

# Kurt Schwitters and 27 Senses: Resonances in Norway, England, and Time

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# Kurt Schwitters and 27 Senses: Resonances in Norway, England, and Time

## Wood Roberdeau

“In the relationship of a known and an unknown quality, the unknown varies and modifies the known.”

— Kurt Schwitters <sup>1</sup>

The oeuvre of Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948) has been consistently brandished as legendary modernism in its nascent state; the man has been portrayed as myth, the objects and literature he produced as remnants of an idiosyncratic or private audio-visual language, but also as portals to a collective unconscious or universal impulse to create. Schwitters’s own dadaist writings confirm his investment in human agency and in a concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and it is this investment along with the biographical context of a flight from fascism that so often has established him as an art world hero. My aim is to interrogate his theories for art practice alongside recent curatorial efforts that have interpreted and invoked the many narratives that surround him. Accordingly, the model of the retrospective museum exhibition is contrasted with what I believe to be a rightfully indefinite and experimental alternative; namely, the artist residency-cum-exhibition. One reason for juxtaposing these two approaches has to do with their mutual desire to achieve a real proximity to this modern “master.” Fundamentally, though, their paths diverge at that point where such narratives may either be recounted or (re)performed. The history of art often depends upon classification and the charting of visible transitions from one stylistic origin to another; meaning or analysis at times falls prey to further mediations and coding – expository wall text, for example. Why not eliminate distance from an object by adapting it to present-day concerns, by looking at it from the periphery instead of head-on? In some ways, inhabitation and transmutation – as opposed to mere archive and display tactics – augment the voice of the historicized artist to greater effect. Schwitters, whose ambition was to communicate the universal power of artistic expression as something generative, has been reinvestigated in the twenty-first century more than once and, following post-colonial theory and interrogations into the very

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<sup>1</sup> “Dadaismus in Holland” 9; English translation qtd. in Hiller 134.

notion of globalization, we understand the obvious problems surrounding totalitarian concepts of subjectivity and creativity. Yet, to test them from a reimagining of their interior seems a more viable mode of determining their historical significance for the future of visual culture. This is because curatorial knowledge has grown considerably over the last two decades, as have exhibition strategies, thanks to a welcome participatory turn. Not surprisingly, rather than suffering a decrease in patronage, art museums and mid-size non-profit spaces have enjoyed a renaissance through the promotion of exhibitions as anti-didactic sites of learning; these formerly cool zones are once again hot. Heritage and tradition, however, often reverse such endeavors to stage an authentic experience of art's histories after the fact since

the ways in which art is talked about, understood, and debated are largely determined through the medium of exhibitions – through the exhibition as a complex representation of institutional, social, and, paradoxically, often personal values, simultaneously. And the exhibition's representivity then is an exemplary identification of the direct political tendencies (democratic, nationalistic, feminist, regionalistic, postcolonial or whatever) on offer. (Ferguson 180)

Despite the best intentions, it is challenging to effectively situate artworks between historical or philosophical contexts and the varied agendas of the institution in question. As Bruce Ferguson and others underlined in the 1990s, the exhibition is a medium unto itself, a frame in which its organizers have composed objective information. An encounter with art in a vacuum that can transport the viewer into the subjectivity of the artist(s), thereby avoiding third party interpretations or external analyses, has been accepted as an unlikely and misleading possibility. This is largely due to the inability of Western cultural institutions to sever the ties to their colonialist ancestry, which, in turn, is indebted to the Enlightenment's investment in the taxonomy and commodification of secular unknowns. One of the political tendencies mentioned above is nationalism, and London's Tate Britain provides a discursive example with *Schwitters in Britain* (30 January-12 May 2013; Sprengel Museum Hannover, 2 June-25 August 2013).

I will address the problematic of attempting to house the Dada ethos in due course; at this stage, it is important to note that the expected reaction to Schwitters's practice is evidenced by this exhibition that celebrated his later years in England after the Nazi occupation of Norway in 1940, where he had been living in exile since accusations of degeneracy were leveled at his work in 1937. Two main threads ran through Tate's presentation of what was indeed a remarkable accumulation of works. The first was formalist – each assemblage or collage was discussed in terms of its materiality and Schwitters's belief that through a subtle mixing of chance and decisiveness said materials would metamorphose once contained and controlled by the work of art. Significantly, such formalism on the part of the museum managed to de-accentuate the process of making such objects

and the potential they hold for phenomenological investigations into visual perception in general. The second thread was archival – the chronological layout of works was compounded by each room’s containment of a chapter of Schwitters’s life and they were displayed in an almost genealogical fashion so as to confirm the biographical exception of their subject. To this end, scattered vitrines held the printed matter (pamphlets, zines, etc.) published by Schwitters and his peers as supplementary textual aids for understanding the more profound attempt to marry the higher art forms of painting and sculpture and consequently enter the canon of modernist abstraction. Returning to the problem of nationalism, I introduce this exhibition because the expanse of its detailed account of England’s effect on Schwitters, e.g. his fascination with local landscapes and portraiture, arguably detracted from any comprehension of the philosophical trajectory that culminated during the isolated, interstitial, or liminal space-time of rural Norway. Yes, this particular moment was given its own gallery in which a paradigm shift between the detritus of urban banality in the early work and a new-found intrigue with nature was clearly communicated through apparent stylistic changes, but the significance of this shift for art theory was overshadowed by a specific subtext: Britain’s role in exacting a fully evolved body of late, great work, or, the nation’s impact on an itinerant, troubled genius.

