CONJURING CAPITAL

The dominant economy with which we operate today is a system that fails to see the value in profit-less operations. The focus on economic growth, as opposed to the intangible benefits of giving, is the presumed driver of our industrial age. The lack of human and environmental ethical concern for the impact of today's system of accrual, profit and waste is exemplified in the mercantile expansion of empire in the 1600s and the violent assumption of race and class to occupy, divide and enslave foreign land and its peoples. Many of these colonized communities previously thrived as gift-giving societies, where the economic system was a reciprocal process founded on symbolic exchange. For example, in what is known as 'potlatch' to the Northwest American Indian community, they recognized that wealth was to be given and annihilated (sacrificed and thus destroyed). Wealth was not to be possessed[1]. How are ideas of wealth manifest in contemporary society today? What are the systems that exploit human labor for betterment of those with power? What kinds of institutions take part in the corruption and abuse of human dignity and cultural tradition in their desire for efficiency and influence? More importantly, how can an artist's perspective provoke reflection on these issues? In this exhibition a select number of artists reveal five social contexts from the Global South (Cambodia, Kenya, India, Argentina and Vietnam), illustrating numerous dilemmas in the unequal social landscape of producing and consuming 'capital'.

What, exactly is 'capital'? Capital is considered wealth in the form of money or assets, which is socially taken as a sign of financial strength of an individual, organization or nation and assumed available for development of investment.[2] According to economic theory, 'capital' is an exchangeable resource produced by human labor. Karl Marx in his landmark text 'Capital: Critique of Political Economy' critically outlines how the capitalist system argues a commodity's value according to its 'exchange-value' which is measured by how much labor power went in to its production. Marx specifically reveals the level of human exploitation incurred under such a system, arguing that the worker becomes a measured unit of energy where the idea of 'usefulness' is no longer about quality and skill, but about time. Time becomes socially coded, constructed and controlled by how much labor can be quantifiably measured where profit is prioritized over need. Such an intangible system of control over resources – not only human labor but also the materials excavated, exhumed and melded as its task – is often an ethical challenge to the sustainability of our environment, cultural rituals and beliefs. Today, those who control and disseminate capital circulate the stories that *they* want its future labor force to hear.

We enter the exhibition 'Conjuring Capital', via the small library of San Art, and we can hear the voice of artist Adriana Bustos as she sits within a whole other kind of collection. She sits behind glass as part of a diorama representative of the Salta jungle within a natural science museum in Argentina, near the border with Bolivia. Adriana is recounting the words of German writer Sabine Kuchler who poetically describes the mood of this jungle and its wounds as rotten, crumbling pieces of wood, where there is a deep absence of animal and human, where the trees seem tired of trying to reach for the sun. Such descriptions are in stark contrast to the myriad animals that lie physically poised and still around Adriana, where lush green vegetation in dappled light gives the mood of abundance. Adriana's choice of text metaphorically refers to the Argentinian government of the early 1800s who invited German scientists to document and catalog Argentina's natural environment. Their research effectively erased much indigenous local knowledge of flora and fauna, their categorizations becoming the basis of educational curricula across the country.

What is of particular interest to Adriana is that this jungle extends across the mountains of the Andes in Latin America and is the home of the coca leaf - that prized yet deadly plant that human greed distills into cocaine powder. Much of Adriana's research focuses on the motivations, systems of control and affect of cocaine production and consumption; her early paintings, photographs and collaborative installations exploring the exploitation of humans as 'mules' to carry this exorbitantly pricey white substance illegally across national borders.

‘Landscapes of the Soul’ takes place inside a museum, we can hear the guard admonishing a child for touching the exhibit and perhaps as viewers we wonder what is alive and what is dead, what is fact or part of the artists’ illusion. Adriana attempts to make us think about how history presents particular images of the past that overlook the truth. This jungle infers great fear across Latin America today for the thousands of victims who continue to fall prey to drug cartels that demand their bodies as machines, in often-deadly missions, to deliver cocaine for a black market economy[3]. Like the German scientists who re-categorized the flora and fauna of Argentina, similarly the drug mafia took over the wonder of this jungle again - she wonders if the museum curator understands their participation in this control of nature and culture by their failure to acknowledge this turbulent history in their display.

In the work of artist Than Sok, such a question of conscience is challenged through the religious practice of giving alms. ‘To Give is to Receive I’ is a reconfiguration of objects used in ritualistic practice between Buddhist monks and laity in Cambodia. A large radial LED disc representing the halo of Buddha is placed in the West corner of the gallery – in Cambodian temples, Buddha is always facing east towards the sun. In front of this multicolored light rests seven small mounds of sand on the floor. In each mound of sand the artist has placed several Cambodian riel – a common practice in Khmer Buddhist temples as a prayer ritual to release bad luck.

