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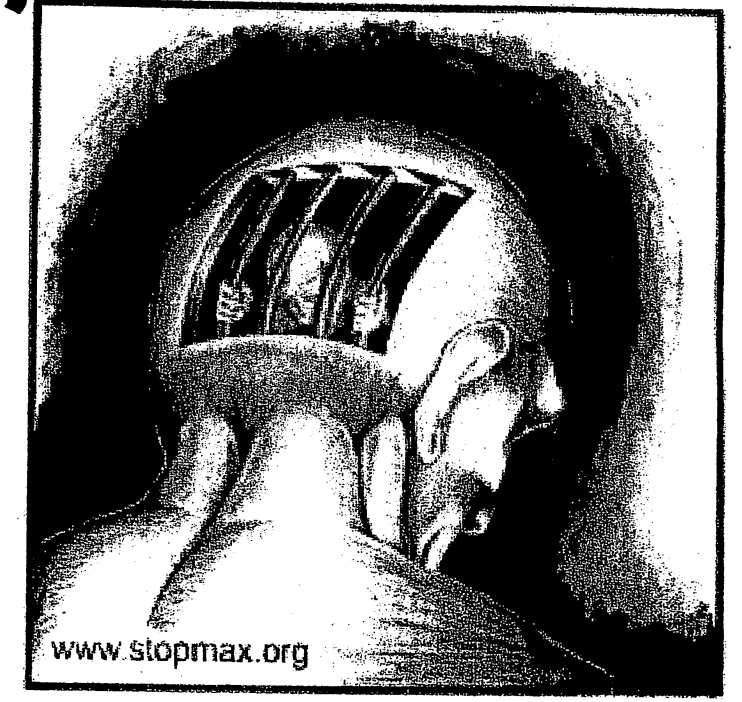
Stop Control Unit Prisons



Art by Todd Tarselli

Bonnie Kerness

AFSC Prison Watch Project

Speech at AFSC Stopmax Conference

Plenary Session
Temple University
May 31-June 1 2008

About the Artist

Todd (Hyung-Rae) Tarselli's ink drawings illustrate the exploitation of prisoners by the prison industrial complex. He is incarcerated at SCI Greene, a Pennsylvania supermax prison. To contact Todd, or make a make a donation toward art supplies write to:

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No One Can Stop the Rain

Assata Shakur

Watch, the grass is growing.
Watch, but don't make it obvious.
Let your eyes roam casually, but watch!
In any prison yard, you can see it, growing.
In the cracks, in the crevices, between the steel and the concrete,
Out of the dead gray dust,
The bravest blades of grass shoot up, bold and full of life.
Watch, the grass is growing.
It is growing through the cracks.
The guards say grass is against the Law.
Grass is contraband in prison.
The guards say that the grass is insolent.
It is uppity grass, radical grass, militant grass, terrorist grass,
They call it weeds.
Nasty weeds, nigga weeds, dirty, spic, savage indian, wetback, pinko,
Commie weeds, subversive!
And so the guards try to wipe out the grass.
They yank it from its roots.
They poison it with drugs.
They maul it.
They rake it.
Blades of grass has been found hanging in cells, covered with
Bruises, "Apparent suicides".
The guards say that the "GRASS is UNAUTHORIZED".
"DO NOT LET THE GRASS GROW:"
You can spy on the grass. You can lock up the grass.
You can mow it down, temporarily.
But you will never keep it from growing.
Watch, the grass is beautiful.
The guards try to mow it down, but it keeps on growing.
The grass grows into a poem.
The grass grows into a song.
The grass paints itself across the canvas of life.
And the picture is clear and the lyrics are true,
And the haunting voices sing so sweet and strong
That the people hear the grass from far away.
And the people start to dance, and the people start to sing,
and the song is freedom.

Watch the grass is growing.
Thank you.

I want to honor our foremothers and forefathers in this movement for abolition of prisons, isolation and torture with a poem of Assata Shakur's called "No One Can Stop the Rain", which reminds us that no one can stop a righteous movement. We, all of us, are a powerful community of resistance, and this is a dream come true for me.

Bonnie Kerness, AFSC Prison Watch Project

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I want to thank the AFSC for renewing its commitment to issues of isolation and torture in US prisons; the AFSC Healing Justice staff for their collective brilliance and spirit and Naima Black and the Stopmax Team for organizing this extraordinary community.

