
Peggy Diggs

Peggy Diggs: *Readiness* (2004). Photos on this and the previous page by Ed Epping.

Peggy Diggs

Peggy Diggs first started actively exhibiting her art in the early 1980s. She began making art in the collaborative and socially engaged manner that she is best known for today in the early 1990s. Trained as a printmaker, Diggs started to explore the possibilities for mass dissemination using printmaking when a woman who was in prison for killing her abusive husband suggested that she get her art placed onto product packaging. This was a suggestion that, after many tussles with bureaucracy, ultimately resulted in a graphic about domestic violence that circulated on approximately 1,500,000 milk cartons (*Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project*, 1992). In this process, Diggs recognized that sometimes it can be more effective to do away with calling the work "art" and let the work have a life in the world that is freed from peoples' preconceived notions of what art is and how it should be judged.

Peggy Diggs' body of work thus far is a fantastic basis for discussing a number of problems that frequently arise in socially engaged art practices. A guerrilla approach to doing public work without permission can provide instant gratification and compelling results, but it is sometimes limited in scale because of budgetary constraints and lack of a solid distribution network. One must also consider the legal risks involved in the guerrilla approach in our increasingly monitored, controlled, and punitive society. Because Diggs seeks adequate funding for her projects, chooses to follow the law, and collaborates with institutions that can extend her ideas to a wide audience, there are often many committees, authorities, permissions, dialogues and, sometimes, concessions that must happen before a work can be finalized.

Diggs' work usually has no saleable outcome, so a number of outside organizations are persuaded to grant money to allow these projects to happen. The projects that the grantors support may ultimately take a very different final form than what was initially suggested by a proposal. Often relationships with multiple groups and individuals must be negotiated simultaneously. Each set of people has its own concerns, values, opinions and expectations. Caught in the middle of this is the artist, who has her own ideas about what should happen. It is she who will have to shoulder most of the responsibility for how the work is received critically.

Diggs' work is a model of patience and openness in working with others. Her work also reveals the risk of projects not coming to completely satisfying resolutions, even after years of work. She admits that she has not always been able to shoulder the full weight of a project and its implications or continue to propel a conversation about the issues that a work calls forth once she completes the exhausting task of simply making her art and releasing it to the public.

The structure of exhibitions, brochure essays and short art reviews rarely account for the complex experiences of making collaborative works. Additionally, sometimes the anecdotes that result from a collaboration are as rewarding as the finished objects, but it is hard to access these narratives unless you know the artist or have heard her give a lecture.

For this booklet we decided to focus on three projects: *Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project*, *WorkOut*, and *Readiness*.

For a synopsis of *WorkOut*, a collaboration with fifteen prisoners at the State Correctional Institution at Graterford near Philadelphia, Diggs wrote:

> *WorkOut* was inspired by an apocalyptic article read in a 2004 *Observer* about a secret Pentagon report predicting extreme living conditions after severe flooding from climate change over the next twenty years. I sought a community with hyper-specialized expertise that few other constituencies possess, in this case experience in

> confined living habitats. [...] one prototype was decided upon for full-scale production, a compactable desk/storage system made out of sturdy cardboard, a material consistent with the deprivation of incarceration.

On Diggs' website (www.williams.edu/humanities/pdiggs) *Readiness* is described as an eighty pound outfit that:

> [E]volved as a response to the location of my studio residency from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council [...] near the former World Trade Center site. Through discussions, interviews, online research, data collection and an engagement with people closely related to the 9/11 events, I explored how each of us might prepare for the next time, for the Ultimate Terrorist Attack.

The outfit consisted of:

> • An Information and Memory layer (photo ID, passport, important papers, currency, credit cards, photographs, letters, etc.);
> • A Medical layer (antiseptic creams, burn gel, bandages, stomach and intestinal remedies, etc.);
> • A Food layer (canned meat and fish, granola bars, dried fruit, protein powder);
> • A Water layer, with purification tablets;
> • A scarf Comfort layer (candy, tea, peanut butter and honey, etc.);
> • A Tools layer (compass, knife, rope, plastic sheeting, sleeping bag, etc.);
> • A Change of Clothing layer (as a head wrap);
> • And finally an outer Collection layer, a Great Coat with large empty pockets for scavenging useful or valuable items found in the apocalyptic wreckage. This cover also conceals the deeper layers, which would be of value to any survivor who hadn't planned ahead.

Temporary Services has had the good fortune to cross paths with Peggy Diggs a few times over the last five years as co-exhibitors and co-panelists at a conference. We felt that Peggy would have a lot to teach others who are interested in these ways of working. We first became aware of Peggy's work about ten years ago when we were researching art projects that used mass-produced multiples and public signage to engage diverse audiences outside of the usual art presentation channels. Years later we learned that Diggs' project *WorkOut* with prisoners was partly inspired by our project *Prisoners' Inventions* (in which we collaborate with an artist named Angelo who is incarcerated in California).

This interview was conducted over the phone by Marc Fischer from Temporary Services on December 31, 2009 with a list of questions that was also generated by group members Brett Bloom and Salem Collo-Julin. This booklet was printed in January 2010. It was supported by Philagrafika for *Philagrafika 2010: The Graphic Unconscious*. Thanks to John Caperton at The Print Center in Philadelphia for coordinating our participation in the festival.

Temporary Services (TS): What was your art education like? Were you always interested in art? Did your parents encourage you in art when you were a kid?

Peggy Diggs (PD): I stuck with art from pretty much day one but I always saw it as just a fun thing to do, not really something to get terribly serious about, although it was closest to my

heart. That and writing fiction. I lived in the Washington D.C. area, so my parents and the family often went to museums and things on the weekend. Oddly enough (and the older I get, the more increasingly odd this seems) my favorite place to go was the Phillips Collection [the first museum of modern art in the U.S., located in Washington, D.C.] and my favorite work there was Picasso's *Three Musicians*. When I looked at all of these other more realistic kinds images I thought, "Why wouldn't a little girl prefer those?" My dad would say, "We are going to the Phillips to see Mr. Money and Mr. Carrot." So we would go see Monet and Corot and none of those guys really impressed me all that much, but I really loved abstraction, provided I could see some kind of representation of something there. And we got posters and postcards and such and I put them up on my wall.

Then I went to an alternative high school in D.C. called Hawthorne School and oddly enough you could be an art major in high school. So I did that, and basically just copied things because the art teacher wasn't very … athletic, shall we say. He didn't really push very much, so I would copy various art works and look at them very closely and Dante the teacher would say, "You know there's a good living to be made in making copies!" And I remember being so sad [Laughter], thinking, "…that's not what I want to do!" But he wasn't capable of any more and I didn't know how to ask the question. So I went on to college at George Washington University and started out as an English major and then was complaining to a friend of mine that I didn't like British literature and I didn't want to keep studying that. That wasn't my interest. And she said, "Well move on over into art. It's great!" So, that's just what I did – majoring pretty much in printmaking. Then I went away and did other things and then decided five years later to go back to graduate school at Cranbrook [Academy of Art in Michigan] and did printmaking there too simply because I had a history in it, but I didn't feel like I was committed to printmaking so much as I just needed to get my feet into it.

TS: Thinking about D.C. and the prevalence of protests that happen on "the Mall", was that something that intrigued you? Did you participate in rallies like that? When did your social and political concerns and your art practice start to intersect?

PD: Well that requires a bit of a prologue. My dad was a journalist and he was an editor at *U.S. News and World Report*. So political issues and current events were very, very important in my household. As a result, they couldn't be important in my life because to rebel meant saying "No" to all of that.