Importantly for the purpose of this article, Tate’s linear production (from Room 1, “Schwitters in Germany” to Room 7, “New Friends and Commercial Opportunities”) was capped in a final gallery by the inclusion of two installations by contemporary artists that are the result of a commission by the museum and Grizedale Arts, an organization that supports artist residencies in the Lake District of England, where Schwitters lived from 1945 until his death, after having been sequestered on the Isle of Man to wait out the war with other German refugees before working in London. It is here, at Elterwater in the Langdale valley, where he manifested the final version of the *Merzbau* (1933) as the *Merz Barn* (1948). Intended as an inhabitable artwork, the architecture of the barn was altered by sculptural accoutrements and was intended to meld with its landscape. Such a model is conceptually rigorous, and one I will return to as it became foundational for the *27 Senses* project. For the museum’s two sponsored works, it is significant because both artists Laure Prouvost and Adam Chodzko responded not only to its theoretical properties, but also to the circumstantial specificity of its British locality within the terms of this narrative driven exhibition.

Taking everyday activities as her cue, Prouvost produced a film that imagines a private domestic interior, its residents having left the table and her own voiceover affected by the style of concrete poetry. Installed within the gallery, that same table was set with cups and saucers whose design is derived from the Bauhaus School but is reinterpreted as kitsch. More of these objects were encased and spotlighted in surrounding vitrines, framed in the same way Schwitters’s own small hand-painted sculptures of the 1940s were displayed in a previous gallery. The installation’s content supports a mimicry of the isolated and eccentric figure

of the artist. This very literal inhabitation is augmented by Prouvost's intentional confusion of facts; the viewer has been invited into her fictional grandfather's living room where Schwitters and Edith Thomas, nicknamed 'Wantee' after her fondness for the English custom of afternoon tea, are said to have frequently socialized. This links Prouvost's own biography or narrative to that of the *Merz Barn* and, to her credit, demonstrates just how personal mythologies are disseminated. Though the work has since been justifiably awarded the prestigious Turner Prize (2013) for its ingenuity, at this site *Wantee* (2013), regardless of its approach to the Dada legacy, relegated Schwitters to the role of Lewis Carroll's Mad Hatter.

Chodzko's approach was somewhat more linear, in that it traced forgotten or inconsequential facts in order to reconfigure the *Merz Barn* by juxtaposing the gravity of physical materials with the levity of storytelling. He succeeded at adding his own extension to the past through its deconstruction and reconstruction. The installation can be divided into three parts: first, *Because* (2013) tells of the acquisition and manipulation of a wood paneled office designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the father of Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr., a curator at MoMA who awarded Schwitters a \$1000 grant towards the barn in England. The office, a prime example of Art Deco design, is owned by London's Victoria and Albert Museum. For Tate, Chodzko dismantled it and displayed its fragments as if they were minimalist sculptures, saving the larger pieces for a central hut that doubles as a theatre for the second element, the video work *Knots* (2013), which abstracts the site-specificity of the Lake District by blending documentary footage, sound, and graphic design. A third aspect connects with a notion of inhabitation and fictive narrative, in that Chodzko installed box after box of stationary from Commerzbank in Germany after photographically documenting their shipment to the barn itself in a mock relocation of the bank's head office. Reuniting Schwitters's concept of "Merz" with a symbol of its own etymology, coupled with the implications for Eurocentric late capitalism, is meant to bring the Dada legacy full circle.

For both Prouvost and Chodzko, memory and its malleability are highly important (Stout 137). However, if the objective is to engage with Schwitters's idiosyncratic perspective without falling into the limited range that tributes permit, such work might resonate more fully away from an all-encompassing retrospective meta-narrative. My reasons for such direct criticism of what are, in fact, very accomplished, complex works have to do with the fairly recent expansion and layering that the field of visual cultures has been able to coax out of art's prescriptive histories. These artists did, in fact, initialize such a paradigm shift, to some extent, despite their having been awkwardly situated at the endpoint of Tate's timeline. Importantly, for the exhibition viewer, it was at this moment of navigating the expansive layout of objects and texts that Schwitters's *Weltanschauung* became all the more palpable thanks to these two additions. By turning to a potential for wider politico-aesthetic experience within exhibition

