
'THE UNPREDICTABLE RICHNESS OF COLLAGE': IN ZURICH, ZAHA HADID'S FINAL PROJECT, THE DESIGN FOR A KURT SCHWITTERS SHOW, GOES ON VIEW

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Installation view of "Kurt Schwitters: Merz," designed by Zaha Hadid, 2016, at Galerie Gmurzynska, Zurich.

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In 2010, [Galerie Gmurzynska](http://www.gmurzynska.com/) (<http://www.gmurzynska.com/>), on the occasion of its show on the great Russian liberator Kazimir Malevich, enlisted Zaha Hadid to fashion its modest storefront space in downtown Zurich into a Suprematist fantasia of exploding geometry. It was an apt pairing. At the time, Hadid's designs spoke in a particularly Suprematist grammar: buildings like the [Vitra Fire Station](http://www.archdaily.com/112681/ad-classics-vitra-fire-station-zaha-hadid) (<http://www.archdaily.com/112681/ad-classics-vitra-fire-station-zaha-hadid>) and the Phaeno Science Center (<http://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/phaeno-science-centre/>) buoyed strict, rectilinear planes that floated happily in suspended motion. Hadid had been wrapped up in Malevich since at least her time as a student at the Architectural Association in London, where she submitted projects that applied the painter's conceptions of spatial organization to architecture and insisted on painting her proposals as geometric abstractions instead of drawing them like everyone else.

For Hadid, the Suprematist exhibition left debts unpaid, which is why this month, as Zurich fêtes the 100th anniversary of Dada's start, Gmurzynska has again been transformed, this time into a swooping, searingly white Futurist altar at which one may kneel before the German modernist Kurt Schwitters. The show of 70 works and the swelling walls on which they're mounted do double duty as both a retrospective of a nonconformist master shunted out to the margins and as a paean by someone who recognized herself in kind. That this was Hadid's final project before she died in March lets the whole proceeding flirt with elegy.

Museum design has long been a notch in the architect's portfolio: a high-key public monument to their particular genius. Individual exhibitions—tucked away and temporary by definition—would not seem to offer the same allure. Yet here we are: Santiago Calatrava's biomorphic platforms for a Calder show at Dominique Lévy (http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/04/22/alexander-calder-santiago-calatrava-dominique-levy/?_r=0) last spring, Annabelle Selldorf carving up (<http://www.selldorf.com/sa-news/frank-stella-a-retrospective-at-the-whitney>) the limpid column-free fifth floor of the Whitney Museum for its Frank Stella retrospective last fall. Hadid dipped a toe in here early , contributing to "The Great Utopia," the Guggenheim Museum's massive, tepidly received survey of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde in 1992.



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Gmurzynska is, of course, small in comparison to the Guggenheim. It sits in the tony Paradeplatz square, about an hour's car drive away from where the collector class just wrapped up another session of schmoozing in Basel. Its neighbors are the world headquarters of Credit Suisse and UBS, which is an ironic thing, considering it also occupies the site of Galerie Dada, an early seat of the aggressively anti-establishment movement.

Schwitters is often lumped into the Dada demimonde, though he is probably better described as Dada-adjacent. His art flowered from a personal culture of resistance, but he was never counted in the Dadaists' official roll calls and probably would have declined membership if it had been offered.

Schwitters's major idea, to which this exhibition is devoted, is "Merz," a word which meant nothing when he chopped up the name of the German Kommerzbank and rechristened its second syllable a declaration of creative freedom, a semiotic jailbreak of art from commerce's cloistered vaults.

Merz met the vectors of Cubism and German Expressionism and refocused them into a cosmic dialogue of muddy, muted collages. It was plastic, both in its philosophy and, literally, in its makeup—reliefs of discarded children's toys, bits of cigarette packaging, scraps of magazines and spent bus tickets—the flotsam of modern life ennobled as high art.

Schwitters considered the found, readymade material with which he created his assemblages as important (or, perhaps, as arbitrary) as any other media: "A perambulator wheel, wire-netting, string and cotton wool are factors having equal rights with paint," he wrote.

Whereas Duchamp's famous readymades might be seen as a thumb in the eye of global power structures, Schwitters's Merz was a frenetic, joyous amalgam of garbage from which beauty could be rendered. It trafficked in the void between art and life, to paraphrase Rauschenberg's line about where he himself liked to work.



