

### The Invisible Americans



Figure 1. Jeff Wall



Figure 2. Industrial Prison Complex  
Google Images

*Artists feel that anyone who doesn't enjoy their work does not really experience it. So we are insulated, we have this happy space of ours. But we cannot shape very much and so we do not have much direct effect on the affairs of the world. From within our space, our me'tier, we can contemplate and reflect on the difficulty, the burden, the obligation accepted by those who take on practical tasks.*

— Jeff Wall<sup>1</sup>

During the last 20 years in America there has been a significant shift in the allocation of public funding and one that I would think most people living in the US are probably not completely aware of. There has been an extreme reversal in the money designated for education and prisons. In California education was receiving seventeen percent of the state budget and prisons received three percent. Now education receives seven and prisons nine percent.

A year ago I became one of the founding members of a grass roots civic organization called, *Save Rural Yolo County*. This came about because a friend informed to me that less than a mile from her house, the County was offering a piece of land to the State of California to build a prison. She asked me to attend a public hearing on the issue. Little did I know that for the next year this would become a significant part of my life. In the beginning there might have been a hint of selfishness – not in my back yard. However that changed very quickly. With multiple environmentally unwise facts weighing against prisons - i.e. a huge carbon footprint, large water polluters and consumers along with the evidence that prisons don't have to follow many environmental impact regulations, it became obvious that this was not in anyone's best interest. Our organization in the end did prevent the construction a full - level four – maximum security state prison from being built and in the process I became more educated about prisons then I ever dreamed possible. Having this experience made me want to investigate further and find out what happened to make this shift occur - prisons receiving more funding than educational institutions.

I am also interested in how artists address and contextualize community issues in their practice. When I was going to college I knew that art, philosophy and religion were the areas that I was most drawn to. At the time my work as a painter was labeled decorative, which it was. It was the mid 70s; there was so much happening in the country in the aftermath of the Vietnam War along with many significant social issues on individual rights - i.e. racial, gender equality and gay rights. I distinctly remember feeling overwhelmed and that I felt incapable of addressing specific events that were happening in the world with regard to my work as a painter. I felt like I just didn't know what my concerns were or how to express them. For me working on the prison issue, alongside friends, family and new acquaintances for so many reasons, was empowering and has given me much to contemplate.

The work of Ed Ruscha, Jeff Wall, Bernd and Hilla Becher all resonant with me and begin to construct an internal dialogue that engages my curiosity. I wonder if any of them would do a series of works based on prisons. It seems like they might. Shields Library at the University of California, Davis, has in their special collections several of Ed Ruscha's hand-made books. Recently I went there to really look at them, and one of the books was *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*. The librarian carefully brought the books to me on a tray along with a pair of white gloves. I have to say holding the books, examining them as if they were dinosaur bones was a thrill and I wished for a moment that I was wearing a white lab coat. My experience was similar when I went to see the Jeff Walls exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Fine Art. I took my time to digest them, marveling at the presentation and looking around at the side of the frame to see if I could figure out just how he constructed the light boxes. Once again the presentation, like Ruscha's hand-made books, was complete perfection. However they didn't feel real to me - the work felt removed from the commonness of Wall's subject. Another experience akin to this was on a visit to the Centre Pompidou during the Paris Photo, at an exhibition of Bernd and Hilla Becher's. Once again the presentation was perfection, repetitive images in pristine clean white frames laid out in a precise grid. I felt like I did looking at Ruscha's books and Wall's light boxes - that the subject was removed and perhaps distanced and free from personalization by the presentation. I felt, in a way, like I was in a scientific laboratory. It is interesting that Ruscha, Wall and the Bechers are working with everyday, common places images that in our busy lives we don't even notice. The sad fact is that we tune them out - the subject or work simply is invisible.

