Roanoke County Jail, Salem, Virginia. “All I can tell you is that our capacity is for 108 men and women, and the jail is holding more than that.”
DEGREES OF VISIBILITY
Ashley Hunt, with Critical Resistance, Project South, Solutions Not Punishment Coalition (SNaP Co), and Southerners on New Ground (SONG)
Presented by WonderRoot and Profiles in Abolition

As a six-year survey of the visual politics of the prison industrial complex, Degrees of Visibility offers a body of photographs that study the landscapes in which over 250 prisons, jails and detention centers sit, throughout each of the fifty US states and territories. Each photograph is shot from a publicly available point of view, and is titled according to the number of people imprisoned and concealed within that view. While in some, that number is described in the language of the system itself, in others, the prison’s language gives way to a history, a document or record that offers a different understanding of the space. All statistics were obtained between 2013 and 2016.

The project is a study of the aesthetic regime that governs today’s prison industrial complex, documenting how history’s largest system of civil imprisonment has been enabled through its disguise within everyday landscapes — disappearing the bodies, practices and systemic inequalities it conceals among various types of space and land-use.

Recognizing today’s mass imprisonment as one arm of a larger system of racial, class and gendering controls that structure the United States’ hierarchies, segregations, political and economic relations, the project looks to the spaces in which we encounter prisons each day, often without any sense of what we have or have not seen, or what we might be participating within.

Rather than see this as a coincidence of appearance, however, Degrees of Visibility studies this as a politics of appearance — an aesthetic organization that is as integral to a mass, industrial-scale imprisonment as walls, fences, weapons, laws and cages; rooted in the prison’s racial and security practices and the ongoing manufacture of political consent. To counter this systemic erasure, this survey offers a visual literacy in the system’s appearances, while juxtaposing them with the very statistics, qualities and histories they attempt to conceal.

As the system’s camouflage offers us landscapes and cityscapes without the prison, however, their image can also point us to a future after the prison — each image showing a different space in which we can imagine the costs of the prison industrial complex redirected, reinvested into what can truly build strong communities and new horizons of justice, ones in which prison and police no longer restrict our political imagination.

The seeds of this body of work were sewn during my research into prison architecture in the early 2000s, tracking the changes that accompanied today’s extraordinary prison expansion, as it began during the Civil Rights movement and the people’s movements of the 1960s and 70s. While mass incarceration truly begins after Emancipation, when the policing and imprisonment regime of today replaced the social and political controls that chattel slavery had previously provided, it is in the Post-War years, as Jim Crow segregation breaks down, that the system begins to militarize, professionalize and multiply to the globally unprecedented scale we see today.

At this same, a two-hundred year history of modern prison architecture shifted, from designs that highlight the presence of the prison to ones that camouflage and disappear
that identifies people for whom probable cause may result from arrest, and reifies it, as the obvious contradiction between the era’s promises of equality and its heightened repression required new and more secretive spaces. Similarly, as this repression bred resistance and identification with anti-colonial revolutions around the world, an architecture of invisibility would also serve the state’s growing need for architectures of counter-insurgency, where disappearance became one more piece of technology within the prison’s security arsenal.

This was embodied especially by the 1990 expansion of the Marin County Jail, which in order to avoid public controversy, was “buried,” surrounded by an artificial hill; the parts of ADX Florence which, in Colorado, are actually built underground; the general era of signifiers of punishment so that a jail will look like a neutral office building; or the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Detention Center in Kentucky, whose 1999 reconstruction is designed to resemble the surrounding racing horse barns.

Despite these changes, the security fundamentals of prison architecture remain rooted in the military fortification of castles and fortresses that preceded the modern era — slot windows and curtain walls, ramparts — but instead of keeping things out they are designed to keep them in. This connection suggests that the prison is, at its root, dedicated to a continual form of warfare against those considered “enemies” and “outsiders.” This history tells us much more about the nature of the prison industrial complex than motivations toward overt profit represented by prison labor or for-profit prisons.

It is for this reason that the public presentation of Degrees of Visibility is conceived in partnership with organizations who are dedicated to changing the very society that needs prisons and policing; groups who, instead of asking for limited reforms that will ultimately strengthen the system, fight instead to diminish it, to abolish the conditions that make it appear necessary, and redefine safety as we know it.
Rather than see art as only a space of reflection, I see it as a space of action, where the meanings and perceptions that art has the ability to activate mingle with people’s lives, always taking place within a set of social relations, amidst economies, politics and possibility. For this project, it has been important to work with a venue who recognizes this and sees it as a part of what it facilitates, while also seeking community organizations to help shape the space of its audience, interpretation and potential effects as they are carried beyond the walls of the gallery.

My first introduction to Critical Resistance was in 1998. A number of friends from Chicago had just returned from CR’s first national conference in Berkeley, energized by the thousands of activists who’d turned up, seeking ideas and strategies for changing the system, and recognizing with one another that change and a different future would be possible.

It was in 2000 while shooting for my first feature documentary, Corrections (2001), that I had the chance to interview some of CR’s founders. Impressed and schooled by the work they were doing, I began to develop a series of projects in dialogue with their work. This included: Attica: Roots of Resistance to open their 2001 Eastern Conference; A Prison in the Fields (2001), which documented their work challenging the construction of a second prison in Delano, California; and a pair of videos around their work with young people. These projects have been groundbreaking and have helped to shape my thinking, connecting my work to organizing and helping me to better understand what art can do in the world.

— Ashley Hunt, 2016

Ashley Hunt is an artist living in Los Angeles, where he directs the Program in Photography and Media at CalArts.

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### Degrees of Visibility

#### Saturday October 29 – 9am to 3pm – Social Change Screen Printing Workshop

WonderRoot – WonderRoot is an Atlanta-based nonprofit arts and service organization with a mission to make art accessible and community based. It includes SONG – Mission: SONG is a home for LGBTQ liberation across all lines of race, class, ability, age, culture, gender, and sexuality in the South. We build, sustain, and connect a southern regional base of LGBTQ people making the South a better place for all people. SONG builds an intersectional trans justice organizing model across all lines of identity and experiences of oppression. We believe in “traveling on rails.” We plan to build an infrastructure that moves us towards liberation across all lines of race, class, ability, age, gender, and sexuality. To that end, we will be offering a workshop in social change screen printing at WonderRoot.

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