

# The Cumbrian barn-stormer: is Kurt Schwitters' last masterpiece finally about to be restored?

The dada artist fled the Nazis and settled in a Lake District barn, which he turned into an astonishing work of art. We meet the replica-making craftsman hoping to make it whole again – and create a colony of artists in its luscious lakeland surroundings



Gaudi-esque ... the Merz Barn Wall, which was moved to Hatton Gallery in Newcastle.

Photograph: Colin Davison/courtesy of Hatton Gallery

Adam Lowe has created extraordinary replicas of great works from around the world, including one of Tutankhamun's tomb and a full-size bronze replica of Dippy the diplodocus at the Natural History Museum in London. But he has now taken on a very different challenge: a barn in Cumbria. More specifically, he wants to recreate and preserve the legacy of [Kurt Schwitters](#), the great German dada artist, nonsense poet and experimenter in sound, who died in exile in the Lake District in 1948.

Lowe, through his non-profit [Factum Foundation](#), has taken over the Cylinders Estate in luscious Elterwater, where Schwitters created his final unfinished masterpiece: the Merz Barn. This enigmatic work is a unique



**Jonathan Jones**

Mon 16 Sep 2024 09.00 CEST

mixture of dry-stone walling and biomorphic plaster forms, encapsulating the private art that Schwitters created in exile. It has been championed by Damien Hirst and other leading artists as one of Britain's secret treasures.

## *His Cathedral of Erotic Misery was destroyed during an air raid on Hanover*

Factum, using digital technology, plan to make an intricate facsimile of the decorated wall of the barn, which in the 1960s was removed to the [Hatton Gallery](#) in Newcastle. By fitting this into the Merz Barn, they aim to restore it as closely as possible to how it was when Schwitters died. Around the barn, the hilly green Cylinders Estate will, he hopes, become "a dynamic cultural hub", with other buildings converted into spaces for artists and scholars.

Most movingly, it will host a residency programme for refugee artists, in recognition of Schwitters's own flight from Nazi Germany. Schwitters, whose art was featured in the [Degenerate Art exhibition](#) held by the Nazis in Munich in 1937, was a genius of collage and assemblage, of rescuing what he called "rubbish" and turning it into evocative, complex works. He's usually called a [dadaist](#), a member of the anarchic anti-art movement that was started during the first world war by poets and artists avoiding German military service. But Schwitters fell out with the Berlin dadaists, who were fiercely political. His art is, instead, emotional and introspective.



Refugee ... Schwitters, whose work was featured in the Nazis' Degenerate Art show. Photograph: Interfoto/Alamy

"He's a romantic dada artist," says Lowe in Factum's London office, a basement in St James's where other replicas of masterpieces bask in low lighting. Schwitters created his own artistic world in Hanover, where he was born in 1887. He worked there until 1937, four years into Nazi rule. He was the scion of an affluent local family and, as Lowe says, "lived off the rent of a number of properties he inherited – which is why the political dadaists didn't like him".

While George Grosz and John Heartfield were using collage to viciously satirise the Berlin bourgeoisie and the rise of the far right, Schwitters made work that was more poetic. He gave his own version of dadaism the name Merz, calling his creations Merz Bilden (or Merz Pictures). The name seems to have come from a cut-  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2024/sep/16/kurt-schwitters-dada-artist-restoration-cumbrian-barn>

up advert for the Kommerz Bank, but Lowe has another theory: “It’s probably more about *Schmerz*, the German word for pain.”

Schwitters began his most famous – and sadly lost – exploration of concealed pain and longing in the early 1920s, when he started to build a marvellous grotto from found material that gradually took over his home. This was his first Merzbau (or Merz Building) and it was given the title *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*. Black and white photos from the 1930s make it look like a delirious mixture of [Gaudí](#) and outsider art. “With the Cathedral,” says Lowe, “Schwitters begins with the death mask of his son.” The boy had died during the first world war, a personal loss to Schwitters amid the slaughter taking place across Europe. The Cathedral of Erotic Misery was destroyed in the second world war, during an air raid on Hanover in 1943.

That’s what makes the Merz Barn in Cumbria so special. It was a final attempt by Schwitters to recreate his idiosyncratic architecture of the inner life – and it’s the best remaining connection we have to his visions. Schwitters also created a Merz building in Norway, where he initially fled, but it burned down. A potato shed he converted on the Norwegian island of Hjertøya is also being preserved with Factum’s aid. As Lowe performed digital scans on it, he could see layers containing newspapers with reports about the latest events in Hitler’s Germany.

In the Lake District, however, Lowe wants to do much more than preserve a barn. “I want Schwitters to come back to life,” he says. He envisages the rugged farm buildings and rainy woods of the estate becoming places where artists and writers can respond to Schwitters’ elusive genius. “I would love [William Kentridge](#) to do a performance of the *Ursonate*,” he says. The *Ursonate* is a 45-minute sound poem by Schwitters, an entrancing, hilarious tapestry of coos and chirps, somewhere between nonsense poetry and atonal music. Kentridge, a great South African artist, has performed it elsewhere. He also plans an exhibition of Schwitters’ radical typography, co-curated by the designer Bruce Mau, and a display of Merz collages



The Merz Barn ... if restored, it could become a hub for artists. Photograph: Courtesy of Factumfoundation.org

This may sound like dreaming but Factum has the clout to make such things happen. Lowe's commercial studio, Factum Arte, fabricates many hit works for today's best-known artists. Meanwhile, his non-profit Foundation is at the cutting edge of heritage and art preservation around the world. And there is a particular reason for him to bring the radical dada and Merz art of the early 20th century back to life. He was personally given the job by the late pop and conceptual artist [Richard Hamilton](#). "You can do me a favour," Hamilton said to Lowe.

Hamilton was another great believer in reproductions of artworks. He spent years creating a replica of his hero Marcel Duchamp's masterpiece *The Large Glass* – with Duchamp's support. In the 1960s, when the Merz Barn was forgotten, Hamilton took it upon himself to remove one of the walls, which had been transformed by Schwitters into an intriguing nuanced work. Hamilton offered it to the Tate but was rejected, so instead it is in the Hatton. In later years, Hamilton discovered Lowe and his method, a blend of hi-tech scanning and patient craft. He wanted Factum to make a facsimile of the wall, to reunite it with the Merz Barn for future generations.

And the plan is under way. Factum, having bought the estate, is now seeking funding to create this artists' Cumbrian colony, complete with a copy of the wall placed in the barn. "It's something Schwitters would have loved," says Lowe. "And we would love to create it."