

Salwa Aleryani  
*Far from closing the circle*  
28 Jan–12 Mar 2023

Moving between a water tank, a fountain, a roundabout, and a penny press, Salwa Aleryani's exhibition *Far from closing the circle* follows a trail of artefacts and symbols, which serve as protagonists of national narratives, or as carriers of value, marked by events that express political aspirations and power relations across geographies. Aleryani shifts from bird's-eye view to close-up, giving attention to the individual stones of a building and the individual coins of a currency; the inconspicuous carriers of built landscapes and capital, from which in turn social spaces and their structures arise.

Aleryani's exhibition evolved out of research into illustrations on Yemeni banknotes and coins. With these depictions and related artefacts as a starting point, the exhibition charts a course to the places, people and social contexts behind the illustrations. As a universal equivalent and quantifiable value, money abstracts things from their specific properties and contexts. Aleryani works against this grain and explores concrete manifestations of this abstraction, along with the stories, hopes and promises they hold. She creates fragmentary spatial narratives by bringing together things and images in which infrastructures, social relationships, and systems of value manifest. They are traces of historical events, condensations of everyday worlds, or anticipations of that which is yet to be realised, containing within them the fragility of the future.

The exhibition begins with an earlier work, *Coined Notion* (2016); an incision in this marble block contains a mis-struck, US one-cent coin, known as a "Lincoln". Except in this instance, the minting is skewed in such a way that the former US president appears without his head. The sculpture was created within the context of Aleryani's preoccupation with the ceremonial laying of foundation stones, which often marks the beginning of construction or infrastructure projects. Aleryani understands these ceremonies as sculptural gestures, comprising the first articulation of the intention to realise an idea and thus imprint upon a piece of the world. It is a ritual that anticipates the future, that announces something that is yet to be, and that is potentially expressive of a whole spectrum of attitudes and motivations, some even contradictory; be it a demonstration of power, the desire to control what is to come or the hope for a better future.

But even in a mechanical process that is supposedly precisely predetermined, such as the minting of dollar coins, deviations occur. Or what happens if someone throws a mis-struck coin into a fountain? Does this influence the realisation of the wish?

In addition to their function as means of payment, coins and banknotes have a rhetorical function: they are symbols of power that stand for a nation state (or for a monetary union in the case of the euro) which in turn guarantees their value. Often, what is represented on a currency is intended to offer a sense of national identity and so this forms one part of a multitude of acts, representations and narratives that construct the fiction of a nation in the first place.

One station within the exhibition that takes up and subverts this "state-supporting" function of physical currency is the coin press *Variations in pressure, or a thought for your penny* (2023). This works in the same way as souvenir penny-press machines, often found around tourist attractions, which imprint a new motif onto a coin, turning it into a memento.

Visitors are invited to operate the coin press. On inserting a 5 or 10 (euro) cent coin into the upper slot and turning the crank clockwise, a souvenir coin is ejected below—in this case an art work by Aleryani—which can be viewed under one of the magnifying glasses provided. Considering that, in this action, a means of payment is being devalued and an official symbol is minted over, the coin press then takes on a subversive dimension: the machine overwrites an image minted by state institutions and reinterprets a dominant narrative.

Like many other currencies, the Yemeni rial coins and banknotes feature iconic buildings, famous landmarks, and characteristic features of the country. 5, 10 and 20 Rial coins are mounted on the large gear wheel of the coin press. The images show the Central Bank of Yemen building in the capital, Sanaa, the Shaharah Bridge in a mountainous region of northern Yemen and a species of dragon tree that is native only to Socotra. Before the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, the island in the Arabian Sea belonged to the South. Since 2018, it has, been occupied by United Arab Emirates troops.

The motifs of the three Rial coins are referenced on the new-minted images—but with some important deviations. For example, Arabic lettering was added to one

motif, the translation of which reads: we are governed by hope. Unlike the coins from an ordinary souvenir press, which recall a past experience, the coins from Aleryani's machine could function as souvenirs of a possible future. Or perhaps, someone throws a coin into a fountain, but then the wishes themselves, together with the circumstances from which they spring, leave an imprint on the coin.

