Proposed Project Coversheet
2008 New Media Fellowship

Sharon Daniel

Title: Capitalist Punishment

Primary Genre: New Media
Additional Genre: 
Role in Production: artist/designer
Production Format: multi-media installation, interactive website, locative media interface, hand-held/PDA interface, database
Proposed Running Time: n/a

Brief Description

The Prison Industrial Complex represents a return to the institution of slavery - now under the guise of justice, security, and "corrections". As a result of California's "three strikes and you're out" law, inmate populations have expanded exponentially and so has the prison industrial complex. Prisons are "serviced" by giant corporations, like MCI and Marriott, with monopoly contracts for catering, telephone service and medical care. Inmates are often employed by private corporations at extremely low pay. Companies that service the criminal justices system and are served by prison labor need sufficient quantities of raw materials to guarantee long-term growth - the raw material is prisoners, and industry will do what is necessary to guarantee a steady supply. For the supply of prisoners to grow, criminal justice policies must ensure a sufficient number of incarcerated Americans regardless of whether crime is rising or the incarceration is necessary.

The proposed project, "Capitalist Punishment", will challenge audiences to join in critical resistance against the corruption of the Prison Industrial Complex through interaction with:

- a museum installation of 40+ products produced by prison laborers imprinted, embroidered or otherwise transformed by the words of the prisoners who produce them;
- a multi-media museum tour that accesses an online archive including audio recordings of relevant statements made by prison laborers and visualizations mapping the production and distribution of each of the prison industry products in the installation;
- a locative media interface for cell phones and handhelds that functions as "social cost" price tracker to trace the retail distribution of prison industry products; and
- an interactive web site that maps the social and economic geography of the prison industrial complex.

"Capitalist Punishment" will be the third project generated in the context of a broadly conceived, ethnographically-based investigation of the legal, political, and social status of persons who cross physical borders into, and social borders within, states that identify as "democracies." This larger endeavor, titled "BorderTechnologies", represents an effort to use technology for social inclusion through the production of a series of "new media documentaries". In this series, which includes the online audio archives "Public Secrets" [http://publicsecret.net] and "Blood Sugar" [forthcoming], media and information technologies are deployed as a means of giving voice to the experience of socially, racially and economically marginalized 'others' - those who are subject to the rule of the state without enjoying its protections. Where "Public Secrets" reveals the secret injustices of the Criminal Justice System, and "Blood Sugar" exposes the social and political construction of poverty, alienation, addiction and insanity in American society, "Capitalist Punishment" will examine the politics of privatization and labor exploitation within the prison system and the resulting emergence of a new slavery-based security-economy. Like "Public Secrets" and "Blood Sugar", "Capitalist Punishment" will assemble narrative, theory and evidence from myriad sources - linking the voices of the incarcerated, to the theoretical discourses of social theorists, and to the financial reports of the extensive network of multi-national corporations that profit from prisons.
"Capitalist Punishment", the third work in a series of "new media documentaries" titled "BorderTechnologies", will examine the politics of privatization and labor exploitation within the prison system and the resulting emergence of a new slavery-based security-economy. Like the companion works in this series -- "Public Secrets", which reveals the secret injustices of the Criminal Justice System, and "Blood Sugar" an expose' on the social and political construction of addiction and poverty in American society -- "Capitalist Punishment" will assemble narrative, theory and evidence from myriad sources - linking the voices of the incarcerated, to the theoretical discourses of social theorists, and to the financial reports of the extensive network of multi-national corporations that profit from prisons.

Both inside and outside the prison, the fox is guarding the hen house. Prisoners' lives are in the hands of politicians, prison administrators and prison guards' unions - "interested parties" who are economically dependent upon the growth of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). The PIC is a for-profit collaboration between the state and multi-national corporations. A market economy for prisons has led to a market demand for prisoners resulting in a strong lobby for ever-tougher sentencing laws. Hundreds of thousands of American prisoners and immigration detainees work in prison industries. Federal and state prisons employ inmates to produce goods for sale to government entities, for the open market, and for international export. Private companies receive substantial tax incentives from state and local governments to establish facilities on prison sites and hire prison laborers who often work for less than a dollar a day. Private prisons similarly employ inmate labor, either contracted to outside companies or for the operation of the prison itself. What all these arrangements share is the exploitation of a growing and literally captive labor pool.

