



Kurt Schwitters

By Werner Schmalenbach
Harry A. Abrams, 1967 (out of print)
Standard Book No. 8109-0477-2

Kurt Schwitter's Hanover Merzbau

In an early stage of his Merz art Schwitters decided to extend his newly won insights to sculpture proper: "Now I am doing Merz plastics [sculptures]: *Pleasure Gallows* [*Gallows of Desire*] and *Cult-Pump*. Like Merz pictures, the Merz plastics are composed of various materials. They are conceived as round plastics and present any desired number of aspects." These two sculptures -*Gallows of Desire* and *Cult-Pump* -are known only in reproduction, for Schwitters incorporated them in the Hanover Merzbau. In 1919 he exhibited them at the Berlin Sturm. They might be described as three-dimensional collages or assemblages made up of pieces of wood, parts of boxes, bits of wire, and the like, which are nailed onto a wooden base. Both works are dominated by vertical elements; the one in *Gallows of Desire* has a wheel attached to it. These sculptures are Dadaist altars of nonsense, and historically they fall somewhere between Marcel Duchamp's cult of the utilitarian object and the Surrealists' cult of the found object. A related work, also known from reproductions only, Schwitters obviously regarded not as a sculpture but as an architectural model: *House Merz*. At first glance these works must seem rather tangential to the rest of Schwitters' oeuvre, but in fact they were closely bound up with a major work he began at the same time and considered from then on at the center of his entire production-the Merzbau.

Destroyed by bombs in 1943, the Merzbau was regarded by Schwitters as his lifework. He spent years building it, changing it, rearranging it, and adding on to what began as a stalactite-like sculpture but gradually filled his studio and then spread into a number of other rooms in

the house where he lived. As the little Dadaist sculptures and shrines with which he began his Merzbau were gradually swallowed up in an increasingly more architectural construction of wood and plaster, he became ever more irrevocably caught up in it. It became his *Lebenstraum* in the most personal sense, the creation of an artist, no doubt, but a creation that could not possibly serve as model for any other art, any other architecture. The Merzbau was a unique Expressionist-Dadaist-Constructivist apparition in the spirit of *Dr. Caligari*, which, had it survived the war, would have become a most singular place of pilgrimage for art lovers: the utopia of an irrational architecture, which, after it had outgrown its Dadaist beginnings, tried to become ever more rational and “objective” in its stylistic means but which never tried to disguise the fact that here an artist was creating a refuge for his most subjective spiritual and artistic needs. From the photographs it is difficult to say to what extent it was a work that had attained artistic completion. In any case, it was an enchanted room that baffled some, bewitched others, and in all its fantasy and bizarreness it was an expression of Schwitters’ genius of the utmost liveliness and originality. Bound up as it was with Schwitters’ unique personality, the Merzbau could hardly be expected to have imitators, although the notions of an irrational space and of a sculpture enclosing the viewer have both been engaging artists since.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly when Schwitters began to construct the Merzbau” the column,” as he called it, since it began with a “column.” In December 1930 he wrote that the Merzbau “has already taken seven years,” which would suggest 1923 as the date it was started. But it must be said that it was not in the nature of things that such a work should ever be finished, or indeed begun. What happened, probably, was that his studio took on a strange appearance from the innumerable Dada creations he was working on, for example sculptures such as *Gallows of Desire* and *Cult-Pump* (which were constituent parts of the Merzbau in its first phase), as well as such other Dada show-pieces as a dressmaker’s dummy with ludicrous objects and inscriptions suspended from and glued to it (of which photographs titled *Die heilige Bekümmernis* [“*The Holy Affliction*,”] have come down to us). When, around 1923, Schwitters moved his studio to another room of the house, he began to let the hitherto separate creations coalesce into a whole. This must have been the point that Schwitters had in mind when he fixed the date of the beginning of the Merzbau as 1923.

