

Neutrality Model

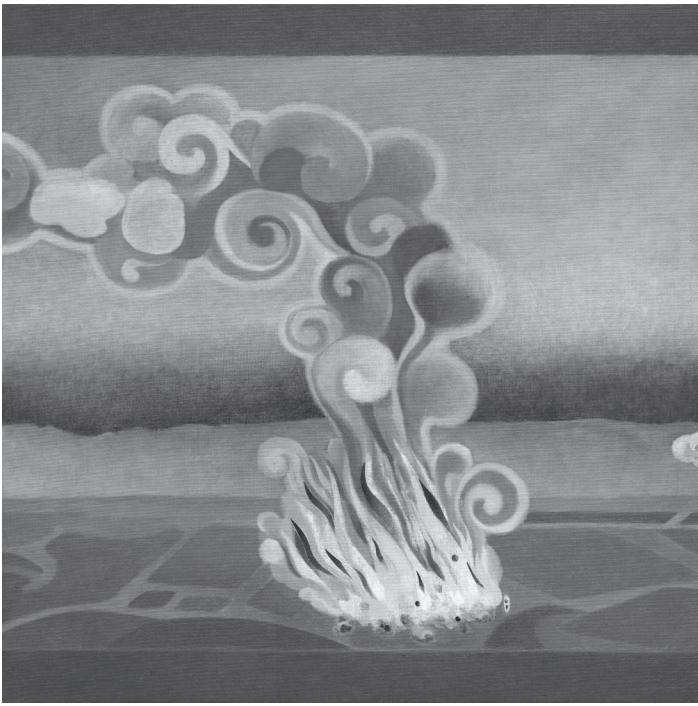
Aargauer Kunsthaus

1.2. – 11.5.2025

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Introduction

This tour starts with a thought experiment: We imagine that Switzerland does not exist. What would be missing? Beyond the loss of cliché-laden cultural or natural treasures, we'd quickly come to miss more important things. What if historical events had not permitted the foundation of a humanitarian aid organisation such as the Red Cross? What wars would have devastated the continent if Switzerland had not served as a buffer zone, as a place for diplomatic mediation? Switzerland may be small, its role in world history, however, must not be underestimated. Switzerland may be neutral, but what this meant in the past and means in the present or even in the future is our task to find out. The show provides 14 artists and their works with the space to initiate a critical debate around the principle of neutrality—a principle with significant impact on how Switzerland sees itself. Their art is focussed on Switzerland as the domicile of international organisations and multinational corporations, as an island of peace and idealised paradise. These artists also look at how neutral art institutions, language, or artificial intelligences can in fact be.



Caroline Bachmann (*1963), *58 av. J.-C.*, 2020 (Detail)



