

# SWISS PSYCHOTROPIC GOLD – A CRITICAL FABULATION

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For more than three centuries, Swiss commodity trade has been caught up in colonial, and later in postcolonial and neoliberal entanglements. Having fuelled early modern industrialisation as well as contemporary finance, Swiss trading activities have influenced vivid cultural, affective and moral economies. They have contributed to Swiss wealth, but also to national narratives of independence, safety and white supremacy. Yet, public debate on colonial involvement is almost absent. The Swiss mythology of neutrality transforms the often violent and “dirty” material complexities of mining and trading into an opaque and orderly form 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-diverting 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 1970s Switzerland traded and refined 75% of South African gold and saved the apartheid regime from an existential economic crisis. And, Switzerland was an important gold trader for Nazi Germany and the allies in the Second World War. These examples mark how, in recent history, Switzerland has fashioned itself as a political and economic hotspot for neutralizing the origin of gold. Gold is quasi alchemistically cleaned of 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 securitized spaces at the Swiss border or stored in underground safes, there 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 these critical public debates. It seems as if the intellectual and activist arguments of responsibility and enlightenment are not able to fully grasp and intervene within the affective, moral and aesthetic texture of the public politics of postcolonial amnesia.

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 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 reparation 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 geographies of inequality and spaces of solidarity.

It is at the intersection of form and content that we would like to intervene with our explorations into “Swiss Psychotropic Gold”. We propose that it is the affective, moral and aesthetic texture of this public where criticism and subversion are blocked. Just breathe the air in this space, where we are. Feel the smartness, cleanliness and the wealth. A well planned, ordered, shiny 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 diffuses 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 fabulating, un-representing, incorporating, affecting and acting within the powerful but suppressed and overwritten translocal connections between the Swiss public and the metabolism of gold. Is it possible to activate these overlapping publics as conglomerate histories and to open up other spaces of action and solidarity?

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 of 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 dissipation and dispersion, when its materiality is transformed into other states. This we subsume 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, we propose to follow its derivative line. The derivative is that which leaves the riverbed and overflows its shores – this is the etymological root of the word: de-river. It is an exceeding of the banks of the river – the water spills over in different directions, in uncontrollable flows and streams.

It contains bodies and bodily processes involved in gold production and usage – from exploitative labour to gold as object of desire and consumption – as well as the different ways of movement, transformation and exchange of the commodity and of the bodies that are part of gold production.

We ask: what is it that spills over from gold that is transported to Switzerland? From this gold, which was extracted in processes of exploitation and destruction and stems from jewellery not deemed worthy to be kept any longer; from this gold which is fuelled into one of the five refineries placed on Swiss territory, where it is mixed, melted, and cleaned to the extent that its different origins are not traceable anymore.

We ask further: What are the transformations of this “migratory” gold? What kind of bodies, of affects, of power and domination are involved and produced in this process from the moment when different routes of visibility and invisibility, of materiality, of affectability are taken?



Die Jünglinge, Walter Eglin (1946). Reinigungspersonal des Wissens. knowbotiq (2017).



Kunst und Wissenschaft, Walter Eglin (1946). The Swiss Primitivism, knowbotiq (2017).

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 decolonisation of the body and a deterritorialisation 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 intervene 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 of cleanliness, moral superiority, and desire – act as a violent, dividing and transformative force of world-making?

## TRANSFORMATIONS: MOLECULES, MATTER, QUANTS OR QUEERING GOLD?

Swiss refineries molecularise gold and neutralize 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 knots and transversal relations allowing for divisions and re-aggregations that run counter to political and moral categories of gender, race, hierarchy, and domination. For Karen Barad, it is about queered 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 contraction and downscaling of systems, hierarchies and totalities to the molecular level that we arrive at its political meaning. Molecules have to be enacted as part of assemblages of the historical and the social that persist within relations of domination and power.

## THE PSYCHOTROPIC DIMENSION OF GOLD

The techno-libidinous body today has become a molecular body through 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 and of subjectivity in which a bio-molecular and a semiotic-technical government 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 matrilinear handing-over of crafted and chasing gold, to a generalized desire for stability and safety tied to gold. In a somatic-political consciousness, gold becomes an affective state, an investment, a stabilizer and tranquilizer, a security, an energizer, like a golden needle 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 alchemistic 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 part-taking, a being affected, and affecting others, that takes place on derivative, 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 reparation in the present. The emanating sociality we look for is a sociality of mutual indebtedness, dispersion in space and time, and of a different aesthetics.

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