

## Kurt Schwitters: Aspects of Merz\* and Dada

### “In the Elysian Fields of the Inventory”

“To Kurt Schwitters, the purest artist of my time.” Thus did Herwarth Walden dedicate the new edition of his book *Einblick in Kunst*<sup>1</sup> in 1924.

These words also expressed Schwitters’s deepest single desire to be an aesthete of “structural consistency”. He was an aesthete for whom the various individual arts were all too specialized and who sought to embody within his own work not merely all art forms but also all contemporary materials and media. Indeed to Schwitters life itself only had justification if it could stand as an aesthetic phenomenon, and in his scheme of things “the Beautiful” – in contradiction to classical categories of art – could include the non-artistic, the banal, the trivial, the discarded, the temporary and the superficial. The Nietzschean spirit of the time found its indirect reflection in Schwitters’s work, for he was not concerned with an all-embracing, exhaustive cohesion of meaning, but with truth. This truth lay in the both enlightening and deceptive surface of things and in their inflated appearance. If making all life into an aesthetic experience was one stage in the ultimate fusion of art and life into the complete work of art, the vitalizing of art was the second stage. In the *Merzbau*,<sup>2</sup> Schwitters’s life-work which he started in 1920/3, these two tendencies are intertwined to create an aesthetic, solipsistic structure, for, as Hans Richter remarked, “he [Schwitters] was the synthesis of all the arts.”<sup>3</sup> The only

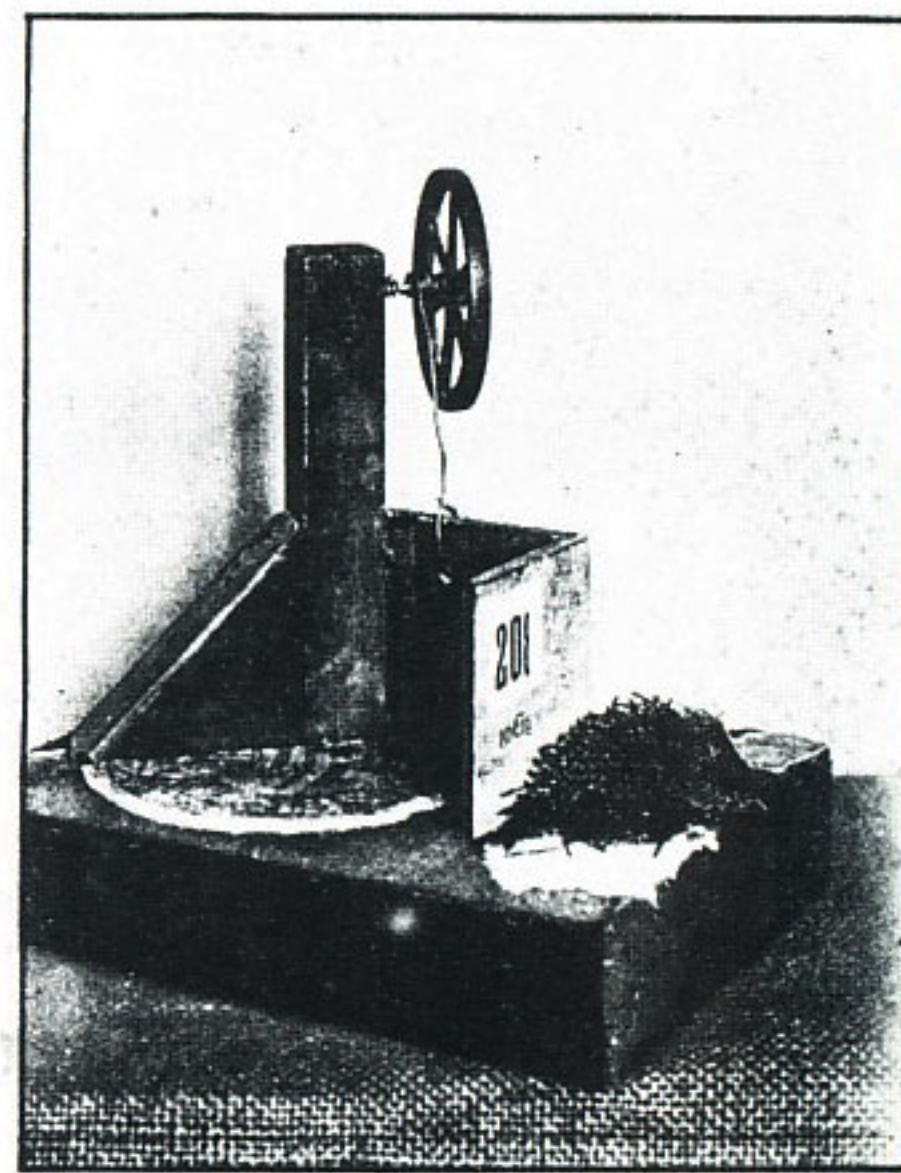
surviving remnants of this extensive life-work which was planned to extend over decades are now to be found in England. In 1937 political pressure forced Schwitters to break off his work in Hanover; he then continued it in 1940 during his Norwegian exile in Lysaker and resumed it in 1947/8 shortly before his death in England.<sup>4</sup>

