Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

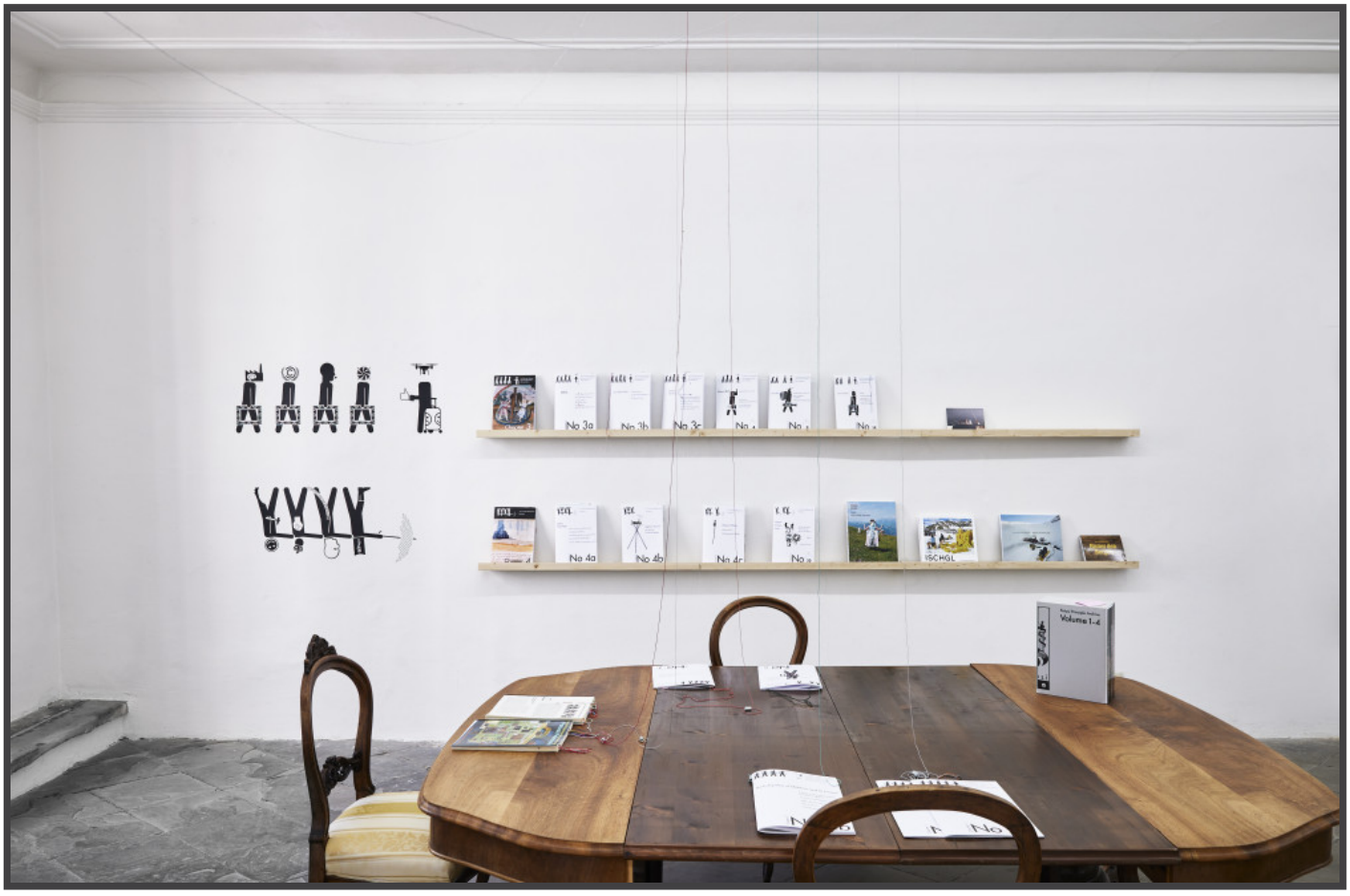
www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

