

*The Summer Teepee and the Little Rag Pickers*

Over several summers, the following ritual of garden colonization is held at a north Italian lake in the midst of a bourgeois milieu: my siblings and I extract a piece of soft, elastic, midnight-blue jersey fabric—a useless rag long since forgotten—from a storage bench, releasing a cloud that smells of mold and dust, in order to set up a tepee on the lawn in front of the parents' house. As we children go about our work full of blind zeal and concentrated silence, we can already see ourselves sitting in the finished tepee, protected by its soft cotton walls, immersed in its aquamarine shade. But despite our initial vigor, the architectural project never comes to fruition—sometimes an opportunity comes up for an excursion that suddenly seems more attractive, sometimes the construction plan turns out to be more difficult to realize than we'd initially assumed. What always remains is a jumble of strings, clothespins and twigs. The jersey fabric can be seen for a while as a flag hanging flaccid, until it's stowed away in the chest again, forced back into the world of dead things.

The gesture of finding and rediscovering an old piece of fabric that marks the beginning of this childhood memory lets us children slip into the role of rag pickers who relish in rummaging through forgotten things. Rag picking describes a form of work that entails curiosity about forgotten details and fragmentary traces, instead of methodical precision and analytical sharpness. Famous rag pickers can be found in the literature of classical modernism: Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer carved out the rag picker as both a concrete historical figure and an aesthetic-historical model of thought.<sup>1</sup> While Baudelaire created an analogy between the rag picker and the poet, Walter Benjamin saw in the cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer the ideal archetype of the rag picker. In his 1930 review of Kracauer's novel *Die Angestellten*, Benjamin writes:

...what we will see is a rag picker, at daybreak, picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart, not without letting one or another of those faded cotton remnants—'humanity,' 'inwardness,' or 'absorption'—flutter derisively in the wind...<sup>2</sup>

To use Benjamin's words, Kracauer comes across like a lonely rag picker at daybreak: here rag picking refers to a way of working with language, while the rag picker himself who reluctantly collects linguistic garbage represents a subject position that cynically mocks the idealized subject of humanism. The practice of collecting takes place on the threshold between night and day: today's meaningless leftovers are only dead matter at first, but they already point to the possibility of being "illuminated" in a future reevaluation.

## *Monuments of Inner Male Complexity*

A rag picker becomes what they are by working their way through a collection. In short: there is no rag picker without a collection. This statement may sound simple enough, but it raises a question that's less easy to answer: what does the rag picker's collection look like? One imagines the result of true rag picking as something like a cheerful, non-hierarchical ensemble of things that exist next to each other according to a horizontal principle.

In aesthetic modernism, the idea of such an exuberantly anarchic collection of seemingly worthless objects was paradigmatically realized in Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* work. The first *Merzbau* was built from 1923 onwards in Schwitters' middle-class apartment on the second floor of his parents' house at Waldhausenstrasse 5A in Hanover (the process would come to an abrupt end in 1937 with Schwitters' emigration from Nazi Germany to Norway). As a room-filling installation, the *Merzbau* first devoured Schwitters' studio, then other rooms in the apartment. The transformation of the studio into the *Merzbau* corresponds to the step-by-step transformation of the study into a complex, constantly growing spatial structure that includes several mirrors as well as garbage and found objects picked up from the street, and the resulting columns, grottos, and caves are intended as places of remembrance for the artist's friends.<sup>3</sup> Derided by Schwitters' critics as merely an "accumulation of dirt and scribbles"<sup>4</sup> and praised by its admirers as "the only truly Expressionist building ever executed,"<sup>5</sup> the *Merzbau* forms a hybrid, intermedia assemblage intended to simultaneously blur the boundary between life and work within an idyllic private Biedermeier interior, while also protecting it from an increasingly dangerous outside.<sup>6</sup>

The process of making the *Merzbau*, which intervenes in the private sphere and incorporates personal memories as well as remnants of everyday life, has repeatedly given rise to psychologizing interpretations that see Schwitters' work as an "image of his own soul"<sup>7</sup> or as a "paradigm of interior complexity."<sup>8</sup> These readings are not only based on essentialist philosophical concepts such as the "soul" and "interiority," but also uncritically reproduce another trope of classical modernism: the studio as a mythical site of creative processes, isolated from the public sphere and largely determined by introspection and concentration.<sup>9</sup>

