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idea journal

(extra) ordinary interiors:
practising critical reflection

vol. 18, no. 01

2021

the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association



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practising critical reflection**

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cover image

Lying motionless, listless. Consuming time; being present, each moment folds into another. Surfaces becoming expanses of inflections of hue. Normality expands into a stream of observing luminosity. Still image from video by Chora Carleton, 2021.

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this issue's provocation

(Extra) Ordinary Interiors calls for contributions from academics, research students and practitioners that demonstrate contemporary modes of criticality and reflection on specific interior environments in ways that expand upon that which is ordinary (of the everyday, common, banal, or taken for granted).

This theme has two agendas: First, the desire to amplify critical reflection as a key practice of the disciplines associated with this journal's readership. In short, to prompt interior designers, interior architects, and spatial designers to be more proactive and experimental in asserting their specialist knowledge and expertise as critical commentary. This asks authors to reconsider the role of critique and criticism in their scholarly and creative works, or, to demonstrate how to reflect critically upon a design and to locate the design's relation to material, political, social, cultural, historical and geographical concerns. Such an enterprise may reveal whether models of criticality centred on judgement, authority and historicism are relevant, constructive, insightful or generative, or, as Bruno Latour poses, have they 'run out of steam'?⁰¹ This exercise may prompt some to revisit key thinkers who pose new discursive, visual and temporal models for critical practice in this recent age of criticality. We draw your attention to *Critical Spatial Practice* by Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen, which asks for thinking "about 'space' without necessarily intervening in it physically, but trying to sensitise, promote, develop and foster an attitude towards contemporary spatial production, its triggers, driving forces, effects and affects... [to] speculate on the modalities of production and potential benefits of the role of 'the outsider.'"⁰²

We also look to Jane Rendell's introduction to *Critical Architecture*, which asserts that criticism and design are linked together by virtue of their shared interests in invoking social change.⁰³ Whether it takes written, built or speculative form, criticism is an action, which according to Roland Barthes, is a calling into crisis, a moment where existing definitions, disciplinary boundaries and assumptions about normativity are put into question.⁰⁴

The second agenda of this journal issue takes heed of the ordinary, and how, in its intense observation, what is normal or often taken for granted exceeds itself, becomes extra or more ordinary. Everyday spaces such as supermarkets, service stations, laundry mats, hardware stores, parks and four-way street intersections, and banal gestures such as washing the dishes, walking the dog or street sweeping become subject to critical scrutiny and introspection. Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage Around My Room*, Julio Cortázar's *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* are but a few historic examples that draw out critical depth and aesthetic meaning about ordinary interiors, interiors understood in the most liberal sense.⁰⁵ What new actions to the crisis of critical commentary lurk restlessly in ordinary interiors?

While a nostalgic or romantic response to this journal's theme may dwell on interior situations with no special or distinctive features, or explore the persistence and abundance of ordinary interiors, even commonplace spaces, noticed or not, it can not be denied that recent pandemic events world-wide have flung the many facets of everyday life into crisis, including long-standing notions of proximity, intimacy, hapticity, privacy, freedom and rights to access 'essential' services. For many, the world has become home and home has become an internal world, an interior contaminated or augmented by virtual technologies serving as lifelines to a previous highly social and diversified lifestyle. As the interior of one's domestic space finds coincidence with one's isolation bubble, many are finding that interiority and interiors are conflating to take on new meaning, new function, and new configuration. Ordinary scenes of dead flies on windowsills, sun rays pointing to poor house-keeping habits, mounting bags of uncollected rubbish and recycling, shuffling of mattresses, improvised work surfaces, revised chores rubrics, commandeering of the bathroom, and the commodity of headphones and adapters highlight an intensified condition.

Authors are prompted to practice a form of critical reflection on one (extra) ordinary interior.

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01 Bruno Latour. 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,' In *Critical Inquiry - Special issue on the Future of Critique* 30, no. 2 (2004): 25-248.

