

Speaker 1:

Thank you so much all of you for those incredible presentations, which I think really underscored the urgency, the gravity, and the stakes of all of the work that you're doing here in Chicago. Something that became really apparent to me, and we've all spent many years at this point speaking, but having you here together, what struck me this time, was the movement from the I to the we. Whether that's with Kevin and also from public to private whether, as Kevin spoke about Lucky Pierre, the individual in isolation being opened up to a group conversation in a civic platform, opening up the prison at Statesville to the community and then beyond, and then Chicago Torture Justice making these very unheard stories, the subject of public discourse.

In that movement, I also see a kind of deferral of the sort of sacred space of the artist to highlight the voices and experience of those people that are most directly effected by these issues that we're talking about today. Can each of you speak to the collaboration or the methods that you've come together as individuals within a group within to move these private conversations into the public?

Eric:

Well, as for me, being both an inmate in the inside for a long time and now being out here, I think that the collaboration or the collaborative effect have ultimately changed, but it still remains extremely, extremely important because so many times these guys do not have a voice. There's no one in there with a camera to see exactly what goes on. A lot of the public is ultimately oblivious to the rules and the laws that ultimately affect not only their lives, but what goes on in the prisons and just how easily... And the situation with Mr. Burge or Reynaldo Guevara, with [James Sanchez 00:00:02:17] that... Or Jason Van Dyke, the way these things can be swept under the rug. And these lives really would have no value in so many different ways. So I think that having that voice and being able to ultimately get these, whatever it is, art poems, dance, whatever it is out, I think it is very, very, very important instrument, not only for their lives, but for ours as well.

Sarah:

I mean, I think that just to build on that, first of all, we didn't introduce ourselves very much when we came in, but I just want to say that Eric was in our classes at Stateville and he just got out. What, what. In May, is that right? On a wrongful conviction case and lawyers from Northwestern were part of his team. So anyway, that's just really special because so many people either don't get out from the reason why Kevin was taught, because of death row, we don't have that here, but we have another kind of death penalty, which is these long sentences, death by incarceration. So it's just a real gift to have him and the few other guys that we know have come out, but I feel like the exciting thing for me is that kind of collaboration when people come out to be then in the exhibitions and work on the stuff on the other side of the wall, because to the best of our ability, collaboration's really hard when there's a 40 foot wall that keeps you from actually seeing what happens.

And it's always a big celebration when we have an exhibition, but it's also pretty sad too, because all the artists are not there. And so it feels like that there's both celebrations, people's families come et cetera, but there's also this big loss of people who are not there. So I think the potential for collaboration is always cut short by the systems of prison. Yet we end up doing all these other weird things as everybody does in prison to make things work. You do things on the down low, you take out things that... We always give permission to take on things, but you're always just doing things to make things work. So I think that the conditions of collaboration are both public and private, right? There's a way in which working with folks inside sometimes, there's all these ways in which we're discouraged to do anything called collaboration, right? In fact, we never talk about collaboration inside, except to each

other. We never talk about that with the prison administration, because that language doesn't exist. Do you think?

Speaker 2:

I think collaboration is always difficult. It's always challenging, right? But I think the way maybe sometimes some people who come into this auditorium, I think of it as artists, individual artists competing with each other and in CTJN, what's been particularly interesting is that it's not just a collective of artists, it's attorneys and it's teachers and it's activists and poets and people from all these different spaces. And of course that sounds really positive and generative and it is, but it also means the way we collaborate is that we actually give space to each other to do the things that we think we particularly do. So the example of Joey coming up with what I call a conceptual art project, because it was conceptual, it did not exist, in terms of that scroll, the ordinance. That's one thing.

Another is, I'll never forget when Darrell Cannon, who's one of the survivors you saw pictured in some of the slides, when in a discussion in Detroit with other arts activists folks and when he was asked what his vision for the Memorial would be, which is a big question we've been engaged in for the last two... since reparations particularly. So Darrell said, "We know what we don't want. We don't want to plaque. We know what we do want, we want something that's never been seen before." And that's what every artist wants, right? And Darrell doesn't consider himself an artist, but that idea of a space that doesn't even exist yet being a work of imagination.

Speaker 3:

I think I'm going to take a little different kind of approach. And I think the collaboration to me is the number of family members who are impacted by this issue. And being involved with those family members I was a member of Blacks Against Police Torture. We reached out to the family members of people who had been tortured by John Burge to see if we could provide them with support. So one of the first people, and that I was actively involved with, is a man by the name of Aaron Patterson. And so working with Aaron Patterson, when he was released from prison and then helping him to become back into a member of the community and providing support to him, providing support to women from Visible Voices, which is part of Cabrini Green Legal Aid when they come out, who are just trying to try and get their lives back together.

