

# Kurt Schwitters' resonant objects: matter and politics in early *Merz*

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Figure 1 Thomas Hirschhorn, *Schwitters Platform*, 2011. Plywood, cardboard, particle board, paper, photocopies, felt-tip pen, adhesive tape, plastic wrap, books, couch. Installation view, Hanover, Germany. Photo: Courtesy Kurt Schwitters Archive, Sprengel Museum Hanover. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

This essay is part of a suite of articles, written in honour of Charles W. Haxthausen, that take the 'resonant object' as their focus. I'd like to start, however, by reversing these terms – and considering the objectification, or making-object, of a resonance. It was just this project that the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn undertook when he received the Kurt Schwitters Prize, awarded by the Sprengel Museum in Schwitters' hometown of Hanover, in 2011. For his prize project, Hirschhorn created a work he dubbed the *Kurt Schwitters Platform* (Figure 1): a raised wooden structure, complete with ratty leather couch and makeshift library, constructed in the back garden of the prosaic apartment building at Hanover's Waldhausenstraße 5, the exact site previously occupied by Schwitters' original *Merzbau*. Schwitters, most readers will know, was a *sui generis* figure within the interwar German avant-garde best known for his intricately constructed and intimately scaled collage and assemblage works; related to these,

he built the inhabitable environment he termed the *Merzbau* in his apartment and studio over the better part of the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> It was precisely this locational exactitude that drove Hirschhorn's work on his 2011 Hanover piece. The Swiss artist was fascinated with the fact that his *Plattform* – located towards the rear of its residential lot and raised one story – occupied as closely as possible the precise location, the very same airspace, as had Schwitters' construction eight decades before.

As Hirschhorn wrote in 2000, when he first began conceiving of his Hanover project – which he then referred to as the *Schwitters Wallfahrtsort*, or *Schwitters Pilgrimage Site*:

...the visitor or pilgrim [...] stands exactly at the spot where, seventy-five years ago, the *Merzbau* was. He or she stands *in the Merzbau*. All around was, and is, *Merz*. *It is in mega-virtual space and simultaneously in real, genuine space*. *It was there, and at the same time there it is.*<sup>2</sup>



Figure 2 Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau*, early 1930s, detail view (photographed 1933). Colour, paper, cardboard, plaster, glass, mirror, metal, wood, stone, electric lighting, found materials, approximately 393 x 580 x 460 cm. Destroyed. Photo: Wilhelm Redemann, courtesy bpk Bildagentur/Art Resource, NY.

Such desire in fact echoes the *Merzbau's* own primary goals. For Schwitters' earlier project, comprised of reliquary traces of past visitors and constructed in the secluded confines of the artist's home (Figure 2), was itself a form of spectral

<sup>1</sup> Schwitters worked on the project from roughly 1931 up until his 1937 flight to Norway; it was then destroyed in a British bombing raid in October 1943. For the most complete analysis of the *Merzbau*, see Gwendolen Webster's unpublished dissertation, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau*, Open University, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hirschhorn, *Thomas Hirschhorn: Kurt Schwitters-Plattform, Unter Kontrolle*, Cologne: Walter König, 2012, 14.

time machine, motivated by a desire to animate the past (that of the German avant-garde's vibrant and all but-extinguished expansion of just a few years before) in the present (that of Germany's 1930s descent into barbarism) through visitors' inhabitation and imaginative activation of its spaces and forms. Just so was Hirschhorn's *Schwitters Platform* to function: as a real, genuine space in which what *was* and what *is* were fused, and in which Schwitters' grandest project, re-concretized in the form of a rickety wood construction hovering over a Hanover residential garden for eight weeks in late 2011 and early 2012, was to become real, become active, again.

Hirschhorn's desire to channel and amplify the *Merzbau's* lingering resonance exemplifies the terms of our relationship to any great art. Works of art are made in, and travel across, time and space, and in this they concretize the distinct conditions not just of their production but of their extended lives – as objects of display, adoration, emulation, exchange, and occasionally, as in Hanover, violence. And they do this, at the moment of our later encounters with them, in necessary dialogue with the present.



Figure 3 Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild 10 A/L Merzbild L4 (Konstruktion für edle Frauen)* [*Merz Picture 10 A/L Merz Picture L4 (Construction for Noble Ladies)*], 1919. Oil, watercolour, gouache, wood, metal, funnel, leather, cork, paper, and board on board, mounted on wood, 103 x 83.4 cm. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY.

