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## PRISON PHOTOGRAPHY AS DIALOGUE

### 1. Photography inside and outside prison walls

In 1998, Eric Schlosser published “The Prison-Industrial Complex.” By now a much-quoted classic, this essay heralded the discussion of what has come to be known as the era of mass incarceration in the US. This period started in the 1970s, escalated during the 1980s in coincidence with the War on Drugs launched by President Reagan, and continues through the present time. In the course of approximately the last four decades, an unprecedented number of people convicted of different (especially nonviolent) crimes have been incarcerated in the US. This has also resulted in unprecedented rates of incarcerated people per US residents. Schlosser contextualizes this unique social phenomenon as follows:

The enormous increase in America’s inmate population can be explained in large part by the sentences given to people who have committed nonviolent offenses. Crimes that in other countries would usually lead to community service, fines, or drug treatment—or would not be considered crimes at all—in the United States now lead to a prison term, by far the most expensive form of punishment. “No matter what the question has been in American criminal justice over the last generation,” says Franklin E. Zimring, the director of the Earl Warren Legal Institute, “prison has been the answer.” [...]

[T]he United States has developed a prison-industrial complex—a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need.

In coincidence with such unprecedented numbers and growth in prison population in the US, campaigns and other activism aimed at reforming the American prison system have, especially since the 1990s, been increasingly addressing the many issues endemic to an age of mass incarceration. As part of this context of activism, or in dialogue with it, a number of prison photography initiatives and discussions have also gained visibility. For instance, the prestigious photography magazine *Aperture* devoted in 2018 a whole issue, titled *Prison Nation*, to the articulated relationship between photography and prison in the US. Several photographers, who see their work as a means of intervention in social and political life, or as an attempt to pursue justice, have worked on the carceral system. Artists such as Dread Scott, Deana Lawson, and Hank Willis Thomas also analyze the current reality of incarceration as related to the persistence of racial injustice in the US and the ongoing criminalization of black people.<sup>1</sup> Bruce Jackson and Diane Christian have documented the life of men on Death Row in Texas during the 1970s—first in a 1979 film, one year later in a book and, finally, in a 2012 photobook titled *In this Timeless Time: Living and Dying on Death Row in*

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<sup>1</sup> While this essay does not openly analyze prison photography from a racial perspective, it is imperative to remark that several authors and public figures (Bruce Jackson, Bryan Stevenson, Nicole Fleetwood, and many more) have powerfully highlighted and discussed how the US prison system, and the era of mass incarceration, disproportionately target nonwhite Americans, and especially African Americans. This fact illuminates disturbing historical continuities between the present time and past periods like the period of racial segregation in the US, and all the way back to the age of slavery.

Recent protest movements such as #BlackLivesMatter are responses to a surveillance, juridical, and social system that structurally discounts the lives of black people and incarcerates them at a higher rate than any other ethnic group.



*America*, mostly based on previously unpublished photographic material.<sup>2</sup> Lou Jones followed in Jackson and Christian's footsteps with his 1996 book *Final Exposure: Portraits from Death Row*.

Photography in/on the US carceral system is, in other words, an expanding field, for practitioners, artists, and scholars. In this essay, I shall consider prison photography, in broad terms, as a rhetorical and social network that potentially or actually brings together agents from both sides of the prison walls. I discuss prison photography as a practice that exposes the border separating the inside and outside of prisons and creates communication channels attempting to bridge such divide. If, on the one hand, photographic initiatives centered on prisons, and the increased visibility they entail, contribute to blur the divide between inside and outside, on the other hand, photography retains and amplifies the stark quality of this divide—both because of the inescapable realism and documentary value of photographic images and because photographic images make present, and materialize, the starkly uneven distribution of the technological means for crafting them. Because of its fluid, yet inescapably asymmetrical nature, prison photography requires, and simultaneously fosters, a nuanced reflection on what separates the world within prison walls from the world without. This essay focuses, for the almost totality of its case studies, on the US prison system and US photographers; at the same time, we shall see how, in the case of communication networks involving, actually or potentially, photographers from many parts of the world, the scope of the dialogue between inside and outside can become international, even global.

While there is—also thanks to the increased circulation of digitized images via the Internet—a growing possibility, for people (including myself) who have never been inside a prison, to see images captured in a prison environment,<sup>3</sup> the possibility to own and use cameras in prison is heavily curtailed by prohibitions and regulations. Photos are taken, or not taken, for 'security reasons,' on the basis of a historically consolidated usage of photography as means of surveillance. It has been observed that, in the era of mass incarceration, the level of control and prohibition on the use of cameras in prison has increased, with less and less chances for incarcerated people to use them—for instance, for educational and creative projects:

Between 1981 and 1988, Karen Ruckman offered a program of photography workshops at Lorton. [...] Such initiatives were rare then and are rarer now. Ruckman's was one of the last camera-based photography workshops offered in a male adult prison in the United States. This curtailment reflects mass incarceration's shift in penal philosophy from rehabilitation to incapacitation. In the prison setting, cameras are not considered tools for art; they are tools for security. (Brook 2018, 106)

Most prisons and jails across the United States do not allow prisoners to have access to cameras. How, then, can images tell the story of mass incarceration when the imprisoned don't have control over their own representation? How can photographs visualize a reality that, for many, remains outside of view? ("Editors' Note" 2018, 19)

Photography has been historically crucial for creating an archive of criminal 'others.' Allan Sekula's "The Body and the Archive" (1986) is by now a classic in its discussion of photography as a disciplinary tool employed since the nineteenth century at the service of an increased policing of space and life, and of a view of nonnormative bodies as intrinsically deviant. "The photographer and theorist Allan Sekula argues that the photographs taken for police and prison records should be seen alongside the portrait photographs that flourished at the same time. People were encouraged to read portraits using physiognomy, [...] against which the criminal body was measured" (Henning 2004, 165). The editors of *Prison Nation* openly acknowledge that "[p]hotography, since its early years, has been used to create and reinforce typologies of criminality, often singling out specific groups of people. The responsibility of photographers today is to provide counterpoints and move beyond simplistic descriptions of the criminal and the imprisoned" ("Editors' Note" 2018, 19).

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<sup>2</sup> For another study on the relationship between photography and the prison, see Jackson's essay on this Special Issue of *Iperstoria*.

<sup>3</sup> The website *Prison Photography* ([prisonphotography.org](http://prisonphotography.org)), curated by Pete Brook, is a rich resource in this respect.