Schwitters’s allegiance to the primacy of the aesthetic was enlivened by the international Dadaists with some of whom he enjoyed lifelong friendships. Among these are to be numbered Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch, Hans Arp, Theo and Nelly van Doesburg, and Tristan Tzara. A later friend was Marcel Duchamp. But chief among these contacts was Katherine Dreier, a co-founder of the ‘Société Anonyme’, and it was thanks to her understanding of avant-garde art that Schwitters was accorded so excellent an introduction to the USA.<sup>5</sup> Constructivists were also of importance to Schwitters during the 1920s. Among them were Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Domela, Vordemberge-Gildewart, Mondrian, Malevitch, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe. Many of these figures were to be immortalized in the *Friendship Grottoes* of the *Merzbau* by means of some objects typical of them. Cooperation with some of these artists can be discerned in Schwitters’s *Merz* art.

His assemblage *The Sacred Affliction* (1920; fig. 1) gives us in allegorical form a many-sided vision of the Dada influences at work. It is connected with the further assemblages of the *Gallows of Desire* (fig. 2) and the *Cult of Pump* and not least with his concept of the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*.

A legend of the “Sacred Affliction”<sup>6</sup> (also known as *Wilgeforte*, a derivation from *virgo fortis*) dates from the fifteenth century. Well-known in Europe and particularly in Bavaria, it tells of the daughter of a pagan king who after her conversion to Christianity refused to comply with her father’s wish that she should marry another heathen ruler. She prayed that she should be so disfigured by Christ that she would prove displeasing to all men. Another version relates that she prayed to look like Christ alone. Her wish was granted in that she received the face of a heavily bearded man. The Sacred Affliction was known in England as *Liberata*, who was said to have released all women from unhappy union with their husbands.

This legend alludes to the same “erotic misery” which the Dadaists so emphatically rejected. They refused to accept the principle of patriarchal authority which permeated all aspects of Wilhelminian society from the



Kurt Schwitters's. Merzplastik. Der Lustgalgen.

Fig. 2 Kurt Schwitters, *Merz* Sculpture, *Gallows of Desire*, about 1920

small family unit through organized army cadres, to political and public life, and which, in the form of the First World War, had fashioned its own apocalyptic downfall. In the *Grotto of Love* in the *Merzbau*, Schwitters presented a grotesquely twisted and distorted image of the ‘embryo cell’ of society. “He has no head, she has no arms; he is holding a huge blank cartridge between his legs. The child with the syphilitic eyes in its big twisted-around head is telling the embracing couple to be careful.”<sup>7</sup> This grotesque apparition, linking as it did dreams of virility with martial yearnings for potency, and injected with the deadly bacillus of syphilis, presented a rejection of society clearly influenced by Dadaist principles. It also laid the responsibility for the origins of the apocalypse at the door of the family unit. The post-war years, which in cultural terms took place against a background of the Passion and Redemption, orientated towards damnation and resurrection, were given an ironically twisted reflection in the *Sacred Affliction*. The martyrdom, with which many of the Expressionist artists were able to identify themselves, seemed to Schwitters to be a kind of *Gallows of Desire* principle or a *Cult of Pump* system calling for de-mystification.

He saw the *Cult of Pump* system in particular as the product of a deeply disturbed society clinging with superstitious fervour to var-



Fig. 1 Kurt Schwitters with his *Merz* sculpture, *The Sacred Affliction*, about 1920



