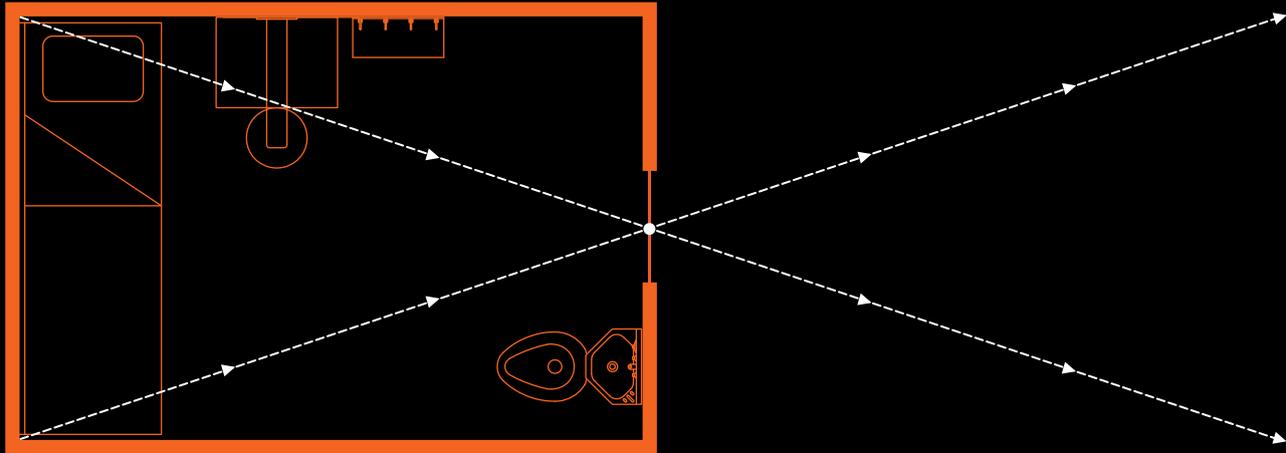


PRISON OBSCURA



PRISON OBSCURA

Curated by Pete Brook

Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery

Haverford College

January 24 - March 7, 2014

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

Navigating the long driveway to the State Correctional Institution at Graterford, I am struck by its bucolic setting. The prison is surrounded by cornfields, sunflowers, picturesque Mennonite 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. Still, Graterford is within driving distance of Philadelphia. Every Friday evening, Haverford students and alumni, sometimes accompanied by faculty and staff, make the trip.

The largest maximum-security prison in Pennsylvania, Graterford is a forbidding place. Why would Haverford students want to spend time there? Students travel around the globe to learn about sociopolitical issues, to contribute to social justice initiatives, and to interact with widely varied cultures and communities. Participating in the Restorative Justice Project at Graterford, a little over an hour from campus, students have the opportunity do all of these things. They engage with a world very different from their own, one that is often obscured from view.

KRISTIN LINDGREN Director, Haverford Writing Center

Upon entering the prison, we encounter layers of security: fingerprint identification, metal detectors, ultraviolet hand stamps, plastic ID bracelets, thorough searching of any papers we have brought into the prison. We are allowed to carry with us our prison IDs, car keys, driver's licenses, and papers relevant to the workshop or meeting we're attending. Nothing else. Books or other materials must be previously approved and entered on the gate memo. No written communication can come in or out. Our clothing is closely inspected: An exposed shoulder or low-cut blouse can bar entry. We are subject to sudden and seemingly arbitrary changes in the rules and regulations. Welcome to the carceral state.

