

KURT

SCHWITTERS

ELTERWATER

MERZ BARN



The Merz Barn wall art work insitu. c. 1947

(by courtesy of the Sprengle Museum and the Kurt and Ernst Schwitters Foundation)



The Merz Barn, December 2012



"I know that I am an important factor in the development of art and shall forever remain so. I say this with great emphasis, so that one can not say, at a later date: 'The poor fellow had no inkling of how important he was'. No I am no fool, nor am I timid. I know full well that the time will come for me and all other important personalities of the abstract movement, when we will influence an entire generation. However, I fear that I shall not experience this."

* Kurt Schwitters, 'I and my purpose' in Merz, no. 21, 1931; as quoted in 'Introduction' of the catalogue of Schwitters one-man show at the Marlborough Gallery, London March-April 1963.



Kurt Schwitters (in dark suit) seated outside the Shippon June 1947, with Edith Thomas and Bill Pierce (seated). The letter sticking out of Schwitters' pocket is from MoMA New York announcing the award of the Kaufmann Fellowship of \$1,000 which enabled him to begin work on the Merz Barn.

(by courtesy of the Sprengle Museum and the Kurt and Ernst Schwitters Foundation)



June 1947 - the people who supported Schwitters with his work on the Merz Barn;
(l-r) Gwyneth Davis, Edith Thomas, Jack Cook (standing), Kurt Schwitters, Harry Pierce and
Hilde Goldschmidt

(by courtesy of the Sprengle Museum and the Kurt and Ernst Schwitters Foundation)

Kurt Schwitters and the Merz Barn project

Proposals for the restoration and development of Kurt Schwitters' Merz Barn project and the associated Lakeland heritage landscape gardens at the Cylinders Estate Elterwater, Cumbria

"Dada was perhaps the first fully international art movement, and Kurt Schwitters one of its most significant representatives. He is an artist of global renown and global reach, and the Merz Barn is both a magnet for and a beacon to creative people around the world."

Dr Michael White, Professor of History of Art, University of York

27th November 2015

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The legacy of the Merz Barn and Kurt Schwitters in Britain – some commentaries in support of the report



“The Merz Barn project is an outstanding contribution to the understanding of contemporary art, not only in this country but in the world-art context. It has taken great care and work to bring this to fruition. It speaks enormously well of Cumbria and of us as a nation, and will undoubtedly be a focus of interest for decades to come.

To think that it will crumble away for the sake of a modest grant speaks very badly of the Arts Council’s priorities, especially in the more remote parts of England. I do hope this will be reconsidered.”

Lord Bragg, (11/6/2014)



“Kurt Schwitters’ extraordinary Merz Barn and artistic legacy in rural Cumbria are [now] ... our responsibility; in the North and also nationally ... I hope that the Arts Council will see its way towards supporting these important and vital next stages in the project’s capital works, restoration and future arts development work.”

Ed Vaizey, Arts Minister DCMS, Tate Britain. (27/11/2014)



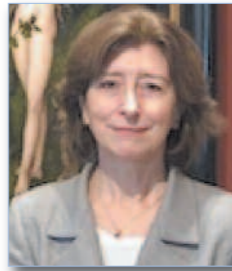
“I want to take this opportunity to celebrate the great work that Littoral Arts (Ian Hunter and Celia Larner) have achieved with the Merz Barn project in Cumbria. As a funder it is very rare that you meet people who have the imagination and are genuinely tenacious and innovative, and who want to make a difference and an impact in a new area of public life. And they have achieved this in a way that actually proved to be so exciting and culminating in this capital project”

Pauline Tambling CBE, CEO UK - National Creative and Cultural Skills Academy, 2015, formerly Head of Policy and Research at Arts Council England. (17/11/2015)



“I love what they [the Littoral Arts Trust] are trying to do here and I’m glad someone is keeping the memory of Schwitters alive. It’s a wonderful project that will further strengthen and expand good cultural relations between Germany and Cumbria and the North of England.”

Gräfin von Roedern, the The Federal German Republic Consul for the North, at the official opening of the Entartete Kunst memorial garden at the Merz Barn site, (11/6/2014)



“The Merz Barn is a uniquely inspiring monument in the UK: a work of art, a piece of autobiography, and a historic document, being a kind of memorial to the upheavals of the first half of the 20th century in Europe. That it remains so little known to a wider public is greatly to be lamented and there is no doubt that it deserves greater recognition in this country, as indeed does its maker, Kurt Schwitters, and his connection with the UK. This leading artist of the Modern era spent a significant part of his career here and yet goes relatively unrecognised alongside the likes of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, with whose artistic production Schwitters’ is surely equal.

I therefore applaud the excellent work already done by the Littoral Trust in bolstering the profile of this deserving artist, and fully support its proposals for the restoration of the Merz Barn site, which will allow a yet greater pool of artists, designers and architects to be inspired by Schwitters’ work and provide a centre from and around which Schwitters scholarship will rightly flourish”.

