

Nuova serie / New series n. 15 - 2025

# ARCHALP

Rivista internazionale di architettura e paesaggio alpino / Revue internationale d'architecture et de paysage dans les Alpes / Internationale Zeitschrift für Alpine Architektur und Landschaft / Revija za alpsko arhitekturo in pokrajino / International journal of alpine architecture and landscape



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## **L'arte di aprire mondi. Ricerca artistica e nuove visioni della montagna**

L'art d'ouvrir des mondes. Recherche artistique et nouvelles visions de la montagne / Kunst, kann Welten eröffnen. Künstlerische Forschung und neue Sichtweisen auf die Berge / Umetnost odpiranja svetov. Umetniško raziskovanje in novi pogledi na gore / The Art of opening worlds. Artistic research and new visions of the mountain

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# The constructed view: Contemporary interventions in the Karl Max Kessler Archive

Karl Max Kessler (1880-1960) was a carpenter, hunter, entrepreneur, and photographer whose pioneering spirit helped shape the modern identity of the Kleinwalsertal throughout the 20th century. He captured alpine life in around 10,000 glass plate negatives – images that contributed to the growing appeal of the region as a tourist destination. In 2021, his grandchildren founded the Karl Max Kessler Archive to preserve this legacy and open it to local citizens as well as tourists. Through an annual artist-in-residence program, the archive invites contemporary artists to respond to Kessler's photographs and to the valley itself. Their works – installed directly in the landscape – explore the constructed nature of local identity, the impact of tourism, and the shifting relationship between people and place. As the region transitions from alpine agriculture to a tourism-driven economy, contemporary art plays a vital role in reactivating cultural memory. These contemporary art installations foster public dialogue about the traditions and customs that may be lost. The public context enables landscape and picture to intertwine, rendering the changing environment of the Kleinwalsertal visible.

## Chiara Juriatti

She is a university assistant and doctoral student at the Institute for Contemporary Art and Media at the Catholic Private University Linz and art historical researcher at the Karl Max Kessler Archive. Juriatti examines the relationship between art, ecology, and technology.

## Keywords

*Karl Max Kessler, Kleinwalsertal, Landscape Photography, Contemporary Art, Alpine Tourism.*

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Tucked away behind a range of alpine mountains, the Kleinwalsertal has long occupied a unique position. Although located in Vorarlberg, Austria – close to the Bregenzerwald and the renowned ski resorts of Lech – the valley is accessible only by a single road from southern Germany. In 1891, the Kleinwalsertal became part of German economy, introducing the German mark as their main currency. Easier geographic and economic accessibility has made the valley increasingly popular with German tourists after World War I – in opposition to their Austrian countrymen.

This secluded valley is rich in traditions and cultural heritage stemming from its alpine farming and its geographical encapsulation. Between 1907 and the late 1960s, photographer Karl Max Kessler documented and staged the landscape, customs, people, and architecture of the region. In 2021, his grandchildren, Bettina and Mathias Kessler, founded the Karl Max Kessler Archive to preserve, digitize, and contextualize a collection of around 10,000 negatives.

Recognizing the value of these photographs in shaping local identity, the archive actively engages the community with its holdings – most notably through an annual artist residency. Each year, a contemporary artist is invited to create a public art intervention that weaves together Kessler's historic imagery with the living culture and environment of the Kleinwalsertal. The main exhibition space is a billboard mounted to a hut directly at the ski run of the Kanzelwand, which allows the simultaneous perception of the artwork and the scenery.

#### Opening picture

Arno Gisinger, *Reframing*, 2023, Riezlern, Austria. All photographs © Karl Max Kessler Archive.

**Fig. 1**

Karl Max Kessler, interior shot of the Ifen Hotel, early 20th century.

**Fig. 2**

Arno Gisinger, *Reframing*, 2023, Riezlern, Austria.

#### Staging the Landscape

Photographer and historian Arno Gisinger was the archive's first artist in residence in 2023. Born in Vorarlberg, Gisinger brought not only familiarity with the region but also a practice that merges photography and historical inquiry. During his two-week stay, he explored the archive, traversed the valley, and immersed himself in its culinary and agricultural life, speaking with residents about social and cultural shifts.

Gisinger's final work *Reframing* was installed on the hut, where thousands of skiers would pass daily.

He selected one of Kessler's photographs – a 1950s interior of the iconic Ifen Hotel. Seen from behind, a statue in the foreground leads the viewer's gaze out through a large panoramic window. It opens up to a grand mountainous landscape, which is arranged in triangular compositions, highlighting the town in the front of the picture but most importantly the peak of the Widderstein mountain. Such motifs that were captured by Kessler were printed on postcards and sent throughout Europe. This resulted in the reputation of the Kleinwalsertal as a remote region with sublime mountains that are ideal for winter as well as summer tourism.