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occupying *merzbau*: the critic, her words and the work

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abstract

In the early twentieth century, German artist Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948) constructed the work *Merzbau* [Merz building] inside his studio in the family residence in Hanover, Germany. The interior developed from a series of *Merzsäulen* [Merz columns] which eventually grew into a continuous spatial structure along with three of the studio's four walls. The central floor space was left empty while some elements stretched across the ceiling above. Only three photographs, taken in 1933 by a local photographer, have survived as evidence of the work which was destroyed by allied bombing during World War II. Schwitters had, by then, fled Germany and travelled to Norway where he would start the construction of a new *Merz* building. The following examines the Hanover *Merzbau* as a work of art embedded in the fabric of a conventional residential house. It explores how, employing the intermediary space of the artist's studio, the work unfolded an inhabitable wall space built from scrap material collected from the streets of Hanover. If Schwitters seems to have grounded himself between the interior and exterior of his house through the intricate weaving of a liminal living space, the following addresses this space between the ordinary/familiar and the extraordinary/strange that *Merzbau* negotiated. It does so for the purpose of framing the work's attempt at transcending its everyday domestic setting. Radical writing strategies developed by French novelist George Perec (1936-1982) are employed for experimentation with the way that insight into *Merzbau* is produced. This approach involves detailed descriptions of places and scenes that complicate the extra/ordinary nature of these in pursuit of a space beyond named the 'infra-ordinary'. Three positions between the artwork *Merzbau*, the conventional dwelling house inside which it was built, and the critic evaluating the work, are developed for the purpose of foregrounding the act of writing as a critical and creative spatial practice.

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extra/ordinary

Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* is, by all means, an extraordinary work. This is not only so because of the construction's highly unusual appearance in contrast to the seemingly ordinary house inside which it was built. The circumstance that neither house nor work exists today means that three photographs captured in 1933 by the photographer Wilhelm Redemann are the only surviving evidence of the structure (Figures 01-03). Numerous accounts of *Merzbau* in its various stages of development have been given by Kurt Schwitters himself, by his wife and son and visitors to the house, as well as by historians, critics, and others who have pieced the evidence and anecdotes together to produce an understanding of what the photographs display.⁰¹ On this basis, what is attempted here is to explore the relationship between house and work — the ordinary and the extraordinary — as a relation of co-dependence. Furthermore, to explore and articulate, in forms of writing that exceed conventional practices of academic critique, how the convolution of site and work comes to constructively involve and engage the critic when discussing the work.

A relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary is developed through the introduction of a third term from Georges Perec — the 'infra-ordinary' — which is the title of a collection of texts written in the 1970s.⁰² Here, Perec suggests that something lies beyond the extra/ordinary which is neither one nor the other nor something in-between. The concept of the infra-ordinary must, in spatial terms, be understood as something

beyond that barely exists. The infra-ordinary is 'the opposite of events,' as Perec explains.⁰³ It is

what we do when we do nothing, what we hear when we hear nothing, what happens when nothing happens ... those things which are the opposite of the extraordinary, yet which are not the ordinary either — things which are 'infra' ...

as the architect Paul Virilio elaborates when thinking back on his work with Perec on the French journal *Cause commune* in the early 1970s.⁰⁴

Merzbau, in this light, was anything but a non-event, but the house inside which the work took form was an ordinary residential building relative to time and place. Furthermore, *Merzbau* was created over the course of several years during which Schwitters daily added more material and adjusted the overall composition according to his *Merz* methodology. Thus, the work emerged in close relation to the domestic life of the artist and his family and thereby inevitably became entangled in everyday events and non-events, as well as this notion of *nothingness* characterising the infra-ordinary according to the architect. When Virilio further claims that, 'In the city there is never a void. There is always background noise, there is always a symptom, a sign, a scent,'⁰⁵ he suggests that the infra-ordinary signifies something which can barely take place, and when it does, is something barely perceptible, barely happening, barely demarcating a space. Thus,

it is a conceptualisation of a presence at the limit of sense-making with which one might nevertheless connect. It is the premonition of something beyond the surface of perceived reality that is both/and, extra/ordinary, not fully empty, yet a notion of value in what might otherwise be perceived as valueless. The infra-ordinary becomes perceptible if one can tune in to it.

The questions emerging in relation to Schwitters' work that will be addressed in the following involve how, then, one gets to know *Merzbau* when neither work nor house exists? How to tune in to the work and the artist's deeper motivation? Is it possible to actualise the work in writing like Perec actualised the streets and places of Paris when immersed in his chosen environments and describing these 'flatly' and without reminiscing?⁰⁶ What does it mean to actualise a site, a work of art, an interior space, an event/non-event in writing? How is it possible to write critically and with some form of certainty about *Merzbau*?

writing the everyday

For the purpose of 'locat[ing] in the everyday something that reveals it,'⁰⁷ Perec challenges the limit of language and writing when exploring whether the infra-ordinary lends itself to description. For example, is it possible to place oneself in a situation, on a site, and write down everything appearing before the eyes? Which means, is it possible to simply write what there is, one observation after the other, in a deadpan neutral fashion? 'You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most

common, most colourless,'⁰⁸ Perec guides the one who does not know how to 'see more flatly.'⁰⁹ Vision is the primary sense and writing is in the present tense — the observer is *there* and involved in the writing while every now and then announcing his/her presence in the first person. Perec's *place-writings*, as we may call them, are based on a set of fieldwork techniques that involve playful as well as quasi-scientific approaches gleaned in part from the work of friends, collaborators and philosophers of the everyday such as Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre.