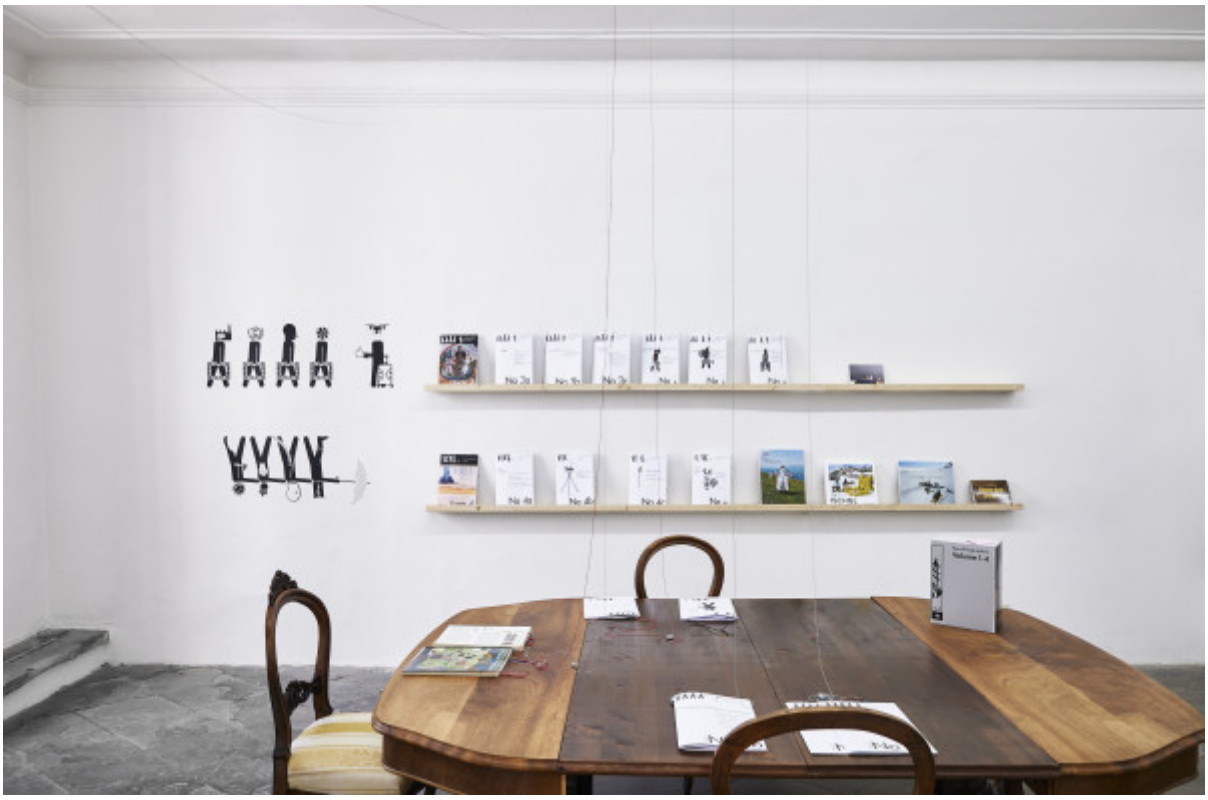
How Does One Get to Own a Mountain?

Potosí-Prinzip-Archiv. June 4–October 1, 2022

Rose-Anne Gush

The «Potosí-Prinzip» was a touring exhibition project curated by Alice Creischer, Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, and Andreas Siekmann that looked at how European Capitalism could not be thought of without the exploitation of men and nature in Latin America during Colonialism. In their show «Potosí-Prinzip-Archiv,» currently presented at Kunstraum Schwaz in Tyrol, Austria, they revisited the project and outlined blind spots and pressure points.



