that he is not against Dadaism.[1] Schwitters was not Dada. He was not against Dada either. He partially identified with dadaist views on art and life and partially rejected them, to finally conduct his own individuated type of revolt. Kurt Schwitters was Merz.[161]

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[156] Huelsenbeck, Richard. *En Avant Dada. Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus.* Hanover, 1920. Translated by Ralph Manheim in Motherwell's Dada painters and poets, 1951, pp. 21-48.

[157] Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile,* 22.

[158] Schwitters claimed so about himself. Letter of March 29, 1947, Reichardt 1962, 15. Cited in Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* 42.

[159] Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters,* 14.

MERZ KURT SCHWITTERS

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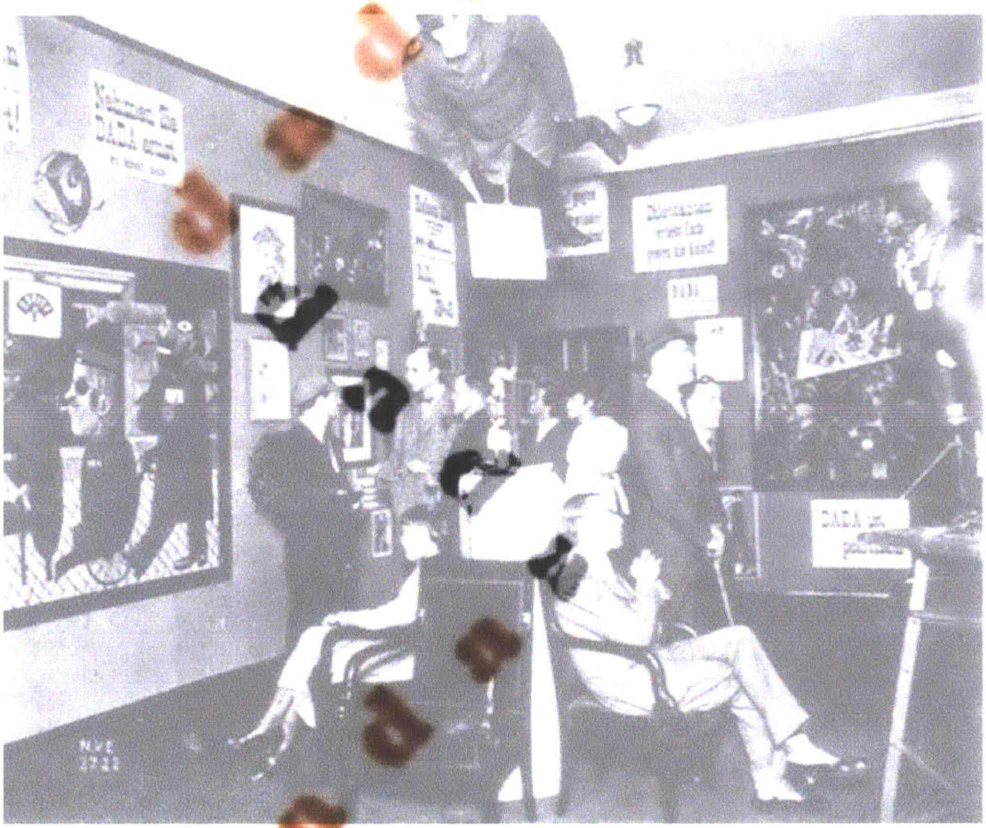
[160] Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 23.

[161] In "The Stature of the Artist," Siegfried Gohr wrote: "Kurt Schwitters is Merz, not Dadaism, not Surrealism, to which he had few ties, nor Constructivism" in Schwitters, *I is Style,* 19.


Nehmen Sie DADA ernst
Dilettanten erhebt euch gegen die Kunst!
DADA ist politisch
DADA

DADA
REKLAME
Die Kunst ist t
Es lebe die neue
Maschinenkunst
TATLIN

DADA

4.4. Expert (Discipline of Knowledge) : Abstract Art

My ultimate goal is the unification of a rt and non-art in a "Merz" total vision of the world.

-- Kurt Schwitters, 1920[162]

This section focuses on Schwitters' widely regarded and self-admitted ultimate artistic liberation: Merz. Before introducing his personal suggestion for the art of his time, Schwitters had already been painting "seriously" for almost a decade.[163] At the end of the Great War in 1918-19, after siding the active avant-gardes of his time, Schwitters made the decisive shift from the Academy to Merz. This step is here examined as a shift from an attitude of hesitation to an attitude of decisiveness, from an unfulfilling endeavor to adapt to ongoing avant-garde streams and practices to a decisive choice for a personal *marche-en-avant.* A remarkable fact is that in parallel to his Merz-activities and until his death in 1948, Schwitters remained devoted to naturalistic painting and continued painting landscapes and portraits. While the spirit of the time, as expressed in the polemic avant-gardes, required proclamatory rejection and an almost religious break with representational art, the introduction of Merz which can be seen as Schwitters' personal take on non-representational art, did not signify a programmatic and unyielding break with the art of the past. The new spirit was nuanced with the complicated aspects of a personality that still needed to observe, express, and reform.

The goal of this section is therefore twofold: on the one hand, to describe Merz as a synthesizer of the expressionist, dadaist, and constructivist tendencies of its time, and on the other hand, after establishing its relationship with the thought and practice of its time, to set the basis for examining Merz as a personal mechanism rooted above all as a necessity inside Schwitters. Apart from the sources that informed its practice, Merz will be raised to Schwitters' personal coping mechanism that gave a response to the critical quests of avant-garde art in the context of Interwar Germany.

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[162] Schwitters, Kurt, Annja Müller-Alsbach, and Heinz Stahlhut. *Kurt Schwitters : MERZ--a total vision of the world / [editing, Annja Müller-Alsbach, Heinz Stahlhut].* (n.p.: Wabern/Bern : Benteli, c2004., 2004), 9.

[163] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* 12.

4.4.1. The battle between Pure Art and Political Propaganda

In Spring 1923, the "Proletarian Art Manifesto" appeared in No.2 of Schwitters' journal *Merz,*[164] signed by Schwitters and the "kernel-Dadaists."[165] With it, Schwitters openly opposed the notion of political art. He proclaimed that when it comes to art, there is no class distinction between the proletarian and the bourgeois: everyone becomes an artist. Art therefore addresses itself, according to Schwitters, to "the mature human being,"[166] with the vision of arousing its creative powers. Schwitters set about to further clarify the distinction between what he called "proletarian" and pure art. For him, proletarian art was "politics in pictorial form," whereas pure art was "a spiritual function of man." While on the one hand, the works of the former functioned eventually as nothing more than "advertisements of the bourgeoisie," the purpose of pure art was

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[164] Ernst Schwitters "Instructions for Use" in Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 23.

[165] The Manifesto was signed by Theo Van Doesburg, Hans Arp, Christof Spengemann, Tristan Tzara, and Kurt Schwitters at the Hague, on March 6th, 1923. His son Ernst, included the manifesto in his 1965 article on his father's work, entitled "Instructions for Use" which was revised on 1981 and appeared on the "Kurt Schwitters in Exile" Volume. After quoting the anti-proletarian-art manifesto, which concludes with the words "What we on our part are striving for is the universal work of art that rises above all forms of advertisement, be they for champagne, dadaism or communist dictatorship," Ernst commented: "What an irony of fate it was that the so-called Thrid Riech branded as a "cultural Bolshevik" an artist who so clearly advocated art for art's sake and was utterly convinced that art and politics had nothing in common!" Ibid., 24.

[166] All quotes in this paragraph come from Ernst Schwitters' text, as cited above. Ibid.

"to redeem man from the chaos of life and its tragedy." Even though Schwitters believed in the role of the artist as an instigator of change and responsible for the creation of a new cultural epoch, he believed that in order for art to have such an impact on reality it should by all means supersede its social conditions, cut its ties with the social organization that brought it into being. He argued that art should be powerful enough to influence "the whole of civilization" rather than itself be influenced by social conditions. In order for it to reflect what he called "a sense of world citizenship," art should supersede the constraints of time and space.

Throughout his life Schwitters' most persistent artistic preoccupation was the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art combining all aspects of the arts into one form that would bring both a spiritual and social renaissance. His affiliation to Expressionism allowed him to cultivate the spiritual aspect of his artistic practice, while his relationship, even though tenuous, with Dada and mostly his identification with assemblage, brought him close to ideas of social change. However, Schwitters' attitude was and remained purely artistic throughout his life. Through the Sturm group, Elderfield describes, Schwitters became an agent of the Blaue Reiter's ideas concerning art as a primordial concept, the inner identity of the arts, and the multidisciplinary idea. Schwitters identified with the new spiritual epoch that the artists of the Blaue Reiter talked of, and set about to materialize cultural change. In this synthesist process of combining the arts into a whole new spiritual condition, he consciously avoided direct political or social activity. His attitude pointed to the spiritual side of cultural change. Elderfield comments that Schwitters' preference for pure art was not a popular stance in the avant-garde of the interwar period.[167]

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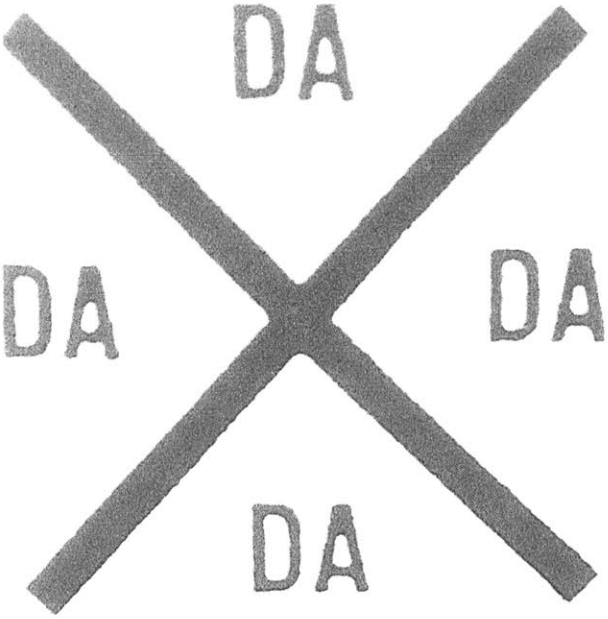
[167] The apolitical stance of "The Sturm" was what after all resulted in the erosion of its place at the forefront of avant-garde activity. Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 33.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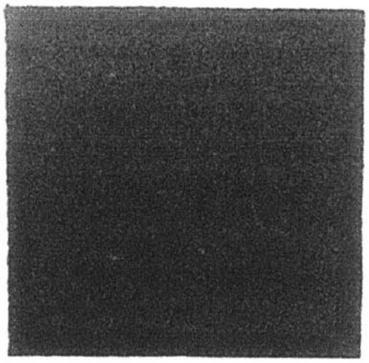

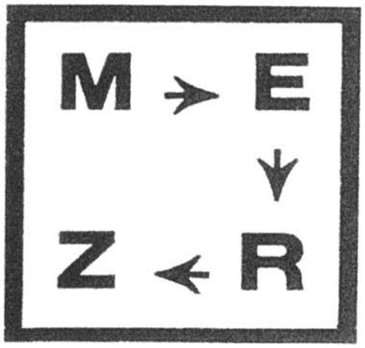
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4.4.2. The Spirit of Merz: Reformative Act rooted in Motivational Drives

> One needs a medium. The best one is his own medium. This medium you called yourself will tell you to take absolutely the wrong material. That is very good, because only the wrong material used in the wrong way, will give the right picture, when you look at it from the right angle. Or the wrong angle. That leads us to the new ism: Anglism. The first art starting from England. That is my confession, I have to make MERZ.
>
> -- Kurt Schwitters, My Art and My Life[168]

Determined to "rebuild" his garden, Schwitters set about to unveil the living spirit from all dead matter, to discover the energy that was latent in the debris of what had been destroyed. Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter theory gave him the spirit: the search for the identical innermost core that could be found within all the arts. The Sturm gave him the mood: introversion, and expressionism. Elderfield argues that the Sturm organization provided Schwitters with "the working model of a multidisciplinary artistic enterprise on which Merz would be based."[169] And finally, Dada gave him the language: assemblage. In one word: Merz.

Merz is here revisited as Schwitters' personal response to the artistic, intellectual, spiritual, and social preoccupations of the art of his time. In other words, it is regarded as a profoundly individuated yet synthesizing attitude towards the thought and art of a time that Schmalenbach calls "the time of ferment and experiment."[170] In interwar Germany, avant-gardist creative energies were coalescing from everywhere in an attempt to find a solution, at least a response. After all his efforts to ally himself with the avant-garde movements of his time failed, Schwitters decided on a highly individuated style, Merz became his personal ontology, a proces of world creation, specific to its creator.

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[168] "My Art and Life" in Schwitters, *I is Style*, 100.

[169] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 30.

[170] Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, 12.

On the one hand, Merz was expressive. In his 1919 manifesto "Merz painting," Schwitters described that his "Merz art strives for immediate expresion by shortening the path from intuition to visual manifestation of the artwork."[171] "For people who are sensitive to it, a composition can communicate an expression," Schwitters also said.[172] On the other hand, Merz was restorative. From its introduction to the world, Schwitters claimed that the invention of Merz was at some extent informed by a social viewpoint. "I felt myself freed and had to shout my jubilation out to the world," he declared. "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*." Merz was Schwitters' prayer for the victorious end of the war, in the sense that peace had won. Above all, Merz was a personal mechanism, his tool for dealing with chaos, for reasoning and creating within what a world of destruction. Schwitters did not only come to terms with destruction as world's contingency, he decided to embrace it programmatically.

Having probably internalized the destruction on a personal, physical, and social level, Schwitters felt he carried a destructive power with him, which he set off to actualize so that he could then work with the ruins, for the construction of a new world. In "My New Hat,"[1

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[171] "Merz Painting" in Schwitters, *I is Style*, 91.

[172] "The Origin of Merz" Ibid., 104.

[173] "My New Hat, Ibid., 94.

Schwitters described the story of his hats, all of which got lost after the first time he wore them. Except from the last hat he mentions, which was blown by the wind and thrown onto the top of a new house, which then collapsed. After the collapse, the hat came back and put itself right back on top of his head. His hat symbolized the destructive force he felt he carried with him. He did not oppose destruction, instead he praised it. "Everything had broken down in any case and new things had to be made out of fragments: and this is Merz."[174] Merz was assemblage, but profoundly personal, in that sense expressionist, and above all, unceasing. In Merz, Schwitters seems to have combined the sentiment of Expressionism, the spatiality of Constructivism, and the individualized language of Dada, a synthesis of the artistic stimuli he was exposed to. But beyond the conceptual, Merz was a personal mechanism of being, feeling, thinking, and dealing with the world. Schwitters was constantly Merzing, not only to express, but to cope.