And so to me, that is kind of the collaboration that I have is, how can I use who I am and the contacts that I have and the knowledge that I have as a senior citizen to give back to people? And how do I work with young people who I have to say really pushed the reparations movement? The activism of BYP100, We Charge Genocide, Black Lives Matter is one of the reasons that I think that we really, really saw this push toward reparations, even though I strongly believe the fact that the Trayvon, the Laquan McDonald tape had been hidden and was about to become public, was a major factor in us winning reparations in the way that we did,

Speaker 4:

I just want to touch on two aspects of collaboration. And one is just this affinity that many of us share in terms of, many of us have worked in different configurations together because as visual artists, we've been drawn to using art as a tool to dissect and kind of tease apart the complexities of the issues around mass incarceration. So Sarah has called on me to come and help install shows that P. Knapp has put on. We both worked with Chicago Torture Justice Memorials project. I was attending many of their events and charrettes as an audience member. And because I kept on showing up, then they invited me to be part of the collective. And then through my connection with CTMJ then Lucky Pierre devised a project as

a hypothetical imaginative Memorial proposal that was included in the exhibition. And so that's just one also way that affinity groups kind of share and support each other around this work.

And then another way that I think Lucky Pierre has approached it, is in terms of our invitation to individuals when we invite them to be part of a project and a participant in final meals. And we've really... The project has evolved and been dynamically responding to the conversations that we have when people come to this, sometimes very foreign or unknown thing. They've heard about the project. Maybe they understand, they understand it's an art project, but then there is this many times emotional, overwhelming feeling that they may experience in terms of sitting with the work and being filmed.

And so when we would meet with people afterwards and when they were leaving, it struck up a different type of discourse. And then we realized we had to adjust the project accordingly. So that directly led to us doing the communal meals as a counterpoint to the individual filmings because we realized it was more important and we needed to do something else, where we had a shared space of processing the complexities around the emotional feelings that people are having as well as then directing and connecting to additional resources for direct action and political work and activist work that would compliment the emotional impact that people were feeling in response to the scenario that we were setting up for them.

Speaker 1:

So we're running out of time. So I'm going to ask one question picking up on something that Sarah was saying that we don't talk about collaboration in prisons, which I think is a statement that points to the sort of different demands of different aspects of what you're doing, depending on where the inquiry is being located. And all of you are trained as artists and also have activist practices. So why is art the mechanism for moving this forward and when, and in what forums is that maybe a challenge to what you're doing?

Eric:

Well, I think the challenge comes because politicians do not respect our... That's been truthfully 100. I mean, the policymakers really just look at it as artists. I mean, you see what happens today. So I think it has to be more than just art. It has to be more of a public. It has to be more of everything, but I think art is a good way to ultimately start the conversation or to get the attention, the notoriety, or even just to highlight the problem. I think that can be the start, but I think it can't be the end all be all.

Sarah:

Yeah, I think so too. I feel like that art is just one of many tools. I mean you're not going to get anybody out of prison with art. You're just not. I mean, maybe there's one person like who did The Thin Blue Line, I don't know. And maybe Errol Morris will do it, but you're just not going to get.. People need to get out of prison, right? People need to get off death row, people need... So I just want to echo what Eric said but I do think that art has a potential to do something that politicians absolutely need. And they need a whole community of people to demand something out of them. Because even if they have the idea that, oh yeah, I'm going to, I don't know fight for the jay-walk cases or the burbs cases or whatever.

And thus they have constituents behind them or people behind them who say, "Yes, you should do this." Even people who are generally brave might not do it because of the political backlash. So I feel like that the work the way you've talked about at Stateville has been, I mean, people in the beginning and they were like, let's have an exhibition on the governor's mansion. I was like, well I don't literally

know anybody at the governor's mansion, so that'd be a little hard to pull off. But we talked about this idea of making work that could build movement, that could participate in movements. Movements already happening, how do we make work that can participate in that and actually give an interesting visual language to movement work as a way to move that conversation forward.

Speaker 3:

I think for me, when art starts a conversation, it's an incredible thing. So I have a larger version of the Trayvon quilt that's been traveling the country for about three years. And some of the letters that I've gotten from people, one lady wrote a very long letter to me about how she took her son because he was a baby. And when she got to the quilt, that's really when it hit her, that really could have been her son. And what that meant to her. I am working on a quilt and I have a huge family, got six brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, great nieces, great nephews, and took my latest quilt and progress to them, which was Laquan McDonald, where I had pulled the autopsy report and put the bullet holes in the quilt.

And boy, the conversation that went on for hours about that quilt in my own family. And when the conversation ended, I said, "I'm on the right path. Not because of the artwork, but because of the conversation about what happened to him." And how do we keep this from happening to somebody else? And also to people who go in to see art, and who are not expected to be moved in the ways that they get moved by the kind of art that we do, the social justice art, I think is important.

