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FOREWORD

SANDOW BIRK

California Correctional Center—Susanville, CA (After Thomas Moran). 2001, oil and acrylic on canvas. 33½ x 29½ in.
Collection of Winsor Soule and Marcia Tanner. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

In February 2008, the Pew Center on the States issued an astonishing report on the contemporary levels of incarceration within the United States. As well as indicating that one in one hundred U.S. adults were currently in prison, the report, titled “One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008,” reveals how the impact on specific communities is even more acute. Clearly this is a hard time to be a young person of color in America. One in nine African American males aged 20 to 34 are incarcerated, and large percentages of young Latino and Native American men are also jailed. Pew’s March 2009 follow-up showed that one in thirty-one Americans—that’s more than five million people—were on probation or parole, and the United States now leads the world in its population behind bars: 2,245,189, or 1 percent of all adults, plus 3.2 percent living under criminal justice supervision. What could any art exhibition bring to the recognition of this stark and grim reality?

This book represents several years of dialog on incarceration and culture in America, a process that resulted in two related exhibitions and a host of public programs in San Francisco, California, in 2007 and 2008. Utilizing our strengths as arts organizations and as artists, we wanted to make tangible some of the profound ways that imprisonment manifests and reverberates in our society. Through a collaboration between San Francisco State University and Intersection for the Arts, we were presented with an opportunity to address and challenge traditional barriers—between “inside” and “outside,” between “professional” and “amateur,” between institutions and people—and to bring marginalized and misunderstood stories to light. Indeed, this was an opportunity to imagine and empower realities different from those we have been encouraged to accept.

Criminal: Art and Criminal Justice in America, the exhibition at San Francisco State University, featured the work of noted artists who have explored such issues in their work. Bringing together powerful and sophisticated painting, photography, sculpture, and installation from across the country, this exhibition was initially proposed by University Gallery Manager Sharon E. Bliss, who served as its curator with University Gallery Director Mark Dean Johnson. A host of campus affiliates, including the departments of Criminal

Justice Studies and Sociology, the Poetry Center, Associated Students, and Project Rebound, played critical roles, especially in an all-day public symposium. *The Prison Project exhibition* at Intersection for the Arts concurrently featured California artists and, significantly, included work created by artists working both inside and outside regional state and federal prisons. Principally organized by Kevin B. Chen, Program Director for Visual Arts, Literary, and Jazz at Intersection, and in collaboration with Education and Community Engagement Program Director Rebeka Rodriguez and advisors, this exhibition was part of an ambitious and far-ranging two-year, organization-wide initiative. “The Prison Project” was initiated in the summer of 2006, in response to a serendipitous array of artists, activists, and organizations who had approached Intersection with the desire to create collaborations that would address the elaborate criminal justice system in our state. Each collaborator—whether working in visual arts or poetry, new jazz composition, dance, or theater—set out, from very distinctive artistic and conceptual starting points, to consider the reality of the prison industrial complex and its effects on the human beings, families, and communities both inside and outside of prison.

While this publication includes images and texts drawn from both exhibitions, it is more than a straightforward catalog. Juxtaposing work by professional artists with artists who are working inside a prison, the book challenges us to rethink notions of community and culture. It presents poems, selected by San Francisco State University Poetry Center Director Steve Dickison, by poets Amiri Baraka, Reginald Dwayne Betts, Chuck Culhane, George-Thérèse Dickenson, Sesshu Foster, Robert Hayden, Jack Hirschman, Ericka Huggins, Keith Antar Mason, Luis J. Rodriguez, and Janine Pommy Vega, that further amplify the issues. It also features an extended interview with photographer Deborah Luster, in conversation with San Francisco State University Criminal Justice Studies faculty Lizbet Simmons, and a beautifully provocative suite of drawings created expressly for reproduction here by artist and activist Rigo 23. In addition, composer Howard Wiley’s Angola Project jazz suite is discussed, and placed alongside excerpts from the related theatrical production, *A Place to Stand*, a new work by Campo Santo that adapts writings by Jimmy Santiago Baca and Ntozake Shange and forges them into an original and moving theater experience. Rounding out

this book are two revelatory essays by renowned California scholars Angela Y. Davis and Mike Davis, who each challenge the embeddedness of the prison industry in American society.

