

“Kurt Merz Schwitters from Lysaker, Hjertøya, Ambleside, and Hanover”

It was not without reason that Kurt Schwitters signed several of his letters with the word “Merz” and gave as his address all the four places where he had worked on his so-called “Merzbau”: Hanover in Germany, Lysaker and Hjertøya in Norway, and Elterwater in England.

Kurt Schwitters was Merz. Having discovered the word by accident in the winter of 1918–19, he gradually came to use it as a term to refer to all his work, and not just his works of art. For Schwitters, art and life were one and the same thing—a “Gesamtkunstwerk” in which everything he came in contact with was given an artistic form: life, nature, music, poetry.

The Merz artist Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) is regarded today as one of the most influential and innovative artists in the field of experimental art during the twentieth century. From his roots in Dadaism, he was to make his mark on Surrealism and, later, on artists belonging to groups and movements such as Nouveau Réalisme and Fluxus during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Today, there is a renewed interest in his work, not least among young artists. In spite of his importance during and after his lifetime, there are many sides to Kurt Schwitters’s life and work that are still shrouded in mystery. One of the reasons for this is that the dramatic events of his life led to long periods of loneliness and isolation. The fact that this artist had such close ties to Norway and that large parts of his oeuvre are linked to this country happened somewhat by chance and is still not generally known.

Due to his fascination for the Norwegian landscape and nature, and because of the world situation, Kurt Schwitters lived in Norway for long periods from 1929 until 1940—the last years in exile. His production during these years was prolific, and he built two of his four Merz constructions here. Only a few remains exist of one them in the tumbledown stone cottage on the island of Hjertøya outside Molde in western Norway, while the *Haus am Bakken* (House on the Slope) at Lysaker outside Oslo burned to the ground in 1951. Even though a great many of the other works he produced during these years in Norway can now be found in the Sprengel Museum Hannover in his hometown of Hanover, a large number of his portraits and landscapes are still in Norwegian ownership. It is therefore all the

more surprising that Kurt Schwitters’s art has never been the subject of a separate exhibition in this country.

As the various articles in this publication explain, a series of chance events originally brought Kurt Schwitters to Norway. But the greatest driving force must have been Norwegian nature. It was this that made him return to this country time and again. Instead of traveling to other European cities or later escaping to the USA, where many of his colleagues ended up when conditions became difficult in the years running up to the Second World War, Kurt Schwitters chose the Norwegian mountains and an isolated existence on an island at the mouth of a fjord in western Norway. He became a proficient mountain trekker, often accompanied by his son Ernst, and he traveled extensively, making many acquaintances on his way. When he settled at Lysaker outside Oslo in 1937, he also sought contact with the Norwegian art scene. He participated in a group exhibition of international contemporary art in 1938, but otherwise met with little understanding for his abstract paintings, collages, and experimental art. In contrast, his compatriot Rolf Nesch (1893–1975), who arrived in Norway about the same time—in 1933—and remained there, became a Norwegian citizen in 1946 and came to play an important role in Norwegian art. Schwitters did make a few artist friends, but even such a visionary man and art collector as Rolf Stenersen declined to take action to save his Merz construction *Haus am Bakken* at Lysaker. Schwitters made several applications for Norwegian citizenship, but these were refused. It was only his son, Ernst Schwitters, who was granted Norwegian citizenship—in 1945. On the other hand, Ernst Schwitters became a leading figure in the experimental movement of Norwegian art photography that flourished in Norway after the war.

However, this lack of recognition was nothing new. Earlier on, other leading artists such as Naum Gabo and Claude Monet had stayed in Norway and created major works here, without this having any effect on the Norwegian art scene. The latter was interested in quite different things, and the public did not become aware of these artists until much later. In retrospect, it is obvious that Norwegian art life during the nineteen-twenties and thirties was not yet ready for Dadaism and the experimental,