

FLORIAN MEHNERT

Extended Practice  
Of An Enlarged Concept  
Of Art

installations

projects

photography

paintings

works on paper



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If you enter the name Florian Mehnert into any search engine, it immediately becomes clear how broad and multi-layered the artist's work is. His photos made while the pandemic went around the world. You will find many articles about his provocative works, which question social issues such as surveillance and privacy, as well as paintings and drawings that defy categorisation, lectures and numerous interviews. One could also discover details of his art experiments, which achieve great reach through new forms of participation and raise awareness of global social issues. Driven by an ongoing interest in who we are and how we interact with the world, Mehnert continues to push the boundaries of what it means to be an artist today.

Designed by the artist himself, this richly illustrated book contains a personal selection of not only his installations and participatory projects, but also his photographic works, as well as his oil paintings and works on paper, accompanied by a selection of personal statements and biographical material.

Florian Mehnert has addressed a variety of themes in his work, from the physical materiality of the work to the meaning of privacy and the influence of surveillance capitalism in the form of installations, lectures, colloquia and interventions in public space. Florian Mehnert is also a sociological researcher who explores boundaries with the means of art. He focuses on the artist's relationship to politics and society in his very own way, using images and new methods of dissemination and forms of participation to examine global social concerns.



Florian Mehnert 2023

# Extended Practice Of An Enlarged Concept Of Art

Florian Mehnert's work is characterised by a profound reflection on the symbiosis of art and society. As a conceptual artist, he pursues an interdisciplinary approach that enables him to deconstruct and scrutinise complex social phenomena in his works. His artworks are characterised by a critical examination of social and societal phenomena. He examines the effects of digital data capitalism and raises important questions about privacy, the ethics of surveillance in our society.

## **Art as a magnifying glass for social issues**

Florian Mehnert's work acts as a critical magnifying glass for the social issues of the digital age. His approach to complex issues such as migration, privacy, surveillance and social control makes him stand out as an outstanding thinker and artist in this field. Florian Mehnert's work represents an expansion of the concept of art that breaks through the traditional boundaries of artistic creation and views art as an active player in social discourse. His unconventional approach to complex social issues and his critical reflection on their impact on society make him an influential voice in contemporary art. Through his works, Mehnert not only invites discussion about the future of our society, but also inspires us to recognise and use the transformative power of art as a tool for reflecting on the big questions of our time.



installation view Kunstverein Wolfsburg, 2015

# the forest the last refuge

screenshot, original  
website of the published  
protocols, 2013



Forrestprotocols , 2013

In response to the NSA scandal, Florian Mehnert had bugged paths and clearings in forests for days in 2013. His microphones installed there listened to passers-by. Sounds and conversations were recorded and processed into digital traces. After analysing the data, the artist published excerpts of the bugging logs on his website. The invisible threat Florian Mehnert bugs nature, the forest, the last refuge where people believe they are undisturbed and unheard. There is no longer a place of unobserved retreat. With his art project „Waldkprotokolle“, Florian Mehnert highlights the danger and absurdity of Internet surveillance.

Here, he acted as a catalyst for exposing the absurdity of omnipresent surveillance. This intervention was not just an artistic manifestation, but also an appeal to raise awareness of the threat to privacy in the digital era.

### Reactions to the forest protocols

The publication of the forest protocols was followed by a huge media response. Florian Mehnert received a complaint under Section 201 of the German Criminal Code (STGB) for breach of confidentiality. The public prosecutor's office investigated Florian Mehnert, but ultimately allowed artistic freedom to prevail.

C / O Berlin, „watched“ For-  
restprotocols, 2018,  
23 channel sound installation,  
Headphones,  
mp3 players



photo: David von Becker

### Also in the forest, there are the bugs

The artist Florian Mehnert installs a work titled „Wiretapping Protocols from the Forests“ in the German forest. It is intended to awaken walkers and remind them of their threatened privacy.

What does a person have to do in the forest today? Mushrooms, peace, and themselves. In the German forest, the memory of nature lives on. The fairy tale fir tree was cut down in the Middle Ages. Since the Enlightenment, forestry has been invented, the trees have been cultivated as a cultural landscape. The romantics have transformed the timber plantations back into forests, a refuge for the driven souls of modernity.

The German forests have also survived forest dieback. Tree crowns are still sung as a green roof, tree trunks are recommended for leaning against. Those who follow the poetry path in the Hardtwald forest on the Upper Rhine come across Kurt Tucholsky's old forest criticism: „And these old trees are supposed to go away/ They, who do not grow back overnight?“ Nothing does a person better today than whistling in a forest that he has created for himself. In the Eifel region, the Black Forest, and the Bavarian Forest, the artist Florian Mehnert has now installed his work „Wiretapping Protocols from the Forests“ (Link: <http://www.waldprotokolle.florianmehnert.de/>). Directional microphones lurk in the undergrowth, bugs stick to the trunks, which switch on as soon as walkers approach and speak confidentially to each other. Normal stage microphones were also hung in the branches for everyone to see.

America, you're better off

Now everyone can listen to the recordings on Mehnert's homepage: „What's that? Microphone or what? Come on, let's go further.“ It is this indifferent attitude that has inspired the artist to bug German forests. What if, after the home computer, the forest, the last sanctuary, is no longer protected from America, the algorithms, and the Big Brothers from the NSA?

Florian Mehnert maintains his homepage to wake up the Germans. But he strictly refuses to use any social networks. „The material from nature contains an opposition, a strong tension to reality, also to the electronic,“ he explains: „The forest protocols represent a conflict and an attempt to approach something that is difficult for me to understand.“

America still has forests where one can get lost, where a forester has never laid his calipers around a trunk and felled it. Anyone who wants to be alone or share a secret just has to leave the worn-out Appalachian Trail. Perhaps the roots of the NSA scandal can be found there, somewhere in the wilderness, where America once again has it better. Where Reinecke and Master Rabbit still secretly say goodnight, there is no network. There are trees like in a German fairy tale, but no German artists.

Michael Pilz



Die Welt, 16.11.13 (translation page 11)

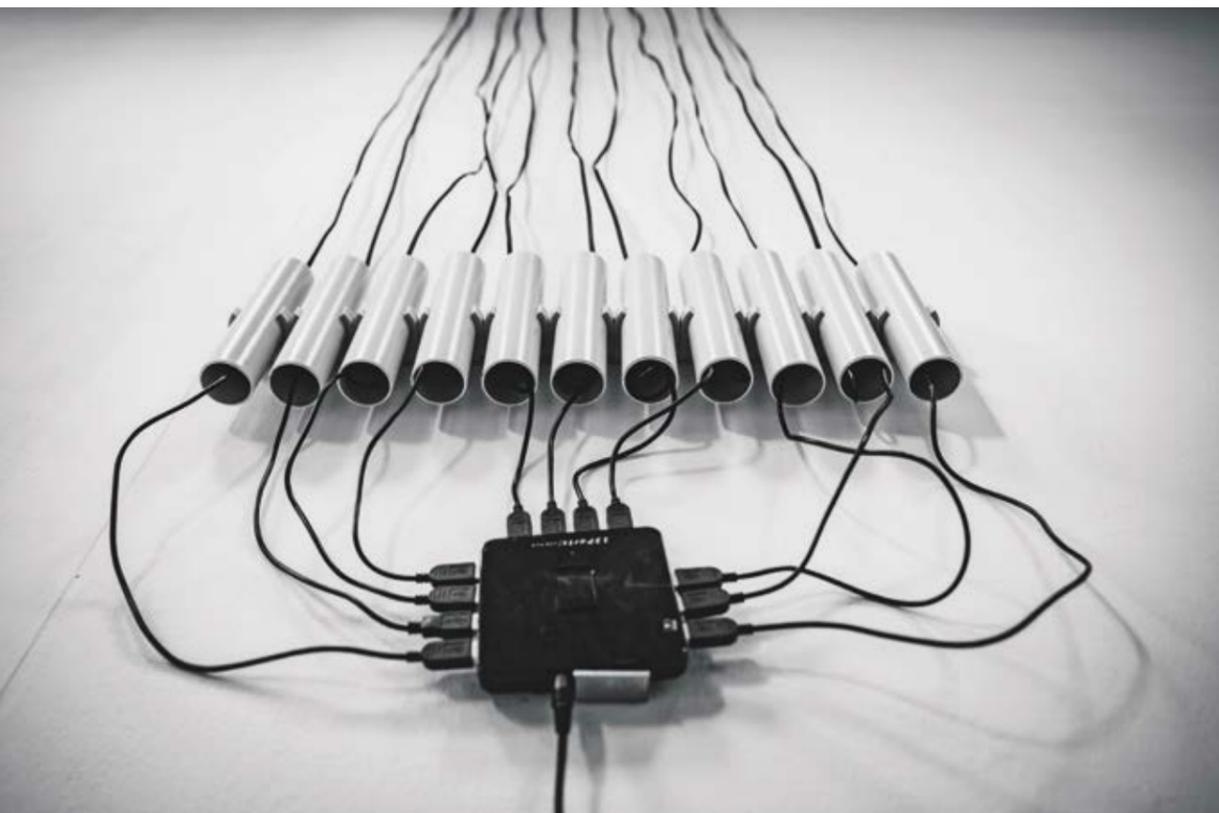
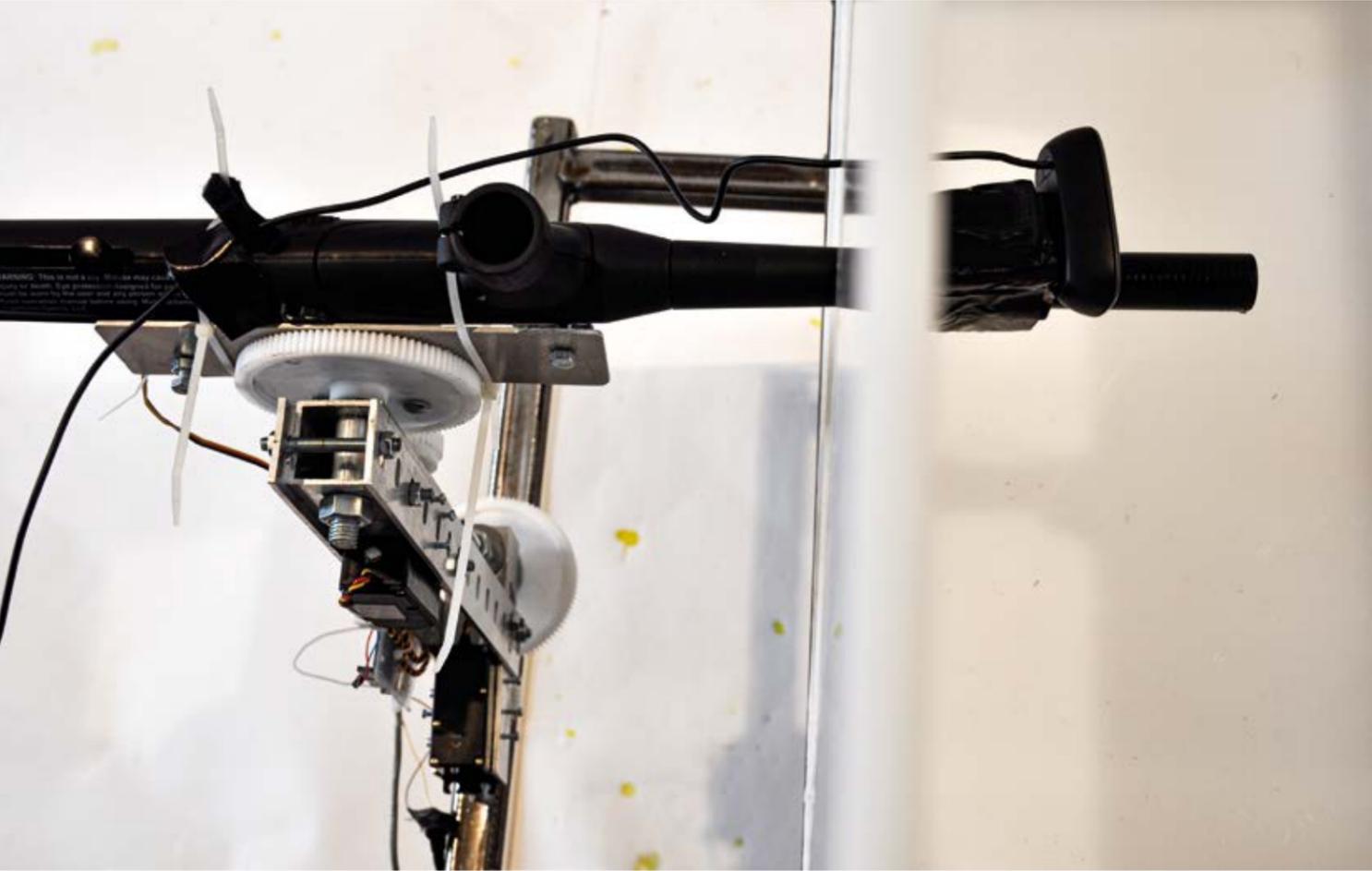