With the researcher's vigilant eye, Perec sets to work and writes (about) selected streets and places in Paris from the window seat in a café or while walking from house to house with a clipboard in hand. Most often, the chosen spot is already familiar to the writer, although the mode of writing — which Perec defines as 'sociological' — does not attempt to recall or reconstruct personal memories.¹⁰ Rather, Perec describes what he sees, such as in the text *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* [An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris] (1975), where over the course of three days, a series of registrations are produced around Place Saint-Sulpice. The attempt to exhaust the chosen location by listing 'what happens when nothing happens'¹¹ produces long lists of seemingly mundane phenomena where a tension exists between note-taking and subtle composition of observations on the published page. Through the employment of methods that register what appears before the eyes, Perec unsettles the objective of flatness when arranging his observations in small narratives introduced by a note regarding

each session's date, time, location and weather condition. Even when the singular statements are made successively, these can still be read as actualisations of the observed sites in compositions that play with form and structure.

Perec's street/place-writings thereby perform critiques of conventional fieldwork while, at the same time, challenging the notion of objectivity usually associated with such. The Geographer Richard Phillips notes that Perec's fieldwork strategies de-familiarise scientific conventions as much as they unsettle the everyday under scrutiny.¹² They do so by exaggerating the notion of plain description to the point where it breaks down because the words reveal that more is at stake than can be accounted for. 'To write down simply, flatly what I saw there,' is how Perec sets out his aim,¹³ but as Perec expert Andrew Leak comments, 'What could be more straightforward, or more impossible? ... These texts are haunted by the invisible.'¹⁴ In other words, Perec's exaggerated flatness not only captures what he believes to see, but something unseen reveals itself in the process of writing and subsequently reading the text. Perec's pursuit of the infra-ordinary captures the everyday by replicating its repetition and routine rather than by framing the ordinary as something extraordinary — a tendency debated in everyday aesthetics because of the tendency to frame the everyday as art for this purpose.¹⁵

perec and schwitters

Something in Perec's writing on places and his profound interest in buildings resonates

with Kurt Schwitters' work on *Merzbau*. Both Perec and Schwitters were deeply affected by World War II and, for both, the loss they suffered involved the unsettling of houses and interior worlds. Something is also shared in the way that they both acknowledged the value of things left behind, such as objects found in the street and the lives that these refer to as material for artistic creation. In the text *Espèces d'espaces* [Species of spaces] (1974), the question of space is explicitly addressed by Perec who writes, 'Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.'¹⁶ The statement arrives when Perec is reflecting on the precariousness of the spaces we inhabit and most often end up leaving behind. In this context, to write is seen as an attempt 'to try meticulously to retain something ... to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows ... to leave a trace.'¹⁷

The process of building *Merzbau* is a spatial journey and the history of what happens to a house when an artist in need of a place to live sets to work. It is what happens to the walls of a seemingly ordinary dwelling house when the artist spatialises these for extended forms of occupation. If *Merzbau* foremost is a work of art, an interior space, a kind of wall-architecture, a living room in a doubled house, then to capture the work in writing is an attempt at wresting a few scraps from the void, full as it is. In the following, three positions relative to *Merzbau* are written with the aim to frame a series of encounters with the work. Constellations of photographic evidence, critical inquiry and creative forms of writing outline three sites of critique that draw on the

architectural critic Jane Rendell's practice of 'site-writing.' According to Rendell, such is a writing:

...that investigate[s] the limits of criticism, that ask what it is possible for a critic to say about an artist or architect, a work, the site of a work and the critic herself, and for the writing to still 'count' as criticism.¹⁸

Thus, the limits of writing are challenged when employing methods outside conventional scholarship while also moving between disciplines as well as venturing outside the first, architecture, to return with new approaches to critical enquiry.¹⁹ Rendell's background in education and the training of architectural students is reflected in her focus on the site as a condition for the architectural practice to which she relates her writing. 'Modes of working adopted from the studio spatialise writing processes, resulting in creative propositions in textual form that critique and respond to specific sites,' Rendell explains with regard to her site-writing teaching methodology.²⁰ It is not only that architectural practice, in the sense of the design of buildings for a specific site, informs the writing of criticism, but that it does so with the same level of creativity, risk-taking and experimentation employed in the studio. Rendell explains:

