

Bodies, Grids and ECSTASY

1. November 2023–20. April 2024

Margret Eicher
Beate Gütschow
Verena Issel
Inna Levinson
Roy Mordechay
Katja Novitskova
Pavel Pepperstein
Pieter Schoolwerth
Lena Schramm

KAI10 | ARTHENA FOUNDATION

Introduction

Ludwig Seyfarth · Curator

What becomes of physical reality in a world that is increasingly pervaded by digital processes? This question lies at the heart of the group exhibition **Bodies, Grids and Ecstasy**. The show confronts visitors with surprising encounters and contradictions between surface and space, abstraction and matter, reality and fiction. The show combines images, objects and sculptures in which things come together or are pieced together that as such are not compatible – like collages with invisible seams.

Bodies, Grids and Ecstasy shows a variety of artistic paths that lead away from the two-dimensionality of the gridded flatland back to the world of the haptic, the corporeal and story-telling. Sometimes these paths run in straight lines, be it in unexpected directions, but their course can also be convoluted, humorous and enigmatic, occasionally even issuing critical sideswipes at the political and economic consequences of digitalisation.

The artists in this exhibition make use of digital source material or imaging software, but this is not the kind of art to be experienced solely on a screen or with a VR headset. The works are located in physical space; at the same time, however, they reveal how much our sense of that very space is altered as digitally calculated and simulated phenomena steadily invade our everyday life and living environment.

On multiple levels we are made aware of things and processes that generally escape our conscious perception. The media theorist Marshall McLuhan who, as early as the 1960s, in prediction of the electronic and digital age far-sightedly ventured to write: “the serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.”¹

In other words, artists are able to see what is beyond our horizon – an analogy to our three-dimensional world that lies beyond the comprehension of the inhabitants of the flatland conceived by the English mathematician Edwin A. Abbott in his book **Flatland. A Romance of Many Dimensions**, published in 1884. Abbott’s intention was also to communicate the then much-debated issue of the fourth dimension to lay people with an interest in science. As inhabitants of three-dimensional space, we can perceive this flatland from above. However, those who are at home there are trapped in the horizontal dimension and can barely make out the course of a line the moment it bends around a corner.

A flatland was also envisioned by the radical non-representational art that found orientation not least in the grid patterns of the modern industrial age. The US-American art theorist Rosalind W. Krauss analysed the grid as a model of modern, self-referential works that hold testimony to nothing else but themselves: “Flattened, geometricised, ordered, it is anti-naturalistic, anti-mimetic, anti-real. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.”² “The barrier [that the grid] has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech.”³

For Krauss, the regular pattern of a grid is unaffected by time and immune to further development. Today, by contrast, it stands for the opposite: through contemporary imaging software the grid has become the visual formula for a potential source of infinite variations.

