

Eric Robertson
Arp: Painter, Poet, Sculptor
Yale University Press, 2006

One whom some were certainly following was one working and certainly was one bringing something out of himself and was one who had been all his living had been one having something coming out of him.

Something had been coming out of him, certainly it had been coming out of him, certainly it was something, certainly it had been coming out of him and it had a meaning, a charming meaning, a solid meaning, a struggling meaning, a clear meaning.¹

Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein's 1909 extended textual portrait of Picasso at once tries to capture the artist anew, as he has never been rendered before, and resists closure and flatness of meaning. It is multi-faceted, cubist, repetitive but never static, trying to arrive at the essence of the artist, but acknowledging the slipperiness of its objective. In writing a portrait, biography or monograph, the author's challenge is to apprehend a subject and to distil the themes and techniques of his/her life and work, but without reducing that person to a one-dimensional outline. This is especially difficult when the figure is well-known, or at least when some aspect or aspects of that figure are well-known. It is a challenge that Eric Robertson not only faces, but relishes, in *Arp: Painter, Poet, Sculptor* (Yale University Press, 2006). When he writes that Arp, "seems to have fostered his multiple identity with a quite deliberate disregard for the biographer's task" (p. 3), it is in a spirit of admiration rather than complaint.

Jean or Hans Arp (1896–1966) is an acknowledged twentieth-century great; part of the Western fine art canon. He was a founding member of Dada, went on to work within Surrealism, and continued to produce innovative artworks long after the demise of those infamous movements. He was a Constructivist, a member of Cercle et Carré, and a contributor to Abstraction-Création. His later work has been described in relation to Minimalist and Concrete Art contexts. He was married to, and collaborated extensively with, the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber. Arguably best known as a painter and as a sculptor, he was also an experimental and innovative poet, who wrote both in French and in German. He was extraordinarily prolific. Arp is known for one of these aspects, or several of these aspects, or even many, depending on the perspective or the background

¹ Extract from "Picasso" by Gertrude Stein, *Camera Work*, New York, August 1912.

from which his portrait is sketched or written. With these phrases, fragments, and reputations, we angle in on the figure Arp, but nevertheless remain unaware of many of the dimensions to his work.

Eric Robertson's study tries to bring all these fragments of reputation together: not to streamline or reduce them, but rather to get at all of them, to get at "a charming meaning, a solid meaning, a struggling meaning, a clear meaning", to use one of Stein's phrases. He does not over-emphasize obscurity or undue neglect for his subject, but he does point out a particular paucity of scholarship in English, as well as highlighting those aspects of Arp's eclectic output that have received less insight, less of a gaze. Rather than take apart scholarship in different areas, destroy existing perceptions, or downplay the various contexts in which Arp's work is known, he builds on and forges links between these contexts. Intersections, crossovers, connections, junctions: these are key elements in *Arp* the book, as in Arp's oeuvre. For the first time, here is a study that includes each major aspect of Arp's work, his painting, poetry and sculpture and which, moreover, is driven by their meeting-points. This approach, this making of connections, highlights the lacunae in Arp scholarship and convinces the reader from the start that there is plenty to discover about the richness of his productions. It is in this highly constructive way that Robertson demonstrates that ubiquity and staccato truisms do not equate to profound understanding, but rather to fragments, whose potential is enriched when they are brought together.

This joined-up approach to scholarship makes its impact felt in a number of ways, each of which can be appropriately prefixed "cross". To begin with, the study is cross-disciplinary. Few would argue that Arp is still better-known as a painter and sculptor than as a poet, even as he is revered by Dada scholars for his early role in Dada and for his poetic innovations within that movement and within Surrealism. The considerable emphasis this book placed on Arp's poetic work is a welcome intervention, then, given that scholarly work is most lacking and most limited in this area. This negligence has not just to do with Arp, but is part of a broader issue. An all-too widespread dismissal of Dada poetry as nonsensical and nihilist has consigned not only Arp's literature, but Dada literature in general to profound misunderstandings, outside of avant-garde studies. Robertson restores an emphasis on Arp's poetry, embedding it not only within literary studies but also as one element within a multidisciplinary body of work, across a period of time. So, for instance, in considering anti-rationalism as a theme, he draws not only on Arp's later more overt statements (essays from the 1940s and 1950s), but also to an anti-rationalism implicit in earlier poetic manifestations, and in addition to their relationship with fine art, pointing for

example to Arp's "treatment of text as a fluid, multi-referential, and even abstract medium to be arranged into patterns like different colours and shapes on a canvas" (p. 6).

Already it is clear that an emphasis on literature does not undermine Arp's work in collage, painting, woodcuts and sculpture. In the first chapter, for example, Robertson considers the role of chance both in Arp's early *papiers collés* and slightly later biomorphic forms, turning then to poetic texts, and looking at the role of chance in, and across, each. Chapter three, though predominantly focused on sculpture, takes concretion and morphology as thematic concerns that span sculpture and poetry. And in chapter four, Robertson highlights Arp's reliefs, delving into the crossovers between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, the framed and unframed, the object as painting and the object as sculpture. Again, these insights come full circle, to consider the place of materials across Arp's oeuvre: his use not just of paint but of pencil, of canvas and of paper, of shapes and of words.

