

Dear Art Patrons, Museumgoers, Fellow Artists, and Citizens –

This artwork is a proposal, a form of social practice art meant to establish real and aesthetic community relationships that impact everyday life. At its center is visible tomorrows, a project designed to engage and disrupt on an individual level the social mechanisms that so often appear to destine young men and women for entry into the criminal justice system.

Proposals are not passive expressions of their author's points of view. They are made to elicit a response, positive or negative. In 1729 the Irish author Jonathan Swift, famous for Gulliver's Travels, published an essay entitled A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick. Using satire to confront widespread starvation in Ireland and hoping to jolt the Irish out of their complacency toward English rule, he suggested to the Irish that they sell their young children as food to persons of quality and fortune.

Of course, Swift never meant for his shocking proposal to be taken literally. His indignation resonates across centuries. His intent – like ours – is to rectify suffering, discrimination and social inequality. Unlike Swift's, our proposal is direct and earnest. It proposes a project we do plan to realize over the coming year. (And although you may be accustomed to supporting artworks, we are not asking you for funding.)

Instead, we welcome you to participate in an open-ended creative process. Consider the impact of this art practice on young adults' lives. Contemplate the capacity of art to help us all grapple with complex social problems that have no easy answers.

While this proposal clearly involves social engagement, your participation is not overtly directed. The realization of the proposal is something more ongoing. More like a question and an invitation, it asks you to consider the social relevance of art practice and museum culture.

Imagine the museum as a crossroads where people come together to think more deeply about life. Engage thoughtfully in the role of the museum as a site of reflection and public dialogue. Carry forth into your own life this knowledge and get involved wherever you are drawn.

When Swift lambasted heartless attitudes of the privileged in Ireland towards their less fortunate fellow countrymen, his goal was the transformation of his country, one reader at a time. Our proposal is extended to each of you, one museumgoer at a time.

The success of such a proposal depends upon the response of its audience. When someone proposes marriage, he/she submits (gets down on one knee) and hopes the answer will be yes.

We present our own modest proposal to you. We hope that your answer will be yes.

visible tomorrows

a pressing need Today our country is experiencing an extraordinary rate of imprisonment, a “mass incarceration,” so high that it affects not only the individual offender, but also society as a whole, whether measured by cost, recidivism, the failure of rehabilitation, or the impact on children and families.

The seeds of this proposed project come from a series of questions: How can a country that prioritizes freedom and democracy be the world leader in incarceration? Could this be the first generation in America to spend more on incarceration than education? Can the aesthetic focus and reflective quality of a museum be activated to build communal support and civic dialogue?

the plan and promise of a project We – artist Gregory Sale and poet TC Tolbert – propose a social and aesthetic project designed to engage at-risk young adults in the Maricopa Country area who are often without familial or communal support or who have experienced foster care, homelessness, juvenile detention, adult jails or prison. They risk being caught up in Arizona's system of criminal punishment. Many have aged out of the foster care and juvenile detention systems. The challenges they face are considerable and often invisible to the public at large and muted in public discourse.

visible tomorrows draws on previous artistic projects by Sale and on the ongoing youth and prison programs facilitated by Tolbert. This existing work addresses the issue of incarceration. Working in collaboration with Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development, we will design a series of workshops to open spaces for creating personalized visual and poetic materials that can impact the lives of these young adults. Participants will examine their personal court documents as a means to contemplate new ownership of personal narrative and an opportunity for revision. Centered around collaborative workshops and exhibitions, **visible tomorrows** aims at allowing young men and women to find ways to go beyond invisibility to self-recognition and the possibilities of imagining a new future.

our partner As a non-profit organization and resource provider, Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development serves as a multi-tiered safety net for youth ages twelve to twenty-five in Maricopa County, who are endangered by abuse, neglect and homelessness. Tumbleweed offers drop-in services and entrepreneur resource programs. Young adults can come by to take a shower, get a meal or see a case manager. They can also participate in therapy, housing, education and employment programs. For **visible tomorrows**, Tumbleweed will assist in determining the content and organization of the workshops, will provide psychological support for project participants, and will partner with us throughout the project, from selecting participants to collaborating on outcomes.

specifics A group of ten to twelve young adults ages eighteen to twenty-five will participate as both subject and makers of a body of artwork that invites a consideration and re-articulation of self in relation to official documents. The bureaucratic, governmental construction of identity is often experienced as dehumanizing. The power to obtain and possess one's personal court documents, combined with mentorship in transforming the content of these documents, encourages personal voices to emerge. For the young adults who have been in foster care or incarcerated, this artistic process invites them to transform a part of their history without completely eliminating it.

