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VISUALIZING ABOLITION

EXHIBITIONS

EVENTS

STUDY GUIDES

ABOUT US



On View: Solitary Garden

Visualizing Abolition features art programs aimed to shift the social attachment to prisons.

Event Archives



Material and Memory
Sanford Biggers and Leigh Rafford



Abolitionist Feminisms
Sonya Clark, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie



Art, Abolition, and the University
Ashley Hunt, MJ Hart, Joshua Solis, Alberto Lule, Ryan Flaco Rising, and Rodrigo Vazquez

Visualizingabolition.ucsc.edu (2020), created and maintained by Abram Stern, featuring Barring Freedom images, artist interviews and study guides, as well as event archives and videos for 'Music for Abolition'. Photo: courtesy of the authors.

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CURATORIAL REFLECTIONS

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Barring Freedom: Art, Abolition and the Museum in Pandemic Times

Abstract

Barring Freedom, a travelling exhibition featuring artworks engaging the histories and current conditions of prisons and policing in the United States, was to open in April 2020. While COVID-19 disrupted that plan, the realities of inequity in the United States placed into stark relief by the pandemic and the uprisings of summer 2020 brought urgency to rethinking the curatorial vision of the exhibition to reach audiences beyond the gallery walls. Buoyed by the idea that, in the words of Angela Davis, art can ‘propel people towards social emancipation’, the exhibition and related programming was reconceived as an ongoing, interdisciplinary, public scholarship initiative reaching across the borders normally perceived between museums, prisons and universities. Opportunities arose for expanded forms of community building and participation that welcomed different forms of knowledge, furthering the political and aesthetic aims of the project to shift the social attachment to prisons.

Keywords

art and prisons
Barring Freedom
curating and social
justice
exhibitions and prisons
museums and prisons
online exhibitions



Barring Freedom (2020), installation view at San José Museum of Art. From left to right: Sharon Daniel, *Undoing Time/Amends/Excessive Force* (2020), embroidered American Flag; Levester Williams, *Tar Ball* (2014), *unclean bed sheets from a Virginian adult penitentiary, tar, flies, other media*; Dread Scott, *Stop* (2012), 2-channel HD video. Photo: J. Arnold, *Impart Photography*, courtesy of the authors.

In March 2020, when the White House declared a state of national emergency in response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, art institutions were forced to close and exhibitions were being cancelled across the United States and the globe – seemingly a small price to pay to stem the tide of the pandemic. *Barring Freedom*, a higher education teaching exhibition featuring contemporary art engaging the racialized and economic inequalities of prisons, was one such casualty. Organized for the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) Institute of the Arts and Sciences (IAS) by Rachel Nelson, IAS director, and Alexandra Moore, IAS curatorial fellow, *Barring Freedom* was slated to open in New York City at John Jay College of Criminal Justice’s Shiva Gallery in April 2020, and then to travel to UCSC and neighbouring San José Museum of Art in October 2020. A two-day symposium planned with feminist and legal studies scholar and noted abolitionist Gina Dent, who also served as an advisor for the exhibition, was to mark the West Coast opening.

With death rates rising and hospitals at capacity, predicting how the pandemic would affect the travelling exhibition and related educational programming over the next months (and years) was impossible. Yet, it was soon evident that the pandemic only increased the urgency of the themes and artworks of *Barring Freedom*. COVID-19 was tracing familiar paths of wreckage through society, with Black people, brown people, poor people, the elderly, and the incarcerated disproportionately among the sick and the dead, following the same dynamics of oppression that undergird policing, courts and prisons. By summer 2020, as historic uprisings in the United States took place against police homicidal violence towards Black people, it was clear that the curatorial approach of *Barring Freedom* would have to be rethought to allow

the art and ideas of the exhibition to permeate out of the walls that surround museums and universities.

