

CRISTINA GRAJALES GALLERY

HIGHSNOBIETY

How The Ladd Brothers Helped Rikers Island Inmates Tell Their Story In a Pandemic

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With 2.3 million people locked up nationwide, the United States has the world's largest incarcerated population, detained in facilities that are notoriously crowded and unsanitary. Brothers Steven and William Ladd had been working with inmates in the NYC Department of Corrections for nine years as part of their art practice. But when the coronavirus began to ravage the prison system, regular programming was thrown out the window.

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Each year, the brothers run workshops on Rikers Island, but in February their visit was canceled as coronavirus spread through the complex. “We were supposed to go and do a one-week ‘Scroll-a-Thon’ at nine different jails and work with about 500 inmates,” William Ladd told Highsnobiety. The plan was “to start filling this whole space, the size of a jail cell filled with scrolls from the inmates, our biggest scroll with on to date.”

By March, the top doctor at Rikers labeled the situation a “public health disaster unfolding before our eyes” as the infection rate soared seven times higher than the rest of the city. “This is not a generational public health crisis — rather, it is a crisis of a magnitude no generation living today has ever seen” he added.



Entering the prison would be impossible, so the artist duo developed a packet for each prisoner that included independent and collaborative projects encouraging them to tell their stories of their lives through art. For the collaborative component, inmates were asked to write “one word that describes incarceration for you.” The brothers were overwhelmed by the response and developed the answers into an immersive installation as part of their exhibition at The Invisible Dog Art Center in Brooklyn.

Cruelty and iniquity are able to flourish within the prison system, in part because they are largely invisible to the rest of the population. The moving contributions by inmates give voice to their experience within the system; the jail cell installation, shingled archways denoting metal detectors, and a surveillance booth installation serve to visualize these spaces.

The words inscribed on each brick of the jail cell installation represent the individual perspectives of incarcerated people. From “hell” and “slavery” to “suffocation” and “grief,” the words describe a multitude of painful stories. Unfortunately, incarcerated people are often treated as a homogeneous entity, and this perception does not shift upon release. The stigma of felony convictions follows people long after their

court-mandated “debt to society” has been paid.

In normal times, reentry into society is a complex and difficult process. Incarcerated people have mental and physical health needs at higher rates than those of the general population, and they face significant hurdles to employment on release. During the pandemic, the number of obstacles has increased, and so has the risk of recidivism.



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“It’s hard to get a job already, especially right now” explains William, “if you’re getting out of jail and you’re 16, 17, or 18... you’re just in this really horrible position of not knowing what’s going to be next for you.” A felony conviction jeopardizes someone’s ability to find housing, employment, and access to social welfare programs.

The artists hope the exhibition will inspire compassion, respect for humanity, and action. As well as helping people incarcerated during a pandemic to tell their stories, they’re hoping to help some of those people once they’re released.

With awareness raised through this exhibition and their other projects, they hope to gain funding for a paid internship program that will help formerly incarcerated people develop their skills into a position in marketing, communications, production, or shipping.

For those still imprisoned on Rikers, the risk of a second wave looms heavy this winter. Thankfully, last year’s landmark decision to close the troubled complex and replace it with four smaller jails by 2026 could minimize the spread of future outbreaks, improve conditions for incarcerated people, and reduce the burden for their visiting friends and family.

The Invisible Dog Art Center
51 Bergen Street
Brooklyn, New York 11201
September 12-October 17
Masks and social distancing required.