

**CENTRE 7
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fondation suisse pour la culture

prohelvetia



**DENISE BERTSCHI
OASIS OF PEACE.
NEUTRAL ONLY ON THE OUTSIDE**

12.09 - 14.11.2021

	PREVIEW	
FRI	10.09.2021	10:00 - 13:00
	OPENING	
SAT	11.09.2021	17:00 - 21:00

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curator : Claire Hoffmann

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Cracks in appearances, representations out of step with reality, and gaps in historiography are all of interest to Denise Bertschi (*1983). The artist seeks in her work to render visible the links between Switzerland and global geopolitics. To this end, she retraces Swiss colonial entanglements and ambivalent relations in the world of economics, while calling into question narratives of nationalism and the notion of neutrality. Using the tools of historians, anthropologists, or investigative journalists, she creates installations and videos in which archival documents and personal photographs commingle with the narratives of the people she encounters and the findings of her own research.

The exhibition *Oasis of Peace. Neutral Only On The Outside* establishes unexpected links between Switzerland and two regions of major geopolitical importance: firstly, the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea; and secondly, apartheid South Africa. Switzerland has played its cards cleverly, in both cases, using to its own ends a "neutrality" that the historian Hans-Ulrich Jost has characterized as "self-serving" and "dualist".

All the work assembled (since 2014) under the title *State Fiction* (2014–2021) reflects the artist's long-term research into the zone that divides the two Koreas, a locus of congealed international Cold War interests and a source of improbable images. After an internationally brokered armistice in 1953, the United Nations (UN) invited Switzerland to participate in the peacekeeping mission foreseen for the DMZ. Three other neutral nations were likewise present: Sweden represented the capitalist and anti-Communist Western bloc; Poland and Czechoslovakia, the Communist Eastern bloc. Armed Forces were then stationed extensively throughout the DMZ, and tasked to oversee the divided countries' exchange of prisoners and arms. Following disbandment of the Eastern bloc, the mission was massively downsized, in part because North Korea spurned it in 1994, on the grounds that it no longer represented Communist interests. Switzerland nonetheless maintains a military presence there to this day. It was there, at the "Swiss Camp", an at once idyllic, nostalgic, and absurd little island of "swissness", that Denise Bertschi shot photos and videos during a trip in 2014. And it was there, too, long before her, that Swiss soldiers documented their daily lives and pastimes, their encounters with the local people, and their fascination with the Korean fauna and flora. This immense mass of images and films is now conserved in Bern, at the Library Am Guisanplatz (BiG) the main archive of the federal administration and the Swiss Armed Forces.

Devised especially for the exhibition, Bertschi's new video montage consists entirely of such archive material. It reveals not only the gaze of these supposedly "neutral" soldiers—the way they regarded all that is "other"—but also, and above all, how, at the height of the Cold War, Swiss nationalism forged a narrative in which were fused both neutrality and a desire for power in the international arena. The video suggests, in effect, that Switzerland astutely seized upon this chance to improve its image, an image severely tarnished by the end of the Second World War; for while purporting to be neutral, the

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country had taken care to maintain its economic ties with Nazi Germany, to issue permits for the passage of German trains, and to impose extremely restrictive policy on Jewish refugees. To number among the four countries assigned a peacekeeping role in Korea was a welcome opportunity to renew relations with the leading international players, in particular with the USA, the living incarnation of the anti-Communist sentiment prevailing at the time among the Swiss.

