

SCHWITTERS IN THE GARDEN

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“Mies van der Rohe tells that once Schwitters was on a train, carrying great roots from trees with him. Someone asked him what the roots were and he replied that they constituted a cathedral. “But that is no cathedral, that is only wood!” the stranger exclaimed. “But don’t you know that cathedrals are made out of wood?” Schwitters replied.”¹

¹ Robert Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets-an Anthology*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Press, 1981, p.xxvii.

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The Portuguese artist Tiago Madaleno asked me to write this essay on the subject of his most recent site-specific project, which stems from the topic of gardens as related to some idiosyncratic details of the life of the artist Kurt Schwitters. In particular, the garden at Cylinders Farm belonging to landscape designer Harry Pierce whom Kurt Schwitters befriended during the last years of his life, and where Schwitters transformed a shed into his last project, the *Merzbarn*.

Madaleno’s exhibition titled *A Garden at Night* [*Um Jardim à Noite*], playfully develops its visual and audio core in an immersive atmosphere of light and dark. The exhibition has four spatial moments: *Wild Flowers, Still, the eye gazed and gazed...*, *Red Shoes* and *Silhouette of a Stranger* deriving from the Schwitters/Pierce’s nexus.

ABOUT MADALENO

A quick flashback: I first saw Madaleno’s artwork while he was an artist in residence at Air351, in the Lisbon area. During the open house, as the public visited the studios, Madaleno explained the context of his artistic research talking about Descartes’ odd experience. While in Bavaria, Descartes enclosed himself inside an oven so that he could, in his own words, “think better and more profoundly”. Bizarre as it may seem, at the impressionable age of 23, the dreams that he had inside the oven were groundbreaking for his philosophical and scientific quest.

In this informal environment, my attention was caught by Madaleno's ability to pick up this biographical moment of the French philosopher and turn it into the leitmotiv for the creative development of the artwork on the walls.

Madaleno does a thorough research on his subjects, gathering and organizing copious amounts of documentation. These documents are then put in an active dialogue that catalyzes a creative chain reaction. This process is not guided by a straightforward causality in which images and visual projects erupt, full blown, from the core of awkward situations, from an osmotic equalization of ideas and historical facts into artistic substances. As Madaleno's process condenses the material, the product is not the sum of all these factors but something else altogether.

Though conventional wisdom tries to impose inspiration, epiphany, spontaneity, improvisation or random chance as necessary steps for the creative act, in the case of Madaleno, maturation-time is of the essence. Post-conceptual artists know that enduring relevance and a hermeneutic future, come less from the lightning effect of the singular creator and more from the roaring thunder of dialogical interaction. This resilience is less dependent on the commanding mesmerism voiced by the creator, rather it is crystalized by the semantics that free the artwork from its finitude.

ABOUT GARDENS AND 3-D COLLAGE

But enough about the plot that precedes the plow. Something about gardens and three-dimensional collage will envelop my writing. These two subjects are filled with metabolic vectors, suspended between uncertainty, care for the fruits of life [both the aesthetical, the eatable and the hermetic] and all the burdens of want and duty.

In the garden, the visible, audible, felt, smelled world, the organic earthly flow where life comes after death and after life again and again, meets logos and empiricism, anticipation, observation and reflection. Gar-

dens lie in a moral, disciplined space struggling at the edge of chaos. They are surfaces flowing in time, between the shade of perished forces and the light of new beginnings, vulnerable beginnings. The celestial gardens of immortal beauty – the Cedar Forest in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Elyseum, the Garden of Eden – or of the ephemeral, secular gardens always in need of tending, imply a cycle of time, alienated by space, alienated by time. Space-time are spent in contemplation and loss, punctuated by green mazes, anthologies of trees, flowers and plants, architecture and order, expectation and fear for the unborn.