My suggestion is that this kind of criticism or critical spatial writing, in operating as a mode of practice in its own right, questions the terms of reference that relate the critic to the

work positioned 'under' critique. This is an active writing, composed of a constellation of voices that spatially structure the text, constructing as well as tracing the sites of relation between critic and work.²¹

performative writing

The encounter with *Merzbau* takes place on a site where the critic consciously and creatively positions herself in relation to the work and the text she is writing. She is spatially aware of the conditions for making connections, drawing up relations, and creating narratives between the chosen object of study and herself. She summons surviving evidence for the purpose of conjuring a moment, an event, a situation in which the reader is invited to become part of the work's re-enactment. If the artwork no longer exists to evoke and support a given interpretation, surviving evidence in diverse forms and media replace the direct encounter and become the site of critique and writing. As suggested by art critic Gavin Butt, 'Criticism today may find itself turning away from some of the established procedures of critical practice *precisely in order that it remain critical*.'²² Butt suggests that a focus on criticism's inherent performativity, for example, leads to 'a kind of criticism responsive to the pressures and limits of the writerly *acts* ... foreground[ing] the performative, and paradoxical, conditions of critical address.'²³ Butt is interested in the encounter with the object of study as an event beyond theory, which, like a spatio-temporal performance event, relies on re-enactment on the scene of writing. Not only does art in the past century increasingly involve the audience, but the

critic as spectator also becomes immersed in the work.

Performance scholar Della Pollock writes 'Six Excursions into Performative Writing' in the form of a list starting with the qualification of such writing as 'evocative.'²⁴ This is a metaphorical writing which gives presence to the absent performance/object by 'expanding the realm of scholarly representation.'²⁵ Pollock's list continues with qualifications of performative writing as 'metonymic' (always partial); 'subjective' (the writer is related to the work); 'nervous' (collage); 'citational' (quoting the world); and 'consequential' (making things happen).²⁶ On such a performative basis, scholarly writing might, according to Pollock, reclaim its 'meaningfulness' after poststructuralism's swirls of textuality, however constructive these have been for a more open discursive practice. Writing might 'become itself' by 'turning itself inside out' and 'making *writing* perform.'²⁷ In a manner that may serve to summarise the aim of the following piece of writing on *Merzbau*, Pollock writes:

Performative writing evokes worlds that are otherwise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and in-sight. Whereas a mimetic/realist perspective tends to reify absent referents in language, thus sustaining an illusion of full presence, a performative perspective tends to favour the generative and ludic capacities of language and language encounters – the interplay of reader and writer in the joint production of meaning.²⁸

The critic performing her subject matter in a text might choose to write in the first person. She thereby acknowledges her position as the author although her writing might not actually be about herself. When scrutinising a couple of photographs to draw up a site for the interpretation of the artwork on display, she is not an eye witness in a direct sense either. Her vision of the work is one possible re-construction, and she invites the reader to participate in the creation of the text when, in the process of reading, the reader also inhabits the first person narrative.

i-site

Before entering the performative space in the next section, the writing subject must clarify the background for her engagement with the chosen work on the scene of writing. By doing so, she seeks to justify the validity of her claims as well as her ability to perform the work in question. Will the writing otherwise count as scholarship? She gradually approaches her task by introducing the first person in the form of herself.

I engage with *Merzbau* on the basis that I was already there some years ago. I studied the literature – Schwitters' own *Das literarische Werk, vol. 1-5* [The literary work] and the scholarship produced on the work during the last century.²⁹ I visited the Kurt Schwitters Archive in Sprengel Museum Hanover, which also displays the reconstruction of *Merzbau* developed by the architect Peter Bisseger (1981-83). I walked through Waldhausenstrasse and spent some time near the site of number 5A where Schwitters' house and *Merzbau* were built.

