THE RECEPTION OF THE MERZBAU

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Introduction

To begin with, I must explain that in this lecture I will focus less on the reception of Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau as a whole than on a few of the many legends and misconceptions that have arisen in descriptions and analyses of the Hannover Merzbau since the artist's death in 1948.

First of all, I'd like to recap briefly on the history of this most enigmatic of 20th century art works. The beginnings of what has come to be known as the Hannover Merzbau can be traced to a number of sculptural assemblages in Kurt Schwitters' studio dating from the early 1920s. In its later stages the Merzbau took the form of a sculptural environment that during the 1930s expanded into various areas of the family home in Hannover. Despite the labelling of Schwitters' abstract work as 'entartet' [degenerate] from 1933, and despite the threats Hitler issued to the former avant-garde at annual Nuremberg Party conferences, Schwitters remained in Hannover until 1936. By this time, however, he had become highly concerned not only about his own future, but also about that of the Merzbau. He bombarded friends in exile with letters in an attempt to gain a commission to build a Merzbau in the US, and also contacted the Swiss collectors Annie and Oskar Müller-Widmann, evidently in the hope that, as friends and patrons, they would permit him to construct a Merzbau in the grounds of their house in Basle.

All these efforts, however, were in vain. Schwitters left Hannover in January 1937 and in autumn, began on a second Merzbau in Oslo that was almost
complete when he fled from invading Nazi troops in 1940. During his time in Norway, he also inhabited a hut on the Norwegian island of Hjertoya, for which he designed an interior that displayed many of the characteristics of the Merzbau, though he never referred to it as such. In England in mid-August 1947 he began on a third Merzbau, the Merz barn, which was left incomplete on his death. Schwitters regarded the Merzbauten as his Lebenswerk [life work] and even a new domain of art, and in their time they certainly represented an unprecedented idea that preoccupied him for nearly thirty years, that is, most of his working life.

![Fig. 1. The ruins of Waldhausenstrasse 5 after the bombing. Kurt Schwitters Archive, Sprengel Museum Hannover.](image)

Sadly, little remains of these works today. In exile in wartime London, Schwitters was distressed to hear that the Hannover Merzbau had been destroyed in an Allied bombing raid in 1943. ‘My studio and the work of my life does no more exist,’ he wrote. ‘For what did I actually live? I don’t know.’ In 1951, three years after his death, the Oslo Merzbau was destroyed by fire. The third Merzbau in the English Lake District now stands empty, as its original contents were either destroyed or removed to other locations. The hut in Moldefiord has more or less been left to rot since 1940.
In any discussion of the Merzbauten, we are faced with a number of special difficulties. Standard methods of investigation and critical appraisal remain problematical because so little remains of their original substance; we seem to have no point of reference by which we can analyse these works or judge the analyses of others. While the example of Duchamp’s ‘Fountain’ show that art works do not have to survive to be open to fruitful discussion, the Merzbauten present a different case in that they were continually changing. In Hannover, a sculptural assemblage developed into a complex of columns, then into a single-room - later multi-room – environment over a period of thirteen years, and in exile, Schwitters continued to explore various concepts of the original work. In effect, the term Merzbau applies to a series of works erected in various countries over three decades. Bearing in mind the problems of timescale, the lack of originals and a body of written and visual evidence that is imprecise, patchy and frequently contradictory, I’d now like to focus on some of the legends that have grown up round the Hannover Merzbau in the post-1945 reception.

**Early Reception**

Up to the 1960s most references to the Hannover Merzbau were tucked away in notes, asides or at the back of exhibition catalogues. Early commentators evidently found themselves at a loss for terms to define the work or locate it in some kind of recognizable context. We find vague phrases such as ‘open sculpture’, ‘a sculpture, which sprouted from the inside outwards’, ‘a series of strange grottos built by Schwitters at the rear of his house’, ‘a sculptural-
painterly collage construction’, ‘an utterly new medium of tremendous impact and bizarre fantasy’, ‘a cathedral of things for things’, or simply ‘Schwitters’ house is said to have been very strange’. One rather longer account speaks of ‘a model of a project for a monument to humanity, in which all sorts of materials were to be used helter-skelter: wood, plaster, a corset, musical toys and life-size houses in the Swiss style. Parts of the monument were to move and emit sounds’. Another relates that ‘Schwitters’ house in Hannover was a maze of mining shafts from top to bottom [with] tunnels spiralling from the cellar to the roof’.

