

PRISONERS' INVENTIONS



Three Dialogues

Prisoners' Inventions: Three Dialogues

Three years ago Temporary Services invited Angelo, an incarcerated artist, to write and illustrate a booklet about the ingenious, practical, and sometimes bizarre things he has seen prisoners make. Angelo generated more than 100 pages of drawings and text - representing 78 different inventions or skills. The collection offers a glimpse into the social environment of prison, where inventiveness and ingenuity are needed to satisfy even the most basic human desires.

This initial invitation led to an exhibition that included prints of Angelo's drawings and writings, along with facsimiles of the inventions constructed by Temporary Services and a long list of helpers. At Angelo's request, a full-size copy of his prison cell was also featured. The cell was built by following Angelo's drawings and measurements.

This booklet includes three dialogues about this project. Full acknowledgements for Prisoners' Inventions are included at the end of this publication but special thanks are due to the participants in these dialogues who allowed them to be reprinted together for this booklet.

A book of Angelo's complete Prisoners' Inventions writings and drawings was published by White Walls in 2002. It has since been reprinted (visit www.whitewalls.org for details).

Angelo remains seemingly unaffected by the circulation of the book (which he still has not been able to receive) and the press that has surrounded this project. He continues to actively read, write and draw - although sadly without the company of his friend and former cellie Paul, who was recently transferred to another prison. We continually update Angelo (and Paul) with new developments for Prisoners' Inventions and Angelo keeps us informed as well. In a recent search, a guard discovered the photos we sent Angelo of his recreated cell. Stunned and angered that an inmate had somehow acquired photos of his own cell, the guard demanded information on how he got the pictures. When Angelo pointed out the fabricators' subtle discrepancies in the cell recreation and explained a little about the exhibition, the guard's anger quickly turned to wonder and amusement.

Temporary Services
(Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julian, Marc Fischer)

project. There's only so much he could do after that. So, that is a collaborative element as well.

Another important element of a positive collaborative process is people knowing where their skill sets are and what they can contribute. A good collaborative has people that compensate for other's lack of skills. The collaborative process with Richard and Miguel was just like that - Miguel can't build things, but Richard can. Richard really brings a lot to the table. So, that kind of process is really productive as opposed to everyone having the same skill sets and battling it out over ultimate vision.

JB: Artists can be wary of working with administrators because they don't trust that the administrators have their best interest at heart. Subsequently, the artists fail to see the positive aspect of the working relationship as collaboration. Administrators help artists realize projects by focusing on peripheral elements such as fundraising, allowing artists to worry mostly about their work. Don't you think this idea of the lone artist; working in solitude is in some ways a myth?

NT: I think that's right. You know, everyone loves to live in the myth because it's helpful, for one, to feel good about being on Earth, created by this great god of humanity. I mean it's just such a given. That's why arts administration is such a funny thing because we all know administratively how much of a collective process it is. You have a PR person, you have a fundraiser, you have a secretary and you have a registrar. Everybody-a fabricator, maintenance, custodial-everybody collaborates to make this thing exist. If this jail cell were covered in dust and dirt and not clean it would look crappy. If it weren't lit it would look crappy. All these things are a collaborative process. Arts administration understands collaboration and that bureaucracy is collaboration. It's all the gears that go into the process. That's why I hate when people rail on bureaucracy because it seems some people just love to think and want everyone else to administrate.

What I like about Temporary Services is that they actually create a Beuysian, but better than Beuys, sense of social sculpture. Everybody knows that with organizing any type of social space there are PR requirements, building requirements. That is the sculpture. The administrative ties to projects are an art form. I think that you can play with the art form far more. You can be Dadaist about these kinds of questions. You can be a Dadaist development officer. There are aesthetics to all of these ties. I think that in the social sculpture that goes into producing social space, there are already collaborative elements being ignored. All of the artists in this show, well most of them, have been pretty friendly about the situation. They understand how many people it requires to produce this space. It's not like they just came in and made it. Well initially when I was talking about collaboration I referred to artists but you are right, even beyond

that everybody is collaborating in this big space. The audience collaborates. What is it without them coming here looking at it and caring? Right? For instance, I hate the text label. I hate the label, but it is important. We have this thing called the label and it has this name on it. Whose name do you put on that, everyone's? No one is going to read that. Somebody wants to know who came up with the idea. For instance when you go to a movie, who has the big name at the beginning? It's the director, but there is a big crew list also and maybe the crew list should go first.

JB: In terms of this project, what is intriguing is that all this information is coming from one person who is in prison who has documented inventions that have been told to him by cellmates. Through Angelo's contact with Marc Fischer and the subsequent inclusion of these inventions in the Fantastic exhibition, the project is then seen as Temporary Services project. How does working with this web of collaborators fit into the scope of their work?

NT: Temporary Services and Angelo are on the credit line. That makes sense to me because Temporary Services proposed this project to me. The credit for Angelo is tricky because he did all the drawings, from which Temporary Services and the SAIC group fabricated them. The credit could have been "Angelo and Temporary Services" too, which I don't think they have a problem with. They are very interested in making sure that they show the diversified collaborative process. In the context of their work, this piece makes a lot of sense in terms of those questions. They provide this intermediary space between people and other people. Also, their "art" is basically taking ready-made social spaces and exploring the creative process, as well as also trying to generate new ways of looking at the world in a politically motivated sense.

TH: And not to mention that "Angelo" is a pseudonym, right? Which then adds another layer to that complex discussion.

NT: Yes. Well then there's that - the question of using Angelo's real name in the show. I think you've probably read the emails we've had back and forth about this . . .

AP: We heard from Temporary Services the play-by-play, but yes, if you could talk a little bit about the problems . . .

NT: I was really frustrated [about not knowing what crime Angelo was incarcerated for] and went to a thousand different sources in the art world, to everyone I respect and said, "What do you think?" My frustration is that ultimately, I'd love to use dude's real name and just put it out there. However, everyone on my staff and everyone I talked to, not just staff, but everyone I first mentioned the project to - the first thing they

NT: People reacted strongly. You know it really resonates on a lot of levels. Many people read the [accompanying didactic material]. In a museum, when you see the people reading, you know they are interested because people typically don't read in those places. On busy days there are crowds sitting with the vitrines. These are testaments to the success of the project.

JB: Were you friends with Temporary Services prior to Prisoners' Inventions?

NT: Yes.

JB: What is it like to be working with your friends? Would you do this process again?

NT: I'll give you a very candid response to all of it. I think in this life you have to build up your own mafia and you have to support things you like. Well, I like their work; I'm going to show it. People say, "You are helping out those that you know." Yeah, but I also know people whose work I like. I work in the art world. I gravitate towards people whose projects I like. I didn't gravitate towards Vanessa Beecroft. I actually gravitate towards relevant work. So, I don't have any ethical qualms about showing my friends' stuff. However it is difficult, as you mentioned, to work with your friends. It is inevitable because I have to sometimes tell them "no" and sometimes they tell me "no". There are things on the line and it can get messy. It can destroy relationships. But, I still like working with my friends. It's hard to not take things personally when you are friends. But, it was actually wonderful because it worked well.

