

DISCIPLINE, PUNISH, CREATE:  
ART IN PRISON

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When my son was a Cub Scout, I chaperoned his den's visit to the local county jail. The purpose of this field trip was to expose the boys to part of the local civic structure, with a dose of warning thrown in. The boys were fingerprinted, locked in a cell for a brief time, and told facts and anecdotes about why and how people ended up in jail, and what they did (and couldn't do) once they were there. Hopefully, it was the first and last trip to the jail for all of them.

For me, the most fascinating part of the field trip was an exhibit of artifacts made by the inmates, mostly clandestine "craft" projects. Apparently the jail toilet paper was a rough, sturdy stuff that when mixed with water made a very strong yet lightweight modeling material. We were shown a small soccer ball and several crosses made of this material. Most remarkable was a pair of boxing gloves, sewn together and decorated with blue yarn. "Where do you suppose he got the yarn?" the warden asked. We had no idea, and were told that the inmate had unraveled his white socks and dyed a portion of the yarn with the ink he collected from a broken ball point pen. Someone had carved a human hand gesturing the "Peace Sign" from a bar of soap, using the sharpened end of a toothbrush as a tool. A female inmate had made an incredible picture frame of folded playing cards. The backs of the cards were exposed, and the fanciful printed pattern on them was painstakingly incorporated into layers of tessellating stars that all locked together into a rectangle.

I was very humbled by this display of creativity, especially since I am a designer who is supposedly creative by profession. Would I have thought to unravel my socks to procure yarn, or produce dye from a broken ink pen? Would I sit and fold tiny three-dimensional stars from playing cards if I had no other medium? It is easy to dismiss these jail projects as escapes from boredom and frustration, but I have never been able to forget them. The county jail had televisions, and anyone who wanted one received a free Bible from a local church, as well as

other books. These simple entertainments were apparently not enough for some, however, who were inspired to make, to create, with whatever they could lay their hands on and appropriate.

Reading Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, I kept going back in my mind to those jail artifacts. What drove these social pariahs to create things, when they had nothing left to do? How does the power to create something fit into Foucault's schemes of social power? What is the value of these prison artifacts? These are questions that fascinate me, and that I would like to explore in this paper.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault was concerned with structures of power in society, but he did not approach these structures in a conventional way. To Foucault, power was a social interaction that worked not only from the top down, as a king influences his subjects, but from the bottom up, as the behavior of jail inmates influences wardens and administrators, or horizontally, as teenagers influence the clothing choices of their peer groups.<sup>1</sup> Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish* is an extensive examination of how the penal system of the Western world has developed over the last few centuries, and how broader notions of power and control have played out in the prison systems. His work focuses on the criminal body, which up to the 18th century was used as a location for torture and destruction. As philosophies towards human motivation changed in the 19th century, the bodies of prisoners were viewed as something to be corrected, controlled, and reformed.<sup>2</sup>

Modern prisons are not the torture chambers of the past; Foucault described the many services now associated with incarceration: “medicine, psychology, education, public assistance, 'social work' assume an ever greater share of the powers of supervision and assessment...”<sup>3</sup> Foucault's concern was that all of these practices intending to help the inmate will only lead to

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, Richard. “Foucault's theory of power.” In *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, edited by Dianna Taylor, 22-24. Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*, 127-129. New York, NY: Random House, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 306.

more social control and domination.<sup>4</sup> In her study of modern American prison reform, Linda L. Zupan seems to find this is true; she notes that the metrics used to analyze the effect of reform programs usually focus on maintaining good behavior and improving the job satisfaction of the prison guards.<sup>5</sup>

Artistic opportunities in prisons are often motivated by outside volunteer organizations, who believe that providing art supplies and encouragement to inmates is a way to at least alleviate boredom and at best to provide a means for inmates to communicate inner experiences and emotions through creating works of art. These organizations often originate from religious or educational institutions. Melanie G. Snyder, in her book *Grace Goes to Prison*, describes how she and other church workers brought art supplies to inmates in the Indiana system and organized art shows and Christmas card sales with the resulting work, all of which produced a positive effect on prisoner attitudes and relationships.<sup>6</sup> In the Michigan system, the Prison Creative Arts Project is largely supported through the volunteer efforts of University of Michigan students.<sup>7</sup>

