

KURT SCHWITTERS' MERZBAU



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ABSTRACT

Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau, which first took shape in Hannover, Germany, between 1923 and 1936, is regarded as the forerunner of what is now known as installation or site-specific art. It also remains one of the most problematical artworks of the 20th century. This dissertation examines numerous original sources relating to the Hannover Merzbau and its successors in Norway and England and concludes that the Merzbauten were, in effect, all works of exile.

The Hannover Merzbau and its lesser-known successors in Norway and England present an unusual challenge to art historians because so little remains of them. The first was destroyed in 1943, nothing survives of the second, constructed in Oslo, and the last, in Elterwater, England, was never completed. Despite the painstaking investigations of Werner Schmalenbach, Dietmar Elger and John Elderfield between the 1960s and 1980s, the Hannover Merzbau in particular has amassed so many myths and legends since Schwitters' death in 1948 that the reception of the work may be said to have established a dynamic of its own. The combination of the lack of originals and a plethora of misunderstandings about the evolution of the Merzbauten has meant that these sculptural interiors are frequently misconstrued as essentially ludicrous, macabre or regressive works that are hardly to be taken seriously within the framework of the 20th century avant-garde. The main aim of this dissertation is to relocate the Merzbauten in their historical context by building on the often forgotten work of early researchers. It includes an examination and assessment of a selection of scholarly studies, a review of the evidence that draws on new archival discoveries, critical analyses of key sources such as Schwitters' few published statements on his constructions, his personal correspondence and the visual material, and a revised chronology that not only calls into question many of the numerous anecdotes and legends surrounding the Merzbauten, but also most of the accepted art-historical theories. The concluding chapter examines various aspects of the complex interweaving of the public and private facets of the Merzbauten and suggests ways in which the revised chronology can alter our understanding of these works and in addition, redefine them as works of exile.

(It should be noted that since this was written, the interior of Schwitters' hut on Hjertøya has been transferred to the Romsdal Museum on the mainland.)

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INTRODUCTION

The beginnings of what has come to be known as the Hannover Merzbau can be traced to a number of sculptural assemblages in Kurt Schwitters' studio dating from the early 1920s. In its later stages the Merzbau took the form of a sculptural environment that spread through several parts of the artist's family home in Hannover. After Schwitters fled Germany in 1937, he created similar environments in exile in Norway and England. He regarded the Merzbauten as his *Lebenswerk* [life work], and in their time they certainly represented an unprecedented idea that preoccupied him for nearly thirty years, that is, most of his working life.

The Hannover Merzbau was destroyed in 1943, the second, in Lysaker, Oslo, burned down in 1951 and the last, in Elterwater, England, was left incomplete on Schwitters' death in 1948. All three were largely dismissed as historical curiosities until the advent of the neo-Dada movement in the late 1950s, which brought with it a new interest in Schwitters' work. Werner Schmalenbach, Dietmar Elger and John Elderfield were the first post-war art historians to provide studies of the Merzbauten, based on their own ground-breaking research, whereby Elderfield's wide-ranging exploration of the diversity of their temporal and physical aspects (Elderfield 1985) remains the most extensive of its kind.

Any detailed study of the Merzbauten entails a number of especial difficulties, the most important of which I have listed below:

- (1) Customary models of investigation and critical appraisal must remain inadequate in the case of the Merzbauten because so little remains of their original substance. There is no longer any intact material artefact called a Merzbau as a point of reference to analyse these works or to assess previous art-historical analyses.
- (2) The Merzbauten were of an essentially dynamic nature. While examples such as Duchamp's 'Fountain' or even Brunelleschi's first perspectives show that art works do not have to survive to be open to fruitful discussion, the Merzbauten differ in that they were

continually reconstituted. In the reception history, the term Merzbau has been applied to one or more (almost entirely lost) columns and environments erected in various locations in various countries over three decades.

- (3) Many art historians have linked these works to Schwitters' involvement with various early twentieth century avant-garde movements, though little evidence of such connections emerges from contemporary reports.
- (4) Neither Schwitters' writings on the Hannover Merzbau nor the extant photos correlate satisfactorily with standard accounts of its development.
- (5) The first-hand sources include numerous apparently irreconcilable eyewitness reports, many of which are also incompatible with extant photos and unpublished documents in archives.
- (6) The visual and written evidence relating to the Merzbauten is imprecise, patchy and frequently contradictory. A comparatively substantial amount of information is available on the most significant period of the Hannover Merzbau's development between 1927 and 1933, but even here, the primary sources do not constitute a body of definitive evidence as regards its form, content and evolution.

Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield addressed the problems of the lack of first-hand evidence and the diverse aspects of the Merzbauten by undertaking detailed research into their location, the history of their development and Schwitters' construction methods, while in 1983, Harald Szeemann commissioned a reconstruction of the main room of the Hannover Merzbau. Since that period, the Hannover Merzbau has been the subject of numerous art-historical examinations, while its successors, which for many years received little critical attention, have recently attracted fresh interest. In the late 1980s, a paradigm shift in attitudes to early 20th century avant-gardes resulted in new frameworks of interpretation being applied to the Merzbauten, while Environments and more recently, conceptual, installation and site-specific

art have also furnished art historians with alternative interpretative tools. The reception history of the Merzbauten is not only marked by a wide plurality of approaches, but also reveals the remarkable extent to which these works continue to be relevant to succeeding generations of artists and art historians, and discussion and analysis of their many facets continue to this day.

The most common focus of analyses of the Merzbauten has been on the relevance of various practices of the early 20th century avant-garde to their evolution. Cubism, Expressionism, Dada and Constructivism have all proved useful points of reference, either from the standpoint of their perceived impact on the developmental stages of the Merzbauten or as examples of how these works deviated from contemporary models. Nonetheless there remains a notable lack of consensus among art historians here, not least because eyewitness accounts rarely mention any such associations, so that this remains one of the central and most indeterminate areas of the reception.

With regard to points 4, 5 and 6 listed above, there has been little thorough critical analysis of key evidence such as the few published texts on these works, the visual material, Schwitters' personal letters and other first-hand sources relating to the Merzbauten, so that the many mutually exclusive descriptions of the Merzbauten that emerge from the reception history also reflect in part a failure to engage adequately with source material. The lack of originals, combined with the mass of conflicting evidence, has resulted in what has seemed a promise of free rein for commentators, many of whom have, nolens volens, allowed themselves considerable leeway in their speculations. In most commentaries, the criteria by which 'facts' are selected as a basis for analysis are not revealed, so that the Merzbauten are frequently subjected to much unfounded theorising, hyperbole and exaggeration. Such interpretations, in my view, fail to do justice to the innovative nature of Schwitters' achievements and are often detrimental insofar as they distort or misrepresent verifiable

information. The Merzbauten remain enigmatic and ultimately indefinable works, but they are not inevitably the aggregate of all that is possible to say about them, nor does their absence render it permissible to marginalize or ignore core research simply because it resists inclusion in the writer's interpretation.

The extreme diversity of Merzbau reception is, therefore, attributable not only to changing modes of interpretation or to the elusive nature of the works themselves, but also to the fact that in general, insufficient attention has been devoted to a study of the sources. I shall argue that after seventy years of Merzbau reception, we have in many ways lost touch with what is known of the originals, and that the whole body of evidence requires reassessment. My first task, therefore, will be to draw up a new chronology of these works. In doing so, I will draw on the groundwork of Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield, who all argue that to recover the Merzbauten for analysis, it is of fundamental importance to establish a chronology by which to clarify the contours of their development and provide a yardstick by which to evaluate the multiple contradictions of the evidence. Like an historical chronicle, a chronology provides a comparatively neutral framework; it may not always disclose what the Merzbauten were, but it can in many instances reveal what they were not. My dissertation is primarily indebted to the painstaking investigations of these three art historians who laid the foundations of research into the evolution of the Merzbauten in the 1970s and 1980s. For many reasons, not least the availability of new archive material, their work now requires reconsideration. In the following chapters, I aim to assess and expand on their ideas, using a revised version of their chronology as a basis.

In Chapter One, I will discuss what I will term the 'standard chronology' of the Merzbauten as advanced by Schmalenbach, Elderfield and Elger, summarise their researches and explain why these need updating. In Chapter Two, I will provide a critical review of the written and visual evidence and conclude with a revised version of the standard chronology. In Chapter

Three, I will look at various aspects of the reception history of the Hannover Merzbau. I will show how the revised chronology can alter the common perception of the Merzbau in relationship to early 20th century avant-gardes and to the period of the 1930s, discuss Schwitters' complex associations with avant-garde circles and reconsider his personal movement of Merz as a useful interpretative tool for the Merzbau. After reviewing the largely forgotten analyses of Carola Giedion-Welcker, I will examine some of the legends associated with the Merzbau, together with problems arising from translations. In Chapter Four, I will continue with an analysis of all the Merzbauten with respect to the revised chronology. I will start by discussing the significance of Schwitters' first description of his studio constructions both as a source text and in the wider context of *Merz 21, erstes Veilchenheft*, the publication in which this passage first appeared. (For reference, I have provided my own translation in Appendix I.) I will then show how the public and private tensions revealed in the *Veilchenheft* may be understood as informing the evolution of the Hannover Merzbau from its beginnings as assemblage to its final stages as a sculptural environment, both in the reception of the work and in my own analysis. I will conclude this chapter by extending this discussion to the Merzbauten in Norway and England.

This dissertation is accompanied by an extensive file of visual evidence relating to the Merzbauten. This is intended to supplement the written evidence and also to underpin arguments for and against different art-historical interpretations of the Merzbau. A compilation of this kind, devoted entirely to a visual documentation of all the Merzbauten and constructions associated with them, has not been undertaken to date.

Note:

The material consulted here has largely been in English or German, as the languages in which the main body of research and commentary pertaining to the Merzbauten have appeared.

Where required I have provided my own translations of foreign-language sources, including

texts that have already been translated when I consider the result too far removed from the original. If my translations sometimes read awkwardly, it is because in the cause of accuracy I have aimed throughout at a precise rather than an elegant rendering. Quotations in Schwitters' original English are marked with a star (*).

Suggestions for further research

The role of the theories of Naum Gabo, Moholy-Nagy and De Stijl architecture in the Hannover Merzbau's transformation from column(s) to environment have yet to be investigated, as do numerous parallels between the Merzbau and the work of Friedrich Kiesler (1892-1965), whose *Raumbühne* [Space Stage] was exhibited with Schwitters' Merz Stage in the 1924 Vienna Theatre Exhibition. There has been no study of the Hannover Merzbau in relation either to the political and social dilemmas of Expressionism in the 1920s and 1930s, or to the manifold activities of the *Deutsche Werkbund*, of which Schwitters was a member. The theme of the domestic element in the arts in the decades surrounding 1900 (including works such as Strauss's *Sinfonia Domestica* and art exhibited in a domestic context, such as Galerie von Garvens in Hannover) would constitute a worthwhile study. The Merzbauten also invite literary comparisons with the collage techniques of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and with Robert Musil's *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, the writing of which spanned a period almost comparable to that of the Merzbauten (1921-42). Finally, in view of my conclusion that the Merzbauten were essentially works of exile, I consider that they warrant more detailed examination within the historical and art-historical context of the 1930s and 1940s.

CHAPTER ONE THE STANDARD CHRONOLOGY

I Introduction

The first post-war Schwitters retrospective was organised by Werner Schmalenbach in 1956. Many exhibits came from the home of the artist's son Ernst in Oslo, where they had been stored for nearly two decades. The discovery of these major collages and assemblages resulted in a reassessment of Schwitters' work as a whole, including his almost forgotten Merzbauten. In time, this led to the publication of three investigations into the Hannover Merzbau by Schmalenbach (Schmalenbach 1967a), Dietmar Elger (Elger 1984/1999) and John Elderfield (Elderfield 1985). In this chapter I will provide an overview of their enquiries into the temporal and spatial aspects of the Hannover Merzbau, with a preliminary survey of the statements of Ernst Schwitters, one of their main sources. I will conclude with a summary of their research into the later Merzbauten.

II The Hannover Merzbau

1. Ernst Schwitters

The Hannover Merzbau was located in the Schwitters' family home in Waldhausenstrasse 5, and was the most extensive of the Merzbauten. According to the standard chronology, the Merzbau was begun in the 1920s and had spread to several rooms of the house when Schwitters fled to Norway in 1937. It was completely destroyed in a bombing raid of 1943. The testimony of Ernst Schwitters, who until his death remained the principal witness to the various phases of the Hannover Merzbau, retains a special authority in all accounts of its development, so that in their chronologies of the work, Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield attach considerable significance to his reminiscences. In the 1960s, Ernst published little on the Merzbau; in a catalogue of 1963, for instance, he briefly mentioned it as 'one of

[Schwitters'] most important works [...] a gigantic abstract construction three storeys high and occupying four rooms',¹ and two years later he wrote without further explanation that it was his father's most 'extensive' [*umfangreichste*] work.² It was not till the appearance of Schmalenbach's monograph on Schwitters in 1967 that his recollections of the Merzbau, documented by Schmalenbach himself, reached a wider public. Indeed, it can be argued that most of his statements on the work were elicited by Schmalenbach and other art historians who subsequently consulted him.

In 1964 Ernst wrote to Schmalenbach that early Merzbau consisted of Merz works in the form of Dadaist sculptures and 'collage material' [*Collageteilen*], which Schwitters gradually combined and extended to create a 'purely Dadaist' [*rein dadaistisch*] work.³ In the early 1930s, a 'geometrical period' [*geometrische Periode*] began, but as Schwitters regarded the primary sections as 'part of his artistic ego' [*Teil seines künstlerischen 'Ichs'*], they remained visible throughout the structure in what Ernst terms 'grottos', that is, deep niches in the overlying geometrical forms. The Merzbau eventually encompassed several rooms, including one under the balcony and one in the attic.

Ernst first published his own account of the Merzbau's origins in 1971. This article, which contains quotations from Schwitters' own description in *Merz 21, erstes Veilchenheft* (henceforth *Veilchenheft*),⁴ traces the Merzbau's beginnings to a group of sculptural assemblages of about 1920 (Figs. 2, 5). Ernst describes how these free-standing works and some box-like assemblages were combined to form a large column:

It all began harmlessly enough with a few dadaistic sculptures in Schwitters' studio. The most famous were 'Holy Affliction', 'Pleasure Gallows' and 'Cult Pump', reproductions of which have been retained for posterity on Merz postcards, though they themselves vanished within the huge, steadily expanding, sculpture in the course of time. Free-standing and set on pedestals, these sculptures were so positioned that they remained accessible from all

1 Schwitters E. 1963, 10.

2 Schwitters E. 1965, 7ff.

3 Letter from Ernst Schwitters to Werner Schmalenbach, 6.9.64, KSF.

4 Cf. Appendix I, ¶10.

sides and didn't disturb, but rather enhanced each other. But it didn't take long before their number multiplied and at the same time Merz pictures were created, some with very deep relief, and - as Kurt Schwitters called them - grottos, boxes with a stage-like structure. All this required space, and the space in the studio became more and more restricted, the distance between the works less and less. Simultaneously the relations intensified between the free-standing works, and now it was only a matter of time before the logical conclusion had to be drawn. One day two of the till now free-standing works suddenly 'grew' together and that was the start.⁵

Ernst further maintains that this column expanded into a 'giant sculpture' [*Riesenplastik*] that Schwitters eventually combined with similar wall structures also containing pictures, reliefs and grottos. The result was a number of larger grottos, later covered by a Constructivist-influenced superstructure. This 'enormous, bizarrely architectural room construction, rather like a cubist-geometric stalactite cave',⁶ finally extended to five rooms and represented Schwitters' attempt to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In an article published in 1983 entitled 'Kurt Schwitters – father of Merz – my father', Ernst described the Merzbau as Schwitters' major work, 'the closest realization of his dream of universal Merz art'.⁷ In contrast to earlier essays in which he describes the Merzbau as evolving from a group of sculptural assemblages with some undefined affinity, here he relates that his father literally connected its elements with string, and later wire and wood, to emphasize their interaction. For the first time he dates the beginnings of the Merzbau to 1918, also the pre-Merz year of his birth:

though it had to be restarted in 1920 in another room [...] it developed out of my father's studio. His pictures decorated the walls, his sculptures stood along the walls. With Kurt

5 [Alles das fing harmlos genug mit einigen wenigen dadaistischen Plastiken in Kurt Schwitters Atelier an. Am bekanntesten wurden *Die heilige Bekümmernis*, *Der Lustgalgen* und *Die Kultpumpe*, die durch Reproduktionen auf den Merz-Postkarten der Nachwelt erhalten blieben, obwohl sie selbst im Laufe der Zeit im Inneren der ständig wachsenden Riesenplastik verschwanden. Auf ihren Sockeln freistehend, waren diese Plastiken so aufgestellt, dass sie allseitig zugänglich blieben und einander nicht störten, sondern eher ergänzten. Es dauerte aber nicht lange, bis ihre Zahl ins Vielfache wuchs, und gleichzeitig entstanden z. T. sehr tiefe reliefartige Merzbilder und – wie Kurt Schwitters sie nannte – Grotten: Kästen mit einem bühnenartigen Aufbau. All das brauchte Platz, und dabei wurde der Platz im Atelier immer begrenzter, der Abstand zwischen den Werken immer kleiner. Gleichzeitig steigerten sich die Relationen zwischen den aufgestellten Werken, und jetzt war es nur noch eine Frage der Zeit, wann die logische Folgerung gezogen werden musste. Eines Tages 'wuchsen' plötzlich zwei bis dahin freistehende Werke zusammen, und das war der Anfang.] Düsseldorf 1971, 16-17.

6 [eine enorme, bizarre-architektonische Raumgestaltung, etwas wie eine kubistisch-geometrische Tropfsteinhöhle.] Ibid., 16.

7 Schwitters E. 1983, 143.

Schwitters' particular interest in the interaction of the components of his works [...] he started by tying strings to emphasise this interaction. Strings became wires, which were then replaced by wooden structures which in turn were connected with plaster of Paris.⁸

Apart from inconsistencies concerning dates and methods, Ernst's essays also display some discrepancies regarding the primary stages of the Merzbau. In 1971 he described how a complex of columns expanded outwards, while in 1983 he indicated that the Merzbau spread from the margins of the room. In 1971 he describes the grottos as integral to the original structure, but in the 1983 version they emerge as a result of Schwitters' construction method. This article also differs from its predecessors in its underlying assumption that the Hannover Merzbau was a premeditated work rather than one whose expansion was the outcome of spontaneous experiment and improvisation. Ernst Schwitters is one of the most frequently quoted sources on the Merzbau, but an explanation of its development in the early years depends very much on how his statements are evaluated.

2. Werner Schmalenbach

Werner Schmalenbach's monograph *Kurt Schwitters*, published in 1967, remains a standard work of reference to this day. Schmalenbach's overview of the Merzbauten, of necessity relatively brief within his broad survey of Schwitters' life and work, nonetheless established a foundation for all further research, discussion and interpretation.

Schmalenbach cautions at the outset that published descriptions of the Merzbau by eyewitnesses such as Hans Arp, Hans Richter and Kate Steinitz, all of whom he quotes at length, contain many errors and inaccuracies; he demonstrates, for instance, that no credence should be given to Arp's tale of the Merzbau filling the whole of the Schwitters' family house. In the 1960s, much of Schwitters' correspondence and literary oeuvre was either unpublished or inaccessible, leading Schmalenbach to consult Ernst Schwitters on the origins

⁸ Ibid. Schwitters' first Merz picture dates from early 1919. Ernst Schwitters was born on 16.11.1918 and died 17.12.1996.

and development of the Hannover Merzbau. His chronology (more detailed and occasionally at variance with what Ernst wrote to him in 1964) derives both from their correspondence and their conversations. He also utilizes Schwitters' own description of an early column in the *Veilchenheft*, published in 1931 (see Appendix I). Schmalenbach's chronology may be summarised as follows:⁹

1. The Merzbau developed from Schwitters' cabinet of curiosities in his studio, situated in what had once been his parents' bedroom on the ground floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5 in Hannover. These objects included early Dadaistic sculptural assemblages (Figs. 2, 5) created in about 1920.
2. In 1923 Schwitters moved this studio to a back room and began to combine free-standing assemblages within a geometrical wood and plaster framework fitted with glass panes. One of these, which constituted the core of the Merzbau, was a Constructivist sculpture returned to the studio after having been exhibited in the Sturm Gallery in Berlin¹⁰ and described by Schwitters as a column. (It may be noted here that according to the *Catalogue Raisonné*, Schwitters exhibited no sculptures in Sturm during the period 1921-23). Schwitters gradually united these Dada works to form a complex, irregular structure that expanded outwards towards the walls. Schmalenbach attributes these developments to Schwitters' increasing interest in Constructivism as manifested throughout his work in the 1920s.
3. The result was a column named the Cathedral of Erotic Misery (*Kathedrale des erotischen Elends*, henceforth KdeE). The column contained numerous caves and grottos filled with remnants of everyday articles and souvenirs of friends and events, in a kind of reliquary.
4. By 1925/26 this column had expanded to fill the whole of the studio.
5. In the first room, Schwitters built staircases into the constructions. Some led to geometrical ceiling constructions whose external aspect derived from his idiosyncratic concepts of

⁹ The following information is taken from Schmalenbach 1967a, 141-3.

¹⁰ See Fig. 10. The story of the Constructivist sculpture does not appear in Ernst's written accounts.

Expressionism and Constructivism. In the *Veilchenheft* Schwitters published a description of the KdeE, and often referred to the whole Merzbau as such after this original structure.

6. Schwitters created constructions in an adjacent room that had once been Ernst's playroom, having removed the connecting door. These constructions, like those in the main room, were made of wood and plaster and painted white, with patches of primary colour, but were generally less complex and stylistically more consistent.
7. Schwitters converted part of the second room into a sleeping area for himself. In the late 1920s or early 1930s he worked on subsidiary sections of the Merzbau in two rooms of the attic and in the basement.
8. In about 1933 he broke through a wall¹¹ between the first room and the adjoining balcony, which was glazed over to provide further space. In 1934/5, he cut an opening in the balcony floor and built a spiral stair of wood and plaster to ground level, then walled in this area to create a further room. In 1936 he added a column in the attic that extended through a skylight to the roof. The last major extension was undertaken in December 1936, when the balcony stair was extended two metres below ground to the water level of a cistern that Schwitters and his son had discovered when laying foundations for a floor. Schwitters built new forms into this cistern almost to water level.
9. In the main room, an electric lighting system was installed that allowed for considerable variations in illumination. Schwitters hired a joiner, painter and electrician in the 1930s and employed them full time on the Merzbau when he was at home. He continued to incorporate sculptures into the constructions and in later years left these as free-standing elements. He also added a very large column on wheels.

¹¹ This information, repeated by Nündel (Nündel 1981, 55), is not borne out by any documentary evidence.

Schmalenbach surmises from Ernst's statements that the Merzbau had no defined beginning and accepts Schwitters' statement that it was 'unfinished on principle'.¹²

3. Dietmar Elger

Dietmar Elger's *Der Merzbau*, published in 1984 and revised in 1999, was the first publication devoted entirely to the Hannover Merzbau. While admitting that the dearth of evidence allows only rare insights into its primary stages, by relying on archival information and personal interviews, Elger was able to reveal much that was hitherto unknown about the Merzbau's location and content. His study broke new ground by including all extant photos of the Hannover Merzbau and original ground plans of Waldhausenstrasse 5.

According to Elger's researches, in 1920 Schwitters' studio was located in his parents' former bedroom on the ground floor (Fig. 6, Room 1). Elger considers that this pre-Merzbau studio was conceived as a didactic work: 'Schwitters wanted to see his Merz art, Merz drawings, assemblages and columns ideally presented [...] in a kind of Merz Demonstration Room.'¹³ He attributes Schwitters' decision to abandon this plan to his dissatisfaction with the amorphousness of large-scale wall collage. Elger's discovery that ground floor rooms of Waldhausenstrasse 5 were let to tenants in 1921 led him to conclude that Schwitters must have relinquished his first studio in that year, transferring only a few portable elements to a new studio at the back of the house. Here Elger describes Schwitters as adopting a 'two-track' approach [*zweigleisig*],¹⁴ using the room as a studio and concurrently developing it as a

12 Appendix I, ¶10.

13 [So wollte Kurt Schwitters seine Merzkunst, die Merzzeichnungen, -bilder und Merzsäulen, in [...] einer Art Merzdemonstrationsraum, ideal präsentiert sehen.] Elger 1984/1999, 46. At the Constructivist conference of 1922, Doesburg, Lissitzky and Richter demanded an end to standard concepts of the exhibition: 'Today we are still standing between a society that doesn't need us and one that doesn't yet exist; that's why only exhibitions as demonstrations of what we wish to achieve come into consideration for us.' [Heute stehen wir noch zwischen einer Gesellschaft, die uns nicht braucht, und einer, die noch nicht existiert: darum kommen für uns nur Ausstellungen in Betracht zur Demonstration dessen, was wir realisieren wollen.] Quoted in Düsseldorf 1992, 304; see also Lissitzky 1923.

14 Elger 1984/1999, 24.

planned environment. He challenges Ernst's 1971 version of the Merzbau's haphazard beginnings, maintaining that there is every indication that the work was conceived in 1923, and that Schwitters devised a unified room concept inspired by his intensive contacts with Constructivist artists and architects at this time.¹⁵

Elger assumes that an undated photo of a single column (Fig. 12) documents the state of Schwitters' studio in 1923, with the implication that this object constituted the core of the Merzbau. Although he stresses the impact of the Constructivist movement on Schwitters' work at this time, Elger admits that early photos (Figs. 14-16) reveal that the formal vocabulary of Constructivism cannot have been integrated into the Merzbau until after 1929. According to his chronology, Schwitters first created Dadaistic wall constructions of found objects and gradually extended them into the room. He transferred his studio to an adjoining room in January 1927 (Fig. 6, Room 2), whereby, unlike Schmalenbach, Elger assumes (following the reminiscences of Hans Richter) that the Merzbau occupied only part of the first room at this stage.¹⁶ He attributes the reason for the move to what he terms the 'powerful artistic presence' emanating from the nascent Merzbau, which would have hindered Schwitters from using the room as his studio.¹⁷ A turning-point came in 1930 when these structures were covered with predominantly white plaster Constructivist forms, accentuated by patches of red, blue, yellow and brown. Elger's theory of an initial three-sided, wall-based construction,¹⁸ ostensibly confirmed by later photos (Figs. 21-23), hardly allows for the idea that the early Merzbau consisted of discrete units, and consequently he seldom refers to a column or columns. As he regards the name Cathedral of Erotic Misery as no more than an

15 Elger later modified this view, stating that 'Schwitters' work process can best be compared to the growth cycle of a natural organism'; Elger 1997b, 196.

16 Richter 1964/78, 78 and Richter 1965/78, 152.

17 [Die Ursache hierfür war vermutlich die inzwischen starke künstlerische Ausstrahlung des Merzbaus, die ein gleichzeitiges Arbeiten in dem Raum an anderen Werken nicht mehr angemessen erscheinen ließ.] Elger 1984/1999, 27. Elger later discarded this theory (Elger 1997b, 195).

18 [Der Merzbau hat sich von der Wand zu einer Raumkonstruktion erweitert.] Ibid.

alternative, possibly humorous, name for the Merzbau, he rarely uses the phrase except to extract from it a potential metaphor that illustrates the Merzbau's kinship with Expressionist architecture.¹⁹

Elger states that by 1933, a complex electric lighting system and a stairway had been integrated into the first room, while most of the grottos had disappeared under plaster till only a few found objects remained visible under glass. On the evidence of later photos (Figs. 21-23), he claims that Schwitters introduced calculated disruptions to the smooth exterior constructions in the form of found objects and external grottos conceived as an '*Irritationsmoment*' [irritating moment].²⁰ He considers that Schwitters' increasing isolation from fellow-Constructivists led to his adoption of a Cubo-Expressionist style in the final years of the Merzbau's development. From the 1930s, he follows Schmalenbach's chronology closely, and like Schmalenbach, states that the Hannover Merzbau was unfinished on principle.

4. John Elderfield

John Elderfield's *Kurt Schwitters* (1985), published in conjunction with a retrospective marking the centenary of the artist's birth, was the first major study in English to explore all aspects of Schwitters' life and work. Chapter 7 reviews the evolution of the Hannover Merzbau as described by Ernst and Elger, after which Elderfield presents his own chronology.²¹ He states that because of the many far-fetched tales and misconceptions about the Merzbau, this is worth establishing as precisely as possible:

Once the development of the Merzbau is removed from the realm of myth and fanciful exaggeration, and the facts explained, what it loses in fantasy it gains in credibility [...] To learn the facts of its further development [...] and to strip from them the kind of anecdotal

¹⁹ Ibid., 97, 110.

²⁰ Ibid., 97.

²¹ Elderfield 1985, 144 ff. (His chapter on the Merzbau is based on Elderfield 1973 and Elderfield 1977.)

elements that have become attached to Schwitters and his art in general is to make the Merzbau fully available for analysis and evaluation.²²

Like Schmalenbach and Elger, Elderfield conjectures that the first studio, which he locates in room 1 on the ground floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5 in Schwitters' parents' apartment (Fig. 6), contained a repository of Dada objects. He concurs with Elger that this studio was abandoned in 1920/21 and that the original column (Fig. 4) was removed to a new studio in a back room. Elderfield points to the existence of two other columns, one of which he dates to about 1923 (Fig. 12) and another that Schwitters named the Cathedral of Erotic Misery. Citing Ernst's story of Schwitters' tying strings across the studio, he postulates that as soon as these three columns were in place, the process of creating a total environment began.

The inception of the Merzbau, in Elderfield's view, coincides with the year in which Schwitters first assimilated Constructivist concepts: 'In 1923, when Schwitters began consciously to form the Merzbau, his art was undergoing a change towards the geometric.'²³ Between 1923 and 1926, Elderfield assumes that Schwitters added the Constructivist sculpture mentioned by Ernst to the other columns and transformed them into an increasingly geometrical environment inspired by interiors such as those of Buchholz, Rietveld/Huszar, Lissitzky, Peri and Doesburg (Fig. 118).²⁴ Writing of a process of 'stylistic lamination', he states that 'the contrast of Dadaist content and Constructivist form within an Expressionist whole was characteristic of the Merzbau during its first five or six years'.²⁵

Elderfield continues by documenting three stages of the evolution of what he terms an 'environmental sculptural interior',²⁶ noting, as Elger had done, that there is no foundation for

22 Ibid., 156.

23 Ibid., 162.

24 Ibid., 151. Friedhelm Lach makes a similar suggestion; cf. Lach 1971, 55. Schwitters was unimpressed by Huszar's interiors; cf. Wiesbaden 1990a, 113.

25 Ibid., 191.

26 Ibid., 152.

the commonly cited anecdote that any part pierced the ceiling.²⁷ Elderfield accepts Ernst's assertion that by 1925/6 the first room was so full of constructions that Schwitters had to move his studio to an adjoining room (his son's former playroom). From 1926 to 1932, he surmises that the strictly geometrical appearance of the original room was tempered by the addition of flowing, natural forms, so that by 1930 Dada constructions, geometric glazed grottos and curvilinear forms 'were layered on top of one another like the Romanesque, Gothic and late Gothic styles of an ancient cathedral'.²⁸ Elderfield also notes that when in 1936 Schwitters drew up a summary of the materials and time required to build a room and sent it to Alfred Barr in the hope of gaining a commission to construct a Merzbau in the USA, his proposals (which required the aid of a glazier, electrician and carpenter) were informed by a more orthodox form of Constructivism.

The sculptural nature of the Merzbau in its later stages is underlined by Elderfield when he remarks on what he terms Vitalist elements on the wide-angle photos (Figs. 21-23), which he regards as 'growths' and 'stylised radiations of an inner core'.²⁹ His account of the extensions to the main room follows those of Schmalenbach and Elger, although he ascribes them to an earlier date of the late 1920s.

Elderfield's ground plan of the main room in the early 1930s (Fig. 24a) marked a major step towards a better understanding of the Merzbau's layout. Three salient points emerge from an examination of this plan: first, that the room possessed a large window, not shown on any photo, which gave on to the adjacent woodlands (Fig. 58), secondly that the name KdeE referred to that section of the Merzbau to the left of this window, and thirdly that the constructions possessed an exterior, that is, were not always flush with the walls. He provides a short tour of this room, much of which explores the perimeter of the Merzbau, i.e., the

27 Ibid., 156; Elger 1984/99, 13.

28 Elderfield 1985, 154.

29 Ibid., 171.

invisible areas behind the constructions, including a high ledge along the right-hand wall that allowed views of the interior, and a stair inside the KdeE that provided access to grottos on various levels. He also notes that the word Merzbau does not occur until 1933, ten years after the work's inception.³⁰

Elderfield's chronology, based on the idea of a core of three free-standing columns, is very much at odds with Elger's suggestion that constructions spread from the wall inwards. Both Elderfield and Elger, however, claim that from the start the Merzbau was planned; Elderfield writes that 'it was not the by-product of an amusingly eccentric way of life, but a visually and thematically remarkable, complex and ambitious work of art'.³¹ He treats Schwitters' statement that the Merzbau was 'unfinished on principle' with more caution than Schmalenbach and Elger, stating that 'it could have been continued almost indefinitely. It was not'.³²

5. Summary of Elger's and Elderfield's chronologies

The revised chronologies proposed by Elger and Elderfield may be summarised as follows:

1. Schwitters' first studio contained a number of Dadaist sculptural assemblages that in the early 1920s were removed to a new studio at the rear of his parents' apartment on the ground floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5, Hannover. These constituted part of a Merz Demonstration Room (Elger)/were largely autobiographical objects (Elderfield).
2. In 1923 the Merzbau began to take shape as a planned environment modelled on contemporary three-dimensional interiors. At this time the studio contained early Dadaist works, the 1920 column (Fig. 4), and also a column topped by a baby's head (Fig. 12) that

³⁰ Ibid., 147.

³¹ Ibid., 156. Elderfield frequently qualifies this theory, writing that it may also be argued that the identity of the Merzbau 'was as fluid as its developing form' and noting that most early publications suggest that it began in 'a sheerly intuitive way'. Ibid. 400, n. 19.

³² Ibid., 157.

constituted the heart of the Merzbau. An unidentified De Stijl-like column was incorporated into the studio from 1923 (Elger)/from 1924-5 (Elderfield).

3. The De Stijl column and a number of Dadaistic wall constructions gradually expanded to cover the walls and ceiling (Elger).

The De Stijl column and the Dada constructions were combined with two columns of 1920 and 1923 and a column named the KdeE, and glazed grottos were created in the interstices (Elderfield).

4. The KdeE was an alternative name for the Merzbau (Elger).

The KdeE referred to only one section (Elderfield).

5. The constructions remained Dadaist in the mid-1920s (Elger).

Pictures and sculptures were joined with string in 1924/5 and by 1925/6 the room had developed into a geometrical environment comparable to Constructivist didactic rooms (Elderfield).³³

6. Schwitters moved his studio to an adjoining room in 1927 because the disturbing auratic influence of the constructions hindered him from using the room as a workplace (Elger).

The move took place in 1925-6 because the first room was full (Elderfield).

In appearance this second room, which was also used by Schwitters as a bedroom, later resembled the current state of the first room.

7. By 1929 the constructions in the main room were largely of Expressionist and Cubist aspect and in 1930 they were covered with plaster geometrical forms (Elger).

From 1926-32 the constructions in the main room entered a new stage of curvilinear forms.

By 1936 these had reached a 'Constructivist conclusion'³⁴ that may also be interpreted as a highly individualistic interpretation of a Constructivist environment (Elderfield).

33 In a footnote, Elderfield queries his own chronology, suggesting that 'the Merzbau was not in fact very far advanced in 1924-5'. Ibid., 400, n. 19.

34 Ibid., 157.

8. In the late 1920s, interior staircases were built into the first room, and in the early 1930s, Schwitters enlisted the aid of a joiner, painter and electrician. A complex lighting system was installed in the first room. At no time did constructions pierce the ceiling to the floor above.

In the 1930s external grottos were added, contained in formal Constructivist structures. From the numerous external elements visible on the wide-angle photos (Figs. 21-3), the layering process of the Merzbau involved more than concealing objects within a geometrical casing. The external found objects provide a deliberate *Irritationsmoment* (Elger)/the exterior as a whole suggests a new Vitalist influence (Elderfield).

9. The attic room was created in about 1930. The balcony room was complete by 1934, the room below was constructed in 1935 and the cistern found in late 1936 (Elger).

The attic and balcony rooms were created at the end of the 1920s; by 1932 the main structures of the Merzbau were almost complete, apart from the roof platform and the cistern (Elderfield).

10. In late 1936 Schwitters sent Alfred Barr a detailed breakdown of costs and working time in the hope of gaining a commission to create a new Merzbau in the USA (Elderfield).

III The Merzbauten in Norway and England

Schwitters left Germany in January 1937 and began work on what he referred to as a second Merzbau in Lysaker, Oslo, in October of the same year (Figs. 65, 66).³⁵ As no space was available in his apartment, he erected a two-storey wooden studio in the garden, the *Haus am Bakken* [house on the slope], and filled it with constructions similar to those in Hannover.³⁶ It was nearing completion when Nazi troops invaded in 1940 and Schwitters left Norway for

35 Schwitters was planning this new studio by mid-1937: cf. letter to Katherine Dreier, 24.7.37, Nündel 1974, 138.

36 Ernst Schwitters maintained that Schwitters normally talked of 'the second Merzbau'; as note 3.

Britain. Most of the information on it comes from Ernst Schwitters, as the building was destroyed in 1951 and no visual records of the interior exist. A second location in Norway, a hut on the island of Hjertøya, Moldefjord, is sometimes regarded as a Merzbau that also served as living quarters (Fig. 70-3). Limited information on the interior is provided by contemporary photographs and letters and the evidence of the original structure, which still stands, although in an extremely dilapidated condition (Figs. 80-2). In late 1947, Schwitters worked on the preliminary stages of a further Merzbau, the Merz Barn, in Elterwater, England (Fig. 86). Part of Schwitters' work was removed to the Hatton Gallery at the University of Newcastle on Tyne in 1965 (Fig. 98) and the remainder was either dispersed or destroyed.

The essays by Ernst Schwitters quoted above also recount the history of the Lysaker and Elterwater Merzbauten.³⁷ In 1971 Ernst applied the concept of 'unfinished on principle' to all the Merzbauten (though he also wrote of his father's sorrow that the Lysaker Merzbau was never finished), but underplayed this aspect in the essay of 1983. In 1971 he described the Merz Barn as untypical of his father's vision of a universal Merz art; in 1983 he noted only that it was very different from its predecessors.

1. Schmalenbach, Elger, Elderfield

The first analysis of the Lysaker and Elterwater Merzbauten appeared in Schmalenbach's 1967 study of Schwitters' life and work. Basing his account on as yet unpublished material from Ernst Schwitters and information from documents and letters, Schmalenbach proposed that the *Haus am Bakken*, which he described as almost finished in 1940, was conceived as a continuation of the Merzbau, citing elements common to both such as the Blue Window (Figs. 23, 66a). Schmalenbach's description of the Merz barn is limited to a single paragraph. He maintains that, in contrast to the Hannover and Lysaker Merzbauten, the constructions of the

³⁷ Düsseldorf 1971, 16-18; Tokyo 1983, 142-5.

Merz barn expanded from the walls outwards. He views the technique employed by Schwitters in Elterwater as one of ‘modelling rather than constructing’ (*er konstruierte nicht, er modellierte*), producing an effect similar to that of the abstract paintings of Schwitters’ English period (e.g. Fig. 99).³⁸ In addition, he states that here, in contrast to Lysaker, Schwitters did not work according to preconceived structural principles. When creating the forms of the Merz barn, he ‘succumbed to the natural laws of their growth’ [*sich den natürlichen Gesetzen ihres Wachstums überlassend*].³⁹ Schmalenbach follows Ernst Schwitters in claiming that Schwitters executed only a single wall of the barn before his death.

Both Elderfield and Elger subsequently expanded on Schmalenbach’s research. Elderfield revised his earlier detailed article on the Merz barn (Elderfield 1969) for his study of Schwitters that appeared in 1985; Elger first wrote on the three major Merzbauten in 1986 and extended his work on them in the 1990s. While differing in their interpretations of Schwitters’ approach, Elger and Elderfield both agree on the status of the later Merzbauten as developments of the original work. They also give consideration to a number of smaller three-dimensional works with a possible bearing on the Merzbauten, including Schwitters’ early sculptural assemblages, as well as columns and constructions in Basle (Fig. 101), Molde (Fig. 74), Kijkduin (Fig. 102a) and the Douglas internment camp (Fig. 103).

Elderfield’s meticulous enquiry into the structure and content of the Lysaker and Elterwater Merzbauten remains the most extensive and reliable ever undertaken.⁴⁰ His conjectural plan of the interior of the *Haus am Bakken* (Fig. 66a) is based on Schwitters’ short text on the new studio,⁴¹ his letters from exile, and the reminiscences of Ernst Schwitters. Elderfield views the Lysaker Merzbau as Schwitters’ attempt to recreate the style of the later stages of the Hannover Merzbau. In describing the former as ‘in effect, the quickly built interior that

38 Schmalenbach 1967a, 177.

39 Ibid.

40 Elderfield 1985, 203-4 and 220-23.

41 Schwitters 1938a.

Schwitters had offered to Alfred Barr in 1936', he implies that the Merzbau's Norwegian successor was designed with completion in mind.⁴²

Elderfield's survey of the Merzbauten does not cover the hut on Hjertøya, but he devotes a paragraph to a grotto Schwitters made during his internment (1940-1) on the Isle of Man (Fig. 103). Although he sees this impromptu composition as manifesting a potential for expansion characteristic of the Merzbauten, he regards it as no more than an amusing diversion; unlike Elger, he never refers to more than three Merzbauten. Once more, he points to a sense of continuity linking each new work to its predecessor; in the case of the later Merzbauten, similarities of location (a wooded hillside), structure (the placing of the light source) and technique (a work that was planned from the start). On the basis of contemporary letters, he dates the start of work on the barn to mid-August 1947. He gives a precise description of the interior elements, which, as his research demonstrates, included far more than a wall relief, adds a conjectural ground plan from his earlier article on the barn (Fig. 90) and supports his argument by referring to letters, photos, the extant physical evidence and accounts of contemporaries who aided Schwitters.

Schmalenbach's discussions of the Merzbauten (Schmalenbach 1967a) were not grouped together but separated in favour of a biographical structure. Elderfield similarly split his analyses in 1985, while Elger confined his first publication entirely to a study of the Hannover Merzbau. In 1994 he published a further article in which the Merzbau is introduced as an idea that occupied Schwitters all his life.⁴³ Elger maintains here that Schwitters regarded the *Haus am Bakken* as a logical development of the Hannover Merzbau and designed the interior to resemble its advanced stages. For information on the later Merzbauten, Elger relies mainly on Elderfield, but gives additional consideration to the hut on Hjertøya, which had not till then

⁴² Elderfield 1985, 204.

⁴³ Elger 1994, 140-51. He revised his opinion after visiting Hjertøya in 1992, and his subsequent publications led to the still common idea that the hut was a fourth Merzbau. Ernst Schwitters indicated this in *Der Spiegel* as early as 1986, but showed no interest in the hut apart from a brief inconsequential visit in 1963.

been accorded the status of a Merzbau. He considers this a rudimentary work modelled on the final phase of the Hannover Merzbau, though also associates its collaged surfaces with early photos of Merz columns. He devotes little space to the Merz Barn, stating that Schwitters worked on no more than a single wall relief before he died.

IV Conclusion

No other studies of the Merzbauten incorporate a survey of the temporal or spatial scope of the Merzbauten comparable to those of Elger and Elderfield. Yet their work raises a number of significant questions, particularly about the Hannover Merzbau. They concur on its location and extent but fail to agree either on the nature of its initial phases or on the manner and speed of its expansion, so that substantial variations emerge in their accounts of its temporal, spatial and stylistic evolution. There are pronounced differences between their descriptions of the Merzbau's beginnings; Elderfield understands it as a collection of private objects, while for Elger it bears the hallmarks of a public experiment. Their interpretations of the Merzbau's transition from column(s) to environment also differ considerably.

Schmalenbach provides little information on this stage, writing of a single column that coalesced with other works and expanded until the room was virtually inaccessible. Elger claims that this change took place very early, so that the studio became a sculptural environment almost from the first. Elderfield envisages a period of six years during which four geometrical columns were enveloped in a layer of curvilinear forms. Even where they agree – for instance on the Merzbau as planned work - their conclusions are hypothetical or (as in the case of Elderfield) based on Ernst's anecdote of the strings, which, as noted above, differed from his original account. The work of Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield does not, therefore, result in a reliable chronology that provides a framework for interpretation.

The researches outlined in this chapter also raise a number of broader questions pertaining to the chronology that will be addressed in the following chapters:

- A. Despite their differing conclusions, Elger and Elderfield consult an almost identical pool of sources, so that the disparity of their results is mainly due to the weight and authority they attach to these sources. As Schmalenbach warned, many published accounts that are assumed to provide incontrovertible evidence about the Merzbau's development are open to doubt, but even John Elderfield, who explicitly aims to strip the Merzbau of anecdotal elements, allows some to pass without comment. In addition, all three art historians place great reliance on the recollections of Ernst Schwitters, which, as has been shown, are not always consistent.
- B. Elger and Elderfield draw extensively on an extract from the *Veilchenheft* which, as it only describes a single column, hardly accords with their theories regarding the extent of the Merzbau in 1930-1. This again suggests that the sources on which they base their arguments require reassessment, not least the *Veilchenheft* itself. This issue of Schwitters' Merz periodical (Figs. 54-5), subtitled *Eine kleine Sammlung von Merz-Dichtungen aller Art* [A Little Collection of Merz Poems of all Kinds], announces itself as a literary anthology, raising the question of whether Schwitters' description of the column is as straightforward as is generally assumed.
- C. Neither Schmalenbach, Elger nor Elderfield give consideration to the process by which the original column(s) could have evolved into the extensive work captured in the photos of 1933 (Figs. 21-23). This conceptual transformation is especially difficult to account for if the Merzbau was from the first a planned work; a column that viewers were apparently supposed to walk round does not plausibly constitute a primary element of a walk-in environment.
- D. The above analyses illustrate the multiple difficulties of disentangling the Merzbau's apparently convoluted links with Expressionism, Dada and Constructivism. All three art historians are in no doubt that elements of all these movements are clearly detectable at various stages of the Merzbau's evolution, but no agreement emerges on when, where and how these influences become manifest.

I will examine the first three of these points in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I will engage with the last by discussing various aspects of the reception history of the Hannover Merzbau. In Chapter Four, I will offer my own account of the evolution of the Merzbauten with particular reference to the differing socio-political contexts of the 1920s and 1930s.

CHAPTER TWO REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE

I Introduction

In Chapter One, I showed that the revision of Werner Schmalenbach's original chronology by Dietmar Elger and John Elderfield in the 1980s did not result in a consensus on the temporal and spatial evolution of the Hannover Merzbau. Though most subsequent interpretations are grounded on the supposition that its development has been adequately documented, this is far from the case. The most marked disparities in their chronologies occur in the period of the 1920s, a time when Schwitters disclosed nothing in writing about his studio constructions. In Part II, I will first investigate this seldom-mentioned lacuna and continue by examining a wider range of sources than those available to Elger and Elderfield, including the personal correspondence of Schwitters and his family and reminiscences of contemporaries. This will be followed by a discussion of the photographic material and the Merzbau reconstruction of 1983. In Part III, I will summarise the evidence relating to works in Norway and England that may be regarded as successors to the Hannover Merzbau. Finally, on the basis of this evidence, I will propose a revised chronology of the Merzbauten.

II The Hannover Merzbau

1. Schwitters' silence on the Merzbau

In the *Veilchenheft*, Schwitters dated the beginnings of the first column to 1923, yet published nothing about it till this 1931 issue of his Merz journal. Elderfield was the first to address the question of why he should have remained silent about such an ambitious work for so long, commenting that 'for such a self-publicist, this seems astonishing'.¹ Given his lifelong predilection for self-promotion, Schwitters' reticence is indeed highly uncharacteristic. In the 1920s he adopted the controversial publicity methods of Berlin and Zurich Dada and of the

1 Elderfield 1985, 148.

Sturm Gallery in Berlin, using every available opportunity to advertise his work, and from 1923 to 1932, documented his latest activities in his *Merz* periodical.² His silence is all the more perplexing if, as Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield suggest, much of the Merzbau was in place by 1927.

A few examples of what may be considered as missed opportunities to publicize the Merzbau will suffice here. When in 1925, Schwitters contacted Jane Heap, editor of the *Little Review*, it was to send her a model of his design for a Merz theatre.³ Schwitters' correspondence in the same year with the collector and gallery owner Galka Scheyer, whom he had known personally before she moved to the USA in 1924, included no attempt to interest her in his studio (as happened four years later): 'You will surely be interested to know what I am doing at present. I can't live from art any more and now keep myself busy in all sorts of ways. Naturally I carry on painting and nailing [i.e. making assemblages], but in particular I write for newspapers.'⁴ In his catalogue of the Great Merz Exhibition of 1927 (an overview of his abstract and figurative work), Schwitters included neither a photo of his studio nor a reference to any part of it. In the late 1920s, the eminent art historian Hans Hildebrandt corresponded with Schwitters and at the latter's invitation, visited Hannover in 1928; he also gave Schwitters an entry in his extensive review of 19th and 20th century art.⁵ It would have been a unique opportunity for Schwitters to publicise his constructions, but there is no allusion to them in Hildebrandt's entry on Schwitters and none in the Hildebrandt-Schwitters correspondence until 1933. Between 1928 and 1930, Schwitters gave a number of illustrated lectures on design in art, architecture and typography [*Gestaltung in Kunst, Architektur und*

2 Merz 1923-32. (Merz 10, 14-19 and 22-3 never appeared. Planned topics included packaging and interior design.) He stated in Merz 20 (1927) that he had produced no innovative sculpture (LW 5, 255).

3 Letter to Jane Heap, 16.12.25, KSF. For publications that reproduced works by Schwitters in his lifetime, see Orchard/Schulz 2006, 679-80.

4 [Es wird Sie gewiss interessieren, was ich jetzt tue. Ich kann von Kunst nicht mehr leben und beschäftige mich nun sehr vielseitig. Natürlich male und nagele ich weiter, aber besonders schreibe ich für Zeitungen.] Letter to Galka Scheyer, 17.1.26, Archives of American Art, Galka Scheyer papers, reel 1905.

5 Hildebrandt 1931; also letter from Schwitters to Lucy Hillebrand, 14.7.28, SAH. Schwitters sent Hildebrandt an overview of his work in 1926 with no mention of columns; c.f. Schwitters 1926c: Schwitters 1926c/2.

Typographie] in various towns in Germany, and his slides and lecture notes are still extant. The slides show interiors by Huszar, Haesler and Lissitzky (including one of Lissitzky's *Abstraktenkabinett* in Hannover), constructions by Moholy-Nagy and Gabo and examples of his own collages and typography, but neither here nor in his lecture notes is there any reference to his own room constructions.⁶ The situation in Germany in the early 1930s may not have been conducive to highly experimental art works, but when, as a member of the Paris-based group *cercle et carré* and its successor *abstraction-création*, he contributed to their journals in 1930 and 1931, he made no mention of either columns or an interior.⁷

If we accept the common view that the Merzbau was an avant-garde work of the 1920s, it also seems inexplicable that in the whole of Kurt and Helma Schwitters' known correspondence from 1919 to 1932, there is no hint either of the existence of a Cathedral of Erotic Misery or a sculptural interior. Even if it is assumed that for personal reasons Schwitters wished to conceal the early columns from the public, it is surprising that neither he nor his wife allude to them in private letters, as, for example, those addressed to colleagues like Hannah Höch, Doesburg and Lissitzky, and above all to Schwitters' patron and especial confidante Katherine Dreier, founder of the New York *Société Anonyme*. Throughout the 1920s, Schwitters sent Dreier numerous detailed accounts and explanations of his current projects, future plans and personal and professional difficulties, but made no reference to a column or anything similar. Dreier did not mention the Merzbau when she included Schwitters in her 1926 Brooklyn exhibition, though she had visited him earlier that year. Her catalogue note remarks that '[Schwitters]' most original work is the creation of the *Laut Sonate*' and includes publicity for his new advertising agency, the *Merz Werbezentrale*.⁸ In early 1927, Schwitters told her that he had contributed to the interior design of the house of

6 Cf. SAB 1987, nos. 328-30, also Schelle 1990. Schwitters wrote on the *Abstraktenkabinett* in the influential architectural journal *Das neue Frankfurt*; Schwitters 1929a, 83.

7 Schwitters published work in the journal of *cercle et carré* (March/April 1930) and exhibited with the group in the same year.

8 Luyken 2000, 32.

the Dresden art collector Ida Bienert (for whom Mondrian also designed rooms), but made no mention of his own room constructions in Waldhausenstrasse 5, which according to most studies were of considerable extent by this date.⁹ In May 1927 Schwitters wrote to Dreier that he had transferred his studio to another room. Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield all consider the move in the mid-1920s as the point at which a working area became an artistic environment, thus marking the transition between the Merzbau as functional and non-functional space. In this letter, if anywhere, one would expect a reference to the content of the studio, but Schwitters makes no further comment; his letter closes: ‘It’s always so nice to write a letter to America, then I can relive everything that has been merzed up [*zugemerzt*] in the last three months. I hope it doesn’t bore you too much.’¹⁰

As Schwitters’ writings disclose nothing of the work in the 1920s and no plans are known to exist, the evidence of this period must be limited to the accounts of his family, acquaintances and friends. From 1930, this will be augmented by the statements of Schwitters and his wife.

2. The columns, 1919–1929

I have shown that Ernst Schwitters provided more than one version of how and when the Merzbau was conceived and how it developed in the early 1920s. These are unlikely to have been personal memories, as they date from a time when Ernst, born in November 1918, was very young indeed; certainly none of his accounts are supported by other eyewitnesses. Ernst told Schmalenbach that the nucleus of the Merzbau was a sculpture in the De Stijl manner that Schwitters called a column. What struck visitors to Waldhausenstrasse 5 during the 1920s, however, was far removed from De Stijl, and in its primary stages not even identifiable as a

9 [In Dresden habe ich für Frau Bienert einige Räume gestalten helfen.] Letter to Katherine Dreier, 29.1.27, Nündel 1974, 112.

10 [Es ist immer so nett, einen Brief nach Amerika zu schreiben, dann erlebt man alles noch einmal, was sich in den letzten 3 Monaten zugemerzt hat. Hoffentlich langweilt es Sie nicht zu sehr.] Letter to Katherine Dreier, 4.5.27, BLY.

work of art. They write of a single, bizarre, nameless object and refer to it either as a tower or (Merz) column, but agree neither on its location nor its appearance.

The first indication of such an object in Schwitters' studio dates from December 1919, when Richard Huelsenbeck visited Schwitters to discuss a forthcoming Dada publication. At this time Huelsenbeck regarded him as his protégé and colleague, but Schwitters proved unwilling to talk about the column, and Huelsenbeck left only with the impression that it contained material of a highly personal nature:¹¹

This tower or tree or house had apertures, concavities and hollows in which Schwitters said he kept souvenirs, photos, birth dates and other respectable and less respectable data. The room was a mixture of hopeless disorder and meticulous accuracy. You could see incipient collages, wooden sculptures, pictures of stone and plaster. Books, whose pages rustled in time to our steps, were lying about. Materials of all kinds, rags, limestone, cufflinks, logs of all sizes, newspaper clippings.¹²

Huelsenbeck maintained that this object stood in Schwitters' studio, but according to Max Ernst's biographer Patrick Waldberg, the tower that Ernst noticed a few months later was in Schwitters' living-room (Fig. 7). Waldberg's biography, based on personal conversations with the artist, states that Ernst understood this tower to consist of surplus refuse, constituting a storehouse of impersonal material that had been selected for the very reason that its provenance could not be determined:

The walls of the room were bare, but along the walls, on the floor, was an accumulated heap of the artist's works, his tools and his material in hopeless confusion. Right next to the chair where he was sitting an extraordinary hotchpotch [*fouillis*] rose from the floor to about two thirds the height of the room. It was impossible at first to make out either the material [it consisted of] or what it was supposed to be used for. As Max Ernst's gaze persistently fell on this ornament, Schwitters said to him: 'That's my Merz column.' Every time he went out, he brought back from his walks, in the form of booty, a whole collection of refuse [...] he chose them for their form, for their colour and for the uncertainty by which you could determine their origin, their former use [...] Having selected what could be of use to him in the construction of his reliefs, Schwitters piled up the rejects into a 'Merz column' and stuck it all together with plaster [...] He insisted on proclaiming the absolute equality of all materials that could be used to create a picture or a sculpture.¹³

11 For Schwitters' friendship with Huelsenbeck see Schrott 1992, 229, 234; Burmeister 2004, 143-5, also unpublished letters in Schwitters' *Bleichsucht und Blutarmut* notebook, KSF.

12 Huelsenbeck 1974, 66.

13 [Les parois de la pièce étaient nues, mais le long des murs, par terre, s'accumulaient en tas les œuvres de

Huelsenbeck's and Ernst's visits date from late 1919 and mid-1920, and neither saw the studio in Waldhausenstrasse again. Although their memoirs were published many years after the event, it can be assumed that by 1920, Waldhausenstrasse 5 contained an unusual structure that was *either* a construction of *objets trouvés* in the living-room (Max Ernst) *or* a repository for souvenirs in the studio (Huelsenbeck). From the earliest stages, then, the column (assuming that there was only one at this point) is attributed to two irreconcilable locations and endowed with two conflicting purposes.

Bernhard Gröttrup, invited to the studio in 1920 for a 'guided tour' [*Vorführung*] by the artist, reported that 'colossal paintings fill a third of the room like stage scenery. Painting utensils are stored on a special stand. The refuse of a small parish: old pot lids, shards of porcelain, rags, bones, old iron, bits of tin, slate and so on'.¹⁴ In the same year the journalist Alfred Dudelsack wrote of the artist's Impressionist paintings as being on the ground floor, while the Merz works, enigmatically referred to as 'the intimate works of the master', were on the second floor.¹⁵ He describes the sea of debris in the studio, but does not say where this room was. One can only speculate whether Gröttrup's 'special stand' and Dudelsack's description of items of refuse stored up for future use 'with loving care' [*mit liebevoller Sorgfalt*] are oblique references to a tower. An acquaintance from Hannover recalled a visit to Schwitters' studio at about the same time, but did not record anything similar:

l'artiste, ses instruments, son matériel, en un inextricable fouillis. Tout près du siège ou il était assis, s'élevait du plancher jusqu'aux deux tiers de la hauteur de la pièce un extraordinaire pilier, dont il était impossible au premier abord de discerner la matière, ni l'usage auquel il était destiné. Comme les regards de Max Ernst s'attardaient avec insistance sur cet ornement, Schwitters lui dit: C'est ma colonne de merz (merz-säule). Chaque fois qu'il sortait, il rapportait de ses promenades, en guise de butin [...] Il les choisissait pour leur forme, pour leur couleur, pour l'incertitude ou l'on était de déterminer leur provenance, leur ancien usage [...] Après avoir fait le tri de ce qui pouvait lui servir pour la construction de ses reliefs, Schwitters agglomérait le rebut à la 'colonne de merz', fixant le tout avec du plâtre [...] Avec insistance, il proclamait l'égalité absolue de toutes les matières susceptibles d'entrer dans la confection d'un tableau ou d'une sculpture.] Waldberg 1958, 162-4. Ernst remained a lifelong admirer of Schwitters' work.

- 14 [Er bat [...] ihn zu besuchen [...] Kolossalgemälde füllen kulissenartig ein Drittel der Räume. Auf einem besonderen Gestell lagern die Malutensilien. Der Unrat einer kleinen Gemeinde; alte Topfdeckel, Porzellanreste, Lumpen, Knochen, Alteisen, Blechreste, Schiefer usw.] Gröttrup 1920.
- 15 [die intimen Werke des Meisters] Dudelsack 1920. This article is full of ironic religious metaphor, with phrases such as '*frommen Schauder*' [holy shudder], '*Allerheiligste*' [holy of holies], '*andächtiger Besucher*' [devout visitor], and '*Augen erheben*' [raise one's eyes].

From the hallway we entered a room, long, narrow and with a window to the garden. It was a work room, better a junk room. On the wall hung a wooden board, about 60 x 60, white [...] The wheel of a doll's pram was mounted on the lower right corner. Of course we tried turning it and it whirred round quite nicely. Schwitters was really pleased about that.¹⁶

This account indicates that the studio was on the ground floor, and as none of the last three witnesses registered the presence of a column, this may, as Max Ernst said, originally have stood in the living room on the second floor. According to his biographer, however, Alexander Dorner, director of the painting department of Hannover's *Provinzialmuseum* (Fig. 121), described the tower as a collection of refuse in a plaster casing in the cellar.¹⁷ Possible confirmation of this can be found in the statements of two contemporaries: Elisabeth Maack, who lived on the first floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5 from 1925 onwards, remembered constructions in two basement rooms,¹⁸ and the mother of Schwitters' colleague Otto Hohlt recalled in her memoirs a visit to Schwitters' 'Dada Museum' in the cellar.¹⁹ She is one of only two people to associate the column with Dada; the other is Höch, who suggests a link by comparing it to a work by Johannes Baader (Fig. 106a):

[It was a column] only at first and finally developed into a progressive, architectonic growth. When the column began to give up having a life of its own and - broadening out, so to speak - became a construction of caves, it had at an intermediate stage the form - and also something of the character - of Baader's monumental Dada architecture [...] When this construction was at its most interesting phase, passages ran from all sides into the interior, and to the left and right of these lay cabinets or caves, according to how they were designed and assigned a content.²⁰

16 [Von der Halle aus gingen wir in einen Raum, schmal, lang und mit einem Fenster zum Garten. Es war ein Werkraum, besser gesagt eine Rumpelkammer. An der Wand hing eine Holztafel etwas 60x60 - weiss [...] Rechts in der unteren Ecke war ein Rad von einem Puppenwagen anmontiert. Natürlich probierten wir, ob man auch daran drehen könnte, es schnurrte ganz gut. Das machte Schwitters eine rechte Freude.] Kaltendorf 1962. The work referred may have been *Merzbild mit Drehrad* (1920), CR 600; cf. Schwitters' comment verso. In contrast, Thilo Maatsch remembered Schwitters' 'bare studio' in 1919/20; letter of February 1968, KSF.

17 Cauman 1960, 44.

18 Elger 1984/1999, 150, n. 86.

19 [Der Keller ist zu einem Dada-Museum ausgebaut.] Hohlt 1968. I am grateful to Brigitte Schuller-Kornbrust, Saarbrücken, for allowing me access to these memoirs.

20 [[Die] Säule von Kurt Schwitters, die ja nur im Anfang eine solche war und sich zuletzt zu einem progressiven, architektonischen Gewächs entwickelte. Als die Säule anfang, ihr Eigenleben als solche aufzugeben und - sozusagen in die Breite gehend - zum Höhlenbau wurde, hatte sie als Durchgangsstadium eine Weile die Form - und auch etwas den Charakter - von Baaders Dadaistischer Monumental-Architektur [...] Als dieser Bau in seinem allerinteressantesten Stadium war, liefen von allen Seiten Gänge in das Innere und von diesen Gängen aus lagen rechts und links Kabinette oder Höhlen - je nachdem wie sie gestaltet und beinhaltet waren.] Berlin 1989, 209.

Höch also indicates that the grottos were additions rather than constituting the core. Her description emphasizes the collaborative nature of the Merzbau and complements that of Max Ernst in that she describes the interior as a repository for Merz material, which potential contributors were allowed to use unrestrictedly:

You could regard it as a special honour when Kurt Schwitters allowed a guest to design a cave [in his Merz column]. Then he would put the whole of his material at your disposal. Built-in secret depots in the secondary column [...] opened up and he let the material flood out all over the place to allow you as much freedom as possible in your choice.²¹

In a series of jottings, she writes more imprecisely of Merz material being hidden throughout: ‘Always: the forms could be opened/Material inside.’²² Höch also recalled accompanying Schwitters on excursions to a flea market to collect material for the column; as an example she mentions half a globe.²³

Alfred Arndt, a student (later a teacher) at the Bauhaus, who visited Schwitters’ studio in the mid-1920s, related that it was a strange room with sloping walls (which would indicate an attic room); in the centre stood a cardboard column with a drawing board on top and above, a round bowl containing a deep yellow fluid. When Arndt remarked that it resembled urine, Schwitters replied, ‘Yes, it IS piss!’²⁴ The bottle of urine appears in many later accounts and is mentioned by Schwitters in the *Veilchenheft*. It may not have been the only one, as Naum Gabo later stated that a phial of his urine was placed in a Gabo Cave in the Merzbau to commemorate the friendship between the two artists.²⁵

In later years, Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers remembered her unease at the sight of a tower in Schwitters’ house in 1923:

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- 21 [Als besondere Ehrung durfte man es ansehen, wenn Kurt Schwitters einem Gast erlaubte, eine Höhle zu gestalten. Er stellte dann sein gesamtes Material zur Verfügung. Eingebaute Geheimdepots in der [...] Nebensäule öffneten sich, überall ließ er es herausquellen, um einem die Auswahl so frei wie möglich zu überlassen.] Ibid., 210. Elderfield notes that ‘the debris in Schwitters studio was necessary to the Merzbau’s construction’; Elderfield 1985, 400, n. 19.
- 22 [Immer: die Formen zum öffnen /Material drin.] Höch 1995, vol. 1, 124. This may have applied to the KdeE; in the *Veilchenheft*, the Grotto of Love is said to take up only a quarter of the column’s base.
- 23 Ibid., 121.
- 24 Conversation with Arndt’s widow Margarethe, 27.5.02. Frau Arndt dated this event to about 1925 and was insistent that the urine was in a large goldfish-bowl-shaped glass.
- 25 Hammer/Lodder 2000, 114.

We gazed in amazement at the first mysterious Merz column. It was as yet constructed of material from rubbish boxes of the war years and had indescribable secret compartments. For me, the border between originality and nonsense in Schwitterian creations, whether sculptural or literary, was often not clearly recognisable.²⁶

In 1924, Nina Kandinsky was also shown a high tower with niches containing a miscellany of objects, which she located in Schwitters' studio on the second floor.²⁷ One of Schwitters' close friends and colleagues, Kate Steinitz, was certain that the tower stood in the studio, though admitted that she could not remember where this room was:

One day something appeared in the studio which looked like a cross between a cylinder or wooden barrel and a table-high tree stump with the bark run wild. It had evolved from a chaotic heap of various materials: wood, cardboard, iron scraps, broken furniture and picture frames. Soon, however, the object lost all relationship to anything made by man or nature. Kurt called it a "column". The column-like structure was hollow. Later, when it began to rise like a tower, some irregular divisions of platforms divided into stories. The inside walls were perforated with entrances to caves – more or less dark, depending on whether the electricity was functioning.²⁸

Here Steinitz describes Schwitters as inserting grottos into an already existing column. She also claims to have seen this object developing over twelve to fourteen years, which is hardly possible if, as she states, she last saw it in 1929 (cf. Fig. 16a). Like several other eyewitnesses, she emphasizes that the column's design invited the viewer to move round it: 'The cave entrances were on different levels and never directly above one another. If someone wanted to visit all the caves, he had to go all the way round the column.'²⁹

These accounts (all dating from many years later) generally describe this object as a loose agglomeration of material, yet the only incontestable evidence of a column in Waldhausenstrasse 5 in the early 1920s is a photo of a construction bearing little resemblance to any of the above descriptions (Fig. 4). Written reference to it appears solely in the memoirs

26 [Wir [bestaunten] die geheimnisvolle erste Merzsäule. Sie war noch aus dem Material der Abfallkisten aus Kriegszeiten konstruiert, hatte geheime, unbeschreibliche Einbauten. Für mich war oftmals die Grenze zwischen Originalität und Unsinn bei Schwittersschen Schöpfungen, seien sie nun plastisch oder literarisch, nicht klar erkenntlich.] Lissitzky-Küppers 1966, 24.

27 Kandinsky 1976, 105. Kandinsky lectured at the Kestner society in December 1924.

28 Steinitz 1968, 90. Käthe Steinitz (1889-1975) studied in Berlin under Kollwitz and Corinth. She made Schwitters' acquaintance in 1919.

29 Ibid. Lissitzky was also interested in the idea of a construction to be observed from all sides by going round it [ein Bau, den man umkreisend von allen Seiten betrachten muss]; Lissitzky 1922, 83.

of Raoul Hausmann and Grete Dexel. Hausmann, who probably saw it in December 1923, later identified it with the Merzbau.³⁰

Schwitters' work was a pedestal of medium height with a very varied assortment of articles glued and nailed to it. A photo in the magazine *G* shows this pedestal, which I saw for myself on my last visit to Schwitters.³¹

Grete Dexel maintained that this 'pedestal' was dismantled for re-use, which may be construed as further support for the statements of Max Ernst and Höch respectively that the column was primarily or secondarily a stockpile of rubbish. In her memoirs, she distinguishes between this object, which, like Max Ernst, she placed in the second-floor apartment, and the Merzbau, which in her recollection stood in a ground-floor room with direct access to the cellar:

Schwitters' flat, a [...] handsome five-roomed apartment in the best area of Hannover, Waldhausenstrasse 5, was quite conventional and solid middle-class [...] Only his own pictures and those he'd exchanged didn't really fit the surroundings, and neither did a sort of plaster goddess on a pedestal, which was first smashed to pieces and then supplemented by Merz art. The real Merz proceedings took place a few floors below, in a studio with a spiral staircase leading to the cellar. From there rose the huge Merzbau, a vast sculpture that never came to an end. The great heaps of raw materials to be used for Merz, often in a pretty squalid state, didn't make the most pleasing impression.³²

Other descriptions that may be presumed to apply to the incipient Merzbau are similarly inconsistent about its location. Hans Arp described it as on the first floor:

We mostly wrote poetry [together] in his parlour. His studio was one stair down [...] the appallingly beautiful Merz grotto, where broken wheels were combined with matchboxes, iron grilles with brushes with no bristles, rusty tyres with strange Merz shapes

30 Hausmann and Schwitters gave a performance in Hannover on 30.12.23; cf. Schmied 1966, 247.

31 [Das Schwitters'sche Werk war 1923 noch ein mäßig hoher Sockel in den die verschiedensten Gegenstände geleimt und genagelt waren. Eine in der Zeitschrift ‚G‘ erschienene Fotografie zeigt diesen Sockel, den ich selbst bei meinem letzten Besuch bei Schwitters sah.] 'Aussichten oder Ende des Neodadaismus' (c. 1973), unpaginated essay, Koch 1994.

32 [Schwitters Wohnung, eine [...] ansehnliche fünf-Zimmer Wohnung in bester Gegend Hannovers, Waldhausenstrasse 5, war ganz konventionell und gut bürgerlich [...] Nur die eigenen und die getauschten Bilder passten nicht ganz dazu, noch etwa eine gipserne Göttin auf Postament, die einst zerschlagen und dann durch Merzkunst ergänzt war. Das eigentliche Merzgeschehen spielte sich ein paar Geschosse tiefer in einem Atelier mit Wendeltreppe in den Keller ab. Von dort aus stieg der gewaltige Merzbau empor, eine Riesenplastik, die nie ihr Ende finden sollte. Die reichlich angehäuften Rohprodukte zu merzlicher Verwendung machten in ihrem oft recht vergammelten Zustand nicht den erfreulichsten Eindruck.] Dexel 1973, 16. I take this to mean that the whole pedestal (and not just the goddess) was destroyed. In 1923, Schwitters complained to Til Brugman about the difficulties of modernising his outmoded apartment with its stucco and old furniture; cf. Blotkamp 1997, 37. Schwitters' cousin recollected that he painted his living room carpet black and the walls and antique furniture black and white; cf. Keitel 1984, 58.

[*Merzgurken*, literally Merz cucumbers] and cardboard boxes full of scraps of posters paired with pocket mirrors, to form a dome up to the ceiling.³³

Forty years after the event, Hans Richter, the first witness to suggest a likeness between the column and Constructivist sculpture, sited it in Schwitters' apartment:

There was also one work in which he sought to integrate all his activities, and that was his beloved Schwitters-Säule (Schwitters column). For all his competence as a business man and propagandist, this one thing was sacred to him. This, his principal work, was pure, unsaleable creation. It could not be transported or even defined [...]. At the end of a passage on the second floor of the house that Schwitters had inherited, a door led into a moderately large room. In the centre of this room stood a plaster abstract sculpture. When I first saw it, in about 1925, it filled about half the room and reached almost to the ceiling. It resembled, if anything Schwitters made ever resembled anything else at all, earlier sculptures by Domela and Vantongerloo. But this was more than a sculpture; it was a living, daily-changing document on Schwitters and his friends. He explained it to me and I saw that the whole thing was an aggregate of hollow spaces, a structure of concave and convex forms which hollowed and inflated the whole sculpture. When I visited him again three years later, the pillar was totally different. All the little holes and concavities that we had formerly 'occupied' were no longer to be seen [...] covered by other sculptural excrescences, new people, new shapes, colours and details. A proliferation that never ceased. The pillar had previously looked more or less Constructivist but was now more curvilinear.³⁴

One of the most curious reports is that of Willy Pferdekamp, who visited Schwitters in late 1926. Like Richter, he maintains that the tower was on the second floor, but contradicts his claim that it was not transportable. (It should be noted that this account, like those of Max Ernst and Alexander Dorner, is not first-hand; it was written by Pferdekamp's wife shortly after his death.)

The house was solid middle-class and not furnished without expense. The front hall smelt promisingly of red cabbage; I was supposed to stay for a meal. Schwitters gave me a warm reception and led me upstairs to show me older and newer works and experiments of all kinds that he was especially busy with at that time. Above all a sculpture seemed to be close to his heart that I, and certainly other observers too, will never forget. To see it you had to open the balcony door and go outside. On the balcony stood a tall, bizarre, tower-like construction. At first it was a modest affair, but in the process of its formation this tower had steadily expanded in height and breadth. It proliferated to such an extent that it reached the ceiling and took up too much space in the room. Schwitters had rescued

33 [Wir dichteten meistens in seiner guten Stube. Sein Arbeitsraum lag eine Treppe tiefer [...]. die grausig-schöne Merzgrotte, wo sich zerbrochene Räder mit Streichholzschachteln, Drahtgitter mit Bürsten ohne Borsten, verrostete Reifen mit rätselhaften Merzgurken, Pappschachteln voller Plakatfetzen mit Handspiegeln paarten und bis zur Decke wölbten.] Quoted in Gohr 2000, 140.

34 Richter 1965/1978, 152. The first visit may have been in 1924, when Richter was in Hannover for a *gruppe g* exhibition at the Kestner Society.

himself and his family from these dire straits by transporting it on to the balcony and continuing to work on it there. But here too, the ‘construction’ came alarmingly close to the ceiling. It was the MERZ-Bau (Schwitters called it the Merz tower at that time.) On his strange tower he had carved out niches of various shapes and sizes which he called grottos.³⁵

Improbable as the description of a Merzbau on the balcony may seem, Dorner’s assistant Ferdinand Stuttmann also limited it to a balcony, but on the ground floor:

The [Merzbau] room [...] was confined to a glazed-over balcony on the ground floor of the house in Hannover-Waldhausen, which was Schwitters’ property. As the balconies in the older houses of this garden suburb were quite big, I reckoned the floor area of the Merzbau to have been about 6 x 4 sq. m. It was partly destroyed in 1943.³⁶

Not one of these witnesses apart from Steinitz uses the name Cathedral of Erotic Misery.

Both Richter and Steinitz declared that Schwitters evicted tenants in the apartment above in order to extend the column through the ceiling; Steinitz even stated that ‘one of their rooms was left with no floor’.³⁷ This claim was emphatically denied by the residents of the house interviewed in later years, including the Brockmann-Maack family who occupied the entire first floor from 1918 to 1935. Yet Richter not only insists on the hole in the ceiling but singles it out as a key aspect of the work:

Most important of all, 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 go round the column; so he had to expand upwards. But there was the ceiling. Schwitters found the simplest solution. As landlord of the house, he got rid of the

35 [Das Haus war gutbürgerlich und nicht ohne Wohlstand eingerichtet. Im Hausflur duftete es vielversprechend nach Rotkohl; ich sollte zum Essen bleiben. Schwitters empfing mich herzlich und führte mich nach oben, um mir ältere und neue Arbeiten und experimentelle Versuche verschiedenster Art zu zeigen, die ihn in jener Zeit besonders beschäftigten. Vor allem eine Plastik schien ihm am Herzen zu liegen, die mir, und gewiss auch anderen Betrachtern, unvergesslich blieb. Um sie zu besichtigen, musste man die Balkontür öffnen und ins Freie treten. Auf dem Balkon stand ein hohes, bizarres, turmartiges Gebilde. Zunächst von bescheidenem Format, war dieser Turm im Lauf des gestalterischen Prozesses immer höher und umfänglicher geworden. Er wucherte derart, dass er schon an die Decke stieß und zu viel Platz im Zimmer einnahm. Schwitters hatte sich und der Familie aus der Bedrängnis geholfen, indem er ihn auf den Balkon transportierte und dort an ihm weiterschaffte. Doch auch hier näherte sich der ‘Bau’ schon bedenklich der Decke. Es war der MERZ-Bau (Schwitters nannte ihn damals MERZ-Turm.) An seinem seltsamen ‘Turm’ hatte er Nischen von unterschiedlicher Größe und Gestalt ausgehöhlt, die er als ‘Grotten’ bezeichnete.] Pferdekamp 1968. Pferdekamp edited Corbusier’s journal *L’Esprit Nouveau*. Both Pferdekamp and his wife Modeste (the author of this piece) were writers; Pferdekamp also published fiction under the pseudonym Arnold Nolden.

36 [Der [Merzbau] Raum [...] beschränkte sich auf einen verglasten Balkon im Erdgeschoss des Hauses in Hannover-Waldhausen, das Eigentum von Schwitters war. Da die Balkons in diesen älteren Häusern in der Gartenvorstadt recht groß waren, schätzte ich die Grundfläche des Merzbaues auf 6 x 4 qm. Er wurde 1943 teilweise zerstört.] Stuttmann 1960.

37 No tenants on the first and second floors moved out between 1921 and 1935; cf. HW, also KSA 9, 28.

tenants in the flat above his, made a hole in the ceiling and continued the column on the upper floor.³⁸

As Richter located the Merzbau on the second floor, however, the column would in fact have led to the housemaids' quarters in the attic.

If Richter dated his visits correctly (1925 and 1928), then on his return he would have seen the column in a different place. In early 1927 Schwitters wrote: 'I have had to move my studio to a room at the rear, because my parents are using my former studio as a bedroom.'³⁹ Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield reiterate Ernst Schwitters' statement that this move happened between 1921 and 1923, and assume that when Schwitters writes of transferring his studio in 1927, he meant he had to move to room 4 because room 2 was at such an advanced stage (Fig. 6). Schwitters' correspondence indicates that in 1926, his studio was still in part of room 1, and that the move to room 2 took place in 1927. This event is also briefly mentioned in another letter of January 1927.⁴⁰ (The move to room 4, as will be shown below, did not occur till 1933.)

The background to the decision to move the studio to room 2 in 1927 is revealed by documents in Hannover city archive. In May 1921, as a result of an acute housing shortage, an ex-military civil servant named Hermann Boetel and his family were allocated rooms on the ground floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5 that they occupied for the next four and a half years. In June 1921, Schwitters indicated that these rooms were 2, 4 and 5: 'unfortunately you can't stay with us. My parents are away and will remain so during July, and besides, they have had to give up three rooms at the back.'⁴¹ His parents presumably allowed him to use the rear section of room 1 as a studio after the Boetels took up residence in 1921. This partitioning is

38 Richter 1965/1978, 157. Schwitters' father Eduard was the landlord till his death in 1931.

39 [Dann musste ich mit dem Atelier in ein Zimmer nach hinten umziehen, weil meine Eltern das frühere Atelier als Schlafzimmer benutzen.] As note 9.

40 Letter to Otto Ralfs, 4.1.27, Nündel 1974, 110.

41 [Es geht leider nicht, dass ihr bei uns wohnt. Meine Eltern sind und bleiben im Juli verreist, haben außerdem 3 Zimmer hinten abgeben müssen.] *Schwarzes Notizbuch VI*, entry 927, KSF. Elger suggests that the Boetels were allocated rooms 1 and 5 (Elger 1984/1999, 23), but with two children, born 4.2.15 and 18.4.22, they are likely to have occupied the back rooms; see Fig 6.

likely to have been an unsatisfactory solution, as only a double door separated studio and living room, and Schwitters' father Eduard became increasingly irascible with age.⁴²

Schwitters' studio was untidy and cluttered, and Merz was not only an odiferous undertaking (most visitors commented on the pervasive smell of glue) but also noisy; as Schwitters told Hausmann, 'I nail my pictures together'.⁴³ (Schwitters apparently searched for alternative working space at this time, as Moholy-Nagy recalled sharing a studio with him in Berlin in 1922.⁴⁴ Schwitters' offer of a similar arrangement with the sculptor Otto Hohlt in the early 1920s was rejected by the Hohlt family on the grounds that he was too disreputable.⁴⁵) The Boetel family left in December 1926 and Schwitters' parents reclaimed the rear section of room 1 as their bedroom. (Richter's anecdote of Schwitters ejecting tenants, told decades later, may well be a confused version of the Boetel family's departure.) By January 1927 Schwitters had moved his studio to room 2 (Fig. 6), described (again, many years later) by his cousin Elisabeth Keitel, who located the Merzbau on the ground floor at the rear, adjacent to a room used by Schwitters' father:

At the back of my uncle's apartment, [Kurt] had a big room that he used as a studio [...] In the mid-twenties he started on his Merzbau [there][...] So this room, which led out to the back, wasn't in his flat. If you wanted to get to this room you had to go through my uncle's so-called living-room. I always wished I could back straight out of this room, Schwitters' studio. It wasn't my style, for you could find everything here that he'd collected. He made the pictures he wanted to sell or exhibit in this room. It had big windows without curtains and you could see [...] the Eilenriede [park] outside. I found this room weird - not that I didn't like his pictures, but his studio looked horrible.⁴⁶

42 Cf. KSA 1984, 62 and Höch 1995, vol. 2, 264. Eduard (1857-1931) was in his mid-sixties at this time. Kurt describes him as suffering from *Nervenfieber* [nervous fever], probably a form of typhus, that left him a semi-invalid for the rest of his life.

43 [Ich nagle meine Bilder.] Hausmann 1970/1992, 70.

44 Moholy-Nagy 1967, 72.

45 Information from Brigitte Schuller-Kornbrust (daughter-in-law of Otto Hohlt), Saarbrücken. Both Hohlt and Schwitters were members of the Hannover Secession.

46 [Er hatte hinten in der Wohnung meines Onkels ein großes Zimmer, das er als Atelier benutzte. Mitte der zwanziger Jahre hat Schwitters seinen Merzbau begonnen [...] Dieses Zimmer, das nach hinten hinausging, war also nicht in seiner Wohnung. Wenn man in das Zimmer hineingelangen wollte, musste man durch das sogenannte Wohnzimmer meines Onkels gehen. Aus diesem Zimmer, Schwitters Atelier, wäre ich am liebsten rückwärts wieder herausgegangen. Das lag mir nicht, denn hier konnte man all das finden, was er gesammelt hatte. Seine Bilder, die er verkaufen oder ausstellen wollte, hat er in diesem Zimmer gemacht. Es hatte große Fenster ohne Gardinen, und man guckte in [...] die Eilenriede. Mit war dieses Zimmer unheimlich, nicht, dass mir seine Bilder nicht gefielen, aber sein Atelier sah entsetzlich aus.] Keitel 1984, 62.

When Rudolf Jahns visited the new studio, reached by a narrow corridor, he recalled being ushered into a construction of wood and plaster that stood in a corner opposite the door (not, as Richter said, in the middle). The remainder of the room, according to this undated memoir, was nearly empty:

We entered the column itself through a narrow door, which was more like a grotto; a plaster construction was hanging over the door panelling [...] Schwitters asked me to go through the grotto alone. So I went into the construction which, with all its bends, resembled a snail shell and a grotto at the same time. The path by which you reached the middle was very narrow because new structures and assemblages, as well as existing grottos and Merz-reliefs, hung over from all sides into the still unoccupied parts of the room. Right at the back, to the left of the entrance, hung a bottle containing Schwitters's urine, in which everlasting flowers were floating. Then there were grottos of various types and shapes, whose entrances were not always on the same level. If you walked all the way around, you finally reached the middle, where I found a place to sit, and sat down. [...] I saw the grotto again soon afterwards, and it had changed once more. Many of the grottos were covered up and my impression was more of a unified whole.⁴⁷

At Schwitters' request, he recorded his impressions in a book at the centre of the column.

Jahns' dating of this event to 1927 is problematic in that he describes the column (he does not use the name KdeE) as in a far more advanced state than other visitors of the time. He may in retrospect have combined memories of this occasion with a later visit, for whereas other witnesses of this period write of walking round a column and inspecting it from the exterior, he describes being enclosed within it, which would correspond to a more advanced stage of the Merzbau's development. His account of the interior layout is also puzzling. After entering a narrow door he walks around an irregular column or combination of columns to what he calls the 'middle', from which he can apparently see the entrance and the bottle of urine. The column has been encased entirely in plaster, but as he notes constructions hanging over the sides, has not reached the ceiling. The mention of the bottle of Schwitters' urine indicates that this column is the KdeE as described in the *Veilchenheft*. Jahns could certainly have sat inside in its advanced stages, as by 1930, the base measured 2 x 1 metres and the

47 Jahns 1982 (Fig. 56).

whole was 3.5 metres in height; the measurements are Schwitters' own.⁴⁸ It is likely that higher sections were in some way accessible from the interior; Ernst Schwitters told Elderfield that there were stairs inside the KdeE that allowed the visitor to look into grottos on various levels,⁴⁹ and Höch also noted that stairways were an important feature.⁵⁰ One is shown in Schwitters' own sketch of the column (Fig. 37).

Two others who witnessed the column in the late 1920s were Käte Ralfs, who described it as a 'droll' [*witzig*] Dadaistic construction in the corner of Schwitters' studio⁵¹ and the architect Lucy Hillebrand, who frequently worked with Schwitters in 1928/29. She recollected neither any Constructivist features nor any white structure spreading through the house, but only a column like an Expressionist grotto, coloured predominantly blue and green.⁵² Writing of the Lysaker Merzbau, Ernst Schwitters noted that in colour it was similar to that in Hannover: 'mainly white "geometrical" forms with a few accents in bright reds, blues, yellows, and of course the Dadaistic grottos resembled my father's collages and assemblages, both in Hannover and Lysaker, and were very colourful.'⁵³

3. The evidence, 1930

The letters of Kurt and Helma Schwitters

A letter written by Schwitters in January 1930 indicates that his studio had gained some new significance: 'I look forward to receiving you in my studio and would draw your attention to the fact that only there can you receive any sort of total impression of my works.'⁵⁴ Despite

48 Appendix I, ¶10.

49 Elderfield 1985, 155.

50 Höch 1995, vol. 1, 124. See also Fig. 37.

51 Conversation with Käte Ralfs, 22.6.91. See also Lufft 1985.

52 *Neue Presse*, 24.3.1986, SAH. See also her comments in 'Zeitzeugen von Kurt Schwitters erinnern sich', 21.3.86, KSF. Schwitters' correspondence with Hillebrand on joint projects in the late 1920s is in SAH. Both were members of the *Deutsche Werkbund*.

53 Wadley 1981, 51.

54 [[...] erwarte ich gern Ihren Besuch in meinem Atelier und mache Sie darauf aufmerksam, dass Sie nur dort einen einigermassen vollständigen Eindruck meiner Arbeiten haben können.] Letter to Miss Blattner, 26.1.30, Nündel 1974, 133.

his sudden emphasis on its representative nature, there are few descriptions of his studio during the final years of the Weimar Republic. This was most probably due to the exodus of artists and intellectuals from Germany in the wake of the economic and political crisis of 1929-30, for there is no evidence that Schwitters was in any way secretive about it during this period; on the contrary, letters written by himself and his wife repeatedly allude (for the first time) to one or more columns. As this correspondence was addressed to patrons, active supporters and gallery owners located outside Germany, it seems that after seven years of silence about his studio constructions, Schwitters was now looking for opportunities to publicize them abroad. Germany had become a difficult place to exhibit and sell avant-garde work, and there was mounting opposition to the avant-garde from influential right-wing organisations such as the *Deutsche Kunstgesellschaft* [German Art Society] and the *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* [Combat League for German Culture], which drew much of their membership from the middle classes and academic institutions.⁵⁵

At the end of a letter to his friend and patron Carola Giedion-Welcker in January 1930, Schwitters mentioned in passing that ‘I’ve been painting a lot and working on my columns. The middle-sized one is as good as finished. Then I’m working on several dramas’.⁵⁶ In February he informed Katherine Dreier that he was occupied with painting, sculpture and his ‘three columns’.⁵⁷ The lack of further clarification can possibly be attributed to the fact that both addressees knew of the columns from previous visits - Giedion-Welcker in the company of her husband (at that time advisor to Kunsthaus Zürich) in 1928, and Dreier with Duchamp

55 Members of the latter are listed in the *Mitteilung des Kampfbundes für deutsche Kultur*, 1929-31. The activities of this burgeoning fascist organization, founded in 1928, (which included engineering the dismissal of progressive museum directors) were bolstered after the 1929 NSDAP election victory in Thuringia, which enabled the state government to impose rigid cultural restrictions, and, for example, destroy murals by Schlemmer and Dix as examples of degenerate art.

56 [Dann habe ich viel gemalt und an meinen Säulen gearbeitet. Die mittelgrosse ist so gut wie fertig. Dann schreibe ich an mehreren dramatischen Arbeiten.] Letter of 15.1.30, Giedion-Welcker 1973, 504.

57 [Ich habe [...] an meinen 3 Säulen gearbeitet.] Letter of 27.2.30, Nündel 1974, 132.

in 1929.⁵⁸ If so, it can be assumed that by 1928, Schwitters was already working on more than one column in the studio.

By May 1930, the middle-sized column was presumably complete, for in a letter to Galka Scheyer, who was planning to include contributions by Schwitters in an exhibition in California, Helma wrote that ‘Kurt has many interesting works, such as a column, an *Ursonate*’.⁵⁹ It seems that at this point, the column was considered transportable and thus exhibitable. In March 1930, Dreier, also a collector and gallery owner, again visited Waldhausenstrasse 5. After she left, Helma wrote to remind her that she had left a hairpin behind on her visit, adding that ‘We’re really looking forward to the column book, but the hairpin isn’t worth keeping – or should it go on Kurt’s column, since it will probably make the journey across the Atlantic twice?’⁶⁰ Dreier had taken the book with her to record her impressions of the column, presumably returning it on her next visit in March 1937. From this letter it also seems that she either knew of, or had drawn up, plans to transport the finished column to the USA for exhibition.

The *Veilchenheft* / ‘Das grosse E’ (see Appendix I)

Schwitters’ first public acknowledgement of a studio column occurs in an essay of 1930 entitled ‘Ich und meine Ziele’, published in the 1931 *Veilchenheft* (Figs. 54, 55). Joachim Büchner’s opinion that ‘Ich und meine Ziele [...] conveys a complete and authentic impression of the all-embracing profuse reality of the Merzbau’,⁶¹ is accepted in almost all analyses of the Merzbau, and Schwitters’ portrayal of the KdeE in this text is often regarded as a key to the whole work (e.g. Bergius 1989, Dietrich 1993, Falguières 1994, Gamard 2000;

58 Ella Bergmann-Michel visited Schwitters at the same time as Duchamp; cf. letter to Schwitters, 27.10.47, KSA 7, 67-70. Lach claims that the painter Schweighelm von Braun in Schwitters’ drama *Es kommt darauf an* (1930) is a parody of Duchamp; cf. Lach 1971, 166-7.

59 [Kurt hat viele sehr interessante Arbeiten, so eine Säule, eine Ursonate.] Letter of 3.5.30, Luyken 2000, 34.

60 [Wir sind sehr gespannt auf das Säulenbuch, die Haarnadel ist doch aber nicht des Aufhebens wert oder soll sie an Kurts Säule, da sie ja wahrscheinlich 2 mal die Reise übers grosse Meer macht?] Letter of 2.9.30, BLY.

61 [Schwitters Text in ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ im *Veilchenheft* von 1931 vermittelt einen vollständigen und authentischen Eindruck der allumfassenden Wirklichkeitsfülle des Merzbaus.] Büchner 1986, 18.

an exception is Osswald-Hoffmann 2003). In fact the great diversity of Merzbau reception can in many instances be traced to Schwitters' elusive stance in the *Veilchenheft*. The description of the column takes up roughly a quarter of 'Ich und meine Ziele' but is embedded in claims that 'depiction and statement are not the aims of works of art', and pleas for the recognition of the primacy of form. Furthermore, its thematic correlation to the remainder of the essay, which focuses on abstract art, typography and recent political developments in Germany, is obscure. Schwitters gives a detailed account of part of the column, but also compares it to a shy violet that may have to remain hidden. He dates its beginnings to 1923 and is evasive about the nature of the content, which is set out in grottos and relates to a wide range of themes: people, places, history and myth, animals, art, architecture, advertising and social taboos. At the same time he distances himself from these elements, which he also attributes to the year 1923, on the grounds that they are outmoded, Dada, 'literary' and no longer related to his search for pure form.

Schwitters frequently amends or challenges his own statements on the KdeE through a qualifying or negatory phrase, again as if in two minds about how much to reveal to the public. Despite the apparently overt eroticism of some of the grottos, he writes that the name KdeE has '*not at all, or little*' bearing on the content. It contains all the things '*with some exceptions*' that had been '*either important or unimportant*' to him as regards form in the last seven years. His description of the grottos is as Dadaistic as their content: Persil advertisements are juxtaposed with sex crimes, a lavatory attendant with a grotto of love, coke with Michelangelo. Schwitters ends with a deliberately irritating parenthetical disclaimer: 'The impression of the whole is reminiscent of something like a cubist painting or Gothic architecture (not one bit!)'. Some commentators choose to ignore this and Schwitters' other negations of his position, but as a tactic, it is typical of his literary and artistic work and has

been compared with the gesture of deliberately scoring an own goal.⁶²

Using an architectural vocabulary (pillar, cathedral, metropolis, house, building authorities, townscape, grottos, staircase) Schwitters sets out his working method; he glues found objects to the column, encases them in plaster and applies paint. As these structures accumulate they give rise to further spaces that are absorbed into a structure of helical supports (of wood, though the material is not specified); these in turn provide the foundations for a geometrical exterior of painted plaster. He writes of ‘about ten columns’, but the phrasing is imprecise and may mean that these were planned, not completed; his letters never refer to more than three. There is indirect confirmation of the plan to fill the studio with columns in Steinitz’s memoirs,⁶³ but if this had been realised, little space would have remained. Ten columns with dimensions comparable to those of the KdeE (2 x 1 x 3.5 metres) would in effect have filled a room whose floor area was less than 24 square metres.⁶⁴

This description in the *Veilchenheft* tallies only awkwardly with the standard chronology. There is no indication of an initial Constructivist phase and no intimation that the work had ever constituted a Merz Demonstration Room. Elderfield follows Schmalenbach in describing the studio as ‘full’ by about 1927, but this does not accord with any written evidence and would have entailed the wholesale destruction or relocation of much of room’s content prior to the 1933 photographs (Figs. 21-3). If by 1930 the Merzbau was at the advanced stage suggested by Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield, it is difficult to explain why at this point Schwitters, far from writing of a room, or rooms, full of constructions, should have limited his account to the KdeE, which Elderfield identified as situated left of the main studio window (Fig. 24). On the evidence of the *Veilchenheft* and personal letters of this time, it seems that the extent of the Merzbau in the late 1920s was far less than is commonly assumed.

62 Cf. Szeemann 1994, 225.

63 ‘Finally the column will stand with ten other columns as gigantic forms in space.’ Steinitz 1968, 91.

64 It has been suggested that individual columns were no longer distinguishable by 1930 because they had been absorbed into a broader structure; cf. Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 165-6, also Fig. 53a.

In the *Veilchenheft*, Schwitters mentions one other contributor to the column: Hannah Höch. She made two grottos and, in the outline of her unrealised autobiography, relates that she was twice invited to co-operate on the Merzbau: ‘Access to everything [...] was supposed to collaborate. Also later when the two grottos had long disappeared in the interior.’⁶⁵ Richter, Hausmann and Steinitz allude to these grottos, and one is documented in Schwitters’ correspondence.⁶⁶ Höch’s contribution is also mentioned in Schwitters’ stylistically comparable text on the column entitled ‘Das grosse E’ (‘The Big E’, Appendix II). In the collected edition of Schwitters’ literary works this precedes ‘Ich und meine Ziele’; it could have been written in 1930 (it refers to the wreck of the German cruise liner *Monte Cervantes* on 22.1.30) but is likely to date from 1931, as it presents the column at a more advanced stage than in the *Veilchenheft*. It might be speculated that Schwitters drafted this piece for the next issue of the Merz periodical announced at the end of the *Veilchenheft* (Fig. 55), entitled *Merz 22 Entwicklung* [Development]. Whether this title pertained to developments in his studio is, however, unverifiable, as neither *Merz 22* nor *Merz 23* (entitled e.E.) ever appeared (Fig. 55).

In ‘Das grosse E’, Schwitters writes that he has renamed the column the Big E after making some unspecified changes. For the first time he describes the column as Merz, explaining that he has reworked it so that it is now negative and non-functional (without elucidating how the KdeE had been positive and functional till now). This is the second of only two written references by Schwitters to the KdeE. Whether the title was applied to the column from the beginning is not known. It does not occur in his correspondence and can be found only on two photos and in the *Veilchenheft* and ‘Das grosse E’ texts, in each of which he expressly qualifies his use of the name. The only available evidence on the nomenclature comes from Ernst Schwitters, who stated that the terms KdeE and Merzbau were interchangeable, but there is no proof of this in contemporary writings or photos. Even Friedrich Vordemberge-

65 [Ich zu allem Zugang [...] Sollte mitarbeiten. Auch noch später als die beiden Höhlen längst im Inneren verschwunden waren.] Höch 1995, vol. 1, 124.

66 See note 90.

Gildewart, who saw the Merzbau at various stages, writes only of ‘the famous column, later named the Merzbau’.⁶⁷

The opening reference in ‘Das grosse E’ to ‘negative function’ is reminiscent of Constructivist strivings to articulate space through objects. Alexander Dorner, for instance, saw Constructivism as expanding on the Cubist tradition by introducing new discoveries in physics: ‘Bodies, planes and lines are, so to speak, transferred from the Earth’s surface to the cosmos, where masses and currents of energy achieve reciprocal balance and penetration.’⁶⁸ ‘Das grosse E’, like the *Veilchenheft*, acknowledges the importance of form – Schwitters claims the column is a ‘monument to pure art’ - but concentrates on content.⁶⁹ He reveals that he has not dispensed with the grotto per se but still regards it as a key element, and provides a list of grottos, some devoted to iconic figures like Hitler, Haarmann, Hindenburg and Mussolini, others to obscure, perhaps fictional personages like Professor Wanken and his son Punzelchen.⁷⁰ Schwitters seems more willing to reveal the existence of the column to a wider public, but this text is as resistant to interpretation as the previous passage on the KdeE. Neither reveals anything about the column’s location, and both make ample use of his favoured literary devices of contradiction and bathos. In the *Veilchenheft*, he had described the column as unfinished on principle; in ‘Das grosse E’ it is announced as complete, then incomplete.⁷¹ His appeal for contributions to the grottos of the rechristened KdeE (‘extraordinarily obliged’, ‘your esteemed family’) is couched in terms of a formal German invitation, but his request for ‘material of international importance’ is followed by a list of

67 [die berühmte Säule, später Merzbau genannt.] Vordemberge-Gildewart 1976, 43.

68 [Körper, Ebenen und Linien werden von der Erdoberfläche gleichsam ins All versetzt, wo auch die Massen und die Energieströme sich gegenseitig ausbalancieren und durchdringen.] Dorner 1928. In *Nasci*, Constructivism is described as a development of Cubism; cf. LW 5, 189.

69 In the catalogue of the Merz exhibition (1926), Schwitters wrote: ‘It’s not as if form were the most important thing for me, as then my art would be decorative.’ [Nicht als ob mir die Form das Wichtigste wäre, denn dann wäre meine Kunst dekorativ.] Schwitters 1926d.

70 Wanken is a very rare German surname and may be an oblique reference to the predominantly right-wing German universities; *wanken* means to totter or sway, and *Punzelchen* means little puncher.

71 [Every form is the frozen instantaneous picture of a process. Thus a work of art is a stopping place on the road of becoming and not the fixed goal.] Schwitters/Lissitzky 1924; see Fig. 114.

items (cloakroom and tram tickets, ballot papers, theatre programmes, family photos, etc.) less than appropriate for a monument to pure art. He also lists Höch, Vordemberge-Gildewart and Walden as having already contributed. Both Höch and Steinitz later confirmed that colleagues created grottos in the Merzbau. Höch mentions two by Arp, one by Lissitzky, who contributed a cage structure measuring about 20 x 20 cm, and others by Moholy-Nagy, Hausmann, Mondrian and Doesburg,⁷² while Steinitz wrote that Moholy and Schwitters made a joint grotto, a ‘little modern villa’ named the White Palace (Fig. 50).⁷³ Herwarth Walden probably contributed a grotto as Schwitters’ guest in December 1929.⁷⁴

From the allusion to negative function in ‘Das grosse E’, it might be conjectured that the column was evolving into something quite different from the work of specific dimensions (3.5 x 2 x 1 sq. metre) described in the *Veilchenheft*. The appeal for contributions also indicates that Schwitters had begun to think of the column as a collective effort. (Assuming that Höch was indeed asked to collaborate, this may have been his concept from the first, but it seems that only later could he implement this idea.) He was also considering how to integrate the surrounding area, as he concludes by referring to an adjoining art exhibition that he conceives as a didactic space. ‘In an extension of the Big E is the E-Collection, the point of which is to provide guidance to the latest in art.’⁷⁵ Fifty-four pictures remain of this collection; most were destroyed with the Merzbau (cf. Schulz 2006a).⁷⁶

72 Höch 1989, 209-210.

73 Steinitz 1968, caption preceding page 67. This caption is questionable (see Fig. 50). It has been claimed that Moholy-Nagy played an ‘instrumental part’ in the construction of the Merzbau up to 1930 (Kaplan 1995, 104.) Steinitz’s allusion to grottos dedicated to Schwitters’ other colleagues does not specify whether these contained personal objects or were constructed by the artists themselves.

74 Walden lectured at Schwitters’ house on 5.12.29; cf. Wiesbaden 1990a, 189. His grotto is mentioned in ‘Das grosse E’ (Appendix II).

75 See Fig 25a. The Lysaker and Elterwater Merzbauten also contained pictures (Figs. 68, 69, 90).

76 In May 1938 Schwitters informed Sophie Täuber-Arp that the Merzbau collection (including three works by Arp) remained intact in Hannover; letter of 10.3.38, Nündel 1974, 145.

4. The evidence, 1931-1933

1931-1932

From the evidence of the *Veilchenheft*, Schwitters regarded his studio columns as separate entities in 1930; he writes of the KdeE that ‘The whole is covered with an arrangement of cubes of the most strictly geometrical form’.⁷⁷ By January 1931, when Helma Schwitters informed Katherine Dreier of the new developments in the studio, he was apparently revising this concept:

The column will be extremely beautiful, one column is already finished and so that it doesn’t get dusty it’s completely wrapped in paper – the other column, the Column of Life, is growing and growing, and as it can’t grow up any further for lack of room height, it’s therefore growing outwards, which opens up all sorts of possibilities [...] I think it will be really very beautiful.⁷⁸

Ernst Schwitters later remembered that his father often lamented the limited height of this room.⁷⁹ The above letter provides further confirmation that the column did not extend to the floor above; Helma implies rather that it was the impossibility of penetrating the ceiling that encouraged Schwitters to adopt a strategy of lateral expansion. This may well be the period in which Ernst remembered his father spanning strings across the studio, rather than 1920, when Ernst was only one year old.⁸⁰

Nothing in the sources supports either the theory advanced by Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield (following the testimony of Ernst Schwitters) that by the mid-1920s the first room of the Merzbau was complete, or, as Schmalenbach and Elderfield suggest, that it was so full of constructions (Schmalenbach refers to it as ‘impenetrable’ [*undurchdringlich*])⁸¹ that Schwitters had to move his studio to another room. It is noticeable that apart from Helma, no eyewitness mentions more than one column, with the sole exception of Hannah Höch, who

⁷⁷ Appendix I, ¶10.

⁷⁸ [Die Säule wird bildschön, eine Säule ist ganz fertig und damit sie nicht verstaubt, ist sie ganz von einer Papierhülle umgeben, die andere Säule, die Lebenssäule, wächst und wächst, und da sie wegen Mangel an Zimmerhöhe nicht mehr hochwachsen kann, so geht sie in die Breite, dafür bestehen ja noch grosse Möglichkeiten [...] ich glaube, sie wird wirklich mal sehr schön.] Letter of 13.1.31, BLY.

⁷⁹ Wadley 1981, 51. Here Ernst estimates the height as c. 4.2 m; the CR gives it as c. 4.6 m.

⁸⁰ Schwitters E. 1983, 143.

⁸¹ Schmalenbach 1978a, 141.

writes of a 'secondary column' [*Nebensäule*].⁸²

On the evidence of personal letters, by 1931 the studio consisted of one room containing a sizeable column (the KdeE), shrouded in a protective covering, which both Schwitters and his wife regarded as finished and transportable. A larger, incomplete construction of unknown dimensions named the Column of Life stood in the same room. As Helma does not mention a third column in the above letter, it is likely that this was either in its preliminary stages or had been incorporated into the horizontal extensions of the Column of Life.

In mid-1931, the author and composer Paul Bowles made a forty-mile detour especially to call on Schwitters. Nearly forty years later, Bowles recalled this visit:

Schwitters lived in a stolid bourgeois apartment house. The flat was relatively small and sombrely furnished. I slept on a small glassed-in porch off the dining room [...] We went that day to the city dump and walked for two hours among the garbage, ashes and pieces of junk, collecting material for the Merzbau in the apartment below. In the trolley-car returning from our outing, people eyed us with curiosity. Schwitters, his son and I each carried a basketful of refuse; we had bits of paper and rags, broken metal objects, even an ancient, stiff hospital bandage. It was all to be formed into parts of the Merzbau. The Merzbau was a house within an apartment, a personal museum in which both the objects displayed and the exhibit rooms were inseparable parts of the same patiently constructed work of art.⁸³

A letter written by Bowles shortly after his visit indicates that the columns were still separate entities at this time, as he describes how he and Schwitters 'took a walk about the dumping grounds to hunt for material for his statues he has in his studio'.⁸⁴ The articles selected, according to Bowles, included a whole vase, a broken tin spoon, part of a mosquito net, a damaged thermos flask and shards of china and glass.

This is one of the few eyewitness reports of the Merzbau from the 1930s, none of which documents the transitional stage between column(s) and environment. Two of Schwitters' contemporaries who later recorded their impressions of the Merzbau do, however, seem to be talking about the studio in advanced, yet very different, phases. Whereas for early visitors, the

82 See note 21. Höch visited the studio in 1929 and in the early 1930s.

83 Bowles 1972, 114-5.

84 Sawyer-Lauçanno 1999, 104. Bowles does not use the names Cathedral of Erotic Misery or Merzbau.

term ‘grotto’ refers to a small niche in a column that contains minute *objets trouvés*, Rudolf Jahns uses it to mean an enclosed space with a door in part of a room, matching the account of the column in the *Veilchenheft*.⁸⁵ In Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart’s recollection of the column,⁸⁶ he refers to it as an ‘open sculpture’ [*offene Plastik*] and uses the word grotto to refer to structural components of all sizes within a sculptural environment: ‘these grottos, details of the great structure, were in part so roomy that they provided space for two or three people.’⁸⁷ By this time the Merzbau was also large enough to function as a theatre:

Schwitters was [...] given the opportunity to bring the Merzbau to its ultimate consummation by giving a recital of his poems, grotesqueries, his Ursonate.⁸⁸

These at least seem authentic memories, unlike much of the rest of Vordemberge’s description, which relies heavily on quotations and paraphrases from the *Veilchenheft*.

Vordemberge is listed as the creator of a grotto in the ‘Big E’ (see Appendix II)⁸⁹ and certainly saw the Merzbau in the 1930s, as he remained in Hannover till 1937 and maintained contact with Schwitters through membership of groups such as the *abstrakten hannover*, *cercle et carré* and *abstraction-cr ation*.

At some time between January 1931 and August 1932 there seems to have been a radical change in the development of the studio in that the columns were fused into an integrated room sculpture. As Helma wrote: ‘it’s growing outwards, which opens up all sorts of possibilities’, whereby the ‘it’ refers to the second column, not the ‘finished’ KdeE. The

85 Jahns 1982.

86 Vordemberge-Gildewart 1976, 43-44. Vordemberge is described as an Elementarist artist in *De Stijl* 7, 1928, 24. The first sentence of *Nasci* is an implied criticism of the Doesburg/Vordemberge-Gildewart advocacy of mechanical design. For Vordemberge-Gildewart’s response, see Vordemberge-Gildewart 1976, 15.

87 [Diese Grotten, Details des gro en Baues, waren teilweise so ger umig, dass sie zwei bis drei Personen Platz gaben.] Ibid. This article, which originally appeared in a Dutch journal (Vordemberge-Gildewart 1948), was later revised and translated into German (Vordemberge-Gildewart 1959). It was rejected by a Munich art journal in 1949 (see Hannover 2000, 310).

88 [Hier bot sich dann die Gelegenheit, dass Schwitters den MERZ-Bau dadurch zur h ochsten Vollendung brachte, dass er seine Gedichte, Grotesken, seine Urlautsonate vortrug.] Vordemberge-Gildewart 1976, 44. See also letter to Giedion-Welcker, 26.2.56, Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, vol. I, 323.

89 Vordemberge-Gildewart wrote affectionately of Schwitters in later years, though their relationship was beset by tensions in the 1930s; cf. letter from Schwitters to Susanna Freudenthal, 9.10.35, KSA 9, 115; letter from Vordemberge-Gildewart to Arp, 16.6.33, in Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, vol. I, 21; letter from Vordemberge-Gildewart to Giedion-Welcker, 26.2.56, *ibid.*, 323; correspondence with Auguste Herbin, *ibid.*, vol. II, 30 ff.

process of smoothing and homogenizing exterior surfaces also affected older, hitherto open grottos. In October 1932, Schwitters wrote to Höch that Gabo had visited him and begged her to ‘let him tell you about my studio [...] your little Bordello has come under glass’.⁹⁰ In time, he adopted a new terminology for the expanded structures of the studio, such as *Grosse Gruppe* and *Grande Corniche* (Fig 21, 28c).

