SWISS PSYCHOTROPIC GOLD – A CRITICAL FABULATION

Nina Bern, Viktor Jäger and knowbotiq (Christian Huebler, Yvonne Wilhelm)

For more than three centuries, Swiss commodity trade has been caught up in colonial, and later in postcolonial and neoliberal arrangements. Having fuelled early modern industrialisation as well as contemporary finance, Swiss trading activities have influenced vital cultural, affective and moral economies. They have contributed to Swiss wealth, but also to neoliberal narratives of independence, safety and white supremacy. Yet, public debates on colonial involvement is almost absent. The Swiss mythology of neutrality transforms the often violent and “dirty” material commissions of mining and trading into an opaque and onefold system of technocracy, discretion and virtual finance.

An artistic and ethnographic project, Swiss Psychotropic Gold re-narrates global gold trade – from mining in former colonies to its refining and re-diverted in and out of Switzerland – as a series of transformative immediations of primary materials, values and affects.

More than 50% of global gold refining per year takes place in Switzerland (including gold which was appropriated during the recent commodity wars in Central Africa). In the 1970’s Switzerland traded and refined 75% of South African gold and saved the apartheid regime from an economic crisis. And, Switzerland was an important gold retailer for Nazi Germany and the Allies in the Second World War. These examples mark how, in recent times, Switzerland has fashioned itself as a political and economic hotspot for neutrally outsourcing the origin of gold. Gold is quasi scientifically claimed as its violent and physical history and transformed into an ephemeral symbol of power, status and purity – into condensed wealth.

Besides the invisible gold, the one refined in sacred spaces at the Swiss bordures of today and tomorrow. This invisible gold is also a visible gold: the involvement of Switzerland in the global commodity and gold trade has been investigated and brought to light recently by NGO reports and historical research. Yet, despite the moral grammar of humanitarianism or justice, the lamented violence is strangely neutralized in those critical public debates. It seems as if the enterprises and active arguments of responsibility and enlightenment are no longer able to fully grasp and intervene within the affective, moral and aesthetic textures of the public politics of postcolonial amnesia.

In this state of postcolonial amnesia, it is not through enlightenment and rational seeing that truth becomes automatically visible, or that a bone forces steps up and redemption arises as it is suggested in NGOs discourse. On the contrary, it asks for a process of recovery, both affectively and ethically. This refers to the acknowledgement of violence and suffering and requires politics of repatriation in the present. There is no “here” and “there”. “They” from “there” are “here” now! A new cartography of Switzerland is necessary to re-imagine global geopoliticalities of inequality and spaces of solidarity.

It is at the intersection of form and content that we would like to interweave with our explorations into “Swiss Psychotropic Gold”. We propose that it is the affective, moral and aesthetic textures of this public where criticism and subversion are hatched. Just breathe the air in this space, where we are. Feel the steaminess, cleanliness and the wealth. A well planned, ordered, sturdy and opaque surface of neutrality and perfection. What does it take to keep up such a public display of wealth? Which histories and stories are visible, which are made invisible?

We are interested in understanding and opening up such a postcolonial public, which differentiates the visible against the invisible, the righteous versus the dubious and the clean versus the dirty, the refined versus the raw. We try to explore strategies of fabricating, un-representing, incorporating, affecting and smartness. And the narrative gold aims to open and override conventional narratives of connectivity between the Swiss public and the metallogeny of gold. It is possible to activate those overlapping narratives as conglomerate histories and to re-imagine their production.

The story concerning gold that has been researched and worked upon more widely – albeit only in recent years with regard to Switzerland – is the story of bullion making and bullion storage as well as jewellery, both of which are characterized by a specific material visibility. However, Swiss Psychotropic Gold rather focuses on the moment when gold loses its stable form, in moments of disruption and dispersion, when its materiality is transformed into other states. This we submit under its derivative, psychotropic and molecular dimensions.

