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Artists' estates: keep or get rid of them?[1]

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The fate of the estates (Nachlässe) of visual artists are as varied as the fortunes of the artists themselves.[2] It is only the well-known, high value artists with considerable resources who have the means to create their own museum or archive.[3] Yet the storage and preservation of the vast remains of artists' estates is an increasingly urgent matter. Artist output has dramatically increased since the middle of the 20th century, as has the awareness of the importance of artists bequests. Artists have often taken matters into their own hands while they are still living. More often though, it is the heirs to an estate who are faced with the task after the artist's death. The immediate family (widow, widower, children) understand the importance of the work and feel a sense of obligation. But the second generation (grandchildren) questions what to do with "all this stuff"? Often the heirs do not have the expertise, understandably, and are overwhelmed by the financial and other costs of appropriate storage for the permanent preservation of the material.[4] How to professionally accommodate, develop and make such collections accessible? In the following, several models for the handling and storage of artist estates are presented, with specific reference to the issues of sifting, recording and selection.

Where should bequests go?

Visual artists estates usually contain several types of material such as works of art (paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures and maquettes), as well as written and visual documents (letters, memos, contracts, exhibition and sales lists, press clippings, photos, etc.). The classic repositories for works of art are museums and art collections, while written and visual documentation belong in archives or libraries. There are some institutions in Germany known for their extensive bequest holdings, such as the archives of the Akademie der Künste Berlin

1. The text is based on a paper presented on 24 October 2013 at the symposium "Kulturelles Erbe digital – Bedingungen und Perspektiven", organized by the prometheus digital image archive in co-operation with the Pausanio Akademie and the University Library Centre in Nord-Rhein Westphalia. http://prometheus-bildarchiv.de/en/tagung2013/index, accessed 12 January 2015.

2. The estates of a full range of artists – also including musicians, writers, and performing artists - is described fully in the anthology *Special delivery. Von Künstlernachlässen und ihren Verwaltern,* edited by V. Hansen et al and published in Bonn by the Arbeitskreis Selbständiger Kultur-Institute in 2011.

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Fig. 1. Website for Rheinisches Archiv für Künstlernachlässe, Bonn

(which mainly receives the estates of its members)[5], the Zentralarchiv der Berliner Museen[6], the Rheinische Archiv für Künstlernachlässe (whose holdings are stored in the Bonn Stadtarchiv)[7] and the Deutsche Kunstarchiv at the Germanische Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (Figs. 1 and 2).[8]

Some libraries accommodate artists' estates, such as the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin, the state libraries of both Berlin and Munich, as well as the SLUB (Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek) in Dresden and many others. Specialist art and museum libraries, such as the Kunst- und Museumsbibliothek in Cologne, offer a natural environment for artists' estates. The employees have the necessary know-how for the preservation, acquisition and development of the collections and their existing publications and holdings provide contextualization and access points for new bequests.[9]

How to choose what to keep?

If an artist's works appear on the art market and have been sold, their artistically significant works usually would have entered museums and collections during their lifetime. Whether market success is always directly related to artistic quality is indeed questionable, but will not be discussed here (Fig. 3). What is certain is that estates almost always contain the bulk of works that (for whatever reason) have not found their way into collections. This raises the questions: "Should any of it be kept? Who wants it?" Uwe Degreif, curator at the Museum Biberach, holds the following provocative thesis after many years of experience with artists estates[10]: he claims that there is only about 5–10% of artistically significant work worth preserving from the total stock of an estate, not including the printed material and archives. In a bequest containing about 2,500 works, this amounts to only 100–250.

It is almost hopeless to try to interest any single public museum for the acquisition of an estate of this size. Very few museums would preserve an entire estate. Firstly, for reasons of space. In addition, the necessary acquisition and cataloguing of such an extensive legacy

3. Gerhard Richter archive in Dresden (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen) is an example, or the Georg-Kolbe-Museum. For the artists' estates that can be found with the Kolbe-estate, see. C. Jahn, "Aus dem Atelier ins Archiv – Künstlernachlässe im Georg-Kolbe-Museum", *AKMB-news* 17, 1 (2011): 12–13.

4. A recent publication on this topic: F.-J. Sladeszek and S. Sykora, *After collecting: Leitfaden für den Kunstnachlass*. Zurich: Rüffer & Rub, 2013.

5. Archiv der Akademie der Künste http://www.adk.de/de/archiv/aufbau-aufgaben/ [accessed 22 January 2015].

6. For some of the 19th-century estates they hold, see P. Winter. "Vom Zerreißen und Verbrennen. Genese, Charakter und Bedeutung der Künstler-Nachlässe des 19. Jahrhunderts im Zentralarchiv" in J. Grabowski und P. Winter, eds., *Kunst recherchieren. 50 Jahre Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*, Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2010: 121–130.

