

Sin fars advokat

I den internasjonale kunstverdenen inntar Ernst Schwitters en verdig plass som Kurt Schwitters' sønn og forvalter av hans etterlatte verker. Arven etter den berømte Merz-kunstneren¹ tilkom ham uventet tidlig som 30-åring. Da var han nettopp i ferd med å starte egen familie og opparbeide seg en tilværelse som profesjonell fotograf i Norge. Frem til da hadde han nesten hele tiden bodd sammen med sin far – også i løpet av sitt første ekteskap. For ham var ikke faren bare en far, men også en “nær og god venn”.² Konflikten mellom sitt eget yrke og kravene som de etterlatte verkene fra faren stilte, påvirket fra nå av hans liv. Ikke bare siden Schwitters død i 1948, og allerede på den tiden det knapt nok fantes en etterspørsel etter hans verker, var sønnen bevisst på arvets historiske betydning og hvilket ansvar dette innebar for ham. Han satte aldri spørsmålsteget ved dette ansvaret. Den økende internasjonale interessen for Kurt Schwitters verker gav Ernst Schwitters økonomisk frihet. For første gang siden han emigrerte som 18-åring var han i stand til å livnære seg uten å arbeide som fotograf. Han bestemte seg for å legge ned sitt profesjonelle arbeid og utnevne seg selv til sin fars advokat. Han anerkjente uten videre sin far “som den største kunstneren”.³

Etter sin fars død var Ernst Schwitters heller tilbakeholden. Han var preget av det personlig tapet og den byrden han betraktet arven å være i begynnelsen.⁴ Det varte imidlertid ikke lenge før han gjorde offentlig krav på rollen som den autoriteten det innebar å være “Kurt Schwitters' sønn og nære medarbeider i mer enn 25 [sic] år”.⁵ Han gjorde også krav på rollen som den som kjente hans verker best. En hyllest han skrev i 1965 viser hvor nær han følte seg sin far. Der betegner han seg selv som “broren til MERZ”. Etter at Kurt Schwitters døde “ble jeg plutselig MERZ! Nå var det altså min oppgave å føre videre det som sluttet så altfor tidlig”.⁶ At denne graden av identifikasjon ikke alltid var fordelaktig for mottakelsen av Kurt Schwitters' verker, viste seg spesielt i forbindelse med hans *Ursonate*. Ernst Schwitters hadde i flere tiår strenge regler for utgivelsen av lyddiktet. Siden han hadde erfaring med fremførelsen og fortolkningen til sin far fra barnsben av, betraktet han seg selv som den eneste som kunne fremføre *Ursonate* slik forfatteren ønsket det.

Kurt Schwitters' fotograf

Hans virke som fotograf har derimot beriket og preget vår kjennskap til personen Kurt Schwitters og vårt syn på hans kunstnerskap. Den kjente portrettserien som viser Kurt Schwitters som fremfører *Ursonate* i London (fig. 1), gir

Der Anwalt des Vaters

Ernst Schwitters ist in der internationalen Kunstwelt vor allem als Sohn und Nachlassverwalter von Kurt Schwitters prominent in Erscheinung getreten. Das Erbe des berühmten Merzkünstlers¹ musste er unerwartet früh, im Alter von 30 Jahren, antreten, gerade als er begonnen hatte, eine eigene Familie zu gründen und sich eine Existenz als professioneller Fotograf in Norwegen aufzubauen. Bis dahin hatte er, auch während seiner ersten Ehe, fast ununterbrochen mit dem Vater zusammengelebt, der für ihn nicht nur Elternteil war, sondern auch »ein naher und guter Freund«. ² Der Konflikt zwischen dem eigenen Beruf und den Anforderungen, die der Künstlernachlass an ihn stellte, beeinflusste fortan sein Leben. Nicht erst seit Schwitters' Tod 1948, und schon zu der Zeit, als kaum jemand nach dessen Arbeiten fragte, war sich der Sohn der historischen Bedeutung des Erbes sowie seiner nie in Frage gestellten Verantwortung dafür bewusst. Das wachsende internationale Interesse daran und die damit einhergehende finanzielle Unabhängigkeit ermöglichten es Ernst Schwitters Ende der 1960er Jahre, erstmals seit seiner Emigration als 18-Jähriger unabhängig von fotografischen Aufträgen leben zu können. Er beschloss, die professionelle Arbeit aufzugeben und sich vollkommen zum Anwalt seines Vaters zu machen, den er »als den weitaus größeren Künstler«³ anerkannte.

Nach dem Tod seines Vaters war Ernst Schwitters unter dem Eindruck des persönlichen Verlustes und der Bürde, als die er das Erbe anfänglich empfand, zunächst eher verzagt.⁴ Aber bald schon beanspruchte er »als Sohn von Kurt Schwitters und als dessen enger Mitarbeiter für mehr als 25 [sic!] Jahre«⁵ öffentlich die Autorität desjenigen, der am besten mit dem Werk vertraut war. Wie nah er sich dem Vater fühlte, offenbart ein 1965 verfasstes Geleitwort, in dem er sich als »Bruder von MERZ« bezeichnete, seit Kurt Schwitters' Tod jedoch »war ich plötzlich MERZ! Es lag nun auf mir, weiterzuführen, was so allzu früh endete«. ⁶ Dass dieser Identifikationsgrad für die Rezeption nicht immer förderlich war, erwies sich besonders in Hinblick auf Schwitters' *Ursonate*. Über Jahrzehnte reglementierte Ernst Schwitters die Veröffentlichung des Lautgedichts. Er hielt sich aufgrund der von Kindesbeinen an gewachsenen Erfahrung um die Ausführung und Interpretation seines Vaters für den Einzigen, der die *Ursonate* im Sinne ihres Autors vortragen könne.