Schwitters' *Merzbau* is something of a journey in this realm of care and metamorphosis. The *Merzbau* was compared, in its quest for an organic memory that becomes space, with his friend's, Berlin Dadaist Hannah Hoch, famous collection of cacti. In both enterprises, the aesthetics of banality meets the poetic desire to dismantle law and order, even if with tenderness and care. The Hannover *Merzbau* was a domestic inner space; a bourgeois dwelling that became in part a modernist grotto, and a *wunderkammer*² under the pressure of technoscience's *sturm und drang*³. The utopia of totalizing the human experience and a passion for the fragment, for the micro-object, form the ideological agency of this built environment.

Brian O'Doherty posits this structure as a novelty, "maybe the first

² *Wunderkammer* is the German word for "Wonders Cabinet" or "Cabinet of Curiosities". *Wunderkammer* is a repository, a collection and sometimes an irrational stacking of multidisciplinary manmade products, heteroclitite objects, mineral matter and organic subjects. A space where the abnormal and the conventional live together in a constructed sometimes spectacular, many times harmonic and nonsensical display.

³ *Sturm und drang* is the German expression for "Storm and Drive", which stems from the aesthetics of proto-romanticism. "Storm and Drive" is the thundering explosion of nature mixed up with the impulsiveness of the self, suggesting an ideological countering between sensibility and logos, it is the anti-humanism of emotion and free will reacting against the excessive force of rationalism. In today's context this may seem like a contradiction, since technoscience is the modern product of both rationalism, and empiricism but, please bear with me: this oxymoron derives from the irrational outcome of World War I, when the cream of Western scientific intelligentsia was deeply implicated in the development of chemical warfare, killing machines and all technological paraphernalia related to the destruction of life. This also speaks of the financial demise of a powerful industrial nation such as Germany

example of a gallery as a chamber of transformation⁴. I would add that a dialectical entanglement develops here between the ritualization of accumulation [Schwitters playing King Midas with lost, obsolete objects or pure detritus and creating liminal moments] and the holding up of the spectator's optical and haptic attention [Helma Schwitters would tell Hannah Hoch how she could stay for hours inside the *Merzbau* and always find something new or have a new experience]. Schwitters' work is a repository of myth, order and chaos, ruin and building, amnesia and memory, fragment and totality.

The *Merzbau* is a precursor of the site-specific, but also an ancestor of the immersive atmosphere of participatory aesthetics. Though not prescient, we sense a breakthrough here. The *Merzbau* is not just a sculpture, it is unrelated to house decoration, neither is it a pure architectural structure. It can probably be best defined as an egomorphic space: the poetics of found objects, personal and collective memories, and sensory hybridism – on the cusp of intensification and deprivation – turned this structure into a vivid spatial experience.

BIOGRAPHY AND ARTMAKING

Intro

The historical construction of heroic modernism – cubism, suprematism, dada, constructivism, neoplasticism – relies on the serious and less tragic aspects of human creativity. Art learning and socialization contexts, art related facts [exhibitions, publications, etc.], time-lines, specific and seminal works of art, the trail of inventiveness, the enhancement of the empirical aspects

where science and technology remained the lifeboats for any idea of future thought. That same science was keen on racializing society, profiling and separating the healthy from the sick, and promoting eugenics. In a certain way, Schwitters' gothic grotto reflects this tragic contradiction in which science lives embedded in the myth of a better, enhanced, humanity, knowing that Frankenstein is around the corner.

⁴ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Expanded Edition, Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, (1976), 1999, p.45, see also pp.46-47.

of art making and of the genealogy of art forms, all provide density and substance to an artist's practice.

