

Briers/Petts (Exhibitions) October 1, 2012 First proof

Words 967

Helen Petts.....

Hatton Gallery Newcastle 28 June to 18 August.....

The collages and assemblages of Kurt Schwitters have become gilt-edged investments, but they represent only one part of a larger and even more disparate oeuvre that included exquisitely unconventional typography, expanded prose, non-narrative theatre and sound poetry. Schwitters' protean inventiveness, humour and humanity has remained truly alive for many contemporary artists, who reference him in their work (a current example is the German artist Agnes Meyer-Brandis, who for one of her extraordinary projects trained a flock of geese to respond obediently to parts of Schwitters' *Ursonate* sound poem). Schwitters' art was born out of 1920s European city life and yet, in his escape of Nazi Germany, he spent many years on the sparsely populated fringes of Europe, by inclination as much as by necessity. **[PB/DB: suggestion]**

The artist filmmaker Helen Petts shares this dichotomous existence. Based in central London, she also likes walking in

distant wild places, making work while alone in the landscape. Petts's half hour film *about Kurt Schwitters* was made for continuous loop projection in a gallery, with surround sound. The film has no titles and no commentary, and no work by Schwitters is shown in it. It follows literally in Schwitters' footsteps in Norway and the Lake District (the film is presented like a diptych in echoing halves), locating two modest rural buildings, now disused, that bear faint traces of his former presence. Petts's first glimpse of the Norwegian hut bearing the weathered sign *Schwittershytta* is filmed in monochrome, like a dream. There is a brief sighting of Schwitters' handwriting on the interior wall of the hut. Near the end, the film cuts suddenly and very briefly to a shot of Schwitters' grave hidden in Ambleside churchyard. Otherwise, Petts avoids historically fetishising Schwitters, electing instead to compose her film with the same combination of great care and mercurial randomness with which Schwitters made a collage or poem. The same eye that Schwitters applied to bus tickets and fragments of newspaper, she casts over a bed of yellow seaweed, chaotic spider webs, a bricolaged wooden door, geological strata, and a vintage Ambleside road sign.

The sonic elements of Petts's film are as important as the images: the sound of spattering rain in green Lakeland, or the

sharp call of a crow that makes an unplanned appearance on a flat rock in an echoing pool as Petts is filming. At one point the haunting ringing sound of the double-stopped Norwegian Hardanger fiddle is unforgettably superimposed on the equally plangent chordal signal of the coastal ferry's horn.

As John Cage has been a greater influence on visual artists than other composers, so Schwitters is increasingly a key referent for composers, improvising musicians and performative poets. Petts has interpolated into this work short performances by four British experimental improvising musicians. Petts often allies filmmaking as a visual art practice with her longstanding and close interest in experimental and improvised music. Working with a very small camera, she has filmed live performances at close quarters and, almost by accident, arrived at a new hybrid visual art and music genre disseminated predominantly online. These films are simply extremely good at what they set out to do, models of focused clarity shot in moody hard-edge black and white. Clive Bell in *The Wire* magazine thought that they were often like clips from 'a lost Ingmar Bergman movie'. They remind me of the films made by German TV (WDR) of works by the composer Mauricio Kagel in the 1960s.

In this film only the hands and dextrous fingers of the performers are shown as they adapt what they do to accord with the spirit of Schwitters. From the spokes of a dismantled bicycle wheel played with a violin bow, composer-performer Sylvia Hallett (who is also the idiomatic Hardanger fiddle player) produces mournful glissandi. To match the footage of the inside of the *Schwittershytta*, Adam Bohman (who has brought the declamation of found texts in live improvised performance to a different level, often absurd) generates small sounds from an assemblage of springs, screws and other ephemeral hardware. Drummer and visual artist Roger Turner plays percussively on a cluster of used paint brushes and palette knives lying on a table top, accompanying voice artist Phil Minton's non-standard sputtering and ululations, which inhabit the same world as Schwitters' sound poetry (Minton's face while vocalising looks like one of the grimacing 18th century-'character head' busts of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt).

This film was conceived initially for the Hatton Gallery at Newcastle University, where it could be shown in a gallery next to that which now contains Schwitters' actual Cumbrian Merzbarn Wall, transferred there in 1966 at the urging of lecturer Richard Hamilton from the now empty barn shown in the film. At Abbot

Hall in Kendal, Petts's film will be shown alongside original works by Schwitters from the gallery's collection. Such juxtapositions, it has to be said, provide the ideal, possibly essential circumstances in which to view Petts's installation.

Petts describes her film as a 'private poem', and it is as intimately conceived as many of the works by Schwitters that it shadows. It is difficult to write about Schwitters without making a musical analogy, and in 1996 David Sylvester thought that the large scale works of Rauschenberg were 'collage operas', whereas 'Schwitters had composed collage *lieder*'. The film's title, *Throw them up and let them sing*, is how Schwitters once described his use of collaged materials. Petts's beautifully modulated film is indeed like a song to Schwitters.

Throw them up and let them sing is also showing at the Royal Festival Hall, 31 August to 9 September, and Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, 16 September to 19 November.

David Briers is an independent writer and curator, based in West Yorkshire.