In his "Short Autobiography" written in 1926 and addressed to Hans Hildebrandt, Schwitters, aged 39 at the time, wrote that "all of us are born too early."[175] Too early, in the sense that when we are born we have no idea of our nature, and nothing can help us grasp the events that will follow in our lives. We only understand them after they happen, thus too late to predict them. Merz gave a name to the image of the revolution that was happening within him, "not as it was, but as it should be." Sentimentalizing the banal, Schwitters engaged in an activity, without boundaries, without constraints, with which he set about to actualize an artistic but above all personal revolution: in order to fight the wickedness of the world, he embraced its destructive forces and rebuilt his garden by transforming it into one of the masterpieces of modern art.

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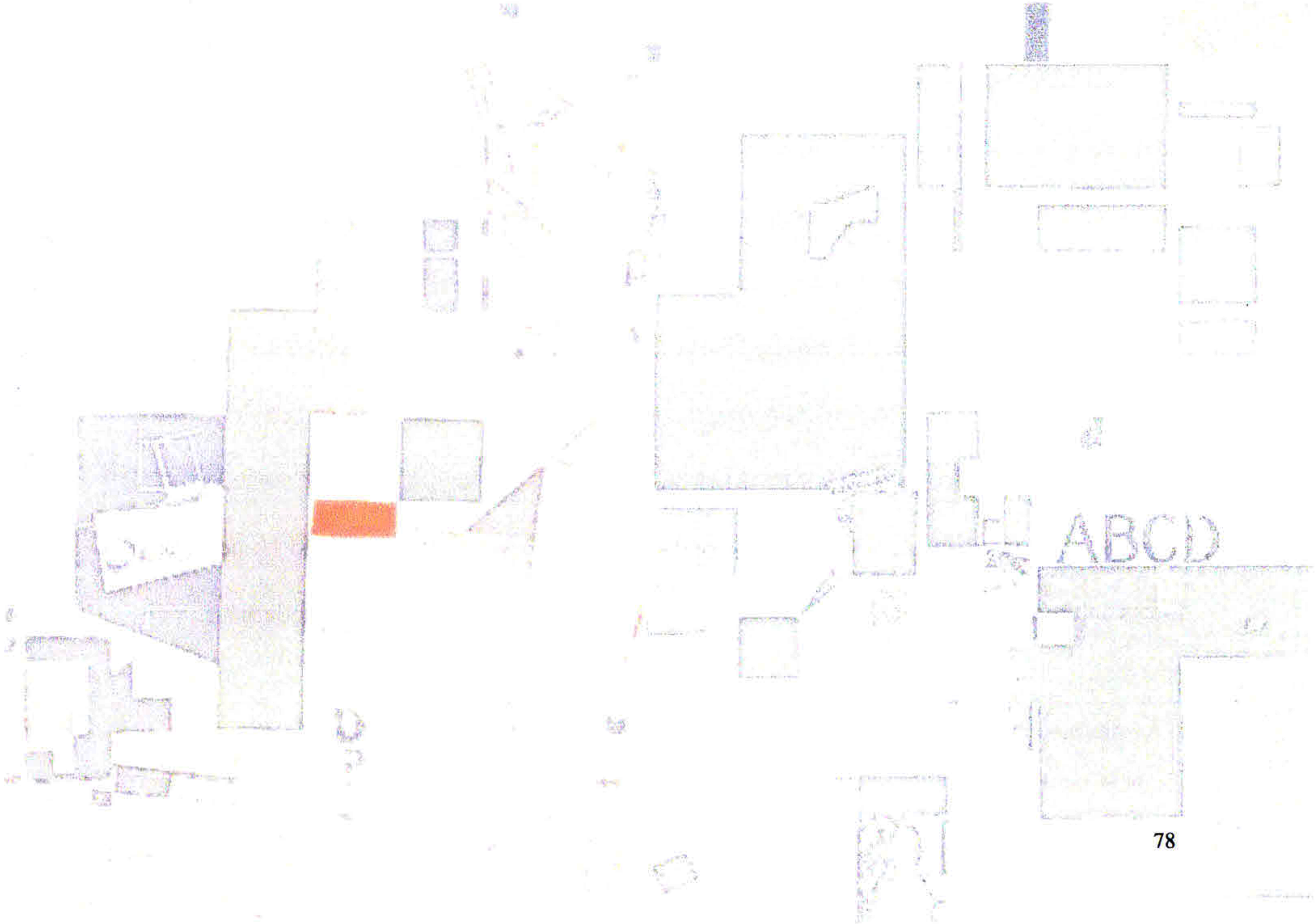
[174] Autobiographical statement: Rasch 1930, 88-89 (LW-5, 335) as cited in Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 12.

[175] "Autobiography" in Schwitters, *I is Style*, 92.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4.5. Ulmer's Theory of the Manifesto: Schwitters' CATTt

Merz does not represent any self-sufficient art theory that could be identified independently of the creative output of the artist himself.[176]

-- Isabel Schulz, *In the Beginning was Merz,* 2000

Schwitters had not CATTts, but many guinea pigs that walked around his atelier, providing him with the animate Merz materials to be included in his ever-evolving Merz-cosmos, as was himself: a material part of an ever-evolving liquid Truth. In *Heuretics*, Gregory Ulmer explains that all of the manifestos of the avant-garde belong to the discourse on method and include a common set of elements, representable by the acronym CATTt. *Contrast* expresses opposition, inversion, differentiation, and refers to an operation of pushing away from an undesirable example or prototype. *Analogy* is a figuration or displacement that facilitates the invention of the method. *Theory* refers to an operation of repeating the argument and theoretical position of another theory. These two do not become identical as the new theory is only one of the constitutive elements of the CATTt. *Target* refers to the area of application that the new method is designed to address. The *tale* is the representation of the new method, the demonstration of the theory in a form or genre.

Applying CATTt in the case of Schwitters:[177] (Contrast: Truth) Schwitters opposed all systems of thought that claimed the status of "eternal and godly" Truth, therefore imposing restrictions on "the free choice of the means" by which one is to live, think, create, and make meaning of the world. (Analogy: Petroleum) He saw that all Truths tend to collapse, to prove themselves “liquid." Truth is "a liquid closer to petroleum than wine,” Schwitters said, a viscous liquid that “chooses to be drilled" rather one that naturally "flows out of the pores of one’s skin." (Theory: Blaue Reiter) In the Blaue Reiter Theory, Kandinsky wrote that there is an innermost spiritual core unifying all the Arts, and the artist must always strive to unveil this spiritual identity in matter. Schwitters became preoccupied with Kandinsky’s idea that “even dead matter is living spirit” (Target: Redemption) Within what he saw to be a world fragmented into material elements of equal aesthetic and spiritual value (Merz), he set about to realize the multidisciplinary spiritual renaissance that the Blaue Reiter initiated, by reordering the ruins of the rational world, the formerly collapsed Truth. His goal was "to redeem man from the chaos and tragedy of life": the tragedy that accompanied the knowledge that all Truths tend to collapse, that destruction happens everywhere. (tale: the Merzbau) Immersed in a never-ending process of collecting all sorts of detritus and using them as art materials, Schwitters withdrew to write with the objects-of-the-world his autobiography, and offer what he called "a model monument to humanity," a *Merz-Gesamtkunstwerk* (Merz-Total Work of Art) that enclosed a *Merz-Gesamtweltsbild* (Merz-Total Vision of the World) in which all things, including himself, associated with one another to construct ever-evolving images of the cosmos.

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[176] Schwitters, Kurt, Susanne Meyer-Büser, and Karin Orchard. *Merz : in the beginning was Merz : from Kurt Schwitters to the present day / edited by Susanne Meyer-Büser and Karin Orchard ; [translation from the German, Fiona Elliott].* (n.p.: Ostfildern : Hatje Cantz, 2000., 2000), 244.

[177] All quotes come from Schwitters, *I is Style.*

5. Design Attitude: Performative Autobiography

In this chapter, Schwitters' Merz-Activities,[178] as epitomized in the Merzbau, are discussed as an act of producing personal ontology: an act of dealing with the world not by attempting to comprehend how things actually *are*, but by actively engaging in the construction of the state of things, in other words by designing a reality and suggesting its categories of cognition, of being in it and making sense of it.[179] I coin the term "performative autobiography" to summarize the adoption of a design attitude towards reality itself, which I believe captures on the one hand, the nature of the transformation of the space inside Schwitter's Hanover residence into the autonomous and incomprehensible reality of the Merzbau, and on the other hand reflects a mindset that is becoming dominant in the digital age. I see Schwitters' early and intuitive engagement with personal world-creation (*Merz-gesamtweltbild*) as a harbinger of contemporary ontological practices in cyberspace.

Gregory Ulmer's tetralogy comprised by *Applied Grammatology* (1985), *Teletheory* (1989), *Heuretics* (1993), and *Avatar Emergency* (2012) lies in the basis of my attempt to talk about the Merzbau as a new reality overflowing all categories of literate being, a reality that resists the abstracting and interpretative postulates of the literate apparatus and functions on the basis of its internal logics that do not claim the status of universal Truth. In that sense, I see the Merzbau as a profound manifestation of the form-less.[180] Ulmer's influence is manifested throughout this chapter mainly in the use of terms, coined or quoted by him, yet the impact of the Ulmerian project on the articulation of the "perfomative autobiography" design attitude as well as the general mindset of this thesis is omnipotent, even when not directly referenced.

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[178] In "The Merzbau and Expressionist Architecture," Dietmar Elger lists the "multifarious artistic activities" that Schwitters rallied under the name "Merz." Elger writes: "He would refer to his collages and assemblages as Merz drawings and Merz pictures. He produced numerous Merz sculptures and voluminous Merz poetry. He worked out the theory of Merz architecture - utopian in character- and reconstructed his studio as a fantasy Merz building [Merzbau]." Notz, Adrian, *Merz World,* 18.

[179] According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the larger discipline of ontology can be seen as having four parts: (O1) the study of ontological commitment, i.e. what we or others are committed to, (O2) the study of what there *is*, (O3) the study of the most general features of what there *is*, and how the things there are relate to each other in the metaphysically most general ways, (O4) the study of meta-ontology, i.e. saying what task it is that the discipline of ontology should aim to accomplish, if any, how the questions it aims to answer should be understood, and with what methodology they can be answered. I use the term to refer to the nature of being within reality in order to talk about a stance that strives at constructing a state of things (nature of being) rather than capturing an existing one. "Logic and Ontology." Last modified August 30, 2011. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/

Interestingly enough, my attempt to extract what is valuable from the spirit and process in which Schwitters lived and created is also facilitated by Richard Huelsenbeck's later interpretations of Dadaism. Schwitters' self-proclaimed enemy is revoked to give voice to a contemporary discourse which seeks to raise Schwitters into the "image of thought" of electrate culture, an "electrate Socrates"[181] who lived in accordance with a new social apparatus. The ideas Huelsenbeck articulated in his "Memoirs of a Dada Drummer"[182] written between 1949 and 1969 in the US, and at the "Art of Assemblage" Symposium[183] held at MOMA in 1961, are here revisited as capable of highlighting the current value of Schwitters' individuated (Merz) cosmology.

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[180] I use the notion of "form" to refer to Truth, to the assumption that form manifests the highest and most fundamental kind of reality, on which the entire Western civilization was based since Plato. The "Allegory of the Cave," presented by the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato in the *Republic*, is a story narrated by Socrates describing a gathering of people who lived chained to the wall of a cave all their lives, facing a blank wall. There is a fire behind the people, which projects to the wall the shadow of the things that pass in front of it. The prisoners designate names to those objects, in fact to the shadows of the objects, which are the closest that the prisoners get to reality, eventually raising the shadows to reality itself. When the prisoners are released, they can turn their heads and see the real objects. Then they realize their error. Plato concludes that only knowledge of forms is real knowledge. I see the Merzbau as a profound celebration of the formless, an individuated ontological process that does not strive for universal truth, but for personal well-being.

[181] As described earlier in the thesis (p.30), Socrates personifies, according to Ulmer, the behavior and experience of selfhood.

[182] Huelsenbeck, Richard. *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*. New York: Viking Press, 1974. The "Memoirs" include a Foreword by Rudolf E. Kuenzli (International Dada Archive Iowa City), an editor's note by Hans J. Kleinschmidt, a 95 pages long autobiographical statement by Richard Huelsenbeck, entitled "The Dada Drummer", 9 chapters on his Dada friends, each one dedicated to a specific personality, including Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, Hans Richter, Marcel Duchamp, George Grosz, and others, and finally 10 chapters with which Huelsenbeck intended to rewrite the history of Dada (Post-script to Dada, The Case of Dada, Dada, Dada and existentialism) and also reflect on the creative act in general (Psychoanalytical Notes on Modern Art, On Inspiration, About My Poetry, The Agony of the Artist, and others).

In order to describe the attitude of "performative autobiography," I will first address the existential condition in which Schwitters practiced Merz, and make projections to the post-World War II era and the digital world. In the section "Existential Condition: Absurdity," I use Huelsenbeck's description of the "Age of Anxiety,"[184] to refer to the existential condition in which man, abandoned by God, witnesses the systems of rational thought collapse. My argument is that in a world of "nothingness," Schwitters quit searching for inherent meaning in the world, and instead looked out to produce it.

Second, I will talk about the type of reality that validates the conception and materialization of a Merzbau, in accordance with Ulmer's suggestions regarding the metaphysics and logics of electracy and more specifically the Lacanian notion of *jouissance*[185] and the technique of assemblage. In the section "Metaphysics and Logics: Accessing Jouissance through

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[183] The "Art of Assemblage" exhibition took place from October 4 until November 12, 1961 and included 250 works by 130 artists including Braque, Cornell, Dubuffet, Duchamp, Picasso, Rauschenberg, Man Ray and Kurt Schwitters. The "Art of Assemblage" symposium was organized on the night of October 19th. The press release of October 10, 1961 (The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street New York 19, N.Y. : No. 117) wrote: "The controversial exhibition The Art of Assemblage, now on view at the Museum of Modern Art, will be the subject of a public symposium on Thursday, October 19 at 8:30 p.m. in the Museum Auditorium. Lawrence Alloway, well-known British critic, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Huelsenbeck (Dr. Charles R. Hulbeck), psychiatrist and Dada poet, Robert Rauschenberg and Professor Roger Shattuck, author of "The Banquet YearV will participate. William C. Seitz, Museum curator who directed the exhibition, will moderate. Tickets, $2.25 for Museum members, $3 for non-members, include admission to the Museum galleries which will remain open until 10 p.m. Dinner and light refreshments will be served." The exhibition catalogue was published the same year by William C. Seitz, Associate Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions. Seitz, William Chapin. *The Art of Assemblage*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, in collaboration with The Dallas museum for Contemporary Arts and the San Francisco Museum of Art, distributed by Doubleday and Company, Inc, Garden City, New York, 1961.