Within this framework, artistic persona, with no past of handicaps, traumas, father and mother issues, eclipses the biographical personality, often corrupted by incompleteness and pathos, lost friendships and failed opportunities. The main consequence of this separation is the downsizing of the *bildungsroman*⁵ process. Hegemonic narratives tend to ignore how the growing pains of the human subject who identifies as an artist are deeply embedded in the interaction – negative or positive – with other human beings who either claim the same condition or belong to other social and professional realms. This perspective also fails to give a proper insight on the antediluvian part of the artist's biography: his/her childhood, the period when everything he or she did was not haunted by the promise of being art, unlike contemporary art theory, which treats both realities as unified and in which the psychological aspects of creativity have a significant output. Under the lens of contemporary art theory, Louise Bourgeois or Mike Kelley are seen as precariously human super artists questing for redemption and release.

Childhood might not be significant nor decisive enough in many biographies, but the opposite can also be true. There was in Mondrian's childhood an incident that gives context to Michael Seuphor's assessment of the painter's dislike of trees and flowers, though he painted, as Schwitters did, many to survive, and of the green color which is

⁵ This German word refers to a device in literature known as the "coming of age" novel. The *bildungsroman* is a fictionalized biography, usually the story of a young European from the upper classes living a series of defining experiences. These novels are anchored in a process of social and mental transformation undergone by the protagonist navigating the ups and downs of life, falling prey to his own overconfidence and facing existential and philosophical questions. The *bildungsroman* is both an exercise on the fiction of the individual, how he reacts and gives way to external factors, as it is an organic conceptualization of what makes life meaningful. In this particular case it refers to the progress and maturity of the creative individual and how the subjective self needs the wisdom and lessons from other artists to overcome his own limitations.

⁶ Michel de Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian, Life and Work*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1956, p.160. Mondrian did no effort to visit the green surroundings of Paris and New York and Seuphor tells that when visiting Albert Gleizes's home for lunch Mondrian had to be seated opposite to the windows displaying the Bois de Boulogne because of his intolerance to the natural world.

absent from his gridded abstractions. On his Mondrian biography, Seuphor recollects that in his Paris studio there was not a single evidence of green, even the fake tulip at the entrance had its leaves painted white⁶. Malevich strolling in his childhood in the sugar beet fields of tsarist Ucrania with his father, a sugar merchant, might have had a symbolic impact on his future post-surrealist paintings of peasants standing, unaware of themselves, in an abstract landscape. Or maybe Tatlin's father being a mechanical engineer was an influential factor on his interest with industrial structures.

⁷ A wordplay with a Shakespeare's sentence: "And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. / There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio. / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy". In W. Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act I, scene 5, Edited by George Lyman Kittredge, Indianapolis: Focus Publishing, 2008, p.38.

About Schwitters

I thought I knew enough about Schwitters' biography, his art practice and everything in between his art and his life. Yet Schwitters is as unfinished and endless as the glowing darkness of the night sky. He is like a dead star, still blitzing the distracted eyes with images of the past. Truth be said, he is just like every creature of modern society: a multitude of accounts, hearsay and documented facts blurring, dissolving the visible spectrum of an official picture. New implications and discoveries, from the realm of fact or from the labyrinthic space of fiction, will continue to surface.

Childhood and fatherhood

Madaleno's research showed me that there is still "more in nature than in [my] philosophy"⁷. I failed to consider that Schwitters had been a child before becoming an adult, like every human subject. I learned that, as a little boy, Schwitters liked plants and had his plot to garden, which he probably enjoyed tending, rain or shine. I also

learned that his efforts were cursed by neighborhood bullies. The garden was destroyed – probably the very first incident on the list of his many doomed projects. This loss brought him an immense distress and pain; he learned that human experience can be sweet, sour and intolerable. Good or evil, fertile or sterile, tamed or wild, life has many difficult tastes and tasks. This experience aggravated his epilepsy, causing a seizure that kept him in bed for two years, affecting him throughout his life.

