

Kurt Schwitters' Anti-Art and the Dada Movement

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1 Introduction

For a number of years, Dada has been incessantly polemical to modern art. Dada has unraveled the tangle of confusion and provoked the world to misunderstand it. It was a storm that broke over the art world, just as a war that outraged the nations. Dada had no formal characteristics of any kind and it equated to its grandeur of existence. It evolved itself from a number of different personalities who conjured their outlandish statements. After the outbreak of the First World War, a very well-rounded man came to Switzerland named Hugo Ball founded Cabaret Voltaire (Richter, 1965). It became a haven for young artists to freely express their creative energies that uprooted all kinds of literary works, compositions and even performances. For over a year of dauntless anti-art activities Cabaret Voltaire relocated and changed its name to Galerie Dada, where Tristan Tzara continued to advocate its ideals (Lewer, 2009). The term 'Dada' had several presumptions about the genesis to its name. To scrape through its fragmentary origins, the word 'da, da' was an outcry, a riotous imperative of 'yes, yes' to life (Trachtman (2011). It lived up to its sensation to freedom and a smiling optimism that geared from the old way. Dada was not meant to be a movement. Its proliferation endowed new beginnings, a repertoire of ideas and a dynamic unifying force of mutual inspiration. These mirrored images of sound poems, preposterous junk and the words that conjunct to defy its meaning broke into shards that triggered a sense of direction. It was a counterpoint of inspiration and verse.

2 Kurt Schwitters and Merz

As Dada artists began to reflect the new anti-art currents of thought, the ability to entrust themselves to a new revelation became the central message of the movement. Kurt Schwitters was a Hanoverian artist who delved further into a variety of mediums and experimented with new innovative techniques such as collage, sculpture, typography and installation art. He was one of the enduring figures of twentieth century avant-garde who was unhesitant to extend himself in a phenomenal journey of his imagination. The man with an aquiline nose, a stern countenance and who takes great pleasure in poetry also created his own consort, his feminine alter ego by the name of Anna Blume (Kramer (1985). During his late twenties he completed his formal training in Dresden Academy and continued to live in Hanover working as a technical draftsman (Meyer-Büser & Orchard, 2000). The austerity of the revolution did not have a veritable effect on Schwitters. He was not politically active and refused to create such parodies compared with his other artist counterparts.

His profundity gave birth to *Merz*, his own artistic invention and the soul of his creative work. Extracted from a name of a bank called *Kommerz Und Privatbank*, the term *Merz* is an 'amalgamation of all imaginable materials for artistic purposes and treating them with respect' (Meyer-Büser & Orchard, 2000). His guiding principle of *Merzgesamtkunstwerk* aggregates all types of art in one entity that became a true manifestation of his work (Richter, 1965). He began to utilize heavier tactile materials, clear evidence of his obsession for urban wastes that have little or no value. With his own surroundings, Schwitters began to take

interest on forgotten pieces of everyday life such as remnants of trash, scraps of fabric, cigar bands, train tickets, cheese wrappers, newspaper cutouts and bric-a-brac materials. Every single thing that appealed to him had an amiable effect to his innocuous mind. His incisive character, his whole heart and soul were all dedicated to the furtherance of his ideas. He was free-spirited and created without malice or contempt.

3 Analysis

The concept of Schwitters' modernity grasps on the equilibrium of colors and forms to achieve a rhythmic composition. Color was the most glittering facet of Schwitters' work in which his technique of 'overpainting' launched a new direction in modern art. His earlier works are delineated with plaintive dark tones and his late collages gradually exemplified a much more vigorous flair. In his work entitled *Merzbild 5A Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica)* done in 1919 (Fig. 1), he mustered flat pieces of wood, old wires, coasters, burlap, cardboards, a metal disc and nailed them altogether on a coarse fabric. A three-dimensional work of art is



Fig. 1. Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild 5A Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica)*. 1919. Assemblage. 52.2 x 41.5 cm. Whereabouts unknown.

comprised of these found elements and Schwitters' modern experimentation on assemblage shows his intention of *Merzgesamtkunstwerk*. It asserts a trace of Cubist techniques due to its varied overlapping shapes that is metamorphosed into an alluring torrent of belongings. These range of objects are scattered on a Prussian blue background that was overpainted on a thick cardboard and thus, the two mediums interpenetrate. It intensifies the contour of each object that is highly texturized showing its weariness from time. The harmonica on the lower end projects from the base and overlaps the flat wood. A piece of wire is hung on its surface

displaying sinuous curves that was supported by a rounded hook. The overlapping pieces of cardboard were dispersed respectively and fastened with nails. These lifeless objects appear to float as it protrudes ostensibly and achieves an illusion of space. Scraps of paper are ruffled and show visible traces of wet spills as it absorbs itself and dries up. The blank cards are crisped from a slight flare of the match and the ten of clubs transpire essentially to stand out, retreating from the ordinary. The arrangement of these objects is merged with coated pigments and hence, these color harmonies thrive perceptively. In addition, there is a subtle balance on how these objects are orchestrated and shows pure evidence of abstraction due to its manipulated division of shapes.

