

(UN) FORMING NATURE: KURT SCHWITTERS'S MERZ BARN (1947-1948)

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis centers on Kurt Schwitters's *Merz Barn* (1947-1948), exploring the relationship between nature and the *Merz* principles of *formung* (forming) and *entformung* (un-forming) within the context of this late work. The *Merz Barn*, the last of Schwitters's *Merzbauten*, has yet to receive the extensive level of research accorded to its famous Hannover predecessor, resulting in an underdeveloped grasp of the project as a whole within *Merzbau* scholarship. The present study considers Schwitters's increasing orientation towards nature as a model for artistic creation to elicit an understanding of the ways in which his paradoxical *Merz* formula, "Formen heißt entformeln," evolved during his period of exile. I contend that Schwitters employed the organic processes of natural growth and decay to realize the principles of *formung* and *entformung* in his *Merz Barn*. Furthermore, the sculptural interior underscores the dialectical exchange between forming and un-forming, highlighting the liminal space between the opposing processes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Following the end of the Second World War and his exile from Nazi Germany, the German artist Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948) settled in the English Lake District. In June of 1947, he received a grant from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to begin constructing his third and final *Merzbau*, which he called the *Merz Barn* (Figs 1-4). This work, left unfinished as a result of his death in early 1948, would conclude his *Merzbau* project begun nearly thirty years earlier with his Hannover *Merzbau* (Figs. 5-7), a revolutionary sculptural space that many scholars have considered a precursor to installation art. Like his other *Merzbauten*, the *Merz Barn* is made up of found objects encased in plaster and subsumed into a greater sculptural entity. This project is a physical manifestation of the aesthetic and conceptual goals of *Merz*, Schwitters's name for his artistic philosophy and practice. Out of the three structures that he termed *Merzbauten*, the *Merz Barn* is the only one that has evaded complete destruction (the first was bombed, the second burned), yet it remains largely neglected by scholars.

Schwitters's *Merz Barn*, though a continuation of his larger *Merzbau* project, diverts from the earlier examples in that its style is far more organic and that it thematizes nature more so than the previous works. While the Hannover *Merzbau* has been the object of an extensive body of scholarship, there has yet to be a thorough examination of the ways in which the *Merz Barn* both expanded and revised Schwitters's *Merzbau* project. In this thesis, I explore how Schwitters's paradoxical notions of *formung* (forming) and *entformung* (un-forming), and particularly his formula "MERZ ist Form.

Formen heißt entformeln,” relate to his *Merz Barn*.¹ I argue that in his *Merz Barn*, Schwitters employs the organic principles of nature to realize his *Merz* formula, according to which forming always already implies the opposite process of un-forming. Furthermore, I contend that this final *Merzbau* highlights the exchange between the processes of forming and un-forming, therefore calling attention to the work’s development. The resulting sculptural environment privileges process over product, revealing the liminal space between the work’s fluid formation and decay.

In the early 1920s, Schwitters undertook his first *Merzbau* in his home on Waldhausenstraße in Hannover. This work began as a group of isolated sculptures that were eventually merged to create an immersive space that the viewer could enter. The project demonstrated the influence of Dada, Constructivism, and Expressionism on Schwitters’s practice and represented his radically inclusive approach to art. This *Merzbau*, which grew to occupy multiple rooms in Schwitters’s family home, was destroyed during an Allied bombing raid in 1943.

Schwitters fled his home in 1937 to avoid persecution by the Nazis, who grouped him among the “degenerate artists” of the *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung*. He went to Norway, where he began to create a second *Merzbau*, which he called the *Haus am Bakken* (Figs. 8-10). Schwitters worked on this structure from 1937-1940, which is said to have generally emulated the style of the original in Hannover. The *Haus am Bakken* was the only *Merzbau* where Schwitters constructed both the building and the sculptural interior. This work was also destroyed, this time by an accidental fire in 1951.

When the Nazis invaded Norway in 1940, Schwitters was once again forced to flee, this time escaping to England. After the war, following a stint in an internment camp

¹ Kurt Schwitters, *Merz 7*, (Hannover: Merz-Verlag, 1924), 65.

and a stay in London, Schwitters moved to the Lake District in northern England. He wished desperately to return to work on his earlier *Merzbauten*, but this effort proved in vain due to his declining health, lack of funds, and the difficulty of travel immediately following the war. Instead, Schwitters ultimately resolved to rent a barn on the local Cylinders farm from the owner Harry Pierce, in which the artist began to create his final *Merzbau*. The interior, of which he had nearly completed one wall at the time of his death, is far more sculptural than those in his earlier *Merzbauten*, with the found objects from his pastoral environment dictating the undulations of the plaster surface that they are absorbed by. Unlike the Hannover *Merzbau*, which had artificial lights, the *Merz Barn* was lit by natural light streaming in from a skylight and two small windows. The *Merz Barn* also had a dirt floor and was eventually to have a grass roof, which was put in place after Schwitters's death. A diagonal wall, partially constructed by Schwitters, was intended to direct visitors from the door towards the skylight, immersing them in a cavernous mass of form and color. The *Merz Barn* has an organic character that is distinct from the other *Merzbauten*, and John Elderfield states that it supplies the viewer with “the same kind of wonder as a natural curiosity.”²

The *Merzbau* project as a whole occupied a central place in Schwitters's *Merz* practice. For the artist, *Merz* served as both an identifier and a name for his practice, distinguishing his production from the various other avant-garde movements of that era. *Merz* was built around the idea of aesthetic redemption, in which Schwitters would take found objects, namely debris, and ‘redeem’ them through their inclusion in a work of art. While most scholars highlight the constructive nature of this practice (Schwitters's act of assembling disparate materials into a *Merz* work), it is important not to ignore the act's

² John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 223.

deconstructive nature. Schwitters removed the found objects from their original context, stripping them of their previous intention and use, in order to repurpose them into his work. In doing this, Schwitters often obscured the object's original identity, un-forming the pre-existent to form something new. In the seventh edition of his *Merz* magazine (1924) (Fig. 11), Schwitters included a phrase on the cover that has since held a central position in scholarship on the artist. It reads, "MERZ ist Form. Formen heißt entformeln." This phrase is translated differently by various scholars, but is most frequently interpreted to mean, "Merz is form. To form means to un-form." While this statement can, on a straightforward level, be understood to refer to the physical forming and un-forming of the materials in *Merz* works, it can also be approached metaphorically. According to Rainier Rumold, in an essay that theorizes the Hannover *Merzbau*, Schwitters's paradoxical notions of forming and un-forming constitute the subversive dismantling of high western culture.³ This, Rumold argues, is accomplished through Schwitters's allusion to high cultural forms, particularly in the artist's secondary name for the work as a *Kathedrale* (cathedral), despite the inclusion of abject themes and items. Rumold does not, however, address the *Merz Barn*, which on my account performs a similar process not through its allusion to themes from western culture, but by its literal placement in the dirt and the interior's potential to grow like an organic entity. Such a process reveals the extent to which Schwitters's paradoxical formula of forming and un-forming was a multidimensional idea that operated differently in various works and throughout the artist's extensive career.

³ Rainer Rumold, "Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*: Arche-texture as *Kunststück*," *Virgin Microbe: Essays on Dada*, edited by David Hopkins and Michael White (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 139-160.

CHAPTER II

MERZ AND CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR THE MERZBAU

Kurt Schwitters began his career as a traditional artist, studying academic art at the Dresden Kunstakademie from 1909 to 1914. Like many artists affected by the First World War, however, he responded to the perceived need for artistic innovation and began to experiment with avant-garde styles. During the war years, Schwitters's artistic trajectory led him to adopt Impressionism (1914-1917), Expressionism (1917), and abstraction (1917-1918) before inventing his own artistic enterprise, *Merz*, in 1918. The latter essentially permitted Schwitters to freely absorb new styles as he encountered them, allowing his own *Merz* to evolve and account for his shifting influences.

The birth of *Merz* was directly connected to Schwitters's desire for reconstruction following the First World War. More than ten years after the war, he provided this statement:

In the war, it fermented horribly. I could not use what I had brought from the academy and the useful new ideas were still unready, while an imbecilic struggle raged around me about things that have never concerned me. Then suddenly the glorious revolution was upon us. I don't think highly of revolutions; mankind has to be ripe for such things... now the fermentation began in earnest. I felt myself freed and had to shout my jubilation out to the world. Out of parsimony I took whatever I found to do this, because we were now a poor country. One can even shout out through refuse, and this is what I did, nailing and gluing it together. I call it '*Merz*,' it was a prayer about the victorious end of war, victorious as peace had won in the end; everything had broken down in any case and new things had to be made out of fragments; and this is *Merz*.⁴

Here, Schwitters assigns *Merz* the task of transforming objects of waste into objects of value, elevated to that status by his artistic intervention. The use of found objects was essential to *Merz*, beginning with its name. *Merz* comes from a word fragment – the

⁴ Quoted in Werner Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1970), 32.

second syllable “found” in the German word *kommerz* (commerce). Schmalenbach also points out that *Merz* is the central syllable of the German verb *ausmerzen* (to reject), a fact that a master of language such as Schwitters would have been unlikely to miss. Furthermore, *Merz* is a homonym of the word *März* (March), the first month of spring, and therefore connotes the idea of new beginnings. By considering the multi-layered meaning contained within the word, a more complete picture of the *Merz* process is possible, particularly as it relates to objects finding new life through their aesthetic redemption.

Defining *Merz* has long troubled scholars, as Schwitters used the term quite broadly, applying it to everything from his collage to his poetry. It is fruitless to try and pinpoint a singular meaning in *Merz* or *Merz* works, as Schwitters’s art was not homogenous. Rather, he adopted a radically inclusive approach to art, allowing multiple styles and media to be subsumed into the *Merz* operation. For example, despite Schwitters’s shift to utilizing debris as material for his works, he never fully abandoned his use of traditional painting techniques. In addition to *Merz*’s wide range of artistic applications, Schwitters treated the concept as both an identity and way of life. *Merz* defied classification as a mere artistic style. Of this, Schwitters stated in his 1920 essay titled “Merz”:

The medium [das Material] is as unimportant as I myself. Essential is only the forming. Because medium is unimportant, I take any material whatsoever if the picture demands it. When I adjust materials of different kinds to one another, I have taken a step in advance of mere oil painting, for in addition to playing off color against color, line against line, form against form, etc., I play off material against material, for example, wood against sackcloth. I call the *Weltanschauung* [world view] from which this mode of artistic creation arose ‘Merz’.⁵

⁵ Kurt Schwitters, “Merz,” in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1951), 59.

Here, Schwitters also underlines the paradoxical characteristic of *Merz*. He begins by describing himself, the artist, as a trivial component of the process, yet follows this with an explanation of his power as artist to manipulate base materials into an artistic composition. In the original text, Schwitters uses the German term *das Material*, stating that “Das Material ist so unwesentlich, wie ich selbst. Wesentlich ist das Formen.”⁶ This too is significant, as it implies *Merz*’s applicability to any material or medium. Schwitters could construct works from whatever he saw fit, be it fragments of language or visual elements.⁷

For all of its instability, Schwitters did identify a few key characteristics of *Merz* as it was applied to art. According to his description in “Die *Merz* Malerei,” *Merz* could use any material, allowed found objects an equal status as traditional art media, and relied on the artist as the forming entity.⁸ Schwitters distinguished between the naturalistic works that he used to generate income (what he called art *for* commerce) and that which he formed from the waste of a commercial world (art *from* commerce, or *Merz*). This act serves as a perfect example of *Merz*’s main purpose, the process of artistic transformation. As Schwitters stated in “Merz,” “The word ‘Merz’ had no meaning when I formed it. Now it has the meaning which I gave it. The meaning of the concept of ‘Merz’ changes with the change in the insight of those who continue to work with it.”⁹ The process of the ultimate artistic power to form any material, a crucial component of

⁶ The original reads: “Das Material ist so unwesentlich, wie ich selbst. Wesentlich ist das Formen. Weil das Material unwesentlich ist, nehme ich jedes beliebige Material, wenn es das Bild verlangt. Indem ich verschiedenartige Materialien gegeneinander abstimme, habe ich gegenüber der nur—Ölmalerei ein Plus, da ich außer Farbe gegen Farbe, Linie gegen Linie, Form gegen Form usw. noch Material gegen Material, etwa Holz gegen Sackleinen werte. Ich nenne die Weltanschauung, aus der diese Art Kunstgestaltung wurde, >>Merz<<. Kurt Schwitters, “Merz,” in *Der Ararat* 2, no. 1 (1921): 5.

⁷ Nicholas Wadley, “The Late Work of Kurt Schwitters,” *Kurt Schwitters in Exile: The Late Work 1937-1948* (London: Marlborough Fine Art Ltd., 1981), 65.

⁸ Schmalenbach, 89.

⁹ Schwitters, “*Merz*,” 59.

Schwitters's conception of *Merz*, necessitated the dismantling of the object's original state, purpose, and identity.

While some scholars, such as Schmalenbach, emphasize the constructive aspects of Schwitters's work over the deconstructive, the latter's importance cannot be ignored. The principles of *formung* and *entformung* work as a cyclical process, continually operating without a definite beginning or end.¹⁰ It would at first seem that the *Merz* process is indeed finite, as Schwitters dismantled a found object and then formed the materials back into a completed art object. However, his complex process once again evades such straightforward characterization. It is known that Schwitters revisited old works to alter them again, and occasionally included entire earlier pieces in the assembly of later works.¹¹ For example, Schwitters's 1919 collage *Merzbild 10:A, Konstruktion für edle Frauen* (*Merz Picture 10:A, A Construction for Noble Ladies*) (Fig. 12) included a naturalistic portrait of a woman previously painted by Schwitters in its construction. This multimedia work includes the rubbish typical of Schwitters's collages and used overpainting to create a more cohesive expression in the work. It also includes fragments of wheels, a reoccurring motif in Schwitters's *Merzbilder*, which might be interpreted as connoting the idea of an unending cycle. It was not Schwitters's aim to replace the past with the present, but rather to incorporate remains of the past into the present by constantly dismantling objects and ideas, using their materials to build anew. While Schwitters certainly did not rework every art object that he created, no work was safe from his re-manipulation or reuse. Additionally, the motif of the wheel undermines the notion of a singular orientation, further exemplifying *Merz*'s instability and, at times,

¹⁰ Schmalenbach, 139.

