

Exhibition Review - *Responses to Place*, Sayle Gallery, Douglas, Isle of Man, 27th September to 27th October 2013

Kurt Schwitters - Island of No Return

This exhibition review is written from multiple perspectives: In no specific order it takes a view informed by my own research related to how the work of Kurt Schwitters was shaped by his escape, internment and exile. Schwitters work can be understood in relation to the journey undertaken following his flight from his native city Hanover to Norway and beyond in 1937. The trajectory of this movement can be traced in the materials found and collected *en route*, which form part of the narrative encapsulated in the material transformation embodied in his artworks. An analysis of the exhibition's curatorial intent given the significance of the location is also key. As a native of the Isle of Man I stake my own investment in Schwitters work where a movement from one place to another, voluntary or otherwise, in the form of tourism, migration, expatriation or other conditions of exile form part of personal artist perspective, which collects parallel practices and attempts to reposition each, whether in a return or turn towards somewhere else.

After Nazi forces occupied Norway, Schwitters and his son Ernst boarded the ice-breaker Fridtjof Nansen from Tromsø on June 8th 1940. After ten days at sea, they were arrested and interned. Subsequently they were moved between a succession of internment camps including the notorious Warth Mills in Bury, Lancashire as were many other internees. Ultimately they were transported to the Isle of Man, on one of the Island's steam ship ferries arriving in Douglas on July 17th 1940. An *Untitled* line drawing in the exhibition of Adolf Gottschalk, also known as Freddy Godshaw and also another his older brother Walter, who like John Herzfeld (later Heartfield), anglicised their names. The Gottschalks were natives of Hanover and Freddy recalls that most internees departing from Liverpool didn't even know that there was an island in the middle of the Irish Sea. The internees also decided to speak only in English, given the nature of their circumstances. Unlike most, Schwitters had not gone before a tribunal in England, and was therefore held longer than other internees. He was finally released in November 1941 when he was reconciled with Ernst in London.

Responses to Place was curated by Fran Lloyd, a Professor of Art History at Kingston University, who has researched the life and work of Ernst Eisenmeyer and was also involved in the exhibition *Forced Journeys* from the Ben Uri Gallery. The exhibition at the Sayle Gallery in Douglas was a triumph in bringing a selection of Schwitters' artworks and those of his contemporaries to the island. This is no mean feat outside of the curatorial machine of major galleries and museums exemplified in the long overdue *Schwitters in Britain* exhibition at Tate Britain in 2013 and other recent survey exhibitions of this kind. It was a success to the extent that *Responses to Place* set out to acknowledge the little-researched aspect of this phase of Schwitters life and work as well as what preceded internment and what followed. This period was indeed a pivotal one and it is easy to underestimate the measure of its impact upon Schwitters and his contemporaries. The legacy of internment shaped many aspects of British social and cultural life as a result of lives uprooted by the exile experience.

Of the eleven camps in the Isle of Man Schwitters was interned in Hutchinson 'P' Camp, which was established around a square of boarding houses in Douglas, which were requisitioned by the government for this purpose. Hutchinson Square, which is relatively unchanged today, is located half-way up Broadway, which stretches from the centre of Douglas Promenade. The Edwardian boarding houses surround an enclosed park and gardens stepped across two levels. The elevated scene and sea-view, a vantage point with the Tower of Refuge, in Douglas Bay, are depicted in two sensitive line-drawings in colour by Bruno Ahrends: *Hutchinson Camp, Isle of Man* (1941) and a lino-cut where seagulls soar on high. A similar scene by Herman Fechenbach *Douglas, Isle of Man* (1941). This sea-view from the Camp, whilst pleasing to the eye, would equally have exacerbated the sense of marooned captivity, not so much from the perspective of escape, but rather the fearful consequences of a successful Nazi invasion and occupation, which loomed in the minds of all interned.

The events which followed Schwitters' release and his one time hope to eventually reach America or move back to Norway are counterpointed against the tragedy of not being able to return to his wife and home, which was destroyed by allied bombing in 1943. The response to place during internment was not one of a settled genius-loci or *Eigengift*, more usually associated with an unfettered sense of place but instead this experience manifests itself in an intense period of production under conditions of duress, which could be identified with the problematic concept of *innere Emigration*. This term was used to describe the position of those who did not flee Nazi Germany, should they have had that choice, but withdrew into an 'inner sphere' where they remained in Germany without openly criticising the regime and the atrocities committed in its name; A notion fiercely criticised by Thomas Mann.

