

Cameron Rowland

by Ian Edward Wallace

Of the various collected objects in Cameron Rowland's studio—a fluorescent orange work coat, a bundle of street-sweeper bristles, several pot-medal badges—the most abundant are books. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire* features alongside works by political scientists Cedric Robinson and Naomi Murakawa, and Cornel West's writings on genealogical materialism. The influence of the latter, which critiques the biases and blind spots of indexical history, is particularly evident in Rowland's work, which, because it testifies to social injustices that are usually hidden by capital's opaque machinations, he describes as a kind of documentary. But Rowland's documentary is not a process of image production. Instead of mimetically representing or claiming to expose social realities—strategies that have been complicated by the well-rehearsed debates over an image's ability to truly "reveal" reality—Rowland selects objects that speak for themselves as components of broader social infrastructures. His work simultaneously suggests two apparent impossibilities: an implicitly imageless documentary practice, and the potential for art to engage in meaningful critique within the very structures that seem to most aggressively foreclose on that possibility.

Many of the objects that Rowland uses come from online government auctions and scrap yards, from decommissioned municipal buildings and manufacturers of commercial security apparatuses. They're often implicated in the processes of daily life, and yet appear unfamiliar. Few would recognize, for example, the aluminum rings that are used to raise manhole covers to meet the level of newly repaved roads. But these rings—which will feature in some capacity in Rowland's upcoming solo exhibition at Artists Space—are indispensable fixtures of urban infrastructure, literally facilitating the circulation of capital. They're also one of the major products manufactured via inmate labor in the New York State prison industry. Rowland uses this kind of information—listing it on checklists and in image captions alongside a work's title and date—to tint the apparent banality of the presentation of the objects themselves, and to trouble the detached mode of looking characteristic of art viewership.

Beyond indexing processes or exchanges that belong to the past, Rowland's works are explicitly future-oriented. Some are accompanied by a contractual agreement for a collector to rent the work for a fixed period of time, but not to buy it. The document is based on a model used by Rent-A-Center, and Rowland considers it a work in its own right. It mimics the function of the standard museum or gallery loan agreement while bypassing the institution entirely, reorienting an exploitative financial model aimed primarily at



49-51 CHAMBERS STREET BASE-MENT, NEW YORK, NY 10007, 2014, wooden table top, base, hardware, 31 x 42 x 42 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York.

Public Surplus is a private auction system that sells government property to private buyers. This circular wooden table was bought at auction

from Public Surplus. It was used in the building at 49-51 Chambers Street in New York City, when it was owned by the Mayor's Office of New York. The City purchased the building in 1965. The building was sold in 2013 and is now privately owned. Everything unclaimed in the building was sold in 2014 via Public Surplus.

low-income consumers to emphasize the privileged entitlement to property that characterizes exchanges in high-end markets. (Some collectors have gamely responded with their own counterproposals in contractual legalese, but Rowland has stuck by his terms.)

In recent writing by photography theorists Ariella Azoulay and John Roberts, among others, documentary photography's efficacy has been described as a kind of annunciation: a declarative power that circulates within a greater social and political infrastructure, commanding a response. Experimenting with the ways that an object might address not only its beholder but also the financial networks it circulates within, Rowland finds the same political dynamism in material things. Without claiming to eschew the market, or simply ignoring it altogether, as many artists do, he pushes art to initiate—rather than simply comment on—a progressive politics. He suggests one method whereby art, the luxury commodity *par excellence*, might meaningfully begin to critique endemic inequality and economic obfuscation without pointing the way to its own demise.

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49, 40, 6, 2014, catalytic converter, 7½ x 15 x 5 inches.

Catalytic converters are one of the most valuable scrapped car parts. They contain various combinations of Rhodium, Platinum, and Palladium that

filter exhaust. Each model converter has a different value. This Volvo catalytic converter has been quoted at a \$40 value by the author of the *Book of Numbers* and at a \$6 value at a scrap yard. It was bought for \$49.

ZERO TOLERANCE, 2015, 5 gallon bucket, squeegee, washer fluid, water, 19 x 12 x 12 inches.

“As minute a problem as that might seem in the overall scope of a city with 2,000 murders, squeegees are of great significance,” said Mr. Bratton ‘because like fare evasion and like disorder on the subways, it’s that type of activity that is generating fear.’” Steven Lee Myers, “Squeegees’ Rank High on Next Police Commissioner’s Priority List,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1993.





CONSTITUENT,
2014, outlet,
dimensions variable,
edition of 3.

Outlets allow the flow of current through cable. When electrical cable is sold as scrap, the outlet is often still connected, but

cannot be used and has no value. An electrician cuts the power supply to one outlet, removes the faceplate and reveals the copper core of two electrical wires.

PASS-THRU, 2014,
acrylic, hardware,
24-hour rotator disc,
23 x 20 x 21 inches.
Rental.

In some places, businesses use a pass-thru, to pass cash or goods back and forth; this could

be at a bank or a liquor store. The highest standard of pass-thrus use bulletproof glass, although this material is far too expensive to be used as a protective measure by those businesses where

it might be most effective. Therein plastic is used in place of bullet proof glass. They are either made by a manufacturer or by the shop owner. This pass-thru was made by Rowland.



LOOT, 2014
Cut copper tube,
cardboard box,
crate, 11 x 18½ x 13
inches. Rental.

At some point basic utilities like electricity and water were services controlled by the state, because they relied so heavily on public infrastructure. More and more these

flows are valued by private corporations. When abandoned buildings are broken into and stripped of their copper piping, it is sold to scrap yards, where it is cut down. This cut copper was bought from a scrap yard. Copper has a function, its base material has an inherent value.