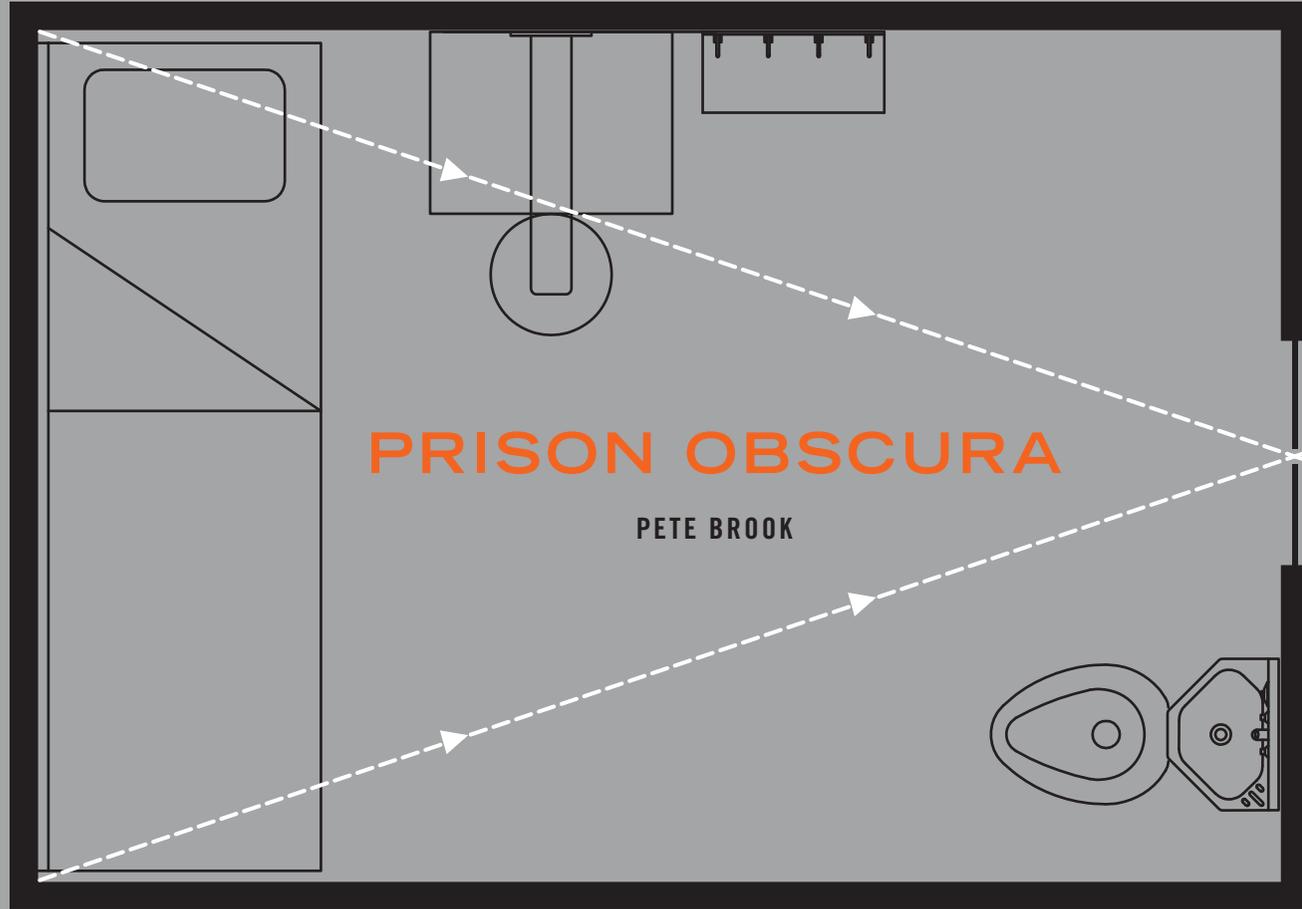
The circulation of images is controlled even more tightly than the circulation of visitors. No cameras of any kind are allowed inside. The only photos that leave Graterford are those taken in the official visiting area by a prisoner employed as a photographer, in front of a painted or digital backdrop that erases any visual cues of the prison. All of the men keep precious personal photos—sometimes a handful, sometimes hundreds—in their cells. Childhood and family photos connect them to the past and to life outside the walls of Graterford. But visual records of their lives inside, and of the architecture and environments that shape their days, are largely absent.

Prison Obscura addresses this absence, offering both micro and macro views: intimate portraits and self-portraits of incarcerated youth and adults as well as aerial satellite photographs of prison complexes. Sponsored by the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery and the Hurford Center for the Arts and Humanities, this exhibition reminds us that the work of the humanities—the making and interpreting of images and stories—is central to understanding lives different from our own and, at times, to instigating actions that address systemic injustice. As Philadelphia public schools are being radically defunded, the state of Pennsylvania is spending \$400 million to construct two new prisons near Graterford. The photographs in this exhibition give us a window into the human consequences of mass incarceration.

Prison Obscura, along with related gallery talks and film screenings, builds on Haverford's involvement with the Restorative Justice Project (RJP) at Graterford. The prevailing notion of networks formed inside prisons involves gangs, drugs, and crime. The RJP creates, instead, a network of support based on repairing harms and restoring relationships, with attention to the needs of victims, offenders, their families and communities. In recent years, Haverford's Center for Peace and Global Citizenship (CPGC) has built a sustained relationship with Graterford that enables students, alumni, faculty, and staff to learn about restorative justice from the incarcerated men who lead the RJP while providing logistical support for their programming.

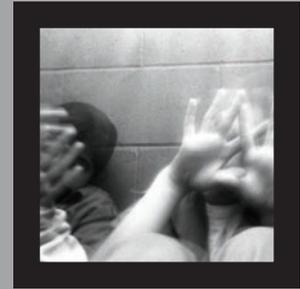
Juliaty Hermanto '12 and Cara Curtis '10 first engaged me in conversations about restorative justice and the prison industrial complex. Juliaty, whose senior thesis explored the accessibility of prison programming, helped to establish a partnership between the prison and the Haverford Writing Center. Emily Bock '11, a law student at Temple University, became involved with the RJP as an undergraduate, continued her work as a CPGC Haverford House post-bac fellow, and plans to incorporate the restorative justice model into her legal career. Emily Dix '12 and Michael Riccio '13 worked with the RJP during their Haverford House fellowship year. Rilka Spieler '14, Ariel Levin '14, and Alison Marqusee '16, members of the student-run group Rethink Incarceration, are currently core volunteers.

