

Turning Walls Sideways: What's Actually Inhuman About the Carceral State?

Risa Puleo and Ruby C. Tapia

Ruby C. Tapia [RT]: Something that you and I talked about immediately after the panel [[No Humans Involved](#)] was how important it is to discuss what it means to make appeals to humanity, and appeals to expand the category of humanness, in works that address carceral violence and its disproportionate effects on specific communities. Sable Elyse Smith's work deliberately shows how complicated these appeals to humanity are through her engagement with Sylvia Wynter, and Simone Brown's work does this as well, in a variety of ways. Smith and Brown give us an opportunity to think critically about how appeals to humanity can depend on ahistorical assumptions that the category of human has encompassed or could encompass populations that—in quite material ways—it never has. Also, when we seek to appeal to humanness or humanity or whatever it is that ostensibly makes people interested in working against suffering and violence, we center the sympathetic subject, the “goodness” of the spectator who watches what Saidiya Hartman calls “scenes of subjection.” This focus on the good subject is exactly what humanitarian efforts appeal to; they appeal to that which is the best in *us*, with an emphasis on the centering of *us*, the watchers. This dynamic has many implications for the kinds of gestures, signs, and incitements in art that produce a powerful effect when carceral violence is the theme. One implication is that viewers look to see themselves in the picture, and if they cannot (and there are so many reasons why they cannot and perhaps many more reasons why they should not), then that potentially critical visual encounter is limited in what it signals and compels. These limitations end up being limitations to our ability to understand the violence as structural and, in turn, to work toward structural change.

For these reasons, I'm very interested in Sable's work that does not render human beings or bodies. I'm thinking a lot about this in my own work, the idea that moving away from the discernible body and toward abstraction in visual art is one way to compel more critical engagements with the structures and systems that make up the carceral state. Racialization has never not shaped these structures and systems, and the same goes for racialized ways of knowing and feeling these structures and systems. And carceral imagery, when it makes its way to the public, has never not been spectacular—so much so, and increasingly more so, that the spectacle of the prison is streamable via various prison-themed dramas and reality shows. This doesn't mean we know increasingly more about how prisons work, of course. So, in the popular realm, it's difficult to find carceral imagery that isn't a racialized spectacle and that doesn't freight all of the problems that come with it. Sable and Simone's work addresses these realities and problems directly by pointing to racialized surveillance and spectacle as constitutive of racialized violence and refusing to reproduce it in word, image, or frame. They push against dominant structures of visibility—Simone by revealing and analyzing them, Sable by refusing to construct objects that entertain them.

Risa Puleo [RP]: My take parallels yours in some ways and diverts from it in others. I'm going to lean on a thesis that I put forward in *Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the Justice System*, the exhibition I curated for the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, about focusing on what art can do as an action rather than what art can illustrate or represent. You began by talking about the value of a conceptual shift, especially around the word “human,” which—to quote Sampada Aranke—is a very “vexed” category.

As the work of Audra Simpson has shown, “Human” is a construction of 19th century anthropological discourses of evolutionary progress. And as such, it has traditionally been held as an aspirational category that bestows rights upon the person who is designated as such. “Human” isn't necessarily something that I'm interested in claiming for myself. Much of my work has to do with classification systems and ontologies, and how these systems sort people and objects into different institutions administered by the nation-state. The supremacy of the human and the denigration of the animal within us are also consistently challenged by our actions. In the defenses of policemen charged with killing young black men, the terms of animality have consistently been registered as descriptors for not only criminality, in general, but specifically for blackness. I'm thinking of investigations or trials of police officers responsible for Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, for Eric Garner's death in Staten Island, and mostly recently, for Laquan McDonald's death in Chicago. The police system and the prison system as they are currently constructed are examples of the work that humans do, and they challenge the elevated idea of what humanity is and who is human. What if we shifted our definition of humanness rather than expand it to encompass more people?

RT: Absolutely. I agree, and I'm not interested, either, in expanding the category. The idea that the category (human) marks an exceptional way of being, a way that's conducive of respect for life in general, needs to be disrupted. There's absolutely nothing inhuman about the carceral state: it is precisely a human product and operation.

