



Exhibition Review

A Look at the Art and Social Justice Practices of Performing Statistics' No Kids in Prison Project

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Abstract: Social practice art, which is a term I borrow from Mark Menjivar, or art geared toward amplifying social justice issues, is on the rise. This review examines how the organization, Performing Statistics, engages social practice art by activating artistic practices, leadership, and engagement from impacted communities and the intentional curation of art and statistics for the purpose of broadening public understanding of youth incarceration. The focus is on Performing Statistics' No Kids in Prison exhibition at Cherry Street Pier in Philadelphia, though the review also addresses the traveling nature of the exhibition. I privilege the production process of the artwork as well as the exhibition experience that the art creates with the intention of expanding the reception that informational exhibits such as these tend to receive by engaging a close-looking analysis of the art.

Keywords: Social Practice Art, Youth Incarceration, Engagement Curation

Review

In the middle of a sprawling warehouse on a pier that lines the Delaware river, a wooden cut lightbox art piece sat amidst the colors and structures of an exhibit on youth incarceration. A large, wheatpasted half-face portrait of a youth leader named Osei is on the lightbox; his expression is solemn. Next to him are stars laser-cut into the wood, the lightbox performing a yellow and white shine. Osei is a boy likely not much younger than I am who has been incarcerated. His words sit next to him on this wooden piece, reading, "I wanna be an astronomer, but down here I have to stand on the toilet just to see a few stars." Mark Strandquist, co-director of Performing Statistics, notes to me that Osei said this during one of their art and organizing workshops. Strandquist shares that when Osei spoke, everything stopped.

Performing Statistics' *No Kids in Prison* project is described as "a national immersive art exhibition"; its inaugural installation was at Philadelphia's Cherry Street Pier (Crimmins 2023). The description rings true on two notes; it gestures to how the exhibit was a surrounding physical experience that will continue to surround us nationally because of its traveling, malleable nature. I point to the malleability of the exhibition because what seems to be at the center of Performing Statistics' work is its ability to answer to and be molded by each community it becomes part of. I had the privilege of speaking to the aforementioned Mark Strandquist and Kate DeCiccio, two of

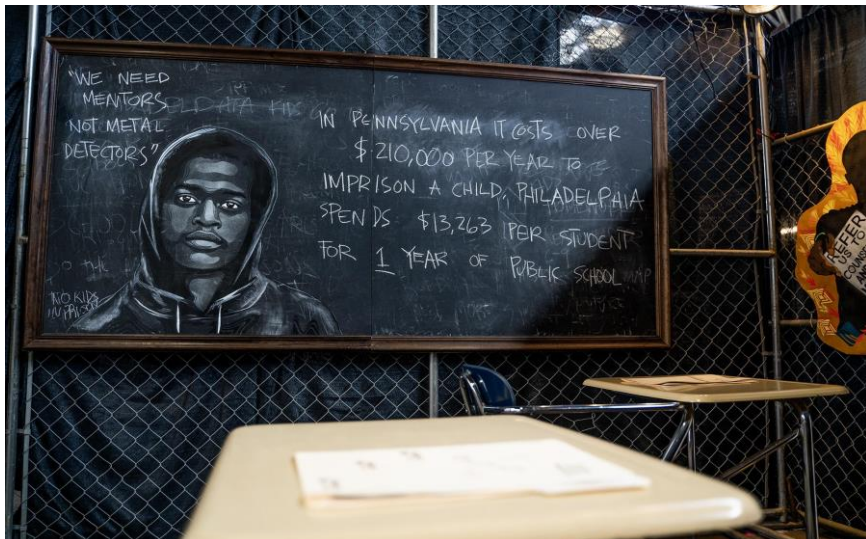
the three directors of Performing Statistics, about their *No Kids in Prison* project. They shared with me that about 60 percent of the exhibition exists before it arrives in each new city (Strandquist and DeCiccio 2023). The existing percentage of the exhibition is a cumulation of the last decade of Performing Statistics' work that began in Richmond, Virginia. It was intended to be a year-long city-wide public art project dedicated to holding space and care for incarcerated youth. Strandquist and his team began to hold summer programming at the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center that, as he notes, stemmed from the complete lack of enrichment for incarcerated children, leading to them spending twenty-three hours a day in their cells. This initial campaign ballooned into a decade of work including public art installations, art and organizing workshops, and reentry programs dedicated to helping incarcerated youth through the violence of that system. The work has spread far beyond Richmond; campaigns in other cities reached out to Performing Statistics, welcoming their exhibition work into new local contexts.

The remaining percentage of the exhibition is built in art and organizing workshops and collaborations with local youth leaders whom Strandquist and DeCiccio connect with through existing local networks of abolitionist organizers who invite Performing Statistics into their communities. These kids guide the work of the exhibition, all having experienced youth incarceration either directly or in a ripple effect manner. Performing Statistics' philosophy involves "treating the youth as experts," relying upon the decisions and voices of the youth leaders first (Strandquist and DeCiccio 2023). In my conversation with them, DeCiccio and Strandquist always deferred to their partnerships with local organizations and to the youth leaders who head the work. This makes for an exhibition that addresses the concerns of the community it is seeking to speak to and support. In our conversation, DeCiccio notes that the youth leaders and local organizers direct the work of the exhibit by deciding on what local history is incorporated, identifying which groups in the city and surrounding areas need to be called in to the effort against youth incarceration, and what narratives surrounding abolition need to be countered or refigured. When I asked them about their trust-building process with the youth leaders, Strandquist noted that perhaps the even bigger hurdle was cultivating a belief within the kids that their voices and lives mattered.

