

## **Jail Wall Art and Public Criminology**

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### **Abstract**

*In this essay, the author reflects on his experience studying jail wall art and discusses its relevance to practice and scholarship. While the visual nature of jail wall art makes it a fascinating and informative area of academic study that also appeals to public audiences, the creation of jail wall art offers an implication for practice—that persons involved with the criminal justice system benefit from participation in the arts. The author's relationship with the art demonstrates that practice and scholarship can be informed using unusual sources of analysis. Photographs of some of the jail wall art are included.*

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### **Jail Wall Art and Public Criminology**

It is important for scholars to search for fresh perspectives in their disciplines as well as practical ways to advance them. In this essay, I reflect on my experiences studying and presenting jail wall art and discuss the art's relevance to "real life" practice, scholarship, and public enlightenment. The chance to document and examine the art became a good opportunity to make criminology more accessible to practitioners and the lay public. With this essay, I hope to demonstrate that inspiration for scholarship and application may be found in unusual places and activities.

### **The Study of Jail Wall Art**

Prisoner art is a fascinating topic. Works such as Kornfeld's *Cellblock Visions: Prison Art in America* (1997) and Gussak and Virshup's (1997) *Drawing Time: Art Therapy in Prisons and Other Correctional Settings* present and analyze prisoner artwork while explaining its importance to corrections. However, little academic literature exists on jail or prison wall drawings—art created without institutional support or approval ("graffiti"). During a recent search of several social science article databases, I found only two articles on the subject. In an analysis of wall images in a county jail in the U.S., Hanes (2005) identifies themes of time, escape, anger and redemption and argues that creating the wall art gave residents a solution to boredom, retreat from harsh surroundings, and safe outlet for expressing violent emotions—in general, a way to endure and adapt to the conditions of jail. In an analysis of graffiti in decommissioned prisons in Australia, Wilson (2008c) identifies themes of power relationships, sexuality, revenge, violence, boredom, and desire for entertainment and argues that the graffiti provides "narrative glimpses" into sociological and social psychological aspects of the prison environment.

Little may be written on jail wall drawings, but the practice of creating this kind of art dates back to the beginning of imprisonment. Throughout history captives in jails, prisons, and other detainment structures (gladiator barracks, medieval dungeons and oubliettes, prisoner of war/internment camps, concentration camps, and insane asylums) have created wall drawings, wall carvings, and tattoos using resources such as pen ink and makeshift tools, as well as crafts and sculptures using materials such as fabric, meat bones, wood, matchsticks, straw, paper, and

bread dough (Cardinal, 1997). Thus, the jail wall drawings presented in recent articles are part of a long, persistent artistic tradition. Perhaps “jail wall drawings” is specific, belonging to broader topics that *have* received noticeable scholarly attention. Jail wall art can be categorized under three established areas of study: art-in-corrections, visual methodology, and culture studies on graffiti.

Art-in-corrections is the subject of a relatively small but significant number of books (for examples see Gussak and Virshup, 1997, Kornfeld, 1997, Liebmann, 1994, and Williams, 2003) and articles (more recent examples include Alexander and Gothard, 2006, Clements, 2004, Delshadian, 2003, Gussak, 2007, Gussak and Ploumis-Devick, 2004, Merriam, 1998, Mullen, 1999, and Teasdale, 1995). This body of literature is concerned with establishing the uses that the arts have for corrections. Art humanizes correctional environments and improves the quality of life for all concerned. For sanctioned persons, art responds to their educational and therapeutic needs. For the community, art helps sanctioned persons contribute to the public good. And for those working in corrections, art helps to build good relationships and manage behavior, thereby reducing the costs of violence and deprivation. While jail wall art is the result of illicit activity, it may serve several of the functions identified in the literature. Thus, jail wall art can be properly understood within art-in-corrections frameworks.

Visual research was pioneered by such well-known social scientists as Erving Goffman and Howard Becker. More recently, Douglas Harper, Jon Caulfield, Charles Suchar, and several other researchers have advanced visual methodology. Photographs of visual images are representations of social reality and thus a useful form of data in social scientific analyses (Caulfield, 1996; Harper, 1988; Suchar, 1997). The visual facilitates an intensive kind of “seeing” in social research. Suchar (1997, p. 35) explains that “seeing involves the ability to reveal patterns, features or details in a research setting or topic—such as aspects of material culture, subjects’ characteristics or behavior, etc.—that are not readily apparent in less acute observations of that reality.” Caulfield (1996, p. 57) points out that visual images are of sociological interest because they “reflect the lifeworlds and social relations of their makers and users,” “are often formative elements of social life,” and “may hold documentary information about their subjects.” It is apparent, then, that visual analysis is an additional, highly useful field

research method for the grounding of theoretical concepts (Suchar, 1997). In a manner of speaking, theoretical concepts are given life and brought to life in properly analyzed visual images.

