The Purloined Coin: Art, Money and Agency

Aestheticist Provocations by Norbert Francis Attard

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**INTRODUCTION**

When I agreed to write a text to accompany the artworks of my friend Norbert Attard, I did not fully appreciate the complexity it would pose. On the one hand, his themes appear to be local: corruption in his natal Malta (DIRTY MONEY), the effects of the pandemic (COVID-19), and the 2017 assassination of Malta’s prominent investigative journalist, Daphne Caruana Galizia (INVICTA). Yet they cannot be divorced from wider global issues: the social alchemy of money, the circulation of viruses, and the effects of media disclosures of the networks of complicities to conceal hidden wealth. This is Norbert’s most socially engaged collection of art works. Norbert's works are ironically beautiful objects that explore these issues in a beautifully ironic way, weaving together the global and the local. They invite anthropological engagement, for art and anthropology have much to say to each other in how we respond to the worlds we live in (Sansi 2015).

In this essay I explore the significance of Norbert’s works on three levels. The first is the relationship between art and money. Although this has received attention by many observers and international artists, as far as I can ascertain Norbert is the first Maltese artist to systematically explore the dark side of money. Whilst grounded in local concerns, his approach nevertheless highlights certain universal features of money that I believe have not previously been explored. Artists, curators, art theorists, community animators, investment advisors, the culture industry, even taxation authorities have been exercised by the implications of art as the ultimate commodity, the role of the artist, and the estimation of artistic labour in advanced capitalist society. But the boundaries between (and identities of) art and money have been less scrutinised and merit attention, especially in terms of their deployment to express actual or anticipated social relationships. By employing certain logics of substitution very akin to what Levi-Strauss called ‘pensee sauvage’, Norbert’s work hints that money has abductive powers. This renders it close to how ancient Greeks viewed money, and bears similarities to Alfred Gell’s anthropological approach to art. Gell argued that art objects are devices ‘for securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed’ (1992: 43). This leads me to suggest that we could approach money as our co-evolutionary art product. In the first part of this essay, I explore the elective affinities of art and money, and the implications for both.

Ancient Greeks, the earliest monetarised society, called money ‘hidden or disappearable wealth/substance’ (ousia aphanes), in contrast to the displayed wealth (ousia phanera) of the earlier Homeric world (land, flocks, women, followers, fine things). Money ‘treasurizes wealth’ (Figueira, 1988:549) rendering it concealable or invisible. Partly because of its small scale and natural resource paucity, Malta’s political economic default mode has relied heavily (though not exclusively) upon this characteristic of money: from 17th century piracy (legalised corsairing) to contemporary sovereignty capitalization realised through igaming, low corporate tax, and passport sales. Such resource inflows endow the state with immense clientelism potential, structuring resource distribution along partisan lines, and provide opportunities for corruption. Norbert’s works grouped under the headings DIRTY MONEY and INVICTA deal with this phenomenon and its dire implications. In the second part of this essay, I explore the ‘parasitism’ that has integrated Malta into colonial, regional, and transnational economies by reference to Norbert’s artworks that demonstrate how this pervades local society.

Finally, I explore a parallelism between invisible money and microbes. I argue that attempts to curb the transnational circulation of ‘dirty money’ corresponds to a bio-medicalization of the body politic that, whilst compelling, imbricates a specific mode of domination and legitimacy.

**I.**

**ART AND MONEY**

1. The first systematic reflection on art and money (by Plato) begins with their condemnation, realised through another equally criticised medium, writing. The social world art and money had brought into being paradoxically generated those very innovations of thought, action, and social organization that permitted Plato’s condemnation. And it was realised through another kindred technology of the intellect, writing, that Plato equally criticised whilst enabling him to elaborate his ideal closed social order.

Plato profoundly distrusted art and money, wanting to ban both in his Republic. His Politeia proposed banning the material sign: of value or of beauty, as both attach us to the sensuous world of things, mere semblances, preventing us from acquiring true knowledge of essences and being. By its mimetic and emotional powers, art prevents us from appreciating true essences (‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’) attaching us to mere representations. Money attracted Plato’s opprobrium to a greater extent, banned in his Republic, where it is associated with the Lydian king Gyges, the founder of the Mermnad dynasty, whose magical ring enabled him to become invisible, just as money enables the invisible exercise of unaccountable power and influence at a distance. The Greeks believed Gyges to be the first tyrant. As Shell notes, ‘the frequent association of tyranny and minting with one man suggests that they may be mutually reinforcing and interdependent’ and thus his story (first recounted in Herodotus), ‘however hypothetical or mythical, is a great explanation of the genesis of a political, economic, and verbal semiology’ (1989:22).

In contrast to Plato, Aristotle accepted the necessity of money, but likewise linked it to a double deceit: that of the Sophists’ purporting to sell something (wisdom) that should not be sold (and should reached through a ‘gift exchange’, as in a Socratic dialogue), and in delivering a counterfeit in exchange. ‘The sophist is one who makes money (chrimatistis) from apparent (phainomenis) and not real (ousis) wisdom (sophia)’ (1955:165a22). Chrimatistis also signifies a trafficker, thus conjoining secreting false coinage (kibdelos) into the agora by exchanging false knowledge for genuine nomismata (money).

2. Plato’s view that art and money are powerful motivators of emotion and action cannot be denied, even if we discount his specific objections. Ever since art became detached from the patronage of the Temple, Prince, or Cardinal, and with the increased accessibility of the printed text that nurtured the Enlightenment, we now expect art to be politically or socially ‘subversive’. Likewise, the ancient Greek apprehension of money as hidden wealth exerting invisible unaccountable power is a contemporary global concern, evidenced by the Panama/Paradise/Pandora papers, etc. Ironically, whilst it is now de rigeur for art to be politically engaged, it has become a major avenue for investment and money laundering. Late capitalism easily accommodates, even nurtures, this tension in its chic postmodernist ironic aestheticism (Jameson 1991). Like siblings, art and money have made each other in ways they partly acknowledge, partly reject. I begin by situating Norbert’s art within a wider international context. I then argue that his heritage and his resolute attempt to plough his own furrow provides us with some important insights about art and money.

3.The political expectations of contemporary art have long generated a major conundrum. At the risk of gross distortion, we can distinguish two broad poles of ideological positionings by contemporary artists and theorists regarding the relationship of art and money: art as ‘critical commodity’ and art as ‘entangling gift’. The former argues that art cannot escape its capitalist context as commodity (‘exchange-value’) but, in the hands of competent artists, could also engage in a critical reflexivity on financialization, including art’s role in this. The ’entangling gift’ approach rejects art as super-commodity in favour of art as a ‘gift’ (‘use-value’) (Sansi 2015). Many artists construct their works to engage viewers as participants. The former concentrate on what art could say, the latter on what it could do. Social theory approaches to the art-money nexus parallel this opposition. Velthuis (2005) labels them the ‘Nothing But’ and the ‘Hostile Worlds’. In the former, ‘aesthetic or artistic value is .. [ ] .. “Nothing But” a particular form of economic value’ (2005: 26). In the latter, money and art are opposed: “what strip-mining is to nature, the art market has become to culture” (Hughes 1990: 20).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Ironically, both neo-liberal economists and post-Marxists subscribe to the ‘Critical Commodity’/‘Nothing But’ thesis. The former domesticate art’s exceptionality by arguing that “works of art are economic goods, their value can be measured by the market, [and] the sellers and buyers of art - the people who create and benefit from it - are people who try to get as much as they can from what they have” (Grampp 1989, p. 8).[[2]](#endnote-2) For post-Marxists, by contrast, from Benjamin to Adorno and his successors,[[3]](#endnote-3) art and money’s imbrication requires unravelling. Following Jameson, Haiven argues that art ‘cannot be corrupted by capitalism because it has always already been derivative of capitalism’ (2018:15). In the age of financialization, art must grapple with “Jameson’s conundrum”: if capitalism is more than a mode of production but a totality, a culture, it is inherently unrepresentable yet demands representation. Capitalism’s representability through art is doomed to be both partial and compromised because art is itself shaped by it and thus far from independent. This leads Haiven to suggest that the ‘crises of representation under capitalist totality’ (2015:38) is realised through the ‘mutual encryption’ of money and art (2018:14). This felicitous expression indicates simultaneously “conversion”, “concealment”, and “entombment” (i.e., crypt or vault of sacred relics). He employs the term ‘money-art’ to signify that it is an ‘important laboratory for financialization, a curious, unique field of self-reflexive activities that is at once deeply alien and highly germane to the capitalist economy from which it (sometimes antagonistically) emerges’ (2018:123).

3. Some fifty years ago, Adorno appeared to identify art’s aporetic destination in a gnomic utterance: ‘The absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity’ ([1970] 1997:21). We could see evidence of this in the contemporary secondary art market of major auction houses that have increasingly encroached on the art gallery primary market (Adam 2014: 50; Velthuis 2005). As Adam notes, globalized art dealers have transformed contemporary artists into brands replacing museums in setting taste agendas: slick auction houses now provide financial services, art-fund managers abound, and art has become a futures market. Unsurprisingly, artists have engaged with this phenomenon in emblematic works. These range from Klein’s Zone de Sensibilité Picturale Immatérielle (Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility) where he sold empty space for gold dust, or his Le Vide (1958) featuring an empty whitewashed gallery whose ‘pictures’ were for sale (art-commodity as its own apotheosis), to Banksy’s mocking self-destructing Love is in the Bin (2018) (art-commodity as shredded expensive detritus), to Damien Hirst’s insouciant mortuary art of neoliberal narcissism, For the Love of God (2007): a diamond encrusted skull, priced at some 50 million GBP (the ‘absolute commodity’ qua ‘absolute’ ‘artwork’).