Schwitters was a dad, a good one. Ernst Schwitters, his surviving son, accompanied him during his predicaments throughout Norway and the U.K. and was his confident, protector of his work, and first-hand admirer. I also learned that Schwitters had experienced the tragic suffering of the loss of a child. The first *Merzsaulen* [collage column] had a totemic, spiritual input radicalized by his child's death mask, strangely confused, in some accounts, as a doll head. The columns were filled with memories, gestures, materials of petty-bourgeois routines, family and social traumas, souvenirs of enduring friendships. The "as found" paraphernalia was likened to a symbolic tree but also to the "arche" of tectonic structures.

Schwitters in the artistic community

Schwitters' adult hyperactivity or overacting with in the avantgarde community could be seen as a compensation for those dull days, recovering lost time. His adulthood seems to have fallen between "two excessive forms", the lone narcissistic rider that sets his own rules and plays his own game, and the gregarious, assimilative individual that accepts to be an unit on a structure of power and command, in the group, the collective, the movement; and also performs according to the group expectations.

"Two excessive forms..." Here I am quoting Barthes on the concept of idiorhythmic practices. Let me ex-

⁸ Roland Barthes, "Comment Vivre ensemble. Cours et séminaires au Collège de France" [1976-77]. Paris : *Traces écrites*. Seuil Imec, 2002. p.33-34 e 36-39

plain: in his Collège de France lecture, *Comment Vivre ensemble* [How to live together, 1977] Roland Barthes⁸ elaborates on the epistemological genealogy of the concept of rhythm, “the pattern of a fluid form” but particularly Barthes is interested in the less petrified concept of idiorrhythmy. He describes it as an unregulated, power free, form of life where the community, the collective gathering, doesn’t deny nor imposes its rhythms on the individuals but, instead, harmonizes both spheres. Barthes’ examples are scarce mostly historical accounts such as Mount Athos monk’s lifestyle and an early extremist Hebrew sect that had relocated into the desert. Free will and top down external regulation meet half-way.

Schwitters put something of a clownish, emphatic, one-man show; simultaneously looking for an audience and turning that heteroclitic audience into a community. Inventor of the *Merz* pun, he could be taken for the nursing force within 1920’s German avantgarde, a caretaker trying to save and preserve art through glue and scissors⁹. But still Richard Huelsenbeck, the father of the Berlin Dada group, declined Schwitters’ allegiance calling him the Caspar Friederich of Dada¹⁰. Others labelled him the Florence Nightingale¹¹ of Dada for his lack of any iconoclastic enthusiasm with the destruction of art and society.

Schwitters’ Work in the context of exodus and survival

Schwitters’ realist/abstract compositions vaguely neighboring some of the lessons of neoplasticism and particularly Theo van Doesburg’s [his Dada Dutch friend] De

⁹ Eberhard Roters, *Kurt Schwitters et les années vingt à Hannover*. In Pontus Hultén [Ed.], Paris-Berlin, 1900-1933, Paris: CNA-M-Centre Georges Pompidou, 1978, p.158.

¹⁰ Jean Christophe Bailly, *Kurt Schwitters*, Paris: Éditions Hazan, 1993, p.35.

¹¹ Eberhard Roters, Op. Cit., p.158.

¹² Werner Heine and Annette Haxton, *‘Futura’ without a Future: Kurt Schwitters’ Typography for Hannover Town Council, 1929-1934*, *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 7, No. 2 [1994], pp. 127-140.

Stijl variant or the Diagonal Elementarism, provided a visual environment and imagery that detached the *collage/papier collé* cubist experience from being just a subsidiary of pictorial action. His compositions show a self-ruling development of non-mimetic collage – abstraction is here created by urban entropy.

He was also the keeper of modern graphic design, introducing the Futura type to his town council stationery bureaucracy¹². He was an art believer with nursing concerns. For him Art was not a divider of communities but a space of reconciliation and agreement, an utopian almost religious commitment with monomania: as his son would later point out¹³.

