



Windows From Prison: Collaborative Photography as a Vehicle for Social Change

It was not a book, film, or photo essay that most radicalized my socio-political beliefs as a teenager. Those texts informed that transformation, they *primed* my heart and head, but it was my experiences working with low-income black senior citizens in Washington, DC that most affected me. That planted a deep seeded empathy that still feeds my life today.

While these weekly senior visits were often accompanied by delivering groceries or helping with various tasks around their apartments, the main purpose of my presence was to sit besides someone whom I presumably had very little in common with, and for an hour or so, just talk. Each week, sitting in small rooms, in depressing section-8 high rises, I would hear stories of race riots, official segregation in Washington, DC, decades of cultural, economic, political, and social struggles (as well as plenty of building gossip and personalized reviews of everything from TV shows, politicians, and 'today's horrible fashion').

Viewed as a whole, these conversations provided a window into systemic issues that no representation ever could. 'History' had not included these voices, yet I was constantly learning. Constantly challenged. As I spent more and more time with each senior, and started recording their stories, I began to understand a phrase I wouldn't hear till much later in life:

"Anything about us, without us, is against us."

I began to feel and respect the power of co-presence. I began to understand the importance of those most affected by any given issue being an integral part of any conversation about their lives and the issues that they face. It was here in these dark rooms, over cups of sweet tea and **on** dusty couches, that I encountered the *political potential of conversation*. The power of breathing the same air. Of slowing down. Of shutting up and listening.

And with that in mind, I can't think of a better way to end [here], and keep moving.—I see this is intended as a transitional sentence, but it's a bit confusing. Either cut it, or rework—I think the confusing word is “end”; the reader may think the essay is ending. Here's what I suggest: “With that in mind, I can't think of a better way to keep moving.” Just write ok—or provide a rewrite when you resend this.

Some reasons to listen:

“If you could have a window in your cell, what place from your past would it look out to?” **[if you put the responses in italics then the key question should be visually set differently—bold? Larger font?**



[the design/typography should indicate multiple voices—Is there a way of visually setting this off beside using quotation marks? I am thinking of some kind of frame or at the least putting everything in italics and indenting.]

“If I had a window in my cell it would carry the view of Olive St N.E., off of Kenilworth Ave by Deanwood subway station. The photo would include the street beginning at the bottom where the station is, where it starts to incline like a hill, capturing the houses on both sides and the street littered with its ornaments. Addresses not being important, rather the view, as if I were standing in the center of the street, at the bottom of the concrete slope staring backward into a life, longed deterred from that quiet place.

This caption having much meaning, carrying with it an abundance of nostalgic memories, for this place used to represent home. Safety was ever present while my brothers and I played with the neighborhood kids, decorating the sidewalk with innocent laughter and jovial games children play. I see my mother smile because she could worry a little less, we no longer lived in the projects of S.E., I could see the “maybe,” the “hope” that her boys might have a chance at something better inscribed in her countenance...this place seen it all, and through the thick and thin it always caressed me with its safety and comfort, always worthy enough to call home...These days they view from my window is full of nature’s delights, towering trees and hills that makes the sunset look ethereal. Breathtaking, but only for a moment, because beyond its beauty lies a standing structure with a menacing stare, reminding what this place really is. Home is what its not. So if I had a window looking out to a place from my past, it would be the place it all began and ended, full of love, safety, and comfort in the midst of turmoil as well as triumph. There’s no place like home.”

Kenneth, Windows From Prison participant.



Dear: Reader and Spectator

Reckant's State Park, The Dam (of ... (Rewrite to scan) VA)

As I stare out my window through the bars I can see The Dam. A beautiful water fall in the middle of Reckant's state Park. Surrounded by never ending rows of trees that resemble multi color buds sprouting high into the clouds. Where wildlife comes with no boundaries. God's creation so pure. Five friends since birth this has been our sanctuary we have retreated to since we found it on our exploration off the beaten path as kids. Over the years we have come to celebrate, mourn, and hide. Here has always been one constant in our ever growing hectic lives. Our names mark the rocks from the day this peaceful place was discovered. Always a story to reminisce about when we return. This place has been able to pause are on going world for the time we visit. The Dam is always flowing no matter what happens in my life. It never judges me and will always be there to welcome me back. A place to free my mind and soul once again.

