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In Conversation with **Smriti Vohra**, *Sarai-CSDS*

SV: How would you describe your work in relation to your practice as a multimedia artist?

SD: I teach film and digital media in the San Francisco Bay area. My focus is on using information and communication technology in the service of social justice. I try to frame contexts in which disenfranchised and marginalised communities can have a voice in the public domain of the Internet, and also the city. I consider myself a context provider: I'm not interested in representing others, but in creating a space in which they can represent themselves.

SV: Can you describe how you became involved in this project, *improbablevoices.net*, its content being the intellectual property of women inmates in the California prison system?

SD: I got involved in this project partly because of my experience with 'Subtract the Sky', a software development project I initiated and directed, which takes its name from a method used in astronomy. Astronomers must eliminate the light of all the stars they do not wish to see, in order to capture the light of a single star. Effectively, astronomers must define what "sky" means for every observation. There is no single meaning for "sky", but many, given the perspective of the observer. To "subtract the sky" is to interpret data from a subjective perspective.

'Subtract the Sky' was, conceptually, very much like OPUS, the digital platform for collaborative online work created in the Sarai Media Lab here. Each provides an open system in which people can communicate with each other – contributing media objects, sharing in their authorship, categorising and classifying them.

The classification system in 'Subtract the Sky' included a number of highly contested terms such as 'nature', 'culture', 'aesthetics', 'public', 'private'. The goal was to see if language could be re-invented from the ground up; to see if the images, texts and sounds contributed by individuals and groups could open and inflect the meaning of the terms and create new associations for them; to suggest relocating and reinterpreting language through a process of collective authorship.

'Subtract the Sky' is a web application targeted towards the online community. And while I am interested in networked society, I started to feel that I needed to get involved with specific and local communities in order to do something socially productive. I wanted to deal directly with social problems, and see if art using information technology could have a positive impact in the area of social justice.

So I started working with a needle exchange organisation in my neighbourhood in Oakland. I gave their clients cheap cameras and audiotape recorders, and asked them to document their own experiences; I then brought them into a small computer lab that we set up in the organisation's office, and taught them how to use a basic web authoring application, to create web pages where they could post their pictures and stories and audio files. Over the course of working with this community – injection drug users who were primarily homeless, involved in prostitution and other crimes of survival – I learnt more and more about the criminalisation of poverty and the injustices of the US criminal justice system.

My friend Cassandra Shaylor is co-director of Justice Now, a non-profit, human rights organisation that supports the rights of women prisoners in the California state prison system and works with

women in prison in an effort to build a safe, compassionate world without prisons. Cassandra, her co-director Cynthia Chandler and I started a dialogue about how I might do something meaningful in collaboration with their organisation that would result in getting the voices of women prisoners out into the public domain.

Justice Now got me into the prison in Chowchilla, which wasn't a simple thing. In California there is a "media ban" on visits or contact with prisoners. No one, basically, except lawyers and family members, is allowed to visit. Members of the media or journalists (which is what I would be considered by the authorities) are not allowed to have conversations with prisoners unless the dialogue is controlled and monitored by the prison authority. Justice Now had me cleared to enter the prison as a legal advocate; I was able to enter by pretending to be a lawyer or a legal intern.

So I started going to the prison and meeting with women who are peer organisers within the prison, women who have a long relationship with Justice Now. The organisation assists incarcerated women in cases of medical neglect, and compassionate release, physical, mental and sexual abuse. Peer organisers bring other women who are having problems with the prison into contact with Justice Now. They identify women with needs, and approach them saying, "Look, if this guard is sexually abusing you, or you aren't getting proper medical treatment, you don't have to tolerate that, you need to talk to this organisation..." I have been going to the prison for approximately two years now.

Initially, I went on three or four visits and met about 10 women. I knew I needed to find a way to make these women's voices heard. So we managed to get a mini-disc recorder cleared by the prison bureaucracy, and I started recording each visit.

The conversations are directed by the women. I ask them to identify their issues, and talk about them: from conditions in the prison, to their personal history, the situations that other women are in, their legal cases, their political stand, that sort of thing. *Improbablevoices.net* is just one attempt to make this material available to the public, so that people would become aware of the situation within the criminal justice system, and the prison industrial complex.

