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Cameron Rowland in Frankfurt am Main: There's no escaping these debts

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Photo: Courtesy Cameron Rowland

Cameron Rowland "Bug trap", 2023

"Bugs in the wheat" was code among the enslaved. It meant that slave patrollers had discovered their secret meeting. Enslaved people protected these meetings by tying a rope across the path. The rope tripped the patrol horse and threw the patroller.

Cameron Rowland's exhibition at Frankfurt's MMK Tower is aesthetically minimal, but full of explosive material. It shows how closely the banking city is still intertwined with colonialism

Taunustor 1, the address of Tower MMK, is an office tower in Frankfurt's banking district, developed by Commerzbank and Tishman Speyer. The fact that MMK has a dependence here for 15 years and that subsidies are paid for rent and ancillary costs is due to the requirements for public use of office buildings. It is made possible in part by the rents paid by the financial groups that operate here, such as Barclays, Schrodgers, J.P. Morgan and Credit Suisse. Cameron Rowland has identified them as successors to profiteers of slavery.

The exhibition resembles a research project, and many of the historical connections researched have explosive power. Rowland refutes the assumption that slavery originated only in countries like Portugal or Spain. "All Europeans* who capitalized on the existence of black and indigenous people were involved in the establishment of slavery," writes Cameron Rowland in the accompanying booklet to the exhibition *Amt 45 i*. That office is the MMK, or so it is listed with the city government. Its director Susanne Pfeffer proves here as exhibition organizer once again her willingness to go to the limits, also to those of her own institution, in favor of radical changes of perspective.

On view in this exhibition are a few found objects. A rope, two buckets of cleaning agents, a loom, a kettle, a heap of spices, and other things. Within each exhibit are the relationships between contemporary wealth and racialized slavery. The stories materialize in them before background knowledge that should be read while they are there.

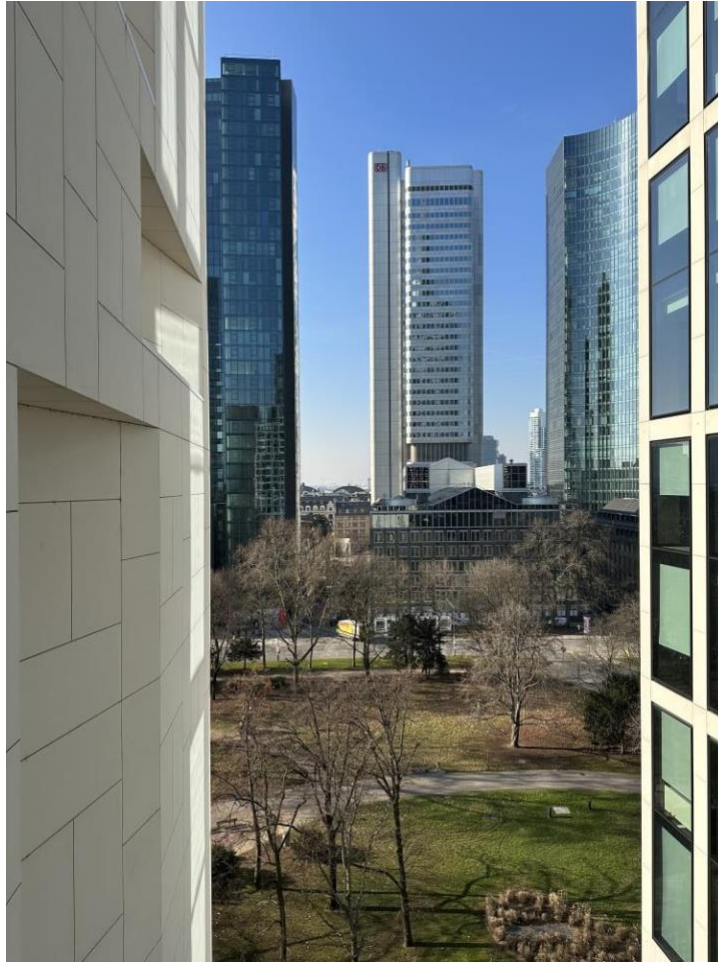


Photo: Silke Hohmann

Cameron Rowland opens the way to the roof terrace of Tower MMK and reveals a view of the prosperous banking city of Frankfurt am Main, which can also be traced back to profits from slavery.

