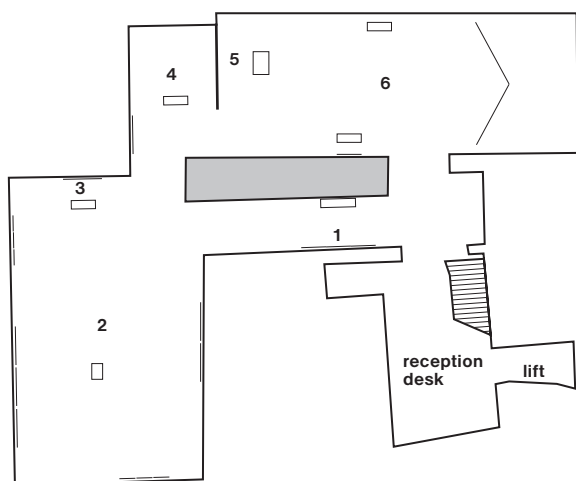




SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR

Denise Bertschi with Aline Motta and Pedro Zylbersztajn

21.09–10.11.24



Introduction to the exhibition

Denise Bertschi's artistic research lies at the intersection of visual culture, architecture and history. Through the prism of Switzerland's colonial involvement in extra-European expansion, she critically examines not only archives, but also landscapes and the built environment. The exhibition *Spatial Convers(i)or* is the fruit of several years of research between Brazil and Switzerland, investigated as part of a doctoral thesis – "Echoing Swiss Coloniality. Land, Archive and Visuality between Brazil and Switzerland" (2024)– at EPFL's Laboratoire pour les Arts et pour les Sciences and a residency at CAN. This exhibition is not only an opportunity for the artist to present the resulting artistic production, but also to launch two invitations, one to Pedro Zylbersztajn and the other to Aline Motta, both artists residing in São Paulo and whose practices correspond to her own. In order to embark on this multi-layered and cross-sourced exhibition, it is worth reviewing some of the historical facts that will be addressed in the works and that link Brazil and Switzerland, and more specifically the state of Bahia and the City of Neuchâtel.

During the 18th century, Brazil was under the domination of the Kingdom of Portugal, which for almost 200 years had been developing a trade that would later be called "triangular", in which enslaved people from the African continent were exchanged for European products in Africa, and then for raw materials – which they were forced to extract – on the American continent. It was during this period that Neuchâtel-born David de Pury began trading, first in London, then in Lisbon, where he specialized in the import of *Pau-Brasil*, a precious wood, and diamonds; his activities were closely linked to the enslavement and forced labor of men, women and children. When he died in 1786, without an heir, he bequeathed his immense fortune to his native Neuchâtel, which built several administrative buildings and developed educational projects. 80 years later, when work was completed on the Seyon river, which runs through the center of the town, a commemorative square and statue were erected in his name.

In 1818, in the Brazilian state of Bahia, the Colônia Leopoldina was founded. After a deforestation operation, it soon became one of the world's largest coffee plantations. Between 1818 and 1888, up to 2,000 enslaved people worked there for a white minority, many of whom were Swiss, particularly from the Neuchâtel region. Two of the largest farms were named Pombal (owned by the Borel family from Neuchâtel) and Helvécia (owned by the Flaach family from Schaffhausen), thus beginning a close shared history between Bahia and Switzerland.

In 1837, after many years spent in Brazil building up his *Aréa Preta* tobacco snuff business in Bahia and assisting the various owners of Colônia Leopoldina