SV: What exactly is the prison industrial complex? We don't have much information, other than the general sense that there's a huge monetary investment in this, by the state and by corporations...

SD: In the 1980s, there was a shift in the political climate around crime and punishment in the US. While the overall crime rate was decreasing, stricter sentencing laws were put in place. Minor crimes were given much longer and much tougher sentences. This led to an explosion in the prison population, huge private and state investment in prison construction, increased political power for the Prison Guards Union, and the emergence of private industry within the prison system. 'Prison industrial complex' refers to a corporate/state collaboration in which both the state and the corporate state profit from the incarceration, on a massive scale, of marginalised communities and people of colour.

The state ensures an ever-increasing population of prisoners to serve and be served by the prison industrial complex. On the one hand, prisoners are forced to do work for slave wages – 11 cents an hour – for large corporations that set up industries within the prisons, even within public/state funded prisons. And on the other hand, the basic needs of this large population of prisoners, like catering/food, medical and telephone services are provided through monopoly contracts with big corporations like Marriott and MCI.

The telephone service is a great example of how the state allows corporations to create monopolies that simultaneously profit from and destroy economically marginalised communities. Inmates can make collect phone calls from the prison only to people who have MCI as their long distance service provider. And the rate for a long distance collect call from the prison is five times what the same long-distance collect call would normally cost. It's really harsh also because the calls are interrupted every 20 seconds by this taped voice saying, "You are talking to to an inmate at such-and-such prison"...

Many families have difficulty getting an MCI account and maintaining it. This can be an insurmountable obstacle to working-class, welfare-dependent or impoverished families who don't have the credit rating required to open an MCI account, or the money to pay the arbitrarily inflated long-distance charges. Many prisoners are not able to maintain contact with their families for this reason. It is not difficult to imagine the negative impact of this sort of isolation on prisoners, and the long-term effect on their children, their families and their communities.

"Prison industrial complex" is "short-hand" used to describe the set of relations, or systems, by which profiteering and political oppression are promoted in the guise of justice.

SV: What space does the prison, as an entity, occupy in the American imagination, in public consciousness? People are not indifferent to it. The prison industrial complex is debated, featured, interrogated...

SD: People are not indifferent, but they do not have enough information, and often what they get from corporate media is inaccurate. People would change their assumptions if they were more aware of the social conditions that lead to crime and subsequent incarceration, the draconian sentencing guidelines that allow extremely young offenders to be given what amount to life sentences for petty and victimless crimes, the discriminatory conditions under which prosecutions are played out, and the inhumane conditions within the prison.

There's a kind of political capital attached to "tough on crime" legislation, for politicians who court the largely white, middle class vote...Middle class people think, "Oh, that's good," when they hear 'three strikes and you're out', which is a law in California.

In the public imaginary, 'three strikes', a term from baseball, makes people think, "Oh, this means strong action will be taken against repeat offenders who are child molesters, serial killers, mass murderers, they should be put away forever." But most people don't realize what how 'three strikes' really works. A felony conviction can be a victimless crime, like drug possession, or prostitution. If you happen to have previous felony convictions for drug possession or prostitution and you get picked up for a misdemeanour like shoplifting or a "gang-related" crime like throwing a beer can at a police car in a "gang"-identified neighbourhood, you can end up with a life sentence – even if you are under 18 years old. People don't realise that someone can get picked up for drug possession twice – the second time, the sentence is automatically doubled, no matter what the circumstances are; then years later, that person could be arrested for shoplifting, and end up with a life sentence, even if the previous convictions for drug possession were prior to the date when 'three strikes' was signed into law. 'Three strikes' is applied retroactively, which is in violation of human rights as per the UDHR. I think we would be able to rescind this law if the American public really understood what it means. But they don't. I think the government, which is one of the partners in the prison industrial complex collaboration, takes care to make sure they don't. Hence the media ban. There was a recent proposition to decrease the severity of the 'three

strikes' law, and it seemed that it was going to win, but at the last minute our governor Mr Arnold Schwarzenegger launched an expensive media campaign against the proposition, which then lost. For Beverly Henry, one of the first inmates I talked to, this meant the difference between 120 more days of incarceration or six more years.

