



Nasher Sculpture Center

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In the Archive: Stiftung Arp, Berlin

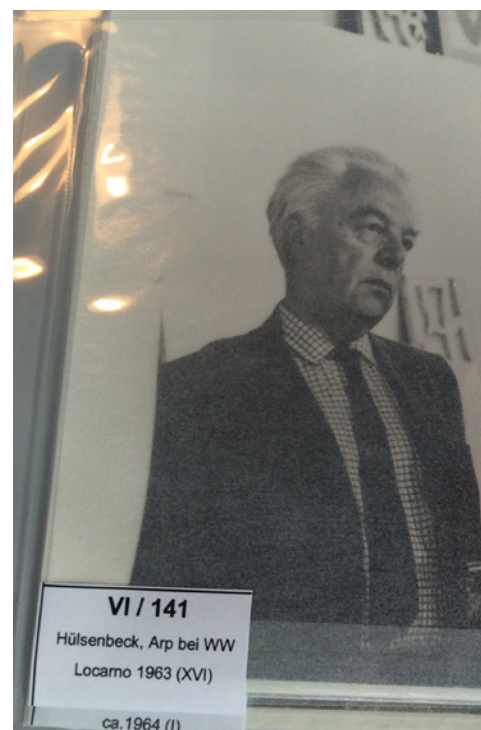
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Nasher Sculpture Center Curator

This summer I was fortunate to spend three weeks in Europe, where among other activities I visited archives in Berlin, Locarno, Zurich, and Paris for research on an upcoming Nasher Sculpture Center exhibition devoted to the artist Hans (Jean) Arp (1886-1966). In addition to Arp's *Torso with Buds* (1961) being the founding work of Raymond and Patsy Nasher's collection of modern and contemporary sculpture, Arp was one of the most important artists of the modern era, although today he is perhaps also one of the lesser known.

As a founder of the Dada movement during World War I, Arp pioneered the use of chance and spontaneity as artistic processes, and his employment of fabricators for the creation of his reliefs preceded by decades such artists as Donald Judd (who admired Arp tremendously). In the 1910s and 1920s he developed a vocabulary of curving, organic forms that moved fluidly between abstraction and representation, becoming the *lingua franca* for several generations of artists who followed, starting with the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists. Arp's sculptures in the round, begun around 1930, took on varied orientations and went through complex processes of multiple fragmentations, casting and recasting, enlarging and reducing. His approach to creativity rivalled that of his fellow Dadaist, Marcel Duchamp; like Duchamp, Arp remade works that were lost, damaged, or sold, placing priority on the underlying concept that spurred them into being.

If that weren't enough, Arp also energetically explored practices central in today's global art world. Born an Alsatian who switched easily between Alsatian dialect, German, and French (signaled by the Hans / Jean of his name), Arp deftly negotiated boundaries between cultures, countries, movements, and media, at ease being identified as a Dadaist, Surrealist, or abstractionist, a painter or a sculptor, an artist or a poet. He collaborated with fellow artists and writers on artworks, exhibitions, and magazines, traveling all over Europe

Photographs of Hans (Jean) Arp, ca. 1920s-1960s. Clockwise from upper left: photo of Arp and El Lissitzky with silhouettes of Arp by Hannah Höch; Arp at work on plaster sculpture in his studio, Clamart; party in garden, Clamart, with guests including Meret Oppenheim and Max Ernst; Arp at Pompeii; Arp and Richard Huelsenbeck looking at one of Arp's sculptures; Arp working on sculptures in garden, Clamart. Photo binders from the Archive, Stiftung Arp e.v., Berlin. Photo: Catherine Craft.







Reading room, library and archive, Stiftung Arp, e.V., Berlin © Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth (photo: Leo Pompinon).

to meet his peers, participating in group shows and working on collaborative publications. According to Maike Steinkamp, curator at the Berlin archive I visited, who has studied several such projects, “Arp was the original networker.”

I hope that the Nasher’s exhibition, which will open in the fall of 2018 and will be the first such show in the U.S. in three decades, will introduce Arp to a whole new generation and reestablish his significance. That sentiment is shared by the three European foundations dedicated to preserving and promoting Arp’s legacy. The largest of these, the Stiftung Arp, e.V., was founded in Rolandseck, Germany in 1977 by the artist’s widow and in 2013 opened a branch in Berlin to house its collection, archive, and library to make them more accessible to researchers. To encourage new research, they also established travel fellowships to enable scholars, students, and curators to come to Berlin and work in their large, airy space on the top floor of a renovated building in a former industrial area in West Berlin. Receiving one of these fellowships made it easier for me to come to Berlin for 10 days, most of which I spent at the Stiftung in the company of Steinkamp, its curator, and two other research fellows.