1932-1933

In August 1932, both Helma and Kurt wrote of the first room as nearing completion. In one letter, Schwitters states that he has ‘an enormous amount of work in my studio, which, having spent 10 years of my life working on it, I at last wanted to bring to an end’; in another, Helma refers to typographical experiments ‘that [Kurt] wants to continue after the completion of his studio’.⁹¹ These letters are part of a correspondence with the Stuttgart architects Heinz and Bodo Rasch, who employed Schwitters as advisor for their international exhibitions of modern typography (*Gefesselter Blick* 1930) and advertising (*Werbeschau* 1932).⁹² In a time of mounting economic and political crisis, the Rasch brothers also offered Schwitters a rare opportunity to publicize his typographical work and experimental typefaces in Germany. Their interest extended to his prose and poetry, and it was through their good offices that part of his *Ursonate* was recorded for German radio in 1932.⁹³ Schwitters was therefore optimistic that they would enable him to publicize yet another unorthodox work. In January 1933, Helma wrote to Bodo Rasch: ‘As my husband still has things to do in his studio, he asked me to reply to you [...] we’ll be sending you photos of the studio as soon as we have had them

90 [Gabo war bei uns zu Besuch. Lass Dir von ihm über mein Atelier erzählen [...] Dein kleines Bordell ist unter Glas gekommen.] Letter of 11.10.32, Höch 1995, vol. 2, 462. Höch later wrote that in her Merzbau grotto she ‘mainly used photos - with a few cheeky little additions. The first [...] was called Bordello – and the lady in the foreground had three legs’. [Ich benutzte hauptsächlich Fotos – mit einigen kleinen frechen Zutaten. Die erste [...] hieß ‚Bordell‘ – und die vordergrundliche Dame hatte drei Beine.] Höch 1989, 210. The second was a grotto that Höch remembered as having something to do with Goethe, whom she portrayed as completely pink; *ibid.*

91 [eine ungeheure Arbeit in meinem Atelier, die ich jetzt endlich, nachdem eine Lebensarbeit von 10 Jahren drin steckt, zu Ende bringen wollte.] Letter to Bodo Rasch, 11.8.32, SAH: [die er nächstens nach Vollendung seines Ateliers weiterführen möchte]. Helma Schwitters to Bodo Rasch, 25.8.32, SAH.

92 For more on the Rasch brothers’ projects, see Rasch 1981.

93 Wiesbaden 1990a, 260-1.

taken, which has still not been done because we lack the money.⁹⁴ Hans and Lily Hildebrandt were also to receive photos:⁹⁵

My husband has asked me to answer your letter as he has so much to do in his studio downstairs that he can find no time to write. He has made a single great sculpture out of his studio, or perhaps you could also say a Gothic cathedral; in any case, if you are in the vicinity of Hannover you really should visit us, and once we have some photos of the studio, we'll send you one too.⁹⁶

The death of Schwitters' father on 16.3.1931 may have been a decisive factor in the decision to give the studio increased publicity: Eduard is unlikely to have welcomed visitors walking through his apartment to the studio at the rear (Fig. 6).⁹⁷

In April 1933 Helma informed Hannah Höch that 'Kurt is still doing abstract works. He has now completely transformed his former studio into a Merzbau; you can sit and contemplate it for hours and still keep discovering something new and interesting'.⁹⁸ This letter marks the first occurrence of the word Merzbau. No explanation is given, though it can be assumed that if the name KdeE was still in use, it would have had to be jettisoned after the election victory of the NSDAP in January 1933, as too indicative of the Weimar avant-garde. As Helma refers here to the 'former studio', it may be assumed that Schwitters had by now decided that this room should no longer be used for its original purpose. Though the correspondence indicates that he moved his workplace to the adjoining room in early 1933, he continued to refer to room 1 as his studio, and as the Merzbau spread, he applied the word to all successive stages of its development; Helma generally did the same. When it was bombed in 1943, the Merzbau

94 [Da mein Mann noch immer an seinem Atelier zu tun hat, hat er mich gebeten, Ihnen zu antworten [...] Von dem Atelier werden wir Ihnen sobald wir Fotos davon haben machen lassen, was wegen Mangel an Geld noch immer unterblieben ist, einige schicken.] Letter to Bodo Rasch, 24.1.33, SAH.

95 These were evidently not available for the 1933 issue of *abstraction-création*, in which two photos of details of the Merzbau were published, both by an unknown photographer (cf. Fig. 25a, Fig 30).

96 [Mein Mann bittet mich, Ihren Brief zu beantworten, da er soviel unten im Atelier zu tun hat, dass er keine Zeit zum schreiben findet. Er hat aus seinem Atelier eine einzige grosse Plastik gemacht oder wie man vielleicht auch sagen kann einen gotischen Dom, jedenfalls müssten Sie uns, falls Sie einmal in die Nähe von Hannover kämen, besuchen, und wenn wir erst Fotos vom Atelier haben, senden wir Ihnen auch eine.] Letter to Lily Hildebrandt, 30.1.33, HLH.

97 For more on this difficult father-son relationship see KSA 1984, 62: Schwitters 1926c/2; Schwitters 1930b, scene 1: Höch 1995, vol. 2, 264.

98 [Kurt arbeitet weiter abstrakt, er hat jetzt sein früheres Atelier ganz zum Merzbau umgestaltet, man kann stundenlang sitzen und betrachten und entdeckt immer noch Neues und Interessantes.] Letter of 5.4.33, Höch 1995, vol. 2, 482.

extended to several rooms, but Helma simply wrote that ‘Kurt’s studio has been destroyed’.⁹⁹

The term Merzbau was, it seems, used only for official purposes; it does not appear in Schwitters’ letters till 1937, after he emigrated to Norway, and even then he generally writes of his studio or his Merz/abstract room(s).

The events of 1933 soon terminated the Rasch brothers’ patronage. In July, under the pseudonym of Paul Krüger, Schwitters published *Schacko* in *Zirkel*, the journal of Bodo Rasch’s Marxist-leaning *Klub der Geistesarbeiter*, but Helma turned down Rasch’s request for more of Schwitters’ ‘progressive work’ [*fortschrittliche Arbeiten*].¹⁰⁰ Later in the year such activities led to Rasch’s imprisonment. Schwitters’ association with Paul Renner’s college of printing in Munich resulted in the seizure and denunciation of the *Ursonate* as a ‘cultural bolshevist’ work on 25 March,¹⁰¹ and a 1933 ruling on epilepsy provided a further reminder of his questionable status in the eyes of the regime.¹⁰²

Unable to promote the Merzbau in Germany, Schwitters utilized his membership of the Paris-based *abstraction-création* to publish an article on the Merzbau in their eponymous journal in 1933 (see Appendix II). While the *Veilchenheft* and ‘Das grosse E’ describe a single studio column, this article introduces the work under its new name as an abstract sculptural interior. Two photos are included, both of details: one is of ceiling constructions, the other of a glazed grotto (Fig. 57). As no windows are visible, this enhances the impression of an all-encircling structure. Even accounting for the fact that Schwitters was writing in a hostile political climate and for a publication very unlike his own Merz periodical, it seems that a considerable change in his concept of the studio had taken place between 1930 and

99 Letter to Edith Tschichold, erroneously dated 3.10.43, SAH. In a letter to Oliver Kaufmann of 10.04.46, in which Schwitters begs for money to save the remains of the Hannover Merzbau, he refers to ‘a studio called Merzbau’ and again of ‘restoring the studio’; MMA.

100 Letter to Bodo Rasch, 18.5.32, SAH. For more on the *Klub der Geistesarbeiter* see Andritzky/Siepmann 1982, 132.

101 Stadtarchiv München, Personalakten Nr. 11850. In 1932 Schwitters accepted the offer of a lectureship by Renner (inventor of Schwitters’ preferred Futura typeface) and Tschichold, but contact broke off in 1933 (cf. Wiesbaden 1990a, 260). Renner was dismissed on 13.3.33, and his copy of the *Ursonate* was impounded by the SA.

102 Legal measures to eradicate hereditary diseases (specifically including epilepsy) were approved in July 1933. Schwitters suffered from severe attacks from 1901; these decreased in middle age and ceased around 1941.

1933. In emphasizing form rather than content, he evidently hoped to appeal to the readership of *abstraction-cr ation*, but nonetheless, two years on from the *Veilchenheft* and ‘Das grosse E’, his description is scarcely recognizable as pertaining to a development of the same work:

The Merzbau is the construction of an interior from sculptural forms and colours. In the glazed grottos are Merz compositions arranged as a cubic volume and which blend with the white cubic forms to form an interior. Each part of the interior serves as an intermediary element to its neighbouring part. There are no details which constitute a unified and circumscribed composition. There are a large number of different forms which serve to mediate between the cube and indefinite form. Sometimes I have taken a form from nature, but more often I have constructed the form as the function of different lines, parallel or crossing. In this way I have discovered the most important of my forms; the half-spiral.¹⁰³

On closer inspection, however, some of this reiterates the ideas of the *Veilchenheft*: the ‘objects that have lost their validity as individual units’ are introduced as elements that serve as intermediaries to adjacent parts, while the ‘winding screw-like shapes’ of the KdeE have gained new significance as ‘the most important of my forms; the half-spiral’.¹⁰⁴

‘Le Merzbau’ was written for an international readership, and Schwitters must have hoped that in conjunction with the photos, it would attract considerable attention. The essay lacks his customary ironic tone, and there is reference neither to socially or politically controversial material, nor to a column or columns, only an interior. Glazed grottos, visible in the photos, are selected by Schwitters for comment. These do not, however, correspond to the (evidently unglazed) grottos mentioned in previous texts, and there is no allusion to contributions by others. A photo of the Blue Window appeared in *abstraction-cr ation* in 1934 (Fig. 23).

5. The evidence, 1934-1936

1934

Between 1930 and 1933, Schwitters had made increasing efforts to publicize his studio constructions on an international scale, and after 1933, his silence on the Merzbau, in

103 In the same issue, Doesburg wrote that the artist’s studio should resemble snow-covered mountains. For Schwitters’ previous contribution to this publication, see Schwitters 1932.

104 The spiral is one of the ‘biotechnical’ elements elucidated in Raoul Franc e’s *Die Pflanze als Erfinder* (Stuttgart 1920), cf. Elderfield 1985, 139; D usseldorf 1992, 127.

Germany at least, was unwillingly self-imposed. All commercial and public activities had become impossible for him by late 1934. Although he was permitted to sell abstract pictures by the local branch of the *Reichskulturkammer* [Reich Chamber of Culture], of which he was perforce a member¹⁰⁵ (Fig. 127), his day-to-day income came from landscapes and portraits, many painted and sold on lengthy sojourns in Norway.¹⁰⁶ With prohibitions on almost all his customary activities, Schwitters resorted to working on the Merzbau when at home. While it is possible to document some of the changes to the main Merzbau room at this time, very little can be pieced together about its extensions, as they were never photographed and Schwitters furnished no known description of them.

By January 1934, after the completion of the first room, Schwitters had started to create a sculptural interior in the adjoining room (Fig. 6, room 4, formerly his son's playroom), which also came to serve as his bedroom. This development is recorded in a letter from Helma Schwitters to Hannah Höch:

You knew the studio, dear Hannah, when almost finished, but now it has grown further, that is, into the room in front of the studio, which is to be Kurt's bedroom [...] This room is being connected to the studio, which again [entails] lots of rebuilding, and when you come to Hannover next, Granny Schwitters' room too will probably have been be-grottoed and be-Merzed. Perhaps Merz will someday manage to make the connection as far as Berlin.¹⁰⁷

105 [...] obgleich mir die Reichsfachschaft ausdrücklich erlaubt hat, im Atelier abstrakt zu malen und bei eventuellen Anfragen auch solche als Kulturbolschewismus bezeichneten Bilder zu verkaufen.] Letter to Steinitz/Arp, 15.2.38, Nündel 1974, 143. The *Reichskulturkammer* was inaugurated in November 1933. Artists' materials were available only to members of the RKK, who were issued a strict agenda; cf. Brenner 1963, 59, 63. Among the first presidents were Richard Strauss and Wilhelm Furtwängler, as an effort by the regime to boost the RKK's status. In 1937 the Nazi painter Wolf Willrich protested officially about Schwitters' membership (Wulf 1963, 314).

106 In the municipal records of 1933, Schwitters is listed as *Kunstmaler* [artist] and from 1934-6 under *Werbegrafik* [graphic design]. His career as Hannover's municipal typographer ended in 1934; cf. KSA 7, 49, also Wiesbaden 1990a, 119 and Lach 1971, 71.

107 [Das Atelier kanntest Du, liebe Hannah, ziemlich fertig, nun ist das aber weiter gewachsen und zwar in das Zimmer vor dem Atelier, was Kurts Schlafzimmer werden soll [...] Dieses Zimmer bekommt nun den Anschluss ans Atelier, auch das sind wieder grosse Umbauten, und wenn ihr einmal wieder nach Hannover kommt, wird der Oma Schwitters Zimmer wohl auch vergrottet und vermerzt sein. Vielleicht findet Merz noch einmal den Anschluss bis Berlin.] Letter of 27.1.34, Höch 1995, vol. II, 512. This new addition may have been Schwitters' bedroom as a child. After 1931, Schwitters' mother Henriette (Granny Schwitters) lived in a front room (Fig. 6.)

In October 1934 Schwitters wrote to Robert Michel that his studio had spread to three rooms, though he does not specify their location.¹⁰⁸ This is one of the few letters dating from this time, probably because few were written; Schwitters and his wife were apparently intent on making the studio known both on a private and public level, but the dangers of broadcasting information about it, even in personal letters, were also increasingly evident. Hitler's speech at the party conference of September 1933 in Nuremberg had contained direct physical threats to artists responsible for the 'monstrosities' [*Ausgeburtten*] of the previous age, targeting particularly the 'cultureless dregs' [*kulturlosen Bodensatzes*] represented by the 'cubist-dadaist cult of the primitive' [*kubistisch-dadaistisch Primitivitätskult*].¹⁰⁹ From February 1933, Schwitters was repeatedly defamed in National Socialist publications, and his abstract work (sometimes in the form of reproductions) was exhibited throughout Germany in exhibitions of degenerate art.¹¹⁰ In the Hannover *Kunstverein*, he was represented for the last time in 1934 with four Norwegian landscapes.

1935

From the mid-1930s onwards Schwitters' letters confined mention of the Merzbau to addressees outside Germany. He continued to refer to it as his studio, partly, it may be assumed, as a safeguard; Helma informed Josef Albers in June 1935 that 'you can't show [anything abstract] to anyone either, for you don't know if your best friend won't betray you'.¹¹¹ Schwitters must have been further endangered by his contacts with the Hannover resistance movement (Obenaus 1993).

108 [Aber ich arbeite dabei auch an meinem Atelier, das sich nunmehr über drei Räume ausgebreitet hat.] Letter of 21.10.34, KSA 7, 50.

109 Adolf Hitler, 'Die deutsche Kunst als stolzeste Verteidigung des deutschen Volkes'; Eikmeyer 2004, 43-55.

110 The original *Entartete Kunst* exhibition toured Germany from 23.9.33 to 30.9.36. Schwitters was represented with two assemblages and the poem *An Anna Blume* and cited with a sentence from Lissitzky/Arp 1925: 'Alles, was ein Künstler spuckt, ist Kunst' [Everything an artist spits is art]. Cf. Orchard/Schulz 2000, 612, 600.

111 [Zeigen kann man [abstrakte Dinge] auch niemandem, da man von seinem nächsten Freund nicht weiß, ob er einen nicht verrät.] Letter to Joseph Albers, 8.6.35, JAAF. Helma's statement that abstract art was forbidden is incompatible with that of Schwitters; see note 105. Possibly official consent had been withdrawn by 1935.

Until the late 1980s, little documentary evidence on the later stages of the Merzbau was available to researchers. The discovery of the Freudenthal correspondence in 1986 therefore proved exceptionally useful in revealing new information about the original studio and its extensions. These letters, addressed to Schwitters' Dutch friends Hans and Susanna Freudenthal, provide a vivid picture of how work on the Merzbau proceeded in the mid-1930s. The first extant letter, written in February 1935, reveals that the main room had acquired a library (Figs. 36, 37) situated behind the KdeE, and that work on this area (invisible from the room itself) was still progressing:

I am sitting here in the library, but it's only a room of about one square metre in a corner of my studio. I like sitting here, as it's up high and so quiet. There is my bookshelf, contents about 20 books, and things are glued and nailed to the walls around. I still work on this room and want to write there later. Leading up to it is a sort of winding staircase, which is very narrow. When I'm up here, I can swing my legs, and I'm sure that's good for me. When we undertake the thorough spring-cleaning of my rooms, new things are always created. I have just finished two grottos [...] I glazed both grottos myself today. I'm proud of myself for that achievement. And slowly, very slowly, the work on the whole studio progresses. You'll see it soon [...] Perhaps you will then sit in the library and work.¹¹²

In which room these grottos were located is not stated. (It may be noted that if Schwitters did not learn glazing techniques till 1935 and did not employ workmen till the 1930s, it is unlikely that glazed grottos were elements of the early column(s).) Schwitters further discloses that flowers (a vase of anemones on the windowsill) were an acceptable addition and that mirrors (some visible on the photos) afforded unusual angles on the constructions and in winter enabled him to see the main road (Fig. 51, 58).

A recently discovered letter of 1937 from Ernst to his father reveals that parts of the Merzbau were given names unknown till now. The letter mentions a photo taken 'from the Nest through the window over to the Romantic Arch' (Fig. 25d) and another with 'the front

112 [Ich sitze hier in der Bibliothek, es ist aber nur etwa ein 1 qm. grosser Raum in einer Ecke meines Ateliers. Da sitze ich gern, weil er hoch liegt und so still ist. Da ist mein Bücherschrank, Inhalt 20 Bücher etwa, und die Wände rundum sind beklebt und benagelt. Ich arbeite an dem Raum weiter, und später will ich da schreiben. Eine Art gewundene Treppe führt hinauf, und sie ist sehr eng. Bin ich oben, so bammeln meine Beine, das ist sicherlich gesund. Bei der gründlichen Frühjahrsreinigung meiner Räume entstehen dann immer neue Dinge. Gerade heute habe ich 2 Grotten vollendet [...] Ich selbst habe die beiden Grotten heute verglast. Ich bin stolz auf diese Leistung. Und langsam, ganz langsam, kommt das Werk des gesamten Ateliers vorwärts. Du wirst es ja bald sehen [...]. Vielleicht sitzt Du dann in der Bibliothek und arbeitest.] Letter of 28.2.35, KSA 9, 95-6.

corner of the *Rundgang* [outer way (?)], a little over your “tree-trunk”.¹¹³ The second photo is lost, but it can be assumed that it was taken in the first Merzbau room; elsewhere, Ernst described a photo (no longer extant) of this room showing ‘part of a tree-trunk [...] from a big beech tree’.¹¹⁴ In 1937, Schwitters records working above the *Schäfersteg* [Shepherd’s Bridge], possibly the ledge (Ernst’s *Rundgang*?) running behind the Big Group (Fig. 21, Fig 24b).¹¹⁵ The name is surely a play on words. Karl Schäfer (Fig. 42) carried out carpentry work on the Merzbau in the mid-1930s and also worked on the hut on Hjertøya.

A letter of March 1935 includes a sketch (Fig. 36) of the second room, marking Schwitters’ bed, and, judging by the hatching, constructions on three walls. Schwitters writes that the balcony is undergoing conversion as a new Merzbau space:

I’m sitting as always in the library. It’s an important moment, because outside, the balcony’s being glazed over. That’ll make it into a room. I’ll draw you an approximate plan. You can see there’s no direct light here. It’s pretty cold too, as the heating has to go through a long, narrow corridor. But if I sit here for a longer time, then I heat the room myself, because it’s so small [...] Outside on the ladder on the balcony is Hengstmann the glazier, nicknamed Kitt [putty], and I keep having to dash out and help him [...] But it’s very important, because the [glazing will make that] the third room [...] The other window has a wonderful view of the Big Group in the studio. It’s really the nicest view I can show you.¹¹⁶

The enclosure of the balcony continued till April 1935, with the aid of at least three workmen.¹¹⁷

Work on the areas adjoining the main room must have meant that dust and other particles

113 [ferner ein blick vom nest durch das fenster auf den romantischen bogen und endlich ein detail über der vorderen ecke des rundganges, ein wenig über deinen ‘baumstamm’.] Letter to Schwitters, 18.6.37, KSF.

114 [Teil eines Baumstammes [...] von einer grossen Buche.] Letter to Werner Schmalenbach, 6.9.64, KSF.

115 Schwitters 1938a. If this is correct, the *Schäfersteg* may have enabled access to nearby ceiling constructions.

116 [Ich sitze wie gewöhnlich in der Bibliothek. Es ist ein wichtiger Augenblick, denn draußen wird der Balkon verglast. Dadurch wird er zum Raum. Ich zeichne Dir einmal ungefähr den Grundriss auf . Du siehst, es ist hier kein direktes Licht. Es ist auch ziemlich kalt, da die Heizung durch einen dünnen, langen Gang muss. Aber wenn ich hier längere Zeit sitze, dann heiz ich selbst den Raum, weil er so klein ist [...] Und draußen auf einer Leiter im Balkon Glaser Hengstmann, genannt Kitt, und ich muss dauernd hinauslaufen und ihm helfen...Aber es ist sehr wichtig, denn dadurch wird der dritte Raum [...] Das andere Fenster hat aber einen wundervollen Blick auf die grosse Gruppe im Atelier. Es ist wohl der schönste Blick, den ich Dir zeigen kann.] Letter to Susanna Freudenthal, 30.3.35, KSA 9, 101-2. Whether the third room mentioned a few months earlier (see footnote 108) anticipates this conversion or refers to a non-contiguous area such as the attic is not clear.

117 ‘I work with a painter, glazier and joiner.’ [[ich] arbeite mit Maler, Glaser und Tischler.] Letter to Susanna Freudenthal, 19.4.35, KSA 9, 106. The joiner was Schnüll, Hannover-Ricklingen; cf. Elger 1984/1999, 149, n. 71.

collected on the original plaster constructions; as we have seen, the KdeE was at one point covered in paper to protect it.¹¹⁸ In April 1935 Schwitters complained to Susanna Freudenthal about the interminable time required to clean the Merzbau: ‘Your letter is still lying here. That comes from the spring-cleaning of the studio. If you knew what that involved. Just a white floor is a lifelong task.’¹¹⁹ A week later, on Good Friday, he revealed to her that even on the greatest and most solemn festival of the Lutheran church, work on his studio continued:

I’m really working hard. The wretched studio just won’t give me a break. Every day including Saturday I work on it with a painter, glazier and joiner, and alone. Today we worked from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and that’s a big exception in Germany, as Good Friday is a day of mourning only. I’ll work for another four days, then take a holiday while you’re with us.¹²⁰

Susanna Freudenthal saw the Merzbau in the same month and sent a description to her husband, which, considering the extent of the work by this time, is very brief:

It’s very nice. You can’t look at it all at once. Kurt has installed 19 switches. You can work out the effects of the number of lighting variations. That’s why it’s actually even better in the evening than during the day, when especially the effect of the little grottos is fantastic.¹²¹

Judging by this description, she had been introduced to the Merzbau in a fashion that emphasized its lighting, an aspect which Schwitters further enthused upon in subsequent letters to her (see below).

118 As note 78.

119 [Der Brief liegt noch hier. Das kommt von der Frühjahrsreinigung des Ateliers. Wenn Du wüsstest, was das bedeutet. Ein weisser Fußboden allein ist ein Lebenswerk.] Letter of 9.4.35, KSA 9, 105. According to the Sprengel Museum, a vacuum cleaner (a luxury article in the 1930s) is regularly used to clean the Merzbau reconstruction. The bulbs often need replacing and objects left by visitors (such as sweet papers) are frequently removed from niches. The paint is touched up every few years.

120 [Ich bin sehr bei der Arbeit. Das verflixte Atelier lässt mich einfach nicht frei. Sonnabend und Alltag arbeite ich, mit Maler, Glaser und Tischler, und allein. Heute haben wir von 8 – 20 gearbeitet, und das ist in Deutschland eine grosse Ausnahme, da am Karfreitag nur getrauert wird. Nun arbeite ich noch 4 Tage, dann mache ich Ferien, solange Du da bist.] As note 117. Easter Sunday and Monday are also important festivals of the Lutheran calendar. Schwitters was christened as a Lutheran on 11.9.1887. For an account of his confirmation, see Helma Schwitters’ letter of 17.3.40, KSF.

121 [Es ist sehr schön. Man kann gar nicht alles auf einmal übersehen. Kurt hat da 19 Knipser eingebaut. Du kannst dir da die Zahl der Lichtwirkungen ausrechnen. Abends ist es daher eigentlich noch schöner als am Tage. Besonders die kleinen Grotten wirken dann phantastisch.] Letter to Hans Freudenthal, April 1935, Haarlem State archive, Freudenthal collection. Ernst Schwitters stated that the room contained fifty-three lights in all. For further discussion of the lighting, see Elger 1984/1999, 99-105 and Szeemann 1994, 258.

Almost all the people who saw the Merzbau in the 1930s came from abroad (Paul Bowles, Carola Giedion-Welcker, Hans and Sophie Arp, the Freudenthals). In June 1935, Alfred Barr, the newly-appointed director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, journeyed to Hannover with Philip Johnson. According to an article based on his diaries, Barr was shadowed by the authorities but succeeded in meeting Alexander Dorner and arriving, unannounced, at Waldhausenstrasse 5 to inspect the Merzbau. Schwitters was away, otherwise Barr might have been able to give a more comprehensive report of his visit. He was shown around by Ernst Schwitters and, according to this retrospective account by his wife Margaret in 1987, was overwhelmed by what he saw:

Passing the cold, tiled kitchen [...] [Ernst] shows the way to the famous Merzbau, installed in a back room by his father. It is like a cave; the stalactites and stalagmites of wood, junk and stray rubbish picked from the streets are joined together to fill the whole room from floor to ceiling and walls to walls [...] Barr is silenced. The effect is mesmerizing.¹²²

Barr included five collages by Schwitters in the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at MoMA in early 1936. Several photos of the Merzbau were on show in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition the end of the year (Fig. 64b), and two were published in the catalogue.

A label on a grotto made in 1935 (Fig. 35), the *Grotte in Erinnerung an Molde* [Grotto in Remembrance of Molde] draws attention to its souvenir status, evoking what Schwitters referred to as the ‘literary’ grottos of the KdeE. The formal aspects of later grottos were influenced by their setting, judging by Schwitters’ description of his use of external light effects to determine their position and composition:

But in working on my studio, I create hollows and planes for the light and augment them through colours. When the light outside shines through the willow branches, then I can observe what I build into the grottos in the studio. It’s not the objects that are important to me but the music that the light plays on them.¹²³

By October 1935 Schwitters had started work on the balcony’s interior, informing Susanna

122 Barr 1987, 39.

123 [Baue ich aber an meinem Atelier, so schaffe ich Hohlräume und Flächen für das Licht und vermehre sie durch Farben. Scheint das Licht draußen durch die Weidensträucher, so beobachte ich, was ich im Atelier in den Grotten baue. Nicht die Gegenstände sind mir wesentlich, sondern die Musik, die das Licht auf ihnen spielt.] Letter to Susanna Freudenthal, 20.7.35, KSA 9, 112. See also ‘Licht’ (1935-40), LW 5, 369-70.

Freudenthal that ‘[its] form will be finally determined with regard to the later lighting system’.¹²⁴ In November he told her that the studio was extending through the balcony floor: ‘My studio is growing through the balcony into the earth. I overstrained myself a lot in that and I’m looking forward to relaxing.’¹²⁵

The third floor attic rooms of Waldhausenstrasse 5 provided living quarters for service staff. Maids were resident in Waldhausenstrasse 5 till 1943,¹²⁶ but Ernst recollected that in the mid-1930s, his father converted two adjacent attic rooms to one, removing a connecting wall to create a further Merzbau area resembling the main room.¹²⁷ Helma Schwitters also mentions ‘Kurt’s studio in the attic’.¹²⁸ Ernst remembered this room as containing a column and steps to a skylight, leading to a platform under the apex of the roof; this was erected in 1936 and apparently used for sunbathing.¹²⁹ As Schwitters wrote of the Merzbau subsidiaries as ‘white, smooth, imaginative [...] and at the same time simple’,¹³⁰ their structures must have resembled those of main room after 1933.¹³¹

1936

Nothing else is known of the content of these later rooms, for few visitors ventured into Waldhausenstrasse 5 in the 1930s. One was Susanna Freudenthal’s husband Hans, a lecturer

124 [Ich bin beim Balkon. Da wird die Form endgültig festgelegt unter Berücksichtigung der späteren Beleuchtung.] Letter of 9.10.35, KSA 9, 114.

125 [Dazu wächst mein Atelier durch den Balkon in die Erde. Das hat mich sehr überanstrengt und ich freue mich auf Erholung.] Letter of 25.11.35, *ibid.*, 28.

126 Resident maids are listed in HW.

127 ‘Do you know that in the attic [...] there was another, almost completed room furnished with constructions exactly like those on the first floor, although there was no physical connection between them? It came into being shortly before the room under the balcony.’ [Weißt du, dass es auf dem Boden noch einen beinahe fertigen Raum gab, der genau wie der Merzbau im ersten Stock ausgebaut war, trotzdem es keine physische Verbindung zwischen beiden Teilen gab? Er entstand kurz vor dem Raum unter dem Balkon.] Ernst uses ‘first floor’ in the American sense here. As note 114. Schwitters later wrote of constructions in a front attic room [Ich hatte auch auf dem Boden vorn einen Raum gestaltet.] Letter to Christof Spengemann, 17.7.46, Nündel 1974, 205. For the story of two attic rooms converted to one, see Schmalenbach 1967a, 142. Elderfield states that the room had sloping walls and floor measurements of c. 2.5 x 3 m. See also Elger 1984/1999, 150, n. 84.

128 Letter to Edith Tschichold, erroneously dated 3.10.43, SAH.

129 Schmalenbach 1967a, 142. For a discussion of the platform, see Osswald-Hoffman 2003, 92-4.

130 [weiss, glatt, phantasievoll [...] und dabei einfach.] Letter to Katherine Dreier, 25.11.36, BLY.

131 ‘The interior [in Molde] is to be completed with plaster and then, as in the Hannover studio, to receive a smooth white polish.’ [Im Innenraum [ist] die Gestaltung zuerst in Gips zu vollenden, dann wie im Atelier Hannover glatt und weiß zu polieren.] Letter to Karl Schäfer, 24.10.38, Hannover 1986, 61. Ernst Schwitters also stated that most of the constructions were painted white; as note 114.

in Mathematics at Amsterdam University, who, on seeing the Merzbau in February 1936, suggested that the white studio floor should also be modelled. Schwitters immediately adopted the idea: '[Hans] said that the structuring of the floor was lacking in my studio. Now it's being structured.'¹³² Ernst Schwitters recollected helping his father to erect a spiral staircase of wood and plaster from a circular opening in the balcony down to the back yard, after which they enclosed the area beneath with a wooden wall to form a new Merzbau room about 1.8 metres high. After an underground cistern, two metres in diameter, was unearthed in this space, Schwitters constructed an arrow sculpture pointing downwards, which the water surface reflected as pointing upwards.¹³³ This area remained unfinished at the time of his emigration.¹³⁴ In a letter to Annie Müller-Widman written in Norway in July 1936, Schwitters wrote of uncovering the underground cistern beneath the balcony and expressed the hope that she would soon be able to admire the new additions to the Merzbau. 'In Hannover I have been working like mad on my rooms [...] you really should see my rooms. I'd be really delighted and it will certainly be interesting for you. I've reached ground water.'¹³⁵

After Schwitters returned from Norway in autumn 1936, he became preoccupied with fears for the future of the Merzbau. In 1935, Hitler's annual speech on the future of German culture had warned of harsh but unspecified measures to be imposed against Dadaists, Cubists, Futurists and Impressionists. In 1936, the threats were more overt:

The period of bolshevist besotted art is now ended. Therefore National Socialist art can no longer tolerate any aspects of that decadent world that lies behind us. Since we are determined to apply [...] the health and with it the sense of beauty of the New Man as a criterion for our cultural achievements, we will also find a constructive path toward that pure, veracious, timeless form that is grounded in the steadfast nature of our people. [...]

132 [Er meinte, in meinem Atelier fehlte die Gestaltung des Fußbodens. Jetzt wird er gestaltet.] Letter of 28.2.36 (35), KSA 9, 117.

133 Ernst repeated the story of the room under the balcony to Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield; see Chapter 1 above.

134 'Under the balcony a new room was being constructed.' [Unter dem Balkon war im Grund und Boden ein Raum im Werden.] Letter to Christof Spengemann, 25.4.46, Nündel 1974, 193-4.

135 [In H[annover] habe ich wild an meinen Räumen gearbeitet [...] Sie müssten sich wirklich meine Räume mal ansehen. Ich würde mich sehr freuen und Ihnen wird es sicher interessant sein. Bis zum Grundwasser bin ich vorgedrungen.] Letter to Annie Müller-Widman, 9.7.36, Schaub 1998, 21. The incorporation of the cistern may have been planned in 1933; cf. Elger 1984/1999, 150, n. 83.

Whatever is not in a position to go along [with us] must be rejected. Just as we freed our people in the political sphere, in the sphere of culture [we] will also increasingly eliminate those who, whether intentionally or through lack of ability, assisted, or even merely intended to assist, in creating the cultural conditions for political disintegration.¹³⁶

Since 1933 Schwitters had become progressively more isolated in Hannover, and by late 1936 he was preparing to emigrate. According to Vordemberge-Gildewart, he experienced considerable difficulties in the mid-1930s because of rumours that he regularly spat at a bust of Hitler in his studio, and many other anecdotes tell of his public demonstrations of contempt for the Nazis.¹³⁷ His final decision to leave Hannover may have been prompted by the arrest of the leaders of the local Socialist resistance movement in autumn 1936, including some of his closest friends. His connections with the movement are not altogether clear, but would have constituted plausible grounds for the Gestapo's issue of a summons to him on 16 February 1937, when he had already fled to Oslo.¹³⁸

At the end of 1936 Schwitters tried to gain a commission to construct a new Merzbau abroad. Most of his letters were addressed to friends in the USA, and all the replies were in the negative. In a letter to Josef Albers, he disclosed that:

In Germany it is a possibility that my most recent work will be entirely destroyed through a disastrous development that may well be in the offing. [...] I sent about 40 letters round the

136 [Die Periode der bolschewistischen Kunstvernarrung in Deutschland ist abgeschlossen [...] Daher kann diese nationalsozialistische Kunst auch nicht mehr die Erscheinungen der hinter uns liegenden dekadenten Welt dulden [...] Indem wir diese Gesundheit und damit das Schönheitsempfinden des neuen Menschen als Massstab für unsere kulturellen Leistungen anzulegen entschlossen sind, werden wir auch konstruktiv den Weg zu jener edlen, wahrhaft zeitlosen Form finden, die im gleichbleibenden Wesen unseres Volkes begründet ist. [...] Was dabei nicht mitzugehen in der Lage ist, muss abgestossen werden. So wie wir auf politischen Gebiet unser Volk befreien, werden wir auch auf kulturellem Gebiet immer mehr diejenigen entfernen, die, sei es gewollt oder infolge mangelnden Könnens, mitgeholfen haben oder gar noch mithelfen wollten, die kulturelle Voraussetzung für den politischen Verfall zu schaffen.] Adolf Hitler, 'Rede auf der Kulturtagung des Parteitags der NSDAP in Nürnberg, 9.9.36', Eikmeyer 2004, 114.

137 [Der arme Schwitters hatte viel darunter zu leiden, speziell weil das Gerücht lief, dass er zu Hause [...] im Atelier eine Hitlerbüste aufgestellt habe, die er jeden morgen und abends anspuckte.] Letter to Alfred Barr 26.11.45, Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, vol. I, 142. During his performances, Schwitters would invite his audiences to spit at a photo of Hitler (Janis and Blesch 1962, 73, see also Motherwell 1951/1989, xxix-xxx: Elderfield 1985 198: Richter 1965, 153-4.

138 SAB 1987, no. 303. In July 1945, Ernst Schwitters gave these connections as the reason for his father's emigration (Stadtmüller 1997, 177). For more on Schwitters' links with the Hannover resistance, see Obenaus 1993.

world, all with the same question: what shall I do to save my art from external dangers? About 40 answers arrived – not one of them told me what to do. The world is hard.¹³⁹

In November 1936, he wrote a disheartened letter from Amsterdam to his patron Annie Müller-Widmann, attempting to convey the urgency of his situation and hinting that he would like to construct a new Merzbau in Switzerland, presumably in her garden (Fig. 102b): ‘It could even be that they destroy my studio. That’s why I turned to you [...] my biggest worry is my abstract room. I need a refuge for my construction somewhere in the world. Perhaps it really is difficult in Switzerland.’¹⁴⁰ He also told her that in late 1935, Tschichold and Arp had rescued him from a mood of ‘blunt resignation’ [*stumpfe Resignation*], when he had almost decided to create artworks only for himself and ‘a perhaps far distant future’ [*eine vielleicht sehr ferne Zukunft*].¹⁴¹ A letter to Dreier of this time is relevant to the chronology because it indicates that the Merzbau as sculptural interior dates from the early 1930s and not before. While Schwitters does not directly connect this new phase with political circumstance, he does mention it directly after describing his personal dilemma, that is, his voluntary yet reluctant subjection to a state of inner emigration. He gives Dreier to understand that on her previous visit in 1930, the appearance of the studio had been quite different. Since then, the constructions have undergone what he terms ‘new developments’ that she cannot be aware of. These are of an expressly sculptural nature, which he explains by describing the diversity of white forms that now fill whole rooms:

I can work at home, and continue to construct incredible sculptures, in six rooms, partly underground. But I am utterly miserable about the lack of contact. In Germany my art is only shown in the Entartete Kunst exhibition. Of course I can’t show anyone my studio, even though I have whitewashed the windows over. It depresses me so that I can’t show it

139 [In Deutschland ist die Möglichkeit gegeben, dass mein letztes Werk ganz zerstört wird, durch eine unheilvolle Entwicklung, die aber wohl kommen kann [...] etwa 40 Briefe habe ich in die Welt gesandt, alle mit der gleichen Frage. Was soll ich tun, um meine Kunst von den äußeren Gefahren zu retten? Etwa 40 Antworten sind gekommen, davon sagt mir nicht eine, was ich tun kann. Die Welt ist hart.] Letter to Josef Albers, 8.2.37, JAAF.

140 [Es kann sogar sein, dass man mir das Atelier zerstört. Darum wandte ich mich an Sie [...] Meine größte Sorge ist mein abstrakter Raum. Ich brauche irgendwo in der Welt eine Herberge für meine Gestaltung. In der Schweiz ist es vielleicht doch schwierig.] Letters of Nov. 36, also of 1.12.36, to Annie Müller-Widman, Schaub 1998, 25-6. For more on the failure of plans for a Basle Merzbau, see Schaub 1998, 86-93. For more on the collectors Annie and Oskar Müller-Widmann, *ibid.*, 101-10.

141 For more on the background to this episode, see Schaub 1998, 97-100.

to anyone. My work lives in voluntary exile from which it cannot liberate itself. You do not know the new developments in my art. I have most especially become a sculptor, create columns and rooms, white, smooth, imaginative in the sheer variety of forms and at the same time simple. I would like to build such columns in America, or better a room. However, a column takes 6 weeks to make, a room 6 months, then I need materials, about 100 marks a cubic metre, and finally I need workmen to help. Who would do so much for art [...] and show interest? Private? Museum? School? I'd be content with some pocket money, without any great payment [...] Another idea would be to design a café [...] If you write back, only to Amsterdam. I would like to appear under the pseudonym Robert Lee [...] These are such strange times.¹⁴²

The windows had, it seems, already been whitewashed to protect both himself and visitors, but now merely one's presence in such a work constituted a risk.

These letters of late 1936 were all carefully adapted to their recipients. The letter to Dreier is chary of criticism of the regime, whereas to Albers, Schwitters expresses his worries directly: 'My pictures are only to be seen in exhibitions named Degenerate Art. Unfortunately. You can imagine that I fear some fanatic will destroy my rooms.'¹⁴³ Although several Merz pictures were already in collections in the USA, he did not, he stressed, wish his art ultimately to be judged on the strength of these:

That is why I'm looking to be represented abroad, just in case. But the few little Merz pictures would represent me wrongly. I would like to design a room in a cubist (abstract) fashion, or at least build a column, that is, best of all in America.¹⁴⁴

142 [Ich kann zu Hause arbeiten, baue weiter an der Gestaltung von unerhörten Plastiken, in 6 Räumen, teils unter der Erde. Aber ich bin tottraurig, dass mir der Kontakt fehlt. In Deutschland zeigt man meine Kunst nur auf der Ausstellung ‚Entartete Kunst‘. Ich zeige natürlich niemand mein Atelier, aber wenn auch die Fenster weiss getüncht sind, mich betrübt es so, dass ich es niemand zeigen kann. Mein Werk lebt in freiwilliger Verbannung, aus der sie sich nicht befreien kann. Sie [kennen] die neue Entwicklung meiner Kunst nicht. Ich bin besonders Plastiker geworden, baue Säulen und Räume, weiss, glatt, phantasievoll in der Vielseitigkeit der Formen und dabei einfach. Ich möchte gerne in Amerika solche Säulen, oder besser noch einen Raum bauen, jedoch dauert es 6 Wochen für eine Säule, 6 Monate für einen Raum, dann brauche ich Material, etwa 100 M pro cbm, und endlich Handwerker zur Hilfe. Wer sollte soviel für die Kunst tun [...] und Interesse dafür haben? Privat? Museum? Schule? Ich bin ohne grosses Honorar mit einem Taschengeld zufrieden [...]. Eine andere Idee wäre es, ein Café zu gestalten [...] Wenn Sie schreiben, bitte nur nach Amsterdam [...] Ich möchte überhaupt gern unter dem Pseudonym Robert Lee auftreten [...] Es ist ja eine so komische Zeit.] Letter to Katherine Dreier, 25.11.1936, BLY.

143 [Meine Bilder sind nur auf Ausstellungen genannt entartete Kunst zu sehen. Leider. Sie können sich denken, dass ich Angst habe, dass mir irgendein 150-prozentiger meine Räume zerstören wird.] Letter of 23.11.36, JAAF. See also note 110. Schwitters may have known that Dreier admired Hitler's leadership qualities. In a speech of 1933 she described him as a visionary who 'has had the spiritual courage to inspire the youth of his nation'; 'Germany', 7.6.33, BLY.

144 [Daher suche ich jetzt, im Ausland vertreten zu sein, für alle Fälle. Aber die wenigen kleinen Mz würden mich falsch vertreten. Ich möchte einen Raum kubistisch (abstrakt) gestalten, oder wenigstens eine Säule bauen, und zwar am liebsten in Amerika.] Ibid. His fears are echoed in a letter to Edith Tschichold of 20.12.37 in which he writes 'Mein Merzbau lebt noch' [My Merzbau still exists]. Stadtmüller 1997, 109.

He compiled a list of necessary materials for Albers with an estimate of the time required,¹⁴⁵ explaining that the Merzbau was ‘not only a room construction, but also a sculpture in space, which one can enter, in which one can go for a walk!’¹⁴⁶ In November, Dorner wrote to Barr requesting his help in the matter of Schwitters’ ‘abstract interior’.¹⁴⁷ Shortly afterwards, Schwitters sent Barr more details of the project (Fig. 64), stating that he would require:

about 100 bags of plaster, an equal quantity of wood and plywood, 70 kg. spackle putty, 70 kg. paint, 30 kg. varnish [...] carpenter, glassworker, electrician [...] working hours: for a column, 5-6 weeks; for a niche, 2-3 months; for an interior, about $\frac{3}{4}$ year.¹⁴⁸

This appeal, with its emphasis on formal elements, is especially tailored to Barr’s interests.¹⁴⁹

It also adds a further interactive dimension to that described in ‘Le Merzbau’:

My working method is not a question of interior design, i.e. decorative style; that I do by no means construct an interior for people to live in, for that could be done far better by the new architects. I am building an abstract (cubist) sculpture into which people can go. From the directions and movements of the constructed surfaces, there emanate imaginary planes which act as directions and movements in space and which intersect each other in empty space. The suggestive impact of the sculpture is based on the fact that people themselves cross these imaginary planes as they go into the sculpture. It is the dynamic of the impact that is especially important to me. I am building a composition without boundaries; each individual part is at the same time a frame for the neighbouring parts, all parts are mutually interdependent.¹⁵⁰

Schwitters’ enclosed sketch of a projected column closely resembles the sculpture he erected on Hjertøya (Figs. 64, 74).

145 ‘I would like to build a cubist (abstract) room, or at least build a column, and best of all in America [...] Material, about 100 sacks of plaster, plus wood, paint, glass, putty, electr. light for a room of 4x5x3.5 metres, assistants (joiner, electrician, glazier, painter) and accommodation (5-6 weeks for a column, the same in months for a room.’ [Ich möchte einen Raum kubistisch (abstrakt) gestalten, oder wenigstens eine Säule bauen, und zwar am liebsten in Amerika [...] Material, etwa 100 Sack Gips + Holz, Farbe, Glas, Kitt, elektr. Licht für einen Raum 4x5x3.5 Meter, Hilfskräfte (Tischler, Elektriker, Glaser, Maler) und Aufenthalt (5-6 Wochen für eine Säule, ebenso viele Monate für einen Raum.) Ibid. This estimate differs slightly from that sent to Barr; see letter of 23.11.36, MMA.

146 [Es handelt sich nicht nur um Raumgestaltung, sondern um eine Plastik im Raum, in die man hineingehen, in der man spazieren gehen kann!] Letter to Josef Albers, 8.2.37, JAAF.

147 Schwitters mentioned this in a letter to Barr of 23.11.36, MMA. Dorner’s letter may have been lost, or he did not fulfil his promise, as MoMA have not been able to trace it. (Query of 13.7.07.) On 12.2.37, however, Dorner sent a letter to Barr from London requesting help for Schwitters; Dorner papers, Busch Reisinger Museum, Harvard. I am grateful to Ines Katzenhusen for this information.

148 Elderfield 1985, 155; original in MMA.

149 Schwitters had studied Barr’s writings carefully before formulating his letter. Barr would apparently have been more sympathetic to Schwitters’ highly restrained plea if he had made his precarious political situation clearer. I am grateful to Adrian Sudhalter, Department of Painting & Sculpture, MoMA, for these observations.

150 Quoted in Elderfield 1985, 156.

Barr replied in December 1936: ‘I wish very much that we might carry out the project which you propose, but unfortunately the Museum has neither space nor fund [sic]. Believe me, I regret very much that we can do nothing. I am delighted to have the photographs of your room taken by your son [...] They are at present on exhibition.’¹⁵¹ This exhibition, showing six photos of the Merzbau (Fig. 64b), closed on 17 January 1937, by which time Ernst and Kurt Schwitters had fled to Norway. Helma Schwitters remained in Hannover to care for elderly relations and administer the family properties.

6. The evidence, 1937–1948 (Quotations marked * are in Schwitters’ original English.)

1937-1938

Just before emigrating, Ernst Schwitters had devoted two days to photographing the Merzbau. Schwitters aided him, but it was not a task he especially enjoyed, as he wrote soon afterwards: ‘because lots in the Merzbau studio seemed to me outdated, but I didn’t really dare construct a new studio.’¹⁵² After Schwitters’ departure to Norway on 1 January 1937, Dreier again visited Hannover. Schwitters wrote to her from Oslo, expressing his delight that she would be able to see the Merzbau: ‘You belong to the few for whom it is built, who can understand it.’¹⁵³ This letter also reveals that by mid-March 1937, Helma had removed all the pictures from the studio except those belonging to the Merz collection.

In view of the political situation, few had been able or willing to accept Schwitters’ invitations to the Merzbau in the mid-1930s. One of the most pressing was addressed to Carola Giedion-Welcker, who decided to publish a monograph on him in 1938. Although as

151 Letter of 10.12.36, Gohr 2000, 40. The photos were mounted on a black panel and hung next to Giacometti’s ‘Palace at 4 a.m.’ in the section ‘Fantastic Architecture’ (Fig. 64b).

152 [Ich war nicht sonderlich froh dabei, weil mir vieles im Atelier Merzbau überholt vorkam, aber nochmals ein neues Atelier zu bauen, traute ich mir nicht so recht zu.] Schwitters 1938b.

153 [Sie gehören zu den Wenigen, für die es gebaut ist, die es verstehen können.] In the same letter Schwitters wrote that ‘Pictures are no longer to be seen in the studio’ [Im Atelier sind keine Bilder mehr zu sehen.] Letter to Katherine Dreier, 18.3.37, Nündel 1974, 136-7. That pictures were integral to the Merzbau is confirmed by Schwitters’ statement that ‘Helma has brought all my pictures [to Norway] that weren’t part of the Merzbau.’ [Helma hat mir alle Bilder meiner Sammlung mit hierher gebracht, die nicht als Teile des Merzbaus galten.] Letter to Annie Müller-Widman, 28.1.37(8), Schaub 1998, 31.

an exile he could not return to Germany to meet her, he urged her to visit Hannover despite the evident hazards:

It is important for the study of my work that you gain a substantial impression of the Merzbau [...] In no case may the place be named, as that would mean a danger to the Merzbau.¹⁵⁴

Soon afterwards, she abandoned her plans after Sigfried Giedion accepted a professorship at Harvard.

By mid-July 1938, Helma Schwitters had blocked the entrance to the three Merzbau rooms (Fig. 6; probably the entrance to Room 4).¹⁵⁵ (As they were at the rear of the house, this would not have impeded the movements of other ground floor residents.) There were several possible reasons for this; first, Helma was undergoing a series of interrogations by the Gestapo, who were searching for her husband, and secondly, the Merzbau came under further threat after a commission sent by Goebbels in 1937 to the Hannover *Provinzialmuseum* ordered the destruction of Lissitzky's *Abstraktenkabinett* and the seizure of 240 works by Jewish, Expressionist and Constructivist artists, including abstract works by Schwitters.¹⁵⁶ As a precaution, Helma made no mention of the Merzbau in her frequent and lengthy letters to Kurt and Ernst in Norway. As far as is known, after 1938 it remained inaccessible until its destruction five years later.

From 1937 onwards, Schwitters' letters from Norway constantly express his fears for the Merzbau, particularly after the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in Munich (not, as is often assumed, the reason for his fleeing Germany). Once more, he implored friends in Europe and America to give him a chance to start a new Merzbau in a less vulnerable location. Some correspondents received pleas for the first time, such as Gropius, to whom he wrote: 'Who

154 [Es ist für die Arbeit über mein Werk wichtig, dass Sie einen starken Eindruck vom Merzbau haben. [...] In keinem Falle darf der Ort genannt werden, da das eine Gefahr für den Merzbau bedeuten würde.] Letter to Carola Giedion-Welcker, 18.7.38, Nündel 1974, 148. (She had in fact already mentioned its location; see Giedion-Welcker 1937/1960, 17.)

155 'My Merzbau is not to be seen any more. Blocked up.' [Mein Merzbau ist nicht mehr zu sehen, zugebaut.] Ibid. Schwitters' mother refused Hannah Höch access to the Merzbau in 1937, thinking this was a Gestapo trap; see letter from Schwitters to Höch, 19.10.46, Hannah Höch archive, Berlin.

156 For a full list of works impounded, see Hannover 1962, 205-6.

would give me the chance [to create] a room, even if it were only a corner?'¹⁵⁷ Other, such as Katherine Dreier, received renewed appeals for aid:

What most fills me with sorrow is the fact that I can't live in my Merz room and that it may be liable to destruction. So I am requesting once more, can't you find out if someone in America would give me the opportunity to create a sculptural design from a room?¹⁵⁸

As he again received no response, his decision to build a Merzbau in Norway in mid-1937 may, given his familiarity with the conservative nature of Norwegian culture, best be seen in terms of a last resort.

1939-1948

From 1939, as a major industrial centre, Hannover was the target of repeated aerial attacks. One of the most severe came on the night of 8 October 1943, when an Allied bombing raid obliterated the city centre and part of the outskirts of Hannover (Fig. 136). Among the buildings destroyed was Waldhausenstrasse 5. A letter from Helma reveals that the police had searched the house six weeks before:

What is practically most painful to me is the fact that Kurt's studio has been destroyed, perhaps one of the most interesting and if you like, the most beautiful things in the world, and with it a lot of his best pictures, which six weeks ago the police demanded be removed from his studio in the attic so that they weren't spoiled. But strange are the ways of fate, for if I had left Kurt's pictures, they would have been saved, as this room was not affected [...] but everything else is a heap of rubble.¹⁵⁹

Helma Schwitters died in the following year, by which time Schwitters had fled to England.

He first heard of the destruction of the Merzbau from the Swiss collector Marguerite

Hagenbach. In reply, he wrote:

157 [Wer [würde] mir zu einem Raum Gelegenheit geben, und wenn es nur eine Ecke wäre?] Letter to Walter Gropius, 7.8.37, Schaub 1993, 157.

158 [Was mich am meisten mit Trauer erfüllt, ist, dass ich nicht in meinem Merzraum leben kann, und dass dieser vielleicht der Zerstörung preisgegeben ist. Ich frage daher noch einmal an, können Sie nicht noch einmal sich umhören, ob niemand mir in Amerika Gelegenheit zur plastischen Gestaltung eines Raumes geben will?] Letter to Katherine Dreier, 24.7.37, Nündel 1974, 138.

159 Attics had to be cleared at this time to prevent roof fires. [Was mich beinahe am meisten schmerzt, ist, dass Kurts Atelier damit zu Grunde gegangen ist, vielleicht eines der interessantesten Dinge, und wenn man will, der schönsten Dinge dieser Welt und damit auch eine Menge seiner besten Bilder, die ich 6 Wochen vorher von seinem Atelier auf dem Boden auf Geheiß der Polizei herunterholen musste, damit sie nicht verderben. Aber sonderbar ist der Weg des Schicksals, wenn ich die Bilder in Kurts Atelier auf dem Boden gelassen hätte, wären sie alle heil geblieben, denn dieser Raum [ist] unversehrt geblieben, aber alles andere ist ein Trümmerhaufen.] As note 128. As the pictures were not destroyed, they may have been figurative rather than abstract works.

It is sad, naturally, but far more for others than for me. For me the creation of a work is the most important thing [...] But people don't really deserve to have art works preserved for them, as they are not prepared to give them their support.¹⁶⁰

Later letters from exile reveal a more emotional response and frequently refer to the Hannover Merzbau as his life work:

*I worked almost ten years exclusively on it and am no more able to rescue it, because I am now 57 years old [...] I did not lose the second life work, my sonata, because it exists in my voice.¹⁶¹

*My studio and the work of my life does no more exist. And I go on living. My sonata in sounds exists only in my voice and shall die with me. Isn't it sad. For what did I actually live? I don't know.¹⁶²

At first Schwitters mistakenly imagined that the Merzbau could be partly salvaged, and sent an emotional plea for help to Oliver Kaufmann:

*I built before Hitler's time a studio, called Merzbau. [...] It was the work of my life, I worked 20 years on it. [...] This Merzbau means very much to me, and I think also to the avant-garde in art, because it is unique. I would like to go to Germany for restoring the Merzbau, but it would cost much money, and I am poor [...] It is the first time in my life that I beg anyone for money, but I am desperate, because if I don't act quickly, the debris would be taken away with all my work, it would be away for all times. I fight for it in desperation, as an animal for its child.¹⁶³

He wrote to a friend in Hannover that 'it's really worth it, as it was my *life work*. And it was highly regarded in the opinion of [those] abroad as a new domain of art. [...] There really *must* be something to save, if only parts [...] these can be reassembled and made into a new sculpture'.¹⁶⁴ MoMA had been directed by Kaufmann to distribute the grant to Schwitters, and

160 [Es ist natürlich traurig, aber weit mehr für Andere als für mich. Für mich ist das Schaffen einer Arbeit das Wichtigste [...]. Aber die Menschen verdienen es eigentlich nicht, dass ihnen Kunstwerke erhalten bleiben, da sie nicht dafür selbst eintreten.] Letter to Marguerite Hagenbach, 27.2.45, Nündel 1974, 178. Christof Spengemann wrote: 'Kurt's Merzbau – a catastrophe! I've just examined the state [of it] from the woodland side. I really know the details of the work very exactly, but of that which is to be seen, nothing remains of what used to be there. The bomb went through the roof precisely over the Merzbau [...] It will be very painful for Kurt.' [Kurts Merzbau – eine Katastrophe! Ich hab mir die Sache jetzt mal von der Waldseite aus betrachtet. Ich kenne die Einzelheiten der Arbeit ja sehr genau, aber von dem, was dort zu sehen ist, erinnert nichts mehr an das, was vorher war. Die Bombe ist genau über dem Merzbau ins Dach gegangen [...] Es wird Kurt sehr schmerzlich sein.] Letter of 27.7.46, Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, vol. II, 274.

161 Letter to Nelly van Doesburg, 4.3.45, KSF.

162 Letter to Kate Steinitz, 24.6.45, Gohr 2000, 47.

163 Letter to Oliver Kaufmann, 10.4.46, MMA. Kaufmann agreed; the grant (brokered by MoMA) eventually went towards the Merz barn.

164 [Und es lohnt sich wirklich, da es mein Lebenswerk war. Und es galt sehr viel in der Meinung des Auslandes als neues Gebiet in der Kunst.] [Da muss unbedingt was zu retten sein, wenn es auch nur Teile [...] Diese [...] lassen sich zusammenfügen und ergeben wieder eine Plastik.] Letters to Christof Spengemann, 25.4.46, 17.7.46,

by September, encouraged by a letter from Barr's successor James Johnson Sweeney that described the Merzbau as an important monument of the 20th century, and having been pledged financial support from the Kaufmann family,¹⁶⁵ he prepared, despite failing health, to return to Hannover to construct a new Merzbau from the ruins (Figs. 38, 39).

Schwitters' post-1946 correspondence relating to the Hannover Merzbau has led to confusion about the precise extent of the Merzbau rooms in Waldhausenstrasse 5. In November 1936 he had written to Katherine Dreier of six rooms (whereby it is unclear if these included the original studio).¹⁶⁶ Letters of 1946, however, invariably refer to more than six. In one he writes that eight rooms of the house were Merzed,¹⁶⁷ while another states that besides the main room: 'parts of the Merzbau were in the adjoining room, on the balcony, in two cellar rooms, on the second floor, in the attic.'¹⁶⁸ The constructions in the adjoining room, on the balcony and in the attic are all documented in letters, but here Schwitters includes two areas of the house rarely mentioned in any sources till now: the cellar and the second floor. Early accounts and photos indicate that there may at one time have been columns in the basement, and two visitors in the mid-1930s later wrote of the Merzbau as extending to the cellar (Osten 1963, Vordemberge-Gildewart 1976). This was, however, vehemently denied by Ernst Schwitters in 1964:

Now to the Merzbau and the two rooms in the cellar; unfortunately, that is wrong. I don't know the whys and wherefores of my father once writing that, but there quite simply were not two rooms in the cellar that were supposed to belong to the Merzbau. I can't have overlooked them, as I was, after all, 18 when I was last in Hannover! And my father naturally didn't conceal these two rooms from me either. Somewhere there is simply an

Nündel 1974, 194, 207.

165 'I feel [the Merzbau] is an important monument in 20th century expression, and I sincerely hope that you will be able to undertake this work before it is too late.' Letter from James Johnson Sweeney to Schwitters, 7.8.1946, MMA. Sweeney hoped for a photo documentation of the ruins and restoration of the Hannover Merzbau. See also letter to Raoul Hausmann, 2.9.46, Nündel 1974, 222-3.

166 Letter to Katherine Dreier, 25.11.1936, BLY.

167 Letter to Christof Spengemann, 11.11.46, Nündel 1974, 246.

168 [Teile des Merzbaues waren im Nebenraum, auf dem Balkon, in 2 Räumen des Kellers, in der 2ten Etage, auf dem Boden.] Letter to Christof Spengemann, 18.9.46, *ibid.*, 230.

error. In the basement [...] there was only the space under the balcony, the building of which I was of course greatly involved in from a purely technical aspect.¹⁶⁹

Regarding the second floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5, the family apartment was so small that there can have been no space for any large-scale constructions (Fig. 7). Schwitters may have been thinking of the tiny room abutting the parlour, his bedroom till 1934, which apparently had collaged walls,¹⁷⁰ or alternatively, the stairwell leading up to the third floor landing, which Hans Freudenthal remembered as lined with constructions.¹⁷¹ Schwitters' list omits the room under the balcony, which both he and Ernst later described as unfinished when they fled Hannover; in 1946 Schwitters noted that this section had not been completed,¹⁷² and in 1964 Ernst described it as 'the last part of the Merzbau to be begun. It [...] was not finished when my father finally emigrated in January 1937'.¹⁷³

Schwitters' post-war correspondence relating to the destruction of Waldhausenstrasse 5 not only raises questions about the full extent of the Hannover Merzbau but also about the time-scale involved; he often writes of the work as having been under construction for ten years.¹⁷⁴ Helma Schwitters' final letter also speaks of 'a really valuable studio that actually cost my husband ten years of uninterrupted work, and which was perhaps one of the sights of the world'.¹⁷⁵ As both refer to the whole Merzbau as the studio, two interpretations are possible; either they are referring to the development of an environment from individual columns, a process that started (according to the *Veilchenheft*) in 1923 and ended in 1933, or to the

169 [Nun der Merzbau und die zwei Räume im Keller; das ist leider falsch. Wieso und warum mein Vater das einmal geschrieben hat, weiß ich nicht, aber zwei Räume im Keller, die zum Merzbau gehört haben sollten, gab es einfach nicht. Ich kann sie nicht übersehen haben, denn ich war ja schließlich 18, als ich zum letzten Mal in Hannover war! Und verheimlicht hat mein Vater mir diese beiden Räume natürlich auch nicht. Irgendwo ist da einfach ein Fehler. In der Kelleretage [...] gab es nur den Raum unter dem Balkon, an dessen rein technischem Ausbau, natürlich, ich mich noch stark beteiligte.] As note 114. Spengemann indicates there may have been cellar rooms: see letter of 1.4.1946, SAH. Schwitters' cousin Henny Beckemeyer rescued pictures from the cellar and cleaned them with turpentine; letter of 23.9.46, KSF.

170 Denecker 1993, 186.

171 Elger 1984/1999, 150, n. 84.

172 As note 134.

173 [das zuletzt begonnene Teil des Merzbaues. Er [...] wurde zur endgültigen Emigration meines Vaters in Januar 1937 nicht mehr fertig.] As note 114.

174 Cf. letter to Nelly van Doesburg, 4.3.45, KSF, also letters of 16.7.46 and 6.10.46; Nündel 1974, 204, 239.

175 [Einem ganz wertvollen Atelier, das meinen Mann eigentlich 10 Jahre unaufhörlicher Arbeit gekostet hatte und vielleicht eine der Sehenswürdigkeiten dieser Welt war.] Letter to Edith Tschichold, 3.7.44, SAH.

extended Merzbau, begun in the new studio in 1927 and abandoned when Schwitters left Germany in 1937.

Six months before his death, Schwitters wrote that ‘My two [Merzbau] guest books were destroyed by bombs in Hannover’.¹⁷⁶ A possible explanation for the presence of two such books in the Merzbau may be that one stood on a table in the main room (Figs. 23, 46a, 46c) while another was inside the original KdeE.¹⁷⁷ Alternatively, two guest books may have been required either because Dreier removed the first in 1930, or because more people visited the Merzbau than has hitherto been conjectured.

7. The visual evidence

The visual material relating to the Hannover Merzbau may be divided into three groups:

- 1) photos of early sculptural assemblages that, according to Ernst Schwitters, formed part of the core structure (Figs. 2, 4, 5)
- 2) photos of sections of the work from the 1920s (Figs. 14-17)
- 3) photos and sketches illustrating the constructions of the 1930s (Figs. 20-23, 25-35)

The visual evidence relating to the later Merzbauten will be discussed in Part III.

The first known photo of Schwitters’ studio (Fig. 4) dates from 1920. Of poor quality, it appeared in 1924 in the journal *G*, bearing the caption *Studio*, and in 1925 in the Lissitzky-Arp publication *The –Isms of Art* (both part of a network of broadly Constructivist publications).¹⁷⁸ The photo shows a tall, slender pedestal topped by an accumulation of unidentifiable material and a plaster bust of a woman. It stands in a corner of a badly-lit room whose walls have been partly covered by collaging; on the rear wall hang a few conventional

176 [Meine zwei Gästebücher sind beim Bomben in Hannover verschüttet.] Letter to Otto Ralfs, 3.7.47, Nündel 1974, 283.

177 Cf. Jahns 1982. One eyewitness related that after visitors had signed their name, ‘there was a cup of tea and biscuits and for that you were expected to donate 1.50 German marks to the Merzbau’. ‘Zeitzeugen von Kurt Schwitters erinnern sich’, 21.3.1986, KSF.

178 Lissitzky/Arp 1925, 11. Accompanying the photo in *G* is an essay by Schwitters on poetry: cf. LW 5, 190. For more on *G* see Düsseldorf 1992, 65, 71.

pictures of trees. Elderfield considers that this photo was taken in room 1 (Fig. 6) of Waldhausenstrasse 5.¹⁷⁹ An editorial in *The Little Review* of 1924 described Schwitters as living ‘in a house papered with newspapers and tramway tickets’,¹⁸⁰ but it nonetheless seems unlikely that he would have blocked the only source of daylight in his studio, and it is equally possible that the column was situated in the basement directly below room 1 (Fig. 6).¹⁸¹ Even if it was integrated into the Merzbau, this column must subsequently have been obscured by other constructions, as the female head is not visible on any other photo.¹⁸² Neither column, location nor dating have a definitive bearing on the content and evolution of Schwitters’ studio from 1923, but the photo is often considered as indicative of the idea that he was to pursue in the Merzbauten (e.g. Elger 1984, Elderfield 1985, Osswald-Hoffmann 2003). A second photo of 1920, showing Schwitters standing beside his sculptural assemblage *Heilige Bekümmernis* (Fig. 5), shares many elements of the first: a corner of a cluttered environment, a free-standing element, a plaster head of a woman, a column shown against a backdrop of conventional studio material. It is nonetheless difficult to believe that these two photos were taken in the same room. In addition, the second foregrounds assorted artists’ materials as central to the scene and corresponds far more closely to the common perception of a studio. It may be relevant here that the first photo was used to represent Merz in two little-known avant-garde publications, while the second was published in a high circulation daily paper.

A second, later column (Fig. 12, with a framed landscape in the background) is generally accorded a key role in the chronology of the Merzbau. Here, a tall, cube-shaped plinth supports a loose collection of material crowned by a plaster head, in this case the death mask of Schwitters’ first child Gerd, who died in 1916 aged one week (Fig. 13). The photo was not

179 Elderfield 1985, 146.

180 ‘Comments’, *The Little Review*, vol. 10, spring 1924, 38.

181 A resident of Waldhausenstrasse 5 remembered Merz constructions in the basement corresponding to rooms 1 and 7 on the ground plan; as note 18. A description of the studio c. 1920 mentions a window to the garden; cf. note 16.

182 Grete Dexel maintained that it was destroyed and does not associate it with the Merzbau; see note 32.

published and the column never exhibited. It is generally dated to 1923,¹⁸³ and is often supposed to have formed the whole or a major part of the nucleus of the Hannover Merzbau (Elger 1984, Elderfield 1985, Dietrich 1993, Gamard 2000, Osswald-Hoffmann 2003 et al.). There is, however, no documentary evidence for either of these assumptions; striking as this object is, it may be noted that no visitors to the Merzbau mention a column with a baby's head. The *Catalogue Raisonné* (henceforth CR) attributes the column to 1926 (if so, it possibly commemorates the tenth anniversary of Gerd Schwitters' death) and notes that the photo was probably taken in a front room of the basement of Waldhausenstrasse rather than in the restricted living space available at this time (Figs. 6, 7). In the first Merzbau room, it stood in a prominent position immediately to the right of the entrance (Fig. 20, 22), so did not constitute part of the KdeE, which took up the entire wall left of the entrance. It is likely to have been incorporated into the studio after the move of 1927, and possibly provided the core of the Column of Life mentioned by Helma Schwitters in 1931.¹⁸⁴ With its roomy base, this may also have been the 'secondary column' said by Hannah Höch to afford storage space for Merz material.¹⁸⁵

Some of the misleading assumptions about the time scale of the Merzbau's development arise from two untitled photos (Fig. 32) of this column, dated 1925 by Schwitters himself, which show it encased in plaster. Both closely resemble the state of the column in 1933 (Fig. 22). These close-ups ostensibly support the theory that the column with the baby's head was a primary element of the Merzbau and that by 1925 the studio constructions closely resembled those on the 1933 photos. The evidence for this is, however, tenuous. First, it is difficult to reconcile these photos with the state of the KdeE as photographed in 1928/29 (and as described by Schwitters in 1930), particularly as the KdeE was the first column to be finished; secondly, Fig. 32a must date from a later year, as it was taken by Ernst Schwitters, who in

183 The sole reason given for this dating is that the column displays material from a Merz magazine of 1923.

184 As note 78.

185 As note 21.

1925 was aged only six. Another of his photos marked *Barbarossagrotte* (Fig. 17) is also dated 1925, but again, can hardly be the work of such a young child; Ernst himself stated that he first took up photography at the age of about nine. An exhibition catalogue of 1936 (New York 1936) labels both photos 1925-32; from this it may be assumed that Schwitters attributed the original column to 1925 but that the photos show its aspect in 1932.¹⁸⁶ If the two photos in Fig. 32 date from 1932, then there is no visual evidence that in 1925 the Merzbau was as advanced as is commonly supposed.

I would therefore suggest that the first photos of the column date from 1928, a year after Schwitters moved his studio to Room 2. (A possible exception is Fig. 18.) These snapshots (Figs. 14, 15), by an unknown photographer, are inscribed 'KdeE 1928'. They show part of a large sculptural assemblage, some features of which correspond to the account of the KdeE in the *Veilchenheft*, but with no evidence of a division into box-like grottos. In about 1928/9, Kate Steinitz photographed a collaged surface elsewhere in the KdeE (Fig. 16). As with the 1928 photos, nothing indicates that the Merzbau had reached the stage of curvilinear forms suggested by Richter and Elderfield. The guinea pig was placed there as a joke, as animals were not allowed to run around this room,¹⁸⁷ though Steinitz stated that a Moholy-Schwitters grotto named the White Palace was constructed expressly to house guinea pigs.¹⁸⁸

Hugo Erfurth's portrait photo of Schwitters depicts him standing by the main window beside a collaged wall (Fig. 19), with part of a column behind. Ernst Schwitters described this as a movable element, about three metres high. 'As far as composition was concerned, however, it was an integral part of the whole work. It must have weighed around 1000 kg. and was built on castors, like a concert grand, so that you could roll it out of its 'niche' and look at it from all sides. [...] If you don't know this, you think it is a connected part.'¹⁸⁹ (Given its weight, this

186 New York 1936, Nr. 672, 674.

187 Conversation with Ernst Schwitters, 29.7.92.

188 See Fig. 50.

189 [Eine ganz grosse [Säule], etwa 3 Meter hoch, verblieb jedoch immer ein freistehender Teil. Kompositionell

column possibly provided further storage space for Merz material.)

No photos of the Merzbau are known to have been taken by Schwitters himself, though from 1928 he undertook experiments in photography and photograms, some of which were exhibited in the Werkbund's *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart.¹⁹⁰ He did not include a photo of the KdeE in the *Veilchenheft* but prefaced his final essay with an illustration of a collage entitled *Der erste Tag* [The First Day] (Fig. 55).¹⁹¹ The KdeE was the sole part of the Merzbau that he wrote about in detail, but few photos are extant. (Figs. 14-17). The edge of the casing is shown in Fig. 23 and Fig. 25d, while the upper sections appear as a reflection in Fig. 26, but the exterior was never photographed in its entirety. This omission may have been due to its austere plaster housing; as the earliest part of the Merzbau, it was not originally informed by Schwitters' later concept of 'imaginary planes' and 'a composition without boundaries'.¹⁹² Richter likened it to a sculpture by Vantongerloo, and in the *Veilchenheft* Schwitters noted its (possibly unphotogenic) exterior of geometrical cubes. If so, this had changed considerably by 1933, when numerous external grottos are visible, some very large (Figs. 23, 28d, 46b.) The Merzbau reconstruction shows that the KdeE is very awkward to capture with a camera, and then as now it remains the least photographed section.

In early 1933, Wilhelm Redemann, the official photographer of the Hannover *Provinzialmuseum*, took three wide-angle shots of the main Merzbau room (Figs. 21-3), shortly after Helma Schwitters wrote that her husband had 'made a single great sculpture out of his studio'.¹⁹³ They cover the entrance area, the full extent of two walls of the Merzbau and

gesehen war sie jedoch ein integrierter Teil des Gesamtwerkes. Sie muss wohl an die 1000 kg. gewogen haben, und war auf Lenkrollen gebaut, wie ein Konzertflügel, sodass man sie aus ihrer 'Nische' herausrollen und allseitig betrachten konnte [...] Wenn man nicht darüber klar ist, glaubt man, sie sei ein 'festgewachsener' Teil.] As note 114. The column's content, if any, is unknown.

190 CR 1638-1648, also Stuttgart 1929, 75 and *Film und Foto*, exhibition catalogue, Vienna 1930, 13. There is no evidence to support Gamard's statement that the Merzbau was photographed only by Schwitters and his son (Gamard 2000, 7).

191 CR 1040.

192 Letter to Alfred Barr, 23.11.36, quoted in Elderfield 1985, 156.

193 As note 96. Ferdinand Stuttmann made the unlikely claim that these photos were taken after Schwitters left Hannover; Stuttmann 1960.

enough of the area around the movable column to show that the wall collaging in Erfurth's portrait had by 1933 been concealed. The main window is hidden from view, as is most of the KdeE apart from its far edge and a table with the guest book in front (Fig. 23). Behind the joiner's bench (Fig. 21), there is a large flat rectangular area that is singularly bare in comparison to the rest of the room; possibly Schwitters placed boarding there at the last moment to cover the stairs behind. There is little to connect these photos with the description in the *Veilchenheft*, and the grottos which feature so prominently in that description remain invisible. Instead, the photos show a number of external grottos enclosed in glass. The importance that Schwitters attributed to these may be judged by the fact that a close-up of the two largest was one of the first pictures of the Merzbau to be published (Fig. 57).

A number of close-ups of the studio structures, which the CR dates to about 1932, also show the studio as sculptural environment. Whereas the photos of the 1920s focus on the content of the Merzbau, those of the 1930s (the majority by Ernst Schwitters), concentrate on capturing various aspects of the constructions from unusual angles and under different lighting conditions, giving prominence to dramatic effects of light and shadow. Many focus on upper sections of the Merzbau, but not one includes the floor or the main window, which took up a large part of one wall (Fig. 24) and which by 1935 apparently played a crucial role in the formation of new structures. Some later photos emphasize the Merzbau's self-reflecting glass panels and mirrors and the fluidity and evasiveness of its forms, introducing an element of uncertainty about the viewer's own position (Figs. 25-33). Others reveal accessible areas *behind* the constructions; one remarkable shot shows a photographer apparently photographing the photographer, who is hidden within (Fig. 34). Beside the bespectacled figure holding the camera (left-handed) is part of the head of a woman with eyes closed, asleep or in ecstasy, and the word '(M)erz'. The photographer is in fact part of a poster, or more likely, a

collage (see Fig. 34).¹⁹⁴ Few original photos of the Merzbau remain, as the majority were destroyed in the early 1940s when the aircraft transporting them was shot down.¹⁹⁵ Four photos were published in Schwitters' lifetime: two appeared in *abstraction-cr ation* in 1933 (Figs. 25, 30), one in *abstraction-cr ation* in 1934 (Fig. 23) and two in the catalogue of MoMA's 1936 *Fantastic Art, Dada Surrealism* exhibition (Figs. 21, 30). Six photos of the Merzbau were on show in the exhibition (Fig. 64b).

Neither the main body of visual evidence nor Elderfield's ground plan (Fig. 24a) feature in most analyses of the Merzbau. Most commentators prefer to base their interpretations on a small body of written material – two paragraphs from the *Veilchenheft* of 1930 and a standard assortment of memoirs - to the exclusion of other sources. This has meant that such elements as the hidden areas of the Merzbau, the visitor's book, the external grottos (Figs. 30, 31, many also on Figs. 22-3), the main window (Fig. 43), *Fromme Helene* (Fig. 20), the drive belt, the dead twigs (Fig. 22, 28a), the letters of the alphabet (Figs. 22, 26) and the photo of the Kyffh user Grotto (Fig. 17) have been accorded relatively minor significance in comparison with the written evidence. The Kyffh user Grotto mentioned in the *Veilchenheft* is, for example, often discussed as if it were modelled on the still extant monument in Thuringia.¹⁹⁶ The photo (Fig. 17) shows a tableau with rough wooden forms, presumably offcuts, in which the only recognizable object is a round table. Judging by the size of other content dating from this time (Figs. 14, 15) this would have been a miniature construction, though nothing in the photo indicates its dimensions.¹⁹⁷ There is no obvious connection with Kyffh user itself, where the table is not even portrayed (Figs. 48-9), and no element corresponds to the key figure of Barbarossa (unless the piece of bevelled wood centre left is meant as a remote

194 Peter Bissegger was not able to ascertain where this photo was taken; conversation of 1.7.2007.

195 *'The Merzbau was 'the work of my life [...] It exist some fotos of it, specially done by Ernst, but most of his negatives were lost in an accident of an aeroplane.' As note 161.

196 Dorothea Dietrich sees this grotto as one of a group that 'resonates with the rhetoric of Germany's conservatives in its focus on the formation of nationalist ideologies' (Dietrich 1993, 195-7). She also compares the staircase of the Great Grotto of Love (Fig. 14) to that of the 81- metre (266 ft) high Kyffh user monument (Fig. 48, 49).

197 Dietrich suggests the table came from a doll's house (Dietrich 1993, 196).

suggestion of his iconic gesture). Judging by its content, then, any resemblance to Kyffhäuser was entirely ironic.

In the 1930s, Schwitters continued to make his mark on places he visited by building further columns. In 1936 he wrote to a friend: ‘Have you seen my column at Tschicholds? [i.e. in Basle] It was wonderful in Paris with Arp. I worked on a column there. Now I’m working on an even bigger one in Molde in the far north.’¹⁹⁸ There were further columns, for instance in Holland (Fig. 102) and on the Isle of Man (Fig. 103), but only those in Basle and Molde (Figs. 101, 74) were photographed.

8. The reconstruction

The three-dimensional reconstruction of the first Merzbau room was commissioned by Harald Szeemann for the exhibition *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* in Zurich in 1983. It is now on permanent display in the Sprengel Museum, Hannover (Figs. 43-6). The museum also stores a transportable copy. This section will draw on the documentation of the project to provide further details of the structure and content of the Merzbau in the early 1930s. Part of this information is supported by other accounts that came to light after the reconstruction was finished. I shall first outline the background to the reconstruction project, then consider how it contributes to our knowledge of the Hannover Merzbau.

The history of the reconstruction

The reconstruction was based on a stereometric analysis of Redemann’s photos of 1933, each measuring 18 x 24 cm. (Figs. 21-23), a photo in *abstraction-cr ation* and others taken by Ernst Schwitters and Kate Steinitz. The project was undertaken in Locarno in 1981-3 by the Swiss stage designer Peter Bissegger, whose methodology resulted in a close approximation

198 [Haben Sie meine S ule bei Tschichold gesehen? [...] In Paris war es wunderbar bei Arp und Nelli. Ich habe dort auch eine S ule gearbeitet. Nun arbeite ich an einer noch gr o eren in Molde, im hohen Norden.] Letter to Annie M uller-Widmann, 9.7.36, Schaub 1998, 21.

of the original studio in 1933 in as far as it reproduced as accurately as possible the structures visible on Redemann's photos.¹⁹⁹

Ernst Schwitters' reminiscences were of great importance in this project. Although I have questioned Ernst's accounts of the earliest stages of the studio constructions, I believe that his statements regarding the appearance of the Merzbau in the 1930s should be given more credence, particularly as he photographed this room so often before leaving Hannover in December 1936.

New aspects of the Merzbau as revealed by the documentation of the reconstruction

According to Ernst Schwitters, before entering the studio itself, visitors were asked to don felt slippers. This gave the impression of entering a special kind of space, but was also a measure to protect the white floor, which was easily smudged.²⁰⁰ Directly to the left of the entrance there had once been a door to the balcony, but at some time this was converted to a window with rippled blue panes that Schwitters named the Blue Window (Fig. 23). Ernst stated that the sacral connotations of this porch-like entrance, like the slippers, did not constitute an intended effort to induce a devotional atmosphere but were rather a by-product; he maintained that the blue glass was originally fitted to block the neighbours' view of the studio, as they were extremely critical of Schwitters.

At the entrance stood an angular free-standing sculpture of wood and plaster named the 'Hand Shaker' (Fig. 43). Behind this, a group of constructions lined the left wall. From the early 1930s, the Madonna (Fig. 27) was placed on a niche on the near edge and was one of the first objects one saw from the entrance.²⁰¹ It is evident from the reconstruction that when one stood in the doorway (the door itself was removed in the early 1930s), only part of the room

199 Bissegger 1986. As there is so little visual evidence of internal grottos, these were not included in the reconstruction. The external grottos are not filled with material; instead, cut-out sections of the photos were enlarged and inserted into the glazed grottos. Though most constructions in this room were not flush with the walls, Bissegger made no attempt to recreate these invisible areas, again because the photos give no indication of their content or form. For Szeemann's account of the project, see Hannover 1986, 256-7.

200 See note 119.

201 See Fig. 27.

was visible; this included the opposite corner, part of the main window, the movable column to the right and the central area with a table for the guest book (Fig. 43). The structures of the entrance could be reproduced reasonably accurately on the basis of Redemann's photo that focuses on the Blue Window from inside the room (Fig. 23); this vaulting is most probably the area referred to by Ernst as the Romantic Arch.²⁰² The photo of the Blue Window shows a glazed grotto on the far left that an under-exposure of the original reveals as a source of artificial light, with a chain of small bulbs similar to Christmas tree lights (Fig 23). Ernst noted that not all the grottos were fixed; Schwitters would often make room for a new one by removing an existing one to a higher position.

Walking clockwise round the reconstruction, one first passes the Cathedral of Erotic Misery [KdeE] left; in area this corresponds to the dimensions recorded by Schwitters in the *Veilchenheft*. The KdeE was the sole section of the studio to be described in detail, but little of it is captured on the wide-angle shots, and it was therefore reconstructed on the evidence of the photo of the Blue Window (Fig. 23), two photos of the Madonna (Figs. 26, 27) and the recollections of Ernst Schwitters. (According to Rudolf Jahns it must have had a door, but where this was is not known.) Peter Bissegger has pointed out that from its exterior, the column resembles a church tower and nave (Fig. 52).

Ernst stated that the KdeE concealed a barrel organ which played '*Ach, du lieber Augustin*' or some other familiar German melody.²⁰³ At the far end of the KdeE was a narrow spiral staircase leading up to a niche that housed a seat and a library. Schwitters' sketch of the library (Fig. 37) shows a large diagonal seat and a small corner cupboard, possibly a bookshelf.²⁰⁴ Though this niche was not visible from the room, Schwitters wrote that from here he was able to observe the centre of the room and the balcony. A mirror affixed to the opposite constructions afforded a view from the library through the main window to the park

202 As note 113.

203 This may have been the organ incorporated into the KdeE; cf. Appendix I, ¶10.

204 This letter was not discovered until four years after the Szeemann exhibition.

outside and, in winter, to the main road (Hildesheimerstrasse) and the tram stop at Döhren Tower (Figs. 51, 58). Underexposures of the wide angle photos show trees reflected in shards of mirror and what may be a woman walking past with a pram. Other mirrors also reflected the Eilenriede and other parts of the Merzbau; the glass casing of the grottos fulfilled a similar function (Fig. 26).

From the reconstruction it becomes evident that the main window was a dominant feature, taking up almost an entire wall and framing the adjoining woodlands of the Eilenriede park. Beside it, on the adjacent wall, stood the movable column, and to its right, the *Grosse Gruppe* [Big Group]; this whole section is shown on one of Redemann's wide-angle photos (Fig. 21). Here the *Hobelbank* [joiner's bench] was a prominent element; according to Ernst, Schwitters used this bench and kept his planing equipment inside. Although not evident from the photos, the *Grosse Gruppe* (at least in the upper part) was not flush with the wall, allowing space for a rear passageway. At one end of the ledge a stair ran down to the movable column: at the other was a niche known as 'The Nest' with a seat or sofa. From the ledge one could observe the room (Fig. 25d) through a circular hatch with a sliding door, right of the descending central shaft (Figs. 21, 44). From the Nest, an old wallpapering ladder led down to the corner construction and an exit into the room. To the left of the stairway entrance, a spiralling band wound through the whole corner (Fig. 22). This was a long drive belt [*Transmissionsriemen*] of thick leather that Schwitters incorporated into the corner constructions and covered with plaster.²⁰⁵ The circular coloured object to the right above this entrance is a rolled-up paper streamer [*Luftschlange*]; various letters of the alphabet are also visible.²⁰⁶ Overexposures of Redemann's original wide-angle shots reveal more details of the collaging, including a

205 This object is reminiscent of a remark by one of Schwitters' closest friends: 'Art belongs to the people. It must be transmitted to them. There seems to be something faulty in the transmission.' [Die Kunst gehört dem Volke. Es muss zu ihr hingeleitet werden. In der Leitung scheint etwas faul zu sein.] Spengemann 1920b.

206 Ernst told both Peter Bissegger and the author that as a child, he glued streamer rolls together to make tablemats to sell at Merz evenings. For a connection between the letters of the alphabet and German mysticism in Schwitters' work, see Darsow 2004.

number of photos, on the rear wall of the entrance. The ground floor plan (Fig. 6) shows a door behind this section. As this led to a room rented by the Bergmann family from November 1931 to March 1937, it was probably rendered unusable after 1931.²⁰⁷

One of the most striking objects in the main room is the plaster cast of a baby's head (Fig. 20), the death mask of Kurt and Helma Schwitters' first child Gerd (Fig. 13). The two tubes behind the head come from a pneumatic postal system [*Rohrpost*], of the type that used to be common in department stores, banks, hospitals, etc. According to Bissegger's calculations, there was a large space behind this section, possibly a storeroom in which Schwitters stowed the mass of refuse that, according to his friends, he collected at every available opportunity (Fig. 24, 53a). It seems, therefore, that in the main room only a small section of the Merzbau beside the Blue Window was flush with the walls (Fig. 53a).

In the essay 'Le Merzbau', Schwitters noted that the most important of the forms in the Merzbau was the half-spiral [*la demie vis, Halbschraube*].²⁰⁸ In the *Veilchenheft*, he described his method thus: 'In that intersecting directional lines are connected by surfaces, winding screw-like forms are created.'²⁰⁹ Peter Bissegger has identified several of these half-spirals and has explained how they were formed. Schwitters apparently juxtaposed two wooden slats and covered them with plaster. The slats were then twisted slightly, either by accident or design, to produce a long and slightly curving shape. Striking examples of these can be seen immediately to the left of the baby's head and descending from the ceiling above the joiner's bench (Figs. 20, 21, 22).

In the *Veilchenheft*, Schwitters wrote: 'Well, what is the column? It is first of all (for the time being) only one of many, ten or so.'²¹⁰ Whether these columns were already constructed

207 Information from Frau Inge Bergmann-Deppe, Hannover.

208 See Appendix II.

209 Appendix I, ¶10.

210 Ibid.

is unclear.²¹¹ Peter Bisseger has located nine basic structures within the main room that may formerly have been separate columns (Fig. 53a). He has also provided an impression of two huge cubic forms which, according to Ernst, were suspended from the ceiling in front of the doorway to the main room (Fig. 53b).²¹² Ernst also claimed that by 1933, Schwitters regarded this room as complete. Some sections were occasionally touched up with paint, and some free-standing sculptures were added (e.g. Fig. 29) but little was altered after Redemann had taken the photos.

More than any other source of information on the Merzbau, the reconstruction reveals how the customary trappings and features of an artist's studio – the north-facing window, the display of unusual and striking objects, tools, photos, books, tables, pictures, musical instruments, manikins, steps, mirrors, photographs, plaster models, light-reflecting surfaces, etc. - had by 1932/33 become an integral part of what at least in this period was intended as a 'finished' artwork. There is no attempt in the reconstruction to reproduce unknown areas such as the Merzbau's inner content, outer shell, or indeed the domestic environment in which it was situated. Occasionally the reconstruction is exhibited with its exterior in full view to create a *Verfremdungseffekt* [alienation effect] and to demonstrate the size of the Merzbau in relation to the dimensions of the original room (Fig. 47, 53a).

III The Merzbauten in Norway and England

The later environments that Schwitters created in exile were works that, in circumstances other than those of repression, war, poverty and severe illness, he may well have been able to complete. That at least was his stated intention, and his correspondence on the Lysaker and Elterwater Merzbauten frequently mentions the necessity of finishing them so that they can be shown to the public. Although in retrospect Schwitters described the Hannover Merzbau as

211 Schwitters' letters of 1930 mention only three columns; cf. note 57.

212 Elizabeth Buchheister and Rudolf Jahns also remembered these; see KSA 1982, 34.

his life work, his letters often refer to the later Merzbauten as improvements on their predecessor.²¹³ His view that his Merz rooms were the most significant of his visual works was supported by MoMA in New York, whose trustees agreed in July 1947 to transfer a grant of \$3000 from the Oliver M. Kaufmann Family Trust in instalments to finance work on any Merzbau that he regarded as suitable, whether this involved restoration of an older structure or the creation of a new one.²¹⁴

1. Haus am Bakken, Lysaker

By July 1937, Schwitters was considering the possibility of erecting a transportable studio in Lysaker. He began building the outer walls of the two-storey *Haus am Bakken* in October 1937 and completed them in January 1938 (Figs. 65, 66). By May 1938 he had started on the interior constructions,²¹⁵ and he continued to work intermittently on the upper and lower room of this studio until he fled Norway after the German invasion of June 1940. Like the Hannover Merzbau after 1933, its existence could not be made public.²¹⁶ Schwitters did not apply for planning permission and when constructing the exterior, constantly worried about the possibility of being observed. He related that even children's questions made him nervous, and that after nailing each plank in place, he would camouflage it with earth and evergreen. He originally intended the studio to consist of portable elements, hoping that it would eventually be moved to a more accessible location, but by late 1937 it became clear that if at all, it could only be moved in one piece, and without its basement.²¹⁷

213 Letter to Annie Müller-Widman, 17.12.39, Schaub 1998, 35-6; to Christof Spengemann, 17.7.46, Nündel 1974, 205; to Katherine Dreier 18.4.47, BLY; to Ella Bergmann-Michel, 5.10.47, KSA 7, 66; to Marguerite Hagenbach, 23.10.47, Nündel 1974, 286; et. al.

214 See note 163, also Elderfield 1985, 204.

215 Letter to Sophie Täuber-Arp, 10.5.38, Nündel 1974, 145.

216 Schwitters rented the plot for 10 years (cf. contract of 8.11.38, KSF) in the hope of avoiding conflicts with officialdom. He recounted some of his problems with the police in letters, e.g. to the Freudenthals, 12.11.38, KSA 9, 42.

217 These details come from Schwitters 1938; see also letter to Alexander Dorner, 12.12.37, Nündel 1974, 140.

As John Elderfield noted, Schwitters' plan for a projected Merzbau in the USA may well have provided the groundwork for the Lysaker Merzbau. From the first, Schwitters conceived the interior of the *Haus am Bakken* as an entity, for which he drew up preparatory sketches.²¹⁸ As these are no longer extant and no photos exist, the appearance of the interior must remain largely speculative. The following description is based on contemporary letters and documents and on the testimony of Ernst Schwitters.

The floor space of the upper room, 3.7 x 3.5 metres, was similar to the main room in Hanover. The maximum height of the sloping roof was about 3.5 metres.²¹⁹ There were five windows,²²⁰ including a Blue Window with horizontal divisions, a picture window and a skylight. Many features of the Hannover Merzbau were incorporated into the new studio: constructions lined the walls and obscured the corners, there were a number of free-standing, mainly white, sculptures, and cubes and curvilinear stalactital forms were suspended from the ceiling. The predominant colour was white, relieved by patches of bright red, blue and yellow.²²¹ The interior also contained photos²²² and colourful grottos, which according to Ernst Schwitters were added last; they differed from the haphazard Dadaist structures in Hannover in that they were intentionally designed as compositional elements.²²³ Instead of a guest book there was a 'studio book' [*Atelierbuch*] for which Schwitters requested photos and texts from friends by post.²²⁴ There may also have been an art exhibition (Fig. 68, 69). The floor was even more structured than in Hannover; Ernst Schwitters stated that only a small part was

218 'Das Haus selbst ist fertig und die Gestaltung des Innenraumes skizziert.' [The house itself is finished and the design of the interior sketched.] Letter to Hans and Susanna Freudenthal, 22.7.38, KSA 9, 41, also Schwitters 1938a.

219 For alternative versions of the measurements see CR 2327.

220 Cf. letter to Annie Müller-Widmann, 28.1.38, Schaub 1998, 31. Elderfield estimates that the Blue Window measured c. 0.6 x 2.5 m and the picture window 1.2 x 1.6 m (Elderfield 1985, 204).

221 Letter from Ernst Schwitters to Werner Schmalenbach, 20.9.64, KSF.

222 On 3.7.39, Schwitters wrote to Katherine Dreier: 'Your portrait is to hang in my studio on the wall.' [Ihr Portrait soll in meinem Atelier an der Wand hängen.] BLY. See also letter to Helma Schwitters, 23.12.39, SAH.

223 As note 114, also Düsseldorf 1971, 17-18.

224 As note 215.

completely horizontal.²²⁵ According to Ernst, the Madonna sculpture gained new prominence in the Haus am Bakken:

In the second Merzbau in Lysaker a new Madonna was created straightaway, but this time she was exactly planned. In fact she looked very similar to the first two but was about 90 cm. high, and her surroundings were also on a higher level and were somehow reminiscent of Gothic church architecture, despite the fact that actually everything was of course abstract. So the grotto surrounding the Madonna in Lysaker extended from the floor to the high ceiling. Everything was painted white as before and a high, narrow window with blue-painted panes of glass in it cast a blue light over the Madonna very like that [surrounding] her predecessor in Hannover. A sort of religious mood was inevitable, although strictly speaking my father was not religious [...] The impression was however, clearly 'ceremonial'.²²⁶

The central column (Fig. 66a) was apparently formed around a stock of refuse piled near a spiral staircase to the lower floor, a practice which (on the testimony of Max Ernst and Hannah Höch) may be a reprise of Schwitters' initial *modus operandi* in Hannover. Ernst wrote to his father in July 1939 that:

I have just been to the studio and have looked at the alterations. Very nice. It's good that the rubbish heap around the entrance to the cellar stair has now been incorporated into the whole composition.²²⁷

Ernst described this column as a branching structure that merged with geometrical ceiling constructions comparable to those around the Blue Window in Hannover (Fig. 23). The stair led to a basement studio with walls made of stones cleared from the site. From 1939 Schwitters used this lower room, which was partly built into the hillside, to work on sculptures.²²⁸ In 1981, Ernst wrote:

225 [Man bestieg praktisch weisse Berge! nur ein kleiner Teil des Bodens war ganz waagrecht.] As note 114.

226 [Im zweiten Merzbau in Lysaker entstand dann gleich eine neue 'Madonna', aber diesmal war sie genau geplant. Sie sah an sich den ersten beiden sehr ähnlich, war dabei aber rund 90 cm hoch, und auch ihre Umgebung war höher, und erinnerte irgendwie an gotische Kirchenarchitektur, trotzdem natürlich alles eigentlich abstrakt war. So ging die 'Madonna' umgebende Grotte im Merzbau in Lysaker vom Fußboden bis zur hohen Decke. Alles war wieder weiss gemalt, und ein hohes, schmales Fenster mit blau bemalten Fensterscheiben drin, warf ein ähnliches blaues Licht über die 'Madonna' wie über deren 'Vorgängerin' in Hannover. Eine art 'religiöse Stimmung' war unumgänglich, trotzdem mein Vater ja streng genommen nicht religiös war [...] Der Eindruck war jedoch eindeutig 'feierlich'.] As note 221.

227 [Eben bin ich im Atelier gewesen und habe mir die Veränderungen angesehen. Sehr schön. Gut, dass der Rumpelplatz um den Eingang zur Kellertreppe jetzt auch in die grosse Einheit mit einkomponiert ist.] Letter of 20.7.39, KSF. A spiral stair was mentioned by neighbours; cf. Stadtmüller 1997, 88.

228 Letter to Helma Schwitters, 23.12.39, SAH. Entry to Merzbau II was only possible through this room.

My father wanted to recreate the Hanover Merzbau [...] and the second Merzbau in Lysaker resembled the original in most ways. Even the dadaistic grottoes were there, but they were planned and built-in from the start. What had taken my father 16-18 years in Hanover, took him roughly three years to recreate here, with the knowledge and 'feel' he had gained in Hanover. There was of course no exact duplication intended, but the basic concept was exactly the same [...] The materials used were wood, mostly as a skeleton, plaster of Paris, oil paint and *objets trouvés*.²²⁹

Ernst's statements that 'the Merzbau [in Lysaker] began where the Hannover Merzbau left off'²³⁰ are supported by his father's comments to friends that the second version was a continuation, rather than a reproduction, of the original. In 1938 Schwitters wrote that it was a more planned, 'unified' structure [*aus einem Wurf*] than in Hannover, affording greater significance to the 'air forms' [*Luftformen*] between the plaster constructions.²³¹ (Elderfield notes that this development corresponds to the 'breathing spaces' in Schwitters' Merz pictures of this time.²³²) In a letter to Katherine Dreier after the war, Schwitters wrote that *'I built a new Merzbau in Oslo. I did not copy the old, but learnt on the faults of the original Merzbau. But it is the same spirit'.²³³

As in his last years in Hannover, Schwitters frequently expressed his sorrow that nobody was able to see his Merzbau; as he wrote to Dreier: 'I would rather have built this room in the USA or Switzerland, where someone can see it occasionally too.'²³⁴ When it was finally discovered by the authorities in 1938, Ernst Schwitters provided details for the local planning department (Fig. 65). The officials consented to a provisional halt of the demolition order, but revoked this in 1939:

Unfortunately the Building Department have once again ordered me to tear the little house [i.e. *Haus am Bakken*] down. I'm often totally in despair that I just don't succeed in finding a site for my monumental works. But I'm now constructing the sculptural forms to be

229 Wadley 1981, 51.

230 [So setzte der Merzbau hier da ein, wo der Merzbau in Hannover aufgehört hatte.] As note 114.

231 As note 215.

232 As note 214.

233 Letter of 18.4.47, BLY.

234 [Nur hätte ich diesen Raum lieber in USA oder Schweiz gebaut, wo ihn auch mal jemand sehen kann.] Letter to Katherine Dreier, 22.7.38, Nündel 1974, 149. His idea of leaving it to the National Gallery of Norway (letter to Ernst Schwitters, 8.8.1939, KSS) was entirely illusory; see also Stadtmüller 1997, 55.

transportable. If I have to pull [it] down, I'll try and find a possibility of putting it together again anew.²³⁵

The second Merzbau remained standing, however, and in 1947 Schwitters made several futile attempts to journey to Norway to restore it, a task he estimated would take six months.²³⁶

Already in poor state, (Fig. 67) it deteriorated further after his death and by 1949, according to Ernst, was already in a critical condition. It burned down on December 16, 1951.²³⁷

2. Hjertøya (please note that the hut's interior has now been removed to the mainland)

In the early 1930s, Schwitters rented a section of a stone hut on the Norwegian island of Hjertøya (Fig. 70) that provided accommodation for him in summer. Although the hut was uninhabitable at first, by 1936 he had transformed it into a living space (Fig. 72, 73) embellished with abstract forms similar to those of the Hannover Merzbau.²³⁸ In 1938 he summoned the aid of a joiner from Hannover (Fig. 42) who had worked on the original Merzbau.²³⁹ The interior constructions of the hut were made of refuse and pieces of wood from the floor of a carpenter's shop, plastered over and painted white; by May 1939 these covered the whole interior, according to a letter Schwitters wrote to Nelly van Doesburg.²⁴⁰ As the floor space of the hut measured only about 2 x 3.30 metres (Fig. 71), these geometrical forms did not contain grottos but often served a practical purpose. Movable panels gave

235 [Leider hat sich schon das Bauamt gemeldet, dass ich das Häuschen einmal wieder abreißen muss. Oft bin ich ganz verzweifelt, dass es mir nicht gelingen will, für meine monumentalen Arbeiten eine Stätte zu finden. Aber ich konstruiere nun die plastischen Formen transportabel. Falls ich abreißen muss, versuche ich eine Möglichkeit zu finden, wo ich es neu zusammensetzen kann.] Letter to Oskar Müller, 24.2.39, Schaub 1998, 33. Ernst Schwitters noted that the Merzbau was discovered after a neighbour reported that it housed a transmitter. As note 187.

236 Letter to Ernst Schwitters, 3.7.47, KSF.

237 For the state of the building in 1949, see Crossley 2005, 123. On 10.12.55 Ernst wrote to Schmalenbach: 'An einem Sonntag morgen zündeten 2 12-13 jährige Jungen den Merzbau an, und bis wir das sahen, war es schon zu spät. Der Merzbau brannte vor unseren Augen bis zum Grunde nieder. Als die Feuerwehr kam, konnte sie nur noch die rauchende Ruinen löschen.' KSF.

238 For the original state of the hut, see Schwitters 1936, 104. See also a letter in which KS (30.7.37, KSF) asks Ernst to photograph the exterior of the hut. Possibly the interior was not fully 'merzed' till 1937/8.

239 'I have a hut on the island that I've decorated like my studio [...] mainly it's the interior that needs plastering, then smoothing and polishing like the studio in Hannover.' Letter to Karl Schäfer, 24.10.38, translated in Webster 1997, 290. Schäfer had worked in Lysaker in early 1937: see KSA 9, 30.

240 Letter to Nelly van Doesburg, 22.5.39, Nündel 1975, 151; Falkenthal 1997, 78.

access to everyday articles like sugar bowls,²⁴¹ while part of the central column was used as a table.²⁴² As in Hannover, a number of mirrors were fixed to the interior.²⁴³ According to the testimony of friend in Molde, penned many years later: ‘Schwitters’ main concern was to build another of those Merzbauten, if only a small version [...] Not until the whole interior of the hut became a Merzbau, painted white, was he finally satisfied.’²⁴⁴ In 1936, Schwitters constructed a column on a hillock next to the hut, using the wreck of a rowing boat (Fig. 74). The column was removed to a nearby island, where it fell apart some years later.²⁴⁵

After 1940, the interior of the hut began to disintegrate (Fig. 75) but remained publicly accessible until the early 1970s. Evidence that the rough masonry of the interior was covered with a cornice of plaster in basic Constructivist colours is still visible today, as are traces of printed material pasted on the doors and wooden surfaces (Figs. 76-82). The collaged door (Fig. 77) was sent to London for sale but was returned for lack of interest, and now stands in a museum in Molde. The efforts of the sculptor Ellen Maria Heggdal and other artists have ensured that the exterior of the hut has been partially repaired, but nothing remains of the covered veranda that Schwitters erected at the front (Fig. 72).²⁴⁶

3. The Merz barn, Elterwater

By June 1947 Schwitters, now living in Ambleside, had decided against returning to Hannover in the hope of salvaging the Merzbau’s remains, partly because of his deteriorating health: ‘I say to myself, Merzbau is Merzbau. Better I complete the one in Lysaker.’²⁴⁷ He had

241 Falkenthal 1997, 78.

242 Elger 1997a, 42.

243 Schwitters 1936, 104.

244 [Aber Schwitters ging es ja darum, noch einmal einen dieser Merzbauten zu errichten, wenn auch im kleinen [...] Erst als zuletzt das ganze Innere der Hütte ein Merzbau war, weiss angemalt, war er endlich zufrieden.] As note 241. This is not what Schwitters’ himself writes: see LW 3, 124.

245 As note 114.

246 For the story of the disastrous neglect of the hut from 1948 to the present, see Heggdal 1997. The hut’s interior has now been removed to the mainland.

247 [Ich sage mir: "Merzbau ist Merzbau." Da vollende ich besser den in Oslo.] Letter to Christof Spengemann, 25.6.47, Nündel 1974, 282.

already broached the idea of erecting an entirely new Merzbau in a letter to Ernst in March:

*‘It is no use to finish the studio in Lysaker. I will suggest to start a new Merzbau here in England or in USA. I simply have to live as long as necessary for a new Merzbau.’²⁴⁸ It was not until July, however, that he abandoned his plans to restore the Haus am Bakken,²⁴⁹ and began to plan his third Merzbau in a stone barn in Elterwater, in six acres of woodland known as Cylinders, the site of an old gunpowder works [Fig. 86].²⁵⁰ The owner, a retired landscape architect named Harry Pierce (Fig. 100), drew up a contract requiring Schwitters to pay £52 rent per annum.²⁵¹ The Merz barn was from the first planned as a public work. When Schwitters next wrote to Carola Giedion-Welcker, he added that Pierce intended the site to pass to the National Trust:

He has interested the government in [Cylinders] and later it will be National Trust [property]. He lets the weeds grow but makes a composition out of them by small touches. Just as I make art out of rubbish. Merzbau 3 will later stand in the middle of a protected area with a wonderful view in all directions and bound up with nature.²⁵²

In comparison with the other Merzbauten, the barn is well documented on the basis of photographs, accounts by those who aided Schwitters in his work, the physical remains of the original building and those of the original structures still extant.

The barn, built in the local dry stone walling manner, had two windows (which still exist) and was about 2.5 metres high. Its floor area of roughly 4.5 x 5 metres was close to that of the

248 Letter to Ernst Schwitters, 7.3.47, KSF.

249 Compare letters to Ernst Schwitters of 3.7.47 (Nündel 1974, 283) and 26.7.47, KSF.

250 The name derives from Bishop Watson’s method of manufacturing carbon in steel cylinders. Production in Elterwater ceased in 1926 and the site was set alight to rid the land of gunpowder. The barn, built in 1943, was used to store hay.

251 Before retiring, Pierce had been chief garden architect for the landscaping firm of Thomas Mawson. The rent he charged for a barn in appalling condition was about double that for a small cottage, and Schwitters was responsible for repairs and insurance; see Crossley 2004, 109.

252 [Er hat die Regierung dafür interessiert und es wird später National Trust. Er lässt das Unkraut wachsen aber macht durch small touches eine Komposition daraus. Genau wie ich aus rubbish Kunst mache [...] Der Merzbau 3 wird später im Centrum des Naturschutzparkes stehen mit einer wunderbaren Aussicht nach allen Seiten und verbunden mit der Natur.] Letter to Carola Giedion-Welcker, 19.8.47, Giedion-Welcker 1973, 506. Pierce would certainly have removed intrusive weeds such as brambles from his site, but his typescript on Cylinders contains a chapter on its wild flowers, and he writes of naturalising his garden imports. (My thanks to Celia Lerner for this information.) The National Trust still holds Pierce’s Deed of Conveyance, dated 8.11.1944. In an undated document headed *‘Suggestions for the agreement Pierce - Schwitters concerning Merz barn’, Schwitters wrote that in the event of his death, the barn should pass to an art institution (KSF).

Hannover and Lysaker Merzbauten (Fig. 90); Schwitters reckoned it the largest sculpture he had ever made.²⁵³ Pierce undertook repairs to the roof and windows, and Schwitters started work in mid-August 1947 with an initial award of \$1000 from the Oliver Kaufmann Family Trust. (In 1946 Oliver Kaufman had delegated the task of distributing Schwitters' funding to MoMA, where his nephew worked as a curator, but administrative hurdles held up the process, so that it was over a year before Schwitters received the grant.) A barn door was fitted, over which he fixed a coloured snake-like stick (Fig. 96a) reminiscent of the central element in the Merz assemblage *Hölzerne Schlange*, which Ernst Schwitters claimed had been part of the *Haus am Bakken* (Fig. 68a).²⁵⁴ On the earth floor, short posts connected by strings indicated a walkway through the barn.²⁵⁵ As in Lysaker, Schwitters first determined the position of the main light sources. A skylight, designed as the focal point of the barn, was cut into the right hand corner of the far wall (Fig. 97b) and strings spanned across the interior that Schwitters referred to as leading lines (Fig. 87). On the basis of interviews with those familiar with the original, Nicholas Wadley stated that:

These strings were strung from nails fixed in a vertical line up from the floor on the left hand wall. Descriptions vary but they suggest that another row of nails was fixed along the topmost ridge of the mural relief that curves upwards toward the light. The strings must have been stretched between these two rows of nails [...] All accounts confirm that Schwitters' intention with these lines, drawn through space, was to re-emphasize that the focus of the whole work lay in the light entering the barn from the top right corner.²⁵⁶

The ends of these strings are still visible near the door of the barn and at the top of the relief in Newcastle.

Schwitters first made models of his projected structures from stones and branches.²⁵⁷ He whitewashed the walls (Pierce later stated that Schwitters intended completing all four walls

253 [Ich baue dabei die grösste Plastik meines Lebens, 5x5x3 m. Eine Innenplastik.] Letter to Marguerite Hagenbach, 23.10.47, Nündel 1974, 286, also to Ludwig Hilbersheimer, 25.10.47, *ibid*, 293.

254 Letter to Werner Schmalenbach, 27.8.64, KSF.

255 Elderfield 1985, 221.

256 Wadley 1981, 53-4.

257 Elderfield 1985, 222.

as murals²⁵⁸) and prepared the end wall, which measured approximately 5 x 2.7 metres, by forming a smooth surface with commercial decorator's plaster mixed with his hands or with a spatula. This was reinforced with twigs, wire and garden canes. He sandpapered it and added rough and smooth plaster forms.²⁵⁹ The first found objects had been inserted into the interstices of the wall before plastering, while others were incorporated later: these included binder twine, a slate log splitter, a metal window frame, the nozzle of a child's watering can, a fragment of cartwheel, a red tin can, a china egg, a rubber ball, part of a circular gilt picture frame, fragments of a cartwheel and tool handle, gentians from Pierce's garden, tree roots, pebbles from the stream, a child's watering-can nozzle, a twisted drain cover, a damaged drain pipe and industrial objects (see Fig. 84c).²⁶⁰ Plasterboard provided support for areas of heavier relief (Fig. 92). Schwitters made a number of sculptures for the barn (Fig. 95), in a style that he described in a letter of 1946: 'I am developing a new kind of sculpture from found forms. Very small. Not ornamental, like the Merzbau.'²⁶¹ He erected a semi-circular stone wall left of the entrance (Fig. 87), pierced by a hole revealing part of the space behind and containing the sculpture 'Chicken and Egg' (Fig. 95). Pierce stated that this wall diverged at an angle from the door and ran back to the window.²⁶² Another curving wall was planned; John Elderfield, who interviewed those who had aided Schwitters, comments: 'Whether this was to have been built is not known. Schwitters does not seem to have made up his mind on this; he chose rather to try and complete one small section so that he could envisage the whole

258 Wilson 1994, 304.

259 Elderfield 1985, 223. Gwyneth Alban-Davis related that 'on the far wall, with a base of clay spread over the dry stones, [Schwitters] modelled his design, fixing in bits from his collection of rubbish. He was always ready to describe his plans to us.' Alban-Davis 1, 1992, 17.

