1926

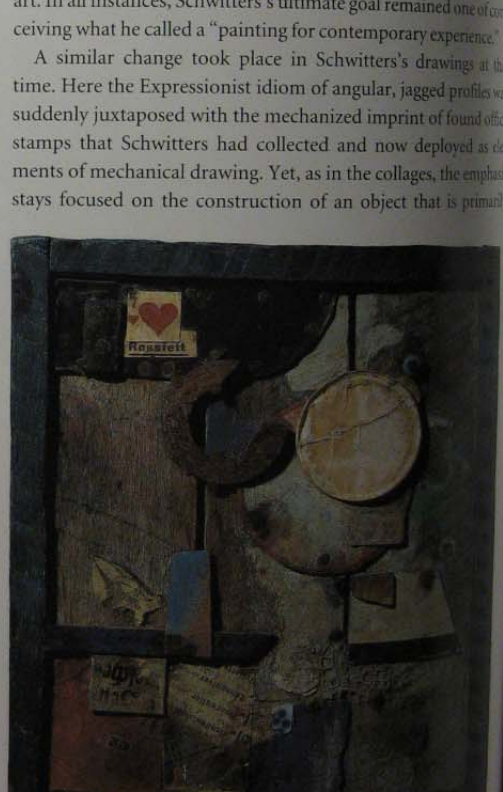
El Lissitzky's *Demonstration Room* and Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* are installed in Hanover, Germany: the architecture of the museum as archive and the allegory of modernist space as melancholia are dialectically conceived by the Constructivist and the Dadaist.

In July 1919 Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) jettisoned both his formation as an academically trained landscape and portrait painter and his recent past as a member of the German Expressionist avant-garde by publicly declaring his discovery of a new type of picture-making. The name he gave this new project was "Merz," a syllable fragmented from a larger word, *Kommerz*, which he had accidentally found on a torn advertisement for the Hannover Kommerzbank when wandering round his native Hanover. It was on the grounds of that fragment that Schwitters developed an aesthetic both of collage and of phonetic, textual, and graphic segmentation that became one of the key contributions to German Dada.

In his initial practice of Merz, however, Schwitters maintained all the idioms of the Expressionist and Futurist aesthetic that had been so influential for the German avant-garde during the late teens. In early Merz works, such as *Welten Kreise* (1919), one can trace both the dynamic vectors and force-lines of Cubo-Futurism and the chromatic scheme of Expressionist painting. Yet what radically alters works from this period is Schwitters's insertion of found metallic, wooden, or other debris collected in the streets [**1**]. Morphologically and formally, one could even go so far as to sense a distant echo of ▲ Francis Picabia's mechanomorphic works in these paintings. Yet, as with all responses that Schwitters makes, in each instance, the • legacy—whether of Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, or Picabia's Dadaism—is transformed into what one could call a specific mode of "melancholic" response. In his reaction to the total transformation of painting into a technological object, or in his response to the assimilation of mechanomorphic forms to the shapes of the composition, or in his response to Expressionism's high-flown humanitarian ideals, Schwitters situates himself as an artist who returns to an allegorical reading of techno-scientific utopianism by countering it with a position of melancholic contemplation.

The debris in Schwitters's work was, quite logically, not accepted as a credible commitment to Dada practices; and already in early ■ 1919, the leader of the Berlin Dada circle Richard Huelsenbeck had denounced Schwitters as "the Biedermeier" of German Dada (a reference to an early-nineteenth-century style in German art and life, and a term often used pejoratively to describe something as conventional or bourgeois), thereby calling attention to Schwitters's manifest concern for a continuation of painting as a space of contemplative experience. As Schwitters himself never tired of saying, the technological objects, the found materials in his work, only functioned in order to conceive of a new type of *painting*. They were never theorized as readymades that would displace painting, or as morphologies that deny the validity of drawing, or as chromatic objects that dismantle the legacy of visual intensity in Expressionist art. In all instances, Schwitters's ultimate goal remained one of conceiving what he called a "painting for contemporary experience."

A similar change took place in Schwitters's drawings at this time. Here the Expressionist idiom of angular, jagged profiles was suddenly juxtaposed with the mechanized imprint of found office stamps that Schwitters had collected and now deployed as elements of mechanical drawing. Yet, as in the collages, the emphasis stays focused on the construction of an object that is primarily



1 • Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild Rossfett (Horse Fat)*, c. 1919
Assemblage, 20.4 x 17.4 (8 x 6⅞)

▲ 1916b, 1919 • 1908, 1909, 1911, 1912, 1916a ■ 1916a, 1920

legible as poetic or pictorial, never reducing the compositional structure or the reading order to a fully homogenized, mechanically produced image such as in Picabia's mechanomorphic portraits. Rather, the drawings operate within the tension between manual inscription and technologically based textual production.

