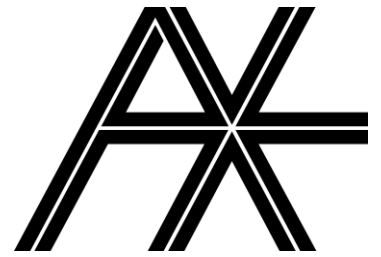


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Neutrality Model

1.2. – 11.5.2025

Press release

Aarau, December 2025

Current wars within and outside Europe are once again generating discussions around the principle of neutrality. The Aargauer Kunsthaus has invited 14 contemporary artists to take the floor. Their art focuses on Switzerland as the host location for international organisations and multinational corporations while also exploring the country's reputation as an island of peace and an idealised paradise. These artists also look at how neutral art institutions, language, or artificial intelligences can in fact be.

Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau

With this exhibition, the Aargauer Kunsthaus once again addresses a relevant question of our time while also exploring a specifically Swiss topic closely connected to building a national identity. Its neutrality under international law has made Switzerland an impartial point of contact during crises and a base for international organisations and sensitive transactions in the heart of Europe. Historically and politically very consensus-oriented, Switzerland now increasingly feels under pressure to take up a distinct position in a world that has become more and more destabilised and beset with conflicts. The "Neutrality Model" has therefore become the topic of intense discussions from the perspectives of international law, history, politics, as well as ethics.

Artists are familiar with uncertainty. They know how to open up new perspectives by casting doubt on old certainties. And so it is that they are creating works that, directly or indirectly, engage with the topic of neutrality and contribute to societal debate. The Aargauer Kunsthaus has offered 14 of them a platform and thus is opening up a space for critical exploration of neutrality outside of political negotiations.

Museums such as the Aargauer Kunsthaus—just like libraries, educational or memorial institutions—have never been neutral venues. Given the growing awareness of diversity in our society, the Aargauer Kunsthaus is faced with an increasing number of questions regarding its collection policy and the writing of (art) history associated with that policy. Beyond the context of art, language also serves as a venue for negotiating neutrality. While dominant interpretations are democratically capable of winning a majority, their assumed unity of voice, however, feeds the notion that there is only one way to explain the world. It is art in particular that, since the 20th century, has built a counterpoint to this fallacy by playing with new systems of symbols and the media of communication.

The different perspectives contained in this exhibition can prompt not just the public, but also the museum and its operations, to discover neutrality as a sphere of action all of its own, not just as a product of history. In the best case, the exhibited art promotes an understanding that neutrality, as a part of Swiss culture, is changing all the time—just as our society is constantly changing. *Neutrality Model* invites us to reflect on our own stances and our interconnectedness.

Artists and Exhibited Works

Caroline Bachmann (*1963) shows a different side of the contemporary culture of remembrance in her work *58 av. J.-C. (2020) [58 BC]*. No less monumental than more customary historical paintings but unusually contemplative, the frieze was presented as a gift to the Aargauer Kunsthaus and has been part of the museum's collection since 2023. Over its eight-metre length, it depicts a battle of the Helvetians against six Roman legions during the first year of the Gallic War. The Helvetians lost and were pushed back into the Alpine area around Nyon and Augst by Julius Caesar with the goal of preventing incursions by Germanic tribes. Where in Bachmann's work purple billows of smoke waft across the floor of a valley and an orange sun glows above the horizon, the painting by the 2022 recipient of the Prix Meret Oppenheim invites us to think about one of the birth moments of the Swiss Confederation. It is the starting point of the exhibition and so immediately provides space for us to reflect on the history and myths that influence our daily lives here in Switzerland to this day.