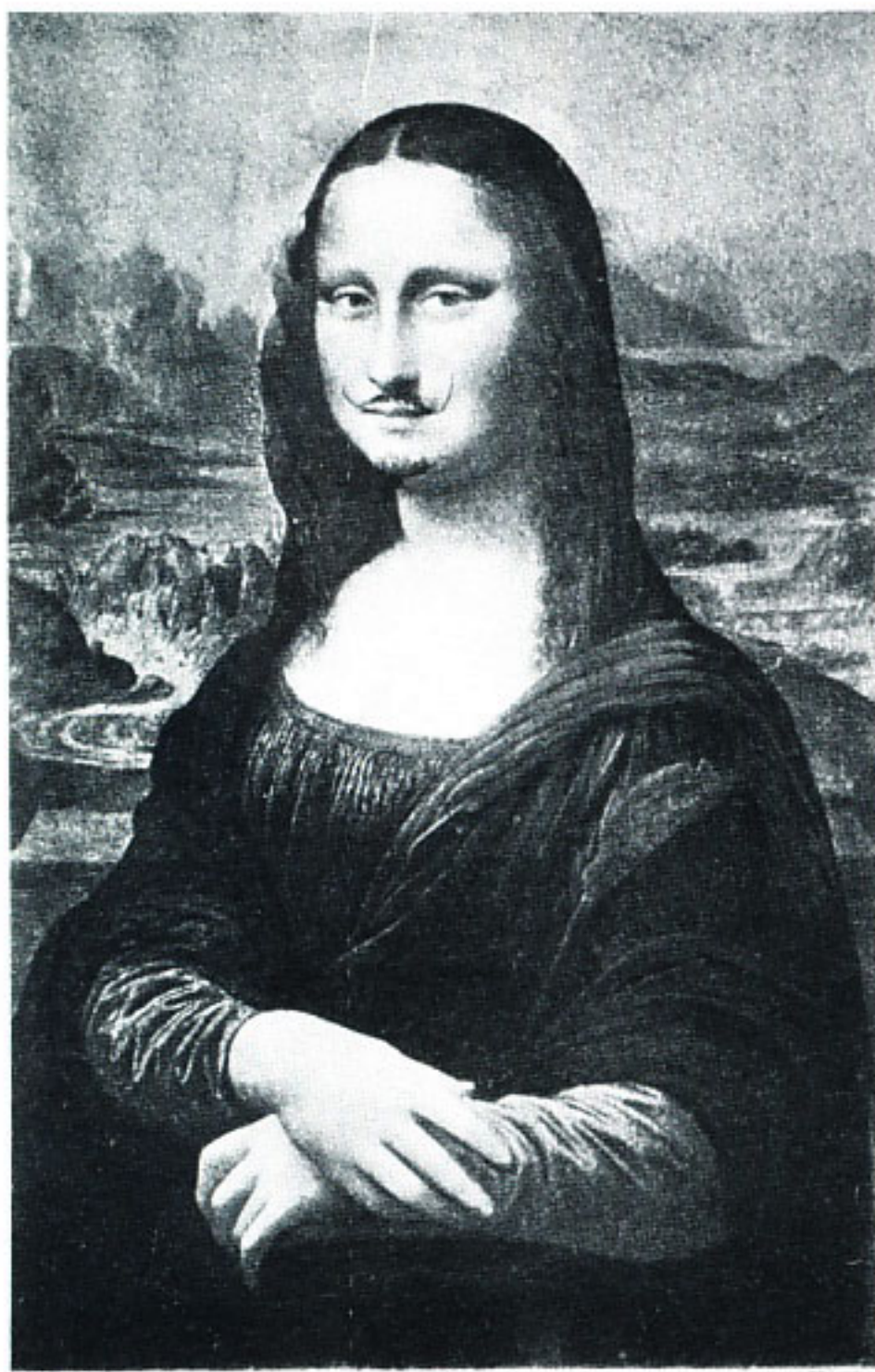


Fig. 3 Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919

ious fetishes. The *Sacred Affliction* was like a tailor's dummy fitted with a pear-shaped head and equipped like a reliquary with the words "Upper Silesia". Upper Silesia was at that moment the fetish of the Deutsch-national middle class, as a referendum was to be held in 1921 which threatened to hand the area over to Poland. This would have been a serious economic loss to the German bourgeoisie as Upper Silesia, along with the Ruhr, was the largest industrial area in Germany. A decoration for a Christmas tree, a burning candle, a notice reading "Upper Silesia" fitted on to a hurdy-gurdy, the words "Happy Christmas" as well as a label round the neck of the dummy saying "Give generously for Upper Silesia" – all these elements compose a picture of the time with an embellishment of Christian sentimentality, national interest and glorified family feeling which to Schwitters quite simply meant "Madness" – another word hung round the puppet's neck.

In the *Merzbau* Schwitters pointed to further bourgeois fetishes which he incorporated into the structure as trophies of cultural values and myths. The Grottoes of Goethe, of Luther, of Kyffhauser and of the Nibelungen, and those of the Grand Duchy of Brunswick-Lüneburg, of the Ruhr, of the Disabled, of the Family Unit and of Sexual Murder<sup>8</sup> directed the gaze not to the marble halls of heroic and cultural history – as D'Annunzio was doing at this very moment (1923) for an Italian audience in the *Vittoriale degli Italiani*.<sup>9</sup> In Schwitters's *Merzbau* the display-cases of the Biedermeier epoch, where these memorials were honoured with a devotion approaching idolatry, are all trans-

formed into a panopticon of grottoes full of parodies intended to shock. In the Goethe grotto for example, laid out by Hannah Höch, one is confronted not with a bust of the poet but with his leg, in keeping with the Dadaist principle that anything in the world can be made into a cultural object. This reliquary of a leg is also a cynical reference to Germany's post-war manufacture of artificial limbs. These grottoes vibrate with the feeling of a culture in decline. A culture atrophied in fetishism is presented to us as ironic proof of the fact that the formerly enlightened bourgeoisie of Germany has surrendered all cultural life and is now mummified in superstitions and idolatries which make all cultural dialogue impossible.