One early attempt to subvert art’s pictorial quality - price/exchange value nexus was Klein’s 1957 exhibition “The Blue Epoch” where he displayed differentially priced, but perfectly identical, monochrome paintings, on the presumption that “the pictorial quality of each painting was perceivable by means of something else besides the material appearance” (Duve 1989:78). Klein thus inverted the conventional formula of ‘Pictorial Quality plus Social Estimation equals Exchange Value/Price’, to ‘Differential Price (for identical object) determines Perceived Pictorial Quality’. Duve is thus correct to note that ‘[M]ystified mystifier, Klein is, like [neoliberal] economists, the theologian of the artistic commodity’ (ibid.:79), but amiss in not pursuing his initial intuition: that Klein was the necessary Tartuffe to stage Jameson’s conundrum of representing Capital.

Adorno argued that the convergence of the art object as ‘absolute commodity’ ‘would be free of the ideology inherent in the commodity form, which pretends to exist for-another, whereas ironically it is something merely for-itself: It exists for those who hold power’ (1997:236). This paradox may mislead. To exist ‘merely-for-itself’, an ‘absolute commodity’ should have no history, no adhering trajectory of ownership. Therefore, a Salvator Mundi (emblematic of stratospheric price = commoditization), or any Old Master, are disqualified, whilst contemporary art is perfect for neophiliac capitalism voraciously generates art for its consumption. To ‘exist for those who hold power’ it must be nothing other than self-referential sign-as-sign, not of anything else. In short, self-proclaimed ‘bling’. Requiring an immense sacrifice to acquire, it must be predicated on an unrecoverable loss. But its acquisition can only be through the art auction ‘tournament of value’ circuit as ever ascending losses for its serial purchasers, that are simultaneously ever ascending profits for its serial consigners. Entangled in its past ownership histories, the ‘absolute commodity’ may be an unachievable asymptote, just as the ‘pure gift’ is compromised by the obligation to reciprocate.

Whilst Klein is the theologian of the artistic commodity, Hirst may well be its alchemist, an unrecognized merry heir of Piero Manzoni. If Klein is ‘a mystifier, it's because he is totally sincere in making others believe that he is a mystic and even more so in making them doubt his sincerity’ (Duve, ibid.: 76), Hirst is provocatively brutal in demystifying art as pure singular commodity, whilst making us uneasy with his artful artlessness: “I have proved it to myself that art is about life and the art world is about money. And I’m the only one who... knows that. Everyone lies to themselves to make it seem like it’s the other way. But it isn’t.”[[4]](#endnote-4) No surprise then that so important was it to maintain his skull’s aesthetic nominal value of 50 million GBP (its fiduciarity in monetary terms) above its ‘bullion’ value (i.e., its constituent diamonds, reputedly some 20 million GBP), that it was bought-in by a consortium, including the artist, when it failed to find a buyer. Its trajectory thus parallels a Central Bank’s desperate selling of its foreign reserves to prop up its own currency: an instantiation of Haiven’s mutual ‘encryption’ of money and art, and its ‘entombment’ qua skull, in a bank vault.

4. By contrast, the ‘embedded gift’ or ‘Hostile Worlds’ practitioners (Gallerists, artists, and theorists) strive to bracket art from extreme financialization or commoditization. New York contemporary art dealers, attempting to suppress the commodity character of their artworks, establish complex patterns of reciprocity including gift exchanges, dinners and compensatory purchases, with their “family” of artists and collectors (Velthuis 2005). Caught between the former who desire higher prices/more publicity and tempted by more glamorous mega-galleries, and the latter who may resell on the secondary auction market, New York gallerists resemble traditional benign ‘Mafiosi’ challenged by more ruthless ‘syndicates’ of globalized gallerists and Auction Houses.

Art critics and theorists regularly bemoan art’s hijacking by ‘cold money’ (Hyde 1983, Hughes 1990). Art, they argue, is fundamentally not a commodity or exchange value but emotional value.[[5]](#endnote-5) It is made, staged, and intentioned as a socially transformative interaction, even a ‘gift’ residual in labour power (Beuys). Critical in envisioning alternative non-exploitative, non-monetary, social relationships through the exchange of goods and services was Mauss’ ‘The Gift’ (orig. publ.1925). But whereas anthropologists were interested in how order is maintained in ‘archaic’ stateless societies through overlapping obligations, theorists and artists were attracted by the ‘freedom’ the gift-as-art could promise. Mauss’ competitive (and constraining) potlatch was thus transformed and reinterpreted: by Bataille who saw it as an ‘expense without return’, then by Debord’s Situationists who wanted dissolve the distinctions between work and leisure, and between artists and others (Sansi 2014:94).

One artist deserves mention as the trickster of art as both gift and commodity: J.S.G. Boggs (1955-2017). Boggs literalised ‘money’ as art, whilst ‘metaphorising’ (i.e., transporting) art as money.[[6]](#endnote-6) He is the ‘American Klein’, as disarmingly earnest through his ‘cash and carry’ ambush, as Klein was mystifyingly disarming through his feline flânerie. Boggs produced meticulous pen-drawn single sided ‘copies’ of banknotes with which he attempted to pay at their face value for commodities as declared artwork: labour time into artwork as pure simulated money, offered as means of commodity exchange, money’s function. If accepted, he insisted on receiving the change in ‘real money’, duly receipted and documented: artwork reduced to (and recorded as) its simulated ‘face value’ as money. The receipt and change (as the record of a realized commodity exchange) were then sold to a collector together with the details of the person who had originally accepted the artwork banknote. The ‘worthless’ record/receipt of a commodity exchange thus itself became a commodity at a higher price than its negligible face-value trace. They also functioned as the history and ratification of the artwork’s genuine provenance. The collector could then contact the original payee (‘seller’ or ‘gift exchanger’?) and offer to purchase the ‘banknote’ at a price far higher than its original surface value at which it had originally been accepted, should the latter accept. The artwork thus became a ‘gift’, i.e., promise of higher monetary return to the original recipient that could become a commodity should he ‘cash in’ the gift he received in exchange for the ‘gift’ he originally gave, the ‘purchased’ commodity. In this way, an artwork slipped vertiginously in and out of ‘money’, ‘gift’, and ‘commodity’ in a ‘comedy of values’ (Weschler 1999). Unsurprisingly, Boggs was harassed by our Ulama, the Guardians of the Sign as Value: the US Treasury and the Bank of England who prosecuted him and raided his studio. Equally predictably, his artwork is now displayed in, and guarded by, our other Banks of Apotheosized Materiality: The British Museum and MOMA. [[7]](#endnote-7)

The above examples are ‘jokey’, intellectually provocative, even ‘Groucho Marxian’. Laughter and irony may well be a major route to bypass ‘Jameson’s Conundrum’. But art’s elective affinity to money can cling to it like Nessus’ poisoned cloak, or Manzoni’s “Merda d’artista”. Artists and their ratifying art institutions are dependent on the spectacle. Like Silicon Valley entrepreneurs to whom they bear more than a passing resemblance, ‘critical commodity’ artists from Koons to Hirst may have to ‘fake it until they make it’. Indeed, Vishmidt has subtitled her book Speculation as a Mode of Production (2019), ‘Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital’ (added emphasis) to tease out the doubling, (but also potentially antithetic significance), of speculation as a mode of valorization in the economy and in art, as well as to introduce the notion of value via the subject.

5. Despite the localist referents of Norbert’s artworks, it would be a disservice to see them as mere socio-political critique. I characterize the artworks here as a modernist aesthetic sensibility employing post-modernist means with serious intent. His personal route to artistic social engagement is quite distinct from the two general approaches outlined above: that of an ironic aestheticism through symbolic substitutions. The aestheticism is part of his cultural heritage; the symbolic substitutions an aspect of ‘Mediterranean irony’. These substitutions employ what Levi-Strauss calls ‘savage thought’, working like a bricoleur with adapted items at hand (soap for money, etc.). As a canny ‘primitive’ artist, Norbert signifies the object (money/passports) either by substitution or repetition rather than reproducing it, even if he paradoxically does so by emphasizing money’s protean reproducibility. He operates in the opposite direction to Boggs who ‘reproduced’ the object as singularly different (drawing ‘money’ as work of art) in order to destabilize its original encoded meaning (money as state-monopolized means of exchange etc.). Tucked into Norbert’s aesthetic treatment of ‘Dirty Money’ with its visual punning, repetitions, inversions, and substitutions is an unconscious suggestion that only art can make. From a Levi-Straussian perspective, art expresses a ‘deep homology between the structure of the signifier and that of the signified’ (Wiseman 2007:121). Norbert’s unconscious suggestion is that money has art-like qualities, thus recoupling Plato’s ‘deceiving duo’ on a higher plane. Levi Strauss noted that with works of art ‘the starting point is a set of one or more objects and one or more events which aesthetic creation unifies by revealing a common structure’ (1966:26). That ‘common structure’, I argue below, lies partly in money’s abductive power, its ability to act upon us, rendering it very close to art itself. We could call this ‘Platonism Mark II’.

Both art and money are mediators, employed to establish specific types of social relationships. They are also (i) referential to other signs in a system laid over a peopled world to manipulate it through their respective technologies, employing specific cultural logics, and (ii) ‘modèles réduits’ (Levi Strauss 1962) of social relations, although they operate in different directions. Art compresses a series of dia-(or)allochronic social exchanges (events) into a synthetic synchronic arrangement of objects; money projects a synchronic exchange of objects into a diachronic social arrangements. Although art, being closely tied to myth, precedes money and writing, the three are our co-evolutionary technologies, kin to each other, human products that have shaped and express our humanity and sociality. Like siblings they have a complicated relationship. Envy and admiration, competition and solidarity, imitation and one-upmanship, alliance and hostility, dependence and independence, characterise their relations, particularly between art and money. In Weberian terms they share an ‘elective affinity’ to each other.