In the works of **Marc Bauer** (*1975), too, Swiss history plays an important role. With his drawings, Bauer develops historical events further, releasing them from the past. The room installation *Sphinx, 1931, 1935/1947 (2014)* consists of a wall drawing, a series of drawings on paper and selected paintings by Karl Ballmer (1891–1958). Bauer's work addresses Ballmer's flight to Switzerland and speaks to the appropriation of culture under National Socialism. Ballmer, whose art was vilified as "degenerate" in Nazi Germany, interacted with (confiscated) art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt (1895–1956) in Switzerland, which Bauer's work also depicts. Ballmer's personal biography thus impacts how his work is interpreted today. The room installation by Bauer gives rise to discussions about restitutions, controversial loans and gifts, indirectly questioning the neutrality of museum institutions and, ultimately, of art.

Denise Bertschi (*1983) lets us peek behind closed doors, although all we get to see are impenetrable walls of other buildings. The artist has been researching the architecture of the gold business for around ten years, specifically the connections between Switzerland's gold trade and South Africa. Appearing as an archive of (post-)colonial building typologies, the 3-channel video installation *CONFIDENTIAL (2018)* presents the places that form a fundamental part of our lived and political reality, even though very few have any real sense of what they are. Especially when we think we are dealing with a part of history that we thought had been processed historically, Bertschi makes us doubt this perceived certainty. In *Swiss CONFIDENTIAL (2024)*, a new production created by Bertschi for the Aargauer Kunsthaus, we travel through Switzerland and visit the locations where to this day colonial entanglements demand space in our lives in the neutral heart of Europe.

The history of Switzerland would not be complete without the country's role as a neutral place for negotiations, which in many residents of the alpine country evokes images of grand halls with a large table at the centre. Around it, the powerful are gathered to sign groundbreaking treaties. With her work *Masa* (English: table), **Mirkan Deniz** (*1990) shows that there is some truth to this cliché. In 2015, she made a replica of the table used for the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in the Palais de Rumine in 1923. In this treaty, Turkey and the Allied Powers

redesigned the map of what is termed the Middle East, and split Kurdistan up amongst Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. This decision impacts the lives of the people of Kurdistan to this day—but that is not Deniz's only reason for creating a replica of the table. The former president of Switzerland, Pascal Couchepin (*1942), presented the original table to his Turkish counterpart as a gift. In light of this questionable diplomatic gesture, since 2015 Deniz has been trying to bring the table —along with its history—back to Switzerland, as a way of highlighting the responsibility that can arise even from the good will of neutral roles.

As part of a larger complex of works on the topic of war and transfiguration, the artistic duo **huber.huber** (Markus Huber, *1975/Reto Huber, *1975) created a work in 2015 about the "peace apostle" and famous 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 plan in their exhibition *Und plötzlich ging die Sonne unter* [And suddenly the sun went down] (2015) at the Aargauer Kunsthhaus. Ten years later, 2025 will see some of the cards returning to Aarau, together with the publication *Friedensfahne* [Peace Flag] (2024) produced for the Aargauischer Kunstverein. This is a new interpretation of the famous rainbow flag created by Aldo Capitini (1899–1968) as a symbol for peace. Engaging with the ongoing desire for peace in our society has also motivated Reto and Markus Huber to realise a long-planned new production for *Neutrality Model*. In a swap action, they collected faded, 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?

In 2022, **Guerreiro do Divino Amor** (*1983), who represented Switzerland at the Venice Biennale in 2024, created a new chapter in his *Superfictional World Atlas*. The work titled *Le Miracle d'Helvetia* (2022) [The Miracle of Helvetia] is a room installation in three parts consisting of a cistern, 13 light boxes, and a video projection, where the artist opens a collection of curios related to myth-heavy Swiss values. His story begins with a Helvetia in Olympian heaven who, with blind eyes and deaf ears, guards her daughters on Earth, defending her holy principles inwards and outwards. With a twinkle in his eye, 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 biotechnology advances.