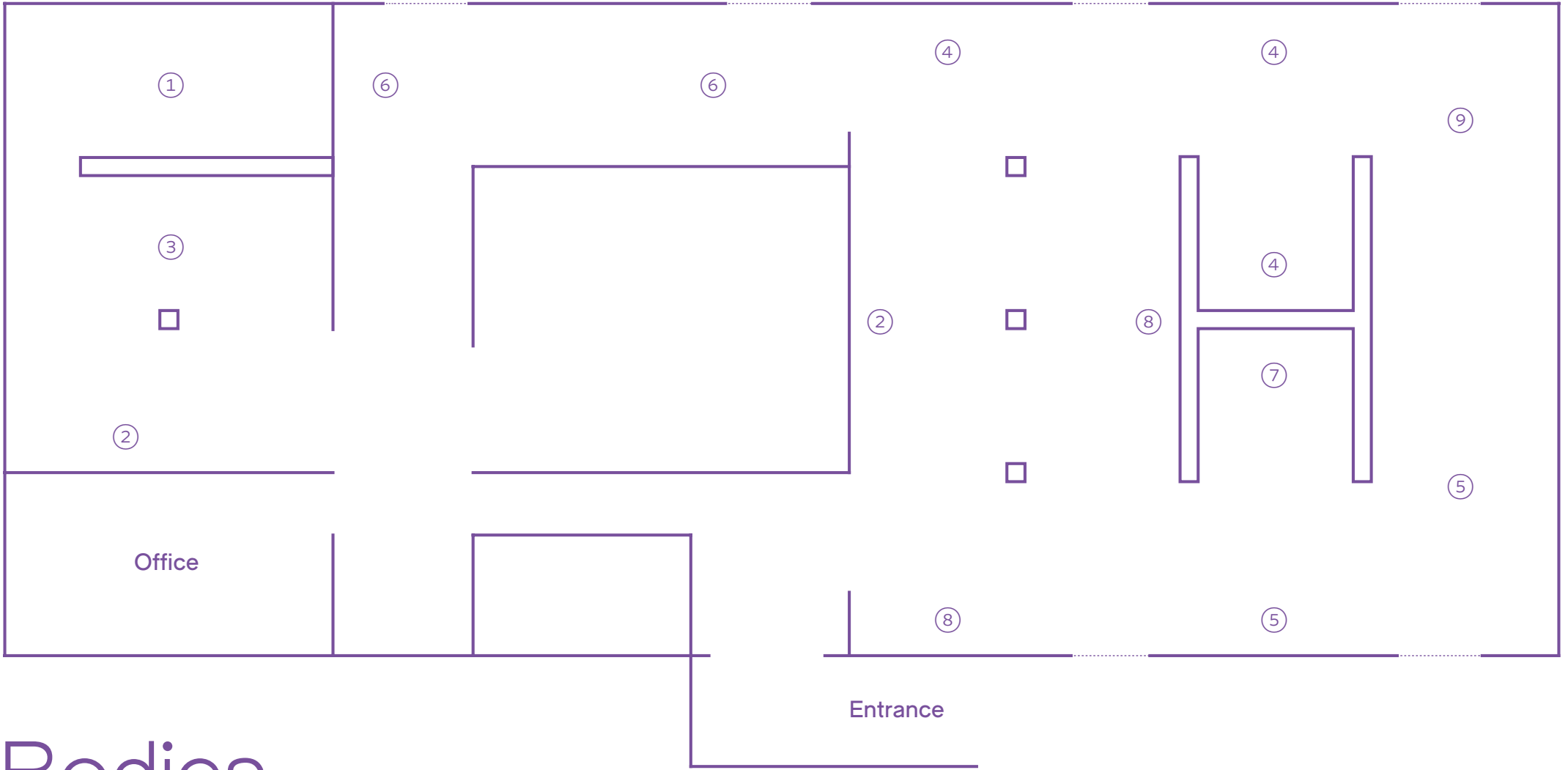
Thus, in contemporary art, the order and calculability of the grid are often no more than a starting point from which things can be made to happen that could not be pre-programmed. This, on the one hand, counterbalances the disembodiment and dematerialisation that issues from digitalisation. On the other hand, even where the human body or physical substance are out of the game, we still have been bequeathed a massive ecological footprint.

To put it bluntly, there is no such thing as abstraction. However much one tries to eradicate them, body and space keep coming back. They then often look unreal and distorted as if witnessed under the influence of drugs. Is the suggestion of three-dimensionality on a plane the only illusion or is two-dimensionality likewise a deception? For if it were real, we would have no space to exist. Or does whatever refuses to sit neatly within an algorithmic grid simply become analogue residual matter?

1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), London, 1967, p. 27.

2 Rosalind H. Krauss, *Grids*, in: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass./London, 1985, pp. 9–22, here p. 9.

3 *Ibid.*



Bodies, Grids and ECSTASY

- | | | |
|------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| ① Margret Eicher | ④ Inna Levinson | ⑦ Pavel Pepperstein |
| ② Beate Gütschow | ⑤ Roy Mordechay | ⑧ Pieter Schoolwerth |
| ③ Verena Issel | ⑥ Katja Novitskova | ⑨ Lena Schramm |

① MARGRET EICHER

In her large-format tapestries, Margret Eicher (*1955 in Viersen; lives in Berlin) frequently addresses the impact of media images on collective memory, which is why the artist chooses to describe them as “media tapestries”. Further developing her **CopyCollage** series begun in the 1980s – the duplication of mass media motifs by means of laser photocopies and their subsequent combination in ornamental wall and room installations, realised in classical collaged technique – Eicher’s recent work draws on found digital and analogue images. With the assistance of image processing programmes, this material is shaped into new, homogeneous compositions. On the one hand, the resulting collaged wall hangings that are produced in a digital weaving mill in Belgium are reminiscent of baroque tapestries: these, in turn, were originally designed to demonstrate the supremacy of nobility and to visualise aristocratic rules of conduct. On the other hand, Margret Eicher quotes current, socially relevant themes, events and personae: in the exhibition, Julian Assange is portrayed as an (anti-)hero in a pose reminiscent of James Dean, flanked by subcultural and undercover comic superheroes, who, since the 1980s, have been fighting for “the Good” in reptilian guise: the **Ninja Turtles**. This is just one of Eicher’s many combinations of motifs, where various semantic levels provide us with an impulse to critically question present-day events.

