

## Black Emergency Coalition Teaches In Prisons



After a photo by Evelyn Hofer

By BENNY ANDREWS

I remember it well. It was one of those gray nothing days, the kind that even at 12 noon you already knew the sun wouldn't be shining, not only for that day but for several days. This was November 10, 1971.

Checking the scrap of paper that I'd scribbled, "The Manhattan House of Detention, 125 White Street," I looked up at the address to try and make some sense out of this huge and forbidding building I seemed to be walking around and around. While there were huge gates, always closed, and other entrances, the building looked as if it had no entranceways, just hundreds of little windows that climbed up its 13 stories, squinting down on the gray streets of lower Manhattan. It didn't take a glass expert to know that not much light filtered through the thick, dirty, little squares that filled the windows.

"That's the door," I said half-aloud to myself as I turned off Centre Street onto White Street, spotting a line of people, mostly women and children, strung out onto the sidewalk, obviously waiting to get in. "It's the door, if you're visiting somebody who's already in here," replied a bundled-up Black woman who was waiting in line, when I asked if this was the line waiting to get into the prison.

"Well, I'm not exactly going to see any special person in, I'm supposed to be teaching an art class," I said, feeling silly when I heard how it sounded. "Art?" someone in the line asked, and then turned around and said something obscene to someone standing in the line next to them. Obviously this was not the entrance I was supposed to come through. I walked on down the street, still looking for the entranceway, thinking that this place sure is called by the right name, "The Tombs."

I found the number 125 over a door, walked up the steps, pulled open the door and stepped inside only to face another door 10 feet away. This one looked like it was made out of iron and had a square peephole with a real human face peering through it from the other side.

"Yeah?" the face asked me as I approached the door.

"I'm supposed to teach an art class here," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh, yeah?" the voice asked, still peering at me.

"Yeah, that's what I been told," I said.

"Wait a minute," and he stepped away from the slot. I could hear him yelling out, "Hey, does anyone knows what's the story about some guy teaching an art class here today?"

(OVER)

1



The few seconds I stood outside waiting and hearing his voice reverberate around the unseen space he was yelling in, I felt very cold and isolated. Hell, I had a studio down on Beekman Street only about 20 blocks from here, and yet it was like I was thousands of miles from anyplace I'd ever known. I was experiencing something that I, and others who would join me in going into prisons all over the country, would feel every time we waited outside those iron doors with assorted slots and faces peering through, always asking suspiciously, "Yeah, whatta you want?"

The door made heavy sounds like grunts and groans (if steel grunted and groaned), but opened anyway.

"C'mon in," said the face that had looked through a slot, now a six-foot tall, gun-toting guard, as he professionally looked me up and down.

No sooner was I inside a huge caged-off room full of guards, complete with sign-in and sign-out books, with more guards behind a second barred door, when a lean, intense-looking Black man came over to me with an extended hand and said, "Hello, Mr. Andrew. I'm Officer Herman Green, head of the institutional program here at the 'Tombs.' Will you come with me?" "Sure," I said, and at that moment—as if they'd come out of nowhere—about 10 people came over to join us, including two representatives from the Museum of Modern Art's Junior Council, Mrs. Barbara Jacobson, its president, and Mrs. Liz Susman, plus several people from the Board of Corrections, more officers and a reporter from the *New York Times*, Richard F. Shepard.

As we got into the elevator that would take us up to the library, I had a feeling I might never see any inmates, only uniformed men who said little and looked very somber. The library—like any institutional library—had a formal group of tables and chairs, and shelves of books. Atop the shelves were little pieces of sculpture which must have been done by inmates and I thought, "we're getting warm."