A second "cross" action is the book's cross-geographical approach, which takes Arp's name as a point of departure. Born in Alsace, Arp used both Jean and Hans, this double choice demonstrating a fluidity and lack of fixity in identity and nationality. Cultural institutions have been selective – he is better known as Jean in French-speaking contexts, and Hans in German-speaking contexts – but nevertheless the multiplicity has been maintained. Arp can not be pinned down: he still evades being only 'a German poet' or 'a French sculptor', and it is precisely this resistance to categorisation that fascinates Robertson, who, through Arp, interrogates the associations between name, place of birth, historical events, geographical context and artistic practice. He asks questions about the links between being in a place and production; between identity, performativity and representation. He does not deny the impact of nationality, but refutes its certainty and one-dimensionality, emphasising instead its mutability and slipperiness.

Thirdly, and which is linked to geography, Robertson's book undertakes a sustained investigation into Arp's use of languages, and the fact that he wrote in both French and German. This point deserves its own consideration because the question of language is not brushed aside, lightly referenced, or passed over, here, but made central. It is not enough to state the novelty that 'he spoke and wrote in both'. Why, when and how did he choose to use each? It is a question of immense interest and not only to modern linguists and theorists, since it also preoccupied Arp. So, in chapter five, Robertson looks also into the translations that Arp made of his own work, from both French to German and German to French,

approaching them as renewed works in themselves, the products of a great deal of conscious reflection on language, communication and expression. Once again, the author's observations are not limited to one category of Arp's work (in this case poetry). Robertson emphasises, too, Arp's reworkings of collages as processes which repudiate the aura of the art object. In his conclusions he comes back to this "seemingly chronic compulsion to tamper with any work left in his hands for long enough that he genuinely feared that it might acquire a state of fixity" (p. 211), in this context also highlighting Arp's dismissal of life's work as edifice.

Fourthly, *Arp* is cross-movement and runs counter to a too-strict linear chronology. When reviewing the life and work of an artist involved in well-known movements such as Dada or Surrealism, it is tempting to try to make the person and the work fit neatly into the movement. Robertson's approach refuses these demands, pointing out that Arp "was intolerant of those groups which sought to restrict their membership on the basis of narrowly defined stylistic grounds" (p. 5). Rather, he asks us to consider the stretchiness of the movement in question, and the ways in which its terms are enhanced by the individual working within or alongside it. So, there is no impetus to make Arp more distinctly Dada, or a core Surrealist. Nor is there a hierarchy of importance in these labels, just as there is none between painter, poet and sculptor. This refusal of boundaries is maintained through the structure of the book, by its conceptual as opposed to chronological approach, and above all by the fluidity of observations and connections.

A comprehensive study of Arp was long overdue. The strength of this publication is that whether the reader's interest lies in the historical avant-garde or the post-war avant-garde; fine art, the plastic arts or poetry; French- or German-speaking contexts; he or she will find detailed and insightful material that not only relates to that specialism, but which takes him or her beyond that chronological or conceptual context. This crossing of categories is helpful in breaking down hierarchies of interest more broadly. To take a related example: Sophie Taeuber, too, has been recognised principally for her fine art from the 1930s onwards. That increasing recognition, in some geographical contexts at least, means she can no longer be considered neglected, and yet many areas of her work have been forgotten, where they simply do not fit existing frameworks. Embroidery, tapestry, puppets and wooden heads, let alone dance, have scarcely been admitted to the male-dominated Dada canon, and yet her work in these areas feeds, and feeds off, Dada principles, and then again plays its part in the realisation of later work. Equally, the work of each of these artists had an impact

on the other, and the widening scholarship on Taeuber's work – across all disciplines and time periods – will benefit from this comprehensive study on Arp.

If Arp were working as an artist or writer today, then he might well be encouraged to settle on one profession or the other. Secondly, his gallery or publisher would no doubt insist he select one name only, for P.R. and marketing purposes. Meanwhile, the Arp scholar might be expected to produce an art-historical book, or a study of poetry, making both marketing and library shelving much easier. Robertson's book instead revels in the boundlessness of Arp's work, raising questions both about the limits set on creativity in the arts by cultural institutions, and those imposed on scholarly work by disciplines and departments. Was Arp primarily a painter, poet or sculptor? Was he French, German or honorary Swiss? Should the author be considered a literary theorist, art historian, biographer or translation studies scholar? Which boxes should be ticked on the funding forms? *Arp* is exemplary of what interdisciplinary approaches can achieve, when the interests of multiple perspectives and comprehensiveness are privileged over categorisations and restrictions.

Robertson begins the final chapter thus: "The notion of a life's work as a homogenous totality, constructed over a period of time from layer upon layer of small but meaningful parts, all directed towards a common goal, is a conception which, one suspects, Arp would have found entirely alien" (p. 209). In *Arp*, the layers are present and the parts are present, but homogeneity and a common goal are replaced by heterogeneity, multiplicity, and insightful connections. This publication produces a portrait that respects and celebrates "one who had been all his living had been one having something coming out of him". Avoiding reductionism, it embraces all aspects of Arp's long, looping, creative career.

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