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# FOREVER OR IN A HUNDRED YEARS

DENISE BERTSCHI INAS HALABI

What brings together the artists Denise Bertschi and Inas Halabi is their research-based practice, reflected in videos, photographs, installations and publications. Building on the materials they collect, they both develop their own forms of narrative, in which the documentary – traditionally understood as a pure representation of reality, as «the truth» – begins to dissolve. The themes the two artists address also overlap. Bertschi has been dedicating herself for several years now to unmask Switzerland's political neutrality as an impossible balancing act. Meanwhile, Halabi examines how national identities are created through collective memories and cultural myths. Both artists deal with history and stories in a world that is increasingly intertwined, both geographically and historically. Within this matrix they search for that which is hidden, secret, overlooked and repressed, presenting us with their discoveries in subtle works.

The title of this exhibition, *Forever or in a Hundred Years*, refers to diffuse (temporal) interconnections. It is inspired by two indications of time, which play a role in Inas Halabi's video *We Are Champions*, in reference to the disposal of radioactive waste. In one hundred years, a decision is to be made as to whether the tunnels of Switzerland's future deep geological repository, which is still in the evaluation phase, should be definitively closed. If so, the hazardous waste would remain underground *forever*. That, at least, is what one employee of the Gösgen nuclear power plant told the artist. Experience has shown that stories are passed on over three generations – for a hundred years – before they become lost in obscurity. These hundred years contrast with eternity, as a projection surface for all possible realities – past and future – outside this period of time. The works of Denise Bertschi and Inas Halabi oscillate between these two poles; the latent and the possible, the past and the future continuously resonate in their stories.

When Denise Bertschi conducts her research on Switzerland's role on the international political stage under the motto *Neutrality as an Agent*, the artist understands neutrality as a guiding motif that is ambivalent and likely impossible, but in any case, more a concept than reality. Neutrality is therefore a pretext, a deputy and a mediator that makes impossible connections possible. Is it, besides its role as an «agent» in the sense of an acting party, perhaps a «secret agent» as well? At least the title *Forever or in a Hundred Years* also evokes a (bad) spy movie. The secret agent is an ambivalent and fascinating figure, acting outside the realm of what is permitted and in the service of a client. We are all aware of these agents, but we repress their existence along with the doings in which they are involved. Denise Bertschi and Inas Halabi deal with these «secret agents» and work against collective processes of repression and forgetting.

At Alte Fabrik, Denise Bertschi shows four new works that investigate Switzerland's relations with the apartheid state of South Africa. Last year, she spent four months researching the topic in Johannesburg and in Cape Town. From the beginnings of the gold trade in the 1950s to the apartheid protests in the 1980s, Bertschi identifies the economic and political interdependencies between Switzerland and South Africa and searches for their traces in the present. What seems to be over is far from over: *Forever or in a Hundred Years*.

Inas Halabi's two exhibited bodies of work deal with global inequalities and hierarchies of power and the role that narrative plays in the construction of truth. She explores how various landscapes are controlled and manipulated, and searches for ways of tracing this inherent violence. In the works on display, Halabi is guided by the question of how and where radioactive waste is or should be disposed of. How does this problem, which remains unsolved worldwide, manifest itself in different contexts, and under whose control?

Curator: Josiane Imhasly

# INAS HALABI

## **WE HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN THE WIND'S DIRECTION**

For *We Have Always Known the Wind's Direction* Inas Halabi drove from her hometown Jerusalem to the southern West Bank over the course of one year. She went there several times all by herself, recording and collecting soil, plants and objects. She visited fifteen Palestinian villages and their surroundings, where radioactive waste is suspected of being buried. The villages lie approximately 20 to 50 km south of Dimona in the Negev desert. Founded in 1955 as a development for Jewish immigrants, Dimona is home to an Israeli nuclear reactor, which for many years was disguised as a textile factory.

In the course of her research, Halabi learned that in 1989, villagers from Beit al-Roush saw trucks with yellow license plates (i.e. Israeli vehicles) driving into the mountains, followed by a cement mixer. After this, residents noticed an increase in cancer. Two individuals have taken a public stand on this sensitive issue: Dr. Khalil Thabayneh, a nuclear physicist, and Dr. Saadah, a physician. Around ten years ago, Dr. Thabayneh collected soil samples in the area, including the fifteen villages mentioned. The samples were tested for natural radioactive nuclides, as well as for Caesium-137, which is only produced during artificial nuclear fission. Finding increased concentrations of all four substances, registering above the internationally recommended limit, he published the results. Since then, however, no further measurements have been made, due to the lack of equipment and restricted access to the areas in question. Meanwhile, the physician Dr. Saadah has reported a disproportionate number of cancer cases as well as rare cancers in the region. According to eyewitness reports, radioactive waste was buried according to the wind's direction, so that areas with red tiled roofs – Israeli settlements – would be avoided.