In 2004 whilst conducting my own research into Schwitters escape, internment and exile I had the opportunity to meet with Klaus Hinrichsen, at the art historian's home in Highgate. During what was a very informal discussion of this experience and that of Schwitters and other internees, Hinrichsen referred to the notion of *innere Emigration* in part reference to the position adopted in the Camp, where it was decided that to maintain their morale and identity, co-operated in the sense that there was no possibility of escape; they maintained their dignity and moral by expending their energies devoted to intellectual, educational and creative activities. At the same time, in specific ways, they also acknowledged the way in which their status and identities were irrevocably changed as a result of events over which they had no control. But instead they finding themselves interned they could enrich their experience by drawing on their knowledge and history, which led Captain Daniel the camp official to claim credit for establishing what he named the Hutchinson University. Hinrichsen embraced this ethos and played an active part in the activities of the taking place in the camp. Hinrichsen had even seen Schwitters work in the infamous *Entartete Kunst* or Degenerate Art exhibition in Germany, where Schwitters work was declared *Vollendeter Wahnsinn* – complete insanity – by Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels and his henchmen, and somewhat in awe, the twenty-seven year old Hinrichsen befriended Schwitters who in turn warmed to the young man.

The exhibition *Responses to Place* features documentation related to two exhibitions in the Camp, one of which was organised by Klaus Hinrichsen. In November 1940 the first exhibition featured a painting by Schwitters of Rudolf Olden, secretary of the PEN Club in Exile. *Responses to Place* also contained a large portrait of Hinrichsen, as well as one of Fred Uhlman, whose *My Bedroom – The Artists uses his Suitcase as a work Surface* (1940) was on show as one of a series of conté poignantly titled *Absence of a Table*. Uhlman later wrote a vivid memoir recounting the internment experience in *The Making of an Englishman* (1960), which described other internees perception of Schwitters as an anachronistic representative of a redundant avant-garde. This is highlighted in a ascerbic manuscript account of life in the Camp written by Paul Ferdinand Jacobsthal, an esteemed Jewish classical archaeologist and author of *Early Celtic Art* (1944) who criticises all around him whilst relishing the luxury of the position from which he shows his impatience for everything including the intimacy of Camp life, the blazing sun overhead and everyone from Orthodox Jews, to ‘intellectual imposters’ one of whom he cites in Dr R. Eisler, who he recounts was painted by Schwitters in ‘robes borrowed from the daughter of the English Camp doctor, an undergraduate of an English University’. The sitter for this portrait, which was also included in the second art exhibition had previously been unidentified until my research for this review. Jacobsthal also described Schwitters as follows: “an amateurish painter who in the years after the last war in the Munich *Kabaret Simplicissimus* had given recitals of Dadist poems, a sort of infantile poetry, then much en vogue in Germany, a pedant of a certain type of bogus painting.” Schwitters however profited from his astute business sense in painting his fellow internees for a fee calculated on a sliding scale related to the type of portrait painted. These competently painted and drawn figurative works alongside Schwitters landscape output seemingly sit at odds with Schwitters collage and assemblage works, and the distinction or previous disregard for these has been ably articulated and championed by the Danish artist Per Kirkeby elsewhere. According to Hinrichsen – if Jacobsthal’s account is anything to go by – it is no surprise that Schwitters kept his abstract work hidden from view, worried that it would draw the ridicule of others, which indeed it did. Consequently he was protective of a deeply personal practice in which he privately subsumed his own psychic and physical dislocation.

What is found in the most febrile examples of Schwitters’ work is a psychic charge, where the biographical narrative of his journey is evident, in the material elements reconfigured in these works which, each time he temporarily settled, locate those staging points. They are cut-loose from their vernacular origin and purpose as they are displaced by a *shock*, which resonates in the gut and mind. This is leant a poignancy in the base-level resort to materials and substrates (as a substitute for more conventional materials) which were adopted by Schwitters. They charged specific works made during internment with an identity that, following John Elderfield’s observation, in some instances, hover on the edge of legibility. The most reductive of this type of work made during internment were not included in this exhibition probably owing to their fragility. Schwitters was aware of the significance of what was his *modus operandi*, in their materiality and dematerialisation (*entmaterialisation*), which are key facets of his work outlined in the manifesto publication of *Merz 1 - Holland Dada* in 1923.