[184] "The Art of Assemblage" symposium (1961) at MOMA, Historic audio from the Museum of Modern Art : 1961. Originally aired 05/10/2004. (2 hours) Available at: http://artonair.org/play/7692/show/the-art-of-assemblage-1961

[185] Even though it literally translates as "enjoyment" (from the French verb *jouir*) the term *jouissance* is usually left untranslated, as Lacan did not use it to refer to pleasure (*plaisir*), but to a paradoxical enjoyment that always has a deadly reference, as it reaches an intolerable level of excitation. It is important to distinguish between Freud's pleasure principle, a homeostatic mechanism, according to which the psyche seeks the lowest possible level of tension and therefore imposes a limit to the subject's enjoyment, and *jouissance* which in fact transgresses the pleasure principle. Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*. Trans. Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 1992. Ch. 15

Merz," I situate the Merzbau enterprise within the pleasure-pain axis that Ulmer, based on Freud and Lacan, regards as the organizational structure of electrate reality. For Ulmer, electracy revolves around well-being, in the psychoanalytical sense of instinctual sexual drives, as opposed to the structure of what is true or false in the case of literacy, or what is right and wrong in the case of orality. I argue that the idea of "erotic misery" that haunted Schwitters during the construction of his Cathedral, powerfully places the Merzbau within the psychoanalytical discourse on drives and the apparatus of electracy. I see the Merzbau as Schwitters' personal process of accessing *jouissance*, in the Lacanian sense of striving for intolerable excitation beyond the pleasure principle, where enjoyment is experienced as suffering.[186]

For the question on logics, and in order to establish the categories for discussing the "electrate" value of Merz, I consider the symposium at MOMA, where questions related to Dada and assemblage were discussed. However, the questions addressed at the symposium were largely related to those topics that I am intentionally setting aside, such as: Was Dada anything more than a cultural firework, an expression of a shocked, short-circuited humanity that had just undergone one of the deadliest conflicts in the history of mankind? Did Dada manage to "crack" the backbone of the culture that led to the World Wars? Is Dada revivable? Is neo-Dada valid in its adaptation of assemblage as its dominant mode of expression? Yet the discussion of these issues brought out that four decades (1960's) after the Dada moment, World War 2 and its atomic bombs, assemblage had become, according to William Seitz, "ubiquitous."[187] For Seitz, the 1960's were already witnessing the gradual transformation of the artistic practice of assemblage into urban environments ("the collage environment") and also into aesthetic and critical discourse. By bringing the ideas discussed at MOMA fifty years ago into the present moment, I look to demonstrate a powerful potential for assemblage as constructing a new modality of reasoning seemingly contained in the Dada virus, and to demonstrate this potential in current praxis as "the digital" coming into full operation.

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[186] Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection.* Trans. Alan Sheridan. (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 844.

[187] Seitz, William. "The Art of Assemblage." Historic Audio from MOMA, 5 Oct 2004. <http://artonair.org/play/7692/show/the-art-of-assemblage-1961>

The purpose of this section is to note the thread of assemblage as something more than a passing artistic expression, but as a pervasive operative trope that subsequently disseminates into a broad range of daily praxis; this seemingly raises it to a process of creative and material normalcy, effectively a new mode of being. In this context, I read the Merzbau as Schwitters' individuated use of assemblage. I argue that the Merzbau does not *mean* anything, it is not something to be interpreted for example by saying that this is what one should do in order to "get" *jouissance*. The Merzbau is not a *thing*, it is a process, relational-based. It certainly becomes an object: the object that testifies to Schwitters' process of accessing *jouissance*.

Finally, I will talk about Schwitters' experience in the construction of his Cathedral. In "Identity Experience: Early Avatarism," I examine Schwitters as an early example of a new type of identity formation, based on Huelsenbeck's "New Man" manifesto[188] and Ulmer's suggestions regarding "concept avatar."[189] I argue that in the construction of the Merzbau, Schwitters is not rationalizing. Instead, he seems to be practicing what Ulmer calls "flash reason," based on an experience of an eternal "now-time" (moment) which reflects the Merzbau's programmatically mutating character. The notions of "prudence," 'descent," "joke," "measure" and "memory" that Ulmer uses to describe the new type of identity in the electrate era, are revisited in the purpose of articulating Schwitter's experience inside the Merzbau as an early example of agile avatarism.

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[188] After Huelsenbeck arrived in Berlin in January 1917 and united with Raoul Hausmann, George Grosz, Franz Jung, Walter Mehring and other to found Berlin Dada, he contributed to several magazines. In Wieland's Herzfelde's *Die Neue Jugend*, he published his manifesto "The Neue Mensch." Kleinschmidt in Huelsenbeck : xxiv

[189] In "Avatar Emergency," Ulmer defines avatar as "that part of you inhabiting cyberspace (for lack of a better term)." He postulates that everyone meets the avatar they already have, that they already are, now that it may be augmented within the digital apparatus (electracy) beyond branding to become prostheses of counsel and decision. The goal of his book is to make avatar a practice of digital education. The goal of this section of my thesis is to use Ulmer's suggestions regarding the concept, tradition, and practice of "avatar" in order to talk about Schwitters' activities in the Merzbau as an early manifestation of this "something that is happening to us and through us that goes by the name avatar." Ulmer, *Avatar Emergency*, ix.

5.2. Existential Condition: Absurdity

5.2.1. An Attempt at Reconciliation: How to Look at Schwitters, Today.

> But instead of being grateful to this man to the happiness he gave to us and all his unregarded objects, for the inexhaustible wit he applied to the juxtaposition of tram-tickets, nail-files, cheese-paper and girl's faces, for his many poems, apophthegms, stories, plays, in which the loftiest sense went hand in hand with the profoundest nonsense - and were united in deathless language as boy and girl are united in spring time - instead for being grateful for all this, we allowed him to die unrecognized, in poverty and exile, and protected only by an English girl, Edith Thomas, and an English farmer by the name of Pierce.[190]
>
> — Hans Richter, *Schwitters The Man*, 1965

In 1965, Hans Richter wrote a chronicle of Dada, in which he expressed the desire of placing Schwitters "in the perspective in which history will see him."[191] Richter's writings had already been imbued by the desire to articulate a discourse about Dada as a mindset that besides its historically specific attempt to shock the bourgeoisie could be seen to have significant implications for the present and future. This endeavor of pointing out a constructive attitude inherent in the dadaist mayhem of the twenties was characteristic of the dadaists who addressed Dada from a later moment in time. Richter contended that the real motive force of Dada was not revolt as a value in itself, but the question of "where next?"[192]

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[190] Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, 138.

[191] Richter attempted to "set Schwitters, and his work, in the perspective in which history will see him," by focusing on the overwhelming nature of his art and the peculiar character of his being. He wrote that Schwitters was a totally free spirit, which was ruled by Nature, and whose art and life were "a living epic." Ibid.,138-139.

In 1966, Huelsenbeck wrote that even though Dada had started mainly as an artistic reaction and moral revolution, and he could now see the philosophy of an entire age.[193] Dealing with Dada, according to Huelsenbeck, meant dealing with a new existential condition of man within a world of absurdity and constant conflict. In this section, I bring Schwitters and Dada, mainly Huelsenbeck, into an imaginary dialogue, with the vision of doing what Richter suggested: establishing a different perspective to see Schwitters from the current moment in time.

By means of an attempt at reconciliation, I invoke Huelsenbeck's later interpretations of Dadaism to talk about the bizarre architectural environment of the Merzbau. I see the transformation of Schwitters' bourgeois residence in Hanover as the result of a very consistent, or one might even say logical process of transforming ever-evolving images of the world out of the ruins of the given. I read Schwitters' activity as a systematic concretization of a profoundly personal and artistic revolution based on the conviction that in the ashes of the destroyed lay new images of the world. I therefore see the Merzbau as an enterprise of exploring into these images: an incubator, as I will later explain further, in which Schwitters prepared and tested a new individuated reality, the internal mechanisms and workings of which, were however universal.[194]

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[192] Richter wrote: "Our real motive force was not rowdiness for its own sake, or contradiction and revolt in themselves, but the question (basic then, as it is now), 'where next?' " Ibid., 9.

[193] Huelsenbeck wrote: "Dada, mainly at the outset at the Cabaret Voltaire and then later in Berlin, was a violently *moral* reaction. This beginning of dada was really a humanitarian reaction against mass murder in Europe, the political abuse of technology [...]. I would like to say that dada developed into an artistic reaction after starting as a moral revolution and remaining one - even when the artistic question seemed to dominate." In "The Case of Dada" written in 1966 and published in Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer,* 137.

5.2.2. Eulogy from a Sworn Enemy: Dada as Personal *Weltanschauung*

> We are and were the protestants of individuality. We lived and still live on the stage of the world in a state of absurdity. Dada is the philosophy of our age, and this is why all artistic people have to cope with Dada if they want to create something essential and characteristic.[195]
>
> — Huelsenbeck, *The Case of Dada*, 1966

Huelsenbeck had proclaimed his first dadaist manifestations against the inhumanity of the war "with a revolver."[196] *En Avant Dada!* (1920), written in interwar Berlin, was a typically aggressive political manifesto, explosive in style and content, declaring the demands for "the international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of radical Communism."[197] Under the battle cry "Dada!" Huelsenbeck and his comrades praised freedom from all dogmas.

A few months before Schwitters' escape to Norway in the spring of 1936, Huelsenbeck managed to flee Germany and start his new life in the United States, as Dr. Charles R.

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[194] A note that appeared in the catalogue of the 1936-37 New York Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Fantastic Art, dada and Surrealism," described the Merzbau as "a model monument to humanity." Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 7. I use this phrase without assuming that it captures the original meaning of the specific note.

[195] Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, 138.

[196] In *En Avant Dada!* Huelsenbeck wrote: "For a while my dream had been to make literature with a gun in my pocket." in "The New Man - Armed with the Weapons of Doubt and Defiance," Introduction by Hans J. Kleinschmidt, Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, xvii.

[197] Rudolf Kuenzli in the Foreword to the Paperback edition of Huelsenbeck's memoirs. Ibid., xi.

Hulbeck.[198] Faced with the threat of imminent arrest, the change of his name reflected a deep desire to relinquish Dada. Huelsenbeck cut all contacts with his past. He lived penniless for two years upon his arrival until he finally received his New York State license to practice medicine, through the personal intervention of Albert Einstein. He started a private practice in psychiatry, and took part in founding the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis.[199]

From 1936 to 1945, Huelsenbeck did not write or publish anything. In 1949, one year after Schwitters' death, he launched a new "Dada Manifesto"[200] and started writing his memoirs. The "Memoirs of a Dada Drummer" were Hulbeck's re-writing of the history of Dada concerned with the question of whether Dada still lived. Written in the Cold War climate of severe censorship in America, the memoirs were probably also the result of a desire to reinterpret Dada as a politically safe search for a new art, guided by Huelsenbeck's fear of being discovered and arrested as a former Bolshevist. After all, he had been already investigated by the FBI after Robert Motherwell published *The Dada Painters and Poets*,[201] in which Huelsenbeck and Raoul Haussmann were presented to demand Communism.[202] Dada *had* to be re-interpreted as anticommunist. Huelsenbeck *had* to transform himself to Huelbeck.[203]

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[198] Kuenzli quotes Huelsenbeck: "All people's pasts are painful. You have to lose the past sometimes in order to find it." For Kuenzli, "Hulbeck" was symbolic of Huelsenbeck's emerging American self who hoped to become a member of a new, hopefully better, society. The name change signified his intention to make a new beginning. Ibid., xxvii.

[199] Ibid.

[200] Huelsenbeck, Richard "Dada Manifesto" Wittenborn, Schultz, New York, 1951. This was inserted in Motherwell's "Dada Painters and Poets" along with an introduction to Dada by Tristan Tzara. Motherwell, Robert. *The Dada painters and poets; an anthology. Texts by Arp [and others] Illus. after Arp [and others] And documents, objects, journals, reviews, manifestoes, photographs, catalogues, invitations, etc.* n.p.: New York, Wittenborn, Schultz [1951], 1951.

[201] Ibid.

[202] In *En Avant Dada!*, Huelsenbeck wrote that the Dadaists in Berlin needed a program of action. This program was drawn up by Raoul Hausmann and Huelsenbeck. In it they consciously adopted a political position, as they demanded: "The international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of radical Communism" and "the immediate expropriation of property (socialization)." Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, xi.

An apologetic tone covered Huelsenbeck's endeavor of doing what he was not supposed to be doing: interpreting Dada. Regardless of what brought his later interpretations into being, Huelsenbeck's new dada manifesto and his memoirs attempted to convey that the real essence of Dada was individuated worldview. These writings, focusing on the constructive, positive aspects of Dada as individual creativity and freedom from conceptual dogmas, are in this section regarded as a sort of unintended apologia functioning as Schwitters' redemption, without arguing whether they were or were not intended as such. Huelsenbeck by the name of Hulbeck declared that noisy dadaist nonsense was not mere anarchy but a demonstration of how a certain anarchism might lead to something positive: creation.

In the "The Case of Dada" written in 1966, Huelsenbeck wrote: "We were never committed to Communism or any other ism; our reaction was personal." Dada, in Dr. Huelbeck's mind and words, was not a political affair. In fact, the political character of Berlin Dada seemed completely foreign to him. "We never threw anyone out of the *club*," he continues, "because of a person's unsuitable marriage or unsuitable *Weltanschauung*; we let each individual believe, think, and act as he liked."[204] Huelsenbeck talked about Dada was not a theory of art and life, it was "life itself." For him, it was only with Dada that art finally broke the boundaries that separated it from life, and attempted to have a direct impact on reality. Huelsenbeck described that in contrast to the Futurists who depicted motion and speed in a technological world, and the

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[203] In his autobiography entitled "Reise bis and Ende der Freiheit" Huelsenbeck told the story of one of his patients who discovered that Dr. Charles Hulbeck and Richard Huelsenbeck were one and the same person, and sent copies of his early Dada program to the FBI. Huelsenbeck's lawyer managed to prove that the accuser was insane, and Huelsenbeck escaped arrest. However, this event had already cost him "much money, sweat, many sleepless nights, and a deep anxiety about the guarantee of political freedom in America." Ibid., xii.

[204] Ibid., 138.

