

Press Conference

**The transfer of the *Essl Collection*
to the ALBERTINA**

Vienna, 16 February 2017

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The transfer of the *Essl Collection* to the ALBERTINA

Effective today, the Essl Collection is being officially transferred to the ALBERTINA in Vienna. This marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the *Essl Collection* as well as the Albertina itself. And at the same time, this acquisition of one of the largest private collections of contemporary art represents a milestone in the history of the Austrian Federal Museums.

With its over 6,000 works, the *Essl Collection* numbers among the world's largest private collections of its kind. Groups of works by figures including Karel Appel and Arnulf Rainer, Franz West and Georg Baselitz, Maria Lassnig and Alex Katz, Erwin Wurm and Anselm Kiefer, VALIE EXPORT and Cindy Sherman, and photographs by artists ranging from Andreas Gursky to Candida Höfer characterise this collection's unique richness and special profile.

In 2014, the *Essl Collection* was in danger of being caught up in the financial turbulences surrounding the group of companies owned by the Essl family. But that same year, the collection—in no small part thanks to the efforts of Dr. Hans Peter Haselsteiner—was placed under the ownership of a new company, thus ensuring its survival. Now, its permanent loan (until 2044) to the ALBERTINA places the *Essl Collection* beneath the umbrella of the Austrian Federal Museums.

“With this forward-looking cooperative arrangement, the Essl Collection has been saved for Austria. These highly important works of contemporary art by artists from Austria and abroad complement the collections of the Federal Museums in a unique way, making this a win both for art and for the Republic of Austria,” commented Minister of Culture Thomas Drozda.

“In the ALBERTINA, we have found an ideal partner for the future of the collection,” said a cheerful Karlheinz Essl.

Klaus Albrecht Schröder: *“Today is a shining moment in the ALBERTINA's over 200-year history. To my mind, this transfer of the Essl Collection to the ALBERTINA opens up an entirely new chapter in the history of this tradition-steeped museum and of contemporary art in Austria.”*

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Voices from the art world on the transfer of the *Essl Collection* to the ALBERTINA

Georg Baselitz

“I’ve maintained close ties with the Essl Collection for many years—as I also have with the Albertina. For me, the fact that these two great collections will now be brought together beneath the roof of the Albertina is a piece of good fortune indeed, and I think that also goes for all the other artists represented in the Essl Collection. I’ve always believed in Vienna, and I was sure that the best possible solution would be found for the Essl Collection.”

Max Hollein (Director, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco):

“The Essl Collection is not only a significant piece of Austrian art collecting history but also a major manifestation of important developments in the international art scene over the past several decades. Failure to keep this collection in Austria and ensure its permanent accessibility to the public would have represented a huge loss. It is a great boon for the public that the Essls have been active in this form—and that the ALBERTINA will now be offering their collection a new and adequate home over the long term. The result, integrated into and in dialogue with the outstanding existing holdings of the ALBERTINA, will be an exciting and important continuation of and expansion upon a great story of both collecting and of art.”

Eva Schlegel:

“I’m ecstatic! For artists like myself, the decision to preserve the largest world-class collection of post-war Austrian art for the public is a cultural policy act of great foresightedness. Preserving this important art archive by integrating it into one of the most important institutions guarantees its permanence, its exemplary status, and its visibility. My warmest congratulations to all those decision-makers who were involved!”

Erwin Wurm:

“By assuming this collection, the ALBERTINA has catapulted itself into the first rank of contemporary art museums. It was always clear to me that the art of our times could stand to involve several big players in our capital city of Vienna. And I think that the ALBERTINA’s assumption of the Essl Collection is a courageous show of commitment to contemporary art.”

The Story Behind the Collection's Transfer to the ALBERTINA

In 2014, the Essl Collection was in danger of being caught up in the financial turbulences surrounding the group of companies owned by the Essl family. But that same year, however, Dr. Hans Peter Haselsteiner helped place the collection under the ownership of a new company, thus ensuring its survival.

The Essl Museum was forced to close in July of 2016, and the Essls' singular private collection—numbering over 6,000 works—has been inaccessible to the public ever since.

The collection's two owners, Dr. Hans Peter Haselsteiner and Prof. Karlheinz Essl, then set out to find a way to not only ensure the collection's future, but above all restore its accessibility to the public. It was early on in this process that they found their ideal partners in the ALBERTINA and its director, Prof. Dr. Klaus Albrecht Schröder. Initial talks and negotiations began in late 2015, and the process picked up considerable momentum with the arrival of Mag. Thomas Drozda as Austria's new Federal Minister of Culture.

