

## Interview with Michael St Mark for the Kurt Schwitters Society Newsletter

*In 2017 the London-based artist Michael St Mark proposed that Kurt Schwitters' Merz Barn Wall, housed in Newcastle since 1965, should be returned to its original location. Gwendolen Webster recently asked him to expand on his ideas, resulting in the following interview. Many thanks to Michael for permitting us to reproduce his photos of the Merz Barn, all dating from 2018.*



**GW:** *In 2017 you published a blog article entitled PROJECT RETURN MERZ BARN WALL – There's no place like home. In it, you argued that the Merz Barn Wall should be returned to Elterwater after 'languishing as an unnatural decapitated artwork, stranded like a fish out of water for over 50 years in the Hatton Gallery Newcastle'. Was there any special incident that prompted you to make this plea?*

**MM:** Not as such, but rather it naturally occurred as a shining ideal and almost a moral crusade to work towards, given Schwitters' series of bravely-fought battles against adversity and the serious ill health that dogged him before even beginning work on the Merz Barn, the details of which I learned while researching Schwitters' life more deeply during focusing on the artist's birthday anniversary in June 2017. My intention was to mark it by searching for (and eventually finding) the exact location of the spot featured in the [well-known photograph of KS and Wantee](#) picnicking in the Lake District in 1947 (see below).

It seems to be adding insult to injury that after all the terrible deprivations, bad luck and serious ill health the artist stoically endured during the 1940s in order to arrive at the point of creating his "life's great work", that now, posthumously, the art establishment cannot bring itself to even contemplate taking steps towards realizing what, all things such as the Wall's integrity and security being equal, Schwitters himself—few could argue—would not have preferred, if not demanded, were he alive today.



1947, above Wastwater Cumbria, England

Kurt Schwitters (centre), with his partner Edith "Wantee" Thomas (to his right) and friends enjoy a summer picnic together



70 years on, artist and founder of London Dada Michael St. Mark poses with a portrait of the German Dadaist, having traced the location where the picnic took place, high above Wastwater, Wasdale.

### Interview with Michael St Mark (2)

**GW:** *Kurt Schwitters was of course the great master of the incomplete, the fragment, the flawed; that was his daily bread, so to speak. What convinces you that it would have been his wish to restore the Merz Barn Wall to its original position?*

**MM:** I beg to differ on that fundamental point, in fact Schwitters was a master advocate of harmony, of integration, of wholeness. I quote: “Merz creates connections between absolutely everything in the world...” and “Abolish boundaries”. I cannot believe an artist as serious about his/ her art as KS was wishing anything other than to argue passionately for the reintegration of his Merz Barn Wall back into its original setting and obvious home, the Merz Barn. To continue to separate the two in my view is to disrespect and short-change one of the most important figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century art. To continue to separate the two whilst the means to safely re-integrate the Wall may well be eminently feasible, given a little vision and good will on the part of the arts authorities concerned, is surely seriously to compromise and debase the meaning, feel and vital historical context of this most important international work of art.

**GW** *It has long been regarded as impossible to return the Wall to Elterwater, first on account of its extreme fragility, and secondly, because of the difficulties of conservation outside a museum environment. It seems ironic that while the interior of Schwitters’ Norwegian Merzhytta has recently been removed from its original exposed location to a museum (see KSUK Newsletter, August 2016) you contend that the reverse should apply to the Merz Barn Wall. What convinces you that you can achieve what the Norwegian conservation experts regarded as unworkable, even given present-day advanced technologies?*

**MM:** The first “impossibility” (of return)—that of fragility—is obviously a misnomer in the light of the Wall’s successful removal, transportation and integration at the Hatton using 1960s building know-how and engineering technology. How much easier and safer would the reverse be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The second “impossibility” is based on the flawed assumption that a museum environment would not also be possible to achieve with the use of advanced 21<sup>st</sup> C. SOTA (state of the art) security and preservation techniques, at the Merz Barn site in Elterwater.

