

Review | Shows at the Whitworth Gallery Manchester

By **Gareth Dale** - 29 September 2023

Colonialism, art, the museum logistics chain. **Gareth Dale** reviews the exhibitions on show at the Whitworth in Manchester this month.



Elements from the Whitworth Gallery exhibitions, 2023-24.

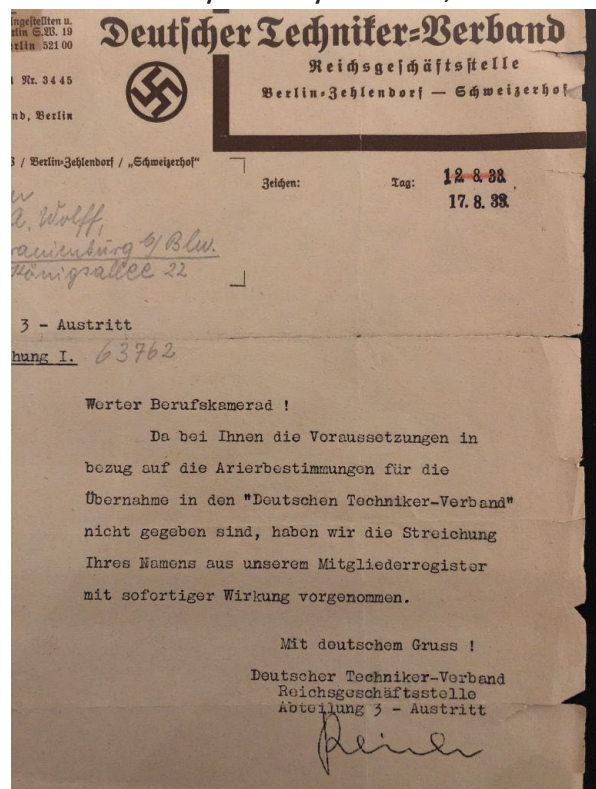
***Economics the Blockbuster – It's not Business as Usual* runs until 22 October 2023; *Traces of Displacement* runs until January 7 2024; *Albrecht Dürer's Material World* runs until March 10 2024**

The relationship of art to industry in nineteenth-century Britain was hardly one of mutual warmth, but the construction of the Whitworth Gallery in 1889 set out to redress that—to demonstrate that these two domains of human life could flourish in harmony. Its funding arrived courtesy of the legacy of Sir Joseph Whitworth (1803–87), an individual who, one of the curators [tells us](#), rose ‘from humble beginnings to make his fortune through his aptitude for engineering.’ It would be

more accurate to say that his father was a clergyman and his uncle owned a cotton mill at which he was given his first break—and every encouragement to develop that engineering aptitude. The pioneering sniper rifles (or “sharpshooters”) from which much of his fortune derived were bought by the British and especially the French imperial states, as well as by the Confederate army which used them to spectacular effect during the Civil War, when operating from their base in Richmond, Virginia—a town to which we’ll return below. Whitworth’s company evolved into Vickers-Armstrongs and then Rolls Royce, which remains today a major weapons manufacturer.

The current exhibitions at the Whitworth all connect to that history, and in fascinatingly multifaceted ways. They begin with the permanent display, which alludes to the dark economic dealings that lay behind the gallery’s dazzling exhibits, dealings that included the just-mentioned rifles, one of the tools through which refugees are created—and this is the topic of the adjoining exhibition, ‘Traces of Displacement.’ To compile it, the gallery’s curators combed the entire collection to find artworks and documents relating to displacement and asylum. The geographical and historical canvas is immense, stretching from Transatlantic slavery through to refugees from sub-Saharan Africa or Syria today. Of the living artists featured in the exhibition, many attended its launch, but many more were [prevented from attending](#) by—ironically—the British government’s hostile immigration laws.

It is a rich and varied exhibition that cannot be fully surveyed here, but let me mention one of the more unsettling documents on display. It’s a letter from an official at a trade union, the German Association of Technicians, to one of their Jewish members, Arthur Wolff. The message begins ‘Werter Berufskamerad!’ [‘Werter’ means dear or valued; ‘Beruf’ is occupation or profession; Kamerad is comrade]. The letter goes on: ‘Because the prerequisites for your membership of the German Association of Technicians are no longer valid on the basis of the Aryan regulations, we have struck your name from our register of members, with immediate effect.’ The official then signs off ‘Mit deutschem Gruss!’

