

**Critique  
d'art**

## Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art  
contemporain

**48 | Printemps/été 2017**  
**CRITIQUE D'ART 48**

---

### *Hans Hartung, an Archival Life*

**Thomas Schlessler**

Translator: Simon Pleasance



#### **Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/25671>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.25671

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

#### **Publisher**

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

#### **Printed version**

Date of publication: 15 May 2017

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

#### **Electronic reference**

Thomas Schlessler, « *Hans Hartung, an Archival Life* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 48 | Printemps/été 2017, Online since 15 May 2018, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/25671> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.25671

---

This text was automatically generated on 21 April 2019.

EN

---

# *Hans Hartung, an Archival Life*

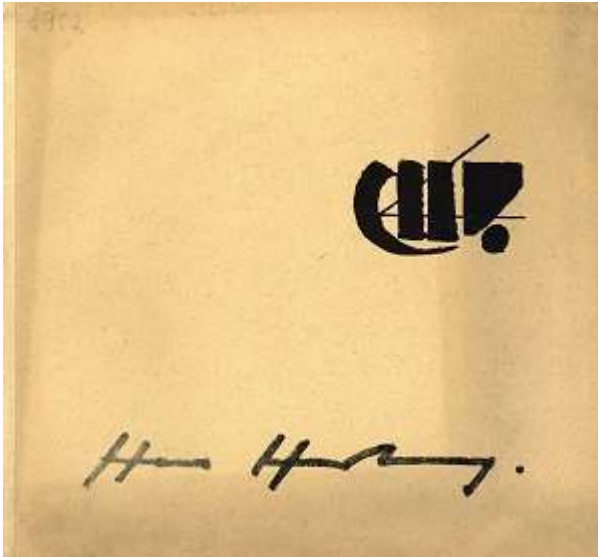
Thomas Schlessler

Translation : Simon Pleasance

---

- 1 In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we are well aware how many artists collect, conserve and compile archives (be they personal or exogenous), then, rather than confining them to the status of historical documentation, incorporate them in their work. The case of the Franco-German painter Hans Hartung is not unrelated to this kind of approach, but in a manner which is, paradoxically, both more empirical and more structured. Very empirical on the one hand, because Hartung never completely predicts what the status of the objects (in the material sense of the term) which accompany him will be, because this status changes on the basis of his own visual research, and because the things in his life have, when all is said and done, a moveable use and value, which can sometimes even be reversed. Very structured, too, because Hartung is also informed by a liking for method and meticulousness, and attached to classifications and categorizations, trying to keep

within a large coherent whole the diverse range of his activities, going beyond just abstract painting.



Couverture du catalogue *Hans Hartung : Paris, Mannheim* : Galerie Rudolf Probst, 1952, fonds Robert Fleck

- 2 Hans Hartung's obsessive relation with archives and archiving, which could be the subject of a whole thesis, thus partly constitutes his oeuvre (and, furthermore, greatly complicates its sense and scope). But it is even more a relation that constitutes his actual existence. Working on this artist is tantamount to not only traditionally relying on masses of data to retrace an itinerary and analyze it, but also to considering this obsessive relation as consubstantial with this itinerary. Many examples illustrate as much. Let us mention three here: the youthful notebooks (diaries); the photographic portraits; and the press clippings.
- 3 Like most teenagers, Hartung started to write diaries when he was 14 going 15, in the summer of 1919. He carried on that diarist's activity for five years, but not on a regular, daily basis. What it entailed for him was rather setting down memories of sequences in his life. What motivated him to write his first entries was his visits and journeys organized by the "Cercles bibliques", protestant organizations mixing excursions, community activities, and religious education. In those notebooks, written in German, we find a host of information shedding light on young Hans's personality (in particular his mystical flights of fancy, then the precociousness and energy of his artistic calling), on the people he spent time with (forging friendships which the painter would keep throughout his life), his areas of interest (sport, dancing, opera...), his education and reading, and his early works. Comprehensive research still remains to be undertaken, because Hans Hartung's youth has usually been dealt with by historians with the aid of secondary sources and later narratives, relatively accurate but incomplete.
- 4 Let us mention that when Hartung wrote, he did so with the aim of instantly linking an archival practice (by its very nature turned towards the past) with a personal construct in the making. At the beginning of his introductory notebook, he referred in particular, as a source of motivation, to the possibility of awakening memories at a later stage. Hartung would operate precisely in this sense. So he embarked on his 1921 notebook by observing that he had read his "old diary" and, in so doing, realized that "memories are relived in

