Cian Quayle: MerzNorth Seminar 3 - 28th October 2015
Review for Kurt Schwitters Society Newsletter, November 2015

MerzNorth is a research cluster based within the Department of Fine Art at the University of Cumbria in conjunction with the Littoral Arts Trust. This event is the third hosted by Merz North, whose work seeks to forge networks between 'academics, artists and other interested persons' concerned with the 'legacy of Kurt Schwitters in the context of his work and his period of residence in Cumbria'.

This event follows previous seminars with a focus on the Hatton Gallery, which houses the relief wall of Schwitters' final work the *Merz Barn*: "that the group acts in an advice and support capacity for anyone interested interested in the legacy of Schwitters in the North of England and support Littoral Arts and other organisations to develop this legacy." The second seminar included a visit to the Armitt Museum in Cumbria with recommendations related to: "different ideas in support of the Merz Barn site and wider archives and materials including the Armitt […] and to support new educational and artistic projects […] addressing issues related to […]the wide dispersal of Schwitters materials in various sites." Dr Mark Wilson introduced the project and conference to a small but engaged audience, and discussed the notion of a 'third space' and sites related to Schwitters' legacy, around which networks between curators, artists and academics might emerge. Throughout the day ideas related to site, absence, artists' networks and legacy prevailed. Wilson also cited Adrian Piper's work *Everything Will Be Taken Away* by way of introduction for the discussions which followed.

The keynote speaker for the day's proceedings was **Dr Michael White**, Professor of Art History at the University of York. White delivered a fascinating address entitled ***Dada Migrations: Definition, Dispersal and the Case of Kurt Schwitters***. During the 1920s Schwitters travelled extensively in Europe, honing a network of contacts built around exhibitions, recitals and performances. The complexity of these networks contributes to an understanding of Schwitters' work within the Dada network and social milieu. The different locations in which these artists congregated assumed varying significance, each providing a hub for Dada in the formation and spread of its activities across multiple centres. The First World War was the cataclysmic backdrop against which these movements were set and out of which Dada's revolutionary and irreverent art practices emerged. White explained the different imperatives which fuelled the Dadaists 'desire for travel', with a line-up including Raoul Hausmann, Hans Richter, EL Lissitzky and Hugo Ball. We also heard of meetings with personality clashes based upon their perceived expectations of one another. The talk was excellently illustrated and also included many references, including T. J. Demos and Edward Said's 'four conditions of exile', which revealed the extent of White's research; Raymond Williams call to 'settle nowhere' also seemed particularly apt. What these travels and each relocation 'enabled' was shown to be key for the activities of Dada artists.

The Dada propensity for mayhem and the audience's expectations of the same were a stock-in-trade at this time. White went on to explore Schwitters' relationship with Hanover, a town characterised by its 'ordinariness', and also Schwitters' willingness to revel in the persona of the bourgeois prone to acts of playful idiocy—no doubt purposeful when set against the posturing antics of his contemporaries before the camera. To further highlight this, a family photograph of Schwitters shows him as a well-dressed family man, pictured with his son Ernst, in his Waldhausenstraase home, which housed the *Merzbau.* Schwitters was far from an idiot and his travels were also 'business trips' driven by a commercial acumen geared to generating income. Reference was also made to Gwendolen Webster and Roger Cardinal's observations related to these

activities as very much being a 'vehicle for publishing'. We were also informed of a consistent presentation of works during this period on at least seventy occasions.

The talk then shifted to the 'hermetic caché' (but in other ways public nature) of Schwitters' work on the *Merzbau.* As many artists, Schwitters was sometimes inclined to invite others to see his work in progress in the same way that he visited other's studios from which he in turn purloined items. His introduction to the *Merzbau* was very much a guided performance, which took his visitors into the realm of his particular manifestation of '*innere Emigration'*. Katherine Dreier was noted as having loaned Schwitters' guestbook in place of the possibility of showing the *Merz Column* which of course was impossible to transport. Schwitters comment of 1936 provides a sense of his isolation at home as well as impending dislocation: 'my work lives in voluntary exile'. This period marks the beginning of Schwitters' correspondence with Alfred Barr who visited the *Merzbau* in 1935, and this led to photographs of the *Merzbau* being exhibited at MOMA NY. These events culminated in the whitewashing of Schwitters' studio windows to hide the *Merzbau* from the outside world and the deadly forces at work in Nazi Germany, and the *Merzbau* was never seen again.