Guido Nussbaum (*1948), *Schweizer Welt 1*, 1995

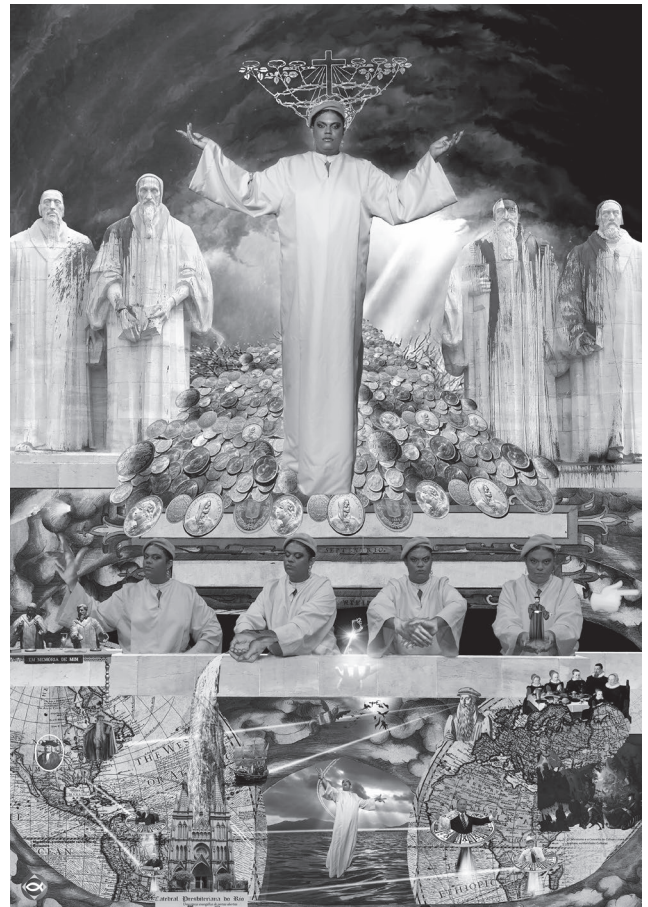
Room 1

During the first year of the Gallic War, the Helvetians lost their battle against six Roman legions in the area of Bibracte, in the present-day French region of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté. Subsequently, Julius Caesar (100 B.C – 44 B.C.) pushed the Helvetians back into the alpine area around Nyon and Augst. The wall frieze *58 av. J.-C.* [58 B.C.] (2020) by Caroline Bachmann (*1963) captures this event in ten parts over a length of eight metres and reminds us that Swiss neutrality was not a freely made choice. The oil painting encourages us to study the origins of the Swiss Confederation. It is the starting point of the art show and gives us the opportunity to reflect upon the history and myths that influence how Switzerland sees itself to this day. Using thoughtful brush strokes, Bachmann approaches the mysterious elements of the historic landscapes, opening new ways to give the bloody wars of our past a new pictorial form.

Although many works by Guido Nussbaum (*1948) show the world as a whole, at times the artist directs his focus to Switzerland, depicting the country nestled in the Alps as a microcosm full of contradictions. Nussbaum's often subtly ironic works resemble models that let us, the artist, and his art forge a relationship with the environment. In his analogue photograph *Schweizer Welt 1* [Swiss World 1] (1995), which is part of the Aargauer Kunsthaus collection, the artist captured a globe on black, pleated velvet. Observing the object more closely, one finds that it is not the outline of Europe in the ocean—instead, Switzerland sits at the centre of the world, or, to be more precise, Western Switzerland, because the positioning means the rest of the outline is just vaguely perceptible. In combination with the sculpture *Schweizer Weltglobe* [Swiss World Globe] (1998 – 2008), Nussbaum's works remind us that no model can cover everything and that we need each other's help to view all facets of the globe.



Denise Bertschi (*1983), *CONFIDENTIAL*, 2018



Guerreiro do Divino Amor (*1983), *Le Miracle d'Helvetia*, 2022

Room 2

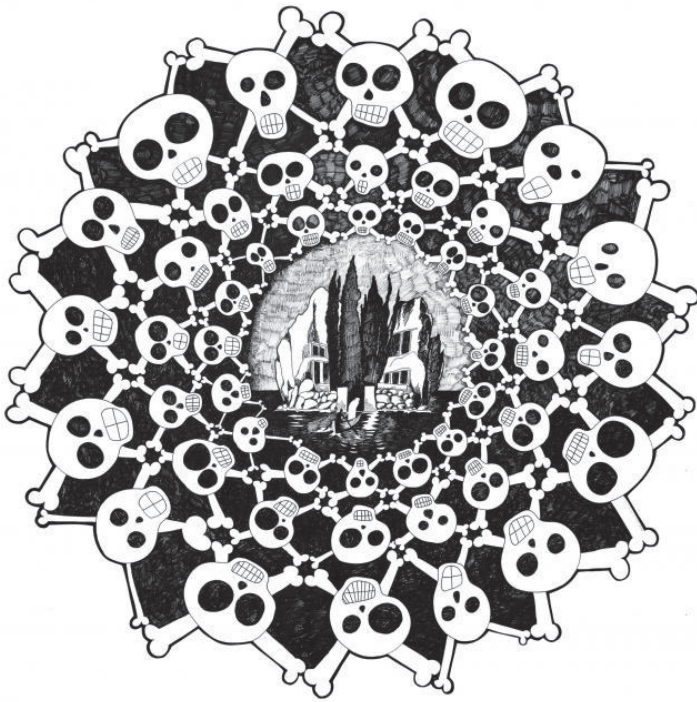
In her work series *Neutrality as Agent*, Denise Bertschi (*1983) examines Switzerland's role as a reputed neutral player in international politics. A central part of this series is the 3-channel video installation *CONFIDENTIAL* (2018). In it, Bertschi shows six buildings in Johannesburg and Pretoria, South Africa, that are connected to the gold trade, including the Swiss House, the Chamber of Mines of South Africa, the old Stock Exchange, and the former Reserve Bank South Africa, as well as Precious Metals Developments Ltd. During her investigation, the artist and researcher found evidence that the Schweizer Bankgesellschaft (today known as UBS) was involved in gold transactions with the apartheid regime during the 1950s. The buildings in Bertschi's work give testimony of these business relationships, and by filming the architectural traces, Bertschi avoids reproducing the mostly violent images of exploitation—of both people and nature.

