PRISON OBSCURA
A lot of times when we talk about ‘that’s my dog,’ a dog’s your best friend out on the street, so when we say that’s our dog, that really means that’s somebody that’s not somebody you just met. It’s somebody that you have a bond with, someone that you’ve expressed stuff to, cried with, shared things with them, talked about your family, a family that you might not see for the rest of your life, and you kind of become family then. But because of the system, you don’t always get to be housed where you’re at for two or three years. You can just get up and they can move you to some other prison for whatever reasons they want to, and a lot of those friendships are just memories.

ROBERT GUMPERT
John Allen Hasley, 5 May, 2010 (detail)
From the series Take A Picture, Tell A Story
PICTURING INCARCERATION

Naveen staffer campus about incarcerated, color-labeled Mesquite Farms with red barns and silos. Deer are grazing along the road. The air is thick with the sound of crickets and frogs. It’s jarring, every time, to reach the end of the road, where the massive gray prison suddenly comes into view, along with its nine guard towers, coils of razor wire, and stenciled identification on the outside of each windowless block: Z-1, Z-2, Z-3, Z-4, Z-5. Like most prisons, SCI-Graterford is located well outside the urban area from which most of its residents come. Welcome to the carceral state.

The circulation of images is controlled even more tightly than the circulation of visitors. No cameras of any kind are allowed inside. The only photos that leave Graterford are those taken in the official circulation of visitors. No written communication can come in or out. Our clothing is must be previously approved and entered on the gate memo. No written communication can come in or out. Our clothing is must be previously approved and entered on the gate memo.

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How does photography serve to legitimate and normalize existing power relationships? How is historical and social memory preserved, transformed, restricted and obliterated by photographs?

— Allan Sekula
Paul Rucker
Proliferation

A PINHOLE • punctures one side of the box-shaped camera obscura or “dark chamber” allowing a small ray of light to slip into the darkened interior. Projecting an upside-down, left-to-right reversed image of the outside world on the opposite wall, the box might allegorize sight itself, shadowing the play of inverted light shared between pupil and retina. “The image in the camera obscura looks so real and yet there is clearly something fundamentally wrong with it,” writes critic Gen Doy. “Using a mirror can make things look right, but that merely changes things on the level of sight, not comprehension. For that you need to stand outside of the darkened box.”

Prison Obscura considers this fundamental distortion that characterizes vision and viewing, how we see and don’t see the people we incarcerate, the people we put in boxes. Guiding the viewer through the visual culture of America’s prisons, the exhibit traces the contours of that box, to attempt to make sense of the dominant narratives and stereotypes that somehow justify a U.S. system now locking up people at an unprecedented rate. What do we know of our prisons? Do photographs help us know? Are the images of prisons we see reliable? Are they even useful? How do images relate to the political, social, and economic realities that exist within our prison industrial complex? Do prisons, as closed sites, present any challenges to the claims photography makes as a medium of communication?

The works in Prison Obscura direct audiences toward creativity and activism, calling for a responsible consumption of images. While the artists in the exhibit co-create and capture experiences, their works press on a more conventional documentary tradition so powerfully shaped by the efforts of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis. In their wake great documentarians such as Danny Lyon, Bruce Jackson, and Ethan Hoffman plugged images of prisons into the discourses of race and class inequality during the sixties and seventies. In the past few decades, however, such documentary photography has come under scrutiny for commodifying tragedy and hardship; for parachuting into grave situations and leaving just as quickly; and for being the reserve of Western photographers and white, male patriarchy. The debate is of course more nuanced, but the foundational criticism is that a constant flow of silver gelatin prints serves to codify catastrophe as happening elsewhere, anesthetizing the viewer to the individuality of human suffering.

