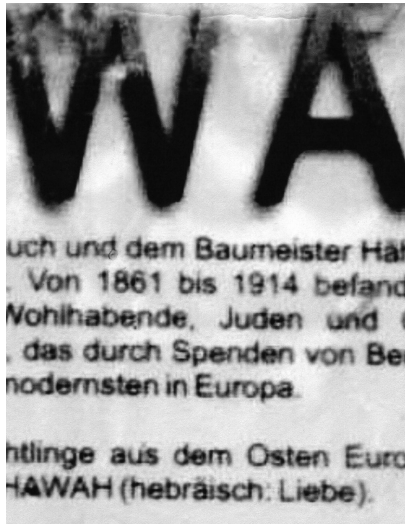
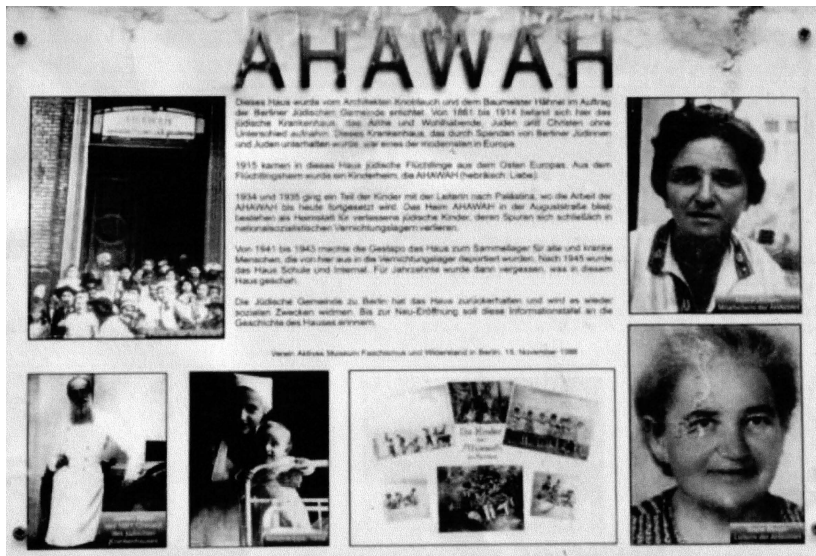


## Kurt Schwitters, WA



Previously unpublished talk presented at the conference 'Merzland: Kurt Schwitters in England', organised by Ian Hunter and Celia Lerner at Tate Britain, 9 July 2004.



Susan Hiller, photograph of a commemorative notice on the side of a building on Auguststrasse, Berlin, which before WWII housed the headquarters of the Jewish organization Ahawah (Life), an orphanage, children's hospital and school, c. 2004 (detail).

Susan Hiller, photograph of a commemorative notice on the side of a building on Auguststrasse.

I GREW UP AS AN ARTIST WHEN PURITY, POLITICS OR POP SEEMED THE ONLY CHOICES; I LEANED, METAPHORICALLY, VERY HEAVILY ON KURT SCHWITTERS IN GIVING MYSELF PERMISSION TO USE SOUND, TO TREAT WORDS AS THINGS, TO APPROPRIATE CULTURAL MATERIALS, TO FOREGROUND REJECTS AND RUBBISH, TO CUT UP, REARRANGE AND PASTE TOGETHER ANYTHING AT ALL. IN 1975 I SAID, 'THE ACT OF COGNITION IS A FORM OF COLLAGE.'<sup>1</sup>

So I was very pleased when, in relation to a group exhibition opening this month at the ICA in London called Artists' Favourites, I was offered the opportunity to select any artwork I wanted to claim as a personal favourite - and I wanted a work of Kurt Schwitters. My selection was limited only by the exhibition proposal that no work chosen could be earlier than 1947, the date the ICA was founded.

If I really had had a free hand in choosing any work by

Schwitters, I would have selected the Ursonate, which I had previously featured in a touring exhibition I selected for the Arts Council called Dream Machines,<sup>2</sup> where the Ursonate played alongside works exploring other hallucinatory forms of linguistic and visual experimentation by Brion Gysin, Henri Michaux and much younger, living artists. There are personal reasons why I wanted the Ursonate. When I first started to make work I didn't know much about Schwitters, about his impoverished exile in the UK or his Merzbau constructions, but in New York in about 1963 my boyfriend recited his own version of the poem to me: fabulous nonsense, extraordinary signifiers without signifieds, growls and tweets and honks, language falling apart and renewing itself, body language, something for future ears or at least for my future. I remember that it wasn't until a long time afterwards that I finally heard a recording of Schwitters' own reading of the Ursonate ... And I felt something rarely touched by art, an inner lightness, happiness and a sense of freedom. But 1947 was a sticking point for the ICA. I couldn't select the Ursonate, which is dated 1921-1932.

In fact I was very unhappy with the range of late Schwitters' works available to select from. In particular, because there are currently two very large exhibitions of Schwitters showing in Basle,<sup>3</sup> the choice of work not already on display somewhere at the moment is very limited. I settled on a collage called WA, an almost generic 'abstract' Schwitters, in tones of brown with one startling pale blue splinter. Three days ago I received an email saying that the museum in Hanover could not permit this work to come to London, because the ICA couldn't guarantee the right conservation requirements; then only yesterday another email arrived saying it would be OK, because the ICA was prepared to build a special separate little room where the tiny Schwitters can reside in conditions of perfectly controlled light and temperature.

