

Zaha Hadid's final art installation celebrates a revolutionary artist



By [Thomas Page](#), for CNN

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Photos:

Late architect Zaha Hadid's design for the Kurt Schwitters retrospective in Zurich is a curvy interior year and a half before her death.

Story highlights

One of Zaha Hadid's last exhibition designs was for a retrospective of Kurt Schwitters

The German artist was a pioneering member of Dada, which celebrates its 100 years

Like Schwitters, Hadid "did not compromise for outside pressures"

influential in life and in death -- there can be little debate on the matter.

But what about the influences that shaped the late titan of the architecture world?

Kazimir Malevich, the Suprematist painter, is one. She focused her graduation thesis on [Malevich](#), wrote for the [Royal Academy](#) on his impact, and designed an exhibition for the Guggenheim Museum on Russian avant-garde art in [1992](#).



Portrait of Schwitters by El Lissitzky.

Another, perhaps less well known, is German Dada artist and poet Kurt Schwitters.

Schwitters was a man of revolutionary talent who tipped the art world on its head. Niche at the time, his reputation has grown down the years.

Now, in the words of renowned curator Norman Rosenthal, "there

is no artist working today that has not been influenced by Kurt Schwitters."

Schwitters was a pioneering member of the Dada movement, which began life in Zurich, Switzerland in 1916 and spanned art, poetry and performance.

Its purpose was to create a climate in which creativity was unrestricted by establishment values and redefine what was considered 'art'.

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Hadid's quiet appreciation for Schwitters saw her utilize his philosophy and even lobby to save the artist's home from decay.

A century after Dada set the art world alight, she's celebrating Schwitters in one of her final, posthumous projects.

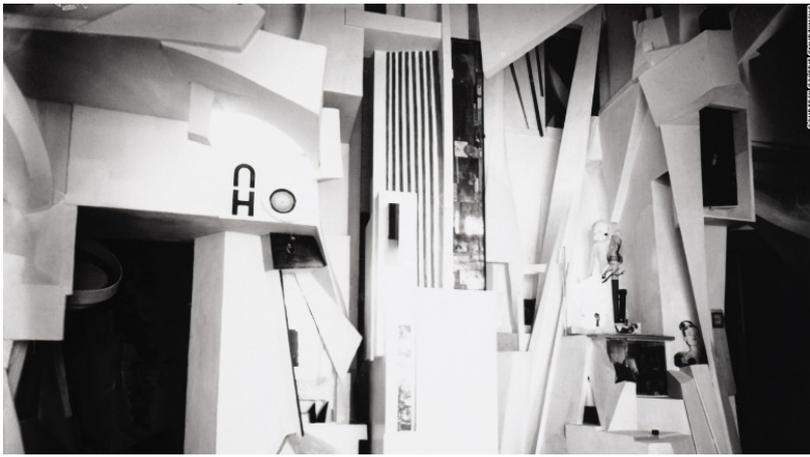
Reimagining the Merzbau

Dada's one hundredth birthday is ironic: a milestone for movement that actively opposed convention.

However Zaha Hadid and the [Galerie Gmurzynska](#) have been preparing for it for years.

The gallery in Zurich sits within a complex which once housed the Galerie Dada, a haven during Dada's formative years. It was the obvious choice to host retrospective "[Kurt Schwitters: Merz](#)", looking back at the gallery's fifty-year relationship with Schwitters and the building's Dada history

To mark the occasion, Pritzker Prize-winner Hadid designed an installation drawing on Schwitters' major work, the Merzbau.



The Merzbau in Hanover, Germany before its destruction in World War II.

The Merzbau, a giant, 3-D composition in Schwitters' house in Hanover, was a continually-shifting installation, a shrine to everyday objects to which the artist added over 16 years.

It was destroyed during World War II, as was a second Merzbau created in Norway -- leaving photographs of the jagged composition as the only evidence of Schwitters' living artwork.

But before Hadid's reimagining of the Merzbau could be realized, tragedy struck in March this year.

"We were very far along with the project -- let's say a year and a half in the making -- when she died," says Mathias Rastofer, CEO of Galerie Gmurzynska.

"At the funeral, in front of her grave, Patrick Schumacher [director and senior designer at Zaha Hadid Architects] and I hugged each other and cried and said 'now we have to finish the project'."

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Interior of the Zaha Hadid-designed installation at the Galerie Gmurzynska.

The exhibition space has been transformed to fulfill Hadid's intentions, featuring a curvy interior full of troughs and hollows that displays 70 of Schwitters' works. It's quintessentially Hadid and a fitting homage to the man who influenced her.

Schumacher describes the space as "our Soft Merzbau," maintaining the principals of Schwitters' work while adopting the curvilinear forms Hadid was known for in the latter half of her career.



He

Hadid-designed Nekon stools.

suggests the project followed a similar trajectory to that of Schwitters -- an attempt to "forge a new super-organism or swarm organism" out of shapes from the architect's previous endeavors: [Dune Formation shelving](#), [Vortexx chandelier](#), [Nekton stools](#), and so on.

The installation is a "complex, unitary spatial construct," he argues, however one is aware that it is made up of disparate parts. That is fitting: a manifestation of a movement is always uneasy with being grouped together -- it holds a "distrust of unity" in the words of [Tristan Tzara](#), one of Dada's first advocates.

Dada at 100

Schwitters' retrospective sits within a wider celebration of Dada's 100 years in Switzerland.

Hauser & Wirth Zurich play host to "[Schwitters Miró Arp](#)" (June 12-September 18), part of [Manifesta 11](#), and Galerie Gmurzynska is also reproducing Hadid's installation at its booth at Art Basel, where Dada is a recurring theme.



Further
afield,

The Merz barn in Cumbria, England.

Schwitters last home in Cumbria, England -- the "[Merz barn](#)" -- has benefited from a conservation drive by the [Littoral Arts Trust](#), financed in part by the Galerie Gmurzynska after lobbying by Hadid.

The affinity between the two artists clearly runs deep.

"Both of them were, as the French term goes, *enfant terribles*," says Rastofer. "They did not adapt to common practice and standards that were expected of an artist or architect at the time.

"Both of them were people who believed in their work, believed in their message and did not compromise or adapt to outside pressures."

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For all the abstractions of Dada, "these two like-minded spirits," he says, "[are] in perfect harmony."