

ARTFORUM

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PRINT JANUARY 2019

SLANT

BROUGHT TO JUSTICE

Colby Chamberlain on “Walls Turned Sideways”



Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia, *The Couple in the Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey*, 1993, video, color, sound, 31 minutes.

IF THE AUTONOMY of art was ever actually a thing, it ended with smartphones. The whole time I was visiting “Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the Justice System” at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston on October 6 of last year, I was painfully aware that if I pulled out the screen in my pocket, I might have to confront that inevitable, disheartening headline: SENATE CONFIRMS KAVANAUGH. The white cube was no antidote to the nausea of the present. If aestheticism’s belief in art’s distance from social and political concerns still endures, it does so only in the negative, as a sense of learned helplessness. In short, my trip to camh provided little comfort or distraction. It did, however, offer some perspective. Nothing there gave me any reason to believe that art could derail the dark farce unfolding over at the Capitol, but the show did demonstrate how artists have meaningfully intervened in the US legal system across a constellation of other spaces: prison cells, police cars, interrogation rooms, the museum itself.

With “Walls Turned Sideways,” curator Risa Puleo has staged an important intervention into the discourse on art and law, which, to date, has largely focused on those celebrated episodes when artworks have entered the courtroom, such as the 1927 trial over the aesthetic validity of Brancusi’s *Bird in Space*, 1925, or, more recently, copyright disputes involving Jeff Koons and Richard Prince. In part, “Walls Turned Sideways” follows the lead of Black Lives Matter, which has brought urgency not only to the issue of unlawful police shootings but also to that of the prison-industrial complex’s disproportionately corrosive effects on African American communities. At the same time, the exhibition reactivates the meticulous analysis of jails, barracks, and other sites of regulatory confinement that Foucault inaugurated in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). The result is a mapping of the US legal system that makes hardly any reference to the courts. To put it in Foucauldian terms, Puleo seems to believe that the sovereign authority of judges has ceded ground to a legal apparatus that controls individuals through the continuous exercise of disciplinary power. More bluntly: In an era of plea deals and mandatory minimums, going to trial is increasingly a luxury reserved for those with the resources to lawyer up.

If there are structural connections between the art world and the prison-industrial complex, then those conduits can, and should, be transformed and

exploited.

The exhibition's first half explores several striking correspondences between the penitentiary and the museum. Here, Puleo has built on the work of Douglas Crimp and Tony Bennett, both of whom have previously read museum practice through Foucault's framework. Insisting on curatorial research as its own unique form of knowledge production, Puleo conducts her analysis through groups of artworks. Documentation by Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia of the eight-venue 1993 piece *The Couple in the Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey*, in which Fusco and artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña performed as caged natives from a fictional Caribbean island, points to the captivity and display of Sarah Baartman and Ota Benga as precedents to today's ongoing incarceration and spectacularization of black bodies. Kapwani Kiwanga's video *A Primer*, 2017, explores how museums, penal institutions, asylums, and hospitals all deploy color theory to modify behavior. In Andrea Fraser's *Index II*, 2014 (a sequel to a work studying income inequality and the art market that appeared first in these pages as an anonymously published advertisement in the summer of 2011), a graph compares the growth of museums and prisons since 1976. The import of their synchronous upward slopes is grimly apparent: As museums have expanded to stockpile the 1 percent's surplus wealth, carceral institutions have proliferated to absorb the economy's surplus population.

What kind of charge is being leveled here? Should Abolish ice broaden its purview to shutter the museum as well? Or is "Walls Turned Sideways" just another guilt trip, like the handwringing that liberals ritually perform whenever they order on Amazon Prime? Puleo's own position appears embedded in the exhibition's title, which riffs on a saying by activist Angela Davis: "Walls turned sideways are bridges." That is, if there are structural connections between the art world and the prison-industrial complex, then those conduits can, and should, be transformed and exploited: first, through methods of visualization that, figuratively speaking, bring the cell into the gallery; and second, through social-practice strategies that funnel cultural and financial resources into reform efforts.



Deana Lawson, *Mohawk Correctional Facility (detail)*, 2013, forty-six ink-jet prints, each 11 x 8 1/2".

The methods of visualization that Puleo surveyed swung between picturing the array of carceral institutions hidden in plain sight and portraying their effects on individual lives. Ashley Hunt has reinvented American photography's romance with the road trip by documenting 250 different jails and penitentiaries across four US territories and all fifty states. Josh Begley's website *Prison Map*, 2012–, aggregates Google Maps satellite views of many of the same facilities. Trevor Paglen, better known for his research into military black sites and NSA infrastructure, contributes a wryly majestic six-foot panorama of a sunset over California's San Quentin State Prison. Other works draw more from firsthand experience. Collectively, they chart a *Pilgrim's Progress* itinerary through the justice system, tracking a body's sequence of transfer from arrest to detention to parole. Sable Elyse Smith and Titus Kaphar both offer roundabout meditations on their fathers' sentences; Deana Lawson presents a friend's collection of family snapshots taken in the visiting room of Mohawk Correctional Facility in Rome, New York. A participatory work by Sherrill Roland invites visitors to carve messages into a wall that is periodically repainted, a reference to the artist's own former assignment to a work detail that readied cells for incoming inmates.

Artists who provide services to prisoners or otherwise intervene directly in the justice system have a more ambiguous relation to display, in part because they don't necessarily regard museumgoers as their main audience. For *Tamms Year Ten*, 2007–13, a sustained and successful campaign to close an Illinois "supermax" prison, Laurie Jo Reynolds engaged primarily with inmates and their families, other educators and activists, and state

officials with the authority to enact legislation. Such social-practice projects are featured mostly through the “Walls Turned Sideways” catalogue, an omnibus of readings on art and justice by artists and scholars, including Shaun Leonardo, Cameron Rowland, Rebecca Zorach, and Elizabeth Alexander, that could easily fill out a course syllabus. (Teachers, take note.) That said, a handful of seemingly diminutive works by Reynolds are among the most ethically compelling in the show. The “Calling Cards” series, 2008–, appropriates the format of Adrian Piper’s *My Calling (Card) #1*, 1986, for use by registered sex offenders. This is hardly a population that wins much public sympathy, yet the cards, with their tone of polite confrontation, persuasively explain the myriad circumstances that can land one on the registry and the long-term burdens it inflicts on individuals and their loved ones. Here, Reynolds leverages the art museum’s unique capacity to produce historical resonance, giving legibility to a seldom-discussed social problem through the precedent of Piper’s well-known work.

“Judges are people of violence,” the legal scholar Robert Cover famously wrote in 1983. What ultimately distinguishes a judge’s decisions from those of, say, a curator, is the apparatus of domination that enforces them. That, of course, is why, as a society, we expect judges to mind their privilege and consider the impact of their determinations on the lives of others. Curators aren’t necessarily held to that same standard, but “Walls Turned Sideways” suggests what exhibitions might routinely look like if they were. In her catalogue essay, Puleo describes how her research brought her to artists who participated in activist forums, mobilized their work to serve social-justice causes, taught in prisons, had direct experience with the justice system, or had been incarcerated themselves. That is, she selected artists on the basis of whether their practice moved through different kinds of institutions and tilted walls to build bridges between them. Call it other criteria.

“Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the Justice System” is on view through January 6 at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

Colby Chamberlain is a lecturer at Columbia University.

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