I was pleased of course to hear this good news, but not relieved of the anxiety of wondering how this very small, brown, almost generic collage could carry the weight of everything that the name Schwitters designates. Speaking personally,

I can still feel the excitement of seeing for the first time how Schwitters recycled materials, how he slyly incorporated fragments of culture (bits of text, traces of other peoples work) into his work, getting them to say something different, maybe something they'd been wanting to say, giving them weight so that things from the gutter or rubbish bin didn't just biodegrade into the past's oozy compost heap but stayed cut out, sharp and clear to be resurrected in some kind of future ... But the collage I selected, WA, wasn't perhaps a very good example of any of that. In WA, language fragments seemed to remain as decontextualised, abstract shapes. The large letters WA, in sans-serif capitals, seem to be purely formal elements.

But a couple of days ago I came across something down the road from where I live in Berlin. I noticed something I had never seen before, something I might never have noticed if I hadn't been thinking about the small brown almost generic collage WA, something that cast it in a different light entirely.

The Berlin Dada group rejected Schwitters' application for membership; he didn't do political art although some of his best friends did. He did, however, paste politics into works, as for example in A finished poet, made in 1947 like WA. And there is something related and very strange about the way many of the collages are enriched by disturbing blotches, miniature ceramic dogs or clots of dirt, like another very late piece, Dead Cissors (sic) also from 1947, in which his scissors clearly failed and the paper and cloth components are all very dirty and rough. In Berlin they had a real revolution and the Berlin Dadaists decided to join in. There was gunfire in the streets and on the rooftops. While in one corner of the city sailors were defending the imperial stables against troops loyal to the Kaiser, the Dadaists - as well as the anarchists, the socialists and other activists - were laying their plans in others. When the stables fell, there was fighting at the Anhalter Bahnhof and in Charlottenburg. Soldiers and workers' councils, fraternal unions and the Club Dada all held excited meetings. But the Club Dada was, as Hans Richter says, 'No less exclusive than the Herrenklub whose members [...] later rode Germany into the quag-

mires and catastrophes of the Third Reich.' Thus, when a bourgeois, supposedly apolitical, provincial Hanoverian called Kurt Schwitters applied for membership, he was blackballed.<sup>4</sup>

Narrow definitions of political art are always tautologies, since art never takes place inside a social void. In this sense it can be a political decision to tackle political questions in abstract terms, for instance, if a certain kind of figurative art is promoted by the state or validated by the art market. The opposite is of course equally true. So it was surely not without a certain deeper intention that Schwitters referred to his work in terms of 'the detoxification of the material', the removal of unaesthetic residues and contexts. The trivia, discarded and rubbish of society are given voice when an artist selects and juxtaposes them according to his or her principles. In this way, art has the potential to create a balance in which rational and magical thinking have equal weight. (I am here looking at Schwitters through the lens of Joseph Beuys.) In much of Schwitters' work, splinters of various 'primitivisms' - horseshoes, tiny jars of urine, scraps of lace, locks of hair - appear oddly placed in compositions made in the spirit of Constructivist modernism, as if the rational order was trying to accommodate the rejected objects which persistently clutter and disturb the smooth progress of technology. In a similar way, collaged textual references enable viewers to interpret certain works as signs of the times, rather than formal abstractions.

Schwitters sent a letter disguised as a business document in 1936 from Hanover in Nazi Germany, where he was a political suspect as well as an officially-designated lunatic, to Tristan Tzara in Paris, referring to a mysterious 'consignment'. This 'consignment' consisted of microfilms concealed in the cover of what looked like an ordinary photograph album. These microfilms from Hitler's Reich documented the actual conditions of living under that regime; the huge posters hanging in tatters from the walls of Hanover, ration cards with minimal quantities of food, and all sort of other revealing details. The cover letter from Schwitters to Tzara said: 'As and when it is possible to assemble a new consignment, we shall naturally forward it to you.

I am sure you appreciate the difficulties this work entails.'<sup>5</sup>

When the letters WA, in sans-serif capitals, seemed to jump out at me from a tattered notice on an old building in Berlin, I experienced a small epiphany. I had been on that street many times but had not seen it in context. In fact I had not seen it, and I never would have seen it if I had not been thinking about the small, generic, perhaps non-referential collage WA. By ignoring any political/non-political dualism and, instead, creating works which range from the clearly referential to the clearly non-referential, Schwitters retained an ability to refer outwardly to the world in uncannily relevant terms, as I discovered through the experience of 'coming across' another WA in Berlin.

#### NOTES

1 Text accompanying the work Enquiries/Inquiries, 1972-1973, Serpentine Gallery, London 1976.

2 See Section III, 'A Kind of Machine that Works' in this volume.

3 Editor's note: Kurt Schwitters, MERZ, at the Museum Tinguely, and Schwitters/Arp at the Kunstmuseum, Basle, both 1 May-22 August 2004.

4 Hans Richter, Dada: Art and Anti-Art, Thames & Hudson, London 1965, p. 137-151.

5 Ibid. I've leaned very heavily on Richter's account.