RP: With its focus on what happens when the category of human has systematically excluded certain people, namely black people, as a way to enact violence against them, Sable and Simone's conversation stakes another claim. The struggle to claim the terms of humanness by those who have been exempted from the protection and rights its designation grants is different than changing the definition of human and humanity to include a more honest assessment of our propensity for violence, a responsibility-taking for acts currently deemed “inhuman” or “inhumane.” Underscoring both tactics is the desire to make change at a structural level, with language being the fulcrum around which that change turns. Challenging the term on a definitional level or expanding it to include more people are two options. Thinking differently about our categories is a third way that we could make change at a structural level.

I want to come back to what you were saying about abstraction, and language being a kind of representation. This parsing gets to this other question, which is a strategy that drives *Walls Turned Sideways*, a focus not on representation, but instead on action and doing. In considering the role of figuration in artworks about the carceral system, I also think oftentimes images that include the figure have a tendency to reenact violence by recreating a situation in which a viewer can occupy a surveillant's gaze upon a body who can't look back, thus, replicating panopticonism.

RT: With regard to the politics of representation in carceral spaces, yes, there are fundamental problems in terms of the discrepancy between the power of those who look at, or look back from, or produce visual knowledge about the space and those who cannot do these things. The prison produces these problems in some singular ways, even though these problems characterize and

persist within many environments structured by vast discrepancies of power. Prison is a space of hyper-surveillance at the same time that it is largely invisible to those who do not have to encounter it, to those who support it by ignoring it, or condoning it, or naturalizing it. This simultaneous hyper-surveillance and invisibility produces so many states of exception with respect to even those most critical questions we might ask about how visual culture and artistic expression work. Just framing these questions requires a critical retooling of how we assess what images are made in that space and what images about that space are made. Again, I agree that the move to try to expand the category of “human” in prison-themed representations to include those who have been excluded from it, and to also and thereby appeal to a generic humanity, is not the way to go. There’s nothing contradictory about or within a humanity that has produced the violence of the prison or the carceral state. Nothing.

So yes, there are so many critical questions that need a rigorous reframing, and we also need to reframe how we engage with images or representational gestures about the prison that we might initially find reductive or simplistic or even stereotypical. We want to be able to identify such problems with these gestures and artifacts, to be sure, but because we have such limited access to images produced inside, we have to really make use of them, really read them against the grain of the simplistic frames and usual visualities that we apply to decode them. We have to think about what we can do differently with images that we might find either reductively stereotypical or sentimentally problematic or unproductively invested in staking claims for, and on behalf of, humanity. How can we read images and visual projects that apparently do these things against their own framing and intentions? How can we use this material to highlight and work toward something other than a recognition of a common humanity, because that project leaves us

running in circles while we try to make sense of the violence that's both constitutive of *and* obscured within widespread ideas about that same humanity? We need to move away from this investment in a carceral humanity and move toward terms, cultural productions, and critical frames that center respect for life, period, and meaningful justice.

RP: To elaborate on what you're saying, I'm thinking about the work of Stephen Eisenman, an art historian and prison abolitionist who worked on the Tamms Year Ten campaign, and Che Gossett, a cultural theorist. Both are interested in abolition across species, thinking about the entanglement of animal captivity and human captivity. If we're talking about the quality of being dehumanized as a precursor of incarceration, an act of further dehumanization, they would both make the case that animal rights and abolitionist projects need to be thought about together.

RT: Absolutely. I agree. And this puts a significant burden on critical, theoretical work—and on projects informed by this work—to actually get out there, to find a wide audience and to actually make a difference. This is not an easy thing, but I see you doing it in your work, and I try to do it in mine, and Sable and Simone are certainly doing it in theirs, in terms of how we write and curate, how we frame. You're clearly doing it in *Walls Turned Sideways*. Work needs to be produced and also made accessible with these things in mind. I've been thinking a lot about if and how we can facilitate broader engagement from communities directly and disproportionately affected by the carceral state when we design and host art-focused events about it. Are we actually doing things that make it possible for folks to get to exhibitions, symposia, and conferences that are ostensibly about issues that impact them directly? I'm part of a small group that organized symposia on the carceral state at my university this year, and while we filled out

the panels with community organizers and folks directly and significantly impacted by the prison system, we didn't think enough about how to facilitate audience participation from non-university community members from locations outside of Ann Arbor. We need to pay much more attention to this, overall. We are all affected by these issues, of course, but in different ways, and we have differential access to the spaces wherein these critical reframings need to happen. We have to expand this access across the board.

