

Authoritarianism, Autonomy, and an Art Show

In January 2014 while serving time at Collins Bay Medium Institution I began thinking about creative ways in which we prisoners could continue to resist the onslaught of petty reprisals that the Conservative government had been levying against us as part of their political punishment agenda. One of such issues that was on my mind at the time was the imposition of a 30% food and accommodation tax on the already paltry dollar or so per hour payments which we prisoners received for the labor that we contributed towards the operation and maintenance of the prison; this, in addition to the elimination of the \$2.20 per hour incentive payments which prisoners received for the productive labour performed as a part of CORCAN industries captive labour-force. The introduction of these particular policy changes in October 2013, had actually sparked mass resistance through a nation-wide work strike which garnered national attention and saw

prisoners from coast to coast standing up to the authority of the system in solidarity against the cuts. By the beginning of the new-year, however, we had reluctantly returned to work as the coercive arm of the state threatened sanctions which would further restrict our liberty. Resentfully deferring our attention from more direct measures, an application for judicial review was launched in the federal court and we held on to the hope that the matter would be resolved.

As I said, it was then that I began deliberating upon creative ways in which we prisoners might be able to continue expressing some of our frustrations while at the same time draw attention to aspects of our incarceration which the public ought to consider. An idea that came to me one night as I was lying in my cell lamenting the narrative which seems to have been written up about prisoners of late was to organize an art show. It seemed like a soft, but tactful, and potentially effective approach to provide a venue in which we could both vent some of our frustrations about the

realities of prison life, while at the same time encouraging a conversation to emerge about the prison, which would hopefully allow members of the public to come to some of their own conclusions about who we are and what our experiences are like. It was hoped also that this would challenge some of the political scripts in which Stephen Harpers public safety office have strategically been disseminating in an effort to demonize and further vilify prisoners.

In what follows, then, I would like to bring you a little closer to what this endeavor was like by opening up some of my personal experiences to you in an auto-ethnographic fashion. By drawing upon these personal experiences and sharing them I seek to accomplish three things. The first is to contextualize this art show in terms of the lived experiences of prisoners and the power structures which impose upon our daily lives. The second is to demonstrate the significance of this art show, in its current form, in light of those experiences. And the third is to empower others to take the risk

of organizing, in any capacity, as a strategy of resistance.

As I shared at the outset, the idea for this project was spawned as a tactic of resistance against the Harper government's punishment agenda. In looking over my notes from the early part of 2014 I can see that in the preliminary stages of the project I originally had a vision for a local art exhibit "with a focus on how the pay cuts and other conservative government changes have affected prisoners." I would write "if we can use it as a platform to effect political changes all the better." I followed through on getting the idea off the ground by conducting a small survey with some known artists at Collins Bay Medium Institution to see what the level of interest might be and by putting up a poster to garner additional input and participation. By mid-January things were starting to look promising. I wrote:

"Today I saw a definite interest on the part of some prisoners here to participate in the art exhibit. This is nice to see.

I saw genuine excitement to contribute and through the conversations I have had, it seems that some real thought has been put into what these men would like to create. I will be holding a meeting with these individuals on Monday to rally the group together and unify the message as well as provide some info on how and where the art will be displayed."

At this stage I had been in contact with my friend, comrade, and fellow organizer Eric along with the EPIC group. His main question to me at the time being, what can we do to help? And help he did, as he pointed us towards the Sleepless Goat Café as a promising location to exhibit the art-work, with an additional offer to do whatever could be done to help make the project a success.