Cubists who, as "the first relativists," dealt with what it meant to see the world from different sides, Dada had nothing to do with representing how things are or how things are perceived. "The dadaists were different," declared Huelsenbeck.[205] Through a first hand engagement with the very nature of being-in-the-world, to think and feel Dada meant to deal with a world of constant change by creating a personal *Weltanschauung*: a self-constructed reality accessible by the means of its creator.

It is interesting that in Huelsenbeck's collection of memoirs, Schwitters' name comes up only in an essay entitled "Dada and Existentialism" and written in 1957. Building upon Jean Paul Sartre's self-claim of being "the new dada,"[206] Huelsenbeck talked about Dada as an existential attitude of creative irrationalism.[207] He explained that the destructive war had opened up "the chance for a free decision,"[208] a decision for an individual response of a "yes" or a "no" to conventionalism, an enemy "not at some faraway frontier but int their own home."[209] For Huelsenbeck, Dada was a simple but heroic "no" that was powerful enough to raise public fury and brought with it the danger of lynching.[210] In this essay, Huelsenbeck mentions the antagonism with Schwitters. Specifically, he confesses that Schwitters' Merz-art would have been to Berlin Dada's "complete satisfaction" if it focused more on the remodeling of life rather than art itself, which was, according to Huelsenbeck, of such prime importance to Schwitters, "as the forest is to the forester." Huelsenbeck seems to have wanted to tone down the antagonism. He actually recognized Schwitters as "a genius in a frock coat."[211]

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[205] Ibid., 137.

[206] "Dada and Existentialism" in *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer.* Ibid., 143.

[207] Huelsenbeck wrote: "The existential attitude, as we know it from Leon Chestov, Berdyaev, and Sartre, this creative tension face to face with life, creative irrationalism which assigns the same place to both good and bad." Ibid., 145.

[208] Ibid., 144.

[209] Ibid.

[210] Huelsenbeck recounts that it was a common situation that the audience would raise "to their feet and move toward the rostrum in order to hurl themselves" at him. Ibid., 145.

The German dada drummer concluded his essay on existentialism by defining Dada as a symptom of a great spiritual revolt: "existential revolt" that postulated for a reforming of man in a new world, for a new type of existence. Huelsenbeck's climaxed with the manifestation that dada was "a problem of personality."[212] In a later section [5.4.1. The New Man], I will argue that Schwitters can be actually seen as the personification of the "New Man" that Huelsenbeck described in 1917.[213]

5.2.3. The Age of Anxiety: Abandoned Man and Creativity

> Dada is what is occurring now in the heart of man in the street. Then only few felt it, now everybody feels it on his back: the fear of the irrational.[214]
>
> — Richard Huelsenbeck, *Postscript to Dada,* 1958

This section recapitulates the main issues raised by Huelsenbeck in his talk "The Metaphysics of Assemblage" at the "Art of Assemblage" symposium in 1961, the objective of which was to discuss certain ideas, attitudes and postulates gathered around the objects of assemblage that were exhibited at the respective exhibition and reflect on the wide application of the term.[215] Seitz pointed out the breadth of style of the objects exhibited as well as the spread of interest in assemblage on the part of painters and sculptors who were previously working in other mediums, but now made works using such techniques.[216] Diverse objects from diverse artists had been included in the exhibition, such as Duchamp's Ready-Mades, Schwitters' Merz-images, Rauschenberg's combined paintings, and many others. The symposium was organized to discuss the implications of including real object and materials in the surface of the painting, on the nature of the painting itself, as well as the nature of reality.[217] On the one hand, assemblage seemed to expand the range of artistic possibilities and at the same time to attempt to bridge the gap between art and life.[218]

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[211] Ibid., 146.

[212] Huelsenbeck wrote: "In our hands, then, dada became a problem of personality. It was fighting for a creative life, for growth and becoming, for what may only be divined, not what may be calculated in advance. In this divination, art was but a part, just as existence, in the judgement of Heidegger, is only one possible form of being." Ibid., 148.

[213] "Der Neue Mensch" was published by the Malik-Verlag, in Berlin, in 1917. There is no complete English translation. For partial translation, see Introduction of Huelsenbeck's *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer,* Ibid., xxx-xxxii.

[214] Ibid., 135.

A highly qualified panel was put together to discuss "the bristling points and shape edges" included in works made in an "unorthodox" way.[219] The panel was comprised by University of Texas Professor Roger Shattuck, psychoanalyst and former dadaist poet Richard

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[215] In the press release for the exhibition, Seitz defined works of assemblage as "combined objects made out of diverse materials that had lost their provenance and initial signification." The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street New York 19, N.Y. Press Release : No. 117, October 10, 1961.

[216] William Seitz, "The Art of Assemblage" (1961) Historic audio file from MOMA <http://clocktower.org/drupal/play/7692/show/the-art-of-assemblage-1961> 03:26.

[217] In the "Foreword and Acknowledgments" of the publication that accompanied the "Art of Assemblage" exhibition, Seitz quoted Margaret Miller, director of the exhibition of collages held at MOMA in 1948, who wrote that: "collage cannot be defined adequately as merely a technique of cutting and pasting , for its significance lies not in its technical eccentricity but in its relevance to two basic questions which have been raised by twentieth century art: the nature of reality and the nature of the painting itself. Collage has been the means through which the artist incorporates reality in the picture without imitating it." Seitz, William Chapin. *The Art of Assemblage*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 6.

[218] Cooper, Philip "Assemblage" in MOMA's *Art Terms*. Source: Oxford University Press, 2009, available at: <http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10057>

[219] William Seitz, "The Art of Assemblage" (1961) Historic audio file from MOMA, 03:15.

Huelsenbeck, "an-artist" Marcel Duchamp,[220] neo-dadaist artist Robert Rauschenberg, and art critic Lawrence Alloway. The discussion sought to reveal the contemplative side of the objects of assemblage, inquire into the "spirit" of Dada, and make projections to what Alloway described as "the collage environment" of the contemporary city.[221]

Even though the rest of the panel members attempted exquisite analyses of assemblage as juxtaposition, shock, or jolts in perception,[222] Huelsenbeck, aged 69 at the time, did not say a single phrase about the artistic technique. His talk, which pointed to the ideas raised by the *existence* of the objects of assemblage, rather than the objects *themselves*, is revoked as a theoretical basis for addressing issues related to the existential situation of man in a catastrophically industrialized world which came out of two world-wide conflicts.

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[220] Marcel Duchamp gave himself the title of the "an-artist" ("no artist at all" according to Seitz) to convey the "anaesthetic" intentions behind his creations. At the time he was 74 years old, a former satrap at the College de Pataphysique, who had already given up art to devote his life to playing chess. Duchamp gave a brief almost autobiographical statement, that had no ambitions of speaking any truth about modern art, Dada, or the present condition. He talked about the choice of his ready-mades which was never dictated by taste, but was based on visual indifference, what he called "complete anaesthesia." Duchamp also proclaimed that he decided to limit the production of his ready-mades to a small number yearly, to rescue them from the "contamination" of art, which he regarded as a "habit-forming drug", a "sedative" that pleased or displeased with its taste, but in any case put the spirit into sleep. Marcel Duchamp, "The Art of Assemblage" (1961) Historic audio file from MOMA, 45:57 - 50:38. As he later denoted in his interviews to Calvin Tomkins, this "very short thing" that he presented that night at MOMA explained *everything* about the intentions behind his readymades. Tomkins, Calvin. Marcel Duchamp: *The Afternoon Interviews*. Brooklyn, NY : Badlands Unlimited, 2013.

[221] Seitz devoted a chapter of the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition catalogue to "The Collage Environment." Seitz : 72. Alloway distinguished between assemblage as quotation and as organization. In the first part of his talk, he talked about the process of integrating a fragment of the living environment as a "quotation" in the body of an artwork as a "jolt" in pictorial surfaces that does not disrupt the overall unity of the work. This type of art is the one Lawrence seeked to attach the least importance to. In the second part of his talk, Alloway talked about the cases of Schwitters and Cornell, who used assemblage as an organizational principle, in an almost fethihist way, that resembles the way that the source material, the fragment occurs in the environment. Schwitters made a "personal museum" of what "we all have but we throw away." Alloway explained that everyone may have something that Schwitters used in a collage. Assemblage used in this way seemed to him like "border art." "You have to settle the question each time you look at an assemblage, is it art, how is it art, I know the object already, what has happened to it that makes it art here," he explained. "I consider this border art, consistently "problematical" in this way," Alloway concluded.

[222] Roger Shattuck, 38 years old and Professor of Romance and Languages at the University of Texas at the time, also writer and translator of Guillaume Apollinaire and Alfred Jarry, and "provéditeur" at the Collège de 'Pataphysique, was the first speaker of the night. He talked about "The Mode of Juxtaposition." In his introductory exposition, Shattuck recapitulated ideas documented elsewhere in his work, concerning phenomena that for him could help demonstrate the "changes of temper" related to the advent of collage. These phenomena were classified by him as "the arts of juxtaposition". According to Shattuck, the technique of "juxtaposition" has always present in artistic and literary production. Yet up until the advent of collage, it was practiced as an exception and in a way that did not constitute a challenge for the unity of the artwork as an organic composition. Shattuck distinguished between the juxtaposition of homogeneous and heterogeneous elements, as well as between two types of reaction towards juxtaposition: aesthetic zero and critical tension. Shattuck, Roger "The Metaphysics of Assemblage" at "The Art of Assemblage" Symposium (1961) Historic audio file from MOMA, 08:20 - 27:46

Huelsenbeck started his talk provocatively, with a joke about his career in psychiatry. He proclaimed that being a psychiatrist was about the last profession that one could have at the time, as all other professions would sooner or later be eliminated.[223] Huelsenbeck used "dada" and "assemblage" as summary-words to talk about the state of being in a world, in which "all crucial concepts are bound to break down." He described that watching all morals, religions, philosophies and ideologies "crumble" during the two World Wars, man lost all confidence in the values and systems of thought that assisted him in making sense of the world. This existential condition he called "nothingness."

For Huelsenbeck, art was "always and at all times," two things: according to Carl Jung "an archetypal urge," and second "an expression of its time of the period of history and culture it is made in." Huelsenbeck therefore saw the language of the dadaist revolution as a response of "the abandoned man" who experienced emptiness after observing "all pillars of society and morals" collapse, and who felt the necessity of creating "something better emotionally, morally and aesthetically." Huelsenbeck concluded with a wish, which can now be seen as prophecy. He hoped that "out of the Age of Anxiety and Uncertainty, something entirely *new* will arise."

In the next section, I will describe Merz as Schwitters' creative stance towards abandonment, nothingness and collapse, as I believe that the *new* that Huelsenbeck hoped for, had already risen.

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[223] Huelsenbeck, Richard "The Metaphysics of Assemblage" at "The Art of Assemblage" Symposium (1961) Historic audio file from MOMA, 30:00. All quotes in this section come from the same source.

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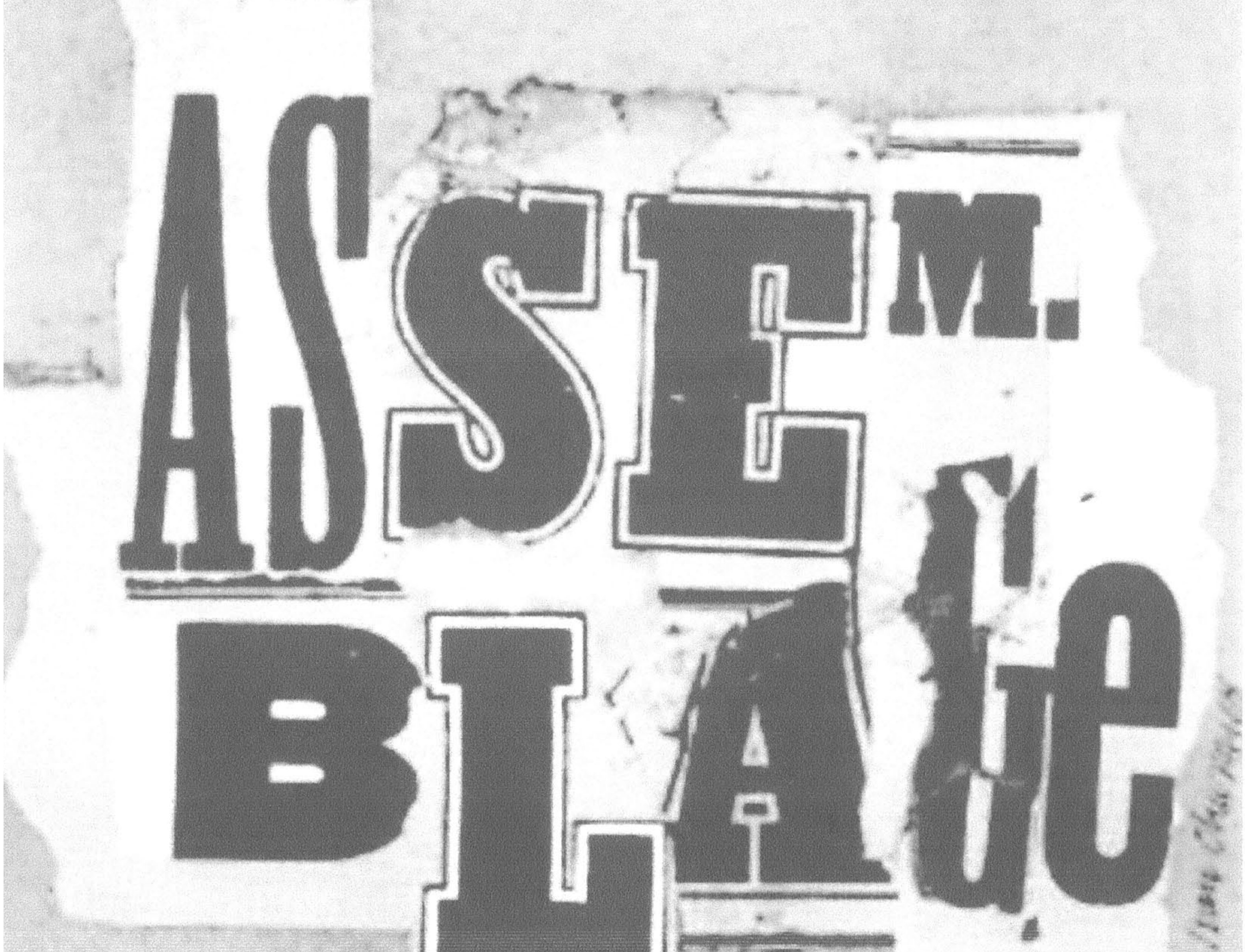
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5.2.4. The Case of Merz: Transforming the Unpleasant into its Opposite

For nearly thirty years until his death in 1948, the German artist Kurt Schwitters constructed environments for himself: self-contained worlds, places of safety, nest. Everywhere he went he stockpiled materials and built them into three-dimensional sculptural edifices.[224]

Clare O' Dowd, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau*, 2009

A non-translatable word-fragment, Merz became a device for Schwitters' art and life, and was undoubtedly the most significant and enduring episode in his creative activity.[225] It was not a movement in the traditional sense, but more like a personal methodology, a unique approach to assemblage that accompanied the majority of his activities.[226] Almost all accounts of Schwitters' life and art put significant focus on his shift to abstract art. Merz is at large regarded as his personal and artistic revelation. However, even though the very quick expansion of Schwitters' artistic horizons in the direction of collage has been amply documented, there is absolute lack of a concrete contemplation on *why* this happened.[227]

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[224] Clare O'Dowd, "Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*: Chaos, Compulsion and Creativity" in *Moveable Type* Vol. 5, 2009 <http://www.moveabletypejournal.org/files/7813/8663/0702/Clare_ODowd.pdf>, 1.

