BRITAIN AWAKE
MARGARET THATCHER

AARON FLINT JAMISON
Galerie Max Mayer, Düsseldorf, Germany

It is likely that, if you are reading this, you are an artist or art student, work in the arts, follow art out of cultural curiosity or for professional gain. In other words: you probably fall on one side of what writer Janet Malcolm once icily characterized as the 'gap' between the 'tiny group of people who consider themselves the professional art public' and the 'ordinary literate' person. What determines this gap and its width? Questions as to whether what we do, make, curate and critique has any value, also nag, privately, at many of us. Rarely, though, are we forced to account for them as directly as Aaron Flint Jamison did last year, when he appeared in court to defend the public value of contemporary art space Yale Union (YU).

Jamison co-founded YU in Portland, Oregon, in 2013, in what a court dossier from this year describes as 'a century-old former industrial laundry', gifted by an anonymous benefactor. YU applied for tax-exempt, not-for-profit status in October 2013 but received a rejection in September of the following year: a fact that would be anodyne were this building's size (a city block) and history (protected) not cause for a (massive) property tax liability. Jamison's exhibition at Galerie Max Mayer, 'YU Contemporary, Inc. vs. Dept. of Revenue and Multnomah County Assessor', contains a book that reproduces the court deposition which followed this rejection, bagged remnants of a Lutz Bacher floor piece (The Secret Garden, 2016), once shown at YU, and an R.H. Quaytman edition published by Jamison (Orchard Spreadsheet, 2016) with YU designer Scott Ponik's presentation tables. 'Britain Awake' (2017) is a plastic display stand containing letterpress folios, one of which reprints Margaret Thatcher's

1976 inaugural speech (Iron Lady, 2017). Such inclusions reference past shows at YU and the strain between private gain and public interest, while also prodding at the contradictory notions of portability, exchange and site-specificity.

Rarely has accounting been so thrilling. Denied not-for-profit status, YU was declared of 'only incidental benefit to the public at large, if at all'. There's a haziness to what conceptual art looks like – when and why dead time, diffuse labour and the hard-to-explain can become 'art'. A tax assessor observes that, 'much of the time', the 'primary exhibit space sat empty and was not utilized at all, let alone for artistic purposes'. He questions: 'How is Yale Union any different than slightly older art-school graduates getting together and partying in a building?'

Why did people appear to be sleeping in this building? Why were animals allowed in? What is the meaning of 'residency'? Is Veneer, Jamison's magazine, printed on letterpress machines installed at YU, a commercial entity? In short: how does an art space contribute to the public good? In the 448-page dossier at the heart of Jamison's exhibition, we read an earnest untangling of the couched implicits about showing art and why it's done. The protagonist of the story becomes its adjudicator, Honourable Henry C. Breithaupt, who listens with responsiveness, curiosity and humour. ('Is that a picture of decapitated chickens?') His reasonable semantic yield signs – 'What do you refer to as a time-based performance?' – meet with defensive, revealing answers: 'Sorry, some of my rhetoric is – it's stuck in – art language.'

Breithaupt admonishes the tax assessors' creaky reasoning and cranky word-twisting. For Breithaupt, the trial was 'very interesting in terms of a view on a world of art that goes beyond my Janson's art-history text, which I had in the 1960s'. In his closing statement, he suggests printing the deposition by letterpress. In the old days, he expands, 'people were much more careful about their briefing' because 'it was literally sent out and printed'. A surprisingly entertaining courtroom drama about art's broader significance has ensued, in the form of Jamison's exquisite, testimonial exhibition. Exemption was granted – on letterpress, to boot.

Pablo Larios