

Due Time

Sarah Ross, Damon Locks and Fereshteh Toosi.

Context

In 2013-2014 artists Damon Locks, Sarah Ross, and Fereshteh Toosi offered a year long class at Stateville Prison in Illinois through the Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project (PNAP), a visual arts and humanities project. PNAP connects teaching artists and scholars to people at Stateville Prison through classes, workshops, and guest lectures. Classes are held once a week on a semester schedule. Courses result in finished projects—visual art, creative writing, and critical essays—with the goals of forging public discourse about the contexts and conditions of criminalization and incarceration.

Description of the class

The class was prompted by a collaboration with the Jane Addams Hull House Museum’s exhibition *Unfinished Business: Rec Room*. The exhibition explored contemporary ideas and iterations of early 20th Century Progressive Era reforms around time, freedom, and play. “Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, and eight hours for what you will” was the slogan for the controversial movement which asserted that all people deserved free time to participate fully in democracy. We thought that undertaking such a project with incarcerated artists might bring attention to the contexts of freedom and time, in the 21st century, and consider the fact that so many people— the 2.2 million locked up today— have lots of time: months, years, and decades of time, but no freedom to control it, act upon it, or use it in the way that reform era activists imagined.

The actual steps you and your students took to fulfill the assignment.

The class was divided into two traditional college semesters. In the first semester, Sarah Ross and Fereshteh Toosi led artists through a study of time by reading and doing time-based exercises. We read from a variety of sources including Georges Perec, Lynda Barry, Etheridge Knight, Nelson Mandela, and Nazim Hikmet.¹ Our friend James Kilgore wrote a piece about time specifically for our students. We did several exercises that consisted of tracking one’s activities and time throughout a day. For instance, the first assignment looked like this:

¹ See bibliography.

“Choose 3 consecutive hours from your day today. Using gridded paper mark the hours on the top or side of the paper in 30 minutes increments. Write out your activities (including thoughts and feelings if you like) during each of the 30 minute increments. You can make smaller time increments if you choose.”

The next assignment expanded upon the first:

“For this experiment, use graph paper and a similar method to what we have started in class. Track your activities for five days. This will serve as both a diary and a timeline of your day-to-day activities. Track all activities in your life (physical activity, eating, sleeping, reading, counts, laundry, commissary, visits, prayer, etc.). Even mundane or ‘boring’ activities are worth tracking and adding to your timeline. IMPORTANT: when you track your activities, be specific. For instance, if you are reading a book, what are you reading? If you are eating, what is your meal? If you are talking on the phone, what are you talking about? To whom? The more detail you can provide, the more informative your timeline will be. Also note aspects like sounds, smells, the quality of light in the space you are in, etc. Use the gridded paper and create a chart of days of the week and times of the day. Use colors, patterns or shapes to define each specific activity. Create a legend or key for your timeline.”

We then turned to the book *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline* by Daniel Rosenberg² to develop a deeper aesthetic language for what would become a series of visual and personal timelines. In addition, we played the surrealist game the Exquisite Corpse, with prompts around ideas of time. Finally, we recorded audio interviews with the artists talking about their experience of time in prison.

Over the break between semesters, the artists read Robin D.G. Kelley’s book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*³ as a starting point for a second semester in which we thought about the concepts of freedom and time together. In this portion of the class the artists worked with Damon Locks to develop an animation. They created narratives and each of the eleven artists in the class produced 100 frames, making 1100 drawings for the animation. Animator Rob Shaw, working from Portland, Oregon, created

²Rosenberg, Daniel, Anthony Grafton, and Princeton Architectural Press. Staff. *Cartographies of Time*. New York: Princeton Architectural, 2013.

³Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston, MA: Beacon, 2002. This assignment was prompted by Hull House staff Heather Radke.

a tutorial for the artists at Stateville to create the animation cells, and he scanned and animated the work once the drawings were completed. Here, time was part of the content and process of making the work.

Description of what actually unfolded and the outcomes.

The projects that emerged from this year-long inquiry into time and freedom included: a series of works on paper in the form of timelines; a video animation; recordings of audio interviews; a glossary of time developed with scholar and author Erica Meiners and made into a zine by the art group Temporary Services; a series of prints of exquisite corpse poems, and a parallel community engagement module that Fereshteh designed for students at Columbia College Chicago.

What unfolded over the year was a series of deep conversations about how people experience time in and out of prison. For instance, several artists said that the timelines were a way to show their families some details of their lives inside. For instance, someone said that his family thought that prison was only oppressive and monotonous— and it absolutely is— but even in this context he had crafted a life with habits, routines, and friends that were particular. Over the course of the year we became quite interested in how time, in this contemporary moment, shapes both inside and outside worlds. We looked at how time was so slow and punishing inside, while for many of us in the free world, time felt accelerated with deadlines, work, and overbooked schedules. We imagined how inside and outside time connects us through the logics of a carceral state. We became more aware of categories of time, understanding that time is an under-theorized and under-interrogated part of both work and punishment.

Overview of the discussion and reflection/evaluation process.

One of the more profound things we learned from incarcerated artists are the sentencing structures that lock up people for longer and longer time. For instance, during the course of Damon's class, we found out that the eleven artists in the class were collectively serving a total of over 260 years and nine life sentences. Their convictions or crimes are not different from convictions and crimes of twenty or thirty years ago, but state and federal sentencing is. One student told us that the judge said that he could be rehabilitated and then sentenced him to eighty years, which is essentially death by incarceration. Artists inside articulated that they wanted people on the outside to know more about time and the ways

people are procedurally and legally locked away for life.

Once the class at Stateville concluded, we continued to work with artists incarcerated there and, as a mission of PNAP, we showed the work around the city, in museums and classrooms, as a way to ask questions about time in prison, sentencing structures, and more. This project has sparked a new series of projects and inquiry that we call *The Long Term*. They reflect on long term sentencing and the other long terms it produces: like long term relationships in prison, long term loss in neighborhoods, and long term struggles for justice. The project is intended to dovetail with local and state policies around long term sentencing, and to articulate the lives that are confined by these policies. The initial project about time has also produced a method by which we can take up a subject that is important to both artists and writers in prison and those of us teaching inside. It has helped us think about how that subject impacts us in both free and unfree worlds.

Suggested bibliograpy

Levine, Robert. *A Geography of Time*. New York: Basic, 1997.

Perec, Georges. *Approaches to What?* in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* translated by John Sturrock. London: Penguin. 1997.

Barry, Lynda. *What It Is*. S.l.: Drawn & Quarterly, 2015.

Brotchie, Alastair, and Mel Gooding. *A Book of Surrealist Games including the Little Surrealist Dictionary*. Boston: Shambhala Redstone Editions, 1995. Print.

Haiku by Etheridge Knight

Hikmet, Nazim, *Some Advice To Those Who Will Serve Time in Prison*

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/some-advice-those-who-will-serve-time-prison>

Hikmet, Nazim, *On Living* <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/living>

Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. London: Little, Brown, 2001.

Kilgore, James. "Finding Time to Write" 2012. Unpublished essay.