

GIVING VOICE, FORMING BODY

**A Conversation between Christina Végh,
Alexander Birchler and Teresa Hubbard**



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In late August 2017, Katharina Amman, head of the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA) and Christina Végh, director of the Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover, gathered in Zurich for a public dialogue with artists Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler at Villa Bleuler, the headquarters of SIK-ISEA. The event explored Hubbard and Birchler's contribution to the Swiss Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, cited by audiences and critics as one of the most meaningful, outstanding works in the Biennale. Continuing the initial dialogue, the artists and Végh further explored ideas about feminism, storytelling and re-framing history in the following conversation.

Christina Végh: *I would like to start with Flora (2017), the film installation you developed for the Swiss Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, in which you provide a multilayered, kaleidoscopic view of artist Flora Mayo, previously only mentioned in passing in studies on her lover Alberto Giacometti. Various narrative lines emanate from the work: the story of an American woman living in Paris, passionate about becoming an artist; a romance between two young people; an exploration of the relationship between a mother and son; a discussion on storytelling itself, and how our identities, experiences and opportunities in life are affected by the narratives that we tell or are told to us; and finally a critique on art history and historiography in general, making it visible how women are often neglected in research. After all, you “simply” detected some mistakes of former art historians and corrected them!*

Your work is providing new critical insights into the art historical domain, but obviously you work from the standpoint of artists rather than art historians. How does your “artistic research” differ, and how do you view this term within your own practice? Can you elaborate on the issues connected to definitions of “research,” and describe the working modes you are interested in?

Alexander Birchler: Rather than thinking of “correcting,” we think about “re-framing.” We start from a place of questions and these questions lead us to other questions as part of the journey that’s fueled by our interest in storytelling and strategic digression. We allow ourselves to get lost and we allow for a place of unknowing. We think of our work as action-based

research, propelled by our interest in narrative structures—how to unpack a story, how a story is told and who is telling it. In our collaboration, we are searching for a third place—collective authorship—a third voice.

Teresa Hubbard: It leads all the way back to when we were studying at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax, Canada. It was very early on in our collaboration—we were the first artists in North America to be accepted into an MFA program as a collaborative team. Artistic collaboration is significantly more accepted now, but at the time, the school took a bold stance to make an experiment with us. We were fortunate that our attempts in finding a language and ground to work together were nurtured in an environment that embraced trial and error as a defining responsibility for an artistic practice. The discourse at NSCAD, well known for their legacy in conceptual art and early video art, provided a generative, critical challenge to our interests in storytelling.

The dichotomy between absence and presence is crucial to Flora (and other of your works) and also happened to be the point of departure for Philipp Kaiser’s curatorial approach to the Swiss Pavilion, in reference to the fact that Giacometti had repeatedly rejected invitations to represent Switzerland at the Venice Biennale.

AB: I think it really started when we began talking about ideas of absence. Philipp [Kaiser] had closely followed our *Sound Speed Marker* trilogy (2009–14), which is focused on ideas of absence and obsolescence and where we experimented with hybrid forms of storytelling, combining documentary and narrative forms. For the Venice Biennale, Philipp asked us to consider the 1952 and Giacometti’s refusal to show in the Swiss Pavilion as a way to think about absence. We spent a lot of time finding a point of departure, researching the history of the Swiss Pavilion and Giacometti’s life. Eventually we came across Mayo through a biography of Giacometti by James Lord. Mayo is but a brief mention in this biography, but she stuck with us.

TH: Lord’s entries about Mayo are sexist. His biography about Giacometti was very popular yet fiercely criticized by art historians and Giacometti

scholars but, curiously, it has never been specifically criticized for how Lord writes about women. Reproduced in Lord's book is a photograph of Mayo and Giacometti, and this image has since been circulated and reprinted in other books about Giacometti. In the image, the two young lovers sit on either side of a clay bust that she has made of Giacometti.