Now, the permanent loan of the *Essl Collection* to the ALBERTINA places it securely beneath the umbrella of the Austrian Federal Museums. From the very beginning, Federal Minister Thomas Drozda lent his active support to the vision of integrating the *Essl Collection* into Austria's museum landscape via its transfer to the ALBERTINA.

The *Essl Collection* at the ALBERTINA

In a first step, the *Essl Collection* is being turned over to the ALBERTINA as a permanent loan slated to run until 2044. This entails the transfer to the Albertina of all the associated rights—from presentation to lending and publications: it enjoys complete independence and freedom in all museological decisions. In return, the Albertina assumes the obligation to preserve the collection in an optimal manner, to show it in an appropriate way, and to continue the scholarship associated therewith.

The coming six months will first be used mainly in order to achieve full integration of the *Essl Collection* into the ALBERTINA's collection structure. To this end, the entire collection will be entered into the ALBERTINA's online collection database.

“Our goal is to make around 5,000 works accessible via the ALBERTINA's database by the end of 2017. The second step will then be to do what's necessary to show this outstanding Austrian and international collection in the best possible manner.” Klaus Albrecht Schröder

Holdings of the *Essl Collection*

Austrian Art

With its over 6,000 individual works, the Essl Collection numbers among the world's largest private contemporary art collections. Two thirds of these holdings provide a survey of Austrian art history from 1945 to the present that is unique in Austria. The collection contains individual works and large groups of works by artists including Günter Brus, VALIE EXPORT, Wolfgang Hollegha, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Martha Jungwirth, Peter Kogler, Brigitte Kowanz, Elke Krystufek, Maria Lassnig, Josef Mikl, Hermann Nitsch, Markus Prachensky, Arnulf Rainer, Gerwald Rockenschaub, Eva Schlegel, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Franz West, Peter Weibel, Erwin Wurm, Franz Zadrazil, and Heimo Zobernig.

International Art

An approximately 1,700-work segment of the *Essl Collection* is devoted to international art, including exceptional groups of works by figures such as Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Georg Baselitz, Günter Förg, Jörg Immendorff, Asger Jorn, Anselm Kiefer, Per Kirkeby, Marie Jo Lafontaine, Markus Lüpertz, Neo Rauch, Daniel Richter, Antonio Saura, Jean Scully, Cindy Sherman, Pierre Soulages, Antoni Tapies, and Rosemarie Trockel.

Photography

Contemporary photography is a particularly strong emphasis, with works by Elgar Esser, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Thomas Ruff, Beat Streuli, Thomas Struth, Walter Niedermayr, and Gregory Crewdson.

Women Artists

Happily, the *Essl Collection* includes large groups of works by renowned Austrian and foreign women artists from the fields of painting, photography, and video art, as well as numerous key works of the feminist avant-garde.

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Support from the Federal Chancellery of Austria

The inventorying and administration, preservation and care, research and presentation, and preparation of such a large collection for public showings and exhibitions in Vienna and the rest of Austria entails a special challenge for any museum in terms of personnel, logistics, and finances due to its sheer size. The funding necessary to do so in the case of the *Essl Collection* was secured for the ALBERTINA in the amount of 1 million Euros by the Austrian Federal Chancellery. Thus, as Federal Minister of Education, Arts and Culture Thomas Drozda explains, “The first and most important step has now been taken toward making this great collection once more accessible to the public, rather than a hidden treasure in the vaults. For only thanks to the synergies with the ALBERTINA, its contemporary art curators, its restorers, and the rest of its specialist staff will it be possible to sustain the *Essl Collection* as a renewed, permanent landmark in Austria’s museum landscape.”

The Minister further stated that he is “glad we’ve succeeded in forging an agreement that will once again make this collection accessible to the Austrian people and to our international guests. And I am immensely satisfied that the substance of the *Essl Collection*, through its transfer to the ALBERTINA, has been secured and will be preserved in accordance with the highest standards of museology and preservation.”

The *Essl Collection*

The vast number of artworks brought together by Agnes and Karlheinz Essl represents to the most important collection of post-1945 Austrian art and one of the world's most important private collections of international contemporary art. Austrian art from the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century is present in incomparable breadth and depth in this collection, which was compiled over a period of more than 50 years. What's more, its international orientation allows one to perceive tendencies and cross-connections of recent art history in a global context.

The *Essl Collection* is home to around 5,000 artworks, including over 6,000 individual objects. Among these, all artistic media—including painting, sculpture, photography, video, object art, and installation art—are represented. Around two thirds of these works are by Austrian artists.

History of the *Essl Collection*

The history of the *Essl Collection* is inseparably linked with the life stories of Agnes and Karlheinz Essl. It was in 1958, in New York, that the young Carinthian businessman Karlheinz Essl and the gallery employee Agnes Schömer from Klosterneuburg met each other for the first time. From the very beginning, the two of them shared a mutual passion for contemporary art.