Allan Sekula’s refusal to think of photography as a benign or neutral medium is pertinent to this discourse on human pain and prison images, especially when representations of and from prisons are tightly controlled and legislated by the interests of the dominant power, namely the prison authority. What images of prisons are routinely or automatically manufactured? What scenes in prisons are never documented? What images are suppressed, or worse still, destroyed? Prison Obscura exists within a context of innumerable nascent, unseen images of U.S. prisons.

Mass incarceration is a manmade problem. So feasibly, it can be unmade. The issues are many: egregious sentencing, gutted rehabilitation and education programs, substandard physical and mental health care, aging prisoners, the expanded use of prisons for youth, amplified hardships for women and families, and persistent violence. The deep roots of these difficult conditions are complex, even overwhelming. The work of Prison Obscura is to give image and voice both to the causes of, and the individuals marked by, these issues.

Josiah Beggley and Paul Rucker: DATA AND THE VISUALIZATION OF MASS INCARCERATION

One in 100 American adults lives behind bars. Whether we accept it—whether we see it—we live in a prison nation, and the prisons are ours. One of the most difficult tasks in depicting the prison industrial complex is imaging (and imagining) its sheer size. In the course of a single year, 13.5 million Americans are incarcerated. On any given day 2.2 million men, women, and children are behind bars. These two figures reflect the constant cycling of bodies through the gates and cells of over 5,000 locked facilities.

American taxpayers spend $70 billion per year on corrections and incarceration.

The American prison system has not always been this massive. Until the 1980s, the prison population was a quarter of its current size, but it has since exploded thanks to the “War on Drugs” rhetoric introduced by Richard Nixon and the subsequent federal policies enacted by Ronald Reagan, many of which concomitantly dispensed with safety nets for society’s most vulnerable. In the nineties, a raft of high profile crimes fueled public fear, and politicians from both sides of the aisle responded with inflated promises to keep the public safe.

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Prisons in the United States of America


1900
People in state and federal prisons: 57,070
Rate per 100,000 U.S. residents: 69

1940
People in state and federal prisons: 165,585
Rate per 100,000 U.S. residents: 125

1980
People in state and federal prisons: 329,821
Rate per 100,000 U.S. residents: 145

2000
People in state and federal prisons: 1,312,354
Rate per 100,000 U.S. residents: 478

2005
People in state and federal prisons: 1,438,701
Rate per 100,000 U.S. residents: 488

PAUL RUCKER
Proliferation
Who are these people we’ve locked up? Many are not the hardened criminals popular media might have us believe. Some are low-level drug-dealers; many are addicts; a disturbing number have diagnosed mental health issues. At the same time the prison boom began in the 1980s, mental health institutions were shuttered and never adequately replaced with social services or community supervision. Consequently, a good proportion of prisoners are corner-dealers, people with addiction, people with mental health needs, and people without homes. Crucially, many prisoners on long sentences have never committed a violent crime.

Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, believes that with the political and cultural will we could release nearly a million people tomorrow, and in so doing replace imprisonment with education, rehabilitation, and treatment:

“We have close to a million people in prison for non-violent property crimes or drug crimes. Frankly, if someone stole $50 from your house, you’re never going to get that back in our current system, but you can imagine a world where the obligation to pay back to restore and to compensate the victims of crime in ways that are meaningful could replace the use of prisons to punish and crush folks.”

2 Without any threat to public safety, society could scale back its reliance on incarceration and still tackle—more humanely and inexpensively—the root causes of this population’s transgressions.

When prisoners have not been maligned in mainstream media, they have been strategically isolated to the point of invisibility. The majority of recent prison construction has been tied to boosterism in depressed, post-industrial rural America. As a consequence, prisons are located in small towns, high deserts, and remote corners of states. For families of prisoners, visitation is prohibitively expensive and time-consuming. For the general public, the architecture of incarceration is hidden. Josh Begley’s *Prison Map* makes visible these distant concrete citadels.

