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**Autor:** Meszmer, Alex  
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# ENTROPY IN THE STUDIO OR APRÈS MOI LE DÉLUGE

76 **Alex Meszmer** Matter is subject to constant change and the attempt to preserve things actually means: working against nature. If not for this process, the planet would soon turn into an uninhabitable rubbish heap. Works by artists are seen as something worth conserving and we try to halt the process of decay. Destruction of art is an act punishable by law, an offense against commonly recognized culture. In my youth, I was deeply impressed by the story of how Max Frisch went into the woods at one point in his career to burn all his manuscripts and venture a fresh start. It was new to me that artists could be so extreme in making such a clean break with past works. Yet in order to make art, this decline and decay is necessary. Otherwise there would be no room for the works of the future.

Performance and actions, net art and installations are examples that illustrate artistic processes – works in the classical sense of the word they are not. It thus seems almost anachronistic that we have to grapple with the theme of artists' estates at a time when we will soon be confronted with the more fundamental problem of being able to preserve such fleeting works in the first place. Video and digital art have to be given much more careful and laborious treatment. Without the archiving of the technical equipment, these works will be history after just a few years. Letters, photos and personal notes will only be able to be researched in the years to come if archive solutions can be found for digital files. The average shelf life of files is presently limited to fifteen years, with each computer crash providing a form of natural selection. If the current

state of development continues, we anticipate the coming of a time when culture will only exist for the moment. Works that do not find their way into the public's data consciousness will be forgotten even more quickly than they are today. Whether our files will last longer than a generation is uncertain. It may well be that the culture of our current era will no longer exist when we look back from some point in the future.

Contemporary art evolves and develops in face of this schizophrenic process and the paradigm shift in notions regarding a work of art leads directly to a generational conflict: The generation of artists working with the old concept of artwork must be frustrated seeing how another generation is conquering the art business without giving thought to such interconnections. The penchant for youth culture as a perpetual supplier of the avant-garde and subculture obscures the art world's ability to perceive the quality of artistic explorations that they have evolved and developed over time. Thus stymied, the older generation is left with the hope of the future and the option of storing their works in anticipation of a correction in the view of their own significance. Real solutions are not brought forth by this shift, however, for even video and net artists prefer to leave worries about preservation to the experts and instead flirt with transience.

Every artist nurtures the hope of going down in art history. Deep within, however, each artist has a sense of their personal significance in the world – they can judge themselves and their work stacked up against others. Artists who have gone through an academic



education are used to seeing themselves in comparison to other works and artists. In this respect, the hope of posthumous recognition remains a romantic illusion and obscures the realities of the art world: Those who have not achieved at least supra-regional or national prominence by the time of their death will only very seldom achieve posthumous fame and honor. Orienting one's life and work around this aim is questionable. Such hopes and illusions get in the way of planning ahead for one's own passing and the fact that the artistic profession still tempts its practitioners to misjudge the reality of their own significance often makes estates an unintentional Trojan horse with which responsibility for one's own work is passed along to heirs.

Today's art world – perhaps it has always been this way – considers itself well organized, firmly holding to the opinion that geniuses and art movements will be recognized early on and promoted. Our enlightened society cannot imagine that past errors in judgment could be repeated and that our perspective on the needs of the future could be blurred. The artistic profession has become sophisticated and the advancement of one's own art has become a central task facing artists in order to get any kind of recognition. In the context of the academic art world, this is the only way to achieve a stable position for the long term. Those who follow the beaten path of the art world may be successful over the short term yet market value alone does not decide art historical significance – in the long term, the market is also subject to other laws. The artists who consistently

reject the market and the art business need perseverance and rely on chance to be discovered. Lifelong disappointments can make artists neglect the ordering of their estate, a manifestation in response to an indifferent society. Sometimes the preservation of artistic works contradicts the underlying intention.

Nonetheless, it is recommended that artists confront the task of getting artistic bequests in order early on. An index of works and well-structured documentation are much more useful than an overflowing collection of papers and works. Executors do not always operate with discretion. Artists who order their estate can lay down clear boundaries in their own life and work and decide which works, information and anecdotes will remain preserved for posterity. This is an important issue and by no means something to be scoffed at.

Complaining about the situation is of little use. In any case, proactive and creative ideas are much more beneficial than passive hoping. Sensitivity to contemporary societal problems and an intuition about the way things might develop in the future form the set of tools we have as artists, which will guide us in dealing with what we leave behind.