

# Swiss Psychotropic Gold

**F**or more than three centuries, Swiss commodity trade has been caught up in colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal entanglements. Having fuelled early modern industrialisation, as well as contemporary finance, Swiss trading activities have influenced 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 many diversions in and out of Switzerland—as a series of transformative immediations of primary materials, values and affects. Currently, more than 50 percent of global gold is refined in

Switzerland, including gold, appropriated during the recent commodity wars in Central Africa. In the 1970s, Switzerland traded and refined 75 percent of South African gold and in doing so saved the apartheid regime from an existential economic crisis. Switzerland was also an important gold trader for Nazi Germany during World War II. These examples mark how, in recent history, Switzerland has fashioned itself as a political and economic hotspot for neutralising the origin of gold. Gold is quasi-alchemically 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, refined in securitised spaces at the Swiss border or stored in underground safes, there is also visible gold: Swiss involvement in the global commodity and gold trade has been investigated and brought to light by recent NGO reports and historical research. Yet, despite the moral grammar of humanitarianism and justice, the lamented violence is strangely neutralised 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.

We are interested in understanding and opening up a postcolonial public, which transgresses the binaries of 'visible and invisible', 'righteous versus dubious', 'the clean versus the dirty', and 'the refined versus the raw'. To that end, we 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 of histories and materialities to open up other spaces of action which are not bound with traditional accounts of agency? *Swiss Psychotropic Gold* focuses on the moment when gold loses its stable form, in moments of dissipation and dispersion, when its materiality is transformed into other states that we subsume under its molecular, psychotropic, and derivative dimensions.

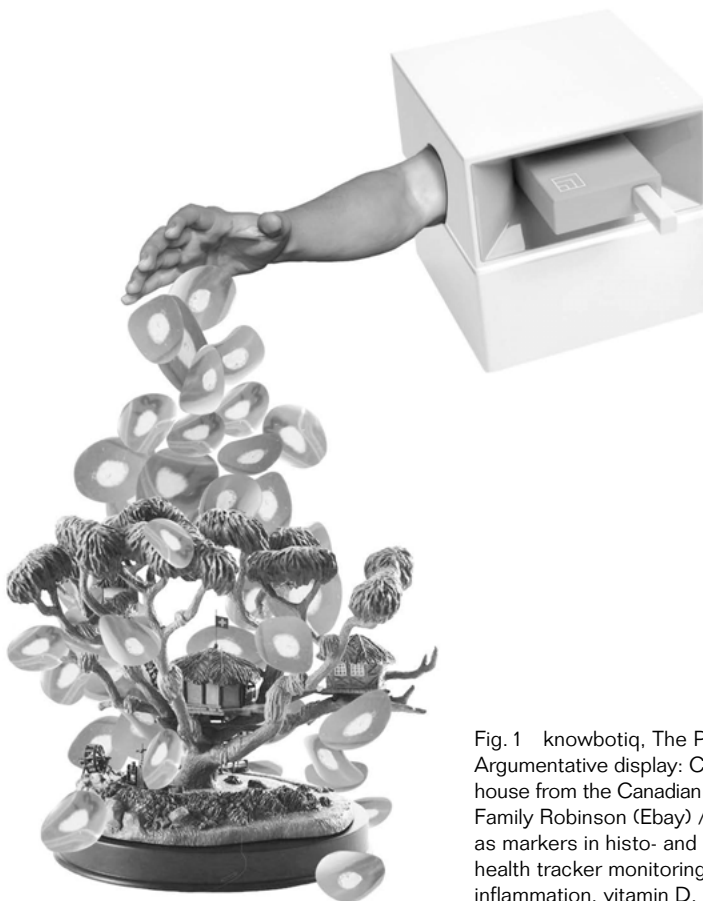


Fig. 1 knowbotiq, The Puppets (2016); Argumentative display: Ceramic model of the tree house from the Canadian TV series (1974) *Swiss Family Robinson* (Ebay) / Gold nanoparticles used as markers in histo- and cyto-chemistry / molecular health tracker monitoring testosterone, fertility, inflammation, vitamin D.



Fig. 2 Aerial view of illegal gold mining in Arimu, Guyana, South America.



### Transformations: Matter, Molecules, Quantum; or Queering Gold?

Swiss refineries molecularise gold and neutralise its origins. Liberated from their histories, molecules of gold transform from violence into virtuality. The molecular implies knotted trajectories and trans-versal relations, allowing for divisions and 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 via 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 the historical and the social, which persist within power relations.