[225] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 11.

[226] Richter recounts that "When he [Schwitters] was not writing poetry, he was pasting up his collages. When he was not pasting, he was building his column, washing his feet in the same water as his guinea-pigs, warming his paste-pot in the bed, feeding the tortoise in the rarely-used bathtub, declaiming, drawing, printing, cutting up magazines, entraining his friends, publishing Merz, writing letters, loving, designing all Gunther Wagner's printing and publicity material (for a regular fee), teaching academic drawing, painting really terrible portraits, which he loved, and which he then cut up and used piecemeal in abstract collages, assembling bits of broken furniture into MERZ pictures, shouting to Helmechen, his wife, to attend to Lehmann, his son, inviting his friends to very frugal luncheons.. and in the midst of all this de never forgot, wherever he went, to pick up discarded rubbish and stow it in his pockets. All this he did with an instinctive alterness of spirit, an *intensity*, that never failed." Richter, *Dada Art and anti-Art*, 139.

[227] Webster argues: "Exactly why, where and when Kurt Schwitters turned to collage is impossible to determine." Webster : 39. Referring to Schwitters' turn to collage, Clare O'Dowd also contends: "No critic has successfully put a finger on *why* and *how* this happened." She also cites other authors who merely acknowledged that Schwitters used collage, but not precisely why or how he came to do so. See Schmalenbach : 89, Elderfield : 28 & 35 and Dietrich : 18-19. Clare O'Dowd, "Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*: Chaos, Compulsion and Creativity" in *Moveable Type* Vol. 5, 2009 <http://www.moveabletypejournal.org/files/7813/8663/0702/Clare_ODowd.pdf>, 3 & footnote 10.

In this section, Schwitters' artistic practices which he intended as a powerful outcry at a world that was falling apart and Germany's disastrously polarized post-WWI society,[228] are associated with a deep-rooted coping strategy of dealing with chaos and destruction by raising them into a programmatic plan of action. I believe that the significance of such an association, does not lie in its explanatory power for the case of Schwitters alone, but in its wider suggestiveness with regard to Huelsenbeck's later quests for individual creativity as a way of dealing with *nothingness*, the existential condition that was described in the previous section.

Merz can be seen as Schwitters' instinctual response to the fragmentation and collapse he experienced at multiple levels: The idealized form of nature he had cultivated was devastated when his garden in Isernhagen was destroyed. The world as it was known before the War had irreversibly vanished. The death of his infant son, the dismissal from the incredulous Club Dada, the Nazi threat, the constant uprooting from exile to exile, all these incidents and situations brought about a necessity of dealing with destruction. Schwitters did so by celebrating havoc: he started collecting bits from the world that had fallen apart and associated them on the surfaces of his collages, the body of his columns, the space of his studio. His intention was not to rebuild what had been destroyed, but to create a new type of order: a dynamic order that contained disorder and contingency and was therefore resilient to destruction.

In "Chaos, Compulsion and Creativity," O'Dowd associates Schwitters' use of assemblage as "a complex strategy to remain in command of his own world."[229] Anna Freud's analysis of Defense Mechanisms formed the basis of O'Dowd's psychoanalytic perspective on

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[228] Schwitters explicitly wrote what brought Merz into existence. "I felt myself freed and had to shout my jubilation out to the world." See previous section: "The Spirit of Merz: Reformative Act rooted in Motivational Drives."

[229] O'Dowd, *Chaos, Compulsion, Creativity,* 3.

Schwitters' art, and more specifically her examination of his artistic practice in the context of compulsive behavior. Anna Freud talked about a powerful process of transforming the unpleasant into its antithesis in order to make it controllable. She explained that in order for the ego to master the aggressive instinctual demands that accompany drives such as jealousy, mortification, pain and mourning, the ego has to transform them: they must undergo "metamorphosis."[230]

This principle of dynamic metamorphosis according to which artworks remained subject to future alterations, lied in the basis of Merz. An exact antonym to "static end," Merz celebrated form through its absolute devaluation which reflected the profound recognition that claims to Truth are futile. Merz can therefore be seen as Schwitters' response to the problem of "form," both aesthetically and metaphysically: a formal language that was subjected to constant change. Isabel Schulz has aptly pointed to the constructive character of Merz according to which "loss" was a form of "gain."[231] For Schwitters, "forming" entailed a process of "disassociation" (*entformeln*)[232] through which things lose their individual character and original meaning, and become "indifferent."[233] The objects (or fragments) selected for inclusion in Merz should first undergo a process of transcription into pure "material-elements"[234] that were then positioned in new contexts of signification, based on paradox and contradiction, rather than rationality. The Merz-works that resulted were then transcribed anew into "indifferent" material elements to be re-Merzed, and so on.[235]

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[230] "Love, longing, jealousy, mortification, pain and mourning accompany the sexual wishes, hatred, anger and rage the impulses of aggression; if the instinctual demands with which they are associated are to be warded off, these affects must submit to all the various measures to which the ego resorts in its efforts to master them, i.e. they must undergo metamorphosis. Whenever transformation of an affect occurs, whether in analysis or outside of it, the ego has been at work and we have an opportunity of studying its operations." Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 34. Cited in O'Dowd, *Chaos, Compulsion, and Creativity*, 2.

[231] Orchard, *In the Beginning was Merz*, 246.

[232] Kurt Schwitters, in *Merz 7*, January 1924, title page. Cited in Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, 247.

[233] In 1929 Schwitters wrote in the American literary magazine *Little Review*: "The happiest moment of my life was when I discovered that everything is really indifferent." Isabel Sculz notes that the dismissal of meaningful content in the materials was of crucial importance to the emergence of Merz. In that sense, the essence of Merz was an absolute lack of inhibition, a complete lack of prejudice when it comes to choosing the art medium. The act of Merz should therefore not be understood as an ordering of particular materials or contents, but as an opening-up and expansion of art and of the expressive potential of the medium being used. Isabel Schulz, "'What Would Life Be Without Merz?' On the Evolution and meaning Of Kurt Schwitters' Concept of Art," in Orchard, *In the Beginning Was Merz*, 246.

The compositional principle of Merz was repeated by Schwitters almost compulsively,[2] as if he was motivated by a profoundly emotional drive rather than a conceptual framework. I see the Merzbau as the epitome of Schwitters' engagement with the uncontrollable through an appropriation of the ruins of a dissolved unity (collapsed reality) and with the vision of spotting constructive alternatives within the unstable and the menacing. In this context, the later constructivist phase of the Merzbau appears as the ultimate logical consequence of an attempt to separate and protect one's system of cosmology from external interference, rather than an impersonal purifying phase. I see Schwitters' abstractions as nonetheless expressionistic. His constructivism reflected sorrow and pain, it was an act of transforming melancholy into a utopian architecture of constant change in which the trauma of destruction was confronted and healed.

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[234] "I demand the principle of equality of all materials., equality between able-bodied people, whistling wire mesh and brain pumps. I demand the total fusion of all materials from welding torches to violins. I demand the most scrupulous rape of technology for the attainment of this fusion." Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbuhne* (1919), in Schwitters, *I is Style*, 91.

[235] In a letter to Raoul Hausmann in 1946, Schwitters wrote: "When it's that crook Picasso, you want to know what artist he's plagiarizing today. But if it's me, you ask what I've been re-working today." Adrian Notz, *Merz-World.*

[236] In his *Courier Dada*, Hausmann narrates a trip to Czechoslovakia with Hannah Hoch, Schwitters, and his wife, Helma. On their way to Lobosice, they got lost. Schwitters suggested that Hausmann and Hoch went over to the near town and ask where Lobosice was and whether there was a hotel where they could spend the night. When they came back: "Under an apple-green evening sky, against a high black embankment, burned a single feeble street-light. There stood a statue; it was a woman with her arms stretched out in front of her and draped with shirts and underclothes. She stood there like Lot's pillar of salt, while on the ground knelt a man, surrounded by shoes and articles of clothing, before him a suitcase full of papers, like the intestines of a slaughtered animal. He was doing something to apiece of cardboard with scissors and tube of adhesive. The two people were Kurt and Helma Schwitters. The picture is one I shall never forget: these two figures in the great dark Nothingness, totally absorbed in themselves. As I approached I asked "Kurt, what are you doing?" Kurt looked up and replied "It occurred to me that collages 30 B I needs a little piece of blue paper in the lower left-hand corner. I shan't be a moment." Such a man was Kurt Schwitters." Richter, *Dada Art and anti-Art*, 151.

5.3. Metaphysics and Logics: *Merz* and *Jouissance*

5.3.1. The axis of Pleasure and Pain

In electracy we must learn to think and write *bliss sense.*[237]

— Gregory Ulmer, *Avatar Emergency*, 2013

For Ulmer, electrate reality is organized around the modalities of pleasure and pain (or attraction and repulsion) and is ontologized by means of aesthetic practices.[238] Schwitters' acts of associating Merz materials inside the Merzbau, can be seen as a process of accessing and experiencing *jouissance*.[239] In fact, the idea of "erotic misery," which describes the certain experience that Schwitters is having when constructing the Merzbau, is almost a paraphrase of the Lacanian term. Also, the death drive associated with *jouissance* was a crucial component in the evolution of the Merzbau, which originated in a plinth carrying the death mask of Schwitters' infant son.

According to Ulmer, in electrate metaphysics, the *thing*[240] changes its metaphysical connotation: the illusion of solidity, isolation, and fixity of the object is relieved. Schwitters' substitution of the "object" by a "process" in the case of the Merzbau seems to correspond to

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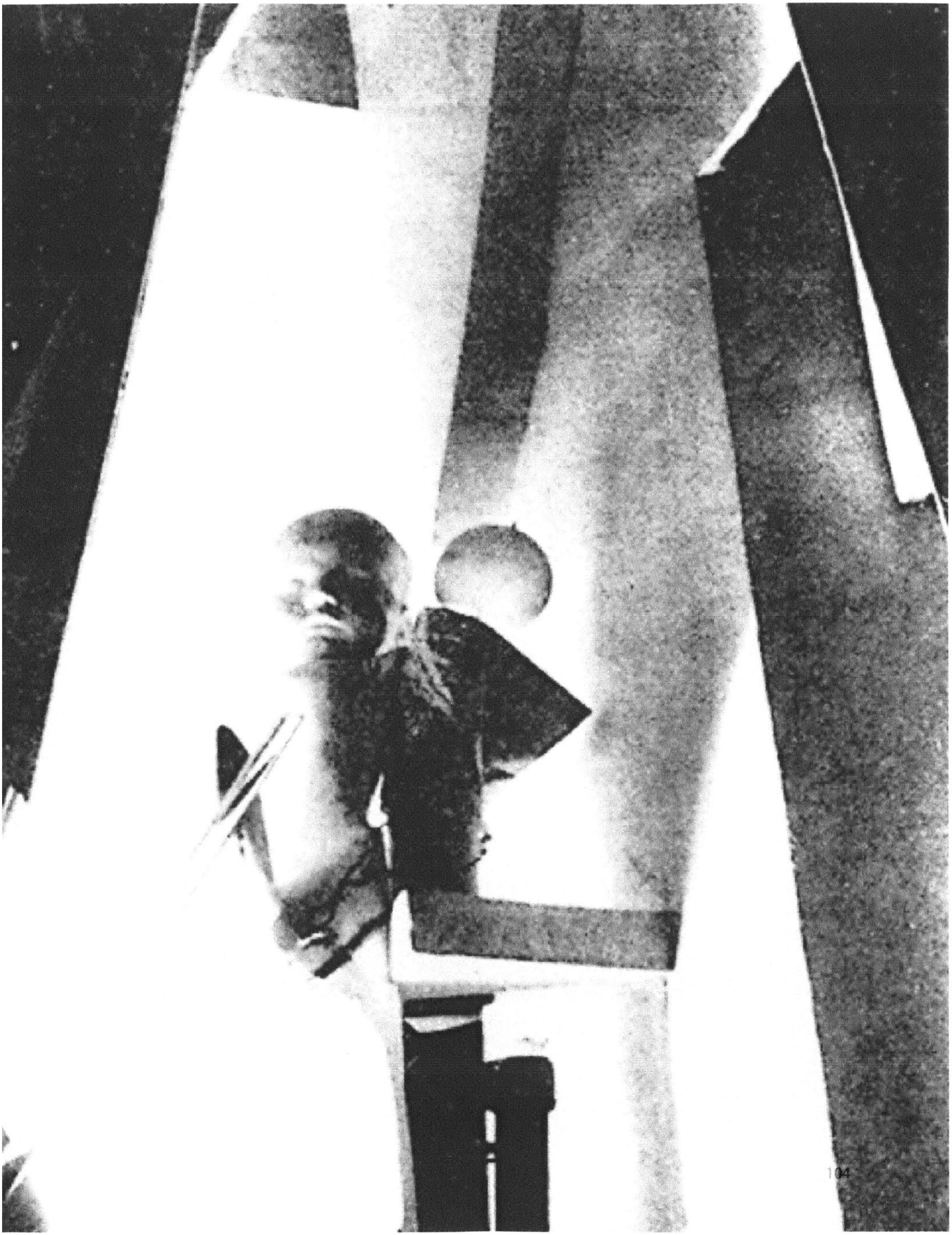
[237] Ulmer, *Avatar Emergency,* 163-164.

[238] Ulmer writes: "In electracy, the axis of pleasure and pain is opened to ontology" Ibid., 150.

[239] Ibid., 163.