Instead of starting from a moment of mimetic imitation, through which a room bursting at the seams with work could be seen as a mirror of the artist's "complex" interior, I would like to set aside normative implications (What is *complex*? What is *simple*?) and instead investigate the mechanisms of exclusion, the gaps and voids associated with the coupling of *Merzbau* and artist typology. One fragmentary memory relayed by the Dadaist Hannah Höch, in which she recalls a train ride with Kurt Schwitters from Berlin to Hanover in 1924, offers a starting point for addressing this complex of questions:

At 5:30 am we leave the house in Friedenau. As always with K. Schw., we marched off like we were in a parade. He had *four or five huge suitcases, preposterously heavy as always*. Then there was also: a heavy, old typewriter; a package of images with *colossal* dimensions, held together by Helma's *old* apron and a thick cable; a backpack; a package of magazines, 'Der Sturm' and others.<sup>10</sup>

The whole travelogue is fascinating in so far as reading it, one slowly gets the impression that the author recounting this adventurous journey through Germany is adhering to a gender-specific division of roles: Hannah Höch does not appear in the scene as an artist, but as a trusted helper, as the seemingly exasperated but actually flattered companion of an artist in a creative frenzy. Though the joy of improvisation and the thirst for adventure are certainly conducive to this journey,

adaptability proves to be an absolutely necessary quality, as it remains unpredictable when and how the travelers will change from one train to the next. Meanwhile, Schwitters unpacks his typewriter and lowers his eyes.

In conclusion, it can be said that Schwitters' self-staging as an artistic rag picker<sup>11</sup> corresponds, at least in this text fragment, with the invisibility of Hannah Höch as an artist who humbly assumes the status of a helping hand. But that's not all: at the end of the text, the name of Helma Schwitters, the artist's wife, is mentioned. At the end, Hannah Höch reminds readers of Helma, her extraordinary patience and loving helpfulness. A picture reluctantly emerges before the reader's eyes: Helma Schwitters, who tacitly observed the *Merzbau's* rampant growth and consumption in their shared apartment, whispering quietly but resolutely: "Time for us to clear things out!"

1 The historical boom in the figure of the rag picker in classical modernism from the 1880s to the 1930s can be understood in the context of a *material turn* in literature and philosophy, i.e. a growing interest in the material world of things in response to a technologically transformed environment, in which industrial mass production and the media had produced an excess of objects. See: Barbara Thums: "Im Zweifel für die Reste. Lumpensammler und andere Archivisten der Moderne," in: *Sprachen des Sammelns. Literatur als Medium und Reflexionsform des Sammelns*, pp. 545-559.

2 Walter Benjamin: "An Outsider Makes His Mark," in: Jennings, Eiland, et al., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1927 – 1930*, Belknap Press: Cambridge, 1999, p. 310.

3 The epistemic trick of capturing *Merzbau* with a single term or image in order to avoid describing all its elements in detail when writing it down is a common topos in *Merzbau* literature.

4 This is how the German art historian Alexander Dörner describes his first impression of the *Merzbau* when visiting Schwitters' apartment. In: Samuel Cauman: *Das lebende Museum. Erfahrungen eines Kunstbistorikers und Museumsdirektors – Alexander Dörner*, Hannover 1960 [1958], p. 44.

5 Rosemarie Haag Bletter: "Kurt Schwitters' unfinished rooms," in: *Progressive Architecture* 58, No. 9, September 1977, pp. 98–99.

6 After the National Socialists banned Schwitters' art as "degenerate," he went into exile in Norway with their son Ernst, while his wife Helma initially stayed behind in Germany.

7 Hans Ulrich Obrist: "The *Merzbau* as a Paradigm of Interior Complexity," in: Hans Ulrich Obrist & Adrian Notz: *Merz World: Processing the Complicated Order*, Zurich 2007, pp. 6–11. According to Obrist, the idea of inner complexity experienced a new heyday in the 1990s with Jonathan Meese and John Bock.

8 Werner Schmalenbach: *Kurt Schwitters*, Cologne 1967, p. 144.

9 For an overview of the historical change in the function and staging of the artist's studio, see: Isabelle Graw's foreword to the "Studio" issue in: *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 49, March 2003, pp. 5–9.

10 Hannah Höch: "Die Revue. Eine der Reisen mit Kurt Schwitters," in: *Dada. Dokumente einer Bewegung*, Düsseldorf 1958. Italics added for emphasis.

11 A *Taz* article from 07.06.2019 already characterizes Kurt Schwitters as an artistic rag picker in its title: <https://taz.de/Der-Kunst-Lumpensammler/!5599834/>