### 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 the bio-molecular and the semiotic-technical government of sexual subjectivity coincide. Gold as a material-discursive metabolism involves bodies, technology, aesthetics, psychotropic substances, hormones, which fuel the affective assemblage that surround and permeate gold. From drugged miners



and psychotropic traders to the matrilinear handing-over of crafted gold, to the generalised desire for stability and safety tied to gold. In a somatic-political consciousness, gold becomes an affective state, an investment, a stabiliser and tranquiliser, a security, an energiser, like the 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 alchemical promise of eternal youth has transformed into the discrete but hyperactive façade of wealth, righteousness, and smartness.

### **The Derivative Line of Gold**

In order to go beyond ‘gold’ and trace its different materialities, we follow its derivatives. The derivative leaves the river 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. Derivatives contain bodies and bodily processes involved in gold production and usage – from exploitative labor to gold as object of desire and consumption. They also include different ways of movement, transformation, and exchange of the commodity and of the bodies that are part of gold production. What is the spillover from gold that is transported to Switzerland? Gold, which was extracted through exploitative and destructive forces or stems from jewellery deemed unworthy to be owned any longer. Gold, which passes through one of the five refineries on Swiss territory, where it is mixed, melted,





Fig. 3 knowbotiq, Swiss Psychotropic Gold\_Molecular Refinery (2020); digital video, 16min30, video still, in collaboration with anna frei, raw forest (sound).

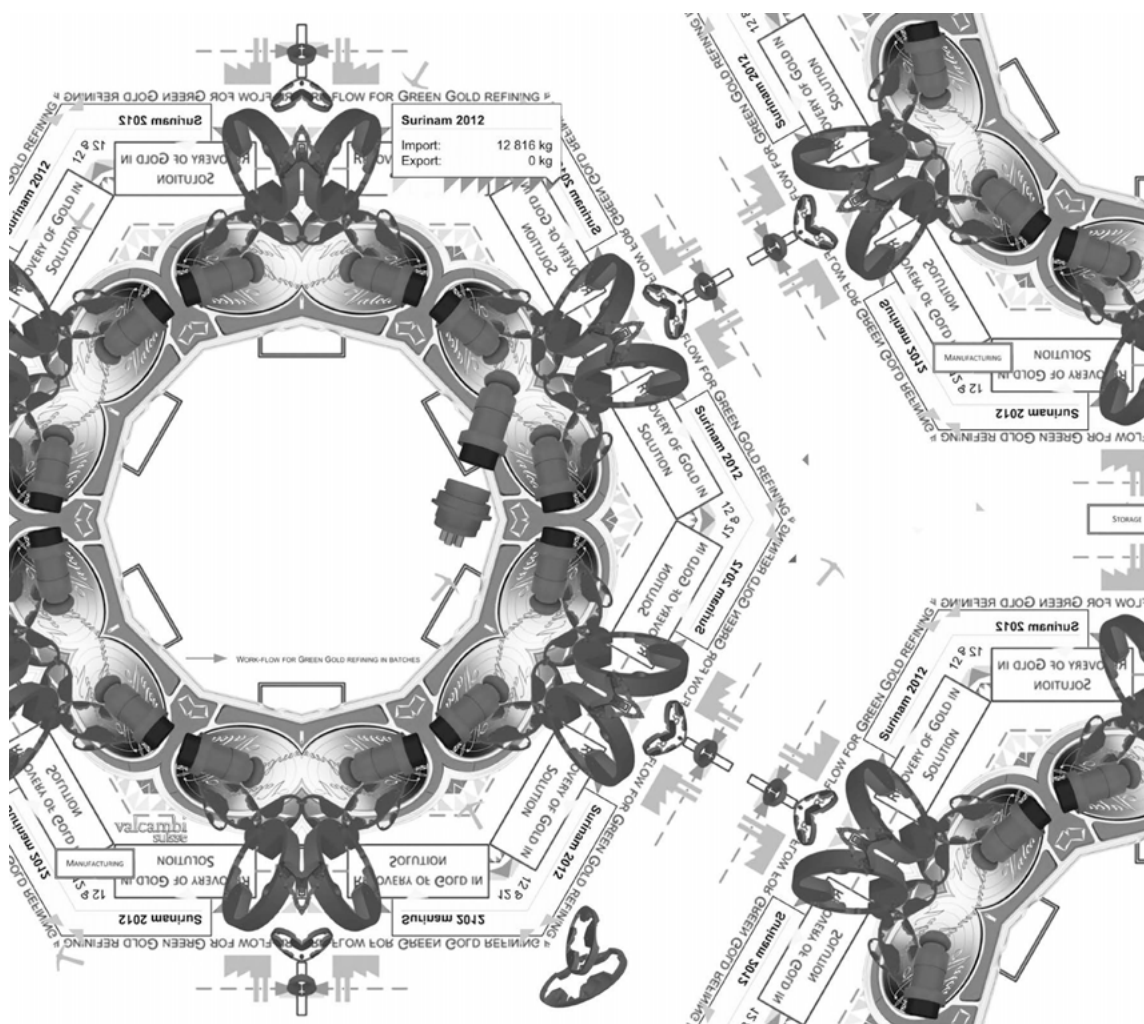
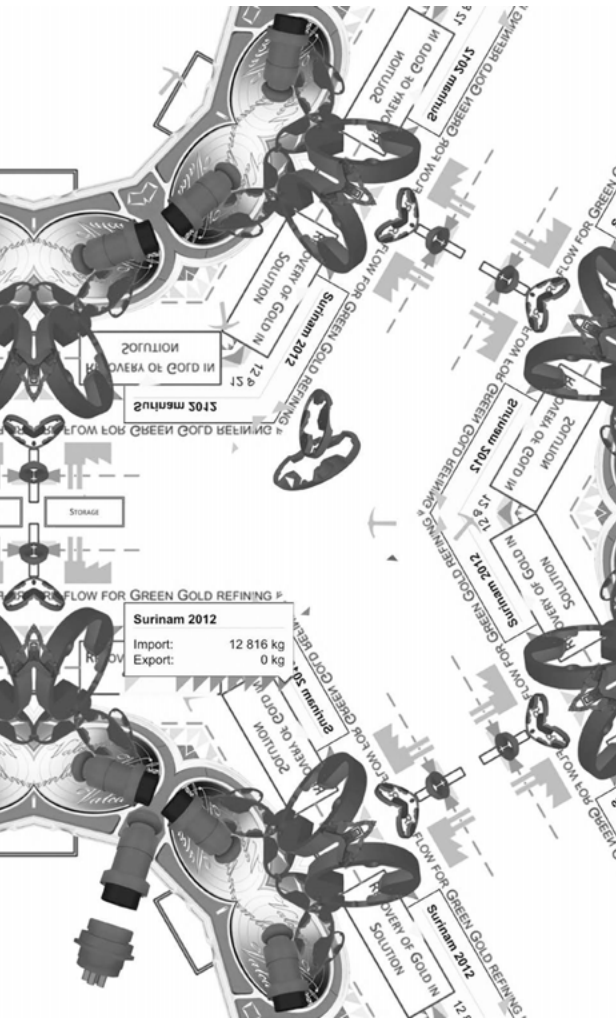