The video *State Fiction* is shown amid art works suspended in mid-air: floral textiles on which have been printed slogans found in the Swiss Camp or in the surrounding Joint Security Area, which is under the jurisdiction of the United Nations Command (UNC). Inspired by the curtains typically found at the threshold of Korean households, they stand both for the barriers and links between exterior and interior spaces, delimiting thus the realms of public and private life. *STATE FICTION. The Gaze of the Swiss Neutral Mission in the Korean Demilitarized Zone*, edited by Denise Bertschi and the Centre de la Photographie Genève for this occasion, compiles within its pages several essays on the topic, as well as amateur photography analyzing the gaze of the Swiss on the divided Koreas from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Neutrality as an Agent is a further complex work series, collated in this case in the course of Denise Bertschi's numerous trips to South Africa. Drawing on archives, architecture, the urban fabric, and local production of vernacular images, she first brought to light traces of history and delved into the self-serving ways neutrality is put to use. She pursued artistic research in a variety of media, from video and photography to collage; and not least in her acclaimed publication, *We say we are fine. They say we are not*, which was listed in The Most Beautiful Swiss Books Award 2019.

It's a quite other type of Swiss enclave that Denise Bertschi came across in South Africa in 2018: the Swiss Social & Sports Club welcomes Cape Town's Swiss ex-pat community and temporary visitors to sit back and relax, be they businesspeople, bankers, or financial experts. In her video, *Please ensure the gate is properly closed* (2018), the Club's caretaker, John, tells the history of this private enclave—but, too, of racist discrimination he has faced there, over the years, from being accused of theft to being deprived of the keys; thus he is a caretaker yet with limited access!

This Swiss Club, its very existence, is perhaps the most caricatural proof of the close and continuing relations that Switzerland has maintained with South Africa since the earliest days of the Apartheid regime. Arms exports, banking maneuvers, gold mines, and Swiss bank loans were crucial to a regime regularly subjected to international boycotts (e.g. the arms trade resolution adopted by the UN Security Council in 1977 and international campaigns such as that of 1983/4, to stop the IMF making loans to the country)—none of which Switzerland participated in. Yet despite this economic pressure and international policy, despite widespread recognition of the racist regime's brutality and the mounting tension among South Africans and in Switzerland (the latter evident in Gertrud Vogler's photographs of anti-Apartheid protest marches, which Denise Bertschi represents), the Swiss government and Swiss

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companies never ceased to invoke neutrality and use smokescreens to uphold the status quo. In 2003, even, the Swiss government commission tasked with investigating the country's involvement in Apartheid found itself suddenly denied access to the federal archives—which says a lot about the nature of that involvement.

To get to the bottom of the story, Denise Bertschi took up research at the National Archives of South Africa, among other places, and there discovered two archive boxes with correspondence from the 1950s concerning the gold trade dealings of the Société de banque suisse (SBS; now UBS). She thereupon chose to pay a personal visit to the site of these transactions. The video *Confidential* (2018) thus constitutes a cartography of six buildings in Pretoria or in Johannesburg's former Central Business District (CBD), which at the time of the veritable "goldrush" seemed destined to become an entirely white "African New York City." We glimpse glass and concrete facades, and the old signs of businesses that have long since relocated or been abandoned for good—but above all, we sense the striking absence of a history carefully buried behind the official version of the past.

Close-ups of rhododendrons and geraniums, of mountains and hills on the horizon, of architectural walks in derelict modern buildings: the photography and video work of Denise Bertschi, with its almost banal or even cryptic images, may well deceive. Yet these images are haunted by what lies beyond the lens, outside of the frame, by all that is going on, or once happened, just to the side of the neat flowerbeds, somewhere between here and those distant hills, or behind those locked and bolted doors. Denise Bertschi takes the pulse of these places and material traces so as to fly in the face of willful oblivion; she turns the images of wishful innocence inside out, to better dissect the often so conniving construction of news and views.

— Claire Hoffmann

Translation : Jill Denton

STATE FICTION is supported by Pro Helvetia, Aargauer Kuratorium and CAN Centre d'Art de Neuchâtel.

