3.3 / Make Big Demands

On Seeing and Being Seen

By Danielle Sommer *October 16, 2011*

The French philosopher Michel Foucault considered prisons to be examples of a unique kind of place, both set aside from reality and somehow counter to it. Along with cemeteries, boarding schools, brothels, boats, and Oriental gardens, they contain the otherwise incompatible: past and present, dead and living, or, as in the case of the garden, the world as a microcosm with the world as a macrocosm.[1]

Foucault named this type of place a “heterotopia”—in medical terms, a displacement of parts. Its physical attributes are only important insofar as they lend themselves to achieving a particular state of mind. Foucault was most interested in the state of mind in which you notice, as you look at yourself in the mirror, that you are only able to see yourself—to define yourself as real—because an identical, yet unreal, version of yourself is looking back.

We gravitate toward such experiences, though we prefer to only follow the equation halfway. Our love for reality TV or dramas like *Criminal Minds* represents our desire for a controlled taste of the butterflies that come from seeing the Other in one’s self (the thought: “Oh! *I* act like that sometimes!”). The reverse can also be true—the entertainment industry makes an equal amount of capital by providing us with goods that allow us to feel good about recognizing ourselves in others (the thought: “She’s just like me!”).

But what of the place or the moment, asked Foucault, that includes the experience of the reflection itself? An experience in which we don’t just see, but we see ourselves both seeing and being seen? To willfully create such an experience is an art, particularly when the tools at hand are largely discursive. Yet this is what We Players, a site-specific theatre troupe featuring a revolving collective of actors, dancers, and artists, have done, and they have done it with and because of one particular site: Alcatraz Island, the most infamous of all federal penitentiaries, and one of the Bay Area’s top tourist destinations.

Alcatraz has a big history for such a tiny pile of rock (twenty-two acres). The Muwekma Ohlone refused to use it, except to gather eggs. Various other indigenous groups considered it either bad luck, sacred, or both.[2] Lieutenant Don Juan Manuel de Ayala, the captain of the San Carlos and the first Spanish explorer to see the island, wrote that it was “very steep and barren and would not afford shelter even for [a] launch.”[3] Eventually, the United States military took control, turned it into a prison, and then passed it over to the federal government during the Great Depression, under whose purview it remained until 1963.[4] More recently, in 1964 and again from 1969 to 1971, Alcatraz was occupied by Native Americans protesting the federal government’s policy toward their land rights.[5]

Despite the fact that the protest began with a lot of community support, that support had waned significantly after two years. The National Park Service took control of the island in 1972, and today the trip to Alcatraz is a rite of passage

for every visitor to and resident of the Bay, including most of its elementary-school-aged youth. Alcatraz remains best known as a place for “killers too tough for steel walls to cage,” or as a facility that housed the “worst of the worst” for a brief moment in its history,: Al Capone, the Birdman, George “Machine Gun” Kelly.[6] These names, plus the fourteen escape attempts—some of which ended in death—are a large part of the reason visitors keep coming. Perhaps we want to know what the consequences would be if we let out “the worst of the worst” inside us—an experience similar to our penchant for crime TV.

In 2008, We Players, under the leadership of artistic director Ava Roy and her longtime collaborator Lauren Dietrich Chavez, the current managing director, performed *Macbeth* at Fort Point National Historical Site, in San Francisco, to an audience that included Amy Brees, then soon-to-be site supervisor of Alcatraz National Park. Brees recognized a kinship between We Players’ site-specific practices and those of the National Park Service on Alcatraz, and eventually extended We Players an invitation to use the island as their next location. Specifically, We Players were contracted to use the site to help the National Park Service deepen its exploration of themes of isolation, redemption, and justice, all part of the Alcatraz mythology. In 2009, We Players staged a retelling of the *Oresteia on Alcatraz,* followed in 2010 by *Hamlet*—plays that explore the cycle of justice and all its progeny. As is its trademark, We Players utilized the entire island as a stage, immersing its audience members in each scene, surrounding them with both place and narrative.

Roy and Chavez say they knew from the beginning that the plays wouldn’t be enough of an answer to the site; they alluded only to the general themes present in Alcatraz’s history and touched too lightly on present specifics. What is least effective and remains Alcatraz’s largest missed opportunity in the eyes of We Players is the gaping black hole that exists where information on the current penitentiary system should be. Over the course of the past year, with the help of artist and curator Patrick Gillespie, We Players has attempted to fill this gap by staging four exhibitions combining visual arts and discursive panels, ultimately hoping to provide its audience with insight on what it means to be incarcerated in 2011.