From there we went into the high-ceiling assembly hall and chapel where I set up my easel and sketching board. Standing on the small platform while the committee (as I shall call the others who came to observe this class) sat off to the side in the back, I felt more like an actor than a painter. I wondered how to reconcile the social obligations I professed to be involved in, with the problems of becoming a good artist. Most of all I kept asking myself, "How in the hell can I get something over to these guys in prison from an artistically valid standpoint and at the same time not be a living bore?" I also felt that the committee in the audience was viewing this as an experiment, and that they were going to reach conclusions about my presentation and the inmate's reception of it. The importance of the demonstration began to get to me.

Suddenly the door to the back of the hall opened and a stream of silent people came in—my students for the demonstration. The guards pointed out seats to them, and I looked at their faces. They looked familiar. They looked like my regular students. In fact, they even looked like me; I was them, we were, in fact, each other.

A sense of relaxation came over me. I don't remember exactly what I said that first day. I do know what I asked for a model, one leaped up on the stage, and then we began to draw. They were hungry to work, and it went on like any other class, except that I was surprised at the amount of inherent ability I encountered in those rows of men. They were eager to see each other's work, and I held up examples.

Suddenly time was running out, and I still wanted to tell them about basic composition, and working from the imagination. So I told them how I felt it had been a great couple of hours and they started asking if I was coming back. I shrugged my shoulders and looked inquiringly towards the committee. Then the class let out a burst of applause. I began to gather up my equipment, keeping my back towards them because I felt so damn helpless. Somehow it was not right that a simple drawing lesson like this should mean so much to them. I was flattered by their response. And I was almost ashamed that I was walking out of there intact to go back to my profession while they were to be trooped back to the cells I knew existed behind the walls.

The other artists who came in right after me were Cliff Joseph, co-chairman of the B.E.C.C., Camille Billops Lutz, Rudolf Baranik, and Charles Trott. I still remember our satisfaction that after the massacre at Attica prison, we, a group of artists, were going into prisons to contribute what we could to others less fortunate than ourselves.

It has been over four years since that first class at the "Tombs" and now the B.E.C.C. has art programs in prisons throughout the U.S.A. We've received grants from both the New York State Council on the Arts (which unfortunately they ceased to continue, though they've funded programs that copied what we started) and from the National Endowment for the Arts. In fact, with the latter's help we've expanded our programs in ways that take advantage of the different situations found in the different prison systems in the country.

We have three types of programs now: regular classes once or twice a week in the New York City detention centers, and the Federal Prison, Gloria Grayeb and Tyrone Mitchell (also in New York City), at the Rhode Island Training Schools (under the leadership of Shelly Killens and George Knowlton), the Cook County Jail (Chicago, Illinois) under the leadership of Ernest McBurrows and Deborah Gadiel, in the California Correctional Institute at Claremont, under Jan Jeminson, at Burke Prison in North Carolina under Thomas Bintz, the Bellerica Prison in Massachusetts under Anne Hmburger, and in the Kings County Hospital (prison ward) under the leadership of Bill Anastasi.

We have visiting artists programs in the following institutions: the Federal Correctional Institute, Tallahassee, Florida; the Western Correctional Center, North Carolina; the Leavenworth facility in Kansas. There are also free-floating programs where visiting artists go into prisons in Connecticut, under the leadership of Jonathan Bruce; in Ohio under the leadership of Adrienne W. Hoard; in Michigan, under the leadership of J. D. Jackson and Reginald Gammon; and in upstate New York.

Our third type of program is what we call an in-institution program, and very often depends on one or two very talented and dedicated inmates. This also means that the programs last only as long as these talented and dedicated inmates are in this particular prison. We've had these in-institutional programs in New York State in the Greenhaven Facility, under George C. Smith; at the Auburn Facility, under Ralph T. Thompson; and in the Bronx House of Detention, and we are in the process of setting up programs in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the Federal Prison in Kentucky.

We've been fortunate to have enlisted the aid of many artists who ordinarily would not have identified their work or aims with being involved with prisoners. The B.E.C.C. is an organization of Black artists, but our prison art program enlists the aid of and depends heavily on the participation of all artists.