Ultimately, this book is about the ways that these artists, poets, and scholars bring into focus contradictions between criminal justice and social justice. For those who care to regard this horrifying and so often invisible aspect of our contemporary American experience, such uses of art and activism, and the cultivation of shared cultural space that challenges the separation of art and daily life, can encourage a sense of participation, of communion. This project exemplifies ways that artists, arts organizations, and educational institutions might grapple with the most difficult realities, generating ideas and mapping pathways to a better future. Work of this order, conceived on the premise that the best solutions to the challenges we face in our communities and country will originate from inspiration, imagination, creativity, and collaboration, can bring vital issues into public dialog, and possibly even engage society to rethink its own failed paradigms.

Deborah Cullinan, Executive Director
Intersection for the Arts

Kurt Daw, Dean, College of Creative Arts
San Francisco State University

PRISON / CULTURE

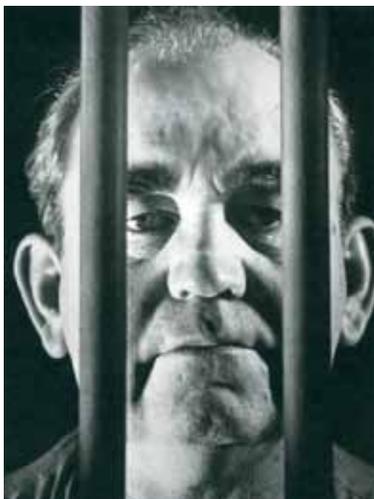
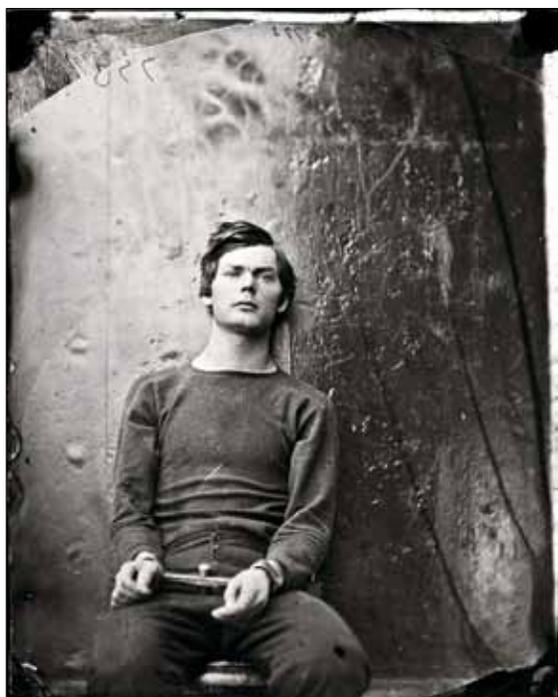
An Illustrated Introduction

Mark Dean Johnson

ETHICS AND MORALITY—and crime and its punishment—are difficult issues of deep philosophical and sociological dimension. Art about these issues is often troubling, raising a mirror that reflects painful histories at the same time that it questions systems of justice and their mechanisms of retribution.

The long history of art about criminal justice provides many precedents for any contemporary survey of these concerns. During the Romantic Period, some artists embraced the progressive ideals of the Age of Enlightenment, including the writings of John Locke (1632–1704) and especially Voltaire (1694–1778). Voltaire, who had been exiled from his native France and was himself repeatedly imprisoned for his audaciously liberal political and clerical satire, was also noted for his activism for social justice (which included extensive pamphlet writing about prisoners), as well as for his strong positions against torture and in favor of better treatment of the mentally ill. Théodore Géricault's (1791–1824) portraits of institutionalized mentally ill subjects are really compassionate explorations of human difference and suffering, and it has been argued that his disturbing paintings of severed limbs and heads were created as statements against the inhumanity of capital punishment. Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828) created several paintings of prison interiors and scenes from the Inquisition. One of his *Caprichos* etchings (1799) suggested his sympathies lay with the heretic being paraded on a donkey and not with the church, a subtext that necessitated the artist's hasty withdrawal of the series. Goya's *Inquisition Tribunal* (1815) provides a similar critique in





portraying a vision of the madness that reigns when the church dominates the court of law. The issues first explored by these philosophers and artists continue to have relevance across generations and cultures.