Viewed through this prism, the intimate collages and assemblages out of which the *Merzbau* emerged – part of a vast body of work Schwitters inaugurated in 1919 and dubbed, utilizing a term of his own making, *Merz* – are arguably among the twentieth century's most resonant art objects. For Schwitters' *Merz* works are built – declaratively built – from the basest and most historically specific sort of everyday matter, from tin cans and bicycle parts to torn fabric and ticket stubs (Figure 3). The works they comprise thus confront their viewers, in

the here and now of our encounter with them, with the material facts of the life-worlds from which they come. Surveying Schwitters' images, one can learn about tram lines, concert performances, chocolate brands, and packaging trends in Hanover, or Berlin, or wherever else the artist happened to fill his pockets, and contemplate the passage of these materials into and their relevance for the present. Roger Cardinal has accordingly compared the artist's collages and assemblages to the rubbish pits examined by archaeologists looking for information on lost societies. The works are 'unfalsifiable testimony' of their source culture, Cardinal writes, 'much like forensic evidence in a criminal trial'.<sup>3</sup>

But simultaneously, Schwitters' works function through – indeed, are grounded in – their ostensible opposition to just such prosaic materiality and simple historical reference. The artist specifically defined his *Merz* works as being generated through the dissolution of what he termed the '*Eigengift*' – roughly translated, 'particular poison' – of the objects and artefacts that comprised them. His materials only became elements of *Merz*, he thus explained, when they lost all contact with their role and history in the world at large: when they took leave of their previous lives, before becoming *Merz* material, as tram tickets, advertisements, household artefacts, and so on. This premise, of course, was a fiction, one of which Schwitters was well aware. How else can his decision be understood to include *Das Arbeiterbild* – *The Worker Picture*, in English – as the single largest work in his 1919 *Merz* debut at Berlin's *Sturm* Gallery, at a moment of unparalleled worker revolt in Germany (Figure 4)? For anyone in Berlin that year, the word '*Arbeiter*' – especially rendered in fire-engine red and ripped from the pages of the mass press, as it appears in his image – spoke unequivocally of worker unrest and political crisis, of precisely the street from which so many of Schwitters' materials came.

Such contrast was also highlighted, in his inaugural *Merz* show, in the slightly smaller assemblage *Construction for Noble Ladies* (Figure 3). Integrating a found gouache portrait (looking upwards at center-right) and suggesting, with his title, a work fit for an '*edel*', or noble, audience, Schwitters made an explicitly self-referential



Figure 4 Kurt Schwitters, *Das Arbeiterbild* [*The Worker Picture*], 1919. Oil, paper, cardboard, wood, chicken wire, cloth, cotton wool, and wheel (in original form) on wood, 125 x 91 cm. Stockholm: Moderna Museet. Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Cardinal, 'Collecting and Collage-Making: The Case of Kurt Schwitters', in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds, *The Cultures of Collecting*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, 84.

image in which his own structuring terms and categories – art and trash, the elevated and the mundane – pushed against, and accordingly destabilized, one another. Which is to say: he positioned the processes by which discarded scraps somehow managed to become a work of art, and works of art came to be made from discarded scraps, as his primary aesthetic concern. *Merz*, to again evoke our guiding term, is here positioned as a process of interrogating how objects, both petty and prized, come to resonate as such.

As this brief introductory discussion suggests, to study Schwitters' *Merz* objects means to work across precisely the divides traversed by Haxthausen throughout his career. Schwitters' practice requires detailed engagement with both his objects and the social fields in which they were made, and demands – because these objects are built from the physical residue of these very same fields – that any historical or political conclusions made about his art be rooted in concrete analysis of its material form. It is as if Schwitters worked to produce a set of test cases for Haxthausen's 1999 Clark Art Institute conference 'The Two Art Histories': his oeuvre's political and theoretical complexities – those primary foci of 'university' art history as discussed within the conference's rubric – are activated, made resonant, and finally understood only through careful consideration of the material particulars of the objects that comprise it – whose primary custodians and promoters are those, precisely, on the 'museum' side of Haxthausen's conference binary. To explore this dual operation, and consider the historiographic lessons and challenges it raises, is the goal of the following pages.

