

kunstmuseum basel

# Shirley Jaffe

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This exhibition was organized by Centre Pompidou, Paris in cooperation with Kunstmuseum Basel and Musée Matisse, Nice. It was on view in Paris from April 20 until August 29, 2022 at the Centre Pompidou as *Shirley Jaffe. An American Woman in Paris* and will be at the Musée Matisse from October 11, 2023 until January 8, 2024.

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MUSÉE MATISSE

# Shirley Jaffe

## Form as Experiment

Born in New Jersey in 1923, the American artist Shirley Jaffe moved to Paris in 1949, where she would live and work until her death in 2016. Jaffe quickly became part of the close-knit community of American artists based in the French capital in the 1950s.

During her long and prolific career as a painter, Jaffe developed a unique formal language that was characterized by several radical breaks with her own style. Her beginnings show the influence of Abstract Expressionism, that multifaceted movement born in the United States in the aftermath of World War II. The “gestural abstraction” that Jaffe practiced in her early years draws largely on intuition and feeling, for example, in large-format paintings executed in quick, spontaneous brushstrokes. In the 1960s, Jaffe turned away from this by now well-established movement and found fresh inspiration during a 1963–64 residency in West Berlin. She began to shape the structure of her paintings with vibrant color. Around 1968, Jaffe took an even more radical approach, introducing clearly defined surfaces, calligraphic lines, and an inexhaustible variety of colors into her compositions. Yet another phase began from the 1980s on, as she started to explore the full potential of white, particularly its power to add tension to her geometric compositions.

Jaffe’s oeuvre, varied as it is, is consistently marked by a deep interest in cities, a strong sense of precision, and the courage to embrace complexity. Playfulness, dynamism, and nimbleness also infuse her work. This exhibition is the first Swiss retrospective of a daring artist who is not yet widely known.

Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau

2nd Floor



# 1 Abstract Expressionism: The Beginnings

Paris would enjoy its reputation as the international capital of Modernism until well after the end of World War II. By the end of the 1940s some three hundred artists had moved there from the United States. Many of these “Americans in Paris” could benefit from the G.I. Bill, which was signed into law in 1944 to provide financial support to veterans, including those seeking higher education abroad. With these modest grants, the artists enrolled in the city’s art schools; others frequented the studios of renowned artists. This liberation from material constraints—not to mention from competition with peers at home—fostered a productive atmosphere and gave rise to a lively scene of so-called second-generation Abstract Expressionists.

Shirley Jaffe’s husband, Irving Jaffe, used the G.I. Bill to enroll at the Sorbonne for a short time and could finance their life in Paris. The move to Europe was both liberating and traumatic for the artist. A reliable circle of other “expats” helped her establish an inspiring working environment. Her friends included the American artists Sam Francis, Al Held, Joan Mitchell, Jules Olitski, Kimber Smith, and the Canadian artist Jean-Paul Riopelle.

At first, Jaffe’s palette was bright. Occasionally she used a palette knife to apply paint in thick layers. Paintings from this period bring to mind geological formations and landscapes.

## **Untitled, 1952**

Oil on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Musée national d’art moderne, Paris, donation 2020

Jaffe’s first paintings in Paris that are known to us, were influenced by Impressionism. This group of artists was active in France in the 19th century and is famous for their quick experimental plein-air painting. Claude Monet (1840–1926) was one of the most famous Impressionist painters. During her many visits to local museums, Jaffe must have seen several examples of Monet’s famous Water Lilies cycle (1890–1926). Its importance cannot be overstated in this context. By the late 1940s, Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning or Franz Kline had successfully rediscovered the French painter’s radical late work. The chromatically limited, but materially dense treatment of the entire canvas was perceived as a precursor of their own methods.

### ***Arcueil Yellow*, 1956**

Oil on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, donation 2020

Before Shirley Jaffe established her own studio, she used to work occasionally in Sam Francis' studio in Arcueil. Her painting, *Arcueil Yellow*, was either painted there, or its title pays homage to Francis' magnetic personality and to the suburban hideaway, where he created some of his large scale paintings. *Arcueil Yellow* is one of the most important works from Jaffe's early period. Here, the paint has the same viscous consistency that we find in the works by Willem de Kooning, which the artist started a little later. Jaffe admired the Dutch-born artist, and seems to have anticipated him in this particular instance.