SV: It's interesting that on the one hand there's a media ban, that journalists have no access to the prisoners or to authentic information about conditions in prison, data which would be filtered, censored, made palatable by the authorities. On the other hand, there's also a media glut – for instance, the massive media spectacle when lethal injection was administered to Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber. Wasn't that shown on TV as pay-per-view?

SD: Was it? I don't know. But I'm not surprised, actually.

SV: After *Dead Man Walking*, the whole world is familiar with the lethal injection scenario. That's a Hollywood interpretation. But it's also a fact that in the US, on prime time TV, Monday to Friday, you have a sustained imaging of the criminal justice system in various modes, as popular culture. Police drama, court cases, forensic investigation, detective shows; all hugely popular. So the issue is also about how the general public is conditioned to view law enforcement. Prisons are the logical, material end of the regime. But the whole relationship to the prison system begins with TV images – of the lock-up, the violence, the pathology of perpetrators. The dialectic of predation and retribution is enacted in full colour, every night. You also have the reality cop shows, the docu-drama of raw footage, where you see the freeway chases, "criminals" from poor neighbourhoods being exposed on camera, blinded by lights as they are shackled, slammed onto cars, searched...In this sense there is indeed constant media presence, with respect to the criminal justice system.

SD: The images produced by Hollywood are mostly a celebration of the criminal justice system as an institution that represents mainstream American values, and since these images reinforce stereotypes around racial and economic difference, they are hugely popular, definitely. In popular culture, there are very few fictional accounts of the system that critique it, and even fewer that realistically represent the social conditions that lead to criminalised behaviour and the incarceration of massive numbers of impoverished people of colour in the US. The criminal justice system is a high-profile spectacle in popular culture; but the conditions in prison, and the existential conditions of the people most affected by the system, are not understood. People in America remain ignorantly proud of their democratic system without acknowledging the system of oppression it has generated. People in the US assume that the US Constitution is the greatest, the most just law in the world, and it therefore protects the rights of all those who deserve to be protected. But it's not. It was originally written to protect the rights of privileged property owners, and despite the Civil Rights amendment, it provides very little protection for prisoners in the US, and creates only weak provisions that allow human rights to be violated.

SV: What obstacles did you face from the prison apparatus, once you began to engage with it? How did you prepare yourself for such an intimidating experience?

SD: Going to the prison is a very difficult experience. The visits require the acceptance of invasive search and surveillance procedures. The environment is extremely oppressive. But to some extent I feel ridiculous saying that it is difficult and oppressive for me, given what the women incarcerated there have to live through, day after day...

It's a three-hour drive from San Francisco to the prison, so it becomes a very long day, going there, doing the visitations for eight hours, driving back...Eight hours might seem enough time, but

actually it's not, because the visits are interrupted by what is called "the count": when no one can move around and all the women are returned to a holding cell where they are counted to see that no one is missing.

Visitors are searched upon entry. We are allowed to take in a clear plastic bag, a clear ink pen, an ID, driver's licence, eyeglasses, and a legal file for documents. We go through a metal detector, take off our shoes, turn out our pockets, all of that...The mini-disc recorder has to be cleared two weeks in advance – the serial number is submitted then, and checked on the day of the visit. Each part is inspected and enumerated. Everything you bring in, you have to bring out. The discs have to be factory sealed. It is absurd...

The place is a horror. Concrete blocks, dingy, grim, overcrowded...to enter, you pass through three 20-foot-high razor-wire fences and three electronic security gates that cost \$3 million to build. You are surveilled from the moment you arrive in the parking lot; there are guard towers everywhere. Between the razor wire and the visiting room there is a manicured rose garden that looks like a middle-class suburban lawn. A bizarre artifice in comparison to the rest of prison grounds where the earth is bare, there is no shade, only dust and extreme heat...

Once inside, I always have to make a decision between sitting in a private legal visit room or the large common room used for family visits. If I ask for a legal visit room, in order to ensure better audio quality, there is a higher risk that the prison authority might also be recording my conversations – it is generally assumed that they are listening, even though it is a violation of the prisoner's civil rights. Once, during a visit in one of the private rooms, during a pause in the conversation we heard the sound of electronic feedback – like when a microphone is held too close to a speaker – the sound came from the heating circulation vent in the ceiling...

In our conversations, the women offer their critique of the prison industrial complex and tell story after story of human and civil rights abuses in the prison. These women are highly politicised and seriously committed to having their voices heard. But I worry about retaliation – the women take the risk consciously, but they are vulnerable to all kinds of abusive retaliation by guards and administrators, including the possibility of false charges that could lead to a second or third 'strike'.

The worst thing – our visits are "contact" visits, we are not separated by the piece of glass and telephone set that you see in the movies – is that when the women return to their cells after speaking with me, they can be subjected to a strip search or visual body cavity search that might be conducted by a male guard. When I go to the prison, I think about that. It disturbs me. I feel responsible for it.

So, I try to do the best I can to make the visit worth *that*, for the women. I have to make sure I get what they're saying, and that I do something meaningful with their intellectual property.

To prepare myself before a visit, I try and think, the night before, of the nice thing I'm going to do on the evening after I return from the prison visit, something really frivolous and pleasurable. And, during the drive to the prison, and while I'm passing through the metal detector and when I walk past the guard towers and the razor wire and through the gates, I just keep saying to myself, "I get to leave, I get to leave, I get to leave." If I didn't think that, I wouldn't be able to make myself go in.

SV: In your presentation at this conference, you had mentioned certain kinds of deprivation the prisoners continually experience. One kind, of course, is the larger overall deprivation of freedom

itself. Visitors can leave, family members can leave, guards can leave, but the prisoners cannot. Within this, what are some of the daily deprivations that corrode the spirit, so that when the time comes to take a stand against some aspect of the system, the necessary energy is not even there?

SD: There are so many. I think the most serious deprivation is psychological rather than physical. Inside prison, the women don't have the status of persons. They can't expect or assume that they will be treated like human beings. Most of them have talked about this in one way or the other. For example, when I asked Zundre Johnson to write her bio, she used phrases like "I'm not a number", "I have a name", "I am a woman with children who bear my name". Many of the women say, "I need to be recognised", "I have a right to be treated with dignity."

And the ways in which they are deprived of their human dignity are myriad. There is abusive behaviour from the guards: there is physical and sexual abuse, but also mental and emotional abuse. A woman's cell and her belongings can searched, or "tossed", at any time, and for no reason. There's medical neglect. The way the prison handles medical treatment is really obscene. Women have to wait for weeks, months, to be treated for something that could be cured, but because it is not treated, becomes lethal. A ten-year sentence for robbery can become a *de facto* death sentence. The conditions within the medical facility are horrific, and apparently the medical technicians who have to care for the seriously ill women are less than compassionate. There's overcrowding, eight women in a cell originally designed for two. There's the fact that guards commonly pit prisoners against one another for sport or retaliation, often creating a situation whereby a prisoner is forced into an altercation that might lead to prosecution and another 'strike'. There is alienation; loneliness and constant fear...One of the women described it to me as "just shutting down". She said, "I can't communicate with anyone, I can't be close to anyone, I can't have any interaction because I'm afraid it will lead to a fight, a case against me, my third strike, and I would never see my family again." That's one thing the women talk about a lot – the loss of contact with their families and separation from their children. Another woman told me that she didn't dare show emotion or weakness for fear of being put on psychotropic drugs. Apparently, while it is very difficult to get adequate care for a physical illness like diabetes, psychotropic drugs, which make the women who take them more manageable, are readily prescribed.

There's also the food, another thing the women talk about a lot; it's a daily concern. The food service is horrible, and the prisoners are only given 15 minutes, total, for a meal. There are so many inmates, they are herded in for meals; you have to get your tray, sit down at your place and then you have the rest of your 15 minutes to eat your meal. There are no special diets for prisoners with health problems that call for special diet, like diabetes.

There is also the "generational cycle", where incarceration becomes part of the family heritage. Each generation ends up in the system, because each generation has to live with the same social problems that caused the previous generation to enter the system, and has to endure the loss of that previous generation to the system. There is actually a case of a mother and her three daughters all incarcerated in the same prison. There is no rehabilitation, only the decimation of families and whole communities.

SV: Has your work on this project affected you in particularly significant ways, as a person?

SD: I think the first time I went into the prison was a big life-changing experience for me. It's one thing to have a political point of view that you hold on to in an intellectual way, and that's how I thought of prison rights before I actually went into the prison and had a conversation with a

woman named Beverly Henry...After that first visit, my political position became a personal philosophy, one on which I would have to act.

I was already, through my interaction with the clients of the needle exchange programme, in a position to distrust the police and the system, but I hadn't actively critiqued or rejected the system as such. We have a jury mechanism for certain trials, and last year I was called for jury duty. By random selection I was listed as a potential juror for a criminal prosecution. I decided, before I heard any of the facts of the case, that I could not participate in a process that could lead to the conviction and incarceration of any person, no matter what that person might have done.

This case was an armed robbery. I've been robbed at gunpoint, so I was in a position to understand the victim's perspective. I was so frightened that I was not able to describe my assailant five minutes after the robbery. All I could remember was what the gun looked like and that the man was black. The case for which I was being summoned as a potential juror had occurred in 1996, and it was to be tried in 2004. I wondered how the witnesses would be able to identify their assailant. While the judge, prosecutor, and defence attorney would not tell the potential jurors why the case had been postponed for eight years, my best guess was that the defendant had been incarcerated for another crime during that time – that would trigger 'three strikes' sentencing guidelines.

The accused was a black man, and the possible jury panel was primarily white. The situation had all the potential makings of a wrongful conviction. Potential jurors had to fill out a form that asked if we had any problem with the police, if we had any personal connection to the defendant, victim, police involved, etc. I just wrote that I am a prison abolition activist: "I don't believe in the criminal justice system as it is currently constituted...I will not participate in sentencing anyone to prison for any reason..."

I was interviewed the following day, and the prosecutor asked me if I couldn't just ignore the question of sentencing. I said, "No." He asked if I couldn't be fair and impartial, and I said I didn't think anyone could be fair and impartial. He said, "Couldn't you just trust the system?" I said, "Absolutely not. I can't trust a system where there is the prison industrial complex on one hand and 'three-strikes' on the other."

Obviously, I wasn't empanelled on that jury.

What I have seen has convinced me in no uncertain terms that the current criminal justice system is not the right solution for the kinds of social problems that it's supposed to solve. The prison industrial complex is essentially a contemporary version of the institution of slavery. I have to act on that knowledge.

SV: Brutal systems exist in all countries. You can go anywhere in the world, look two feet in any direction, and you will see something that makes you want to close your eyes forever. But the point is that one should not close one's eyes, one has to look, one cannot avert one's gaze, otherwise change will never happen.

The prison you worked in, the range and nature of this work of being a context provider for the articulation of the intellectual property of inmates, and the people you've come in contact with through the work, inmates and their 'keepers', both: all this is now part of your vision. But when you look within, what is the insight, so to speak, in terms of your own subjectivity, and your practice as a multimedia artist?

SD: As a practitioner, I've been gradually moving further and further away from what most people think of as art practice. In a sense, my practice has become ethnographic. And then there is the question of the connection between art and activism. I want to act for change. I've often thought, "Maybe I should just drop this whole new-media art thing and become a lawyer, then I could really accomplish something." I've never really been that interested in art for its own sake or technology for its own sake. My focus is on what art and technology can do in the social realm; and it can be both a boundary and a bridge.

I was talking to Danny Butt yesterday while we were walking around the Taj Mahal, and he offered a wonderful quote from Lilla Wallace which I'll paraphrase: "If you've come here to help, you are wasting your time; but if your liberation is bound up with mine, let's work together."

That's how I feel about this project. I can't be free till the women in prison are free. I can't be safe until the injection drug users are safe. But I can deploy whatever resources I have, however limited they may be, in that direction, towards that end. That's what I want to do.