In industrial coin production, before minting, individual coin discs are punched out of large sheets of metal. The shiny panels *Remnants of what was once owed* (2023) that hover over the exhibition space point to what is left behind in this "money making" process. Aleryani once remarked in conversation that she imagines that everything which flies through those holes becomes money.<sup>1</sup> An image that also recalls The Star Money fairy tale.

What remain in the metal sheets, as negative shapes, are holes. A negative form of capital would be liabilities, i.e. debts. The widespread assumption that money originated from barter is rejected by debt theories of money. Rather, historical evidence suggests that money evolved from systems of debt, and money's indebting function comes before its function as a medium of exchange.<sup>2</sup> Whilst money keeps options open for the future, debt narrows room for manoeuvre and causes the future to appear predetermined and sealed. And it is not uncommon that investments in built environments, in houses and infrastructures are among the triggers of a spiral of capital accumulation and devastating crises that can drive whole portions of society, but also entire states, into debt dependency.<sup>3</sup>

Two patent drawings of construction tools that Aleryani has reworked with copper and brass rods remind us that, under capitalism, knowledge does not circulate freely, but instead is treated as property and traded like a commodity. The technical drawings come from the archives of the US Patent and Trademark Office and record two patents for construction tools from the second half of the

19th century. These represented small steps in the development of modern building methods—a process during which certain types of built landscapes and associated spatial orders were to spread over the face of the earth with increasing dynamism.

A circular structure runs through the middle of the exhibition space, interrupted in some places. It could well be under construction, or equally, in decay. Behind it the sculpture *Means to flow with* (2023) represents a water tank, which could be used to sprinkle water on the plaster as it is applied. Inspired by traditional building methods in Yemen, the individual bricks are treated with qadad plaster. The waterproof plaster is made of a lime-soap mixture, produced using time-consuming methods and applied in a labour-intensive compacting and polishing process. In contrast to modern building techniques, qadad demands a different temporality, a sense of dedication and care. The plaster encloses the bricks like a skin and reminds us that both buildings and the individual bricks themselves are resonant bodies, that not only record and reflect social contexts, but shape them too.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to its use on façades and in bathrooms, qadad is used in particular for pipes, water basins and cisterns, because of its waterproof properties. The wall-like border could, then, encircle a cistern or a fountain, thus evoking associations with places used to meet or linger, or public supply points providing access to a valuable resource. For a long time, cisterns were an important part of the water supply system in Yemen.<sup>5</sup> A significant example of an urban drinking water collection system, with origins presumably dating back to antiquity, is the cisterns of Tawila in the port city of Aden, which are depicted on the 100 Rial banknote

While water can circulate in canal systems, plastered with qadad, bodies circulate on streets—the piping systems and supply arteries of a city. Accordingly, Aleryani's circular installation refers to yet another architectural and

infrastructural feature: a roundabout. Aleryani takes up an observation by the architectural theorist Eyal Weizman, which he uses as the starting point for his study *The Roundabout Revolutions* (2015). During the uprisings and demonstrations of the Arab Spring, there were many cases in which roundabouts served as important assembly points. Weizmann explains the way a social movement and infrastructural phenomena came together through exploring the shape, function and history of these roundabouts: “The roundabout organized the protest in concentric circles, a geometric order that exposed the crowd to itself, helping a political collective in becoming.”<sup>6</sup>

Since urban roundabouts are often located at critical junctions within road networks, their blockage leads to a city’s entire traffic flow being severely disrupted. Moreover, the roundabouts of the Arab Spring, such as Tahrir Square in Cairo, often had a symbolic function or enclosed monuments that stood for the ruling regime.<sup>7</sup> Unlike junctions, roundabouts do not need to be controlled by traffic lights or traffic police. Their functioning is based on the cooperation of road users, which is conducive to the formation of a collective body. Furthermore, Aleryani’s broken brick circle could be emblematic of such assemblies of bodies, in which diverse individuals temporarily unite. This is concordant with the connecting line that Weizman draws from roundabouts to round tables. The political power created by the spontaneous gathering of people on the roundabouts needs to be complemented by longer-term, democratic negotiations at round tables.<sup>8</sup>