Against a backdrop of welcome increasing use of photography for purposes of activism and social justice, one should, in other words, not forget the fraught history of the medium. Nor should one forget that, in broad terms, the possibility to photograph in prison comes rarely, especially if compared with the much freer possibility to photograph in private as well as public areas outside of carceral institutions. In her acclaimed book *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay elaborates a radical view of photography as the coterminous coming-into-being of a technology that grants its wielders an unprecedented representational power and the possibility for everyone, at least in principle, to gain access to such technology and its representational power. Photography, in this respect, is inherently democratic, and coincides with a civil space wherein everyone is already, and always, a “citizen of photography:”

Not only is the invention of photography the invention of a new encounter between people, but the invention of an encounter between people and the camera. Photography was invented at the moment when a space of plurality was initiated, at the moment when a large number of people—more than just a certain circle of acquaintances—took hold of a camera and began using it as a means of producing images.

Photography was invented at *that* moment, by *those* people. They cannot be identified; they do not belong to any milieu of professionals, but are ordinary people who, simply by using a camera, both promoted photography and initiated what I am calling the civil contract of photography. (Azoulay 2008, 93, emphasis in the original)

Recent prison photography initiatives address the issue of what appears like a lasting shortage of images, and answer a growing demand for public knowledge about what really happens inside prisons. For instance, the exhibit *Prison Obscura*, curated by Pete Brook, was initially displayed at Haverford College’s Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery from January 24 through March 7, 2014. This exhibit, its website states, “presents rarely seen vernacular, surveillance, evidentiary, and prisoner-made photographs, shedding light on the prison-industrial complex. Why do tax-paying, prison-funding citizens rarely get the chance to see such images? And what roles do these pictures play for those within the system?”<sup>4</sup>

Among the main reasons for multiplying the chances to take photographs in prisons, and/or displaying photos taken in prisons to as broad an audience as possible, is making life inside known to the general public; this is, in turn, based on the assumption that showing what happens inside matters to those outside and cannot simply be overlooked or forgotten because it happens behind locked doors. Another reason is, many argue, ‘humanizing’ incarcerated people,<sup>5</sup> giving individual prisoners their stories back. This is part of the effort to provide a counterpoint to the disciplinary tradition of photography by emphasizing the manifold humanity of those who are categorized as ‘others,’ deviants, and criminals. Re-centering prisoners, their stories, and their too-often-neglected (complex) humanity is one of the declared aims of prison activists, who frequently use photographic images as a way to mobilize public opinion and create grassroots support for campaigns and struggles to improve living conditions in prisons, protect the constitutional and human rights of prisoners, and indict those carceral institutions that patently violate such rights. Bryan Stevenson, a renowned lawyer based in Montgomery, Alabama, is keenly aware of the power and importance of culture, and especially visual culture, to contrive narratives that invest in the truth and advance social justice. In a conversation with art historian Sarah Lewis, Stevenson discusses such importance, as well as his self-conscious use of photography: “For me, it has always been clear that there is a way in which photography

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<sup>4</sup> [exhibits.haverford.edu/prisonobscura/](http://exhibits.haverford.edu/prisonobscura/). Last visited July 24, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Visual artist Jesse Krimes, imprisoned from 2009 to 2013 (first year spent in solitary confinement), challenges this view. In a conversation with fellow artist Hank Willis Thomas, he affirms: “I try to create artwork that complicates oversimplified and harmful narratives. I don’t like to say it’s a way of trying to humanize people in prison because they’re already human, so that’s a very ridiculous thing to say. But I think art can be a way to spark empathy in people and get them to see, feel, and think differently” (Thomas 2018, 97).

Hank Willis Thomas is himself a highly engagé artist and photographer who has repeatedly addressed social and racial injustice, including the inequities of the prison system. For instance, Thomas recently partnered with Baz Dreisinger in realizing *The Writing on the Wall*, a massive traveling installation composed of writings by incarcerated people around the world.



can illuminate what we believe and what we know and what we understand. It led me to increasingly use imagery to try to help tell the story of our clients” (Lewis 2018, 22).

“In knowing prisons,” Brook writes, “sometimes we’ll rely on images by committed individuals coming in from the outside, and sometimes we’ll rely on those by prisoners—cellphone snapshots and videos, visiting-room portraits and artworks” (2018, 109). A peculiar type of prison photography is the work of prisoners appointed to take pictures on the occasion of visits—pictures that can later be purchased by imprisoned people and their dear ones. Nicole Fleetwood’s intense and moving discussion of this type of vernacular prison photography highlights its role in establishing a connection between inside and outside, a communicational, physical, and emotional exchange that requires an effort—or, as she puts it, *labor*:

Vernacular photography that takes place in prisons circulates as practices of intimacy and attachment between imprisoned people and their loved ones, by articulating the emotional labor performed to maintain these connections. [...] These photographs also capture the work that is necessary to maintain connection and facilitate physical and emotional expression in carceral spaces. Smiling, hugging, and performing a sense of togetherness are deliberate and *labored* activities. (Fleetwood 2015, 490, 503, my emphasis)

In Fleetwood’s photo essay, herself, her incarcerated relatives, and other family members pose against the background of painted murals depicting outdoor scenes, like landscapes or city skylines, “signs of aspiration, futurity, and fantasy-as-play [...] they represent a sense of nonconfinement, a lack of bars, boundaries, borders” (Fleetwood 2015, 496). Murals used as backdrops for these photoshoots are often painted in prison by incarcerated artists. Under the title *Prison Landscapes*, Alyse Edmur has collected a small portion of what must be the innumerable existing photographs displaying prisoners, with or without visitors, in this ‘fantasy’ environment.<sup>6</sup> Edmur’s collection pays special attention to the imaginative quality of the painted backdrops, recognizing them as an important part of such liminal space within the prison: namely, the visiting room, wherein (to use Fleetwood’s phrase) the ‘emotional labor’ of the incarcerated ones and their dear ones condenses, becomes visible, and starts circulating.