¹¹ Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), 3 and Wadley, "Late Work," 65.

potential for reversal.¹² Schwitters wrote in his essay “Merz,” “Locomotives run in both directions. Why shouldn’t a locomotive run backwards now and then?”¹³ This playful phrase, typical of Schwitters’s writing, establishes the flexibility of *Merz* to move both backwards and forwards, to dismantle and assemble, or to form and un-form. In Schwitters’s final *Merzbau*, the *Merz Barn*, this theme resurfaces in conjunction with organic growth, as Schwitters produced a sculptural interior that encapsulates the themes of both growth and decay.

The most famous of Schwitters’s *Merz* works is his Hannover *Merzbau*, a project that he considered central to his oeuvre. In this interior, Schwitters accumulated collaged objects and began to cover them with a shell of plywood and plaster, molding geometric forms that he eventually painted white. While the core was made up of Dada works, the later stages bore more relation to Expressionist and Constructivist styles. This gradual transition fulfilled the aims of *Merz*, as it embraced the fusion of the diverse artistic styles and concepts that Schwitters moved fluidly between. As Rumold notes, the complex thematic orientation of the *Merzbau* oscillated between the apex of western (and particularly German) culture and the base of humanity.

In “Ich und meine Ziele” (1931), Schwitters begins by describing the work’s inception and subsequent growth, stating that his great column, called the *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends (KdeE) (Cathedral of Erotic Misery)*, emerged among a series of columns in his home. The unfolding structure was “unfinished, and on principle,”

¹² Christoph Bignens, “Cogs and Wheels,” *Merz: A Total Vision of the World*, (Bern: Benteli Publishers, 2004), 110.

¹³ Schwitters, “Merz,” 60.

growing much like a cohesive city.¹⁴ Schwitters notes that when he came across materials that would find a home in his *Merzbau* he collected and added them, “always keeping in mind the rhythm of the whole.”¹⁵ Like an organism, parts of the *KdeE* could also die: “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.”¹⁶ In this way, Schwitters allows the structure to adapt, reflecting his shifting artistic practice without fully abandoning his earliest inspiration. He describes how the structure continued to grow, resulting in the formation of grottos that had begun to “lead a life of their own within the overall structure.”¹⁷

From this point, Schwitters shifts his focus to elaborating on some of the themes contained within the work. Though he calls the work a “development into pure form,” he acknowledges the presence of literary elements.¹⁸ He describes the many sections within the work, identifying a Goethe grotto, a cavern with “sculptures by Michelangelo and myself being viewed by one dog on a leash,” references to Martin Luther, and imagery of a disabled war veteran.¹⁹ Schwitters also notes musical elements of the work, describing an organ “which you turn counterclockwise to play Silent Night Holy Night, and Come ye Little Children.” He identifies the presence of his artistic community represented in the work, such as his *Monna Hausmann*, “a reproduction of the Mona Lisa without the

¹⁴ Kurt Schwitters, “Ich und meine Ziele,” *Merz 21: erstes Veilchen=heft*, (Hannover: Merz-Verlag, 1931), 115-116.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

silly smile, since I pasted the face of Raoul Hausmann over hers” and a “three-legged lady” produced by Hannah Höch.²⁰

The Hannover *Merzbau* also includes some abject objects and themes, such as the *Lustmordhöhle* (sex-murder cave), which “has one abominably mutilated corpse of an unfortunate young girl, painted tomato-red,” and the big *Grotte der Liebe* (Grotto of Love). As Schwitters notes:

Madame Pipi, 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.²¹

Schwitters explains that the impact of the work is “more or less reminiscent of Cubist painting or Gothic architecture (not a bit!)” and that the only viewers who would fully grasp the work were Herwarth Walden, Dr. S. Giedion, and Hans Arp.²² I will return to discuss the influence of Arp on Schwitters in greater detail in the following.

The lengthy description provided by Schwitters indicates not only the complexity of his Hannover *Merzbau*, but also the multi-layered, diverse references contained within the work. Such cultural references are not present in the *Merz Barn*, which reveals the need for further study on the subject. As the last of Schwitters’s *Merzbauten*, this work signifies the continued evolution of the *Merzbau* idea and can be understood as the culmination of Schwitters’s thoughts on the project.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Following Schwitters's death, the Hannover *Merzbau* has become the subject of a wealth of scholarship. John Elderfield, Dietmar Elger, and Werner Schmalenbach were the pioneering scholars who established the facts and chronology of the construction of the *Merzbau* using surviving photographs and primary accounts. Gwendolen Webster has since played a crucial role in furthering their work. Other scholars have developed multiple conceptual frameworks through which the Hannover *Merzbau* can potentially be viewed. The first, found in the work of scholars such as Elizabeth Burns Gamard and Alexander Nagel, is the *Merzbau*'s conceptual relationship to a cathedral.²³ Gamard additionally explores both allusions to alchemy in the *Merzbau* and applies concepts from German Romanticism, like the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to the piece. Others, such as Leah Dickerman, have interpreted the *Merzbau* as a hall of both personal and collective memory.²⁴ The *Merzbau*, much like Schwitters's collages, can also be understood as an act of constructing from ruin or waste, and scholars such as Isabel Schulz have explored this process.²⁵ Dorothea Dietrich discusses the *Merzbau* in terms of its constant evolution, a notion that is furthered by Megan Luke's investigation in her recent book *Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile*.²⁶ Here, Luke puts forth the idea of the *Merzbau* as an exploration of space unfolding "from the inside out," or radiating outwards from a central

²³ Gamard, 87-109 and Alexander Nagel, "Cathedral of Erotic Suffering" in *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 263-274. This relationship is seen not only in Schwitters's title for one section of the work, *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends (Cathedral of Erotic Misery)* or *KdeE*, but also in Schwitters's decision to form grottos dedicated to people or ideas within the larger architectural space.

²⁴ Leah Dickerman, "Merz and Memory: On Kurt Schwitters." *The Dada Seminars*, edited by Leah Dickerman with Matthew S. Witkovsky, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 102-125.

²⁵ Isabel Schulz, "Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage," *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*, edited by Isabel Schulz (New Haven: Yale University Press), 51-63.

²⁶ Dorothea Dietrich, "Hannover," *Dada*, edited by Leah Dickerman, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2006) 156-212.

point.²⁷ Luke additionally discusses Schwitters's act of structuring the *Merzbau* around “conceptual oppositions,” a characteristic of the project that enforces the essential paradoxical essence of *Merz*.²⁸ Finally, Schwitters's progressive vision of immersive sculpture has led many to consider the work a precursor to installation art.²⁹ Karin Orchard states of this:

If one thinks of the *Merz* buildings as a ‘distributed network,’ analyses them according to their functions and use—and in particular the role of Kurt Schwitters as a living element of his structures (apart from others involved in making or living in these structures)—then it becomes clear that these early avant-garde spatial projects can be viewed as precursors of artistic activities of recent years such as mapping, LKW (*Lebenskunstwerk*), performative installation or social practice.³⁰

Schwitters himself struggled to define the work, lacking the language of later artists and art historians.³¹

Rainier Rumold offers a conceptually advanced framework in his compelling chapter, “Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*: Arche-texture as *Kunststück*.” In this text, he argues that Schwitters's notion of *entformung* is similar to the dissident Surrealist Georges Bataille's conception of the *informe* (formless), an operation that seeks to liquefy structures and address the space beyond the boundaries of form.³² The *informe*, in

²⁷ Megan R. Luke, *Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 121.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

²⁹ Josef Helfenstein and Isabel Schulz, “Introduction,” *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*, edited by Isabel Schulz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 7.

³⁰ Karin Orchard, “Kurt Schwitters's Spatial Growth,” in *Merz: A Total Vision of the World* (Bern: Benteli Publishers, 2004), 45.

³¹ Gwendolen Webster, “Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*” *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*, edited by Isabel Schulz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 128.

³² Rumold, 139-160 and Yve-Alain Bois, “The Use Value of ‘Formless,’” *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 9-40. In 1929 George Bataille published the short paragraph titled “*Informe*” in the Surrealist Magazine *DOCUMENTS*, and it addressed the conception of the “formless.” It read: “A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its own form. What it designates has no right in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal, it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what

its effort to bring form down into the realm of the formless, embraces the abject materials that fall beyond the scope of respectable structure. However, while Bataille's formless obliterates form in a crushing blow, Schwitters's deconstruction of form is playful, and not without the final 'redemptive' return to form through the artist's construction.

Rumold argues that the work is a critique of "vertical" culture, specifically western Christianity and order. This, he notes, is seen not only in Schwitters's inclusion of banal objects, but also of societal waste. These objects of waste, placed into the context of Schwitters's "cathedral," imply the critique of such traditional structures, and could therefore be understood as similar to Bataille's own critique of "vertical" culture.³³

Rumold continues, however, by exploring Schwitters's deviation from Bataille, outlining how Schwitters's de-forming through the process of *entformung* is just one of the steps in "Schwitters's aesthetic preoccupation with metamorphosing the violent and the obscene into formal process."³⁴ While Bataille's formless works to bring form down into the realm of the formless, Schwitters un-forms so that the materials taken beyond the edge of

is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit." Bataille, quoted in Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A Users' Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 5. In *Undercover Surrealism*, Dawn Ades and Fiona Bradley describes *Documents* as a text that attacked perceived ideas. They also state that Bataille detested the notion of "art as panacea and substitute for human experience." Dawn Ades and Fiona Bradley, "Introduction," in *Undercover Surrealism*, edited by Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (London: Hayward Gallery, 2006), 11.

³³ Rumold, 143. Additionally, Schwitters's preferred method of collage making also emphasized its process of creation in the final product, and particularly its creation on "a horizontal surface." Schwitters's friend Charolette Weidler described his creative process of heavily saturating the paper materials, which he then situated and resituated to his preference, moving them around "in the soupy mix." Quoted in Dickerman, 89). Dickerman argues that "the very liquidity, the wetness of his process, denied verticality...this process is revealed by thickened, overlapping surfaces with soft edges, errant particles captured in the viscous binder, and often the degraded traces of a glue coating seen across the surface of the collage." Schwitters often also included reminders of the process in the works as *Merz* materials in their own right, such as ink rags. Leah Dickerman, "Schwitters Fec.," *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*, ed. Isabel Schulz (New Haven: Yale University Press), 89. Once again, the notion of a constantly unfolding process takes priority over the idea of a 'finished,' stable form. The suggestion of horizontality coupled with the denial of set form as a result of the work's instability recalls Bataille's conception of the formless.

³⁴ Rumold, 142.

form can once again be (re)formed, and in this way the artist performs his aesthetic redemption. This relationship to Surrealism, for Rumold, moves Schwitters's beyond his typical classification as a Dada artist and begins to approach what makes him such a complex figure in European Modernism.

Despite the attention paid to the Hannover *Merzbau*, neither the *Haus am Bakken* nor the *Merz Barn* has received the same in-depth consideration. Instead, they are frequently mentioned in passing throughout texts about the Hannover *Merzbau* to establish the continuity of the project and assert its centrality in Schwitters's oeuvre. The extension of the *Merzbau* is interpreted as a sign of Schwitters's optimistic spirit in exile and described as an attempt to make sure that his progressive project was not lost to history.³⁵ Webster considers the project's flexibility to be a demonstration of *Merz's* adaptability, the potential for various types of spaces to be transformed and renewed by the artist.³⁶ Webster and Roger Cardinal interpret his persistent creation of *Merzbauten* as an act of forging a familiar environment in a foreign land, an assertion of 'home' in his state of exile.³⁷

Luke has given a more substantial treatment to the later *Merzbauten* than most Schwitters scholars. In her book, Luke theorizes Schwitters's decision to make the *Haus am Bakken* portable as an inversion of the wandering act. Rather than the viewer wandering through the *Merzbau*, the structure itself becomes the wandering entity. Orchard interprets this as a metaphor for exile, thereby connecting Schwitters's changing

³⁵ Ibid, 130 and Isabel Schulz, "The *Merz Barn*," in *Schwitters in Britain* (London: Tate Britain, 2013), 131.

³⁶ Webster, "Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*," 130.

³⁷ Roger Cardinal and Gwendolen Webster, *Kurt Schwitters* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 81.

circumstances to the conceptual aspects of his work.³⁸ Additionally, Luke posits the *Merz Barn* as a *Merzbau* that further exemplified Schwitters's efforts to join abstraction and collage, frustrating yet another binary relationship in his project.³⁹ Finally, Schulz notes the *Merz Barn*'s foregrounding of nature and its connection to biomorphic abstraction.⁴⁰

In the present study, I continue to investigate the *Merz Barn*'s connection to nature, expanding this inquiry to consider how the organic principles of natural growth and decay appear in the work. Additionally, I explore the ways in which Schwitters's paradoxical formula, "MERZ ist Form. Formen heißt entformeln" has evolved throughout Schwitters's career, specifically during his years in exile. I will argue that Schwitters's growing interest in nature in this period culminates in the *Merz Barn*, a work that positions the organic principles of nature as a new paradigm for the *Merz* process of forming and un-forming.

³⁸ Orchard, 32.

³⁹ Luke, 242.

⁴⁰ Schulz, "The *Merz Barn*," 132.

CHAPTER III

FORMEN = ENTFORMELN

On the cover of his January 1924 issue of *Merz*, Schwitters asserts “MERZ ist Form. Formen heißt entformeln.”⁴¹ This statement has not been translated into English uniformly. For instance, Luke translates it, “*Merz* is form. To form means to de-form”⁴² and Gamard as “*Merz* is form. Form signifies deformatizing.” Both can be roughly understood to say that a *Merz* “form” can only be achieved through un-forming, or deconstructing, but there are subtle differences in each interpretation.⁴³

For Gamard, this statement is evidence of Schwitters’s interest in his materials undergoing an “aesthetic redemption,” a transformative process that she relates to alchemy and transubstantiation.⁴⁴ According to this perspective, the original function of objects must be dismantled or un-formed for the materials to achieve a new, higher purpose through the transformative operation of *Merz*. The base materials are purified and dematerialized, redeemed through their conversion to an art object. Luke, on the other hand, interprets the phrase as an indifference to materials. Her viewpoint, unlike Gamard’s, emphasizes the deconstructive aspect of the process: “All material would have to be de-formed (entformelt) to serve one master, composition.”⁴⁵ However, she continues by explaining that the idea of dismantling form fascinated Schwitters, but that he did not adhere to the traditional destructive connotations of deforming. Of this she states “this word [entformeln] is an artificial construct, itself a combination of grammatical fragments, in a manner that emphasizes Schwitters’s fascination with the

⁴¹ Schwitters, *Merz* 7.