Prison Map, which Begley has recoded exclusively for *Prison Obscura*, is disarmingly simple in its design but powerfully comprehensive in its panoptic coverage. Begley manipulates the Google Maps API to write code that uses longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates in creating aerial satellite views of every carceral facility in the U.S. The resultant 5,000 images tell us much about prison architectures and siting. We see common patterns in prison design, namely the spider-like organization of pods and units of maximum and super-maximum facilities like Pelican Bay State Prison.
Prison Map
(clockwise from top left):
Facility 183
[33.470766,-112.435504]
Facility 366
[41.853509,-124.150594]
Facility 745
[38.437036,-105.15344]
Facility 491
[33.72646,-118.266833]
Facility 492
[37.104328,-120.155686]
Facility 657
[38.320775,-121.975193]
Facility 404
[35.154323,-117.858642]
Facility 498
[37.940239,-122.490158]
Facility 590
[32.584574,-115.933336]
Facility 207
[33.209813,-112.6527]
Physician Atul Gawande has compared the permanent psychological impact of solitary confinement of those that have incurred a brain injury. Stuart Grassian, forensic psychiatrist and former faculty member at Harvard Medical School, interviewed more than two hundred prisoners in solitary confinement, concluding that about a third developed acute psychosis with hallucinations. Neither Mendez’s recommendations to the UN nor the conclusions of these scientific studies are news for our legislators. In June 2006, the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons, a bipartisan national task force, reported that “the majority of those confined in solitary confinement practice no benefits can be found and the harm is clear—not just for inmates but for the public as well.” And yet, U.S. states remain invested in the practice, frequently using solitary to punish minor infractions: It is no longer reserved for “the worst of the worst” as corrections departments often insist. Between 1977 and 2004, the number of women imprisoned has leapt 757%, from 11,000 to 111,000. Today the figure has been estimated at close to 200,000. The majority of these convictions are a result of the War on Drugs, which introduced new mandatory sentencing laws for existing drug crimes and annulled judges’ discretion, allowing them only the option to sentence convicted persons to firm, longer custodial sentences. An expensive failure, the War on Drugs also ushered in new legal definitions of behavior to codify crimes. “Conspiracy” is now a catch-all charge used by Federal investigators working narcotics cases. By virtue of proximity to the site of sale or by personal relationship to the seller, a person can face conspiracy charges even when it cannot be proven he or she bought or sold drugs. Women, often in poor neighborhoods, are the frequent victims of broad-brush conspiracy charges. Many of these women are further subjected to misogyny and prejudice in a society that accepts vicious characterizations of female prisoners as “fallen” or morally derelict.

KRISTEN S. WILKINS: WOMEN’S STRUGGLE

The effect of mass incarceration on women has been particularly acute. Between 1977 and 2004, the number of women imprisoned has leapt 757%, from 11,000 to 111,000.

TODAY the number in the Mountain State’s prisons has leapt 1,600 percent. The state of Montana, where criminals imprisoned has leapt 757%, from 11,000 to 111,000. Today the number at Missouri’s prisons, have been used more frequently as backdrops for portraits. An appointed prisoner most often paints the murals. Usually, the visiting room photographer is a prisoner. At one time Polaroid cameras were the norm for this practice, but digital cameras have been used more frequently as backdrops for portraits. An appointed prisoner most often paints the murals. Usually, the visiting room photographer is a prisoner. At one time Polaroid cameras were the norm for this practice, but digital cameras have been used more frequently as backdrops for portraits.

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Supplication #9

“Arlee, Montana, and it’s Dancing Boy. Just go into the Hummingbird coffee shop and ask for Dancing Boy. They’ll show you.”

KRISTEN S. WILKINS

Supplication #10

“Choose one: 506 S 34th Street, Billings – first house I rented when I left prison the first time. The Wild Horse Range or Ice Caverns – went there with Dad, love of my life, kids and grandkids the weekend my mom died. The Western Heritage Center – where I decided I would no longer drink/use (1995) next to the irrigation ditch display.”
From the series *Prison Landscapes*

David Wells, Thumb Correctional Facility, Lapeer, Michigan

Shawangunk Correctional Facility, New York

Kimberly Buntyn, Valley State Prison for Women, Chowchilla, CA

Steven Boyd, United States Penitentiary, Atlanta, Georgia
If current incarceration trends continue, one in every three black men born today will go to prison at some point in their lives, compared with one in every six Latino males, and one in every 17 white males.