- 1 Denise Bertschi
Helvécia, Brazil, 2017
3 channels video, color, sound, 20'00"
- 2 Denise Bertschi
SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. The Villa of (no) Return, 2024
engraved sequoia wood, analog photograph inkjet print, archive document
- 3 Denise Bertschi
SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. The Cocoa Question, 2024
video, color, sound, 18'00"
- 4 Denise Bertschi & Pedro Zylbersztajn
Export Quality Poetry (1924–2024), 2024
video, color, sound, 28'00", analog photograph inkjet print, edition
- 5 Denise Bertschi
SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. «Maison de Santé», 2024
wallpaper inkjet print, archive documents
- 6 Aline Motta
Filha Natural, 2024
Print on fabric, Plexiglas, video, color, sound, 15'52", edition (one-off)

in their banking dealings, Auguste-Frédérique de Meuron from Neuchâtel left the management of his plantations and Solar do Unhão factory to his nephew James-Ferdinand de Pury and returned to his home town. With the considerable fortune he had amassed, he undertook the construction of the *Maison de Santé de Préfargier*, which was to become the cutting edge of its time in the treatment of mental illness.

Some 30 years later, in 1871, James-Ferdinand de Pury marked his return by building a private mansion on Saint-Nicolas hill in Neuchâtel. On his death, he bequeathed the estate to the city to be used as a museum of ethnography. The de Pury name, through James-Ferdinand but also through David, gave shape to the modern city, leaving its mark through buildings and institutions; without this colonial capital, Neuchâtel would not be the city we know today.

In 1892, Emil Wildberger, originally from Schaffhausen, arrived in Bahia. As a young merchant, he took over the prosperous export house C.F. Keller & Cia, a Swiss cocoa trading company that had been active in Bahia since the early 19th century. As a member of the esteemed cocoa elite and leading exporter, he became Swiss Consul in Bahia, a position later taken by his son, Arnold. They supplied some of their cocoa to the Neuchâtel-based company Chocolat Suchard.

In 1924, Suzano was founded in São Paulo and over the decades became an international pulp and paper company. Today, the company owns vast territories in Brazil, where everything that grows comes from a single tree cloned in millions: the eucalyptus, of which it is the world leader. In the same year, Oswald de Andrade, one of the founders of Brazilian modernism, poet, novelist, playwright and member of the coffee oligarchy, published the *Manifesto da Poesia Pau Brasil*, laying the foundations for a nationalist ideology of poetry influenced by economic growth, making Brazil entry into modernity.

In 2005, the village of Helvécia in the south of the state of Bahia was granted *quilombo* status – the name given to communities whose ancestors were enslaved refugees – which officially gave it special rights, including the right to manage land. This status enabled them to launch a struggle of political resistance against Suzano and the destruction wrought by its infrastructure works on their territory, indigenous vegetation and the soils of the *Mata Atlântica* – the Atlantic forest.

The investigations of Denise Bertschi, Aline Motta and Pedro Zylbersztajn, through their different points of view, reveal mechanisms that are not only at the origin of a capital on which Neuchâtel, Switzerland and more broadly Europe rest, but are also the source and model of our current economy. We can observe a rebound effect between the stories and events that took place in the 18th and 19th centuries between Bahia and Neuchâtel, and the actions of any multinational today. This logic is based on the same principles and their deadly consequences: over-extraction, the denial of environmental justice and even the use of so-called modern slavery, whether forced or debt-induced.

Helvécia, Brazil

Denise Bertschi, 2017

3 channels video, color, sound, 20'00", 2 videos, color, sound, 20'53", MAHN Collection

Collaborations

Concept, camera: Denise Bertschi

Editing: Denise Bertschi, Eliane Bertschi

Color editing: David Röthlisberger

Protagonistes: Helvécia residents who introduced themselves by first name: Daniel, Danilo, Krull, Ze Da Paz

Protagonists (interviews): Balango, Daniel, Tidinha ainsi que Iracema Sulz, Caravelas et Itaberaba Sulz

Traductors on site: Ana Beatriz Henriques, Carol Bento

Translations: Eduardo Simantop, Bianca Góis Barbosa, Jasper Walgrave

Special thanks

Balango, Cocota, Daniel, Danilo, Krull, Tidinha, Tiquila, Toninha, Ze da Paz, ainsi que Carol Bento and Ana Beatriz, Henriques, Salvador, Alessandra Mello Simões Paiva, Ilhéus, Marcelo Rezende, Eduardo Simantop, Felix Toro, Augustin De Tugny