260 Wilson 1994, 304, also *Harry Pierce, Cylinders Farm, Elterwater, Ambleside, Cumbria. An Experiment, ca. 1952*, unpublished typescript, ed. Celia Lerner. A stock of found objects lay in the barn until the wall's removal to Newcastle.

261 [Ich entwickle eine neue art Plastik aus gefundenen formen. Sehr klein. Nicht ornamental, wie den Merzbau.] Letter to Vordemberge-Gildewart, 5.1.46, in Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, vol. II, 236 (for dating see editor's note). See also Elderfield 1969, 63. For other sculptures in the barn, see CR 3660/3661.

262 Wilson 1994, 304.

effect.²⁶³ Schwitters also planned a number of ceiling constructions, according to Pierce: ‘from the top ridge was to be produced for some distance a low roof or ceiling so that light from the window in the adjoining wall should be carried past it to the far corner where a column was to rise from the floor some little distance from the walls, leaving the far corner for a culminating feature lit from a skylight in the roof.’²⁶⁴ (Fig. 94a) There was to be a grass-covered roof as on Hjertøya.²⁶⁵

Seriously ill and unable to afford professional workmen, Schwitters was reliant on help from neighbours, friends and Edith Thomas/Wantee. He wrote to Ella Bergmann-Michel that: ‘I am building the greatest Merzbau I have ever constructed. It is the Merz barn [...] Wantee, several boys, Mr Pierce and son help me. I can’t climb on the ladder any more or carry stones, or sand down plaster.’²⁶⁶ Shortly after Schwitters’ death, Pierce attempted to carry out his final instructions by adding plaster swathes (Fig. 97b) still visible to the right of the skylight.²⁶⁷

Schwitters stated expressly in a number of letters that this was his third Merzbau, and that he considered it an improvement on its predecessors.²⁶⁸ To Katherine Dreier he wrote that it was better and more consistent than anything he had done before.²⁶⁹ As far as it is possible to judge from the plans and the surviving wall, the Merz barn would have differed considerably from the previous Merzbauten, particularly in the wide palette of colours and the extensive use of textures and organic forms. In a letter to Ernst written on the final days that he worked on the

263 Elderfield 1969, 58. For more on the interior see Wadley 1981, 53-4. Fred Brookes stated that much of the walls had been plastered. Roughly applied traces are still visible at both ends of the left-hand wall.

264 Wilson 1994, 304. ‘Schwitters explained how this wall, which was only part of the overall design, would be lit by a small window [...] something else was going to be built up and another wall was going to be built down. When we suggested that this was going to present problems - "There’s gravity, you know!" - he swept all difficulties aside in his enthusiasm.’ Alban-Davis 1, 1992, 17.

265 See Fig. 87.

266 [Dabei baue ich den grössten Merzbau, den ich je gestaltet habe. Es ist die Merz Barn [...] Wantee, mehrere boys, Mr Pierce und Sohn helfen mir. Ich kann nicht mehr auf die Leiter steigen, oder Steine tragen, Gips schleifen.] Letter to Ella Bergmann-Michel, 15.10.47, KSA 7, 65.

267 Cf. Wadley 1981, 57. Edith Thomas/Wantee later wrote: ‘Mr Pierce tried his best and worked on the right hand side of the wall. Brave man.’ KSA 8, 149.

268 *‘My Merzbau gets much nicer than the Merzbau I and II. I learned a lot at them.’ Letter to Ernst Schwitters, 28.9.47, KSF. ‘My Merz barn is better and more consistent than anything I have done up to now.’ [Meine Merz Barn ist besser und konsequenter als alles, was ich vorher gemacht habe.] Letter to Marguerite Hagenbach, 2.9.47, Nündel 1974, 286.

269 Letter of 6.10.47, *ibid.*, 291.

barn, Schwitters wrote that it was '*noch weniger dadaistisch*' [even less Dadaistic] than the Lysaker Merzbau.²⁷⁰ In October 1947 he estimated that a tenth of the work was finished²⁷¹ and that he would need two or three years to complete the barn.²⁷² He ceased work on it in early December 1947 and died a month later.

Katherine Dreier and Herbert Read quickly drew up plans to transform the barn into a memorial to Schwitters by removing his grave to its interior, but the idea was rejected by Ernst Schwitters.²⁷³ Not three weeks after Schwitters' death, Pierce demolished the semi-circular wall with the approval of Ernst, as it interrupted the view of the main relief. Edith Thomas, who had attempted to dissuade Pierce, protested to Ernst that this had been an entirely mistaken decision.²⁷⁴ He replied that the wall 'did not mean much in the composition of the whole barn. It lacked counter balance [...] considering that the barn will eventually be made into a café, the wall took quite a little bit of the little room available'.²⁷⁵ Schwitters' painting materials, originally left inside with some smaller sculptures and a few pictures, were later removed because of the damp conditions.²⁷⁶ Pierce decided to convert the barn to a café and art gallery to generate some income;²⁷⁷ he added a box office (Fig. 97a) but no other amenities apart from a concrete floor with a drainage system.²⁷⁸ In 1955 he opened *Cylinders* to the public, permitting free access to the barn. By now the original colouring was fading and

270 Letter of 29.11.47, *ibid.*, 295.

271 Letter to Marguerite Hagenbach, 23.10.47, *ibid.*, 286.

272 *'I am working a lot on the new Merz barn. I can do it with much help. Wantee helps the whole time [...] I did already quite a lot but I need 2-3 years.' Letter to Eve Schwitters, 15.10.47, KSF.

273 'Mr Read and I thought it would be very interesting and would help to establish the interest if the body of Kurt Schwitters would be moved into the barn with a slab over it at the foot of his wall. However, Ernst [Schwitters] does not like this idea at all, and so we will drop it.' Letter from Katherine Dreier to Edith Thomas/Wantee, 15.6.48, BLY. In 1970 Ernst had his father's remains exhumed and buried in Hannover.

274 Letter from Edith Thomas/Wantee to Ernst Schwitters, 1.2.48, Hyman Kreitman Research Centre, Tate Britain, London. She was apparently not informed of discussions about the barn's future until the wall had been moved, although the terms of Schwitters' Tenancy Agreement with Pierce required her approval.

275 Letter from Ernst Schwitters to Edith Thomas/Wantee, 7.2.48, *ibid.*

276 Cf. Burkett 1979, 1. Burkett states that Pierce had moved nothing when she saw the barn in 1958. Ernst expressed concern about 'pictures that were hung up everywhere'; as note 275. Sarah Wilson states that nine abstract works, four sculptures and a portrait were left in the barn for over a decade; Wilson 1994.

277 Ernst Schwitters hoped to exhibit his photographs in the barn on a long-term basis; Crossley 2004, 121-2.

278 Pierce's son concreted the floor shortly after Schwitters' death; see. letter from Edith Thomas/Wantee to Katherine Dreier, 1.6.48, BLY.

the plaster flaking, and Pierce became concerned about this obvious deterioration. In late 1958, Sir Lawrence Gowing, Professor of Fine Art at Newcastle, informed the Arts Council that the barn was in poor condition and was plainly in need of preservation.²⁷⁹ Not everyone saw it as a serious artwork, and reactions to Gowing's report were in any case slow to materialize, so that by 1961, when the Arts Council finally approached the Tate Gallery on Pierce's behalf, consultations were limited to rescuing the end wall.

Pierce was disappointed to learn in July 1962 that the Tate's Trustees had formally declined the offer of the gift of the wall because of the expense.²⁸⁰ He had, however, also contacted other institutions, including MoMA, Marlborough Fine Art, the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, and Abbot Hall Gallery in Kendal. As documents from their archives show, all were attracted by the idea of saving Schwitters' final work, at least in theory, but in each case their deliberations remained at the discussion stage and no concrete plans were formulated.

After the Tate had rejected Pierce's proposal, he had also turned to the University of Newcastle on Tyne in September 1962, as an institution with connections to Schwitters (Gowing's 1958 report was followed by a Schwitters exhibition at the University's Hatton Gallery in 1959). It took a year for the University to express direct interest in the wall, and not until October 1963 did Richard Hamilton, then a lecturer in Fine Art, inspect the barn with a civil engineering expert with a view to opening negotiations with Pierce. In May 1965 a thorough survey, led by Hamilton, was undertaken. Under his instruction, the 25-ton end wall (in fact a double wall filled with rubble) bearing the unfinished bas-relief was transported to Newcastle between 22 September and 1 October 1965, funded by the V&A and the Rothley Trust. It was installed in the Hatton Gallery with a stone surround, albeit neater than the rough dry stone walling of the original (Fig. 98).

279 Minutes of meeting on 19/12/58, Arts Council Archive.

280 Minutes of the Tate Trustees, 19/7/62. Tate Gallery Archive.

IV A revised chronology

In this section I will propose a revised chronology of the Merzbauten. Although still provisional, this constitutes the most plausible reconstruction of their development that can be presented on the basis of the available evidence.

- Some contemporaries note the existence of a tower or towers in Waldhausenstrasse 5 in the 1920s. The number, location, size and degree of mobility of these structures, which consisted mainly of refuse, can no longer be determined. The first grottos (one made by Hannah Höch) arise in hollows within the column or columns.
- While the Boetel family are resident (1921-6), Schwitters' studio is situated in a partitioned area of room 1 (Fig 6). The Boetels leave in December 1926, Schwitters' parents reclaim their bedroom, and Schwitters immediately converts room 2 into his new studio. This room, at the rear of his parents' apartment, has a large north-facing window. He installs sculptural assemblages from his former studio and possibly from the basement. These also function as (or possibly originate as) repositories for Merz material.
- By 1928, a column to the left of the door has been named the KdeE. The title is first recorded in a photo of 1928, but not used after 1931. The primary construction(s) may not have had a name at first; certainly in their memoirs, contemporaries generally referred to a tower or a column, using the name KdeE only if they had a copy of the *Veilchenheft* to hand. Work on this and other columns is intermittent during the 1920s, as Schwitters is involved in numerous projects and travels extensively at this time.²⁸¹
- By 1930 the KdeE is covered in geometrical plaster housing with a narrow door. Its dimensions are 3½ x 2 x 1 sq. m. The content includes a bottle of Schwitters' urine and an unspecified number of grottos; the 1933 photos show some of these as visible from the

²⁸¹ For some indication of Schwitters' manifold activities at this time, see Orchard/Schulz 2000, 534-47.

exterior. In the *Veilchenheft* Schwitters outlines his working method and describes a number of grottos dating from 1923, but dismisses them as ‘literary’. A visitors’ book stands on a table in the interior. Although in the *Veilchenheft* Schwitters describes the column as ‘unfinished on principle’, his wife writes of it as completed and covered for protection. Visitors to the studio include gallery owners and collectors. Katherine Dreier visits with Duchamp and proposes to ship the column to the USA.

- According to letters, three columns are in place by 1930: the KdeE, the Column of Life (possibly identical with the column with the baby’s head), which expands outwards after reaching the ceiling, and a third nameless column. One or more of these may have been used as storage space for Merz material.
- In 1930 Schwitters announces his intention of creating about ten columns (Schwitters 1930a), or, alternatively, integrates about ten small columns in larger structures (Fig. 53a). From 1931, he begins to publicize his studio at home and abroad, having remained silent about it since its inception. In an unpublished text, written in about 1931, he states that he has renamed the KdeE as The Big E.
- ‘Das grosse E’ is symptomatic of a change in Schwitters’ approach to his studio in suggesting a new focus on the articulation of space. As it takes the form of an invitation, this text also indicates that he is interested in the idea of a communal work. Höch makes a second grotto and is invited to collaborate, but this proves impossible, if only on account of her personal circumstances.²⁸² Other colleagues have already begun to participate, and Arp, Ella Bergmann-Michel, Doesburg, Gabo, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Vordemberge-Gildewart, Walden and possibly others add grottos. Dreier takes the visitors’ book to the USA in 1930, probably returning it on her next visit in 1937. The studio now contains an exhibition of work by contemporaries.

282 Höch travelled in Europe after her break with Hausmann in 1922 and in 1926 moved to The Netherlands.

- Schwitters' father Eduard dies in March 1931, facilitating visitors' access to the studio. In 1931 or 1932, Schwitters abandons the idea of creating further discrete columns and begins to assemble a sculptural environment. Ernst's anecdote of strings tied across the room is likely to derive from this period rather than the early 1920s. The grottos are probably not glazed until Schwitters begins to employ workmen at this time; as he and his mother administer the family properties after his father's death, he now has more income.
- The 'unfinished on principle' statement notwithstanding, from late 1932 both Schwitters and his wife write of the first room as nearing completion. By early 1933, the visible exterior of the Merzbau consists of flowing forms of white plaster extending over three walls and the ceiling, with patches of colour and numerous surface interruptions, including mirrors, glass-fronted grottos, abstract plaster sculptures and found objects.²⁸³ The balcony door is converted to a window, with panes of blue glass. Few of the new constructions are flush with the walls, and one large column is on wheels. Most of the Merzbau has a hidden exterior accessible by means of stairs, with ledges, walkways, niches and hatches that at certain points afford a view of the interior and the main window. By now the studio has also become a performance space in which Schwitters provides guided tours and recites his own works. Another visitors' book is placed on a table in front of the KdeE.
- The year 1933 marks the end of a decisive phase in the development of this room. The faulty lighting system has been replaced by a complex new one with variable lighting possibilities. The transition from a studio containing individual columns to, in Schwitters' own words, 'a room sculpture that one can enter, in which one can go for a walk!' is now complete.²⁸⁴ Schwitters has the room photographed by a professional, publishes an essay on it in *abstraction-cr ation* and sends photographs to friends and supporters. He removes the door to the adjacent room, which after 1933 becomes both his new studio and a second

283 Ernst Schwitters stated that a few parts of the bare wooden framework were left visible; letter to Werner Schmalenbach, 6.9.64, KSF.

284 Letter to Josef Albers, 8.2.37, JAAF.

Merzbau room (Fig. 36). Up to 1935 he employs three or more workmen, in winter on a full-time basis, to help with the building work and later to carry out basic tasks on extensions in other rooms. The name Merzbau is applied to the first room from 1933, and later to all such sculpted areas in the house, though Schwitters rarely uses the name before the time of his exile. In later years he claims that the first room constituted the ‘actual Merzbau’ (Fig. 59b). Schwitters and his wife try to publicize the Merzbau in Germany and abroad but are increasingly hampered by the political climate. In 1934, Schwitters’ professional activities cease. In summer he earns money selling conventional paintings in Norway and in winter he works on extensions to the Merzbau with the aid of workmen. Ernst Schwitters takes a large number of photos in the 1930s, most of which are later lost.

- In 1934, Schwitters transfers his bed from his apartment on the second floor to the second Merzbau room. He carries out minor alterations to the first room in subsequent years and continues work on concealed areas behind the constructions, one of which now contains a library (Fig. 37). The function of another concealed area (Fig 53a), behind the constructions right of the door, is not known.
- Schwitters continues to add grottos and in 1935, begins to glaze them himself. In the same year, he extends the constructions in the second room, first to the adjacent balcony, which is glazed over by a professional in March/April 1935, and then to the space beneath and into a cistern below ground. Merzbau subsidiaries are constructed in the attic, possibly also in the stairwell and the basement. Work on these extensions continues till shortly before Schwitters emigrates in January 1937. Barr visits the Merzbau in 1935 and photos of the first room are exhibited in MoMA in late 1936. At the same time, faced with the likelihood of Merzbau being destroyed, Schwitters strives to gain a commission to construct a Merzbau column or room in the USA or Switzerland, to no avail.
- Schwitters continues to create similar Merzbauten in exile, all of them in the form of sculptural interiors. The first, a two-storey studio built from scratch, stands in his garden in

Lysaker. It is closely modelled on the original, but does not evolve in the manner of the Hannover Merzbau, as Schwitters works according to a preconceived plan.²⁸⁵ He is distressed about the necessity of concealing both the Hannover and Lysaker Merzbauten, and attempts (unsuccessfully) to construct the latter of transportable elements, hoping that they will eventually be removed to a more suitable location.

- As far as it is possible to judge, the Elterwater Merzbau would have been more colourful than its predecessors, with more organic shapes and material, but from its concept – a studio-cum-sculptural environment in an unusual location, whose interior cannot be seen all at once, containing a picture gallery, niches or grottos for found material, sculptures, a column, windows and contributions from friends and colleagues – it bears close comparison with the other Merzbauten.
- Schwitters refers only to his constructions in Hannover, Lysaker and Elterwater as Merzbauten, although he created related structures such as that on Hjertøya.

V Conclusion

This revised chronology differs from previous ones in the following ways:

- 1) Given the lack of verifiable information and the difficulties of interpreting the sparse photographic evidence, the physical development of Schwitters studio(s) during the 1920s must remain largely a matter of speculation. He published nothing on his studio constructions until 1931 and made no mention of them till 1930. Eyewitness reports are imprecise and written years after the event, and their terminology is generally vague; like Schwitters, they use the words ‘grotto’ and ‘column’ to refer to a wide variety of structures of indeterminate size.

²⁸⁵ “‘Exactly planned’ is very important in this connection. Here [i.e. in Lysaker] it didn’t “grow”, here everything was planned! One can say the same about the grottos of the Lysaker Merzbau.’ [Dabei ist das ‘genau geplant’ sehr wichtig. Hier ‘wuchs’ es nicht, hier war alles geplant! Das gleiche kann man auch über die Grotten des Merzbaues in Lysaker sagen.] Letter from Ernst Schwitters to Werner Schmalenbach, 6.9.64, KSF.

- 2) There are no grounds for the theory that the column with the baby's head (Fig. 12) constituted either the core of the Merzbau or part of the KdeE.
- 3) Schwitters did not move his studio to the room that became the Merzbau (room 2, Fig. 6) till 1927, about five years later than assumed by Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield. The move to room 4 did not take place till 1933, six years later than in their reckoning.
- 4) Schwitters did not abandon the idea of discrete columns till 1931, so that the sculptural environment phase did not begin till 1931/32.²⁸⁶ Nothing in the sources supports the theory that the Merzbau was from the start a planned work (apart from Hannah Höch's remark that at some time in the 1920s she was asked to 'collaborate'²⁸⁷) or that it was inspired by any architectural model or demonstration room, whether Expressionist or Constructivist. With rare exceptions, contemporaries do not associate any of its stages with any early 20th century art movement.
- 5) The grottos of 1923, as described in the *Veilchenheft*, are small and not necessarily representative of the work as a whole. Later grottos, many of which appear on photos, bear simpler descriptive names like Grotto with Cow's horn, Gold Grotto, Molde grotto, Circus grotto, etc. Schwitters later extends the term grotto to include larger elements of the work such as the Blue Grotto. After the studio becomes an environment, light plays a significant role in the construction of the grottos.
- 7) In the late 1920s, Schwitters develops the studio as a multi-functional interactive space. He gives performances there, exhibits work by contemporaries and invites friends to make their own contributions. He harbours similar ambitions for the later Merzbauten that are thwarted by political events and personal difficulties.
- 6) Schwitters' description of the KdeE in the *Veilchenheft* as 'unfinished on principle', a frequently quoted catch phrase of Merzbau reception, is not an essential criterion either of

286 Ernst Schwitters indicated this in 1964; cf. Chapter 1, section II above.

287 As note 65.

his columns or sculptural interiors. The seemingly contradictory finality of the dimensions of the KdeE's casing occurs in the same paragraph, and contemporary letters refer to it as complete. Schwitters' plans for an American version suggest that a Merzbau in the sense of a sculptural interior can also be finished. Later, he often expresses a desire to finish one of his Merzbauten, but in certain circumstances (as in Hannover in the 1930s) it was indeed possible to extend them indefinitely. The idea of a construction that is 'unfinished on principle' should therefore be qualified by his later insistence on the desirability of completing at least one. That all remained unfinished must be attributed to political and personal circumstance rather than principle.

On the basis of the evidence quoted above, it can be argued that the work generally referred to in art-historical literature as the Hannover Merzbau consisted of two separate works, the second of which emerged from the first:

- a single column, named the KdeE (Cathedral of Erotic Misery), under construction from about 1923, which by 1930 constituted a walk-in unit within the studio.
- a sculptural environment conceived in the early 1930s that incorporated the KdeE, which Schwitters named the Merzbau and which extended to several rooms.

The revised chronology thus demonstrates that the Merzbau as we understand it today should be primarily regarded as a work of the 1930s rather than the 1920s. In the next two chapters of this dissertation I will investigate the implications of these revisions to the standard chronology.

CHAPTER THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE HANNOVER MERZBAU

I Introduction

The following chapter will focus on various interpretations of the Hannover Merzbau. In Part II, I will discuss a number of ways in which 20th century art movements have been understood as inspiring and informing the development of the Merzbau and in Part III, examine how the conversion of the original columns into a sculptural environment has been covered in the reception of the work. In Part IV, I will discuss the Hannover Merzbau in terms of Schwitters' own movement of Merz, and in Part V, look at the largely neglected analyses of Carola Giedion-Welcker. In Part VI, I will review some of the legends and misunderstandings commonly associated with the Merzbau and finally, identify some problems that arise from translations of German texts.

II Reception history in relation to the avant-garde

In this section I will briefly discuss the immediate post-war reception of the Merzbau, then examine some examples of how Werner Schmalenbach, Dietmar Elger, John Elderfield and a representative selection of later art historians have analysed the Merzbau in relation to twentieth century avant-garde movements.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Hannover Merzbau was scarcely mentioned in art-historical literature, while the fragile remains of the Merzbauten in Norway and England received even less attention. Allusions to the Merzbau are difficult to find, occurring most commonly in footnotes and introductions, or as an aside in articles on, or by, Schwitters' former colleagues and friends. At this time, as in Schwitters' own day, those who wrote on the Merzbau often seemed to find themselves at a loss for terms to define or classify the work; we find, for instance, phrases such as 'open sculpture'¹, and a 'sculpture, which sprouted from

1 Vordemberge-Gildewart 1976, 43.

the inside outwards',² while Werner Haftmann's history of 20th century art, first published in 1954, characterised the Merzbau as 'a cathedral of things for things'.³ In addition, neither the Hannover Merzbau nor its successors could, it seemed, be assimilated into the kind of schematization of the avant-garde established by Alfred Barr on the catalogue cover and poster of his *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition (Fig. 133a). In 1963 Hans Bolliger described the Merzbau as 'an utterly new medium of tremendous impact and bizarre fantasy', with the explanation that 'the important thing is for the spectator to stand "in" a piece of sculpture'.⁴ These remarks were, however, confined to the biographical notes of a catalogue.

Ad Reinhardt's successive versions of his family tree of American art illustrate the revisions in the approach to Schwitters' work brought about by the Neo-Dada movement (Fig. 133b). In 1946 his name is absent; by 1961 he is firmly ensconced in the tree-trunk. The 1960s also saw an increase in published reminiscences of the Merzbau by Schwitters' contemporaries. These memoirs are commonly utilized as dependable sources and as a repository of factual evidence, but they are better regarded as interpretations in their own right; most eyewitnesses were writing decades after the event, in an entirely different context and sometimes not even in their native country, continent or language. It is extremely difficult to judge the combined potential effects of time, location, memory, post-war perspective, occasional intermediaries writing on their behalf (as in the cases of Max Ernst, Dorner, Pferdekamp and Barr) and the possible influence of extraneous material. Many quote extensively from the *Veilchenheft*, some admit to having read the memoirs of other contemporaries, and several art-historical analyses predate their reminiscences.

The first art historian to research the Merzbauten was Ronald Alley, who in 1958 wrote a well-informed but little-read article on Schwitters for *The Painter and Sculptor*. Alley describes the Hannover Merzbau as arising from:

2 [[Eine] Plastik, die von innen aus spross.] Freudenthal 1956, 17.

3 Haftmann 1961/1965, 187. This is the translated version of his original *Geschichte der modernen Malerei*, (1954).

4 Bolliger 1963, 16.

three-dimensional constructions built out from the walls; a fusion of sculpture, painting and architecture [...] it grew like a natural thing till it occupied three floors of the house. The earlier parts were constructed of bric-à-brac in a Dada manner, but later, when [Schwitters] changed his style, he covered most of the rubbish section with semi-geometrical forms in plaster of Paris, except for certain areas which were left as grottoes [...] The forms were in very high relief and almost free-standing, with small patches of colour placed here and there, and many concealed electric lights, so that the lighting could be precisely controlled. The effect must have been quite fantastic, somewhat in the spirit of German fairy tales (and indeed of the Cabinet of Dr Caligari).⁵

Alley draws a direct comparison between Dada and the work's early stages, but most other early references to the Merzbau in the context of Dada are more circuitous. An early Dada exhibition catalogue (published at a time when the terms 'Environment' and 'Installation' were not yet common currency) refers to it in passing as a 'sculptural-painterly collage construction'.⁶ In Motherwell's often reprinted Dada anthology, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, Motherwell alludes to the Merzbau in his introduction, but only as 'a series of strange grottos built by Schwitters at the rear of his house'.⁷ In the same volume, George Hugnet touches on the Merzbau in his essay 'The Dada Spirit in Painting', but first explains that Schwitters' relation to Dada was highly problematic; Dada was a facet of his personality, and it was only in his immediate environment that he showed himself 'truly Dada'.⁸ Hugnet observes that 'Schwitters' house is said to have been very strange', and describes it as containing a 'model of a project for a monument to humanity, in which all sorts of materials were to be used helter-skelter: wood, plaster, a corset, musical toys and life-size houses in the Swiss style. Parts of the monument were to move and emit sounds'.⁹

It was against this background, characterised by a growing stock of tenuous, implausible and unsubstantiated descriptions of the Merzbau, that Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield undertook detailed research to retrieve the work for art-historical examination. With a view to

5 Alley 1958, 15. Alley was for many years Head of the Modern Collection at the Tate Gallery. His detailed information can only have come from Ernst Schwitters. His remark that the Merzbau's forms were 'almost free-standing' has (with the exception of Elderfield 1985) since played no part in the reception.

6 [plastisch-malerische Collage-Konstruktion] Düsseldorf 1958, unpaginated.

7 Motherwell 1951/1989, xxvii.

8 Hugnet 1932/1989, 163.

9 Ibid., 164.

addressing Schwitters' complex cumulative method, largely neglected in the reception till then, they used as a basis for analysis the avant-garde practices that informed his visual work from 1917 onwards, focussing on (1) the stylistic impact of Expressionism during and after the war, (2) his post-war collaboration with Dada and De Stijl and (3) as the culmination and final phase of this period, his involvement with the German Constructivist movement and other abstract groups up to the late 1920s. In addition, all concluded that on the grounds of the Merzbau's perceived formal divergences from avant-garde idioms, some private agenda was implicated. Again, such arguments could be supported by the *Veilchenheft*, in which Schwitters stated that the expansion of the KdeE was 'in keeping with my continuing spiritual development'.¹⁰

In 1967, Schmalenbach shed new light on the Merzbau by discussing it from such multiple perspectives. His analysis was informed by his understanding of Schwitters' differing approach to contemporary art movements; he saw the early Merzbau as originally a Dadaist work, whose later stages reflected the artist's idiosyncratic version of Expressionism and his dissatisfaction with the principles of Constructivism. Schmalenbach contends that the process of concealing grottos resulted from the artist's gradual dissociation from Dada, and that the later Expressionist elements provided him with a kind of personal safety-valve to offset the rigours of abstraction:

Schwitters believed he had overcome Dada, and the Merzbau seemed to make this overcoming actually visible, as an event, a process [...] Dr Caligari [...] was closer to this Merzbau than the 'New Building' of those architects whom Schwitters so admired and publicized. Schwitters the Romantic, the Expressionist, broke through cubic forms, hollowed them out [...] certainly according to recognisable formal principles, but not for the sake of strict form; rather as a portrayal of his own secret desires, his own soul. A portrayal of his soul was so much the single *raison d'être* of the Merzbau that people found no place in it and, room by room, were driven out.¹¹

10 Appendix I, ¶10.

11 [Schwitters glaubte, den Dadaismus überwunden zu haben, und der Merzbau schien diese Überwindung geradezu als Ereignis, als Prozess, sichtbar zu machen [...] Dr Caligari [...] war dieser Merzbau näher als dem 'Neuen Bauen' der von Schwitters bewunderten und propagierten Architekten. Der Romantiker, der Expressionist Schwitters durchbrach die kubischen Formen, höhlt sie aus [...] gewiss nach erkennbaren Formregeln, aber doch nicht den strengen Formen zuliebe, sondern als Abbild der eigenen geheimen Wünsche,

Schmalenbach claims that though Schwitters was an avowed apologist of Constructivism, his idea of the Merzbau was founded on a shifting matrix of spatial and temporal coordinates that provides evidence of his personal struggle with its strictly geometrical style. In his closing analysis of the Merzbau as a work at once highly calculated and highly imaginative, Schmalenbach finds traces of what he regards as the mystical and romantic aspects of Constructivism as evident in the work of Gabo, Mondrian and Malevich.¹²

Elger and Elderfield discuss the Merzbau in more detail and envisage its formal development as far more sophisticated in its amalgam of styles.¹³ Elderfield describes the geometrical exterior as a ‘formal matrix of Cubo-Expressionism’, for instance, while for Elger it incorporates the opposite poles of ‘organic’ and ‘crystalline’ Expressionist architecture.¹⁴ Both premise their studies on the idea of the Hannover Merzbau as a planned work and both regard Dada as having a bearing on the Merzbau’s beginnings. However, both maintain that from the first it was also modelled on three-dimensional Constructivist environments.

Elger was the first to suggest that the themes of the grottos reflected controversial socio-political issues, pointing especially to the turbulent years of 1923 and 1929. Nonetheless, he argues that the Merzbau’s formal development is best understood in terms of the legacy of Expressionist architectural theory and film, and he frequently emphasises its affinities with the utopian projects of Expressionist architects, which he sees as informing the whole course of its development. Elger thus interprets the Merzbau in terms of what he sees as Expressionist architecture’s ‘complementary forms of manifestation; tower and cave’,¹⁵

der eigenen Seele. Abbild der Seele zu sein, war so sehr die einzige raison d’être des Merzbaus, dass der Mensch in ihm keinen Platz fand und Raum um Raum aus ihm verdrängt wurde.] Schmalenbach 1967a, 144.

Schmalenbach may be drawing on a comment on Schwitters’ Haus Merz (Fig. 2): ‘This cathedral cannot be used. The inside is so filled with wheels that no room is left for people.’ Spengemann 1920c, 41, translated in Elderfield 1985, 114. Haftmann likewise envisioned people being systematically expelled from the house by Schwitters’ compulsive claims to space; Haftmann 1961/1965, 187.

12 Schmalenbach 1967a, 144.

13 Elderfield’s comparisons are particularly wide-ranging, citing for instance the work of Gaudi; Elderfield 1985, 163. Schwitters apparently visited Park Güell in 1932; cf. Notizbuch der Spitzbergen- und Osloreise, SAH.

14 Elderfield 1985, 163; Elger 1984/1999, 71.

15 [zwei der für die expressionistische Architektur komplementären Ausdrucksgestaltungen: Turm und Höhle.] Elger 1984/1999, 107.

structures that in his view signify voluntary isolation.¹⁶ Elderfield also describes the Merzbau as ‘essentially a piece of Expressionist architecture. Its form is as regressive as the content it conceals’.¹⁷ In this context, it becomes ‘a house within a house from the relics of experience [...] a diary on the grandest of scales’.¹⁸ Elderfield follows Schmalenbach in proposing that the inclusion of Expressionist elements provided Schwitters with a means to preserve his individuality during his involvement with the Constructivist movement (a theory which largely precludes the identification of the Merzbau as a joint artistic activity), and suggests this as the reason for his not admitting to its existence in the 1920s.¹⁹

All three art historians exercise caution in their assessment of the Constructivist aspects of the later Merzbau, and all conclude that Schwitters’ methodology was far removed from orthodox Constructivism. Elger contends that Constructivism played a minor role in the later Merzbau, claiming that Schwitters’ use of geometrical forms was mainly a functional measure that lent coherence to his studio constructions.²⁰ In contrast, Elderfield suggests (on the basis of Hans Richter’s account) that by the mid-twenties, the exterior of the Merzbau had developed purely Constructivist traits, which further evolved into what he calls an ‘organicist interpretation of Constructivism’.²¹ His study of the chronology and his recognition that grottos and sculptures were added at all stages leads him to conclude that ‘it would be wrong [...] to interpret the development of this work merely as the victory of geometrical Constructivism over Schwitters’ personalized Dadaism’.²² Elderfield describes sculptures like *Schlanke Plastik* (Fig. 29) as ‘breaking the deadlock between formal rigidity and fantastic, imaginative content that had characterized the Merzbau’s previous development’.²³ He interprets Schwitters’ perceived departure from Constructivist ideals in a positive light,

16 Ibid., 133.

17 Elderfield 1985, 163.

18 Ibid., 165.

19 Ibid., 148.

20 Elger 1984/99, 52.

21 Elderfield 1985, 192.

22 Ibid., 162.

23 Ibid., 191-2.

claiming that the adoption of the collective style of Constructivism had frequently led to a loss of authenticity in his work.

While the analyses of Elger and Elderfield remain the most extensive investigations into the Hannover Merzbau's formal evolution, many later studies also presuppose that its expansion paralleled the development of Schwitters' abstract work up to 1933. Some cite the influence of Cubism and Futurism,²⁴ others mention Surrealism,²⁵ but most follow the Expressionist-Dada-Constructivist model that dominates the analyses of Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield, and most likewise ascribe to the Merzbau an additional private agenda.²⁶ In the catalogue to the Tate Gallery's Schwitters retrospective of 1985, for instance, Richard Humphreys describes the Merzbau as 'an autobiographical sculptural growth' that shows how Schwitters 'responded to contemporary aesthetic phenomena in his own gothic and unruly fashion'.²⁷ According to Humphreys, the Merzbau may be regarded as a record of the artist's obstinately individualistic approach to the avant-garde.

In 1985, most art-historical analyses still focussed on the Merzbau primarily in terms of what was regarded as the influence of Expressionism, Dada and Constructivism, using a broadly modernist-formalist model of stylistic innovation in the manner of Barr's influential 1936 chart (Fig. 133a). This approach offered considerable flexibility in so far as Expressionism, Dada and Constructivism were movements in which a wide range of artists participated, and in many different ways, allowing for extensive analytical leeway. Nonetheless, reliance on compartmentalized art movements of the kind illustrated by Barr, which discounted the idea of any contemporaneous feedback among groups and assumed that the development of art is unidirectional, inevitably resulted in a restricted understanding of the Merzbau. Since the late

24 Cf. Perloff 2004, 77, which states that the Merzbau's Cubist structural framework is transformed by Futurism.

25 Cf. Curtis 1999, 141 ff. Schwitters often dismissed Surrealism as a reactionary movement, but admitted its influence on Merz pictures of the 1930s. He attended a Surrealist meeting but declined an invitation to join; cf. Schwitters 1940, 383. In the years when Dada and Surrealism were generally bracketed, he was often categorized as a Surrealist artist: e.g. Hannover 1956: Cauman 1958: Osten 1963.

26 E.g. Curtis 1999, 165, 169; West 2000, 89-90.

27 London 1985, 18.

1980s, however, the understanding of the avant-garde has no longer been circumscribed by that paradigm. This has led to expanded frameworks of interpretation and more detailed investigations of the Merzbau's socio-political, spiritual and interactive facets.

Hanne Bergius, in her study of Berlin Dada, was one of the first to analyse the Merzbau in terms of a post-modernist perception of Dada. She begins her discussion by interpreting Schwitters' *Heilige Bekümmernis* (Fig. 5) and other of his early sculptural assemblages as condemnations of Wilhelmine patriarchal society and bourgeois values. Bergius claims that these works anticipate the Merzbau, 'in whose grottos was displayed the apocalyptic dimension of a desolate culture',²⁸ and sees their radical agenda as stemming from Schwitters' contacts with Berlin Dada. She regards the KdeE as orientated towards the redemption of a doomed society through an androgyny implicit in the indeterminate nature of Merz, the *Heilige Bekümmernis* and Schwitters' identification of himself with Anna Blume.²⁹ For Bergius, the metaphor of the cathedral functions as an ironic commentary on consumer culture and also as an expression of the Merzbau's role as a 'labyrinthine, alchemistic cave' combining subjective and collective experience.³⁰ She concludes that this process of physical and thematic layering and merging, described as a material manifestation of the stream-of-consciousness method, meant that specific political, scientific and religious issues were not included in the Merzbau; instead, Schwitters' cathedral had a mythological character, revealed in the interweaving of tradition, contemporary fields of experience and the hopes and fears of Weimar society.³¹

In the first full-length study of the Merzbau since that of Elger, Elizabeth Burns Gamard states that the recovery of art's spiritual consciousness was fundamental to the development of 20th century avant-gardes. Whereas for Bergius, the Merzbau's Dada origins gave rise to a

28 [In diesen Grotten zeigte sich die apokalyptische Dimension einer desolaten Kultur.] Bergius 1989, 293.

29 Ibid., 294. (Schwitters' adoption of Anna Blume as his alter ego makes an interesting comparison with Duchamp's *Rose Selavy*. He expressed the idea that his art was female in a letter to Carola Giedion-Welcker (Giedion-Welcker 1973, 503), translated in Webster 1997, 82.)

30 Ibid., 297.

31 Ibid., 298.

work that offered a wide-ranging form of social critique, Gamard writes that for Schwitters, ‘the production of art [...] could not be corrupted by forces or ideas that lay beneath its lofty realm’, so that his artworks cannot be regarded as conveying any socio-political commentary.³² She understands Merz as inclusive in the sense that Schwitters ‘wrestled with the effects of well-framed ideologies in order to reincorporate them [into] a larger developmental organism’.³³ In her view, the methodology of Merz thus represents ‘a singular departure from the organisational and collective goals of other avant-garde groups’,³⁴ and Schwitters’ style sets its own parameters as ‘a living, dynamic and highly particularised aesthetic condition manifest of the singular oneness of its own nature’.³⁵ She criticises other art historians for their ideological use of formalist analysis when discussing Schwitters’ work, stating that ‘the grandiosity of his vision [...] was not grounded in the normative terms of the European avant-garde [...] but was instead transhistorical in nature and therefore at once profoundly sentimental and messianic’.³⁶ Gamard defines the Merzbau as ‘a vast organic enterprise destined to grow unchecked’ and claims that it was founded on a covert esoteric programme whose origins can be traced to the earliest Merz works of 1919.³⁷ Where she sets the Merzbau within the framework of the avant-garde, it is largely in the context of those redemptive and revelatory aspects most evident in what she sees as ‘the higher reality of Expressionist ideals’³⁸ – that is, the intuitive, the irrational, the mystical and the subjective. She thus regards Expressionism as fundamental to Schwitters’ work, affording him with a means to articulate a numinous plane beyond the reach of all but the adept.³⁹ On the basis of her account of Schwitters’ Dadaism as meditative, withdrawn and remote from aggressive

32 Gamard 2000, 11, 26. She speculates that ‘Schwitters may have been fundamentally incapable of realising what was happening in the world around him.’ Ibid, 168.

33 Ibid., 148. Compare this with Harald Szeemann’s description of Schwitters’ treatment of Constructivism in terms of rape; Szeemann 1994, 255.

34 Ibid., 11.

35 Ibid., 34.

36 Ibid., 24. She notes that Schwitters contributed to this idea in repeatedly alluding to the primacy of form over content.

37 Ibid., 6, 45 ff.

38 Ibid., 22.

39 Ibid., 37-8.

strategies - ‘a nature-based, organic dada [...] an active indifference that behaved like alchemy and hermeticism, as life itself’,⁴⁰ she interprets the Merzbau as embodying this alternative form of Dada in ‘the cathedral that became in effect his summa theologia’.⁴¹ She claims that while the late phases of the Merzbau can be seen as manifesting a Constructivist style, they are also ‘reminiscent of the emotive turbulence of Expressionist painting, albeit reconstituted in a purified, abstract state’.⁴² Above all she discusses the impact of what she sees as the underlying motivations and aims of other artists on the Merzbau, selecting in particular Doesburg’s search for a redemptive universal language and Lissitzky’s pursuit of absolute art.⁴³ She maintains that such aspirations were reflected in Schwitters’ decision to bury all but a few traces of the personal in the late Merzbau, which she interprets as a whitened domestic tomb that recalls the ‘pallor of death and the presence of the spirit’.⁴⁴ She also invests the Merzbau with a strong autobiographical and obsessive element that mirrors what she terms the artist’s ‘fitful attempts to negotiate a path through the miasma of his life and work’,⁴⁵ and maintains that this interpretation is applicable to all the Merzbauten, each of which she regards as harbouring a mystic, clandestine, coded agenda that embraced alchemy and an hermetic inner existence.

While Gamard understands the Merzbau in part as a deceptive work in which Schwitters deploys formal means to undermine attempts to reveal the work’s hermeneutic content, other art historians since the 1990s who assume the existence of an avant-garde framework in the Merzbau have drawn quite different conclusions. In his investigation into Schwitters and Russian Constructivism, Wulf Herzogenrath notes the Merzbau’s affinities with the Jalukov/Tatlin ‘Café Pittoresque’ of 1916 and claims that its beginnings coincided with the

40 Ibid., 63-4. Gamard expands on this concept of Dada in Chapter V. Her statement that ‘Mies, Hilbersheimer and Gropius were, according to Schwitters, all Dadaists’ (p. 162) may be a misreading of Schwitters 1924a, 194.

41 Ibid., 77. Gamard nonetheless attributes ‘some degree of dissimulation’ to the statement in the *Veilchenheft* that parts of the KdeE were Dadaist.

42 Ibid., 142.

43 Ibid., 146-62.

44 Ibid., 159, 177.

45 Ibid., 6.

publication of photos of the café in Germany.⁴⁶ John Macarthur and Robert Harbison, who both examine the Merzbau from an architectural standpoint, conclude that it constitutes a flawed version of Modernist architecture.⁴⁷ In ‘Kurt Schwitters and the Alternative Art Community in Hannover’, Curt Germundson examines the Merzbau in terms of the wider field of mass culture that provided Schwitters’ income and took up most of his time from 1924 to 1933, focusing on his close association with Hannover’s Kestner Society and his adoption of its vision of a multinational community renewed without rupture and without nostalgia.⁴⁸ He describes the impetus lent to the society’s work by the introduction of Constructivism to Hannover in the early 1920s and the efforts of its members to introduce an ‘extended definition of art’ [*erweiterter Kunstbegriff*]. He highlights in particular the multiple similarities between Lissitzky’s *Abstraktenkabinett*,⁴⁹ whose dynamic design he sees as an attempt to create a ‘transactional environment’,⁵⁰ and the Merzbau, both of which allowed the viewer to achieve an active relationship to ‘the world at large’ by challenging elitist notions of culture, exhibiting reproducible imagery and conveying a ‘new reality of space’.⁵¹

The Merzbau exemplifies Schwitters’ interest in the way the external manifestations of art change through time. It became more constructivist during the later twenties, in reaction to growing concern with constructivism within the Hannover art community around the Kestner society [...] Differences between public and private became less and less important for Schwitters as he allowed his environment to literally become part of the Merzbau.⁵²

In Germundson’s view, the account of the column in the *Veilchenheft* confirms the Constructivist basis of the later Merzbau. He argues that Schwitters repudiates the 1923 grottos at this point, and describes this passage as deliberately written in the ‘productivist

46 Herzogenrath 1994b, 187. The café was frequented by the Russian avant-garde; cf. Düsseldorf 1992, 196.

47 Macarthur considers this a deliberate strategy; Macarthur 1993, 113. Harbison sees the Merzbau as a ‘Modernist building gone wrong’; Harbison 1997, 162-3.

48 Germundson 1997, 206. He quotes Dorner’s pronouncement that ‘We have not to negate tradition but to digest and outgrow it’.

49 Lissitzky’s *Abstraktenkabinett* was installed in the Hannover *Provinzialmuseum* in 1927.

50 Germundson 1997, 221. Germundson defines transaction as ‘a push/pull relationship between the individual and society’; *ibid.*, 228, n. 35.

51 *Ibid.*, 223.

52 *Ibid.*, 225.

language of the city planner'.⁵³ He concludes by criticizing those approaches to the Merzbau that present it as a finished product: 'Instead of connecting Schwitters to a search for the absolute, more emphasis must be placed on the artistic process itself.'⁵⁴

In a later article, Germundson contends that 'Schwitters was not interested in differentiating between public and private [...] Schwitters' Cathedral [...] expands the idea of community, merging the personal and the societal, setting up the experience of art as an alternative to an art and architecture tied up with religion and nationalism'.⁵⁵ In accordance with his understanding of the avant-garde as maintaining a complex interrelationship to tradition, Germundson argues that the transformation of tradition and emphasis on the organic in the Merzbau mark 'the culmination of Schwitters' search to create within the guise of an autonomous work of art a new kind of collective, a constantly evolving space',⁵⁶ resulting an avant-garde work based on montage that may nonetheless be read in terms of the early 20th century Gothic and Romantic revival.

Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann, in her study of the three-dimensional rooms of Schwitters and Lissitzky, offers a mainly formalist interpretation of the Merzbau. She devotes a quarter of her section on the Merzbau to a 'fictitious round tour' [*fiktiver Rundgang*] of the main room as it appears in the photos of 1933, with a meticulous investigation of its elaborate geometry and intricately interwoven structures. She suggests that in the 1920s, artists developed new strategies linked to the field of architecture because the room, as an architectural concept, was supposed to encourage the involvement of the observer; the room as artwork therefore presented a possible solution to the dilemma of Weimar artists who felt a deep sense of responsibility for the betterment of their world yet found themselves socially isolated.⁵⁷ She criticizes comparisons of the Merzbau with Expressionist utopian architecture, arguing that

53 Ibid., 220.

54 Ibid.

55 Germundson 2006, 172.

56 Ibid., 157. Germundson contests Peter Bürger's theory of the avant-garde (Bürger 1984) on the grounds that 'it cannot tolerate the idea that art might be autonomous and affect society at the same time'; *ibid.*, 176.

57 Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 20.

Schwitters did not commit plans for the Hannover Merzbau to paper, but claims that it was the only truly Expressionist building ever executed in that it represents a sole example of unplanned and non-functional architecture.⁵⁸ She divides the development of the Merzbau into two distinct stages, the first taking the form of an oversized Dadaist sculptural assemblage, the second following an individualistic system that, she argues, in its plurality of forms constituted a betrayal of Constructivism.⁵⁹ For Osswald-Hoffmann, the ultimate significance of the Merzbau lies in a phrase from the *Veilchenheft*, ‘evaluation through rhythm’ (¶6), which she interprets in terms of an innovative exploration of different aspects of time, as, for instance, in the frozen time of the grottos, the changing nature of the structures, the limited time of the visitor, historical time and the circle of the seasons.⁶⁰

Given the evidence of the revised chronology, explanations of the Merzbau both in terms of a formalist and a postmodernist understanding of the early 20th century avant-garde must be subject to a number of reservations.

1. As almost all analyses in relation to the avant-garde rely heavily on the evidence of the 1931 *Veilchenheft*, we may conclude that this text is so ambiguous that it will support almost any idea of the Merzbau one chooses to read into it.
2. The revised chronology shows that far less is known about the evolution of the columns in the 1920s than is customarily assumed.
3. The idea of the Merzbau as an avant-garde work would seem to be self-defeating if its existence was not made known in the 1920s.
4. The revised chronology indicates that Merzbau reached its environmental stage between 1931 and 1933, weakening the case for its conforming to the general orientation of Schwitters’ art in the 1920s.

58 Ibid., 161. Rosemarie Haag-Bletter also made this point; cf. Haag-Bletter 1977.

59 [Schwitters] verriet [...] in Prinzip die konstruktivistische Gesinnung.] Ibid., 148.

60 Ibid. 222-3.

5. The tendency to divide the Merzbau into clearly distinguishable stages or to explain it as developing from a single underlying agenda means that problematical junctures such as the conceptual shift from column to environment have generally been overlooked.

This final point will be examined in more detail below.

III From columns to sculptural interior

The Merzbau as sculptural environment has frequently been regarded as a forerunner of the three-dimensional art of the Sixties (e.g. Rubin 1968). More recently, all the Merzbauten, again in the sense of sculptural environments, have been subjected to analysis as predecessors of contemporary art practices such as site-specific and installation art, and have increasingly been set in the context of work by contemporary artists and architects.⁶¹ Schwitters' first studio constructions, however, began very differently, as works to walk round and to be viewed from the exterior. The written and visual evidence of the 1920s is sufficient to show that in these years, Schwitters began to construct a studio column that by 1928 he had named the KdeE. On Ernst Schwitters' testimony, as early as the mid-1920s, the KdeE already been absorbed into a sculptural interior that filled the studio and had begun to spread to an adjoining room. His statements thus encouraged researchers to conclude that well before the publication of the *Veilchenheft* in 1931, the environment stage of the first Merzbau room was in effect complete. Just as importantly, they were given to understand that at this point, Schwitters moved his studio out of this room, thus opening up his sculptural interior to definition as a work of art in its own right.

On the basis of such a timetable, it is possible to understand the first column(s) as a relatively brief preliminary or experimental stage of the sculptural environment. This may

61 The 'In the Beginning was Merz' exhibition [Hannover 2000] juxtaposed the Merzbau with environments and installations by Gregor Schneider, Rem Koolhaas, Anselm Kiefer, Tony Cragg, Nam June Paik, Jessica Stockholder and others, while the documentation of the Zurich Merzbau symposia includes articles by Yona Friedman, Thomas Hirschhorn and Gabriel Orozco on the impact of the Merzbauten on their work (Zurich 2007). Most recently, structural processes inherent to the Merzbauten have been deployed in communication systems and Internet technology; cf. Lenman 1996: Century 1996.

partly explain why the most studies of the Hannover Merzbau that describe its evolution in terms of these two phases generally gloss over the transition from one to another.

Nonetheless, a conceptual difference between the two remains apparent, and begs the question of what unifying factor, if any, might underlie the Merzbau's thirteen-year evolution. Many studies still draw on Schwitters' own explanation in the *Veilchenheft* and account for the growth of the Merzbau in terms of a straightforward layering process consisting of two stages: that is, (Dada) grottos as primary, unsystematic, elements, concealed beneath (Constructivist) secondary elements in the form of rigid geometrical plaster housing. This is, however, neither how contemporaries wrote of it nor what the photos of 1933 show (Figs. 21-23), and art historians whose studies are closely linked to the chronology avoid such simplistic solutions. When, in the most extensive study of its public and private aspects to date, Elderfield argued that the Merzbau was 'a visually and thematically remarkable, complex and ambitious work of art', he added nonetheless that 'its identity as a single coherent work of art remains elusive'.⁶²

The broader understanding of the early 20th century avant-garde that emerged in the late 1980s offers more potential for investigations of the various stages of the Merzbau than earlier Modernist analyses, and has led to suggestions of entirely new agendas behind the Merzbau's evolution such as 19th century German Romantic irony (Nobis 1993, Germundson 1996) or the tenets of alchemy and mysticism (Gamard 2000). In *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters* (Dietrich 1993), Dorothea Dietrich detects an underlying organicist agenda steering the course of the Merzbau's development from its beginnings, and if she regards its primary stages as conveying a sense of discontinuity and fragmentation, she nonetheless identifies its environmental stage as the outcome of what in her eyes is the artist's aim to create a monument to conservative ideologies and cultural pessimism. Dietrich regards the evolution from column to environment as almost inevitable, writing of 'a series of probably

62 Elderfield 1985, 157.

ten free-standing columns, which in the expansionist manner of collage, eventually formed a continuous environment' and of Schwitters' creation of 'assemblage always expanding towards architecture'.⁶³ In an essay written for the catalogue of an exhibition devoted to the idea of Merz as Gesamtkunstwerk, Karin Orchard writes of the Merzbau and its successors as a series of diverse experimentations with what she terms 'spatial growths' that began in 1923, when Schwitters started on an autonomous work of art in architectonic form that was 'not inanimate matter, but living and enlivened architecture, an active space'.⁶⁴ Other art historians have suggested that different phases of the Merzbau reflect changes in Schwitters' approach; as an example, in *The Frame and the Mirror*, a study of collage and postmodernism, Thomas Brockelman proposes that what he regards as the radically heterogeneous nihilism of Merz as manifested in the early grottos demanded from the artist 'an almost impossible rigor', so that a regressive 'shift to aestheticism' increasingly dominated the period of the 1930s.⁶⁵

The 1930s mark the period of the Merzbau's development that is customarily regarded as irrelevant to its status as an artwork and often not mentioned at all. This neglect can be justified on the grounds that the standard chronology relegates this stage to the poorly documented time during which Schwitters created secondary constructions in obscure corners of Waldhausenstrasse 5. Few people saw these additions (whose final extent is not clear) and little is known about them except that they were closely modelled on the sculptural interior in the first room and were situated in seemingly inconsequential parts of the house such as the back yard and the attic. Regardless of how significant or insignificant the location and aesthetic value of these additional elements may have been in relation to what Schwitters himself termed the 'actual Merzbau' (Fig. 59b), the fact remains that he continued to expand

63 Ibid., 3. Dietrich's introduction of an architectural discourse allows her to read the Merzbau's geometrical exterior in terms of the 'time-honoured notion of architecture as craft'; Dietrich 1993, 180. In addition, she interprets any resemblance of the Merzbau to progressive architecture and the avant-garde concept of *Gestaltung* as pejorative, describing Modernist architecture as born under the sign of the 'masculine' Doric column and explaining *Gestaltung* as elucidated in the Expressionist writings of Taut and Behne.

64 Orchard 2004, 43.

65 Brockelman 2001, 60.

on his original constructions during the first four years of National Socialist dictatorship. In Dorothea Dietrich's interpretation, this may not have concerned Schwitters at first, as she claims that his espousal of reactionary modernist ideas marks him out as the most conservative of all the Weimar visual artists.⁶⁶ Of the few art historians who discuss the Merzbau in relation to the Thirties, however, most suggest that in these years it functioned as a kind of political retreat. This idea, first broached by Werner Haftmann and Werner Schmalenbach, was expanded on by Dietmar Elger, who concludes that from the late 1920s, the Merzbau came to serve as Schwitters' refuge in an age of increasing political extremism.⁶⁷ Similar interpretations have been offered by Penelope Curtis, Jean-Claude Beaune and Isabelle Ewig.⁶⁸ Certainly in the years when he was branded a degenerate artist, Schwitters created for himself an invisible area in the recesses of the Merzbau that enabled him to survey the room unobserved and in winter even watch strangers approaching from the main road (Fig. 51).⁶⁹ In exile he often expressed his distress about having had to abandon the Hannover Merzbau, and one nostalgic letter refers to it as his home.⁷⁰

The interpretation of the Merzbau as refuge nonetheless fails to explain why Schwitters should have persisted with extensions to the Hannover Merzbau till the day he emigrated. Those few of his colleagues who stayed in Germany after 1933, such as Buchheister, Dix, Feininger and Schlemmer, rapidly relinquished their former activities to avoid attracting unwelcome attention, and Hannah Höch buried any evidence of her association with the

66 Dietrich categorises Schwitters as one of a circle of intellectuals whose endorsement of an organicist discourse 'helped to create an atmosphere of unreason that made the growth of Nazi ideology possible'; Dietrich 1997, 129, also Dietrich 1991. It may be noted here that Schwitters' name does not appear in association with conservative circles such as the Völkisch movement, Moeller van den Bruck's *Juniclub* or those surrounding Paul Schulze-Naumburg.

67 Elger 1997a, 203, also Elger 1984/1999, 137.

68 Curtis 1999, 165, 169; Beaune 1999, 32; Ewig 2000, 342.

69 Cf. Letter to Susanna Freudenthal, 30.3.35, KSA 9, 103. On the evidence of hearsay, Dietrich claims that Schwitters named this area the 'black hole'; Dietrich 1993, 204.

70 'And so, as I can't live in my Merzbau any more, I have built a new one [...] I have lost that which I loved most of all, my home that I made for myself.' [Und so habe ich mir, da ich nicht mehr in meinem Merzbau wohnen kann, einen neuen gebaut [...] ich habe das verloren, was ich am meisten liebte, mein Heim, das ich mir geschaffen habe.] Letter to Katherine Dreier, 22.7.38, Nündel 1974, 149.

avant-garde in her garden in Berlin. Yet the Merzbau even housed the ‘Sammlung Merz’,⁷¹ Schwitters’ collection of pictures by himself and his contemporaries, all of which would have been categorized as cultural bolshevism and put him further at risk. His decision to whitewash the windows in the mid-1930s indicates that until then, the Merzbau was partially visible from the path outside the studio window (Fig. 58).⁷² As already noted, Schwitters was doubly endangered as a political target through his severe epilepsy. If Elger’s assumption is correct, then as an artist he could hardly have selected, and then chosen continually to expand (even to the balcony), a more perilous retreat.

Only two art historians have addressed the idea that through the post-1930 Merzbau, Schwitters responded to socio-political developments rather than cutting himself off from them. Elderfield approaches this in general terms, seeing what he regards as the tempering of Constructivist principles in the Hannover Merzbau as largely attributable to a widespread disillusionment with urban society resulting from Great Depression. The main thrust of his argument is that from 1930 onwards, Schwitters oriented his style chiefly to artists working outside Germany, so that the later forms of the Merzbau reflect his interest in works reproduced in the journal *abstraction-cr ation*,⁷³ such as Arp’s biomorphic sculptures and Kandinsky’s Paris-period paintings.⁷⁴ He suggests that during this period, Schwitters began to mould ‘luminous Vitalist images, images which took their form from the found objects they contained’.⁷⁵ In this sense, the constructions of the later Merzbau may be understood as a crystalline purification or biomorphic transformation of internal structures.⁷⁶ The other art historian who has touched on this issue is John Macarthur, who compares the late Merzbau with Dziga Vertov’s film ‘The Man with the Movie Camera’ (1929), claiming that both may

71 See Schulz 2006a.

72 Letter to Katherine Dreier, 25.11.1936, BLY.

73 see A-C 1968.

74 Elderfield 1985, 194-5. Schwitters visited Paris in 1927 and annually from 1929 to 1932

75 Ibid., 171; also 193-5 for his further discussion of this topic.

76 Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann suggests a similar idea with her theory that the Merzbau cannot be divided into interior and exterior, as the exterior constructions were abstracted extensions of the underlying framework. Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 154, 177.

be understood as a response to the crises of the age:

Progressive art, according to Vertov, does not desire a new experience but to express the poverty of experience, the historical truth of the destruction of experience [...] [The Merzbau] is not a ragged and crazed symbol of a dadaist, then constructivist, then expressionist environment [...] The Merzbau was an allegory of the experience of the city and the weight of responsibility in the inheritance and construction of culture in a tragic time.⁷⁷

Macarthur claims that the Merzbau does not presuppose the concept of a unified subject and makes the concept of 'place' unstable: it 'seems to exemplify a work where a critical function is predicated upon the apprehension of certain absences, voids and undoings'.⁷⁸ He identifies many examples of 'homologies' between the Merzbau and Walter Benjamin's essay 'Poverty and Experience', in which Benjamin set out his ideas on the situation of art in the 1930s.

None of the above analyses directly addresses the development of the Merzbau in relation to the era of National Socialist dictatorship or engages with it in the context of political developments of the 1930s.

If we endorse the opinion of the majority of art historians that the Merzbau was a work whose evolution was closely linked to, if not necessarily fully identifiable with, the preoccupations of a small and (despite its internal dissensions) close multi-national avant-garde community, then up to 1930, on the evidence of the few photos and contemporary reports, we may assume that the studio columns were in some way reflections of, and on, this network. According to the standard chronology, when the avant-garde disintegrated in the early 1930s, the main sections of the Merzbau (in the sense of a sculptural environment) were in place; its further expansion was limited to minor areas that in relation to its overall evolution possess little more than curiosity value. The revised chronology, however, indicates that Schwitters did not begin to convert his studio columns to a unified sculptural interior till 1931-2, just at the time when the activities of many of the avant-garde and their supporters were becoming increasingly restricted. This implies that we should be considering the

⁷⁷ Macarthur 1993, 117.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 122, 116.

Merzbau's expansion in the 1930s from a different perspective. Schwitters' progressive isolation from artist groupings is not just a factor in his creation of Merzbau subsidiaries but coincides with the transitional phase between columns and environment, culminating in early 1933 in the removal of the studio from the first room and the coining of the name Merzbau. The Merzbau becomes a completed environment at a time when the geographical, political and social circumstances of the former avant-garde had so changed that as a community, it could no longer be said to exist.

If the environment phase is indeed a product of the 1930s – and it is above all this concept of what Schwitters calls an 'abstract interior'⁷⁹ that informs both the various manifestations of the post-1933 Hannover Merzbau and its successors - it becomes far less easy to relate it to avant-garde styles of the 1920s, and far more difficult to bypass the Merzbau's potentially vexed relation to late Weimar society and the Nazi era. This, in turn, implies a need to reassess some aspects of the reception. When, for instance, Elderfield writes of the ceiling constructions as features that in terms of Expressionism are 'nothing especially new or innovative',⁸⁰ he is assuming that they are products of the mid-1920s. In the light of the revised chronology, one might question whether an ostensibly bland version of Weimar Expressionism is, in the context of the 1930s, Expressionist at all; if so, one must at least ask if the contemporary understanding of Expressionism had not changed considerably by that time.⁸¹

In conclusion, we can see that the revised chronology brings into focus three new aspects of the Merzbau. First, it shows that the passage in the *Veilchenheft*, dating from December 1930, was written before the creation of the sculptural environment around 1932, and can therefore hardly be regarded as representative of the Merzbau as we understand it today. Secondly, it draws attention to the process of conversion from column to sculptural interior, dating it to the

79 Letter to Alfred Barr, 23.11.36, MMA.

80 Elderfield 1985, 164.

81 For more on Expressionism in the 1930s, see, for instance, Brenner 1963, 63 ff; Rave 1949/1987, 61 ff.

time of severe social and political crisis between 1930 and 1933. Thirdly, in shifting the start of the conversation to the period when the democratic constitution of the Weimar Republic had begun to collapse, it suggests that the reception's pronounced emphasis on the Merzbau as an avant-garde work of the 1920s, with all that entails, is disproportionate in relation to the consideration of its development in the neglected period of the Thirties.

IV Merz and the Merzbau

Many studies of the Hannover Merzbau focus on correlations between the formal aspects of the work and the methods and techniques of the early 20th century avant-gardes. When the reception history is considered as a whole, however, it is clear that little consensus has been reached. This was also the case in Schwitters' own time; reviews of his work show that from the start neither his critics nor his supporters were agreed on how to define the abstract work that from 1919 onwards he described as 'Merz', categorizing it (if at all) variously as Cubist, Dada, Expressionist, Futurist or even neo-classical.

Interpretations of the Merzbauten based on the identification of comparisons and influences are not always helpful, and are sometimes misleading. It is therefore important to consider an alternative approach that might be described as latent in the work of those art historians who have analysed the Hannover Merzbau in terms of its indefinite relationship to contemporary art movements. In 1985, Elderfield noted Schwitters' ambivalence towards the very idea of the avant-garde, implying that this was a source of the strength of his work: 'many of [Schwitters'] artistic failures lie in precisely those areas where he submitted to current avant-garde trends'.⁸² In this section I will first examine the nature of this ambivalence by briefly outlining how Schwitters located his work with respect to the Expressionist, Dada and Constructivist movements, not on the basis of the visual evidence, but as this emerges from written statements. I will then show how the characteristics of Merz stem from its relationship

82 Elderfield 1985, 226.

to the avant-garde, and look at ways in which the Merzbau has been discussed in terms of Merz to date. Finally, I will suggest an alternative reading of Merz and its relationship to the wider practice of Schwitters' abstract work that can provide a framework for an analysis of the Merzbau over the period of its development up to 1936.

Schwitters' contacts with the Expressionist movement date from 1916, when he became a member of the Kestner Society in Hannover. The impact of Expressionism on his visual work is most pronounced in the last years of the 1914-18 war and its aftermath, when his membership of Herwarth Walden's *Sturm* in Berlin led to encounters with leading Expressionist artists and also with theorists such as Adolf Behne,⁸³ Mynona [Salomo Friedländer] and Bruno Taut, who published his work in *Frühlicht*.⁸⁴ Schwitters' initial enthusiasm for the movement was, by his own admission, short-lived, and in 1920 he described the striving for expression in art as '*schädlich*' [injurious].⁸⁵ Nonetheless, between 1919 and 1922, Schwitters' close friend Christof Spengemann published a number of articles and a pamphlet on Schwitters⁸⁶ written in an Expressionist style that even by the standards of the age reads as excessive.⁸⁷ In 1923 Schwitters wrote of Merz as 'the shadow side of Expressionism',⁸⁸ while his choral stage play of the mid-1920s, *Oben und Unten* (a utopian work that takes as its theme the building and destruction of a tower), bears all the hallmarks of Expressionist drama.⁸⁹ The introduction to *Nasci* distances its authors from the 'sour soul, named Expressionism',⁹⁰ a phrase

83 Behne was one of Schwitters' earliest and most steadfast supporters. In 1925 he drew parallels between Schwitters' work and the theories of Planck, Einstein, Kjellén, Wertheimer and Mynona; see Behne 1925.

84 This was without Schwitters' permission; cf. Nündel 1974, 57. In 1921 Merz was lauded by the *Gläserne Kette* as a genre worthy of development; cf. Boyd White 1996, 81. Taut categorised Schwitters as a Dadaist; see Taut 1921, 78. In 1924, Taut visited Schwitters (*Schwarzes Notizbuch VI*, KSF) and Schwitters reviewed Taut's architectural projects in Magdeburg (LW 5, 267).

85 Schwitters 1920a, 76, also Schwitters 1924b, 194-5.

86 E.g. Spengemann 1920c, translated in Motherwell 1981, 61-2, also Elderfield 1985, 114, with the comment that this reads 'suspiciously like a parody of contemporary architectural writing': Spengemann 1919b: Spengemann 1920a. At least one of these articles was written with Schwitters' co-operation; see letter from Spengemann to Schwitters, 23.11.19, SAH.

87 A typical excerpt: '[Schwitters'] life is ecstasy, eternal fire [...] His heart beats the Absolute. His vision contains the World.' [Sein Leben ist Ekstase, ewiges Feuer [...] Sein Herz schlägt Absolutes. Sein Schauen fasst Welt.] Spengemann 1919b, 157.

88 Tran 35 (1923), 172.

89 LW 4, 89, dated by Ernst to 1925 but possibly later; excerpts translated in Rothenburg/Joris 1993, 191-6.

90 [von der sauren Seele, genannt Expressionismus.] Schwitters/Lissitzky 1924.

Schwitters repeated to Kate Steinitz,⁹¹ and in the catalogue of the Merz retrospective of 1927 he insisted that Merz was not Expressionism, Cubism or Futurism.⁹² Expressionism thus remained an indeterminate factor in the definition of Merz for much of the 1920s.

Schwitters' contacts with Dada were far more diverse, widespread and, as he himself ensured, even more difficult to categorize. Between 1919 and 1923, he collaborated with members of Zurich and Berlin Dada,⁹³ wrote for international Dada publications and took part in Dada soirées at home and abroad. Nonetheless, his association with Dada was calculatingly borderline, especially as he was under contract to Walden's Sturm gallery.⁹⁴ In 1926 he wrote that since 1919 he had been reckoned a Dadaist 'without being one',⁹⁵ and in many ways, it was Dada that adopted Schwitters rather than the reverse. Leading figures of the movement such as Tzara and Lajos Kassak promoted his work, he was greeted as an authority on Dada on the 1923 Dada-Holland tour, and Katherine Dreier included him in her Dada exhibitions despite his insistence that he was not a Dada artist: 'Only one painter besides Duchamp has expressed Dadaism through the art of painting, Kurt Schwitters [...] and strangely enough, he rejects the appellation.'⁹⁶ In general, it was the confrontational nature of his public activities, such as those surrounding his poem *An Anna Blume*, that led to his being classed as a Dadaist by the press and the general public – an impression that Schwitters did little to discourage. On occasions when he associated himself directly with Dada, it was in connection with his literary works and generally a matter of expediency; one of the rare exceptions is the passage from the *Veilchenheft* in which he explicitly describes himself as a former Dadaist. There is a sense in which the Merzbau has become Dada by default; today, Schwitters, like Marcel

91 Steinitz 1968, 91.

92 Schwitters 1927b.

93 These included Tzara, Huelsenbeck, Hausmann, Höch, Stückenschmidt, Arp and Richter. Schwitters contributed pictures and poems to the final Zurich Dada publication, *Der Zeltweg* (1919). Giedion-Welcker identified Merz as a variant of Zürich Dada; see Giedion-Welcker 1937/1960, 351.

94 Cf. letter from Katherine Dreier to Tristan Tzara, 16.8.20, Schrott 1992, 268. This correspondence refutes Hausmann's tale of Huelsenbeck's rejection of Schwitters; *ibid.*, 229, 234, also Burmeister 2004, 143-5.

95 [So gelte ich als dadaist, ohne es zu sein.] Schwitters 1926c, 241: 'I was a Dadaist without intending to be.' [Ich war Dadaist, ohne die Absicht zu haben, einer zu sein.] Letter to Raoul Hausmann, 29.3.47, Nündel 1974, 265.

96 Dreier 1923, 120.

Duchamp, is never missing from exhibitions and general publications on Dada, so that the Merzbau is classified as Dada merely in virtue of its inclusion in books, catalogues and anthologies on the subject. Attention is seldom paid to Schwitters' ambivalent attitude to Dada and to the way he frequently turned the label to his own advantage. As he himself realized, it paid off to consign experimental works to a diffuse but high-profile phenomenon that rejected any common style.

Schwitters was progressively involved with De Stijl and various branches of German Constructivism from 1921 until 1933.⁹⁷ Many artists who apparently contributed grottos to the Merzbau were associated with these movements (Arp, Ella Bergmann-Michel, Doesburg, Gabo, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Vordemberge-Gildewart). Moreover, Schwitters' texts on the Merzbau increasingly echo Doesburg's, Gabo's and Lissitzky's ideas of creating three-dimensional objects that use formal relationships to articulate and bestow tension on space (Fig. 118).⁹⁸ At the same time, Schwitters often voiced criticism of central features of Constructivism, including what he saw as its deliberate lack of a distinction between art and applied art, its disregard for the natural environment, and its lack of interest in generating a creative synthesis of old and new.

From Schwitters' writings, it seems that throughout the 1920s, he defined and legitimized his work by linking it to the discourses of the avant-gardes while at the same time locating himself at their margins; in this sense, Merz emerges as a 'movement' in the form of a balancing act. There were various factors that ostensibly weighed against Schwitters' avant-garde credentials, such as his practice, even at the height of his avant-garde activities, of painting and selling figurative work, and his decision not to move to the capital but to live in Hannover with his parents. With the site (both literally and metaphorically) of Schwitters'

97 Schwitters published work in *De Stijl* as early as 1921 and in 1922 contributed four collages to the International Constructivist exhibition in Düsseldorf. For more on the ideas of Elementarism shared by Schwitters, Lissitzky and Moholy, based on Raoul Francé's seven elementary forms, see Düsseldorf 1992, 108.

98 Cf. Lissitzky 1922 and Doesburg 1924, translated in Baljeu 1974, 64 and 144. Doesburg admitted that his programme presented a problem for engineers by challenging gravity.

artistic practices often located on the periphery of the avant-garde - the Merzbau included - he demonstrated his allegiances through his pursuit of numerous joint projects, his custom of availing himself of the ideas of colleagues (a widely accepted practice at the time), and his strong commitment to the avant-garde community;⁹⁹ he supported colleagues personally and professionally, furthering their careers, selling their pictures, publishing their work, and finding and creating opportunities for them to exhibit or lecture. For Schwitters to maintain his status within an international network of artists that was subject to continual splitting, disintegration and regrouping, Merz of necessity required repeated adjustment and redefinition, a task that Schwitters finally circumvented by identifying Merz with himself: ‘Merz has become a world-view for me. I can’t change my standpoint and my standpoint is Merz [...] the development of the concept of Merz is closely connected with my personal development, is inseparable from it.’¹⁰⁰

Merz did not start out as a world-view but as a method. Schwitters first used the term in 1919 for pictures in which he employed collage and assemblage techniques. The first Merz manifesto aimed to vindicate his use of refuse as material, claiming the artist’s right to use any material to create a work of formal harmony.¹⁰¹ Schwitters was thus able to extend the idea of Merz to include sculpture, poetry, prose, criticism, performance, architecture and commercial design. In 1922 he identified architecture as the art form that bore the closest relationship to the idea of Merz,¹⁰² while the launch of his Merz magazine marked the start of his interest in layout, which he eventually put to commercial use with the foundation of the Merz advertising agency in 1924. The more closely Schwitters was involved in different avant-garde activities and practices, and the more he perceived Hannover as a centre of the

99 Up to 1936, Schwitters was associated with about twenty artistic and literary groupings, many, however, short-lived.

100 [Für mich ist Merz eine Weltanschauung geworden, ich kann meinen Standpunkt nicht mehr wechseln, mein Standpunkt ist Merz [...] die Entwicklung des Gedankens Merz hängt ganz eng zusammen mit meiner persönlichen Entwicklung, ist von ihr untrennbar.] Schwitters 1926a, 248. From 1922 Schwitters often signed himself Merz; cf. Schulz 2000, 247.

101 Schwitters 1919a, 37.

102 [Die Architektur ist an sich auf den Merzgedanken am meisten von allen Kunstgattungen eingestellt.] Schwitters 1922, 95.

Weimar avant-garde,¹⁰³ the more latitude he allowed himself in his definition of Merz. In 1924, immediately after the Dada-Holland tour, he wrote: ‘Merz means establishing relationships, best of all between all the things in the world’,¹⁰⁴ and in 1926, in drafting an issue of the *Bauhausbuch* series, described Merz as an attitude open to all, ‘a standpoint that anyone can employ’.¹⁰⁵ In this year, possibly the time at which he enjoyed most success as an artist, he located Merz at the greatest possible distance from the avant-garde; he defined it as a fundamentally inclusive concept that admits of human failings, with no allusion to utopian strivings or a desire for societal transformation, no mention of friction or hostility between Merz and its environment and no prescriptions of aesthetic criteria.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, he published a sketch in *Sturm* that implicated Merz in a formal discourse articulated by himself, Mondrian, Kandinsky and Moholy (Fig. 110).¹⁰⁷ Once Merz is understood as more than a collage method or a minor variant of other movements, the idea that the Hannover Merzbau incorporates the Dadaist, Expressionist and Constructivist phases of Schwitters’ artistic development becomes questionable, as does the concomitant theory that the work was an expression of his need to liberate himself from the constraints of avant-garde idioms. The focus on influences on the early studio thus shifts to the question of which aspects of contemporary discourses Schwitters perceived as compatible with the aims of Merz.¹⁰⁸

In this context, Ernst Nündel, in his monograph on Schwitters (Nündel 1981), observes that to hunt for Schwitters’ sources of inspiration is ultimately a fruitless task, as throughout his career he helped himself to a plethora of contemporary styles, even from movements like

103 Cf. Schwitters 1926b, 246, also Schwitters 1929a.

104 [Merz bedeutet Beziehungen schaffen, am liebsten zwischen allen Dingen der Welt.] Schwitters 1924c, 187.

105 [Merz ist ein Standpunkt, den jeder benutzen kann.] Schwitters 1926a, 247.

106 The Merz *Bauhausbuch* was never published; the cancellation was apparently due to the disruption caused by the move to Dessau.

107 Cf. Helma Schwitters’ comment: ‘we are delighted that you want to exhibit [the work of] my husband together with his colleagues – he’s actually in a class of his own.’ [Es freut uns sehr, dass sie meinem Mann mit seinen Kollegen zusammen ausstellen wollen, eigentlich ist er eine Nummer für sich.] Letter to Galka Scheyer, 3.5.30, KSF.

108 Isabel Schulz maintains that ‘Merz does not represent any self-sufficient art theory that could be identified independently of the creative output of the artist himself’; Schulz 2000, 244.

Surrealism that in his writings he categorically rejected.¹⁰⁹ Nündel argues that ‘there is hardly a single element of Schwitters’ artistic expression that couldn’t be ascribed to another originator’.¹¹⁰ The strength of Merz, and its ability to benefit from and at the same time outlast different formations of the avant-garde, lay in its heterogeneity and flexibility. Its vulnerability lay in the fact that in the 1920s, Merz could not operate on its own terms but only through convergences with and divergences from a series of ostensibly competing but fundamentally related discourses. Schwitters retreated from the frontiers at the threat of any real detachment from the avant-garde; when, at a time of political crisis in 1930, he articulated his sense of isolation and his concern about the future of art in ‘Ich und meine Ziele’, he did not mention Merz at all. In this context, Helma Schwitters’ curious remark of this time that ‘Kurt doesn’t find his naturalistic pictures so good any more and doesn’t want to exhibit them,’¹¹¹ is explicable in terms of his shift to a more explicit position in relation to the avant-garde; wherever possible during the 1920s, he had exhibited figurative work and avant-garde work together.¹¹²

The generic term ‘Merzbau’, which Schwitters first used in 1933 and subsequently applied to his three main studio installations, suggests that Merz should be given primary consideration in studies of the Merzbauten. In the reception history, this approach is less prevalent than might be expected, given that Merz allows such a wide palette of definitions. Many books on Dada present Merz as a facet or variant of Dada or fail to differentiate the two altogether. Some commentators discuss the Hannover Merzbau under the name of the first column, the KdeE, and some regard the two as identical (e.g. Dietrich 1993, Gamard 2000); the more

109 *‘So many Surrealists are absolutely nothing. And in principle it is about literature with the wrong means, not about painting.’ [So viele Surrealisten sind absolut nichts. Und im Prinzip handelt es sich um Literatur mit falschen Mitteln, nicht um Malerei.] Letter to Nelly van Doesburg, 21.5.47, Nündel 1974, 275-6. Schwitters was not always so unsympathetic towards Surrealism; cf. Schwitters 1940, 383.

110 [Es gibt kaum ein einzelnes Element schwittersche Kunstäusserung, das nicht auf einen anderen Erfinder zurückführbar wäre.] Nündel 1981, 50. Elderfield likewise refers to Merz as ‘a personalized collection of borrowings on the grandest of scales’; Elderfield 1985, 238.

111 ‘Kurt findet seine Naturbilder nicht so gut und will sie nicht ausstellen.’ Helma Schwitters to Katherine Dreier, 13.1.31, BLY.

112 Alexander Dorner, like other contemporary art critics, found this practice irritating; cf. Dorner 1922. Schwitters’ first exhibition of figurative work was at Galerie Blomquist, Oslo, 1934.

prosaic term ‘Merzbau’ is often ignored in favour of ‘Cathedral of Erotic Misery’, a designation that offers a potentially richer vein of analysis and can be historically justified both by Ernst Schwitters’ claim that the Hannover Merzbau and the KdeE were synonymous and by Schwitters’ 1930 description of the KdeE, which makes no reference to Merz.

Many studies of the Merzbau draw on Schwitters’ original definition of Merz as collage, which facilitates an explanation of the different stages of the Hannover Merzbau both in terms of Merz and of Schwitters’ embrace of, or at least uneasy truce with, movements such as Expressionism, Dada and Constructivism. Dietmar Elger’s study is typical of this approach in defining Merz as a collage principle applied by Schwitters to a wide range of art forms.¹¹³

John Elderfield similarly writes of Merz as ‘a way of reconciling the disjointed, the disassociated and the anomalous – like a gigantic collage [...] Schwitters’ oeuvre as a whole presents itself as a panoramic collage’.¹¹⁴ Dorothea Dietrich defines Merz as an ‘organizational apparatus’ and ‘a theory of collage in its most encompassing sense’,¹¹⁵ but not a flexible one; she argues that by 1923, Schwitters had consolidated his idea of Merz, which she regards as directed towards conventional artistic totalities. She further imputes to Merz a certain rigidity and stasis, insofar as she claims that the Merzbau represented the concretization of Merz in architectural form.¹¹⁶

Some art historians have analysed the Merzbau in terms of the ‘Merzgesamtkunstwerk’, an idea that Schwitters proposed in 1920.¹¹⁷ Harald Szeemann sees in the Merzbau a ‘cohabitation’ [*eine freie Ehe*], of the sublime and the ridiculous that enabled Schwitters to pursue his aim of integrating art and life (Szeemann 1994). He contrasts contemporary examples of the Gesamtkunstwerk like D’Annunzio’s ostentatious monument to himself and

113 Elger 1984/1999, 17-20.

114 Elderfield 1985, 238.

115 Dietrich 1993, 17.

116 Ibid., 164. Compare Roger Cardinal’s view of the Merzbau as a critique of the new architecture (Cardinal 1996, 61).

117 Schwitters 1920a, 79. He describes Merz pictures as preparatory studies for the *Merzgesamtkunstwerk*; Schwitters 1923a, 133.

the Fatherland, *Il Vittoriale degli Italiani* (Fig. 125) with the unobtrusive Merzbau, which he describes as an anti-nationalistic, anti-hierarchical and anti-ideological work constructed of banal fragments in the most unpretentious of settings. He concludes that this was a ‘vulnerable [*verletzliches*] Gesamtkunstwerk’ that fell victim to the very forces (Szeemann cites Hitler and German nationalism) that Schwitters had hoped to banish to its grottos.¹¹⁸

Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann maintains that by means of Merz, Schwitters pursues the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk *ad absurdum* in that he employs patterns of conflicting ideas within a work designed to remain forever fragmentary.¹¹⁹

Nündel offers a wider understanding of Merz by focusing on an essay in which Schwitters describes Merz as a means of breaking down the barriers between the arts and even between art and life.¹²⁰ For Nündel, this text demonstrates that Schwitters’ aspirations lay beyond the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk, which aims to link separate arts. Nündel regards the Merzbau as by definition an unplanned work. He describes it as the embodiment of the idea of Merz: ‘and that knows no bounds, neither of categories of art nor material, neither of space or time [...] The Merzbau demonstrates [...] the integrative principle of Merz [...] [It] expresses the Merz idea in its purest form, because it is to be understood as a processual construction.’¹²¹

Joachim Büchner, in his catalogue article for the Schwitters centenary exhibition of 1986 in Hannover (Büchner 1986), offers the widest possible definition of Merz (printed in capital letters throughout the volume) as a pioneering genre of the 20th century with Renaissance roots, and his assessment of the Merzbau is similarly eclectic. In Lambert Wiesing’s *Stil statt Wahrheit*, a comparative study of Schwitters and Wittgenstein (Wiesing 1991), the author traces in detail the development of Merz from the ideas expressed in the first Merz manifesto of 1919 to what he defines as a post-Expressionist and post-Dada ‘philosophy without

118 Szeemann 1994, 259. Elger questions Szeemann’s reading in Hannover 1986, 249.

119 Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 85.

120 Nündel 1981, 27. (The reference is to Schwitters 1923a, 133.)

121 [[...] und die kennt keine Grenzen, weder der Kunstgattungen noch des Materials, weder des Raumes noch der Zeit [...] Der Merzbau demonstriert [...] das integrative Prinzip von Merz [...] [Er] drückt auch deshalb die Merz-Idee am reinsten aus, weil er als prozessuales Gebilde zu verstehen ist.] Ibid., 50-1.

truth'.¹²² Wiesing focuses in particular on how Schwitters' essentially positive approach, his insistence on 'consistency' [*Konsequenz*] and his concept of Merz as an aesthetic distinguish him from what Wiesing regards as the philosophical scepticism of the Dadaists.¹²³ In his essay 'Merz: A Transactional Model for Culture', Stephen Foster is also concerned to find a suitable critical apparatus to examine the concept of Merz, which he regards as an attempt to alter common perceptions in a process of definition through exchange. He sees Schwitters' work as providing a means of both unifying and individualizing experience:

Rarely prescriptive, Schwitters was [...] led to re-examine the operational nature of culture – that is, how culture was perceived and acted upon, and how culture worked. Schwitters' importance lay in his profoundly innovative use of art as an instrument for examining and analysing the very facts of 'culture' and 'culturing'.¹²⁴

In Foster's interpretation, Merz is less an art movement than a significant utopian endeavour to establish a new foundation for culture. Thomas Brockelman likewise emphasizes the transactional aspects of Merz, which he defines as 'a kind of representation for a world not organized round a fixed hierarchy of values. It could receive anything, allow anything to interact'.¹²⁵ He argues that Merz aims to 'transform the metropolitan inhabitant from a passive victim of the shock produced by metropolitan chaos to an active participant in it'.¹²⁶ Many of these later commentators are interested in Merz as a precursor of postmodernist ideas, particularly Wiesing, Gamard and Brockelman, who make explicit reference to correspondences between the two.

Isabel Schulz argues that during the 1920s Schwitters established in Merz 'something like a corporate identity for his work [...] he stresses the mediating character of the Merz idea, which is not trying to create a new world, but striving for an active response from artists to the conditions prevailing in the real world'.¹²⁷ She concludes that Merz is not synonymous

122 [Merz ist eine [...] Philosophie ohne Wahrheit.] Wiesing 1991, 91.

123 Ibid., 80 ff.

124 Foster 1997, 103.

125 Brockelman 2001, 47.

126 Ibid., 47-49.

127 Schulz 2000, 248.

with any technique but instead ‘must be broadly understood along the lines of the term “impulse” as used by Schwitters’.¹²⁸ (The reference is to a passage from his introduction to the Merz exhibition of 1927, stating that the impulse for Merz always came from ‘some kind of item not formed by myself’.¹²⁹) In 1926, Schwitters listed the conditions for Merz: a basis of found material, an admission of human imperfection, looking only to achievable aims, a striving to be as honest, open and logical as possible and, in conclusion, a hint of subversion: ‘Merz is the smile at the grave and solemnity on cheerful occasions.’¹³⁰ Here, it seems, Schwitters wanted Merz to be understood in terms of impulses both received and conveyed. The material and tangible were, however, always a vital component of Merz, and especially in the case of his three-dimensional assemblages, the impulse of the actual setting provided a crucial element. In a defence of his pacifist views written during the 1923 Dada tour of Holland, Schwitters deplored the way in which art and religion were falsified in the service of war and concluded: ‘Were art to situate itself consistently next to the bad things of the world, perhaps there would emerge from it a favourable influence on culture.’¹³¹ One outcome of this approach was that he set out to reassign environments that were often inhospitable and in addition not fully his own. Just as an essential element of Schwitters’ Merz pictures and writings was the *objet trouvé*, so a vital component of his three-dimensional environments was (for want of a better expression) *espace trouvée*.¹³² I will continue by looking at Merz and the Merzbau in terms of the reassignment of borrowed, abandoned or second-hand space.

The location of Schwitters’ studio prior to 1927 is not clearly documented, but on the grounds of the available evidence, it seems that between 1921 and 1926 he partitioned off part of a room in his parents’ apartment as a studio, possibly also using the cellar room beneath.

128 Ibid.

129 [durch irgendwelche nicht von mir selbst geformte Einzelheit]. Schwitters 1927b, 253.

130 [Merz ist das Lächeln am Grab und der Ernst bei heiteren Ereignissen.] Schwitters 1926a, 247.

131 [Würde die Kunst sich selbst konsequent neben die bösen Dinge der Welt stellen, so würde doch vielleicht ein günstiger Einfluss auf die Kultur von ihr ausgehen können.] Schwitters 1923b.

132 Hanne Bergius points to correspondences between Schwitters’ articulation of space in the Merzbau and the spatial theories of Berlin Dadaists such as Hausmann, Golycheff and Carl Einstein, quoting the latter’s definition of space as ‘a piece and a selection of human experience that can always be modified’; Bergius 1989, 297.

Accommodation in Waldhausenstrasse 5 was less spacious than would appear from its exterior (Fig. 1). Throughout most of the 1920s and 1930s, six families lived there, not including maids, who occupied rooms in the attic. Schwitters' studio must have been a small area in the most petit-bourgeois of environments, restrictive in terms of both space and working time, and the situation would have been exacerbated through the Boetel family's occupation of three rooms on the ground floor until 1926 (Fig. 6). In this context, Schwitters' *Merzbühne* text, with its supra-dimensional claims to space, may be read as a counterpart to the projects of those Expressionist architects who, with Germany's building programme at a standstill after the war, resorted to inventing unrealizable edifices sketched on paper until new commissions became available.¹³³

There is plentiful evidence that in the early 1920s Schwitters incorporated into his art many of the tactics of resistance and confrontation he had learned from Dada Berlin (cf. Bergius 1989), at least in part as a response to the frequent vilification of his collages, his literary work and his own person by the press and the public. Hannah Höch noted the resemblance of Baader's *Plasto-Dio-Drama* (Fig. 106a) to Schwitters' first studio column, and one of the original elements of the Merzbau, the *Heilige Bekümmernis*, with a tailor's dummy as a base (Fig. 5), invites comparison with the Grosz-Heartfield *Der wildgewordener Spiesser* (Fig. 107). Whereas the latter was exhibited at the 1920 Dada Fair, Schwitters appropriated the domestic stage for his construction, so that the figure not only works on the level of a challenge to and protest against its environment, but (remembering that his parents had made their money in the fashion industry) stems from its background.¹³⁴ Schwitters' translation of Merz into three dimensions thus resulted in a less aggressive, more subversive form of sculptural assemblage than that of Dada Berlin. Informed by its commonplace surroundings, and removed from any aesthetic context, the *Heilige Bekümmernis* is a figure created from the

133 Translated in Motherwell 1951/1989, 63. Taut referred to the Wilhelmine facade as a wolf in sheep's clothing; see Ward 2001, 65.

134 The dummy had belonged to Schwitters' mother; see Keitel 1984.

refuse of the private and public domain that reflects on the German bourgeois milieu from within. Whereas Merz pictures display found objects in a form that renders them available for relocation in a museum, gallery or collection, the *Heilige Bekümmernis* marks the point when Schwitters first began to explore the reassignment of mundane space by leaving arrangements of *objets trouvés* in their original environment.

If Schwitters looked to Berlin Dada for ideas, those Dadaists who saw the first studio column did not, it seems, identify it as a Dada work. In Huelsenbeck's later assessment of the disagreements between Berlin Dada and Schwitters, the friction arose less from what Schwitters did than from where he did it. Huelsenbeck describes Schwitters as living 'like a lower-class Victorian', and targets what from the standpoint of Berlin Dada was his failure to carve out new territory:

We, who regarded the desert, the military barracks, the empty room as the best place to be in, couldn't stop ridiculing Schwitters. Here, for us, was the German forest and a bench with hearts carved on it.¹³⁵

Schwitters continued to court ridicule from Berlin Dada by his continuing membership of Herwarth Walden's *Sturm*, and in 'The Artist's Right to Self-Determination', his early manifesto of artistic autonomy, he provocatively established the basis of that autonomy in what might be regarded as the taboo-laden space of the avant-garde, that is, the province of the dealer, in this case Walden.¹³⁶ How precarious this course was became evident in 1923, when many galleries that Schwitters relied on for support (*Sturm* in Berlin, Hannover's Kestner Society, Dresden's Galerie Arnold, Hannover's Galerie von Garvens, etc.) were brought to the verge of ruin by the inflation crisis. (Walden was later to contribute a grotto to the Merzbau, so that as in a looking-glass world, the dealer's contribution became an unsaleable object under the artist's control.) From this time, Schwitters' artistic independence was no longer sited in the realm of the dealer, but nonetheless retained its roots in 'Kommerz', implicit in the Merzbau in the ironic comparison suggested (according to Carola

135 Huelsenbeck 1975, 35.

136 Schwitters 1919b, 38.

Giedion-Welcker) by the similar-sounding names KdeE and KdW, Berlin's largest department store (Fig. 128).¹³⁷

One might conjecture that at about this time, Schwitters moved the basis of Merz from the specific interface between art and life represented by the dealer to another, unmediated point of intersection between artist and public over which he had more command. The new site of his investigation was the studio. The first columns were located in his studio and the Merzbau, whichever form it subsequently took, also remained, in Schwitters' definition, a studio. Here the primary objects of the Merzbau, among them the *Heilige Bekümmernis*, actually derive from their surroundings; situated outside any clear-cut commercial or aesthetic context, they scarcely looked like art to most contemporaries.¹³⁸ Harald Szeemann and John Macarthur describe the Merzbau as critical simply by virtue of its space of representation, but this is also a two-way process; the columns, and later the Merzbau, not only present a critique of their surroundings, but are directly subjected to a critique that stems from their setting, including the milieu from which Schwitters himself came and in which he chose to remain. The androgynous figure of the *Heilige Bekümmernis* reflects the female domestic environment¹³⁹ and also recalls reviews of his work that compared collage with the 'female' pastime of making scrapbooks.¹⁴⁰ So the word 'madness' [*Wahnsinn*] that stands out like a heading or caption on the *Heilige Bekümmernis* functions both as a gloss on Germany's disastrous political developments of 1920 and society's judgement of Schwitters and his art, which at the time was almost universally negative.

The first columns may be interpreted as exploring the fluctuating boundaries between the

137 Giedion-Welcker 1956a, 283. Schwitters' explanation in Hildesheim that Merz derived from *Commerz* caused hilarity among his audience; unidentified press cutting 12.4.1922, *Schwarzes Notizbuch*, KSF.

138 Kate Steinitz writes: 'But soon this construction bore no resemblance to any kind of natural or artistic product, though Kurt defined it as a column.' [Bald aber hatte das Gebilde keine Ähnlichkeit mit irgendeinem Natur oder Kunstprodukt, obgleich Kurt es als Säule bezeichnete.] Steinitz 1963, 145. In the English translation, this becomes 'Soon, however, the object lost all relationship to anything made by man or nature. Kurt called it a "column"'. Steinitz 1968, 90.

139 As with Anna Blume, Schwitters even identified himself with the figure: 'Ich bin die heilige Kümmeris geworden.' Letter to Walter and Grete Dexel, 29.10.21, Nündel 1974, 56.

140 Cf. Dr B., 'Merz-Malerei', in *Die Republik* 15, Munich 1920.

avant-garde and the everyday through the bourgeois environment itself. In this sense, the formal aspects of Schwitters' columns in the 1920s are of less significance than the way in which they explore the predicament of the Weimar avant-garde, whose experiments in setting up a democratic basis for art met at best with indifference, at worst with unbending opposition and a widespread lack of acceptance, so that any concessions made were almost entirely one-sided. Schwitters' studio constructions subsisted on borrowed space of a precarious nature that had to be eked out of its surroundings.

The intrusion and perpetuation of an avant-garde discourse into a domestic, suburban context such as Waldhausenstrasse 5 demanded of necessity subversive means. In his studio, Schwitters upheld two apparently contradictory positions: the integration of art and life and the autonomy of his art. This was fully in accord with his formulation of Merz in 1923, that is, as a process of 'reconciling opposites and allocating priorities'.¹⁴¹ The presence of the columns on his parents' property was legitimized through their function as the accoutrements of an artist's studio, while the preservation of their avant-garde status was legitimized by their autonomous status as sculptural assemblage, 'columns', although various contributions from colleagues and friends raised additional questions about authenticity and authorship. The studio did not so much resist classification as include as many classifications as possible. It could only perpetuate its existence by absorbing multiple definitions, and in as far as the actions of defining and classifying can only take place after the event, the process of constantly reinventing the studio became integral to the furtherance of its diverse identities.¹⁴²

In as far as Schwitters' constructions were not absorbed into the structures of organised culture that mediated between aesthetics and daily life, they did not benefit from the surroundings of a protected space.¹⁴³ Although the studio was an interior, the kind of exposure to

141 [Gegensätze ausgleichen und Schwerpunkte verteilen.] Schwitters 1923a, 134.

142 'Merz can only be defined provisionally.' [Merz lässt sich nur vorläufig definieren]; letter to Herwarth Walden, 1.12.20, Nündel 1974, 41-2.

143 Even in exhibitions, Schwitters' work was not fully protected, as visitors occasionally scrawled insults on his collages; cf. Spengemann 1920b, also comments in *Gästebuch für die Merzausstellung* (Hildesheim) 1922, KSF.

which it was subjected – that is, lacking any intervening aesthetic medium such as a gallery, museum, demonstration room or theatre - was that faced by modernist housing projects. These seldom followed a policy of inclusion, however, but tended to occupy new space, in well-defined estates (Fig. 122); this led to incongruous combinations of old and new in that, while such housing was designed with appropriate fittings in mind, most residents were either unwilling or financially unable to discard their conventional, often ornate furnishings (Fig. 117).¹⁴⁴ In the 1920s, the majority of municipal, industrial and office buildings, memorials, cemeteries and monuments were built in conventional styles, and most architects and artists of the time were educated in institutions oriented towards traditional practices.¹⁴⁵ One example of the difficulty of striking a compromise by manoeuvring between progressive and traditional may be seen in the fate of the Weimar Bauhaus after its staff and students had moved to Dessau.¹⁴⁶ The new director in Weimar, Otto Bartning, attempted to ward off further controversy by steering a course between new technologies and traditional crafts and by introducing a policy of restrained reform. Yet the school remained, by contemporary standards, revolutionary; though little more than one hundred students attended in all, it was caught in political crossfire from its opening in 1926 to its dissolution by the National Socialists in 1930.¹⁴⁷ Bartning's endeavour failed because in the polarized society of the Weimar Republic, political issues were endemic to any public discussion surrounding the arts.¹⁴⁸

Schwitters' early columns provided a different means of testing the interface of art and life, not by combination or compromise, but by the deployment of spatial ambivalence. To reach the Merzbau one had to traverse the apartment of Schwitters' parents (Fig. 6), described by Kate Steinitz as 'full of good plush furniture and lace-trimmed headrests'.¹⁴⁹ The abstract

144 Cf. 'Instead of Cathedrals, Dwelling Machines'; Saldern 2002, 93ff.

145 See Wolsdorff 1997.

146 See Nicolaison 1997.

147 In 1930 it was reopened under the leadership of Paul Schulze-Naumburg.

148 'One can say that nothing in Germany escapes political discussion.' [Man kann sagen, dass nichts in Deutschland der politischen Diskussion entgeht.] Viénot 1931/1999, 199.

149 Steinitz 1968, 8.

Madonna that stood at the entrance to the main room was an upturned wooden arm of a chair (Fig. 28, 29), while the coloured circular elements on the exterior originated as little paper tablemats made by Schwitters' son.¹⁵⁰ By virtue of the absorption of the domestic setting into the studio and vice versa, the Merzbau functioned as an arena whose public and private aspects were so blurred that they were no longer distinct. In this interpretation, the Merzbau emerges as an inherently vulnerable space in which irony, with its multiple perspectives, become a key weapon. In this connection it may be noted that one of Schwitters' tactics in the 1920s was to present his ideas from an apparently conservative point of view, as for instance, in his expression of patriotic sentiments for Waldhausenstrasse, left-hand side, or in his insistence (in response to the numerous critics who accused him of betraying the German character) that his art consisted of pure German rubbish, collected on German rubbish tips.¹⁵¹ Such subversive perspectives could, however, work both ways. The image of the cathedral, which in its Expressionist usage had symbolized community, was later misappropriated both by ultra-right-wing authors and by the National Socialists in the Nuremberg 'Cathedral of Light' festivities (Fig. 130).¹⁵²

V Carola Giedion-Welcker

In the reception history, little attention has been paid to Carola Giedion-Welcker's analyses of the Merzbau to date, although their importance has not diminished with time, not least because she was one of only two professional art historians to see the Merzbau before writing

150 Some doll parts apparently came from a small girl living on the same floor; information from Frau Bergmann-Deppe, Hannover. In 1935 Schwitters described the anemones on the studio windowsill and the kitsch in his new grotto; see letter to Susanna Freudenthal of 28.2.35, KSA 9, 95-6.

151 Tran 23, 106: Schwitters 1924b, 196. Compare Thomas Mann's speeches in support of the Weimar Republic (1922-32), in which he adopts as his starting-point his audience's (anti-democratic) point of view; cf. Mann 1922. For an analysis of Mann's technique in these lectures, see Sautermeister 1982.

152 Josef Magnus Wehner, author of the best-selling war novel *Sieben vor Verdun* (1930), wrote in a speech of this time: 'The Reich stands before us as a vast cathedral of the spirit, as the cosmos itself.' [Das Reich aber steht vor uns als gewaltiger Geisterdom, als der Weltraum selber.] Quoted in Sontheimer 1962, 288.

about it.¹⁵³ (The other was Gerd von der Osten, whose comments will be discussed below).

Giedion-Welcker's interpretations of the Merzbau are unusually rich and wide-ranging. They span almost a quarter of a century (1947-72), and thus provide a useful guide to the progressive contextualization of the Merzbau during this period. Her essays are not easy to translate and on a first reading, the general cast of her thought seems remote from present-day discourses. I will therefore conclude this section with an attempt to reassess her contributions to the reception of the Merzbau.

Schwitters maintained close professional and private connections with Carola Giedion-Welcker and her husband Sigfried Giedion from the late 1920s to the outbreak of war. They, in turn, gave his most controversial work their support throughout this period.¹⁵⁴ Giedion-Welcker does not specify the dates of her visits to Schwitters' studio, but the earliest was almost certainly in 1928, when Giedion was in Hannover. Giedion himself had seen the studio by 1930, for in the *Veilchenheft* he is named as one of the few who could understand the KdeE.¹⁵⁵ Further encounters are probable, but only one is documented; Giedion-Welcker visited Waldhausenstrasse 5 in autumn 1935, though at the time Schwitters was not at home.¹⁵⁶

Giedion-Welcker first wrote on Schwitters in 1929, when he recited some of his literary works in Kunsthaus Zürich; other programme items included Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique* and the Buñuel-Dali film *Un Chien Andalou*. In the invitation she described Schwitters' writings

153 Carola-Giedion-Welcker (1893–1979) was of German-American parentage. A student of Wölfflin's, she had to leave Munich because of her radical political stance. In 1920 she married Sigfried Giedion (1893-1968). In the mid-1920s, encounters with Moholy and Arp marked the start of her engagement with the work of artists and writers such as Joyce, Le Corbusier, Mondrian and Brancusi.

154 Giedion's 1929 exhibition of Surrealist and abstract art in Zurich (for which Schwitters acted as an agent, contributed nine pictures and gave recitals of his poems) provoked outbreaks of violence among visitors. Giedion subsequently published an article praising the *Ursonate* as one of the great works of contemporary literature, though the editors publicly distanced themselves from his views (Giedion 1929).

155 See Appendix I. Schwitters first met the Giedions in 1926 in Holland. Sigfried Giedion lectured on architecture in Hannover in February 1928, probably invited by Schwitters himself; cf. his letter to Schwitters, 27.4.28, gta archive, Zurich. Vordemberge-Gildewart later stated that he visited Schwitters' studio with Giedion and Walden in 1928; see letter from Vordemberge-Gildewart, 26.2.56, Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, vol. 1, 323.

156 Letter to Susanna Freudenthal, 9.10.35, KSA 9, 115.

as ‘a potent parody of the complacent bourgeoisie’.¹⁵⁷ Her early essays concentrate primarily on Schwitters’ literary rather than his visual work, although she emphasizes that both spring from the same creative impulse; both use as a medium ‘ready-mades’, scraps of refuse and everyday language. She interprets Schwitters’ approach as a modern version of romantic irony that deploys the banal and negligible to generate an ironic but not unsympathetic investigation of the everyday world. The roots of both his art and literature lie, in her view, in his humorous acceptance of life as he found it and his moulding of everyday experience into what she later called a *Daseinsmosaik*, a mosaic of existence, that expressed the spirit of the times.¹⁵⁸

Giedion-Welcker’s first reference to the Merzbau appeared in her book on contemporary sculpture, *Modern Plastic Art*, first published in 1937.¹⁵⁹ Shortly afterwards she informed Schwitters that she was preparing to write a monograph on him, but because of various family circumstances, this project was never realized.¹⁶⁰ In 1946 she published thirteen of his poems in an anthology of experimental verse,¹⁶¹ and in 1947, at the instigation of Vordemberge-Gildewart, wrote an article in commemoration of the artist’s 60th birthday entitled ‘Kurt Schwitters: Konstruktive Metamorphose des Chaos’ [The Constructive Metamorphosis of Chaos].¹⁶²

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- 157 [eine saftige Parodie des Spiessertums] . Programme and introduction reproduced in Schaub 1993, 132-3. ‘Saftig’ also implies enjoyment of the task. As Schwitters was best known as an author, publisher and publicist at this time, it is mainly his literary work that Giedion-Welcker engages with during the pre-war period. Schwitters joined the PEN club in 1930, and entries in reference works of the 1920s class him first and foremost as an author, with little or no allusion to his other activities (e.g. *Meyers Lexicon* 1929, vol. 10, 1689). The general public (on the strength of his poem ‘An Anna Blume’) regarded him primarily as a renegade literary figure.
- 158 Giedion-Welcker 1956a, 280.
- 159 ‘Schwitters has transformed his house in Hannover into a sort of shelter for plastic forms, which he describes as a little world of branching and building where the imagination is free to climb at will.’ Giedion-Welcker 1937/1960, xvii.
- 160 In the post-war edition of *Modern Plastic Art*, the newly added biographical notes describe the Merzbau as ‘a monumental example of ironic Merz art, a ‘colonne sans fin’ of wit, poetic and picturesque ideas to which [Schwitters] constantly made fantastic additions, though always careful to preserve its architectonic vigour and unity’. *Ibid.*, 351. The Merzbau is also mentioned on p. xvii. Schwitters refers to the monograph in a letter of 18.7.38; see Giedion-Welcker 1973, 504-5.
- 161 Giedion-Welcker’s *Anthologie der Abseitigen. Poètes à l’Écart* of 1946 (Fig. 115) included work by Hennings, Ball, Jarry, Klee, Tzara and Schwitters.
- 162 Giedion-Welcker 1947. See also letter from Vordemberge-Gildewart to Giedion-Welcker, 27.5.47, Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, 316. ‘Wäre es da nicht mehr als nett, wenn die Freunde aus alter Zeit zum 20 Juni seiner gedenken würden?’ [Wouldn’t it be more than nice for friends from old times to commemorate [Schwitters’ birthday] on 20 June?]

This rarely quoted article consists of a biographical introduction followed by a survey of Schwitters' literary and visual work that reveals a seemingly intimate knowledge of his methods and aims. Though written as a gesture of friendship, the article contains little personal reminiscence. Carola Giedion-Welcker, as an art historian of considerable erudition, sets her subject within a pantheon of artists and writers from the 18th to the 20th century, including figures such as Charlie Chaplin, Paul Klee, Alfred Jarry, Ludwig Tieck and Lewis Carroll, with the addition of legendary creatures such as the Roc of the Arabian Nights and the phoenix; she also compares Schwitters' Anna Blume to Apollinaire's *Tristouse Ballerinette*, Joyce's Anna Livia Plurabelle and Breton's *Nadja*. She identifies Schwitters with those who in her view adopt the technique of the heckler or the sceptical outsider, counteracting the overly elevated and theoretical with what she calls 'a certain common sense' [*ein gewisser common sense*] – though not solely with the aim of destroying, but in order to create a new artistic realm from the fragments. She depicts Schwitters as a jester who combines entertainment with unpalatable truths; one who takes the building-blocks of human failings and the tatters of a crisis-ridden society, with its tawdry 'German idylls and petit-bourgeois melodies',¹⁶³ to build a poignant new Wonderland and Looking-Glass world. On the one hand, she sees the subversive aspects of his literary work as a liberating game; on the other, as revealing the disturbingly insecure foundations of German society:

In Schwitters' case the idyll is somewhat eerie, for beneath, one senses a shattered world, coming apart at the seams, intermingled with war, inflation, social tensions, Spartacus and Kapp revolts. And the poet himself [is] stricken and sharpened in his sensibilities, his composure disturbed, aware of the catastrophes but nonetheless casting his spell (over society) to create a fantastic jester's play.¹⁶⁴

In Giedion-Welcker's view, it is Schwitters' idiosyncratic collage technique, his all-pervasive wit and humour, and above all the rooting of his work in everyday banalities that distinguish

163 [deutsche Idyllen und Spiessermelodien]; Giedion-Welcker 1947, 286.

164 [Die Idylle bei Schwitters ist etwas gespenstig, denn man spürt eine aus ihren Fugen geratene, erschütterte Welt darunter, durchsetzt von Krieg, Inflation, von sozialen Spannungen, von Spartakus- und Kapp-Putschen. Und auch den Dichter selbst in seiner Empfindsamkeit getroffen und geschärft, in seinem Frieden gestört, wissend um die Katastrophen, aber dennoch alles in ein tolles Narrenspiel verzaubernd.] Ibid.

his art from the ‘aggressive party-political style of German Dada’ and from Expressionism, with its proclivity for a ‘histrionic world-view’.¹⁶⁵ She maintains that Schwitters’ outwardly whimsical but fundamental critique of society finds its ultimate expression in the ever-changing Merzbau (which in almost all her writings she refers to as the ‘Merz column’):

Schwitters lived [and breathed] his Merz art daily in this provincial milieu and in this landscape [i.e. Hannover and the North German plain], like Alfred Jarry his Ubu-Roi [...] sustained by all his eccentric habits and pranks, casting his spell ever more intensively on his world by means of that original, artistic parable. His aim from the first was a Gesamtkunstwerk in which all the arts were to be united in this Merz construction [...] to build a monumental, condensed, artistic synthesis of our time. The foundations of a realisation of this idea were put into practice by Schwitters in the interior extensions of his studio, where he built an endless Merz column into which he injected a never-ending stream of new witticisms, fanciful ideas, fantastic forms and objects. [It was] a bizarre combination of a universally directed Elementarism, an irony that kept pace with the times, and [the ideas of] an uninhibited German dreamer, realist and jester. This chronicle of the age and [...] a truly original life work that was created, one might say, as a metamorphosis of a local tradition, was largely destroyed in the war, a war whose inevitability Schwitters long before had recognized.¹⁶⁶

She concludes by describing the essence of Schwitters’ work as an elevation of the nonsensical, insignificant and inconsequential to the level of an artistic medium to effect an unmediated, intensely sensuous awareness of the *comédie humaine*.¹⁶⁷

Giedion-Welcker’s essay is of especial interest in that the artist’s response to it is still extant.¹⁶⁸ Schwitters wrote to her that the article was the best that had ever been written about

165 [parteilich-aggressiven Art des deutschen Dadaismus]; [dem Weltanschaulich-Pathetischen des Expressionismus] Ibid.

166 [Schwitters lebte in diesem Provinzmilieu und in dieser Landschaft tagtäglich seine Merz-Kunst, wie Alfred Jarry seinen Ubu-Roi [...] in lauter schrulligen Gewohnheiten und Spässen versponnen, immer intensiver seine Welt in jenes originelle, künstlerische Gleichnis bannend. Er zielte von Anbeginn an auf ein Gesamtkunstwerk hin, wo alle Künste innerhalb dieser Merz-Gestaltung vereinigt werden sollten [...] eine monumentale, zusammenfassende, künstlerische Synthese unserer Zeit aufzubauen. Grundlagen zu einer Realisierung dieser Idee verwirklichte Schwitters in dem Innenausbau seines Ateliers, wo er an einer endlosen Merzsäule baute, in die immer wieder neue Witze, Einfälle, phantastische Formen und Gegenstände projiziert wurden. Wunderliche Mischung eines universal gerichteten Elementarismus, einer aktuellen Zeitironie und eines freispielenden deutschen Träumers, Realisten und Narrengestes. Dieses zeitgeschichtlich und [...] durchaus originelle Lebenswerk, das quasi in einer transformierten heimatlichen Tradition geschaffen wurde, ist im Krieg zum grössten Teil zerstört worden, einem Krieg, dessen Unabwendbarkeit Schwitters frühzeitig erkannt hatte.] Ibid. 286-7.