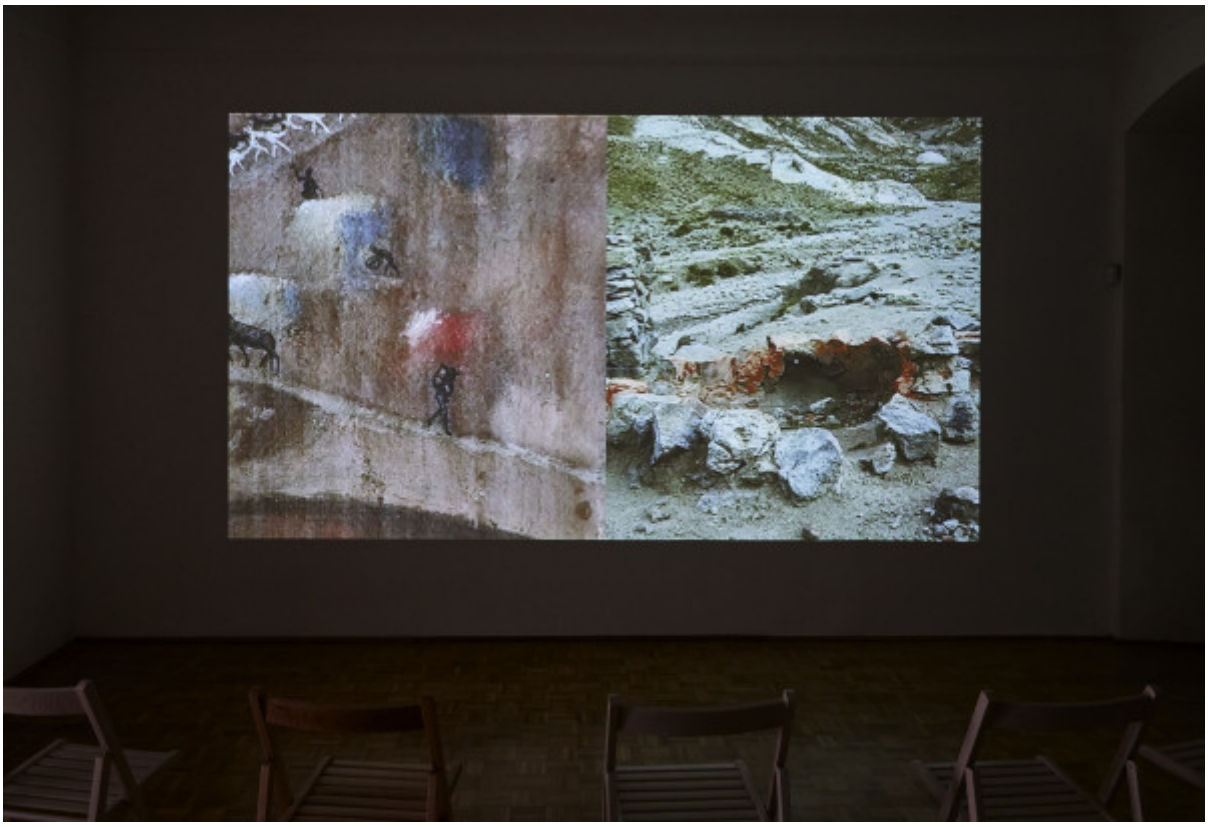


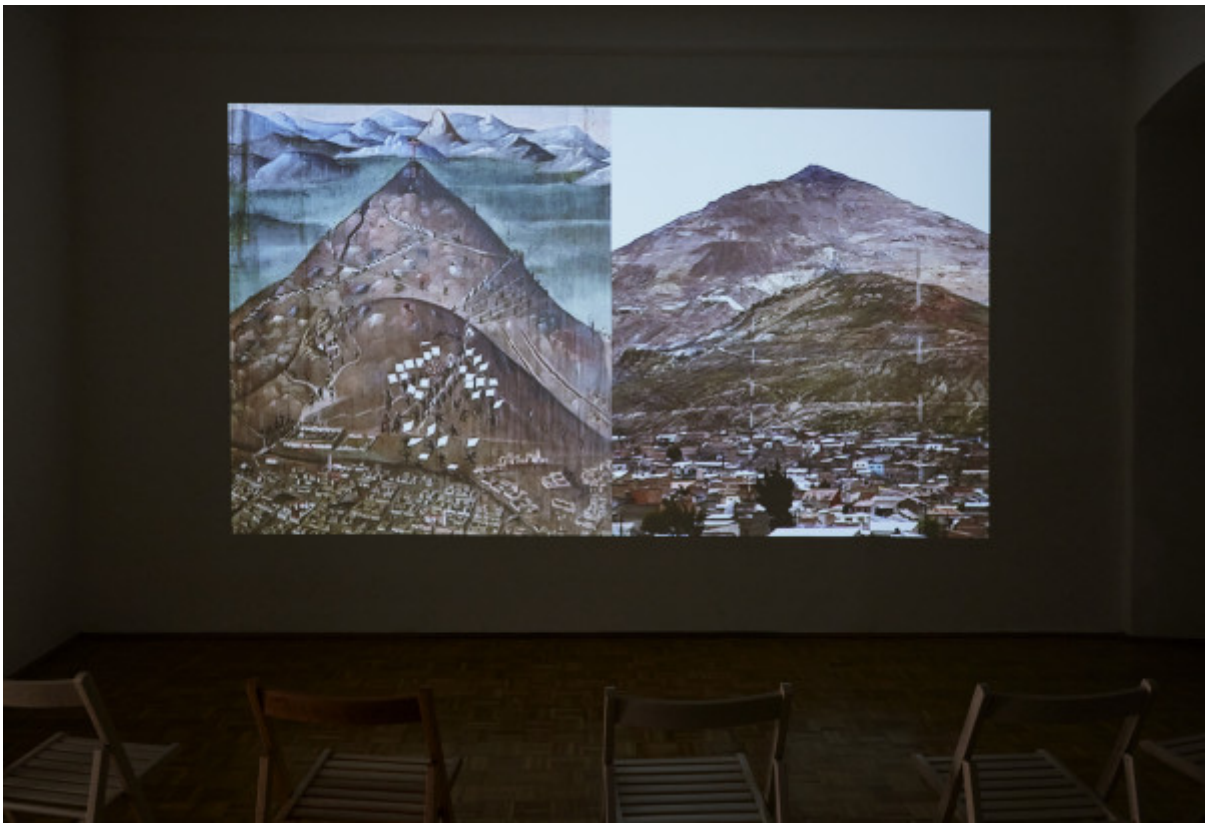
Installation view, *Potosí-Prinzip-Archiv*, 2022, Kunstraum Schwaz, © Verena Nagl and Kunstraum Schwaz

How does one get to own a mountain? How do the relations that have underpinned and continue to underpin the destruction of our shared world become visible? These questions are addressed in *Potosí-Prinzip-Archiv*, an exhibition currently presented at Kunstraum Schwaz in Tyrol, Austria. It is the closing act of the project and interchangeably named *Principio Potosí* and *Potosí Principle*. In its first iterations, the exhibition, curated by Alice Creischer, Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, Andreas Siekmann and Silvia Rivera, took place across three locations, between 2010 and 2011, at HKW in Berlin, MNCARS in Madrid and MNA/MUSEF La Paz in Bolivia. Exploring the extractivist logic of colonial expansion and production and its marriage to religion through colonial Baroque painting, the curators sought to produce a space that mediated the existence of simultaneous temporal zones: the presence of the sixteenth century in the twenty-first. Contemporary artists and theorists were commissioned to respond to artworks from the colonial period. Harun Farocki's film, *The Silver and the Cross* (2010), is a contemporary response to the 1758 painting *Descripción del Cerro Rico e Imperial Villa de Potosí* (Description of Cerro Rico and the Imperial City of Potosí) by Miguel Gaspar de Berrío. In Schwaz in 2022, Farocki's work supplements the *Archiv*, alongside Miguel Hilari's video work, *Bocamina* (2019) and photographic works by Lois Hechenblaikner that show obscene scenes from Austria's Alpine ski region. The suggestion to produce an archive based on the exhibitions came from Anselm Franke, head of Visual Arts and Film at HKW, in 2017. Rather than gathering documentation from the initial exhibitions, the archive, the curators explain, explores how the initial issues addressed by *Potosí Principle*—such as primitive accumulation, hegemony, the placebo effect of human rights, the world turned upside down, and the role of art in all of this—have fared since 2010. As a reflexive development of the exhibitions, it is structured in more than 36 pamphlets collected in 4 volumes totaling 1,768 pages, starting with the arrival of Viceroy Morcillo in Potosí and ending with a booklet on utopian structures such as the commons. The archive revisits the exhibition's concepts and its internal omissions, the most glaring being, in the eyes of the curators, the financial crisis of 2008 and its implications. Concretely, the archive includes letters, essays, interviews and poems by activists, authors and artists including Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, David Riff, Ines Doujak and Eduardo Molinari, to name just a