Among professional photographers who have approached the prison environment, Sara Bennett specifically situates her work in liminal zones between the inside and outside of the carceral space, thus revealing both the stark nature of this divide and a porous, asymmetrical exchange that connects the two sides. A public defender specializing in battered women and the wrongly convicted, Bennett has also authored books and photo essays. Since 2014, she has been working on three photo projects on incarcerated women. *Looking Inside* is a series portraying women serving life sentences for homicide in New York State Prisons. The portraits show the prisoners in various carceral environments—among which the library, the mess hall, the recreation room, the infant center—and are accompanied by personal statements handwritten by each of them (Fig. 1). The other two projects, *Life After Life in Prison* and *The Bedroom Project*, focus on the life of women who have been released on parole after serving different amounts of time, often because convicted of homicide. These two other series also feature Bennett’s photos accompanied by the women’s statements, written or reported (Fig. 2). All three projects make a clear case against life-long incarceration. Bennett’s decision to focus on life *after* prison sheds light on a regained freedom that is, all the same, heavily limited and monitored through parole—on lives in which the aftermath of incarceration is present and vivid. The shadow of the “inside” lingers on the “outside” for many years, from the persistence of memories to an ongoing struggle with the practicalities of life, like the difficulty of finding and maintaining a job, or securing a place to live. In Bennett’s photos, inside and outside bleed into each other. At the same time, the artists’ approach remains positive in showing the women’s step-by-step attempts at reappropriating their own lives. For instance, Evelyn’s photostory, one of those featured in *Life After Life in Prison*, happily ‘ends’ with an anticipation of the ritual that is by tradition, more than anything else, a metaphor of the social pact: the last in the series is a photo showing Evelyn and her partner Andrea awaiting their wedding ceremony.

The inside/outside divide is not only both porous and unbalanced in terms of who is—or is not—granted the power to traverse it. It is also, potentially, a site of representational violence. If Bennett’s approach remains

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<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.alyseemdur.com/4\\_Prison%20Landscapes/index.php](http://www.alyseemdur.com/4_Prison%20Landscapes/index.php). Last visited October 21, 2019.



optimistic, not for this reason it falls out of the scope of Ruby C. Tapia's powerful argument on the gendered problematics at the core of any attempt to represent incarceration. Not only, Tapia argues, is carceral violence gender-specific; she also maintains that any attempt to represent the violence undergone by women in prison is bound to fail. Yet this failure is far from being useless: to the contrary, it must be carefully considered and its reasons determined. Making ethically charged critical gestures in representing the carceral condition makes it paradoxically necessary, exactly, to "theorize what we cannot know" (Tapia 2008, 684). Full articulation of carceral violence is impossible; at the same time, I would add, such failure to articulate appears as a reconsideration, a stretching, of the very the limits of the 'real': "the narrative forms that might break complacency and apathy with regard to the death making of the prison need to be straight and 'real' as much as they need to be twisted and inarticulable" (Tapia 2008, 687). In Tapia's argument, what appears to be crucial is passing on the very urge to articulate the inarticulable: "these experiences are not meant to be processed, assimilated, left on the page as understood. They are meant to inform and to incite others to seek more information, toward the goal of change" (2008, 685).



i am not unlike u. Yet, no one saw my potential.  
Unlike u I was deemed unworthy, irredeemable  
at the age of 21 and given a 50-yr- life  
sentence.  
i am not unlike u, I too have hopes and dreams.  
Like u, I struggle to find meaning  
to find love.  
i am not unlike u. Like u I am not the person  
I was 22 yrs. ago. We all change when given  
the chance to grow from within and to  
reach our full potential.  
i am not unlike u.

**Fig. 1: Sara Bennett**  
"MONICA, 42, in the college office at Bedford Hills  
Correctional Facility (2018)  
Sentence: 50 years to life  
Incarcerated at the age of 20 in 1996."  
Courtesy of the artist.

Much has been said and written on the necessity to avoid exploiting the disempowered while not downplaying, nor failing to respond to the calls to make them visible. In Tapia's words again:

If pictures give us "windows" or "inside looks," if they provide "rare glimpses" into brutal experiences not our own, enabling us to see ourselves "there," then we recruit them to play central roles in what Saidiya Hartman aptly indicts as "the violence of identification." If we set out to make—or take with us—these pictures, then we do far worse: we orchestrate this



violence. We must consistently interrogate and disrupt this relationship between pictures of “others” and what we imagine and want them to do for “us.” (2010, 1-2)

The point made here resounds with Susie Linfield’s words on the ethical conundrum (first discussed by Susan Sontag) that surrounds the photographic representation of violence. For Linfield, we must certainly not succumb to the illusion of identifying with the victims of violence: “We are not inside those prisons: they were. Our hells almost certainly are not theirs” (2012, 59). Such awareness, though, should not turn into an argument for not looking, or not making images. Explicitly referencing, among else, Azoulay’s work, and apparently echoing Tapia as well, Linfield, on the one hand, observes that “[t]o look at these pictures is necessary, but its only guarantee is failure. The closer one gets, the further a comprehensible world secedes; the more one knows, the less one understands” (2012, 59). On the other hand, if, as Azoulay maintains, it is our responsibility not only to produce photographs but also to approach them through an ethics of seeing, not in order to silence them but, instead, in order to make them speak, “[t]his requires transforming our relationship to photographs from one of passivity and complaint to one of creativity and collaboration” (Linfield 2012, 60).



I've been home 19 years but re-entry is a lifetime process. In some ways prison is with you forever. Still the impact is a lot less than it used to be. For years everything I did, everything I thought about, reflected back to prison. It was about 15 years out - I did 15 years in - that I stopped connecting to that girl I was in prison. maybe you have to do the same amount of time outside, as you did inside, before you feel FREE from it.

**Fig. 2:** Sara Bennett

“MARY, 51, with her niece, Trish, in her own apartment, 19 years after her release. Brooklyn, NY (2017)

Sentence: 15 years to life

Served: 15 years

Released: May 1998.”

Courtesy of the artist.



## 2. “The order we have here”

In his aforementioned 2018 essay, Brook does not explicitly mention the photographs taken by individuals who spend a considerable amount of time on the inside but are not incarcerated, such as guards and correction officers. On the other hand, he seems to make a covert reference to such work as part of a wide array of images being made in prison. Brook’s words evoke a continuum of photographic images, a visual space in which inter-image dialogue between (or among) different photos matters more than the value ascribed to a single image: “I don’t disregard the significant contribution of individual image makers, but I do want to consider their photographs alongside other images that emerge from the prison-industrial complex” (2018, 109). Prison photographs speak to each other, regardless of the level of professional expertise, or individual artistry, of the photographers involved. The *Prison Obscura* exhibit explicitly pays attention to “vernacular, surveillance, [and] evidentiary” photographs that are not part of articulated projects coordinated by professional image makers, nor are they made by prisoners. Photos can be taken by individuals working within the system for a number of reasons: photography is, in that respect, part of the practices that normally take place in a prison environment. The issues raised by exhibits such as *Prison Obscura* regard the intrinsic value of such images, the matter of who is or should be entitled to see them, and what can be done with them. Brook and others involved in such display suggest, in many ways, that those images are of public interest. Azoulay maintains that the inherently public value of photography, and its role in advancing the renewal of the political sphere, was recognized from the earliest period of diffusion of the new technology. Azoulay’s rich reflection complicates, deepens, and socializes the widespread idea of ‘the public’s right to see’ what is of public relevance. In her own terms: “The camera embodied the possibilities available to the modern citizen to take part in the production, investigation, and distribution of what interests the entire public. These practices—in which the general public could in principle participate, either as active or passive agents (photographer or photographed)—constituted a significant stratum in the new exchange relations formed in the political sphere” (Azoulay 2008, 123). Photography is, in this respect, revolutionary, although its revolution is, so far, a “missed” (123) one because, Azoulay maintains, both the market and the nation-state have always had an interest in appropriating photography to pursue their own agendas, as well as in curbing photography’s civic potential. Photography is intrinsically revolutionary because it is always the bearer of a future possibility: in always being the product of an encounter involving different agents—the photo’s subject, the photographer, and the photographer’s spectator, or addressee—it is “an unfinished event that will remain unfinished. To become a citizen of the citizenry of photography means giving renewed sanction to the agreement on photography, to come together (*con-venir*) for photography, remembering that the photographic image is unlike any other image—it is the product of being together through photography” (166).

