

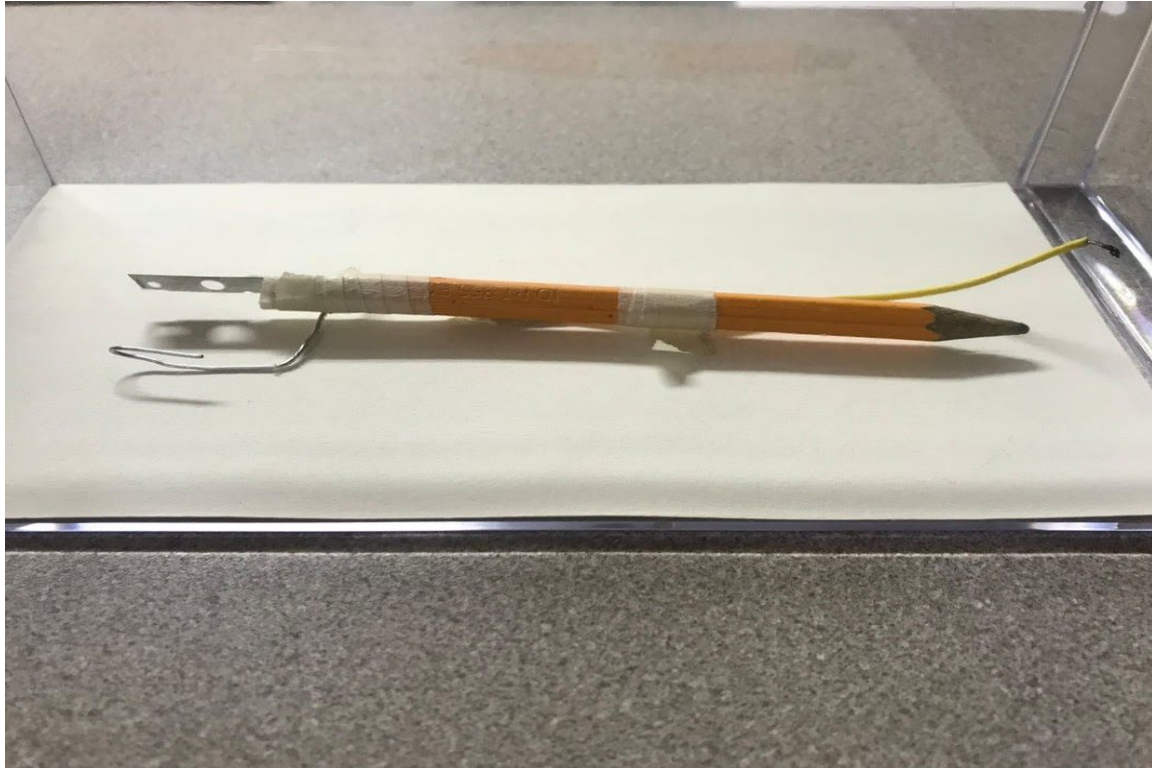
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Prison Readymades

I have several objects that I have been presenting as readymades in my UCLA art classes since the Fall of 2018. I was already aware of the infamous pisser by Marcel Duchamp when I decided to present these objects as art. However, that was not the case when I first encountered these items. The items I will write about in this essay are items I became familiar with while serving a 13 year sentence in California prisons. Although the items are altered to have a function in the reality of a prison setting, I believe the items do fall within what most artists would classify as readymades; The objects have been created for a function outside of the art world. These prison readymades are assembled from smaller objects which are mass produced in society. Now, I, as the artist, have selected the objects to be artwork instead of the purpose they are originally created for. Finally, the objects were selected as artwork to raise questions about what art can be, and how art can raise awareness of different issues in contemporary society, in this case, mass incarceration.

About two weeks after reaching what most California prisoners call "the mainline" (general population), my new cell mate asked me if I wanted to smoke a cigarette. By this time, 2003, smoking in California prisons had been banned. So, in order to light these now illegal smokes, inmates became creative, which is a characteristic found in many inmates due to the restrictions of the prison system. So my cell mate sent me over to another cell where he said I

could find a light. I went over to this other cell and asked for a light. The inmate there hands me something very similar to the object which is pictured in Figure 1.



(FIG 1.)
Title: Prison ReadyMade #2 (Prison Lighter)
Medium: Mixed Media

This was the first time that I used a prison lighter. To be honest, I was immediately more interested in this object than smoking that cigarette. My cell mate then plugged this object into the power socket, which all prison cells have, and then gently tapped the electrical wire to the front tip of the pencil generating a spark, which he used to light a piece of toilet paper on fire. Voila! We had fire! I remember saying to my cellmate, "Dude, that is not just a lighter! This is art!"

