

Conditions of Homelessness

Kurt Schwitters' Investigation of Un/Homely Territories

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What is, for example, the German nation? A more or less incidental or deliberate community of people, the majority of which speak German, who have lived, worked, collaborated, fought together for some time due to historical contingencies, who celebrate the same feasts and who call themselves the German nation to distinguish themselves from other nations [...]. The geographical border, laid down by treaty, determines to which nation a person belongs. [...]

I come from Hanover. I can say: "My national sentiment is limited to Hanover town excluding the neighbouring town Linden. Or to Waldhausen-Straße, and to be more explicit the left side, where I live. My enemies live across the street. I place my machine gun in front of my house and shoot all passers-by".¹

Kurt Schwitters (1924)

The Jews have to leave before thousands of German emigrants [...]! The workers are always called homeless, but those who say that, don't even know what Heimat means. [...] Those who feel at home everywhere can't possibly know what Heimat is, exactly because they don't have any [...]. He who is international has no right to say that he feels German.²

Adolf Hitler (1920)

In 1937 the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* opened in Munich. Organized by the National Socialists the exhibition aimed at presenting what was considered the diametrical opposite of the national canon – the “degenerate art” of the international avant-garde. Among many works which the Nazis had collected from public German collections and museums in their effort to demonstrate the subversive nature of modern art were four pieces by the German Dada artist Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948). As part of the international avant-garde movement and with close connections to Expressionist, Constructivist, and Dadaist factions

¹ Kurt Schwitters. “Nationalitätsgefühl”, in *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 5, Friedhelm Lach (ed.), Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1981, pp. 197–198. Originally printed in *Der Sturm*, XV, Monatsbericht (August 1924), pp. 3–4. My translation.

² Adolf Hitler. “Der Jude als Arbeiterführer”, speech to a NSDAP-assembly in Munich June 24, 1920. Printed in *Hitler – Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen 1905–1924*, E. Jäckel og A. Kuhn (eds.), Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1980, p. 151. My translation.

all over Europe, it was inevitable that the creator of Merz – the man who in 1920 had launched a one man movement based on a strategy of making art out of trash – would become a thorn in the side of Nazis obsessed with purity.

Included in the exhibition was the assemblage which had given Schwitters' Merz-art its name: *Merzbild* (1919). This was an abstract composition created from all kinds of found materials that Schwitters salvaged from the streets of his hometown Hanover. The title of the work derived from a small fragment of an advertisement for "Kommerz und Privatbank" which the artist had glued onto the work. Considering this work the incarnation of his working method, Schwitters subsequently chose Merz as a generic term for all his activities. Finally, he even called himself Merz or Kurt Merz Schwitters.

The Nazis presented the work in the Dada section of the exhibition. Here the organizers of the show framed the Dada artists' approach to visual arts in general using the following quote from Hitler's Nuremberg speech of 5 September 1934:

All the artistic and cultural blather of Cubists, Futurists, Dadaists, and the like is neither sound in racial terms nor tolerable in national terms. It can at best be regarded as the expression of a worldview that freely admits that the dissolution of all existing ideas, all nations and all races, their mixing and adulteration, is the loftiest goal of their intellectual creators and clique of leaders. With innate, naïve effrontery this cultural equivalent to political destruction seeks to delight the new state with a Stone-Age culture, as if nothing had happened.³

However, there is absolutely no doubt that the artists were well aware that much "had happened". Even if the exhibition officially marked the beginning of a comprehensive persecution of artists who in the widest sense were considered enemies of the state, in reality *Entartete Kunst* represented the culmination of several years' effort to displace these "hostile" individuals. Since the beginning of the 1930s many of Schwitters' German colleagues had left the country. In the winter of 1936/37 Schwitters also decided to flee Hanover, which until then had determined his life and art in every sense. At first he sought refuge in Norway, but with the German occupation in 1940 he was forced to flee once more, this time to England.

³ Quoted in English from Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau. "Entartete Kunst, Munich 1937 – A Reconstruction", in "Degenerate Art": *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Stephanie Barron (ed.), New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1991, p. 57.

