

Potential Unlocked – Next steps / Conclusion – Carpenter van Barthold 09/06/21

We think of creativity as showing the real person in a way that – for instance – academic achievement does not. For this reason, art made by prisoners is often judged by the artist's crimes rather than its artistic merits (**Parkes, Bilby 2010**). However, this confusion of the individual with their actions presents an opportunity. Because art is seen as belonging to the emotional reality of a person, making art is understood as opening pathways to their development and growth – in the way that we have heard. In other words, in the prison context – art becomes an agent for changing behaviour (**Parkes, Bilby 2010, p.107**) and contributing to desistance (**Cheliotis, Jordanoska 2016**). Therefore, in criminological literature, art programmes are assessed by their outcomes, such as improved desistance, rather than for the nature of the exchange or the quality of the art that is produced. This is an instrumental view of art. These outcomes are very hard to measure; the very difficulty of the measurement might account for the volume of literature on the subject.

We see the opportunity for fresh insight by looking not at outcomes but at the nature of creative exchange through arts in prison, the process. To give you a sense of why this may be useful, we would like to conclude with a brief anatomy of the carceral/creativity ensemble, looking at it more through the lens of artistic critique.

The first observation is that art is not always a good thing. Art and punishment have a long association. The modern prison was predated by public displays of punishment (**Foucault 1991, pp.3–7**). This idea of a theatre of punishment is evident in Jeremy Bentham's notion of the prison as 'so many small theatres' (**Hart 1986, p.14**). A more modern example can be found in the factual psychodrama *Scared Straight* in which inmates inform and intimidate wayward adolescents (**Hart 1986**). In other words, the first article in our anatomy is **art as punishment**, art as social control. In some cases, this control is overt; in others, it is covert, with arts projects serving to cover the painful nature of imprisonment behind a claim of benevolence, this manifestation being described as 'decorative justice' by one researcher (**Cheliotis 2014**).

The second item in our anatomy is **art as exploitation**. This is probably the largest category, but we can cover some of its aspects under the roof of one building. During the city's Year of Culture in 2016, Reading Gaol housed an exhibition organised by Artangel. This included a recital of *De Profundis* written by the prison's most famous inmate, Oscar Wilde, read out by the musician Patti Smith. She was sat on a concrete plinth the size of Wilde's cell which had the original cell doors built into it (**Gormley, Monzani 2016; Buck 2016**). These doors also featured in Tate Britain's *Queer British Art* show in 2017 (**Duffy 2017**). More recently, the decommissioned prison was a film set for *Killing Eve*, and has been used as a canvas for one of Banksy's most recent interventions (**Da Silva, Jose 2021**). Reading Council is currently proposing to turn the gaol – which shut in 2013 – into an arts centre (**Mortali 2021**). In the case of art as exploitation, prison is used either as a backdrop or artefact for the arts. This category includes some of the uses of prisoners' art. Here we can ask the provocative question: 'Does the incarceration of the artist lend fascination or attraction to their artwork?' If the answer to this question is 'yes', then we may be looking at an instance of dark tourism.

The third item on our anatomy is **art as campaign**, in which the arts lend campaigning and charitable support for incarcerated people. In some cases, such as the project set up by the American painter Mark Bradford to coincide with his exhibition in the US Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, in which a shop was set up for prisoners to make and sell products, these

initiatives are aligned with an artist's personal and creative interests (**Harris 2017**). More usually however, they are conducted through established charities. All of these categories are quite broad, and here we can see a marked distinction between Koestler Arts in the United Kingdom which encourages 'people in the criminal justice system to change their lives by participating in the arts' (**Koestler Arts n.d.**), and – by implication – to change public perception of prisoners by exhibiting prisoner's artworks, and the Art for Justice Fund in the United States, which describes itself as 'a "**decarceration**" fund', 'disrupting mass incarceration by funding artists and advocates working together to reform [the American] criminal justice system' (**Art for Justice fund n.d.**). Despite the more radical position of the US organisation, both organisations take art as a site for change, because art engenders hope, empathy, and meaning. This change is twofold: it acts on the audience for art, on public perceptions of prisoners, and it also acts on the participants.

Most of the time, the activities of prison arts charities are either about giving prisoners access to arts education and artistic experiences, or are about showing prisoners' art to a wider public. But there is a final form of relationship between the arts and incarceration that sits somewhere in-between these two points. This is **art as co-creation** and co-working, in which the empathic potential of art is taken as a site of mutual vulnerability and learning. In this final example, artists and prisoners work together on more equal terms, and it follows, therefore, outside of structures of control. One example of this is the iterative *Solitary Gardens* project led by Jackie Sumell in which the garden plots corresponding to the dimensions of a prison cell are planted according to the directions of inmates held in solitary confinement. The project was designed through a longstanding collaboration between the lead artist and Herman Wallace, a prisoner who spent four decades in solitary confinement in Louisiana (**Solitary Gardens n.d.; Institute of the Arts and Sciences n.d.**). We argue that the Soft Touch project is co-productive in the same way.

We want to conclude that these four categories are not discrete containers but rather overlapping ideas that can easily bleed into one another. However, if you consider the prepositions that might belong with each category, we think that you will get a flavour of our ongoing curiosity and the direction of our future research:

Art as punishment: art done **to** prisoners

Art as exploitation: art done **from** prisoners

Art as campaign: art done **for** prisoners

Art as co-creation: art done **with** prisoners

It is what happens in the moment of **doing with** that interests us, and that we intuit will lead to fresh insights into why carceral arts matter.

Thank you for listening.

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