White deftly interwove the complexity of the political, social, aesthetic and business relationships which positioned Schwitters as a Dada outsider as much by choice as by the fact of his Hanover provincialism; even Richter later reappraised this position, probably as a result of his subsequent recognition of the significance of what Schwitters' work at home and his peripatetic activities in Europe had represented. It was a stance that ultimately led to his flight to Norway and eventual exile in Britain, in London and the Lake District via the Isle of Man.

Pavel Büchler, an artist and teacher at Manchester Metropolitan University, continued with the playful theme of the 'idiot' in the sense of having 'licence to talk nonsense'**.** ***Studio Schwitters*** **(2010)** is both a response to Schwitters *Ursonate* (1932) as well as Schwitters' sensibility and persona, and of course the two are inextricably linked. Büchler describes his interest in the economy of language and form that the *Ursonate* adopts, and the potential that language facilitates in terms of doing 'what we want it to do', as in the Dadaists wilful 'construction of a new language'. In Büchler's work the words of the *Ursonate* are retransmitted electronically in a synthesised playback reminiscent of the automata-like, voice-over of Alpha 60 in Jean Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965). The sonic installation utilises a collection of tannoy-style, trumpet-shaped speakers; in their arcane form they add to the uncanny nature of Schwitters' poem, which was always as much about its performance as what is read and understood.

We were also introduced to a series of typographic artworks in letterpress as an acknowledgement of Schwitters' pioneering typographic and graphic work, which had a public outlet in addition to his personal publishing ventures. Büchler's approach is reductively minimalist as the works strips back the use of language via a systematic account of the frequency of the use of specific letters in *Faulty Puzzle* (2012). The significance of the cryptogram led us to Edgar Allen Poe, Francis Picabia and Marinetti. A version of *Studio Schwitters* is due to go on permanent display at the Sprengel Museum in Hanover. At the Sprengel the work also incorporates the projection of the text where this was previously displayed on the screen of a computer laptop.

Rob Airey, Keeper of Art at the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle University introduced his update for the restoration work that is about to be undertaken on the relief wall of the *Merz Barn* at the Hatton. Airey explained the background status and governance of the gallery in its local authority status, with 3,500 objects in its collection. As audience member Lloyd Gibson observed, this also includes a bequest of African tribal sculptures

from Fred Uhlmann. The restoration project is in receipt of Heritage Lottery Funding of approximately two million pounds; this includes costs related to the overhaul of the gallery space as well as funding specifically associated with the renovation of the relief wall. The project incorporates three related strands of activity: conservation, the change in physical context of the gallery space, and interpretation.

Airey went on to describe how, following its removal (coordinated by Richard Hamilton) and arrival in Newcastle in 1965, the relief wall was actually left outside for a year, into 1966, in order to dry out. Coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of this event, the gallery will close in March 2016 for work to start. The conservation will involve two processes: first the survey and examination of the work, and secondly its physical restoration. The task in part depends on retracing the various states, transformations, additions and deterioration to which the form of the relief wall has been subjected. A photographic chronology of the work is being assembled and later the seminar discussion turned to a consideration as to which timeframe this restoration might assume, and the key state that best represents Schwitters' intentions for this work. The documentation of the wall includes sixty 35-mm. slide transparencies made at the time of the wall's removal; these were featured in the Tate Britain exhibition *Kurt Schwitters in Britain* (2013). Earlier photographs of the relief reveal a surface luminosity in the low-light setting of the barn as a result of Schwitters' copious use of flake white that he applied to the plastered, curvilinear form of the wall. Derek Pullen, who has long been involved in working group discussions related to Kurt Schwitters and *Merz Barn*, is a former conservator at Tate Britain who has been commissioned by the Hatton Gallery to undertake the project via his independent company SculpCons Ltd.