Support

Arquivo Público do Estado da Bahia, Associação Quilombo Helvécia, Bahia, Goethe Institute, Salvador da Bahia, Instituto Geográfico e Histórico da Bahia, Universidade Federal do Sul da Bahia UFSB

Helvécia, Brazil

The ensemble of video works that make up this work is a recording of the testimonies of people living in Helvécia on the site of the former Colônia Leopoldina. Denise Bertschi's research crystallizes around the stories told by the descendants of this *quilombo* at a time when slavery has been abolished and eucalyptus monoculture has replaced coffee. Denise Bertschi seeks to understand how the violent history of a community can survive in its collective memory and attach itself to places that are special to its inhabitants, despite the absence of visible traces. Oral history and its reminiscences enable the past to be interwoven with the present, and fill the gap in archives relating to the people who lived in this colony, particularly those who were enslaved. Helvécia, strongly imbued with the violence of plantation life, is haunted; its collective memory and that of its colonizers are invisible in its landscape, as invisible/invisibilized as Swiss colonial history itself.

SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. The villa of (no) return

SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. The Villa of (no) Return

Denise Bertschi, 2024
engraved sequoia wood, analog photographs inkjet prints, archive document

Sources

– Léo Châtelain, «Plan de la propriété de Mr. James de Pury A St. Nicolas.», Neuchâtel, 1872, MEN Collection (fac-similé)
– Unknown, «Instruction sur la cultivation du Tabac au Brésil», env. 1835, document from the Swiss consular collection in Bahia, Federal Archives of Bern
– Photographs (three tapestry details from the Villa de Pury), Inkjet print, MAHN Collection

Collaborations

Woodworking: Colin Havlicek (Opus Lignum), Guillaume Voegeli, l'Établi Volant, Marc Rinaldi (Rinaldi & Fils)
Print: Nathanael Gautschi (Gautschi Editions)
Framing: Daniel Arnold (Arnold Rahmen)

Special thanks to Martin Jakob and Sebastian Verdon

The elements of this work come from the Villa de Pury, commissioned by James Ferdinand on his return from Brazil. A plan of the park and the original house stands in the middle of the room, while all around are details of the luxurious elements that can still be seen today in the Museum of Ethnography: the exquisite refinement of recently rediscovered tapestries, trompe-l'œil painted faux marble and the pinkish wood of a large sequoia in the park (felled by lightning in 2023), a species prized at the time in pleasure gardens for its rarity and “exoticism”. On the latter, we can decipher the engraved fragments of a document from Bahia’s consular correspondence: a series of instructions for growing tobacco in Brazil. The artist’s work is gradually revealed in successive layers, from the public museum to the prestigious villa, then to the colony and, in the background, to the work of enslaved people. The accumulation of wealth is achieved through a double distancing: first, socially, on the plantation itself, where a hierarchy of beings is based on a violent and rigid system - and then geographically, as the abundance that accumulates only for a few is reinvested elsewhere (to the point of losing trace of its origin).

SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. The Cocoa Question

SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. The Cocoa Question

Denise Bertschi, 2024
video, color, sound, 18'00”

Sources

– «Chocolat Suchard», corporate album «Plantation de Cacao de Emil Wildberger à Bahia/Brésil», early 20th, MAHN, Museum of Art and History, Neuchâtel, Suisse
– «The Cocoa Question», epistolary correspondence between the Swiss Consul General A. Gertsch in Rio de Janeiro and Emil Wildberger, Swiss Consul in Bahia, 1915, Swiss Federal Archives, Bern
– «Au Village du Chocolat», corporate album, Chocolat Suchard Neuchâtel, 1945, City of La Chaux-de-Fonds Library
– «A Casa Cacú. Do tijolo da mansão, ao futuro concreto do arranhar-ceu. Mansão Wildberger dos fundos da igreja, para o noticiário Brasileiro», Rafael Dantas, Skyscraper Blog, Salvador da Bahia, 2007