In her video work *Swiss CONFIDENTIAL* (2025), Bertschi explores the architecture of refineries and banks in Switzerland in the context of the gold trade and shows the strong impact the commodity trade has on the Swiss landscape. The artist overlays her own landscape videos with the companies' imagery of self-promotion and historic

pieces from the Schweizer Filmwochenschau [Swiss Weekly News Reel] (1949-1969) of working conditions in refineries and mints. The closing credits play a radio show of 1987 with the song "Wägem Gold" [Because of Gold] by Polo Hofer to remind us of Switzerland's economically motivated refusal to support the UN sanctions against apartheid in South Africa.

Room 3

The rotating fountain sculpture of Helvetia scans the room with glowing eyes. The work *Le Miracle d'Helvetia* (2022) was made by Guerreiro do Divino Amor (*1983), who represented Switzerland during the 2024 Biennale in Venice. As a chapter in his *Superfictional World Atlas*, it is part of his research on the exaggeration and appropriation of myths in our everyday life. The fountain with Helvetia leads us to a room where 13 mechanically animated light boxes open an iconographic collection of curios related to traditional Swiss values. The female figures represent, among others, discretion, integrity, or virtuous tidiness and punctuality. The figures blink at us at times with heroic expressions, at times in alluring back view. The following room contains a video projection that enlightens us on their divinity. In the myth of Helvetia, who defends



Aleksandra Mir (*1967), *Island of the Dead*, 2006



Kim da Motta (*2000), *How would I walk, had I never seen a woman walk?*, 2022

her holy principles with blind eyes and deaf ears, we soon recognise bitter-sweet cynicism. Guerreiro do Divino Amor lets us discover a Switzerland whose neutrality appears to be a source of countless contradictions, from the idyllic background of the Alps to the cradle of biotechnological progress.

Room 4

Arnold Böcklin's (1827–1901) *Toteninsel* [Isle of the Dead] (1880) is considered an icon not only because of its mysterious motif, a shining dream structure in black water. The sombre work fascinated Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) so much so that he decorated first his private home and then the Reich Chancellery with a version of the *Toteninsel*. Nonetheless, the oil painting is considered a central work of Swiss art, probably because the past of our neutral alpine country includes some dark chapters as well. Aleksandra Mir (*1967) may have recognised these parallels. Her work *Island of the Dead* (2006)—a large-scale tondo created in felt-tip pen for her solo exhibition *Switzerland and Other Islands* in Zürich—suggests a clear link between geographic isolation and human brutalisation in the fortress of Europe. A glance at *Insula Svissera* (2006) offers more hope. In early modern times, the creation of maps

gave expression to claims of power and ownership and served as a vehicle for the symbols of many nationalist movements. With her Swiss island, ringed by sea monsters or a Hello-Kitty mermaid, Mir sees art as a way to contribute to the new stories and myths of the present.