We use as many volunteers as we can get, but our National Endowment for the Arts grant does allow us to pay artists-teachers \$25 per session. We break this down to payment for spending at least two hours with the artist, inmates and at least two hours of preparation time, or \$6.25 per hour. With our visiting artists (we use only one per month in an institution) we pay \$50 for the visit demonstration—again with the understanding that the visiting artist will spend at least 3 hours with the artist inmates and two hours for preparation time, \$10 per hour. For the visiting artist we'll pay travel expenses via the cheapest transportation possible, namely by bus, within a 50-mile radius of the prison.

Since we've been working in the nation's prisons we've learned lots. In fact, while we are called upon by groups, both private and governmental, to advise on their plans to set up similar programs, we do acknowledge that there is no way to set up a uniform set of rules for prison art programs. The nation's prisons are very individual—like ships really. They're very often so different from one another that success in one is a failure in another.

However, here are some guidelines that persons interested in setting up a program should follow:



1. Decide in advance exactly what you'll offer in art. Be specific as to whether or not you'll try and teach crafts—which by the way is a "whole other ball game" from teaching drawing and painting.

2. Decide how long classes will be, and how many days will you teach.

3. Decide if you will provide supplies. Frankly, unless you're really rich, I'd suggest that you try to get some institutions or civic organization or the prison to supply your program.

4. Set up your program under some name, or associate yourself with some ongoing organization because the penal authorities are leery of individuals volunteering to do things. They often see individual efforts as being fickle and short-lived. Also, "institutions respect institutions" even down to letterheads.

5. Approach the prison very directly; don't hem and haw, don't be indecisive about what you'll do. You tell them what you'll do; you're the artist.

6. Make contact with the warden, but figure out as quickly as you can the officer who really runs the area (usually called institution program officer), because his or her opinion will go a long way in determining whether or not you and your program stay, no matter what great smiles the warden gives you in front of the press and visiting dignitaries.

7. Once inside, start getting the class involved with the continuance of the class. The students have a big say over whether or not the program lasts. After all, that's why you're there in the first place—to serve them.

8. Keep clear records of your programs, tell others, both artists and non-artists, about what you're doing. Enlist the help of allied arts like poetry and creative writing. The students inmates are just as interested in those as they are in drawing, painting and crafts. Also, if you can get others to start classes in the other arts you can compliment each other in ways that will insure the continuance of your program.

9. Here are a few "DONT'S:" Don't over emphasize the possibilities of the artists inmates regarding their potentials as professional artists. If you're one you know it's a very rough profession for the few lucky ones, training and all. Don't try to push them into trying to make money off their work. Don't make promises that you may not be able to keep; remember they're captive audiences, and it's downright insulting to them for you to promise to come and not do it. Hell, they're left sitting in some classroom and made to feel like they're worth nothing while you—free—can do as you please by coming or not.

There are more do's and don'ts, and if anyone is interested in getting materials from the B.E.C.C., write to Michael Chisolm, coordinator, 463 West Street, New York, N.Y. 10014.

We're signing up artists for our program now, both to teach on a regular basis in our established programs and to be visiting artists for both our programs and other ongoing activities.

We're also interested in helping others set up art programs in prisons in their communities. Like I said earlier, prisons differ from one to another; therefore while an organization like ours can work in them all over the country, it is imperative that we get local artists to run them. They cannot be run from any other central location. So if you're interested in setting up a program get in touch with us at the above address.

Now I'd like to make just a comment on the rewards of working in institutions like prisons to those who might have some questions to ask a full-time exhibiting painter. The idea of being an artist or sharing in the pleasure of art is not the personal prerogative of anyone person or any group. It is something that all of us have a right to. How many times have we heard our former teacher say, "Oh, how I enjoyed teaching you do this and that." What they're telling you is that though you've gone on to become something else, they had the pleasure of sharing with you their talents,

and they feel a part of whatever you became. Well, in these institutions you're like that teacher. By comparisons to the prisoners, you're free and that's something you have that they don't, yet you'll take some of your talent and share it with them. They in turn will give you just as much back, their attention and the things they know and can do—which, by the way, can very easily be much more than you have to give. It all boils down to sharing what you do best with those who appreciate it the most, very often the ones without.

