‘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.