6. In making this suggestion I draw inspiration from Gell’s ‘methodological philistinism’ in his treatment of art where he eschews aesthetics, arguing that what theology does for religion, aesthetics does for art: it becomes a scholarly cult refractive to the social efficacy of art objects. We could similarly view economics as money’s ‘theology’, with its origin myths (e.g., “money replaces barter”),[[8]](#endnote-8) its complex theories and rival schools with their ‘Pretence of Knowledge’ (in Hayek’s words),[[9]](#endnote-9) dismissive of popular ideas about money’s mysterious powers. Gell argues that art objects are devices ‘for securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed’ (1992:43). The power of art objects ‘stems from the technical processes they objectively embody: the technology of enchantment is founded on the enchantment of technology. The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form. Art, as a separate kind of technical activity, only carries further, through a kind of involution, the enchantment which is immanent in all kinds of technical activity’ (1992:44, original emphasis). If we can recognise this enchantment of visual staging in Las Meninas, could we not acknowledge that the mining of cryptocurrencies or the financialization of art through NFT’s, also activate an analogous enchantment of technology, however mysterious they may appear to some of us?

7. In conventional western art theory, objects are passive: they attract our interest, engagement or contemplation. Gell dismissed aesthetical approaches to art arguing that art is abductive. An art object embodies ‘a special kind of technology that captivates and ensnares others in the intentionalities of its producers’ (Pinney and Thomas 2001: vii). Gell defines art objects as a class of thing-agents (including religious representations, icons and statues),[[10]](#endnote-10) the ‘equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents’ (1998:7). An extreme example of a thing-agent is a religious representation that performs miracles. A prosaic example is the aftermath of the 1911 theft of the Mona Lisa when thousands queued to gaze at its empty space on the wall. Here, the Mona Lisa became a ‘thing-agent’ exercising its agency through its absence. Is that not indicative of an art object’s abductive power that its very absence draws crowds? The thing/index (e.g., ‘Mona Lisa’) appears to act autonomously; it ‘itself (is) seen as the outcome, and/or the instrument of, social agency’ (1998:15). Gell argues that ‘the work of art is inherently social in the way the merely beautiful or mysterious object is not: it is a physical entity which mediates between two beings, a channel for further social relations and influences’ (1992:52).

Gell defined the anthropology of art as ‘the theoretical study of social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency' (1998:7). An ‘art nexus' consists of the interactions of ‘agents’ and ‘patients’. Agents and patients are not necessarily persons. Whilst the agent is normally considered the artist or a commissioning patron, it could even be a thing itself. A miraculous statue is the agent, the pilgrims are its patients. The Sistine Chapel is the agent, its visitors are its patients abducted by its world. The art nexus, i.e., the interactions of agents and patients, can also extend to the artistic process itself. Consider when a bicycle handlebar and seat suggested a bull’s head to Picasso. Picasso did not set out to make a bull’s head. Gell would argue that the components and Picasso ‘abducted’ each other to produce something new. The former ‘needed’ a ‘Picasso’ to re-cognise them, whilst Picasso had the imaginative suppleness to appropriate their indexical value and make them his. The handlebar and the seat provided the material for what Peirce calls an ‘abductive inference’ to take place. ‘The material 'index' (the visible, physical, ‘thing’ or components) permitted a particular cognitive operation’ which resulted in the creation of a bull’s head that looks remarkably palaeolithic. Gell calls such artistic operations ‘the abduction of agency’ (1998:13). As artists recognise, it is hard in such cases to fully distinguish whether the artist was the agent or the patient, for they are often both. Are we not witnessing an analogous process of artistic abduction with Norbert’s coining of soap bars as money, and thus a complex enactment of agency? Shoehorning this in Aristotelian terms, we could say that the bars of soap were the ‘material cause’, and the artist the ‘efficient cause’ who recognized their indexical value to make an abductive inference and produce his sculptures.

In Gell’s schema, art objects have agency because they operate in specific social contexts. They act upon us in intentional ways. He defines agency in art as ‘a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation, when what happens is (in some vague sense) supposed to be intended in advance by some person-agent or thing-agent. Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an 'intention' lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of 'agency' (1998:17).

8. If this notion of agency can be applied to an Asmat shield, a Trobriand canoe prow, Achilles’ armour donned by Patroclus (both designed to dismay opponents), or some charm against the evil eye (that act on people in their vicinity who become ‘patients’), could we not extend a similar abductive potency to money? In addition to viewing it as substance (a ‘store of value’) or function (a ‘means of exchange’), we could also approach it as having an agency of its own in that it abducts its owner. Money abducts us in that its actual or anticipated possession stimulates us to think what we can or should do with it, from “saving for a rainy day”, to a gift, to realising some investment or indulgence. It demands engagement. It shapes the “dreams for those who are awake”, which is why Plato (the quote’s author) rejected both money and art. Although we are often the primary agents (the ‘efficient cause’ in Aristotelian terms), money as ‘material cause’ gives specific shape to the result (the ‘final cause’).[[11]](#endnote-11) If, as Bachelard suggested, ‘Man is a creature of desire, not of need’, money has long been one of desire’s shapers.

Although Gell’s theory has its critics, its influence has extended from anthropology (Pinney and Thomas 2001, Sansi 2015), to classics (Osborne and Tanner 2007), and aesthetics and art history (Preziosi and Farago 2012). Nor is it strictly new, for some of Gell’s key concepts were hinted at in Pliny’s History of Art: deception, skill, entrapment, and ‘distributed personhood’ (when one artist leaves his intervention on another’s painting as his ‘calling card’), etc. When reflecting on Gell’s Art and Agency in connection with Norbert’s works, I was struck that money could also be approached as our collective co-evolutionary artistic enterprise. This is not to say that ‘money is art’, or is ‘artistic’, although its tokens (coins or notes) have often been. Rather, it is to begin by noting that popular accounts of money attribute an agency to it very much in line with Gell’s notion of that of what art objects do. An agent, such as money (and art) 'causes events to happen' in their vicinity’ (1998:16). Popular discourse attributes money with miraculous, often corrupting, powers.[[12]](#endnote-12) As Gell notes ‘social agency can be exercised relative to 'things' and social agency can be exercised by 'things’ (1998:17).

9. When we examine the way money works across time, we can intuit that it progressively operates like a vast collective art project creating value, employing techniques and representation, activating exchange, sociality, power, agency, ‘fetishism’ and abduction, and realising personhood. Although money and art are clearly two distinct spheres of human expression and action governed by different logics and rationalities, there are significant parallelisms between the two, and their contemporary convergence provides valuable insights into the nature of money, and by extension art. Simmel (2004) illuminated his treatment of money by references to art arguing that money moves progressively from substance to function. What Klee had said of 20th century art, ‘Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible’ (1961: 76), applies to contemporary money, but with a twist: ‘money renders the invisible visible, whilst potentially vanishing its human agency’ (qua ousia aphanes/’corruption’). In this collection of artworks, we encounter an artist’s innovative take on the significance of money in its local socio-political context. But they are more than that, for Norbert’s punning substitutions interrogate money’s mysterious agency through its slippery haecceity (the-what-it-is).

10. Scholars have long debated the origins of money that occurred contemporaneously with writing in different parts of the world. The ‘beginnings’ of money qua coinage probably lie in transferring an image from a seal or die to a piece of metal and calling it chremata (money as means of exchange) or nomisma (money as legal tender, issued by a central authority): ‘it is at any rate certain that the seal is directly related to the earliest coins - it is the antecedent of the struck coin...It signifies, or rather marks, ownership, and such is endowed with a special aura that was originally magical’ (Gernet 1977:125, original emphasis).

Hart notes that Keynes viewed coins as ‘a mere act of ostentation appropriate to the offspring of Croesus and the neighbours of Midas’, concluding that ‘the stamping of pieces of metal with a trade-mark was just a piece of local vanity, patriotism or advertisement with no far-reaching importance’ (quoted in Hart, 2000:245). Keynes's aim in downgrading the significance of coinage was to ‘establish that, as a social creation, money did not have to wait until coins were struck; and it is this aspect of making money, rather than finding it in the form of natural objects, that he wanted to stress. Money is a thing, but it also has to be named, and it is this act of naming that is more truly creative and social than manufacturing per se’ (2000:246, added emphasis). That act of naming a thing to be cognised as a representation of a store, measure of value, and medium of exchange, is an artistic creation stealthily concealing its own artifice. Art involves a cunning material transubstantiation through a symbolic substitution. As Marx noted "gold and silver themselves become their own symbols".[[13]](#endnote-13)

11. Both art and money employ transsubstantive powers that abduct or entrap us, the concealed reason for Plato’s suspicion. Catholic readers readily recognize the notion of ‘transubstantiation’ where the ritual of the mass transubstantiates a wheaten wafer into the body of Christ. Transubstantiation also occurs in both art and money. Consider Picasso’s joining together of a bicycle handlebar and seat to conjure a bull’s head, or a €500 bill whose crypto security features transform it into a store of value.

By ‘transsubstantive’ I therefore mean the transformation of one thing into another by the application of a secret skill, ingenuity, ritual, or projection, sometimes with the imputed assistance of third-party ‘occult’ (i.e., unseen) powers, such that the final product is believed to act upon others, influencing their behaviour, emotional state, or condition. This class of set-apart objects could include a Trobriand canoe prow, Achilles’ mythical shield, a Eucharistic bread, a lump of silver stamped into a coin, a 500-euro money note, Norbert’s ‘Money Soap’ or his ‘Roulette Wheel’, etc. In all of these, some ‘occult’ power is believed to have been brought to bear to transform the object into something more potent than its constituent matter or arrangement such that it entraps, enhances, or illuminates the user, possessor, or viewer. Thus, magical secret spells accompany the carving of a Trobriand canoe prow such that, once completed, it flies over the sea to other islands enabling its crew to seduce Kula valuables away from their exchange partners, Achilles’ shield is fashioned by Hephaestus’ ‘craft and cunning’ into ‘a world of gorgeous immortal work’, the invisible tyrant’s ring seal imprints his all-seeing presence on coins holding his subjects in his thrall through his representation, crypto-security features transubstantiate a piece of paper into a store of value and medium of exchange, Norbert’s ‘Money Soap’ expresses money’s power as ousia aphanes to disappear, and his ‘Roulette Wheel’ hints at the transformation of inscrutable moira (fate) into nemesis. In all these examples we witness a transubstantiation that is abductive.