RP: With *Walls Turned Sideways*, I was also really interested in making the museum as accessible as possible to people who had experienced the carceral system directly. The show wouldn't be successful for me if, after it closed, the museum just went back to being an alienating space, if an exhibition about the carceral system moved on to an exhibition about abstract paintings, seamlessly, as if the two subjects were continuous and held the same weight. That meant that the show was only successful at a topical level, but not at a structural level, and as such participated in a phenomenon that I see a lot of museums participating in: a self-congratulatory "we tackled social justice, now we don't have to think about that again for the next five years." To avoid this phenomenon meant thinking about how the show could intervene structurally in how the museum thinks about its audiences, to be more inclusive and accessible. The show didn't achieve this goal. To make an exhibition that uses a method of institutional critique within the museum complex, sixty years into the history of institutional critique, is also to be absorbed by the museum, which can no longer be stung by institutional critique directly. Institutional critique is now the punchy kick that's easily branded as an entertainment gesture. In both of our stories, we are relating different ends of the system: exclusion and co-optation, which means that we're talking about capitalism.

RT: Right. I think that it's really important to continue to acknowledge the limitations and the failures of this kind of reframing work within this system. The work you're doing is critical on all these levels, especially in terms of how you interact with institutions hosting your exhibition, your commitment to trying to make them accountable beyond entertaining critical thematic content. That commitment and the attempt to realize it are important; even though you judge the impact to be relatively limited, it matters. We have to maintain a balance between the awareness of a limited reach and creative efforts to expand this reach, and know that the work can and does make an impact. Because the alternative is to not even try, to resign ourselves to the fact that these spaces are exclusive, that their conversations are exclusionary, that we don't need to try to say anything different in them or expand their approaches or widen their audiences. And that's not a real alternative. It's a perpetual challenge for scholar activists and artist activists as well. We need to be able to continue to do the work but not overestimate its reach or impact, but not underestimate this reach or impact nor the importance of expanding both. I think we agree about the kinds of spaces and approaches that need to be disrupted, and a key part of this disruption has to do with framing, with frames—with objects and subjects in the frame—and perhaps with conceiving of these differently when the themes are carceral, maybe rethinking what should be there and what can, in turn, generatively push against the terms that have so long framed our engagements with the topic.

RP: It is interesting that we got to this place, because this is where Sable started. In their conversation, Sable talks about how Simone's epilogue is titled "When Blackness Enters the Frame" and then talks about the importance of frames in her work.

RT: Right. They both do work that shows how race hails altogether-specific visualities. I'm interested in this question in terms of the roles of sentimentality and empathy in prison-themed works, how these feelings are applied in limited and limiting ways. Too often visual cultures or productions that compel people to feel like the prison is doing bad things—like it needs to be changed, as opposed to seeing that prisons don't solve social problems and need to be abolished—focus on “exceptional” survivors of its violence. Mothers and young people and the innocent and exonerated, for example. These are not necessarily exceptional subjects in terms of the demographics of incarcerated populations, but they are exceptional in terms of how a wider public can and does feel about their incarceration, in terms of the feelings that images of these subjects compel. Often what they compel are limited desires for and movements toward population-specific prison reform—which of course can make a huge difference for these communities; but these feelings do not necessarily compel a fundamental critique of incarceration itself. The prison doesn't solve social problems or social inequality or issues of safety, regardless of whom and how it cages; and because of whom and how it cages, it exacerbates these problems and issues. But the production of feelings that point to some incarcerated populations as undeserving of imprisonment and some as justly imprisoned is not something that takes issue with the carceral state. Again, these feelings rely too much on identification and notions of our human being as exceptional and somehow not represented by and within carcerality. So I appreciate that you brought the discussion back to frames and framing, because I agree that we need to shift them.

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She co-edited *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the U.S.* and is the author of *American Pietàs: Visions of Race, Death and the Maternal* and the forthcoming book *The Camera in the Cage: Prison Photography and the Abject Sentimentality of the Exception*. She has collaborated with partners at Macomb Correctional Facility For men and Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility and is the lead faculty member for the Critical Carceral Visualities branch of U-M's Carceral State Project.

Risa Puleo is the curator of *Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the Justice System*, which opened at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston and traveled to Tufts University Gallery. She is a curator of the 2023 Counterpublics Triennial in St. Louis. Puleo teaches art history at The School of the Art Institute in Chicago and in the Northwestern Prison Education Program.