167 [...] wird hier das Alltägliche mit Alltäglichkeit vorgenommen [...] Wir hören Sie unmittelbar [...] [sie werden] für uns sinnlich akut [...] aus der ewigen comédie humaine.] Ibid., 286.

168 This article reached him at a critical period in mid-1947, when he was living in Ambleside in extreme poverty, gravely ill and burdened by a series of professional setbacks and disappointments.

him, ‘einfach marvellous’,¹⁶⁹ praising in particular the passage intimating that a volatile and violent society had provided the foundation for the Merz aesthetic. He supported her idea that his work drew on the tradition of German romantic irony, which Giedion-Welcker defines both as a standpoint and a programme for action: ‘sovereignty of the spirit, the weapon of wit and the victory over the inertia and burdensomeness of life.’¹⁷⁰ Her distancing of his art from Expressionism and Dada also met with his express approval.¹⁷¹ After his death, Giedion-Welcker added a conclusion to her essay in which she described the Merz barn as ‘the last comprehensive vision of his Merz art’.¹⁷²

In a lecture of 1956, Giedion-Welcker reiterates many of these ideas, emphasizing in particular the socio-critical and ironical aspects of Merz and the location of the Merzbau in suburban Hannover as exemplary of Schwitters’ subversive approach; in her view, it takes us to the heart of the world of the *provinziellen Spiessertums* [provincial petit-bourgeoisie] in a way that is simultaneously moving and ironic.¹⁷³ Whereas in her first essay she had referred to the Merzbau’s ‘Elementarism’, here she writes of its ‘formal connections with Constructivist spheres’, though she claims that these ‘originate from a completely different world view’.¹⁷⁴ It is evident from the text that she now had the *Veilchenheft* to hand:

One senses [in his Merz column] how he unites clear-cut constructions with haphazard proliferations, and how often in these constructed reliefs transience – in effect the gnawing of time - is articulated by damaged material, scoured and washed ashore by the sea, rusted in the damp or spewed out by the metropolis. ‘Weathering – Schwittering’ [*Verwitterung–Verschwitterung*], as he once said, to give things their inner lustre, their tragic beauty; patina, the incursion of time, a sign of the transitory nature of all that exists. [This is] apparent even in his Merz column, whose compact construction he suddenly intersperses with caves and niches, with unconstrained branchings, in order to integrate a visual rendering of his poetic fancies, those allusions to Germany’s fossilized pillars [lit. frozen posts] of learning and its proliferation of mystic utopias, which he discerned [well] before they broke out in catastrophic mass hysteria. There is Barbarossa’s marble table in

169 Letter of 19.8.47, Giedion-Welcker 1973, 506.

170 [Die Souveränität des Geistes, die Waffe des Witzes und sein Sieg über die Trägheit und Schwere des Lebens.] Giedion-Welcker 1947, 285.

171 ‘Of course I distanced myself from Expressionism.’ [Natürlich rückte ich vom Expressionismus ab.] Schwitters also corrected her statement that he had been rejected by Berlin Dada. As note 169.

172 Giedion-Welcker 1947, 287.

173 Giedion-Welcker 1956a, 282.

174 [So spürt man gerade hier die formalen Zusammenhänge mit den konstruktiven Sphären, wenn auch einem völlig andern Weltbild entsprungen.] Ibid.

Kyffhäuser hill, the gleaming treasure of the Nibelungen hoard, a reliquary bone of Goethe's surrounded by numerous stubs of pencils and much more. This too is a 'colonne sans fin', not as a prayer ascending to heaven like that of Brancusi, but a sign of the times with infinite reverberations, one that for him never ceases as long as life lasts and also as long as his life lasted. He also called this construction KdeE, which is as much as to say the Cathedral of Erotic Misery, as an echo of the Berlin department store KdW [*Kaufhaus des Westens*], and he carried on building it even after his house in Hannover, in Waldhausenstrasse 5, had been reduced to ashes [...] Unbounded fantasy combined with architectural austerity, with the ever-present constructive element.¹⁷⁵

Here, for the first time, Giedion-Welcker examines the methodology of the Merzbau. She interprets the grottos, where articles of seeming historical and material worth (a marble table, gleaming treasure, a reliquary) are constructed of refuse, as symbolic of a society that sought redemption everywhere but in the present. She claims that the grottos were inserted into an existing structure (she never uses the term Merzbau), after which both underwent a parallel development, creating an amalgam of abstract architectural format and urban and rural debris that provided an ironic running commentary on its times and also on time itself. As these aspects are developed in tandem, each maintains a continual critique of, and validation of, the other. She also argues that if, as she indicates, the structure of the KdeE is to be understood as an ironic metaphor, a parody of commodity display as represented by the KdW, the column also subjects the material desires of the age to scrutiny. She includes in Schwitters' arsenal far more than the subversive reconstitution of cultural and consumerist space, however; she also analyses his method of dissecting the tragicomedy of human existence by the adroit juxtaposition of scraps of humdrum, everyday experience.

175 [Man spürt, wie er klar Konstruiertes dem zufällig Wuchernden verschwistert, wie auch in diesen gebauten Reliefs häufig die Vergänglichkeit – quasi das Nagen der Zeit – gegliedert wird durch lädiertes Material, durchspült und angeschwemmt von Meere, verrostet in Feuchtigkeit oder ausgespieden von der Grossstadt. 'Verwitterung – Verschwitterung' wie er einst meinte, um den Dingen ihren inneren Glanz zu geben, ihre tragische Schönheit; die Patina, Einbruch der Zeit, Zeichen der Vergänglichkeit alles Existenten. Sogar in seiner Merzsäule spürbar, deren straffen Bau er plötzlich mit Höhlen und Nischen durchsetzt, mit lockeren Verästelungen, um seine poetischen Einfälle bildhaft einzugliedern, jene Anspielungen auf die eingefrorenen deutschen Bildungspfeiler und mystisch-wuchernden Wunschträume, die er schon spürte, ehe sie verhängnisvoll als Massenwahn ausbrachen. Da gibt es den Marmortisch Barbarossas im Kyffhäuserberg, den glänzenden Schatz des Nibelungenhortes, einen Reliquien-Knochen Goethes, umgeben von zahlreichen fast zu Ende geschriebenen Bleistiften und vieles andere. Auch hier eine 'colonne sans fin', nicht wie Brancusi als Gebet zum Himmel steigend, sondern ein Zeit-Zeichen das ewig rumort und für ihn nie aufhört, solange das Leben währt und auch solange sein Leben währte. Im Anklang an das Berliner Warenhaus KdW hatte er diesen Bau auch KdeE genannt, was so viel heißen sollte wie Kathedrale des erotischen Elends, und er baute wieder an ihr, nachdem in Hannover sein Haus in der Waldhausenstrasse 5 in Asche versunken war [...] Freie Phantastik, mit architektonischer Strenge gepaart, das konstruktive Element immer präsent.] Ibid., 283.

In the same year, provoked by the publication of Hans Sedlmayr's *Verlust der Mitte*, she wrote an article that dismissed Sedlmayr as 'blockheadedly wrong' [*verbohrt-falsch*] and took up cudgels on behalf of Schwitters.¹⁷⁶ Conceivably in response to Sedlmayr's condemnation of the new architecture, she presents the Merzbau as a modern cathedral, a witty persiflage of 'fusty ideas stuck in German brains',¹⁷⁷ embedded in a well-proportioned, 'surprisingly strict structure of basic architectural elements'¹⁷⁸ and conveying the atmosphere of De Stijl architecture. She ends by assigning the fragmentary aspects of the Merzbau to domains beyond the scope of *Verlust der Mitte*: 'this Merz column, or better, this ever-growing, living 'tree of art' of Kurt Schwitters was completely destroyed in the war [...] so his Tower of Babel, like the one in Breughel's picture, remained incomplete.'¹⁷⁹

In all her early essays on the Merzbau, Giedion-Welcker identifies it as a diverse, witty and profoundly subversive work that was as bizarre and unpredictable as the age it portrayed. She also claims that it articulated the Weimar Republic's social and political crises by investigating its very foundations. This is only explicable in the context of her understanding of Merz as a means by which the artist interacts with a complex range of conventional and innovative ideas to create new forms that challenge accepted values. Her final reminder in both essays that Schwitters continued constructing Merzbauten till his death indicates that she regarded the column's critique as extending well beyond the Weimar Republic; as she points out, for Schwitters, the sermon on 'the transitory nature of all that exists' could never be transitory. The crucial element here is the Merzbau's temporal, rather than spatial, evolution; it is this that enables Schwitters to pursue his Merz *Weltanschauung* to the end of his life regardless of circumstance.

176 Giedion-Welcker 1956b. In *Verlust der Mitte*, written in 1941 and first published in 1948, Sedlmayr makes 19th and 20th century art a scapegoat for the disasters of the 20th century and appeals for a return to hierarchy and piety.

177 [die verstaubten Begriffe, die in deutschen Hirnen steckten.] Ibid.

178 [[...] eine klar gegliederte, proportional wohlabgewogene Architektur, die mit überraschender Strenge aus baulichen Grundelementen geformt und gefügt war.] Ibid.

179 [Diese Merzsäule oder besser; dieser immerfortwachsende lebendige 'Kunstbaum' von Schwitters [war] restlos zerstört [...] so blieb sein Turm von Babel, wie auf dem Breughelschen Bilde, ein unvollendeter.] Ibid.

Common to all Giedion-Welcker's descriptions of the Merzbau is her use of architectural terminology, although she does not discuss it in terms of interior and exterior, concepts that are essential to many subsequent art-historical studies.¹⁸⁰ In successive essays, however, she clearly switches her focus on Schwitters in response to her times, with increasing reference to Modernist movements, and her later articles are far more conventional pieces of art history. In the 1970s she still spotlights the revolutionary aspects of the Merzbau but sets Schwitters' work outside any political context, and her earlier portrayal of Schwitters as jester (in the Shakespearean sense of the wise fool) changes to that of a pioneering abstract artist.¹⁸¹ She also discards the literary comparisons that had been a prominent feature of her early analyses, focusing instead on the relationship of Merz to the avant-garde of the 1920s and to neo-Dada.

In the essay of 1947 cited above, Giedion-Welcker describes the geometrical forms of the Merzbau as a 'universally directed Elementarism'. What she means by this is not explained, but it is evident that she is referring to a far wider discourse than that proposed either in the Elementarist manifesto drawn up by Moholy, Puni, Arp and Hausmann in 1921 or in Doesburg's later interpretations of Elementarism in *De Stijl*.¹⁸² For an explanation of her ideas it is useful to turn to a pre-war essay on literature (Giedion-Welcker 1933) in which she discusses Schwitters' prose in the context of an avant-garde revolution that she regards as perhaps the only effective mode of resistance to the dominant hierarchies and the intellectual and institutional crusades of the age. She proposes that art must be 'de-artificialized' [*Die Kunst muss entkünstlicht werden*], not merely on aesthetic grounds but as a social

180 A notable exception is Beatrix Nobis, who also analyses the Merzbau in terms of Romantic irony. Nobis contends that the importance of the layering process lies in its transparency; the interior of the Merzbau must remain accessible to document the underlying Romantic idea of self-creation and self-destruction [*Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung*]; Nobis 1993, 96-7.

181 'Though the principle of bringing forth new means of expression [...] through the *moyens pauvres*, as Igor Stravinsky called them [...] stands in the same general context with events in the international art scene [Cubism, Futurism and Zurich Dada], Schwitters himself endowed it with a special and individual mark of his own.' London 1972, 6.

182 The 1921 manifesto demanded an anti-individualist art on the basis of pure (i.e. neither useful nor beautiful) but otherwise undefined artistic elements; cf. Düsseldorf 1992, 107-110. Both the joint Schwitters-Lissitzky publication *Nasci* and Moholy-Nagy's *von material zur architektur* (Bauhausbuch 14, 1929) named Francé's forms as the basis of Elementarism (see note 97). Doesburg insisted on a more rigid definition excluding natural forms; cf. Baljeu 1974, 66-70. For Doesburg's writings on Elementarism, see Baljeu 1974, 162-180.

imperative.¹⁸³ A new content expressed in an outmoded form will be ineffective: ‘Only when material that emerges from an historical moment is shifted to a spiritual perspective and processed in a manner appropriate to the times can today’s run-down bourgeois organizational process be overcome.’¹⁸⁴ She insists that ignoring the world of the petit-bourgeois will not make it go away; if it is to be transformed, it must be absorbed into the new discourse. Her idea of Elementarism involves an immediate expression of human experience that dispels the fixed and static, releasing ‘existential and linguistic energies’ [*Lebens- und Sprach-energien*].¹⁸⁵ In 1937 she still perceived, in the fields of architecture, art, literature, music, philosophy and the sciences, the birth of a cultural revolution entailing the universal adoption of an elementary formal idiom and commonplace motifs.¹⁸⁶ When she reconsidered the legacy of Schwitters in the post-war years, she continued to argue that he had applied the core principles of this revolution to the whole range of his work. By 1948, however, she was thinking in terms of a discourse that at this time seemed past history. Schwitters learned this for himself in 1947 after contemptuous reactions to the first drafts of a joint Schwitters-Hausmann anthology of abstract poetry named PIN.¹⁸⁷

The only other art historian who both saw and wrote about the Merzbau was Professor Gert von der Osten. In 1963, on the occasion of a Schwitters retrospective in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, Osten, the museum’s director (and general director of Cologne museums), wrote a catalogue introduction that described Schwitters as an accomplished artist, poet, musician, cabaret performer and commercial artist.¹⁸⁸ Osten’s account of the Merzbau is of additional interest because in 1963 there was no standard Merzbau literature of the kind that was to accumulate in subsequent years and that continues to shape the reception of the work

183 Giedion-Welcker 1933, 213. See also Tzara 1964, 67 ff.

184 [Erst wenn dies aus dem historischen Zeitmoment gewachsene Material in eine geistige Perspektive gerückt und zeitgemäss verarbeitet wird, kann der heute leergelaufene bürgerliche Gestaltungsprozess geschlagen werden.] Ibid., 216-17.

185 Ibid., 215.

186 Giedion-Welcker 1937/1960, partly reproduced in Gaiger/Wood 2003, 10-16.

187 Cf. Reichardt 1986.

188 Osten 1963. Ernst Schwitters lent many pictures but did not contribute to the catalogue. Gert von der Osten (1910-83) also worked on the Pelican History of Art, vol. 1.

to this day; Osten does not even seem to have been aware of the existence of the *Veilchenheft*.

When he first met Schwitters in the mid-1930s, Osten had just graduated, at a time when the status of most of those working in the arts was insecure.¹⁸⁹ By 1963 he was one of Germany's most eminent art historians, but he does not attempt to give his readers an expert's informed, retrospective encomium; instead, he offers a personal memoir that conveys a sense of bewilderment resulting from his visit that apparently still preoccupied him decades later. He visited Waldhausenstrasse unannounced (he refers to himself as having 'intruded' [*eingedrungen*]) and relates that his first impression of Schwitters as a solid, down-to-earth Hannoverian burgher changed after he realized that, in the (literary) tradition of shameless liars and expert tricksters such as Till Eulenspiegel and Baron Munchhausen, Schwitters' irony was concealed behind the guise of the profane.¹⁹⁰ Like Giedion-Welcker, Osten portrays Schwitters as harbouring a certain sympathy for the victims of his irony, though he sees it as far less affectionate; in Osten's opinion, it was merely commiseration for those who were bound to emerge as losers.

Osten writes of the Merzbau as the artist's sculptural life-work, an unplanned, cumulative 'formation' [*Gebilde*] that extended from the cellar to the top floor (he describes Schwitters as a master of the 'and'), adding that, like all Schwitters' Merz art, it was 'dyed, like wool, in humour' [*im Humor wie in der Wolle gefärbt*] and, despite its fragmentary nature, displayed a remarkable coherence. He describes Schwitters as one who practised a constant 'tight-rope walk' [*Gratwanderung*] between the roles of bourgeois and rebel, an artist so far ahead of his time that only now was it possible to begin to comprehend the new forms of literature and art that he created from the 'compatibility of the incompatible' [*Vereinbarkeit des Unvereinbaren*].¹⁹¹ He also notes the important fact that Schwitters made no concessions to Nazi policy after 1933; as before, he continued to create, and give precedence to, his abstract Merz works,

189 Cf. Dilly 1988, 23 ff.

190 'Bei Schwitters zieht sich die Ironie hinter den Vorwand des Profanen zurück'; Osten 1963, 5.

191 Ibid., 6.

and regarded figurative painting as a hobby, though the latter could have provided him with what Osten calls an ‘alibi’.

Osten’s account is brief in comparison to the analyses of Giedion-Welcker, but a number of similarities are evident. Both emphasize the role of ambivalence and Romantic irony as crucial to an understanding of Schwitters’ work, and both underscore the witty and humorous aspects of the Merzbau. The accounts of these two art historians serve as a reminder that, for some visitors at least, the Merzbau was not necessarily the solemn, even morbid work that sometimes emerges in the reception history. Both compare Schwitters to Till Eulenspiegel (reputedly born not far from Hannover), the peasant trickster whose jests and practical jokes often relied on the literal interpretation of idioms or figures of speech, thus underlining the subversive qualities of the Merzbau both in the double-edged character of Schwitters’ ‘play’ with refuse and fragments and in the manner in which he directs his critique at the predominant cultural forces of his day by starting from, and working within, the premises (in both senses of the word) of the ordinary and everyday.

VI Legends and translations

1. Merzbau legends

In Chapter Two, I assembled a range of different types of evidence in order to establish as far as possible the various constituents of the Merzbau during the different stages of its existence. This section will supplement this information by establishing what did *not* constitute the Merzbau. This is important because, even today, many descriptions of the work are based on unsubstantiated or even demonstrably erroneous sources of information, compounding the problems of art-historical analysis that I have already discussed.

Many legends attached to the Merzbau originated in the 1960s and 1970s, when erstwhile friends and colleagues of Schwitters recorded their indistinct recollections of his studio,

promoting the rise of a Merzbau mythology that freely exploited the work's obscurity.¹⁹²

Werner Schmalenbach corrected some common misunderstandings about the Merzbau in his monograph of 1967, but a few years later, Ernst Schwitters noted that many myths about the Merzbau were still in circulation¹⁹³ and the situation is little different today.

An early example of misleading anecdotal evidence appeared in 1962, in a publication on collage that cited the Merzbau as a prime example of Schwitters' eccentricity:

Schwitters was in the truest sense of the word an original. His Hannover apartment in Waldhausenstrasse became a Merzbau, an incredible grotto of old lumber, weirdly molded plaster and a dozen other materials combined into a rambling, stalactitic, uterine cavern that was eventually extended into the upper story by the simple expedient of evicting the tenant. Moholy-Nagy and his wife [...] often visited the Schwitters family in the Merzbau den. Mme Moholy has related that the fantastic architecture was subdivided into plaster grottos dedicated to Schwitters' friends. She remembered an occasion when her husband discarded a worn pair of socks, Schwitters retrieved them, dipped them in plaster of Paris and added them to the Moholy Grotto. On that same occasion their host similarly preserved and dedicated a brassiere of Sophie Täuber-Arp, another overnight guest.¹⁹⁴

This short paragraph, compiled from notes taken ten years earlier, shows the importance of Schmalenbach's cautionary advice that eyewitness accounts cannot be treated as factual evidence.¹⁹⁵ It already contains four aspects of Merzbau lore that have persisted to the present: the legend of the evicted tenants, the idea that the work was in Schwitters' own living quarters, the corollary that Schwitters and his family actually occupied the Merzbau, and the notion that one of its main functions was to harbour a scurrilous collection of souvenirs appropriated from friends. The first and last of these tales were also recounted by Hans Richter, one of the most important eyewitnesses in terms of the subsequent impact of his report on Merzbau reception. Richter's statements are inconsistent with what is known of the early chronology of the studio, yet his description, the most innocuous of all those by Schwitters' contemporaries, is one of the best-known passages on the Merzbau, partly

192 An article of 1960, for instance, claimed that the Merzbau was a legendary object that had hardly ever been seen, and featured 'rescued secret photos' [geretteten Geheimfotos] (Fig. 21-23) that had already been published and were neither rescued nor secret; Fischer 1960.

193 Düsseldorf 1971, 16.

194 Janis and Blesch 1962, 63.

195 A footnote states that these reminiscences derive from notes taken by Harriet Janis at a Schwitters evening on 18.10.52.

because it is in easily accessible form and is available both in German and English. Its credibility and evident lacunae are seldom questioned, as is the fact that it bears little relevance to the 1933 photos of the work. In addition, Richter recorded his memoirs nearly forty years after the event and in a context that may well have coloured his account. Resident in the US from 1941, and writing after a period of personal difficulties in the McCarthy era, he clearly downplays Dada's political aspects and his own role in the German revolution in his reminiscences.¹⁹⁶ He devotes a whole chapter to Schwitters under the misleading heading of Dada Hannover, presenting him as the ideal of an authentic Dadaist ('in reality,' he writes, 'HE was the total work of art').¹⁹⁷ He refers throughout to the Merzbau as a sculpture or column, giving a striking but vague account of its growth, with no suggestion of socio-political critique.¹⁹⁸ Richter's account is the primary source of one of the most durable Merzbau legends, the *Deckendurchbruch*, i.e. the column's penetration of the ceiling, which still features in numerous commentaries.¹⁹⁹ Regardless of whether this was a misunderstanding or a deliberate invention, it makes a fitting conclusion to Richter's presentation of Merz as a sub-Dada movement that created art by the (in this case literal) invasion of the realm of the philistines by tactics of inconvenience rather than assault; in maintaining that Schwitters owned the house, Richter implied that he was simply claiming back his own property.

The legend that the Merzbau filled the whole of Schwitters' house first appeared in Hans Arp's fanciful description of 1949:

His house in Hannover was a maze of mining shafts from top to bottom, artificial fissures though the storeys, tunnels spiralling from the cellar to the roof. The influence of the Sun King's style was obviously not preponderant in Schwitters' house. After years of intense and sustained effort, he succeeded in totally merzing his house [...] Through those hollows, gulfs, abysses, cracks, grew the monumental Merz columns, artistically erected with the

196 Richter omits his connections with Munich Dada, for instance, and claims to remember nothing of the Aktionsausschuss revolutionäre Künstler [Action Committee of Revolutionary Artists], of which he was leader (Richter 1964/1978, 83); cf. Hoffmann 1998, 48-71.

197 [In Wirklichkeit war ER das Gesamtkunstwerk.] Richter 1964/1978, 156.

198 He sums it up as 'eine Vegetation, die niemals aufhörte' [a vegetation that never ended]. Ibid., 157.

199 E.g. Caws 2000, 388; Brockelman 2001, 53; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, OUP 2004, 304.

help of plans, rusty scrap iron mirrors, wheels, family portraits, springs, newspapers, bricks, cement, colour prints, plaster, paste, lots of paste, lots and lots of paste. Yet this monument, unmatched in the Old World or the New, never seemed like a pastime of a naïve eccentric. On the contrary, the rhythmic beauty of the work linked it to the masterpieces in the Louvre.²⁰⁰

Variations of this tale regularly appear in descriptions of the Merzbau; Schwitters has, for example, been described as ‘gutting his house’²⁰¹ and as constructing both Merzbau and Merzbarn in his apartment.²⁰²

Numerous accounts locate the Merzbau within the artist’s living quarters. This claim is often presented in tandem with the *Deckendurchbruch*, as in the assertion that Schwitters ‘built within his home the Merzbau [...] a Constructivist assemblage of discarded junk that eventually pierced the ceiling’.²⁰³ These two ‘myths’ appear together in the following passage:

Growing from an earlier assemblage, Cathedral of Erotic Misery, which Schwitters constructed in his living room, Merzbau was literally a living installation, occupied as it was by Schwitters, his wife and his children [sic], who must have devised inventive ways to become one with assemblage. Merzbau’s walls were carved into and then plastered over, doorjambs were extended, and runways for a guinea pig were constructed under ceiling planes that had been lowered at jarring cubist angles. Cubist collage and Expressionism cohabited somewhat precariously in Schwitters’ domestic experiment. Thwarted by lack of space, at one point he moved the upstairs tenants out, cut the ceiling free and extended the Merzbau through the floor above.²⁰⁴

The anecdotes and legends surrounding the grottos are among those in which it is most difficult to separate fact from fiction. They have their origins in three sources: the content of the grottos as listed in the *Veilchenheft*, the friendship grottos cited by Richter and Steinitz, and the supposed secret grottos mentioned by Steinitz. These three accounts have been combined and embellished in many different ways, very often in connection with a fourth anecdote deriving from Alexander Dorner’s reported reactions to the Merzbau.

The primary source of legends relating to the grottos is Schwitters’ own provocative account of the Cathedral of Erotic Misery in the *Veilchenheft*. In the reception, the assortment of

200 Arp 1972, 252: original in Arp 1949.

201 Broyard 1974, 51.

202 Herbert 1999, 66.

203 Kostelanetz 2001, 552-3.

204 Suderburg 2000, 11-12.

objects listed here is often subjected to a further selection process; items such as Persil advertisements and gas coke are seldom subjected to analysis, while it is not uncommon for the bottle of urine and the Great Grotto of Love to be taken as representative of the supposedly macabre and repulsive aspects of the whole. The *Veilchenheft* passage, however, makes no mention of the so-called friendship grottos that feature in Richter's account. Richter describes the content of what he calls the 'caves' (he does not use the word grotto or KdeE) as consisting mainly of tiny, bizarre, souvenirs 'pilfered' from Schwitters' friends, so that in his report the column seems little more than a mischievous, if at times repellent, documentation of friendship.

Kate Steinitz's memoirs have been translated into English and though, like Hans Richter's, they are occasionally inconsistent and tendentious, they too have become one of the standard sources of information on the Merzbau.²⁰⁵ Her description is in many respects similar to Richter's, particularly in her inclusion of grottos in which Schwitters stored items from friends, but she adds a new element, writing of 'very secret caves' that were 'probably never seen by anyone except Walden, Giedion and Arp'.²⁰⁶ This is doubtless the original source of the idea that Schwitters concealed certain grottos,²⁰⁷ though three early visitors to his studio also record him as unwilling to divulge too much about the column's content. In 1919, Huelsenbeck's curiosity about a tower in the studio elicited a taciturn response: 'We asked him for details, but Schwitters shrugged: "It's all crap."' ²⁰⁸ Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers recalled a column with 'secret, indescribable compartments', though, as someone who would have been expected to disapprove, if she saw enough to describe them as such, it is difficult to

205 Steinitz 1968, 89-95.

206 Ibid., 90.

207 Ibid. She names Giedion, Arp and Walden, which suggests that she has lifted a passage from the *Veilchenheft* from its context; Schwitters writes: 'I know only 3 people who I assume will understand me completely as regards my column; Herwarth Walden, Dr S. Giedion and Hans Arp.' Osswald-Hoffmann understands this statement as an example of Schwitters' number metaphor; Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 205, n. 321. Christof Spengemann and Carl Buchheister appear to have been fully acquainted with the Merzbau; see letters from Spengemann to Vordemberge-Gildewart, 27.7.46, Vordemberge-Gildewart 1976, vol. II, 274, and from Schwitters to Buchheister, 29.4.46, Nündel 1974, 196.

208 Huelsenbeck 1974, 66.

judge how secret they can have been.²⁰⁹ Nina Kandinsky found Schwitters both forthcoming and reticent about the column: ‘For every requisite that he stored in the niches [...] he always had an anecdote, a story or a personal experience to hand. We didn’t dare to ask him any questions, for he behaved very mysteriously about some of these requisites.’²¹⁰ Steinitz, however, refers to the work at a more advanced stage. In a later passage she writes of the ‘chaos of the darkest erotic caves’, whereby the word ‘dark’ implies both that she regarded their contents as dubious and (as she acknowledges that she never saw them) that it must be left to her readers to guess their exact nature.²¹¹

There may well have been erotic grottos in the Merzbau, but there exists an alternative explanation of the content of its interior compartments that is mentioned nowhere in analyses of the Merzbau: Hannah Höch reported that one column contained ‘built-in secret depots’ where Schwitters hoarded his stock of potential Merz material.²¹² Höch’s memoirs, however, have not been translated and did not appear in book form, and it is not her prosaic hoards of hidden, as yet unsorted rubbish, but Steinitz’s erotic grottos that have become a widespread feature of the Merzbau reception, generally in conjunction with their presumed ‘perverted’ content. In support of this theory, many commentators refer to what has become one of the most commonly quoted opinions on the Merzbau, often cited as definitive of the whole work: ‘the free expression of the socially controlled self had here bridged the gap between sanity and madness. The Merzbau was a kind of fecal smearing - a sick and sickening relapse into

209 [geheime, unbeschreibliche Einbauten] Lissitzky-Küppers 1966, 24.

210 [Vor dieser Säule wurde Schwitters überaus redselig. Für jedes Requisite, das er in den Nischen der Säule aufbewahrte, hatte er eine Anekdote, eine Geschichte, oder ein persönliches Erlebnis zur Hand. Wir trauten uns nicht, Fragen an ihn zu stellen, denn er tat bei einigen dieser Requisiten sehr geheimnisvoll.] Kandinsky 1976, 105. Kandinsky lectured at the Kestner society in December 1924.

211 Steinitz 1968, 92. Steinitz draws on Richter’s account and the *Veilchenheft* (from which she quotes extensively). She portrays the column as an expression of ‘the hidden life of Schwitters’ soul’ but also states that she does not feel able to explain it ‘*psychologisch*’ (Steinitz 1963, 144), a word omitted from the English translation (Steinitz 1968, 89).

212 [Eingebaute Geheimdepots.] Berlin 1989, 210, also Höch 1995, vol. 1, 124. Elderfield notes that ‘the debris in Schwitters’ studio was necessary to the Merzbau’s construction’; Elderfield 1985, 400, n 19.

the social irresponsibility of the infant who plays with trash and filth.²¹³ This view of the Merzbau as a repulsive infantile pastime (shared, it seems, by no other eyewitnesses), is, however, not quoted but reported; it occurs in Samuel Cauman's biography of Alexander Dorner, published shortly after Dorner's death and soon afterwards translated into German (Cauman 1958/1960).²¹⁴ Cauman does not expand on Dorner's verdict and attaches no date to his visit; he twice uses the word Merzbau, but the description of a column in the cellar suggests that Dorner saw it at an early stage, well before Schwitters invented the term.²¹⁵

In the reception of the Hannover Merzbau, elements from all these sources – i.e. the *Veilchenheft*, Richter, Steinitz and Dorner – are found in diverse and often embroidered combinations. In an essay published on the Internet in 2002, Jaleh Mansoor (in addition to reiterating many of the legends cited above) states that Schwitters placed hair, nail parings and his urine in containers throughout the Merzbau.²¹⁶ Richard Humphreys and Dorothea Dietrich claim that Schwitters stole objects from their owners,²¹⁷ while Elderfield adds his own anecdotal trappings, thereby conflating the 'friendship' and 'secret' grottos: 'the biographical grottos are probably the most celebrated because Schwitters made off with his friends' belongings to fill them. When Sophie Täuber stayed with Schwitters, she awoke to find her bra had disappeared, hidden away in some secret cave that bore her name.'²¹⁸ By altering Steinitz's phraseology²¹⁹ Elderfield also emphasises their secrecy: 'Schwitters, by and

213 Quoted in Elderfield 1985, 162. Curt Germundson has pointed out that Dorner corrected the manuscript of Cauman's biography before his death but made no comment on this passage.

214 Cauman maintains that Dorner greatly admired Schwitters' abstract pictures, collages, poems and parodies. This may have been true in later years, but Dorner was not an unqualified supporter of Schwitters in the 1920s; in Tran 31 (1922), Schwitters wrote a vigorous riposte to Dorner's public criticism of his collages. After the war Dorner revised his opinion; cf. letter to KS, 1.7.46, SAH. Cauman makes an arcane reference to Schwitters as 'one of the seven founders of Dada', without revealing their identity; Cauman 1960, 43.

215 Cauman claims the visit took place after a Nolde exhibition in Braunschweig. I have been able to find no record of this event. Possibly the reference is to Nolde's 60th birthday exhibition in Dresden in 1927. In 1960, Dorner's assistant Ferdinand Stuttmann expressed his disapproval of the Merzbau by dint of omission; he records only the dimensions of what he calls a 'very small' room; cf. Stuttmann 1960. His remarks are strangely inapposite in this otherwise euphoric feature on the Merzbau.

216 Mansoor 2002, 6.

217 Humphreys 1985, 19; Dietrich 1993, 197.

218 Elderfield 1985, 160. The tendency to categorize the grottos according to type (e.g. Dietrich 1993, 198) can convey the incorrect impression that these designations came from Schwitters himself.

219 Steinitz 1968, 90.

large, showed the grottos themselves only to sympathetic friends.’²²⁰

The supposition that some grottos were kept secret rarely acts as a deterrent to an examination of their content. Humphreys states that many grottos were seen only by a few friends and stresses their fetishist and sadistic nature.²²¹ Charles Pickstone, writing in *Modern Painters* in 1991, stretches authorial licence further by describing the Merzbau as a creation of violent and obscene material ‘furtively collected’ by the artist: ‘Schwitters nocturnal wanderings enabled him to feed it more tit-bits [...] it grew as Schwitters’ coprophagous imagination fed it more blood.’²²² Macarthur and Dietrich provide analyses of the grottos while at the same time claiming that they were shown only to ‘initiates’.²²³ In some cases Steinitz’s secret caves have (somewhat improbably) been identified with the grottos of the *Veilchenheft* and promoted to a dominant role as the conceptual basis for the entire construction. Such interpretations inevitably emphasize the layering processes of the Merzbau, described by Schwitters himself in the *Veilchenheft*.

To show how the kind of legends and anecdotes described above have been used to sustain the interpretation of the Merzbau as a private work, I shall now look more closely at three recent analyses of the Merzbau: those of Patricia Falguières, Dorothea Dietrich and Elizabeth Burns Gamard.

Alexander Dorner’s reported opinion provides the starting point of Patricia Falguières’ essay ‘*Désouvrement de Kurt Schwitters*’, published in a Centre Pompidou catalogue of 1994.²²⁴ Falguières expands on Dorner’s negative view of the work by presenting the Hannover Merzbau as a ‘forgetting machine’ [*une machine d’oubli*], a repulsive monument of fetishist objects concealed in grottos and subjected to a continual process of sedimentation and burial

220 Elderfield 1985, 162.

221 London 1985, 19.

222 Pickstone 1991.

223 Macarthur 1993, 111; Dietrich 1993, 166.

224 Falguières 1994.

[*enfouissement*].²²⁵ This theory is supposedly endorsed by Schwitters' own somewhat sinister account of his methodology in the *Veilchenheft*:

Some new part has to be created, [one] that wholly or partially passes over the corpse of the object. As a result, there are everywhere objects that overlap [...] as an explicit sign of their devaluation as individual units [...] The whole is covered with an arrangement of cubes of the most strictly geometrical form, enveloping twisted or broken up shapes until they completely cease to exist.²²⁶

Falguières draws extensive parallels between what she terms '*le monstre Schwittersien*'²²⁷ and various examples of *Wunderkammer*, but her conjectures move far from what is known of Schwitters' working method and the extent and dimensions of the Merzbau. She does not question the credibility of the few sources she consults (Richter, Steinitz, Arp), cites only those which accentuate the menacing and sepulchral aspects of the grottos, and states that *all* visitors felt threatened by both artist and work. She disregards the work of Schmalenbach, Elderfield and Elger, portraying the Merzbau as a gigantic parasite that penetrated ceilings and eventually filled the whole of Schwitters' house.²²⁸

Dorothea Dietrich, who locates the studio in the privacy of the family apartment, describes the Merzbau as a defensive response to the social and political predicaments of its age, 'a lifelong salvaging operation to reclaim personal wholeness and control in the face of fragmentation and chaos'.²²⁹ Relying heavily on the *Veilchenheft*, she claims that grottos of perverted sexuality provide the physical and conceptual foundation of the Merzbau,²³⁰ and on this basis, identifies two discourses of tradition and modernity that she attempts to unite under the concepts of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* as expounded by Oswald Spengler in his *Decline of the West*. The first, according to Dietrich, 'implied the reign of the soul over the intellect',

225 Ibid., 152.

226 Appendix 1, ¶10. Dietrich regards this passage differently, writing of its 'matter-of-fact' style; Dietrich 1993, 187.

227 Falguières 1994, 157.

228 Ibid., 155.

229 Ibid., 181.

230 Dietrich 1993, 193. She also claims that nationalist ideologies constitute what she terms its 'heartland'; *ibid.* 195. In a later article Dietrich argues that the subterranean chambers of the Merzbau provided 'the hidden staging grounds of [Schwitters'] male modernist anxiety'; Dietrich 1998, 231.

while the second was ‘characterized by chaos [and] signalled a moment of cultural decline’.²³¹ The rigid agenda that Dietrich attributes to the Merzbau frequently conflicts with her accounts of its appearance. She claims, for instance, that the collaged material of the grottos was hidden in the recesses of the columns, but also that the grottos functioned like museum displays or shop windows.²³² The ‘seemingly impermeable’ outer geometrical structures, whose ‘unifying molded shell’ she regards as illustrative of the power of authority and tradition, is likewise difficult to reconcile with her statement that the Merzbau’s exterior remained in constant flux.²³³

In her study of the Merzbau, Elizabeth Burns Gamard takes Steinitz’s anecdote of the secret grottos to an extreme by claiming that the Merzbau was ‘all but hidden from view’ from beginning to end.²³⁴ She pays little attention to its public aspects, declaring that it ‘at once responded to the outside world while remaining wholly removed from it’,²³⁵ and her location of the work in Schwitters’ own apartment is used as prime evidence of its deliberately intimate nature.²³⁶ In addition, Gamard’s persistent reference to Schwitters’ embrace of alchemical tenets as an interpretative guide to the objects in the ‘friendship caves’, which she locates in the ‘inner sanctum’ of the Merzbau, must be regarded as entirely speculative.²³⁷ Gamard herself notes that her interpretation relies on a highly selective reading, and admits that there is no explicit evidence that Schwitters was interested in the occult.²³⁸ For the Merzbau to function as an artwork at all in a ritualized system of privacy, opacity and subterfuge, Gamard presents the idea of Merz as a counterpart to the Merzbau, a non-elitist,

231 Ibid., 180. Spengler’s era of Kultur ended around 1789, after which Zivilisation represented the descent into the apocalypse. To confine Schwitters’ work to the framework of Spengler’s theories is doubly restrictive because although Dietrich writes of Kultur and Zivilisation as dichotomies, Spengler presents them as part of an organic process.

232 Ibid., 166, 185, 194.

233 Ibid., 203.

234 Gamard 2000, 8. Gamard states that there was virtually no natural light in the Merzbau.

235 Ibid., 6.

236 Ibid., 8. This error is repeated on the back cover of the book. The caption to Fig. 30, however, locates the Merzbau on the ground floor.

237 Ibid., 103. Similarly problematical is her theory that Roman Catholic doctrine provides a key to an understanding of Schwitters’ work; Schwitters was a member of the Lutheran church, and by his own admission an agnostic.

238 Ibid., 38, 64.

non-transcendental art, ‘not [...] intended as a project to be pursued in isolation’.²³⁹ Merz and the Merzbau are irreconcilable here; Gamard offers no explanation of why the artist should have been so conspiratorial about expressing his search for a wholesale redemption of humanity.²⁴⁰

Many anecdotes and legends attached to the Merzbau, whether in original or modified form, seem inconsequential in themselves, but taken together, they are of considerable significance. Their cumulative effect has resulted in a mounting fund of speculative material that has made art-historical analysis of the Merzbau increasingly difficult. To start from one or more of the premises that this was a largely surreptitious artwork, situated in private living quarters and created by an artist with little regard for family, friends, neighbours or social issues, results in a picture of a work proliferating largely in its own hermetic environment. This approach admits of few functional, transformative or evolutionary processes and leads to a portrayal of the Merzbau as a non-developmental, non-interactive construction, which in turn largely obviates the need for chronological accuracy about the various stages of its development. In addition, this picture is at odds with so much of what is known about the Merzbau (and its creator) that interpretations of this kind invariably display internal contradictions, as may be seen in Falguières museal catacombs, Dietrich’s ‘all-encompassing’ yet ‘ever-expanding’ Merzbau and Gamard’s ‘technological enterprise in the spiritual sense’.²⁴¹

A different kind of legend appeared in the 1960s when the focus shifted to the extempore aspects of Schwitters’ working method. The Merzbau was described as a spontaneous work, in metaphors that ranged far beyond both the pre-war avant garde’s use of chance to undermine aesthetic traditions and the random expansion Schwitters attributed to the KdeE: ‘valleys, hollows and grottos appear, which then lead a new life of their own within the

239 Ibid., 185

240 Ibid., 32, 183. Her conflicting perspectives on Schwitters’ approach lead to further conflicting statements: she declares that ‘Merz, like nature, is conceptually transparent’, yet also contends that conceptual transparency is by definition alien to Merz; *ibid.*, 59, 169.

241 Dietrich 1993, 164; Gamard 2000, 183:

whole.’²⁴² Höch and Jahns, for instance, attribute ‘a life of its own’ to the whole column; Richter writes that it ‘burst the room apart at the seams’ and Arp describes constructions ‘forcing their way upwards through [...] abysses and fissures’.²⁴³ Even Ernst Schwitters, whose vantage point was generally more dispassionate, alludes to ‘free-standing works that suddenly “grew” together’.²⁴⁴ Art historians of the time also promoted the idea of the Merzbau’s animate nature, often with echoes of the rampant foliages of science fiction or Frankenstein’s monster. Werner Haftmann claims that ‘the intention [of the Merzbau] was for things to create a space of their own’,²⁴⁵ Werner Schmalenbach writes that its upper part ‘formed itself in varying heights’,²⁴⁶ William Rubin that ‘anti-art materials left the surfaces of [Schwitters’] collages and began to form the components of the Merzbau [...] freestanding objects [...] began to merge with the furniture’, while Kenneth Coutts-Smith envisages a Merz studio where ‘heaps of disparate objects, each piece waiting, as it were, its turn, themselves formed spontaneously assembled sculptures’.²⁴⁷ Rosemarie Haag-Bletter cites the story of the evicted tenants to embellish her dramatic portrayal of the Merzbau’s development in terms of a vengeful behemoth, a ‘cancerous growth’ with ‘twisted tentacles’ and of ‘grotesque’ character – grotesque both in the modern and original sense (i.e. referring to grottos).²⁴⁸ Such renderings generally sidestep the physical evolution of the Merzbauten; in effect, potential debate about levels of meaning is circumvented by shifting the focus to the supposed autonomy of the material and its control of the artist.²⁴⁹

Roger Cardinal was the first to undertake a comparative study of the reception of the

242 See Appendix I.

243 Berlin 1989, 210; Jahns 1982; Richter 1965/1978, 153; Arp 1972.

244 Düsseldorf 1971, 17.

245 Haftmann 1961/1965, 187.

246 [in wechselnde Höhe von selbst gebildet hatte.] Schmalenbach 1967a, 142.

247 Rubin 1968, 53, 56; Coutts-Smith 1970, 122.

248 Haag-Bletter 1977, 99.

249 The idea that Merzbau was involuntarily motivated can still be found (if less commonly than in earlier years); e.g. the suggestion that KdeE was ‘unconsciously modelled on the plague columns familiar in various East European towns’; Harbison 1998, 162-3.

Hannover Merzbau.²⁵⁰ As one of the few commentators to highlight the inconsistency of the sources, he also suggests that the Merzbau has become its own reception, contrasting its actual fate with the robust myths that proliferate ‘as a disparate amalgam of recollection, hearsay and conjecture’.²⁵¹ Ernst Nündel saw the Merzbau’s legendary heritage as integral to the nature of Merz and wholly in accordance with the artist’s intentions. He concluded that:

The Merzbau, destroyed in 1943, continues growing, in the memory of those who saw it [...] in the speculations of art historians. To each his/her own (concept of the) Merzbau. In this state it approaches the idea of Merz, the idea of continuous recasting, of an artistic process without bounds, without beginning and without end.²⁵²

Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann is highly critical of writings on the Merzbau, arguing that most are dominated by speculative discussions about the grottos (thus tacitly attributing the source of the Merzbau’s resilient myths and legends in part to Schwitters himself).²⁵³ She dismisses analyses that rely too heavily on eyewitness reports that she refers to as ‘demonstrably pure invention’ and compares the reception of the work to Schwitters’ arbitrary, unsystematic construction of the KdeE.²⁵⁴ She concludes that the destruction of the Merzbau has led to an accumulation of readings that constitute mere re-interpretations of interpretations, so that writing on the Merzbau has become an independent activity with a dynamic of its own, creating a new discourse that has little bearing on the original.²⁵⁵

As a result of the paucity of original documents and photos, eyewitness reports, important as they are to any analysis, created from the first a plethora of misconceptions about the Hannover Merzbau. In addition, more than once in the reception we find the memory of one brief visit treated as a definitive account, one vague reminiscence taken at face value as an authentic report and one supposition becoming another’s indisputable fact. It is, moreover,

250 Cardinal 1996, 197.

251 Ibid., 193.

252 [Der Merzbau [...] 1943 zerstört, wächst weiter: in der Erinnerung derer, die ihn noch gesehen haben [...] in den Spekulationen der Kunsthistoriker. Jedem seinen eigenen (Begriff vom) Merzbau. In diesem Zustand kommt er der Idee von Merz noch näher, der Idee von fortwährender Umgestaltung, vom Kunstprozess ohne Grenzen, ohne Anfang und Ende.] Nündel 1981, 58.

253 Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 179.

254 Ibid. 26-7.

255 Ibid.

often forgotten that Schwitters' contemporaries witnessed the Merzbau at various stages of its development. The mountain of commentary that has accrued since Schwitters' death, while undoubtedly important in preserving and evaluating the Merzbauten for posterity, has sometimes resulted less in explanation and clarification than in the dissemination and fabrication of considerable misunderstandings about these works.

2. Problems presented by translations

Some of the common misconceptions and uncertainties about the appearance and location of the Hannover Merzbau may be traced to inaccuracies and rephrasing in English renderings of German texts. These inevitably augment the difficulties of reconstructing the Merzbau's evolution and of assessing Schwitters' attitude towards the work.

Schmalenbach's 1967 study of Schwitters quotes a passage from the *Veilchenheft* (see Appendix I) that is rendered very freely in translation:

I pick it up, take it home, and attach it and paint it, always keeping in mind the rhythm of the whole. Then a day comes when I realise I have a corpse on my hands – relics of a movement in art that is now passé. So what happens is that I leave them alone only I cover them up either wholly or partly with other things, making clear that they are being downgraded. As the structure grows bigger and bigger, valleys, hollows, caves appear, and these lead a life of their own within the over-all structure. The juxtaposed surfaces give rise to forms twisting in every direction, spiraling upward.²⁵⁶

Schmalenbach's account of the Merzbau also contains errors in the English version: for example the German *Parterre* [ground floor] is translated as 'above ground floor', *klare Farben* [bright colours] as 'pastel colours' and *Boden* [attic] as 'ground floor'.

Schmalenbach's original *ein weltoffener Eremit in seinem weltfernen Gehäuse* [a cosmopolitan hermit in his unworldly cell] is translated as 'a refuge [sic] from the world in his

256 See Appendix I, ¶10. 'So I find some object, sense that belongs to the KdeE, take it with me, glue it on, plaster it over, paint it according to the rhythm of the total effect, and one day it turns out that some new path has to be created, [one] that wholly or partially passes over the corpse of the object. As a result, there are everywhere objects that overlap, either partially or wholly, as an explicit sign of their invalidation as individual units. As the ribs grow, valleys, hollows and grottos appear, which then lead a new life of their own within the whole. In that intersecting directional lines are connected by surfaces, winding screw-like shapes are created. The whole is covered with an arrangement of cubes of the most strictly geometrical form, enveloping twisted or broken up shapes until they completely cease to exist.'

own drawing-room' and his '*so sehr die einzige Raison d'être des Merzbaus, dass der Mensch in ihm keinen Platz mehr fand, und Raum um Raum aus ihm verdrängt wurde* [this was so much the raison d'être of the Merzbau that people had no place in it any longer and were driven out of it room by room] becomes 'the man who made it was driven out of it'.

The ready availability of English translations of Richter and Steinitz has no doubt contributed to their becoming one of the most frequently quoted sources, but again, these deviate in part from the German originals. It is, for example, instructive to compare the original version of Steinitz (Steinitz 1963) with the English rendering (Steinitz 1968), not only because the latter contains translational errors but also because of changed phraseology and textual additions. Steinitz's quotation of Schwitters' statement that '*zum Schluss wird die Säule mit noch zehn anderen Säulen als riesige Form im Raum stehen*' is translated as 'finally the column will stand with ten other columns as gigantic forms in space', although the German *Form* is clearly singular. The English edition renders '*Zuerst stand da etwas im Atelier*' [lit. 'At first something stood in the studio'] with 'One day, something appeared in the studio', a phrase associated with fiction and fairy tales.²⁵⁷ The account of the caves is augmented by a melodramatic sentence lacking in the German: 'In each cave was a sediment of impressions and emotions, with significant literary and symbolistic allusions.' In 1961 Steinitz wrote that 'the Column was a repository of Schwitters' own problems, a cathedral built not only around his erotic misery but around all the joy and misery of his time'.²⁵⁸ In her memoirs, the social component implicit in this last phrase is omitted, so that the Merzbau is portrayed primarily as a personal drama and projection of Schwitters' inner strivings. Richter's indistinct but impressive picture of the Merzbau also differs in part in the English translation. The latter doubles the amount of space the column occupied on his first visit, for example; the German original states that it filled about a quarter of the room, the English

257 Steinitz 1968, 91.

258 Quoted in Elger 1984/1999, 98.

version about half the room.²⁵⁹

As a final example, Gamard's interpretation of Schwitters' terminology also sometimes leaves room for doubt. She maintains, for instance, that when the artist refers to 'rooms' occupied by the Merzbau, he means thematic areas,²⁶⁰ and her analysis of the 1935 *Erinnerung an Molde* grotto [Fig. 35] is dependent on a misreading of its name. Gamard states that the name refers not only to the Norwegian town but also to mould, in which she detects a symbol of life, love, death, decay and rebirth, a reminder of the 'exceedingly visceral' material in Schwitters' 1920 studio and also 'in retrospect [...] a preliminary study for [...] the Merzbarn', prophetic of its 'organic edifice of fluid forms'. Till now I have not found any German dictionary which lists this meaning of the word.²⁶¹

The task of checking translated material is clearly an arduous one and in many cases unnecessary. Nonetheless, if a theory about the Merzbau is to be based on a translated sentence or phrase, it is, as I hope I have shown, advisable to undertake an examination of the original text beforehand.

259 Richter 1964/1978, 156; Richter 1965/1978, 152.

260 Gamard 2000, 94-6. She includes here the *Biedermeierzimmer* and *Stijlzimmer*, which were not part of the Merzbau but located in Schwitters' own apartment (Fig. 7).

261 *Ibid.*, 175-7. She describes mould as exemplifying 'the consistency of Schwitters' artistic program', although also maintains that deliberate inconsistency was part of his method; 'according to Schwitters, any revelation of the work's hermeneutic content [...] would inherently compromise the work itself.' *Ibid.*, 38. Her translation of the German *bauen* (p. 199) as 'to farm' is also incorrect. Gamard's work is, on balance, extremely unreliable.

CHAPTER FOUR THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE

I Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine in more detail the public and private aspects of the Merzbauten that have emerged from the evidence of the previous chapters. In Part II, I will focus on Schwitters' first published description of his studio constructions and on the literary and social context in which it first appeared. I will continue by providing examples from the reception history of differing approaches to the private and public facets of the work, then offer my own interpretation of the complex interaction of public and private in the Merzbau during the 1920s and 1930s. In Part III, I will extend this discussion to columns and environments that Schwitters created in exile.

II The Hannover Merzbau

1. The *Veilchenheft*

In the reception history of the Merzbau, one passage above all others has served as a guide to the content and form of the Hannover Merzbau and hence as the key to understanding the artist's motivation and ultimate aims. It occurs in the *Veilchenheft*, issue 21 of Schwitters' Merz periodical, and few analyses omit direct or indirect reference to it, so that it has come to bear a canonical status seldom afforded to 'Le Merzbau' of 1933, Schwitters' correspondence or the photographic evidence. Numerous strands of Merzbau reception can ultimately be traced to what amounts to little more than one paragraph from 'Ich und meine Ziele', the final piece in the *Veilchenheft*, written in December 1930. For all the prominence given to this description of the Cathedral of Erotic Misery (KdeE), it constitutes only about a quarter of a personal statement that in itself seems more of an appendage to the *Veilchenheft* than an integral part. In an overall context, then, this passage is relatively brief, and I would suggest that unless one were looking for it explicitly, it would hardly stand out in what is first and

foremost a literary anthology, except as a curious aside. Of the few art historians who have questioned its validity, Dorothea Dietrich remarks that here it is ‘difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction’,¹ while Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann, in her study of the room constructions of Schwitters and Lissitzky, regards the whole of ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ as a ‘poetic essay’ [*poetische Essay*] rather than a disinterested documentation.² She draws comparisons with Schwitters’ cabaret performances of the 1920s and his account of the Cathedral of Erotic Misery, which she considers to be a type of ‘set piece’ [*Versatzstück*] expressly written to uphold the myth of the artist as discerning outsider and lone prophet,³ and concludes that the account of the grottos is irrelevant to an analysis of the Merzbau.

Although this description, written half way between the beginnings of the KdeE in 1923 and the final extensions to the Merzbau in winter 1936, is often understood as paradigmatic of the entire Hannover Merzbau, it should be noted that it pertains only to a single column and was written before the studio became a sculptural environment (and before the name ‘Merzbau’ came into use). In Chapter Two, I also noted that the wording of this text poses many interpretative difficulties that have hardly been addressed to date. By 1930 Schwitters was an experienced author in many fields, and his opaque phraseology and effective dismissal of the content of the grottos must be seen as calculated gestures that require more consideration than has been accorded to them till now in the reception. The account of the column is, moreover, invariably isolated from its context, though it is no more than an excerpt from an essay that Schwitters presumably expected to be read as a whole. In this section I propose to reassess this passage, first by considering it as part of ‘Ich und meine Ziele’, secondly by examining the circumstances in which it was written, and finally by discussing its relationship to the *Veilchenheft*.

1 Dietrich 1993, 192.

2 Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 179.

3 Ibid., 62.

2. 'Ich und meine Ziele' as a manifesto

As the title 'Ich und meine Ziele' [Myself and My Aims] indicates, this essay may be regarded as belonging to the category of that indispensable adjunct of early 20th century avant-gardism, the artist manifesto. After his exposure to the rhetoric of Zurich Dada and the Berlin Sturm gallery, Schwitters became, as Andrew Webber notes in his survey of the European avant-garde, 'one of the masters of the avant-garde manifesto',⁴ and 'Ich und meine Ziele' (Appendix I) employs some familiar devices of the genre: we find, for instance, striking typography, extravagant literary artifice, the introduction of a utopian discourse, and tensions emerging from a drive to engage with and simultaneously reject the present. 'Ich und meine Ziele' also reiterates many of Schwitters' frequently expressed standpoints: his condemnation of the political exploitation of art, his assertion of the independence of the artist and his claim that art can free mankind from everyday burdens. At the same time, the manner in which he expresses himself deviates both from the conventions of the artist manifesto and from his earlier polemical texts, and his markedly negative tone is quite out of character.

At the outset Schwitters expresses concern about the co-opting of art for political purposes.⁵ He states that his hopes for the present are founded in his trust in a powerful contemporary *Formwille* [will to form] to act as a bulwark against political trends such as the calculated indoctrination of young people by radical right-wing and left-wing parties. Yet he repeatedly qualifies his insistence on the ineffectuality of political extremists by identifying numerous counter-positions and adversaries - including an indiscriminating or censorious public, reactionary artists, art critics and politicians - whom he fears or with whom he is disinclined to engage. In its confrontation with the present, 'Ich und meine Ziele' reworks the artist manifesto by employing a strategy of self-defence rather than attack.

4 Webber 2004, 104.

5 This may be a reference to attempts to involve Schwitters in political propaganda; cf. letters from the Lower Saxony communist party (KPD) to Schwitters, SAB 1986, 401-2.

In late 1930, Schwitters evidently believed it was necessary to take a stand in the face of a crisis in both art and politics. Stasis emerges as a different kind of metaphor, however, from the expressions of challenge and resistance in his earlier apologia (such as his ‘Tran’ texts), which here give way to passivity, resignation and inertia. The vocabulary is one of indifference and detachment; he writes of preservation, foundations, roots, peace, forgetting, self-immersion, distance, cold judgment. Rather than respond to his opponents, he chooses to address a like-minded audience whom he courts with the formal *Sie* before adopting the informal *Euch* in the final paragraphs, and from whom he makes little attempt to alienate himself apart from the occasional crudely insulting phrase (*ihr könnt mich alle*)⁶ and the in part rebarbative description of the KdeE. Hitherto a vigorous and optimistic self-publicist, here Schwitters expresses reluctance to reveal too much about a seven-year old column that he writes about for the first time. He appeals to his readers to show understanding for what he admits is a difficult work, but is evasive about its content, gives no indication of its location and does not provide a photo. Compared with the self-vindicating, even schoolmasterly tone of the main body of the essay, his ironical description of the column reads as an awkward, even irrelevant digression, which may explain why these two paragraphs are invariably treated as a self-contained textual entity rather than an extract.

In the context of the whole essay, Schwitters’ vacillation about the future of the column seems to reflect a more explicit unease about his own prospects as an artist. His art may, as he insists, mirror the age and even constitute an alternative to religion, but he admits that its revelatory and spiritual aspects attract no public interest; thus enfeebled, it presents only the forlorn offer of a ‘break from your stresses and strains’ [¶7]. The utopian aspirations of the manifesto and his faith in the power of art to create ‘new people who will create a new

6 Generally translated as ‘Kiss my ass’. This still common term of abuse refers to a line from Goethe’s drama *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773), uttered by the defiant Götz to besieging troops from the window of his castle. Götz is the ‘last knight’ to resist the tyrannical forces of a new era in which he foretells that the ignoble will rule with deceit and the honourable will fall into their net.

society’⁷ find conditional expression in his anticipation of a ‘great time [...] when we will influence a whole generation’ (§11). He envisages a future when his art will be self-evident, even passé, but not in his own lifetime. Humanity (bar the unredeemable art critic) will eventually change, but not till after his death.

Schwitters’ earlier attempts at self-presentation had always been undertaken with the explicit or implied backing of some collaborative and accommodating circle, but the manner in which he formulates his aims in this one-man manifesto suggests that such co-operation within the intellectual community could no longer be taken for granted. By 1930, many groups and institutions in Germany on which he relied for support (such as the Bauhaus, the *Deutsche Werkbund* and the Sturm gallery) had fallen prey to internal political strife or were on the verge of collapse.⁸ Paris had resumed its role as a centre for artistic experiment, but *cercle et carré* had disintegrated a few months previously and its successor *abstraction-cr ation* had not yet been founded. Typography, Schwitters concedes, is the one field in which he can rely on a modest interaction with the public domain and earn a degree of success (as reflected in the elegant new layout and format of *Merz 21* itself). In contrast, his art, as represented by the column, is, he claims, understood only by three distant friends: a Berlin art dealer (Walden), a Swiss architectural theorist (Giedion) and a Paris-based artist (Arp). Schwitters’ increasing isolation leads him to present a negative rendering of the manifesto in which the declamatory group performance is replaced by a monologue in the form of an apologia for his exodus from the public stage. As such, ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ reads as a requiem for the artist manifesto.⁹

7 [Das [...] Ziel der Kunst ist Schaffung der neuen Menschen, die die neue Gesellschaft bilden werden.] Schwitters 1927c, 272.

8 Adolf Behne wrote in 1929 that Constructivism was by now considered dead; Behne 1929, 153.

9 As an adjunct to the *Veilchenheft*, *Neues Merzbild* [New Merz Picture] of 1931 (CR 1772) offers a visual counterpart to ‘Ich und meine Ziele’. Elderfield concludes that: ‘the title as well as structural method [of the *Neues Merzbild*] constitutes virtually a manifesto [...] Its formal vocabulary [...] suggests that Schwitters was trying to synthesise the methods of his most ambitious Dada and Constructivist works [...] Virtually all the contrasts of the 1920s are encapsulated in *Neues Merzbild*. It is Dada and Constructivist, anecdotal and abstract, environmentally allusive and self-contained. It has machinist connotations but is patently handmade. It is vividly coloured in part yet tonal in conception [...] The elements are both geometric and organic.’ Elderfield 1985, 196.

A further feature of 'Ich und meine Ziele' is the topos of absence. Schwitters repeatedly emphasizes the gulf between himself and what he regards as an apathetic society open to manipulation and exploitation, and professes his desire for a life that is undisturbed, unencumbered and removed from the obligatory urban stage of the Weimar avant-garde. Absence characterizes his present, his future and his past: in the metaphor of himself as a violet, an ineffectual figure whose protest has become irrelevant to an intractable age, in the doleful (if ultimately vindicated) prophecy of his posthumous fame, and in the wry description of a Cathedral of Erotic Misery with a meaningless name, obsolete grottos, a failed lighting system, a malfunctioning organ, a deserted exhibition, headless and limbless dolls, disintegrating flowers, a vanished city and a lost smile.¹⁰

Another manifestation of absence in this lengthy documentation of Schwitters' aims and attitudes in 1930 is the extraordinary omission of Merz, used only once as a prefix [Merz-bilder] (§10). In its professed rejection of all dogma, Merz had till now provided him with a resilient aesthetic framework that he had come to identify with his own person: in the previous issue of his Merz magazine he had written succinctly, 'Now I call myself Merz'.¹¹ The very title of the essay, however, conflicts with his statement that 'Merz has no programme with predefined aims, on principle'.¹² It might at least be expected that he would introduce his column, whose development, he states, parallels his aesthetic maturation over seven years (§10), as the epitome of the structural equilibrium and dynamic adaptivity of Merz. Instead, the KdeE is presented, not in terms of the *Merzgesamtkunstwerk* that Schwitters had once declared his goal,¹³ but, albeit ambivalently, as an incongruous combination of Dada, Cubism and the Gothic.

10 In a speech of 1922, Thomas Mann called for a 'democratic eroticism' to satisfy the need for collective action while safeguarding individual rights - a middle course between aesthetic isolation and the extinction of the individual in a universalized society. In Mann's view, the 'democratic Eros' could provide a substitute for the regressive anti-democratic bonding offered by right-wing organisations. Mann 1923, 34-37.

11 [Jetzt nenne ich mich selbst MERZ.] Schwitters 1927b, 253.

12 [Merz hat kein Programm mit vorherbestimmtem Ziel, aus Prinzip.] Letter to Herwarth Walden, 1.12.20, Nündel 1974, 42. This statement is repeated almost exactly in 'Les Merztableaux', 1932 (see Appendix II).

13 [Mein Ziel ist das Merzgesamtkunstwerk.] Schwitters 1920a, 79.

Isabel Schulz has noted that ‘though the fundamental compositional principles of Merz remained the basis and centre of [Schwitters’] creative work [...] the term Merz disappears almost entirely from the titles of his work after 1931’.¹⁴ The reasons for this can only be guessed at (and from 1933 may have been obligatory), but in as far as Schwitters defined Merz as a creative interaction between artist and public, this potential no longer existed from his perspective in 1930. Unable to sustain the dynamic essential to Merz, he seems to have seen no alternative but to retreat into inner emigration, that is, to practise a form of resistance in a private sphere in the face of social and political repression. This development was arguably a factor in his decision to identify himself and his art not through Merz - an active process of provocation involving a complex spectrum of negotiable parameters - but through the metaphor of passive erotic misery as embodied in the KdeE.

Most aspects of Merzbau reception, however mutually exclusive, can be traced to this passage on the KdeE, and as a characteristic example of Schwitters’ use of ambiguity and multiple perspectives, it is of course open to alternative interpretations. Much of ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ centres round the drive towards abstraction as the art of the future. The passage preceding the account of the KdeE explicitly defines the *Ursonate* and *Schacko* as abstract literature,¹⁵ and Schwitters quotes directly from *Merz 8/9 Nasci*, repeating Lissitzky’s credo of an art that ‘does not represent but presents’ [*nicht darstellt, sondern da-stellt*] (¶7).¹⁶ The disjunctive narratives of the column bear no ostensible relation to his present concerns, but Schwitters emphasises the importance of abstraction in his description of the column’s evolution; even the grottos incorporate possible pointers to a modest resignification as a new

14 Schulz 2000, 249.

15 See earlier version of *Schacko*, SAB 1986, no. 223, also LW 2, 432. Schwitters had pared the story down considerably by 1930.

16 *Nasci* also stated that ‘the route from Cubism to the Constructivists is not so long any more’ [Der Weg vom Kubismus bis zu den Konstruktivisten ist nicht mehr weit], offering the opportunity of bypassing Dada altogether; Schwitters/Lissitzky 1924.

miniature white-washed metropolis, with building lights, Persil advertisements,¹⁷ toy houses and Schwitters himself as official typographer. The first and last object encountered in the KdeE is urine, which evokes disgust, but whose healing and fertilizing properties were valued then as today.¹⁸ References to ‘new life’ and ‘Christmas’ may signal an alternative discourse, as may the reproduction of the collage *Der erste Tag* [The First Day]¹⁹ preceding ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ (Fig. 55); both Szeemann and Osswald-Hoffmann trace allusions to the biblical creation myth in this passage.²⁰ The *Veilchenheft* can also be read as heralding a new beginning for the studio constructions (including the incomplete Column of Life²¹) that were to develop into a sculptural interior in the following months and, significantly, as indicated by ‘Das Grosse E’ and ‘Le Merzbau’ (Appendix II), re-engage with the concept of Merz.

3. The socio-political background

The disintegration of liberal Weimar culture with which the German intellectual community was confronted from 1930 onwards produced a widespread malaise among left-wing authors that is reflected in Schwitters’ subdued, occasionally bitter frame of mind in ‘Ich und meine Ziele’.²² (In the *Zeitromane* [socio-critical novels] of this year, the most common theme is that of suicide.²³) The Weimar Republic had inherited the Wilhelmine belief that culture was a moral and political issue, and at the end of the decade, prominent artists, writers and composers found themselves subjected to increasing vilification by the *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* [Combat League for German Culture], and the *Deutsche Kunstgesellschaft* [German Art Society], whose publications habitually targeted art and artists of the

17 Schwitters’ lectures on contemporary design (1929-30) included slides of Persil advertisements; see SAB 1987, nos. 328-30. In *Das neue Frankfurt* 1929, to which KS also contributed, Ludwig Hilbersheimer describes neon advertising as the new architecture (Hilbersheimer 1929).

18 The urine recalls Tzara’s prediction that ‘I shall one day return to you like your urine reviving you to the joy of living the mid-wife wind’; Tzara 1919a.

19 CR 1040.

20 Szeemann 1994, 255; Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 97.

21 Letter from Helma Schwitters to Katherine Dreier, 13.1.31, BLY.

22 Cf. Trommler 1982 and Sontheimer 1962, 384.

23 Winkler 1982, 367.

revolutionary post-war period as scapegoats for the post-1929 crisis.²⁴ An example of what Schwitters condemns as the indoctrination of young people (Appendix I, ¶6) had occurred earlier in 1930 when the *Kampfbund* held a Youth Festival during which non-German influences in the arts were condemned as damaging to the German race, with personal appearances of the new champions of the nation's 'eternal values' in the person of 'spiritual heroes' [*Geistesheroen*] such as Goebbels and Goering.²⁵

In the early 1920s, Schwitters' collage techniques, his choice of materials and his own person had often been seized on by the press as insalubrious, contaminating, schizophrenic and a threat to the nation, and the image of Schwitters undermining what was perceived as the true German spirit was as widespread then as it was after 1933.²⁶ As Schmalenbach notes: 'in spite of [Schwitters'] noisy insistence on a pure artistic standpoint, his art was not unfolded in the shelter of aesthetic insularity but in an extremely vulnerable sphere of his own making.'²⁷ If public hostility was not new to Schwitters, the nature of such opposition had changed considerably by 1930, however, as had the standing of the arts as a whole. There was more organized and more official resistance to liberal Weimar culture, exemplified by a law that had come into force in 1927 (sufficiently rigorous to survive till 1935), aimed at protecting German youth from erotic literature.²⁸ Demands for stricter censorship grew more vociferous in the wake of the Great Depression, and its advocates were by no means all right-wing. As Kurt Tucholsky commented: 'The censor of 1903 wore a monocle and was conservative: the censor of 1930 wears horn-rimmed glasses, is a member of the Social Democrats and

24 In 1930 the journal of the *Kampfbund* denounced Schwitters as a 'brush-wielding hack' [*pinselnder Literat*] in 1930; *Mitteilung des Kampfbundes für deutsche Kultur*, April/May 1930, 39. For the attacks of the German Art Society, see Clinefelter 2005, 34ff.

25 Brenner 1963, 17-19. A second such festival in Potsdam in 1931 was dominated by themes of race, blood, honour and sacrifice; *Mitteilungen des Kampfbundes für deutsche Kultur* 3 (1931), 5/6, 33-51. A contemporary film about this event, *Der Kampf ums Dritte Reich* [The Struggle for the Third Reich] is in the Bundesarchiv Berlin.

26 Even the lack of a position could be seen as dangerous; as a member of the Kestner Society, for instance, Schwitters came under attack on the grounds that the art it promoted was unusable as propaganda (Germundson 1997, 208).

27 Schmalenbach 1978, 28. This two-language catalogue translates 'einer durch ihn selbst höchst verunsicherten Sphäre' as 'sphere of his own choosing'.

28 *Gesetz zur Bewahrung der Jugend vor Schund- und Schmutzschriften*, or *Schmutz- und Schundgesetz* [trash- and filth law], 18.12.26.

sympathizes with the centre.²⁹ From this time onwards, many of Schwitters' collaborative efforts were politically directed. As a founding member of the *abstrakten hannover* in 1927,³⁰ he hoped, as he wrote to Katherine Dreier, to counteract reactionary trends, but a considerable disparity soon emerged between the aims of the *abstrakten* and the reception of their work. Despite their participation in numerous exhibitions, the group sold very little; in Hannover they were tolerated but at the same time ignored by officialdom,³¹ though one local critic condemned their work as 'a strange degeneration'.³²

In 1930, Schwitters joined controversial local activists such as Christof Spengemann and Carl Credé to launch the *Kampfstelle gegen Zensur und Kulturreaktion* [Branch of the League to Combat Censorship and Cultural Reaction] and the *Ring Hannoversche Schriftsteller* [Hannover Writers' Circle].³³ In late 1930, Schwitters, Spengemann and Credé planned a *matinée, Künstler in Front (KIF)*, the proceeds of which were to be donated to artists in need. The vehement opposition to this event must have been unexpected and was certainly out of proportion to the content of the programme (Fig. 113). The right-wing press denounced the event as a showpiece of the left, the organizers were subjected to threats and radical students planned to disrupt the proceedings with physical violence. Many items were cancelled and the

29 [Der Zensor aus dem Jahre 1903 trug ein Monokel und war konservativ; der Zensor aus dem Jahre 1930 trägt eine Hornbrille, ist Mitglied der sozialdemokratischen Partei und steht dem Zentrum nahe]; *Die Weltbühne*, 29.4.1930, Nr. 18, 647.

30 [Wir haben uns nämlich zusammengeschlossen zum Kampf gegen die Reaktion.] Letter to Katherine Dreier 4.5.27, Nündel 1974, 113. For the foundation of the *abstrakten hannover*, see a letter from Helma Schwitters to the Michel family, 7.11.1927, SAH: Düsseldorf 1992, 255 ff; Hannover 1987: Valstar 1987.

31 The Hannover *Kunstverein* showed the works of the *abstrakten hannover* outside normal exhibition space, often with poor and inaccurate labelling. For more on municipal policies of discouraging displays of avant-garde art, see Katenhusen 2000.

32 [eine seltsame Entartung]; Wilhelm Frerking, *Hannoversches Tageblatt*, 16.11.1928, reproduced in Buchheister 1980, 284. See also letter from Buchheister to Frerking, *ibid.*, 38. Schwitters' work was categorised as 'entartet' as early as 1921; see Weygandt 1921 (Fig. 108). Disappointment with the *abstrakten hannover* set in early; in late 1927, Helma Schwitters wrote; 'We haven't sold a thing at exhibitions and are thoroughly fed up with the whole exhibition business.' Letter to Robert and Ella Michel, 7.11.1927, SAH.

33 The *Kampfstelle* was a branch of a Berlin organisation originally founded to protest the banning of the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* and was supported by the local Social Democrat party and Young Socialist Workers. Spengemann, a socialist who openly criticized Hannover's cultural policies, was later involved with the Resistance and imprisoned with his family in 1937. Credé, a gynaecologist with Communist leanings, wrote plays attacking Weimar's judicial system and in support of abortion. He was imprisoned from 1926-28 for carrying out abortions.

matinée ended in a debacle.³⁴ A contemporaneous (unfinished) drama by Schwitters apparently provides a background to the happenings of December 1930. *Irrenhaus von Sondermann* concerns an event entitled KIF which, like its artist antihero Eduard, is threatened by reactionary forces.³⁵ The play opens with Eduard hanging up an abstract picture and reciting ‘Times are changing/Time’s up/Gone, gone/The world’s turning stupid’, before being confronted by his ultra-conservative father, who smashes the picture to pieces.³⁶ (In Schwitters’ resumé of the plot of what he calls a ‘political piece’, Eduard attempts suicide and is sent to an asylum.³⁷)

The KIF matinée took place on 21 December 1930, and Schwitters finished ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ six days later. Its penultimate paragraph refers directly to a ‘young critic’ whose denunciatory review of KIF declared that ‘we are in 1930, nearly 1931 [...] Today Schwitters is simply impossible [...] Times move on’.³⁸ When Schwitters announced his retirement from public life at the end of the *Veilchenheft*, he may have taken this decision at the time of writing. To find himself branded an anachronism in a period when he perceived himself as working at the forefront of the arts is conceivably reflected in the title of the *Veilchenheft*, doubly apt in that *Veilchen* means not only violet, but also a black eye.

Both Spengemann and Schwitters were disheartened by the collapse of KIF and the lack of support for the groups they founded in 1930.³⁹ In the light of this disillusionment, ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ may be interpreted in terms of Schwitters’ overall response to the deteriorating political climate. With its bursts of bold type, the essay adopts an increasingly defiant tone,

34 For an account of this event and Schwitters’ part in it, see Christof Spengemann, ‘Mit Heinrich beginnend’, unpublished typescript, SAH, also Katenhusen 2000, 241-2.

35 Schwitters 1930b. The description of the antihero as a ‘blumiger Dichter’ [flowery poet] invites association with the *Veilchenheft*.

36 [Es kehrt die Zeit/Die Zeit ist um/Vorbei, vorbei/Die Welt wird dumm]. Ibid. *Die Zeit ist um* was the name of the revue originally planned for KIF on 21.12.28. A film was shown instead, which provoked a riot; see note 34.

37 LW 4, 342, dated 23.12.30.

38 [Wir schreiben 1930, bald aber 1931 [...] heute ist Schwitters einfach unmöglich [...]. Die Zeit geht weiter.] Quoted in Rischbieter 1978, 270.

39 The city council of Hannover was in conservative hands, leading local newspapers favoured nationalist oriented literature, and local cultural organisations, reliant on official subsidies, rejected co-operation with Spengemann and Schwitters. For more on municipal policies towards local artists, see Katenhusen 1998.

and the name Cathedral of Erotic Misery, highlighting various aspects of the theme of social and individual deficiency, malfunction, perversion and incontinence, invites interpretation as a commentary on an impotent Weimar democracy and on Schwitters' own impotence as an artist and writer. The description of the partly redundant KdeE is embedded in the recognition that by the end of the decade it was illusory to suppose that artists could exert any form of social or political control. 'Ich und meine Ziele' reveals that 1930 marked a watershed for Schwitters. Merz, as Schwitters wrote in 1920, was 'the liberation from any direction in art',⁴⁰ but a deeply divided society permits little space for the indeterminate, and the omission of Merz from this essay may indicate that he felt the need for more solidarity with what remained of the avant-garde. After public reactions to his activities had convinced him that the avant-garde in Germany faced diminishing support and an increasing number of adversaries, he increasingly turned to Paris in search of new opportunities. Once he found a new grouping through which to define himself – in this case, *abstraction-cr ation* in 1931 – he was once again able to resume his allegiance to Merz (c.f. 'Les Merztableaux', Appendix II).

While Schwitters' first column is suspended between various private and public discourses, the wording of the *Veilchenheft* seems to endorse a form of art that offers a relief from the burdens of everyday life, with particular allusion to the current political crisis. Schwitters wrote this, however, before the rapid deterioration of the political situation in the next two years and before Hitler became a German citizen in 1932, opening the way to his direct participation in German politics.

As a postscript, Schwitters did not, despite his declaration in the *Veilchenheft* that 'I personally prefer to distance myself from political events', retreat entirely from politics after 1930. In 1931 he wrote of voting for the Communists as the only party that could withstand the Nazi threat.⁴¹ In 1932 he became a member of the Social Democratic party, until it was

40 [Merz [ist] die Befreiung von jeder Richtung in der Kunst.] Tran 15 (1920), 71.

41 'Bliebe der Kozi. Aber wer will einen ewigen Kozi im Hause haben? [...] Aber es bleibt schon keine Wahl.' [All that's left is a Communist. But then who wants a Communist round the place all the time? [...] But there seems to

banned in June 1933; he penned satirical texts, ridiculed the swastika and in 1934 made an untitled collage with a cutting showing imprisoned SPD leaders (CR 1948) and apparent references to Hitler, anti-Semitism and the brutal practices of the new regime.⁴² From now on, however, he published his written works either anonymously or under a pseudonym, and when he approached Dreier about a Merzbau in the US, he asked to exhibit it under the name Robert Lee.⁴³

4 ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ within the context of the *Veilchenheft*.

The long delay between the publication of *Merz 20* (1927) and *Merz 21 erstes Veilchenheft* (1931) can be accounted for by Schwitters’ multifarious activities in the intervening years, including his extensive travels in Europe, numerous contracts for his Merz advertising agency, his work as co-organizer and co-author of two large-scale revues that enjoyed considerable local acclaim,⁴⁴ and from January 1929, his regular employment as Hannover’s municipal typographer. *Merz 21 erstes Veilchenheft* is subtitled ‘eine kleine Sammlung von *Merz-dichtungen aller Art*’ [a small collection of Merz poems of all kinds]. It consists of a one-page introduction, two short stories entitled ‘Die zoologische Gartenlotterie’ and ‘Schacko’,⁴⁵ an excerpt from the *Ursonate*, a reproduction of a Merz collage entitled *Der erste Tag* [The First Day]⁴⁶ and the essay ‘Ich und meine Ziele’. Whether ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ should be read as an appendix or as a final Merz poem remains open, but it clearly evinces a number of thematic correspondences with the previous texts.

be no choice.] Letter to Robert Michel, 26.8.31, KSF. Schwitters may also have joined the anti-Nazi *Eiserne Front* [Iron Front]; see Stadtmüller 1997, 177.

42 For an analysis of this collage, see Schulz 2004, 202-3.

43 Letter to Katherine Dreier, 25.11.36, BLY.

44 These were the *Zinnoberfest* [Cinnabar Festival], staged by the *Reichsverband bildender Künstler*, the national association of artists, and the *Fest der Technik* [Festival of Technology], sponsored by the association of technical and scientific societies in Hannover. For more on these events, see KSA 1984, 123-63.

45 *Gartenlotterie*, LW 2, 216-23; *Schacko*, LW 2, 289-92. The former had already been published in newspapers; cf. LW 5, 421. Max Ernst illustrated the French edition (1951); see SAB 1986, 119.

46 CR 1040.

As bizarre tales of deformation and cruelty, the ‘Gartenlotterie’ and ‘Schacko’ fall within the tradition of the German *Grotesk*, one of Schwitters’ favoured literary genres. Both have the moral dimensions of the fable but are inspired by actual events, whether circuitously (a proposed zoo lottery in Hannover)⁴⁷ or directly (the author’s encounter with the parrot’s owner). In the former, the prized animals disposed of in the zoo’s lottery die at the hands of their well-meaning but ultimately ill-fated suburban owners (Fig. 111): in the latter, a petit-bourgeois trio of husband, wife and veterinary surgeon unthinkingly mistreat a parrot in their care. Having plucked out its feathers, this ludicrous naked creature, constantly exhorted to ‘*schäm Dich, Schacko!*’, finally expires.

These tales also function as narratives of disillusionment. Both can be read as allegories with an underlying scenario of the decline and fall of the Weimar avant-garde. The helpless Schacko is reminiscent of Tzara’s 1919 Dada manifesto, in which he declares that art, the ‘parrot word’, ‘needs an operation’.⁴⁸ The ‘Zoologische Gartenlotterie’ is similarly reminiscent of Tzara’s ‘zoo of art’ in the first Dada manifesto of 1916.⁴⁹ Lissitzky’s comment on his *Abstraktenkabinett* provides a further possible link to the *Veilchenheft*: ‘The great international picture revues are like a zoo, where the visitor is roared at by a thousand different beasts at the same time. In my room the objects are not supposed to assault the observer all at once.’⁵⁰ In the meantime, it is the avant-garde who have become the zoo of art; the proud animals of the ‘Gartenlotterie’, like the wretched Schacko, find themselves disposed of as mere pets, no more than a commodity to be sacrificed to a baffled public, meeting their absurd end through society’s blinkered incomprehension. As with ‘Ich und meine Ziele’,

47 When Hannover zoo had to close in 1922, the animals were sold and a lottery was proposed to raise funds for its reopening; c.f. Dittrich 1990, also Fig. 111 and Schwitters 1923d, 130.

48 Tzara 1919b. Doesburg’s De Stijl houses in Drachten, NL, (c. 1921), almost immediately overpainted but now refurbished, were (and still are) nicknamed the *Papegaaienbuurt* (Parrot District).

49 Tzara 1916.

50 [Die grossen internationalen Bilder-Revuen gleichen einem Zoo, wo die Besucher gleichzeitig von tausend verschiedenen Bestien angebrüllt werden. In meinem Raum sollten die Objekte den Beschauer nicht alle auf einmal überfallen.] Quoted in Eindhoven 1965, 58. An article on Dada of 1925 claimed that in Schwitters’ *An Anna Blume* that ‘one believes one hears animal noises, no people speak like that, if at all the insane’. [Man glaubt Tierlaute zu hören, keine Menschen sprechen so, höchstens Irrsinnige.] Jansen 1925, 171-3.

these fables also raise the spectre of Schwitters' vision of himself in 1930 as an emasculated artist whose art has been robbed of its foundations. In each, the possibility of integrating the untameable into a domestic setting proves delusory, reflecting just the predicament facing Schwitters' KdeE in 1930. The bottle of urine that introduced the visitor to the KdeE may be interpreted as a further ironic commentary on a phrase from Tzara's 1919 Dada manifesto: 'art is a pretension warmed by the timidity of the urinary basin, the hysteria born in the studio.'⁵¹

As a parallel to the animal fables of the *Veilchenheft*, the grottos as listed in 'Ich und meine Ziele' may also be read as an elegy recording both Schwitters' attachment – in both an artistic and emotional sense – to the Dada excursion into anti-culture and his realization of its insignificance for the present. He states that a Dadaistic concept underlies the 1923 grottos but announces his severance from his Dada heritage in that the column, with its phallic connotations, now stands impotent and shrouded in strict geometrical forms. The enfeeblement and obsolescence of Dada threaten the cessation of a Merz dynamic hitherto driven by a persistent engagement with (from Schwitters' standpoint) Dada's various resistant and accommodating agendas.⁵²

Like the tragi-comic corpses of the dead animals, however, the 'corpse of the object' in the grottos of the KdeE can be surmounted;⁵³ melancholy is correspondingly only one aspect of the *Veilchenheft*. For all the misery and suffering of their characters, 'Die zoologische Gartenlotterie' and 'Schacko' remain comic tales whose narrator constantly plays off his protagonists, occasionally presenting the animals as ridiculous creatures and evincing a certain sympathy for their unthinking human owners. Similarly, the author's single-minded resolve in 'Ich und meine Ziele' collides with the confusions and complexities of the KdeE, while the stylized violets on the cover and the *Ursonate's* abstract verse are set off against the

51 As note 48.

52 Cf. Lambert Wiesing's concept of Merz as a post-Dada phenomenon; Wiesing 1991, Ch. 3.

53 Appendix I, ¶10.

nostalgic account of violets in the introduction and the coarse vernacular of *Schacko*. The final paragraphs of 'Ich und meine Ziele' recall the tolerant philosophy of Merz. Schwitters states: 'it is the destiny of mankind in general to err, and one should allow [people] to do so, for it keeps them happy', concluding that: 'on the whole, that's how humans are and nobody can do anything about it.'⁵⁴

Writing at a political and economic conjuncture that John Willett, in his study of the Weimar Republic, designates as 'The Crunch',⁵⁵ Schwitters apparently felt compelled in the *Veilchenheft* to reassess his situation in relation to an increasingly polarized society that was rapidly to degenerate into a fascist dictatorship. Isabel Schulz, in her essay on Schwitters and politics, contends that abstraction, 'formal but never neutral in meaning', was the only means by which Schwitters could register a personal statement of artistic freedom under a dictatorship. 'Schwitters defended abstraction when the political environment demanded a different form of art: only abstraction was able to reflect for him his own time. Like no other, [he] was able to make the contradiction between abstraction and the manifestations of his own time artistically fruitful.'⁵⁶ Ironically, this freedom was, at least at first, sanctioned by authority. When the manifold occupations he had built up for himself (typographer, commercial artist, author, publicist, lecturer, journalist) collapsed in 1933, Schwitters resumed his former career as an artist, with calculatedly humiliating official permission to paint abstract works and sell them under the label of cultural bolshevism. As illustrated in the aporia of the *Veilchenheft*, art was at a dead end, yet presented the only way out.

Schmalenbach has described Schwitters' years in exile as condemning his art to a monologue.⁵⁷ The situation that was to confront him in exile, however, began as early as 1930 and can ultimately be traced to the collapse of democracy in the Weimar Republic. It is not only in the monological manifesto of 'Ich und meine Ziele' but also in the *Veilchenheft* as a

54 Ibid., ¶14.

55 Title of Chapter 5, Willett 1978.

56 Schulz 2004, 203. See also comments on Schwitters' anti-Nazi stance in Nündel 1981, 99-101.

57 Schmalenbach 1978, 30.

whole that Schwitters articulates this social, political and artistic impasse, confronts the prospect of his own isolation and formulates the beginnings of a solution. Even a monologue, however, is addressed to an audience, and the physical expression of Schwitters' continuing predicament is, I shall argue, to be found in the Merzbauten from this time onwards.

5. Public and private aspects of the Hannover Merzbau

Schwitters' deliberations in the *Veilchenheft* on the advisability of publicising the KdeE convey the impression that at the turn of 1930/31 he regarded his studio columns as neither fully public nor fully private, and the sense of indecision and ambivalence that he conveys in this text is frequently reflected in studies of the Merzbau. From their formalist perspective in the 1970s and 1980s, Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield all suggested that there was some autobiographical element behind its development, and all concluded from their chronologies that it could not sustain the type of clear-cut interpretations that divided it into 'personal' interior grottos and a 'public' shell. Elderfield in particular devotes considerable space to the character of the grottos, which he regards as maintaining a tenuous balance between public and private. He claims that: 'insofar as we recognize particular fantasies and psychological conflicts in Schwitters' art, they need to be seen as much in the context of his cultural background as of his individual psychology.'⁵⁸ Other studies of the Merzbau that similarly emphasize its eclectic, dynamic nature also highlight the tensions between the private and public domain. Ernst Nündel, for instance, regards the growth of the Merzbau as reflecting Schwitters' diverse artistic and biographical relationships, experiences and encounters.⁵⁹

Roger Cardinal suggests that the Merzbau resembles an architect's maquette in that it may be understood as a microcosm of spaces outside itself,⁶⁰ but also speculates that 'the formalist

58 Elderfield 1985, 238.

59 Nündel 1981, 70. Nündel, like Steinitz, particularly emphasizes Schwitters' relationships with women. There were manifest animosities and jealousies among women with regard to Schwitters; see Katenhusen 1998, 424, also Schwitters' correspondence with Susanna Freudenthal, KSA 9.

60 Cardinal 1996, 201.

claims which Schwitters voices [...] could partly have been an alibi, a way for the artist to cover up – even from himself – his tendency to fetishize, his neurotic impulse to hoard’.⁶¹

Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann presents the Merzbau as a formal exhibition space in which the artist also revealed intimate details of his private life.⁶²

Those who ascribe a relatively limited agenda to the Merzbau, however, tend to favour *either* a private *or* a public interpretation. Elger underscores what he sees as the imbalance of the Merzbau’s private/public dialectic by arguing that the grottos present at best an evasion of socio-political issues: ‘At most [Schwitters] had a surrogate confrontation [with them] by collecting their relics [...] he created his own complete cosmos in the Merzbau. In it Schwitters could rule the world, arranging and manipulating it at will according to his own rules.’⁶³ For Elizabeth Burns Gamard, the Merzbau represents an entirely personal, esoteric world, ‘an entombment of the time and space of [Schwitters’] autobiographical impulse’, while Richard Humphreys sees it as ‘a three-dimensional image of Schwitters’ mental life’.⁶⁴ Two writers who adopt an architectural standpoint have described it as ‘founded on the idea that a house can represent the self’ and as a metaphor for the ‘convoluted pathways of Schwitters’ brain’.⁶⁵ In contrast, Dorothea Dietrich attaches little importance to any kind of psychological reading, stating that what she sees as the Merzbau’s ‘sinister sexuality’ was endemic less to the work than to the times.⁶⁶ Curt Germundson makes interactivity the focus of his analysis of the Merzbau, emphasizing Schwitters’ lifelong belief in ‘the possibility of calculating and transforming an audience’s negative opinion into an active factor of his artwork’.⁶⁷ He argues that as a cabaret artist, ‘Schwitters was on one hand creative participant, on the other the controller of the actively participating audience. Instead of thinking of [him]

61 Elsner/Cardinal 1994, 84.

62 Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 188.

63 Elger 1997b, 203.

64 Gamard 2000, 124; Humphreys 1985, 19:

65 Harbison 1997, 162-3: [Der Merzbau [...] bildet eine Metapher für die gewundenen Gänge von Schwitters Gehirn]; Brigitte Frantzen, ‘Die Grossstadt, ein gewaltiges Merzkunstwerk’, Karlsruhe 1997, 126.

66 Dietrich 1993, 164.

67 Germundson 1997, 215. (See also Lach 1985.)

as the creator of the Merzbau, we can see him as the coordinator of such interactions'.⁶⁸

Germundson resists any reading of the Merzbau as a refuge or as a purely individualistic or subjective work, arguing that Schwitters' endeavours to redefine cultural practice were integral to the whole range of his activities in the 1920s, all of which involved the community's response.⁶⁹

Many art historians have highlighted the public aspects of the Merzbau by discussing the work in terms of a museum. Dorothea Dietrich refers to it as a 'museum of mass culture'.⁷⁰ Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann regards the Merzbau as a museum designed to confuse, claiming that the exhibits conveyed no system or statement [*Aussage*] but resembled a woven fabric [*Gewebe*] of political, artistic and philosophical ideas.⁷¹ Ulrich Krempel traces the history of the artist's studio as exhibition space, comparing the Merzbau with Courbet's 'The Painter's Studio' of 1856 and Rodin's *atelier-musée* of 1896.⁷² He suggests that in all these, 'realistic depictions and allegories combine in complex, inextricable layers',⁷³ and concludes that the Merzbau 'rescued past stages of the artist's development in his artistic career, repositioning them in a new formal and artistic context; thus each new Merzbau became 'a museum of past versions of itself [...] a museum of its own history'.⁷⁴ Elderfield describes the Merzbau more in terms of a collection, comparing Schwitters' role as collector-scavenger to Baudelaire's rag-picker,⁷⁵ while Patricia Falguières draws parallels between the Merzbau and Sir John Soane's museum.⁷⁶ Roger Cardinal, who detects correspondences with the collections of

68 Ibid., 223. There has been little further discussion of the Merzbau's interactive aspects, though Elderfield has examined the grottos in relationship to Schwitters' performance pieces (Elderfield 1985, 166-70).

69 Ibid., 206.

70 Dietrich 1993, 191.

71 Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 184-5.

72 Krempel 2000, 265.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 268. Krempel nonetheless maintains that the Merzbau was 'a hidden place only to be entered in the presence of the artist and curator, a hortus conclusus.' Ibid., 261.

75 Elderfield 1985, 168.

76 Falguières 1994. John Elsner's study of Sir John Soane's Museum is relevant to the *Veilchenheft* in explaining the significance of the textual act in defining the collection. Neither Schwitters nor Soane chose to differentiate between aesthetic projects and habitable space, and Soane's Model Room has much in common with the Merzbau. Barbara Hofland's role as Soane's publicist closely parallels that of Giedion-Welcker (Elsner 1994, 155-176). How these two women express themselves is perhaps as important as what they express; their elegiac

various outsider artists, argues that the cultural arguments that fed into the Merzbau ‘seem so variegated that the thought of comparing the work to a museum would seem to fly in the face of curatorial discipline’.⁷⁷

Eyewitness reports present a broad spectrum of opinions on the public and private aspects of the constructions in Schwitters’ studio, though we must differentiate here between ‘private’ and ‘hidden’. Despite many theories to the contrary, there is no indication that Schwitters concealed the Merzbau from public view except when its existence came under threat, and there is no evidence that even the first columns were either secret or exclusive; Hannah Höch was invited to collaborate from the first and one of Ernst Schwitters’ earliest memories was helping his father to work on the column (Schwitters E. 1983). At least fifty people are recorded as visiting the Hannover Merzbau, though the number was probably more. The columns were situated in Schwitters’ studio, to which he issued printed invitations (Fig. 11), but even after he moved his studio to an adjacent room in 1933, neither his son nor those who reported on the Merzbau, at whatever stage, give the impression that he tried to conceal it (in any of its manifestations) from view; on the contrary, most report him as expressly directing their attention to a creation he held in special regard. As Schwitters did not promote it as a demonstration room or exhibition space, it is unsurprising that contemporaries frequently resort to explaining it as a largely personal pursuit. There are innumerable grounds for such reactions, for taken at any stage of its development, this was an unprecedented artwork, as far as it was recognized as art at all.⁷⁸ Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann argues that not only the creator of the Merzbau should be accorded the role of pioneer but also its viewers, suggesting

descriptions elevate the works in question to a sublime level, while skirting around detailed description and physical dimensions.

77 Cardinal 1996, 201-202. Cardinal’s study of collecting practice in relation to Merz is mainly concerned with the collages, but his analytical framework also offers the potential for an interesting and largely unexplored interpretation of the Merzbau that allows for an interwoven private and public discourse. As a collection, the Merzbau fits into the category of landmark early 20th century collections that explored non-mainstream culture, such as Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), the Prinzhorn collection (1st publication 1922) and Bartok’s compilations of folk music.

78 Brian O’Doherty points out that Schwitters’ contemporaries ‘don’t report themselves in the Merzbau. They look at it, rather than experience themselves in it. The Environment was a genre nearly forty years away, and the idea of a surrounded spectator was not yet a conscious one’. O’Doherty 1986, 44.

that they must have struggled to orient themselves and to discern any familiar frame of reference.⁷⁹ From the evidence in Chapter 3 we can conclude that Schwitters' constructions, with their domestic location, parallel function as studio, inherent immobility, unorthodox content and succession of different guises, presented such an incomprehensible phenomenon that visitors found it difficult to convey an adequate impression of their complexities.

In the case of at least some eyewitnesses who write of the private and public aspects of the work, a certain post-war prejudice must be taken into account, particularly among former Dadaists. I have already questioned Hans Richter's narrow definition of the 'Dada column' as little more than a personal 'daily-changing document on Schwitters and his friends'.⁸⁰ Raoul Hausmann's memoirs combine a homage to Dada (in its non-political aspects) with a highly critical attitude towards his contemporaries, including Schwitters; these dual standpoints are illustrated in his account of the column (which he last saw in 1923), which includes extremes of private and public. He describes it both as a personal 'schizophrenic-fetishist cult object',⁸¹ and a 'universal work of art' [*Universalkunstwerk*] to which Arp, Doesburg, Höch and others contributed, and alleges that in its later stages, Schwitters succumbed to the 'dictatorship of the rectangular style' [*Diktatur des Rechteckstils*] for fear of censure from Constructivist colleagues.⁸² Hannah Höch's descriptions portray the column as a largely public work. She remarks on its affinity with Baader's Dada tower, then spotlights the grottos, which she sees as providing a cross-section through the history of human culture and society: 'from Adam and Eve via Caesar – or was it Augustus? the Nibelungen, Richard Wagner's Venusberg, Goethe and other outstanding personalities of mankind's history, up to the excessive mores of the modern metropolis.'⁸³ As Höch's reminiscences accentuate personal friendships, her

79 Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 204.

80 Richter 1965/1978, 152.

81 [...schizophren-fetischistischen Kultgegenstand]; 'Aussichten oder Ende des Neodadaismus' (c. 1973), unpaginated essay, Koch 1994. Hausmann was in Hannover in September 1922 (Garvens Gallery guest book, Bornholms Kunstmuseum, Gudhjem) and in late December 1923 (Hannover 1962, 136).

82 Hausmann 1970/1992, 80. Hausmann claims that *Universalkunstwerk* was Schwitters' own expression.

83 [Von Adam und Eva über Caesar – oder war es Augustus - die Nibelungen, den Venusberg des Richard Wagner, Goethe und andere aus der Menschheitsgeschichte herausragende Persönlichkeiten und Geschehnisse bis zu den

omission of the ‘souvenir’ caves as described by Richter seems remarkable. What she does emphasize is the idea of the column as a collaborative work that not only reflected the cultural history of mankind but also presaged the course of post-war art; one, moreover, to which she had the ‘special honour’ of contributing two grottos.⁸⁴ This may be regarded as an implicit rebuke to the many male colleagues who belittled or ignored her in their memoirs.⁸⁵

If we examine accounts of contemporaries who might be expected to provide a more disinterested retrospect, most emphasize the Merzbau’s multi-faceted nature. Hans Freudenthal, a mathematician, was one of the last people to see the Merzbau and one of the first to write about it. He visited Hannover in September 1936, when Schwitters’ political status was precarious and he was preparing, unwillingly, to emigrate. Twenty years after, Freudenthal articulated what some contemporaries were later, and more hesitantly, to suggest: the assumption that the Merzbau represented a corporeal and psychic extension of the artist. His brief description, with its sexual and religious intimations, identifies it as Schwitters’ ‘life work’ and also portrays it as an impulsive, autobiographical creation, a direct revelation of the artist’s emotional turmoil: ‘His life work was much more a by-product than the aim of his activity. The sculpture, which sprouted from the inside outwards, was a symbol of life, Kurt Schwitters’ tumultuous life.’⁸⁶

However one interprets the Merzbau, it is clear from the size and fragility of even the first column that the prospect of its generating an income was remote, and it is not surprising that Katherine Dreier’s wish to transport it to the USA was never realised. Every expansion of the work increased its unsaleability; when Alfred Barr saw it in 1935, his first reaction, according

Sittenauswüchsen der modernen Großstädte.] Berlin 1989, 209. The phrase ‘excessive mores’ suggests that if there were, as Kate Steinitz implies, erotic caves, they were not as secret as she claims.

84 [besondere Ehrung]; *ibid.*, 210.

85 These include Huelsenbeck 1957, Richter 1964, Hausmann 1972, Grosz 1974 et al. Richter praises Höch chiefly for her girliness and for serving refreshments at Dada events (Richter 1964/1978, 136). Her annoyance at Huelsenbeck’s snubs is documented in Huelsenbeck 1996, 247, 253. In her memoirs, Höch (who is not mentioned in encyclopaedias or art historical literature of the 1950s/60s) often notes that Schwitters, unlike other male colleagues, always respected her as a fellow-artist.

86 [Sein Lebenswerk [war] vielmehr das Nebenprodukt als das Ziel seiner Tätigkeit [...] Die Plastik, die von innen aus spross, war Symbol des Lebens, Kurt Schwitters ungestümen Lebens.] Freudenthal 1956, 17. At the time, Freudenthal was unaware that Schwitters had recently had an affair with his wife.

to his wife, was to ask how Schwitters intended to exhibit it.⁸⁷ This would seem to support the idea of a primarily private work, as would the fact that Schwitters made no effort to publicize his studio constructions in the 1920s. In my view, this point is central to any attempt to understand the Merzbau, but with the exception of Elderfield's study of 1985, it has not been discussed in the reception history.⁸⁸ The reasons for Schwitters' silence must remain conjecture, as so little is known of the early columns. Possibly he entertained ambitious plans for his studio that remained unimplemented in the 1920s because of professional commitments. Possibly this was a matter of location, as Schwitters' father was bitterly opposed to his son's avant-garde activities; it is noticeable that Eduard's death in early 1931 coincided with the period in which Schwitters began to publicize his studio constructions in earnest. Below I will propose a further explanation of why he refused to publicize them for so long and yet still regarded them as works in the public domain.

In the *Veilchenheft* Schwitters, most unusually, describes himself as a former Dadaist. I wish to reconsider this statement with regard to Dada Berlin, which in the immediate post-war years provided a model for Merz.⁸⁹ Dada Berlin's activities targeted the values enshrined in institutionalized German culture, such as hierarchy, militarism and the preservation of a cultural elite, personifying them in the sanctimonious bourgeois figure of the *Spiesser* (Fig. 126b),⁹⁰ and it was the accusation of 'petit-bourgeois' that Huelsenbeck, originally a supporter of Schwitters, directed at him after visiting him in Hannover.⁹¹ Dada's campaign against the

87 Barr 1987, 39.

88 Elderfield suggests that Schwitters felt uncomfortable about producing such a personal monument while publicly supporting the Constructivist line; Elderfield 1985, 148. Richard Humphreys mentions Schwitters' silence on the Merzbau, but refrains from comment; Humphreys 1985, 19.

89 See Schwitters' own explanation of his deployment of Dada's methods; Schwitters 1920a, 77: Tran 50: Schwitters 1924a, et al.

90 Cf. Hausmann 1919. The *Spiesser* occurs in 'Raddadistenmaschine' (1921) and 'Personenzug' (1922); LW 2, 48, 56. Later Schwitters wrote of Dada as 'a revolutionary art [...] but at the same time a mediator of pure art. The hallowed sensitivities of the worthy bourgeois were deliberately violated because these [...] were claptrap.' [eine revolutionäre Kunst [...] aber er war zugleich Mittler der reinen Kunst. [...] Der werthe Bürger wurde absichtlich in seinen heiligsten Gefühlen gekränkt, weil diese [...] ein Schmarren waren.] Schwitters 1940, 382.

91 'He disliked my fighting ways and I liked his static, snug, middle-class world even less'; Verkauf 1975, 35-6. See also letter from Huelsenbeck to Schmalenbach, 22.5.60, SAH. What went wrong with this relationship is unclear: in 1920, Huelsenbeck wrote of the 'Spiesser' as their common enemy, (CR 730), praised Schwitters'

Spiesser was part of a longer-term process of dissociation, at least in liberal circles, from a culture whose authority had already been shaken in the wake of the industrial revolution and the German Reform Movement.⁹² This culture safeguarded its identity in art of the kind promoted in the *Kunstvereine*, the official German art societies, of which Hannover's was one of the largest and oldest.

I have already mentioned Huelsenbeck's declaration that Dada was incompatible with suburban Hannover. Assemblages such as the *Heilige Bekümmernis* would surely not have been out of place in a Dada exhibition, however, and reviews of Schwitters' work often categorize him as a Dadaist, particularly in view of his 'excremental' or 'schizophrenic' materials, which attracted fierce critical abuse as symbols of what society demanded should be repressed or hidden from view.⁹³ His use of rubbish defied the canons of an art that in effect served to exonerate a whole class from its social responsibilities. Many detractors of Merz who identified it with the gesture of parading in public that which belonged to the intimate sphere reacted by dismissing Schwitters' work as both unworthy of notice and an insult to national pride; a typical review compares his collages to decorative 'flower pots in petit-bourgeois houses' and also presents them as a threat to the German cultural heritage.⁹⁴ Up to 1923, exhibitions proved self-defeating for Schwitters in that critics did not discuss the social issues they raised but retreated further into established notions of culture. When, in a

poems ('full of fantasy and humour') and planned a joint Dada performance with him in Hannover (which Schwitters cancelled). See the correspondence in Schwitters' notebook *Bleichsucht und Blutarmut* (KSF).

92 Cf. Darmstadt 2001.

93 Cf. Servaes 1920; Weygandt 1921 (Fig. 108).

94 [Blumentöpfe kleinbürgerlicher Häuser]; Dülberg 1920, 53. This self-contradictory comment is reminiscent of Giedion-Welcker's and Osten's comparisons of Schwitters with Till Eulenspiegel. Another contemporary critic warned that Schwitters was: 'a juggler, a comedian – and for heaven's sake, don't take him seriously! If you do, you make yourself a laughing stock. Every attack will be a flop.' [Ein Jongleur, ein Komiker – um des Himmelswillen nehme man ihn nicht ernst! Man macht sich sonst lächerlich. Jeder Angriff ist ein Reifall.] Thies 1922. For Harald Szeemann, visitors to the Merzbau were invariably taken in by the 'Merz trapper' [Merzfänger]; Szeemann 1994, 263.

review of Schwitters' work, Paul Westheim asked 'So what is actually the art of these times?' it was not in a spirit of enquiry but as an ironic aside.⁹⁵

In 1922 Schwitters wrote that 'the most valuable thing in art and the most important thing in life and the only way of making art and life permeate each other is to overcome the greatest possible tension by [creating] form'.⁹⁶ When he imported the ideas of Dada into the domestic environment, he began to investigate the limits of Dada's methods by extending this process both to the intellectual and the material domain of the *Spiesser*. This was above all the milieu into which Schwitters had been born and with which he identified himself for the first half of his life. Before 1919 he had preferred to see himself as the cultured burgher (cf. Fig. 105), and as a model student in Dresden, had painted the representative bourgeois interior (Fig. 104b, 105c) as a haven from potential threats to his future stature as an academic artist; the nearby *Brücke* group, for instance, or what he saw as the 'competition' of a local photography exhibition.⁹⁷

Schwitters' first columns were, as he indicates in the *Veilchenheft*, created in the spirit of Dada, that is, as a challenge to the art of German affirmative culture. First, he uses the universal form of the column or tower, but substantially weakens its potential connotations for bourgeois art:⁹⁸ any symbolism of masculinity or power is offset by associations with the female and domestic, any ideas of a polished, 'authentic' work are abandoned in its function as a stock of potential Merz material and invitations to others to participate, and it is further distanced from notions of what constitutes a finished work of art in that it never leaves the

95 '[...] the disorientation of Schwitters, who has begun to incorporate a musical box into a picture [...] so what is actually the art of these times?' [die Zerfahrenheit von Schwitters, der angefangen hat, eine Musikspieldose ins Bild einzubauen [...] Was nun ist eigentlich die Kunst dieser Zeit?] Westheim 1921. The word *Zerfahrenheit* is used here in the sense of a symptom of schizophrenia. Schwitters replied to this article in Tran 19. Westheim (1886-1963), editor of the *Kunstblatt* from 1917-33, launched frequent attacks on the artists of Walden's Sturm.

96 [Das Wertvollste in der Kunst und das Wichtigste im Leben und die einzige Möglichkeit, Kunst und Leben einander durchdringen zu lassen, ist die Überwindung möglichst grosser Spannung durch Gestaltung.] Entry in the Flemming guest book, 26.20.22 (CR 1049).

97 Letter to Richard Schlösser, 2.5.09, Nündel 1974, 19.

98 From 1869 to 1934, about 240 Bismarck towers were built in Germany. According to Wilhelm Kreis, one of the chief designers, their harmonious form was supposed to provide the public with an uplifting experience. Curt Germundson suggests that in the Merzbau, Schwitters may have been reacting to the national rhetoric and pathos associated with these edifices (Germundson 2001).

works in progress in the studio. Secondly, to extract the column from the sphere of affirmative culture, Schwitters removes it from any public context, by locating it, ironically, in just those private surroundings it is designed to resist. In this sense, the studio is less a demonstration room than an anti-demonstration room. In effect, Schwitters is issuing a challenge to himself (both as the product of such an environment and as a former master student of the Dresden academy) that, it seems, he rises to; early photos containing Merz works display a certain candour (Figs. 3, 4, 5, 12) in showing his pre-Merz works in the background. There is a mutual critique implied in this juxtaposition, but however it is to be understood, it contrasts with Dada's methods in as far as it generates a distinct tempering of the columns' impact. If we regard Schwitters' large-scale sculptural assemblages as part of his investigation of what happens when the avant-garde is directly confronted with the contingencies of everyday life, then they need to be seen in the context of their surroundings and call for a different kind of interpretation from his Merz pictures.⁹⁹ This may be one explanation of why, in many illustrations of the photo in Fig. 12, the lower part, showing a toppling pile of corrugated paper and an old paintpot, is cut out. Similarly, the figure of the *Heilige Bekümmernis* (Fig. 5) is often illustrated in isolation, blocking out the central cluttered shelf.

The earliest photo of a column (Fig. 4) shows a tall, compact construction that seems to embody the kind of embattled situation in which Schwitters and his wife perceived

99 Schwitters evidently preferred his pictures to be displayed in his studio or his apartment, and only unwillingly shipped some of them to Oslo after 1937. Compare the way Johannes Baader frames the domestic by including it in a collage; Fig. 106b. In 1926, Katherine Dreier exhibited Schwitters' collages in a room with furniture purchased in a nearby department store. 'Dreier had four galleries in the [International Exhibition of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum] made up to resemble rooms in a house to illustrate how modern art could and should readily integrate into an everyday domestic environment. There was also a prototype "television room," designed in conjunction with Frederick Kiesler, which would make any building a worldwide museum of art by illuminating different slides of masterpieces with the turn of a knob.' John D. Angeline, 'New Thoughts on an Old Series', <http://www.brickhaus.com/amoore/magazine/Davis.html>. Kiesler's typographical work may have influenced the design of the Merz magazine (Wiesbaden 1990a, 14).

themselves at this time, according to their notebooks.¹⁰⁰ It appears to be in a cellar room; if so, this uncompromising work made few inroads into its surroundings. Schwitters seems to have destroyed it, possibly seeing it as a failure, but, in accordance with the principles of Merz, its remains were apparently integrated into other Merz works, possibly even a later column. Neither the early columns nor the *Heilige Bekümmernis* (also integrated into the Merzbau) were offered for sale, nor did Schwitters exhibit them, which would have categorized them in the public view as art, however debased; in fact he did not promote them at all or provide any kind of framing device. Nonetheless, the inclusion of a guest book in the KdeE (which Katherine Dreier saw as so important that in 1930 she took it to the USA for a time) would indicate that Schwitters valued not only visitors' reactions but also their documentation. This is not untypical, for until the end of his life he gave high priority to various forms of exchange with the public. These interactions took the form of lectures, polemical essays, documentations, recitals, articles, guided tours of his exhibitions, Merz publications and demonstrations of Merz art, all designed to encourage, even provoke, spoken and written responses to his work.¹⁰¹

Although the prevailing impression of the first column in the reception is that of a private work, I shall argue that it nonetheless had an important public dimension. This will involve expanding on Germundson's idea that the interactive and performative aspects of the Merzbau, at least in its early stages, were crucial to its development.