⁴² Luke, 17.

⁴³ Gamard, 150.

⁴⁴ Luke, 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

mutability of form without the connotations of damage or degeneracy suggested by ‘deform.’”⁴⁶ Rumold, who does not address Schwitters’s statement directly, also explores these ideas by considering the artist’s dismantling of objects as an act of play. Like Luke, Rumold indicates that Schwitters’s act of deconstruction is more dialectical than the irreversibility implied by “deforming.”

In light of its centrality to Schwitters’s *Merz* practice, the phrase “Formen heißt entformeln” requires further examination. Though traditionally translated as “to form means to un-form,” this statement provides specific connotations as a result of Schwitters’s word choice. To begin, the German verb *formen*, meaning “to form,” can alternately be interpreted as “to shape” or “to mold,” and therefore carries with it the implication of sculptural formation rather than a verb like *bauen*, which means “to build” or “to construct.” *Formen* more so than *bauen* implies the fluid manipulation of materials, calling attention to the subtle alteration of these by the artist. Additionally, to build or construct connotes the assembling of discrete parts into a conjoined form, whereas molding or shaping implies changing the form of a malleable substance.

Certainly, Schwitters’s working method is somewhere in between the verbs *bauen* and *formen*, as he both manipulates acquiescent materials and joins disparate objects into *Merz* assemblages. However, when considering the *Merz Barn* as the culmination of his *Merzbau* project, which in turn epitomizes his *Merz* process, it is interesting to note that this phrase lends itself to associations with sculpture. As shall be explored, the *Merz Barn*’s interior takes on a far more organic, sculptural aesthetic than the previous *Merzbauten*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

In addition to the need for a more nuanced understanding of *formen*, Schwitters's choice of "heißt" deserves closer attention. *Heißen* is the verb used to identify someone or something, whereas the terms *bedeuten* or *meinen* are more commonly used to imply meaning. *Heißen* describes the relationship between two words, but states what the latter *is* rather than what it means. For this reason, Schwitters's phrase "Formen heißt entformeln" indicates something closer to the idea that forming (with the connotation of sculpture) *is* or indicates the presence of its opposite, un-forming.

As his career progressed, Schwitters became increasingly interested in the relationship between nature and art, and particularly how the organic processes of growth and decay could be utilized in artistic creation. His mounting interest in natural processes adds another layer of complexity to his "Formen heißt entformeln." In later work, such as his *Merz Barn*, I contend that Schwitters utilizes the continual processes of natural growth and decay to realize his essential *Merz* formula, written over two decades earlier.

CHAPTER IV

NATURALIZING MERZ: SCHWITTERS AND ARP

When Schwitters came in contact with new influences, his understanding of *Merz* transformed to reflect this. In the early years of his career, Schwitters pursued association with the Berlin Dada group. However, the attempt was short-lived. Schwitters, though keen to adopt modern artistic practices, proved less than willing to abandon his view of the artist as a unique and creative personality in exchange for the new, Berlin Dada artist who was more interested in political engagement. Richard Hülsenbeck remained hostile towards Schwitters for many years, citing his reason as Schwitters's bourgeois nature, which thoroughly conflicted with the aims of the Berlin Dadaists. According to Hülsenbeck, who singled out Schwitters for insult in his introduction to *Dada Almanach*, Schwitters's work was too abstract, too idealistic, and therefore in opposition to the Berlin group's overt political commentary.⁴⁷ For Hülsenbeck, Schwitters simply did not possess the qualities of a Berlin Dadaist.

Following his encounter with Berlin Dada, Schwitters chose to align himself with Zurich Dadaists who were more interested in exploring the relationship between art and nature than art and politics. Choosing to connect with the organic processes of nature, such artists attempted to situate themselves (at least to some degree) outside of a dominant cultural system to allow for art to spill from an inner, natural creative source. In his book *Romantic Roots in Modern Art*, August Wiedmann states “The work of art as an organic event was an autonomous production. Although, like a plant, dependent on a given ‘soil’ or ‘climate’—the artist’s personality and cultural environment from which it assimilated diverse elements for its nourishment and growth—it was an independent

⁴⁷ Richard Hülsenbeck, “Introduction,” in *Dada Almanach* (Berlin: Erich Reiss Verlag, 1920), 9.

creation developing in accordance with its own innate law of becoming.”⁴⁸ Gamard describes this secondary strain of Dada as “a rejection of the social and political programs of Berlin Dada and the concomitant embrace of an art conditioned by particularities and circumstances—a kind of nature based, ‘organic’ dada.”⁴⁹ This was not to say that their interest was necessarily to depict nature in their work, but rather to think of their art as developing according to principles of nature.⁵⁰ Hans Arp, one of Schwitters’s closest colleagues, was one of the most well-known artists of Zurich Dada. An examination of some major themes in his work, consequently, demonstrates the ways in which Schwitters’s work, particularly the *Merz Barn*, engages with similar notions of organic creation.

Hans (Jean) Arp (1886-1966) is remembered for his participation in Dada and his innovative approaches to collage, relief, sculpture, and poetry. Arp was a central part of the Dada movement from its inception in Zurich in February of 1916. Arp worked with his partner, Sophie Taeuber, to dismantle the hierarchy between fine art and applied art, distancing himself from academic attitudes towards artistic production. In 1917, however, Arp shifted his practice and began focusing on automatic means of making. Of this new focus, Arp stated:

Dada aimed to destroy the reasonable deceptions of man and recover the natural and unreasonable order. Dada wanted to replace the logical nonsense of the men of today by the illogically senseless...Dada is for the senseless, which does not mean nonsense. Dada is senseless like nature. Dada is for nature and against art. Dada is direct like nature. Dada is for infinite sense and definite means.⁵¹

⁴⁸ August K. Wiedmann, *Romantic Roots in Modern Art* (Surrey, UK: Gresham, 1979), 152.

⁴⁹ Gamard, 63.

⁵⁰ Schmalenbach, 96 and *Ibid*, 63-64.

⁵¹ Hans Arp, “I Became More and More Removed From Aesthetics,” *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, edited by Marcel Jean and translated by Joachim Neugroschel. (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), 238.

It was in this organicist Dada that Hans Arp was a central figure, where political revolution was forgone in exchange for a conceptual and aesthetic revolution led by nature. Of his own intentions, Arp stated:

We do not want to copy nature. We do not want to reproduce. We want to produce like a plant that produces fruit and not reproduce. We want to produce directly and not through interpretation. As there is not the slightest trace of abstraction in this art we call it: Concrete art. The works of concrete art should not be signed by their creators. These paintings, these sculptures, these objects should remain anonymous in the great studio of nature like clouds, mountains, seas, animals, men. Yes, men should return to nature, artists should work in community like artists of the Middle Ages.⁵²

Arp was more interested in the laws that governed nature than in the natural forms themselves, and believed that art grew from the artist as organic beings grew in nature. The idea of imitating nature, a concept that Arp recalled as highly valued in his academic artistic training, was abhorrent to him. Arp believed that art must be an original creation like nature, not the imitation of nature. However, it is important to note that Arp did not use the term “nonsense” (*Unsinn*) to describe his own work. Rather, he used the term *ohne-Sinn*, meaning “without sense.”⁵³ Here, Arp cannot be understood as pursuing sense or its absolute negation, nonsense, but instead as aiming for the lack of perceptible sense that Arp identified as a quality of nature.⁵⁴ He felt that “art is of a natural origin” and therefore had the potential to evolve through natural processes.⁵⁵

Continual metamorphosis and cyclical growth are themes that often reappear in Arp’s work and the idea of constant change in nature held philosophical significance to

⁵² Quoted in Hubert van den Berg, “Poetry as a Reification of Nature: On the Role of Nature in the Poetry of Hans Arp,” *Nature Literature and Its Otherness/La littérature et son autre*, ed. by Svend Erik Larsen (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1997), 129.

⁵³ Van den Berg, 125.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hans Arp, “Art is a Fruit,” *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, edited by Marcel Jean and translated by Joachim Neugroschel, (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), 241.

the artist. It was important for Arp to express the impermanence of life through his work's focus on "the unending cyclical rhythm of the universe."⁵⁶ Scholars have interpreted his common use of circular forms as an indication of this. Arp does not often, however, use perfectly symmetrical circles in his work, choosing instead to render ovals as their asymmetrical or unbalanced quality better implied instability or the potential for continual change.⁵⁷ This is indicative of Arp's assertion that nature's eternal becoming was the purpose of his work, designating the act of continual metamorphosis as central to his aim. The sculpture *Growth* (Fig. 13), demonstrates this, as the work delivers the impression of a "gently swelling, ascending form," one that appears to evolve before the viewer's very eyes.⁵⁸ Other sculptures by Arp, such as *Human Concretion* (Fig. 14), were designated as "free from fixed orientation," meaning that they defied the limitations of an orientation, furthering their potential for continual change beyond Arp's control.⁵⁹ In such sculptural works, Arp turns the viewer's attention to the potential for change, particularly change associated with natural processes, in his work.

Additionally, Arp spoke of his use of naturalia in his work, stating, "I made use of objects I found on the beach, and I composed natural collages and reliefs. I thus acted like the Oceanians, who never worry about the permanence of their materials when making masks, and use perishable materials like sea shells, blood, and feathers."⁶⁰ This tendency towards decay, an essential component of natural processes, surfaces in Schwitters's later work as well. Arp and Schwitters even searched for such found materials together, as

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Mundy, *The Naming of Biomorphism*, in *Biocentrism and Modernism*, edited by Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company), 21.

⁵⁹ Margherita Andreotti, "A New Unity of Man and Nature: Jean Arp's 'Growth' of 1938," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 16, no. 2 (1990): 138.

⁶⁰ Hans Arp, "Conversation at Meudon," *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, edited by Marcel Jean and translated by Joachim Neugroschel, (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), 338.

Schwitters recalled in a 1946 letter to Margaret Miller at the Museum of Modern Art, “...I went with Arp along the sea and picked up material, merz material. Arp was interested and gave me also some pieces of wood or stones.”⁶¹

Schwitters indicated his own interest in organic growth through multiple statements, such as “art is never the imitation of nature, but grows according to equally stringent laws, like nature herself.”⁶² With this statement, Schwitters aligned himself with the growing interest in allowing nature to serve as a model for artistic process as well as forms. Furthermore, in his essay “Watch Your Step!” Schwitters speaks out against mimetic artists (despite his own interest in representational painting), imploring the need for a vital creative force by stating:

Style is creation out of normalized forms according to individual laws. Imitation is an uncritical copy of any forms, without any laws. One should not let oneself be deceived by the claim of the imitators that they are striving for style, nor by the imitator’s attempt to conceal his imitation, by slyly mixing several different models. Such a mixture is not style, but fraud. The imitator is not rooted at all. As he is artistically dead, he does not need any nourishment. He lives only as a more or less decent mirror lives, that reflects something living. As he is not rooted, anyone can knock him over. As the imitator doesn’t grow, he cannot help to create style, as he is himself withering away. And finally the undigested, borrowed forms of others rot in his stomach and he decays from within. That is why there is always a stink around imitators. Some wear perfume, but to a sensitive nose no smell can outstink or kill the putrefaction of their bowels. Imitators, watch [your] step!⁶³

Here, Schwitters demonstrates his desire for a creative source that was not based on the imitation of other artistic influences, indicating that such an imitator is “creatively dead.” It is especially interesting to note that Schwitters speaks of this creative vitality using language related to nature, describing the imitator as lacking roots, dead, withering away,

⁶¹ Kurt Schwitters to Margaret Miller, December 11, 1946.

⁶² Quoted in Luke, 207.

⁶³ Kurt Schwitters, “Watch Your Step!” in *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Dawn Ades (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 300.

and rotting. Such language implies that an artist based in a fundamental, creative source would conversely be rooted, alive, flourishing, and growing.

In addition to rejecting the concept of imitating nature, the artists associated with the natural growth in art were opposed to the idea of approaching artistic creation with “rational deliberation.”⁶⁴ This resulted, Wiedmann argues, in producing “effects wholly unforeseen by the artist.”⁶⁵ The idea of the work’s autonomous power to evolve apart from the artist’s deliberate creation shares a paradoxical relation to *Merz*’s emphasis on the artist/genius figure and can be observed in Schwitters’s *Merz Barn* through his decision to facilitate decay in the project. In both the Romantic and the early twentieth-century Neoromantic artistic *Weltanschauung*, this was accounted for by considering the artist as a creative force tied to nature, because “he possessed in his soul an unconscious formative power which enabled him to identify himself with the formative energies of the world.”⁶⁶ Schwitters, however, would have likely embraced the inherent paradox in the notion of artistic creation as simultaneously the product of nature and the product of man.

Finally, Arp might be understood as an important influence during Schwitters’s period of exile as a result of the former’s lack of national identity. Arp was born in Strasbourg, which lies in Alsace, a region situated on the border between France and Germany that has changed hands between the two countries multiple times in its history. The fluidity of this boarder meant that Arp grew up in a bilingual environment as a transnational individual. Arp’s prominent role in Zurich Dada further distanced the artist from a singular national identity, as exiled artists (such as Arp himself) were the primary force in the movement. Straining his ties to a homeland that had a complicated

⁶⁴ Wiedmann, 153-154.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 155.

relationship to national identity in the first place, Arp's participation in Zurich Dada served as a catalyst in his search for a fundamental source for his creativity, one that transcended culture, language, and political boundaries. As Schwitters admired Arp and his work, this would have presented an important model for Schwitters's own attitudes towards exile.

Schwitters's turn towards the influence of Arp is, additionally, tied directly to his *Merz Barn* in a letter to his friend Carola Giedion-Welcker from August of 1947. In this letter, Schwitters states that his final *Merzbau* sat in a location that was to be turned into a park. He writes, "The third *Merzbau* will later be in the center of a nature park, connected to nature, with wonderful views in all directions. I am very happy to stand beside Arp and to hate John Heartfield, who tried in the Free German League of Art to produce art in tribute to Communism."⁶⁷ Here, Schwitters explicitly states his allegiance to the ideas of Arp and nature-centric Dada over John Heartfield, a Berlin Dadaist known for his interest in producing art to support his radical Leftist political views. This is not to say that Schwitters's own political views were necessarily opposite to Heartfield's and the Berlin Dadaists', but rather that Schwitters conceived of his art, to some degree, as apolitical.

