Habeas Corpus: a Body of Art from the Incarcerated America

Anna Iatsenko

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/68002>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.68002

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Translation(s):

Habeas Corpus : un corpus d'œuvres venues de l'Amérique incarcérée - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/68006> [fr]

Publisher

Grouperment d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 November 2020

Number of pages: 33-43

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Anna Iatsenko, "*Habeas Corpus: a Body of Art from the Incarcerated America*", *Critique d'art* [Online], 55 | Automne/hiver, Online since 30 November 2021, connection on 15 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/68002> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.68002>

This text was automatically generated on 15 September 2022.

EN

Habeas Corpus: a Body of Art from the Incarcerated America

Anna Iatsenko

“I want to remind us all that art is dangerous. I want to remind you of the history of artists who have been murdered, slaughtered, imprisoned, chopped up, refused entrance. The history of art, whether it’s in music or written or what have you, has always been bloody, because dictators and people in office and people who want to control and deceive know exactly the people who will disturb their plans. » Toni Morrison¹

- 1 *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* by Nicole R. Fleetwood is not only one of the most thorough and comprehensive accounts of visual art emerging in, around and against the industry of mass incarceration and its legacy in the United States of America to-date, it is also timely and, of course, dangerous. Indeed, this meticulously curated work, informed by Fleetwood’s research in humanities, rigorously deconstructs the carceral system in the United States by means of the works it presents and the texts which accompany these works and provide larger contexts to the personal perspectives expressed by the artists whether they have been themselves imprisoned or not, including the members of her own family. In a general sense, *Marking Time* comes to join a peculiar lineage of works that engage with the elements of incarceration, the legal system, the penal system, as well as their repercussions on lives of people in very specific minority populations in the United States and how these people use art as strategies of resistance to the oppressive police state. More specifically, however, *Marking Time* does more than standing a witness to a breaking, failing system: it tells the story of how art incessantly informs us, both artists and their audience, about our very being in the world.
- 2 It is interesting to observe that while arts like literature for example, or music, have longer traceable historical links to incarceration, visual arts have joined the debate only recently. Universities throughout the western world offer courses on “prison literature” with Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy* (524 A.D.) as the genre’s earliest work, but as of that point instructors have a frighteningly long list of works to choose from. Whether they are works written in prison or by imprisoned authors, political

figures, whether they're poems, letters, memoirs, or works of fiction, most of the readers of this article will have no trouble naming at least three titles or names of their creators. The 20th century has been particularly prolific in this domain to the extent that it has now become commonplace for University curricula in either postcolonial, or American, or Soviet literatures that carry names of authors who has had a personal encounter with a place of incarceration.

- 3 Indeed more than any other artistic practice, literature has been successful in infiltrating the prison environment by means of libraries or book-distribution efforts, creative writing courses and poetry workshops, book clubs and other talks featuring authors, literature teachers and book enthusiasts at large. Literary networks have been known to emerge within and to continue beyond prison walls, forming support systems, providing writing material and even publishing opportunities. In 1999 PEN America edited a celebratory anthology entitled *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing* that collected the works by authors who have won the yearly literary contest fully sponsored by PEN². The project ran through the last twenty-five years of the 20th century and became a powerful symbol of hope for change of ways that imprisonment functions in American society. In their overwhelming majority, the works in this anthology addressed the mourning for a complex notion of the self which had to be left behind the walls of the incarceration facility, for a simplistic, shameful and irreversibly destructive term "criminal" or "prisoner". Some works also conveyed a sense of the "irreversible".
- 4 It was not until 2010 and Michelle Alexander's renowned study entitled *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* that light was shed not only on life within the prison walls, but on the very processes by which social, economic, policing, legal, carceral, and post-carceral systems in America converge to form a weapon of methodical elimination of the country's own citizens³. Alexander's work is particularly remarkable in the ways that the author makes apparent how events that may be qualified as insignificant for many members of her white readership, can be lethal for the overwhelming majority of the country's "non-white" citizens. Late payments of bills is one of these examples: an unpaid electricity bill can result in a person being incarcerated which, in turn, results in difficulties in finding housing, work and it can even bar a person's access to any benefits or state support, or recovering their children who have been placed in the custody of that very same state. The carceral system in the United States of America does not conceive punishment through temporary isolation from society – it permanently severs these ties. This practice echoes all the way back to a time of slavery, and also to post-civil war period or reconstruction when slavery was discretely transformed into segregation in order to resonate full circle in what we sometimes like to call the "post-race" America of the 21st century. Except that there is yet another small detail – incarceration can result in a person's loss of their right to vote. Finally, here is the last detail: the United States of America have the highest incarceration rate in the world.
- 5 It is within this continuity that the publication of Fleetwood's *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* becomes most significant because while like the two publications briefly mentioned above, it denounces the extreme systemic violence perpetrated on a specific portion of the country's population, the work also gestures towards art as the emerging potential for problem-solving. One of the first most striking aspects which returns in the overwhelming majority of the works⁴ is the fact

that they present, represent and recall bodies. Whether they are portraits, drawn figures, or bodies that call at us from a distant historical past, *Marking Time* presents an undeniably incorporated experience of imprisonment which is, indeed, something rather recent. Few works of literature written in prison, for example, place the body at the center of the artistic creation. Indeed, while a narrator's body may be alluded to as secluded, locked away, or broken, the presence of a creative, analytical and forth-moving mind becomes liberated at the same time. We rarely saw the body and, moreover, we were rarely given glimpses of the body's experience of imprisonment, leaving one with a kind of physical and sensorial amnesia in favor of "the mind".