The *Merzbau*'s grottoes reveal only some of the concepts underlying it. Other themes had already been indicated in the *Sacred Affliction*, ones which also affect substantially the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*. The polymorphic eroticism which enable the saint in the fifteenth-century legend to succeed in her refusal to marry the heathen suitor permeates the entire Dadaist aesthetic. Do we not find concealed behind the bearded saint of the legend the moustachioed Mona Lisa, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (fig. 3), which Duchamp published in March 1920 in Picabia's journal 391?<sup>10</sup> Duchamp himself was playing an ambiguous sexual game in his appearance as *Rose Selavy*, an affront against the socially established unidimensional view of sex. Raoul Hausmann also assumed an androgynous role in *Monna Hausmann*, his *Friendship Grotto* in the *Merzbau*, by affixing his own portrait to the face of the Mona Lisa. Schwitters proceeded differently and in reverse, for he repeatedly attached the words "Anna

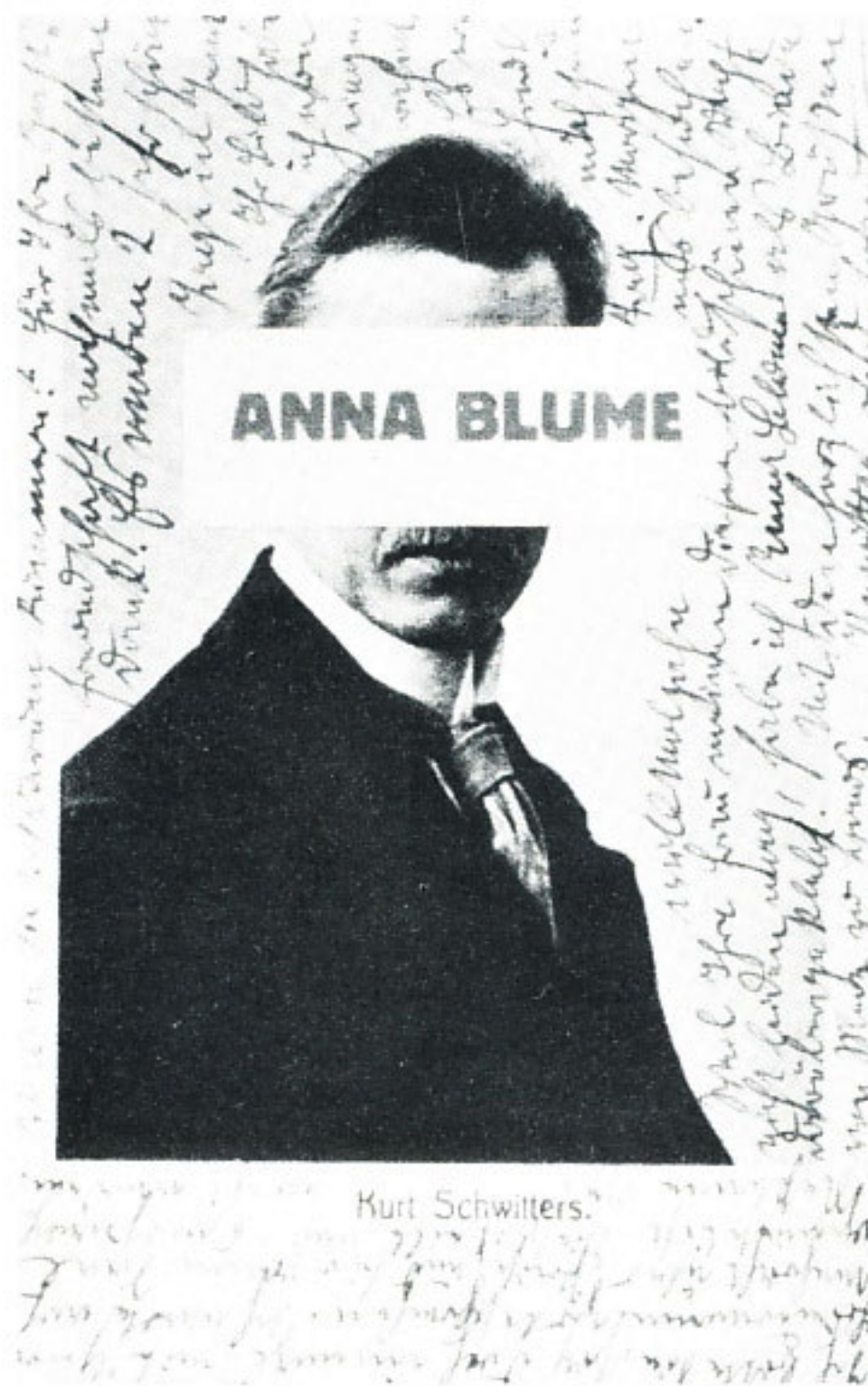


Fig. 4 Pasted-over portrait photograph of Schwitters on an advertising postcard

Blume" to his own portrait (fig. 4). And may we not see in the *Merzsäule* (fig. 5) with which Schwitters inaugurated the *Merzbau* a poor relation of the 'divine' androgynous Eros, solidified here into a bust, and who now appears with its doll's head as an echo of the hermaphrodite primeval child? A fantasy of melancholy encircles this column as it does the mourning Muses of de Chirico.

