

BLAU

“ALL FATHERS DIE, BUT THIS ONE DOESN’T”

She was Germany’s youngest ever judge, today she manages the estate of Hans Arp. Now Loretta Würtenberger has authored a book about artists’ estates.

Business with dead artists is booming. Almost every week we receive emails from major galleries announcing the representation of a new artist’s estate. Loretta Würtenberger, whose company Fine Art Partners manages four estates, has asked the heirs of such artists as Donald Judd, Max Beckmann, and Robert Mapplethorpe how the legacies of late artists can be kept alive. The result is a handbook – as well as the Institute for Artists’ Estates, the first of its kind worldwide.

Loretta Würtenberger, an artist dies and their children inherit the estate. What does that mean for their art – and what does it mean for their children?

There is a famous sentence which I think originally referred to Thomas Mann: “All fathers die, but this one doesn’t”. It can be a large shadow that an artist casts over the lives of his children – from the very beginning the child has to share their father or mother’s love with art. This may also affect several generations. Mayen Beckmann, Max Beckmann’s granddaughter, expressed it like this: “If you grew up with his paintings, you’d be ‘brainwashed’ anyway by the time you reached twenty, so that basically you can only see through the pictures”. In addition to the psychological challenge there is also the one of expertise. Many artists have suppressed the thought of their own mortality and have a ‘devil may care’ attitude to what they eventually leave behind. What’s then inherited is also an immense responsibility. Not

many artists' children are art professionals. They lack the necessary contacts. Artists' estates are a delicate business – and as yet there has been no set of guidelines for dealing with them.

Your book about the management of artists' estates which is due to be published in the coming spring, is set to change that. What would your fundamental rules be for successfully managing an estate?

Each generation of curators, academics, and collectors has to be able to have their own take on the work. There are three basic pillars that need to be maintained if the work is to be kept alive posthumously: the museum world, the academic world, and the market.

Why does an estate need a gallery? Isn't it more important to show the work in museums?

A good gallery is just as important as regular museum exhibitions. Most estates are rich in art but poor in cash. They have to fund themselves. In the USA it is normal for estates to also sell. But in Europe moral reservations still exist – the careful positioning of an important artist's estate is crucial, not least because the same blockbusters can't always be the ones that are retrieved from the depot. It's more about gradually unfolding the work for collectors and museums and also appreciating ancillary aspects, and the early or the late work. Any artist lacking market recognition will be unable to sustain major museum exhibitions over the long term. And it's only work which is exhibited that will attract academic attention.

For the book you spoke to the heirs of Donald Judd, Robert Mapplethorpe, Robert Rauschenberg, Max Beckmann, and others. What do they have in common, apart from having a large shadow cast over them?

What they all have in common is a great need for interaction. When I told Donald Judd's daughter Rainer about the others I would be talking to, she immediately exclaimed: "I want to meet them all too!" This encounter really moved me – here was an

immensely intelligent woman sitting in front of me, mid-forties, but you could still see the young girl who had been thrown into the role of administrating her father's estate. This discrepancy between emotional fragility and an innate intellect, between detachment and a whole-hearted embracing of her task impressed me deeply.

It sounds as if she had no choice.

Yes, you have to try to imagine it: a child is about to embark on their own life when their father dies, leaving them with this crazy responsibility. At that time Rainer was very young – 24 years old. It had already been foreseen that this responsibility would fall to her and her brother Flavin, but apart from that hardly any instructions were left. This is usually the case. Whether an estate is managed well is often a question of whether there is a talent for this within the family. When I asked Rainer what her advice would be to other children of artists, she said to find a mentor and talk to as many people as possible!

What could happen in the case of a family who don't possess the appropriate talents?

The worst scenario would be a disaster as was the case with Oskar Schlemmer. Disputes lasting decades hindered any serious ongoing reception of the work. One of the grandchildren used copyright to boycott any and all activity. For example he wouldn't agree to the reproduction of works in exhibition catalogues. This put museums as well PhD candidates off the work because they were always refused permission for reproductions. Three years ago the time limit on the copyright ran out and major retrospectives immediately followed, as well as a market. But for over seven decades virtually nothing happened.

How can an artist plan against something like that happening?

Franz West probably is the most prominent example at the moment. Shortly before his death in July 2012 he established a foundation. His family has a financial stake but no influence over what is done with his work. A lawyer was appointed as the

estate's executive. It's quite possible that West took his cue from the sculptor Bartolomeo Cavaceppi who bequeathed his estate to the Accademia di San Luca upon his death in 1799. His family received regular amounts of money, but not a single house, piece of furniture, or work of art.

You have just founded the first institute for artists' estates, to date a unique source for advice in this area. What do you see as your main purpose?

I see it as a platform that should do three things: firstly, inspire interest in academics in these issues – we want to assemble an archive of research into estates; secondly, networking – providing a place for heirs to interact with each other; and thirdly, consultancy and management services for estates. We want to be continually proactive in all three areas, the resulting activities may then have their own agenda – but we want to be the active initiators.

Your company Fine Art Partners manages four estates, including Hans Arp's estate, which until a few years ago produced headlines concerning the scandal around posthumous casts. The name Arp was associated with inconsistency, but today he is represented by Hauser & Wirth. How has such a reappraisal been achieved?

Our company supports galleries in financing their transactions in the secondary market. Because we have such a good overview of the art market, five years ago the Arp foundation asked us whether we would be able to develop a strategy that could re-establish faith in Arp's work. It was clear to us that we would only be able to rehabilitate Arp, if the foundation opened its archives, to allow transparency concerning the issues surrounding the posthumous casts. Our first recommendation was the production of a catalogue raisonné by independent academics. The foundation then moved to a depot in Berlin that's open to the public. Today the estate mainly concentrates on awarding fellowships to academics, organising conferences, and initiating exhibitions – as a result Arp has been fully rehabilitated and the galleries have regained their faith in the work.

What did you learn from the Arp experience?

Something quite banal – even the most renowned artist can die a second death if their estate is not well managed. During the last fifteen years of his life Arp enjoyed an extraordinary amount of recognition. He had a solo exhibition almost every year, and in 1954 he was awarded the Grand Prize for Sculpture at the Venice Biennale. He died in 1966 at the peak of his fame, leaving his work to a very capable widow, Marguerite Hagenbach-Arp, who had already managed his career during his lifetime. She continued to do so in an outstanding manner, solo exhibitions took place regularly such as the Guggenheim retrospective of 1969. As Marguerite's health deteriorated, she transferred the estate to a foundation managed by Johannes Wasmuth. She died in the mid 1990s. It's easy to trace how the motor driving Arp's work, which had been running extremely well until Marguerite's illness, gradually slowed; from that period until the 2000s, there were only three major museum exhibitions, hardly any dissertations, and almost no relevant publications.

And then the whole issue surrounding the posthumous casts occurred...

Yes, out of approximately 1,600 bronze sculptures about 36 were problematic. The problem wasn't that in the wake of Arp's death no more casts could be produced, but that the foundation bit off more than it could chew, to put it mildly, not only casting a fifth but also a sixth and seventh sculpture. It's tragic, Arp was a peer to Max Ernst, Henry Moore and Joan Miró, he was regarded as one of the titans of 20th century sculpture – but in the absence of a well-oiled engine even such a renowned artist will begin to fall from fashion or can even fall into disrepute.

And what about artists who are not as well known? Do they have any chance at all of being seen in a new light after their death?

Of course there are estates which don't have a good basis to start work from. Philippe Vandenberg would be one example; he was once the Belgian Polke and very well known, but in the mid 1980s he broke radically with the art market, withdrawing everything. He died in 2009, leaving three children. And they've done

everything absolutely right. First of all they closed the studio for a year, so they could find out for themselves what they wanted – for the work, for themselves personally, and financially. Subsequently everything was given a very solid foundation, the studio was reopened and made into a lively place. Hauser & Wirth represent Philippe Vandenberg today, and the collector Harald Falckenberg has exhibited him; it's been a renaissance in his reception.

The topic seems to be highly emotional.

Yes, as soon as you get involved with estates, the majority of the stories you hear are very moving. It's about how families themselves are conceived. Take for example Francesca Woodman who committed suicide when she was 22. Her estate is looked after by her parents – there's a really wonderful film about her. Watching the two of them in conversation, how they continue to take care of their child, bringing her into the world – the whole thing appears almost like the re-staging of a childhood!

Managing an estate as your purpose in life...

Well, Rainer Judd put it like this: "We were destined to do it. As Donald Judd's children we could never have done anything other than the right thing, for him and his world". Or take Charlotte Berend Corinth, the widow of the German Impressionist Lovis Corinth. She talked about an "inner vow to dedicate my life to you as long and as much as is necessary, in all directions, to conserve everything here that represented your life's work". Her son Thomas was no less committed, preserving each and every mention of his father and even publishing postcards of his works. When he died in 1988, his sister Wilhelmine noted soberly: "I'm now solely responsible for taking care of everything. That is my only task!". Nina Kandinsky took it to an extreme. She wouldn't allow any other topic of conversation in her presence other than her husband...

Which artist succeeded during their own lifetime in establishing a sound basis for their estate, to the satisfaction of all parties involved?

Robert Mapplethorpe. He knew that he was going to die as a result of AIDS. With the assistance of the lawyer Michael Ward Stout, and together with his partner Sam Wagstaff, he decided in advance where the money should flow – into AIDS research and the support of photography. With a fortune of over 200 million dollars, the estate has achieved financial miracles! Mapplethorpe had numerous editions produced before his death, so that the estate would later have enough art to work with.

That sounds like overproduction...

No, the wealth of works meant a lot of sales but no flooding, so that values continue to increase. In the meantime the archive has been handed over to the Getty Research Institute, the best place for conservation and academic research. Today Stout is facing the question of whether the estate's inventory should be sold. The revenue would then go to organisations supporting the causes that were of such importance to the artist.

INTERVIEW: GESINE BORCHERDT

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