Objects like this are found in all prisons. Taken out of their environment, they may be unfamiliar to most people, but you can show anyone who has done time this object and they will be able to tell you exactly what it is. They are objects that are created to serve a specific function in a specific place. Not all inmates know how they are made. However, I was one of those inmates that became so fascinated with these objects that I turned my fascination into what prisoners call my "hustle." I learned how to make objects that prisoners needed or wanted, but were not available. This knowledge has value in prisons because the objects can be sold or traded.

Under this rationale, these objects become not much different from functional everyday objects in general society. When somebody needed a lighter, or a tattoo machine, they would usually come to me and buy it instead of learning to make it themselves. This situation can be linked to the fact that Marcel Duchamp went to a place and bought the readymade urinal he would later display as art. Although the prison lighter has to be assembled into what it is to function the way it does, I believe the fact that it can be bought and sold the same way as an ordinary liquor store lighter can be, is evidence that it is also a readymade. More evidence can be seen in the fact that these objects are assembled or created with mass produced objects that are instantly recognizable in American society, in or out of prison. Look at Figure 1 again and try to guess what the prison lighter is made of. What you see is all its made of: a pencil, a paper clip, a blade from a shaving razor, some tape, and a small piece of electrical wire.

Another readymade object that is even more recognizable to people who have not been to jail or prison, but has become notorious for its function--a shank.. This object, in Figure 2, is a commonly assembled item in jails and prisons all over the world, not just the United States.



(Fig.2)
Title: Prison Readymade #1 (Shank)
Medium: Plastic Pen, Sharpened Steel.

This object may well be the most recognizable item that is created by prisoners. The fact that everyday citizens of society can recognize what it is and what it is for does show evidence that incarceration is a fascinating subject to the public. Popular shows like “Orange is the New Black” and “60 Days In” profit from dramatizing the lives of people in prison and the horrors that await anyone unfortunate enough to have to go there. This is evidence of how the prison readymade can raise awareness about mass incarceration. The recognizability of the prison shank

and other objects in today's prison system can raise questions about a problem that has been brewing since the days of slavery.

I will not get into facts or statistics in this essay, but I will tell you another story about my days in the California prison system. In 2006, California prisons became so over-crowded that the state began shipping inmates out of state to private prisons owned by an entity known on the New York Stock Exchange as Corecivic Inc. (Corrections Corporation of America). The only reason I know this is because in 2009, I was shipped out to the state of Mississippi to do my time, see Figure 3.

