



Zach Vanes

Video Art and Mass Incarceration

Following recent tumultuous events, media outlets and commentators have highlighted how the police, for over a hundred years have been a continual source of racially-biased injustice and oppression; but so far there has been relative silence on the same disastrous principles within the prison system, even as white supremacy has left incarcerated people particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Angela Davis writes, “On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them. At the same time, there is a reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside them.” The *Video Art and Mass Incarceration* program presents a selection of artist-made videos that face head-on the reality of the United States prison system, and recognize the lives that exist within it.

The videos included in this program are rooted in the politics of the 1990s. Annie Goldson and Chris Bratton’s *Deathrow Notebooks* and Lawrence Andrews’ *And They Came Into Town Riding Black and Silver Horses* were released in 1992, while Harun Farocki’s *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* (2000) and Laurie Jo Reynolds’ *Space Ghost* (2007) were initiated in the 1990s, despite being released in the following decade. The televised



The Deathrow Notebooks, Annie Goldson, 1992

police brutality against Rodney King with its revelation of the limitations of documentary video evidence certainly looms large in any discussion of 90s video art. Both Lawrence Andrews’ *And They Came Riding Into Town on Black and Silver Horses* and Laurie Jo Reynolds’ *Space Ghost* explore the power of twenty-four-hour news media images involving people color, and Harun Farocki’s *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* shows how video surveillance regulates the lives of people in prison. Even without the media spectacle of violence and racially biased legal proceedings that followed the Rodney King case, Davis notes in the introduction of *Are Prisons Obsolete?* that the 1990s were a time of great expansion for prison abolitionist thinking.

So what was going on back then? In the decade after the Reagan administration, the ramifications of the War on Drugs became visible through the massive growth of prison facilities and the subsequent

doubling of the prison population. During the eight years that Reagan was in office, the United States prison population went from 329,000 to 627,000¹. Furthermore, the racial disparities of people in prison became painfully clear during that time. In 1995, the Sentencing Project published a benchmark study that almost one in three Black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine were in prison, jail, house arrest, or parole. At the same time, private prisons began springing up across the country with a financial motive, and states like Mississippi went from having one prison in 1982 to having eight (five of them private) in twenty years.² Journalist Albert Samaha explains, “Private prisons survive by maintaining a certain balance: they must run cheaper

¹ James Cullen, “The History of Mass Incarceration,” Brennan Center for Justice, Last modified July, 20, 2018. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/history-mass-incarceration>

² Albert Samaha, “The Prison Reform Blues,” BuzzFeed, Last modified August 20, 2020. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertsamaha/the-rise-and-fall-of-mississippi-top-prison-reformer>

than state facilities, and they must turn a profit for the executives or shareholders. So to stretch profits, prisons cut as many costs as possible." The private prison model has led to more people in more prisons run less effectively.

In his book *Conversation Pieces*, Grant Kester asserts that funding cuts for social welfare and the arts in the 1990s led private funders to position artists as social service providers.³ The same faulty logic that replaced social workers with police officers, mental health clinics with jails, and state-run facilities with private prisons also blurred the line between socially-minded art and genuine social services. In other words, it is not through accident or lack of conviction that the videomakers included in the program approach their videos from the standpoint of artists first. Rather than playing the heroic savior, the video artists in this program approach people within the system as collaborators and interlocutors. In Annie Goldson and Chris Bratton's *Deathrow Notebooks*, political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal speaks about the racist policing and politics that have kept himself and members of MOVE behind bars to this day, and in Lawrence Andrews' *And They Came Riding Into Town on Black and Silver Horses*, the artist enters into dialogue with a police officer, a sketch artist, and a falsely accused man. The personal perspectives are more than just the raw material folded smoothly into the B-roll. Each of these works models what Kester refers to as a "dialogical aesthetic." He explains, "[In a dialogical aesthetic] subjectivity is formed through discourse and intersubjective exchange itself. Discourse is not simply a tool to be used to communicate an a priori 'content' with other already formed

subjects, but is itself intended to model subjectivity." Instead of merely bringing the video artist's creative subjectivity to bear on the prison, these works model a process of understanding the reality of prisons. Most importantly, understanding the reality of the prison system does not come through merely memorizing the injustices and punishments inflicted upon the incarcerated, though they are important to know. If that were the case, a detailed list would be much quicker and easier to produce. Video, on the other hand, has space for the irrepressible moments of self-respect, good humor, and creativity that occur in every human life, including those that take place behind prison walls. Small details like a toy UFO made from papier-mâché and ping pong balls in Laurie Jo Reynolds' *Space Ghost*, or footage of an inmate marveling at the new design on a quarter in Harun Farocki's *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, reveal naturally-occurring, everyday moments of humanity behind bars. It would seem that our society, in its avoidance of the prison, is reluctant to face the personhood of incarcerated people more than any violent depravity.

Like so many other human rights issues, our reluctance to recognize the rights of incarcerated individuals has become increasingly fatal during the pandemic. As Illinois State Representative LaShawn Ford succinctly put it, "You cannot practice social distancing in prison."⁴ As of August 18th, 2020, the Marshall Project reported that there have been 102,494 confirmed cases of

³ Patrick Smith, "Democrats and Republicans Are Critical of Pritzker's Handling of COVID-19 in Prisons," WBEZ, Last modified June 29, 2020. <https://www.wbez.org/stories/democrats-and-republicans-are-critical-of-pritzkers-handling-of-covid-19-in-prisons/d4c77f32-e437-4677-8765-8b0e53120b09>

COVID-19 and 889 COVID-19 related deaths in the inmate population of United States prisons. These numbers are most likely skewed lower because of the lack of individual action taken by both liberal and conservative governors, who undoubtedly fear political reprisal in an uncertain time. For example, Indiana and Illinois have done minimal testing of prison inmates and staff, and both states released only a handful of prisoners when early release programs for people with less than a year on their sentences could depopulate the prison by nearly twenty-five percent.⁵ Since they are red and blue states respectively, the lack of action points to a much larger problem than a specific political party's relationship with scientific fact. If the larger problem lies within our collective political imagination, perhaps art might keep us from failing incarcerated people again.

⁴ Kelsey Kauffman and Michelle Daniel, "COVID-19 And Indiana Prisons: An Emergency Plan," Date accessed August 28, 2020. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/Indiana_prisonreleases_coronavirus_plan.pdf

³ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 138..