Little wonder that it seemed almost impossible in these years to make any sense of the no longer extant Hannover Merzbau, and with few exceptions, it was dismissed as a bygone historical curiosity until the advent of the neo-Dada movement in the 1960s brought a new interest in Schwitters’ work. With it came the beginnings of a Merzbau mythology that freely exploited the work’s obscurity. As an example, an article of 1960 entitled ‘The Merzbau, Pantheon of Dadaism’ described it as a work that had hardly even been seen, a mixture of ‘abstract hermitage, ghost’s playroom, atomic witches’ kitchen and space ship interior,’ featuring ‘rescued secret photos’ that were in fact neither rescued nor secret. In addition, Schwitters’ contemporaries began to publish their own very hazy recollections of the Hannover Merzbau, adding to the confusion that already existed.

**Schmalenbach, Elger, Elderfield.**

The art historians who first tried to make sense of the burgeoning Merzbau mythology were Werner Schmalenbach, Dietmar Elger and John Elderfield, who all undertook detailed research (now often forgotten) into the Merzbauten. One of their most important tasks, as they saw it, was to clear away the many legends surrounding the Merzbau, and Elderfield’s statement in his major study of Schwitters (1985) may be seen as representative of the aim of all three art historians:

Once the development of the Merzbau is removed from the realm of myth and fanciful exaggeration, what it loses in fantasy it gains in credibility. To learn the facts of its development is to make the Merzbau fully available for analysis and evaluation.
Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield all realised that to recover the Merzbauten for analysis, it was of fundamental importance to establish as neutral a framework as possible - i.e. a temporal and spatial chronology - by which to clarify the contours of their development. With regard to the Hannover Merzbau, the first question they raised – and one that at first may seem almost simplistic - concerned its location. Certainly it was situated in the Schwitters’ family home in Waldhausenstrasse 5, Hannover, but exactly where it began and its final extent have, surprisingly, not been satisfactorily determined even today. If we examine the reports of eyewitnesses (the majority of whom were writing many decades after the event), they are unanimous that the first columns were situated somewhere in this house, but they locate them variously in the cellar, in the attic, on the ground floor (which was the apartment of Schwitters’ parents), on the first floor and on the second floor (whose front apartment was occupied by Kurt and Helma Schwitters and their son Ernst).

The façade of Waldhausenstrasse 5 is perhaps deceptive, for this was far more than just the family home: during much of the 1920s and 1930s, six families lived here, not including resident maids whose rooms were in the attic. Plans and documents relating to the house in Hannover City archive
show that the amount of space available for an artist’s studio was in fact very limited. There was no room for a Merzbau on either the first or second floor, and there is not the remotest foundation for Hans Arp’s tongue-in-cheek declaration that Schwitters ‘succeeded in totally merzing his house’, (although even today, variations of this tale regularly appear in descriptions of the Merzbau).

Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield tackled many of the problems surrounding the Merzbau’s extent, presenting sufficient evidence to show that it originated on the ground floor of the family house, that is, not in Schwitters’ own apartment but in that of his parents. From here it spread to a second room, to an adjacent balcony, to the space under the balcony and to one or two rooms in the attic. (There may also have been subsidiaries in the cellar, although this was vehemently denied by Ernst Schwitters in later years.) It did not break through the ceiling (as Hans Richter and Kate Steinitz had maintained), and no tenants were ever ejected to enable Schwitters to extend the work to another floor. It also emerged from their analysis of Schwitters’ construction method that the layering process of the Merzbau involved far more than simply concealing objects within geometrical plaster casing; grottos and formal structure were created in parallel.

Fig. 4. A letter from Schwitters showing his parents’ apartment on the ground floor of Waldhausenstrasse 5. The hatched sections represent the Merzbau. Kurt Schwitters Archive, Stadtbibliothek Hannover.