The work *How would I walk, had I never seen a woman walk?* (2022) by Kim da Motta (*2000) explores gait as an ordinary feature that surveillance systems increasingly use to determine a person's gender. Instead of recognising several physical ways of expression, this practice reduces the complexity of human movement, laying bare the regulatory potential of digital systems and their subtle and discreet operations that aim to categorise people. The work lets us experience first-hand that artificial intelligences are not neutral and are only as intelligent as the archives they draw on for their information. To play the 2-channel video installation, we must step on a treadmill—which means we must present our own gait. In doing so, we learn how computer programmes use Machine Learning to assign a binary gender to people just by the way they walk. Kim da Motta's work asks whether our own motion patterns may be formed by structures similar to the ones in computer programmes that repeat whatever has been normalised over centuries.



Felix Stöckle (*1994), *Welcome to Switzerland, if you can afford it*, 2025



Mirkan Deniz (*1990), *Masa*, 2016–ongoing

Although Switzerland does not participate in armed conflicts with its military, its neutrality is armed. This means that the Confederation has both an army and a defence industry, which are often unfavourably viewed against the background of Switzerland's neutrality. According to Felix Stöckle (*1994), the continued existence of armed neutrality in the 21st century is also due to the interconnectedness of military and leisure time. With his works, the artist examines visual and design languages that are used not only in Switzerland, but elsewhere too, to play down violent content, even making it look attractive. Felix Stöckle uses water-coloured wood tablets that he modelled after vintage tourism posters to show the close relationship between war and consumption. Stöckle's use of different materials and explicit amateurish technique make the poster templates tumble towards the grotesque, an effect that is enhanced by the display of research material and strange objects from the context of weaponry. *Welcome to Switzerland, if you can afford it* (2025) encourages us to view the label denoting precision and quality, *swiss made*, with a critical mind when it comes to weapons of war. The installation also poses the question of what we are willing to give in order to abandon colonial thought patterns. Within the Aarau show, Stöckle provides a new interpretation of the famous children's

slippers named Tigerfinkli according to the motto "Pantoufle Suisses statt Patrouille Suisse" [Swiss Slippers instead of Swiss Patrol] for the Swiss label Tiger Swiss.

Room 5

In 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres guaranteed Kurdistan the right of self-determination, but only three years later this promise of the so-called dictated peace seemed to have been forgotten: In the Palais de Rumine in Lausanne, on 24 July 1923, Turkey and the allied forces split Kurdistan between Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The focus of Mirkan Deniz' (*1990) work *Masa* (2016–ongoing), "Table" in English, is not so much the act of signing that redrew the map of the Middle East. Even after extensive research, Deniz is unable to find any objects in Switzerland that are connected to the treaty. But when the artist found out in 2015 that the former president of Switzerland, Pascal Couchepin (*1942), presented the original table to his Turkish counterpart as a gift in 2008, she uses this questionable diplomatic gesture to give the replica of the table—including its history—back to Switzerland, using exhibitions and public art initiatives to remind the country of its responsibility. Ripped from its place of origin, the massive piece



Gabriela Löffel (*1972), *Grammar of calculated ambiguity*, 2023–2024

of furniture looks out of place in the museum. The work *Untitled (Out of Place)* (2023) appears here like a ghost in the exhibition and evokes a sense of foreignness, referring to a rug that has lost its oriental patterns over the course of 100 years. With its long fringes on both sides, the carpet reminds us of the one that once lay under the table in Lausanne, where the treaty was signed—a silent reminder that the story is not finished yet.

Room 6

The Pandora Papers are a data leak concerning business files on offshore accounts and were published in 2021 by the international network of investigative journalists (ICIJ). Not long after that, Gabriela Löffel (*1972) attended a conference of the financial services industry.

The audio recording, which is often difficult to understand acoustically, documents a panel discussion on public perception of the offshore financial industry from this multi-day event. In her approximately hour-long video-sound installation *Grammar of calculated ambiguity* (2023-2024), the artist takes visitors to a recording studio where she invited four financial experts to analyse the recording with the help of forensic phonetics specialists. In her work, Löffel is interested in

showing the contents of the discussions and the linguistic methods with the goal to reveal what the financial industry does to maintain and drive economic and social inequality. Hearing how terminologies and infrastructures are used to circumvent applicable law, we realise that even the smallest sound nuance allows for ambiguities. The audio track (composed by Olga Kokcharova *1985) forms an installation space element that helps describe this permeability of linguistic and legal systems also acoustically.