The *Cathedral* symbolically points the way to Revelation and Salvation; to Schwitters, androgyny seemed a necessary stage on this



Fig. 5 Kurt Schwitters, *Merzsäule* in the Hanover *Merzbau*

path. The fetish grottoes had similarly contained a pale, fragmentary reflection of the libido. The word "Merz" is stuck on to the base of the hermaphroditic sculpture in many places as a kind of pictorial incantation. The conception of *Merz* art; the metamorphosis of certainty; the still undefined; the self-destroying logos of language as found in Schwitters's sound poetry; the obscuring of anything unequivocal as a result of the *Merzbau*'s disclosure of the multi-layered nature of subjectivity – all this was bound up with erotic-aesthetic drives which are deeply androgynous.

It becomes clear that Schwitters developed his ideas for *Merz* art in many respects from Dadaist principles. In his own arbitrary way he represented the notion, accepted by the Dadaists, of "buffoonery and requiem" being closely allied, as Hugo Ball had expressed it.<sup>11</sup> If we are to believe Huelsenbeck it was not foolhardiness, love of adventure, boldness, sharpness, personal effectiveness, nor a desire to proselytize<sup>12</sup> that characterized Schwitters. These were all important traits in the eyes of the Berlin Dadaists and partly determined the pamphleteer nature of their montages and socio-satirical works. Neither was Schwitters "the genius in the frock-coat"<sup>13</sup> as he was represented by the



Berlin Dadaists and by Huelsenbeck in particular. The black suit which Schwitters favoured and in which he is depicted on many portrait postcards was intimately connected with his vision of himself as a dandy. The Berlin Dadaists totally overlooked the fact that this black outfit was for Schwitters a disguise, particularly useful in the provincial town of Hanover. With this outfit of "black uniformity" Schwitters was resorting to a tactic already used by Baudelaire, for whom the black suit was a 'poetic' expression of a "public state of mind" – "the symbol of eternal sadness . . . as represented by an interminable series of invitations to funerals, invitations to political funerals, to erotic funerals, to private funerals. We are all celebrating some burial or other."<sup>14</sup>

Does not the melancholic interpretation of the black suit make the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery* more intelligible? In this guise its creator, in his ascetic black, integrated himself as an artefact unobtrusively and with dandyish humour into society. Schwitters's humour was a playful, conciliatory kind of narcissism which insulated him against the suffering of the real world.

With an apparently stoical calm he elicited from the doomed patchwork of society the small, insignificant word "und" – a word which was to become the dominating signal within the *Und Picture* (fig. 6). Things which seemed grotesque and indeed nonsensical (and which were meant to seem precisely that) took on a complex quality which expressed very accurately their cultural-critical coherence. "It appears that the *Und* between things has rebelled," wrote Franz Werfel as early as 1914, "we are all pushed into a terrifying immensity. The very wealth of opinions and organisms make us despair. Faced with one detail, to which no order gives a unity, we are powerless. Everything is in chaos and a fearful loneliness renders us silent."<sup>15</sup> If the *Und* collage does contain this melancholy view, distance and indeed irony



Fig. 6 Kurt Schwitters, *The Und Picture*, 1919

are also attached to the little word "und" and the same may be said of "na und?!" ("so what?!").

This artistic strategy enabled Schwitters not only to develop aesthetic concepts out of the rootlessness sadly noted by Werfel, but even to exorcize this rootlessness by setting against it an all-embracing capacity for relationships. "Merz means creating relationships, preferably between all things under the sun."<sup>16</sup> The disturbed relationship between things and the world – which was the basic premise of the Berlin Dadaist montage work – was to be replaced in *Merz* art by the relationship arising from the things themselves. The material, the form, "the choice, the diffusion, the distortion 'of the materials', the separation, the twisting, the covering or painting over" – these things are now raised to the status of content.<sup>17</sup> The power to arrange things, which reality denies the artist, was now exercised to the full in the work of art in a vengefully many-sided and imaginative way and in the form of solipsistic rituals, in libidinous objects reflecting the self and in fetishes. This indicates that Schwitters referred only indirectly to reality. He needed to preserve mementoes of reality and this he did with his obsession for collecting things, "like a hunter in the Elysian fields of the inventory", as Walter Benjamin put it. In his collecting Schwitters secured traces of life and established a durable counterbalance to the ephemeral nature of existence and, as a narcissistic nature, paradoxically confronted his own obsessively accumulated objectification; this is the result of his "uncanny gift for reduplicating himself" (Hugo von Hofmannsthal). In this way traces of life and death mingled, and the same was true of subject and object.