Certainly, I felt the imprint of the youth leaders and the strategically curated statistics-based art in the Philadelphia exhibition throughout. At the top of the exhibit in Philly, viewers were invited to raise their phones up to an augmented reality banner and experience a skillful animation overlaid with an auditory poem that framed the exhibit. The banner was designed by Invisible Thread with direction from a number of youth leaders including Tiguida, Duane, Jahir, Incite, Rodney, Ja, Tasheema, and Aqilla, many of whom were also included in the animation. I was invited to participate in the "this day and age" practice of recording art—the gesture of documenting my consumption of art (particularly socially engaged art)—before I had the urge myself. Drawing on Dr. Lindsay Reckson's work on gesture, I saw an activation of the consumerist practice. In swirling colors and gorgeous animated design, we are encouraged to overlay our experience of the exhibit with sharply statistical and emphatically emotional

representations of those experiencing and close to youth incarceration. The youth leader who is speaking in the animation tells us that youth incarceration impacts us all, so the fight to end it takes all of us. The poem was co-written during Performing Statistics' workshops with over fifty youth organizers led by Kah Yannghi, DeCiccio, and Strandquist. Already, at the helm of the exhibit, we are invited to imagine new worlds and forms over top of the reality we can document on our phones. They model for us the way in which we can answer the largest demand of the exhibit: to envision and enforce a world that does not imprison children by demonstrating how we can creatively build upon the reality before us.

The vibrancy of the animation, reflective of the other artwork in the exhibit and closely linked to other abolitionist art, is antithetical to the prison aesthetic, which is represented in the exhibit's recreation of the cell and phone barriers and the wire fencing (here again I am borrowing Dr. Reckson's language about abolitionist artwork). Room for complexity is held in the space of the exhibit in this way. Certainly, the prison-*industrial* is emphasized, where statistics and recollections of the resources funneled away from the lives of these youth and toward their imprisonment. Across a written over blackboard next to a detailed, emotive chalk portrait of a young Black boy with his hood are the comparative statistics: "In Pennsylvania it costs over \$210,000 to imprison a child, Philadelphia spends \$13,263 per student for 1 year of public school." The literal and figurative arresting of Black lives is noted, bolded, and underlined here while also, as the stoic portrait represented to me, was the consistent insistence of faces and bodies throughout the exhibit. Whether in outlines or in detailed portraits, the youth body and face permeated every element of the exhibit, insisting on their fully physical presence, insisting that they cannot be erased or forgotten.



Source: Mark Strandquist; courtesy of Performing Statistics

Also present on the same blackboard is a quote from a youth creator: “We need mentors, not metal detectors.” Just like their physical presences, the exhibit always focalizes the voices of the youth so that they may be the ones to dictate their treatment, both returning agency to them while also intentionally teaching exhibit viewers the practical elements of a world without youth prisons, where kids can be held and encouraged through difficult times and choices. In the school section of the exhibit, youth leaders have filled in the sentence that begins with “before you refer me...” in a piece entitled “Lift Us Up! Don’t Push Us Out!” created by youth leader, Chanya, with DeCiccio. Similar to the piece about mentors over metal detectors, the exhibit seeks to exist in both an imaginative space, building worlds beyond, as well as grounded in what *should* happen. In “Lift Us Up! Don’t Push Us Out,” youth leaders tell us explicitly how we can support them in school in a way that is care-focused rather than punitive. I was also struck by the detention slips that were folded into paper airplanes hanging over top of the exhibit. The main word I could make out was “disruptive,” and here, the leaders with their instructional voice fill out the “disruptive” label with their circumstances, refusing its singularity and making a strong demand for their care. “Before you refer me...”, they say, so we might be encouraged to hear them first.

The environment of the immersion occurred at the pier, which itself has a warehouse feel; the acoustics encourage voices to boom and warp and be nearly drowned out by the Delaware River mere feet away. This is the perfect place for an installation to be loud. The noise of the environment necessitates a high-volume exhibit, and the incarcerated youth, who *Performing Statistics’* installation carves space for, require it too. The industry element of the prison-industrial was defined within the warehouse as the elements of the exhibit were hung from temporary wire fencing with zip ties, emphasizing that which is caged and restrained. As the exhibit often does, it finds ways to hold multiple truths within itself. The wire fencing also underscores that which is portable and that which will continue on, thus having a necessary broader, longer life than a traditional exhibit.

The exhibit allows for the multidimensional, complex representation of youth incarceration from where it begins in schools to its culmination in prison. The literal sequence of the exhibition occurs this way—beginning with installations that communicate the carcerality of the school systems before leading to how children experience imprisonment. Strandquist and DeCiccio noted that the sequencing decisions arose from conversations in their workshops. Youth incarceration is itself marginalized in larger conversations of mass incarceration, and the exhibit refuses to consider this as truth. I think again of Osei and the lightbox piece. If I were to only have experienced Osei’s words as the surface layer of the installation, I still would have come away with this heartbreaking rendering of the way that incarceration splinters hope. These are children, the exhibit reminds us. Spending further time in front of the lightbox reveals that the laser cut stars represent the 590 children, younger than 12 years old, who will be incarcerated tonight, and the heart breaks further. There are layers contained within each of the installations that make up the exhibit so that something may be

gleaned at all times, holding within themselves all the truths—the emotion, the numbers, the pain, the urgency, and, importantly, the possibility.

The exhibit is clear about the crushing reality, but it also promises a way forward. Local legislators were invited to the exhibit for the purpose of “priming” them, as Strandquist and DeCiccio (2023) put it, for change. They were lead through the exhibit by representatives from a local law center and were presented with ways to mitigate youth incarceration including, based on a report by Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth, and Family Services, community intervention and house arrest instead of court proceedings and time in jail (Crimmins 2023). I experienced the exhibit on its closing day when a panel was held, involving people who were close to someone who experienced youth incarceration or experienced youth incarceration themselves; Strandquist mentioned a “classroom” intention for these exhibitions, which was clearly upheld. The space within the exhibit belonged to the mission by belonging to its youth leaders first and foremost.

Performing Statistics’ work with their constellation of partners in the numerous cities they work in extends in a multitude of directions. As such, many hands are involved in the work—the organizers are activists who are artists who are curators. In one direction, the product of their work materializes a philosophy surrounding the power of public art and its role in justice. Another such direction involved running reentry and immersion programs for children who had been formerly incarcerated in Richmond, VA. In their work, they helped kids develop skills to enter the workforce and offered resources such as housing and healthcare for a six-month period. Social justice work branded as empty statements and virtue signaling in educational institution settings depresses me, making me more comfortable with pessimism than I had ever liked to be. Learning about Performing Statistics’ work as a heady force of art and justice has restored my faith; they and the people they work with have thought of and are executing ways forward that I was not sure existed—what is there to be done, we often ask. For those who are seriously asking, here, we are presented with a serious answer.

The final piece of the exhibit involved walking through on banners that float, moving gently in the breeze that comes in from the water. The local youth leaders who shaped the exhibit are pictured here in larger-than-life portraits, ending the exhibit with those who created the work, whom the work is dedicated to, and for whom the work is for. In each city the exhibit travels to, the portraits will change to reflect the faces of the youth who shaped the exhibit. Strandquist and DeCiccio noted the color trajectory of the exhibition, where muted, desaturated tones become increasingly vibrant as we move through it. The colors coincide with the chronology. If the exhibition as a whole documented and expressed the history and present of youth incarceration, this final section represents the future. Strandquist and Deciccio shared that the curatorial decisions with regard to sequence and placement came about within workshops with the youth leaders and relied heavily on feedback and intuition. Embedded even with how the exhibit was conceived of is this collaborative, impacted-youth focus.



Source: Mark Strandquist; courtesy of Performing Statistics

The exhibit closed the same way it began, modeling for us how we are to respond to the greatest demand of the exhibit: to imagine children free from incarceration. We, as viewers, were invited to become part of the exhibit by creating art on brightly colored paper with stamps. The instruction read: “Start by choosing a beautiful piece of paper...then use all of the beautiful stamps to create your vision of a world where all youth are free!” Here, the exhibit models the way in which abolitionist practice involves using the firm applying of tools, what the stamps represent created by others, to engage liberatory practices. This part of the exhibit was formed by all those who had chosen to create. I was there on the last day of the exhibition run, so all the stamped paper had accumulated, clipped to strings in banners across the space. It was beautifully crowded, further showing us how making something beautiful—creating a world where you are free—is collaborative. It tells us that it takes us. All of us.

Acknowledgment

My deepest thanks to Performing Statistics and, particularly, Mark Strandquist and Kate DeCiccio for their work and time. We are all in need of it. Thank you also to Dr. Reckson for pointing me to the fact that youth incarceration is itself marginalized in larger conversations in mass incarceration, and this exhibit refuses to consider this as truth. Thank you to Daniel Tucker for pointing me to the detail about fencing in the exhibit design and for the conversations about this exhibition, engagement curating, and the art world that formed and pushed my thinking for this piece and beyond. My largest and most significant thanks to the youth leaders whose work and experiences give the exhibit and its installations their life, texture, and impact.

AI Acknowledgment

The author declares that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete essential authoring tasks in this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Umika Pathak is an undergraduate student pursuing a degree in English at Haverford College. She is a writer and future academic with deep interests in cultural studies, texts and theories of the subaltern, and curatorial practice. In the summer of 2023, she interned with Daniel Tucker and worked on this issue of *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* as an Editorial Assistant while also assisting Dr. Lindsay Reckson with her research on gesture. The John B. Hurford '60 Center for the Arts and Humanities supported her internship, and she is currently editing their student journal.