Hans Arp

Hans Arp is a familiar figure of classical Modernism and was a key contributor in the development of Dada, Surrealism and Abstractionism in the early twentieth century. Arp continued producing sculpture and poetry using his own unique visual language and forms until his death in 1966, during which time he built up an incredible body of work.

Arp has been the focus of two Hauser & Wirth exhibitions: ‘Chance – Form – Language (and a FRANZWESTigation)’ at Hauser & Wirth London (2014), curated by Julian Heynen, Artistic Director for Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, and ‘Ovi Bimba’ at Hauser & Wirth Zürich (2012), curated by Dada scholar Juri Steiner and Loretta Würtenerberger, who co-runs Fine Art Partners and works closely with the Hans Arp Estate.
In the following text Heynen and Würtenerberger discuss their relationship with Arp’s work and how it has affected their professional roles.

**Julian Heynen:** In our conversation about Hans Arp, I would like to start with a personal question. How did you come to deal with Arp? What was your initial approach to dealing with Hans Arp?

**Loretta Würtenerberger:** It was more that Arp found us than we found Arp. The lawyer of Arp’s Estate approached Daniel Tümpel and me at Fine Art Partners because he knew about our involvement in the art market and our strategic background, and asked us to write a paper on how to deal with the Arp Estate.

The Estate was in a very interesting situation when we first became involved. Arp didn’t have children neither with his first nor his second wife. Sophie Taeuber-Arp had passed away in 1943, Hans Arp in 1966. Both Estates then fell to Arp’s second wife, Marguerite Hagenbach-Arp, who decided that both should go to a not-for-profit Foundation, which she founded in 1977. So when we started working with the Estate, we were dealing with something that had been in place for more than 30 years and which was in a phase of redefining itself. We asked the board: what is your goal for the coming decades, what do you want to achieve for Arp, beyond maintaining your own collection and reacting to outside enquiries?

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**JH:** You discuss the professional specifics, but my question now is, what is your personal view on the work of Hans Arp? What is your relationship with his work? What does it mean for you as an individual looking at Arp?

**LW:** Before we began working with the Estate I certainly had an opinion on Arp. I was aware of his work because it was being shown all over the world. However, before working with the Estate, I was not familiar with the finer details of Arp’s work. I found that his work could always be approached intuitively – it’s hard not to appreciate the forms – but my intellectual understanding only started after we got involved. I was very surprised to find in Arp a person, who, although having this playful practice of organic growth, was deeply intellectual. Julian, what was your approach?

**JH:** Similarly, for me, Arp was a household name that one would see all over the place, but my first real encounter with Arp was when I was asked to curate the Hauser & Wirth London exhibition last year. I understood the importance of engaging with his area of work and his outlook, but I was unsure of it. I’m not a specialist, and the idea was to do the show not as a specialist but from a contemporary perspective. The first thing I did after Iwan Wirth asked me to curate the show was to talk to artist friends, mainly sculptors, about what they thought of Hans Arp. I received very positive feedback, including responses from the likes of Richard Deacon and Jeff Wall. Wall said: ‘Do it! He’s such a great artist! One of the best artists from the twentieth century!’ I was surprised to get such a response from Jeff Wall, who seems so different in artistic outlook. In the end, speaking with these artists resulted in a little help from my late friend Franz West, whose work was also included in the exhibition. I needed a bridge from the intellectual framework of my own time – post-conceptualism – to access Arp.

**LW:** Firstly, it’s interesting how you mention the other artists because for me the real eye-opener was an article Donald Judd wrote in 1962 about an Arp exhibition he had seen in New York. Judd was not a very kind critic in general and he especially didn’t like European artists, but one of the very few European artists he was positive about was Hans Arp. I will never forget him describing what he liked about Arp. It was ‘the wholeness’, not only of the single figure but of the whole approach. He also admired how Arp dared to follow one canon of forms for such a long time, dedicating more or less his whole life to a set of forms that he had been working on since his 20s. Secondly, I like your use of the word ‘bridge’, because if you are two or three generations younger, you do
And In Addition

running, leaping dog-paws
and wagging dog-tails
and no dog in between
a stiff little stream
that refuses to end
combed-out forests
lying inert
snakes turned to wax
round as globes
of transparent glass
that quietly roll off
through nature
[...]

– Hans Arp

need a bridge. For me, the bridge also came from
the female component of his work. Arp really went
against convention. For a man of his generation it
is very interesting to see that he had a very natural,
unbroken and unheard-of approach to femininity. The
breast, the navel, the womb – when you compare this
naturalism to, say, Picasso, you find with the latter a
much more disruptive, aggressive aspect. This is why
I think Hauser & Wirth is such a perfect place for Arp;
not only do they represent female artists but artists
who have a focus on femininity, like Louise Bourgeois.

JH: I feel the same. There is a bad joke about Arp:
‘Sophie Taeuber is the better artist’. A bad joke, or a
true joke depending on your generation and how you
look at Feminism! I was interested to find that when
you look into Arp, you see Sophie Taeuber, and you
find a symbiosis. After Sophie’s death it took four
years for Arp to resume sculpture again, a biographical
indication that the symbiosis had been split and he
had to re-work his way, and learn how to continue
with this feeling inside of him. This is evident in his
art forms.