Considering how these stories shift our perception and relationship to the landscape, Halabi includes both the scientific findings of Dr. Thabayneh and the statements of the villagers and the doctor as compelling facts in her narrative. Together, they merge into a hunch, a story, a feeling, to address nuclear radiation as an invisible threat. The objects, plants and soil that she collected on site are part of the installation. While some of these are presented on cast cement blocks, Halabi has made casted moulds of others, giving the «evidence» a haptic quality.

## **WE ARE CHAMPIONS**

The video work *We Are Champions* (2016) also deals with radioactive radiation and the disposal of waste resulting from nuclear fission. Here Halabi contrasts the period from the 1950s, when nuclear fission was still a new «achievement», with the present day. The work combines the audio recording of a tour she took of the Gösgen nuclear power plant in 2016, with excerpts from a propaganda film on the medical aspects of nuclear radiation, which was released by the US Department of Defense in 1951. The first successful nuclear chain reaction had occurred nearly ten years earlier, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki six years earlier, and the fear of a nuclear war was immense. The aim of the US government was to reassure the population as well as convince them of the potential for civilian use of nuclear power. It provided information on medical aspects of radioactive radiation and marginalized its threat. Today, there is another elephant in the room that remained unaddressed at the time: where to put the highly radioactive waste?

«We are anyway champions in the world to produce tunnels,» said an employee of the Gösgen nuclear power plant during the tour Halabi took there. Switzerland's experience in underground construction apparently gives it special expertise in operating a deep geological repository. It seems that we are also masters at repressing the truth, as there is currently not a single final repository for high-level radioactive waste in Switzerland or anywhere else in the world. The so-called sectoral plan procedure for evaluating a site's potential as a deep geological repository is far from complete. Around the year 2030, Swiss voters are to vote on the proposed site, in the case that a referendum is held against it. The cantons were deprived of the right of veto in 2013 and the local population is now involved in the process under the «regional participation» programme only.

In combining these two documents, Halabi brings together not only different times and places, but also the shifting challenges and questions surrounding this issue. Both documents bear witness to public relations work in the service of economic and political interests, which mould society's perception of the issue.

## DENISE BERTSCHI

### PLEASE ENSURE THE GATE IS PROPERLY CLOSED

While Bertschi works with material from the 1980s in her zine *We say, we are fine. They say, we are not.*, she addresses the presentday Swiss Social & Sports Club in *Please ensure the gate is properly closed* (2018). A video portrait of John, the club's caretaker, is contrasted with photographs of the Swiss Club house in Cape Town. The club's somewhat dusty and folcloric interior serves clichés about a supposedly traditional identity of Switzerland. Anyone seeking current references to the country in the photographs will almost only find the smiling sun of SVP (Swiss People's Party, populist right wing) election advertising. The fact that a portrait of Nelson Mandela can be seen in the same photograph anticipates some of the tensions that John is exposed to. John has been tending and maintaining the club for 30 years with great commitment and also lives on the grounds. He joined the South African navy at the age of 18, where ships had separate sections for the «blacks» and the «whites». Deeply influenced and hurt by apartheid, John explains how in gardening he finds peace from bad memories, speaks of his dreams and his deceased wife, and talks about businesses done in the club and the racism he experiences from time to time. John gives a differentiated picture of his relationship with the Swiss, and their presumed connections with South Africa. Although he sees himself as part of the «family», he does not have his own key to the clubhouse. Since he was accused of theft, the keys were taken away from him and he has not wanted it back since.

### CONFIDENTIAL

With the video installation *CONFIDENTIAL* (2018) Bertschi traces the spirit of six buildings in Johannesburg's Central Business District (CBD) and Pretoria. In the National Archives of South Africa, she discovered two boxes containing correspondence documenting the purchase of South African gold by the Swiss Bank Corporation (now UBS) in the 1950s. Folders from following years were not to be found. During this period, a strong foundation was laid for economic relations between Switzerland and South Africa, which continued until the end of apartheid despite UN sanctions. It was a foundation consisting of individuals and their trust relationships, and remained largely invisible. Bertschi tries to render the invisibility of these deals visible, by enabling the buildings to become architectural

agents of the gold trade. The CBD – where Bertschi lived during her stay – was to become a (exclusively white) «New York City of Africa» during the gold rush; after the end of apartheid many of these buildings were abandoned. Thus, the buildings depicted in *CONFIDENTIAL* are in very different states, and some of the original structures have even given way to new architectures.