Elderfield in particular succeeded in differentiating between the Merzbau (a word first invented by Schwitters in 1933) and the initial section known as The Cathedral of Erotic Misery, or KdeE. While this is often regarded as
synonymous with the Merzbau itself, Elderfield discovered that the KdeE constituted only part of the main room, i.e. the section to the left of the entrance, between the doorway and a large window that took up much of one wall. In addition, Elderfield revealed that most of the constructions in the first Merzbau room were not flush with the walls, so that they had an exterior, accessible by means of hidden stairs and ledges. In the light of new evidence, the Catalogue Raisonné has now provided us with a more accurate plan of the main room that confirms many of Elderfield’s findings.

It might be assumed that there is little remaining research to be done on the chronology of the Hannover Merzbau. Yet if we look at the accounts of Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield more closely, their theories on the spatial and temporal evolution of the Merzbau in the 1920s vary considerably, so that despite their investigations, they did not succeed in drawing up a standard chronology that provides a reliable framework for interpretation. If three art historians can come up with such different versions of the development of the Merzbau, then it seems pertinent to examine the reliability of the sources on which they based their conclusions.

**Eyewitness evidence**

One of the most problematical areas of Merzbau reception is what precisely constitutes evidence. More than once, we find the memory of one brief visit treated as a definitive account, one vague reminiscence taken at face value as an authentic report, one art historian’s supposition becoming another’s indisputable fact. It is, moreover, often forgotten that visitors witnessed the Merzbau at various stages of its development. What is usually regarded as eyewitness evidence is better understood as interpretation, for most of Schwitters’ contemporaries did not write about the Merzbau till many years later, in an entirely different (i.e. post 1945) context and often enough not even in the writer’s native country or language.

As there is only time here to quote a few examples, I have chosen just three - those of Hans Richter, Kate Steinitz and Alexander Dorner. Richter’s account, one of the most important eyewitness reports in terms of its subsequent impact on Merzbau reception, appeared in the mid-1960s in his book ‘Dada – Art and Anti-Art’. Resident in the USA since 1941, Richter had experienced professional difficulties in the McCarthy era and was concerned to play down both the political dimension of Dada and his own role in the revolutionary politics of his time. Given this background, it is not unexpected to find that his chapter on Schwitters (under the misleading title of Dada Hannover) presents him as
an ideal example of a Dadaist, harmless, amiable, but nonetheless authentic - ‘in reality,’ he writes, ‘HE was the total work of art’. In Richter’s account, recorded about forty years after the event, the Merzbau features as a bizarre but basically innocuous work, with ‘caves’ (he uses neither the term grotto nor Cathedral of Erotic Misery) mainly containing tiny, bizarre souvenirs ‘pilfered’ from Schwitters’ colleagues and acquaintances, so that in effect, he portrays the Merzbau as little more than a mischievous, if occasionally repellent, documentation of friendship. Richter’s statements are inconsistent with what is known of the early chronology of the studio, yet his description, the most innocuous of all those by Schwitters’ contemporaries, is one of the best-known passages on the Merzbau, perhaps because it is in easily accessible form and is available both in German and English. Its credibility and evident lacunae are seldom questioned, as is the fact that it bears little relevance to the 1933 photos of the work. Richter’s account is also the primary source of one of the most durable Merzbau legends, the Deckendurchbruch, i.e. the column’s supposed penetration of the ceiling.

Kate Steinitz’s memoirs, likewise published in the 1960s and translated into English, have also become one of the standard sources of information on the Merzbau. Steinitz’s chapter on the Merzbau rapidly drifts off into speculations about Schwitters’ affairs with other women, but before this, she makes tantalising mention of ‘very secret caves’, mysterious interior compartments of the column that she describes as ‘probably’ seen only by a few friends. She draws her own conclusions that these contained dubious sexual material, although also admits that she never saw them. Although three early visitors to Schwitters’ studio also record him as behaving strangely about some of the column’s content, the idea that he actually concealed certain grottos from visitors can clearly be traced to Steinitz’s vague account. I will return to this point later.

As a final example, I’d like to cite the memoirs of Alexander Dorner, first published in English in 1958 and later translated into German. These are an often-quoted source, but again, are not as clear-cut as we are frequently led to believe. Dorner, who had publicly criticized Schwitters in the early 1920s, probably visited his studio at about the same time as Richter, but his verdict
was very different (and, incidentally, does not seem to have been shared by any of Schwitters’ contemporaries). As an avowed supporter of the Constructivist movement, Dorner condemned Schwitters’ Merz column outright, claiming that:

the free expression of the socially controlled self had here bridged the gap between sanity and madness. The Merzbau was a kind of fecal smearing—a sick and sickening relapse into the social irresponsibility of the infant who plays with trash and filth.