AB: That was a very exciting point of departure for us. There is a lot of existing scholarship about Giacometti's models (indeed, Lord also wrote about this); however, very little consideration has been made of Giacometti sitting as a model for another artist. In the moment that this photograph was taken, Mayo is the artist and Giacometti is the model. This image was the initial trigger that started our journey: Who was Flora? What happened to her?

TH: The photograph of Mayo and Giacometti, like all photographs, offers a surface, a complicated terrain that is ripe for use, misuse and interpretation. It was our entryway into the consideration of absence—the specific absence of Mayo, but more so absence in an extended sense in terms of the systemic, historical exclusion of women artists.

I presume most people who saw Flora at the Swiss Pavilion must have been struck by the double projection. The orchestration of image and sound lures the viewer into the knot of stories instantly. However, the longer I reflect on the work, the more I think the bust—standing in for the lost original made by Mayo of Giacometti—which was included as part of your Venice Biennale presentation, can almost be seen as the culmination point of your project. You commissioned the bust to be made after a found photograph. What seems to be a portrait of a famous artist turns out to be much more about the materialized reconstitution of another artist, namely Mayo, who in her time was underestimated, dismissed as a woman artist in both her professional and private context. You have given her form and weight, literally in a bronze cast, as an artist and as a person. Understanding the backdrop of the bust, it receives a ghostly quality. How do you see this? Can you tell us about the procedure?

AB: *Bust* (2017) is such a meta-object or meta-image. As an object, you can touch it, it's solid and heavy compared to the ephemerality of projection and sound of *Flora*. However, *Bust* is equally ephemeral—it has an expression of presence but actually it's a hollow shell of presence; everything about the piece exudes absence. Even today, we can't fully grasp what it is, and we like that uncomfortable quality about it. It makes a lot of sense when you describe it as having or receiving a ghostly quality. This is really a rich and provocative insight.

TH: When we first saw the reproduction of Mayo and Giacometti in Lord's book, all of our questions began to emerge. Who was the photographer? Where was the negative? Where was the positive? Part of the trail of our research eventually became embedded in the lengthy title of the work:

Bust 2017

Flora Mayo and Alberto Giacometti, with the bust she made of him, circa 1927. Photographer unknown. Original photograph belonging to Flora Mayo, kept under her mattress, lost. Film negative missing. Reproduction from only known duplicate print, archive of Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur. Original clay bust portrait of Alberto Giacometti by Flora Mayo, lost. Reconstructed and cast in brass.

Trying to give form to experience of the image meant for us to rebuild, reconstruct it, have it as a character in the film, and ultimately finish it by casting it. We see a direct and generative relationship between the reproduction process of casting a sculpture and the process of photography: both employ casting on a negative and using the negative to create a positive. From the very first moment, working on *Bust* was a physical process in which a number of different hands, a collective voice, were working on it. As part of the sculpting process, we were looking to other photographs of Giacometti, who was photographed and filmed often. We were working around an impossibility—rendering his “likeness” and finishing Mayo's sculpture.

(Opening page)

Exhibition view, detail of **TERESA HUBBARD / ALEXANDER BIRCHLER's** *Bust*, 2017
Flora Mayo and Alberto Giacometti, with the bust she made of him, circa 1927. Photographer unknown. Original photograph belonging to Flora Mayo, kept under her mattress, lost. Film negative missing. Reproduction from only known duplicate print, archive of Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur. Original clay bust portrait of Alberto Giacometti by Flora Mayo, lost. Reconstructed and cast in brass.
Framed silver gelatin print, 89 x 72 cm;
brass sculpture with concrete base, 154 x 47.9 x 53.3 cm. Photo by Ugo Carmeni. Courtesy the artists and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin.

(Opposite page)

Exhibition view of **TERESA HUBBARD / ALEXANDER BIRCHLER's** *Flora*, 2017, synchronized double-sided film installation with shared soundtrack, 30 min, loop, at “Women of Venice,” Swiss Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Photo by Ugo Carmeni. Copyright Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler. Courtesy the artists and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles; and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin.

