

Merzbarn Exhibition Research Proposal

Proposed arts research, commissioning and exhibition programme: partnership with the Hatton Art Gallery and the Kurt Schwitters in England Merzbarn working group.

Aims

To develop a major touring exhibition and public art programme, and associated research, new media and documentation, promoting scholarship and wider public understanding of the Merzbarn installation and the other art works produced by Kurt Schwitters during his last years in England. The exhibition will be staged first at the Hatton Art Gallery, and then toured regionally and nationally, in a possible partnership with Manchester Art Gallery, the Tate Liverpool, and the Tate Britain. Part funding for the project will be sought through the Arts Council England national touring fund.

The exhibition and research project

The core exhibition will be based on art works by Schwitters (paintings, sculpture, assemblages, drawings and photographs) held in regional and national collections, together with documentary records relating to the Merzbarn. This will be developed in tandem with a programme of new research and documentation about the Merzbarn commissioned from leading artists, architects, new media artists, and writers. The programme could include artists' residencies, digital arts/architecture research projects, new writing, websites/net art, and video installations, coordinated to create an in-depth study of the history of Kurt Schwitters' unfinished Merzbarn project in Elterwater, and its iconography, development, critical legacy, and ongoing influence on contemporary art and architecture.

Promoting new scholarship and public access to Kurt Schwitters and the Merzbarn

The project will explore the potential of new media, on-line technology, virtual reality/interactive projects, and CD ROMs to provide new ways of investigating the Merzbarn; re-connecting the wall installation from the Merzbarn, now on display at the Hatton Art Gallery, with its original site in the barn on the Cylinders estate; and connecting up electronically all the archives, documentation and published work about Schwitters in England and the Merzbarn held in regional and national/international museum collections and university centres, and to make these more widely accessible to international and domestic audiences. This may also form the basis for a parallel bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Proposed Elements

- 1 **Exhibition: 'Reconstructing the Merzbarn, its history and critical legacy'**,
An exhibition tracing the history, iconography and development of the Merzbarn installation, and the critical legacy left in terms of its influence on contemporary sculpture, environmental art, and architecture. Possible elements include:
 - i Presentation of all the known original photographs, drawings, sketches, correspondence, and written descriptions of the Merzbarn produced by Schwitters and his associates, with interpretations of these by curators and art critics such as John Elderfield and Fred Brookes.
 - ii Display of new commissioned documentation by leading artists/photographers, based on records of the site at Cylinders and the Hatton Gallery wall as they are today; including photo_graphs, digital art imagery, and drawings and plans of the Merzbarn shed and (if possible) the wall.
 - iii Reconstructing the story of the removal of the Merzbarn wall from Elterwater, and its relocation and restoration at the Hatton Art Gallery, University of Newcastle. This will be mainly based on new research and interpretation of the visual records, drawings and photographic records of the Merzbarn made by Mary Burkett and Fred Brookes.
 - iv Architectural models, drawings, and digital projections of how the completed Merzbarn might have looked. Interactive digital projects tracing the evolution of Schwitters' installation, using digital animation and 3D articulation of the key design and and sculptural elements. With 3D

architectural models presenting views of how the barn might have looked had Schwitters had time to finish the installation.

- v The Elterwater project in the context of the Merzbauten. An exhibition tracing the origins of the Merzbarn in the context of the development and iconography of the earlier Merzbauten in Hanover and Norway. This will be based on photographs, documentary materials and models on loan from the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, the Tate Schwitters archive, and Norwegian museum and KS Foundation contacts.
- vi Documenting the critical legacy and ongoing influence of the Merzbarn project and Schwitters' ideas, on the development of contemporary art, sculpture, writing, music, environmental art and architecture. Drawing on works by leading UK and international artists, architects, writers and filmmakers who have a particular interest in the Merzbarn, or have been influenced in some way by it: Jack Ox, Christopher Fox, Tim Ulrichs, Damien Hirst, Peter Blake, George Melly, Hank Bull, Willoughby Sharp, Masami Akita, Frank O. Gehry, Susan Hiller, Daniel Libeskind, and others.
- vii Merz audio anthology. New music and audio works CD commissioned for the Tate Britain conference and MERZKABARET in July 2004; Masami Akita, Conrad Lampert MERZ band, Christopher Fox, etc.

2 **Publication: Merzbarn anthology and catalogue**

Proposed exhibition catalogue and/or critical anthology of key essays and new writing about the Merzbarn, by leading art historians, artists, curators and critics. Suggested format, and possible editor and contributors:

Editors: **Sarah Wilson**, Courtauld Institute of Art and Isabelle Ewig, (Sorbonne, Paris)

Introduction: **Richard Hamilton?**

Suggested Contributors and Topics:

Fred Brookes: - The re-discovery of the Merzbarn in the 1960s and its relocation and restoration at the Hatton Gallery, University of Newcastle

Sarah Wilson Courtauld Art Institute: Kurt Schwitters and the Merzbarn in England (reworking of 1994 Pompidou exhibition catalogue essay).