A first phase of our work will be to develop rapport with these young participants. Together with these young men and women, we will go on field trips, study relevant art and poetry examples, and undertake a series of process-based, creative workshops. The workshops will be designed for ongoing participation and will accommodate the intermittent participation of some of the young adults. The workshop sessions will begin in fall 2012.

field trips We plan to tour the museum as a group, view several co-op galleries, visit artists in their studios, and meet some street artists. The group will then spend time with selected writers, attend a poetry slam, and visit the library. We will also go to the repository of court records and obtain copies of personal court documents.

art and poetry Because the project will use artistic practices such as erasure, redrawing, and collage, we will study Robert Rauschenberg's erasure of a Willem de Kooning drawing; William Kentridge's politically-charged video of drawing, erasing and re-drawing stories of his South African homeland; and Jenny Holzer's large-scale replicas of declassified government documents with redacted secret and blacked-out names. To introduce poignant personal narrative in poetry and prose that the participants may later emulate, we will read and listen to a sampling of works from Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, and Saul Williams. We will also study the work of Tracie Morris, Giovanni Singleton, and Yedda Morrison, conceptual poets who utilize erasure to create visual poetry.

contemplation A first phase of creative work will be to critically analyze the stories that court orders, arrest records and birth certificates tell about who we are and who we can become. Questions we may jointly contemplate include:

- What do you know about what's written about you?
- What power do official or legal documents hold over us?
- What do these documents symbolize?
- Who gets to tell his or her own story? How is it told? Who writes the official version?

- What does it feel like to be visible or invisible?
- What is the difference between responsibility for another human (in this case, a minor or an offender) and ownership?
- Who wields power in language? In what ways can that change?
- How can we imagine the future?

creative process Working with duplicate copies, we will then begin a process of erasing or marking out parts of these official documents. We will leave some words or perhaps elements of an official seal, to create something new: a poem and an artwork. Maybe we will add color or an image. The parameters of our process will afford a range of individualized and dynamic outcomes.

As the project develops, we will work with these young adults and Tumbleweed staff to identify opportunities for public presentation of our work. We will discuss the possibility of compiling the completed works in a book or exhibition or placing them on permanent display at the Tumbleweed Resource Center. We will also consider an innovative t-shirt series that would be produced by TumbleTees (Tumbleweed's youth-run screen-printing business.)

evidence To demonstrate the potential of our strategies, we present two bodies of artwork within this proposal and a June screening. In one body of work, Tolbert applies the process of erasure to the proposal text that Sale drafted and uncovers an intimate poem. The erased poetry then serves as a springboard for the other components of this artistic installation. The other body of work, a suite of text-based works on paper entitled **Life is life**, was created by ten men serving life-without-parole in Pennsylvania. That project, led by Sale, involved the men writing their own obituaries and discussing popular beliefs and narratives that support the current culture of incarceration in the U.S. Their life experience and stories underscore an urgency to reimagine tomorrow.

Completing our proposal, we invite you to a screening of **It's not just black and white: a video and mediated performance** at the Phoenix Art Museum on June 20 at 7pm. The film documents the creation of an installation of black-and-white-striped walls painted last year for Sale's residency exhibition at the ASU Art Museum with the participation of inmates in a Maricopa County Sheriff's Office rehabilitation/reentry program, correction officers, and artist collaborators. Over three months, this installation at the ASU Art Museum served as an instructional platform for public forums, panel discussions, performances and social actions.