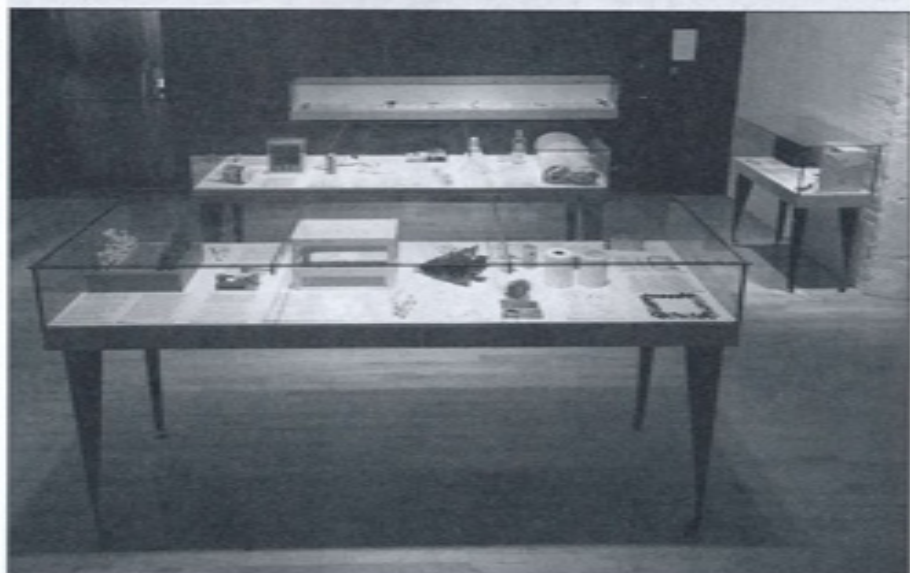
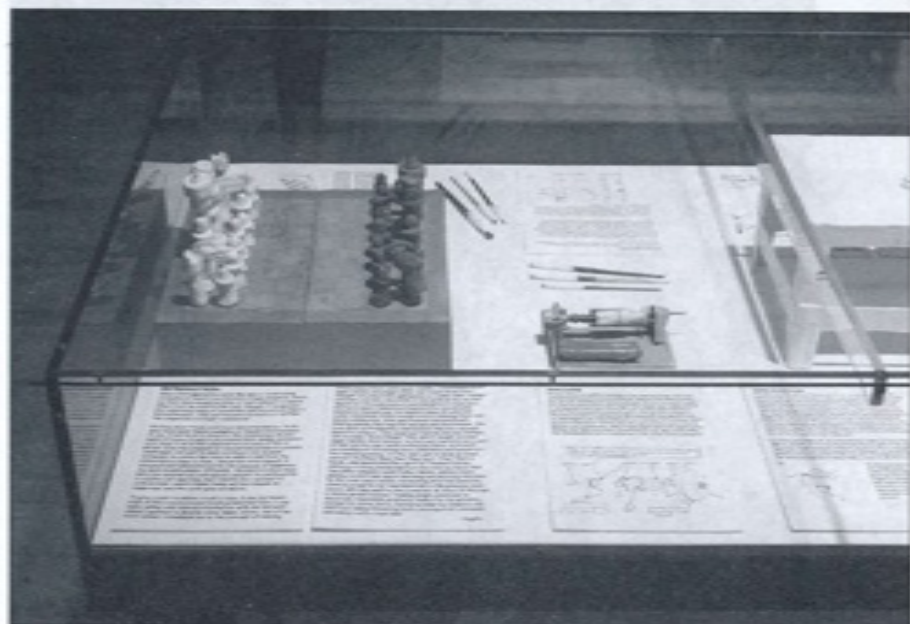
AP: Do you feel like you are in a difficult situation as a mediator between the MASS MoCA institution and the artists, and trying to create something that was the best for both?

NT: Always. That's my job, but I don't like that kind of job. In a sense, I like to work on projects that stem from my ideas and think only about that. But I've got to look out for a lot of different things. I can't just be doing exactly what I'd like to do. And fortunately I work with a pretty great institution that's flexible and who jumped at this project right away. Hyde Park Art Center, which wouldn't have had a lot of the complications we faced, refused it. So MASS MoCA really went out on a limb.

JB: What do you have planned after this exhibition?

NT: Well, I have this show tentatively titled "Strategic Engagement", which is a survey of tactical media, basically political art of the 1990's. There are going to be about sixty artists but a lot of public projects; The Center for

Land Use Interpretation, William Pope L., Critical Art Ensemble, Sub Rosa, @rk, Institute for Applied Autonomy and Las Agencias, among others. All of these groups, all of the collectives will tell you, they are resistant to showing in museums and they are all a big pain in the ass, but I love them to death.



Vitrines at MASS MoCA containing Prisoners' Inventions recreations and Angelo's writings and drawings.



'Prisoners' Inventions': An Interview with Temporary Services

by Craig Buckley

The interview deals mainly with *Prisoners' Inventions*, a book and an exhibition that came out of a collaboration between Angelo, a man who is currently incarcerated in California, and Temporary Services, a group based in Chicago. The interview was developed via email in the summer and fall of 2003.

CB: Temporary Services had been in contact with Angelo for some time prior to the *Prisoners' Inventions* project. Can you describe how you initially met Angelo and how you arrived at the collaboration that became the *Prisoners' Inventions* project?

TS: Angelo first contacted Marc Fischer from Temporary Services back in 1991 (Temporary Services began in 1998). At the time, Fischer was publishing a fanzine about underground music, politics, and art. The zine was free to prisoners and Angelo's cellmate requested a copy which he shared with Angelo. Angelo contacted Fischer and sent him one of his drawings; this marked the beginning of their friendship and correspondence.

In 2000, Temporary Services mounted an exhibition of Angelo's narrative drawings from a more personal and continuous body of work that he has been producing for many years. The organization of this exhibition became the group's larger introduction to Angelo's work and ideas. Since the beginning of Temporary Services, we have been self-publishing booklets for our projects and we regularly send these to Angelo. He enjoys receiving them and was greatly excited by the booklet that we produced in conjunction with his exhibit.

We arrived at the idea for the *Prisoners' Inventions* project through a series of casual discussions about inventions that Angelo sometimes mentioned in his letters. We also talked about inventions that group members had read about in varied sources or heard about in dialogues with other inmates. The idea of prisoners inventing wildly creative things to maintain greater personal autonomy and to bypass the restrictions that are imposed on them was immensely appealing to us.

We casually asked Angelo if he'd like to write and illustrate a small booklet on the subject of prisoners' inventions. We had been invited to partic-

ipate in a one-day event titled "Autonomous Territories of Chicago" organized by an initiative called the Department of Space and Land Reclamation. We felt that a free booklet on this subject by Angelo would be a nice contribution to this event. Angelo took a while to think about the invitation. At first, he couldn't think of many inventions of great interest. Fortunately, Angelo has an astounding memory for visual details. In time, he began to remember, draw and write about lots of things he had seen.

He missed the deadline for the event but as his work on this project became more ambitious, it immediately became clear to us that Prisoners' Inventions should be something more than a photocopied booklet. The amount of writing and drawing that Angelo was doing necessitated a real book and an exhibition. After we began to receive the finished drawings and writings from Angelo in several separate mailings, we discussed amongst ourselves, and with Angelo, how this project might be expanded.

CB: In any collaboration one of the hardest and most important parts is the process of decision making. It sounds like your work with Angelo has largely been through correspondence, either through letters or perhaps email. Given the fact of this distanced relationship how does the decision making process take place? For instance, when you were putting together the book, was there a selection process? When you present the project as an installation (such as the installation for Fantastic at Mass MoCA, or recently for Get rid of yourself at Halle 14 in Leipzig) does Angelo work with you on the installation? In this process, what part of the work would you call "yours" and what part would you call "his"?

TS: All of our work with Angelo has been through written postal correspondence. He does not have access to email and has never seen the Internet. The communication process can be extremely slow because it takes 2-3 weeks before Angelo receives a letter. Everything must be inspected for contraband by the mail room so even if we respond to a letter immediately and he responds immediately, it can still take nearly a month for all of us to get 'on the same page'.

We spent a very long time communicating with Angelo and each other before the exhibition at MASS MoCA and the book were realized. Questions from Nato Thompson (the curator at MASS MoCA)--and from Anthony Elms--(the managing editor of the book's publisher) were all forwarded to Angelo through Temporary Services to protect his privacy and limit the circulation of his address. We continually generated questions for Angelo about how to proceed with various aspects of the project and we filled him in on how our own thinking was progressing.

When we decided to realize a book and an exhibit around Prisoners' Inventions we immediately sought Angelo's input and shared our ideas. We

felt that the drawings alone would not be visually tactile enough as an exhibit so we suggested making precise copies of some of the objects. Angelo then suggested that we build a copy of his cell or find people who could build it for us. He even recommended friends of ours--Zena Sakowski and Rob Kelly--who he thought might be good cell builders. This suggestion came from his having seen a booklet we published on their work and photos from one of their exhibitions.

Angelo understands that we have to work under pressures and time and budget constraints that are not always knowable to him given his situation. He gives us his input on anything he thinks is important and then he trusts us to do what we think is best and take or leave his advice. In the case of the book, we used every drawing and piece of writing that Angelo sent. Nothing was omitted. In the case of the first exhibit, we could not construct the cell exactly as Angelo had hoped, though he was extremely pleased with the result (we sent him many photos). The cell was built entirely from Angelo's drawings by the fabricators at MASS MoCA and there wasn't time or money for us to help or intervene in their process. There were some deviations from what Angelo wanted in the area of realism and these are things we might be able to correct in future showings of the project. Though we sent him sketches of some installation ideas early on, ultimately it was impossible to really confer with Angelo on the precise installation at MASS MoCA and Halle 14. We did not fully understand how we would install the work until we arrived at the spaces.

After seeing photos of the cell and of the inventions, Angelo offered corrections where needed. In some cases he felt that things had been built incorrectly. In other cases he noticed that he could have been clearer about scale and proportions in some drawings and this accounted for errors that we can fix next time around. We have worked with Angelo long enough that he trusts us to make decisions.

He will always correct us if we make mistakes. We make it clear, in this collaboration, that the drawings are Angelo's as was the idea to make a replica of his cell (for MASS MoCA). The book is clearly credited as Angelo's work with just some basic editorial notes about our involvement in the project. Beyond that we don't make a lot of distinctions; we just present it as a collaborative project. We also had many other people helping us out on Prisoners' Inventions. We calculated upwards of 20 people collaborating in various capacities to make the entire thing happen. We do not provide authorship for who made any of the inventions but we do publicly acknowledge everyone that helped either in publications or on wall labels.

CB: That kind of distance reminds me of a striking story in the book, an invention that is actually about this kind of distanced communication. In an entry titled "A Fishing Tale" Angelo writes about a story he heard from



another inmate about the Hall of Justice Jail in Los Angeles. That particular prison had a number of floors and somehow someone discovered the toilets shared the same pipe, and that fishing wire flushed down the pipes could be caught by a lower floor and used as a system to pass messages, love letters, objects, pictures. Both the book and the installations are not unlike letters, in that the experience they represent are always distanced. Video and photography, such as the documentation of exonerated men featured in Taryn Simon's *The Innocents* project, (a project that links itself very explicitly to inmate advocacy) work to give you an impression of an individual presence. *Prisoners' Inventions*, even though it is recounted in the first person, remains anecdotal, fragmentary, written by an author who we cannot see, and about whom the reader knows little or nothing. While this distance may have been imposed by the system, it also seems to me to be a decision, a strategy of presentation. Could you describe how you

approached the strategies of presentation and how you see the link between the specificities of making your work and the issues of inmate advocacy?

TS: The distance you describe is partly a reality of geographic and institutional constraints, partly a natural outgrowth of how Angelo wanted to be included in this project, but it was also a deliberate choice on all of our parts.

In the past, as when Temporary Services presented drawings of his in our old office space, Angelo has been forthcoming about many aspects of his life (but he does not discuss his conviction). He has shared a lot of biographical information with us. *Prisoners' Inventions* is somewhat different as Angelo is not telling his own story; he is acting as a vehicle through which the inventions of prisoners are explained. It is appropriate that the specifics of his own life or the lives of other inmates would not be in the foreground of this project.

Angelo insists that he's just trying to stay sane during the course of his sentence and he does not want the attention that he might receive if knowledge of his full name, his conviction, or his exact location were made public. He does not want the hassle of becoming a celebrity prisoner. So some distance was created in order to protect Angelo's privacy. This strategy has helped keep viewers more focused on the major themes of this work: the inventions and the social context that forced their creation. The distancing prevents viewers from judging prisoners for their crimes and allows the viewers to think about aspects of their everyday lives that are given short shrift.

The themes of this project transcend the biographies of the people that made them. One can easily imagine that similar inventions exist in any prison anywhere in the world where inmates are restricted from having things that they feel are fundamental to their everyday comfort and existence. On a recent trip to Buchenwald Concentration Camp we saw homemade chess and checkers sets from the 1930's that look identical to the things Angelo describes.

Angelo has been quite clear in his letters that he is not trying to lead some kind of revolution on behalf of other inmates, or trying to take that advocating type of position. This project is not a focused type of advocacy that campaigns for one person's case or individual rights. The project does however speak to the kind of extreme repression that is imposed on prisoners and it shows how many of them are dealing with it. Parts of the project could probably be used by inmate advocacy groups to demonstrate prisoners' responses to their conditions. News about this project is being circulated among people who work in the field of Criminal Justice.

There is a possibility that this project could generate profit and our response to that is something we would have to discuss. Marc supports Angelo to a degree and this support may remain a private arrangement in order to retain a distinct separation between state-funded institutions that host Prisoners' Inventions and the publisher White Walls which is also partly state funded. Angelo does share a copyright on the book (along with us and White Walls). We wanted to make sure that if he gets out, he would have a stake in the success of this book. This project is ongoing and so far we have not had a lot of conversations with Angelo about money because we did not expect to generate any income from this project. Our primary drive has been to figure out how to realize Prisoners' Inventions, not how to make money from it. Just doing the project seemed daunting enough! If we do start seeing money from the various components of Prisoners' Inventions then this is something we will have to start dealing with. So far it hasn't really been an issue or a large part of the public discourse around the project because the project hasn't turned a profit.

We have talked a little about ways of making a profit and safeguarding it legally for Angelo if or when he gets out of prison. It is incredible to us to what an extent American prison systems and civil society will go to put up barriers to a person's reintegration into the world--the stripping of funding for education and rehabilitation is the first destructive step. The privatization of the prison industry has not helped and will be a perpetual barrier to prison reform. We didn't set out with this project to address these issues, but have been forced to encounter them along the way.

CB: I'd like to change directions for a moment and ask what has informed your commitment to collaboration, both as a group and with others. I am also interested in how you relate to some of the writing about collaborative practices in the art world. Authors like Miwon Kwon and Hal Foster (among others) have used the phrase "ethnographic turn" to describe the research and collaborations artists conduct with individuals or institutions outside the traditional fields of art practice. One thing they stress is the need for a certain kind of reflexivity regarding the way that artists wittingly or unwittingly adopt positions of ethnographic authority, framing "otherness" for public or institutional consumption. Your work sits at an interesting angle to these conversations in that Prisoners' Inventions contains much that could be considered "ethnographic" yet it is not presented as the product of your own participant observation or ethnographic authority, it relates a very complicated process of self-presentation, perhaps even a kind of portraiture, authored by Angelo. You mentioned the term *liaison* earlier to describe your relationship with Angelo; how do you see this position relative to the one described in the debates about the "artist-as-ethnographer"?

TS: On a basic level, we collaborate with people that we consider friends

and whose work and ideas we respect and admire. We work with people that we want to know better, learn from, and whose ideas we want to understand more deeply--all of those things become possible through collaboration. Those reasons for collaborating are part of why the three of us work together. Of course it is different collaborating with Angelo because we can't all be in the same room together. We can't go out drinking or eat meals or spend days making things together. We can't even email back and forth like the three of us are doing right now when we pass this text around to answer your questions. But that's okay. The mechanics of collaborating can be extremely varied.

The benefits of collaborating are many. To borrow a little from a text we have written about this:

Collaboration is an important activity to us, both within our group structure and as a pre-cursor to dealing with others outside the group. Group work already functions in almost all art projects --from those that are labelled collective or collaborative to those advertised as "solo shows". On a practical level, working together gives us both the ability to do multiple projects at once and the flexibility to use each other's experiences to our collective advantage. We also like collaboration because of the inherent challenges and incredible possibilities that come with working with each other and with persons outside of our group. We not only do more, but we are exposed to varied perspectives and opinions that we might never have to address on our own.

The writers you mention have no impact on our work or how we go about it. We haven't paid close enough attention to their ideas to specifically comment on the relationship of our work to their writing nor do we care to. We try to avoid speaking and debating from within this academic framework because it excludes too many people from the conversation. We often feel quite excluded from it ourselves. We look, rather, at how groups (and not just artists) talk about their practice and articulate it from their own perspectives.

It is possible to say a few things about ethnography in general but to just get stuck on making terms for art practice in this way really misses the point. Art is about life and is deeply embedded in it no matter what - not even if you try and claim some sort of aesthetic detachment. Angelo is definitely closer to the role of the ethnographer in Prisoners' Inventions than we are but Angelo has never used that term to describe his involvement in this project. We aren't about to tack it onto him. The categorization isn't necessary. We do feel that Prisoners' Inventions is a pretty serious piece of research on Angelo's part and he did employ a lot of direct observation. We fully trust his findings but ultimately we have no easy way of checking the precision and accuracy of his work. No one is professing to

be an authority on the subject of Prisoners' Inventions. We can present Angelo's findings and make them more tactile for viewers and use his work as a springboard for all kinds of dialogues that we want to answer to and initiate, but we can't claim the observations that he is making for ourselves and won't give his work a label like ethnography.

We are interested in vernacular visual culture. It can teach us a lot about human behavior and how what people do leaves visual clues and traces to this behavior and its meanings. In other projects we have directly recorded public urban phenomena that interests us such as commercial sandwich board signs, makeshift roadside memorials to accident victims, block club signs that list the rules of behavior on various streets, unusual street flyers and public expressions, things people drag into the street to save their shovelled out parking spaces after heavy Chicago snow storms and things like that.

Prisoners' Inventions is definitely not portraiture. The idea of portraiture has been applied to so many kinds of contemporary art practice and has been stretched so thin that it has been stripped of any useful meaning. We don't ever talk about our work in this way. We spend an enormous amount of time trying to get away from these kinds of conventions and all the dead weight they pull along with them. This is one important way of breaking down concentrations of power that swirl around writers like the ones you mentioned and the way in which they get a disproportionate influence over art practitioners.

CB: If the work of people like Foster and Kwon isn't of interest to you, perhaps you could say a little more about the models or perspectives of other art or non-art groups that you are interested in?

TS: On our website we have a section for readings that includes interviews and articles by people like: WochenKlausur, Greg Sholette, Julie Ault (formerly of Group Material), Nato Thompson, N55, Alan Moore, Guy Debord, and Lars Bang Larsen. A recent booklet we published compiled quotes about collaboration and included people and groups like: The Ex, Sonic Youth, Act Up, Paper Tiger Television, Parliament / Funkadelic, REPOhistory, Studs Terkel, Benjamin Nelson, and Frederick Wiseman. Our practice has been greatly affected by some of the people we have collaborated with like Zena Sakowski and Rob Kelly, Brennan McGaffey, Dave Whitman, and Angelo. The contributions of past members of Temporary Services: Lora Lode, Kevin Kaempf, Nance Klehm and Lillian Yvonne have also helped to shape what Temporary Services is doing now.

CB: The antagonism you outlined is interesting and especially relevant given the theme of Us vs. Them. While I do share your desire for a language that is inclusive I am a little wary of how anti-academicism is used. For

instance, populist "anti-academic" critics (such as Dave Hickey) have just as disproportionate an influence as "academic" ones, often linking populist language to quite conservative aesthetics. Forms of collaborative practice, while they do resist certain features of how power is organized in the art world (the focus on the individual, on object production, etc.) are not without their own specific power dynamics. One kind of power is the power of being able to invite the public to participate in a work: while this may be in a spirit of democracy, it may involve subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) forms of coercion. Often the forms of participation are established in advance and the public's role becomes that of fulfilling this function. I am especially interested in moments of awkwardness, or where a work is outright rejected, and the ability for conversation to come out of such antagonisms. You mentioned vernacular culture as one way of dealing directly with the dynamics of "everyday life." Can you say a little more specifically how you approach the use of vernacular culture, and what role, if any, social antagonisms play in these situations?

TS: We don't try to construct an "US vs. THEM" situation with our work at all. We work to get the ideas we value out into the world. We feel accountable for this work so we talk about it and explain what we do. Angelo may feel that it's the prisoners against the guards but that is something else entirely. We certainly didn't invite him to join hands with us to fight imaginary oppressors on the front lines of critical theory. We couldn't care less about their fucking squabbles.

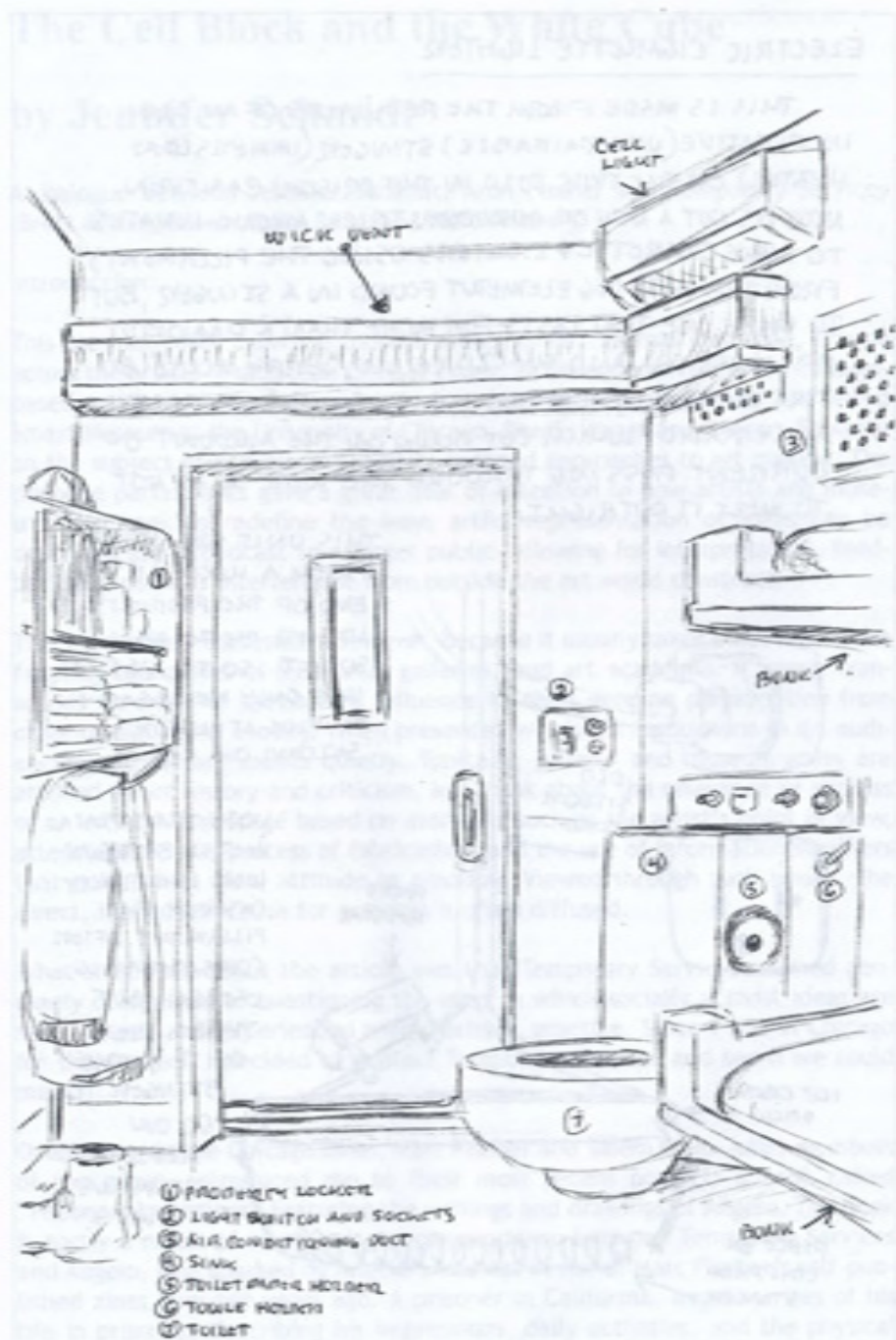
We don't concern ourselves with the writings or ideas of the people you have mentioned. Asking us about these people really leaves us out in the cold. Deferring to these external authorities that have nothing to do with how we think or talk about our work puts us in an awkward position; all we can do is react and therefore look reactionary.

And it isn't about making simple choices between "academic" and "populist". We are neither of these; we work in many ways that try to articulate our ideas from our desires and not positions of power that are external to our concerns. Every situation ever involving humans has power issues that have to be negotiated. This is unavoidable. What we can do is try to avoid replicating this behavior. Complicated ideas can be communicated without needing to rely on specialized language and creating a position of power for yourself. One does not need to adopt an obscure language of theoretical gobbledey-gook and name-dropping to participate in the academic world, nor does one have to speak on a third grade level to make things comprehensible to a more general audience. Both the academic world and the popular press have been very supportive of this project. It is possible for artists to navigate all of these areas in a variety of ways without having to choose sides.

We also avoid terms like "everyday life" if we can. It is so loaded and over-used in contemporary practice. Generalizing about this, or about how collaborative art as a whole might coerce an audience feels unproductive and vague.

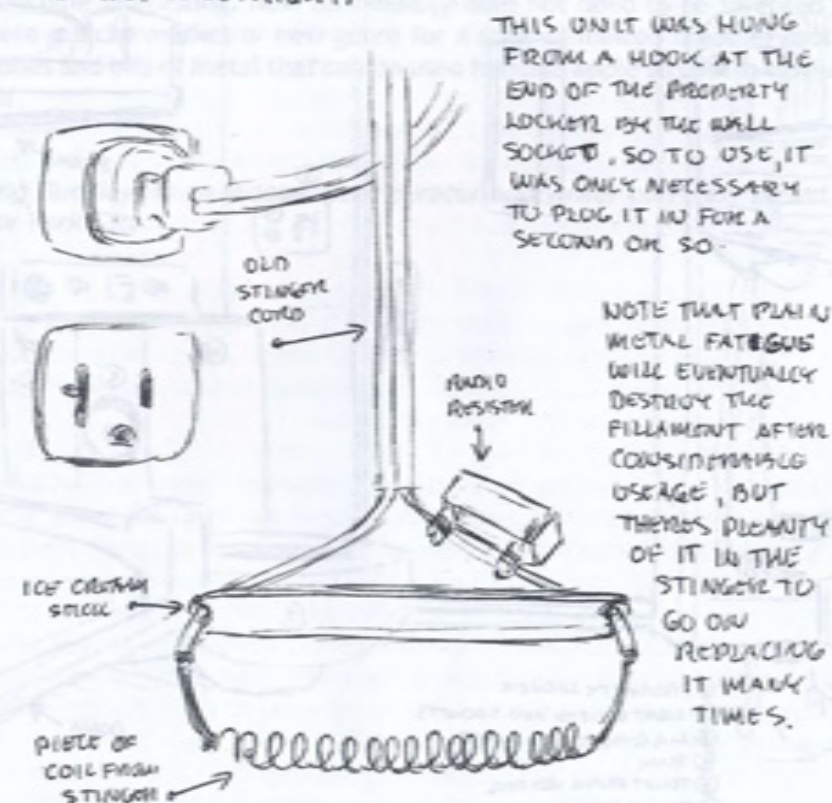
Looking at vernacular visual culture tells us a lot about how people use their houses, streets, cities, and all kinds of other things in a direct way that isn't about top-down planning or theorizing. In the past artists have presented vernacular culture in museums in an effort to antagonize audiences but this is not our intent at all. We were really happy that MASS MoCA did not feel the need to justify the Prisoners' Inventions as works of art or "readymades" or examples of "abject low culture" or some shit like that. One success of this project is that people seem willing to accept the inventions of prisoners as creative objects that merit our attention and thought without us having to force them into goofy critical constructs like "Outsider Art." We wouldn't do that. These objects don't need critical help to become interesting. New terminology does not need to be invented to create a niche market or new genre for a stick of melted together toothbrushes and bits of metal that can be used to make apple strudel in a prison cell!

Craig Buckley, is an independent curator and writer currently based in New York City.



ELECTRIC CIGARETTE LIGHTER

THIS IS MADE FROM THE REMNANTS OF AN OLD INOPERATIVE (UNREPAIRABLE) STINGER (IMMERSION HEATER) OF THE TYPE SOLD IN THE PRISON CANTEN. NOW IT'S NOT A NEW OR UNKNOWN TRICK AMONG INMATES TO MAKE CIGARETTE LIGHTERS USING THE FILAMENTS FROM THE HEATING ELEMENT FOUND IN A STINGER, BUT TO MAKE ONE THAT LASTS FOR MORE THAN A HANDFUL OF LIGHTS IS, AND MY OLD CELLE, JERRY, ACHIEVED THIS BY CANNIBALIZING A RESISTOR FROM A THROWN AWAY RADIO, WHICH CUT DOWN ON THE AMOUNT OF CURRENT PASSING THROUGH THE WIRE SO AS NOT TO MELT IT OUTRIGHT.



THIS UNIT WAS HUNG FROM A HOOK AT THE END OF THE PROPERTY LOCKER BY THE WALL SOCKET, SO TO USE, IT WAS ONLY NECESSARY TO PLOG IT IN FOR A SECOND OR SO.

NOTE THAT PLAIN METAL FATIGUES WILL EVENTUALLY DESTROY THE FILAMENT AFTER CONSIDERABLE USAGE, BUT THERE'S PLENTY OF IT IN THE STINGER TO GO ON REPLACING IT MANY TIMES.

A page from Angelo before it was cleaned up, spell checked, and typeset for the book version of Prisoners' Inventions.

The Cell Block and the White Cube

by Jennifer Schmidt

A dialogue between Jennifer Schmidt, Aron Fischer and Temporary Services (Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julien, and Marc Fischer)

Introduction:

This summer while browsing through a copy of Art Journal magazine, I came across the article "Practice in Critical Times," a dialogue involving the Chicago-based artist group Temporary Services, museum staff at the David and Alfred Smart Museum at the University of Chicago, Dan S. Wang, and Gregory Sholette on the subject of activist and socially engaged approaches to art making. The dialogue participants gave a great deal of attention to how artists and museums can seek to redefine the ways artful representation of ideas can be described and broadcast to a larger public—allowing for interpretation, feedback and perhaps interference from outside the art world construct.

This is not a new discussion. However, because it usually takes place within the familiar boundaries of museums, galleries, and art academia, it rarely transcends its origin of specialized influence to elicit genuine participation from other disciplines of inquiry. When presented within art institutions to art audiences, activist art speaks quietly. Typically, gallery- and museum-goers are attuned to art history and criticism, and think about the relevance or success of an artwork's message based on elements such as the artist's point of view, attention to craft, process of fabrication, and the use of information signifiers that point to an idea, attitude or emotion. Viewed through such lenses, the direct, immediate cause for activism is often diffused.

What struck me about the article was that Temporary Services seemed genuinely committed to questioning the ways in which socially activist ideas are seen, heard, and experienced within artistic practice. Since I was in Chicago for the summer, I decided to contact Temporary Services and see if we could meet.

Over dinner at the Chicago Diner, Marc Fischer and Salem Collo-Julien, members of the group, introduced me to their most recent project: a book called "Prisoners Inventions" featuring the writings and drawings of Angelo. The book is partly a result of an on-going correspondence between Temporary Services and Angelo, first sparked by Angelo's interest in one of Marc Fischer's self-published zines over ten years ago. A prisoner in California, Angelo writes of his life in prison by describing his impressions, daily activities, and the physical cell that he lives in. His drawings illustrate inventions or problem solving solutions to living under constant supervision on a daily basis. In book form, the reader is able to internalize Angelo's experience and identify with him as a fel-

low human being with practical needs, a desire to express himself through writing and art, as well as to personalize and organize his living space. Angelo's drawings illustrate inventions in situations where resources are limited and time is immeasurable. The reader can reflect on the system of incarceration and what that necessitates, while recognizing the inherent relevance of the object as it pertains to an actual person's experience. Serving as a starting point for investigation and inquiry into the penal system, "Prisoners' Inventions" also addresses issues concerning the role of expression and freedom of speech.

Later that week, Marc and I found ourselves in a conversation about Prisoners' Inventions with Aron Fischer (no relation to Marc), who was working as a public defender. As an advocate for defendants in the criminal justice system, Aron was interested in the way the project depicted the full humanity of prisoners, as opposed to the narrower legal or political claims he was used to making on their behalf. Marc, in turn, welcomed the chance to discuss the political implications of the work with someone in that world. For my part, I saw this as an opportunity to engage the idea of "Prisoners' Inventions" in a manner that looks beyond the project's identity as an art object, showcased within an art venue. At the end of the evening, we all felt there was more to say and decided to continue the conversation in written form.

The following is a dialogue between Jennifer Schmidt, Aron Fischer, and Temporary Services. It addresses the legal implications associated with "Prisoners' Inventions" and Angelo, as well as the display of Prisoners' Inventions as part of the Fantastic exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, MA.

TS: One thing that came up as we were preparing for the exhibition of Prisoners' Inventions at MASS MoCA, was a debate about the issue of morality when working with incarcerated persons. We do not know what Angelo was convicted of. He has requested that we, and the people we work with, respect his privacy by not pursuing the matter. Nonetheless, people commonly ask us why Angelo is incarcerated and how we could work with someone without having that knowledge. Thus far, Angelo has not asked us to participate in his legal situation. We work with Angelo because we value his art and ideas. He does not use his art to glorify or advance criminality in any way that could harm others and he has been terrifically generous with us.

Originally we planned to put Angelo's full name on the project but the museum feared that they might be scandalized if someone researched Angelo's conviction and made it public. They loved the project but were concerned about the risks. To eliminate that concern, Angelo suggested that we either make him anonymous or use his "artist name" (Angelo) rather than his full name. So, in order to protect his privacy, we no longer use Angelo's full name and we never mention what prison he is in. He clearly likes that his creative work is finding an audience, but as long as he is incarcerated, he just wants to "stay sane" while serving his time. He's not interested in becoming a celebrity prisoner.

Perhaps his work on this project will be personally helpful to him later in life if he gets paroled, but for now, the public dispersal of his work seems to be reward enough. He really enjoys seeing his drawings and writings exhibited and published.

Where we're heading with this is the question of: how can prisoners usefully participate in the world in spite of their convictions and the moral judgments that many might make against them? We don't think prisoners should have to wait until they get out to be productive. We know that prisoners already participate in our culture in various ways: they do work for industries that use prison labor: they make our street signs and license plates, they package Starbucks coffee and they do telemarketing. And then of course, prisoners also participate in our culture through all of the prison slang, fashions, and customs that we see on TV and in movies. Many people in the world of Hip Hop know about prison firsthand; James Brown learned to sing in prison.

One thing we are trying to work with in Prisoners' Inventions is: how can prisoners' channel their experiences of incarceration into constructive cultural work? How can prisoners make positive thoughtful contributions to culture in spite of their crimes? What kind of barriers do we have to contend with in order to get their work out into the world? So Aron, what can you add here? What are your thoughts on this from the legal work that you are doing?

AF: What interests me about "Prisoners' Inventions" is that it's by and about a prisoner, it's about prison, but it doesn't take any of the conventional positions on crime and punishment. In my world, whenever people talk about crime and punishment, it's usually from one of a few well-staked-out points of view. One view is that crime is the result of racism, inequality, poverty, and so forth, not immorality. It follows from this that punishment shouldn't be about revenge, it should be about rehabilitation, and maybe public safety. Another view is that crime is immoral, so criminals deserve to suffer; punishment should be about retribution. Then there are people who think punishment should be about deterring people from committing further crimes. Of course, elements of these viewpoints can be mixed and matched.

All of these positions share two things in common. First, they are very general—they are rarely based on careful attention to actual experiences of actual people. And second, they all assume that crime and punishment are inextricably linked; what you think about crime determines what you think about punishment, and vice-versa.

"Prisoners' Inventions" is different. It is, as you say, a serious research project by a person with a lot of experience with what it's like to be a prisoner. And Angelo says a lot about punishment—about prison—but refuses to talk about his crime. The effect of bucking convention in these ways is to suggest a much more humanistic way of thinking about prison than you see elsewhere. The viewer is not allowed to think about punishment in the abstract, apart from how it actually feels. The viewer is not allowed to let their ideas about crime

color their ideas about how punishment feels.

Still, it's inevitable that questions are going to arise about the politics of the thing. And it makes sense that those questions are directed at you guys rather than Angelo. Angelo can legitimately say that he's just writing and drawing about his life, about what he knows. You say, you work with Angelo because you value his art and ideas, but, unlike Angelo, you chose to work with these ideas over many other ones. Why? Obviously, your work deals with the place of prison and prisoners in our culture. What are you saying about it?

I'm not saying you have to answer all those questions. But if you do—and it sounds to me like you're trying to answer those questions when you talk about the contributions other prisoners can make to society—then I think it will be hard to avoid the questions of crime. When it's just Angelo, it's his decision not to talk about his crime, and he's not trying to glorify or advance crime, and you respect that, and the viewer respects that. But if it's not just Angelo, and if you're also talking about other prisoners—about how maybe there are too many of them, or maybe more can be done to coordinate their participation in our culture—then why? Why do we want prisoners to participate? Why do they deserve it?

I guess you could just say, there are so many people incarcerated in the United States, many of them have something valuable to say, and, as long as what they have to say doesn't glorify crime, everyone benefits from their saying it. And that works for people like Angelo, who can do their work sitting on their bunks with ballpoint pens. Legally, prisoners have a constitutional right to freedom of speech as long as the guards don't have a good reason to take it away from them. But what about those who can't make a contribution with nothing more than a ballpoint pen? Should conditions be changed to allow them to? Will that cost money? Will it make it easier for them to escape? Will it make prison too pleasant?

TS: We chose to work on this project - to ask Angelo about this material and to produce a book and exhibition - because of how compelling the material is. It really has a broad appeal and its importance was clear to us immediately. We seek out intense creativity wherever it resides. The art world is a place where you would expect to find a lot of creativity, but is probably the one field where it exists the least. For example, the biotech industry has harbored a frightening amount of creativity and experimentation - more than the art world has ever seen. The inventiveness and resourcefulness in the prisoners' inventions offers several profound lessons to those of us not in prison.

Anyone can immediately see what an impoverished environment prisoners live in when they are presented with this material. In addition, the way that this project has been handled short-circuits the desire that a lot of people have for an "emotional target" - someplace to level blame and to justify or dismiss the horrendous circumstances under which we warehouse prisoners. The conditions most prisoners live with are appalling if not clearly human rights violations. We

know that things don't have to be this way. Prisons can be built in a way that minimizes exploitation, physical violence, sexual assault and related deadly diseases, recidivism and other problems that contemporary prison design compounds. Our culture is a selfish one and won't spend the money or devote the resources necessary to seriously reduce crime and to rehabilitate those that can be. The biggest evidence of this is the privatization of prisons and that people will seek to increase profits from others' misery and mistakes.

People are not their crimes. They are not committing the crime, that got them in jail, over and over again each day that they are in prison. However, our penal system treats them this way and refuses to deal with them as persons. It was important to us to take this out of the equation when people encounter Prisoners' Inventions. They are not able to dismiss the work or to fall back on only focusing on the crime that Angelo, or the other inmates whose inventions are presented, committed. We were accused of everything from being hypocrites, about the ethical standards we demand in our practice and that of others, to being immoral for not knowing about Angelo's crime.

There is a flipside to this that has also affected our collaboration with Angelo. It is that for seemingly every positive application that an accepted object or privilege will have for one inmate, another prisoner will immediately find a harmful, violent, or destructive use of that same object or privilege. The drug and weapons trade is a good example of this. Where Angelo is incarcerated, books must be sent by an outside publisher or large well-known distributor because there have been too many problems with individuals hiding drugs in books and attempting to smuggle them in through the mail. Even bubble mailers can't be used to send things for this same reason. Hardbound books are completely banned - in all likelihood because the spines make good hiding places for contraband. Restrictions like these prevent us from casually passing along a lot of books that a person like Angelo might really benefit from. There are a lot of restrictions that cut both ways like this.

One inmate (not Angelo), who for over two decades had been trying to better himself during a very long sentence, once made the comparison that "Being in prison is like being the only sober person on a road filled with drunk drivers. You waste so much energy just trying to avoid getting hit by the other drivers that it becomes extremely difficult to get where you are trying to go." Prisoners who are trying to do something constructive or self-advancing are in a really tough situation because many of the other inmates practice behavior (and inventiveness) that causes some of these restrictions to be put into place. For the prisoner that is trying to do something positive, the difficulties come from all angles.

Nonetheless, this project gives clear evidence that prisoners can make huge contributions. Not everyone is going to make these amazing inventions nor should we expect them to; that would be like expecting every panhandler to be a virtuoso musician because you've seen that a couple can carry a tune. But it does give us a lot of hope. Certainly some people, as you suggest, will always

feel that doing anything with prisoners at all - that giving them any kind of voice - is giving them something they don't deserve. One answer to that challenge perhaps lies in the absurdly high recidivism rate in this country. Based on the number of people that return to prison after they get paroled (often for crimes worse than the ones they committed the first time), it seems that we can afford to be a little more experimental in what some prisoners are able to do during their sentences. We can afford to rethink what they might contribute to society while they are still in prison. We can afford to keep thinking about how prisoners might be able to re-integrate into society upon release.

Not every person in prison is going to be worth the effort that we have made to collaborate with Angelo. But of course, this would be true if you made generalizations about collaborating with any random person in any random situation. People in prison are certainly no more likely to produce interesting art, writing, or ideas than any other random person. We certainly think that Angelo is a really exceptional artist - in many ways not even demonstrated in the Prisoners' Inventions project. One of the nice things about Prisoners' Inventions is that Angelo has highlighted the interesting achievements of others who, in some cases, might be far less enjoyable to work with than he has been.

AF: Angelo certainly is exceptional, and the material is certainly compelling. It is a hazard of my profession to lose sight of the particular person in the pursuit of "justice," which is supposed to be blind and impersonal. This very hazard is what made Prisoners' Inventions attractive to me in the first place. And this same hazard, this same perception that it is necessary to dehumanize in order to do justice, also seems to underlie the undeniable cruelty our society tolerates in prisons. Nevertheless, we seem to fall prey to the same tendency to depersonalize every time we talk about the structural injustices of the criminal justice system. The best thing may be simply to refuse to engage in generalized (and therefore impersonal) debates about justice and insist methodically, rigorously, on the humanity of each individual prisoner.

Assuming we want to talk about the broader issue of prisons, we quickly run into a difficult fact, which the prisoner you quote alludes to: nobody knows how run a good prison. When I say a "good" prison, I mean one that does both of the things you talked about—has conditions that are not appalling, and reduces recidivism. In the 1960s and 1970s, the dominant view was that prisons were for rehabilitating prisoners, and there were a lot more programs than there are now. But it turned out that for the most part these programs had very little effect on recidivism. The "failure" of these programs—along with a rise in crime and the broader rightward shift in politics—led to a backlash that resulted in the much more punitive system that we have now. Of course, making life worse for prisoners hasn't reduced recidivism either, so I agree with you that we can afford to experiment. But it is so much harder to make improvements than it is to perceive the need for them.

JS: I'd like to talk more about how "Prisoners' Inventions" functions when displayed as art within a museum or gallery. Rarely is there immediate cause for

activism after pausing to read the wall label and to observe the object presented.

I agree that Angelo's writings and drawings are compelling. But for me, what stands out is not so much Angelo's technical ability to draw, but his ability to render and describe from a personal perspective what it is like to be a prisoner within a regulated system. I saw your recreations and the fabricated cell as part of the Fantastic exhibition at MASS MoCA. I wonder if visitors will be able to transcend the role of the art object and the neutral space of the gallery to think about and respond to the legal and political aspects of "Prisoners' Inventions". The exhibition title Fantastic implies the sensational or surreal, or as described in the exhibition literature:

In the fantastic, things could go either way. Poised between the possible and impossible, the fantastic is a destabilizing pause in the plausible, a moment for our utopian dreams and dystopian fears to acquire form. ...This imagery, populated by alien lights, levitating hippies, and utopian schemes, teeter in the fantastic moment, beguiling us to linger there with them on the precipitous cusp of possibility. Philosopher Walter Benjamin believed that meaningful social transformation required these disorienting moments just beyond the real: in his view, the fantastic is a powerful tool for preconceiving - and reordering - our world.

Temporary Services, how did you approach showing "Prisoners' Inventions" at MASS MoCA and what kinds of decisions or considerations did you have to make regarding its method and context of display?

I feel if "Prisoners' Inventions" is meant to be a means of education and insight into the penal system or issues surrounding freedom of expression, additional sources of information and outlets for response could be provided in conjunction with the show. Some suggestions would be to provide a study room where information could be easily accessed through pamphlets and books, provide Internet access to web addresses, and/or to give related organization contact information.

But perhaps this point is confusing because the book "Prisoners' Inventions" does not pretend to have a particular agenda. It is the writings and drawings of Angelo. How important is it for there to be a means of response from the viewer?