Money and art are two sides of the same metonymic coin with which we pay ourselves to both shape and realise our fantasies. Money, particularly in its contemporary form, could be approached as a collective ‘art project’ because it is a mysterious agency of über-function setting in motion what art does in a restricted way: an ‘infinite range of substitutions’ (Jameson 2011:34).

12. One difficulty in approaching money as art is that it appears prosaic and profane. Like the State (initially the tyrant) that ensured its production and acceptance (Knapp 1926), it now appears ‘natural’. We could say that art (qua human creativity) ‘coined’ money as the metaphor of value by ‘metonymizing’ it as coin. Undoubtedly, this solidity and ‘naturalness’ was achieved through its anchoring qua currency in precious metals (gold/silver), becoming a sign with inherent material value. Yet coinage was always a sign of surplus material value extracted through social alchemy. Coinage’s bullion content as precious metal was always less than its nominal value as coin/currency. This fiduciarity is nothing else than a state-sustained social connivance at the artfulness of its transubstantiation into something more than it is. This social fiction is essential for the state from ancient Athens onwards, as the difference in value is its “cut”, its monopoly. Simmel (2004) argued that this heritage of substance-value, much like the ‘realism’ that pervaded most western art until the 20th century, prevents us from recognising money’s essential function: the transformation of qualitative differences into quantitative ones. Detached from substance-value and the abandonment of the Bretton-Woods system, contemporary money is now pure sign whose value emerges from its relationship to other signs (Goux and DiPiero 1988). One could argue that money has become so functionally successful as our collective co-evolutionary art product that its cunningness pervades our cognition such that we never question its social artifice.

Traditionally, art, i.e., techne in both making things and performing, from Homeric gifts to Trobriand vaygua to the reliquaries of Conques and beyond, made ‘quality’: the singular, the gift, the person (from the Homeric warrior to the Christian pilgrim). Money made ‘quantity’, often challenging the singularity of the former. Anthropologists recognise that despite money’s corrosive properties it can be ‘domesticated’, channelled through circuits (Parry & Bloch 1989), expressing kinship and creating personal relations as ‘gift’. But where it is diverted away from the collectivity to the private it becomes graft: hidden, transferred through circuitous routes, forming cabals which the Maltese label their ‘Mafia State’, a theme explored in Norbert’s works.

13. Money has ‘art-like’ qualities for three reasons: (i) it represents through a particular technology, (ii) has abductive power and (iii) through its employment personhood is distributed, and agency realised. Together with its coeval, writing, money is the most extraordinary social technology humans have devised as a means of representation, information storage, social organization, and action. It is also a mode of thinking, a ‘distribution of mind’ in and through persons and things, enabling us to navigate and transform the world and ourselves. It is a means of commensurate representation (as ‘unit of account’), a realisation of potentiality (as ‘medium of exchange’) and possesses inherent power (as ‘store of value’). If an art object embodies ‘a special kind of technology that captivates and ensnares others in the intentionalities of its producers’ (Pinney and Thomas 2001: vii, added emphasis), then money can be considered as a very distinct collective ‘art object’, admittedly with no original ‘author’ or ‘artist’, but nevertheless a particular technology ensnaring others in the intentionalities of its users. It is the personal usage that realises the intentionality of money as collective art project. The very representative function of money (from silver drachmas to virtual digits as signs), i.e., its representativeness, its performativity (for, like words, we ‘do things’ with it), and the creativity in its employment to realise our desires, necessitates that we take money as a product of collective imagination, representation, and engagement (i.e., all features of ‘art’) seriously. At a minimum level, therefore, money and art share an elective affinity, even if they work in opposite directions: the former towards incomparable comparability,[[14]](#endnote-14) the latter towards emblematic singularity. And they do so via inverted styles: contemporary money through its artful artlessness, and contemporary art often through artless artfulness.

14. The origins of money appear to lie in the imprinting (entyposis) of the image or symbol of the tyrant’s seal ring (daktylios) (Gernet 1977). This may appear a curio, but money is above all the creation of a sign that represents and measures value to realise exchanges between things. It is realised through a technology or technical knowledge that is either secret or controlled that cannot be appropriated for that purpose within the territory within which that sign is sovereign. Money is a sign-monopoly through a medium-monopoly. As Marshall McLuhan noted, ‘the content of any medium [ money: PSC] is always another medium [stamping coins, printing notes, mining/blockchain ledgers-PSC]’. Reflecting on the seal-ring Platt (1995) puns with serious intent on the seal as a ‘(meta)physical artefact’, for there is a sense in which the seal as the imprinting of a Form donates a new identity to matter, magically transforming it. This applies to the transformation of metal into coins, the printing of special paper into currency notes, the application of computing power to ‘mine’ bitcoin, and even stamping a cross onto a wafer/dough. In all these cases, the basic technical act of imprinting a representation or symbol of some supreme authority as a mark on the surface, through some secret or ritual powers that confer authenticity, transforms that thing qua matter into something else. Thus transubstantiated the item becomes a ‘(meta)physical product’ that, in Gell’s words, like art ‘casts a spell over us.’

If an artwork is quintessentially a trap that ensnares us, as Gell argues, then money certainly does so, but without any conscious ‘artistry’ which renders its techne, its cunningness, even more wily through its illusion of transparency. Gell had argued that the Trobriand Garden is a ‘Collective Work of Art’, because it is ‘both the outcome of a certain system of technical knowledge and at the same time a collective work of art, which produces yams by magic’ (1992:60). Similar connotations could be attributed to the ‘Contemporary Money Garden’, the Stock Exchange: a system of technical knowledge, skill, and experience, plus a certain ‘magic’ (and subterfuge) which enables ‘magicians’ like Warren Buffet (for example), our modern Midas, to produce the greatest ‘yams’, whose advice is avidly followed by thousands of prospective investors/’gardeners’.

15. Plato latched onto a common feature of art and money: their propensity to deceive, though with very different moral implications. One is held to be inspirational (“the lie that tells the truth”, Picasso), the other is considered morally corrosive (“the root of all evil”, St Paul). Both money and art were traditionally seen as things, ‘substance’ in Simmel’s terms (2004): marble, bronze, painted canvas, etc; gold, silver, copper coins and banknotes. Their value inhered in the object itself that exercised a quasi-magical power on the subject, the ‘patient’ in Gell’s terms. But both harbour what Goody (1996) had called a ‘kernel of doubt’ expressed in the terms ‘Veil of money’, ‘Veil of painting’.[[15]](#endnote-15) The former refers to whether money deceives us by making us think that it has special properties through its ‘veiling’, rather than a mere commodity like others. The ‘Veil of painting’ works in an opposite direction: revelation of deception. Art’s ‘history’ commences with a simulated concealment that becomes a revelation through the deception of the master painter Zeuxis. In their artistic competition, Parrhasius tricks Zeuxis (whose painting of a bowl of fruit had deceived birds to peck at it), by painting a veil ‘concealing’ the anticipated painting beneath, that Zeuxis impatiently attempts to draw open only to discover that the ‘concealing’ veil was the painting. This mythical anecdote initiates Pliny’s history of painting as a warning not so much of the cunningness of representation, but rather of the cunning of cunningness: human beings can be the victims of their own deception by bringing to an encounter what they expect to find. The revelation is not Parrhasius’s cunning painting; it is that Zeuxis, like us, can deceive himself, just as we consider money to have an inherent value. We delight in unveiling the cunning of art because we intuit that it is appearance, we detest money’s deceiving veiling because we resent that it may well be so.

16. Two reasons can be advanced why contemporary money can be approached as approximating a collective if humourless art project. The first comes from a transformation of art itself. Benjamin highlights the decay in art’s ‘auratic quality’ (i.e., its traditional aura) through its reproducibility: ‘technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual. To an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility’ (Benjamin 2008:24). Through reproduction, traditional art loses its monopoly of the visual as magical effect, i.e., as apparition. As Adorno noted ‘artworks are images as apparition, as appearance, and not as a copy’ (1997:84, original emphasis). Art’s aura of cultic value now melts into exhibition value, and often as pure exhibition value.

A second reason is contemporary money’s shedding of its substance value in favour of its pure sign value. This sign value is monopolised, i.e., it cannot be ‘copied’ even as ‘art’. Money does not mock itself. It can only permit this through art as its ultimate self-indulgence. Any ‘copy’ is a forgery because it requires protection qua sign. This is quite different to ancient money where the forgery subsisted in lower silver content. But things then were more subtle. Ancient Athens stationed dokimastes (money testers) in the agora to check the validity of silver drachmas that were produced without Athenian authorisation throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Bad coins would be confiscated, but “sincere imitations” were accepted in the interests of encouraging trade, a pragmatic compromise (Ober 2009). “Sincere imitation”, like an ‘Athenian Boggs’? Not quite. This ‘testing’ of drachmas was an important ritual of power to scaffold their appearance value. What was important was to reject some. The rejection ratified the accepted ones. But so insecure has the appearance value of money become with its increasing dematerialisation that the modern State attempted a Keystone Cops recovery of the image with Boggs’ arrest and prosecution. A hand-drawn copy of a bank note moved from a “sincerely provocative imitation” to a “dangerous counterfeit”. Boggs’ prosecution illustrates that the State resolutely protects modern money-sign’s non-reproducibility as its own art product qua pure sign, even if the artist patently ‘copied’ it to ironically transubstantiate it into art. In short, that modern money is pure apparition just like art.

Is this not a confirmation that money has assumed an aura previously occupied by art’s singularity? Boggs’ currency notes were a self-advertising simulacrum. Yet Deleuze notes that ‘the simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbours a positive power which denies the original and the copy ... the model and the reproduction’ (1990: 262). He suggests ‘simulation designates the power of producing an effect. But this is not intended only in a causal sense...It is intended rather in the sense of a “sign” issued from a process of signalization; it is in the sense of a costume, or rather a mask, expressing a process of disguising, where, behind each mask, there is yet another’ (1990: 263). Boggs’ ‘performance art’, within which his arrest was central, exposed two things. First, that money’s signalization power (to use Deleuze’s term), is fabricated in reverse through an iconoclasm. The prohibition of any copy conjures the sign as ‘original non-copyable’ despite its immense material multiplicity. Second, that process of disguising is fundamental to money’s ‘currency’ as pure non-self-referential signification. We could say that money is humankind’s cunning art product that jealously denies any exposure of its artistry, unless exposed through something more cunning that, in employing ‘savage thought’, literalizes metaphor: art itself, and thus mockery.