Of the twenty-six artworks by Kurt Schwitters on show in *Responses to Place*, approximately half of these were actually made during internment; in fact he

made over 200 works during the sixteen months that he was interned. *Pink, Green and White* of 1940 was certainly made during internment and consists of vertically aligned strips and torn scraps of paper including slithers of text. One prophetic line of printed text incorporated in the collage reads 'From her Foundations, – rent'. During his movement from place to place Schwitters had always taken great care to ensure the safe passage of his artworks in his wake, when he could not physically take them with him, though they often were, along with other unlikely items, which he might pull from his jacket or trouser pockets at any moment.

The exhibition also draws together works by Schwitters' fellow artist internees, and what this represents is the significance of Schwitters standing and importance in the history of twentieth century art as opposed to the largely figurative output of his contemporaries. These works by others provide a counterpoint to Schwitters in their expressionist idiom, such as the linocuts of the graphic artist Hellmuth Weissenborn like *Still life in the Internment Camp – The Dust Bins*. This is not to discount the significance of those artists or other contemporaries such as Erich Kahn whom Hinrichsen later extensively researched for his biography of Kahn *A Painter's Life and Time*. In *Responses to Place*, a lithograph printed cover for the Camp Almanac designed by Kahn was presented in a display case. The exhibition's use of ephemera and documents of this kind provide a picture of life in the Camp included a weekly *Bill of Fare* that featured a local staple of smoked herring or kippers. A recording of the *Ursonate* sound poem also forms part of the exhibition. Hinrichsen's account of Schwitters performance poem *Silence* carried added poignancy where the very English ritual of taking afternoon tea is given the Merz treatment. Schwitters repetitively utters the word 'silence' whilst rotating a cup on its saucer progressively raising his voice until this incantation attained a pitch, which culminated in his smashing the cup and saucer against the floor to the incredulous but rapturous applause of his audience. This irreverent and aberrant relationship with materials and place is exemplified in the sonic dimensions of Schwitters' work which continue to reverberate today. (Recent recipient of the 2013 Turner Prize Laure Provost's video work *Wantee* is testament to this.) Schwitters was also prone to barking from an open window of his room at night, he built a nest under his bed, didn't wear socks and the erection of three columns fabricated from left-over porridge collected each morning, as no plaster was available, could be construed as a substitute for the original *Merzsäule* column, which he had left behind at the heart of the *Merzbau*, constructed across six or more rooms of his home in Waldhausenstrasse in Hanover from 1923 onwards. The porridge sculpture was playfully rejected by Hinrichsen for the second exhibition on the grounds of health and safety in place of the portraits of Olden and Eisler cited above.

The interrelationship of all the different elements described here are embedded in the exhibition, but its design does not succeed in drawing these to the surface in an explicit way; the remit of the exhibition was not necessarily to fulfil this potential for an audience, who in fifteen minutes might walk from the gallery to the place where some of these works were made. (The programme of events run in conjunction with the exhibition did include a walking tour by the curator and others, which was reported in island's press but attended mainly by those in the know rather than enlightening a wider public but such is the nature of events of this kind.)

The internees found themselves caught in a 'double-binded homelessness', faced with the expectation in their minds that they may never be able to return to their former homes, and held captive by those with whom they had sought refuge. Many intellectuals and academics had already settled in Britain and held positions in British Universities. Churchill's mandate to 'Collar the lot!' was proposed as the only expedient way of dealing with the crisis of managing domestic fear and panic surrounding the possibility of infiltration and invasion. Hinrichsen told me that the internees' greatest fear was the possibility of a successful Nazi invasion and occupation of the British Isles via Ireland. It is easy to forget that as part of their incarceration the internees were not privy to news of the war's progress. Hinrichsen described moments when the intellectual and artist related events and debates shifted to conversations where it was agreed that the only option with which they would be faced should such a situation materialise, would be to take their own lives rather than face the fate that was to affect millions of others. This was the decision taken by many others, such as the German, Jewish literary critic, and no doubt many others, Walter Benjamin during his ill-starred attempt to escape from Nazi-occupied France to Port Bou in Spain. Benjamin had written about Schwitters in his landmark essay *The Little History of Photography* in 1931.

The exhibition includes other important collage and assemblage works made prior to internment, such as *Opened by Customs* (1937), which refers, in this context, to the censorship of correspondence entered into by internees; letters were limited to twenty-four lines on special paper. Schwitters had been energetic in maintaining a network of Dada associated artist contacts across Europe before the war and during his time in Norway and during internment wrote letters to friends and his wife Helma, still in Hanover, and artists including Kate Steinitz in America. Schwitters and others were also instrumental in lobbying the Home Office to state the case for their release. Many of Schwitters' letters to Helma and his mother present a purposefully rose-tinted view of his experience so as not to alarm his wife, (and in order to satisfy the requirements of the censors), where in reality he was prone to bouts of frustration and depression. He displaced these feelings when he could by working feverishly on paintings and smaller works as well as giving readings of his poems and stories at events hosted by the Camp's self-styled Cultural Department, of which Hinrichsen was secretary.