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Exhibition view of “Women of Venice,” Swiss Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Photo by Ugo Carmeni. Copyright Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler. Courtesy the artists and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin.





How were you able to find more information about Mayo?

TH: What was known about Mayo before we started this work was very little: she is only a side note in Lord's book. She has survived in art history until now only because at the same time Mayo was working on her sculpture of Giacometti, he was also sculpting her. His work survived: *Tête de femme (Flora Mayo)* (1926) is in the collection of the Giacometti Foundation, Paris. Mayo's portrait bust of him—indeed, we do not know if it was ever finished, as all we have is a blurry, poor-quality reproduction—has not survived.

AB: We scoured through hundreds of books about Giacometti trying to find mentions of Mayo. She was hidden—extremely hard to find. Even Giacometti, when he was writing to his mother about Mayo, didn't ever use her name; he only referred to her as "the American." We also searched for the source of the image that has been reproduced again and again in many publications. We discovered that none of the publishers who have reproduced this image have information on the copyright or are in possession of a negative or print of the photograph. We went all the way back to the 1980s, when the image was first published in Lord's book by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

After a number of months working along these lines of research, we came across an essay by Véronique Wiesinger, a renowned Giacometti scholar and former director of the Giacometti Foundation. In an exhibition catalog, *The Women of Giacometti*, published by Pace Wildenstein in 2005, which accompanied a Giacometti exhibition at Pace New York in 2005 and the Nasher Sculpture Center in 2006, Wiesinger contributed an essay titled, "On Women in Giacometti's Work (and Some Women in Particular)."

TH: Wiesinger presents the reproduction of Giacometti and Mayo and asserts that there has been a misidentification—that the woman in the photograph is not Flora Mayo, it is Marguerite Cossaceanu. We hit a wall with our research when we came across this article and her findings.

AB: If the woman depicted in the image is not Mayo, then the artwork depicted in the image is also not made by Mayo. With Wiesinger's published pronouncement, Flora Mayo as an artist becomes effectively erased a second time. We set about making contact with Wiesinger to ask her more about her research and how she came to her conclusion. Wiesinger generously gave us her time and notes. By retracing the steps of her research, we discovered that there were some leaps in her conclusions.

We realized that in order to fully verify the identity of the woman in the photograph next to Giacometti, we needed to find other photographs, other traces of Mayo. In order to find more photographs, we needed to find her family. This took us on an incredible journey searching for possible family members, ultimately leading us to find Flora's only surviving child, David Mayo, a son no one knew existed.

TH: With the help of David and the numerous photographs he has of his mother, we were able to correctly identify that the woman in the image with Giacometti is indeed Flora Mayo.

AB: We discovered a most amazing error: that in another photograph Wiesinger had used as part of her "proof" that Mayo was not the person in the picture with Giacometti, Mayo is indeed present; however, she's not the woman in the foreground standing next to her mentor Antoine Bourdelle, as Wiesinger asserted. Mayo is actually standing in the background, at the edge of the frame. That position—the figure at edge of the frame—says so much about our agency and how we approach storytelling. What eventually turned out to be an art historical error by Wiesinger forced us to dig deeper. Wiesinger's finding was an immensely disruptive stumbling block, yet it became an extraordinarily generative moment for us.

It is such an amazing outcome! The discovery of Mayo's still-living son David enabled you to focus on existential questions manifest in a mother-son relationship, and what it meant to be a single parent in those days. More importantly, you gained an important voice for Mayo. David's

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Detail of **TERESA HUBBARD / ALEXANDER BIRCHLER's** *Bust*, 2017
Flora Mayo and Alberto Giacometti, with the bust she made of him, circa 1927. Photographer unknown. Original photograph belonging to Flora Mayo, kept under her mattress, lost. Film negative missing. Reproduction from only known duplicate print, archive of Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur. Original clay bust portrait of Alberto Giacometti by Flora Mayo, lost. Reconstructed and cast in brass. Framed silver gelatin print, 89 x 72cm; brass sculpture with concrete base, 154 x 47.9 x 53.3 cm. Photo by Ugo Carmeni. Courtesy the artists and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin.