## **2 Swiss Connections**

Works by Shirley Jaffe were exhibited in Switzerland as early as the 1950s. This was thanks in large part to her friend the painter Sam Francis (1923–1994), who was already enjoying international success. He introduced Jaffe to Swiss art dealers and curators, chief among them Swiss art historian Arnold Rüdlinger (1919–1967), who showed a notable early commitment to Jaffe.

As director of the Kunsthalle Bern (1946–55) and Kunsthalle Basel (1955–67), Rüdlinger modernized the Swiss art scene. His pronounced interest in the latest trends in American art was inspired by his friendship with Francis. On regular trips to France, Rüdlinger frequented the artist's studio, coming into contact with Shirley Jaffe, Kimber Smith and other artists.

At the Basel opening of the touring exhibition *The New American Painting* in 1958, Rüdlinger emphasized the importance of his contact with this group: "From their pictures and from conversations in their studios, I gained an understanding of what was for the time being an alien American painting." The show was organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The aim of the international touring exhibition was chiefly to make Abstract Expressionism known in Europe.

### ***Which in the World, 1957***

Oil on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, donation 2020

Shirley Jaffe kept few works in her small studio. However, her largest canvas, *Which in the World*, never left the space. It remained facing the wall, hidden behind the organized pile of paintings, some in progress and some finished. The enigmatic title of the work seems to be a fragment of a conversation or thought. Conversations with Jaffe have later revealed that the painting is a direct reference to Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Le Déjeuner des canotiers* (1880–81). The painting belongs to the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, the last place where Jaffe lived in the USA.

### ***Medrano, 1958***

Oil on canvas

Kunstmuseum Basel, Acquired with funds from the Arnold Rüdlinger-Fonds of the Freiwilligen Akademischen Gesellschaft Basel

The work is characteristic of the early gestural period of the artist. The title of the abstract, large-format painting is possibly connected to the famous Cirque Médrano in Paris. It was exhibited at Galerie Klipstein & Kornfeld in Bern as early as 1959 and was the first work by Shirley Jaffe to enter the collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel.

## **3 Friendships**

Along with Sam Francis, Kimber Smith (1922–1981) was one of Shirley Jaffe's closest friends. Arnold Rüdlinger showed all three painters at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1958, the same year he curated the exhibition *Sam Francis, Shirley Jaffe, Kimber Smith* for the American Center in Paris. In the preface to that catalogue, Rüdlinger wrote admiringly of their "entirely non-European sense of space, which dispenses with a center, perspective, and harmonious proportions."

After the show, the three painters went their separate ways in terms of style. By 1960, Abstract Expressionism was already art history. Sam Francis remained true to it; while Shirley Jaffe and Kimber Smith moved on to find other means of expression.

Jaffe's paintings attained a complete mastery of color between 1958 and 1961. The prevalence of dark, cheaper tones in the works from this phase was largely due to a lack of financial means. The paintings now show hints of differentiated forms. Around 1961, Kimber Smith also began to introduce simple forms overlaid with broad brushstrokes. Unlike Jaffe, he decided in 1965 to return to the United States.

**East Meets West, ca. 1962**

Oil on canvas

Collection Christophe Melard

Shortly after its completion, *East Meets West* was acquired by a large Dutch company. The climate in the Netherlands was in favour of Abstract Expressionism, since it was a period when the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam was making a name for itself with pioneering acquisitions of American art. It was the first major painting Jaffe sold. The Kunstmuseum Basel started collecting American art as early as 1959. First additions to the collection were works by Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still.