[240] Ulmer argues that Aristotle is credited with inventing the "thing." He explains that when Lacan took up Heidegger's and Freud's projects on metaphysics and the boundary object respectively, he created another understanding of "thing" and another "object" that fundamentally transforms ontology. Ulmer writes: "To use the term "ontology" here is to emphasize that his "thing" and "object" open a new dimension of the Real, make this dimension exist as reality, to be developed on behalf of human well-being (or not), just as literate metaphysics opened up the material dimension that historically became science." Ibid., 160.



Ulmer's description of electrate reality. Schwitters deactivated the semantics of the objects of the world (he made them "indifferent") and transformed them into elements that could be infinitely associated with one another. The representational link to reality was disrupted, and meaning was no longer a property of the objects themselves. Instead, it belonged to the processes of their associations. Schwitters' activities proclaimed the superiority of shaping over the selection of material, which was inessential. I see the construction of the Merzbau as Schwitters' act of "writing with the objects of the world" based on individual working forces of the creator who becomes a manipulator of associations, instead of signs. It was not the properties of the objects but the actual process of reshaping and distributing that was of significance.

The caves and grottoes of the Merzbau were Schwitters' shelter and retreat, located according to Dorothea Dietrich, "in the juncture between the wilderness and the tamed." In them, Schwitters explored the gamut of the passions and preoccupations of his age, "everything from the crude relish for raw sex to the utopian yearnings for noble abstract forms,"[241] and was determined to reveal the underlying pathologies that support the most profound impulses of religion, eroticism, violence, disease, insanity, and death.

5.3.2. Merz-Logics

In his 1918 "Dada manifesto," Tristan Tzara defined Dada as an "absolute and unquestionable faith in every god that is the immediate product of spontaneity."[242] When asked to describe Merz, Ernst Schwitters referred to his father's highly detailed "instructions for use,"[243] his informative statements by means of declarations of principle of what Merz-art was. Huelsenbeck described the Merzbau as "a mixture of hopeless disarray and meticulous accuracy."[244] In the *Ararat* of 1920, subtitled "Essays, notes and sketches on the subject of new Art", Schwitters talked about Merz as "a liberation from all shackles that impede the production of art."[245] However, the freedom he referred to was neither nihilistic nor random, but a freedom resulting from "strict artistic discipline."[246] Despite the anti-systemic declarations of Dada, all the afore-mentioned statements point to the existence of some kind of logic or discipline in the artistic pursuits of Dada and specifically Merz.

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[241] "Kurt Merz Schwitters by Gwendolen Webster" in http://www.stunned.org/merz2.htm.

[242] "Dada Manifesto" by Tristan Tzara <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/DadaSurrealism/DadaSurrReadings/TzaraD1.pdf>

In this section, I argue that Schwitters' thought and action during the construction of the Merzbau were at the same time completely irrational and entirely reasonable. The Merzbau did not *mean* anything. There was no organic unity in the sense of leading coherently from one element to the other, but a constant juxtaposition of jolts. However, the production of the Cathedral corresponded to Schwitters' personal metaphysics and embodied the logics of the Merz-reality he propagated. In *Avatar Emergency*, Ulmer quotes Roger Shattuck who described the process of signification in the case of montage, which appears as an arbitrary juxtaposition, but is in fact reasoning, yet a different kind of sensing than the one included in rationalizing. Shattuck describes that "the mutually conflicting elements of montage are to be conceived not successively but simultaneously, to converge in our minds as contemporaneous events, the conflict between them prevents us from fitting them smoothly end to end."[247]

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[243] Schwitters, *Schwitters in Exile,* 20-24.

[244] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* 145. Cited in Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* 88.

[245] "Merz" 1920. "Merz" (dated Dec. 19, 1920). Der Ararat, vol. 2., no.2 (Jan. 1921), pp 3-9. Translated by Ralph Manheim in Motherwell 1951, pp. 55-65 (LW-5, pp. 74-82; 404-409.)

[246] Ibid.

Ulmer argues that in electracy, reason is twisted and turned in labyrinths of associations. He uses the term "flash reason" to refer to an act of making decisions at the speed of light, with the purpose of bridging the aphorisms of thought and the anecdote of life.[248] Ulmer also uses the notion of "hole logics" which he defines as a mode of information management according to which the subject reasons beyond definition or formula, adapted to their own case, to access an experience beyond literal signification.[249] "Flash reason" and "Hole logic" seem to best describe the mode of associative and affect-based rather than analytical reasoning in which Schwitters engaged while constructing the Cathedral. The outcome of his associative reasoning was an incomprehensible construction.

The Merzbau was at the same time the materialization of Schwitters' dream reality and a material record of his life praxis, that grew with him, "physically and spiritually," through every epoch of his life. Below, I attempt to extract the Merz-logics of the Merzbau in terms of a never-ceasing process of transubstantiation and associating.

First, the construction included a process of alchemy and transubstantiation, through which Schwitters chose, distributed and reshaped his materials in space. I have already mentioned that he had no inhibitions in choosing his art materials. It is however worthy the repetition, I believe, to quote some descriptions from the people who witnessed the diversity of materials that Schwitters chose for inclusion in his Cathedral.

Tristan Tzara noted that "every tram car ticket, every envelope, cheese paper, cigar band, ripped shoe sole, ribbons, wires, feathers, floor cloths, everything that was discarded: all that had a place of honor in life, specifically, in his art.”[250] Käte Steinitz described that the *Leiden-saule* (with the baby’s death mask) had evolved “from a chaotic heap of various materials: wood cardboard, scraps of iron broken furniture, and picture frames.”[251] In his article in 1920, art critic Alfred Dudelsack described the interior of Schwitters’ studio as a carpentry shop in which he stored up all the necessary materials that would “find a grateful use in future creations.”[2] Dudelsack named a few: planks, cigar chests, wheels from a perambulator, broken light-switches, damaged neckties, colored lids from Camembert cheese boxes, colored buttons torn off clothes, and tram tickets. Huelsenbeck also recounted all sorts of materials lying about Schwitters’ atelier: “rags, limestone, cuflinks, logs of all sizes, newspaper clippings.”[253]

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[247] Ulmer, *Avatar Emergency*, 70.

[248] Ibid., 4.

[249] Ibid., 173.

Inside the grottoes of the Merzbau, Schwitters displayed the different uses of the fragment. For instance, the friendship caves were shrines dedicated to Schwitters’ friends and professional relationships. In these grottoes, the fragment retained a special fetishized power, as the contained objects were filched “fetishized representatives” from their owners, such as Sophie Tauber Arp’s bra, a piece of Theo van Doesburg’s tie, a lock of Hans Richter’s hair, articles of clothing, pencils and nail pairings. Richter described that among the findings/offerings that Schwitters collected, there were “some odd (and more than odd) things such as a dental bridge with several teeth on it, and even a little bottle of urine bearing the donor’s name.”[254] All these became sacred objects of adoration, eliciting the spirit or aura of the sacrilized individual or theme.

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[250] “Hanover-Dada” by Hans Richter in Schwitters, *I is Style,* 152.

[251] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* 88. Cited in Steinitz, *A Portrait from Life,* 90.

[252] Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* 144.

[253] Ibid., 145.

[254] Ibid., 103.

In his talk about the "Mode of Juxtaposition" at the MOMA Symposium, Shattuck had talked about "the setting of one element beside another without supplying the connection."[255] I believe this definition of "juxtaposition" can serve to capture a second aspect of Schwitters' Merz-logics. The materials that Schwitters collected were subjected to *formung* and *entformung*[256] inside his personal lab. Wholly separated from the outside world, the Merzbau became the site of multiple inversions and interconnections, manifested in the physical juxtaposition and assembly of Merz-elements. Determined to create connections "if possible between all the things in the world," Schwitters reformulated the material he incorporated into the Merzbau by division, twisting, covering or painting over it.

The project was not about the object itself, but about the intrinsic relationships between the material that appeared in the course of its making. Theoretically, there should not be a single element that could not be subjected to further possible revision, as "meaning" was no longer in the elements themselves, but in the act of associating "indifferent" elements. And yet, it was not inherent in their associations, but baptized in the moment of action when two Merz-elements were assemble into a fragile unity subjected to further associations. The refuse became the "stars" in Schwitters' mapping of multiple constellations. Every addition demanded a readjustment of the entire form to accommodate the new, resulting in a "labyrinth of associations and inflections."[257] Yona Friedman later wrote that reality within the Merz world was not an accumulation of isolated facts but rather processes, a random agglomeration of things that formed a whole.[258] According to Gamard, Schwitters' exploration into the associations between the Merz-elements of his art and life record his successive attempts to negotiate a path through the chaos of his existence.

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[255] Roger Shattuck, "The Mode of Juxtaposition" in *The Art of Assemblage* Symposium, Historic audio file from MOMA, 10:29.

[256] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* 87.

Third, the transformation of the Waldhausenstrasse house into "an all-encompassing ever-expanding collage environment," was more than a search for an arduous complicated order: it was a dynamic flow that never ceased. The Merzbau's defining principle was to remain perpetually unfinished, capable of being worked and reworked repeatedly, to constantly expand resisting totality and consolidation. The unfinished nature of the work was elevated to a doctrine: the collage process was constant. In that sense, the Merzbau was not a "project" in the traditional sense, as it had no beginning and no end. Its "additive collage principle" was synonymous to Schwitters' ongoing life praxis. The process was simple but had to remain in-flux. Abstract foldings of wood and plaster grew to link "all the objects in the world" into a new reality that was produced in the moment of action and constantly updated with the addition and connection of new material.

5.3.3. World Creation: The Total Work of Art as Total Vision of the World

The various analyses of the Merzbau seem to point to a dual function of the Cathedral in

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[257] Gamard wrote: "With its labyrinth of associations and inflections, the construction at once responded to the outside world while also remaining wholly removed from it. Representative of the artist's highly individualized cosmology, the Merzbau functioned as a safe harbor from the prevailing chaos of Weimar Germany." Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, 6.

[258] Notz, *Merz-World*, 100.

Schwitters' art and life. On the one hand, the Merzbau was the site where Schwitters regressed to control chaos. Georges Hugnet talked about Schwitters' ability "to create around himself an atmosphere into which he escaped."[259] With the rise of National Socialism in Germany, it literally became the artist's refuge against the Nazi hostility to which he was subjected. Dorothea Dietrich characterizes the construction of the Merzbau as Schwitters' "lifelong salvaging operation to reclaim personal wholeness and control in the face of fragmentation and chaos."[2] She talks about the grottoes that gradually developed inside the complicated construction as "sanctuaries" dedicated to his personal relationships and most significant life events, or "miniaturized cultural and political landscapes," that encapsulated the events and obsessions of his era.

On the other hand, the Merzbau was the storage-space where Schwitters kept all the necessary ingredients he collected from the outside world, in order for him to construct a world of Merz. In this section, I focus on the second aspect of Schwitters' Merz-activities, and talk about the Merzbau as world-creation. The Merzbau seemed to oppose the impersonal mode of abstract art by suggesting something more than personal expression. Schwitters did not use collage/montage/assemblage as a way to depict the subjectivity of perception, as did the Cubists, nor did he content to demonstrate the malleability of reality, as did the Dadaists. In the Merzbau, Schwitters engaged in personal ontology: he conceived of a new kind of reality, and tested it inside his self-constructed lab. He did not set off to create an artistic object, but engaged in the reenactment of a mechanism synonymous to life. The Merzbau was the celebration of a new metaphysics, according to which form and certainty are succeeded by process and uncertainty.

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[259] Robert Motherwell, *Dada Painters and Poets,* 163 .

[260] Dietrich, *Collages,* 181.

The Merzbau contained a universal claim for a new type of reality, It was the standpoint through which Schwitters arrived at his personal world view (Weltanschauung). In his Merz-cosmology, life and art had already started flowing into each other. Art was no longer an epistemological tool, but an ethical imperative, an end in itself. The compositional principle of assigning equal value to individual materials[261] was translated by Schwitters into a process of reconciling the disassociated at all scales. His Merz-Pictures were more like "preparatory studies for the collective forming of the world"[262] which Schwitters envisioned as a Merz-stage,[263] "an uncontrollable assemblage, by hurling dynamic lines and structures onto imploding and exploding surfaces, following them with a deluge of disfigured, hacked, strangled, and beheaded objects, including people, until the spectacle reaches a menacing orgasmic climax with the squirting of foam."[264]

Schwitters build himself his own world by transferring external information to the inside system, and connecting it with the already existing nexus of associations. This "other-wordly reality," in which he voluntarily confined himself, took the shape of a rigid impenetrable shelter protecting the sacred reality he meticulously built, a materialized mind-game in the total control of the artist's life-desires. Malin Zinn likens the Merzbau to an "incubator," an impenetrable shell protecting the organism that inhabits it and allowing it to develop organically into an autonomous existence. He characterized the Merzbau as "a safe enclosure for life in a state of preparation."[265] Schwitters attempted to formulate patterns in the chaos of the social and political milieu that surrounded him. The construction of the prototype was an autobiographical statement, a private obsessive search for redemption coupled with a self-regulating ontology. In an attempt to bridge art with architecture and sublate both with the praxis of life, Schwitters seems to have accomplished an individualized "utopie realizable," an ontology in a state of constant change, capable of accommodating new input into ever-evolving layers, without allowing its density to affect its flexibility, and which ceases to exist only when formalized.

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[261] Manifeste und kritische Prosa, ed F. Lach Friedhelm, Cologne 1981, 37. Cited in Orchard, *In the beginning was Merz*, 245.

[262] Ibid., 247.

[263] Notz, *Merz-World*, 51.

[264] Ibid., 52.

5.3.4. Systems of Control: Anticipated Cybernetics

At the "Art of Assemblage" Richard Huelsenbeck made a provocative manifestation that seems to fit in the discussion of the Merzbau in terms of systems and mechanisms of control. The goal of this section is mainly to invoke Huelsenbeck's associations between Dada and the science of Cybernetics, with the vision of a more in-depth reflection on its connotations at a later point of my research.

Huelsenbeck saw all modern art as an attempt to redefine the position of the creator towards the artwork. He narrated that the Futurists depicted the object in motion, while the Cubists depicted the relativity of perception. Dada on the other hand, was according to Huelnsebeck an aesthetic expression of "the new reality that man is faced with today." Only Dada, he proclaimed, had managed to put this relationship into the perspective that best corresponded to a world in which "the objects themselves had started to mobilize." Assemblage was therefore an aesthetic "reliving" of man's existential condition within the post-war reality. In a time where nothingness is felt stronger than ever before, the self-accumulated, self-happening, self-organizing power of the object becomes a creative principle that influences the hands and the brains of man.