Sound: Melissa Tun Tun, Colour grading: David Röthlisberger

### **WE SAY, WE ARE FINE. THEY SAY, WE ARE NOT.**

The zine *We say, we are fine. They say, we are not.* (2018) reflects on the relationship between Switzerland and South Africa from the perspective of Swiss residing in South Africa and of protesters in Switzerland, based on two sources from the 1980s.

Bertschi's first source was an informal archive of the almost 100-year-old Swiss & Social Sports Club in Cape Town and the regular newsletters sent to its members. From this collection Bertschi compiled thematic collages that reflect club life: club activities, business offers and nostalgic expressions of Swiss folk culture. What this source material does not reveal however, is what was happening beyond the supposedly «idealistic world» of the Swiss Club: South Africa's prime minister and president, P. W. Botha, was tightening apartheid laws and taking military action against the ANC (African National Congress). Bertschi juxtaposes these collages with pictures by the socially committed Zurich photographer Gertrud Vogler (1936–2018). Vogler, a chronicler of social resistance in Zurich and elsewhere, also documented the apartheid protests in Switzerland. Many of the images by the photographer, who died at the beginning of this year, have become part of the Swiss collective memory. While starting in 1965, various groups «at home» started campaigning against apartheid, reaching a wider public with their actions by the 1980s, the Swiss who were active in the Swiss Club in Cape Town during this same time seem to have been preoccupied with completely different things.

This contrast, between the political and the supposedly banal, raises the question of how geographical proximity or distance, and participation affect processes of repression and who actually becomes an agent, for what and how. The social reality of the protesting minority in Switzerland was very different from that of the Swiss Club members in Cape Town. It is also striking how the use of certain visual worlds shifts in the political spectrum over time. The images

used by the Swiss protest movements at the time would hardly be used by similarly minded groups today, as they tend to confirm racist stereotypes rather than question them. These days, such stereotypes are more likely to be found in the advertising of right-wing populist parties.

### **CLARENS – CLARENS**

With her work *Clarens – Clarens* (2018), Bertschi refers to early connections between Switzerland and South Africa. South African President Paul Kruger went into exile shortly before the Boers lost the war against Great Britain under his leadership. He lived in a prestigious villa in Clarens, idyllically situated on Lake Geneva not far from Montreux, which today bears the name Kruger Villa. The South African state purchased the property in 1950 to erect a memorial to the former president, including a museum. Clarens is also the name of a village in the Free State province, which was named after the Swiss Clarens in 1912. The Kruger room still exists today, although the building is now a boutique Bed & Breakfast. The current owner had to assure, that he would keep the Kruger room and make it accessible to visitors. There is a guestbook in which the signature of P. W. Botha can be found, when he visited the Villa Kruger in the year 1988 on his state visit to Switzerland, received with protests. And the circle closes: Bertschi originally picked up the trail of the Kruger Villa in the National Archives of South Africa, where she came across bills authorized by Botha's government for the renovation of this very building in the 1980s together with blurry photographs showing Krugers last days in Switzerland.

## BIOGRAPHIES OF THE ARTISTS

**DENISE BERTSCHI** (\*1983, Aarau) lives and works in Switzerland. She holds a BA from the ZHdK in Zurich and an MA in Fine Arts (Work.Master) from HEAD – Genève. Bertschi has widely exhibited her work in project spaces and institutions in Switzerland and elsewhere, including the Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich, the MKG in Hamburg, Rosa Brux in Brussels, Artsonje in Seoul, Corner College in Zurich and the Aargauer Kunsthaus. She was awarded with the NAB-prize from the Aargauer Kunsthaus and diverse project grants from the Aargauer Kuratorium and Pro Helvetia. In 2017 Denise Bertschi spent three months in an artist residency in Johannesburg funded by Pro Helvetia. Next to diverse exhibition projects she is currently working on her PhD at EPFL in Lausanne.

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**INAS HALABI** (\*1988, Palestine) lives and works between the Netherlands and Palestine. She holds a BA in Fine Arts from Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem and an MFA from Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her work has been shown in numerous national and international venues, including the 13th Sharjah Biennial's acclaimed offsite project, *Shifting Ground*. In 2016, Halabi was the A.M. Qattan Foundation's Young Artist of the Year and she has recently been awarded production grants from AFAC (Arab Fund for Arab Culture) and Mophradat. She is currently artist-in-residence at De Ateliers, Amsterdam.

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