photo: Ben Hicker

Forest Protocols, Installation detail, Biennale Strassbourg



Detail of the installation 11 DAYS

# THE ART EXPERIMENT 11 DAYS

Florian Mehnert's project "11 DAYS" offered a unique insight into the complex dynamics of modern warfare and surveillance technologies by putting participants in the role of drone pilots who decided on life and death. This immersive world, existing in a hybrid space of physical installation and virtual interface, opened up new terrain for grappling with the ethical challenges of modern warfare.

Participants in "11 DAYS" were not merely passive observers but active agents in a complex network of decisions and consequences. By controlling a physical weapon over the internet and observing the target via live stream, they experienced a direct connection between their actions and the resulting impacts on the environment. This telepresent experience led to increased cognitive load and emotional intensity among participants.

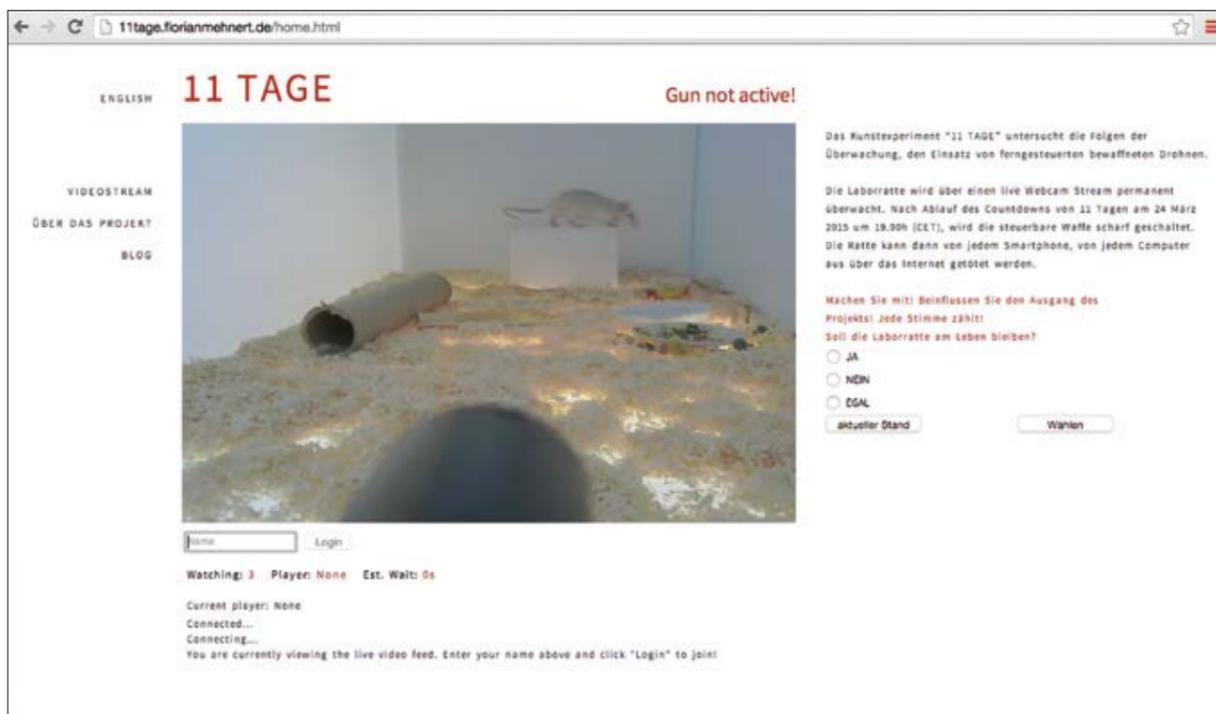
The choice of the first-person shooter perspective as an aesthetic medium allowed participants to experience the complexity of decision-making in an environment marked by uncertainty and moral ambivalence. By reducing the spatial distance between actor and action, this perspective laid bare the ethical gray areas of modern warfare technologies and forced participants to grapple with questions of accountability and moral agency.

The virtual presence of participants in a real environment controlled over the internet opened up a level of reflection on the role of technology as a mediator between the subject and their actions. The incorporation of the webcam stream, connecting the physical weapon to the intended target, illustrated the complexity of human-technological interaction and provided a space for critical engagement with the ethical implications of using surveillance technologies in modern warfare.

"11 DAYS" was an artistic intervention and at the same time a social experiment, that prompted deep reflection on the ethical and moral dimensions of modern warfare and surveillance technologies. The project sparked a global shitstorm and received extensive world wide media attention, leading to a broad public discussion about the ethical boundaries of art.

The controversy escalated rapidly, and Mehnert was confronted with a flood of death threats and numerous complaints that kept prosecutors busy.

website with livestream view  
before the project started



the installation 11 DAYS, 2015  
white plastic box, steel frame, webcam, weapon,  
Mac mini, arduino board, servo's,  
custom programmed software,  
webserver, website, livestream,  
living white rat and facilities for the rat,  
240 x 140 x 80 cm



work biography 11 DAYS  
ISBN: 978 3 750 4945 03

„After the twelfth day, the gun will be pointed at you! No matter where you are: in the mall, in the shop around the corner or on the street. You know a life is worth nothing, then it shall be the same for you.“

*1...r+4.....4@guerrillamail.com*

extract of the work biography 11 DAYS:

[...] On Tuesday morning, I give an interview to another radio station. At 11.30 a.m., a television crew from the regional television station announced that they would be coming. Around 10.30 a.m., the cast-iron bell on my gate rings.

I react. During my walk to the opaque gate, I see from the shoes visible underneath that several people are waiting behind it.

I open the gate and come face to face with three gentlemen in trench coats.

It is not the camera crew.

One of the gentlemen approaches me confidently and authoritatively: „Mr Mehnert?“

I answer in the affirmative.

„We would like to talk to you,“ he asks in a convincingly firm voice that brooks no argument.

Caught off guard, I let the three gentlemen enter the courtyard. Silently, I lead the way and then halt hesitantly in front of the front door.

As I turn around, the presumed leader of the trio speaks up again and begins to introduce himself and his companions by name.

The situation slips away from me because at that moment I realise that I am dealing with a superior form of official authority that was previously foreign to me.

The men stand in a semicircle around me and simultaneously pull out their badges, which they routinely hold out to me.

I can't keep up with their pace and only glance at their cards without reading them. When they want to take them again, I insist and ask to see them again. I try to gain time, although I don't know what for.

Mr P., I estimate him to be in his late 50s, is the first to hand me

his ID card again.

He is slim and a little taller than me. Over his grey suit he wears an open beige trench coat.

His face, looks narrow, the dark bags under his eyes contrast with his strikingly broad nose. He looks at me with a mockingly smug drawl around the thin corners of his mouth.

He seems to be the talker.

I study his identity card with exaggerated interest, and read there „Senior Government Director/ Head of Department“. Abruptly and slightly annoyed, he suddenly snatches his ID from my hand and comments gruffly, „We're not that pretty on our IDs, Mr Mehnert!“

The other man identifies himself as Detective Chief Inspector Mr G.. He speaks with a slight Swabian accent.

I estimate him to be in his early sixties.

He gives me the experienced impression of an old hand. His broad round face on his slightly corpulent stocky body smiles at me in a friendly fatherly way.

The third man.

Maybe in his mid-fifties, tall, broad and stocky.

Official veterinarian Dr. vet. K.

I don't remember his name.

Good-naturedly, I follow my cooperative attitude and kindly ask what I can do for the gentlemen.

Head of Department P. briskly takes the floor:

„Can we talk to you in peace, Mr. Mehnert?“ [...]

Mehnert talking at the ADCE European Creativity Festival of the Art Director Club of Europe in Barcelona Disseny Hub about 11 DAYS:

“11 DAYS is a social experiment giving a frighten insight into a society controlled by aggression and hatred”



screenshot : <https://youtu.be/VYq-2bOnkqQ>

victims of drones: livestream view after the project has ended



'One mouse click and a rat dies in artist's protest against drones

David Charter Berlin  
Published at 12:01AM, March 14 2015

A controversial artist has set up a gun so anyone on the internet can shoot a rat using their keyboard or smartphone — in an installation he says is designed to protest about the use of military drones.

Florian Mehnert, a German artist who has previously bugged random conversations to highlight state surveillance, will set up a webcam on the rat today with a countdown to March 24, when the gun will be loaded.

Mr Mehnert's latest work, called 11 Days, will film the rat continually until it is shot, in a twin protest about snooping by drones as well as their use to kill people by remote control.

The 44-year-old artist from Cologne is reflecting a mood of suspicion in his country about the military activities of the US, especially its killer drones used in the lawless Pakistani-Afghan border region.

While their operators are located in the US, data and images from drones are sent via the US Air Force base at Ramstein in southwest Germany.