Fig. 4 knowbotiq, The Virtualities of the Swiss Refineries—Valcambi (2017), <https://www.valcambi.com/>, wallpaper (detail), digital print.



and cleaned to the extent that its different origins are not traceable anymore. What are the transformations this ‘migratory’ gold undergoes? What kind of bodies, affects and powers are involved and produced when different routes of visibility and invisibility, of materiality, and affectability are taken?

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 molecular, psychotropic, and derivative levels. *Swiss Psychotropic Gold* affects the postcolonial archives both affectively and ethically. It alludes to the hopeful acknowledgement of violence and a politics of reparation in the present. Through this project we are looking for a different aesthetics bringing forth a sociality of reciprocal indebtedness dispersed across space and time.

### Diffraction Interventions

When thinking of possible interventions into this amnesia, the notion of the ‘assemblage’ helps understand that there is no easy position from where one can act. Additionally, it is also unclear who is to be addressed. In thinking about possible interventions, however, it is crucial to conceive of postcolonial amnesia not only as an analytic concept, but also imagine the transformative possibilities, such as those opened up by a feminist materialist stance.

Donna Haraway was the first to explicitly think about “diffraction” as a mode of thinking, critique, and knowing. Diffraction, a term from physics to describe the conduct of waves when they encounter an object,



is an alternative to reflection or reflexivity which, according to Haraway, “invites [...] the illusion of an essential, fixed position, while diffraction trains us to more subtle vision”<sup>1</sup>. The position from which we see, act, and think is questioned. Questioning the path of the enlightened subject, this departure becomes more important when seen in relation to the post-colonial amnesia. Haraway also says “[d]iffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction.”<sup>2</sup> Interference maps the effects of difference, as opposed to difference itself. Or, as Karen Barad would say, it is a tracing of “what comes to matter.” Karen Barad brings diffraction closer to interference. Interfering in the historical implies questioning the very terms of its time. It then becomes not only a question of subjectivity and position but also of history and time. A time that is non-linear, not synchronous, and not disassociated from space and matter. The coming to matter of time. A time that is out of joint. A multiplicity of times unfolding, crossing, and touching at the same time. As Barad says, “[...] there is no moving beyond, no leaving the ‘old’ behind. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then. There is nothing that is new; there is nothing that is not new.”<sup>3</sup>

Tracing spacetime-matterings—a neologism introduced by Barad where she proposes space, time and matter as a single onto-epistemological entity—allows us to think through processes of knowing/unknowing together with what has been in the past and what is forming anew. It is more than the Bergsonian duration and multiplicity of time because the unfolding in Barad’s term contains the formation and unformation of knowledge that goes with time.

The question, however, still remains: how does one intervene, how does one act without the ‘I’? Instead of reflecting on the past, Karen Barad proposes re-turning, not in the sense of going back to a past, but by “returning it over and over again—iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities”<sup>4</sup> or spacetime-matterings. Barad also brings up the term of responsibility or rather response-ability. Thus, with these concepts of subjectivity and time in mind, how can we think of the term responsibility, in a way such that it is relevant when it comes to think through this amnesia that has taken hold of us? A responsibility that does not presuppose classic liberal contractual relations of obligation and duty, which are themselves part of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity.

For Barad it is a responsibility preceding “the intentionality of consciousness. Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world’s on-going intra-active becoming and not-becoming.”<sup>5</sup> However, this does not mean that there is no work, no reworking of responsibility over and over again, but it is a reworking without the sense of entitlement that foregrounds the metropolitan perspective<sup>6</sup> (Edward Said), which forestalls these processes of reworking, or in Gloria Wekker’s terms, a reworking that does not perpetuate society’s state of being at ease with “white innocence”<sup>7</sup>.

### Derivative Openings

To end this text, we would like to return to the concept of the derivative in an attempt to steer the question of time towards continuation, continuity, and persistence in tackling the viscosity of the ‘postcolonial amnesia’.

While diffraction is about positionality, different times and places, about finding a line of thought as a line of flight that does not imply reflexiveness and preliminary recognition of the self, the derivative bears the possibility of movement, to go somewhere from somewhere without defining the place now and the place there. Is it an escape route? To go back to the metaphor of the river, which is overflowing (*dérivé*) with water, which surpasses its shores in order to multiply, to continue in different streams and textures. The water is independent and of untraceable origins, and still, it is the ‘same’ water that is spilling over. Where and how is this transformation happening? The derivative of gold is important because it is concerned with the ‘migratory’ paths that gold as a commodity takes on its way to and from Swiss refineries.

Besides diffraction, the derivative is maybe one of the best ways to think about intervention. Finding space, time, and the possibility to transform, or better still, realising that it is not necessarily about finding a space as a spatial location, but more as a derivative line that opens up. For Randy Martin, this could be found in what he called a “derivative sociality”: “[T]he intriguing feature of derivative logics is what they leave behind—which turns out to be most of the networked and organized sociality, the precarious materiality crafted and created by the practitioners engaged in these forms. For better and for ill, the derivative flows from decolonization and takes the undoing of what was whole, the unbounding of what was enclosed, the bundling of what was scattered and shred as its conditions of possibility.”<sup>8</sup>

Extract of Nina Bandi, Rohit Jain, knowbotiq, “Swiss Psychotropic Gold—a Critical Fabulation”, 451–660, and Nina Bandi, “Intervening into the Post/colonial Amnesia: a Diffractive Reading of Time, History and Memory”, 7606–7920, both in: knowbotiq & Nina Bandi (eds), “Swiss Psychotropic Gold”, (Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2020), <http://swisspsygold.knowbotiq.net/>

#### Swiss Psychotropic Gold\_Molecular Refinery

<http://knowbotiq.net/psygold/>

- 1 Donna Haraway, ‘The Promises of Monsters: a Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others’, in: Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 70.
- 2 Haraway 2004, 70.
- 3 Karen Barad (2014), ‘Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart’, in: *Parallax*, 20:3, 168–187, 168.
- 4 Barad 2014, 168.
- 5 Barad 2014, 183.
- 6 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books 1994), xxiii.
- 7 Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, (Durham and London: Duke 2016)
- 8 Randy Martin, *Knowledge Ltd: Toward a Social Logic of the Derivative*, (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press 2015), 206.