If we look at this account more closely, however, it is not as straightforward as it might seem. Dorner did not write this himself, and his opinion is not quoted but reported by Samuel Cauman, whose biography of Dorner appeared in 1958, shortly after Dorner’s death. Cauman, who makes an arcane reference to Schwitters as ‘one of the seven founders of Dada’, attaches no date to this episode, but claims it took place after Dorner attended a Nolde exhibition in Braunschweig (an event of which I have found no record to date). Cauman twice uses the word Merzbau, although Dorner must have seen it at a relatively early phase, well before it became a sculptural environment and well before Schwitters invented the term ‘Merzbau’ in 1933; according to this description it was no more than a tower located in the cellar and had hardly progressed beyond the stage of a large sculptural assemblage.

**The gaps in the evidence**

If the eyewitness reports of the Merzbau present a number of anomalies, then the gaps in the evidence, equally neglected in the reception history, are even more problematical. Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield assume that the first Merzbau room was more or less complete in the 1920s, even considering it may have been modelled on the kind of Constructivist Demonstration Room advocated by Theo van Doesburg and El Lissitsky in the early 1920s. Indeed, the majority of analyses of the Hannover Merzbau consider it in terms of early 20th century avant-garde movements (mainly Dada, Expressionism and Constructivism), either in terms of the impact of these movements on the Merzbau or with regard to its perceived deviations from avant-garde models.
Yet one of the most puzzling aspects of the Hannover Merzbau, commented on solely by Elderfield, is that in the 1920s (as far as I have been able to ascertain) Schwitters made no reference to it at all. As Elderfield remarks, for such a keen self-publicist as Schwitters, this was truly remarkable. It is even more remarkable when we draw up a list of the opportunities available to Schwitters to publicize his columns. In the late 1920s, the eminent architect Hans Hildebrandt corresponded with Schwitters and also gave him an entry in the second edition of his comprehensive Handbook of 19th and 20th Century Art (1931). It would have been a unique opportunity for Schwitters to advertise his studio constructions, but there is no allusion to them in Hildebrandt’s book, and none in the Hildebrandt-Schwitters correspondence until 1933. His correspondence of 1926 with the collector and gallery owner Galka Scheyer, whom he had known personally before she moved to the USA, included no attempt to interest her in his studio (as happened four years later). Between 1928 and 1930, Schwitters gave illustrated lectures on contemporary design in art, architecture and typography, but nowhere in his slides and lecture notes, which show Constructivist interiors such as Lissitisky’s *Abstraktenkabinett* and several examples of his own work, is there a reference to his studio or to any columns.
Even if Schwitters wished to conceal the work from the public for some reason (difficult in itself, as it stood in his studio), we find nothing on it in his personal letters, even those to his patron and especial confidante Katherine Dreier. Throughout the 1920s, Schwitters sent Dreier detailed accounts and explanations of current projects, future plans and personal and professional difficulties, but made no mention of a column or anything similar.

If, as generally assumed, the Merzbau was an avant-garde work that was more or less complete by the end of the Twenties, Schwitters’ own Merz periodical, which appeared between 1923 and 1932, would surely have been an ideal outlet to make it known. Yet even here Schwitters refrains from any allusion to it until the last but one Merz magazine, *Das Veilchenheft*, appeared in 1931.

**Das Veilchenheft**

It is, then, not until the start of the new decade that Schwitters decided to make the existence of his studio constructions public, in a text that for many art historians serves as the ultimate guide to the Merzbau and the key to the aims of its creator. This passage, however, requires as much caution as other sources. It appears in *Merz 21, Das Veilchenheft*, an anthology of Schwitters’ literary work entitled ‘A Collection of Merz Poems of All Kinds’. At the end of this anthology appears an essay entitled ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ [Myself and My Aims], whereby it is unclear if this is an appendix or yet another Merz poem. Here Schwitters alludes to a single discrete column that he calls the Cathedral of Erotic Misery, although on examination, this text is
Fig. 8. Das Veilchenheft, cover. Kurt Schwitters Archive, Sprengel Museum Hannover.