contexts, as argued by theorist Irit Rogoff, we can appreciate the value of such attempts. So as to recognize a wealth of alternative productions at work in such spaces, she warns of our tendency to don very familiar blinders within them regardless of the artistic tradition of institutional critique, stating, “the most insistent separations between bodies of work and their surroundings come about through two sets of beliefs. Firstly, an overriding belief in the singularity of the work of art and, secondly, a belief in the cultural habits of affording it, that singular work, our unfragmented attention” (127). Again, a theme of assemblage emerges as an alternate mode of inhabitation that sits conveniently alongside Schwitters’s own criteria for authentic perception. In this instance, the known quality is the art museum and its long tradition of interaction with its own subversion. The unknown quality, or what is not already present in such discourses, promises to modify the known. By extending the boundaries of the curatorial and excavating the peripheral edges of display and its politics, we can reconstitute the exhibition as a performative space rather than a theatrically anthropological stage, thereby elaborating upon an idea of the exhibition-as-laboratory and reorienting aesthetics away from antiquated barometers of good taste and nullified tradition. To a large extent, as discussed in her text, Rogoff’s outlook stems from the writings of Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition*, with the hope of kindling participatory action, Arendt sought to reconcile the public and the private and what they have come to respectively represent in the modern era by turning to the classical model of the polis, defined as “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together. . .” (198). In ancient Greece, she explains, the purpose of the polis was twofold: on the one hand, the walls which separated the public arena of recognition from the private realm of isolation would have been theoretically breeched, causing an even flow for the appreciation of everyday events, thereby rendering them remarkable or memorable; on the other hand, such exposure would effectively lend to futile or phatic speech and otherwise forgettable deeds a sort of resonance, leading to “a kind of organized remembrance” (197-98). Within this area of interactivity, one person would *appear* to another, allowing for a glimpse of reality otherwise unobtainable by fault of the concept of a private sector and the seclusion of the introspective mind; hence, a public could emerge from the community at large.

Similarly and more recently, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, philosopher Jacques Rancière discusses notions of community and alienation within communities. He asserts that works of art are proposals that are met with responses; as such, they should not be treated as entirely hermetic. Citing the poet Mallarmé to stress the potential satisfaction of indefinite knowledge, he suggests that the inevitable disconnections that culture induces allow us to form new connections and that some mysteries are more poignant if left unsolved. A parallel can be drawn here to politicized art practices and the important impossibility of their capacity to repair social crises and, conversely, to the possibility of their critical engagement with and identification of such crises. It is the “distribution of the sensible” that

entangles us in our apparent state of disconnection. Rancière writes: “The solitude of the artwork is a false solitude: it is an intertwining or twisting together of sensations, like the cry of a human body. And a human collective is an intertwining and twisting together of sensations in the same way” (56). In other words, sensations, triggered by the artwork and our encounters with it, transfer knowledge and establish a “*sensus communis*” or “aesthetic community” (57). Following this emancipatory logic, Schwitters’s claims for *Merz*, as a total work of art, are not necessarily better understood from a position of immanence rather than analysis, but I would argue that it is from an immanent critique that effective new levels of proximity to them can be reached. Certain contemporary curatorial strategies, as will be seen, are more on a par with his sustained approach to art making-as-assemblage (i.e. assemblage-as-being) than others. With this in mind, it is useful to briefly explore Schwitters’s early practice in Hanover and his enthusiasm for the tenets of Dada that were established at the time of the First World War.

Each subsequent branch of the Dada movement supported and thrived upon a climate of confusion, though ideological themes of internationalism and assimilation were also enthusiastically supported, as was spiritualism in some cases. For Schwitters, this was best addressed by the obsessive collection of random and mundane materials that were assembled in such a way as to create pictorial compositions; yet composition, a skill usually employed by realist painters, presented a problem if one’s ambition was to maintain experimentation based on chance. He struggled to explain his artistic constructions by comparing them to the outdated techniques that were employed by those concerned with the picture plane and saw the act of painting as having been methodically scientific, overly precise, and measured. If anyone could obtain such artisanal skills, then the result would be an unwitting refusal of serendipitous expressivity. These reasons propelled Schwitters towards the nonsense of dadaist ideology, though he clearly demonstrated his inability to completely abandon the concept of the artwork as a composed object, deciding instead to somehow incorporate this aesthetic into Dada. By subverting traditional painterly composition with the inclusion of non-traditional materials, Schwitters produced collages that contributed to the expansion of artistic boundaries; his work sits somewhere between the styles leading up to cubism and its successor, full-scale Dada. Rather than annihilate the history of art-making and begin anew, Schwitters aligned those traditions and techniques with whimsy; by creating objects that bring together the traditional formats of painting, poetry, and sculpture, he began to engage with the relationship between the autonomy of art and the stuff of everyday life, culminating in the first of four *Merzbauten* (Hanover, Lysaker, Hjertøya, and Elterwater). An ultimate assemblage, it “was utterly at variance with prevailing concepts of a work of art and could not be accommodated within the framework of traditional hermeneutics. The wealth of materials and their intense effect on all the senses precluded an unambiguous, objective response from the viewer”

(Meyer-Büser 275). The house-as-sculpture acted as a theoretical vehicle for the artist, who was determined to merge and dissolve his own subjectivity with the materiality of the urban environment. "The environmental structure . . . both hid and emphasized what lay beneath . . . the detritus of the modern world. . ." (Carroll 715). The dadaists considered their main endeavor to be the ultimate expressive gesture that would produce the foundation from which to build a new cultural sphere. Their entire modernist framework depended upon the understanding that their efforts allowed a new beginning – a rupture – and possibilities for living and working never before realized. It is interesting to note, then, the work of Albert Gleizes, a cubist painter whose writings on Dada indicate another perspective from which to consider the merit of this position. Rather than view Dada as the self-proclaimed savior of a decaying culture, Gleizes suggested that, in fact, Dada was the end result of that culture's ultimate decay (303). Either way, a *tabula rasa* would be the outcome.