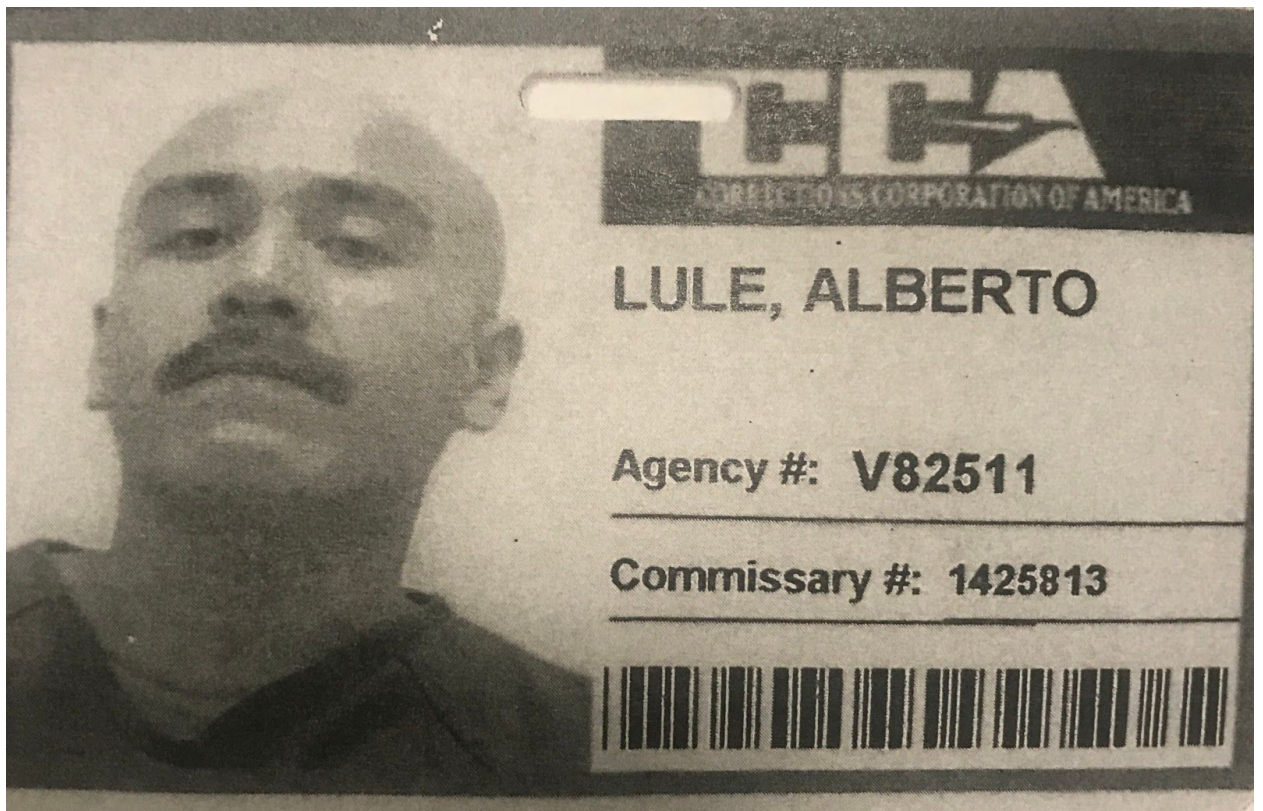


Fig. 3

Title: Prison Readymade #3 CCA I.D. (The Privatization of Correctional Institutions)

Media: Plastic

I was told I was to remain California state property, but I would resume my sentence at Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility, a subsidiary of Corrections Corporation of America. They were moving us the same way ranchers move their cattle which exemplifies where America is in regards to incarceration; America has made such a great business out of sending people to prison that the government itself now needs help with storing their property, which has opened the doors to for-profit prison companies that are publicly traded the same way as Coca Cola. I believe that Marcel Duchamp might have had his own ideas about the industrialization of Western society, and its effects on the masses of underpaid, underrepresented, and overworked people working for slave wages to create crap like mass produced urinals for “civilized” society.

One of the reasons Duchamp's Fountain is still relevant and prevalent in the art world today is that the idea of choosing an object to comment on or represent an issue in society is constantly fresh. The process of mental labor an artist must go through to achieve the complex concepts that Fountain achieves, was so deep that viewers of the work today are still scratching their head. It is these levels of mental struggle and insight that have survived beyond the initial reactions of the object. As for the artists who have chosen to see how deep this rabbit hole is, I believe there is still plenty more concepts to harvest and to mentally invest in and struggle with. As time passes, the objects and issues have changed, but the idea of choosing an object as a method to shine a light on an underrepresented group suffering abuse or neglect at the hands of another group or government, is still very current for artists working today. Art has the power to make people react in more creative ways towards sensitive issues that usually end up in shouting matches and even violence when being dealt with in politics or town hall meetings. A simple

object can symbolize a mass struggle, and even help spark a revolution. I believe the object in Figure 4. has helped create such a revolution in the art of tattooing.