Wirtschaftslandschaft Davos [Economic Landscape Davos] (2001) by **Thomas Hirschhorn** (*1957) has all but become a myth in its own right, and not just because of its elaborate form of presentation. The collective work was last shown at the Aargauer Kunsthhaus in 2011. It is composed of a miniature mock-up of mountainous terrain made of PU foam, gift tables with works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), as well as various objects and paper records and a theatre for Rolf Lyssy's cinematic drama *Konfrontation* (1974). Playfully analysing the role of Switzerland as a business hub, peaceful tourist mecca, place of international political negotiations or even as a location of historical failures and constitutional double standards, the work is part of Swiss cultural history. While a model train peacefully passes figurines in military uniform on its sinuous way through the artificial mountain valley, Hirschhorn's sculpture helps us discover an entirely different side of Davos and Swiss neutrality.

We see and hear two people in a recording studio, which could also serve as a set for a science-fiction film. They are wearing headsets while playing a recording and commenting on what is being said. Only some ten minutes later, after four experts have joined them, does **Gabriela Löffel's** (*1972) video-sound installation *Grammar of calculated ambiguity* (2023–2024) explain what the mission of the filmed subjects is. The group is listening to the recording of a panel discussion of experts in the offshore finance industry, which was made during a meeting in the financial services sector. Löffel invited four business experts to reconstruct the recording with the help of forensic audio technicians. This translation process is what the artist filmed, using her most recent work to provide insight into the ambiguity of language.

While we hear how technical jargon is used, among other things, to circumvent applicable law, we realise that words are never neutral and that even the smallest nuance can open up new contexts. An intervention by the sound artist Olga Kokcharova (*1985) will enhance Löffel's video in Aarau.

In early modern times, many artists were interested in cartography. Their interest was aroused not just because new continents had been discovered and could now be represented in their entirety. The creation of maps also gave expression to claims of power and ownership and served as a vehicle for the symbols of many nationalist movements. This is what may have prompted **Aleksandra Mir** (*1967) in 2006 to create large-scale felt-tip pen drawings of (fictitious) islands in the style of geographical maps for her exhibition *Switzerland and Other Islands*. In line with an old tradition, Mir showed Switzerland in works such as *Insula Svissera* as an island encircled by mythical creatures and sea monsters. The artist is known for her space-consuming work and also created an adaption of *Toteninsel* [Isle of the Dead] by Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901). Ringed by skulls, we immediately recognise in Mir's work the Swiss artist's epic dream architecture, which had excited Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) so much that he decorated first his private home and then the Reich Chancellery with Böcklin's work. Ultimately, Mir refers to the power that images have when they occupy, or open a new perspective on, locations in history.

It has been widely known for quite some time that artificial intelligences are not neutral and are only as intelligent as the archives they draw on for their information. The artist **Kim da Motta** (*2000) underscores this insight in her work *How would I walk, had I never seen a woman walk?* (2022). To play the video essay of this 2-channel video installation, we must first step on a treadmill. Once we do this, we learn from a computerised voice and film recordings, as well as from the images of an avatar, 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. That gender norms can also be shattered is evidenced in the references that da Motta's work makes to dance styles in the drag scene. They are like a vote for diversity in our society and the power of subcultures that could be capable of convincing not just computer programmes to get an upgrade.

Guido Nussbaum (*1948) has been exploring how to represent the world since the late 1980s, be it in a three-dimensional globe or in maps of the world. With just a dash of irony, Nussbaum's works open new perspectives on seemingly known territories. In his analogue photograph *Schweizer Welt 1* [Swiss World 1] (1995), which is part of the Aargauer Kunsthaus collection, the artist photographed a globe of the world against black, pleated velvet. Observing the photographed 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 at most assumed. 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 at the same time, even if it is just showing our little Switzerland.

