

Call for Applications

Summer School “The Moral Meaning of Modern Painting”

organized by Larissa Dätwyler and Ralph Ubl

invited guests: Bridget Alsdorf (Princeton University), Todd Cronan (Emory University)

University of Basel, eikones – center for the theory and history of the image

Basel (Switzerland), 1-5 June 2026

(arrival on 31 May 2026)

eikones cordially invites MA students and doctoral candidates from Basel, as well as international doctoral candidates in art history, to participate in a week-long summer school exploring questions and problems on the moral meaning of modern painting.

Topic and format

Modern painting is often described as indifferent to the moral dimension that was central to the depiction of human action in history and genre painting up to the early 19th century. Many artists and critics since Romanticism have emphasized painting's sensual and affective force, rejecting its moral potential as oppressively moralizing. Painting, in particular, has provoked philosophical reflections on its subjectivity, ontology, and phenomenology, from Hegel to Merleau-Ponty. However it is rarely discussed in relation to moral philosophy or ethics, which tend to rely on the novel, theater, and film as representations of modern life's moral dilemmas.

The eikones summer school will test the claim that modern painting is more deeply committed to the moral implications of artistic production and representation than this standard history of aesthetic autonomy suggests. We will do so by analyzing paintings, criticism, and theoretical debates from Romanticism to High Modernism as well as more recent philosophical and art historical contributions by authors such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Stanley Cavell, Michael Fried, and Robert Pippin. Two main issues will lead the discussion:

- 1) Artistic practice understood as *Lebensform* (form of life): How might we understand the practice of making art, and artworks themselves, as moral proposals or “forms of life”? What role does the artist's actual life play, if any, in such forms? On the one hand, we will consider questions of sociality and autonomy as well as success and failure in their ethical dimensions; on the other hand, we will discuss what artworks demand from their beholders.
- 2) Historical perspectives on the moral justification of painting: Autonomy, both as a social institution and philosophical concept, does not eliminate the moral dimension of painting but puts it up for discussion. Painters' commitment to subjective expression and formal unity has often put the relevance of their work to everyday life in doubt, especially so in moments of political crisis. We will ask, once again, about the relation between art and politics, or how modern painting responded to social and political pressure and, more importantly, how engaging with moral scepticism was intrinsic to painting as an autonomous art.

The week-long summer school will focus on classroom discussions combined with visits to the rich collections and exhibitions of art in Basel. Each day will be chaired by one of the organizers and invited guests, who will share their current research. To prepare for the summer school, participants will receive an anthology of key texts. For participants from outside of Basel, accommodation will be provided as well as travel expenses up to CHF 300 (for overseas travel up to CHF 500).

Application materials

Please send by 15 February 2026 the following materials (compiled into a single PDF) to
larissa.daetwyler@unibas.ch

- Cover letter explaining your disciplinary background, your motivation for participating, and (in the case of doctoral candidates) how your current research relates to the summer school's topic.
- CV