

Molecular Fabulation—A Practice of Criticism with Materialities and in Collaborations:
The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining by knowbotiq et al.

(**Abb.**) A bright exhibition space with installative ensembles: A group of information stands presents collaged elements from online databases and image archives concerning Swiss history and culture—graphics, 3-D models, documentary illustrations, and image photos from tourism advertising—that are arranged in exploding displays, so to speak. At the center of the space, Plexiglas cubes with fragrance atomizers, a blue pharmaceutical bottle with a pipet, and terrycloth objects are reminiscent of the atmosphere of a beauty/wellness salon; a platform with meditation cushions as well as a Plexiglas lounge hung vertically in the space are relics from or utensils for wellness treatments. There are tablets in the space and on the walls presenting videos. (**Abb.**) The wallpapered walls are defined by the repetition of kaleidoscopically arranged elements that were taken from the corporate websites of Swiss refineries, such as gold bars from Argor Heraeus, one of, as its website explains, “Switzerland’s most prominent precious metal refineries” and whose “brand is recognized worldwide.”¹ Placed next to the gold bars is a logo consisting of two snow-covered mountains, a golden hard shell case, mechanical elements, and incantory formulaic scraps of sentences from the refineries’ image campaigns, such as: “Seeking maximum purity,” “Refining / Transformation,” “for a long-term industrial vision,” or “We are the golden link for our customer’s metal.”

The ornamental structure of the wallpaper holds the exhibition together, joins it to become an environment,² and at the same time reflects on the assembling technique. This combines various research strategies, with the result with traditional and experimental techniques come to bear, for instance literature and Internet research, conversations, interviews, but also field recordings, closed readings, or self-historization. The research is communicated through objects, materials, and practices that have an affective, sensorial effect and address visitors to the exhibition at an acoustic, visual, and olfactory level.

¹ <https://www.suissegold.ch/en/product/argor-heraeus-10-gram-multigram-gold-bar> (accessed September 8, 2019).

² According to Allan Kaprow, visitors in an environment are part of the installation and are invited to “recreate and continue the work’s inherent processes.” Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966), p. 184.

With the exhibition *The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining: 'What is your mission'?* presented in Zurich in 2017, knowbotiq continued its inquiries, begun in 2016, into the translocal commodity trade with gold with a specific focus on the role of Switzerland in this value-added chain in the form of “performative settings and the healing of post/colonial amnesia.”³ The exhibition, aesthetic articulations of the investigations by the artist duo, is associated with a multiplicity of other performance and time-based formats, such as sound collages, videos, performances, lectures, or texts. The events taking place as part of the exhibition and in the scope of the supporting program include a *molecular listening session* with DJ Fred Hystère and Nina Bandi, a *golden acupuncture/charming the ghost points* with Martina Buzzi, a *meditation on pure gold* with Gabriel Flückiger, and finally a *Conversation between Rohit Jain and knowbotiq: Swiss Psychotropic Gold and latent archives*. The artist duo makes these different parts of the project available on its website. The (re)presentation of the various aesthetic updates to the investigations and fictionalizing documentations of gold do not convey a causal narration along a direct line of reasoning; rather, a newly assembled image of a postcolonial Switzerland develops that is invisible and remains fragmentary. The materialities of the (re)presentation molecularize the not immediately perceptible Swiss colonialism without colonies;⁴ the colonial enmeshment of Switzerland does not hereby disappear into the imperceptible but becomes palpable in material traces. In the following, I would like to reflect on and theorize over this molecular fabulation in terms of its context.

Molecular Fabulation

With *fabulation*, knowbotiq affirms a mode of speaking that is discredited and suppressed in the universal structure of reason; however, it is rendered visible by feminist, postcolonial, and queer theories as an epistemologically critical practice.⁵ By calling their technique *molecular fabulation*, knowbotiq links the aesthetic

³ Corner College, Zurich, September 10–October 8, 2017. <https://corner-college.com/Kollaborateure/600> (accessed May 3, 2019).

⁴ Cf. Patricia Purtschert, Barbara Lüthi, and Francesca Falk, eds., *Postkoloniale Schweiz: Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne Kolonien* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012).

⁵ Marc Siegel, “Gossip ist fabelhaft: Queere Gegenöffentlichkeiten und ‘Fabulation’,” *Texte zur Kunst* 61 (2006), *Gossip*, pp. 68–79.

technique of narration with critical reflections on and analyses of political occurrences.

