

1.

*concealed by monstrous growth*

In 1919, Kurt Schwitters began work on his cathedral of erotic misery. Little by little, the construction took over his home in Hannover until he cut a hole in the ceiling and continued building in the flat upstairs.<sup>1</sup> To this day it remains unclear precisely what the eight chambers of Schwitters' *Merzbau* contained. The three black and white photographs taken by Wilhelm Redemann in 1933, which have served as the foundation for numerous reconstructions since the *Merzbau* was destroyed by a British air raid in 1943, captured this dynamic environment at only one particular point in time. We do know this: the structure was riddled with holes—each containing personal details related to particular people. There was a hole for Mondrian, another for Arp, for Mies van der Rohe, one for his wife, another for his son.<sup>2</sup> Guided by an ethos of what he called *formung* [forming] and *entformung* [deforming], Schwitters conceived of his *Merzbau* as a living organism, “a dynamic metamorphosis of becoming, rather than a static end in itself.”<sup>3</sup> And it devoured everything it came across: found objects, old works, items filched from artist friends when they came to visit the studio. Its hunger knew no bounds. No wonder then, that Deleuze and Guattari referred to Schwitters' construction as a “desiring house,” identifying the same voracious need that characterizes their *desiring machines*—which emerges not from a lack, but as a productive force.<sup>4</sup>

2.

*when the sardine can look back*

In Japanese folklore, inanimate objects and tools gain sentience after one hundred years of serving their owners. Suddenly, they have a soul. The *tsukumogami*, as they are called, are a gentle variety of trickster—but if you dispose of them in their 99th year, they'll come looking for you to exact their revenge. After Paul told us about the *tsukumogami*, I couldn't help but think about all of the objects embedded in Schwitters' holes and grottos—the nail clippers, bottles of urine, Mies van der Rohe's pen, Hannah Hoch's missing keys—sprouting limbs and scrambling over to Kreuzberg where they might ascend the wooden spiral staircase to pester Olivier while he builds the physical framework for *Merzbau Garten*, a collaborative project that partially borrows its name from their original home. “Objects,” WJT Mitchell writes, “are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template. Things, on the other hand, ... [signal] the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can look back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny [...].”<sup>5</sup>

3.

*mingled bodies*

Art historian Jaleh Mansoor writes about the *Merzbau* as a kind of anthropomorphic armature that blurs distinctions between interior and exterior by subsuming bodily remains and refuse in the structure's architectural shell. The world and the body touch through the skin, which defines their common edge. Contingency, accident, collaboration, and surprise, therefore, are defined by *mutual touching*—a mingling with the world that mingles within you, a body composed of many bodies that extends beyond your skin.<sup>6</sup> For Schwitters, aesthetic contamination was a source of inspiration. Work on *Merzbau Garten* began during a time when issues related to contamination—and therefore proximity, collaboration, and touch—became increasingly urgent. We sent each other emails from the isolation of our own homes, sharing references and images, until restrictions on public gathering loosened enough for us to meet in a big circle, not touching, in a public space. For those fortunate enough to not fall ill, lose their income, or drown under the weight of balancing unpaid care work with securing their livelihood, the COVID-19 quarantine could best be described as a collective mind fuck that fundamentally, albeit temporarily, changed our perspectives regarding the

limits of our bodies and, particularly, about the safety of objects. Media reports repeatedly stressed how long the novel corona virus was capable of living on surfaces and it seemed like these estimations varied daily. Like the *tsukumogami*, inanimate surfaces suddenly teemed with life—and the perceived potential to bring us harm. The doorknob, the cereal box at the grocery store, the banister, the pole on the bus, anything once touched without a second thought became a repository of touch, a storehouse of contagion.

4.

*swarming vitality*

What is a thing but a succession of congealed moments?<sup>7</sup> Amidst our conversations about objects—how they circulate, how we consume them, how we produce them, how they make meaning—I became fixated on the notion of the “high-touch surface” as a reclamation of all of the stories, all of the moments, that a thing encounters. Something highly-touched, whether a thing, a history, or an idea is an invitation to inhabit a state of multiplicity, not an abstraction, but as a lived experience—a swarm of vitalities.<sup>8</sup>

Jesi Khadivi

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1 Schwitters was the owner of the building and therefore able to give notice to the tenants who lived above him. See Werner Schmalenbach, “Kurt Schwitters Hannover Merzbau” in *Kurt Schwitters* (New York: Harry A. Abrams, 1967): <http://www.publicaddressart.com/uploads/1/0/1/9/101973130/merzbau.pdf> (last access July 5, 2020)

2 Ibid.

3 Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000)

4 See Jaleh Mansoor, “Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Desiring House.” : [https://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/Issue4-IVC/Mansoor.html](https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue4-IVC/Mansoor.html)

5 WJT Mitchell, quoted in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p.2.

6 Here, a cross-pollination of Michel Serres and Eula Biss. See Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley, (London: Continuum, 2009) and Eula Biss, *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2014).

7 Arjun Appadurai writes, “all things are congealed moments in a longer social trajectory [...] brief deposits of this or that property, photographs that conceal the reality of the motion from which their objecthood is a momentary respite. See Arjun Appadurai, “The Thing Itself,” *Public Culture*, 1 January 2006, p.15.

8 See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p32. “A theory of distributive agency, in contrast, does not posit a subject as a root cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits. To figure the generative source of effects as a swarm is to see human intentions as always in competition and confederation with many other strivings, for an intention is like a pebble thrown into a pond, or an electrical current sent through a wire or neural network: it vibrates and merges with other currents, to affect and be affected.”