17. Thus liberated as pure sign value, money readily usurps art’s previously embedded role in representing qualitative distinction. Not only is art’s previously magical trans-substantive potential now largely residual in money, but its cultic value and aura is demonstrated through that very calibration, as manifested in ‘potlatching’ auctions.

It is thus hardly surprising that art’s lost monopoly of its jealously guarded technologies for apparition production qua representation (from the gnomon to the camera obscura and photography), and thus of the visual that contributed to its previously cultic status, has oriented it in new directions: experimentation and engagement with the world, from the oft-quoted ‘Duchampian intervention’ via the readymade, to inter alia in making things happen, as in processual art. This explains both the attraction of anthropology and social theory for artists, and paradoxically Baudrillard’s frustration when he complained that contemporary art is a ‘reflective game with the contemporary world as it happens’ (2005:89). Let us note the difference to modern art where the object had aesthetic autonomy. Contemporary art creates itself through its own speculation (Haiven 2018:43), which explains why many contemporary artists’ ‘omnivorous metabolism’ (ibid.:22) has turned them into theorists of a sublime that despises any notion of the sublime.

18. Contemporary art and money converge in the way they operate, and art can provide a particularly illuminative - if often cryptic or elliptic - handle on the way money operates. Both now function not so much as things, as repositories of material, aesthetic, or cultic value, but as expressing actual and anticipated potential social relationships. The type of contemporary art I am referring to is ‘relational art’ (Bourriaud 2002): ‘installations’, arrangements of objects, engagements with the public that construe ‘human relations as artwork’ (ibid.: 44). This is not to discount that money searches art as a means of investment; indeed, art has become one main avenue of money laundering.[[16]](#endnote-16) But as this collection of artworks shows, art can explore money’s material and conceptual elusiveness to our anthropological benefit.

19. In contemporary money and art, we discover similar processes:

(i) Contemporary money has become detached from its fixed place of issue (the nation state), just as art has become detached from its cultural treasure bank (the museum and art gallery): they have become deterritorialised.

(ii) Like art, which is no longer a static object of contemplation, money is no longer an immutable essence, a fixed object of value. In both there is an ‘instability and diversity in the concept of form’ (Bourriaud 2002: 20), which is a ‘relational property’ (ibid:21). This is a source of irritated incomprehension by substantial public segments accustomed to considering art as a thing to view, having certain recognisable features, a ‘form’, in much the same way that cryptocurrencies and virtual currencies lacking recognisable forms or substance are viewed with suspicion. Similar possibilities and challenges are present in both.

(iii) Like money, contemporary art is a ‘place that produces a specific sociability’ (Bourriaud 2002: 17); it is a ‘social interstice’ (ibid.:14).

(iv) In a world that has become increasingly standardised, money is used to realise personal identities and alignments (donations to charities, causes, etc). Just as art activates ‘relational aesthetics’ (i.e., the different ways personal aesthetics relate to each other), money expresses ‘relational ethics’ (i.e., the different ways people navigate and relate to others by virtue of dispensing money). Money mediates personhood, just as contemporary art attempts to interrogate it in ‘idiosyncratic’ ways.

(v) Just as art ‘keeps together moments of subjectivity’ (Bourriaud 2002:20), money acts as a ‘bonding agent’. In contrast to more traditional art and money, these linkages are transitory, to be replaced by others with different configurations and rationalities.

20. To many, contemporary art appears elusive. But then so does contemporary money. Some confirmation of its elusiveness comes from Dodd: ‘[W]hether idealised as collective memory[[17]](#endnote-17) or denigrated as socially corrosive, ‘‘money’’ in its generic sense is a utopia - a non-place where form and idea coalesce’ (2005:409). This renders money close to contemporary art precisely despite (or because of) the latter’s often perplexing imperspicuity, for - like money - art is inter alia constantly in search of realising significance qua value where it was not previously discerned. But whereas money realises value through its metamorphosis of quality into quantity, art does so through its metamorphosis of unrecognised quantity into the intuited quality of singularity: ‘the artistic process is completed as soon as it has succeeded in presenting the object in its unique significance’ (Simmel 2004:451). And it is this singularity that money attempts to capture through the celebrity art auction that is the performance of singularity: quantity into quality.

In the next section I explore several Norbert’s works in their political economic context.

**II.**

**NORBERT’S WORK IN ITS POLITICAL ECONOMIC CONTEXT**

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1. In this collection Norbert ‘coins’ soap as a metaphor of money (“laundering”) that becomes a metonym for disappearance. This is tantalisingly close to how the Greeks saw money’s occult powers as ousia aphanes. As Burke noted, ‘[T]he Basic "strategy" in metonymy is this: to convey some incorporeal or intangible state [disappearance/laundering -PSC] in terms of the corporeal or tangible [bars of soap - PSC]’ (1945:506). With artistic endeavour ‘everything depends on discovering the meaning and secret of things in order to represent them in a form that is purer and clearer than their natural development’ (Simmel 2004:451), a perspective similar to Levi-Strauss’.

Let us take a trivial example of an apparent continuity in money’s occult powers that derive from an act, dismissed as ‘superstition’ but performed nonetheless: its role as a votive offering for graces solicited or received, including money cast in wishing wells and fountains (from Trevi to Lourdes to Snow White’s fountain at Disneyland). The act has long antecedents: that of flinging a ring into the sea which is found by the challenged [as with Theseus finding Minos’ ring, (Gernet,1977:124)], or returned (as with Polycrates’ ring in the belly of a fish) that ‘divines’ or presages the owner’s fate. What better contemporary divinatory analogue of the wishing well than the lottery or roulette wheel whose ‘lucky number’ (according to some websites I consulted) is ‘17’? Maltese readers will readily recognise two dark ironies. First, that popular belief cautions that fate eventually catches up on ‘lucky’ chance (cannily rejected by most Maltese as ‘loaded’ by ‘connections’): ‘ir-rota idur ghall-kulhadd’ (‘the wheel turns for everybody’), referring to the village festa lottery wheel. They will also recognise that ‘17 BLACK’ was the name of the secret UAE bank account established to receive (and redistribute) the proceeds of corruption (to Panama accounts held by a Minister and the PM’s Chief of Staff) by the scion of Malta’s preeminent business family, fawned upon by politicians, civil servants, and the demos, in thrall to this family’s magical transcendence from rags to riches within one generation. Apart from innumerable interests, including the island’s Power Station that was to prove his nemesis, this gentleman owned a Casino and benefited from the good friendship of high ranking Police officials,[[18]](#endnote-18) of the Chief Executive Gaming Regulator who applied a ‘light’ regulatory touch, went on paid holidays with him to Las Vegas, and kindly offered his wealthy friend ‘to do business’ with him.[[19]](#endnote-19) In folk mythology, this family’s wealth is attributed to a ‘lucky encounter’ the now deceased grandfather had with a Minister in the 1970’s who reputedly gave him unprecedented access to state-owned land, building permits, etc. In popular parlance, he had ‘won the lottery’ (rebah il-lottu), but as a TV documentary reassures us, he was generous, a galantom, a benefactor. It was the owner of the 17 BLACK, the U.A.E. bank account connected to the power station, that Daphne Caruana Galizia was attempting to identify, leading to her assassination. The police, entrusted by the tax authorities to trace its ownership, initially got nowhere because the ‘wrong data’ was inputted in their requests to the UAE authorities.[[20]](#endnote-20) It was only after arduous attempts by the Daphne’s sons and a team of journalists that the account owner’s identity was finally revealed: none other than the grandson heir, now undergoing court proceedings.

Norbert’s eponymous Roulette Wheel is thus a supremely uncanny artefact, an allegory of local models of social advancement through money’s occult powers. In its spinning, the kaleidoscopic fractals of nemesis (divine retribution), tyche (fortune), and moira (fate) align like some oracular stroboscope. As Levi-Strauss noted, ‘by his craftsmanship the artist constructs a material object which is also an object of knowledge’. Could we not therefore see in Norbert’s Roulette Wheel, an artistic interpretation of money’s occult powers that begins with Polycrates flinging his seal ring in the sea?[[21]](#endnote-21)

2. This is the right moment to approach Norbert’s art within its political-economic context. I begin by comparing the ancient state in the classical period with the modern Maltese state to appreciate the latter’s specificity.

The traditional state can be seen as the quintessential protection racket. A protection racket requires two things: (i) providing ‘security’ as a ‘service’ for which its subjects pay, and (ii) creating insecurity for those outside its control such that they either ‘opt in’ or pay to be left alone. The security must seem natural, essential, trusted, and reliable. To realise this internal security, it needs to make its subjects’ wealth fungible by transforming it into its own tokens of value. To ‘protect’ its subjects and harass others it requires mercenaries. Graeber (2001:103) suggests that the creation of coinage (as standardised money) was not so much to facilitate exchange (for there were hundreds of city states having their own coinage with consequent ‘exchange rate’ problems), but rather to tame wealth and render it visible by requiring that all transactions within its confines be realised through its own stamped coinage. By turning wealth into easily portable money, rulers could engage mercenaries who could enslave the inhabitants of neighbouring territories and thus extract greater surpluses. Graeber labels this the ‘military-coinage-slavery complex’.[[22]](#endnote-22)

3. There is a sense in which the state in Malta, like states generally, but also specific to its history as a fortress, has long exhibited elements of a protection racket. Its nature is clearly different from the ancient one. We can identify three phases: (i) under the Knights of St John (1530-1798) and (ii) under British rule to early independence (1815-1979). The former can be characterised as ‘Ground Rents - Corsairing - Redistribution’; the second as ‘Imperial Fortress- Proletarianization - State dependency’. We could characterise Malta’s contemporary political economic model (the third phase) as a ‘sovereignty capitalization - hidden wealth (ousia aphanes) – State patronage’ complex. Small states like Malta, Cyprus, and Caribbean and Pacific Island states capitalise their sovereignty by various legal loopholes to attract company registration, pay full EU taxation rates (in Malta’s case), then reimburse them through rebates. It could be argued that transnational capital requires “pirate islands”. Similarly, ‘Golden Passports’ are sold to wealthy individuals enabling them and their dependents to settle throughout the EU and enjoy global visa-free travel. Malta, Cyprus (until 2019), St Kitts, Vanuatu, etc. depend heavily on such passport sales. In turn, state income sustains extensive patronage networks thus ensuring electoral support. This parasitism is not static; it adapts with alacrity to external opportunities. Whole new parasitic chains may be formed further up, others marginalised, and yet others clinging to the illusion they are still privileged. When these new forms are exposed (‘DIRTY MONEY’), as with Daphne Caruana Galizia’s disclosures and her subsequent assassination (‘INVICTA’ in this collection), a wide range of responses followed: outrage, denial, disassociation, resistance, abreaction.