7. Rheinisches Archiv für Künstlernachlässe http://www.rak-bonn.de/ [accessed 16 January 2015].

8. B. Jooss. "Das Deutsche Kunstarchiv im Germanischen Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg. Vom Umgang mit schriftlichen Nachlässen von Künstler und Kunstwissenschaftlern", *AKMB-news* 16, 1 (2010): 16–21.

9. For examples of this expertise, see http://kalliope.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/ (this explains about the bequests in the libraries) and the Zentrale Datenbank der Nachlässe of the Bundesarchiv includes descriptions of artists' bequests, http://www.nachlassdatenbank.de/ [accessed 16 January 2015].

10. Under this title, Uwe Degreif presented a lecture at a Hamburg symposium (see reference 11 for further information) in which he convincingly pleads for a radical, strict review and selection. My thanks to Uwe Degreif for sharing the lecture manuscript with me and for the permission to quote from it. An interview with him on the same topic can be found in F.-J. Sladeszek and S. Sykora, *After collecting: Leitfaden für den Kunstnachlass*. Zurich: Rüffer & Rub, 2013: 155–160.

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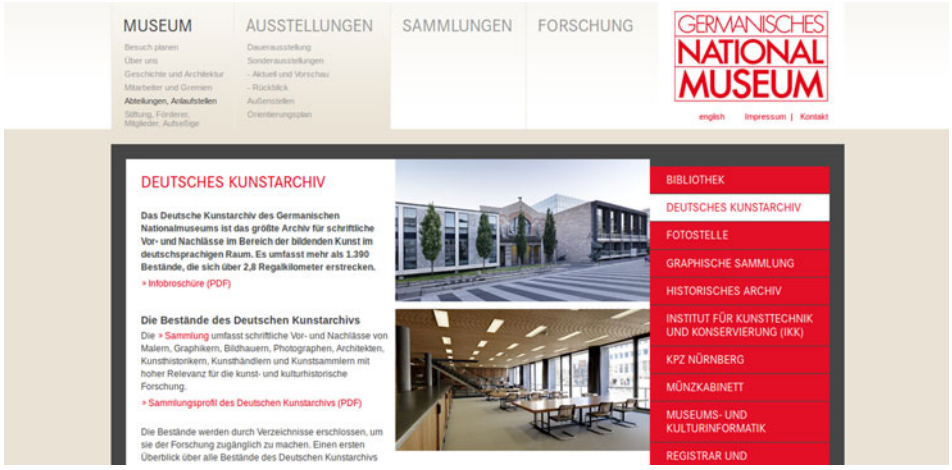


Fig. 2. Website for Deutsches Kunstarchiv in the Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg



Fig. 3. Studio in Düsseldorf. Photograph: D. Haffner, August 2013

makes it difficult to afford. Museums are more than archives – the collecting priority is usually based on quality rather than quantity. An entire bequest rarely meets those criteria.

For estate executors, it is therefore advisable to diversify the portfolio, so to divide the estate giving individual works or groups of works to a number of suitable collections or museums. Smaller groups of works can be rapidly identified, developed and presented; temporary exhibitions help keep the artist's name in public eye. "Suitable collection" means that works must fit into the existing collection (which, in turn, presupposes the presence of a collection policy). Ideally, works complement existing movements or schools (as a member of a particular artists' circle or group, etc). Or perhaps they show regional references, based on the artist's biography or in the subjects of their works.

What to do with the rest?

To provide guidance on this issue, several dedicated initiatives have come together in the last ten years.

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Forum für Künstlernachlässe (Forum for Artists' Estates), Hamburg (Fig. 4)

First of all there is the Hamburg Forum für Künstlernachlässe, which celebrated its 10th anniversary with a symposium in September 2013.[11] The Forum is a voluntary 'club' initiative supported by donations, sponsors and personal dedication. Their activities are centred on the city of Hamburg and the states immediately around it. The concept is to ensure artists' estates are processed and made accessible to the public. In addition to events, lectures and exhibitions, comes digitization, documentation and the online presentation of art. It was a wise and far-sighted decision to operate online from the beginning. The Forum also has, through its connection to the Museumsverbund der Nord- und Ostsee Region which provides the web-based software digiCULT, an online reporting tool so that the data can be available immediately in the appropriate online portal.[12] Thus the art and the artists are rapidly visible to the public. The development also serves to ensure a meaningful artistic core component is present. After the digitization and documentation, works can be sold to support the ongoing work of the organization.