Windows From Prison

The process of dehumanization is part and parcel to the experience of incarceration. Creating images *with* prisoners that don't further stereotype, traumatize, reduce identities, or dehumanize my collaborators were my goals when I began the ongoing project, *Windows From Prison*. From the beginning, it was important that the project engage with prisoners not as monsters, or "Others" as we often see in photos or videos around prison issues, nor as mere numbers and statistics utilized by many of the most well intentioned reports. Instead, the project started with the belief that by engaging with individuals as human beings (through dialogue and creative exchange), something powerful, potentially therapeutic, and politically activating could arise.

While it has evolved to engage each local context in which it's produced, the project always begins with an open-ended question:

"If you could have a window in your cell, what place from your past would it look out to?"

Participating prisoners respond by writing detailed descriptions of the photograph that they wish they could see, and include a letter that 'captions' and gives personalized meaning to their chosen and pre-designed image. The requested images are then created, sometimes by myself, sometimes through collaborations with high school and college students, and given back to each participating prisoner.

Whenever the project is exhibited, the images and corresponding writing become a staging ground for a set of public events to expand the dialogue, to fill the gaps left by any photographic project, and to instigate community conversations around local issues of incarceration.

Since its initial iterations in the fall of 2012, *Windows From Prison* has expanded into interactive exhibits in various states, a national postcard-exchange program (including hundreds of prisoners who responded to the question: "If you could create a window in the prison walls, what would you want the world to see?"), a high school curriculum that connected incarcerated teens and high school students (produced by myself and Georgetown University's street law clinic), and various public installations that have brought thousands of individuals together with prisoners across the country.

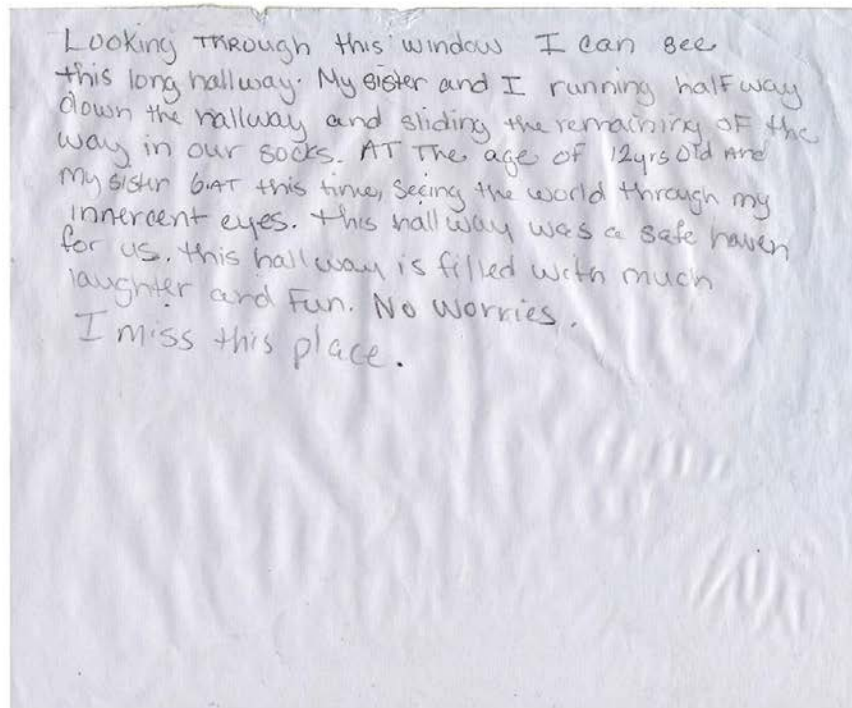
From the beginning, it was important that the project strive to generate a new *kind* of prison photography. In this instance, to create new photographs of incarceration required that no images of prisoners, detention facilities, police cars, court rooms, or execution chambers were necessary. Nor sought after.

In an attempt to move beyond this, it became evident that, if I couldn't get cameras into prisons for prisoners to use, and creating another documentary project was not of interest, but **[and?]** I still wanted to work collaboratively with prisoners to create their own photographs, then it only made sense to use the limitations as our medium, to work with prisoners to think photographically. To write photographically. To utilize collaboration and translation as way to foster empathy and powerful moments of community engagement at every phase of the project.

Windows From Prison began in October of 2012 in Richmond, VA, where, as an undergraduate student, I began holding workshops through a creative writing class a friend was running at the local jail (Open

Minds VCU). After an initial discussion, the men and women I was working with would spend an hour writing letters and [cut written] descriptions for making the photographs. Individuals were then invited to share what they wrote with the larger group, sparking conversations that often moved between notions of nostalgia, home, childhood, camaraderie, dislocation, and often the need to ‘move beyond’ or ‘better’ the very places they wish they could see.