1 Ernst Schwitters, *Kurt Schwitters beim Vortrag der Ursonate* · *Kurt Schwitters fremfører Ursonate* · *Kurt Schwitters Reciting the Ursonate, London 1944*

The ‘Brother of MERZ’ – Ernst and Kurt Schwitters

Isabel Schulz

stantial funding for carrying out the inventory of the photo archives. Thanks are due as well to the Goethe-Institut of Oslo for its important contribution to the production of this catalogue and to the authors for their enlightening essays. Last but not least, we wish to thank the Sprengel Museum Hannover, which has been home to the Foundation since it was established, and to the museum staff, in particular those involved in this project, for their commitment to the success of this exhibition.

Following the exhibition in Hanover, Ernst Schwitters’ photographs will be shown at the Preus Museum (National Museum of Photography) in Horten, Norway. We wish to thank Director Jonas Ekeberg and curator Hanne Holm-Johnsen of the Preus Museum for their interest and co-operation in this important project.

Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung
Harald Böhlmann
Chairman of the Curatorial Board

His Father’s Advocate

Ernst Schwitters attained prominence in the art world primarily as the son of Kurt Schwitters and as the executor of his estate. He was only thirty years old when the artist and *Merz*¹ creator died unexpectedly. He had just begun to start a family of his own and pursue a professional photography career in Norway. Until then, and even during the years of his first marriage, Ernst and his father had lived together almost without interruption; Kurt was not only a parent but also Ernst’s ‘close and good friend’.² The struggle between maintaining his own career and the obligations he undertook as executor of his father’s estate would affect the rest of his life. Even before his father’s death in 1948, and later as well, at a time when demand for his work had ebbed, Ernst Schwitters was well aware of the historical significance of his father’s legacy and never doubted his responsibility to it. Beginning in the 1960s, growing interest in Kurt Schwitters’ oeuvre – and the financial independence that came with it – enabled Ernst Schwitters to live without depending on his photography for income for the first time since his emigration at eighteen. He abandoned his career and devoted himself entirely to his responsibility to advocate for his father, whom he described as ‘by far the better artist’.³

Immediately following Kurt’s death, however, Ernst Schwitters was despondent in the face of his personal loss and what he initially saw as the heavy burden of the artist’s legacy.⁴ But he soon laid claim to the authority that came with being the person most familiar with the oeuvre and the ‘son of Kurt Schwitters, and his close collaborator for more than twenty-five years’.⁵ Just how close he felt to his father was revealed in 1965, when he described himself as the ‘brother of MERZ’. After Schwitters’ death, ‘I suddenly became MERZ! It was now up to me to carry on what had ended all too soon’.⁶ This degree of identification

was not always a benefit the reception to his father’s art, as is particularly evident in the case of Schwitters’ *Ursonate*. Ernst Schwitters exercised complete control over the publication of the sound poem for decades. Based on the experience with the performance and interpretation of the work he had been exposed to since early childhood, he regarded himself as the only person qualified to recite the *Ursonate* in the manner intended by its author.

Kurt Schwitters’ Photographer

Our knowledge of Kurt Schwitters and our understanding of his oeuvre have been enriched and guided by his son’s work as a photographer, however. His famous portrait series of Kurt Schwitters, showed at a performance of the *Ursonate* in London in 1944 (fig. 1), conveys the artist’s vital presence and expressive power even today. Ernst Schwitters set the frame-filling bust, shown *en face* and slightly off centre in the photos’ square format, close up and against an illuminated background. He also directed a softly accented light on the face from the left, thus emphasizing the speaking physiognomy of the performer perfectly.

Ernst took a final photograph of his father during a hiking tour in the Lake District before his return to Norway in 1945 (fig. 3). In retrospect, it seems to be a personal farewell gift to his father, who is elevated to almost symbolic status in these images. Holding a long walking stick, he is a small silhouette in the vastness of a barren mountain landscape, and he looks out at the dramatic cloud formations and Lake Windermere, bathed in light. The motif of a rising view into the distance with a figure in the foreground seen from the rear beneath an animated sky, recurs in the Romantic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich. The individual standing atop the summit (having reached his ‘goal of life’) experiences intimations of eternity and transcen-

dence in the presence of boundless nature and the light. Quite apart from its religious implications, this approach to the incorporation of the figure into the landscape reflects an essential aspect of the father-son relationship. The overpowering impressions of nature they experienced together in Norway were important events that bound them closely for the rest of their lives and were reflected in the work of both men.⁷ Viewed against the background of their biographies, which were influenced by their dual emigration, the theme of *The Wanderer*, as Ernst Schwitters referred to the photograph, takes on yet another dimension.

While still in Hanover prior to emigrating, Ernst Schwitters began documenting his father’s works, and many of these photographs are now the only available evidence of works that have since disappeared or been destroyed. He regarded himself not only as a reproducer but also as an interpreter and advisor, as is made evident by detail photos of the *Merzbau* (fig. 2). He presumably took these pictures in late 1936⁸ and presented his father with prints of them on his fiftieth birthday the following year, along with the following comments: ‘The double image is not a positive and a negative, as one might be tempted to think, but the same spot in two different kinds of light. I printed the two images next to one another so that you can use these pictures to demonstrate the importance of proper lighting, the possibilities for lighting and the design of lighting’.⁹

He experimented with different lighting effects in the mid-1940s while taking photographs of several of his father’s abstract sculptures, which he positioned in front of a neutral background and photographed from a slightly lowered perspective (fig. 5).¹⁰ He was less interested in rendering the rough impasto surface or the material qualities of these works than in capturing the animated interplay of light and shadow with which he