So I would go to the protests in college – to the ones on "the Mall", the one out to the Pentagon, all of the big ones – more or less as social events. Because everybody went, everybody felt strongly about the issues and I felt strongly about the Vietnam war and about civil rights but I couldn't say that I knew that much. Ironically, it wasn't until I got isolated here in the Berkshires that I woke up.

TS: When were your college years?

PD: 1964-1968. So during the heat of all of those protests, and also afterwards, because I taught in a little school in southern Maryland and would take part in protests against the Justice Department. I remember that one protest – a particularly ugly one – I took a bunch of students there and the police came out in force and everybody separated. It was really rough finding the kids again and one of the teachers that came along with us was jailed and it took us a while to find him so it got quite intense there in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Then I was in San Francisco for a year, right out of school, so there were a lot of the music issues that came up, and

Haight-Ashbury, and all of that.

But truly it wasn't until post-grad school, and I got away from Washington and the coasts, and ended up in Michigan and then here in Massachusetts that I became much more interested in social and political issues. I think the isolation here got me interested in finding ways of getting out. First it was to inform myself more and then it was to get myself out to talk to people who knew more about various social and political issues. So that was sort of the sequence and it served me very well – living here, and enabling me to get engaged with people while working on projects who were very committed to more than academia.

TS: When did you start making art collaboratively? You mentioned that you focused on printmaking in undergrad and grad school, but was there anything in your education that taught or encouraged collaborative art-making? How did you come to that?

PD: One of the things from printmaking that really stuck was the idea of the multiple, and the idea of the large audience. But after graduate school, I wasn't so interested in the fine art print, but rather in the cheap giveaway.

There were a couple of influences. I did lithography mostly, and I loved stones more than plates, and a guy in Printmaking when I was in Cranbrook – this would have been 1973-75 – he and I liked the idea of just passing a stone back and forth and responding to one another's marks and not talking about anything. So that didn't have any writing or social reference to it, but it did kind of open the door to letting in unexpected effects into the print. And then actually there was a group of guys in Printmaking then – one of whom was Doug Huston, who's in Chicago now. He's at the School of the Art Institute in Printmaking and he's been there forever and he's a fabulous, wacky guy.

And he and two or three other guys were really interested in printing on goofy stuff like napkins and doing performances, and not breaking character, even if the professors wanted them to. Probably due to them I did an art workbook that was lithographed and I gave it out to a few people to perform the exercises and it seemed kind of edifying, only because it was a fine art print on nice paper and a limited edition, but something "set" during that process. So there were all of these little pieces coming together. And it really wasn't until I got involved with the Domestic Violence Movement, which I didn't even know was a movement at the time, that the collaboration changed and I started going out to people who were working in that arena and getting their expertise and their input into my knowledge bank.

The first project, which was the *Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project* sort of happened through serendipity but it became the model for the process of my work for a long time. It began with reading a book by Angela Browne called *When Battered Women Kill*, and I didn't know about battered women and I didn't know that they killed. It was riveting. And I thought, "Oh my god I have to do something with this." So I just started talking to … even here in the Berkshires, going to the Pittsfield police and asking, "Is there a detective who investigates domestic violence issues?" And I talked to that guy, whose specialty was interviewing the children. Then I went to shelters and talked to people who ran the shelters and talked to a couple of the residents.

TS: How did the police receive you? How did you introduce yourself? Did you introduce yourself as an artist doing research?

PD: I think it must have been that, because I don't really know what else I would have said and I didn't know what I was going to be doing with the information.

TS: But you wanted some kind of a firsthand account from people?

PD: Yeah. I mentioned that I'd read this book and there was a great deal of stuff that I didn't know, and I was putting together a reading list, and I was beginning to do serious reading on it, but I wanted some firsthand responses from people. So it was a combination of things like that. But I did spend a year reading everything I could find on domestic violence, most of which was academic research oriented stuff that wasn't in the general public reading arena. But this book by Angela Browne was a very big deal and I think I learned about it because it was reviewed in the *Boston Globe* and it just sounded incredible.

I also found that people love talking about what they do, so you can go and talk to most anybody about what it is they do and they're not gonna tell you stuff they don't want you to know. If you're there taking notes, they know that you're taking notes and they'll either say, "This is off the record" in which case you put down your pen, or it just serves as background.

TS: Do you think that watching your father working as a journalist gave you a sense of permission to just dig into these interests? Do you think his work was a helpful model?

PD: Yes, I think it was, but I didn't like the way he did journalism. He followed everything. He watched all the news he could. He read lots of papers and everything, but I didn't like the fact, for instance, that he covered the Vietnam War by going to the Pentagon once a week and talking to the Generals. That didn't strike me as okay. But it was perfectly in keeping with what I learned later from him. When I asked him, "How did you begin your journalism career?" he said he was ten years old, he was living in Linthicum Heights, Maryland, and he took a desk up to the attic of his parents' house and put it next to a little window that looked out to the street, and he sat at the desk, and had a pad of paper and had a pencil and he waited. He waited for news to happen on the street. [Laughter] He had a little newsletter for the neighborhood and it was a little troubling because the newsletter consisted of ... "Mrs. Smith lost a chicken which was seen going down the street and was finally caught by Mr. Holiday." You know, stuff like that. But the passivity of his method is what really bothered me.

So that was part of the underground stream also, I think. I wanted to go out and look for people who knew more than I did and that also influenced the form that a lot of my projects have taken. My projects also have been about finding a format that would go out to the people who I wanted to have see the work.

TS: In your long exhibition history there are almost no examples of works presented in commercial galleries.

PD: Right. I really lost heart when I had taken my work around to forty galleries in New York at one point and people said, "Huh. Well, no thanks," or Holly Solomon looked at my work and said, "What am I supposed to sell here?" And I remember thinking, oh, I guess that's the point, isn't it? And I kind of lost interest. Leo Castelli came to see my work and he said, "Okay, this is interesting. Talk to me." So I did, and he said, "I think I want you to see some friends of mine who are just starting a new gallery and it's called Metro Pictures. Go see them and tell them that I sent you." And I did that, and they said [in a disinterested tone], "Uh huh." And that was that. [Laughter]. So I just decided to stop after that.

Making projects that wouldn't rely on people coming to see them so much as their going out to see people struck me as much more interesting. So the projects operated in a much different arena and didn't look like art at all, which was fine by me.

TS: Related to that, I'd like to talk more about the *Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project*. So you had done this research of going to talk to these different people, such as detectives. At what point did that start shaping up into an art project and how did that relationship form with Tuscan [Dairy Farms], the company that produced the milk?

PD: The last person that I contacted to help me out was a woman who I had known a long time ago in Providence. She had taught art in the women's prison in Cranston, Rhode Island. I got in touch in with her and she was now the Warden of the women's prison. I talked to her about wanting to do something around domestic violence and particularly from the perspective of the woman, the victim. We didn't call them survivors in those days. We called them victims. And she said, "Ah ha. Well, I have a couple women I want you to talk to."

One of them was the first case in Rhode Island, who made quite a splash, because as you know, many of the women who kill their abusers do not have any criminal record – they've never done anything wrong in their lives – and generally kill as self-protection or to protect their children. So this case was a very big deal because all of those questions were being aired. And it's amazing to think that this was during the late 1980s, and now it seems so old hat.

So she said, "I want you to meet that woman and I want you to meet another one." So I went to the prison and sat down and talked to each of these women separately. The woman whose case was a very big deal was kind of … in absentia, shall we say. She was really damaged. She wasn't very responsive. I just felt very sad in her presence but I didn't feel like there was anything I could work with or that she even could work with. She felt like a puppet.

Then they took me to meet another woman who was quite lively. She was in prison for killing her abuser. You could just see, by looking at her, how many facial bones had been broken – like a boxer. Things were not in the right place. She was very lively and very interesting and we had a wonderful conversation.

I was getting ready to do a show at the Alternative Museum [in New York City] so she said, "I gather you're going to be making sculptures, and paintings or something for the show?" And I said yes. And there was a silence and then she said, "Lookit! Do you want to do something real for people like me before something horrible happens?" And I said, "Yeah!" [Laughter] And she said, "Well, most folks like me who are in extreme situations like I am aren't even allowed to leave the house, much less see a gallery show. So if I were you, I would do a project that goes to places or can be seen in places that a woman who is being very badly abused might be able to go." And she said, "That would be the grocery store. My abuser felt it was a feminine thing to go to the grocery store. So the only place he allowed me to go was the store and he would drive me there, sit in the parking lot with the engine running, and I had to go in and had to do the grocery shopping very quickly and leave. And then we'd go home." She said that as a result, that's a really important site for information for women. And it's neglected. There isn't any information there.

I asked, "Well what are you thinking of?" And she said, "Well if I were you, I would approach bakeries, cigarette companies, and dairies, to see if they couldn't get a message on bread, or cigarettes, or milk cartons." And I thought, "Duh. Of course!" Because of the precedent of putting pictures of disappeared children on milk cartons, I decided to go that route.

I worked on a few really simple designs because I saw that Creative Time [A New York-based organization that funds temporary public art projects] had a deadline coming up and I thought maybe I could get some help funding this. So I did some quick sketches and got them to Alyson Pou at Creative Time, and she called me up and she said, "This looks really interesting. Can you send me something more refined?" So I did just a little scratchy thing and she said, "Yes, but keep working on it."

I got the grant and did four designs and sent them off to eight dairies in the New York City area because I wanted to get wide coverage. Remember, this was all before computers, so they would write back, or I'd follow up with phone calls or something, and they said, "Thanks very much, but we're not interested." I think Tuscan Dairy was one of them, and I asked, "Could you please tell me why this is something you don't want to do?" And they said, "We don't want to scare our audience. We don't want to have them put something on the table which would cause awkwardness within the family unit or that children would ask scary questions about."

I thought, "Ah, that's it." So I did some other drawings and sent them to Tuscan and I talked to Tuscan and they said, "Okay, we're interested in taking this to the committee. This looks interesting. We do pride ourselves in getting into important social issues." So I thought that was terrific, and they said, "You're going to have to get an 800 [toll-free telephone] number to put on the carton, because we're going to have to aid to people, not just make them aware." So I said okay and went looking for a 1-800 number.

I learned that Tuscan sold its milk in six states, which was unusual. Most dairies just sell locally. I was going to need to have not just a domestic violence number for a state but rather the national one. So I went looking for the national one, found that it was based in Chicago, called up, and spoke to the director, and she said, "Send me the image and I will go to the owners." I said, "Owners?" And she said, "Yeah. Johnson & Johnson owns the hotline number." I thought, well, this is weird.

So I sent them the images at the same time that Tuscan was also taking it to their committee. Johnson & Johnson wrote back and said, "I don't know. This is pretty scary stuff. We've got to think about it some more." And so the woman called me and told me that, and I said, "Wait a second. What's the point of a national domestic violence hotline number if you don't use it? And here's a way of getting it out into six states. I don't understand." And she said, "I don't quite understand either but we just have to sit on our hands and wait."

Then I heard back from Tuscan, and they said, "Thanks very much for your interest but we're not going to do this. Good idea but good luck on finding another dairy. Bye." Really quickly. That was it.

I called the hotline woman back up and before I could say anything, she said, "Yay! Yay! We got permission! We got permission!" And I said, "Well, we're not going to be able to do the milk carton now because Tuscan turned us down." She knew it was going to the Tuscan committee so she said, "Ah hah. Well, this is not over." I asked what she meant. She said, "What it means is there's an abuser on the committee." So she said what we're going to have to do is to get serious about this. This is one of the best art lessons that I ever got. She said, "Everybody knows that if you deal with

Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project prototypes.

an artist, you are dealing with a lone kooky person. And it's easy to say no to them because they are kind of eccentric, and they live on the margins and nobody is going to be the wiser that you said no to them. You're going to have to blow out of that stereotype and what you're going to do is send a letter to all of the coalitions against domestic violence in all six states. And there are a number of them in each state. Show them all of the drawings, write them a letter, and ask them to send you a letter of support for the project. And then bombard the dairy with all of those letters."

I thought, "Oh fuck! This is amazing! Okay, I'll do that." So I spent three months doing that – you know it all had to go by mail. And I got lots and lots … I mean everybody said, "Yes, absolutely!" And I even got a letter from an abuser, who wouldn't sign his name, but he indicated that this project was really important because, frankly, his wife had found some sign for a shelter in a grocery store which allowed his family to start to work out their difficulties.

TS: How did the abuser learn of the proposal? Was it through one of the organizations maybe?

PD: I guess. Yes. I guess.

TS: So the organizations were not only dealing with it internally but also showing it to their constituencies?

PD: I suppose. Right. So I asked all of them to send me the letters of support so that I could send them as a bundle to Tuscan. And this

Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project (1992). Above: Proposal. Right: Final design.

was sort of the funny part. I got them all together and I sent them to Tuscan and I said, "I would like for you to reconsider the proposal because of this support and I will call you in a week."

I sent the letters and called Tuscan back in a week – the guy I had been talking to all along – and he said, "All right, all right, all right. We'll do the project and we'll do it for just a couple of weeks and we'll use the simplest image. And I just want to let you know that we are not at all happy about all the phone calls that we got. That was really over the top." I said, "Excuse me, what phone calls?" He said, "Oh come on, it wasn't just the letters. It was the phone calls that followed up!" I said, "I do not know what you are talking about." He said, "Well all of those people that sent letters also did follow up phone calls and threatened to boycott the dairy unless we did the project."

I thought, "Oh shit! These people were playing hardball." But, more importantly, they knew what was required to get something done. So if you have women in six states threatening to boycott, you go ahead and do what they want. So they did, and we did the project in New York City and New Jersey. It did not go out into six states. And I did end up calling Tuscan many months later and asked how it was for them to have done this and they said, "Actually, it was fabulous because women who were not abused saw us as advocates for women, so it really made sales go up." So I thought that was pretty interesting.

TS: In hearing about this project,

one of the first things that comes to mind is that this is an incredible amount of bureaucracy to wade through.

Personally I have so little patience for that, so I think about that, and I also think about how I like to juggle different projects simultaneously. Were you entirely focused on this one project?

PD: No! Oh no. The Alternative Museum show was fairly big by my standards, and I did maybe twenty sculptural installation pieces, so I was really focused on that. And I didn't think of the milk carton project as part of the Alternative Museum show. I just saw it as a side venture that I was exploring that was kind of interesting in terms of its process. I thought of the artwork as the stuff that goes on the wall, so that's what was really absorbing me. It wasn't until the project was accepted by Tuscan that I decide to put facsimiles of the cartons in the show. So it did indeed become part of it and, as it happened, it was the only piece that got attention.

TS: You had mentioned going back and talking to Tuscan after the fact and that their opinion had turned around after doing this. Did you maintain any contact with other people who were instrumental along the way, like the woman in prison who planted the seed for the idea in those conversations?

PD: Yes. Yes, I did keep up with her. As a matter of fact, when Tuscan chose … remember I had done four designs and I kind of kept up doing four, and I decided to do them in a range of ways – one of which was just a very general kind of an image and text, and it ranged to more specific definitions of what violence meant within an intimate relationship, because everything I was reading said that most people do not self-identify as abusers, even if they are. So you have to spell out what that means.

The design that Tuscan chose was the one that I was least interested in and I was terribly disappointed. It showed a hand, with the text "When you argue at home does it always

Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project. Cartons in circulation.

get out of hand?" So I sent the image to the woman in prison who had given me the idea, and I felt like it was our project, and I asked her, "Is this even worth doing? What do you think?" And she wrote back and said, "Absolutely, it's worth doing. One of the things you have to realize about a person that's being abused is that, unlike other people, they have their antennae out, always, for signs of violence or signs of help. So they will see this in a way that people who are not abused will not see it." She said, "I understand why the dairy would want this one. It would be easy for parents to answer questions that children might ask. However, an abused woman would know exactly what it's all about and would respond and hoard the number just the way that you want. You're sneaking answers into her house."

TS: There is a small credit with your name on the carton but it's not really clear that it is an art project. How do you feel about identifying projects like this as art?

PD: I feel that as soon as anybody can see, "Oh, this is art," out in the public arena, they tend to treat it very, very differently. Either, "This isn't pretty. I'm not going to look at this." Or, "I could have done that. What's so great about that?" They bypass what other issues might be going on with the project. So, by not claiming authorship as an artist, by not saying "partially funded by Creative Time, an art organization", they have to look at it and treat it on its own terms.

TS: How much of a challenge in this project or in other things you've done has it been to get funders to forgo putting their stamp on the project, wanting that credit, and showing that they funded it, or forgo putting your name on the work and showing that you're the author?

PD: They usually insist that it be credited in the press. If there are reviews of the work, and if I have any input in the review, I am supposed to mention who funded it. Or in a press release, or something like that. But it doesn't have to be on the artwork and people who fund this kind of work understand that.

TS: What about people like the woman in prison? Did she feel the need to have her name on this?

PD: Oh no. Although we didn't discuss it, I think she would have preferred not to because one of the things that I kept hearing was that she would be in quite a bit of trouble if she were to get out. You know it's a small world. People talk about each other. People have friends and if they had learned that she had enabled news about other battered women to get out there, she may have been put down in some way that would have been negative. And as it turned out she did eventually get out, from what I understand, and I have not been in touch with her since then.

TS: In 1994 you were a speaker at a hearing on domestic violence before a Subcommittee of the House Judiciary, chaired by Representative Charles Schumer at the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Crime and Criminal Justice.

How did this invitation come about? Were you invited to speak as an artist, and what did you say? Was this the first and only time you participated in a hearing like this?

PD: In the summer of 1994, I had been invited to come and participate as a speaker at a conference in Washington D.C., on domestic violence. It was a group of people that I had not met before and I went down to the conference and stayed for a few days. The week before I went to the conference, I got a phone call from someone's assistant on Capital Hill, and the woman

said, "We would like for you to testify before the Subcommittee on the House Judiciary because we are trying to educate some of the Representatives about domestic violence." [U.S. Senator at the time] Joe Biden's Violence Against Women Act was coming up again for discussion and for voting. He had gone through this once I believe, earlier in the 1990s, and it had not passed, and he decided to do it again because it was a topic that was more out in the public by this point.

So I was asked to come and talk about the milk carton project, and I said to the person, "I don't understand. Why would you want an artist to talk about an art project in a hearing like this?" And she said, "Because they want to hear about something that a citizen has done on a grassroots level to deal with this topic. Because otherwise it sounds too hopeless." And I thought, "Whoah! That's so interesting." So she said, "Come on this afternoon, at that time, to room such and such, and you have five minutes to talk, and you must have your speech in writing. It must be timed so that you know it's five minutes and it will be distributed among all of the Representatives who are there, and it will be put into the Congressional Record." This was also during the "Culture Wars" [a period when the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) was coming under great scrutiny for funding art projects that were in opposition to conservative values]. I was talking to everybody, "How do I get in some little reference to the NEA?" So I worked in a little of this and a little of that and basically just talked about that project, and I talked about Creative Time giving me funding, and I said that if it were not for the generosity of the NEA funding Creative Time, this project could not have happened. And they all laughed.

I gave a talk on the project and included a couple of images and had those reproduced and distributed, and asked Schumer if he could ensure that the images got into the Congressional Record as well. He said, "No one has ever asked that before!" And I said, "Well, I think it's really crucial to the talk that people know what this looks like." And he said, "Well, I will do everything that I can." And that was it. Every television channel on earth was there, and I was so excited, and I thought, "Oh great. I'm running back to my hotel to see it!" Unfortunately, this turned out to be the first day of the O.J. Simpson hearing [the criminal trial in California in which former American football star and actor O. J. Simpson was charged with the 1994 murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman], so all of the news was on O.J. Simpson.

TS: *WorkOut* at Graterford State Correctional Institution is a project you worked on between 2004 and 2007, and it was fraught with quite a few problems. For readers who don't know, Graterford is the largest prison in the state of Pennsylvania, and it has the added challenge of being a maximum security prison for men. First, what was the inspiration for working on this project, and what lead you to Graterford?

PD: Temporary Services was the model and the inspiration for *WorkOut*. I saw your project *Prisoners' Inventions* with Angelo at MASS MoCA [the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art] and loved it, both the model of the prison cell and all of the little objects that were made from prisoners' designs. And I got the book and I loved the combination of letting the inside be seen by the outside, but also the reasonableness of working with very few people – in your case one person – and keeping it small and doable. And then also highlighting the inventiveness that prisoners have that comes out of having time, but also having needs. If you need a certain kind of tool, you're going to try to find a way to get it, and if you have enough time to work on that, you might be able to come up with an answer.

One of the things I thought could be the next generation of a project like *Prisoners' Inventions*, though, would be finding ways in which that inventiveness could be put to work

for folks on the outside – not just solving problems for prisoners on the inside. I got to thinking about how their very condition of being held captive, and housed in extremely tight confines, and just having to accept what they're given in terms of food and warmth and comfort and exercise, and having no grounds for negotiating, meant that they had certain kinds of skills that, at times, the public may need.

Having read this secret report coming out of the Pentagon on global warming, I thought that it could very well be that when people start running inland from the coasts and have to live in temporary housing, and have to carry everything they own on their back, it could be people like prisoners who would be able to provide some aid to the general population who may have to live in these tight circumstances. So that's how it all came together.

One of the things that the prisoners were so fascinated with when I first started working with them in 2004 was Saddam Hussein's hole. [Laughter] When Saddam Hussein was caught they got access to some of the photographs and illustrations of his hole, and you would see them in groups of ten, studying these images and talking about the design of them and what he should have done. It was really funny.

TS: How did you get access to Graterford? Because I know from my own experiences that usually it's really hard to get into those places without some kind of credentials. And then there's the added bonus for you of being a woman in a men's facility, and it's maximum security, so there's the detail of being searched on the way in. How did you initiate all of that? And also you do not live in Pennsylvania, so how did you decide on that place?

PD: Before I made the proposal to Creative Capital for this project, I had to come up with a prison and I tried two ideas. I went to Roberta Richman, the woman through whom I met the woman prisoner in Rhode Island, and asked how a project like this might work in her prison with women. Then I went to the Mural Arts Program in Philadelphia and I talked to Jane Golden. Jane and I had talked about a year before about a project that she thought I could help out with. I think she did not get funding for that project, but I really loved talking to her and she liked talking to me too. So I figured she would be approachable, and she had told me about working with men at Graterford on mural projects. Whereas Roberta said, "I don't know, we'd have to pull together a group and see if they'd be interested, and we'd have to find a way to pay them." And I said that my grant could do that if I got it and she said, "I don't know. I don't know how many people would want to do it." So it sounded a little bit loosey and like it could as easily fail as succeed. Jane already had a group of fifteen men who she had worked with for a couple of years already. They were accustomed to working on art projects, knew how to talk about them, knew how to critique, and were willing. And they were being paid already by the state. So I went to her and asked if she would be willing to allow me to do this, and I would put in some funding request for the Mural Arts Program in a grant proposal, and we worked out those details. That's how I did it. If it weren't for Jane, I probably could have never gotten access.

TS: How did the furniture designs develop, or how did the ideas start forming once you were in the prison?

PD: I came up with a proposal for Creative Capital that, out of necessity, was very general. I talked about proposing something akin to industrial design that the prisoners, either individually or as a group, might come up with. Something that would be useful in a very tight situation if something regionally or nationally disastrous took place. I didn't know what kind of an

object that might be, but sort of had to guesstimate what might be involved if they designed something. Are we gonna have a designer come in and talk it over with them? Are we gonna have to have a prototype made? Are we gonna go into production? And who's going to pay for that? What about patents or copyrights? What about debts incurred? What happens to profits? Whose name is on the project? It's a huge set of questions that could not be answered. I really just emphasized the process. The process was asking these guys to imagine being of help to a general population that would be in extremis. What they had was specialized knowledge and what did they think would be necessary? And we'd just have to go from there.

So I sent that through Jane to the prison and they said okay. And I went to the prison with Jane, and she asked me to do a presentation of my work to the prisoners, and ask who would be interested in working with me for a number of months until we came up with something, and all fifteen said they would like to participate.

They saw some of my previous projects as reminiscent of their own, which was odd. Like the money stamping project. They saw that as a form of graffiti that had never occurred to them before. A number of them were graffiti artists, and they said, "Wow! I never thought of doing graffiti really small, but that could travel and get out there in the world. Wow, what a great idea! When I get out I wanna do that." [Laughter]

That's pretty much what started it. They liked what had come before, they liked the idea of designs going out into the world, and they were interested in being a part of that too.

TS: These artists were working collaboratively already on murals but this had a three-dimensional design aspect to it. Do you think this project took them outside of their aesthetic comfort zone?

PD: Well, in a way, but the design work they were doing themselves in terms of coming up with tools [and things like that] – that was three-dimensional, but they didn't see it as art. Yes, it was out of their comfort zone, and most of the murals had been designed, perhaps with them, but literally done by an artist who would come in and talk to them about the neighborhood where this thing was supposed to go. And they would do a back and forth about it, but the artist would do the actual design work. And then he or she would lay it out on giant pieces of a material like

Peggy Diggs: Stamped bills from *MakeDo part 1: Has Money Hurt You?* (2003).

Tyvek, and the artist would lay it out like a paint-by-number. And the guys would put these giant sheets on big tables, and take the pre-mixed paint, and paint the designs large scale, and this would be taken out onto the walls and adhered to the walls.

TS: So a lot of creative decisions had already been made for them.

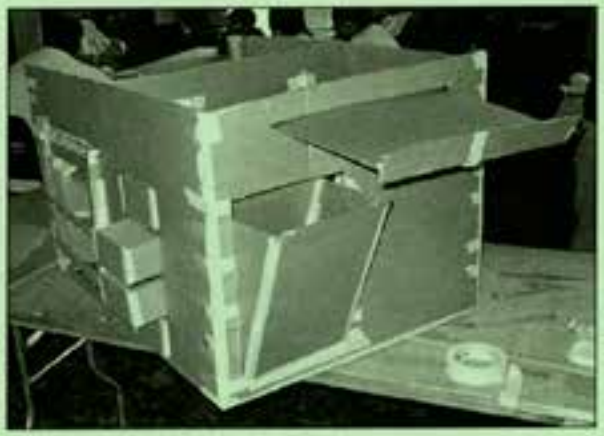
PD: Yes. Exactly. So by asking them to design their own things, that was a little out of their arena. And then also trying to do it three-dimensionally was a little out of their arena – especially since I learned way late in the game, that I really couldn't take any materials in for them to work with. That became really a bitch.

TS: At first weren't you making cardboard prototypes?

PD: Initially the prison said we could use paper, fabric, and masking tape. And that was it. [Laughter] So we did some kind of design refinement things using those things, and I thought, "This is not going to work. It is simply not going to work." So then I asked if we could use cardboard and they said, "Yeah, that's fine, however how are you going to cut it?" I said, "Well, I don't know, but can we use cardboard?" And the administration said yes.

I went to the guys and said, "We can use cardboard but I don't know how you're gonna cut it." And they looked at me and they said, "Don't ask us how we're going to cut it. Just keep in mind, we can cook an egg on the floor." [Laughter] So I said, "Okay, I'm not asking." And sure enough they managed to cut the cardboard. They started to make some stuff – very crude things out of cardboard – and I brought in a guy who was finishing up his MFA in industrial design at the University of the Arts, which is a really interesting industrial design program that focuses on social issues and social justice in design. I went in and did a presentation to a grad class there, and one person, Kreg Jones, volunteered. So he came out to the prison and did a kind of critique, but it was a very, very gentle, very kind, and encouraging sort of critique.

At the same time a woman who was the design journalist from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* came out and after we finished with the critique – and everything we had seen had been real crude. She lit into me, like somehow I had personally affronted her. She said, "There is absolutely no way there is anything of interest going on here. And there is absolutely no way you're going to come out with a project. These guys don't know what the fuck they're doing, and they haven't been taught how to do industrial design or design of any sort. And you're not going to be able to do anything with these people. You might as well quit now."



WorkOut (2005-06): Tony and Dada's storage box.

TS: Wow!

PD: It was just absolutely awful. So I ended up in tears, calling Creative Capital, and saying, "I'm at the end of my rope. I just don't know where this is going to go." I don't know why I called them, but

they just essentially said, "Take it a step at a time. Change the project as you need to. It's all about reacting to circumstances and see what can happen."

TS: What did the artists wind up generating?

PD: A couple guys worked on a bed unit that could go up against the wall, and on the bottom of the bed could be another plane that could pop down and be a table. And then stools that were supports for the bed would be rooted to the floor and used as chairs during the day when the bed was up and the table was down. Or they would be more support for the bed when the bed was down.

A couple guys did an expanded version of an exercise that we did called "The Reconciliation Room." It was a portable wall unit that could go up to make an enclosed space, and they had designed two seats that came out of that wall unit somehow. It was a way of enabling people to resolve difficulties which would be intensified through a disaster. By operating in a warm enclosed space, their feeling was that reconciliation is easier to achieve.

Two other guys worked on this box unit that one of them had actually made out of bits of cardboard and tape and hung underneath the upper bunk in his cell. It was something that held his ten-inch television, and also held writing utensils, and magazines, and a pair of socks, a pair of underwear, an undershirt. I think they have one spare of all pieces of clothing. Basically everything he owned could be put into this box unit, accessible from one of the four sides. Everything in the interior was dovetailed and puzzled so that you could get access to different aspects of your life from different sides. That got to be pretty interesting. It was really ugly and really complicated in its current state, but the idea of it was really interesting.

TS: How did this progress to the next step of trying to get these things produced with more stable materials?

PD: Kreg Jones came in looked at all of the things, studied them very closely, talked to the men about them, got clarification in some cases as to what they were thinking about, and he and I went out afterwards, and I said, "So, do you see anything here for us to work with?" And he said, "Yeah, I think so. I think there's something with that box that has a lot of different compartments in it that might go somewhere." I said, "Okay. How do you recommend we proceed?" He said, "I could either work with that box idea and think about what would sell now, and think about materials that it could be made out of, and come back with a couple of versions that we could then present to the prisoners and get their feedback on – treating the prisoners like a client." I thought, okay, this sounds good, so he went off to do that.

The journalist had quickly made a reference, at the prison, to Jaime and Isaac Salm of MioCulture, a terrific design firm in Philadelphia. I emailed her later to get their contact info, made an appointment, and went down to meet with them. I took the prisoners' models and drawings, and asked for the Salm brothers' feedback.

These were young guys, probably in their mid-twenties, who were from Argentina I think, and they were both industrial designers and were fabulous. Very thoughtful. Not judgmental in the slightest about how these things looked, but, rather, they were trying to get into the mindscape of the prisoners. They said, "You know, one thing that's going to be really important here is to hold onto the cardboard." I said, "Why?" And they said, "It's the root of their experience. The cardboard is about deprivation. It's about having nothing else. It's what, perhaps, no matter how this project evolves, it's what remains true to their experience. So you should by all means hold onto that." So I thought, "Wow, that frees us up a lot." I loved that, and they were very encouraging, so I calmed down quite a bit.

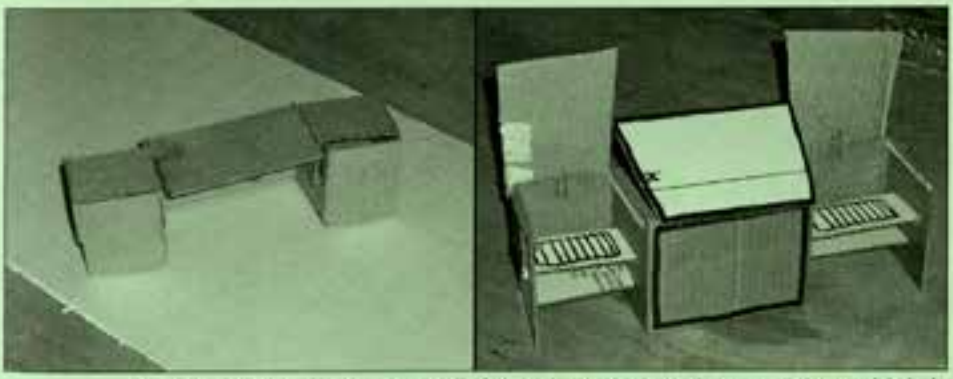
I kept taking designs from Kreg Jones to the prisoners and they started getting less and less and less interested. Which was interesting, because they had a very hands-on way of looking at work: something is of value only if you make it yourself. Being the client, they felt, put them in a much weaker position. They didn't want to be the client. They wanted to do it themselves.

Finally, one day, one of the prisoners [named Eddie] slapped together what was essentially the prototype for the thing we actually made. He said, "Here, I've got this idea." Then he walked out. He had a visitor or something. Everybody looked at this, and it was two inches high by four inches wide and they said, "Yeah. That's it right there. We can work with that. Let's go with that." And I was so excited. I'm going to go home and I'm going to make a larger version of it, fine tune some of the measurements, figure out how to put it together and have it be foldable without breaking along the edges. I left the prison, and ran into Eddie on the way out, coming back from his visit. I said, "The guys loved your design! We're gonna work with it." And his response was, "What?! You mean to say, I did something good?" It was heartbreaking.

So essentially we went back and forth on this. I made a fifty percent scale model. They advised putting shelving into it. I went home and put shelving into it and I realized we were gonna have a problem because you could only use this thing in one position. Otherwise you couldn't get access to the shelving. Then I realized late one night that I could provide entry on two sides of the shelving. I took that back. They liked that. Then I said, "Well, what about surface design?" They said, "What about it?" I said, "That's where you can put your personal mark on this. What would you like to do?" They said, "Can you bring us Xerox copies of Celtic design, wrought iron gate designs from old neighborhoods in Philadelphia? Can you give us designs from the backs of playing cards? We've got graffiti covered." They came up with quite a list of things that they wanted images of. So I Xeroxed lots of things and brought them in, and they started working individually on designs that they could do. And eventually those became a series of designs that they hand-painted on this Tyvek stuff, because they couldn't do silkscreen in there. We eventually adhered these to the cardboard that was pre-painted the colors that they chose, and then were incorporated into the desks. So that's why and how they have designs on them.

TS: What was the ultimate outcome of this project? How did these things circulate beyond the prison?

PD: We had a conversation about what to do with them. We went through all kinds of things



WorkOut. Eddie's prototype (left) and one by another participant (right).

around selling them in order to make money for, first, the prisoners. The director said: "No way. They're not allowed to make money at their prison job." I said okay. I went back and talked to the prisoners again, and they said, "Okay, we could sell them and make money for organizations that we believe in." I said okay, fine, and I went back to the director and he said, "No. Nobody can make any money whatsoever on anything that prisoners make." Okay. I went back to the prisoners and said, "They say that we can't sell them. What are we gonna do? What are we gonna do?" And one guy said, "Well, that's easy. We just don't sell them. We give them away." And everybody said, "Yeah!" So then the question was who do we give them to? Jane was at that meeting, and she said, "There's a woman who is the director of a kind of public care center for people who were homeless, but are old and ailing in some way, and it's a city-run facility. Maybe she would take them?" And the guys said, "Yeah! Because we'll end up being like them anyway, so we might as well give them to ourselves in the future." I contacted that director, and she said, "Great," so we gave them twenty and they kept them in the hallways and said that they were available for anybody. Then I did a radio show with Peter Crimmins of Studio360 in New York City [the interview "IKEA Behind Bars" can be found at www.studio360.org/episodes/2007/03/09] and went back to this facility. Peter interviewed a couple people who had taken the units out of the hallway and moved them into their room and he talked to them about how they were using them and why they liked them.

All of these things were about choice, and folks having choices. I would like to go back again and see what's happened to them and talk to the people who are using them now, but I haven't gotten back to Philadelphia for quite a while.

TS: In talking about the *Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project* and the *WorkOut* project at Graterford, there's so much complexity in what happens behind the scenes to arrive at these finished objects. How do you reconcile the gap between the object at the end of the tunnel and all of the stuff in between which is largely invisible? These things get written about but they

WorkOut: Finished project (front).

certainly don't get written about in the length that we're discussing them. What do think about that problem?

PD: Well, I've thought long and hard about it. The part that in the past I have most enjoyed has been the part in the process of setting up very basic things. The community that I'll be working with, the process, and what that community wants to say. And then from that we come up with the format that that should take. Sometimes I determine that all by myself. Other times the organizations I'm working with come up with [the format]. But, almost always, I don't know what the final format will be, much less what it's going to look like. And I like not knowing. I like the process and the query being authentic. If a funder tries to determine the final form or the content, I tend to feel a little less invested. I find that less interesting.

TS: So, when you look to initiate a project, you're more focused on the group of people you want to work with than trying to predetermine the final outcome.

PD: Yes. Of course, as you have heard, the process and the surprises are huge. They take a lot of time and/or energy because I don't know what it's going to involve, and by the time the piece actually gets into the world it's really only fifty percent finished. It's now hitting the audience that it's been decided it should hit. At that point though, I'm exhausted and overwhelmed by it all and tend not to have the energy or the focus to see it through another fifty percent. So I have been weakest, certainly, in following what has happened to these projects afterwards unless somebody draws my attention to it. And if I were a better person, I would keep going.

TS: See, this is where you need collaborators! You can disperse that energy to the others. It's an interesting problem because when you are making the work, the creativity is divided – maybe not perfectly evenly – but the others are not depending on you to do all of the thinking.

WorkOut: An additional finished variation (interior).

all of the construction or all of the generating of a text. But when it comes to actually representing the work ... this is part of the challenge of being a self-representing artist. You don't have a gallery or an agent to somehow take on the task of being this liaison between you and the public. You have to do all of that yourself, right?

PD: Depending on who I'm collaborating with, sometimes the collaborating organizations will do follow up. Certainly they would be more apt to hear outcomes through their network than I would. For example, working in Atlanta with Men Stopping Violence, I did an enormous amount of the process through them, and through a prison system down there. The guys at Men Stopping Violence would give me feedback on how the project was shaking down in the neighborhoods, so that was great. But very often I don't have that.

One of the things I did want to mention, about how the word gets out about this work, is that I think I was one of the first people that I know of – and this was with the *Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project* – to hire a publicist. It was Barbara Pollack. She was the publicist that I had met first at Franklin Furnace [A New York space – now archive – that was founded to champion ephemeral forms neglected by mainstream arts institutions]. She and I had become friendly, and I asked if I might hire her to publicize these projects about domestic violence, because not being from New York, I was afraid this whole thing would fall through the cracks. I especially wanted someone to cover the milk carton piece.

She was fabulous. She went to a number of the morning talk shows and morning news shows in New York and delivered donuts and gallons of milk in an attempt to get them to cover the project spontaneously, and she tried all kinds of different tactics to get the word out. And indeed it spread like wildfire – to the point where, at the opening, when other artists saw how many people were at the opening, and saw that a TV news station was there wanting to interview me and whoever else wanted to talk to the news station about the Mike Tyson rape situation, which was breaking at the time, all of these artists went to Barbara and said: "Can we hire you? Can we hire you?" Her work made all of the difference in the world. So I think for people doing work of this type, that's not a bad idea.

TS: You've talked about temporary public art being this trigger for starting conversations. The idea of hiring a publicist is probably outside of the realm of a lot of artists' thinking. How do you help ensure that your work is represented accurately or that the media focuses on the important details, not what you're wearing while you're talking about domestic violence? [Laughter] What are some strategies you've learned?

PD: Largely due to the nature of the issues this work covers, people tend to get very sober and serious when they talk to me. In some ways I think, "God my work is too serious!" I wish I could find some things that I could be a little bit more playful with but it just is what it is. I do find that people don't tend to write about my work without interviewing me, so I do get that kind of input. And I also have some sense from the kinds of questions they ask whether they're into it, and want to really talk about the issues or the process, or whether they're not. And for the most part, they have been, and I do feel that my work has been treated seriously, although if it's in a big huge group show like *The Art of the Print* at MoMA [The Museum of Modern Art], one of the Deborah Wye giant projects that had a huge catalog – in a situation like that the work is generally just referred to as a project that was done as a print project with an edition of 1.5 million.

TS: For our group one of the things we've done with press is to sometimes respond to questions

only by email, rather than over the phone, so it's almost impossible for the writer to misquote you.

PD: You guys are really brilliant at taking charge of your own representation and your own outreach and I really admire how you handle yourselves so that you're seemingly never in that weird position of dangling and other people get to take from you what they will.

TS: Well, you haven't seen the article on *Prisoners' Inventions* in some Australian men's magazine. [Laughter] There, the person we spoke to was phenomenal, but his editors were not. We try to the best of our ability to ensure that the writers are thoughtful, however there have been some publications where we've felt that the odds of the writing being accurate or honest were so incredibly slim that we just don't respond to the inquiry or we refuse to participate.

How do you determine the length of a project? What do you do when you're working away from home and you feel like you need more time? How neatly does each project wrap up? A lot of these things feel like they could go on forever, right?

PD: Yeah. Yeah. If I initiate the project then it can go on as long as it wants. But if I have a grant that's funding it, let's say Creative Capital, it was initially a three-year thing. So that gave me, I thought, plenty of time. And actually it was plenty of time but I wish it had taken less. I wish it had required me to do it more quickly because then it might have been less painful.

I think you can come up with a project in any amount of time. I've had to do it in three weeks. I got a Lila Wallace grant and went down to Caracas and worked on a project for two months and began it from scratch but knew that I had to produce something at the end of two months so I just paced it. I don't really find it terribly hard to work with a deadline, with the understanding that of course it would be a very different project if I gave it more time.

TS: Your 2004 project *Readiness* about disaster preparedness that you performed near Ground Zero in New York City seemed like a departure from other projects in that you were physically available during the entire presentation of the work. Is it different in that way?

PD: Well, only in that I just simply put on all the layers and walked two blocks from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Studios on Broadway to the World Trade Center site, and a person was taking digital photos, and another person was video-taping. It was just walking from point A to point B. They kept shooting and I didn't quite know what to do once I got there. So I started taking off all of the layers, and then a guard came up to us and talked a little bit, but it wasn't so much a performance in any big way. It was simply wearing the unit out on the street. And yes, it's the first time I've done something like that.

TS: Did you have a sense of what kind of reactions it elicited? Did people ask you questions?

PD: Well, what was interesting was that this was 2004 and we were literally, as I said, two blocks from the World Trade Center site, which was pretty much the reason why I did the project and had talked to a lot of folks in the neighborhood who had been there on 9/11. Some of the things that were in the *Readiness* outfit were in baggies with no official labels, like powdered milk. So I was very worried about putting the whole thing on and hitting the streets and having somebody stop me and arrest me for carrying powders. Right in front of our building were a series of police who were stopping every van and truck that came by and looking un-

derneath the vehicles and inside. It was still a very active … danger zone, let's say.

I had to go through a number of processes to get permission from the … I think it's the New York City Movie Council, to have an actual written thing that said it was okay for me to wear a costume outside on such and such a date. So I walked right in front of those policemen who were stopping trucks and no one said anything but when I got down to the fence and was taking off these layers – the thing was enormously heavy and it was just uncomfortable and I thought I would reveal what was in all of these eight or nine layers – as I was doing that, a guard came up to me and said that there were people complaining that I was not respecting the sacredness of this site. So we had a conversation about that, but by that time I had all of the layers off.

TS: That's a really abstract idea.

PD: Yeah. [Laughter] So I don't know what those people meant but it was interesting to me that they didn't come and talk to me themselves but rather had the guard come and do that.

TS: It's a very imaginative garment.

PD: It sort of started out as a joke – the absurd number of instructions out there telling us what to do to protect ourselves … After doing a whole lot of research in New York around all of that, I thought, "Okay. Okay. You want to be like that? Let's put it all together and see what we've got," and that's what came up. So in a way the project is just a one-liner, but quite an elaborate one-liner.

TS: You could probably update it as new precautions are announced. So it should have five gallons of Purell hand sanitizer in light of the H1N1 "swine flu" scares. [Laughter] It should have

Readiness. Above photo by Ed Epping. Right: *Readiness* back, food layer.

had duct tape at the time you created it.

PD: It did! [Laughs]

TS: How do you deal with the emotional weight of working with difficult content and collaborators who have suffered, and perhaps caused, enormous trauma? What tips would you share with others who might want to work in places like prisons and aren't sure how to contend with the constant moral and ethical challenges that arise in these environments?

PD: It is so interesting that nobody has ever asked this question of me, and I think it's a very important question, and I guess I would answer it this way.

I keep a journal while I'm working on a project in order to be able to record things like that because they do disappear. The first day that I went into the womens' prison and talked to the two women who had killed their abusers, I set aside an hour and a half afterwards to go have a cup of coffee and sit with the journal and write about everything I was going through. It was extremely moving being in the presence of those women, in that context, and finding myself shocked, for instance, that for them being in prison was safety and was protection and in many ways was the ideal place for them to heal. These encounters would sometimes challenge views that I had before going into these specific situations and I never expected to think of prison that way.

I do have places to record those feelings because it's similar, perhaps, to the whole mourning process. I don't know if you have ever lost someone who you are close to or a family member … there's the initial

shock but then you set about doing what you have to do. And if you are an adult and have tasks like notifying people or going through somebody's stuff, there's lots to do and you put much of your energy into that. And while you have things to do, part of yourself is on hold and I think something similar to that takes place in doing this work with people who have been through much more than you could even imagine.

So the emotional weight. It's acknowledged and I have to look at the people that I'm working with sympathetically in some way or else I don't think I could work with them. I was very nervous about working with men in this maximum security prison since most of them have either raped or killed or both. And I did not particularly want to know what they had done. I had been hearing about these guys from women for so long that I was really prepared for the worst, but you find little bits that you become sympathetic to. By letting them know that you are open to hearing what they have to say, you hope that will ease the stress.

TS: A long time ago I was a volunteer visiting artist at Western Penitentiary in Pittsburgh and they had this form I had to fill out before I started and you could specify if there were any convictions the men might have that would disqualify them from being able to work with you. I thought about that for a moment but just decided they should send me whoever was interested in working with me.

I never asked people why they were in prison. To me it felt like the more relevant problem in relation to what I was doing there was whether they might get out or not. Because if they were definitely never getting out, then we could think about how they could continue being an artist while still being in prison. And if they were getting out, that created different possibilities for what they might be able to do.

Nonetheless, people always want to know how you justify working with people who have likely done some pretty horrible things. How do you deal with that question?

Readiness. A detail of the medical layer.

PD: What I have said almost more than anything else about these men, is that among them there are people who I love. I really came to love a few of them and that has been very surprising to me and to other people. I certainly usually found reasons in which I felt sympathy for them. Like this one young kid, he must have been nineteen, named Dada [pronounced day-day – Peggy noted: His name was David, but the guys called him Dada. He said he didn't want to write that out for me because he didn't want me to think it was Dada as in the art movement.]. I was just starting to work with the group and I wanted to start a conversation about basic three-dimensional space. So we talked about things like, "How do you define a wall? What is the job of a wall? What is it doing when it's working well?" And then we moved on from there to, "What would be the ideal space for you? What do you envision? Would it be tall ceilings? Would it be a smallish space? A large space? What would it look like?"

They all looked at me very quizzically. One guy said, "Well, it would be the beach. There would be no walls. There would be nothing." And Dada said, "I don't even understand the question. There's no such thing as an ideal space." I said, "Well, tell me more. What are you thinking?" He said, "Look, I grew up in a housing project. Then I went to Juvie [Juvenile Hall]. Now I'm in prison. I've never seen anything that wasn't built out of cinder block and steel and that wasn't small and pathetic. So what does ideal space mean? I have not a single clue." Just those little things made me think, "Oh fuck. Yeah." How could you be a functioning human growing up in cages?

It's a question that's almost too hard to answer simply.

TS: When I was at Western Penitentiary I only went in one day a week, and it was only for a few hours because you had to work around the "count" [a period when all of the prisoners must be counted that shuts down most activities]. I found that when I went in twice a week, the separation between me being free to leave and the prisoners having to stay there started to disappear a little bit. It felt awkward to lose sensitivity to the freedom I had to go in and out. And now it's over seventeen years later and though that prison has closed down, a bunch of those men are still incarcerated, if they are alive.

PD: Yes, that in/out thing is really an interesting problem.

TS: I also found that the space of not being an employee of the prison and not being a prisoner was strange. I would take the bus to the prison and it was the last stop on the route, so when you got off the bus the only people left were either visiting someone in prison or they worked there. Once I had the experience of waiting for the bus with someone who was being paroled which is a mind-blowing situation, given how long that person may have been in prison.

How do you even start to think about that? With all of these projects there is no textbook that tells you … there's no explanation like "Turpenoid is a good alternative if you are allergic to turpentine." [Laughter] Nothing in art school tells you what to say to the guy who is getting paroled after fifteen years when you are waiting for the bus together.

PD: Exactly, but that's part of what's so amazing about doing this work. There's an authenticity to it that requires a real part of your self to always be present. You don't use your gallery-opening self. You have to call on your foundation layer.

I once got caught going through the prison with a photograph that somebody else and I had taken of the outside of the prison and I'd forgotten that they told me that I couldn't do that. And shit fell down around my ears. I got pulled down to the basement with the head of security who kept me waiting for an hour and then they put me into a room that had cloth

taped over all of the windows and they turned on a tape recorder. They pushed every button they could on me and on the machine and told me that I was not welcome to come back because I had disobeyed. It was really a frightening experience and made me feel a whole lot of sympathy for what these guys were going through also. And the guys loved hearing about this and they asked several times, "Can we hear it again?!" [Laughter] It brings out the trapped animal in you. Not a nice thing. But it really helped to be able to report that to the guys.

Another thing that helped is that my dad had been a POW [Prisoner of War] during World War II and my husband's father spent some time in prison too. I guess the prisoners are looking for some kind of similar experience too. They like seeing that you have some things in common with them when you appear to be so different from them.

TS: Are there people outside of the situation that you compare notes with, like people who have done similar kinds of work or you go to for emotional support?

I think when you do this kind of work there's just not a good way of knowing how to deal with these things. I know I have a couple people I go to when I'm having some struggle with institutional bureaucracy, for example, or we're trying to figure out a good way to explain ourselves when we decide to say no to an invitation that we have problems with.

So do you bring this all home to your husband? [Laughter] Or are there other people in a professional capacity you can talk to?

PD: Actually not too many. They tend to be people in the institutional realms or people who are not artists but who might understand because they're involved in similar subjects or similar groups of people. I guess the only artist I might have been able to talk to in that way, but never have, is Suzanne Lacy, because she's worked with elderly women (whom I've also worked with), she's worked with prisoners, she's worked with a lot of the same populations, but she works on such a different level and is an entirely different kind of personality from me that it wouldn't necessarily have given me what I needed I guess.

Right now, trying to deal with issues of race in my work, I prefer to talk not with artists so much as other people who deal with issues of social justice, folks involved with organizations I'm looking at or people at conferences that I've gone to on white anti-racism. I don't speak to many artists and that's because I'm fairly isolated, which is hard for me, but I don't really know how to correct it, living where I live.

TS: Are you not such a big fan of email?

PD: No, I email a great deal. I purposely put my computer in this dark little room so I wouldn't do it so much, but instead I tend to spend a lot of time in my dark little room.

TS: So you feel isolated from a larger creative community?

PD: I miss a creative community and I guess I could contact them more and talk with them about work. I guess I just assume everyone is busy and they don't want to do that. But it would be good. It would be a very good thing to do.

TS: See, we have to invent these reasons for making contact. [Laughter] This is obviously one of them, and we probably should have talked like this years earlier, but it can sometimes take a long time to get up the nerve to follow through.

TEMPORARY CONVERSATIONS

We have a great appreciation for the interview format. When researching a favorite subject or person, it seems we always prioritize the interview as a primary source of information and inspiration. Essays can be effective too, but reading about someone's work, in their own words, often with a tone that makes you feel like you are sitting in the room with them, is particularly satisfying and sometimes feels more trustworthy as a reference.

Too often when we go looking for interviews with people whose work we admire, we find that they either don't exist, were done a very long time ago, or don't focus on the aspects of their work that we want to know about. This frustration has led us to conduct our own interviews where we get to choose the focus and ask the questions.

Frequently, when people conduct interviews, they have to be severely edited to fit within the confines of a book or magazine. While it's not any fun to try to follow the transcript of a rambling, fragmented conversation, sometimes too much nuance, detail and personality gets lost in the editorial condensation process.

Temporary Conversations is a series where each booklet will focus on a single interviewee or subject. The booklets can be as long as they need to be. For us they will be an opportunity to connect with and spread the ideas of creative people of multiple generations. Some will be people we have a long history with. Others will be folks that we've never met, feel rather in awe of, and needed to work up the nerve to contact for the first time. We'd also be happy to see others conduct interviews that we publish but do not participate in so if you have ideas for someone you'd like to have a temporary conversation with, please contact us.

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