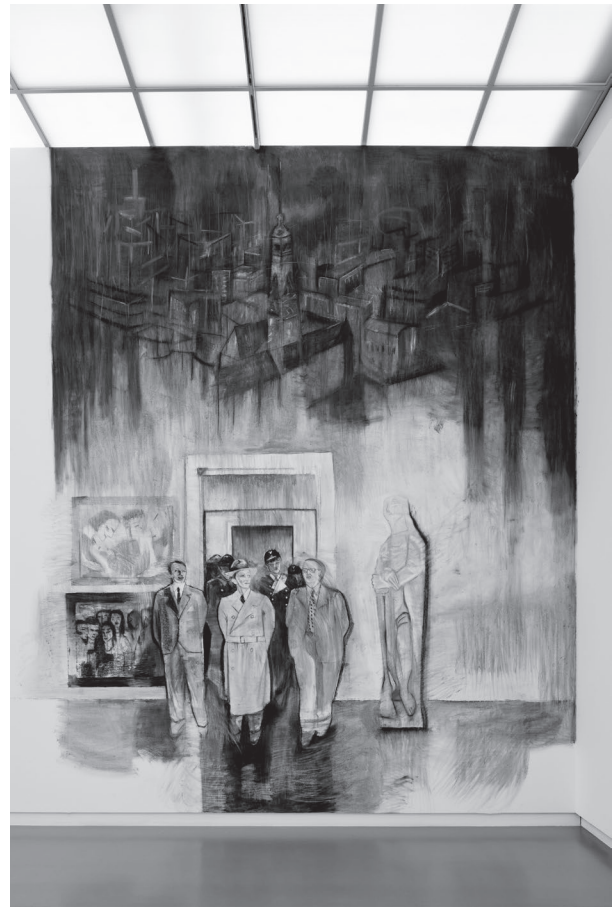
huber.huber (Markus Huber, *1975 / Reto Huber, *1975), *Friedensfahne*, 2024

Room 7 and Atrium

The artistic duo huber.huber (Markus Huber, *1975 / Reto Huber, *1975) create art to make a space where we can contemplate war and peace. Back in 2011, the brothers created a work on the peace activist and conscientious objector Max Daetwyler (1886 – 1976). In 1934, the Gestapo prevented Daetwyler from distributing cards inscribed with the words “People, love one another” in public. huber.huber made good on this symbol-laden initiative with their exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthaus, *Voici un dessin suisse*, providing the historic gesture with a new setting in the form of an art performance. Some of the cards return to Aarau in 2025 and will be complemented by the Edition *Friedensfahne* [Peace Flag Edition] (2024) which was specially created for the Aargauischer Kunstverein. This new interpretation of the famous rainbow flag by Aldo Capitini (1899 – 1968) addresses the question of the universal wish for reconciliation. The contradiction between the longing for peace and reality also inspired Reto and Markus Huber to a new work for *Neutrality Model*. In an exchange, they collected tattered and weathered peace flags and turned them into the textile wall installation titled NO WAR. The work is a poetic formulation of the question: Why do the rainbow colours of the peace flags on our balconies and façades fade but peace has still not come?



Daide-Christelle Sanvee (*1993), *La transparence n'est pas tranquille*, 2025 (Process insight)



Marc Bauer (*1976), *Sphinx*, 1931, 1935/1947, 2014

The works of Davide-Christelle Sanvee (*1993) display power structures anchored in architecture or in the public space. Especially in her room installation, *The not so white cube* (2023), Sanvee reveals the entanglements of the art establishment and colonialism. The rectangular crate with three busts that were shown in Sanvee's performance during the 2023 Swiss Art Awards (and refer to the founders of Art Basel), are exhibited in Aarau together with a video of the performance. In her new production, *La transparence n'est pas tranquille* [Transparency is not tranquil] (2025), Sanvee paints the glass panels in the atrium of the Aargauer Kunsthaus with white chalk pigment, turning the patio into an open-air white cube. In a related performance, Sanvee leaves her tracks on the chalk. The performative act of scratching denotes the artistic practice as a disrupting factor in the seemingly neutral white exhibition spaces. Both works have a clear point: the apparent objectivity associated with the white cube concept exists within the structure of the majority of society. Museums and archives are powerful places of historical narrative because they not only reflect cultural values, but also actively shape and hierarchise them.

