



USA

Cameron Rowland

ARTISTS SPACE, NEW YORK

The title of Cameron Rowland's exhibition at Artists Space, '91020000', is the customer number assigned to the institution by Corcraft, a division of the New York State Department of Correctional Services that oversees prisoners' work and sells the products they make to public entities and state-funded charitable organizations. As a non-profit, Artists Space qualifies and three of the works included in the show were purchased directly from state penitentiaries.

New York State Unified Court System (2016) is a display of four wooden court benches. In New York, the caption explains, prisoners in a maximum-security facility in Dutchess County build the benches used in courtrooms throughout the state: 'The court reproduces itself materially through the labour of those it sentences.' The benches share their bureaucratic aesthetic with *Attica Series Desk* (2016), a steel and laminated-particleboard desk produced at Attica, another high-security prison just east of Buffalo. Amidst the sea of anonymous serial numbers that blur the scale of the US prison system, Attica is memorable on account of the infamous 1971 riot, which lasted four days and left 43 dead. One of the prisoners' demands was that they be paid minimum wage for the work they were forced to perform while incarcerated. (That demand has yet to be met.)

The text accompanying the exhibition opens with the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which, in 1865, abolished slavery 'except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted'. Across four, single-spaced pages and 28 footnotes – ranging from a close reading of the New York Correctional Code, statistics made publicly available by the Department of Justice and essays on the American prison system – Rowland develops the argument that US prison labour is an extension of slavery. His text charts the steep rise in US incarceration rates over the last 50 years and the staggering fact that blacks are more than five times as likely to end up in prison as whites.

What's new here is Rowland's framing of prison labour within the infrastructure of the art world. With



previous works, he established a system whereby his art would not be sold but, rather, rented for a period of time agreed upon with the collector, after which either the rental could be prolonged or the works returned to the artist. This is especially pertinent when the pieces bought from Corcraft circulate as art, bypassing its bureaucratic, state-funded approved clients and entering the private market.

The objects on display do not, in themselves, communicate the unjust conditions of their production, nor does placing them in the gallery space imbue them with such a power. Each bench and steel ring requires a caption to explain its source and reason for inclusion in the show. They also disappear in the large, pristine gallery – even the massive container lashing bars of *Insurance* (2016) are dwarfed by the gallery's high ceilings and open floorplan. The bars are accompanied by certificates from Lloyd's Register of Shipping, used by underwriters of slave ships throughout the 18th century. (Lloyds of London held a monopoly on this type of maritime insurance at the time.)

On the back wall of the space, hangs *Disgorgement* (2016), a framed contract establishing the 'Reparations Purpose Trust' (the grantor is Artists Space and the enforcer Rowland himself). The trust – whose purpose is, 'to make a statement emphasizing the continuing impact of slavery in the United States and encouraging federal and corporate programmes of reparation' – bought 90 shares in the American insurance company Aetna, which also issued insurance policies on slaves. Like every other work in this exhibition, it's a symbolic gesture. The language of law is visual: 'to create', 'to present'. Even if Rowland's conceptual installations don't always offer much to view, as a society we can't afford to look away.

ORIT GAT

1
Cameron Rowland
Attica Series Desk, 2016, steel,
powder coating, laminated
particleboard, 152 × 182 × 73 cm

2
Cameron Rowland
*New York State Unified
Court System*, 2016, oak wood,
419 × 146 × 91 cm