The American literary critic and historian Robert Scholes described the concept of fabulation as an experimental literary form that distances itself from realism and in which the poetic discourse and historical facts converge. "Reality is too subtle for realism to catch it. It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, by fabulation, we may open toward a reality that will come as close to it as human ingenuity may come."⁶ More recently, Donna Haraway helped draw renewed attention to fabulation. In her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, she characterizes the narrative style as "multispecies storytelling" and compares this with games of string figures. Haraway looks for "real stories that are also speculative fabulations and speculative realisms. ... SF is a sign for science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact, and also, string figures. Playing games of string figures is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, ..."⁷

Molecular as the adjectival modifier of fabulation, on the other hand, brings about a conceptual connection to the considerations of Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik that developed in conversations with social activists, party representatives, or intellectuals during their journey through Brazil after two decades of military dictatorship and in a time of incipient micropolitical vitality. The *molecular revolution* is characterized by a resistant process of permanent differentiation/singularization.⁸ Whereas Guattari and Rolnik speak of a molecular *revolution*, at the same time Guattari establishes: "[W]e have to stop thinking about the relation between autonomy and large-scale social struggles in terms of a dualist logic ... in any case, the political dimension drifts toward a micropolitical and analytic dimension."⁹ For him, the molecular revolution is

⁶ Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979) quoted in Richard T. Gray, *Ghostwriting: W. G. Sebald's Poetics of History*, *New Directions in German Studies* 20 (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 242.

⁷ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 10.

⁸ In *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, the authors write: "The attempt at social control on a world scale through the production of subjectivity clashes with considerable factors of resistance from processes of permanent differentiation that I would call 'molecular revolution'." Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 61. The book is a kind of travelogue that is based on audio recordings. While some passages include the name of the author, others do not, which underscores the collective-collaborative thought process.

⁹ Guattari, in *ibid.*, p. 428.

not a “slogan or a program, it’s something that I feel, that I live, in meetings, in institutions, in affects, and also through some reflections.”¹⁰ For “the enemy is to be found not only in the dominant imperialisms, but also in our own allies, in ourselves, in this insistent re-embodiment of the dominant models not only in the most dearly loved political parties or in the leaders who defend us in the best possible way, but also in our own attitudes, on the most diverse occasions.”¹¹

As is known, this reflection on the molecular corresponds with the considerations that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari differentiated in *A Thousand Plateaus*. According to the authors, “[e]very society, and every individual, are thus plied by both segmentarities simultaneously: one *molar*, the other *molecular*.”¹² These segmentarities do not have “the same relations or the same nature or even the same type of multiplicity,” yet they cannot be separated from one another. “[T]hey coexist, cross over into each other” and “are always in presupposition. In short, everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a *macropolitics* and a *micropolitics*.”¹³

With these literary-poetic and philosophical-political references, molecular fabulation does not communicate aesthetic as an isolated sphere, but as a practice that traverses numerous fields of knowledge and thus involves “ethico-political implications” and calls for “responsibility of the creative instance with regard to the thing created.”¹⁴ Such responsibility becomes discernible in knowbotiq’s specific methods and forms of presentation, in queer-feminist, postcolonial, as well as micropolitical theory-practice: project realization develops in participative processes of heterogenous media-based assemblages that do not solely incorporate objects, but likewise artists and people engaged in the cultural sector. The latter do not present themselves as legitimizing voices that embody the media productions of the participants, but instead, like the other material actants, fabulation, like in a string

¹⁰ Guattari, in *ibid.*, p. 457. Guattari and Rolnik do not have their eye on *the* (political) revolution but on *revolutionary microprocesses*. These require specific spaces that are contrary to dominant temporalization and do not correspond with the nature of social spaces. Revolutionary microprocesses become effective physically-sensorially. “[A]n individual’s relation with music or painting can stimulate a totally new process of perception and sensibility.” *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum International, 1987), p. 235.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paula Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 107.

figure game “hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, ...”¹⁵ This practice of knowledge does not subordinate itself either to the binary distribution/division of art and science or to that of subject and object, but rather develops sensory-micropolitical practices and material-affective structures of thinking and doing in the macropolitically organized apparatus of knowledge.