In *Merz 21. erstes Veilchenheft* (1931) Schwitters wrote a description of the Merzbau, which, though written at a time when the spirit of Constructivism had long since taken possession of his fantastic creation, still gave an idea of the original Dada elements that were “Merzed” in it. This account is quoted in extenso:

“... and so my great column came into being.-Now just what is the column? Well, first of all, it is one of a number, about ten. It is called Cathedral of Erotic Misery [*Kathedrale des erotischen Elends*], or KdeE for short, this is an age of abbreviations. Moreover it is unfinished, and on principle. It grows about the way a big city does when a new building goes up, the Housing Bureau checks to see that the whole appearance of the city is not going to be ruined. In my case, I run across something or other that looks to me as though it would be right for the KdeE, so 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 realize 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. An arrangement of the most strictly geometrical cubes covers the whole, underneath which shapes are curiously bent or otherwise twisted until their complete dissolution is achieved. The name KdeE is only a designation. It has no bearing on the content, but this is a fate it shares with all names, e.g., Düsseldorf is no longer a Dorf, and Schopenhauer is not a drunkard [*Schoppen*, a beer mug]. The KdeE, it might be said, is the development into pure form of almost everything that has struck me as either important or unimportant over the past seven years-though some literary elements have crept in. The Cathedral measures 3-1/2 by 2 by 1 meters and used to be elaborately wired for electric light but a short circuit changed all that. So now the Bau has candles everywhere-little Christmas candles in the dark corners when I am making additions or repainting. These are not part of the composition proper, but when lit make the whole thing one big unreal Christmas tree. Each of the caves or grottoes takes its character from some principal component. One holds the glittering treasure of the Nibelungs, another the Kyffhauser with the stone table, and the Goethe grotto has one of his legs and a lot of pencils worn down to stubs. The submerged personal-union city Braunschweig-Lüneburg has houses from Weimar by Feininger, Persil ads, and the official emblem of the city of Karlsruhe, which I designed. The sex-crime cave has one abominably mutilated corpse of an unfortunate young girl, painted tomato-red, and there are splendid ex-votos here. Other caves contain authentic brown coal and authentic gas coke from the Ruhr, an exhibition of paintings and sculptures by Michelangelo and myself being viewed by one dog on a leash, a kennel with a water closet and a red dog, and an organ which you turn counterclockwise to play Silent Night Holy Night, and Come Ye Little Children. There is also a 10% disabled war veteran with his daughter, who has no head but is still well preserved, and my Monna Hausmann. This consists of a reproduction of the Mona Lisa without the silly smile since I pasted the face of Raoul Hausmann over hers. There is the brothel with a three-legged lady made by Hannah Hoeh, and the big Grotto of Love. This last alone takes up approximately 1/4 of the base of the column. A wide free staircase leads up to it, and Madame Papi, life's eternal female lavatory attendant, stands under it in a long narrow corridor with scattered camel dung. Two children greet us and step into life; owing to damage only part of a mother and child remains. Shiny broken objects set the mood. In the middle a couple embracing: he has no head, she has no arms; he is holding a huge blank cartridge between his legs. The child with syphilitic eyes in its big twisted-around head is telling the embracing couple to be careful. This is disturbing but there is reassurance in the little round bottle of my own urine in which immortelles are suspended. This is just a tiny part of the column's literary content. Besides, a number of grottoes have vanished from sight since under later accretions, for instance, Luther's Corner. That the literary content is Dadaist goes without saying, for it dates from the year 1923, and I was once a Dadaist. But the column has been under construction for seven years and has taken on a more and more severely formal character, in keeping with my spiritual development, especially so far as the outer structure is concerned. The over-all impression is thus more or less reminiscent of Cubist paintings or Gothic architecture (not a bit!)-I have given a fairly detailed description of the KdeE because this is the first reference to it in print, and because it is very hard to understand because of its ambiguities. Only three men, I venture to suppose, would fully understand what I am doing with my column-Herwarth Walden, Dr. S. Giedion, and Hans Arp (though I should be delighted if others came forward in support). I fear that the others will not quite get it, even with the help of the foregoing explanation, but then, where such out-of-the-way things are concerned, who needs full understanding? Actually, the KdeE is one of those violets born to blush unseen. People may never beat a path to it, but I am

not so shy.”

Three friends of Schwitters—Hans Arp, Hans Richter, and Kate Steinitz—have left probably the best, at least the most vivid, descriptions of the Merzbau as seen by other eyes, though not accurate in every detail.