"So that nothing shall be lost, even if it is false and dull"<sup>18</sup> – it was this attitude which he also had towards his academic training and his nature studies that formed an essential difference between Schwitters and the dynamic Dadaists of his day. "For I regard it as vitally important," he maintained, "that in the end the whole of life with all its aspirations should stand there in its entirety. I have nothing to hide."<sup>19</sup> The model for this was his *Merzbau* in which he included along with his collages and assemblages individual nature studies such as *Flooded Meadows* (1914) with the *Merzsäule* in the background.

Not only did he attempt to weave certain works into the *Merzbau*, he also wished to come to terms with an over-burdened memory of the period in which he lived. It was a time which was reproducing itself in an inflationary style as it surged forward. This inflation was particularly noticeable in the consumption of paper which proceeded at an ever increasing rate and in greater and greater volume. The city, too, Schwitters also saw as a body constantly bursting its bounds, constantly disintegrating and constantly reproducing itself. In all its fragments this was to be reflected in *Merz* art. All the



Fig. 7 Otto Dix, *Suleika, the Tattooed Wonder*, 1920

trivial documents of the hectic daily round of a town's life were drawn into Schwitters's work – tickets of all kinds, cuttings from newspapers and magazines, all are woven in. Urban man is reflected in these documents as the "restless slave of his own gadgets . . . less as a human being" (Kurt Tucholsky). He is there as a passenger, a diner in a restaurant, as a newspaper reader, a traveller on a bus, as a customer in places of entertainment. The big town jeopardizing itself in this way was not allegorized as it was by Dix in his *Suleika, the Tattooed Wonder* (1920; fig. 7); in the *Merzbau* and in Schwitters's collages we find echoes of the "erotic misery" of a dream industry which especially during the years of the inflation created appetites which could never be satiated. In the collage labelled *Mz 94: Grünfleck*<sup>20</sup> (1920; fig. 8) Schwitters juxtaposed the word "for" (which is shorthand for "Money paid for") with scraps of advertisements from the years of the inflation. These are for unobtainable luxury items like chocolate, coffee, cigarettes. They show the power of commerce from which the word "Merz" is derived, for in times of acute shortage "the heart goes from sugar to coffee" (Schwitters).

Perhaps the shortening of the *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends* to *KdeE* is not accidental since "KaDeWe" was the abbreviated name of one of the big stores in Berlin, the Kaufhaus des Westens.<sup>21</sup> If the big stores were in Baudelaire's eyes the "ivresse religieuse des grandes villes"<sup>22</sup> and if he saw in them "temples dedicated to this intoxication"<sup>23</sup> the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, with its cult-like presentation of things, also alienated the gleeful dressing-up of the wares in these new cathedrals.





Fig. 8 Kurt Schwitters, *Merz 94: Grünfleck*, 1920

Just as “the lyrical frenzy of the material” has replaced “the long exhausted psychology of the human”<sup>24</sup> so did Schwitters in the *Grottoes of Friendship* replace friends with various objects associated with them. This he did with humorous objectivity. A thick pencil, for example, stands for Mies van der Rohe, a key and a prescription for Dr Steinitz, a pair of socks for Moholy-Nagy, a cut-off tie for van Doesburg, a tuft of hair for Hans Richter, while Sophie Täuber-Arp is represented by her brassière. In one way Schwitters secured the memory of his friends and gave life to those articles, and in another way the display of the objects reflected, albeit grotesquely, the material objectification of interpersonal relationships. These fetishes are selected with humour and make clear a fragmented perception of people which loses itself in details, taking them for the whole.

In the *Merzbau* (fig. 9) and in his *Merz* collages Schwitters allows associations of time, life, companionships, reality, play and imagination to filter through. These then set

loose a stream of consciousness which starts off further impressions and memories. This gives rise to an organic process of growth itself which transcends and excels the “dead body of the object”.<sup>25</sup> In the *Merzbau* “the inner form of time seems to regain the three-dimensional extension”<sup>26</sup> of which it had been deprived by its functional use. The metamorphic subject has found its ideal location in the *Merzbau*. “Where experience in the strict meaning of the word prevails, certain contents of the individual past come into conjunction in the memory with elements of the collective past.”<sup>27</sup> In this way the *Merzbau* is able to present a union between subjective and collective experience. It assumes the significance which originally belonged to “the cathedrals” and more especially to the cults with their ceremonials. In them the present, memory and expectation were fused into a revelation, and in the experience they formed a unity of disparate parts.

