**Notes from Discussion with Sheila Pinkel**

September 10, 2015

SP: Exciting and terrifying experiment together! [Quick introductions, including why taking course, other questions to add to list.]

[Computer issues.]

SP: Suggest to focus on two of the questions that SP poses in response to original responses, adding these into the document and build information: collect images, relevant articles, list of web sites, etc. Annotate where you find things. Researching online and building information.

Quite a few students are interested in prison economics: can collect individually but then begin to share.

Create a Word document that’s your own private space: let yourself be intuitive, free associate ideas, write down words and wordplay. Write down in a notebook – own personal world of ideas. “The incubator page.” An uncentered space for ideas and feelings.

Class designed beautifully and intelligently, but it’s also important to discover a “deeper intuitive intelligence” about themselves. Trusting those burning desires to do something – that’s your best friend. Follow your curiosity even if you have no idea where it will take you. Learn to receive the gifts of own intuition.

SP an activist in Los Angeles, testifying frequently against building new jails and prisons. Trying to reduce the jail and prison populations and stop crazy growth of incarceration. Just last week LA County Board of Supervisors voted for what will amount to $5B to build new jails.

There is activism in the Philadelphia area that seeks to create such campaigns. You can be effective! Students at Columbia last year were able to force the university to divest from private prisons.

Experts aren’t those who know the answers but instead those who believe they can figure it out when any question arises. This is the kind of “expertise” SP and the faculty possess.

Thinking this as a workshop: mindset of generosity and sharing; the sum total in the room is greater than any one person or artist. Everyone can share technical expertise, resources, particular experience.

Working as an artist on incarceration since 1999. This work began with a particular case in Philadelphia, Mumia Abu-Jamal, who was convicted of murder in early 1980s after being involved in a shooting that left him shot and a police officer dead. [See <http://www.prisonradio.org/mumia101>]

[Rosa knows Mumia Abu-Jamal and Noelle Hammerham, someone involved with him.]

Discussion of growth of incarceration and connection to expanded and more punitive drug laws, a backlash in part to rising black power movement.

AD: Thirty minutes left, so let’s talk about where the project might go.

SP: Been making books for years – this would be a possibility for creative output. But still wants each student to follow own ideas about what they would like to do. But this example would mean engaging with women about their own writing about the possibilities of organizing their writing into some kind of a book. Take the pages, scan them into Photoshop, import that into nDesign or something like this, then print it inexpensively. Then you can give each of them a copy of the book – a book that shows what has been accomplished during the semester, perhaps also including the writing each person has done themselves.

Also possible to engage a larger creative project different from this: get women to perform their writing at the prison, give them a wonderful other, performative experience – one that makes them feel very strong and alive. Then 360 students could also perform their writing, with each student becoming one of their voices. A powerful way to communicate outside of the prison what is happening inside. SP imagines the women will be excited to be represented outside the prison.

As an artist, SP always thinking about “how big can I make this idea.” From performing these ideas you could even think about something farther. SP just saw “Fun Home” during which there were hysterically funny singing and dancing routines – adding a completely different dimension which can broaden what is understood about the issues but in a completely different way. Make films of these performances even.

SP: To class: what are some things you might want to see as a creative outcome?

Julia: Interested in the arts – dancing, painting, drawing.

Shirah: Does Shakespeare theater on campus with Julia – also interested in visual arts as well.

SP: Hoping the websites give further information on how to artistically respond to subject of incarceration, start imagining things to do visually or theatrically, start collecting images, and so forth.

Keires: Many of students visiting for first time today, don’t yet know the women. Hesitant to thinking about this as “mining some experience that we’re then able to take.” We want to come in as equals in a sense – which was spoken about before.

SP: Wonderful comment – it’s up to the class to take artistic projects in direction they want to take it. In SP’s experience, often people who are incarcerated feel that SP’s ability to communicate with other people to communicate with other people allows them to have a presence in this world when they feel they don’t have any. This is the personal belief for SP, but class needs to follow its own beliefs.

Anne: My sense of the project: everyone in the class will do some research on a particular topic they find interesting; then the question is how to relate this to some artistic project at the end. The 360 wants to spread to a larger audience some of what we’ve been learning about prison or life in prison or the prison industrial complex. What’s the relation between the research and the artistic performance at the end?

SP: Tends to do a ton of research without knowing what the final container will look like. As an artist, then ends up trying to find the appropriate container for what it is she wants to say. She doesn’t know what she’s going to find, how to appropriate it, etc. Right now “confusion is a good thing.” Be a little confused. If you know quite well what you’re going to do, it’s not going to allow you to open up to the creative possibilities. As you generate these relationships and begin to collect information just follow these intuitions and passions. Example of SP’s mural that used the blown-up graph of the growth of incarceration and information she put around it. When SP started collecting the information, she had no idea what she was going to do with it. Real creative work is done this way: doing research and then coming to know later – creativity comes from not knowing where you’re going. Artists are scared but they find ways to make it work. “Eventually you’ll figure it out. You have to trust that.”

Jody: This process seems to be (a) doing research and then (b) posing the question of what are we going to do with this, going back and forth.

SP: Yes – back and forth, clarifying as you research more, and so forth.

SP: We also need to develop a little technological expertise, starting to create a web site to organize all these findings.

Rhett: Capable of doing this but also interested in it especially to make it more accessible.

SP: Others who know about Photoshop?

Rhett: 4 – 5.

SP: Photoshop folks can also start to hone their work. SP can help with this as well as nDesign. People who can help here too?

Rhett: 2.

SP: You only need it in a simple way. It’d be great if everyone in the class at least learned a little something about these programs so that you grow in your expertise on that level as well. It’d be helpful to set up some quick tutorials here – Photoshop, InDesign, web design, etc.

Meera: Do you envision this as concrete – what kind of form? Interested in sculpture and wondering if that would be a possibility.

SP: There’s no limit. The only limit is the limit of your imagination.

Rosa: Wanting to think more about the purpose. Impressed by how voices of those in prison are silenced and it seems like a basic idea here is to get voices heard. How could this happen exactly?

SP: This is a great place to start. It’s clear that the class is very sensitive to all of these issues. Has anyone experienced incarceration themselves or with a family member or friend. [Nobody.] It’s interesting to understand who we are because asking this question elsewhere almost every hand would go up – such as in South Central LA or among those involved in Social Justice Coalition. We lack first-hand experience and it’s worth asking why.

Jody: This is a lot to take in – partly because we didn’t prepare exactly and wanted to talk with you. There’s a lot of interest but because you’re on the phone you can’t see smiles and body language.

Anne: Students need to depart and then we’ll call back.

Class discussion:

Discomfort with idea of using the women’s stories when there’s a lack of trust

Also some concern about making art the foremost thing – forcing art as a response

Important to note that SP is committed to art as well as to prison activism and both have given her strong ideas about what’s happening.

“This is not for our gain” according to the orientation packet. We’re building relationships – not supposed to be community service project.

It may be that we want to do research in a container – like her website – and not do anything with the women or using their stories. If that’s comfortable then we can do that.

We don’t all have to do the same thing either – differences here need acknowledging. There could be one person or three people doing song and dance but not everyone has to.

Is this something that we should tell the women – that this is a research project?

We don’t yet know what we’re doing –

Some of us want to make it more specific, including specific and particular stories – making it so that it’s more relatable.

Anne – “Nothing about us without us.” Right now, however, we’re not doing something “about” yet. We can go in, be open, be present . . .

“It’s not about us right now” – we have a literacy group and we have a book club and everything else is auxiliary. These are meant to foster discussion and make connections – don’t want to start pulling from it immediately.