In the United States, the Civil War period further exacerbated some of the long-standing ruptures in the country's national identity. Conflicting regional views led to drastic individual and collective actions that held grim consequences for millions. The complicated case of abolitionist John Brown, who had hoped to instigate a slave revolt in the late 1850s and was later hanged, captured the imagination of many artists, including Horace Pippin (1888–1946), John Steuart Curry (1897–1946), Thomas Hovenden (1840–1895), and Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), who produced a print series on the subject. Lawrence's spectral portrait of Brown awaiting execution is particularly powerful in its focus on the ragged, whitening hair of the American visionary, almost obscuring his fixed gaze on the cross of martyrdom he clutches (Figure 1). Another depiction of a prisoner awaiting execution dates from the inspiration of a few years later. The image, captured in the emerging medium of photography by Alexander Gardner (1821–1882), depicts the twenty-year-old former Confederate soldier and Lincoln-assassination co-conspirator known as Lewis Payne (Lewis Thornton Powell) shackled and staring ahead with a seemingly beatific ambivalence about his destiny (Figure 2). These images are about more than their elegance: they are reminders that the individual is motivated by more than the will to commit a crime.

Many political leftists and labor leaders who were the subject of wrongful imprisonment inspired powerfully artistic portraits after the turn of the twentieth century, when political ideology again divided America—although then moreso along lines of class rather than region or race; Otto Hagel's (1909–1973) photograph of Tom Mooney (Figure 3) is among the most famous of these. Ben Shahn's *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* is also among the most iconic (Figure 4). The 1927 execution by electrocution of these laborers, anarchists, and anti-war activists spawned worldwide protests. In the early 1930s, Shahn created a related series of paintings about this Massachusetts fishmonger and his shoemaker friend, the most famous of which now hangs in the Whitney Museum of American Art. In it, the two dead Italian immigrants lay in their

Fig. 1 (opposite page)

JACOB LAWRENCE

The Life of John Brown, No. 21. After John Brown's capture, he was put to trial for his life in Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia). 1941, gouache on paper. 19¹³/₁₆ x 13¹¹/₁₆ in. Courtesy of The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Fig. 2 (above left)

ALEXANDER GARDNER

Lewis Payne Portrait. 1865, black and white photograph, albumen print. 8³/₄ x 6⁷/₈ in. Library of Congress, LC-B817- 7773.

Fig. 3 (above middle)

OTTO HAGEL

Tom Mooney. 1936, gelatin silver print. 14 x 11 in. © 1998 The University of Arizona Foundation. Courtesy of the Collection Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

Fig. 4 (above right)

BEN SHAHN

The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti. 1932, tempera on canvas. 84¹/₂ x 48 in. Gift of Edith and Milton Lowenthal in memory of Juliana Force 49.22. © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York.



Fig. 5 (above left)

ANDY WARHOL

Thirteen Most Wanted Men. 1964, silk-screen ink on masonite, installation for New York's World Fair. 20 x 20 ft. Courtesy of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, New York.

Fig. 6 (above right)

DAVID HAMMONS

Injustice Case. 1970, body print (margarine and powdered pigments) and American flag. Sheet: 63 x 40½ in. Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum Acquisition Fund. Photo © 2008 Museum Associates/LACMA.



coffins while a judge and the presidents of Harvard and MIT preside over them in top hats and mortarboard, holding lilies. This piece stands as an indictment of America's breach in civil liberties for immigrants of the working class, and the related complicity of the country's intellectual establishment.

During the 1960s, an explosion of political art paralleled the tumultuous dynamism of this decade. Pop artist Andy Warhol (1928–1987) created a ghostly series of empty *Electric Chair* paintings and silkscreen prints that were begun in 1963, the year of New York State's first execution in a dozen years. Their colorful banality stands in stark contrast to the horror the chairs embody, an effect that imbues the works with profound pathos. Warhol created his *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* in 1964, a series of prints and one multi-panel mural (Figure 5) famously displayed at the New York World's Fair and almost immediately painted over. The work, based on mug shots published by the New York Police Department in 1962, exemplifies Warhol's interest in quotidian, non-art photography as well as his fascination with criminality. In this, Warhol followed the example of French artists including Jean Genet and Jean Cocteau, who had earlier created works of fiction and film that blended homoerotic longing with sympathy for outlaws. Later in 1964, one of Warhol's films, along with a copy of Genet's prison film *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950), was even confiscated and lost by New York City police during a raid at a public screening.