This mythical experience united Schwitters with Hans Christian Andersen’s collages<sup>28</sup> which are uncannily similar to his own. Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) wove things filled with the spirit of the time into the enigmatic rebus of the private hieroglyphics of his collages. One example is given here in the collage from the *Kinderbuch der Agnete Lind* (1894; fig. 10) of which there are four further versions. It was not only the playful method of his collages that Andersen had in common with Schwitters; he also shared his passion for collecting. For his collages he compiled a wealth of cut-out silhouettes, glossy pictures, portraits, labels, series of comic pictures, lottery and entrance tickets, etc. An overt allegorized form of memory, very much like a “strange dream”,<sup>29</sup> is visible in Andersen’s collages, and then enclosed again in the theme of a fairy-tale. Just as the Surrealists found their nineteenth-century poetic forbear in Lewis Carroll, a kind of counterbalancing memory, so Schwitters unconsciously stepped into the mystical legacy of Hans Christian Andersen. Andersen and Carroll, who both lived in the



Fig. 10 Hans Christian Andersen, Page from the *Kinderbuch der Agnete Lind*, recalling Andersen’s fellow poets Holberg, Ingemann and Kingo, and Weber’s *Freischütz*

era of the great world exhibitions, based the fetishistic nature of things on a new poetic principle of construction – they supplied the dream, the unconscious and above all the element of play, knowing that “in this most arid century the entire dream-energy of society has fled into the silent, impenetrable nebulous world of fashion, into which reason cannot follow”.<sup>30</sup> In Andersen’s poetic vision of himself he was a fool, an outcast from society burying himself in drawing, painting, making cut-outs, composing lyrics, dramas, plays, ballets, writing memoirs and telling stories. So far the links in style, in the use of the grotesque, and in the use of humour in the poetry and art of this Pierrot of the North have not been investigated in relation to Schwitters’s art. Another such Pierrot was Wilhelm Busch, whose “pious Helene” was an ancestress of Schwitters’s Anna Blume and who is quoted in the *Merzbau*. In their work, both these artists reveal the subversive forces which lie beneath the surface of the cosy culture of the Biedermeier.

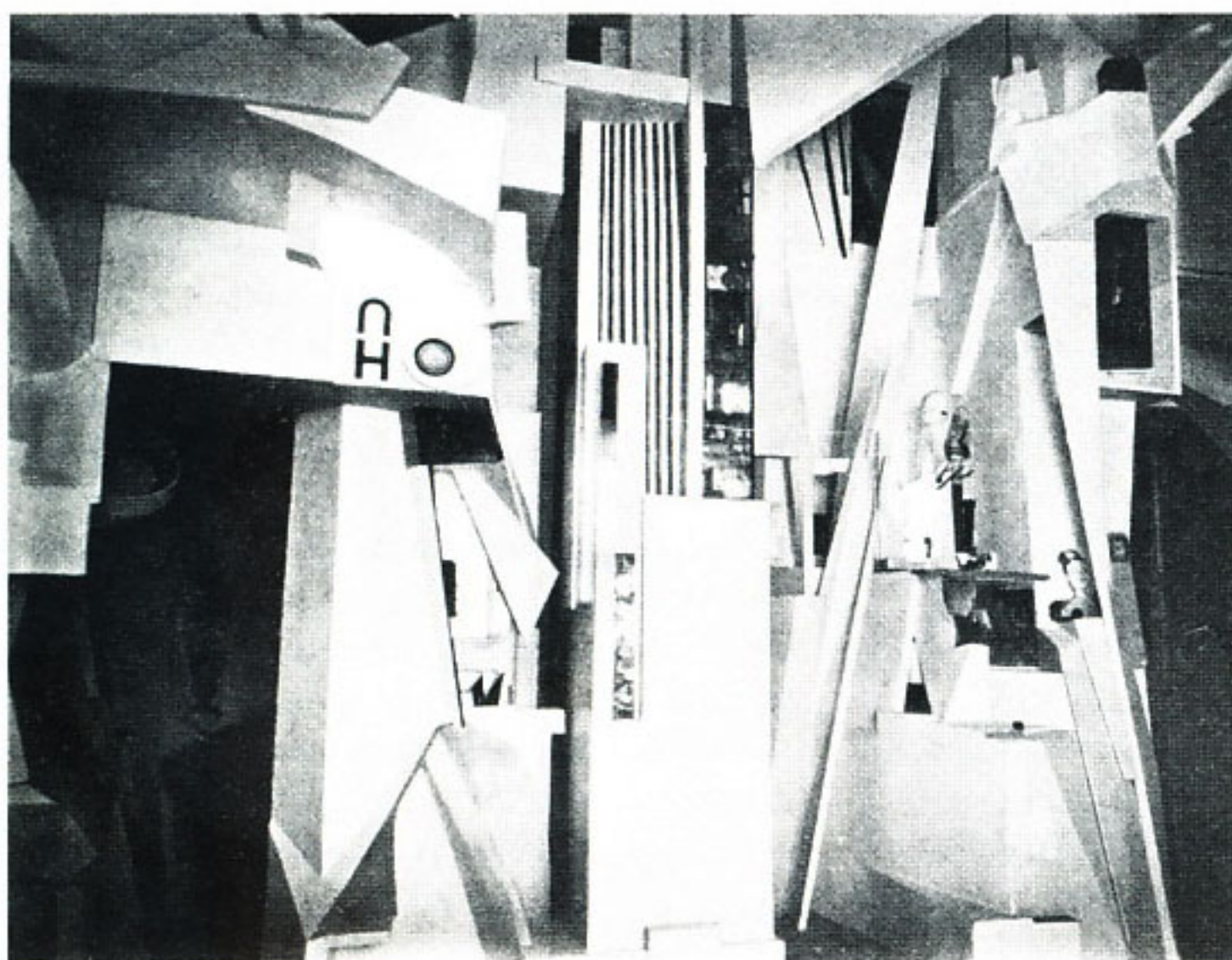


Fig. 9 The Hanover *Merzbau*, with the later state of the *Merzsäule* on the right