In the mid 80's I received a letter from Ojore Lutalo who had just been placed in the Management Control Unit at Trenton State Prison. He asked what a control unit was, why he was in there and how long he would have to stay. At that point, we knew little of control units, except for the ground breaking work of Nancy Kurshan and Steve Whitman of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML) and the many prisoners who reached out to the AFSC, which, in 1985 produced a pamphlet called "The Lessons of Marion". We began hearing from people throughout the country saying that they were prisoners being held in extended isolation for political reasons. We also heard from jailhouse lawyers, Islamic militants and prisoner activists - many of whom found themselves locked down in 24/7 solitary confinement. The AFSC began contacting people inside and outside the prisons to see who was interested in working specifically on control unit isolation issues, and in

1994 (after eight years of organizing) we hosted the formation of the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons. This was done with the help of CEML, Komboa Ervin, who was one of the Marion Brothers, Corey Weinstein of California Prison Focus, Alejandro Molina from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, students from Oberlin College, young people across the country who belonged to the Anarchist Black Cross, the United Church of Christ, Yaki Owusu of Spear and Shield, the input of the women held in small group isolation at Lexington, Ky. and many others who gave strength and purpose to the work. Some of these people were actively involved in the different political movements of the 60's and 70's and understood how control units were being used against us all. Getting issues of isolation and torture into the light has been a long road and I bow in gratitude to those inside who so gracefully and patiently mentored those of us on the outside.

In 1996, the National Campaign held four Regional Hearings across the country, giving voice to people in prison, ex-prisoners, family members, advocates, lawyers and others whom were impacted by the use of isolation. In 1997 we came out with the Interim Report which held data on the emergence of over 45 control units or supermax prisons in almost every state. We matched inside and outside monitors in each state and formed the testimonies we received into a Listening Project called "Testimonies of Torture" and the "Survivor's Manual". In 1998, the National AFSC folded the work of the Campaign into Newark, NJ's Prison Watch Project of the New York Metropolitan Regional Office. During the four years of its existence, NCSCUP trained dozens of students in organizing principles, including helping to develop about half a dozen campus Prisoner Awareness groups. Many of those former stu-

security threat group management units.

One of the things that makes this such an exciting time to re-new our efforts through Stopmax, is that we now have the growing understanding of the validity United Nations international law. The Convention Against Torture, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, The UN Convention on Political and Civil Rights and other international and regional treaties help give us a new set of legal, educational and organizing tools for social change.

Our work this weekend is very rooted in struggle against the system and political oppression. It is deeply touching to me to have representatives of so many long time political formations present. Those of us in AFSC rooted in these issues, continue to hear from prisoner activists, the mentally ill, people charged with being gang members and thousands of others - all being housed in extended isolation where devices of torture are used with impunity. After each Homeland Security Code change, Prison Watch is flooded with calls from people reporting loved ones with Islamic names being placed in solitary without charges.

Our work this weekend is a time when the building of new relationships and the broadening of our base can truly create social change. I think we all need to be mindful of the deep sense of grief that many of us feel as it impacts on our work and interactions. There may be groups here who need to work through differences with one another. There may be groups here who can form working alliances no matter what those differences are. Our priority has to be to work cooperatively to shut down these torture chambers.

both inside and outside the walls. Ojore Lutalo, the man who first contacted us in 1986, was released from the control unit via litigation in 2002 after 16 years in isolation. In 2004, he let us know that he had been placed back into the Management Control unit with no charges pending or any explanation. When I called the Department of Corrections, it took many conversations before I was bluntly told that this was upon the order of Homeland Security, that he is one of a number of prisoners across the country who they have targeted in this way.

The latest progression of control units are called "security threat group management units". This is particularly egregious because it is the government which gets to define what a "security threat group" is. According to a national survey done by the Department of Justice in 1997, the Departments of Corrections of Minnesota and Oregon named all Asians as gangs, which Minnesota further compounds by adding all Native Americans. The State of NJ DOC lists the Black Cat Collective as a gang. The Black Cat Collective is my free foster son along with two friends who put on Afro-Centric cultural programs in libraries. Because my own background stems from the Civil Rights Era, I am very mindful of who is considered a "security threat" to this country and how they are treated.