Professor Deborah Swallow, Märit Rausing Director, The Courtauld Institute of Art (27/11/2015)



“... I would like to thank Littoral Arts Trust for what it is doing. I think it is so extraordinary. For those of us who have loved what Schwitters has done here it has been a source of difficulty to see how little had happened before Ian and Celia arrived on the scene a decade ago, with a determination no less than equal to the artist’s. They have really carried this along, ... now we have this great organisation. This is a hinge moment. A great deal has been achieved and we are right at the turning point. Anything we can do to put some oil on the hinges [for the Merz Barn project] we must and should do.

Dr John Elderfield, Chief Curator Emeritus Museum of Modern Art, New York, European art advisor, Larry Gagosian



“I cannot overstate how important a site the Merz Barn is and what a boost for the Cumbrian economy if some sort of an art museum or similar could be accommodated there ... I congratulate the Littoral Arts Trust for all their hard work and in helping to bring this project forward, for Cumbria and nationally”

Tim Farron, MP Lonsdale and Westmorland, Leader of the LibDem Party. (11/06/2014)



“The Littoral Arts Merz Barn restoration project promises an exciting future for contemporary art in the county. Having recently re-launched the Institute of the Arts at our Brampton Road campus, the focus on the rediscovery and repositioning of Kurt Schwitter’s work in Cumbria is timely and we offer our enthusiastic support to Littoral Arts in their work. We look forward to developing a close and fruitful relationship.”

Professor Peter Strike, Vice Chancellor, University of Cumbria. (19/11/2015)



“It is amazing what Littoral Arts have achieved at the Merz Barn and the range of people that they manage to bring together. It was also very touching for me as a German, in the arts, to see the admiration for Schwitters, and all the [Entartete Kunst] artists whose work was also neglected and displaced by the Nazis. It is very rewarding to realize the scholarship that is being done here in the UK on Schwitters.”

*Professor Ute Meta Bauer, international curator Singapore,
former Dean of the Royal College of Art.*



“The Littoral Arts Trust are widely respected internationally for their early pioneering work and conferences promoting socially engaged art practices; Salford 1994 and Dublin in 1998. They were ground-breaking events. Their current work on Art and the Policy Sphere, and with connecting up arts and culture and rural development and agricultural policy agendas are also of equal international importance, and should be supported. Further, had Kurt Schwitters made it to the USA in 1945/46 and erected his Merz Barn with MoMA's help in NY, as he had hoped, a major art museum would almost certainly have been erected in the artist's honor by now.”

Professor Suzanne Lacy, Chair Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, USA 23/11/201



“Although Kurt Schwitters was considered peculiar by many of his contemporaries and labelled 'degenerate' by some of them, from our standpoint he has all we expect of an artist today; he made full potential of every medium of communication available to him, explored the intersections of language, meaning and aesthetics in hugely innovative ways, and made work that spoke across borders, understood in every sense: geographic, linguistic and cultural. I very much hope that the [Future of the Merz Barn] report is as well received as it deserves to be. Well done to Littoral Arts for pulling all of this together and getting such an extraordinary range of people behind it. It's really tremendous.”

Professor Michael White, History of Art, University of York



“The Royal College of Art's historic links with Cumbria and Kurt Schwitters date back to WWII when the college was evacuated from London to Ambleside. This relationship was not only bound by the physical relocation of our students to Ambleside but also founded upon a desire to engage with the work of Schwitters and his fellow artists. The utopian desire for art, which had developed out of Berlin Dada, inspired a generation of artists to think critically about the importance of art's role in creating a better way to live. Our students and staff continue to visit and organise residential workshops at the Merz Barn site. This year we have validated a new MA programme entitled 'Contemporary Art Practice' with pathways in Critical Practice, Public Sphere, Performance and Moving Image. For us there could be no better time to consolidate our relationship with Ambleside and we look forward to future collaborations. We fully support the Littoral Arts Trust's proposals for the restoration and future development of the Merz Barn site, for what is clearly a project of great national and international importance.”

Juan Cruz, Dean of Fine Art, Royal College of Art.

Introduction and Project Summary:

Professor John Holden

“The U.K. has an international moral responsibility to safeguard the future survival of Schwitters’ last Merzbau, the Elterwater Merz Barn, which is an acclaimed pioneering and experimental site for modern art and architecture”.

Kurt Schwitters (1887 – 1948) was a German artist who in his last years lived, worked and died in the Lake District; “almost a British Citizen” as Brian Sewell wrote. His historic and international reputation has been growing, particularly over the past two decades, and in 2013 Tate Britain honoured Schwitters with a show dedicated to his work. His creative legacy continues to influence a large number of both established and emerging artists.

