

## Alfred Schmeller The Museum as a Flashpoint

September 27, 2019, to  
February 16, 2020

Press conference:  
Wednesday, September 25, 2019,  
10 am

Opening:  
Thursday, September 26, 2019, 7 pm



Cora Pongracz, **View of the Live exhibition in the 20er Haus, 1970**  
mumok  
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mumok has committed itself to revisiting its collection policy since its beginnings and to making it accessible to a broad public. After exhibitions about Werner Hoffmann, the Hahn and Ludwig collections, and Viennese Actionism, the current show takes a closer look at the work of former director Alfred Schmeller. The Schmeller era (1969 to 1979) can be best described with his vision of a “museum as a flash point”: He was interested in reinterpreting surrealism and collected works by the Chicago Imagists—a group of US artists in the 1970s who celebrated the subversive counter-culture by means of figurative painting—along with works by the Austrian group “Wirklichkeiten” and others. Schmeller’s exceptional merit was to open the institution in a way that at the time was by all accounts unconventional: Apart from fine art, he put on architecture and design exhibitions, supported concerts by Austrian musicians and laid the foundation for modern art education.

Alfred Schmeller became the second director of 20er Haus (today’s mumok) in 1969, after the departure of his predecessor Werner Hofmann. Unlike Hofmann, who was appointed director as a young art historian, Schmeller had already enjoyed a long and varied career before he became director, having played a crucial role in the development of the Austrian art scene after 1945: As director of the Art Club, Schmeller had helmed one of the most important postwar artists’ associations; he also had worked as a critic for the newspaper *Kurier* and was the head of monument conservation in Burgenland. In the course of his career, he pursued a wide spectrum of activities that always foregrounded the exploration and study of contemporary art.

In fields that were traditionally in the purview of the museum—collecting, preservation, research—Schmeller continued in the footsteps of the founding director. What was new was the orientation of the education program, with which he established an enormously successful tradition at mumok: Schmeller saw the challenge of his directorial work in “reducing the distance between people and art,” regarding his work, as he put it, as “comprising the entirety of culture.” One milestone of this was the installment of a comprehensive children’s program. The first kids’ brochure, which he himself authored, was titled *Adolf Loos for young people* and was astoundingly modern in its structure and language. Schmeller’s innovations were received with such enthusiasm that some even saw them as a “full-frontal attack on conventional art education.”

According to Schmeller, the museum was to be a “flash point” in which many subjects could be addressed. His idea of a museum was unconventional, abandoning the scientific ivory tower in favor of a radical opening of the institution: Schmeller invited the Vienna Festival to host the avantgarde festival *Arena* at 20er Haus, and endeavored to also attract non-art enthusiasts with various events—with the side effect of being able to more than double visitor numbers in the first year alone.

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Some exhibitions of his era—for instance the blockbuster *Wiener Schule des Phantastischen Realismus* (1972)—are still regarded as milestones today. Early on, he recognized the exceptional significance of the exhibition-maker Harald Szeemann and brought his legendary exhibitions *Junggesellenmaschinen* and *Monte Verità* to Vienna—projects with which the museum made exhibition history in 1977 and 1979.

A major focus of Schmeller's acquisition policy proved to be the Chicago Imagists, who were rediscovered in recent years: a loose formation of artists who had studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and were influenced by surrealism, art brut, comics, and popular culture. In their figurative paintings, unimpressed by the trends dictated by the New York art scene, they swiveled the spotlight on both the grotesque and whatever was far from convention. But Alfred Schmeller also collected Austrian contemporaries such as Oswald Oberhuber, Hans Hollein, and Walter Pichler as well as the "Wirklichkeiten," a loose group of sociocritical painters gathered around Kurt Kocherscheidt, Martha Jungwirth, and Peter Pongratz. Moreover, Schmeller continued to expand the holdings of modern art, a particular focus of his predecessor Hofmann, extending it with a sculpture collection he started.

Schmeller also started the careers of many Austrian artists. A sensational example was the *Giant Billiards* by Haus-Rucker-Co in the exhibition *Live* (1970), with which Schmeller introduced the group whose members at the time were Laurids Ortner, Klaus Pinter, and Günter Zamp Kelp. With this, he removed the barrier between traditional categories and pushed the performative and unconventional into the foreground.

The reconstructed *Giant Billiards* by Haus-Rucker-Co, a plastic island measuring 15x15 meters with three colossal balls, is also at the center of the exhibition *The Museum as a Flash Point*. Defying the prescriptions of conventional art exploration, visitors had to tread on shaky ground if they wanted to move the balls—a situation that inspired many photographers like Cora Pongracz or Peter Baum. With their photographic records, which are also displayed in this exhibition, *The Museum as a Flash Point* forges a bridge between yesteryear and the present day—for this current exhibition also invites visitors to get active. At the time, Schmeller advertised the interactive part of the show with the slogan, "The Prater is closed. Come to the museum!" This remains an exciting option in 2019, not only when the Prater amusement park closes in the fall due to weather.

Curated by Susanne Neuburger and Nora Linser

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