"Of course I expect protests," said Mehnert. "A rat is to die in the service of art. I would also prefer if it were not necessary. But people nowadays are so jaded, that art must break new boundaries."

Mehnert has set up a website where anyone can register and wait their turn to control a gun from their keyboard, aim it and take a shot at the rat.

"Preparing all this was not only a technical, but also an emotional challenge," he said.

"I want to make people aware . . . that you can kill over the internet. This is not a doomsday scenario, but long ago became reality."

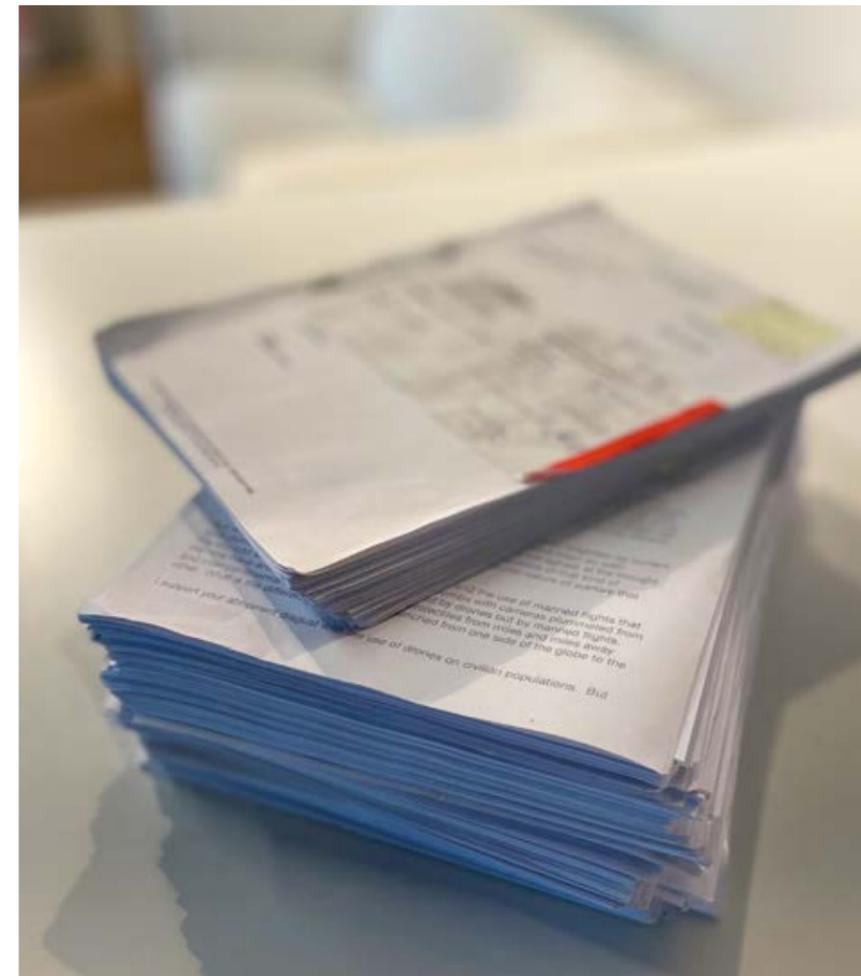
A survey on his website yesterday found that 1,440 viewers (55.6 per cent) wanted the rat to live, 37.5 per cent thought it should die, and 6.9 per cent did not care.

Viewers have been advised that they must be 18 or over to take part in the shooting.



examples from countless comments in social media

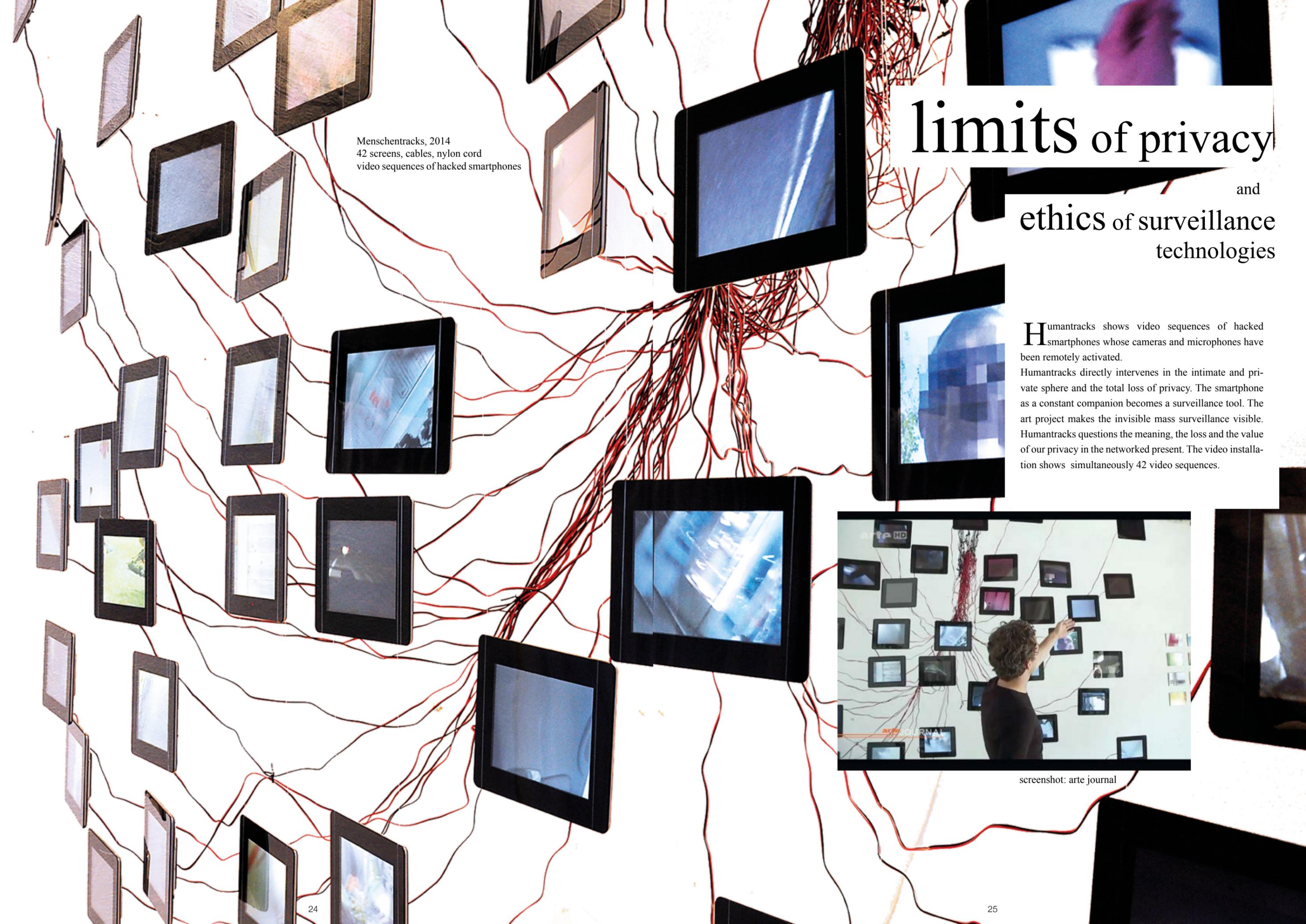
print-out of the shitstorm and files of the criminal proceedings



Menschentracks  
(Humantracks)



Museum für Angewandte Kunst,  
MAK Frankfurt,  
installation view, 2015



Menschentracks, 2014  
42 screens, cables, nylon cord  
video sequences of hacked smartphones

# limits of privacy

## and ethics of surveillance technologies

**H**umantracks shows video sequences of hacked smartphones whose cameras and microphones have been remotely activated. Humantracks directly intervenes in the intimate and private sphere and the total loss of privacy. The smartphone as a constant companion becomes a surveillance tool. The art project makes the invisible mass surveillance visible. Humantracks questions the meaning, the loss and the value of our privacy in the networked present. The video installation shows simultaneously 42 video sequences.



screenshot: arte journal

**I**n painting, I process phenomena that I have often previously explored in photographic concepts. Photography often functions as a conceptual starting point from which my painting and work with other media develops organically.

Painting is therefore closely linked to my photographic works.

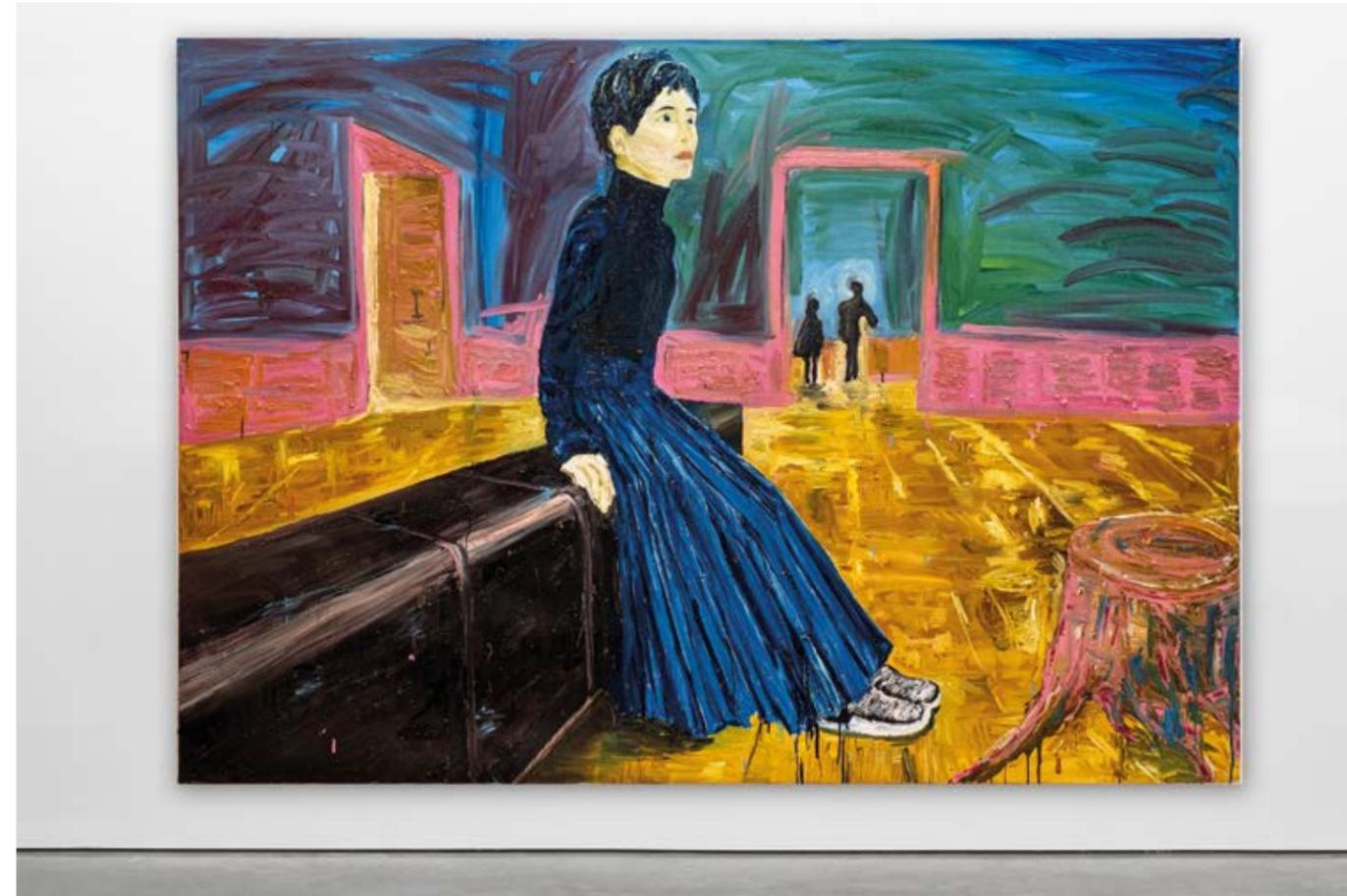
While my installations can be controversial, painting offers me an additional space to work in a more subtle and open way.