Exposing the racist structures of the museum-context 'white cube', **Daive-Christelle Sanvee** (*1993) delighted visitors during the Swiss Art Awards in Basel with her work *The not so white cube* (2023). The artist captivates her audience by stepping out of a white box and talking powerfully about the meaning of the colour white in everyday life and in museum institutions. In an act of internalisation and simultaneous deconstruction during her performance, Sanvee begins to eat a cake decorated with an image of the hosting institution. With her bare hands and seemingly violent crudeness, Sanvee delves into the cake, tearing the white icing apart. This shows us that what is behind the façade of our art institutions and museums is anything but all white. In *Neutrality Model*, this performance work will be shown as a permanent

installation with video. Sanvee has also created a location-specific installation for the Aargauer Kunsthaus, including a performance with the title *La transparence n'est pas tranquille* [Transparency is not tranquil] (2025). For this project, she will paint the glass walls of the atrium on the ground floor white. Then during a performance, she will bring that neutral canvas she created back into critical art production.

During his time as an art student, **Felix Stöckle** (*1994) explored society's interaction with the hardware of war, weaponry, and military propaganda. He quickly realised that artisan craftwork and artistic design are often used to render harmless in appearance, items that are inherently destructive. A co-founder of the serigraph studio Turbopress in Biel, Stöckle is mainly interested in the connection between graphic design and political content. Inspired by vintage tourism posters, the artist produced for the Aargauer Kunsthaus wooden tablets that he decorated with carvings and watercolour designs. The motifs force us to recognise that military structures are solidly anchored in our collective awareness. Stöckle's use of different materials makes the poster templates not only tumble towards the grotesque, but their eccentricity is also enhanced by the display of research material and strange objects. Stöckle's work *Welcome to Switzerland, if you can afford it* (2025) not least poses the question of the importance ascribed to the defence industry in a neutral country.

Publication

A reader comprising eleven essays 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, and 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. *Design: A Language*, Zürich (Martin Stoecklin and Melina Wilson), publisher: Scheidegger & Spiess

Event program

In close collaboration with the artist Dr. Denise Bertschi, the Kunsthaus has developed a discussion series "*Neutrality and...*". Bertschi has for many years been conducting research on the mythification or mythologising of Swiss neutrality and has dedicated a number of works to this topic. Several prominent voices will engage in a public discussion to initiate a diverse debate on the concept of neutrality. The selected topics for discussion include *Neutrality and Prosperity*, *Neutrality and Knowledge*, *Neutrality and Identity*, *Neutrality and Security*, and *Neutrality and Art*.

A collaboration with the Zentrum für Demokratie Aarau (ZDA) [Aarau Centre for Democracy] in the context of *Neutrality and Security* is planned. The ZDA is holding a conference on security policy on 3-4/4/2025.

Felix Stöckle, one of the exhibition's featured artists, will join with art teacher Ursina Spescha to host an inclusive holiday workshop for youth (13-16 years old) with and without disabilities on 10/4/2025 between 10 am and 3 pm. Participants will create art together and at the same time playfully explore and creatively question the *Neutrality Model*.

In the publicly accessible and free *Freiraum* area of the Kunsthhaus, we run a survey, which will also introduce the *NEXPLORER* project. Visitors can share their results on-site and also, based on a question about neutrality, comment on living together in neutral Switzerland and engage in dialogue. *NEXPLORER* is an initiative of NEXPO – the new Expo - by authors Johannes Hedinger (Com&Com), Michael Hermann (Sotomo), Anne-Outram Mott, Juri Steiner, and Mathis Brauchbar (Kuratorium Lancierungsphase NEXPO).

Further collaboration partners are Bühne Aarau and Kunstraum Aarau.

Exhibition Opening

Friday, 31.1.2025 6 pm

Preview for the Art Association

Friday, 31.1.2025 5-6 pm

Exclusive preview for members of the Aargau Art Association

All events in the event program can be found at aargauerkunsthhaus.ch/agenda

Acknowledgments

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Aargauer Kunsthhaus Opening Hours

Tuesdays – Sundays, 10 am to 5 pm

Thursdays, 10 am to 8 pm

Closed Mondays

Thursdays 5- 8 pm free admission

Opening Hours on Public Holidays

The Kunsthaus is open during Easter.

From 10 am to 5 pm on

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

Images

On our website, www.aargauerkunsthhaus.ch > Medien, images are available for download. Please note the image credits.

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