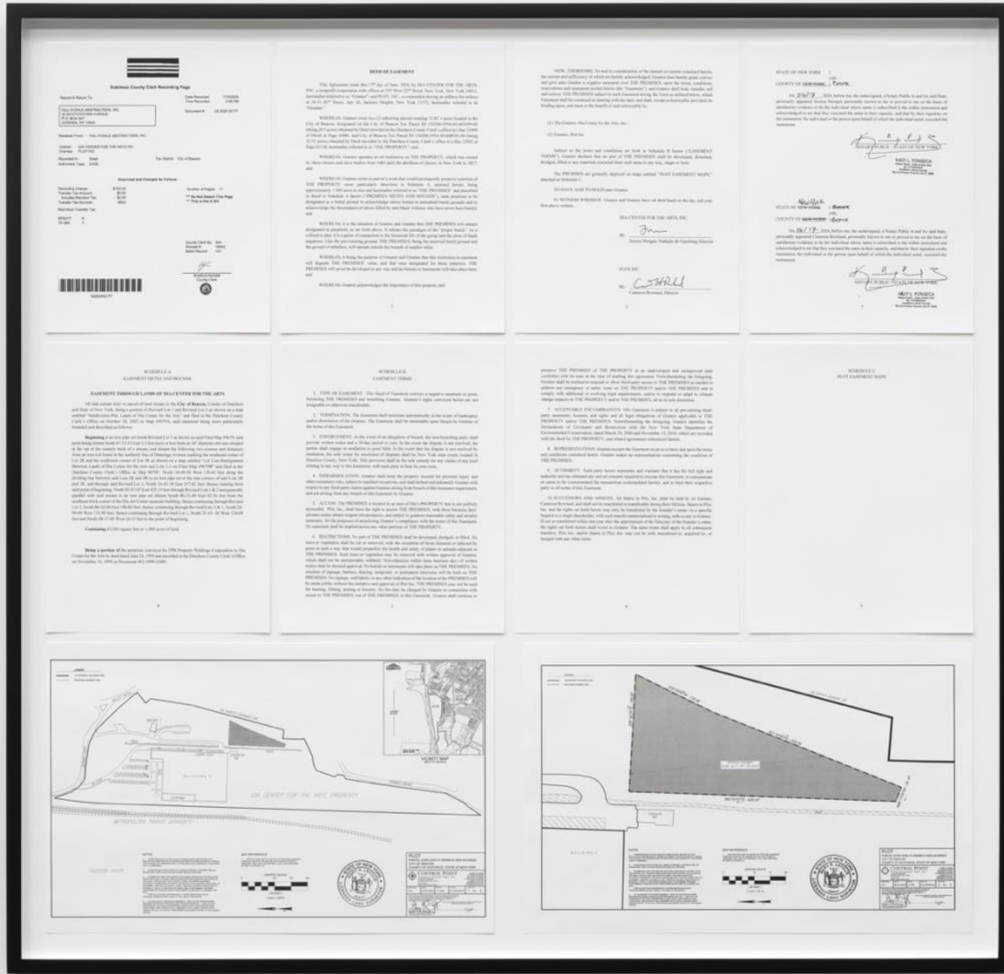
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

November 2024

Cameron Rowland: *Properties*

By Reese Lewis



Cameron Rowland, *Plot*, 2024. Easement, 1 acre in Beacon, New York.

Black people were prohibited from being buried in cemeteries. These prohibitions were applied to both free and enslaved black people, in both the North and the South. They were meant to make the degradation of blackness permanent. Black people were buried in unmarked slave plots and unregistered black burial grounds.

For many black people these black mass graves were extensions of black life. As Sylvia Wynter describes, black mass graves were a point of connection to the "permanent future" and the "historical life of the group."[1] As Wynter writes of the provision grounds where slaves grew their own food, the burial plot was also "an area of experience which reinvented and therefore perpetuated an alternative world view, an alternative consciousness to that of the plantation. This world view was marginalized by the plantation but never destroyed. In relation to the plot, the slave lived in a society partly created as an adjunct to the market, partly as an end in itself."[2]

Black people used funerals and burial grounds to plot escape and rebellion.[3] In response, laws banning slave funerals and grave markers were passed throughout the Caribbean and the North American colonies. As former slave John Bates said, masters who prohibited slave funerals would "jes' bury dem like a cow or a hoss, jes' dig de hole and roll 'em in it and cover 'em up."[4]

Unmarked black burials are frequently disinterred during real estate development. This has been the case for numerous burial grounds in New York State and throughout the country. Construction frequently continues despite these "discoveries."

