

ART

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Cameron Rowland: 3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73 Tendai Mutambu

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In Black Audio Film Collective's historic essay film *Twilight City* from 1989, the central character Olivia laments the cruelty with which London crushes the people on whose backs it has been built. In a letter to her mother, a former exile from Dominica to England who has since repatriated, she attempts to dissuade her from returning. *Twilight City* connects the lives of those descended from the formerly enslaved and the once-colonised – like Olivia and her mother – to the rapacious expansions of finance capitalism in Margaret Thatcher's London during the 1980s.

Cameron Rowland's first UK solo exhibition, '3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73' at London's Institute of Contemporary Art, limns a similar terrain where financial regimes, imperialism, colonial violence and the sordid histories of slavery collide. Alongside his usual display of repurposed objects and legal documents, the artist offers a 4,000-word footnoted essay which, some argue, is needlessly prolix; but its directness of tone is considered a stark improvement on the often garbled and impoverished language of the press release-industrial complex. Prudent, then, of both institution and artist to replace the usual pairing of promotional image and modishly vague precis with Rowland's disquisition.

Mooring, 2020, is a framed two-page rental agreement for a mooring at Liverpool's Albert Dock, once home to a slave market and the timber merchant Rathbone and Sons, which imported timber, including mahogany, 'felled and milled by slaves in the West Indies and operated a number of trading ships that sailed to West Indian colonies as well as the southern states of the US'. (Today the Rathbone name is associated with the UK and Jersey-based investment management service Rathbone Brothers Plc, which claims to have inherited the Rathbone family's 'activist' ethos, as exemplified by the ethical investment branch of the business.) Like Black Audio Film Collective before him, Rowland alludes to black life's cruel entanglements with modern mercantilism and the tenebrous operations of finance capitalism.

A delicate balance is at play in Rowland's practice between what he withholds with spartan rigour, of en visually or sculpturally, and what he presents, textually, in all its voluminous glory. *Encumbrance*, 2020, for example, is a set of architectural components presented *in situ* along with five framed contracts. These prosaic items are revealed to be one of the artist's characteristic interventions into the accrual of value, to wit: Rowland instructs the ICA to mortgage the



Cameron Rowland, *Behavioral Intervention*, 2020, Officer monitor for probation, parole, detention

Electronic monitoring is used to track people. In the U.S., it is often a condition of probation, parole, home detention, and release from immigration detention. It is described as an alternative to incarceration. It is legally termed 'partial confinement.' Electronic monitoring imposes curfews stipulating when the person being monitored may and may not leave their home, and exclusion zones stipulating where they can and cannot go. Electronic monitoring in the U.S. rose 140% between 2005 and 2015. If the terms of electronic monitoring are violated, the person being monitored may be 'fully confined' in prison.

The officer monitor manufactured by BI Incorporated is 'a portable, handheld receiver that detects the presence of HomeGuard or TAD bracelets from several hundred feet away. It enables officers to conveniently monitor clients from outside a home, work, school, or any location.'¹

1. BI Incorporated provides Behavioral Interventions® services. It is a GEO Group company.

building's five mahogany elements (four doors and a handrail) for £1,000 a piece; this amount will not be repaid.

As a result, the mortgagee retains a security interest in said elements, creating an encumbrance on any future transactions of 12 Carlton House Terrace (home to the ICA), ostensibly diminishing its value.

Yet the full import of Rowland's intervention only becomes clear once it is revealed that the property is owned by the Crown Estate, whose revenue is split between the Treasury and the monarchy, two institutions central to the colonial project and the transatlantic slave trade. Consider, for example, how 'the Royal African Company of England shipped more enslaved African [people] to the Americas than any other single institution during the entire period of the transatlantic slave trade', and how the Treasury paid, until 2015, compensation from the public coffers to descendants of slave-owners for lost property (the formerly enslaved) following the formal abolition of slavery marked by the 1833 act from which Rowland's exhibition derives its title.

Like several of his exhibitions to date, '3 & 4 Will' focuses on the complex reticulations of institutional power and its shifts as told through objects and their provenance – be it the glinting coin in *Guineas*, 2020, signalling the standardisation of currency in England by way of the de facto gold standard, or the snaking form of interspersed brass manillas and Venetian glass beads of *Pacotille*, 2020, heaped on the gallery floor, indexing a set of goods produced in Europe's domestic manufacturing markets and used solely for the purpose of trading the enslaved.

A more prosaic-looking piece, *probability of escape*, 2020, comprises a trio of police search lights, each tucked away behind a pilaster along the gallery's busiest thoroughfare. The lights correspond to three pieces of legislation, two being 17th-century statutes and the other an extant law in the state of South Carolina. All three acts, to varying degrees, sanction the use of lethal force to protect *inter alia* interests in property, the definition of which expanded during colonisation and slavery to make the enslaved at once chattel (moveable property) as well as real estate (immovable property). In the ICA's Upper Gallery, Rowland presents a pair of cattle brands under the title *Society*, 2020, along with *Behavioral Intervention*, 2020, an electronic monitor for probation, parole and detention. Unfree labour and surveillance, the artist reminds us, stretch across the long arc of slavery and its afterlife.

Has Rowland sharpened erstwhile forms of institutional critique, making them trenchant again? Or is he cultivating something altogether different? Since 2014, the artist has rented his work to museums and private collectors instead of selling it outright, a move that affords him control over the work's circulation while curtailing its move into the secondary market. Rowland's is a practice of working with and against the institutions of art, law, property and finance, enacting, in the words of Hans Haacke, 'a running involvement in all the contradictions of the medium and its practitioners'.

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