**KIMBER SMITH (1922–1981)****Orange Flowers, 1954–1957**

Oil and lacquer paints on canvas

Private collection, Switzerland, Courtesy Galerie Mueller, Basel

As a soldier in the United States Army, Kimber Smith spent a short time in Marseille after World War II. There, he discovered the French painters Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard. In 1954, he returned to Paris with his family, where he lived and worked until 1965. In the 1950s, the painter often referred to floral motifs. During this phase, the brushstrokes are spontaneous and uninhibited. Smith completed this particular picture by painting over an old canvas, laying it on the ground, and pouring a layer of lacquer paint onto the surface. He thus detached the painting process from his person and introduced an element of arbitrariness. In Switzerland, the artist enjoyed great popularity and exhibited in Bern, Basel and Zurich.

**KIMBER SMITH (1922–1981)****Le Khédive, ca. 1960**

Acrylic and silver bronze on canvas

Private collection, Switzerland, Courtesy Galerie Mueller, Basel

Similar to Shirley Jaffe, Kimber Smith became interested in simple geometric shapes and their relationship among each other around 1960, inevitably moving away from the gestural abstraction of the 1950s. In the case of *Le Khédive*, he used matte acrylic paints and silver bronze instead of oil paint. His interest in the effect of generously applied metallic color stems from his study of early Renaissance Italian art (15th century).



## 4 Transformation in Berlin

Jaffe was awarded a grant from the Ford Foundation to live in Berlin from 1963 to 1964. Here she could look closely at the works of the German Expressionists and simply roam around the city, which was still marked by the ravages of war but also experiencing great cultural ferment. The fellowship was in keeping with the general cultural diplomacy then underway as part of US Cold War policy.

The grant was open to artists from all fields, including musicians and composers. In Berlin, Jaffe came into contact with the Greek-French composer, theorist and architect Iannis Xenakis and with the German pioneer of electronic music, Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Jaffe's time in Berlin, and the newfound financial independence that coincided with it, marked a watershed in her work. The transformation was sudden and conspicuous. The imminent geometry of her pictures contrasted with ever more vigorous painterly gestures. Bright colors now appear to clash, emphasizing the structure of the paintings.

## 5 Works on Paper

Shirley Jaffe used a variety of techniques when working on paper. Working with watercolor, gouache, oil chalk, vinyl paint, and other materials was integral to her artistic practice from the beginning. The works on paper are usually shown separately from her paintings. The artist herself emphasized that she followed a different logic on paper, working much faster and more spontaneously.

At first glance, one might mistake the improvisations on paper as preparatory studies for specific paintings. Jaffe herself denied such correspondence. Her studio diaries are more revealing of the thinking that went into her large paintings. Their meticulous notes and sketches give a vivid sense of the precision with which Jaffe plotted and documented the interplay of form and color on her canvases.

Jaffe's works on paper are best seen as an independent area of activity, a zone in which she could experiment unreservedly with composition, color, and light. Jaffe engaged with them actively, constantly hanging up new constellations on the partition wall separating her living area from her workspace.

### ***Boulevard Montparnasse, 1968***

Oil on canvas

Centre national des arts plastiques, acquisition 1969

Depositum im Centre Pompidou, Paris

When the events of May 1968 broke out, Jaffe was busy photographing the ruins of Montparnasse station before its complete modernization. She is interested in the mess of the rubble and brings the chaos into the foreground of the photos. *Boulevard Montparnasse* is a successful and daring demonstration of Jaffe's desire for rupture. It was the first painting to enter a French public collection. It was also the highlight of Jaffe's sensational exhibition at Jean Fournier in 1969, where she distinguished herself from the gallery's American line. This acquisition must have encouraged the artist to pursue her new formal language.

### **Studio journals**

Notes on Bristol paper

Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Musée national d'art moderne,

Centre Pompidou, Paris

Shirley Jaffe meticulously recorded the progress of her ongoing paintings on squared Bristol paper. The density of information on these small cards makes them illegible, and even the artist herself must have had difficulty deciphering them. However, they are evidence of a need for guidance and documentation. The notes make clear how she gradually developed each work with precision, while putting each decision to the test.

## **6 Adieu au geste**

In 1968, while Paris was being rocked by political and sometimes violent protest, a radical, if quieter, change was taking place in Jaffe's studio. From that point on, the artist abandoned the gesture in favor of a clear geometric vocabulary and a matte palette. Her goal in these first geometric works was "a *bouleversement* of the order of things" and the development of a new pictorial language.