Central to this installation is Sok’s consideration of ‘giving’ as an act that expects to thus receive in return. He is critical of the institutionalization of religion and how Buddhist spiritual foundations of giving alms today have shifted into a non-spiritual labor. Traditionally, the more alms the laity gives to the monk, the more wealth the layperson is said to receive. This definition of ‘wealth’ is a spiritual value that heralds generosity, humbleness and respect desiring a higher reincarnation in the next life towards Nirvana. The halo of Buddha spins in a mesmerizing whirl in front of the viewer, the aura of divinity enshrined in technology. It is ironic to know that the giving of money at Buddhist holidays is considered good karma, as if the act of giving money alone is a ‘good’ enough deed, instead of attention to due diligence with an ethical character. Like the placing of a coin in a slot machine at a casino, faith in wealth is considered a hopeful act of chance, an opportunity to shift into a better cycle,

In a country where many young men from the countryside migrate to the urban centers, becoming monks as a way of earning money for the future, the giving of alms has become a highly contested practice, a conjuring of wealth from faith that denigrates the principles of Buddhist thinking as something purchasable and thus expendable. If karma is considered the sum of a person’s good deeds towards the next life, Than Sok queries the social architecture of contemporary life where the short sightedness of instant gratification fails to provide for future generations to come.

In northern Vietnam, the insatiable desire by the French and Chinese for natural resources during the 1900s has left an indelible mark on the local community of artist Nguyen Hong Ngoc’s hometown of Thai Nguyen. It was in 1910, during French occupation, that the French began mining coal in this area that by 1960 was fueling the nearby Chinese iron factory. Needless to say this tiny village began to suffer the environmental impact of such industry and today is sadly a landscape of unusable coal, where massive mounds of black rubble rise behind domestic homes that were once an expanse of green. On a recent visit, Nguyen discovered a derelict building with drawings of snakes on its inner walls and she was struck by the ominous portent it voiced by its presence – the snake as a symbol of a life force, of rebirth but also as a marker of darkness and vengefulness.

While Than Sok’s Buddhist halo sits in heightened awareness of the gesture of giving, Nguyen’s snake straddles the dualism of death and mortality, where coal as capital may bring warmth, light and energy it also consumes and emits a waste that cannot be recycled. In ‘Sign of Reincarnation’, Nguyen has drawn a series of images in charcoal where the snake weaves in and out. A sketch of an open-air coal-mining pit hovers in outline above the concentric circles of the ‘wheel of becoming’ or ‘wheel of life’ according to Buddhist *thanka* paintings. This ‘wheel of life’ has numerous layers of meaning, its traditional inner hub representing the three

poisons of ignorance, attachment and aversion, its second layer representing karma, while the ferocious figure that typically holds this wheel together represents impermanence. For Nguyen, whose emerging practice has often employed and referenced coal as material and symbol, she is drawn to the fact that coal is a fossilized decomposition of living matter, that it is part of the cycle of living things and yet the systems of industrialized society have become so dependent on this substance that the 'wheel of life' has lost its balance. Nguyen's project highlights how local economies become dependent on these destructive industries because an income must be generated to survive. She points to the value of belief and tradition in providing hope and explanation for the impermanent world in which we live, the thanka cycles defying human idleness, that the only constant is change.

It is this hope that must be nurtured in the coal mining towns in remote areas of Vietnam and China, where the women above-ground living in squalor and immense air degradation work the coal-mining machines, organizing family and food in their make-shift steel shacks waiting for their men to re-surface from the privatized coal pits below. It is this same principle of hope that finds itself in another form in Kenya, as this nation attempts to innovate their access and distribution of income through *mpesa*, a microfinancing service that uses mobile phone technology to enable the transfer of funds easily from urban to rural communities. In the short film 'Am I going too fast?' Hank Willis Thomas and Christopher Myers focus on the cities of Nairobi and Nakuru where *mpesa* aids local forms of trade.