few. The editors claim that it is structured intuitively and, in a pun on its subject, can be «mined» by readers. As a complex entanglement of curators, authors and artists, text heavy and limited in visual production, *Potosí-Prinzip-Archiv* in Schwaz demands in-depth study. Reflecting on the mine as action and site, curators Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann included works that respond to the specificity of this quaint touristic Tyrolian town that still benefits from its novel reputation as a former silver mining center. A graph depicts the chronology of global mining and its growth during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, how it shifted from Europe to South America.[1] One premise of *Potosí Principle* was to explore how the extraction of metals from Potosí produced the first accumulation of capital in the modern period. This capital accumulation was used to fund the Habsburg wars in Europe and, as has been argued, foresaw present-day global financial capital and its recurrent crises. In Potosí the system of accumulation was built on the *mita*, a slave-based labor practice within the Peruvian viceroyalty where the indigenous population was worked in inhuman conditions and then replaced by enslaved Africans.[2]

One of the key concepts of the exhibition and the archive is the Marxist term «primitive accumulation,» popularized among others by Silvia Federici's 2004 book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*.[3] Federici frames primitive accumulation as the Marxian term used to describe the foundational process that reveals the structural conditions for the existence of capitalist society. In an interview from 2018, in the *Archiv*, she describes the debt crisis of the 1970s in the Global South as foundational to the recolonization of much of this region and a new round of «primitive accumulation» and «new enclosures.» In its contemporary form, primitive accumulation is also understood as necessary and constant for the reproduction of capitalism, because capitalism unceasingly separates people from the means of their reproduction.





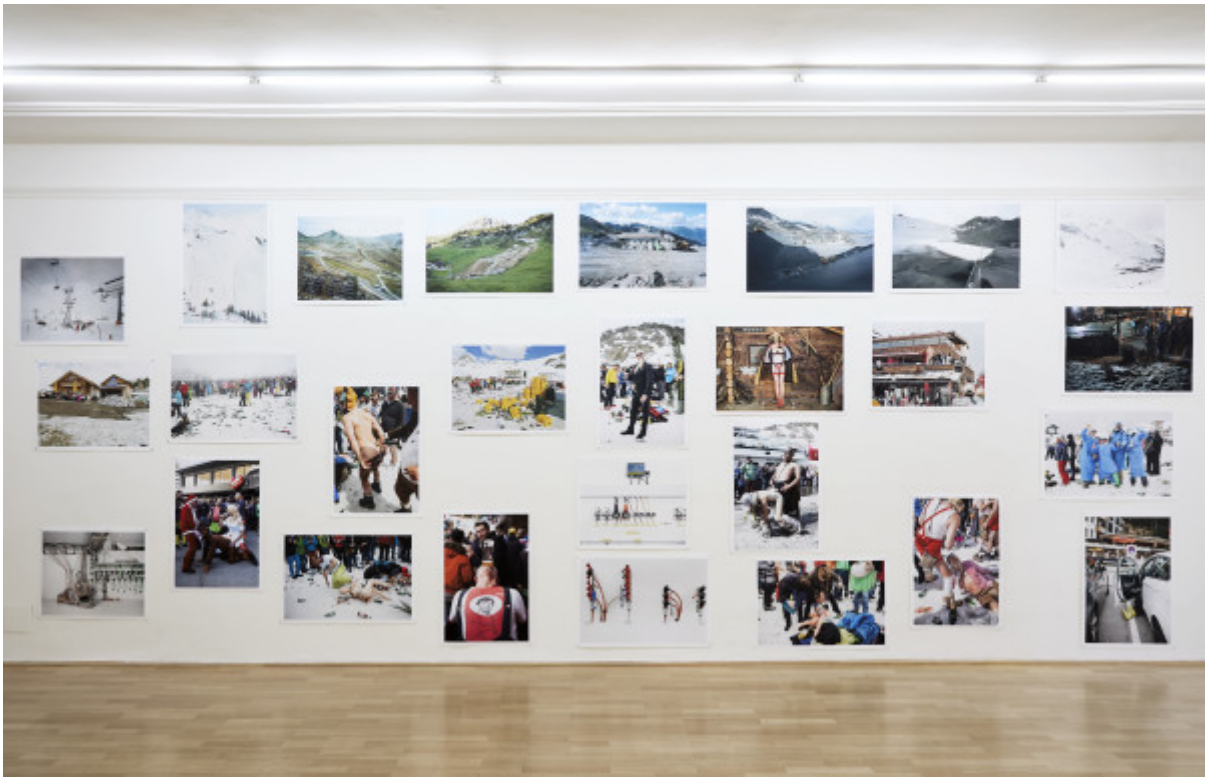
Harun Farocki, *The Silver and the Cross* (2010), *Potosí-Prinzip-Archiv*, 2022, Kunstraum Schwaz, © Verena Nagl and Kunstraum Schwaz