Merz constitutes a diversion from life's adversities and Schwitters' *Merzbild 5A Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica)* proves it. The art of playing cards elude the tension of the times, sighing over the prospect of the long wait. The harmonica's crescendo resonates a pleasant sound, barring from the strident cries of humanity as a dreary act of waiting. The activity behind this assemblage is a modern foundation of combining industry and art as one, transforming from what is valueless to valuable. Approaching *Merz* as an extension to painting and a pictorial practice of modernism, Schwitters had a 'painterly eye' with a great gift of an uninhibited nuanced vision.

The notion of the *Merz* picture is not intended to mean anything, only to be strong in compositions of color and elevate its relational values. On the contrary, Schwitters' later work entitled *This Was Before HRH the Late Duke of Clarence & Avondale. Now It Is a Merz Picture. Sorry!* (Fig. 2) presents a different statement that thoroughly conveys another form of modern experimentation. The



Fig. 2. Kurt Schwitters, *This Was Before HRH the Late Duke of Clarence & Avondale. Now It Is a Merz Picture. Sorry!*. 1947. Collage. 39.1 x 27.3 cm. Sprengel Museum Hannover.

process of 'reusing' and 'forming' subordinate another crucial technique in collage by Schwitters. The usage of these fragments is dependent on each other in order to produce an absolute rhythm. The combination of these elements is minimal, albeit diverse quintessential methods such as collage, typography and the

juxtaposition of *objet trouvé* are modern utilization of non-art materials. The sparse leather and pieces of cardboard produce a simplified composition, whereas *Merzbild 5A Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica)* is more complex and its components are muddled up. The very history of the picture's origin begins on a photograph of Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence and Avondale who was a member of the British Royal Family in United Kingdom. His involvement with such controversies includes a homosexual brothel that has hitherto been surmised about his sexual orientation (Aronson, 2020). Moreover, historians have speculated that Albert Victor was allegedly professed as Jack the Ripper, who was the serial killer responsible for the massacre of five women in London (Cook, 2009).

With comparison to *Merzbild 5A Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica)*, it consists of Cubist traits in which Schwitters' devotion to abstraction continues to persist. By employing such Cubist techniques, the scraps of leather define new geometric shapes that overlap in several layers appearing very modern and progressive. Schwitters produced the dynamic rotating sharp-pointed triangular shapes tilted sideways concealing half of the subject's face. The striking box of blades is flattened across the lower body that shrouds the subject's grand portrait. These simplified collage forms deliberately coincide with the iconography of Albert Victor's dubious persona. The shape of the metal crown placed athwart the subject's face signifies his nobility and protection of authority. It also pertains to his questionable sexuality in which the dividing line corresponds to a fracture of his true self. Tracing some Dada elements, the blades wittingly imply Albert Victor's association with Jack the Ripper that induces a comic relief. Thus, the concept of eschewing life's predicaments is shown on this collage that is also evident on *Merzbild 5A Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica)*. Moreover, the British-made blades have persuaded Schwitters to create his own typeface that is very much similar to sans serif. It attests his fondness for letters and symbols that led to the early stages of typography.

Schwitters' work does not represent any notion of mockery, only to profess a facile truth about an aristocratic figure who was faced with conundrum. These nostalgic materials capture the clear signs of modernity and intrigued by pop culture. The clever inner workings of Schwitters never cease to fail such subtlety and his idea of Albert Victor was deliberately shown on what he currently sees in his everyday life, creating an aesthetic memory driven by avenues of inspiration.

4 Later Years and Merzbau

Ostracized from the Dada circle, Schwitters pursued his vitality as an artist and kept a disciplined mind at work. He was forced to flee from Germany, leaving his first *Merzbau* or also known as *Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (Fig. 3) in Hanover that was heavily destroyed by an Allied bomb in 1943 (Hughes, 1985). He continued to live in Norway where he erected his second *Merzbau* called *Haus am Bakken*, which means 'House by the Slope' (Schwitters, 2005). As he tried to rebuild his life in Norway with his wife and son, he constructed another *Merzbau* not too far away from *Haus am Bakken*. The view of fjords, cherry blossoms, cliffs and snow-covered mountains ameliorated his freedom as an artist. Afraid to be discovered by the Nazis, he dappled coat of paint and camouflaged his structure with dirt and fir needles. His temporary rights to residency and the Nazi invasion in Norway caused him to flee for England, leaving his second structure unfinished and was later destroyed by fire. Schwitters' exile in England lasted for four years until his health began to deteriorate. He found a stone barn owned by a farmer, allowing him to work for free and named it

Merz Barn that still exists today (Blood, 2013). Nothing can truly be as groundbreaking as the *Merzbau* construction where Schwitters' ingenuity revolved around it. This one thing was



Fig. 3. Kurt Schwitters, *The Merzbau*. 1923 (destroyed 1943). Hanover.

sacred to him, a pure spectacle that is vested on the terrains of his odyssey.