↗ Tanja Korte

② BEATE GÜTSCHOW

At first glance, the works from the series **HC** (= Hortus Conclusus) by Beate Gütschow (*1970 in Mainz; lives in Cologne and Berlin) look like commonplace park scenes captured on camera. If we take a closer look, however, we notice that the photographs have been assembled and that our position as viewers cannot be localised. We seem to be standing at an indefinite distance from the depicted scenes, leaving us to wonder from where they were taken. This is because Gütschow – with the help of a complex technical process – has retrospectively substituted the vanishing lines that would usually converge in the background with parallel perspective, causing the lines to run parallel to one another. Instead of coherent deep space, she has generated what seems like a flat architectural grid. Gütschow accomplishes the transition to parallel perspective by photographing each individual object from all sides with a 35 mm camera. With the help of photogrammetry, a tool used in architectural surveying and in augmented reality applications, the multitude of resulting photographs is digitally transferred to a photogrammetric model, where an algorithm connects overlapping points. This allows Gütschow to form a polygon mesh, onto which the original photographic surface is projected. The resulting photographic 3-D object is then transferred to a 3-D programme, by means of which the central perspective can be transformed into parallel perspective.

The title of the series refers to the confines of the enclosed Garden of Paradise, a recurrent theme in medieval illuminated manuscripts, whose outer walls were also usually represented in parallel perspective. Gütschow depicts components of contemporary architecture as if she had found them in 14th- and 15th-century paintings. Hence, in her works not only does the correspondence between surface and space appear to be transformed, but time also seems to have stood still.

↗ Christine Tebbe

③ VERENA ISSEL

Verena Issel’s (*1982 in Munich; lives in Berlin) floral material images in pastel shades such as pale pink, baby blue and mint, lure viewers almost as if by an invisible hand into the meticulously gridded garden (maze) of human production as depicted in her spatial installation **Grids and Flowers** (2023) on view in the exhibition. As you approach them, what at first sight looked like delicate paintings of a wide variety of flowers, plants and trees, prove to be, once again in great, partially gridded precision, an assembly of commonplace materials and household objects such as foam, polystyrene, plastic, felt, pipe cleaners and non-slip mats for carpets and fringed borders. A juxtaposition of human-made products and the produce of nature. What Issel clearly shows us here is how humankind takes for granted its appropriation of nature and the ensuing consequences: many of these materials end up as (plastic) waste in forests and oceans, endangering flora and fauna and destroying the very habitat and food that are essential to our survival. Evermore, untouched nature is forced to give way to human culture – just one of many socio-political themes addressed by the artist in her multimedia works. Symbolic of the cultivation of wilderness and our attempt to control nature are the fences and rose arches made of dark green wire mesh, which consign the wildly sprawling, fragmentary material works to the context of a landscaped garden or park.

↗ Tanja Korte

④ INNA LEVINSON

The painter Inna Levinson (*1984 in Lviv, Ukraine; lives in Berlin) is concerned with how digital media and technologies determine our everyday lives and change our reality: social media, our constant checking of digital displays, the continuous movement of our fingers over touchscreens and the mass of information and images we consume day in, day out. Her works are based on templates created on the computer. Digital collages consisting of her own or of found photographs and images from the internet are subsequently transferred onto canvas. Levinson primarily uses coarse-meshed jute as the ground for her paintings, onto which she applies oil paint

with spatulas, first very lightly and then, in places, in a much thicker mode. In some parts, this leaves the coarseness of the canvas visible as an essential component of the painting. The result is the kind of grid-like structure and pixelated effect that are familiar to us from the digital world. Stepping back from the paintings, we discern abstract entities, deformed faces and body outlines which cannot be concretised as clear forms and yet seem to reference digital phenomena. Moving up close again, the images seem to disintegrate into individual pixels, as would be the case on a screen. Levinson effects an analogue transfer of digital templates onto canvas while retaining their digital character. But does the paint that seems to have vanished into the coarse weave of the canvas also suggest matter left over from what has already disappeared from the physical world?