11. The catalogue for the 10th anniversary exhibition, Forum für Nachlässe von Künstlerinnen und Künstler e.V., eds., *Entdeckt und Bewahrt! 10 Jahre Forum für Künstlernachlässe mit einem Querschnitt durch die Sammlung*. Hamburg: the Forum, 2013. For the symposium programme, see www.kuenstlernachlaesse.de/projekte/ausstellungen/2013-2/ [accessed 16 January 2015].

12. Museen Nord http://www.museen-sh.de/startseite [accessed 16 January 2015].

Künstlernachlässe Mannheim

Two years later, in 2005, the project "Nachlass-Stiftung für Mannheimer Künstler" was born in Mannheim . As in Hamburg, this is a volunteer, civic initiative that has achieved a lot with limited resources, with their material costs offset by sponsors.[13] Now renamed "Künstlernachlässe Mannheim" they maintain a strong regional reference. Since the work of many artists is often closely rooted in their belonging to certain places, local references are often also reflected in their œuvre. This aspect is not to be confused with provincialism, but rather to be understood as part of their identity. Also in Mannheim the artworks are digitized and are already online and searchable via the home page. However, the data is not yet available through an online portal (such as the German Digital Library). Such a development is desirable and would enhance significantly the public presence of the Mannheim artists and art.

13. Künstlernachlässe Mannheim http://www.kuenstlernachlaesse-mannheim.de/ [accessed 16 January 2015].

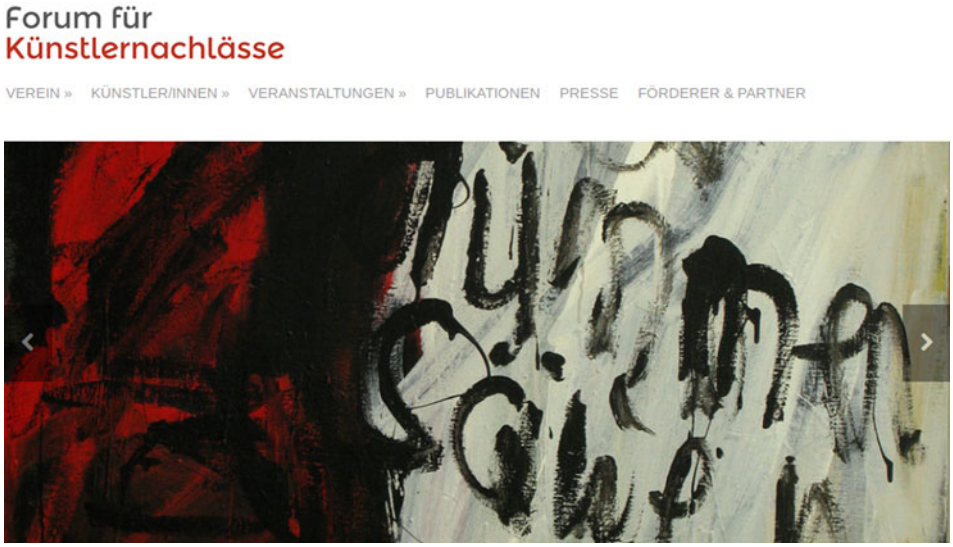


Fig. 4. Forum für Künstlernachlässe, Hamburg

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Archiv für Künstlernachlässe der Stiftung Kunstfonds, Brauweiler

The Archiv für Künstlernachlässe der Stiftung Kunstfonds (the Stiftung Kunstfonds is similar to The Art Fund in the UK) in the former Brauweiler Abbey in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, enjoys somewhat better conditions than the two above-mentioned initiatives.[14]. It was opened in April 2010 and receives both state and national funding. This means that this collection receives works by artists of "national importance" (however that is defined). The professionals in all relevant fields arrange proper storage and conservation, the loan of works to exhibitions or as permanent loans, and work with partners such as museums, galleries, universities, researchers and scientists. Digital services and on-line availability on the archive site are also part of the Brauweiler programme, although the integration of the digitized data into a nationwide portal is still missing and would be useful. Brauweiler also aims to archive the core original collections. Since autumn 2013 they have been collaborating with the Van Ham Art Estate, a subsidiary of the Cologne art auction house Van Ham. Van Ham helps with valuation and processing of individual, selected estates, and with the arrangement for sale of works of art from the archive.[15]

14. Stiftung Kunstfonds http://www.kunstfonds.de/kuenstlernachlaesse.html [accessed 16 January 2015].

15. Van Ham Art Estate http://www.van-ham.com/van-ham-art-estate.html [accessed 16 January 2015]. Critically reviewed by Christiane Fricke in the *Handelsblatt*, 20 August 2013. ww.handelsblatt.com/panorama/kunstmarkt/kuenstlernachlaesse-kampf-um-ressourcen/8665614.html [accessed 16 January 2015].

