

About *The Art of Value*.

To history's already charged findings about Hannema, Van Houwelingen adds another accusation: a counter-monument to slavery, sufficiently ambivalent to both emit a pungent whiff of racism, as well as to update the historical record with a reflection on post-colonial 'heritage'. This work is a copy of an Atlas, one of the four propping up the lower colonnade of the funeral monument for the Doge Giovanni Pesaro, at Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice. Black marble clad, and masked, in white marble, this figure would deserve pages of symbolic and political exegesis, as a disturbing example of the perverse alliance of mythology and colonialism. The Atlas is both Atlas and the mimesis of a slave, or a slave to architecture and capitalism. The motions of an actual African slave in Renaissance Venice, the signs of dehumanizing physical exertion, are arrested, so that the figure's stillness, crushed by the weight of the bag, can be employed sculpturally, as both body and as image, as human column and as negative image of his master's heavenly flight.

Van Houwelingen pursues this thread by a two-fold maneuver: his replica Atlas is 'prettied' with a real gold Rolex watch, which in such a context cannot but look like a copy, and burdened with an impossible stack of bags of Surinamese rice. Uncomfortably propped atop the marble piece, these 'original' bags make visible an economy that perpetuates colonial relations, forms of production and consumption that encode new, fuzzier modalities of slavery. Yet, perhaps more significantly, the vertical thrust of the bags emphasizes the void above. The Atlas no longer carries an edifice of marble and metaphor on his shoulders; the image of a comprehensible world is replaced with a collage of contrasting signifiers: crushing weight and the nothingness overhead, real rice and real gold, extreme poverty and extreme wealth. What is more 'out of place' here, inappropriate – and by which standards of moral or aesthetic adequacy? The slave accumulates so many contradictory attributes that the work extends across different – incommensurate perhaps – scales of value. Place and race, marble and collectability, the cheapness of rice and its value when it becomes part of an artwork, the value of solid gold and the worth of the work it ambivalently embellishes, victimization and liberation – all these contradictory markers enter a strange alliance to resist an easy assessment of the work. Equally importantly, the replica Atlas becomes protagonist in the murky, unsettled narrative of Hans van Houwelingen's own work, which orchestrates these material and symbolic transfers between a Venetian church and Hannema's collection, real and abstract subjugation, real and abstract emancipation, artistic evidence of inequality and its material equivalent, its calculation between the worthless and the exorbitantly priced.

As opposed to a chart of neatly ordered historical facts, Van Houwelingen bends timelines until they meet, or loop, to form something like a three-dimensional object, whose facets – time, place, value – are inseparable from one another. *The Art of Value* is a clear manifestation of the project's preoccupation with the notion of 'historical supplement': the unwarranted, unnecessary 'what if' that insinuates itself in the story to muddy it, and to complicate the question of a moral vantage point from where we would unify, and reconcile, the story's many ethical underpinnings. 'What if...?' – the rhetorical strategy of historiographic speculation and artistic invention, sculpting nebulous shapes at the edges of the plausible, the imaginable.