During the period of his exile, Schwitters also began to incorporate naturalia into his *Merz* works more frequently. While this is partially the result of his shift to working in more rural settings, it is nonetheless significant. The majority of artists whose work had been included in the *Entarte Kunst Ausstellung* fled for major cities in Europe and America, yet Schwitters privileged locations with exquisite natural landscapes over

⁶⁷ Kurt Schwitter to Giedion Welcker, 19 August 1947. "Der Merzbau 3 wird später im Centrum des Naturschutzparkes stehen mit einer wunderbaren Aussicht nach allen Seiten und verbunden mit der Natur. Ich bin sehr froh, neben Ihrem Arp zu stehen und hasse John Heartfield, der in der Free German League of Art versucht, die Kunst dem Communismus untertan zu machen."

vibrant artistic communities. His work reflected this, as found objects of the bucolic environments began to occupy a prominent place in his *Merzbilder*, juxtaposed with the sordid materials that were a constant in his compositions.

To see the increasing significance of nature in Schwitters's *Merzbilder*, one can examine some examples of his work from the time of his exile. Such pieces are precedents for the *Merz Barn*, Schwitters's last work, which foregrounds nature more than any of his previous *Merzbauten*. For example, *Untitled (Merzbilder Alf)* (1939) (Fig. 15) contains a sampling of small blooms, integrated into an image that also includes forms reminiscent of knots in wood. With the exception of a few touches of a vibrant red, the image consists of relatively neutral colors (brown, tan, pale blue, light pink). In Schwitters's *Untitled (ROSS, with Penny)* (1945-1947) (Fig. 16), the artist incorporates a spindly feather among the collaged materials, juxtaposing its delicate form against paper fragments. In *Untitled (Merzpicture with Coral)* (1944-1945) (Fig. 17), the found piece of coral nearly overtakes the composition, a large, three-dimensional object contrasting the flat expanses of color in the background. Inorganic components of nature appear in his work as well, such as the rock included in *Untitled (Anything with a Stone)* (1941-1944) (Fig. 18).

Schwitters includes allusions to natural decay as well, as is demonstrated in his *Untitled (Merzbilder with Teeth)* (1937) (Fig. 19). In this image, Schwitters includes a section of a creature's jawbone, with a small row of teeth in place. The inclusion of bone, seen in multiple collages by Schwitters, adds a *memento mori* to the image. This reminder of the natural presence of death and decay serves as the *entformung*, paradoxically necessitated by its opposite, organic growth, or *formung*.

Finally, Schwitters's *Hut on Hjertøya* (Fig. 20) is a precedent for the *Merz*-ing of a makeshift stone building, much like his later *Merz Barn*. During his frequent visits to Norway throughout the 1930s, Schwitters began to transform the interior of a hut on the island of Hjertøya, but this work was never explicitly labeled a *Merzbau*. The hut, which stands today, contains stages similar to the Hannover *Merzbau*, but Schwitters's choice of locale demonstrates a turn towards transforming lowly structures that are close to nature. This is continued in the *Merz Barn*.

CHAPTER V

THE MERZ BARN: CATHEDRAL OR STAGE?

Scholars frequently address the Hannover *Merzbau* as Schwitters's version of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As David Roberts suggests in his book *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism*, the two great reoccurring models for the *Gesamtkunstwerk* were the cathedral and the theater.⁶⁸ The first of these is already alluded to by Schwitters's section of the *Merzbau* called *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery (KdeE)*.⁶⁹ Less commonly addressed is the work's relationship to a stage, which serves as an alternate interpretation for the environment. Schwitters delved into the performative aspects of *Merz* in his 1920 essay entitled "Merz."⁷⁰ In addition to identifying the character of *Merz*, this essay highlights Schwitters's aim for the *Merz* stage. This can be understood as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Schwitters's statement, "My aim is the *Merz* composite work of art, that embraces all branches of art in an artistic unit."⁷¹

However, it is the second model, the theater, which Schwitters identifies as his aim in the essay "Merz" in his quest for the *Merz* stage. While the cathedral is typically associated with the fusion of plastic arts (painting, sculpture, architecture), the theater is linked to the synthesis of the temporal arts (poetry, music). Yet the very nature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* resists such a division, and we are led to contemplate whether or not the plastic environments created to host temporal expressions can ever be fully complete without each other. For example, a church is created for sacred rituals, and a music hall is

⁶⁸ David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), 159.

⁶⁹ Schwitters occasionally uses the title *KdeE* to refer to the work as a whole, so the exact limits of the *KdeE* remain ambiguous.

⁷⁰ Schwitters, "Merz," 57-65.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

constructed to provide a space for entertainment. The plastic and the temporal can be appreciated separately, but reach a greater unity through their intended purpose.

The *Merzbau* also alluded to the performative elements of *Merz* that exemplify the idea of *Merz* and the *Merzbau* as a fluid process rather than a fixed work. Schwitters's Hannover *Merzbau* can be seen as a sort of performance due to the long duration and ever-changing nature of the work itself. Schwitters not only fluctuated back and forth between forming and un-forming the work as a sort of playful 'performance' of his *Merz* process, he also held performances for small audiences of his poetry at soirees in the *Merzbau*.⁷² Such performances blurred the lines between which aspects of the *Merz* performance were *Merzbau* and which were not (if such boundaries can even exist in Schwitters's radically inclusive *Merz* practice). Additionally, several aspects of the foretold *Merz* stage echo the later realizations of the *Merzbau* project.⁷³ For example, Schwitters indicates, "The parts of the set move and change, and the set lives its life," a statement that could certainly be said of the *Merzbau*. Schwitters also concludes his prediction of the *Merz* stage by stating "even people could be used" as its material, a phrase which is almost certainly connected to the Hannover *Merzbau*'s future nearly literal inclusion of Schwitters's artistic community. The equation of humans with materials is a potentially problematic statement when considered in the context of the willful de-humanization in rapidly emerging Nazi ideology. However, Schwitters's materialization of humans, rather than erasing individual identities, allowed the character of his friends to shape the Hannover *Merzbau*'s content. This is generally interpreted as

⁷² Ibid, 92-93.

⁷³ Schwitters even goes so far as to state that the *Merz* stage would be connected through wires and have its surfaces smoothed over, a future reality of the Hannover *Merzbau*. Kurt Schwitters, "Merz," 57-65.

an act of admiration, demonstrating Schwitters's desire to literally include his artistic comrades in the work.

First-hand accounts by artists who encountered the *Merzbau* (such as Hans Richter) indicate that Schwitters dedicated niches of his project to artists that he admired, often including tokens from that person. For example, Schwitters incorporated László Moholy-Nagy through the inclusion of a pair of his socks and Richter through a lock of his hair. Other prominent modernists with grottos dedicated to them included Piet Mondrian, Hans Arp, Theo van Doesburg, Naum Gabo, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. As Orchard argues in her chapter from *Merz: A Total Vision of the World*, the *Merzbau* was “living and enlivened architecture, an active space. The permanent and temporary occupants, real and fictive creatures, and the users of these spaces are an integral element.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, she states that the *Merzbauten* function “performatively in a symbiosis of happening and work,” noting the project’s hybridity between plastic work and performance.⁷⁵

It is possible to view the *Merzbau* as an iteration of both the architectural and theatrical *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The plastic environment, the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, was the realization of the *Merz* stage, which Schwitters indicated in his essay “*Merz*,” “serves for the performance of the *Merz* drama.”⁷⁶ This drama was *Merz* itself, the artistic practice and life philosophy of Schwitters, which both played out on the stage of the *Merzbau* and in the act of forming and un-forming of the *Merzbau* itself. As Orchard states, “the most important part of the *Merz Building* [*Merzbau*] was, of course, Kurt Schwitters himself. He was *Merz*. He frequently signed letters with ‘Kurt Merz

⁷⁴ Orchard, 43.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 44.

⁷⁶ Schwitters, “*Merz*,” 62.

Schwitters' or just 'Merz.' His concept of the artwork not only included all the arts, which were to be combined in a '*Merzgesamtkunstwerk*,' but also his own person."⁷⁷

Schwitters's *Merzbau* also exemplified the relationship between ideas by highlighting the space in between dualities, radically testing the boundaries of what seemingly opposite themes could be contained within the same work. This emphasis on paradox fits neatly within Rumold's analysis of the Hannover *Merzbau* and is directly related to the opposite (but complementary) relationship between *formung* and *entformung*, as his inclusion of certain themes works to form a narrative within the piece that is quickly un-formed by the inclusion of its opposite. In "The late work of Kurt Schwitters," Nicholas Wadley states, "paradox is an essential characteristic of the heart and life of Kurt Schwitters at all times and at all levels."⁷⁸ It should come as no surprise that the artist derogatorily called the "Caspar David Friedrich of the Dadaist revolution" by Hülsenbeck would exhibit his fair share of paradoxical themes in his most central work, the *Merzbau* project.⁷⁹ As Hülsenbeck's statement implies, Schwitters shifted fluidly between avant-garde and Romantic themes in his work. Indeed, the Hannover *Merzbau* obscured the division between tradition (especially Gothic and Romantic) and the avant-garde, between the impulse for a total environment and inclusion of fragments of the surrounding world, between the private locations and the communal focus, the remnants from a commercial world transformed into an "unsalable creation," and, perhaps most importantly, the boundaries between the height of German culture and the lowest of the base. The Hannover *Merzbau* blurred the lines between the profane and sacred by formalizing the dark and erotic subject matter through its inclusion in the

⁷⁷ Orchard, 44.

⁷⁸ Wadley, "Late Work," 63.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Wadley, "Late Work," 63.

KdeE, the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*.⁸⁰ Rumold explores this playful subversion of the cathedral, an archetype of the lofty western architectural tradition, and Schwitters's literal deconstruction of the *Vaterhaus*'s prim and proper Victorian interior.⁸¹

In an image of Kurt and Helma Schwitters taken in 1919 (Fig. 21), the conservative Biedermeier interior of Waldhausenstraße 5 is clearly visible. This would eventually be replaced (in parts of the house) by the steadily growing *Merzbau* interior. Stark white geometric forms extend down from the ceiling and create an immersive, cavernous interior. Figure 5 shows the *Merzbau* in its more advanced stage, at the point that the sculpture had evolved to become an environment. Perpetually in flux, this work progressed from its early stage of isolated sculptures to become a cohesive installation. After Schwitters accumulated collaged objects, he began to cover them with a shell of plywood and plaster, molding geometric forms that were eventually painted white. While its core was made up of Dada assemblages, its shell bore more relation to Expressionist and Constructivist works. This evolution fulfilled the aims of *Merz*, which embraced the fusion of diverse artistic styles. In the later stages of the *Merzbau* there were many caves or grottos, at least forty of which have been identified in first-hand accounts. These subsections of the work, dedicated to various figures and concepts of Western (and especially German) culture, can be related to the integration of smaller chapels or altars into a large cathedral. Additionally, Schwitters's Hannover *Merzbau* included a small sculpture that he identified as a *Madonna* (Fig. 22). The figure is abstract, a white vertical axis that curves at its peak to resemble a downturned head. Schwitters's abstract *Madonna* presides over the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, the attack on a western

⁸⁰ Elderfield, 63.

⁸¹ Rumold, 141.

architectural archetype from its interior. This blending of the apex and the base, as Rumold argues, serves to simultaneously bring down the work of art while adding value to the detritus of culture.

The *Merz Barn*, however, again differs from the Hannover *Merzbau* in this respect. The final *Merzbau* that Schwitters constructed lacked the overt indications of its status as a cathedral, such as the title and inclusion of a Madonna figure. Furthermore, the *Merz Barn*'s abstraction and the materials used in its construction remove it from the high cultural context of the Hannover *Merzbau*, prompting viewers to question whether it can similarly be considered an attack on the height of western culture.

After further consideration, it becomes clear that the distinction between sculpture and architecture is additionally blurred in the *Merzbau* project. The *Merz Barn*, especially, with its abstraction and lowly shell, becomes more difficult to link to high forms of western culture. In fact, once it is apparent that the *Merz Barn* is not a "cathedral" like the Hannover *Merzbau*, the distinction of whether it is architecture at all becomes much more slippery. Furthermore, the small interior lacks the room to serve as a space for performance, making it problematic to consider this final iteration of the *Merzbau* as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The Hannover *Merzbau* treads a fine line between sculpture and architecture. While many scholars discuss the work as experimental architecture, Schwitters himself explicitly stated that he did not understand the Hannover *Merzbau* to be an architectural prototype. For Schwitters, architecture as utilitarian structure was far from the governing idea in the Hannover *Merzbau*, which was a purely irrational construction. Schwitters clarifies the *Merzbau*'s separation from architecture in a letter to Museum of Modern Art

director Alfred Barr in 1936. Schwitters penned this letter hoping to persuade Barr to commission a *Merzbau* in the United States. Here, the artist identified the work as a sculpture and discussed how it fills and interacts with the space, stating:

In order to avoid mistakes, I must expressly tell you that my working method is not a question of interior design, i.e. decorative style, that by no means do I 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 places 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 neighboring parts, all parts are mutually interdependent.⁸²

The *Merz Barn*'s sculptural interior further departs from the idea of an architectural space, producing a more organic appearance that links the work to its natural environment. Furthermore, its integration into the natural environment blurs the line between interior and exterior, making it difficult to determine where manmade structure begins and landscape ends. The *Merz Barn*'s formal character, according to Wadley, "is deeply rooted in the physical environments, as well as being particular to the original interior."⁸³ The barn itself was a humble structure made from stone and, at the time of Schwitters's working, a dirt floor. The artist also intended to have a grass roof, added years after Schwitters's death. This defies the conceptual division between the built environment and the space beyond that structure, between human space and the untamed wilderness.

⁸² Quoted in Elderfield, 156.

⁸³ Nicholas Wadley, "The *Merzbauten* in Norway and England," in *Kurt Schwitters in Exile: The Late Work 1937-1948* (London: Marlborough Fine Art Ltd., 1981), 58.

It is important to note that, as a lowly barn constructed in a vernacular style, the *Merz Barn* could not critique a western architectural paradigm with the same vigor as is demonstrated by the Hannover *Merzbau*'s metaphoric link to a cathedral. Additionally, as the subversive transformation of *Vaterhaus* (house of the father), Schwitters's work on the interior at Waldhausenstraße 5 in Hannover conceptually dismantled tradition, especially inherited architectural tradition. The *Merz Barn*'s interior had no such connotations for Schwitters and does not, therefore, indicate the same sort of subversive act.