THE DERIVATIVE LINE OF GOLD

In order to go beyond the material gold and to trace its different materialities, it is necessary to follow its derivative line. The derivative is that which substances, desires, and affects enter and disperse. Paul B. Preciado argues that we find ourselves in a new type of governmentality of the living bodies and of subjectivity in which a bio-molecular and a semiotic-technical governmentality coincide. These experimentations can be read in the socio-political changes that have surfaced in the 20th century. In this state of postcolonial amnesia, it is not through enlightenment and rational acting that truth becomes automatically visible, or that a better future opens up and redemption arrives as it is suggested in NGO discourse. On the contrary, it asks for a process of recovery, both affectively and ethically. This refers to the acknowledgement of violence and suffering and requires politics of repatriation in the present. There is no “here” and “there”. “They” from “there” are “here” now! A new cartography of Switzerland is necessary to re-imagine global geopoliticalities of inequality and spaces of solidarity.

To look at the derivative line of gold gives way to a different sociality. In Randy Martin’s terms, it is an expansion of the horizon of desire and possibilities beyond what currently exists, which gives rise to a deconstruction of the body and a decenteralization of space. Consequently we search for aesthetic configurations that bring these derivative states of gold to the fore. The question becomes: how does gold in its different states and processes interconnect in the distribution of the sensible? How does gold – in violent acts of extraction and dispersion as well as in its cultural and aesthetic dimensions – approach that we find ourselves in a new type of governmentality of the living and of subjectivity in which a bio-molecular and a semiotic-technical governmentality coincide.

TRANSFORMATIONS: MOLECULES, MATTER, QUANTS OR QUEERING GOLD?

Swiss refines molecular gold and neutralizes its origins. Liberated from its histories and aggregations, molecules of gold start to transform from violence into virtuality. The molecular implies taking into account different trajectories of known and transversal relations allowing for distinctions and re-aggregations that run counter to political and moral categories of gender, race, hierarchy, and domination. For Karen Barad, it is about queering and queering matter and atoms. To question and counter the physics of gold means questioning established categories of causality, agency, space, time, and matter and how these are tied to moral and political assumptions by the Swiss myth of humanitarianism and democracy.

Matter and molecules are not political per se. It is not with the contamination and downsizing of systems, histories and relationalism to the molecular level that we arrive at political meaning. Yet, there have been marked parts of aestheticism of the historical and the social that present within relations of domination and power.

THE PSYCHOTROPIC DIMENSION OF GOLD

The techno-blasphemous body has become a molecular body through which substances, desires, and affects enter and disperse. Paul B. Preciado argues in his book on self-fashioning that we find ourselves in a new type of governmentality of the living and of subjectivity in which a bio-molecular and a semiotic-technical governmentality coincide.

Gold as a material-discursive metabolism involves bodies, technology, aesthetics, psychotropic substances, hormones, which all fuel the affective assemblage that surround and permeate gold. From drugged miners and psychotropic traders to the maintenance bundling over of crafted and sharing gold, to a generalized desire for stability and safety tried to gold. In a somatic-political conscious, gold becomes an affective state, an investment, a stabilizer and tranquilizer, a security, an energy, like a golden noodle used in acupuncture.

How does the opaque and unacknowledged omnipresence of gold (in Switzerland) affect postcolonial public spaces? Gold is omnipresent, but not visible. It is psychotropically active, but physically, aesthetically, and morally silent. The age-old alchemical promise of eternal youth has transformed into the discrete but hyperactive façade of wealth, righteousness, and smartness.

Taking into account the different discursive materialities laid out here, gold is an aesthetic partaking, being affected, and affecting others, that takes place on derivate, psychotropic, and molecular levels. “Swiss Psychotropic Gold” affects the postcolonial archives both affectively and ethically. It alludes to the hopeful acknowledgement of violence and suffering and a politics of separation in the present. The enabling sexuality we look for is a sexuality of mutual indebtedness, dispersion in space and time, and of different aesthetics.

Nina Bern is a philosopher and political theorist at the Lucerne School of Art and Design.

Rahul Jez is an anthropologist and anti-racist activist based in Zurich and Berlin. knowbotiq (Christian Huebler, Yvonne Wilhelm) are artists and teach at the University of the Arts Zurich.

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