Farocki's *The Silver and the Cross* (2010) explores the class and labor relation of the mining city of Potosí. To compare Berrío's painting *Descripción del Cerro Rico e Imperial Villa de Potosí*, completed between 1756 and 1758, and the city of Potosí in 2010, Farocki went to Sucre, because in all reproductions of the original, the painting's details were not legible. Figures under 1cm in size were obscured, invisible to the logic of the pixel. The painting was removed from the church and placed in a natural light setting, and Farocki was allowed to film it. My first introduction to the film was through a talk by Kodwo Eshun, organized by Gail Day in London in 2016.[4] Eshun described the film's logic through its fixed, moving and blank shots. He highlighted what Eyal Weizman has called a «threshold of detectability,» in relation to this film, because the camera cannot capture and reproduce details that are too small. Farocki used the camera to track the distinction between «non-workers» and «workers,» between free laborers (those who sell their labor) and forced-laborers (those entrapped in relations of slavery). Eshun characterizes the fixed perspective shot as one that gives an insight into sorrowful events, allowing a view on the future. By looking and keeping our gaze intently on the surface of the painting and that of the city, Farocki can reveal something like the logic of primitive accumulation, the structures foundational to capital accumulation that reverberate from the past into the present. Contrary to the fixed perspective shot, for Eshun, the travelling shot depicts pathways, waterways, processions, pack animals, viaducts, houses of the wealthy and the indigenous. Thus the moving shot is cartographic; it shows topographies of infrastructure.

In Farocki's own textual description of *The Silver and the Cross*, included in the *Archiv*, the city of Potosí located on the mining mountain is given as the site of a genocide. The genocide is the fundamental condition of the rich city, but this fact is silenced by the painting. In the film, the narrator tells us that this is a constitutive silence that erases the genocide. Eshun argues that the painting is not just the witness, but also the participant in this crime. Temporally, the film is non-synchronous: 1758 is depicted alongside 2010, and entangled, the painting's materiality as an evidentiary form is rendered material by means of video. The past

is recalled. Finally, for Eshun, the black image, the break in the moving image is the moment of the painting where the genocide can become visible, but only negatively.

Miguel Hilari's response to Farocki, *Bocamina* (also included in the exhibition), shows the future that Farocki couldn't see. *Referencing The Silver and the Cross*, *Bocamina* starts with an image of Berrio's painting. It then depicts the use of the mine today: people can simply buy dynamite there, find an area to blow it up and record this. Hilari turns the focus to the presence of the past in the present by speaking directly to young students, asking them what they associate with the mine. He also asks them if they have been inside; they reply that it was ugly, dark, scary. Indirectly, they describe the ongoing genocide, as they talk about the number of people who died, people whose ghosts now inhabit the tunnels of the mine. The girls point out that women are only permitted to work outside of the mine. Older children describe the mine's lawlessness: if someone is caught stealing, that person might end up being killed—no one would know. The life of a miner is one of sacrifice. The mine makes the life of the town one of sacrifice. While Farocki's film compares the painting and the image of the city, placing them side by side, Hilari's film closes with the image of the city, a mirror image of the painting. A place that has not changed.