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TERESA HUBBARD / ALEXANDER BIRCHLER, *House with Pool*, 2004, high definition single-channel film installation, 20 min 39 sec., loop. Copyright Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler. Courtesy Burger Collection, Hong Kong.

memories of his mother are antagonistic to what authoritative art history had to say about her. How did you end up finding David and how did you deal with the responsibility you gained for his personal insights?

AB: It wasn't mentioned in any published material that Mayo had given birth to children—only that she had been married and divorced. I began a painstaking search using ancestry, travel and newspaper records. While Teresa was researching, she came across a brief mention of Mayo's first child, a daughter named Joan. Then I came across a strange notation entered by Mayo in a Los Angeles lodger's ledger book, where she leaves a record of being accompanied by a person named David, but does not identify this person as her child. There are a number of very good possible reasons why, as a single mother, she wouldn't have made mention of her child, as she was trying to find a job and a decent place to live at the same time. These two findings about Mayo's children were the first threads. The way we were then able to find David in the end is an interview all in itself!

TH: When we found David, to our complete amazement, we realized he had never been contacted by any Giacometti researchers or art historians. No one had ever asked him about his mother. In a trunk in David's garage, we found never-before-publicly-seen photographs, notes and letters detailing Mayo's life with Giacometti. David didn't realize what he had kept in his garage. Giacometti meant nothing to him—he had simply kept the photographs of the "guy with the funny hair" because his mother was in the images.

*Ultimately, you helped David to see his mother in a new light. I think this is one of the reasons why a lot of people were so deeply touched by your work; every viewer can identify with those existential aspects that you built in by focusing on the mother-son relationship. The construction of the self is complex; it may also depend on our understanding of where we come from, of our parents, for instance. In other works, such as *Single Wide* (2002), *House with Pool* (2004) or *Eight* (2001) and *Eighteen* (2013), the formation of subjectivity and identity is traced too, though I wouldn't see you as contemporary portraitists at all, but quite the opposite—as artists describing the fluidity and uncertainty of things that seem stable and firm, deconstructing histories in which people are enmeshed.*

*In *Flora*, the same story is simultaneously told in different ways, across two channels. *Flora's* story focuses on cinematographic style, whereas *David's* takes a strictly documentary approach. For the viewer, this leads to*

a visceral understanding that each story unfolds in a very different way, depending on who speaks. We all know this, but we collectively forget with a multitude of systems or structures that spread all sorts of "claims of truth." In fact, you gave David a seemingly more objective voice with the documentary language. The viewer's bodily experience of flipping from one side to the other triggers the critical analysis of powerful individual versus institutional perspectives on art history. What were the challenges, conceptual and technical, that you ran into while developing this installation? How did the physical body of the viewer factor into the process?

AB: We consider *Flora* a film installation and we are interested in creating a hybrid space that uses and subverts dominant cinematic language. We are dedicated to a process of forcing the conventions of mainstream cinematic language into a structure that is highly experimental. *Flora* consists of two different sides, with each side unfolding a completely different story using a different genre—one side is David's space and the other side is *Flora's*. Both sides share the same soundtrack, with the source of sound emanating from the closed gap between the screens. We want our viewers to be active and physically engaged—it is not possible to experience both sides at once—so the idea of a complete experience is an impossibility; it must be pieced together by the viewer. The installation is structured as an impossible conversation between mother and son. We think about this choreography as a collapsed cinema—two cinemas in one. We have been obsessed with the idea of a collapsed cinema for a number of years.