Black women are four times more likely to be incarcerated than white women.

Over half the female prison population is comprised of women of color, and yet women of color account for only about a quarter of the female population generally. Of the 1.7 million children with incarcerated parents, over forty percent are African-American children. That’s one in fifteen black children in the U.S.

In a culture that portrays men of color as threatening, the visiting room portraits offer a hint of humanizing self-representation. Ironically, these fantasy-landscape portraits also function as instruments of power for prisons. The backdrops ensure that photos of doors, windows, or locks will not circulate outside the prison. “The images are intentionally framed to block out everything outside the frame,” says Emdur, “so the images are hiding what the visiting room actually looks like.”

Emdur’s large-format photographs of visiting rooms in eight different prisons contextualize the frames around the backdrops. By drawing back, she shows us the stages and performances used by America’s prisoners to provide keepsakes for their loved ones. In an age when most people can make, share, and trash digital images in seconds with mobile devices, these single, precious prints remind us that self-representation is not a guaranteed right.

With an average cost of $80,000 per year to lock up a child, the U.S. spends more than $5 billion annually on youth detention. America locks up children at more than six times the rate of any other developed nation. On any given night, there are approximately 60,500 youth confined in juvenile correctional facilities or other residential programs. These children often suffer from conditions of psychological, physical and sexual abuse, homelessness, suicide attempts, addiction, and illiteracy. Repeated studies have shown that youth incarceration does not reduce recidivism rates or benefit public safety, and many states have turned away from punishing acts such as truancy and delinquency with detention. Furthermore, states that lowered juvenile confinement rates the most from 1997 to 2007 saw the greatest declines in juvenile violent crime arrests.
STEVE DAVIS

Untitled, Remann Hall, Tacoma, WA

Untitled, Remann Hall, Tacoma, WA

Untitled, Remann Hall, Tacoma, WA
That the audio is uncensored is vital. While Prison Obscura is curated from a point of political opposition to prisons, it is not intended to whitewash the seriousness of crime or to deny the incorrigibility of some people in prison. "Take A Picture, Tell A Story" delivers uncomfortable content, stories that remind us that one can oppose the injustices of our prison system without embracing violence and criminality.

The agreement Gumpert proposes with his subjects is simple: He'll make a portrait of a prisoner and give them four prints in exchange for a story. He does not set the topic, instead he gives prisoners an opportunity to recount their uninterrupted thoughts. The methodology seems straightforward, and yet one rarely comes across this combination of image and audio in such a context. We may hear sound-bites of a prisoner's voice in a radio program or online multimedia presentation, but it usually lacks the raw quality of the scores of recordings that Gumpert has uploaded to his website.

The girls, who could not be identified by face for legal reasons, were given pinhole cameras with long exposures to create blurred photographs, resulting in a series of eerie and morose images. Because the boys had access to the cameras outside of structured class time, their images capture a freedom of invention that would have been difficult to document more formally. At times, their photos show discomforting—if understandably—images of machismo posturing, but they are also clear evidence that these boys are exactly that: boys, not men.

Along with these reductions in detention rates, some facilities continue to experiment with arts programs as models for creative responses to devastating social conditions. Artist Steve Davis conducted photography workshops in four Washington State juvenile detention halls. Prison Obscura features work by children at the Maple Lane and Green Hill schools for boys and Remann Hall School for girls. Not only do the arts give these children a creative outlet and opportunity for storytelling, they also provide windows into these children's lives and circumstance.

