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# Artists and Viewers DO TIME III

December 21, 2010

By [Analia Saban](#)



LAPD's "State of Incarceration Performance" at The Box Gallery, Los Angeles, CA - © John Malpede

I am getting used to Art taking me through some fantastic adventures. Just in 2010, I was inside [Julian Hoeber's "Demon Hill"](#) structure at the Hammer Museum, a project that changes our perception of gravity, climbing [Doug and Mike Starn's "Big Bambu"](#) at the Metropolitan Museum's roof or answering the question "What is Progress?" to a six-year old child who was part of [Tino Seghal's "This Progress"](#) performance at the Guggenheim Museum. Over time, one gets used to identifying that something Arty may be up. Nevertheless, this time, especially given the current state of the real state industry, when a Circuit City becomes a TJ Max, or a furniture store becomes a legal-marijuana shop, etc., it took me some time to realize that Mara McCarty's [The Box](#), an LA Art Gallery that is never afraid of taking risks with its program, was still an Art Gallery. The project: an exhibition and a performance series by the [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#) Performance Group called ["State of Incarceration"](#) directed by John Malpede.

The installation filled the space wall-to-wall with 30 bunk beds to reference [the current situation](#) of the California state prison system, where gymnasiums and cafeterias have been turned into dormitories. Almost all performers have been incarcerated, either for a day or for longer periods of time. A few of them showed signs of health problems through different skin disorders. Others were strong as bulls, showing that type of immunity that the body only gets in a hostile environment.

On a Saturday at 8 p.m., viewers were sitting wherever they could find an empty spot on some of the beds. The room got crowded, the air got dense, the performance began. Sitting on one of those beds, leaning on the cold iron bedrest, I thought, "How fun to fantasize with being in prison." Issues of imprisonment or bondage are embedded in human nature's darkness. This was an opportunity of experiencing its symbology in a controlled environment.

It is impossible to transcribe a performance that is meant to be experienced. In this case, a scripted structure holds a lot of improvisation. At the beginning, a song: "Cell life, history of incarceration began before my time." Then, an enumerating walk-through the history of the prison system from the Greeks, Siberia, South Africa, up to the North Kern State Prison which is part of the California State Prison System. Sometimes the performers sang in sync, sometimes they fell out of sync. They spoke at themselves, they counted, they argued, they fought, they told jokes, they told each other to shut up. Then silence. Then another song. Someone started to work out. Someone slept. Someone whined. Someone told a good joke. Some laughed. After an hour, my skin started to itch. I was ready to leave. But I knew that boredom, concern for germs, breathing in that dense air, etc., was part of the performance itself. I decided to stay. And later on, I asked myself once again whether it was too impolite to leave. Again, I stayed. After all, I was *locked in*. My fantasy of feeling "incarcerated" was losing its fun.

Then, an upper: some of the performers assembled; the dense air suddenly smelled funny. The inmates contributed with snacks and by using Ramen Noodles and hot water as a base ingredient, they created "The Spread," a communal meal in which everyone (even those who have not contributed) is welcome:



Analia Saban eats "The Spread" at The Box Gallery, Los Angeles, CA - © Lauren Lavitt

- 18 packages of soup Ramen noodles: beef-chicken-oriental-shrimp
- 2 bags of Cheetos chips-1 bag original flavor and 1 hot
- 1 bag tortilla chips, guacamole flavor
- 2 packs crackers, original flavor
- 1 pack of big flour tortillas
- 1 jar light mayo
- 1 jar sliced jalapeños, hot
- 1 jar sliced pickles
- 12 oz. turkey bologna
- 1 pack of small beef sausages
- 4 packs of light tuna in water
- plenty of garlic
- hot water

*The cooking is done by putting noodles, hot water and everything else in a large clear trash bag and kneading it for 20 minutes until done.*

I was not fond of the flavor but I loved the gesture. It was a reminder that there was a sense of friendship, of togetherness. For a moment, I forgot about the gallery, the performance, the germs, the time: food brought us together. Then a song. Then the

end.

The air outside felt definitely better than the air inside. I washed my hands. I was happy to be out. I thought about “freedom” and how many times it feels like a fantasy.



Tags: [freedom](#), [John Malpede](#), [Los Angeles Poverty Department Performance Group](#), [prison](#), [State of Incarceration](#), [The Box Gallery](#)

### One Response to *Artists and Viewers DO TIME III*



1. [Jimmy Gabacho](#) on December 21, 2010 at 3:29 pm

Heavy stuff. Sounds like the holidays with the in-laws.

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