

Research report
Stiftung Arp e. V., Berlin
Fall 2018

My research stay in Berlin took place in the fall of 2018. It involved research mainly in the library of the Stiftung Arp e. V. but also at the Kunstbibliothek and the library of the Akademie der Künste. The initial research plan was bipartite. It sought to examine: 1) the archival resources relating to Jean Arp's collaboration with the magazine and gallery *Cahiers d'Art* with particular focus on two 1934 exhibitions (*Arp, Ghika, Héliion, S.H. Taeuber-Arp* in the Cahiers d'Art gallery and *Abstrakte Malerei und Plastik* at the Zurich Kunsthaus) and 2) the specialised bibliographical sources available at the Stiftung in an attempt to situate Arp in the debates over abstract art between the wars and the favourable reception of his work in a magazine (*Cahiers d'Art*), which did not lend a sympathetic eye on pure abstraction. Due to lack of archives on the interwar period, the archival material examined during my research concerned documents from the post-WWII era, more specifically the folders Correspondence: Amis divers: A-Z: letters from Greta Stroh to Michel Seuphor (1978), letters by Charles Kittel (1962) and correspondence with Christian Zervos (Zervos, Edition Cahiers d'Art, Z1/1-17, 1956-1971, 20.04.1956 – 18.11.1970 : 19 Dokumente). The bibliographical sources consulted at the library of the Stiftung Arp e. V. consist of a long list of monographs, exhibition catalogues, collective volumes and periodicals on Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber, Theo van Doesburg, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, El Lissitzky, Michel Seuphor, D.-H. Kahnweiler, De Stijl, Art Concret, Abstraction-Creation, Merz, Abstract art, Neo-plasticism, biomorphism, Dada and surrealism. Most of the journals published by the diverse groups with which Arp collaborated throughout his career are now available online.

One of the major questions that motivated my research on Arp was his flexibility in collaborating and preserving strong connections with heteroclite artistic networks and groups which, nevertheless, appear to have exerted small influence over his individual expression. This was in fact the central idea on which the Cahiers d'Art group exhibition *Arp, Ghilka, Héliion, S.H. Taeuber-Arp* was organised in 1934 as highlighted in Jan Brzekowski's text published in *Cahiers d'Art* the same year (Les quatre noms Hans Arp – Ghilka – Jean Helion – S. H. Tauber-Arp: à propos de leur exposition à la galerie des Cahiers d'Art,' *Cahiers d'Art* 9, 1934). The same text was republished by Brzekowski in 1936, now referring exclusively to Arp and excluding all references to the other artists, in a small catalogue reproducing the artist's works

donated by the a.r. group to the Museum of History and Art in Lodz at the beginning of the 1930s.

There is an interesting contradiction in the way the artist perpetually inscribed his activity in collective efforts, while art critics and – later - scholars praised his individualism. With discussing the anonymous group or in different terms the entity which was known to the wider public as Dadaism, Michel Sanouillet (*Dada à Paris*, 2005) maintained that the group was in fact the ‘crucible in which an individual establishes oneself, discovers oneself and surpasses oneself.’ This definition obviously applies to the case of Arp. However Dada was not Arp’s first group activity. Already since the age of 16, he was involved in the Alsatian movement Jungst Elsass and the circle around René Schickele publishing his first texts in 1903 in the review *Der Stänkerer*, which was edited anonymously for political reasons as mentioned on its front cover. Here, again, Aimée Bleikasten (*Mélusine no IX, Arp Poète Plasticien*, 1987) properly remarked that ‘with regard to all groups in which he later participated, Arp finds himself in the same situation [...] Whether it be the Dada movement [...] or surrealism [...] he will be both present and yet elsewhere.’

By 1915, before moving to Switzerland, Arp had established important contacts with international artistic and literary circles. In the spring of 1916, the cubist dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler sent him his unpublished manuscript *Der Kubismus*, asking Arp to play the role of the intermediary for its publication in Switzerland with an introduction by Schickele. Already three years earlier, Arp’s name figured on the cover of the book *Neue französische Malerei*, published in Leipzig together with his close friend, the art critic L. H. Neitzel. Arp’s contribution to the book was the selection of works that were reproduced in it, namely works by Henri Rousseau, Henri Matisse, Kees von Dongen and Pablo Picasso. It is important that most of these works belonged to Kahnweiler’s collection. Despite his exchanges with the cubist networks and considering that a small number of his early works that survived carry the influence of impressionism, neo-impressionism and Cezanne, the fact that Arp never experimented with or entirely gave in to the cubist idiom is telling of his ‘reactiveness’ but also his ambitions as an artist. However the Dada collages are generally viewed as the first cubist-influenced abstract creations. Given that Arp had evidently read Kahnweiler’s book as early as 1916, it is interesting to remark the fact that Christian Zervos’ (founder and editor of *Cahiers d’Art*) view of abstract art, as Briony Fer (*On Abstract Art*, 1997) has pointed out, echoed that of Kahnweiler on non-objective painting, who wrote in *Der Kubismus* that ‘what the followers of this movement are creating is simply ornament.’