[Private] Künstlernachlässe im Land Brandenburg (Fig. 5)

Spring of 2011 saw the unveiling of a voluntary initiative in Potsdam, in the state of Brandenburg, which has three development goals: the distributed acquisition of estates that are immediately made available via an online portal for artists' estates; a 'mobile service' to advise and assist estate executors/administrators; and a core collection repository.[16] The distributed collection of data provided by estate executors was the beginning of the concept, the corresponding web-based database went live in the middle of 2014. It allows you to locate an estate's inventory and, from these results, generate a catalogue raisonné. The plan to build a collection repository is based on the same considerations as in Hamburg or Brauweiler: The artist estates

16. [Private] Künstlernachlässe im Land Brandenburg. http://private-kuenstlernachlaesse-brandenburg.de/ [accessed 16 January 2015].

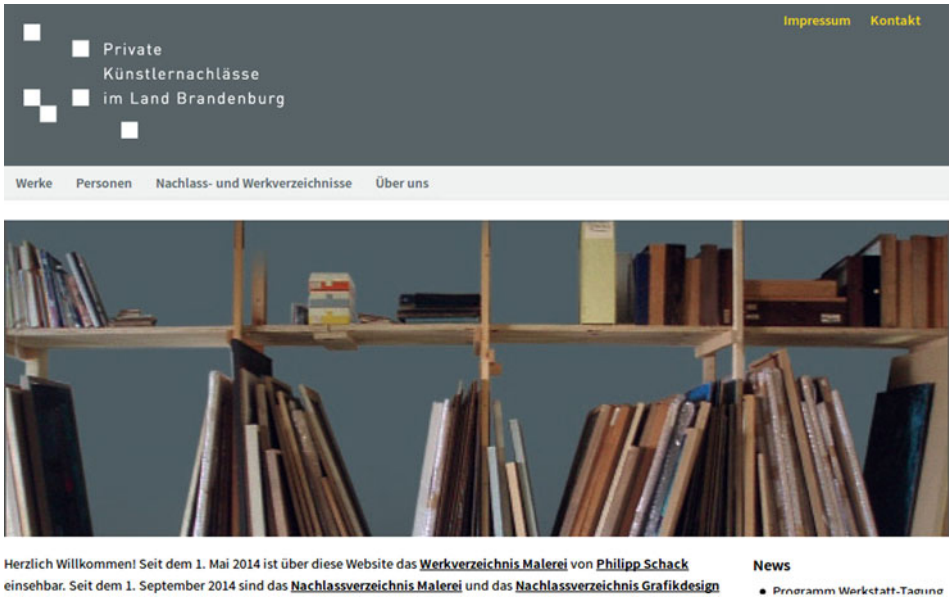


Fig. 5. Website for Private Künstlernachlässe im Land Brandenburg

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are to be preserved professionally. However, the model allows for items from the estates to be sold to help fund further work because, as with most of the initiatives, the problem is the lack of financial support. The need to secure the artistic legacy has not penetrated the consciousness of politicians enough and, in times of tight budgets, contemporary artists come further down the list of priorities.

In conclusion

What all these initiatives and institutions have in common is that they, from the outset, intended the acquisition and documentation of the works to be available online immediately. This is a wise, far-sighted decision. The web-based, possibly distributed collection is the only way to present the wealth of objects. It requires appropriate arrangements in advance (the estates must, for example, transfer the reproduction rights to the works of art at the beginning) but it is, in the long term, the right approach. By enriching the data and linking with other data sources such as GND (the German authorities database), Wikipedia, etc., data quality can be significantly improved in the medium term. As a result, the public presence of the respective artists and artworks increases, relationships with other art works and documentation about the artists can be identified, publications can be produced and the knowledge of our artistic and cultural life – especially away from the current mainstream – can be raised.

These initiatives have understood that to secure the artists estates, they should not be regarded purely as preservation facilities, like museums. They work with galleries and art dealers; sales are desired and encouraged, not taboo. The focus is on the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage – core holdings are retained but others may enter private hands through sales. However, there is still digitized record in the public domain. Meanwhile some bits of paper from the estate might also just disappear ...

This is a translation of the article "Künstlernachlässe: hin oder weg?" that first appeared in the *AKMB-news,* 1 (2014): 15–19. The text has been translated by Erica Foden-Lenahan.

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