She went on to create compositions consisting of planes of color that do not register any sense of depth. They resemble walls made up of chromatic blocks. In the process, her palette took on an unprecedented range. Jaffe openly displayed the departure from her early work in her solo exhibition at the Jean Fournier Gallery in 1969. It was a bold move for the artist, who was finally leaving the relatively safe harbor of Abstract Expressionism. The period from 1973 to 1982 was thus marked by a new freedom.

In 1969, Jaffe moved to a small studio at 8, rue Saint-Victor in the 5th arrondissement, where she painted and lived almost until her death in 2016. The Spartan apartment became a port of call for many American artists, including Polly Apfelbaum and Sarah Morris.

***F's Picture, 1968***

Oil on canvas

Courtesy Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris

*F's Picture*, dedicated to the art dealer Jean Fournier, is a work of transition from gestural painting to a new style. The hinge lies in two freehand brushstrokes in a vibrant red. They contrast with the orthogonal organisation of the carefully painted, rectangular blocks of plain color. The time taken to execute each block without leaving a trace is invisible. Conversely, the red brushstrokes create the impression of several fast movements. They express a nonchalance, which is unusual for the artist and gives the picture its structural vitality.

***Malibu, 1979***

Oil on canvas

Courtesy Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris

*Malibu* was originally a private commission intended for a teenager's bedroom. Here, it is exhibited without the colorful surroundings with which it had to compete in its original setting. The architectural dimension of the work becomes clear through the interplay of the various elements of the painting, as well as through the arrangement of the compositional elements. For the first time, the color white takes central stage and foreshadows Jaffe's next creative period. *Malibu* also reveals the artist's playful interest in the shape of her canvas.

## 7 A Sense for Geometry

Shirley Jaffe's work from 1983 on shows a prevalence of white. However, white is never merely a background in these works and its shade changes subtly from painting to painting. Sometimes we see the addition of long sinuous or angular lines running through multiple elements.

Jaffe was not a rapid painter. Even when working in her largest formats, she relied on small brushes, which allowed her maximum precision. She began each painting with very diluted paint, slowly fleshing out the final tones one step at a time. Sometimes she tested out new elements on

a transparent film before applying them permanently to the canvas. If passages did not pass muster, she would scrape the color off the canvas again. The use of white ultimately allowed her to hone the final outline of the shapes and to erase all traces of their genesis.

Jaffe often stressed that she was not interested in beauty. Rather, she said, her pictures were looking for a kind of *coexistence* of elements, reflected in the tense relationship of form to color. She consciously incorporated the unexpected into this equation, embracing certain elements precisely because she considered them to be “non-belonging.”

***Bayeux, 1983***

Oil on canvas  
Mobilier national

***Shannon, 1985***

Oil on canvas  
Private collection, Paris

In 1983 and again in 2001, Shirley Jaffe created tapestry “cartoons” for the Manufacture des Gobelins. *Bayeux* refers to the famous medieval tapestry from the eponymous Normandy town. It takes an original format—a door or a column—as its reference. We know of at least five works of this format. In a rare report from 1982, the artist and photographer David Boeno shows Jaffe working on another panel that could not be located until this day. It may have been destroyed or painted over.

***Sailing, 1985***

Oil on canvas  
Centre Pompidou, Musée national d’art moderne, Paris, acquisition 1985

*Sailing* is representative of the new style that Jaffe developed at the end of the 1970s. It continued to evolve over the course of nearly four decades. It is characterized by the use of distinct shapes with clear contours, to each of which the artist assigns a specific color. White is important and never merely used as a background. The artist continued to consolidate this style, seeking an “imbalance” of elements in each work. *Sailing* is the Centre Pompidou’s first acquisition.

### **All Together, 1995**

Oil on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, acquisition 1996

Shirley Jaffe painted a small number of diptychs between 1995 and 2002. Since the stairwell leading to her studio was too narrow to move large paintings, she used two panels. This was the case with *All Together*. The two panels of the picture are rich in contrasts. It is a matter of forcing opposing things to fit together, as in a city where buildings from different periods clash. Jaffe's urbanistic interest is documented in the photographs she took in the 1960s. The title might allude to a dynamic form of "coexistence," which became an important keyword for the artist.