Regarding the *Norwegian Merzhytta*’s recent removal, I would have thought one, if not *the* main factor in the decision to move the hut’s interior to a museum environment, was that there was no pre-existing support structure in place at the location as well as its awkward geographically isolated island position - unlike Merz Barn, which already enjoys a secure support base, good transport links, international recognition and worldwide popularity in terms of art pilgrimage.

In answer to the next point, I’m not sure the Norwegian experts would have regarded conserving the entire hut at its original location impractical based upon present day available SOTA conservation technologies being inadequate but rather, much more likely, on the basis of wider drawbacks, examples of which are listed above. At least, in line with Scandinavian thoroughness, a proper survey and scrutiny of all the factors involved was conducted before a decision was reached on the *Merzhytta*. It seems somewhat telling that many of the people or organizations that are reacting with immediate dismissal and as “impossible” the vision of re-integration of Merz Wall without even a feasibility study having been undertaken, are those with vested interests in keeping the Merz Wall in its current separated money-spinning stasis. No doubt they would also be the ones to first rail against an officially-proposed feasibility survey/investigation as to whether the MW can indeed be practically returned safely and kept securely under museum conditions at Cylinders.

### Interview with Michael St Mark (3)

**GW:** *Could you contemplate installing a reconstruction in the Merz Barn, much as the original Merzbau room was partly recreated at the Sprengel Museum Hannover by the Swiss stage designer Peter Bissegger? In fact Bissegger assembled two reconstructions for the Sprengel – a static one and a travelling version that goes on tour to exhibitions. Surely an attractive alternative?*

**MM:** Agreed, that is very attractive proposition (and I'm really surprised a Bissegger replica of the Wall isn't already installed or has at least been given top priority from the word go, given the substantial grants and donations made to the owners over the years. How much more attractive, inspiring and popular would the Merz Barn look and be! - but not before the possibility of having the original article returned is fully explored. Another second best alternative would be to, if at all possible, have the original Wall installed at the Armitt Museum Ambleside, at the very hub of where the artist lived and worked during his final years. However, recent contact with an Armitt representative suggests they are happy with the status quo, again using the—in my view questionable—“impractical” tag to justify their stance.



### Interview with Michael St Mark (4)

**GW:** *You maintain that Schwitters 'would have strongly wished Merz Barn to be viewed exactly as he left it in 1947'. That's not as easy as it sounds. First, he left his pictures hanging on the walls. Secondly, many of the sculptures once in the interior are now in the Tate Gallery, and are not in robust condition. Thirdly, not three weeks after Schwitters' death, Harry Pierce and Schwitters' son Ernst destroyed a semi-circular wall Schwitters had constructed in the interior. No photographs of it remain. Do you have plans to replace any or all of these elements?*

**MM:** With the museum conditions required for the Merz Barn Wall's re-instatement necessarily in place, the next logical step would naturally be to have as many compatriot Schwitters artworks also returned, including those at the Tate. However most historians would agree the west Wall relief was the main feature and first stage of primary intent of purpose of the Merz Barn – and absolutely integral to it. (Schwitters plan for his last Merz Barn, along with displaying his minor works, was I understand, to cover all four walls with Merz relief, again using found objects from the nearby environs.)

After examining what kind of man Schwitters was, who could possibly go along with the idea that he would be happy to see his "life's work" forever split into two parts? – with the most important part located so far away from the locality in which it was constructed, and entirely out of locally-sourced objects. I contest that KS would be campaigning vigorously for steps to be initiated at least for a full feasibility study.



**GW:** *Leaving aside the thorny question of funding the projected move, how do you envisage the future of the Cylinders site after the reinstatement of the Wall?*

**MM:** Celia Lerner from Littoral has expressed what I find are some interesting, nay inspired, ideas for development of the existing site, including, I believe, a centre for art studies, exhibition spaces and an eco-advanced high tech museum sited on the slopes above the Barn; all of which would fairly obviously stand an infinitely better chance of achieving funding with the original Merz Wall back in place. Regarding finding the funding for the move, even if the Arts Council continue to balk at supporting large Schwitters-related projects in the UK, there are more than a few wealthy and already sympathetic benefactors (for instance Damien Hirst) who have already financially supported the work done at Cylinders by Littoral and who would surely be inspired and thrilled to contribute as much as is needed when they learn their donation would be going directly to fund the return of the Merz Wall back to its intended and therefore rightful place of exhibition.