Airey went on to highlight the extraordinary circumstances of the wall's removal and its two-day transport and journey on the back of a low loader, which at the time even warranted an in-depth feature by the Daily Mail. The relief wall was eventually lowered into a specially constructed extension space, which was facilitated by renovations to the University and gallery buildings taking place at the time. By the time the work was unveiled in 1968 it had already suffered further deterioration, with a substantial loss of paint that had flaked off since 1947. In 1993 'retouching and consolidation' of the relief was also undertaken. All these factors present a complex series of questions for Derek Pullen and his team, and Airey cited a range of processes to which the wall will be subjected, including the analysis of microsamples and radiography; the forensic analysis will also depend on contemporary accounts gleaned, each step of the way, from those who have been involved in the history of this major work, in order to uncover the 'mystery of its construction'.

The projected renovation of the gallery spaces is intended to provide a more contemplative setting for the experience of the work with an adjacent space comprising six panels for which the HLF (Heritage Lottery Fund) initiative includes a two year programme of related exhibitions addressing the 'stories and contexts' of the *Merz Barn*. Airey also observed that the *Merz Barn* relief could be misconstrued as some kind of 'monolith', divorced from its original setting and the other works, which inhabited the space, such as the small stone sculptures made at the same time, and indeed it might be conjectured how the work would have been developed further, to its completion. Also pertinent are the interventions that the work suffered following Schwitters' death, such as the additions of Harry Pierce, from whom Schwitters rented the barn at Cylinders.

All of this will be significant in terms of the *Merz Barn*'s wider relationship with Schwitters' work in Britain, including London and the Isle of Man, as well as the obvious link with Schwitters' work in Norway and even the Hanover *Merzbau*. The *Merzhut* (*Schwittershytta*) on Hjertøya near Molde in Norway, whose interior has recently been

removed from the island setting, can now be seen in the form of a photographic facsimile by Factum Arte at the Henie Onstad Art Centre near Oslo, who care for Schwitters' Norwegian legacy.

The commentary turned on the significance of the work in terms of its audience, as every day someone will visit the gallery specifically to see the wall. The aura of the work and its relationship with its place of origin, and subsequent reception and interpretation presents a series of questions in terms of legacy which continued to fuel the discussion throughout the rest of the day.

I have been in preliminary discussions with the Merz North team and the Littoral Arts Trust regarding the proposed preparation of an AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) proposal. As its potential author, I was duly invited to outline my thoughts and ideas related to what form this could take: ***Cian Quayle (University of Chester): Kurt Schwitters in England Reprise and the AHRC Merz Barn Proposal***. This summary encapsulates the thoughts, ideas and conclusions drawn from the day's proceedings, which I will return to later.

I broadly sketched the possibilities and potential that the Proposal might embrace and fulfil. By way of introduction, I reflected upon Schwitters' influence for my own practice and research; *Kurt Schwitters Escape, Internment and Exile*, was also a chapter of my PhD thesis *Inventory for a Reverse Journey – Photographic Image and Found Object* (2005), a practice-based project that investigated different modes of exile and how notions of travel and journeys have shaped artist practice. My conference presentation proceeded to draw attention to areas of research that still require more in-depth investigation and that might build on my own research in related areas; Schwitters' internment in the Isle of Man would be key here.

A series of slides showed a selection of the 200 works, primarily collages, made during the eighteen months he was interned. In addition the figurative work of his contemporaries featured alongside images drawn from my own archive, manifesting a pyscho-geographic understanding of the territory and chronotope of this phase of Schwitters' life. In 2004 I visited Klaus Hinrichsen at his home in London, and he asked me to present his paper at the Tate conference as a compliment to my own account of his and Schwitters' internment in Hutchinson P Camp in Douglas.

