

The Milwaukee Model: A Postscript

When the symposium *The Milwaukee Model: Envisioning the Role of the Arts in Criminal Justice Reform* took place over the course of three days in November 2018, there were just over twenty-three thousand people incarcerated in Wisconsin, with nearly sixty-six thousand more on parole.¹ Wisconsin had the highest incarceration rate of black males in the nation, nearly double that of any other state.² These troublesome statistics sparked widespread and ongoing activism and reform efforts in Milwaukee, where our two art institutions are located. But what do these numbers look like, and how can the arts provide the space for a conversation that brings these statistics to life? To address these questions, and to build on reform efforts, we sought to create a forum for community dialogue around the role that the arts might play in the complex ecosystem of justice reform in southeastern Wisconsin.

This symposium was the result of a collaboration between a civic art museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and a university art museum, the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University. It was planned in conjunction with thematically related exhibitions at both institutions: *The San Quentin Project: Nigel Poor and the Men of San Quentin State Prison* and *Sable Elyse Smith: Ordinary Violence*,³ which were on view simultaneously. The collaboration was designed to illuminate some of the ways that artists are uniquely suited to contribute solutions to pressing social issues like mass incarceration.

The symposium was born out of a conversation about what it means for a cultural institution to uphold the public trust. How does a museum assert its public-service role in the twenty-first century? When we had these planning conversations, we couldn't have imagined that 2020 would become an inflection point for issues of racial injustice, with renewed calls for museums and other institutions of historic white power and privilege to address systemic racism. The questions that we considered in 2017 and 2018—What responsibility do curators have in creating a platform for conversation and a larger context for exhibitions that tackle social issues? Why engage a city in a conversation about this? What is the social function and civic responsibility of a museum?—have now taken on new urgency, and they are part of a much broader reckoning happening within society in general and cultural organizations in particular.

The guiding principle of this project was to create a bidirectional conversation with our community and not an authoritative event. Over the course of a year we met with academics,

¹ State of Wisconsin Department of Corrections, "Data and Reports," <https://doc.wi.gov/Pages/DataResearch/DataAndReports.aspx> (accessed November 1, 2018 and October 1, 2019).

² John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn, "Wisconsin's Mass Incarceration of African American Males: Workforce Challenges for 2013," *ETI Publications* 9 (2013), https://dc.uwm.edu/eti_pubs/9.

³ *The San Quentin Project* was organized by Lisa Sutcliffe and on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum from October 18, 2018–March 10, 2019, and at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive from August 22–November 17, 2019. *Sable Elyse Smith* was organized by Emilia Layden and on view at the Haggerty Museum of Art from August 17, 2018–January 27, 2019. Revised and expanded version of an exhibition of the same title at the Queens Museum from September 17, 2017–February 18, 2018.

attorneys, judges, social service providers, policy makers, community groups, and incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Ultimately, we convened an advisory committee to help guide and shape this three-day event. We heard from experts and those on the front lines of this issue that cultural institutions such as ours could effectively present people with stories, metaphors, and poetics that function more symbolically and viscerally than simple facts or statistics.

At the symposium, nearly six hundred people from the Milwaukee community gathered to discuss the role of the arts in criminal justice reform. We witnessed the ways that art forged connections, disarmed people, and provided the freedom and space to enter into conversations that could have felt timeworn, or worse, contentious. Through panel presentations, conversations, and hands-on workshops, leading scholars, educators, artists, and practitioners shared information about arts-based justice reform initiatives that have been successfully implemented in California, New York, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Virginia.⁴ These initiatives ranged from visual artists interrogating the justice system at the structural level, to socially engaged artists collaborating with incarcerated or justice-involved individuals, to arts educators creating higher-learning opportunities in prisons, to formerly incarcerated artists using their creative tool kits to successfully re-enter society.

While the featured artists and practitioners had different approaches to their work, and their work was certainly context-specific, they each brought their own critical frameworks and creative processes to problem solving. Their efforts yielded productive disruptions within justice and corrections systems across the country, and we wanted the Milwaukee community to hear about, and perhaps learn from, their work. Our hope is that this volume can offer a summary of the symposium proceedings, via transcript excerpts, so that interested readers can better understand how these programs, models, and artistic interventions function.

In addition, and in an effort to mimic the discursive space of the symposium itself, we invited respondents from multiple disciplines to attend the symposium and contribute their thoughts on the presentations. What follows are reflections from diverse viewpoints on the seemingly intractable problem of mass incarceration and the power, or limitations, of thinking and acting through the arts to address it.

In organizing the presentations and speakers for this event, our aim was to provide a broad historical context through the keynote conversation, present a range of national models in our artist-led panels, and invite the Milwaukee community to engage with these topics in a day of community action.

The symposium started with a keynote conversation featuring Elizabeth Hinton, historian and author of *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. In outlining the central argument of her book—that our nation’s turn to policing, prison, and surveillance was a systemic, bipartisan project—Hinton urges the audience to think about how we might use resources differently to collectively transform policy and institutions and repair a mass-incarceration society. The following day featured three artist-led panels. In

⁴ All participant biographies, as well as the full list of symposium panels and activities, are reprinted in this volume.

