

## **SHEEP, SYSTEMS, CHOCOLATES AND PLANTS: ANOTHER HISTORY OF MONEY**

**By Sonia Fernández Pan**

The *Sheep, Systems, Chocolates and Plants: Another History of Money* podcast arose out of a series of conversations with artists **Patricia Esquivias**, **Francesc Ruiz**, **Rubén Grilo** and **Fritzia Irizar**. The resulting itinerary, forged out of these discussions with the artists, follows an irregular path. It begins in the terrain of ancestral forms of economy, goes on to explore different systems, materials, logics and events in all of which money plays some role, and finally comes full circle to examine some of the natural environments that have been exploited by capital.

This spoken itinerary began with a number of pictures and the narratives of those images. In my exploration of the Banco de España's collection, I was guided by two concepts: economy and money. Although not all the works in the collection are explicitly linked to either of these two themes, many of the contemporary pieces are. The reason is obvious: they are all owned by a bank –as money once was. But that obviousness does not make them any less interesting or enigmatic. We frequently find it difficult to talk about money, especially in the world of art, where we constantly have to remind people that art is actually work. Speculation, so abundant in critical thinking, is as much a resource for artworks as it is for the financial market. However, that was not the primary factor behind my desire to explore the notion of money; rather, I was interested in the possibility of revisiting some works and voices I already knew, and the chance to engage with others I was far less familiar with – all through a series of shared observations and conversations, made up far more of intersections than straight lines.

Many years ago, Lúa Coderch told me that the financial and stock markets are like latter-day mythological beings. They have all the authority of an oracle that we are required to believe, even when it goes against us or its predictions prove unreliable. Like it or not, they rule our lives. And yet, however abstract they may seem, they have very concrete and material effects. We are constantly shocked by crises that are depicted as being exceptional, when in fact they are inherent to capitalism. But who are they? Where are they? Who is responsible for their mistakes? My conversations with Rubén Grilo only served to reinforce my belief that I am incapable of understanding the vagaries of capital and economic speculation. We think about money every day. And yet, as in so many fields, thinking about something repeatedly does not mean actually understanding it. What makes money so hard to pin down is not the ease with which it slips through our fingers, but rather its ubiquity. Everything has a price, but that price is far from stable. In a world where currencies are also borders, even the value of money can vary throughout the day.

For this itinerary I invited [Patricia Esquivias](#), [Francesc Ruiz](#), [Rubén Grilo](#) and [Fritzia Irizar](#) to talk to me. I selected the order of the conversations intuitively, partly on the basis of their works in the Banco de España collection. However, I was also looking for ways of incorporating features from one conversation into others – and that is exactly what happened, independently of any specific questions or remarks I had on their art or their ways of doing and thinking things. Stephen McEvoy's music, although it is not

'speech' in the literal sense of the term, also acts as a voice in this story of money made from sheep, systems, chocolates, plants, sounds and artworks.

### **Patricia Esquivias. Transhumance Day 2020**

There was a time when the economy depended on the territory in a much more obvious way than it does today. That is not to say that the utilitarian perception – whereby the environment is seen as an inexhaustible resource to be tapped by the economy – did not exist, but it was different. The connection between things and the materials from which they were made was also more direct. The wool was not synthetic: it came from sheep that occupied a specific place, albeit they moved around different geographical and climatic zones in search of greener pastures. Of course, they did not move alone; they were driven by shepherds. This migration has not entirely disappeared; transhumance is still practised to this day. However, it exists within an ideological system that strategically conceals pre-capitalist forms of economy or those that do not fit within its narratives of technological innovation. Almost everything in these narratives becomes obsolete before its time, even progress itself. In her tapestry [Transhumance Day 2020](#) (2020), Patricia Esquivias examines this ongoing story through the lens of a very specific scene. A shepherd is driving a flock of sheep up Madrid's Calle Alcalá to the Banco de España's trading floor. Alongside this scene, we have a [stained glass art deco window by Maumejean](#) and Julius Klein's 1920 publication [The Mesta: A Study in Spanish Economic History](#), all in a drawing in wool that looks as if it has been sketched on a paper napkin. Initially, this practise of droving sheep, once Spain's 'white gold', reminded me of the way banks move money around. However, I think Patricia is more accurate when she says it is us that shepherd the money – money that is becoming ever less tactile as it is increasingly turned into an algorithm. The nomadic quality of money, capable of crossing borders that are closed to so many people, does not quite match the notion of transhumance. While transhumance is regular and seasonal, money moves far more continuously and irregularly on our screens and in our wallets. Given that we are now living in a time when the material value of money is waning – as previously happened with sheep and gold – it might be pertinent to recall a comment by Patricia Esquivias. Like any object, coins are carriers of memory. This desire to remember is also evident in *Transhumance Day 2020*. Not only does it celebrate a centuries-old tradition and a textile-making technique that dates back thousands of years; it also drives the past forward, depicting a scene that actually occurs, albeit the shepherd and his sheep have never actually entered the Banco de España, as Esquivias might like.