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For my own thinking about Schwitters, the 2010 retrospective of his work organized by Houston's Menil Collection – astonishingly, the artist's first major US exhibition in a quarter century – was an absolute watershed. My previous encounters with his work had always come in smaller doses, on just a few gallery walls or carefully lifted one after the other from storage cartons in a museum study room. What the Menil's 2010 presentation allowed was not just the sustained and intimate study of individual images, but the tracing, across walls and galleries, of developmental lines and ruptures between them: of such particularities as Schwitters' repeated use of favourite materials, including the selection of chocolate and tea wrappers that appeared from wall to wall across the 2010 show's opening galleries (Figure 5); or his frequent play with words as carefully arranged matter, as in his merging of frayed edge and typed line in the early *Drawing A6* (Figures 6a-b); or, finally, his intensifying interest in organic abstraction and semantic directness over the course of his exile years, which the sheer critical mass of the exhibition's final galleries helped bring into focus.

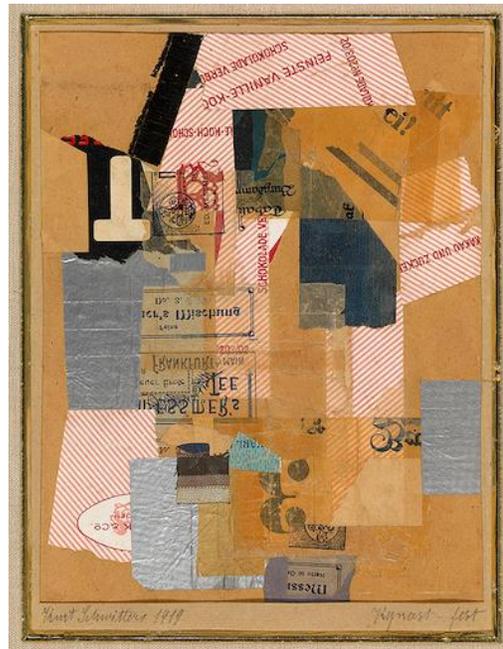
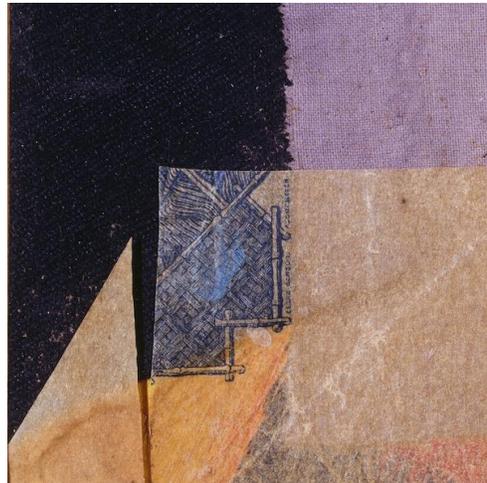


Figure 5 Kurt Schwitters, *Kynast-fest*, 1919. Paper and fabric on board, 28.1 x 21.7 cm. Northampton, Massachusetts: Smith College Museum of Art, purchased with the Eleanor Lamont Cunningham, class of 1932, Fund. Photo: Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts.



Figures 6a-b Kurt Schwitters, *Zeichnung A6* [Drawing A6], 1918. Paper and fabric on paper, 21 x 17 cm.; detail of same. Switzerland: private collection. Photo: Courtesy Kurt Schwitters Archive, Sprengel Museum Hanover.

Despite all my previous thinking about Schwitters' work, the confrontation with such details at the Menil newly revealed the intricacies, routines, and interests by which his practice had taken shape, in a manner only such skilled museum presentations could do. At the root of this development, the show made clear, was the dialectical charge of *Eigengift* at its core – to repeat from above, the 'particular poison' of the artist's component parts. For despite their fragile, carefully constructed beauty, Schwitters' collages and assemblages remained, on the Menil's artfully arranged walls nearly a century after their

creation, collections of trash. Their parts unapologetically collected from the waste-bins and pockets of Europe a century before, the artist's works greeted Houston viewers as both intricately formed aesthetic objects and, in their uniquely straightforward manner, simple accretions of timeworn scraps – as art and rubbish at once.

Just such indeterminacy had in fact dominated initial responses to *Merz*. As Ernst Cohn-Wiener began his review of Schwitters' first presentation of this work, at Berlin's *Sturm* Gallery in the summer of 1919:

Old padlocks; preserve jar caps; metal springs; butter, milk, and meat rationing cards; postal addresses; wooden matches; children's bike wheels – a pile of rubbish? – no, the palette of Mr Kurt Schwitters! – in the dump? – no, in the art exhibition at *Sturm!*<sup>4</sup>