Finally, the *Merz Barn*'s level of abstraction makes it difficult to discuss the work as an inward critique of the Western architectural tradition. It should be noted that exposing the disparity between form and meaning was an essential component of *Merz*, as the idea of un-forming (by removing a found object from its original context) was connected to the aim for 'disassociation,' or separating the form from its constructed meaning within the visual world.⁸⁴ Despite this disassociation being Schwitters's professed aim, Schulz argues "the effect and expressive power of a work undoubtedly depends on the eloquence of the fragments used, their patina and the nature of their semantic character which is not entirely negated by their being incorporated into the inherent logic of the work itself."⁸⁵ By presenting the *Merz* materials half-submerged in the plaster, Schwitters obscures the elements that make up the mass of the *Merz Barn*. This makes it difficult to identify the objects' original purpose, context, or identity, and therefore more difficult to connect to a specific interpretation. Finally, even if the objects

⁸⁴ 'Disassociation' is how Schulz translates Schwitters's ambiguous term 'entformeln.' Isabel Schulz, "What Would Life Be Without Merz? On The Evolution And Meaning of Kurt Schwitters's Concept of Art," in *In the Beginning was Merz-From Kurt Schwitters to the Present Day*, edited by Meyer-Büser, Susanne and Karin Orchard, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000), 245.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

could be readily identified, they are primarily taken from Schwitters's rural environment. For this reason, they are not tied to the same cultural system that the Hannover *Merzbau* alludes to with its caves bearing names like *Goethe Grotto*.

The autonomy of the *Merz Barn* in relation to the cultural system that the Hannover *Merzbau* critiques leads the viewer to question how, if at all, this work oscillates between the high and the low, forming and un-forming. However, even without its direct ties to a cultural system, the base is also present in the *Merz Barn*. While the Hannover *Merzbau* deals with some of the most abject and sordid themes in Western culture, such as excrement and murder, the *Merz Barn* manages to exhibit the base without such references through its literal placement in the earth. The *Merz Barn* retains a figurative existence beneath the ground, as it is situated between its grass roof and earth floor. While soil may not have the same shock value as the horrors of the Hannover *Merzbau*'s *Lustmordhöhle*, for example, few elements are more base than dirt, which is treaded beneath our feet. However, in keeping with the character of *Merz*, the *Merzsaüle* (*Merz* column) that was intended to eventually grow upwards towards the skylight indicates the optimism of Schwitters's *Merz* process, offering hope for an aesthetic redemption from the base.

CHAPTER VI

THE MERZ BARN AS NATURE

Schwitters's orientation towards nature can most clearly be seen in his final *Merzbau*, the *Merz Barn*. In her chapter "The *Merz Barn*," Schulz even goes so far as to identify the *Merz* sculptural environment as a work that "might have become one of the greatest and most exceptional examples of biomorphous abstract sculpture in European Modernism after the Second World War."⁸⁶ The location itself is remote, sitting just beyond the small village of Elterwater in the English Lake District. Schwitters purposefully relocated to the Lake District in an attempt to return to nature and reconnect with the natural environment. He selected the barn as the site for his final *Merzbau* as a result of its remote location and the farm's artistic overgrowth, which appealed to him. The barn that Schwitters used to construct his *Merz Barn* is approximately fifteen by twenty-two and a half feet long. It is divided into two rooms, one much larger than the other, and the larger room is where the sculptural interior was located. Upon entering the work, the viewer would encounter a diagonal wall that led them towards the skylight opposite the entrance (which Schwitters had added.) Under this skylight there was to be a column, which was not in place before Schwitters's death. He had begun a false dropped ceiling on the side opposite to the skylight, which would give the interior a more cramped, cave-like feel. Pierce removed both this and the diagonal wall, only partially constructed, so that the relief wall, the most complete part of the work, could be viewed more clearly. The relief wall was that opposite to the entrance and the viewer would have seen it upon entry. It would have been possible to see this through a niche in the diagonal

⁸⁶ Schulz, "The *Merz Barn*," 132.

wall, intended to hold the sculpture *Chicken and Egg, Egg and Chicken* (Fig. 23) while still allowing the viewer to see the relief wall in the background.

The reliance on *Merz* materials to provide characteristics to the work that were informed by those objects' environment meant that the *Merz Barn*, located on a farm, was destined to reflect its rural environment. Just as the found object was an integral component of *Merz*, so found space was central to the idea of *Merzbau*. The removed locale was clearly of great importance to the artist, as he paid a large sum of money to rent the barn despite his meager financial existence at that time. He also prompted the barn owner, Pierce, to alter the space by adding a natural skylight in the corner of the barn opposite the entryway. Schwitters oriented the forms in the *Merz Barn* towards this skylight, which provided a different experience than the artificially lit Hannover *Merzbau*. By having the work be lit by a skylight rather than artificial lighting, Schwitters called attention to the natural cycles of day and night. Finally, Schwitters and Pierce had plans to turn this area into a public space, so that the *Merz Barn* would eventually be situated in a natural environment where audiences could come and interact with it.

The notion of continual forming and un-forming, furthermore, defies the idea of the project being finished despite the artist's death. The 'completion' of any *Merzbau* is complicated by Schwitters's denial of singular authorship and his inclusion of ephemera. Schwitters not only included grottos dedicated to his artistic colleagues in the Hannover *Merzbau*, but he allowed artists to contribute their own grottos. This is a direct challenge to traditional conceptions of authorship. Pierce and Wantee (Schwitters's partner at this time) also aided Schwitters in his work on the *Merz Barn* due to his lack of strength. By allowing others to play a creative role in the *Merzbau* project's production, Schwitters did

not restrict the *Merzbau*'s forming (or un-forming) to his own hand, and therefore it cannot be understood as finished even in the wake of his death. Pierce, for example, both aided in the forming and un-forming of the *Merz Barn* after the artist's death, tearing down the beginnings Schwitters's diagonal wall and adding more sections of plaster after Schwitters's own working method.⁸⁷ Regardless of how many individuals actually made changes to *Merzbauten* in the absence of the artist, it can certainly be understood that Schwitters, in challenging the notion of sole authorship, opened the *Merzbauten* to the potential manipulation by outside forces.

One of the primary ways that Schwitters exhibited special attention to un-forming in his final *Merzbau* was by implementing the conditions for its eventual decay, facilitating the circumstances for that which he had formed to slowly deteriorate into something entirely different. Schwitters's lease agreement with Pierce dictated that the barn would be in Schwitters's name for fifty years, which indicates Schwitters's intent to allow for the *Merz Barn*'s evolution well beyond his death without fear of its demolition.

There are a few ways to identify themes of decay in the *Merz Barn*, the most prominent of which is Schwitters's decision to incorporate perishable materials into the work's makeup. For example, in addition to having a grass roof, he included within the relief wall highly perishable gentians. These small blue flowers, which he called *Merzblümchen*, not only served as a symbolic connection to his German Romantic lineage, but also ensured that elements of the *Merz Barn* would change rapidly through natural processes.⁸⁸ Additionally, the barn is an example of the Lake District's vernacular architecture (Figs. 24-26) and its rough, dry-stone construction did little to protect from

⁸⁷ Gwendolen Webster, "Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*," (Dissertation, Open University at Milton Keynes, 2007), 1 and Schmalenbach, 97.

⁸⁸ Schulz, "The *Merz Barn*," 131-133.

the elements, allowing rain and water to infiltrate the space on a regular basis.⁸⁹

Ultimately, it was this progressive degradation that led Richard Hamilton to orchestrate the removal of the *Merz Barn*'s relief wall to Newcastle. In a region as notorious for unpredictable weather as the Lake District, the reality of rapid deterioration would surely not have been a surprise to Schwitters. Therefore, it stands to reason that incorporating decay into the conception of the work may have certainly been his intention. Whether or not Schwitters intended the *Merz Barn*'s slow transformation as a component of the piece, the fact that it *is* part of the work demonstrates one way in which the *Merz Barn* continues its process of decay, or gradual un-forming, beyond Schwitters's active participation in the work.

The conditions for gradual decay in the *Merz Barn* are quite different than the destructive powers that demolished the first two *Merzbauten*. While the destruction of the Hannover *Merzbau* and the *Haus am Bakken* were neither intentional nor an attack on Schwitters himself, they were both the result of violent acts. This sort of intensive, singular act of aggression seems quite unnatural when juxtaposed with the slow, gradual degradation seen in the *Merz Barn*. The latter connotes the cyclical processes of decay and growth found in nature, much like those that Arp references in his recollection on including perishable materials in his collages. Perhaps this unnatural destruction is what shook Schwitters so thoroughly following the Hannover *Merzbau*'s sudden decimation. He sent letters to various friends and colleagues asking for help in restoring his Hannover *Merzbau*, intent on rebuilding anew from the remains of his beloved work. This desire reveals Schwitters's need for cyclical progress in his work, his unwillingness to let the structure be destroyed without the hope for renewal so pertinent to his practice. Perhaps it

⁸⁹ Luke, 239.

is also the reason that Schwitters took such measures to ensure that his final *Merzbau*, the *Merz Barn*, appeared as if in a gradual process of forming and un-forming, defiantly resisting the idea of its sudden disappearance.

Furthermore, whereas in the Hannover *Merzbau* the found materials tended to be revealed in their fragmented state and then covered, those in the relief wall of the *Merz Barn* appear as if the plaster is actively engulfing it. This effect affirms the idea of the *Merz Barn* as a natural process, seemingly forming by its own accord. Luke discusses this formal difference between the earlier *Merzbauten* and the *Merz Barn*, citing Schulz's statement that in this work we see, "the competition between object and surface that had at last been overcome."⁹⁰ Luke notes the found object's state of partial absorption into their backdrop, stating that they are "impoverished relics on the verge of disappearance, some of which remain partially visible, not yet swallowed up by color, light, and texture."⁹¹ Though the barn stands empty today, the viewer can imagine the immersive sensation of entering the space as Schwitters intended it, with sculptural forms completely overtaking the small interior. The experience would have straddled the line between comforting and claustrophobic, as viewers would have moved through a compact space that both embraced them like a womb and simultaneously threatened to consume them.

This work, I assert, conveys the sense of continual forming and un-forming even beyond the artist's presence by calling attention to the same processes found in nature. Schwitters alluded to these natural cycles not only through his choice of a remote location and integration of the work into the rural landscape, but also through one of the

⁹⁰ Quoted in Luke, 242.

⁹¹ Luke, 242.

sculptures in the work. As in his Hannover *Merzbau*, Schwitters intended to integrate smaller sculptures into his larger sculptural environment. Included among these was one of his last stand-alone sculptures, *Chicken and Egg, Egg and Chicken*, for which he had planned a small niche in the diagonal wall. This work, an abstract sculpture painted white except for details of black and red, exhibits a similar hooked shape to Schwitters's Hannover *Merzbau Madonna*, but with an opposite orientation. Intended a prominent place within his final *Merzbau*, this work could be interpreted as an agrarian or nature-based replacement for the *Madonna* figure. The Christian mother and child are replaced with the egg as *Ur*-mother and her offspring, the chicken. This de-humanized mother is a primeval, essential force, female and, therefore, generative. With the chicken that produces the egg and the egg that in turn produces the chicken, Schwitters thematizes the cycles of nature, asserting the unending characteristic of these processes. This replacement for the *Madonna* demonstrates Schwitter's departure from Western culture to return to the primal forces of nature, the fundamental narrative of the *Merz Barn*.

Additionally, the title of this work itself alludes to Schwitters's later attention to ongoing organic growth, and indicates his continual interest in cyclical processes such as his own *formung* and *entformung*. The title, *Chicken and Egg, Egg and Chicken*, engages the space between phases of existence, highlighting the exchange between the two ideas. Furthermore, the white 'exterior' appears to split open and reveal a colored 'interior,' almost as if the abstract entity is a bloom in the process of opening, revealing itself, just as is the case in Schwitters's earlier sculpture entitled *Opening Blossom* (1943-1944) (Fig. 27). This, I argue, is exactly what the *Merz Barn* does as a whole. By embracing the space in between forming and un-forming through an attempt to show the work as if it

were still unfolding (even beyond the artist's participation), the viewer becomes more aware of the *Merz* process, the continual performance of the dual *Merz* principles of *formung* and *entformung*.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The importance of continuing scholarship on the *Merz Barn* should not be underestimated. As Schwitters's last *Merzbau*, this work can be understood as the culmination of his thought on the project. Perhaps more importantly, it is the only *Merzbau* left that scholars can examine in person, even if it does exist only in a fragmented state. This work is crucial for our understanding of the *Merzbau* project precisely because of its divergences from the original Hannover *Merzbau*, which might lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the project as a whole.

It is also important to consider the relationship between abstraction and nature in the *Merz Barn*, a combination employed by Schwitters that challenges the notion of abstraction and naturalism as opposite concepts. In his chapter, "Complexities of 'Abstracting' From Nature," Andrew Inkpin indicates that the conventional definition of abstraction is artwork that "does not recognizably correspond to the visual appearance of objects in the world."⁹² He explains that this implies a binary relationship between the two poles of abstract and naturalistic representation.⁹³ In this chapter, Inkpin sets out to establish some ways that this traditional binary is inadequate. He also provides examples of work that frustrate this binary and prove the need for greater consideration of the relationship between abstraction and nature. Though Inkpin does not address Schwitters or his work directly, all three methods that he puts forth to express art's potential to disrupt this perceived binary are present in the *Merz Barn*.

⁹² Andrew Inkpin, "The Complexities of 'Abstracting' from Nature," in *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory*, edited by Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche, (New York: Routledge, 2012) 255.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

For Inkpin, the traditional contrast between naturalism and abstraction is unsatisfactory because it accounts only for visual representation. In the second half of his chapter, Inkpin turns his attention to abstract works where nature is literally present in order to express the need for a more robust consideration of the relationship between abstraction and nature.⁹⁴ These works, Inkpin argues, can be “used to elicit an extended model of modern art’s representational possibility, which is then used to bring out certain limitations of the specifically visual notion of representation and which suggest a more coherent and complex conception of the relation between naturalism and abstraction.”⁹⁵

The works he provides as examples come from the category of Land Art, and he terms these “ontological hybrids,” which bridge the gap between abstraction and nature.⁹⁶ The first category of these hybrids are works where natural materials are used in the makeup of the work itself, such as seen in Schwitters’s inclusion of naturalia, a dirt floor, and a grass roof in the *Merz Barn*. Next, Inkpin writes about works that are abstract yet are integrated into natural location, which is certainly true of the *Merz Barn*’s placement in the remote, pastoral setting of the English Lake District. Finally, Inkpin cites abstract works that exhibit natural processes, which fits with the *Merz Barn*’s emphasis on organic growth and decay.