“Entdeckung”, oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm, 2024



“waiting beauty”,  
oil on canvas, 230 x 160 cm,  
2024



portrait with smartphone, 2023, 40 x 50 cm,  
pencil on drypoint etching on Bütten



“wave”, oil on canvas, 220 x 180 cm, 2019

“Jurte”, oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm, 2016

“Giraffe”, oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm, 2016





“Weg”, oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm, 2019



“Wurzel 2”, oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm, 2018





“Waldwirbel”, oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm, 2019

“Nachtwald”, oil on canvas, applicated plastic object, 240 x 180 cm, 2020





42°11N, 9°21O, oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm, 2022



Blätterschatten Moving, Installation, 2013  
Video-Projection, Loop 20 min.  
installation view

# Invitation to your ZEN

The installation is ment as a meditation created by observing the aesthetics of light and shadow. It shows the shadows of tree leaves on a wooden floor. The viewer is confronted with the aesthetics of the changing shapes and compositions created by the light through the shadows cast. The installation refers to the philosopy of ZEN, which corresponds to Florian Mehnert's way of life. It invites to immerse oneself in a moment of non-emptiness, to find oneself in a moment of inner peace and contemplation through observation. The installation invites to find ones own ZEN moment.



paintings and works on paper related to the  
video installation, studio view

“Stallflut”, soil, oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm, 2017





"Fluss", oil on canvas, , 220 x 160 cm, 2018

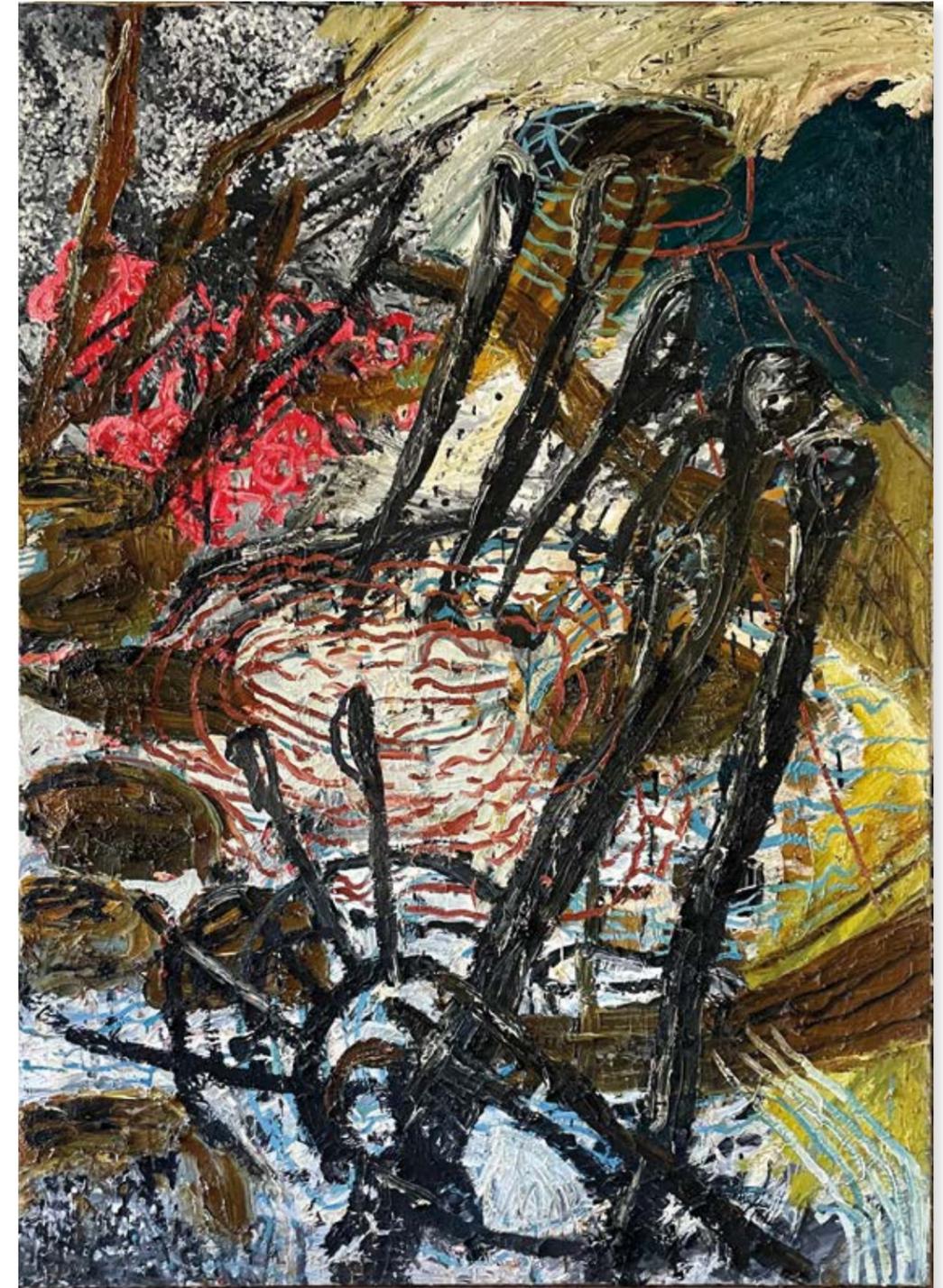
"untitled", oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm, 2022





“Was für eine Nacht!”(What a night!), oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm, 2021

river, oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm, 2022



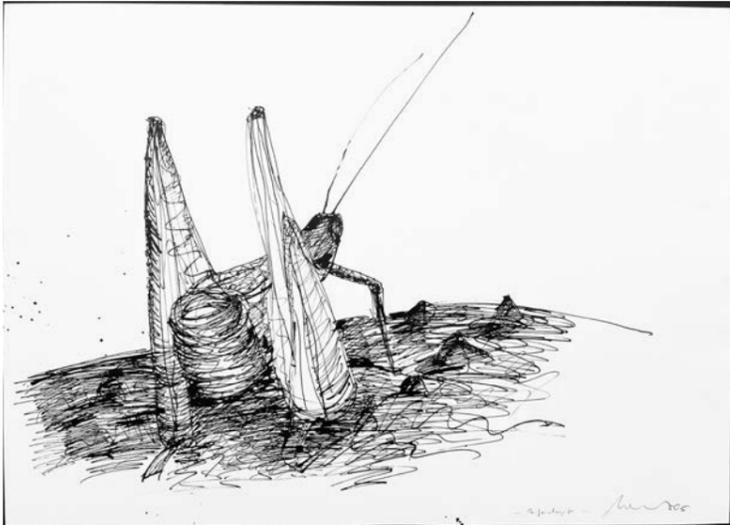


“forestprotocol”, graphite, inc on paper, 160 x 110 cm, 2022

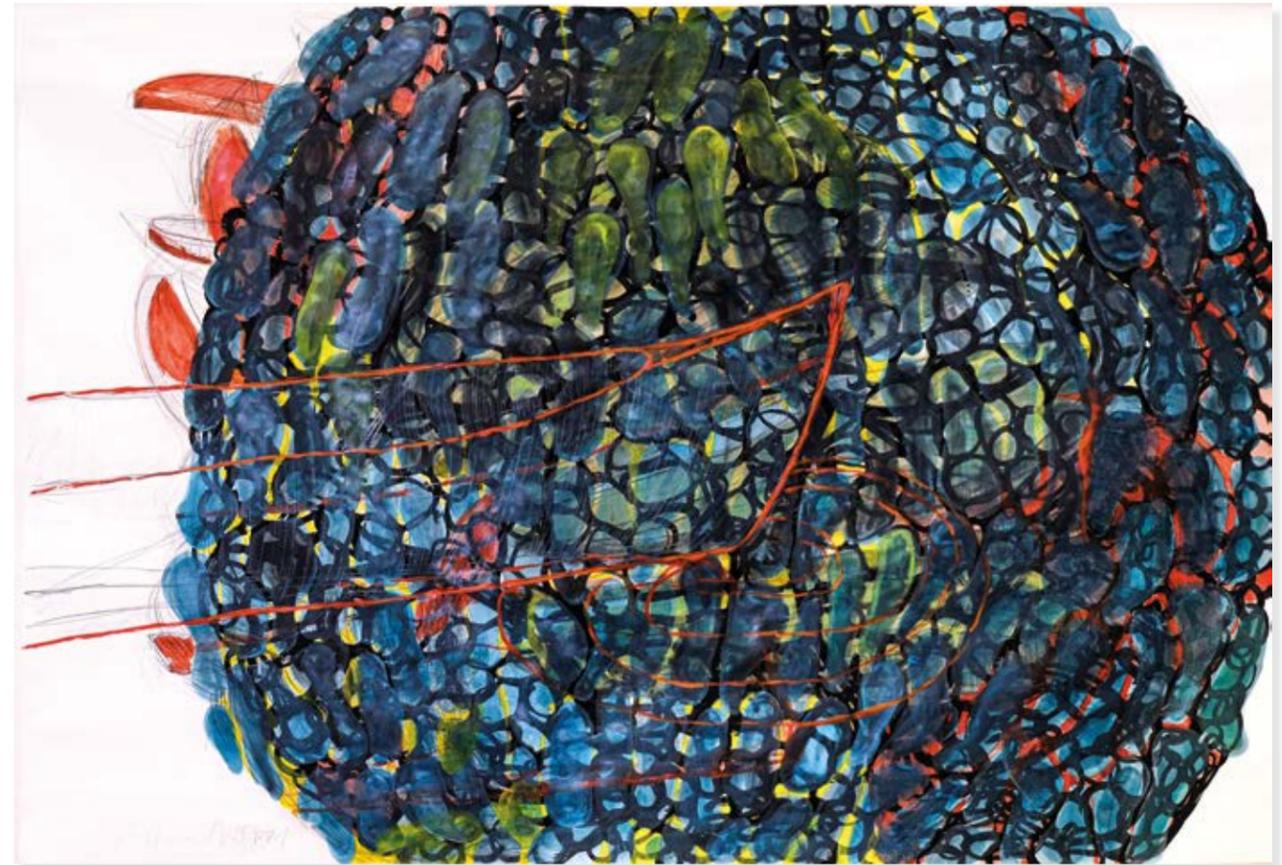


“forestprotocol”, oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm, 2022

works on paper



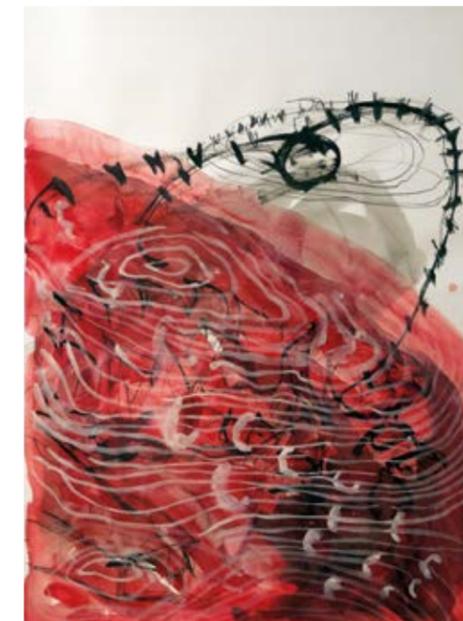
“boat - pectinella magnifica”  
ink, graphite, watercolor, acrylic on  
paper, 240 x 150 cm, 2007-2021





“dairy”, guache, ink, graphite on paper,  
50 x 70 cm, 2020

“dairy”, guache, ink, graphite on paper,  
50 x 70 cm, 2020



“menscentracks”  
acrylic, ink, graphite on paper,  
180 x 150 cm, 2023





“from the series “my Hongkong”  
acrylic, chinese ink, graphite on paper,  
180 x 150 cm, 2023  
*(private collection Hong Kong)*

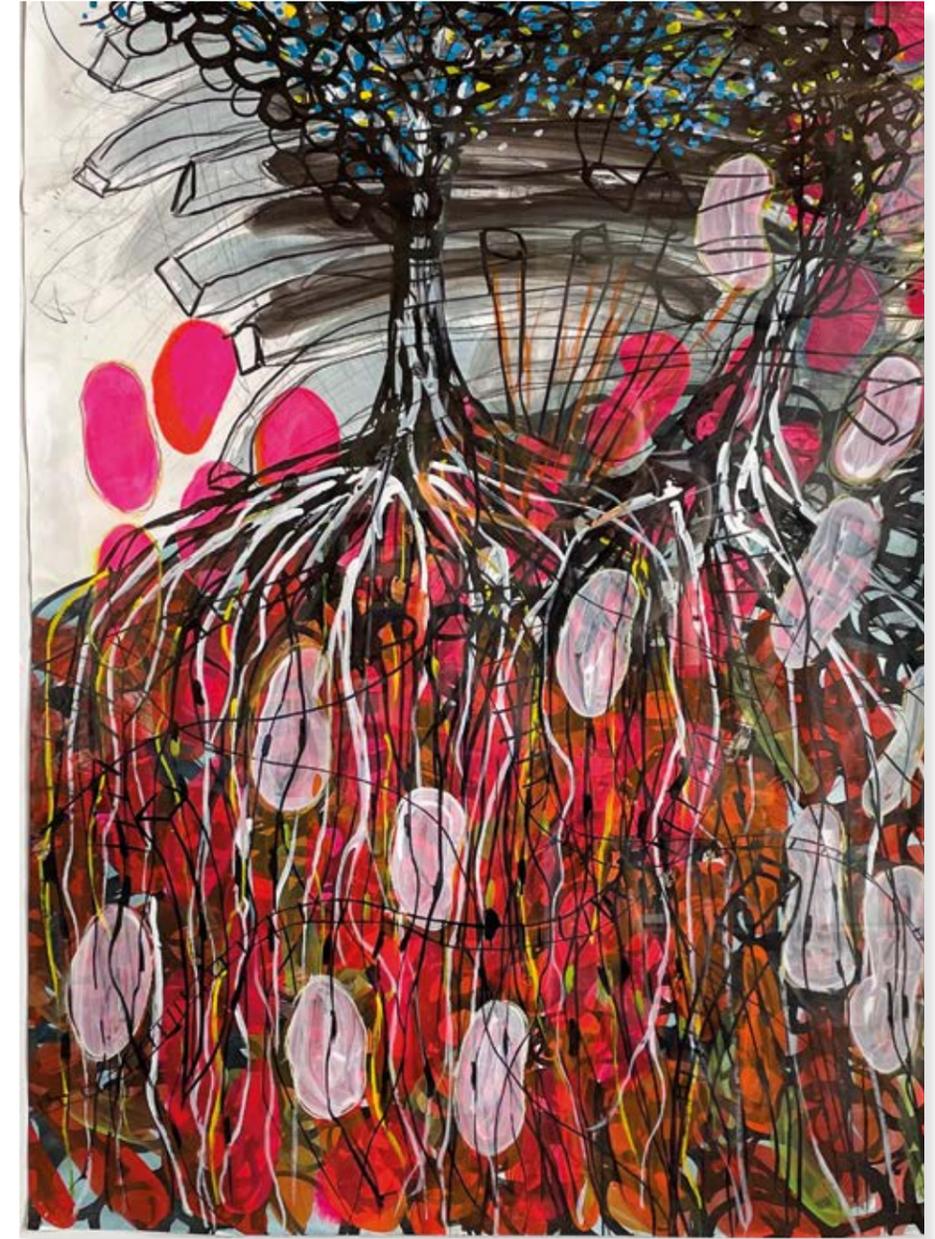
“from the series “my Hongkong”  
acrylic, chinese ink, graphite on paper,  
180 x 150 cm, 2023  
*(private collection Hong Kong)*

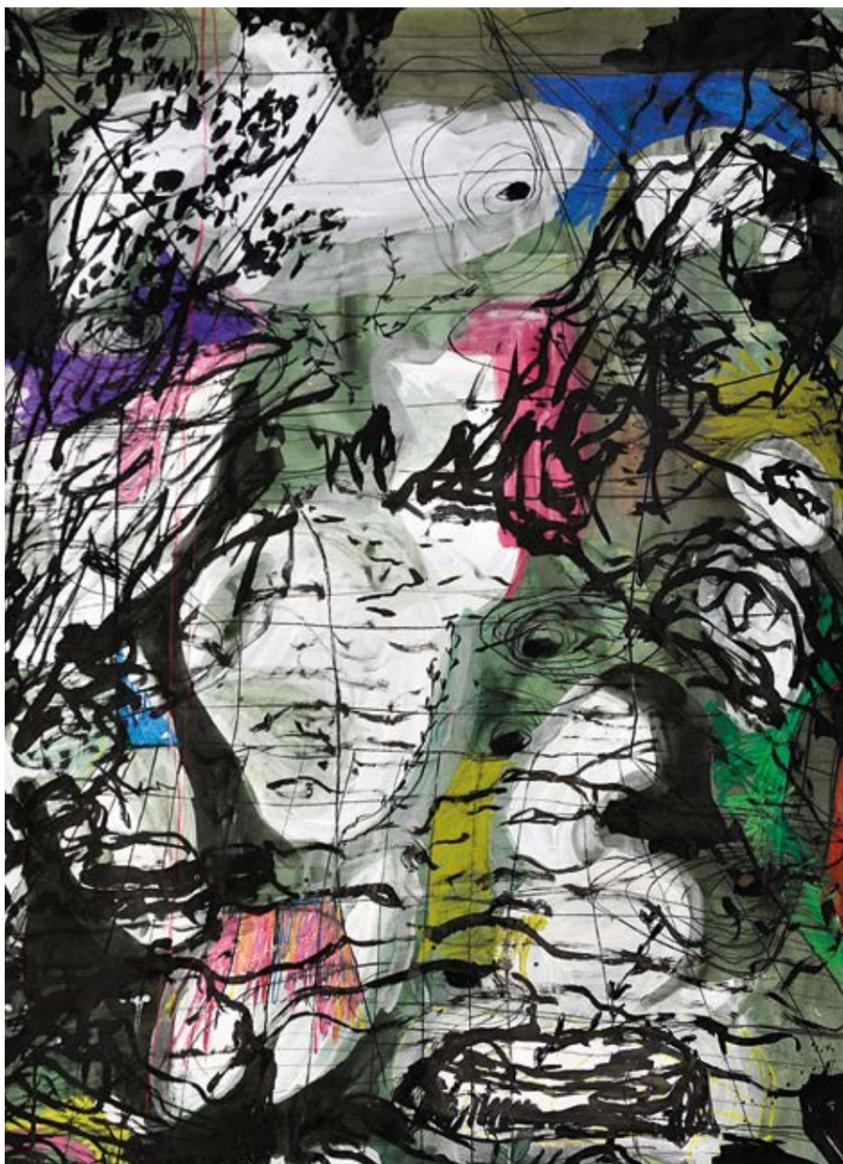


“from the series “air roots”, acrylic, chinese  
ink, graphite on paper, 150 x 110 cm, 2023