The photo requests moved in a variety of ways: a hallway one individual used to slide down with his sister in their socks; a view of a participant's bedroom so he could better imagine hearing his siblings "tearing the house apart" as they ran down the stairs to get out the door for school each morning; a bucolic image of a state park where there's a dam and a **river**—[cut where] the "water is ever flowing. Never judging."

Participants in the workshops included the specific address (if **there was one**) and described exactly how to create the image, where to stand, what to include in the frame, occasionally what the sky should look like or what time of day the exposure should be made at. After the initial set of writing workshops, the requested images (which were initially photographed by me, and later expanded to include high school and college students) were then created, printed, and given back to the incarcerated participant.

It's important to note here, that before each version of the project is ever exhibited, there have already been a **multitude [best word?]** of community exchanges. The image, and thus the narrative of incarceration that is presented, is not imposed on the 'subjects' of the project but **generated** collaboratively. The collaborative structure not only **generates [vary language—produces?]** a new *kind* of prison photography, but, importantly, **[becomes? is itself]** a vehicle for bringing diverse communities together. Thus, each stage of the image (designed in writing workshops, photographed with community

members, and exhibited in public spaces) creates its own multi-centered classroom, each ripe with avenues for generating deep levels of empathy and understanding.

To translate something (taking the words of each prisoner and translating them into an image) is to dive deeply into someone's life. To immerse yourself in their writing and reveal and produce your own perceptions of their desire. In hopes of making this 'classroom' as powerful as possible, I designed the process of creating the image to be very slow and intentional. When I'm working with high school and college students to create the images, we go in a small group to each requested location. When we arrive, we read the corresponding letter aloud and have a moment of silence to allow the space to envelope us as much as possible. If the requested image is of a home, then we go to the door and knock, and explain to anyone who answers what we are doing, why, and ask permission to create the photograph. This alone has led to many unique and powerful experiences. At one location, the door opened to the sister of a man (mentioned above) who, though in her twenties now, used to slide down the hallway with her brother when she was 7. The exact hallway was right behind her as she held her two year old son in her arms. We talked for over an hour and finally made the photograph. It's not a moment you can really translate, but the process creates those possibilities. At another location, the family who lived there did not know the person and would not allow us to photograph their home. Strangely, though they wouldn't allow us to create a new image, they suggested that we use Google's street view (which we did).



When we're ready to start making the image, we begin by using our digital cameras as sketchbooks, creating various compositions of the requested location that we think best fits the prisoner's description. Looking over each digital image we decide upon which is the best composition and then use that composition to create a final image with a 6x7 medium format camera. We use medium format to give the participant the highest quality image that we can afford. By the time we've made the image it's usually taken upwards of an hour. Slowing down the process is integral for creating as strong an image as possible, but also because it creates space for dialogue between myself, the students I'm working with, and any individuals in the area that may come up and talk with us.

Exhibition tactics, or the value of creating photographs that don't try to answer questions:

What do viewers learn from these photographs? At first glance, I believe and hope very little. It is precisely the fact that the images give little information, precisely that they are often mundane 'snapshots' (a photo of a bay window, a sign on a street corner, a hallway...) that I believe creates a powerful vehicle for revealing something deeper than a hundred journalistic endeavors. As a viewer, if you want to engage with this image and the person whose history it contains, then you have to go to the voice of the prisoner. The images intentionally tell very little (except to the individual who requested it). Here, the privileged eye is inverted. This is as much an attempt to avoid voyeurism, as it **is a** hope of sharing a more **emotional window [what is that? The language is not quite right—alternative language?—empathetic view??]** into the experience of incarceration. As a viewer you can choose to engage or not, but if you do, it is the voice of the subject that will guide you through the image, not the preconceptions or prejudices of the photographer. Their captions imbue these spaces with life and can radically shift our perceptions of the image's meaning (ie; a seemingly simple image of a bay window is transformed as the viewer learns that it was requested so that the participant could imagine herself on the other side of that window playing games with her children with snacks all around them on a cold day...).

