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ART & DESIGN

Artists Grapple With America's Prison System

By SABINE HEINLEIN MARCH 11, 2016



"Angola Prison, 1980," by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick. Keith Calhoun/Chandra McCormick

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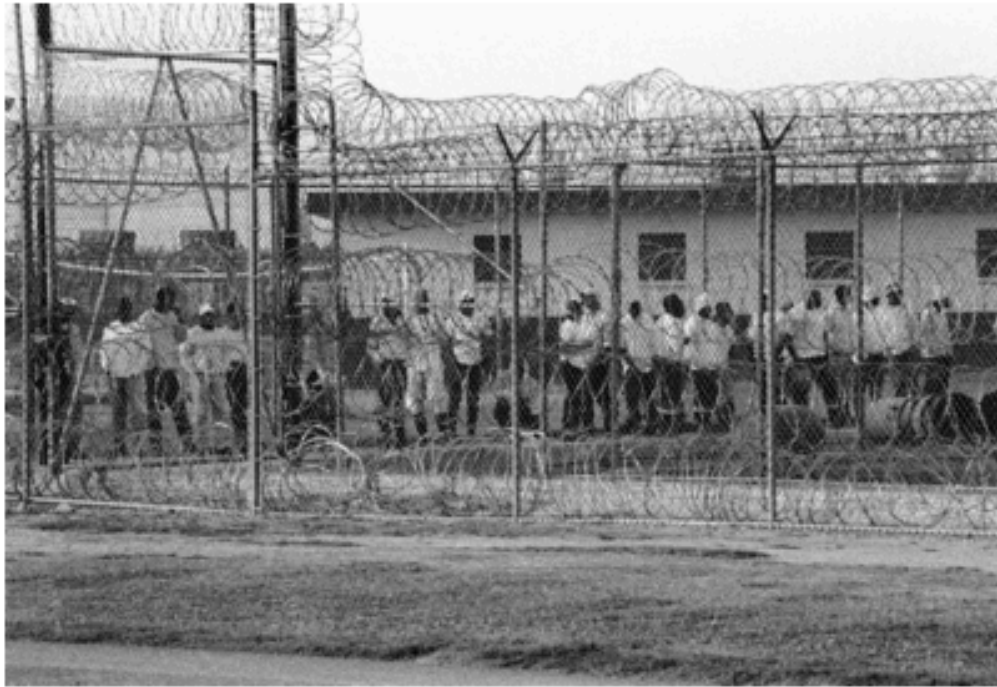
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For several weeks in February and March, the Whitney Museum's fifth-floor gallery has been drenched in the slamming of gates, the rattling of keys and the bellowing of prisoners and guards. The artist Andrea Fraser recorded the sounds at Sing Sing, the infamous prison 34 miles up the Hudson River, then fed them into a gallery that's roughly the same size as the prison's A Block.

"Down the River," her commanding work, alludes to the practice of connecting slaves — and prisoners to this day — from their families and

nonprofit and community groups are bonding together with artists.”



"Angola Prison, 2004," by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick.
Keith Calhoun/Chandra McCormick

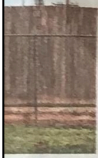
While [Ben Davis](#), the author of "9.5 Theses on Art and Class," praises artists for taking up the topic, he warned: "We should push the question beyond just consciousness-raising. There is this progressive-era style of political art where well-to-do people throw banquets for homeless people and then stand up on the balcony and congratulate themselves. There is an icky history of using the suffering of the people at the bottom as a spectacle."

Some artists are taking inspiration from their own experiences with the criminal justice system.

[Deana Lawson's](#) series of intimate, yet alienating photographs — part of MoMA PS1's recent "Greater New York" show — tracked her cousin's

Incarceration Can Serve as the Angriest Muse

By SABINE HEINLEIN



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"Down the River," her commanding work, alludes to the practice of separating slaves — and prisoners to this day — from their families and sentencing them to backbreaking labor on the

A prison system moves beyond politics into museums.

South's cotton plantations. It is a show that prods viewers to consider "the institutional and symbolic polarization that increasingly defines American society," Ms. Fraser said.

Artists around the country are increasingly grappling with America's incarceration system.

Like Ms. Fraser, Cameron Rowland's show at Artists Space engaged a privileged art world with the economic mechanisms behind mass incarceration, focusing on how our society benefits from prisoners' labor.

"Museum curators are increasingly paying attention to artists that visualize the criminal justice debate, and bringing subjects like necessary prison reform into their institutions," said Klaus Biesenbach, director of MoMA PS1 in Queens. Last December, the Rauschenberg Foundation called for fellowship proposals for "Creative In-

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