The change in Schwitters' conditions and his real experience of homelessness was reflected in his work as he continued to expand the Merz production, which he for practical reasons had been forced to leave behind in Hanover. This is evident in works like *Bild mit Raumgewächsen/Bild mit zwei kleinen Hunden* (1920/1939), a collage which Schwitters brought with him and modified during his exile in Norway. In 1939 while "burying" all allusions to Germany and his native language he added Norwegian text fragments, references to Oslo, and calendar pages from the present year to the composition, a strategy which led art historian Roger Cardinal to characterize the work as "an expression of radical dislocation" and "a symbolic farewell to a Hanover he would indeed never set foot in again".⁴ The collage *Lysaker* (1937), whose title refers to Schwitters' geographical location at the time of creation and whose composition is dominated by "local" materials (a small Norwegian flag and a dried flower), explicitly deals with both literal and psychological questions of how to appropriate a new national identity and a foreign national territory in life as well as in art. And as pointed out by Roger Cardinal, a most complex picture of the relationship between the native and the foreign is expressed in the collage *Opened by Customs* (1937).⁵ Pointing to the passage of both mail and people from one defined national territory to another, to geographical borders and the authorities which enforce them, this work takes as its point of departure a label with the words "Zollamtlich geöffnet". A date postmarked 3 August 1937 and the fragment of an address label with the word "Norwegen" which both form part of the collage, clearly indicate that the materials derive from private letters sent to the artist from Germany. Emphasizing the physical distance between Schwitters and his home country, the political censorship imposed by the National Socialists at this particular time in history, and the continued intrusion into Schwitters' private life even after his displacement, *Opened by Customs* presents the schism between native ground turned hostile and a friendly land that is paradoxically foreign.

Characteristic of the above mentioned works is the fact that they explicitly relate to homelessness as a concrete existential condition rather than a theoretical concept. In this sense they represent a shift in focus in comparison with Schwitters' Hanover work, in which Schwitters, I would argue, undermines the conservative-national ideas of the German Heimat flourishing in his own

⁴ Roger Cardinal. "Collecting and Collage-making: The Case of Kurt Schwitters", in *The Cultures of Collecting*, John Elsner & Roger Cardinal (eds.), London: Reaktion Books, 1994, p. 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*

time after the defeat in WW1. While the text “Nationalitätsgefühl” (1924), quoted in the beginning of this article, literally represents both a critical and ironic comment on nationalist sentiments, many other examples of this strategy are found in Schwitters’ literary production before 1937. Among the most sophisticated of these works are “Franz Müllers Drahtfrühling” (1919) and “Ursonate” (1922–32), in which various linguistic and phonetic means serve to break down any idea of an essentialized, cultivated German language – and by extension an essentialized, cultivated German people – characterized by homogeneity and shared interests. Going against nationalist ideology predicated on a belief in an organic bond between language, people and territory – a belief which had provided the main argument for the unification of Germany in 1871⁶ – Schwitters in these works exposes national language as a “heteroglossia” typified by internal differences rather than unity (e.g. between different regions and different social classes).

That Schwitters was attacking his own Heimat from within was, however, nowhere more evident than in the installation *Merzbau*, which the artist began constructing in his private home in Waldhaussen Strasse 5 in Hanover beginning in 1923. Calling to mind T.J. Demos’ remarks about the connection between nationalism and “home as Heimat” in early 20th century Germany, it would seem that Schwitters could not have chosen a more suitable setting for his radical critique of the essentialist belief in specifically German roots:

One way nationalism defined itself ideologically was through the metaphor of the home. The figure of the home asserted values of belonging, of social and economic integration, which were the defining and commonly held principles of fascism, whether in Germany, France or Italy. [...]. National unity was established by associating itself with the unity of the home, as “home” became freighted with political value. In French, [...], common ways of referring to one’s house (*chez soi*) also signify one’s country. In German, this slippage between house and nation similarly occurs with the word *Heimat*, meaning one’s home, childhood, family, as well as one’s country and homeland.⁷

However, before looking into the strategies with which Schwitters transformed his home into a contradictory, heterotopic site where symbols of the German

⁶ Eric J. Hobsbawn. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 103.

⁷ T.J. Demos. *Duchamp Homeless? The Avant-Garde and Post-Nationalism*, unpublished PhD. dissertation, New York: Columbia University, 2000, pp. 47–49.

Heimat agitate against signs of an international, “homeless” avant-garde, the history of *Merzbau* shall briefly be accounted for.

Merzbau was a highly unusual, process-oriented work. It grew out of collages and assemblages placed on the walls in Schwitters’ studio and gradually developed into a spatial construction based on so-called columns that were built up of various collected objects and refuse. The most famous of these was *Der erste Tag Merzsäule* (c. 1923). This column was supposedly crowned by the death mask of Schwitters’ first born son Gerd and seemed simultaneously dedicated to “impurities” of all kinds and to the purpose of situating Schwitters’ art practice within an international network and broader aesthetic movement. Thus, not only was the German word “Bakterien” (“Bacteria”) readable on the collage covering the base of the column but it also consisted of fragments from various international avant-garde magazines as well as Schwitters’ own Merz publications. In this way a link is made between abject material, the work of the international avant-garde, and Schwitters’ own creations.