But Gisinger's intervention highlighted how constructed these views could be. In the accompanying artist talk, he explained that Kessler had replaced the original window view with a more dramatic mountain panorama – one that did not exist in reality. This technique of photomontage underscores Kessler's dual role as documentarian and image-maker, shaping external perceptions of the valley.

These staged landscapes place Kessler within the genre of *Heimatfotografie* – a style that emerged in 19th-century Germany and was later adapted by Austrian photographers. As Elizabeth Cronin notes, the German *Heimat* movement was fueled by Romantic ideals and a desire to protect nature in the face of industrialisation. Photography was seen as a truthful medium and, in this context, was expected to avoid artistic manipulation. In contrast, post-World War I Austria, lacking a unifying national identity, showed less concern for protecting a collective *Heimat*. Photography reflected this looser relationship, often leaning more toward aesthetic expression than nationalist preservation. Austrians saw themselves as part of Germanic culture yet often sought to distinguish themselves – presenting themselves as more refined or intellectual (Cronin, 2015). Kessler's archive spans a wide array of subjects: chapels, interiors, portraits, and landscapes. Some images are straightforward documentation – cave expeditions or home interiors – while others, such as sweeping mountain views, reveal a more deliberate aesthetic staging. Kessler's work thus moves between German and Austrian notions of *Heimat*,



with recurring emphasis on the mountains as romanticized symbols of identity and place, echoing the dual existence of the Kleinwalsertal between those two nations.

### Nature as commodity

The second residency invited artist David Brooks, whose practice interrogates the ways nature is perceived, manipulated, and commodified. His installation, titled *There's Gold in Them Thar Hills*, explored the economic and cultural entanglement between people and landscape.

Brooks presented a golden billboard to skiers and hikers, printed on reflective foil. The image depicted a snow-laden fir tree from a low angle, with two huts nearly buried in snow. The idyllic winter scene, however, is at odds with today's climate reality. Natural snowfall has diminished, and snow cannons now maintain the slopes essential to tourism. The golden shine of the installation had two intentions: First, to highlight the monetary value that lay in the propagation of the scenic wintery landscape. Secondly,

the surface reflected the surrounding environment and the perceiver within the billboard, associating the environmental change with human activity. To drive home the point, Brooks replicated the billboard and divided it into 32 golden strips, distributing them throughout the valley – to bus stops, local businesses, and scenic lookouts. Each fragment served as a reminder that all residents participate in, and benefit from, the commodification of the region's image. The title references the California Gold Rush phrase “there's gold in them thar hills,” which encapsulates the historical impulse to extract value from natural environments. In the Kleinwalsertal, when nature no longer produces what is needed – such as snow – humans intervene to recreate it.

The value, however, does not only lie in the snow, but also in the staging of it through Kessler's photography. Again, the art installation presents a montage. The tree in the foreground can be found in multiple other pictures. It can be assumed that Kessler used this depiction to cover his snow tracks and therefore accentuate the untouched, empty land-

**Fig. 3**  
David Brooks, *There's Gold in Them Thar Hills*, 2024, Riezlern, Austria.

**Fig. 4**  
Karl Max Kessler, *Winterlandscape*, early 20th century.





scape of the valley, which is more attractive to the touristic eye. Through these aesthetic decisions, landscape and photography mutually shaped one another – ultimately influencing how nature was preserved, perceived, and sold. Once difficult to access, the valley's infrastructure has evolved to meet the demands of tourism, replacing agriculture as the primary economic driver.

### Tracing the past into the present

The residencies initiated by the Karl Max Kessler Archive offer layered experiences – inviting viewers to explore archival photographs while immersed in the physical valley itself. These projects connect the past with present-day life, fostering a renewed appreciation of the region's cultural and environmental history. The archive remains committed to engaging contemporary artists and historians to reinterpret and activate its materials. By doing so, it provides a space for locals to reconnect with their

heritage and reflect on its ongoing relevance. With the changing economy, that focusses more on tourist rather than alpine agriculture, a lot of knowledge, practices and traditions are lost. The art installations brought into the public, hence, aim to initiate a debate about heritage and customs that might be valuable to archive and revive.

The third resident, Judith Neunhäuserer, is currently developing a new project that delves even deeper into the valley's ancient past. Her work brings a scientific and spiritual lens to the landscape. As recent studies show, the valley harbors numerous archaeological sites that can be traced back to the Mesolithic, making it a “singular micro-region” in the Western Alps (Posch, 2022).

As these artist residencies demonstrate, the Kleinwalsertal is not only a place of aesthetic wonder but also a site of complex cultural narratives – shaped, staged, and shared through photography, memory, and art. ■

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