Within the framework of a hypothetical ‘continuum’ of images in prison photography, ‘vernacular’ images raise a peculiar and, in my view, fecund set of issues. We often believe that photographic images must be classified and systematized according to a preconceived order, if the information gathered through them must be used to advance knowledge. Photographic images can be used as evidence that serves an argument, a research, or an advocacy that accompanies them and grants them meaning; or, simply, they are believed to reflect, and hence reinforce, a (putatively already) meaningful condition. Or, if we ground our gaze in aesthetic criteria of expertise, a separation can be made between vernacular photographs taken on the inside of prisons and the ones by the ‘committed individuals’ coming from the outside: the latter appear to be driven by an intention, and spectators rely on the faculty of the competent photographer to craft effective images, the prerogative of professionals in the field. Moreover, ‘making sense’ of vernacular images taken within prison walls often occurs thanks to the intervention of a figure from the outside—something that is not, of course, deplorable *per se*, but that highlights, once again, the delicate issue of power imbalance in terms of representation and beyond.

In his meditation on photography, originally published in 2005 with the title *The Ongoing Moment*, writer Geoff Dyer addresses the tension between order and disorder, between photographing according to a structured project versus following the random and disorderly nature of reality, that presents interesting subjects to the eye in non-foreseeable ways. Taking his cue from Alan Trachtenberg’s well-known study *Reading American Photographs* (1989), Dyer compares Lewis Hine’s and Walker Evans’ lists of picture categories, and notes that they were supposed to orient the photographers’ choices of their photographic



subjects.<sup>7</sup> Dyer shares Trachtenberg's idea that Evans' catalogue is remindful of Hine's, while at the same time Evans adds a layer of irony and unpredictability that is missing in Hine. Moreover, Dyer observes that

it's more than irony that sets the two endeavors apart. Hine's is an entirely logical and rigorous listing—'Immigrants,' 'Women Workers at Work,' 'Men Workers at Work,' 'Incidents of a Worker's Life' and so on—comprising over a hundred topics and more than eight hundred sub-topics. [...] A model of orderly arrangement and organization, it is entirely lacking in the provisional, highly contingent and ultimately unsustainable ('a lot else') quality of Evans's catalogue of his own intentions. (2007, 2-3)

What I find especially remarkable is that, when you see reality and capture chunks of it through a camera, the more you attempt a systematization, the more the categories you had in mind become unruly and highly subjective, and category lists resemble poetry, "the poetry of comprehensive contingency" (Dyer 2007, 4). Dyer states that his work was inspired by Jorge Luis Borges' famous, and much quoted, "certain Chinese encyclopedia," invented by the Argentinian writer in "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" (1952):

I am not the first researcher to draw inspiration from a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' described by Borges. According to this arcane work "animals are divided into: (a) those that belong to the Emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's-hair brush; (l) et cetera; (m) those that have just broken the flower vase; (n) those that at distance resemble flies." (2007, 1)

Borges' inspiration, for Dyer, is a token of a more general attitude: namely, the impulse behind "well-intended attempts to marshal the infinite variety of photographic possibility into some kind of haphazard order" (2007, 1). On the other hand, Dyer's own attempt immediately stumbles upon the discovery that his own journey through photographs—he is a spectator of them, not a photographer—is a very fluid one, much more based on contingency than on necessity, much more on subjectivity than objectivity:

It is inherent in the idea of a taxonomy that the categories are distinct, that there is no overlap between, say, cats and dogs. [...] One of the features of this photographic taxonomy is that there is a great deal of seepage or traffic between categories. No sooner had I established hats and steps as organizing principles than I saw that some of the pictures that had engaged my attention had both hats and steps in them. [...] Once this started happening the static grid of the taxonomy began to melt into the looser, more fluid form of narratives or stories. And while a taxonomy is expected to be comprehensive and disinterested, I knew right away that my own interests were best served by being—in both senses of the word—partial. (2007, 6-7)

Not all photographic images gathered, whether both taken and catalogued by the same person or by different persons, Dyer seems to suggest, necessarily comply with an archival imperative to categorize according to a rigid, unchanging structure. Making them visible to a broad audience can follow different channels, as it happens in the case of Bruce Jackson's book *Pictures from a Drawer: Prison and the Art of Portraiture* (2009); or it can contribute to deconstruct the archive from within, as in Nigel Poor's *San Quentin Project*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In 1934, Dyer narrates, Evans compiled a list of categories as a note to himself, to better determine and understand what he wanted to photograph and what kind of work he was going to do. Alan Trachtenberg, Dyer reports, noted that Evans' category list is both remindful of and different from Hine's category list. The latter is included in Hine's *Catalogue of Social and Industrial Photographs* (1912).

<sup>8</sup> For a recent perspective that questions the idea of archives as closed and orderly, and that attempts to liberate their *fluidity* potential in the interest of livable and sustainable futures, see Manalansan IV 2014.



Photographer and California State University faculty member Nigel Poor has been working on projects centered on California's San Quentin State Prison since 2011. That year, she began co-teaching classes in the history of photography there, as part of a university prison project. During a day at San Quentin, Poor stumbled upon "a massive and barely organized trove of negatives" (Arbuckle) documenting a wide range of aspects of life in the penitentiary, mainly from the year 1960 to 1987. Rebecca Bengal narrates Poor's discovery and her reaction to it:

One day, in 2013, Poor noticed a few boxes of photographic paper in the office of Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer [...]. "That's nothing," Robinson told her. He opened a file storage box; inside where hundreds of 4-by-5-inch negatives, each in a little manila envelope with a date and a cryptic description: "Assaulted in print shop," "Football game," "New Exercise Fence." Poor learned from him that more storage boxes were filling a room. "I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that my heart just stopped," Poor told me. She was granted permission to take home a box to scan. The first batch turned up violent images, including one of an assault victim, but also some of men in a classroom and a man carving a giant ice sculpture.