A mere fifteen miles north of Alcatraz sits the San Quentin State Prison, which also provides tours of its facilities, although the number of tourists and Bay Area residents who go out of their way to take this tour (assuming they have no family inside) is far fewer than the one million who visit Alcatraz.[7] There is no comparison. Alcatraz’s three-story, steel-reinforced concrete cellhouse has a total of 336 cells. At one prisoner per cell, the average population never reached capacity, hovering around 275.[8] In contrast, San Quentin has capacity for 3,302 prisoners but currently houses 5,247.[9] There is so much body heat produced that the upper levels are significantly warmer. At Alcatraz, a man was allowed to step outside of his cell after his morning shave. At San Quentin, it’s not uncommon for a prisoner to be cuffed and shackled, then stripped and searched before being allowed to leave his cell.[10]

Whether or not it is the job of the National Park Service to provide this kind of information, the fact remains that Alcatraz is one of the few prisons accessible to the general public, and it belies the contemporary experience of incarceration. We Players’ first exhibition, *Proliferation*, included a video work and performance of the same title by artist and musician Paul Rucker, produced in 2009 while he held a Prison Issues residency at the Blue Mountain Center. The video starts out black. The visuals, scored with a cello, unfold slowly. Dots of different colors, each representing a prison built during a particular time period in U.S. history, begin to appear. The culmination of the video corresponds to the period with the largest proliferation of prisons, 1981 to 2005. The piece sets a mood, but more importantly, it speaks to the tension between talking about incarceration in quantitative versus qualitative terms. For

the next three exhibitions—*Invisible People*, *Youth Perspectives*, and *Images from the Inside*—Gillespie, Roy, and Chavez chose to concentrate on the qualitative, showing the work of prisoners, or work done in collaboration with prisoners, as well as hosting a series of educational panels.

Invisible People showcased work by artists Monica Lundy and Evan Bissell. Lundy's oil-and-gouache portraits of women stem from her research on San Quentin's female inmates in the California State Archives. The resulting portraits are muted and patchy, suggestive of our incomplete understanding of the subjects. In contrast, Bissell's portraits are collaborations between artist and subject. Through a group called Community Works West, Bissell teaches writing and art workshops to prisoners and the children of prisoners. The pieces on display for *Invisible People* were the result of a five-month-long collaboration with different individuals in these groups, in which they worked with Bissell to make nearly life-size portraits that placed them in personalized locations with symbols of their choosing.

At the closing ceremony for *Invisible People*, which I attended, Bissell led gallery visitors through many of the same exercises he performs with his collaborators. We ate tangerines and did some contour drawings of the peels, and then wrote letters to an important life figure. Afterward, we wandered around to look at the work, and I found myself flipping through a journal full of show comments. They ranged from inane—"Thug Life" scrawled in block letters—to openly emotional: "Most of the adults in my life have spent time in jail. The only one 'fixed' by it stayed in jail 3 days. The ones spending the longest are still effected [sic]. Does it work? Maybe. Does it tear families apart? Definitely, but so do drugs." At this moment, I moved, like Bissell, from being a mere voyeur to a participant—not merely seeing myself reflected, but beginning to notice my reflection watching me in return.

Implicit here, and in Foucault's argument, is the question of complicity, something also touched on by Pelican Bay inmate Les Dewberry in his acrylic painting *Justice*, from 1993. *Justice* is part of We Players' final exhibition, *Images from the Inside*, up through November 12, 2011. Compiled with the help of Carol Newborg of the William James Association, a Bay Area nonprofit, *Images* presents a collection of works made by prisoners in the California corrections system through a program called Arts-in-Corrections. The program lost its funding in 2009 and was forced to close in 2010, after thirty years in operation at different facilities across the state, plus a documented twenty-seven percent drop in recidivism and a seventy-five percent drop in disciplinary actions for its participants. In 2009, the Dalai Lama recognized one of the Arts-in-Corrections artists facilitators, Steve Emerick, as an Unsung Hero of Compassion for his work at San Quentin. Arts-in-Corrections is survived by its originator, the William James Association's Prison Arts Project, which currently relies on donations to pay its artists facilitators at San Quentin and the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco.[11]

Justice draws a thick black boundary between outside and inside across the middle of the painting, so that it becomes the horizon line. Those on the outside are bodiless faces, holding signs that say "Vote." Only the prisoners and the guards, depicted as stick figures, have mobility and access to the interior. The prisoners are white and black with blue and red handkerchiefs, and several are holding weapons. The guards are separated from the prisoners by the outline of the state of California, made of prison bars dripping in red. The guards wear green and orange and look suspiciously like soldiers, an observation that squares with the comments of every single member of the panel on arts in prisons that followed the exhibition: that the penal system is devolving into a privatized, industrial complex with no thought toward rehabilitation. What's striking about *Justice* is that everyone is complicit: those outside who stare in, the prisoners who ignore the stares and fight amongst themselves, and the guards that do nothing.