In his obituary piece on his friend, Arp recalled: “His house in Hanover was shot through with mine shafts from top to bottom. Openings in the floors made a system of tunnels connecting the roof with the ground floor. Obviously not a residence in the style of the Sun King. Working hard at it over a period of years, Schwitters succeeded in completely ‘Merzing’ the house where he lived. The soaring Merz-columns ingeniously, constructed out of rusty old iron bars, mirrors, wheels, family portraits, bedsprings, newspapers, cement, paints, plaster, and glue—lots and lots of glue—forced their way upward through successive holes, gullies, abysses, and fissures. ‘Without parallel in either the ancient or the modern world, this monumental structure by no means suggested the merely odd works of eccentric hobbyists. Quite the contrary: the beauty of its rhythms set it alongside the masterpieces of the Louvre.’”

In *Dada Profile* Hans Richter gave this account: “On my first visit with Schwitters in Hanover, the city where he was born and lived until the Nazis drove him out, he showed me, though not until he had prepared me for it at some length, the work that meant most to him. This was ‘the Schwitters column.’ In the second storey of the house Schwitters inherited from his family, a door at the end of the corridor opened into a not-too-large room. In the middle stood an abstract sculpture in plaster. At the time it filled approximately a quarter of the room and almost reached the ceiling. It resembled, if anything Schwitters ever made resembled anything else, early sculptures by Domela or Vantongerloo. But this was not just a sculpture; it was something that changed from day to day as Schwitters’ life changed. He explained it to me, and I saw that it was made up of alternating concavities and convexities, the hollows forming little caves or grottoes, the bulges giving shape to the over-all structure. Every part had a ‘meaning,’ especially the concavities. Besides one for his wife and another for his son, there were grottoes dedicated to Mondrian, Arp, Gabo, Van Doesburg, Lissitzky, Malevich, Mies van der Rohe, Richter, and Werner Graeff. Each little grotto contained highly personal mementoes of the individual concerned. He cut off a bit of my hair and put it inside the Richter grotto. A thick pencil filched from Mies van der Rohe’s drawing table was in the space reserved for him. Others were represented by a bit of shoelace, a half-smoked cigarette, a fingernail paring, a piece of a necktie (Van Doesburg), a broken pen. But there were odder things than that: for instance, a broken denture with some teeth remaining and a small bottle of urine marked with the name of the donor. More than one grotto might be devoted to the same person, depending on Schwitters’ feelings at the moment This was how the column had been built up, and it was still growing.

“When I visited him again three years later, I found the column completely changed. To begin with, all the little hollows and bulges that we formerly ‘inhabited’ were no longer visible. ‘They’re all deep inside now,’ Schwitters explained. They were in fact buried under the column’s monstrous new growths: new people, new forms, new colors, and further details. It was like some jungle vegetation threatening to keep on growing forever. And whereas the column looked more or less Constructivist before, now it was taking on curves.

“However, since the column had grown so overwhelmingly and was still growing, the dominant impression was that it was going to burst through the walls of the room. If Schwitters was still to be able to walk around it, he could not add another thing. If only there were some way to extend it upward! Schwitters considered this the ‘easiest’ solution. Being the owner of the

house, he gave notice to the tenants above him, made a hole in the ceiling, and then continued to add to the column from the floor above. I never saw the finished work. I left Germany before Hitler came to power and had no news from Schwitters until he went to Norway, one step ahead of the Nazis who had ordered his arrest in Hanover. Although he began a second column in Norway, and a third one in England, he never forgave the Nazis for destroying what he considered his lifework, the one that, more than any other, reflected his own physical and spiritual growth day after day and year after year.”

Lastly, this is what Kate Steinitz tells us of the Merzbau:

“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 or platforms divided it into stories. The inside walls were perforated with entrances to caves—more or less dark, depending upon whether or not the electricity was functioning. The cave entrances were on different levels and never directly one above another. If someone wanted to visit all the caves, he had to go all the way around the column. The very secret caves were probably never seen by anyone except Walden Giedion and Arp. “I remember the Goethe Cave, the Niebelungen Cave, and the Cave of the Murderers, where little plastic figures were bleeding with lipstick. It has all frequently 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. In addition to the Cave of Deprecated Heroes, there were Caves of Hero Worship, Caves of Friendship, an Arp Cave, a Moholy-Nagy Cave, a Gabo Cave, and a Mondrian Cave. Hannah Hoehch was allowed two caves for her photo-collages.

“I did not work actively on the column, but I remember that Kurt built into it a lost key of mine which I had been searching for desperately. He placed the key next to a medical prescription written by Dr. Steinitz and the box of pills Schwitters bought but never took. In each cave was a sediment of impressions and emotions, with significant literary and symbolic allusions.