Eventually, I traced and framed in writing how scrap material collected from the streets of Hanover piled up inside the house and swept through it like a sea of debris while accumulating into sculptural columns—first collages, then assemblages, and finally bricolages—cornerstones of an unusual spatial interior to come.³⁰

Schwitters not only built *Merzbau* on the back of the house, quite literally, but did so based on his *Merz* strategy for the transformation of throw-away material. In the space between the extra/ordinary, *Merz* operated as a recharger of everyday waste as material for a new interior architecture. Schwitters started from the term *Merz* sampled from the German word *Kommerz* meaning trade or profit. If the irony of such connotations was not lost on the Dada-artist, then the reference to systems of value was important. In 1919, Schwitters wrote:

The word *Merz* essentially means the combination of all conceivable materials for artistic purposes and, technically, the in principle equal evaluation of individual materials. *Merz* painting, however, not only makes use of paint and canvas, brush and palette, but all materials perceptible to the eye and all necessary tools. It is irrelevant whether the materials used were already intended for some other purpose or not. The pram wheel, the wire mesh, the string and cotton wool are all elements of equal importance to paint. The artist creates by choosing, distributing and de-moulding such materials.³¹

So, I write here three positions relative to the three photographs captured by Redemann in 1933. The frontal framing of the work against three of the studio's four walls appears to have been a conscious decision made by the photographer or perhaps Schwitters himself. One could argue that it was done this way with the aim to objectively approach the otherwise highly unusual, in some sense wild and transgressive work. With reference to George Perec, one could further suggest that the photographer framed the work flatly when photographing it without any trace of engagement. From this perspective, the attempted neutrality towards the work's strong charge arguably captures *Merzbau's* strangeness with a stillness and distance in the images that is puzzling and invites closer scrutiny of the work.

Such is attempted on this occasion by using creative writing strategies to open *Merzbau* for engagement beyond the photographic surface, the façade, as captured. Through this writing, I seek to catch sight of the work's infra-ordinary dimension when looking beyond the immediate strangeness of the structure to capture its inside on the outside, so to speak. That is, I pursue a space where the charge of the extra/ordinary work is ambiguous and something else appears in writing. Through this practice, I enter into a constellation with the absent work by confronting one image after the other while exploring possibilities for the work's articulation. Each time, a quote from either Schwitters or Perec sets the writing in motion, followed by my impression of *Merzbau* sketched in a brief poetic form. I trace the work as it appears to me while

considering the limits of my writing — how spontaneous, vivid, poetic, precisely spaced on the page can it be? I forget academic writing conventions to obtain writerly freedom and try out the words with which to express what I see, know and imagine about the work. I give the writing a rhythm while, in the second part, the writing shifts to lines of flat description à la Perec. Here, a series of statements are drawn from the structure that seeks to capture the dynamism and coherence of the part of the sculptural wall displayed in the photo. Eventually, in the third part, first person narratives locate the writer and reader inside the house and work as witnesses to the emergence and endurance of *Merzbau*. For each new photograph, the procedure starts afresh.