Dewberry's painting ushers in a missing voice, a perspective from the inside on what is occurring outside, and the programming for an upcoming and culminating symposium promises to do the same—to reflect the experience of the reflection. The complexity of the project shouldn't be overlooked, technically or bureaucratically. In the first place, We Players have used just about every tool in the arts and humanities toolbox, from theater to dance to rhetoric to the visual arts. As for the second: for *Images* alone, obtaining permission to show prisoners' artwork required so many signatures that We Players toyed with the idea of displaying the documentation, but ultimately held off, wary of how it might be misinterpreted as provenance, the historical record of authenticity that collectors lust after. It almost goes without saying that works by prisoners are fetishized, and more so if they are works by inmates with cachet. Similarly, to invite former prisoners to come speak about their experiences as either artists or as prisoners requires a delicate attention to the entirety of their circumstances, including their original crime and their potential victims.

After nearly three years on Alcatraz, meeting people from throughout the corrections community, testing the waters and experimenting with different strategies for an accurate and effective portrayal of the experience of incarceration in 2011, We Players launch their culminating symposium on October 20, 2011. They will welcome back previous participating artists like Lundy, Rucker, and Bissell. New participants will include artist and activist Richard Kamler, Mabel Negrete, performance artist and founder of the Counter Narrative Society, and the Poetic Justice Project, performing the play *Women Behind Walls*. Larry Brewster, formerly the dean of the College of Professional Studies at the University of San Francisco, will moderate a panel discussion with former prisoners on the effects of art as a prison rehabilitation program. There will also be a panel on restorative justice and victim awareness. And for the moment, Alcatraz will move from being the perfect, historical-mythical prison, to taking on the burdens of a heterotopic space, full of dozens, if not hundreds of conflicting narratives. Staying true to one of We Players main tenets, "The position of viewership [will be] self-determined. Audience members may choose and change the perspective from which they view the show."[12]

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22 –27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/464648/.
2. Troy R. Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination and the Rise of Indian Activism* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 1–2.
3. Zoeth Skinner Eldredge, "The Log of the San Carlos," *The March of Portolá and the Discovery of the Bay of San Francisco*, trans. E.J. Molera (San Francisco: The California Promotion Committee, 1909), 58. http://books.google.com/books?id=-UVnAAAAMAAJ/.
4. "A Brief History of Alcatraz," from the website of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, http://www.bop.gov/about/history/alcatraz.jsp/. Accessed October 7, 2011.
5. Troy Johnson, "The Alcatraz Indian Occupation," featured in "We Hold the Rock," from the website of Alcatraz Island, hosted by the National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/alca/historyculture/we-hold-the-rock.htm/. Accessed October 7, 2011.
6. "Welcome to Alcatraz," from the website Alcatraz History, published by Ocean View Publishing Company, http://www.alcatrazhistory.com/rs1.htm/. Accessed October 7, 2011.
7. "Alcatraz," from the website of the Golden Gate Parks Conservancy, http://www.parksconservancy.org/visit/

alcatraz/alcatraz-tours.html. Accessed October 10, 2011.

8. “A Brief History of Alcatraz,” from the website of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, http://www.bop.gov/about/history/alcatraz.jsp/. Accessed October 7, 2011.
9. "Adult Facilities Locator: San Quentin State Prison,” from the website of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2010, http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Facilities_Locator/SQ-Institution_Stats.html. Accessed October 10, 2011.
10. From an interview with We Players’ collaborator Patrick Gillespie regarding a tour taken at San Quentin State Prison, June 2011.
11. From a panel conversation with Arts in Corrections and Prison Arts Project participants held on Alcatraz Island on August 27, 2011.
12. “Our Practice,” from the We Players website, http://www.weplayers.org/about/our-practice. Accessed October 7, 2011.

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