In this curatorial reflection, we discuss how, as museums and universities closed their doors due to the pandemic, and as calls to ‘defund the police’ provided an audible backdrop, *Barring Freedom* was transformed into an ongoing hybrid public scholarship initiative. While the exhibition was on view intermittently at San José Museum of Art October 2020–April 2021, the broader context of social unrest provided the inspiration to design online exhibition materials and create programming aimed to highlight how art and culture can take part in the growing movement to imagine and create a world free of carceral structures. We will argue that as museums were shuttered and the pandemic brought attention to issues of equity and systemic racism not only within the criminal legal system but also in art institutions and higher education, other doors opened. Opportunities arose to reckon not only with the problems of who can see themselves and their experiences reflected in art exhibitions, but the socio-economic power structures that shape the contours of most art viewing. Concentrating primarily on this curatorial challenge and the strategies developed in response, we also hope to convey the importance of keeping these doors wedged open, including those of the carceral state that serve to remove people from society, even as some people can return to museums.

1. See Couloute (2017) and Sawyer and Wagner (2020).

In the Before Times: Art and the ‘Social Character’ of Carcerality

Prior to the pandemic, *Barring Freedom* was organized as a travelling teaching exhibition, designed to engage university students and the public through exhibition tours, education materials, and talks by invited speakers. The goal was to stage critical pedagogical inquiries into a question scholar and activist Angela Davis posed almost twenty years ago: ‘Why do we take prisons for granted?’ (2003: 15). As Davis and numerous scholars and activists have documented, the normalization of prisons, jails and detention centres (their ‘taken for grantedness’) seems to run counter to the dire and large-scale impact incarceration has had on communities. There are over 2 million people in various forms of cages in the United States. Each of those individuals have families and communities who are also impacted by their incarceration: 1.5 million children have fathers currently incarcerated, and 113 million adults have a family member who is currently or formerly incarcerated.¹ There are stark racist and economic inequalities throughout the entire criminal legal system, leading scholars including Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore to argue that incarceration feeds and maintains the rampant social and material inequality of racial capitalism (Davis 2003; Gilmore and Kumanyika 2020). Yet, despite the clear data about both the scale and the inequities of incarceration and policing in the United States, many people remain far from shocked and dismayed. Instead, large swathes of the population continue to accept prisons and policing as a necessary, and even natural, part of society.

While *Barring Freedom* was inspired by Davis’ (and other scholars’) diagnoses of the pervasiveness of social and cultural desensitivity to prisons and their workings, it draws as well upon her proposal for art as a mode of education, vital to movement building. Davis is eloquent about this potential:



Angela Davis and Gina Dent in conversation with Rachel Nelson (2020), event held at San José Museum of Art. Photo: courtesy of the authors.

Progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation.

(1998 [1985]: 238)

Barring Freedom aims to pose questions about the ‘social character’ of how people perceive the world, which has made punishment via prisons the common-sense solution to societal problems including poverty, sexual violence, substance abuse and homelessness. Dent makes the stakes explicit:

We cannot teach about prisons simply with statistics. [...] We also must deal with the ideological and aesthetic dimension to carcerality, which is part of our consciousness that we do not really interrogate.

(Davis and Dent 2020)

Through different aesthetic tactics, the artworks in *Barring Freedom* issue challenges to how and what people understand when it comes to policing and prisons in the United States, as well as how they view their relationships to these systems. In doing so, the show promotes the vision of social emancipation and prison abolition for which Davis and Dent both compellingly argue.

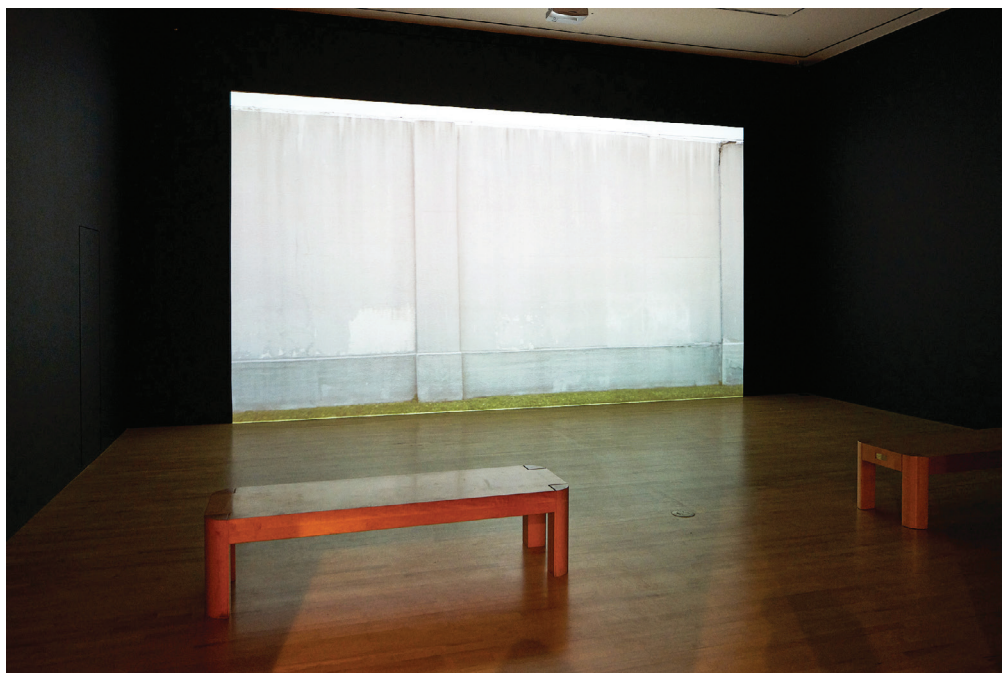
For instance, in the photographic series ‘Degrees of Visibility’ (2013–ongoing), artist Ashley Hunt brings into focus how prisons, detention centres and jails, despite numbering in the thousands, remain largely invisible to people who are not directly impacted by their workings. Hundreds of photographs document carceral structures across the United States. These images are taken



Barring Freedom (2020), installation view at San José Museum of Art. From left to right: Ashley Hunt, *Degrees of Invisibility* (2013–ongoing), installation of framed and unframed prints, stacks of newspaper and shipping crates; Sadie Barnette, *FBI Drawings: No Violence* (2020), graphite on paper. Photo: J. Arnold, *Impart Photography*, courtesy of the authors.

from publicly accessible sites and are surprisingly nondescript: many feature empty fields or unremarkable urban architecture. However, as the images name the prison and give the number of individuals incarcerated within, the innocuous photographs create a poignant archive of how prisons – and the millions of people they contain – disappear in US society.

Artworks that delve into the brutalities and racist dimensions in the US history of incarceration are also included in *Barring Freedom*. Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun’s documentary photographs taken in the Louisiana State Penitentiary (called Angola), *Slavery: The Prison Industrial Complex* (1980–2013), focus on the lives of men incarcerated at Angola, the vast majority of whom are African American, as they work in fields once tended by people who were enslaved. The historical roots of carceral relationality also informs Sonya Clark’s *Edifice and Mortar* (2018), an eight-foot wall made of brick that draws connections between nation building and the current prison system. Each brick of the sculptural wall bears a maker’s mark featuring the outline of a head with an Afro and the word *schiaivo*, Italian for ‘slave’. The other side of the wall features text from the Declaration of Independence (1776). The mortar for the wall is made of African American hair, binding together the promises of equality written across the bricks with the history of transatlantic slavery.



Above: *Barring Freedom* (2020) installation view at San José Museum of Art. From left to right: Sherrill Roland, *Contraband series* (2019); *Jumpsuit Project* (2016–ongoing); Titus Kaphar and Reginald Dwayne Betts, *Redaction Project* (2019), etching and silkscreen on paper; Sonya Clark, *Edifice and Mortar* (2018), hand-stamped bricks, human hair, and glass; *Three-fifths* (2010), cloth and thread. Below: Maria Gaspar, *On the Border of What is Formless and Monstrous* (2016), five-channel sound and video installation. Photos: J. Arnold, *Impart Photography*, courtesy of the authors.

As Dent expresses it, *Barring Freedom* is an invitation to ‘feel the divide [created by prisons] rather than exist in the divide’ (Davis and Dent 2020). A sound installation by Prison Renaissance (a collective of artists either currently or previously incarcerated) brings the voices of people in prison into the gallery space, serving as a reminder of the over 2 million individuals who are part of the social body, but are rendered invisible because they are behind bars. Deana Lawson’s *Mohawk Correctional Facility: Jazmin & Family* (2013) is an appropriated series of prison portrait photographs taken over two years of the artist’s cousin, Jazmin, and Jazmin’s partner, Erik. The images foreground the warmth that is present between them, despite the intrusions of the prison into their family structure. Maria Gaspar’s video and sound installation, *On the Border of What is Formless and Monstrous* (2016) renders the walls of the Cook County Jail momentarily permeable by blending the sounds from inside and outside.

In the original iteration of the exhibition planning, these and other artworks were to offer the primary critical engagement with ideas of prisons and abolition, offering embodied experiences of the carceral state and multiple points of entry into the implications of the systems of power that normalize the caging of millions. Exhibition tours and class visits were being arranged for university students and the public to stimulate discussions about these creative confrontations with racism and injustice, as well as the possibilities of a radically transformed society in which these structures are rendered obsolete. The looming question was how students and the public could access these experiences – and this collective vision of abolition – during a global pandemic.

The Problems of Containment and the Partitioning of Knowledge

By the end of March 2020, shelter-in-place orders were issued, and the April opening of *Barring Freedom* at New York’s John Jay College of Criminal Justice was cancelled. The physical exhibition at San José Museum of Art (SJMA) did open sporadically, based on state guidelines, between 30 October 2020 and 25 April 2021 (it was open a total of 28 days across those months). These limitations made it challenging for most university students and the public to attend the exhibition, yet the urgency attached to exploring the web of relations that sustain prisons and policing has not abated. Our job was to make sure this transformative potential was still felt through other modes.

With the closing of museums and universities, we began to think anew about the problematics of staging teaching exhibitions about this critical subject that existed well before the pandemic: the issues of accessibility and systemic inequality rife in museums as well as education and society at large. Our curatorial model for *Barring Freedom* is best articulated by curator and theorist Okwui Enwezor, who productively articulated the role of exhibitions as ‘platforms’ for socio-political engagements:

The exhibition as a diagnostic toolbox actively seeks to stage the relationships, conjunctions, and disjunctions between different realities [...]. [It is] less a receptacle of commodity-objects than a container of a plurality of voices, a material reflection on a series of disparate and interconnected actions and processes.

(2002: 55)

2. See Farrell and Medvedeva (2010) and Olivares and Piatak (2022).

Including artists who are currently incarcerated or system impacted and those without that lived experience, *Barring Freedom* is intent on illuminating the impacts that prisons have on society at large, blurring the distinctions between these supposed 'different realities'. Yet, upending the partitioning of knowledge that has happened within Euro-American museum spaces, in which singular voices and versions of reality have historically dominated, has not been accomplished. A widely circulated 2010 report on US museums, for instance, showed that 89 per cent of visitors are white, and more recent data reveals that families with income levels below \$75,000 a year are largely absent from cultural institutions.² These statistics uncomfortably reverse the demographics of the people most impacted by the US criminal legal system. Two-thirds of people in prisons, jails and detention centres report annual incomes under \$20,000 a year prior to arrest, and the racial disparities in incarceration are well documented (Kopf and Rabuy 2015).

Museums are mirrors into carcerality, reflecting through their demographic absences the inequalities that feed the prison system. Artists and scholars have levelled even more direct critiques of the relationships between prisons and museums, with artist Andrea Fraser, for instance, arguing that the institutions are two sides of the same structure. In an early work, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), Fraser links the development of both institutions, noting the shared disciplinary functions between museums and prisons as they shape social behaviours and norms. More recently, Fraser has extended this critique with *Tehachapi at Kings Road* (2014), a recontextualization of recordings from California penitentiaries, along with *Index I* (2011) and *Index II* (2014), which chart parallel trends in income inequality and art prices, and museum and prison construction, respectively.

These troubling links have been the subject of a recent notable travelling exhibition. *Walls Turned Sideways*, curated by Risa Puleo, first opened at Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston in 2018. The extensive exhibition included works from 42 different artists, organized around specific pressing issues within the criminal legal system, such as police violence, juvenile detention and the death penalty. One of the themes particularly highlighted was the entanglements between the institutions of museums and prisons. Puleo confronts this relationship in her curatorial introduction:

Walls Turned Sideways presents the museum as one in a campus of institutions that includes the prison, the library, the hospital, the zoo and the university, all of which were built to consolidate the power of the nation-state and administer to its citizens.

(2018: 25)

Included were Fraser's *Index I* and *Index II*, as well as works by Mary Patten and Kipwani Kiwanga that further explore the troubling relationships between forms of institutional power that often work in tandem to establish and normalize inequality.

Another important exhibition and publication, *Prison Nation* (2018) points to how art and the history of representation, even outside of the institutional containers, are implicated in carcerality. *Prison Nation* manifested as both a special issue in *Aperture* magazine, edited by visual studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood, and an exhibition, curated by Fleetwood and Michael Famighetti. Together these platforms considered the paradigms of representation that

maintain the prison system, concentrating particularly on the problematics of photography within the carceral state. The curators stage the exhibition as an inquiry:

How can images tell the story of mass incarceration when the imprisoned don't have control over their own representation? How can photographs visualize a reality that disproportionately affects people of colour, and, for many, remains outside of view?

(Fleetwood and Famighetti 2018)

Artworks by Sable Elyse Smith, Jesse Krimes, Deborah Luster and others brought into focus the power imbalances inherent in both art history and the representational politics of the criminal legal system. Worth noting here, and discussed further below, Fleetwood has since expanded upon this research and curatorial project, and in 2020 published *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, with a concurrent exhibition with the same name at MOMA PS1.

The pressing issues articulated through these exhibitions and research about the entanglements between art, museums and prisons highlighted our curatorial challenge: how to recreate the exhibition in ways that would work against the systems of containment that keep intact the illusion that these systems are disconnected. And, if people were unable to visit the exhibition or gather for events, how could it still act as a starting point for important conversations across the walls that seemingly separate prisons from society?

Art without Distance

In the early months of the pandemic the decision was made: if people could not come to us, we would have to go to them – virtually. Luckily, the seeds of an online initiative intending to collapse the distance between people incarcerated and the so-called 'free world' were already planted, quite literally. In October 2019, *Solitary Garden*, a public art and garden project by artist jackie sumell, had gone on view at UC Santa Cruz as the first stage of *Barring Freedom*. Created in collaboration with writer and abolitionist Tim Young, who is on Death Row in San Quentin State Prison, the artwork consists of a sculpture of an aluminium 6 × 9 foot solitary confinement cell, similar to the one in which Young has spent a minimum of 22 hours a day in for the last 21 years. Around this cell is a garden designed by Young through letters and drawings, and planted on his behalf by students and staff at the university. The project provides a model of reimagining modes of collaboration through the walls and bars that surround Young and many others in the United States.

The letters Young writes for the project do more than communicate what plants he wants to grow; they serve as a conduit for learning about his life in what he describes as 'a tiny, antiquated, windowless cell' so narrow that he cannot fully extend his arms (Young 2019). While articulating the garden he dreams of, complete with roses, daffodils, kale and Swiss chard, the letters also provide vivid details about the sensory deprivation, prison diet and medical neglect that Young suffers. Details about his innocence, the corruption and mishandling of his court case, and the racism he has endured also trickle in. These writings are an important part of *Solitary Garden* and, even before the pandemic, were circulated on social media and other online modalities to reach broader audiences than the sculpture and garden alone. By April 2020 the regular missives Young sent included graphic reports of



Above: jackie sumell and Timothy Young, UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden (2019–ongoing). Photo: courtesy of the Institute of Arts & Sciences, University of California, Santa Cruz. Below: Barring Freedom (2020), installation view of letters from Timothy Young at San José Museum of Art. Photo: San José Museum of Art, courtesy of the authors.

eroding conditions in the prison due to the pandemic and offered devastating insights into the uncaring bureaucracy of the prison as guards and incarcerated folks were falling ill and (by June and July 2020) dying in record numbers. There was a growing community online who were reading Young's words. The next step was to expand the digital presence of the exhibition and to explore other avenues through which to bring artworks and ideas into people's homes.

Our premise was that key aspects of the sensorial nature of encounters with (non-digital) artworks cannot be translated into the virtual space. Materiality has its own communicative power, which artist Sonya Clark, whose work features in *Barring Freedom*, describes succinctly: 'I believe that each material has its own vernacular [...]. Materials have the capacity to soak up our stories' (Ritchie, Meiners and Clark 2021). Therefore, the goal was not to use virtual technologies in an attempt to emulate the museum experience but instead to create different forms of engagement. Because the physical exhibition could not operate in the pandemic as the platform that Enwezor has prescribed to counter the closed and divisive circuit of museums and galleries (and there are questions about whether institutional spaces can achieve that regardless), our solution was a website and online programming. This would provide the structure and location for multi-modal engagement and allow for the diversity of participation the project aspired to manifest. Working with graduate students at UC Santa Cruz, a stand-alone website for the project was created (Moore, Nelson and Stern 2020). Images of the artworks accompany interviews with the artists. *Solitary Garden* features prominently on the website, with Young's letters and audio files of him reading from his writings and speaking about his views on prison abolition, as well as his suggested reading lists. Study guides, created by a team led by Moore, are featured on the website, integrating artist interviews, relevant texts and questions for reflection. The study guides are designed to translate the conversations and collective learning normally done through gallery visits and in classrooms for home use and remote learning environments. In this way, questions about the relationships between representation and incarceration were made available to anyone with an Internet connection.

Building a platform for an engaged community was the central idea of the series organized by Dent and Nelson, 'Visualizing Abolition', an ongoing program of regular, free online conversations featuring artists, activists, lawyers and scholars in and out of prisons. The events gathered together these people to speak about the importance of the arts, and the nuances they can offer, in the movement for abolition. Lawyer and founder of Equal Justice Initiative, Bryan Stevenson, for instance, offered a compelling argument about how the arts can help create informed communities:

We have to find ways to get the message about what's happening in our country, what's happening around the world, with these carceral responses to human struggle out there. We've got to get people to start thinking differently [...]. I am no longer satisfied in just kind of having this truth, and seeing this pain, and walking around with it. I want others to see it.

(Stevenson and Dent 2020)

A persistent theme in the 'Visualizing Abolition' events, as well as one of the issues that inspired *Barring Freedom*, was the failure of statistics and

other forms of data to communicate and inspire action against the injustices of incarceration. Indigenous studies scholar Joanne Barker (Lanape), for instance, noted that Federal data sets on rates of incarceration for Indigenous populations rely on forms of gender and racial classification, assigned by the police, that do not reflect the realities of Indigenous lives. Nationally, Native Americans are incarcerated at a rate 38 per cent higher than the US average for all groups (Daniel 2020). Barker questioned how the term ‘disproportionate’ in relation to these rates of incarceration impacts understanding: ‘How do the expectations or perceptions about what is proportional and symmetrical tell a story about the inevitability of Indigenous experiences of violence, arrest and incarceration?’ (Barker, Gaspar and Hernández 2021). In another ‘Visualizing Abolition’ conversation, sociologist Ruha Benjamin cited a study that found that white participants respond to statistics about racial disparities in incarceration rates by being more likely to support punitive measures (see Hetey and Eberhardt 2018). Benjamin explained that rather than necessarily elucidating injustices, data can become part of narratives that serve to justify oppression:

We might call it narrative; we might call it imagination; we might call it lies – racial lies – what we learn and retell about why people deserve to be [in prison.] [...] We have to be as rigorous about the stories in our culture that we tell and are told, as we are [about] the statistics.

(American Artist, Browne and Benjamin 2021)

The online events allowed for people to join from around the country and also enabled the participation of people currently within the prison system, emphasizing the vital roles they play within the movement for abolition. Young called in from San Quentin for a conversation with artist jackie sumell and former political prisoner Albert Woodfox and connected his own wrongful imprisonment to the entrenched problems of the system and the need for alternative visions of justice:

With racism impacting all aspects of not only policing but also how the courts mete out their judgments and sentences, how could justice be found within the same systems constructed around the discrimination of Black people, people of colour, indigenous people, and the poor? Abolition [...] should be part of the reparations that are past due in the United States.

(sumell, Woodfox and Young 2021)

Political prisoner and UC Santa Cruz graduate student Mumia Abu Jamal also participated through a prerecorded message in an event with artist and organizer Ashley Hunt and members of the Underground Scholars, a self-organized group of formerly incarcerated and/or system impacted students in the University of California system (Hunt et al. 2021).

The wide-ranging conversations of ‘Visualizing Abolition’, first live streamed and then archived on the website, were channels for community engagement, discussion and education that we had feared would be lost due to the pandemic. To offer people the more embodied experiential interaction with the ideas and thematics lacking in online events, Grammy-award winning musician Terri Lyne Carrington curated a series called ‘Music for Abolition’ of fifteen original music videos, created for the initiative and premiered at

Study Guides

The study guides provided here, created for the *Barring Freedom* exhibition, engage with the roles of the arts in the struggle for prison abolition. These study guides organize artworks from the exhibition into five themes of engagement as related to the issues of prisons and abolition.



INTRODUCTION



HISTORIES & STRUCTURES



CARCERAL VISUALITY



FROM THE INSIDE OUT



ABOLITION FUTURES



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barring Freedom study guides at visualizingabolition.ucsc.edu (2020). Photo: courtesy of the authors.

‘Visualizing Abolition’ events. Musicians from across the United States, including Chief Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, Samora and Elena Pinderhughes, Dianne Reeves and Camila Contina Bello, among others contributed to the endeavour to sonically imagine abolition. ‘Music for Abolition’ was, as trumpeter Nicholas Payton (2021) put it, another chapter in a long history of Black jazz musicians and other creatives of colour using music as a ‘means of crafting our liberation’.

Artworks were commissioned to respond to the circumstances. Lauren Dickens, our collaborator and senior curator at SJMA, commissioned Young (2019) to write a letter, which was sent to museum members. *Barring Freedom* artist Sharon Daniel and designer/programmer Erik Loyer interviewed Young and other people in US prisons and jails for an interactive, digital timeline of COVID-19’s effects on prison populations (Daniel and Loyer 2020). And artist Ashley Hunt collaborated with Stephen Czifra, MJ Hart, Alberto Lule and Joshua Solis (members of the Underground Scholars) to create ‘Abolish the University’, a print and digital broadsheet that discusses the connections between the university and prison systems in California (Hunt et al. 2020).



'Abolition from the Inside Out' (2020), online event with Rachel Nelson, Gina Dent, jackie sumell, Albert Woodfox and Timothy Young, 13 April. Photo: courtesy of the authors.

Finally, *Solitary Garden* continued to grow, despite the fact that people were not able to physically tend the plants. People who had been in correspondence with Young for the project formed a community around him and the garden, with staff, students and volunteers, including Louise Leong, Chloe Murr, Edie Trautwein and Zaarin Mizan at the early forefront, organizing online workshops for Young's supporters. Titled 'Revolutionary Greetings', Young's opener in his correspondence, the conversations explored themes of friendship and solidarity as well as Young's choices of healing plants and herbs for the garden. These workshops culminated in a zine of writings and artworks by Young and his supporters (Leong 2021). A 'Free Tim Young' campaign developed, exemplifying the ways in which, with the normal container of the museum's gallery inaccessible, the ideas and connections of the artworks successfully sprouted and proliferated in new and unexpected directions, surpassing what we could have initially imagined (Pak, Young and Nelson 2021).

Opening (Other) Doors

The digital programming reached broad audiences and inspired public engagement around ideas of art and abolition beyond our expectations. Over 24,000 people from across the United States and internationally have viewed 'Visualizing Abolition' online events. The website has averaged over 30,000 unique views a month since it launched in October 2020. Universities including not only UC Santa Cruz and San José State University, but also UC Davis (California), Colby College (Maine), Stetson University (Florida), University of Kansas, University of Massachusetts and others have utilized the online study guides and resources. This is a clear response to how the abolition of prisons,

as a clear present-day manifestation of past inequities, is an idea taking root in the popular imaginary.

Another surprise was that, despite the obstacles, there was unexpectedly high attendance for the exhibition at SJMA, with upwards of 60 per cent of attendees' first-time visitors to the museum (additional data was not collected). That an exhibition about prisons, racism and abolition would draw new audiences to the museum was significant, as artist Sanford Biggers made clear:

There was a long time that it was hard to feel welcome in certain museums and that might have been an attitude of staff, it might have been the shows that were being presented, and just the way the culture of the museum has not been the most inviting for people who are outside of a certain sort of elitist class.

(Biggers and Raiford 2021)

The focus of *Barring Freedom* on a pressing social concern impacting most explicitly those who have not always felt 'welcome', in Biggers words, shifted the demographics of visitors. This was strong evidence that when museums address issues of representation in exhibitions, and confront who sees themselves and their experiences reflected in artworks and exhibitions, doors open for different audiences. And art institutions can come to serve different purposes in society, becoming at least closer to being meeting places for communities – instead of being divisive.



Barring Freedom (2020), installation view at San José Museum of Art. From left to right: Sanford Biggers, *Infinite Tabernacle* (2017), HD video installation, carpet; BAM (Seated Warrior) (2016), polished bronze. Photo: J. Arnold, *Impart Photography*, courtesy of the authors.

The enthusiastic response to *Barring Freedom* and ‘Visualizing Abolition’ did not happen in a vacuum. The exhibition and programming benefited from Davis and Dent, as well as other prison abolitionists’, long decades of activism, scholarship and organizing to raise public awareness about prisons and abolition, as well as their insistence that art and the imagination is crucial in social transformation. Additionally, Nicole Fleetwood’s groundbreaking exhibition, *Marking Time* (2020–21), was on view at MoMA PS1, almost concurrently to *Barring Freedom* at SJMA. The *Marking Time* exhibition and accompanying award-winning book feature the work of currently or formerly incarcerated artists and make a compelling argument for ‘prison art as central to the contemporary art world’ (Fleetwood 2020: xxiii). The years of research Fleetwood undertook to change the contours of contemporary art, redefining it so that it does not exclude the people who have been disappeared from communities across the nation but instead recognizes their presence at the centre of culture, created the conditions in which our efforts could thrive.

Barring Freedom, if originally conceived as a space for viewers to recontextualize and rethink prisons and their relationships to them, became a vehicle through which to question how art and educational institutions can confront their (our) own relationships to systems of inequity. The work is not done, by any means. The lines drawn between classrooms, museums, houses and prisons might have become (if momentarily) less pronounced through the confluence of exhibitions and online programming in 2020 and 2021. However, there are many problems these expanded approaches could not solve. Participation in much of the online programming relies on reliable Internet access, something that remains a barrier for many people. Further, although Young and the voices of other currently or formerly incarcerated individuals could be heard in the programming and exhibition spaces, these physical and virtual spaces remain largely inaccessible to people incarcerated.

Within a carceral society, the walls that attempt to divide communities are pervasive. Abolition, therefore, means taking down *all* the walls and cages that structure inequality and oppression to build a more equitable society. The reception of *Barring Freedom*, ‘Visualizing Abolition’ and other related programming suggests that more and more people are starting to embrace this vision of social change. As prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba says, ‘Hope is a discipline’ (2021: 185). What is required now is sustained and disciplined hope – accompanied by action – that keeps the doors of museums, universities and larger society open to systemic change.

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