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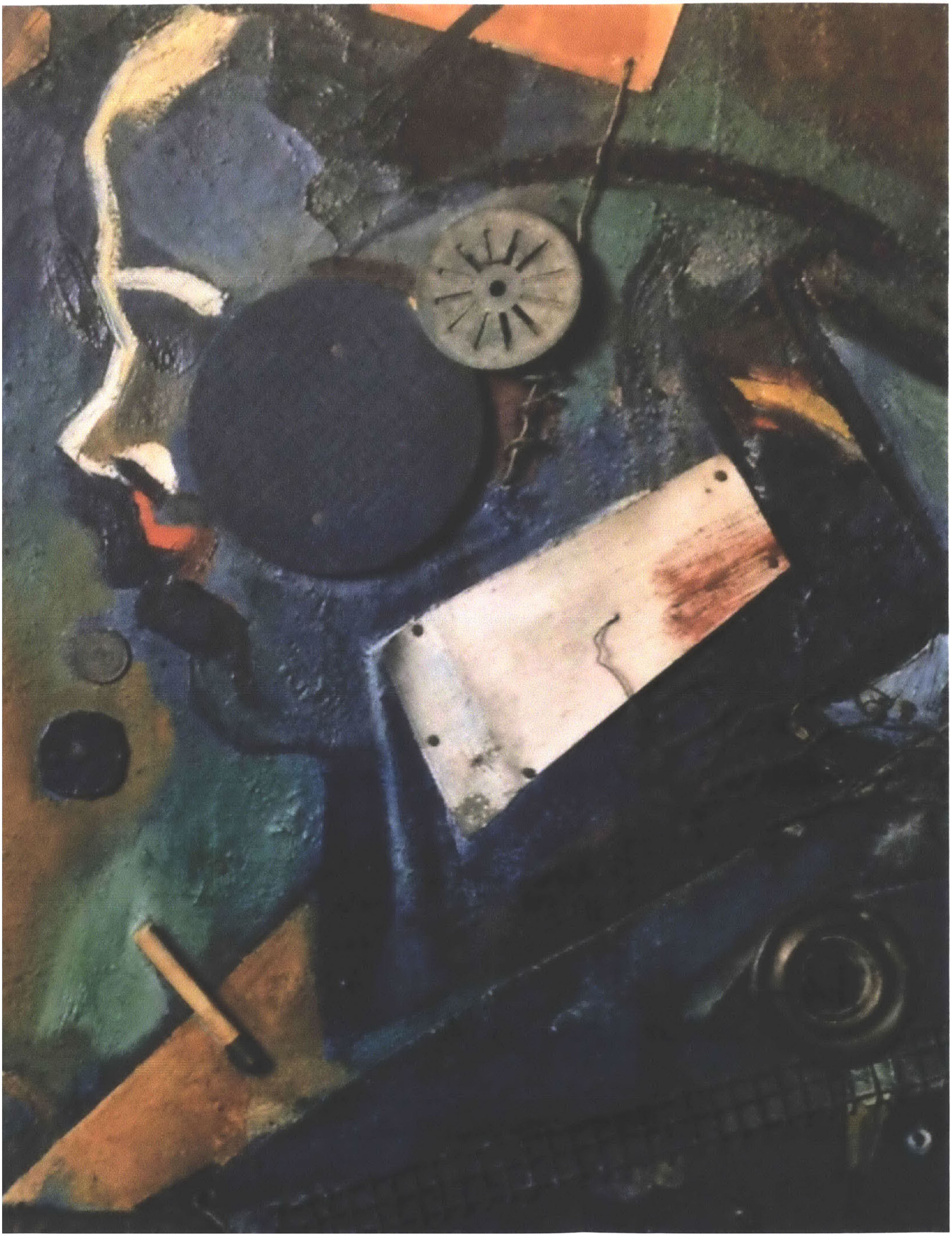
[265] Malin Zinn, "The Dying Dreamer. Architecture of Parallel Realities" (School of Architecture, Royal Institute of Technology, 2003), 99.

Huelsenbeck argued that Dada's largest contribution to 20th century philosophical thought was its attitude of nihilism. What the previous speaker, Roger Shattuck, called "gleeful destructiveness" was further scrutinized and specified by Huelsenbeck: dada did not develop a nihilistic attitude towards the world, but towards the creative subject itself, what Huelsenbeck calls "a philosophy of doubt, of irony, of not taking the act of creation seriously." For him, this new position towards the product of creation was an aesthetic expression of the position of man inhabiting a world in which everything constantly changes. The surrender to laws of chance, which was praised as the ultimate creative stance by the Dadaist artists, was an aesthetic expression of a deep understanding of the irrationality of creative forces in a time where man was being conceptually displaced by the machine, and later, one speculates, by the computer.

At very least assemblage became the art form that played out the anxiety of the emerging man-machine symbiosis that was underway, and that has accelerated since. At this point, mentioning the new media, the relationship of man towards the machine and towards the computer, Huelsenbeck referred to creative forces as no longer bound to the hands and brain of man, but as potentially autonomous, self-creating. Huelsenbeck's construction climaxed in a prophetic manifestation: "Dada on an aesthetic level anticipated the science of Cybernetics," he proclaimed, but was interrupted by the moderator William C. Seitz who felt that the audience would not be interested (!) in listening about the relation between man and the computer.

I read Huelsenbeck's declaration as pointing to the engagement of the viewer in a system of producing and reproducing meaning through interaction. However, I believe that if the Dada logics can be seen to relate to Cybernetics, the Merzbau reaches even further. I believe that the design of the Merzbau escapes networks and systems of control, and subjects the existing associations to an opened-ended process that embraces the contingency of action. Meaning is no longer in the object itself, nor in its associations with other objects: in the Merzbau design prototype, meaning lies in the process of action.



5.4. Identity Experience: Performing the Essential Creative Play

5.4.1. The "New Man" Manifesto

Within an inherently irrational world, Huelsenbeck saw that the moral and the immoral became "the relativized components of a total personality."[266] For him, the "New Man" would be a man of transcendence. The only common principle of action is the constant concern for individual freedom, and a subsequent attitude that urges the self to constantly remodel and transform itself.

In *Dada and Existentialism*, Huelsenbeck talked about "suicide" as "the ultimate work of art."[267] His definition of "suicide" did not point to an act of physical self-destruction, but to a constant dissolution of the self in order to release "the extraordinary capacity" for "savoring what life has to offer."[268] According to, Huelsenbeck raised what Benjamin called "a diversion from the self" to a lesson in social comportment. The responsibility of existence, the creation of individual values and the acting upon them, For Huelsenbeck, the "New Man" knows that moral struggle is individual, and takes full responsibility of his existence through the creation of individual values and the acting upon them. In his words, Dada becomes a plea for a new humanism, a protest against all systems in the name of individual freedom.

I believe that Schwitters personified Huelsenbeck's "New Man." who practices and experienced a new type of identity formation emerging out of the trauma of the total collapse of humanity, and formulated on the basis of a process of constant redefinition. In the Merzbau, his identity was an instance of the creative process, a temporary work of art that emerged as an apocalyptic moment in the constant assemblage of fragments, and was eternally lost again in a loop of fragmentation and destruction, of dissolution and reconstitution through the constant addition of new information (new material.)

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[266] Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs*, 140.

[267] A. Alvarez, *The Savage God, A Study of Suicide.* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 189; (New York: Random House, 1972), 228. Cited in Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs,* Introduction / xxxix.

[268] Ibid.

5.4.2. Early Avatarism: Performing the Essential Creative Play

Something is happening to us and through us that goes by the name avatar.[269]

— Gregory Ulmer, *Avatar Emergency*, 2012

In *Avatar Emergency*, Ulmer raises Nietzsche's "Ecce Homo" to an imperative of electrate culture. "Become what you are!" he postulates. In this process of becoming what one is, the subject is malleable, its identity is constantly changing. According to Ulmer, in electracy, the self of literate culture, formerly an oral spirit, becomes "concept avatar."[270] Ulmer uses the term avatar as a verb, to refer to the active state of experiencing the new type of identity emerging online. For him, avatar is the personification of flash reason.[271] It refers to the experience of exercising simultaneity in reasoning, freely associating on the axis of pleasure and pain, as described in a previous section. Ulmer provides a definition of "concept avatar" as "an uncanny encounter with one's own possibility" which as he later describes is an event of "prudence," of time-logic.[272]

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[269] In *Avatar Emergency,* Ulmer talks about the "antiquity of this imperative." Ulmer, *Avatar Emergency*, 4.

[270] Ibid., ix.

[271] In the preface of *Avatar Emergency,* Ulmer defines flash reason as making decisions at the speed of light. Ibid.

Ulmer uses the notion of "prudence" to refer to the capacity of making appropriate decisions in a particular situation, based on affect rather than rationality. Deliberating based on prudence is a more intuitive and impulsive process, rather than an analytical one, based on concepts. Prudence in an electrate context is therefore redefined as the capacity of *immediately* assessing the givens of a particular situation, and drawing upon maxims formulated from past experience, making a decision to act in a way that foresees the best outcome in the future.[273]

According to Ulmer, avatar does not eliminate essence, but redirects attention to a different aspect of a scene, to different traits, that gather into an alternative pattern expressing and constructing an "affective metaphysics." For him, "experience ontology" is a reminder of this background of flash reason, joining data extraction, visualization, and collaboration tools, to integrate data and interface design, virtual worlds or mixed augmented realities, maybe designed to support experience ontology. For Ulmer, "concept avatar" becomes the personification in human form of abstract principles or intangible qualities. In the condition of being caught and held within "now-time" there arises the need for Heidegger's *Ereignis* (Enownment) to facilitate the re-appropriation of one's agency.[274]

According to Ulmer, the experience of concept avatar can be described based on Freud's notion of the *unheimlich.*[275] The avatar experiences the uncanny: this is the feeling of contemporary identity, in encountering something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.[276]

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[272] Ibid., 101.

[273] Ibid.

[274] Ibid.

[275] Ibid., 77.

The argument of this chapter is that Schwitters's experience in the Merzbau resembles that of an electrate identity within a virtual world. I believe that what happened *to* Schwitters and *through* Schwitters in the Merzbau, was very similar to "concept avatar." My conviction is that by engaging in associative reflection of the artistic/ontological practices undertaken in the Merzbau, one can find Schwitters to be a convenient "image of thought" in Ulmer's project of inventing the practices of electracy. The point of arguing that in the Merzbau Schwitters avatared, does not facilitate the interpretation of the work, but encourages the use of the Merzbau as a starting place for invention. In this process of using the Merzbau as tutor, its form will be the last thing to be applied, and in case of its application one is at direct "risk" of pure literacy.

Schwitter practiced a kind of time-logic in the Merzbau, a type of decision-making that included prudence. According to Ulmer, practicing prudence means coming to direct contact with one's *daimon*.[277] After having drained the objects of the world from their meaning, Schwitters consulted his *daimon*, what the avant-garde called *chance*, religions call *spirit*, literacy calls *talent*, what we commonly name "*genius*." The *daimon* requests the eternal return, the recursive loop, the repetition of drive, the recurrent pattern, the image of wide scope. A self-encounter through prudence, the moment of decision making, of encountering oneself with one's own thought, affectively, intuitively, results in an updated identity. The avatar is informed, through the consultations of the genius. In the Merzbau, meaning did not precede being: there were moments of significance in the process of construction. The experience of time in the

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[276] This refers to the transformations of a more basic experience: *heim* means home, the homelike the familiar, yet with an *un* the token of repression.

[277] Ibid., 97.

Merzbau is a single time, real time: there are moments of signification, instead of everlasting meaning. Schwitters was playing his avatar, day and night, he even came up with a technique to do it all night. His avatarism was his experience of accessing jouissance, well-being, by performing an essential pattern: correcting a disordered world condition of personal, physical, moral and sociopolitical collapse.

AVATAR
EMERGENCY

6. Epilogue

The method was simple; You put the nail in place and hammer it once with an almighty blow. That results in a single, enormous crash, which naturally wakes everyone up. But because people never actually know what has woken them up, they finally go back to sleep again. You wait ten minutes, until everyone has fallen asleep again and then you deliver a second hefty blow to the nail, with the same result as before: every one wakes up, no one knows why. You repeat this and so you can hammer in the nail: slowly, to be sure, but nevertheless in the middle of the night.

— Ernst & Helma Schwitters[278]

Schwitters was body and soul devoted to the construction of his *Lebenswerk*. In her text about compulsion and creativity, Clare O'Dowd concludes that creation of the Merzbau was wholly necessary for Schwitters.[279] As his wife, Helma, and his son, Ernst, confirmed, Schwitters had no regular working hours. The examination of the associations between the material elements of the world became synonymous to his very life praxis. Merz became a mechanism of life, Schwitters' primary and never-ceasing preoccupation.

After having many of his works exhibited in the touring *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition commissioned by the Nazis in Munich in 1937, Schwitters fled to Norway with his son. Under Ernst's encouragement, which aimed at assuaging his father's depression for being separated from his life's work, Schwitters embarked on a second Merzbau inside his residence in Oslo (The Lysaker Merzbau, Oslo, 1937-1940), on which he worked until the Nazis invaded Norway in 1940 and he had to depart once more. The only "witness" of the Norwegian Merzbau, Ernst, recounted that the Lysaker Merzbau was very similar to the one in Hanover. It resembled it in most ways: the size of the room, the color scale (white structure, with few colored accents), the dadaist grottoes, the materials (wooden skeleton, plaster of Paris, oil paint, and Merz materials).[280] "The Lysaker work could simply be called a continuation," described Ernst.

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[278] Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters,* 214.

[279] O'Dowd, *Chaos, Compulsion, and Creativity,* 11.

Ernst recounted that when the German invasion of Norway reached Oslo, Schwitters preferred "to lie down and die," than move again. Schwitters was in Great Britain when he was informed of the destruction of his Merzbau in Hanover during an allied bombing raid in the autumn of 1943. Any remaining vestiges of the Merzbau fell prey to wind and weather. He was devastated and suffered a stroke that left one side of his body temporarily paralysed.[281]

In 1946, he received a letter reporting that some parts of the *Merzbau* might have survived under the ruins of the Waldhausenstrasse residence in Hanover. Schwitters requested funds from MOMA in order to go back to Hannover and pick up the pieces of his life's work. However, it came to his attention that if he entered Germany or Norway, he would not be allowed to re-enter England. He therefore offered to build a third construction instead of returning to Hanover. Harry Pierce allowed him to use a barn in his estate at Elterwater that previously belonged to the Elterwater Gunpowder Company. Pierce had developed a landscape garden of rare trees and flowering shrubs, with which Schwitters greatly identified. The composition reminded him of his art.[282] MOMA offered him a stipend to pursue what was destined to be his swang-song, the so-called "Merzbarn."

