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Proposed Abstract for NFAE Conference: "Research Practice Practice Research"
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July 17th & 18th, 2016

'Smells like Kurt's Spirit'

A sensory exploration of Kurt Schwitters' spirited legacy of Merz.

This paper intersects at the early stages of the Kurt Schwitters Studentship at the University of Cumbria and an ongoing involvement with Littoral Arts Trust's Merzbarn Project, based in Elterwater in the Lake District National Park. It frames the starting point of a formal art practice-based exploration of selected aspects of Kurt Schwitters' one-man art movement - Merz.

With an underlying theme of movement in both the research and the practice, the research asks if Schwitters' legacy of Merz can be considered as a nomadic entity and transformative site for affecting change to social, subjective and economic relations through art practice.

Schwitters made art on the move, fleeing, being interned during WW2 and finally making the locational choices of London then Elterwater. He scoped out a conceptual, autonomous space in which to develop his practice. Thinking around this in terms of a nomadic, shifting space rather than a fixed utopian place better accommodate ideas of the uprooted individual.

The methodology adopted in relation to the nomadic, is an adaptation of a 'see-saw mechanism' with art practice and the other subject area of academic research as critical counter balances, mobilising and energising each other in turn. This could be visualised as an airborne railway handcar minus the tracks.

The research aims to contribute to efforts which hold the problem of Schwitters' Merz ajar and debates open. Learning to better understand the problem by developing a generative art practice alongside a personal art practitioner philosophy, the study aspires to augment his proliferating influence by creating and connecting relevant dialogues.

The problem of Schwitters' Merz is that the UK currently lacks a place to coherently demonstrate and proffer Schwitters' legacy. This demands a dynamic methodology orbiting around the problem and finding strategies for seeking out points of entry, enabling ways with which to worry at it. The problem is how to ensure that it remains problematic and therefore, alive.

Smells like Kurt's Spirit

A sensory exploration of Kurt Schwitters's spirited legacy of Merz.

I have found myself in two uniquely fortunate situations, in that I am the first person to be appointed this particular research scholarship from the University of Cumbria, which I began in April. The second is that this conference coach trip to Kurt Schwitters' Merz Barn coincides with the subject matter of my research.

I am engaged with the opportunity to explore through my art practice, selected aspects of the work of German artist Kurt Schwitters' work from his one-man art movement which he called MERZ.

The kind of sensory exploration which I allude to in the title of this Paper is a metaphorical use of the human vestibular sensory system of movement and balance. Biologically, balance is perceived in the inner ear. In the context of my art practice and research, however, I have been investigating successes and failures of balance in art produced whilst in transit.

Kurt Schwitters succeeded in producing a prolific output of balanced art works, despite being almost constantly in transit for the last ten years of his life. This is a disorientating prospect considering that for Schwitters, balance was the aim of a work of art. This unstable method of working can be seen to mobilise both the possibilities and limitations of content, contexts and success, measured in terms of balance.

Broadly speaking, Schwitters left Hannover and Nazi Germany from Norway in 1937, via Edinburgh and the Isle of Man to London four years later. After another four years he arrived in Ambleside, working on his final Merzbau in Elterwater until he died in 1948. Elterwater and Ambleside are in The Lake District National Park, a reference which also serves to highlight the cultural and geographical connections between Kurt Schwitters, the University of Cumbria Institute for the Arts and MERZ.

I am interested in Schwitters' apparent ability to manage a conceptual psychological and philosophical space in which his nomadic practice evolved. Schwitters' material and temporal resourcefulness is evident in his many exhibited works, printed publications and recordings.

The generative art practice that I am developing has involved multiple trips by a variety of forms of public transport for a variety of practice and research related reasons. Departures from my home in Manchester have recently included numerous short trips to Ambleside, Carlisle, Elterwater, Lancaster, London, Preston and Zurich. I view time and money spent on travel as a

resource rather than an irritation, not only as raw material with which to consider and form work, but an embodiment and an emersion into a way of working necessary for becoming attuned to ideas being generated from this rhythm.

In her thesis 'Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau', Gwendolen Webster refers to 'the neglected field of the art of (inner) emigration' as a suggestion for further research. I understand inner emigration in this sense to refer to Schwitters' ability to proliferate under duress, not to be confused with Thomas Mann's expression regarding post-war German politics. Her timeframe is outlined in relation to Schwitters' Merz buildings in the 1930s and 40s which also encompasses Schwitters' nomadic period. Schwitters' activated his Merz methods from the autonomous world he both retreated into and looked out from. In my recent practice I have reflected that by moving around independently and consistently, I have begun to recognise similar notions of being simultaneously inside and outside of situations. The generative activity of selectively drawing in content and outputting work from within the fluid parameters of this adaptive and responsive situation, so far have struck a balance between feeling energised and drained. Through this line of enquiry, I am seeking out resonances between what I hope to understand of Schwitters' (inner) emigrant in relation to the one I am deliberately creating. I acknowledge that the circumstances of my own transitory movements as an agitative research method are in no way similar to those of Schwitters, his 'enemy alien' and refugee status, accompanying harsh realities and hardship. Schwitters' arguably had a vision made vulnerable, compromised by his circumstances. I value the access to vital sources of energy from having an outward facing, socially and critically engaged practice. For this reason and contrary to my necessarily static studio-based processes, I adopt situation responsive methods around the selected remit of site, performativity, objects and conversation or to use the acronym, S.P.O.C.