While exhibitions of the project have expanded and evolved since the first installations, the goal has always been for the exhibition to function not as an endpoint, or a culmination of a body of work, but as a starting point for bringing diverse audiences together through dialogue and community actions around ending mass incarceration. Thus, each exhibition features expansive public events (community forums, poetry from prison readings, film screenings, and many others) where individuals most affected by these systemic issues, and those most invested in their transformation (former prisoners, family members of incarcerated individuals, at-risk youth, NGOs, policy advocates, and many others), utilize the humanistic stage that the images create to push the project's civic, educational, and artistic potential further. By creating points of exchange between prisoners and a multitude of individuals, I believe that the project presents alternative models for documentary photography, and strives to facilitate a humanistic window into the histories, realities, and desires of some of the 2.3 million incarcerated Americans.



In June of 2013, the Bridge Progressive Arts Initiative in Charlottesville, VA hosted the first solo exhibition of the project. As you entered into the space, you were immediately surrounded by content. Straight in front of you were the images. The photographs were each printed too small to immediately see with a shelf filled with cards below each image. To your right you encountered a large map made up of orange dots that filled the wall and created the shape of the United States. To your left was a library of books, plants, a bulletin board, quotes painted on the wall, and various infographics. For the map I geo-located every jail or prison in the United States, projected it on the wall, and painted each dot. Besides the map were various stats about incarceration in the United States (e.g., With 2.3 million US citizens behind bars, the US **with** only 5% of the world's population, **has** 25% of the world's prisoners...). On the left side was a reading room with chairs, a local resource guide including information about groups that work around issues of incarceration, a lending library full of books written by prisoners or about incarceration that had been donated by publishers around the world, plants grown by **local** prisoners sat on shelves while a bulletin board full of post-its invited community members to ask questions about incarceration, beside that was a calendar of exhibition events, quotes about incarceration, and a smaller map that identified all the detention facilities in the area.

[this repeats somewhat] As mentioned, the photographs, which were in the center of the room were printed at a small scale in frames without glass. **Their size meant that** the images could not be seen from afar. If you wanted to encounter them you had to come up close. Below each image were cards with each prisoner's written photo request and corresponding letter. Visitors could read the letters prisoners wrote and take them with them, but the images could only be viewed in the space. For that exhibition, and any time the project has been shown in a gallery, the images are always printed at the same size that I am allowed to mail or give back to the incarcerated participant, which is typically 4x6 inches. This choice of scale **strives** to reinforce the micro and macro ways that incarceration constantly strips away a prisoner's humanity as well as to create an exhibition experience that [language repeats **strived** to] fosters a more

intimate viewing experience. While I've always used a 6x7 camera to create each set of images (in hopes of sharing the highest quality that I could afford to make) I wanted to present a viewing experience that individuals could either engage with or not. If you want to see the image there is no standing back or keeping one's distance.

Beyond what individuals would encounter on the walls of the space, we hosted an extensive set of community forums, film screenings, poetry readings from prison, letter writing workshops, vigils, teach-ins led by community members affected by incarceration and many many others. These events had the potential to fill in the gaps left by any document, create community connections, and champion the importance of interpersonal engagement. Viewed as a whole, the hope was that the photos may have gotten viewers 'in the door,' but perhaps it was finding out about a local group, meeting someone, hearing directly from a neighbor about these issues, that might truly activate community members.



In addition to the exhibit, we printed a newspaper and placed them in bright orange newspaper boxes across the city. Expanding the exhibit beyond the gallery, the newspaper reached out to community members to fulfill additional photo requests from local prisoners. The newspaper had information on the exhibit, public programming, an editorial written by writer/curator Pete Brook on the history of photography workshops in prisons and included a "housing wanted" advertisement for a local group working with women through the reentry process that were in need of a permanent location. During the exhibit this group began meeting at the gallery, and while no permanent location has been found yet, they continue to hold regular events at the space.

Viewed from afar, many of these choices were made to respond to a gallery context, which had both a pre-existing architecture and a self selecting audience (both of which I employed various tactics to expand upon). Within a less defined setting, with a more diverse public, it has made more sense to utilize photographs to create something in a larger scale, to alter or dominate space in hopes of creating a new environment (another classroom) altogether.

This can be seen in a recent installation of the project held in the main square of George Mason University just outside of Washington, DC. The project, which began in September 2013 and exhibited in April 2014 responded to Washington, DC's local context in a variety of ways. In DC, if you are sent to prison, you are put in the federal system (because DC is not a state and has no prison) which mean you can be sent thousands of miles away from family and friends. For this project we worked with the group "Free Minds DC" to write letters with the same question, "If you had a window in your cell..." to dozens of individuals from Washington, DC but who have been put in prisons across the country. After getting a **multitude [best word?]** of responses back, we worked with photo students from Duke Ellington High School and photographers from George Mason University, and went across DC to create each image according to the corresponding directions, and mailed them back to each participant. In April of 2014 the images and corresponding prisoner's writing were printed on 12x9 ft banners and displayed on campus in GMU's central public square. The banners were placed in a circular design with a large interactive installation in the center, so that that the photos created their own classroom, carving out space for dialogue and community action.