The Merzbarn was worked only for about five months and only for a few hours per day, because of Schwitters' deteriorating health.[283] Nicholas Wadley describes that Schwitters "worked "feverishly" against time, sometimes by candlelight."[284] Everyday he traveled by bus with his partner, Wantee, from Ambleside where he lived, to Elterwater. "If I can't work any more, I don't want to live," he said shortly before his death.[285] Schwitters died less than a year after the beginning of the Merzbarn project, on January 8th, 1948, after suffering a heart attack. He played until death knocked on his door.[286] The stone that stands in the churchyard of St. Mary's in Ambleside where Schwitters was initially burried, reads "Kurt Schwitters, Creator of Merz."[287]

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[280] Letter from May 25, 1981. Cited in Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 51.

[281] Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 38.

[282] Carola Giedion-Welcker "Schwitters: or the Allusions of the Imagination" in Magazine of Art, 1948, 218-221, Cited Ibid., 53.

The Merzbau was "the restive and restful site"[288] of its creator's living art, its character that of an on-going ever-evolving autobiographical process. In my thesis, I examined this cryptic work in the context of Gregory Ulmer's apparatus theory, with the vision to elicit an evocative design process closely linked to Schwitters' and my personal *themata*. I see the Merzbau as the "performative autobiography" of a creative genius, the actualization of a personal disposition that postulated the manipulation of destruction through its opposite. The constructive mechanism of Merz arose at a time when art was confronted with critical questions of representation and ontology. Schwitters gave humanity what he called, "a model monument." In this context, I see the Merzbau as the object that testifies to an attitude of world creation, and therefore as something to be undergone and reinvented, rather something to be understood and explained.

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[283] In his letter to his friend Christof Spengemann, Schwitters described how he worked against time; "My maximun is one hour a day. And very slowly. I have to sleep 12-14 hours a day. You'd be surprised how thin I've got… I look 75-80." Schwitters' letter from June 25, 1947. Cited in Ibid., 40.

[284] Ibid., 53.

[285] Ibid., 17.

[286] Dietrich, *Collages,* 207.

[287] The stone was erected by Schwitters' partner, Wantee in 1966. Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters in Exile*, 41.

[288] Gamard, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* 11.

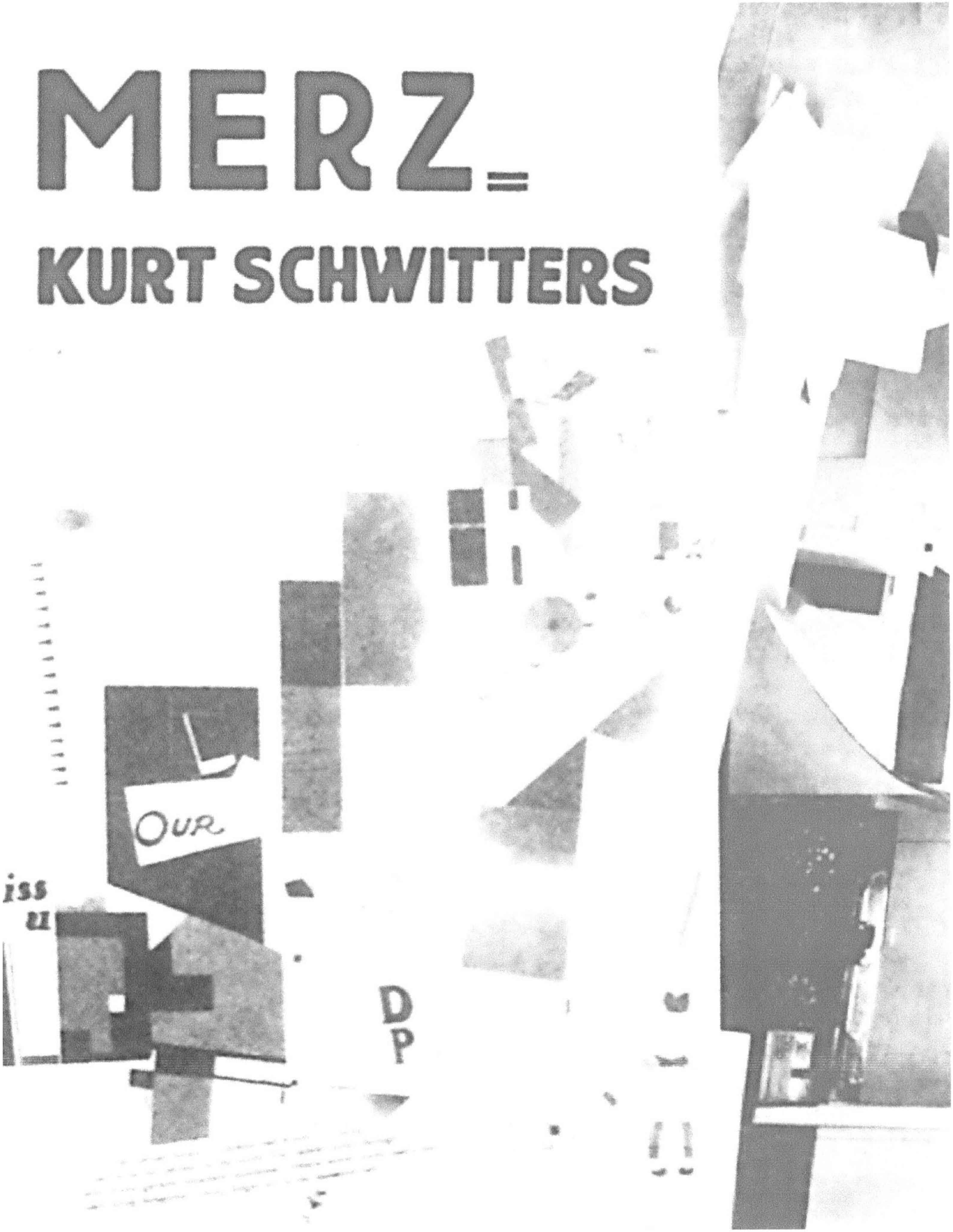
In his autobiographical statement in 1926, Schwitters, aged 39 at the time, wrote that "we are all born too early." He, as a matter of fact, was definitely born too early. An artist of the 21st century, Kurt Schwitters seems to personify the "image of thought" of being, thinking and creating within a world, incomprehensible as ever, in which we are abandoned by all possible Gods. In my thesis, I set out to make associations at two levels. First, I examined Merz as a design mode that results in world-creation, which I believe presents affinities with image and affect based modes of operation within electracy. The designer transforms personal disposition into the order of the work.

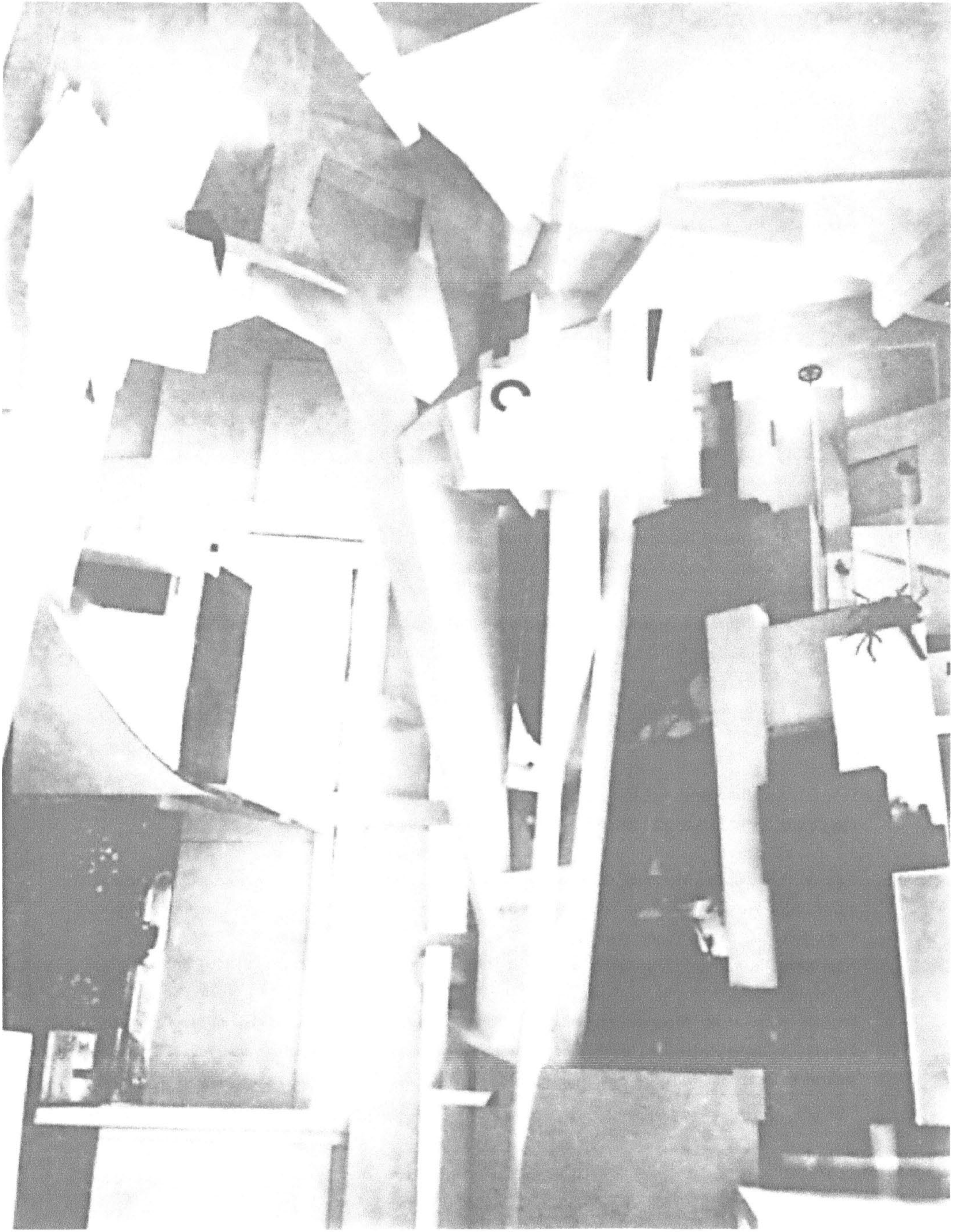
Second, I suggested the artistic technique of assemblage as launched by Dada and recast by Schwitters, as a productive descriptive framework for discussing being and making sense of the world of digital recording and communication technologies. The implications of these two associations that I make refer broadly to the questions of *who* designs and *what.* I argue that assemblage expanded these questions to include potentially everyone as a designer and reality as a design project. Assemblage as practiced by Schwitters transcended the atemporal and impersonal aesthetics of combination and suggested a procedural attitude of creating by including the onlooker as an active agent in the signification of the whole.

We can all be designers, Schwitters implicitly suggested, assembling fragments of a world that is constantly being recorded and turned into bits, not as fixed elementary units but as products of a subjective segmentation, into new material or immaterial realities. In this spirit, I set out to retell the story of the Merzbau in terms of Schwitters' account for the whole world, metaphysical in that sense, with the vision to provide an intellectual scaffolding that will enable contemporary designers to invent new worlds, by directing, augmenting and putting to work their own "performative autobiographies."

Kurt Schwitters.

MERZ =
KURT SCHWITTERS





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Page 52: **Detail from the Merzbau in Hanover, "The Gold Grotto," 1933.** [*Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges Pompidou,* 154].

Page 56: **Käte Steinitz** wearing a blouse printed with the program of the "Cinnabar Festival," Hannover, January 1928 [*Color and Collage,* 161]. On her left, top to bottom: **El Lissitzky's "Self-Portrait", papier à lettres à en-tête des "abstrakten hannover"** [*Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges Pompidou,* 161], **detail from a "Der Sturm" magazine, and Hans Arp's 1932 "Mustache Hat."**

Page 70: (top left) **Opening of the First International Dada Fair, art salon of Dr Otto Burchard, Berlin, 1920.** Left to right: Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausman, Dr Otto Burchard, Johannes Baader, Wieland and Margarete Herzfelde, Otto Schmalhausen .George Grosz and John Heartfield. Hanging from the ceiling: Prussian Archangel by John Heartfield/Rudolph Schlichter. [*The Collages of Kurt Schwitters,* 142] (tope right) **Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch next to a sign that reads "Art is Dead, Long Live Tatlin's New Machine Art!"** (Die Kunst ist Tot. Es lebe die neue Maschinenkunst Tatlins!) (below) **Group photograph in Weimar on the occasion of the International Congress of Constructivists and**

Dadaists, in September 1922. From left to right: Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Max Burchartz and his wife, Hans Richter, Nelly van Doesburg, Corenlis van Eesteren, Theo van Doesburg, Peter Rohl and his wife, Werner Graeff. [Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges Pompidou, 110. It also appears in Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* illustration 144].

Page 74: **Detail from the cover of *Merz* 1, *Holland Dada*, January 1923 and logo Merz from p.14 of the same issue.** [*Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges Pompidou,* 168].

Page 78: **Four lithographs (56 x 44,2 cm) from the "Merz-Portfolio" (*Merz 3*, *Merz Mappe*), 1923.** [*Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges Pompidou,* 171].

Page 81: Hanover Merzbau: **Detail of the *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends (KdeE)* (Cathedral of Erotic Misery) with guinea pig, around 1930.** [*Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges Pompidou,* 143, and Elderfiled Illustration 188.

Page 97: **Poet-leader of Club Dada Richard Huelsenbeck.**

Page 98: **Cover of William C. Seitz's "Art of Assemblage" publication that accompanied the exhibition and symposium at MOMA, New York, 1961.**

Page 104: **"Column with child's head," 1925-1932**. Later stage of the Merz-Column from page 45. [*Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges Pompidou,* 154, Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters,* illustration 165, and Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* illustration 179].

Page 116: One of Schwitters' Merz-Pictures. ***Merz-Bild 1A. The Alienist* (*Der Irrenarzt*), 1919. Assemblage on Camvas, 48,5 x 38,5 cm.** Museum Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. [*Kurt Schwitters, Centre Georges-Pompidou,* 53, Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters,* illustration 43, and *Color and Collage,* 15].

Page 121: **"Avatar Emergenzy and Merz,"** photomontage by Rodanthi Vardouli, 2014.

Page 126: **Details from Schwitters' Veilchenheft**.

Page 127: "**Schwitters with signature**" photomontage by Rodanthi Vardouli, 2014.

Pages 128-129: The **"Merz-World,"** photomontage by Rodanthi Vardouli, 2014.

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