For the past five years, I have interviewed incarcerated women at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), I posed as a "legal advocate" in order to circumvent the California prison media ban. My recorded conversations with women inside, which form the basis of "Public Secrets", include their accounts of horrendous labor conditions and the bitter struggle for economic survival inside the prison. In California, many inmates are employed either by the Prison Industry Authority (PIA) or in "Joint Venture" industries set-up by Private Corporations. Women prisoners at CCWF work for slave wages (as little as 8 cents/hour) in prison sweatshops, soldering circuits for Joint Venture Electronics and sewing US and State flags for the PIA.

Beverly Henry, whose voice is heard throughout "Public Secrets", works in the PIA flag factory. On January 1, 2006, the 254th anniversary of the birth of Betsy Ross, she wrote the following...

"Like Betsy Ross, I sew American flags. But I do my work for 55 cents an hour in an assembly line inside the Central California Women's Facility, one of the largest women's prisons in the world. I was sentenced to prison for 15 years after being convicted of selling $20 worth of heroin to an undercover cop. I sew flags to buy toiletries and food. From the time I was a little girl, I was taught to put my hand over my heart when pledging allegiance to the flag. I emphatically believed in the values of independence, freedom and equality the flag represents. But as time went on and I grew older, I learned that these values do not apply equally to all Americans. As a black girl, I attended segregated schools without enough resources to provide a quality education. As an adult, I struggled continuously with drug addiction, but there were no resources available for me to get help. Instead, I was sent to prison. America has become a country that imprisons those it fails, blaming poverty, drug addiction or homelessness on individuals rather than recognizing and addressing the conditions that give rise to them. In California, more than 70 percent of women in prison are serving time for nonviolent, property or drug-related offenses. The 3,000 women in my prison are disproportionately poor and minority. Prison marks the separation in our society between the haves and the have-nots, between those who walk free and those of us held captive?. Betsy Ross sewed a flag that represented a vision of an equal and just society. And
we, as Americans, pledge allegiance to a flag I sew, dedicating ourselves to 'one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.' To honor this flag we must resolve to make America a country where all people can thrive."

Like many others who work for slave wages in textile "sweatshops" around the world Beverly is politically disenfranchised, un-represented in the symbolic order depicted by the flag she sews. When I read Beverly's "Betsy Ross" text my first impulse was to see it inscribed into the fabric of every US flag produced at the prison. Then I realized that, because I work for the state as a professor at the University of California, I am able to purchase goods from the Prison industry Authority. My first online "shopping" trip to the California Department of Corrections PIA, revealed a vast prison industry that spans forty-five facilities (prisons, camps, immigration detention centers and juvenile detention centers) and produces everything from milk to medical uniforms, to electronic circuit boards, to the security cages that imprison the "workers" themselves. Together, this "shopping" trip and the eloquence of Beverly's text inspired the design for "Capitalist Punishment", a museum installation of prison industry products inscribed with statements made by prison laborers, a multi-media museum tour, a locative-media "social cost" price tracker, and an interactive web site that maps the social geography of the prison industrial complex.

For example, for the Museum installation; a fragment of Beverly's "Betsy Ross" text will be industrially embroidered into the stripes of one of the US flags produced in the CCWF flag factory, a prisoner's statement about medical malpractice in the prison will be imprinted on a medical technician's jacket, the packaging of almonds grown at the prison will be re-printed to include a prisoner's description of prison farm labor, etc... the commodity standing in for the absent body of the prisoner who is enslaved to, but excluded from, commodity culture. The embroidered flag, along with each of the 40+ similarly altered prison labor products, will be installed in the museum with an embedded RFID chip that will trigger the museum-tour wireless, hand-held device to search the project database for the audio files and tracking data related to each object. The museum visitor will then, in the case of the flag, be able to choose to hear Beverly read the full text of her "Betsy Ross" piece, access transcripts and other recordings about labor conditions in the textile factory, trace the distribution of the product, and (in the case of objects produced in private, "Joint Venture" industry), explore a visualization of the production, wholesale, retail, and export histories of the companies that produce and purchase these products.

