

# The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release

June 1985

RETROSPECTIVE OF PIONEERING GERMAN ARTIST  
KURT SCHWITTERS  
TO OPEN AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

KURT SCHWITTERS, the most comprehensive exhibition ever assembled of works by the pioneering German artist, premieres at The Museum of Modern Art from June 10 to October 1, 1985. Organized by John Elderfield, director of the Department of Drawings and curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, the exhibition presents important discoveries, affirming the stature of Schwitters among the masters of modern art. After closing at The Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition will travel under the auspices of the International Council of the Museum to The Tate Gallery, London, and to the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, West Germany.

Although Kurt Schwitters has long been recognized for his innovative combination of pure abstraction and the free use of materials, the extent of his accomplishments has never been fully explored prior to this retrospective. Drawing on major European and American collections, the exhibition includes over 200 examples of work by Schwitters in all mediums and from all periods. Over 100 of his highly evocative collages--made from scraps of cloth and colored paper, postage stamps, and various discarded remnants from daily life--will be presented. In addition to his famous, dramatic large-scale assemblages, examples of his paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, books, and typography and advertising designs will be exhibited, illuminating the range and depth of the artist's work.

- more -

- 2 -

Born in Hannover, Germany, in 1887, Schwitters first achieved recognition in 1919 when he exhibited his assemblages and collages in Berlin. He was associated with the group of Expressionist painters and poets, Der Sturm, but was denied membership in the Berlin Dada group which rejected Expressionism because of its primary concern with esthetic, rather than with political, issues. Nonetheless, the spirit of Schwitters's early work had affinities with both the Dada and Expressionist movements. He juxtaposed worthless materials--a technique frequently employed by other Dada artists--and his extremely angular Cubo-Futurist structures aligned him with the German Expressionist painters. In order to distinguish his work from both camps, he invented the word "Merz" to describe it. "Merz" is a word fragment derived from the phrase "Commerz- und Privatbank" (Commercial and Private Bank), which the artist used in one of his earliest assemblages. He chose it to describe the process of transforming useless fragments of banal objects from the commercial world into works of art.

Although he was not an official member of the Dada group, Schwitters collaborated with some of its leading members, notably Hans Arp in Zurich and Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Hoeh in Berlin. He participated in provocative public performances of sound poetry, expressing a prophetic effort to eliminate the boundaries between the separate artistic disciplines. A recording of Schwitters reading his most famous poems will be played in one of the exhibition galleries.

Schwitters was also an intensely private artist. Among his greatest achievements was the extraordinary Merzbau (Merz-building) which he constructed in his Hannover home. This inspired series of bizarre columns and grottoes

- more -

- 3 -

composed of found objects eventually filled many rooms, expanding into an ambitious work of Expressionist-Constructivist architecture. It is documented in the exhibition in large photographic panels, as is a Merzbau he began in England at the end of his life.

During the mid-twenties, Schwitters became involved with the international Constructivist community through his associations with Theo van Doesburg and El Lissitzky, and his work reflected the influences of De Stijl and avant-garde Russian art. Even when he worked in the most strongly Constructivist style, however, his distinctly individualistic approach was evident. By the end of the decade, he had returned to a more allusive form of assemblage.

Dismissed by Hitler's regime as a "degenerate artist," he resided in Norway from 1937 to 1940, and in England from 1940 until his death in 1948. The work that he produced during this period underwent an important change, shifting away from geometric composition toward more naturalistic forms, reflecting his rural surroundings. Very few of his large-scale late collages and assemblages have ever been seen in this country. They are among his most daring works.

Kurt Schwitters has been increasingly acknowledged as one of the most original artists of the twentieth century, particularly since the fifties when interest in Dada was revived. Since then his art had been regarded as internationally influential, receiving the critical attention that it deserves. American artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Motherwell, Louise Nevelson, and Robert Rauschenberg have expressed their indebtedness to Schwitters, and critics have cited his collages as significant precedents for Pop Art. Contemporary European artists like Joseph Beuys and Mario Merz work in the

- more -

tradition that Schwitters established, while certain forms of very recent art, both in Europe and America, are indebted to his achievements.

Kurt Schwitters, a thoroughly researched monograph by John Elderfield, is being published in paperback for The Museum of Modern Art by Thames and Hudson Ltd. The 424-page volume features 324 black-and-white and 32 color illustrations, along with extensive notes and bibliography.

This exhibition has been made possible, in part, by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and The Government of the Federal Republic of Germany. An indemnity for the exhibition has been provided by the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities.

\* \* \*

These images of the rise of Nazism, as reported by British newsreel makers at the time as objective, balanced accounts--are the subject of Before Hindsight, a feature-length documentary produced in Britain in 1977 and now being released in the United States by The Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library. The film will be available through the Museum in 16mm format for rental and sale. Public screenings are scheduled for the concluding program in the weekly WHAT'S HAPPENING? series at 3:00 and 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, June 27, in the Fay and Stata Titus Theater 2.

Directed and edited by Jonathan Lewis, with on-camera commentary by James Cameron, Before Hindsight uses extensive footage from the Movietone, Pathe, March of Time, and Paramount newsreels of the 1930s, including material shut but never released by the companies for fear of commercial damage. As some of the newsreel makers now explain in interviews, entertainment value and the film companies' perceptions of public opinion weighed more heavily than the need to report the news. And, although there was no official censorship, filmmakers who were active at the time testify that government influence was both strong and pervasive. As a result, British audiences throughout the 1930s watched newsreels that showed Hitler as a spokesman, promoted Chamberlain's program of appeasement in unflattering terms, and treated the English Blackshirts as a "point of interest" on a par with the

No. 41

For additional information or photographic materials contact Jeanne Collins or Jessica Schwartz, Department of Public Information, (212) 708-9750.