### **Francesc Ruiz. Branding**

There is a clear link between tapestry and banknote engraving. Both are artistic techniques that are increasingly falling into disuse. The way banknotes and coins are circulated, following the logic of obsolescence, creates a relationship between these separate items. They can be found in antique shops, where an object's lost value is not only preserved, but even augmented by the passing of time. The value of 'original' or 'handmade' items is also increased in a system of industrial production that conceals the human hands working in the factory. In Francesc Ruiz's [Branding](#) (2016), the obsolescence of the peseta, unseated by the euro, is represented in small fragments

and details from the banknotes with which Spaniards bought things at the end of the last century. Our attention is drawn to eyes, mouths, ears and noses from faces that we recognise without the need to see them in their entirety. In the very moment that they were portrayed on banknotes, all of the people who featured on the notes – Rosalía de Castro, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Benito Pérez Galdós, Leopoldo Alas Clarín, Juan Carlos I and Felipe IV – ceased to be characters from the world of culture or power and instead became paper, handled and exchanged in our everyday lives. This series of seductive images, framed within a single photograph, has many purposes, one of which is to restore agency to those who lost it when their face was printed. And yet, as Francesc points out, money is something we have but which is not ours. It belongs to a system of which we also form part, that seeks to produce nationally branded objects and subjects. [José María Cruz Novillo](#), who designed Spain's banknotes in the 1980s, was also behind the visual identity of the Spanish postal service, Correos, and many other companies and institutions that have manufactured and benefitted from the notion of 'brand Spain'. Correos is also an infrastructure in motion after which an [exhibition](#) by Francesc Ruiz at García Galería in 2016 was named. It is to this other system of relationships and works that *Branding* belongs, a piece which flirts not only with the viewer, but also with print capitalism, the art of distribution, King Midas, the *yaoi hentai* of Japanese mangas and anime, fan-fiction and copyright-busting strategies. But like anything else that is overused and overcirculated, systems also suffer from ageing and deterioration, even when – as in the case of the nation state or art – they are created to last.

#### **Ruben Grilo. Mongrels #4**

In the same way as sheep in Spain, cocoa also became a trading currency in the cultures colonised and plundered by Spain and other European powers. Today, chocolate coins do still exist, but although we can *buy* them, we cannot *buy with* them. Their size and price are markedly different to the euro coins they imitate. In supermarkets, they are generally displayed not amongst the chocolate bars, but in the children's sweets shelves, close to the checkout area. Perhaps for this reason, they function as a reward we give ourselves when we finish a task – be it shopping or making some headway in meeting the demands of a job that is never completed. Their logic infantilises us and they are intended to make us forget that we are actually working. Like money or chocolate, work is an alloy of many transcendent elements. Ruben Grilo's [Mongrels #4](#) (2019) explores the viscous relationship between chocolate, money, work and pleasure. However, like others items in his [Indigo Eye](#) exhibition, this piece did not function in isolation, but as part of a system that included the CentroCentro building itself (purpose-built in the early twentieth century to house the central Post and Telegraphs Office). Each exhibit in *Indigo Eye* was quite literally a piece in a circuit that was as hybrid as the chocolate itself. Whatever the marketing campaigns – with all their evocation of purity and craftsmanship – might have us believe, chocolate is not only an industrial product but a product of products. It is a 'mongrel'. And although the history of chocolate dates back thousands of years, the development of the chocolate bars we enjoy today parallels the history of colonial industry, as does the packaging, which dictates the shape of this liquid substance sold in solid form. *Mongrels #4* addresses the paradoxes of chocolate, industry and labour