When the first photo of Schwitters' studio was published in 1924 (Fig. 4), it was juxtaposed with a picture of him as a performer. Schwitters took lessons in recital techniques and during the 1920s frequently recited his works in Germany and abroad. According to contemporaries,

100 Helma Schwitters quotes Luther ('Here I stand') and writes that 'Kurt has the profession of a reformer' [Kurt hat den Beruf eines Reformators]. *Schwarzes Notizbuch VI*, KSF. For the crisis facing artists at this time, see Clinefelter 2005, 26 ff.

101 See, for instance, *Gästebuch für die Merzausstellung*, 1922 (Fig. 109), which also contains comments by the artist and press reviews of his accompanying lectures and recitals. Hannah Höch later wrote that Schwitters often invited criticism and tried out the effects immediately [er forderte zu Kritik heraus und probierte zugleich die Wirkung aus.] Letter to Werner Schmalenbach, 18.12.58, KSF.

he was well versed in techniques of how to steer audience reactions.¹⁰² In 1923 he wrote ‘*Aus der Welt Merz*’ (Schwitters 1923c) which takes the form of a dialogue between himself and the kind of rowdy, scornful audience before which he frequently appeared in these years. Schwitters explains to his hearers that as an artist, he is also a performer who is simultaneously leader and led, because he is also a member of the public [*Geleiteter, also Teiler des Publikums*]. He continues by giving a lecture on Merz that is interactive in the sense that he allows the audience to invest the banal placard he presents (uncommented) to them with meaning. He then explains that art is a matter of felicitous improvisation that absorbs and responds to all kinds of reactions, so that the most fertile basis for the creation of a Merz work is an uninformed and disapproving audience (as demonstrated in this piece, which starts and ends with cries of ‘Idiot!’). ‘*Aus der Welt Merz*’ reveals his interest in exposing identities; the artist and his trivial props function as catalysts, arousing heated discussions and goading members of the audience to reveal more about themselves. In reviewing his Holland Dada campaign of 1923, Schwitters likewise identified the resistance of the public as the performers’ chief weapon.¹⁰³ Where his work was publicly exhibited, Schwitters also created a performance aimed at destabilizing both the visitors’ expectations and the works on show. For his one-man exhibition in Hildesheim in 1922, for instance, the posters bore the phrase ‘The Well of Lunacy’, and the accompanying recitals of his own work were, according to press reports, highly provocative.¹⁰⁴ At the same time Schwitters engaged Professor Habicht from Hannover University to give an illustrated lecture on ‘Futurism, Picasso, Klee, Kandinsky and

102 See, for instance, Neumann 1985, 218; Lach 1971, 27-8; Webster 1997, 123-4, 130-3, 315, 339.

103 Schwitters 1923d, 131, also Lach 1985. For a gloss on how this piece was also aimed at conservative art policies in Hannover, see Katenhusen 2000, 235-6.

104 Anon., unidentified clipping dated 24.4.22, *Schwarzes Notizbuch VI*, KSF, which describes heated audience reactions to one of Schwitters’ performances, also press cuttings in *Gästebuch für die Merzausstellung*, (Hildesheim), KSF. Hildesheim was a provincial, very conservative town. The museum director suspected that Schwitters was either mentally defective or a good businessman; see letter from Professor Dr. Roeder to Dr Mönkemüller, 29.3.22, Stadtarchiv Hildesheim.

finally myself.¹⁰⁵ Merz collages were hung beside his figurative work, though the visitors generally ignored the latter in the (almost entirely insulting) verdicts recorded in the guest book (Fig. 109). For Schwitters, such pejorative remarks were productive in that he marked some for use in future Merz (literary) works.

One example of how Schwitters applied such ideas to the first column occurs in the account of Willi Pferdekamp, who visited Waldhausenstrasse in about 1926, when he was editor of the periodical *L'Esprit Nouveau*. With such a background, it was unlikely that Pferdekamp would enthuse on the column, yet instead of trying to justify his work, Schwitters appears to have made the confrontation as daunting as possible.

On his strange tower he had carved out niches of various shapes and sizes which he described as grottos [...] Schwitters [...] brought to light a crumpled piece of cloth of indefinable colour and texture. It turned out to be an old matted man's sock full of holes. 'Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's left sock', he intoned in a reverential whisper [...] My attention had been attracted by a spherical glass vase with a circular opening inside the grottos. It was about half-full of a transparent liquid the colour of light amber [...] 'And what is that?' I asked, all agog. Schwitters raised the circular vase triumphantly and held it against the light. 'Here you see the urine of The Master!' There was no doubt about who was meant by The Master. It was, however, this Merzbau demonstration, steeped in Schwitterian irony, to which I owe a lesson that was to shape my [future] attitude; the cult of genius will be abhorrent to me as long as I live.¹⁰⁶

Pferdekamp (as later related by his wife) conveys Schwitters' relish in manipulating his credulous guest by imbuing the shoddy fragments of the Merzbau with an air of mystery and reserving the most intimate item, the urine, for the finale. He sets out to discredit Schwitters and mock his pretensions, yet he also observes himself as the victim of mockery ('I asked, all agog [...] Schwitterian irony'). Pferdekamp is convinced by the performance ('abhorrent as

105 [Er wollte über die Futuristen, Picasso, Klee, Kandinsky und schliesslich mich im Lichtbild zeigen und über die Bilder erklärend sprechen.] Letter to the Roermuseum, 24.4.22, Stadtarchiv Hildesheim. For more on Habicht, see Katenhusen 1998, 496-503.

106 [An seinem seltsamen 'Turm' hatte er Nischen von unterschiedlicher Grösse und Gestalt ausgehöhlt, die er als 'Grotten' bezeichnete [...] Schwitters [...] förderte eine verknüllte Textilie von undefinierbarer Farbe und Struktur zutage. Sie entpuppte sich als ein alter, verfilzter, durchlöcherter Herrenstrumpf. 'Die linke Socke von Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, ertönte es in ehrfurchtsvollem Flüstern [...] Mir war in einer der Grotten eine kugelförmige Glasvase mit kreisrunder Öffnung aufgefallen. Sie war etwa zur Hälfte mit einer durchsichtigen hellbernsteinfarbenen Flüssigkeit gefüllt [...] 'Und was ist das?' fragte ich aufs höchste gespannt. Triumphierend hob Schwitters die Kugelvase in die Höhe und hielt sie gegen das Licht: 'Hier sehen Sie den Urin des Meisters!' Wer mit dem Meister gemeint war, darüber konnte es keinen Zweifel geben. Dieser von Schwitters 'scher Ironie getränkten Demonstration am MERZ-Bau jedoch verdanke ich eine Lehre, die meine Anschauung bestimmen sollte: Geniekult bleibt mir bis ans Lebensende zuwider.] Pferdekamp 1968.

long as I live’) but in retrospect, also recognizes himself as a figure in a drama in which the Merzbau serves as a disorientating stage and Schwitters supplies an impromptu script, trading on and simultaneously undermining the idea of artist as genius.¹⁰⁷

Schwitters was evidently bent on provoking a reaction to the content of the grottos, with tactics aimed at disrupting Pferdekamp’s ironic distance and initial disdain, and one may conjecture that other visitors were in part influenced by Schwitters’ introductory remarks. If Dorner and Stuttmann, as advocates of Constructivism, were also subjected to such treatment, this would help to explain their unease about the Merzbau. Schwitters seems to have adapted his Merzbau performance to suit his audience, giving outsiders a histrionic tour that was deemed unnecessary or superfluous for colleagues and friends. Certainly Giedion-Welcker, who expressed sympathy for Schwitters both privately and professionally, received an entirely different explanation; she writes that Schwitters had ‘transformed his house in Hannover into a sort of shelter for plastic forms, which he describes as a little world of branching and building where the imagination is free to climb at will’.¹⁰⁸ Elderfield notes the diversity of reactions to the Merzbau, remarking in the case of Giedion-Welcker and Dorner that ‘it hardly seems possible that they are talking about the same thing’.¹⁰⁹ By 1930, it seems, one could find whatever one looked for in Schwitters’ studio, and more besides when the artist was on hand with a fund of explanations to fit the occasion.

In an early article on Schwitters, Elderfield described the Merzbau as a ‘by-product’ – that is, he identified it as Schwitters’ idiosyncratic way of storing rubbish destined for use in his Merz works.¹¹⁰ One might speculate on the basis of the evidence in Chapter 3 that the evolution of these ‘by-products’ was to some extent steered by the curiosity of visitors and the reactions of those who were provoked, or allowed themselves to be provoked, by such bizarre

107 Ibid. Despite Pferdekamp’s professed distaste of Schwitters’ gesture, he continues by relating his pleasure at being able to accompany the artist to Berlin, where Schwitters staged a further performance for him.

108 Giedion-Welcker 1937/1960, xvii.

109 Elderfield 1985, 162.

110 Elderfield 1969, 57.

objects, so that the column – originally, perhaps, no more than an ingeniously constructed stockpile of rubbish – developed into a work of art that was somehow linked with the reactions of visitors. (This scenario displays many parallels with one of Schwitters' standard performance pieces in which a man dressed as a Merz sculpture who does nothing but stand immobile in Hannover rankles the public to the extent that a riot breaks out.¹¹¹) On this interpretation, Schwitters came to see the column as an artwork partly as the result of a feedback loop whose dynamic was driven by the responses that he extracted from visitors through his customized explanations and, at a later stage, through the grottos and objects that they contributed to its expanding structures. In this context it is instructive to recall his taunting of Pferdekamp and the many other eyewitnesses who were in varying degrees unsettled by what they saw, or by what, with prompting, they thought they saw. Richter claimed that he received 'careful psychological preparation' before viewing the column;¹¹² Steinitz enjoyed visualizing what (she was given to believe) she was forbidden to see. One wonders whether Schwitters would have given similar instructions to Marcel Duchamp, who visited him in 1929, or indeed to Hans Freudenthal, a mathematics professor, Carola Giedion-Welcker, a distinguished art historian, or Katherine Dreier, an influential patron.

One might also ask what the content of the grottos would have conveyed without the kind of commentary that Schwitters provides in the *Veilchenheft*. The photograph of the KdeE is not what one would expect from this text, and the mock aura Schwitters lends to the pencil stubs seen by Richter arises by dint of their supposedly having belonged to Mies van der Rohe. Pferdekamp is shocked by the tattered socks and tiny Woolworth's playthings that (as Schwitters tells him) symbolize Goethe and St Cecilia, both icons of conservative culture. Feininger's toy houses (Fig. 61) do not evoke Weimar any more than a nationalist agenda visibly underlies the Kyffhäuser grotto, where one searches in vain for anything that actually

111 'Franz Müllers Drahtfrühling', LW 2, 29-46 (c. 1922), translated in LW 2, 383 ff. The public's reactions are partly steered by a character named Alves Bäsensiel, like Schwitters a pacifist, who later pleads to his audience to boycott inflammatory racist slogans in the mass media; *ibid.*, 39.

112 Richter 1961, 100.

recalls the original; this miniature tableau (Fig. 17) could mean anything or nothing (like the monument itself, which has been appropriated for a range of conflicting ideologies since its foundation). Schwitters does not reject cultural icons, but by staging them with scraps of refuse, he resignifies them to the point of unrecognizability; culture has to be explained anew. (One might speculate on his possible explanations of the grotto in Fig. 40, said to have been part of the original Merzbau). This seems to be what Schwitters is referring to when he writes of the ‘literary grottos’ of the KdeE. His strategy is, as Carola Giedion-Welcker saw it, to ‘de-artificialize’ art¹¹³ to surmount what she regarded as the obsolete authority of the bourgeoisie.

In ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ (1930), Schwitters looked back on the grottos as belonging to a period that was now closed.¹¹⁴ His career had certainly undergone considerable changes since 1923. He rarely appeared as a performer, and his main source of income came from his advertising agency, from institutions such as the *Reichsforschungsgesellschaft für Wirtschaftlichkeit im Bau- und Wohnungswesen* (a government organisation responsible for research into modern building technology) and high-profile architectural projects such as the Dammerstock estate (Fig. 122).¹¹⁵ He also carried his artistic practices over to functional stage design, publishing, revues, multiples¹¹⁶ and photography.¹¹⁷ As an artist he enjoyed little success in the late 1920s, but as official typographer of Hannover, his designs must have reached almost every one of its citizens. In an essay of 1927 on numeric reform, he expressed the hope that new media were altering the nature of experience, writing of system-building as ‘the aim of

113 [Die Kunst muss entkünstlicht werden.] Giedion-Welcker 1973, 213.

114 Six years before, Schwitters had written that: ‘Here in Germany, Dada is no longer as necessary as in 1918; artists live and work in the spirit of the times, the spirit of 1924.’ [Bei uns in Deutschland ist der Dadaismus jetzt nicht mehr so notwendig, wie im Jahre 1918. Jetzt leben und schaffen die Künstler im Geiste der Zeit, im Geiste von 1924.] Schwitters 1924a, 194.

115 Cf. Wiesbaden 1990a, 180-185.

116 Elderfield 1985, 181, also *Lampenbild*, CR 1777 (1931). Schwitters’ plans for multiples predate those of Duchamp by about four years.

117 Schwitters’ letters to Lucy Hillebrand of 14.7.28 and 23.7.28 (SAH), note his plans to design facades, cinema interiors, shop windows and neon lighting. *Merz 11* (1924), entitled *Typoreklame* [Commercial Typography], lists (unrealised) forthcoming issues on advertising, theatre, shop and interior design and packaging. See also *Hamburger Notizbuch* (SAH) in which Schwitters notes ideas for shop windows, bars, cinemas, offices, trade fairs and packaging of tea, matches, chocolate, tobacco products and washing powder.

our time, arising from a new feeling for life given us by technology and the will to a new style, the style of our time [...] Our age is not so far from experiencing system as beauty'.¹¹⁸

A central tenet of avant-garde practice was that if art was and life were to become one, the structures of everyday life had to undergo far-reaching changes to accommodate art.¹¹⁹

Schwitters often suggests that the reverse is equally valid. What distinguishes Merz from other art movements of the time is its inclusion of themes that address the ideas of conservative culture. Although Schwitters was an advocate of the new architecture, his reviews of the 1927 *Weissenhofsiedlung* and the 1928 *Werkbund* conference¹²⁰ both identify points at which the avant-garde failed to enter into a dialogue with the public, and both criticize what he sees as the neglect of everyday needs in the applied arts (Fig. 117).¹²¹ If Schwitters often saw the avant-garde as too divorced from its public, his enthusiasm for the new media was also accompanied by worries, expressed both in private letters and in published articles, that a full commitment to public projects could detract from the ability to see both sides of a problem.¹²²

Schwitters not only discussed the artist's independence in relation to the field of applied arts, but also recognized that art itself might be under threat.¹²³ The studio column may have furnished a means of reasserting his artistic freedom, for after the move to the new studio in 1927, it was apparently covered in a geometrical plaster housing with a door and so became a discrete construction open only to the ceiling. This stage is described (imprecisely) by Steinitz

118 [das ziel unserer zeit, entsprungen aus dem neuen lebensgefühl, welches uns technik [...] und der wille zu einem neuen stil, dem stil der zeit, gegeben hat. unsere zeit ist nicht mehr weit davon entfernt, system als schönheit zu empfinden.] 'Zahlen' (1927), LW 5, 268-9.

119 'The remodelling of life seemed to [Berlin Dada] to be of prime importance.' Huelsenbeck 1975, 35-6.

120 Schwitters 1927a; Schwitters 1928. In the latter, Schwitters praises the work of Hugo Häring and Otto Haesler (who won second prize with his design for the Karlsruhe *Dammerstocksiedlung*) and parodies a lecture by the conference's special guest, the sociologist Alfred Weber. (Original in Fischer 1975, 243-5.)

121 Letter to Helma Schwitters, 14.8.27, Nündel 1974, 127. See also his private view of Bauhaus furniture: 'You keep knocking yourself on the corners [...] I recently banged myself horribly on the handles of a Bauhaus desk.' Letter to Lucy Hillebrand, 23.7.28, SAH.

122 Cf. letter to Katherine Dreier, 29.1.27, Nündel 1974, 111; Schwitters 1926d, 243.

123 See, for instance, his worries about Lissitzky's statement that art was no longer necessary; letter to Katherine Dreier, 16.9.26, Nündel 1974, 108.

and Richter and, more vividly, by Rudolf Jahns.¹²⁴ What Jahns saw must have been very close to the state of the column as described in the *Veilchenheft*. He uses neither the name KdeE nor Merzbau and does not reveal whether Schwitters prepared him, stating only that he was instructed to enter alone and to record his impressions in a guest book:

It was a strange, enrapturing feeling that came over me at the time. This room had a very special life of its own. The sound of my footsteps was hardly audible and absolute silence reigned. There was only the form of the grotto whirling round me, enabling me to find words that alluded to the absolute in art. I saw the grotto again soon afterwards, and it had changed once more. Many of the grottos were nailed up and the impression was more of a unified whole.¹²⁵

There is implied approval in this last observation, but Jahns, unlike Dorner and Pferdekamp, does not seem to have been unsettled by the content of the grottos. His description indicates that the tensions within the studio once generated by its ambivalent status between domestic and the avant-garde were no longer predominant; instead, the tensions now arose from the disparity between its abstract architectural constructions and its coarse materials. Despite the incongruous contrast between his transcendental experience and his mention of Schwitters' urine and a shadowy case with porcelain insulators that he mistook for 'dirty white bodies',¹²⁶ Jahns chose to give prominence to the formal aspects of the work with his repetition of the word 'absolute', his mention of progressive stylistic cohesion and the recounting of his experience of spatial and temporal dissolution in the column's interior. It is possible that, like other visitors, he was influenced beforehand by Schwitters' explanations.

To judge by Jahns' account and the evidence of the *Veilchenheft*, Schwitters' former reliance on objects as the focus of the column had given way to a focus on abstract articulations of space. At the same time, he restored some of the aura of the column that he had formerly set out to destroy. This may have been related to a particular Constructivist topos; the idea that

124 Jahns 1982. Jahns later claimed the episode took place on a personally significant occasion; the day in 1927 on which he was invited by Schwitters to participate in the inauguration of the *abstrakten hannover*. The advanced state of the column makes a later dating far more likely; cf. Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 86, n. 99.

125 Ibid. Jahns' euphoric account of his experience of the column may well have been influenced by other factors. Nine years younger than Schwitters, he was a self-taught artist who worked full time as a civil servant in the tax office. He was far less experienced and influential than the other members of the *abstrakten hannover*, and Schwitters' encouragement and promotion of his work were to prove invaluable to his career as an artist.

126 Ibid.

Einstein's theories of space-time continuum could be incorporated into architectural and sculptural design.¹²⁷ Gabo exhibited a kinetic sculpture in Berlin in 1922 subtitled 'Time as the new material of art' and Doesburg undertook similar experiments in early architectural designs such as the *Maison d'Artiste and Maison Particulière*, both models for Mies van der Rohe's 1924 *Landhaus in Backstein* [brick country house] (Fig. 120). A plan of the *Landhaus*, which sought to replace traditional perceptions of exterior and interior with the concept of 'flowing space',¹²⁸ was among those shown by Schwitters when, in the late 1920s, he toured Germany to give illustrated lectures on abstract art and modern design; his notes point, for instance, to Gabo's sculptures as 'prismatic divisions of space' and to Mies's *Landhaus* as the finest example of the 'new experience of space' [*Raumerlebnis*].¹²⁹ Whether the work of Mies or Gabo had any bearing on the Merzbau must remain surmise, but Schwitters' architectural projects brought him together with Mies in the late 1920s, and Gabo visited Schwitters twice in 1930; Schwitters invited him to lecture in Hannover in that year, and this resulted in his first one-man show at the Kestner Society in November. The exhibition included a 'Constructive Spatial Design for a Wall Niche' (Fig. 119) and two columns, which have not survived.¹³⁰

While Jahns was left alone to experience the 'flowing space' of the column, Vordemberge-Gildewart received what he called an official tour. His description presents the Merzbau as a sophisticated, fully public work:

It was I who together with Giedion was able to experience the three-hour tour of the Merz column [...] only once did I have the pleasure of being given this complete official tour. I see and hear Giedion when he said to me, 'Now for a cognac', because Schwitters' tour

127 Cf. Düsseldorf 1992, 126. For a wider discussion of this topic see Müller 2004, also Glüher 1992.

128 'The brick country house [...] symbolizes [Mies's] space concept, the flowing together of inner and outer space.' Ludwig Hilbersheimer, quoted in Müller 2004, 92. Mies used the same concept in the Barcelona pavilion. When Einstein was asked for his opinion on the application of the concept of the fourth dimension to a fixed object, he replied that it was 'Klugscheisserei' [smart-ass talk]; *ibid*, 11.

129 These slides, with notes, are in SAH (SAB 1987, nos. 328-30, also Schelle 1990).

130 Hammer/Lodder 177-88. For more on Gabo's possible influence on the Merzbau see Darsow 2006. Mies van der Rohe owned a number of Merz collages: see Orchard/Schulz 2006, 772.

was so great and so compelling that you actually left Number 5, Waldhausenstrasse completely worn out.¹³¹

His memoir of Schwitters extends the tour's three hours to four, but even this is not improbable in the Merzbau's more advanced stages, as a recital of the Ursonate alone lasts forty minutes:

Schwitters was [...] given the opportunity to bring the Merzbau to its ultimate consummation by reciting his poems, grotesqueries, his Ursonate [...] the poet Schwitters was an ideal addition to the great Merzbau sculpture. The [...] tour through the giant work lasted four hours, guided and illuminated by Schwitters himself. No light matter, just as [James Joyce's] *Ulysses* isn't exactly holiday reading.¹³²

He pursues this literary comparison by portraying the Merzbau as a social document with narrative connotations: 'As in Joyce's *Ulysses*, the whole of life with all its ramifications was played out in the Merzbau.'¹³³

What Vordemberge-Gildewart means by a 'column' is less clear than in Jahns' description, which mentions an entrance through a door. Vordemberge-Gildewart also seems to be referring to far larger constructions than, for instance, Steinitz. (As he saw the Merzbau several times, in 1928 and also during the 1930s, his account, like that of Jahns, may mix reminiscences of both column and environment.) The problem of size, which constantly crops up in discussions of the Merzbau, is also related to its public and private aspects. In the majority of studies of the Merzbau, Schwitters is regarded as working on two different scales, creating room-sized public structures to enclose small private objects. In the *Veilchenheft*, he is (perhaps deliberately) vague about size; he gives the dimensions of the column but not of

131 [So war ich es, der mit Giedion zusammen die dreistündige Führung durch die Schwitters-Säule miterleben durfte [...] nur eben dieses eine mal das Vergnügen hatte, diese offizielle und totale Rundreise mitmachen zu können. Ich sehe und höre Giedion, wie er zu mir sagte: jetzt einen Cognac. Denn Schwitters Rundreise war dermaßen großartig und mitreißend, dass man tatsächlich aufs äußerste mitgenommen die Waldhausenstrasse no 5 verließ.] Letter to Giedion-Welcker, 26.2.56, Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, vol. I, 323. This letter expresses his continuing resentment that Giedion and not himself had been named in the *Veilchenheft*.

132 [Hier bot sich dann die Gelegenheit, dass Schwitters den MERZ-Bau dadurch zur höchsten Vollendung brachte, dass er seine Gedichte, Grotesken, seine Urlautsonate vortrug [...] so addierte sich der Dichter Schwitters ideal mit der großen Plastik MERZ-Bau. [Die] Führung durch das riesige Werk dauerte vier Stunden, von Schwitters selbst geleitet und illuminiert. Kein leichtes Erlebnis, wie ja auch der *Ulysses* keine ausgesprochene Ferienlektüre ist.] Vordemberge-Gildewart 1976, 44. (The comparison with *Ulysses* suggests that this may have been one of Schwitters' stream-of-consciousness performances as transcribed in the Sturm Gallery in earlier years, apparently to his annoyance; see Schreyer 1956, 114-123.)

133 [Wie im *Ulysses* von James Joyce spielt sich das ganze Leben in all seinen Verästelungen im MERZ-Bau ab.] Ibid.

the grottos, and, with only a passing reference to his materials (Appendix 1, ¶10), gives the impression that these are imposing, large-scale works.¹³⁴ Early photos of the KdeE reveal that these must have been diminutive structures (Figs. 14-16), but it is worth remembering that from the 1930s, far larger grottos were added that constitute prominent features of all the 1933 photos. Vordemberge-Gildewart even uses the word grotto to mean structural components of all sizes within a sculptural environment, writing: ‘these grottos, details of the great structure, were in part so roomy that they provided space for two or three people.’¹³⁵ Schwitters’ own terminology regarding the Hannover Merzbau is extremely confusing; in his correspondence of the 1930s and 1940s he applies the terms studio, column or, more rarely, Merz room[s] to all stages of the Hannover Merzbau.¹³⁶

By 1930, according to the revised chronology, there were already three columns in the studio. These were supplemented by the ‘Sammlung Merz’, Schwitters’ display of pictures by contemporaries (Schulz 2006a). Some later accounts of his studio remark on its function as an exhibition space, and two visitors at this time described it as a museum in itself: Philip Johnson claimed that what he termed Schwitters’ ‘mad museum’ had influenced his ideas,¹³⁷ while the writer and composer Paul Bowles described the Merzbau as ‘a personal museum’.¹³⁸

This ‘museum’ was not exclusively reserved for Schwitters’ own work. Vordemberge-Gildewart, according to ‘Das grosse E’ (Appendix II), made a grotto in the Merzbau, and Schwitters evidently allowed others to make their own additions, most of which seem to date from the late 1920s and early 1930s. As I have already argued, it is probably no coincidence

134 This causes confusion even today. One commentator, for example, writes of a grotto containing Goethe’s leg, another of ‘one of the cave rooms [with] the ‘blood’-spattered figure of a nude female mannequin’; Harbison 1997, 162-3; Sandford 1995, 12.

135 [Diese Grotten, Details des großen Baues, waren teilweise so geräumig, dass sie zwei bis drei Personen Platz gaben.] Vordemberge-Gildewart 1996, 43-4.

136 As late as 1946, Schwitters can still write of the whole work as the *Merzsäule* [Merz column] (see letter to Cesar Domela, 10.12.46, Nündel 1974, 242), though he also applies the word column to more conventional sculptures (Figs. 64, 101).

137 ‘Dorner influenced us, no question! But so did Schwitters, who built his own museum, the Merzbau. [He influenced me] by the fact that he had a mad museum, that he would do, as an artist making his own surroundings.’ Obrist 2003.

138 Bowles 1972, 114-5. See also the reference to Schwitters’ ‘Dada museum’ in Hohlt 1968 (Chapter Two/II/2 above).

that these developments took place around the time that Schwitters' father Eduard died in early 1931. Eduard left his wife and son as joint owners of the house, so the studio was no longer borrowed space but Schwitters' own, which could be accessed and used more freely and even lent out.

While the grottos are often categorized in the reception history as highly personal spaces, they remained in constant tension with a more public conception of art. It is remarkable how many icons of conservative and mass culture are listed in the description of only part of one column (Nibelungen, Goethe, Kyffhäuser, the Gothic cathedral, Weimar, Persil, Haarmann, the Ruhr, Michelangelo, Silent Night, Mona Lisa, etc.); 'Das grosse E' extends the list further. Furthermore, the so-called 'friendship grottoes', in which Schwitters stored items from friends, often regarded as one of the Merzbau's most private features, may be seen as possessing a public, even political dimension when set against the gesture of 'comradeship' (Fig. 129). Comradeship, as Siegfried Kracauer explained in three essays published between 1917 and 1923, develops among those with a common cause, and in times of crisis links the fate of the individual irretrievably to the group, whereas friendship is not dependent on a shared aim but develops from within and is manifested as a complex gesture grounded in individual freedom and independence.¹³⁹ The idea of comradeship as the bonding of individuals in service to a beleaguered nation was glorified throughout the 1920s by novelists such as Ernst Jünger¹⁴⁰ (making the sense of crisis into a self-fulfilling prophecy), and, at the end of the decade, extolled in a plethora of novels, pamphlets and articles lauding military life.¹⁴¹ To cite from one work of the time: 'Germany will again be free when the German people put their trust in the soldiers of the front and in German youth [...] Our greatest gift

139 Kracauer 1980.

140 The best-known novel of Ernst Jünger (1895–1998) was *In Stahlgewittern* [Storm of Steel], published 1920/1924.

141 The success of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) prompted a reaction in a wave of *Frontromane* [front novels] from conservative writers praising war as 'creating a new kind of German, high as a tower over the degradations of the everyday'; cf. 'Für einen neuen deutschen Menschen', *Frontromane*, in Schütz 1986, 204, also Sontheimer 1962, 115 ff.

was the experience of comradeship.’¹⁴² In effect these writings called for ‘comradeship’ to restore sense and structure to German society.¹⁴³ In contrast, the ephemeral objects of the ‘friendship grottos’ as described by Steinitz, Richter and Sybil Moholy-Nagy (the only sources who mention them) are cast-offs or remnants (such as a cigarette butt and a shoelace) that lack obvious meaningful content.¹⁴⁴

Another aspect of the column raised by Giedion-Welcker (Giedion-Welcker 1956) has hardly been pursued further to date (with the exception of Bergius 1989): the ironic correspondence between the KdeE and Berlin’s largest department store, the KdW (Fig. 128), once regarded as a symbol of democracy and the realm of women.¹⁴⁵ In 1929, Adolf Behne described the display windows of the department store as the primary site where art and popular culture met.¹⁴⁶ No consideration of art is now possible, he writes, without incorporating the exhibition of wares: art is conveyed to the public by means of fashion, sport, revue, magazines and films. The socio-political ambitions of Constructivism – (a movement, he notes, that like Expressionism, ‘never reached the street’) – have, ironically, been realised in an art that has appropriated only its visual mannerisms and lives only on the street; art that is challenging or addresses contemporary problems attracts no interest, and artists can make a living only from a ‘delectable mixing of colourful sensations’ [*leckeren Mixen farbiger Sensationen*]. Siegfried Kracauer expressed similar disenchantment with developments in popular culture in 1930, writing, ‘What good is an arcade in a society that itself is only an arcade?’¹⁴⁷

142 [Der Krieg ist uns zum Erlebnis geworden. Der Krieg und die Kameradschaft [...] Deutschland wird wieder frei sein, wenn das deutsche Volk seinen Frontsoldaten vertraut – und der deutschen Jugend [...] Das Grösste, was und hier geschenkt wurde, ist das Erlebnis der Kameradschaft.] Quoted in Sontheimer 1962, 123. See also Pierre Viénot’s commentary on this literary genre in Viénot 1931/1999, 147-8.

143 Heinrich Brüning’s so-called ‘Cabinet of Front Soldiers’ (e.g. *Weltbühne* 1931, 861) marked the end of Weimar democracy in 1930. ‘[Brüning] has managed to rule Germany for the past eleven months as a semi-dictator, forcing the Reichstag into dissolution and ruling by Presidential decree.’ ‘Fighting for Fatherland’, *Time*, 15.06.31; <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,846885-1,00.html>

144 Compare this approach to Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*, with miniature sketches of ‘my friends pictured within’. Elgar never revealed the nature of the enigma that bound them together.

145 For a detailed discussion of department store display in the Weimar Republic and its demise after 1933, see Ward 2001, 192ff.

146 Behne 1929, 153-5.

147 [Was sollte noch eine Passage, in einer Gesellschaft die selber nur eine Passage ist?] Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Abschied von der Lindenstrasse’ (Dec. 1930), Kracauer 1987, 35. Kracauer’s arcade as a place where the

According to the *Veilchenheft*, the KdeE had from the first been a site where art and popular culture collided. By the end of the decade, the number of columns had increased to three and more were planned. Judging by Schwitters' letters and texts pertaining to the studio written between December 1930 and early 1933, the period of transformation from columns to environment must have taken place in 1931-2,¹⁴⁸ the years in which the final disintegration of the former Weimar avant-garde network began. By 1930, Lissitzky had already left for Russia and Kandinsky and many former Dadaists had moved to Paris. Doesburg died in 1931, the Bauhaus closed in 1932, and Walden and Gabo emigrated in 1932, followed by many others in 1933. With almost no avant-garde discourse in Germany against which he could continue to define Merz, Schwitters looked to the USA, where Katherine Dreier continued to support him, and to Paris, where his article 'Le Merzbau' and the first published photos of the work appeared in the journal of *abstraction-cr ation* in 1933. *abstraction-cr ation* seemed to offer an ideal platform in proclaiming itself a catholic, international art movement that vaunted its German legacy and promised members an expanding market.¹⁴⁹ Schwitters' situation in Germany made contact with *abstraction-cr ation* progressively difficult, however, and in 1936 he was among those foreign members who, an editorial announced, were no longer able to participate.¹⁵⁰

Elderfield sums up the tensions between the public and private in the Merzbau as follows:

[Schwitters'] private universe was built from and modelled upon the world outside. And if it offered an escape and retreat from the outside world, this was not into sheer subjectivity. Schwitters was not lost or overcome by his urban civilization as was the Expressionist

marginalized aspects of bourgeois culture have survived (but are now threatened) makes an interesting comparison to the *Veilchenheft* passage on the KdeE, written in the same month.

148 See Chapter Two, II.4 above.

149 An editorial of 1935 stated that: 'We know that the abstract movement had its great development, as far as architecture was concerned, in Holland, that Germany after the war of 1914 used this movement as a leitmotiv; example their Bauhaus etc. In England this concept was completely ignored. It is curious to see how, in America, the number of those interested in the movement has increased, and progress is also noted in England [...] Paris is the center of the movement [...] we sincerely hope she will keep up this position and prerogative.' A-C 4, 1935, 3. London was fast becoming a centre for members of *abstraction-cr ation*, with annual exhibitions of abstract art. In addition, Gropius, Moholy, Breuer, Gabo, Mondrian and Kokoschka were among those temporarily in exile in Britain. For a list of exhibitions see M nster 1978.

150 [...] pour multiple raisons qu'il est inutile de souligner]; A-C 5, 1936. Schwitters also published work abroad in Eugene Jolas' *Transition* (1927-38) and in Sophie T uber-Arp's *Plastique* (1937-9).

generation from which he emerged; it was the very subject of his art, to be altered and transformed but not to be put aside.¹⁵¹

This urban civilization had provided the impetus for the early constructions in Schwitters' studio, making them into what Brian O'Doherty has called a 'tougher, more sinister work than [...] appears in the photographs', and their extraordinary location had supplied Schwitters with a possibly unexpected freedom to pursue the idea of Merz as interface.¹⁵² In the decade between the breakdown of the Weimar Republic and Schwitters' arrival in London in late 1941, the urban aspects of his art were of necessity greatly diminished, while his connections outside Germany proved a poor substitute for the former community of Weimar artists, with all its animating rivalries and tensions. The importance that Schwitters attached to the presence of visitors to the Merzbau is particularly evident in a letter to Dreier of 1936 describing his despondency that he cannot show anyone the studio.¹⁵³

After the Great Depression of 1929, with both the avant-garde and cultural pluralism under threat, the emphasis of Merzbau seems to shift from various frictions sustained within the studio to new forms of tension between the studio and the outside world. From 1931 the columns expand into a room structure and for a time, studio and art work apparently become one. Schwitters extends the KdeE upwards and outwards and links it to the constructions to the right of the door with an arch to give the impression of a flowing sculptural environment. The main door is removed so that the room seems to lack boundaries, and the corners are obscured. Visitors no longer walk round a discrete column or round a column set in a housing, but are now themselves contained within the unified structure of what has in effect become one great grotto, particularly as viewed from outside, where the main window, taking up almost a whole wall, acts as a framing device. In 1933, Schwitters moved his new studio to the adjoining room, thus removing the area of works in progress from his constructions and,

151 Elderfield 1985, 238.

152 O'Doherty 1986, 44. Elderfield notes that 'Schwitters nurtured his eclecticism as much as he did his provincialism [...] for they gave him a happy freedom of mobility.' Elderfield 1985, 170.

153 See Chapter II, note 142 above.

at this relatively late date, creating the Merzbau as a sculptural environment. It is characteristic of its unorthodox nature that whereas an artist's work is generally defined as finished when it leaves the studio, the studio had to be removed from the Merzbau for it to become an artwork.

Elderfield interprets the structures shown in wide-angle shots of 1933 as Vitalist,¹⁵⁴ but it is also possible to see in them a kind of deviant Merz Vitalism, in which the continuity between interior and exterior lies in objects rather than in forms. This is less a process of growth than of reciprocity; as the sculptural environment expands, it also seems progressively to turn it on itself. The dead twigs that resemble a spider crawling across the edge of the KdeE (Fig. 28a) are a reminder both of the wooden framework of the Merzbau, small sections of which were left exposed,¹⁵⁵ and of the different temporality of the trees outside in the park, visible both through the main window and in glazed surfaces and shards of mirror. The domestic setting had been reflected from the first in the representations of a woman and a child around which the first columns were assembled (Figs. 4, 5, 12), and by 1933, a woman and a child remain as striking compositional elements; from their proximity (Fig. 20) they seem to strike up a (reluctant) relationship. These figures may be seen as stylized, but not idealized. Schwitters' first son Gerd provided the model for the child's head, which is constructed, like much of the Merzbau, from plaster, the material of rough casts, impressions, mass-produced busts, cheap models and replicas. (In Schwitters' time at least, plaster was connected with models of classical sculptures made by academy students and rated as characterless.¹⁵⁶) The woman is *Fromme Helene* [Devout Helene], the anti-heroine of Wilhelm Busch's eponymous satire, an irreverent young woman who refuses to heed the hypocritical moralizing of her self-righteous petit-bourgeois relations.¹⁵⁷ The ornate oval frame half-hidden in the Stairway Entrance (Fig.

154 Elderfield 1985, 171.

155 See Chapter Two, note 281 above.

156 Cf. George Grosz's account of studying at the Dresden Academy; Grosz 1983, Chapter 4.

157 Szeemann sees *Fromme Helene* as a key element in the Merzbau; Szeemann 1994, 263. This image appeared on the poster advertising a Wilhelm Busch centenary exhibition at the Hannover *Provinzialmuseum* in 1932. Busch

45b, with mirror) is a further reminder of bourgeois correctness (Figs. 3, 105b). Some of these elements may also be understood as exemplifying a loss of flow and exchange, such as the fragments of a pneumatic postal system, the rolled-up paper streamers, the stopcock above the KdeE, the upturned wineglass, the dead twigs and the immobilized coils of the drive belt. In this setting, a fictional woman (*Fromme Helene*) and a dead child (Gerd Schwitters), which form part of two converging axes, are the main human figures left to view.¹⁵⁸

By the time the first photos of the Merzbau were published, preparations were being made to show Schwitters' work in a travelling exhibition entitled *Kunst im Dienst der Zersetzung* [Art in the Service of Corruption].¹⁵⁹ Culture was the first area to come under complete control of the Third Reich (Figs. 127, 131), and with Hitler himself visualized as the nation's artist-creator,¹⁶⁰ the new regime sought to create a uniform mass culture in which artists and writers would become priestly educators whose task was to ensure the cultural health of the nation.¹⁶¹ Merz was increasingly prevented from entering into any kind of a dialogue with an antagonistic outside world, and, just as the first columns had been an integral part of the studio, so the Merzbau was progressively incorporated into the domestic environment, moving into new *espace trouvée*, part of which had been the domain of women and children: Ernst Schwitters' playroom (which became Schwitters' bedroom), the maids' quarters in the attic and possibly cellar rooms. Other parts (the balcony, the roof, the back garden) were, at least till 1935-6, partially exposed to the outside world (Fig. 58). This fragmented distribution ensured that the Merzbau could not be seen all at once (and never fully surround the viewer).

(1832-1908), born near Hannover, was, like Schwitters, an author and artist, and is often regarded as the inventor of the comic strip.

158 Helene eventually sets fire to her room and dies. The text accompanying Busch's sketch (which now reads as an ironic prediction of fate of the first two Merzbauten) reads: 'Hier sieht man ihre Trümmer rauchen/Der Rest ist nicht mehr zu gebrauchen'. [Here you see her ashes smoking/the remains are good for nothing.] For a comparative study of Busch and Schwitters, see Imm 1994.

159 See Orchard/Schulz 2000, 612.

160 This idea was frequently voiced by Goebbels and many others. In 1940, for example, the President of the Prussian Academy announced that 'German history is being structured by the blessed hands of the Führer into a work of art of gigantic proportions.' [So gestaltet sich die deutsche Geschichte in den gottbegnadeten Händen des Führers zu einem Kunstwerk von gigantischem Ausmaß.] Quoted in Mommsen 2000, 230.

161 Cf. Brenner 1963, 57, also Fig. 127.

By 1936, Schwitters was confronted with a single political discourse that laid claim to all aesthetic aspects of society, especially in its mastery of what Walter Benjamin termed the *aura*, not as applied to the single art work but as expressed in the dramatization of the representative arenas of the *Volk* such as imposing architectural projects and mass Party rallies (Figs. 130-2). Merz started from a basis of given circumstances, however unfavourable or hostile, but in this intimidating political environment, the space available for the implementation of independent ideas rapidly dwindled to the point where the Merzbau became as liable to elimination as any other public display of nonconformity. Robert Ley summed up this policy in his statement that ‘In Germany there is no private matter any more [...] We no longer have private people. The time when each could act as he wished is over’.¹⁶² A totalitarian state had, as Schwitters later wrote, ‘levelled out art to an easily comprehensible form of propaganda’.¹⁶³ The Merzbau occupied spaces that as far the regime was concerned, were not Schwitters’ own, so that in a reversal of its former state, it became a private work tied (irretrievably) to a public context.¹⁶⁴

The main window, not visible on any photograph, was now invested with a significant new role. Schwitters writes that his ideas for new Merzbau structures arise from the natural world and patterns of light and shadow falling through the window; his source of inspiration thus remains stable but changes continuously. At the same time, he continued to make grottos in a manner which, from his description, had not changed since 1930:

I have just finished two grottos, one with the theme ‘Longing’ and the other ‘Circus’. In the first there’s a big Herr Remmer at the front, and you can see he certainly isn’t longing for anything, and behind there’s a kitschy, poor girl with flowers. Also an oriental landscape, a Buddha, a circus girl and the words ‘frisch gewonnen ist halb zerronnen’.¹⁶⁵

162 [In Deutschland gibt es keine Privatsache mehr! Privatleute haben wir nicht mehr. Die Zeit, wo jeder tun und lassen konnte, was er wollte, ist vorbei.] Ley 1938, 71. Ley (1890–1945) was head of the German Labour Front from 1933 to 1945.

163 [In den totalitären Staaten [... ist] die Kunst Dienerin zum Nutzen der Propaganda [...] die Kunst ist nivelliert.] Schwitters 1940, 380-1.

164 Compare Catherine Randall’s study of the encoded critique of French Calvinist architecture, which Randall terms ‘architexture’; Randall 1999, Ch. 4. Her analysis of the subversive architecture of 16th and 17th century Calvinist architects reveals numerous striking parallels with Schwitters’ Merzbauten.

165 The German original of this proverb is ‘Frisch gewagt ist halb gewonnen’, (lit. newly dared is half won). Schwitters’ version means ‘newly achieved is half curdled’.

The circus grotto is really kitschy. In particular a cheap, shiny blue bauble from the Christmas tree lends it character.¹⁶⁶

The only visual evidence of a grotto at this time is the photo of the ‘Grotto in Remembrance of Molde’ of 1935 (Fig. 35), which frames a selection of natural objects including a bone.

Whether this was a purposeful allusion to one of the most popular Nazi songs, *Es zittern die morschen Knochen* [The frail bones are trembling], must remain conjecture. From the little that is known of their content, it is probable that in the 1930s, Schwitters continued to use the grottos as a way of rereading and reinterpreting various aspects of the contemporary world.

With its fragile materials and multiple perspectives, the Merzbau lay at an opposite pole to Fascism’s monumental and manipulative use of space. Whereas Nazi art demanded instant mass appeal, the Merzbau, never an easy work, developed further into an increasingly abstract, complex and convoluted structure. This was partly due to Schwitters’ definition of Merz as a fundamentally inclusive concept that admits of human failings; it meant that the Merzbau was not only informed by his current perceptions but also by each previous one, so that it consisted of all its former stages. (This is perhaps what Carola Giedion-Welcker meant when she suggested a connection with Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine*, described in his preface (1842) as a series of galleries of which the ‘history of which each chapter was a novel, and each novel the picture of a period’.¹⁶⁷)

The apparent openness of the Merzbau was deceptive, as there were hidden sections at the rear of the constructions containing walkways, stairs, seating, a library and a large area whose function even today remains unexplained (Fig. 53a). The only way in which it could absorb the outside world was through the window, which reflected the adjoining woodlands. Multiple

166 [Gerade heute habe ich 2 Grotten vollendet, die eine hat das Thema „Sehnsucht“, die andere „Circus“. Bei der einen ist gross vorn Herr Remmer, dem man es ansieht, dass er bestimmt keine Sehnsucht hat, und hinten ein kitschiges armes Mädchen mit Blumen. Dazu orientalische Landschaft, ein Buddha, ein Mädchen im Circus, und die Worte „frisch gewonnen ist halb zerronnen“. Die Circusgrotte ist ganz kitschig. Besonders eine flitterige, blaue Kugel vom Weihnachtsbaum gibt ihr den Charakter.] Letter to Susanna Freudenthal, 28.2.35, KSA 9, 95-6. Buddha as a symbol of indifference was used by Dada; Huelsenbeck wrote in the 1920 Dada-Almanach that Dada was a form of American Buddhism, and in his lecture on Dada (1922) Tzara described Dada as ‘a return to a quasi-Buddhist religion of detachment’.

167 Giedion-Welcker 1947, 286. The unfinished *Comédie Humaine* was planned to begin with ‘Scenes of Military Life’ and end with ‘Scenes of Country Life’.

perspectives were available through various standpoints within the Merzbau itself, and also through movable elements, variable lighting and reflective surfaces. As much of the outer perimeter of the first room was negotiable, in this part one was both inside and outside the Merzbau and by means of hatches and apertures could view those who considered themselves viewers. In this respect, it is significant that ambivalent vision and self-reflection were common themes of artists who retired into inner emigration.¹⁶⁸ A study of self-portraits of the former German avant-garde in the Third Reich remarks on their consistently self-questioning nature,¹⁶⁹ and it is worth noting that of Schwitters' known self-portraits, whose moods range from bitter to dejected, all were painted after 1933 (Fig. 123).

The period in which the Merzbau seems progressively to become a self-reflexive work, and eventually has to be hidden behind whitewashed windows, is also the period in which Schwitters employs professional craftsmen to work on it and increasingly opens it up to the public domain; in art publications (e.g. *abstraction-cr ation* 1933 and 1934, Giedion-Welcker 1937), in his search for a space outside Germany to accommodate a similar sculptural environment, and in the MoMA exhibition of late 1936 that included photographs of the Merzbau (Fig. 64b) and illustrations in the catalogue (New York 1936). It was at the apex of the Merzbau's fame that Schwitters fled into exile, after which its diverse structures were partly boarded up until they were finally destroyed in 1943.

III The Merzbauten in Norway and England

1. Reception history

For many years after Schwitters' death, the existence of the later Merzbauten (one no longer extant, one of doubtful status, one a fragment, and all compounding the complexities presented by the original work) was glossed over in art-historical studies or received no

168 As an example, Oskar Schlemmer's 'Window Pictures' series (Fig. 124), dating from a period of isolation in 1942, frame shadowy views of everyday scenes; cf. Maur 1978.

169 Hofman 1980, 50 ff.

mention at all. That so little was known about these works inevitably led to uncertainty about their status similar to that engendered by the Hannover Merzbau in the post-war period, while the sheer extent of the original seemed to confirm it as the most significant work. Carola Giedion-Welcker was the first art historian to suggest that the later Merzbauten were direct continuations of the Hannover Merzbau (Giedion-Welcker 1947), and Ronald Alley provided an early survey of all three Merzbauten (Alley 1958). Other references of this time are, however, brief and imprecise.¹⁷⁰ Schmalenbach's reservations about the quality of Schwitters' work in exile may also have served to divert attention from the later Merzbauten (Schmalenbach 1967a).¹⁷¹ His study of Schwitters' visual work is, moreover, structured chronologically with subheadings according to work groups, so that many potential connections are subsumed under other headings - the 'Madonna' (Fig. 28, 29), for instance, is placed in the section on sculpture.

In 1958 Alley observed that 'the English Merzbau is the only one still in existence and it too seems doomed to destruction'.¹⁷² The operation to save the barn's rapidly disintegrating end wall by moving it to Newcastle was documented by Fred Brookes, who had been in charge of the operation (Brookes 1969). At the same time, Elderfield published an article relating the barn to the style of Schwitters' late work (Elderfield 1969). He concluded that: '[Schwitters] never conceived of the work as simply mural decoration [...] This was architecture; architecture without function, it is true, though of a primitive kind [...] an emotional architecture, and one close to nature.'¹⁷³ In his study of Dada, Kenneth Coutts-Smith described the Merzbauten as reflections of their age, but related the barn only to the following decade:

Stylistically, Schwitters [...] responded like a delicate aesthetic barometer to the changing climate of the times [...] From the photos of the original Hannover work, we notice a

170 In an article of 1963 Ernst Schwitters scarcely mentioned the Merzbauten (London 1963), while Haftmann located the second in a 'farmhouse in Norway' (Haftmann 1965, 187).

171 Schmalenbach repeatedly defended the stance he took in 1967, e.g. in Hannover 1986, 21.

172 Alley 1958, 15. Alley described the Lysaker Merzbau as 'a deliberate creation in the manner of the Hannover house with Dada grottos constructed at the same time as the rest', and the Merz barn (including the end wall and a section near the entrance) as 'in [Schwitters'] De Stijl manner in low relief'. This article was written before the wall was moved to Newcastle.

173 Elderfield 1969, 58

predominant constructivist flavour, while the Ambleside wall with its rough texture and subtle but muted colouring anticipates matter painting foreshadowing the work of such artists as Tapies and Burri in the fifties.¹⁷⁴

Other commentators likewise avoided examination of the barn directly in relationship to its time. In an article of 1973, Elderfield compared the urban aspects of the Hannover Merzbau to what he called the ‘primitivist’ Merz barn, discussed here in terms of Expressionism and the organic (Elderfield 1973).¹⁷⁵ Nine years later Nicholas Wadley claimed that the barn was ‘a very private activity’ removed from any identifiable modern tradition.¹⁷⁶

However we choose to categorize the later Merzbauten, all were products of the 1930s and 1940s, created in exile and in circumstances in which avant-garde art would seem to have lost its relevance. In the case of the Lysaker Merzbau, one could argue that from the first Schwitters hoped to move it to a more suitable location, but this was by no means the case with the Merz barn. The problems that arise from an analysis of the Hannover Merzbau conducted in the terms of a restricted Modernist understanding of the early 20th century avant-gardes are thus exacerbated in the case of the later Merzbauten. If one assumes that here, Schwitters was simply perpetuating stylistic idioms of earlier decades, they must be regarded as regressive works that, as Elderfield expresses it, occupy ‘a precarious position between the abstract and the nostalgic’.¹⁷⁷

A move away from interpretations based on a Modernist understanding of the 20th century avant-gardes is evident in texts from the late 1980s onwards. Sarah Wilson’s analysis of the Merz barn, for instance, (which includes its free-standing sculptures and demolished oblique wall) closes with the claim that Schwitters’ late sculptures were ‘not the work of a despairing man, but sculptural extensions of a personality acknowledging sexual desire, irony and often

174 Coutts-Smith 1970, 130. Schmalenbach made a similar point (Schmalenbach 1981).

175 Sarah Wilson criticized Elderfield’s standpoint in this article as sacrificing ‘almost half [Schwitters’] work on the altar of American modernism’; Wilson 1994, 306-7.

176 Wadley 1981, 72.

177 Elderfield 1969, 65.

scatological humour'.¹⁷⁸ By this time, Elderfield had already expressed reservations about his earlier verdict of the Merz barn as fundamentally regressive, and in 1985, he described the barn as a work of great charm. He compared its grottos to 'an abstracted relief landscape animated by light' and described the whole as:

like a single grotto [...] far indeed in feeling from the dark fetishistic grottos from which the first Merzbau developed. It is a softly primitive cave whose walls grow like plants to the light, beginning to assume those serpentine forms characteristic of the Lake District landscape.¹⁷⁹

Here, Elderfield again explores the artistic roots of what he calls Schwitters' 'romantic ideal of organic wholeness' and 'long-standing primordial ideal', traceable in part to *Nasci*, but argues that the artist was never wholly led into the realm of cliché or nostalgia: 'even at his most introspective, Schwitters still trafficked with the times'.¹⁸⁰ He concludes that to the end of his life, Schwitters' art articulated a challenge to all prescriptions and ideologies, including those of the avant-garde:

Schwitters' existing (urban) vocabulary had to be severely ruptured to tell of his new surroundings. The damage this did to the quality of his art has certainly been exaggerated [...] after an astonishingly productive career, risks were taken that [...] opened new and daring avenues hitherto little unexplored.¹⁸¹

Elderfield also proposes that after exile cut him off from urban life and the avant-garde, Schwitters reasserted his 'atavistic Dada beliefs':

[He] allowed sheer feeling to assert itself, at which point, in Norway and then in England, his long-standing primordial ideal was finally made manifest. At the same time, I think, it is indisputable that he was at his very best when his primordial ideal was just that, an idea, and not within geographical grasp.¹⁸²

In the 1970s, the fact that a major 20th century artist had lived in the Lake District began to reach a wider public. Schwitters' time in Ambleside was first researched by William Feaver, who wrote a lengthy article for the *Sunday Times* (Feaver 1974) and subsequently by Mary

178 Wilson 1994, 304.

179 Elderfield 1985, 222-3. Elderfield nonetheless concludes by repeating his original comparison with 'Picturesque' style (Elderfield 1969).

180 Ibid., 239.

181 Ibid.

182 Ibid, 239-40.

Burkett (Burkett 1979); Barbara Crossley later expanded considerably on their work (Crossley 2005). The historical context of the Elterwater Merzbau has thus been well documented.

Burkett, at that time director of Abbott Hall Museum, recorded testimonies of those who had seen the original work, and Crossley provided a detailed investigation of its history and the fate of its contents after Schwitters' death.¹⁸³

Despite these numerous studies, the barn has not remained free from the kind of legends and misunderstandings attached to the Hannover Merzbau. The most unshakable of these is that only the end wall was extant when Schwitters died. Ernst stated this in 1971,¹⁸⁴ though Elderfield had already published a documentation of Schwitters' work on the barn, with diagrammatic plans of the interior (Elderfield 1969). Ten years later, Wadley endorsed this article by showing that more progress had been made on the barn than was generally assumed, citing in particular the demolished central wall (Wadley 1981). The researches of Elderfield and Wadley have, however, played little part in the reception since then (exceptions are Wilson 1994 and Crossley 2005). The catalogue of the 1985 exhibition at the Tate Gallery referred to the later Merzbauten only briefly,¹⁸⁵ and they received no mention in a major exhibition (Cologne 1985) of Schwitters' late work.¹⁸⁶ Since then, most commentators have assumed that only a single relief existed when Schwitters died.¹⁸⁷

Elger's essay in the catalogue of the centenary exhibition in Hannover (Elger 1986) was indicative of a change of attitude towards the later Merzbauten prompted by Elderfield's study of 1985. In a substantial revision of his original analysis, Elger argued that there was in effect only one Merzbau, whose basic concept could be traced to early sculptural assemblages (Figs.

183 The Armit Museum in Ambleside maintains a collection of oral history relating to the barn. Isabelle Ewig and Sarah Wilson have written on the barn in biographical accounts based on detailed researches of Schwitters' life in England; see Ewig 2000, *passim*; Wilson 1994, 296-309.

184 Düsseldorf 1971, 16-18.

185 London 1985, 20-1. Although several sculptures from the barn were on show, the catalogue mentions only the Merz barn's 'completed' bas-relief in the Hatton Gallery. The fact that the Tate Gallery rejected the offer of the Merz barn wall may have contributed to the dismissive attitude of this article.

186 The introductory chronology records the destruction of the Hannover Merzbau, omits the Oslo Merzbau and states that the Elterwater Merzbau is now in the Hatton gallery.

187 E.g. Dietrich 1993, 221, n.6; Elger 1997b, 197; Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 95. Both Elderfield's and Wadley's articles on the barn were translated into German.

2, 5).¹⁸⁸ Since then, the Merzbauten have often been perceived as forerunners of conceptual, installation and site-specific art. Marc Dachy, in his study of Dada, wrote of the Merzbau that: ‘Fate saw to it that [Schwitters] had to construct it three times.’¹⁸⁹ Elizabeth Gamard saw the Merz barn as ‘inextricably adjoined to its context’, and also as attesting to the consistency of Schwitters’ artistic programme.¹⁹⁰ Ulrich Krempel described the Merzbauten as an idea that ‘existed in different versions in different places’, citing Schwitters’ dissatisfaction with the Hannover Merzbau in 1936 as ‘of fundamental significance; even if it is not possible to understand it in detail, it highlights the continuous creative process by which the Merzbau was constantly changing’.¹⁹¹

The suggestion that the Merzbau was an overarching concept was not new. In 1969, Elderfield wrote that:

to speak of Schwitters’ three Merzbauten is in a sense not quite the truth. The Merzbau concept was the inevitable by-product of his manner of working: the accumulation of unused debris [...] found its way into fantastic configurations wherever he worked.¹⁹²

Carola Giedion-Welcker also suggested that all three Merzbauten were ‘an embodiment of the Merz idea’ [*Verkörperung des Merz-Gedankens*].¹⁹³ This proposal can, in fact, be attributed to Schwitters himself. Before finally deciding to start on the Merz barn, he had written to a friend: ‘on my birthday I received a scholarship from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to restore my Merzbau. But there is nothing more to be done there. But I say to myself, ‘Merzbau is Merzbau’. Better I finish the one in Oslo.’¹⁹⁴

In the mid-1990s, art historians began to write of four rather than three Merzbauten. Elger, for instance, described the Hannover Merzbau as a ‘prototype’ and continued by claiming that

188 Elger 1986, 248.

189 Dachy 1990, 178.

190 Gamard 2000, 175-7.

191 Krempel 2000, 268, 266. The reference is to Schwitters 1938b.

192 Elderfield 1969, 57.

193 [eine [...] Verkörperung des Merzgedankens.] Giedion-Welcker 1971, 12.

194 [Du musst wissen, dass ich am 20.6, meinem Geburtstage, eine Scholarship vom Museum of Modern Art in New York erhalten habe zum Ausbessern meines Merzbaues. Aber da ist ja nichts mehr zu machen. Aber ich sage mir: "Merzbau ist Merzbau." Da vollende ich besser den in Oslo.] Letter to Christof Spengemann, 25.6.47, Nündel 1974, 282.

Schwitters also converted the hut on Hjertøya to a Merzbau.¹⁹⁵ The accompanying photos bear the caption ‘Merzbau Hjertoy’. Elger notes here that the dual role of living space and abstract environment on Hjertøya was not a new feature, pointing out that Schwitters also slept in the Hannover Merzbau. He concludes that ‘all four Merzbauten simply represented different stages of development and [different] characteristics of one and the same artistic (Merz) principle’.¹⁹⁶ Elger later extended the list of potential Merzbauten to include Merz columns and constructions such as those in Kijkduin, Switzerland and the Isle of Man, and similar references occur in other recent art-historical texts; Penelope Curtis, for instance, writes of Merzbauten in Hannover, Oslo, Elterwater and also Hjertøya, which she describes as Schwitters’ most intimate Merzbau.¹⁹⁷

In the meantime the 1983 reconstruction of the Merzbau has garnered its own reception. Szeemann himself began the debate when he recalled his doubts about the advisability of reconstructing a myth and capturing a moment of a creative process.¹⁹⁸ Krempel criticized the reconstruction on the grounds that ‘the public nature of the reconstruction follows the principles of the museum’; he argued that as the original Merzbau was ‘a private work and not a theatrical event’, the number of visitors to the reconstruction at any one time should be limited.¹⁹⁹ Zvonimir Bakotin’s ‘Merzbau in Cyberspace’ translated it into an interactive model for the Internet,²⁰⁰ and in 2001, the psychiatrist Georg Franzen recorded the reactions of a group of his patients to the reconstruction, which they regarded as conveying an atmosphere of security, cheerfulness and freedom.²⁰¹ His presentation of the Merzbau as therapy echoes Schwitters’ own appeal to his readers in the *Veilchenheft* that if they are tired of politics and want a break from stresses and strains, they should ‘just come to art, to pure unpolitical art,

195 Elger 1997b, 194.

196 [Alle vier Merzbauten [repräsentierten] lediglich die unterschiedlichen Entwicklungsstufen und Ausprägungen ein und desselben künstlerischen (Merz)prinzips.] Elger 1997a, 45.

197 Curtis 1999, 169; see also Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 189.

198 Hannover 1987, 256.

199 Krempel 2000, 261, 268.

200 <http://www.merzbau.org/Bakotin.html>

201 Franzen 2001.

that is unbiased, not social, not national, not fashionable but timeless. It can refresh you, and will find it a pleasure to do so’.

Extensive documentary material relating to the Merzbauten, including the hut on Hjertøya, has become available since the publication of the three-volume *Catalogue Raisonné*, and in 2005, the newly reopened Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich launched a series of international Merzbau symposia. Finally, the Elterwater site, where annual conferences on Schwitters also take place, was purchased from the former owner in 2006. Pierce’s original plans are now available for scholars, and the shell of the Merz barn is undergoing repair, after which it will house a digital replica of the original wall.

2. Public and private aspects of the later Merzbauten

From the mid-1930s, when the threat to the original Merzbau became increasingly evident, Schwitters resolved to create another Merzbau to pass down to posterity. During the 1940s, he made every effort to ensure the survival and completion of at least one of his Merzbauten, even if, as in the case of Hannover, it meant rebuilding it from its ruins.

Given that the later Merzbauten were products of a period when Schwitters became a permanent refugee, the idea that they constituted a kind of a retreat is common, but just as with the Hannover Merzbau, much weighs against such readings. The Lysaker Merzbau, laboriously erected on a steep slope in the garden (Fig. 66b), would have made an incongruous choice of refuge, as it stood directly opposite a police station, and despite Schwitters’ efforts to camouflage it, caused constant problems with officialdom; as a result of his activities, he repeatedly came under suspicion as a spy.²⁰² The hut on Hjertøya was in a less vulnerable location, but the authorities in Molde would not have permitted him to show his huge sculpture for long, and it was usually hidden in a shed nearby (Fig. 74). The Merz

202 According to Ernst Schwitters, the Merzbau was discovered after a neighbour reported that it housed a transmitter. Conversation with Ernst Schwitters, 29.7.92. In his correspondence from Norway, Schwitters repeatedly reported that he was regarded as an informer.

barn can also hardly be deemed a sanctuary in any conventional sense, for in the months that Schwitters worked on it, already in precarious health, he subjected himself (just as he had in Hannover and Lysaker) to extremes of physical strain that arguably contributed to his death.²⁰³ If Schwitters continued to devote himself to his Merzbauten till the end of his days, it would be more plausible to suggest that this was despite, not because of, circumstances that ranged from hostile to life-threatening.

In 1985, Elderfield raised the neglected issue of Schwitters' own statements on the barn. What led him to write that this was his greatest sculpture? What made it in his eyes superior to its predecessors? Elderfield claims that this was not mere self-delusion; he argues that the barn was conceived by Schwitters as his culminating artistic statement, in which he hoped to invest the experience of a lifetime. In reality, however, his isolation told against him.²⁰⁴ We could turn this round and suggest that as in Hannover after 1933 and in Oslo, Schwitters took this isolation fully into account; it could even be argued that in the case of the Merz barn, he was in many ways less isolated than before.

In Chapter Three, I offered an alternative interpretation of the Hannover Merzbau in terms of 'borrowed space' that may also be applied to its successors. All the later Merzbauten were of necessity articulations of *espace trouvée*, if for no other reason than the spaces of refugees are by definition not their own.²⁰⁵ If we look first at the Lysaker Merzbau, it becomes obvious that some of the conditions of the post-1930 Hannover Merzbau also applied to this work; it occupied an insecure site at a time when contact with the avant-garde had become extremely difficult. Schwitters upheld the basic tenets of Merz in Lysaker as far as he started out from given conditions, however unfavourable, and absorbed the resulting tensions into his work.

203 See KSA 9, 28, 30; Schaub 1998, 31-2. Schwitters had already made his will after a serious illness in June.

204 Elderfield 1985, 239.

205 Ella Bergmann-Michel described Schwitters' visit of 1936 in her diary: 'In the night he unpacked his rubber mattress and laid it on the floor of the room. He didn't want a proper bed any more – the symbol of tranquillity – he refused it. One had to be able to lie down and sleep quickly, all of a sudden, somewhere, somehow [...] always prepared to flee.' [In der Nacht packte er seine Gummimaträtze aus und legte sich auf den Boden des Zimmers. Ein richtiges Bett wollte er nicht mehr – dies Symbol der Ruhe – er lehnte es ab. Schnell und plötzlich musste man sich legen und schlafen können irgendwann irgendwo [...] zum fliehen immer bereit.] Entry of 9.4.40, KSF.

Even more than in Hannover, however, his work was under constant threat of demolition, and its location – the back garden of a rented apartment in a country in which he was forbidden employment and had only temporary right of residence – was one over which he had no control. What was devised as a public work was increasingly driven into the private sphere. In the sense that Schwitters had to erect the building himself first, there was no contiguous ‘borrowed space’ with which he could set up preliminary tensions. He was no longer confronted with the Weimar Republic’s rapidly changing and crisis-ridden world or with the menace of dictatorship, but with a conservative, largely homogenous Norwegian culture that offered no place for interaction with the European avant-garde. The Lysaker Merzbau was thus a discrete construction in both a physical and metaphorical sense: it also housed Schwitters’ studio, but there were, it seems, no multiple perspectives here, no synthesis of opposites, no opportunities for an ironic stance poised between the public and private domain, and no dynamic ensuing from audience reactions. The complications of negotiating this space were possibly as material as they were aesthetic; Ernst Schwitters noted that the floor was so irregular that ‘one practically climbed white mountains!’²⁰⁶ The balancing act of Merz had to be contrived; for lack of a public, Schwitters fabricated the studio’s interactive aspects by asking friends abroad to send texts, photos and contributions to his guest book, in anticipation of the time when the new Merzbau could move abroad:

Even if by some misfortune I would to stay here for ever, apart from my family you wouldn’t find anyone here in the next thousand years who would understand the meaning of this work. The studio must migrate southwards one day.²⁰⁷

This was written after the outbreak of war, but the potential defects of the new Merzbau were clear from the first. In the month he began work on the foundations, he wrote:

I am building a new studio as a visible sign that a new life is beginning for me. It has to begin, I’m only fifty years old, one can begin again at that age. In all, life is so cruel that one shouldn’t have been born. With this premise one can live extremely well.²⁰⁸

206 [man bestieg praktisch weisse Berge!] Letter to Werner Schmalenbach, 6.9.64, KSF.

207 [Denn selbst wenn ich per Malheur ewig hier bleiben könnte, fände sich ausser meiner Familie hier in den nächsten tausend Jahren niemand, der den Sinn dieser Arbeit begreifen könnte, Das Atelier muss einmal in südlicher Richtung auswandern.] Letter to Annie Müller-Widmann, 17.12.39, Schaub 1998, 36.

In such unpromising circumstances, Schwitters seems to have turned to the past for inspiration; Ernst Schwitters wrote that the Lysaker Merzbau was an anachronism, a refined version of the Hannover Merzbau.²⁰⁹ Planned from the first as a unified structure, with little chance of interaction with any aspect of its environment apart from the natural world, this, one might conjecture, must have been the most ‘aesthetic’ work, the one in which artistic autonomy found little counterweight in the aim to integrate art and life.²¹⁰ One might also speculate that if instead, Barr or another patron had been able to offer Schwitters a commission in the USA, it would have resulted in a very different kind of Merzbau from the *Haus am Bakken*.

The Elterwater barn, both as an already existent structure and as *espace trouvée*, offered far more potential than Lysaker. If we think of this final Merzbau in the sense of the kind of sculptural interior that Schwitters created after 1930, then this was a work with as much, or even more potential than its predecessors. The damp, unfloored, rough stone barn was, for its time, a suitably unpromising site for an artwork. It was located on private industrial land that was in the process of being laid out as an exotic garden in a remote valley of the Lake District (Figs. 84, 86). A surrounding urban civilisation was lacking but Schwitters was accepted by the local community as a competent painter of portraits, landscapes and flowers and had joined the local art society. He was not working against a background of repression – he was even about to gain British citizenship – so that the barn was under no threat, and its funding was assured. He had resumed his correspondence with Katherine Dreier and former friends and colleagues who had seen the original Merzbau and could envisage what he was trying to

208 ‘Ich baue hier ein neues Atelier als sichtbares Zeichen, dass ein neues Leben für mich beginnt. Es muss beginnen, ich bin erst 50 Jahre alt, da kann man noch einmal anfangen. Alles in allem ist das Leben so grauenhaft, dass man lieber nicht geboren wäre. Mit dieser Prämisse lebt sichs ganz leidlich gut.’ Letter to Katherine Dreier, 13.10.37, Nündel 1974, 139.

209 As note 206.

210 Schwitters wrote that the Lysaker Merzbau was oriented around the main window with a view of the landscape; Schwitters 1938a, 366. The potential of the work seems to have been of great importance to him: see Stadtmüller 1997, 55.

do. Some of his former status had been restored through Carola Giedion-Welcker's work²¹¹ and his contacts with the refugee community in England. The hybrid nature of the Merz barn seemed to be guaranteed by plans for it to house a cafe or art gallery, and also by the fact that Schwitters had a small band of helpers who had no knowledge of contemporary art, let alone the pre-war avant-garde. The primary elements of the barn were not only of a rural nature, but also reflected the age-old, extensive industrial history of the area (the former Cylinders gunpowder factory and the Elterwater slate mine (see Fig. 84), both a couple of minutes' walk away). Nonetheless, as Schwitters devoted less than four months to a work that required, in his own estimate, over three years to complete, and it lay in the nature of Merz to adapt, it is impossible to judge what the final effect of the Merz barn would have been.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that however private the conditions were in which Schwitters created the later Merzbauten, they were not conceived as private works. The Lysaker Merzbau was designed to consist of portable elements so that it could be moved to a more public environment. Schwitters assumed (with no notion of the complications involved) that the Merz barn would eventually pass to the National Trust, and the grant that he received with the aid of MoMA was a guarantee of future publicity. The hut on Hjertøya, in contrast, with its painted geometrical constructions containing food and household articles, never existed as more than a private work, and Elger's suggestion that Hjertøya, rather than Lysaker, was the site of 'the actual Norwegian Merzbau' must be open to doubt.²¹² Schwitters never referred to the hut as a Merzbau, though as one half of a potato store rented from a farmer and situated on a remote island in a Norwegian fiord, this could possibly have constituted the ultimate example of a Merzbau as *espace trouvée*. In addition, it seems at first

211 E.g. Giedion-Welcker 1947; see also Fig. 115.

212 Elger's essay on the Norwegian Merzbauten (Elger 1997a) quotes Ernst as saying that the hut on Hjertøya housed 'the actual Norwegian Merzbau' [den eigentlichen norwegischen Merzbau], on the basis of a note in SAB 1987, 327 (Nach Auskunft von Ernst Schwitters befand sich in der Schmiede der [eigentlich] dritte Merzbau). This information was transmitted orally and no written record exists (enquiry of 27/10/2005). It was certainly not the opinion that Ernst voiced to Nicholas Wadley in their correspondence (now in KSF).

a prime example of art grafted inseparably on to daily life. What was lacking on Hjertøya was the component of any societal interaction to maintain the dynamic of Merz, so that the hut must be regarded more as an experiment or a study than a Merzbau per se.²¹³ The same may be said of more obscure manifestations of the Merzbau such as Schwitters' porridge sculptures and the fragile window grotto in the Douglas internment camp.²¹⁴ In another sense, however, Schwitters issues a challenge to his surroundings in these flimsy constructions. They may be seen as indictments of an age that not only alienated Weimar artists such as Schwitters, with their hopes for a more democratic, tolerant society, but drove them to locations where their visions could no longer be realized in lasting form.

213 In 1936 Schwitters envisioned bringing a World Fair to Hjertøya, in which the hut would be the main office and therefore require new pillowslips, painted floors and doors, a bathroom, a desk, a separate entrance for the potato store and a higher roof so that people could stand up straight ('I am against all forms of servility'); see Schwitters 1936, 118, also Stadtmüller 1991.

214 Hinrichsen 1989, 111; Uhlmann 1960, 235.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored the complexities of formulating a response to two questions: what were, and what are, the Merzbauten? In view of the impossibility of engaging directly with any intact surviving example, Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield, the first art historians to undertake detailed investigations into these works, examined a range of sources in order to assemble an overall picture of the Merzbauten that would make them available for art-historical analysis. In view of the unusual time span involved (c. 1923-48), all three scholars emphasized the value of drawing up a reliable chronological framework on which to base their interpretations. Writing from the 1960s to the 1980s, they took the early 20th century avant-gardes as a starting-point for their studies, while also detecting a personal motivation behind these works. This combination of avant-garde and individual agendas has become what one may call the standard approach to the Hannover Merzbau, and has since resulted in numerous analyses of its various public and personal aspects.

Since the pioneering work of these three art historians, no coherent picture of the Merzbauten has emerged in the reception history, but rather a noticeable lack of consensus. What we do find, however, is a correlation between category and chronology. Depending on whether an interpretation accentuates Expressionist, Dadaist or Constructivist aspects, it will tend to highlight different stages of the Merzbau, that is, the beginning and end, the grotto/column stage and the sculptural environment respectively. Discussions of the Merzbau in terms of Merz generally provide a broader view of the work and concentrate more on developmental factors and cultural connotations than on visual detail. Studies that emphasize the private aspects of the work tend to focus on the early stages of the Hannover Merzbau and give little prominence to its function as studio, while discussions of the public aspects of the Merzbau generally concentrate on its later stages and often adopt a position that can be applied to all the Merzbauten. A programmatic interpretation will tend to begin with Schwitters' earliest assemblages and be less likely to identify any psychological meanings;

one involving Romantic irony will highlight the openness of the work, while an architectural one will concentrate on the environment stage and present the constructions of the Merzbau as inappropriate, unseemly or highly personal. Analyses of the Merzbauten in terms of early 20th century avant-garde styles invariably involve a caesura in the early 1930s, which leads to the once widespread notion that the later Merzbauten, in that they were created outside the context of the –isms, were largely inconsequential structures that must be regarded as failures, or at best private works, that are of far less artistic significance than the Hannover Merzbau. This conclusion is far less likely when the Merzbauten are considered as forerunners of Environments or installations, an approach which generally downplays the role of the early columns. As a rule, when the interpretation results in a Merzbau with a clearly definable identity, the chronology will play at most a minor role and the use of source material will be cut to a minimum.

A disadvantage of interpreting the Merzbauten in terms that are not specific to their times is that it can result in a tendency to sidestep the complexities of the individual works and to bypass their potentially vexed relationship to the age in which they were constructed. Partly because of the assumptions built into the standard chronology, the post-1930 evolution of the Merzbau has received little attention to date; contextual complexities have less frequently been addressed than questions of lineage. The few discussions of this period have concentrated on recording *what* Schwitters was doing in the Merzbau in the 1930s. There has been little interest in *how* or *why* he was doing it, or in the fact that after 1933, he should not have been doing it at all. In view of the tendency towards anachronism in the reception history, I have argued throughout this dissertation for the necessity of widening our understanding of the Merzbauten by relocating them in their historical context.

I have shown that an interpretation of the Merzbauten depends not only on the choice of approach but also on the selection of temporal and spatial co-ordinates. A very different result emerges if the framework for discussion covers only the field of the Weimar avant-garde or is

expanded to the art of the Thirties and Forties; any conclusions about the Merzbauten will likewise vary considerably if the primary focus is on a sculptural assemblage in a studio in Weimar Germany or on a series of environments in three different countries. We can only set up and identify the Merzbau by first establishing a context, and the abundance of variables presents a challenge to any enquiry into these works. The point of departure is of crucial importance here: as with an historical event that only crystallizes in retrospect, interpretation becomes a matter of which angle we take on the often indeterminate development of the Merzbauten, what we select as our starting and finishing point and which of their multifarious manifestations we choose to highlight.

The role played by the interpretative framework in the analysis of the Merzbauten became especially evident by the 1990s, when far-reaching changes in the climate of art-historical enquiry resulted in a more differentiated understanding of the avant-garde. The earlier emphasis on stylistic evolution was balanced or in some cases overridden by a more direct focus on the private and public aspects of the work. Carola Giedion-Welcker's early essays set a precedent here; she related the Merzbau to a broad range of issues, so that she was able to analyse it in relation to a nexus of disparate social, political and cultural discourses. Giedion-Welcker, however, not only knew Schwitters but wrote about him from the perspective of her personal support of a particular circle of European intellectuals. Without the benefit of such an agenda, art historians in the 1990s searched for new criteria for an analysis of the Merzbauten. The attempt to find some unifying principle behind the Merzbau or Merzbauten outside the sequential format of avant-garde discourses has brought with it a reduced reliance on the work of Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield, which perhaps provides one reason why the disparities of their chronologies have seldom been questioned to date. While the postmodernist approach has exposed the limitations of analyses of the Merzbau in terms of discrete avant-garde styles, it has also tended to set aside the intricacies of the temporal and spatial chronology as largely extraneous to discussions of meaning and

motivation. A diminished interest in the chronology has in turn meant that many commentators have continued to overlook the multiplicity of the Merzbauten by concentrating on the Hannover Merzbau as the largest and doubtless most ambitious work. Some even narrow their analysis down to the first room (or the first column) as the original and most significant section, either without mentioning further additions or in the assumption that this part was paradigmatic of what came afterwards. If, however, we follow Schwitters' own statements and pursue the idea that he created three different Merzbauten in diverse locations in three countries over three decades, then it becomes impossible to ignore the dynamic nature of these works, and, in view of the fact that only fragments of each remain, impossible to undertake an adequate examination without first establishing, as far as possible, a chronology consistent with the sources.

I have therefore taken as the guidance principle for this dissertation the argument of Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield that a necessary foundation for any analysis of the Merzbau is a chronology supported wherever possible by the available body of information. In Chapter Two, I undertook a re-examination of the original sources, with the inclusion of material not available to early researchers. This resulted in a revised chronology that, if still provisional, challenges many received opinions of the Merzbauten. First, it demonstrates that less is known of Schwitters' early studio constructions than is generally assumed: Schwitters gave them no publicity, not even alluding to them in his correspondence, eyewitness reports of them are mostly contradictory, and the visual evidence is sparse. Secondly, the revised chronology draws attention to the numerous legends surrounding the Merzbau, some merely dubious, others entirely incompatible with verifiable sources; these legends have not only proliferated in the course of the reception history but continue to do so. Thirdly, the revised chronology indicates that the Merzbau consisted of two distinct stages. The first studio constructions took the form of a column or columns, one generally referred to as the Cathedral of Erotic Misery. This work was described in 1931 in the *Veilchenheft*, marking the

start of the time when Schwitters first made the existence of his constructions known to a wider public. By 1932/33, the studio had been transformed into a sculptural environment into which the original columns were integrated, and in 1933 Schwitters removed his studio to the adjoining room and gave this environment the name Merzbau. The revised chronology reveals the existence of a remarkable anomaly; most commentaries on the Merzbau concentrate on the period when Schwitters did not mention it at all, and most disregard the decade when it took shape as a coherent work and he began to publicize it in earnest.

In Chapter Three, I suggested that Schwitters' idea of Merz can offer an explanatory framework for the Merzbauten, most especially because he presented it as a way of blurring the boundaries between the public and private domain. During the 1920s, there was no clear dividing line between studio, artwork and domestic environment. In these years, the studio is best understood in terms of an interface, a giver and receiver of impulses, but the columns were also subversive in that they occupied spaces far removed from those of the avant-garde. The studio became the focus of Schwitters' investigation into the possibilities of amalgamating the avant-garde and everyday life. His approach was, if only by virtue of his materials, essentially ironic and gave rise to multiple perspectives that provided a form of defence for this intentionally vulnerable space. Schwitters' practice of accepting and at the same time undermining his surroundings is evident in his appropriation of *espace trouvée* and his insertion of found objects into abstract forms to compose, with the conscious or unconscious co-operation of visitors to the studio, a new rendering of the surrounding world.

The generation of these tensions within the early studio was heavily reliant on multiple personal and public interactions and on the urban environment with which Schwitters had been so closely involved in the years after 1923 and with which he compared the construction of the KdeE in the *Veilchenheft*. Of necessity, these became increasingly minor factors in his work after 1930. It was at the close of this year that Schwitters penned 'Ich und meine Ziele', his attempt to engage with the dilemma of the artist in an era of severe political and social

crisis; the year 1930 may even be regarded as marking a watershed between columns and sculptural interior.

Such an interpretation raises the additional question of the adaptability of Merz to political circumstance. I argue that Schwitters had to reassess his idea of Merz after the collapse of Weimar democracy and adjust it to social and political circumstances that denied him both his former status and any furtherance of his role as social reformer. After 1933, the Merzbau is open to interpretation in terms of the art of inner emigration that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, in many ways not just an offshoot or extension of the practices of the avant-garde of the previous decades but a new development. Many artists such as Schwitters had to go underground – as did the Merzbau, in parts quite literally. Most of his colleagues who remained in Germany adopted themes of isolation, self-reflection and loss of communication that reflected both the lack of a platform for their work and any shared discourse through which they could identify themselves. In the 1930s these artists were less concerned with exploring new territory than redefining and re-reading existing (and often antagonistic) space, so that the art of this period, inclusive of the Merzbauten, arguably demands its own interpretative approach. The Merzbau as we know it today, that is, as a sculptural environment – in its time, an innovative idea that Schwitters struggled, generally unsuccessfully, to explain to his contemporaries - evolved in the context of a personal tragedy marked by the artist's determination to employ the integrative principles of Merz and continue his subversive intrusions into spaces that were not his own, despite his isolation from urban society and the avant-garde and despite circumstances that were far more hostile than those of the 1920s. When Schwitters persisted in pursuing his concept of a Merzbau after 1933, it was in the full realisation that these works aimed at the public domain were from the outset condemned to the private sphere.

The adaptability of Merz meant that by the end of Schwitters' life, the Merzbau involved a flexible working method, first outlined in the *Veilchenheft* and based on an interwoven

process of incorporating *objets trouvés* into a continually expanding structure, for as long as the situation requires. A Merzbau is cumulative and comprises all its former identities. It can be located anywhere and can be adapted to, and incorporate, any given environment. A Merzbau surrounds its viewers but cannot be seen all at once, and requires an active observer. In addition, a Merzbau can, but need not, be planned in advance, be finished, take the form of a joint work, take up a foreseeably limited space, fill a room, fill several contiguous/non-contiguous rooms, fill a building, possess an exterior, function as studio, storage space, café, library, theatre and exhibition space in any desired combination, and consist of its own remains. The beginnings of this idea can be traced back to the inception of the Hannover Merzbau, when Schwitters was confronted by extremely limited working space, a rigid domestic environment, the staid conservatism of Hannover society and the virulent attacks of the national press. In the space of his studio, Schwitters was able to reread and reinterpret key aspects of contemporary culture and enable others to do the same. His own definition of the dominant discourse was constantly shifting; sometimes it emerged from contemporary political, social or artistic ideologies, at other times it was latent in the suburban, urban or rural environment. In the 1920s, the studio was the work of an iconoclast whose techniques were insidious rather than destructive. In the 1930s, denied the interaction and orientation that fuelled the dynamic of Merz, Schwitters protected his vulnerable *espace trouvée* with a different kind of invulnerability. While preserving to the end their function as studio, he also developed the Merzbauten into a form of completable artwork whose hybrid nature sustained the potential of the original, even if the hope of realising this was largely denied to him in the circumstances of exile.

APPENDIX I

TRANSLATION OF 'ICH UND MEINE ZIELE' [MYSELF AND MY AIMS], FROM *MERZ 21 – ERSTES VEILCHENHEFT* (1931), LW 5, 340-49.

1. Why should I not write about myself for once, even if at this point nobody asks me? I am not vain, because I am aware of the insignificance of all things. I am only writing here to give a general answer to all those who keep asking why and what for, e.g. why in the end the 'Violets' have turned out quite differently from how they were planned at the start, **for I myself am such a violet** which deliberately blooms in secret, because I am convinced that my scent is sweeter there.
2. Originally I wanted to publish 'Violets' only as a collection of new poems, to give the many people who keep asking where they can buy my latest works an opportunity [to do so]. They will most likely not ask any more when they know they can [actually] buy them, **for people are happy to ask but unhappy about buying**. But why should I always think of others and do others a favour; as an artist one so seldom has the opportunity to publish something. **The world is full of [political] parties** and each party judges as untalented any artist who considers other things more important than its own agenda. **Every party denies the internal justification of an art that does not fight alongside it** or does not in some way support it in the implementation of its agenda. **'Working'** [i.e. producing an effect] is the motto today, but art requires contemplative **self-immersion**. The desire of art is to create, and only have an effect insofar as it exists. 'Oh yes, and why don't you want to exert an influence at the same time?' the party asks me, thinking of the extensive propaganda that I am going to develop to [broadcast] its ideas, by which I will confirm to my right to be an artist; but I know that every task can only have one aim and **for me, art is far too valuable to be misused as a tool**. I prefer to distance myself from current political events.
3. I hope that as far as politics is concerned, the times will continue to survive without me, whereas I know for sure **that art still needs me for its development**. Art is a strange thing – it requires the whole artist. An art work, like any entity, is **not the sum but the state**, just as a chemical substance is not the sum of its elements. H₂O only means a relationship of 2 parts of hydrogen to every 1 part of oxygen. It means that 2 parts of hydrogen and 1 part of oxygen maintain a balance. If I add SO₂, then I get a new substance, H₂SO₄, which is no longer water but sulphuric acid. In the same way, the nature of a purely artistic structure changes if, for instance, something is added to the [existing] rhythm of the parts that works for or against some [element], and art turns into **compromise**. You can see that as an artist, I cannot agree to that. Balance alone is the aim of the work of art, and art is its purpose.

4. **Art wishes** neither to exert influence nor to work [have an effect], but rather to **liberate from life**, from everything that burdens people, such as national, political or economic struggles. **Art wants pure people**, unencumbered by problems of state, party and sustenance.
5. People accuse me of not keeping abreast of the times when I don't in some way reflect the age in my art. I maintain that **abstract art**, and only abstract art, **mirrors our age**, for during the whole of the period known to us, ours has been the most recent and logical phase in the development of art, and [that art] is not something that will last years or decades but is foreseeably **the art of the next thousand years**. The so-called 'New Objectivity' in painting is a passing, temporary, biased [party-related] reaction; in addition the name is used completely wrongly, for **the new and objective art of our times is abstraction, and every subsequent development can only build on the foundations of abstraction;** figurative art will only be possible in the future as a reaction because developments have overtaken it. That is why, although as an abstract artist I stand apart from current social and political events, I stand [am rooted] in the times **more than the politicians** who are [merely part] of the decade.
6. People accuse me of not taking into account young people, who, regardless of whether they are right-wing or left-wing, want nothing to do with abstract art, because their concern is with other matters. I don't believe that young people are exclusively concerned with other matters. But I notice that both extremes, the right-wing as well as the left-wing parties, make every conceivable effort **to provide political education for young people** in their own [i.e. the parties'] interests. Then it can happen that young people educated in this way think exactly like their elders and don't derive much pleasure from art, but that will change. For there is nothing so valuable for people as self-immersion in the strict laws of art. Do not understand it as a blasphemy [when I say that] the concept of divinity, which has brought joy to mankind for thousands of years, regardless of national and social barriers, is closely related to art. **Self-immersion in art is similar to an act of worship** in that it liberates people from the troubles of everyday life. That is just the reason why the more art distances itself from national and social issues, the more there is of it, the more it desires the purely human, self-immersion, seeing and hearing, forgetting oneself. Although art is not meant only to address the senses, depiction and statement are not the aims of works of art, even if for a long time they were used as [artistic] means. Actually, in a work of art, every method and every material may be permitted and may be balanced [against other elements], **though**

the important thing is not means and material, but the art that is created from evaluation through rhythm.

7. After [present-day] developments have shown that with an abstract picture – that is, a picture that doesn't represent but only presents [*nicht darstellt, sondern da-stellt*]– one can indeed **create a work of art** – a further stage in the development of art has been reached, and **development can't go backwards**.
8. I must emphasise here that this new stage of development does not result in, let's say, works of art of more value than those of earlier stages of development, but only **works that keep abreast of the times**, for the work of art in every stage of development is eternal, and as **eternal equals eternal**, one can't evaluate one art work against another.
9. In **literature** it is extremely difficult to put pure abstraction into practice; we don't have sufficient prerequisites for that in our day. Of my poems, the most purely abstract is the *Ursonate*, whose Scherzo is printed here. I would like to abstain from proving that here, and instead point out the structure of **Schacko** and the abstract principle of its composition. I myself heard the story of Schacko told by a woman, **word for word, the complete story**, and at the same time I saw the wretched critter. I was moved by the fate of this woman who lost the husband she loved above all else and now is left in possession of this ghastly animal that she so detests, the only remembrance of her husband. Her love for her husband is perpetuated in this despised animal, and that conveyed the human side of the story to me, but as it stood, it was not yet a work of art. **The whole affair only became a work of art through form**; how the statements of the woman counter each other, how they are repeated, complement one another, how they anticipate or substantiate each other, how they stand together as a whole and make ever more clear the wife's love for her husband –**an abstract concept** – and her despair – **yet another abstract concept** – and that is **the content of this poem**. You can analyse all my poems in this way, and you will have to admit that in this sense, their form is always abstract. Statements are evaluated against each other.
10. In painting too I like to use **scraps of daily refuse** for the composition, in the way that Schacko is constructed from the speech of his owner. That's how my **Merz pictures** originated and especially my **great column** – well, what is the column?¹ It is first of all (for the time being) only one of many, ten or so. It is called the **Cathedral of Erotic**

1 Vitruvius stated that the Doric column represented an abstraction of the strength, proportions and beauty of a man, while the Ionic column was designed to be characteristic of women; 'the third order, Corinthian, is an imitation of the slenderness of a maiden [and admits] of prettier effects in the way of adornment.' Vitruvius 1914, 102, 210-13.

Misery or **KdeE** for short - we live in a time of abbreviations. Besides that, it's incomplete and on principle at that. It grows more or less according to the principle of a metropolis; somewhere yet another house has to be built and the municipal planning department has to ensure that the new house doesn't mess up the whole townscape. So I find some object, sense that belongs to the **KdeE**, take it with me, glue it on, paste it over, paint it according to the rhythm of the total effect, and one day it turns out that some new path has to be created, [one] that wholly or partially passes **over the corpse of the object**. As a result, there are everywhere objects that overlap, either partially or wholly, as an explicit sign of their invalidation² as individual units. As the ribs grow, valleys, hollows and grottos appear, which then lead a new life of their own within the whole. In that intersecting directional lines are connected by surfaces, winding screw-like shapes are created. The whole is covered [*übergossen*, lit. doused] with an arrangement of cubes of the most strictly geometrical form, enveloping twisted or broken up shapes until they completely cease to exist. The name **KdeE** is only a name. **It relates to nothing of the content**, or very little, but that is a fate it shares with all names; e.g. Düsseldorf isn't a village [*Dorf*] any more and Schopenhauer isn't a drunkard.³ One could say the **KdeE** is the structuring of **all** the things, **with a few exceptions**, that during the past seven years were **either important or unimportant** in my life as regards pure form, although a certain literary form has crept into them. [The **KdeE**] is 3½ by 2 by 1 square metre and used to have an extensive electric lighting system, but this was destroyed by a short circuit in the interior. In its place there are now building lights everywhere; these are little Christmas tree candles used to illuminate the corners when I make extensions or apply a coat of paint. They are not actually part of the composition, but when they are lit they lend the whole the impression of an unreal, illuminated Christmas tree. All the grottos are characterized by some sort of principal components. There is the **Nibelungen Hoard** with the gleaming treasure,⁴ **Kyffhäuser** with the stone table,⁵ the **Goethe grotto** with one of Goethe's legs as a relic and many pencils worn down to stubs [*den vielen fast zu Ende gedichteten Bleistiften*; lit: pencils worn down by writing poems], the lost city once formed by an

2 A more exact rendering of the German *Entwertung*; usually translated as 'downgrading.'

3 This is a play on words: Schopenhauer sounds like *Schoppenhauer*, which (if it existed) would mean someone who knocks back alcohol, a toper.

4 Fritz Lang directed two Nibelungen films in 1923/24. See also 'the gleaming treasure of the Nibelungen', Giedion-Welcker 1973, 282. Siegfried was renowned for his virtue of *Treue*; that is, loyalty, fidelity, trustworthiness, reliability; c.f. Gentry 1983, also Fig 126a.

5 Cf. Fig. 48, also 'the marble table in the Kyffhäuser mountain', Giedion-Welcker 1973, 282.

alliance of **Brunswick and Lüneburg**⁶ with houses from Weimar by Feininger,⁷ Persil advertising and the insignia of the city of Karlsruhe designed by myself; the **sex-murder cavern** with the dreadfully mutilated corpse of a pitiful young girl coloured with tomatoes,⁸ and plentiful votive offerings; the **Ruhr** with genuine lignite and genuine gas coke,⁹ the **art exhibition** with paintings and sculptures by Michel-Angelo and myself,¹⁰ the sole visitor being a dog with a veil, the **dog kennel** with lavatory and red dog; the **organ** which has to be turned anti-clockwise so that it plays Silent Night' - it used to play 'Ihr Kinderlein kommet'¹¹ - the **10% disabled war veteran** with his daughter, who has no head any more but is otherwise in good shape; the **Mona Hausmann**, consisting of a reproduction of the Mona Lisa with the pasted-on face of Raoul Hausmann, whereby she has entirely lost her stereotyped smile; the **brothel** with a lady with 3 legs, constructed by Hannah Höch,¹² and the great **Grotto of Love**. The Grotto of Love alone takes up approximately ¼ of the base of the column. A wide flight of steps leads up to it; beneath stands the **female lavatory attendant of life** in a long narrow passage which also contains camel wool.¹³ Two children greet us and step into life; of a mother and child, only a part remains, as a result of damage. Shiny and fissured objects set the mood. In the middle is the loving couple; he has lost his head, she both arms, and **between his legs he is holding a huge blank cartridge**. The big twisted child's head **with syphilitic eyes** above the loving couple is warning urgently against being over-hasty. But making up for it again is the little round bottle with my own urine **in which immortelles have disintegrated**.¹⁴ I have described here only a small part of the literary content of the column. Many grottos

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- 6 The dukedom of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, founded in 1235, was repeatedly divided among the heirs until it disintegrated into numerous tiny insignificant states.
- 7 See Fig. 61.
- 8 Compare the *Lustmordkasten* [Lust Murder Box], CR. 771. This inlaid box, exhibited at Galerie von Garvens in 1922, foreshadowed the citation of Garvens himself in the Haarmann murder trial. The human remains that led to Haarmann's arrest were not discovered till May 1924.
- 9 The national crisis sparked off by the occupation of the Ruhr by French and Belgian troops from 1923-25 played a crucial role in Nazi propaganda.
- 10 This may be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Hausmann's condemnation of Michelangelo's art: cf. Dusseldorf 1992, 59. Michelangelo himself was accused of producing 'decadent' art; cf. Rave 1949/1987, 9.
- 11 *Ihr Kinderlein kommet* is one of the best-known German Christmas carols. If the second note of *Stille Nacht* is omitted (by a defective barrel-organ), the first six notes of both are identical. In the 1930s, according to Ernst Schwitters, a barrel organ stood behind the façade of the KdeE. See also Elderfield 1985, 401, n. 109.
- 12 See also Höch 1989, 209; Höch 1995, 462; Giedion-Welcker 1973, 282; Pferdekamp 1968; Steinitz 1968, 90.
- 13 [[Camel wool] was a sort of pretty ball of wool he had fished out of the sea on the coast of Greece. As it was very light and porous from the salty sea water, it may have been true that, as he said, it had swum over the sea from Africa.] Berlin 1989, 209.
- 14 Immortelles were used in classical times to decorate statues of gods; cf. Elger 1999, 132. See: 'Immortellen!' Höch 1995, vol. 1, 124, also 'it has all been described – particularly the cave in which a bottle of urine was solemnly displayed so that the rays of light that fell on it turned the liquid into gold'; Steinitz 1968, 90. In 1922, Thomas Mann wrote that 'Man is the most complicated, most refined excrement of a supreme [...] flame'. Mann 1923, 34.

have also long vanished under the present exterior, such as, for example, the **Luther Corner**.¹⁵ The literary content is dadaist; but that is self-evident, for it dates **from the year 1923**, and I was a Dadaist at that time. But as the column has taken seven years to construct, the form has developed increasingly strictly, especially in the ribs, in keeping with my continuing spiritual development. The overall impression is now more or less reminiscent of Cubist painting or Gothic architecture (not one bit!).¹⁶

11. I have described the **KdeE** in a fairly detailed way because this is the first publication about it, and because it is very difficult to understand on account of its ambiguity. I know **only 3 people** who I assume will understand me completely as regards my column; Herwarth Walden, Dr S. Giedion and Hans Arp. (I would be glad if some others would declare their support for [*bekennen*, lit. bear witness to] it.¹⁷) The others will, I fear, **even with these instructions**, not understand me entirely, but anyway, a complete understanding is not required **in the case of such unusual things**. The **KdeE** is just that kind of typical violet that blooms in obscurity. Perhaps my **KdeE** will always remain in obscurity, **but not me**. I know that I am an important factor in the development of art, and will remain so in all ages. I say this expressly, so that people don't say afterwards, '**the poor man had no idea of how important he was.**' No, I am not stupid, and I'm not shy either. I know for certain that for myself and all other important personalities of the abstract movement, the great time will come when we will influence a whole generation, only I fear that I personally won't live to experience it, which is why I collect, poem on poem, sketch on sketch, picture on picture, everything carefully packed and signed, in various places, to counter the danger of fire, and so concealed **that the thief won't find it**. That is my legacy to the world, with whom I am not angry that it can't yet understand me.
12. What I predict here with cool, deliberate judgement is in reality no more than something banally self-evident, for what we express in our works is neither idiocy nor a subjective game, but **the expression of our time**, dictated by the age itself, and the age has influenced us free [e.g. independent, open-minded] artists first, as we are the most flexible. Through us and beside us, it [i.e. our time] also influences controlled forms of expression such as, quite clearly, typography or architecture.
13. I definitely do not wish **typography** or architecture to be understood as an application of abstract art, for that they certainly are not. One can't apply a free, purposeless structure to a

15 Cf. Helma Schwitters' comparison of Kurt and herself to Luther; *Schwarzes Notizbuch VI*, 9, KSF.

16 Schwitters may have known the Gothic-inspired paintings of Gleizes and Leger, and Raymond Duchamp-Villon's designs for the 1912 *Maison Cubiste*. See also Elderfield 1985, 195.

17 Walden attended meetings of the *abstrakten hannover* on 15.3.28 and 5.12.29.

functional form. **Typography and architecture are parallel manifestations to abstract art.** Typography cannot be designed merely on the basis of visual aspects. In addition, typography always fulfils some purpose outside itself; its aim is to influence or orientate. And the point of architecture is to produce a dwelling or other room with a purpose. I do not underestimate the necessity of imparting visual expression to what the architect constructs, but the aim [the architect] strives for is and will always remain the construction of space.

14. Now, with all the differences in intentions, there are nonetheless great formal similarities between the new form in architecture and typography on one side and in abstract painting and sculpture on the other. **Both forms have in fact developed out of the typical will-to-form of our age.** Mankind, still thinking in obsolete terms, does not care for contemporary form, while at this very time the new style is developing, unnoticed by the general public and recognised only by a few talented art historians,. One day it will suddenly be universal and then we will be fetched out of our hiding-places, perhaps not until the needs of the future have long changed, **for it is the destiny of mankind in general to err**, and one should allow [people] to do so, for it keeps them happy. Even today there aren't many people who like living in those unadorned houses that are planned from the interior outwards; on the whole, people prefer old, overloaded, Baroque houses, because they want to contribute to what is beautiful. Only a later age will be able to recognize that just these unadorned houses, if they are built by a gifted architect, **such as Haesler**, not only fulfil all requirements as regards comfort and healthy life style, and are not only technically the best solution, but are also visually the most beautiful forms. It is relatively easy for the new typography to gain public acceptance. Although people don't like the simpler forms, they approve of them if they are part of a rigorous clarification of content, which is the main purpose of the New Typography. In general people are beginning to appreciate it more and more, because it results in better orientation and better advertisements and saves time and money.¹⁸

15. **And now back to present-day youth** and mankind altogether. I beg you all to let me carry on flowering in my seclusion. I'm quite happy like that and don't strive for fame and honour or for your recognition. I'm satisfied if I can carry on working in my studio or at my desk undisturbed and completely in peace, unaffected by the noise of the street and

18 'The New Typography was seen to be suited to its age in that it was suited to the new tempo, and flood of stimuli for the modern rhythms of life and people in a hurry.' Tschichold 1928, 65. See also Lissitzky, 'Topographie der Typographie', in *Merz 4*, 1923, 47, <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/merz/4/pages/47.htm>

with no worries about food.¹⁹ I am helped in this by my activities as a typographer and typographical consultant for many authorities and factories, for which I produce more than 500 items of printed matter annually. **I'm all right, Jack, and you can all get stuffed**, especially as I am also happily married, and people are increasingly acknowledging my typographical work. And gradually I am beginning to understand something of the extraordinarily complicated and many-faceted field of printing.

16. **Art is a different matter**, for first of all, nobody knows anything about it, as the subject is considerably more complicated, and secondly, for a personal point of view, I lack any recognition. I carry on getting bad reviews, **because the nature of critics always stays exactly the same**. And when a young critic writing about my own stage appearance says I am simply impossible, it's a matter of complete indifference to me, and means just the same as if he had written that I was the best speaker of the present-day – a claim that, though it is not absolutely correct, would have made him look less of a fool. **My time will come**, that I know, and then the same critics will write: 'How stupid people used to be in not recognising Schwitters, and how clever we are, on the other hand, to recognize him.' Although it is not my intention to insult people who haven't been born yet, I already know full well that in as far as they are critics, they will be just as harmless and will comprehend just as little as their colleagues today, for on the whole that's how humans are and nobody can do anything about it, **only then they shouldn't give themselves airs**. But if you people of the future want to do me a special favour, try at least to recognize the important artists of your day. It is more important for you and a greater pleasure for me than if you discover me at a time in which I have long been discovered.

17. But you, you political people of the Right or Left, or you sort in the middle, or from whichever blood-stained spiritual [intellectual] camp you may come, **when one day you are properly fed up with politics**, or just want a break from your stresses and strains only for an evening, just come to art, **to pure unpolitical art, that is unbiased**, not social, not national, not fashionable but timeless. **It can refresh you, and will find it a pleasure to do so.**

27.12.1930

Subscribe to the next MERZ MAGAZINE, 22, '**Development**', price 3 Reichsmark, publication date early 1932.

19 In 1929 Schwitters wrote that the happiest day of his life was when he discovered that everything was indifferent to him, apart, regrettably, from food. Schwitters 1929b, 322.

APPENDIX II – OTHER SOURCE TEXTS

KURT SCHWITTERS – DAS GROSSE E [THE BIG E], c. 1931, LW 5, 338-9.

The Big E is finished. It is the negative function of the KdeE. It is the monument to pure art. It is a non-functional construction of things that once had a function. So it is Merz. It is the result of untiring, consistent work of 7 years. The Big E is finished. There remains only one detail or another in a few places and for that I need material and that is why I am turning to you. Important artists like Walden, Hannah Höch, Vordemberge-Gildewart, and others have all made contributions to important sections. I should be extraordinarily obliged if you, too, would donate a structure [consisting] of a small grotto. Large grottos too are still available. Only what is now lacking in these grottos is material of international importance such as tram tickets, cloakroom tickets, visiting cards, ballot papers, theatre programmes, business announcements and especially photographs. In particular I lack suitable photos of yourself and of your esteemed family as well as of your works. Already pictures of many important persons are represented in my Big E, people like Haarmann, Hitler, Hindenburg, all the Roman gods, Captain Dreier of the sunken Monte Cervantes, Conrad Veidt,¹ Mussolini, my wife and me, my son, Professor Wanken and his son Punzelchen, Mrs Elizabeth Klenner and many, many others. Please also donate things for the Big E from your favoured circle of colleagues; art, kitsch and whatever you like.

In an extension of the Big E is the E-Collection. The point of this is to provide guidance to the latest in art.

[LE MERZBAU] 1933 *ABSTRACTION, CREATION, ART NON-FIGURATIF, CAHIER II, PARIS 1933, 41.*

These two photos represent some sections of the Merzbau in Hannover; the Big Group and the Gold Grotto.

The Merzbau is the construction of an interior from sculptural forms and colours. In the glazed grottos are Merz compositions arranged as a cubic volume and which blend with the white cubic forms to form an interior. Each part of the interior serves as an intermediary element to its neighbouring part. There are no details which constitute a unified and circumscribed composition. There are a large number of different forms which serve to mediate between the cube and indefinite form. Sometimes I have taken a form from nature, but more often I have constructed the form as the function of different lines, parallel or crossing. In this way I have discovered the most important of my forms; the half spiral.

¹ The actor Conrad Veidt starred in such films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Casablanca* (1942). He was an outspoken opponent of the Nazis.

Je fais une grande différence entre la logique artistique et la logique scientifique, entre construire une forme nouvelle ou constater la forme de la nature. En construisant une forme nouvelle, on crée une œuvre abstraite et artistique. En constatant la forme de la nature, on ne fait pas une œuvre d'art, mais on étudie seulement la nature. Il y a un grand nombre de membres intermédiaires entre construire la forme et constater la nature.

1 C'est en tout cas possible, qu'un artiste abstrait peigne aussi des nus.

2. Dans mes compositions abstraites, il y a l'influence de tout ce que j'ai vu dans la nature, par exemple les arbres.

3. Une locomotive n'est pas une œuvre d'art, parce qu'on ne l'a pas construite dans l'intention de faire une œuvre d'art.

4 et 5. Il ne fait rien à l'efficacité artistique, qu'on reproduise une machine ou un animal ou la Joconde.

'LES MERZTABLEAUX', ABSTRACTION, CREATION, ART NON-FIGURATIF, CAHIER I, PARIS 1932, LW 5, 352.

si le délégué d'un pays se rend à l'assemblée de la société des nations, il a un programme, il a un but qu'il voudrait atteindre. Si un élève de la première classe doit faire une composition il commence par élaborer un plan. Si le bon bourgeois sort, il a un but. mais cela n'est pas merz.

si merz était à la société des nations, il n'aurait pas de but, sauf l'intention de sauver ce qui est à sauver. si merz faisait une composition, il ajouterait un mot après l'autre et, par la création le long des mots d'un rythme, se découvrirait un but jusqu'alors inconnu. si merz sortait pour faire une promenade, il entortillerait ses jambes sans but et collectionnerait ce qu'il y a à collectionner. demandez à quelqu'un comment il se porte et il vous dira ce qu'il a l'intention de faire. demandez à merz ce qu'il va faire et il vous dira qu'il se porte bien.

on peut avec des buts détruire un monde et par la connaissance et la conformation des possibilités, construire un nouveau monde avec le débris.

c'est ainsi que la diplomatie détruit, et aussi l'élève de première classe: ainsi merz crée.

car merz ne connaît aucun but et que d'ailleurs les buts demeurent inaccessibles :

car merz travaille sans plan et parce que les plans demeurent illogiques.

car merz entortillerait ses jambes jusqu'à ce qu'il se forme quelque chose, jusqu'à ce qu'un but apparaisse par développement logique.

le matériel de base est à volonté. le but qu'on atteint est indifférent.

le bref espace du temps qui nous est donné peut être aujourd'hui, demain ou hier, seulement ce temps doit se reconnaître, compenser ses tensions, se construire, se poétiser, se conduire avec justesse.

quant à hier, demain, ou après-demain, il est indifférent où et comment on est né, ce qu'on porte avec soi; seule importe la façon dont on le porte et ce qu'on fait.

mais cela même est merz.

et de tels tableaux sont des merz-tableaux.

et celui qui les peint est merz.

avant-hier, hier et demain.

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<http://webtext.library.yale.edu/xml2html/beinecke.DREIER.nav.html>
- CR** Kurt Schwitters *Catalogue Raisonné*: Orchard/Schulz 2000, Orchard/Schulz 2003, Orchard/Schulz 2006.
- FAZ** *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.
- HLH** Hans and Lily Hildebrandt Papers, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles.
- HW** *Hausstandsbuch Waldhausenstrasse 5*, Ordnungsamt, Hannover.
- JAAF** The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, CT.
- KSA** *Kurt Schwitters Almanach*, Postskriptum-Verlag Hannover, vols 1-10, 1981-91. (It should be noted that vols 1-9 all contain one spurious article and vol. 10 is a complete invention.)
- KSF** Kurt and Ernst Schwitters Foundation, Sprengel Museum, Hannover.
- LW** *Kurt Schwitters, das literarische Werk*, ed. Friedhelm Lach, Cologne 1973-81: vol. 1, *Lyrik*: vol. 2, *Prosa 1918-30*: vol. 3, *Prosa, 1931-48*: vol. 4, *Schauspiele und Szene*: vol. 5, *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*.
- MMA** Department of Painting & Sculpture collection files, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- SAB** Schwitters Archiv, Stadtbibliothek Hannover, Bestandsverzeichnis.
- SAH** Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Stadtbibliothek Hannover.