The stone circle serves as a display medium for a constellation of smaller objects. Among them is the steel printing plate of a postage stamp, part of a set that was commissioned from the American Bank Note Company to mark Yemen’s accession to the United Nations in 1947, but never released. The United Nations could exemplify the idea of the round table, as its institutions use a variety of circular architectures for assembly. But the example of the UN Security Council shows that round tables can

also harbour unbalanced power structures, in which an exclusive inner circle—in this case the five permanent members—holds the actual decision-making power. Like many other international bodies, the United Nations is dominated by former colonial and imperial powers, whose rules must be followed by the other, mainly post-colonial countries. It remains a questionable matter whether the promises and hopes for the future associated with Yemen’s accession to the UN, and echoed in the stamp motif, have been fulfilled.

There is a replica of another printing plate to the left of the stamp plate, this one transparent. It shows a design for a 200 Rial banknote illustration. The original was made by the British banknote manufacturer De La Rue in 1996, part of a commission by the Central Bank of Yemen, and was later donated to the British Museum by a former employee.<sup>9</sup> Like the currencies of many other countries in the Global South, rial banknotes are not printed in Yemen but produced by European companies.<sup>10</sup>

Currency names such as “shekel” or “pound” still suggest that predecessors of today’s money developed from units of measurement.<sup>11</sup> Two scales with digital displays hold an arrangement of further objects—pewter casts of whistles on one, and on the other, an assortment including a planchet coin and sea glass. Just like coins, which are modelled by social forces and circulate as means of payment, these shards can also be understood as sculptures. But here, in addition to social processes of production and exchange, other forces and circulatory systems were involved in shaping them.

The objects in the exhibition space are complemented by two footnote-like references on display in the gallery on the upper floor. One comprises excerpts from an exchange of letters between the central bank of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, Masraf Aden and Great Britain’s Royal Mint. The correspondence testifies to a continuity of dependencies between Great Britain, which

had dominated South Yemen as a former colonial power, and the communist People's Republic, which existed in the territory of South Yemen until 1990 and was indeed close to the Soviet power bloc.

The other display consists of photographs that the German composer, photographer and travel writer Hans Helfritz took in Yemen. In 1931, he first travelled to the Kingdom of Yemen, then largely unknown in the Western world, to make sound recordings of local music. This was followed by further trips, on which he published travel reports and photo books.<sup>12</sup> In the course of her research on Yemeni banknotes, Aleryani discovered that many of the illustrations are based on photographs by Helfritz, including the photo of the Al-Bakiriyya Mosque in Sanaa, which is depicted on the Yemeni 10 Rial banknote, its domes covered in qadad.

In Aleryani's exhibition, a broadly branching network of social relationships and dependencies unfolds between the obscurity of the objects and their stories. It is characterised by movements and counter-movements that traverse different geographies and time periods, that tell of exchange and transformation processes, but also of asymmetrical power relations, of political aspirations and hopes. Thus, circulation proves to be a foundational principle of the exhibition; be it the circulation of capital and resources, of bodies and things, or of images, information and power. Much like a riverbed, infrastructures and built environments set the trajectories of the flow. Following the suggestion that coins and bricks can be viewed as sculptures, the exhibition deals with questions that can be understood both sculpturally and socio-politically: what leaves an imprint and how? What is shaped and impressed upon by other things? How and to what end does something flow, move or develop? Does the movement run in a stable cycle or in a steep curve that threatens to crash abruptly?

Referring to her preoccupation with foundation stones, Aleryani once remarked that each individual brick

of the broken circular structure could be a foundation stone.<sup>13</sup> Against this backdrop, another question emerges as a vanishing point for the exhibition: what kind of future is being built? And further to that: upon what, from what and for whom?