Visitors to the Museum exhibition or the website will be able to download a locative media interface onto their cell phones or PDAs. This interface will use GPS location information to provide the user with statistical and ethnographic media-data about prisons, immigration detention centers, prison industries, and prison industry products within a 10-mile radius of the device. In California "prison towns" prison expansion has created lucrative new markets for big-box retailers. In selected big-box stores users will be able to scan or key-in the bar code numbers of products in order to identify prison industry items and access the ethnographic and statistical data attached to each object - thus allowing social-cost price tracking and comparison. Users will also be able to track the impact this information on their own purchasing decisions and upload it to the website. The website will trace, map and visualize the relations among corporate participants in the PIC and provide access to an extensive database of interviews with prisoners who are forced to labor in Prison industries, such as the following

"I work here, I work PIA Fabric -- the Prison Industry, it's not private -- the CDC still owns it. We make boxers for male inmates -- we have to complete up to six bundles a day. Six bundles consists of fifty boxes... It's definitely a sweatshop. Yes. And legally we belong to the state. Yeah. We do. We belong to the state. I'm their property. Do as you will, do as you want, I belong to them." Genea Scott - Interview at CCWF 2/24/05

In California, a prisoner who attempts suicide unsuccessfully can actually be charged with destruction of state property - property that is obviously valuable to the state as a source of labor. Clearly, the Prison Industrial Complex represents a return to the institution of slavery - now under the guise of justice, security, and "corrections". It is my hope that, through the installation and interfaces of "Capitalist Punishment", I can challenge audiences to join in critical resistance against the abuses of the Prison industrial Complex. I respectfully request the support of the Renew Media Fellowship in this endeavor.
Artistic Statement

2008 New Media Fellowship

Sharon Daniel

Artistic Statement

My work is located at the nexus of historically distinct practices and modes of knowledge production: art and activism, theory and practice. Underlying all of my research is a commitment to participatory culture. In my scholarship I trace a thread through social theory that ties the potential for self-representation to social change. In my creative practice I take hold of this thread.

In this passage from "The Author as Producer," Walter Benjamin precisely describes what I see as my artistic vision and my position as a practitioner.

"What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers -- that is, readers or spectators into collaborators."

I see myself as a context-provider -- stretching the concept of artistic creation from making content to making context. Context provision comprises both Benjamin's "exemplary character of production" and his "apparatus." A context-provider does not speak for others but "induces" others to speak for themselves by providing both the means, or tools, and the context where they can speak and be heard.

What connects all my recent projects is a desire to effect social change - first, by providing technologically disenfranchised communities with access to media tools and information spaces and, second, by facilitating collective self-representation across socio-economic, cultural and linguistic barriers.

I think of the Internet as a public space and see my work as "public art," but I want to expand the definition of who constitutes the "Public" in this context and create a more inclusive public sphere -- both in the digital domain and in the physical domain. To this end I engage in custom software development and establish on-going project collaborations with non-profit organizations that empower participants from marginalized groups to represent their own experiences in information space.

For example, one recent software development project, "Palabras_," [http://palabrastranquilas.net] is a set of tools and interfaces intended to facilitate collective self-representation and promote social inclusion; it is also an expanding network of on-going collaborations with non-profit organizations that serve socially marginalized and technologically disenfranchised communities. At each "Palabras_" site, inexpensive, disposable digital video cameras ("hacked," or transformed, into re-usable cameras) are distributed. These cameras allow participants to document and represent their own experience. "Palabras_" participants "tag," organize, and share their videos online using Palabras_ web tools (clip browser, tagger, and editor). The Palabras_ website currently provides access to an archive of over 2000 video clips created in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Kiel, Germany, San Francisco and San Jose, California, and Darfur, Sudan. Workshops continue at "Palabras_" sites in Germany and Argentina where the tools are being used in cross-cultural exchange between eight schools. The "Palabras_" tools establish a framework in which both online communities and communities of place can engage in a broader social and political dialogue by building databases of their own design, in order to share texts, sounds and images derived from their own world of experience, across the internet.