“I said to Kurt, ‘You call the Expressionists painters of their own sour souls, but aren’t you emptying your own sour soul into the caves?’ ‘This is something entirely different,’ he answered. ‘The caves are only minor matters. Mere details. You will see. Finally the column will stand with ten other columns as gigantic forms in space.’

“Actually the details did all disappear in the course of time. The caves were walled up so you couldn’t get in anymore. They were either nailed shut with rectangular, colored wooden boards, or they simply 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 on one of the protruding parts.

“When I left Hanover in 1936 the construction had spread out so far horizontally that it almost filled up the entire ground-floor studio next to the apartment of Kurt Schwitters’ parents. Growing steadily in the other direction, too, the Cathedral had broken through the ceiling, and, aspiring upward, had pushed into Kurt’s and Helma’s apartment above, leaving one of the rooms with no floor.

“If the column had not been entirely destroyed by a bomb, if it had only been buried, it might have been excavated after a few centuries. Then one would have found, as in a time

capsule, hidden deep in the inside of the column, the hidden life of Schwitters' soul his struggle with all problems of life and art, language and literature, of human and unhuman relations. The Cathedral harbored much more than his erotic misery, which perhaps was rather complicated, but not as tragic as his struggle for pure form which finally conquered the chaos of the darkest erotic caves, the entanglements of the historical caves, and the complexities of the caves of friendship."

It was probably because the Merzbau was a bewildering experience for most people even the enthusiastic visitors—that inaccurate and erroneous ideas of its structure and extent were widely disseminated and even published. Especially persistent was the notion that in the course of time it grew to fill the entire house at Waldhausenstrasse 5, the only truth to which is that it was not confined to one story. Most intimately acquainted with the Merzbau, particularly in the later years, was the artist's son, who lived through the daily changes and transformations at close quarters and even had a hand in building it; the following description of its appearance is based on conversations with him.

The essential area of the Merzbau was parts of the house situated just above the ground floor. Around 1920 Schwitters' studio was in a room at the rear of this floor that had formerly been his parents' bedroom. At this time the room was already taking shape as a "cabinet of curiosities," thanks to the collection of Dada sculptures and assemblages, and was hence if not a part at least the source of the Merzbau. Around 1922/23 Schwitters' studio was transferred to a larger room at the rear, and with this shift commences the history of the Merzbau proper. Thus it began at the time when Schwitters was yielding to his obviously stronger Constructivist inclinations. But still the nucleus was the Dadaist works, now no longer isolated in space but housed in wood-and-plaster constructions in which they were visible through panes of glass. The actual start seems to have been a sculpture in the De Stijl manner, which Schwitters called a "column." After being exhibited at the Der Sturm gallery in Berlin, it was set up in Schwitters' studio. This was only the first of a number of column-like sculptures. Schwitters called it the "the column" or the "KdeE." These constructions were full of nooks and crannies, some hollowed out afterward, some already there. Inside these caves or grottoes an astonishingly heterogeneous collection of objects was introduced: things of everyday use as well as souvenirs and mementoes preserved like relics. Many of these grottoes were gradually swallowed up as the construction grew larger. Around 1925/26 the room was becoming virtually impenetrable, and Schwitters extended it to take in his son's room, which was adjoining. His son had to move farther upstairs. The two rooms were made one. The newer constructions were in keeping with Schwitters' artistic development, more homogeneous and more "consistent," but less luxuriant than the earlier ones. Wood and plaster, mainly painted white but with pastel colors here and there, gave the Merzbau its character. All the photographs that we have show the earlier portions.

As the larger space became filled up, Schwitters built an irregular stairway into the construction, by which it was easy to climb, partly within the "columns" and partly alongside them, to the "ceiling" of the construction, which had grown to varying heights. In the newly created room Schwitters built a false ceiling to create a windowless room above, which served as his bedroom for many years.

On the ground floor of the house were two rooms which, some time in the late 1920s or the early 1930s Schwitters converted into a single room and proceeded to transform in the Merzbau style. A column extended through a slanting skylight, ending in a staircase leading to the highest point of the roof. A platform was built here in 1936 and used for sunbathing.

In the house proper the construction had filled up more and more of the lower floors.