As indicated by the description of *Der erste Tag Merzsäule* in the first years after its inception *Merzbau* stood out as a Dadaist construction in which Schwitters eventually began to build small cavities or “grottos” that he would furnish with trashy (if carefully selected) objects. The work gradually took over several rooms of the house and around 1930 this three dimensional organism turned into a predominantly architectural structure which, as can be seen in the last photographs of *Merzbau* from c. 1933, was characterized by Constructivist, Cubist, and Expressionist forms. It is almost certain that the work would have developed further had Schwitters not been forced flee his home, and had *Merzbau* not been destroyed during an air raid on Hanover on the night of October 8, 1943.

While starting out as a work apparently concerned with abject Dadaist content, within a decade *Merzbau* underwent profound changes culminating in Schwitters’ seeming devotion to the pure, white architectural form, which photographs of the work from 1933 attest to.

However, if the artist’s proclaimed intentions are disregarded and the work is analyzed from a socio-political point of view, it is possible to understand the various aesthetic strategies employed in *Merzbau* over time as anything but conflicting. Rather than being symptomatic of a profound change of focus and interest, the form and content of *both* the early Dada phase and the later form-oriented phase stand out as ways of challenging the prevailing nationalist agenda on different levels. Thus, I will argue that a consistent effort to criticize the notion of Heimat and to engage in conditions of homelessness is demonstrated

in *Merzbau* on three levels: 1. As pointed out by art historian Dietmar Elger critique is expressed through the literal content of the “grottos” of the first phase, as Schwitters placed a series of political portraits and other concrete references to the cultural history of Germany in these cavities,⁸ 2. Critique is also articulated via the architectural styles which were accumulated in *Merzbau* during the last documented construction phase and which became endowed with strong political connotations in Schwitters’ own time; 3. Finally, critique manifests itself on a psychoanalytical level, as Schwitters orchestrated a work that had the potential of making itself felt as *Unheimlich*.

Focusing firstly on the Dadaist grottos, of which Schwitters made a thorough literary description in 1930/31,⁹ before beginning to bury them under the architectural forms that were later to dominate the work, one finds cavities dedicated to current events and actual places; grottos referring to historical and mythological persons; grottos with an explicitly erotic and often violent content; and, finally, grottos which the artist devoted to persons and places of special importance to his own private life. Some of these grottos thematized the sources of the strong contemporary currents of nationalism, e.g. the grotto containing the so-called “Hitler alter”. We can also consider the Ruhr district grotto, which referred to a German territory that between 1923 and 1925 had been occupied by foreign powers as a result of conditions in the Treaty of Versailles calling for German renunciation of land. The “Göthe grotto” and the so-called “Luther corner” were also concerned with issues of national identity as they both referred to figures who represented “true” German identity and culture to the population at large.¹⁰ Contrary to this, all the grottos dedicated to Kurt Schwitters’ avant-garde friends from Germany and abroad represented either international art movements or the International Style in architecture. Thus, a confrontation between the nationalist notion of *Heimat* and the so-called “nomadic”, homeless culture which the artist and his friends were accused of propagating was created through the contradictory content of co-existing grottos.

⁸ For a thorough interpretation of the content of the grottos in relation to the flowering nationalism in Germany in the 1920s, see the chapter “Der Einfluss politisch-gesellschaftlicher Ereignisse und Strömungen auf die Entwicklung und die Ikonologie des Merzbaus” in Dietmar Elger. *Der Merzbau von Kurt Schwitters*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 1999 (1984), pp. 120–134. The following remarks on the content of the grottos are based on Elger’s observations and research.

⁹ See Kurt Schwitters. “Ich und meine Ziele” (1930/31) in *Kurt Schwitters: Das literarische Werk*, vol. 5, Friedhelm Lach (ed.), Cologne: Dumont 1998 (1981), pp. 340–341. Originally printed in *Merz 21 erstes Veilchenheft*, Hannover, 1931, pp. 113–117.

¹⁰ Elger 1999, p. 128.