Ultimately, Inkpin argues that these examples taken from Land Art encourage viewers to consider in what ways a work is abstract rather than posing the question of whether or not the work is abstract. Therefore, it is possible to consider the *Merz Barn* as another example of art that frustrates the perceived binary between abstraction and nature. I suggest that the *Merz Barn* might also be considered a precedent for Land Art,

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 256.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

serving as a bridge between the prewar and postwar avant-gardes. Such a possibility further complicates Schwitters's *Merzbau* project, exhibiting the need for a more in-depth consideration of the project as a whole rather than studies that center only on his most famous Hannover *Merzbau*.

APENDIX A

IMAGES



Figure 1: *Merz Barn*, Cylinders Farm, Elterwater, Langdale, United Kingdom. 1948.
Source: Chambers, Emma and Karin Orchard, eds. *Schwitters in Britain*. London: Tate
Publishing, 2013. Plate 37.



Figure 2: Merz Barn, Cylinders Farm, Elterwater, Langdale, United Kingdom. The only known photo of Kurt Schwitters at the Merz Barn. Artist Hilde Goldschmidt on the right. Source: Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Archive, Hanover.



Figure 3: Relief wall from the *Merz Barn*, Elterwater, England. 1947. Photo by Ernst Schwitters, ca. 1953/1960. Source: Schulz, Isabel, ed. *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Plate 26.

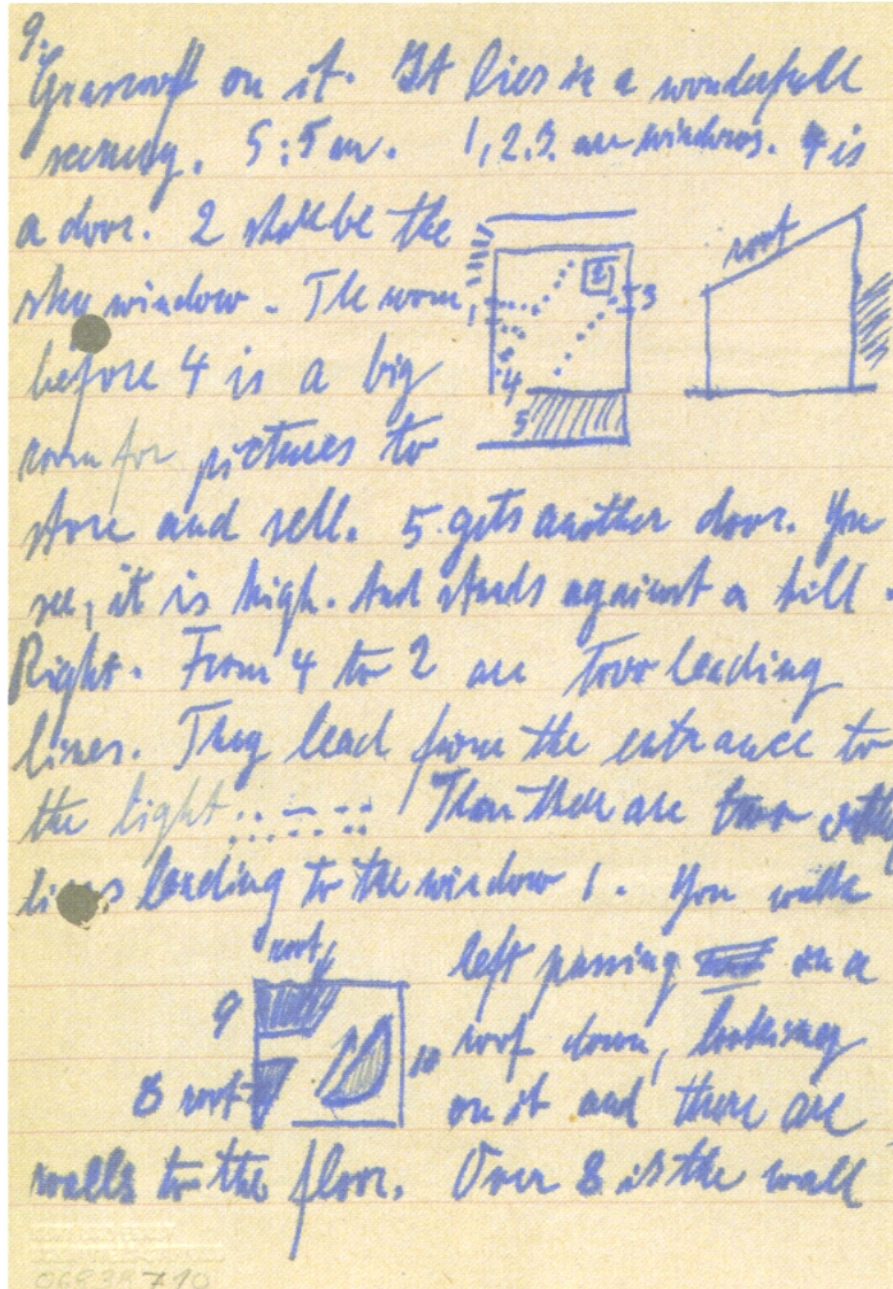


Figure 4. Schwitters's sketches and descriptions of the *Merz Barn* (Letter in English to Ernst and Lola Schwitters, Ambleside, 28 September 1947): '1, 2, 3. Are windows. 4 is a door. 2 shall be the sky window. The room before 4 is a big room for pictures to store and sell. 5 gets another door. You see, 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 ~~over~~ on a roof down, looking on it and there are walls to the floor. Over 8 is the wall [next page] to be decorated. 10 is also a roof, and there are walls to the ceiling. You can walk under this roof.' Source: Chambers, Emma and Karin Orchard, eds. *Schwitters in Britain*. London: Tate Publishing, 2013.

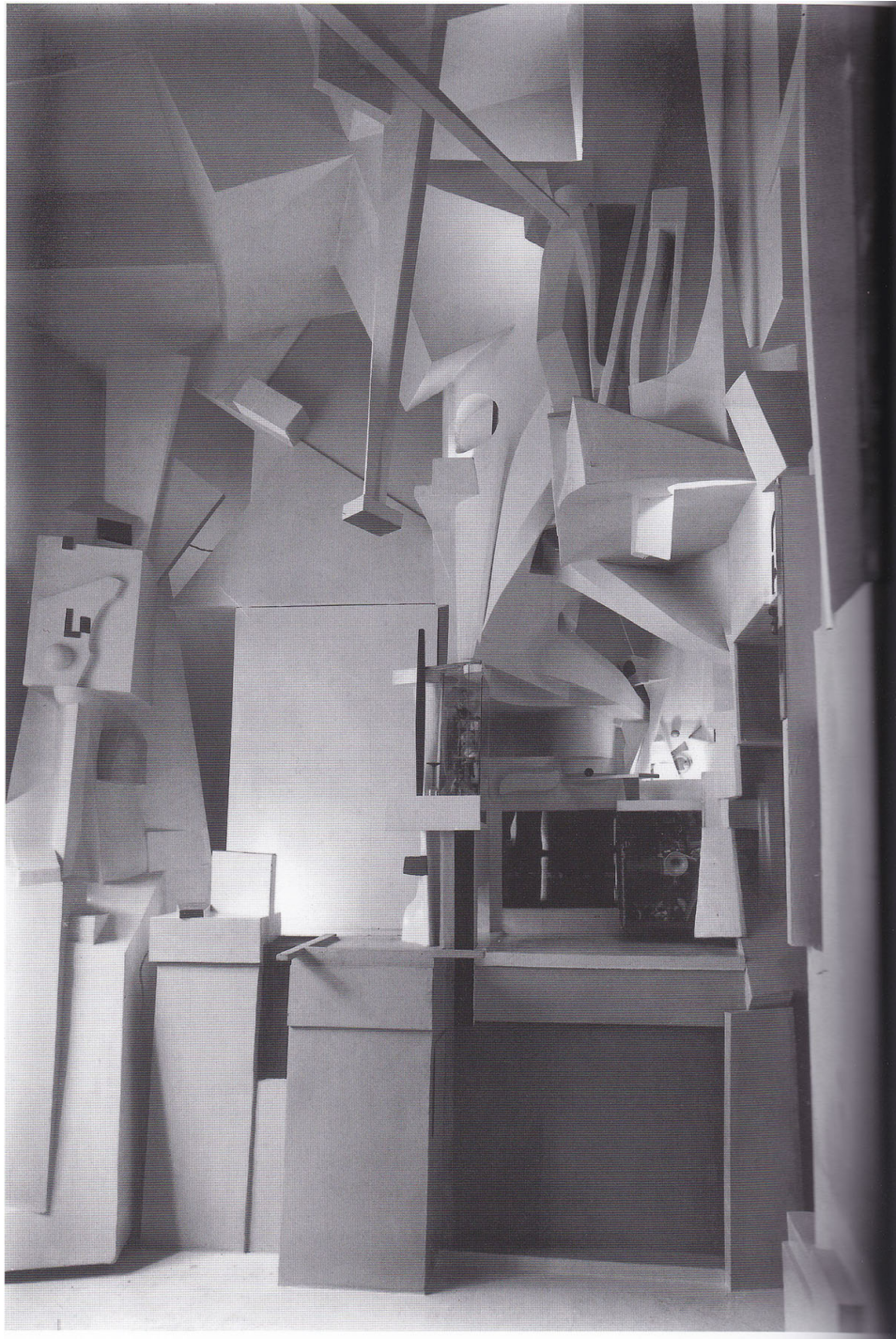


Figure 5: Detail, Hannover *Merzbau with Madonna*. c. 1930 (destroyed 1943), Photo by Ernst Schwitters, 1932/1935. Source: Schulz, Isabel, ed. *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Plate 24.



Figure 6. *Untitled (Merz Column)*, from the *Merzbau*. 1923/1925 (destroyed 1943).
From: Schulz, Isabel, ed. *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*. New Haven: Yale
University Press, 2010. Plate 20.



Figure 7. Full-scale reconstruction of Kurt Schwitters' Hannover *Merzbau* (Merz Construction). Built by Peter Bisseger in 1981-1983 from photographs from 1933 of the original construction (ca. 1923-36; destroyed 1943.) Source: Schulz, Isabel, ed. *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Plate 96.

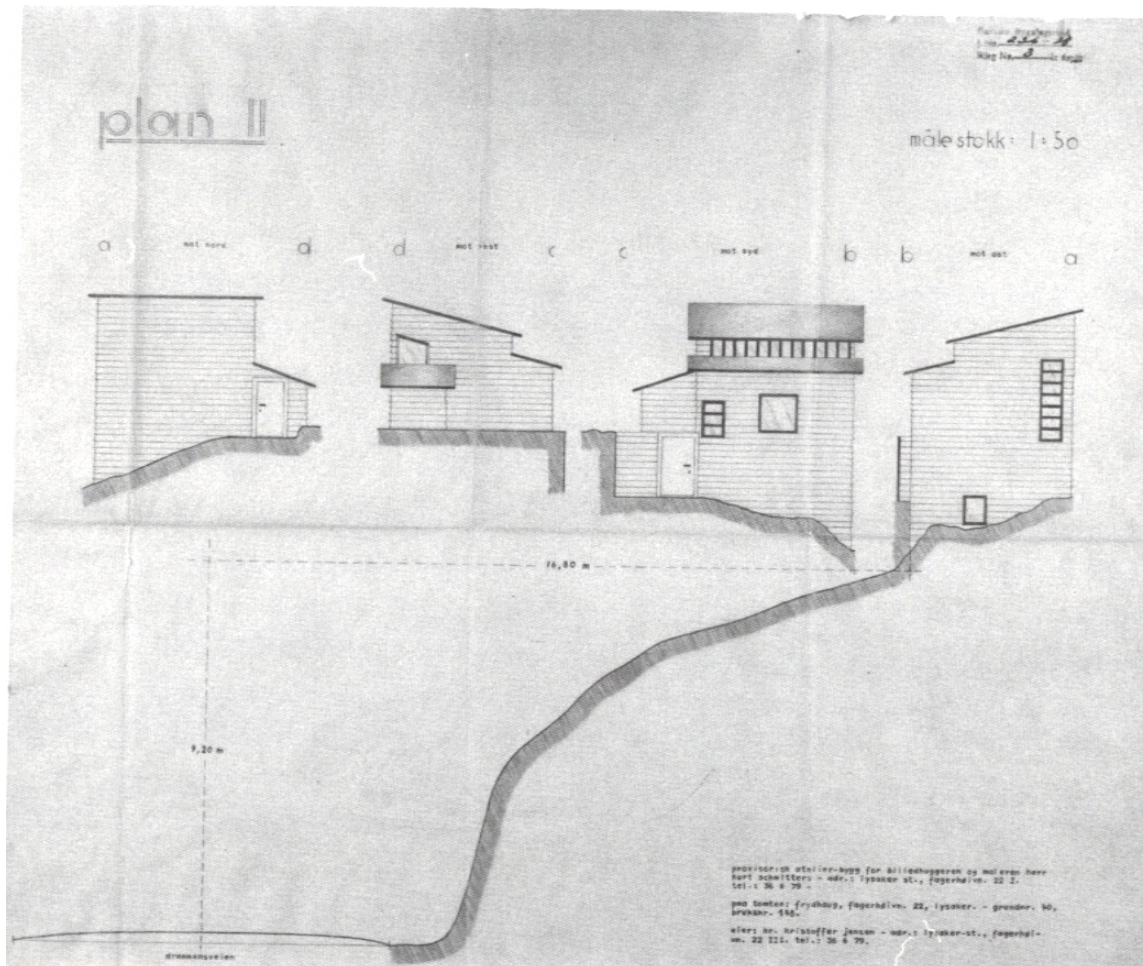


Figure 9: Ernst Schwitters, *Makeshift Atelier Building* (plan 2 of the elevations of the Lysaker Merzbau (*Haus am Bakken*)). 1938. Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hannover. Photo: Kurt Schwitters Archive at the Sprengel Museum in Hannover. Photographer: Michael Herling, Sprengel Museum Hannover. Source: Luke, Megan R. *Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Plate 56.