The historical avant-gardes were in many ways contradictory and essentialist to their own detriment. Founding members wrote copious manifestos, invented rules and regulations that some would later refute, deny, or inadvertently disobey causing them to be excommunicated from whatever group, frequently undermining original plans for solidarity in the face of bourgeois complacency. If, like Gleizes, one considers Dada to be the culmination of the erosion of a very long art historical tradition, it is no wonder that reconciliation between artistic activity and the mundane became desirable. In general, the movement failed to reconcile its artistic goals with its political aspirations. To put it another way, the chaotic "anything goes" mentality that Dada endorsed as crucial for the transformation of everyday life overshadowed any translatability of such concepts by artworks, to the point where a desired cohesiveness was lost; at this particular moment in European history the *Merzbau* was doomed to have the opposite effect from that which Schwitters had intended; it was overwhelmingly interior-driven and therefore overly self-referential. This is largely because as a methodology, Dada had become ineffective – it was stifled by its own lack of structure. Nevertheless, its resounding *non* or call for nothingness produced a discourse for a new sociological way of thinking about art. This is the crux, I feel, of the conundrum of exhibiting such practices; what can curators and historians accomplish after the demolition Dada forced upon itself and wider visual culture? Furthermore, how might contemporary artists avoid a similar fate? In his *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974), Peter Bürger asked related questions about the unavoidable neutralization of the historical avant-gardes through their institutionalization. To exhibit dadaist works is, in many ways, to shut them down. The alternative would be to embrace their fluidity and ephemerality, qualities that begin to resonate with the biography of our protagonist and the translocation of *Merz*. That is, the inherent migratory nature of an assemblage-based perception of the world denies its stasis and any external comprehension or critique of it is to be discouraged as inadequate.

Schwitters scholar John Elderfield provides some insight into what one might characterize as an underlying concentration on process rather than product, and therefore on perpetual relocation: "... we have indeed recognized conflicting affiliations on Schwitters's part between the bustling urban environment, which was the background and source for his art, and a primeval, even mystical, understanding of art itself, which opposed this background and attracted him to the natural world" (198). It has been argued that a progression is traceable from the early collages and paintings to the later works produced in Norway and England. Elderfield notes, as I have above, that the interiority of the urban clashes with the indeterminacy and exteriority of the rural. Yet rather than look to geography and landscape as markers for a lineage in artistic representation, it is perhaps more intriguing to test the teleology of *Merz* across the spatio-temporal zones in which it thrived and failed. The term "mystical" is apt, because it connotes a metaphysical riddle or the potential for innovation through epiphany and humanist principles, characteristic and derivative of the earlier outlook of Dada artists working in Zürich (e.g. Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball). The natural world, if conceptualized as independent from the cultural world, presents a challenge for the artist to bridge that gap – not through representation, but through parataxis. The conundrum that *is* art lives at the heart of Schwitters's biography, but it can also be expanded beyond that biography's restrictions. Moreover, in this vein, it becomes possible to acknowledge the liminality of his exile in Norway within which the fixity of a signature style would begin to devolve. With respect to the unity of Schwitters's body of work, Anette Krusynski claims that he "was not interested in depicting the external world but in preserving the autonomy of the work by means of an equilibrium of colors and forms, independent of figuration and abstraction. In his late works, this led ultimately to the harmonious coexistence of collage themes and the realistic depiction of nature" (258). Rhythm and perpetuity are emboldened here and the works made in Lysaker and the island of Hjertøya near Molde are, after a fashion, interchangeable thanks to their existence as remnants of a process that was less concerned with composition than with capture and balance. The artistic creativity often said to have been inspired by the geopolitical displacement compounded by the uncertainties that accompanied the Second World War can be further defined by a notion of displacement as temporal suspension. The tension between nature and culture had crystallized during this hiatus in the Norwegian landscape, resulting in the acquisition of that elusive austerity demanded by Dada. Often mistaken or overlooked as uncontrollable anarchy or the refusal of a regimented approach to art, this austerity confirms a modernist ethos that ironically strips culture away so as to demonstrate the natural state of creation, of merging one's subjectivity with one's environment and touching a totality. In a 1961 symposium entitled *The Art of Assemblage*, Richard Huelsenbeck described this mentality in appropriately poetic terms:

Man is and feels abandoned, isolated, and atomized because all his values crumbled during the two world wars and later. He feels what he has lost, and he thinks of something better emotionally, morally, and aesthetically. . . . What a pleasure to think of the coming days when we may be able to live like cavemen again, killing everybody approaching our shelter, hunting rats and blackbirds. . . . Such is this Dada world. (Alloway et al. 132)

Echoing the existential phenomenology to be found in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1953), and despite having been part of that Berlin-based faction of the movement that embraced an art of political activism, here Huelsenbeck appears to endorse a return to *Dasein* or "being" as pure presence and recovery in the aftermath of the dark mutations of formerly enlightened industry. This recovery, grounded in austerity, is hypothesized using the language of primitivism and the wilderness, the pre-modern, as it were. If the Dada world is one that has returned ritual to art, then once again the problem of exhibiting such art presents itself since its function or content, *Dasein* and its confirmation, is sacrificed for a cultural attention to form and the order of the archive.