I connect with communities of interest and place through collaborations with non-profit organizations that serve their needs. For example, for a number of years I have worked in various ways with the HIV Education and Prevention Program of Alameda County (HEPPAC) in an effort to engage injection drug users in a process of self-representation.

The first phase of this collaboration involved training the organization's staff and clients to use disposable cameras and
author websites populated with their own images. During the second phase of my work with HEPPAC I have recorded many hours of conversation with a number of injection drug users who use the needle exchange and other services provided by HEPPAC. These recordings will provide much of the media for my new media documentary work on addiction titled "Blood Sugar", a companion piece to the "Webby Award" honoree "Public Secrets".

"Public Secrets" springs from my work with the non-profit human rights organization Justice Now and 20 women incarcerated at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) in Chowchilla, CA, the largest female correctional facility in the United States. Access to prisoners and prisons by the media or human rights investigators is virtually non-existent. Several states, including California, have enacted media bans, making it illegal for the media to conduct face-to-face interviews with prisoners that are not controlled and censored by prison officials. For the past five years I have circumvented the California Prison media ban, gaining access to incarcerated women as a legal advocate. The conversations recorded during these visits comprise the audio databases of "Public Secrets".

The injustices of the criminal justice system and the Prison Industrial complex are public secrets - secrets that the public chooses to keep safe from itself, like "don't ask, don't tell." Public Secrets provides an interactive interface to an audio archive of over five hundred statements made by current and former prisoners which unmask the secret injustices of the war on drugs, the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex. Visitors to the site navigate a multi-vocal narrative that links individual testimony and public evidence, social theory and personal statements, in an effort to engage the public in a critical dialog about crime and punishment and challenge the assumption that imprisonment provides a solution to social problems.

My collaborations with HEPPAC and Justice Now are motivated by our collective desire to create a context in which the voices of marginalized and disenfranchised persons, their stories and their perspectives can be heard in the public domain. It is my responsibility to collect and listen to these voices and create a context in which they can be heard across social, cultural and economic boundaries.

I also work in the mode of a hybrid artist/scholar, writing as a way of theorizing my own creative practice in participatory culture. My essays engage questions concerning how art can respond to and act on our most troubling social problems, how access to information technology and the opportunity for self-representation might assist those without rights in the physical public domain, and what constitutes the "ethical position" of the context provider.

In my writing and my creative practice I refuse to stand outside the context I provide. As a context provider I am more of an immigrant than an ethnographer -- crossing over from the objective to the subjective, from the theoretical to the anecdotal, from authority (artist/ethnographer) to unauthorized alien. As an academic I was once reluctant to include my own story when theorizing my work. But my position is not neutral; in theory or in practice, that would be an impossible place. So I have crossed over into what theorists such as Jane Gallop and Michael Taussig call "the anecdotal," where theorizing and storytelling, together, constitute an intervention and a refusal to accept reality as it is.

By employing a polyphony of voices, including my own, in order to challenge audiences to re-think the paradoxes of social exclusion that attend the lives of those who suffer from poverty, racism and addiction, my work fulfills the role that new media documentary practices - practices of context provision - must play: empowering speech, changing perceptions, asking tough questions and making radical demands. To understand my projects as works of art one must move from questions of aesthetics (what is beauty?) or ontology (what is art?) to questions of pragmatism (what can art do?). I believe that these works, archives and tools, make a significant contribution to public political discourse and to the evolution of new documentary forms by allowing marginalized communities to take hold of the power of representation and imaginative speculation.
Title: Public Secrets

Description

Public Secrets - http://publicsecret.net

The injustices of the criminal justice system and the Prison Industrial complex are public secrets - secrets that the public chooses to keep safe from itself, like "don't ask, don't tell." "Public Secrets" provides an interactive interface to an audio archive of over 400 statements made by current and former prisoners which unmask the secret injustices of the war on drugs, the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex. Visitors navigate a multi-vocal narrative that links individual testimony and public evidence, social theory and personal statements, in an effort to engage the public in a critical dialogue about crime and punishment and challenge the assumption that imprisonment provides a solution to social problems.