The background of both Zervos and Arp was quite similar. They both started their careers in the periphery mainly occupied with literary questions of language and form, while cultivating radically critical positions towards humanist culture. The terms ‘plasticity’, ‘lyricism’ and ‘poetry’ appear with astounding frequency in Zervos’ discourse and had become the trademark of the art criticism published in *Cahiers d’Art*. It is important, however, to observe that the same terms not only constitute key-terms in theoretical texts on abstract art, but also precisely describe Arp’s sculptural and graphic work. Arp’s presence in *Cahiers d’Art* is reduced to sculpture, which represented accurately what the term ‘pure plasticity’ stood for in Zervos’ thought. Arp also published a number of texts and poems in Zervos’ publications such as a response to a survey on abstract art, which constitutes to-date his most comprehensive early positioning to the topic (1931) and the architectural plans for the Room of Superstitions designed by Frederick Kiesler for the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1947 (1947) in *Cahiers d’Art*, a poem published in Zervos’ smaller journal *L’Usage de la Parole* (1939) and an essay which criticises rational and ornamental architecture in *14 rue Dragon* (1934), a small journal also published by Zervos. It is certainly significant that two out of his four total contributions dealt with architecture to which Zervos generally gave generous space.

Although being highly critical about the surrealist indifference towards ‘plasticism’ in the 1920s, *Cahiers d’Art* established strong collaborations with the surrealists throughout the 1930s supporting a group of artists belonging to the young and promising generation, like Joan Miro, Andre Masson and Arp, whose work demonstrated the fruitful combination of plasticity, poetry and lyricism. In keeping with the positions that surrealism developed during its ‘period of autonomy’, *Cahiers d’Art* espoused individual expression but never identified Arp with the surrealist movement. In his 1938 book *Histoire de l’Art Contemporaine*, Zervos does not include a section on surrealism and lists Arp in the Dada movement. In *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), Alfred Barr almost forces a formal comparison between Picasso and Arp describing their works as ‘near-abstractions.’ Similarly, the catalogue of Gallatin’s *Museum of Living Art* (1936) stressed the similarities and contradictions among the styles of Picasso, Braque, Mondrian and Arp claiming that all four artists had the lesson of Cezanne as a point of departure but followed different paths of abstraction. As early as 1925, Arp had identified himself with both the abstract and the Dada movements in *Die Kunstismen*, published with El Lissitzky. I was particularly interested in this publication which constitutes an early effort, from the part of the abstractionists, to inscribe themselves to the system of –isms, which was identified by many as a continuation and revival of the artisanal tradition of the

Middle Ages and the collective working in guilds. I am grateful to Dr Jana Teuscher, who disclosed to me the reference to a second book on the same topic envisaged by Van Doesburg during the same period. Although the book was never published, it offers a valuable account of the way in which these artists in that particular time positioned themselves in reference to art historical narratives while cultivating at the same time a strong sense of belonging.

Finally, an additional perspective that came into question during my research concerned Arp's *papiers déchirés*/torn papers and his 'recycling' or 'recreation' of existing works, a destructive method that generated new artworks. Arp wrote in a 1932 diary: "we must destroy in order that the lousy materialists may in the ruins recognize what is essential' ("Arp," in *On My Way: Poetry and Essays 1912-1947, 1948*). He added later that he introduced in these compositions aspects of decline and death.¹ Arp compared his technique to the primitive Oceanic creators who were not at all preoccupied with the duration of the materials they used to create their masks, using only perishable objects. It is interesting to compare Arp's technique and statements of that period to Joan Miro's 'assassination of painting' phase, which lasted over a decade from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s and is generally considered as a period of aggression, decomposition or the 'traces of some inconceivable disaster' left on a canvas in Georges Bataille's words. This phase, nevertheless, implied a 'return to origins', a revival of primitive creator's methods or even childlike vandalism. The comparison of the two phases-techniques of the two artists is important for they coincide with significant developments in the artistic and political front of the period in question.

The Stiftung Arp offers not only a pleasant and luminous environment for research, but also a plethora of specialised bibliographical sources which may be studied together with original artworks by Arp. I take this opportunity to address my warmest thanks and gratitude to Dr Jana Teuscher, who has provided valuable guidance and insights on my research throughout my stay. My project drew significant benefits from my interaction with Dr Teuscher and the fruitful discussions we had on major questions associating with the life and work of Arp and Sophie Taeuber.

Sincerest thanks
Dr Chara Kolokytha

¹ 'Mes collages se décollaient, avaient des boursouflures. J'introduisais donc dans mes compositions la déchéance et la mort. Je réagis en évitant d'un jour à l'autre toute précision. Au lieu de couper le papier, je le déchirais avec la main, j'employais des objets trouvés au bord de la mer, et je composais des collages et des reliefs naturels.' (Arp in *Jours effeuillés*, 1955).