

A NOTE ON METHOD

Marking Time began with my meditation on the profound and myriad ways that hyperincarceration has impacted my family, my hometown, and the many places where I've lived (Houston, Oakland, Harlem). I decided to share these experiences and feelings publicly, at universities, art centers, and professional gatherings, and I would loosely structure my talks around images from my family's prison archives. How and what I shared evolved as my community of directly impacted people grew and as I became more immersed in the robust scholarship on prisons and carceral studies. With the help of research assistants, I constructed a preliminary database of arts programs in prisons and jails across the country; many of these organizations participated in the Marking Time conference and exhibition at Rutgers in 2014.

As I delved into the research, I chose to focus less on popular media, governmental, and pop culture representations of prisons and those warehoused in them and instead to pay careful attention to the visual and creative practices emerging in and as a result of imprisonment. Initially, it was a challenge to get access since I was not formally affiliated with any organizations providing art classes. Through the assistance of incarcerated people I know, I gained more exposure to creative practices inside prison. Over time, I developed an incredible network of artists (both currently and formerly incarcerated), educators, administrators, attorneys, activists, family members, and volunteers whose acts of generosity and support

facilitated various kinds of access. These contacts led to initial interviews that turned into ongoing conversations and collaboration with many who appear in this book.

But the methodology is rooted in practices of care and collective survival among black women whom I have learned from my entire life. My aunt Sharon and cousin Cassandra exemplified the practices of care and a steadfast commitment to staying connected with incarcerated loved ones that so many millions of other black women have developed and performed historically and continuously. This methodology emerged from my observations of Aunt Sharon and Cassandra spending twenty-one years consistently visiting and supporting their son and brother Allen during his imprisonment. What that entailed for them was laborious, economically extractive, and emotionally taxing. I cannot do justice to their care work in a few sentences or paragraphs. It included paying monthly phone bills, which sometimes amounted to thousands of dollars because of the exorbitant rates charged by prison phone vendors, ordering an endless array of goods for Allen, again from exploitive vendors, hiring attorneys to review his case, helping to support his daughter, who was only a couple of months old when he went to prison, and journeying at least monthly to wherever he was housed to sit in a prison visiting room across from him. They did it together. They supported each other. They listened to each other and cried when they needed to. Their work is the daily and fearless labor of black women across this nation to sustain intimate and family ties. This is the foundation of a contemporary movement of diverse people not only to end mass incarceration, but to do away with prisons and caging entirely.

One of the challenges of writing this book has been that many currently and formerly incarcerated artists are not in possession of their art, nor do they have documentation of their work or know how and where their art has circulated. For various reasons that all have to do with the extreme inequalities and exploitation that incarcerated people suffer, art made in prison is sent to relatives, traded with fellow prisoners, sold or “gifted” to prison staff, donated to nonprofit organizations, and sometimes made for private clients. Unlike artists who work outside prison, who are able to document their creations, incarcerated artists often are unable to photograph or make copies of their work. There are people I interviewed who described their work and practices to me but had nothing to show.

In some cases, artists were able to send their work to relatives or loved ones. I also received materials from attorneys, art instructors, and nonincarcerated allies who advocate for the arts of people in prison. At times, I traveled to locations where the artwork was stored and hired or collaborated with photographers to document it. Every step of the way, I was guided by the willingness of others to share and to participate. In the case of a few artists, it was very difficult to make contact with them, either inside or outside prison. In one case in particular, it took me over eighteen months to be able to reach a formerly incarcerated artist whose work circulates widely through organizations and even news media but who has received little remuneration or security as a result of his art and labor; he is unhoused. What I learned is that art in prison is a practice of survival, an aesthetic journey that documents time in captivity, a mode of connecting with others, but it does not resolve the injustices rooted in the carceral system.

This book focuses on the art and aesthetic experiments of people imprisoned in the massive labyrinth of domestic jails and prisons in the United States. It explores the creative practices that incarcerated people cultivate and the relationships forged through art-making. I foreground the experiments, experiences, and conceptualization of incarcerated artists in order to present prison art as central to the contemporary art world and as a manifestation and critique of the carceral state.

Generally when discussing artists, I do not state why an artist was sentenced and imprisoned, unless the artist has requested that I include this information or these details are primary to their self-narration. I am not invested in categories of guilt and innocence. Scholars of carceral studies and abolition studies have argued that the proposition of degrees of innocence is perilous because it reproduces carceral logics. When advocates for incarcerated people focus on innocence, abolition scholar and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, it does two things:

First, it establishes as a hard fact that some people should be in cages, and only against this desirability or inevitability might some change occur. And it does so by distinguishing degrees of innocence such that there are people, inevitably, who will become permanently not innocent, no matter what they do or say. The structure of feeling that shapes the innocence defense narrative is not hard to understand: after all, if criminalization is

all about identifying the guilty, within *its* prevailing logic it's reasonable to imagine the path to undoing it must be to discover the wrongly condemned.²

At least four of the artists in the book identify as being wrongfully convicted. Two of them have been exonerated by the Ohio Innocence Project, and two were released for time served, negotiated by their attorneys. For each of these artists, their imprisonment for crimes they did not commit propelled their art-making and their political consciousness and critique of prisons, so I speak of their wrongful conviction, exoneration, or release in this context. My intention is not to play into binaries about good versus bad prisoners, innocent versus guilty people, or those who are deserving of sympathy and recognition versus those who are not. At the same time, not to acknowledge their claims of innocence and eventual exoneration or release would be to enact another form of violence against these artists who have entrusted me with their stories and art.

MARKING TIME



Ronnie Goodman,
*San Quentin Arts
in Corrections Art
Studio*, 2008.