brighter colours.”<sup>1</sup> And again, in December 1922, he transcribed an elegiac passage about his own condition written two and half months earlier in a previous notebook, with the “copy-and-paste” stimulating within him an angry and tempestuous flood of new thoughts. These two examples display series of comings-and-goings; Hans Hartung proceeded to record experiences in writing, and he then re-shaped and rekindled those recorded experiences.



Hans Hartung, *Alain Jouffroy*, Antibes, 1974. Avec l'aimable autorisation de la Fondation Hartung-Bergman

- 5 The early 1920s was a crucial period in his career. It was then that he made his first abstract works (in particular a series of watercolours produced in 1922), and, after the Second World War, that period would be the subject of many historiographical observations, including those, documented by the Archives de la critique d'art, of Pierre Restany, Michel Ragon, François Pluchart and Alain Jouffroy. But for want of access to all of Hartung's archives, none of these major critics had a chance to note that the dynamic which governed the manuscripts from 1919 to 1924 harbingered the later dynamic that would hallmark the artist's research: the deferred factor (with his famous method of transferring from drawing to painting), re-cutouts, and permutations.
- 6 Hans Hartung practiced photography throughout his life, from his boyhood—an ingenious technician, he made his own cameras himself, at an early age—to his death, accumulating large quantities of contact sheets and prints. That practice, described as a “ceaseless image factory”<sup>2</sup> in a 2016 exhibition of his work, would gradually underwrite his legitimacy as an artist photographer, first in the late 1950s and early 1960s (a long article in the magazine *Camera*, featuring in particular an essay by Dominique Aubier),<sup>3</sup> and then in the 1970s (with photographs of stones, dealt with in an essay by Jean Tardieu,<sup>4</sup> and a succession of exhibitions, including one at the Centre Pompidou in 1982).

- 7 But let us return in time to those moments of institutionalization to observe that photography also had an archival function. In the second part of his life, when he was beginning to enjoy a considerable reputation, Hans Hartung met a growing number of personalities. He made a note of his meetings in writing, creating and scrupulously keeping diaries, which are today very rich in information about the social goings-on of the period. He also recorded them with images. By his own admission, he used photography partly as an aid for his memory. Be it a well-known personality (Zao Wou Ki, Alexander Calder, Henry Geldzahler...) or not, the photos he took of his interlocutors were then methodically annotated. The names of his models sometimes featured on the contact sheets, and at times their function and their relationship with a third party: in 1974, for example, "Joël Delouche, friend of Pluchart".<sup>5</sup> This archiving of faces was not reduced to a mere repertory, for Hartung strove each and every time to make nothing less than portraits. He captured several poses and expressions before making his selections on contact-sheets, producing the print he was most satisfied with, and giving it to the model. Regular letters of thanks, sometimes very enthusiastic,<sup>6</sup> attest to that everyday and ongoing habit. Among the critics whose collections are held by the Archives de la critique d'art, some have their portrait by the artist. This is so in the case of Michel Ragon and Alain Jouffroy; it is above all the case with François Pluchart, of whom there are 20 effigies in all: four in 1966, five in 1974, seven in 1981 and four in 1982.
- 8 In 1973, Hans Hartung and Anna-Eva Bergman moved into the property at Antibes which, in 1994 (i.e. five and seven years after their respective deaths) became, in accordance with their wishes, the Foundation which still exists today, responsible for spreading knowledge about their work, and its sphere of influence. The property, which was designed on the basis of Hartung's plans and thoughts, was in no time organized in such a way that everything—artistic output, many exchanges of letters, administrative and financial matters, day-to-day social life...--could be cleverly archived, in step with their busy activities. In tandem, the couple made sure that all the possible archives were retrieved—some of them not easy of access—, like the pieces which, for Hartung, were located in his family home in East Germany. It is this twofold effort (gradual archiving of activities, collection of past archives) which explains the wonderful wealth of the collection today held in Antibes. Neither Hartung nor Bergman undertook this archival labour themselves. They delegated it and gave free rein to an administrative organization supervised by the Norwegian Marie Aanderaa. So the original organization of the property made the future organization of the Fondation Hartung-Bergman possible—not without problems, but in a logical and even natural way. The way it operated stemmed, in many respects, from what had been orchestrated between 1973 and 1989.