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**KURT SCHWITTERS' MERZBAU
ILLUSTRATIONS
I THE HANNOVER MERZBAU**

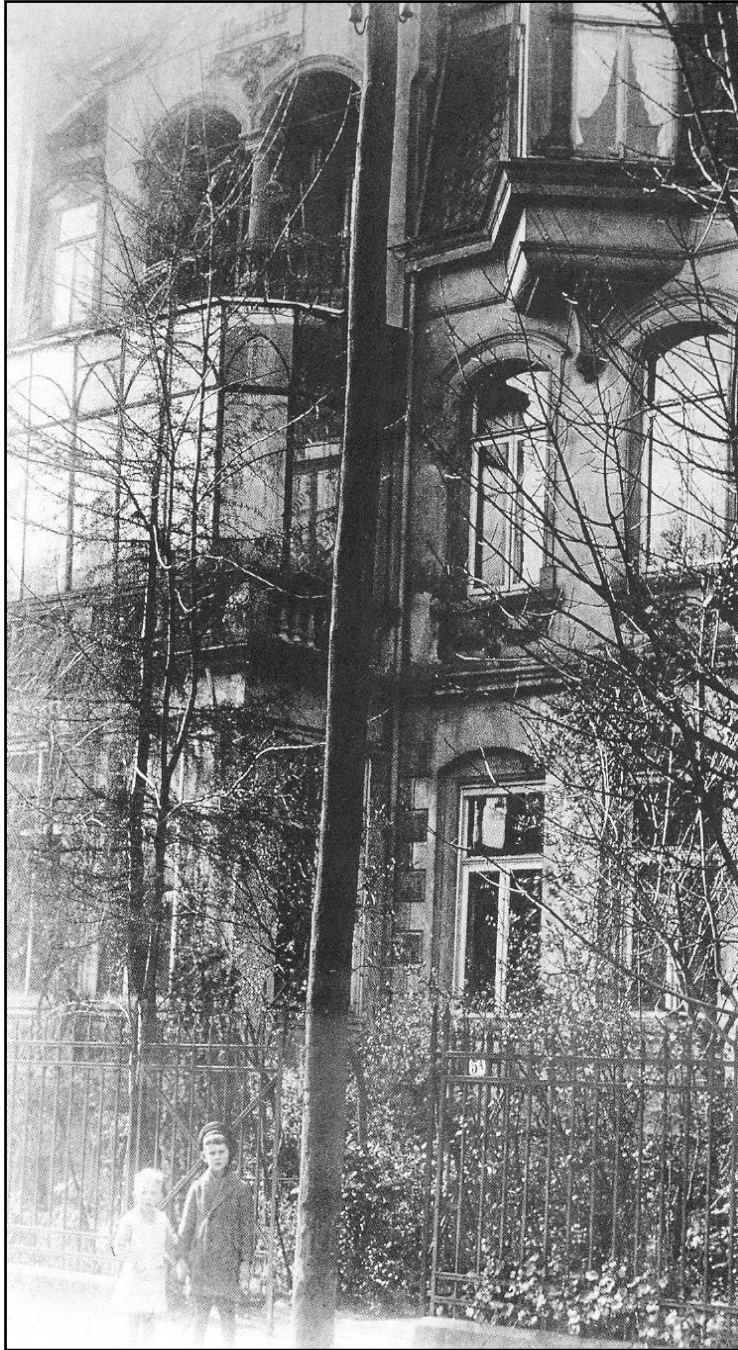


Fig. 1. Waldhausenstrasse 5 in about 1926.

The boy in the cap is Ernst Schwitters. On the ground floor is Schwitters' parents apartment, with their conservatory on the left. The apartment occupied by Kurt, Helma and Ernst Schwitters is on the second floor.

Reproduced in Orchard/Schulz 2000, 532.

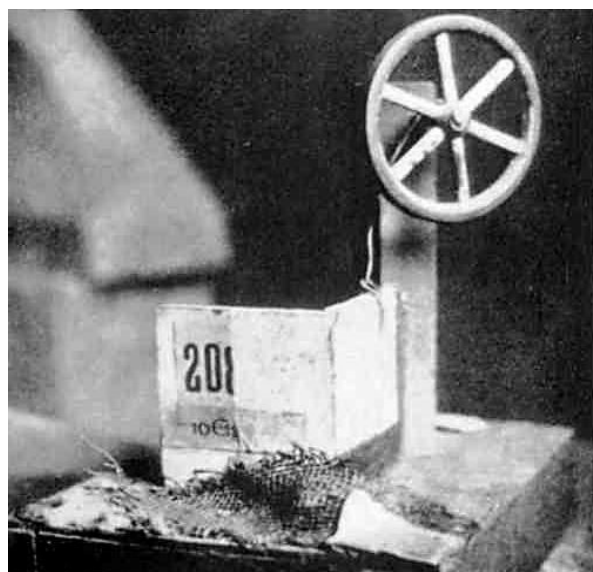
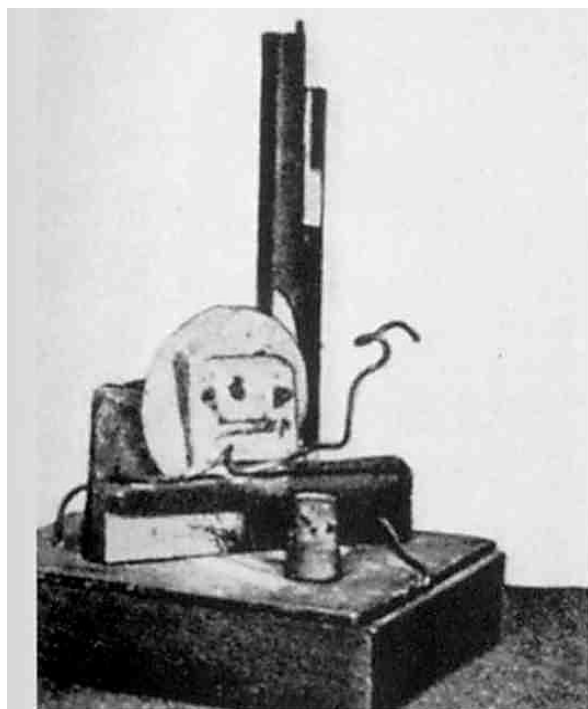


Fig. 2 Kurt Schwitters, three sculptural assemblages.

Die Kultpumpe (Cult Pump, above l.), c. 1919, CR 581.

Die Lustgalgen (Pleasure Gallows, above rt.), c. 1919, CR 582.

Haus Merz, (House Merz, below), 1920, CR 773.

Three sculptural assemblages by Kurt Schwitters, whereabouts unknown. According to Ernst Schwitters, the upper two were integrated into the Hannover Merzbau.

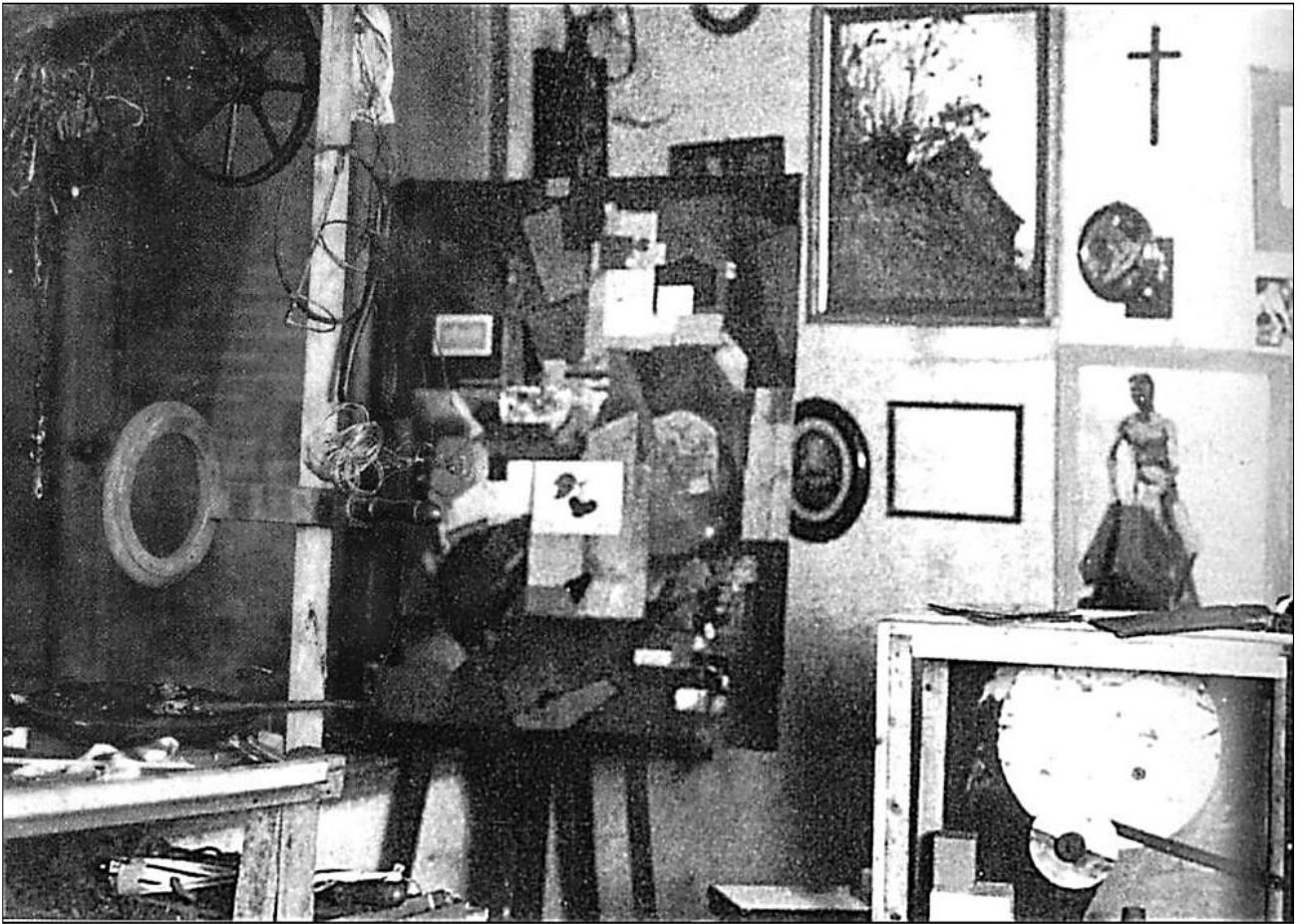


Fig. 3. An early photo of Schwitters' studio.

Photographer: Wilhelm Hoepfner. Date uncertain, probably about 1924. In the pan on the left, Schwitters is apparently heating up adhesive. Reproduced in Hannover 1986, 8.

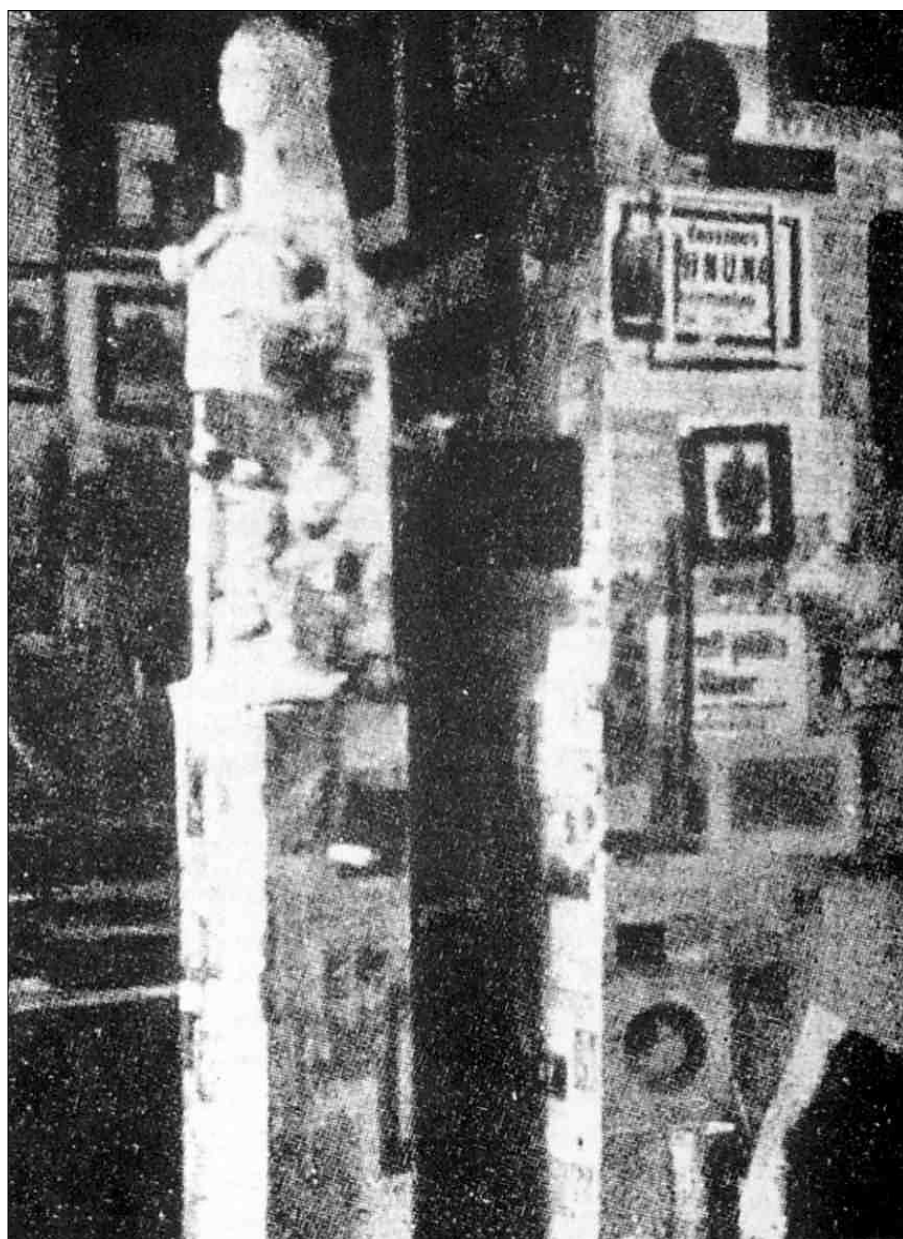


Fig. 4. Kurt Schwitters, *Studio*, 1920.

CR 769. This photo, of very poor quality, was published in 1924 in the journal *G* with the caption 'Studio', and in 1925 in the Lissitzky-Arp publication *The -Isms*. John Elderfield and Dietmar Elger suggest that from the shape of the room, this photo can only have been taken in Room 1 (see Fig. 6). It is, however, unlikely that Schwitters would have blocked off the only window in his studio, and this room seems very different from other pictures of his studio (Figs. 3, 5). This photo may, then, have been taken in the basement, immediately below Room 1. It is not known if this column was integrated into later constructions, as it is never mentioned by Schwitters and is not visible on any subsequent photo.



Fig. 5. Kurt Schwitters, *Heilige Bekümmernis*, c. 1920.

CR 768. This assemblage was never exhibited. According to Ernst Schwitters it was incorporated into the Merzbau.^[1] The assemblage was made from a tailor's dummy belonging to Schwitters' mother. Notice the old shelf containing miscellaneous objects that provide the bond between artist and work. The figure was used as a prop for Merz poetry recitals and a centrepiece for Merz parties.^[2] The picture on the wall is probably one of Schwitters' Expressionist oil paintings of 1918; cf. CR 230. The photo was published in the *Berliner Boersen-Courier* in 1924.^[3]

[1] Düsseldorf 1971, 16-17.

[2] c.f. Webster 1997, 83, also Keitel 1984, 60.

[3] *Berliner Boersen-Courier*, Beilage Bilder-Courier, 31.10.24.

Fig. 6. Plan of Waldhausenstrasse 5, ground floor. (Elderfield 1985)

Waldhausenstrasse 5 was a three-storey house with an attic and cellar. Schwitters' parents Eduard and Henriette occupied the ground floor, but gave up some of their rooms (probably 2, 4, and 5) to a family named Boetel between 21.5.1921 and 11.12.1926 (HW).

During this time, Schwitters' studio was apparently in room 1. When the Boetels moved out, Schwitters' parents made room 1 their bedroom and Schwitters moved his studio to room 2, which became the heart of the *Merzbau*. From 1933 onwards, the work expanded first to room 4, which became Schwitters' bedroom in 1934, and then to the balcony (marked as room 3), which became the third *Merzbau* room after it was glazed over. The space below the balcony was enclosed to house further constructions in 1936.

When Eduard Schwitters died in 1931, Henriette moved into room 7 and let rooms 1, 5 and 6 to the Bergmann family, who occupied them from 1.11.31 to 16.3.37 (HW).

Rooms 2, 3 and 4 could only be accessed by the hallway of the ground floor apartment belonging to Schwitters' parents. By blocking off the doorway to room 4 during the war, Helma was able to ensure that these rooms remained hidden from the Gestapo.

The Brockmann-Maack family occupied the first floor above this apartment (Fig. 8) from 1919/20-1935 (HW). The upper part of the basement (whose layout in effect corresponded to that of the ground floor) was above ground. It would have been customary for Schwitters' parents, as owners of the property, to reserve the south-facing front rooms of the basement for their own use, leaving the darker back rooms to other tenants.

Elderfield 1985, Fig. 165.

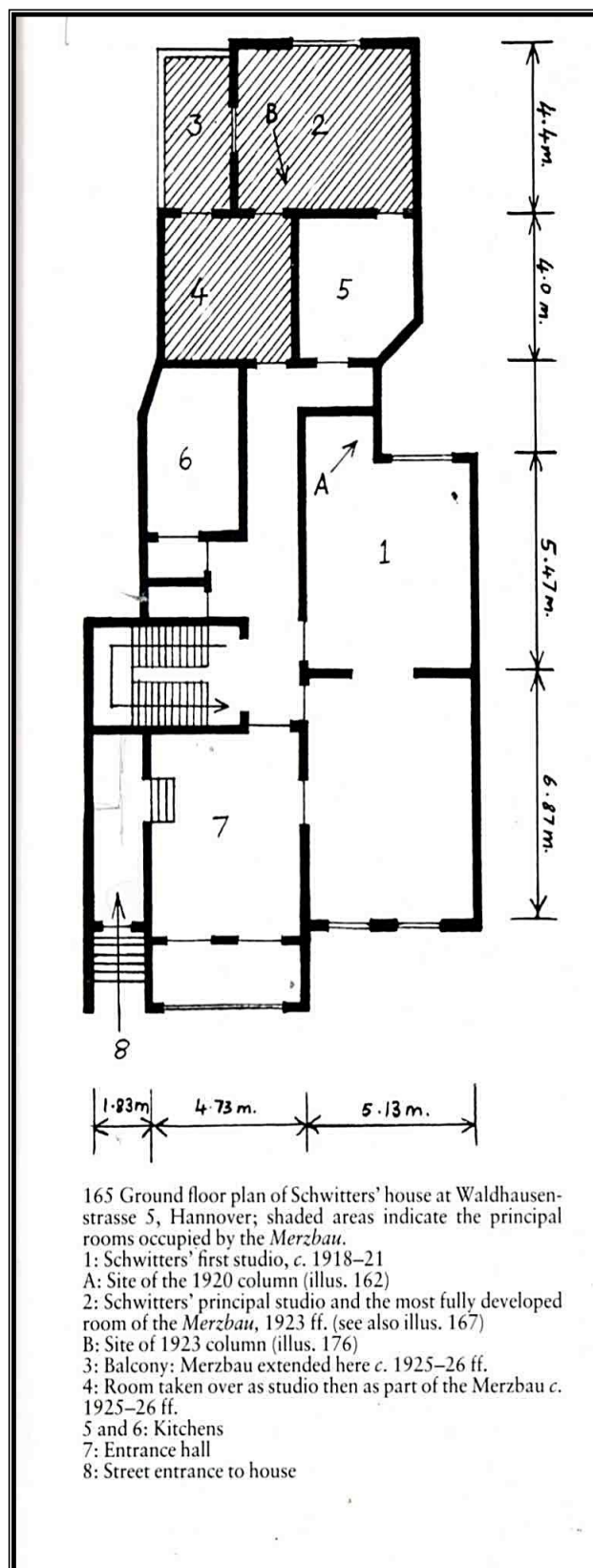


Fig. 7. Plan of Waldhausenstrasse 5, 2nd floor.

CR 1199/2. This sketch is dated 19.3.1921.

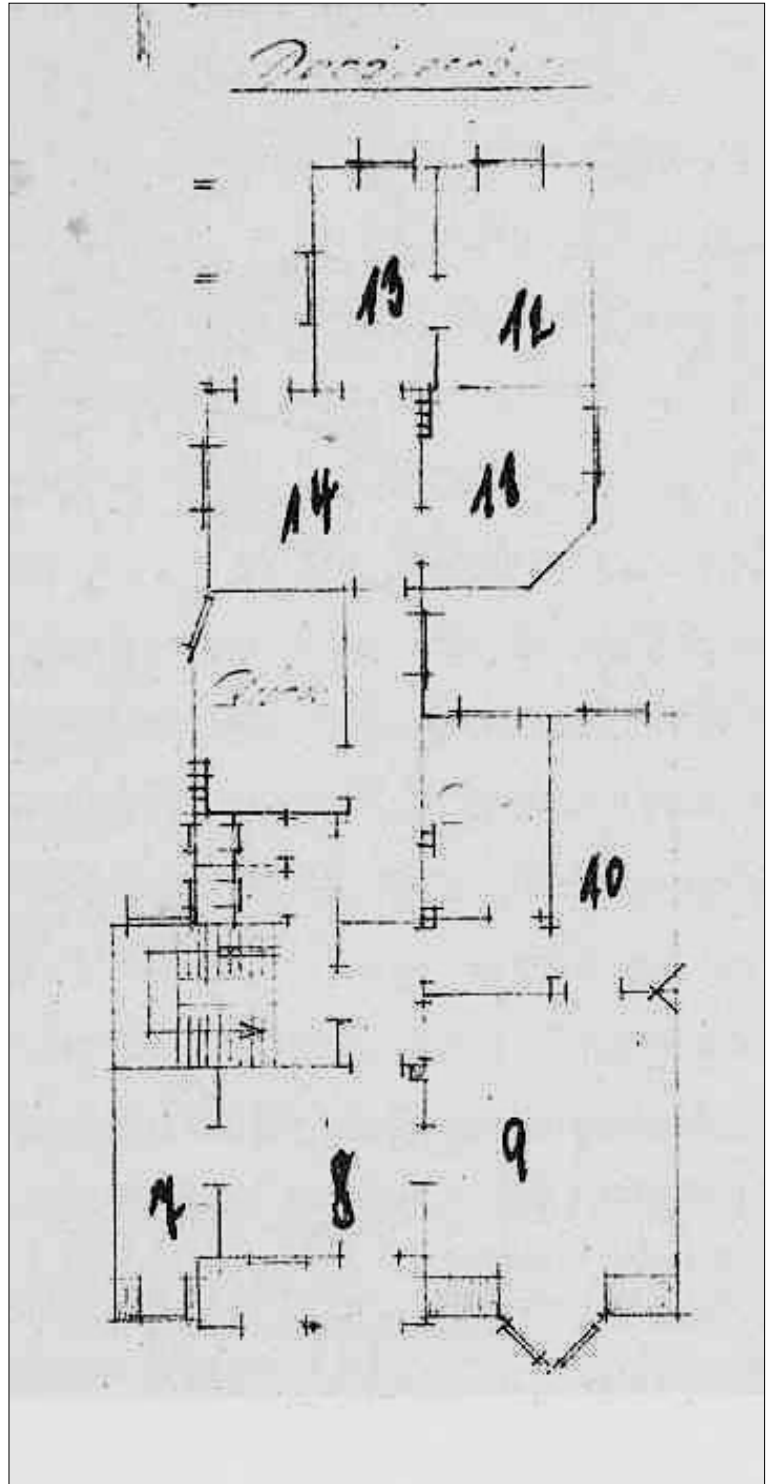
After their marriage, Kurt and Helma Schwitters lived in the apartment at the front of the second floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5 (rooms 7-10). From 1920/21–1943, rooms 12-15 were inhabited by the Reismann family (HW).

Kurt slept in room 7 till 1934, after which he slept in room 4 on the ground floor (see Fig. 6). Helma and Ernst (born 1919) slept in room 10 until 1934/5, when Helma moved into room 7 to give Ernst his own bedroom. Room 8 was named the 'Bauhaus' or 'De Stijl' room, room 9 the 'Biedermeier' room, [1] with décor to match, and it was in these rooms that Schwitters held his Merz evenings once or twice a month. On each of these occasions, a red lamp was lit outside the house. [2]

Fig. 1. shows the frontage of their apartment.

[1] cf. KSA 1982, 3, 8 n.4.

[2] Information from the Maack and Bergmann families.



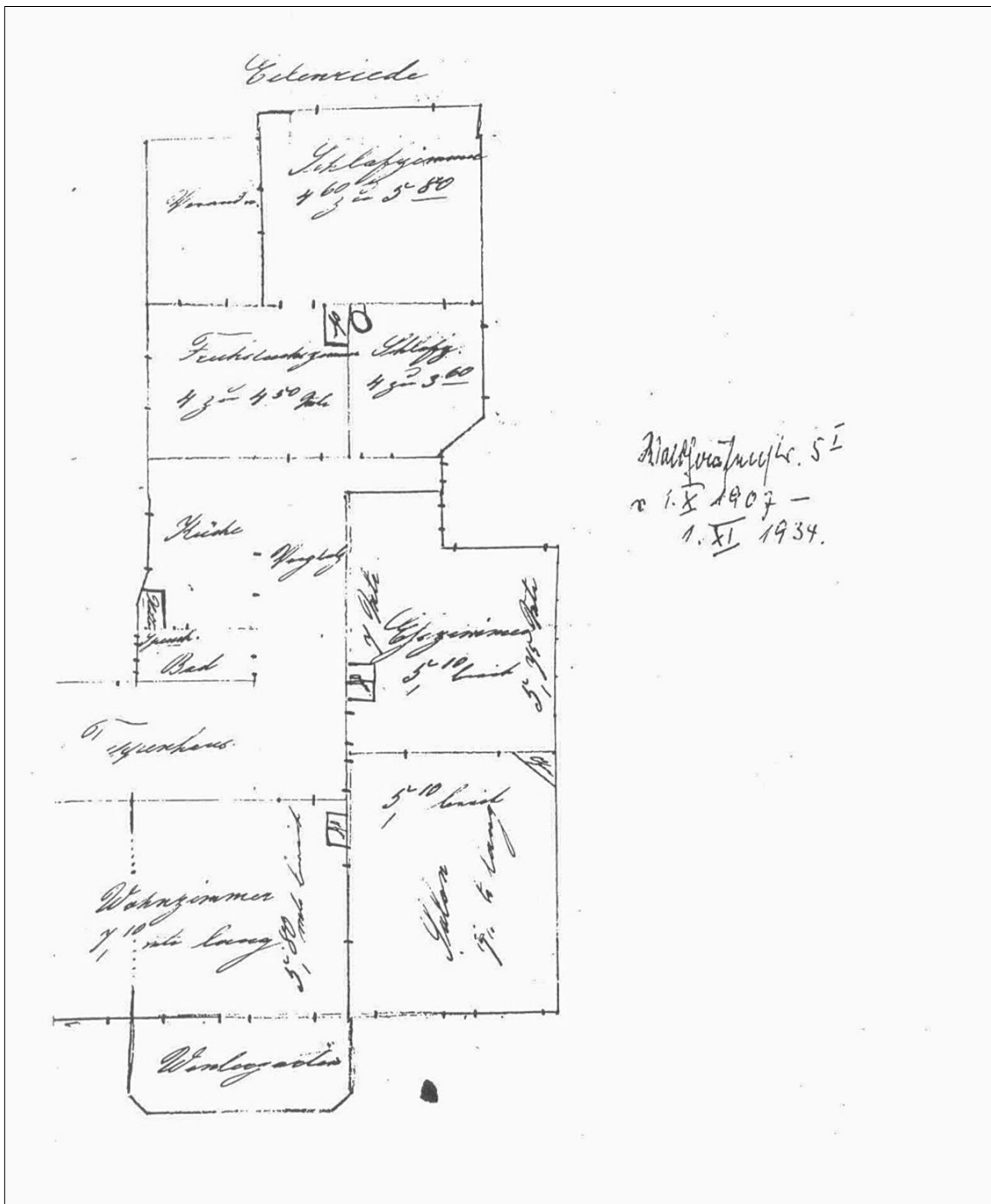


Fig. 8. Plan of Waldhausenstrasse 5, 1st floor.

CR 1199/1. The Brockmann-Maack family occupied the whole of this floor from 1919/20 to 1935 (HW).

According to Ernst Schwitters, his father could 'work at any time of the night or day and had even developed a method whereby he could drive nails into the Merzbau in the middle of the night without arousing the hostility of the other tenants of our house in Waldhausenstrasse. 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. At least, that was the theory. You wait ten minutes, until everyone - you hope - has fallen asleep again and then you deliver a second hefty blow to the nail, with the same result as before; everyone 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'.^[1]

[1] Wiesbaden 1990a, 9.

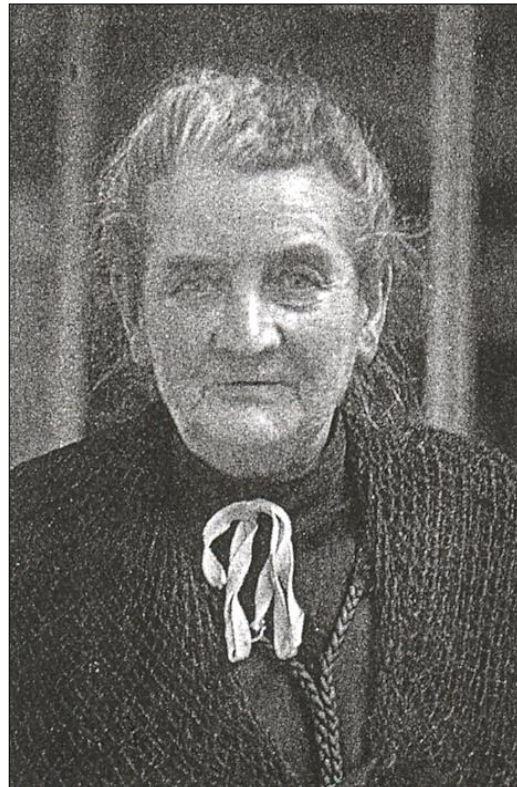


Fig. 9. Eduard and Henriette Schwitters.

Kurt Schwitters' parents: Eduard (c. 1924) and Henriette Schwitters (c. 1939).
Reproduced in Orchard/Schulz 2000, 529.



Fig. 10. Untitled sculpture, 1923.

CR 1195, 51 x 12.8 x 14 cm. Schwitters' only Constructivist sculpture known to date from 1923. Made of painted wood, it was not part of the Merzbau, but owned by Til Brugman until 1958.

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HANNOVER, Waldhausenstr. 5 II. (in der Nähe des Döhrener Turms)

Kurt Schwitters

Fig. 11. Invitation to Schwitters' studio with price list.

Judging by its typography, this invitation dates from between November 1923 and November 1924. Schwitters' generally cheaper figurative work is listed at the top.

Reproduced in Wiesbaden 1990a, 126.



Fig. 12. Merz column, c. 1925/6.

CR 1199/6. This photo is undated and is assumed to have been taken in the cellar of Waldhausenstrasse 5; the CR dates it to about 1926. The photographer was Wilhelm Hoepfner from Garbsen. Art historians generally refer to this as the column with the boy's head (Elderfield 1985) or the First Day column (Dietrich 1993); the latter name derives from a collage of 1922 entitled *Der erste Tag* [The First Day], CR 1040, affixed to the base. This collage was also reproduced in the *Veilchenheft* (Fig. 55). The column's subsequent position in the Merzbau (Fig. 24a) indicates that it was not part of the KdeE. The head is a death mask of Kurt and Helma Schwitters' first child Gerd, who died in 1916 shortly after birth (Fig. 13). Possibly the column commemorates the tenth anniversary of his death. The picture behind is *Überschwemmte Wiesen* [Flooded Meadows] 1914, CR 97.

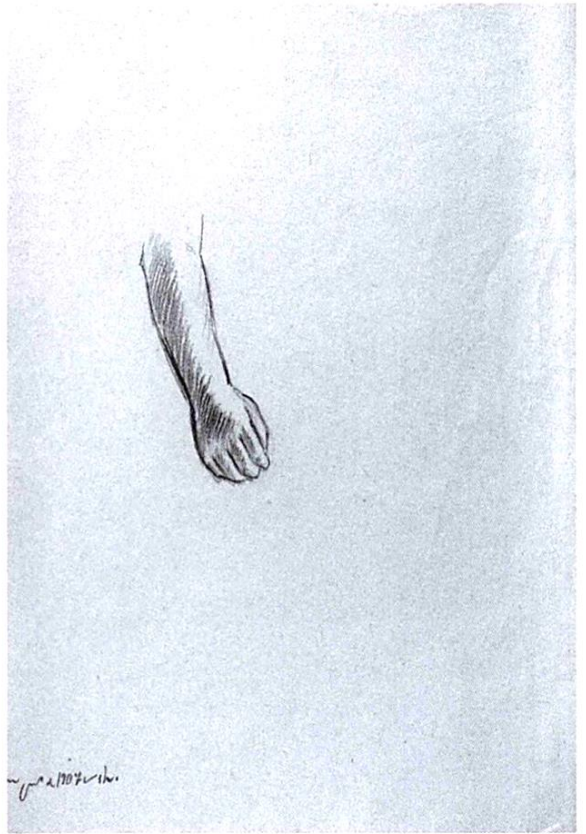


Fig. 13. Gerd Schwitters.

CR 168, 169. Two sketches, 33.1 x 26 cm., of Kurt and Helma Schwitters' first son Gerd, who died in 1916 when only eight days old. He was born in Opherdicke and buried in the cemetery there. A further sketch is inscribed '9.9.1916-17.9.16, 4 Uhr'. Below: transcribed excerpt from a letter from Kurt Schwitters, 21.8.27 in *Merzgebiet 2*, unpublished MSS, KSF. .

5, 4, 7

27.8.27.

5

Liebes kleines totes Gerdchen! Im Vorbeifahren an Opherdicke grüße ich dich. Ich steige nicht aus, das Wetter ist zu schlecht und ich will zur lieben Mama. Ich werde dich bald aufsuchen und dir Blumen bringen. Aber du bist nicht tot für mich, du lebst, denn unser kleiner Ernst, der bist du, der ist bei uns, und wir lieben dich in Ernst. Sollen wir dich zu uns nach Hannover holen, ja? Aber du kennst Hannover nicht einmal, diese Gegend hier ist deine Geburtsurkunde. Hier bist du geboren, und

(4)

mit dir haben wir unsere schönste Zeit im ganzen Leben gehabt, Mamamama und ich. Es ist 11 Uhr 32. Ich sehe die beiden lieben Kirchen von Opherdicke. Da, an der leeren Stelle muss dein Friedhof sein. Du liegst hier schön, wo wir glücklich waren. Ich beklage dich nur, dass du nicht das schöne Leben sehen und fühlen kannst. 11.40 hält der Zug in Holzwickede. Sei nicht traurig, ich liebe dich, lesse mich reisen zu deiner Mama, ich werde ihr von dir erzählen. Du bleibst unser lieber Junge, von dem wir leben. Ich will schreiben an den Pastor, der soll mir dein Grab zeigen, dass ich dir Blumen bringen kann. Wenn du lebstest, würdest du schon 11 Jahre alt sein. Ich küsse dich. Dein Vater. Jetzt fahre ich nach Unna.



Fig. 14. KdeE, 1928 (1).

CR 1199/13. This photo is inscribed 'KdeE 1928'. The name occurs in two essays entitled 'Ich und meine Ziele' (1930) and 'Das grosse E' (undated, probably 1931) to describe a column that has been under construction for seven years. The photo shows a section of the sculptural assemblage described in 'Ich und meine Ziele' (Appendix 1, ¶10). John Elderfield identifies the stair and the mother and child to the left of it with those mentioned in this text, and suggests that the picture of the Mona Lisa in the angle of wood below centre is that which Schwitters partly covered with a photo of Raoul Hausmann.^[1]

^[1] Elderfield 1985, 159, 161.

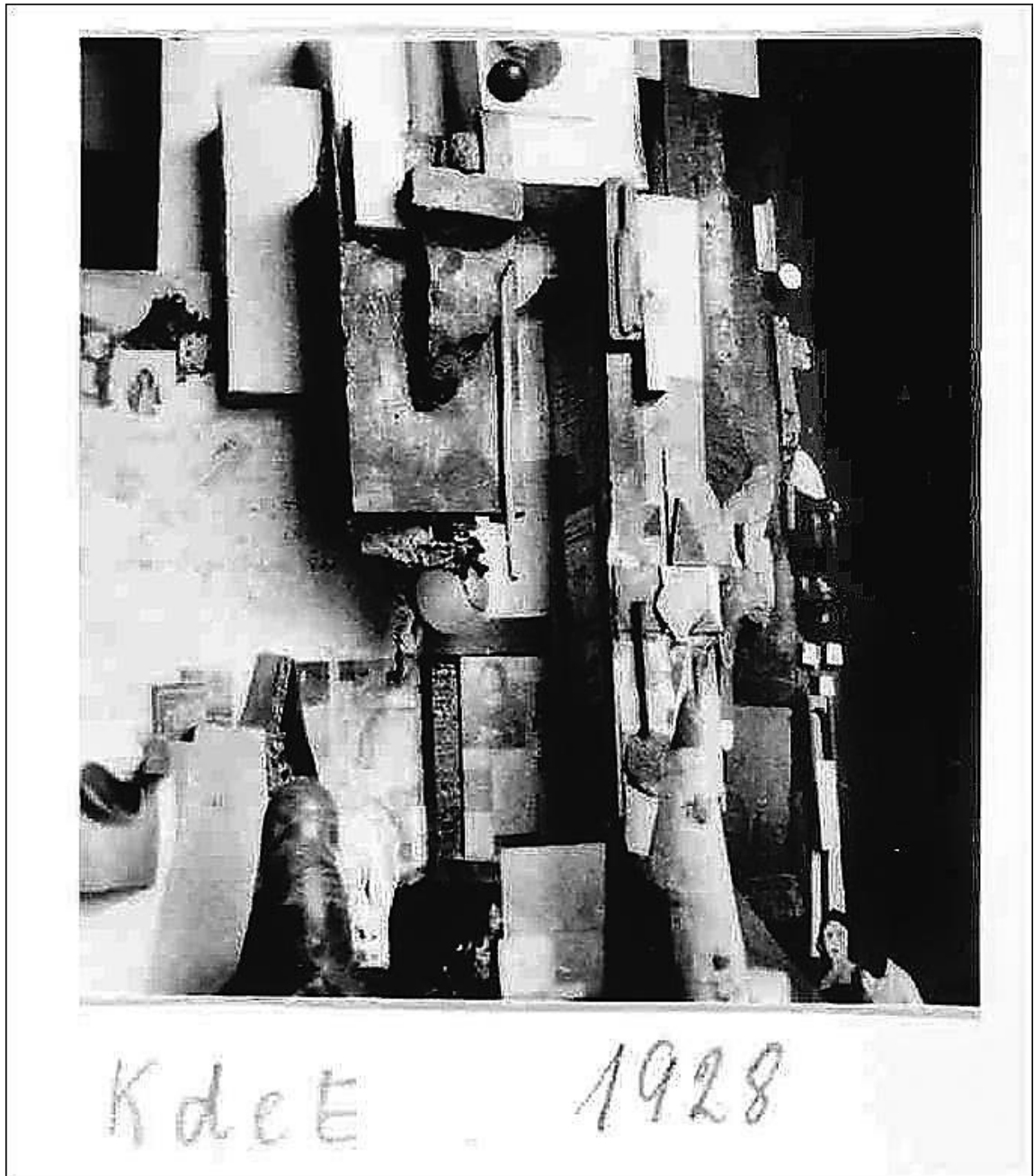


Fig. 15. KdeE, 1928 (2).

CR 1199/12. Judging by this and the previous photo, the elements of the KdeE were smaller than might be expected from 'Ich und meine Ziele' (Appendix I). Although Schwitters does not reveal the dimensions of the grottos in his essay, the vocabulary he uses - column, Great Grotto, wide flight of steps, long narrow passage - gives the impression of a more monumental work. Neither this nor Fig. 14 gives any indication that the KdeE was covered in a plaster housing. As far as is known, these pictures were never published.

Fig. 16a. KdeE, c. 1929.

CR 1199/14. In her memoirs, Kate Steinitz wrote: ‘As an eyewitness, I am able to describe [the column], for I saw the huge construction grow over a period of twelve to fourteen years. The caves [...] disappeared into the depths of the column, which gradually became a cathedral. Some parts of the Cathedral of Erotic Misery were in this stage of transition when I last saw and photographed it. A little guinea pig was sitting of one of the [...] parts.’ [\[1\]](#) Kate Steinitz dated her photo to about 1929. The guinea pig was placed there as a joke, according to Ernst Schwitters, as animals were not allowed to run around this room. The collaged background consists mainly of tickets. The words ‘Theater Scala’, to the right of the handle, have been regarded as indicating a connection between the Hannover Merzbau and the Expressionist Scala restaurant in Berlin (see below).

[\[1\]](#) Steinitz 1968, 91.

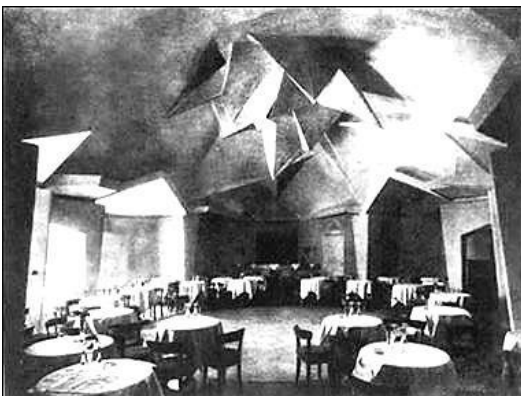
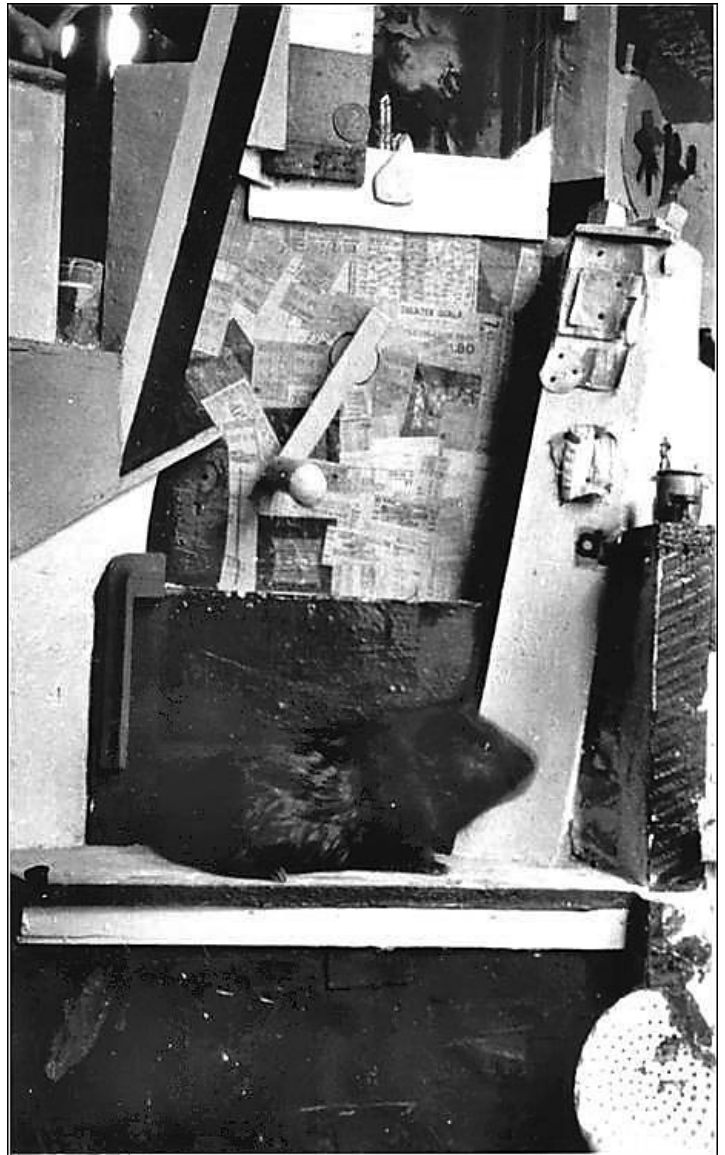


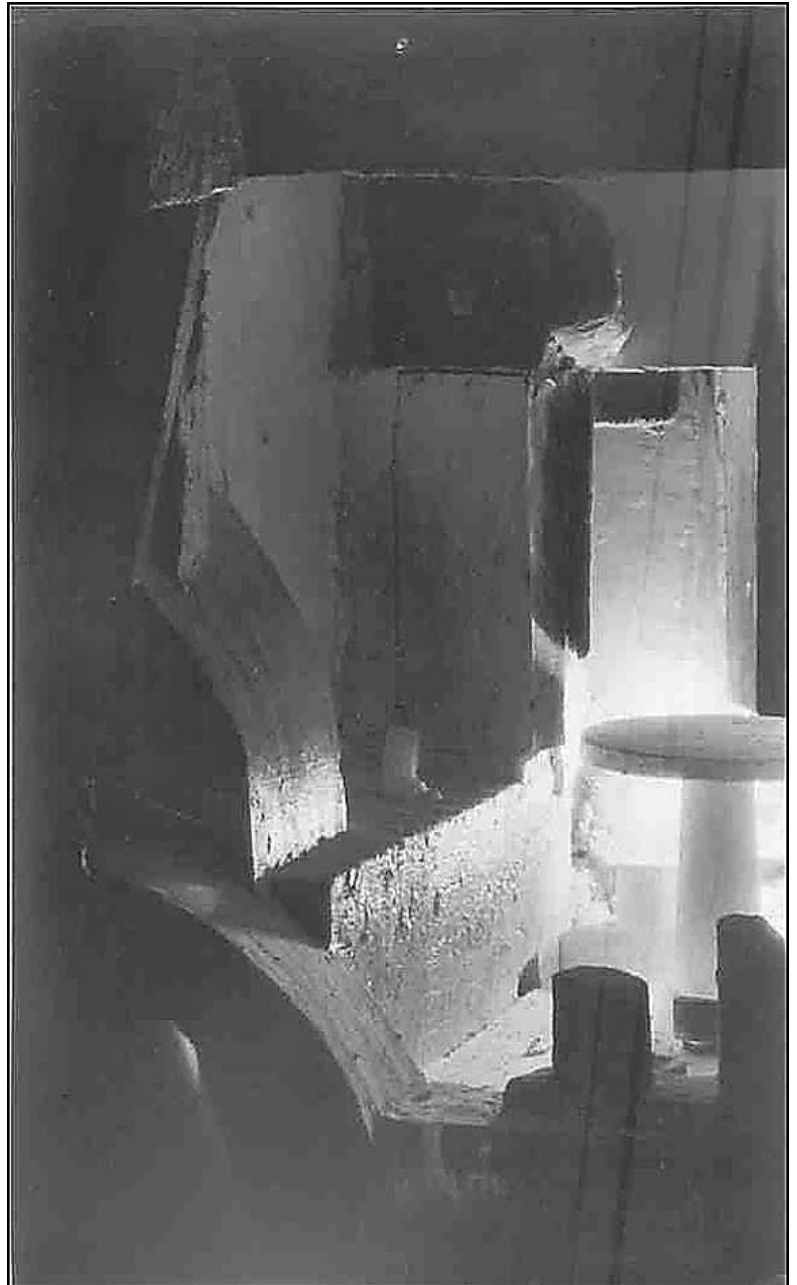
Fig. 16b. Scala Restaurant, Berlin, 1921.

The restaurant of the Scala Tanzpalast in Berlin was designed by Walter Wirzbach and the sculptor Rudolf Belling. [\[1\]](#) John Elderfield notes that work on this room was ‘done directly and improvisatorily from clay models without preliminary drawings’. Reproduced in Elderfield 1995, 163.

[\[1\]](#) For the Scala restaurant as Expressionist architecture, see Weinstein 1990, 244.

**Fig. 17. Hannover
Merzbau, Barbarossa
(Kyffhäuser) grotto.**

CR 1199/8, NY 673. This photo, dated 1925, was inscribed 'Barbarossagrotte' by Ernst Schwitters. The grotto is presumably identical with the Kyffhäuser Grotto mentioned by Schwitters in the *Veilchenheft* and also by Carola Giedion-Welcker ('the marble table in the Kyffhäuser mountain').^[1] The date 1925 presumably refers to the year it was made, not to the date of the photograph, which can hardly have been taken by Ernst Schwitters, who was only six in 1925. In addition, Ernst claimed to have started photography at the age of nine. This photo was exhibited in New York in 1936. The scale is unknown, but a possible indication of its size may be found in the assemblage shown below, entitled *Merz 1, 1925, Relief im blauen Quadrat*, CR 1277, 49.5 x 50.2 cm.



[1] Giedion-Welcker 1973, 282.

[2] Schwitters E. 1990, 10.



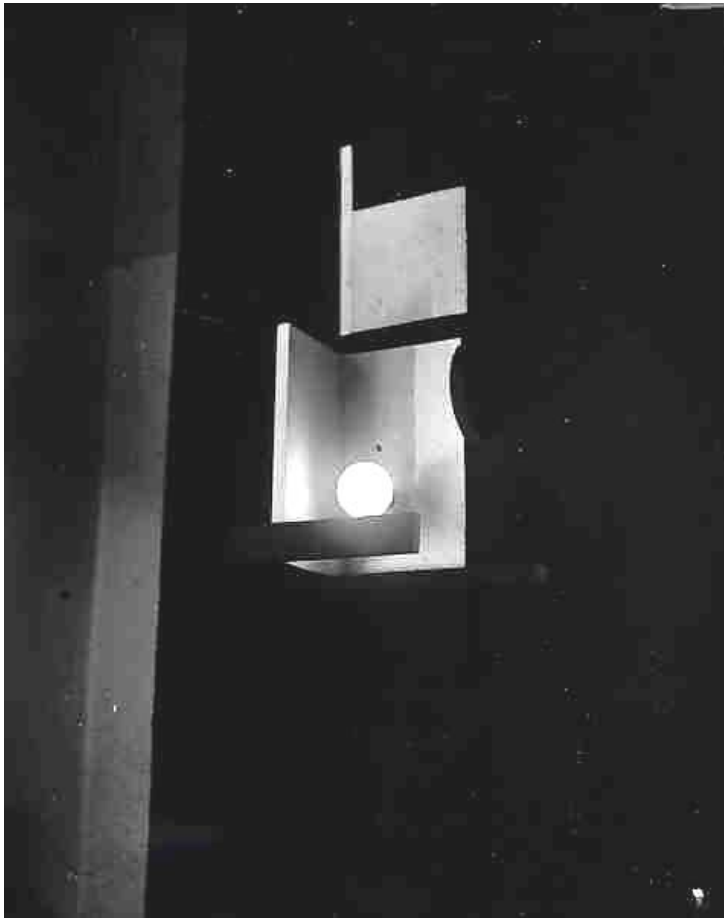


Fig. 18. Hannover Merzbau, relief.

CR 1199/11. An untitled photo dated (on stylistic grounds) in the CR to about 1925.



Fig. 19. Hugo Erfurth, portrait of Kurt Schwitters, c. 1932.

CR 1199/29. A undated portrait photo taken by Hugo Erfurth shows Schwitters standing in front of the movable column (see Fig. 21). The collaged wall behind is presumably that on the right of the main window that looked out on to the Eilenriede park (Fig. 24). No evidence of wall collaging is visible on the 1933 photos (Fig. 21).

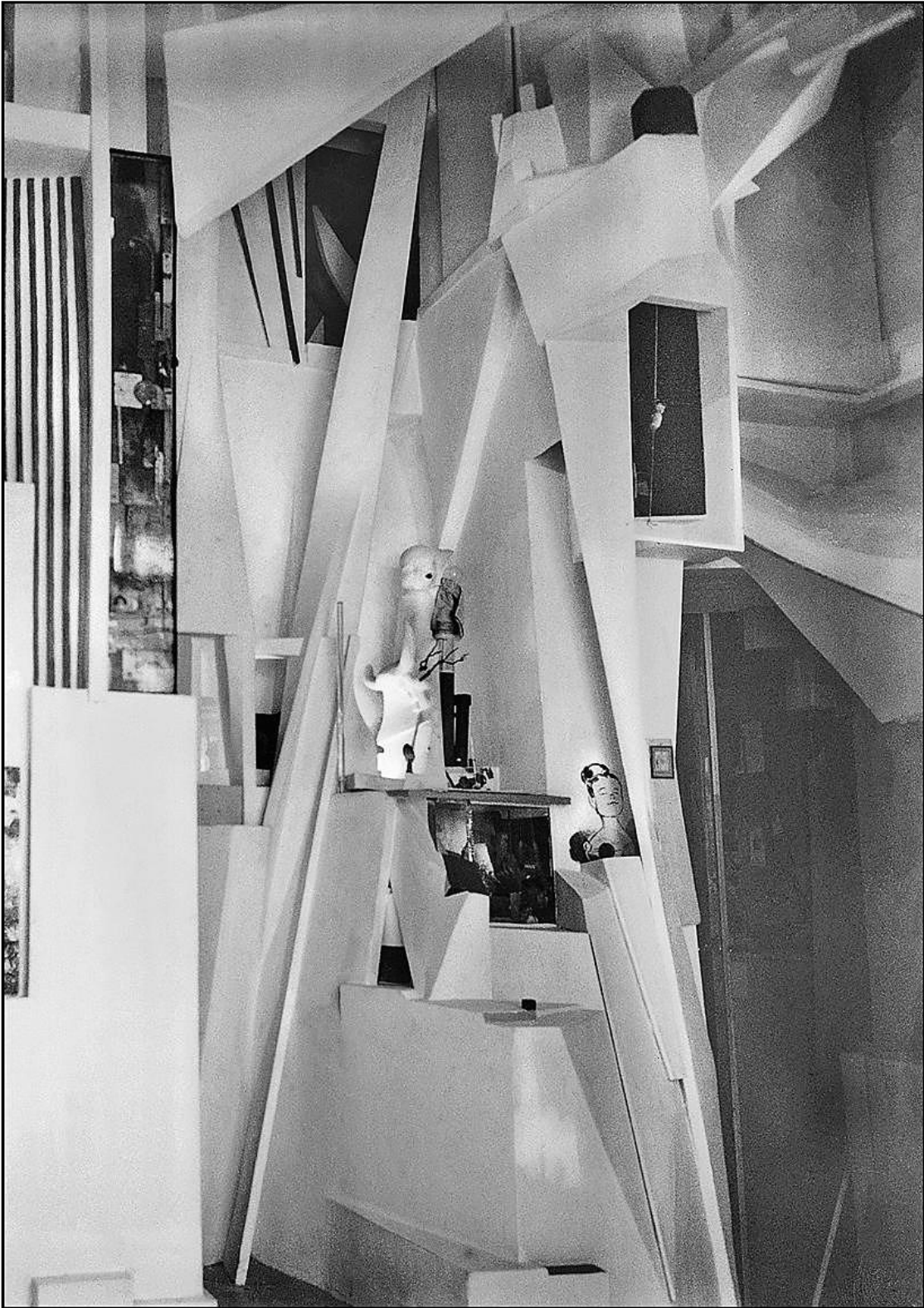


Fig. 20. Hannover Merzbau, 1933, entrance and column with the baby's head.

This shows a detail of Fig. 22. The entrance to the Merzbau is on the right. Traces of what looks like collaging can be seen in the next room. The tall glazed grotto left is shown from another angle in Fig. 21.



Fig. 21. Hannover Merzbau, *Die grosse Gruppe* [The Big Group], 1933.
 CR 1199/19, NY 671. The Big Group was photographed by Wilhelm Redemann in 1933. Jutting out centre is the *Hobelbank* [joiner's bench]. The descending shaft above the bench is an example of what Schwitters described as 'the most important of my forms, the half-spiral' (Appendix II, ¶10). To the right of it is a circular hatch with a sliding door, which gave a view of the whole room. The hatch was reached by steps leading up from the entrance on the right (see also Fig. 22) to a sofa in a niche named The Nest, in the top right-hand corner on this picture. The ledge ran behind the constructions and ended in a stair behind the movable column on the left. The flat rectangular board behind was presumably designed to conceal this stair.

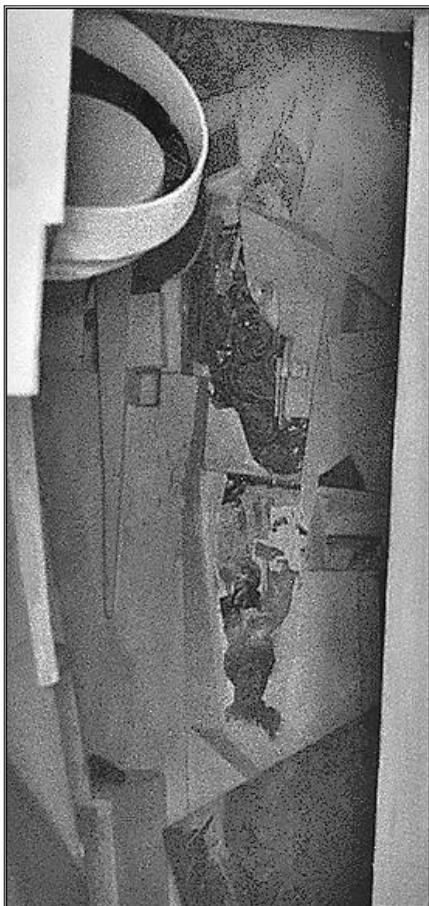
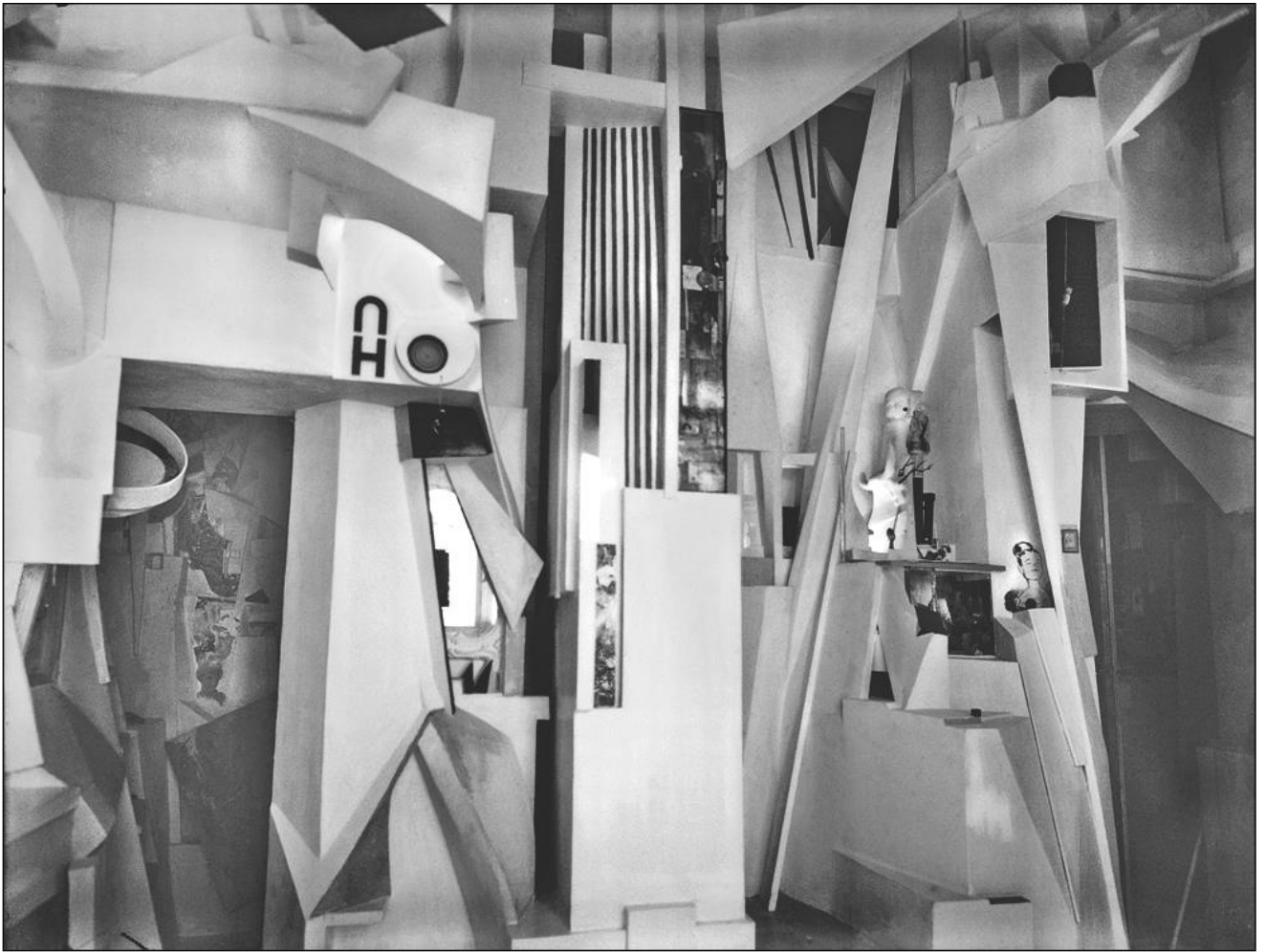


Fig. 22. Hannover Merzbau, *Treppeneingang* [stairway entrance].

CR 1199/20, NY 672. Left: enlargement of entrance. This section was photographed by Wilhelm Redemann in 1933. The main entrance to the Merzbau is on the far right; the door was removed in the early 1930s. To the left of it stands the column with the baby's head. High up between the two is a grotto with a doll strung up inside, and below is a picture of Wilhelm Busch's anti-heroine Fromme Helene. On the left can be seen an entrance flanked by a curving spiral form, actually a long drive belt plastered over. Inside on the left, a stairway led to a corner niche with a sofa.^[1]

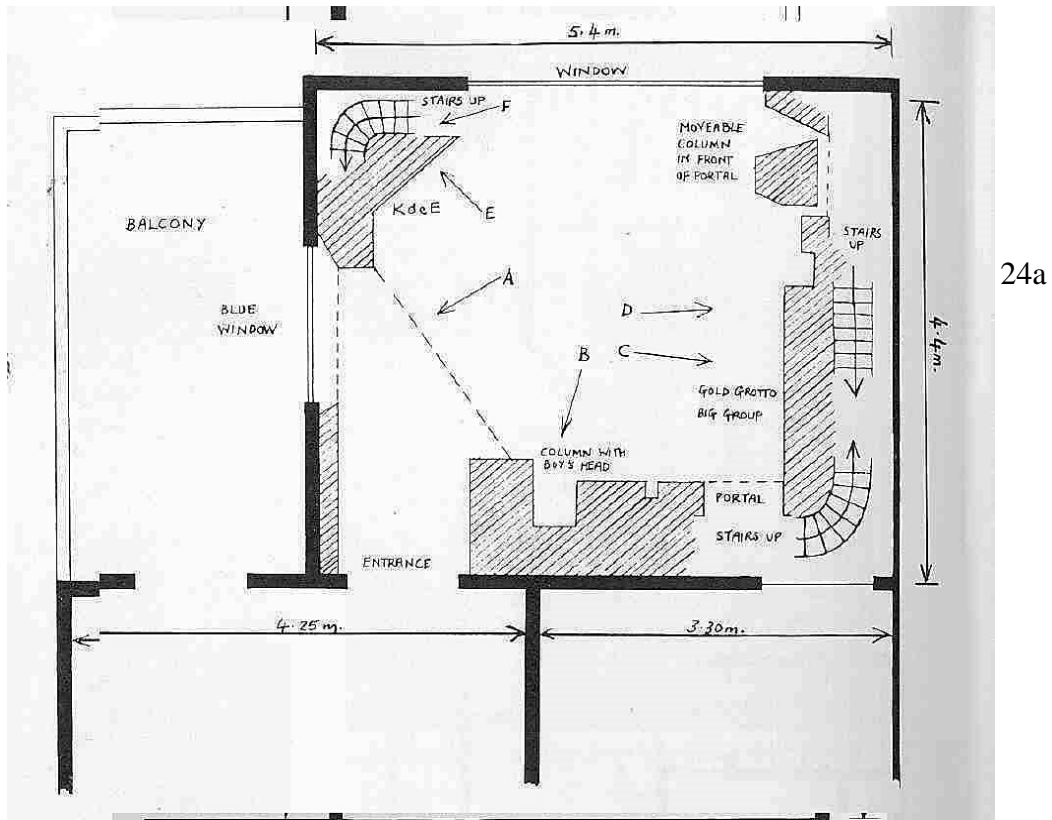
^[1] For a comment on the landscape format of this photo, which differs from the other wide-angle photos of 1933, see Osswald-Hoffmann 2003, 108.



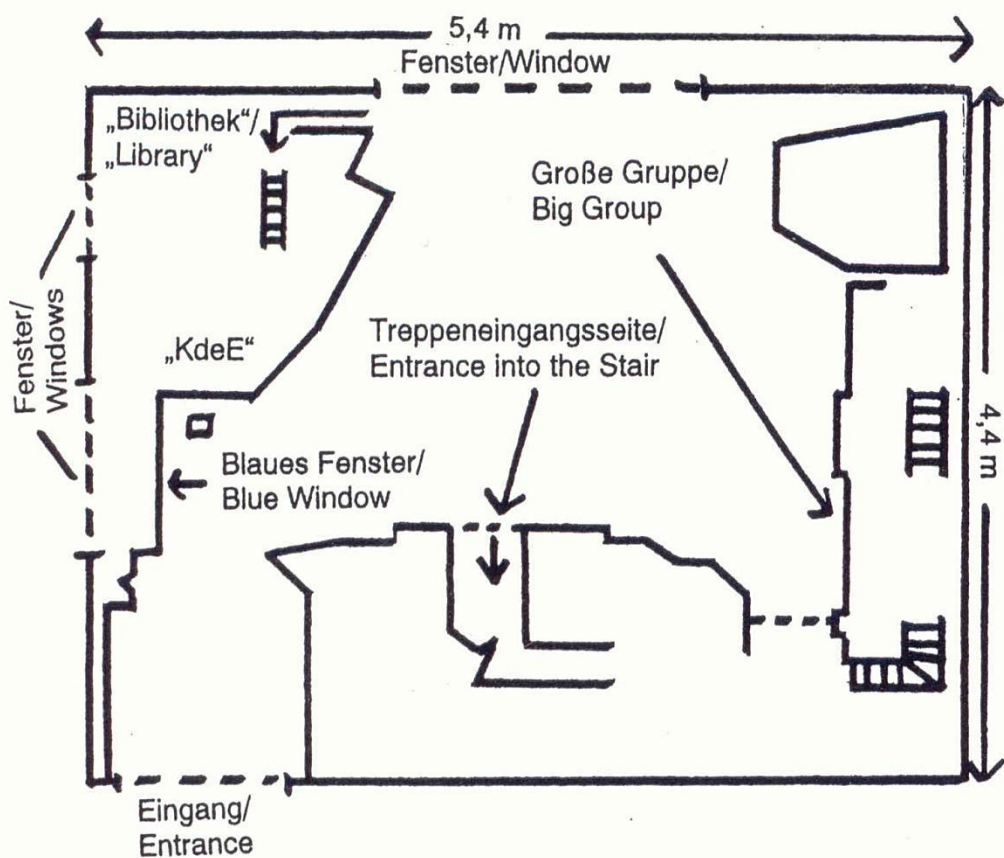
Fig. 23. Hannover Merzbau, view of the Blue Window, 1933.

CR 1199/21, A-C 1934, NY 671. This photo of 1933 by Wilhelm Redemann shows part of the KdeE on the right, with the Hand Shaker (see Fig. 43) below centre and the table for the guest book below right. One eyewitness stated that when visitors had signed the book, they were given tea and biscuits and asked to contribute 1.50 marks to the Merzbau.^[1] The entrance is just outside the photo, left. Visitors would enter this area, bathed in blue light from the coloured window, with the edge of the KdeE facing them, then walk beneath the arched vaulting into the main part of the room. On the left is a grotto containing a string of small lights. Mirrors affixed to the constructions reflect elements in other parts of the room. A picture (a Merz collage?) stands on a ledge on the left. Inside the grotto lower right can be seen a photo of Schwitters, printed matter, a broken wheel and a chess figure (see also Fig. 28d).

[1] 'Zeitzeugen von Kurt Schwitters erinnern sich', 21.3.86, KSF.



24a

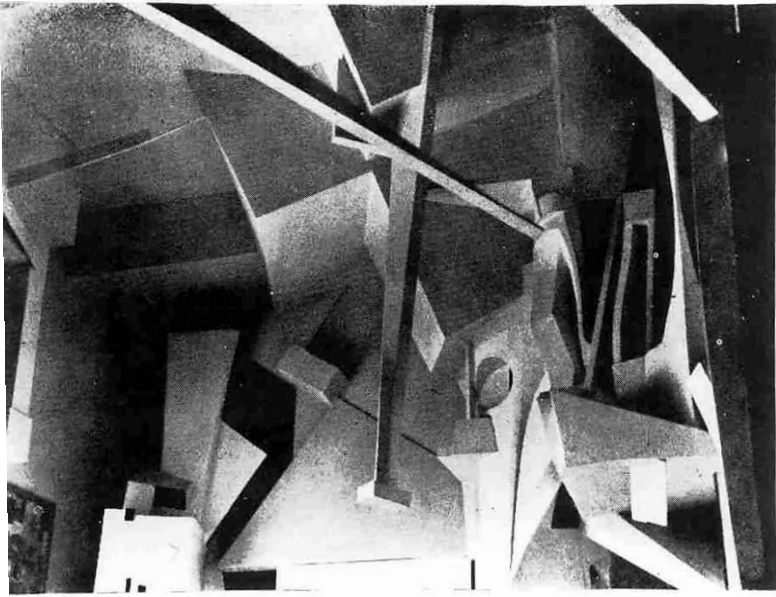


24b

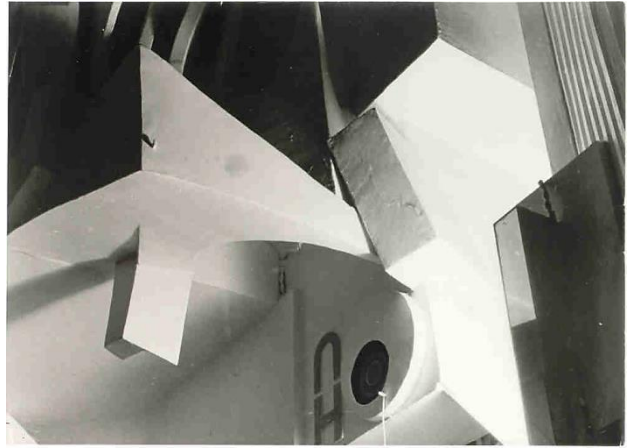
Fig. 24. Hannover Merzbau, plans of the first completed Merzbau room.

24a: Elderfield's plan of the first Merzbau room (Elderfield 1985, Fig. 167).

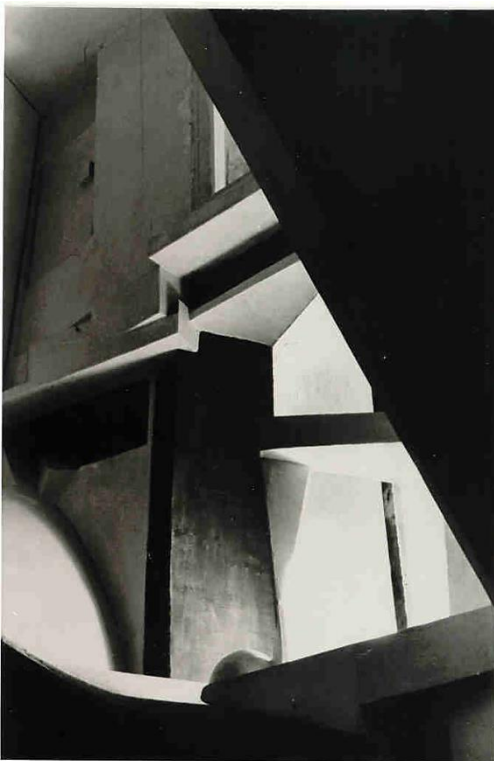
24b: revised plan from the Catalogue Raisonné (Orchard/Schulz 2003, 86).



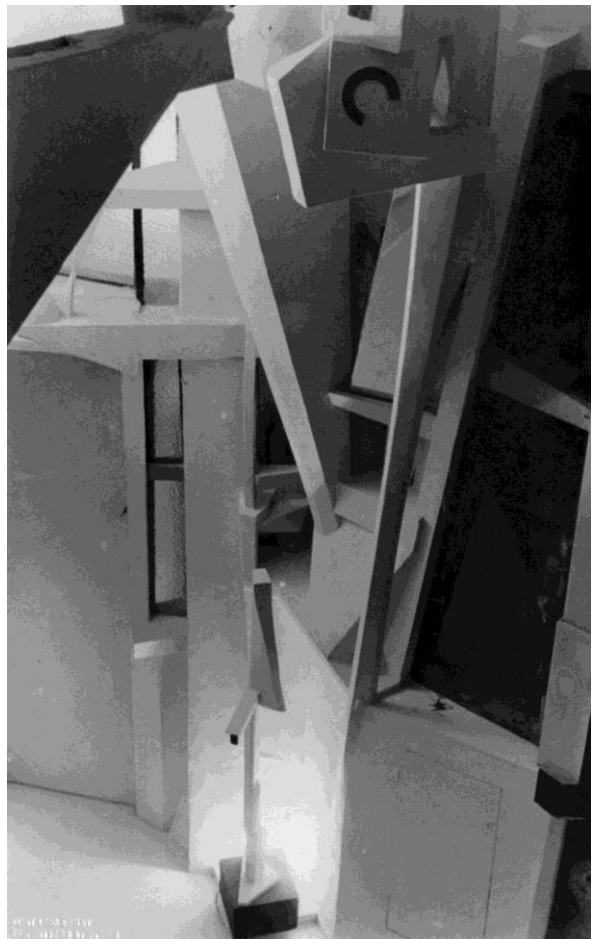
25a



25b



25c



25d

Fig. 25. Hannover Merzbau, details

25 a-c: CR 1199/22-24 AC 1933. Three close-ups by an unknown photographer of parts of the Big Group (25a), the stairway entrance (25b) and the Blue Window (25c). The Catalogue Raisonné dates these photos to circa 1932. In 25a, first published in *abstraction-création* in 1933, untitled, a picture frame can be seen in the lower left hand corner. This may be part of the E-Collection, pictures which Schwitters had received from Arp, Klee, Feininger, Kandinsky and other friends (Schulz 2006a).

25d. Ernst's photo taken 'from the Nest through the window over to the Romantic Arch', c. 1936. (Letter to Kurt Schwitters, 18.6.37, KSF)

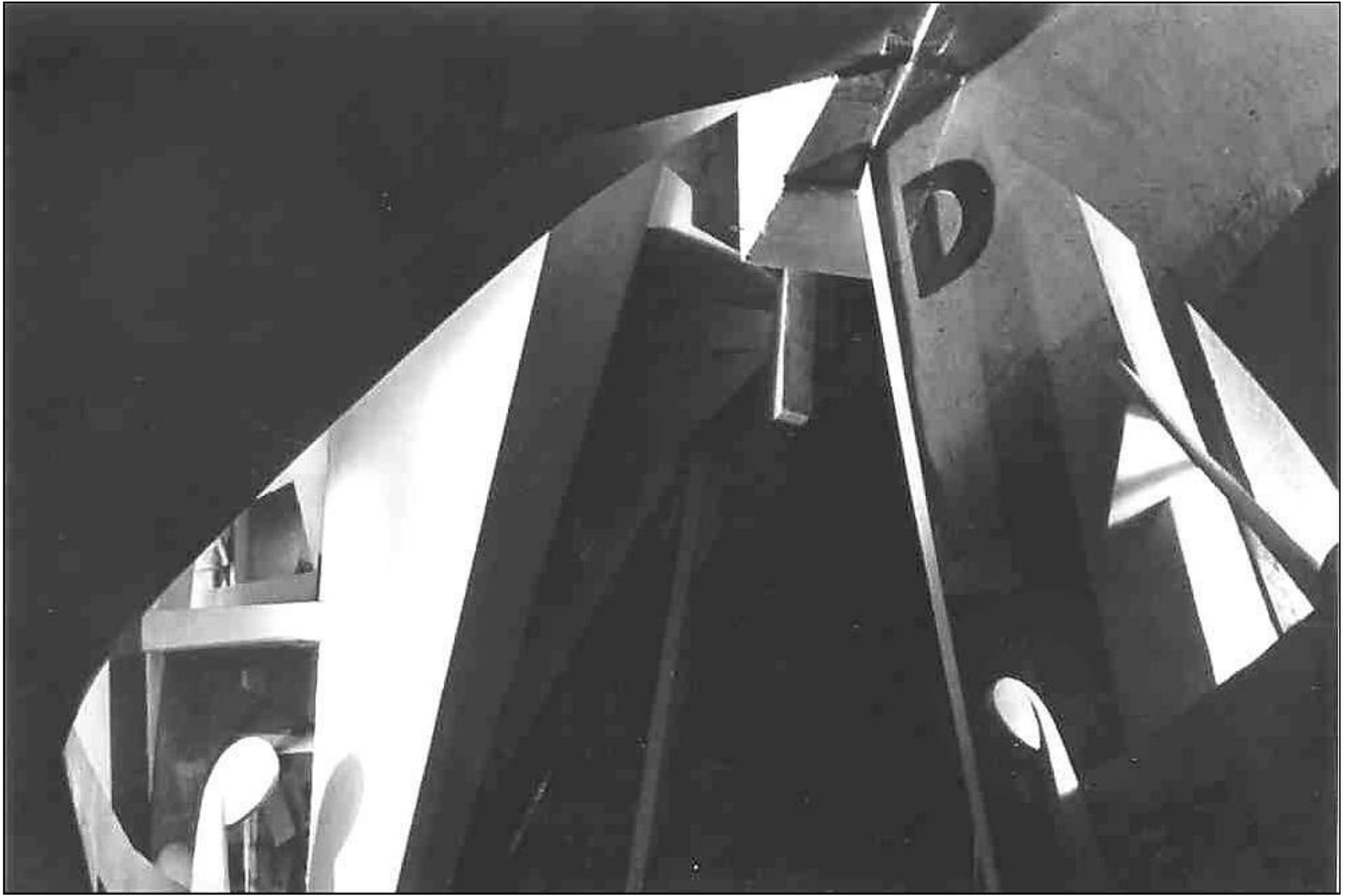


Fig. 26. Hannover Merzbau, Madonna and KdeE.

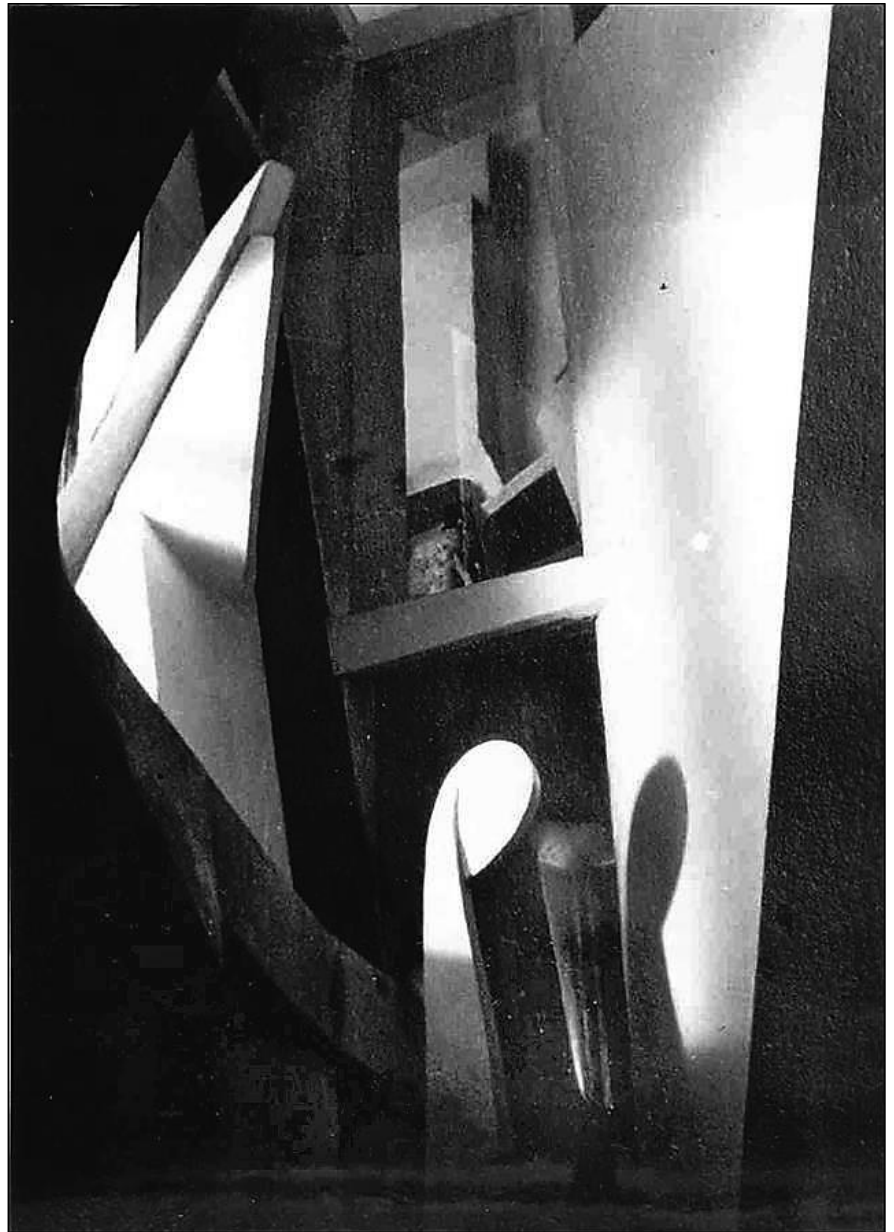
CR 1199/16. 'The Madonna stands in front of the balcony window in my studio.' [\[1\]](#) Neither this nor the following photo of the Madonna sculpture bear title or date, and the photographer is not known. This photo shows the Madonna and its reflection. On the far right is a reflection of the upper part of column known as Cathedral of Erotic Misery (KdeE). It is known that many mirrors and reflective surfaces (including the glazing of the grottos) were built into the Merzbau in its later stages, and many seem to have been precisely positioned to provide alternative views of the structures or a view of the park outside. The Madonna was a characteristic Merz object in that it was made of refuse; it consisted of the arm of a chair set on end and painted white. Schwitters offered this sculpture for sale in 1937 at a price of 300 Swiss francs.[\[2\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) [Die Madonna steht vor dem Balkonfenster in meinem Atelier.] Letter from Kurt Schwitters to Susanna Freudenthal, 15.7.37, KSA 9, 38.

[\[2\]](#) Letter to Edith Tschichold, 3.7.1937, Getty Research Institute, Jan und Edith Tschichold papers.

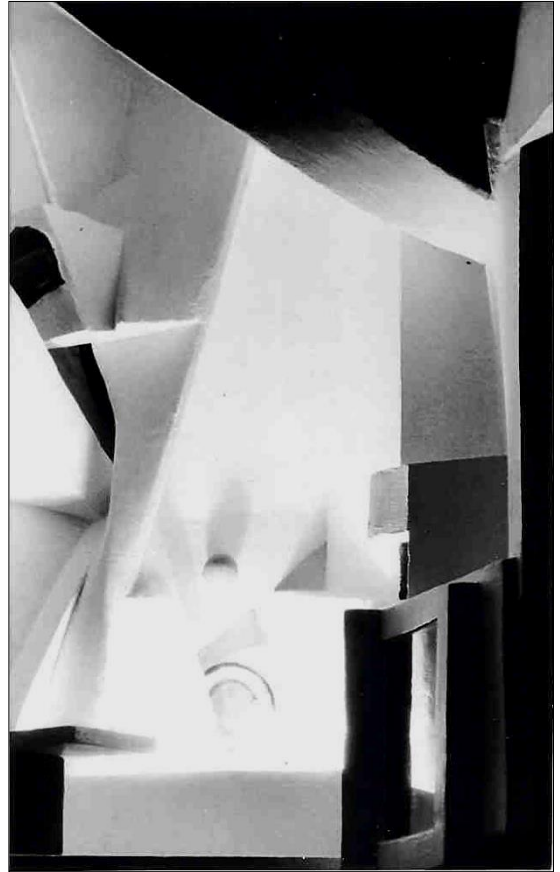
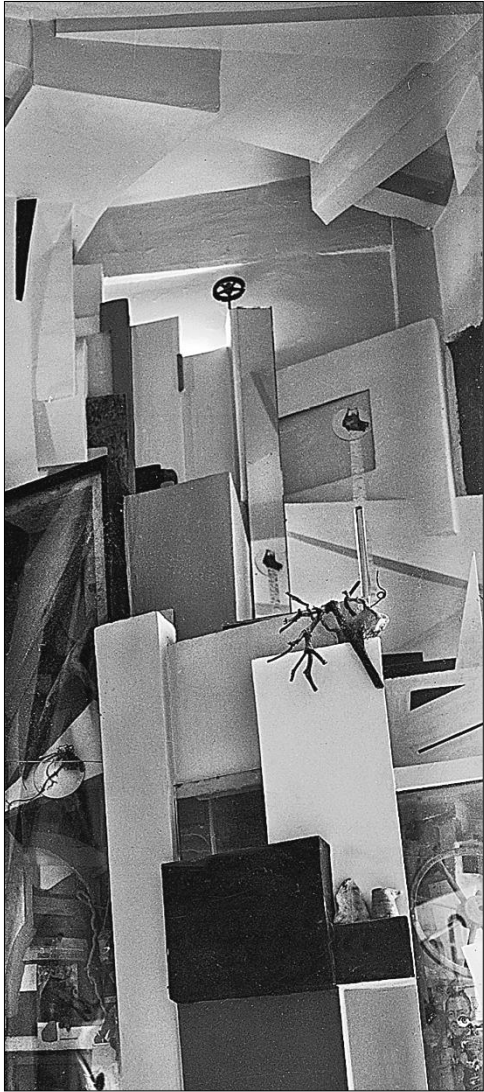
Fig. 27. Hannover Merzbau, Madonna.

CR 1199/15. 'The first Madonna was created in the so-called Blue Grotto, about 2 metres from the entrance to the main Merz room, and directly next to the door to the [...] balcony. The grotto was so named because [...] it was bathed in a blue light, and in the centre in front of this grotto stood the Madonna. It wasn't really planned as a Madonna at first, but simply as an abstract form, but when it was finished, you couldn't avoid the impression that this was a 'very devout' stylized Madonna. That's how she got her name, which therefore came from my father himself. The first Madonna was an integral part [of the Merzbau] and was about 60-65 cm. high, made of wood and plaster and painted white, more or less like the overall style of the Merzbau at this time. My father must have been very fond of this sculpture, for soon afterwards he made a second Madonna, very similar to the first but this time free-standing, and this one stood in our home in Waldhausenstrasse 5 for years, and stayed there till we finally emigrated to Norway [...] The first two Madonnas were made between 1930 and 1934.'^[1] Schwitters also worked on a Madonna in England: cf Nündel 1986, 171.

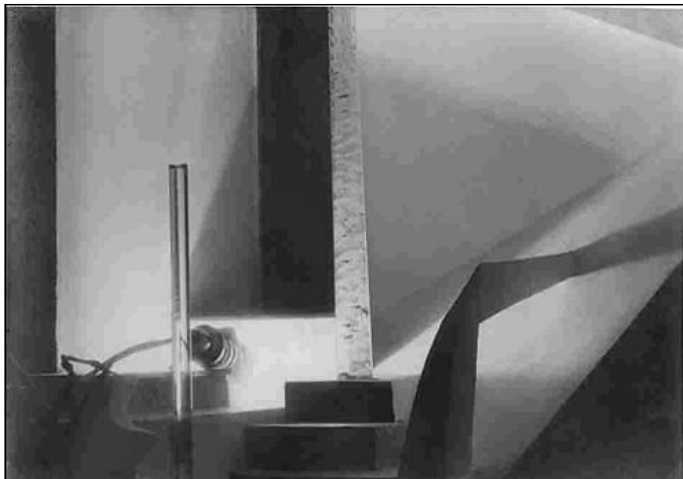


^[1] [Die Madonna entstand zunächst in der sogenannten 'blauen Grotte' etwa 2 m gegenüber dem Haupteingang zum Hauptraum des Merzbaues in Hannover, und direkt neben der Tür zum [...] Balkon. Die Grotte hieß so, weil [...] die ganze Grotte lag also in diesem blauen Licht gebadet, und mitten vor dieser Grotte stand 'die Madonna'. Zunächst war sie wohl kaum als eine 'Madonna' geplant, sondern einfach als eine abstrakte form, aber als sie fertig wurde, konnte man den Eindruck einfach nicht umgehen, dass es hier eine 'sehr fromme' stilisierte Madonna gab. So bekam sie denn diesen Namen, und der stammt also von meinem Vater selbst. Die erste Madonna war fest eingebaut, und etwa 60-65 cm hoch, aus Holz und Gips gebaut, und weiss bemalt, etwa so wie der Gesamtstil des Merzbaues zu dieser Zeit. Die Plastik muss meinem Vater sehr gefallen haben, denn er baute schon bald eine zweite 'Madonna', der ersten sehr gleich, aber nun freistehend, und die stand jahrelang in unserem Heim in der Waldhausenstraße 5 II in Hannover, und blieb auch da, als wir endgültig nach Norwegen emigrierten [...] diese beiden ersten 'Madonnen' entstanden zwischen 1930 und 1934.] Letter from Ernst Schwitters to Werner Schmalenbach, 20.9.64, KSF.

28a



28b



28c



28d

Fig. 28. Hannover Merzbau, details.

28a: detail of Fig. 23.

28b: untitled. Detail of the Big Group, 1932, CR 1199/17, NY 675.

28c: 'Grande Corniche', 1932, CR 1199/18 1932, NY 676, with *Grande Corniche* written by Ernst Schwitters verso.

28d: Enlargement of the grotto in 28a.

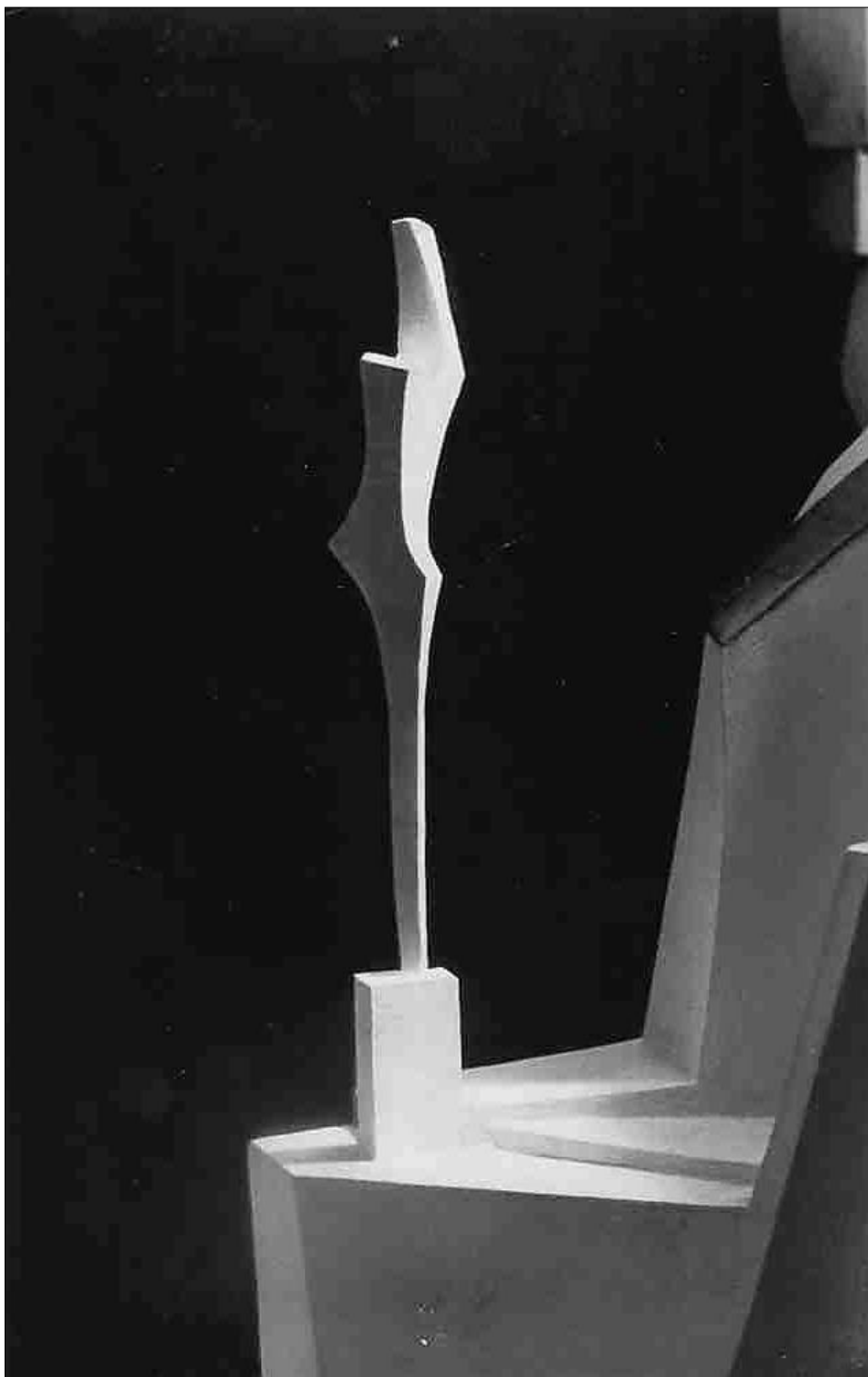


Fig. 29. Hannover Merzbau, *Schlanke Plastik* [Slender Sculpture], c. 1935.

CR 1960, NY 678. In 1964, Ernst Schwitters wrote: 'I was only 16 when I took [this photo]! [...] The Slender Sculpture was not made until 1935 and was permanently installed in the Merzbau. It stood immediately right of the entrance to the main room [...] only it was added so late that it can't be seen on the [1933] photos. It was about 35 cm. high.' [\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) [Ich war nur 16, als ich diese [Aufnahme] machte! Die *schlanke Plastik* entstand erst 1935 und war ein fester Teil des Merzbaues. Sie stand gleich rechts von Eingang zum Hauptraum, nur kam sie so spät, dass sie noch nicht [auf Fotos] zu sehen ist. Sie war rund 35 cm hoch.] Letter from Ernst Schwitters to Werner Schmalenbach, 17.9.64, KSF.

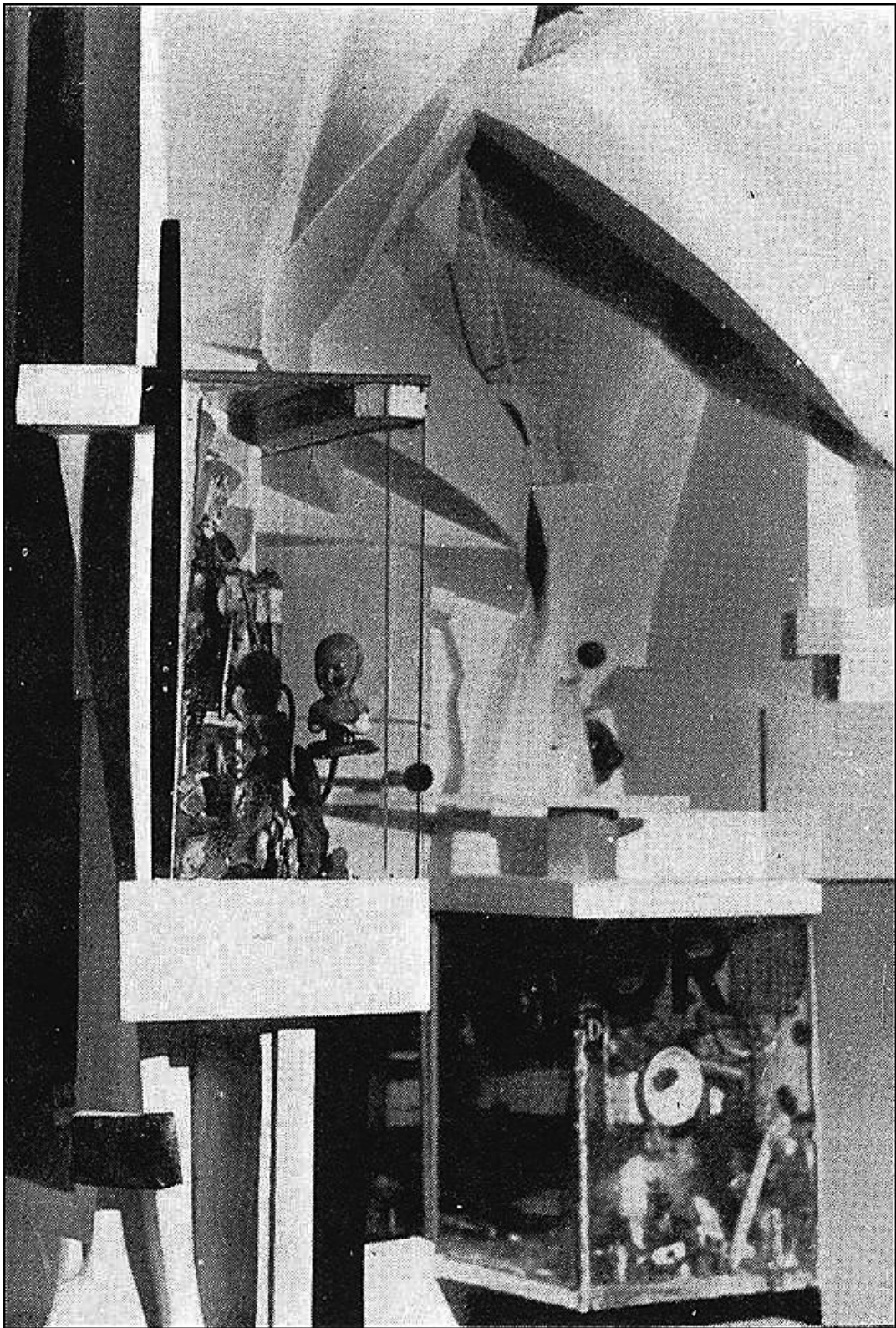


Fig. 30. Hannover Merzbau, *Die Goldgrotte* [The Gold Grotto].
CR 1199/27 AC 1933, NY 1936, 670. See also Fig. 57.



Fig. 31. Hannover Merzbau, *Grotte mit Puppenkopf* [Grotto with Doll's Head].

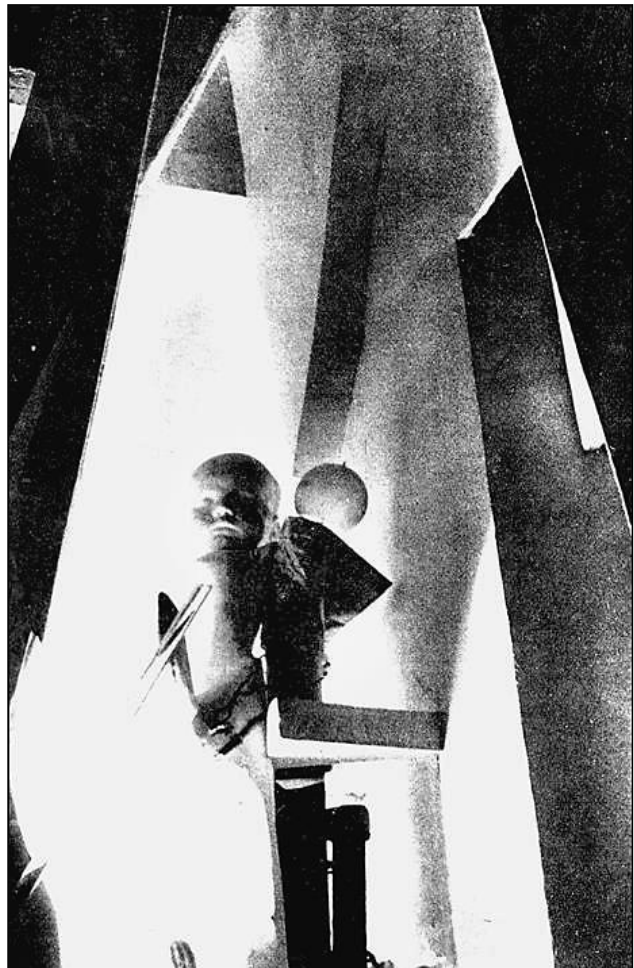
CR 1199/28, NY 1936, 667. In this photo by Ernst Schwitters, the head visible in Fig. 30 has apparently disappeared and been replaced by a light bulb. This photo (untitled) was published in *abstraction-création* in 1933 and dated to the same year. In 1936 it was exhibited in New York, mistakenly dated to 1925. Inge Bergmann-Deppe, who as a child lived next to the Merzbau from 1931-37 (see Fig. 6) remembered Schwitters rescuing parts of her broken porcelain doll as a child (“Die Scherben nicht wegwerfen! Das ist alles für die Kunst!!!”)

Fig. 32. Hannover Merzbau, details of column with baby's head.

CR 1199 9-10, NY 1936, 672, 674. These untitled photos were dated 1925 by Schwitters himself and show the column of Fig. 12 at a later stage, with much of the structure sheathed in plaster. Fig. 32a was taken by Ernst Schwitters. If the 1925 dating is correct, it is difficult to reconcile the appearance of the column with photos of other sections of the Merzbau taken in 1928, which give no indication of plaster casing. As it is unlikely that Ernst could have taken this photo at the age of six, it must be assumed that either the dating is erroneous or that the photo was taken at a later time and was backdated by Kurt. The latter theory is given credence by the catalogue of an exhibition in New York in 1936 in which both photos are labelled 1925-32. From this it may be assumed that Schwitters dated the original column to 1925, while the photos show its aspect in 1932. The details are not identical with those of the 1933 photos.



32a



32b

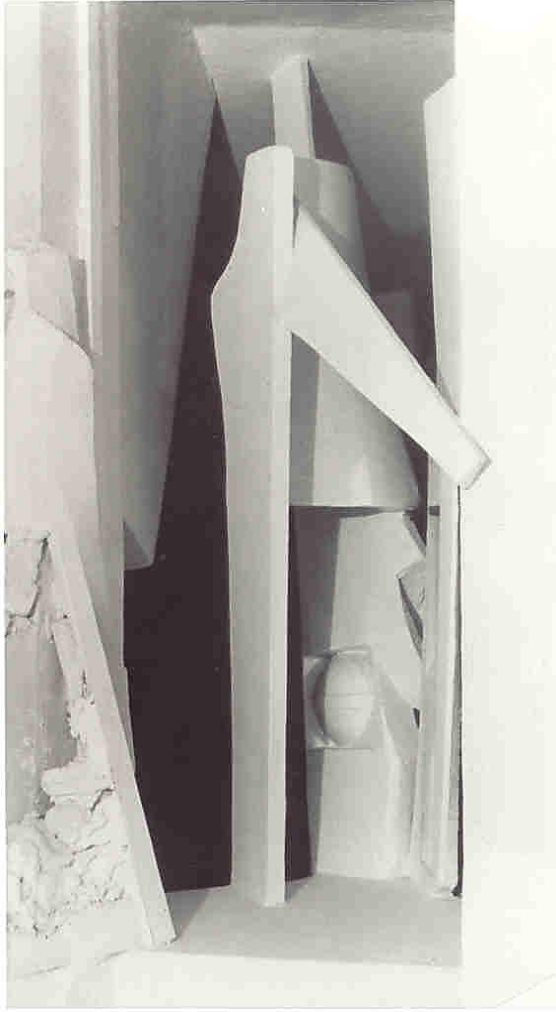


Fig. 33a

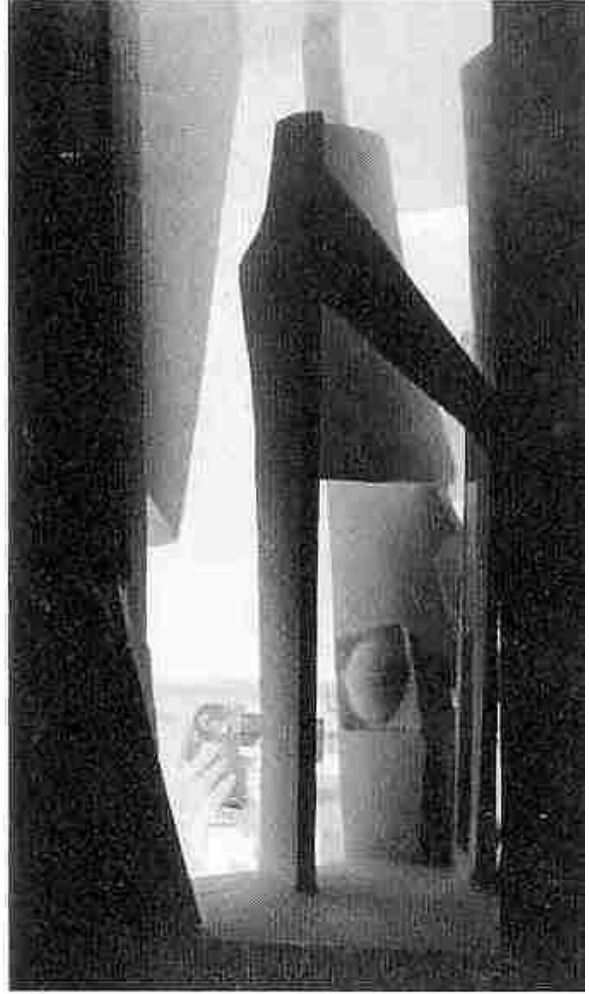


Fig. 33b

Fig. 33a, 33b. Hannover Merzbau, two view of the stairway entrance (?), c. 1932?
CR 1199/25, 26. These two photos show a detail of the Merzbau under different lighting conditions. They were evidently taken from inside the constructions. The CR dates both to c. 1932.

Fig. 33c. The background image in Fig. 33b. is taken from Paul Schuitema's poster for the 1931 exhibition of the ring neue werbegestalter, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam .



Fig 33c



Fig. 34. Hannover Merzbau, enlargement of Fig. 33b.

CR 1199/25. See Fig. 33c for details. A woman's head, part of the word Merz and newspaper cuttings are also visible, which would indicate that we are looking out at a collage.



Fig. 35. Hannover Merzbau, *Grotte in Erinnerung an Molde* [Grotto in Memory of Molde].

CR 1199/30. This photo is dated 17.9.35 and was taken by Ernst Schwitters. It is possibly identical with the *Tiefseegrotte* [deep-sea grotto] mentioned by Ernst in 1937.^[1] It is not known where in the Merzbau this grotto was situated.

^[1] Letter to Kurt Schwitters, 18.6.1937, KSF

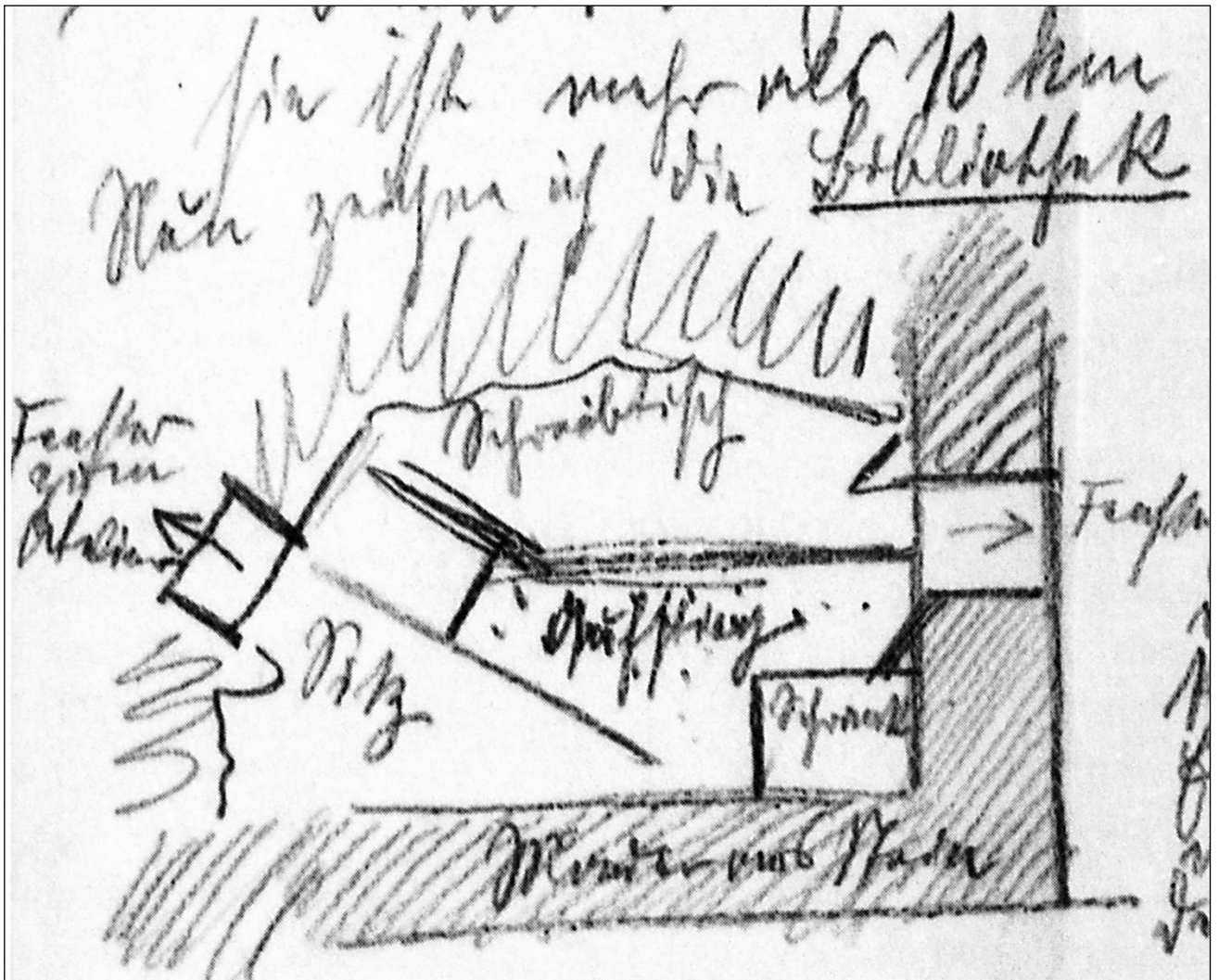


Fig. 37. Hannover Merzbau, sketch of the library

CR 1199/3. Schwitters' sketch of the library, March 1935 (Fig. 36), enlarged. The library is at the top of the column. Schwitters marks *Sitz* [seat], *Schrank* [cupboard], *Schreibtisch* [desk], *Aufstieg* [way up, i.e. stair], *Fenster zum Atelier* [window on to the studio] and *Fenster zum Balkon* [window on to the balcony]. Beside this sketch Schwitters has written: 'Du siehst, es ist hier kein direktes Licht' [You see, there is no direct light here]. Note that this sketch, like the previous one, is on a south-north alignment and gives no indication of the remainder of the house, so that the entrance to the Merzbau seems to be through the window.