In 1790, the U.S. Census recorded nearly as many slaves in New York State as in Georgia.[5] The land that Dia Art Foundation currently owns in Beacon, New York, was owned by slave owners and slave traders from 1683 until the abolition of slavery in New York in 1827.[6]

The easement between Dia Art Foundation and Plot Inc. conveys the rights to a one-acre section of the institution's property to Plot Inc. for the purpose of protecting the graves of enslaved people who may have been buried there. This burial ground easement runs with the land and requires Dia and all future owners to relinquish the rights to use, disturb, or develop this section of the property.

The plot will remain unmarked. It will degrade the value of the institution's property. It challenges the assumed absence of black burials on sites of enslavement by assuming their presence.

1. Sylvia Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis" (unpublished manuscript), 57, 87.

2. Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 53.

3. Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 85, 87.

4. "Interview with John Bates," Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1 (Washington, DC: Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration, 1941), 53.

5. Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790 (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 1908), 8.

6. Correlation of property ownership records for Dutchess County Tax Parcel ID 130200-5954-41-605699-00 and Tax Parcel ID 130200-5954-49-608543-00 with the Northeast Slavery Records Index (https://nesri.commons.gc.cuny.edu/).

Composed of found objects, written documents, and a landscape intervention in and out of the gallery space of Dia's Beacon location, Cameron Rowland's (b. 1988) new show *Properties* reveals how the material conditions of slavery and capitalism in the US adapt to historical change as a method of self-preservation. This process of subsumption was met with constantly adapting forms of Black resistance that entailed processes of appropriation. For Black slaves, this meant understanding the inherent violence within the means of production of slave labor and turning these very material conditions against their oppressors in seeking liberation. Rowland takes this historical analysis as a framework for making art where the very act of intervention, whether in Dia's real estate holdings or in using found tools of production in the context of a contemporary exhibition, is the site of aesthetic invention and critique.

Within Dia's larger collection of galleries in the Beacon former factory, the visitor will discover three works of found objects and one wall-framed set of legal documents scantily placed across the gallery's four walls. As is typical for Rowland's practice, the work has a visual economy that requires focused and considered contemplation of complementary texts provided by the artist to discover meaning beyond what is immediately presented to the viewer. This is typically the most common critique of Rowland's work, but with *Plot*, Rowland turns this to their advantage and produces work whose meaning comes from the fact that part of its aesthetic quality does not exist.

Plot is represented to the viewer as a series of black-and-white legal documents printed, signed, and arranged in a frame on a gallery wall. Hidden within the legal jargon of the typical twelve point text on letter-sized pages, Cameron Rowland, the executive the corporation invented for this work "Plot Inc.", is named as the grantee of one acre of land within Dia Art Foundation's Beacon property. This legal agreement allows "Plot Inc.", in perpetuity, to limit Dia's further development and use of this parcel of land for the specific purpose of acknowledging the possibility that this site is an unmarked graveyard of enslaved people. In the accompanying essay and descriptions of the artwork written by the artist, Rowland argues that since Dia's property was formerly owned by slave owners from the late seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century, it is most likely that it will contain the traces of the common practice of burying slaves in unmarked graves. Surrounded by Dia's landed property, *Plot* feels like it is floating arbitrarily in space with no real constraints other than the conceptual desire to be sized at the singular unit of one acre. In all of the text, Rowland does not suggest that we go up digging burial grounds or claim this site to be a discovery. Rather, this site is ultimately a universal model that suggests if one parcel of land is capable of being an unmarked slave burial, any site in the US is capable of being one.

As stated in "ACCESS," section five of the *Plot* legal documents, "The PREMISES is located in an area of Dia's PROPERTY that is not publicly accessible." There are no photographs of the site, and the Dia staff reiterated that visitors are not permitted to exit the gallery spaces and look around Dia's property. The viewer has no way of knowing what the site looks and feels like; there is no representation of anything real, like topography or vegetation, in the plans, and the text only briefly mentions stipulations on leaving existing vegetation to grow on its own. However, with their complex legal jargon and architectural conventions, these mediated forms of representation are ultimately inaccessible to most of the public. The work is profoundly unconcerned with audience participation, in mobilising some collective body around the politics it raises, or producing a commons that returns the land to the public. I couldn't help but feel that the actual plot is meant to exist only in our mind's eye, and that this is a central decision in the work. The actual plot may as well not exist. I was then reminded of utopia's etymology: "no place."

Translated from the ancient Greek prefix “ou-”, meaning “no,” and the suffix “topos,” meaning “place” or “location.” English political philosopher Thomas More used this combination of translated words to develop the concept of “Utopia” in his 1516 book of fiction and political satire. Meant to be a pun, More’s use of the prefix plays off the similar-sounding Greek prefix “eu-” meaning “good” to signal the conflict between idealism and realism underpinning the concept. More described a fictional society on an island to illustrate that aspirations for such an ideal society are unachievable and, therefore, should not be sought out. Nevertheless, utopian thought directly informed the Enlightenment and European colonial project.