The *Merzbau* presents a modern architectonic structure that consists of Cubist and Constructivist traits in its form. It shows a manner of Cubist influence appropriated in an abstract and almost four-dimensional design. The *Merzbau* was very much equivalent to his *Merz* pictures, not only that this structure demonstrates a spatial collage but it was also a modern component in joining art and non-art materials (Meyer-Büser & Orchard, 2000). With comparison to *Merzbild 5A Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica)* and *This Was Before HRH the Late Duke of Clarence & Avondale. Now It Is a Merz Picture. Sorry!*, the guiding principle of *Merzgesamtkunstwerk* and Cubism encompasses an abstract representation of Schwitters' creation. In addition, all three artworks have symbolic meanings as they ruminate with the pleasures of sight. Occupied a total of eight rooms, the interior is painted in white on which the walls are arranged in staggered forms creating a cubic volume. Electrical cables were attached to illuminate hidden areas such as walkways, stairs, ceilings and a small library. Multiple perspectives were acquired through its reflective surfaces with several niches that were enclosed by glass and mirrors. Upon entering the passage, several concave and convex forms protrude from both walls and ceilings luring the viewer to probe in its complexities. The hollowed spaces of these brightly colored grottos were stored with miniature dolls, coals, popular advertisements and the oddity of a small, rounded bottle filled with urine (Richter, 1965). In the center of his room stood a gripping sculpture known as the *Merz Column* (Fig. 4) that is attributed to the mannerisms of Dada. This plaster abstract sculpture was festooned with a myriad of collages, illustrations and letters written by close acquaintances that were all glued together. These intricate features relate to *Merzbild 5A*



Fig. 4. Kurt Schwitters, *Merz Column*. 1923 (destroyed 1943). Hanover.

Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica) as the process of 'forming' is shuffled resulting to a greater depth.

A clear distinction from *This Was Before HRH the Late Duke of Clarence & Avondale. Now It Is a Merz Picture. Sorry!*, its surface is rather flat and the content is comprehensible than the complexities presented in both *Merzbau* and *Merzbild 5A Spielkartenharmonika (Play Cards Harmonica)*. The *Merzbau* creates a statement that enlivens a multi-sensual experience between the viewer and space. It stimulates one's psyche allowing to be captivated by its equivocal nature. These relics in every corner that peer from the tiniest crevice has seeded the early signs of proto-installation echoing a rapid transition to subsequent art movements. The number of people whom Schwitters encountered and all the things he has seen revolves in a sphere of wistful pursuit. He withdrew from public life, worked in isolation and did not convene with other artists. This isolation had a liberating effect on him to create on his own and the *Merzbau* became a place of refuge during a period of his seclusion that sheltered him from the dissonances of life. Although Schwitters' nomadic lifestyle obviated his latter structures to prosper, the *Merzbau* nevertheless became a cabinet of his private memories. It equated to an essential backdrop of his creative process where he extricated himself from the apprehensions of banishment.

5 Conclusion

The First World War marked an epoch of industrialization and mechanization. Avant-garde art paralleled to the age of machines and evoked an intense awareness to modern culture. This idea of progress has summoned a moment for things that were built to last in perpetuity. The existential angst of the revolution had a glorious outcome on Schwitters' concept of art. These collective trappings are germane to modern civilization with a discursive effect of mass media, urbanization and advertising in which we live our lives around it (Schwitters, 2005). *Merz* was deemed as the image of revolution, a bulwark against poverty and the utterances of despair

in order to rebuild a nation that tortured all humanity. Schwitters marched with aplomb to high modernism and effaced all forms of prejudice in his works. The evolution of *Merz* was not intended to dispel the traditional way of painting but to simply enhance them. His commitment to abstraction was rooted from the Western influence of Cubism transmitting the power of ideas without an ending in sight.

As we walk through the areas of life, something welcomes our eyes to an astonishing view of art that may intrigue us or we do not agree on. It grants us such moments to ponder about a certain context that speaks to us truthfully. We are exposed to a variety of images that require our attention, challenging us to a new idea, to give a verdict whether or not what is in front of us is good enough. Some art are not meant to be beautiful and Schwitters created an aesthetic expression from what was destroyed. As Jean-Luc Godard once said, '*It's not where you take things from – it's where you take them to.*' *Merz* was the formula that Schwitters solely channeled all his creativity to, it equated to an aesthetic phenomenon that brought boundless expansion to modern art.

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