Countless other students have become involved through CPGC-sponsored Inside-Out courses, in which incarcerated men and women learn alongside undergraduates. In collaboration with CPGC Domestic Program Coordinator Janice Lion, Sarah Morris '05 brought the Inside-Out curricular model, developed at Temple University, to Haverford. Barbara Toews, the instructor, has been instrumental in building a relationship between the Haverford community and area prisons, and Graterford staff members have offered crucial support. The campus Tri-college community (Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr, and Haverford) shares in this work through courses across the disciplines that incorporate the study of incarceration, reconciliation, social justice, and self-representation.



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



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.” ¹

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.



Paul Rucker Proliferation

JOSH BEGLEY 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 fuelled public fear, and politicians from both sides of the aisle responded with inflated promises to keep the public safe:

¹ Doy, Gen. *Picturing the Self: Changing Views of the Subject in Visual Culture*. New York: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2005. Print.

PAUL RUCKER

Proliferation

Prisons in the United States of America

Year Prison Opened: ● 1778-1900 ● 1901-1940 ● 1941-1980 ● 1981-2005



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



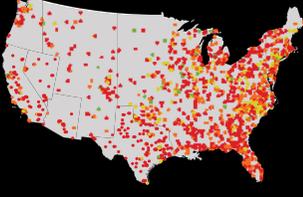
1980

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

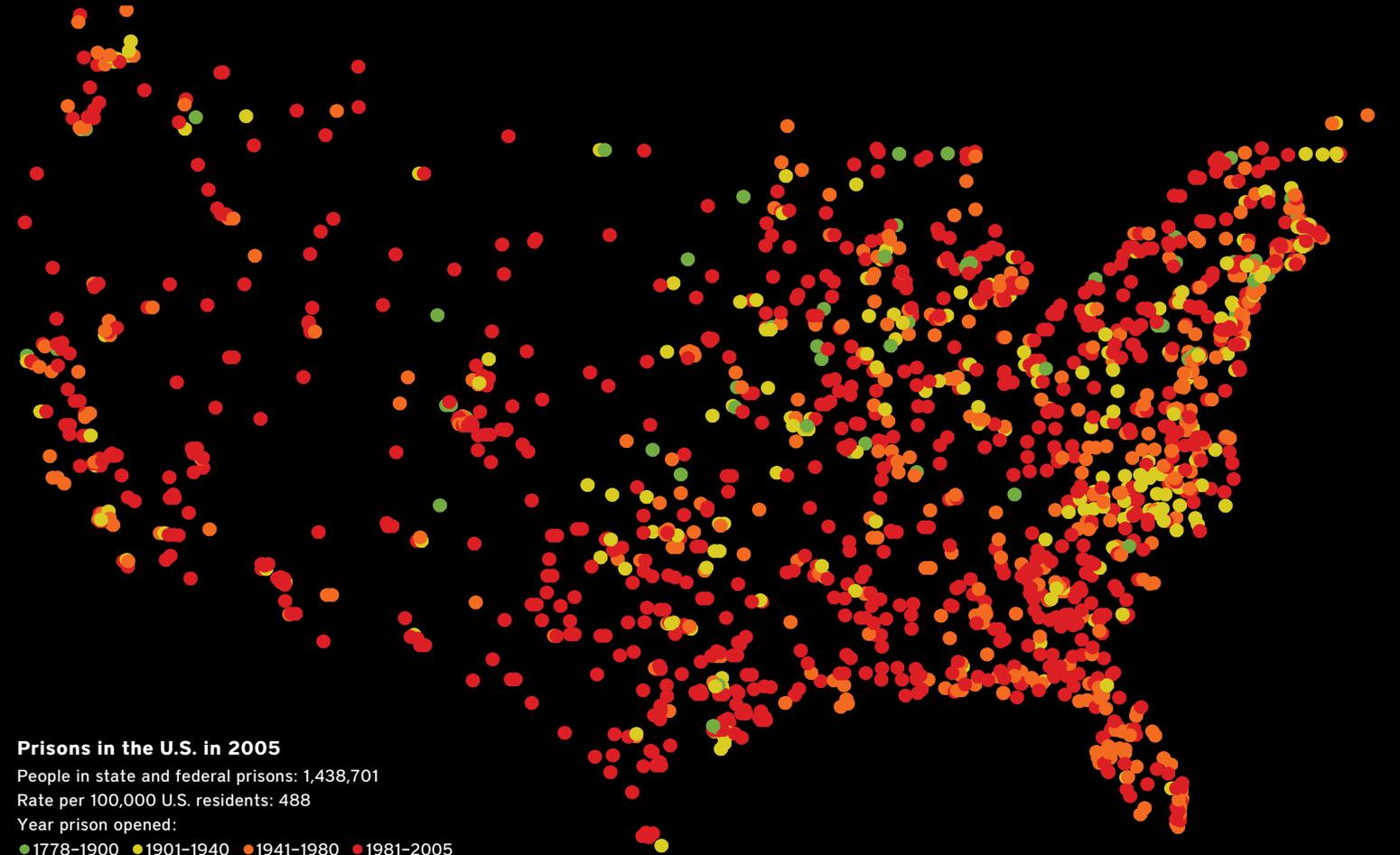
People in state and federal prisons:
1,438,701
Rate per 100,000 U.S. residents:
488

Prisons in the U.S. in 2005

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

Year prison opened:

● 1778-1900 ● 1901-1940 ● 1941-1980 ● 1981-2005



Virtually every state passed voter-endorsed Three Strikes Laws that introduced longer mandatory-minimum sentences. The need for prison cells rocketed. In California, for example, it was not unusual for some prisons to house twice the capacity for which they were designed. Some still do.

With the use of satellite imagery and animated video, respectively, artist Josh Begley and musician-composer Paul Rucker address the size and scope of America's prison system. Coincidentally, they both use data provided by the same reform group, the Prison Policy Initiative.

Rucker's animated video *Proliferation* compresses 250 years of prison construction into 10 minutes. From a black screen, different colored dots appear: each dot represents a single prison or jail; each color, a specific stretch of years—green: 1778-1900; yellow: 1901-1940; orange: 1941-1980; and red: 1981-2005. The speed and density of the dots accelerates as the video progresses, the result resembling a cellphone coverage map. The swath of red that remains at the end is a sharp visual jolt, a forthright reminder that our current reliance on prisons is a historical anomaly.

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.

California built this first state-operated Supermax in 1989, and it has provided the model for 60 similar facilities across the nation. Supermaxes are designed for long-term isolation and sensory deprivation. Conservative estimates put the number of Americans in solitary on any given day at 20,000. Many reform groups say the figure may be as high as 75,000 depending on the parameters of one's definition. The widespread use of solitary confinement is American exceptionalism at its worst. In June 2011, Juan E. Méndez, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, reported to the UN General Assembly that solitary permanently damages the mental health of prisoners and should not be used for a period of more than 15 days.



Josh Begley Prison Map: Facilities 81 and 399

2 Stevenson, Bryan. Interview by Pete Brook. "A Conversation With Bryan Stevenson [Part Two]." *Prison Photography*. 1 Nov 2012. Web.

JOSH BEGLEY

Prison Map
(clockwise from top left):

Facility 183
[33.470766,-112.435504]

Facility 366
[41.853509,-124.150594]

Facility 745
[38.437936,-105.151344]

Facility 491
[33.726146,-118.266833]

Facility 492
[37.104328,-120.155686]

Facility 657
[38.320775,-121.975193]

Facility 404
[35.154323,-117.858642]

Facility 498
[37.940299,-122.490158]

Facility 590
[32.584574,-116.933336]

Facility 207
[33.209613,-112.6527]



Physician Atul Gawande has compared the permanent psychological impairment of solitary to that incurred by traumatic brain injury.³ Dr. 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.⁴ Neither Mendez’s recommendations to the UN nor the conclusions of these scientific studies are new information for our legislators. In June 2006, the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons, a bipartisan national task force, reported that, “beyond about ten days [of solitary confinement] practically 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.

Begley’s *Prison Map* discloses the terrifying size and brutality of both isolation and expanse in our prison system. And yet the map component is merely an overview. By using the publicly available embedded data on town, state, and security level, users can drill down and investigate for themselves. Granted, Begley possesses the software skills to manipulate the data, but in an age of open source collaboration, *Prison Map* may be

³ **Gawande, Atul.** “Hell Hole.” *The New Yorker*. Conde Nast, 30 Mar. 2009. Web.
⁴ **Grassian, Stuart.** “Psychiatric Effects of Solitary Confinement.” *Journal of Law & Policy* 22.325 (2006): 327-80. *Washington University in St. Louis | Law School*. Washington University School of Law, 2006. Web.

the opening gambit in a public enterprise that uses any single satellite image as a visual turnkey to the statistics, history, and news items on a specific prison.

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 111,000.⁵ Today the figure has been estimated at close to 200,000.⁶ The majority of these convictions are a result of the War On Drugs, which introduced new mandatory minimum 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,⁷ 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 women in poor neighborhoods, are the frequent victims of broad-brush conspiracy charges. Many of

⁵ **Greene, Judith, Kevin Pranis, and Natasha A. Frost, Ph.D.** *Hard Hit: The Growth in the Imprisonment of Women, 1977-2004*. Rep. no. 7. Women’s Prison Association, May 2006. Web.

⁶ **Talvi, Silja J. A.** *Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System*. Emeryville, CA: Seal, 2007. Print.

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’ project *Supplication* creates dignified portraits of incarcerated women, rare respectful treatments of a group that has been roundly battered by the lengthening of sentences across the criminal justice system. The state of Montana, where Kristen worked with the women, is particularly punitive. While the number of women imprisoned nationally has shot up 800 percent, the number in the Mountain State’s prisons has leapt 1,600 percent.⁸ Mugshots of these women are often found in Montana’s local papers, and *Supplication* is Wilkins’ response to their ubiquitous presence.

“Mugshots,” writes Wilkins, “are meant to document a transgressor, but act to criminalize individuals and strip them of identity and sympathy.” Pushing back against the visual exploitation, Wilkins aims both to restore some level of empowerment for her subjects and to balance the equation between the convicted person and the camera lens. Wilkins and the women speak at length about historical portraiture, self-representation, power, and control. Beyond the informed choices that Wilkins offers her subjects, she wants to build on the

⁷ The United States has spent \$1 trillion and made 45m arrests. The number of offenders imprisoned for drugs charges has increased twelvefold in the last 40 years. And yet illegal drug use has remained unchanged.

individual creativity of each woman.

The women possessed photographs of husbands, children, family, and friends when Wilkins met them; thus, she offers to photograph the sights they were surprised to miss—sunrises, sunsets, past homes, mountains, kittens, graves, and stores. These seemingly mundane scenes, given to the women as printed photos and reproduced here as diptychs, reflect lives and imaginations that stretch beyond the prison cell.

ALYSE EMDUR: PRISON PORTRAITS AS ESCAPISM AND FAMILY TREASURES

It was the incongruous colors that first drew in artist Alyse Emdur. Finding a Polaroid of her 5-year-old self with her incarcerated brother, she noticed behind them a tropical beach scene. Prisons have a rich but scarcely studied history of mural painting, and in recent decades, murals in prison visiting rooms 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

⁸ “Changing Public Attitudes Toward the Criminal Justice System.” Open Society Foundations (OSF). Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. for The Open Society Institute, Feb. 2002. Web.

KRISTEN S. WILKINS



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."



Supplication #19

"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 grand-kids 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."



ALYSE EMDUR

20

From the series *Prison Landscapes*

David Wells, Thumb Correctional Facility,
Lapeer, Michigan

Shawagunk Correctional Facility, New York

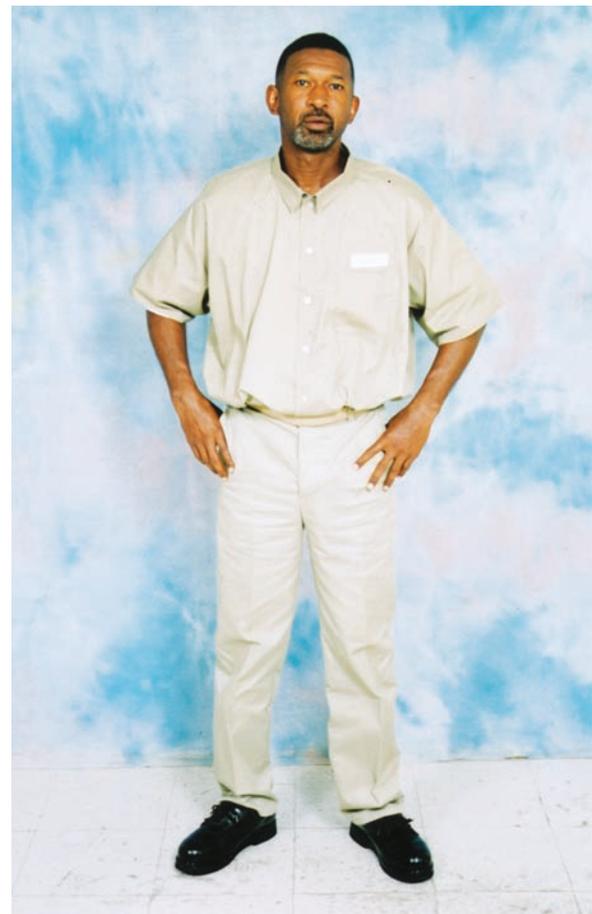
following pages:

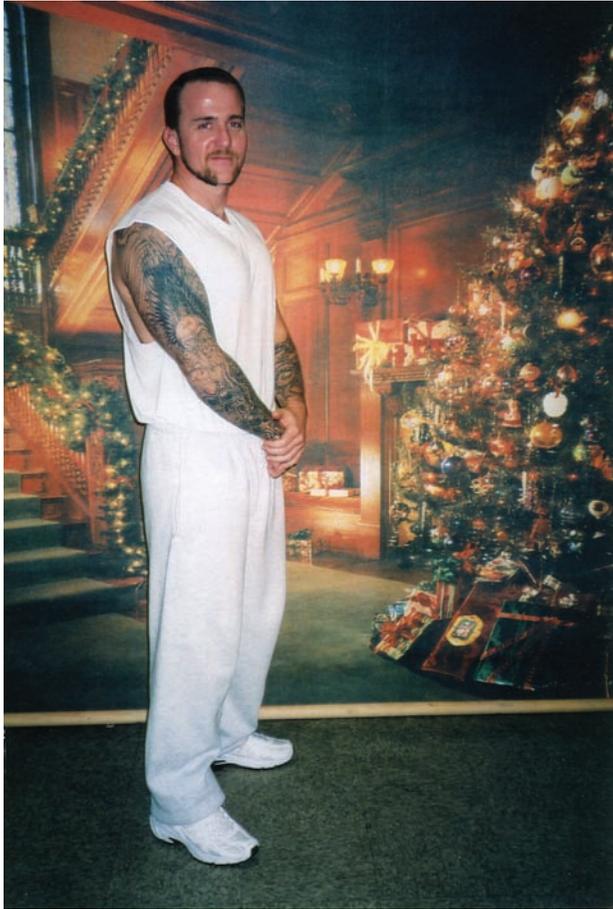
Woodbourne Correctional Facility, New York

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

Steven Boyd, United States Penitentiary,
Atlanta, Georgia







Alyse Emdur Brandon Jones, United States Penitentiary, Marion Illinois
From the series *Prison Landscapes*

have since replaced them, and printed vinyl backdrops have succeeded the painted murals.

Regardless of the technological changes, such spaces still aim to create corners in visiting rooms that appear “non-institutional.” “They really are like portrait studios,” says Emdur. “In some places there are even lights set up in the ceiling special for the picture. Some portrait studios have ceiling mounted carousels with rotating backdrops which have ten backdrops.” ⁹

Given the enormity of the American prison population, tens of millions of these informal portraits—made both for families and for prisoners themselves—must exist. Is it surprising that this long-practiced mode of American vernacular photography has only recently surfaced in the public sphere? ¹⁰ Yes, but the long-overdue emergence of the “genre” is consistent with a general culture that has habitually ignored the emotional territories journeyed by prisoners’ families. “These images offer an opportunity to see America’s prison population, not through the usual lens of criminality, but through the eyes of inmates’ loved ones,” says Emdur.

When viewing *Prison Landscapes*, we might wonder who these families are. Predominantly, they are families of poor minorities.

⁹ **Brook, Pete.** “POTR Dispatch #10: Prison Visiting Room Portraits, An Interview with Alyse Emdur.” *Prison Photography*. 3 Jan. 2012. Web.

¹⁰ Alyse Emdur can be largely credited for distributing both the images and providing context for prison visiting room portraits and the backdrops. The artist David Adler similarly used correspondence with scores of prisoners to source

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. ¹¹ Black women are four times more likely to be incarcerated than white women. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴

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

this type of imagery.

¹¹ *Report of The Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee: Regarding Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System.* Publication. The Sentencing Project: Research and Advocacy for Reform, Aug. 2013. Web.

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.

STEVE DAVIS: GIVING KIDS A CAMERA, GIVING KIDS A PLATFORM

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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶

¹² (Talvi)

¹³ The racial breakdown of women prisoners is as follows: 95,300 Euro-American, 68,800 black women, 32,400 Latinas. (Talvi)

STEVE DAVIS

Untitled, Remann Hall,
Tacoma, WA

Untitled, Remann Hall,
Tacoma, WA

Untitled, Remann Hall,
Tacoma, WA





Untitled, Green Hill School, Chehalis, WA (detail)

Untitled, Green Hill School, Chehalis, WA



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 provide broader audiences with a window into these children’s lives and circumstance.

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 discomfiting—if understandable—images of machismo posturing, but they are also clear evidence that these boys are exactly that: boys, not men.

ROBERT GUMPERT: TACKLING INVISIBILITY AND VOICELESSNESS

Ask Robert Gumpert what *Take A Picture, Tell A Story* is and he’ll dodge any label. This nine-year project in the jails of San Francisco is neither activism nor journalism, he says. It *is* storytelling and it is prisoners themselves who are telling the stories. Gumpert’s portraits sit stylistically within the documentary tradition—high contrast, black and white, scars and gripping gazes. Audio recordings of prisoners’ stories, however, are the heart of the works, and they prove how much is missing from any isolated documentary photograph.

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 the 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.

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.

MARK STRANDQUIST: DISCUSSING PHOTOGRAPHY, FORGING CONNECTIONS ACROSS BOUNDARIES

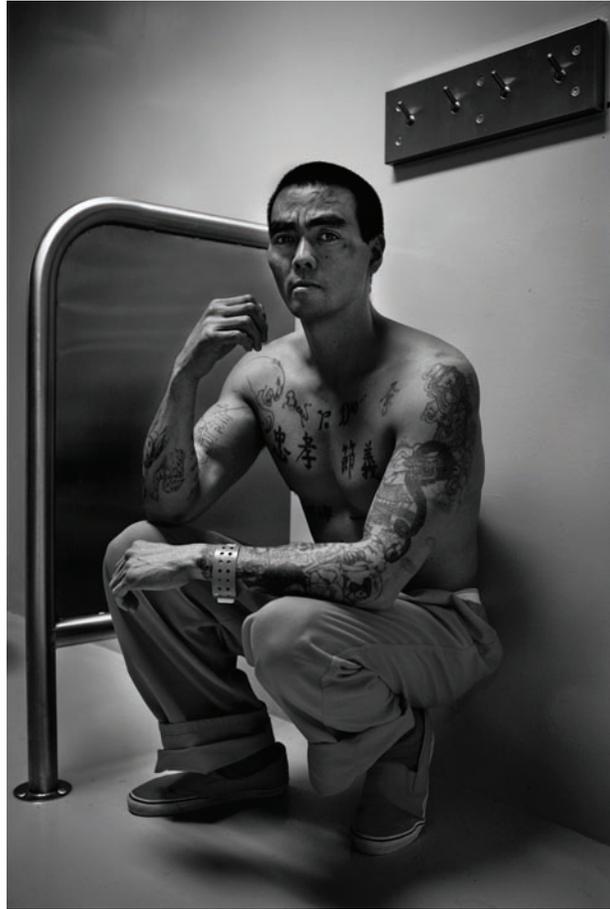
Cameras provide security for prison administrations. In the hands of others, however, they are a security hazard. Accordingly, photography workshops such as those coordinated by Steve Davis have not been practiced in American adult facilities, save for a very brief period. In the 1970s, the Floating Foundation of Photography (FFP) delivered photo-education in eight New York state prisons. Guest teachers at FFP included famous photographers such as W. Eugene Smith, Arthur Tress, Mary Ellen Mark, and Lisette Model. In the 1980s, Karen Ruckman coordinated a photography skills class in Lorton Prison, Lauren Hill, Virginia. With the exception of these two multi-year programs, however, photography has never gained a foothold in the arts programs of American prisons.

Mark Strandquist’s *Some Other Places We’ve Missed* takes us back to that earlier era of pedagogical experimentation and optimism, sharing with us the voices, regrets, and dreams of just a small number of men incarcerated in Virginia and Washington D.C. jails. Strandquist operated a photography workshop with no cameras! His simple question, “If you had a window in your cell, what place from your past would it look out to?” acted as proxy to any release of the shutter, instead asking students to *think* photographically. While Strandquist then makes the images beyond the prison walls, the essential contributions of his subjects—their memories and self-reflections—shape the project.

And yet the 1/125th of a second needed to make a photograph is a perverse fraction of the months and years many spend imprisoned. Are the photographs enough? On their own, probably not. Strandquist invites gallery-goers to receive and, if they feel compelled, to fulfill photo requests from prisoners, thus transforming the project into a widespread effort by diverse collaborators.

14 Glaze, Lauren E., and Laura M. Maruschak. *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*. Rep. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010. Print.

15 Mendel, Richard A. *No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration*. Rep. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011. Web.



ROBERT GUMPERT

From the series
Take A Picture, Tell A Story

Nelson Yee,
09 September, 2009

Tameika Smith,
22 February, 2013



MARK STRANDQUIST



From the series **Some Other Places We've Missed**

Front Stoop, Seven Gables Apartments, Nine Mile Rd.
One Year and Two Months.

I'm staring at a place where I once was a child. A confused 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 w/ no parental direction. Having to sponge everything from the neighborhood of sex, money, deception, manipulation, violence, & drugs. But still would rather be out there than inside my household of physical abuse & neglect where a mother worked all day, leaving me in the care of a father who abused the use of crack cocaine & a short fused temper. I find myself alone to an empty house when I awake in the morning but actually relieved that my father was not there. This is a place in my past that dictated my current events. I became a product of my environment. A participant in the same activities of my old neighborhood... sex, money, deception, manipulation, violence, & Drugs.

Dear: Reader and Spectator

Pocahontas State Park, The Dam (all the way to the top, to see it)
(Rewrite to scan) (A)

As I stare out my window through the bars I can see The Dam. A beautiful water fall in the middle of Pocahontas State Park. Surrounded by never ending rows of trees that resemble multi color buds sprouting high into the clouds. Where wildlife comes with no boundaries. God's creation so pure. Five friends since birth this has been our sanctuary we have retreated to since we found it on our exploration off the beaten path as kids. Over the years we have come to celebrate, mourn, and hide. Here has always been one constant in our ever growing hectic lives. Our names mark the rocks from the day this peaceful place was discovered. Always a story to reminisce about when we return. This place has been able to pause are on going world for the time we visit. The Dam is always flowing no matter what happens in my life. It never judges me and will always be there to welcome me back. A place to free my mind and soul once again.



Pocahontas State Park, Picture of the Dam.
One Hundred and Thirty Days.