Cameron Rowland, *Commissary*, 2024. Scythes. 59.5 x 52 x 16 inches. Rental

Sharecropping was debt peonage. It was instituted to replace slave labor. It operated in explicit violation of the Thirteenth Amendment’s stated ban on involuntary servitude. Sharecropping contracts were designed to keep black people bound to the land, which their labor made valuable. Violations of the contract included leaving the plantation without permission; being loud, disorderly, drunk, or disobedient; having an “offensive weapon”; and misusing the tools. Violations were grounds for dismissal, eviction, and forfeiture of the share. In addition to cultivating the land, these contracts could include obligations to do the washing “and all other necessary house work” for the landlord’s family. Sharecroppers were forced to buy food, clothes, tools, and other necessities on credit from the landlord’s general store, also called the commissary. The commissary charged up to seventy percent interest. Debts were deducted from the cropper’s share. The contract and the commissary kept sharecroppers in perpetual debt.

W. E. B. Du Bois describes the terms of this labor as “a wage approximating as nearly as possible slavery conditions, in order to restore capital lost in the war.”[1] Many sharecroppers were former slaves. Many sharecroppers were the children of former slaves. Slaves used scythes as tools of rebellion in Henrico County, Virginia, in 1800; in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831; and in Coffeeville, Mississippi, in 1858. In violation of their contracts, croppers armed themselves as well. The tools of perpetual debt were also the tools of black riot.

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America (1935; repr., New York: Free Press, 1998), 586.

Plot recasts the history of slavery as a fundamental misinterpretation of utopia. Rowland makes dystopia redundant. Plantation owners mirror the Utopian state organization as More presented it, which was ultimately a colonial project created on the grounds of white supremacy and slavery. Rowland demonstrates chattel slavery to be a totalizing system that later subsumes its social relations of production into the capitalist framework. With found objects such as *Commissary* (2024), *Underproduction* (2024), and *Increase*

(2024), material poetics are provided to the argument in the exhibition's accompanying essay that this structure needed to assume slaves were subhuman to subjugate the complexities of human nature necessary for an enclosed society. In doing so, labor was rendered pure abstraction, which proved impossible. The show's found objects are not accompanied by any information on their acquisition or when and where they were created. This could be interpreted as a reflection of this dehumanizing process: the work is made by no one, used by no one, and used nowhere.

The misinterpretation of utopia produced a perceived "right to punish" legal framework, and in response resulted in strong forms of resistance from Black people. *Commissary* is a collection of five metal and wood scythes, simultaneously the tools of indentured servitude and Black riot. *Underproduction* is an overturned metal pot that dampens sound from meetings to organize slave revolt and resistance. The fragile, rusted one-person bed frame or iron rods for *Increase* is not presented with its typical association as a site of leisure and rest. There is not even a mattress. It is framed here as a value (labor) generating device through reproduction or Black women in labor.

The objects found in the gallery are not presented in glass vitrines or on pedestals like the typical historical museum. They are laid out in a casual manner as they would in reality. The metal bucket used to block sound from escaping a room is at the entry of the gallery room, a metal rod bed frame is placed against the wall, and scythes lean against the wall as they would in a storage shed, waiting to be used for the day's labor. It is as though Rowland removed these commodities from a historical museum and has placed them in the present. Furthermore, by flattening the dialectic of subjugation and resistance, we can extend the meaning of this work to say that rest and limits on use may be our most valuable resistance tools today.

This also speaks to the value of a "no place" for their institutional critique found in *Plot*. Since its critical capacity is argued in its ability to devalue Dia's property, for visitors to be able to occupy and photograph the site, or even easily grasp its lengthy text-based historical and legal framework, the work would be entering into the network of image circulation and experience economy so dominant in today's art market. This would risk contributing to Dia's property value increase even further. Rowland proposes that what the artwork is actually doing is better off without an audience.

Estate (2024), a letter-sized coil-bound booklet sold in Dia's gift shop, outlines Dia's history of real estate holdings, listing their size, location, and purpose of purchase in a simple spreadsheet. One recurring type of property stood out because it is a void that restricts any use or development within its boundaries and seems to be a clue to what *Plot* is responding to. These are Dia properties up to eight hundred acres at a time, "[p]urchased to ensure that nothing is built within the visible distance of…" any of their land artworks. These are empty spaces used to increase the value of the land and art. Rowland détourns this property type with *Plot* by creating an idling value rot that takes measure of the workings of capital and real estate, uses their methods, and produces meaning from them. *Plot,* its pretext *Estate*, and the found object pieces that are both implements of work and Black resistance suggest that every space and orientation of time in this world is touched and owned by the ruling class. There is no out. Rowland's show *Properties* suggests all we can do is take what they own—utilizing the systems they have created—and reclaim it for disuse.