One curatorial strategy for reinstating lost immanence involves the remobilization of historicized gestures. At this register, contemporary artists act as curators and curators become artists, or, at the very least, facilitators for new encounters with old points of view. Intellectual precedent for such a stance can be found in Walter Benjamin's posthumous treatise on fragmentary modernity, *The Arcades Project* (1982), in which he writes: "To approach, in this way, 'what has been' means to treat it not historiographically, as heretofore, but politically, in political categories" (392). Benjamin's choice of the word "political" confirms Arendt's later usage of it as a signifier for collective action through the hypostatizing or activating of two or more singularities.

In the 1990s, Hal Foster observed that art practices had diverged from what he saw to be a neo-avant-gardist or early postmodern precedent locatable in the 1950s and 1960s, namely, a rearticulation of historic experimentations such as those performed by the members of Dada for the purpose of critiquing contemporary conditions. Foster constructs his analysis by comparing what he saw to be two options for visual practitioners:

. . . in the postmodernist rupture . . . the horizontal, spatial axis still intersected the vertical, temporal axis. In order to extend aesthetic space, artists delved into historical time, and returned past models to the present in a way that opened up new sites for work. The two axes were in tension, but it was a productive tension; ideally coordinated, the two moved forward together, with past and present in parallax. Today, as artists follow horizontal lines of working, the vertical lines sometimes appear to be lost (202).

Let me clarify the distinction between these two divergent lines of working that, if in tandem, would form a secure grid of sorts. The horizontal, including the “ethnographic turn,” moves from social crisis to social crisis; with a propensity for the political, the aesthetic has become secondary. The vertical axis is indicated by those practices that focus on their own materiality and its historical manifestations and possible future mutations. Foster also states that the emergence of the horizontal or political way of working can be read in conjunction with a postmodern embracing of information, that is, a turn towards the text and away from the work. The neo-avant-gardes, maintaining a postmodern quality before its extreme textuality, managed to straddle both the aesthetic and the political axes. Their works, following Benjamin’s aforementioned observation, not only took into account contemporary socio-economic subject matter, but did so through the awareness of that subject matter’s own history within a wider history of art. By *inhabiting* familiar forms, urgent and relatively new content could be communicated effectively and without the threat of institutional shelving or of being discounted altogether as mere propaganda. Foster’s complex theory provokes an important question: taking on board Prouvost and Chodzko’s contributions for Tate Britain and Ferguson’s observation that exhibitions are media in their own right, in what way and in what milieu can the vertical and horizontal balance, or the gridic, inform an accurate experience of Schwitters’s dadaism so that its urgency is legible?

### Inhabiting Merz

In 2007, preparing for what would become the *27 Senses* exhibition, Kenneth Goldsmith, Karl Holmqvist, Jutta Koether, and Carl Michael von Hausswolff (later to be joined by Eline McGeorge) travelled to the site of Schwitters’s *Hütte* (his third *Merzbau*) on the island of Hjertøya where it could be said they indirectly tested Foster’s assessment of the horizontal way of working, and also what he has referred to as the “archival impulse,” by reintroducing, from a curatorial standpoint, the potential of neo-avant-gardist breaks with univocal linearity ([http://www.electra-productions.com/projects/2007/27\\_senses/overview.shtml](http://www.electra-productions.com/projects/2007/27_senses/overview.shtml)). Specifically, during the residency the group considered the years Schwitters spent in exile as *conceptually* traceable and not as an art historical narrative in need of retelling. Rather than seeking to explain paradigmatic shifts in the formal qualities of dadaist assemblages through distanced reproduction, they embarked on a residency that would allow them to critically engage with the nature-culture dialectic in idiosyncratic and ephemeral ways. This allowed them to successfully arrive at a “productive tension,” as opposed to a literalist tribute, evidenced in the subsequent installation of their respective works at Kunstmuseet KUBE in Ålesund, Norway (2009) and Chisenhale Gallery in London, England (2010).

“Dislocation” was an integral motivator. Individuals in the group were not simply extracting themselves from their own artistic comfort zones, but were

loosening the grip of current events and concerns so that they might reread these at a varied pace and in a loaded but still ambiguous place. In other words, to use Foster's terminology, they were inviting the vertical axis to join its horizontal counterpart. Exile denotes uncertainty, a nomadic existence that lends itself to contingency and possibility. It was believed that this uncertainty, if self-imposed regardless of tried and tested histories, could do much more than just honor a cultural hero. Curator Lina Dzuverovic explains: "The objective of *27 Senses* was not so much to create a tribute to Schwitters, as to spread the word about his presence in Norway, immerse ourselves in the story and open up a dialogue around it" (8). Such a dialogue is really one between the present and the past – crucially empirical, rather than rationalist, in its mission. Dzuverovic and her artists were counting on an idyll; that is, Norway as an "historical unreality" or, again, a liminal space-time that might prove the local could reflect upon the global through its stark contrast with it. Schwitters's ruined *Hütte* on the island in the Moldefjord was the central hub for the initial explorations into a heightened perceptive awareness of transience and the purpose of art, characterized by a line from the poem "Anna Blossom Has Wheels" (1942): "O Thou, my beloved of twenty seven senses/I love Thine!/Thou thee thine, I think, thou mine. – we?" (PPPPPP 16).

