

# Cracked memories of everyday life in Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau

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This paper investigates „Merzbau“, the most ambitious project of Hannover Dadaist, Kurt Schwitters in relation to the culture theory of Walter Benjamin. The main concern is the way of visualizing the artist's view to the modern culture in antithetical dichotomic structure of this work.

Merzbau is an ever-expanding collage environment into which Schwitters transformed his studio and adjacent spaces in his house. It consisted of two parts: an inner core of collage material that is a more or less formless accumulation of discarded things, and an exterior shell of clear architectural form created with wood and plaster in white. The structured shell contrasts with the chaos within. Ten Merz-columns and numerous grottos were incorporated within the Merzbau, which consist of various fragments of found objects. These collaged objects captured a moment in personal memory or social and cultural issues in his time.

In its origins, the Merzbau foregrounds the theme of memory, deploying accumulations of mnemonically significant fragments from both public and private spheres. It reflects the social or individual memory-culture of modernity, which is represented by the monuments in public space and the collection on bourgeoisie interior.

Benjamin regards the collector's activities in relation to a crisis in the structure of memory: The modern individual is no longer able to experience the past as an organic continuum that makes up one's own history. Collecting becomes a compensatory effort to incorporate the fragmented experience of daily life into the organic construction of cultural system of the past.

The structure of the Merzbau also foregrounds the instability of memory. Accumulations of fragments, souvenirs and keepsakes related to the artist's public and private history, fill the niches and grottoes to be a materialized memory. The obsessive aspect of collecting within the Merzbau suggests a disturbance in the sense of continuum with the past and the chaotic accumulation of the objects reflects the messiness and incoherence of everyday experience.

Benjamin's analysis on conceptual distinction of symbol and allegory is helpful to understand the structure of the Merzbau. According to Benjamin, symbol is the manifestation of ideas in art. It is characterized by organic wholeness and represents the realm of the perfected beautiful individual. On the contrary, allegory overthrows semblance of organic wholeness and reveals the truth through the ruin, destruction and formless fragmentation. Faced with the impossibility of a coherent culture, according to Benjamin, the historical truth of the destruction of experience could be expressed

effectively only through allegory. Benjamin's concept of allegory is exemplified in the inner structure of Merzbau. The piling up of numerous discarded objects of modern civilization suggests not the harmony but rather traumatic disturbance, recalling the death and ruin.

But the Merzbau also has a symbolic aspect. The chaotic part of the discarded fragments was integrated in an ever growing and complexly interwoven wholeness and subsumed under a crystalline, cathedral-like white shell. By doing so, Schwitters infuses this construction with utopian idealism. This aspect of Merzbau reminds us of Benjamin's conception of symbol that is an embodiment of an idea in form of transcendent organic wholeness. In this way, Schwitters combines the two contrary concepts of allegory and symbol in the Merzbau.

According to Benjamin, in the modern society the attempt to embed the discontinued and fragmented experience within pre-existing organic cultural constructs is pathological. In its invasiveness, the Merzbau's growth also seems to be pathological as well, which doesn't follow a normative pattern. It moves without any respect for boundaries, transgressing limits between rooms, between inside and outside, between area above and below ground. Undoubtedly, Schwitters also knew that the transformation of fragmented experience of modern society into the culture as an organic whole is impossible, so that he gave expression to this irony with the subtitle of the Merzbau, "The Cathedral of erotic misery".

In conclusion, the Merzbau is an allegory of the experience of the modern and at the same time a monument to unfulfillable desire for the construction of culture as a harmonious and organic whole.

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