Other works in the exhibition include *Roofs of Houses in Douglas* (1941), which was painted onto linoleum cut or raised from the floor of one of the boarding houses. It depicts a view across the town to Douglas Head painted from a studio, which Captain Daniel provided Schwitters with for this purpose. Windows in houses opposite, which are seen across an expanse of roof, were painted dark blue to ensure blackout during air raids. (Similarly painted windows around the camp, in one case, were scraped away by the circus impresario Neunzer to depict animal drawings.) In return Schwitters presented the enlightened commander with *Untitled (Abstract oval picture)*, which was included in a leather-bound album of works by Schwitters and other internees presented to Daniel in gratitude for his support. The exhibition also featured a number of works made whilst in London and the Lake District following his release including three small sculptures, one *Untitled (Ochre)* (1945 -47) were first analysed in the paper *Sculpture for the Hand – Kurt Schwitters in England* presented by Megan Rand Luke, invited as special guest speaker for the 2009 conference, *Kurt Schwitters in*

England and the Art of Appropriation, which I facilitated and organised at the University of Chester.

The artworks which Fran Lloyd has brought together for the exhibition have been drawn from major collections held by the Tate and the Sprengel Museum (home of the *Kurt Schwitters Archive*), as well as works from smaller museums and galleries and private collectors. The last item listed in the exhibition catalogue has been loaned by the Armitage Museum in Ambleside. An anonymously authored painting on an asbestos tile of approximately 15 cm square, nestles in the midst of other works in the exhibition. It would be easy to miss why the presence of this painting is potentially significant. It is a missed opportunity that the background of this work was not elaborated on as part of the curatorial strategy and narrative of the exhibition, which could have been more fully explored and developed and this criticism is advanced only in the sense of high expectations of this writer. About ten years ago this particular painting first came to public attention on the BBC television programme the *Antiques Road Show*, along with some signed portrait line drawings, which were undoubtedly attributable to Schwitters. The unsigned painting, however, remains an anomaly as its provenance – so important to museological identification and authenticity – rests alone upon means of verification, which rely on other factors, which to some extent lie outside the work itself. These items were brought onto the programme by a viewer named Eva Shrewsbury who was interested to find out more about the person she understood had given them to her father Walter Goldschmidt. At the time Mrs Shrewsbury believed that her father and Schwitters had met in Hutchinson Camp or it is also supposed possibly at Warth Mills. I was eventually able to make contact with Eva Shrewsbury, who described her father's experience of internment as an unhappy one, following his flight from Germany in 1939. Shrewsbury has described how her father loved and collected art and how he could have purchased the painting and the drawings from Schwitters. They were apparently kept in a cardboard portmanteau in a cupboard in Goldschmidt's home in Britain following his release until they stirred the interest of his daughter after her father passed away.

The painting whether it is from Schwitters' hand or not – and surely it could be – defies categorisation and encapsulates, in its celebratory flourish, the possibility of hope in the face of destruction. The painting delicately and fluidly renders a clover-like, heart motif in redolent of Schwitters' inventory, which often included talismans of luck and fortune of this kind. Its immediacy carries within it echoes of Schwitters emerging preoccupation with natural forms, rather than the urban context of his earlier output, and it was nature that was at the root of his final work the *Merz Barn* which he worked on in Elterwater before he died in January 1948. The hope and possibility, which this image embodies, was carried forward by those who never ceased to believe in the redemptive potential of art, such as Klaus Hinrichsen, whom this review is dedicated.

In 2004 as part of Tate conference *Kurt Schwitters in England* convened by the Littoral Arts Trust Hinrichsen asked me to present his paper *The Schwitters and Wantee I Knew* as part of my own presentation, which it was an honour to be asked to do. Klaus Hinrichsen's wife Gretel sent a message of support for *Responses to Place*, which was read out at the exhibition preview:

“Klaus always believed that had many of the artists who came to Hutchinson not been forced to flee, their names and work would now be far more widely recognised and in the forefront of German art. He would have been delighted with this exhibition and the importance the Isle of Man continues to give to this period of its history.”

Lanke Trr gll – Lanke Trr gll – Pe, pe, pe, pe – Ooka, ooka, ooka – Züüka, züüka, züüka...

Cian Quayle, February 2nd 2014

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