4. Lest we dismiss the classical Greek apprehension of money as some antiquarian irrelevance, we too have our ousia aphanes in three forms: (i) corporate and private offshore accounts, (ii) cryptocurrencies, and (iii) art and other precious items. With respect to the first, in the post WWII period multinationals found it convenient to ‘treaty shop’ from the thousands of bilateral taxation treaties to reduce their tax liabilities. The international financial sector (e.g., accounting firms) supplied small states with the legislation and know-how to become feudal subsidiaries in the global movement of capital - for corporate and private tax avoidance, as well as hot or dirty money. The result is that an increasing percentage of corporate profits are now parked in tax havens (some 20 percent of US corporate profits according to Zucman, 2015). For the year 2014, Zucman (2015) calculated that globally some US $7.6 trillion of corporate profits were hidden offshore, translating into a global annual tax revenue loss of approximately US $190 billion. Ironically, large economies are often the least compliant in the sharing of OECD tax data, whilst ‘tax haven’ countries are generally compliant with international law. It should not surprise us that Malta’s national economic strategies (like many other states), are based on taking advantage of differential taxation regimes (for what is sovereignty if not to capitalise lower taxation?), to attract transnational capital (company registrations, igaming, passport sales).

Multinational tax strategies paved the way for the private sector: offshore accounts through shell companies linked to camouflaged bank accounts, trusts, holdings, and foundations as nominal asset owners in Hong Kong, Switzerland, Singapore, Panama, the Cayman Islands (Brittain-Catlin, 2005) and the Bahamas, etc. Inevitably, this route attracted ‘dirty money’ and corruption - the subject of a section of Norbert’s works in this collection (DIRTY MONEY), intimately linked to Daphne’s assassination (INVICTA).

5. Popular outrage in the West misses two key issues. The first is that outflows from poor countries to other tax jurisdictions rarely occasion indignation in the First World, further strengthening corruption and grinding in poverty. Second, the general public and the media may not fully appreciate the symbiotic links between ‘onshore’ and ‘offshore’ capital (Brittain-Catlin, 2005: 199). Popular ignorance of the links between the legal and illegal (Strange 1996), sustains the illusion that eradicating the latter will sanitise capital, and/or maintain the integrity of the ‘legal’ from its ‘contamination’ by illegality. The former often encompasses the latter (Nordstrom 2000).

Another important consequence is that national public attention in the shielded larger players is easily deflected to the smaller players (“Paradise Islands”). Presented in the international popular press as ‘parasitic’ on larger economies, this further reinforces the cultural divide between northern European countries (called “aggressive/competitive tax optimizers”) and peripheral or southern European ones (labelled tax policy “black holes”). These local facilitators of transnational capital flows (accountants, lawyers, etc) are quick learners. They soon employ the same techniques and channels to realise similar tax avoidance schemes and hot money laundering from their own countries, as explored by Norbert’s works. The circle is now complete. Let us recall Serres’ insight that the ‘parasite-enemy’ is also ‘subject, object and friend’. These small country accountants, lawyers, and financial specialists are simultaneously ‘friend’ to the flows of international capital seeking lower tax regimes, ’hosts’ to their politicians and local scrutineers who close an eye, ‘enemies’ to their own outraged national public opinion, ‘collective subjects’ (i.e., “we”) providing benefits to the national collectivity through their services, and ‘object’ of disapprobation to the international media and political elites elsewhere. The ‘parasite’ must be nurtured in a suitable ecology to realise its multiple identities.

6. Cryptocurrencies are a second manifestation of ousia aphanes. Not issued by nation states or banks under license, it enables capitalization of new resources as units of account, payment and value, independent of the state, and its transfer need not be through ‘hard’ tollbooths (Banks, etc) that charge for the service. Finally, contemporary money figures as ousia aphanes through investment in art. [[23]](#endnote-23) Largely unregulated, ‘the art industry is considered the largest, legal unregulated industry in the United States’ (US Senate Report 2020:2). In 2019, the US (the single largest market) accounted for 44% ($28.3 billion) of world-wide art sales of $64.1 billion, roughly split between auction houses and private dealers.[[24]](#endnote-24) As the US Senate Report noted ‘Secrecy, anonymity, and a lack of regulation create an environment ripe for laundering money and evading sanctions’ (ibid.:3). The EU’s Sixth Laundering Directive (6AMLD) obliges all independent or linked transactions above €10,000 to be verified, and subject to Anti-Money Laundering (AML) screening and Customer Due Diligence (CDD). Freeports (in Geneva, Singapore, Luxembourg) are well-known routes to subvert such regulations. Art works are stored there, and thus technically in transit, from where they can be viewed, bought or sold and thus avoiding tax sales, possibly remaining there through whole cycles of sales, often paid through cryptocurrencies. A notorious case was the ‘Bouvier Affair’ involving the Swiss art dealer Yves Bouvier and the Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev. Bouvier was a minority shareholder in the Geneva Freeport and subsequently went on to establish similar “artistic hubs” in Singapore and Luxembourg.

7. In 2013, the Malta Labour Government added an ‘Antiguan’ element to the economy, perfectly consistent with its traditional ‘sovereignty capitalization - hidden wealth - patronage’ model: remote gaming and an ‘Individual Investors Programme’ (IIP) whereby non-EU individuals could purchase a Maltese (i.e., EU) passport. By extending the capitalisation of its sovereignty from preferential taxation to the intimacy of perpetual national membership, the State demonstrated the paradox that political sovereignty, long adulated by paleo-Statists (from Brexiteers to ‘Non-Aligners’) as the ultimate defence and repository of ‘national culture’, may be nothing more than the state’s attempt to ensure its monopolistic hegemony as a protection racket that began with its issuing of money. So extensive and lucrative has this parasitism become that the initial affectations of horreur by the opposition Nationalist Party were soon abandoned. Too many of its stalwart lawyers benefit, plus reputedly a well-positioned entrepreneurial Russian couple who ‘advise’ on applications. Why abandon a cosy parasitism if everyone benefits? As Serres noted ‘to parasite means to eat next to’ (1982:7). Every host is, and has, a parasite, who is in turn a host to another: ‘this constellation is a constant one. We shall see this everywhere, from fable to history, from comedy to philosophy, from the imaginary to the scientific’ (ibid.:9).

In the international scheme of things, selling passports is now far from rare. Norbert’s work Passport displays all the countries that issue passports for investment in one sort or another: 165 out of the 193 represented at the UN. The benefits can be considerable both for the countries and the “investors”. Although Malta was not the sole EU country to sell passports, [[25]](#endnote-25) its passports were the least expensive and daunting, signalling self-devaluation. Rather than pitching passport sales as a ‘tournament of value’ where high prices confer prestige on the purchaser (as with the art auction), Malta’s politicians succumbed to the blandishments of their Swiss passport concessionaires, interested in their hefty commission. The haggling bazaar (monti) or agora, not the aristocratic ‘potlatching’ art auction, is the politicians’ marketing arena, evidenced by the previous PM’s numerous passport-peddling trips. Popular repugnance at the commoditization of citizenship suggests that the public considers it a publicly bestowed gift of recognised mutuality, a symbolic kinship.[[26]](#endnote-26) This explains why Ancient Athens bestowed the rare privilege of citizenship on resident outsiders only through public deliberation. These were individuals who had distinguished themselves as extraordinary benefactors or risked their lives in the city’s defence. Neither secretive nor a sale, it was the demos’ recognition of a mutuality of identity. This prerogative was never put to the Maltese through a referendum. As often happens, the State abrogated to itself the right to mute its subjects.

8. Should not the emblematic early 20th century symbol of the nation state, the ‘Monument to the Unknown Soldier’ give way to the 21st century ‘Monument to the Unknown Passporteur’? The Passporteur’s ‘investment’ now props up the nation for which the young conscript previously sacrificed his life. He is the inverse to the ‘Sans Papiers’ migrant or refugee, moving effortlessly across borders via airports, whilst the latter languishes unseen in refugee camps, both the quintessential ‘non-places’ of modernity (Auge 1995). The passporteur establishes no ties to his new country: no home, residence, social links, solidarities, pleasantries, nor even a local introductory verbal exchange; merely a paper trail designed to subsist as a trace of a fiction (fictional ‘rental contracts’, ‘residence’, etc). In short, a cypher, a confection. “Give a man a mask [i.e., a new passport-PSC] and he will tell you the truth”, one of Norbert’s ‘Wildean’ works in this publication, perfectly captures the truth of this mask: he will disappear. But whilst the passporteur is a furtive expert at disappearance from interpersonal encounters, he embraces biometrical registration. That is the trace that he wants to lay down as a new EU citizen, the ratification of his new identity. By contrast, the sans papiers or migrant picked up in the Libyan straits is denied state recognition that withholds its entyposis, its imprinting, for s/he is like an unstamped coin, a blank, i.e., neither obverse, nor reverse, but undocumented labour. One embraces bio-documentation; the other either evades it if he must smuggle himself across state boundaries or is denied it when he requests it.