The thousands of images represent the work of correction officers, who ostensibly made them in a pure documentary sense: to keep a record of incidents and events, weddings and stabbings, Christmas trees, lunchtime, the prison band, the eerie masked dummies some prisoners concocted when they attempted to escape. "It's everything about life in prison that you see when you go in there," Poor said, "the most depressing and funny and bizarre." Poor is assembling an archive of the photographs [...] under twelve categories that reflect the aching divide between inside and outside. (Bengal 2018, 84)



**Fig. 3:** Nigel Poor, "Venerable Suicide, 4.4.65." By anonymous correction officer. *San Quentin Project, Part #3*. Courtesy of the artist. Nigel Poor and the San Quentin State Prison Museum, with thanks to Warden Ron David and Lieutenant Sam Robinson.



**Fig. 4:** Nigel Poor, “Wedding, nd.” By anonymous correction officer. *San Quentin Project, Part #3*. Courtesy of the artist. Nigel Poor and the San Quentin State Prison Museum, with thanks to Warden Ron David and Lieutenant Sam Robinson.

It is this “aching divide” between inside and outside, and the very photographic activity which creates the possibility to bridge such divide while retaining full awareness of its depth, that most interest me in this essay. If we regard prison photography as an attempt at communicating from one side of the wall to the other, and vice versa, we can understand, and perhaps valorize, *both* the inevitable gaps and (paraphrasing Tapia) failures in this dialogue *and* its radical potential not so much for creating, but instead for recognizing a common human, aesthetic, and political ground that already exists. Poor’s San Quentin project is of this kind in its attempt to create a bridge by rethinking the very impulse to categorize, inventing an interesting use for an archival logic. In Part #3 of the project, Poor divided the previously disorganized negatives into twelve categories, leaving the original cryptic descriptions/titles of the negatives unchanged:

1. Escape & Confinement
2. Correctional Officers, Inmates & Volunteers
3. Holidays & Ceremonies
4. Education, Food & Health
5. Murders & Suicides
6. Violence & Investigations
7. Work & Leisure
8. Injury & repair
9. Family & visits
10. Blood & Evidence
11. Animals & people
12. The Ineffable

The categories of Poor’s archive are not meant to discipline the material for purposes of detached, objective study, in line with the tradition of the archive discussed by Sekula. To the contrary, Poor manages to retain a



subjective, emotional dimension to the archive, making room for the “Ineffable”—the twelfth category but also, I would suggest, a more general substratum connecting human experience across the divide of the prison walls, a partially common ground based on an acceptance of the inevitable partiality of gathering information and understanding—of “not knowing:”

Some of these categories are specific to prison life but others reflect experiences all of us have. Every life, whether free or incarcerated must consider family, work, health etc. So it is through these categories that we can connect and recognize each other. [...] [F]inally there is the ineffable, perhaps the most interesting, the category, which does not attempt to answer any questions, the category where we must be satisfied to not know. Again every life whether free or incarcerated lives with the ineffable—it may be in this state of not knowing that we are ultimately given the opportunity to engage in the most difficult of life’s questions.<sup>9</sup>

Elaborating on Poor, as well as Tapia, it may be suggested that a common ground exists, and that finding it specifically entails recognizing the incommensurability between the prison experience and our possibility, or capacity, to know it, understand it, and/or represent it from the outside.

While most vernacular photos taken in prison seem to be taken starting from a documentary intent, ordering and cataloguing them, turning them into an archive, does not occur consistently, nor, perhaps, must necessarily occur. Similar to what happened for Poor, Bruce Jackson’s project, which gave shape to his 2009 book *Pictures from a Drawer*, grew out of an unexpected discovery. Since 1971, Jackson had repeatedly visited Cummins Prison Farm in Arkansas—at the time, an institution with a reputation for being among the worst in the country. Granted free access to the prison by Terrill Don Hutto, who had recently become commissioner of the Arkansas prison system,<sup>10</sup> Jackson had been doing research for a book, when he realized that he was actually spending most of his time there taking photographs, “documenting Cummins visually” (Jackson 2009, 17).<sup>11</sup>

One day in November 1975, during what would turn out to be his last visit to Cummins, Jackson

was walking along the corridor leading from the outside world to the interior of the main building when one of the convicts who took the identification photographs for the prisoners’ jackets beckoned me into the room where he worked.

I went in. He looked both ways in the corridor then shut the door.

“This will interest you,” he said. He opened a drawer. In it were hundreds of small loose prisoner identification photographs. “Help yourself,” he said.

“Don’t they belong to somebody?” I said.

“Just the state. Fuck ’em. Help yourself.”

I did as he suggested. I stuffed photographs into my jacket pocket and stopped only when a guard came into the room to look for something, then sat down at the desk and began smoking. He gave no sign of leaving, and I had no particular reason for being there, so after a while I left. (Jackson 2009, 19)

Jackson quotes Foucault quoting Borges’ “certain Chinese encyclopedia” to propose an idea of ‘order’ of the photographs based on a network of dialogical interpellations:

for most things, order exists as we make or imagine it. That is the point of Jorge Luis Borges’ fabulous catalog of animals that Foucault quotes so delightfully at the beginning of *The Order of Things* [...].

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<sup>9</sup> [nigelpoor.com/project/san-quentin-part-3/](http://nigelpoor.com/project/san-quentin-part-3/). Last visited July 26, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> With reference to his long-term work in various prisons since the 1960s, Jackson has, later on, repeatedly observed that he would never be granted such free access today.

<sup>11</sup> Several among these photos would later be published in Jackson’s books *Killing Time: Life in the Arkansas Penitentiary* (1977) and *Inside the Wire: Photographs from Texas and Arkansas Prisons* (2013).