Michael Erlhoff Cologne Design School and **Klaus Stadtmüller**: The Merzbarn and its links with the Hanover Merzbau (Editors of the Kurt Schwitters Almanac 1983 - 87).

Jasia Reichardt: Kurt Schwitters in Exile: The Late Work 1937 - 1948; the Merzbauten in Norway and in England.

Mary Burkett: The Merzbarn and Kurt Schwitters in Ambleside - the records held in Abbott Hall and Elterwater, a Cumbrian perspective.

John Elderfield MoMA: The art historical context and the international legacy of the Merzbarn.

Adrian Glew Tate Modern: Archiving the Merzbarn, international research sources, web_ography and bibliography.

Other suggestions: Dr **Roger Cardinal**, University of Southampton; Dr **Stephen Foster**, Dada Archive University of Iowa; Dr **Sean Rainbird**, Tate Modern; Prof. **Karel Dudesek**, Head of Intermedia studies KIAD, Ravensbourne.

3 **Merzbarn Website and CD ROM**

Development of a dedicated Merzbarn website to promote the exhibition, and to act as a point of contact and networking platform for other Kurt Schwitters sites and museum archives, and as host site for the Virtual Merzbarn, interactive architectural/digital arts research and restoration project.

See (iv). And a CD ROM based on the Website.

4 Artists' research projects and documentation commissions

- i Documenting the Merzbarn today. Commission for a photographer/artist to generate new visual images for the exhibition based on the environmental and architectural aspects of the Merzbarn site in Elterwater, alongside a detailed study of the Hatton Merzbarn wall, and the art works and locations associated with Schwitters' time in Ambleside and Elterwater. Possible portraiture commission, to photograph people associated with Schwitters and the Merzbarn (contemporaries and present day): Mary Burkett, Geoff Thomas, Klaus Hinrichsen, Nicholas Wadley, Jasia Reichardt, John Elderfield, George Melly, Richard Hamilton, Fred Brookes.
- ii *The Absences of Schwitters*. Commission for an artist/photographer to produce a new body of work based on the idea of recording the 'absences' of Schwitters: the empty grave in Ambleside; the empty Merzbarn shed in Cylinders; the bombed site of the Merzbau in Hanover; the site of the fire damaged Merzbau in Norway; and the artist's various former residential addresses in London (Barnes), Douglas, Isle of Man, and Ambleside. Possible joint commission with the Tate Britain, Abbott Hall, the Sprengel Museum, and the KS Foundation in Norway.
- iii The Merzbarn architectural legacy, research and restoration project
Commission for a team of architects and/or architecture students to carry out research, using existing archives and sketches, into the possibility of re-constructing the Merzbarn as Schwitters might have completed it, and covering the engineering and architectural problems involved with its removal and re-location to Newcastle. Production of a set of 3D architectural models, drawings and projections documenting the findings and proposing hypothetical completions for the Merzbarn. The project could also trace the influence of the Merzbauten and the Merzbarn installation on contemporary architecture and environmental art. Proposed collaboration with the RIBA, Daniel Libeskind, etc.
- iv *The Virtual Merzbarn*. Interactive architectural/digital arts research and restoration project, possibly organised in collaboration with project (iii). Proposal to bring together architects, digital artists and IT engineers, to construct an interactive virtual representation of the Merzbarn, tracing its iconography and evolution from conception through the various stages of its construction and design. The project could include an on-line chat room and interactive website/3D virtual Merzbarn, allowing scholars, artists and researchers in different countries to contribute new information and participate in debate about the Merzbarn. It may be possible to use new technology to visualise and construct alternative online solutions to the unfinished Merzbarn. Led by Professor Karel Dudesek KIAD/Ravensbourne
- v Video/film documentary about the history of the Merzbarn and the exhibition.
A 30 -40 minute video/DVD commission documenting the Merzbarn exhibition and research projects, including an historical overview and documentary about the Merzbarn project, drawing upon the main exhibitions and artists projects' research work as outline above, including other film and photography archive materials about the Merzbarn and Schwitters in England.

5 Merzbarn Research Fellowship

Proposal to establish a one year Kurt Schwitters/Merzbarn Research Fellowship to coincide with the exhibition and research programme. Possible partnership with the Tate Britain/Liverpool, The Hatton Art Gallery, Abbott Hall Art Gallery, and could be based at the University of Newcastle. Open to artists, film makers, art historians and/or curators committed to working on longer term research projects, leading to exhibitions, films, publications or conferences about Kurt Schwitters and the Merzbarn.

6. Public forums, international conference and summer school

The opening of the exhibition could co-incide with a Kurt Schwitters Merzbarn international

conference and summer school proposed for July or September 2005. This could be staged jointly at the Hatton Art Gallery/University of Newcastle and at Elterwater and in Ambleside. The Kurt Schwitters in England working group is considering holding a preparatory seminar and workshop for artists and researchers at Elterwater in September 2003. A Merzbarn forum and VIP fund-raising event and reception is also planned for London, possibly at the Tate Britain in November.

7. **Kurt Schwitters in England Merz-land conference** at the Tate Britain, 9 - 10 July 2004
(see draft programme attached)