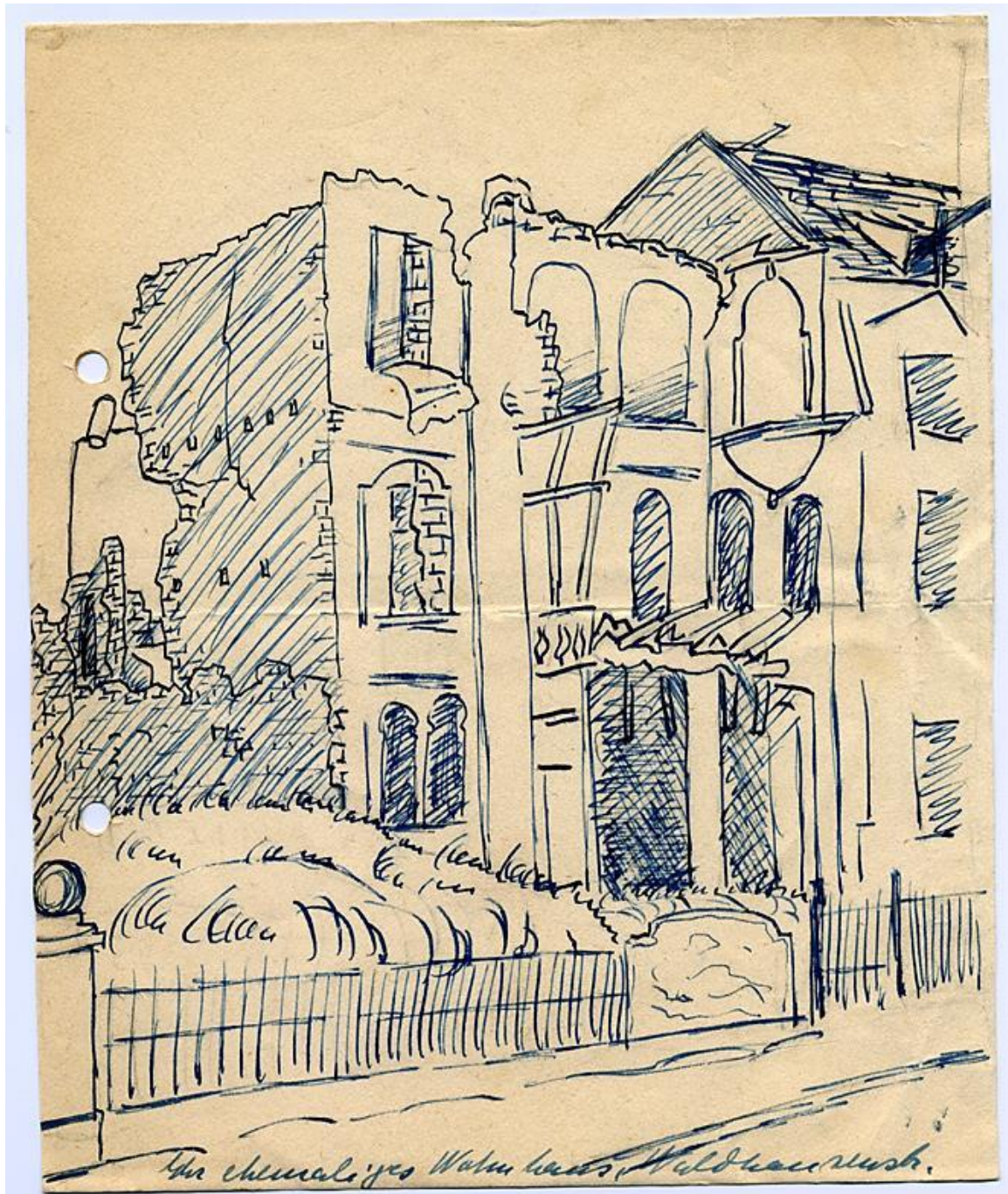


Fig. 38 Lotte Gleichmann-Giese, sketch of the ruined Waldhausenstrasse 5.
(See also Fig 136)

Schwitters heard of the destruction of the Merzbau in 1944. *‘My studio and the work of my life does no more exist, and I go on living [...] Isn't it sad. For what did I actually live? I don't know.’^[1] Otto Gleichmann's wife Lotte later sent him this sketch of the ruin, and in his reply, Schwitters expressed his thanks ‘for the instructive sketch. I think the house looks terrible’.^[2] Lotte Gleichmann wrote to Schwitters that she passed his house daily: ‘your balcony is still there and a solitary canister – probably from your bathroom furnishings – rises eerily into the air. One mustn't look back.’^[3] KSF.

^[1] Schwitters to Steinitz, 24.6.45, quoted in Gohr 2000, 47.

^[2] [Zuerst danke ich Frau Gleichmann für die aufschlussreiche Skizze. Ich denke, das Haus sieht übel aus.] Letter of 2.2.47, Nündel 1974, 262.

^[3] [Ihr Balkon ist noch vorhanden und ein einsamer Kanister – wahrscheinlich von Ihrer Badeeinrichtung stammend – ragt gespenstig in die Luft. Man darf nicht zurückblicken.] Letter of 25.7.46, SAH. See also a note on this origin of the canister in ‘Zeitzeugen von Kurt Schwitters erinnern sich’, 21.3.86, KSF.



Fig. 39 Ruins in Waldhausenstrasse. (See also Fig. 136).
Photo of Waldhausenstrasse 5 after the bombing of 1943. KSF.



Fig. 40 Kurt Schwitters, untitled assemblage.

CR 1198. This grotto, measuring 9.3 x 16.8 x 7.2 cm., was said by Ernst Schwitters to have been part of the Merzbau.^[1] It was badly damaged during transport in 1956 and was reconstructed in 2004. KSF.

^[1] Letter from Ernst Schwitters to Werner Schmalenbach, 25.04.56, KSF, also Basel 2004b, 250.



Fig. 41. Kurt Schwitters, *Weisses Relief* [White relief], 1924-27.
CR 1216, 66.5 x 48.7 x 28.7 cm. Said to have been incorporated into the
Hannover Merzbau.



Fig. 42. Kurt Schwitters, portrait of Karl Schäfer, 1933.

CR 1893. Karl Schäfer (c. 1880-1967), by profession an ecclesiastical painter, lived in Ricklingen, Hannover. He frequently assisted Schwitters during the construction of the Merzbau in the 1930s. In 1938, Schwitters requested his help in fitting out the hut on Hjertoya (Fig. 71) in the manner of the Hannover Merzbau. [\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) See correspondence in Hannover 1986, 61-2.



Fig. 43. Merzbau reconstruction, entrance.

This is taken from the entrance to the Merzbau reconstruction. To the left is the Blue Window. The Hand Shaker (CR 1767?) is the angular construction at the front on the floor. Behind that is the KdeE with the table for the guest book in front. Right of the main window stands the Movable Column. Behind it, a stair led to a ledge that ran along the wall to the far corner. The exit was through the stairway entrance (Fig. 44).

http://www.merzbaureconstruction.com/realization_e.htm



Fig. 44. Merzbau reconstruction, stairway entrance.

View of the reconstruction with the Gold Grotto, Stairway Entrance and drive belt. A high walkway ran behind the constructions left and led down to the room via the ladder behind the drive belt. Along this walkway was a circular hatch, visible top left, from which it was possible to view much of the room.

http://www.merzbaureconstruction.com/realization_e.htm



45a



45b



45c



45d

Fig. 314. Merzbau reconstruction, stairway entrance, details.

45a: view of the area around the stairway entrance. The joiner's bench is on the left. There were passageways behind all these sections.

45b: fragment of a framed oval mirror.

45c/d: details of ceiling constructions.

Figs. 45b-d courtesy of Peter Bissegger.

http://www.merzbau-reconstruction.com/realization_e.htm

Fig. 46 Merzbau reconstruction, four views of the KdeE.

46a: part of the KdeE (right), with the table for the visitors' book. The Blue Window is on the left.

46b: part of the KdeE with the main window.

This gave on to the Eilenriede park. The grotto left was possibly the Nibelungen grotto. The library was high up in the corner behind this section.

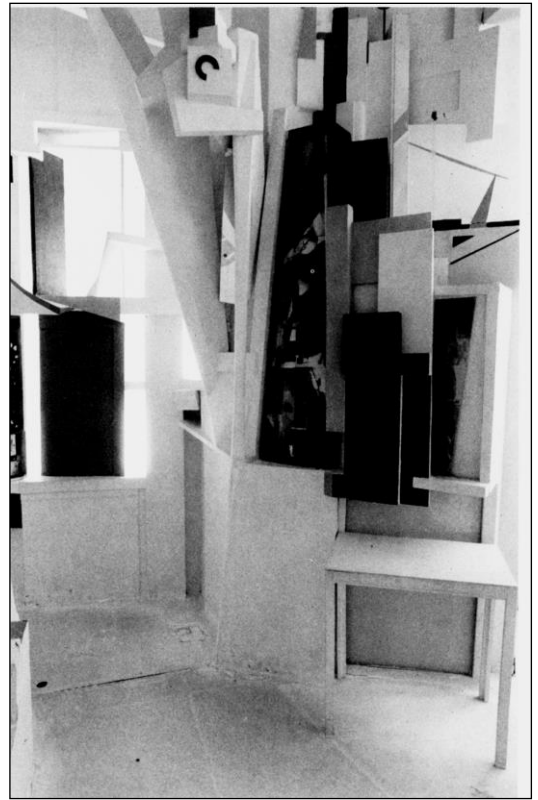
46c: the table for the guest book. This stood in front of the KdeE, with the Hand Shaker left.

46d: upper part of the KdeE.

Photos courtesy of Peter Bissegger.



46c



46a



46d



46b

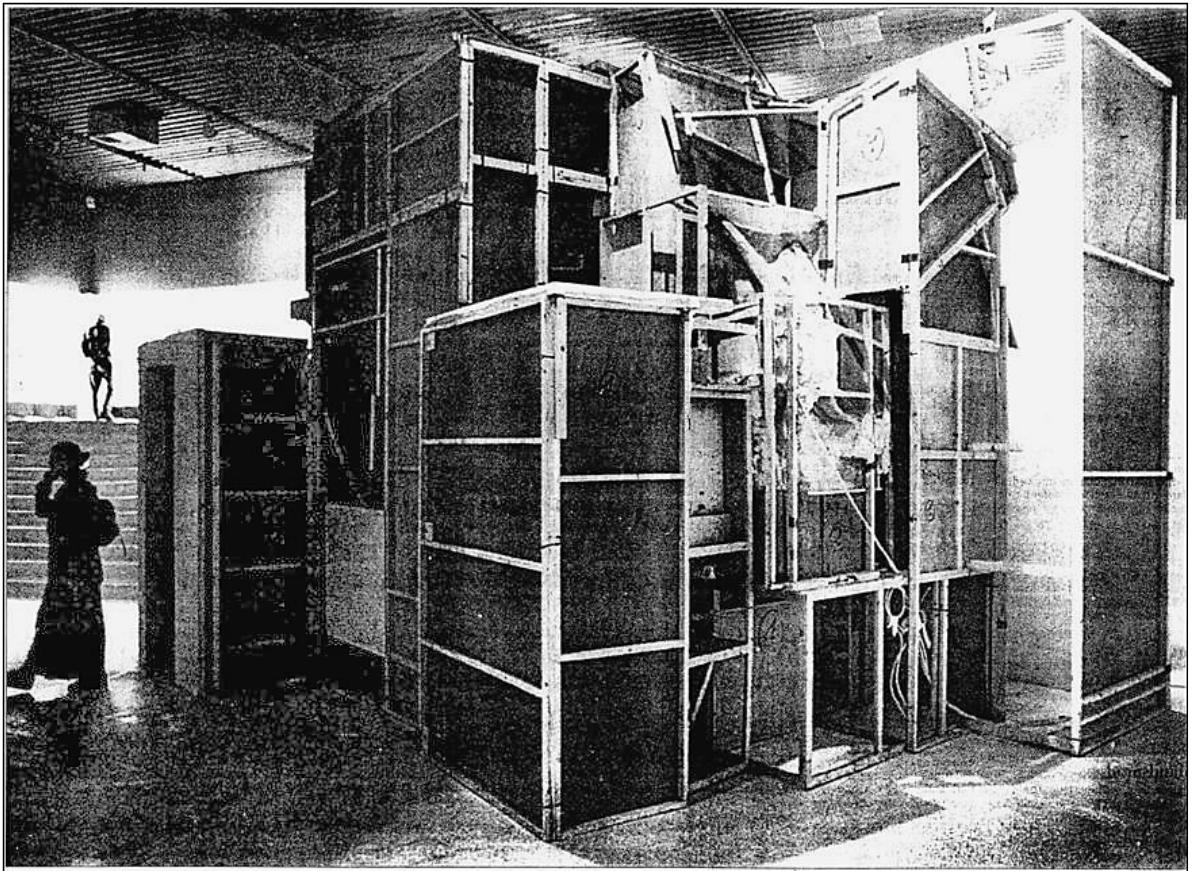


Fig. 47. Merzbau reconstruction.

Above left: The KdeE

Above right and below: two views of the reconstruction of the Merzbau from the exterior as exhibited in Copenhagen in 1996. Photos courtesy of Peter Bissegger.

48a (photo: author)



48b



Fig. 48. Two views of the Kyffhäuser monument.

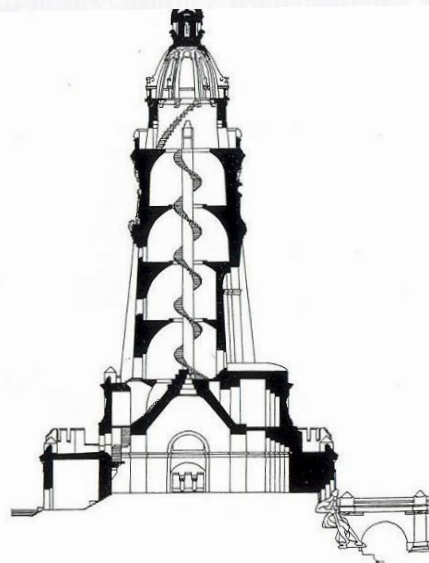
The Kyffhäuser monument is located on the high, exposed terrain of the Kyffhäuser hills. It is visible for miles around and surrounded by forests. The monument depicts Wilhelm I and beneath him, Barbarossa (above), who, legend relates, slept beneath the mountain till the time came for him to return as the harbinger of a new Germany. The monument, 81 meters (267 feet) tall, was built in 1890-96 by the architect Bruno Schmitz (1858-1916) atop the ruins of the medieval fortress of Kyffhausen and like the Tannenberg memorial (1927), was sponsored by the (still existent) *Kyffhäuserbund*, (<https://www.kyffhaeuserbundev.de/aktuell-1/tradition-hat-zukunft/>) the German war veterans' association.



49a



Der Kyffhäuser mit dem Kaiser-Wilhelm-Denkmal ...



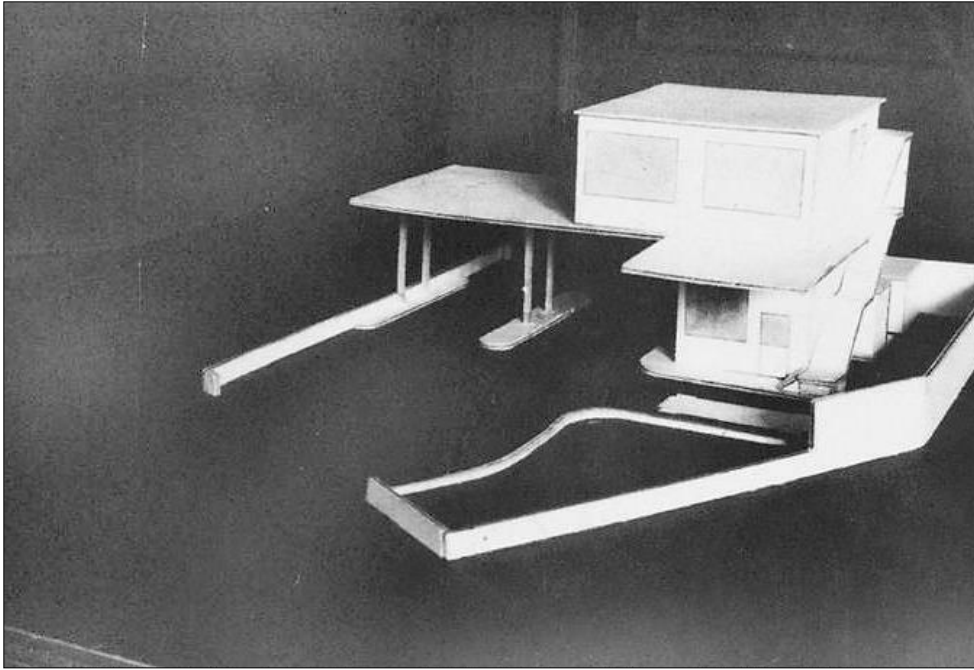
49b

Fig. 49 The Kyffhäuser monument.

49a: two postcards of Kyffhäuser, 1900. The lower one shows an artist's impression of how the monument would appear in the year 2000.

49b: cross-section of the Kyffhäuser tower, 81 metres (266 ft) tall, The interior spiral stair has 247 steps.

Both reproduced in Müller 2002, 88, 92.



50a



50b

Fig. 50. The White Palace.

Kate Steinitz's memoirs include the photo in Fig. 50a., labelled as the joint Moholy-Schwitters White Palace for guinea-pigs in the Merzbau.^[1] This model bears a striking resemblance to the Dapolin filling station in Frankfurt (Fig. 50b) designed by Lucy Hillebrand, who worked with Schwitters in 1928-9.^[2] (My thanks to Dr Isabel Schulz, Sprengel Museum Hannover, for this observation.)

[1] Steinitz 1968, caption preceding page 67.

[2] Reproduced in Hillebrand 1990, 176.

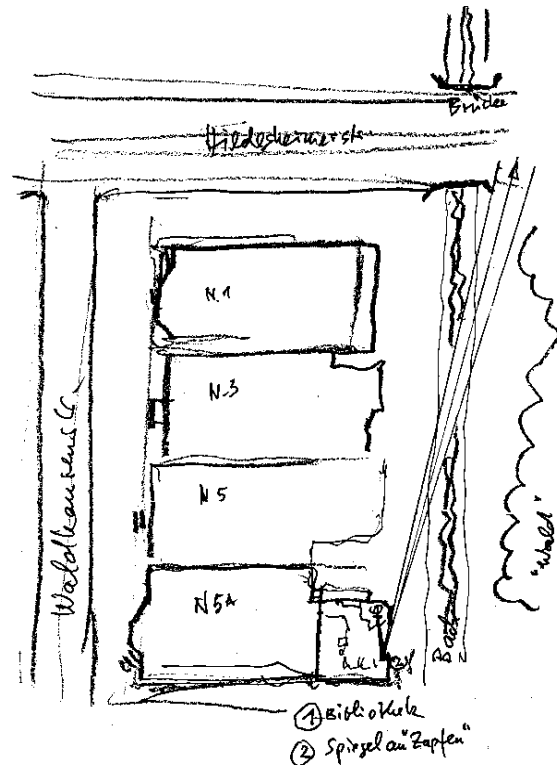
Fig 51. Sketches of the view from the Merzbau.

51a: the row of houses in Waldhausenstrasse 5. From the library in the Merzbau, a mirror affixed to a construction gave a view of the tram stop on the main road (Hildesheimerstrasse).

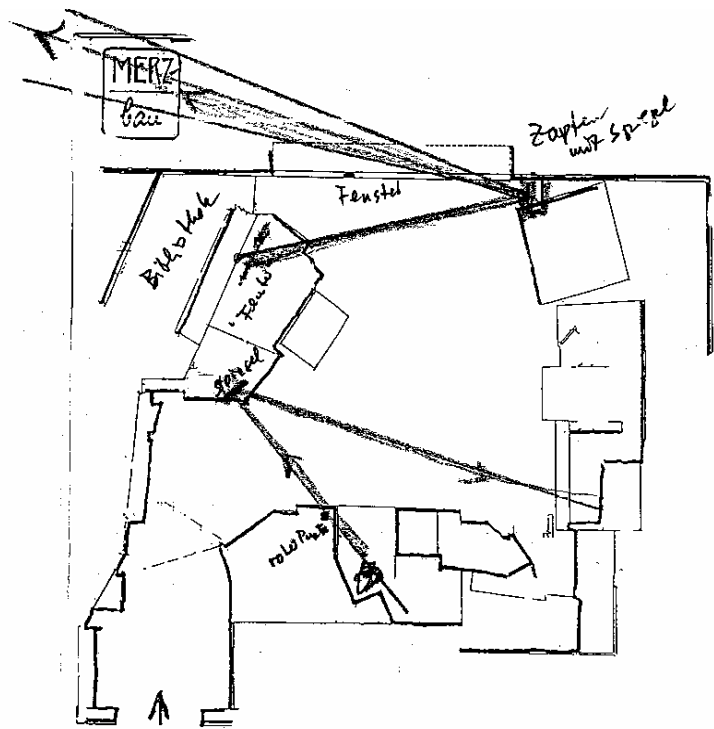
51b: mirrors in the Merzbau. This shows the position of two mirrors, one reflecting the view outside, the other reflecting an internal view from the hatch. Fig 51 a. and b. courtesy of Peter Bissegger.

51c: Schwitters' sketch of the old Döhren watchtower as seen from the library in March 1935. 'I look through the mirror and through the woods to Hildesheimerstrasse. I see the old watchtower there, the Döhren Tower.'^[1] See also Fig. 58.

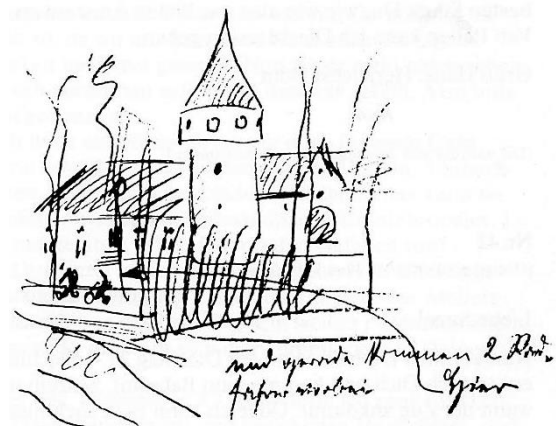
[1] [Ich sehe durch den Spiegel und durch den Wald auf die Hildesheimerstrasse. Ich sehe da den alten Wachturm, den Döhrener Turm]. Letter to Susanna Freudenthal, 30.3.35, KSA 9, 103.



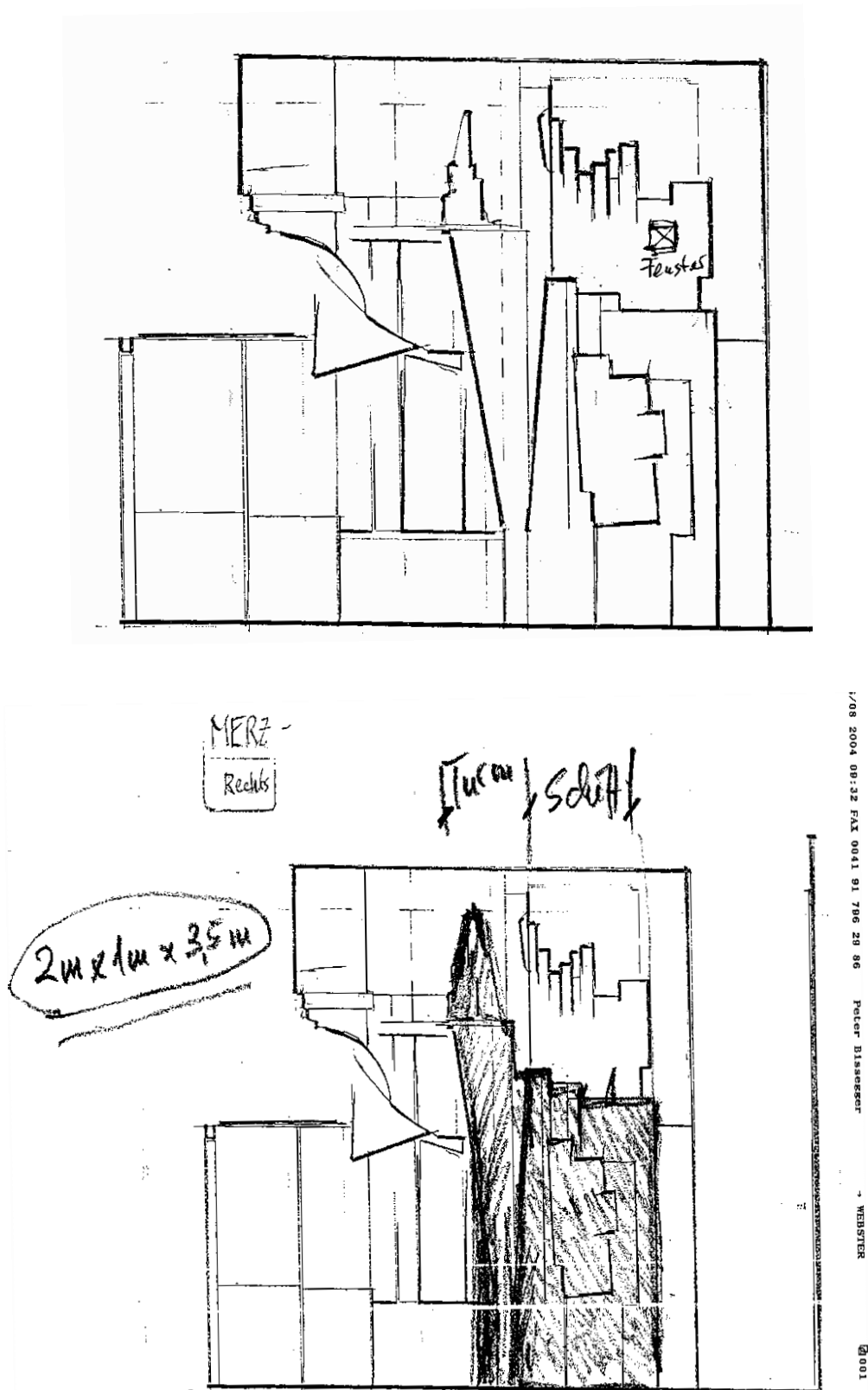
51a.



51b.



51c.



1/08 2004 09:32 FAX 0041 91 796 29 86 Peter Bisseger

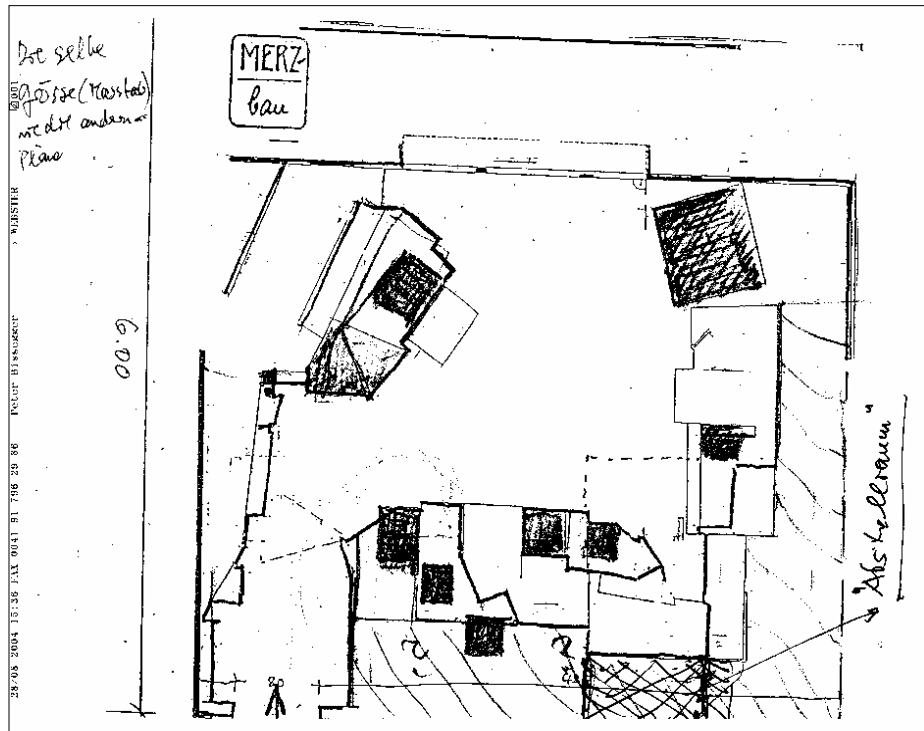
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0001

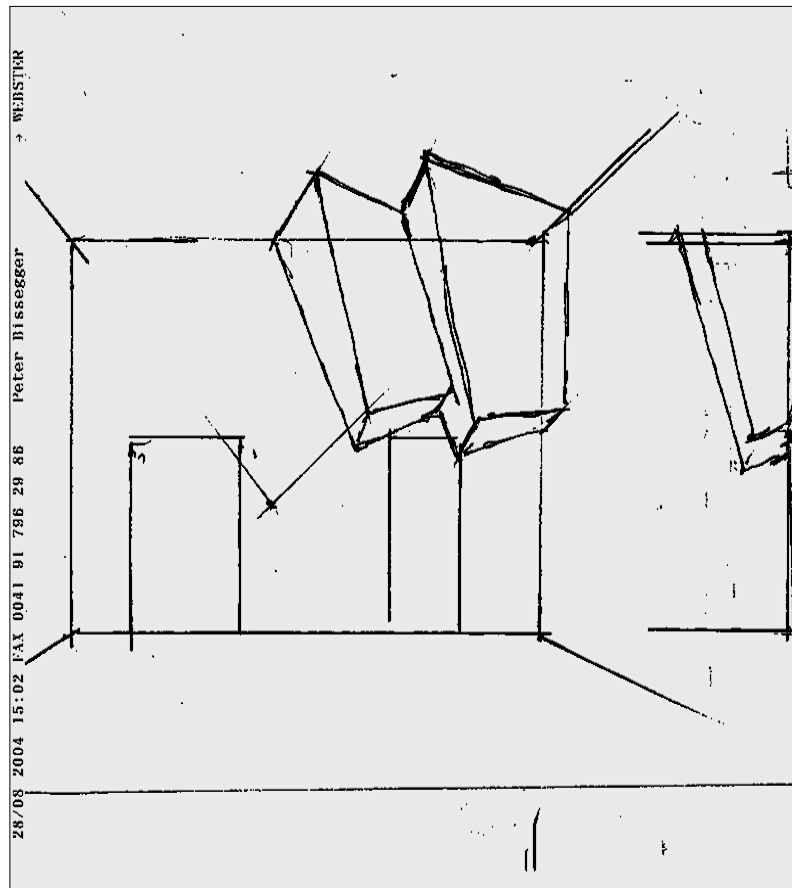
Fig. 52 Peter Bisseger, two sketches of the KdeE.

(Above) Outline of the constructions of the Cathedral of Erotic Misery.

(Below) Shaded areas indicate how this section displays an external resemblance to a church or cathedral. The area of constructions along this wall corresponds to the measurements given by Schwitters in the *Veilchenheft*. Sketches courtesy of Peter Bisseger.



53a



53b

Fig. 53. Peter Bisseger, two impressions of Merzbau constructions.
 53a: sketch showing the conjectural location of nine original columns. The hatched areas at the bottom show a large space whose function is unknown.
 53b: Peter Bisseger's impression of the cubic forms over the doorway. These were erected above the entrance to the main Merzbau room in the early 1930s.

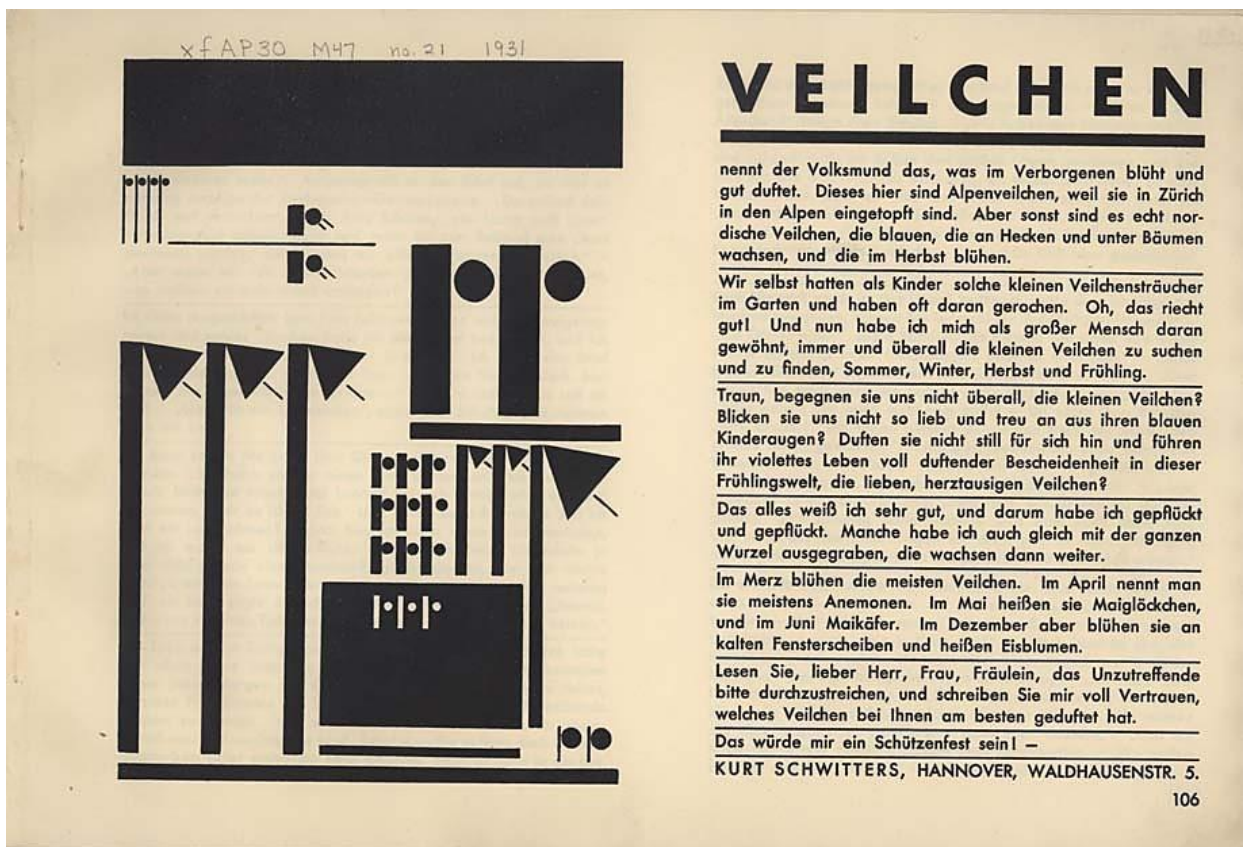
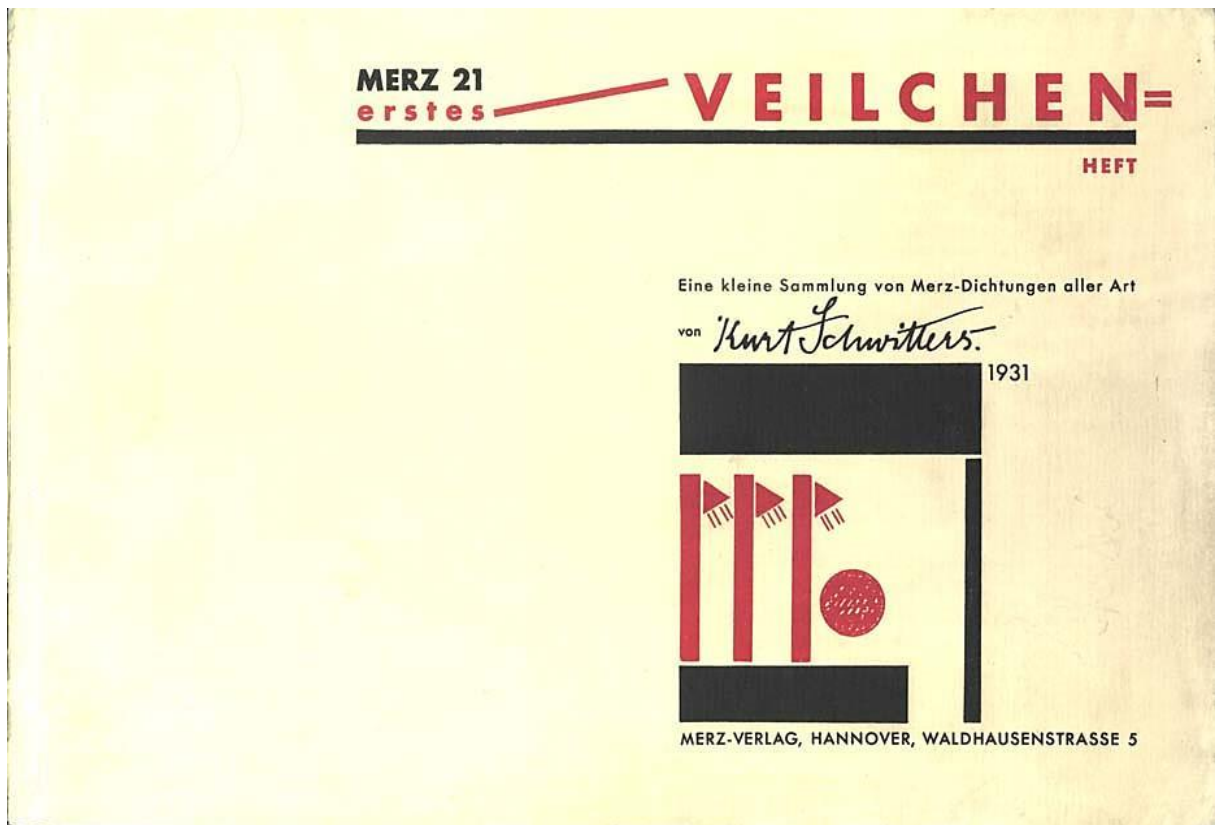


Fig. 54. *Das erste Veilchenheft*, 1931, cover (above) and title page (below).

<http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/merz/21/index.htm>



Der erste Tag

ICH UND MEINE ZIELE.

Warum soll ich nicht auch einmal über mich selbst schreiben, selbst wenn mich an dieser Stelle niemand darum bittet. Ich bin nicht eitel, weil ich die Belanglosigkeit aller Dinge kenne. Ich schreibe hier nur, um allen denen eine gemeinsame Antwort zu geben, die immer wieder wieso und warum fragen, z. B. weshalb die „Veilchen“ zum Schluß ganz anders geworden sind, als am Anfang geplant war, **denn ich selbst bin solch ein Veilchen**, welches mit Absicht im Verborgenen blüht, weil ich überzeugt bin, daß ich dort schöner dufte.

Ursprünglich wollte ich als „Veilchen“ nur eine Sammlung neuer Dichtungen veröffentlichen, um den Vielen, die immer fragen, wo man meine neuesten Sachen kaufen könne, dazu Gelegenheit zu geben. Sie werden jetzt wohl nicht mehr fragen, wenn sie wissen, daß sie kaufen können, **denn man fragt gern, aber man kauft ungern**. Aber warum soll ich immer nur an andere denken und anderen Gefälligkeiten erweisen; man hat so selten als Künstler Gelegenheit etwas zu veröffentlichen. **Die Welt ist voll von Partalen**, und jede Partei hält den Künstler für unbegabt, der etwas Anderes für wichtig hält als ihr Programm. **Jede Partei spricht der Kunst die innere Berechtigung ab, wenn sie nicht für ihr Programm mitkämpft** oder ihr sonst in irgend einer Weise zur Durchführung ihres Programms verhilft. „Wirken“ ist heute die Devise, die Kunst aber braucht beschauliches „Sichversenken“, die Kunst will schaffen, und nicht anders wirken als durch die Tatsache ihres Bestehens. „Ja warum wollen Sie nicht gleichzeitig wirken?“ fragt mich die Partei, und denkt dabei an eine großzügige Propaganda, die ich für ihre Ideen entwickeln soll, um ihr dadurch meine Berechtigung als Künstler nachzuweisen; aber ich weiß, daß man nur ein Ziel bei einer Arbeit haben kann, und **die Kunst ist mir viel zu wertvoll, um als Werkzeug mißbraucht zu werden**; lieber stehe ich persönlich dem politischen Zeitgeschehen fern.

Ich hoffe, die Zeit wird auch ohne mich politisch weiter bestehen können, wohingegen ich bestimmt weiß, **daß die Kunst für ihre Entwicklung mich noch braucht**. Kunst ist ein sonderbares Ding, sie braucht den Künstler ganz.

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seits. **Beide Formen sind eben entwickelt aus dem für uns typischen Formwillen der Zeit.** Noch liebt die Menschheit, die immer in veralteten Formen denkt, die Form der Zeit nicht, während sich gleichzeitig, aber unbemerkt durch die Allgemeinheit, und nur von wenigen begabten Kunsthistorikern erkannt, der neue Stil herausbildet. Später wird er einmal allgemein werden, und dann wird man uns alle aus unsern Verstecken herausholen, vielleicht erst dann, wenn die Zukunft schon längst andere Bedürfnisse haben wird, **denn das Schicksal der Menschheit im Allgemeinen ist es zu irren**, und man soll sie gewähren lassen, denn sie fühlt sich wohl dabei. Heute noch gibt es nicht viele Leute, die gern in jenen schmucklosen, von innen heraus gestalteten Häusern wohnen, man zieht allgemein die alten, überladenen, barocken Häuser vor, weil man auch etwas für die Schönheit tun möchte. Erst eine spätere Zeit wird erkennen können, daß gerade diese schmucklosen Häuser, wenn sie von einem begabten Architekten, etwa Haesler, gebaut sind, nicht nur allen Erfordernissen der Bequemlichkeit und der Gesundheitspflege entsprechen, nicht nur technisch die besten Lösungen sind, sondern auch optisch die schönsten Formen. Relativ leicht findet die neue Typographie allgemeineres Verständnis. Zwar liebt man nicht die einfacheren Formen, aber man heißt sie gut, wenn sie verbunden sind mit einer intensiveren Verdeutlichung des Inhalts, welches der Hauptzweck neuer Typographie ist. Allgemein beginnt man sie mehr und mehr zu schätzen, weil sie leichter orientiert, besser wirbt, Zeit und Geld spart.

Und nun zurück zu der heutigen Jugend und dem Menschen überhaupt. Ich bitte Euch Alle, laßt mich in meiner Verborgenheit weiter blühen. Es geht mir dabei ganz gut, und ich strebe nicht nach Ruhm und Ehre, oder nach Eurer Anerkennung. Ich bin zufrieden, wenn ich in meinem Atelier oder an meinem Schreibtisch ungestört und in aller Ruhe, vom Lärm der Straße nicht berührt und ohne Nahrungssorgen, weiter arbeiten kann. Dazu verhilft mir aber meine Tätigkeit als typographischer Gestalter und Berater bei zahlreichen Behörden und Fabriken, wo ich im Jahre mehr als 500 Drucksachen bearbeite. **Mir kann Keiner und Ihr könnt mir Alle**, zumal da ich auch glücklich verheiratet bin; und ständig wächst die Anerkennung meiner typographischen Tätigkeit. Und allmählich

kenne ich mich auf dem außerordentlich komplizierten und vielseitigen Gebiet des Druckens etwas aus.

Anders die Kunst, denn erstens kennt sich da keiner aus, denn das Gebiet ist noch bedeutend komplizierter, und zweitens fehlt mir persönlich die Anerkennung. Es bleibt bei schlechten Kritiken, **weil sich die Kritiker in ihrem Wesen stets gleich bleiben**. Und wenn ein junger Kritiker bei meinem eigenen Vortrag schreibt, ich wäre einfach unmöglich, so ist mir das vollkommen gleichgültig, ebenso gleichgültig, als wenn er schreibe, ich wäre der beste Sprecher der Gegenwart, eine Behauptung, die zwar auch nicht ganz stimmt, mit der er sich persönlich aber bestimmt weniger blamiert hätte. **Meine Zeit wird kommen**, das weiß ich, und dann werden später dieselben Kritiker schreiben: „Wie dumm waren doch früher die Menschen, als sie Schwitters nicht erkannten, hingegen wie gescheit sind wir, daß wir ihn jetzt erkennen“. Ich habe zwar nicht die Absicht, Leute zu beleidigen, die noch garnicht geboren sind, aber ich weiß es schon jetzt, daß sie, soweit sie Kritiker sind, genau so harmlos sein und genau so wenig erkennen werden, wie ihre augenblicklichen Kollegen, denn das ist allgemein menschlich, und dazu kann keiner etwas; **nur sollen sie sich dann nicht aufspielen**. Wenn Ihr Menschen der Zukunft aber mir eine besondere Freude machen wollt, so versucht es die wichtigen Künstler Eurer Zeit zu erkennen. Es ist für Euch wichtiger und für mich eine größere Freude, als wenn Ihr mich entdeckt zu einer Zeit, in der man mich schon längst entdeckt hat.

Ihr aber, Ihr politischen Menschen von rechts oder links, oder Ihr mittlere Sorte, oder aus welchem blutigen Heerlager des Geistes Ihr kommen mögt, **wenn Ihr eines Tages mal die Politik recht satt habt**, oder Euch auch nur für einen Abend von Euren Strapazen ausruhen wollt, so kommt zur Kunst, **zur reinen unpolitischen Kunst, die ohne Tendenz ist**, nicht sozial, nicht national, nicht zeitlich gebunden, nicht modisch. **Sie kann Euch erquicken und sie wird es gerne tun.** 27. 12. 1930.

Subskribieren Sie auf das folgende MERZ-HEFT, 22: **Entwicklung**, Preis 3 RM, es erscheint Anfang 1932.

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Fig. 55. *Das erste Veilchenheft*, 1931: 'Ich und meine Ziele'.

(above) Reproduction of the collage *Der erste Tag* (1922) and the first page of 'Ich und meine Ziele'
(below) The last two pages of 'Ich und meine Ziele', dated 27.12.1930.

Two more issues were planned but never appeared: *Merz 22 Entwicklung* and *Merz 23 e E* (cf. Nündel 1974, 134.)

<http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/merz/21/index.htm>

26. AUGUST 1982

Feuilleton

Als Schwitters noch in Waldhausen merzte

Der Maler Rudolf Jahns erinnert sich

nover gingen während der ihre wichtige Impulse für die Kunst aus, so entwickelte sich ... a. zu einem der Zentren des Dadaismus, zu einem Schnittpunkt und niederländischer Gestaltungen, repräsentiert durch Lisvan Doesburg. 1927 gründete Schwitters, Jahns, Vordemberge und Nitzsche „die hannover“, und im selben Jahre Alexander Dörner im Provinzialmuseum das „Abinett“, den ersten Ausstellungsort für konstruktivistische Kunst in der Provinz.

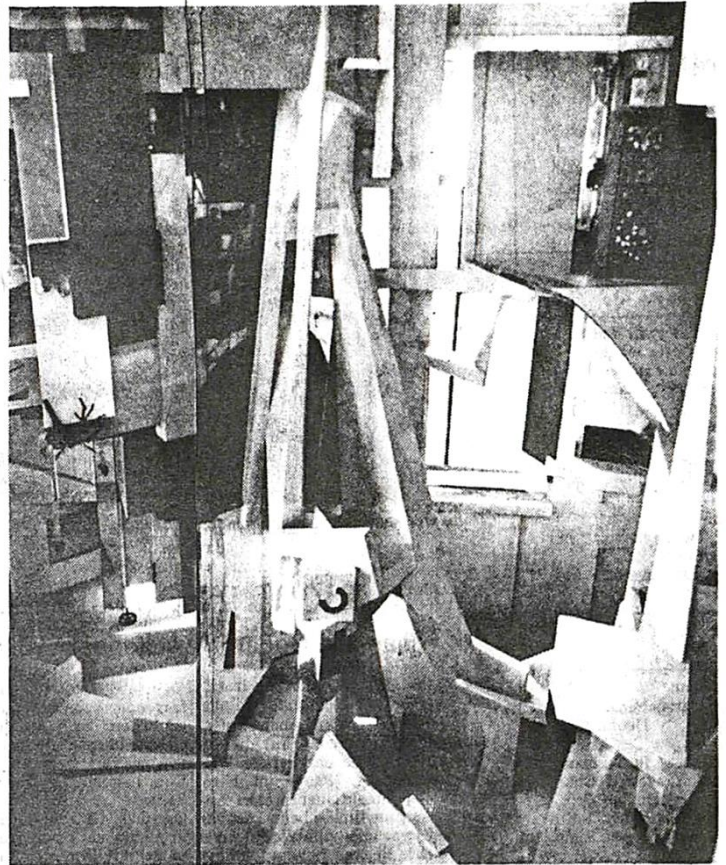
Der nachstehende Beitrag enthält auszugsweise Tonbandaufzeichnungen von Rudolf Jahns, dem einzigen noch lebenden Mitglied der „abstrakten hannover“. Seine Erinnerungen lassen die nicht nur künstlerisch so bewegte Zeit des ersten Nachkriegsjahrzehnts unmittelbar gegenwärtig werden. Jahns, der im vergangenen Jahr aus Anlaß seines 85. Geburtstages vom Kunstmuseum Hannover mit Sammlung Sprengel durch eine umfassende Retrospektive geehrt wurde, zeigt gegenwärtig bis zum 5. September eine Auswahl seiner Arbeiten im Schloß seiner Vaterstadt Wolfenbüttel.

R. L.

mit Kurt Schwitters begann 1927. Ich hatte Schwitters nachgebeten, um hier seine Lautsohlen. Damals gab es dort keine großen Kasernen, und in Hannover gab es unglaublich schöne Gebäude, die allerdings das Laster der Unordnung hatten. Aber was macht das aus, wenn er ein schönes Gebäude darin schalten und walten ließ? Ich war es ja nicht während der Kriegsjahre. Dieser Saal, ungenutzt, sieben Meter breit, nutzte, um von Schwitters werden mit seiner Stentorstimme Lautsonate. Er sagte so kam er dann eines Tages, einer Tüte Bruchkeks von

lange besinnen. Ich mußte das Grammophon aufdrehen, und dann wurde durch den Saal gescherbelt – getanzt. Der Abend verlief dann trotzdem für alle eigentlich befriedigend.

Die Freundschaft mit Kurt Schwitters und Helma, seiner prachtvollen, uneigennütigen Frau, führte noch im Jahr 1927 zur Gründung der Gruppe „die abstrakten hannover“ als Gruppe der „Internationalen Vereinigung der Expressionisten, Kubisten und Konstruktivisten e. V. (Centrale Berlin). Gründungs- und gleichzeitig aktive Mitglieder waren: Kurt Schwitters, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, Carl Buchheister, Hans Nitzsche und ich. Gründungstag war, wie die Einladung vom 5. 3. 27 ausweist, der 12.3.27. Wir tagten in der Wohnung Kurt Schwitters' in der Waldhausenstraße Nr. 5. Ich erinnere mich genau der Umstände. Es war noch kalt. Der eiserne Ofen im Zimmer strömte eine gewaltige Hitze aus. Kurt Schwitters kam gerade aus dem Keller, wo seine Meerschweinchen untergebracht waren, und brachte ein totes Tier nach oben, wo er es mit einigen weisevollen Worten in den Ofen warf. Später mußten wir uns im



Schneckenhaus und Höhle: Kurt Schwitters' „Merzbau“ in Hannover-Waldhausen. Repr. Görke

waren bereits auf die Töpfüllungen übergegangen. Den Anfang dieser KDE – Kathedrale des erotischen Elends – den Kate T. Steinitz in ihrem Buch „Kurt Schwitters“ im Verlag der Arche, Zürich, schildert, habe

waren es nicht, es waren Sauereien – waren wirklich unbotmäßig. Sie schädigten uns nach Strich und Faden.

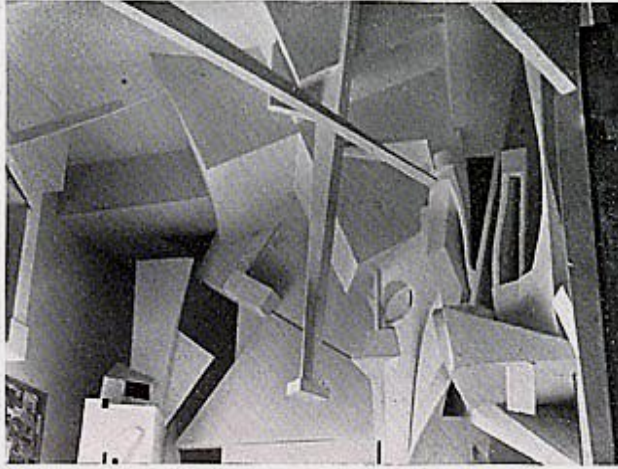
Nun konnten wir ja nicht von nichts leben, denn es wurde ja nichts verkauft. Wir



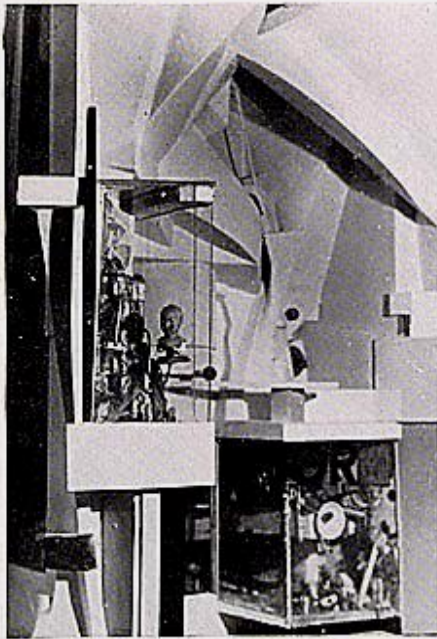
Fig. 56. Article on the Merzbau by Rudolf Jahns, 1962.

An unintentional misprint. Rudolf Jahns relates his memories of the Merzbau, with an illustration labelled 'Schneckenhaus und Höhle, [snail shell and cave]: Kurt Schwitters "Merzbau" in Hannover-Waldhausen'. FAZ., 26.8.62.

Schwitters 1933



Schwitters 1933



Schwitters

Ces deux photos représentent quelques parties du « Merzbau » à Hanover : « die grosse Gruppe » [le grand groupe] et « die Goldgrube » [le groupe d'or].

Le « Merzbau » est la construction d'un intérieur par des formes plastiques et des couleurs. Dans des grottes vitrées sont des compositions de Merz qui forment un volume cubique et qui se réunissent à des formes cubiques blanches en formant l'intérieur. Chaque partie de l'intérieur sert à la partie voisine d'élément médiateur. Il n'y a pas de détails qui forment comme unité une composition limitée. Il y a un grand nombre de différentes formes qui servent de médiateur du cube jusqu'à la forme indéfinie. Quelques fois, j'ai pris une forme de la nature, mais plus souvent j'ai construit la forme comme fonction de différentes lignes parallèles ou croisées. Ainsi j'ai trouvé la plus importante de mes formes : la demie vis. (Halbschraube).

Je fais une grande différence entre la logique artistique et la logique scientifique, entre construire une forme nouvelle ou constater la forme de la nature. En construisant une forme nouvelle, on crée une œuvre abstraite et artistique. En constatant la forme de la nature, on ne fait pas une œuvre d'art, mais on étudie seulement la nature. Il y a un grand nombre de membres intermédiaires entre construire la forme et constater la nature.

1. C'est en tout cas possible, qu'un artiste abstrait peigne aussi des nus.

2. Dans mes compositions abstraites, il y a l'influence de tout ce que j'ai vu dans la nature, par exemple des arbres.

3. Une locomotive n'est pas une œuvre d'art, parce qu'on ne l'a pas construite dans l'intention de faire une œuvre d'art.

4 et 5. Il ne fait rien à l'efficacité artistique, qu'on reproduise une machine ou un animal ou la Joconde.

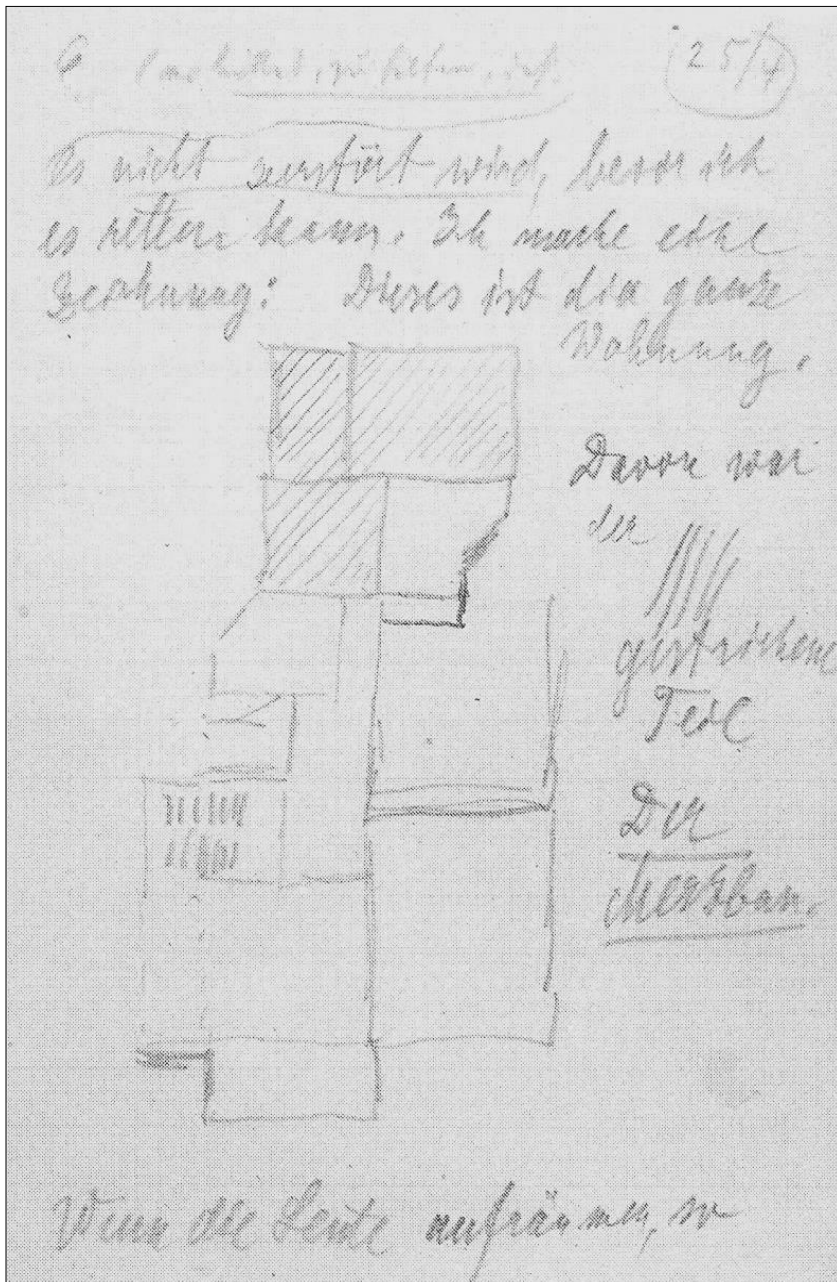
Fig. 57. abstraction-crétion art non figuratif, Nr. 2, 1933.

KSF. The first photographs of the Hannover Merzbau to be published. The text is partly translated in Appendix II.

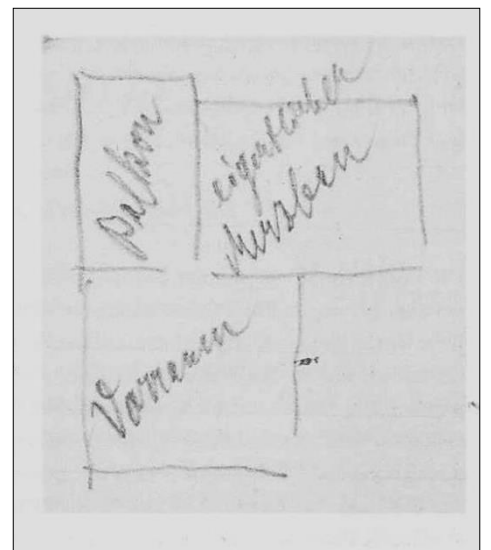


Fig. 58. Waldhausenstrasse 5 today (Google Earth).

Waldhausenstrasse 5 (rebuilt) is the fourth house from the left, with a white and a blue car in front. The yellow pin marks the course of the footpath that runs through the Eilenriede park, parallel to Waldhausenstrasse itself. The neighbouring red-roofed house to the right, whose structure mirrored that of No. 5, survived the bombings and gives a good impression of the extent of the destroyed building. As Schwitters' studio was at the back of the house, it would have been partly visible from the path behind (Fig. 135), as would the balcony. The small tower with a circular red roof on the far left next to the tramlines is the *Döbrenner Turm* on Hildesheimerstrasse that Schwitters could see from the Merzbau's library (see Fig. 51). As then, it marks the nearest tram stop.



59a.



59b.

Fig. 59. Kurt Schwitters, two sketches of the Merzbau rooms, 1946.

CR 1199/4.

59a: letter to Christoph and Luise Spengemann, 25.4.1946, Nündel 1974, 195. Here, Schwitters has written: 'Dies ist die ganze Wohnung. Davon war der gestrichelte Teil Der Merzbau.' [This is the whole apartment. The hatched part of it was The Merzbau.]

59b: Schwitters sent this sketch of the ground floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5 to Christoph and Luise Spengemann on 25.3.46. The hatched rooms of the Merzbau are labelled *Vorraum* [vestibule], *Balkon* [balcony] and *eigentlicher Merzbau* [actual Merzbau].



Fig. 60.
(above) Peter Bissegger and
(below) Edith
Thomas/Wantee in the
Merzbau reconstruction





Fig. 61 'Houses from Weimar by Feininger' (Appendix I, ¶10).

Reproduced in Feininger 1965, 68, 94.

These houses were part of a toy town, the 'Town at the End of the World', made for Lionel Feininger's sons. The maximum height of the figures was about 8 cm. There is no ostensible connection between these houses and Weimar, but one set was made of plaster and cast in the Bauhaus, where Schwitters probably saw them; cf. Feininger 1965, 57.



Fig. 62. Miscellaneous portraits (1).

From left to right: 1st row: Hannah Höch (l) and Til Brugmann, 1931, Vordemberge-Gildewart.

2nd row: bust of President Hindenburg, the actor Conrad Veidt (1893 –1943), who, as an outspoken opponent of the Nazis, fled Germany in 1933; the mass murderer Fritz Haarmann.

3rd row: Mussolini c. 1931, Captain Dreyer of the Monte Cervantes, Hitler after the 1930 elections.

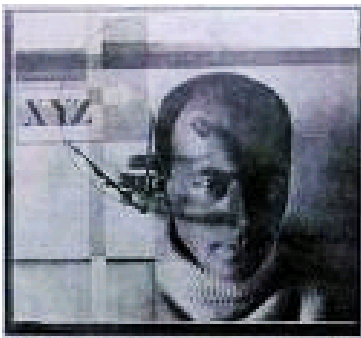
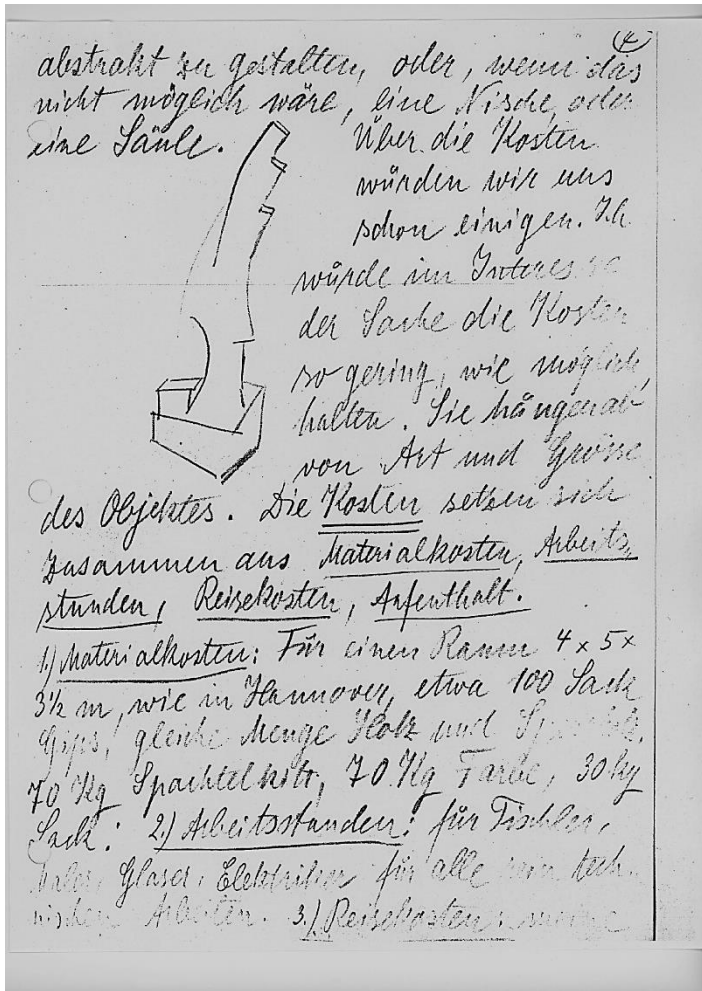


Fig. 63. Miscellaneous portraits (2).

Top row: From left to right: Herwarth Walden, Sigfried Giedion, Theo van Doesburg.

2nd row: Lissitzky, Ella Bergmann-Michel, Moholy-Nagy.

3rd row: Hans Arp, Raoul Hausmann, Naum Gabo.



64a

Fig. 64a. Letter from Schwitters to Alfred Barr, 23.11.36.

MMA. Writing from Amsterdam, Schwitters asks Barr to give him the opportunity to design an abstract interior, or if that is not possible, a niche or a column. Note the similarity of the column to that in Fig. 74.

Fig 64b. Photographs of the Merzbau exhibited in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* in MoMA, 1936,

MMA. According to the exhibition catalogue, seven photos were lent by Ernst Schwitters (cat. nos. 672-8), and two by "Abstraction-Creation and G. Vantongerloo, Paris" (nos. 670-1). On the evidence of the loan card and a letter to Ernst Schwitters of 28.3.39, the Museum received nine photos from Ernst. As the installation photo shows only six, Barr may have made a selection because of space constraints. I am grateful to Adrian Sudhalter, MoMA, for this information.



64b

II THE LATER MERZBAUTEN

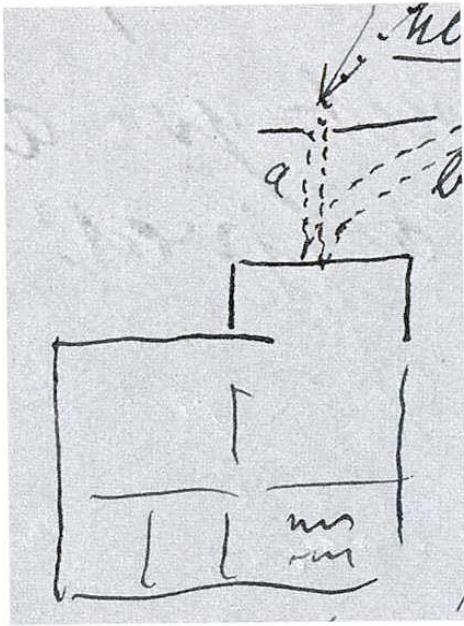


Abb. 1: Kurt Schwitters, Grundriss Haus am Bakken, 1947

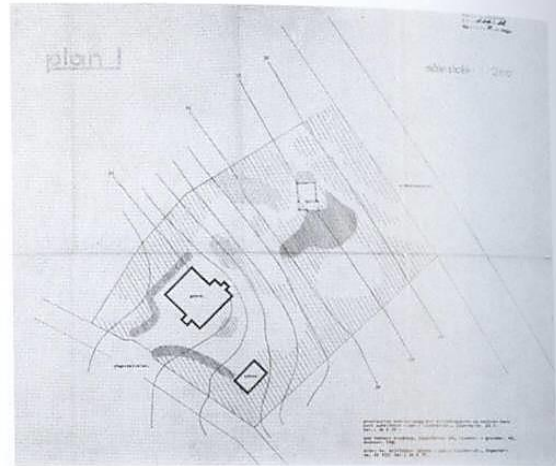


Abb. 2: Ernst Schwitters, Plan I (Lageplan), 1938

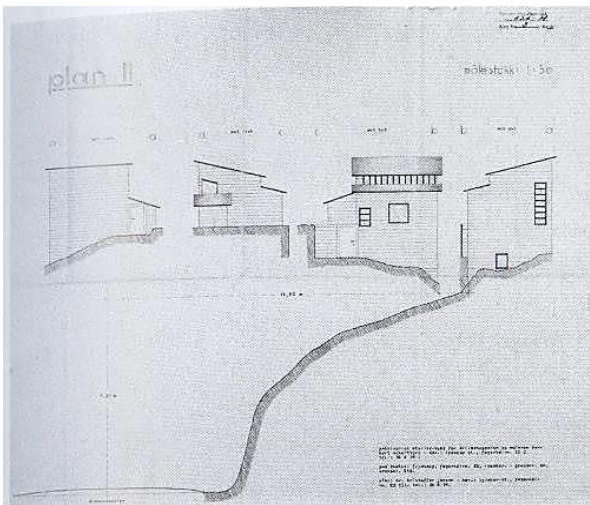


Abb. 3: Ernst Schwitters, Plan II (Außenansichten), 1938

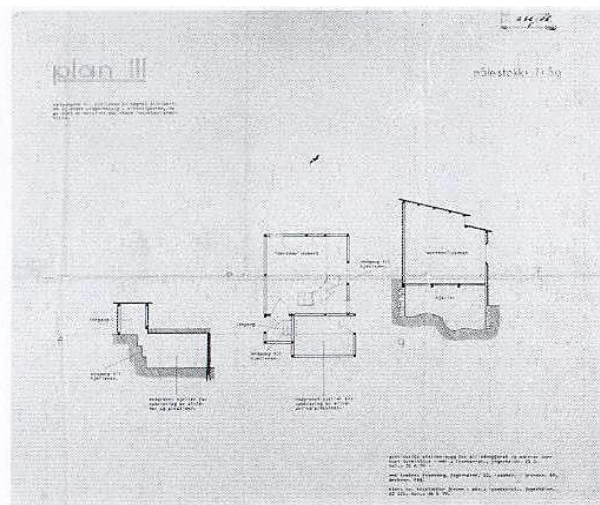


Abb. 4: Ernst Schwitters, Plan III (Grund- und Aufriss), 1938

Fig. 65. Plans of the Lysaker Merzbau (Haus am Bakken), 1938.

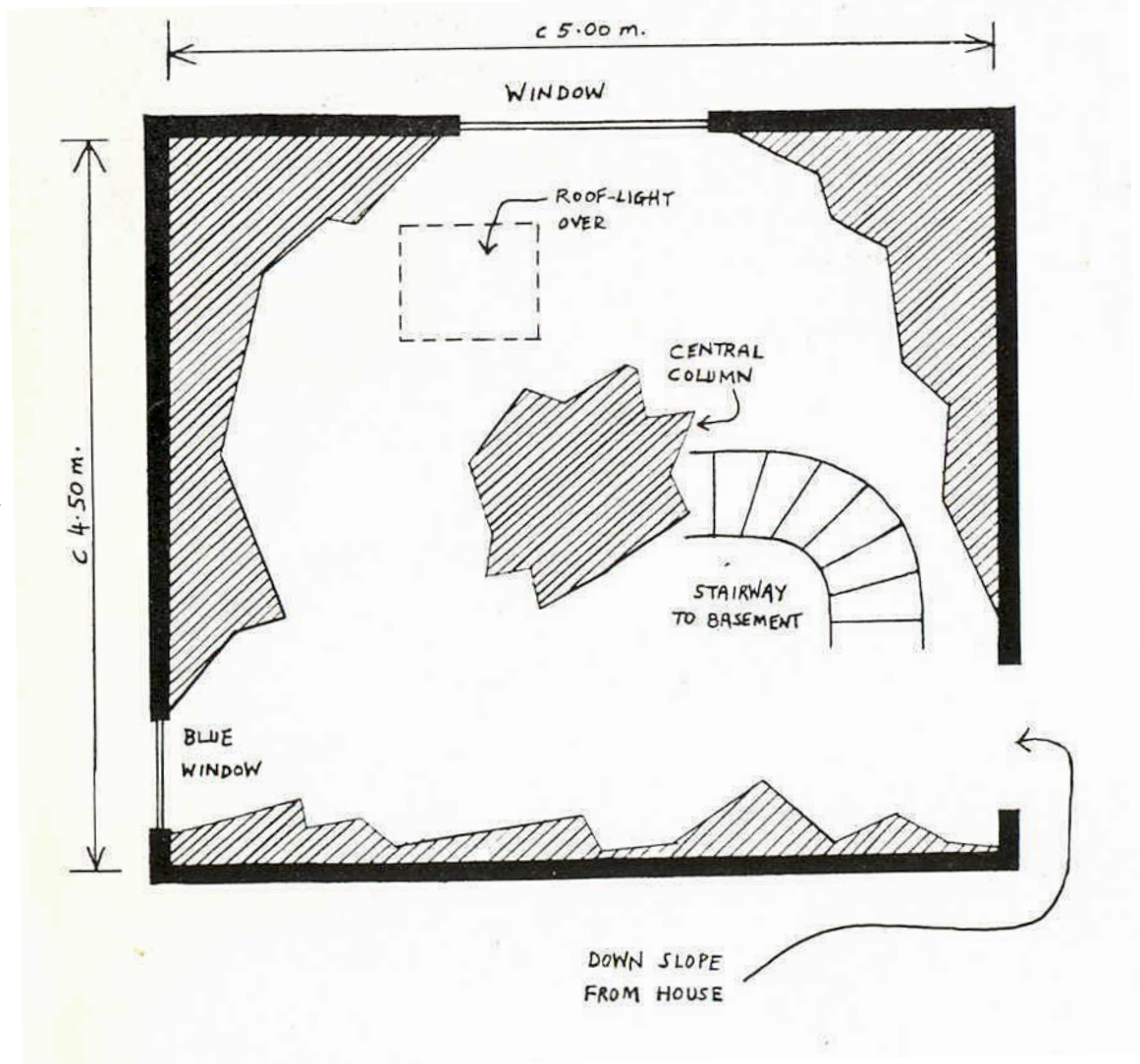
CR 2327 1-4. The sketch top left is by Schwitters and shows the ground plan of the Lysaker Merzbau. The remaining three sketches on tracing paper were prepared for the local Planning Department by Ernst Schwitters in 1938. As a result, Schwitters was granted a provisional building permit.^[1]

The CR gives various dimensions for the Lysaker Merzbau: 700 x 400 x 600 or 350 x 370 x 350 or 500 x 500 x 500 cm.

Schwitters originally planned to build his second Merzbau in a quarry; cf. Letter from Ernst Schwitters, 18.6.1937, KSF.

[1] Letter to Oskar Müller, 24.2.39, Schaub 1998, 33.

66a



66b



Fig. 66. The Lysaker Merzbau.

66a: conjectural plan of the upper room, c. 1940. Elderfield 1985, Fig. 316.

66b: Kurt Schwitters, *Untitled*, (next door house in Lysaker), 1939.

CR 2537, 68.7 x 94.5 cm., oil on wood. This painting of the neighbour's garden in Lysaker gives an impression of the steepness of the slope on which the second Merzbau was erected.

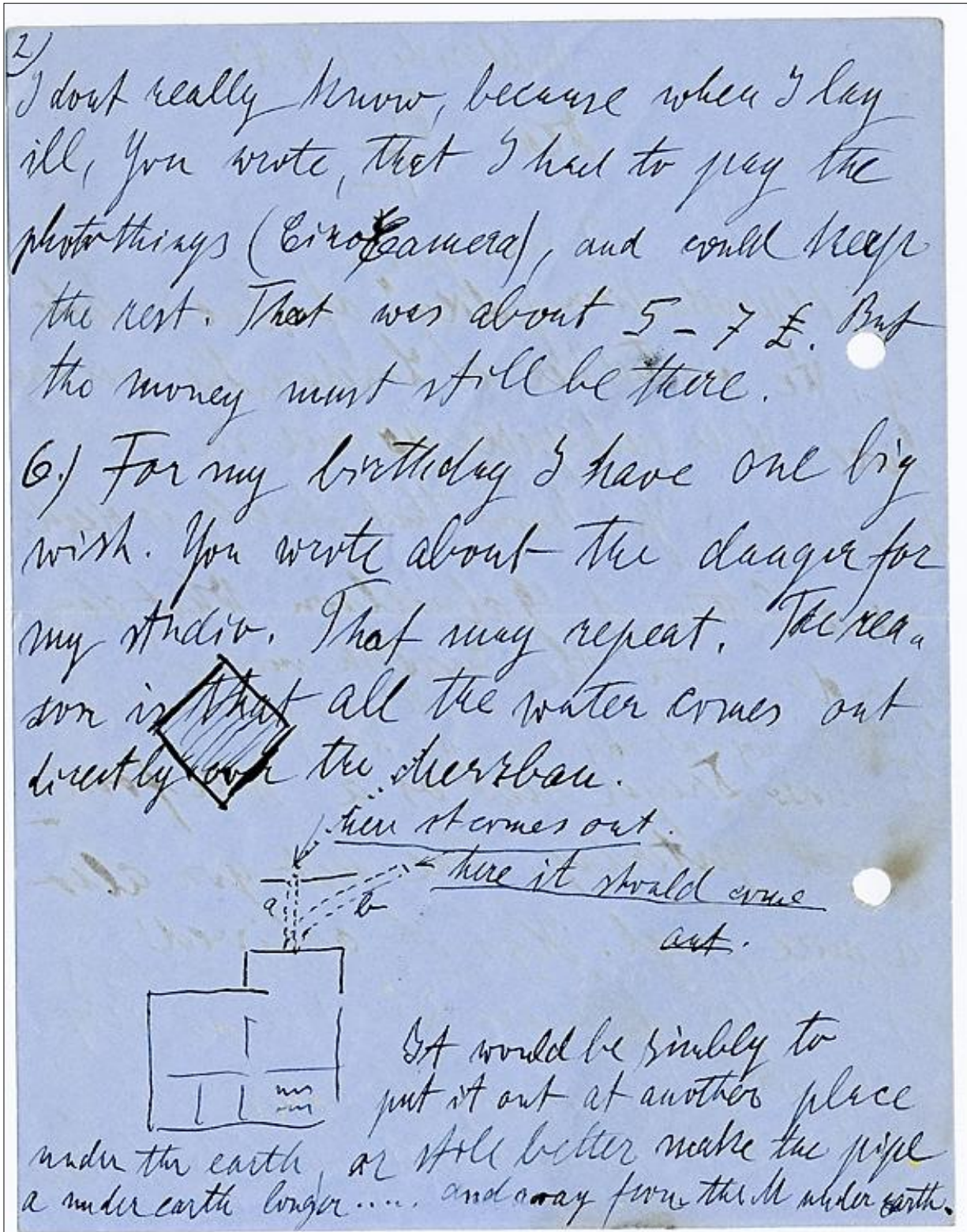


Fig. 67. Kurt Schwitters, sketch of the Lysaker Merzbau, 1947.

*'For my birthday I have one big wish. You wrote about the danger for my studio. That may repeat. The reason is that all the water comes out directly over the Merzbau. It would be simily to put it out at another place under the earth, or still better make the pipe under earth longer [...] and away from the M. under earth.'^[1] Schwitters and his son corresponded in English at this time, refusing where possible to use their native language.

^[1] Letter to Ernst and Eve Schwitters, 1.4.1947, KSF.



68a



68b

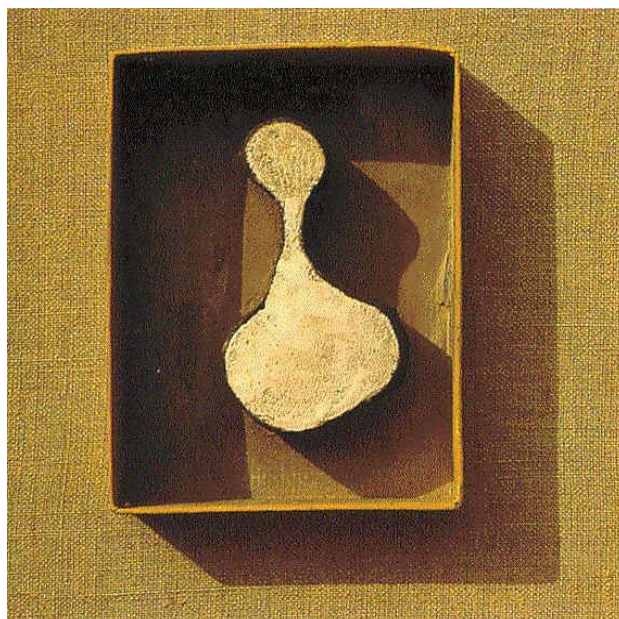
Fig. 68. Kurt Schwitters, two assemblages from the Lysaker Merzbau

68a: *Hölzerne Schlange* [Wooden Snake], 1937. CR 2109, 22.2 x 14.4 cm.

68b: *Merzbild mit Filmspule und Draht* [Merzbild with film spool and wire], 1937/40. CR 2112, 19.8 x 14.8 cm..

Ernst Schwitters stated that these were displayed as separate pictures in the Lysaker Merzbau, but also formed part of the composition [*als loses Bild, aber mit in die Komposition des Merzbaues einbegriffen*].^[1]

[1] Cf. letters from Ernst Schwitters to Werner Schmalenbach, 27.8.64, 31.8.64, KSF.



69a



69b

Fig. 69. Kurt Schwitters, two assemblages from the Lysaker Merzbau.

69a: *Untitled* (Garter picture), 1940. CR 2626, 15.8 x 11.5 cm., with handwritten note verso 'Re(...)ned from the Norwegian Merzbau when it was destroyed by fire'. The fire occurred on 16 December 1951.

69b: *Das kleine Seemansheim*, 1926. CR 1352, 66.1 x 52 cm.

The titles and dates of these assemblages come from Ernst Schwitters. Whether they were just stored in the Merzbau or part of an exhibition is not known.

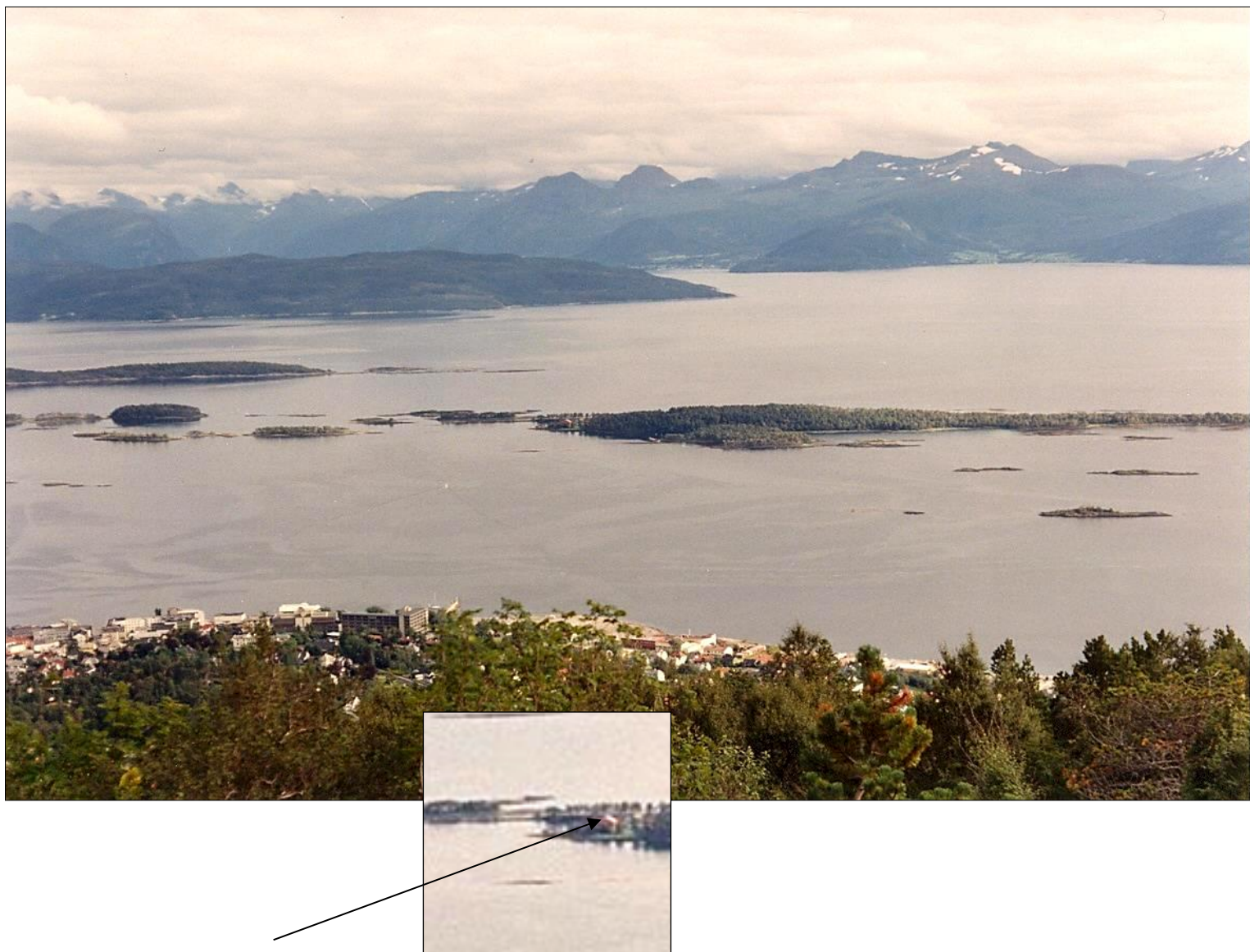


Fig. 70. View of Moldefjord, 1994.

The town of Molde can be seen in the foreground. Hjertøya is the long wooded island right of centre. It is uninhabited and accessible only in summer. The inset below shows the location of the hut, which is near the landing stage and the red-roofed house. Photo: author.

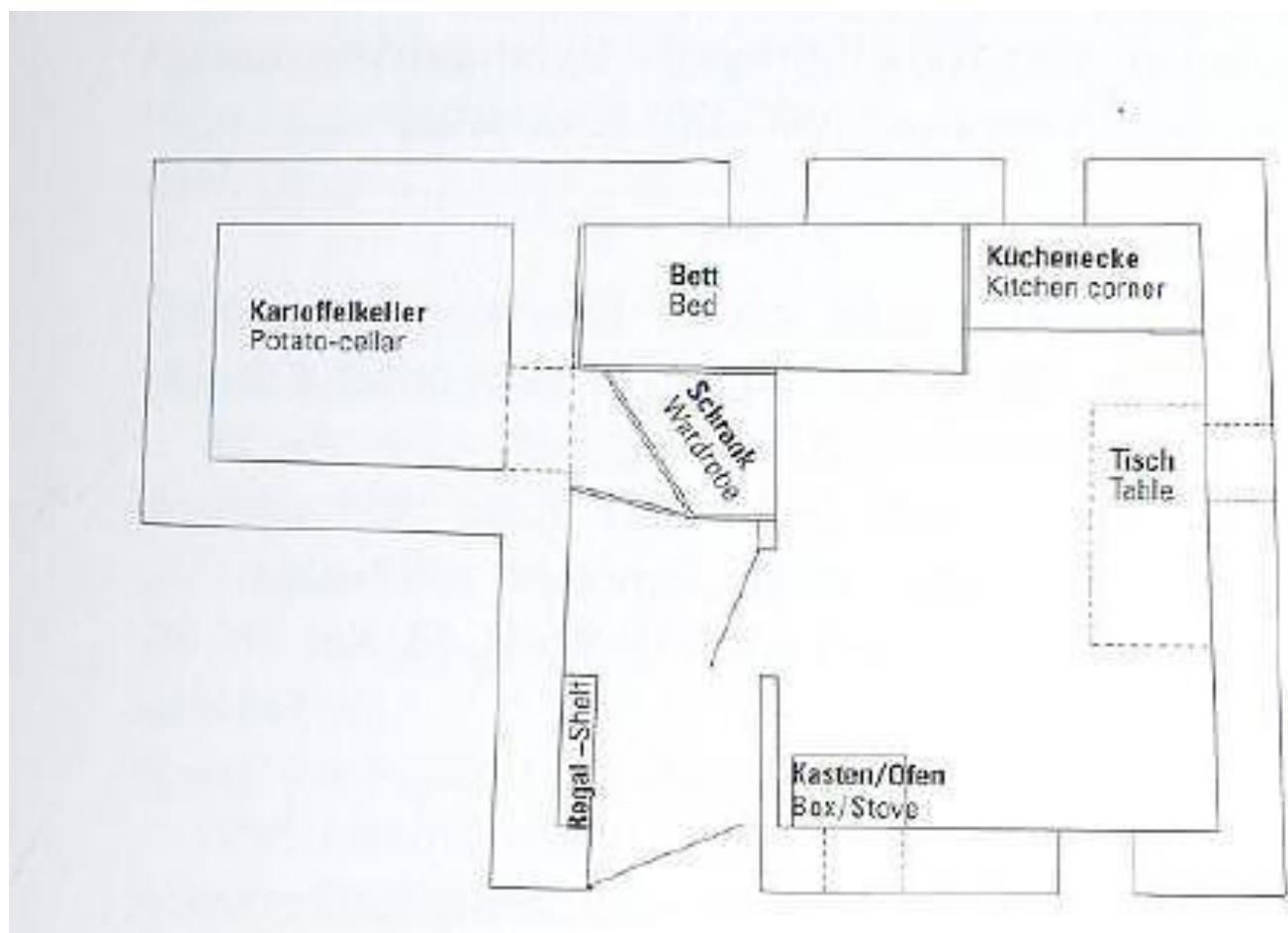


Fig. 71. Ground plan of the hut on Hjertøya.

CR 1864/16. Ground plan of original layout.

The floor area was approx. 2.00 x 3.30 metres. There was a sloping roof, with a maximum height of approx. 3.20 m., bunk beds and a kitchen corner (Fig. 73). The potato store (now ruined) was used by a farmer named Hoel and his wife, at that time the sole residents of the island.

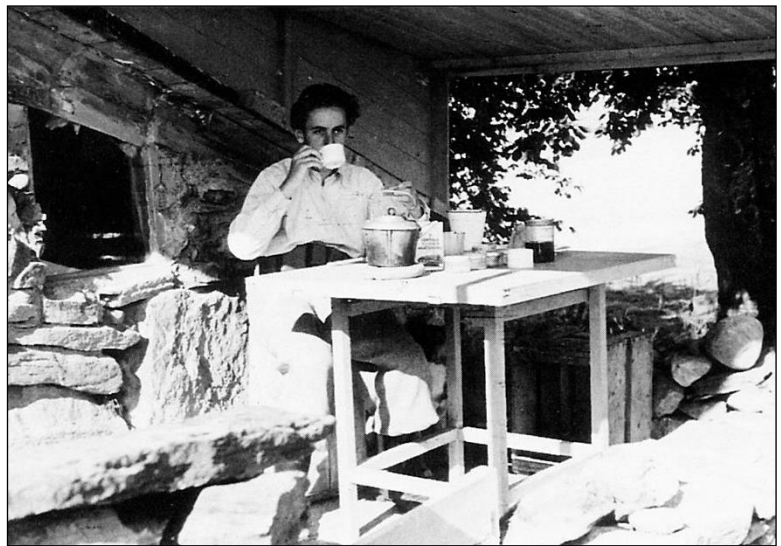
**Fig. 72. Three photos
of the hut on
Hjertøya, 1930s.**

CR 1864/1-2.

(above) With Helma
Schwitters. The potato
store is visible behind.

(centre and below) With
Ernst Schwitters.

Schwitters dates the
addition of the veranda
to 1.6.1936 (LW 3,
103.)



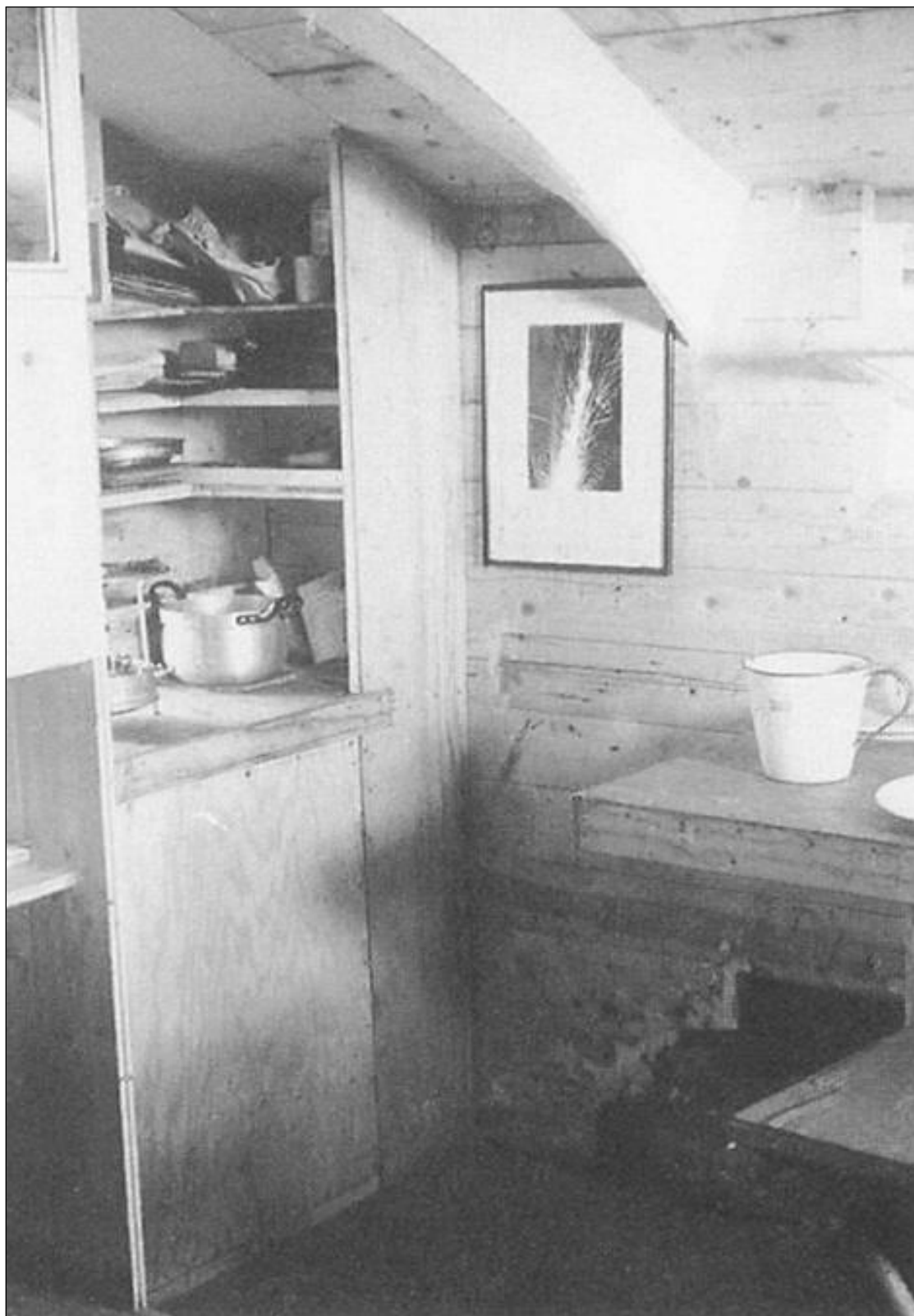


Fig. 73. Hut on Hjertøya, view of the kitchen corner, late 1930s.
CR 1864/3.

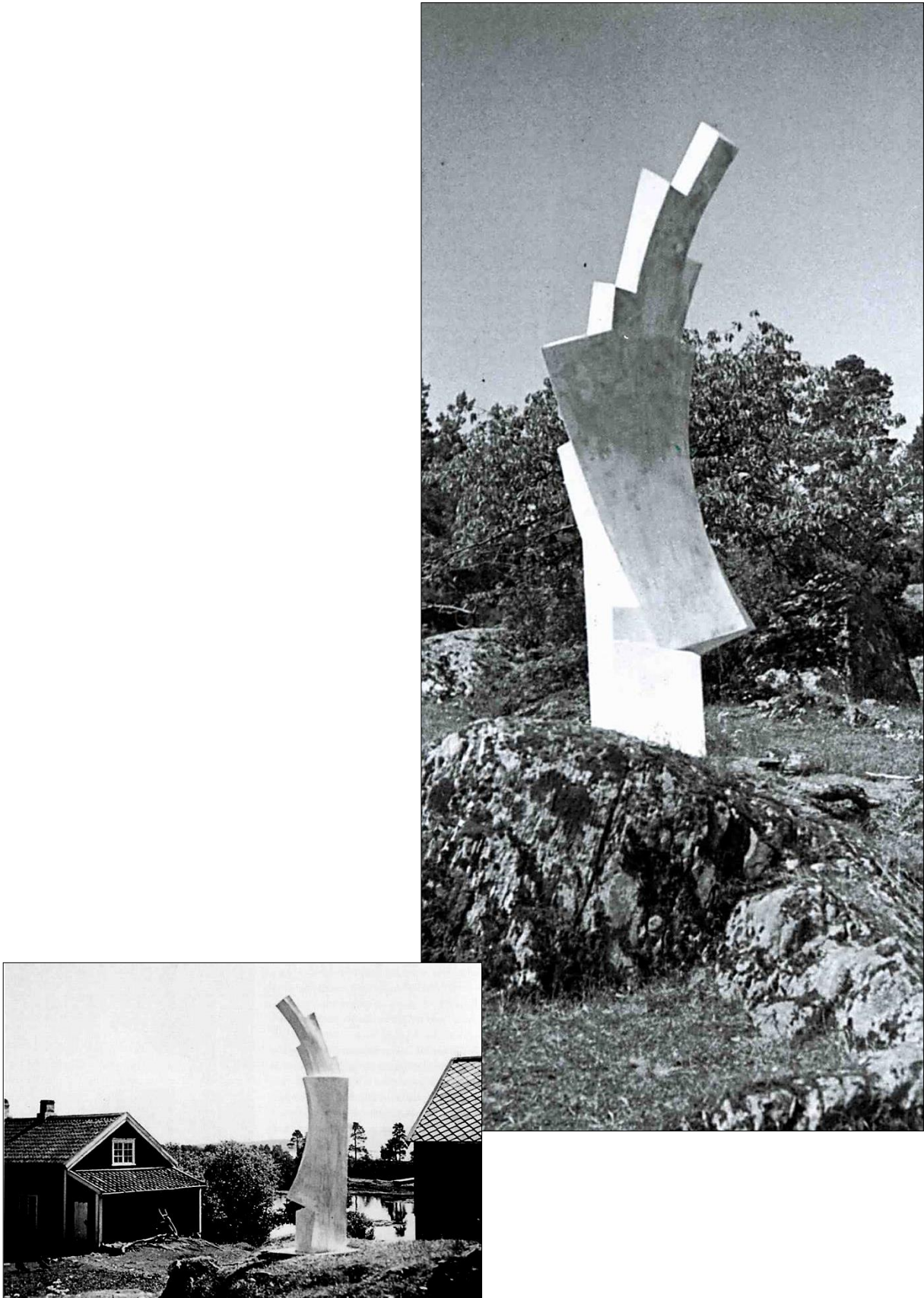


Fig. 74. The Merz column on Hjertøya, c. 1937.

CR 2105, c. 307 x 97 x 60 cm. Part of an old rowing boat covered with plaster.^[1] A reconstruction can be found in place and in the Sprengel Museum, Hannover.

^[1] Cf. letter from Ernst Schwitters to Werner Schmalenbach, 6.9.64, KSF.



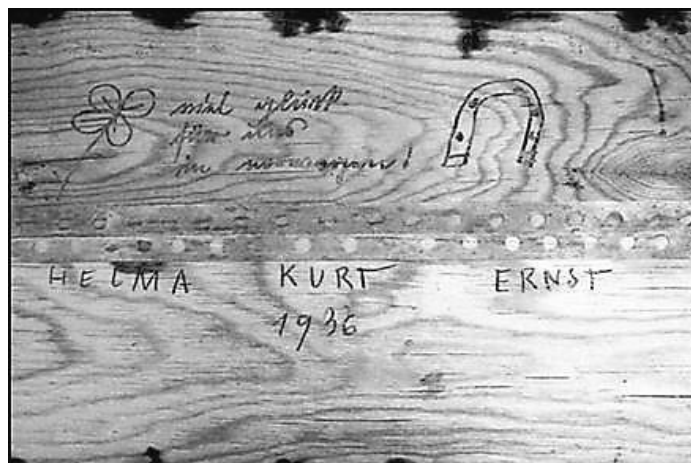
Fig. 75. The interior of the hut on Hjertøya, 1953. CR 1864.

The hut is often regarded as a fourth Merzbau, but at no point did Schwitters ever appeal to anyone to restore or replicate its interior as he did with the Merzbauten in Hannover and Lysaker, though he knew it had been exposed to wind and weather since 1940, and when he wrote of Hjertøya in later years, it was never in the sense of a lost artwork. In a letter of 30.7.1937 (KSF) Kurt asked Ernst to photograph the hut, but only the exterior.

Ernst Schwitters visited Molde in 1963, when much of the hut's interior was still intact and announced that he would photograph it and support its restoration. This did not happen, and from the 1980s the hut was maintained by the Romsdal Museum in Molde.¹

Dietmar Elger documented the state of the hut in 1992, and thenceforth publicized the idea that this was a fourth Merzbau. Subsequently, the Oxford History of Art (1999) cited the hut as 'Schwitters' most intimate Merzbau'.

1. In 1987 Ernst claimed that it was a fourth Merzbau. "Schauplatz der Kriesen", *Der Spiegel* 1986/7, pp. 209-213.



76a



76b

Fig. 76. The hut on Hjertøya, 1994.

76a: inscription in the hut. CR 1864/14.

‘viel glück für uns in norwegen Helma Kurt Ernst 1936’

76b: view of ceiling constructions, 1994. Photo: author.

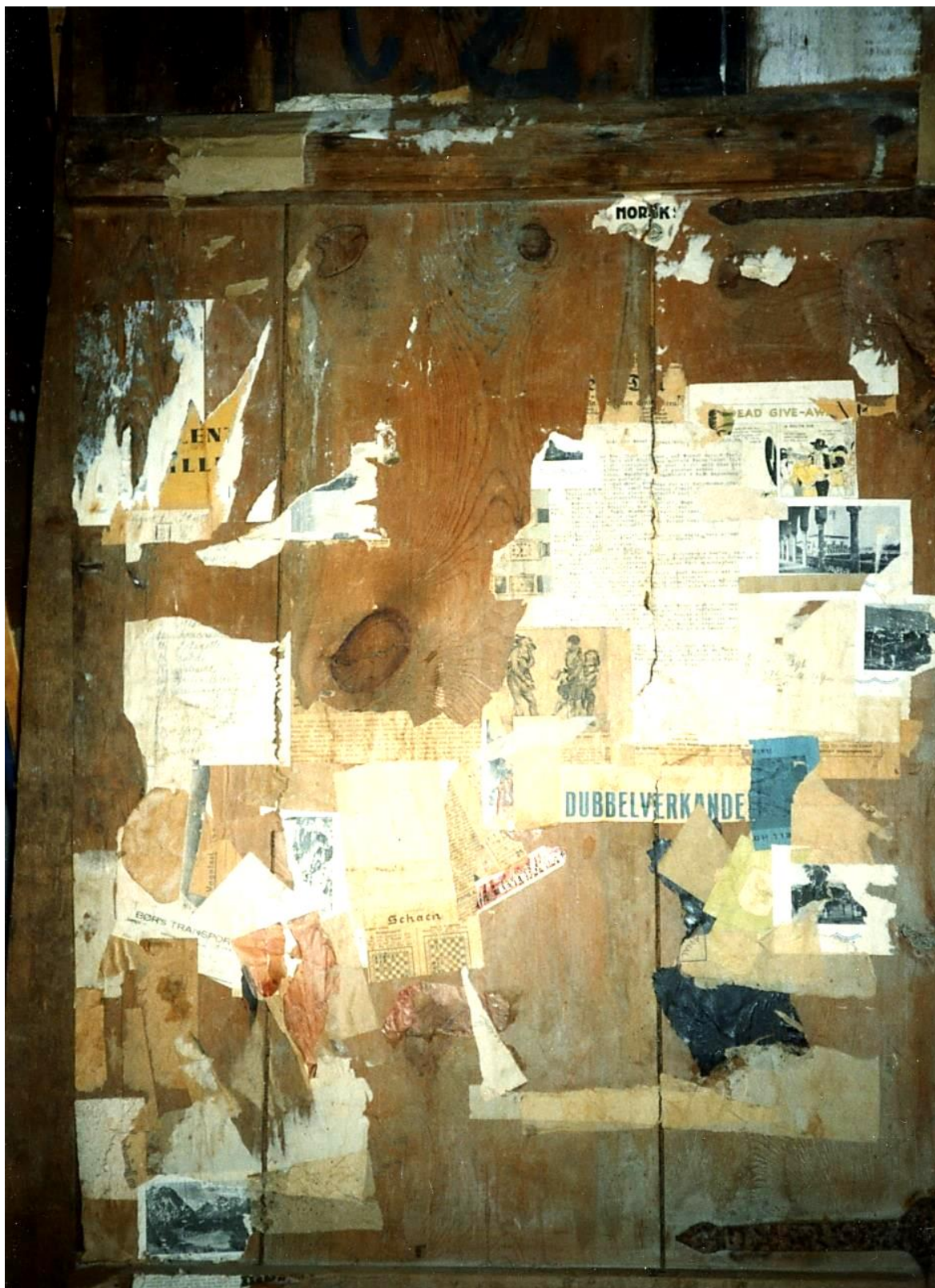


Fig. 77. The hut on Hjertøya, door, 1994.

CR 1864/17, 153.5 x 81.5 cm. After its removal from the hut in 1974, the door was sent to London for sale, but returned on the grounds that it was of insufficient (artistic) interest. It is now preserved in the Molde Kunstforening. Photo: author, 1994.



78a



78b

Fig. 78. The hut on Hjertøya, 1994.

78a: the hut in 1994. Photo: author.

78b: the entrance. Photo courtesy of Peter Bissegger.



Fig. 79. The hut on Hjertøya, detail of collaged surface.

The portrait below is of the warrior queen, Margaret of Anjou (1429 –1482), wife of Henry VI of England. Reproduced in Stadtmüller 1997, 43.



Fig. 80. The hut on Hjertøya c. 1990.
Photos courtesy of Peter Bissegger.



Fig. 81. The hut on Hjertøya c. 1990 (2).
Photo courtesy of Peter Bissegger.



Fig. 82. The hut on Hjertøya c. 1990 (3).
Photo courtesy of Peter Bissegger.

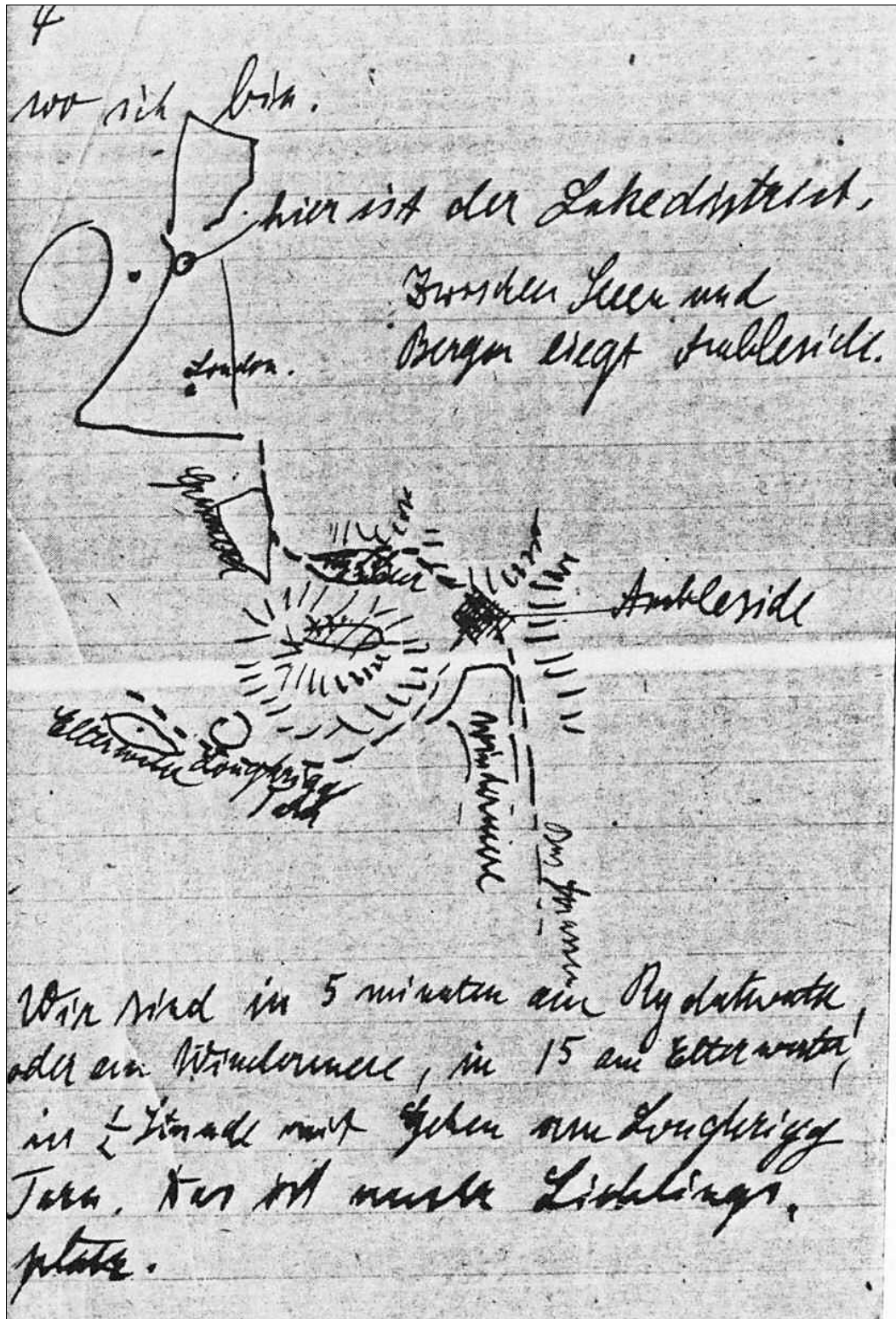


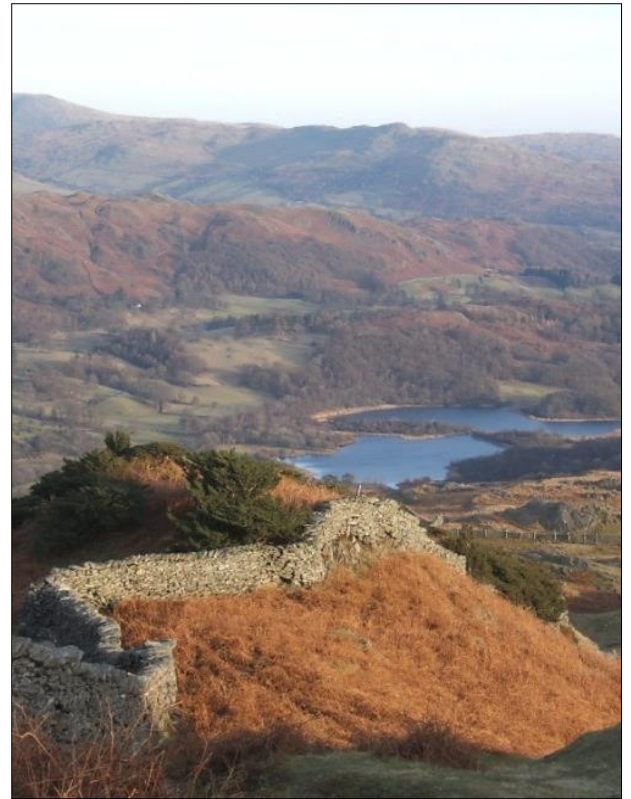
Fig. 83. Kurt Schwitters, plan of Ambleside, 1946.