primarily concerned with quite different topics. Ostensibly it reads as a kind of manifesto in which Schwitters focuses on abstract art, typography and political developments in Germany in the crisis-ridden year of 1930, so that the relevance of the passage on the column to the remainder of the essay is not at all apparent. In this lengthy documentation of Schwitters’ aims and attitudes in 1930, we may also note the extraordinary omission of his own art movement of Merz, used only once as a suffix. In its professed rejection of all dogma, Merz had provided Schwitters with a resilient aesthetic framework that he identified with his own person: as he had written succinctly in the previous issue of his Merz magazine, ‘Now I call myself Merz’. Indeed, the very title of this essay conflicts with his statement that ‘Merz has no programme with predefined aims, on principle’. It might at least be expected that he would introduce his column, whose development, he states, parallels his aesthetic maturation over seven years, as the epitome of the structural equilibrium and dynamic adaptivity of Merz. Instead, the KdeE is presented, not in terms of the Merzgesamtkunstwerk that Schwitters had once declared his goal, but, albeit ambivalently, as an incongruous combination of Dada, Cubism and the Gothic.

In many art-historical accounts of the Merzbau, this passage is not only discussed entirely out of context, but also very selectively. Some elements such as Persil advertisements, the insignia of the city of Karlsruhe and the piece of lignite have seldom been subjected to analysis, while it is not uncommon for the bottle of urine, the Great Grotto of Love and the sex-
murder cavern to be taken as representative of the supposedly macabre and repulsive aspects of the whole. Schwitters’ disclaimer is likewise often ignored; having listed part of the column’s content, which he attributes to the year 1923, he then expressly distances himself from it on the grounds that it is outmoded and ‘literary’. Within its overall context, then, the passage on the KdeE turns out to be more resistant to interpretation than is generally assumed.

Fig. 9. The Blue Window in the Merzbau as photographed in 1933, showing the table for the guest book below right and above it, a section of the Cathedral of Erotic Misery. Kurt Schwitters Archive, Sprengel Museum Hannover.

It may be surprising to find that although this description of the Cathedral of Erotic Misery has been the subject of much art-historical theorizing, we have no evidence to show what it looked like in 1930. In 1983, Harald Szeemann commissioned a reconstruction of the Hannover Merzbau, now in the Sprengel Museum Hannover, on the basis of photos taken in early 1933, and this at last has given us some idea of the appearance of the Cathedral of Erotic Misery at that time, but even today, it remains the least photographed section of the Merzbau.
The passage on the column in ‘Ich und meine Ziele’ was not Schwitters’ last word on his studio constructions, but when, in 1933, he published a further text on them, he seems to be talking about a quite different work. This is a more sober piece, with no mention either of grottos or a column or a Cathedral of Erotic Misery.

The Merzbau is the construction of an interior from sculptural forms and colours. In the glazed grottos are Merz compositions arranged as a cubic volume and which blend with the white cubic forms to form an interior. Each part of the interior serves as an intermediary element to its neighbouring part [...] sometimes I have taken a form from nature, but more often I have constructed the form as the function of different lines, parallel or crossing. In this way I have discovered the most important of my forms; the half-spiral.

This text, taken in conjunction with the evidence of contemporary photographs and letters, indicates that it was not until 1931/32 that Schwitters transformed the constructions in his studio into a unified structure that absorbed the original columns almost entirely into what we might now call a sculptural environment. In 1933, Schwitters removed his studio to the adjoining room and gave this work the name Merzbau. While his studio had never been a private place – he issued printed invitations, colleagues were invited to contribute grottos to the columns and there were two guest books to record visitors’ reactions - it nonetheless seems that during the early 1930s, his sculptural interior enters an entirely different, more public phase. Schwitters has the room photographed by a professional, adds an art exhibition and employs three or four workmen to help him. He builds a library in a corner, uses the Merzbau as a theatre, publishes an article on it in a French journal and invites gallery owners, dealers, patrons, and anyone else potentially interested in giving this unsaleable work some publicity, with all the difficulties this involved after 1933. It is a remarkable anomaly of Merzbau reception that most commentaries concentrate on the period when Schwitters did not mention it at all, and most disregard the decade when it took shape as a coherent work and he began to publicize it in earnest. Ironically, Schwitters fled Germany at the point when the Merzbau reached the height of its fame – that is, when photos of the work were exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
Merzbau legends