'We were tasked with making a film about people overcoming poverty. We wanted to stress that poverty isn't idle…. We were really devoted to showing people at work and in motion in Africa…. We wanted to show a 'normalcy' instead of an exotic. We were also interested in showing a complex story, a tapestry of converging lives, agendas, industries and technologies. Images of modern African metropolises are so few and far between.'[4]

In this short film we see sleuth metal craftsman sculpt animals of myth and fantasy; we see immigrant families from India negotiate trade in traditional textiles through cross-continental family networks; we hear the observations and dreams of the local businessman who comment that their workforce is bigger than China, bigger than India; they speak of the revolution that mpesa, this informal banking system, has brought to their country and how it has enabled their own means of conjuring capital. 'Am I going too fast?' speaks of the difference between perception and reality, begging the world to look at the transformation that is happening on the ground, to move beyond the persisting stereotypes of color and class to focus on the wonder of their historical context. Both Hank Willis Thomas and Christopher Myers are visual artists committed to troubling the image of the African-American, in turn examining how cultural attitude and social forms of memory are conditioned by the turbulent history of enslavement and occupation, desiring a recognition of how critical it is to insert new images and narratives of their people's past into the popular visual psyche of the next generation - to encourage them to challenge and rise up against the systems of power that presumes its control of representations of race, class, nation as capital.

In thinking of how images and objects are used as forms of capital to speak about our realities beyond our lifetime, Sudarshan Shetty presents 'Waiting for others to arrive', a single channel video work that focuses on the Tuslidas Kunwarji chawl in Mumbai. A 'chawl' is a type of building found in India and literally means 'rooms' on each floor. The Tusildas Kunwarji chawl is named in memory of its benefactor whose act of philanthropy in the construction of this site assisted hundreds of poor migrant traders seeking to make a better life in Mumbai. During the 19th and 20 Century, such charity greatly contributed to Indian urban development. Sadly this chawl is to be demolished, its occupants to be resettled by the developer who bought the land.

In 'Waiting for others to arrive', Shetty provides three separate tableau: the interior of the chawl, its hallways, followed by its exterior. The sound of the *sarangi,* an ancient instrument of India, threads its presence with a 'raga' through all three sites – its mournful voice a reflection of the player's emotional state. It appears as if the musician is expectant of a guest as the cup and saucer edge closer and closer to the edge of the table in lieu of their arrival until it smashes to the floor – perhaps an omen of the community that will

soon be thrown into fragments with the destruction of this building. The sound of this video is integral to the work and meant to be heard before it is seen. Hearing the montage of time through traditional instrument; the smashing of porcelain followed by the sound of the jackhammer in the rear alludes to the fragility of cultural and material capital, a fitting piece to conclude this exhibition for the video is placed on constant loop, reaffirming the cycle of creation and destruction. Sudarshan Shetty's art often conjures incongruous relationships between material and subject, where bathtubs lie water-filled containing clicking scissors or dinosaur bones are placed in replica like a rocking horse. His art poetically challenges the space between life and death, creating a space where the categories of reality and value are magically defied, where the realm of fiction allows for new readings of our world and its systems.

'Conjuring Capital' was inspired by the resourcefulness of these contemporary artists who challenge the notion that time invested in labor is an exchange value that can justify and determine wealth. These voices come from the Global South, a complex yet problematic set of geographies that endure the residual affect of coloniality and its current neoliberal face. Such a Global South is here desired as a social architecture with cultural, social and political historical platforms of similarities – a central focus of the 3-year San Art endeavor called 'Conscious Realities' to which this exhibition forms a part. What connects the artists in this exhibition are their sharp observations of the designed circulations of wealth – be they colonial, religious, capitalistic, entrepreneurial or cultural – bringing to light the smaller human tales of drug mules; monks as traders; coal landslides as residential back yards; the upward mobility of life amongst seeming poverty and the psychological affect of resettlement within urban gentrification. Their study of social systems and its symbolic languages are provocative statements that pose countermemory to the official record.

Zoe Butt, July 2014.

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'Conjuring Capital'
Group Exhibition
8 August – 30 October 2014
San Art, 3 Me Linh, District Binh Thanh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Participating artists include Adriana Bustos (Argentina), Christopher Myers and Hank Willis Thomas (USA), Nguyen Hong Ngoc (Vietnam), Sudarshan Shetty (India) and Than Sok (Cambodia). Encompassing video, sculpture, installation, painting and drawing, the exhibition is curated by Zoe Butt (Executive Director and Curator, San Art), as part of the 3-year endeavor 'Conscious Realities', sponsored by a Network Partnership between the Prince Claus Fund and San Art.

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[1] Georges Bataille 'The Accursed Share: Volume 1' (trans. Robert Hurley), Zone Books, New York, 1991, pg. 67

[2] http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/capital.html

[3] Interview between author and Adriana Bustos, March, 2014.

[4] Email interview between author and Hank Willis Thomas, 7 July 2014