↗ Christine Tebbe

⑤ ROY MORDECHAY

Roy Mordechay (*1976 in Haifa, Israel; lives in Düsseldorf) combines the recurring abstract, figurative and strangely fluid elements of his works in a collage-like manner to build a world of enigmatic imagery. In his paintings, watercolours and sculptures, anthropomorphic shapes intermingle with cultural and mythological reminiscences from his “subjective archive” which is based on personal memories, especially from his childhood. Here, we see the appearance of the so-called Jewish hat¹, First Nation totem poles or Cantabrian cave paintings. The result is a playful and sometimes surrealistic pictorial cosmos that also calls to mind art-historical archetypes such as the poetic and demonic worlds of Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516). The colour gradients of the pastel backgrounds generate a quasi-digital visual aesthetic. Is he combining scenes from computer games with fantastic dreams? The loose arrangement of the various pictorial elements that appear to be floating across the canvas neither specifies a trajectory of reading or interpretation, nor does it indicate a self-contained pictorial narrative. Formally, the mixture of opaque and translucent paints creates a depth that simulates indeterminate three-dimensionality similar to that of digital screen backgrounds. This impression is emphasised by the sculptural nature of the frames: sometimes in the form of a speech bubble, sometimes with rounded corners in analogy to the contours of a smartphone, or with built-in or appended components, reminiscent of shelving or printers’ type drawers.

↗ Tanja Korte

¹ This is an iconic representation of a semi-spherical or cone-shaped pointed hat with a knob at the top. This symbol was already used to represent Jews in 11th-century book illuminations, when it was still worn by choice as an element of Jewish attire. However, as early as the 13th century, anti-Jewish sentiment caused it to be considered a stigma – since when it has retained a decidedly negative connotation.

⑥ KATJA NOVITSKOVA

How do digital imaging software and AI influence our perception? How do machines gaze at us? Such are the questions posed by Katja Novitskova (*1984 in Tallinn, Estonia; lives in Amsterdam). The artist approaches these topics not least through her observations of the animal world. In her *Approximation* series, we encounter largely magnified animals or their cut-out details in the form of silhouettes printed on aluminium. A squid could almost be taken for an alien, while even the giant head of a chameleon looks strangely unnatural, its lateral eyes suggestive of implanted camera lenses. The flat, cut-out shapes of *Approximation* allude to a perception that classifies things or living creatures according to their outer configuration, namely by means of digital pattern recognition. This process is the subject of *Our cosmos was bruised* (2018), a piece based on a photo of a colony of bats. The lines over the insects are the result of an algorithmic mapping of their silhouettes. Algorithms can also identify and differentiate protein structures or viruses, as can be seen in the images of the *Earthware* series. These can be both real or imaginary. The motifs – akin to scientific illustrations – are incised with ink into epoxy clay; their glossy enamel colours come from nail polish. The deliberate artisanal style of their making lends them a haptic, corporeal presence, which is characteristic of all of Novitskova’s works. While harnessing the suggestive power of images, the artist is at the same time highlighting the tremendous power they exert on us today, reaching well beyond their visual impact: indeed, their manipulation can go as far as to alter biological structures. The production of synthetic vaccines, for instance, is based on image recognition systems capable of precisely differentiating between the shapes of different viruses. Images no longer depict reality; far more, they are prototypes for possible new realities, of which Novitskova’s art offers us a brief glimpse.

↗ Ludwig Seyfarth

⑦ PAVEL PEPPERSTEIN

The artistic biography of Pavel Pepperstein (*1966 in Moscow; lives in Moscow) begins in the underground art scene of the Soviet Union. He was co-founder of the artists’ group *Inspection Medical Hermeneutics* that existed from 1987 until 2001. Their “inspections” were ironic observations on, for instance, political censorship: based on entirely subjective criteria, they took the form of diagnostic examinations of a society that was perceived as sick. While still a member of the group, Pepperstein created the two early drawings *City is a Flat* and *Flat as a City* (1994) which are much more illustrative in character than his later works in colour. Here, the surreal world has been turned upside down in its dimensions, reflecting a strategy of free association and of a stream of consciousness that Pepperstein, who is also a writer, has adopted from literature.

He refers to his canvases and drawings as “political hallucinations”. Rendered in watercolour, acrylic, ink washes and pencil, he relocates figures sourced from mythology or reality to sci-fi film scenarios, further populated by quotes from Socialist propaganda or Western Pop art. His works also recurrently feature geometric shapes with which the non-representational avantgarde art in the early Soviet Union articulated its utopian visions. Pepperstein integrates these elements – among them, Kazimir Malevich’s famous **Black Square** – into his figurative pictorial worlds, namely in **Hercules and his teacher Centaurus** of 2015. As in many of his drawings, the geometric forms seem not only to have been dispatched on a time journey into the world of the Greek gods, but look as if they have been pasted onto the ink-splattered pages of a school exercise book: maybe in ironic allusion to what has become of the utopias of the avantgarde?

