



## Media communiqué of 30 June 2015

### Josef Helfenstein named as the new Director of the Kunstmuseum Basel

**Dr Josef Helfenstein, currently Director of the Menil Collection and Foundation in Houston, is set to take up his new post as Director of the Kunstmuseum Basel on 1 September 2016. In this position, he will succeed Bernhard Mendes Bürgi. Helfenstein has an excellent record of accomplishment as a museum director, curator and art historian. The Department of Presidential Affairs of the Canton of Basel-Stadt as well as the Commission of the Kunstmuseum Basel are delighted with the unanimous decision to appoint the internationally distinguished and well-connected museum director.**

The art historian Dr Josef Helfenstein, who was born in Lucerne in 1957, has worked in the museum sector for over thirty years. He has been the extremely successful Director of the Menil Collection and Foundation in Houston, Texas, since 2004. This institution holds one of the world's most important collections of modern art. In addition to its artistic direction and focus, he has overseen above all the development of the collection as well as the architecturally important expansion of the museum site, which encompasses several buildings: Menil Collection, Rothko Chapel, Cy Twombly Gallery, Dan Flavin Installation, and the newly converted Byzantine Fresco Chapel. His most recent project is the planned Menil Drawing Institute. Josef Helfenstein's expertise as an art historian, his abilities as a curator and his openness to the key cultural issues of the present day make this distinguished scholar an outstanding ambassador for art. With his exhibitions and educational projects, he communicates with the general public and experts alike. As Director, Josef Helfenstein will be responsible for upholding the traditional Basel attributes anchored in the Kunstmuseum. These build upon artistic excellence, academic research and a cosmopolitan outlook. Responsibility for the scholarly interpretation of the collection and presentation of its outstanding exhibits to the general public is being entrusted to a highly experienced curator with the ability to communicate his profound knowledge and expertise as an art historian with a masterly blend of earnestness and passion.

Josef Helfenstein is set to take up his post as the new Director of the Kunstmuseum Basel on 1 September 2016. The previous Director, Dr Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, will be retiring on 30 August 2016. As his successor, Josef Helfenstein will oversee the Kunstmuseum with its main building, extension (opening April 2016) as well as the Museum für Gegenwartskunst. In addition to using the spatial capacities that will become available once the extension is completed, particular attention will also be paid to cross-fertilisation between the three museum buildings. This is because the Kunstmuseum will have the opportunity to extend still further its outstanding reputation in the international art world with high-quality programmes and high-profile exhibitions, along with continued development of its globally important collections.

### **The Kunstmuseum as a place of public dialogue**

With Josef Helfenstein, the Kunstmuseum has secured the services of a Director who regards the museum as an institution with social responsibilities. An institution with a remit to foster public debate on contemporary cultural issues. In his view, the Kunstmuseum should be a venue for a broad swathe of the population with an interest in art and society.

*Josef Helfenstein: "I am firmly convinced that art exists for the general public and for the wellbeing of society at large. Museums safeguard our society's heritage – not merely for a select element of society, but instead for society as a whole. People of all socioeconomic backgrounds should have access to art, just as they should also have access to education. In our increasingly*

*commercialised and privatised society, museums are key cultural treasures, platforms of memory, places of education and of public discussion. Most importantly, however: museums are places of astonishment and beauty. In my view, the Kunstmuseum Basel is far more than a museum in the conventional sense. Thanks to its ideal central location in the city, Basel's history as a centre of Humanism and research, and of course thanks to its outstanding collection, the Kunstmuseum has a fantastic profile in a unique context."*

### **The Selection Commission**

The Department of Presidential Affairs of the Canton of Basel-Stadt and the Commission of Kunstmuseum Basel are firmly convinced that Josef Helfenstein will exercise the unquestionably demanding position of Director of the Kunstmuseum Basel with the greatest skill and commitment, and that his dealings with the various stakeholders will be based upon trust. Josef Helfenstein has dedicated his career to high artistic quality, while at the same time being open to cultural and social developments.

The Selection Commission was chaired by Philippe Bischof, head of the Department of Cultural Affairs of the Canton of Basel-Stadt, in his capacity as a Delegate of the Department of Presidential Affairs. The other members of the Commission were Dr Peter Mosimann, Dr Maja Oeri, Prof Dr Ralph Ubl as representatives of the Commission of Kunstmuseum Basel as well as Dr Alfred Pacquement, former Director of Centre Pompidou Paris, Dr Kathy Halbreich, Vice Director MoMA New York and Peter Fischli, the Zurich-based artist, as external specialists of international renown.

### **Proven museum experience**

Josef Helfenstein was awarded his doctorate in 1991 by the University of Berne. He worked from 1988 to 2000 at the Kunstmuseum Berne. He was also Senior Curator of the Graphischen Sammlung and of the Paul Klee Foundation, latterly in the position of Deputy Director. From 2000 to 2004 he headed the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois. He also held a professorship at the same university. As Director of the Menil Collection and Foundation, he has overall responsibility for the activities of the contemporary museum. These extend from the continued development of the collection, through fundraising and personnel management, to architectural expansion, and not least the realisation of an internationally-renowned and scholarly exhibition and educational programme. Josef Helfenstein's work as a museum director is based upon this long-standing experience of a fruitful as well as wide-ranging cooperation with artists and scholars, as well as with art professionals and collectors.

### **Further information**

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### **Reference**

[www.menil.org](http://www.menil.org)