## Notes

\* Translator’s note: Schwitters started to compose collages out of torn-up scraps of paper in 1918. On one such scrap was the syllable MERZ, from an advertisement for the German Commerz and Privatbank. From then on Schwitters described his assemblages as *Merz*.

1 Herwarth Walden, quoted from Werner Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, Cologne, 1967, p. 43

2 Cf. Dietmar Elgers, *Der Merzbau, eine Werkmonographie*, Cologne, 1964

3 Hans Richter, *Dada-Kunst und Antikunst*, Cologne, 1964, p. 156



- 4 Surviving remains of the Elterwater *Merzbau* are to be found in the Hatton Gallery of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.
- 5 Cf. Schmalenbach, *op.cit.*, pp. 61, 70
- 6 Cf. *Vollständiges Heiligenlexikon*, ed. Johann Evangelist Stadler and Franz Joseph Heim (contd. by J. M. Ginal), reprint of the Augsburg ed. of 1858, 5 vols., pp. 642 ff.
- 7 From the English edition of W. Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, New York, 1967, p. 132. Cf. Schmalenbach, *op.cit.*, p. 137
- 8 Schwitters, quoted from Schmalenbach, *op.cit.*, p. 134 ff., and Elgers, *op.cit.*
- 9 Cf. Monika Steinhauser, 'Noch über dem Vaterland steht die Kunst'. Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Vittoriale degli Italiani* on Lake Garda', in *Beiträge zum Problem des Stilpluralismus*, ed. Werner Hager and Norbert Knopp, Munich, 1977, pp. 163-92
- 10 Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, ready-made in 391, ed. Francis Picabia, Paris, March 1920
- 11 Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (1927), Lucerne, 1946, p. 78. Cf. Hanne Bergius, 'Dada als "Buffonade und Totenmesse zugleich"' in *Unter der Maske des Narren*, ed. Stefanie Poley, Stuttgart, 1981, pp. 208 ff.
- 12 Richard Huelsenbeck, quoted by Schmalenbach, *op.cit.*, p. 78
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Charles Baudelaire, in Walter Benjamin, *Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus. Zwei Fragmente*, ed. with an epilogue by Rolf Tiedemann. See "Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire III", *Die Moderne*, Frankfurt, 1969, p. 76, and Hanne Bergius, 'Der Da-Dandy – Das Narrenspiel aus dem Nichts', in *Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre*, Berlin, 1977, pp. 3, 12
- 15 Franz Werfel, 'Aphorismus zu diesem Jahr', *Die Aktion*, ed. Franz Pfemfert, III/4, Berlin, 1914, p. 903
- 16 Kurt Schwitters, 'Merz' (1924), *Der Sturm*, ed. Herwarth Walden, XVII/3, Berlin, 1927, p. 43
- 17 Schwitters; quoted from Schmalenbach, *op.cit.*, p. 98
- 18 Schwitters, *ibid.*, p. 78
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Cf. Annegreth Nill, 'Rethinking Kurt Schwitters, Part Two: An Interpretation of Grünfleck', *Arts Magazine*, LV/3, New York, 1981, pp. 118 ff.
- 21 Carola Giedion-Weicker made the same connection in 'Einheit in Vielfalt', in *Kurt Schwitters*, exhibition catalogue, Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, 1971, pp. 11 ff.
- 22 Charles Baudelaire, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt, 1982, p. 109
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 55
- 24 F. T. Marinetti, 'Technisches Manifest der Futuristischen Literatur', in Christa Baumgarth, *Geschichte des Futurismus*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1966, p. 168
- 25 Schwitters, quoted in Schmalenbach, *op.cit.*, p. 137
- 26 Elisabeth Lenk, *Die unbewußte Gesellschaft. Über die mimetische Grundstruktur in der Literatur und im Traum*, Munich, 1983, p. 313
- 27 Walter Benjamin, *op.cit.*, p. 107
- 28 Cf. Kjeld Heltoft, *Hans Christian Andersen als bildender Künstler*, Copenhagen, 1969
- 29 Heltoft, *op.cit.*, p. 106
- 30 Walter Benjamin, quoted by Elisabeth Lenk, 'Der Traum als Konstruktionsprinzip bei Lautreamont und Carroll', in Comte de Lautreamont (Isidore Ducasse), *Die Gesänge des Maldoror*, Munich, 1976, p. 303