The entry of homeless culture into Schwitters' home became no less evident as the grottos eventually gave way to architectonic structures: The Expressionist, Cubist, and Constructivist forms only seem to have accumulated in *Merzbau* parallel to a serious escalation of the public debate over – and critique of – the International Style in architecture. The centre of this debate was, of course, the Bauhaus School, which was accused of representing an “a-national”, “homeless” approach.¹¹ According to conservative-nationalist critics of the new architecture, the International Style (or *Neue Sachlichkeit*, as it was called in Germany) was synonymous with cultural and social decadence, as it was conceived by urban nomads with absolutely no idea of their German *Heimat* and a true German architectural tradition.¹² Thus, instead of simply signifying pure, disinterested abstract form, the architectural styles which took over *Merzbau* around 1931 were already embedded in a socio-political fight over cultural values and national identity. This fact makes it hard to believe that Schwitters' home had now become a much purer place in contrast to his earlier abject Dada phase.

Last but not least, however, *Merzbau* can be seen as a Freudian expression of homelessness. With his work Schwitters not only created a labyrinthine spatial structure. He also made use of a whole series of other motifs described by Freud in his contemporary theory on “The Uncanny” (“*Das Unheimliche*”, 1919) – a theory dealing with the impossibility of maintaining a clear distinction between the familiar and the strange or foreign. Taking specific literary examples as his point of departure, Freud examines under which conditions the well-known can come to appear unfamiliar. Subsequently, he concludes that what appears to be foreign is not really unfamiliar. In fact “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” – that is, the foreign is something well-known that has been repressed.¹³

At the core of Freud's theory lies the thesis that the foreign is always embedded in the familiar. This is exactly what Schwitters seems to have confronted the visitors to his apparently homely *Merzbau* with. The bourgeois façade of the house encouraged visitors to believe that they were on safe ground. However, the inner, labyrinthine character of the home had, according to

¹¹ Barbara Miller Lane. *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918–1945*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1985 (1968), p. 73.

¹² A strong example of this attitude towards the new architecture is found in Paul Schultze-Naumburg. *Das Gesicht des Deutschen Hauses*, Munich: Georg D.W. Callwey Verlag, 1929.

¹³ Quoted from Sigmund Freud. “The Uncanny” in *Writings on Art and Literature*, James Strachey (ed.), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 195. Originally printed in Sigmund Freud. *Das Unheimliche – Aufsätze zur Literatur*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer dubbelpunkt, 1963 (1919), p. 46.

Freud's theory, the potential of provoking that specific sense of the Uncanny, which stems from a repressed infantile anxiety arising from the fear of getting lost or losing control.¹⁴ The grottos containing erotic or violent imagery, moreover, were also well suited to the purpose of eliciting the Uncanny, as the body parts, the miniature representations of mutilated corpses, and the grotesque sexual imagery situated in these cavities can be connected to the fundamental castration complex mentioned by Freud in "The Uncanny". The objects bearing indexical traces of close friends and family members, which Schwitters incorporated in *Merzbau* (e.g. a lock of Hans Richter's hair, a pencil from the drawing board of Mies van der Rohe, the death mask of Schwitters' firstborn son, and the bra of Sophie Tauber-Arp) can also be set in relation to the Freudian concept of the Uncanny.¹⁵ Thus, not only did Schwitters seem to rescue fellow artists, friends, and family from oblivion by including their objects in his time recording structure, he also allowed those people to (if unconsciously or unwillingly) meet "themselves" in the grottos. In Freudian terms, they were, to meet their "double" – an Uncanny encounter that could potentially make repressed fears of death resurface.

Writing about the artistic practice of Marcel Duchamp in his Ph.D. dissertation *Duchamp Homeless? The Avant-Garde and Post-Nationalism* (2000) the American art historian T.J. Demos defines the homelessness, which arises in and influences the work of Duchamp, as "a historically specific condition, [which] groups together geopolitical dislocation, non-national identity, anti-national and anti-fascist politics, and psychic deracination".¹⁶ In the above I have suggested that this definition also applies to the work of Kurt Schwitters: Not only during his years of exile but also – and perhaps more convincingly – in the Hanover production, Schwitters drew up a highly complex picture of the Un/homely territory that Europe, both socio-politically and psychoanalytically, was transformed into in the immediate aftermath of WW1.

¹⁴ I should stress that I in the following don't wish to insinuate that Schwitters had any knowledge of Freud's theory of "The Uncanny". I am only pointing to that fact that *Merzbau* in specific ways reflects motifs listed by Freud in his text of 1919.

¹⁵ For more details on the content of some of the personal grottos see Hans Richter. *Dada – Kunst und Antikunst*, Cologne: Verlag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1964, p. 156.

¹⁶ Demos 2000, p. 1.

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