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# ALL MEMORY IS PRESENT

(Novalis)

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**Inga Vatter Jensen** Remembering is an activity. By remembering we keep the already thought, the already made alive. In the Association for the Administration of Swiss Fine Artists' Estates we preserve art from sinking into oblivion. We process past creation, take inventory, set up archives and thus preserve a part of Swiss and regional culture and art history – and in particular the female side of this art and culture.

During my activity as GSBK central chairperson (1989 – 1997) I was to experience time and again that the art estates of women were not treated with the same diligence and attention as those of their male colleagues. Up until the 1970s and 1980s most professional women artists deliberately renounced marriage and children in order to practice their art professionally. According to the then conventionally held moral values, it was almost impossible for women to work as fully professional artists. Some rare exceptions set aside, art as a full profession did not exist at the beginning of the last century. Thus, female artists had to pay a high price to pursue their careers. They remained unmarried and childless; hence they were thus to some degree considered as social outsiders.

The world has moved on, yet despite the equal status and rights today, few works by women are to be found in art collections and archives. Since the 1970s there has been an increase of artists of either sex in Switzerland, and hence there exist more and more art estates, obviously including a growing share of

women's art. The state does not feel bound to attend to art estates. Neither are there any communal agencies responsible for them. Swiss museums do not provide additional space, the authorities lack funds, and the municipalities are overstretched both spatially and financially.

Less known artists are on the fringe of the culture circuit, their estates are administered at a private level such as family and art patrons. For well-known artists, however, museums or private collectors engage willingly. In order to evaluate an estate, the issue of quality arises. Mostly artists unfortunately tend to keep everything and anything. The appropriate selection of art objects is therefore paramount. The same applies to written correspondence and intellectual exchange with other artists.

A specific committee elected by the Association for the Administration of Swiss Fine Artists' Estates is entrusted with this task. All vestiges of an artist's life that help to offer insight and thus a better judgment of the work are sifted most carefully. Only an intense engagement with the complete works and the artist's personality can give us insight into the artists' creative ideas. Thus, we reach the awareness required for the judgment of a complex oeuvre in its entirety.

The association was founded in 1998 and now has around 200 members and patrons in all of Switzerland. Out of the numerous estates entrusted to us, a large part has already been attended to; the remaining ones are under examination. The estates are being



documented, inventoried, archived and, whenever possible, published and exhibited and made accessible for MA/lic.-theses.

The task is partly executed by members of the executive committee, by voluntary associates of the Benevol of the City of Berne, by art historians and a person working in the archive on a part-time basis. In Berne, we possess of archival rooms of our own that can be further enlarged and that are open to our members once a year. There are guided tours by appointment. The interest and the reception are positively pleasant, so that we hold an art reception combined with a tour through the archives each year in August. Additionally, there are exhibition activities in various smaller museums and galleries at home and abroad.

"Without a public, without perception, without reception, there is no work. An exhibition contributes to giving the work its reality, it is the first-rate medium for the realization of an artwork." (U. Look).

Since June this year we have our own gallery in Berne: the "ArchivArte Galerie", in which we present estate exhibitions. In addition we exhibit the "Art Prize" for women artists from the Canton of Berne every year, we open the gallery to young artists on fair and advantageous terms and there is the "graphic window" curated by Barbara Bandi once a year. These exhibition activities form a significant component of our work, as it seems crucial for us that the artwork of the estates administered by us does not fall into

oblivion, but can at least partly be returned to the market again.

For the last three years the Estate Association has also been running a publishing house: the "ArchivArte Verlag Bern". Whenever financial means permit, we compile publications on women artists whose estates we administer or who have willed their estates to us. Meanwhile we have compiled seven publications. The publications are financed by foundations, lottery funds, communes and towns, private sponsors, the artists' families or by the sales of paintings. The works of other, often very renowned artists present in the estates are of additional acute interest as well, or alternately, precious books or curiosities, such as for example Johannes Brahms's sugar tongs.

The GNSBK is an umbrella association which can and should accommodate a great variety of concerns. Next year we can celebrate our decennial jubilee, and we are proud of having survived for so long and that our visions have come true. Christoph Reichenau, cultural secretary of the City of Berne, said in the ArchivArte Gallery's inaugural address: "Art is always also an archive. Each art piece is a part of a development into which it inserts itself and which in turn expresses itself through it. There is no contemporary art without a connection to the evolution of art." For this reason it is crucial that institutions such as the Estate Association exist to attend to artists' works and prevent them from falling into oblivion. For culture without memory is inconceivable.