In my initial proposal I outlined methods of working that ten weeks into the study, I would like to review.

1. Did I select an appropriate departure point which might lead to an effective framing of my research question?

In my initial proposal I referred to an existing methodology, an adaptation of a see-saw mechanism outlined by writer and theorist Katy McLeod as a practice research method. This served as a means of carefully weighing into the study rather than wading in. The force of the practice opportunities which have since come my way or that I have initiated, combined with the unfolding rhythm of the travel, have required responsive adaptations to the binary

strategies of this methodology. Rather than going back and forth, research and practice assert influence on each other in an energetic Möbius strip formation. Practice methods are consequently developing from this energy by being selectively receptive to choice and use of materials within a specific situation.

2. What effective methods have been employed so far?

In April weighed into the Kurt Schwitters scholarship with three diverse projects at different stages in their development. I will outline a project which I believe demonstrates the above. That is, a new method developed from energy generated whilst in transit, pointing to a particular selection and use of materials in connection to specific events and locations.

An invitation to perform at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich as part of the Dada Centenary program took the form of a panel presentation called Dada Dead Panel, UK-Z, working both alongside and in collaboration with London-based artists Alice McCabe of the There-There School of English Dada and James Mansfield of The Museum of Imaginative Knowledge and Zurich-based performance artist, St. Pauli; Alice being the main connection between us as individuals and the venue. Strategies for the conception of the evenings' presentation were developed from an initial one-hour Skype conference call. An initial framework was agreed upon which included taking a collection of pre-existing objects, with the remaining content to be devised on site.

For my part, this included art object, Hugo the Ball. Before this Dada-turn, the provenance of this 2014 work called Counter, was as one of two out-sized abacus beads suspended in the award-winning atrium of the new art and design Benzie Building of Manchester Metropolitan University. They hung as an instrument of institutional critique in my MA Textiles Graduate Show.

Once assembled in Zurich, the Dada Dead Panel explored places and set tasks deliberately chosen to trigger collective thoughts and threads, through action, conversation and documentation. This required a concentrated effort to become attuned each others methods of working in search of common ground, resulting in a running order of items to present in the performance. Outcomes delivered from this just in time way of working included my exploratory project and discovery, Camera Chiara: Zurich Through The Cheesehole. This method of double-framing an image, referred to as Cheesehole Photography, fledged during the research process. Cheesehole Photography is a variant of Pinhole Photography whereby the Camera Obscura, or Dark Room, is substituted by the Camera Chiara, or Light Room. This significantly refers to regarding the outside world at large, indicating our close inspection of both personal and collective views within a given timeframe and range of movement.

Some reflections, despite the lack of a quantifiable way of gauging the effectiveness of our methods at Cabaret Voltaire:

- a. The participation, applause and generally appreciative comments from the captive audience of art enthusiasts visiting Cabaret Voltaire in its Centenary year.
- b. According to Adrian Notz, the director of Cabaret Voltaire, although it had taken 100 years, thanks to our endeavours, finally there was some British Dada, which we took as a compliment, albeit a back-handed one.
- c. Our collaborative methods, although project-specific, could be transferred and developed in alternative contexts.

3.How do you intend to develop it?

Schwitters' Merz was distanced explicitly from politics. In an illuminating artist talk, Pedro Cabrita Reis spoke of art as being innately political, without artists having to labour the point through their work. Whilst I agree with him, studying towards a practice based PhD presents additional opportunities. I would like to use this opportunity to conduct a feminist re-reading of the vision of Kurt Schwitters' Merz as the ultimate authorial avant garde statement, in order to gain new insights into his work and also to develop mine. Earlier this week and immediately prior to this presentation, I had the opportunity of exploring these and other ideas at the inaugural Feminism and Contemporary Art Summer School at Middlesex University ran by Katy Deepwell of printed and online international feminist art journal, N:Paradoxa. Along with confirming the approach I intend to take with my research question, I now have a clear strategy for my literature review. This involves re-reading key texts such as *Women in Dada* by Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, which interestingly, is out of print. By tracing back the references in the book I hope to recover female voices and review their insights in relation to my research ideas. I anticipate adjusting my focus from contemplations of movement and balance which have served as a revealing introduction to my study, using the energised Möbius strip way of thinking about practice and research. This study will now pursue the conceptual idea of Merzwoman that I indicated in my initial PhD proposal. I aim to contribute to the central placement of contemporary art practice within the realm of the current reconstructions, debates and considerations of the legacy of Merz. I will propose an outward facing manifestation of this for the forth Merz North Conference with a thematic exhibition entitled *Merzwoman and the Daughters of Dada*.

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