9. The Maltese state thus signalled to its subjects that the nation consists of no necessary shared bonds, no mutuality or intimacy rooted in descent, shared pasts, kinship, milieux de memoire, residential interactions, or language (i.e. ‘Being’ in all its realizations), but a mask of citizenship, purchased not to join their own community, or any desire to belong, but merely to settle elsewhere in the EU and gain privileged visa-free circulation to other countries. It marks the culmination of a long process whereby the independent neo-colonial state qua patronage politics may have decoupled itself from the nation. Theories of nationalism argue that the state incubates the nation as sentiment (Anderson’s “imagined community” (1983)) or as mobilised universal culture (Gellner 1983). By contrast, Malta’s nation-statehood appears to be a cynical Herderism: the fiction of the nation is only necessary to establish the state whose destination is the commoditization of its very citizenship. Once the latter is realised, there is no nation or its culture, with all its rich contradictions, tensions, and debates to simulate nurturing or debating. The state is no longer the ‘natural’ political realisation of the nation’s distinctiveness but a contract agency fabricating fake co-nationals. This may be a perfect ironic confirmation of Baldacchino’s (2002) suggestion that Malta is a ‘nationless state’. For here we have the case where the state sells the nation via citizenship, perhaps because it may never have possessed it in any real substantive sense. Norbert’s artworks suggest that the mirage of the nation conceals the pragmatic politics of state-originating clientship, and thus loyalty.

10. Three consequences follow from this political economy. One, a rationality of quick economic opportunism rather than long-term planning and investment: the quicksilver tactic rather than the long-term strategy. The tactic ‘operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of opportunities and depends on them being without a base where it can stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids’ (de Certeau 1984:37). Two, a dependence on exogenously derived income, offering services at lower prices to ensure competitiveness. From tourism where ‘the stranger comes today and leaves tomorrow’, to passport sales where ‘the stranger comes today and leaves tomorrow as your co-national’. Three, moral relativism: fuzzy boundaries between the legal/illegal, the moral/amoral (Pardo 2000), and a reluctance to audit risk, including to reputation. These three qualities render the island particularly suitable for such contemporary services. And because the triad of low company tax, passport sales, and igaming are externally derived, the current system appears as a natural continuation of traditional economic practices.

11. Malta’s political economy has thus long taken advantage of money’s character as ousia aphanes, from state-sponsored and privately licensed corsairing to contemporary low corporate taxation-igaming-passport sales. At the time of writing (23 June 2021), Malta has become the first EU country to be ‘grey-listed’ by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for ‘insufficient enforcement’ of financial crime and terrorism funding. In 2018, eager to get on the cryptocurrency bandwagon, the country’s political elite touted Malta as the ‘blockchain island’. To achieve a head start over other jurisdictions, it failed to put in place the necessary controls. As a result, some €60 billion in cryptocurrency and virtual assets glided through the island, the equivalent of the global art market in one year.[[27]](#endnote-27) This is distinct from another much-advertised sector, remote gaming, attractive to the Italian mafia. Nor is the local political elite’s obsession with attracting invisible transnational wealth as Malta’s main national development strategy restricted to low corporate taxation, cryptocurrency, and remote gaming. Bouvier was none other than the person whom Malta’s ex-PM, Joseph Muscat, re-contacted in March 2020 with the intention of setting up similar facilities in Malta,[[28]](#endnote-28) soon after his resignation as Malta’s PM following the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia. In place of Graeber’s ancient ‘military-coinage-slavery’ complex, Malta’s long established political economy can be characterised as a ‘sovereignty capitalization - hidden wealth (ousia aphanes) – State patronage’ complex, as Norbert’s works cunningly bring out.

**III.**

**‘SOAP’, ‘INFECTION’, AND THE BODY POLITIC**

1. I have suggested that Norbert’s artworks provide an inspiration to explore the relationship between art and money, and that money can be approached as our co-evolutionary collective art-project. More than mere ‘function’, it acts upon us as ‘patients’ in a manner analogous to how art objects abduct us. Money’s occult powers, expressed in its ancient Greek characterisation as hidden wealth, renders its owner invisible and unaccountable. Norbert intuited that soap provides an important connection between his major themes. ‘Soap’ is what Levi-Strauss would call a ‘specific operator’; it is ‘good to think with’. It has been an instrument of self-regulation, of biopower, even of the colonial ‘civilizing process’.

As visual puns figure in a significant number of Norbert’s works, let us begin with a material resemblance that evokes a punning association: the soap blocks with their incisions [LAUNDROMAT, DIRTY MONEY, KSJMKM 2, MOSSACK FONSECA, MALTA SYNDICATE] resemble in their form, size, and cryptic pictography, clay cuneiform tablets, the origins of money, writing and taxation. Both soap and writing originated in ancient Sumeria. Soap becomes a ‘social good’ in the latter 19th century with the discovery of the bacteriological transmission of diseases by Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur. This bacteriological model not only transforms theories of infection through microbes and bacteria replacing previous theories of miasma but becomes a metaphor for the state’s attempts to control corruption, in particular ‘dirty money’.

Mass-produced soap in the late 19th century becomes linked with hygiene both somatic and political, a primary vehicle for the implementation of a biopower whereby propriety is initiated through citizens’ daily cleanliness routines, their inculcation of self-responsibility, the eradication of infection, shame at absconding body odours, and the consumer anticipation of individualising bodily fragrances. Soap was nationally ‘good to think with’. Wright’s Coal Tar Soap was advertised as Edwardian Britain's second defence after the Navy. The nation’s dual weapons against penetrative invasion were battleships and soap. Its 1912 advert depicted a sailor and a matron with the inscriptions ``Recommended by ‘The Lancet’”, and “Protects from Infection''. The danger from infection was as much biomedical as national, subliminally militarized, with the unarticulated flipside that the unwashed were irresponsible citizens opening the Nation’s defences to infection-invasion. After WWI, vigilance gave way to comforting uxorial maternity: “Children go quickly and Soundly to Sleep after a bath with WRIGHT’S COAL TAR SOAP”, below an image of a mother gazing lovingly at her soundly asleep daughter.

Lest we dismiss such sentimentalities as evanescent advertising, let us note that a Lever Brothers poster for Lifebuoy soap in the 1930’s in the US: “Crowds Breed Contagion: More than a Soap – a Health Habit” could apply to COVID-19. As Campbell and Deane note ‘bacteria offer an unparalleled channel for utterances that indirectly express fantasies about purity, gender, race, community, family, pollution, class, disease and sexual promiscuity–deviancy’ (2019:239).

2. In the public eye, bacteria and viruses merge through three common properties: (i) they are omnipresent and invisible to the naked eye, (ii) they are socially transmitted, and (iii) they can only be held at bay by an alliance of individual hygiene routines and prophylactic cautions (including ‘commerce’ in its double senses), health regulations, and constant societal vigilance. Is this not the way how ‘infection’ (‘corruption’) of the body politic through the circulation of ‘dirty money’ is held at bay: through a combination of banking regulations, and the constant vigilance by financial regulatory authorities? And is not the resulting paranoia ‘reasonable’? For these bacteria and viruses are wily, mutating, requiring unwitting ‘hosts’, much like money-laundering through ‘shell companies’, animated by the same ‘intelligence’ that requires further intelligence-gathering. We now transpose, or ‘translate’ (in Latour’s terms), from capitalism to biology and back again. Bacteriologists use terms like ‘co-evolution’, ‘competitive exclusion’, ‘kin selection’, ‘niche, ‘public goods’, ‘resource ratio model of competition’, and ‘social cheaters’ (Hibbing et.al. 2010). As Michel Serres noted the parasite, long humanized in fables, is now humanized in bacteriology and virology. But in an interesting inversal he proposes ‘we have made the louse in our image; let us see ourselves in his’ (1982:7), suggesting ‘there is no system without parasites. This constant is a law’ (1982:12). Do we approach it as an external danger to be eradicated, or as endemically generative? Or as he puts it: ‘are we in the pathology of systems or in their emergence and evolution?’ (1982:14).

3. On one level the spread of a virus and the circulation of ‘dirty money’ in its digital format appear similar. Both require forensic tools and methods to identify; both operate in specific ecologies and become particularly threatening when they migrate (Cross Species Transmission/CST in the case of viruses, crossing taxation regimes in the case of money); both mutate when they do so, both are subject to ‘natural selection’ for survival (albeit at different speeds); both are intricated in a co-evolution with their hosts as the latter attempt to regulate their behaviour to deal with the new threats or to take advantage of them in the case of money; both transcend borders, and both stimulate the development of new protocols, technologies or immunities. Both can be weaponized. But perhaps the most powerful analogy is that both are parasitic, requiring a healthy host to reproduce. Michael Hudson (2015) argues (perhaps apocalyptically) that industrial capitalism and previously state-subsidised public goods and services (health, communications, etc.) are being replaced by a rentier capitalism or a ‘tollbooth economy’ as public goods and services are privatised to pay off debts, and the state atrophies. He suggests that such oligarchic ‘parasitic financial capitalism’ eventually ends up killing its host.

‘Dirt’ and the ensuing ‘parasitism’ it engenders may be central to modes of contemporary governance and regulation predicated on ‘hygiene’. We need a more nuanced way of approaching them, including how they are fabulated to ensure legitimacy. Whilst we often think of the parasite as the ‘enemy’, it is also as Serres reminds us, ‘subject, object and friend’ (1982:23), a discomfiting linkage. Norbert Attard has rightly intuited that soap is both “good to think with”, functioning as a symptom of wider national and cultural concerns, and that it encapsulates a veritable revolution in our conceptualization of the biological and political body. The bacteriological metaphor is now one central way of conceiving society and economy. It underlies Norbert’s main themes: COVID-19, Dirty Money and Invicta. As the Panama Papers disclosures precipitated a veritable crisis in Malta, in which Daphne figured as initial whistle-blower and victim, we need to explore whether this was an ‘aberration’ for a small island, or whether it was long predetermined by the flow of capital in search of willing hosts.