Despite the researches of Schmalenbach, Elger and Elderfield, Merzbau legends continue to be disseminated and even embellished, both in general and in specialized publications. Two of the most resilient are Richter’s long-disproved story of the Deckendurchbruch, which still features in numerous commentaries, and the location of the Merzbau in Schwitters’ living quarters. These legends often appear in tandem, as in the assertion that Schwitters ‘built within his home the Merzbau [...] a Constructivist assemblage of discarded junk that eventually pierced the ceiling’, or are further embroidered, as in the following passage from a book on Installation Art:

Growing from an earlier assemblage, Cathedral of Erotic Misery, which Schwitters constructed in his living room, Merzbau was literally a living installation, occupied as it was by Schwitters, his wife and his children [sic], who must have devised inventive ways to become one with assemblage. Merzbau’s walls were carved into and then plastered over, doorjams were extended, and runways for a guinea pig were constructed under ceiling planes that had been lowered at jarring cubist angles. Cubist collage and Expressionism cohabited somewhat precariously in Schwitters’ domestic experiment. Thwarted by lack of space, at one point he moved the upstairs tenants out, cut the ceiling free and extended the Merzbau through the floor above.

It is in the anecdotes and legends surrounding the grottos that it becomes most difficult to separate fact from fiction. Many accounts of the Merzbau emphasize their fetishist and sadistic nature, and in recent times their content, or rather the little that is known of it, has been described in increasingly macabre terms; according to some recent interpretations, the Merzbau apparently contained little else than flasks of urine, hair, fingernails and miscellaneous body parts. Needless to say, such statements are based on a highly selective use of source materials that in themselves are open to dispute. As just one example of excessive authorial licence, I’d like to quote an article from a fine art journal that portrays the Merzbau as a monstrous collection of material amassed by a Frankenstein-like Schwitters:

furtively collected and avidly displayed [...] the violent and obscene images of the Merzbau looked like the exposed viscera of the mind in a Freudian textbook. Schwitters …was an incremental mystic [...] his nocturnal wanderings enabled him to feed the Merzbau more titbits [...] it grew as Schwitters’ coprophagous imagination fed it more blood [...] Schwitters must have relished the similarity of Merz to the French ‘merde’.
Here I’d like to return to Kate Steinitz’s memoirs and her mention of ‘secret grottoes’. Given the ambivalent nature of her account, their existence is at least open to question, but they nonetheless appear in countless analyses of the Merzbau, and it is above all around these supposedly hidden grottos (which presumably were not identical with those publicized by Schwitters in ‘Ich und meine Ziele’) that many improbable legends have accumulated. How concealed they were remains matter of debate. Often they are described as having been seen only by a few of Schwitters’ friends, if at all, though the supposition that they were kept secret rarely acts as a deterrent to a detailed examination of their content.

At this point it is worth remembering Hannah Höch’s completely different version of the secret grottos:

You could regard it as a special honour when Kurt Schwitters allowed a guest to design a cave in his Merz column. Then he would put the whole of his material at your disposal. Built-in secret depots opened up and he let the material flood out all over the place to allow you as much freedom as possible in your choice.

Höch, then, writes that the secret caves that she (in contrast to Steinitz) actually saw, were no more than storage space for the rubbish Schwitters collected at every available opportunity, his ‘Merz material’. As all her
reminiscences accentuate personal friendships, her omission of the ‘souvenir’ caves as described by Richter and Steinitz seems remarkable. What Höch does emphasize is the idea of Schwitters’ constructions as a socio-political and above all collaborative work, to which she and other colleagues were allowed to contribute. Höch’s descriptions have, however, been ignored in Merzbau reception to date, possibly because her memoirs have not been translated into English and did not appear in book form, and it is not her prosaic hoards of hidden, as yet unsorted rubbish, but Steinitz’s erotic grottos that have become a widespread feature of the Merzbau reception, generally in conjunction with their presumed ‘perverted’ content.