By the later 1960s, the swelling energy of Civil Rights was transforming into the activism of Black Power. Both movements spotlighted the racial inequities that divided America, and a new generation of political activists emerged, many of whom were falsely arrested and incarcerated, and some of whom were often badly mistreated by the criminal justice system. During this period in Los Angeles, David Hammons (born 1943) produced a series of experimental body prints using grease (margarine) and powdered pigment to create dramatic life-sized imagery. His 1970 *Injustice Case* monoprint (Figure 6), created with his own figure and provocatively incorporating an American flag as its frame, clearly references the infamous 1969 trial of the Chicago Eight. After the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, eight activists were arrested on charges of riot incitement, and one of these, defendant Bobby Seale, was forced to appear in



court bound and gagged. Seale had been a founder of the Black Panther Party in Oakland and he had vigorously protested the continuation of the Chicago trial after his own attorney called in sick and was unable to appear. Seale's discriminatory treatment became yet another symbol of the social injustice of that period.

Philosopher and scholar Angela Davis was also associated with early Black Panther, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and communist organizing. Her involvement with Soledad and San Quentin prisoner and author George Jackson led to her own arrest and imprisonment, although she was acquitted of all charges. In 1971, Bay Area artist Rupert Garcia (born 1941), himself an inspiration for the blossoming Chicano Arts Movement, created a dramatic silkscreen print he entitled *¡Libertad para los Prisoneros Políticos!* (page 17) that used Davis's defiant expression of strength as an image of the transformative courage of these political prisoners. The eventual death of George Jackson was also a factor that contributed to the bloody New York State Attica Prison riot in 1971, although the charges of overcrowding and demands for better living conditions were more central. That same year, Northern California artist Mel Henderson (born 1922) attempted a performance art event about Attica in Southern California in response to an invitation by conceptual artist Tom Marioni (born 1937), enlisting Paul Kos (born 1942) as his assistant. Only weeks after the prison siege was ended by force and with nearly forty people dead, the artists used Christmas tree lights to spell out the word "ATTICA" in the landscape above an interstate freeway. Henderson and Kos were almost immediately arrested (Figure 7), and Kos endured a longer time in jail because he couldn't make bail. Works like those just listed underscore the ongoing interrelationship of the racial and cultural factors in criminal justice and their political manifestation in American prisons.

By 1980, the voice of French intellectual Michel Foucault (1926–1984) had reached critical resonance in America. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) had been translated into English in 1977, and Foucault had established an active profile at UC Berkeley and in San Francisco during that time. He wrote about the changing nature of punishment in relation to surveillance and power, and he connected the urge to exert behavioral control among military regimens, factories, school classrooms, and of

Fig. 7

MEL HENDERSON

Untitled (The Arrest), from *Attica*. Performed March 11, 1972, at the San Francisco Performance, Newport Harbor Art Museum. 1972, gelatin silver print, featuring Paul Kos and cop. Courtesy of the University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Gift of the Naify Family. Photo by Larry Fox.



Fig. 8 (above left)

**JO BABCOCK AND
CATHERINE COSTELLO**

MARION, THE NEW ALCATRAZ: Non Contact Visit via Telephone with Leonard Peltier and Morton Sobel. 1988, wood, metal, Plexiglas, recorded testimonials on audio tapes, telephones, slide projection. Site-specific installation. 15 x 10 x 12 ft. Courtesy of the artists.



Fig. 9 (above right)

CHRIS BURDEN

L.A.P.D. Uniform. 1993, textile, fabric, leather, wood, metal, and plastic. 88 x 72 x 6 in. © Chris Burden. Courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery.

course prisons. His ideas were the topic of café conversation and widespread alternative press coverage. Bay Area grassroots prison art correspondingly expanded in the 1980s. *Art on the Rock*—a 1988 dynamic exhibition of installation art in the cellblock on Alcatraz Island, supported by the National Park Service and the Headlands Center for the Arts—was one stunning example, if ultimately partially censored. Contributions included one thousand paper cranes soulfully displayed in a cell of horizontal shelves by Reiko Goto (born 1955), and an interactive interview installation by experimental photographer Jo Babcock (born 1954) and Catherine Costello (born 1955) with Native American political prisoner Leonard Peltier (Figure 8).