**GW:** *You sometimes refer to the Wall as a Dada work, but of course in 1947, Dada was long dead. Schwitters himself wrote that only the primary sections of the Merzbau in Hannover were Dadaist, and they predate the Merz Barn by nearly a quarter of a century. In 2007 I made a case for categorising all the Merzbauten as works of exile, and I still stick by that theory. Don't you think it would be more helpful and authentic to present the Merz Barn in the context of the (almost entirely neglected) art of the 1940s?*

### Interview with Michael St Mark (5)

**MM:** Going back to a previous KS quotation; “*Merz connects between absolutely everything in the world*”. Please compare this with Hugo Ball’s “*The Dadaist understands the fundamental connection between all things and beings*”.

In art history terms, Dada is considered to have ended around 1923 but there were and are important artist figures, Man Ray and Richard Huelsenbeck among them, who maintained that the essential spirit of Dada lives on. (See [RH's “Dada Lives!” interview for Clocktower radio in NY](#) in 1960.) Even given that Schwitters’ Merzbauten are not entirely Dadaist, surely in spirit and intent they inherently and essentially consist of many Dada ideals and traits such as chance and use of *objets trouvés*. If we can separate or differentiate in style the Schwitters-in-exile Merzbau reliefs from his earlier, Dada period (almost) two-dimensional Merz assemblies of found object/photomontage paintings that were admired by the likes of Tristan Tzara as Dada, then there would be a strong case for separate categorization. But from both periods they seem to me at least to be strongly linked by this common thread relating to a search for connectivity with nature, wholeness or oneness – incidentally shared by Dada founder member Hans (Jean) Arp. It would be most interesting to read your ideas on the case for re-classification beyond the historical time frame compartmentalization, as “works-in-exile”. Being a relatively novice student of KS history I’m most likely missing vital context.

**GW:** *The Norwegian Merzhytta undertaking was just one element of the ambitious Schwitters in Norway project that involves preserving his legacy on a national level, in various locations and in various forms. Let’s for a moment postulate that the Merz Barn Wall has indeed been returned to Elterwater. Is it pie in the sky to propose setting up a similar kind of collaboration on this side of the North Sea? I’m thinking of a Schwitters trail, involving, for instance, Elterwater, the Armit, the Tate, Abbot Hall, the Hatton, the Isle of Man, etc.*

**MM:** I think it’s a truly wonderful idea; there are of course places of association along the way such as KS and Edith’s accommodation in SW London and in Ambleside that could well be included. I’ve additionally identified and located two further previously unknown Cumbrian locations of somewhat rare photographs of KS and Edith in the Lake District. (Ruminating a little, a side attraction could perhaps be there for followers of a UK Schwitters Trail, young and old alike, to create their own miniature “Merz” artwork as a personal memento at the end, from small objects found as they go along.)

In conclusion; I’m personally convinced that in future times the moral case for re-homing the Merz Barn Wall, a seed of which is planted here, will prove irresistible and prevail over all obstacles—political, financial and technological—and the day will come when this most important artist’s “life’s great work” is carried back through the gates at Cylinders with much fanfare.

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#### Michael St Mark:

*Born in 1962, Ulverston, Cumbria. Preston and Lancaster Universities: BA Graphic Design with Photography, History of Art. 1983 Freelance photographer; Paul Popper agency. 1994; Producer & videographer: Hillwalks on Video (first filmed walks to UK mountain summits). 2005-present; Conceived and founded London Dada with artist Phillip Simmons via 691, first online art gallery (followed by Saatchi online in 2006). Interests; History of Dada, nature, film-making, multi-media art, photography (street & experimental,) philosophy/psychology, experimental percussion, comparative religion, Eastern mysticism, travel.*

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### Interview with Michael St Mark (6)



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