“No Humans Involved: Structures and Systems,” a conversation which borrowed part of its title from cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter’s notable essay published in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles race riots,⁵ Sable Elyse Smith and Simone Browne invoke Wynter’s writing as a framework to discuss their shared interest in the concepts of humanity, commodity, and objecthood. In one notable exchange, Smith notes that her approach to making work about prison-industrial-complex violence is centered on the ways that the system is perpetuated by the foreclosure of humanity for some subjectivities. Browne praises the ways that Smith leverages “bodily knowledge,” or the visceral, affective experience offered by art, to open up greater possibilities for understanding and identifying with bodies in captivity. The concept of humanity and the practice of dehumanization is parsed differently in the next panel, “Inside Out: Collaboration and Narrative,” featuring Nigel Poor, Jody Lewen, and Michael Nelson. Lewen makes the argument that mass incarceration—generally understood as a byproduct of a dysfunctional criminal justice system—is truly a crisis of dehumanization and invisibility. She and her fellow panelists go on to discuss the Prison University Project at San Quentin, as well as Poor’s podcast, *Ear Hustle*. They reject the simplistic narratives of redemption that are endemic to the field of prison education and programming, embracing a more nuanced and complex form of engagement with incarcerated populations. Finally, in the concluding panel, “Humans Involved: Rehabilitation and Re-entry,” Devon Simmons and Michelle Jones discuss their journeys from incarceration to re-entry with a focus on the role of the arts in the process. They acknowledge the ways that the system of mass incarceration turns on a set of discriminatory processes that move from the individual level to the policy level, noting that art, in its fundamental ability to change the way we see and perceive one another, can disrupt that cycle.

Our respondents continued the dialogue prompted by these panels and presentations. Encouraged to embrace an experimental format, they chose excerpts of the transcripts from our proceedings to consider and react to within their conversations and essays.

Art critic and curator Christian Viveros-Fauné, who moderated the keynote conversation with Elizabeth Hinton, considers the rise of prisons alongside that of museums. In “Behind the Museum, a Prison: America’s Bookend Institutions Examined,” he examines the role of our institutions themselves in perpetuating inequality—expanding upon a thread that was raised in his conversation with Hinton.

In her essay “‘I Knew I Was a Man’: Possibilities for an Abolitionist Aesthetic,” artist Sarah Ross outlines the limitations of the rhetoric that art and education practices humanize incarcerated individuals, and instead proposes a new form of aesthetics, or art as experience, that demands mutual participation in a process of building new political and visual languages as forms of resistance to the carceral state.

Scholars Risa Puleo and Ruby Tapia engage in a conversation about the vexed nature of the term “human” and how appeals to humanity often center the spectator. They consider how such appeals limit an understanding of the larger structural issues at play, and they propose challenging, expanding, or shifting our framing of the term itself.

⁵ Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Forum N. H. I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA) 1, no. 1 (fall 1994), 42–71.

Photo historian Kate Palmer Albers examines the complexity and urgency of visibility in “Codes of Visibility.” Her essay outlines the problematic pivot between the visible and invisible: how it affects the construction of our systems of value and can, in turn, be weaponized. Albers suggests that it is perhaps the role of artists to attune us to this erasure and resist what it represents.

In her essay “Breathing Electric Air,” scholar Michelle Jones chronicles her multidisciplinary engagement with the arts while she was incarcerated at Indiana Women’s Prison. She makes an argument that art is an essential tool for forging community and connection in prison and for creating pathways for individual spiritual, mental, and emotional freedom.

In their dialogue with Kaile Shilling, Founding Executive Director - Emeritus of the Arts for Healing and Justice Network, artists Shaun Leonardo and Mark Strandquist discuss the artistic and ethical responsibilities of working in meaningful partnership with court-involved youth. They discuss the philosophical positioning of their diversion programs as both extensions of the justice system and disruptive art processes that prioritize listening to, understanding, and stewarding the voices of the young people with whom they work.

We hope that this volume demonstrates ways that art, artists, and arts institutions can convene conversations and promote dialogue about the complex social issues that their communities face. It is often acknowledged that artists provide an essential role in bringing pressing social issues to the attention of a broader public. While this is indeed a necessary form of artistic practice, we hope this project also conveys the importance of offering artists a seat at the civic table; artists are well suited to offer bold and creative reimaginations of broken social systems.

As we write this, institutions of all stripes, including cultural institutions, are reassessing their priorities and rethinking the ways that they can better serve and reflect their communities. As we all do the work of affirming our commitment to the actions necessary for change, perhaps this project—a set of nested collaborations (between an academic and a civic museum, between two cultural institutions and their shared community, between artists and policy makers, between people on the inside and people on the outside of prisons)—can serve as model not simply for envisioning the role of the arts in justice reform, but also for authentic institutional listening and learning. The pursuit of justice and the responsibility of transformation—of improving the oppressive and unfair systems we inherited, created, or perpetuated—are, after all, shared projects.

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