The potential for further research and an AHRC bid in this area will be defined by the identification of a specific context and set of research questions upon which the research proposal rests. The research questions could potentially be framed around the notions of absence and loss and primarily the aura of works of art and their displacement; of relevance here is Schwitters' dislocation and exile and Rudi Fuch's *Conflicts with Modernism or The Absence of Kurt Schwitters* (1991). The Proposal also considers the impact of artist networks which will generate further responses to Schwitters' work such as those undertaken by John Darwell and Pavel Büchler.

My PhD thesis articulated a trajectory which followed Schwitters flight from Germany in 1937. This now presents a series of staging points and networks both historic and contemporary, which the Proposal seeks to draw together in order to establish a series of dialogues between other stakeholders. I am in the process of establishing this network in order to frame the background of the Proposal which could and should be closely linked to the restoration of the *Merz Barn* relief at the Hatton Gallery and proposals related to maintenance and future development of the Cylinders site, which were expanded upon by Dr Ian Hunter at the end of the day. This area led to further discussion initiated by Lloyd Gibson's recent research into Harry Pierce's early

discussions with the National Trust, the role of sculpture parks such as Grizedale, and how sites of significance in terms of their various designations are utilised in a public context. In between, the Armitt Museum and Abbot Hall Gallery in Cumbria, Henie Onstad Art Centre and the Sprengel Museum Hannover should also figure as part of the network which the Proposal could potentially incorporate. The University of Cumbria and *Merz North* are also in the process of establishing a fully funded PhD Fellowship related to Schwitters' legacy.

The day's discussions also made reference to recent surveys and initiatives that seek to cement closer relationships between university institutions and mutually beneficial networks, partnerships and collaborations. Kings College London recently published the findings of an AHRC supported Research Network project based around a series of workshops which sought to uncover the interrelationships which might find their overlap in other spaces 'beyond the campus'; here academics and other practitioners and communities are able to initiate new dialogues generated via 'Third Space' settings. In this, Kings have taken their cue from Ed Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), which they define as: 'spaces which are neither solely academic spaces nor solely creative and cultural production spaces but an open creative and generative combination of the two'.

The concept of authorship alongside that of aura (here taking another cue from Walter Benjamin) deepens the research question in relation to the status of the Cylinders site, and its relationship with that from which it gains its significance. This pulls the site and *the artwork* into a dialogue related to absence. Here I turned to the replica construction of the Merz Barn fabricated as part of the Royal Academy's exhibition *Modern British Sculpture* (2011), which presented the Academy audience with an enigmatic point of entry; the exhibition was curated by Penelope Curtis, who went on to curate *Kurt Schwitters in Britain* at Tate Modern (2013).

Here I also made reference to Richard Hamilton's wish, which he described at the 2004 Littoral-organised conference *Kurt Schwitters in England* at Tate Britain, to see some form of replica of the *Merz Barn*'s relief wall. This, in the same way that he worked on a remake of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even* or *The Large Glass* (1915) around the time that he orchestrated the removal of the *Merz Barn* relief wall. In 1965 Duchamp was able to tell Hamilton what exactly the original work entailed, or at least what he chose to recall—leaving Hamilton to solve the conundrum of the work's making for himself. I also made reference to Littoral's invitation that led to Adam Lowe and Factum Arte's work, now on show at the Henie Onstad Art Centre near Oslo: https://vimeo.com/1896440.

In 2009 I convened the conference and exhibition *The Art of Appropriation and Kurt Schwitters in England.* The conference called for academic and artist proposals which identify with practices associated with the use of found objects and materials that are also associated with strategies of Appropriation. This dimension was highlighted by David Evans in *7 Types of Appropriation*, one of three keynote lectures, which provided a framework around which other artist and academic papers were integrated. Roger Cardinal, co-author with Gwendolen Webster of *Kurt Schwitters* (2011) provided insights based upon the materiality of *Kurt Schwitters and the Aesthetic of Clutter*. The artist's perspective was best outlined by John Stezaker's *Violation and Redemption in the Late Collages of Kurt Schwitters*, which focussed on Schwitters' use of splintered shards of vertically sliced photographic images. Megan Rand Luke was a special guest with *Sculptures for the Hand*, a paper first presented at Chester, later adapted and published in her book Kurt Schwitters. *Space, Image, Exile* (2014). A Symposium which reprises

these proceedings is planned for 2016; it will also provide a platform for new papers and further discussions related to the work of Merz North and the AHRC Proposal.