A Focus on Austrian Art

In the 1980s, the couple's *Essl Collection* grew into the most important collection of Austrian contemporary art. From Viennese Actionism to the abstract paintings being created by the Galerie nächst St. Stephan circle, and from the *Wirklichkeiten* and *Neue Wilde* groups to artists of even younger generations, the *Essl Collection* came to be unique in its inclusion of post-Second World War output from all across the Austrian art world.

Making the Collection Accessible

In the architecture competition leading up to the 1985 construction of the Essls' new company headquarters, the Schömer-Haus in Klosterneuburg, the integration of the *Essl Collection* was a central criterion in judging the submissions. It was a design by the Austrian architect (and eventual State Prize winner) Heinz Tesar that prevailed. Tesar planned a multi-story building with a light-flooded oval hall surrounded by galleries at its centre. His finished building became the first setting in which it was possible to show the *Essl Collection* outside the collectors' private circle.

International Collecting Activities

In the wake of the Iron Curtain's demise and the opening of the borders between Eastern and Western Europe in 1989, Agnes and Karlheinz Essl decided to internationalise their collection holdings. The period that ensued saw them acquire works from all over Europe—especially from Germany, Spain, and Southeastern Europe—as well as from the USA. Output from China, Australia, and India then augmented these international holdings during the first years of the 21st century.

Worldwide Recognition

The exhibition *Das Jahrzehnt der Malerei* at Kunstforum Wien in Vienna (1991) introduced central works from the *Essl Collection* to the broader public for the first time. Due to its great success and strong international demand, this exhibition then toured internationally (as *The Decade of Painting: Austria, 1980–1990*) until 1996, as during which time it was shown at eleven further museums on three continents.

A Home for the Collection

In order to provide a permanent home for the *Essl Collection*, which had grown to encompass several thousand works, the collecting couple Essl decided to build their own museum. And at the resulting Essl Museum (likewise designed by Heinz Tesar), which opened in 1999, Agnes and Karlheinz Essl were to spend 17 years presenting their collection to the broader public as a significant part of recent Austrian art history while also making it available to researchers and specialist circles.

Featured Artists

The core of the *Essl Collection* consists of post-1945 Austrian art. This includes the supremely important protagonists of the 20th century's second half such as Maria Lassnig, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, and Max Weiler—who are represented in the collection by important groups of works. Other highlights include the Viennese Actionists, with Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, the *Wirklichkeiten* group with Franz Ringel, Kurt Kocherscheidt, Martha Jungwirth, Peter Pongratz, Wolfgang Herzig, and Robert Zeppel-Sperl, the circle of artists associated with the Galerie nächst St. Stephan including Arnulf Rainer, Markus Prachensky, Wolfgang Holleggha, and Josef Mikl, *Neue Wilde* group members such as Siegfried Anzinger, Erwin Bohatsch, Herbert Brandl, Gunter Damisch, Alois Mosbacher, Hubert Scheibl und Hubert Schmalix, and singular stances like those of VALIE EXPORT, Franz West, Bruno Gironcoli, Christian Ludwig Attersee, Hans Bischoffshausen, Andreas Urteil, Joannis Avramidis, and Adolf Frohner as well as the Gugging Artists.

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All of the aforementioned artists are represented in the *Essl Collection* by their respective works in an unparalleled breadth and depth. The collection further extends this arc to encompass artists like Heimo Zobernig, Erwin Wurm, Brigitte Kowanz, Eva Schlegel, and Peter Kogler, as well as figures from younger generations including Elke Krystufek, Esther Stocker, Martin Schnur, Clemens Wolf, and Markus Bacher. All told, the *Essl Collection* contains works by over 250 Austrian artists.

Due to the composition of its non-Austrian holdings, the *Essl Collection* likewise numbers among the most important international collections of contemporary art. These works include exceptional artistic stances from second half of the 20th century such as those of the Cobra Group surrounding Karel Appel and Asger Jorn, important individual figures such as Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, Jörg Immendorff, Markus Lüpertz, A.R. Penck, Günther Förg, Dieter Roth, Albert Oehlen, Martin Kippenberger, Jonathan Meese, Daniel Richter, and Andreas Gursky, representatives of the New Leipzig School such as Neo Rauch and Tim Eitel, and still others including Nam June Paik, Jim Dine, Sam Francis, Alex Katz, Cindy Sherman, Jean Scully, Cecily Brown, Tal R, Pierre Soulages, Daniel Buren, Anthony Gormley, Antoni Tàpies, Per Kirkeby, and Tony Cragg. Further collection focuses lie in contemporary art from China, India, and Australia, and from Central and Southeastern Europe.