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**An excerpt from Denise Bertschi's essay
*"Supervise, Observe, Inspect and Investigate": The Scopic
 Practices of the Swiss Neutral Military Mission in Korea from 1953
 to 1980***

Scopic Practices of the Swiss Neutral Military Men

Wandering through the masses of photographs produced by the Swiss men traveling to Korea under the guise of their neutral military mission after the Korean armistice, is a valuable tangent by which to approach the multi-layered and geopolitically charged space in the wake of the so-called Cold War. It is valuable because it allows us to understand the complexity of the gaze, with which these military men scanned their environment and visually sensed their experience in an Extra-European, post-colonial context, previously unknown to them. How did their photographic decision-making influence the complex fabric of relations around the act of photography, in the historical and geographical space of a newly divided Korea? Which are the visual strategies the amateur photographers and film makers applied in their peripheral vision, while scanning the objects and life around them? Moreover, what was the influence of their military role, labelled with Swiss neutrality? I argue that these—exclusively—men, developed a *quasi*-ethnographic gaze, fundamentally rooted in masculinity, on the cultural ways of life of Korean peoples and, thereby, stepped into a tradition of visual strategies they knew from travelogues of ethnographers, or the so-called explorers of non-western cultures from the end of the 19th century to the second half of the 20th century. They applied strategies of visually collecting or capturing what was foreign to them and through the photographic act owning what they saw. By doing so, they fixed cultural differences towards their exoticized photographic subjects. What remained in the *pars optica retinae*, the “seeing” part of the eye and what stayed, symbolically speaking, in their *pars caeca retinae*, the “blind” part of the retina?

The official military mission's objective was to “supervise, observe, inspect, and investigate”¹ the armistice agreement of 1953 that the representatives of the US, China and North Korea decided on. As defined in an internal report of the Swiss military, neither of the two conflicting war parties were allowed to reinforce their own army's infrastructures: “The inspection of combat aircraft, armoured vehicles, weapons and ammunition by the NNIT shall be conducted in such a manner that the members of these groups can be fully satisfied that these combat aircrafts, armoured vehicles, weapons and ammunition are not being imported into Korea as reinforcements.”²

Nevertheless, browsing through the photographic archive of the neutral Swiss men in Korea, we realize that they did not only “monitor, observe, inspect, and investigate” possible military enforcements, but also the everyday activities, fauna and flora, landscapes, women, children, and men, living in rural and urban environments in either North or South Korea.

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In the beginning of their task, from 1953 on, they were stationed at the Joint Security Area in the demilitarized zone (DMZ), but some mobile teams were sent in rotation to other places in the North as well as in the South of the peninsula. The visual lens travelled with them: to Incheon, Daegu, Busan, Gangneung and Kunsan, regions under military control of the United Nations-Command—and to Sinuŭiju, Ch'oŭngjin, Huŭngnam, Manp'o and Sinanju, regions under military control of the Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army. The neutral status of the Swiss enabled them to enter both territories, forcefully divided in 1945. What do these photographs witness at the frontier of the perceivable of these highly politized places, which remained restricted to the divided parties? What are the ghosts of what Heonik Kwon calls a "hot", instead of a "cold" war,³ which might appear through them and what is the role of the seemingly neutral spectators in military uniforms?

In this essay, I will look at how the visual strategies of the Swiss amateur photographers in their function as neutral military in Korea rendered visible the making of the national myth of neutrality—still a stronghold of the Swiss national identity. In this Extra-European territory, they negotiated neutrality between the capitalist West, and the communist East, while constantly upholding the image of the small state named Switzerland as that of a "peace island". To uphold this purity of the superior vision of Swiss neutrality, the "imagined-nation" needed to constantly construct and maintain the image of "the other". While developing a quasi-ethnographic gaze in post-colonial Korea, the Swiss "self" reflected in their own photographs. This essay closely analyses the construction of the colonial gaze through the legacy of the photographs and film footage of the Swiss Neutral Mission in Korea.