*The majority of protagonists in your film installations and photography are women. Even when you were invited to play off the curatorial line of the persistent absence of Alberto Giacometti, you ended up with a woman, *Flora* Mayo, at the forefront. May I ask somewhat provocatively: what makes women so interesting? On a very general level, art enables us to see or learn about the previously unknown, and historically, it is indisputable that women have always been less visible and heard in the public sphere, which is connected automatically to power and influence. Is it these blind spots and how they possibly manifest themselves in female figures that interests you?*

TH: As a feminist working for many years primarily in a lens-based practice, I have always questioned coded functions of spectatorship and the blind spot. I am drawn to examine it like a moth to the flame. Why?



Because of my own personal, politically lived experience. On screen, women have navigated, and continue to navigate, through such complicated and biased power structures of being a prop, being background versus foreground, being on display in a state of “being looked-at-ness,” to borrow the term from Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema.” When we first began developing *Flora*, it was triggered by an image of a woman—a reproduction of a lost photograph from the 1920s depicting Mayo and her lover, Giacometti. Written records only described Mayo by her physical appearance, as a “pretty blonde.” It was striking but not surprising that in most notes and letters referring to her, Mayo was described by how she looked, rather than by her level of education, intelligence or ambitions. In Lord’s book, he describes Mayo as “attractive, but not beautiful, and there is something weak in her face.”

Your approach enables us to escape the double-bind situation that occurs so often when trying to subvert systems of power relations. By this I mean that at first glance, your piece in Venice could have seemed highly problematic: here we are, once again talking about women only because of men; after all, Giacometti is the reason we know of Mayo. By revealing how Mayo, under the circumstances she lived in, never could have obtained resonance as an acclaimed sculptor, you shed light on the discussion about who speaks, how, and for whom. Following Flora’s narrative, we increasingly forget about Giacometti; in fact, he becomes the ghost, just like Flora was! Furthermore, the work poses questions about how subjectivity or identity is constructed, how a story is lived or experienced, and how art history (and history in general) is evolving as a discipline and being written. So, in the end, your piece allows Giacometti to be absent from the Swiss Pavilion once again and, more importantly, raises questions about how power and value is passed on and is played out. Even though the piece refers to the past, it reaches out to contemporary issues surrounding the voices of the marginalized, which, in these days, are even more apparent against a backdrop of conservative backlashes. How do you view this situation? Were there particular issues of our times that were as formative for the work as your historical findings?

TH: Yes! *Flora* and *Bust* refer to the past but are an indictment of the present: of how women and the work women produce is framed and valued.

AB: We are not interested in the question of whether Mayo was a good artist or not; rather, our work revolves around questions of social convention and Mayo’s struggles and strength to defy prescribed roles of motherhood. It asks questions about a mother and son, and Mayo’s ability to survive in light of making some very difficult choices within a limited set of choices available to her. We want to give voice to these questions, which continue to resonate with urgency within the current social, economic and political climate.

CHRISTINA VÉGH is the director of the Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover, since 2015. She studied art history, ethnology and philosophy in Zurich and Santa Cruz. She was curator at the Kunsthalle Basel from 2000 to 2004 and director of the Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, from 2004 to 2014. She has worked with artists such as Monika Baer, John Baldessari, Rita McBride, Haegue Yang, Charline von Heyl, James Richards, Franz Erhard Walther and Christopher Williams, among others. Since 2000, she has written extensively on art and is involved in numerous juries, such as for Art Biennials grants for Pro Helvetia (2015-18) and for the Wolfgang Hahn Prize (2017/18).

TERESA HUBBARD and **ALEXANDER BIRCHLER** are a Swiss-American duo who have been working collaboratively since 1992. They are both professors in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas in Austin. In 2017, they were awarded honorary Doctorates in Fine Arts in recognition of their outstanding achievements to art and culture by the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, Halifax, Canada. They divide their time between Austin and Berlin.

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler’s upcoming exhibition “Flora” will open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on January 20, 2019, and run through April 7, 2019.



TERESA HUBBARD / ALEXANDER BIRCHLER, *Flora*, 2017, stills from synchronized double-sided film installation with shared soundtrack, 30 min, loop. Courtesy the artists and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin.