Struggling with Art: How Artmaking Practices Mediate the Relational Violences of Prisons

by

Vitalis Im

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Social Work and Anthropology)
in the University of Michigan
2024

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Damani Partridge, Co-Chair
Professor Rogério M. Pinto, Co-Chair
Assistant Professor Melissa Burch
Professor Ashley Lucas
Professor Richard M. Tolman

Vitalis Im

vitalis@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4134-7572

© Vitalis Im 2024

Dedication

I dedicate this to you:

Warriors of the written word,

Fearless improvisers,

Artists armored with pen, paper, and imagination,

Strangers made familiar.

Acknowledgements

At its core, this is a project about relationships. It's about the necessity of being able to relate to others and the importance of being able to be related to.

I'd like to, first, thank the three most influential people in my life: Thank you to Anatasia Solberg and Ilka LoMonaco, the music teachers that started it all. Thank you to Jeffrie Cape, an exemplar of social work practice.

For your support, friendship, insights, frivolity, comradery, stories, and patience around some combination of food, drink, scholarship, and art, I owe you all a very great debt: Hannah Agnew, Fran Alba, Walt Albee, Lindsay Bornheimer, Amelia Burke, Alicia Castaneda, Ashley Cureton, Emily Chase, El Chen, Jeff Clarke, William Elliott III, Lauren Ernst, Rachael Gunning, Emerson Granillo, Megan Gougeon, Matthew Aaron Hiller, Aaron James, Swarnim Khare, Nora Krinitsky, Carol Lee, Vanessa Mayesky, Arthur Mengozzi, Charlie Michaels, Suzy Moffat, Janie Paul, Janaki Phillips, Maria Sonevytsky, Aleck Stephens, Eryn Talevich, Sarah Unrath, Martín Vargas, Kimiko Uyeda, Lukas Vrbka, Juliana Wiggins, Lai Wo, and Anna Wood.

I'd like to thank my committee members Melissa Burch, Ashley Lucas, Rogério Pinto, Damani Partridge, and Richard Tolman. I thank you for your insights, wisdom, and generosity.

Thank you to my wonderfully compassionate, forward-thinking colleagues at the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute for indirectly but significantly informing much of my thinking throughout our lively conversations together.

To my fellow facilitators Maryam Ashraf and Megan Holmes, thank you for bearing witness to the crazy, zany, depressing, inspiring, joyful, loving, and tragic antics that are at the intellectually stimulating, emotionally draining, and spiritually nourishing heart of the work that we do.

To the one-and-only Mary Heinen McPherson, whose generosity, heart, and kindness made these past six years possible to begin with.

Finally, I'd like to thank the innumerable interlocuters with whom I've had the distinct honor and privilege of meeting and learning from throughout the course of this work. I have been utterly transformed by you. I sincerely hope to have imparted some kind of impact throughout the course of our interactions, play, and silliness together over these many years together. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Figures	vi
List of Appendices	viii
Abstract	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Methodology	29
Chapter 3: Bearing Witness	47
Chapter 4: Negotiating Recognition	106
Chapter 5: The Live Third	135
Chapter 6: Conclusion	167
Appendices	185
References	211

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Graph comparing global rates of incarceration with Michigan 8

Figure 1.2 A map of correctional facilitates in Michigan 9

Figure 3.1 Tiger Lilies by Mark Bailey 47

Figure 3.2 The Duderstadt Gallery during the *28th Annual Exhibition* 55

Figure 3.3 An excerpted line from an artist statement in the artist's original handwriting 57

Figure 3.4 A photocopied artist statement 58

Figure 3.5 Computers used to find artists, artwork, and artist statements in the gallery 59

Figure 3.6 Audio symbols demarcating audio tour pieces on the gallery's floor 60

Figure 3.7 Booklet entry on graphite and ink by the author 62

Figure 3.8 *Life in Segregation* by Donny 64

Figure 3.9 Donny's artist statement 65

Figure 3.10 Booklet entry on texture by Martín Vargas 66

Figure 3.11 *Horizon* by Jill Day, coffee and watercolor on canvas 67

Figure 3.12 Booklet entry on place of peace by Janie Paul 69

Figure 3.13 Booklet entry on place of peace, co-written by the author and Martín Vargas 71

Figure 3.14 *Christina's Prison* by Doc 72

Figure 3.15 *Blah Blah Blah* by Ashley Peretiatko 73

Figure 3.16 Booklet entry on family and relationships by the author 75

Figure 3.17 *I'll Never Forget* by Parys Armstrong 76

Figure 3.18 *The Madness of K2 (Toonchi) Use!* by ALL PAIN, NO PITY! 2024 77

Figure 3.19 Booklet entry on play, whimsy, and humor by Suzy Moffat and Martín Vargas 79

Figure 3.20 *Prison Schematic* by Space Ghost 80

Figure 3.21 *The Final Dindin* by Grumpy 81

Figure 3.22 Booklet entry on political art by Megan Holmes 83

Figure 3.23 *SK8-MAG Rooster* by Parker "Slug" Ayers 85

Figure 3.24 The Duderstadt Gallery being prepared for the *28th Annual Exhibition* 89

Figure 3.25 Emily Chase's grounded approach to the organization of art 99

Figure 3.26 Brainstorming themes proposed by the curation group 101

Figure 5.1 Description of "Sound and Motion" from the PCAP Exercise Inventory 135
Figure 5.2 Description of *Big Booty* from the PCAP Exercise Inventory 137
Figure 5.3 Description of "Evil Twin" from the PCAP Exercise Inventory 139
Figure 5.4 Description of *Exquisite Corpse* from the PCAP Exercise Inventory 141
Figure 5.5 An example of *Exquisite Corpse* alongside a transcription 141
Figure 5.6 Description of *Open Letter* from the PCAP Exercise Inventory 143
Figure 6.1 A poem entitled "The Outsiders" by Franklin 167
Figure 6.2 *Sunrise at Old Kinross* by Oliger Merko 174

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Workshop Agenda 186

Appendix B: Excerpts from the PCAP Exercise Inventory 187

Appendix C: The Process of Curating Art 189

Appendix D: The Risks of Making Art 199

Appendix E: Entering the Prison 203

Abstract

In this dissertation, I show the ways in which visual art, theatre, and creative writing practices countermand what I call the relational violences of prisons, the incapacitation of one's ability to relate or to be related to. Utilizing data collected through ethnographic fieldwork in Michigan prisons, I point to the ways in which artmaking practices provide points of connection between people in the freeworld and people that live in prison, subversive experiences of joy and communitas, and a means by which people in prison may relate to the violences of confinement in new and imaginative ways. At the same time, this project seeks to complicate an overly simplistic understanding of artmaking practices as a guarantor of well-being in prisons. To do so, I point to ethical dilemmas experienced by exhibition curators and workshop facilitators that risk reproducing the very relational violences that they seek to subvert through their artistic praxes. By foregrounding the prison as an object of study, I examine the ways in which art itself becomes subject to carceral power as a technology of relational violence.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I was once asked to be a guest lecturer in a course entitled "Engaging Social Justice, Diversity, and Oppression in Social Work." Naturally, I chose to teach this class filled with aspiring social workers about artmaking practices in prison. However, to teach about art is, from my perspective, to *do* art: One thing that you very quickly learn as a facilitator in the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) is that art is not something that you look at or watch from afar. Rather, it's something that you participate in.

After delivering a brief lecture on the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons* and the visual artmaking practices that occur in prisons,[1] I chose to bring the prison to the classroom: I facilitated a ninety-minute theatre workshop the way that I had been doing in Michigan prisons for the past six years.[2]

We played a great many improvisatory theatre games together. Among them were "Woosh!," "Freeze!," "Zip, Zap, Zop," "Two-Line Vocabulary," and "Party Quirks," each as ridiculous and zany as they sound.

---

[1] For a fuller explanation of the Prison Creative Arts Project's *Annual Exhibition*, please refer to section 3.2 of the dissertation, "The 28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons."

[2] I discuss the ins-and-outs of creative arts workshops beginning in section 5.2 of the dissertation, "The Workshop."

In a moment of transition following a particularly rousing game of "Two-Line Vocabulary," a student posed a question with a touch of incredulity coloring both the tone of her voice and the expression on her face: "People in prison will really do this with you?"

"You'd be surprised," I replied with a smile.

At that point, I had been facilitating creative arts workshops in prisons for nearly six years. And, so, when this student posed this question to me, I remember experiencing a confusing kind of dissonance: "Of *course* people in prison really do this with us," I thought to myself.

This conversation is part and parcel of the primary intervention of my dissertation, to explore the relationship between artmaking practices and what I call the *relational violences* that prisons perpetrate, which I define as the incapacitation of one's ability to relate or to be related to.[3] By placing people behind bars, prisons prevent people in the freeworld[4] from knowing people in prison beyond the stereotypical imageries of prisons and people in prison. Part of the work of the Prison Creative Arts Project is to countermand this particular flavor of violence.

This was a teaching moment that I regret not following up on. I imagine that if I had probed a little bit deeper, at the heart of this student's question would have been some kind of assumption about what prisons are and what people who live in prison are like. Perhaps this student, like many people that I have casually and professionally spoken to about the work that I do, was surprised by the playfulness, creativity, and fun that is at the heart of my work with people in prison, a difficult image to hold in a dialectic with the image of hardened "criminals" and imposing, razor wire fences.

---

[3] I operationalize this term more thoroughly in section 1.3, "Defining Violence" as well as within what follows.

[4] In prisons, freeworld is a slang term for the world outside prison. For people in prison, "freeworld" carries with it connotations of opportunities for autonomy and a life to be lived based on one's own terms rather than by compliance to the prison.

It surprises me, sometimes, how second nature this work has become over time. I've lost touch with the experiences of strangeness that defined my first forays into prison, and, as a result, I often forget how odd it must appear while looking in from the outside. After having collaborated and communed with so many people that live in prison, it is sometimes frustrating to feel as though I must justify that this work does in fact *work*. It is equally vexing to have to defend these people that I have come to care so deeply about to those in the freeworld that have never set foot inside of a prison.

Because it is, in fact, the case that playfulness, creativity, and fun are to be experienced through this work in prisons. It would simply not be possible to dedicate six years of my life to this work, going in and out on a weekly basis, spending entire weeks, weekends, or days traversing the entire state of Michigan to visit prison after prison, if it did not feel like nurturing and sustaining work. Neither would it feel particularly sustainable to do if we, as freeworld facilitators and curators, did not know it was equally rewarding for the incarcerated people with whom we work.

The stakes that are attached to this work are quite high. This is because if part of the relational violence of prisons is to prevent people in the freeworld from relating to people in prison, this relational violence also prevents people in prison from relating to themselves and to others on their own terms. Instead, as I show in chapter five, people in prison are forced to interact with themselves and others in ways that are prescribed and in compliance with the demands of the prison. Artmaking practices afford a space where people can feel free to be, in the words of many of our participants, "authentic" and "real."

The relational violences of prison manifest through a number of ways, namely the punitive nature of confinement (Toch and Kupers 2007; Goomany and Dickinson 2015; Walker et al. 2014), the deprivation of people's experiences of autonomy (van der Kaap-Deeder et al. 2017), the experiences of physical and sexual victimization (Daquin and Daigle 2018), and the isolation that

people experience as a result of being cut off from their loved ones and support networks (Cochran, Mears, and Bales 2017).

The consequences of such violences are many and varied. Mental health disorders are more prevalent in prisons and jails than in the general population (Prins 2014), people in prison typically have pre-existing and co-morbid mental health issues (Tyler et al. 2019), and experiences of incarceration facilitate the onset of and exacerbate existing mental health disorders (Goomany and Dickinson 2015).

I will show throughout the course of this dissertation that artmaking practices in prisons are, on the whole, a tool by which the relational violences perpetrated by prisons are resisted and a means by which people in prison create meaning and meaningful relationships with others. In this sense, my work follows a lineage of scholarship written by two scholars that are intimately connected with the Prison Creative Arts Project.

First, Ashley Lucas, theatre studies scholar and former director of the Prison Creative Arts Project, best surmises the nature of this work when she writes, "The greatest contraband a person can sneak into a prison is joy" (Lucas 2020, 37). The programming that PCAP facilitates in Michigan prisons is important for this reason: To bring "the light and the joy" into spaces that place a stranglehold on the aspects of being that make people feel human.[5]

In a similar vein, Janie Paul, co-founder of the *Annual Exhibition* at PCAP, extensively details the ways in which visual artmaking practices resist the dehumanizing nature of prisons by providing incarcerated artists with a medium by which to embody unmet human needs, "the need for love,

[5] Quote by Ashley Lucas, participant-observation in her course entitled "Theatre & Incarceration" at the Residential College of the University of Michigan.

community, growth, intellectual exploration, sense of pride and identity, satisfaction in work" (Paul 2023, 39).

Both Lucas and Paul speak to the potentialities of artmaking practices in disrupting the everyday violences and monotony of confinement. Prisons tend to amplify the stakes of this work, as well, due to the ways in which carcerality and punishment affect and influence the ways in which artmaking practices happen in prisons (Cheliotis 2016; Lucas 2020). Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I have experienced ethical dilemmas that, I see now, must inevitably arise through the course of working in prisons. While the vast majority of this work is mutually enriching, there are, by virtue of the fact that we work in prisons, problems that require careful examination both for the well-being of the people with whom we work and to better our own practices of care as freeworld facilitators and curators.

In this dissertation, I build from the works of scholars like Lucas (2020), Paul (2023), and Cheliotis (2016) to begin from the premise that prisons are inherently violent and that any analysis of art that occurs under conditions of confinement must always be situated within the prison proper. This turn toward the prison as an object of study takes seriously Cheliotis's (2016, 6) claim that there is disproportionate and uncritical focus on the arts as a tool of rehabilitation and empowerment that comes at the expense of an examination of the arts as a technology of social control and resistance, an argument that I will expand on and complicate in the sections that follow.[6]

My research aim is to show the possibilities and limitations of artmaking practices to subvert what I have termed the relational violences of prisons. What I seek to do throughout the course of this dissertation is to illustrate how these violences are inherent to experiences of confinement and

[6] I expand on this argument more thoroughly in section 1.2, "The Shift from Well-Being to Violence."

how these violences are mediated by art. I show the ways in which curators and workshop facilitators must adapt to the ways in which confinement influences artmaking practices, lest they unwittingly sustain the very relational violences they seek to countermand through their work.

In this chapter, I seek to do the following. First, I provide a brief history of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan, the organization that I partnered with over the past six years to conduct ethnographic field research. Second, I contextualize the work of the Prison Creative Arts Project within the context of mass incarceration in Michigan. Third, I discuss the ethnographic tensions that led me to shift my research aim from one that explored the relationship between artmaking practices and well-being in prisons to that of artmaking practices and violence in prisons. Fourth, I clarify what I mean when I speak about "art" as well as to the "relational violences" of incarceration. Finally, I end by providing an overview of this dissertation's chapters and arguments.

1.1 The Prison Creative Arts Project

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the Prison Creative Arts Project as an organization. I detail the work that it facilitates in Michigan prisons, its origins, as well as how it approaches the work of creative arts programming in prisons. I save my ethnographic expositions of this work in the methodology chapter that follows; here, I provide brief histories and descriptions of the organization's programming most immediately relevant to the work described in my dissertation.

1.1.1 The Beginnings of the Prison Creative Arts Project

The Prison Creative Arts Project originated in a single course taught at the University of Michigan by Buzz Alexander entitled English 319 (Alexander 2010, 4). Founded in 1990, this course

was formed during the carceral boom that informs the context of mass incarceration in Michigan today.

In his inaugural address in 1981, Reagan argued that the Great Inflation of the 1970s was "proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government" (Reagan 1981). Reaganism in the 1980s demolished American social programs, portrayed poverty as a moral failure, and weaponized racist stereotypes to recast social welfare programs as an enabler of criminal dependency (Alexander 2010). During his tenure as president, a slate of legislation was passed that quickly contributed to the rise of mass incarceration in America: In 1984, Congress passed the Comprehensive Crime Control Act that established mandatory minimum sentences (diGenova and Belfiore 1984); and, in 1986, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act was passed which resulted in "apartheid sentencing" (Parenti 2001, 57, cited in Alexander 2010) for Black Americans.

The impact of this body of legislation on mass incarceration in the United States is startling. From 1990 to 1995 alone, corrections officials built 213 state and federal prisons in the United States (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997). The "tough-on-crime" rhetoric espoused during this era would culminate in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, the largest crime bill in American history that contributed to nearly $10 billion in funding for prisons in the country (McCollum 1994).

The work that the Prison Creative Arts Project facilitates today is born out of and within this history. When Reagan began his presidency in 1980, there were a total of 329,000 people in prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1981); by the time Regan left office after eight years in 1988, the population of people in prison nearly doubled to 627,000 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1990). Between 1983 and 2015, the rate of incarceration in America basically quadrupled to over 2,100,000 people (Wagner and Rabuy 2015); in the state of Michigan, rates of incarceration in this time increased by a staggering

165% (Wagner and Rabuy 2015). In 2019, Black people constituted 15% of Michigan's residents but 37% of people in jail and a staggering 53% of people in prison (Vera Institute of Justice 2019).

In Michigan today, there are over 34,000 people behind bars. Approximately 32,000 people are incarcerated in state facilities (Michigan Department of Corrections 2023) while another 1,500 people are incarcerated at the federal level (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2024). While Michigan as a state incarcerates people at a rate below the national average, the statistics remain alarming: According to the Prison Policy Initiative (Prison Policy Initiative 2024), Michigan incarcerates 535 per 100,000 people, "meaning that it locks up a higher percentage of its people than almost any democratic country on earth."

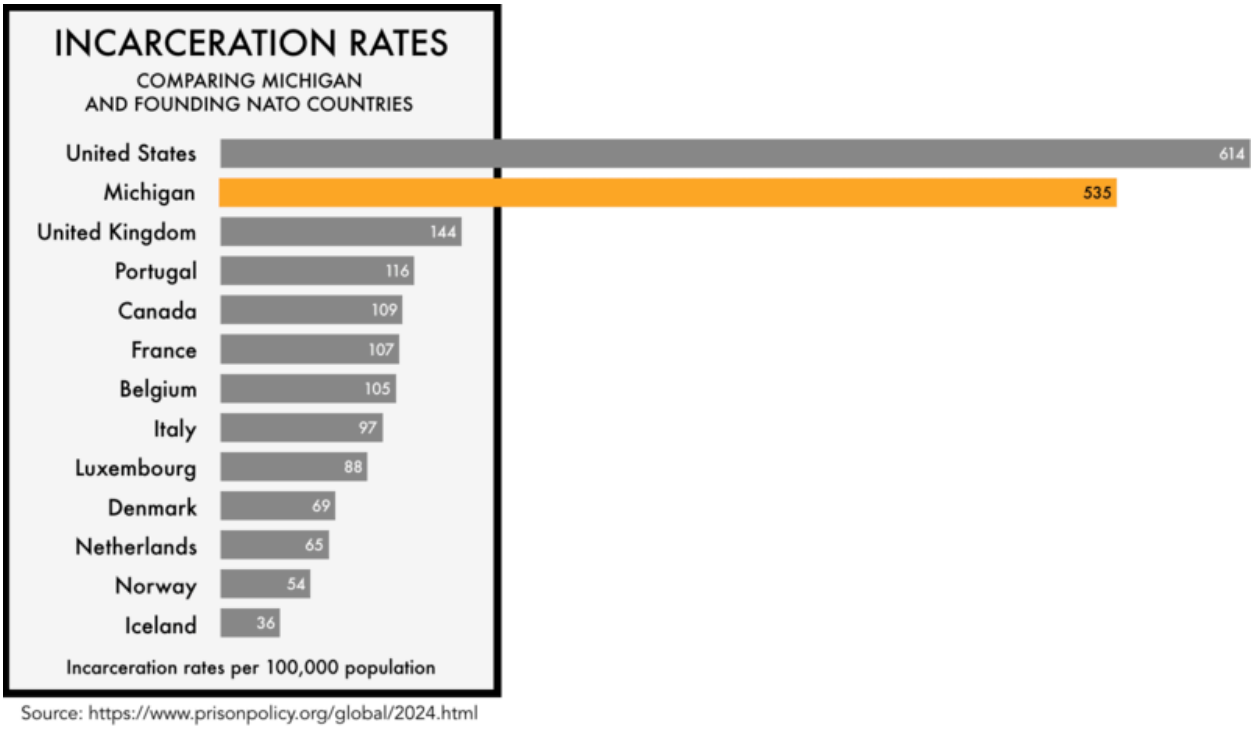


Figure 1.1 Graph comparing global rates of incarceration with Michigan[7]

[7] Prison Policy Initiative, "Michigan Profile," 2024, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/MI.html.

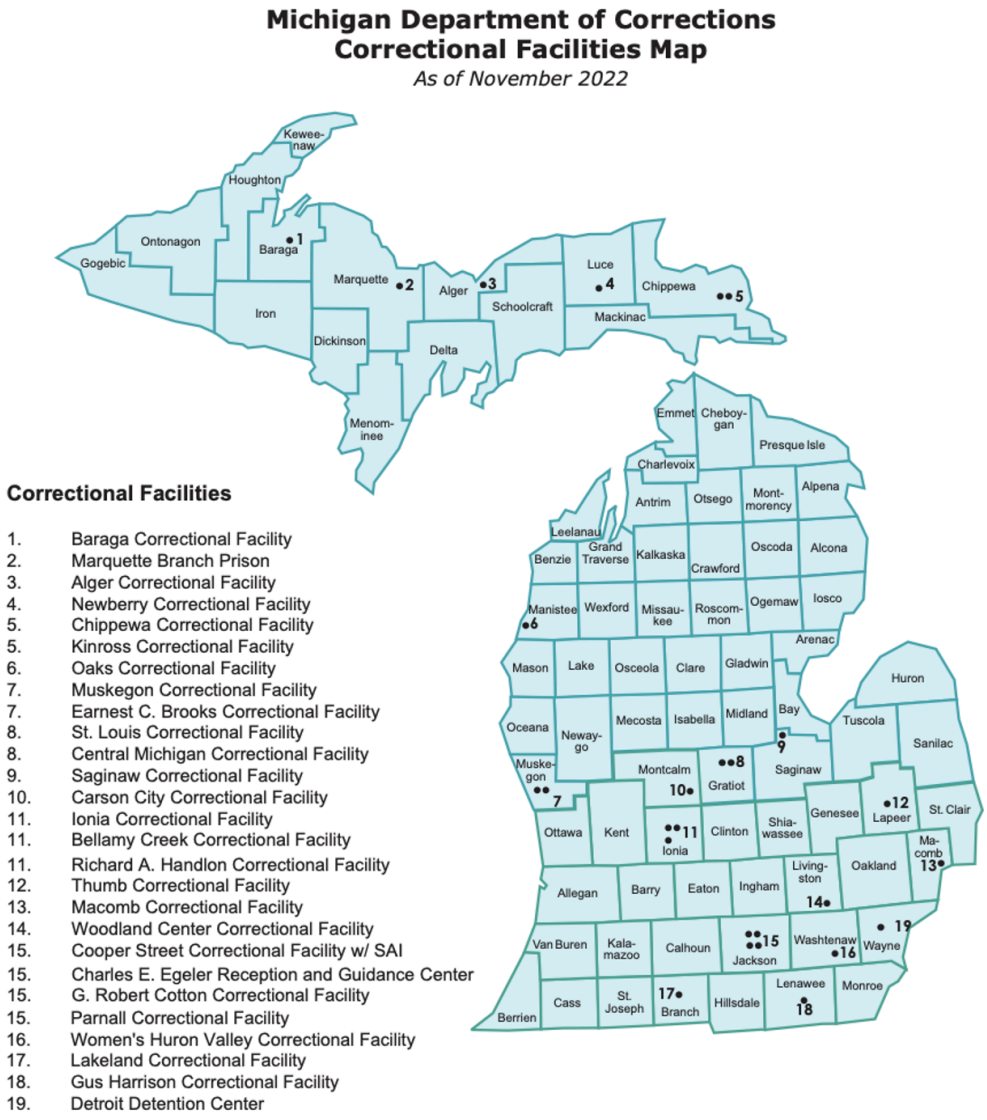


Figure 1.2 A map of correctional facilitates in Michigan[8]

[8] Correctional Facilities Administration, "Michigan Department of Corrections Correctional Facilities Map," 2022, https://www.michigan.gov/corrections/-/media/Project/Websites/corrections/LG/Prison-Location-Map.pdf.

More accurately, there are 26 prisons in the state of Michigan as of 2024. 25 are state prisons (Charles E. Egeler Reception and Guidance Center and Detroit Detention Center are not prisons) while one, FCI Milan, is a federal prison.

This is but a small slice of the context that propelled the growth of mass incarceration in the United States and the sociopolitical environment in which the seeds of the Prison Creative Arts Project were first planted. The Prison Creative Arts Project was later officially integrated into the University of Michigan as its own organization following the success of English 319. Buzz Alexander and Mary Heinen McPherson were at its helm as the program's co-founders.[9]

If this was the sociopolitical climate in which the Prison Creative Arts Project was formed, it was also the climate that it intentionally reacted and responded to. Philosophically, PCAP was shaped out of the work of major political thinkers like Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. As he writes, "English 319 became an action theatre and guerrilla theatre course" that "disrupted classrooms, libraries, dorms, and outdoor university and community spaces with our performances" (Alexander 2010, 20). English 319, the beginnings of PCAP, was founded with a deep commitment to disrupt, subvert, and provoke societal change using the arts.

In an interview with Mary Heinen McPherson, she recalled Buzz Alexander coming into the then Florence Crane Detention Facility to ask her about starting the first prison theatre workshop in the state. "He just came in here and asked me if I wanted to do something called guerilla theatre," Mary said with a laugh. "I said, 'Hell yeah I wanna do guerilla theatre, let's do it, that sounds awesome. As Mary would tell me in this interview, the work that came out of this first workshop was, to say the least, disruptive:

> We were nearly kicked out of prisons in the beginning, before we even got up and running. We did for a little bit, actually. We were fired! And I remember the skit that did it, too. Buzz

[9] Mary Heinen McPherson, then Mary Glover, was the lead plaintiff in the landmark case Glover v. Johnson, which established parity in prison programming for incarcerated women in Michigan. Mary was one of two participants in the very first theatre workshop facilitated by Alexander at the then Florence Crane Correctional Facility in English 319. She is currently the Program Coordinator at the Prison Creative Arts Project.

> came in impersonating a prison guard, acting like a real asshole in this real funny way, and everybody in the audience was laughing their heads off. The problem is, you can't make fun of the guards because it's a security risk. It makes them vulnerable.

I include this example in a description of the origins of the program to highlight the ways in which artmaking practices, from the very beginning, were always in tension with the prison environment. Here, I make a small gesture to the possibilities and limitations inherent to making art in prison, a topic that I will discuss further within the chapters that follow.

An underlying philosophical approach of the creative arts workshops in prisons revolves around an arts-based, participatory approach. In its trainings and practice, the organization emphasizes the cultivation of "human connection" and its opposition to the ideals of rehabilitation or intervention.[10] As Alexander writes and as my fieldwork attests, at the heart of PCAP's approach with people in prison is founded on respect for those that live and work in prisons, even the staff that humiliate, insult, and penalize the people with whom we work.

It involves a spirit of *being-with-others* that does not involve asking people in prison why they are in prison: As Ashley Lucas often asks new facilitators during PCAP trainings, "How would you like to be judged based on the worst day of your life?" As Alexander poignantly writes, "we may be the only people in their lives who do not know, and they deserve to have such people" (Alexander 2010, 65).

In the section that follows, I describe developing my original research aim, which was to examine the relationship between artmaking practices and well-being in prisons. I complicate this aim by choosing to examine the relationship between artmaking practices and violence instead. As I write in the next section, we are in an era where there is an increased scholarly interest in mass

---

[10] Participatory approaches to art are defined by their emphases on dialogism as opposed to didacticism, a collective and processual approach to creation, as well as its emphasis on nonhierarchical facilitation (Aylwyn 2014). I speak to this in chapter five, "The Live Third."

incarceration and arts-based interventions in prisons, particularly as these interventions relate to the concept and experience of "well-being." However, as I will argue, "well-being" as a concept invites complication on several fronts.

I will show how a unidimensional focus on well-being tends to obfuscate the violences of incarceration and renders the prison as a site that is divorced from the social (Rhodes 2004). By focusing on the brick-and-mortar institution of the prison, I argue that scholarship loses sight of other ways in which carcerality operates beyond the physical confines of detention facilities. The rates of incarceration that I opened this this section with say little of the people in Michigan who are under probation or parole, which in 2018 comprised nearly 190,000 individuals (Prison Policy Initiative 2024). This is to say nothing of how the violences of confinement continue well after one's release into the freeworld in the "afterlife" of confinement (Miller 2021; Burch 2019).[11] This critique is what I turn to now.

1.2 The Shift from Well-Being to Violence

In this section, I explain my transition from my original research aim, to explore the relationship between artmaking practices and well-being in prisons, to my new research aim, to explore the relationship between artmaking practices and experiences of violence in prisons. I start by providing reviews of relevant literature related to well-being and care in prisons.

---

[11] In Michigan, the rate of recidivism in 2021 was 23.6%[11] (Citizens Research Council of Michigan 2023). While Michigan's rates of recidivism are well below the national average of 70% within the five years of one's release from prison, it is still nearly one-fifth of the approximately 12,000 people per year that are released from prisons in Michigan on an annual basis (Citizens Research Council of Michigan 2023).

1.2.1 Well-Being as an Analytic

Well-being may be usefully defined as "the multi-dimensional experience of positive emotions and experiences of life satisfaction, autonomy, and purpose" (Fancourt and Finn 2019, cited in Im and Pinto 2024). As the World Health Organization writes in their recent scoping review examining the role of the arts on well-being, there has been increased interest in arts-based research, and that such research yields optimistic implications about the role of the arts in the prevention of illness and the promotion of health across the lifespan (Fancourt and Finn 2019).

Indeed, a burgeoning body of literature illustrates the positive effects that the visual arts (Daykin et al. 2018), theatre (Baxter and Low 2017), music (MacDonald 2013), and writing (Leckey 2011) practices have on measures of well-being in the general population. While it is a more limited literature base, there is a body of research that is similarly optimistic about the influence of such creative practices in prisons, too. The reader may refer to the following for literature reviews examining visual art (Meekums and Daniel 2011; Littman and Sliva 2020), theatre (Davey, Day, and Balfour 2015), and musicmaking practices (Im and Pinto 2023) on indicators of well-being in detention facilities.

Based on this body of literature, my original research aim was to examine the relationship between well-being and artmaking practices in Michigan prisons. However, my research aim has since evolved to examine the relationship between violence and artmaking practices in Michigan prisons. I account for this shift by pointing to the major intervention of my dissertation research, which is to demonstrate the ways in which artmaking practices in prisons are inextricably tied to the violences of confinement. In a scoping review examining the relationship between musicmaking practices and well-being in prisons (Im and Pinto 2023), I argued that there is a gap in the literature that suggests a romanticization of the benevolent capacities of musicmaking practices in prison that does not tend to its potentialities as a tool of violence and discipline.

Thus, the research aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate the ways in which the arts reflect, sustain, and subvert the violences of prisons. To do so, I demonstrate the deeply processual and relational nature of artmaking practices in prison. In so demonstrating this processual and relational quality of artmaking practices in prisons, it is possible to see the sites of conflict and ambivalence that artmaking practices make possible. In revealing these sites of ambivalence, I show how artmaking practices may expose incarcerated people to forms of violence they would not otherwise experience, such as through the destruction of the art that they produce by prison guards. I show, too, how artmaking practices are not guarantors of experiences of well-being and how they make possible experiences of rejection, denial, and misrecognition.

Most importantly, however, my dissertation demonstrates the ways in which violence is inextricably tied to artmaking practices in prison. This dissertation initially began with a focus on the relationship between artmaking practices and well-being in prisons. Throughout the course of my field research, however, it became clear to me that to simply document how the arts influence the well-being of incarcerated people is an overly simplistic aim that belies the deeply complex and political nature of "well-being" as a concept and term, especially as it relates to experiences of confinement and incarceration.

In the section that follows, I complicate well-being as an analytic by briefly situating it within a larger historical context of confinement to explicate the evolution of my research aim.

1.2.2 Contextualizing Well-Being and Carcerality

It is important to contextualize well-being studies in prisons within a history that examines the relationship between well-being and carcerality generally. First, I posit that carceral institutions have long been concerned with the "well-being" of the incarcerated person in some manner or another. In this sense, it is useful to invoke the historian Dan Berger's intervention into the study of

carcerality, "to locate the carceral as a fundamental component of Western authority" (Berger 2019, 281). To return to Foucault is to understand the ways in which the carceral, a fundamental component of Western authority that is embedded in the state itself, has shaped and informed the work of institutions that work on, rely on, or cultivate the well-being of people and populations, including hospitals, schools, asylums, and prisons.

Foucault writes of the various ways in which the prison as a site has long perseverated over the rehabilitation of people in prison, as espoused through the West's historical shift from the public execution to the timetable, from inflicting physical torture on the body to its work on the "soul." As he writes, punishment seeks to make the offender "not only desirous, but also capable of living within the law and providing for his own needs" (1995, 18) and that such penalties are "intended not to punish the offence, but to supervise the individual, to neutralize his dangerous state of mind, to alter his criminal tendencies, and to continue even when this change has been achieved" (1995, 18). This notion of rehabilitating people from within, through the cultivation of disciplinary technologies like routine, labor, self-reflection, and asceticism, suggests the prison's historical and omnipresent relationship to the incarcerated subject's well-being.

As Wacquant argues, "One can argue that the US carceral system has become a perverse agency for the delivery of human services to the social refuse of the market society" (2002, 18). For this reason, I argue that well-being studies that do not reflexively examine the environments in which they are conducted propagate an implicit and dangerous understanding of confinement as a means by which to care for the most marginalized members of society. The anthropologist Carolyn Sufrin (2017) further complicates this relation by demonstrating how jails embody "disturbing entanglement[s] of carcerality and care" (6). Indeed, in her ethnography of maternal care in American jails, Sufrin argues that the pregnant person's relationship to the jail challenges an understanding of prisons as purely punitive. Sufrin coins the term jailcare to describe "a form of care

in which the state's impulses to govern and tend its citizens are knotted into each other not merely as a controlling strategy, but as everyday, affective relationships" (6). At stake in Sufrin's question is the question of how carceral institutions actively make mothers and families, how jails negotiate experiences of punishment with the provision and care of life.

In his historical examination of the relationship between musicmaking practices and carcerality, Waller (2018) argues that the role of music in prisons is ultimately an ambivalent one. On the one hand, its role in prison "is often continuous with the mechanisms of carceral control, with its 'humanising' or 'therapeutic' effects being defined as a luxury to be earned through good behaviour and critical engagement with one's moral and psychological treatment" (275). On the other, he argues that music must also be seen through its potentialities as a technology of the self and as a facilitator of what the ethnomusicologist Tom Rice calls "acoustical agency," the active role played by the incarcerated person shapes, receives, and responds to the sonic space of the prison (Rice 2016). Waller convincingly argues that the music "is often subject to forms of institutional bounding and contestation, and we must therefore situate it's emancipatory potential as part of a wider context of carceral power" (Waller 2018, 296); Rice similarly highlights the ambivalent qualities of acoustical agency in prisons, as a means of exerting genuine control over one's environment on the one hand and "a kind of agency that suggests a boundary-defying potential, but nonetheless keeps prisoners contained" (Rice 2016, 9). Ultimately, what these studies suggest is the ambivalent and contingent characteristics of musicmaking practices in prisons.

I argue that this is a useful theoretical intervention to make into the study of artmaking practices in prisons generally. As Foucault argues, in this transition from the body to the soul of the incarcerated person, "a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner, the immediate anatomist of pain: warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists [who reassure] that the body and pain are not the ultimate objects of its punitive action" (Foucault 1995,

11). Perhaps, in the context of this dissertation, we might consider "art therapists," "music therapists," and "creative arts workshop facilitators" as technicians that prisons ultimately collaborate with in the name of cultivating well-being. In highlighting this potential relationship between discipline and artmaking practices in prisons, I suggest that well-being is not an appropriate analytic through which to examine the uneasy relationship that the arts maintain as a vehicle for well-being on the one hand and a technology of management on the other.

A discussion of well-being, I posit, must involve a discussion of carcerality, given the very real benefits that artmaking practices bring in terms of experiences of well-being as well as its equally real potential to obfuscate the role of the prison in the necessity of well-being interventions in prisons in the first place. This issue is what I turn to now.

1.2.3 The Obfuscation of Violence

Given this bleak outlook of well-being in prisons and how prisons themselves empirically contribute to experiences of *ill*-being, we must next consider the ways in which well-being studies in prison tend to isolate indicators of well-being, such as levels of anxiety, stress, depression, from the context of the prison proper. I have argued elsewhere that such studies unintentionally obfuscate why well-being interventions may be necessary in prisons in the first place (Im and Pinto 2023). Rarely do such studies ask why a person in prison may be anxious, stressed, or depressed in prison, nor do such studies address what happens when an implemented intervention in prison comes to an end. In so doing, a unidimensional focus on well-being in the prison proper situates the brick-and-mortar institution of the detention facility as external to social space (Rhodes 2004). It prevents an understanding of carcerality as a process that occurs over space and time, in the various "afterlives" of mass incarceration (Burch 2019; Miller 2021).

As Wacquant argues, "The prison can also act, counterintuitively and within limits, as a stabilizing and restorative force for relations already deeply frayed by the pressures of life and labor at the bottom of the social edifice" (Wacquant 2002, 18). Following Sufrin and Rice, I do not seek to reduce prisons to factories that monolithically produce certain kinds of subjects and "docile bodies" (Foucault 1995). This is because such a reading comes at the expense of more expansive understanding of the ways in which people in prison negotiate the conditions of their confinement. Neither do I wish to simply understand artmaking practices in prisons as a purely dominative or disciplinary technology, nor, as Waller cautions, do I seek to portray artmaking practices as a source of unmediated well-being. Based on these understandings of artmaking practices in prison, as well as the ways in which care and carcerality interact, I seek a more multidimensional analytic than what the concept of well-being affords. Violence, as I will argue in the following sections, is an analytic capable of dialectically holding these various tensions described in the literature.

1.2.4 The Ethnographic Intervention

As I will show in this dissertation, and as the reviews cited at the beginning of this section suggest, experiences of well-being, broadly defined, are certainly possible in prison. However, I choose to displace the centrality of well-being in my work to, instead, address the gap in the literature as I see it. This gap concerns the obfuscation of the ways in which the violences of confinement are negotiated through artmaking practices in prisons.

In chapter five of this dissertation, "The Live Third," I turn toward the ways in which creative arts workshops facilitate experiences of well-being through what Durkheim calls collective effervescence (1915) and what the anthropologist Victor Turner calls communitas (1995), which align well with understandings of art as facilitators of well-being. However, I show the ways in which such experiences of well-being are experienced by facilitators as triage as opposed to secure

attachments to well-being. By articulating the experiences of violence that artmaking practices make possible in prisons, this ethnography generally illuminates the ways in which prisons refuse to recognize the incarcerated person at the basic unit of their humanity and, for this reason, can always be a "perverse" (Wacquant 2002) but never adequate site of well-being.

Indeed, the major intervention of chapter five is to demonstrate the extraordinarily ambivalent, contingent, and ultimately processual nature of artmaking practices in prison. I show the ways in which well-being, by experiences of recognition, community, and connection, are possible, but not guaranteed. I argue that experiences of misrecognition and violence are often consequences of artmaking practices and that even recognition itself, so pivotal to experiences of well-being proper, may itself be a harbinger of violence and violation.

As I will explicate in chapter five, I choose to focus on the ways in which artmaking practices in prison highlight the ever-present struggle for well-being, the ways in which the prison as an environment forces us to reconsider how we conceptualize well-being in practice and theory, rather than to focus on a unidimensional understanding of well-being as something that may be reliably provided to people in prison through the arts.

1.2.5 Turning Toward Violence

To cite the anthropologist Lorna Rhodes (2004), prisons are "a place of disappearance" (30). Without any analysis of the violences of the prison environment itself, I do not believe that any analysis of the relationship between artmaking practices and well-being in prisons is complete. Rhodes, citing Allen Feldman, writes of the "cultural anesthesia" that has permitted prisons to become an "abstract site" in the public imagination. This cultural anesthesia in the literature, I posit, is exacerbated by a unidimensional focus on the concept of well-being, in which "the disturbing physicality and immediacy of violence itself" (8) is consistently sidestepped in such analyses. To

countermand this trend, I repeatedly situate the experiences of artmaking practices in prison back within the prison itself.

Rhodes argues, "Prisons create by their very nature sets of opposing and aligned positions, at the least consisting of prisoners, correctional workers, and the 'public.' Psychiatry and custody, for example, are mutually dependent and at the same time speak irreconcilable languages" (Rhodes 2004, 8). It is useful here to think about experiences of well-being and violence as another set of opposing and aligned positions in prisons. By foregrounding violence as an analytic, I pursue a dialectical analysis of artmaking practices in prison that shows how art may sit at either end of this spectrum in different instances or occupy both positions simultaneously within a given context.

In this dissertation, I therefore turn, instead, to the relationship between artmaking practices and the violences of the prison environment. In this way, my research simultaneously highlights the ways in which the arts contribute to the well-being of incarcerated people without losing sight of the prison itself as an object of study. Furthermore, this turn toward violence demonstrates the various ways in which artmaking practices not only subvert or countermand the violences of the prison environment but sustain and contribute to the violences that incarcerated people experience in prisons. Crucially, by focusing on violence, my dissertation addresses the ways in which artmaking practices are utilized as a tool to *negotiate* with the violences inherent to being in prison rather than imply that these violences are somehow mitigated or countermanded through an experience of increased well-being in the context of an intervention in prison.

1.3 Defining Violence

In this dissertation, I begin from the premise that prisons are inherently violent. In addition to the ways in which artmaking practices subvert the violences of confinement, I point to the ways

in which art and violence malevolently interact by pointing to the instances of misrecognition that artmaking practices afford, the destruction of art that experiences of recognition itself may invite, the conditions of solitary confinement under which so much art in prison is made, and the ways in which artmaking practices gesture toward the incarcerated person's ever-present struggle for experiences of well-being as opposed to the ability to ever securely experience it in the first place.

As a concept, violence is typically reduced to an understanding of physical or bodily harm (Bourgeois and Scheper-Hughes 2004; Herrenkohl et al. 2010). However, violence may fruitfully be thought to encompass "assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim," (Bourgeois and Scheper-Hughes 2004), as well. Indeed, it is useful to think about violence along a continuum. It is equally important to emphasize the fact that violence is a social process that occurs through relationships and interactions.

1.3.1 Relational Violence

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is important to distinguish between the many kinds of violences that occur in prison.[12] I would like to particularize what I call *relational violence* and how it relates to the ethical dilemmas that freeworld facilitators and curators experience in this line of work. In the context of confinement, I define relational violence as the incapacitation of one's ability to relate or to be related to. The power of the prison, as I argue in chapter three, [13] lies in its ability to

---

[12] Ashley Lucas, for example, writes of the "arbitrary exercise of power" that characterizes prison life (Lucas 2020, 87). In an interview with Mary Heinen McPherson, she made a point to distinguish between the forms of violence most commonly experienced by men and women at men's and women's facilities, such as the sexual assault and rape of women in women' by male guards.

[13] I argue in chapter three, "Bearing Witness," that the work of prisons is to induce a societal forgetting about the people that reside behind bars and that this is the primary problematic of Foucault's explication of our society's shift from displays of sovereign to disciplinary power.

determine how people in the freeworld relate to people in prison and how people in prison relate to themselves and others.

The enactment of relational violence manifests in many ways: The separation of people in prison from their communities and support networks in the freeworld, the forced "moves" that shepherd the incarcerated from prison to prison, as well as the prescribed, compliant ways of being-with-others that prisons as institutions mandate and engender.

Within this context of relational violence, art comes to be felt and experienced as a lifeline, as a means of forging and maintaining connections between people in the freeworld and people in prison. It also comes to be seen variously, as I write throughout the course of this dissertation, as a tool for emotional release, self-expression, and escape.

You, as the freeworld facilitator, do not want to be the person who denies or discourages access to this resource to people in prison. At the heart of many of the ethical dilemmas that I describe throughout the course of this dissertation are our fears related to perpetrating or reproducing the relational violences that prisons commit daily. This fear shows up in several ways, from how we respond to instances of forgery and misrepresentation throughout the process of curation in prisons to the ways in which we respond to barbed comments that our participants sometimes throw at us in creative arts workshops.

There are many fears related to committing violence, a fear of becoming, in some ways, absorbed by the prison environment and of becoming street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980, cited in Partridge 2012). In an environment where access to financial gain is paltry, experiences of validation are few, and authentic experiences of care are in short supply, the stakes of artmaking practices are quite high. The demands of the work, to do it *ethically*, are constantly being felt, argued through, and made sense of.

I show the ways in which people that facilitate arts-based work in prisons are consciously and unconsciously attuned to this fact of relational violence. I show the ways in which this understanding of violence influences the ways in which art in prisons is curated, how creative arts workshops are facilitated, and how art objects in prisons are organized and presented in the exhibition space. I demonstrate the ways in which this fact of violence is imbricated within larger struggles around normative ethics in the facilitation of such work in prisons.

1.3.2 Epistemic Violence

Thinking through the "violence continuum" (Bourgeois and Scheper-Hughes 2004, 5), it is also worth considering violence from yet one other perspective. As I have argued, the literature that examines the relationship between well-being and confinement obfuscates the prison as an object of study. This, I argue here, might fruitfully be considered a form of epistemic violence, defined as "violence exerted against or through knowledge" (Galván-Álvarez 2010). Epistemic violence is typically framed in terms of how one set of knowledges silences, subjugates, or dominates another, as in the Western constitution of the colonial subject as an Other (Morris and Spivak 2010). It may be useful here to comment simply on the silence of such studies on the complicity of the prison on the well-being of people in prison as its own form of epistemic violence. Such a silence, I posit, propagates an understanding of well-being as the responsibility of the incarcerated person to cultivate through their engagement with artmaking practices.

In addition to this silence, however, it is important to note the ways in which such forms of epistemic violence actively and discursively participate in the constitution of certain understandings of carcerality and people in prison. For example, in a study examining the effects of "relaxing music" on levels of anxiety and anger amongst people in prison, researchers make a policy recommendation

that "relaxing music" should be considered by policymakers to "improve [the] prison atmosphere and assist prison administrators in maintaining order" (Bensimon, Einat, and Gilboa 2015, 406).

It is important to note the ways in which artmaking practices as a facilitator of "relaxation" obfuscate the prison as a perpetrator of violence.[14] It is a surface-level analysis that does little to hold accountable the powers that be that make such interventions necessary in the first place. It is troubling, too, in the sense that artmaking practices become an extension of disciplinary power and carceral control. In so doing, such an analysis contributes to the legitimation of the prison as a site whose primary purpose is to warehouse deviant or delinquent bodies which, once again, prevents a problematization of the status quo as it relates to the issue of mass incarceration and the violences of confinement.

1.4 Defining Art

In this dissertation, I define "art" as creative activities whose products and processes mediate social action. In other words, I speak to the ways in which art objects, like paintings, improvisatory skits, and poetry, and the work that goes into creating them, provide opportunities for intrapersonal and interpersonal actions like reflection, conflict, mediation, misrepresentation, and self-fashioning amongst and between people in the freeworld and people in prison.

"Art" is an extremely slippery term and category that has been subject to a great deal of debate and critique over time (Bell 1916; Dickie 1969; Dissanayake 2015). Its definitions are as broad

[14] It is perhaps a useful exercise to substitute "relaxation" with terms like "well-being" or phrases like "decreased levels of depression" to better understand the ways in which a singular focus on indicators of well-being consistently result in the obfuscation of the prison as an object of analysis and problematic (Im and Pinto 2024).

as "the complete range of aesthetically ordered activity in a society" (Baines 2014, 2) and typically appeal to understandings of art that privilege art's relationship to aesthetics. However, this dissertation borrows from Alfred Gell's operationalization of the term. Here, I define art not by an appeal to aesthetics but to Gell's focus on the agency of art objects and what they, as actors in their own right that mediate and index, make possible in the world (Gell 1996; 1992; 1998).

Gell's focus on art was primarily concerned with what we typically refer to as the visual arts, hence Gell's frequent invocation of the term "art objects," and did not necessarily account for the forms of theater and creative writing that I discuss throughout the course of this dissertation. However, I find that this focus on the agency of art objects, namely what art is capable of making happen in the world, translates well to the theater and creative writing practices described throughout the course of this project. It requires, as I will show in chapter five, no large stretch of the imagination to consider a short-form improvisatory sketch or a written piece of poetry as "objects" in their own right that similarly "motivate inferences, responses, or interpretations" (Pinney and Thomas 2001, 4).

Yet, I think this is still an incomplete rendering of how this dissertation has approached the topic of "art." Art is more than an art object or a series of technical practices that result in the creation of such objects. Indeed, here, I believe it useful to complement Gell's definition of art with the ethnomusicologist Christopher Small's coinage of the term "musicking," to take "music" from a noun to a verb, "to music." Indeed, as Small argues, "to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance" (Small 1999, 2).

To music, for instance, in a musical performance is to decenter primacy of the performers on the stage and to consider the ways in which practices of listening, rehearsing, practicing, and composing contribute to the performance, as well (Small 1998). To do so means to involve other key players that make the performance possible in the first place: The audience members that attend,

the movers that bring the piano on and off of the stage, the sound engineers that check and refine the acoustics of equipment; in short, all of the various individuals and acts that come together to make the performance an object of study and consumption (Small 1998).

Throughout the course of this dissertation, I have often found myself relying on terms like "artmaking" and "artmaking practices" to verb the term "art" in a similar fashion. I will show that "to art," like musicking, is more than just the creation of an object like a painting, skit, or piece of writing. "To art" also involves, as discussed in chapter three, "Bearing Witness," the reconstruction of the incarcerated artist through the utilization of artist statements, their handwriting on the walls of the gallery, and to foster relationships between freeworld exhibition goers and people in prison.

As discussed in chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," "to art" requires learning how to discursively sell one's art to a curator, to learn the art of letting artists in prisons down with grace, and to understand how one's positionality influences the evaluation and selection of art.

"To art" in prisons, as discussed in chapter five, "The Live Third," is to speak to the ways in which the arts lend themselves to forms of relating and connection from both ends of the aisle, between freeworld facilitators and incarcerated participants alike, and to understand how artmaking practices must necessarily mediate and contend with the violences of incarceration.

1.5 Outline of Chapters

In chapter two, I explicate my methodology. In it, I recapitulate the arguments of the chapters that follow and discuss the data that I have collected to substantiate these arguments. Additionally, I build on the sections established in this introduction, particularly the section entitled "The Prison Creative Arts Project," by providing a more in-depth explanation of what creative arts workshops and the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons* entail from a methodological

perspective. I discuss my utilization of grounded theory as my data analysis process. I end by providing the reader with the ethical considerations that I have grappled with around the process of doing research in prisons.

In chapter three, "Bearing Witness," I walk the reader through the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*. I provide a context for the visual artmaking practices that occur in prisons to highlight the ways in which incarcerated artists resist the relational violences of confinement through the practice of visual art. I write, too, about the Duderstadt Gallery at the University of Michigan, home of the *28th Annual Exhibition*, to examine how curators strategically employed art from prisons to shed light on the oppressive conditions under which this year's artists toiled by thematizing them in certain ways. I explicate these themes and flesh them out further by providing ethnographic insights gathered throughout the course of my work in prisons for the exhibition.

In chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," I follow up on the exhibition by bringing the reader into the process of how curators collect artwork for the *Annual Exhibition* in prisons. I discuss the ways in which artists in prison create art to countermand the relational violences of prisons and the ways in which processes of curation both facilitate and potentially hamper this process. I do so by walking the reader through ethical dilemmas that curators experience throughout the course of interacting with incarcerated artists and examine what insights may be gleaned about the politics of curation and art in prisons from these ethnographic vignettes.

In chapter five, "The Live Third," I argue that through the cultivation of "creativity" in creative arts workshops, facilitators attempt to subvert the relational violences of confinement. What is at stake here, however, are the ways in which this cultivated creativity is itself subverted by prisons and weaponized as an instrument of violence. I demonstrate how the cultivation of creativity leads to Durkheimian experiences of collective effervescence, experiences of intimacy and connectedness, and Turnerian communitas, experiences that dissolve institutional norms and make possible new

ways of relating to one's environment. As such, I show how the cultivation of creativity fosters new possibilities of *being-with-others* in prison and the limitations inherent to the arts in terms of its capacities to imbue experiences of well-being under conditions of confinement.

In chapter six, the conclusion of this dissertation, I offer reflections from an autoethnographic perspective on the transformative work that I have undertaken with people in prison over these past five years. I speak to the ways in which this work has shaped my own considerations of confinement, people in prison, and the role of art in larger debates around issues related to carcerality and incarceration.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The research that I conducted from January 2019 to May 2024 may be separated into two sections: First, my work facilitating creative arts workshops in Michigan prisons with an organization called the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan; second, my work curating artwork for the Prison Creative Arts Project's *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, one of the largest and longest running exhibitions of art in the world that features work by presently incarcerated artists.

My primary data collection method is ethnography. Ethnography is a method by which to study the "relationships between participants in social systems of various kinds" (Gell 1998, 4). The hallmarks of ethnographic field research are participant-observation, the use of field notes, and ethnographic interviews (Anderson-Levitt 2006). In addition to these ethnographic techniques, I was exposed to artist statements and art objects produced by incarcerated artists throughout the course of my work in prison with the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*.

Finally, in this dissertation, I utilized ethnography as the primary data collection method and grounded theory as the method of data analysis. Grounded theory is a complementary methodological intervention that I used to organize and conceptualize the field data that I collected throughout the course of my field research. Congruent with grounded theory, this dissertation began with an open ended, preliminary research question: What is the effect of the arts on the well-being of incarcerated people? I detail the data analysis process and the evolution of my research in the final section of this chapter.

2.1 Participant-Observation

Participant-observation is defined as a research methodology where the researcher immerses himself in the everyday activities of his research participants (Musante 2015). This is distinguished from naturalistic or direct observation, where the collection of data does not require any interaction between the observer and his participants. In this regard, participant-observation opens up the possibility of collecting a wider range of data as "insiders" have privileges that afford them the ability to observe events that "outsiders" do not have access to (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013). Participant-observation was utilized at 20 unique field sites— generally defined as "bounded" locations in which data is collected (Candea 2007)— throughout the state of Michigan. These sites included prisons (n=19) as well as at the University of Michigan (n=1), which itself was comprised of constituent sites like classrooms, conference rooms, and rehearsal spaces where ethnographically relevant events and meetings took place.

Observations in the field were documented through the use of field notes, defined as qualitative observations recorded by researchers during field research. They are the researcher's "private, personal thoughts, ideas, and queries regarding their research observations and interviews" that aid in the construction of thick descriptions of the study context (Phillippi and Lauderdale 2018). They comprise descriptions of interactions, the physical setting, as well as the social environment in which the ethnography takes place.

2.2 Art Selection Trips

Art selection trips are visits to prisons for the purpose of collecting artwork for the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*. Hosted by the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan, it is the largest and longest running annual exhibition in the world that features artwork by

presently incarcerated artists. I discuss the *Annual Exhibition*, as well as these art selection trips, in chapters one and two of this dissertation.

2.2.1 *Timeline*

From September 2022 to February 2024, I attended a total of 18 art selection trips at 16 unique prisons across the state of Michigan. From September 2022 and January 2023, I went to 7 detention facilities for the 27th *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons* in March 2023. From September 2023 to January 2024, I attended 11 art selection trips for the 28th *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons* in March 2024. In total, I traveled to 14 unique prisons. These prisons comprise the field sites for my art selection trips.

2.2.2 *Background*

A standard selection trip is an all-day affair. Most are multi-day affairs as the majority of prisons in the state are anywhere from a one to six-hour drive away from the University of Michigan's central campus. For selection trips that require particularly protracted drives, members of the curation team will visit multiple prisons in a given part of the state in a single trip that spans multiple days. The length of a selection trip typically varies between 4 to 16 hours depending on the number of artists present at a given prison and the commutes between facilities and lodgings.

The art selection process begins in June. At this time, a "call for art" is sent by the Prison Creative Arts Project to all 25 state prisons in the state of Michigan. Starting in September, a curation team visits all 25 facilities to collect artwork for the exhibition. At the prison itself, the curation process involves many steps, including speaking with the artists at each facility and deliberating over the pieces that the curation team will choose to exhibit.

The curation team is comprised of four to ten individuals and at least two of these individuals are designated as the official curators. These are individuals hired by the Prison Creative

Arts Project for the sole purpose of curating artwork for the exhibition. The rest of the team may be comprised of University of Michigan student volunteers and faculty as well as community members officially or loosely affiliated with the Prison Creative Arts Project or the university. I was not a curator but contributed to the evaluation of art objects as a student volunteer.

In the prison proper, the first step of the curation process involves talking to the artists present about their pieces. The curation team meets with artists in rooms that range in size from classrooms to gymnasiums. The artists will display their pieces to the curatorial team in these spaces, often on tables and easels. A single facility may have anywhere between four to over 100 artists present for a given trip. Artists typically bring two to six pieces of art with them, which range from two-dimensional works like paintings and drawings to three-dimensional objects like sculptures.

Once the deliberations are finalized, the curation team asks the artists to return to the space. The curation team will once again make their rounds with the artists in the room, this time to communicate what pieces they will and will not be taking. This round of conversation is an opportunity for artists to ask technical questions about the exhibition process, such as when they can expect payment for their art pieces if they sell, what will happen to their pieces if they do not sell, as well as to chat with members of the curation team until their next moves are called by the facility.

2.2.3 *Data Collection*

If a facility has ten artists or fewer, the curation team will speak to each artist as a group. Curators will split up at prisons with larger numbers of artists. The stated goal is to make sure that every artist in the room has an opportunity to speak with at least one of the members of the curation team on any particular selection trip. These informal conversations with incarcerated artists serve as ethnographic data in later analyses in this dissertation.

Meeting this goal is of great importance. These conversations are ultimately at the heart of the curation process. Once the curation team has made the rounds, the artists are asked to leave the room so that the team may deliberate about the artwork amongst themselves. Once alone, the curation team walks through the room and speaks candidly about each artist's pieces. Here, the curators that had an opportunity to speak with the artist under evaluation will provide additional context for that artist's works, particularly as that context relates to the artist's artistic process. These informal conversations amongst curators serve as data for the analyses that follow.

2.2.4 *Data Management*

My field notes were comprised of my interactions with incarcerated artists at 14 facilities over the course of 19 art selection trips. As a strict logbook of interactions was not possible to maintain during these trips given the sheer size of certain facilities, the manner of the work involved, and an inability to take notes while in prison, I estimate that I have interacted with at least 200 individual artists in total.

Following each art selection trip, I processed my observations by writing field notes in the car. Field notes were written and stored in Microsoft OneNote and uploaded to Microsoft's Cloud Service OneDrive. The art selection trips I attended generally involved a carpool with a minimum number of three participants. We would talk through the selection trips in the car on our way back home from the facilities. These processing conversations were also a part of my field notes.

Throughout the course of art selection trips, I was also exposed to various art objects, like paintings, drawings, and sculptures, as well as documents called artist statements. Artist statements are forms provided by artists which allow them to share messages about their art with the exhibition's viewing public. Pictures of these art objects and artist statements are in the public domain and available on the digital archives of the *Annual Exhibition*.

2.3 Artist Statements

Artist statements are documents that participants in the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons* may utilize to speak about their art through written word. Artists will often provide background information about the art that they are submitting for consideration, such as how their art was made, the motivations behind their pieces, as well as their experiences as artists in prisons.

2.3.1 *Background*

I encountered artist statements throughout the course of my work facilitating art selection trips from September 2022 to February 2024. These documents provide supplementary understandings of the art that is produced in prisons as well as the artist's perspectives about the pieces that they create for submission into the exhibition, particularly as their experiences relate to the violences of incarceration that experience as artists in prison.

2.3.2 *Data Collection*

Artist statements are publicly available documents. They may be found on the digital archives of the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*. These artist statements were collected due to the supplementary insights that they reveal about artmaking practices in prisons. Preliminary analyses of artist statements comprised portions of my field notes during art selection trips, as artists would often refer to their artist statements in conversations about their art.

2.3.3 *Data Management*

These preliminary analyses of artist statements following art selection trips were stored in Microsoft OneDrive. Artist statements themselves were collected from the digital archives of the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons* and stored in Microsoft OneDrive.

2.4 Creative Arts Workshops

2.4.1 *Timeline*

From September 2019 to April 2024, I participated in nine (n=9) creative arts workshops with the Prison Creative Arts Projects at three (n=3) prisons in the state of Michigan.

2.4.2 *Background*

Creative arts workshops are 90-minute to two-hour sessions that occur once a week. These creative arts workshops are delineated by genre, which are comprised of theater, music, creative writing, and visual art. I include sample workshop agendas from creative writing and theatre workshops in **Appendix A**. I discuss these creative arts workshops in further detail in chapter three of this dissertation.

2.4.3 *Data Collection*

Creative arts workshops may be delineated between "in-person workshops" and "correspondence workshops." In-person workshops occurred before and after the COVID pandemic; as the moniker suggests, they involved face-to-face work in prisons, between facilitators and participants. During the COVID pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns that ensued, these workshops pivoted to a correspondence model. This involved mailing in paper "workshop packets" to participants in prisons. Engagement between incarcerated people and facilitators would occur via written word and mail.

An analysis of the correspondence workshops demands archival research. In keeping with ethnographic methodologies, I choose to focus on the data collected during my engagement with in-

person workshops. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I participated in six in-person workshops which can be seen in **Table 1** below.

Table 2.1 Timeline of In-Person Creative Arts Workshops

Dates	**Workshops Facilitated**
September 2019–December 2019	Music
September 2022–December 2022	Creative Writing
January 2023–May 2023	Theatre and Creative Writing
September 2023–December 2023	Creative Writing
January 2024–April 2024	Creative Writing

For each workshop, the facilitators would meet via Zoom, once a week, to plan their workshops for the following week. **Appendix A** contains a sample planning document. **Appendix B** contains sample pages from the Prison Creative Art Project's "Exercise Inventory," a list of artistic exercises, delineated by genre, that facilitators may draw from in order to plan their creative arts workshops.

2.4.4 *Data Management*

Following every creative arts workshop, I would process my thoughts and observations in the car, either in the parking lot of the facility following a workshop or during my commute back home. My field notes during this time period were either typed up and stored in Microsoft OneNote and uploaded to Microsoft OneDrive or collected and stored as audio files using my iPhone's Voice Memos application, which were later transcribed using a transcription service called Otter AI.

2.5 Ethnographic Interviews

2.5.1 *Timeline*

Ethnographic interviewers were conducted from September 2021 to January 2024.

2.5.2 *Data Collection*

Eleven (n=11) individuals were interviewed for this dissertation. These individuals were comprised of workshop facilitators (n=4), a special activities director (n=1), exhibition curators (n=3), and formerly incarcerated artists (n=3). Semi-structured interviews were utilized. Using theoretical sampling and constant comparison, I pursued follow-up interviews and refined these questions over time depending on the themes I discovered through the coding process. I include the preliminary, structured questions that were delivered to each set of interlocuters.

2.5.3 *Interview Protocols*

Workshop Facilitators

1. Tell me about your experiences facilitating workshops in prisons.
2. What have the most rewarding aspects of the work been for you?
3. What about the most challenging parts?
4. What do you think your participants take away from their work with you?
5. What do you take away from your work with your participants?

Curatorial Team Members

1. Tell me about your experiences curating artwork in prisons.
2. What have the most rewarding aspects of the work been for you?
3. What about the most challenging parts?
4. What do you see the role of art being in the lives of artists that participate in the exhibition?

5. When you curate artwork, how do you decide which pieces you want to take and which ones you want to reject?

Formerly Incarcerated Artists

1. Tell me about your experiences participating in PCAP programming.
2. What have the most rewarding aspects of the work been for you?
3. What about the most challenging parts?
4. What was the role of PCAP programming in your life while you were incarcerated?
5. How does arts-based programming differ from other kinds of programming in prisons?

2.5.4 *Data Management*

My interviews with interlocuters were recorded on an iPhone. These audio files were then uploaded to and stored on Microsoft OneDrive. These audio files were transcribed utilizing a service called Otter AI. These transcripts were later uploaded to the qualitative coding software Dedoose for analysis.

2.6 Data Analysis Process

2.6.1 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is used to discover or construct concepts and theories from qualitative data (Glaser and Strauss 2017). Theories and hypotheses emerge from the data and are not applied in an a priori fashion (Glaser and Strauss 2017). Grounded theory research is primarily concerned with conceptualizing what has been taking place in the lives of study participants and is not concerned with generalizability or replicability (Glaser and Strauss 2017). Grounded theory follows

several principles including constant comparison and theoretical sampling in order to abstract subjective experiences into theoretical statements (Chun Tie, Birks, and Francis 2019).

Congruent with grounded theory, this dissertation began with an open-ended, preliminary research question: What is the effect of the arts on the well-being of incarcerated people? To follow up on this query, I collected qualitative data utilizing ethnographic field research. In this dissertation, I utilize ethnography as the primary data collection method and grounded theory as a method of data analysis, a complementary methodological intervention used to organize and conceptualize the field data that I collected through field research.

Hallmarks of grounded theory analyses are the use of constant comparison and theoretical sampling. I explore my utilization of these tools below.

2.6.2 Constant Comparison

Constant comparison is defined as a process by which data is sorted and organized into groups according to attributes based on open, axial, and selective coding procedures. It is used to "find consistencies and differences, with the aim of continually refining concepts and theoretically relevant categories" (Chun Tie, Birks, and Francis 2019, 4). As it pertains to this dissertation, data is comprised of field notes, interview transcripts, and artist statements.

Open coding is defined as a first level of coding wherein "data is organized by creating initial broad thematic domains for data assemblage" (Williams and Moser 2019, 48). It is the preliminary search for thematic connectivity across data through the development of initial codes (Williams and Moser 2019).

Axial coding is defined as a second level of coding wherein open coded data is more thoroughly distilled. Here, the interrelatedness of the initial codes themselves is stressed. The initial

codes are compared against one another to create categories that tie the initial codes together (Williams and Moser 2019, 50).

Finally, selective coding enables the researcher "to select and integrate categories of organized data from axial coding in cohesive and meaning-filled expressions" and occurs at a level of abstraction and specificity that facilitates theory crafting (Williams and Moser 2019, 52). Here, the categories established in axial coding are compared to formulate "core codes" (Chun Tie, Birks, and Francis 2019, 4).

2.6.3 Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling, defined as the pursuit of "additional information [in order] to saturate categories under development," (Chun Tie, Birks, and Francis 2019, 5) was pursued throughout the course of these months, as well. Theoretical sampling suggests new avenues for data collection "to decide what data to collect next and where to find them to develop theory," (Conlon et al. 2020, 3) and, in the case of this research, involved the pursuit of additional interviews, refined interview questions, as well as a more heightened awareness toward the tensions exposed by the coding process above during this period of my field research in prisons.

2.6.4 Analysis of Field Data

As stated in the explication of my data collection process, I bracket my six years of field research into two distinct categories for analysis: First, my work facilitating creative arts workshops; second, my time curating artwork with the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*.

Following a grounded theory framework (Glaser and Strauss 2017), I initially coded field notes and interview transcripts in July 2023 to determine overarching themes found throughout the research. I utilized the qualitative coding application Dedoose to group my material into two data sets. The first data set was comprised of field notes and interview transcripts relevant to work

facilitating creative arts workshops. The second data set was comprised of field notes, interview transcripts, as well as transcriptions of artist statements relevant to my work with the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*.

I engaged in an open coding process in July 2023. Basic themes, such as "validation" and "rejection" as well as "identity" and "growth" were discovered. Between August 2023 and May 2024 2024, I utilized the constant comparative method as my fieldwork began to taper off. Consistent with the process of the constant comparative method, I began to hone my attention towards a more selective and refined analysis of particular themes, especially the relationship between artmaking practices and violences. At the conclusion of my field research in May 2024, my initial and axial codes were distilled into core, selective codes that were then translated into the theoretical engagements defined in the **Theoretical Engagements section** above.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

It is difficult to receive officially sanctioned ethical approvals for work in prisons, particularly approval by an institutional review board (IRB) (Lucas 2020; Wacquant 2002; Harbert 2011; Gibson-Light and Seim 2020). Ultimately, based on conversations with Dr. Ashley Lucas, a senior scholar who has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in prisons, I chose to forego IRB approval for my dissertation research in prisons.

The roadblocks to receiving approval from IRB were many. My conversations with the IRB ultimately culminated in a meeting with a representative of the Office of General Counsel at the university in which I was told that, to receive IRB approval, I would first have to receive approval to conduct this research from the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC). In October 2020, I submitted a research proposal to the MDOC; after the requisite six months of time required to

examine the proposal, I reached out to the MDOC to follow up on my proposal. It was summarily rejected because my study was "unlikely to produce results … that would justify the disruption to the institution and the expenditures of resources needed to support this study." Prisons are not built to value the humanities, arts, or qualitative research. Their refusal of my proposal was based on their assumptions about what kind of "results" would be useful to them and how my presence in the prison would require extra staff time to enable my entrances and exits.[15]

I followed up to inquire if it would be possible to re-submit this request and received no response from the MDOC. I was encouraged by the IRB to re-submit my research proposal with a professor named as the primary investigator, as I was told that the MDOC regards research conducted by students with greater suspicion and skepticism. The IRB failed to understand that to enter the prisons in any capacity as a researcher officially sanctioned by the MDOC would also negate my status as a volunteer in the prisons. If I had been granted the MDOC's permission to be a researcher, I could no longer have been a PCAP volunteer offering weekly arts workshops or participating in curation trips to the prisons.

Given the requisite six-month review by the MDOC, a lack of guarantee of success, the impracticality of these systems of review, and after consulting closely with Dr. Lucas, I chose to forego IRB and institutional approval to conduct this ethnography and to instead pursue other means of continuously interrogating the ethics and methods of my research with the aim of making currently and formerly incarcerated people central to evaluating the ethics of this work, rather than the boards of two institutions which have historically confined and excluded them from these processes.

---

[15] I emphasized the non-disruptive nature of my research given that my fieldwork was happening in tandem with PCAP programming that already existed at these facilities. My very real claim that I would not require any degree of support or resources from the facilities in question did not appear to convince the review committee.

2.7.1 De-Identification

Throughout the course of this dissertation, I lean on ethnographic vignettes to illustrate ethical dilemmas that we, as people in the freeworld who do arts-based work in prisons, encounter through our engagement with prisons and the people that work and reside there. These vignettes include stories shared by incarcerated participants in the course of creative arts workshop, conversations that I have observed between artists and curators throughout the process of curation, as well as informal and unstructured conversations that occur with guards and prison programming coordinators in prisons and curators during extensive, eight-hour car rides on the way to prisons in the Upper Peninsula.

In this dissertation, I choose to utilize pseudonyms when I utilize vignettes that feature interactions with incarcerated people. This is because I did not receive permission from people that live in prison to include these stories in my research. Whenever I utilize these vignettes in the chapters that follow, I explicitly note how this vignette was collected, why I did not receive permission to include this vignette in my work, and how this interaction was anonymized to ensure the privacy of my interlocutors to the best of my abilities.

In line with ethnographic conventions around confidentiality (Van Cleve 2016, cited in Murphy, Jerolmack, and Smith 2021), I choose to alter what I consider to be minor details about the individuals and circumstances that I speak about. For example, in the discussion of certain art pieces in chapter four, I choose to obscure the subject material of the pieces that I discuss in order to prevent the artist's identification through the *Annual Exhibition of Michigan Artists in Prisons*' public archives. I share the extent of the changes made in these vignettes, while still preserving the anonymity of my interlocutors to the best of my abilities, in footnotes that accompany each vignette.

Following similar conventions around ethnographic anonymity and the ethnographer's characterization of the people with whom he collaborates (Murphy, Jerolmack, and Smith 2021), I create composite characters throughout the course of this dissertation. I create composite characters out of characteristics that I have encountered and interacted with throughout the course of this dissertation. I do so to highlight particularly salient themes that I have heard arise throughout the course of my research. While I choose to highlight the extent of the changes that I make to minor details in the ethnographic encounters that follow, I do not share who the composite characters that I utilize in this dissertation are to maximize the confidentiality of people in prison.

There are legitimate concerns about the use of such anonymization techniques in ethnographic research, particularly around methodological issues related to replicability of ethnographic research and the verification of the veracity of ethnographic data (Murphy, Jerolmack, and Smith 2021). In this instance, I find that my primary ethical responsibility lies with the people with whom I work; as a result, I follow ethnographers that work with similarly vulnerable populations that live under conditions of violence and disenfranchisement (Murphy, Jerolmack, and Smith 2021, 48) and actively choose to utilize these anonymization techniques despite these very real concerns around scholarly transparency and the integrity of one's data and research methodologies.

2.7.2 Thinking Through the Ethical Dimensions of Research

Dual relationships are prohibited in the prisons that I worked and did research in. This contributed to a great deal of my own anxiety about how to go about acquiring consent to include the stories that I did in my dissertation. Consent is not possible to receive after the fact: As a volunteer in Michigan prisons, I was not permitted to communicate with people in prison by mail, individual visits, or phone. To both volunteer and correspond with people in prison would constitute a dual relationship. To communicate with people in prison through mail or phone, you

must first give up your status as a volunteer, which would have revoked my ability to go into prisons to facilitate this work in the first place.

In the setting of the creative arts workshop, a semi-public space, it is difficult to talk to people in prison on a one-on-one basis: You simply cannot bring up a topic of conversation without being overheard by somebody, somewhere. There are no private conversations to be had in the very small, cramped confines of these spaces in which we work. This is true from the beginning of the workshop, where we are escorted in by guards, and especially so at the end of workshops, when we are escorted out by guards who wait for us in the wings.

The curation trips are also incredibly long and oftentimes tedious affairs. Because there are no moments to rest, and because I did not take fieldnotes while in prison,[16] I did not know what I was going to follow up on in the dissertation well after these trips had ended and my notes had been fully fleshed out and processed. It is also the case that all my conversations with artists in prisons occurred through informal and unstructured conversations as opposed to formal interviews (Swain and King 2022; Driessen and Jansen 2013); as a result, many of the conversations that I include in the chapters about the exhibition and curation process were ones where I did not remember the artist's names or instances where I overheard conversations between curators and artists but did not engage in them myself. Even with all of the requisite information in place, it is an unfortunate part of the work that we cannot always get back to people in prison once we know what it is we want to say.

---

[16] Fieldnotes are partly an issue due to what is called a manifest. When you enter a prison, the guards make note of everything that you bring inside with you: Glasses, hair ties, pencils, sheets of paper, and folders, down to each individual unit. When you exit prisons, the guards will follow up and do a recount of this material. In the process, they will also leaf through notebooks, art pieces, and occasionally even read the material inside. It is a common practice amongst all facilitators and curators to simply bring the bare minimum into prisons to prevent delays.

I have weighed the necessity and urgency of these stories and what they say about the violences of confinement and the ethical dilemmas that freeworld people inevitably have to grapple with alongside the ethics of including such stories without the consent of people in prison. Throughout the course of this dissertation, I argue that the primary violence of the prison is that it prevents us from relating to people in prison and that it prevents people in prison from relating to people in the freeworld. I feel that people in the freeworld need to know about the struggles that practitioners encounter and what is at stake in these dilemmas for people in prison. I have strived to do this in ways that do not expose the people in these stories to greater scrutiny.

Ultimately, I do not know what people in prison would say about me anonymously sharing these stories about them. I do know, however, that this is deeply representative of the ethical dilemmas portrayed throughout the course of this dissertation and the fears related to the violences that we all have the potential to perpetrate. I do not want to harm people in prison and, simultaneously, I believe that these are stories that need to be heard. If we do not talk about what happens behind the razor wires, who are people in the freeworld going to hear it from? It is also unbearably clear to me that I still have questions about what constitutes ethical practice and how to go about balancing these real and pressing concerns with the urgency of what is going on in prisons and what we are doing to people in prison. It is an ethical tension that I will wrestle with for the rest of my life.

Chapter 3: Bearing Witness

They paint with coffee and make sculptures out of melted Jolly Ranchers. This is just as genius as Lukács and Gottschalk. It gives artists agency, the ability to operate in your head and to operate in your physical being, not on the institutional plot or on anybody else's game plan but on your own emotions, will, and politics. Prison art is about as political as you get. There's a genius there that isn't about art therapy. It's therapeutic in and of itself but it's way past that, it's the genius and experience of being alive and how it's transmitted.

■ **MARY HEINEN MCPHERSON**, CO-FOUNDER OF THE PRISON CREATIVE ARTS PROJECT

Figure 3.1 Tiger Lilies by Mark Bailey[17]

[17] From the PCAP Visual Art Database, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapartdatabase/item/29943.

A flourishing economy of art exists in Michigan prisons. Imaginably, people in prison have little recourse to material goods. Gifts that they can share with their loved ones in the freeworld are particularly wanting. It follows that if you have a knack for creating visual art, such as greeting cards for birthdays, graduations, weddings, and the like, you tend to be sought out for your skills.

In prisons, the greeting card catapults many a burgeoning artist's career. In fact, "I started by making greeting cards" is a refrain that resounds in conversations with artists about the trajectories of their careers while incarcerated. And, of course, the art varies. For example, artists inclined toward creative writing sell ghosted poetry and love letters to the girlfriends and wives of their clients. Occasionally, talents overlap, as it did for an artist on the inside who spoke to me about his side hustle creating greeting cards. As he says, "I work with this dude who can write poems like no one's business. I did the art for the cards, and he did the messages that went inside."

Ultimately, these artists fill a void. Their labor curries cash, favors, and material goods like high-value commissary food items (I'm reliably told that the lime shrimp flavored Maruchan Ramen and Pop-Tarts top the commissary charts.) These art objects, naturally, vary in price. For greetings cards, "It's $5 here, $5 there," this same artist inside shared. "It's small, but it's an honest way of making a living while you're locked up." Artists with a deft hand for realism may have a side hustle selling pin-up art, too.

The greeting card says something about the relational violences that prisons perpetrate. I have met countless artists on the inside that have told me how difficult it is to maintain contact with their family members, especially their children, when they are shipped states away from their homes

or when they are constantly transferred between facilities in the state.[18] Within this context of dislocation and disconnection, greeting cards remind us of the ways in which prisons deprive incarcerated people of their ability to connect with their loved ones and of the ways they fight to stay connected and demonstrate their love.

However, the greeting card, and the larger economies of art that exist in prisons, are not simply commentaries on what is lacking and wanting. Artists, as I have said, fill an important gap in prisons. In a similar way, the art that comes out of prisons highlights the extraordinary creative ways in which incarcerated people use this gap as a space to create news ways of being in an environment that mandates how they may relate to themselves and with others.

As Mary Heinen McPherson says of her incarceration, which resonate in significant ways with what I have heard people in prison say about their own experiences of confinement, "Prison deprives you of everything that makes a person human. You can't sing to yourself in the showers, dance, have sex, or even laugh without getting cited for it."

Mary speaks to the ways in which people in prison must exist an ever-present state of compliance in order to stay safe. These prescribed ways of being are inculcated through taboos related to touch, intimacy, and privacy in prisons, where bathroom stalls without doors are literally out in the open for all passerby to see, mirrors are hung up to reveal the crevices and corners of communal showers, and where freeworlders and people in prison are required to address one

[18] These conversations are unsurprising given that 47% of the 1.25 million people in state prisons are parents of minor children as well as the fact that nearly two-thirds of incarcerated people are located more than 100 miles away from their homes.

another by "mister-or-miss-surname" to emphasize "proper conduct" and "good manners," a proscribed relationality meant to prevent the development of "overfamiliarity."[19]

The conditions under which this art is created begs many questions: What does it mean to make art in spaces where singing to yourself, dancing, sex, laughter, and physical contact of any kind are made into sanctionable offenses? What does art have to say about prisons and the people that live in them? How might art from prisons countermand the everyday relational violences that prisons perpetrate against the incarcerated?

To answer these questions, this chapter explores how visual art objects that come out of prisons are utilized as a political tool to illuminate the conditions of confinement and to create new ways of relating to people that live in Michigan detention facilities. I walk us through the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, which is a program of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan.

The brainchild of curator Janie Paul and her partner Buzz Alexander, the exhibition enjoys a storied, twenty-seven-year history. It debuted in 1996 with 77 works of art by 50 artists at the Women's Huron Valley Detention Facility in Ypsilanti, MI. In the intervening decades, the project has expanded considerably. In 2024, the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons* premiered with 746 pieces of two and three-dimensional artwork by 479 artists from 24 state prisons in Michigan.

Within this context, the exhibition is more than the collection and presentation of art that comes from prisons. It is far more than just "prison art." From collection, to arrangement, to presentation, the curator ideally assumes the form of a witness. The witness observes and

---

[19] I have found the prevalence of pin-up art in prisons as a particularly powerful reminder of the ways in which prisons deprive people of their basic, physical needs like touch and sex.

remembers. The witness may testify. The *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, I show, serves as a kind of testimony. What is at stake for the curator is how the art that she collects and organizes speaks to the audiences that consume the art created by artists in prisons. In so doing, she subverts the relational violences of confinement that only make people in prison relatable based on essentializing caricatures that reduce them to "felons" and "criminals." Instead, through art, curators seek to make people in prison relatable based on our shared humanities as people in the world.

3.1 Art as Testimony

"Witnessing" is a term that was uttered by curators throughout the course my fieldwork to explain the work of collecting art from prisons. As I write in my introduction, the term has a varied history, as it is rendered in psychoanalytic to legalistic terms and does much intrapersonal, interpersonal, and political work. In this chapter, what I seek to emphasize is witnessing as a way of address which is intrinsically tied to the legalistic redress of human suffering.

To explicate the function of witnessing as a legalistic redress of human suffering amongst curators, I must first contextualize the exhibition within a broader history of carcerality. Foucault, in his foundational genealogy of Western penality, provides a context through which I illustrate the stakes attached to the practice of witnessing through the arts in prisons.

Discipline and Punish (Foucault 1995) opens with an extraordinarily gruesome depiction of Damien the regicide's death by exercise of sovereign power, an execution facilitated by burns with sulfur, the pouring of boiling oil into wounds made by pincers twisted into his flesh, and ultimately by repeated attempts at quartering. Foucault's genealogy of punishment notes a radical shift from such bombastic displays of sovereign power to a shift toward what he terms a disciplinary ethos,

characterized by a shift away from the public theatre of torture and toward confinement, prison sentences, and the private disciplining of the "soul" over the body.

This Foucauldian understanding of penality's transformation over time might usefully be built on as such: That the political work of the prison is to induce a societal forgetting. Behind bars, few, besides volunteers, the incarcerated, and employees of prisons, have access to the brick-and-mortar prison proper. The arts, I argue, provide artists in prisons and curators in the freeworld with a political tool by which to preserve and testify to their experiences of incarceration, especially to the violences that would otherwise go unseen, unheard, and, ultimately, forgotten. I stress that witnessing is more than just the happenstance of being present to a given event, but that it is "connected inward toward the internal and psychological, to memory and outward to the communal and sociological, to testimony" (Pakman 2004). As Pakman writes in conversation with the psychoanalysts, "Testimony is never a matter between 'you and me.' With testimony, the witness is able to open private 'memories' in order to make them public, before others who are always a 'third' person, open beyond themselves to a future and potential community of listeners."

This orientation toward futurity is important because testimony crafted through exhibition is not simply the transference of knowledge from insiders to outsiders but about the remembrance of violence, which "implies a political-ethical impulse and appeal aimed at the future" (Krämer 2017, 17). What is at stake in the act of testimony and being witnessed is not just the truth of that utterance, "but the truth of a life," an embodied truth at the heart of the incarcerated person's experiences of confinement (Krämer and Weigel 2017, xii). Indeed, many artists, as we shall see, make various kinds of remarks on their experiences of incarceration through their art, from scathing critiques to gratitude, and very much desire to be witnessed by a viewing public.

Art objects like greeting cards illuminate the conditions of confinement under which artists toil and create. For curators, mass incarceration provides context for the intrapersonal and

interpersonal experiences of incarceration, what it makes possible as well as impossible. Curators are largely aware of the fact that few people have access to prisons, to the art, words, and interactions with presently incarcerated people as they experience confinement in the moment. The exhibition becomes an intentional ground for testimony, a political-ethical impulse, that takes what is hidden in prisons into the open, towards a public in the freeworld.

As I have stated, this chapter demonstrates how the arts are utilized as a political tool to illuminate the lived experiences of incarceration. However, I show, too, the ways in which this process of testifying on the behalf of incarcerated artists is a deeply mediated process. I show that witnessing is a system of values that orients curators to a certain way of thinking about work that is always in tension with traditional values of curation and high art. This is an important tension to illustrate as this tension speaks to the capacity of the arts to both humanize people in prisons as well as to reproduce the very dynamics of exclusion that they seek to push back against.

As Krämer and Weigel (2017) remind us, bearing witness and testifying are actions that "cannot be determined outside of a testimony constellation that encompasses the triad of witness, testimony and addressee and [that it] is furthermore embedded in specific cultural-historical situations and traditions" (x). In this chapter, I speak to a very particular configuration of this triad within a particular sociopolitical context: The curator as witness, the exhibition as testimony, and the gallery goer as addressee within the traditions of Western high art. This configuration, of course, illuminates the ways in which testimony that comes from prison is always moderated by the process of curation and by those who curate. Testimony and bearing witness, are, however, deeply relational practices with varying compositional makeups. In the chapters that I follow, I explore other configurations of this triad, as well as the consequences that are made possible by desires to witness and desires to be witnessed.

I argue that witnessing serves as a system of values by which curators orient themselves in the work of curation and that it is the violences of the prison that they respond to through the organization and presentation of art from prisons. Utilizing ethnographic data collected throughout the process of organizing the exhibition, I show how this approach to art and people undergirds the process of curating, organizing, and presenting artwork from prisons through the genre of the exhibition. In chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," I will examine the relationship between curators and artists in prisons as these politics inform the process of curation in prisons themselves. In this chapter, I show how art is a thoroughly imperfect medium that enables both new possibilities of engagement and exclusion based on the tensions inherent between the practices of curation and witnessing.

Part of the "work" of art is, to quote Heidegger, a process of "*bringing-forth*" (Heidegger 1988), to move from concealment to unconcealment. So, this chapter strives toward two separate but related tasks: First, to illuminate the ways in which art serves as testimony. Second, to induce the role of witness within the reader by highlighting the stories and conditions of incarceration that art objects invariably provoke. To do so, I hope to bring you, the reader, into the world of artmaking that happens in prisons, and all the attendant joys, sorrows, rewards, and pains that artmaking practices make possible in these spaces. I want to walk you through the very long and difficult process of setting up an exhibition of nearly eight hundred pieces of art by nearly five hundred artists in Michigan prisons and to give you a taste of what visual artmaking practices have to say about prisons by utilizing ethnographic data to support this depiction of the *Annual Exhibition*.

3.2 The 28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons

When you walk into the Duderstadt Gallery, you are immediately confronted by walls upon walls of art.

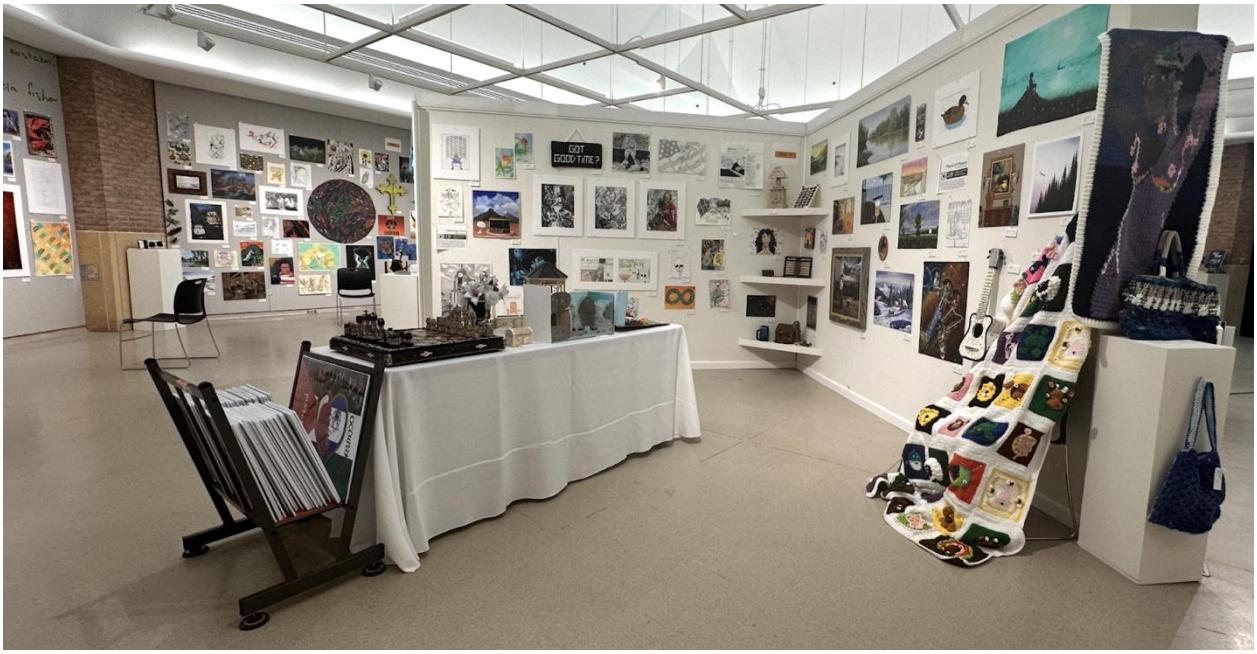


Figure 3.2 The Duderstadt Gallery during the *28th Annual Exhibition*

There are outer walls that comprise the boundaries of the exhibition space itself with two-dimensional pieces of art staggered throughout, delineated in thematic clusters. Small display mounts dressed with three-dimensional art objects like figure trucks, piggy bank cabins, and elaborate abstract structures line these walls. Wooden racks are neatly draped with knitted pieces like blankets and scarves can be found in the corners of the exhibition, too. A large, X-shaped set of walls with shelving where the corners meet sit at the heart of the gallery. The stretch of wall closest to the entrance is the "front wall," a specially reserved piece of real estate for art that curators believe represent the breadth of technique and artistry of that year's featured artists.

Exhibition goers may walk through the gallery to view pieces on each of these walls. The corners of the center wall are stacked with shelves, upon which three-dimensional art sit. Several

bins are scattered throughout the space as well, with matted, shrink-wrapped art that viewers may sort through, pick up, and examine in their hands. Beneath every piece on the wall, and behind every piece of binned art, are stickers with the name of the piece, the artist's name, the mediums utilized, as well as the price of the artwork in question.

Exhibition viewers can purchase the art that they see. The art ranges in price, anywhere from $10 to $3,000 for the *28th Annual Exhibition*. Through the exhibition, artists have an opportunity to sell their art.[20]

How, then, do curators use the exhibition as a space to testify to the conditions of incarceration in Michigan? And how do they seek to induce the role of witness in gallery goers in order to countermand the relational violences of confinement?

They do so by bringing as much of the person behind bars into the gallery as humanly possible: In this section, I provide an overview of two aspects of the exhibition that seek to complement the organization of art objects—artist statements and audio tours.

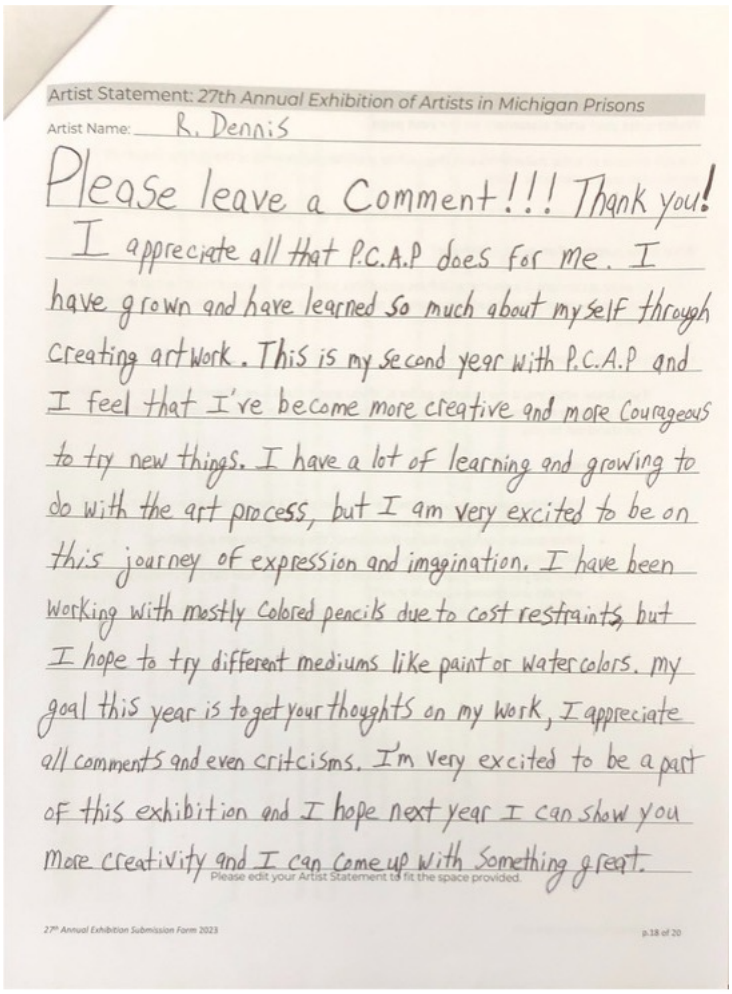
---

[20] They set a base price and, if their piece sells, receive the full amount that they asked for. As I warn artists in prisons, however, the price "on the wall" will be different from this base price. The exhibition is required to add a 6% sales tax and to further inflate the base price by another 6% to provide the Michigan Department of Corrections a cut of the profits earned. This process of monetary exchange is an aspect of the exhibition that I touch on in greater detail in the following chapter.

3.2.1 Artist Statements

Figure 3.3 An excerpted line from an artist statement in the artist's original handwriting

To buttress the centrality of stories, gallery goers have access to documents called "artist statements."



Artist Statement: 27th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons

Artist Name: R. Dennis

Please leave a Comment!!! Thank you!

I appreciate all that P.C.A.P does for me. I have grown and have learned so much about myself through creating artwork. This is my second year with P.C.A.P and I feel that I've become more creative and more courageous to try new things. I have a lot of learning and growing to do with the art process, but I am very excited to be on this journey of expression and imagination. I have been working with mostly colored pencils due to cost restraints, but I hope to try different mediums like paint or watercolors. my goal this year is to get your thoughts on my work, I appreciate all comments and even critcisms. I'm very excited to be a part of this exhibition and I hope next year I can show you more creativity and I can come up with something great.

Please edit your Artist Statement to fit the space provided.

27th Annual Exhibition Submission Form 2023 p.18 of 20

Figure 3.4 A photocopied artist statement[21]

In the summer months, a call for art is sent to artists in prisons, comprised of a packet of documents outlining the ins-and-outs of the exhibition. Amongst these documents is a blank form for the artist statement, which provides incarcerated artists with an opportunity to speak about their art through written word. Many artists use these documents as an opportunity to expound on their thoughts and processes behind the art that they have chosen to submit to that year's exhibition.

[21] Written by Robert Dennis, from the digital archives of the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition28/item/46189

These testimonials by artists influence the choices that curators make in terms of their presentation, as well, which I discuss in further detail in chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition."

Figure 3.5 Computers used to find artists, artwork, and artist statements in the gallery

Within the context of the exhibition, however, the artist statement provides an opportunity to relate to people in prison and the art that they create in novel ways. Not all artists choose to utilize the artist statement and those that do choose to wield them in different ways. By reading through artist statements, you may learn about an artist's intentions and process. Occasionally, you may learn about what brought them to prison or read personal narratives of growth and redemption.

Oftentimes, artists prefer to let their art speak for itself, and they leave their artist statements blank or with minimal information. Others still will use the artist statement to advertise their social media handles for Instagram and Twitter. On one memorable occasion, an artist submitted an advertisement for a podcast produced in the freeworld that he was contributing to while in prison as his art piece. His artist statement was a similarly strategic bid for viewers and sponsorship to audiences in the freeworld.

3.2.2 Audio Tours

Conducted via JPay, a paid telephone service utilized by the Michigan Department of Corrections, a curator from the Prison Creative Arts Project will record a phone call with an artist and upload this conversation to the exhibition's website. By scanning QR codes on select pieces of art throughout the gallery, a gallery goer may listen to an artist speak about their art and their experiences of creating art in prisons as they walk around the exhibition space. This year's exhibition featured 23 audio tours with individual artists about specific pieces that had been accepted into the exhibition.

Figure 3.6 Audio symbols demarcating audio tour pieces on the gallery's floor

3.3 Inducing the Role of Witness

Artist statements and audio tours complement the centerpiece of the exhibition which, of course, is the art. The 28th exhibition featured 746 pieces of art by 479 artists. This staggering amount of art was divided into seven thematic clusters comprised of "graphite and ink," "texture," "place of peace," "interior life," "family and relationships," "play, whimsy, and humor," and "political." These categories across the walls of artwork were delineated by signs displaying the themes in question. Gallery viewers were able to read about these categories in booklets distributed by the exhibition.

In this section, I walk us through these themes and how they were utilized to present this year's art in a way meant to induce the role of witness within the exhibition viewer, to turn art into testimony, and to resist the relational violences of prison that objectify and dehumanize the person in prison.[22] I utilize vignettes from my field research to provide further clarity and context to the themes that were chosen to organize and represent this year's artwork from prisons.

[22] The images below are from the booklet that gallery viewers were able to access throughout the exhibition and keep with them after the fact. Each theme was expounded on in the booklet by a particular member of the curation team. I begin with one of my contributions to the booklet.

3.3.1 Graphite and Ink

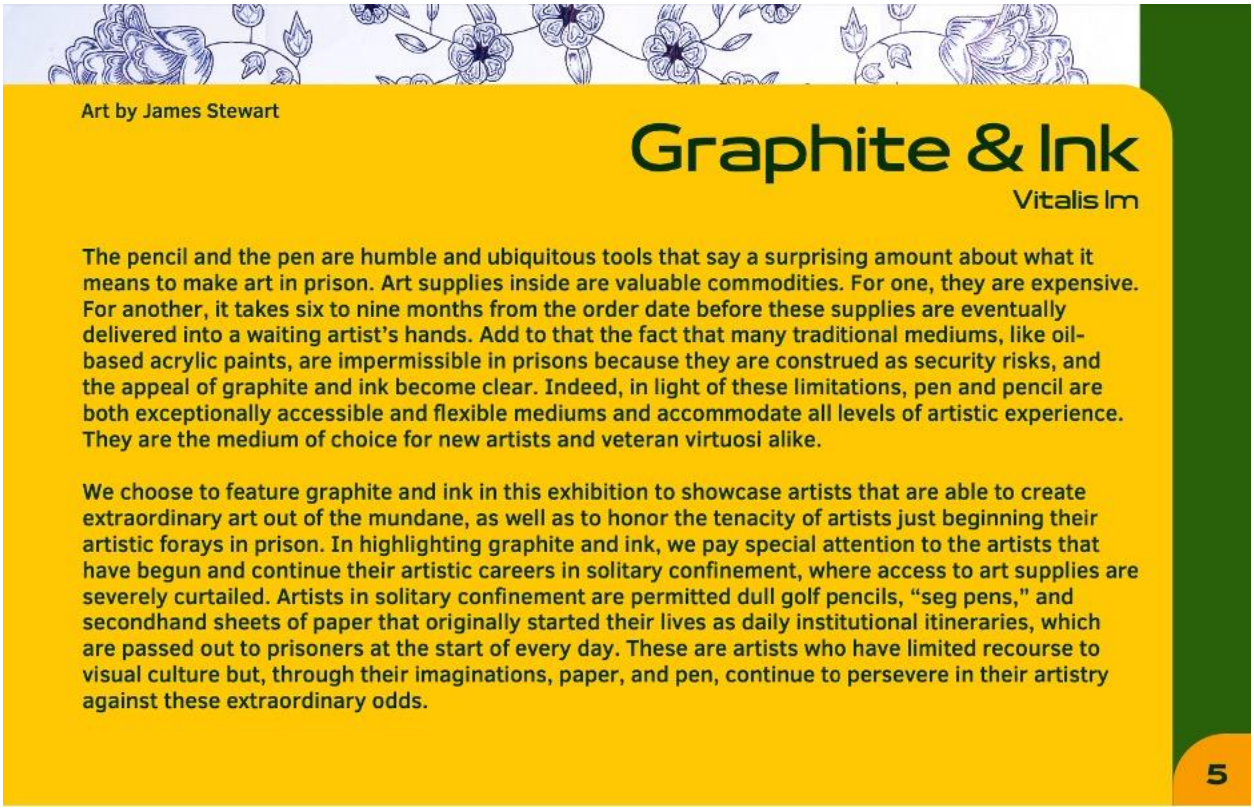


Figure 3.7 Booklet entry on graphite and ink by the author

I recall walking into a prison in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. This time around, the curation team bypassed the bubble entirely. Instead, we entered the facility and went through a side door marked specifically for staff. We went up several flights of stairs, through various winding hallways and combinations of doors that I knew I would never remember the order of coming back out, before landing in a brightly lit, spacious conference room with a large, circular desk.

I very much liked the special activities director at this facility. He was friendly, convivial, and, as we began to drape our jackets and bags on the chairs around the table in the room, offered us coffee, a very welcome offer after an incredibly unwelcome 5:30 AM call time. He brought us through yet another side door into a shared office space occupied by three other guards. In it was an extraordinary sight: A replica model of two solitary housing unit cells. As he poured us coffee, he

explained that these cells were in the office for training purposes, especially for dispersing riots. This, he told us, involves training guards to rush into a cell with minimum damage to the person in the cell and to the officers involved.

I recall that the doors to the cells were quite realistic. They had two sets of holes, one at the level of the navel and one by the foot of the door. These were used to train guards to cuff and uncuff a person's shackles as they were transported in and out of their cells. We were allowed into the mock cell, which was adorned with a bed frame and a fake toilet. It was a very cramped room. The six of us present had to take turns shuffling in and out of the cell to get proper looks at the interior. Although it was very clearly a simulacrum—these "cells" fashioned out of wood were in a literal office space—this first, very limited exposure to the conditions that people in prison are exposed to under solitary confinement continues to rankle my mind.

The presence of these mock cells, while a surprise, made sense. This particular trip was to a maximum level facility. At maximum security facilities, movement for incarcerated people is extremely limited. Many individuals incarcerated at this level of confinement are kept in their cells for twenty-three out of twenty-four hours of the day, with an hour for recreational time. Meetings with incarcerated artists at these facilities—if indeed they happened at all—occurred either with the artist in his cell and the visitor outside by his door or with the artist transported to a cage separate from the SHU, around which the curators would have to crowd to converse with him.

This was one such facility where we were not able to meet with the artists. Instead, we were provided with a manilla envelope filled with sheets of paper. Rather than meeting with the artists in person, we were only able to evaluate their pieces based on the art as it was presented to us. As we sorted through the pieces from this folder, I was immediately struck by the relatively "juvenile" quality of the work. There were no paintings, no pieces using color, and very little technical work like shading. They were all completed on sheets of plain, white computer paper and ink.

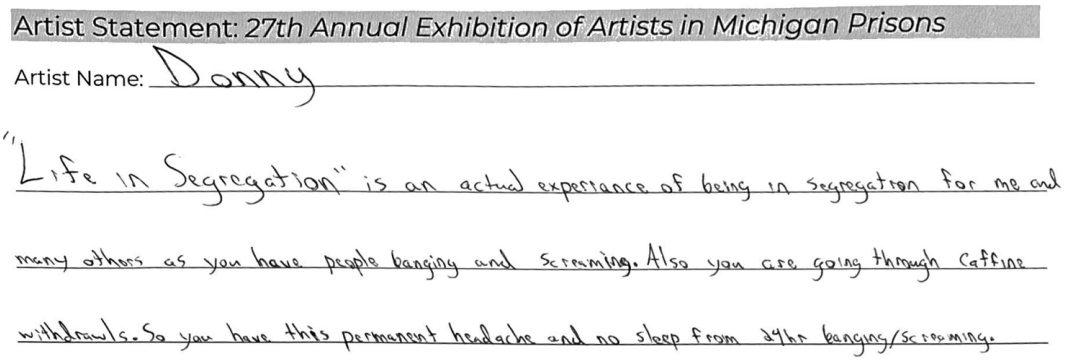
In my interactions with artists, certain mediums provoke strange and dissonant affective qualia. It is impossible, at this point, not to be reminded of conversations with artists as they sit in cages lined with plexiglass with guards keeping an eye on us several paces away when I see pieces that are exclusively comprised of blue ink on white computer paper. In this respect, I am always reminded of a piece by an artist named Donny from the *27th Annual Exhibition* from the previous year. His piece, entitled "Life in Segregation," is Donny's portrayal of his experiences of the SHU.

Figure 3.8 *Life in Segregation* by Donny[23]

As I write in my description of graphite and ink in the exhibition booklet, artists in solitary confinement are severely limited in terms of the material that they are allowed access to. In the SHU, artists are permitted golf pencils, "seg pens," and callout sheets. Seg pens are extraordinarily flexible, "non-lethal" pens supplied to prisons by outside vendors. They are extremely difficult to write with,

[23] From the digital archives of the *27th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons,* https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition27/item/30304.

much less draw and shade with. Access to paper is also restricted. Artists will often submit pieces on the backs of callout sheets, which are essentially daily itineraries that people in prison are provided at the beginning of every morning.


Artist Statement: *27th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*

Artist Name: Donny

"Life in Segregation" is an actual experiance of being in segregation for me and many others as you have people banging and screaming. Also you are going through caffine withdrawls. So you have this permanent headache and no sleep from 24hr banging/screaming.

Figure 3.9 Donny's artist statement[24]

In his artist statement, Donny writes that this is an artistic conceptualization of his experiences in solitary confinement. As he writes,

> Life in Segregation is an actual experience of being in segregation for me and many others as you have people banging and screaming. Also you are going through caffine withdrawls. So you have this permanent headache and no sleep from 24 hr banging/screaming.[25]

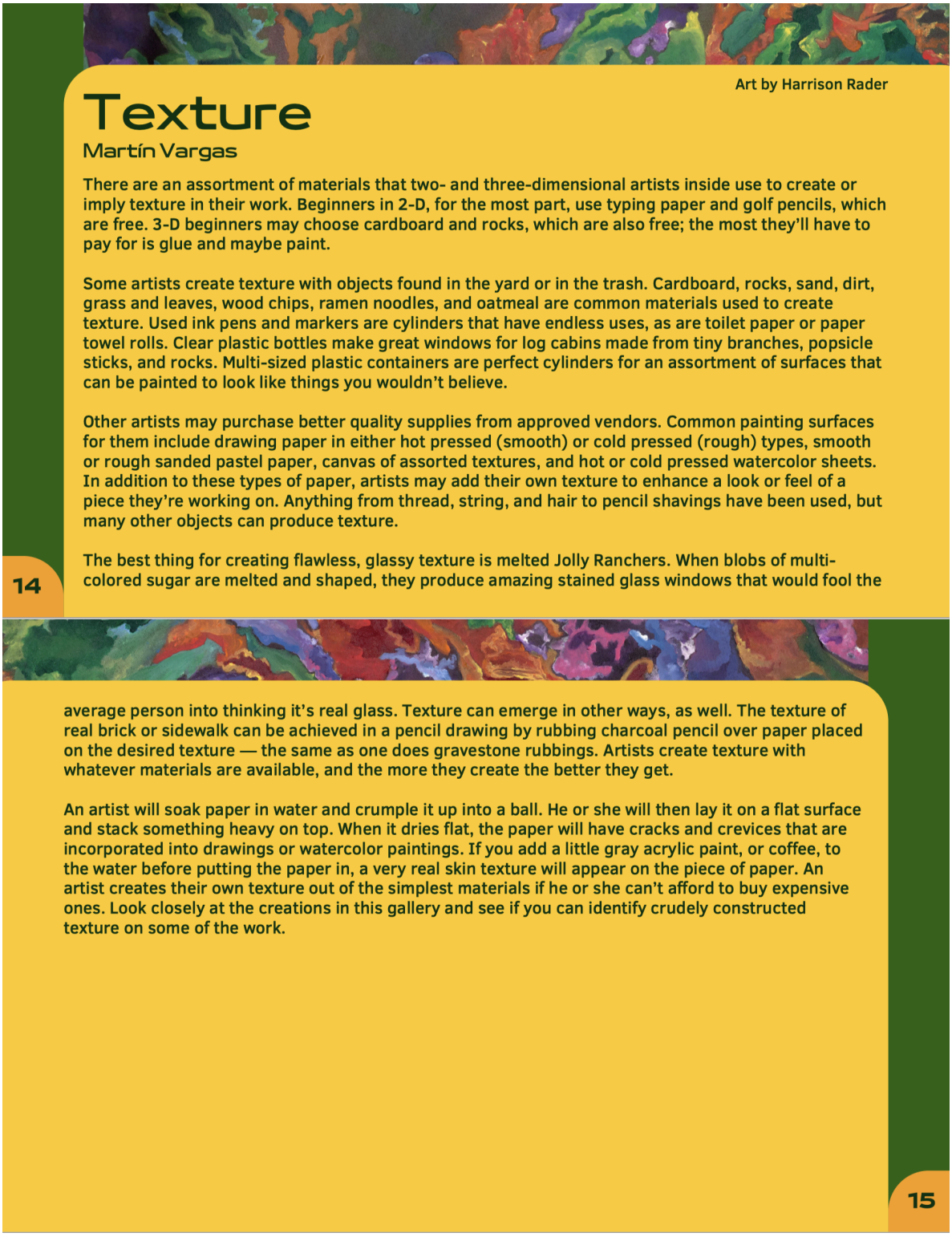
In formally recognizing "graphite and ink" as a category of artwork, the exhibition seeks to illuminate conditions of confinement that are otherwise hidden from view. In so doing, curators use this stretch of wall as a testimony, to induce the role of witness within viewers, to challenge their perspectives about the conditions under which so much art is created, and to challenge perceptions of certain kinds of art as being "primitive" or "underdeveloped" either technically or artistically.

---

[24] From the digital archives of the *27th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition27/item/31487.

[25] The artist statement was transcribed verbatim.

3.3.2 Texture



Art by Harrison Rader

Texture

Martín Vargas

There are an assortment of materials that two- and three-dimensional artists inside use to create or imply texture in their work. Beginners in 2-D, for the most part, use typing paper and golf pencils, which are free. 3-D beginners may choose cardboard and rocks, which are also free; the most they'll have to pay for is glue and maybe paint.

Some artists create texture with objects found in the yard or in the trash. Cardboard, rocks, sand, dirt, grass and leaves, wood chips, ramen noodles, and oatmeal are common materials used to create texture. Used ink pens and markers are cylinders that have endless uses, as are toilet paper or paper towel rolls. Clear plastic bottles make great windows for log cabins made from tiny branches, popsicle sticks, and rocks. Multi-sized plastic containers are perfect cylinders for an assortment of surfaces that can be painted to look like things you wouldn't believe.

Other artists may purchase better quality supplies from approved vendors. Common painting surfaces for them include drawing paper in either hot pressed (smooth) or cold pressed (rough) types, smooth or rough sanded pastel paper, canvas of assorted textures, and hot or cold pressed watercolor sheets. In addition to these types of paper, artists may add their own texture to enhance a look or feel of a piece they're working on. Anything from thread, string, and hair to pencil shavings have been used, but many other objects can produce texture.

The best thing for creating flawless, glassy texture is melted Jolly Ranchers. When blobs of multi-colored sugar are melted and shaped, they produce amazing stained glass windows that would fool the

14

average person into thinking it's real glass. Texture can emerge in other ways, as well. The texture of real brick or sidewalk can be achieved in a pencil drawing by rubbing charcoal pencil over paper placed on the desired texture — the same as one does gravestone rubbings. Artists create texture with whatever materials are available, and the more they create the better they get.

An artist will soak paper in water and crumple it up into a ball. He or she will then lay it on a flat surface and stack something heavy on top. When it dries flat, the paper will have cracks and crevices that are incorporated into drawings or watercolor paintings. If you add a little gray acrylic paint, or coffee, to the water before putting the paper in, a very real skin texture will appear on the piece of paper. An artist creates their own texture out of the simplest materials if he or she can't afford to buy expensive ones. Look closely at the creations in this gallery and see if you can identify crudely constructed texture on some of the work.

15

Figure 3.10 Booklet entry on texture by Martín Vargas

In his explication of texture, Martín highlights the extraordinary resourcefulness of artists in prison: How does one expand one's technique and artistry in spaces where access to artistic material—both technical how-to information as well as material building blocks like paint, fabric, and glass—is severely curtailed? In her book, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, the art historian Nicole Fleetwood (2020) refers to this found-objects quality in art as "penal matter," which refers to "the material conditions of imprisonment, which include extreme restrictions on what incarcerated people can possess" (2020, 42).

Figure 3.11 *Horizon* by Jill Day, coffee and watercolor on canvas[26]

In a trip to Women's Huron Valley, I met with an artist named Jill Day, who spoke to me about her piece entitled Horizon. It was utilized using a mixture of coffee and watercolor on canvas.

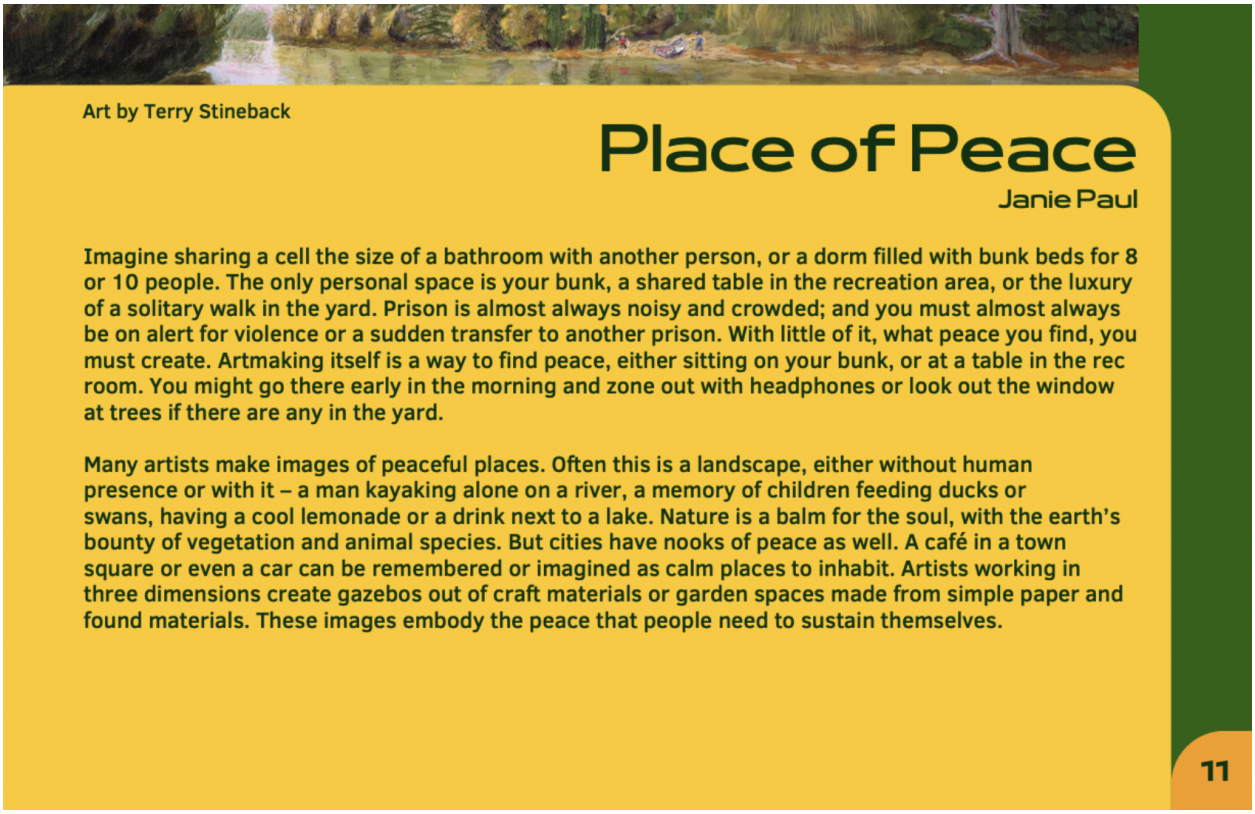
[26] From the digital archives of the *27th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition27/item/30594.

She told me that she had used different concentrations of instant coffee to create the different hues of brown throughout this piece. The use of coffee, she confided, was out of necessity: She had simply run out of brown paint.

As Martín suggests in his entry on texture above, and as Nicole Fleetwood mentions in *Marking Time* (2020), there is an extraordinary drive to create in prisons that lends itself to the use of found, everyday objects in prisons. This is partly due, as it was with Jill Day, out of necessity, as art supplies inside are expensive and may take anywhere from six to nine months to arrive following the placement of an order. As Martín writes, and as I have seen throughout the course of my fieldwork, there is extraordinary artwork to be found out of a dizzying array of mediums like melted down jolly ranchers, geese feathers, and toilet paper mâché. As one artist in prison provocatively asserted to me, "If I had access to the half the material that you had access to out there, man, just think about what I could do given what I've had to do to get to where I am now in here."

There are, naturally, many kinds of limitations that come with a lack of access to art supplies. Many paintings that come out of prisons, for example, are generally very flat. Thick globules of paint to create textured layers takes a tremendous amount of paint that most incarcerated artists cannot afford. The work of many artists in prison is to learn how to creatively move past these limitations. As Fleetwood writes, art like *Horizon* reflects "the material limitations and scarcity of art supplies inside, constraints that some transform into innovative experiments with found objects, ephemera, and state property" (2020, 7). In highlighting this creativity, the exhibition seeks to write against normative ideas of "prison art" that reduce them down to "handicrafts" by showcasing works that resist this temptation to essentialize art from prisons.

3.3.3 Place of Peace



Art by Terry Stineback

Place of Peace

Janie Paul

Imagine sharing a cell the size of a bathroom with another person, or a dorm filled with bunk beds for 8 or 10 people. The only personal space is your bunk, a shared table in the recreation area, or the luxury of a solitary walk in the yard. Prison is almost always noisy and crowded; and you must almost always be on alert for violence or a sudden transfer to another prison. With little of it, what peace you find, you must create. Artmaking itself is a way to find peace, either sitting on your bunk, or at a table in the rec room. You might go there early in the morning and zone out with headphones or look out the window at trees if there are any in the yard.

Many artists make images of peaceful places. Often this is a landscape, either without human presence or with it – a man kayaking alone on a river, a memory of children feeding ducks or swans, having a cool lemonade or a drink next to a lake. Nature is a balm for the soul, with the earth's bounty of vegetation and animal species. But cities have nooks of peace as well. A café in a town square or even a car can be remembered or imagined as calm places to inhabit. Artists working in three dimensions create gazebos out of craft materials or garden spaces made from simple paper and found materials. These images embody the peace that people need to sustain themselves.

11

Figure 3.12 Booklet entry on place of peace by Janie Paul

"Don't get me wrong," an incarcerated artist once told me with a laugh, "I'd rather be free. But, for a little while, I can just be with myself in a way that's different than how it is I usually have to be in here all the time. I can just be myself."

Such a commentary on "escape" and "peace" reorients us to an understanding of these terms that foregrounds the ways in which prisons make experiences of escape necessary and experiences of peace the exception rather than the norm. In my conversations with artists in prison, an unfortunate number of people have felt compelled to preemptively apologize to me when we turn the topic of discussion over toward their art. "I'm sorry about the canvas, I always have to keep it rolled up," an artist said to me, chagrined. "I live with six other bunkies and the only place I can keep this safe is behind the radiator," communicated another.

Despite these restrictions, many artists find refuge in the process of making art and in the act of creation itself. Artists have often commented on how their practice is a form of "escape," particularly from the monotony of prison life. This notion of being with oneself in prison is a striking motif in my conversations with presently and formerly incarcerated artists. However, this sense of peace is always in a strained relationship with the violences of the prison environment. As the artist Janie Paul (2023) writes, it is the overcrowding, the lack of personal space, the precarity of sudden transfers from prison to prison to prison, sometimes across state lines, as well as the other unbounded ways in which prisons facilitate cravings for safety, security, and consistency.

3.3.4 Interior Life

Art by Oliger Merko

Interior Life

Vitalis Im and Martín Vargas

The cultivation of an interior life involves reflecting on one's sense of being. It is an examination of one's self, but also of one's place in the world. Our artists this year explore this concept in stunning detail and explore experiences related to dreams, truth, love, hate, anger, freedom, and existential struggle.

In the theme of interior life, incarceration brings out a similar point of view of the journey even though each artist's individual experience of confinement varies widely. Take the arresting stillness captured by Oliger Merko in *A Beautiful Evening at MTU*, "Doc" Collison's haunting recreation of a classic Wyeth in *Christina's Prison*, and the dialectic between peace and incarceration captured by Michael Dean's *Beautiful Noise*. Note the extraordinary tensions that each piece captures between an internal self and what it means to be in prison.

Even though they are housed in facilities sometimes hundreds of miles away from each other, many artists tackle similar themes through wildly divergent perspectives. Compare and contrast, for example, the depictions of substance use when portrayed through cartoon humor, as in Jefferson "Smitty" II's piece, *'Who's The Victim?' A Rick and Morty Adaptation*, and through the manifest intensity of Evil Ed's piece, *Fighting Relapse*.

Finally, even in depictions of interior struggle, artists always seem to embrace nuance by portraying elusive experiences of hope. Take, for example, Julie Cain's piece entitled *It's Okay*, Ashley Peretiatko's *Blah Blah Blah*, and Kimberly Pappas' *Who's Last on the Phone?* These are all pieces

8

that speak to the existential struggles of being in the world while demonstrating attitudes of acceptance, resilience, and resistance. In highlighting this theme, we show the various ways in which artists bring impactful flavors of nuance to the difficult parts of life, and the ways in which they point us toward the creative, new, and different.

9

Figure 3.13 Booklet entry on place of peace, co-written by the author and Martín Vargas

In *Christina's Prison*, the artist Doc plays with Andrew Wyeth's seminal piece *Christina's World*. In a conversation with Doc about this piece, he said to me, "We want nothing more than to be free." I observed that it was strange, then, that his painting's subject was looking back at the prison—that it looked like she was crawling back toward it. "Yes," Doc responded to me. "That's because prison is a stain on your soul."

Figure 3.14 *Christina's Prison* by Doc[27]

As Doc writes in his artist statement about this piece, "Just as prisoners find it very hard to shed their prison clothes when they are released, Christina looks back at her life and will always find

[27] From the digital archives of the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prions*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition28/item/43666.

the prison she came from forever staining her mind and her past. No one is truly free from prison even when they go home."

I highlight this phrase to note the ways in which the relational violences of incarceration linger in the minds of people even as they leave prison and return home. It is a commentary on the traumatic afterlife of confinement and the ways in which experiences of confinement make it all that more difficult for so many formerly incarcerated people to build up a life for themselves once they are out. Not only do formers have to fight egregious stigmas to struggle for housing, employment, and education in the freeworld, but so, too, do they need to contend with the "stain" that prisons leave on their souls (Sinko et al. 2020; Burch 2021; Miller 2021).

Figure 3.15 *Blah Blah Blah* by Ashley Peretiatko[28]

[28] From the digital archives of the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prions*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition28/item/44134.

In her piece *Blah Blah Blah*, Ashley Peretiatko uses love letters and acrylic on canvas as her mediums to communicate experiences of betrayal and loss. I chose to include this piece in this thematic cluster because it challenged me as a viewer: Do we often think about love and intimacy in prisons, either between people on the inside or with their partners in the freeworld? As a formerly incarcerated artist, together since prison and married to this same partner of over twenty years told me, "Nobody takes prison relationships seriously. Nobody thinks that love that happens in prisons can be real."

In choosing to highlight the theme of "interior life," the exhibition acknowledges the ways in which the art we see deals with extraordinarily complex issues ranging from the complex relationship that many artists have to the prison to universal themes like interpersonal strife and breakups. Much of the "work" that art does in such a setting is to challenge easy, reductionist assumptions about what "prison art" is or entails.

3.3.5 Family and Relationships

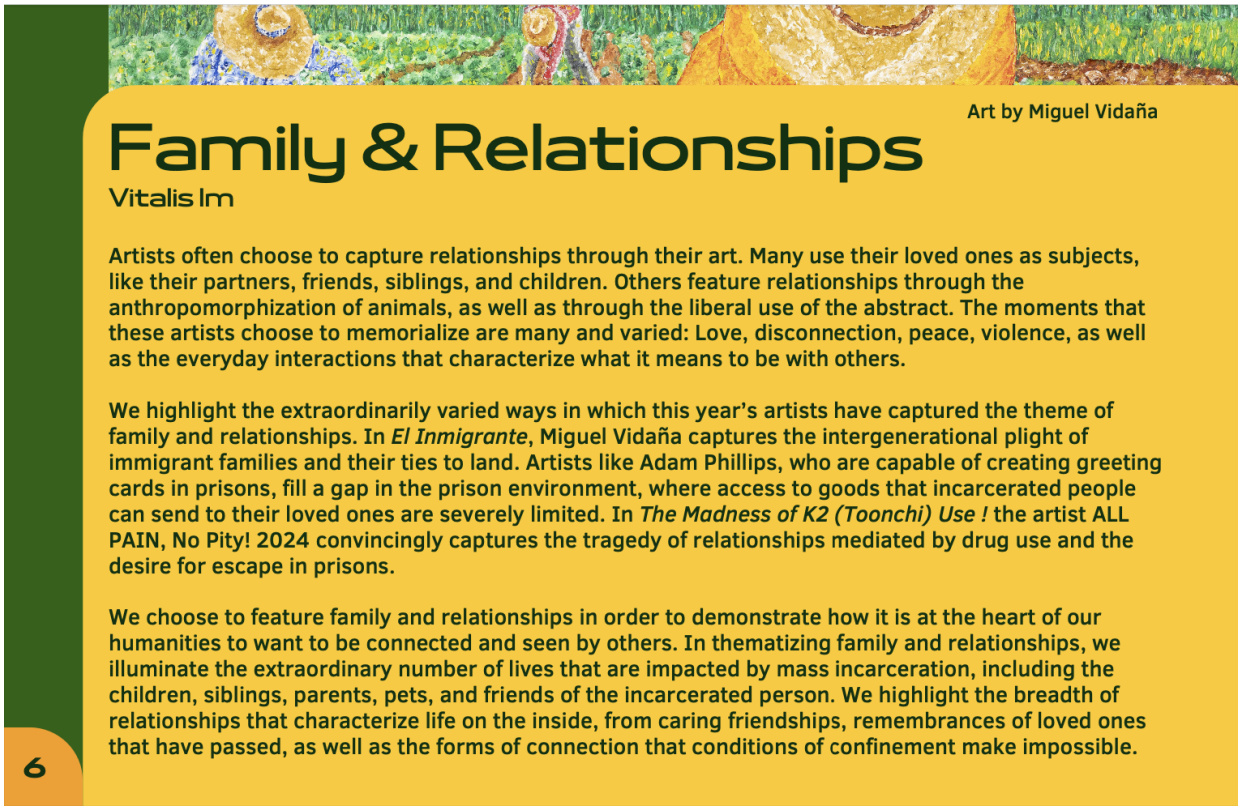


Figure 3.16 Booklet entry on family and relationships by the author

I have always been struck by what prisons make both impossible and possible in terms of the relationships that people in prisons can experience, as well as how art mediates and represents this tension. In this respect, I gestured to the greeting card in the introduction of this chapter as a genre of art in prisons that reminds us of this fact, and how the arts allow incarcerated people to connect with their loved ones in ways that we rarely have to think twice about doing in the freeworld.

During a selection trip for the *27th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, I encountered an artist named Parys Armstrong, who told me about the piece below, entitled *I'll Never Forget* (Figure 3.17). During our conversation, Parys commented how his brother had died over the

COVID pandemic. Despite appeals to the facility, Parys was not able to attend his brother's funeral in person, nor was he able to attend the funeral via Zoom. Parys told me that this piece was how he chose to remember his brother, with an elephant's memory, and to process the grief around his brother's death.

Figure 3.17 *I'll Never Forget* by Parys Armstrong[29]

I include Parys's piece here to remind us of the extraordinarily depraved relational violences that prisons perpetrate on people in prison. That Parys was not able to attend a funeral, even

[29] From the digital archives of the *27th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition27/item/29836.

virtually, is a horrific stain on an institution that claims to rehabilitate. I think of the ways in which art makes these kinds of interactions in prison in the first place, to learn about what is really happening on the grounds, and how tragically commonplace this narrative of disconnection and isolation is for people that live in prison.

During an art selection trip for the 28th, I met an artist who goes by the moniker ALL PAIN, NO PITY! 2024. I reference his piece, The *Madness of K2 (Toonchi) Use!*, below.

Figure 3.18 *The Madness of K2 (Toonchi) Use!* by ALL PAIN, NO PITY! 2024[30]

[30] From the digital archives of the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition28/item/43789.

It might be an unusual move to include such a piece in a category of art that purports to represent families and relationships. However, I chose to thematize this piece in the way that I did to highlight the flavors of relationships that prisons make possible. In our conversation, ALL PAIN, NO PITY! 2024 told me that the inspiration behind this piece was witnessing one of his bunkies going through a psychotic episode induced by the use of K2.[31]

He continued to tell me how drug use is so often facilitated by people's desires to escape the conditions of their confinement. This was painfully reminiscent of many of the comments that I hear from artists, who have told me countless times that art is their way of temporarily easing the realities of their incarcerations. Artists will often tell me that art helps them to "resist" the prison environment, provides them with ways of coping with their confinement, and that it even provides them with recourse to different kinds of futurities, as an "artist" in the world as opposed to a "criminal."

It was a startling moment for me to see alternative modes of being and relating in this environment captured through art. Indeed, whereas greeting cards emphasize what prisons make impossible, *The Madness of K2* shows the various kinds of relationships that prisons make possible, those mediated by psychotic breaks, drug use, and, as this piece hauntingly suggests, surveillance and institutional nonchalance about the general well-being of incarcerated people.

---

[31] K2 is a mixture of shredded planet material that is treated with synthetic compounds similar to THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. K2, I was told, was extraordinarily prevalent contraband at this particular facility.

3.3.6 Play, Whimsy, and Humor

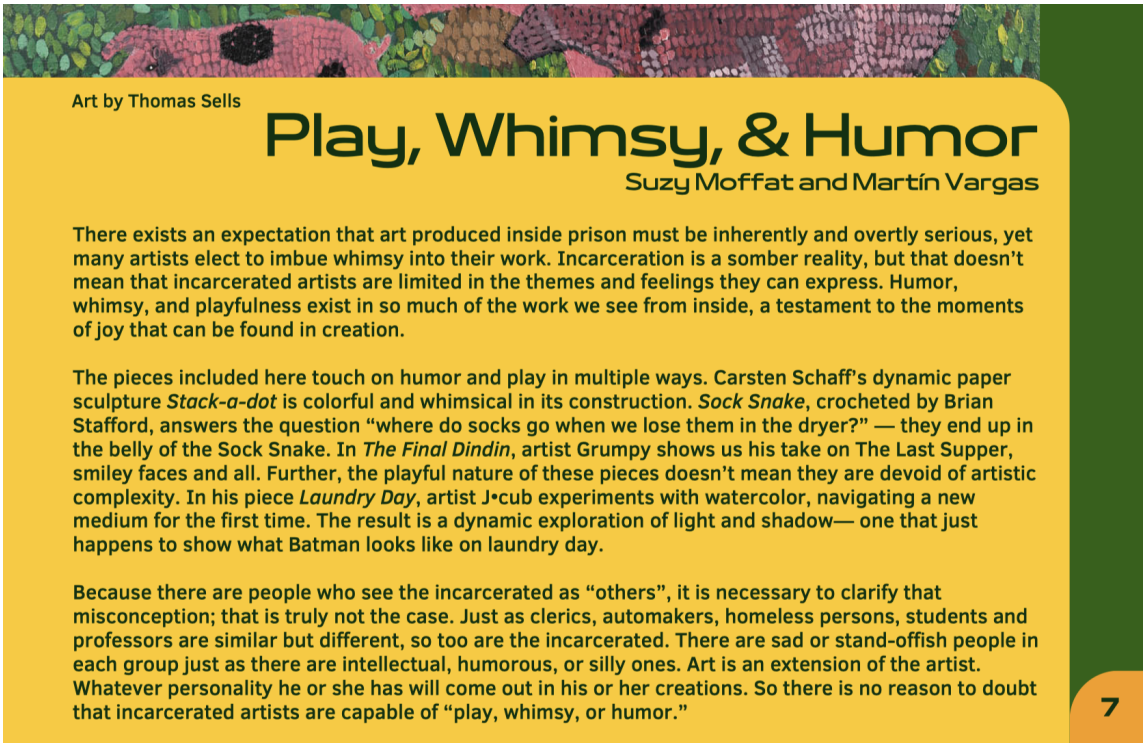


Figure 3.19 Booklet entry on play, whimsy, and humor by Suzy Moffat and Martín Vargas

Play, humor, and whimsy, of course, are often used to subvert expectations. Many artists, like Space Ghost, may use humor as a way to express their political perspectives on the phenomenon of mass incarceration in Michigan, as he does in the piece below entitled *Prison Schematic*.

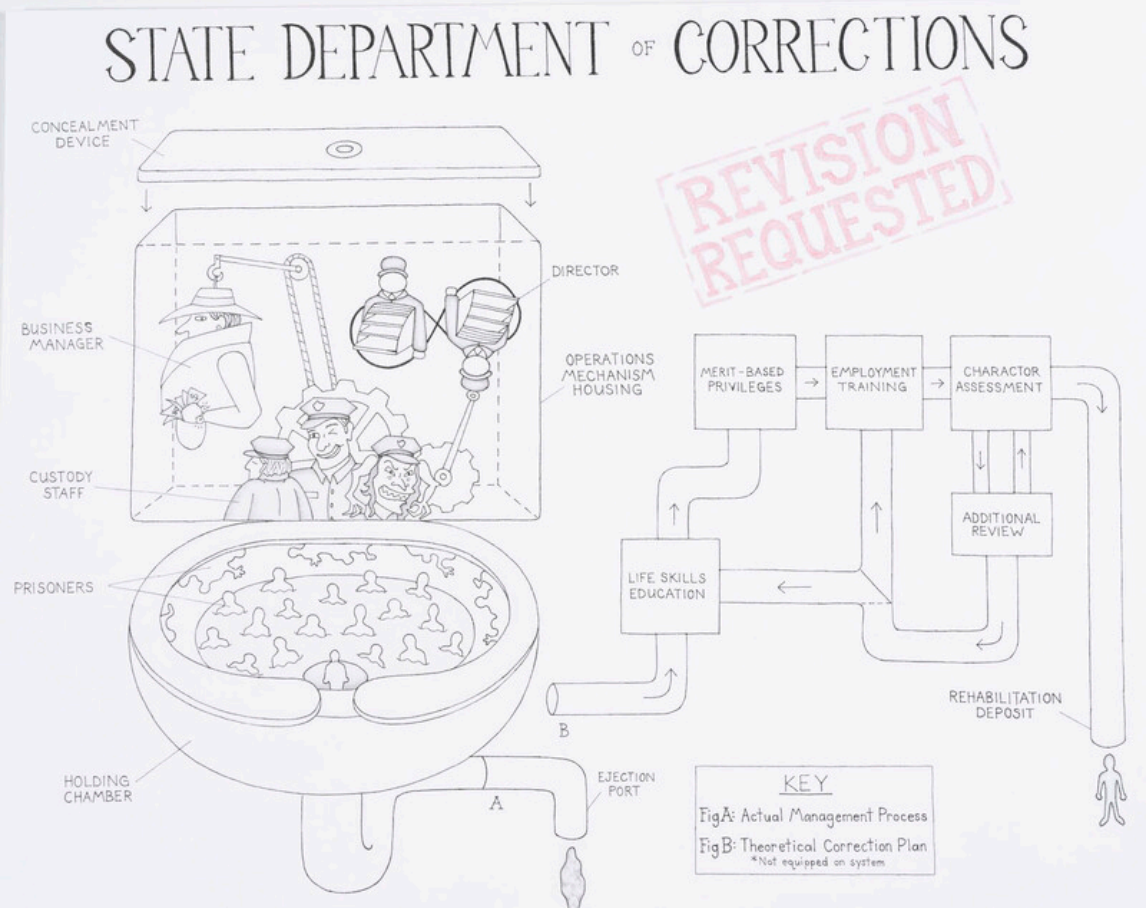


Figure 3.20 *Prison Schematic* by Space Ghost[32]

The capacity to play facilitates possibilities of critique. As one artist shared with me about this capacity of the arts to resist the conditions of his confinement, "It's one of the few things that lets me get up in the morning. I get to define just a little bit of my reality in here whenever I draw or paint."

[32] From the digital archives of the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition28/item/44076.

Figure 3.21 *The Final Dindin* by Grumpy[33]

In highlighting humor, Moffat and Vargas demonstrate the ways in which such art writes against prescribed ideas of what it means to be a person in prison. As they write in their booklet entry,

> Just as clerics, automakers, people living in homelessness, students, and professors are similar but different, so too are the incarcerated. There are sad or stand-offish people in each group just as there are intellectual, humorous, or silly ones. Art is an extension of the artist. Whatever personality he or she has will come out in his or her creations.

By asking gallery goers to engage with humor, viewers are forced to engage with different representations of a shared reality. Humor plays with our expectations at different levels of

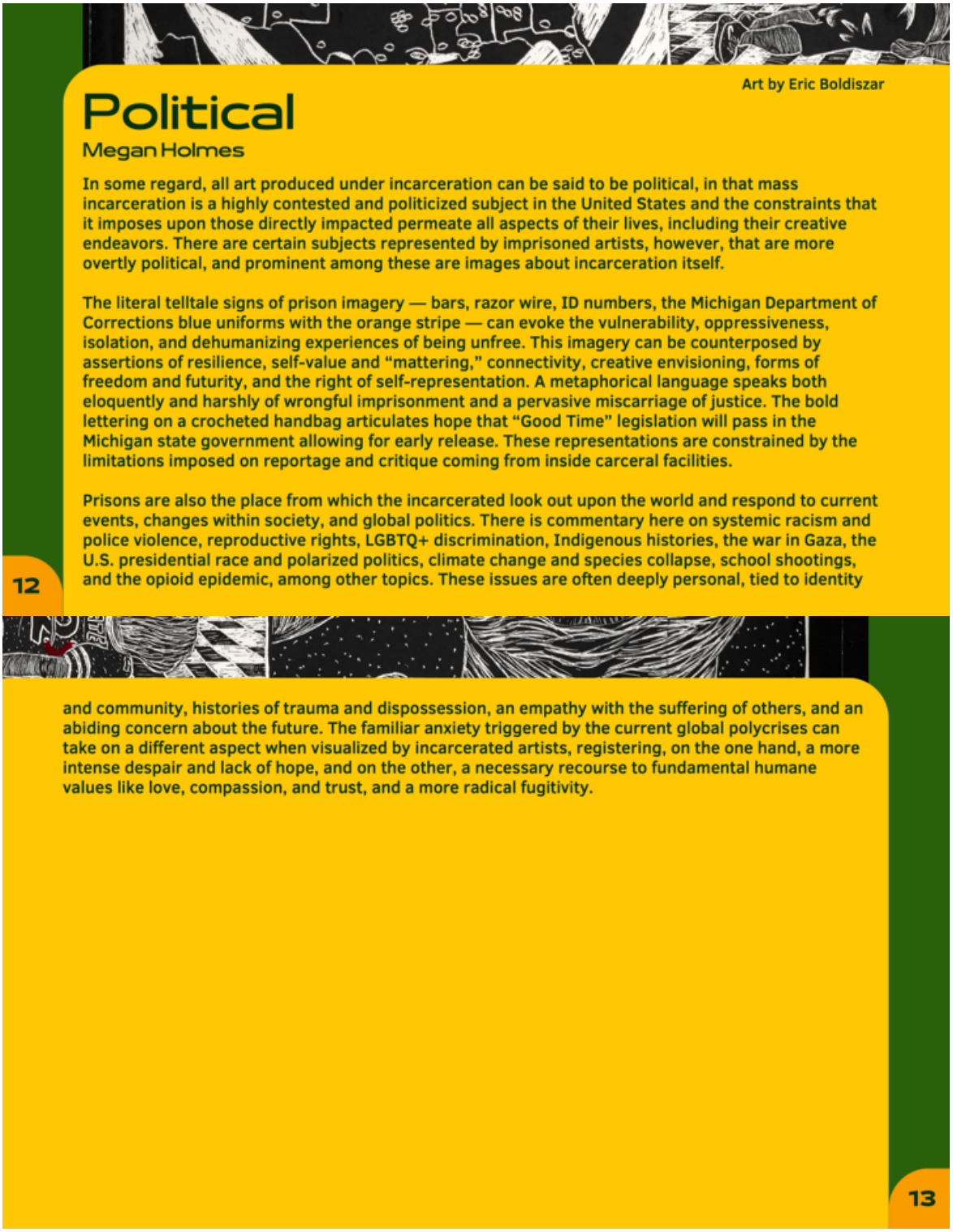
[33] From the digital archives of the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition28/item/43527.

Goffmanian frames, "the culturally determined definitions of reality that allow people to make sense of objects and events" (Shaw 2013). There is, of course, the subject material that artists in prisons ask us to engage with, such as the commentary on incarceration that Grumpy provides us with above. However, in another frame, humor inspires a reorientation of what people expect from "prison artists" in terms of their character and personalities as people.

As a gallery goer during an exhibition tour that I arranged commented, "I can't believe how articulate some of these people are." This statement is a reflection of the relational violences that prisons perpetrate. This is because prisons prevent us from seeing people in prison as articulate, kind, compassionate, and thoughtful. The public perception of people in prison is one-dimensional and of ludircrously lowly.

Humor, as Moffat and Vargas gesture to in their entry about whimsy, provokes an unconscious meta-configuration of our expectations about who artists in prisons are. Humor through art, of course, requires play, but the ability to play requires reflexivity and insight that occasionally surprises viewers who look at this particular flavor of art from prisons.

3.3.7 Political



Art by Eric Boldiszar

Political

Megan Holmes

In some regard, all art produced under incarceration can be said to be political, in that mass incarceration is a highly contested and politicized subject in the United States and the constraints that it imposes upon those directly impacted permeate all aspects of their lives, including their creative endeavors. There are certain subjects represented by imprisoned artists, however, that are more overtly political, and prominent among these are images about incarceration itself.

The literal telltale signs of prison imagery — bars, razor wire, ID numbers, the Michigan Department of Corrections blue uniforms with the orange stripe — can evoke the vulnerability, oppressiveness, isolation, and dehumanizing experiences of being unfree. This imagery can be counterposed by assertions of resilience, self-value and "mattering," connectivity, creative envisioning, forms of freedom and futurity, and the right of self-representation. A metaphorical language speaks both eloquently and harshly of wrongful imprisonment and a pervasive miscarriage of justice. The bold lettering on a crocheted handbag articulates hope that "Good Time" legislation will pass in the Michigan state government allowing for early release. These representations are constrained by the limitations imposed on reportage and critique coming from inside carceral facilities.

Prisons are also the place from which the incarcerated look out upon the world and respond to current events, changes within society, and global politics. There is commentary here on systemic racism and police violence, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ discrimination, Indigenous histories, the war in Gaza, the U.S. presidential race and polarized politics, climate change and species collapse, school shootings, and the opioid epidemic, among other topics. These issues are often deeply personal, tied to identity

and community, histories of trauma and dispossession, an empathy with the suffering of others, and an abiding concern about the future. The familiar anxiety triggered by the current global polycrises can take on a different aspect when visualized by incarcerated artists, registering, on the one hand, a more intense despair and lack of hope, and on the other, a necessary recourse to fundamental humane values like love, compassion, and trust, and a more radical fugitivity.

Figure 3.22 Booklet entry on political art by Megan Holmes

The exhibition attempts to reorganize characterological portrayals of incarcerated people by making space for alternative narratives. For Slug, who definitively orients himself as an artist, and "not a prison artist," he writes against the essentializing work of prisons that continue to define him by his status as an incarcerated person. His interview gestures toward intimate and loving moments of inspiration and familial love, invokes his childhood interests in art, and contextualizes his art piece in a complex tapestry of narrative that works to defend against negatively moralist understandings of "prison art."

In an audio tour interview for the exhibition, the artist Slugs responds to a question about his process of making art in prisons. He says,

> I'm an artist in prison, not a prison artist. At a prison art show, I'd think everything is all drab and sad and utilitarian, but I don't make a lot of art like that … I make a lot of cartoon-inspired stuff … A lot of things that have nothing to do with prisons. SK8-MAG Rooster was an idea inspired by my mom. I used old skateboard magazines, shredded them up, and tried to make a picture out of it. The idea came from an art class in fourth grade, we had to do the same thing with construction paper … My mom has it framed in the kitchen still, to this day. Now that you're a better artist, you should take that idea and run with it. It was the first time I tried to get some shading into it … This was my first time trying to do it. The first time I did an acrylic painting was for PCAP. My first watercolor painting was for PCAP. I definitely like that about PCAP, it gets me trying new stuff.

This interview highlights my fascination with "political art" in prisons. This, of course, is a term that may be operationalized in a variety of ways, as Megan Holmes explicates in her description of this thematic cluster in the exhibition above. It is broad ranging, from commentaries on "current global polycrises" as well as a means by which incarcerated artists counterpose the "bars, razor wire, ID

numbers, the Michigan Department of Corrections blue uniforms with the orange stripe" that they become associated with through what I call the "essentializing work" of prisons, the work of obfuscating one's relatability as a being in the world through the invocation of negative moral character.

Figure 3.23 *SK8-MAG Rooster* by Parker "Slug" Ayers[34]

In invoking political art as a category, curators seek to draw attention to the artists that I have spoken to in prisons, who have emphatically communicated their desires to no longer be seen

[34] From the digital archives of the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition28/item/43576.

as an "inmate," their inmate numbers, or by their jumpsuits. While I gesture toward the potentialities of the art to serve as a technology of self in chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," here I show the ways in which the exhibition attempts to restore this relatability to people in prison by foregrounding values, as Megan Holmes writes in her booklet entry above, like "love, compassion, and trust, and a more radical fugitivity."

3.4 The Spectacle of Art

What I have sought to stress here are the ways in which artmaking practices create new ways of relating to people in prison. This inability to relate to the incarcerated person has important historical roots.

The spectacle of sovereign torture, as it was with Damien the regicide's execution by quartering, results in a "confused horror" that "was always ready to invert the shame inflicted on the victim into pity or glory" (Foucault 1995, 9). Rather than articulate the absolute power of the sovereign, the public spectacle of torture induces experiences of shame and sympathy for its victims that threaten to rupture the capacity of the sovereign to hold and to contain. It is, in fact, the visibility of the body that risks the potential inversion of punishment's aim to quell. Punishment, instead, becomes "a hearth in which violence bursts again into flame" (9). The evolution of penality's efficiency, Foucault argues, is marked by punishment—as well as the obfuscation of the body—becoming the most hidden part of the penal process (9).

Invoking Foucault, I argued in the beginning of this chapter that the political work of the prison is to induce a societal forgetting. Here, I build on this argument by positing that this disappearing of the body from public view effectively disappears opportunities for *relating* to that body. This is the risk of the public spectacle, that a public will relate to the victim in a manner that

makes punishment, and the power behind that punishment, untenable. Strikingly, Foucault writes that punishment then "leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness" (9). As such, the victim of punishment himself, as a subject with the potential to be related to—and, indeed, to potentially be seen as something more than the crime with which he has been branded—enters that very realm of abstracted consciousness, too.

In her book, *Making Art in Prison: Survival and Resistance*, Janie Paul (2023), co-founder of the *Annual Exhibition*, speaks to forms of relating that visual artmaking practices in prisons make possible, between people in prison as well as between people in the freeworld and incarcerated people, as well. Curators like Paul are exceptionally attuned to this inherent unrelatability of the incarcerated person. They understand that very few freeworlders have had opportunities to interact with incarcerated people while they are confined in prison. The concept of witnessing orients them to a certain set of values. Their work in prisons is defined as a responsibility.

"We have to use this art to say something about prisons," one curator remarked to the group at large. "Otherwise, what's the point?"

To do so, curators attempt to turn art into testimony, enliven the process of making art in prisons, and bring as much of the forgotten body of the incarcerated artist by registering remnants of their bodies through the sounds of their voices through audio tours, their perspectives, character, and personalities through the presentation of artist statements, as well as through the handwriting of incarcerated artists through quotes sampled from artist statements, scattered throughout the walls of the gallery.

Witnessing as a curatorial practice attempts to countermand the work that prisons do to disappear the ability to relate to people in prison. In so doing, gallery goers are encouraged to think in ways that are counterintuitive to what I termed the essentializing work of prisons. People in

prison, curators argue through the organization of art, have senses of humor, families and pets in the freeworld, and toil under conditions of precarity, violence, and risk. In presenting art objects under such themes, curators attempt to relocate the public's ability to relate to a body that has been confined and hidden from sight, to restore a Heideggerian capacity of *being-with-others*, through what might usefully be thought of as a spectacle of art.

However, despite this collective, curatorial emphasis on the voices and experiences of incarcerated artists, the reader and the gallery goer are inevitably removed from prisons and the artists that reside in them. There is a limitation to what the exhibition as a genre can do to countermand this aspect of relational violence. As a result, curators must invariably work with and lean into the disembodied objectification of people in prison and their art. In the section that follows, I begin to deconstruct the exhibition as a space of testimony by demonstrating the fraught realities inherent to the process of curation, particularly as they stand in tension with the humanistic desire to recognize the voices of incarcerated artists, and what these limitations suggest about the limitations of art to represent people's experiences of incarceration.

3.5 The Politics of Binning

Figure 3.24 The Duderstadt Gallery being prepared for the *28th Annual Exhibition*

I have elucidated how curators testify and mediate the testimonies of incarcerated artists through the *Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*. In what follows, I explain the ways in which curators bear witness to the experiences of incarcerated people as they simultaneously curate their art. I demonstrate the ways in which this attitude of witnessing sits in tension with traditional curatorial dynamics and regimes of artistic evaluation, as well as the ways in which these two sets of values and orientations toward art and people inform one another.

I argue that rather than countermand curatorial practices, witnessing as a set of values produces new forms of evaluation that both produce new forms of engagement and disengagement. To contextualize this argument, it is important to understand the exhibition as a genre, which the curator Peggy O'Neill argues is always an ideological form. As O'Neill (2008) writes, exhibitions are

"complex expressions of persuasion, whose strategies aim to produce a prescribed set of values and social relations for their audiences" (16). As such, it is important to recognize the ways in which practices of curation are ultimately ideological and how these ideologies may be in concordance or conflict with artists and prisons and even amongst curators themselves, a tension that I explore in this section.

As Bourdieu reminds us, the value and meaning of art is not determined by the artist that creates it. It is, instead, determined by an entire set of agents engaged in the process of doing art, such as curators, critics, and publics. As he argues, what is at stake is not only a "world view but also a vision of the art world" and that through these various engagements, actors "participate in the production of the value of the artist and of art" (Bourdieu 2002, cited in O'Neill 2008, 15).

This section shows the various strands of competing ideologies that inform the organization of an exhibition. For, long before the gallery can be assembled and made presentable to a viewing public, the artwork itself needs to be organized. Following the art selection trips that happen at all twenty-five state prisons in Michigan, which I discuss in chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," the art that we curate from artists in prison are kept and stored in a studio until it is ready to be sorted through. The process of organizing this artwork for the 27th exhibition in 2023 was known as the second pass, a three-day weekend where curators would gather together to make sense of the art that they had collected from September to December of the previous year. For the 28th exhibition in 2024, the second pass was revamped into a weekend called the exhibition design meeting, a marked transition away from the values of the second pass informed by the concept and practice of witnessing and testimony.

I start with the former, the second pass from the 27th exhibition, to lay out necessary context for the latter. By discussing the second pass, I demonstrate the ways in which curators are

informed by and attuned to ways of thinking about art from prisons in the tradition of the "fine arts." Many of the curators that participate in the art selection process possess BFAs and MFAs, have received training at prestigious schools of fine art, and, naturally, come to think about the arts from the perspectives imbued by this background and training.[35]

Curators would gather several weeks before opening day in an art studio to take a "second pass" at all of the artwork accepted for the 27th, an arduous process of sorting through nearly eight-hundred pieces of two and three-dimensional art objects. In the second pass, the initial process was largely about organizing hundreds of art pieces into two kinds of categories: "Bin pieces" and "wall pieces." The monikers are straightforward: An art object deemed to be a wall piece goes up on the exhibition's walls; on the other, art deemed to be a bin piece goes into the various bins laid out throughout the gallery.[36] The second pass also served as an opportunity to decide what pieces might be removed from the show entirely.

Art that hangs on a wall is simply more visible than it would be sitting in a bin. As a curator noted, the wall is typically considered "prime real estate" for sales. Pieces are typically distributed in similar relation throughout the years, with 20% of pieces in bins, 50% on the walls, and the remaining 30% in various "zones" throughout the exhibition space, which are comprised of tables and various kinds of mounts for three-dimensional pieces, like knitted blankets. In this section, I show how the politics of binning exemplifies the tensions between curatorial dynamics that privilege

---

[35] I refer the reader to Appendix C for more information about the curation team.

[36] In terms of binning and walling, there is a clear hierarchy: Wall pieces are more likely to be seen because they have the luxury of being in full view of gallery goers at all times. Bin pieces, on the hand other, require people that visit the gallery to shuffle through bins and will typically only do so if they have time after looking at what is on the walls.

understandings of fine art and the humanistic desire to care for the suffering, stories, and personhoods of the artists with whom the curators work.

Practically, binning is unavoidable simply because the gallery cannot accommodate 645 works of two and three-dimensional art on its walls. From the perspective of using the exhibition as a political platform, however, the very notion of an "exhibition" carries with it certain kinds of understandings of what constitutes "art" which makes binning equally inevitable from a curatorial stance. This politic is complicated by the fact that the curation team is already a veritable melting pot of people that have different tastes, expectations around art, and standards about what does and not belong on the wall. It is a melting pot that inevitably turns into something of a pressure cooker over the course of a three-day weekend.

As I remarked to a colleague after this year's exhibition design meeting, "I think this is just one of those situations where you have to accept that you're going to be both annoying and annoyed." Every member of the group has strong opinions about the art we preside over, which pieces do and do not belong in certain themes, what is best representative of a particular kind of technique or artistry generally. More than the art itself, many discussions are informed by the interactions that we have had with artists about their pieces during our forays into prison. There is a certain kind of fondness and aggression that comes with defending a particular piece due to a relationship we may have had with the artist behind it.

There is something crucial at stake in the question about the categorization of art because implicit within any act of presentation is a question of how it *ought* to be done. Exhibitions need to be curated and presented with care so as to be legible as legitimate. The exhibition, like convincing testimony, "requires an auditorium that trusts the witness and constitutes his speech as 'true speech', as testimony, in the first place" (Krämer 2017, x). To develop testimony that will be perceived as

legitimate or truthful in the context of an exhibition requires curation, which itself denotes and implies the need for pruning and exclusion. If we parallel the exhibition to an act of testimony about its artist's lived experiences of incarceration, how does the curator convince its viewers that the experiences that they mediate through the exhibition constitutes "true speech" worth considering?

The answer to this question lies, in part, to the curator's appeal to taste, as to what constitutes "good" art worth walling. The exhibition, to be taken seriously, must be perceived as a "real" exhibition, not simply a receptacle of "prison art," which has its own set of unfortunate connotations. The politics of binning is brought to life in the language that curators will sometimes use to object to a piece being a wall piece or defending a piece from being a bin piece. Sometimes, it is a practical choice: A piece of art, like a very lightly sketched piece in graphite, is better suited for the bin. Whereas such a piece would get "washed out" on the wall—overwhelmed by the gallery's lighting, not contrastive or "strong enough" to be seen at long or moderate distances—it could be seen up close and handled by a gallery goer in a bin, which would increase engagement with the piece as well as potentially increase its sales value.

While curators repeatedly emphasize that "a bin piece doesn't equal a bad piece," much of the language around binnable art does often harken back to a perceived deficiency of the pieces in question. Curators will refer to pieces worth binning as pieces that "should" be binned and will often point to their "underdeveloped" technical or artistic components as justification for binning them. Oftentimes, the language in these conversations around binnable pieces suggests a general distaste for particular kinds of art.

In such conversations, the exhibition as a genre will also be invoked to justify the binning of a particular piece. For example, I once jokingly commented that we see a lot of paintings and sculptures of lighthouses from men's prisons and wondered out loud about the hidden symbology

of these works. This comment, however, was very quickly taken up by other curators to discuss the oversaturation of particular kinds of themes in that year's collected art. There are many recurrent genres of art that come up throughout the course of this work, like "tattoo art" and "pin up art." There were many pieces that included glitter from the women's facility as well as "commercial art" pieces that featured characters from various kinds of anime and video games that invoked similar kinds of reactions from the curation team.

Despite the fact that tattoo art, subjects like skulls and eyeballs, and pinup pieces are a very real part of the artistic culture in prisons, curators are cautious to highlight this as they fear reproducing stereotypical associations of prisons and the people in prisons. Citing Foucault's "carceral archipelago" and the tendency of freeworld people to "monitor the behavior of those we have deemed criminal," Ashley Lucas (2013) observes the ways in which associations with crime pervade associations with art made in prisons. As she argues,

> Specific artistic genres become coded with what many popular audiences expect of prisoners … Writing from inside prisons is read almost exclusively as nonfiction or as thinly veiled confession about the harsh realities of prisoners' lives. . . Theatrical performance by the currently or formerly incarcerated for outside audiences can invite a kind of voyeurism—a look at people who are most often hidden from us and a chance for spectators to evaluate the appearance, speech, and movement of people who have already been publicly judged. (136)

The exhibition as a genre, as well as an underlying anxiety about constituting its legitimacy through the process of organizing art, is often implicitly invoked through comments like, "I don't think we want to show an entire wall that's just full of eyeballs" or a question along the lines of, "Is this eyeball really the best representation of all of the eyeballs that we have?" Such language, either about

the oversaturation of pieces or the relative artistic merits of a given piece, inevitably ties back to the gallery as a performative space, which has stakes in terms of how it is interpreted by a viewing public, both in terms of its legitimacy as a "real" exhibition, but also in terms of the kinds of messaging that the presentation of art sends about prisons and the culture of art inside.

I highlight these anxieties because there are implications to what it means to invite a general public to scrutinize art created by artists in prisons, people who have already been judged and deemed unfit to live in the freeworld. The work of legitimating the exhibition as a genre is to invite the viewing public to walk away with different perspectives about people in prison. The underlying anxiety is one of reproducing the very relational violences that essentialize "prison art" as less than and the artists that create them as equally wanting.

I wish to clarify, now, how the exhibition is explicitly informed by the political and ethical implications that come with the desire to bear witness to the conditions of confinement under which art is created in prisons. From the perspective of a witness, curators seek to highlight the "humanities" of artists in prisons, which is a set of values oriented around several practical criteria of judgment. This, of course, is sometimes at odds with what a more "authentic" organization of art might look like, as it arguably might be with the presentation of a "wall of eyeballs." What I wish to show are the ways in which judgment about art pieces is informed by an artist's experiences of incarceration and the stories that accompany art objects that come from prisons.

Broadly, I argue that the curator is informed by the values of witnessing when they contextualize a piece of art with the artist that created it in prison. For example, many curators seek to reward artists who "take risks" and "put themselves out there," especially first-time artists in the exhibition, "even if the art doesn't look good." The goal for many is to help people in prison develop an identity as an artist. Such a perspective ties into an understanding of art as rehabilitative

and ethical in the Foucauldian sense, as an act that provides people with direction and purpose at a period of their lives where they have very little resource to those things.

In short, what matters from this perspective of witnessing is the story behind the piece and the artist behind the art. This sensitivity to personhood is exemplified by how curators are attuned to the backgrounds of artists. As one curator commented of an artist whose piece we were contemplating removing from the exhibition entirely, "This guy is really old with no one on the outside." This brief insight into the man's life, which evoked empathy and pity, ultimately swayed us to keep the piece in the exhibition. As this example highlights, there are various kinds of criteria, both spoken and unspoken, that curators utilize to determine whether a piece is walled, bin, stays, or goes.

Such questions include: How long has an artist been participating in the exhibition? There is a difference in standards and expectations amongst the curation team for a first-year artist as opposed to an artist in their fifth of seventh year of participation in the exhibition. Another question might be: What level facility were they on when they created this art? Curators are deeply attuned to the fact that prisons with varying levels of security come with correlative restrictions on the supplies that artists have access to.

A formerly incarcerated curator, Martín, provided the team with an example of a first-time artist that submitted "hand turkey art" for his first time: "It's just so important to understand the kind of message that we send someone by taking a piece of art like that. It's encouragement to grow, validation that you would never get otherwise." Stories like these are often used to resolve tensions between curators that center on debates about aesthetics. For example, if a call to "bin it" is made by one curator, another curator who spoke to the artist that created that piece might intercede with a story about the emotional import of the piece's subject, the fact that the artist is a first-time artist, or

that this artist was experimenting with a new technique—taking a risk—as an already established artist in the exhibition.

Stories, like testimony, are, in fact, central to the process of curating artwork in prisons, a dynamic that I speak to in the following chapter. Stories bring context to art, particularly where they were made and how they were made in the context of the prison. Such narratives are also central to the ways in which curators determine wall and bin pieces and which pieces they feature on the front wall. Stories are so central to the process that it might be useful to think of witnessing as an economy of stories. As with any economy, certain people have more or less access to these narratives than others. These stories come from curators who have a pre-existing relationship with the artists in question. Perhaps they attended an art selection trip where they managed to have a memorable conversation with an artist about their piece. Certain curators have longstanding relationships with long-time artists, especially curators who have been collecting art in prisons over a period of years or even decades.

This relative access to stories speaks, however, to the difficulties inherent to curation in the context of art that comes from prisons. Conversations that happened several months ago may be difficult to recall, curators who have relationships with certain artists may or may not be present at the second pass, and curators may not have the same experiences speaking to an individual about their art. The stakes behind this access are telling, especially for pieces of art where the message behind the piece is not necessarily obvious or foregrounded in the art itself.

For example, I recall discussing the merits of a piece plastered with various kinds of sports logos with the curation team. My vote was to bin it: It felt commercial and relatively unartistic. A curator chimed in to remark that she had spoken to this particular artist. She said that the piece was a memorial piece to his father, who had recently passed away. It was about the memories that this

particular artist had about going to see games by these particular teams with his dad as a child. As a result of this story, the curation team chose to place this particular piece on the wall.[37]

Finally, certain mandates supersede all others. Art construed as "security risks" by the Michigan Department of Corrections for example, are binned. These are often pieces that portray prison guards in overtly negative ways. One such piece that curators perseverated about from this year's exhibition was a painting of an incarcerated man in shackles with a noose around his neck. While artistically striking and compelling in its message, we chose not to feature it in publicity for the exhibition, nor did we choose to hang in on the front wall of the exhibition. We chose to bin a piece about Palestine due to a similar logic. As one curator observed, "If we keep it on the wall, that's all everyone's going to be talking about." Whatever one's sympathies regarding this particular issue, I agreed wholeheartedly with this same curator when she commented, "It'll distract from our message."

I provide this background, of the politics of binning as I encountered them in the second pass for the 27th exhibition, to provide a larger context for the 28th's approach to organizing and presenting the artwork in the rechristened exhibition design meeting. For the *28th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, Arts Programming Coordinator Emily Chase and the head of the curation team offered a novel approach for organizing the artwork in the exhibition space. The stakes of this approach lie in its capacities to diversify the ways in which art that comes from prisons is organized and presented. This is what I turn to now.

---

[37] Despite the fact that gallery goers may not be privy to this reasoning or the stories behind all of the art in question, I simply note here the centrality of the story in determining whether or not a piece is placed on the wall or in the bin.

3.5.1 The Exhibition Design

In a large, spacious conference room, a group of volunteers laid out all 746 pieces of art for the upcoming exhibition.

Figure 3.25 Emily Chase's grounded approach to the organization of art

In the 27th, curators essentially took turns holding up various pieces while everyone exclaimed their votes of either "bin it!" and "wall!" In the 28th, Emily chose to take an approach that would invite the curators into this body of work in a more intimate fashion. Large sheets of barrier paper, pieced together to form neat rows interspaced with gaps to walk between, were placed on the floor. Hundreds of two-dimensional pieces of art were neatly littered on top, while hundreds of three-dimensional pieces of art were placed on nearby tables or draped over chairs. Our task as

the curation team was to examine the art in the room "to identify common themes, topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly across the body of collected work."

We were also tasked to propose "anchor pieces" for each wall, an "approach that allows for organizing a large amount of art into cohesive, related groupings that we can use to anchor each wall/area in the gallery." For Emily, this approach to organizing and presenting art is purposefully rooted in a qualitative methodology known as grounded theory, an approach by which data informs the formulation of theories, hypotheses, and directions for research. This grounded approach was taken to "allow the body of artwork to lead an intentional design of the exhibition" and because it is a "flexible, responsive approach that allows us as curators interpretively plan the exhibition by responding to the artwork, artists statements, and other things."

Over the course of two hours, curators walked throughout the space to acquaint or reacquaint themselves with the art in the room. They took notes of the various themes that appeared to them throughout the course of their relating to the works in the space. We came back together to create a preliminary list of themes and ideas. Many of these thoughts were later paired down, combined in some fashion, removed entirely, and finally solidified into the nine categories of art featured in the previous section of this chapter.

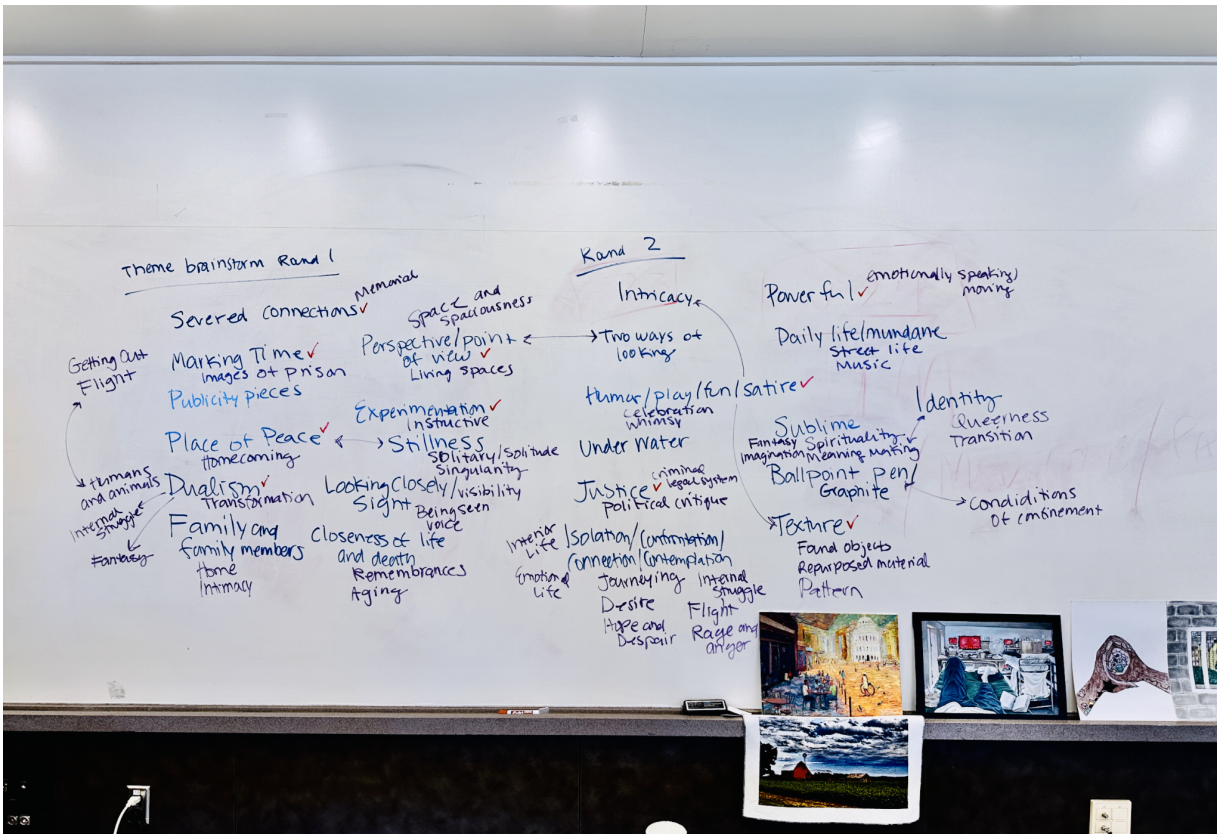


Figure 3.26 Brainstorming themes proposed by the curation group

Unlike at the second pass, the exhibition design meeting was intensely focused on bringing to life the relational nature of art in prisons. That is to say, curators emphasized two aspects of the process that they wanted to emphasize for gallery goers: First, to have audiences understand how the art was collected and organized; second, to have audiences understand the conditions of confinement under which this art is produced. There were long discussions about how to both thematize the art and bring these themes to life for viewers. This is how the exhibition booklet and themes from the previous chapter came to life.

In many ways, I found this process to soften the often-times more brutalist approach of the second pass. This was particularly aided by the expansion of the curation team to include undergraduate students from the University of Michigan. This was an intentional attempt to

diversify the organization and presentation of the exhibition by Emily. In a conversation with me, Emily emphasized the importance of including curators with different kinds of artistic backgrounds—as well as people without arts backgrounds at all—in order to provide the curation experience with broader points of views.

She stressed that while it was important to have artists on the curation team, that standards of Western high art should not be the only means by which art is evaluated. She commented on the ways, too, in which having newer and younger voices join the process of curating artwork helped to shake up old curatorial dynamics. For example, younger students not embedded within the institution were more likely to challenge ways of organizing art without fear of challenging the "old guard" in ways that newer curators, who are embedded within the organization as employees, were. Many of these students identified as queer, did not necessarily have formal art training, and were heavily invested in the ideals of abolitionist politics. The booklet and the categories of art that were explicated in the previous section are a result of this shaking up of the old guard. The exhibition—through the booklet and its themes—explicitly situated the process of artmaking as it happens in prisons.

However, even in the midst of such an intentional approach to curation, the politics of binning pervade. On the final day of the exhibition design meeting, the curators that remained—yours truly included—engaged in what can only be described as a binning spree. With little time left to us, and post-it notes in hand, we scurried throughout the room to vote for bin pieces by sticking a note onto them. There is only so much time to prepare an exhibition, and only so much art that can participate as wall pieces, and, at a certain point, decisions—however haphazardly—must be made. This moment exemplifies how, in the absence of a convincing story, curators tend to revert back to the standards defined by what makes "good" art.

I do not highlight these politics to denigrate or prop up any one side of the argument. I believe that these are decisions that must be made: The exhibition is a real genre with a particular set of commitments, possibilities, and limitations. Similarly, the desire to humanize and showcase the testimonies of incarcerated artists is a real desire motivated by a genuine, activist commitment to reformist and abolitionist politics. What I seek to show through the exhibition design is the largely mediated process of organizing artwork for an exhibition and the compromises that must inevitably be made as a result of this tension between curation and witnessing.

The politics of binning demonstrates when the humanizing ethos of witnessing meets the challenges of curation, as well as the difficulties inherent in extending this ethos to toward unethical and misrepresentative behaviors. To summarize, witnessing provides curators with a certain set of values by which to orient themselves to artists in prisons as well as the art that they produce. This plays itself out in the ways that they privilege the stories behind the art and the artists behind the objects that they make. Furthermore, it is a contentious process, as many people have differing ideas about how the art itself should be presented, which art is worthy of presenting, and what art will further the testimony that the exhibition ultimately is.

There is some degree of overlap between these two sets of values. Forgeries or misrepresentations of art, for example, are unanimously decried, and either removed or binned with alacrity. In one such example, the curation team was considering a piece of quilled paper art, made in the style of an exceptionally well-known artist in the exhibition, so much so that it instantly gave us pause when the name on the piece did not match up to the name of the artist that we presumed it had been made by. In yet another instance, a second-year artist submitted a piece that demonstrated an extraordinary improvement in their technique as a painter relative to the piece they had submitted

to us the year prior. Upon closer inspection of the piece, we saw the signature of another well-known participant scribbled in the corner of the canvas.

From my personal perspective, it is unfortunate but understandable, that given an environment where money is the only means to afford the few, limited creature comforts that people in prison can purchase through the commissary, that any opportunity to make extra money might be seized on by means of misrepresentation. In humanizing these cases of misrepresentation, Martín commented, "Sometimes you owe a person money, and you give them a painting instead. Maybe you need to come up with cash to support yourself and this is the only way you can reasonably do that." There are an extraordinary number of reasons that may play into why an artist chooses to misrepresent themselves in these ways. I will show in chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," how these ruptures related to forgery and misrepresentation harken back to notions of personhood and the rehabilitative ideals embedded within the arts in prisons.

The exhibition design process is undoubtedly a far more open-ended approach to the work than the second pass. Inevitably, as with any set of values, however, it must contend with the ruptures that come with the pressures, confines, and values of the exhibition as a space and practice. These ruptures are what I gesture to in the following chapter, especially as these ruptures happen in conversation with artists in prisons. We began this chapter with the exhibition. We walked backwards to the process of organizing artwork for the exhibition. Next, I seek to illuminate how the process of curation happens in the prison itself, as well to illuminate the real, and how this tension between witnessing as a practice and the demands of the exhibition result in real and material consequences for artists on the inside.

In the following chapter, I will show how witnessing as an orientation to being-with-others pervades the process of curating artwork in prisons. I complicate witnessing as a practice and system of

values. To telegraph the following chapter, I will argue that the act of witnessing may be fruitfully thought to produce a condition, to be met or denied by either party, and that this condition is established throughout the course of an exchange between the curator and the artist in prison. Not unlike the relationship between analyst and analysand, or as between a musician and his audience, the evaluation of art objects in prisons is an exchange undergirded by an unconscious frame that sets up rules, expectations, and modes of proper conduct. Artists in prison present their works and curators consume and interpret them in choreographic fashion, as dictated by this frame. I will show how people in prison themselves, as witnesses in prison, testify on their own behalf through the art that they create and illuminate the ways in which artists also actively refuse to be witnessed as artists in prisons.

Chapter 4: Negotiating Recognition

> "To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self."
>
> ■ **MARGARET ATWOOD, "MARRYING THE HANGMAN"**

> "All sorts of things in this world behave like mirrors."
>
> ■ **JACQUES LACAN, *THE EGO IN FREUD'S THEORY AND IN THE TECHNIQUE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS***

"You're always looking over your shoulder," Martín Vargas tells me.[38] Art made in confinement occurs under conditions of precarity and suspicion because, in prisons, it is always a social act. Art is often made and stored in communal lounging areas and cells with multiple—sometimes six to seven—bunkies in cells as long as an average man's wingspan, which makes commentary from other people inescapable.[39] Artmaking in prisons is an inherently public practice that invites a constant stream of appreciation, conversation, and critique because private space for work is a very rare blessing that virtually no person that lives in prison has recourse to.

---

[38] Martín Vargas is an artist and curator with the Prison Creative Arts Project. He is a formerly incarcerated art teacher that taught at Ionia Correctional Facility for twenty-four years and was a well-known and regarded participant in the Annual Exhibition. This interview with Martín took place during the summer of 2022.

[39] The lack of access to one's own space creates additional barriers. Artists in prisons often tell me about the supplies that they've lost as by being transferred between facilities that have different restrictions on what artists may or may not keep with them. They apologize to me about the curled and weathered qualities of their canvases because they had nowhere else to store it except in between a radiator and the wall because of all of the space that their bunkies take up in their cell.

Prison guards are also involved in the process of artmaking in prisons, typically because it inconveniences them. This is because bringing arts-based programming like the *Annual Exhibition* into prisons requires additional labor by facilities, which include providing trainings to volunteers as well as the day-to-day tasks of accompanying volunteers to the bathrooms, patting them down, shuffling through their materials upon ingress and egress, all of which pose an additional burden on oft-understaffed facilities.

With the visual arts, however, there are additional consequences from the guard's perspectives that need to be considered. As Martín states,

> You have to have so much supervision because there's a huge concern—with good reason—that weapons could be utilized, made, and brought into the facility through some of these programs. A paint brush could be used as a very real weapon. Take the bristles off the tip and sharpen the metal furls that hold the brush together, it can be fashioned into a very sharp blade. The tip can be sharpened to create a very formidable stabbing instrument. That's just one example.

Staff and guards at prisons must balance the potential benefits of having arts-based programming in prisons alongside the security risks that come with introducing new people and objects into the prison. From the prison's perspective, it is oftentimes worth the hassle if it means it keeps people that live in prison docile. As a special activities director once told me on an art selection trip, "You can't participate in hobbycraft[40] if you have a history of getting into trouble, and nobody wants to have these privileges revoked. It keeps inmates busy and out of trouble."

As Martín gestures to in his interview with me, being a guard in prison is no easy job. As he says, there are many disgruntled employees working in prisons because they are constantly fearful. They are trained to view people that live in prisons as coercive, opportunists, and violent. As Martín

---

[40] Hobbycraft is what the Michigan Department of Corrections refers to as artmaking practices

says, "At any given time, they could be assaulted, they could be very badly injured. They walk in groups, just like gangs. It's within reason, but there's just so much distrust on both sides."

I remarked to Martín how surprised I was by the fact that the arts are a source of tension and conflict in prisons. When I asked Martín if he himself had ever caught the attention of prison guards as an artist, he laughed.

> I've experienced this. Guards hate [art] because they're like, "God, you know, I can't do that. I'm not gonna let this be, it's too good. I don't want anybody to see it," and they destroy it. I've had a couple of my pieces ruined, thrown away into the garbage, and stolen. I don't know what happened to them. And I've heard this said, "My kids can't get this type of artistic instruction unless they pay for it, and prisoners are given it for free. That's not right."

Here, Martín points to an altogether different kind of perspective about artmaking practices, one that is ideologically loaded and materially consequential. How it must feel, as a guard whose job it is to conduct cavity searches, to approach everybody that they run into on the job with suspicion, guardedness, and fear, to see the people they mistrust the most having access to programming that they themselves never get to do or had access to.[41] While this ideological question of who "deserves" access to art regrettably plays out in such violent ways between people that work and live in prison, it is largely a failure of the state that such programming is considered a luxury rather than a basic human right.

This tension and attendant rupture also points to an altogether different series of consequences for artists on the inside. Because to be seen as an artist, as something more than an inmate number, invites scrutiny, suspicion, and anger. It invites, too, the destruction of their artwork and their livelihoods.

---

[41] I refer the reader to Appendix E for a better understanding of how guards perceive and work with people that live in prison and the truly difficult nature of working in prisons as a guard in the first place.

I remarked to Martín that this is a side to the arts that most people would not give much thought to, that it is typically seen as something rehabilitative or otherwise couched in therapeutic or redemptive language. As he says,

> Art can be good and helpful to the person that's creating it. But there have been people whose book manuscripts have been stolen. They don't have computers inside and so you sit there and write and write and write for years. And then some angry, evil person just takes it, throws it away, or tears it up. That's years of work and, all of a sudden, it's gone in a puff of smoke.

Martín's experiences point to the ways in which the arts are a source of disconnection and violence in prisons, which exist in tandem with the experiences of artists who describe the work that they do as healing and a way to process the traumas of incarceration. He recalled the ways in which the destruction of art creates distrust between people that work and live in prisons: "What if that disgruntled prisoner who created a piece of work just needs that one last piece of sand on his back or her back? To say, I can't do it anymore, I'm not going to do it anymore, and just go berserk? It happens."

Making art in prisons illuminates the ways in which prisons constantly place demands upon people in prison, to which they must constantly be alert and responsive. As he continues,

> It took a long, long time for me to realize that words are so magical. They can transform and transcend boundaries. I smiled at a guard that I knew who threw away over $1,200 worth of my art supplies and threw away a couple of my paintings. I would smile at him and say, "Hello, good morning. How are you?" And that angered him more and made him feel smaller. Had I said, "I know that you threw away my art. I'll do something to you one day when I get out," then they would feel happy. They would feel like, "Oh, look, I got him good."

The destruction of art demands a response. Martín's ultimate response to the guard's willful destruction of his art, to smile, to actively cultivate prosocial relationships with those who have caused him harm, might be understood as an ethical response. It would be easy to reduce Martín's responses to the guards, for example, smiling and being friendly in the face of their destructive

actions, as a subversive kind of resistance. Martín's own accounting in some ways resonates with this thought, as a way of making the guards feel "smaller." However, more than that, this response better aligns with a certain set of personal values that Martín began to cultivate on the inside.

When I inquired about how he was able to continue creating art in this environment, Martín noted that his reaction to the guards had to change. In his own words, he "grew up." For Martín, anger was a dead end that ended with being sent to solitary confinement. Raw and unprocessed anger makes "your own environment even worse." As he posed: "Where does that struggle end?"

Cheryl Mattingly (2014) poses a fundamental question about ethical transformation. She asks, "Through what kind of inaugural scenes is the moral self born? And what are the practices, within that scene, through which one tries to become a moral person, or a different sort of moral self, a person one is not but wishes to be?" Martín's story speaks to the complex ways in which artmaking practices intersect with what it means to live and to make sense of one's incarceration. His story speaks to the ways in which art both subverts and invites experiences of relational violence and how crucial it was for him to make sense of this push-and-pull relationship in a way that was meaningful and authentic to him.

Martín highlights the ways in which the violence of the prison, over time, served as a series of scenes, through which a process of narrativization occurred. Martín implicitly remarks that notions of deservingness, punishment and rehabilitation, fear, envy, and anger motivated his relationships with other people in prison and guards. Upon reflection, Martín makes sense of the destruction of his artwork by bringing these ideological and affective backdrops to the fore. He is also able to credit his own artistic prowess as a source of envy—an empowering aspect of his identity crafted over decades of effort and successes. As Martín says to me,

> My biggest prison was not where I was housed. But it was inside here, in my head. And I had to overcome it. First, I had to acknowledge that. And then I had to try to figure out how the hell I was going to figure that out, how I was going to get out of this prison.

Thinking with the ethical as an analytic foreground the ambiguities of life, as well as the general existentialist predicament of taking responsibility for a life worth living amid this uncertainty. In a nod to Aristotelian virtue ethics, Martín's reflections and actions demonstrate the extraordinary difficulties inherent in discerning a "best good" in circumstances where actors are forced to respond and to engage with their environments (Mattingly 2013). At the core of Martín's contemplations is a question of how he himself would like to be as an actor in an environment that, at its core, alienates him, one that provokes him to "get drunk," "yell" and "cuss out guards," which, while understandable desires and reactions to have in the wake of the violence that has been perpetrated on him, run contrary to his values as a person in the world.

What Martín demonstrates is a certain kind of playfulness, the ability not to be caught between the extremes of confinement: To destroy the environment around him or to become utterly victimized by the guards in his life. Instead, he finds a middle path.

This tension is, in essence, what I explore in this chapter, what it means to make art in prisons and to then have that art evaluated and critiqued. In this chapter, I ask after the possibilities that arise throughout this process of evaluation, both benevolent and painful.

Whereas in the previous chapter I discussed the final product of this process, the exhibition in the freeworld, here I bring us into the prison proper. I walk us through the interactions that curators have with artists in prison as they decide what pieces to take with them for the exhibition and which ones to leave behind. By highlighting the process of curation in prisons, I show the variously ambivalent ways in which power operates through art objects and the riskiness inherent to

artmaking practices as an artist in prison, the rewards, ruptures, failures, joys, and pains that arise throughout the course of this work.

In this chapter, I take an autoethnographic approach to highlight tensions that I have encountered throughout the process of curation. Martín's story, and indeed Martín as an artist himself, is an exemplar of the potentialities of artmaking practices in prisons. Curators are very aware of the fact that making and practicing art in prisons has the potential to countermand the relational violences of prison and want people in prison to participate in the exhibition for these reasons.

It is useful to think of Martín's story as an act of overcoming the relational violences of confinement. On the one hand, Martín experienced the guards as wanting him to explode and to get angry, a prescribed way of *being-with-others*. It is useful to think about this as an extension of the relational violences that prisons perpetrate: The guards wanted him to act and relate to himself and with others in this very particular kind of way. What is so striking is the way in which he chose to relate to the guards and his environment *on his own terms*.

Janie Paul (2023) argues that art enables the capacity to create meaning in one's life, a pivotal human function. It is, for Paul, the difference between growth and deterioration. Prisons, she said to me in an interview, are oriented toward not having any meaning. It is an environment that reduces people to objects. As she says to me,

> One of the main functions of art making is that the person becomes the person that is acting on something that becomes the object. The person goes from being the object to the subject. The person who is the artist—scrounges together cardboard into a motorcycle from found objects—makes an object with meaning and has gone from an object who is moved around to a person who controls something.[42]

---

[42] This interview with Janie Paul took place September 23, 2002 via Zoom.

This is the primary way in which artists like Martín countermand the relational violences of confinement through art: By reversing the object-subject relationship and imbuing themselves with agency and meaning.

Given the stakes of this work, particularly due to the ways in which artmaking practices come to be experienced as a lifeline to connection and relationship building, how we curate artwork in prisons matter. How we deal with the sometimes-thorny interactions that we have with artists around themes related to money, whether we accept or reject their pieces, and how we speak to them about what we see in their art require nuanced analysis. The ethical dilemmas that I discuss in this chapter are vignettes where we as freeworld individuals risk perpetrating or sustaining the very relational violences that we seek to countermand through this work. This is what I turn to now.

4.1 Matthew's Voice

I have several stories about the process of curation going pear-shaped. This particular interaction sticks with me because of how diametrically opposed our perspectives as curators were with the artist's feelings about his own work.

"This isn't you," I overhear a formerly incarcerated curator named Martín insisting to an artist named Matthew. "This piece doesn't say anything about who you are. This isn't your voice."

In that moment, I didn't think much of this interaction. The curator's passionate tone was what had initially captured my attention—he was speaking with Matthew, whom I had conversed

with earlier—but I was absorbed in a conversation with another artist on the opposite end of a very packed gymnasium.[43]

As it was at every other art selection trip, we wrapped up our individual conversations with artists and asked them to temporarily vacate the space as the curators gathered around the art to discuss which pieces we would be taking with us. Matthew's piece, incidentally, was the first piece for us to review. Matthew had submitted two pieces: An abstract piece drizzled with multi-colored paint and a piece about mass incarceration. For the latter, Matthew had painted the word "PRISON" in block script against a black background. Beneath this word was a painting of bars and a cell door.[44]

In our discussion, I mentioned that I had spoken with Matthew.

"He told me he was experimenting with the prison piece," I offered to the group.

"It's a bit obvious," a curator remarked.

"I think I prefer the other one," a second curator stated.

"He told me that one took him five minutes to do," I replied. "I think he said he was just trying to use up some leftover paint. He told me spent a few months on the other one."

Transparently, I agreed with the other curators: I thought the prison piece was, in the terms of my interlocutor, "obvious." The other painting, while still a similarly unremarkable piece by the

---

[43] Matthew is a pseudonym. I did not receive permission from Matthew to include this interaction in the dissertation. This vignette takes place on an art selection trip in 2023. It was several months after the fact that I chose to include it in my dissertation after combing through my fieldnotes and I was not able to follow up with Matthew after the fact due to constraints related to my ability to write or phone people in prison as a volunteer.

[44] I have altered some minor details about the pieces that Matthew submitted to the curators to better preserve his anonymity.

team's estimation, was slightly more interesting to look at. While neither piece appealed to us, Matthew was a first-time artist and we wanted to take a piece with us to encourage his participation and growth as an artist. With the piece on incarceration, I appreciated the fact that he was trying something new and the fact that it took him quite a bit of labor and time to complete. My experience of art selection trips informed me that curators often appreciate these hidden dimensions of art pieces, and that such considerations often sway curators to take "less developed" pieces.

In this instance, this backdrop to the piece did not sway the curation team. We opted for the abstract piece in a short discussion with total consensus and moved on to the next artist's works.

As it is done at each trip, we asked the artists to return to their original spots, by their artwork. At this facility, we had student volunteers on the curation team. One of these students accompanied me in my conversations with artists.

Matthew was the first artist with whom we spoke. I congratulated him and told him that we wanted to take the abstract piece with us. His reaction threw me off guard.

"Why aren't you taking this one?" he demanded.

"We appreciated the message you were trying to depict," I replied, "But we also want to encourage you to find a more nuanced way of communicating your ideas."

Before I could offer him a more detailed response about how he might consider doing this, he interrupted me.

"Is this your opinion or his?" he demanded, referring to the curator with whom he had spoken earlier, the conversation that I had dimly overheard.

"It's the opinion of the entire group," I replied truthfully.

"This piece," he said, gesturing toward the abstract painting we had taken, "Took me five minutes. It's just something that I made to make. This piece took me an entire month to do."

"And we understand that," I said, trying to steer the conversation back into a constructive direction. He interrupted me again.

"I see what this is," he said, "I'm just a prisoner and you're the high and mighty guy coming in here, looking down on me because I'm a criminal and a low-life. I definitely see what's going on here."

"That's definitely not what's happening here," I replied, now starting to feel annoyed.

"And that other guy, who does he think he is?" he went on. "That guy, telling me that this isn't who I am. I've never been disrespected like that in my life."

"I'm sorry you had that experience," I said.

"I don't want an apology from anybody except him," he said angrily.

"Alright," I said, making a decision to end the conversation. I needed a moment to reassess. "I'll swing back around to address any questions you might have after I've done my rounds."

One of the biggest issues I've encountered throughout the course of this work is the distance between how curators think about art and how people in prison think about the art that they submit to us. This is particularly noticeable when curators comment on issues related to more abstract and conceptual understandings of art like translating one's "voice" through art.

In his formative text *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (2002) complicates naturalized understandings of aesthetic taste by arguing that taste is distinctly tied to experiences of class. Bourdieu demonstrates the ways in which taste becomes a vehicle for what he calls symbolic violence, a form of power that allows the party in power to determine and impose cultural norms, what Bourdieu refers to as "legitimate culture." As he writes, it is typically through educational qualification that one obtains the qualification and aesthetic disposition necessary to enter the world of "legitimate culture" (28).

Following Bourdieu, one useful way to understand the tensions inherent in this interaction between Matthew and the curator on our team is through a reflexive analysis of the curation group itself. Many of the members on the curation team, this curator included, are practicing artists, many of whom have advanced degrees in the fine arts from reputable schools of art.[45]

I imagine that what Matthew experienced in this moment is this Bourdiean symbolic violence. Matthew experienced the curator as imposing what constitutes his voice, what his voice should be doing and what it should look like when it's translated to paint on canvas.[46]

The Prison Creative Arts Project's criteria for the consideration of art depends on "originality," "uniqueness," "commitment," and "personal expression." They explicitly write that they are not necessarily interested in technique. However, the very notion of "personal expression" is a complicated one precisely because it depends on one's skill as an artist. What this illustration with Matthew demonstrates is that self-expression must still be rendered legible within the context of artistic evaluation if it is to sway a curator, if it is able to do the work of Gellean "entrapment" (Gell 1996). There is no wholly purified approach to art that speaks to its capacity to communicate in a manner that is thoroughly unmediated. Because of this, standards of evaluation like self-expression and voicing may become sites of conflict between curators and artists.

Despite the fact that PCAP wants to be more inclusive and to encourage people to submit pieces to the exhibition, their hands are tied in the sense that this is an exhibition of art. Given the nature of the exhibition as a genre, it requires some degree of artistic standards. And, as artists in

---

[45] Please refer to Appendix C for a more detailed description of who the PCAP curators are.

[46] This was compounded by my inability to properly translate why it was we weren't taking a particular piece, although, to be frank, I'm not entirely sure even the best explanation would have sufficed in this particular moment.

prisons are attuned to, the status that comes from being accepted into the exhibition reflects their skill and talent. Because of this, many of the benefits that come from one's acceptance into the exhibition, like experiences of validation and pride, are because other people are excluded from it.

There are also important ways of nuancing the dynamics that happened after our interactions with Matthew.

Toward the end of the selection trip, I offered to facilitate a conversation between Matthew and the curator who had upset him. He was still clearly upset with his experience of being rejected. The conversation between them seemed to go well.

As all of the artists left the gymnasium, the curation team congregated to discuss the incident with Matthew.

"Vitalis," a student that had been with me during my conversation with Matthew, "I think we could've done a better job handling that. I think it was a missed opportunity for us. I keep thinking, 'He is in prison,' and the piece meant a lot to him. Maybe we could've just taken the piece anyway."

"We don't want to infantilize him, either," I responded.

The curator that had spoken with Matthew nodded. He explained that he had apologized to Matthew and offered to purchase the piece we had all critiqued as being too obvious.

"You know," Martín responded, "I shouldn't have bought that piece from him. I just taught him that if he doesn't get his way in the future, he has a free pass to push us around, just like he did today."

This tension between pushing people to be better artists and wrestling with the very humanistic desire to validate their work is one that I have personally had to wrestle with extensively in my work on the curation team. To make sense of this tension, I spoke with Charlie Michaels, a

former curator with over a decade of experience curating artwork in prisons, whose first show was the *18th Annual Exhibition* in 2013.[47]

I began the interview by bringing up my struggles with this balancing act: While you want to hear people's stories and lean into the work of building community between PCAP and people in prison, you also have to curate artwork for a legitimate exhibition, which implies certain kinds of expectations around the art that is collected. I asked Charlie, "How are you supposed to say 'no' to people in this context?"

Charlie responded by telling me, "[It's] respecting that person and their effort." Telling an artist no is also a part of relationship building, a necessary tension involved in the process of curating art in prisons that isn't by itself damaging or exclusionary.

> We're not setting up a situation where we're saying everybody wins, like everybody gets a participation award. By having there be some kind of bar to meet or some kind of competitive aspect to it, you're also making it feel like it becomes an honor for those that get in.

In the exhibition's curatorial praxis, we now make it a point to take at least one piece from every artist with whom we interact, especially artists who are participating in the exhibition for the first time. This is a turn toward a more participatory praxis that seeks to privilege humanistic ideals, like the story behind a piece of art and the artist's process in creating that piece, rather than the standards of Western fine art, like technique or virtuosity.

However, this turn toward a more inclusive approach to curation does not sit well with all of the curators. Indeed, in conversations with various members of the curation team, I have noticed a constant return to this tension between, in the words of Charlie, "setting a bar" and gesturing

---

[47] This interview with Charlie Michaels occurred on October 23, 2023 via Zoom.

toward a humanistic desire to include people in prison who are living under conditions of exclusion and invalidation. This tension comes alive for artists and curators like Martín in particular, where art is a venture to be treated with solemnity. It requires a great deal of work, the development of one's technique, artistry, and, indeed, one's artistic voice over time. For artists like Martín, particularly having spent so many years in prison, art is a lifesaving venture precisely because one learns to earn respect through hard work and effort.

I find that each approach has its benefits and drawbacks. What Charlie highlights is the position that I ultimately like to take in this process. Because what he ultimately points to is a distinction between two extremes: Granting everybody a "participation award" and having "some kind of bar" to work with. But, most importantly, Charlie points to the importance of knowing *how* to say no to an artist in prison because, whatever end of the aisle that you end up in terms of your approach as a curator, not every artist will agree with your decision to take certain pieces over others.

4.2 The Rhematization of Art

In speaking about the artist's voice, I can very vividly recall an interaction with another artist during one of my earliest curation trips. This artist, Daniel,[48] sticks around in my mind for several reasons, many of which dovetail with the interaction with Matthew described in the previous

[48] Daniel is a pseudonym. I met Daniel on one of my earliest art selection trips with PCAP in 2022. I did not receive permission from Daniel to use this interaction in my research; however, I include it here to illustrate a particularly important dynamic around curation, namely the stakes attached to the representation of one's identity through art, especially in prison. I was not able to follow up with Daniel after the fact due to constraints related to my ability to write or phone people in prison as a volunteer.

section. In this particular case, what was at stake was the affirmation or rejection of this artist's sexuality and identity as a gay man.

When Daniel introduced himself to me, he immediately put out his hand, and greeted me by stating, "Hi, I'm Daniel, and I'm a homosexual."

Daniel had submitted three paintings for the curators.[49] The first two paintings were very similar pieces, reminiscent of motivational placards. Both indexed gay identity through an appreciable application of vibrant, fluorescent pinks and blues. Written in swirling black paint were words like "love" and "pride." These pieces felt technically simple and conceptually unconvincing, an opinion shared by the majority of the curators on this trip. The third piece, however, a painting of two abstract laughing figures, was compelling to all of us.

We unanimously decided to take this third piece with us. It was the only piece we took from Daniel. It was also Daniel's least favorite piece, one that he had created because "it was closer in style to the piece you guys took last year." This is, as I established in the previous section, not an uncommon remark to hear from artists on the inside and almost exclusively heard from newer or burgeoning artists. To introduce the concept of a "beginner" undermines the philosophy of the curatorial team, but this tension, between virtuosity and technicality on the one hand and a more inclusive, participatory approach to art on the other, exists and is not unfelt by exhibition participants and results in tensions that curators must learn to navigate.

Daniel was reduced to tears at the end of my discussion with him. It was especially discomfiting because I was excited to share with him that we had unanimously agreed on taking one

---

[49] I've chosen to alter minor details about the art that Daniel submitted to us in an effort to preserve his anonymity.

of his pieces for the exhibition. He became quite animated, pressing me with tearful questions: "I don't really understand, what's wrong with these two? Why didn't you take them, I just really want to know why." I recall fumbling through a response, "Oh, it's based on some of the discussions that we all had," and struggling to articulate a response that would both soothe and affirm the decision we had made as a group.

Rejection and its emotional aftermath is not an uncommon experience amongst artists and the curators that facilitate these experiences. As Mary Heinen McPherson once told me,

> I remember we went on this trip and this man had a huge owl he had created out of paper mâché. It was absolutely enormous; it was basically the size of him. He had a couple of other pieces he'd brought along and it just broke my heart when we had to tell him we weren't taking the owl, because you could just tell that it was the thing he was most proud of and what he had spent the most time working on. I'll never forget the sight of him taking that owl back with him at the end, that'll stay with me for the rest of my life.

Both my interaction with Daniel and Mary's recollection of this artist's hurt are instances where I felt that the ethos of high art had trumped the more humanistic values of taking seriously the artist's stories and processes.

It is useful to understand how the stakes attached to rejection come to be. What my interaction with Daniel illustrates is a process of rhematization, wherein the art object comes to be iconic of something essential about the individuals they are taken to index.[50] As the anthropologist Webb Keane explicates, rhematization is a shift of focus from indexical to iconic. This is significant

---

[50] Following a Gellean semiology of art, it is useful to think about the art object as a Peircean sign. That is, the art object is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce, Houser, and Kloesel 1992, 228). It is important to define two key aspects of the sign's ability to represent something for somebody. First, signs—like a map—can be icons, which have a topological similarity to their objects. Second, signs can be indexes. An index represents a relationship between the signifier and the signified. For example, where there is smoke, there is likely fire; or, in Daniel's case, where there are rainbows there is likely pride in one's identity as a gay man.

because when something is taken to be iconic of a person, it "seem[s] to provide information about the *true essence of the speaker*" (Keane 2018, 70; emphasis mine).

At the denouement of our conversation together, Daniel tearfully asked me why we were rejecting the pieces that were "most important" to him. Within this working context of semiotics, Daniel's question to me, that is, "Why are you rejecting these pieces?," might better be recast as, "Why are you rejecting *me*?"

Qualities of art objects like the fluorescent colors reminiscent of gay pride, as well as the makers of such art, are always serving as figures of one another. The art object is always representing the artist, the artist his artwork, which is why Daniel's felt my rejection as such a devastating blow to his morale. Many artists and curators operate under an implicitly naturalized understanding of art objects as something that communicates something about its maker. As curators, we are implicitly cognizant that, in these encounters, artists produce art that says something about who they are. Unfortunately, we sometimes lose sight of this, as I did in this interaction with Daniel.

The power of the sign, as Daniel's artwork and my interactions with him demonstrate, are not foolproof. In these moments of evaluation, the curators and I only saw art objects that indexed "cheesy" pieces and "plaques you could find at a Joann Fabrics." This rupture between the artist's intentions and our interpretations of his art demonstrates a failure on the part of the sign to do the work assigned to it by its artist. Indeed, as Keane points out, "But if we are to take seriously the world-creating power of signs, then we must attend to the possibility that they might fail. The very potential for failure is one measure of the consequentiality of a social action" (Keane 2018, 70).

Ultimately, I want to pose that, for artists like Daniel, the consequences of this process of rhematization are bundled with various kinds of stakes. It is, I posit, more than simply a discursive construction located within the domain of evaluation, but a genuine identification with what one

produces as a distributed part of oneself (Sansi and Strathern 2016). As my conversation with Martín that opens this chapter shows, art may become a very real means through which identity is explored and even refashioned. For our purposes in this section of the chapter, it is enough to simply highlight this moment of rupture to understand how it came to be.

Rather than focus on what makes "beautiful" or "ugly" art, I choose instead to reframe this evaluatory paradigm according to Gell's conceptualization of art as something that does work in the world. In this way, Gell differentiates between "weak" and "strong" art. In so doing, Gell reappropriates the aesthetic qualities of art and recasts them into the social without abandoning the former in his analysis. In part, the aesthetic qualities of an art object are central to its efficacy, for "to work its magic on enemies, exchange-partners, or prospective buyers, a shield, a prow-board, or a painting must be a compelling example" (Pinney and Thomas 2001, 3). However, the relative capacity of an art object to do work in the world provides us with an opportunity to understand how it is strengthened and weakened through the work of rhematization, as well.

I submit that this interaction with Daniel can be understood as a part of a larger semiotic ideology. Chumley distinguishes between two forms of evaluation that she calls quantifying and rhematizing regimes. I show how artmaking in prisons might fruitfully be thought along such lines, as well. Quantifying regimes are "organized around a standard" (Chumley 2013, 172). In rhematizing regimes, "it is a performance in which examiners and subjects come together to build associations and links between the qualia of an object and those of a subject" (177). In the latter, artists are expected to animate the work of art in two ways, first as an extension of the artist's self into the object as well as animation in the Gellean sense, wherein the art object itself appropriates its own sense of agency.

Indeed, this tension between the rhematizing and quantifying regimes is perhaps best

explicated through the stakes illustrated by the relationship between art and money. It was not until an encounter later on in my work with the curation team that I began to make sense of the stakes involved in the risks that artists take when they submit pieces for our judgement. At a separate facility later on in the year, I spoke with an artist named Dawn. She was seated at a foldout table which she was sharing with another artist. Dawn and I had just wrapped up a conversation about a painting of a horse she had made. The conversation was a typical one: We exchanged greetings, talked about her piece, her various sources of inspiration, and her past participation in the exhibition. I wrapped up our talk and moved onto the woman seated beside her, who I will refer to as Nicki.

Nicki, however, was a first-time artist in the exhibition. Typically, I ask first-time artists if they have any questions about the logistics of the show. Nicki asked about how artists are paid if their pieces sell in the exhibition. I gave her my usual spiel, which I explicated in the previous section of this chapter. In the middle of this conversation about pricing artwork with Nicki, Dawn interrupted us to ask me, "What do you think I should price this at?"

Dawn was holding up the painting that we had discussed at length just a few minutes earlier. I was surprised by how much this question caught me off guard. Up until this point, an artist had never asked me what I thought they should price their art at. Thinking quickly, and mostly to stall for time, I asked, "What do you have it priced at now?" She replied, "$50, but I don't know what other people think it's worth." I genuinely thought then that it was a perfectly fine painting, that it would very likely sell at $50, and I told her so. In response, she replied, "I put in a lot of time and effort into this one, though. I think I want to sell it for at least $200."

Here, I hesitated. I remember thinking to myself that while it would very likely sell at $50 that $200 felt thoroughly unrealistic. However, Dawn's question was not one that I wanted to

respond to flippantly. The response would have very real material and ethical consequences. If I told her that I did not think it would sell at a higher price, what would I be saying about the quality of her art? If I told her that I thought she should price it higher and it did not sell, I felt I would be responsible for her self-esteem and loss of income. Since this exchange, many artists have asked me this same question. The metapragmatic question that underlies such exchanges seems in my mind to be, "What do you think I'm really worth?"

In an interaction that runs counter to my interactions with Dawn, I once met with a first-time artist named Nick. I thought that his impressionist painting of a rooster was priced too low. He originally had it listed for $30, but I encouraged him to raise it to at least $100. I was confident that it would sell because it was a humorous piece and technically very competent. I knew, too, that it was a genre of painting that sells well at our exhibition. In my interaction with Nick, I recalled a curator exclaiming at another art selection trip, "Impressionist paintings, that's really what the market wants."

Happily, Dawn's and Nick's paintings sold at these higher prices. However, what these interactions demonstrate are the ways in which curators oscillate between regimes of rhematization and quantification in their interactions with artists. Implicit within these conflicts about price and pricing is the centrality of talent in determining an honest response to these artists. The economics of artmaking facilitate severe moments of disenchantment precisely because it is a moment of judgment that relies on quantification: How "beautiful" or "ugly" is this object? The humanities of artists that we seek to highlight through the conversations that we have about an artist's process, their background, and how their life stories inform their work, give way to a mode of assessment that is divorced from the conditions of confinement that the exhibition seeks to highlight.

4.3 The Play of Misrepresentation

Foucault suggests that power may be understood as dynamic rather than totalizing (Foucault 1995, 202). What I show in this chapter are the ways in which the distribution of art objects, artists, and curators produce "innumerable points of confrontation" (27); in short, I show the ways in which artmaking practices become a form of negotiation. What is at stake in these negotiations, I posit, are experiences of recognition.

To understand the ways in which artmaking practices operate as a practice of negotiation, I must invoke the semiology of arts as explicated by Alfred Gell and pair an understanding of semiotics of the arts alongside Foucaultian understandings of power. Gell writes that art is "about doing" (Gell 1998, 7). In this Gellean tradition, scholars take art objects as forms that mediate social action, as opposed to objects that simply bear "meaning" or aesthetic value. This is, indeed, a part of a larger "methodological atheism" (19) invoked by Gell, wherein he departs from two axiomatic traditions of thought in the anthropology of art: The first of these theoretical traditions focuses on cross-cultural aesthetics and appreciation; the second on semiotic and symbolic theories of art that takes meaning and communication as its central objects of focus.

Gell's focus on doing speaks to the art object's agentive capacities. Agency, for Gell, is a process that involves indexes and effects; in other words, how material entities motivate inferences, responses, or interpretations. Art, as Gell argues, "captivates and ensnares others in the intentionalities of its producers" (Gell 1998, vii) as one of its agentive capacities. In this way, negotiation is not simply about judging a piece of art based on its aesthetic qualities. To build off Gell's argument, art objects serve not necessarily as mediums of communication but as objects that ask us to ask about them and, by extension, the artists that create them and the environments in which they are created.

Gell's intervention is to argue that that the art object is inherently social, "a physical entity which mediates between two beings, and therefore creates a social relation between them, which in turn provides a channel for further social relations and influences" (Gell 1992, 7). The role of the artist is pivotal here because, as Gell stresses, manufactured objects index their makers (Gell 1998). Invoking this Gellean semiology, the anthropologist Roger Sansi speaks about "relational art," defined by the capacity of art objects to make things happen, "a situation of encounter, a social relation (Sansi and Strathern 2016, 426)." The artist, then, becomes less a creator of objects than a mediator, "a person that fosters and provides situations of exchange" (426). As Sansi argues, "to produce a form is to create the conditions for an exchange" (Sansi-Roca 2015, 11)

Gell obliges us to reconsider our definitions of what constitutes "art" and art objects. I build on this to argue that Gell also asks us to reconsider our definitions of "artmaking" as a term. Utilizing Gell, it may be useful to think about "artmaking" as more than just the process of creating an art object. For artists in prison, artmaking is about legitimating oneself as an artist to curators through what I call technologies of discourse. As I will demonstrate, artists in prison do more than rely on their technical skills and artistry to sell themselves to curators but learn to turn toward strategic ways of speaking that legibly link their "humanities" to the art objects that they produce.

This process of linking occurs in response to the practice of curation. I argue that practices of curation and witnessing produce irreconcilable tensions that engender what Lily Hope Chumley (2013) calls rhematizing and quantifying regimes of evaluation. I argue that witnessing as a practice both writes against existing criteria of evaluation and simultaneously engenders new criteria of evaluation that both open up new possibilities of engagement with the arts in prisons and reproduce the very dynamics that curators seek to write against. Utilizing semiotic regimes as a framework for

this analysis, I show how incarcerated artists navigate these modes of evaluation in a plurality of ways.

It is important to acknowledge that, for Foucault, disciplinary power becomes a problematic when it "establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination" (Foucault 1995, 138). In this chapter, I am not interested in pursuing an analysis that attempts to find or locate instances of the arts as a disciplinary technology in prisons, nor do I seek to essentialize arts-based programming in prisons as a disciplinary power by which prisons produce "docile bodies" (135). Instead, I choose to complicate an essentialist reading of power in prisons that locates it as a purely dominative technology of disciplinary power; I seek to understand the ways in which artmaking practices both increase aptitude and decrease the potentialities of dominative power in prisons. I show the ways in which the practice of creating art speaks to productive understandings of power that foreground its creative potentialities as a tool of self-fashioning.

Through the encounters between curators and artists in prison, I demonstrate the consequences that ensue when the expectations of artists match the expectations of curators. I show, too, the various consequences that ensue when negotiations fall flat, when the conditions for recognition are unmet or violated beyond repair. Finally, if recognition is a resource, it is very variably accessible. As such, in the sections that follow, I demonstrate the ways in which artists gain access to it, how it is sought out by deceit, artistic ingenuity, and mirepresentation, and what is variously at stake for artists that negotiate experiences of recognition with curators from the freeworld. These aspects of curation are what the remainder of this chapter addresses.

To speak to power before play, I want to first discuss the ways in which incarcerated participants are oriented toward a certain understanding of fine art and how a specific kind of artistic habitus is formed in relation to the exhibition. As one artist commented, "We make all sorts of

things, but teddy bears get sold [to other people in prison] and paintings are what go to PCAP." This relatively high status of the show is demonstrated in the ways that artists themselves curate the kinds of works they choose to present to curators like paintings, which carry connotations of items that are worth more in the context of an exhibition, than relatively unostentatious objects like teddy bears.

It is, I think, productive to think of the exhibition as a kind of game that artists learn the rules to over time. This simile helps to illuminate the dynamics that underlie the process of curating art in prisons. People play games for different reasons: To bet, to have fun, to develop their skills. In the same way, the exhibition is approached by artists for any number of reasons: For celebrity, for money, for validation, to hone their crafts, to interact with freeworld artists and university students.

To move toward the notion of play, I want to reference the ways in which curators dealt with instances of forgery and other misrepresentations of artwork by incarcerated participants in chapter one. During these trips, I have encountered several participants that have misrepresented other people's works as their own. Memorably, I recall meeting with an artist who presented us with several pieces of art. Most of these pieces were relatively juvenile, graphite sketches on sheets of computer paper, while one was an intricate painting of a bird that appeared technically incongruous to the other pieces this artist had brought in for us. Upon closer inspection, I discovered the signature of a well-known artist in the exhibition, now formerly incarcerated, scribbled unobtrusively on the bottom right-hand corner of canvas.

During another selection trip, I spoke with an artist who demonstrated a very clear command of the labors demanded by this sort of creative work metonymy. This artist delivered an extremely compelling narrative about the piece that he had created: He told me an extraordinarily sad story about the recent passing of a family member and how it inspired the piece that he had

created. When I relayed my interactions with this artist to the curation team during the selection process, however, we had to take a collective pause. When the various curators that had the opportunity to speak with this artist shared their interactions with him, we discovered a series of incongruences in the versions of the story that we heard that caused us to question the integrity of his narrative.

"The longer you do this," Charlie Michaels tells me, "The more you think they tell stories because they want you to accept a piece." In such a statement, Charlie refers to the artist's ability to engage in what Carr calls anticipatory interpellation, "reading how one is hailed as a particular kind of institutional subject and responding as such" (Carr 2011, 16). While identities like "inmate" or "prisoner" are foisted on people through various carceral techniques, "people can also inhabit such identities, and speak from these designated locales, in politically efficacious ways" (154). While this curator qualifies that "we can never be sure since there's no proof," misrepresentation of art as a phenomenon is worthwhile to consider from a variety of perspectives.

During an interview, I asked Charlie whether or not he had any memorable stories about dealing with the misrepresentation of art on curation trips. He shared a story about meeting with a transgender woman at a men's facility named Fiona.[51] She had two pieces to present to him: A crotched potholder, which was "kind of falling apart," and a painting of a very well-painted tree. Charlie, however, noticed that the painting of the tree was adorned with the signature of an artist that he knew. This signature's owner was, in fact, seated just across the room.

> She had taken somebody else's work and was presenting it as her own alongside the thing she actually made because she was so nervous about being denied for the thing she actually

[51] Fiona is a pseudonym.

> made. I ended up telling [the lead curator] that we have to take this weird potholder. And he was, like, "Really?" and I was like, "Just trust me. We have to take the weird potholder."

As this example shows, the play of misrepresentation is not always an action that inspires judgements of disrepute. Charlie's story harkens back to the interaction that I had with the artist Daniel at the very beginning of this section, the stakes attached to processes of rhematization and this naturalized understanding of the arts as something that is axiomatically communicative and intensely personal. There is typically something deeply personal at stake in the presentation of one's art in this setting.

When I asked Charlie how he responded to this episode of misrepresentation with Fiona, he responded,

> I didn't mention the painting of the tree. I didn't look at it. I focused only on the crocheted thing and she launched into this whole narrative about being trans in prison. I learned so much about a life that I didn't know and I don't think I would have learned if we had said no. And it was pink and blue! It was a trans flag, similar to the example that you shared [about Daniel].
>
> The guy whose piece she had been representing as her own came up to me afterwards and was, like, "Thank you. I didn't know what to do about that." I felt like I ended up validating the person that really needed validation and making the person who felt like they were being used feel taken care of. I was so nervous about exposing somebody.

It is not the purpose of this section to inspire a hermeneutic of suspicion in the evaluation of art that comes out of prisons. As Carr (2011) astutely describes it and as I emphasize it here, anticipatory interpellation is a skill that requires metalinguistic awareness, "the practiced ability to read the range of authorized, acceptable discursive possibilities within an institutionalized set of recursive linguistic practices" (11). This anticipatory interpellation occurs in many ways within the context of the exhibition, such as it is in the performance of carceral personhood or through the misrepresentation of art as a defense against rejection.

Second, I use these terms to gesture toward the ways in which the process of curation is itself an intensely choreographed process and the ways in which power operates throughout this

very particular kind of economy. I demonstrated the ways in which witnessing as a practice attempts to open up new possibilities and directions in interactions with artists, particularly as it relates to experiences of validation and worth as an artist. I wish to stress, too, the ways in which artists like Matthew, Daniel, and Fiona are searching for experiences of recognition; artists that play the system, too, are looking for recognition, for the very understandable reason that the *Annual Exhibition* is one of the few venues in prisons capable of providing some degree of a substantial financial windfall.

What I wish to stress in this section is the inherently playful nature of artmaking practices in prison. As the artists in this chapter remind us, artmaking practices and art objects permit room for play: Art objects may dutifully represent intimate aspects of one's sense of self, be used to negotiate experiences of recognition from freeworld curators, oblige performances of carceral personhood, and, as Charlie's interactions with Fiona substantiate, facilitate ways of *being-with-others* and knowing that would otherwise be impossible.

4.4 Struggling with Curation

What Charlie's interaction with Fiona highlights is a very specific skillset. It speaks to practice dealing with the ambiguities inherent to the process of curation and the dynamics that arise between curators and artists in prisons. The primary tension lies in the push and pull between a more humanistic and participatory approach to curation that emphasizes stories and context over an approach that privileges technique and artistry. This tension has the potential to lead to various kinds of misunderstandings between artists in prison, who do not necessarily have insight or access to the ways in which curators think about art, and curators from the freeworld, who themselves (and I include myself in this count) are not necessarily attuned to the extraordinary stakes behind what it means to the artist's sense of worth and well-being.

And yet, despite these very thorny issues, it is important to remember why it is worth continuing this work. Martín's story, which opens this chapter, is a testament to the ways in which incarcerated artists, across the board, similarly cope with the excruciating relational violences that prisons perpetrate to drive people in prison mad with anger, isolation, and denigration. The process of making art and the process of being recognized by the exhibition creates a sense of dynamism in prison. Through acts of negotiation and struggle, artists in prisons fashion themselves as active subjects rather than passive objects that are simply acted upon by prison (Paul 2023).

Curators like Charlie provide us with a blueprint in terms of how we might consider addressing the issues that arise throughout the process of curation. While conflict is an inevitable part of this work, conflict does not necessarily have to be alienating. Perhaps it is also worth radically reimagining several of the thornier issues presented throughout the course of this chapter, namely the instances misrepresentation that curators encounter throughout the course of the curating art.

When I asked Charlie why he thought artists might misrepresent themselves in this manner, he replied: "Because it's really fucking hard to talk about yourself." It may not necessarily be our role to sort fact from fiction, to determine whether or not the story an artist animates about their art is true or false, but to afford these individuals some degree of grace due to the circumstances of their confinement, and to wonder why it is they may feel compelled to present themselves and their art in ways that, to us, feel disingenuous.

Chapter 5: The Live Third

"It is a joy to be hidden and a disaster not to be found."

■ **DONALD WINNICOTT**

You walk through the bubble, a short walk through an oppressively hot compound, and you've arrived at your destination: A small room with fifteen to twenty men are sitting together in a tight circle. They look tired. The expectation that's been placed on you is one of "bringing the light and the joy" to them—and you've never felt it sit so heavily on your shoulders until this moment.[52] You really want the workshop to go well. The pressure feels high.

Now, imagine fumbling the bag completely.

"Sound and Motion"

(Warmup, Physical, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Circle up. One person makes a simultaneous sound and motion, preferably nonsensical. The person next to them repeats this same sound and motion, and on and on around the circle, until the creator of that sound/motion has to do it again.
- The person next to them has to think of a new sound/motion. Repeat until everyone has had a turn.

Figure 5.1 Description of "Sound and Motion" from the PCAP Exercise Inventory

My field notes from the start of this term have a worn and downtrodden feel to them. This particular workshop, with its inauspicious start, was a creative writing workshop. We did two

[52] The reader may refer to Appendix E for a description of the trainings that creative arts workshop facilitators receive, both through prisons and through the Prison Creative Arts Project.

traditionally extroverted theatre games to get the ball rolling—two workshop classics called "Picnic Game" and "Sound and Motion." Neither of them landed very well, which was both confusing and irritating given how consistently they had performed in every other workshop I had ever facilitated.

This inauspicious start rolled into a second lackluster week, followed by a third. At the end of this third workshop, I brought my concerns to Mary Heinen McPherson, a formerly incarcerated social worker and co-founder of the Prison Creative Arts Project. Mary provided me with a pearl of wisdom: "A lot of these men have been locked up since they were teenagers, sometimes children. They develop a real bitchy shell that takes some time to work through. Just work on them."[53]

Mary followed up with a story from her experiences in prison as a participant in these very creative arts workshops. She told me about a woman who used to come to watch as workshops were being facilitated:

> We would encourage her all the time to join us but she was perfectly happy sitting in the corner just watching us play. Some people are like that. They just need to sit and watch to see what it's all about. It's a special thing in prison to be able to do stupid shit, to laugh, and some people don't really trust it. And, one day, sure enough, I showed up to the workshop and there she was, joining in on the fun as if she'd been there the whole time! She became the life of the party. You wouldn't have believed she was the same person.

Mary then told me about her own experiences of finding her way out of the shell she had developed during her incarceration.

"It's like me after I came home," Mary continued. "I just didn't have it in me to dance. Prison took that away from me." It wasn't until Mary attended a Pete Seeger concert after three years at home that she was able to dance again. "I cut loose like nobody's business," she joked. "It was like something finally clicked back into place."

---

[53] This interview with Mary Heinen McPherson took place at the University of Michigan on October 2022.

In interviews with facilitators, I often hear a motif: That a benefit of the workshop is that it helps participants to "come out of their shells," "to feel safe being their authentic selves for just a few hours." I want to highlight the significance of these comments, as well as Mary's advice to "work on them," by gesturing toward the ways in which these various understandings of the function of the arts—to facilitate experiences of safety and authenticity—discursively shape the facilitator's relationship with workshop participants. This inauspicious start to the workshop, then, becomes recast as an experience of resistance, better explained by the prison as an environment, which fosters experiences of withdrawal and wariness.

"Big Booty"

(Warmup, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Everyone in a circle. One player is Big Booty. The others, going clockwise, are numbered: 1, 2, 3 and so on. Now Big Booty establishes a 4-beat rhythm, saying Big Booty, Big Booty, Big Booty (followed by a rest) - repeat this until everyone gets the rhythm.
- The game then goes as follows: Big Booty passes the buck to someone else, saying Big Booty to 7 (say) (this takes 2 beats, one for saying 'Big Booty' and one for saying 'to 7'). Number 7 then passes in 2 beats to, say number 2, saying '7 to 2'. It then continues until someone makes a mistake: if and when that happens everyone says (in 2 beats) 'Oh Shit', after which we repeat Big Booty Big Booty Big Booty (+ rest on 4th beat), twice.
- After that, the player that made the mistake becomes Big Booty, and everyone's number changes. New Big Booty starts the game again."

Figure 5.2 Description of *Big Booty* from the PCAP Exercise Inventory

I've found that "working on" people in prison is to help them practice experiencing play and playfulness. Even after six years of facilitating these workshops, I still dread exercises like "Big Booty" with a passion. Despite my reservations about certain theatre games and exercises, though, I continue to enthusiastically support their inclusion in every genre of workshop that I facilitate in prisons. In Mary's own words, and through my own experience, persistence makes magic happen in these dark, violent, and depressing spaces.

And it is through these experiences facilitating workshops in prisons that I have found this "bitchy shell" to be the result of the relational violences that prisons perpetrate. The most stunning example of this in the course of my fieldwork was when I visited a prison that I was then facilitating a workshop in. I came in on an off day of the week to attend a concert being performed by Out of the Blue, a choral group from the University of Michigan. I recall walking down a hallway with the choir in a single-file line to the room they were going to perform in.

On my way there, I ran across several of my workshop participants. These were extraordinarily lively individuals in the workshop but it was the first time I had seen them in the prison proper, outside of our intimate group of fifteen. The difference was stunning. When I went to raise my hand and greet them as we passed, they had already had their heads turned down, refusing eye contact with anybody in my troupe. Their eyes were downcast, their postures hunched, shoulders up to their ears. It was an extraordinarily jarring experience.

To this extraordinarily split experience of people in my workshops on the one hand and these very same people outside of the safety of the workshop space, I'm reminded of an interview that I once facilitated with a prison's special activities director who said, "I've seen inmates really come out of their shells in these workshops. But when I see them in their cells or wandering around the compound, it's like they're dead on the inside. They retreat. They're completely different people."[54]

In this chapter, I walk us through the creative arts workshops that I have been facilitating in prisons with the Prison Creative Arts Project. I speak to the ways in which the workshop works in extraordinarily subversive ways, to bring experiences of joy into prisons and to create new ways of

[54] Interview via Zoom in the summer of 2022

relating to the prison environment, as well as the limitations of this work and what these barriers say about the violences that are inherent to prisons.

5.1 Collective Effervescence and Communitas

How this magic happens—the ways in which creative arts workshops facilitate new ways of relating to the prison environment and experiences of joy—is through play. To this end, I have a handful of go-to games that I like to play in my workshops.

5.1.1 Evil Twin

"Evil Twin"

(Improv, Character/Scene Creation, Character Depth)

- 4 players. 2 will play a scene. The other players are the other's evil twins. At any point, the 'twins' can shout 'freeze' after which they tag out their twin, and continue the scene and do something evil. After that, they move out again, and the original twin brother needs to justify the evil, correct or repair the damage done and continue the scene. Great setups for this game are things like first dates, or meeting your in-laws for the very first time.

Figure 5.3 Description of "Evil Twin" from the PCAP Exercise Inventory

In one game of *Evil Twin*, another facilitator and I played the two main characters while two of our participants played our respective evil twins. The scene was a simple one: My co-facilitator and I were on a first date. The scene very quickly devolved.

As our date was hitting its stride, my co-facilitator's twin tagged her out and took over the scene by shouting, "I think I just shit my pants!" to uproarious laughter from the participants and facilitators assembled in the circle around us. The participant immediately tagged himself out and brought my co-facilitator back into the scene to deal with the mess he'd left for her.

With concern, I responded, "Oh, is that something that happens often?"

Without missing a beat, my co-facilitator started to break down and cry, "Yes! I need you to help me. Could you please help me to the bathroom?"

At that moment, I was tagged out by my evil twin, who pretended to whip out a phone from his pocket.

"This is going to make a great Instagram story," he said, laughing as he began to snap pictures of my facilitator in mock distress to laughter from the group.

I choose to include this vignette for several reasons. After this game, a participant commented during their Rose, Bud, and Thorn,[55] "That theatre game was my rose. There's something freeing about being able to look like idiots in front of one another." I cannot overstate the importance of *silliness* as a tool to build community in these workshops. It forces people to relate to one another on an entirely different level than what they are used to.

We learn to relate through play, which is an embodied approach to relating to others that is so different to how people in prison are used to relating to others, oftentimes with caution and avoidance. In a contribution to *Rose, Bud, and Thorn* in a later workshop, one participant shared that he was thankful for the ways in which the workshop affected his relationship with the men in the group outside of the workshop itself: "I go up to guys that I'd usually just pass by in the halls," he commented. "It's really made me feel closer to you guys and I'm grateful for that."

5.1.2 Exquisite Corpse

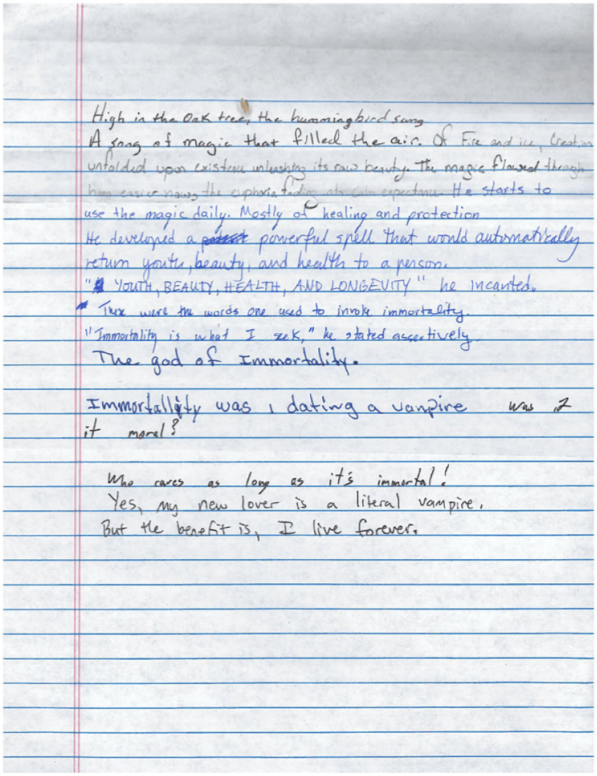
[55] Rose, Bud, and Thorn is a game that I use to close all of my workshops. Everybody in the group shares a rose, a bud, and a thorn. Your rose is something about your week that you enjoyed. Your bud is something that you're looking forward to. Your thorn is something in your week that's been bothering you.

This orientation toward play is also possible through creative writing exercises like *Exquisite Corpse*.

"Exquisite Corpse"

- Form a circle. Have each person write a sentence in which the last three words fall on the last line, then fold the paper over everything but the last line. Then pass it on to the next person, and continue repeating this process. Then read the results.

Figure 5.4 Description of *Exquisite Corpse* from the PCAP Exercise Inventory



High in the oak tree, the hummingbird sang
A song of magic that filled the air.

Of fire and ice, creation unfolded upon existence unleashing its raw beauty. The magic flowed through him easier now, the euphoria fading into calm acceptance.

He starts to use the magic daily. Mostly of healing and protection.
He developed a powerful spell that would automatically return youth, beauty, and health to a person.

"YOUTH, BEAUTY, HEALTH, AND LONGEVITY," he incanted.

These were the words one used to invoke immortality.
"Immortality is what I seek," he stated assertively.

The god of immortality.
Immortality. Was I dating a vampire?

Was it moral?
Who cares as long as it's immortal!

Yes, my new lover is a literal vampire.
But the benefit is, I live forever.

Figure 5.5 An example of *Exquisite Corpse* alongside a transcription

Exquisite Corpse is easily one of my favorite and go-to exercises for building up a sense of community, especially in creative writing workshops. The aim of the exercise is simple: On a piece of paper, a participant starts a story by writing two lines. He then folds the piece of paper over so only the second line is visible. He hands the piece of paper to the participant next to him, in a

clockwise fashion, and the second participant must continue the story started by the first. The catch is that the second participant only has access to the second line written by the previous participant.

The exercise carries on in this fashion until a set amount of time has passed or until we've hit the bottom of a piece of paper, whatever comes first. At that point, everyone is invited to throw their pieces of paper into the middle of the room. Participants then pick up a piece of paper at random, unfold them, and read them out to the group. The results tend to be very funny; occasionally, you end up with a beautifully coherent story despite the patchwork nature of the exercise.[56]

I include this particular example of *Exquisite Corpse* from an early session in a creative writing workshop that I facilitated because I have very fond memories about it: I still recall the way in which the participant who read this piece out loud incredulously exclaimed, "Am I dating a vampire?" and how we all cracked up for a good long while. It was the first time with this particular group of men that we as facilitators left the workshop feeling nurtured by laughter and that they as participants shared with us how much they got out of the workshop that day. I recall one participant during his *Rose, Bud, and Thorn* request more games like *Exquisite Corpse* because, in his words, of how rare laughter is in prisons.

---

[56] In one "failed" performance of this exercise, which didn't elicit the laughter and camaraderie that I'm used to experiencing after this game, I remarked to a co-facilitator at a debrief later that week, "Some of the guys were unrolling the paper and looking at the lines that they came before theirs." She commented that she had seen that, too. "It's almost like they were afraid of getting the answers wrong somehow," she mused, "Or that there was a 'right' way of doing the exercise."

I have found that certain exercises are a good litmus test to perform at the top of a new workshop, to gauge the degree to which a group will need to be normed into the playfulness of creative arts workshops. Oftentimes, there is a real guardedness against looking silly or uninformed; at other times, there is, I have a found, difficulty in simply doing something "creative" without a necessary end goal or final product.

5.1.3 Open Letter

Open letter

(Poetry, Prose)

- Write an open letter to a person or entity that is unlikely to respond

Figure 5.6 Description of *Open Letter* from the PCAP Exercise Inventory

Oftentimes, creative writing workshops tend to be the more "reflective" of the workshop genres. This, I have noticed, is due to a number of different factors. For one, creative writing workshops tend to attract more introverted characters than theatre workshops; second, the nature of the genre lends itself more naturally to reflective processing than theatre games.

Prompts like *Open Letter* deliver a variety of responses. In one workshop alone, we had letters written to Alexander I of Russia, "Mother Earth," Abraham Lincoln, a participant's mother that had recently passed, and a touching letter to a family pet that a participant had not seen in several years due to his incarceration.

Such exercises, over time, facilitate group cohesion in a number of ways. In one such "Open Letter" exercise, I recall sharing a short letter to my father, depicting my personal struggles with family and identity. I had several participants come up to me after the fact to exchange stories; one of them felt moved enough by my piece to write something about his father over the next week to share with the group at the following workshop. The examples are many and countless, and range from discussions about incarceration, to shared experiences of familial death while locked up, to shared trepidations about the process of reentry.

It is deeply *subversive* to be able to experience and openly display the full range of human emotions in a prison. This was made plain to me at one particular facility, where the room where we facilitated workshops was right next door to a guard's office. In the middle of an extraordinarily

raucous game of *Evil Twin*, we were shocked out of our laughter by loud, banging knocks against the adjoining wall, a clear sign of irritation and an indication to keep it down by the guard occupying the neighboring room.

In prisons, where displays of basic human emotion like laughter is a citable offense that has the potential to bring unwanted attention to you, the workshop is a space that allows people to be themselves. There is a real sense of relief that comes with being able to be unreserved and different from the enforced *ways-of-being* that people that live in prison feel forced to abide by on an everyday basis.

I want to emphasize the ways in which creative arts workshops facilitate forms of *being-with-others* that prisons largely make impossible. Such alternative experiences of relating to one another are very often validated by our participants. Because, when they hit their stride, I experience these workshops, and I have every reason to believe that others do as well, as a "moment in and out of time," a "generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (Turner 1995, 360). Experientially, workshops often bring to life Turner's differentiation of the "two major 'models' for human interrelatedness," the first organized by the terms of "caste, class, or rank hierarchies" and the second as "an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus" (360).

There is, as one participant mirrored during his contribution to *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*, something "sacred" about the experience of a workshop when people in the group are attuned to one another, when the workshop flows, and individuals feel free to express their vulnerabilities through their engagement with theatre-making practices. It often feels like a space within a space. I have found Turner's concept of communitas in liminal spaces useful to understand the work of the workshop. As Turner writes,

> Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. The processes of "leveling" and "stripping," to which Goffman has drawn our attention, often appear to flood their subjects with affect. (1995, 372)

In an interview with a theatre facilitator, he stressed the work of theatre as facilitating a process of "breaking people down." In the same way that Mary points to the ways in which workshops have the capacity to break people out of their "bitchy shells," the work of theatre—with its attendant silliness, ridiculousness, childishness—is to allow people to relate in new and novel ways.

If experiences of communitas are made possible through the workshop, I posit that what makes these experiences of communitas possible are what Durkheim calls collective effervescence (1915). Durkheim posits that religion emerges and gains legitimacy through moments of collective effervescence, where individuals in a society unite during religious rituals, experiencing a heightened emotional state that transcends the individual. Through the contributions shared during *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*, I have found that what makes these experiences of communitas possible are experiences of collective effervescence that arise through our mutual commitment to experiences of play and playfulness.

"Thank you," one participant shared at the close of a workshop, "for helping me to forget that I'm in prison for a little while."[57]

If we, as a group, are able to collective create an environment where we can all forget, for at least ninety minutes, that this fun that we're having with one another is happening in a prison, that is a marker of success. If we can mutually create a space where we feel free to play with one another,

[57] Quote from a participant in a creative writing workshop during their *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*, 2022

to forge connections with people from radically different walks of life, and to relate in ways that are reciprocally nurturing, then we have created something deeply subversive together.

5.2 Holding Thorns

"This is like a Hallmark movie," a man in one of my creative writing workshops says to laughter. "We laugh, we cry, we get serious. There's nothing else that's like this."

Rose, Bud, and Thorn is a ritual, at this point. It started off as a nice way to round out our workshops but somehow stuck as the exercise that we end all of our workshops with. This has been the case for the past two years at this particular men's facility. *Rose, Bud, and Thorn* is a reflective exercise. We go around the circle and everyone is asked to share what their "rose," "bud," and "thorn" are. I have spoken in chapters one and two about the relational nature of artmaking practices in prison. I hope to further flesh this out through the genre of the creative arts workshop. *Rose, Bud, and Thorn* is an exercise that makes this dynamic strikingly clear.

Rose, Bud, and Thorn is an opportunity for facilitators to learn more about how people feel about the workshops themselves, what works and what doesn't, as it provides a space for participants in their workshops to voice what they liked and didn't like in a given session. In the workshops that I have facilitated, participants come to express gratitude for the workshop as a space in their lives. There are many roses about how participants are grateful for this space, the facilitators themselves, and the various kinds of creative work that's undertaken within the workshop.

I recall having a one-off conversation with a fellow facilitator about how striking the contributions of *Rose, Bud, and Thorn* in a workshop become over time. The exercise, in the words of a participant, becomes an opportunity for people in the group to talk about experiences that they normally wouldn't be able to in prison. More significantly, *Rose, Bud, and Thorn* is framed as an

opportunity for participants to vent about any misgivings they're experiencing in their lives generally speaking. During a workshop training that I attended, the facilitator commented, "People in prison have very few opportunities to say what sucks without judgment. This is a way for them to do that."

I'm reminded of a participant's contribution during the middle of his *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*. As the workshop was coming to an end, and as this participant, who I'll refer to as Gerald, was about to contribute his rose for the week, a prison guard walked into the room. We were running several minutes late that session, and he came in to alert us to the fact that he had an appointment to tend to. He needed us to wrap up so that he could usher us out of the room.

When he had fully walked out of the room, Gerald commented, "Well, my thorn just walked out of the room, so that's one down." All of us laughed.

To complain about one's conditions in prison, and certainly to complain about guards, is a quick ticket to the hole.[58] The stakes of self-expression in prison are quite high and the workshop as a space is one of the few places that participants will tell us they can freely be themselves, to talk about what's on their mind without censorship or judgement, particularly as it relates to their experiences of incarceration.

In previous conversations with my co-facilitators, we discussed some of the heavier thorns that participants share with us: Deaths in the family, their being denied the ability to attend their funerals either in person or even via Zoom, strained relationships with children and spouses, fears related to leaving prison and the process of reentry. The workshop as a genre inevitably provokes heaviness, but it is well beyond the scope of the workshop to actively process, in a psychotherapeutic sense, the difficult material that may arise in the process of such reflection and

---

[58] The hole is another term for solitary confinement.

reflecting. It is, as a facilitator, a return to the psychoanalytic principles of witnessing: To acknowledge *without* therapeutic ambition (Poland 2000). There is, as a trainer from the Prison Creative Arts Project stated, power in allowing people simply to voice their frustrations in the first place.

As one co-facilitator stated during a weekly meeting after a particularly thorny workshop, "We are just trying to integrate this world of heaviness together, find some laughter and joy to bring light into that place."

A second co-facilitator responded, "I think we need to consider how we can be a container to allow for the range of experiences of human emotion to be experienced in this space that we're trying to co-create."

To this end, I find that "container" is an apt term to describe the work of our workshop, with clear indexical resonances to the Winnicottian holding environment.[59] The Winnicottian holding environment is one that insulates a person from impingement, experiences in one's environment that are felt to be disturbing (2018). This sense of insulation is of central importance because impingement is posited to lead to the development of what Winnicott called the "false self,"

---

[59] I wish to be explicit about my invocation of psychoanalytic theory in this chapter. I want to make clear that facilitators at the Prison Creative Arts Project are not trained in, nor have they espoused to utilizing, psychoanalytic techniques in their work with people in prison. I very intentionally utilize Winnicott's understandings of the holding environment and creative apperception to provide a framework through which the work that facilitators do in prison may be understood in relation to the prison environment.

Winnicott's understandings of the holding environment and creativity both dovetail with how facilitators speak to their work and help to animate much of what facilitators understand themselves to be doing in prison by providing theoretical language to what is they are responding to, namely the forced compliance that prisons oblige of people in prison.

a sense of self created in relation to what is traumatic, distressing, or intolerable (Winnicott 2018). As Josephine Klein (1987) writes,

> The result could be the creation of what Winnicott called the "false self", where "other people's expectations can become of overriding importance, overlaying or contradicting the original sense of self, the one connected to the very roots of one's being".

I argue that the prison may fruitfully be thought of as an environment that fails to hold. It is important to note the ways in which facilitators regard this lack of holding as traumatic. Such understandings of the prison as a traumatic environment which inhibits one's growth are implicit in and amplified by the language of facilitators. The consequences of incarceration, the many ways in which prisons cause people to "retreat" into themselves and develop "bitchy shells," points to the ways in which prisons perpetrate forms of relational violence that prevent people that live in prison from relating to themselves and to others in genuine ways.

In Winnicott's conceptualization of a person's development over time, the individual ideally becomes aware of their capacities by discovering the environment *on their own terms*, which leads to the development of what he called the "true" or "authentic" self (Winnicott 2018). This is a useful framework through which to understand the work of coming alive through art in prisons, the ways in which facilitators seek to countermand the compliance that prisons engender and to create new ways of relating to one another and to one's self through the practice of art and play.

5.3 The Live Third

Facilitators, I posit, look to foster an environment where participants are more than simply a "prisoner," with all the attendant and laden prescribed meanings that come with this label. From this position, to hold and to witness an Other is to facilitate the creation of what psychoanalysis calls the "live third" (Poland 2000). This third is an intersubjective space jointly created between two or more

people, a space of possibility. It is more than simply listening to another person, it is recognizing and grasping the emotional import of a person's contributions without therapeutic ambition.

The live third is a separate space that contains within it alternative possibilities of being both in the world and with others. The work of containing within the workshop, I will show, is to produce a space where what is typical or usual—in the ways that people relate to themselves and to others—is suspended. The live third, I argue, creates the conditions for Turnerian communitas, which I describe in a following section. To contain, facilitators must first figuratively "hold" people's thorns by actively attending to our participants as they voice their misgivings, concerns, and frustrations. In the same way, people in our workshops must also trust in us and their fellow participants to be able to open up in the ways in which I've described.

This live third, this space of possibility, is what the work of PCAP inspires, and it is precisely what countermands the relational violences of confinement. And it is not unfelt, as people's contributions in *Rose, Bud, and Thorn* attest to. I argue, this gesture toward the reclamation of one's sense of autonomy and power that facilitators respond to and hope to encourage. Creativity implicitly becomes a means by which to cultivate a new kind of habitus, "a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking," (Bourdieu 2002, 27) aimed at helping people to relate to one another in new ways, get in touch with deeper emotions and issues, as well as simply to facilitate new ways of relating to people and one's self while in prison.

In conversations with facilitators and curators at the Prison Creative Arts Project, I have often noticed the ways in which "creativity" becomes utilized and framed as an antidote to the violences of incarceration, to facilitate new ways of relating to the prison environment as well with one's self while in prison; in short, the live third in prison. In thinking about how to operationalize "creativity," particularly as it is thought through by workshop facilitators, Winnicott provides us with

a useful framework to understand what it means to make art in prisons. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Winnicott distinguishes "creative apperception" from compliance. He writes,

> It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance … Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living. (2018, 87)

For Winnicott, the capacity for creative apperception is what makes a lively life possible. For Winnicott, as it is for workshop facilitators, creativity is a universal faculty of life. It is an instinct that can be honed, skills that can be sharpened. Creativity is also a faculty that can be defensively hidden beneath a *false self*, damaged by the absent mother. Creativity is what facilitates the Winnicottian true self. Through the active and deliberate doing that creativity inspires, the authentic self may be discovered and uplifted, the ability, as Mary argues, "to operate in your physical being, not on the institutional plot or on anybody else's game plan but on your own emotions, will, and politics."[60]

Creativity is resilience against annihilation by compliance. And it is, I posit, this turn against compliance that many workshop facilitators both unconsciously and consciously rally. The pivot, instead, toward the agency of incarcerated people—and allowing them to be agentive in the space of the workshop—is a persistent motif in the work. In a similar vein, Bourdieu argues that it is the capacity to act, successfully or not, amid novel circumstances that defines the condition of being a

---

[60] To return again to Mary's earliest guidance to me, it is about understanding people in prison as necessarily having to develop a "bitchy shell" to survive their experiences of confinement and how creativity becomes a means by which to "work on them." I find inspiration from Winnicott's conceptualization of creativity and his psychoanalytic theorization of Mary's "bitchy shell," the inauthentic or false self.

social actor (2002). This Bourdieuian conceptualization of the social actor dovetails well with the ways in which facilitators speak about PCAP programming in prisons.

The cultivation of play in prisons is the cultivation of an ethical approach to life predicated on a perception of being as inherently unpredictable and contingent. As Malay attributes to the indeterminacy of games (Malaby 2009), the process of creating art on the inside reflect and embody the uncertainties and constraints that saturate experiences in the freeworld. Play becomes a way of actualizing a certain way of being in the world, a disposition that doubles as a "readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendently ordered account" (206), a disposition that allows for unintended consequences of action. Play and artmaking practices, in other words, become a means by which an approach to living and being are articulated and practiced, a notion of what it means to be a human being in the world.

5.4 The Perversion of Creativity

Despite this extraordinary work that PCAP facilitates in prisons, it is important to recall what it is that prisons themselves invite into the practice of making art and how art is impacted when created in conditions of confinement. I utilize a vignette from my field research to demonstrate the ways in which art may be undermined and weaponized to inflict experiences of violence that people in prison would otherwise not experience.

I was facilitating a workshop one semester when, the week before our final performance, the workshop was canceled. We were given notice that it was due to a disciplinary lockdown, a total shutdown of the prison. This was incredibly disappointing for the facilitators, as we had spent several intensive weeks planning our final performance—a faux commencement ceremony with numerous comedic skits—with our participants. We felt that the group had cohered in a beautiful

way and that were making extraordinary progress in our work with one another, and so we retired from the semester with heavy hearts.

What nettled me the most was that the cause of this lockdown was unknown to us. We were left in the dark until several months had passed and the facility resumed its volunteer programming. At this time, the facility acquiesced to our request to finish up this previous workshop and we were granted two weeks to finish up the workshop from the previous term, with one session to plan for the final performance and one session to perform it. Upon visiting the facility, we found that the majority of our participants from the previous workshop were able to participate in this delayed final performance; perhaps more happily still, several people were not able to participate, as they had been released in the intervening months.

Following a rushed planning session, we opted to end this workshop with a very traditional *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*. We slowly discovered, in bits and pieces, what the phrase "disciplinary lockdown" meant throughout the course of this exercise. The lockdown itself, one participant shared, was the result of alleged contraband in the prison. The disciplinary lockdown led to restricted movement, which meant that people were forced to stay in their living quarters for 23 out of 24 hours a day for an entire month. Even with the resumption of programming at this prison, the facility was still on a partial lockdown, with severely limited movement and early curfews in place.

The stories about the lockdown came out in bits and pieces at the end, with *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*: One participant's thorn was the shakedowns that were perpetrated by guards, an egregiously commonplace practice in which living quarters are searched for contraband and to uncover potential security threats. Rooms were searched and scoured in search of hidden contraband like weapons, drugs, and cellphones. Our participants were given garbage bags for their possessions, which they had to fill and then drag from their dorms across the prison compound for inspection at a separate

site. In conversations with formerly incarcerated artists and facilitators alike, this bizarre protocol for inspection appeared to be the norm across detention facilities in the state and in the country (Shaulis 2008; Moser 2021).

Randy, a participant in this creative writing workshop, contributed a series of thorns. In previous workshops, Randy had shared that he had never written a piece of poetry before a workshop that I facilitated on haikus: He had a real knack for the genre. His contributions from that session several months ago had received unambiguous praise from both his fellow participants and the facilitators. I knew that this experience left an indelible impression on Randy. This is because at the beginning of every workshop following that one, Randy would come up to the facilitators with a stack of poetry he had written in that week's break between workshops. He would ask us to read over what he had written. We were always impressed by his extraordinarily prodigious output and excited to facilitate his growth as a writer.

In the single most rage-inducing episode of my six years of facilitating these workshops, Randy shared during Rose, Bud, Thorn, what had happened to him during the prison shakedown that had shut down our workshop. He stated that the guards had destroyed some of his written pieces. They had entered his living quarters, read his poetry out loud to one another, and laughed while doing so. This was particularly distressing to hear as many of Randy's recent pieces were commentaries on his sexuality, his experiences in prison, as well as deeper meditations on his struggles with depression. Randy's works about the latter were, I was told, "on psychology's desk,"

the implication being that the creative writing had somehow garnered the attention of prison administrators. He was considered a safety risk.[61]

In the earlier days of my work, a participant walked into workshop one day with an enormous and obvious patch of hair missing from his head; the parts of his scalp that had been rendered visible were red and inflamed. But it is often the case that we will witness overt clues about what our participants experience in their lives outside of the workshop. Sometimes, these experiences of violence are shared through contributions in *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*, as with Randy in the aforementioned vignette. We have had participants break down into tears describing their experiences of solitary confinement, their fears related to re-entry, and the "weight of isolation" that they experience in prison. Other times, it is walking into a workshop, striking up a conversation with a participant, only to see that his front teeth—which had been firmly in place the previous week—are missing.

Sometimes, these hints about the violences of confinement are subtle. In scheduling a final performance for a workshop, we told our participants that, traditionally, we open the final performance up to the facility so that other people in prison may watch. Many of our participants were insistent that we keep it as a closed group session: "I think the final performance should just be for us," one participant shared with the facilitators after the workshop had officially ended. "It would nice to keep it closed." I recall being puzzled by this collective entreaty until I had a

---

[61] While I don't know what the implications of being a safety risk for Randy were, I've had many conversations with other formerly and presently incarcerated people about what this designation has meant for other people. For example, people diagnosed with the COVID-19 virus—including some of our own participants—were often deemed a risk to others and segregated in solitary confinement for being ill. Whether justified or not, people in prison that disclose experiences of suicidality have been hospitalized in psychiatric facilities against their will.

conversation with the institution's chaplain who told me, "A lot of the guys in your group are in for child sex crimes.[62] They may not want the extra attention of other guys in the compound."[63]

In a conversation with me following the destruction of his written pieces, Randy would tell me, "I've never felt less human." It felt like a punch in the gut to hear these words in the context of a creative arts workshop, which many participants have sincerely called a "refuge," a "sacred" space. And so what I stress in this section are the ways in which experiences of well-being in the workshop occur within a container, a space within a space. What Randy's tribulations remind us is of the space that envelops the workshop, the prison. The workshops are, to evoke the words of a participant, a "ninety-minute furlough from prison," but ultimately not a space that is capable of transcending the realities—the violences—of confinement.

However, this is not to say that artmaking practices are not capable of mediating these experiences of violence in a meaningful way. So, the question that lies at the heart of this chapter and I turn explicitly to next is this: How do we respond to the violences of prisons as we continue to facilitate the work that we do?

---

[62] At both federal and state levels, sex-related offenses include a very broad range of behaviors including sexual assault, child molestation and sexual abuse, distribution of child pornography, and solicitation of a minor.

[63] People convicted of sexual offenses are vulnerable to assaults, thefts, denigration, harassment, and humiliation in prison (Schwaebe 2005). Because of issues related to our participant's safety, we chose to facilitate a closed-group final performance based on the feedback that we received from the group. We chose not to involve other people that resided in this facility and chose, instead, to celebrate with one another with an open mic night of creative writing and a ceremony to hand out certificates of completion.

5.5 Thinking Through Commitment

Many of the violences that we bear witness to are events that we as facilitators have little to no control over. The vignette illustrating the destruction of Randy's writing in the previous section is an example of this. However, what we do have control over is how we respond to these inevitable instances of violence that haunt the facilitation of these workshops.

Over time, I've come to adopt Ashley Lucas's understanding of the work that PCAP does. To bring the light and the joy, to me, is more than just about the play, fun, and silliness that I've detailed in this chapter, and it is more than responding to violence with empathy and compassion. It is about *showing up*. This is kind of a dilemma around ethics and comportment. One does not do this work simply to do it: If you do it, you need to commit to it, given what is at stake in the building of real and authentic relationships with people in spaces where real and authentic relationships are in short supply.

I find myself writing up this section while meditating on a workshop that I once facilitated. In many ways, I found this to be one of the most rewarding and challenging workshops of my career. My field notes from the beginning of this particular workshop reflect challenges: An inauspicious start to the workshop in terms of the group's willingness to play, a rowdier-than-usual group dynamic where people often spoke over one another, as well as my own inability to completely commit to a weekly facilitation schedule due to various issues and concerns in my personal life.

I thought nothing of my relative lack of attendance at this particular term's workshop. After all, I reasoned with myself, I had nearly six years of this work under my belt at that point; in all of that time, I had only ever missed a handful of workshops. It would be fine, I thought to myself, to commit to a little bit less this term; I had, after all, earned my keep.

Fortunately, but ultimately to my unending chagrin, I discovered that this line of thinking was entirely unjustifiable and the result of my own narcissism. I noticed about halfway into this workshop that the dynamic between myself and our participants seemed somehow off. At that point in the workshop, I had only been able to attend two of the earliest sessions, which meant that I had missed the previous three sessions. The pressing issue at this fifth workshop was that I found that I didn't quite fit into the group's dynamics the same way. My sense of belonging in this group, which I realized I had taken for granted in the introductory sessions, was being severely tested. My attempts to banter fell flat, my capacity to engage participants in games and exercises didn't come with the ease that it did before. I left this particular workshop feeling deeply perplexed. What, I wondered, had changed?

It wasn't until I brought this issue up to my clinical supervisor that I realized my mistake.

"You know the answer to this," she commented. "We've talked about this in the context of your therapy clients. How do you build trust with another person, any person?"

"Consistency," I responded, suddenly struck.

All at once, I recalled a moment from my earliest trainings with the Prison Creative Arts Project:

"If you're choosing to be here, you need to commit to being here," a trainer once commented to us. "People in prison are so used to being promised things. People in prison are always very used to having the rug pulled from underneath them. This isn't something that you just do on a whim. If you're here, you're committing to the work, which means showing up every single week in rain, sun, or snow."

Reflecting on this memory, I began to recall experiences of participants telling us during their *Rose, Bud, and Thorn* contributions that they appreciated our ability to keep our promises: That if

we committed to doing something, that we would follow through. Often, they would refer to the very minor actions that we rarely thought twice about, like bringing in a piece of poetry to use as material for a class that we said we would bring in. While they were already touching when I first began to hear these sorts of shares, they began to take on an entirely new meaning in the context of this particular workshop and my role in it.

Perhaps the clearest example of my failure to recognize the importance of my own commitment to the work came at the halfway point of this workshop. One of our participants, Tim, wanted to share a piece that he had written; however, he only wanted one of the facilitators—the most consistent attendee of us all—to be able to read it.

I remember commenting in jest, "I'm really jealous that she gets to read something that we don't!"

Tim's response was illuminating: "Well," he replied, "I guess you should think about showing up more often."

I recall bringing this interaction up with my co-facilitators in a meeting after the fact. One of them stated, "You know, something similar happened to me with Tim. I had to miss that one workshop a couple of weeks ago. The week that I came back, I told Tim that I wanted to hear more of his writings read out loud and he goes, 'Well, you should've been here last week, then.' In my head I thought to myself, 'But I told you guys I wasn't going to be able to make it last week!'"

"I wonder what that's about," another co-facilitator remarked.

In our meeting in the moment, I made sense of it in the language about relationships most readily available to me.

"It feels like an attachment thing," I recall replying. "It feels like it's his way of communicating the fact that he actually likes us. He wants us to be there and he's disappointed that

we're not. Do you remember what he said during *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*? That it was a really sad thing to have to face that the workshop is going to be ending soon?"

It is important to think through the stakes attached to the cultivation of communitas and collective effervescence in a space where people feel obliged to sincerely thank you for following through with your promises, for, although they don't use these terms themselves, bringing "the joy and the light" to a space that is thoroughly profane and devoid of the sacred. It says much about the goings-on in prisons that we as facilitators are not privy to, that these acts of kindness that most of us would take for granted in the freeworld are amplified in such extraordinary ways in prison.

In this particular workshop, I chose to pivot. I began to attend every week and make an intentional effort to engage, and this required a good deal of work on my end given the precarity of this particular term in my own life.

"Before you go into prison, you need to work on your stuff," a trainer once relayed to us, a message that played on repeat in my own mind throughout the remainder of this particular workshop. "If you go in low and down, that's the energy you're going to receive from them. You need to leave your baggage at the door and bring your best selves to the people that you work with in prison."

I am happy to say that this concerted turn toward consistent attendance did materialize in real change in the group's dynamics, as well as my sense of belonging in the workshop generally: The rapport came easier, my jokes landed and were even returned, and I began to garner real and reciprocated attention from many of the participants in the group.

It really was not until these series of interactions with Tim that I realized the importance of what it means to, in the words of our trainer, "bring the light and the joy" into prisons. There have been extraordinary tributes to us, the facilitators, from our group's members, particularly in the

forms of the roses that people share in their contributions to *Rose, Bud, and Thorn*, but through longer form poetry, too, that I choose not to reproduce here to preserve the anonymity of our participants. The motifs that appear repeatedly in these extraordinary gestures, however, always reference our "kindness," our "altruism" for spending our time in prisons without monetary compensation, as well as our commitment to keeping the promises that we make, for returning week after week, whatever the weather or the goings-on in our lives.

In conversations with senior and experienced facilitators, I have found that they, too, have observed that volunteers that do not commit to the work rarely win the favor of their participants: It makes for a rough facilitation experience when your lack of commitment is obvious to the people with whom you work. Consistency, as my supervisor is fond of saying, is what builds trust in any relationship. What I hope to have shown in this section are the ways in which any emphasis on consistency requires commitment. It is, furthermore, not simply by virtue of one's participation in the arts that creates a sense of well-being—however fraught, temporary, or frustratingly fleeting these experiences of well-being may be—but that any experience of well-being is the result of intentional, relational labor that occurs across time and space.

I do not highlight my labor in this work to garner kudos. As I interpret it, this lack of commitment is an obvious failing on my part; correspondingly, my recommitment to the workshop was simply the equally obvious solution required to right my wrong. Rather, what I argue through this auto-ethnographic turn is that there are stakes attached to developing warm, kind, and intimate relationships with many people in prison. To do so is to ask people who are used to having promises reneged and relationships severed to open up to you in ways that go against the grain of their everyday lives in prison. It feels to me, now more than ever, like a slap in the face to not show up for a group of people who will openly tell you how much they look forward to the next workshop,

for the pleasure of seeing you for one ninety-minute session a week while in prison, and who call the time spent in your company their one and only reprieve from their experiences of confinement and incarceration.

It is also important to note the ways in which this commitment is a reciprocal process. In the same way, just as we witness, we ourselves become witnessed when we share how unsettled we are by their experiences of lockdowns, when we express concern about being shut out of the prison for so many months, and when we ask after participants that aren't in attendance at a particular workshop or have stopped showing up altogether. We become witnessed when participants ask us how our weeks were, what it is we were up to outside of the workshop, and when they follow up with us during the weeks where we ourselves have unexpected or uncommunicated absences. I never feel more carefully and generously observed and tended to by a group of people than I do in a prison workshop setting. It is utterly bizarre in the sense that it seems obscene that entering a prison is what I should find myself looking forward to the most on a given week, that it is one of the spaces in my life that I feel the most seen.[64]

It is also important to highlight that, in many ways, commitment to the work comes easily precisely because of how the work affects the freeworld facilitators that commit to this work. PCAP facilitators, me included, will often say that it is the highlight of their week to go into prison to work alongside participants in their workshops. I've often found, myself, that the time that I spend in prison is the best part of my week. (Prison, somehow, is also the place where I get some of my best writing done.)

---

[64] I refer the reader to the conclusion of this dissertation, specifically the section entitled "Franklin's Coda," on further meditations about this work from my perspective as a facilitator.

And yet, these experiences themselves, that *prisons* are the spaces where I have felt some of the most serious attunement to who I am and what I bring, that it is the space where I have genuinely felt the freest to be creative and open with my own art. It is bizarre, perhaps, that in the most isolated, violent, and traumatic spaces such liveliness and energy can be cultivated; and yet, it is perhaps thoroughly unsurprising that it is precisely because prisons are so devoid of life that any degree of verve is taken up with abandon.

5.6 The Struggle for Well-Being

"Why is *this* the first time we're being exposed to this?"

It was a question, but it sounded like a demand. It was posed by a participant in the midst of a creative writing workshop. We were about three-quarters of the way through that semester's timeline and, in this session, we were writing haikus.

Many of these haikus were hysterical, others were extraordinarily thoughtful and thought provoking. We were wrapping up that day's workshop after a raucous day of improvisatory theatre exercises. It had been a day of extraordinary discovery: There were some truly extraordinary improvisers in the room, many of whom had no idea they had the talent to make people laugh. One participant in particular had an extraordinary talent for impersonations, and it was a particularly striking discovery because this particular participant was always a quiet and reserved presence in our workshops. It was a delightful shock to see him come out of his shell that day.

In the context of that day's workshop, the aggressive punctuation of this question was somehow disconcerting. I continue to think through it on a nearly weekly basis: "Why is *this* the first time we're being exposed to this?"

I wish I had been with it enough to have followed up, to have asked him to expand on his thoughts. I might have asked, "What are you being exposed to for the first time?" Perhaps it was the theatre games, the haikus. Our participant had asked this question, quite explosively, following gales of laughter as a participant read aloud a very funny haiku about a former partner. I wonder if the question, the charged tone of his voice, was in response to the feelings of community and togetherness that we were sitting with at the time.

Many of the people that we work with in prison will share bits of their stories with us, their lives before we met them in prison. It is, especially in creative writing workshops, an expected hazard of the work that we will get autobiographical and reflective. Many people gesture to having grown up poor, others hint at or blatantly describe the traumas that they have experienced and survived. Many still make comments like, "I'd never written a poem before this workshop," "I didn't know that I could act," and "It's cool that all of us are discovering parts of ourselves that we didn't know about before," which always elude to lives where the arts, where exposure to poetry, improvisation, acting, and literature, were irrelevant to or largely absent before coming to prison.

To return to my participant's question, I have always wondered what it means that prison is the place where some people recognize for the first time their capacities to create art. It continues to bewilder me that people discover their capacity to make people laugh, their extroversion, in prison. Many of our participants have told us, "This workshop was the first place I've ever written" a haiku, poem, or short story. It is a space where we hear—time and time again—how people did not know what they were capable of creating until they were encouraged to do so.

Despite the gratitude that participants and facilitaors alike express about this work, it is also a tragic and stark reminder to remember why people in prison are so grateful to us for helping to facilitate this forgetting. It is a stark reminder of the ways in which the everyday experiences of the

prison are degrading, violent, and inhumane. It is a painful reminder to know that this forgetting takes place in the limited confines of a ninety-minute workshop that occurs once a week over the course of twelve weeks.

What I hope this chapter demonstrates are the various ways in which prisons are very terribly suited to be institutions of care or well-being. Invoking Turner, the communitas of creative workshops in prisons is only possible because of the violent, disciplinary technologies that these places of confinement rely on to order and organize its subjects. In a similar vein, the collective effervescence that these workshops inspire take on the meanings that they do because they occur within the context of the profane, everyday violences that characterize one's experiences of confinement.

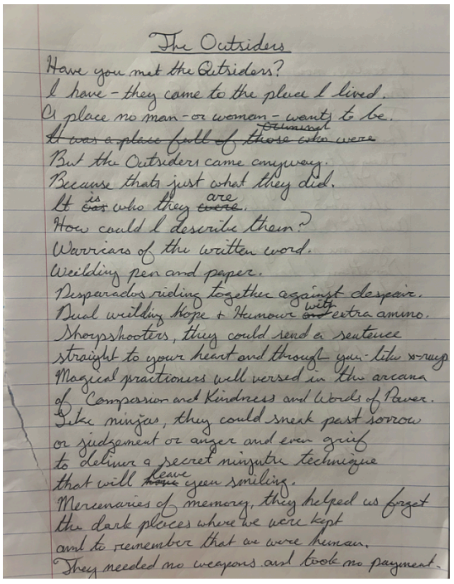
Temporary experiences of well-being in prison are undoubtedly possible. This chapter attests to this. However, this observation by my interlocutor demonstrates why I have chosen to foreground the ways in which the violences of incarceration consistently impede in the work that we as artists and facilitators commit ourselves to in prison. It often feels, as I stated in a previous section of this chapter, like triage rather than meaningful aid.

Throughout the course of my six years facilitating workshops, I have met extraordinarily kind, dedicated, and altruistic people in prison, including guards, staff, and directors. I do not doubt their dedication to the well-being of people in prison; they are, after all, the individuals that work to make the programming that I have described throughout the course of this dissertation possible to begin with. However, as I have documented in previous chapters, prisons participate in essentializing work that consistently reduce the person in prison down to pejorative labels like "criminal," "inmate," or an inmate number. The programming that I have described throughout the course of these chapters are driven almost entirely by unpaid volunteers. This programming is

largely marginalized, often referred to as an unnecessary luxury by people that work in prisons. There are, as I have shown, too, many ideological concerns at play concerning the deservingness of people in prison to have access to such programming in the first place. From a system's perspective, despite the work of individuals that commit to the active and processual work of care, prisons as institutions refuse to recognize the incarcerated person at the basic unit of their humanity and, for this reason, can always be a "perverse" (Wacquant 2002) but never adequate site for care or well-being.

In this chapter, I have argued explicitly that artmaking practices do not causally lead to the recognition of one's humanity. The arts do not, by virtue of some inherent, enchanted quality, afford experiences of well-being, either As I have documented in this chapter, the consequences of well-being that may be reaped from these workshops is the result of a deeply intentional process that requires attunement to the environment of the prison and the violences that it affords. Rather than focusing on the ways in which artmaking practices lead to experiences of well-being, what I have sought to show in this analysis are the ways in which artmaking practices in prison highlight the ever-present struggle for well-being, as any experience of well-being in prison cannot, I pose, be divorced from the circumstances in which these experiences are born.

Chapter 6: Conclusion



The Outsiders

Have you met the Outsiders?
I have - they came to the place I lived.
A place no man - or woman - wants to be.
It was a place full of those who were
But the Outsiders came anyway.
Because that's just what they did.
It is who they are.
How could I describe them?
Warriors of the written word.
Wielding pen and paper.
Desperados riding together against despair.
Dual wielding hope + Humour with extra ammo.
Sharpshooters, they could send a sentence straight to your heart and through you like x-rays
Magical practitioners well versed in the arcana of Compassion and Kindness and Words of Power.
Like ninjas, they could sneak past sorrow or judgement or anger and even grief
to deliver a secret ninjutsu technique
that will leave you smiling.
Mercenaries of memory, they helped us forget
the dark places where we were kept
and to remember that we were human.
They needed no weapons and took no payment,

Have you met the Outsiders?
I have–they came to the place I lived.
A place no man–or woman—wants to be.
But the Outsiders came anyway.
Because that's just what they did.
It is who they are.
How could I describe them?
Warriors of the written word.
Wielding pen and paper.
Desperados riding together against despair.
Dual wielding hope and humour with extra ammo.
Sharpshooters, they could send a sentence straight to your heart and through you—like x-rays.
Magical practitioners well versed in the arcana of compassion and kindness and words of power.
Like ninjas, they could sneak past sorrow or judgement or anger and even grief
to deliver a secret ninjutsu technique
that will leave you smiling.
Mercenaries of memory, they helped us forget
the dark places where we were kept
and to remember that we were human.
They needed no weapons and took no payment,
I realize now, after I saw them,
that they exist across the Earth.
Teachers. Helpers. Healers. Hopers.
Poets. Artists. Singers. And Thinkers.
They often go unseen.
But they go anyway—to the places no one else goes, to help those who need it.
And the Outsiders who came to me
gave me new eyes to see
something I had thought was lost to me
but, really, it was there all along.
And now I will see them forever
even after they are gone.
And for this I am eternally grateful.
Ride on Outsiders, Ride On.

Figure 6.1 A poem entitled "The Outsiders" by Franklin[65]

6.1 Autoethnographic Afterthoughts

6.1.1 My Positionality

This isn't easy work. To do it and to do it well are, I think, important distinctions. Megan Holmes and I were speaking to the ins-and-outs of running workshops when she commented,

> There's a real banal way we can facilitate workshops, without being particularly mindful or making it thought out, and it would still do a shit ton of good. Even then, it makes people get out of their silos, encounter someone opposite to your positionality, and there's a lot of work just that kind of work does for people. At some level, as facilitators, you try not to shut

[65] Franklin is a pseudonym. Franklin wrote this poem for the facilitators in a creative writing workshop that I co-facilitated through PCAP. This poem has been reproduced with his permission.

> it down, you just let it be. It's emergent. We are enabling what happens in the space but it's not always about us having control over it. By trusting in it, we can bring some incredible things in a really dark space.

Mirroring Megan's comments, what I hope to have shown in this dissertation are the very intentional ways in which many facilitators think through the workshop as a genre over time, that the key to the magic of the workshop, these small but significant experiences of effervescence and joy, are the result of trust, built over time, commitment, and consistency.

This work of showing up in prison has forced me to confront and make friends with certain aspects of my identity and how I present to people, how I am interpellated (Butler 1993; 2008; Althusser 1970) in ways that I would prefer not to be. For example, despite having grown up poor, I am often read by people in prison as having come from wealth. This is, at least due in part, to the fact that I am Asian American.[66] The fact that I come from the University of Michigan does nothing to soften this misconception.[67] And, it must be said, of course, that as a doctoral candidate at a prestigious university, and by virtue of the fact that I am free, I do occupy a wealth of privilege relative to the people that I work with who are confined in prison. This is, I have found, a barrier to the work which inspires a doubling down on showing up to the work.

As a psychotherapist, I received my earliest training in groupwork. I worked with court-mandated, male perpetrators of domestic violence, many of whom were formerly incarcerated, in a

---

[66] In a conversation with several formerly incarcerated artists, one commented, "It's probably racism. They see an Asian guy and they just assume you have money."

[67] It is also interesting to note that, in men's facilities, being a thirty-something-year-old man adds to some of the resistances I have encountered in the work, whereas many of my colleagues, typically white women in their early twenties, inspire very few of these difficulties. It has been my experience that the facilitators that are tested in these spaces—teased, talked over, dismissed—tend to be men. It is, in some ways, the reverse at Women's Huron Valley, the only women's facility in the state; there, I encounter much less resistance and have a much easier time developing rapport with participants.

group intervention setting. I recall in the earliest facilitation of my groups with the Prison Creative Arts Project asking my clinical supervisor for feedback on my work in prisons. I remember bemoaning the fact that I felt as though I was being tested by people in prison.

Her response was, as it always is, spot on: "Of course they're going to test you." There is clinical and practical wisdom in this: Groups will test the outsider. Groups will challenge the outsider. However, groups can be swayed. And groups can produce brilliant work, even and perhaps especially because of the various kinds of conflict that inevitably arise in these strangely intimate-but-distanced settings.

I include these considerations to demonstrate the ways in which artmaking practices are, as I have stressed repeatedly throughout the course of this dissertation, not guarantors of well-being, connection, or benevolence. Art requires very real *work*. There have been moments in prisons that have severely tested my patience in the work that we do as facilitators and curators. It is sometimes extraordinarily difficult to commit to people when they choose to test you, despite how understandable it is that people in prison would need to test you before they are able to trust you.[68]

The work, as I have shown throughout the course of this dissertation, is deeply processual. The psychoanalytic threads throughout this dissertation, from the concept of witnessing to the more explicit invocations of Winnicottian psychoanalysis, are not simply theoretical: They are practical and, from my end, have and continue to be practiced as a part of my praxis going into prisons.

---

[68] People in prison have told me countless times how disappointed they feel when people from the freeworld do not keep or remember their promises. These promises may be small and seemingly inconsequential to us in the freeworld, like bringing in a piece of poetry that somebody in the group really wanted a copy of, but are hugely meaningful to people in prison, where access to such material is impossible.

This is because psychoanalytic thinking not only organizes experience but provides a rich set of humanistic and existential values by which to operate from. I choose to highlight my positionality in this section, in this manner, to emphasize the ways in which the work of going into prisons is as potentially transformative for people in the freeworld as it is for people in prison if, in the words of my facilitator, we do it in a "mindful" and thought-out manner, in a way where we can make sense of what comes out of the very emergent work of creating art in prisons.

6.1.2 The Abolitionist Praxis

In an interview with a curator from the *Annual Exhibition*, we got on the topic of abolitionism and how abolitionist praxes intersect with the work of the Prison Creative Arts Project. She commented,

> Sometimes, I wonder what it means to shake hands with someone and then have them divulge to me that the reason they're in prison is because they've murdered somebody. It's one of those things where I have to constantly practice my abolitionist stance in this work. I have to remind myself that people are so much more than their crimes and what they've done to get into prison. It's something that I sometimes really have to be intentional about, especially when the crime is a really challenging one.

These are moments that most people end up facing in this line of work. This is perhaps the hardest part of the work to translate to people who do not go into prisons on a weekly basis, or for those who have yet to be convinced that people in prison are people first. I find that these ways of being with people in prison inspire ways of relating that require us to suspend our own belief systems in ways that we are not asked to do in our day-to-day lives.

It is the praxis of the organization not to ask people about the crimes that they have committed and to refrain from looking up the people that we work with in prisons. Occasionally, however, disclosures occur, usually in the form of stray comments by guards, like, "I can't a believe a pedophile painted that." In my own work, I have been confronted with such disclosures by staff,

sometimes directly and other times more subtly, about the various reasons why the people I work with are in prison, including murder, distribution of child pornography, the sexual assault of a minor, and participation in the January 6 riots. The list goes on and on.

I recall a conversation between several people involved in the Prison Creative Arts Project discussing a resentencing trial of an incarcerated artist that regularly participates in the *Annual Exhibition*. Many people from the organization went to this person's hearing to testify on their behalf. I was told, however, that there were many people, namely the survivors of this person's crime, that were in attendance, as well.

"It was so jarring," one person commented, "to hear people talk about this person I've known for so long in such vicious, horrible ways, just highlighting all of what had been done to their family."

"Even after twenty years," another conversant commented, "it was obvious to me that the family wasn't able to heal. I think that's the saddest part of this whole situation."

It is hard, I think, to hold this dialectic in tension: That, first, many of the people with whom I've worked are responsible for extraordinary violences and harm; and, second, that the work has allowed me to relate to them in ways that are far more than the harms that they have perpetrated in their lives. I have come to deeply care for many of the participants that I've had the privilege of working with, many whose crimes that I am aware of due to betrayals of their autonomy by other people in prison, most whose crimes that I am not aware of nor interested in learning about.

I find that the ways in which facilitators are trained by the Prison Creative Arts Project lend themselves well to a psychoanalytic understanding of *being-with-others*. Rule one of a creative arts workshop, in my mind, is always this: We are guests in people's homes. Because we are guests, we

comport ourselves in certain ways: We do not tell people what to do in their homes, we do not ask them inappropriate questions, and we do not judge them based on the worst day of their lives.

As Buzz Alexander writes in his book,

> But that's just it: not all of it is positive, not everything we are doing is good; the job is far from over. It is too easy to be complacent and take for granted what we've done. Far too often members of the class—myself more than most—will find the smallest positives in the gravest of circumstances. Instead, I should recognize the hardships and attack those; find the root of the issues and begin problem solving and evaluate what needs to be changed within the system. (Alexander 2010, 191)

I ultimately believe that this is what artmaking practices gesture to: The ways in which society has failed people in prison, both prior to, during, and if they are fortunate enough to have a future outside of prison, following their incarcerations.

6.1.3 A Tradition of Art and Care in Prisons

I feel it is important to note that art is made in prisons every single day, independent of the work of organizations like the Prison Creative Arts Project and the volunteers that collaborate alongside people in prison. Throughout the course of my six years collaborating with presently incarcerated people in prison, I have encountered countless actors, pianists, singer-songwriters, playwrights, directors, and comic book authors who have been creating art for their entire lives and for a number of years during their incarcerations.[69] It is, I would posit, important to decenter the role of facilitators and curators in prisons, in case the reader leaves with a sense that the extraordinary breadth of creativity found in prisons is purely the result of our work or intervention.

---

[69] It reminds me of a moment in Ashley Lucas's course entitled "The Atonement Project," who once commented that we, the volunteers, are very rarely actually ever the experts in prisons. In many instances, after all, people in prison have been writing and making art for longer than many of us have been alive.

It is, I think, similarly important to detail the ways in which care is created through community and mentorship independent of such organizations, as well. As I detailed in chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," Daniel, who runs his own art class in prison, suggests that there is a long tradition of mentorship and teaching that has and continues to happen in prisons.

Figure 6.2 *Sunrise at Old Kinross* by Oliger Merko[70]

In an interview with a formerly incarcerated artist, Martín Vargas, I asked after one his protégés, an eminent artist and veteran participant in the *Annual Exhibition* named Oliger Merko, whom he had befriended in prison:

> I taught him how to paint. In the beginning, he would tell me, "Man, I can't do this like you." And I would tell him, "You don't have to do it like me, you just have to do it the way you would do it." I taught him by literally putting my hand on top of his and guiding the brush across the paper. There's a lot of that going on in prisons. There's a lot of mentorship and teaching that happens between people.

Martín himself was an art instructor in prison for twenty-four years at the Ionia Correctional Facility and attests to the ways in which artists in prison would collaborate and learn from one another. It is important to note the ways in which acts of care do happen in prisons, if for no other reason than to countermand the essentializing work of prisons which presume that people in prison are without creativity or the capacity to empathize, love, and care without intervention from the freeworld.

6.1.4 Meditations on the Relationship between Art and Violence in Prisons

In the conclusion of chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," I spoke about an artist who chose not to participate in the *Annual Exhibition* because he refused to benefit the Michigan Department of Corrections through the sale of his art. There is truth to be tended to in this act of resistance: Prisons, after all, do not structurally support arts-based initiatives but monetarily benefit from them.

---

[70] From the digital archives of the *25th Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners,* https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition25/item/9412.

The programming that I have described in this dissertation is run almost entirely by unpaid volunteers. Prisons do not structurally support arts-based teaching and learning in prisons, either, with the singular exception that I alluded to in chapter four, "Negotiating Recognition," of Daniel and the art classes that he leads. Furthermore, as I demonstrated with Martín's story in that same chapter, the institution does not structurally support the artists that already thrive in prisons. Martín's story shows that art may, in fact, be utilized as a source of retaliation and, as I described in chapter five, "The Live Third," a source of punishment and what Ashley Lucas calls the "arbitrary violence" (Lucas 2020) of prisons.

This is not to disenchant artmaking practices in prison but to purposefully orient us toward the everyday violences that prisons enact, that whatever benefits to well-being that the arts provide must always be contextualized within the apparatus of the prison itself. Indeed, whatever care that facilitators can provide to participants is limited. This has never been more clearly apparent to me as a facilitator than when listening to people in prison speak about their fears related to the process of re-entry, which I briefly discussed in chapter five: Many of these individuals have ailing family members on the outside that they themselves will have to take care of once they're out, have no support network to lean, fear falling back into maladaptive patterns—like dealing drugs—and associations—with gangs—out of necessity, due to how poorly prepared and equipped they are from occupational and financial perspectives.

This concern is further exacerbated by the fact that many formerly incarcerated attests attest that, once they are back in the freeworld, they find it extraordinarily difficult to create art of any kind. Prisons provide people with an abundance of time that the freeworld does not. It is nearly impossible to summon the urge or resources to create when they are coming back to a world with alien technology like touchscreen cellphones and Apple Pay, liberty to eat what one wants when one

wants to, to have access to resources and relationships that were unimaginable in prison, all the while burdened with the struggles that come with the stigma of having a record, instabilities related to housing, and the newfound responsibility of having to create order in freedom.

6.1.5 The Possibilities that Art Affords ("They really are just people!")

In chapter five, "The Live Third," I highlighted a question posed by a participant: "Why is *this* the first time we're learning about this?" In the same vein, it might be worth following this up with a question posed by one of my co-facilitators: "Why is *PCAP* the first time people in the freeworld are exposed to people that live in prison?"

As part of my work with the Prison Creative Arts Project, I organized and attended various concerts performed by Out of the Blue, a choral group founded by a University of Michigan alumnus. Following the choir's first concert of the season at a state prison, I was walking down a hallway, back toward the facility's bubble with one of the singers in the group. The concert had been a marked success. As we walked together, he very suddenly turned to me and exclaimed,

> They really are just people! You don't realize how much you learn about prisons through the media and how that affects your perceptions. They're just people. That's why this work is so important, more people need to experience this.

When I tell this story, people tend to respond with incredulity. They roll their eyes as if to say, "Of course they're 'actually people'," essentially denigrating the audacity of this singer for ever having thought otherwise. They might follow this up with a backhanded concession like, "Well, I guess it's a good thing he managed to have that epiphany." In that moment with this singer, these were the thoughts that, to my present-day chagrin, filtered through my own mind.

In a conversation with Vicente Concilio, professor at the Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina and who facilitates arts-based programming in Brazillian prisons, I asked him whether or not he, too, found the act of going into prisons as mundane as I did.

"Yes, of course, like you get used to anything else in life," Vicente responded. "But I think it's our job as people who do this to never forget how strange the experience was the very first time."

I think back on my interaction with this singer rather frequently and I can't help but wonder what motivated my incredulity despite, no doubt, having a similar kind of revelation in the beginning of my work in prisons.

Incredulity is, I think, the easy response: "Of course they're 'actually people'." After all, most of us understand, rationally and intellectually, that people in prison are people first. But for those "Outsiders," to borrow a term from Franklin's poem which opens this chapter, who have never stepped foot into a prison or spoken to an incarcerated person in prison, it is, I think, my obligation to share what a very different experience it is to know that people in prison are people in an embodied sense.

Prisons are, in the first place, utterly disorienting: The pat down is a ridiculous and anxiety-inducing experience that more often feels like badly performed community theater than an actual attempt to address issues related to "security" in prisons. The guards are intimidating. The gates and barbed wire fences are intimidating. The rules for what you can and cannot wear are intimidating ("Is this shirt too tight or just right? How loose is too loose for pants?"). It is all intimidating. The stories that I could share about the extraordinarily odd, annoying, scary, and frustrating experiences I've had simply getting into a prison in the first place would themselves fill a book. I include one such vignette that was originally meant to open the dissertation:

> "That room over there. Someone will be in to strip you soon."
>
> The experience of being in a prison is both strange and has, with the practice of six years, become routine. It is routine in the sense that, at each facility you go to, you are shepherded from waiting room, to bubble, to the prison proper. While the process of ingress and egress remain steady, the experience of a bubble at one facility is never quite the same at another.

It's a quirky term that belies its nature, but the "bubble" is a transitory room between a facility's waiting area and the inner sanctum of the prison compound. It is demarcated at both ends by sliding gates. The gates open at the behest of individuals in a control room that guards must radio call to in order to open. The pair of gates that flank either side of the bubble can never be open at the same time.

Volunteers are sorted through the bubble by gender and are patted down by guards of the same sex. During this particular trip, I was one of two men, the other being a colleague who I'll refer to as Nick. Nick and I were shepherded through the bubble first while the women in our group were patiently biding their turn to enter from the waiting room. This facility had a particularly lengthy bubble with multiple sets of gates and, at its end, by the doors that opened up into the prison grounds, contained a second room off to the side.

This room's door was marked with a piece of copy paper emblazoned with the words "Strip Search" by the nub of a thick, red marker. While Nick and I were making amiable chit-chat, a person in prison, presumably a new transfer to the facility based on his clothing, was lead into this room. The female guard that escorted him into the building blandly stated to him, "That room over there. Someone will be in to strip you soon." A short moment afterwards, a male guard walked by with disposable gloves protruding out of a front pant pocket. As he entered and closed the door to this room, I could distinctly hear him say, "Take off your underwear."

It is, I think, a particularly peculiar experience, perhaps a flavor of strange entirely unique to the prison, to carry on a conversation about one's struggles with fieldwork and writing up a dissertation while both parties are embarrassingly aware that, not two feet away from where you're both standing, a man is undergoing a cavity search. I can't speak for Nick, but I rather think our choices at the time were limited: Pause and acknowledge the awkwardness of the situation with the guards in the control room behind us; or, bravely trudge through the sudden tension in the room with innocuous conversation about our favorite coffee shops to get writing done.

I chose to trudge my way through the sudden tension by complaining about the exorbitant costs of Ann Arbor coffee until our compatriots shuffled their way down to meet us outside of the control room.

Returning to this singer's comments, I think it is a wholly different experience to situate the abstracted idea of "people in prison" in the actual prison itself, as you yourself experience the environment live, in a thoroughly raw and unmediated manner, as you take in the fact that people actually have to live their lives, sometimes for the rest of their lives, in this disorienting hellscape. In the words of a co-facilitator about this work,

> We use the arts to see through the banalities of prison. We're so fucked and society is at a devolving point. We do it for the reasons that Franklin says: It's the best coping strategy for what we've got, it's how joy can still come into really dark places.
>
> The work is about patterning how you can build community across difference, where, over time, we all kind of care about each other, even with all of the weirdness of the membership stuff. And the arts do that in a way that other kinds of programming can't. This programming can do the relational work that instructional programming, the self-improvement programming can't. It allows for the ugliness and the despair and the seriously problematic to come through.
>
> We rely on a given container with a set of agreements where we have a shared understanding of how we operate in a given space and that the container will hold the unresolved, joy, and shit. It will hold all of that. And it will allow all of it to be articulated, to exist in the air. If, as facilitators, we're comfortable enough with that and we don't try to shut it down —if we're comfortable enough with it we can dwell in that space of very difficult emotions as well as the ones that they inspire in us—that's where the container is helpful.

In the same vein, my co-facilitator, I feel, touches on the most powerful aspect of working with the Prison Creative Arts Project. The work creates an environment that is able to hold tensions: It reveals not only what prisons make impossible, but what artmaking practices make possible. To return to the singer who exclaimed, "They really are just people!", it is, I think, one of the most powerful aspects of this work that art is able to facilitate relationships between people in the freeworld and people in prisons in ways that other mediums are unable to do.

6.2 Future Directions

6.2.1 Engaging with Reformist and Abolitionist Theories

I have gestured to the ways in which artmaking practices generate certain kinds of critiques about the prison as an institution. However, this project did not engage with larger theories around change with regard to the phenomenon of mass incarceration generally. This was the result of an intentional decision to limit the scope of the dissertation to the immediate and the particulars of the programming undertaken by the Prison Creative Arts Project in the state of Michigan. In the book,

however, I seek to relate my findings to larger discourses around theories related to rehabilitation, reform, and abolition.

In chapters four ("Negotiating Recognition") and five ("The Live Third"), I spoke to the ways in which artmaking practices imbue a certain kind of habitus that gesture to larger sorts of questions about what it means to be a human being in the world, an agentive actor. In the book, I seek to understand what artmaking practices have the potential to say about the relationship between agency and "freedom," particularly as it pertains to practices of re-entry. Processes of re-entry are largely normative and require the production of a certain kind of subject that can learn to belong to the freeworld. I am interested in examining the possibilities and limitations of this process and what artmaking practices may be able to reveal about these processes.

6.2.2 Engaging with a Community-Engaged Praxis

I have been encouraged to detail both my insecurities about this work as well as the ways in which I plan to give back to the communities that I have had the privilege of working with for so many years. This is what I turn to in this section.

6.2.2.1 **Clinical Social Work Practice**

Through my work as a psychotherapist and social worker, I have begun to formalize a mental health program for formerly incarcerated people in the state of Michigan through my agency, FairSky Foundation. The end goal is to provide no-to-low-cost psychotherapeutic services and support groups for formerly incarcerated people in the state of Michigan. I hope to build on connections established with the Prison Creative Arts Project, specifically their Linkage Project,

which works with formerly incarcerated artists, to create fruitful lines of collaboration for people looking for assistance in the process of re-entry.

6.2.2.2 **Member Checking**

A deep insecurity that I have not been able to address throughout the course of this writing process has been to formalize a member checking process, which involves running research findings and arguments by people within the community that a researcher collaborates alongside (McKim 2023). This is due to several reasons, some methodological,[71] others due to a collapsed, rushed timeline[72]. To address this gap, it is my intention to collaborate with both formerly and presently incarcerated people and participants from previous workshops to scour the dissertation for arguments and perspectives that may not necessarily align with the lived experiences of people in prison once I am in the process of creating the manuscript for the book project.

6.2.3 Facilitating Workshops

As I have stated in this chapter, the most compelling and change-oriented part of this work as I see it lies in facilitating connections between people in the freeworld and people in prison. It is my intention to teach courses modelled after, for instance, Ashley Lucas's "Theatre and

---

[71] It is a policy of the Michigan Department of Corrections that people who maintain a volunteer status with prisons cannot communicate with people in prison through letter writing or phone calls as this constitutes a dual relationship. As a result, to write to people in prison means that I would have to forego my ability to enter prisons in the first place.

[72] I was not able to write my chapters in time to run them by formerly incarcerated participants from the Prison Creative Arts Project. While I was able to run certain kinds of arguments and receive permission to include transcriptions of interviews in this dissertation, I failed to engage in a formalized member checking process, which would include paying interlocuters to read drafts of the dissertation.

Incarceration," which explicitly involve getting undergraduate students into prisons to facilitate the creative arts workshops described in this dissertation. I am optimistic about how I might be able to encourage such relationships moving forward in my career as an assistant professor at the University of Michigan–Dearborn.

6.3 Franklin's Coda: The Outsiders

I choose to open this final chapter of the dissertation with a poem by a creative writing participant, who I will call Franklin, from a creative writing workshop that I helped to facilitate.

Franklin is an extraordinary man: A funny and quick improviser—a fact made all the more stunning by the fact that he has no formal training in it—an extraordinarily vivid writer, and an equally compelling orator. He was a part of one of the most convivial and talented cohorts that I have had the pleasure of collaborating with through my work with the Prison Creative Arts Project.

I often think about this group of talented men. My work with them brought into stark relief some of my own anxieties and insecurities about this work. What, for example, does it mean to conduct research in prisons? How is it possible to reconcile my own positionality—as a person in the freeworld who comes from a place of relative privilege as a student at a prestigious research university—with the fact that I am building my career on the suffering and labor of people in prison?

I shared these anxieties with a fellow co-facilitator. Her comments were illuminating and worth reproducing in full. She said to me,

> The work is about recognizing one's inside-outside position, one's privilege. It's [Franklin's] language of "outsiders"—we *are* the outsiders. But we have to hold that. And we don't hold it in a *mea culpa* way or pretend that it doesn't exist because what we've created is some beautiful, magical space free of these dynamics. It's about speaking from the position that you occupy: We are fucked because they are fucked and what we have to realize is that,

> within this inside-outside dynamic, no movement can happen if we don't acknowledge that we are as fucked as they are in this horrible relationship that's been set up due to mass incarceration.
>
> Everything that makes our being on the outside privileged is built on the dysfunction and the suffering and depression of the people that we are working with. Our privilege is a part of this history and we have to accept it without guilt, to know that, in some sense, we can change it. You just have to mean it. And that little hour and a half that we spend with them inside, it's a shift for us as well. We're stepping out of the crapola rat race of the world—writing a dissertation, teaching in an institution in a moment where our institutions are misbehaving so problematically—it creates a different space for both us and them. Our positionalities are different but the things that come out of that interaction are pretty real and unusual.

I think it is this optimism about change that is important for me to hold onto. I have suggested in the previous section, "Future Directions," directions that I intend to take my research and social work practice moving forward that I hope will contribute to a lively and engaged community-engaged praxis. While I am grateful to be in a position where I am capable of contributing to some degree of giving back to the people with whom I've worked, it would be a lie to say that this tension feels neatly resolved: It is, I think, a tension that will live with me for as long as my career in this field lasts.

I do believe fully in the fact that, out of our interactions together, "pretty real and unusual" things do arise. In chapter three, "Bearing Witness," I argued that prisons induce a societal forgetting. The power of hiding people behind bars—behind the stigma of labels like "criminal," "felon," and a jumpsuit—lies in its capacity to prevent people in the freeworld from relating to the people that exist behind these labels.

These days, entering the prison is what's easy. It is, after nearly six years, routine. What I find most difficult now is leaving these people with whom I've communed in collective effervescence, shared raucous laughter, grief, joy, and tears, behind. It is the privilege of getting to leave at all that is, simultaneously, at the heart of so much of my unease, anxieties, and pains.

The magic of the workshop and the exhibition is in how these genres form connections between people in an environment that prevents so many flavors of intimacy. It is, I posit, an extension of the violence of the prison in that a handful of conversations made over art objects or interactions had over the course of a ninety-minute workshop is where and how these connections start and end. In having stressed the ambivalence of these practices throughout the course of this dissertation, however, I firmly believe there is something special and unique to be found within this simultaneously intimate-yet-detached "live third" (Poland 2007), despite the inevitable experiences of disappointment and loss that must arise given the context of where these relationships are formed.

In the moments where I find myself ruminating over the grief that this work engenders, I find myself clinging to Franklin's parting gift to us:

> And now I will see them forever
> even after they are gone.
> And for this I am eternally grateful.
> Ride on Outsiders, Ride On.

Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Workshop Agenda

September [redacted], 20[redacted]

Facilitators: Vitalis [redacted]

Agenda

- Meet each other at [redacted] at [redacted].
- PPD, printing paper with our games ...

Workshop

1. **Icebreakers**:
    a. Facilitator introductions & name games
        i. Names + make a movement about how you're feeling or something that represents you (6-8 minutes) — [redacted]
        ~~ii. Picnic game (10-15 minutes)~~
    b. Sound machine (10-15 minutes) — [redacted]
    c. Speed interviews (10-15 minutese) - each person speaks for 1 minute uninterrupted — [redacted]
        i. Favorite holiday
        ii. Reason you're in the workshop
        iii. A color that represents you
        iv. An animal you wish to be
        v. Someone you look up to
2. **Transitions**:
    a. Community guidelines — [redacted]
        i. Topics that are off limits
            1. No mentions of drugs, violence, jail and prisons generally.
                a. Use metaphors, framing it as an articulation challenge.
            2. Relationships are off limits.
    b. Final project conversation — [redacted]
3. **Meat**:
    a. 5 senses prompt (15 minutes) — [redacted]

Appendix B: Excerpts from the PCAP Exercise Inventory

THEATER

Some **categories**, to help you find what you need:

- **Warmup:** exercise works best in the first couple weeks or at the beginning of a workshop in order to loosen up the group
- **Physical:** exercise gets people moving around a lot, heart rates up, etc.
- **Vocal:** exercise usually demands that group members project their voices or be precise with their inflections
- **Concentration:** exercise demands that participants use subtlety in their actions or restraint in their movements/voice
- **Group-Building:** demands that people work together or learn about each other
- Improv: exercise includes the active creation of scenes, not just sound or motion practice
- **Character/Scene Creation**: exercise is good to use if you are trying to create characters or scenes from scratch
- **Storytelling:** exercise emphasizes narrative creativity, which may give ideas for scenes or characters
- **Character Depth:** exercise deepens shallow/clichéd characters

Now, the **exercises:**

"Drop Your Cool Card" (A.K.A. "Shake the demons")

(Warmup, Physical, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Move around and scream maniacally. This works well if you have people in the group "too cool" to participate. A good way to start the first workshop or every workshop.

"Sound and Motion"

(Warmup, Physical, Vocal, Group-Building)

- Circle up. One person makes a simultaneous sound and motion, preferably nonsensical. The person next to them repeats this same sound and motion, and on and on around the circle, until the creator of that sound/motion has to do it again.
- The person next to them has to think of a new sound/motion. Repeat until everyone has had a turn.

"Machine"

(Warmup, Physical, Vocal, Improv, Group-Building)

- A PCAP favorite, this is a collaborative "sound and motion." It begins by one of the braver members going to the middle of the room and performing their sound/motion. They must do this continuously throughout the exercise.
- One by one, the other group members add on "parts" by performing a sound/motion that somehow connects to the previous parts of the machine.
- The exercise is completed when everyone has joined in.

POETRY AND PROSE

"Where I Live"

(Poetry)

- Write a poem with the name of a street you know well as the title. Before beginning to write, free-write two lists - one of things you're likely to find on that street, another of things you would probably never find on that street. Then, during the writing of the poem, make sure to include at least five items from each list in your poem.
- This is a good exercise because people have nostalgia for places and the lists demand really specific detail. Since it doesn't have to be a street you lived on, there is a nice variety of what people choose. Also, when making the lists, I don't specify concrete or abstract things, so people could just as easily say that grief/anger/joy lived on their street as the old elm/the fire department/the crazy man with the green hat, which can be interesting. Usually people really share something of themselves in this poem and it encourages a lot of identifying and question-asking.

"N-less"

(Poetry)

- Write a poem without using the letter 'n.'
- The variation of "arbitrary limitation" games is endless. The point, of course, is to make the writers challenge themselves to use words that they would not otherwise use.

"Forming Poems"

(Poetry)

- Take a famous poem, and type it with no line breaks, and make copies.
- Have the group re-write the poem with breaks as they see fit, and talk about why.

"Pictures and Words"

(Poetry)

- Bring in postcards, photos, or other images. Each person picks one and writes a poem being as descriptive as possible, using all their senses (others should be able to recognize the picture described).

"All Work and No Play…"

(Poetry)

- Write a poem using one (interesting) word or phrase TEN TIMES within it.

Appendix C: The Process of Curating Art

There are serious artists and artmaking communities in Michigan prisons. Enthusiasm, in terms of institutional support for these artists, varies. A facility that I visited early in the selection trip visits had real estate on the compound reserved for art classes led by an incarcerated artist named Donald. It was relatively resourced, with a strong selection of paints, canvases, easels, and brushes. Most facilities are far less resourced, due, in part, to the lack of solemnity afforded to art in prisons.[73]

The exhibition itself, is, of course, the final stage of a long and arduous process. The process officially begins with what are called art selection trips. The primary mission of these trips is to curate artwork for the exhibition, which opens to the public every third Tuesday of March. Before the selection trips begin, a call for art is sent out to all twenty-five prisons in the state during the summer months, which notifies artists that the Prison Creative Arts Project will be coming in to curate artwork for the following year's exhibition. The art selection trips themselves begin in September and wrap up in January.

It is important to note that the Prison Creative Arts Project's mission statement and core values do not mention terms like "rehabilitation" or "talent." The organization privileges a participatory approach to the arts which challenges axiomatic understandings of artmaking practices

---

[73] The Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan prisons, does, however, raise the profile of hobbycraft activities in a variety of ways, which I discuss further on into my analysis of the curatorial process.

in the West. Participatory art practices explicitly write against notions of professionalization and directly engage the audience in the creative process, such that hierarchical divisions between "artist" and "audience" are, ideally, neutralized.

The Prison Creative Arts Project maintains the following as their mission statement:

Mission Statement:

The Prison Creative Arts Project brings those impacted by the justice system together with the University of Michigan community for artistic collaboration, mutual learning, and growth.

Core Values:

1. We believe everyone has the capacity to create art.

2. We place human connection at the center of our process.

3. We join with community partners in the movement toward social justice through the arts.

4. We welcome all people who wish to join PCAP's work into our community at the University of Michigan.

5. We recognize the power of diversity and of intersection between different parts of society to create learning opportunities.

6. We celebrate artists, writers, and performers at all skill levels and provide support for artistic growth.

Despite these various emphases on the participatory praxis of the organization, it is important to note the ways in which exhibitions are themselves a distinctly ideological genre (O'Neill, 2008). The very notion of an exhibition, which hierarchically organizes the "curator," "artist," and "public" into distinct roles, undoubtedly pushes up against the notion of participatory artmaking in tense and uncomfortable ways. And, central to the task of curating artwork is, of course, the evaluation of art

objects based on ways of seeing situated in the tradition of Western art, as art that is or is not worthy of being exhibited.

The process of curation brings to the fore ways of thinking about art objects, as well as the artists behind the art, that illuminate the many tensions inherent in the making of art in prisons. Prospective participants in the *Annual Exhibition* are provided with a document that outlines the set of criteria that curators think through. The criteria emphasize the importance of "originality," "uniqueness," "commitment," and "personal expression."

> **Originality**: Does the art piece show original ideas, images, or use of materials? What do we learn about the artist from the work?
>
> **Uniqueness**: Are the ideas, images, and materials used in ways that are unique or new? What might the piece contribute to the exhibition that no other piece does?
>
> **Commitment**: Does the art piece show that the artist is committed to an idea, style, their growth as an individual or as an artist, and/or mastery of materials and media?
>
> **Personal Expression**: What attempt has been made for expressive depth? Does the piece express something that matters to the artist? What meaning does the piece hold for the artist?

As in the mission statement and core values of the Prison Creative Arts Project, aspects of artwork, including technical skill and the number of times an artist has exhibited with the Prison Creative Arts Project, are not included:

> **Technical Skill**: Although we appreciate a high level of technical skill, we do not use this as a selection criterion. We hope to exhibit a wide range of skills, from novice to expert. The criteria above can be used for any art piece, not just those that show a high level of technical skill.

Number of Times an Artist Has Exhibited With PCAP: We welcome exhibition veterans and first-time applicants. Each piece will be evaluated alone, not based on an artist's other work.

Other limitations exist, including injunctions on the dimensions of the art piece, artwork "copied entirely from another source" (such as "images found in magazines, posters, books, or greetings cards" and "copies of fine art pieces,"), pieces that are "still wet," and whether or not the piece can be displayed "in the way the artist intends it to be seen" (including three-dimensional artwork meant to be "viewed from all four sides" or two-sided, two-dimensional pieces).

This approach to curation, which attempts to make curatorial dynamics more transparent dovetails with the "curational turn" (O'Neill 2008) in the latter half of the twentieth century in American art discourse. Within this turn, the critique of art as an autonomous object of study was replaced by the "ascendancy of the curatorial gesture," whereby the "neo-critical curator … usurped the evacuated place of the critic," to maintain the "'separateness of the artistic and curatorial gesture'" (O'Neill 2008). This division, however, obfuscates the interdependence of these practices in the production of exhibitions and is the object of the present analysis.

In the section that follows, entitled "The Curators," I briefly describe the individuals associated with the Prison Creative Arts Project that go into prisons to collect art.

The Curators

As part of my field research, I attended over a dozen curation trips to prisons across the state of Michigan. Curation trips are day-long affairs that sometimes span the course of several overnight trips. The latter is especially true of trips to detention facilities across the Upper Peninsula of the state, a seemingly infinite stretch of rurality that comprises nearly a third of the state's land but only three percent of its total population.

The curation teams are comprised of a rotating cast of actors, five or six people on average. Typically, two of these members were our leads, the official "curation team," who were primarily responsible for the selection of art on these trips. Other members of the team were typically comprised of faculty members, student volunteers, and errant ethnographers. The curation team is comprised of people with and without training in the fine arts. Official members of the curation team tend to have institutional training and degrees, like BFAs and MFAs. Within the past two years, however, the program has consciously been expanding the diversity of the people that attend curation trips in order to broaden the kinds of perspectives that are brought into the process of organizing the art in the exhibition, which I spoke to in chapter three, "Bearing Witness."

Whatever one's role in the group, individuals are expected to speak with artists about their pieces. There is no script that members of the curation team are provided, but most will ask artists about their process, the inspiration behind their pieces, and those members of the team with backgrounds and training in the visual arts will provide critiques as requested by artists interested in such conversations. Members of the curation team are expected to animate discussions that they have had with artists in prisons as a part of the curation process, in order to provide a more holistic understanding of the artist's process as well as the artist in question.

Defining the Artist

In this and previous chapters, I have intentionally referred to people that participate in the exhibition as "artists." This is following the practice of the Prison Creative Arts Project, where curators intentionally use the term to refer to their participants. Curators participate in this practice for several reasons: One, to legitimize the practice of artmaking in prisons, which are often demoted to the rank of "hobbycraft" in prisons; two, to treat people in prison who create art with solemnity, to pay homage to the difficult and risky conditions under which art in prisons is created, as

established in the previous section of this chapter; and three, to write against the phenomena of treating art produced in prisons as "prison art," to reduce art produced in prisons to a fetishistic object that derives its value purely due to its having come from prison in the first place.

The Curation Process

In this chapter, I elaborate the various perspectives through which curators from the University of Michigan's Prison Creative Arts Project judge a piece of art. Most reference some kind of emotional, mental, or physical reaction they have in relation to the piece in question, through the virtuosity of its construction, the creative materials utilized, the sheer amount of time and dedication to its creation, as well as the stories that motivated the piece's creation. I articulate, too, the decisions that curators make in the exhibition of artwork by artists in Michigan prisons, with their humanistic impulse to acknowledge and recognize the humanities of the artists with whom they collaborate.

After twenty-seven years of working in detention facilities, the curation process is well-oiled. Before the curators arrive at the facility, the artwork is typically laid out in a room—sometimes a conference room or a classroom, oftentimes a gymnasium or a recreational room—for the curators to look at before a call for a "move"[74] is announced and the artists arrive. Sometimes, we go to the artists. I have met with artists in extraordinarily strange places, as well, including chow halls, in the hallways outside of their cells, and cages in the SHU.[75]

---

[74] Incarcerated people are only permitted to move from one location to another during periods called "moves." Being in a location without proper authorization results in a "citation" or a "ticket" for being "out of place."

[75] "SHU" stands for "solitary housing unit." At these units, we meet with artists while they are in solitary confinement. They are transferred from their cells in solitary and into iron-wrought, plexiglass-covered cages. We speak with them about their art while they are confined in these cages.

The setups vary, but the artwork is usually arranged neatly on long, foldable tables, chairs, and, if the facility is well-resourced, easels. The number of artists we meet with varies wildly. We may meet with anywhere between four to over a hundred artists depending on the facility in question. Curators first like to look at the artwork without the artists present, to get a feel for the pieces present; sometimes, this is scheduled. Other times, this is also sometimes the result of mistiming, as moves are strictly laid out in prisons and curators may arrive well before or after the next scheduled move time.

As artists begin trickling into the room, usually after chow, we ask that they stand by their assorted pieces. Curators will typically spread out in the room and begin speaking with the artists about their pieces. I had my script down pat:

"Can you tell me a little bit about your pieces?"

"Of these pieces, do you have a particular favorite in mind?"

"How long have you been making art for?"

"Can you tell me a little bit about your process?"

These handful of questions typically engender fruitful, lively, and fascinating conversations. On curation trips, we typically allocate ninety minutes for conversations with the artists. They are absorbing. Indeed, with fifteen or more artists, each curator, particularly those who haven't yet mastered the art of gracefully ending a conversation, always runs the risk of getting to speak with only a handful.

Typically, we allocate one to three hours to speak with all of the artists presenting their works. After conversing with the artists about their works, the curators will deliberate about the pieces in the room. This process typically takes about thirty minutes, and we ask the artists to leave the room while we decide which pieces we will take and leave behind. The group then converses, taking into consideration the stories and motivations behind the art objects, the artistic merits of

these works, as well as to discuss any issues or questions that might have arisen throughout the course of conversing with the artists.

The conversations that we have with and about artists are extremely rich. With artists, I've discussed anything from their technique, to the inspiration behind their pieces, their family lives, their fears about returning home after so many years in prison, their desires to be as seen as something more than just a "prisoner" by the people that view their pieces, as well as their favorite foods, television shows, and books. I have heard stories about artist's children, their hopes about the future, as well as the many traumatic experiences of their confinement.

These conversations are also an opportunity for artists to ask questions about the exhibition, particularly for what we call "first-time artists." First-time artists are not necessarily new to artmaking, but they usually are. This is what we call artists who are submitting art to the exhibition for the first time. Three questions, in my experience, reign supreme:

"Who goes to the exhibition?"

"How does payment work?"

"What happens if my art doesn't sell?"

As I tell artists, the exhibition occurs in the Duderstadt Gallery at the University of Michigan's North Campus. I tell them that the exhibition is open to all, and that opening night typically attracts an audience of at least 300 people. In the three weeks that the exhibition is up, we keep the gallery open and even arrange private tours for interested parties.

The gallery, I relay to them, attracts people from all over the state, including University of Michigan students, faculty, and staff, as well as community members from the surrounding area. I try to paint a picture of the gallery space, the height and the length of the gallery walls that we assemble, and how we hang and display the pieces that we collect in great detail. I am painfully

aware that the vast majority of the artists I describe the space to will not be able to see it in person themselves.

In terms of payment, I emphasize that, if their piece sells, they will receive one hundred percent of whatever the price they listed their piece at. "If you write down a price of $90," I say, "You'll get the full $90 if it sells." The only caveat, I communicate, in terms of pricing is that we have to mark up the price by a combined 12% to account for the state sales tax and the commission that the Michigan Department of Corrections requires from us.

I therefore caution artists, too: "If you choose to price your piece at $90, expect that the price on the wall will be about $100 and change. It makes a difference in terms of buyer psychology!"

This, I think, is important for artists on the inside to know because there is a politic attached to pricing, which I describe in further detail below. For a potential buyer, the difference between $90 and $100 is $10. However, for the artist whose piece did not sell as a result of this markup, it is a lost $90 windfall. This is a significant consequence for an artist that may only be eligible to earn up to 86 cents a day in prison.

"If your piece doesn't sell," I tell them, "We send it back to the contact listed in your documents." Once art is taken out of a prison, it cannot be brought back in. It becomes contraband once it leaves the compound proper. Artists on the inside also have the option to donate their pieces to the Prison Creative Art Project's Annual Art Auction, which is an event in December that helps to raise funds for the exhibition, which takes approximately $50,000 a year to fund.

In illuminating the context of the exhibition and the curation process, I have gestured toward the incredibly fraught nature of creating, selling, consuming, and exhibiting art in prisons. There is money at stake, incredibly difficult choices to make, and inevitable disappointment that artists on the inside are bound to experience. Between the many interactions and observations that

take place during these trips, many insights into the ambivalence of artmaking practices in prison emerge.

Appendix D: The Risks of Making Art

It is important to understand this context under which so much art is created and curated. This is because the creation of art in prisons requires grit. An artist during a selection trip spoke to me about her struggles creating art in small, cramped living quarters, stuffed to the rafters with five other "nosey" and overly critical bunkies. Once, an artist pre-emptively apologized about the curled, weathered quality of his painting's canvas, as it had been kept behind the radiator in his cell, necessitated by lack of access to convenient storage spaces. These examples say nothing about the inaccessibility of art supplies, either, which are expensive, restricted, and regulated. Artists on the inside often express frustration by the fact that it may take up to a year for art supplies to reach them once an order has been submitted through the prison.

In Michigan prisons, pursuant to Michigan Department of Corrections Policy Directive 05.03.102, artmaking practices are referred to as "hobbycraft." ("Hobbycraft Program Directive (MDOC)," n.d.) Hobbycraft activities formally include "drawing and painting," "needlecraft," "beadcraft," "leathercraft," and "soft wood structuring." Each genre of hobbycraft is restricted based on the security levels of facilities and compounds within facilities. Hobbycraft practices are authorized, by the facility's warden, in specific spaces designated as "hobbycraft areas," which may include an incarcerated peron's living quarters. And, pursuant to sections M, N, and P of the policy directive for hobbycraft programming, strict restrictions exist on how and what hobbycraft materials may be purchased.

For example, there is a moratorium on oil-based paints in prison due to its flammability, which is recast as a safety concern. Paint is also a relatively expensive resource for most artists in

prisons. Paintings made in prisons, with rare exceptions, therefore tend to be very flat and smooth due to the inability to apply layers. The inability of people in prison to purchase paints outside of a pre-selected catalogue of material, the inability to purchase no more than $100 worth of material per month, as well as the six to twelve months lag between purchasing art supplies and actually receiving them exacerbate issues related to accessibility. There are strict rules on objects like metal clock hands which may only be permitted "if the hand does not exceed three inches in length" as well as scissors, which "must be under 5½ inches in length, including handle."

There are, additionally, atypical restrictions not strictly mentioned in these directives. Ethnographically, these restrictions were picked up over time through casual conversations. During the construction of the gallery space for the *27th Annual Exhibition*, for example, a formerly incarcerated artist very casually pointed out a drawing hanging on a wall nearby: "That sketch over there," he told me, "That's illegal."

A Light at the End of the Tunnel by Norman Munn[76]

"You can only use green ink in prison if you're staff, and only if you're a lieutenant or higher," he said, referencing the drawing above. "I have no idea where he got that pen, but that man took a risk making that piece and submitting it to us."

The illegality of certain kinds of art supplies is due to the construction of such material as security risks. Volunteers are trained to know, for example, that correspondence sent to people in

[76] From the digital archives of the *27th Annual Exhibition of Artists in Michigan Prisons*, https://dcc.carceralstateproject.lsa.umich.edu/s/pcapexhibition27/item/29582.

prison is always photocopied. These photocopies are provided to incarcerated people and the original documents are destroyed. As reported by the Detroit Free Press,

> In an attempt to stop the flow of drugs into the state's correctional facilities through the mail, the department is no longer giving prisoners original copies of letters and other personal correspondence. Under the policy implemented last week, prisoners receive black-and-white photocopies of letters, greeting cards, drawings and pictures, while the original copies are set aside for shredding after 14 days.

This is due to the ability to soak paper in the synthetic cannabinoid K2 and was consequently included in the MDOC's Policy Directive 05.03.118 about mail sent to people in prison. In a similar vein, framed as such, access to material like green ink can become recast as a security concern related to the forgery of paperwork.

Artmaking practices are fraught with risks in other ways, as well. At one particular facility, deciding what pieces will be left behind was a truly high-stakes affair: The artists were informed that they would not be allowed to take the pieces they had brought into the recreational room back with them to their cells. If the artists had points of contact like family members in the freeworld, their works could be mailed, at their expense, back to these contacts; otherwise, they would be thrown out and disposed of. At this facility, we were told by Special Acts that this was a decision made from "high up," that items moved from the inner sanctum of the compound to the recreational room would be considered contraband once these objects crossed this arbitrary threshold.

Appendix E: Entering the Prison

Prisons are highly regimented spaces from go. You experience the organizing nature of the prison long before you undertake the physical act of walking into the facility itself. The rules for clothing spin heads. They can neither be "baggy" nor "too tight." Undergarments like bras, underwear, and socks are required. Shoes must be sensible. Nothing can have a hole in them, including socks and pants pockets, which guards will check during the pat down. Analog watches are sometimes allowed. Jewelry and piercings are fine as long as they aren't "extravagant" or "distracting."

"Set aside your 'prison outfit' for your volunteer days," a trainer at an orientation suggested. "Once you know an outfit works, just recycle it. It'll save you a lot of time." My prison outfit consisted of black chinos, a rotating assemblage of solid, non-patterned, and logo-free undershirts, a nondescript button-up shirt, and black-and-white sneakers with funny, patterned socks. This latter bit was at the encouragement of my earliest workshop trainers.

"You should wear fun socks," one shared with her trainees. "It's a great way to start conversations with the COs." Oftentimes, new facilitators are counseled, the prison officers one meets on the first day will be the officers that accompany facilitators for the remainder of the semester. "It doesn't hurt to get on their good sides, especially when you're getting so up and person in the bubble with them," the trainer said with a smile. (Despite my best efforts, my socks never sparked much rapport with COs. They have, however, sparked lively discussions with workshop participants.)

The training then walks you through the process of entering the prison. Every visit to a prison, trainers tell you, involves the presentation of your state-issued ID at a front desk, which is an unforgivingly fixed first step in the ritualized process of admittance into the prison proper. (I recall driving an hour through a Michigan snowstorm to a facility to conduct my group's final workshop of the semester—after twelve weeks of saying "hello" and "goodbye" to the very same guard on duty this evening—and not being allowed in because I left my driver's license at home.)

You are then escorted into the "bubble." The bubble is an area that exists in between the waiting room of a facility and the compound itself. The bubble is often partitioned into a series of rooms by sliding doors that are opened and closed at the verbal, radioed commands of the prison officers stationed at these doors. Metal detectors often greet the visitor at the entrance to the bubble. Visitors pass through to enter a room usually dedicated to pat downs.

"The pat down could always be different depending on the facility, the guards on duty that day, or even how the same guards you've met for weeks are feeling that particular day," one trainer warned.

You sit down in a chair or on a bench. You remove your shoes and your socks. At a more welcoming facility, you may be provided with a paper mat to rest your feet on; at other facilities, you may have to awkwardly suspend your feet in the air unless you want your bare feet to make contact with the floor.

The guard will then shake your socks and rummage through your shoes. They will then ask you to show them the bottoms of your feet. You put your socks and shoes back on.

You get up, turn away from the guard. You lift your arms up to the sides and spread your legs. The guard will sweep your arms, torso, and the inseam of your pants. They ask you to turn out your pockets, though, sometimes, they reach in and do it for you, without any prior warning.

The guards will ask you to open your mouth and lift your tongue. If you have long hair, they ask you to lift it up, to show them the back of your neck.

The quality of the pat down depends largely on the mood of the guards in the bubble. I have been confronted with extremely rude guards who were obviously in the midst of sixteen-hour shifts who take particular care to keep you in the bubble for as long as possible. I have also been patted down in ways that I would call performative, a quick series of light brushes against my arms and legs with no real intention of looking for contraband.

The guards usher you through the set of gates that bring you further into the bubble. Here, you sign the visitor's log. It is, accordingly, of paramount importance that this log be signed upon ingress and egress. "In case of an emergency, we need to have an accurate head count," the CO guiding us through a facility shared. This is typically where you receive your PPD.

"You're going to have to write down your names in some logs and collect a PPD," the trainer continued. "Take care of that PPD, make sure you don't lose it, and definitely don't set it off by accident."[77]

Finally, you are ushered into the prison. Depending on the facility and what part of the compound your workshop is slated to take place in, you may walk across the yard. I have facilitated many workshops in gymnasiums, classrooms, chapels, and recreation rooms that are anywhere from five to ten minute walks. Finally, you enter whatever space you will be facilitating in and meet your workshop participants.

---

[77] "PPD" stands for "personal protection device." It's the size of a small, rectangular brick. It comes in a case that you can loop around a belt or the belt loops of your pants.

Training Day

This was a new prison for me. I was slated to facilitate a creative writing workshop here. It was also the first prison I had been to in person since the state's COVID lockdowns began nearly two years ago.

We entered the prison. We were two members of a fairly large cast of prospective volunteers to be trained that day. I counted two dozen people milling about in the waiting area; eventually, we were ushered through the facility's bubble. It was a quick and relatively painless process at this specific facility, the only one in the state where they forego the intrusive and intensive pat down. I was one of the first to get through the rigamarole of the bubble. I sat and watched the others.

It's always easy to spot green volunteers. They set off the metal detectors with their belts and car keys, bring cellphones and smart watches into the facility, look taken aback by the command to remove their socks and shoes, and hold up the line by rummaging through their pockets for their IDs. At this particular training, one woman had the misfortune of wearing a bra with an underwire; she was asked to pass through the metal detector six times before being separated from the crowd. They had to pat her down with a wand.

While this bubble gazing was a show unto itself, the orientation was a production and a half.

"Inmates," our first presenter began, "will manipulate you."

His riposte: "They are here to use and to abuse you."

He was followed by a second staff member at this facility. This man spoke at length about a veritable smorgasbord of affairs: "Your rights to religious liberty are protected and you can say whatever you want," he projected. "But if an inmate starts arguing with you about their religious beliefs, you have the right to tell them, 'No! I didn't ask.'"

He spoke about safety: "If you see an inmate—or a group of inmates—beating me up and stomping on me, you do not interfere!" he enthusiastically preached to appreciative laughter from

several volunteers. "You find a guard, you find a staff member, and you have them take care of it instead!"

He spoke about recalcitrant volunteers: "A man once brought in a pen worth over one thousand dollars. When he left, he realized it was no longer on his person. We had to go back, round up all eighty of the men who were at the meeting, and we had to strip search them on the spot. Leave your valuables at home!"

He spoke about the possibility of being taken hostage: "Your job is not to fight back, it's to submit," our trainer stated with solemnity. "We will rush into the room with everything we've got. At that point, it's your job to get down, as low to the ground as you possibly can, while we sort the situation out."

He spoke to the delicate art of setting boundaries with people in prison: "If you can't say 'no,' you shouldn't be here."

He spoke about drugs: "This," he said, pointing at an image on a sheet of paper passed around the group, "is K2. And this over here is powdered cocaine. If you see something, say something."

He spoke about overfamiliarity: "They will do what they can to take advantage of you! Accept nothing that a prisoner gives you, ever! Maybe they want to share a piece of candy with you, do not accept it. They are trying to establish a relationship with you. They're very ssmart and cunning."

This particular course was followed by an incessant crowd of nods and a chorus of appreciative hums. One volunteer, to my great irritation, grunted in the affirmative, "That's right."

Finally, he thanked us: "It's because of volunteers like you that provide inmates with opportunities to better themselves."

Throughout the course of six years of facilitating these creative arts workshops in prisons, in tandem with my four years of curating artwork in Michigan prisons, I have always been deeply struck by the wildly contrastive approaches taken by prisons and PCAP in their respective approaches to training volunteers to work with people that live in prison.

On the surface, I find that the dissimilarities are readily apparent, particularly in the ways in which the former emphasize "safety," "overfamiliarity," and the ways in which prison trainings encourage volunteers to act in the capacity of "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 1980, cited in Partridge 2012). This is obviously in tension with the more participatory approach to arts-based programming that the Prison Creative Arts Project emphasizes, with their emphases on humility and the centrality of "human connection" in the work that they do.

"Training Day" at the Prison Creative Arts Project is an entirely different, day-long affair. It's a crash course that covers the ins-and-outs of volunteering in prisons.

The trainings begin with conversations about what it is like to facilitate workshops in prisons. A caveat is strenuously repeated throughout this portion of training: "While we can talk about these things generally, every single facility is going to have different rules about what is and isn't allowed."

Unlike trainings in prison, we learn how to interact with the guards nearly as much as we learn to work with people that live in prison.

"Don't talk back to a guard," is another important rule to follow. The whims of the guards determine the speed at which you get through the bubble, how rough they may be during the pat down, and whether or not you'll be let back into the facility. Guards may make comments about people's bodies and get a little too handsy during the pat down.

"They may tell you one thing one day and then something else the next. Your job isn't to question this and to talk back at them. Your job is to say, 'I'm so sorry, that'll never happen again,'

even if they're giving you grief about the smallest or dumbest thing imaginable that makes absolutely no sense."

"Your job isn't to be an abolitionist on the inside. You get to leave the prison. The worst thing that a guard can do to you is to kick you out. You have no idea what they'll do to the people who aren't allowed to leave."

More than an orientation toward how to be in prisons, we are asked to extend a certain kind of ethos toward people incarcerated in prisons. "People," it is often said in the work, "are always more than the worst thing they've ever done. How would you like to be judged based on the worst day of your life?"

"It's important to remember," a facilitator advised, "that we are guests in other people's homes. We should leave it looking a little bit better and brighter than when we first came in."

"What is the best in them? What is their potential? This is the work."

What is consistently stressed, too, is our roles as facilitators rather than teachers

"We work with folks on the inside, they don't work for us," Ashley Lucas says to a room full of prospective volunteers. "We are not the experts in the room. These folks have been writing and acting longer than you all have probably been alive. Many of them have way more expertise than we do."

"Our job," Ashley stated, "is to bring love, light, joy into prisons. This is the greatest contraband that we can bring to people who are suffering everyday in darkness and violence."

I walk us through these trainings to highlight the ways in which they discursively organize the volunteer's relationship to prisons and to people in prisons. I draw from Foucault, who argues that discourse organizes and produces knowledge and meaning (Foucault 1994). Discourse produces material consequences "that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1994, 49) and highlights the relationship between language and the power to shape who and what is

spoken of and about. What I show in the two sections that follow are the ways in which relationships with incarcerated people are persuasively constructed long before volunteers actually enter the prison proper.

References

Alexander, William. 2010. *Is William Martinez Not Our Brother? Twenty Years of the Prison Creative Arts Project*. The New Public Scholarship Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press : University of Michigan Library.

Althusser, Louis. 1970. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." In *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*. Chichester ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Anderson-Levitt, Kathryn M. 2006. "Ethnography." In *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*, 3rd ed. Routledge.

Aylwyn, Walsh. 2014. "Creating Change, Imagining Futures: Participatory Arts and Young People 'at Risk.'" In *Centre Of Urban Community Research*. Goldsmiths University.

Baines, John. 2014. "What Is Art?" In *A Companion to Ancient Egyptian Art*, 1–21. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325070.ch1.

Baxter, Veronica, and Katharine E. Low. 2017. *Applied Theatre: Performing Health and Wellbeing*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Bell, Clive. 1916. *Art*. Chatto & Windus.

Bensimon, Moshe, Tomer Einat, and Avi Gilboa. 2015. "The Impact of Relaxing Music on Prisoners' Levels of Anxiety and Anger." *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 59 (4): 406–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X13511587.

Berger, Dan. 2019. "Finding and Defining the Carceral State." *Reviews in American History* 47 (2): 279–85. https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2019.0040.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2002. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. 11. print. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press.

Bourgeois, Philippe, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. 2004. *Violence in War and Peace*. Blackwell Readers in Anthropology 5. Oxford: Blackwell.

Burch, Melissa. 2019. "Captive Afterlives in the Age of Mass Conviction." *History and Anthropology* 30 (5): 515–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2019.1638778.

———. 2021. "Scripting the Conviction: Power and Resistance in the Management of Criminal Stigma." *American Anthropologist* 123 (3): 645–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13613.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1981. "Prisoners in 1980." https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p80.pdf.

———. 1990. "Crime and Justice Report, 1989." 1990.

———. 1997. "Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1995." 1997. https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/census-state-and-federal-correctional-facilities-1995.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.

———. 2008. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. 1. ed., [Nachdr.]. New York: Fordham Univ. Press.

Candea, Matei. 2007. "Arbitrary Locations: In Defence of the Bounded Field-Site." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (1): 167–84.

Carr, E. Summerson. 2011. *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cheliotis, Leonidas K., ed. 2016. *The Arts of Imprisonment: Control, Resistance and Empowerment*. London: Routledge.

Chumley, Lily Hope. 2013. "Evaluation Regimes and the Qualia of Quality." *Anthropological Theory* 13 (1–2): 169–83. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499613483408.

Chun Tie, Ylona, Melanie Birks, and Karen Francis. 2019. "Grounded Theory Research: A Design Framework for Novice Researchers." *SAGE Open Medicine* 7 (January):205031211882292. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050312118822927.

Citizens Research Council of Michigan. 2023. "Formerly Incarcerated Individuals and the Threat to Public Safety: What Recidivism Data Actually Shows." 2023. https://crcmich.org/formerly-incarcerated-individuals-and-the-threat-to-public-safety-what-recidivism-data-actually-shows.

Cochran, Joshua C., Daniel P. Mears, and William D. Bales. 2017. "Who Gets Visited in Prison? Individual- and Community-Level Disparities in Inmate Visitation Experiences." *Crime & Delinquency* 63 (5): 545–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128714542503.

Conlon, Catherine, Virpi Timonen, Catherine Elliott-O'Dare, Sorcha O'Keeffe, and Geraldine Foley. 2020. "Confused About Theoretical Sampling? Engaging Theoretical Sampling in Diverse Grounded Theory Studies." *Qualitative Health Research* 30 (6): 947–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319899139.

Correctional Facilities Administration. 2022. "Michigan Department of Corrections Correctional Facilities Map." https://www.michigan.gov/corrections/-/media/Project/Websites/corrections/LG/Prison-Location-Map.pdf.

Daquin, Jane C., and Leah E. Daigle. 2018. "Mental Disorder and Victimisation in Prison: Examining the Role of Mental Health Treatment." *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 28 (2): 141–51. https://doi.org/10.1002/cbm.2056.

Davey, Linda, Andrew Day, and Michael Balfour. 2015. "Performing Desistance: How Might Theories of Desistance From Crime Help Us Understand the Possibilities of Prison Theatre?" *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 59 (8): 798–809. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X14529728.

Daykin, Norma, Louise Mansfield, Catherine Meads, Guy Julier, Alan Tomlinson, Annette Payne, Lily Grigsby Duffy, et al. 2018. "What Works for Wellbeing? A Systematic Review of Wellbeing Outcomes for Music and Singing in Adults." *Perspectives in Public Health* 138 (1): 39–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913917740391.

Dickie, George. 1969. "Defining Art." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (3): 253–56.

diGenova, Joseph E., and Constance L. Belfiore. 1984. "An Overview of the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 - The Prosecutor's Perspective." *American Criminal Law Review* 22:707.

Dissanayake, Ellen. 2015. *What Is Art For?* University of Washington Press.

Driessen, Henk, and Willy Jansen. 2013. "The Hard Work of Small Talk in Ethnographic Fieldwork." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 69 (2): 249–63.

Durkheim, Émile. 1915. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Macmillan.

Fancourt, Daisy, and Saoirse Finn. 2019. *What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being?: A Scoping Review*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe.

Fleetwood, Nicole R. 2020. *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1994. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Vintage books edition. New York NY: Vintage Books.

———. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Galván-Álvarez, Enrique. 2010. "Epistemic Violence and Retaliation: The Issue of Knowledges in 'Mother India' / Violencia y Venganza Epistemológica: La Cuestión de Las Formas de Conocimiento En Mother India." *Atlantis* 32 (2): 11–26.

Gell, Alfred. 1992. "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology." In *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*. Clarendon Press.

———. 1996. "Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps." *Journal of Material Culture* 1 (1): 15–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/135918359600100102.

———. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press.

Gibson-Light, Michael, and Josh Seim. 2020. "Punishing Fieldwork: Penal Domination and Prison Ethnography." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 49 (5): 666–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241620932982.

Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. 2017. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. London New York: Routledge.

Goomany, A., and T. Dickinson. 2015. "The Influence of Prison Climate on the Mental Health of Adult Prisoners: A Literature Review." *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 22 (6): 413–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpm.12231.

Guest, Greg, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell. 2013. *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research*. 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506374680.

Harbert, Benjamin Jason. 2011. "Doing Time: The Work of Music in Louisiana Prisons." ProQuest Information & Learning. 2011-99110-262. APA PsycInfo. http://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2011-99110-262&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Heidegger, Martin. 1988. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row.

Herrenkohl, Todd I., Eugene Aisenberg, James Herbert Williams, and Jeffrey M. Jenson. 2010. *Violence in Context*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195369595.001.0001.

"Hobbycraft Program Directive (MDOC)." n.d. Accessed May 20, 2023. https://www.michigan.gov/corrections/-/media/Project/Websites/corrections/Files/Policy-Directives/PDs-05-Institutional-Placement-and-Programs/PD-0503-Programs-and-Leisure-Time-Activities/05-03-102-Hobbycraft-Program-effective-10-01-06.pdf?rev=0099e148829f4257a39ac2c7af37740c.

Im, Vitalis, and Rogério M. Pinto. 2023. "Music and Well-Being in Carceral Settings: A Scoping Review." *Arts & Health* 0 (0): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2023.2251513.

Kaap-Deeder, Jolene van der, Elien Audenaert, Stijn Vandevelde, Bart Soenens, Sarah Van Mastrigt, Elien Mabbe, and Maarten Vansteenkiste. 2017. "Choosing When Choices Are Limited: The Role of Perceived Afforded Choice and Autonomy in Prisoners' Well-Being." *Law and Human Behavior* 41 (6): 567–78. https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000259.

Keane, Webb. 2018. "On Semiotic Ideology." *Signs and Society* 6 (1): 64–87. https://doi.org/10.1086/695387.

Klein, Josephine. 1987. *Our Need for Others and Its Roots in Infancy*. 1. publ. London: Tavistock Publications.

Krämer, Sybille, ed. 2017. *Testimony/Bearing Witness: Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture*. London ; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Krämer, Sybille, and Sigrid Weigel. 2017. "Converging the Yet-Separate Theoretical Discourses of Testimony Studies." In *Testimony/Bearing Witness: Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture*, edited by Sybille Krämer. London ; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Leckey, J. 2011. "The Therapeutic Effectiveness of Creative Activities on Mental Well-Being: A Systematic Review of the Literature." *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 18 (6): 501–9. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2850.2011.01693.x.

Lipsky, Michael. 1980. *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. Russell Sage Foundation. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447713.

Littman, Danielle Maude, and Shannon M. Sliva. 2020. "Prison Arts Program Outcomes: A Scoping Review." *Journal of Correctional Education (1974-)* 71 (3): 54–82.

Lucas, Ashley. 2020. *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration*. Critical Companions. New York: Methuen Drama.

MacDonald, Raymond A. R. 2013. "Music, Health, and Well-Being: A Review." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 8 (August):10.3402/qhw.v8i0.20635. https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v8i0.20635.

Malaby, Thomas M. 2009. "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience." *New Literary History* 40 (1): 205–18.

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2014. *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

McCollum, Bill. 1994. "The Struggle for Effective Anti-Crime Legislation - An Analysis of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994." *University of Dayton Law Review* 20:561.

McKim, Courtney. 2023. "Meaningful Member-Checking: A Structured Approach to Member-Checking." *American Journal of Qualitative Research* 7 (2): 41–52.

Meekums, Bonnie, and Jennifer Daniel. 2011. "Arts with Offenders: A Literature Synthesis." *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 38 (4): 229–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2011.06.003.

Michigan Department of Corrections. 2023. "Prison Population Projection Report November 2023." https://www.michigan.gov/corrections/-/media/Project/Websites/corrections/Files/Legislative-Reports/2023/Prison-Population-Projection-Report.pdf.

Miller, Reuben Jonathan. 2021. *Halfway Home: Race, Punishment, and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Morris, Rosalind C., and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. 2010. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Moser, Ryan M. 2021. "A Different Kind of Labor: Writing in Prison." *Mississippi Quarterly* 74 (1): 85–101. https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2021.0014.

Murphy, Alexandra K., Colin Jerolmack, and DeAnna Smith. 2021. "Ethnography, Data Transparency, and the Information Age." *Annual Review of Sociology* 47 (1): 41–61. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-090320-124805.

Musante, Kathleen. 2015. "Participant Observation." In *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, edited by H. Russell Bernard, Second edition, 251–92. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Pakman, Marcelo. 2004. "The Epistemology of Witnessing: Memory, Testimony, and Ethics in Family Therapy." *Family Process* 43 (2): 265–74. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2004.04302010.x.

Parenti, Christian. 2001. *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*. London ; New York: Verso.

Partridge, Damani J. 2012. *Hypersexuality and Headscarves: Race, Sex, and Citizenship in the New Germany*. New Anthropologies of Europe. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Paul, Janie. 2023. *Making Art in Prison: Survival and Resistance*.

Phillippi, Julia, and Jana Lauderdale. 2018. "A Guide to Field Notes for Qualitative Research: Context and Conversation." *Qualitative Health Research* 28 (3): 381–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317697102.

Pinney, Christopher, and Nicholas Thomas. 2001. *Beyond Aesthetics: Art and the Technologies of Enchantment*. Oxford: Berg.

Poland, Warren S. 2000. "The Analyst's Witnessing and Otherness." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 48 (1): 17–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/00030651000480011301.

Prins, Seth J. 2014. "Prevalence of Mental Illnesses in U.S. State Prisons: A Systematic Review." *Psychiatric Services* 65 (7): 862–72. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201300166.

Prison Policy Initiative. 2024. "Michigan Profile." 2024. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/MI.html.

Reagan, Ronald. 1981. "Inaugural Address 1981." National Archives. https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/inaugural-address-1981.

Rhodes, Lorna A. 2004. *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*. California Series in Public Anthropology 7. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.

Rice, Tom. 2016. "Sounds Inside: Prison, Prisoners and Acoustical Agency." *Sound Studies* 2 (1): 6–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2016.1214455.

Sansi, Roger, and Marilyn Strathern. 2016. "Art and Anthropology After Relations." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (2): 425–39. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau6.2.023.

Sansi-Roca, Roger. 2015. *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*. London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Shaulis, Dahn. 2008. "Prison Stories." *Justice Policy Journal.*

Sinko, Rebecca, Tina DeAngelis, Bernadette Alpajora, Josephine Beker, and Ilyse Kramer. 2020. "Experience of Stigma Post Incarceration: A Qualitative Study." *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* 8 (3): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1610.

Small, Christopher. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Music/Culture. Hanover: University Press of New England.

———. 1999. "Musicking — the Meanings of Performing and Listening. A Lecture." *Music Education Research* 1 (1): 9–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461380990010102.

Sufrin, Carolyn. 2017. *Jailcare: Finding the Safety Net for Women Behind Bars*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Swain, Jon, and Brendan King. 2022. "Using Informal Conversations in Qualitative Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 (April):16094069221085056. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221085056.

Toch, Hans, and Terry A. Kupers. 2007. "Violence in Prisons, Revisited." *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 45 (3–4): 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1300/J076v45n03_01.

Turner, Victor. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Tyler, Nichola, Helen L. Miles, Bessey Karadag, and Gemma Rogers. 2019. "An Updated Picture of the Mental Health Needs of Male and Female Prisoners in the UK: Prevalence, Comorbidity, and Gender Differences." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 54 (9): 1143–52. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-019-01690-1.

Van Cleve, Nicole Gonzalez. 2016. *Crook County: Racism and Injustice in America's Largest Criminal Court*. Stanford, California: Stanford Law Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press.

Vera Institute of Justice. 2019. "Incarceration Trends in Michigan."

Wacquant, Loïc. 2002. "The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration." *Ethnography* 3 (4): 371–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138102003004012.

Wagner, Peter, and Bernadette Rabuy. 2015. "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2015." Prison Policy Initiative. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2015.html.

Walker, J., C. Illingworth, A. Canning, E. Garner, J. Woolley, P. Taylor, and T. Amos. 2014. "Changes in Mental State Associated with Prison Environments: A Systematic Review." *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 129 (6): 427–36. https://doi.org/10.1111/acps.12221.

Waller, Chris. 2018. "'Darker than the Dungeon': Music, Ambivalence, and the Carceral Subject." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique* 31 (2): 275–99. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-018-9558-9.

Williams, Michael, and Tami Moser. 2019. "The Art of Coding and Thematic Exploration in Qualitative Research." *International Management Review*. 15 (1).