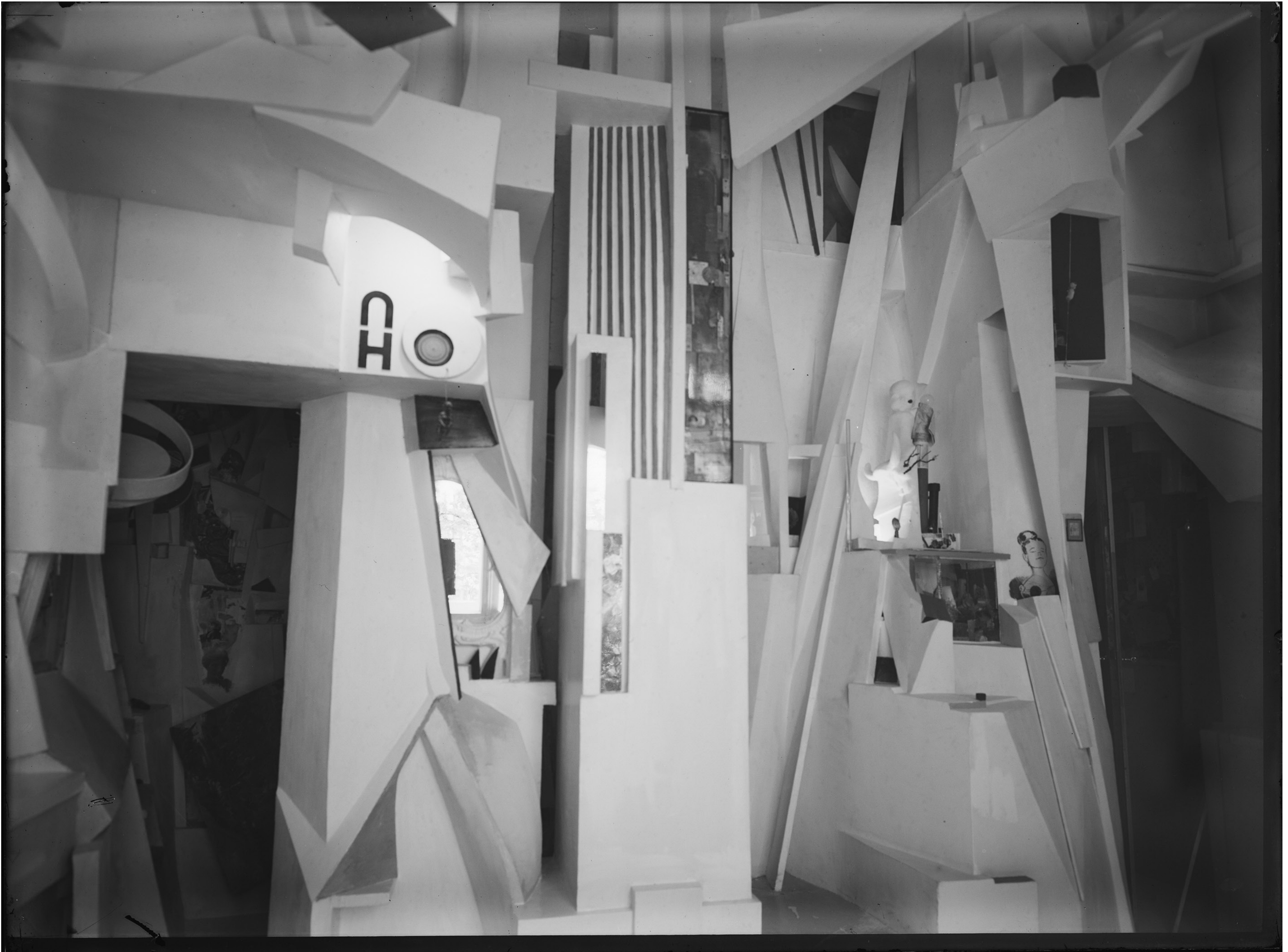


Figure 01:
Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau*
(*Treppeneingangsseite*) [Merz
building (stair entrance side)].
Photographed by Wilhelm
Redemann, 1933. bpk / Sprengel
Museum Hanover.

position 01 | the (ordinary) house

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text.

Georges Perec³²

Entering

white -wash -ness

dark recess es

leaning lines

pointing edges

shining lights

bright

signs numbers forms colours

hanging standing merging gaping

gaps flaps straps traps

one two three four

A o R

or

the lid of a paint bucket

an upside-down stringed instrument

white shadows on black surfaces

doll's head and lady face

in glass box flashes

and mirror tricks

within

Sculptural wall

Assembly of uneven, fragmented forms covered in white paint

Ad hoc constellation of irregular forms that merge and collide

Dynamic, expressive language of predominantly crystalline geometries

Three sections forming part of a larger, coherent structure

Several cracks and gaps open to dark spaces between and behind protruding elements

Either side, openings leading to other spaces with a door open to another room to the right

Smaller parts painted black while recesses and embedded glass boxes display objects

The structure continuing outside the picture frame although the floor is largely unseen

A letter 'A' splits into an arc above an 'H' where artificial light shines from a hidden space

A doll's head, a woman's face and other objects sit on shelves towards the side of door

Reflections visible in the glazing (is there a window in the opposite wall?)

A unifying whiteness holding it all together in one piece

Bricolage

Waldhausenstrasse 5A (always already inside)

I am south of central Hanover inside a typical three-storey apartment building belonging to a family named Schwitters. The house has an attic, a high basement and large windows of different shapes, sizes and styles facing south towards the street. It is 1918 and Schwitters' studio is located inside this house where he also lives.

The basement's layout is identical to the ground floor's and a tall column-like sculpture is standing in the middle of a large room. It is 1919, or perhaps 1920, and I am not sure whether the column is meant to hold up the house. Is the wall behind the column, which is covered in the same kind of collaged paper, part of the work or house or both?

Other families occupy the house and the artist's studio is also his parents' dining room. Art coexists with domestic chores and scenes in this space where another *Merz* column is conceived and placed in front of a door. It is 1925, perhaps 1926, when visitors join Schwitters and his wife upstairs in the second-floor apartment.

There are two options available here: either one enters the Biedermeier living room or the De Stijl living room. The room with the black-painted carpet is a favoured choice because more *Merz* work is on display here.

When one family moves out, Schwitters relocates his studio to the rear side of the ground floor apartment. It is 1927 and all the *Merz* columns are moved there and soon start merging with each other as well as the room's walls. On the balcony, in the front room, as well as on the attic, there is *Merz* everywhere. Schwitters brings more building material into the house.