Schwitters' component elements, Cohn-Wiener rightly observed, were simply there, assembled but not transformed into any sort of figure or pattern or symbol – and as such, threatened to disappear as art altogether. But simultaneously, for such visitors to *Sturm* as the critic and Dada associate Walter Mehring, Schwitters' works utilized 'objects themselves to achieve an objectless pictorial whole' – to dissolve, through the accomplishment of their aesthetic assembly, precisely the declarative thingness so forcefully lambasted by Cohn-Wiener, and accordingly to make trash into a singularly redemptive form of art.<sup>5</sup>

Such oppositions – between things of the world and their sublimation in the name of art – were taken anything but lightly at the time Schwitters was developing *Merz*. For the most fervent of the Berlin Dadaists, Schwitters' collages and assemblages were pure aesthetic delectation, and accordingly to be rejected, in Dada impresario Richard Huelsenbeck's words, 'emphatically and as a matter of principle.'<sup>6</sup> The problem, for Huelsenbeck and others, was that Schwitters' intricately formed abstractions apparently failed to confront the pressing concerns of German daily life circa early 1919, dominated as it was by the unparalleled economic and social upheaval precipitated by the end of World War I. Amidst such circumstances, the Dadaists called for artists to actively embrace the 'thousand-fold problems of the day', which many did by turning to direct political exhortation and action (such as, in the case of John Heartfield and George Grosz, immediately joining the German Communist Party after its

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Cohn-Wiener, 'Auch eine Kunstaustellung!', *Neue Berliner Zeitung*, no. 168, 1 August 1919, unpaginated.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Mehring, 'Berliner Ausstellungen: Kurt Schwitters im "Sturm"', *Der Cicerone*, 11, no. 15, August 1919, 462.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Huelsenbeck, *Dada Almanach*, Berlin: Erich Reiss Verlag, 1920, 9.

January 1919 founding) but which Schwitters, in his aesthetically minded constructions, appeared to be working precisely against.<sup>7</sup>

Viewed through this lens, the Hanover artist has traditionally been understood in a position of natural opposition to the Berlin Dada group: as an utterly apolitical aesthete disinterested in the radical, indeed revolutionary, events around him. Schwitters' own statements, certainly, as well as his close association with the Expressionist-minded *Sturm* Gallery, go a long way towards confirming and solidifying such a picture. So too, to return to the guiding polarity of Haxthausen's 1999 Clark conference, does the often dominant tendency of academic art historians – myself included – to wish to trace art's role within the specific operations of political and economic networks, all too often in a manner that downplays or even disregards consideration of individual works' aesthetic power. Within such a project, Schwitters' repeated paeans to art's singularity and autonomy, and his objects' adamantly opaque semantics, makes an easy and natural foil to the Dadaists' far-ahead-of-the-curve radical engagements.

Not only is such a fixed opposition of Schwitters and Berlin Dada off the mark, however, but Schwitters himself, I wish now to demonstrate, constructed his early *Merz* work as a critical engagement with its very terms. To repeat my suggestion from above: Schwitters, in making the world's physical residue *Merz*'s primary substance, rooted his work's ideological stakes in the material particulars that comprise it – and laid down a charge, in doing so, for art historians to follow.

To support these claims, the following pages consider three of Schwitters' early *Merz* works, all from 1919. Two of these were included in his debut exhibition that summer, and one was not. All will help demonstrate the depth of his interest in the work and ideas of Berlin Dada and the submerged centrality of political thinking to his artistic practice.

First, consider *Merz Picture 9b, The Great I Picture* (Figure 7). Excluded from Schwitters' July 1919 inaugural *Merz* show but included in the Menil's 2010 retrospective, the assemblage appears to have been made directly after the model of

<sup>7</sup> As Huelsenbeck famously declared in his Dada Manifesto, first presented in Berlin in 1918 and published as a collective statement two years later:

Art, in its execution and direction, depends on the times in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art will be the one whose mental content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, which has let itself be thrown by the explosions of last week and is forever gathering up its limbs after the impact of yesterday.

See Richard Huelsenbeck et al, 'dadaistisches manifest', *Der Zweeman*, 1, 3 January 1920, 15.