Lois Hechenblaikner, *Delirium Alpinum* (2022), *Potosí-Prinzip-Archiv*, 2022, Kunstraum Schwaz, © Verena Nagl and Kunstraum Schwaz

In the exhibition in Schwaz, this telescopic temporality is echoed in Lois Hechenblaikner's photographs which can be seen as analogous to the moralizing colonial Baroque paintings decorating churches. Drunk tourists are shown in obscene situations, urinating, fucking, gagging on beer. The photographs depict the infrastructure that has replaced the beer barrel; complex pipelines are used to push beer around the mountain. The mountain, once mined for silver is now a site for leisure. It is still cut into and destroyed, but it promotes tourism.

Considering *Potosí Prinzip*, the return to the mine, the commercialization and violence committed against nature and people under capitalist conditions, I am reminded of a recent talk by Marina Vishmidt where she reflected on the relationship between art and violence, with violence understood as something that is inflicted on people and nature in art.[5] She described violence as constitutive of form. In the forming of materials into artworks and the

arrangement of realities into form, she describes form and content as an index of violence. From Farocki, we learned that Berrío's painting is a participant in the silencing of a genocide, that art is also agentive in relations of violence. Given this and Vishmidt's concern with negative values, with the uncounted as structurally key to capitalism, the uncounted as unwaged labor and uncommodified nature, the void is articulated as an absence of use-value, as nothing. I want to bring her question: can the holes made in the world that precipitate our own social-ecological disaster and act as evidence of environmental racism, with capitalism producing nature just as it produces class relations, point to their own negative power?, to *Potosí Prinzip*. Like Farocki's blanks that can be read as showing a negative image of genocide, or like George Caffentzis' statement that «labor's value-creating capacities must lie in its negative capability, that is, its capacity to refuse to be labor.»[6] This then would be resistance.

[1] Silver mining began at the end of the twelfth century, in Saxony, Germany. During the Middle Ages, 85% of silver produced worldwide came from Tyrol, the largest mining region. With silver and copper, Tyrol, ruled by the House of Habsburg, was one of the richest regions of Europe until the ‹discovery› of the Bolivian City Potosí, and the shifting of mining to South America and the resulting cheap imports. In Tyrol, beneficiaries of silver and copper mining were the Fugger family, or the Fucker family, as they were also known: merchants and monopolists who traded spices, wool and silk to almost all parts of Europe. Though the silver mines closed in the mid-sixteenth century, the region now sees a return of mining with lithium tunnels being built in nearby Carinthia by European Lithium, a company based in Australia. See, https://europeanlithium.com/wolfsberg-lithium-project/. Thanks to Philipp Sattler for making me aware of this development.

[2] See, Peter John Bakewell, *Miners of the Red Mountain: Indian Labor in Potosí, 1545-1650* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984) and Kathryn Yusoff, A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 49.

[3] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2009).

[4] See, School of Advanced Study, *Capitalism, Colonialism & Silver Harun Farocki, The Silver & the Cross* 17 Mins, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKarirIo8tc [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKarirIo8tc].

[5] See, Annenstrasse 53, *Danny Hayward and Marina Vishmidt - LOADING TERMINAL*, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxSUM2kwnLc [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxSUM2kwnLc].

[6] George Caffentzis, «Why Machines Cannot Create Value: Marx's Theory of Machines,» in Caffentzis, *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (PM Press, 2013), p. 145.

ROSE-ANNE GUSH

Rose-Anne Gush is an art historian and theorist based in Vienna and Graz. She is working at the IZK – Institute for Contemporary Art, TU Graz.

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13929990