This map, sent in a letter to Christoph Spengemann of 27.05.46,^[1] shows Elterwater and Schwitters' favourite spot of Loughrigg Tarn. Schwitters writes that 'In 5 minutes we are at Rydal Water or at Windermere, in 15 minutes in Elterwater, [with] half an hour's walk at Loughrigg Tarn. That's my favourite place'. SAH.

[1] Nündel 1974, 197-9.



84a



84b



84c

Fig. 84. Three views of Elterwater.

84a: <http://www.english-lakes.com/elterwater.html>

84b: <http://www.picturesofengland.com/England/Cumbria/Elterwater>

84c: The slate mine above Elterwater village.

Hilde Goldschmidt wrote that Schwitters incorporated found materials from slate mines into the barn's constructions (Hodin 1974, p. 61). He also collected material for the barn from the site of the gunpowder factory at Cylinders (Alban-Davis 1992, p. 7.)



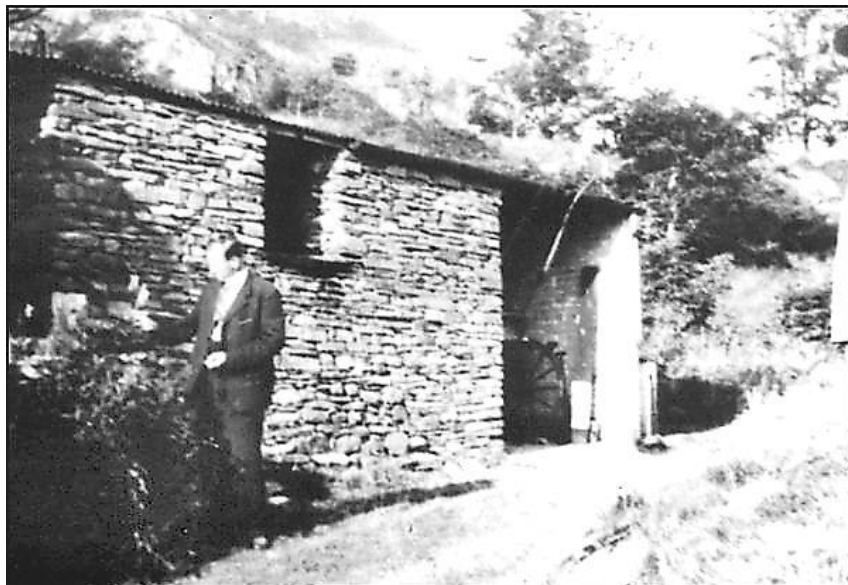
Fig. 85: The Merz Barn

Schwitters at Cylinders in mid-August 1947. Left: Edith Thomas/Wantee and Bill Pierce.

This photo with the conspicuous envelope in his pocket is often assumed to have been taken on his birthday, but he was ill on that day and stayed in bed. (Letter to Ernst Schwitters, 28.6.1947, wrongly dated 1946, KSF.) The letter is more likely to have been notice of his first instalment of 250 dollars towards constructing the Merz barn, or possibly the confirmation (in the same month) from MoMA that the terms of his fellowship had been altered to allow him to start work in England and that his grant had been increased to 3000 dollars. The money had been awarded to him by the Oliver M. Kaufmann Family Foundation.



86a.



86b.



Fig. 86. Two views of the Merz Barn, Elterwater.
86a: Kurt Schwitters in front of the barn, 1947. KSF.
86b: The Merz barn, 1947/8. CR 3659. Photo: Ernst Schwitters.

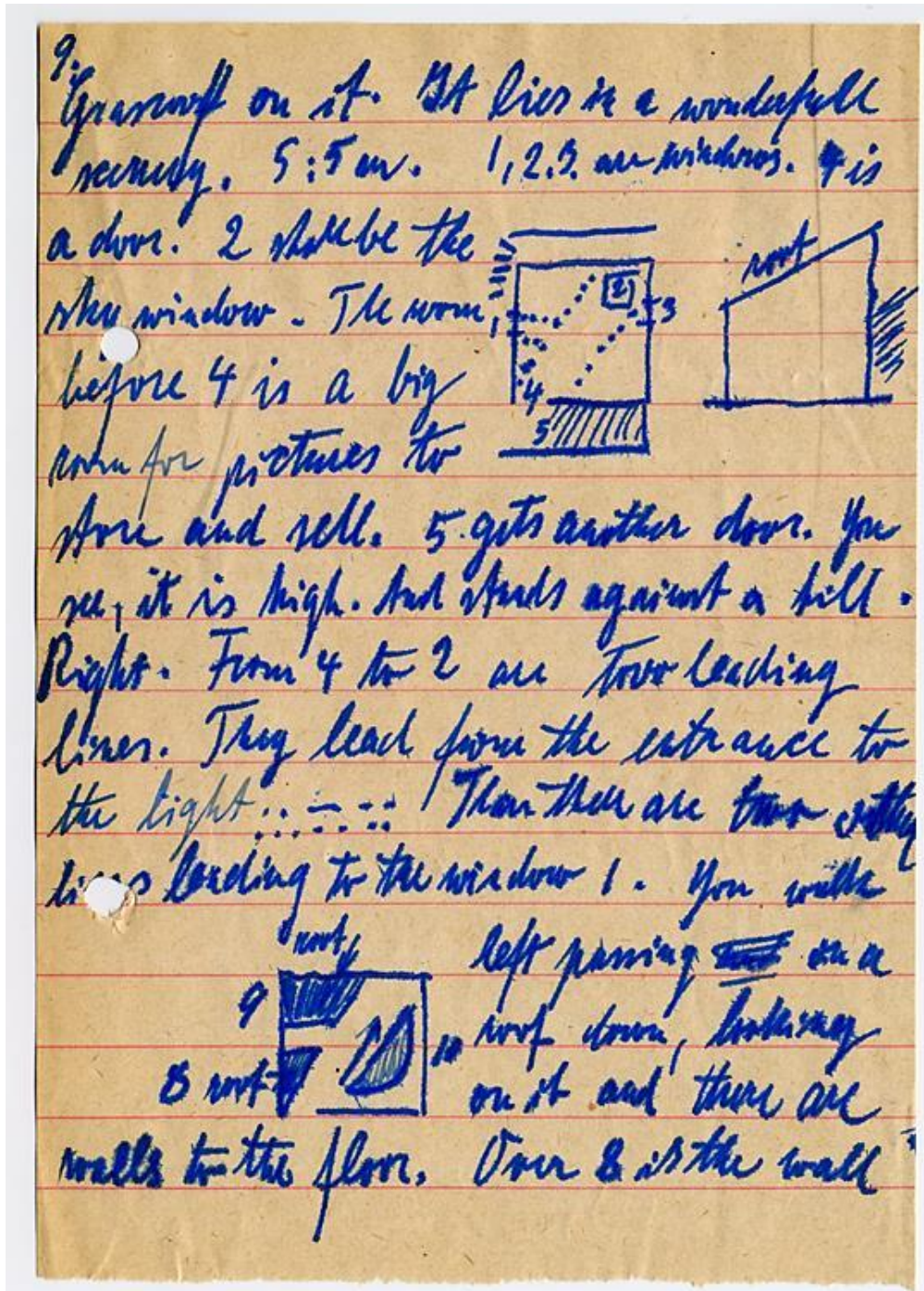


Fig. 87. Letter from Kurt Schwitters to Ernst Schwitters, 28.9.1947 (excerpt).

*But I cannot travel, and started in Elterwater, to do still something. The new Merz Bau is called Merz Barn. It was previously a barn. There comes a Grasroof on it. It lies in a wonderful scenery. 5:5 m. 1, 2, 3. are windows. 4 is a door. 2 shall be the sky window. The room before 4 is a big room for pictures to store and sell. 5 gets another door. You see, it is high. And stands against a hill. Right. From 4 to 2 are two leading lines. They lead from the entrance to the light. Then there are two other lines leading to the window 1. You walk left passing on a roof down, looking on it and there are walls to the floor. Over 8 is the wall to be decorated. 10 is also a roof, and there are walls to the ceiling. You can walk under this roof. I start with the wall behind 10, it is very much already decorated. Wantee and Mr Pierce help me [...] And when I have finished in 2 or 3 years the barn, I want to finish also the Merzbau II in Lysaker. KSF.

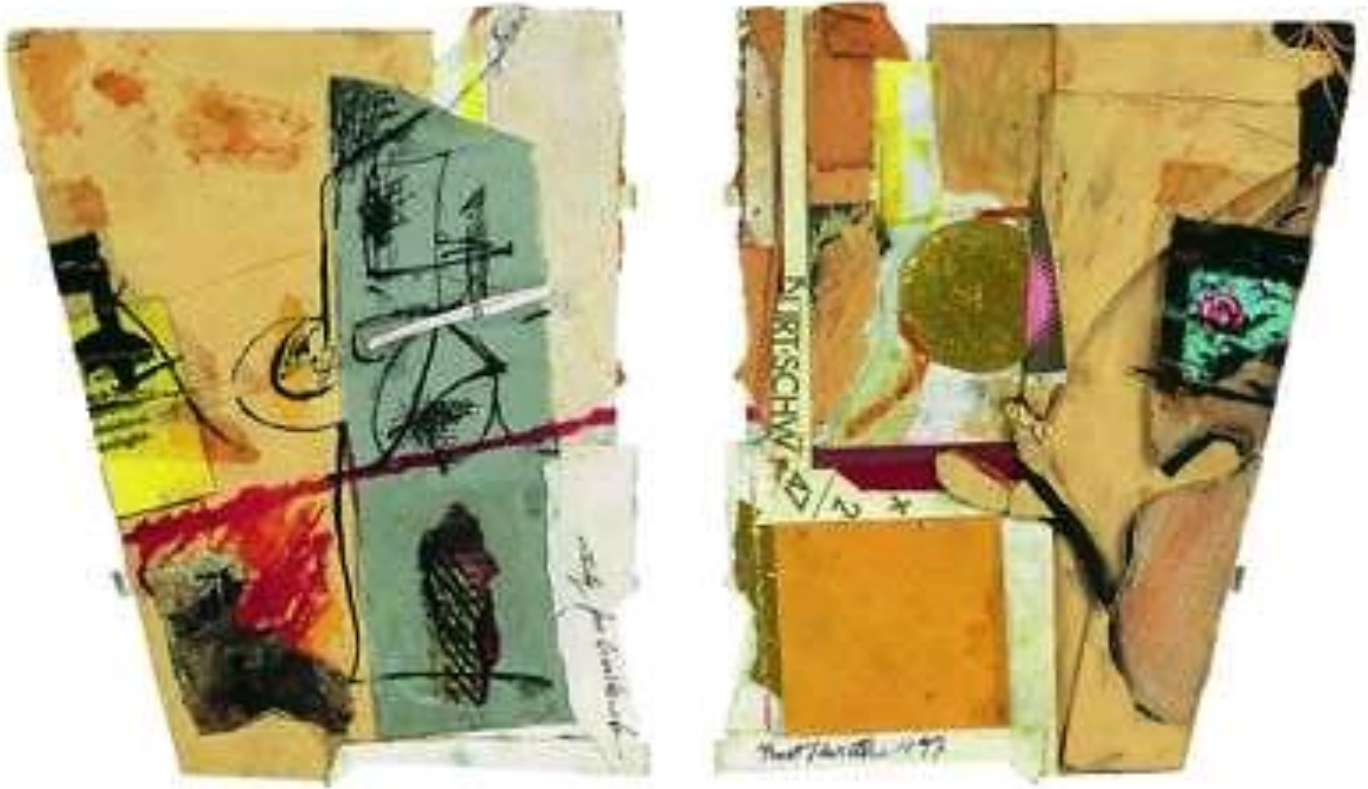
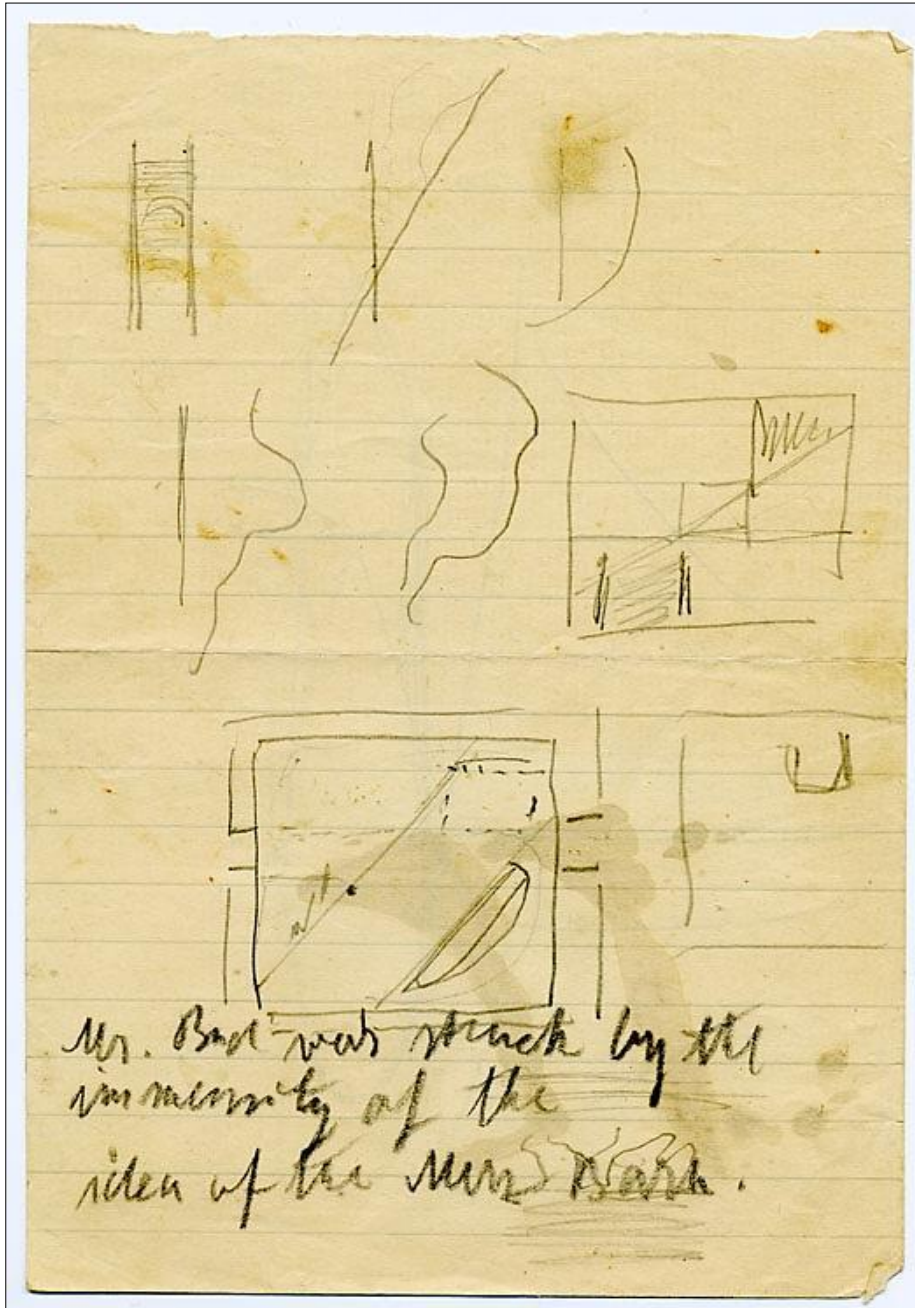
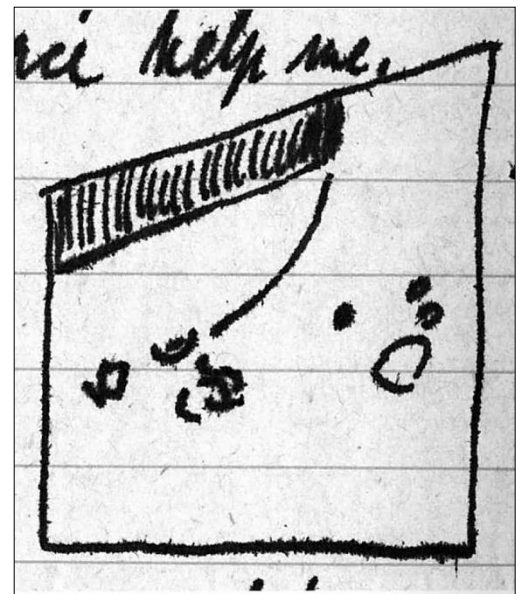


Fig. 88. Kurt Schwitters, *Study for Ambleside*, 1947.

CR 3521/3522. Collage, 1947, 19.5 x 15 /11.5 cm. This double-sided collage apparently contains scraps of sketches with designs for the interior of the Merz Barn. KSF.



89 a.



89 b.

Fig. 89. The Merz Barn, Elterwater, sketches.

89a: Kurt Schwitters, undated note. 'Mr B? was struck by the immensity of the idea of the Merz Barn,' with sketch of the Merz barn interior, (1947), KSF.

89b: Kurt Schwitters, sketch of the interior wall. KSF.[\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) From a letter to Ernst Schwitters, 28.9.1947, Nündel 1974, 287-8.

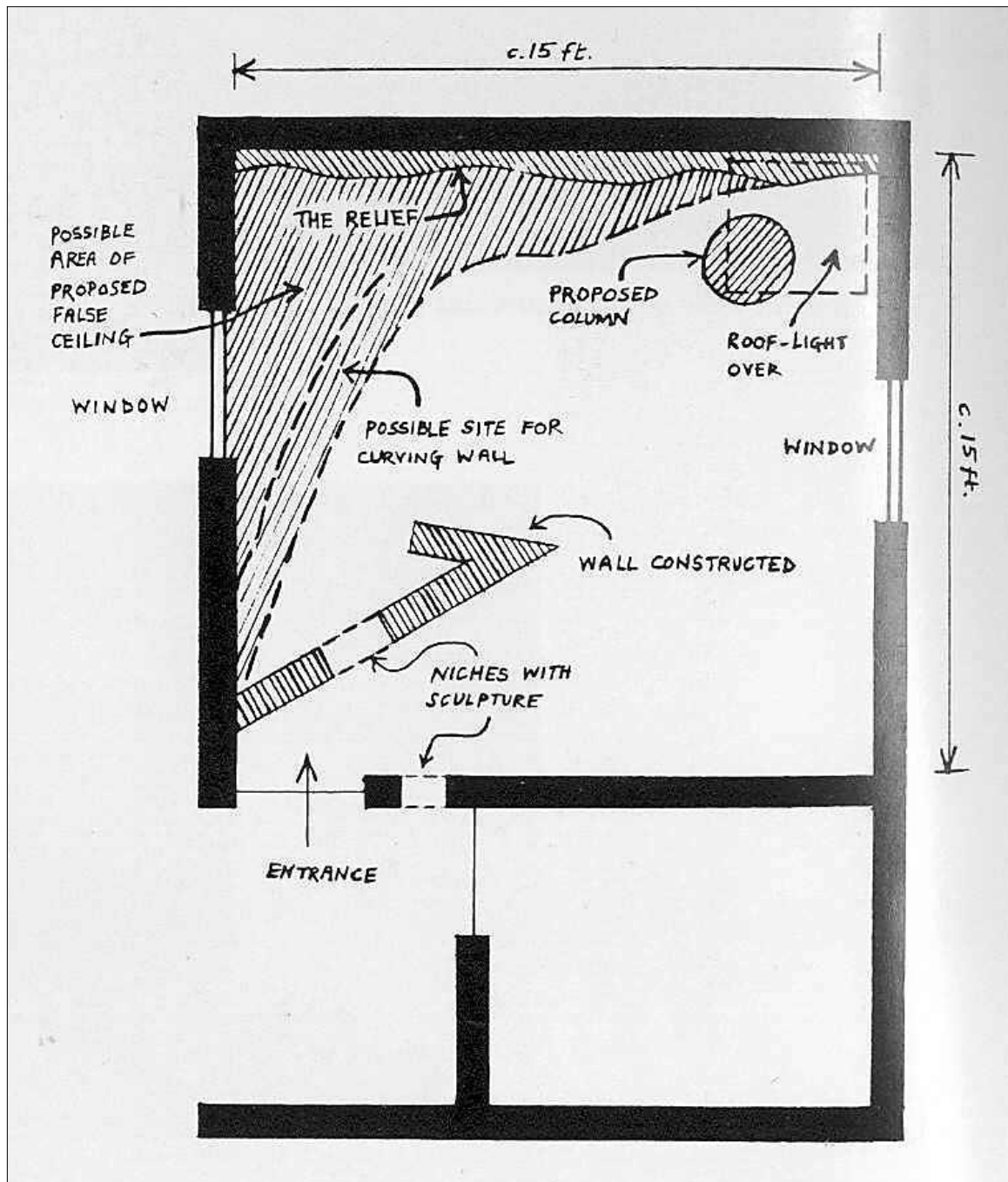
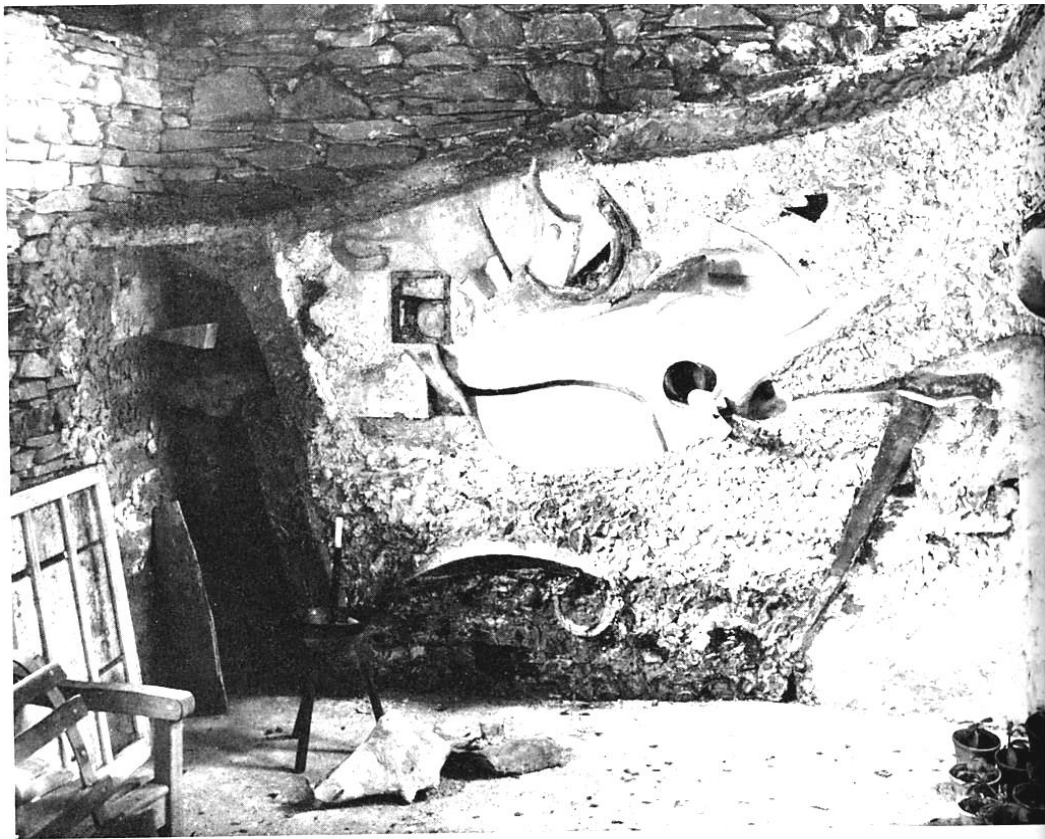


Fig. 90. The Merz Barn, Elterwater, plan.

John Elderfield's conjectural plan of the Merz barn. The smaller room was planned as a picture gallery. Elderfield 1969, reproduced in Elderfield 1985, Fig. 317.



91a



91b

Fig. 91. The Merz Barn, Elterwater, interior, 1947 (1).

91a: interior showing paintings and materials and additions by Harry Pierce.

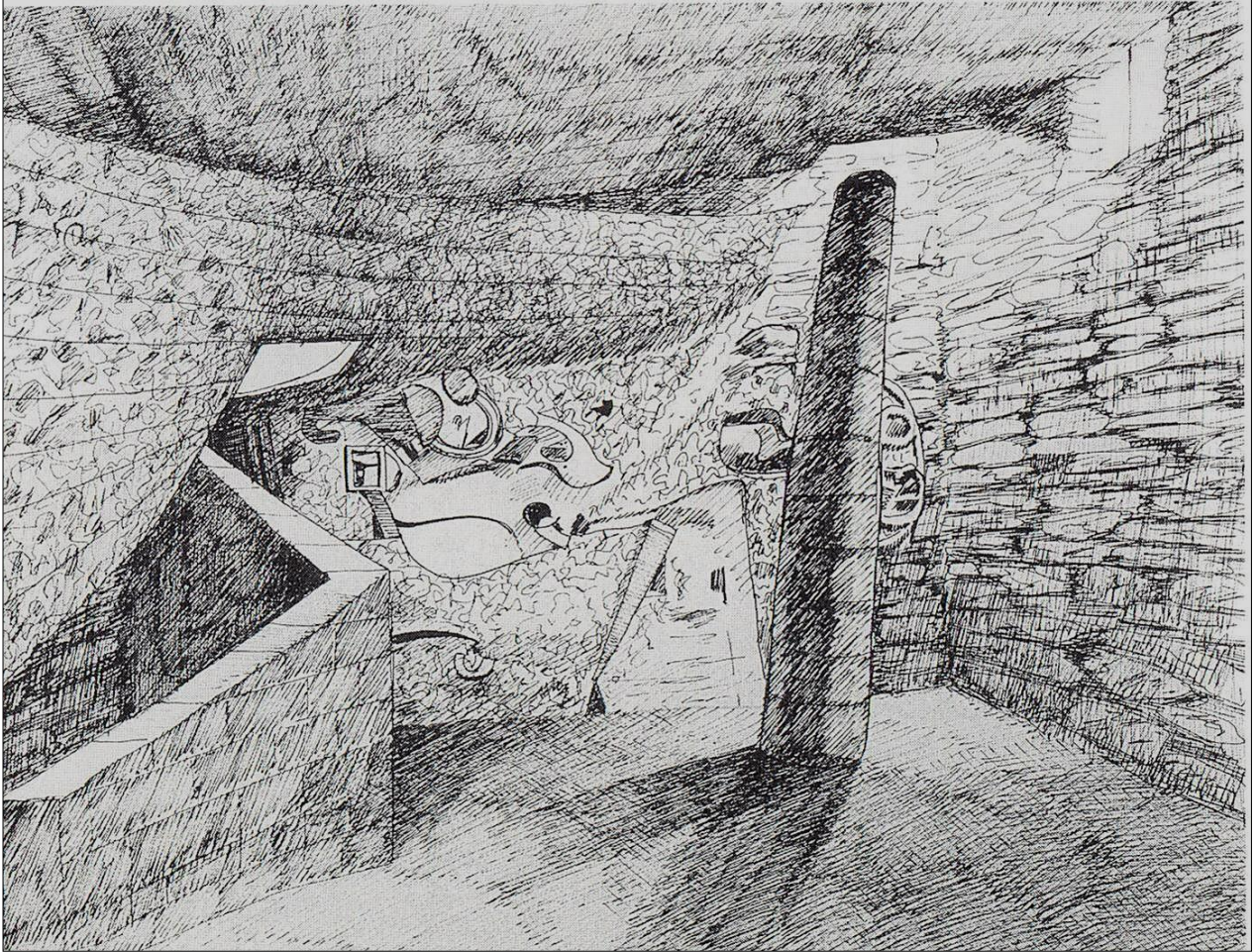
91b: interior showing the candlestick Schwitters used for lighting. Reproduced in Wadley 1981, 42.



Fig. 92. The Merz Barn, Elterwater, interior, 1947 (2). CR 3659/11.



Fig. 93. The Merz barn, Elterwater, interior, 1947 (3). CR 3659/12.



94a



94b

Fig. 94. The Merz Barn, Elterwater (4)

94a: Fred Brookes's impression of the projected plans for the barn. Reproduced in Paris 1994, 302.

94b: work in progress, early autumn 1947. Reproduced in Wadley 1981, 55.

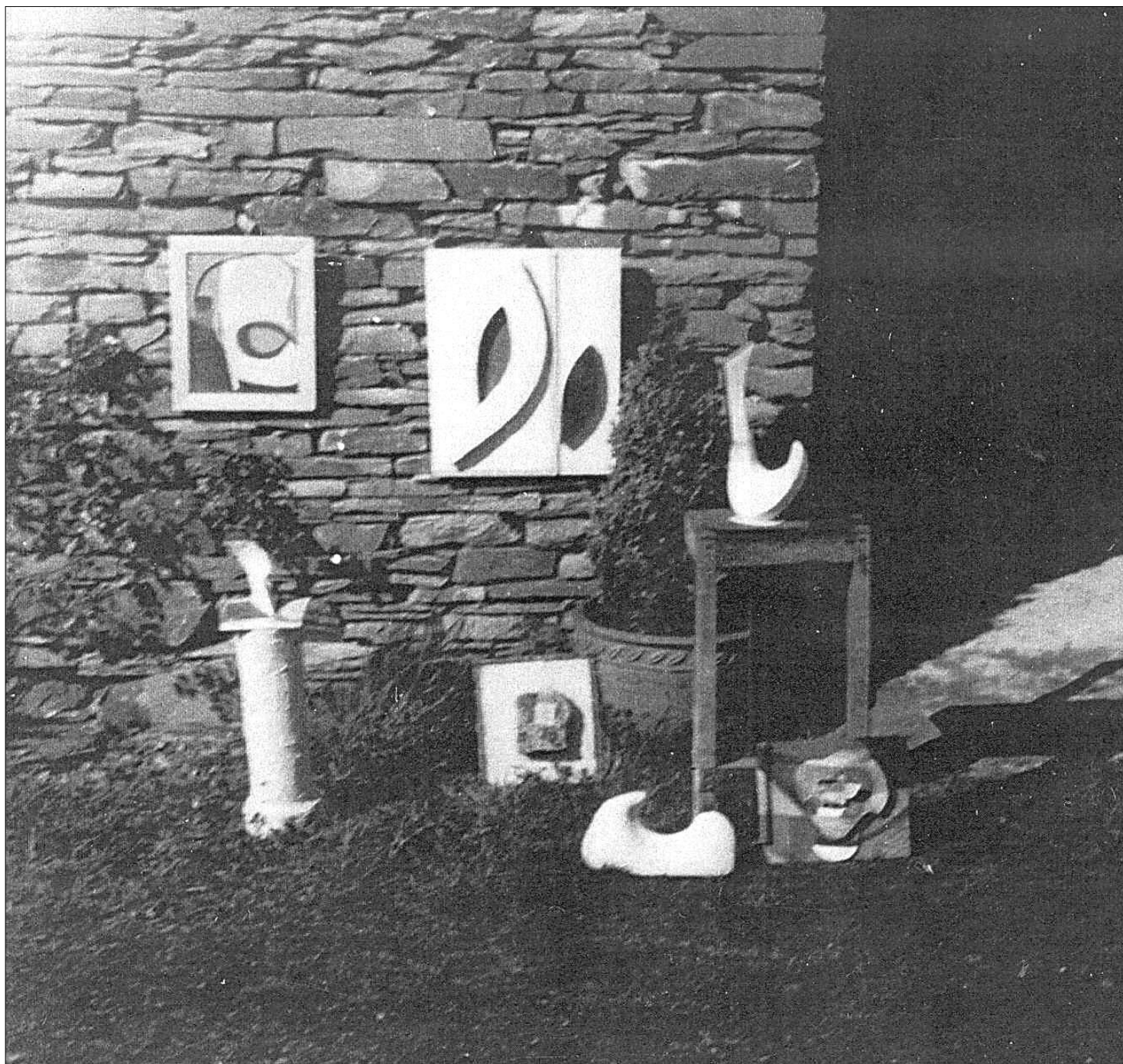


Fig. 95. The Merz Barn, Elterwater, 1948.

Pictures and sculptures from the interior of the Merzbau, summer 1948.

The 'Chicken and Egg' sculpture stands on the table. Photo courtesy of Mrs Hannah Mellor, Beetham. For other sculptures from the barn, see CR 3660/3661.



96a



96b

Fig. 96. Doorways, Elterwater and Hjertøya.

96a: the doorway, Merz barn, Elterwater. http://fp.armitt.plus.com/merz_lives_on_2.htm
Schwitters' final construction in Hannover also took the shape of a horseshoe (Schwitters 1938a, 366).

96b: entrance to the hut on Hjertøya..(Photo: author)

The broken wooden object next to the horseshoe is a piece of ship's tackle known in Norway as a 'virgin'. Photo: author. For the long story of the two horseshoes, see Schwitters 1936.



366a



366b

Fig. 97. The Merz barn, Elterwater, 2004.

97a: Merz barn, exterior. Pierce's box office can be seen on the far right.

97b: Merz barn, the skylight.

Both from http://fp.armitt.plus.com/merz_lives_on.htm

The plastering is not, as is often assumed, Schwitters' work, but was added by Pierce after Schwitters' death in an attempt to carry out his stated intentions. Edith Thomas/Wantee later wrote: 'Mr Pierce tried his best and worked on the right hand side of the wall. Brave man.' KSA 8, 149.



Fig. 98. The Merz barn wall, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle.

Above: CR 3659/1

Below: section of the wall, top right

For damage to the wall during removal, see Orchard/Schulz 2006, 669.

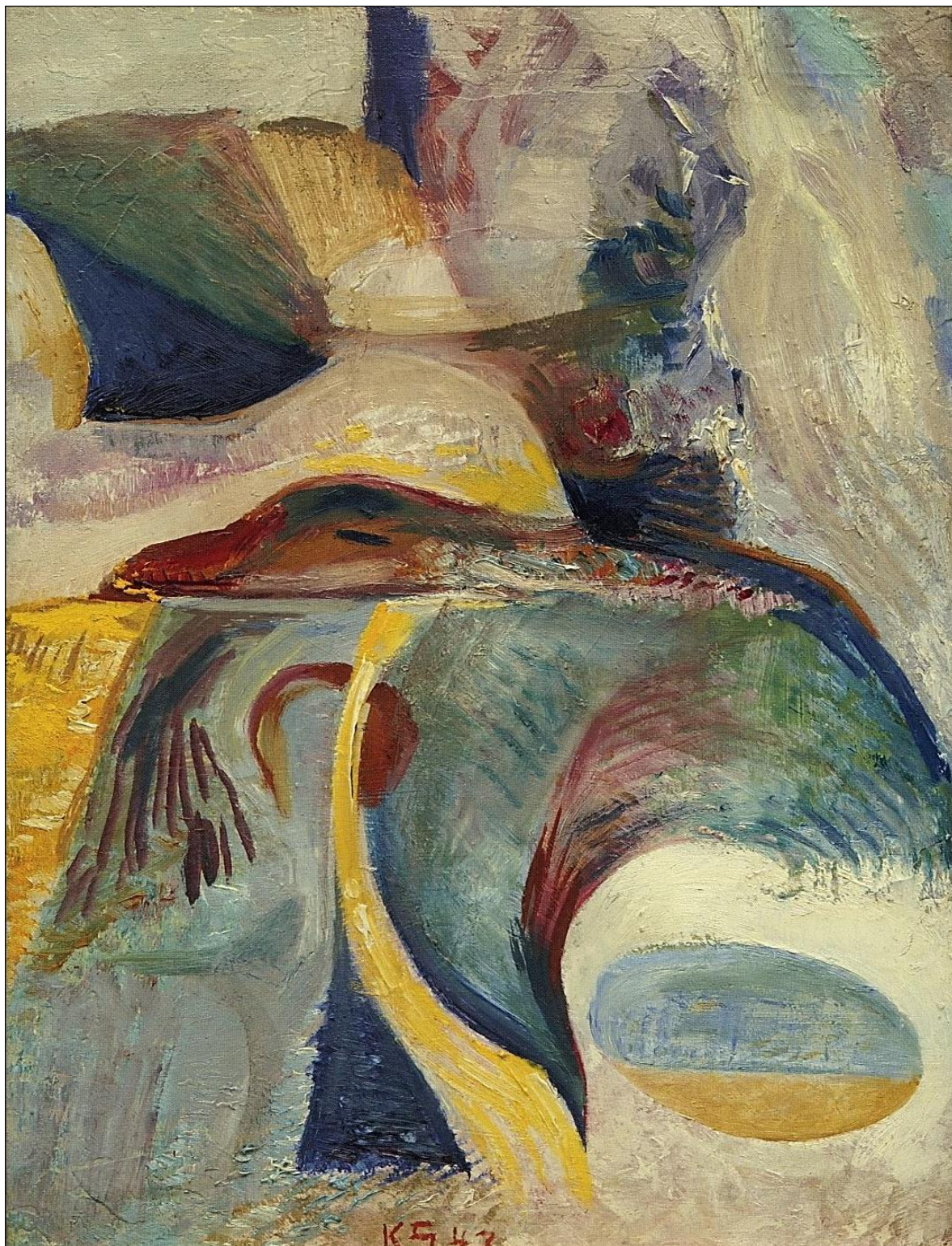


Fig. 99. Kurt Schwitters, Untitled, 1947.
(Abstract Picture with Blue and Yellow Egg Shape)
CR 3410, oil on canvas, 61.2 x 45.4 cm. KSF, Hannover.



Fig. 100. Kurt Schwitters, Portrait of Harry Pierce, 1947.
CR 3431, oil on card, 80 x 62 cm, Armitt Library and Museum, Ambleside.

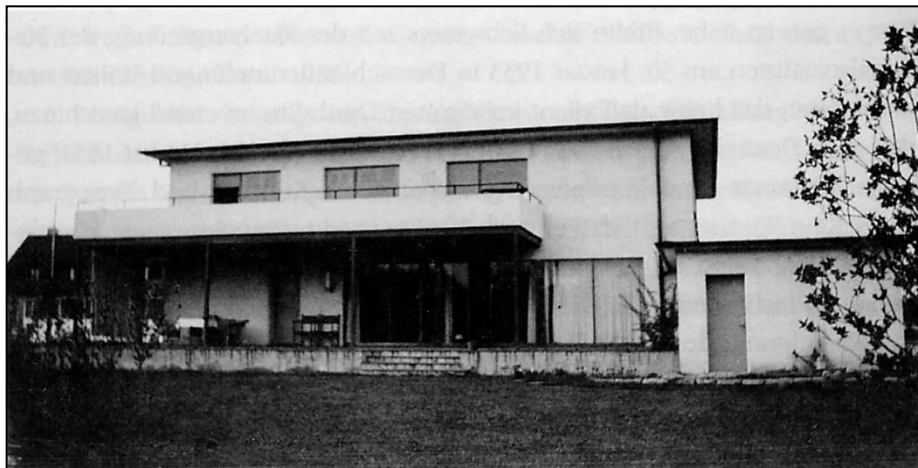


Fig. 101 Merz column, Basle 1936.

CR 2002, 223.5 cm. high. Most of Schwitters' sculptural work was destroyed in the Merzbau. This column was created in Basle while Schwitters was staying with Jan and Edith Tschichold in March 1936. His hope of building a Merzbau in their garden came to nothing.



102a



102b

Fig. 102. Sites in The Netherlands and Switzerland

102a: Villa Park Kijkduin, NL, 1923.

The house of Lajos d'Ebneth was second from the right, since demolished. In 1926, a Merz column called 'Sailor's Home' was erected by Schwitters in the garden during a month's stay with d'Ebneth. It consisted mainly of jetsam he collected on the beach 200 yards away, and grew to a height of over 2.5 metres. Reproduced in Ex 2002, 17. For more on Schwitters' stay in Kijkduin, see Ex 2002, 34-44.

102 b: The house of the Müller-Widmanns, Fringelistrasse, Basel, 1934. Reproduced in Schaub 1998, 80.

Fig. 103. Douglas internment camp, Isle of Man, 1940.

‘On the walls of [Schwitters’] attic room hung his collages, made of cigarette packets, seaweed, shells, pieces of cork, string, glass, wire and nails. A few statues of porridge stood about [...] On the floor were [...] some large pieces of wood, mostly table and chair legs stolen from our boarding houses, which he used for the construction of a grotto round a small window.’

Uhlman 1960, 235.

Below: the Hutchinson Camp art exhibition, 1940.

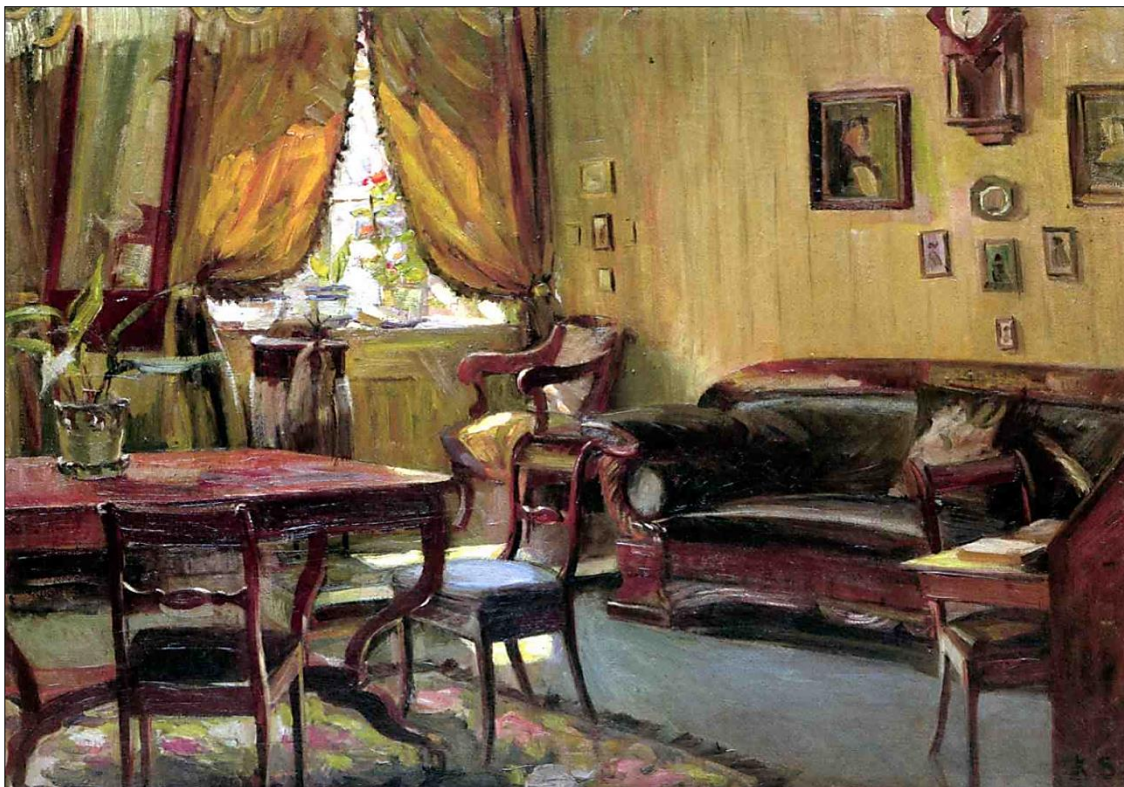
Illustrations from Cresswell 1994, 48-9.



III MISCELLANEOUS ILLUSTRATIONS



104a



104b

Fig 104. The Dresden Academy.

104a: the staff of the Royal Academy of Art in Dresden, early 20th century, reproduced in Dresden 1990, 609. In the 1960s, the academy officially disposed of its collection of hundreds of plaster casts of classical sculptures and reliefs.

104b: Kurt Schwitters, *Untitled* (interior), CR 17, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 86.5 cm. One of Schwitters' student paintings.



105a



105b

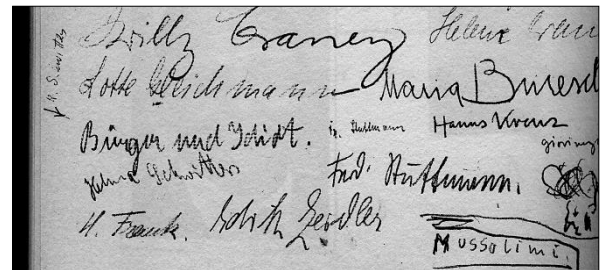
Fig. 105. Schwitters as burgher.

105a: Ernst Körting, Portrait of Kurt Schwitters, 1914, 74 x 94 cm. Marlborough International Fine Art.

105b: portrait of Kurt and Helma Schwitters at home, c. 1918/19, reproduced in Orchard/Schulz 2000, 531.



105c



105d

105c: Kurt Schwitters, *Strickende Alte*, [old woman knitting], 1915. CR 120, oil on board, 110x100 cm. One of Schwitters' typical early genre paintings.

105d: 'Bürger und Idiot' [burgher and idiot]. Schwitters' signature in the Steinitz guest book, 19.1.25. Reproduced in Steinitz 1977, unpaginated.

Fig 106. Two works by Johannes Baader, 1920.

106a: Johannes Baader, *Das grosse Plasto-Dio-Dada-Drama 'Deutschlands Grösse und Untergang'* [The Great Plastic Dio-Dada Drama 'Germany's Greatness and Downfall'], exhibited at the First Dada Fair of 1920. Reproduced in Elderfield 1985, Fig. 164.



106 b: Johannes Baader, *Der Verfasser des Buches Vierzehn Briefe Christi in seinem Heim* [The Author of the Book "Fourteen Letters of Christ" in His Home] (1920). Cut-and-pasted gelatin silver prints, cut-and-pasted printed paper, and ink on book page mounted on paper, 21.6 x 14.6 cm. Baader presents a photograph of a domestic space in which various Dada ephemera hang on the wall upper left. This work is, in fact, a self-portrait of Baader in his persona as the 'Oberdada'. The figure cut out of the upper photograph has been identified as Baader himself, as his reflection is visible in the mirror at the right edge of the cutout.

http://moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A262&page_number=1&template_id=1&sort_order=1





107a



107b

Fig. 107. George Grosz and John Heartfield, *Der wildgewordene Spiesser*, 1920.

107a: *Der wildgewordene Spiesser Heartfield (Elektro-mechanische Tatlin-Plastik)*

[The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild (Electro-Mechanical Tatlin Sculpture)], 1988 (reconstruction of 1920 original), 86 5/8 x 17 11/16 x 17 11/16 in.

Berlinische Galerie—Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur.

107b: *Der wildgewordene Spiesser Heartfield*, photographed in its original context at the 1920 Dada Fair. <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/da/pages/040a.htm>

DIE WOCHE

NUMMER 22

BERLIN, DEN 4. JUNI 1921.

23. JAHRGANG



„Gretchens Schande“, farbiges Aquarell eines Offiziers, der an Paralyse (Gehirnerweichung) leidet und in gesunden Tagen nur etwas zeichnete.

Aus der Psychiatrischen Klinik der Universität Hamburg.

Kunst und Wahnsinn

Von Professor Dr. phil. et med. W. Weygandt, Psychiatrische Universitätsklinik, Hamburg.

Wohl manche Nervenärzte wurden schon, gleich mir, von Beishauern extremer moderner Kunst um Rat in ihrer Bestürzung angegangen. Zur Vermeidung mit den je nach Art und Krankheit wie auch nach Vorbildung ungemein mannigfach, doch oftmals selbst diagnostisch verwertbar. Beainnende Paralyse (Gehirnerweichung) läßt

Fig. 108. 'Kunst und Wahnsinn' [Art and Insanity], 1921.

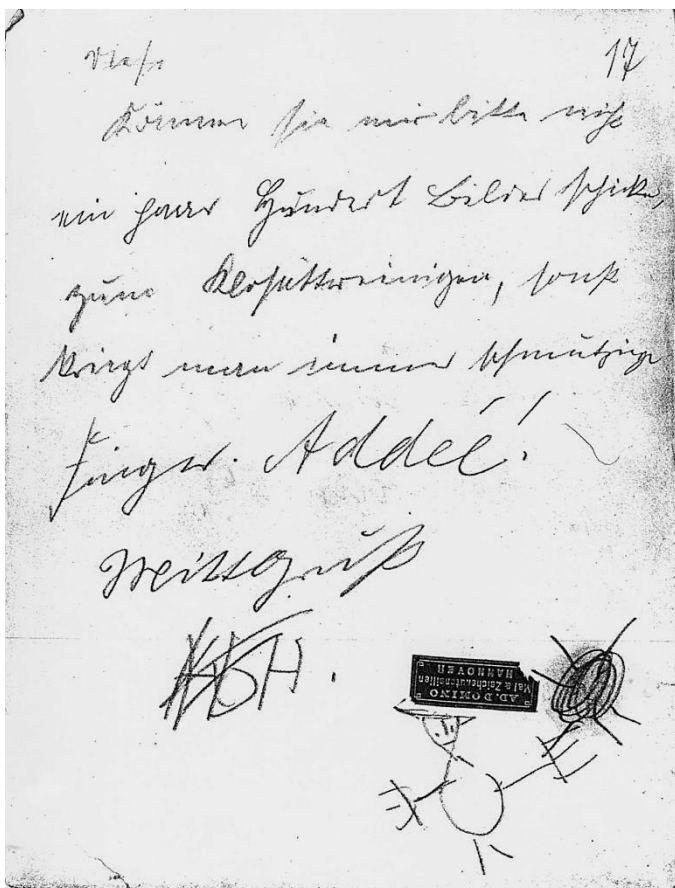
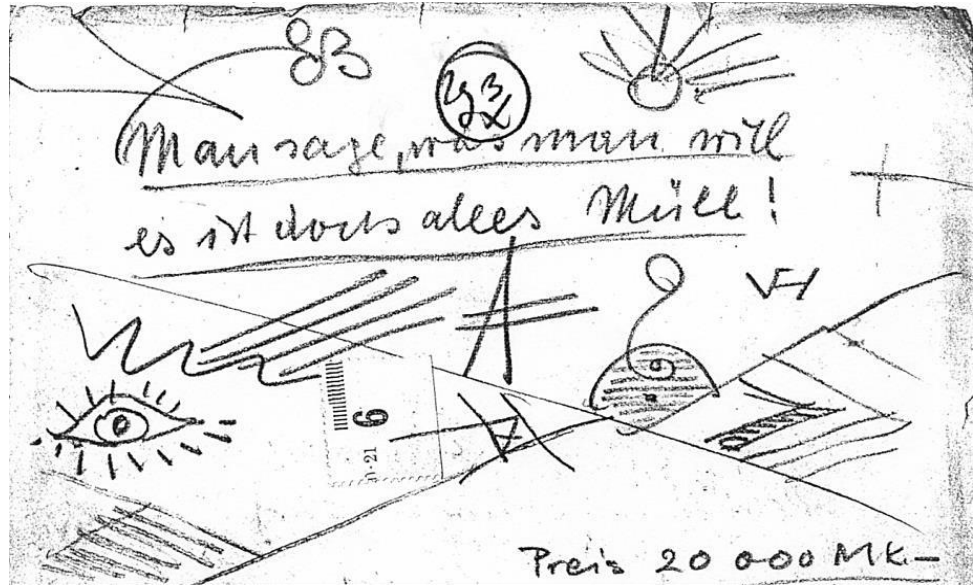
Professor Dr. phil. et med. W. Weygandt, Psychiatric University Clinic, Hamburg.

An excerpt from this article:

'As Picasso sticks a real clay pipe in the mouth on a portrait, Otto Dix glues buttons to the picture and Schwitters uses rubber stamps, scraps of cloth and printed paper and old material - one very often sees such bizarre traits in schizophrenics [...] it signifies an aberration from normal ways of thinking and feeling, a degeneration that in our sick and troubled time is a major cause of human dignity declining even further.' [Wie Picasso einem Porträt eine wirkliche Tonpfeife in den Mund steckt, Otto Dix Knöpfe auf das Bild klebt, Schwitters Gummistempel, Stoff- und Druckpapier-fetzen sowie Altmaterial verwendet, derartige Bizzarrien sieht man auch des öfteren bei den Schizophrenen [...es] bedeutet eine Abirrig vom Wege normalen Denkens und Fühlens, eine Entartung, die in unserer kranken und aufgewühlten Zeit wesentlich dazu beiträgt, die Würde der Menschheit noch tiefer sinken zu lassen.]

'You can say what you like, it's all rubbish.'

Schwitters has marked this phrase Mz³, intending it for further use.



'Can't you please send me a few hundred pictures for cleaning the toilet, otherwise you always get dirty fingers. Adieu! Merz greetings.'

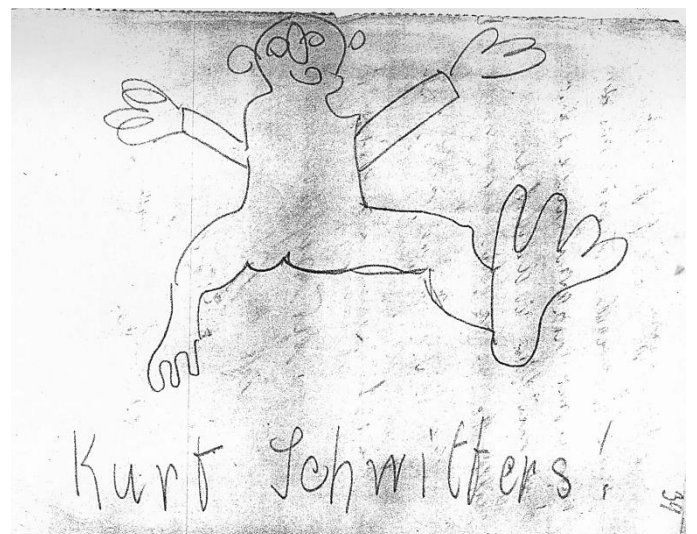


Fig. 109. Gästebuch für die Merzausstellung, Hildesheim 1922, KSF.

Excerpts from the visitors' book of Schwitters' one-man exhibition in Hildesheim in 1922. KSF.

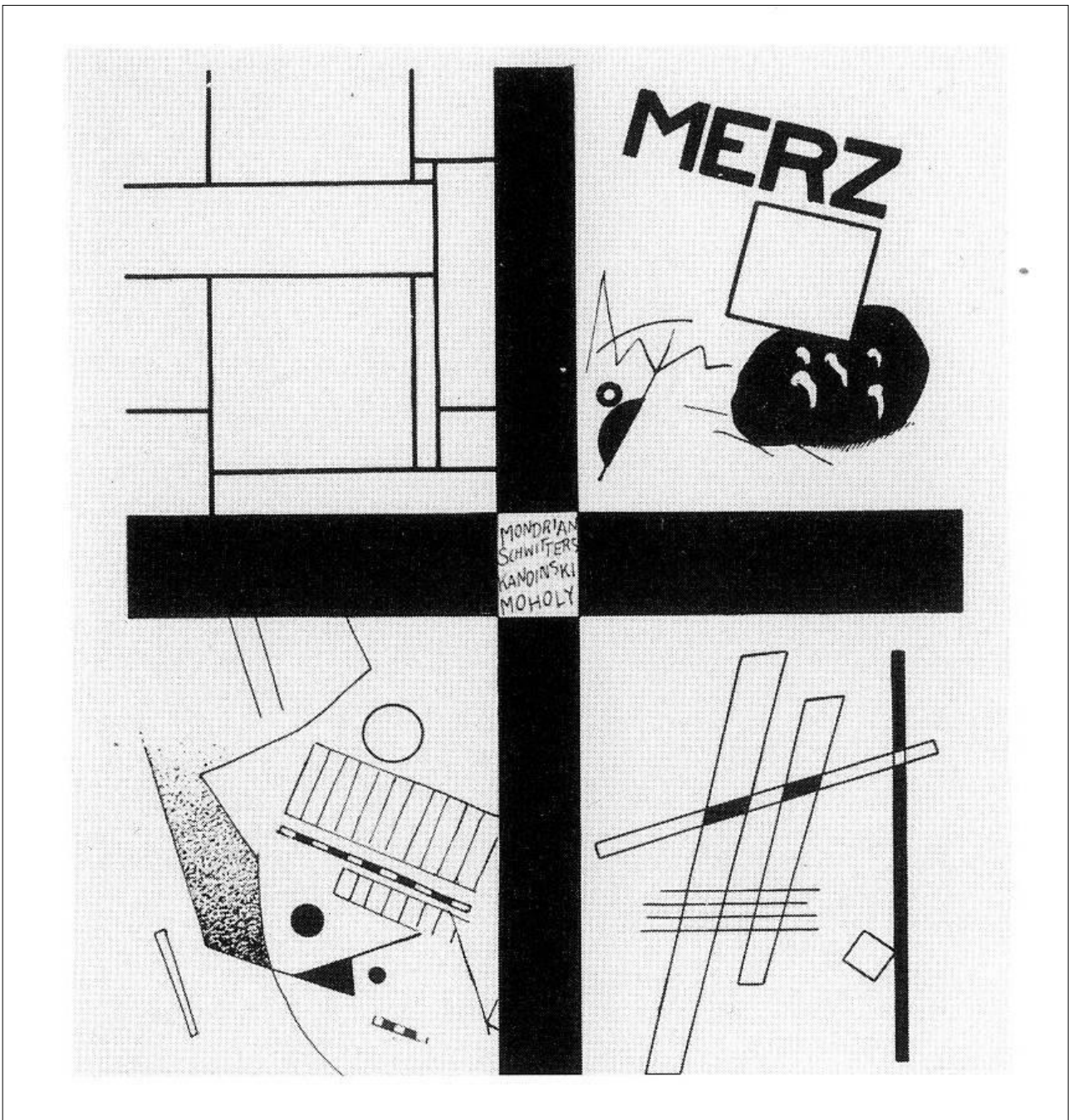


Fig. 110. Kurt Schwitters, *Untitled (Mondrian, Schwitters, Kandinski, Moholy)*, 1926. CR 1487. Measurements unknown.

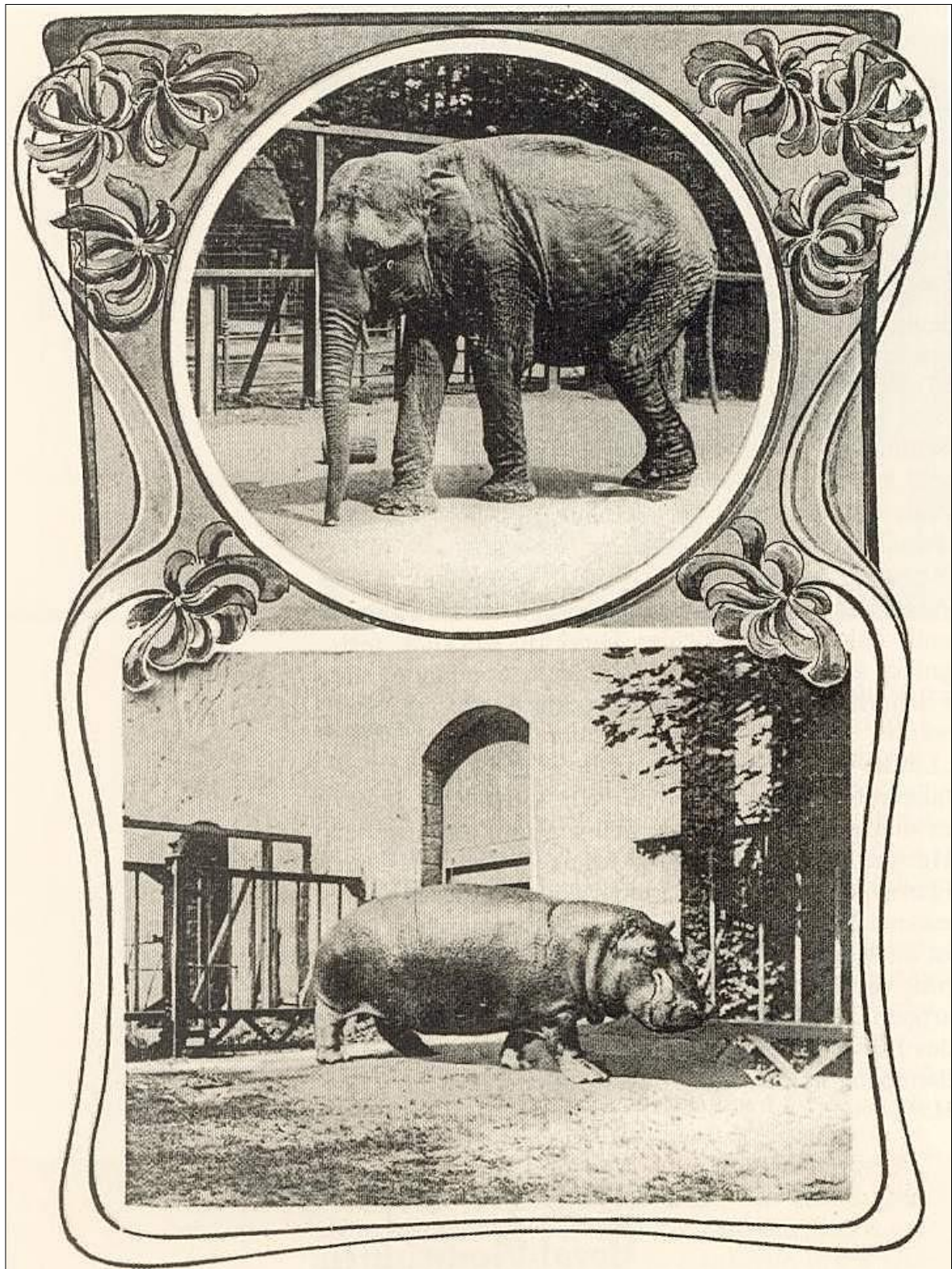


Fig. 111. Hannover zoo, postcard, c. 1920.

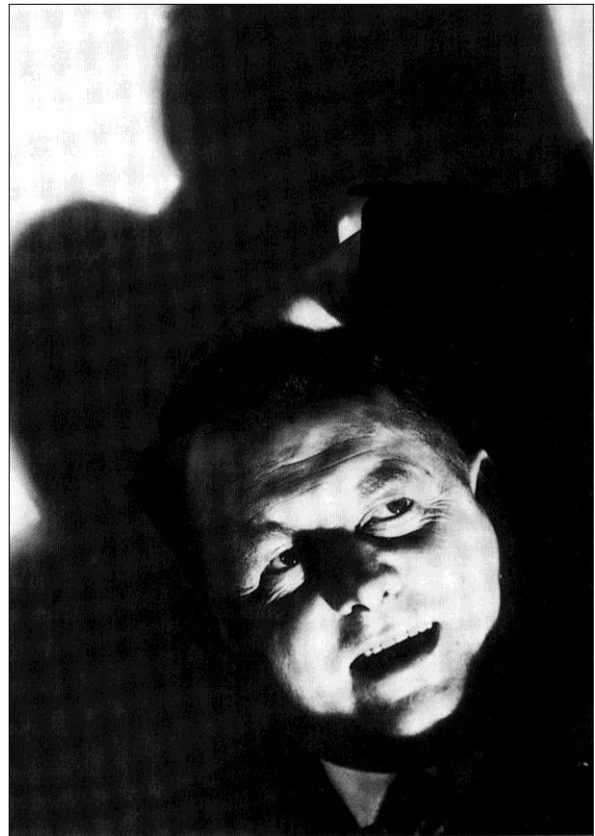
‘Have you seen a violet that advertises the [Hannover] zoological gardens?’ [Haben Sie schon ein Veilchen gesehen, das für den Zoologischen Garten Reklame macht?] (Schwitters 1923d, 130). Hannover zoo was famous for its animal grottos. Wilhelm Lür, the architect, hoped they would enable the animals to live in near-natural conditions. This postcard from the early 1920s shows the public’s favourite elephant ringed by violets. When the zoo had to close in 1922, a lottery was proposed to raise funds for its reopening. (Hannover Zoo archives)



112a



112b



112c

Fig. 112. Schwitters as performer.

112a: El Lissitzky, photomontage of Kurt Schwitters reciting, 1925. KSF.

112b: invitation to a Merz recital evening. Reproduced in Wiesbaden 1990, nr. 39.

112c: Schwitters reciting the *Ursonate*, late 1920s. KSF.

KIF MICHA

KÜNSTLER IN FRONT

Morgenveranstaltung im Capitol-Neckhaus an der Bismarckbrücke

Sonntag, 21. Dezember, 11 Uhr

1. Ouvertüre von Leuschner: Kapellmeister Arno Schäfer, Orchester der Capitol-Lichtbühne
2. Herr Hartjenstein spricht
3. Paul Wiesendanger (Städt. Oper, Hannover): Prolog zu Bajazzo
4. Tiana Lemnitz (Städt. Oper, Hannover): Lieder von Mozart: An die Freude / Wie unglücklich bin ich nit / Heiliges Band / Geheime Liebe / Zufriedenheit im niedrigen Stand, Weihnachtslied von Rudolf Presber, vertont von Walter Lehnhoff (Uraufführung)
5. Ilke Schellenberg: Jazz caprice, vertont von Erwin Grosse
6. Erwin von Delfft: Die Zeit ist um!

Hugo Rudolph, der eilige Spielleiter / Bühnenbild: Erich Wegner / Verwehter Klang: Konrad Böhning
Ewald Gerlicher, der Dichter Höfity / Fritz Holthaus mit dem Koffer / Alexander Elgeti, der Arbeiter / Otto Birkner, der Invalide / Kläre Arnstein, die junge Dame / Gerda Borkmann, das Fräulein Ziesenis / Sieglinde Reichardt, die Nachbarin / Fritz Herbad, der Förmliche und Hugo Rudolph, der Eilige / Gegenwart / Heringhausen

PAUSE Kapellmeister Arno Schäfer und das Orchester der Capitol-Lichtbühne / Kunstausstellung

7. Kurt Schwitters liest Anna Blume, und
8. Inge Herting tanzt sie
9. Paul Wiesendanger: Galgenlieder von Morgenstern, vertont von Paul Graener
10. Margret Pican: Aufstand, vertont von Erwin Grosse
11. Kurt Schwitters spricht: Schacko, das nackte Tierche

Am Helmholtz-Flügel Begleitung der Lieder: Kapellmeister Kraus (Städt. Oper, Hannover) / Begleitung der Tänze:
a) Ilke Schellenberg: Erwin Grosse, a) Inge Herting: Walter Lehnhoff, a) Margret Pican: Erwin Grosse

Kapellmeister Arno Schäfer und das Orchester der Capitol-Lichtbühne

ANSAGER: RUDOLPH, DER EILIGE (STÄDT. SCHAUSPIELHAUS)

GOLDENE S
INTAGSWORTE von Christof Spengemann

Wir danken allen Stiftern, wir danken allen Mitwirkenden, die uns diese Morgenveranstaltung ermöglicht haben. Wir danken allen, die hier erschienen sind. Es ist wahr: wir haben Ihnen geschworen, daß Sie sich erbauen, erfreuen und daß Sie lachen werden. Wir haben es geschworen, obschon es Leichtsinns ist, einen Schwur für andere zu leisten. Wir können uns nicht denken, daß Sie gekommen sind, um uns mit unserm Schwur aufs Trockene zu setzen; dazu sind Sie viel zu nett. Wir glauben, daß Sie den guten Willen haben, unsern Schwur zu halten. Und wir schwören Ihnen, daß wir unser möglichstes getan haben, es Ihnen leicht zu machen. Deshalb sehen wir der nächsten Zukunft — bis dreizehn Uhr! — getrost ins Auge.

Seien Sie so gut, vom ersten Rauschen des Orchesters ab nicht mehr an unsern Schwur zu denken. Entspannen Sie sich und öffnen Sie sich liebevoll unsern Darbietungen; Sie werden schon merken, wann Sie sich zu erbauen, zu erfreuen und wann Sie zu lachen haben. Lassen Sie auch das Fluidum dieses schönen Hauses auf sich wirken. Sie sitzen hier sozusagen auf einem historischen Begriff: das Capitol war das Spitzen-Kino des alten Rom. Wir bieten Ihnen heute zwar keinen Film. Aber das haben wir auch niemals behauptet. Wir bieten Ihnen etwas Ähnliches: Ton, Figur, Gesprochenes —, die Leinwand finden Sie nebenan in der Kunstausstellung. Vergessen Sie nicht, sie zu besuchen.

Künstler in Front! Die Wirtschaftliche Vereinigung Deutscher Architekten, der Reichsverband bildender Künstler Deutschlands, der Ring hannoverscher Schriftsteller treten mit dieser Veranstaltung zum ersten Male gemeinsam in die Öffentlichkeit. Es wird nicht das letzte Mal sein. Dieser Zusammenschluß soll Auftakt sein, für einen Zusammenschluß aller künstlerischen Vereinigungen Hannovers zu einem Block. Wir wollen nicht schon wieder schwören, aber wir hoffen, daß dieser Block ein fester Block sein wird, der dem Kunstleben Hannovers neues Blut und ein frisches Gesicht geben soll.

Kunstausstellung des Reichsverbandes bildender Künstler, vom 21. bis 24. Dezember einschließlich von 11 bis 16 Uhr geöffnet. Gute Bilder zu billigen Ausnahmepreisen.

PREISE: 2. Parkett: —,60, 1. Parkett und Balkon: 1.—, Sperrsitz: 1,50, Logen: 2,50 und 3,50 Reichsmark

Anordnung: Kurt Schwitters,
den Druck stiftete E. Var & Krieger.

Fig. 113. Programm, KIF (Künstler in Front) festival, 21.12.30.

Items 7. and 11. list Schwitters as reciting 'Anna Blume' and *Schacko*. Reproduced in KSA 1984, 163.



Fig. 114. El Lissitzky and Kurt Schwitters, Merz 8/9 Nasci, 1924.
<http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/merz/8/index.htm>



115a



115b

Fig. 115. Carola Giedion-Welcker

115a: Carola Giedion-Welcker, CIAM conference, Athens 1933. Reproduced in Basel 2004b, 24.

115b: Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Anthologie der Abseitigen* [Offside Anthology], 1944. With poems by Rousseau, Kandinsky, Picabia, Klee, Picasso, Doesburg, Arp, Schwitters, De Chirico, Stramm, Von Hoddis, etc.



Fig. 116. Kurt Schwitters, *Ein fertiggemachter Poet* [A Done-for Poet], 1947. CR 3619, 20 x 17 cm. Schwitters sent this collage to Carola Giedion-Welcker in 1947 as thanks for sending him *Anthologie der Absentigen*.

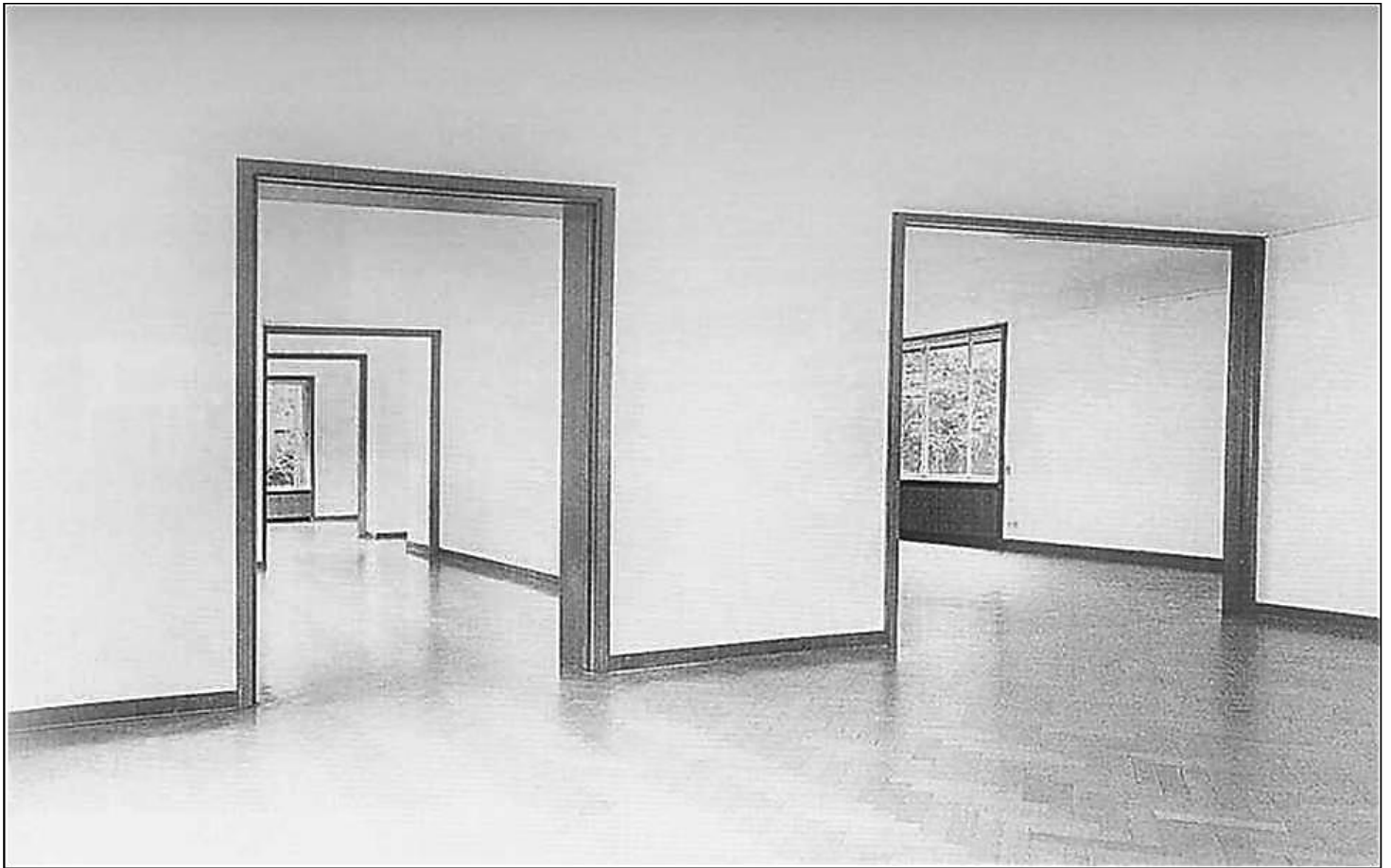
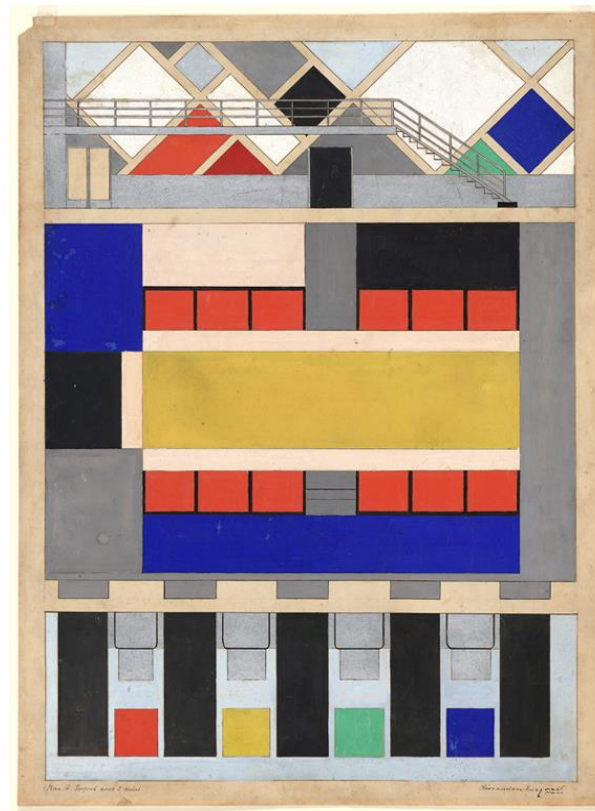


Fig 117. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Haus Esters, Krefeld, 1928-30.

Reproduced in Müller 2004, 203.

'I can't imagine that you can simply walk through [Mies van der Rohe's] doors, rather you stride through them. Great noble beings stride through the doors, full of a new spirit. At least we hope so. It can also turn out as with the [new] Frankfurt estates, where people arrive with their green plush sofas. It can turn out that in the end that the residents are not so mature or liberated as their own doors. We'll just have to hope the house will make them into noble beings.'^[1]

^[1] [Ich kann mir nicht denken, dass man durch diese Türen einfach gehen soll, sondern man schreitet hindurch. Grosse, edle Gestalten schreiten durch die Türen, voll neuen Geistes. Hoffentlich, wenigstens. Es kann ja auch werden wie in den Frankfurter Siedlungen, wo die Leute mit ihren grünen Plüschsofas ankommen. Es kann vorkommen, dass nachher die Einwohner nicht so reif und frei sind wie ihre eigene Türen. Aber hoffen wir, dass das Haus sie edelt.] Schwitters 1927a, 285.



118a



118b

Fig. 118. The Aubette, Strasbourg.

Sophie Täuber-Arp, Hans Arp, Theo van Doesburg, 1927-8. Schwitters saw the Aubette as a work in progress in early April 1927.

118a: Theo van Doesburg, colour scheme for the cinema-dance hall in the Café Aubette, preliminary version, 1928. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

118b: reconstruction of the Aubette, Strasbourg. Photo: Jean-Claude Hatterer.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/060611_006.jpg

‘The structuring space-time painting of the 20th century enables the artist to realise his great dream of placing people inside painting instead of in front of it.’

Theo van Doesburg, *De Stijl*, 1928.



Fig. 119. Naum Gabo, *Construction in a Niche*, 1930.

Plastics, metal and wood object, 610 x 279 x 584 mm, Tate Gallery Collection, London.

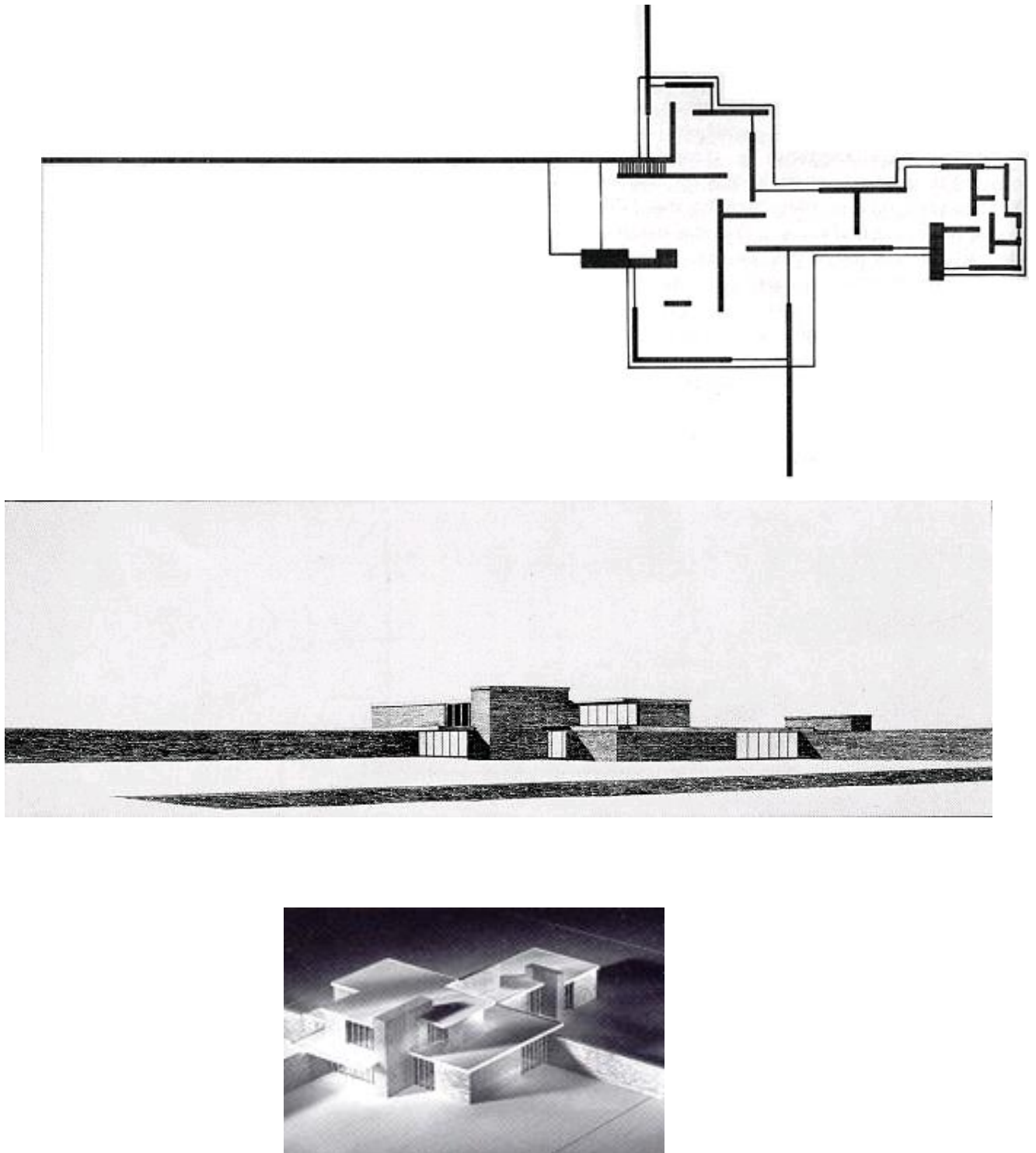


Fig. 120. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *Landhaus in Backstein*, 1924.
Städtische Kunsthalle Mannheim, reproduced in Müller 2004, 78.



121a



121b

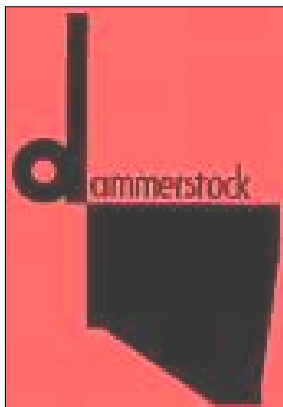
Fig. 121. Hannover, Provinzialmuseum.

121a: Alexander Dorner, director of the department of paintings, 1925-37. Reproduced in Hannover 1962, 209. Dorner was evidently proud of his *Schmiss* [duelling scar], once the mark of a German academic and considered as a sign of courage.

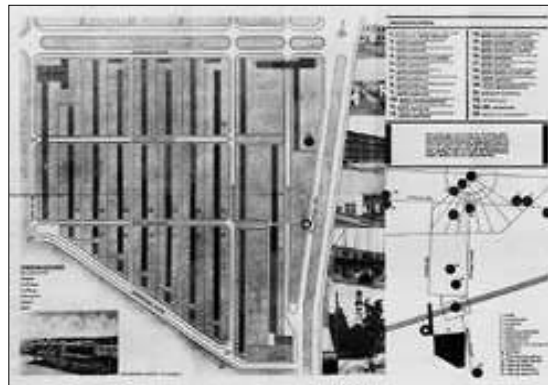
121b: Landesmuseum Hannover, formerly the Hannover Provinzialmuseum.
<http://www.landmuseum-hannover.niedersachsen.de/>



122a



122b



122c



122d

Fig. 122. Walter Gropius, Dammerstocksiedlung, Karlsruhe.

122a: the original estate, c. 1929.

122b: Kurt Schwitters' poster. The black shape is that of the estate itself.

122c: a page of Schwitters' catalogue.

All from <http://www1.karlsruhe.de/Stadtraum/dammerstock.htm>

122d: Dammerstock today.

<http://www.fly-foto.de/luftbildarchiv/html/Karlsruhe.html>

In contrast to Gropius, Otto Haesler, who won second prize, planned to incorporate the surrounding woodlands and historic city centre into his designs; cf. Karlsruhe 2007, 107.



123a



123b



123c



123d

**Fig. 123. Kurt Schwitters,
self-portraits.**

123a: CR 2046, Untitled (Self-portrait) 1936/1939, oil on wood, unfinished, 66.2 x 56.

123b: CR 3310, Self-portrait 1947, oil on paper, 65 x 50 cm.

123c: CR 3393, 'Ich selbst' [I myself], 1946, ink on card, 33.2 x 25 cm.

123d: Schwitters photographing himself in the Yris Hotel, Olden, Norway, c. 1934.
Reproduced in Hannover 1986, 6.

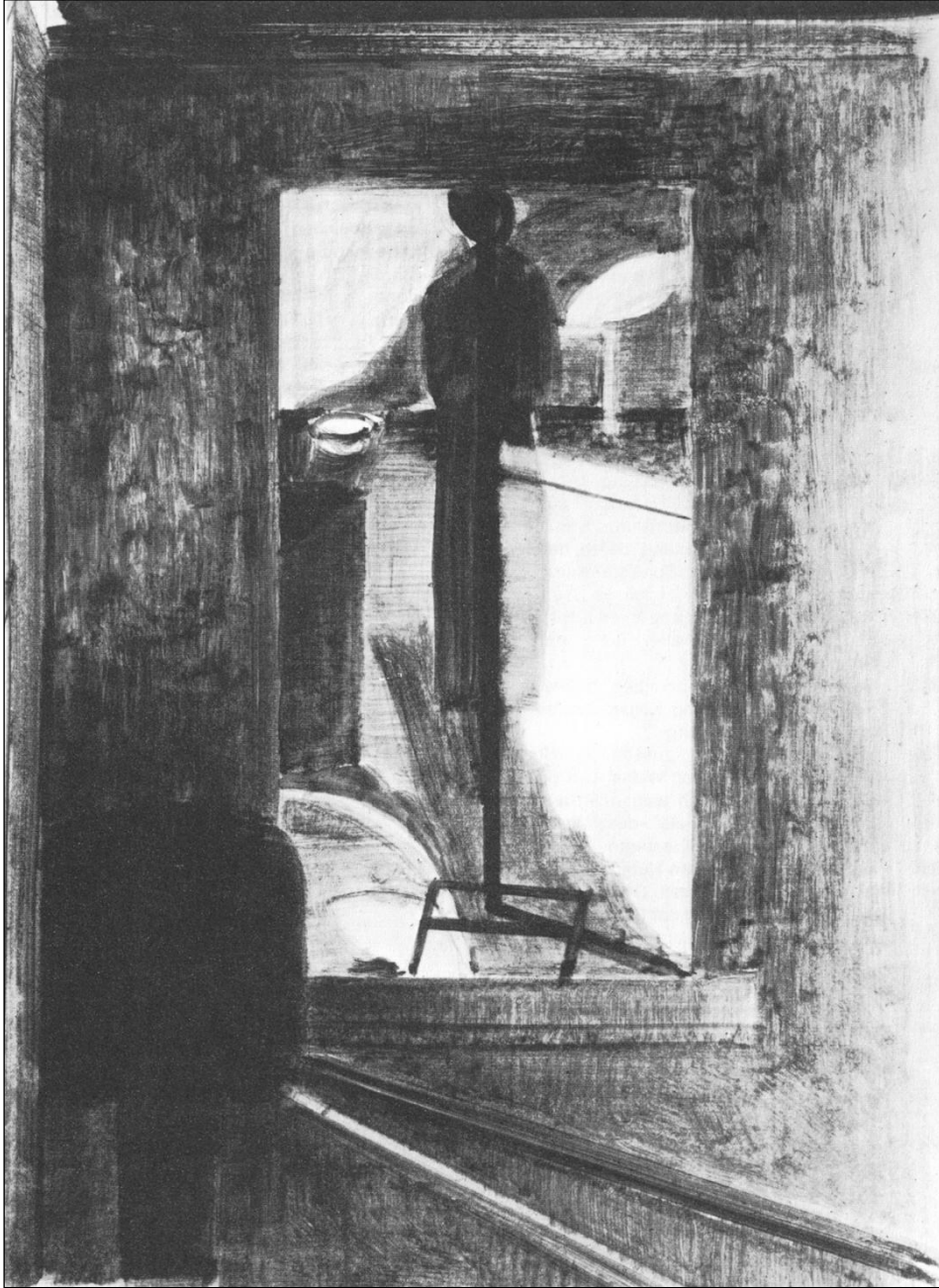


Fig. 124. Oskar Schlemmer, Fensterbild [Window Picture] No. 3, 1942. 32.6 x 22.8 cm. Oils over pencil and crayons on board. Kunstmuseum Basel, reproduced in Berlin 1978, 241.



Fig. 125. Il Vittoriale degli Italiani, 1921-38.

The Fascist Gesamtkunstwerk. D'Annunzio's *Il Vittorini degré Italiano* (1921-38) on Lake Garda. <http://www.vittoriale.it/>

Fig. 126a.

George Grosz, *Siegfried Hitler*, 1923, in *Die Pleite* 8, November 1923.

A caricature of Hitler as Barbarossa was exhibited in the Kestner Society in Hannover in 1932, 'in which his little moustache goes several times through the marble table' [wo sein Schurrbärtchen so mehrmals durch den Marmortische geht].^[1]

[1] Letter from Vordemberge-Gildewart to Hans Arp, 22.9.32, in Vordemberge-Gildewart 1997, vol I, 20-21.

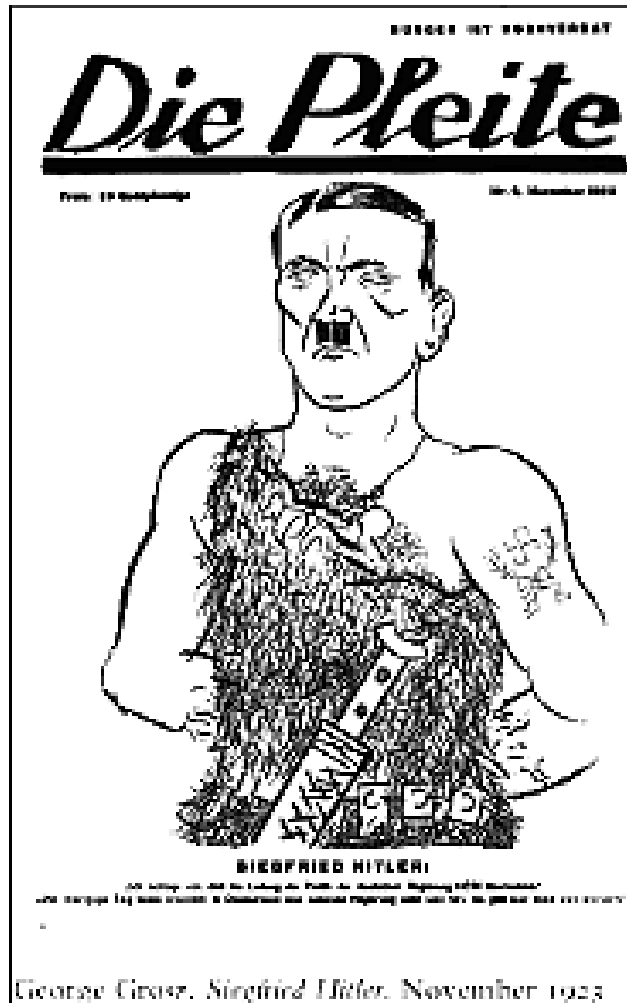
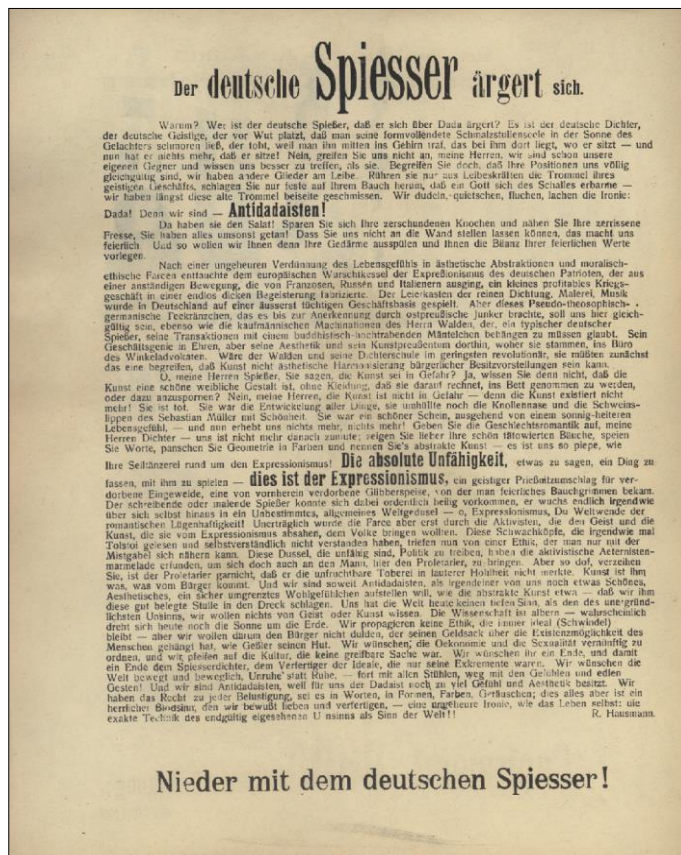


Fig. 126b.

Raoul Hausmann, 'Der deutsche Spiesser ärgert sich', in *Der Dada*, vol 2, December 1919.

<http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/derdada/2/pages/01.htm>



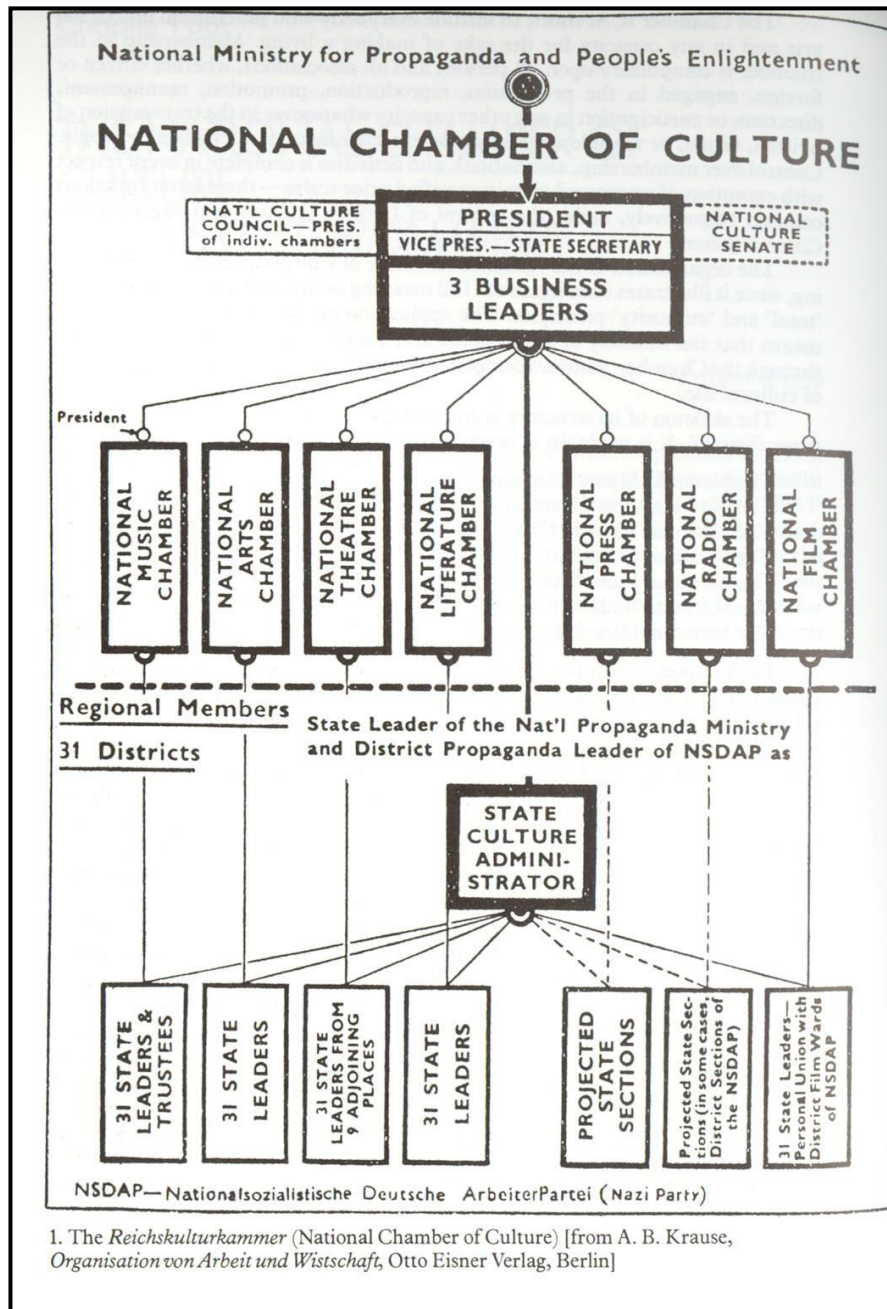


Fig. 127. The organisation of culture in the Third Reich. Propaganda leaflet, 1936.

Reproduced in Taylor/Will 1990, 82. The integration of the chamber's members into the state was described a creative process in itself.^[1] The artist was deemed to be a kind of priestly civil servant, an educator and teacher whose task was to ensure the cultural health of the nation. 'Only consecrated hands have the right to serve at the altar of art.' [Nur geweihte Hände haben das Recht, am Altare der Kunst zu dienen].^[2]

^[1] Brenner 1963, 63.

^[2] Ibid., 54.



128a



128b



128c

**Öffentliche
Volks-Versammlung**

SWASTIKA

Am Freitag, den 30. März 1928, abends 8.30 Uhr spricht im Wellforsaale
der Nationalsozialist
Karl Kaufmann, Elberfeld
über

**Bauern- und Mittelstands-Elend
Warenhausseuche!**

Freie Aussprache!
Eintritt 30 Pfg. Juden ist der Zutritt verboten!

Arbeiter und Bauer, in ihrer großen Masse heute noch verführt und verleitet von volkstümlichen Hetzern und in ihrem tiefstem Kern gesund. Nach werden sie mißbraucht **nicht kennen sie ihre wahren Feinde nicht**, aber haben sie die einmal erkannt, wird einmal diese ungeheure Summe von Freigiebigkeit und Lebenswillen zusammengefaßt und eingesetzt gegen den einzigen und allein gemeinsamen Feind **das internationale Judentum, dann ist der Tag der Freiheit des deutschen Volkes gekommen.**

Das Wort **Mittelstand** hatte einmal Klang und Farbe, das bezeichnet einmal einen Stand, der das Rückgrat des Staates bildete, das war einmal der Inbegriff aller staatsbürgerlichen Tugenden, das bedeutete: einst Fleiß, Tüchtigkeit, Redlichkeit, Wohlstand, Kraft in Lebenskraft, das bedeutet **heute**

Elend, Niedergang, Armut, Feigheit!

Es kam der **Jude** und setzte dem deutschen **Kaufmann** die Warenhäuser vor die Nase, er verdrängte ihn mit der marktschreierischen Deklamation die Existenz er nahm dem **Handwerker** das Brot er zog jedem Gewerbetreibenden den Hals zu, alle bisher geltenden Begriffe von Treue und Glauben, von Redlichkeit und Leistung wurden über den Haufen geworfen und ins Gegenteil verkehrt. Jetzt ist das Ende da!

Arbeiter und Bauer stehen auf und wehren sich, **weil sie leben wollen**, essen schneit sich die Front der Schallenden gegen die Ruffenden **Arbeiter und Bauer in einer Front, und der Bürger!**

Kommt in die oben angekündigte Versammlung und laßt Euch aufklären!

**Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter-Partei
Ortsgruppe Hattingen.**

Buddrucker E. Ballmann Hattingen-Wer

128d

Fig. 128. Kaufhaus des Westens (KdW).

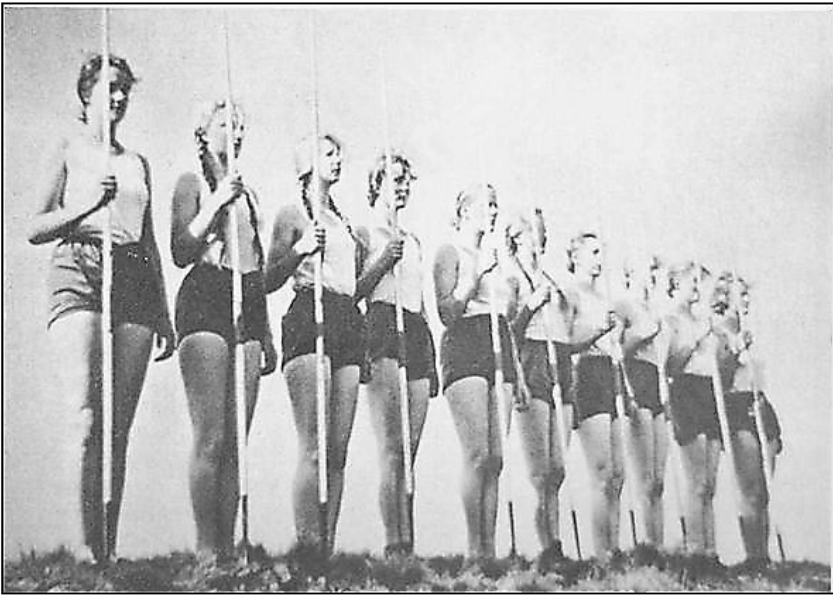
128a: window display, KdW department store, Berlin, 1932 (1).

128b: window display, KdW, 1932 (2).

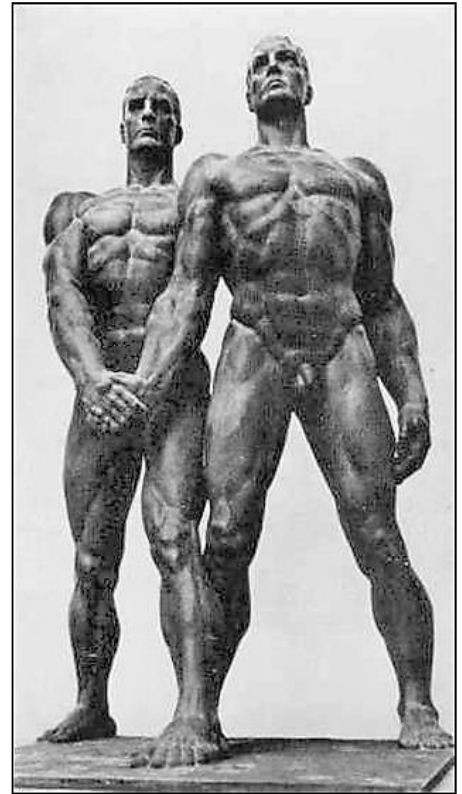
128c: café, KdW, 1929-30.

128d: Nazi propaganda leaflet, 1928, advertising a public meeting to protest against department stores.

All photos reproduced in Stürzebecher 1979.



129a



129b



129c



129d

Fig. 129. Comradeship and friendship.

129a: 'Future Mothers', (Calendar, 1939). Reproduced in Taylor/Will 1990, 76.

129b: Josef Thorak, *Kameradschaft* [Comradeship], bronze, 670 cm., National Socialist pavilion, Paris 1937.

129c: Arno Breker, *Kameraden* [Comrades], 1939/40. This 5-metre-high plaster model, exhibited in 1940, was half the size of that planned for a triumphal arch in Berlin. It was designed as propaganda for the coming war, with the rear figure crying for revenge.

129d. (rt. to l.) Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, Nelly van Doesburg and Helma Schwitters in s'Gravenhage 1923. Reproduced in Orchard/Schulz 2000, 541.

130a



130b



Fig. 130. Albert Speer, 'Cathedral of Light' displays.
The Nuremberg Party Conference of the NSPD, 1936-38.

130a: <http://www.thirdreichruins.com/nuernberg2.htm>

130b: Cathedral of Light, Reichsparteitag der NSDAP, Nürnberg 1936. The light was bluish in colour. From right to left: Hitler, Robert Ley, Rudolf Hess. Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-2006-0329-502 / CC-BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0 de, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5348660>



Fig. 131. Catering for the masses, 1936-9, Prora Wieck.

The remains of the *Kraft Durch Freude* [Strength Through Joy] edifices in Prora Wieck, Rügen, 2005. This leisure complex, much of which is still standing, was four and a half kilometres long and designed to house 20,000 workers. The plans were awarded the Grand Prix of Architecture at the 1937 World Fair in Paris. See also <http://www.proradok.de/dokumentationszentrum/historischer-ort/>



Fig. 132. Catering for the elite; Burg Vogelsang.

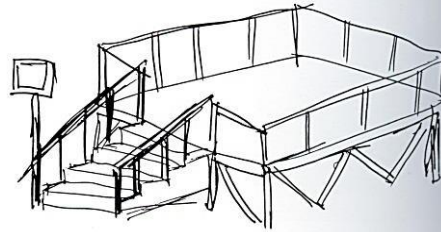
Burg Vogelsang, in the Eifel, was built in 1934 as a training institution for future Nazi leaders. The complex was designed as a symbolic image of a human being. At the top of the hill was the 'brain', the college where young men were trained in Nazi theory, below this the 'heart', in the 'comradeship houses' where social activities took place, and further down, the 'body', a sports complex. Burg Vogelsang was opened to the public in March 2006. Below, the 'sports relief' today. (Photo: author)

See also https://www.vogelsang-ip.de/files/vogelsang/uploads/AEB/VIP_AEB_GB_2017-01.pdf

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN



Plattform am Schwitters' Wallfahrtsort
Waldhausenstrasse 5



Projekt: Schwitters - Wallfahrtsort

Es geht darum den genauen Standort des
eigentlichen Merzbau's auszumachen. Den Ort zu
bestimmen wo in der Hochparterre-Wohnung in
der Waldhausenstrasse N°5 in Hannover der
erste Merzbau entstand. Es gibt dazu Skizzen,
Pläne und Beschreibungen. Es wird deshalb
möglich sein diesen Ort zu bestimmen. Da
das Haus an der Waldhausenstrasse 5 von Bomben
zerstört wurde und deshalb nicht mehr existiert
im Original ist es umso interessanter diesen
Standort auszumachen. Tatsächlich ist das nach
dem Krieg entstandene Haus an gleichen Ort viel
weniger tief und da also wo der Merzbau war, ist
nun der hintere Garten. Ich will nun in dem
Garten diesen Standort bestimmen. Es muss dazu
eine leicht erhöhte Plattform gebaut werden, sodass
der Besucher auf der gleichen Höhe steht da der
Merzbau im Hochparterre war und da zugleich der stige
Garten leicht abfällt. So kann die Besucherin oder
Wallfahrerin über eine kleine Treppe auf die Plattform
gelangen und steht dann im Merzbau. Wenn er noch da
wäre. Er oder Sie steht also genau an dem Ort wo der
75 Jahren der Merzbau war. Er oder Sie steht im Merz-
bau. Rundherum war, ist Merz. ER ist im mega-virtuellen
Raum und gleichzeitig im realen wirklichen Raum. Da war
es, da ist es zugleich! (Killroy was here!) Kein Internet
hilft man muss da hin! Ich will dazu einen kleinen
Informationsstand über Schwitters' Merzbau I, II und III machen.
Zusätzlich gibt's Souvenirs von der Plattform am Schwitters-
Wallfahrtsort, die man am Ort kaufen kann als Erinnerung
der Besuchster. Thomas Hirschhorn Paris, Mai 2000

Fig. 134. Thomas Hirschhorn, Project (1)

‘Schwitters’ Home – Place of Pilgrimage, 2000.’

Here Hirschhorn outlines his plans for a platform on the site of the Hannover Merzbau. Reproduced in Hannover 2000, 218.

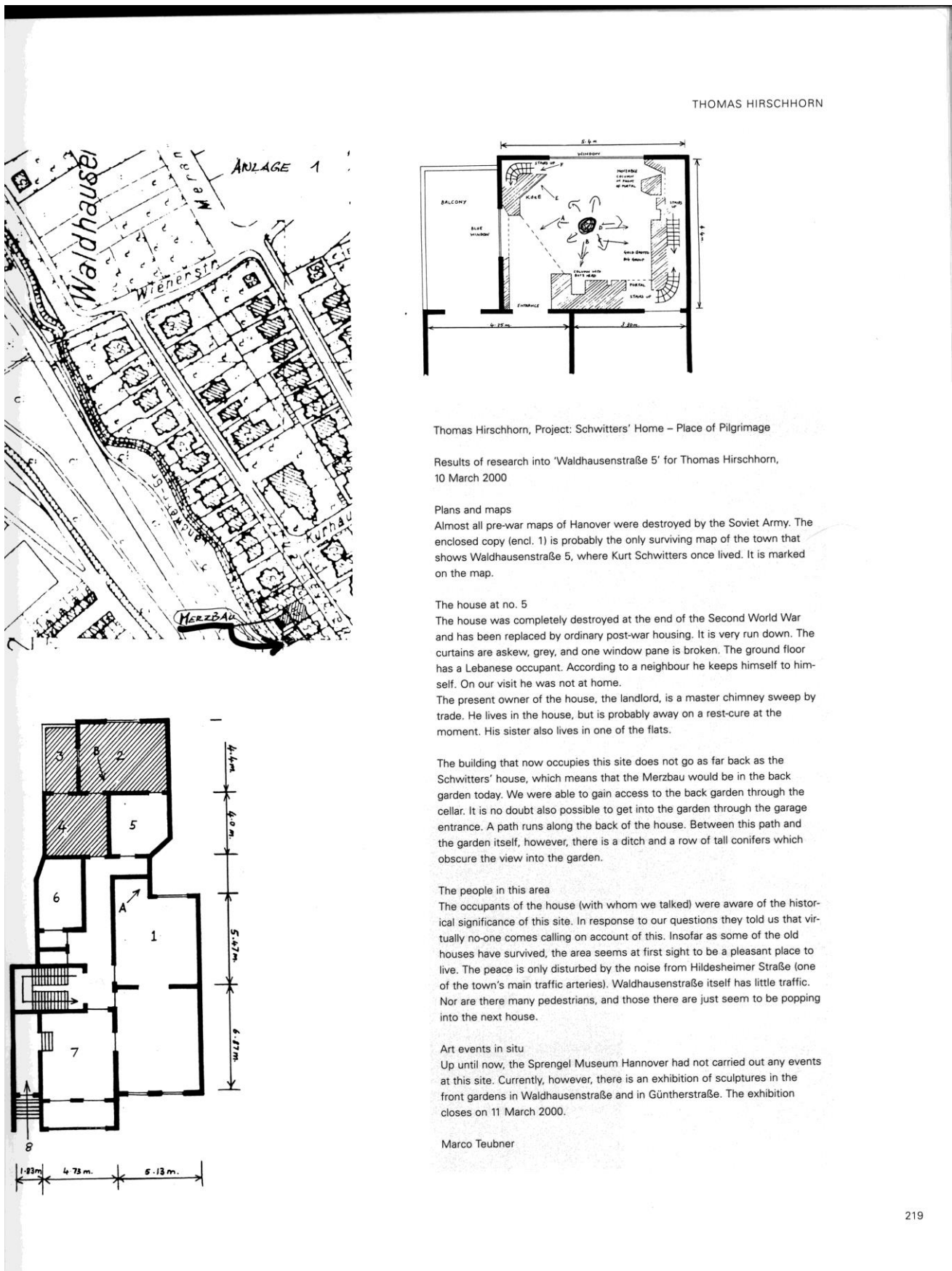


Fig. 135 Thomas Hirschhorn, Project (2).

'Schwitters' Home – Place of Pilgrimage', 2000. (Hannover 2000, 219).



Fig. 136. The destruction of Waldhausenstrasse 5, 1943.

The RAF Photographic Interpretation Unit was renamed the CIU (Central Interpretation Unit) in 1941. The red areas on the map mark bomb damage in Hannover after the air raid of October 8/9 1943. The arrow shows the location of Waldhausenstrasse 5; the dark area beside is the Eilenriede. By courtesy of Andrew Laird.