My reading of aesthetic formulations and verbal observations on the range of topics concerning gold introduced in the following, as well as other contributions in the present publication, take up the threads that are presented, communicate the aesthetic-epistemic, knowledge-policy-related dimension of *molecular fabulation*, not for the purpose of revealing a narration that has purportedly been written down or lending the heterogenous material legible visibility, but instead to generate further attachment sites.

The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining

knowbotiq describes its investigations into gold with the words: “The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining fabulates about commodity trading and the refining of gold. Narratives on violence, on access to black bodies, on derivative enrichment, on psychotropic energies, and on reciprocal debts molecularize on the shiny, gently protective metal. Calvinist gold is never shown (publicly). It undergoes continuous cycles of purification and refinement, processes of repeated melting (jewelry)—thus all of this also makes it a suitable means of erasing or anonymizing any traces of violence and holding the ‘healing’ of post/colonial amnesia in abeyance.”¹⁶

Despite all of knowbotiq’s analytical and historical interest in gold, the installation does not exhaust itself in elucidating gold’s value-added chain in connection with Switzerland, even though this is an important aspect.¹⁷ The projects of *The Swiss*

¹⁵ Haraway 2016 (see note 7), p. 10.

¹⁶ knowbotiq (Christian Huebler, Yvonne Wilhelm): <http://knowbotiq.net/psygold/> (accessed April 29, 2019).

¹⁷ Besides China, the United States, and Germany, as a result of bullion trading Switzerland is a key player in global trade. Four of the largest refineries in the world are located in Switzerland. Christian Huebler points out that in its pivotal position in the bullion trade, Switzerland does not have to declare the country of origin of the gold to be refined. “[W]hether it is blood gold, from which mines, whether there is child labor involved, whether, at the time, it was South African apartheid gold.” Interview with knowbotiq (Yvonne Wilhelm & Christian Huebler) by Dimitrina Sevova and Alan Roth, *in the context of their exhibition at Corner College, The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining: What is your mission?*, September 10–October 8, 2017 (unpublished manuscript), pp. 1–10, esp. p. 4.

Psychotropic Gold Refining draw attention to the participating bodies, to the violence inherent in gold trading,¹⁸ and links the toxic aspects that are inscribed, for instance, in the video *The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining*¹⁹ with the affecting, libidinous power of gold, which permeates everything, is molecular, and poses questions about desire: “We were increasingly interested in dispersed gold, in the desire and libido for gold, the affect from gold, and gold as a drug.”²⁰

Gold communicates itself as a *pharmakon*, that is, as poison and remedy all at once, in the project’s various forms of articulation by knowbotiq’s methods and forms of presentation themselves becoming pharmaceutical: The affecting power of the fragmented, assembled, ornamental material, which closes in on us in the videos and sound works in particular but likewise in the pattern-like repetitions in dynamic rhythmizations and engage us immersively, interlocks critically distanced evaluation/passing judgement and affirmative-emotional identification. Gold takes effect in its affective, material, sensory, and cultural aspects as we also encounter them in everyday life. Such as when the walls of massage and beauty treatment spaces are painted gold, the golden Lindt rabbit convinces us of its premium and rich cocoa content, Viagra Gold contributes “to the natural reaction of the male body to sexual stimulation,”²¹ or the Gold Card promises to be more than just a mere credit card and delights “demanding customers” with numerous “value-added services” and presents those “who want more” with the prospect of “golden days.”²² Accordingly, the acupuncture treatments and meditation workshops in the exhibition are not designed to be ironically distancing, but instead provide space for the longing for healing and purity. The investigations into gold become effective, like the *pharmakon*, in a dichotomous way. Plato had attempted to master the dichotomy “by asserting its definition into simple, clear-cut oppositions: good and evil, inside and outside, true

¹⁸ The extraction of gold is associated with numerous destructive factors. Forests are decimated, a tremendous amount of water consumption is required, highly toxic cyanides are used for leaching that enter hydrological cycles, indigenous peoples are robbed of their living environment, human rights are violated in a large number of mines with the result that inhumane working conditions and child labor belong to the order of the day.

¹⁹ On this, see Yvonne Volkart’s contribution “Mobilizing and Invoking: knowbotiq’s Video *Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining* as a Gold-Evocation Machine” in the present volume.

²⁰ Huebler, in Interview with knowbotiq 2017 (see note 17), p. 5.

