

Show Us the Money: 'The Accursed Share' at Talbot Rice Gallery

– Elisa Adami and Arianna Mercado

In this text, Afterall Research Fellow and Editor Elisa Adami and Project Coordinator Arianna Mercado reflect on the exhibition 'The Accursed Share' on display at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh.

Last summer, over 90 individuals in Hacienda Tinang, Tarlac, Philippines were illegally arrested by armed members of the police while engaging in collective and peaceful land cultivation with farmers. Many of those detained were students, peasant advocates, and cultural workers who were volunteering with local organisations campaigning for genuine land reform in the country. They were released after four days, many with charges of 'malicious mischief' and 'illegal assembly'.

Hacienda Tinang is a 200-acre sugarcane plantation. Most monocrop plantations in the Philippines were installed during Spanish and American occupation and to this day are persistent emblems of colonialism and exploitation in the country. While there have been meagre attempts at agrarian reform, the peasants that for generations have laboured on these farms remain landless and, in a lasting loop of wage slavery, are at constant risk of displacement, abuse, and death.

Central to the exploitative plantation system in the Philippines is *tiempo muerto*, or 'dead time'. Dead time refers to the waiting period between sowing and harvesting. Most plantation workers do not earn their wages during this off-period and are forced to take up casual jobs to sustain themselves. As Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho point out, 'Tiempo muerto is not a rupturing, exceptional episode, like a drought or flood. It is death built into the clockwork mandate of the sugar plantation.'¹ More often than not, those supporting and benefitting from these harsh conditions are the Philippines' oligarchs, corrupt politicians, and imperial-capitalistic forces both inside and outside of the country.

In response to these unjust conditions, many farmers and peasant advocates take up *bungkalan*, a practice in which they set up small pockets of idle land within these massive plantations to cultivate seasonal and edible crops such as aubergines, tomatoes, and okra. It was during an educational activity at the *bungkalan* site that the above mentioned arrest of over 90 individuals occurred.²

These struggles are explored in many of Cian Dayrit's works, some of which are currently on display at Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh as part of the exhibition 'The Accursed Share'. Dayrit investigates and charts the complex entanglements between land, capital, governance, and militarisation in the Philippines through community-based mapmaking and textiles. Often engaging with cartography as a form, his tapestries of maps are littered with several

¹ Enzo Camacho and Amy Lien, *Surviving Tiempo Muerto: On Bungkalan and Peasant Resistance in the Philippines*, Artist Op-Eds, Walker Art Center Publishing, 22 April 2020. Available at <https://walkerart.org/magazine/amy-lien-enzo-camacho-bungkalan-peasant-resistance-philippines-artist-op-ed>

² This was not the first time that the practice of *bungkalan* was met with violent state and feudal oppression. In 2018, nine *bungkalan* farmers were killed in Sagay, Negros Occidental. For more information, see: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/22/philippine-sugar-plantation-massacre>

illustrations and slogans found in calls for agrarian justice, such as farmers, military vessels, sugarcanes, and puppets. These map-based works weave together varying levels of subtext about the history and contemporary realities of the Philippines, while also referencing the visual language of classical European art through its composition, ornamentation, and use of Latin words throughout the pieces.

‘The Accursed Share’ takes its title from French philosopher Georges Bataille’s 1949 eponymous essay, which the curator James Clegg describes as one of ‘the strangest studies of economics’. While the press release frames the exhibition mostly around questions of ‘debt’ and the current cost-of-living crisis in the UK and the rest of Europe, the spectres of financialisation and individual precarity are notably absent from the show. Across a range of geographically far ranging works by nine artists and artist-groups, attention is mostly focused on the *longue durée* of processes of colonisation and capitalist accumulation: extraction of raw materials, land grabbing and privatisation, as well as the human costs of wealth production. This expanded focus is meant to trace the historical and violent roots of current conditions of indebtedness – be them individual, class-based or national. Yet, the connections between *then* and *now*, or *here* and *elsewhere* remain mostly undeveloped.