Tate Britain's exhibition included an audio recording of Schwitters reciting intentionally absurdist verses with similar cadences, and yet there is something more poetic in *27 Senses'* selection of an obscure extract that continues to unfold beyond the limits of its own genre. The organizers of the project complemented Schwitters's interest in merging disparate art forms. Fittingly, his poem was stretched so as to envelop sculptural installation, drawings, and performance works; it was not segregated by its own historical context or its literary specificity, but was shown to function more as a Derridean supplement within a constant chain of signification. Such a minor gesture also denied any sensationalism of its referent while affirming its resonance to be found in the banality of both past and present. For Dzuverovic, "[t]his title seemed to offer not just a historical reminder of Schwitters's expanded, multi-disciplinary, and all encompassing practice, seeping into all areas of life, but also to express the ambition of this exhibition to create an expansive, fluid project – one that has been allowed to grow and develop in ways we could not at first have anticipated" (12). The decision to relocate to this very particular place with its own particular history, so as to *dislocate*, underlines an important distinction between immanent critique and external analysis. As I have hinted before, there is often a tendency for retrospective exhibitions to paint Schwitters's time in exile as a neutral zone, an interstitial episode that divides his oeuvre into a before and after. It was indeed an interstitial episode, but this is also why it is ripe for reassessment, as it was arguably the point at which *Merz*, as an entirely singular and existential concept, was the most clear and therefore the most accessible. Schwitters's philosophy of art is, of course, embellished by his biography and the circumstances that befell him, but to focus on the

exceptionalism of that information with the aim of understanding individual works detracts from answering any questions he himself was asking. *27 Senses* excelled because it shortened the distance between myth and reality so that *Merz* could once again be made to function in everyday life. For one reviewer, the choice to follow in this artist's footsteps and to participate in this residency proved that the exhibition that followed "in many ways traced this idea of exceptionalism, or the interaction between man and context (geographic, economic, social) that leads to his or her reaching different paths than he or she would otherwise" (Gronlund, "Twenty Seven Senses"). In short, this approach to the dadaist legacy reterritorialized the artist mainly because it was not predetermined by limited speculations about foreign experience. To better grasp the scope of this adventure and its outcomes, I have assigned relevant thematic sections for the artists-in-residence: authorship, assemblage, and alienation.

### 1. AUTHORSHIP

Writing in 1928 about the occupation of the graphic designer as one that includes a sense of compositional acuity, Schwitters states:

The artist alone possesses this sense through the exercise of a refined touch; yet this is not a particularly unique feature that others cannot have, rather it is a universal human characteristic refined through use, whether conscious or unconscious, by which one mutually gauges the relations between differing dimensions. The artist is just more sensitive and experiences these things more readily and is thus able to set a path for others as the engineer sets the railroad's path by way of the rails. ("Designed Typography" 68)

Two decades later, in his seminal essay "What Is an Author?," Michel Foucault also questioned authorship by contrasting the role of the author and the act of writing. He began by establishing the seeming necessity for various fields of study to have an author attached to them in order to attribute credibility to disciplinary progress or knowledge production. By focusing on the relationship between author and text or how a text points back to its author, he quickly moved on to the examination of two themes. The first was the notion that writing is freed from expression; that is, that the goal of writing is "a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears" (206). The second concerned the history of writing's relationship to death; the Greek hero eternally glorified in narrative myth and the postponement of death by narrative. In the late 1960s, the state of writing as the killer of its author, put forward by Roland Barthes, had for Foucault developed out of this historical relationship: "the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence. . ." (207). Foucault then attended to the author's entire body of work and claimed that the task of criticism was to analyze a single work's structure rather than any biographical

information pertaining to that work's producer; even so, he asked what a work was if not derivative of its producer and, of all that is written by a named author, what is distinguishable as work and what is not? "The word *work* and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality" (208). As individuals living their lives daily, authors produce countless examples of writing that may not be worthy of distinction; Foucault argued that the names of these individuals were employed by cultural institutions in order to identify and corroborate *meaningful* works. If introduced to the art historical treatment of Schwitters, this assessment illuminates not only his choice to collect and assemble from the detritus of the everyday, but also his defense of the visual artist as evacuee of authorship; a hospitable guide that welcomes the viewer and not a pedagogical demiurge. It is this emphasis on "text" rather than on "(master)work" that relates to the performances of Karl Holmqvist and Kenneth Goldsmith, as demonstrated at the inaugural opening of *27 Senses* on Hjertøya in 2009.



Figure 1 Karl Holmqvist performance by the Schwitters Hütte, Island of Hjertøya, *27 Senses*, 2009. Photo: Simon Wagsholm.