The order we have here is the order we have here: these images, from that drawer, selected and edited by me, seen in this book by you. That is no more and no less than any other order. (2009, 51-52)

What I'm hoping to do here is to liberate these faces from the dossiers, not to reimprison them in them. They were already separated from the dossiers by the various people who put the photographs in that Cummins drawer. [...] Save for one fact that is a given—everyone pictured here had been sent to prison—and what we find in or infer from the images themselves, we know nothing about these persons, and perhaps never shall. Someone might get into the Arkansas archive and find those dossiers and link this face with that report—but that would be a project very different from our enterprise here. It would be about what the dossiers said rather than what the eyes see. This is a book based on evidence from the past, and the evidence consists entirely of the images themselves. The meaning of that evidence is grounded in *what each of us brings to our encounters with it*. (Jackson 2009, 56-57, my emphasis)



**Fig. 5:** From Bruce Jackson, *Pictures from a Drawer*. #436 and #10868. Courtesy of the artist.

An encounter with these photographic troves is an occasion to “liberate these faces from the dossier,” thus claiming for photography—intended, *à la* Azoulay, as an always potentially open network of social and political relations—a very different role from the disciplinary one historically associated with, for instance, the ‘mugshot’ practice. In Fleetwood’s terms, “[v]ernacular prison portraits provide an important counterpoint to a long history of visually indexing criminal profiles” (2015, 493). While an orderly disciplinary reason, and the administrative needs of the carceral institution, could ‘tame’ the photographs and regard them as part of the prison’s dossiers, Jackson’s editing and highly subjective ordering of them is grounded in an effort at communication, at establishing an open, liberating dialogue among at least four agents: the anonymous photographers, the photographed prisoners, himself as the photo’s (belated) editor, and the photos’



spectators. Azoulay's triangulation—the one connecting the photo's subject, the photographer, and the photographer's addressee—here becomes a 'quadrangulation.'

The vernacular, intrinsically plural, 'disorderly' nature of the 'archives' under consideration highlights the problematic issue of making sense of photographic images, especially those that have accumulated over time. Photographic 'archives' such as the ones mentioned here are open for renewed investments of meaning, thus challenging any final ascription of meaning to the images they store. As observed by Audrey Goodman with regard to the Alma Lavenson Archive, a digital collection managed by the University of California's Bancroft Library, it can happen that an archive "remains full of critical potential [...] because we can't know what kind of narrative Lavenson would have constructed, each image remains available for new textual frames" (2018, 60).

By random chance—discovering a neglected 'archive,' like in the case of Poor and Jackson—or by intention—laboriously sharing photographs to create an emotional connection between the inside and outside of the prison space, as narrated and discussed by Fleetwood—photographic images are revealed to be, or become, actors in a dialogic interpellation, or knots in a network of emotional and social relations. The complex, articulated nature of such conversations makes visible what Azoulay has called the "civil contract" of photography: the existence of each photograph is grounded in a fundamentally open network of relations involving the photographer(s), the photographed subject(s), and the spectator(s). Since photography is the product of an encounter, no one can claim the ultimate meaning of, nor own, a photograph.

### **3. Networks of dialogue, co-authorship, and prison photography as unfinished event**

'Committed individuals' and prison employees share the condition of working within prison walls while enjoying freedom of movement outside those walls, something that incarcerated people, needless to say, cannot have. It is true that photography is hardly ever 'free' in a prison environment: even those who are allowed to handle a camera in a prison space are subjected to heavy regulations and restrictions for security reasons—first and foremost, in terms of what they can or cannot photograph. Broadly speaking, though, with the exception of the work done by incarcerated photographers in the prison visit area, or in the case of the scanty photographic projects that directly involve the prisoners, the sheer possibility of using a camera is often predicated on the freedom to traverse the boundary between inside and outside of the prison space. In other words, we should focus on the permeability of the inside/outside divide while keeping in mind that perhaps no divide is more significant, and uncompromising, in terms of who can traverse it and who cannot. The divide is also one between those who have the possibility to craft a photographic image and those who are denied such possibility because, in most cases, they are not allowed access to the most basic tools that produce such images.

The remainder of this essay will discuss photographic initiatives that attempt to circumvent the restrictions/ban for incarcerated people to exercise the right of producing images, as well as two cases in which incarcerated, or previously incarcerated, photographers were actually able to craft images. Some recent projects attempt to substitute, from the point of view of the incarcerated, fantasy cameras for real ones. These are, I would suggest, attempts at materializing the mental images of the prisoners—at realizing, belatedly, photos that were never taken. They can make a difference in social and political terms, and their realization is, at its best, a creative collaboration with an open outcome, a channel of communication which is by definition dialogical in bringing together figures with various degrees of expertise, as well as various media and codes.

A channel of communication and a creative collaboration are both the premises and the outcomes of Kristen S. Wilkins' *Supplication*. At one level, this series shows intense photographic portraits of women prisoners in Montana. Wilkins' work speaks to the exponential increase in the number of women in US prisons in the era of mass incarceration:

The effect of mass incarceration on women has been particularly acute. Between 1977 and 2004, the number of women imprisoned has leapt 757%, from 11,000 to 111,000. [...] Today the figure has been estimated at close to 200,000. [...]

"Mugshots," writes Wilkins, "are meant to document a transgressor, but act to criminalize individuals and strip them of identity and sympathy." Pushing back against the visual



exploitation, Wilkins aims both to restore some level of empowerment for her subjects and to balance the equation between the convicted person and the camera lens. Wilkins and the women speak at length about historical portraiture, self-representation, power, and control. Beyond the informed choices that Wilkins offers her subjects, she wants to build on the individual creativity of each woman. (Brook 2014)

In the artists' own words: "I used a large-format camera and Instant film (printed as digital enlargements). This approach isolated the prisoners in a very shallow depth-of-field, revealing a tenderness not found in the mugshots we are familiar with. This isolation and detail adds an aura of mystery, poetry, and sometimes tragedy to the countenances of the inmates."<sup>12</sup> The series, however, does not only consist of the portraits. Following specific requests from the women, Wilkins has realized photos for them. Some requested images that have a relation with how their life was prior to incarceration—where they lived, or worked (*Supplication #1, #6, and #18*); others requested outdoor sceneries, or objects that are present in their imagination—like a caboose (*Supplication #5*), a cross (*#12*), or a fluffy kitten (*#15*); or images that may reflect their current condition of imprisonment, or give them a sense of hope (*Supplication #19*).

The two photographs—portrait and requested image—are eventually displayed side-by-side, and accompanied by the words of the prisoner's request on a tag.<sup>13</sup> The incarcerated women are simultaneously the subjects of photographic portraits that attempt to subvert the long-ingrained complicity between photography and criminalization, and the co-creators of the photos they have requested and received in print.