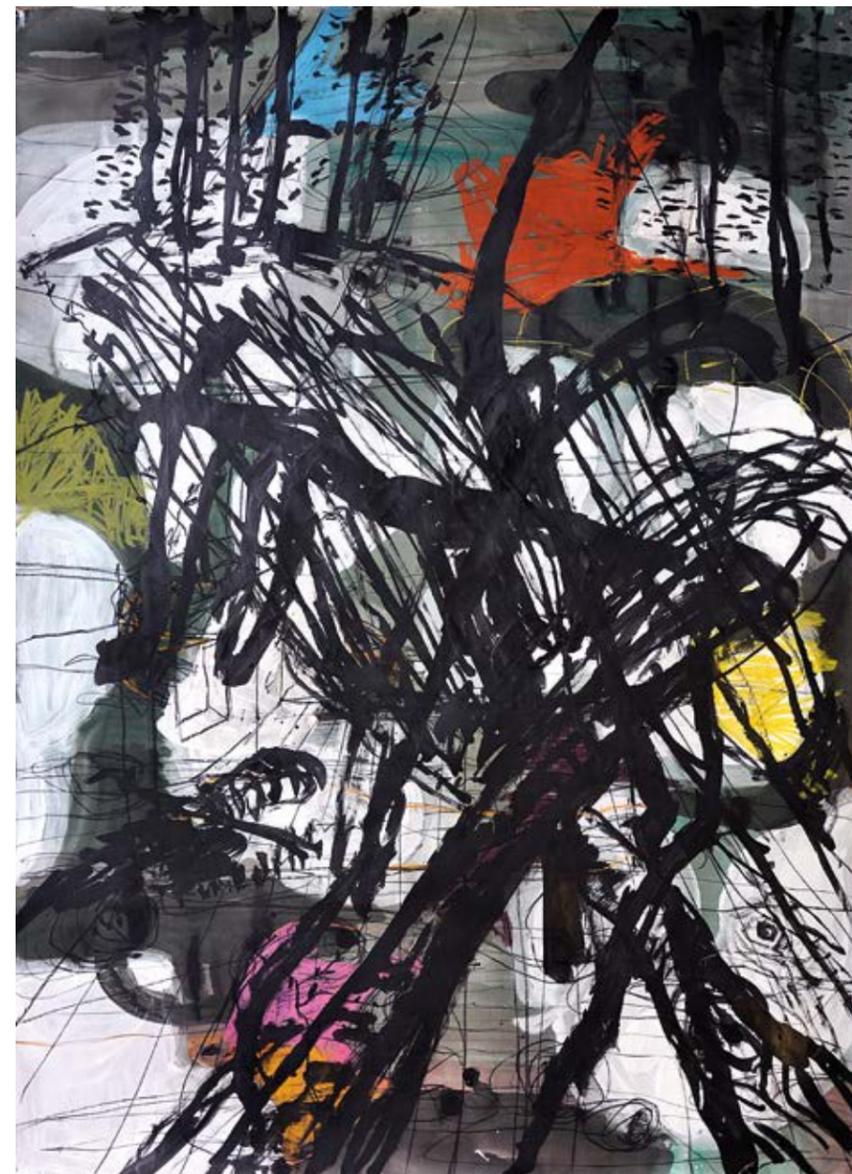


air routes, Hong Kong, Central





“untitled”, acrylic, chinese ink, graphite on paper, 180 x 150 cm, 2021



“untitled”, acrylic, chinese ink, graphite on paper, 150 x 110 cm, 2021

“Bonsai Garden HongKong”, chinese ink, graphite on paper, 120 x 30 cm, 2023



monastery garden, Hong Kong

overpainted etchings and woodcuts





studio view, 2024

overpainted etchings, acrylic, chinese ink, graphite, etching on paper, 2024





contact deduction, India, 1996  
 Florian Mehnert documented his 3 month  
 travel through India with hundres of  
 analog black and white photographs

from the Indian Cycles (10 etch-  
 ings), edition 4 of 10,  
 dry point etching on Bütten



aus Indien II, chinese ink  
 1997, 50 x 70 cm



from the Iceland Cycles,  
épreuve d'artiste, dry point  
etching on Büttin, 40 x 50 cm

Selfportrait, Iceland, 2000



drying fishes, Iceland, 2000





overpainted drypoint etching  
100 x 70 cm, 1999-2018

overpainted drypoint etching  
100 x 70 cm, 1999-2018





“lockdown pads”,  
overpainted woodcut on  
paper, unique prints,  
100 x 70 cm, 2022



“lockdown pad”,  
overpainted woodcut  
on paper, unique print,  
100 x 70 cm, 2022

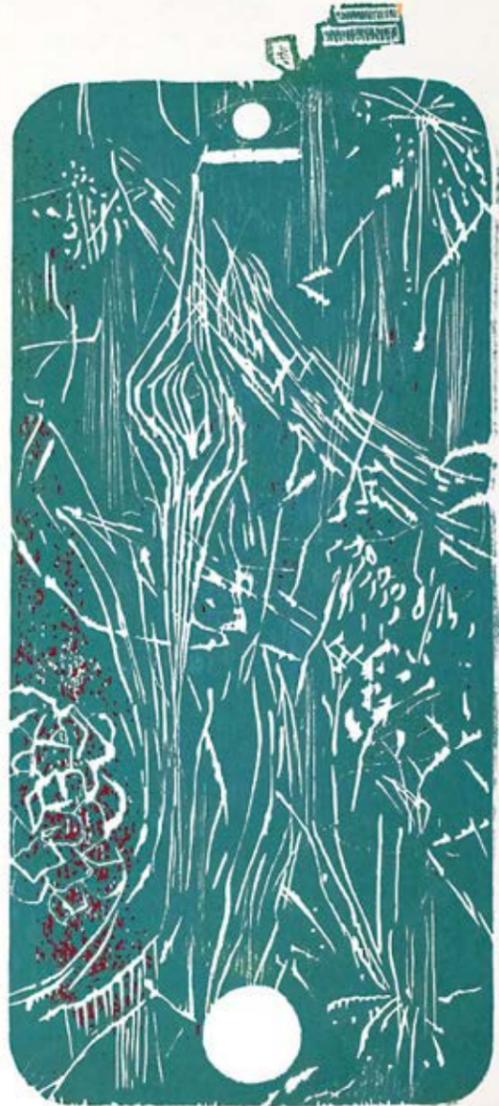




“water” 3 of 3, dry point  
aquatint, 100 x 70 cm,  
2017



“water field storm”  
3 of 3, dry point  
aquatint, 100 x 70 cm,  
2017



*Florian Mehnert*

## contra movement

Lockdown woodcuts 2022

I thought about how I could formulate a contra-movement to the now omnipresent digitality. A contra-movement that does justice to the withdrawal and the lockdown in a completely different way for me.

I have been looking for an analog form of expression that is in complete contrast to my conceptual projects that often take place in digital space with digital tools.

The woodcut is such an old form, perhaps even an anachronistic form of expression, and I found it exciting to create the discrepancy between a traditional way of working but a digital motif, namely the smartphone display.

So maybe it's a kind of paradox, to show a display that doesn't show content, but that self is content. Completely different elements are shown, elements of the woodcut, my treatment, floral elements, cracked elements.

Completely untypical content for a smartphone display.

So what I show is actually a display that shows itself, that shows no other content, but the display itself is the content of the image.

It's also my way of criticizing the use of the smartphone as a data collection device, to use the smartphone to monitor whole societies.

I think it is important to be able to fall back on oneself, to be able to live an analog existence and live one's own form of freedom there.

*Florian Mehnert*

"lockdown", 2022,  
woodcut, unique print,  
107 x 80 cm,



“lockdown”, woodcut, unique prints, 107 x 80 cm, 2022



The woodcuts show dismantled broken smartphone displays. The work oscillate between the exciting discrepancy between the electronic high-tech product of a broken smartphone display and its representation through the century-old traditional woodcut.

photography

Hong Kong Harbour, 2023, photography, lambda print, 180 x 102 cm





Henderson Land Group, 2023, photography, lambda print, 178 x 100cm

Hong Kong Park, 2023, photography, lambda print, 182 x 105 cm





Lissabon, 2022, photography, lamda print, 178 x 100 cm

Hong Kong Central, 2023, photography, lambda print, 165 x 92 cm





Hong Kong, 2024  
photography, lambda print  
177 x 99 cm



Hong Kong, 2023, photography, lambda print, 165 x 92 cm



from the series "Refugee Stacks", 2015  
150 cm x 112 cm, photography,  
lamda print behind museum glas,  
(collection of Kunstforum TU Darmstadt)

# postcolonialism and migration

Refugee Stacks, 2015

The Refugee Stacks project is a reaction to the situation of refugee flows and an examination of postcolonialism and migration.

For one week the Florian Mehnert talked to people in a refugee home and convinced them of his project. The Refugee Stacks as human sculptures draw attention to the fact that behind every refugee there is a personal story, an individual destiny, a person with abilities and dreams. The works approach the viewer through their aesthetics, and then confront their depiction of the stacked refugees in the next step. The viewer's oscillation between the aesthetics and the confrontation with the actual image situation creates a platform for discourse and discussion of the refugee issue.

from the series "Refugee Stacks"  
150 cm x 112 cm, 2015, photography,  
lamda print behind museum glas

*(collection of Regierungspräsidium  
Freiburg i.Br.)*



# privacy paradox

Smartphone Stacks, 2018

Florian Mehnert's „Smartphone Stacks“ vividly addresses the so-called privacy paradox. This describes the contradiction between the expressed desire for privacy and the actual behaviour of many people who willingly disclose personal data. Through this staging, he visualises how the participants literally become „data material“ - a collection of information that they themselves generate through their smartphone use. Mehnert confronts viewers with the fact that although we strive for privacy, we are constantly undermining it through our mobile phone activities. In an interview with Deutschlandfunk Corso, this paradoxical discrepancy between attitude and behaviour is addressed.

On the one hand, many express concerns about privacy, but on the other hand, their digital behaviour constantly feeds the data collection mania of companies and authorities. Mehnert's work shows in a disturbing way how we value the convenience and connectivity of smartphone use more highly than the protection of our privacy. It is precisely this tension between the desire for data protection and the reality of data sharing that constitutes the privacy paradox. His art urges us to question our contradictory attitudes and behaviours in relation to privacy.



Smartphone Stack No.5,  
180 cm x 134 cm, 2018, photography,  
lamda print behind museum glas

exhibited at DHM Berlin,  
von Luther zu Twitter, 2020



Programm  
Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, 2020



Romeo and Juliet, photography,  
lambda print,  
160 x 120 cm, 2021

# social distance

Social Distance Stacks, 2021

During the pandemic Florian Mehnert realized his photographic project „Social Distance Stacks“. Social Distance Stacks addresses the ubiquitous situation of social distance in the Corona Pandemic. For the „Social Distance Stacks“ project, the artist had people each enter a transparent inflatable and sealable PVC bubble. He arranged and photographed, among others, dancers of the Stuttgart Ballet, actors of the Theater Freiburg and the Stuttgart Philharmonic Orchestra. The surreal images are showing the dancers in narrow, restricted bubbles and reflected the isolation and alienation during the pandemic.



Florian Mehnert in cooperation with the  
Stuttgart Ballett 2021

Grand Finale with Romeo and Juliet and the couples of  
Swanlake and Giselle, photography, lambda print,  
182 x 109 cm, 2021





Hallenbad, photography, lambda print,  
170 x 1127 cm, 2021

Philharmonic Orchestra  
photography, lambda print,  
170 x 1127 cm, 2021





photography, Hrótafjörður, Iceland, silvergelatine on cotton

### Fragments, Iceland

Series of 7 photographs exposed directly on framed cotton treated with silver gelatine.

The photographs were developed mounted on the frames using the classic black and white process.

