

Art in Prison Lecture 8: Instructions

It seems important to reiterate that Socially Engaged Art practices are not the norm for artists. Most artists working today still work in traditional ways exhibiting and/or selling artwork in galleries and museums. Social art, as we are studying it, is relatively new. And though there is a history (as you learned reading *Art and Social Change*) the definitions provided by most of our authors indicates an art form not really seen in the past.

This lecture will give you some idea as to how the rest of the semester will proceed.

You will continue to have weekly annotations in for form of lectures and links. In addition, you have two more longer papers. Both are related to your final paper and project. See instructions for both linked on the website.

Paper 2 is actually a list of annotations of your choice. The reason I asked you to begin imagining what you might do using Social Practice in a prison situation is because that is your final paper/project. Paper 2 is a way of gathering additional information that might help you conceive of your population (women, mental health, youth, general, elderly, LGBTQ, etc.). In addition, you will research various different ways this might be approached. I have many different projects linked on the far left column of the website but you might find some of your own.

This paper will be graded based on the quality and variety of your references and your ability to clearly state the reading.

Links must be included so I can check them.

Final Paper/Project includes a 4 page paper discussing your idea. It will include research on your population, which artists we've studied influenced your idea and why you think it will work for this population. The project is a slide presentation (google or PP) that you will put in your TEAM folder. Example is posted to the website.

I will be posting instructions on how to design this presentation.

All TEAM members will read your presentation and respond the last week of the semester. Responses will be graded.

General Useful Information

Creativity abounds in prison. You might find people making sculptures out of cardboard, broom straws, glue and toothpaste. Everything is saved. Matchbooks, toilet paper tubes, toothpicks, and coffee are common art materials. The men in our group at Riverbend have earned the right to be in, what they call, the A group. Last year one prisoner was sent back to C group for creating a sculpture from toilet paper

rolls, items considered contraband. He was no longer able to return to the art group for at least two years as he earned back the rights.

Many prisoners approach art class as merely an opportunity to be out of their cells, many having to stay there 23 hours per day. Some come to be part of a group where they are shown kindness and respect, something they rarely get in prison. Those men in our group, and from what I hear generally, avoid feeling real emotions and stop short of revealing much about themselves in their work. Stereotypical and schematic images are popular as those are popular for graffiti and tattoos. One reason we bring art classes that encourage skills and idea development is to provide more opportunities for expression.

As we have read, and I have found, that developing trust is an essential aspect of working inside. The men in our group joke about the various projects I bring in for them even making fun of me the night the electricity went out. In the 10 minutes or so before 'lock down' I just kept talking, using the scant light from high windows to illuminate the samples I was showing them. We laugh and joke in the two hours we have together allowing the men to momentarily forget where they are. It's a form of escape.

Most of the prisoners we work with transform their cells with artwork, pictures, etc. With strict rules about what is allowed and not allowed, they find ways to decorate with hand-crafted objects so their cells become home. For our men in particular, those on Death Row, the possibility of leaving is very slim. Most will die there, one way or another. They even refer to going back to the cell block as, 'going back to the house' as if they were just hanging out in the neighborhood.

For art therapists, self expression and emotional release are the most important reasons to make art. However, art can serve a range of functions in prison including creating connections between prison populations and those on the outside.

One of the few benefits of incarceration is the opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth. Every one of the men in our group at Riverbend says he is not the man today who committed the crime. Many of them have been on death row for over 20 years as appeals and stays of execution persist. Facing a life in prison is a difficult thing to accept once one has witnessed grown and changed.

Transgressing against society, getting caught, submitting to police interrogation and community censure, losing liberty and social standing and facing lengthy separation from friends and family create enormous gut wrenching emotion with guilt often the most overwhelming emotion of all. With little opportunity to express emotions, whether anger, guilt, confusion, or sadness (tears being signs of weakness), art provides an outlet for emotion.

In prison, art can be a way of dealing with emotions and discovering things about self.

Then the art exhibitions actually do create a bridge between those on the inside and those outside.

They help prisoners control loneliness, they build self-esteem as artists master their skills and get recognized for it.

As you have seen in the lecture last week, our project at Riverbend also includes a series of art exhibits. These provide the men an opportunity to express themselves in various ways while creating connections with those in the community they wouldn't have otherwise. People in the community are brought into contact with issues and preconceived ideas related to prisons (and in our case, the death penalty). Because once art is taken out of a prison, it can't be brought back inside, and in our case, no cameras are allowed, having the exhibits and even the website, give the families and friends of the men to see the work they are doing, creating pride and additional dialogue.