Through the appropriation of language as it appears in the contemporary mainstream, both artists were able to channel the Dada austerity championed by Huelsenbeck and others. Holmqvist's measured recitation of refrains from current pop songs intermingled with lines from Schwitters's own poetry produced an unexpected potency to the words themselves. That is, by chanting these texts at an equal register and in duration, Holmqvist lent to the popular, and hence to the

everyday, an unpredictable aesthetic traceable to Dada's experimentation with nonsensical montages. Another important aspect of this paratactic language involves the evacuation of its speaker from the site of meaning creation. "This textual questioning of authorial voice, and its connection, via appropriation, to words from what we might call the 'auditory mainstream' (the TV, the radio, advertisements, all of which constantly repeat themselves), appears in contrast to the centrality of Holmqvist to his performances" (Gronlund, "Karl Holmqvist" 97).

Kenneth Goldsmith began his performance on the island by reading aloud in Norwegian, a language completely foreign to him. This was followed by an example of "uncreative writing," a poem consisting of a transcribed radio broadcast made during the 9/11 attacks in New York. Next, Goldsmith recited "Flight," Schwitters's poem inspired by the artist's reaction to the Nazi occupation of Norway in 1940. Again, it was the authorial tension between the found and the composed that elicited a unique resonance with Dada. In Goldsmith's words: "Uncreative writing mirrors the ethos of net neutral advocates, claiming that one way of treating language is materially, focusing on formal qualities as well as communicative ones, viewing it as a substance that moves and morphs through its various states and digital and textual ecosystems" (34). The morphology of language or the contingency of meaning is emphasized over the context of its utterance or publication. However, thanks to this detachment, the emotive affect contained by these two historical moments, in 1940 and 2001, are compelled to overlap. Thus, another case reveals itself for consideration alongside Benjamin's position regarding the remobilization of history to politicize the present.

For the exhibitions at the Kunstmuseet KUBE in Ålesund (2009) and London's Chisenhale Gallery (2010), both Holmqvist's and Goldsmith's installations could be said to have investigated authorship and language in a Foucauldian manner, while also taking into account the physicality and idiosyncrasy of landscape and narrative. Holmqvist's *Untitled (Revolving Vanes)* (2009) comprises a series of large-scale cubic arrangements made from plywood, some hollow frames and some enclosures, that have been laden with multiple and iterable phrasings in the form of pasted posters or hanging strips of partially metallic paper. The installation takes its title from the work of Charlotte Posenenske, who wrote concrete poetry in the 1960s. These structures are at once inhabitable and restricted; meanings and associations can be followed but remain indeterminable. Goldsmith's contribution also pushes the viewer in terms of ambiguity and specificity. He has extended the tradition of concrete poetry to familiar but irregular material, namely, the advertisements and appeals one finds in the form of flyers attached to telephone poles within the cityscape. Goldsmith selects the most unusual of these and arranges them in the gallery as a type of mural. This, when paired with a second element that tells the story of David Daniels, another concrete poet who decided to allow his life actions to be guided by the decision to answer "yes" to anything ever asked of him, invokes a latter-day set of absurdist biographies that can then be understood as empathetic with that of Schwitters. Concerning authorship, these

two artists have welcomed a transference from the sculpture-architecture of the *Merzbauten* to their anti-structural and *a priori* presence in language, where they are shown to continue the (dis)integration of meaning.

## 2. ASSEMBLAGE

In a conference paper delivered at Sprengel Museum in 2007 that described how art criticism has assessed the Hanover *Merzbau*, Gwendolen Webster stated:

To start from one or more of the premises (despite all the verifiable information to the contrary) that this was a largely surreptitious and/or obscene artwork created by a half-crazed artist in his private living quarters results in a picture of a work proliferating largely in its own hermetic environment. This approach admits of few functional, transformative or evolutionary processes and leads to a portrayal of the *Merzbau* as a non-developmental, non-interactive construction. (22)

Conservative histories of modernist art have labeled this first construction as merely symptomatic of its author's singular vision and as one that cannot be entered. Within the works of Prouvost and Chodzko at Tate Britain, it was shown that, in fact, the desire to enter is enough to support further upkeep to the house, so to speak. For *27 Senses*, Eline McGeorge also turned to the architecture of Schwitters's domesticity, but to abstract it and introduce the creative force of its own entropy. In the respective gallery spaces, McGeorge installed *Travelling Double Interventions I and II* (2009, 2010), a set of objects and dividers made from wooden panels that loosely referred back to the *Hütte* and seemed to suggest it could accompany one along a consistent trajectory of displacement and longing. The *Merzbau*, as a *thing*, was deconstructed and paired with animation and drawings depicting geometric foldings and unfoldings. Interestingly, through seemingly random associations and a clear interest in the deterioration of the image, these interventions lived up to their name – they intertwined with and added to anything around them, resonating with notions of connection and disconnection as previously discussed with regards to appearance and community.

Jutta Koether confronted the misleading historicity of *Merz* in a similar way, but by looking to the *Merzbild* or framed collages, as well as Schwitters's penchant for simplistic landscape paintings. Her practice falls into the tradition of assemblage, as her "painting is always, in a sense, a form of writing itself. Fragments of songs, poems, coded messages, voices heard, [etc.]" (Nickas, 44). *Cinetracts #20-23 (to expose oneself to one's own un-groundedness)* (2009), for example, accomplished two things: first, their display within a transparent tripartite structure lent two-dimensional canvases a sculptural quality that loosely referenced the *Merzbauten* by also inviting viewers to take a central position among the surrounding imagery. Second, the surfaces and exposed backings of the canvases combined the verbal with the visual so as to give them equal footing. The

familiar was defamiliarized through the elegant layering of tactile materials, allusions to foreground and horizon, and segments of mass media. Such a deconstruction, as with the *Merzbild* in its own time, then constructs an awareness of a multi-faceted phenomenological world. "In this way, the *Cinetracts* feed into a central concern of *27 Senses*: the continuous exploration of the total experience of art in which boundaries between art and life are allowed to move and blur freely" (Hellberg, 93).