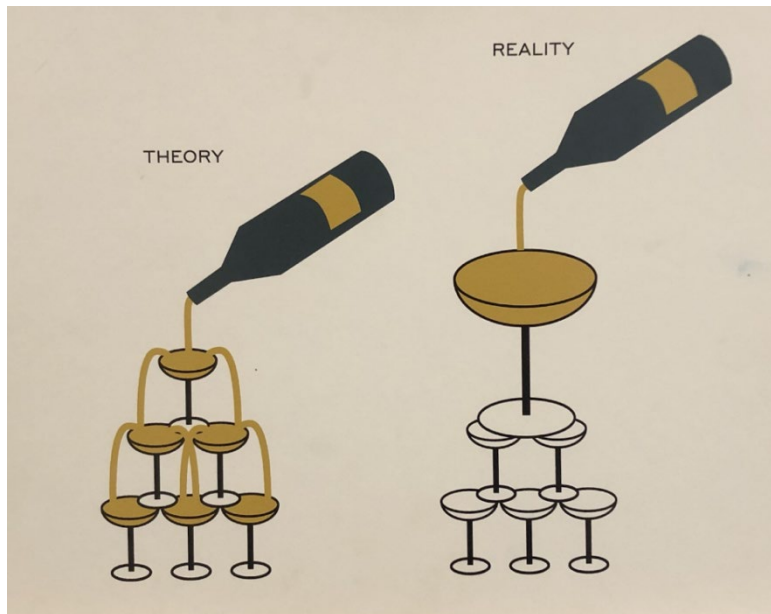


[With German Greetings!] This act of nonchalant bureaucratic cruelty occurred, fortunately, already in 1933. In that year, escape was still a possibility. After internship as an 'enemy alien' on the Isle of Man, Wolff eventually settled in Manchester.

From *Traces of Displacement* we shift into the next exhibition, *Economics the Blockbuster – It's not Business as Usual*. This is an ambitious effort to re-think relations of art and economy, involving ten artist collectives and [numerous contributors](#), including trade unions, academics, Welsh market stall traders, and a Hungarian banknote printing firm. The result is a curator's egg, so to speak. Its standout exhibit, displayed on seven successive screens, is a film by the 'Congolese Plantation Workers Art League,' an art cooperative of former plantation workers based in Lusanga. Their documentary is a fascinating and gripping tale of colonial plunder, its ramifications and echoes in the rich world's museums and galleries, and collective resistance to both.

The story begins with Belgium's colonisation of Congo, and the establishment of a palm oil plantation and factory by Lever Brothers (now Unilever) in the area occupied by the Pende people. Labour conditions were brutal—slavery, in effect, enforced by the kidnapping of children and rape of women. Among the Pende, in their agony and despair, spiritual movements grew, seeking aid from the ancestors through divination, as well as direct resistance through go-slows, strikes and armed revolt. Following some killings of Pende men by colonial troops in 1931, a Belgian tax collector, Maximilien Balot, was killed, and the rebellion escalated. After its suppression, the death toll was over one thousand Pende, and only one European: Balot himself. His corpse was kept—as a talisman—by the Pende, who also carved a bust, to control Balot's spirit and to [make it work for the Pende people](#). The bust is the film's focal point. At a time of terrible poverty, it was bought for a song by a Swiss collector who donated it to a museum—built on formerly slave-plantation land in Richmond, Virginia. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts now proudly owns the item, [noting that](#) "It is displayed publicly for the first time" in their institution. Would the Congolese artists succeed in their request that the Virginia loan them the Balot bust back, for display in their '[White Cube](#)' museum in Lusanga? The documentary detailing their quest is a remarkable work of art in its own right, one that invites viewers to look anew at art and its relationships to power, capital, slavery and colonialism.

If the Balot documentary is the most impressive exhibit in *Economics the Blockbuster*, many others are enthralling too. One, by The Alternative School of



Economics, presents didactic graphics that present an ideology critique of neoliberalism in an intriguingly graphic form that enables us to look at this tired old topic with fresh eyes.

Some of the rest, however, appear to channel the desire of some artists to reinvent themselves as

market traders. They resemble nothing more than over-priced gift shops, and with this the show veers from critique toward kitsch. Perhaps the most imaginative exhibit within the kitschy segment is entitled 'Quantitative Melencolia.' It is a reproduction of Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving, *Melencolia I* (1514), which depicts a downcast, winged figure (possibly a spiritual self-portrait) while all around it unused on the floor are assembled '[the utensils of active life](#),' of science, craft and technique. With help from a Hungarian banknote producer (appropriately, given Dürer's own Hungarian-immigrant background), the



artists have reverse-engineered the original printing plate, and printed eighteen copies on 16th-century paper for sale at for £5,000 each. The exercise, ostensibly, is a comment on 'quantitative easing,' but the point was lost on this reviewer.

Dürer himself, and his 'material world,' is the focus of the Whitworth's third and final exhibition, *Albrecht Dürer's Material World*. The centuries in which he lived, the fifteenth and sixteenth, witnessed the concentration of seminal 'developments

in painting and sculpture,' observes the art historian [Janet Wolff](#) (who happens to be Arthur Wolff's daughter). Dürer (1471-1528) was at its heart, and the best-known artist of the Northern Renaissance. This was an era of explosive change in religion, economy, and the arts, including the Reformation, the spread of printing and growing demand for printed images among the burgeoning merchant class, the concept of intellectual property and, related to this, the notion of artistic genius. Dürer was personally caught up in all of these: a lifelong Catholic who was sorely tempted by Protestantism; a printmaker who revolutionised the medium; and one of a new breed of artist who revelled in their standing as individual genius. He was the first painter, writes John Berger, 'to be obsessed by his own image,' and could almost be said to have invented the self-portrait genre. In one such, on display at the Whitworth, he portrays himself naked, in a bath house with three other men. The focus of *Albrecht Dürer's Material World* is on the artist's involvement in local manufacture and exchange—during this early phase of the social revolution that was birthing capitalist Europe and its imperial discontents, facets of which have been so creatively curated at the Whitworth this year.