through their form, something that adds to the paradoxes of money, such as the use of engraving to make originals from copies or the fact that despite being a reproducible item, money may not be copied. The coins in *Mongrels #4* are made of chocolate but also of plastic. They come from different manufacturers, each with their own recipes. They are industrial products that have been individually hand-painted. The toy-shop colours underline the playful spirit of speculative economics and creative work. And just as we forget that work is work, we also forget the social conventions that make money, and the fact that many other items have been (and continue to be) currencies... as Rubén discusses over lots of chocolate and some tea.

### **Fritzia Irizar. Untitled (Endangered Yucatan Jungle Plants)**

If we ignore their social status, banknotes are still just paper. Although money cannot be legally burnt, it is nonetheless legal to turn it into ash. And this ash can itself be turned into something else. For example, carbon ink, which can in turn be converted into a pen stroke of a drawing by hands that can also exchange, tear and burn banknotes. This subtle transformation of matter flies in the face of the immutability of the words we use to discuss it, an issue that is addressed in Fritzia Irizar's series of drawings [\*Untitled \(Endangered Yucatan Jungle Plants\)\*](#) [2020-2021]. Moreover, says Irizar, the continuous transformation of matter means that things never really disappear, but are constantly being converted and melded into other things. This is what happens to anything that falls in water or on the fire. And the same happens with money; currencies are converted into others, but in such a way as to make clear that they are not all worth the same and that some prevail over others. The science of chrematistics is concerned with the transformation of money, viewed here from the perspective of the irregular value of things. And as I told Fritzia, although the term 'chrematistics' refers to the art of making money, it often evokes for me an image of flames. Perhaps it's because it reminds me of the word 'crackle'<sup>1</sup>, but I think it's more of an unconscious association with the all-consuming nature of money. In the process of making these drawings, three experiences of extinction in the same place – the Yucatan in Mexico – all converged: the extinction of the dinosaurs millions of years ago, our own experience in the Covid lockdown and what has been going on since the dawn of colonialism to a planet abused by extractive capitalism. Fritzia Irizar calls the pieces in her series 'post-mortem drawings', since they start from a landscape that is disappearing as she draws them. As a result of property development in the Yucatan, tourism is interfering with the ecosystem, displacing and destroying local ways of life. The paradox lies in the way an external notion of beauty is destroying the natural beauty of the place. Just as plants have been removed from sites across the world to be put on show in botanical gardens, a European garden aesthetic is being imposed on environments in other continents. And similarly, in the world of currency, the U.S. dollar is prevailing over other national currencies. The ash in Fritzia Irizar's drawings comes precisely from this international currency that 'belongs to everyone and no one at the same time'. The drawings in the series *Untitled (Endangered Yucatan Jungle Plants)* are part of a larger system or environment, the [\*Chicxulub, Studies of a Landscape\*](#) project. Yucatan was hit by an asteroid, forming the Chicxulub impact crater. It not only

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<sup>1</sup>Translator's Note: in Spanish *crematística* and *crepitar*, respectively.

led to the extinction of the dinosaurs (albeit they still live on in our imagination); it also forged a hierarchy of life that is still in effect and which places one section of humankind above all others. In a conversation during the pandemic, Elizabeth Povinelli told me about her concept of geontopower, a form of power that not only dictates the distinction between what is and is not life, but also places some lives at the service of others. It is precisely the logic of geontopower that turns nature into a resource for money and capital, even when the planet is telling us that we cannot go on like this. But just as itineraries never follow a straight line, things cannot actually be radically extinguished. Perhaps, as Fritzia says, we too are getting closer to gold and diamonds, thanks to our shared history of pressure and high temperatures.

Sonia Fernández Pan is an (in)dependent curator,  
writer, researcher and podcast producer.

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#### **Podcast credits**

Voices: Patricia Esquivias, Francesc Ruiz, Rubén Grilo & Fritzia Irizar

Concept and interviews: Sonia Fernández Pan

Recording: Patricia Esquivias, Francesc Ruiz, Rubén Grilo & Fritzia Irizar

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