In 1933, I am contemplating the work from inside the courtyard where Redemann takes the pictures. In front of me is the entrance to the stair which turns out to be a small internal ladder leading up to a room behind the part of *Merzbau* called *Grosse Gruppe* [Big Group]. The overall structure covers three of the walls but the centre of the room is left empty. From here, I am enclosed by the work. *Merzbau* is overwhelming to the eye, body and mind when it wraps around and draws you in. Behind me, the window has also been covered in white *Merz* paint.

Eventually, the entrance to the studio has to be closed and someone moves a large cupboard in front of the door while all *merzed* areas of the house are being cleared. It is 1937 and Kurt Schwitters has just left Germany and travelled to Norway, where he hides from persecution by political forces unaligned with the artistic outlook.

Later, I find the house with the rear half missing and a deep hole in the ground full of rubble. The exposed structure of the remaining half house hovers over the scene for another few days before everything is removed. It is 1943 and allied forces have just bombed Hanover and destroyed a number of houses on Waldhausenstrasse including the rear half of number 5A.

**Figure 02:**

Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau (Blaues Fenster)* [Merz building (blue window)]. Photographed by Wilhelm Redemann, 1933. bpk / Sprengel Museum Hanover.

position 02 | the (extraordinary) work

[The column] is first of all just **one of many**, ten or so. It is called **Cathedral of Erotic Misery**, or in short **K d e E**; we are living in the era of abbreviations. Besides, it is unfinished and that is a matter of principle. It grows somewhat like the Metropolis; somewhere a house is to be built and the planning authorities must ensure that the new house does not distort the whole cityscape.

Kurt Schwitters³³

City wall space

hanging ceiling standing top
upside downside up
around and spin
pointed pin
ice sea
break

light
inside
hide

spider
twig
leg
twist
box cave
small wheel
grotto glow
table top

C

Cathedral of erotic misery

Wildly growing, spreading and pointing downwards — like an ice sea falling from the sky

Splitting into smaller uneven parts, breaking down, doubling up

A column-like structure connecting earth and sky, floor and ceiling

The lower part is not visible beyond the table to the right

The upper part is more developed and expansive

To the right, the structure is boxier, layered, stacked

As if there is a space behind from where the light shines through

As if there are many small spaces hidden in the gaps between or inside the boxes

In the back, a window lets daylight in, and out

To the left, a darker space

In the centre, is it a 'C' or a horseshoe?

Three photographs (stitched together)

I stitch the images together in an attempt to reconstruct the work. Located in the centre of the room where

Redemann positions the camera, I turn on his axis in an attempt to comprehend the work's configuration.

Redemann frames *Merzbau* up against the studio walls as if suggesting that Schwitters has constructed a wall-space.

In that configuration, I am facing the work's internal façade while there might be no external one. When occupying the central void, I am both inside and outside the work.

There is one entrance to the room but I am already inside Schwitters' double house from where a small opening in one corner leads further into the structure. In the opposite corner, another opening leads into another internal space.

A small living room is hidden behind *Grosse Gruppe*

[Large group] from where the *Merz* courtyard can be

overlooked through a small hole in the wall. A library hidden

behind the cathedral has a small window from where one

can look outside. A house, an artist's studio, a living room,

library, courtyard, garden, window to the world — I am in all

places at once and in no particular order. The *Merz* building is

omnipresent and constructed according to its own *Merz* logic.

Schwitters invites his friends and family over and they all contribute to the building in various ways. He places tokens taken from them when they are not looking inside the structure's many hidden spaces and recesses. There are plenty of things to look at and many things taking place in the *Merz* house.

One could say that **K de E** is the pure forming of **all** the things, **with a few exceptions**, that were **either important or unimportant** during the last seven years of my life; but into which a certain literary form has slipped.

Kurt Schwitters³⁴

**Figure 03:**

Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau (Grosse Gruppe)* [Merz building (big group)]. Photographed by Wilhelm Redemann, 1933. bpk / Sprengel Museum Hanover.

position 03 | *merz* (infra-ordinary)

The great secret of *Merz* lies in the value of unknown quantities. This way *Merz* governs that which cannot be governed. And this way, *Merz* is larger than *Merz*. The secret lies in the fact that in the union of a known and an unknown quantity, one changes the unknown when changing the known. This is because the sum of the known and unknown always remains the same, must remain the same, namely absolute equilibrium.