To permit it to grow, Schwitters made a hole in the outside wall of the old studio where the Merzbau had begun ten years earlier, onto a balcony which he now enclosed with glass. But even this did not provide enough space. Under the balcony, which was situated about six feet above the courtyard, there was just enough space for a man to stand, and Schwitters set out to incorporate this too. Around 1934/35 he cut a round hole in the floor of the balcony and built an irregular spiral staircase of wood and plaster. He screened off the area under the balcony from the courtyard within a wooden wall, so that here too “Merzing” could go on. In 1936, after a three-month stay in Norway, father and son began digging, preparatory to building a floor in this new space, and discovered the lid of a concrete cistern over two yards across. The surface of the water was visible at a depth of about two yards. The cistern was situated exactly at the spot where the winding stairs from the balcony reached the ground. The stairs were then extended down to the surface of the water, and, what was more important, several forms were now constructed to extend down from the balcony almost to the water.

Throughout the Merzbau, especially the central part, a great number of electric lights were distributed. The complicated electrical installation was contrived so that Schwitters could achieve a rich variety of lighting effects. During the 1930s Schwitters often worked day and night on his “useless” construction. Except when he was in Norway on an extended stay, he employed a carpenter and a painter full time on the Merzbau. It was never completed of course- this would have gone counter to the principle that sustained its growth. However, work on the cistern ended in December 1936. On December 25 Ernst Schwitters left Germany, and a few days later his father followed him.

The Merzbau is unique in the art of the first half of our century, an unparalleled example of the irrational shaping of space, all the more striking because the stylistic means employed were those of rational Constructivism. Schwitters thought he had gone beyond Dadaism and that his Merzbau was the visible expression of this development, as it swallowed up, one after another, the Dadaist reliquaries. That individual structural elements reflected the stylistic feeling of the Dutch De Stijl and Constructivism is obvious from the photographs, but the spirit in which they were called upon was different, indeed antithetical. Here, where Schwitters created his own most intimate habitat, his subjectivity was too much engaged to be buried under “objectivist” formulas. He availed himself of rational means to create an entirely a-rational space. The outward forms of architectonic functionalism merely provided him with a means of fulfilling a psychic function. Although the Dadaist “grottoes” were more and more swallowed up in sober “objectivity,” nothing could conceal the exuberant romanticism of the Merzbau, direct descendant of the late-eighteenth-century man-made caves and grottoes. Out of his own contradictions, Kurt Schwitters constructed the most florid of these half-sculptural, half-architectural “follies” yet: a refuge from the world in his own drawing room, as it were. In truth the Merzbau had more in common with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (the film was made in 1919) than with the “new architecture” Schwitters admired and propagandized for. The Romantic, the Expressionist Schwitters broke through the Cubist forms, leaving rents and fissures and hollowing out what remained. Though he did all this in accordance with recognizable formal rules, he did it not as an exercise in formal rigor but to make an image of his own secret desires, his own soul. To be an image of the soul was so completely the one *raison d’être* of the Merzbau that the man who made it was progressively dispossessed by it, driven out of room after room in his own house.

It was as though Schwitters had to destroy space before he could realize it. During the years

of the Merzbau's growth, he had become a passionate apologist of the right angle yet seemed to fight it even if he displayed reverence for it in matters of detail. He fought against the idea of cubic space by traversing space in dynamic movements. The cube as the epitome of finite space was abolished for the sake of infinite movement in space. Schwitters must have felt something like this when he wrote in his characteristic theorizing fashion: "There are various kinds of form, which mediate between the cube and infinite form." His real aspiration was toward infinity, but an infinity located, so to speak, inside space, at its imaginary center, at the point of intersection of secret spatial co-ordinates, where the artist wanted to place the viewer. The scarcely conscious ideal of an infinite, endlessly growing space was realized here in a unique way: this luxuriant sculpture has not only the dimension of space but also the dimension of time.

The Merzbau turns out to be the strongest argument against Schwitters' excursion into Geometricism and Constructivism. True, as the works of Naum Gabo (whom Schwitters knew well) and his brother, Pevsner, show, even Constructivism is not untinged by visionary mysticism; a fair number of expressionist and romantic aspirations have been cloaked in the absolutist pursuit of pure form. Objectivity and utopianism, sobriety and romanticism calculation and imagination were not so remote from one another in those years. Though this may not be immediately apparent in the strict rectilinear asceticism of Mondrian and Malevich, it is there for all to see in the labyrinthine stalactites of the Merzbau.