Collaborations

Sound composition: Ludwig Berger
Color editing: Fabian Steiner (FABUST)

Special thanks to Chantal Lafontant Vallotton (MAHN)

In this video, the artist brings together various sources that bear witness to the political and economic activities of the Wildberger family and the imprint they left on Bahia, with links that extend as far as the Suchard factory in Neuchâtel. Photographs filmed by the artist, depicting work on the Brazilian plantation, are set against more recent images from a Suchard factory advertising film. Superimposed on the photograph are fragments of Emil Wildberger’s 1915 correspondence. The exchange between Wildberger, in his dual role as trader-consul in Bahia, and Gertsch, consul in Rio de Janeiro, reveals their very personal interest in improving trade conditions for cocoa from Brazil to Switzerland as part of the “Kakaofrage” (the cocoa question). Finally, Denise Bertschi’s film taken during a stay in Salvador de Bahia take as its subject the Wildberger Tower, a complex built on the family’s former property that was illegally demolished in 2007. Intended for high-end apartments, the construction was temporarily halted due to risky real estate speculation. The *Mansão Wildberger* skyscraper, the tallest in north-east Brazil, overlooks the entire city and echoes the Wildberger family mausoleum in the nearby German cemetery, which towers above the other tombs. The play of superimpositions highlights the interweaving of politics and economics in relations between the two countries, as well as the ambivalence between the raw material (cocoa beans) in Brazil and the finished product (chocolate) in Switzerland, and the extreme opposition of their contexts.

Export Quality Poetry (1924–2024)

Export Quality Poetry (1924–2024)

Denise Bertschi & Pedro Zylbersztajn, 2024
video, color, sound, 28'00”, analog photographs inkjet prints, edition

Collaborations film

Sound composition: Ludwig Berger
Voices: Marcela Jacobina, Pedro Zylbersztajn
Color editing: Sabina Steiner (FABUST)
Capture assistant: Caio Antonio
Voice recording: Nicholas Rabinovitch

Collaborations publication

Concept, text, images: Denise Bertschi, Pedro Zylbersztajn
Graphic design: Páginas (São Paulo)
External texts contributions: Aline Motta, Daniel Frota de Abreu, Jandir Jr., Walla Capeloto, Zainabu Jallo
Lithography: Marieta Morinc (Bâle)
Print: BUBU (Mönchaltorf, CH)

Special thanks

Alice Noujaim, Angie Vial, Ascanio Cecco, Gabriela Mighali, João Paulo Quintella, Katharina Brandl, Luc Meier, Malu Barsanelli, Nolan Oswald Dennis, Tomás Bartoletti, our guide and companions at the *Parque das Neblinas*.

Soutiens

Bourse de co-création Pro Helvetia Amérique du Sud, La Becque résidence d’artistes

The images shot in this work come mainly from the *Parque das Neblinas* (the park of fog) near São Paulo, owned by the Suzano company and managed by its Ecofuturo institute. We can also observe images shot in Nyon, Switzerland, in an ordinary shopping mall; this is where Suzano has set up its European sales offices. (The spatialization of the global commodities trade is often hidden behind nebulous “non-spaces” on Swiss territory, whose legal framework is more than indulgent to multinationals). This work is the fruit of collaborative research between Denise Bertschi and Pedro Zylbersztajn, who are each interested in their own way in the ideas of consumption and depletion - whether in terms of resources or knowledge - of informational and productive monocultures, and of the infrastructure of export and displacement, as they present themselves for their two countries in their shared history. As Suzano and the *Manifesto da Poesia Pau Brasil* - by Oswald de Andrade, one of the most important figures of Brazilian modernism - celebrate their 100th anniversary this year, the two artists recount how today’s capitalist politics of extraction and monoculture eerily echo the post-colonial politics of the early 20th century, and the colonial and enslavement politics before them, in what seems a long chain of nightmarish coincidences that Brazil has lived through for centuries under the shadow of the climate crisis.

SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. *Maison de "Santé"*

SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR. *Maison de "Santé"*

Denise Bertschi, 2024

wallpaper inject print, archive documents

Sources

– « Maison de Santé de Préfargier. Pour le traitement des Maladies Mentale Pour les deux Sexes. Fondée par M. Auguste de Meuron. Construit sur le dessins et sous la direction de F. Philippon, architecte, de 1844 à 1848 » Paris, 1849, Archives of the state of Neuchâtel

– Views of the Préfargier Nursing Home, lithographic plan by Bontemps and views by Bachelier, late 19th century, Archives of the state of Neuchâtel

Special thanks

Salomon Rizzo, Géraldine Galfetti and their colleagues at the Neuchâtel State Archives. Thanks to Marcelo Rezende, director of the Bahia Museum of Modern Art.

The marbled wallpaper motif in this work is taken from the second and third cover pages of the volume on display in the showcase, which is a collection of documents concerning the *Maison de Santé de Préfargier*. This clinic, founded by Auguste-Ferdinand de Meuron on his return from Brazil, still exists; it has become the cantonal psychiatric center of Neuchâtel, (the foundation is led by the family's descendants). And in Bahia, de Meuron's former factory at Solar do Unhão has become the Museum of Modern Art, created in 1959 by renowned architect Lina Bo Bardi. Behind the wallpaper motif, documents such as the location map of the house and its land – which follows the recommendations of the best alienists of the time – administrative documents, photographs of the place today and several representations of the Bahia tobacco factory – which is in a way Préfargier's source – are added transparently. Curiously, it was tobacco consumption, which de Meuron helped industrialize and exported globally, that was declared harmful to mental health by French psychiatrists – who were behind the creation of the *Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia*, the very first university college in Brazil. While making huge profits from his business, de Meuron provided both "disease" and "care" by converting his colonial capital into the architectural structure of a psychiatric clinic. Denise Bertschi invites us to draw a parallel between the construction of this work and her own research work, which unearths archival documents and testimonies from beneath the surface of history in order to retrace the path of colonial wealth, extracted through the labor of enslaved people and then converted into Swiss architectural and institutional materials.

Filha Natural

Filha Natural

Aline Motta, 2024

Print on fabric, Plexiglas, video, color, sound, 15'52", edition (one-off)

Video collaborations

Photography, Direction, Script, Soundtrack: Aline Motta

Additional Photography: Danilo do Carmo

Editing and Graphics: Aline Motta and Caetano Brenga Bittencourt

Production Assistant: Mariana Silva

Recording Studio and Mix: Ori Lab (Caê Rolfsen)

Musician: Victória dos Santos

Singers: Lenna Bahule, Yannick Delass and Victória dos Santos

Music Production: Caê Rolfsen and Pedro Santiago

Sound Editing: Pedro Santiago

Post production and Color Grading: Caetano Brenga Bittencourt

Performer: Claudia Mamede

This body of work by Aline Motta includes an installation, a video, a book and a performance. It follows the artist's investigative work to trace her family history back to her great-great-grandmother, Francisca. The artist combines iconographic elements, family accounts and archival documents to find the minute traces of this ancestor, who probably lived on the *Fazenda Ubá*, a plantation in the Vassouras region of Rio de Janeiro, and is mentioned in the list of possessions of this farm. Aline Motta returned to the site in 2018, found the former owner's house and met Claudia Mamede, a leader of the Vassouras community, whom the artist stages on the porch of the house in one of the fabric photographs and in the video. Her presence in the work overturns the codes and representations of 19th-century Brazilian iconography, acting as a symbolic disruption of narratives linked to slavery. Like stereoscopic photography, which uses binocular vision to reproduce relief, Aline Motta interweaves the past and the present as if, observed together, they develop a new, sensitive dimension, allowing us to access a different quality of narrative and to inhabit the voids that remain.