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Salwa Aleryani in conversation with Heinrich Dietz on 12.11.2022.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. David Graeber, *Schulden. Die ersten 5.000 Jahre* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2022 [2011]), 41–78.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. David Harvey, *Abstract from the concrete* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Ute Holl, “Harun Farocki. Zum Vergleich“, accessed 25.01.2023, <https://www.harunfarocki.de/de/filme/2000er/2009/zum-vergleich.html>. The film *Zum Vergleich* (“*In Comparison*”) (2009) by Harun Farocki juxtaposes ways of making bricks in different cultures. A screening of the film is part of the programme accompanying Salwa Aleryani’s exhibition.
- <sup>5</sup> Fernando Varanda, *The Art of Building in Yemen* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, [1982] 2009), 16–59.
- <sup>6</sup> Eyal Weizman, *The Roundabout Revolutions* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2015), 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Among the examples Weizman elaborates on is the roundabout surrounding the Pearl Monument built in 1982 in Manama, the capital of Bahrain. The gigantic concrete sculpture was intended to highlight the historical significance of pearl diving for the Arab Gulf states and soon became an official symbol of Bahrain, depicted on the highest value Bahrain dinar coin, among other things. During the Arab Spring, protesters occupied the roundabout for several weeks. After the bloody eviction, the monument, which had by then become a symbol of the protests, was demolished and the coins withdrawn from circulation. Cf. Weizman, 47–52.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Weizman, 62–65.
- <sup>9</sup> Collections Archive, British Museum, accessed 25.01.2023, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_2015-4146-17](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_2015-4146-17).
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Shola Lawal, “Why Africa prints money in Europe”, Deutsche Welle, 24.03.2022, accessed 25.01.2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-africa-prints-money-in-europe/a-61246672>.

- <sup>11</sup> The oldest known monetary unit is the “silver-barley value standard”, which can be traced back to the 4th millennium in the Near East. It defined that one shekel was equal to the weight of 240 barley grains in silver and assigned shekel units to different goods and services. The value of a shekel, for example, was equivalent to a sack of barley, which was the monthly wage of a temple worker. Cf. Axel T. Paul, *Theorie des Geldes. Zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2017), 76–81.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Hans Helfritz, *Chicago der Wüste* (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1932); Hans Helfritz, *Land ohne Schatten. Die letzten Wunder der Wüste* (Leipzig: Paul List, 1934); Hans Helfritz, *Vergessenes Süd-Arabien* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut AG, 1936); Richard Gerlach, *Sonne über Arabien* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1960) with photos by Hans Helfritz.
- <sup>13</sup> Salwa Aleryani on 12.11.2022.

Salwa Aleryani (b. in Sanaa, YE) lives and works in Berlin, DE. *Far from closing the circle* is her first institutional solo exhibition in Germany.

Selected solo (S) and group exhibitions (G):  
*Re-turn*, Skulpturenpark, Berlin, DE, 2021, (G); *Imagine Something New*, Galerie Wedding, Berlin, DE, 2021, (G); *Stars Are Closer and Clouds Are Nutritious Under Golden Trees*, MMAG, Amman, JO, 2019 (G); *Tribute to a passerby (ROAMER)\**, SORT, Vienna, AT, 2019, (S); *Geographies of Imagination*, Savvy Contemporary, Berlin, DE, 2018, (G).