A different kind of legend appeared in the 1960s when the focus shifted to the extempore aspects of Schwitters’ working method. The Merzbau was described as a spontaneous work in metaphors that ranged far beyond both the pre-war avant garde’s use of chance to undermine aesthetic traditions. Richter wrote that the column ‘burst the room apart at the seams’, and Arp described constructions ‘forcing their way upwards through [...] abysses and fissures’. Even the artist’s son Ernst, whose vantage point was generally more dispassionate, alludes to ‘free-standing works that suddenly “grew” together’. Werner Haftmann claimed that ‘the intention [of the Merzbau] was for things to create a space of their own’, Schmalenbach that its upper part ‘formed itself in varying heights’; William Rubin that ‘anti-art materials left the surfaces of [Schwitters’] collages and began to form the components of the Merzbau [...] freestanding objects [...] began to merge with the furniture’, Rosemarie Haag-Bletter cited the anecdote of the evicted tenants to embellish her dramatic portrayal of the Merzbau’s development in terms of a ‘cancerous growth’ with ‘twisted tentacles’, while Patricia Falguières described the Merzbau as a monstrous parasite that penetrated ceilings and eventually filled the whole of Schwitters’ house. Such renderings generally sidestep the physical evolution of the Merzbauten; in effect, potential debate about levels of meaning is circumvented by shifting the focus to the supposed autonomy of the material and its control of the artist.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to Schwitters’ statement in the *Veilchenheft* that the KdeE was ‘unfinished on principle’, a frequently quoted catch phrase of Merzbau reception. On principle, Schwitters’ constructions could indeed be extended indefinitely, but in practice, this was not an essential criterion either of his columns or sculptural interiors. The correspondence of Schwitters and his wife around 1932/33 often refers to the ‘completion’ of the Merzbau, and Schwitters’ detailed listing of the material, time and expenditure necessary for an American version, drawn up in 1936, suggest that a Merzbau could indeed be finished. The importance that Schwitters attached to this idea becomes even more apparent in his period of exile, when he was gripped by ambitions for at least one of his environments to pass down to posterity, making every effort to ensure their completion in some form, even if, as in the case of Hannover, it meant rebuilding the work from its ruins. The idea of a construction that is ‘unfinished on principle’ must therefore be qualified by Schwitters’ later insistence on the desirability of completing at least one. That all remained unfinished must be attributed to political and personal circumstance rather than principle.

I’d also like to note that Schwitters’ remaining Merzbauten have likewise not remained untouched by legends and misapprehensions. The most unshakable of these is that the end wall of the Merz barn in Elterwater was the only extant section when Schwitters died, a theory that John Elderfield conclusively disproved as early as 1969.

**Problems presented by translations**

Some of the common misconceptions and uncertainties about the appearance and location of the Hannover Merzbau may be traced to inaccuracies and rephrasing in English renderings of German texts. These inevitably augment the difficulties of reconstructing the Merzbau’s evolution and of assessing Schwitters’ attitude towards the work. Again, there is only time to give a few examples here.

Schmalenbach’s analysis of the Merzbau contains numerous errors in the English version: for example the German *Parterre* [ground floor] is translated
as ‘above ground floor’, *klare Farben* [bright colours] as ‘pastel colours’ and *Boden* [attic] as ‘ground floor’. Schmalenbach’s original *ein weltoffener Eremit in seinem weltfernen Gehäuse* [a cosmopolitan hermit in his unworldly cell] is translated as ‘a refuge [sic] from the world in his own drawing-room’ and his ‘*so sehr die einzige Raison d’être des Merzbau, dass der Mensch in ihm keinen Platz mehr fand, und Raum um Raum aus ihm verdrängt wurde* [this was so much the raison d’être of the Merzbau that people had no place in it any longer and were driven out of it room by room] becomes ‘the man who made it was driven out of it’.