So maybe someday you'll know the feeling of standing outside one of those huge iron doors with the little slot in it framing a face that always asks, "Yeah, whatta you want?" While you won't tell him, you'll say to yourself, "I want to share the pleasure of my art with others who have similar things to share, and it so happens that many of those people are inside this institution that I stand outside in the cold waiting to enter."



# A M B I E N C E / S T I M U L I

Curated by  
Benny Andrews

Elisa D'Arrigo  
Bill Buchen  
Mary Buchen  
Nene Humphrey  
M.L.J. Johnson  
Howard McCaleb  
James H. Merrell  
Richard Miller  
Page Ogden  
Judith Schwarz  
Kathy Stark  
Warner W. Wada

## Alternative Museum

December 12 until January 16, 1982

## INTRODUCTION

From day one of the artist's existence he must hang onto the precarious thread that attaches his conscious mind to his creative impulse. It is like existing in darkness guided only by an unseen wall which often disappears from one's reach causing panic in the artist's mind. On the other hand, when the artist feels he's in direct contact with his imaginary guiding wall, he can feel a sense of sheer ecstasy.

This exhibition sets out to explore this creative urge. Thus, rather than exhibiting their finished artwork, the artists have used a juxtaposition of symbols, images and found objects to create the essential ambience from which their ideas emerge.

The artists, Bill and Mary Buchen, Page Ogden, M.L.J. Johnson, Warner Wada, Jim Merrell, Elisa D'Arrigo, Richard Miller, Kathy Stark, Nene Humphrey, Howard McCaleb, and Judith Schwarz, represent a cross section of styles and ages. Each has fashioned a tangible environment or juxtaposition of images to exhibit in order to share with the viewer the individual references from which his or her final art derives.

In doing so they have made use of many familiar everyday objects, dirt, screen mesh, books, spoons, rocks, audio equipment, furniture, floor coverings, etc. that are easily recognizable. In other instances they have juxtaposed objects and symbols in ways that will challenge the viewer to interpret what the artist is saying. This is a very important aspect of the exhibition, to lead the viewer into this world of the artist, to show that in many ways all of us, artist and non-artist alike have in our mind banks many things that we refer back to in order to come up with creative things. The artist goes further than the average person though in developing and enlarging on things from his or her past. Very often the artist makes use of his dreams, traumas, and fantasies and in this exhibition there are allusions to those experiences in the artist's presentations.

As creative people, we know that no one, two, or ten pieces can fully express the essence of one's creative existence. Much that belongs to finished work can never be shown or explained. Thus each artist was asked to concentrate on one thing, the elusive aura that he must weave around himself in order to express in his chosen medium what is known as art work.

These artists have taken on a challenging task, attempting to make visible the invisible, the origin of their creative impulse, through a collection of tangible symbols. They've made discoveries about themselves in the process, and hopefully through this exhibition, they'll strike chords in the viewers minds that will add to this experience in art so that more people can share the inner worlds of the creative person.

We see it, we feel it, and we know it exists, this abstract world necessary for the creative person to stem from.

Trying to describe it almost kills it.

This exhibition, **Ambience/Stimuli**, attempts to describe it and in the process, share this most wonderful of intangibles in ways that expand and glorify what is one of man's greatest assets, the ability to expand his imagination.

The photographs in this catalogue complement the imagery of the exhibition extending the artists exploration. In the developing of this exhibition both the participating artists and I quickly realized the necessity to go beyond the showing of conventional photographs of the artists in the studio or walking alone in the woods or on deserted beaches in order to convey the ideas that stimulate the artists. The selection of photographs for the catalogue had to be creative so each artist worked to incorporate ideas in either collage, montage or of scenes close to the artist's conception of where their innermost thoughts stem from.

Benny Andrews