Mirroring the project's ethos, the exhibit didn't seek to impose information upon a community, but to create avenues for local knowledge to emerge, complicate, and activate the project's artistic and civic potential. Leading up to the exhibit, social science students from a variety of departments worked on in-class assignments to produce large quantities of research around issues related to mass incarceration. This research was transformed by GMU printmakers and other art students into a set of infographics and silkscreened pamphlets to be placed in the exhibition. For another part of the installation, master paper-makers pulped prison bedsheets and made blank paper out of it. We then painted data points from every jail or prison in the United States on the new and momentarily 'blank' paper.



The exhibit featured historical discussions about photography and incarceration; a forum about the intersections of race, slavery, and imprisonment; events featuring exonerated prisoners speaking about their experiences; film screenings; at-risk youth leading a workshop about their struggles and ideas for the future; and former prisoners reading poetry and discussing with students what it feels like to be incarcerated, what it means to grow up in certain social circumstances, and how solitary confinement affected them.

Viewed as a whole, the exhibition was built around four main concepts. First, that incarceration is far too complex and systemic for photography to be able to present any ‘document.’ [cut rest] Second, that GMU’s faculty and students, like almost any campus or community in the US, had a [cut incredibly] diverse and relevant set of experiences, skill sets, networks, and expertise to include in the conversation (which the exhibition became a catalyst for bringing together). Third, that with GMU’s proximity to Washington, DC, partnering with NGO’s, policy advocates, and organizations not only further expanded the conversation, but created avenues for students to engage with systemic issues in complex, multidisciplinary, and relevant ways. Fourth, that by incorporating communities most affected by issues of incarceration (through various events, workshops, and discussions), the exhibition itself **sought** [strived] to move beyond the very frustrations with representation and abstraction that led to the project’s design.

Whether a large-scale public installation, a national postcard exchange program, or a small workshop setting, I believe much of the project’s power resides in its flexibility. In that its process can respond to, or build upon local contexts, limitations, issues, or campaigns. It can incorporate hundreds if not thousands of individuals and still create space for intimate interactions. For instance, at the GMU exhibit, individuals could view the work by themselves for as long as they wanted (the benefits of public installations), or participate in an increasingly tiered system of engagement: from participating in a workshop, to helping produce content for the installation, to working with our team to create the photos, to moving beyond the project to support one of the many organizations that came and presented at the exhibit. Moving the images beyond the gallery, blog page, or newspaper fold, created alternative spaces

for reflection, education, and community engagement. The images were both the end result of a multitude of collaborative exchanges (which have their own power), and, importantly, they were the starting point for all of the events and interactions that occurred because of their presence. Like a house, there's a history from the construction, and that which the architecture accrues through use. How intentionally that space is utilized is what is most important to me. While I wanted individuals to be able to encounter the project unprompted by myself or others, I wanted to ensure that I didn't waste (another form of shaming) the opportunity that the images and their 'captions' provide. It is a huge privilege and a much bigger responsibility to carry these stories with me. Ensuring that the exhibition is constructed and programmed in a way to impact people in the deepest way possible requires a lot of organizing.

Since beginning the project my role within the project has evolved in a multitude of ways. While photography has always been the starting point and most integral component, the actual time photographing typically takes less than a week of any given nine month long project. The rest of my time is spent organizing, emailing, meeting with partners, speaking publically, more emailing, more meetings, doing 'experience design,' more emails, and finally installing the exhibit and co-facilitating all the corresponding events. With this expansion of practice I now view my role as less of a photographer, and **more** of a 'cultural organizer.' While traditional means of self and collective expression are being produced (through images, writing, multi-media) the installations not only reveal a diverse array of visuals, perspectives, and visions for ways forward, but **become** [is itself] a vehicle for bringing communities together. The entire project is a classroom, but one that I hope through participation, individuals learn and *perform* more creative, just, and equitable ways of being within the world. By viewing every choice as its own socio-political statement, by seeing the entire life cycle of a photograph as a performance (with a multitude of potential stages, actors, audiences, and alternative scripts), by working collaboratively with those most impacted by any given issues, then I believe photography's form and function will begin to impact the world and those within it in a way that truly respects the 'subjects' we wish to document.