Prison gang policies occur within the context of larger society and the wider criminal justice system, and the growth of security threat group management units are part of the larger policy agenda regarding US prisons. One of the standards that the federal government sets in order for states to receive prison construction subsidies is to mandate the building of supermax prisons or

dents are still working for social change today.

The history of the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons really began with the movements of the 60's and 70's. My generation belonged to a society where we genuinely believed that each of us was free to dissent politically. In those years, people acted out this belief in a number of ways. Native peoples contributed to the formation of the American Indian Movement dedicated to self determination; Puerto Ricans joined the movement to free the island from US colonialism; white students formed the Students for a Democratic Society and other groups, while others worked in the southern Civil Rights movements. This was also a time that the New Afrikan Independence Movement reasserted itself, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed, as well as a time where there was a distinct rise in the prisoner's rights movement. It was time when television news had graphic pictures of State Troopers, Police, the FBI, and the National Guard killing our peers. It was a time when I saw on the evening news the bullet holes fired by police into Panther Fred Hampton's sleeping body, a time when young people protesting the Viet Nam War died on the Jackson and Kent State campuses killed by the National Guard, a time when civil rights workers were killed with impunity, and a time when we felt as if there was no opportunity to stop mourning because each day another activist was dead. These killings and other acts of oppression led to underground formations such as the Black Liberation Army and the Weathermen Underground.

The government, in response to this massive outcry against social inequities and for national liberation, utilized an FBI Counter Intelligence Program called COIN-

TELPRO, which had as its objective the crippling of the Black Panther Party and other radical forces. Over the years that this directive was carried out, many of those young people who weren't murdered were put in prisons across the country. Some, now in their 60's and 70's are still there. Those directives are still being carried out, only now we have an entire office of Homeland Security monitoring what it calls "radical prisoners".

While the US denied that there were people being held for political reasons, there was no way at the time, to work with prisoners without hearing repeatedly of the existence of such people, including individuals who clearly fit the United Nations definition of political prisoners and prisoners of war - and the particular treatment they endured once in prison. As early as 1978, Andrew Young , who was US Ambassador to the United Nations, was quoted in newspaper interviews as saying that "there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of people I would describe as political prisoners" in US prisons.

Across the nation, we saw an enhanced use of sensory deprivation/isolation units for such people, and it was this growing "special treatment" which we began monitoring. At the time, Ralph Arons, a former warden at Marion, was quoted at a congressional hearing as saying, "The purpose of the Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in society at large".

For those of us who have been in the struggle for decades, the deliberate use of long term sensory deprivation is haunting. People that we've known, worked with and loved have been, and some still are, being held in this manner. Some of those are people in the audience today. The names - Ojore Lutalo; Sundiata Acoli, who the Management Control Unit in NJ was built for in 1975; Assata Shakur, who was held for over five years in isolation. Marshall Eddie Conway, Albert Nuh Washington, who died in prison; Geronimo Pratt; Dhoruba Bin Wahad, Dr. Mutulu Shakur, Mumia Abu Jamal; Leonard Peltier, David Gilbert, Marilyn Buck, Sekou Odinga, Ray Luc Levasseur, Kazi Toure, Masai Ehehosi; Leonard Peltier, Oscar Lopez Rivera, Alejandrina Torres, Dylcia Pagan, Bashir Hameed, Standing Deer and Sekou Odinga, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin; Richard Williams, Tom Manning, Merle and the rest of the Africas, Africa, Susan Rosenberg, Laura Whitehorn, Linda Evans, Marilyn Buck, Sylvia Baraldini, Mutulu Shakur, Imam Jamil Al-Amin - these names and dozens of others - haunt the spaces of every control unit, SHU, DDU, ad seg unit and special housing unit in the country. No matter what name they are given, their purpose is the same as it is in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo - the breaking of minds. For every name I've read, there are a thousand more.

For people of my generation, this work is done with a compelling and lifetime passion and an understanding that the work is not risk free. We've made a promise to those dead and alive to abolish these torture chambers. People throughout the world are beginning to understand what the prisoners have been saying to us for decades about the oppressive tactics of the US government. The department of corrections is more than a set of institutions, it is a state of mind. It is that state of mind which has expanded the use of isolation, the use of devices of torture and the Counter Intelligence Program, as part of Homeland Security, against activists,