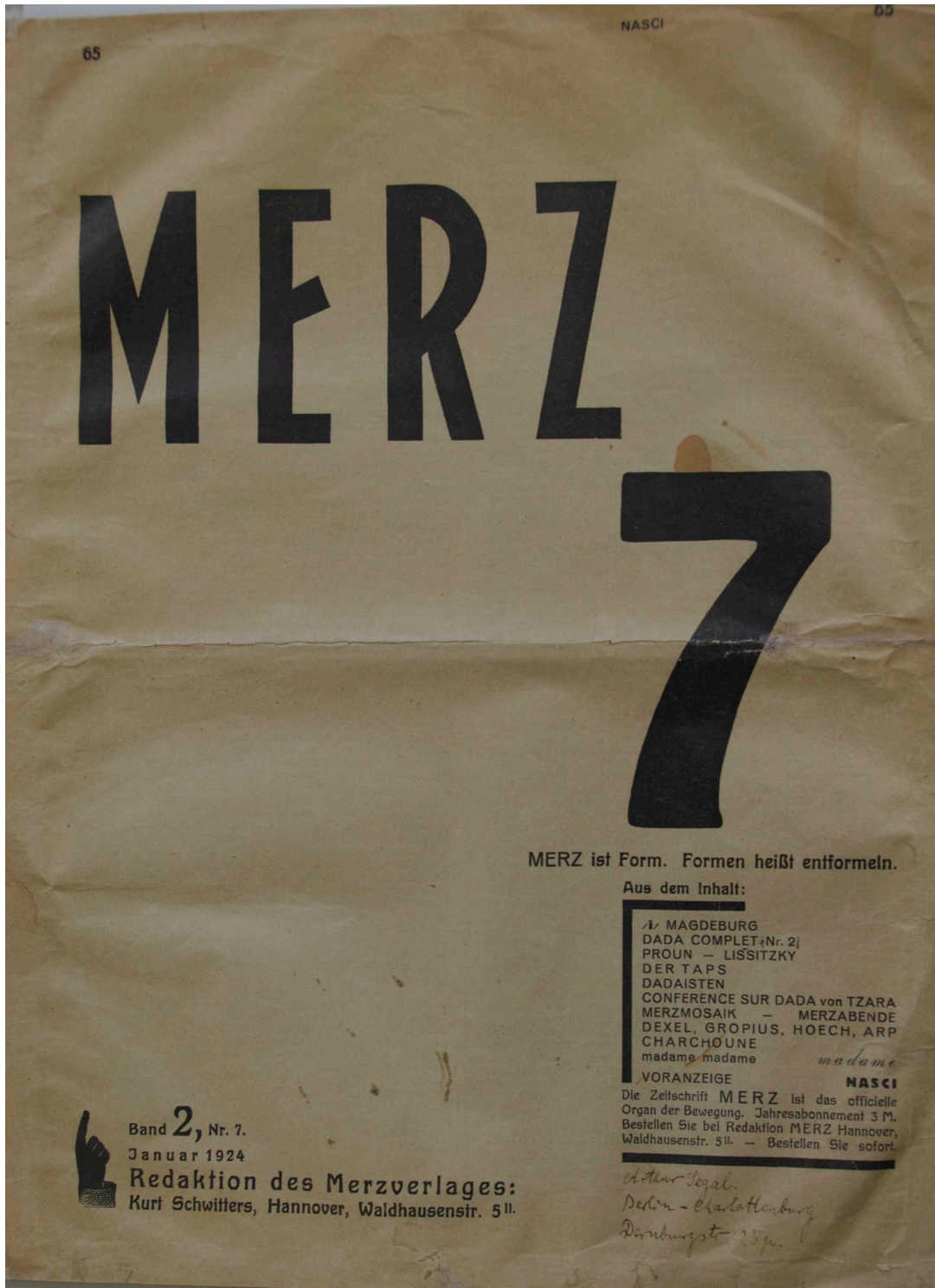


Figure 11: *Merz* 7, January 1924. Image by the author, from Hermann-Löns-Archiv der Stadtbibliothek Hannover.

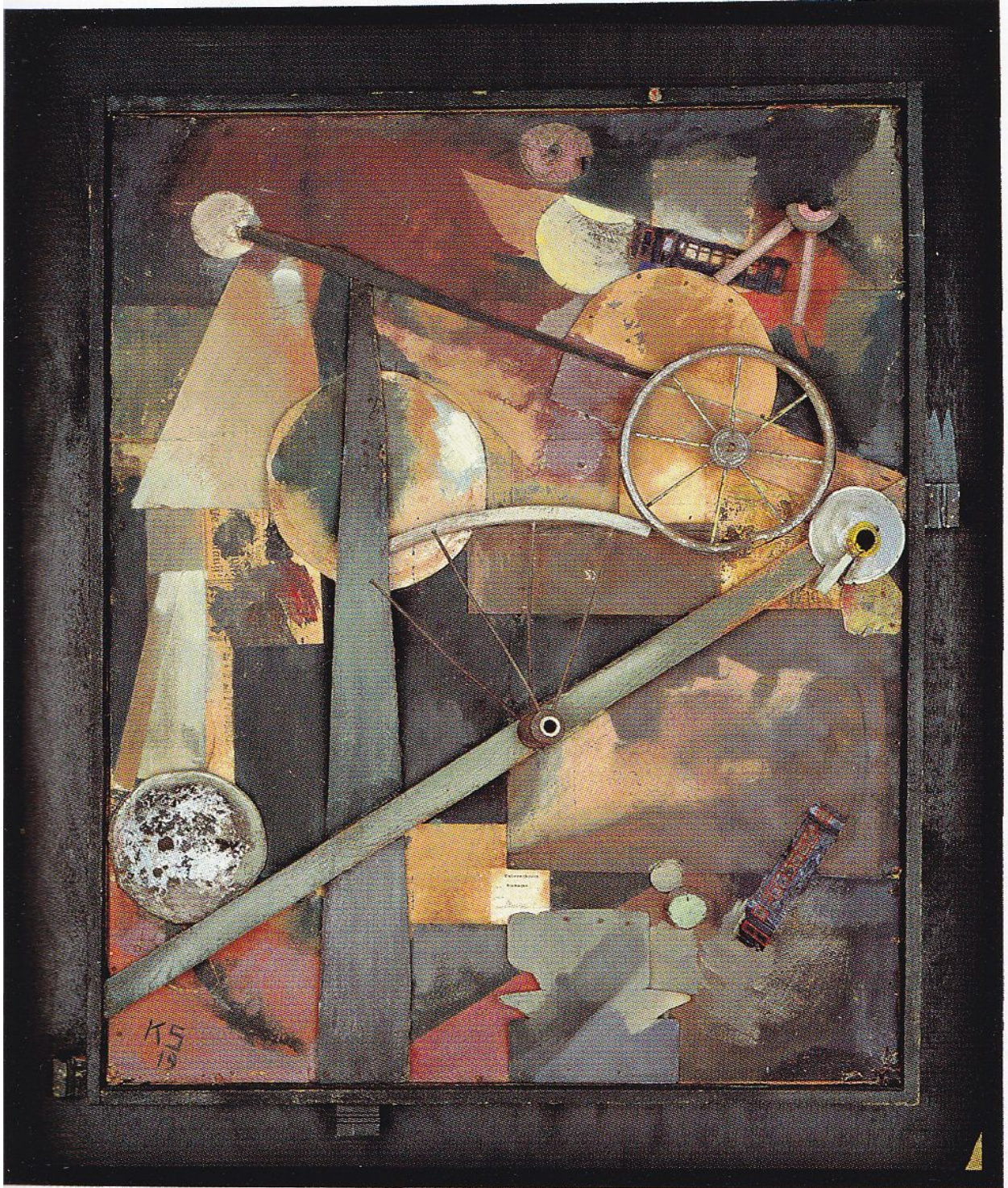


Figure 12: Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild 10 A: Konstruktion für edle Frauen*; (*Merzpicture 10 A: Construction for Noble Ladies*), 1919. From: John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1985. Fig. VII.



Figure 13: Hans (Jean) Arp, *Growth*, c. 1938 (1960s enlargement). Marble, 109.2 cm tall. The Art Institute of Chicago, Grant J. Pick Purchase Fund. Source: Andreotti, Margherita. "A New Unity of Man and Nature: Jean Arp's 'Growth' of 1938." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 16, no. 2 (1990): Figure 1.

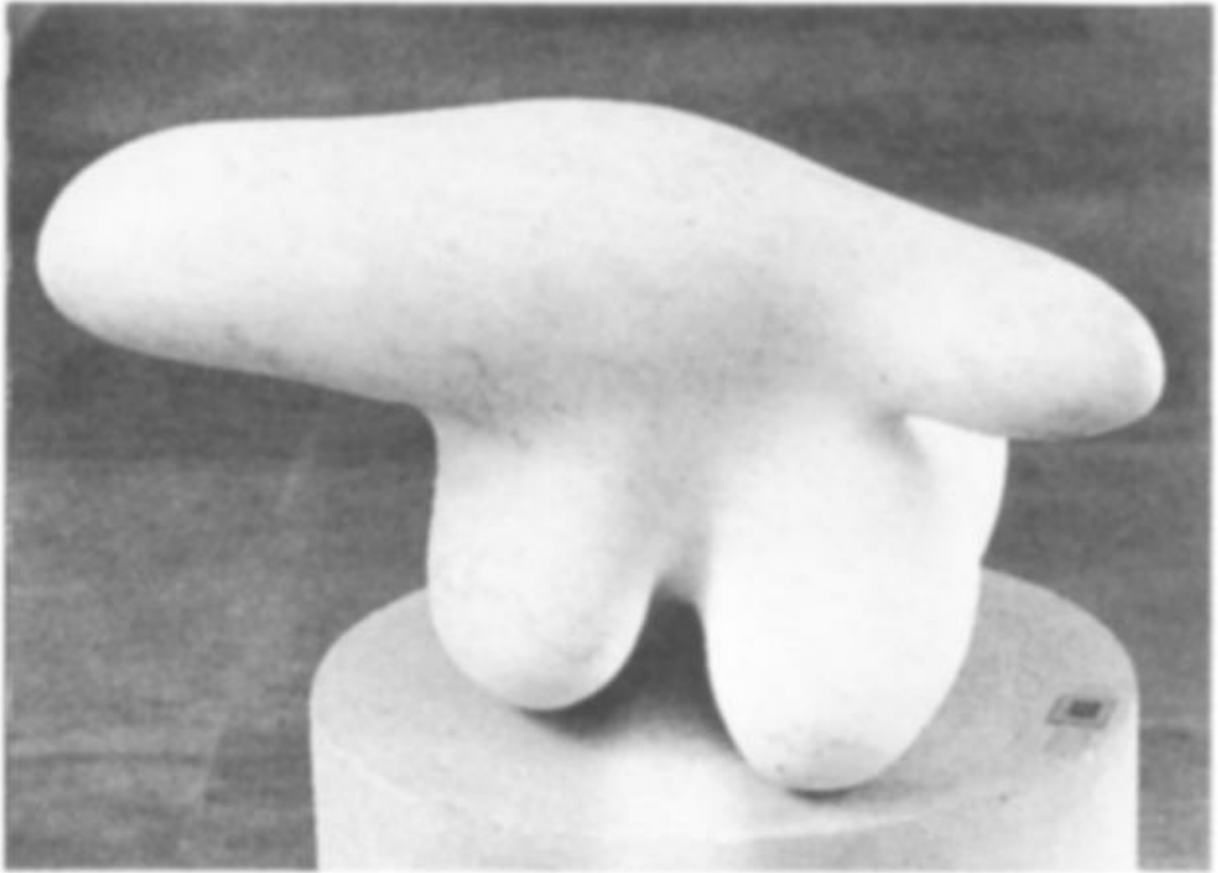


Figure 14: Hans (Jean) Arp, *Human Concretion*, 1933-1935. Marble, 31 x 58 x 40 cm. Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne. Source: Andreotti, Margherita. "A New Unity of Man and Nature: Jean Arp's 'Growth' of 1938." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 16, no. 2 (1990): Figure 8.



Figure 15: Kurt Schwitters, *Untitled (Merz Picture Alf)*, 1939. Source: <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/S/schwitters/alf.jpg.html>



Figure 16: Kurt Schwitters, *Untitled (ROSS, with Penny)*, 1945-1947. Source: Chambers, Emma and Karin Orchard, eds. *Schwitters in Britain*. London: Tate Publishing, 2013.



Figure 17: Kurt Schwitters, *Untitled (Merz picture with Coral)*, 1944-1945. Source: Meyer-Büser, Susanne and Karin Orchard, eds. *In the Beginning was Merz-From Kurt Schwitters to the Present Day*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000. Plate 194.



Figure 18: Kurt Schwitters, *Untitled (Anything With Stone)*, 1941-1944. Source: Chambers, Emma and Karin Orchard, eds. *Schwitters in Britain*. London: Tate Publishing, 2013.