A highly engaged photographer, Mark Strandquist has participated in prison activism with the project *Some Other Places We've Missed*. In a fashion similar to Wilkins, Strandquist reaches out to the prisoners. While they participate in a prison photography workshop *without cameras*, prisoners are asked: "if you had a window in your cell, what place from your past would it look out to?" Strandquist takes the photos and, when they are printed, he hands them out to the workshop participants. The resulting diptych, the final image, does not, in this case, include a portrait of the prisoner presenting the request but, instead, it displays the handwritten request, which itself becomes an image to be visually apprehended—and, in the case of "1219 Oakwood Avenue" (Fig. 6), to be almost 'haptically' apprehended: one can almost feel the creased folds of the paper marked by the handwriting, and imagine the photographer receiving the request and holding it in his hand, a mental window opening another window. Last but not least, for Strandquist, the exhibited 'final image' is not the final step, nor the ultimate aim of the project: "the images and corresponding writing become the starting point for additional action that engages communities in collaboration, dialogue, and exchange,"<sup>14</sup> for instance, through Skype forums, radio broadcasts, film screenings, and more.

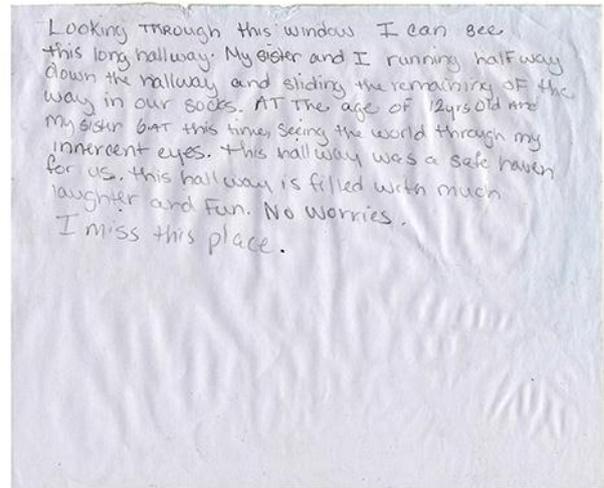
Moreover, the images displayed outside the prison, in exhibition galleries, are printed in sizes consistent with the restrictions imposed on the images that can gain access to prisons. This exhibitory choice minimizes the gap in fruition between prisoners and nonprisoners, while reminding nonprisoners that not only image production, but also image circulation and possession, in prison, are subjected to strict regulations, including sheer size limitations. Strandquist's project fosters dialogue and communication, building networks connecting the inside of the prison with the outside, while refraining from oversimplifying the divide separating the two spaces.

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<sup>12</sup> See [www.kristenwilkins.com/supplication](http://www.kristenwilkins.com/supplication). Last visited July 29, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the reciprocal scale of the triangulation portrait/requested image/words varies in different display contexts. For instance, in some cases the portraits are displayed as larger than the requested image, while in other cases they are smaller; the positions of the words with respect to the images also vary.

<sup>14</sup> See [www.nomovement.com/Some-Other-Places-We-ve-Missed](http://www.nomovement.com/Some-Other-Places-We-ve-Missed). Last visited July 29, 2019.



**Fig. 6:** Mark Strandquist, “1219 Oakwood Ave, A Picture of the Hallway Standing from the Entrance of the Front Door in Direction of the Back Door. Two Years.” *Some Other Places We’ve Missed*.

In the case of some initiatives, the dialogue becomes a full network and involves a large number of participants, including both professional and nonprofessional photographers, like in *Photo Requests from Solitary*. This collective project began in 2008 as one of the initiatives of Tamms Year Ten, a group of Illinois-based activists protesting the establishment and protracted existence of Tamms Correctional Center, an Illinois maximum security prison specializing in long-term solitary confinement. Following the closure of Tamms Correctional Center in 2013, *PRFS* is nowadays managed by an expanded collaboration of various partners. The project still attempts to connect people in solitary confinement—especially in maximum security prisons specifically designed for this incredibly harsh, theoretically exceptional yet all-too-common, type of detention—with people on the outside. Prisoners are invited to write, on a form, a detailed request for a photographic image. The requests are made public through the *PRFS* website, so that voluntary photographers may fulfill them (Fig. 7):



**WE WILL MAKE A PHOTOGRAPH FOR YOU** Date: 1-7-18

Would you like to request one? Yes

If so, fill out this form and describe a photograph you personally would like to receive. A volunteer will make an image based on your description. You may request a photograph of anything (that is not prohibited by prison rules, of course).

In the space below, please describe what you would like to see in your photograph. (You can describe a person, place, object, scene, or idea.)

an image of a <sup>african american</sup> woman behind bars, standing sideways, head back, arms flaired in back of her - with a ~~at~~ mist of her past being shedded off of her. maybe the girl could be in color and the bars, walls could fade into color or bars, walls, + mist be in grayish hues. <sup>example:</sup> my past: Prostitution, drugs, rape, molestation, and all the emotions that come with them.

\* a really ugly mist - yet she's beautiful once she sheds it in an ugly place. Prison

Do you have any specific instructions for the photographer?

Ugly Grayish hues for Everything except the woman who is colorful and beautiful even in Prison. Some mist must remain on the woman to show she's shedding it / her past.

Your photograph will be sent to you. It may be also displayed in exhibits or on our website, along with this request form.

What name would you like us to use for you? Lori Lori

What prison (optional) and what state are you in? Cambridge Springs Pa

PLEASE SEND YOUR RESPONSES TO: Photo Requests from Solitary  
123 7th Avenue, #166, Brooklyn, NY 11215

Fig. 7: "Imprisoned African American woman, surviving her past—For Lori (PA) – REQUEST #152."

In my view, the most striking features of the PRFS initiative are two. First is its nature of completely public, democratic outreach: anyone can take part in it on a voluntary basis, and there is no distinction, for its aim, between professional and vernacular photography, or among various image genres. Second, I am compelled and moved by several of the requests, evocative and poetic in their use of words, conveying not only a pragmatic description, but also personal feelings, emotions, and impressions. The ethically problematic nature of prison photography as both communication effort and artistic practice, and the complex network behind any attempt at dialogue, emerge in a short essay published on the website *Prison photography*, in which Brook analyzes three pairs from PRFS—written request/photographic answer—that demonstrate, in his opinion, different attitudes on the part of the photographers. The premise of Brook's discussion is that, in 2015, a number of photographers who regularly contributed to the magazine *Vice* were encouraged to answer PRFS requests; the photos produced would also be published in a *Vice* issue on prison. For Brooks, two professional photographers, in particular, "failed spectacularly" (2017) in their responses. Fryd Frydendahl answered a request for "a face-shot of a woman with a smile that shines as bright as the sun" by



providing an image of a woman with her mouth slightly open and barely, if at all, smiling, superimposed with a yellow hazy filter that should, apparently, imitate sunlight. Jason Altaan did follow the detailed instructions that requested an image of a woman in black leather pants with pink stitches posing next to a blue Benz, but he did so by re-proposing his own signature style, thus privileging his personal agenda over the fulfillment of the incarcerated person's desire. For Brook, Frydendahl and Altaan failed in their answers because they lost sight of both the aims of *PRFS* and the photo's key audience:

Assessing the level of understanding among audience is a difficult task but we can look closely at the images and ask if they appear to serve the prisoner or if they appear to serve the photographer. [...] "What I think has happened here is that the artists have not always connected to the fact that the prisoner is the primary audience," says [Gemma-Rose] Turnbull. [...] What we have to understand is that *PRFS* is a communication project, not a photography project. [...] *PRFS* must maintain prisoners as its primary audience. Those outside prison walls are the secondary audience. Don't forget that. [...] *PRFS* must remain rooted to its co-authorship intent. (Brook 2017)

Brook seems then to claim that photography—here, it seems to me, we must intend 'photography' as an artistic enterprise mainly aimed at displaying the individual practitioners' creativity and aesthetic competence—is not central to the project, and that the project actually entails various communication codes that should be granted the same space and level of dignity. While I am not completely persuaded that re-centering the communication effort (and the prisoners as its main addressees) must necessarily entail disregarding the aesthetic aspects of photography, I do agree that *PRFS* problematically highlights the matter of the photo's intended audience. In my view, in the case of prison photography projects that involve incarcerated people, Azoulay's triangulation—the one connecting the photo's subject, the photographer, and the photographer's addressee—becomes more complex and articulated, even more so than the 'quadrangulation' evoked when discussing Jackson's work in the previous paragraph. In *PRFS*, the incarcerated are both authors of a mental image expressed in words, hence co-authors of the photograph, *and* the primary audience of the material image produced and fixed on a photographic support—digital and, later, paper. I would also suggest that the incarcerated are, to an extent, the photo's subjects, in the sense that the requests, and corresponding images, symbolically reproduce what they see as their own life conditions, thus providing for them a space of imaginative identification—a possibility to see themselves from the outside, thus giving their own perceptions (and hopes) substance and ballast. In the end, the issue appears to be as much that of a split audience as that of making justice to the co-authorship of the images, to the unique interaction of images and words in this project, and to the autobiographical, sometimes lyrical component inherent in the incarcerated people's authorship, like in REQUEST #152:

An image of an african american [sic] woman behind bars, standing sideways, head back, arms flaired in back of her—with a mist of her past being shedded off of her. Maybe the girl could be in color, or bars, walls could fade into color or bars, walls, & mist be in grayish hues. Example—my past: prostitution, drugs, rape, molestation and all the emotions that come with them. \*a really ugly mist—yet she's beautiful once she sheds it in an ugly place—prison.<sup>15</sup>

Reiterating Azoulay's point, since photography is the product of an encounter among the photographer, the subject, and the spectator, no one can claim, or own, the ultimate meaning or usage of a photograph. The photographic initiatives so far discussed in this paragraph create a dialogic visual sphere wherein the authors/spectators outside establish a dialogue with the prisoners, who are also the intended—albeit not exclusive—visual addressees/recipients of the images they have co-authored. The tension between different audiences—the audience on the inside, the audience on the outside—is a reminder of the delicate ethical issues involved in the initiative, as well as of the fluid nature of a dialogical visual sphere that attempts to connect the two sides of prison walls. This tension also seem to point towards different functions of

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<sup>15</sup> [photorequestsfromsolitary.org/152-2/](http://photorequestsfromsolitary.org/152-2/). Last visited July 28, 2019. To the date of the last visit to the website, this specific request remains unfulfilled.



photography with respect to the prison system, while reminding one that these different functions can overlap: on the one hand, the expository, public function; on the other hand, the more intimate and private circulation of the images among the incarcerated people and their loved ones (Fleetwood), or between the incarcerated and people from the outside, including ‘committed individuals,’ who may eventually establish a meaningful long-term exchange with the prisoners (Bennett).

The recent *Answers Without Words* initiative, created by the Free Mind Collective, is, to an extent, similar to *PRFS* in being structured as queries/responses. One difference is that prisoners participating in *Answers Without Words* have, within limits, a broader range of action, and can even handle cameras. The Free Mind Collective is a group of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists. Facilitated by Anke Schüttler, a professional photographer and MFA candidate at Portland State University, the initiative involves men incarcerated at Columbia River Correctional Institution (CRCI), a minimum security prison in Portland, Oregon. The initiative is organized like an inside/outside exchange of questions and answers. The incarcerated men send out questions, often about life in other countries, and the questions are dispatched to voluntary photographers who answer not in words but, instead, with a photograph. In return, contributors from the outside can ask questions to the prisoners, who then take photos in prison and send them outside as answers. Thanks to this project, and the PSU connections, incarcerated photographers—Ben Hall, Joshua Wright, and Mario Perez among others—have become artists-in-residence at CRCI.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, in at least one case, an incarcerated artist managed to produce images in prison despite prohibition, and managed to have those images reach the outside of the prison. Jesse Krimes was imprisoned from 2009 to 2013 for a non-violent drug-related offense, and spent his first year in prison in solitary confinement. During this time, he collected photographic images of various “offenders” published by the New York Times and, using a hand-printing technique, he transferred them on soap bars. Over his year in solitary confinement, he concealed the printed soap rectangles in playing card containers, cutting rectangular holes in decks of cards and fitting the soap rectangles therein. He managed to smuggle and send home piece after piece through the prison mailing system.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In prison, images—including photographic images—can provide a visual escape from confinement. Discussing Bruce Jackson’s pioneering photographic work in US prisons, Brian Wallis remarks: “In an environment in which all outdoor views are occluded by bars, crafted and reproduced images take on a special importance. Jackson was always attentive to the ways prisoners surrounded themselves with visual icons, not only family photographs, but also fanciful tattoos, miniature houses, and scribbled graffiti. His photographs frequently document these images and objects that prisoners made and collected and displayed” (Wallis 2018, 41). While many photo projects that involve the prison system and its population are aimed at showing people outside what life inside a prison is like, some among them are simultaneously aimed at collecting pieces of life outside to show to those inside, who have very limited access to the world, in both visual terms and in broader informational terms. So the overall structure that we would like to imagine is one of exchange, fostering visibility and the flow of information in both directions, taking the encounter—and the “unfinished event” of prison photography—in unexpected directions.

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<sup>16</sup> For more information about this project, see <http://www.asocialpractice.com/tag/free-mind-collective/> and <https://prisonphotography.org/2018/02/23/answer-u-s-prisoners-questions-with-photos/>. Last visited October 22, 2019.

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