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ROBERT GUMPERT

From the series
*Take A Picture, Tell A Story*

Nelson Yee,
09 September, 2009

Tameaka Smith,
22 February, 2013
I’m standing at a shore where I once was a child. A curious little boy in search of some type of purpose, in search of some type of meaning. 7 years of age in an urban apartment complex of no particular direction. Having to spring everything from its neighborhood of yes, many, something, manipulations, wellness, 5 days. But still would prefer to be all there, inside my household of physical abuse. Right when a mother worked all day, leaving me in the care of a father who abused me to the point of conflict. I find myself always to be an empty house when I awake in the morning, but actually realized that my father was not there. This is a place in my past that defined my current events. I became a product of my environment. A post-apocalyptic and the same activities of my old neighborhood. Snow, money, deception, manipulation... with, Pocahontas State Park, Picture of the Dam. One Hundred and Thirty Days.
Looking through the window I can see the long hallway. My dad and I run across the hallway from the entrance, and sitting there is my dad, looking in our back. At the edge of the picture, my dad has his hand on the window. I run through my underclothes. This wine isn’t a bad place to be. There is a light in my head. I miss this place.

I was amazed that every time I came back, I was taken with my email from Gary. He allowed me to set up living quarters in his garage. But there I had an issue with the cleaning and the amount of time it took to do the cleaning. I was developing a routine that was shaping some positive aspects of the summer. I was only creating a perfect place for climate. The garage I enjoyed playing with the sun. It was the element in the room, everywhere I went at Rockaway, there was a breeze. I enjoyed it.

I began to go out walks at Bryan Park and discovered a spot of serenity. It’s part of the soccer field inside a meadow, pot with a stone bench. There is a bench and a tree with a lovely looking wall. This is where I started it out.
When Justice Kennedy included three photographs of California prisons in the appendix of the majority ruling of Brown v. Plata (May 2011), there was widespread consternation. Protestors acclaimed the photographs of holding cages and overcrowded living quarters too imprecise and emotional to have any place in a high profile legal case.

Brown v. Plata was a class action lawsuit brought by prisoners against the State of California. Ultimately, the US Supreme Court ruled that prison overcrowding had resulted in inadequate healthcare and preventable deaths. As a result, every one of California’s 160,000 prisoners was recognized as suffering cruel and unusual detention in violation of 8th Amendment rights. Prior to Brown v. Plata, the Golden State warehoused the largest prison population of any state, an ignominious distinction California held for 25 years.

The photographs submitted by the Prison Law Office and San Francisco law firm Rosen Bien Galván & Grunfeld LLP were a critical part of the victory. The low-resolution digital images are nothing special; aesthetically they are the antithesis of art or photographic narrative. And yet no photojournalist or documentary photographers’ works have achieved a structural change and widespread benefit as profound as the 200 evidentiary images from Brown v. Plata and the consequent appeals.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO THINK ABOUT IMAGES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

While these works remind us that prisons and those who live in them are both distorted and obscured within American political and entertainment culture, prisons are also hidden in plain sight/site. They are there if we are prepared to see them for what they are and how they function. Ruth Wilson Gilmore contends that alongside labor, land, financing, and organizational capacity, prisons have become an integral part of our economic infrastructure:

While not always public, [infrastructure] is the form of most public wealth - prisons are a monumental aspect of the ghastly public infrastructure underlining a chain of people, ideas, places, and practices that produce premature death the way other commodity chains crank-out shoes or cotton or computers. Why don’t our heads burst into flames at the thought? Why is the prison-industrial complex so hard to see? or

Hackneyed and clichéd photos of razor wire, anonymous silhouettes, and hands through bars serve stock photography agency sales more than they do informed debate. But, we mustn’t give up on images. We must instead look toward more elusive and unexpected types of imagery. By showcasing vernacular, surveillance, evidentiary, workshop-inspired, collaborative, and prisoner-made photographs, Prison Obscura purposefully offers new models of seeing, recording, and making visible.