Speaker 2:

I was just going to throw in that, I absolutely agree that with what you guys said about art alone cannot accomplish really anything. But I think that... I mean, I think there's a uselessness to art that we should respect. Just that we're scribble and just kind of imagine. But the thing is that so much politics is already about using these preconceived art forms, right? That we also want to change. And so I think if we can think about art, it's not just that it's an effective tool, but that it kind of confounds, it changes, potentially it changes the way we think and do politics because it's reaching the whole person, the whole collective of people. It raises like to raise questions and not kind of give the best answer. To raise questions means people have to think and imagine another possibility, right? And that old saying another world is possible. So I think it seems like a both end situation, both things okay.

Speaker 4:

Two things I just want to touch on very quickly. When we put up the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials exhibition at the Sullivan gallery at the School of the Art Institute, one amazing reaction that I think we were surprised by, the torture survivors felt so... They had an amazing response that this work from artists, from all these different countries that were representing the stories and the images and the things that they said were important to them that were kind of in the brief, that visual artists from all over the world took those images and created really compelling images and stories about that work. And they said that they, for so long, no one believed them. And that to have those representations in a art gallery on State Street, in the center of Chicago, they could not believe it. And it was so moving to them and fed them in a way, which for some of the visual artists like us, we forget that it has the potential to have that kind of impact.

And then I think in terms of some of the other work, art can be big and it can be part of this big discourse and this public discourse. And that's one of the power of it, right? For artists to create images that provoke and kind of enter the public sphere and circulate right? And draw people's attention. And that was much of the impulse to bring these stories in a powerful way, through metaphor and imagery,

and have them circulate visually in a way that complimented where this work was happening, more subtly. And so that is definitely one of the functions that art can do that I think we believe in.

Speaker 1:

Before I turn it over to the audience, I have one story of how art got someone out of prison. And then that's the story of Tony Papa. So around the 1993 exhibition of Mike Kelley at the Whitney, the curator Elizabeth Sussman wrote to Sing Sing, asking if there was any convicted murderers who were also painters to include in Mike Kelley installation at the Whitney and Tony Papa lied. He was not a convicted killer, but he said he was because he was an artist and he wanted to show at the Whitney. The painting was a self portrait, and he later used the exhibition experience to leverage his early parole and is now out and does advocacy against drug laws. It's a very extraordinary example, very one in million. And Tony's really great artist, but I also want to give space to you in the audience. Does anybody have any questions? And we're coming around with a mic, Alex Priest.

Alex Priest:

Hello, thank you for your time up there. I was really struck by the length of time that all of you have devoted to your work. I specifically know all the work that Risa has been doing on this exhibition. And I was wondering how you fight the 24 hour News cycle and the 140 character tweet to maintain urgency in your work within the public realm?

Speaker 2:

I'll be real quick just get off Twitter. I'm sorry we so have little time but there is something about identifying how much that can take over our imaginary on a daily basis. And of course, if we just do that, I mean this is why people, I think listen to certain kinds of music when they work right? Because if we just do that, we'll just start thinking in that language.

Speaker 1:

But I also hear a question about longterm commitment and how you all have been doing this for such a long pinups for seven years? The fight against Jon Burge has been going on for decades. I know Lucky Pierre have been making this video for 10 years. What propels that movement forward?

Eric:

I believe that all of these tell a story that you probably wouldn't find on Twitter. I was in prison. I didn't see too many guys with Twitter accounts and all sales, but I think that you ultimately get a chance to see truth is real life. It's just the truth. And these are some of the orange gridding gory, craziest stories, but the most intriguing part about it, is that it's the truth is real life. And I don't think that Twitter or anything can capture that.

Sarah:

I mean I also think that the stakes are high. People keep doing the work because the problem's not... It's unfinished business that has to keep being done all the time. And this way I feel that it's not a project. We actually named pinup a project because the idea of a program felt like it was a permanent thing in a prison. And so we thought, if you naming a project, it means that, it will be over. But we thought it would be over not because we thought we were just go do the same and then come out and whatever.

But rather that we would see prisons in, really to actually imagine that this is just not a way to ever deal with harm, or to ever deal with things that are real problems in society.

Like this is not a solution. So I mean, no one would ever know that because that's just the internal thinking. But I think that both imagining something that is going to happen, you have to know that this thing is going to happen because that's what you keep working towards but you know it's going to take a long time to get there. I mean, Eric kept in his cage for 18 years. That's a long ass time. People in prison are fighting their cases for years and years, all the torture survivors and they're just constantly fighting. So that it's a reminder that you haven't done your time. We haven't done our time. But seven years is not very long.