LW: You’re totally right that if that ‘bad joke’ were true,
then Arp’s inspiration would have faded with Sophie’s
death. Obviously her death was a traumatic moment
in his life and he took four years to recover, before
going to Greece and America, which re-captured his
desire to work. If you look at what came of his trips
to Greece, the way he looked at antiquity and the
integration of it into his work, you can see that after
going through a harsh phase, he found inspiration on
his own two feet, and I think that is what makes him a
great artist. The inspiration he found in Sophie can’t
be underestimated, but his sculptural work reached
new heights after her death.

JH: I agree. Obviously it was necessary for him to
touch base with something much older, things out
of his time – early Greek sculpture for example, but I
don’t really know what to make of his time in America.

LW: I think America was not so much an inspirational
experience for him, it was more an experience of
acceptance and success. He started exhibiting in
America in the 1930s and he had his first participation
in MoMA shows in 1936 and 1937. Additionally, he
had a great impact on many of his immigrant friends
such as Josef Albers, Walter Gropius and Alexander
Calder. After the war, America became the most
important market for his work. He had his first major
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JH: Do you have an idea of how Arp approached the “mise-en-scène” of his own exhibitions in the later years? Do we have photographic records or notes that he made?

LW: Interestingly, no. I studied the archives of the Sydney Janis Gallery and I studied the archives of the Estate itself and I haven’t found a single note.

JH: When first approaching the exhibition at Hauser & Wirth I intuitively realised that Arp was not the exhibition-making kind, he didn’t make work to be shown in exhibitions, the only exhibition he conceived of was his studio – it was naturally evolving, permanently changing, intimate, and an exhibition just for himself. I think I had this role in mind, and in the end the exhibition, which featured clusters of works on different pedestals at unusual heights, felt like a slightly ordered studio arrangement, without the walls of the studio. The walls were white cube walls, but the spirit of the show and structure of the show was more like a studio.

LW: In that way you are totally right. The images that we have of the studio still exist today and you can see that he would not just work on one sculpture, finish it and move onto the next. Instead he would wander from one sculpture to the next, working on many different forms at the same time; it was a very organic process. For Arp it was important that his sculptures gave the sense of a natural evolution and this is reflected in the way he worked.

JH: To reflect on what you said, I wanted to make the viewer feel exactly that, to feel like an artist themselves, imagining wandering around the work as Arp would have done in his studio; he would permanently retouch them here or there to make them perfect. That was also one of the reasons why I decided to add the Passstücke of Franz West. The Passstücke are about that relationship between body, ideas, emotions and the way one relates to objects.

I also wanted to show the other side of Arp in the exhibition – Arp the poet, Arp the writer. I always knew that there were poems but I never knew there were so many, and in two languages. I felt it was important to treat both the visual artist and the poet equally. His poems have been published in a series of volumes in Switzerland, yet his writing does not receive major acclaim in literary history. On the other hand I think he’s very much seen in the art world as just being a visual artist, who also writes some poems. I found his writing very intriguing and think that it shows a deeper level of his formal practices.

LW: Arp’s poems are very touching because he was a man who wasn’t afraid to engage with and express his emotions. Two things strike me about his poetry: his descriptions of nature and his poems about relationships. Earlier we spoke of Sophie Taeuber-Arp, well, he wrote the most beautiful poems out of their love. With Arp’s poetry you can almost watch the words growing out of his deep understanding of the organic energies which form our world. I always have the feeling that his poetic and his sculptural works are very strongly interlinked.

JH: Yes, in a structural sense; the way he composes different elements.

LW: If you look at his sculptures inspired by the forms of the human body, you do not only see the outer form, but also the forces that work behind us as human beings; the forces of nature and the forces of creativity. This is what you see in his poems as well.

JH: I agree with you, and when you describe the relationship between Arp’s visual work and his poetry there is this headline that comes to mind: ‘Arp the Gardener’. A gardener can be viewed as a co-creator of nature. He is not just maintaining nature and mending nature – in a way he is making nature visible. I think the metaphor of The Gardener covers both the visual artist and the poet in Arp. But maybe you have to be a gardener to understand; a garden is a deeply philosophical construction.

LW: The setting of Hans Arp’s studio was in a sense like a walled garden. And the way Arp moved around works in his studio is like cultivating a garden of organic matter. His works have a vitality about them, a force behind the surface that never fades.

Actually, the Japanese have always had an intuitive feeling for his work, in particular the Japanese garden architects of the 1940s, 50s and 60s, as well as Japanese artists like Isamu Noguchi. If you look at the pebbles in Japanese gardens and compare them to reliefs by Arp, they are very similar. If you look at Japanese gardening books, you see images of Arp next to photographs of Japanese gardens. I don’t think it was something that Arp thought about actively, but it’s really interesting to see these parallels.

The Hauser & Wirth exhibition was a real starting point for a revival in how Arp’s work is perceived. We have some major exhibitions coming up: a large retrospective at The Hepworth Wakefield in 2016, and then in 2017 the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas will hold a retrospective that will tour two other American cities. I don’t think it is a coincidence that there is a new interest in Arp. Many of the recent exhibitions were linked to his biography. Now we are coming to a phase in which curators, as well as collectors, are re-focusing on his work and are inspired by Arp in a different, refreshing way.