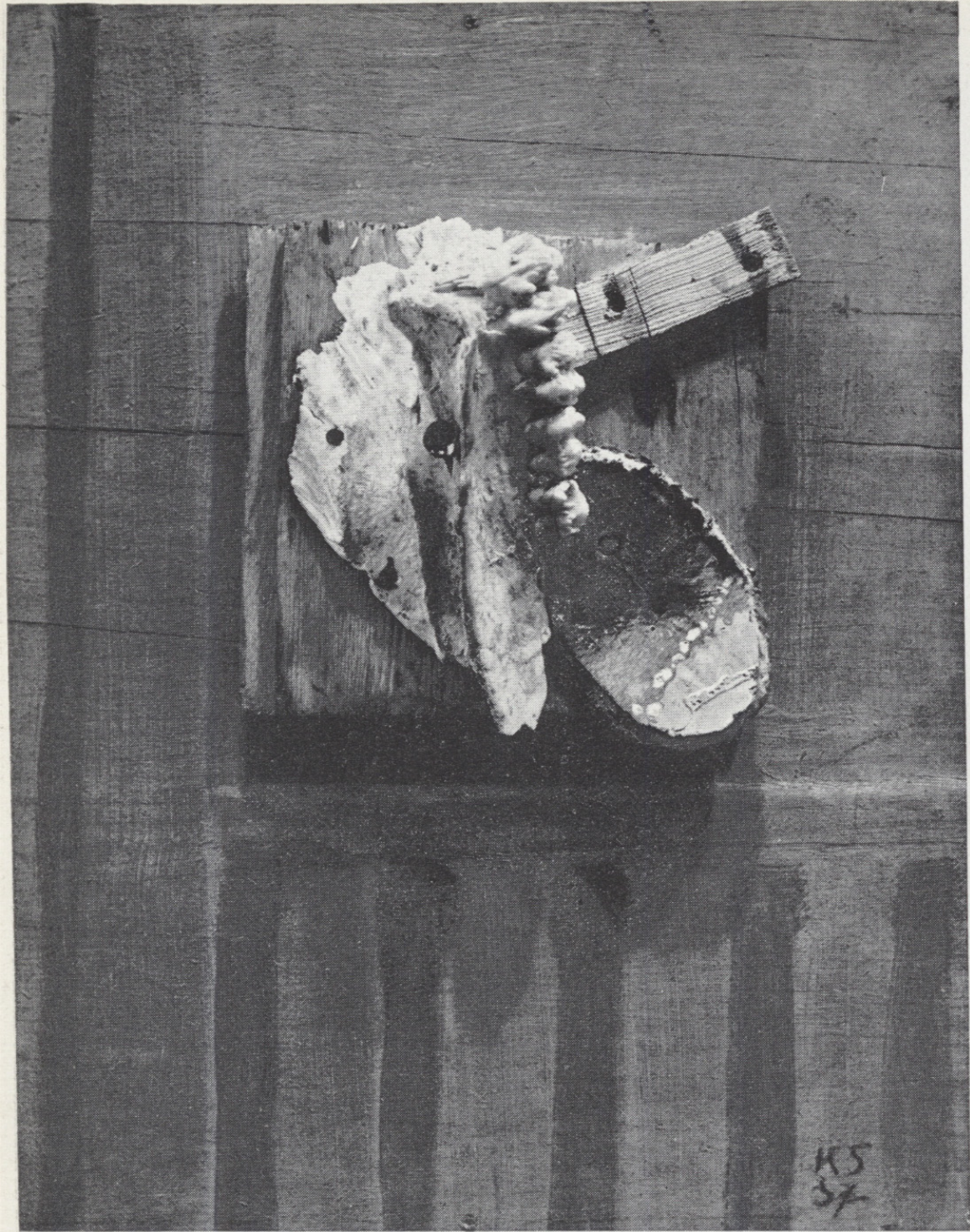


Figure 19: Kurt Schwitters, *Untitled (Merz picture with Teeth)*, 1937. Source: Schmalenbach, Werner. *Kurt Schwitters*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1970. Plate 136.



Figure 20: Hut on Hjertøya. Source: Luke, Megan R. *Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Plate 32.

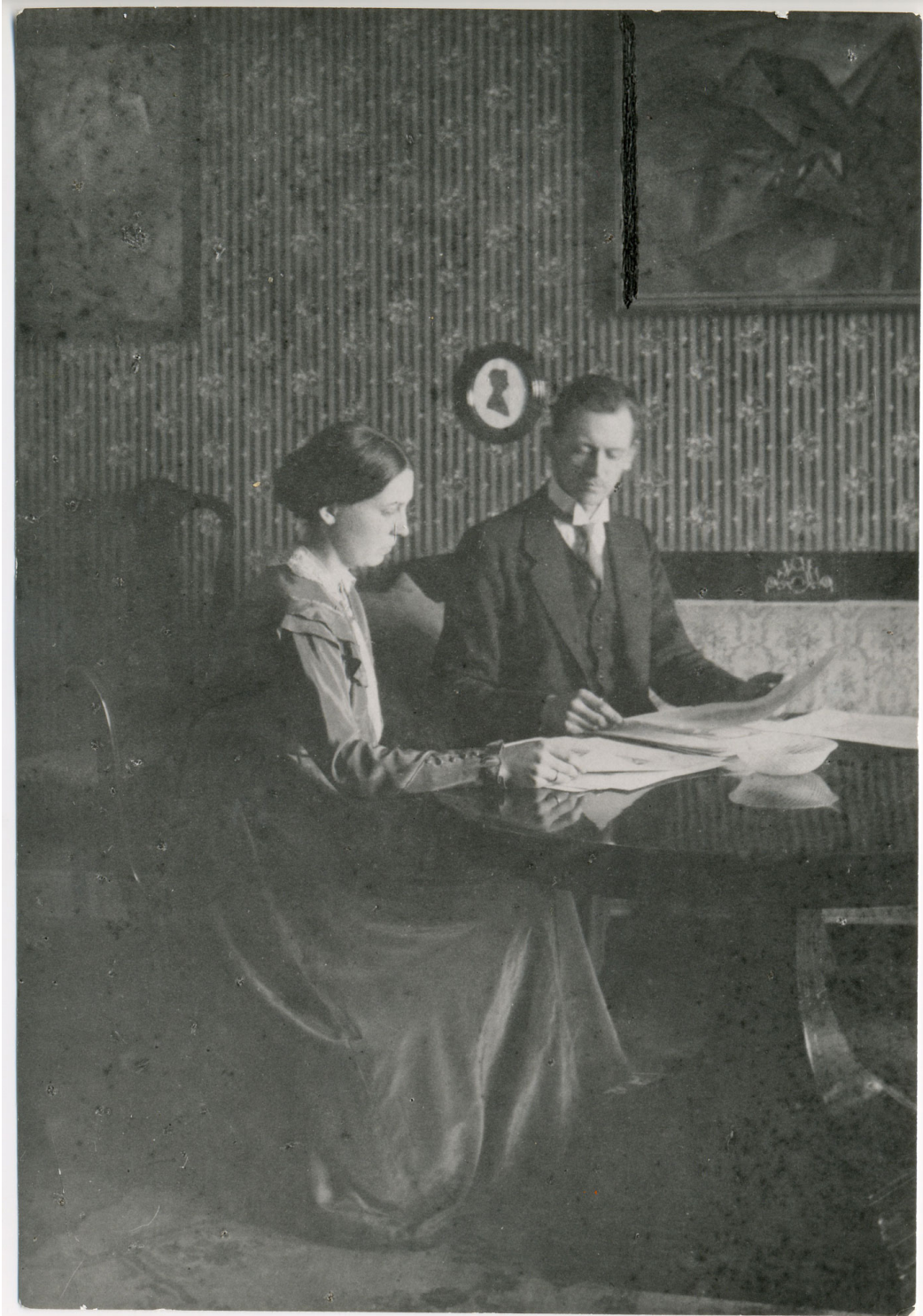


Figure 21: Helma and Kurt Schwitters, 1919. In the Biedermeier room, Waldhausenstraße 5, Hannover. Source: *Merz: A Total Vision of the World*. Bern: Benteli Publishers, 2004.

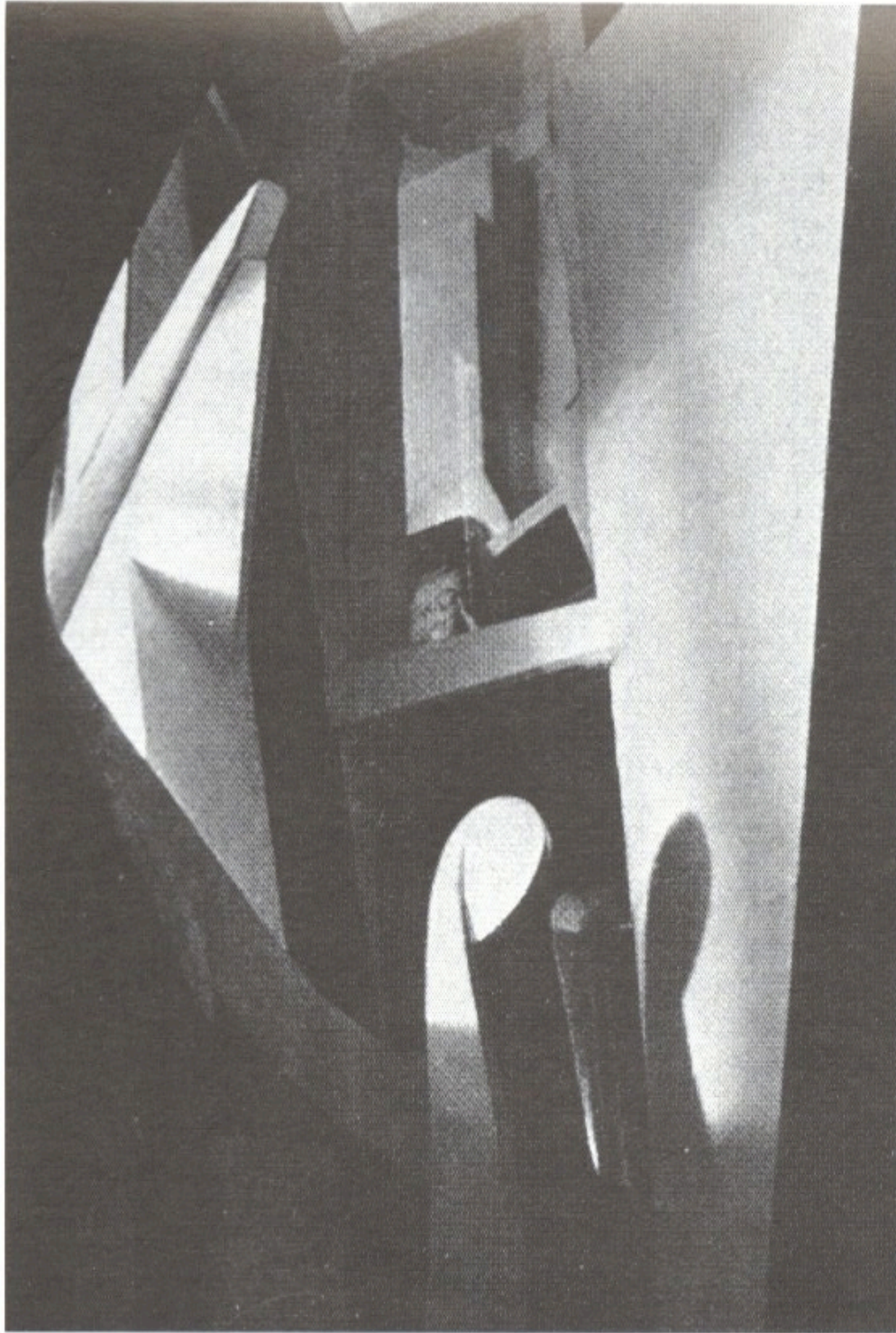


Figure 22. Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau Madonna*, after 1930. Source: Gamard, Elizabeth Burns. *Kurt Schwitters's Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010. Plate 50.



Figure 23: Kurt Schwitters, *Chicken and Egg, Egg and Chicken*, 1946, mixed media.
Source: Schulz, Isabel, ed. *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Plate 83.

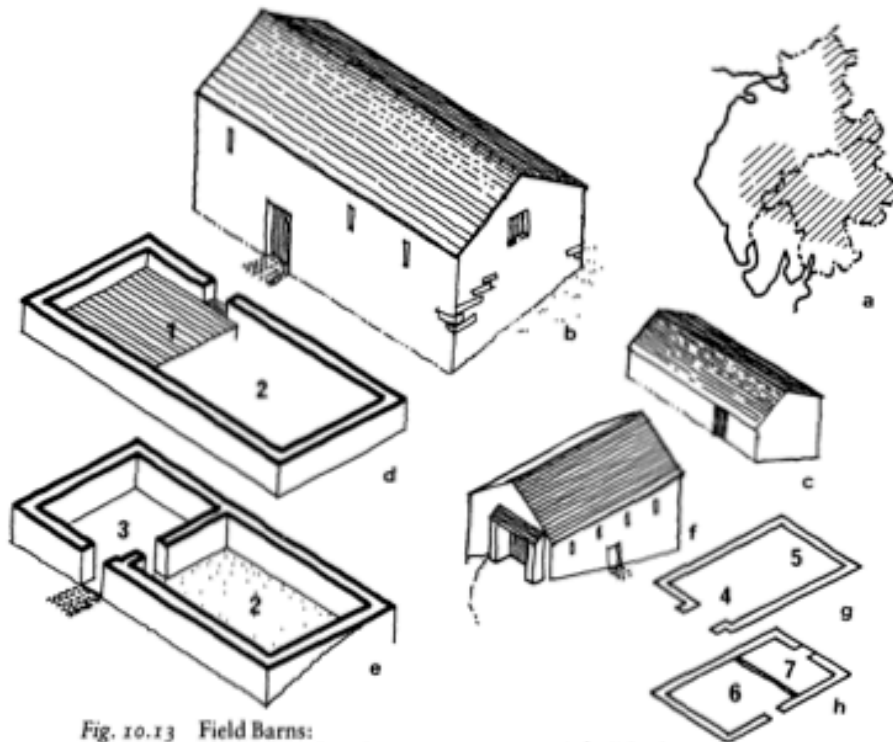


Fig. 10.13 Field Barns:

- (a) principal use along Pennines and lesser use in Lake District
- (b) field barn placed *along* the contours, access at lower level to loose-box
- (c) from opposite direction, access at upper level to hay loft
- (d) plan at upper level with loft (1) and 'sink-mow' dropping to lower level (2)
- (e) plan at lower level with lower part of sink-mow (2) and loose-box (3)
- (f) field barn placed *across* the contours, access at lower level to cow-house
- (g) plan at upper level showing loft (4) and sink-mow (5)
- (h) plan at lower level with cow-house (6) and lower part of sink-mow (7)

Like the bank barn, the field barn made use of the slope to minimize labour. Often the field barn was located part way up a field to balance the labour of delivering hay against that of spreading the manure accumulated from the cattle during the winter. One field barn was often placed alongside a wall so that it could serve two adjacent fields.

The field barn has a much more widespread distribution than the bank barn. Most examples are found in the Yorkshire Dales, many are found in various parts of the Pennines as far south as Derbyshire, and comparable buildings which do not usually make use of the slope are found in other parts of England including the Cotswolds. But the true field barn as described is characteristic of the hilly parts of Cumbria.

Figure 24: Field Barns. Source: Brunskill, R. W. "Vernacular Building Traditions in the Lake District." *The Scandinavians in Cumbria*. Baldwin, John R. and Ian D. Whyte, Eds. Edinburgh, The Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1985.



Figure 25: Traditional Field Barn, Lake District. Presently used for camp lodging.

Source:

<http://www.lakelandcampingbarns.co.uk/barns/dinah-hoggus-camping-barn>



Figure 26: Traditional Field Barn, Lake District. Presently used to accommodate tourists.
Source: <http://www.discoverthelakes.co.uk/accommodation/group-accommodation/wrosters-barn/>



Figure 27: Kurt Schwitters, *Opening Blossom*, 1943-1944. Source: Wadley, Nicholas. "Kurt Schwitters in Exile: The Late Work 1937-1948." London: Marlborough Fine Art Ltd., 1981.

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