The trick to the public secret is in knowing what not to know. This is the most powerful form of social knowledge. When faced with massive social problems such as racism, poverty, addiction, abuse, it is easy to slip into denial. This is the ideological work that the prison does. It allows us to avoid the ethical by relying on the juridical.

As the number of prisons increases, so does the level of secrecy about what goes on inside them. I visit the Central California Women's Facility, the largest female correctional facility in the United States as a "legal advocate" in order to circumvent the California Prison Media Ban. The women I work with there are highly politicized. For these women our conversations are acts of ethical and political testimony.

Their recorded statements form the basis of Public Secrets which in turn brings their voices into dialogue with other legal, political and social theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Michael Taussig, Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Catherine MacKinnon, and Angela Davis. While this is a dialogue that I have constructed between interlocutors whose perspectives originate from very diverse social locations, for me all of their voices emerge out of a shared ethos and converge in critical resistance.

I see the public secret as an aporia - an irresolvable internal contradiction, between power and knowledge, between information and denial. Building on this concept, we created three main branches within Public Secrets each structured as an aporia; inside/outside, bare-life/human-life, and public secret/utopia. Each aporia frames multiple themes and threads elaborated in clusters of narrative, theory and evidence. Together they explore the space of the prison - physical, economic, political and ideological - and how the space of the prison acts back on the space outside to disrupt and, in effect, undermine the very forms of legality, security and freedom that the prison system purportedly protects.

Approximately 5 years ago, on visiting day, I walked through a metal detector and into the Central California Womens' Facility. It changed my life. The stories I heard inside challenged my most basic perceptions - of our system of justice, of freedom and of responsibility. I invite you to walk with me now, across this boundary between inside and outside, bare-life and human-life, and listen to Public Secrets.
Special Instructions

I have sent a quicktime movie screen capture of the site on DVD in case there is a problem with bandwidth or access. The quicktime movie is 16 minutes long. Please feel free to scrub through in order to allow time to go to the URL and navigate a bit through the site online as well. It is extremely difficult to capture an overview of this project in a short linear video file. Unlike many database driven online interfaces, Public Secrets is more of an array than a tree. You don't "dig down" into the content, rather, you traverse it as a narrative of fragments that are selected and arranged algorithmically within a dynamic framework. Each visit to the site is unique. Content may reappear but it is impossible to predict. Many of the audio clips are quite long.

URLs

http://publicsecret.net
Title: Blood Sugar

Role in Production: Artist/Author  Panel Viewing Length: 05:00  OS Requirement: Mac preferred
Year of Completion: n/a  Media Format Submitted for Viewing: Web  Browser Requirement: Firefox or Safari, most recent flash player
Primary Genre: New Media  This is a work-in-progress: X  Require broadband: X
Additional Genre:  Production Format: web

Description

"Blood Sugar" is a "new media documentary" that will examine the social and political construction of poverty, alienation, addiction and insanity in American society through the eyes of those who live it. I have recorded conversations with over 40 current and former injection drug users at the HIV Education and Prevention Program of Alameda County (HEPPAC) and in state prisons. Here is a short example from one of the transcripts of a recording made at HEPPAC by Tanya, a woman who had just been released after nine months in county jail for possession of five dollars worth of heroine.

"I've tried methadone - I've been on methadone many, many, times - off and on, off and on -- methadone is, I don't know, I feel like it's just the government's band-aid for a gapping wound. Its just to pacify us and to push us away and they know where we are going to be today and they know where we're going to be tomorrow morning and I, I don't know what the cure is - its just an ongoing struggle and I don't know who's going to win, you know -- and me -- I know how heroine is, I'm going to lose every time. I'm either going to be in the hospital or I am going to be in jail -- and I don't know personally, how to stop - I am a pretty strong person but I don't know how to beat this thing -- and its because the drug is so powerful- its not recreational where my body feels high and I'm having fun and I'm laughing and I'll recuperate tomorrow and go to work on Monday -- Sunday rolls into Monday, you know, and it's a drug used where you can deal with your life not to add to your life - like you drink alcohol at a party - Heroine is not like that, Heroine you get up with and you eat it like breakfast and then you eat it like lunch and it puts you to bed at night - and any comfortable feeling that you're gonna have, any level of comfort that its going to give you - that's how bad its going to make you feel when you don't have it."

Through the voices of participants like Tanya, Blood Sugar will challenge us to question -- What is the social and political status of the addicted? Is the addict fully human, diseased or possessed by an "other inside", or wholly "other" and thus rendered ideologically appropriate to her status as less than human? Because they must fear encounters with regimes of enforcement participants like Tanya are afraid to be seen -- but they do want to be heard. Theirs are the most important voices in the discourse around addiction, public health, poverty and belonging in America.

Special Instructions

please use the pull-down menu at http://arts.ucsc.edu/sdaniel/bordertech/bloodsugar/bloodsugar.html to view documentation of the work in progress in the form of screen shots, flash prototype and example texts

URLs

http://arts.ucsc.edu/sdaniel/bordertech/bloodsugar/bloodsugar.html
Title: Palabras_

Role in Production: Artist/designer/production director
Year of Completion: on-going development
Primary Genre: New Media
Additional Genre:
Production Format: web
Panel Viewing Length: 05:36
Media Format Submitted for Viewing: DVD (Movie)
This is a work-in-progress: X
OS Requirement: Mac preferred
Browser Requirement: Firefox or Safari, most recent flash player
Require broadband: X
Local copy included: X

Description

Palabras_ is a set of tools and interfaces designed to facilitate collective self-representation and promote social inclusion. Palabras_ is also an expanding network of on-going collaborations with non profit organizations that serve socially marginalized and technologically disenfranchised communities. The Palabras_ website currently provides access to an archive of over 2000 video clips created in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Kiel, Germany, San Francisco and San Jose, California (US) and Darfur, Sudan. The Palabras workshops, tools, and online browser adopt the folksonomic (folk + Taxonomy) or social classification method to give participants the opportunity to interpret and classify their own content. This method also simultaneously generates a map of semantic associations between the self-representations created by participant-communities across languages and cultures.

At each Palabras_ site inexpensive, disposable digital video cameras ("hacked" or transformed into re-usable cameras) are distributed. These cameras allow participants to document and represent their own experience. In Palabras_ workshops participants "tag," organize, and share their videos online using Palabras_ web tools (clip browser, tagger, and editor). The web application is designed to facilitate the discovery of connections between participants' personal stories, at each site and across cultures, by allowing participants to label or "tag" their video content with a shared vocabulary that is both originated by, and familiar to them. This form of social classification allows multiple interpretations and associations to emerge among participants' video clips. The web-application also provides simple tag search, editing and sequencing tools participants may use to create video sequences using their own clips and those created by members of their community. Participants can search for relevant clips from their site's list of tags (called a "tag cloud"). The tag cloud visualizes all of the tags that belong to a site using a distribution algorithm, which scales the size of a tag related to the number of times it has been used.

The Palabras_ public browser interface allows a global and international audience online to see the ways in which place-based communities describe their own social contexts. This browser also provides access to the archive of videos through tag-clouds that visualize "folksonomies" that participants generate to organize their own representations in clusters of semantic association. Visitors to the site may also add tags to clips and sequences in the archive through the public browser. Therefore, what is shared among and between participant communities, and interpreted by both visitors and participants, is visualized in the tag cloud and can be seen in the videos as an improvised map of correspondences across cultures.

Special Instructions

I have included a quicktime movie screen capture on DVD that is 5:36 minutes long. This video gives an overview of the currently "live" version of the Palabras homepage, site browser and tools for editing and tagging that are accessible only workshop participants. Please feel free to scrub through the movie in order to save time to go to the actual site at http://palabrastranquilas.net. To log-in as a user in order to see the video editing interface use the login "laura" and the
password "laura". This will allow you to access the clips, sequences and tags for the Palabras site called "respect" - a cross-cultural exchange between Buenos Aires and Kiel, Germany

**URLs**

http://palabratranquilas.ucsc.edu