A corresponding ambiguity can be traced in Schwitters's practice of abstract sound poetry. This lifelong project began most notoriously with *An Anna Blume*, a masterpiece of German alogical verse in the tradition of early-twentieth-century writers such as Christian Morgenstern. But if, in its shrill and ludicrous exclamation and its florid homage, Schwitters's writing is first of all a Dada derision of both the bathos of Expressionism and the sentimentality of turn-of-the-century German writing, its position nonetheless remains ambiguous. For once again, rather than focusing on the linguistic self-referentiality that Russian Cubo-Futurist poetry forges in the context of a Formalist theorization of language, Schwitters's poetry positions itself in an ambivalent relationship to the most radical dismantling of narrative and representation. Similarly, it occupies the same position with regard to the dismemberment of the poetic texts that Dada figures such as Raoul Hausmann were producing at that same moment in Berlin as they foregrounded the grapheme over the phoneme, exclusively making the poem the subject of a totally nonlexical structure.

Schwitters's declaration from the outset that he had no political ambitions whatever, that he wanted his work to be situated within the tradition of painting, that his goals were utterly aesthetic and aimed at a new plastic formal order, set him at a further remove from Berlin Dada. Remaining in Hanover, with brief interruptions, and developing his own project, Schwitters soon became the center of a separate avant-garde scene, with friends and collaborators forming around him. The museum director Alexander Dorner, especially, became a crucial organizer and curator in bringing international avant-garde activities to the provincial city.

Schwitters and Lissitzky in collaboration

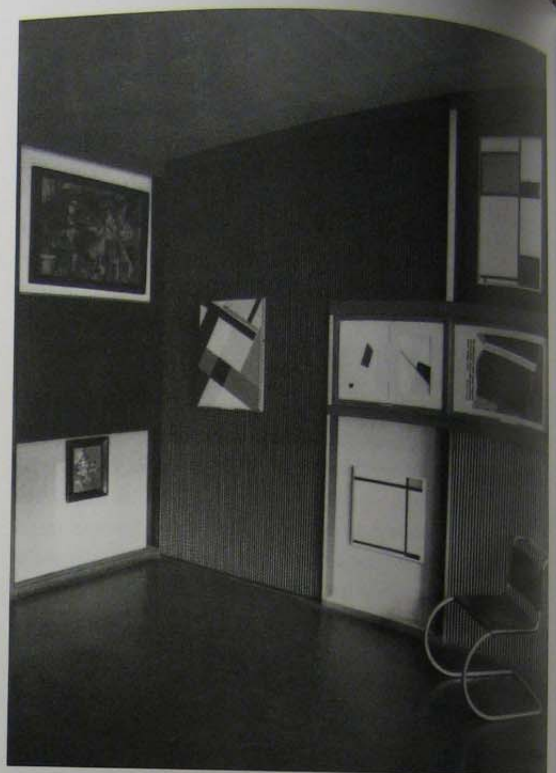
In 1925, Dorner invited the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky to return to Germany to produce a major installation for the Landesgalerie Hannover (Lissitzky had studied architecture and engineering in Darmstadt from 1909 to 1914 and had stayed in Germany for long periods in the early twenties while collaborating on a number of projects). Schwitters first came into contact with Lissitzky and Russian Constructivism and Productivism in 1922, and the two artists became friends and collaborators. In 1923 Schwitters invited Lissitzky to become the designer and coeditor of issue 8/9 of his magazine *Merz* [**2**], published in April 1924 and called "Nasci" ("being born" or "becoming"), which was an explicitly programmatic alliance of Constructivist and Dadaist ideals. While in historical hindsight it seems unlikely that these two models would have provided the basis of fruitful exchange, it is precisely in the collaboration between Lissitzky and Schwitters at the moment of 1926 that the productivity of such an encounter can be most adequately traced.

2 • El Lissitzky, cover design for Kurt Schwitters's *Merz*, no. 8/9, April–July 1924

By then both artists had been increasingly transforming their projects from pictorial or sculptural work into the investigation of architectural space. In his *Proun Room* for the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1923, for example, Lissitzky had transformed his ideas into three-dimensional form for the first time, designing the walls and ceilings with geometric shapes and reliefs [**3**]. An additional element was Dorner's intensifying attempt to theorize the new forms of display, the redesign of traditional museum spaces in favor of an adequate representation and display of avant-garde practices in painting and sculpture. Lissitzky had already designed a space for the 1926 International Exhibition in Dresden in which to show international, avant-garde, abstract art. For his first model, he rigorously emphasized walls on which the works would be hung by installing vertical wooden battens, spaced equidistant all across the display surfaces and painted white, gray, and black, and by placing the paintings on those surfaces. Ironically, the eventual master design of the 1926 Dresden exhibition was placed in the hands of the reactionary German architect Heinrich Tessenow, who would soon become known for his staunch advocacy of the return of architecture to an antimodernist regionalism.