Room 8

In his drawings, Marc Bauer (*1976) links historical events with contemporary issues, thus separating them from their chronological context. His room installation brings together a wall drawing in black coal, a series of pencil drawings on paper, and selected paintings by the Swiss artist Karl Ballmer (1891–1958), whose works were vilified as “degenerate art” in Nazi Germany. Bauer's work depicts both Ballmer's flight back to Switzerland in 1938 and his interactions with the controversial art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt (1895–1956), who played a central role in the trade of confiscated art under National Socialism. *Sphinx*, 1931, 1935/1947 (2014) follows the threads of these historical entanglements and examines how Balmer's biography influences our appreciation of his artistic work today. Furthermore, the installation leads the public into a critical debate on the problematic provenance of works of art in museum collections. By making the work question the neutrality of museum institutions, Bauer indirectly prompts us to reconsider the ethical and political dimensions of the art business. Inevitably, however, we must ask ourselves whether art can ever be neutral and exist separately from its political context.



Thomas Hirschhorn (*1957), *Wirtschaftslandschaft Davos*, 2001

Room 9

"I want to reveal all this shit, these interconnections between the sledding run, the Davos Hockey Club, between Bill Gates and the local history museum, between Laurent Fabius and the village cop who now has become a terrorist hunter instead of placing tickets under the windshield wipers of the wrongly parked luxury cars from Germany." This is how Thomas Hirschhorn (*1957) describes his plans in a letter to curator Bice Curiger (*1948), which he then implements in his 2001 exhibition in honour of the young artists prize that he received from the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft [Zurich Art Association]. Hirschhorn's sculpture *Wirtschaftslandschaft Davos* [Davos Economic Landscape] combines, in the usual precarious fashion, a foam mock-up of the Davos Valley with miniature policemen, soldiers, and tanks, as well as the works of well-known expressionists. The installation also includes a theatre for Rolf Lyssy's cinematic drama *Confrontation* (1974) that retells the assassination of the national group leader of the NSDAP for Switzerland, Wilhelm Gustloff (1895-1936), by the Jewish immigrant David Frankfurter (1909-1982). The work was acquired in 2010 for the collection of the Aargauer Kunsthaus. Hirschhorn questions the neutrality of a country that does not always behave neutrally. In Hirschhorn's work, Davos is the symbol for an opportunistic Switzerland.

Curation

Dr. Katharina Ammann
Bassma El Adisey

Publication

A collection of eleven texts on the topic of neutrality from the disciplines of literature, history, journalism, business, law, social anthropology, and architectural research will accompany the exhibition. With this publication, the Aargauer Kunsthaus wants to underscore the diversity of the Neutrality Model within Switzerland and contribute to enjoyable exploration beyond the bounds of the political concept.

With contributions by Patti Basler, satirist; Lukas Bärffuss, writer; Samia Henni, (architectural) historian; Rohit Jain, social anthropologist, with Rami Msallam, forensic architect; Marco Jorio, historian; Helen Keller, law professor; Urs Meier, former referee; Fatima Moumouni, spoken-word poet; Linus Schöpfer, editor of the NZZ am Sonntag, and Johanna Rainio, neutrality researcher; X Noëme aka X Schneeberger, author and activist; Luzia Tschirky, journalist. Introduction by Katharina Ammann and Bassma El Adisey. Design: A Language, Zürich (Martin Stoecklin and Melina Wilson), publisher: Scheidegger & Spiess

Events

Tour and Dialogue

Friday 2.2.2025 1–2 pm

In dialogue with the artist Guerreiro do Divino Amor, museum director and curator of the show, Dr Katharina Ammann, leads a tour through the exhibition.