The English translations of Steinitz and Richter also deviate in part from the German originals. It is, for example, instructive to compare the original version of Steinitz’s memoir of Schwitters (1963) with the English rendering, published five years later, not only because the latter contains translational errors but also because of changed phraseology and textual additions. Steinitz’s quotation of Schwitters’ statement that ‘*zum Schluss wird die Säule mit noch zehn anderen Säulen als riesige Form im Raum stehen*’ is translated as ‘finally the column will stand with ten other columns as gigantic forms in space’, although the German *Form* is clearly singular. The account of the caves is augmented by a melodramatic sentence lacking in the German: ‘In each cave was a sediment of impressions and emotions, with significant literary and symbolistic allusions.’ In 1961 Steinitz had written that ‘the Column was a repository of Schwitters’ own problems, a cathedral built not only around his erotic misery but around all the joy and misery of his time’. In her memoirs, the social component implicit in this last phrase is omitted, so that the Merzbau is portrayed primarily as a personal drama and projection of Schwitters’ inner strivings. Richter’s indistinct but impressive picture of the Merzbau also differs in part in the English translation. The latter doubles the amount of space the column occupied on his first visit, for example; the German original states that it filled about a quarter of the room, the English version about half the room.

My final example comes from a publication on the Merzbau in which the author’s interpretation of Schwitters’ terminology occasionally leaves room for doubt. Here, for instance, the analysis of the 1935 *Erinnerung an Molde*
grotto is dependent on a misreading of its name, which according to the author refers not only to the Norwegian town but also to mould, referred to here as a symbol of life, love, death, decay and rebirth and a reminder of the ‘exceedingly visceral’ material in Schwitters’ 1920 studio. Till now I have not found any German dictionary which lists the word ‘Mold’.

The task of checking translated material is clearly an arduous one and in many cases unnecessary. Nonetheless, if a theory about the Merzbau is to be based on a translated sentence or phrase, it is, as I hope I have shown, advisable to examine the original text beforehand.

**Conclusion**

As a result of the paucity of original documents and photos, eyewitness reports, important as they are to any analysis, created from the first a plethora of misconceptions about the Hannover Merzbau. Many anecdotes and legends attached to the Merzbau, whether in original or modified form, seem inconsequential in themselves, but taken together, they are of considerable significance. Their cumulative effect has resulted in a mounting fund of speculative material that bears little relation to what is known of the Merzbau (and its creator) and that has made art-historical analysis of it
increasingly difficult. To start from one or more of the premises (despite all the verifiable information to the contrary) that this was a largely surreptitious and/or obscene artwork created by a half-crazed artist in his private living quarters results in a picture of a work proliferating largely in its own hermetic environment. This approach admits of few functional, transformative or evolutionary processes and leads to a portrayal of the Merzbau as a non-developmental, non-interactive construction. This in turn largely obviates the need for chronological accuracy about the various stages of its development. Thus the mountain of commentary that has accrued since Schwitters’ death, while undoubtedly important in preserving and evaluating the Merzbauten for posterity, has sometimes resulted less in explanation and clarification than in the dissemination and fabrication of considerable misunderstandings about these works.

Roger Cardinal was the first to undertake a comparative study of the reception of the Hannover Merzbau. As one of the few commentators to highlight the inconsistency of the sources, he also suggests that the Merzbau has become its own reception, contrasting its actual fate with the robust
myths that proliferate ‘as a disparate amalgam of recollection, hearsay and conjecture’. In contrast, Cornelia Osswald-Hoffmann is highly critical of writings on the Merzbau, arguing that most are dominated by speculative discussions about the grottos. She dismisses analyses that rely too heavily on eyewitness reports that she refers to as ‘demonstrably pure invention’ and maintains that because the Merzbau no longer exists, this has resulted in an accumulation of readings that constitute mere re-interpretations of interpretations, so that writing on the work has become an independent activity with a dynamic of its own, creating a new discourse that has little bearing on the original.

In theory at least, there has been no justification for the perpetuation of a Merzbau mythology since the publication of the three-volume Kurt Schwitters Catalogue Raisonné, which provides a mine of information about all the Merzbauten, with numerous photos, original documents, plans, chronologies and commentaries. Nonetheless, we may have to accept that Merzbau legends will continue to flourish, and I’d therefore like to conclude by quoting Ernst Nündel, who took an indulgent view of Merzbau mythology, regarding it as integral to the nature of Merz and even in accordance with the artist’s intentions.

The Merzbau, destroyed in 1943, continues growing, in the memory of those who saw it [...] in the speculations of art historians. To each his/her own (concept of the) Merzbau. In this state it approaches the idea of Merz, the idea of continuous recasting, of an artistic process without bounds, without beginning and without end.