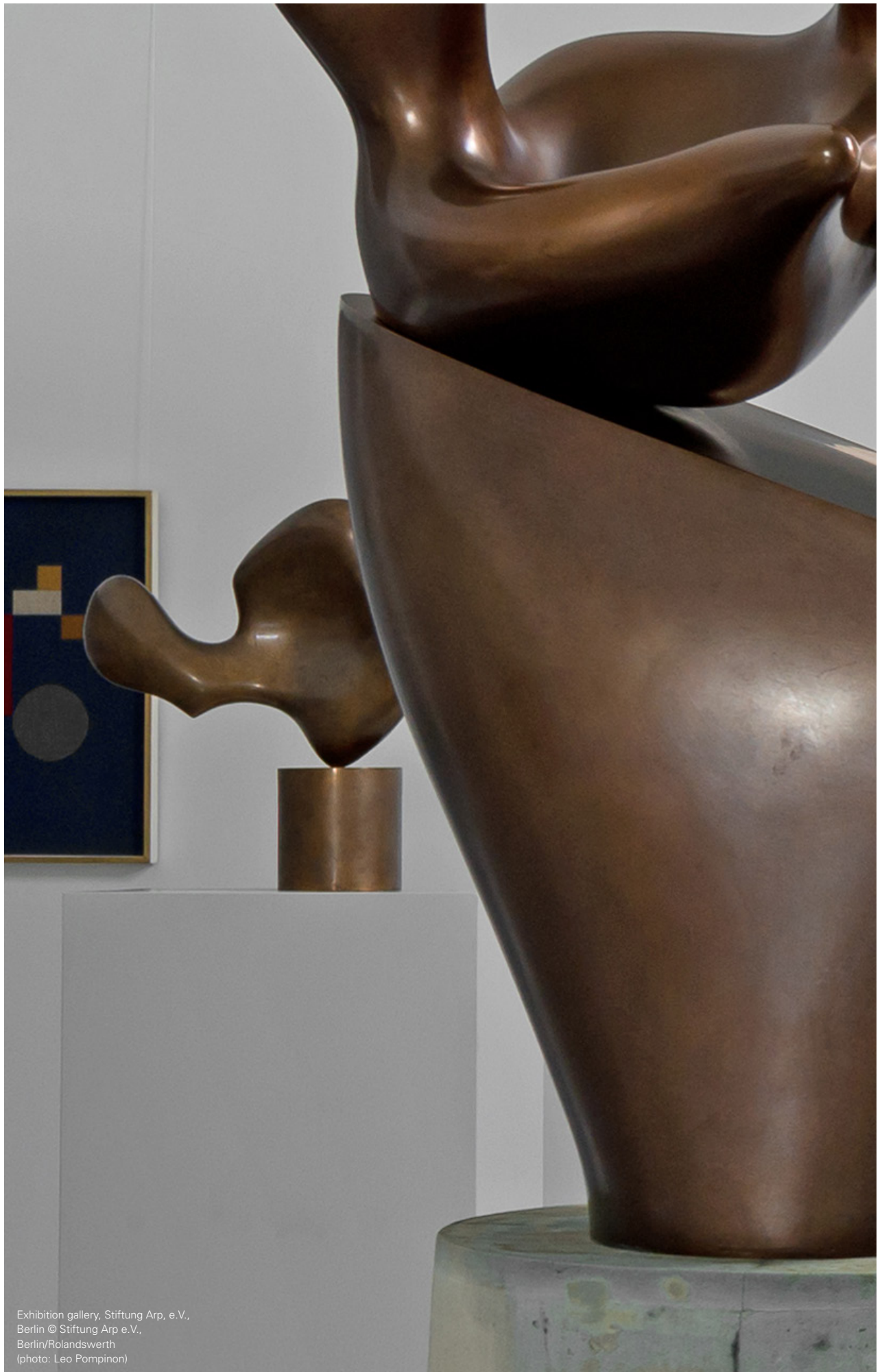
Working on an exhibition devoted to an artist of the past brings an entirely different set of challenges than one focused on a living artist. Because Arp died half a century ago, there are very few people alive today who knew him well, and although his homes and studios in Clamart, near Paris, and in Locarno, Switzerland, have been preserved, they are as much museums as living environments. The interviews and accounts of studio visits with living artists familiar to readers of *The Nasher* magazine are replaced by visits to libraries, museum galleries and storerooms, and archives. Research on living artists also depends on reading publications and looking at artworks in various collections, but

artists’ archives are largely repositories of correspondence, photographs, texts and drafts of texts, legal documents, and other ephemera, much of which has survived, by chance, over a lifetime dedicated to making art, not keeping tidy, complete files. (That tends to come later, with commercial success, and the efforts of family members or galleries to create a more organized record.)