Figure 2: *27 Senses*, 2010, installation view at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Curated by Lina Dzuverovic and produced by Electra. Photo: Andy Keate.

### 3. ALIENATION

It has been shown that one of the key functions of Dada was to disrupt and to question straightforward representations. In recent years, this encouragement of contingency and provocation has, somewhat ironically, trickled down into a foundational concept for participatory encounters with the exhibition and display of contemporary art. Of such intentional provocations Grant Kester writes:

Avant-garde artistic production . . . only recognizes the creative and generative potential of uni-linear attack (against the consciousness of the viewer), while generally dismissing collective or collaborative practice as aesthetically moribund and ethically suspect. Once it is appropriated into the discourse of art (and the relatively static class infrastructure of the

conventional art world) the act of disruption or provocation often loses its responsive and situational character (13).

For *27 Senses*, Carl Michael von Hausswolff found more than one way to return provocation to the exhibition space, but with the understanding that, significantly, it is context that favors either the aesthetic or the political. His interest in geopolitical alienation as read through the Schwitters legacy intermingles with the contemporary gallery's current tendency towards staging disruptions so as to challenge, to revisit Rogoff's terminology, our "unfragmented attention." For the opening of the exhibition in Ålesund, this aesthetico-political gesture was quite subtle. *Red House (for Anna Blume)* (2009), a local house singled out by its having been bathed in red light, was visible across the water from Kunstmuseet KUBE. For Chisenhale Gallery, it was displayed on the wall as a slide projection. In its macro and micro versions, this work visually enunciated the metaphor of the *Merzbau* as a sign for solitude but also as one that might identify degeneracy or exceptionalism. As an accompanying performance, Von Hausswolff read the Anna Blume poem aloud through a megaphone with the red house in the distance behind him, signifying both emotive passion and revolution. In this way, the art-life (aesthetics-politics) dichotomy that many analyses of Schwitters discuss but never resolve is dealt with intuitively. Von Hausswolff explains: "Schwitters was seen as a non-political artist – and maybe he was. At least, he was not a political agitator. But in his poem I sense an anticipation and a longing; something red is blossoming that will begin a period, fulfill itself, and then come to an end" (59).

Less subtle was Von Hausswolff's decision to showcase Staffan Lamm's 1971 documentary film *The Fire* that takes as its subject the unusual circumstance of Selmer Nilsen, a Soviet spy during the Cold War who after his release from prison exiled himself to the remote landscape of northern Norway. Lamm's film culminates with Nilsen's random and seemingly unprovoked reaction of setting fire to a small hut, igniting and energizing what, in the exhibition context, might be taken for another reference to the *Merzbauten*, but through violent aggression and a tangible sense of resentment. In other words, the film and its inclusion in *27 Senses* did nothing to sensationalize this otherwise arbitrary gesture. It did, however, visceralize the existential angst of its protagonist as one subjectivity against a world of uncontrollable circumstances. In this way, by being exposed to a parallel but otherwise unrelated narrative, the timelessness of Schwitters's life and work was communicated.

As a whole, *27 Senses* presented a highly impressionistic discourse for thinking the possible contemporaneity of Dada. Hence, literalist history and its tendency to differentiate between the viewer and the viewed was deftly avoided, resulting in what can only be thought of as an accurate expression of Schwitters's own process, and not an over-glorification of his products. That is, the *struggle* of art-making as work but also as *anti-work* allowed these five artists and therefore the viewing public to learn *through* Schwitters rather than *about* him. The residency-as-laboratory, now a feasible alternative to the standard curatorial process and

exhibition scheme, re-opens the narrative and proposes both fictional and non-fictional extensions of it; this shows just how much history does tend to repeat itself, but also how we are the writers and editors of that history. Granted, the culminations of the project in Norway and England were, in fact, collections of objects arranged within designed spaces – the institutional environment of the art gallery does induce certain behaviors and expectations from its patrons. More important, these arrangements, unlike those in a museum retrospective, could be said to function as residual documentations of something more profound. It could of course also be put forward that those retrospectives achieve the same (if not more) when accumulating en masse rare objects by the artist in question. Yet, it is the ephemerality and activity of the collective residency (in Norway but also within Schwitters's own mindset) that de-emphasized singular authorship, personified but updated the modernist investment in assemblage, and served to expose the potentialities as well as the pitfalls of social alienation. Through this close reading, I have attempted to demonstrate that each of these resonances effectively resuscitated and redistributed, but also rightly defamiliarized, what has otherwise become – in too many instances – a normative avant-garde of the previous century.



Figure 3: *27 Senses*, 2010, installation view at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Curated by Lina Dzuverovic and produced by Electra. Photo: Andy Keate

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