George Grosz's now-lost oil painting *Germany: A Winter's Tale*, 1918, shown in the Dadaists' inaugural group exhibition at Berlin's I.B. Neumann gallery in April/May

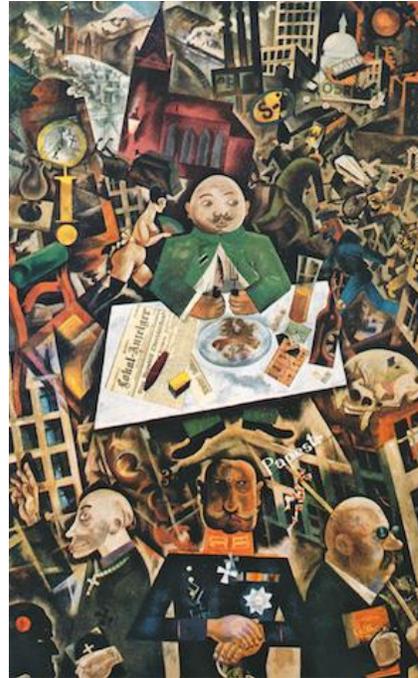


Figure 7 Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild 9b das grosse Ichbild/Merzbild K7* [?] [*Merz Picture 9b, The Great I Picture/Merz Picture K7* [?]], 1919. Oil, gouache, paper and board on board, 97 x 70 cm. Cologne: Museum Ludwig. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln, rba\_c004720, <https://www.kulturelles-erbe-koeln.de/documents/obj/05020819>.

Figure 8 George Grosz, *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen* [*Germany: A Winter's Tale*], 1918. Oil and mixed media on canvas; approximate dimensions 215 x 132 cm. Location unknown. Photo: © 2019 Estate of George Grosz / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

1919 (Figure 8). (Schwitters, who was frequently in Berlin that year, visited the Neumann show and surely saw Grosz's work.) The upper centres of both pictures are dominated by submerged triangular forms, punctuated in each case by a circular shape near the triangle's top apex and a parallelogram/trapezoid near its bottom (in Grosz's painting, the head and table, respectively, of his central figure) that contains, similarly positioned in each, a collaged newspaper segment running from top to bottom near its left edge. The dominant headlines of these two media fragments ('Lokal-Anzeiger' for Grosz, 'Last-Autos' for Schwitters) themselves echo from one picture to the next – as do the carefully positioned implements of Grosz's burgher's fork and knife and the clock-hand-like segments within Schwitters' central circle. Could Schwitters' decision to call his composition *The Great I-Picture* not indicate a tongue-in-cheek self-projection into his abstract echo of Grosz's forlorn philistine, who himself is notably accompanied by a prominently inverted 'i' to his left that, in Schwitters' subsequent work, is made into a pasted-on 87, the year of Schwitters' birth?

I draw out these connections to illustrate that Schwitters, whatever the animosities that would soon form, was looking directly to the practice of Berlin Dada as a model for his own in the spring of 1919, just as *Merz* was taking shape. In doing so, I also wish to stress that the visual evidence provided by works of art themselves, derived from close observation of individual objects, is the surest proof of such developments and connections. If the parallels here identified between Schwitters' and Grosz's pictures are almost entirely formal in nature, there's little doubt that the Hanover artist would have been drawn, at least in part, to the explicitly political intent of *Germany: A Winter's Tale*. But rather than following Grosz's mocking of the institutional pillars and culinary habits of the German petty bourgeoisie, Schwitters directs his critical focus to the institution of painting itself, whose rules and materials (as the disbelief with which Cohn-Wiener opened his 1919 review attests) are radically challenged by his carefully calibrated image.

The sort of direct political reference evident in Grosz's painting was, however, readily on display at Schwitters' 1919 *Merz* debut. For the single largest work on display that summer (and the image that can accordingly be understood as Schwitters' boldest statement of his new art) was entitled, at a time of widespread worker unrest and political crisis, *The Worker Picture* (Figure 4). The image's titular term ('*Arbeiter*', in German), rendered in fire-engine red and positioned so as to be perfectly legible at top right, would have immediately invoked the country's political upheaval at the time, precisely the 'thousandfold problems of the day' heralded by Huelsenbeck as the Dadaists' new priority. (Though Schwitters demurs, it should be noted, from loading his titular word with any explicit political intent.) Once again, then, the Berlin group's imperatives are in evidence at the heart of Schwitters' new *Merz* practice, here in a manner that directly engages (in however oblique a fashion) contemporary political struggle.