↗ Ludwig Seyfarth

⑧ PIETER SCHOOLWERTH

Pieter Schoolwerth’s (*1970 in St. Louis, USA; lives in New York) works are complex compositions comprising painted, drawn, digitally printed and sculptural elements that create a variety of partially overlapping spatial layers. Schoolwerth visualises the disappearance of the body in digital space as the moment when painterly gesture and relief-like plasticity encounter the flatness of an inkjet print.

The source material for his paintings are digital bodies and settings that Schoolwerth acquires through websites such as **Turbosquid** and **Sketchfab**, and then remodels in various ways. In **Vas Differends (Rigged #8)** (2021), for instance, an interior furnished with technical devices seems to melt into an airport baggage conveyor belt. Here, the artist describes his approach: “The result is an image of both spatial and temporal compression – two discrete moments in space and time are represented with a single image of a body. [...] This visual model has an inverse relationship to that of Cubist space: the Cubists depicted one body from multiple points of view; I am depicting multiple bodies from one point of view – which is so often the case today when one’s body is firmly planted in front of a screen opened up onto multiple space-less vistas.”¹

In the 1990s, before Schoolwerth actually began using digital tools, he devised his own alternative languages and cartographies to distort the coordinates of familiar, everyday reality. His disfiguration of bodies takes the semblance of a violent suction force extracting them from the physical world and squeezing them into the virtual realm. And their behaviour in the images looks like an attempt to communicate, even if the connection somehow fails.

↗ Ludwig Seyfarth

⑨ LENA SCHRAMM

The subject of Lena Schramm’s (*1979 in Berlin; lives in Berlin) **Ecstasy** series is a multitude of thickly painted colourful tablets inscribed with a wide variety of logos and motifs, geometrically arranged on a black or light background. From a certain distance, the tablets look like detailed depictions of the real thing. Viewed up close, however, the shapes rendered with heavy impasto paint are revealed to be irregular with cracked surfaces. Rough grooves and logos have been added with a palette knife. The tablets display familiar motifs from everyday life, designer label logos and icons of pop culture: successful and popular symbols and brands that signify luxury. Their rigorous serial alignment creates the appearance of an archive and beckons comparative inspection. At the same time, the series constitutes the pictorial supplement to an eponymous encyclopaedic publication, a strict alphabetical listing of countless ecstasy tablets together with their images that goes back to the 1990s. The lexical data has been drawn largely from the internet, Wikipedia for example. The register’s sobriety stands in deliberate contrast to what ecstasy actually represents: party culture, hedonism and a sense of liberation from and banishment of all constraints.

Schramm presents us with an opulent cosmos of motifs associated with the consumption of this party drug over decades, thereby giving a voice to a piece of contemporary history. In addition to her replicas of genuine tablets, the artist has introduced emblems of her own, such as the logo of Art Basel or the name of Albrecht Dürer, that reference art and art history. Conceiving what might else appear on ecstasy pills is also an imagined perpetuation of what otherwise disappears in a short-lived and synthetically produced sensation of happiness.

↗ Christine Tebbe

¹ Pieter Schoolwerth – Delirierende Schatten. Ein Gespräch mit Michael Stoeber, in: *Kunstforum International*, vol. 276, June–July 2021, p. 238.

Programme of events

Thursday, November 30, 2023 · 7 pm

Verena Issel and Roy Mordechay in conversation with
Ludwig Seyfarth

Thursday, January 11, 2024 · 7 pm

Katja Novitskova in conversation with Thomas Thiel,
director Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen (in English)

Wednesday, January 24, 2024 · 7 pm

Margret Eicher and Lena Schramm in conversation with
Dr. Sebastian Baden, director Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

Public guided tours | Sunday · 3 pm

2023: 5.11. · 19.11. · 3.12. · 17.12.

2024: 7.1. · 21.1. · 4.2. · 18.2. · 3.3. · 17.3. · 7.4.

Opening hours

Tue–Sun 11 am–5 pm | Closed on holidays

Public transportation

Franziusstraße (Bus 723, Tram 706, 707)

Grand Bateau (Bus 726, 732)

Stadttor (Tram 706, 709)

KAI 10 | ARTHENA FOUNDATION

Kaistraße 10

40221 Düsseldorf

T: +49 (0)211 99 434 130

www.kaistrasse10.de