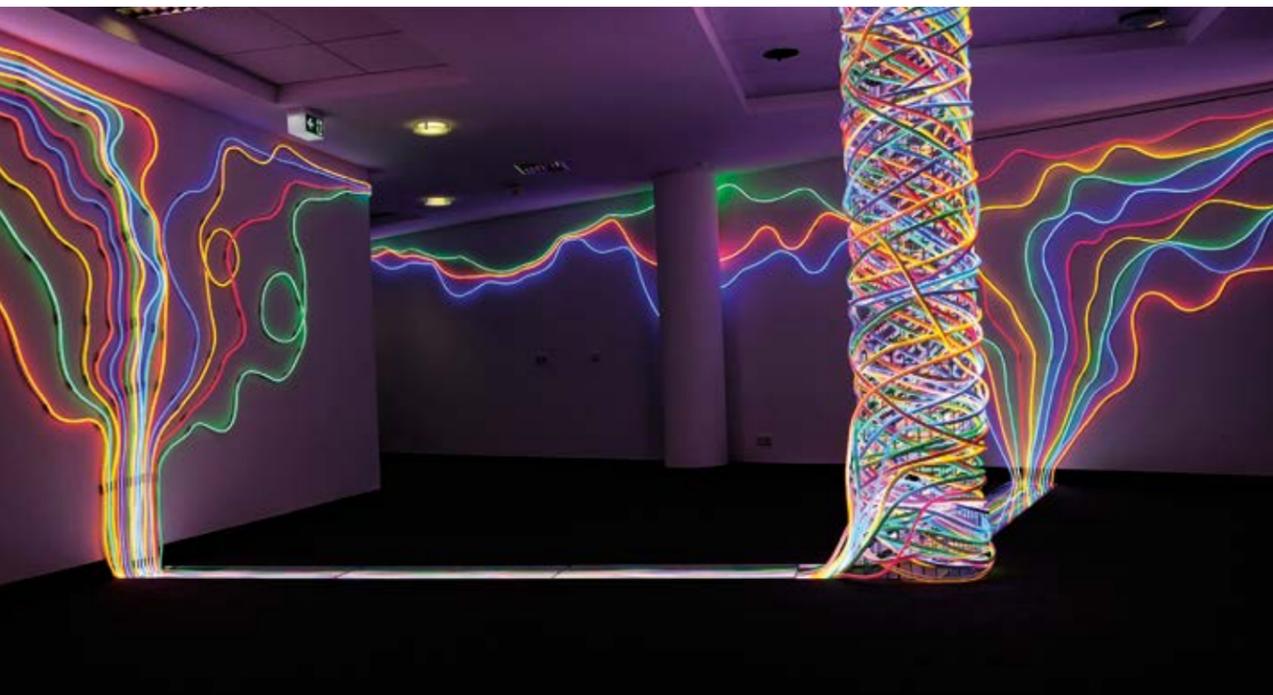
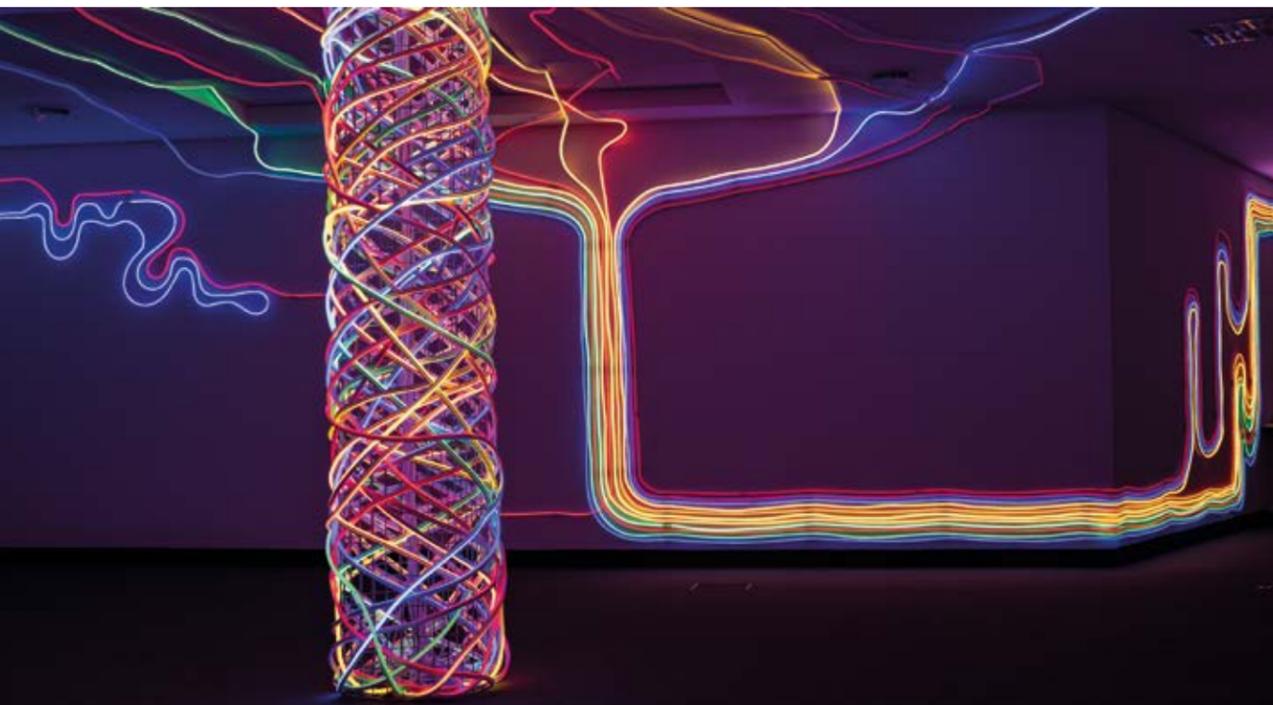


fragments, photography, silvergelatine on cotton, 180 x 140 cm



fragments, photography, silvergelatine on cotton, 200 x 156 cm

data to light



data to light, 2022  
walk through installation over to complete floors  
in the building of the State Commissioner for  
Data Protection, Stuttgart



## data to light

The „Data to Light“ installation is a thought-provoking light art piece that aims to make the invisible work of data protection visible. It was commissioned by the State Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information in Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

The walk-through installation consists of multiple LED strips that lead from many workspaces to the centre of the building, where they form an impressive light column. The light column in turn leads to the second floor, from where the individual light lines lead back to the workspaces. Walking through the installation creates an immersive and dynamic experience.

By translating the abstract concept of data into a tangible, visual form, Mehnert's installation invites viewers to contemplate the ubiquitous nature of data in our digital age and the importance of protecting personal information. The light patterns represent the landscape of data flow, highlighting the complexity and vulnerability of our digital footprints.

The installation is a permanent fixture at the offices of the State Commissioner for Data Protection in Stuttgart, serving as a powerful reminder of the agency's mission and the ongoing challenges of safeguarding privacy in an increasingly data-driven world.

Through „Data to Light,“ Mehnert demonstrates his ability to transform complex societal issues into captivating artistic experiences that provoke thought and foster dialogue. The installation exemplifies his multidisciplinary approach, blending art, technology to create works that resonate with contemporary audiences.



# Intervention in public space



change of name into “drugstore of freedom”,  
(alias Drogerie Rühle, Weil am Rhein)



Freedom 2.0, 2016 & 2018

A remarkable manifestation of Florian Mehnert’s artistic work is the project “Freedom 2.0,” which makes a significant contribution to the discussion on the merging of privacy and digital networking. This ambitious project unfolds as a multifaceted exploration of the political possibilities of citizens in an increasingly interconnected world.

Mehnert employs the expanded concept of art termed “social sculpture” to create a participatory art installation in public spaces, which he brought to life once as a tri-national project in Weil am Rhein/Basel/Hunigau in 2016 and in Stuttgart in 2018. where he worked in a close cooperation with the Data Protection Officer of Baden Württemberg. The central question of the project is: “What does BIG DATA have to do with FREEDOM?” In this regard, “Freedom 2.0” serves as an open platform for discourse, inviting reflection and debate on the tensions between digital networking and individual freedom.

Florian Mehnert takes a critical look at the actual threats to freedom, which do not primarily stem from intelligence agencies, but from a digital surveillance capitalism aiming to monetize behavior predictions and analyze individual behavior in real-time. This approach aims to underscore and define the precious privacy of each individual while shedding light on the ethical challenges of an increasingly interconnected world.

The “Freedom 2.0” project comprises various elements that collectively enable a multifaceted discussion on the societal impacts of digitization. A self-tracking app raises awareness among users about how individual behavior generates data traces, while a series of shops are temporarily renamed to provoke questions about privacy and individual freedom in public spaces. Furthermore, a colored guidance system visualizes the networking of people and their movements in urban spaces, while Big Data colloquiums provide a platform for open discussions.

“Freedom 2.0” thus embodies not only Mehnert’s commitment to a deeper exploration of the consequences of digitization but also his vision of art as a critical tool for reflecting on the significant questions of our time.

Foreword of the publication Freiheit 2.0  
ISBN-13: 978 3 756 82770 1



Google is aware of our concerns, our interests and our next holiday destination. WhatsApp knows with whom we communicate. YouTube knows what videos we watch, and Instagram knows our posted life. Smart Speakers knows what is spoken at home and the smart TV looks in our bedroom. Facebook knows us better than our friends, and Amazon already knows today what we will buy tomorrow. The Big Data system records our lives with all its ramifications. Personal and private data are collected permanently, always and everywhere.<sup>1</sup> We all, the users of the Internet, the consumers, are the source of this free data for the new production process: the prediction of our human behavior. The Big Data industry is therefore looking for a real-time model of our daily lives. Its resulting business models and commercialization processes are low-risk and will generate billions in revenue.

In September 2016 I realized the participative art installation FREIHEIT 2.0 in Weil am Rhein (Germany), Basel (CH), Huningue (France), and in June 2018 in Stuttgart.

The installation should provide a differentiated view of the challenge in the handling of Big Data in our digital, parallel reality and make the interactions between the digital and the analog world visible. I want to point out that democratic achievements, such as personal freedom, are a precious asset that must be defended in an increasingly digital world. I want to transport the complex issue of Big Data to public spaces through an art installation.

It is important for others to see that FREEDOM 2.0 is not confused with a political action or measured as a success on the depth of its Enlightenment.

Behind FREEDOM 2.0, the question raised is, “To what extent could a large-scale participatory installation in public spaces be implemented, whether there could be a broad range of participation and to what extent would people be willing to engage in the abstract form of an art installation.”

#### Advanced art concept

Freedom 2.0 was a social, participatory art installation

in which people were an important, co-shaping element of the work. It combined public spaces, participants and passers-by in its installation. Everyone was able to shape the project through the use of tracking apps, through discussions on the sidewalks, in the shops, and through their own thoughts, which could be expressed later in the Big Data colloquia. Freedom 2.0 was also an artistic form of initiated social revolt in its structure, through the changing of shop names and its guiding system. FREEDOM 2.0 worked with an extended art concept, in which everyone was, in his own way, the designer and “creator” of his environment and society. Participating shops and their employees, the city of Weil am Rhein and Stuttgart, passers-by in public spaces and the visitors of the colloquia, were all part of shaping the elements of FREEDOM 2.0. Employees of renamed shops were exposed daily to questions from their customers and participated in lively debates. Still growing traces of the tracking app users, testify to the enthusiasm for participation in this project.