Susan Sontag’s proclamation that photography is an act of violence has long stunted debate about photography’s value, suggesting that documentary photography has simply accelerated compassion fatigue, deadened conscience. Nonsense. How quick we are to forget that it is the camera that has done so much to globalize our political consciousness. Better than any other thinker in recent years, Susie Linfield has pushed back against the evasions of Sontag and the like. “The answers to these questions reside not in pictures but in ourselves,” says Linfield. “Photographers are responsible for the ethics of showing, but we are responsible for the ethics of seeing. […] This requires transforming our relationship to photographs from one of passivity and complaint to one of creativity and collaboration.”

In the work of Emdur, Davis, Wilkins, Gumpert, and Strandquist, we see radical engagements with prison populations, active and collaborative models of documentation. Rucker, Begley, and the photographs of Brown v. Plata similarly negate the “sanctified” named artist. Begley’s satellite views and Emdur’s snapshots are examples of narrative-rich images that have lain dormant until now.

Rarely will a prison grant a photographer access if there is a risk he or she might depict the institution in a bad light. Exposé by virtue of photography is very uncommon. Photographers do enter prisons at the invitation of the prison administration, and as such, there is ever the charge that a documentary photographer is acting as an extension of the prison administration, and as such, there is ever the charge that a documentary photographer is acting as an extension of the prison authority. The works of Prison Obscura disrupt such accusations, in part because they demand that the viewer investigate on his or her own and join prisoner and photographer in further advocacy efforts.


LITIGATION PHOTOGRAPHS: ANONYMOUS YET TRANSFORMATIONAL

10

19


CONCLUSION: HOW TO THINK ABOUT IMAGES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

While these works remind us that prisons and those who live in them are both distorted and obscured within American political and entertainment culture, prisons are also hidden in plain sight/site. They are there if we are prepared to see them for what they are and how they function. Ruth Wilson Gilmore contends that alongside labor, land, financing, and organizational capacity, prisons have become an integral part of our economic infrastructure:

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BROWN VS PLATA

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
Prisoners triple bunked, gymnasium, Solano State Prison, California, August, 2006. Photograph: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Photographer Unknown
Five prisoners inside five holding cages, Administrative Segregation Unit (ASU), C-Yard, Building 12, Mule Creek State Prison, California. August 1st, 2008.

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
Overcrowding, California Institute for Women, Chino, California, August 10th, 2006.

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
Prisoners triple bunked, gymnasium, California State Prison, Los Angeles County, California, August 8th, 2006.
Wilson Gilmore argues that we must build an “infrastructure of feeling” between viewer and subject, one that circumnavigates the misinformation and non-information characteristic of the prison industrial complex. What pinhole of light, what teasing opportunity do we now have through which to view and change prisons? The recent economic crisis has reinvigorated discussion on criminal justice budgets and prison populations. While the dialogue would benefit from a national moment of moral enlightenment, financial necessity will have to suffice for now. Certainly, it will take more than a few prison closures and compassionate release programs to claw back four decades of flawed policy, but we can all purposefully influence this moment by understanding the failures, and those who have lived the consequences, more fully.

PETE BROOK

Pete Brook is a freelance writer and curator interested in social justice and the politics of visual culture. He writes and edits PrisonPhotography, a website that analyzes imagery produced within, and about, prisons, with a focus on the American prison industrial complex. PrisonPhotography has been recognized as one of the best photography blogs by LIFE.com, The British Journal of Photography and The Daily Beast.

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Pete holds masters degrees in Art History (University of St Andrews) and Art Gallery and Museum Studies (University of Manchester). Among his artistic and activist pursuits, Pete has lectured internationally on topics of photography taught art in prisons, volunteered with Books To Prisoners and served as a board member with University Beyond Bars, a prison college education nonprofit. His work has been featured by The New York Times, The British Journal of Photography, Kickstarter, Featureshout, Seattle Weekly and Draftho.