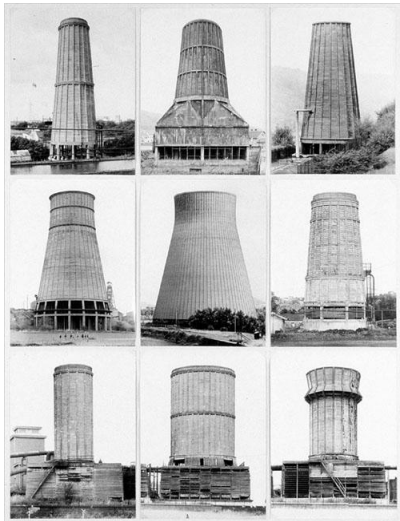


Figure 3. Bernd and Hilla Becher



Figure 4. Edward Ruscha, Twenty Six Gasoline Stations, 1962

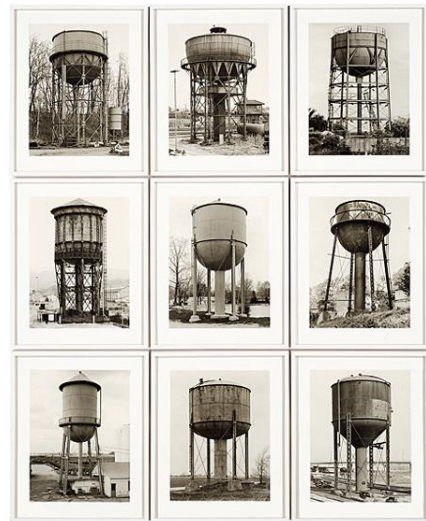


Figure 5. Bernd and Hilla Becher

That’s what I discovered while I was working on the fight to stop the proposed prison it simply was more pleasant for most of us to tune out this issue, to see it as invisible. When one looks back at the year 1980, Reagan was elected President and this is when the dramatic shift occurred, a point of delineation. There were major cuts in funding for mental health programs and the cuts in education began. In addition to the cuts, and happening concurrently, the “Three Strikes Law” contributed to the dramatic climb in the prison population. The statistics clearly show that most incarcerated inmates in prison are there because of drug related issues.

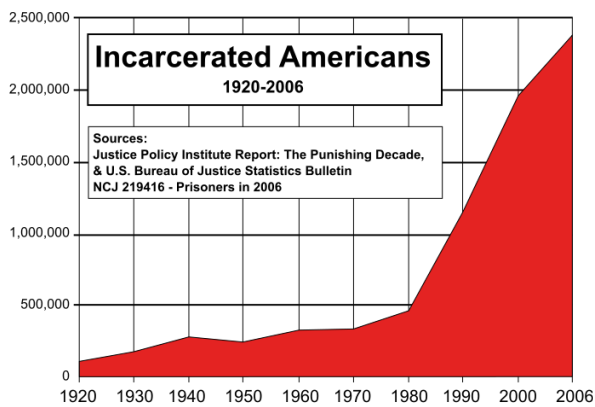


Figure 6. Incarcerated Americans, 1920-2006

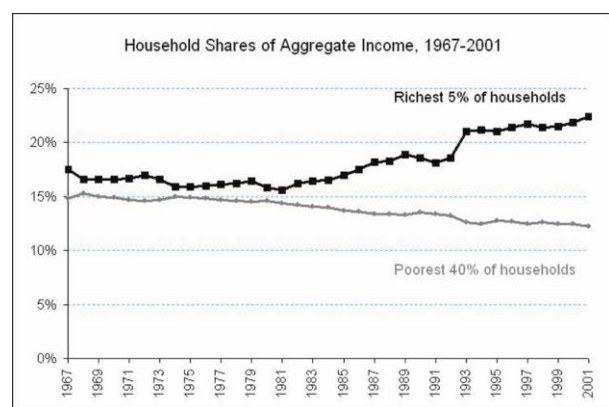


Figure 7. Household income, 1967 – 2001

Over the past twenty years the State of California has built twenty-one new prisons, added thousands of cells to existing facilities, and increased its inmate population eightfold. Nonviolent offenders have been responsible for most of that increase. The number of drug offenders imprisoned in the state today is more than twice the number of inmates who were imprisoned for all crimes in 1978. California now has the biggest prison system in the Western industrialized world, a system 40 percent bigger than the Federal Bureau of Prisons.<sup>2</sup>

A significant problem that exists is that many prisons have been sold to private companies and are being leased back to the states. "In the State of New York the prisons are owned by the Urban Development Corporation and leased to the Department of Corrections. Governor Cuomo "sold" Attica prison to the corporation for \$200 million and used the money to fill gaps in the state budget. In order to buy the prison, the corporation had to issue more bonds. The entire transaction could eventually cost New York State about \$700 million"<sup>3</sup>. I wonder just how many people are aware that prisons are privately owned and are run for profit with an annual cost of \$50,000.00 to keep an individual in prison for one-year<sup>4</sup>.

In a talk about the Prison Industrial Complex, Angela Davis, graduate studies professor emeritus at the University of California, suggests we teach about prisons in our schools and that we make prisons visible<sup>5</sup>. She also raises an interesting concept that slavery was abolished to those living in the free world, but not for those in prison. They are held as hostages to the corporate owners of the prison. When you combine this information with the statistic that one-third of all young black men in the US are in prison, it raises many questions. When one looks at the pristine works of Ruscha, Wall and the Becher's

one sees the facts, straight on, in a scientific manner. Perhaps, this is what needs to be done with prisons  
- look at them head-on and make the industrial prison complex completely visible.

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<sup>1</sup> Stimson, Blake. "The Artiste", Oxford Art Journal 30, 1 2007 109

<sup>2</sup> Schlosser, Eric. "The Prison-Industrial Complex", The Atlantic, 1998  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/199812/prisons>

<sup>3</sup> Schlosser, Eric. "The Prison-Industrial Complex, Atlantic, December 1998  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/199812/prisons>

<sup>4</sup> Huling, Tracy, Building a Prison Economy in Rural America, From *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment* Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind, Editors. The New Press. 2002  
<http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/building.html>

<sup>5</sup> Davis, Angela. "Angela Davis discusses Prison Industrial Complex", YouTube  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh8ZrGhzJIM>