As every other member of the German avant-garde, the Hannover *Ur-poet* had to wake up abruptly from the urban Weimar belief that modernism would rule the future. In a blink of an eye and with all the contingencies of a lack of means, plenty of ideas and an excess will power, paradise was lost. The morbid forces of anti-Semitic hate, Prussian revanchism and anti-bolshevism refashioned the country of Kant, Hegel, Goethe, Schiller into the slaughterhouse of the millenarian fascism. Schwitters’ falling out took some time, as it did for his friends Mies van der Rohe and Moholy-Nagy. He left Nazi Germany in 1937, first to Norway, where he used to spend his family holidays and started a second *Merzbau* experience; and henceforth, due to the Nazi invasion of the Scandinavian nation, he became a refugee in Britain.

¹³ C.f. Ernst Schwitters letter to Robert Motherwell. In Robert Motherwell [Ed.], “The Dada Painters and Poets-An Anthology”, Boston, Mass. 2nd edition. The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1981, p.xxix.

¹⁴ “Kurtmerz” is a word invented by Schwitters that works as his “for friends only” signature, a private joke. A new baptism made out of chance and accident. He plays with his first name – a name he did not choose-and the word he gave to his one-man Dada inspired but independent movement *Merz*. This wordplay looks like a clownish yet entrepreneurial nickname but it has other signifying aspects: it enhances his expectations as a self-made artist that overcomes by the drama of creation and the obsession with originality the banality of daily experience and the word *merz* which, as explained by Schwitters, comes from the word *Kommerz* is both the designation of his performative eccentricity within Dada and a new form of using found words to create poetic content.

Between nihilism and hope

Hannah Hoch shared a strong friendship with Schwitters. He used to sign his letters and postcards to her as “Kurtmerz”¹⁴. They had corresponded regularly and collaborated closely in the twenties. She had the exclusive privilege of creating two caves in his *Merzbau*. Both saw themselves as heterodox dasdas, partnering against the anarchist bluff of “death to art!” Dada. Their non-sensical, anti-naturalist creative and visual efforts in the world of modern collage shared the common ground where art is a living entity. Sabotage, counter-language was accepted as a tool, but for the sake of keeping art and culture alive. Scissors and glue were also Hannah’s trade tools. “Few words won’t explain him”, Hannah Hoch would write about Schwitters. And she would also add that they both had an inclination for open air drawing:

“I remember working several times with him in the outdoors. We would draw naturalistic landscapes and it was like a pianist practicing his fingers before playing”.

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Experiencing and depicting nature was not itself an artistic act, just like cutting, planting, watering, caring and cleaning is not itself the garden. However, this process generates the momentum that forces the garden to leap out of the idea of the garden. This analogy seems plausible and places Schwitters in the path where creation is much more than the birth of something but the affliction of keeping that something alive and well.

In 1946 Schwitters sent his last letter to Hannah, giving her an account of the nine years since he had left Germany, a turmoil of difficulties and adventures. He describes among other events his fantastic escape from Norway “through mountains, the coastline, islands, dodging the Nazis between water and snow” and he ends his letter describing how he was living in England, in the Lake District, among lakes and mountains. Because his companion

Wantee did not speak German, German was ceasing to be his first language.

In this letter, Schwitters’ forced wandering and final encampment feels like a slow change of pastures: the weeds are taking over old ruined memories, cacophony and traumatic demise win their place, his opus magnum, the Hannover *Merzbau* is gone. Pictures will fade away and names will be forgotten. But happiness can be found in a scream, intimacy building up as a vociferous thunder, a boiling, smoky, shapeless, sound breaker, ridiculous scream, a final word of release and oblivion:

“you can scream with garbage”
wrote Kurt Schwitters¹⁵, and you can start all over again¹⁶. •

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¹⁵ Kurt Schwitters, “Ich und Meine Ziele”, 1931. In Dorothea Dietrich, *The collages of Kurt Schwitters-Tradition and Innovation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Cambridge University Press.1993. p.206.

¹⁶ Letter to Katherine Dreier, 1937. In Jean Christophe Bailly, *Op.Cit.*, p.35.