It was Lissitzky's preliminary design for Dresden that made Dorner decide to invite the Russian to Hanover, and it was there that Lissitzky produced a second version of the cabinet for the display of abstract art, called the *Demonstration Room* [**4**]. During

3 • El Lissitzky, *Proun Room*, 1923 (1965 reconstruction)
3,000 x 300 x 260 (1181⅛ x 118⅛ x 102⅜)



4 • El Lissitzky, *The Abstract Cabinet: Demonstration Room* in the Landesgalerie, Hanover, 1927–8 (1935 installation view)

this extended stay in Hanover, Schwitters and Lissitzky further developed their friendship. Schwitters had by now also moved away from painting and collage to his own first architectural project, which came to be known as the *Merzbau* [**5**]. Beginning in his studio on the ground floor of his own private house, he gradually transformed all aspects of the traditional cubic space of the domestic room into an increasingly distorted, multiperspectival spatial structure, installing wooden, painted reliefs and loading various objects and additional forms into the spaces created.

The opposition between the *Merzbau* and the *Demonstration Room* and the close bond between their two authors produce one of the most puzzling moments of mid-twenties German avant-garde history. Yet one bridge that links the two is their focus on the issue of tactility and bodily experience in relation to the work of art. For Lissitzky's project to accommodate avant-garde painting and sculpture within the museum now focused primarily on Dorner's call for a new participatory mode of reading and perceiving. Dorner's project was to reconceive the museum as a space of author/object/spectator collaboration mediated through an increased experience of tactility. In the installation that Lissitzky designed, with its emphasis on drawers and cabinets and shelves that the spectator could open and move, thereby being directly involved in the repositioning of him- or herself as a spectator or in the positioning of the object in a new relationship, tactility and tangibility were clearly elements of a radically altered mode of perceptual interaction, changing the contemplative space of the museum into an archive.

But what Dorner's vision had not anticipated was the specific contribution that Lissitzky was to introduce into the design of the *Demonstration Room*. The transformation of the exhibition space and its display devices and conventions led him to articulate the actual historical transformation of the institution of the museum, as well as the actual status of the object displayed within it. The new situation moved the art work, that is, from being an object of cultic origins to one of pure exhibition-value, from being an object of transhistorical intelligibility to one of historical specificity, of the kind necessary to archival purposes. Those ideas about the need to transform the museum in terms of its functions, its audience, and its institutional definition had emerged in the Soviet Union as early as 1919, when artists discussed the reorientation of the aesthetic object from cult to exhibition and the transformation of viewing spaces from ones of ritual to ones of archival dimensions.

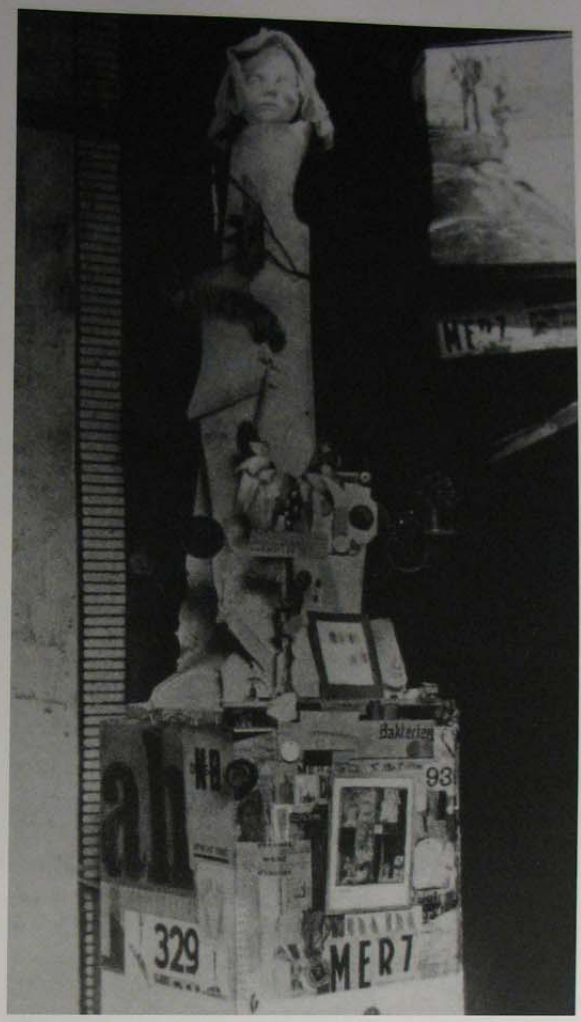
Apart from this shared interest in tactility, however, Schwitters's *Merzbau* inverted every single aspect of Lissitzky's approach, which we could call the rationalist transformation of the last residual ritualistic element in the display and reading of the work of art. In contrast, the *Merzbau*'s space was reconceived as specifically ritualistic, with the object and its display welded into an almost Wagnerian drive toward the condition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which all the senses, all perceptual elements, would be unified in an overall intensified form of visual, cognitive, and somatic—that is, physical—interaction with the objects, structures, and materials on display. Schwitters's attempt to construct a grotto, or a *Bau*, carried all the connotations that word has in German: from an animal burrow (the original meaning of *Bau*) to the famous Bauhaus declaration in which the medieval guilds of community and communality building cathedrals

