

AMERICAN ARTIST®

Forum

WHAT'S THE ASSESSMENT OF PRISON ART PROGRAMS AFTER A DECADE?

The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition decided to bring art classes to prisons, because we believe inmates, as well as people confined to other institutions, have the right to express themselves, and art is one way of doing that. As artists, we want to share with others our great feeling about art.

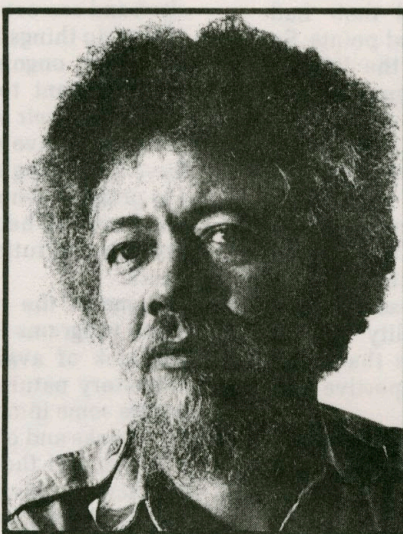
The programs began in New York City at the Manhattan House of Detention in 1971 with the assistance of The Museum of Modern Art. Today there are about 40 programs in 20 states in such institutions as Phoenix Youth Center, Marin County Women's Jail, Bellerica House of Correction and Jail, St. Louis County Jail, Beth Israel Methodone Center, and many others.

We see ourselves as a group that goes into an institution and sets up the program that hopefully will be continued by someone else. We try to function as a catalyst, since we are all full-time artists and don't want to get involved in administering the programs. This is not a big organization in terms of money. Our yearly grant of \$17,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts pays the salary of a part-time coordinator, and the teachers in the program, who might earn only \$200 a month. Many teachers work for nothing. We look for artists who want to work in programs like this and who aren't concerned about how much money they make.

Critics have viewed such programs as too much of a luxury, saying that it is unnecessary for prisoners to express themselves. We believe self-expression to be a human need, not a luxury.

It is easier to describe our art program by what it is not, rather than by what it is. Our objective is to work in the fine arts, namely painting, drawing, and sculpture, and, as in some institutions, creative writing. We are not in crafts, so we do not think in terms of production or getting people jobs. Probably more funding would be available and more institutions open to us if we would go the route of promising job opportunities and turning out products. But our feeling is that no one should expect any return from our classes, other than an opportunity to express himself or herself. This philosophy helps us win accep-

Photo: Kathy Morris



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BENNY ANDREWS

Benny Andrews, noted African-American artist, is a cochairman for the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC). He was born and educated in Georgia and received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. Andrews has won numerous awards for his collage paintings, prints, drawings, and mixed-media work and is a strong advocate of Third World artists, as well as art programs for people confined to institutions.

tance by the inmates. Once they realize that we are not trying to rehabilitate them or get them to turn out crafts for the prison store, they are more open to the idea of art classes.

Another thing we do not do is express a political viewpoint. We are not in those institutions to advance any kind of politics or philosophy. We are there solely as artists.

Some people look at our work from the social-value aspects and think that, because they're interested in social work, this is the program for them. But this is not what we're about. We are not art therapists, although the cochairman happens to be an art therapist. What we do in the prisons could

be described as therapeutic in a particular sense, but not in any prescribed way. It's therapeutic because it permits a period of relaxation and expression for these people.

It's an opportunity for them to express themselves without being crammed full of recriminations. Everything they are exposed to in the prison, even the high-school equivalency program, has been geared to trying to correct them. The art classes are free of that emphasis; they give the inmates time to themselves.

We evaluate their work from an artistic point of view only, not in terms of their psyches. Sometimes a prison psychologist wants to talk to us, to discuss an inmate's work. But we don't get involved in such discussions. We are not qualified to make psychological evaluations.

Although some people in our programs have become practicing artists after leaving prison, we are not there to make artists. Sometimes when we come to some institutions, they might have two or three gifted people they want to encourage. And they ask us to set up criteria for admission to the class. But we don't want to separate advanced people from beginners or shunt anyone aside. If a person is unique, he or she will work anyway. Everyone can benefit from the class on some level, even if it's just a pleasant break in their day.

Aside from the few people who have become artists, the most that people usually get from classes is something to hang onto when they get out. I am reminded of an ex-prisoner who was in one of my classes. I met him again recently, and he told me that some time ago his apartment burned down and he lost everything he had. "I was so angry," he said, "I was going to take a gun and go out to rob someone. Then I thought about what you and the other people in the program did for me, and I thought, 'I'm not going to do it, for them. They did so much for me.' I couldn't do it." Shortly after that, he got a job as an elevator operator and was getting another apartment.

As I mentioned earlier, we don't expect to produce artists from these classes. We talk to the inmates realistically about the art world, so they

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won't have any illusions about easy success. We try to point out that they already have so many strikes against them, in terms of formal education and art education, and that such a very small percentage of people can succeed anywhere in the art world. So I don't think anyone could accuse us of creating unrealistic expectations. In fact, some people who are talented find difficulties in our classes. These people are usually self-taught and haven't had much formal education, if any. Such self-taught individuals are likely to have perfected their bad points as well as their good points. So the teacher is faced with the delicate problem of trying to encourage them to keep working in areas where they are innovative, not belittle what they have accomplished, and keep them interested, all at the same time. They might have become popular in the prison for doing portraits. If you make a case for doing more than photographic portraits, you present a challenge. It's a responsibility of the teacher not only to raise that challenge, but also to be supportive and encouraging.

In spite of everything that is against them, we have had some prisoners go to art school when they left prison and become professional artists. They are wonderful feathers in our cap. Joe Gaines and Ralph Thompson are now well-established artists. A number of ex-inmates now teach in BECC programs. Ronald King, a published poet,

teaches creative writing at Wards Island and in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Sinbad Lockwood, a painter and sculptor, is helping develop a program for juveniles in Brooklyn and teaches at Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration. And Akili-Nali studied at the School of Visual Arts and now teaches at Wards Island.

Our program is always growing. We try to be innovative. Lately, we've been involved in youth programs. We have eight programs—some in juvenile centers for runaway and abused children and correctional institutions. We like to do things that the general public or the ongoing institutions don't do. We want to reach these young people on their way to prison. Those of us who have never been in prison have something to offer. But those in the program who have been in prison can be of real help. A lot of them have been in institutions since their early years.

Some of the problems of running these programs include dealing with the lack of available materials; the transitory nature of city institutions, where some inmates are kept for only two weeks and others are there for six months; and the difficulty of finding teachers for rural locations. We have had some success with university professors and with a few artists who want to live in Maine and Georgia, and the small amount of money they can earn in the program helps.

In spite of problems, our programs are successful. And I'd like to point out that, although we are a group of black artists, a large number of our programs are headed by white artists and reach white, as well as black, inmates. We are dealing with the need for cultural opportunities in prison situations, regardless of who the prisoners are. •