TS: We don't worry about if the inventions Angelo describes, or our recreations of these inventions, are art objects. They are objects of enormous creativity and imagination - for us that is enough. We often say that the distinction between art and other areas of human creativity is meaningless to us and this is one of those situations. One of the great pleasures of working with Nato Thompson (curator of Fantastic) is that he did not feel the need to justify the inventions as art by calling them "readymades" or trying to place them in some kind of art historical trajectory. Certainly the inventions were not thought of

art by the inmates that made them to cook or light cigarettes.

As you note, the degree to which Angelo describes the prison experience in this work is really important. It is telling, and exciting, that instead of people getting hung up on asking "How is this art?", most people move right into the content of the project and ask us for more explanation about why things are restricted, or they try to get a greater sense of other prison issues and what Angelo's situation is like. In this way, viewers seem to move beyond the museum context quite easily.

For MASS MoCA we decided to keep things focused entirely on the drawings, writings, inventions facsimiles and the recreated cell. There are so many things that can be discussed in Prisoners' Inventions and it is through dialogues like this that we have been able to illuminate other concerns in the project that are less easily discussed in an exhibition format. We can discuss prison and legal issues in this dialogue because it is an opportune moment; this is Aron's field.

We had space limitations at MASS MoCA and could not show anything more than what was included. We had to omit some of the inventions that we recreated. We had great budget constraints so our entire budget was used to get us there and to build the cell. We had to keep in mind that this project was also part of a larger show and it would be unrealistic to add too many additional elements to what was already a complicated presentation. The presentation already requires a great deal of reading. It would probably take at least 30-45 minutes to read all of Angelo's inventions writings that are included in the vitrines. It has been a great complement that we saw many visitors putting in the time to do this.

But, to respond to your suggestions - we have generated a lot of supplemental research while working on this project - information about inmate inventions that we found in other sources - and something like a study room could be a logical part of a future presentation. We have been tossing around some ideas about how the project could be expanded in different exhibitions. We know Angelo has made some more inventions drawings that we haven't seen yet. We don't see the show at MASS MoCA as definitive and unchangeable.

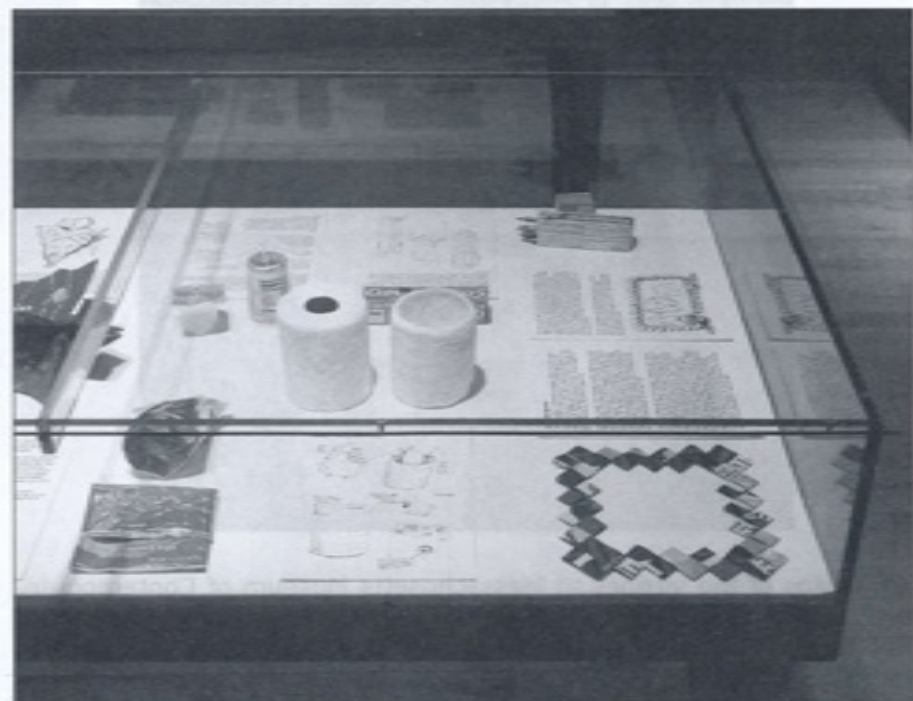
The process of proposing, debating, and ultimately realizing Prisoners' Inventions at MASS MoCA was incredibly intensive and much too long to fully describe here. Students from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago that helped us with the project conducted an exhaustive interview with Nato Thompson [included first in this booklet].

We don't view this project as a direct call to action in terms of prison reform - it doesn't prescribe a particular type of response in order to effect change. That wasn't our reason for doing this work. There is an activist component in making sure that voices like Angelo's get heard. He, in turn articulates the ideas (inventions) of a lot of past cellmates and so there is a chain of informa-

tion that he has worked with us to get circulated. There has been a huge amount of mainstream U.S. and international press on this project, which has spread information about the creativity and imagination of people in prison far and wide. We have been spending a lot of time following up on press inquiries. It is important not for our own promotion but to promote these ideas about prisoners' responses to their repressive conditions. Angelo's drawing of a motorized tattoo gun was featured in the "Ideas" section of the Boston Globe. His writings have been read on National Public Radio's "This American Life" and they have been reprinted in Harpers. Shows at MASS MoCA stay up for a year and reach a lot of people, but the press has brought aspects of this work to millions of additional people.

We have been participating in dialogues like this in order to shed light on the kind of work that it is possible to do with people that are incarcerated. We can talk about the problems we ran into and how we resolved them. We have been working to make people aware that prisoners are a population that can still participate in the world. The press has probably helped us to share that information more strongly than the exhibition at MASS MoCA, however the exhibition component provides people with a more tactile experience. The book that White Walls published is more intimate so that is another kind of experience. There are multiple levels. All are important to us.

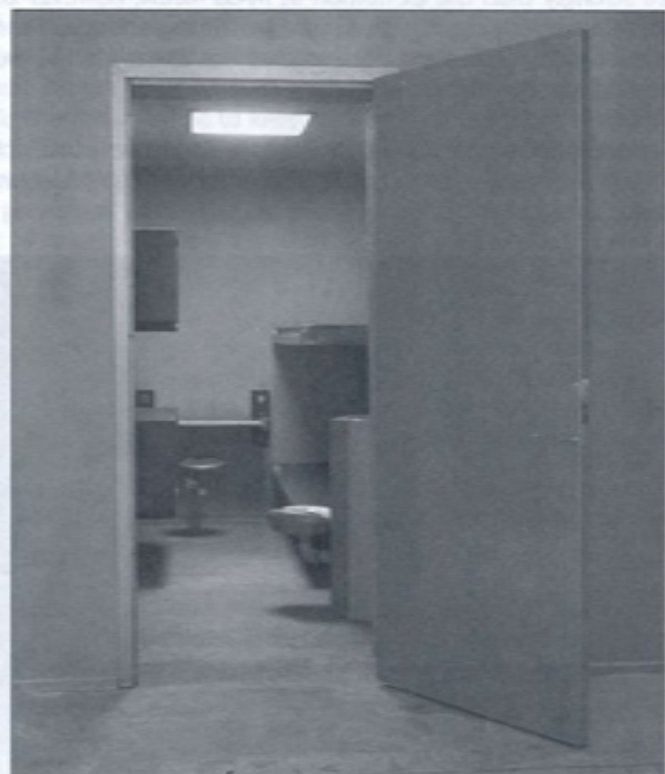
Jennifer Schmidt lives and works in Boston, MA. She currently teaches within the Print and Paper Area at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



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All photos of the vitrines at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, and Angelo's recreated cell were taken by Kevin Kennefick Photography. The cell and fixtures were built from Angelo's drawings by MASS



Temporary Services
P.O. Box 121012
Chicago, IL 60612 USA
www.temporarieservices.org
servers@temporarieservices.org

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