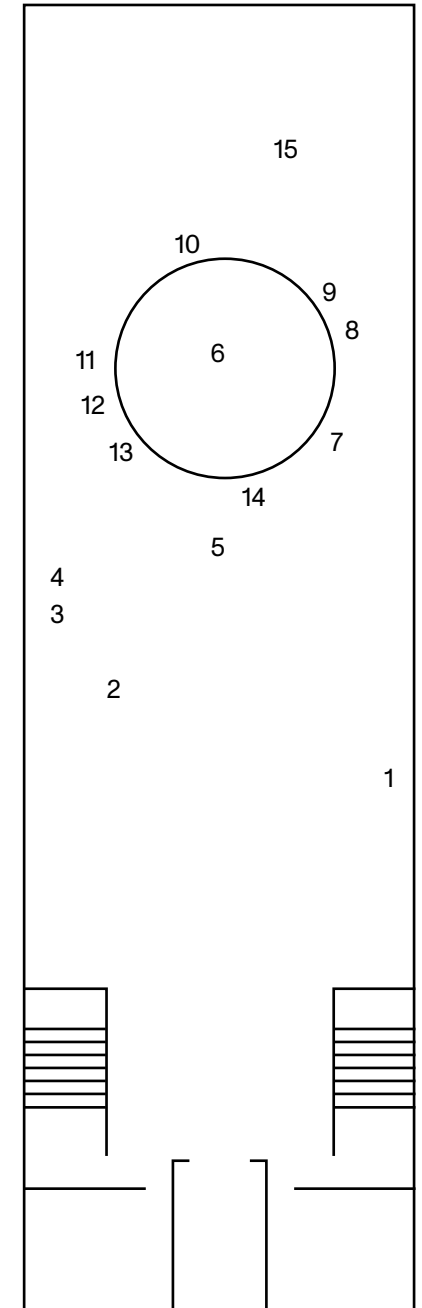
Translation by Morel O’Sullivan

- 1  
*Coined Notion*, 2016  
Marble, mis-struck error Lincoln coin  
48×18×23 cm
- 2  
*Variations in pressure, or a thought for your penny*, 2023  
Penny press machine, 5/10/20 YER coins, assorted magnifying glasses, wooden table  
122×85×56 cm
- 3  
*Potential infringement (brick mold)*, 2023  
Inkjet print on paper (Patent US162355), tape, soldered copper rods, tilted oak wood frame  
40×31.5×6 cm
- 4  
*Potential infringement (trowel)*, 2023  
Inkjet print on paper (Patent US82037), tape, soldered brass rods, tilted oak wood frame  
31.5×40×6 cm
- 5  
*Remnants of what was once owed*, 2023  
Brass webbing punched sheets  
556×620 cm (70×70 cm each)
- 6  
*Far from closing the circle*, 2023  
Hemp, lime plaster, qadad, pigment  
40×Ø 585 cm
- 7  
*Postage stamp printing plate (Commemoration of the admission of Yemen to UN), 1947–49*  
Steel plate, metal stand  
9×6×0.6 cm

- 8  
*The front of 28. (200 RIYAL)*, 2023  
Glass frame, printed paper (part of page 85 ripped from P Symes, M. Hanewich (ed.), *The Bank Notes of Yemen* (1997))  
9×12×0.5 cm
- 9  
*Warrior—or Man with a raised hand*, 2023  
Photopolymer flexo printing plate: al-Juba alabaster stele c. 1 BCE–1 CE illustrated on 200 YER (replica from British Museum: object no. 2015,4146.17 orig. by James Moore for De La Rue in 1996), glass stand, antique magnifying glass, qadad cylinder 7×7.5×0.1 cm (plate), Ø 12×7.5 cm (magnifying glass), Ø 3.5×25 cm (cylinder)
- 10  
*Memorial to a fallen traffic man*, 2023  
Metal cash box, cast pewter whistles, steel sheet, weighing scale PCB, LED display  
10×22×16 cm
- 11  
*Utility in low relief*, 2023  
Glass stand, antique copper letterpress, wood blocks  
4×6×10 cm
- 12  
*Weight of a pocket at day's end*, 2023  
Copper lamp base, weighing scale PCB, LED display, marble, planchet coin on 2 cent coin stack, sea glass bottle heads  
12×Ø 22 cm
- 13  
*View of what's been spent and earned*, 2023  
1975–1980's 2 Pfennig Web Strip, embossed copper, inkjet print on sticker, watch crystal  
15×12×10 cm

- 14  
*Two folds*, 2023  
Inkjet print on folded tracing paper  
12×10×0.5 cm
- 15  
*Means to flow with*, 2023  
Newspapers, wood, plastic mesh, powder coated steel, brass sprinkle heads, LED hose  
195×200×90 cm