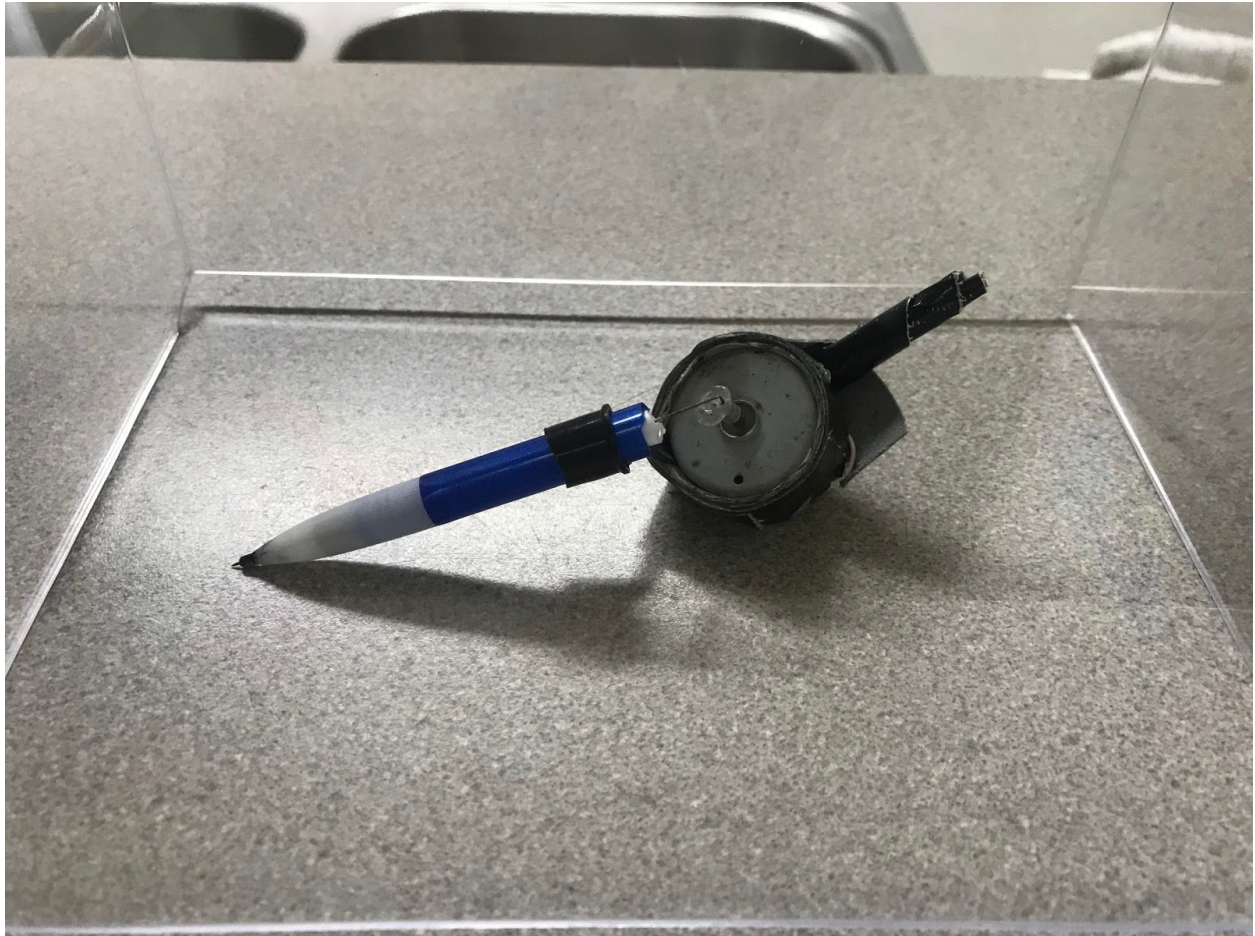


Fig.4
Title: Prison Readymade #4 Tattoo Machine
Medium: Mixed Media

I learned to tattoo in prison. Growing up in the 1980s, seeing someone with a tattoo was rare. Back then, in my mind, only the worst of the worst had tattoos. All the tattoos I have now were all done in prison. Around the year 2000, tattoos started to really explode in a way never imagined by tattoo artists. Today everyone and their mom has a tattoo. A very popular style of

tattooing is called the black and grey style or the Chicano style, and is 100% influenced by the style of tattooing that originated in California prisons, done with handmade machines very similar to the object in Figure 4. I believe this history has gone by unrecognized by many "normal" people getting tattoos that once would have been exclusively reserved for inmates on a prison yard. Taken in this context, I believe that prison tattoos fall along the lines of many other forms of art that are categorized as avant-garde.

If avant-garde refers to artists whose work is opposed to mainstream cultural values with a trenchant social edge, then prison is a place where such artwork can definitely be created. Life in prison has its own ways and rules, and if you are locked up you get acquainted to these rules very quickly, because the consequences for not following certain ways of life can literally mean your life. How much more avant-garde can you get than to be tattooed in prison by an officially convicted rule breaker? Institutionally, even doing tattoos in prison is against the rules of the prison. In fact, in California you get an extra 90 days added to your sentence if you are caught tattooing. I know because I got caught, twice. Culturally, certain tattoo designs are "off-limits" and cannot be tattooed unless certain actions are met. A lot of tattoos in prison have to be earned and cannot be bought. This aspect of not being allowed to be bought is very avant-garde. In a society where everything seems to be for sale, earning a piece of artwork seems like a crazy idea, but it is this "crazy idea," that makes prison tattoos a form of art that falls along the lines of the infamous "Fountain" by Marcel Duchamp.

The objects I have presented have been created for a function outside of the art world. These prison readymades are assembled from smaller objects which are mass produced in

general society. Now, the objects have been selected to be artwork instead of the purpose they are originally created for. Finally, the objects have been selected as artwork to raise questions about what art can be, and how art can raise awareness of issues in contemporary society.

Currently, the issue of mass incarceration in America has become big enough that items that are created in prison have become recognizable to the American mainstream, but instead of acknowledging the issue, Hollywood has decided to capitalize on it instead. Perhaps by displaying these items within in the gallery context, discussions can be brought up about how to deal with an ever growing problem. Positive discussions lead to positive answers and conclusions.