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In the 1920s, Schwitters began creating the first Merz construction, his *Merzbau*, in his Hanover home, gradually forming plaster columns and bursae dedicated to admirable contemporaries (In an essay on the Merzbau subtitled "The Desiring House," art historian Jaleh Mansoor writes that (https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue4-IVC/Mansoor.html) "friends frequently noted that a possession was missing, only to visit Schwitters and find the absent item exhibited in a grotto. Hannah Höch worried over a missing key and later found it part of a sculpture; Mies van der Rohe noted that Schwitters filched a drawing pencil and placed it in one of the caves"). By the early '30s, the Merzbau had colonized the artist's entire living space, a *gesamtkunstwerk* of accreted stalactites subsuming whole rooms. It resembled La Sagrada Família—intricate buttresses and crevices devoted to the gospel not of god but of creative energy. Schwitters called it the Cathedral of Erotic Misery.

Hadid's late-era projects, sinuous buildings like the London Aquatic Center, the spiral jetty set done for a 2014 Los Angeles Philharmonic production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, and the undulating Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku, Azerbaijan—a building so sensual as to provoke similes like "as pure and sexy as Marilyn's blown skirt" (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/30/zaha-hadid-architecture>)—come together in plasmic, near-amoebic forms, and in that way can seem to echo the *Merzbau's* cellular expansion.

"A lot of the architecture of [Hadid's] later years is an accumulation of found elements that she then groups together in an organic way, and so in that part she was very close to Schwitters," Mathias Rastorfer, Galerie Gmurzynska's director, said.

Hadid's idea for the Gmurzynska show was to create a latter day Merzbau, an interpretation which wears her imprimatur openly. Its slick, swelling forms are wedged into one side of the ground floor gallery. The walls protrude and bulge in places and warp in others, as though stretched through time itself—Dalí's Persistence of Memory as shelving unit.

There are intellectual difficulties posed by interpreting a structure that was bombed into oblivion during World War II and which only survives in a handful of photographs and a static recreation in Hanover, Germany. Patrik Schumacher, Hadid's longtime partner and the director of Zaha Hadid Architects, said via email that they wanted to express the "complex variegated order we might find in nature."

"Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* has been described as a living collage and what we have created here will also take on a life of its own as it might reemerge in various guises and constellations," Schumacher said. "We embrace the unpredictable ontological richness of collage as a starting point—it pushes us beyond the homogenous, predictable monotony of a simple order."



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Also here are designs from Hadid's archive: the coil of a "Vortexx" chandelier in conversation with a spiral in a Schwitters collage; the corkscrew form in another echoed in the tendril of a "Genesy" lamp; a "Mew table" so fluid it seems like it must have spilled out from a pitcher.

These Hadid works function like readymades whose inclusion Schumacher described as "the starting point for an elaborate search for potential symbiotic and synergetic relations." Another view might be that Hadid is telling us something highly personal: that she sees herself as having come out of Schwitters's overcoat.

That toward the end of his life Schwitters, mired in the red tape of postwar international law, struggled to collect even a third of a \$3,000 stipend from the Museum of Modern Art in New York while creating a *Merzbau* in a damp barn in England's Lake District (a single wall from it was valued at £10,000 not but seven years after he died) offers an analog, albeit a much less dour one, in Hadid, a Pritzker Prize recipient whose forthcoming condos along Manhattan's High Line will sell for about \$5 million to \$50 million, but who couldn't so much as secure a single commission for the first two decades of her career.

The parallels between Schwitters's and Hadid's all-encompassing practices are not lost on Rastorfer. "Schwitters was a rebel who didn't really care what other people thought, and it took him a long time to be recognized, a little bit like Zaha in the earlier years where she was not compromising on anything," he said. "Both of them were these people who were much more concerned about bringing their own message across, without having to compromise for other people's opinions."

It's worth noting that Hadid's original plans for the 1992 Guggenheim exhibition included a recreation of Tatlin's Tower, a spiraling, steel monument to modernity and industry (and the Third International) which would have shamed the Eiffel Tower. It was to augur a global revolution but was never actually built. At the Guggenheim, the recreation would have filled the museum's rotunda, thus completing Frank Lloyd Wright's nautilus—his ode to nature's grand design—to form a sublime declaration of total creative freedom, not unlike the kind envisioned by Schwitters more than 70 years earlier. In the end, the museum nixed Hadid's design, citing budgetary concerns.