## **9 Organized Chaos**

In the late 1990s, Jaffe broke once again with her own style as she began to juxtapose dense, monochromatic areas of color with irregular, quickly applied forms. These playful inconsistencies are localized, and the brushstrokes are evident. These works almost seem to quote her gestural painting of the 1950s.

Jaffe herself liked to describe her paintings as "organized chaos" or urban landscapes. She thought of them as echoing the fragmented space that she encountered on her regular walks through Paris. This was of course less a matter of translating specific urban impressions onto canvas than of capturing big-city rhythms, which Jaffe loved more than anything.

The background noise of the street is palpable in works from Jaffe's final creative phase. She worked with her hands, but in a way she also worked with her feet: by tirelessly traversing urban space. In works like *New York*, *Traffic*, or *Playground*, the city—as a state of mind—occasionally even found its way into her titles.

***Networking, 2007***

Oil on canvas

Private collection P.W. (Belgien)

In the early 2000s, Jaffe began to consciously introduce chaotic elements to her paintings; she would occasionally even doodle on her canvases. In the case of *Networking*, this erratic gesture dominates the visual effect of the picture. It seems to happen in spite of the artist's will. Of course, this stylistic device has been introduced by Jaffe to increase the internal tension of the painting.

***New York, 2001***

Oil on canvas

Centre national des arts plastiques

There is a similarity between Jaffe's sources of inspiration during her early and her late work. In both phases, the artist often referred to the surrounding environment. Her paintings of the 1950s suggest a proximity to natural landscapes and geological formations. Conversely, 50 years later, works like *New York* refer to the cityscape. However, the city appears to be fragmented and lacking in scale.

## **Stories behind the pictures. Remembering Shirley Jaffe**

### An Oral Art History Project

We have invited people from Shirley Jaffe's close environment to look at the life and work of this extraordinary artist from different perspectives.

Shirley Jaffe was reluctant to talk about herself. Even though there are articles, catalogues, and interviews, the material is especially scarce when it comes to Jaffe as a person. One of the few exceptions is the extensive interview author and curator Avis Berman conducted with the artist for the Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC).

Our project builds on this material and takes this approach further by adding a range of outside perspectives. Through conversations with the artist's friends, family members, art dealers, and other artists who were close to Shirley Jaffe, personal stories and memories were archived for this project that go beyond art historical facts. The collected interview material will be made available to the public on our website and is intended to promote future debates of the artist's work.

A sound collage of the extensive material is made accessible as a half-hour audio installation as part of the exhibition. Listen to the voices and learn more about the artist, her work, and her friendships!



Shirley Jaffe  
Oral Art History Project

*“When I went to Berlin, the first thing I did was to enroll in a language school. When I had a teacher who said, ‘You’re pronouncing that word like a Jewish person,’ I dropped out (...). I already had a resistance about being in Germany, but it was a chance for me to do all these other things that were necessary for me, personally—that is, financially. (...) there were little moments that I felt very conscious of what Berlin represented and where it had been. (...) The fact that I was Jewish in Berlin was something that I was conscious of.”*

*“I had found Paris (...) very provincial. I wasn’t charmed by the things that most Americans love: the café, the browsing around together, the community, being recognized, et cetera. I liked that sense of anonymity that one had in New York. I didn’t want to become part of any intimate group, but of course, I did eventually.”*

Unless indicated otherwise, quotations are from:  
Oral history interview with Shirley Jaffe, 2010 Sept. 27–28  
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington  
Avis Berman in conversation with Shirley Jaffe, Paris



*“Early on I knew that I wanted some kind of dislocated experience and complexity, despite living in a world here that was increasingly searching for a reductive experience. There has always been, consciously realized or not, this desire to give expression to the manyness of visual happenings going on at one time, and to stop them for moments on canvas. This manyness has never been symmetrical, nor even all over the canvas. I have always tried to make something odd, unsatisfying, yet fitting, occur.”*