But this glance to Dada and contemporary politics is only part of the picture's story. For as much as Schwitters was then interested in and looking to Grosz, Huelsenbeck, and others, he remained rooted in the discursive universe of his gallery *Der Sturm* and its guiding impresario Herwarth Walden, whose ventures also included a journal of the same name (in which Schwitters frequently published), an art school, and regular critical publications. And within that framework, politics and art didn't mix at all. Walden wrote repeated paeans to art's autonomy (for which he came under savage attack from the Dadaists) and his journal's pages regularly celebrated cosmic rotation, rhetorically related but operationally opposite to the Dadaists' call for world revolution, as a primary aesthetic goal. 'Nothing unmoving stands still', Walden wrote in his *Sturm* journal that year. 'The earth itself turns. The world turns' – and art's task, given

this ongoing rotation, was to seize upon and intensify such movement, to 'turn humanity in its infinite space'.<sup>8</sup>

If such formulations brought much acid scorn in Walden's direction, they are implicitly embraced in *The Worker Picture*, which entwines its politically loaded content as described above with a visual program of nestling circles and crescent moons (no fewer than three of the latter are visible) that is clearly indebted to *Sturm's* rhetoric of cosmic rotation far removed from everyday struggle. This is clearest at upper left, where a red crescent moon hovers amidst what appears to be a painted night-time sky. Such cosmic play, however, is effected through collected and crudely assembled rubbish – Schwitters' painted moon, for instance, appears atop a jutting form that resembles, at close range, a drawer pull – thus cinching the work's elements' conflictual knot even tighter.

Schwitters, these observations mean to demonstrate, not only put everyday political conflict at the centre of *The Worker Picture's* visual program but, in his specific formal decisions, made the interrogation of art's own political terms and stakes – of his own picture as a carrier of political meaning – immanent to this effort. And he did so, working between the competing discursive frameworks of Dada and *Sturm*, with acute precision. Take, once again, his image's titular term. *Arbeiter* was as politically loaded a word as one could choose in Germany in mid-1919, particularly when rendered in vibrant red and torn from the daily press; though it was used equally in appeals to both right and left, the word's suggestion of political action and agitation was unmistakable. Schwitters surely knew this when he made the term his image's primary element, and fully recognized its apparent accordance with Dada's politically minded imperatives. And yet if his pasted-on fragment is examined up close – as only the museum, in this case Stockholm's Moderna Museet, today allows one to do – a far more specific operation comes into focus than the simple cutting and pasting of politically charged material (Figure 9). For '*Arbeiter*', in Schwitters' picture, is in fact not a newspaper fragment, or even a printed form at all. It is, rather, painted, as indicated by its surprisingly luminous surface and confirmed by the fact that it runs over its torn edge onto the plywood ground beneath. This same red, furthermore, was used to create the schematic crescent moon occupying the image's upper left corner, thus materially equating these seemingly opposed elements.

<sup>8</sup> Walden, 'Das Begriffliche in der Dichtung', *Der Sturm*, vol. 9, no. 5, August 1918, 67. Adolf Behne mercilessly mocked the *Sturm* group's cosmic rhetoric in his October 1918 article 'Kunstwende?' by claiming that Walden and others 'only used the word cosmos to mask the extremely limited range of [their] creation.' See Behne, 'Kunstwende?' in *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, 24, no. 17, 15 October 1918, 948-49.



Figure 9 Detail of Kurt Schwitters, *Das Arbeiterbild* [*The Worker Picture*], 1919. Oil, paper, cardboard, wood, chicken wire, cloth, and cotton wool, and wheel (in original form) on wood, 125 x 91 cm. Stockholm: Moderna Museet. Photo by the author.

In *The Worker Picture*, in other words, Schwitters literally binds the competing aesthetic programs of Dada and *Sturm* – of political revolution and cosmic rotation – and does this through the most specific of material moves. On the one hand, he puts the materials of art to work to emulate simple trash (paint takes the form of a politically charged headline scrap); on the other, he uses everyday detritus to parrot, without embarrassment or obfuscation, the most otherworldly sort of aesthetic rhetoric (his jutting knob, topped with the same paint, becomes a luminous moon). And these details and resonances, as the none-too-obscure symbols of worker and moon evince, were created with crystal-clear understanding of the political and aesthetic stakes involved.

A further look at Schwitters' *Construction for Noble Ladies*, briefly considered above, can deepen and conclude these observations. Like *The Worker Picture*, with which it was shown in Schwitters' inaugural *Merz* show, the 1919 image immediately touches on politics: in designating 'noble ladies' as its intended audience, the picture highlights social stratification – indeed, this evocation could even be understood as an intentional point of contrast to the other work's reference to simple labourers. And this polarity, once again, operates along aesthetic lines. For if *The Worker Picture's* titular figure takes the form of an apparent (if in fact painted) newspaper headline, Schwitters' noble lady is presented as a painted profile portrait (looking up at lower right) that is nevertheless positioned as just one piece of detritus among others. This figure, furthermore, calls attention to the very act of aesthetic contemplation, and is even positioned as a surrogate for Schwitters' own viewers. Just as we (and more precisely, Berlin viewers in 1919) look at Schwitters' elaborate composition on the wall before us, so she stares upwards at the picture's densest concentration of circular elements, which are contained by a wooden frame-like beam (running diagonally across the picture's surface) and accompanied by the artist's signature – an upside-down 'KS' near the picture's centre – just as is the image at which we ourselves look.