He has curated multiple shows, including Non Sufficient Funds, Vermilion Gallery, Seattle, WA (Apr 2010); Cruel and Unusual, Noorderlicht Gallery, Holland (Feb-Apr 2012) which later traveled to Amsterdam, New York, Sydney and Ireland; The Depository Of Unwanted Photographs, Photoville, New York (Sept. 2013); and Seen But Not Heard, Kuturni Centar Belgrada, Belgrade, Serbia (Dec, 2013).

Pete writes regularly for Raw File, the WIRED photography blog. He is currently working on a book about the history of prison photography, to be published in 2014 by Silas Finch. Pete lives in Portland, Oregon.
I’m a good person. I have hope everyday. But I also feel that if I have to be in jail I want my stay to be meaningful. I try every day not to miss out on the lessons or the experiences that I can share with younger people coming in. I am 43 years old and I have been trapped in my addiction since I was a teenager. I would like to not see people going back and forth as I did. I try not to ignore them. They are my community now so this is the best I can do.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Prison Obscura is my first solo curatorial effort; as such, I could not have done it without the help of many people. Firstly, thanks to my parents for encouraging independent thinking, teaching compassion, and supporting my efforts unconditionally. Thanks to Matthew Seamus Callinan for extending the invite to share my ideas with the Haverford community and for keeping me honest and on track throughout the preparations for Prison Obscura.

Sincere gratitude to Josh Begley, Steve Davis, Alyse Emdur, Robert Gumpert, Paul Rucker, Mark Strandquist, and Kristen S. Wilkins for their enthusiasm toward the concept and then the legwork to get works prepared. You are all practitioners who are forwarding conversations on photography and its uses and doing so in a way that is meaningfully engaged with our world. Thanks to Sarah Fontaine for feedback on early essay drafts and for the constant to-and-fro of ideas on politics, visuals and strategy. My gratitude to Laura McGrane and James Weissinger for very thoughtful editing and for reining in the essay word count where I could not! Thanks to Pia Chakraverti-Wuerthwein for her warm welcome, exhibition-title brainstorming, installation planning, and more. Thank you to Michael Rushmore for the creation of the installation video. Ellen Gould did a mighty lovely job with the catalogue design.

My appreciation goes to Kristin Lindgren, Janice Lion, Barb Toews, and John Muise for help shaping Prison Obscura’s core ideas and efforts in coordinating programming attached to the exhibition. Additional thanks to Emily Bock, Jody Cohen, Ann Dake, Emily Dix, Thomas Devaney, Paul Farber, Ross Lerner, Vita Lifvæk, Michael Riccio, and the students of Haverford House and Rethink Incarceration for their support and engagement.

Thanks to Robyn Baseman, Eric Oleh, and the staff and volunteers at the City of Philadelphia Municipal Arts Program for coordinating the production of the mural for the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery space. And, of course thanks to the men at SCI Graterford for the time, design, and painting skills that went into making the mural. Thanks to the administrative staff of SCI Graterford including Norma Hicks, Gerald Galinski, Gary Glinter, Linda Shade, and Tony Wolfe.

Thanks to Tom W Bonner, Emily Cronin, Kerry Nelson and the student assistants at the John B Hurford ’60 Center for the Arts and Humanities, Haverford College for their warm welcome, exhibition-title brainstorming, installation planning, and more. Thank you to Michael Rushmore for the creation of the installation video. Ellen Gould did a mighty lovely job with the catalogue design.

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— PETE BROOK
Prison Obscura presents rarely seen vernacular, surveillance, evidentiary, and prisoner-made photographs, shedding light on the prison industrial complex. Why do tax-paying, prison-funding citizens rarely get the chance to see such images? And what roles do these pictures play for those within the system? With stark aesthetic detail and meticulous documentation, Prison Obscura builds the case that Americans must come face to face with these images and imaging technologies, both to grasp the cancerous proliferation of the U.S. prison system and to connect with those it confines.