4. In his study of how biology discovered an ‘evil’ (bacteria) that inhered in matter and air, in short everywhere, Latour (1988) explores the interplay between three critical actors necessary for the ‘Pasteurian Revolution’: the Hygienists, the Pasteurians, and the Physicians. I transpose this triad to a suggestion inherent in Norbert’s artworks that money in its virtual digital form is, like microbes, almost uncontrollable, invisible in its constant flows and temporary nesting, and potentially corrupting to the traditional concert of nation states, that nevertheless require them as a mode of legitimation.

Let us start with the ‘Hygienists’. They comprise a broad coalition of Civil Society activists, the media (particularly the ICIJ), whistle-blowers, engaged academics, and NGO’s – those social segments and movements concerned with the corrupting effects of the concentrations and flows of capital, and those organisations involved in what Sampson calls the ‘Anti-Corruption Industry’ such as Transparency International (TI) with its country-ranking Corruption Perceptions Index (2010). Daphne, the subject of a section of this book (Invicta), belongs to this group.

The ‘Pasteurians’ consist of those specialised transnational agencies (such as Moneyval, FATF) and their national correspondents (e.g., Malta’s FIAU) engaged in formulating and implementing international agreements into national regulations to monitor, investigate, and prosecute illegal flows of capital. They are the forensic specialists, trained in the metropolis, nominally ‘independent’, placed in ‘laboratories’ by their state authorities as a result of international agreements to trace not the transmission of microbes but to ‘follow the money’ (Falcone). But, as Hibou notes, ‘anti-corruption is not just rhetoric, an imposed morality, a form of power and domination on the international scene: it is also an ‘industry’’ (2017:34).

Finally, the ‘Physicians’ are the guardians of their clients’ financial well-being: Banks, investment specialists, lawyers, accountants, etc. Like late 19th century physicians, they are not trusted by the hygienists or forensic specialists, but they are necessary (Latour 1988:125). Like the 19th century physicians who care for their patients, the contemporary Banks, investment specialists, lawyers, accountants, etc., become the State’s agents of financial hygiene, instructed in minutest detail in their procedures, on pain of punitive fines or losing their licenses. Like the physician, the banker or investment specialist accounts to three masters: the investing client/’patient’, the State to whom he must report, and his own interests, including his employers’ who may have different estimations as to what they believe they should do. These ‘Physicians’ also comprise international Accountancy firms providing advice to clients (including governments, as occurred in Malta and small island states from the Caribbean to the Pacific) on how to attract overseas investment by taking advantage of legal loopholes, or to large companies and wealthy individuals to minimise their tax liabilities. The two sides of these consultancies complement each other: experience gained in one country is applied elsewhere.

5. These three forces are not monolithic. They must balance their own constituencies, agendas, and strategies to ensure their organizational survival as interest groups, including their personnel. To paraphrase Latour, instead of the microbe, money is Ariadne's thread that links all the points together (1988:46). Two other actors exert a magnetic field below this triad of forces: (i) the State, balancing its role as responsible overseer of international agreements over the flow of capital with its own strategies to attract investment, and (ii) those individuals, groups, and alliances taking advantage of the ‘gaps’ to disguise, move, and reinvest transnational capital, including ‘dirty money’. The State’s responsibility is to ensure that its ‘Pasteurians’ (i.e., the local financial overseers and regulators)[[29]](#endnote-29) and ‘Physicians’ (i.e., the Banks, accountants, etc) are doing their job, and thus legitimate the State. In Malta, however, political authorities connived in the cover-ups because of ‘friendship’ networks between Ministers, the PM’s Chief of Staff, Police Superintendents, Financial and Gaming regulators, foreign Bankers on purchased Caribbean passports, accountants setting up secret bank accounts for PEPs, businessmen, and energy suppliers. The country was consequently ‘grey listed’ by the FATF.[[30]](#endnote-30) Norbert succinctly expresses this situation in his Albatross: three soap holders holding identical engraved soaps with the initials of the three major political players: KS, JM, KM,[[31]](#endnote-31) suggesting that these disgraced public figures bear considerable responsibility for Daphne’s assassination. His title probably refers to Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner: a senseless crime, from which there is no redemption.

**IV.**

**CONCLUSION**

Levi Strauss observed that ‘the artist, like the bricoleur, collects signs that have already been transmitted in advance’. Norbert’s collection, by using such transmitted signs, provides with two important sets of insights, one general, the other specific. The first is that there is something creative in how money finds different forms for its materialization, particularly in late capitalism, where it increasingly moves from substance to function. Money can be seen as our co-evolutionary art product, not merely a tool but as mode of thinking, in much the same way as literacy affected our cognition. The intertwining between art and money is complex and merits further exploration.

The second set of insights provide us with a set of ironies regarding Malta’s political economy in its historical context, explored through Norbert’s exquisite works. The objects displayed here are beautiful in themselves, but their message can be particularly appreciated if their political economic context is foregrounded. Ultimately, this collection of art works invites reflection on what Hibou called the political economy of domination, i.e., ‘a political analysis of the economic that shows how the most banal economic dispositifs and the economic functioning of everyday life simultaneously involve mechanisms of domination’ (2017: xii). These works invite reflection on a paradox in Maltese society: it is a society where loyalty, particularly clientelist loyalty, is very strong, but where the state lacks legitimacy. Could we not see such clientelist loyalty as a means to generate a substitute to state legitimacy because it has always been lacking? I very much hope that this collection of stunning works will generate the attention and debate that they deserve as Norbert’s incisive artistic insights into his natal society and its place in the wider world.

1. Quoted in Velthuis (2005:25). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in Velthuis (2005: 26). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E.g., Vishmidt (2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted in Galensen (2007:20). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. And also short-changed by Marxist concepts of ‘use value’. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I use the term ‘metaphor’ in its original Greek sense: to transport or move. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See also Hoeller (2010) for an illuminating analysis of Boggs. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Desan (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. As the UK Labour MP Dennis Healey quipped: “Ask an economist for a telephone number and he’ll give you an estimate” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘Wherever images have to be touched, rather than merely looked at, there is an imputation that there is inherent agency in the material index, which is not to say that the agency of the prototype is excluded in these instances’ (Gell 1998: 32). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. I am trying to fit Gell’s concept of agency within an Aristotelian framework of causality, to which it bears certain similarities (see particularly 1998:101). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Such as the Maltese saying, ‘With money you can build a road in the sea’. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Quoted in Jameson (2011:41, n.35). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. As with art auctions. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. This is probably a lacuna in Gell’s treatment of art. He does not acknowledge that doubts about efficacy can surround art objects as much as religious cures, shrines, etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. As Adam (2014) notes “after drugs and prostitution, art is the greatest unregulated market in the world”. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Here Dobb is referring to Hart. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Who never investigated him for money laundering when expected and kept him informed of their own investigations into his complicity in Daphne’s assassination. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jacob Borg: Gaming Authority chief colluded with Yorgen Fenech to hide casino breaches. Times of Malta, 14 March 2021. https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/gaming-authority-chief-colluded-with-fenech-to-hide-casino-breaches.857857

    Julian Bonnici: MGA CEO Worked With Yorgen Fenech To Block Report On Casinos’ Money-Laundering Issues But Warned It Wasn’t The Worst In Malta. Lovin Malta, March 14, 2021. https://lovinmalta.com/news/mga-ceo-worked-with-yorgen-fenech-to-block-report-on-casinos-money-laundering-issues-but-warned-it-wasnt-the-worst-in-malta/ [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. A practice in Malta when friends in official positions want to slow down or subvert investigations or court cases. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For, in sealing Daphne Caruana Galizia’s fate, that ‘number’ (17 Black) also sealed the fate of the person who had ‘thrown her to the sea’ (*tefagħha il-baħar,* an expression for destroying someone), from where indeed the SMS message triggering the bomb had been sent (from a yacht). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Shell notes that ‘the frequent [Greek] association of tyranny and minting with one man [Gyges] suggests that they may be mutually reinforcing and interdependent’ (1989:22). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. There is an immense literature on this. See: Deloitte and *Art & Finance - Selected reading list*

    *Collecting and investing in ar*t, 2018; How Modern Art Serves the Rich By Rachel Wetzler

    *The New Republic*, February 26, 2018; Kenny Schachter, Opinion *Artnet News*, November 19, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *‘The Art Industry and U.S. Policies that Undermine Sanctions’.* PSI Staff Report , US Senate (29 July 2020): https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020-07-29 pdf Last accessed 25 June 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Cyprus was another, but to its credit abandoned the practice after a corruption scandal. Cyprus had its own ironies: the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus (ROC) in the South pitched its passports at around 2 million euro, whilst the unrecognized TRNC’s passports (Turkish Republic of North Cyprus) have no ‘currency’. Yet Turkish Cypriot politicians in the north have the right to obtain ROC passports (that the ROC to its credit grants them) whilst pushing for a separate state. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. A recent survey by the *Times of Malta* suggested that reactions to passport sales is also a function of class and residence patterns. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ivan Martin: Cryptobillions moved through Malta through ‘lax oversight’. *Times of Malta* 21 June 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Matthew Vella: ‘Muscat courts ‘Freeport King’ Yves Bouvier on precious goods vault in Malta’. *Malta Today* 2 March 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Such as Malta’s FIAU [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Financial Action Task Force, [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. KS: Keith Schembri, Maltese businessman and PM, Joseph Muscat’s (‘JM’), Chief of Staff (2013-19). In 2015 Schembri and Minister of Energy and Health, Konrad Mizzi (‘KM’), purchased two Panama companies from Mossack Fonseca’s Maltese franchisees, Nexia BT, plus a third mystery company ‘Egrant’, whose ownership has not yet been definitively established. This information had been exposed by Daphne, whose son was then working for the ICIJ. These two companies were primed to receive regular payments from a UAE account, ‘17 Black’ owned by Jorgen Fenech, prominent businessman, Chairman of Electrogas, the new Energy Provider set up by the Malta Government. Schembri was obliged to resign after it emerged that he had been leaking police investigations to the prime suspect behind Daphne’s 2017 assassination, Jorgen Fenech.

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