From the series **Some Other Places We've Missed**

1219 Oakwood Ave, A Picture of the Hallway Standing From the Entrance of the Front Door in Direction of the Back Door. Two Years.

Looking through this window I can see this long hallway. My sister and I running halfway down the hallway and sliding the remaining of the way in our socks. AT THE AGE OF 12yrs Old and my sister but this time, seeing the world through my innocent eyes. This hallway was a safe haven for us. This hallway is filled with much laughter and fun. No worries. I miss this place.

I WAS ABSCONDING FOR FORTY DAYS FROM DRUG COURT. I WAS TRYING WITH MY THEN SPONSOR GARY, WHO ALLOWED ME TO SET-UP LIVING QUARTERS IN HIS GARAGE. WHILE THERE I DID REPAIRS AND CLEANING, ALSO SCRAPING AND PAINTING THE EXTERIOR OF HIS HOUSE. AT THE SAME TIME I WAS DEVELOPING A ROUTINE THAT WAS DISPLAYING SOME POSITIVE RESULTS ON THE SURFACE, I WAS ONLY CREATING A MORE STRESSFUL CLIMATE THE LONGER I DELAYED TURNING MYSELF IN. IT WAS THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM- EVERYWHERE I WENT- AT MOMS, GARYS, VARIOUS FRIENDS PADS. I BEGAN TO GO FOR WALKS AT BRYAN PARK AND DISCOVERED A SPOT OF SERENITY. ITS PAST THE SOCCER FIELDS BESIDE A MAN-MADE POND WITH A STONE BORDER. THERE IS A BENCH, WOODEN. ITS UNDER A WEEPING WILLOW. THIS IS WHERE I 'SORTED IT OUT.'



Bryan Park, A Picture of the Bench and Weeping Willow.

LITIGATION PHOTOGRAPHS: ANONYMOUS YET TRANSFORMATIONAL

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 proclaimed 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 Galvan & 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 underlying 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? **17**

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 **18** 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. [...]"

17 Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California.* Berkeley: University of California, 2007. Print.

18 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. Print.

This requires transforming our relationship to photographs from one of passivity and complaint to one of creativity and collaboration."**19**

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 "anointed" 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 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.

19 Linfield, Susie. *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence.* Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010. 47. Print.

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.

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
Prisoners triple bunked, gymnasium, California State Prison, Los Angeles County, California, August 8th, 2006.

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 *Prison Photography*, a website that analyzes imagery produced within, and about, prisons, with a focus on the American prison industrial complex. *Prison Photography* has been recognized

as one of the best photography blogs by *LIFE.com*, *The British Journal of Photography* and *The Daily Beast*.

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 the topic 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*, *Featureshoot*, *Seattle Weekly* and *Dvafoto*.

He has curated multiple shows, including *Non Sufficient Funds*, Vermillion 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*, Kulturni 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.

A friend loves
at all times.
Monique M. M.

Hello there Alyse,

April

How are you? I got your very most welcomed letter a few days ago. I was pleased to know that you want me to be a part of your project. I don't fully understand the concept of what you are trying to do but if it works then hey! I'm down for the cause. Cameras are not allowed in the institution by the visitors but there is a camera in visiting that the photos are taken with, so with that in mind you can still come for a visit and have the picture taken to your liking. For now here is a photo that I have with the back ground showing. They have different backdrops for each holiday. All of which are drawn by the inmates themselves.

I do draw so you scored there, SMILE! I will send you a peice of my art work as soon as I get a big enough envelope. But do you have to keep it or can you just copy it and return it, if you would like the original even though it would be hard for me to part with it I will do I can to support your project. So long as you at least send me a copy of my own art work.

I'm enclosing a visiting form for you to fillout and send back so we can get this thing started as soon as possible. Alittle about me, what would you like to know? I'm a 31 year old latina I have been down since I was 19 on two crimes that I didn't commit. Murder and att. murder. The actual killer in my case came forward in 99 to exonerate me from the crime and implicate himself. I was sentenced to 15 to life. I have one son, he's 12 will be 13 July 15th. He stays with my mother. I get to see them twic a year only because of the distance between us. I'm bi sexual and have been since I was 15. I'm highly educated and currently in college for my AA which I will get by the fall of this year. Then I will go for my BA in Forensic Science at Ohio U. where I was honored a scholarship for my grades. If you would like me to share my grades and details with you please let me know and i will send you as much about me as I can.

Thank you for writing to me and being interested in me as well. Take care Alyse. I hope to hear from you soon.

ps. can you send a recent photo of yourself.
I have 2 Brothers who are also incarcerated

Monique



Alyse Emdur

Monique Ramirez, Valley State Prison for Women, Chowchilla, California
From the series *Prison Landscapes*



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.

ROBERT GUMPERT

Billie Dillon, 01 November, 2010 (detail)
From the series *Take A Picture, Tell A Story*

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— PETE BROOK

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PRISON OBSCURA

CURATED BY PRISON PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR 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.