

ARTS OF THE WORKING CLASS

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Sharing responsibility for historical legacy, Cameron Rowland, ICA, London

By Judith Sieber



When buying a ticket at the ICA for Cameron Rowland's exhibition *3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73* one is handed a large booklet, in my case accompanied with the words "you will need this." This is not only because the objects on the two floors of the building sometimes provide little information about the context or are even difficult to find, but primarily because the booklet contains a long treatise on the interests and continuities behind the Legislative Code for the Act of Parliament (also known as the Slavery Abolition Act). This Act announced the official end of slavery in the British Colonies in 1833 and gave its name to Rowland's exhibition.

The exhibition encompasses historical artefacts arranged around an open center in the barren rooms. Framed contract pages form an important element in Rowland's conceptual work. His reappraisal of past and present laws is followed by interventions that reveal implications and entanglements amidst centuries-old forms of racist violence that are still ongoing.

His conceptual approach, marked by critical engagement with the institution, excavates the past using materials in the form of historical objects such as a British gold coin. On the basis of a diagnosis that describes the Code for the Act of Parliament via its continuities rather than through its ruptures, the look is then diverted towards the present. Rowland's art shows how institutionalized forms of violence can be turned visible.

Rowland's approach is also archeological and thereby reveals continuities behind objects. Three switched-off police car headlights, each titled *Probability of Escape* (2020), are installed in recesses in the entrance area. They are accompanied in the booklet with excerpts from three legal texts whose enforcers remain absent yet simultaneously present through the almost symbolically overburdened headlights. The texts stem from Barbados in 1688, as well as from South Carolina laws from 1690 and 2012 – the latter still presently in effect - and designate the right to kill suspicious persons on the street at night. The fact that this means black people is made explicit in the texts of the 17th century, because it guarantees acquittal of murder to anybody killing slaves who are suspected of flight or theft. The laws, as the booklet makes clear, all refer to the Barbados Slave Act of 1661, which assigns responsibility for escaped slaves to the entire (white) population. This code was adopted for all British territories and written into their own laws. It combined the right to possession and the right to violence and existed before police did, itself installed in Great Britain only around 1800. Today's law of South Carolina still leaves this possibility of murder open, it is now just placed in the latitude of discretion. The life of the accused person is still at stake and the accused can be hunted down on the basis of many different suppositions. Probability of escape thus sheds light on the implications of today's racialised laws by revealing how history installed a relationship between property and the right to violence, laying the foundations for deeply ingrained racist structures within society. Moreover, legal provisions of property were strongly conditioned by the reality of slavery, as Rowland points out. Slaves were on the one

hand part of the land on which they worked, increasing its value, and on the other hand movable goods that were traded. This is the reason why slaves were forbidden to leave the plantations on which they worked, so a suspected violation of this law was reason enough to be killed.

In the work of Rowland manifestations of exploitation play an important role, although they function more as symbols. *Guineas* (2020), a golden two-Guinea coin from 1664 which was "produced" for Great Britain in a British colony in West Africa, is shown framed in the same room. Next to it on the floor is an example of the currency of the *Pacotille* (2020), made of copper and glass beads - a weave of cheap material that was introduced by the British in the colonies as currency for the acquisition of slaves. "Pacotille", as translated from French, means "junk". The tension that arises from this initial spatial juxtaposition illustrates an order that creates and distributes value and property in a very concrete way along racist and imperialist lines. The juxtaposition of the objects, which could also be objects in the collections of historical museums, raises questions as to the flip side of European progress, so often tied to ideals of Enlightenment.

Another order of separation is mirrored in a US probation order (*Probation Order Under 18 U.S.C. § 3607*) exhibited on the second floor, with which most visitors to the exhibition likely have little contact. The work clarifies to what level of dependency and impossible conditions people have to agree today when on probation in the US. By focusing on these everyday objects of oppression, the exhibition points to a line drawn between knowledge and experience that organizes society along racist structures.

These structures also span temporal distances, such as in the case of the mahogany railings and doors set into the ICA exhibition space. The series *Encumbrance* (2020), which centrally fills the upper floor, refers to the building's history - and future. The series comprises the contractual agreement between the ICA and Rowland's specially established company *Encumbrance Inc.* as contracting parties. The contract pages cover the surface of one of the room's walls. Subjects of the contract are the mahogany hand railings adorning the stairs, and the mahogany doors through which the room is entered. Mahogany was, as is explained, processed by the slaves in Jamaica, Barbados and Honduras and imported into Great Britain as a valuable object. Today, mahogany railings, when installed in buildings, still generate an increase in value. The building, the Carlton House Terraces, is rented by the ICA from the British Royal Family, who had it built at the beginning of the 19th century as an investment. The ICA has now pawned five of these mahogany elements to *Encumbrance Inc.*, a company founded by Rowland, which will have an impairing effect on the property's value in the future. Rowland's artistic strategy thus not only reveals the institutional constellation of oppression in British history, but also enters into it as a legal party. In this way, the art institution and Rowland become actors in the exchange of goods and property and share responsibility for the historical legacy they are involved in. The connection and historical negotiation of property and law runs through the exhibition.

As the productivity of some areas, especially the British West Indies, declined and production was no longer able to keep up with the worldwide price pressure built up by other colonies, the abolitionists finally came to terms with the principles of liberalism and free market. The entanglement between liberal thinkers like Adam Smith with colonialism is often only hidden in the writings of political economists. Uncovering their relationship, Rowland refers to the encyclopaedic writings of Malachy Postlethwayt from the mid-18th century. Postlethwayt was himself director of the Royal African Company, which organized slave labor in the forts, and his "Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce" has long been a standard work for the development of free market economies in Europe, advising entrepreneurs in a targeted manner, but without any moral or ethical considerations.

Under this light, the law that gives the exhibition its title marks the dissolution of slavery as the release of the capital frozen in it, giving a new impetus to British trade. Due to the equation of slaves with both fixed and movable property, slave owners were compensated when the Act for the Abolition of Slavery came into force. Slave owner's interest in abolitionism was thus never humanist but commercial. A total of £20 million was paid out to slave owners, many of whom then set up banks like Barclay's.

Rowland's work shows that the violence embedded in history's racist continuities does not necessarily formalise in representations. Rather, it is enclosed as a trace in simple everyday objects, which pass through our hands. Violence implicates us all and does not allow for a simple position of outside observation.

In his book *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (1), the Holocaust and memory scholar Michael Rothberg attempts to develop a theory of responsibility around the figure of the Implicated Subject, who responds to

entanglements within historical violence, but also within today's inequalities. One question Rothberg asks is how one can take a responsible position today, especially as a white person in the US, not only with regard to the present, but also to the past, outside the definite but limited categories of perpetrator and victim. Rothberg approaches the problem with the help of Hannah Arendt's concept of responsibility, which in dealing with the Holocaust proposes a way of thinking against and beyond the sole evidence of individual guilt.

With an examination of various material, not only art, but also social media, Rothberg develops the figure of the implicated subject that serves to make long-distance legacies, and thus responsibilities, comprehensible for history.

The formation of history, together with ongoing oppression and exploitation is revealed to the visitors that are guided through Rowland's exhibition. The further they go, the more embedded or implicated they seem to be. It becomes clear that racial exploitation is not a secondary aspect, but a central element in the formation of liberal and contemporary capitalist structures and therefore omnipresent in today's world. Like Rothberg, Rowland is concerned with finding new forms of making these structures visible and developing an (artistic) language to adequately grasp its complexities. As visitors, we are led deeper and deeper into the entanglements that have become historically entrenched in a place.

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Footnotes

(1) Michael Rothberg. *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2019.

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