During this project I met students and older people who took the city tour along the management system. Some even asked for help installing their app. I engaged in countless conversations with people in and outside the colloquia.

FREEDOM 2.0 has deepened my understanding of the attitude of society to the developments of Big Data.

The notion of freedom in the context of a parallel, digital world has been of interest to many people.

The Freedom 2.0 project demonstrated that younger people in particular have a higher frequency of an undisturbed relationship with data and a digital world.

Some people even ask themselves if a “public self” is not the new social order. According to Zuckerberg, “privacy is obsolete”. Many young “digital natives” consider the discussion about personal privacy to be of little relevance.

This is due in part to the naturally strong need for communication with peers. It takes place over smart phones with well-known apps like WhatsApp, Snapchat

# Individual Movements Become Readable



The Selftracking app serves as an interface between the analog and digital world. It is used to create an awareness of the sensitivity of one’s own data.

The Selftracking app illustrates how individual movements in the analogous world are obtained. Motion profiles are one of the most important data resources that are traded and evaluated. Each line represents the movement of a person.



and also Facebook. It is the basic need of humans to communicate and share their experiences. The Internet and smart phones are perfect for that. The fact that we enthusiastically accept the free communication and expressive tools of the industry correspond to the nature of the human being.

To this, the Big Data industry works with operant conditioning and a positive reinforcement system. A person who posts a lot is interesting and rewarded by many “likes”, “followers”, “comments”, and perhaps even crowned as an Instagram or YouTube star. Those who do not participate fall back into social exclusion. A call for more caution, when dealing with your own data or encryption, lessens but does not solve the basic problem. Insurance companies are experimenting with smart health and telematics concepts. Facebook and Google work with micro targeting, Amazon with dynamic pricing and anticipatory shipping. Anyone who does not provide real-time data cannot utilize these “instant gratifications” and will have to pay for the right to privacy in the future.

The possibility of predictive, calculated customer moves are within reach: the systematic evaluation and the correlation of all personal data.

The creation of personality profiles, psychograms, and digital profiling leads to the systematic destruction of our private spheres. Young people typically lack the insight and the far-sightedness regarding the privacy of their personal data and the recycling industry that is so willing to utilize it. They lack the knowledge about the monetary value their data contains. What kind of enthusiastic young Pokémon-Go player can see that the game is actually paid for with a lot of personal data?<sup>2</sup>

The game is not the product, but the player himself is. There is a difference with “Digital Immigrants”. Here, there is a more conservative view of the world in terms of privacy, which is regarded as an important and elementary commodity. But there is social pressure too. A participant of the colloquia reported how, by leaving a WhatsApp group, he came in conflict with his wife, who had to justify herself in front of her digital friends, because her husband’s departure was interpreted as a rejection and dislike for the group.

There is also enthusiasm for the possibilities and promises of Big Data: “If we are constantly collecting and correlating all the available data, we will get closer to the truth. We will understand human life in all its complex processes and create a better life for each individual.” However, self-determination and privacy must be sacrificed in return.

Digital natives in particular perceive, little by little, that the digital personality profiles in many ways resemble their analogous world. Through the colloquia, I sometimes get the impression that the “transparent self” has already become self-evident. It seems as if the relationship to privacy is about to change into another far less

critical attitude. The reasons are perhaps in the sense of the desire: the desire for security, in an optimistic belief in the good, and in the progress and enthusiasm for the technical possibilities.

In general and in all the groups of the colloquia, the lack of background knowledge and an idea of how the daily and social lives change by means of data correlations and evaluations have often been seen. There is no idea of what it means to live as a calculable algorithmic human, where companies know more about one’s self, than one knows about himself. There is a lack of knowledge of how deep the Big Data industry has already penetrated many areas of life.

The question of how to deal with Big Data has often been discussed at the colloquia, showing this consciousness in our society and politics has already begun.

The goal of the Big Data industry is to extract human personality patterns, to predict real-time results about those behaviors<sup>3</sup>, and then commercialize them. This destruction of human dignity and the order of a free democratic society is accepted by the industry, its investors and by society itself.

FREEDOM 2.0 has taken a first step towards exposure of the business procedures of Big Data; scrutinizing it in the form of a social, participatory art installation. It is to be used as a platform for discussion, for recognizing and learning that we have to develop a global ethic regarding Big Data in order to protect ourselves and our dignity in the future.

Florian Mehnert

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The guidance system reflects the digital movement profiles of the Freedom 2.0 app on the streets and paths of Stuttgart 2018



Big Data Colloquia at Weil am Rhein , 2016

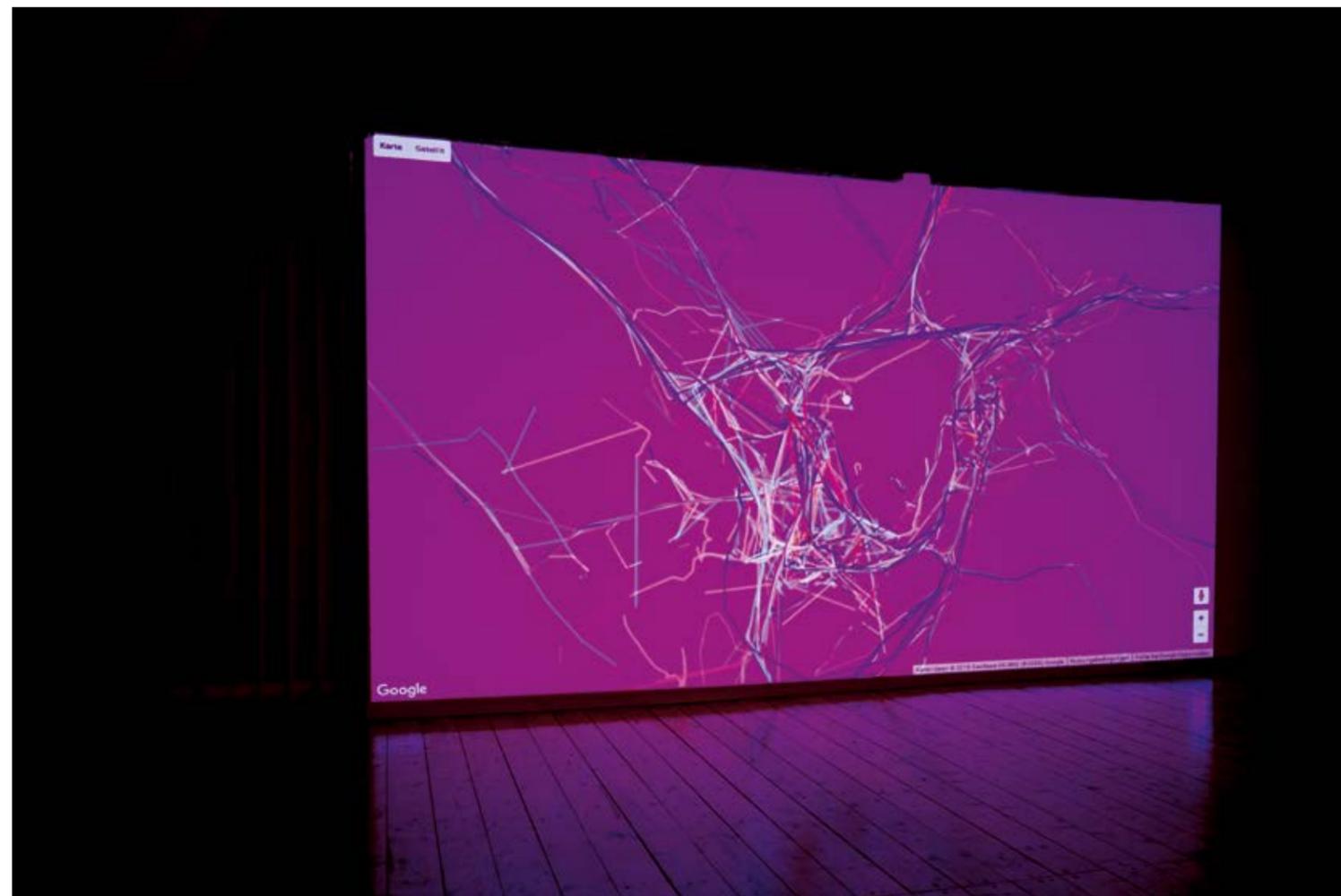
Florian Mehnert's Project Freedom 2.0 is used as learning and illustrative material in a school textbook.  
(ISBN 978 3 532 70094 5)



Projection of the moving profiles users created with the App Freedom 2.0



Freedom 2.0 Colloquia , Stuttgart  
 Dr. Stefan Brink, Data Protection Officer BW  
 Prof. Susanne Hahn, University of Düsseldorf  
 Florian Mehnert  
 Prof. Siegfried Stihl, University of Hamburg





Florian Mehnert's studio in his converted farmstead from 1730

Florian Mehnert born 1970 in Cologne, Germany

Florian Mehnert is Founder and Managing Director of the Institute of Experimental Arts, IEK.

#### WORKS IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Staatsgalerie Stuttgart  
 Kunstforum Darmstadt (Sammlung der TU Darmstadt)  
 Regierungspräsidium Freiburg i.Br.  
 Morat Institut für Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft

#### ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

2016 Museumsquartier Q21, Vienna, AUSTRIA

#### EXHIBITIONS (selection)

2002 Städtische Galerie, Waldkirch  
 2003 Galerie am Tor, Emmendingen  
 2004 Morat Institut Freiburg i.Br.  
 2005 Markgräfler Museum  
 ...  
 2015 Museum Angewandte Kunst, MAK, Frankfurt, „Hamster Hipster Handy“  
 2015 Watch22, Mainz  
 2016 Kunstverein Wolfsburg, Hallenbad  
 2015 Kulturstiftung Vögele, Pfäffikon, Schweiz, „I.ch“  
 2016 C / O Berlin, „WATCHED!“, Berlin  
 2016 Kunstverein Weil am Rhein, Freiheit 2.0  
 2017 Disseny Hub, Barcelona, 11Days  
 2017 Kunstforum Darmstadt  
 2017 OK Linz, Österreich, „Skandal/Normal“  
 2018 Museum Stadtpalais Stuttgart, Freiheit 2.0,  
 2018 Berlinale d'art, Straßburg, Frankreich „touch me“  
 2019 Reforum, smartphone stacks  
 2020 Markgräfler Museum  
 2021 Deutsche Historisches Museum, DHM Berlin  
 2022 Städtische Galerie, Weil am Rhein

#### WORKS IN PUBLIC SPACE

2021 Data to light (permanent light installation in Stuttgart)  
 2016 / 2018 Freiheit 2.0 (non-permanent installation Weil am Rhein/Basel/Hunig, Stuttgart )

#### AUTHOR OF BOOK PUBLICATIONS

Freedom 2.0, ISBN: 978 3 7568 2770 1  
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