I continued to follow the momentum which the project seemed to be carrying as 7 men in the institution showed a solid interest to put their artistic skills to use in making the project

happen. We did have one problem however; we didn't have any art supplies. And according to CSC's ridiculous policy, if I was going to get the supplies into the hands of the artists, even pencil crayons and drawing paper, then I was going to have to get the participants specialized hobby-craft permits. That's right, a special license issued by CSC simply to draw! By this point, however, I did have a commitment from the John Howard Society to donate \$200.00 to the project for art supplies; but, in order for these to be received, it would have to be cleared by the social programs department, the manager of programs, and the assistant warden of interventions, as well as the security intelligence officer in the institution. I then made my first big mistake. I decided to put in a proposal and get "permission" to organize this project, thinking, naively, that this would add a layer of legitimacy to the show and that CSC would somehow appreciate the fact that we were using a soft tactic to voice our frustrations in a healthy way and that perhaps some exceptions could be made to the petty rules which govern

getting pencil crayons and watercolors into the hands of our artists.

On January 21st 2014 I submitted a formal proposal. My notes from that day read:

"Today I submitted an official proposal to hold the art exhibit. I was careful to frame the proposal in terms of policy and legislation such as the charter protected freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression. It is somewhat rudimentary, but I have asked for them to agree "in principle" so I can do the leg work that I need to get the ball rolling with our support network."

At this time our support network included EPIC, the John Howard Society and partial support from the local non-governmental organization who had been involved with prisoner art exhibits in the past. Within the institution there seemed to be some supportive folks as well. One of the more progressive minded people in particular,

showed such an interest that she had agreed to be responsible for helping us get our supplies as well as be accountable to make sure the art-work could make it into the community. On January 27th, after I was told by this person that she would need to check with her boss to verify whether she could take on this task in lieu of her position, I wrote:

"It is very satisfying to see such enthusiasm on the part of a staff member to support this initiative. There is a lot of negativity and cynicism in this place so it is quite refreshing. This shows that activities like this can serve many purposes/functions, such as simply creating positivity in a place that is generally lacking in such. She will be getting back to me in the short-term to let me know what progress has been made."

Again with the idealism; by February 18th she had gotten back to me. According to my journal entry for that day her boss had told her that she would *not* be

able to be the main contact for the art show and delivery of the artwork to the community for exhibition, but she still intended to help whichever way she still may.

It was a little demoralizing to hear, but I did meet up with her the following week. After being frustrated by the fact that we couldn't get anyone's permission for bringing the art-work to the community we brainstormed some ways that we could still make the project possible. Reluctantly, it was determined that perhaps scaling it back to just a showing in the institution and inviting people *in* would be better off for the first run. As I wrote at the time this would:

"Invariably conflict with the idea of making known the lived experiences of prisoners. That said, realistically, this might be our best hope of doing anything. I have so far received no official response from CSC management regarding the status of our proposal and still have a number of things to clear up before

making this a reality. At any rate, doing it institutionally and bringing people inside gives us at least a platform with which to work with so that we can eventually get it out into the community."

I spoke with Eric that night and knowing his values and political orientation as well as those of our other supporters in the community, I was certain that he had already predicted that this would be the outcome of seeking internal approvals from the system; but having the respect for autonomy that he does, he let me stick with my own plan and learn from the drawbacks that I would inevitably face as I continued to seek the blessing of some higher authority to get the project off of the ground.

By this time I was starting to get pretty frustrated with things. It had already been two months and I hadn't even heard a response from the CSC management team at Collins Bay. My journal entry from February 26th is perhaps indicative of where my head was at, it reads:

"On the 24th I had a rather anxious encounter with the acting Assistant Warden of Interventions regarding a project I am currently trying to put together (art exhibit). I went in to the meeting with the intention of simply sharing my frustration over the seeming lack of support for the idea, as it was going towards 2 months with essentially no response, and I want to be able to set some dates, make some invitations, and get these guys going on their art! And so, in attempting to vent some of my frustration towards the social programs area, I, for some reason, became emotional and when what I really wanted to be was angry, became tearful. That was an embarrassing moment for me there in front of the acting AWI and her counterpart the program manager.

There were some other things going on in my life at this time

that looking back, I could see were creeping to the surface. Two months earlier my Father had passed away from cancer. I was granted approval for an escorted temporary absence from the prison to go the hospital and see him in the days before he closed his eyes for the last time. I had felt exceptionally guilty about the fact that my last moments with my father were under an armed escort in leg shackles and handcuffs by his bedside. In some capacity the art project was partly a coping method and distraction from the pain I was feeling. Also, it was a way for me too, to express some of my own frustrations about prison and the effect the carceral apparatus has had on my life and family. Without seeming to be able make any headway, I was actually getting *more* frustrated.