During the decades of the 1990s, several events, many of which took place in California, once again catapulted issues of criminal justice to the forefront of political discussion. These included high-profile public beatings, executions, kidnappings, and murders that were ever more widely covered in the media. The Fox television network's reality series *Cops*, which began production in 1989, became one of the longest running programs in the history of American television, further mainstreaming arrest and incarceration. This conservative swing toward fear was accompanied by the passage of new legislation that further expanded the prison network. Many intellectuals responded to this intensification with critical analysis. In 1995, following the passage of the "Three Strikes" Proposition 184, Mike Davis wrote his essay "Hell Factories in the Field: A Prison-Industrial Complex," which originally appeared in *The Nation* and is now republished in this volume. In 1998, California activists including Angela Davis and Ruth Wislon Gilmore founded Critical Resistance and a prison abolition movement to promote the dismantling of what they also termed the "prison-industrial-complex." A selection from Davis's *Abolition Democracy* (2005) is also republished in this volume. In 2005, San Francisco writer Dave Eggers and physician Lola Vollen published a book of interviews with Death Row exonerees entitled *Surviving Justice: America's Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated*. The revelation that the Bush administration openly embraced extreme and illegal torture techniques at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq and at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba inspired an international torrent of art, perhaps most notably the series of paintings and drawings by Fernando Botero that were eventually gifted to the Berkeley Art Museum.



It is no wonder that contemporary art about the issues of criminal justice and incarceration is very strong. The backdrop of accusations about police brutality that led to the 1992 Los Angeles riots inform Chris Burden's (born 1946) 1993 *L.A.P.D. Uniform* (Figure 9). This collaboration with Philadelphia's Fabric Art Workshop consists of a display of thirty police uniforms, oversized for giants that can dwarf any dialog or resistance. Liza Lou's (born 1969) 2004–2006 *Cell* (Figure 10) is a cinder block environment matching the dimensions of a Death Row prison cell that has been carefully and obsessively covered with tiny glass beads—each with its hole facing up—to maximize the visual impact of this conceptual meditation on waiting. Pepón Osorio's (born 1955) complex two-space installation entitled *Badge of Honor* from 1995 presents two twenty-two-minute-long videos synchronized to create a conversation between a father in his cell and his teenage son in his fantastical bedroom at home (Figure 11). Drawing on Osorio's own experience as a social worker, the piece explores the complex impact on family of every incarceration.

The ideas explored by these artists and philosophers throughout history have resonance for the work gathered together in this collection. The anti-clerical satire of Goya engages with the nineteen portraits on bologna of the 9/11 alleged “Islamic terrorists” by William Pope.L. The compassionate Civil War-era photographs of Alexander Gardner inform the new work of Deborah Luster. The inspiring portrait of John Brown and his cross by Jacob Lawrence can be linked to Rigo 23's oversize Stanley “Tookie” Williams mural and installation, where an actual cross hangs on a chain over prison boots mounted to the wall. The longing and irony implied by Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* is newly manifested in Alex Donis's series of *Dirty Dancing* paintings. The bleak interactive sound space of Jo Babcock's installation at Alcatraz is a precursor of Aaron Sandnes's darkened audio installation. Even Romanticism itself is ironically revived in Sadow Birk's paintings of California prisons in the style of nineteenth-century American sublime landscapes. Together these works enter into a difficult and troubling dialog with an aesthetic history of social engagement and compassion, about the place of criminals and the mechanisms of justice in a healthy society. ■

Fig. 10 (above left)

LIZA LOU

Cell. 2004–2006, wood, fiberglass, and glass beads. 97 x 68 x 96 in.

© the artist. Courtesy of Jay Jopling/White Cube (London). Photo by Joshua White.

Fig. 11 (above right)

PEPÓN OSORIO

Badge of Honor (detail, son's bedroom). 1995, mixed media and video installation. 12 x 26 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 12 ft. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo by Dennis Cowley.