- 6 This later fact becomes particularly salient when we begin to compare *Marking Time* to publications such as *The Pencil Is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists* – an exhibition catalogue for a project which presents drawing from prisoners from different countries and times, ranging from Gustave Courbet, to prisoners of the gulag, to those incarcerated in the aftermath of the Arab Spring events. Throughout its 140 plus drawings, *The Pencil Is a Key* positions itself as a comprehensive overview of visual artistic production in various places of incarceration, for various reasons and throughout various times and cultures, holds a particular interest for the scholarship in terms of genre and cultural specificities thereof. Due to the immensity of the chronotopic span it engages, *The Pencil Is a Key* offers a point of comparison, a backdrop for discussion of further national and cultural specificities of the genre of carceral visual art, allowing us to dwell on the pertinence of terms such as "Art Brut" and the meaning that the term "freedom" holds for culturally-specific imprisonment⁵. It may be seen as an attempt to archive the genre, or to explore its limits, but unlike *Marking Time*, *The Pencil Is a Key* does not engage much with the experience of incarceration – it tells us a lot about the prisoners' longings, but very little about experience.
- 7 In *Marking Time*, works like the photographs of Sara Bennett which depict women in the aftermath of their imprisonment, refocus the attention on the body and the inability to physically fit back into a "life after life in prison". While this quotation, taken from the series, in itself signals a powerful division between life and life in prison, it also goes further to disrupt the very perception of "life" and, by implication, living. Albeit presented in drastically different surroundings, Keila and Tracy – the two women depicted on the photographs – seem to equally not belong to either of their respective environments. Here, both the public and the private spaces equally offer no rest and while Keila may look panicked on a subway, why would Tracy be unable to relax in the comfort of the private space? In a note written below the photograph, Tracy wrote: "I know I need to eat, but my room is my nourishment" (p. 99). Here, Tracy speaks of "nourishment" – a word which strongly evokes the feminine, maternal presence. Women, as we find out on the previous page in Fleetwood's accompanying text, make up the fastest growing prison population in the U.S.A.
- 8 Other works, like the triptych entitled *Ellapsium: Master & Helm* (2016) by Jared Owens, reach back into the past by creating intertextual connections with works from the period of the transatlantic slave trade. Referencing and overlaying J. M. W. Turner's *Slave Ship* in the use of color, the infamous diagram of the Brookes' slave ship, as well as the blueprints of the Fairton Federal Correctional Institution, Owens creates a complex, multilayered visual intertext which makes emerge the deeply disturbing parallel between slavery and imprisonment. While the diagram of the slaver is barely visible in its details, it is identifiable because it is familiar to most western-educated viewers

because the image has become the symbol for the middle passage itself. The original diagram is a depiction of the ship loaded to its full capacity with 454 people and it was widely used in the late 18th century in the early abolitionist circles precisely because of the reactions it provoked. People, in chains, in the boat, travelled for weeks and sometimes for months to reach their final destination: some people could not stand, while others could not lie down. Most viewers who see this diagram have strong physical reactions upon realization that the regular repetitive strokes, that are barely visible in Owens's triptych, are, in fact, people.

- 9 In her more recent work, Judith Butler returns to and rethinks the concept of "vulnerability" as a tool of resistance. While we more generally connote vulnerability as a weakness, Butler's elaboration on this understanding of the term, actually, shows us the very opposite – when we begin to understand that what we all have in common is a body and that these bodies bleed, feel hunger, or cold, or pain, at that very moment we come into our shared physical vulnerability and a solidarity emerges. Indeed, it is not the kind of "vulnerability" that is bestowed by a government onto a migrant person by means of the "vulnerability papers" – naming someone else as "vulnerable", on the contrary, is to inscribe a human being as something less than the one who names. Butler's use engages another trajectory: realization of a shared vulnerability is akin to an event of communion, capable of drawing people together into becoming "a body" of solidarity. *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* by Nicole R. Fleetwood has the same effect: it makes bodies visible through the works of art, allowing us to come into contact with a resonance of our own bodies. At the same time, we also get to experience how art offers us glimpses into other ways of being in the world.

NOTES

1. Morrison, Toni. <https://twitter.com/ArtsAdminColor/status/1159463900905164801>
2. *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999. Edited by Bell Gale De Cheigny
3. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York: New Press, 2010
4. It is significant to note that *Marking Time* is, in itself, a transdisciplinary work both in terms of form and the works it presents. Fleetwood unveils nine years of meticulous field research and analysis, which include her trips to the places of incarceration, the gathering of works and interviews from over eighty artists who themselves engage with and produce works in a variety of media like photography, collage, painting, murals, videos, sculptures, etc. *Marking Time* offers a prism constructed through the media used, but also how the artists themselves master and deform the codes and how they challenge our notion of "art", "media", what can and cannot be seen on both sides of the prison walls, and, most importantly, that "criminals" are also multifaceted and complex beings.
5. The works presented in *The Pencil Is a Key* cover almost two-and-a-quarter centuries of artistic production with incursions into non-Western cultures in terms of aesthetic practices. Temporality is important here because incarceration serves particular political purposes that

provoked the artists' incarcerations. Thus, the volume can be seen as a series of testimonies – at times critical and others not – of the historical events experienced. It tells stories about particular moments in history.

AUTHOR

ANNA IATSENKO

Anna Iatsenko is a researcher in African American literature and currently works at the Centre de la photographie Genève. She is particularly interested in transdisciplinary approaches to literature and the arts more generally. At the moment she is working on a monograph based on her doctoral thesis project in which she explored textual acoustics, aurality and resonance in the fictional works of Toni Morrison.