As quoted in: Merle Schipper, “Shirley Jaffe,” *Woman’s Art Journal*, Autumn, 1981 – Winter, 1982, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Autumn, 1981 – Winter, 1982), pp. 46–49

*“I’ve always been interested in breaking up space as a kind of compositional device, but I wasn’t really thinking about making a satisfying image. I looked recently at some of my very early works; I was so concerned with how I could break up that space that I didn’t think about the fact that I was also making a picture.”*

Shirley Jaffe about her early work in an interview with Shirley Kaneda (*BOMB Magazine*, April 2004)

# MANYNESS

## Musical Magnification for Shirley Jaffe

Sound performance in the context of the exhibition *Shirley Jaffe. Form as Experiment* with compositions by Ruth Crawford Seeger, Julie Herndon, Svetlana Maraš, Jessie Marino, Julia Perry, Kaja Saariaho, Philip Bartels, Elliott Carter, Martin Lorenz, Karlheinz Stockhausen und Iannis Xenakis.

On the Friday and Saturday afternoons (**April 14/15, 2023** and **May 12/13, 2023**), the Neubau of the Kunstmuseum Basel will be transformed into MANYNESS, an oscillating kaleidoscope of sounds that inspired or could have inspired the painter Shirley Jaffe in her visual work. During her time in Berlin in the 1960s, the artist felt a particularly strong affinity with New Music and composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis, and Elliott Carter and by «the adventure that they were going through. It introduced me to new sound.»

MANYNESS is performed without interruption from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m., with pieces that will be heard one after the other as well as at the same time. Thirteen musicians play a 30-minute program that is repeated up to three times a day. Each time, either the location or the acoustic context changes. During the five hours, there will be clusters of sound—as in the monumental work *Persephassa* by Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001), played by six percussionists of the Basel Symphony Orchestra on a variety of small and large percussion instruments, but also very quiet and fragile moments, as in *Amour*, a clarinet solo by Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007).

MANYNESS dedicates each musical location to a title of a painting by Shirley Jaffe. Thus, for the work *Cobra*, we hear the wild piece *Theraps* by Xenakis, which addresses the polarity between opposition and variation, or for the work *Long Black*, the piano piece *X* by Karlheinz Stockhausen, which works with contrasts that go to the limits of playability.

MANYNESS also features the American ultra-modernist Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953) with her *Study in Mixed Accents*, in which she pioneered compositional techniques, or the two young American composers Jessie Marino (\*1984) and Julie Herndon (\*1986), who have found their own musical language and are redefining abstraction. Svetlana Maraš (\*1985), professor for creative music technology and

co-director of the electronic studio Basel, develops a new piece for MANYNESS, which is performed with two historical tape recorders, among other things. The music theater director Philip Bartels (\*1978) combines the two picture titles *Hop and Skip* and *Walkyrie* into a two-part premiere that also involves the museum staff.

MANYNESS also presents «specials» that are only performed on certain days, for example a piece by the composer Martin Lorenz (\*1974) for analog modular synthesizers including a historical video synthesizer, which generates live abstract images to the music or an Ondes Martenot duo, that focuses on an early electronic musical instrument, which was invented in Paris.

MANYNESS is a cooperation of the Kunstmuseum Basel with the collective ox&öl, which is formed by the pianist Simone Keller and the director Philip Bartels. For this project, they involve various musicians from Basel who are all highly specialized in contemporary music and who bring their expertise to this new context with the greatest openness.



MANYNESS  
Musical Magnification  
for Shirley Jaffe

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### **Öffnungszeiten / Opening Hours / Heures d'ouverture**

Di–So 10–18 Uhr / Tue–Sun 10 a.m.–6 p.m. / Mar–Dim 10h–18h

Mi 10–20 Uhr / Wed 10 a.m.–8 p.m. / Mer 10h–20h

Sonderöffnungszeiten / Heures d'ouverture spéciales /

Special opening hours → [kunstmuseumbasel.ch/besuch](http://kunstmuseumbasel.ch/besuch)

### **Eintrittspreise / Admission / Prix d'entrée**

Erwachsene / Adults / Adultes CHF 26

Ermässigt / Reduced / Prix réduit CHF 16, 13, 8

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