Speaker 5:

So I'm an attorney that works with people with criminal background issues. And I started making art sort of as a way of communicating to other people, the sorts of issues that I see in my clients. And I think art opens up these issues to a larger audience that otherwise could care less. I think the recent installation is in Alabama of the lynchings. I mean, I've seen pictures of it. I know people who have seen it. It is incredibly moving. And I think that allows us to bring other people into the conversation. I was really heartened to see... I went to see the Charles White exhibit at the Art Institute. It was an incredible exhibit. And I was amazed at the variety of people, young, old, all colors.

And that made me feel that there are people that want to look at that art. And some of those pieces were really difficult to look at, but the fact that people came and looked and that exhibit is now getting rave reviews in New York, I'm sure it'll get rave reviews in LA, gives me some hope that we can bring more people into the conversation about whether putting people in cages for years and years is the right way to treat crime.

So that's what I'm hoping.

Speaker 3:

I think another thing that this art does is if we're talking about, for example, the lynching exhibit or the Charles White exhibit, it documents history. And so many times people of color's history is lost, not told, not believed, not respected, but the artwork stands for itself. And I think that's important too.

Speaker 6:

I probably don't even remember the man's voice but talk about your name Eric, but also whatever. First thank you for your time. And I think it was a very nuanced and moving presentation altogether, but I know probably all were aware that in Wednesday we have open prisons. And I was wondering as I listened to everybody, what people's thoughts were as you move towards the [inaudible 00:28:53] were a lot smarter than I am. I'm a PhD candidate in education, and I taught in at 26th in California, and I like teaching there a lot, that was one of my favorite place to teach but that said, what if we move toward a country that is no longer majority white, if you see that as perhaps opening some windows of opportunity for larger collaboration in the carceration and which essentially at the end of the day means in humanizing people to the degree that they're not looked at as so different from you or your son or daughter or your dad or whomever, because that's what I encounter because you taught at 26th in California, but that's my best behaved class by far.

And I'm sure you can understand that because people like coming to school. It was really fun to them. I hope I've been clear, that's my question is, what opportunities do you see the tilting down of [inaudible 00:30:06] in the United States. I guess that the objective here is that 24 degrees that we will

no longer be.. and people don't know about this stuff [crosstalk 00:30:15] that will no longer be majority white county and what opportunities for far broader collaboration and we'll move towards open prisons that are effective actually with dealing with crime as opposed to what we're doing, which is not effective with dealing with crime.

Eric:

You want me to go first?

Speaker 6:

Yeah.

Eric:

I actually learned about that at a peanut class, Latino studies in the prison. I think it was a little bit further, but it could have sped up. I still think we're 25, 30 years old. I think we have that 25, 30 years where for work to do, to ultimately get to that point. I think when you look at the American justice system here, from what it ultimately derived from, I think that it still has a lot of growing to do a lot of changes to be made.

And I think that that is what we're all doing fighting for those changes, fighting for the growth. At what point will we get to the points where it's not like that? If I knew I'd be a very rich man, but I don't think we do know. We are seeing changes once again, but if you go back in history, you'll see progression, then you'll see 10 steps back at the same time. So I think that it has to be more of a call for a progression to continue from everyone to ultimately see it, get to that point. Would it be like Finland? I don't know, but who knows?

Speaker 1:

I think we have time for one more question.

Sarah:

Can I ask the one thing? I mean, one thing about that Scandinavian exception or whatever it's called is that those prisons systems are not built on slavery and this one is. And I mean, the way the white supremacy works in Scandinavia is probably really different than it does here. And there's really interesting research by a guy named Dylan Rodriguez who prizes this idea of a kind of multicultural white supremacy that white supremacy can shift through the body. So when there's a call to have black police officers or Latino police officers or whatever, it doesn't change the fact that the police still terrorize communities or all the things the police do right.

So I think that what maybe is even more important to grapple with or another way of thinking about that is just that our system is really specific to this long legacy of slavery. There's prisons that I visited Angola this year that these prisons are built on the same footprint as a plantation. And people work for the first two years for two cents picking vegetables and cotton on 18,000 acre plantation, that is also called a prison, but it is a plantation. So I just think that those are the idea of us getting towards Finland seems maybe just worth questioning more because of where our carceral system was built from.

Speaker 3:

I also want to add if I'm looking at it, which is the way I look at it, and that's from an anti-racism point of view, is it doesn't matter what the population is. It's who has access to and control of system and

This transcript was exported on Oct 22, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

institutional power and people of color still don't have that. And if they don't have it, when the population changes, nothing is still going to change. If they still don't have access to and control of institutions or systems.

Speaker 1:

Thank you so much to our hosts at the block. Thank you so much to our panelists and everybody in the audience, we'll be around for more private conversations afterwards. And I look forward to seeing you next time.