As an important contributor to the development of Modernism, Schwitters created a form of Dada known as ‘Merz’. In the years immediately following the Second World War, Schwitters constructed and worked in a ‘Merzbau’, or Merz Barn, set in the historic landscape gardens of the Cylinders Estate near the village of Elterwater, in South Lakeland. After his death the building fell into disrepair but for the past ten years it has been owned and cared for by the Littoral Arts Trust, an artist-led arts development organization based in the North West of England.

The Littoral Arts Trust has set up a special initiative called the Merz Barn Project that seeks to:

- a) Secure the future of the Merz Barn building and the surrounding landscape site.
The U.K. has an international moral responsibility to safeguard the future survival of Schwitters’ last Merzbau, the Elterwater Merz Barn, which is an acclaimed pioneering and experimental site for modern art and architecture. Germany and Norway have both recently committed significant funding to new museum construction and restoration of Schwitters’ other Merzbau experiments. The Merz Barn and the Cylinders Estate landscape gardens cannot be considered separately – they stand united in a unique art/architecture/landscape continuum.
- b) Increase public access.
The Project will widen public engagement and understanding of Schwitters and the artistic heritage of the Merz Barn itself, and will locate both within the development of British and international Modern art.
- c) Fulfill an art-historical function.
By encouraging scholarly and artistic consideration of Schwitters’ work, and re-positioning his artistic legacy more effectively

within the key narratives of British modern and contemporary art. This will enable Schwitters to take his rightful place in the pantheon of Modern British Art alongside such figures as Hepworth, Moore and Nicholson.

- d) Play a role in contemporary art.
The Project will widen contemporary artistic engagement with Schwitters’ creative legacy, and promote and document his ongoing influence on the development of contemporary art, design and architecture in the United Kingdom and internationally.

The Merz Barn Project has been, and continues to be, supported by many leading UK and international artists, curators, historians and public figures, some of whom have given substantial financial support.

With assistance from a number of funding bodies (including Arts Council England) the Littoral Arts Trust has commissioned four independent consultancy reports to suggest a way forward for the Merz Barn Project. Together these reports address the following issues:

- a) An assessment of the physical condition of the buildings and the site;
- b) The detailed repair and restoration steps needed to secure the future of the Merz Barn and the historic garden within which it sits;
- c) A study of proposals, together with an options analysis, for an arts development programme at the site;
- d) The governance of the Project, following a major review and skills audit undertaken by the Littoral Arts Trust.

The main recommendations flowing from the reports cover the period June 2016 to July 2019, and suggest that Option B Phases I and II (as set out in Section 5 of the Merz Barn Project Report) offer the most realistic, flexible and practical means to deliver the project’s aims. The Option B proposals involve capital expenditure on restoration work for the site and buildings and the implementation of an arts development programme. Implementation of the proposals would help to secure the Merz Barn Project’s longer term sustainability, as well as maximising its potential wider artistic, educational, cultural, economic, environmental and public benefits.

The Merz Barn Project is potentially a major international success story for the UK, Cumbria and Arts Council England. As art-historical interest in Schwitters continues to grow and public interest in the visual arts expands, there is likely to be increasing visitor demand for the preservation and interpretation of this artist’s work. The international importance of the Project has already been recognized by the arts community and by Government, and it is now time to act on their good intentions. 2016 - 2018 will see several important Merz Barn and Kurt Schwitters-related anniversaries, including Dada 100 and the centenary of the beginnings of modern art in Zurich in February 1916.

But there is another, and more worrying reason why action is needed now. The architectural heritage conservationist’s report shows that stabilization and restoration work at the site are urgently needed for health and safety reasons.

Once the physical conservation and arts development programme are in place, the consultancy reports show that there is potential for further development in the form of innovative buildings to provide experimental arts spaces; a new digital aspect; the creation of an ArtsLab; and advanced scholarship and research.

The Littoral Arts Trust is to be commended for having worked long and hard to save the Merz Barn from otherwise inevitable decay. As Lord (Melvyn) Bragg says: “It has taken great care and work to bring this [project] to fruition”. But the Trust’s capacities are limited and the time is now right to take the Project to the next level, as a project of national and international importance. The Merz Barn needs to be put on a firm footing in order to achieve a secure future.

Dr. John Holden is a Strategic Advisory Committee Member of the Clore Leadership Programme, Visiting Professor at City University, London and an Associate at the think-tank Demos. He is a writer, speaker and commentator on many aspects of culture, and his publications include Influence and Attraction, Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, and the co-authored Cultural Leadership Handbook. John is a Trustee of the Hepworth, Wakefield, and a member of the Education Boards of the Royal Opera House and the Design Museum, and of the European Expert Network on Culture.



Entrance to the Langdale valley and the Langdale Pikes, near the site of the Merz Barn