²¹ <https://365-pharm.com/de/viagra-gold> (accesses May 3, 2019).

²² Random quotes from different websites after entering the search string “gold card” on Google.

and false, essence and appearance.”²³ knowbotiq does not follow this resolution of the dichotomous; on the contrary, the exhibition *The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining: ‘What is your mission?’* is pervaded by contradictions: the golden acupuncture needle in someone’s arm as the unblocking of the energy flows of traumatic experiences is overlain by the intravenous consumption of heroin and its ability to produce psychotropic effects (**Abb.**). The decorative plastic atomizers with simulated wood grain make reference to the olfactory benefit of essential oils, yet they are filled with minute constituents of henbane, whose neurotoxic effect in higher doses engenders ecstatic projections of stored away experiences. In molecular fabulation, the quasi-alechemistic quest for the “maximum purity” of gold manifests in its pharmaceutical dimension. Fabulation molecularizes body and mine—quotes from theories become suggestive beats in the videos and sound works. “The techno-libidinous body today has become a molecular body through which substances, desires, and affects enter and disperse”²⁴ writes the author collective Bandi, Jain, and knowbotiq. In *molecular fabulation*, gold does not become an *object* that can be examined in an analytical or historicizing way; it proves to be a psychotropic substance. Molecular fabulation is a risky undertaking; it engages in criticism without any guarantee for success. It works with the voids in (western European) archives—the missing voices of the nonrepresented and the oppressed and the resulting impossibility to tell their story. The molecular fabulation of *The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining* does not follow the rules of judgmental, accusatory criticism;²⁵ instead, criticism becomes a practice, a critical fabulation as put forward by Saidiya Hartman.²⁶ Hartman, who concerns herself with Afro-American literature and history and like Scholes explains the traditional distinction between fiction and history as the separation of the representation of the factual and the representation of the imaginable as untenable, attempts to encounter the limits of archives by means of

²³ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 103.

²⁴ Nina Bandi, Rohit Jain, knowbotiq (Christian Huebler, Yvonne Wilhelm), “Swiss Psychotropic Gold—A Critical Fabulation,” *A*Magazine: *Art *Africa *Analysis* (June 2017), p. 30.

²⁵ On this, see Isabell Lorey, “Critique and Category: On the Restriction of Political Practice through Recent Theorems of Intersectionality, Interdependence and Critical Whiteness Studies (October 2008). <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/lorey/en.html> (accessed September 15, 2019).

²⁶ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008), pp. 1–14.

critical fabulation.²⁷ Unlike Scholes, she does not assume to be able to actually grasp reality. Rather, by writing a story about two young female slaves who were killed, she attempts to enact the impossibility of restoring the lives of the enslaved.²⁸

Taking up Hartman's considerations, knowbotiq sees the technique of fabulation as another way of dealing with institutionalized archives and the history of knowledge: "What is fixed in the archives, according to her [Hartman], is mostly a paternalistic white view on what has happened. We have to affect what's inside the archive, what is not explicit in them but can be found between the lines, if you have another gaze on it, another sensitivity. What is written is mostly written by white male people, but there are other histories, and we have to find them by means of critical fabulation."²⁹

The molecular fabulation of *The Swiss Psychotropic Gold Refining* takes place as a practice of criticism in perceiving, experiencing, and thinking with materialities, in collaborations, in relationships, and in responsibilities. This critically fabulating practice does not pass judgement *on* anything from the standpoint of a sovereign subject; rather, it is performative through its work on perception and through materialities. It enables participation that is more than humane, since it is not primarily about the participative share of the recipients, but likewise about the performance of the materialities, the things, the sounds, the rhythms, or the meanings of the media assemblage. As a result, molecular fabulation communicates itself as relational, partial, and pharmaceutical. It speaks of the uncircumventable limitation of any narration, and reflects on the problematic nature of (micropolitical) narration, of producing new (even macropolitically effective) connections and what is nonsayable/nonvisible.

²⁷ "I longed to write a new story, one unfettered by the constraints of the legal documents and exceeding the restatement and transpositions, which comprised my strategy for disordering and transgressing the protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements and which enabled me to augment and intensify its fictions." Ibid., p. 9.

²⁸ Saidiya Hartman states: "The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration." Ibid., p. 11.

²⁹ Wilhelm, in Interview with knowbotiq 2017 (see note 17), p. 8.