PK When I started to think about the Swiss Pavilion and came across the rather obscure fact that the most prestigious Swiss artist of the 20th century, Alberto Giacometti, continuously refused to show his work there, even though it was designed by his brother Bruno in 1952, I thought this would be the perfect point of departure for a project that addresses historical and contextual specificity in a playful and fascinating way. It raises issues of nationalism, identity, cultural politics, but also establishes a basic narrative about the blindspots of history and reflects national representation. It’s very surprising that the subject of the wonderful mid-century pavilion built by Bruno Giacometti has never been addressed before by any artist. Given your interest in archaeological layers and depths of cinematic reality—I’m thinking about the film trilogy Sound Speed Marker that you recently completed—it seemed to me that you’d be the perfect artists to invite. How did your film project Flora start?

AB I remember early on when we first started talking with you about the pavilion, it was really exciting to begin unpacking the threads of history of the pavilion building. I think it really started with the absence. You said, “Think about 1952, think about this moment, think about the absence.” It was exactly the right provocation for us, to look at the edges of the subject in order to find our point of departure. We initially came across the figure of Flora Mayo through James Lord’s biography of Alberto Giacometti—it’s one of the few places where she’s mentioned in more than one sentence, but Lord also discusses her as a side figure.

TH Lord’s entries about Mayo are dismissive and sexist. His Giacometti biography was first published in 1985 and while it’s been popular—it was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award—it’s also been fiercely criticized by art historians and Giacometti scholars—Rosalind Krauss, for example, described it as being not only bad, but harmful. Flora was an American artist from Denver, Colorado. She studied art in New York before she arrived in Paris. She and Alberto were classmates, friends, and lovers while they were students at the Grande Chaumière in Paris. In Lord’s book there’s a photograph of Flora and Alberto that has since circulated and been widely published in books about Giacometti. In the image, they sit on either side of a clay bust that she made of Alberto. In that moment of the photograph being taken, Mayo is the artist and Giacometti is the model. Lord dates the photograph to 1927; however, our research indicates that this date is unverified, that the negative and original print have been lost, and that the photographer is unknown.

AB So this image was an initial trigger: who was Flora? That started our journey.
What is her story?

Well, perhaps before we go into that, we should first describe the parameters of the work that will be shown in Venice. In the large room of the pavilion—which Bruno designed for the exhibition of paintings—we'll present a double-sided film installation. Put simply, the film installation is a conversation between a mother and a son—a conversation between Flora Mayo and her son, David Mayo. We imagine ways in which the two sides speak to each other, theoretically, conceptually, emotionally, and narratively. David talks about his mother, her life and how he came to find out about Alberto Giacometti.

So you actually filmed an interview with him. How exactly did you find him?

It wasn’t mentioned in any published material that Flora Mayo had children. Finding David was an intense, exciting search. That’s another conversation all in itself! I should mention that we are deeply thankful to David and his wife Marji for their trust and commitment.

The image of Flora and Alberto and the bust she made of him informs the other component we’re exhibiting in the pavilion, in the adjacent space, which was originally designed as a print room. In that room, we’re presenting a sculpture and a photograph: Bust. We think of this work in the same way as we do the film installation, as a re-imagining, as reconstructions.

None of Flora’s artwork from Paris, including the bust she made of Alberto, has survived. She destroyed all her work in 1933 when she left Paris. The photograph introduces questions about absence—Flora’s absence, the absence of her work. We set about rebuilding, reproducing the bust, the portrait of Giacometti. A reproduction of the historical photograph of Flora and Alberto also becomes part of the piece.

In our film, David talks about his mother, her life and how he came to find out about Giacometti. The scenes on the other side of the screen with Flora Mayo, is a re-imagining of her in her first Paris studio in 1926 at the rue Boissonade. So the two sides ‘talk’ to each other, but there’s also this kind of cyclical reversal in it. The conversation becomes almost a loop in itself, where the son becomes the old man and the mother becomes a young woman. Another thread interwoven in the film follows Giacometti’s 1926 sculpture of Flora: Tête de Femme (Flora Mayo) as it’s packed up in the Alberto and Annette Giacometti Foundation in Paris and later exhibited at the Kunsthau Zurich. David journeys from California to Zurich in order to see the head of his mother for the first time.

With the two-sided screen, we’re thinking about the choreography as a hybrid form of storytelling—a filmic essay, a detective story, in the sense of exploring a relationship between knowing and unknowing. We don’t want to present what we’ve found as the truth. We’re interested in varieties of truths.
It's complicated. I was born in Ireland and I am an Irish citizen. I grew up in Australia, lived and worked in Basel, and I've been a Swiss citizen for the past 25 years—and within that mix-up of nationalities I'm also American.

And then there are those years in between where we lived and worked in Canada, and we continue to divide our time between Austin and Berlin.

I think the self-referentiality lies more in our connection to the site of the studio—to Flora's studio, Alberto's studio, our studio. We're drawn to the day-to-day, non-spectacular moments leading up to when the photograph was taken of Flora with Alberto, sitting with the bust she made of him.

We've been thinking about Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio* (Fat Chance John Cage)—the studio space as a site of anxiety, expectation, and long stretches of inaction. In the scenes in Flora's studio, there's a repetition of her doing mundane daily chores, such as chopping wood for her stove, getting dressed, feeding her cat—all the physical things necessary just to get ready to start working. As you pointed out once, we see an immense narrative potential in the sense that nothing really happens. In the course of our research, it was interesting to learn that Antoine Bourdelle (teacher of both Alberto and Flora) expected all of his students, right from the start, to rent their own studios, separate from the shared studio space at the Grande Chaumière. Flora first had a studio space on the rue Boissonade, and later, her studio was next door to Alberto's on the rue Hippolyte-Maindron.

In building Flora's studio space, we were contemplating our own studio, the many different studio spaces we've worked in over the years, as a kind of model for inaction, failure, productivity and the ultimate standstill, which is to stop making artwork altogether, leaving the art world, which is what happened in Flora's life.

She's a fascinating figure precisely because of the complexities implied by her "disappearance."

It can be said that she never even entered art history.

Right. I think a lot about representation, as a woman and an artist, and what it might have meant to try to be an artist back then. Often, women are represented as footnotes in the lives of historical men, predominantly white men. Alberto and Flora were both students accepted into Antoine Bourdelle's sculpture class at the Grande Chaumière. Prior to that, Flora studied at the Artist League in New York. It was also interesting, the more we dug, to see how little evidentiary material the often-published photograph of Alberto and Flora actually gives, versus how much people project onto the image. This image took off and has circulated in art history, due of course, to Giacometti's public profile. Around 10 years ago, some scholars began to question whether the woman in the photograph was indeed Flora Mayo—proposing that it was Marguerite Cossaceanu, another artist who was also a student at the Grande Chaumière.

In the near future, in collaboration with the Alberto and Annette Giacometti Foundation in Paris, we're intending to make a publication that focuses on the circulation and slippage of this image in the context of Giacometti scholarship. We've made some amazing discoveries along the way. It's fascinating to follow the leads and the blind spots surrounding this image. Flora was described as a "pretty blonde," and indeed her passport from 1923 confirms that she had blond hair and blue eyes. However, the woman in the photograph first published in Lord's book appears to have dark hair. There's another photograph that has been used as "evidence" against Flora being the woman in the picture with Giacometti. It's a photograph from the same period of time, in which a group of students gather around Antoine Bourdelle, and it was concluded that the "pretty blonde" standing next to Bourdelle must be Flora Mayo. Through our research, and with the help of David's identification, we discovered the most amazing coincidence—that in this very same photograph used to "prove" that Flora isn't the person in the picture with Giacometti, Flora is actually present in the image; however, she's not in the foreground, she's not in the center—she's standing in the background at the edge of the frame. That's where the story really started for us.

What's compelling to us is that Flora Mayo was written out of history twice—a kind of double erasure—first by James Lord and then by scholarship, which removed her from an image and therefore by extension, as the artist who made the bust of Giacometti.

David Mayo says it the best. When we talked with him about this photograph, he immediately recognized the woman in the image as his mother. He told us that when he was growing up and throughout the years, he never really noticed or looked at his mother in the photograph first published in Lord's book.
mother’s hair color or hairstyle. He knew her by looking at her face. That’s how he recognizes her in the photograph, “I just know from looking at her face that it’s my mother.”

Flora seems to be a reimagination. You took some factual fragments of a so-called accurate art-historical narrative in order to start weaving new threads. Bust, the sculptural element in your Venice presentation, the completion of Alberto’s head that we also see in the making in the film, seems to be the perfect metaphor. The sculpture had been destroyed a long time ago; the only existing testimony is a black and white photograph that only shows one side of the head. You not only reimagined a narrative for Flora Mayo and Alberto Giacometti, but you also completed the third dimension, the not visible side of the sculpture. Your early work, Contestants in a Birdhouse Competition (1991/96), seems to be related to Mayo’s sculpture. You reconstructed all the birdhouses represented in a photograph. The non-visibility of two-dimensional representation highlights the reductive capacity of the photographic representation to depict reality and talks about media-specific differences in general. On a more poetic level, these works remind me of the Greek myth of Pygmalion, the sculpture that comes to life.

Contestants in a Birdhouse Competition, 1991/96
Installation view: Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau
Framed C-Print Photograph, 76 × 97 ¼ in., 8 Birdhouses, wood, paint and plaster
Installation dimensions variable
Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst (Inv. G 2003.3)
To me, it feels more like a development than a shift. When I think back to earlier works like Small Town (1990) or Contestants in a Birdhouse Competition, even back then, we were trying to find a form of unpacking the potential of what an archive is, looking at the anthropology and uncertainty of a place and being triggered by a mediated source—a photograph or film footage. Yes, the result was a restaging or a reframing of something. We’re interested in the idea of what’s been called “near-documentary.”

PK Who coined that term?
AB I think it was Iris Dressler who brought this idea up in a discussion about our work. “Annäherung an das Dokumentarische,” was the term she used. It goes all the way back to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, where we studied. The legacy of the program at NSCAD is highly conceptual, and we always had a narrative side, so this was always a clash.

TH This whole idea that storytelling is theory put into practice: that was our belief and at a school like NSCAD you had to defend that position. It was the perfect challenge for us.

AB We always had a clear desire to have a narrative strand in our work, but we approached it from a position of media reflection. In Venice, we’re again trying to mend these two forms together.

PK The Swiss pavilion exhibition is called Women of Venice, referring to Giacometti’s sculptural group, which he made in 1956 for a group exhibition in the French Pavilion. It was the only time Giacometti agreed to present his work in a national context. How does Flora Mayo fit in here? Can Flora be seen as an homage?
AB I think it’s an homage to women artists.

PK Is she an allegory?
AB Well... she’s a real person. We tried to find and reflect the complexity of a real person.

PK It’s a discursive and historical constellation where you’re zooming in without asking how legitimate she was as an artist, which actually isn’t the interesting or the right question to ask.

TH Right! It’s not the interesting question to us. Because one can say she failed as an artist, but she succeeded as a mother. In terms of weights and balances... it asks those kinds of questions.

AB That’s a very good point. One of the greatest things that Flora wrote down was a conversation she had with Alberto about art.

TH She described Alberto coming up to her studio one night. He was helping her to fix a leak in the roof. They walked around her studio, looking at her work. Flora felt that all of her work was unfinished. In frustration, she told Alberto that she hated art.

ALBERTO laughed and told her that that was a very good way to feel.

PK It’s interesting to see how the complexity and ambiguity of the title Women of Venice becomes even more complicated with your pieces Flora and Bust. The title is a marker for Giacometti’s decision to exhibit in the French Pavilion instead of the Swiss; it’s a marker of a transnational attitude to define yourself without national boundaries, but also addresses the complexity of his relationship to women in general, and the specificity of his own contribution for Venice.
Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler

*Flora*, 2017

*Bust*, 2017
Flora Mayo and her son, David Mayo, California, c. 1940

Flora Mayo's passport, issued 1923
Flora, 2017, film installation, details. Philadelphia Public Ledger, December 6, 1925

Flora, 2017, film installation, detail. (From right to left) Alberto Giacometti, Flora Mayo, Josef Müller and Luella E. Lewis, Tregastel, 1928
Bust, 2017, detail.
Alberto Giacometti and Flora Mayo, with the bust she made of him c. 1927
Bust, 2017, work in progress.
Reconstruction of Flora Mayo’s destroyed bust of Alberto Giacometti

Flora, 2017

Synchronized double-sided film installation with sound
30 mins, loop
Installation dimensions variable

Written and Directed by Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler

Cast
David Mayo  (as himself)
Flora Mayo Julia Zange
Alberto Giacometti Jules Armana
Flora's Cat Melville

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Framed silver gelatin print, 34 ⅝ × 28 ⅜ in. Brass sculpture with concrete base, 60 ¼ × 18 ⅞ × 21 in. Courtesy the Artists, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin

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Biography

Teresa Hubbard (Irish/American/Swiss, born in Dublin 1965) and Alexander Birchler (Swiss, born in Baden 1962) have been working as a collaborative artist duo since 1990. Their lens-based practice interweaves hybrid forms of storytelling and explores the connections between social life, memory and history that sit just outside the frame of a recorded image. As the critic Jeffrey Kastner notes, “Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler’s filmic essays are also in their way detective stories, with all the poetic and philosophical resonance that the form at its best can offer. Not run-of-the-mill whodunnits, but examinations of the ways in which knowing and not-knowing are related.” Hubbard attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and the graduate sculpture program at Yale University School of Art, New Haven. Birchler studied at the Academy of Art and Design Basel and the University of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland. They received MFA degrees from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, NSCAD University, which also recently awarded each, an honorary degree Doctor of Fine Arts, honoris causa.

Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler's work is held in numerous public collections including Kunsthaus Zürich; Kunstmuseum Basel; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; Aargauer Kunsthaus Aarau; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Museum of Fine Arts Houston; Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna and the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich.

Their exhibition history includes solo and group exhibitions at venues including the 48th Venice Biennial; Tate Liverpool; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid; Kunsthaus Graz; Mori Museum, Tokyo; Hamburger Bahnhof; Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Birchler is an Affiliate Research Scholar at the University of Texas at Austin and Hubbard holds the William and Bettye Nowlin Endowed Professorship in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin.

Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler are represented by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; Galerie Vera Munro, Hamburg and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin.

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They live in Austin and Berlin.
Pro Helvetia

The Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia is responsible for the Swiss contributions to the Venice Biennale as the commissioner of the exhibition in the Swiss Pavilion of Switzerland. Mandated by the Swiss Confederation, the Swiss Arts Council promotes artistic creation in Switzerland, contributes to cultural exchange at home, promotes the dissemination of Swiss culture abroad and fosters cultural outreach. Switzerland has been present at the Biennale Arte since 1920 and at the Biennale Architettura since 1991. The nominations for both are within the remit of two independent juries commissioned by the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia. The Jury, which nominated Philipp Kaiser to curate the exhibition at the Swiss Pavilion, is comprised of the following people: Jacqueline Uhlmann, Head of Fair Management and Communication at LISTE Art Fair Basel; Silvie Defraoui, artist; Balthazar Lovay, Director Fri Art, Fribourg; Michele Robecchi, writer and curator, and Christina Végh, Director Kestner-gesellschaft, Hanover.

Philipp Kaiser

Philipp Kaiser (Swiss, born in Bern 1972), holds a PhD in art history, and began his career in Switzerland. He now works as an independent curator in Los Angeles, California, but retains close links to the Swiss art scene. He is currently collaborating on a comprehensive exhibition of the archive of the late, Swiss curator Harald Szeemann with co-curator Glenn Phillips at the Getty Research Institute in LA. From 2001 to 2007, he worked as curator for modern and contemporary art at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel. He then moved to the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles as a Senior Curator and was later appointed director of Museum Ludwig in Cologne from 2012 to 2014. He teaches at University of California in Los Angeles and Claremont McKenna College in California and is working on multiple exhibition projects internationally, including the recent Cindy Sherman retrospective at The Broad Museum, Los Angeles, and the two upcoming inaugural exhibitions of the Marciano Art Foundation in Los Angeles Jim Shaw: The Wig Museum and Unpacking.

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Sabeth Buchmann

Sabeth Buchmann is an art historian and critic, Professor of Modern and Postmodern Art History at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Together with Helmut Draxler, Clemens Krümmel and Susanne Leeb, she is the editor of PolyPen, a series dedicated to art critical and political theory published by b_books, Berlin. Recent publications include Putten Rehearsals to the Test: Practices of Rehearsal in Fine Arts, Film, Theater, Theory, and Politics, Berlin/ Vienna, 2016 (co-edited with Ilse Lafer and Constanze Ruhr); art works. Ästhetik des Postfordismus, Berlin, 2015 (co-authored with Netzwerk Kunst & Arbeit – DFG); Textile Theorien der Moderne. Alois Riegl in der Kunstkritik, Berlin, 2015 (co-edited with Rike Frank); Hélio Oiticica & Neville D’Almeida, Experiments in Cosmococa, London, 2013 (co-authored with Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz).
Exhibition
Title of the exhibition
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Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler

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