Facing Dayrit’s textile counter-maps is an installation by Congolese artist Sammy Baloji comprising 50 copper mortar-shell casings potted with plants from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The casings, which were decorated by WWI soldiers during periods of lull, have strangely enough become a coveted design object as planters for middle-class households. Baloji draws our attention to the fact that the copper these weapons-turned-vases are made of was mined in the DRC’s South-Eastern region of Katanga, during the brutal colonial regime of Belgium’s King Leopold II. Today, the area remains a site of mineral extraction (particularly of cobalt and coltan, which is found in copper deposits), and continues to be at the mercy of the predatory policies of multinational corporations, bordering states and local, corrupted politicians. The installation is overlaid with the sound of an African choir performing ecclesiastical music, taken from Baloji’s film installation *Tales of the Copper Cross Garden: Episode 1* (2017). This additional sonic layer serves to highlight the role of Christian religion in subjugating local populations to colonial domination and forced labour, resonating with Dayrit’s small shrines across the room, *Terra Rationarium* (2018), which combine Catholic iconography with cheap, mass-produced commodities.

Exploring the issue of land struggles through a different register is Marwa Arsanios’s film *Reverse Shot* (2022) – the fourth and last instalment of her series *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* (2017–22) – which documents the attempt to release the land from the private property regime. A private plot of land in Northern Lebanon is transformed into a social *waqf*, a type of commons inscribed in the Ottoman Land Code of 1858.³ Originally intended to designate the charitable endowment of land for religious purposes, the category of *waqf* offers a legal loophole to permanently freeze the land for social purposes. Alongside this legalistic route, the film also approaches land liberation in geological and ecological terms, particularly by following the efforts of the Soils Permaculture Association Lebanon to rehabilitate that same plot which had been quarried for fifty years. Echoing Dayrit’s counter-maps, Arsanios’s film repeatedly undercuts cinematic conventions of physically framing and

³ Alongside the idea of *waqf*, the film also introduces the most radical concept of *masha’*: a local practice where agricultural lands are cultivated collectively. By withdrawing the land from the circuits of exploitation and extraction, *waqf* acts as a potential anticipation of a renewed *masha’*, where ownership is subordinated to communal and sustainable usership.

depicting the landscape. In an attempt to produce a ‘reverse shot’ framed from the perspective of the land, the camera falls to the earth and the screen is filled by a blurry patch of yellow grass.

In the gallery’s neoclassical vestibule, viewers walk into an energetic gathering of Lubaina Himid’s characters in *Naming the Money* (2004). Backgrounded by a score combining jazz and baroque music, Himid’s iconic work, composed of vibrantly coloured life-sized standees, recontextualises the figures of enslaved Africans depicted in European history paintings, by restoring their names and removing them from their ascribed functions in European society. Inscribed on a balance sheet affixed behind each standee, Himid poetically crafts descriptors of her figures and their journeys: ‘My name is Ilomerika / They call me George / I used to move with the trees / Now I hide amongst them / But I have tomorrow’. Grouped together according to profession (i.e., musicians, dancers, dog trainers, and painters), this operatic installation speaks to how the forced displacement, migration, and effacement of these individuals underpinned the financial wealth of European and global consumption. As the title attests, *Naming the Money* is also an act of redress which attempts to undo the dehumanising process that had turned these human beings into commodities, as well as a ‘reserved deposit of a loosely organized, decentered but vast, transatlantic banking system.’⁴

The connection between transatlantic slavery and the development of financial capitalism (with its attendant mechanisms of credit and debit) is clearly pertinent to an exhibition concerned with debt. The curatorial text describes ‘the history of monetary debt [as] one of such startling violence ... empire-building, colonisation, evictions, enslavement, extraction militarisation’. Yet, the exhibition’s focus on the historical and material roots of debt economies risks at times to neglect the contemporary workings of debt as a financial instrument and a form of impersonal political and economic domination, which remain an opaque yet genuine reality. For instance, since the 1980s, debt has been used as an imperial tool to maintain an unequal world order strikingly reminiscent of old colonial arrangements. The structural adjustment programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank on the countries in the Global South represented in the exhibition are testament to that.

Mostly detached from its financial dimensions, the concept of debt is used elsewhere in the exhibition booklet more loosely and metaphorically to indicate the material obligations that European nation-states owe to both the former colonies they plundered (or in Walter Rodney’s phrase ‘underdeveloped’), and to the descendents of the enslaved people on whose exploitation their wealth was built. Yet, as ‘The Accursed Share’ so squarely reveals, the history of debt is one predicated upon exploitation. It’s then hard to see how debt could be metamorphosed into its opposite – a force geared towards social justice. Perhaps, the legal notion of reparations, as rooted in both pragmatic and transformative considerations, could be a better fit for the task. The question remains: can a degrading and exploitative system based on economic calculus be redressed with yet another balance sheet?

For an illustrated version of the article, see: <https://www.afterall.org/articles/show-us-the-money-the-accursed-share-at-talbot-rice-gallery/>

⁴ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005.