By March 26th, nearly three months after originally conceiving the idea and envisioning an art exhibit in the community where prisoners could freely express their views on the system and articulate their experiences through artwork to open up a meaningful dialogue, I was called down to the program

managers office. As my journal that day read:

“I met with manager of programs today who has advised me that the art show has been given the green light. We have approval. I put the proposal in last January, so about three months for a response.”

But there was a caveat.

“I was told, however, that *they* want to regulate the art show. They want all of the art to be censored by the Security Intelligence Officer and the Warden. And as far as the donations from the John Howard Society go, they also want control of managing the distribution of supplies to the participants and even to issue temporary hobby craft permits....”

It would seem what was envisioned and what we were beginning to realize didn't quite square up so well; so much for getting our ideas over the wall

and into the community, not to mention this naïve idea about free expression and meaningful dialogue. It would end up taking until the end of April before I was even able to get the art supplies into the hands of the participants. You would think we were distributing blow torches and cans of spray paint here, with the level of bureaucratic scrutiny that was being imposed upon us. It was sketch pads, drawing pencils, pencil crayons, erasers, and *one* set of water colors!

By the month of May the artists were well underway on their projects. At this point we had been holding weekly meetings with the participants to assist in conceptualizing the artwork on political terms and to make sure the projects were on track to be completed in time for the show. By May the 20th I was given the news that our official presentation would take place on June 11th during the annual pre-release fair. The pre-release fair is an annual half-day wherein the larger community carceral continuum descends upon the institution to entice prisoners into making their halfway house the

choice for conditional release or to access the service that they deliver to parolees in the community. So essentially our primary audience would be folks who were already intimately connected to the experience behind the wall and who have pretty well already made up their mind about the prison and prisoners.

As indicated above we had originally planned to use the art in a political sense. One of the ways we had planned to communicate this political message was not only through the art itself, but also through the prisoner's interpretation as encapsulated in an artist statement. A week out from the presentation the project was curtailed back that much further. The words penned in my journal read as follows:

“Yesterday morning I brought the art over to the programs department so that it can be screened by the Security Intelligence Officer...Originally we had hoped to include an artist's statement with each piece that would

attempt to give voice to a particular issue that prisoners face. It was something that we had hoped to do, but given the level of management being imposed upon the project, it looks like this might not be prudent and that it would be best that we just let people come to their own conclusions about the artist's intentions. This way we don't get banned and the artists won't face any negative reprisals.”

Returning back from my cell that day I learned that the institution was about to commence a lockdown and major search. Two days prior an individual was found dead in his cell from a Heroin overdose, the second in as little as three months, and it appeared that the junk was starting to make its way around the prison. In the week that followed there would actually be 9 drug overdoses in the institution. On June 4th a memo from the warden was slipped under our cell doors. It read the following:

"The institution has recently experienced a suspected fatal overdose and several interrupted overdoses. At this time it is believed that a narcotic either in a purer than normal form or possibly laced with another substance has been the cause.

Based on the available information, this narcotic is believed to cause an extremely rapid reaction which does not allow sufficient time for notification to staff or others of medical distress. With this particular narcotic, a dose with which you may be accustomed may in fact result in overdose and potentially even be lethal.

Should you experience, or observe in another individual, any of the following symptoms you should immediately alert staff and seek medical attention: extremely dilated pupils, slurred speech, extremely

pail/grey skin coloring, stiffness of the joints or rapid and shallow breathing.

A narcotic of this nature should be disposed of immediately.