Coupages de presse extraites du dossier Hans Hartung, fonds Pierre Cabanne [FR ACA PCABA ART090]

- 9 As far as the press archives are concerned, Hartung had taken out a subscription to the price guide (*Argus*) in 1947, in a postwar context where he was not yet enjoying the renown and success which came his way from the 1950s onward. Since then, and throughout the artist's lifetime, that subscription remained good, and after his death was paid for by the Foundation. Hans Hartung enjoyed considerable critical acclaim, whose range was very important for him, because, without any programmatic or theoretical ambition, the painter was thus constructed by what the critics said about him, as well as by interviews with prestigious figures in the art world. Those interviews offered him, in particular, a chance to set down his career and describe his approach. It has often rightly been said this was done, moreover, at the price of the odd approximation, not to say historical distortion. To the point where the reference work on the painter's critical success by Annie Claustres talks of "ups and downs",<sup>7</sup> and, better still, of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. But rather than hastily concluding that certain facts have been manipulated, we can put forward the hypothesis that, in his discourse with the critics and in his connections with them, Hans Hartung was still very involved with re-combinations and re-arrangements, until he found his own line.
- 10 At the Archives de la critique d'art, the Pierre Cabanne collection shows how this latter focused, through his own investigations and selections in the press, on the preparation of dossiers on artists who interested him, including Hans Hartung. In comparison, Hartung himself, the secretariat working alongside him, and the continued work done by the Foundation as from 1994, proceeded to make a location and systematic collection which gave rise to the archiving of a huge swathe of articles. In that swathe, Hartung and/or Bergman are sometimes mentioned in an incidental way in writings about a quite different subject than themselves. Both were also faithful to reference magazines. In this way, the available press archives represent plentiful and useable material for working on the history of press, criticism and networks, over and above Hartung and Bergman.
- 11 This, in a general way, is the distinctive feature of the Foundation. Originally devised around two figures of abstract painting, it now aims to offer resources which go beyond its initial purpose, and have a far greater influence on art history. Among the many requests made of Hartung in the second part of his life, we find that of advising the Institut für moderne Kunst in Nuremberg, in the late 1960s. What he said about that

activity in a letter to his ex-wife, the artist Roberta González (daughter of the sculptor Julio), represents an eloquent statement of his general defence of archives and the utilitarian function he assigned them: “Everything had a tendency that was fiercely restricted to youth and everything that is topical. I protested vehemently against this one-sided tendency. I made a speech to them about the essential importance of being also concerned, where archives are involved, with works already finished, and artists who are already dead, or already old, where the work of the art historian has its real value, where it is urgent both for the documentation to be brought together and for precise and authentic memories [...]. I managed to partly persuade them.”<sup>8</sup>

---

## NOTES

1. Hans Hartung, notebook 3, 1921, archives of the Fondation Hartung-Bergman, Antibes.
2. Fondation Hartung Bergman, “Une incessante fabrique d’images”, *Hartung et la photographie*, catalogue for the exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Siegen, 2016.
3. Aubier, Dominique. “Hans Hartung”, *Camera*, August 1960
4. *Un Monde ignoré vu par Hans Hartung – poèmes et légendes de Jean Tardieu*, Geneva : Albert Skira, 1974
5. Contact sheet L229, Leica, 1974, archives of the Fondation Hartung-Bergman, Antibes
6. Michel Seuphor answered thus when he received his own portrait and his wife’s: “I think they are the best photos we’ve ever had. And we owe them, paradoxically, to one of the great painters of our time. Thanks to our friend and to the artist”. Michel Seuphor, letter to Hans Hartung of 17 September 1969, archives of the Fondation Hartung-Bergman, Antibes.
7. Claustres, Annie. *Hans Hartung : les aléas d’une réception*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2005
8. Hans Hartung, letter to Roberta González of 31 July 1967, archives of the Fondation Hartung-Bergman, Antibes.