In the International Art Scene

The international component of its holdings enables the *Essl Collection* to present a panorama of Austrian art and international contemporary art that is unique the world over. Recent years have seen as many as 400 works from the *Essl Collection* shown at the world's most important museums including Tate Modern in London, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, the National Gallery in Berlin, the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, and many others.

Transfer to the ALBERTINA

February 2017 marks the transfer of the *Essl Collection* to the ALBERTINA as a permanent loan for an initial period set to run until 2044. This means that, in the context of the ALBERTINA's collection, a multi-century panorama of Austrian art in an international context is being created that offers a nearly unbroken centuries-long survey of art history up to the present. The *Essl Collection*, one of the world's most important private collections of its kind, will now be preserved, curated, and made accessible to present and future generations by the ALBERTINA. At this point in time, the collection includes over 6,000 individual objects comprising around 5,000 works, of which 3,200 are by Austrian artists and 1,700 are by foreign artists.

Chronology of the *Essl Collection*

- 1958 Agnes and Karlheinz Essl meet in New York.
- 1970 The couple begins collecting art. Their initial purchases are of early masterpieces by Friedensreich Hundertwasser.
- 1986 The Schömer-Haus in Klosterneuburg opens and serves the *Essl Collection* as a presentation venue.
- From 1990 Agnes and Karlheinz Essl begin collecting art from abroad.
- 1991–1996 *Das Jahrzehnt der Malerei* is the first public exhibition of a selection of works from the *Essl Collection*. The venue is Kunstforum Wien under its then-director Klaus Albrecht Schröder. This exhibition goes on to be shown worldwide at 11 further museums.
- 1999 Opening of the Essl Museum in Klosterneuburg.
- From 2000 The Essls expand their international art holdings by output from Australia, China, and India.
- From 2005 A further collecting emphasis is devoted to young art from Central and South-eastern Europe.
- 2014 Long-term financial safeguarding of the *Essl Collection* via the establishment of the company *SE Sammlung Essl GmbH* by Dr. Hans Peter Haselsteiner and Prof. Karlheinz Essl
- 2015 Initial talks with Klaus Albrecht Schröder on transfer of the *Essl Collection* to the ALBERTINA with the involvement of Austria's Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture. From June 2016, Federal Minister Drozda actively supports the vision of integrating the *Essl Collection* into the Austrian museum landscape via its transfer to the ALBERTINA.
- 2016 The Essl Museum closes to visitors.
- 2017 The *Essl Collection* is turned over to the ALBERTINA as a permanent loan initially slated to run until 2044.
The future will see Agnes and Karlheinz Essl, Europe's most important collecting couple, continue to pursue their mission of helping the general public to both access and understand contemporary art.

Biography of Agnes and Karlheinz Essl

Karlheinz Essl was born into a family of merchants in Hermagor, Carinthia in 1939.

Agnes Schömer was born in Klosterneuburg, near Vienna, in 1937. Her family dealt in construction materials.

December 1958 saw Agnes Schömer and Karlheinz Essl become acquainted with each other in New York. Schömer worked there at the Zabriskie Gallery, while Karlheinz Essl was in town to gather experience in the retail sector. Amidst New York's pulsating arts scene, the two of them discovered their mutual passion for contemporary art and decided to spend their lives together. Once back in Austria, Agnes and Karlheinz Essl married and had five children, and their family business in Klosterneuburg expanded at a brisk pace. At the same time, the Essls also began nurturing their initial contacts in the Austrian art scene.

In the early 1970s, Agnes and Karlheinz Essl began collecting art and showing it privately. And with the rise of the family's business in the 1980s and 1990s, the Essls became capable of making substantial investments in their collection's expansion.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Agnes and Karlheinz Essl began to expand their collecting activities internationally. They viewed contemporary art as important societal asset that should not be subject to political boundaries. Artists such as Georg Baselitz, Hermann Nitsch, Jörg Immendorff, and Alex Katz became their friends and companions. And the couple travelled to all the world's continents, continually expanding their collection by international stances. From the mid-1990s onward, the preservation of these works—and, most importantly, presenting them and educating the public about contemporary art—became the main focus of their activities. To this end, Agnes and Karlheinz Essl, having already begun displaying the collection at their company headquarters in the mid-1980s, had the Essl Museum built in 1999. 2017 sees the Essl Collection transferred to the Albertina in Vienna as a permanent loan.

This comes on the heels of many years of friendly collaboration between the ALBERTINA, represented by Director Klaus Albrecht Schröder, and the Essls.