Published interviews and accounts of studio visits with contemporary artists have a theatrical element largely missing from archival research: characters (artist and visitor) interact, and readers become the audience for their exchange. Trying to recount what happens in an archive is far less thrilling on its face: it can be compared to a treasure hunt, but often the goal of the hunt is not clear. Maybe there will be a “Eureka!” moment of discovery—an unpublished text, a revealing letter—but often what happens is a slow accrual of knowledge and familiarity with people born generations ago. Those glimpses of immediacy are difficult to quantify, but they somehow quicken the mind of a researcher.

For example, I already knew from published sources that especially prior to the death of his first wife in 1943, Arp was known for his high-spirited, absurdist wit and self-deprecating humor. I also knew that although he was a gifted poet, he did not participate in Dada readings and performances as regularly as his friends. Those qualities came into sharp relief in a panicked yet very funny letter Arp wrote to his sister-in-law in 1928 that begins:

I’m answering you in great haste because this evening I have to read at the literary club Hottingen and I have to prepare. I have stagefright and anxiety that I’m going to collapse and urinate in my shoes. I’ll lie on the floor like puke, while the last rites are spoken over me....



Exhibition gallery, Stiftung Arp, e.V.,
Berlin © Stiftung Arp e.V.,
Berlin/Rolandswerth
(photo: Leo Pompinon)



Sculpture storage, Stiftung Arp, e.V., Berlin © Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth (photo: Leo Pompinon)

The Lesezirkel Hottingen was a prestigious literary club in Zurich, Switzerland, which numbered Rainer Maria Rilke, Carl Jung, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse among writers they invited to read. Arp's invitation—which I've seen no reference to in other sources—indicates recognition and respect, but the letter also casts a revealing light on Arp's quiet demeanor and subversive sense of humor: beyond the description of escalating disaster and complete physical unraveling he describes, his language (the letter is written in German) veers into nonsensical words of dialect and puns that suggest a complete undoing, while performing the kind of linguistic dexterity that must have prompted the club's invitation.

The Stiftung Arp also houses a large photo archive encompassing Arp's life and work, with clowning vacation photos mingled with photos of the artist in his studio or, more rarely, at work. In the 1930s, he often worked on plaster sculptures in the garden at Clamart, and it is a bracing shock to see the rough surfaces of his plasters as he built them

up, and before he began the long process of scraping and sanding them to a point of uncanny, elusive smoothness. Likewise, other photos show an array of saws that Arp used for cutting apart plasters and reconfiguring them. He lived and worked surrounded by his art, including multiple casts of the same sculpture—the photos in the archive also serve as evidence of the location and proliferation of works in his home and studio over time.

The Berlin archive and library occupies one end of a large skylit space, which houses at its center and other end an exhibition gallery and storage for Arp's sculptures, reliefs, and works on paper. It's difficult to imagine a better research break than walking across the room to look at the actual objects reproduced and discussed in all the papers at hand. Arp worked in plaster directly, and as he began to create a body of sculptural works, he also began keeping casts of his plasters, using them both for inspiration and as sources for new sculptures, by turning them on their sides, cutting into



them, and otherwise reorienting them. Photographs of related works can be deeply misleading—much better to walk 20 feet and look at the objects themselves, sometimes made years apart, to appreciate Arp’s capacity to conceive, visualize, and transmute forms decades before CAD programs.

Working in an archive can be tedious, but that tedium can be important. Reading through letter after letter about Arp’s ill health in later years, his stage fright when called upon to participate in readings and performances, and finding out which old friends write to him in the familiar “you” (*tu* in French, and *du* in German), rather than the more formal *vous* and *Sie*, provide a sense of the texture of a life, lived, day in and day out. Letters from the 1930s and early 1940s become palpably more anxious as Arp and his friends sensed the rising dangers of Nazi Germany and options for movement became increasingly limited; after World War II, Arp’s ill health alternates with reports of an amazingly active working and travel schedule. On this trip, I focused on the facts of

Arp’s daily life: family and friends, studio and house, work and play. When I return to the archive this fall to complete my fellowship, I will track Arp’s professional collaborations in the years after World War II—the time of the Nasher’s *Torso with Buds*—with his foundries, studio assistants, gallerists, and publishers. As usual, and to my delight, I have little idea what I will find.

¹ Regarding the Stiftung Arp, e.V., its history, fellowship program, and current fellows, see <http://stiftungarp.de/forschungundprojekte/stipendien/>.

² These former residences are the site of the other two Arp foundations, which I also visited on this trip: the Fondation Arp, Clamart, France (<http://www.fondationarp.org/>) and Fondazione Marguerite Hagenbach Arp, Locarno, Switzerland (<http://fondazionearp.ch/>).

³ Letter to Marie Arp, March 10, 1928, Stiftung Arp, e.V. Translated from German by the author.