Hall



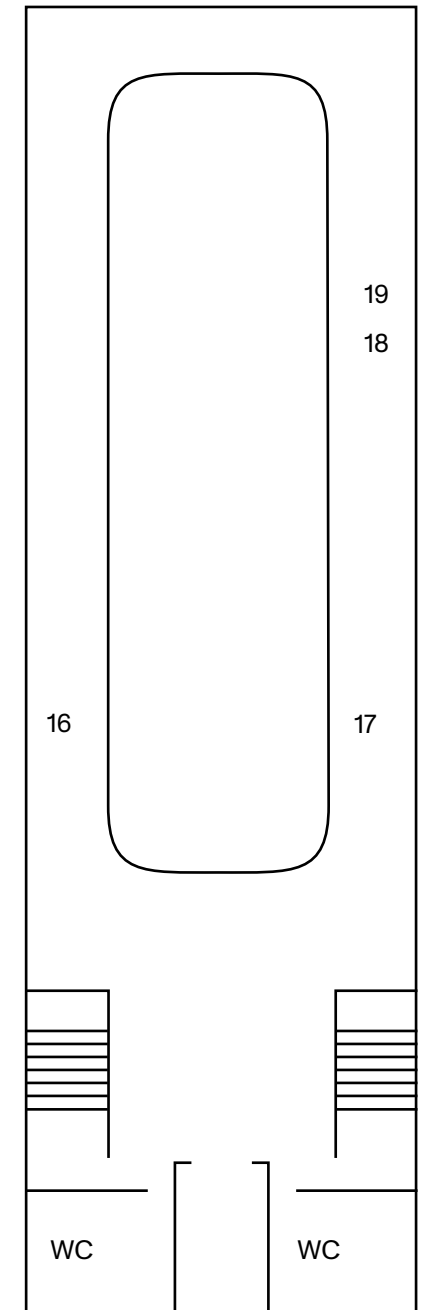
16  
*Masraf*, 1978–1993  
Inkjet and silver emboss print on paper,  
UK National Archives MINT-33-X4-Z  
(selection of 14 from 164), acrylic glas,  
plastic beam strips, metal ring binders  
30×22.5×2.5 cm each

17  
Hans Helfritz  
Untitled (Jemen), undated  
35 mm and 60 mm film negatives,  
aluminum double sided light box  
48×37×12.5 cm  
On loan from the Rautenstrauch-Joest-  
Museum—cultures of the World, Cologne

18  
*110 YER (Culvert in Aden and Bakiriyya  
Mosque in Sanaa)*, 1978–1993  
10 YER (1978), 100 YER (1993) banknotes  
7.5×15 cm, 7×13.5 cm

19  
Hans Helfritz  
Untitled (View of Bakiriyya Mosque, Sanaa),  
undated  
Black and white film print  
24×18 cm  
On loan from the Rautenstrauch-Joest-  
Museum—cultures of the World, Cologne

Gallery





## Programme

Fri, 27 Jan 2023, 7 pm  
Opening Night with an Introduction  
by Heinrich Dietz

Thu, 2 Feb 2023, 7 pm  
Curator's Tour with Heinrich Dietz

Thu, 23 Feb 2023, 7 pm  
Artist talk with Salwa Aleryani

Sun, 26 Feb 2023, 2–4 pm  
Workshop for Children 6–12 years  
Printing Workshop with Buchkinder  
Freiburg e.V.

Tue, 28 Feb 2023, 7.30 pm  
Film Screening  
*Zum Vergleich* (Harun Farocki, 2009)  
Location: Kommunales Kino  
Freiburg

Thu, 9 Mar 2023, 7 pm  
Guided Tour with Theresa Roessler

## Opening hours

Wed–Fri, 3 pm–7 pm  
Sat–Sun, 12 am–6 pm

Entrance: 2€ / 1.50€  
Thursdays free  
Members free

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