Individual artists also create their own prison outreach programs, often made aware of the opportunities through their own experiences in art education or simply their own compassion towards the imprisoned. Two examples are Treacy Ziegler, who works on a project called *The Prison Arts Coalition*,<sup>8</sup> and Phyllis Kornfield, whose project is *Cellblock Visions*.<sup>9</sup>

Kornfield has much experience working with imprisoned artists, and divides prison art into several categories. One of these is folk art, which includes most of the examples my son and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Zupan, Linda L. *Jails, Reform, and the New Generation Philosophy*, 58-59. Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Company, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Snyder, Melanie G. *Grace Goes to Prison*. Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Prison Creative Arts Project. University of Michigan. 2009. Accessed November 10, 2015. <https://www.lsa.umich.edu/pcap>

<sup>8</sup> Ziegler, Treacy. "Memory of Space." *The Prison Arts Coalition*. 1996. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://theprisonartscoalition.com/tag/treacy-ziegler/>.

<sup>9</sup> Kornfield, Phyllis. *Cell Block Visions*. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.cellblockvisions.com/index.html>.

I saw at the Allegan County Jail. Paperfolding, soap carving, and toilet paper modeling are all examples of craft practices common in prisons as these items become available to the inmates. Paperfolding can utilize not only cards but book and magazine pages, candy and gum wrappers, and snack bags. Of prison toilet paper Kornfield writes: “Prison toilet paper is the coarse cheap kind, malleable when wet, hard and durable when dried. One toilet paper artist, paroled to a half-way house, discovered that the relatively luxurious toilet paper available on the streets was too weak for his sculptures. He contacted an acquaintance on the prison staff to get the name of the institution’s supplier.”<sup>10</sup> Other prison folk arts mentioned by Kornfield are handkerchief painting (typically practiced by Hispanics) and envelope decoration. Examples of these arts are shown in Figure 1.

Tattooing is another popular prison art form. Because it is illegal, Kornfield is not involved in its practice, but she is aware of its strong influence on prison drawing and painting as well as the prison economy. An internet search for “prison art” mostly brings up tattoo-like images: “Noble Indians, sinewy basketball players, jungle animals, rugged princess warriors, pretty landscapes, celebrity portraits, fantasy beefcake: Most prisoners who try their hand at art make the same kind of uninspired, tediously rendered stuff that is liable to result from the artistic efforts of any more or less random population with time on its hands.”<sup>11</sup> is the assessment of the *Interesting Ideas* outsider art website.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Interesting Ideas. “Inmates Artists’ Hard-fought Visions.” Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.interestingideas.com/out/prison/prison.htm>.



Figure 1. Clockwise from upper left: Leland Dodd, *Kools Purse*, cigarette wrappers; Nelson Molina, *No One Cares*, Ivory soap; Keith Dwy, *Self portrait*, toilet paper, crayons; Anonymous, colored pencils on handkerchief; Anonymous, envelope and mixed media. Kornfield, Phyllis. Cell Block Visions. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.cellblockvisions.com/index.html>.

As Kornfield observes, most prison art is categorized as “Outsider Art.” The origins of this phrase are linked to the collection of French artist Jean Dubuffet, which he labeled Art Brut. Dubuffet in turn was influenced by a number of European psychiatrists who were beginning to study the art work of the mentally ill at the beginning of the 20th century. Inspired by the ideas of Freud, these doctors studied drawings and paintings by their schizophrenic patients in the hopes that artwork, like dreams, would reveal the workings of the unconscious mind. Dr. Hans Prinzhorn of the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic published the first detailed study of the visual expressions produced by inmates of mental institutions.<sup>12</sup> In his book he published a flowchart

<sup>12</sup>Maizels, John. *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*, 14. London, UK: Phaedon Press, 1996.

that identified the different methods of artistic expression he observed in his patients, shown in Figure 2.

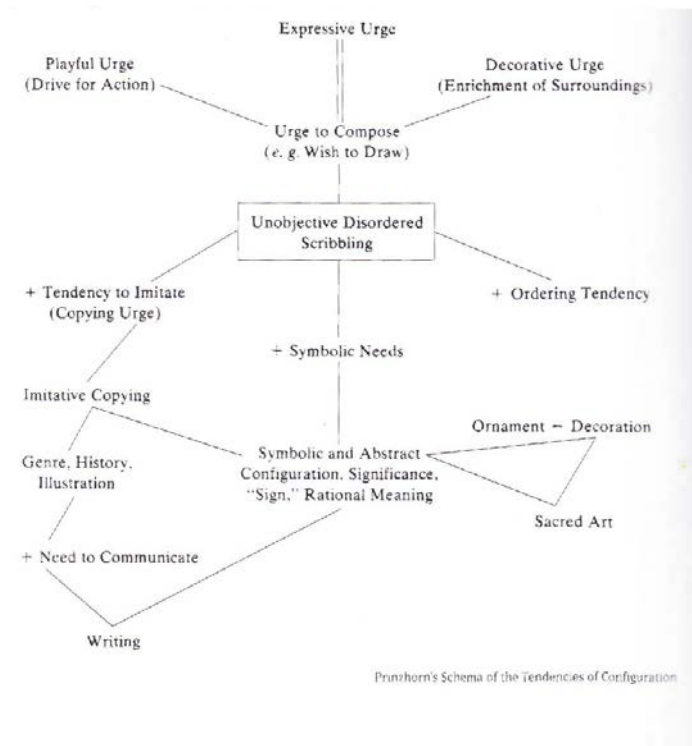


Figure 2. Prinzhorn's Schema of the Tendencies of Configuration. Maizels, John. *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*. London, UK: Phaedon Press, 1996.

Some of the categories of Prinzhorn's schema seem very predominant in prison art also, especially considering the preponderance of tattoo and biker images in so many drawings, most of which have been copied or drawn from memory.

Dubuffet coined the term Art Brut to describe art that he believed had been created with no cultural constraints whatsoever. He preferred the art of children, self-proclaimed mystics and prophets, and the mentally ill, considering it more pure and original than academic art. "He argued that for hundreds of years a cultural elite had been the arbiters of taste and fashion, insisting on their own criteria of quality and developing their ideas only within the concept of classical beauty. In Dubuffet's view no artist of genuine originality would survive in such a

climate.”<sup>13</sup> The term Outsider Art was coined in Chicago in the 1950s by artists receptive to Dubuffet's ideas.<sup>14</sup> It is now used to describe a broad category of folk artists, visionary artists, and creators of idiosyncratic environments. Some well-known American outsider artists include Bill Traylor, who drew simple animal and human silhouettes in crayon on found cardboard, Henry Darger, who wrote and illustrated an enormous fantasy book called *The Story of the Vivian Girls*, and Howard Finster, who built *Paradise Garden* in Georgia. Examples of their works are shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Examples of work, clockwise from top left: Bill Traylor, Henry Darger, and Howard Finster. Maizels, John. *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*. London, UK: Phaedon Press, 1996.

Since prisoners enter the system as adults, even though they are often young adults they have still been exposed to some art and culture, even if it is street art and pop culture. Treacy Ziegler says this about the influences of prison art:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 98.



The primary sources of art in prison tend to be Bob Ross, cartoons, photos of loved ones, tattoos and Playboy-like magazines... Like the spatial limitations of prison, art in prison is limiting and because of this, art has the potential to be oppressive in prison. (This is not totally different than the gallery world where art too is used as a tool of oppression – it works on elitism and eliminates most artists). In prison, art can be undermined when it does not fit into the accepted categories.<sup>15</sup>

One of Ziegler's art students told her he drew in his cell at night to avoid being ridiculed by guards and peers who did not understand his subject matter.<sup>16</sup> Although one might suppose the activity of drawing and making art would offer a sense of release or freedom to prisoners, one also realizes the activity becomes another arena to be watched and controlled, as Foucault would predict. One also recognizes that artists who are not imprisoned must experience this scrutiny and subjection to power as well, while navigating the world of critics, galleries, and peers.

When teaching art to prisoners, Ziegler discourages using “Bob Ross techniques” and copying from photographs. One of her first lessons has the inmates draw the light and shadow of what they observe in their cells. This results in drawings that have a graphic, almost abstract quality, as shown in Figure 4.

Through programs offered by artists like Ziegler, prisoners are exposed to art lessons they may have never accessed outside of prison, as well as opportunities to exhibit their work online and in galleries. Other prisoners follow more idiosyncratic paths in their quest for artistic expression. The website Interesting Things examines several artists who are notable through their use of materials and obsessive focus on a particular theme.<sup>17</sup>

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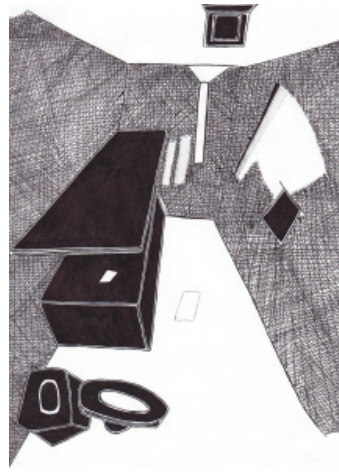
<sup>15</sup> Ziegler, Treacy. “Memory of Space.” The Prison Arts Coalition. 1996. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://theprisonartscoalition.com/tag/treacy-ziegler/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Interesting Ideas. “Inmates Artists' Hard-fought Visions.”



Raymond Palmore



Manuel Gonzalez

Figure 4. Prison drawing exercises. Ziegler, Treacy. “Memory of Space.” The Prison Arts Coalition. 1996. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://theprisonartscoalition.com/tag/treacy-ziegler/>

Ray Materson is a Grand Rapids native who ended up in prison in Connecticut for fifteen years, because of theft committed to support his drug habit. He began unraveling his socks and using the yarn to embroider tiny tapestries, usually portraits of sports figures or imaginary scenes related to drug use. Now out of prison, he has written a book, *Sins and Needles*, about how his personal art gave him hope in prison and sustains him now. Two of his works are shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Miniature tapestries by Ray Materson. Materson, Ray. “Ray Materson.” <http://www.raymaterson.com/bio.htm>.

Michael Harms is an artist who carves intricate chairs out of blocks of soap, and displays them in cases made out of Popsicle sticks. The backs of the chairs are carved with birds, flowers, and vines. Art dealer Phyllis Kind, who shows his work, says:

If you come across someone isolated from those pressures (of the academic art world), we know they don't have influences, such as the art market or friends. They're doing it even though they assume that nobody likes it or nobody ever will...That's why the authenticity of this sort of work is not for a minute questioned. This had to happen, this work was necessary for him. It makes him alive. This person is making something because they can't not make it.<sup>18</sup>

Harms' chairs are typically about two inches high. A collection of them is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Chairs by Michael Harms. Interesting Ideas. “Inmates Artists' Hard-fought Visions.” Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.interestingideas.com/out/prison/prison.htm>.

Chip Jarrett is a Michigan inmate who makes models of motorcycles out of found objects: soap, paper clips, salvaged cardboard. Looking at the small cycles, one marvels at their detail, the mechanical knowledge of their maker, and his ingenuity in using found material. In a letter to an art dealer Jarrett describes his first realization that he could use trash as material: “I

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<sup>18</sup> Swislow, William. “When it comes to art, not everything's carved in stone.” Chicago Tribune. Accessed November 10, 2015. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-04-23/news/9504230059\\_1\\_chairs-phyllis-kind-prison-made](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-04-23/news/9504230059_1_chairs-phyllis-kind-prison-made).

went to dump the trash can from my room, and I had a vision that hit me like a ton of bricks!! I know this sounds crazy, but I couldn't help to wonder why I was throwing away all that good trash!"<sup>19</sup> Some examples of Jarrett's work are shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7. Found object motorcycles by Chip Jarrett. Interesting Ideas. "Inmates Artists' Hard-fought Visions." Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.interestingideas.com/out/prison/prison.htm>.

Art has value, inside and outside of prison. Some of it has very little value: it is easy to imagine a lot of it getting wadded up and thrown away, when a prisoner is released or simply tires of his work or wants to make something new. This happens to a lot of art outside of prison, too. There is also a bartering economy in prisons, where art has value and creates a certain prestige. Good tattooing is highly in demand: "Anything with a biker on it is worth four or five packs," says an inmate of Phyllis Kornfield's acquaintance.<sup>20</sup>

Chip Jarrett writes: "When I started making my bikes, I would go through the trash everyday looking for materials and the other guys used to laugh at me and make fun of me, but after seeing that first bike, they stopped making fun of me and started asking if they could get one."<sup>21</sup> Ray Materson also tells how being the "prison embroiderer" gave him social status and protection by those who had "commissioned" his work.<sup>22</sup>

In his essay "Consumer Society", Jean Baudrillard discusses how most of what we want or buy are not needs but objects that we think will grant us status if we own them. We may not

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<sup>19</sup> Interesting Ideas. "Inmates Artists' Hard-fought Visions."

<sup>20</sup> Kornfield, Phyllis. Cell Block Visions

<sup>21</sup> Interesting Ideas. "Inmates Artists' Hard-fought Visions."

<sup>22</sup> Materson, Ray. "Ray Materson" <http://www.raymaterson.com/bio.htm>.

even derive any actual pleasure from the object. Our possessions are signifiers of taste and achievement. He writes “Consumption is a system of meaning, like the kinship system in primitive societies.”<sup>23</sup> This is true even in prison society, and like society outside prison, a work of art may be one of the highest status-objects of all, showing appreciation for cultural standards and the preciousness of the hand-crafted object, and a relationship with the gifted individual who created the object.

Prison art is valued outside of prison as well; several of the artists mentioned in this paper have dealers who sell the work as a category of outsider art. Persons who would not hang a newsprint drawing of a biker chick on their wall could be fascinated by a two-inch chair carved out of soap with its own popsicle-stick presentation case. In addition to the fascination of this human endeavor is a sense of social empathy in ownership. Purchasers of outsider and prison art can assure themselves of their open-mindedness, sophisticated knowledge of the art world, and largesse in supporting a less fortunate member of society.

How should professional, educated artists view the output of the prison art world? It may be tempting to think of all one might accomplish artistically, given twelve or more hours of solitude a day, with food, clothing, and shelter provided. Life in prison should not be romanticized, however; by all accounts it is lonely, harrowing, and dangerous. Perhaps a better mental exercise is to imagine what circumstances and materials one could sacrifice and still retain one's own passion and discipline to create. Discussing prison art, journalist David Vogner quoted Pablo Picasso: “We artists are indestructible; even in a prison or a concentration camp, I would be almighty in my own world of art, even if I had to paint my pictures with my wet tongue on the dusty floor of my cell.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*, 49. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Vogner, David. Huffington Post. Accessed November 10, 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-vogner/prison-art-is-taking-off\\_b\\_4368876.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-vogner/prison-art-is-taking-off_b_4368876.html).

“I would be almighty in my own world of art”- this is the power of the artist, and to be as creative and productive as one can be is the artist's task, regardless of the circumstances.

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# Discipline, Punish, Create

## Art and Prison

Deborah Mattson





ALLEGANY COUNTY  
JAIL  
& SHERIFF COMPLEX

# Foucauldian Power

- Emerges in relationships and interactions.  
Exercised not possessed.
- Not exterior to other relations
- Interconnected, not reducible to a binary relationship
- Both intentional and non-subjective
- Always accompanied by resistance.

# Jail Craft



Clockwise from upper left: Leland Dodd, Kools Purse, cigarette wrappers; Nelson Molina, No One Cares, Ivory soap; Keith Dwy, Self portrait, toilet paper, crayons; Anonymous, colored pencils on handkerchief; Anonymous, envelope and mixed media. Kornfield, Phyllis. Cell Block Visions. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.cellblockvisions.com/index.html>.



Mouse Lopez



Anonymous



Anonymous



Treacy Ziegler



Phyllis Kornfield

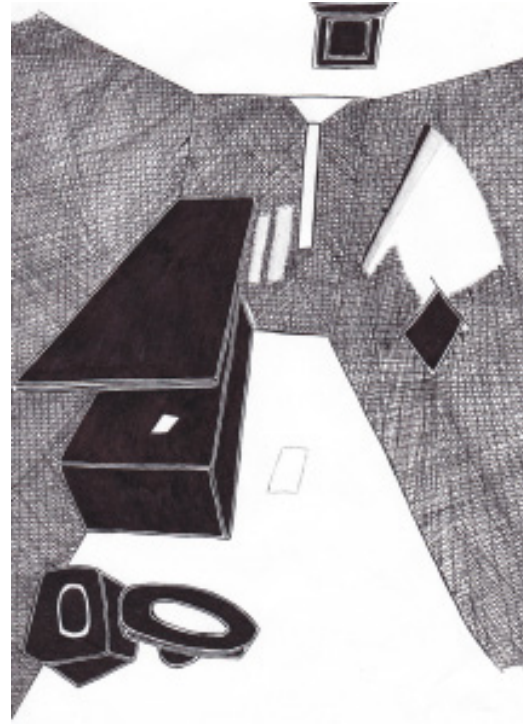


Prison tattoos





Raymond Palmore



Manuel Gonzalez

Light and Shadow exercises by students of Treacy Ziegler

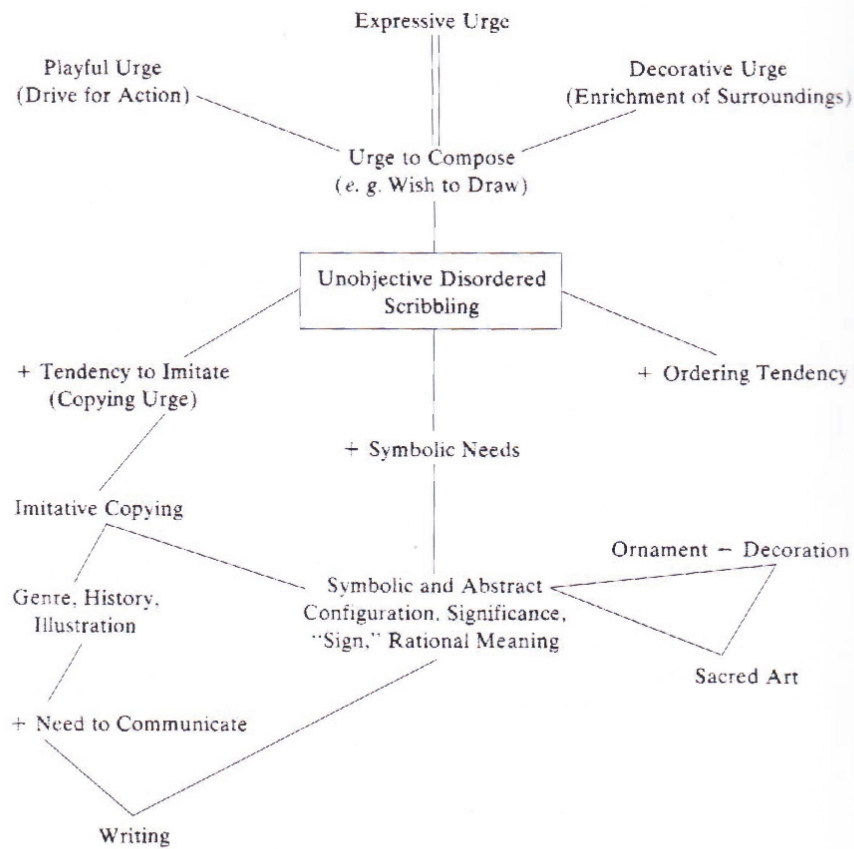


Luis Sanchez, South bay House Correction, Boston, MA

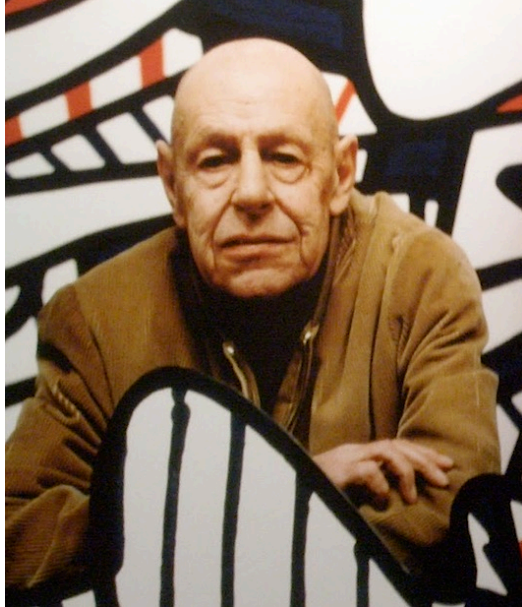




Carving a wood block,  
San Quentin prison



Prinzhorn's Schema of the Tendencies of Configuration



*Apartment Houses*

Jean Dubuffet, champion of “Art Brut”





“Outsider Art”- examples of work by Bill Traylor, Henry Darger, and Howard Finster



- **Howard Neal 2009**  
40 cm x 40 cm
- Painted by Claire Phillips



Drawing of an execution by Howard Neal





Miniature tapestries by  
Ray Materson





Michael Harms  
Chairs carved from soap, apprx. 2" high each  
Popsicle stick cases



Chip Jarrett





“Consumption is a system of meaning, like the kinship system in primitive societies.”

Jean Baudrillard

“We artists are indestructible; even in a prison or a concentration camp, I would be almighty in my own world of art, even if I had to paint my pictures with my wet tongue on the dusty floor of my cell.”

Pablo Picasso