The final presentation of the day was by **Dr Ian Hunter** of **the Littoral Arts Trust** who outlined the findings of *The Future of the Merz Barn Project Report*. Hunter, a former curator in New Zealand, has worked in the North-West since the 1980s and has undertaken long term projects and research related to sculpture and 'strategies for cultural change'. In consolidating 'cultural assets', Littoral sees its role as a charity which facilitates opportunities for scholarship and artist practices in a recovery of narratives, primarily, in this context, those related to Schwitters' work at Cylinders and the *Merz Barn*. Hunter outlined the background which led to the purchase of the site in 2006, supported by Northern Rock and Heritage Lottery Funding. He went on to describe the significance of the site and its place in what is an 'ancient' as well as a 'cultural landscape'. The discussions related to the use of barn and the site and landscape's changing identity and form reinforces the nebulous nature of the different perspectives which Cylinders draws into its orbit, as its use has shifted over the last century in particular. The palimpsest is a surface upon which narratives are rewritten, and Hunter adopted this metaphor to draw attention to Cylinders as a post-war, 'blasted industrial site' before Harry Pierce's transformative gardening work. Pierce also used one of the buildings as a drawing studio for his work as a landscape architect.

Littoral's relationship with different funding organisations, including the Arts Council, was also described, along with Ian Hunter and Celia Larner's call for sufficient funding to carry out restoration to the existing buildings. There are also plans to establish a gallery on the foundations of an original barn adjacent to the Shippon. The 'barn space' has been used over a period of time to stage a programme of events, which has led to the involvement of art world luminaries, academics and a diverse range of communities.

Hunter and Larner see themselves as 'custodians' and advocates for the site, and its future use as it enters a transitional phase. Their hopes are dependent on the potential for Cylinders and being able to pass the management of the site on to another institution or organisation. During this period they have proposed and envisage a four-point plan that will unfold over a five-year timeframe between 2016 and 2021. The plan includes the following: capital work and restoration, an engagement programme, a schedule of international art projects, all built around the development of an ongoing gallery and artist residency programme under aegis of the *Merzshed*, and as discussed elsewhere during the day, the concept of the Cylinders as a 'third space'.

Littoral have also recently coordinated a series of events with a Dada focus, in Manchester at Islington Mill, and also as part of the annual Autumn School events held each year at Cylinders. These have involved the Manchester-based artist Jackie Haynes. Hunter also highlighted the good working relationship that Littoral have had with the National Parks and their support for Littoral's proposals including issues of access to the landscape and agriculturally-zoned farmland which comprises Cylinders. A change of use for educational purposes is feasible and this forms a major part of the Littoral ethos.

The seminar panel discussion chaired by Mark Wilson rounded on the nature of legacy and what this means in the context of Schwitters' work. Michael White suggested that Schwitters' work and legacy has altogether different understandings where this is more closely related to his literary or graphic output. Pavel Büchler cited Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* (1921) and further articulated a perspective constructed around the idea of the artist letting go of the work. Rob Airey steered the discussion back to the significance of art works and their presence and what compels individuals and audiences to return to places with this particular *caché,* as White described it earlier. All

of this reminded the audience of the decentered nature of any perspectives—academic, artist-led, curatorial or otherwise—which Schwitters' work provokes. It was felt that the projects or proposals posited should embrace an international perspective both in terms of research and scholarship as well as the context for their funding. Whereas these perspectives presume or privilege a definitive account or context, Schwitters' work continues to 'destabilise' any accepted notions of this kind.

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