I mention this because I think that it is important to fit these events within the context of the art exhibit. Not only do they settle themselves within the collective psyche of the prison population and reflect several patent problems with the system itself, but when you begin measuring them against the struggle that we went through in trying to create this healthy outlet for prisoners to express their frustration, and open up a constructive way of communicating to the world about some of our experiences in an art show, it just goes to show the absurdity that so many road-blocks had been placed in front of us. I think a strong argument can be made that if more attention and resources were or had been devoted to healthy self-expression, that perhaps some prisoners wouldn't be so inclined

to feed their malnourished spirits with chemicals.

The lockdown finally ended the day before the art-exhibit was scheduled to take place. At this point my hopes had pretty well been dashed and I was feeling fatigued from the lockdown and somewhat cynical about the entire project. Nevertheless, I held on to the hope that just exhibiting the art would be something the participants could be proud of and that perhaps it might serve its purpose to open up a certain conversation about the prison to those in attendance. My journal notes for that day are noteworthy:

"This morning was the pre-release fair. All of the halfway houses and organizations that deliver services to prisoners in the community were on site to share information about their organizations and encourage prisoners to seek residency in their area.

We also had the chance to display our Art Work as part of the Portraits of

Prison art exhibit. After being locked down for the entire last week and not being allowed to get near the art as of yesterday, the staff in the programs department ended up being the ones who took control over the presentation of it and we were only there for one hour. I guess I am happy with the way it went. Given how limited our resource capacity was, I can only say that at least we were able to pull it off."

At least we were able to pull it off? Perhaps I was being a touch sanguine that day, like a boy whistling in the dark to keep his spirits up. Admittedly, I was extremely frustrated and felt defeated by the entire process. Whether intended, or simply a natural by-product of attempting to work within the confines of the system, the entire project had been conquered by an oppressive bureaucracy. There was really nothing to feel proud about, except the men who were patient and enthusiastic enough to boldly and creatively shared their

artwork, despite the many snags we faced. Looking back I can see that some critical errors were made along the way, the first of which being the decision to seek permission. Which is why *this* year, some lessons were learned and we are gathered here in the community at the Sleepless Goat Café on Prisoners Justice Day for the launch of this art show featuring the imaginative artwork of prisoners from coast to coast in the spirit of free artistic expression. And do you know how we did it? *We* did it! As fully autonomous individuals with the capacity to work outside the system to get things done!

Knowing what I know now, it is clear that the problems that we faced in trying to make this project happen last year by working *within* the system were inevitable. What could we have really expected from an authoritarian system except authoritarianism? In Chris Dixon's recently published book *Another Politics*, Chris devotes an entire chapter towards anti-authoritarian organizing entitled *Bringing people Together to build their Power*. In this chapter Chris defines organizing as "building

the capacity of a group of people directly impacted by injustice so that they can struggle to transform their situation". In his discussion he quotes Toronto-based abolitionist organizer Marika Warner, who says that this means "you're (a) challenging power structures, you're (b) working to build power structures, and you're (c) dealing with a problem that you share collectively with the people that you're organizing with." Lessons learned. And I am happy to say that *this year* by working with folks who share our values, folks like Eric, EPIC, CFRC's CPR, The Sleepless Goat Café, and the prisoners from across this country who made contributions to this project, we did much more than "pull it off". We pulled it off, and then some, and we did it with integrity. So in closing I would just like to say thank you to everyone involved in making this project happen. We have all worked together to build our capacities, both challenge and build power structures, and struggle together against the system in Solidarity! It's a beautiful thing. Enjoy the art!

Jarrold Shook is a twenty-nine year-old writer, activist, and academic who currently resides (begrudgingly) in a penal complex in the prison capital of Canada. An enthusiastic critic of the correctional system, he has written on a range of issues, including double-bunking, prison labour, and the Correctional Service of Canada's drug policies. His writing has appeared in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, *The Peak Magazine*, *Out of Bounds Magazine*, and the *Over the Wall* newsletter. He also has made contributions to local, regional, and national news-media. At current, Jarrod is working towards completion of his undergraduate degree in Sociology and intends to merge his academic training with his experiences in the Canadian correctional system to advance a critical analysis as inspired by the Convict Criminology perspective.

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