Furthermore, the spatial formations of the photographic landscape where the images stem from are put into focus, while looking at de- and re-territorializing processes in the DMZ for building a peace infrastructure. Analysing closely their representation of the land and landscape, it reveals how it played a role in constructing the process of colonial "othering", not only of the people, but of the land, mountains, fauna, and flora. Their narratives, told through images as well as their diaries, are both overtly and covertly witnessing the violence and traumas of a war-torn territory and its lingering ghostly presences in a multi-layered network of global hegemonial conflicts. The Swiss military presence in East Asia—on a parquet of global politics—was a novelty, and the picture-taking officers reinforce their presence through the photographic act. Nevertheless, the Swiss were kept in an infrastructural, moral, and cultural dependency on the US army. While upholding a Western hegemony, this may have weakened the well-maintained fiction of Swiss neutrality.

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¹ «Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission: Funktionen und Vollmachten» in: «Auszug aus dem Waffenstillstandsvertrag, Fassung Mitte Juli 1953», Korea-Archiv, Bibliothek Am Guisanplatz (BiG), Bern

² «Auszug aus dem Waffenstillstandsvertrag, Fassung Mitte Juli 1953», Korea-Archiv, BiG, Bern

³ Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War*, Columbia University Press, 2010, p.3

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Bio

Denise Bertschi (*1983 Aarau/CH) is an artist-researcher, working at the intersection of art, history and cultural memory. She holds an MA in Visual Arts from HEAD Haute Ecole d'Art in Geneva and a BA from Zurich University of the Arts ZHDK. She is currently working on a PhD thesis at EPFL Lausanne in the "Arts of Sciences Laboratory", in collaboration with HEAD – Genève. Her first monograph *Denise Bertschi. STRATA. Mining Silence*, was published on the occasion of the Manor art prize, awarded to her in 2020 by the Aargauer Kunsthhaus.

International exhibition activities and research took her to Brasil, South Africa and Korea, places of geopolitical entanglements that she weaves into Swiss historiographical memory and questions them on coloniality. Denise Bertschi's investigative practice translates into academic, as well as artistic forms through the use of media such as film, photography or installations.

Her work has been shown in diverse institutions in Switzerland and elsewhere: in the Aargauer Kunsthhaus, the Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich, LACA Los Angeles, the Museum für Kunst und Gestaltung MKG in Hamburg, RosaBrux Brussels, Artsonje Center Seoul, WITTS University in Johannesburg or Corner College in Zurich.

She got awarded with the Manor art prize in 2020 at the Aargauer Kunsthhaus, the Most Beautiful Swiss Books award (2019), a research grant by the Getty Research Institute GRI in Los Angeles (2019) and a nomination for the Swiss Art Awards in 2019. Together with Dunja Herzog, she was shortlisted for the Swiss Pavilion of the 59th Venice Art Biennale.

Various project contributions from Pro Helvetia, the Aargauer Kuratorium funded her artistic research. Currently she is an artist in residence at CAN Centre d'Art de Neuchâtel, followed by a residency at La Becque in autumn 2021.

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Publications

STATE FICTION. The Gaze of the Swiss Neutral Mission in the Korean Demilitarized Zone

Publication : Édition Centre de la Photographie Genève (Joerg Bader)

Conception and edition : Denise Bertschi

Graphic design : Nadja Zimmermann, NASK Genève (with Alessandro Schino)

Copyright images : Koreaarchiv der Bibliothek am Guisanplatz Bern (CH)

Parution : September 2021

Pages : 320 pages

Texts : Dr Heonik Kwon, Dr Hans-Ulrich Jost, Denise Bertschi

EN / GER and FR insert

This publication brings together Denise Bertschi's extensive research in military archives, numerous photos and films from the DMZ in Korea, as well as essays by Hans-Ulrich Jost (historian specializing in the concept of neutrality in Switzerland), Heonik Kwon (Korean anthropologist specializing in the partition of Korea) and Denise Bertschi.