Whether it is studied as lawbreaking or discourse, graffiti has been of interest to social scientists for quite some time. An advantage of graffiti data is that they provide unobtrusive measures of human activity (Klofas and Cutshall, 1985). While graffiti is commonly associated with gang identification and vandalism, its social and cultural significance is broader (Ferrell, 1996; Halsey and Young, 2006; Nwoye, 1993; Snyder, 2006). Examinations of the context of graffiti production, in addition to the nature of the images, offers knowledge not only about the subcultures within which graffiti is produced but also about dominant culture and the powerful groups that campaign against it (Ferrell, 1996). This is also true of jail or prison graffiti. Klofas and Cutshall (1985) found that graffiti in a vacant juvenile correctional facility provided evidence of the informal group structures that form and institutional socialization processes that take place during incarceration. Also, Wilson found profound gender differences in graffiti in a decommissioned Australian jail (2008a) and evidence of racist and far-Right political sentiments among both prisoners and staff in Australian prison museum graffiti (2008b).

### **A Collection of Jail Wall Drawings**

Several photographs of interesting drawings made on the walls of an old local jail in the Midwestern United States are available for viewing in articles recently published in open-access online journals. These journals provide an ideal home for the photos, as they are easily accessible to a large public audience and the electronic format makes it easy to clearly display several drawings. In three of the articles, the drawings serve as a springboard for discussing the use of artistic activities in corrections. Johnson (2007a) discusses art in jail, Johnson (2007b) discusses art in community reintegration, and Johnson (2008) discusses art in prison. Also, some of the drawings are displayed in Yogan and Johnson's analysis of gender differences in jail art (2006). Additional wall drawings from the jail are presented next in Figures 1-13 (and later in Figures 14-18).

Figure 1: Hebrews 12:5 Address (top) & Habakkuk 3:2 Prayer (bottom)

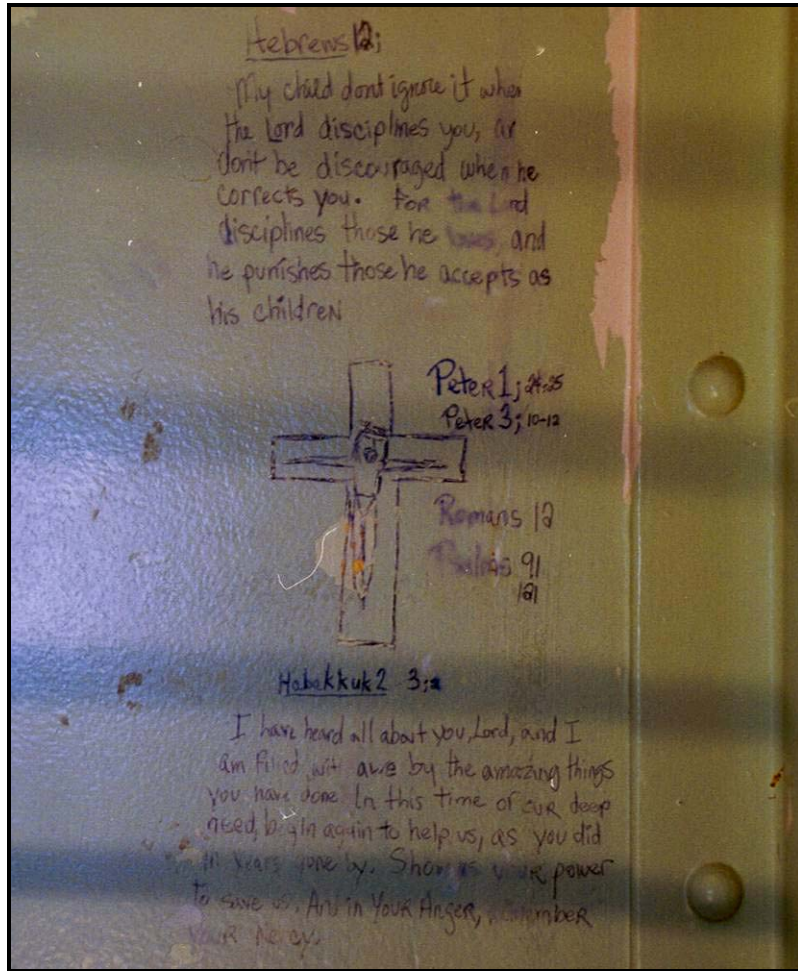


Figure 2: Praying Hands



Figure 3: Lord's Prayer & Mother's Prayer

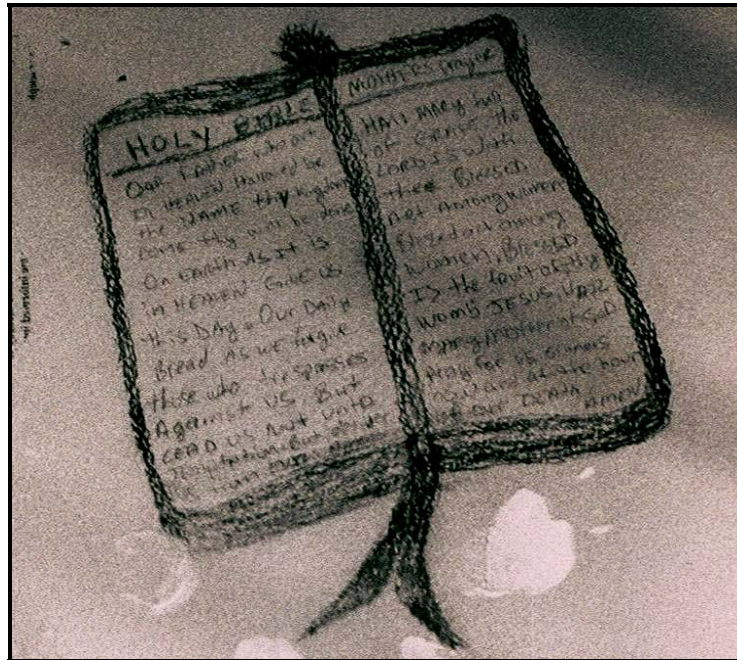
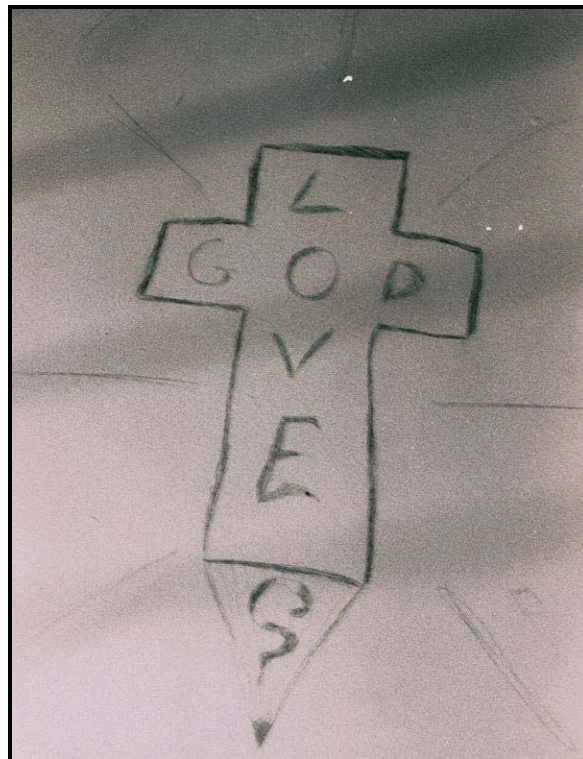


Figure 4: Cross/Pencil



In addition to expressing one's faith and religious identity, the Christian drawings—especially the crosses—could represent the artist's quest for forgiveness and redemption.

Figure 5: The Reaper



Figure 6: Frightening Head



Figure 7: Skull Crossing Arms

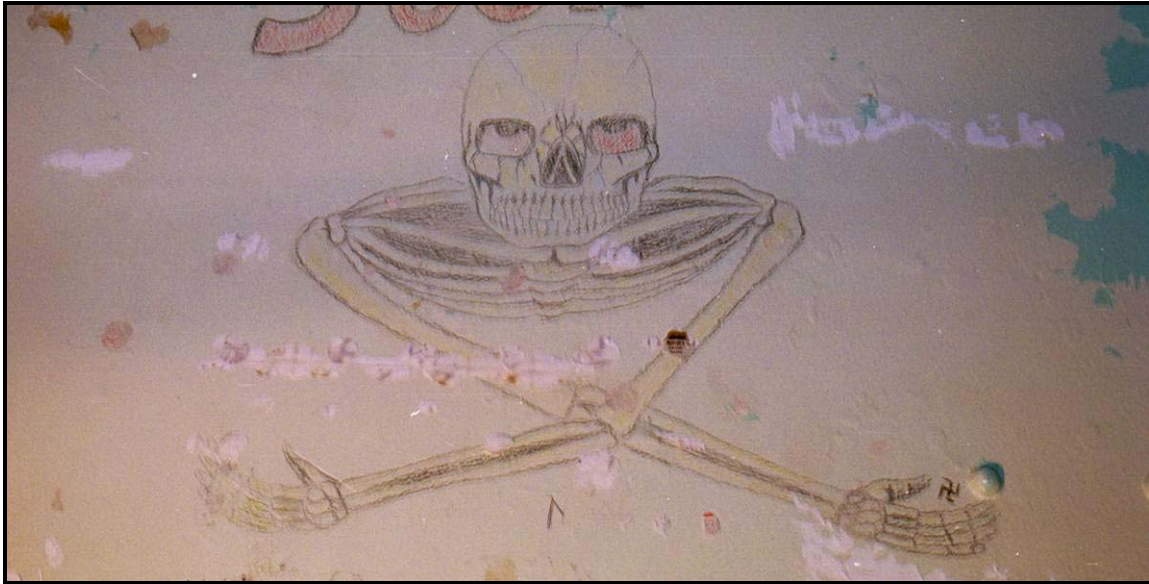


Figure 8: Three Images



Figure 9: Bugs



In addition to religious drawings, skulls and other frightening figures were popular types of drawings in the jail. Maybe the bugs in figure 9 were intended as a bit of humor.

Figure 10: Flag of Puerto Rico



Figure 11: Dreamcatcher

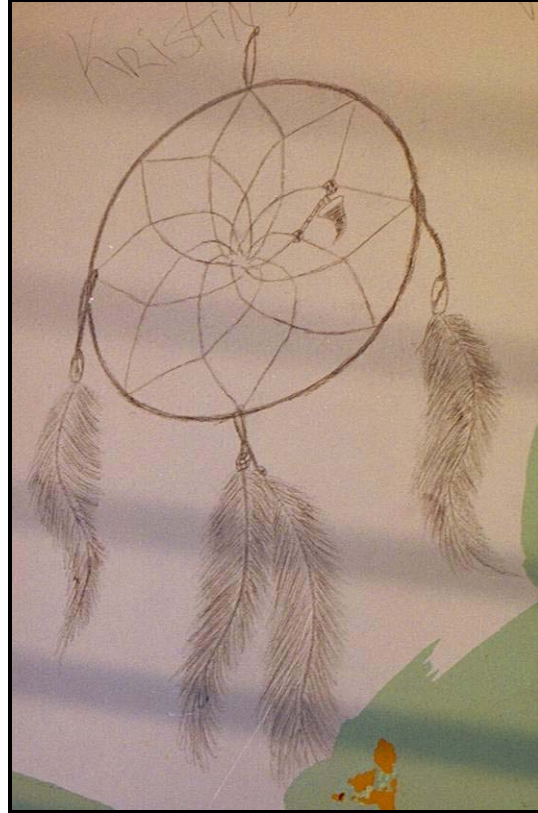
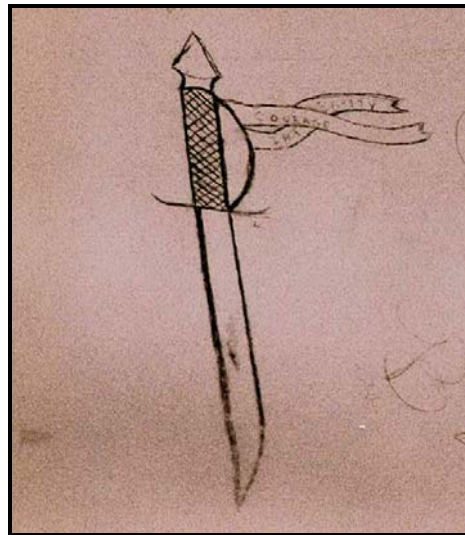


Figure 12: Heart Design



Figure 13: "Courage" & "Integrity"



The walls also contained many other types of drawings.

### **Discovering a Jail “Art Gallery”**

I was presented with the opportunity to examine the jail wall art in the fall of 2002, while living in northwest Indiana. In October, the county in which I lived built a new state-of-the-art jail. Right after the move to the new jail, I received a phone call from the county police chief, who oversaw jail operations. He told me that there was a great deal of fascinating artwork drawn throughout the interior of the emptied jail. He seemed to be impressed with several of the drawings and offered me the chance to come in and “document” them (take pictures) before they were to be washed away; the building was soon to be auctioned. It was interesting that the chief referred to the drawings as “artwork” instead of “graffiti.” He is a high-ranking law enforcement officer and, of course, is opposed to the illegal act of making graffiti. I supposed that the drawings had to be good for him to momentarily look past the fact that they were drawn on walls and find artistic value in them. Curious, I told the chief that I would come to the jail on the following Saturday morning to take pictures of the drawings, and we made the necessary arrangements. At the time, I had no intent to formally study the art; I just thought it would be nice to have pictures to show in special lectures and presentations to community organizations. Being entirely unskilled at photography, I contacted a former sociology and art-photography student and asked her to accompany me to the jail and take the pictures. She enthusiastically agreed.

On that Saturday, we thoroughly searched throughout the interior of the jail and photographed several drawings. Poor lighting, restrictive space, and lack of time made it difficult to shoot, but most of the targeted drawings were at least sufficiently documented. It was very fascinating moving throughout the jail, coming upon so many interesting drawings. I did not expect to see so many impressive creations. I expected to see mass amounts of crude drawings and writings (of which there were many) and maybe a handful of “real art.” Also remarkable was that the art was very diverse (in subject and style)—as diverse as that of the art world in general. [For more background information and detailed descriptions of the artwork, as well as a description of the old jail’s population, see Johnson (2007a) and Johnson (2007b).]

The old jail was located in the downtown area of the largest town in a partly suburban, partly rural county in northwest Indiana—a little over an hour from Chicago. The county does not have the reputation of having a serious crime problem, although substance abuse, especially among teenagers, is a big concern there. One of the reasons that the county needed a new jail was that the old one became overcrowded (the primary reason that the artists were able to get away with making the drawings). The size of the population had reached nearly double-capacity. I visited the jail during the previous spring, while it was still in operation. Indeed, it was very cramped. A middle corridor (sort of a buffer) existed between the outermost passageway and the actual lock-up cells. While as many people as possible were placed in each cell, I noticed that several more were set up in this middle corridor, with cots on which to sleep.

The jail had also become old, worn-down, and expensive to keep in repair. One might think that a trip through such an old jail—a building that has housed several types of offenders over the years—would be an eerie experience, especially when coming across violent or “spooky” drawings. But for me, it was not. The physical environment was depressing, as were my thoughts of overcrowding and what it would be like to be confined there, but the artwork itself relayed to me a sense of normalcy. Like jail and prison facilities in general, this jail was an abnormal environment—a place for, supposedly, abnormal people. However, the inmates did not build this jail, nor did they decide which and how many persons would be locked up there. The artwork, in contrast, *was* made by inmates—artwork that to me felt *normal*. While the look and smell of the interior structure itself implied doom, the art implied hope. Thus I came to wonder if the jail artists were using art to cope with, and even change, their threatening environment (rather than to defy authority or be destructive). Jail and prison are, of course, harsh environments. When they are overcrowded and under-maintained, they are even harsher; their residents face more physical and mental health threats, from violence, unsanitary conditions, lack of space, and idleness to name a few.

Jail and prison, then, can be extremely dehumanizing. Art, in contrast, is therapeutic and has the potential for humanizing the jail or prison; it replaces some of the ugliness of incarceration, in terms of the behavior that takes place within an institution as well as its physical appearance, with beauty. Making art provides one with a distraction or temporary escape from the conditions

of harsh captivity, but more importantly, art is an enjoyable activity that can improve the self-concepts, sense of self-worth, and feelings of control damaged by incarceration. A piece of art is something that one can be proud of; the tangible product gives the creator a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Art can even help prevent problems stemming from environmental pressures; choosing art as a response to boredom, conflict, and negative emotions avoids the harm to oneself and others that results from acting out aggressively. By creating art and using it to adorn one's living space, an incarcerated person exerts a certain amount of control over his or her environment. This helps one maintain a sense of autonomy, and a connection to the outside world, important for the psychological survival of circumstances that may seem to offer no or little self-control. Further, being surrounded by works of art makes the physical environment at least appear less like "a bad place"—less gloomy, sterile, or coarse. Art creates a brighter, livelier atmosphere that can improve mood. Art is something that is created and exhibited outside of jail/prison—in "nice environments" like homes, parks, galleries, and museums. Creating art on the walls of the jail, even as graffiti, perhaps made it a somewhat better place to stay.

I hoped to meet and talk with as many of the jail wall artists as possible. Along with authorities, I attempted to make contact with them through word-of-mouth and public advertisement on a local-access cable television show. Unfortunately, we were able to locate none of the artists. It would have been great to interview them and find out more about the significance of their art. Since virtually nothing is known about the artists, there are severe limitations in attempting to analyze their work; the potential to be overly subjective and speculative with analysis is high. The meaning and artistic intent of each drawing cannot be known with enough certainty.

Although it is difficult to know exactly what they were "saying" with their work, it is apparent that the jail artists had thoughts and feelings that they wanted to express. But, opportunities for free, creative expression in jail and prison are very limited. Jails and prisons are highly controlled environments, and the outward expression of certain inner thoughts and feelings are suppressed both by authorities and other prisoners. Expressions that challenge, or even just seem to challenge, conventional rules and morality will be perceived as threats by authorities (angry, violent drawings for example). Expressions of thoughts and feelings that violate the "inmate

code” of toughness—sadness, loneliness, homesickness, fear, love, etc.—may make one appear weak to others, increasing one’s potential for being the target of verbal and physical attacks. Perhaps, then, inmates or prisoners should not make certain statements, that they may have a need to make, too directly. Again, the art could have been created as a kind of self-therapy—a way to meet the human need for outlets for creative expression, to survive lock-up.

### **Women’s Drawings**

There were not many drawings created by women. There were only about a dozen women in the jail at a given time, and the female unit did not contain as much graffiti compared to the rest of the jail. Generally, the work created by women was quite different than that of the men, focusing more on themes of love, relationships, nature, and sadness. [See Yogan and Johnson (2006) for an analysis of gender differences in the art.] Interestingly, at least five of the women’s drawings featured some kind of facial portraits, with teardrops. Figures 14-17 show some of the women’s drawings. I cannot recall a female drawing anywhere that included a woman’s body. Men’s drawings of women, in contrast, paid a great deal of attention to the body, especially the nude body; see Figure 18 for example. This emphasis on the body is consistent with stereotypically masculine imagery in which the female body represents a sexual object—a part of the physical person. The eyes, on the other hand, represent thought and emotion—part of the psychological person. Further, considering that women involved in the criminal justice system frequently have histories of abuse and sexual exploitation, the female artists’ concern with eyes and sadness rather than the body, a symbol of sexual objectification, seems to make sense.

Figure 14: “LOVE”



Figure 15: "Star Loves Johnny"

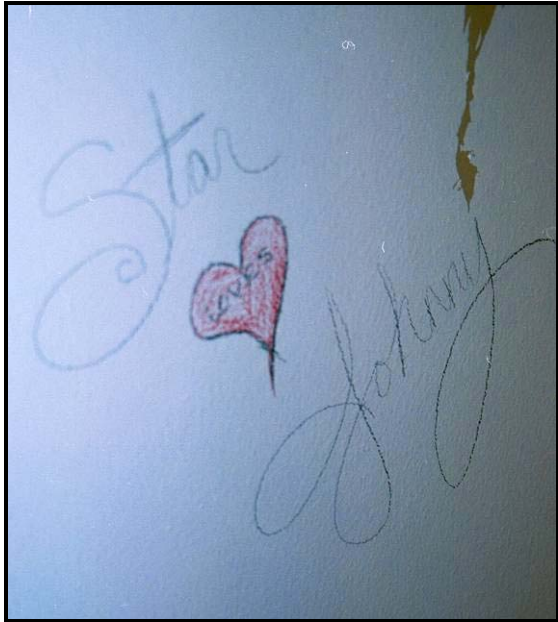


Figure 16: Eye with Teardrop



Figure 17: Woman's Face

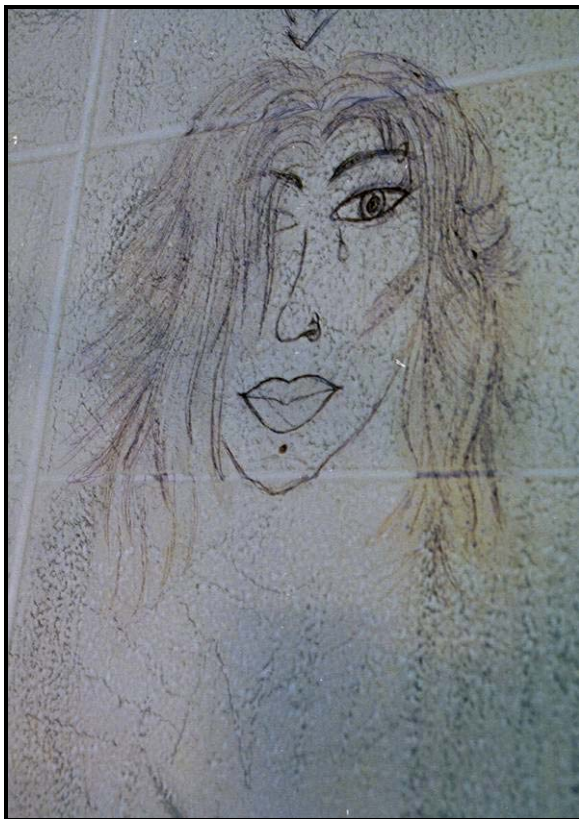


Figure 18: Female Nude by a Male



### **Inspiration for Practice**

It is generally accepted that implications for practice should be drawn from plausible theories, thorough research, and practical experience. But can practice also be informed by more unusual sources—jail graffiti for instance? The jail wall art showed me something important: the creative desire and artistic potential of the incarcerated; it is what inspired me to study the subject of art in corrections. The display of creativity suggests an opportunity to get sanctioned persons more involved in pro-social activities, as a counter to offending. Jail wall art can be fascinating and interesting, but the problem with it is that it is produced, without permission, on property that does not belong to the artists. While this kind of activity cannot be allowed, “legitimate” artistic activity in correctional settings can, and perhaps should, be encouraged. Much can be accomplished when correctional agencies provide sanctioned persons with the proper places and materials for artistic creation—with socially acceptable outlets for creative expression.

Earlier, I speculated that the jail artists may have been using art therapeutically—for creative expression, stress-coping, and the preservation of autonomy and identity. Also, I speculated that the art may have been used to improve their quality of life in the jail—as decoration, a way to fill idle time, and an alternative to destructive behavior. If so, they were using art in ways recognized in formal correctional art programs. Art programs allow incarcerated persons to use art for many other purposes as well. Art therapy also provides an alternative form of communication to those with poor literacy and speaking skills, a safer way to discuss subjects that are difficult to talk about, a method for the internal exploration and confrontation of suppressed feelings and memories, and an aid in the treatment of mental disorders. Art programs also improve quality of life by helping participants get along well with staff, which would improve institutional management and reduce the financial costs of dealing with disruptive behavior.

Further, art programs support education and community involvement. Art education reaches out to people who have trouble learning and helps them improve several intellectual abilities—manual, cognitive, emotional, and social. Participation in the arts constitutes productive, pro-social activities that create bonds with the community and rival the kinds of behaviors that get

one in trouble with the law. Thus, art suggests a way to apply social bond/control theory and increase the social capital of system-involved persons threatened by alienation from the community, especially those faced with the difficult transition from incarceration to life on the outside. Because the jail artwork exhibits creativity and ambition, and because art has so much to offer in corrections, I proposed that the jail wall art implies that engaging correctional system involved persons in the arts will improve environmental conditions and rehabilitation programs (argued in Johnson 2007a, 2007b, and 2008).

### **Inspiration for Scholarship**

In addition to being an area of professional application, art in corrections is, more generally speaking, a fascinating area of academic study. After giving several presentations on the subject of jail wall art to academics at conferences and students in my courses, I can say that artwork produced in jail or prison is a subject that easily gets attention—largely due to the visual nature of the subject and relatively small number of visual art based presentations in these environments. While the processes and products of art-making both have a significant impact on the art maker and his or her surroundings, the artwork created in correctional settings also has much that it can teach those who study crime and justice. Works of art provide a sort of window into the lives of their creators: their experiences, circumstances, emotions, and viewpoints. Art produced in correctional settings can, in many ways, “paint a picture” of the lives of persons sanctioned by the criminal justice system, including their experiences with system involvement specifically.

The jail wall drawings illustrate the five aspects of visual culture important to the study of visual imagery taught by Gillian Rose (2001). *First*, visual images do something—they have an impact in their own right. Even though the jail’s images are still, many of them show that action is taking place. Some directly display violent acts, substance use, travel, destruction and decay, and religious worship. The creation of the jail’s images was likely inspired by active experience, and they may inspire the viewer to think, feel, and who knows, maybe even act in certain ways.

*Second*, visual images conceptualize and portray social difference. Much of the jail’s art expresses social categorization, even if sometimes non-deliberately. For instance, racist and gang-related art display in-group/out-group identification with social categories. Also, class

divisions may be apparent in that some of the themes (gangs, hardcore life, “white power,” etc.), and graffiti and “tattoo-esque” styles, are more frequently used by lower and working class artists.

*Third*, more important than the visual images themselves are the different ways that we perceive them. It is important to pay attention to the relationship between images and their viewers. How the audience experiences meaning upon viewing the jail art is also very important. My examination of the jail wall art is itself an expression of my relationship with the images, and others, for sure, experience them differently.

*Fourth*, visual imagery is embedded in a wider culture. The jail art is a reflection of culture, whether it is subculture, counter culture, or mainstream. The drawings symbolize collective values, beliefs, attitudes, behavioral practices, events, and knowledge. Although many of the drawings have unique styles, none are disconnected from “the outside,” by particular theme, genre, or even compositional method; substances common to the wider society can be found in all of the drawings, including the ones that address controversial themes.

*Fifth*, many times, we do not react to visual images, and/or how they are presented, in ways intended by their creators. This aspect is illustrated by the project in general. The artists likely did not suspect that a criminologist would eventually study the images that they were creating. Nor can I or anyone else be sure that we are interpreting their art in ways that they would expect or like. In fact, we should assume that many of our interpretations would be inconsistent with the intentions of the artists (Rose, 2001).

### **Public Presentation**

In leading their daily lives, members of the general public may not be able to, or interested in, attending academic conferences and reading our journal articles and books, beyond attending college anyway. The typical forums for social scientific discourse are often not very accessible or appealing to the general public. However, there is much for the general public to learn from the work of scholars—when we have information that debunks myths and clears up misperceptions for example. While I do not advocate using entertaining gimmicks or

“dummying down” material in presenting social science to the public (I do not see the use of art as either), I have come to appreciate art’s ability to quickly grasp attention and make a good first impression with lay audiences. After making such an impression, I find that I am better able to engage audience members and make them more receptive to complex and controversial concepts and arguments. Art is fun, interesting, and mind-opening; it can disarm the apprehension that audience members may have when they think that they are about to listen to a “dry lecture” that “is over their heads” or potentially threatens their beliefs.

While crime is an interesting and alarming issue that captures widespread interest, the general public seems to favor certain topics and may approach presentations with limiting assumptions and expectations. My impression is that subjects such as “profiling” and the alleged psychological and/or biological defects of criminals, CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) and courtroom drama, and notions about how crime is currently “out of control” and the system is “soft on crime” have more widespread appeal than sociological topics such as the social construction of law and deviant behavior, the role of power in crime and punishment, crime as social interaction, and the structural causes of crime. During presentations to community groups however, I found jail wall art to be a useful device for engaging the audience in discussions about topics such as gender differences (Yogan and Johnson, 2006), social integration/offender reintegration, and art as social capital (Johnson 2007b)—topics that will not be of immediate interest to several general public audiences.

While living in Indiana, I had the pleasure of giving jail wall art presentations to two community groups—the local Women’s Club and Kiwanis Club. The Women’s Club audience consisted of mostly older/elderly women and the Kiwanis Club audience consisted of middle-aged and elderly men and women—not the kinds of audiences one would typically think of as being “into” jail graffiti. Further, the area was noted for having a politically and culturally conservative population. I have to admit, I was a bit apprehensive about presenting graffiti to these audiences, and using it to make arguments such as that persons in jail are not much different than them (the audience) and that the incarcerated should be provided with more amenities, but to my delight they were very receptive. They paid close attention and asked several questions, and some

continued to talk with me afterwards. Many remarked about the quality of the drawings and indicated that they believed that getting offenders more involved in the arts is a good idea.

The jail wall art made it easier to challenge dichotomous distinctions between offenders and non-offenders, and propose that participation in artistic activities helps system-involved persons integrate into the community and avoid re-offending. I sense that the Women's Club and Kiwanis Club audiences were receptive to my presentations because they were able to relate to the art, and maybe the artists in some way, for two reasons. *First*, people in general, in trouble with the law or not, have an appreciation for the visual. The fact that I was presenting aesthetically interesting results of inmate behavior, rather than something violent and appalling, made it easier for the audiences to see the artists as "people" more than "criminals." The visual appeal may have affected them in a way that made them more willing to think of an issue in a different way. *Second*, the collection of drawings included more conventional images (such as those about the community, Christianity, home, and pop culture—some of them rather funny) instead of just those that are shocking and potentially offensive (about gang affiliation, violence, horror, drugs, the occult, racism, etc.). The more "wholesome" drawings reveal that their creators share interests with traditional members of the community.

### **Conclusion**

Criminological scholarship is typically directed towards students and the academic community. However, advocates of "public criminology" insist that we must direct our scholarship to other audiences as well—policymakers, the media, and the general public. In doing so, criminology will increase its contributions to social policy, public education, and movements toward social justice (Carrabine, Lee and South, 2000; Currie, 2007; Tewksbury, Miller and DeMichele, 2006). Currie (2007, p. 176) describes public criminology as "one that takes as part of its defining mission a more vigorous, systematic and effective intervention in the world of social policy and social action." According to Carrabine, Lee and South (2000, p. 207), public criminology "explicitly breaks boundaries and makes positive connections with other arenas of social action—agendas for improving services for people and communities, local and national political debates, that shape policy and social provision, and, crucially, with the means by which the 'ordinary public,' so often disillusioned and disempowered, can make claims for social justice

and their human rights.” While I can only hope that my presentations had a productive impact on my public audiences, I can say for sure that jail wall art gave me a chance to be more publicly visible with sociology and criminology; it helped me reach audiences that do not have much exposure to social scientific discourse.

Regardless of the type of audience, the jail wall drawings captured from the walls of an empty jail in the Midwestern United States can be perceived in many ways—thought provoking, detailed, complex, scary, macabre, saddening, insulting, and even funny. And while the messages and aesthetic value of the images will not be understood or appreciated by everyone, they reveal the system-involved artists’ interest in being productive. The drawings express the social realities of their creators, and thus provide a sort of window into a world that most of us will never directly experience.

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