Once this play with the fluid boundary between work and world comes into focus, the component parts of *Construction for Noble Ladies* fit together with subtle clarity. The picture's diagonal wooden beam, for instance, is hinged squarely at his figure's collar bone, directly integrating her into its rotational cycle, and its right-most end is capped by a jutting and partly painted funnel whose handle invites our grasp – to, it would appear, give the beam a spin. This jutting funnel is paired with a corroded disk at the beam's opposite end, the two together establishing an oppositional set to mimic, once again, that of Dada and *Sturm*. While the disk's pattern of wear recalls a mottled planetary surface and its carefully arranged containment within Schwitters' beam-cum-picture-frame suggests its belonging to the demarcated space of art – aligning it, in both cases, with *Sturm*'s aesthetic vision – the call to real-world action of Schwitters' funnel at opposite, and specifically this funnel's invitation to initiate a sweep that would wipe away, precisely, his picture-within-a-picture's carefully constellated forms, matches to a tee Berlin Dada's call to reject art outright, to simply wipe it away by embracing the concrete material demands of the here-and-now.

By highlighting the concept of nobility in his image's title, furthermore, Schwitters explicitly connects the evaluative judgment that structures such designations – by which subjects and objects are put in place and labelled accordingly – as part and parcel of the image's opposition of art and the everyday. Just who is this 'noble lady', the painting forces its viewers to ask, and who are we staring at her, and what is the image at which she looks and that in which she appears? And how, finally, are she and we and they positioned and established as such, noble or otherwise? In their most abstract formulation, these questions comprised the motivating core of all of Schwitters' *Merz* pictures when they were first shown at *Sturm* in July 1919. Just as the component parts of *The Worker Picture* alternated between hand-painted form and politically loaded headline, poetic passage and prosaic matter, so Schwitters' parts in *Construction for Noble Ladies* were presented, in Berlin that summer, as at once removed aesthetic matter and objects ready for use, as both 'noble' and utterly familiar – with the picture's own viewers positioned as an integral part of this dynamic.

The resonance of such queries and operations, clearly, stretches far beyond the confines of Schwitters' singular practice, or of art more broadly – and would have done so with particular force amidst the political instability and cultural reinvention that defined Berlin in early/mid 1919. How are things and people assigned a place and given value? By what mechanisms can these places and values shift? How do processes of combination and/or demarcation fix, or open up to transformation, established identities and positions? To close, let us deepen our understanding of Schwitters' *Merz* works by considering their engagement of such broad questions – by stepping, as it were, from the close visual study of the museum gallery to the historical and theoretical questions of the university seminar room.

German life in the roughly six months following war's end in November 1918 – the exact period during which Schwitters invented *Merz* – was dominated by radically open political questioning and frequently violent political altercations. At the centre of these developments, which became known as the November Revolution, was the foundational question of how democratic political assembly and representation come to function at all. While the centrist Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert – the country's leader by default, and hence its primary political figure and the ostensible guiding force of its postwar political reinvention – was committed to ensuring institutional continuity through the rapid adaptation of a parliamentary system and the appeasement of rigidly conservative military leaders, his firebrand opponent Karl Liebknecht – a founding figure of the breakaway Independent Social Democrats, which became the German Communist Party in January 1919 – fought bitterly against just such positions, heralding the primary role to be played by newly formed Workers' and Soldiers' Councils in the country's political regeneration. These Councils, diverse and small-scale assemblies rooted in specific factories and trades, sought to ground democratic decision-making not in a generalized body founded on the abstract notion of the 'rights of man', but in a differentiated structure reflecting the materially specific conditions and arrangements by which personhood itself (and the rights thus granted) comes to be determined.<sup>9</sup>

During the precise months in which Schwitters was formulating *Merz*, then – as a practice rooted, most fundamentally, in experimenting with how pictorial parts are categorized, given meaning, and made to function together – Germany was dominated by intense and widespread questioning of the most basic definitions of individual rights and political union. As the Austrian legal theorist Hans Kelsen discussed in his important study *On the Essence and Value of Democracy*, published in Germany in 1920 and reflecting on the events of the previous two years, this process was one of testing how diverse and even seemingly opposed parts could coalesce in the form of a unified political structure. The national assembly for which the country finally voted in January 1919, Kelsen wrote, was rooted in a fundamental fiction: that of the notion of 'the people', *das Volk*, as a generative force able to instantiate such a body's constitutional power. As Kelsen wrote:

...the reality that we call 'the people' lacks the one essential element for exercising sovereignty: unity. Split by national,

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Franz Pfemfert's opening article in the 30 November 1918 issue of *Die Aktion*, 'National Assembly is Counter-Revolution', in which Pfemfert declares: 'The capitalist "National Assembly" would be the final guarantee of the old violent order. Against this order we insist upon democracy: the organization of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils.' *Die Aktion*, 8, no. 47/48, 30 November 1918, 612.

religious, and economic oppositions, it represents more a bundle of groups than a coherent mass of one and the same aggregate material. The unity of the people is largely an ethical-political hypothesis.<sup>10</sup>

Kelsen's book was published just after the Weimar constitution was signed into law in August 1919, and the problem of the 'people' he identified – that democratic states are based on an idealized unity that remains a problem-laden and little-examined fiction – was central to discussions accompanying the document's drafting.

The structuring terms of Schwitters' *Merz* work during these very same months, I want to propose, are precisely those of Germany's November Revolution as summarized by Kelsen and experienced by the artist during the months in which he formulated his new practice. Developed at the juncture of Berlin Dada's and *Sturm's* aesthetic oppositions, Schwitters' *Merz* objects effectively concretized not just the period's artistic conflicts but its political ones as well – most fundamentally, those around questions of abstract and particular rights, the 'fictional' union of the whole versus the actual divergences of its component parts. Schwitters realized such a practice, as observed above, not by turning to didactic exhortation or a clear taking of sides, but by making utterly precise compositional decisions, ones rooted in the specific material qualities and associations of his pictorial elements. He made his work not by suppressing opposition or celebrating one side of the pairs he put into play, but by utilizing the indeterminate energy of such contrastive relation – of his elements' 'particular poison' and its ostensible but always unresolved dissolution – as his primary aesthetic fuel.

This conclusion is supported not just by Schwitters' pictures but by the artist's repeated engagement, across his 1920s writings, of just the sort of broad political and social questions I am proposing can be located in his art. Indeed, he even described his *Merz* works, in a programmatic essay of 1923, as 'studies for the collective formation of the world', a suggestion that makes perfect sense in light of the shared focus on relationality that defines both his aesthetic formulations and his numerous statements on religion, nationalism, and other essential issues of the period.<sup>11</sup> As he wrote in one such text (a brief 1924 statement on 'The Feeling of Nationalism'), 'there's much that is coincidental about the living-together of people under the banner "nation". Clarity and consequence are missing. And yet we realize the very concept "nation" by

<sup>10</sup> Hans Kelsen, *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1920, 26-27, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Schwitters, 'Die Bedeutung des Merzgedankens in der Welt' (1923), in Friedhelm Lach, ed., *Kurt Schwitters: Das literarische Werk*, vol. 5, *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*, Munich: DTV, 1981, 133.

excluding any notion of coincidence.<sup>12</sup> Straight away, the clear echo of Kelsen's fiction of 'the people' can be noted here, as can the link to Schwitters' own pictorial compositions – in which seemingly discordant parts are made to function with, and even as, one another, and in which such play between opposition and accordance becomes his works' most elementary material. As he declared in a 1920 essay looking back at *Merz's* formation: 'at the end of 1918, I realized that all values only exist in relationship to each other and...[f]rom this insight I formed *Merz*.'<sup>13</sup>

It's no wonder that Schwitters forged this project amidst Germany's postwar tumult, for what other condition but revolution so forcefully calls into question how people and things are defined and joined together, and draws our attention to the structures by which these assemblages are alternately facilitated or hindered? In *Merz*, Schwitters gave material form to such questioning. And in the process, he sought to extend and intensify revolution's interrogatory drive: to reinvent through reordering, and to present this process as something both active and unexpected, shot through with the palpable, and playful, indeterminacy of art. This, finally, is *Merz's* most lasting resonance: for Berlin viewers in 1919, for Hirschhorn in his run-up to the 2011 *Schwitters Platform*, and for us today, on those lucky occasions when we are able to spend time with Schwitters' ragged, lovingly assembled scraps.

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<sup>12</sup> Schwitters, 'Nationalitätsgefühl', 1924, in Lach, 197.

<sup>13</sup> Schwitters, 'Kurt Schwitters: Herkunft, Werden und Entfaltung', 1920/21, in Lach, 84.