Art experience through cognition

On a 300-year-old loom from Osnabrück, for example, cheap linen was woven for export. Low-wage German labor was used to make *Osnaburgs*, the durable, recognizable clothing worn by enslaved people in the colonies. The floor sculpture *Seasoning*, a salt-and-pepper mixture, refers to a method of torture used by slaveholders to break the will of the enslaved through solitary confinement, whipping, and rubbing salt and pepper into open wounds.

All these objects are charged with meaning; the experience of art takes place primarily in the flexibility of one's mind, in the capacity for cognition. Exemplary of this is the work *Bankrott*, a framed contract between MMK and Rowland. Bankrott Inc., represented by Cameron Rowland, grants the museum a loan in the amount of 20,000 euros. This is a "loan on call," which means that the creditor alone determines the time of repayment. At the highest legally permitted interest rate of 18 percent, the museum would be owed 311,591,692,053.27 euros after only 100 years. Three hundred and eleven billion, five hundred and ninety-one million.

This deal, which seems completely insane, is based on real circumstances: Slaveholders receiving reparation payments from the countries where the colonies were located after slavery was abolished. British reparations payments, for example, allowed financial institutions to flourish. (They are also, incidentally, why a nation like Haiti never gets on its feet financially. Its inhabitants, descendants of enslaved people, are still paying). These indemnity payments, Cameron Rowland argues, still yield returns for European banks, just as the profits from the slave-based economy are still real.

Frankfurt am Main as a special terrain

The debt action is not aimed at redistributing wealth created at the expense of enslaved people, Rowland stresses. It is about burdening the institutional heirs and successors of those who capitalized on slavery. In this case, it's the city of Frankfurt. "Bankruptcy Inc. will never demand repayment," the accompanying booklet says, but is that threatening or reassuring, and to whom? The only thing that is certain is that there is no escape from these debts, from this debt.

Cameron Rowland only does one exhibition a year, because his research is extensive and takes a long time. It is clear that this exhibition could have taken place in other European cities with similar cutting evidence. But it is also clear that Frankfurt am Main is special terrain. The civic commitment to culture, especially the arts, is proverbial. Frankfurt with its "Office for Multicultural Affairs" as the first German city. A center of trade since the Middle Ages, it prides itself on cosmopolitanism and tolerance. Those who trade, so the logic goes, do not see "strangers" as a threat, but as potential business partners.

This is also the site of the reconstruction of the "Haus zur Goldenen Waage," built in 1619 by the Dutch confectioner van Hamel. On an ornate cantilever, a black arm protrudes true to the original, holding the aforementioned scales. Even those involved in the reconstruction of the "New Old Town" have so far not been able to recognize any problem in this. A "nostalgia card" of this tourist attraction is available in the MMK Tower and can be purchased as an edition by Cameron Rowland for five euros. Although he does not explicitly thematize this black arm made of metal, he gives a different view of it.

An exhibition that takes place in the mind

Cameron Rowland has opened up the otherwise closed emergency exits and stairwells of the Tower. This is also a work; it is called *Public Use*. You can go up to the roof terrace of the private building and find yourself in the open air at mid-height among all the bank towers that grow annually like bar charts.

Rowland's exhibition takes place almost entirely in the mind. But it has this tremendous power to fundamentally overturn something in perception that you can't get back behind. For the way back, one can choose the otherwise closed exit that leads through the foyer of the part of the building with the private apartments and offices of the many wealthy Frankfurt residents. Or you can go through the café on the first floor. Ah, coffee. There is no escape.