in a preindustrial society and the structure of the collective could be invoked. These sources came together in his perpetual insertions into the overall display of objects, textures, and materials that emphasize the somatic dimension of perception. Thus he brought the solicited residues of bodily secretions into the building (bottles of urine, for instance, or snippets of friends' hair), which he stored and inserted into the various layers of the structure. He thereby fabricated a manifestly nonrational, nonarchival, noninstitutional space, in which a certain regression into the totality of an unconscious architectural space was conceived, and called it *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*.

Two extremes of avant-garde design

Schwitters's *Merzbau* and Lissitzky's *Demonstration Room* could therefore be theorized as the two extreme opposites of the possibilities of avant-garde design in the twenties. Clearly, compared with the ideology of the Bauhaus, neither Schwitters nor Lissitzky belongs to the utopianism of a Bauhaus spirit that was attempting at the same moment to transform everyday life and domestic architecture through a mode of rationalization and a form of democratized consumption. Specifically in the *Merzbau*, which would be continued throughout Schwitters's life (after the *Merzbau* in Hanover was destroyed by Allied bombing in 1943, Schwitters installed a second version in Norway, to where he had emigrated in 1937 after his work had appeared in the "Degenerate 'Art'" exhibition in Munich, and a third—the *Merzbarn*—near Ambleside in northern England, just before his death in 1948), the idea of a space of radical rationalization was refused on every single level. This project of instrumentalizing or rationalizing space was intended to reach right down to the most intimate sphere of everyday life, where function reigned supreme, as daily activities were submitted to planning, control, and the principle of greater efficiency. In the light of this, Schwitters's *Merzbau* proposed a space of total inefficiency, utter dysfunction, a complete refusal to subject spatial experience to rationality, transparency, and instrumentalization. By emphasizing the space as the ground, the grotto, and a home of a different kind, Schwitters created a secularized but at the same time ritualized space of bodily function, one of bodily retrieval outside and in opposition to a rigorously controlled public sphere.

Despite its appearance, Lissitzky's space is also dramatically different from the functional realm of Bauhaus design, specifically because of its theoretical accommodation of the radically transformed conditions of perception of the work of art. That is, Lissitzky's space is in a sense a program for the retheorization of the institution of the museum. If it has been misread as a dynamic display of abstract, avant-garde art, to which it supposedly lends support through its streamlined design, that false interpretation should be counteracted by emphasizing the degree to which Lissitzky saw the museum as being increasingly transformed into the mere institution of historicization and archival order. Thus, inasmuch as Lissitzky recognized that the cognitive and perceptual modes still embedded in easel painting were no longer to be rescued or redeemed by even the most advanced forms of abstraction, he had already subjected the avant-garde promise of abstraction to an internal critique. Looking at the display of the specimens of abstraction in the *Demonstration Room*, one can—with hindsight of course—recognize that even in the way these objects are displayed there is already a certain critical operation taking place. This is because Lissitzky's reliefs—wall structures, cabinets, drawers, movable panels—become the ultimate work of art, while the abstract paintings, in all their radicality, become mere illustrations of an aesthetic that had already been superseded.



5 • Kurt Schwitters, *The Hanover Merzbau: The Merz Column*, 1923.
Mixed media, dimensions unknown (destroyed)

FURTHER READING

Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000)
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Joan Ockman, "The road not taken: Alexander Dorner's way beyond art," in R. E. Somol (ed.), *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning an Avant-Garde in America* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997)
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