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Talks

Thursday October the 21st, 18:00 :

Talk with Denise Bertschi and Heonik Kwon moderated by Adeena Mey

Conversation between the artist Denise Bertschi and Heonik Kwon, author of the book published on the occasion of the exhibition. Heonik Kwon is Senior Research Fellow in Social Anthropology at Trinity College, University of Cambridge, and currently part of the research group at Asia Research Center, Seoul National University, that explores a new, more integrated, and democratic Asia. Author of prize-winning books on the social history of the Vietnam War and Asia's Cold War, his new book is *After the Korean War: An Intimate History*. Moderation by researcher and curator Adeena Mey (Central Saint Martins). In cooperation with E.A.T. Engadin Art Talks and Biennale NEMO.

Saturday November the 13th, 17:00 :

Talk with Denise Bertschi and Doris Gassert

The prolific production of still and moving images by military amateurs, the function of the photographic medium, the view of the "other", the artistic use of found footage and archival material - these are some of the questions that Denise Bertschi and Doris Gassert (Research Curator at the Fotomuseum Winterthur) will address during a guided tour of the exhibition *Oasis of Peace. Neutral Only On The Outside* by Denise Bertschi (12.09 - 14.11).

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Images

Exhibitions view available starting 14.09



Image 1 & 2 : Denise Bertschi, *STATE FICTION*, video stills, 2021 (© Bibliothek am Guisanplatz, Bern/Switzerland)



Image 3 : Denise Bertschi, *In Front of Them All*, digital print on silk (since 2014)

Image 4 : Denise Bertschi, *STATE FICTION*, video stills, 2021 (© Bibliothek am Guisanplatz, Bern/Switzerland)

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Images

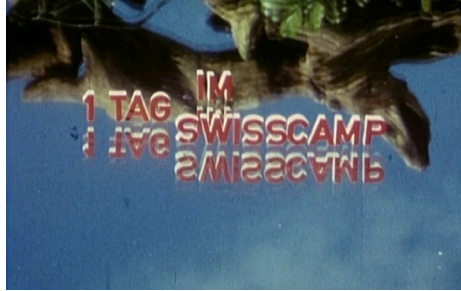


Image 5 & 6 : Denise Bertschi, *STATE FICTION*, video stills, 2021 (© Bibliothek am Guisanplatz, Bern/Switzerland)



Image 7 & 8 : Denise Bertschi, *STATE FICTION*, video stills, 2021 (© Bibliothek am Guisanplatz, Bern/Switzerland)



Image 9 & 10 : Denise Bertschi, *Please Ensure The Gate Is Properly Closed*, video still, 2018

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Images



Image 11 & 12 : Denise Bertschi, *Please Ensure The Gate Is Properly Closed*, video still, 2018



Image 13: Denise Bertschi, *Neutrality as an Agent*, digital print, 2018

Image 14: Denise Bertschi, *We say we are fine. They say we are not*, wallpaper, 2018

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Le Centre culturel suisse

The Centre culturel suisse (CCS) aims to promote contemporary Swiss artistic and cultural creation in France through its programming and to encourage exchange between the artistic scenes of the two countries. The Centre culturel suisse is part of the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia.

Informations pratiques

Denise Bertschi, *Oasis of Peace. Oasis of Peace. Neutral Only On The Outside*

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preview 10.09 10:00-13:00

opening 11.09 17:00-21:00

Talks

Talk with Denise Bertschi and Heonik Kwon, moderated by Adeena Mey on Thursday October 21st at 6 pm

Talk with Denise Bertschi and Doris Gassert on Saturday November the 13st at 5 pm

Art mediation

Curator tour by Claire Hoffmann, on Thursday October 21st at 5 pm

Flash visit : a 20' tour by our art mediators Delphine Melliès, Yael Miller and Indra Berger every week-end at 4 pm

Group visit upon request to Anna Terp : accueil@ccsparis.com

On going at the same time

Claudia & Julia Müller, *Une brève histoire de baskets sales*

12.09 - 14.09.2021

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Tuesday - Friday 10:00-19:00

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Talks : free

Program : ccsparis.com

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