Discussion Series

Discussion series “Neutrality and...” co-curated by Dr Denise Bertschi. There will be five panel discussions on the following topics:
Neutrality and Prosperity (20.2.2025 6.30 pm)
Neutrality and Knowledge (13.3.2025 6.30 pm)

Neutrality and Security
(30.3.2025 2 pm)

Neutrality and Identity
(10.4.2025 6.30 pm)

Neutrality and Art
(11.5.2025 2 pm)

Performance

Saturday 22.2.2025 1 pm

The artist Davide-Christelle Sanvee (*1993) transformed the glass-panelled atrium of the Aargauer Kunsthaus into a White Cube for her project *La transparence n'est pas tranquille* (2025). She will complete the work with a related performance.

Cooperation with Bühne Aarau
Saturday, 22.2.2025 8 pm

Neutralisiert. Wie verstehen Sie die Dolmetscherin? [Neutralised. How do you understand the interpreter?]
A play by and with Zarina Tadjibaeva. This will be followed by a discussion with Zarina Tadjibaeva, Dr Katharina Ammann and Ann-Marie Arioli (Artistic Director of Bühne Aarau).

Workshop

Thursday 10.4.2025 10 am – 3 pm

The artist Felix Stöckle will join with art mediator Ursina Spescha to host an inclusive holiday workshop for youth (13–16 years old) with and without disabilities. Participants will create art together and playfully explore and creatively question the *Neutrality Model*.

In the context of *Neutrality and Security* we will collaborate with the Zentrum für Demokratie Aarau (ZDA) [Aarau Centre for Democracy], which hosts a conference on security policy from 3.4. to 4.4.2025.

In cooperation with Kunstraum Aarau, the artist and forensic architect Rami Msallam will show his work *Voids in Earth* (2024) from 12.4. to 11.5.2025, which is reviewed by Rohit Jain in the accompanying publication *Neutrality Modell*.

Additional events can be found at aargauerkunsthaus.ch/agenda

Freiraum

In the publicly accessible and free *Freiraum* area of the Kunsthaus, we will run an opinion survey, which will introduce, among others, the NEXPLORER project (an Initiative of NEXPO—the new Expo). Visitors can share their results on-site and also, based on selected questions, comment on living together in neutral Switzerland.

Collection 25 I

Selected works of the Aargauer Kunsthaus collection on the upper and lower levels provide an echo chamber for the *Neutrality Model* show. Touring the exhibition space leads to the rediscovery of the *Friedensapostel Max Daetwyler* [Peace Apostle Max Daetwyler] by Varlin or Miriam Cahn's *Sarajevo* series, or even Ben Vautier's “scandalous image”, *Suiza no existe*.

Acknowledgments

The exhibition is supported by: Canton of Aargau, Aargau Art Association, Swisslos Canton of Aargau, City of Aarau, Federal Office of Culture, Ernst Göhner Foundation, Mobiliar Foundation, Pro Helvetia – Swiss Arts Council, Hans-Eugen and Margrit Stucki-Liechti Foundation HMSL. The Aargauer Kunsthaus thanks the Canton of Aargau, the Aargau Art Association, and UBS (partner of Aargauer Kunsthaus), our media partner Aargauer Zeitung, and the City of Aarau for their support. Special thanks go to videocompany and Denise Bertschi for co-curating the discussion series *Neutrality and...*

Opening Hours

Tuesdays – Sunday	10 am to 5 pm
Thursdays	10 am to 8 pm
Closed Mondays	
Free admission	
Thursdays	5 pm – 8 pm

Opening Hours on Public Holidays

The Kunsthaus is open during Easter holidays from	10 am to 5 pm
Maundy Thursday	17.4.2025
Good Friday	18.4.2025
Easter Saturday	19.4.2025
Easter Sunday	20.4.2025
Easter Monday	21.4.2025

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