Kurt Schwitters³⁵

From the courtyard

to the other corner
conglomeration
upwards and folding
within/without
wrinkle and angle

hatch to move and see through
back end space look out
wheels below and roll
flat floor front
light up
move
work

In the folds

Merzbau turns a corner with a dramatically articulated upper part
The intricate, spatial folding pushes forward towards the centre of the room
Movement continues across the ceiling with a high, illuminated space opening up
In the lower part, a stronger base with larger, less *merzed* areas
In the background, a blank piece of wall seemingly set off from the studio wall behind
In the left corner, a free-standing column hovering slightly above the ground
Can it move? Roll out? Rotate?

This part of the structure balances dynamism and stasis
With long, slim, projecting parts twisting downwards and grey-washed boxy forms stacking up
With deep recesses receding further into darkness and the notion that there might be a space behind
To the right, an opening provides an entrance to a small ladder
Should I be able to get inside and turn right rather than left, I might find yet another space behind

Merz interior

Roaming around *Merzbau* after Schwitters left is like tracing a life story inscribed in the folds of a work of art. A work in the form of a spatial interior contained by the studio's four walls. A wall structure like a horseshoe house wrapping around a central courtyard. An empty space at the centre opening towards a window with a northern view pointing in the direction the artist went (Norway). A three-dimensional mapping of a private universe up against the walls of a house in an increasingly hostile location. A chain of events that we piece together from a distance.

Merzbau is an architecture for tomorrow and a space of one's own to live today. Before time catches up with the double walls built from scraps and left-overs picked from the streets of the city. A place turned inside out when material is remoulded into something altogether different. A framework retained when weaving a new fabric of a whole town recast as a house inside a house. Washing over the work in white to unite while claiming that all uneven parts sing together in a momentary harmony before falling again apart.

Moving around inside the structure, small spaces and hidden doors emerge for exploration of things belonging to old friends. Spaces behind layers of material and paint so deep that I might never find them and the things that they hold. *Merzbau* is a structure secretly alive with memories of the past. An inhabitable artwork open for interpretation, co-creation, exploration, articulation, continuation, and so on.

As a matter of principle, *Merz* has no programme with a predetermined goal. *Merz* starts from very specific conditions and processes what is available accordingly.

Kurt Schwitters³⁶

***Merz* loop**

After the work and writing, the text remains as evidence of an encounter with the historical space. The artwork has been performed and thereby opened for critical engagement in a manner exceeding conventional scholarship. The performance has ended, or has it?

According to Gavin Butt, criticism is paradoxical in that it conventionally sets itself apart from received wisdom when judgement is passed.³⁷ Criticism provides a novel perspective, a counter-argument, yet Butt suggests that such a critical *para*-procedure itself risks becoming *doxa* over time. Criticism must, therefore, turn again and do something else, which means to seek less confrontational modes of practice, for example. It might draw from the performativity of its address by speaking to its object, reader and writer in a different way. Such a critical agency might open a space, articulate a possibility, perhaps still run a risk, yet when *Merzbau* continuously rises from the (screen) page — like a pop-up structure folding back again after reading — new perspectives on the work emerge.

Writing in the 1970s, literary critic Hayden White advocated that historians should make use of insights from contemporary science and art when articulating their objects of enquiry without the constraints of illusory objectivity and fact-finding.³⁸ For White, 'The possibility of using impressionistic, expressionistic, surrealistic, and (perhaps) even actionist modes of representation for dramatising the significance of data' was permission granted to a history-writing open to multiple perspectives on the historical object.³⁹ According to White, there had

been no such examples of experimental historiography up until the 1970s, at least not outside the strictly literary circles. In other words, it was about time that new kinds of agency took form in other academic disciplines such as, for example, the present re-enactment of the historical object that is *Merzbau*. Making use of Schwitters' strategies of collage and montage, as well as performance, poetry and other narrative practices, *Merzbau* is actualised on the page – the site of the critical encounter – with the aim to capture the dynamic, expressive form and force of Schwitters' sculptural wall. The configuration of artist, work, text, critic, and reader informs three critical positions in the attempt to let something appear in writing not hitherto discovered and articulated about the work. On this basis, it is argued that criticism, by means of performative writing strategies, unfolds its argument by staging it.

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author biography

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notes

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- 27 Pollock, 'Performing Writing,' 75. Original emphasis.
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- 29 See note 1 for the sources of information regarding *Merzbau* used for the description of the house and work.
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- 33 Kurt Schwitters, *Das literarische Werk* 5, 343, translated by the author from *Merz 21 erstes Veilchenheft* [Merz 21 first pamphlet] (1931). Original emphasis.
- 34 Kurt Schwitters, *Das literarische Werk* 5, 344, translated by the author from the text 'Ich und meine Ziele' [Me and my goals] (1931).
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