

Take a picture, tell a story

Anthony Goodman provides a commentary to the photographs by Robert Gumpert

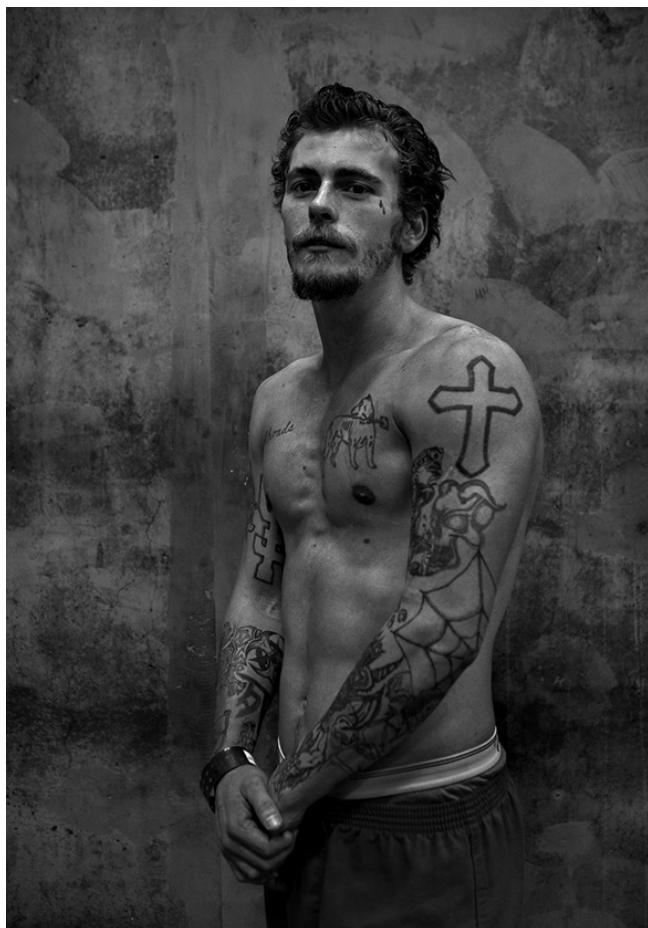
Robert Gumpert has worked as a photographer since 1974, when he documented a miner's strike. He documented a homicide detective in 1994 and was then invited to photograph California's oldest jail, 'Old Bruno', built in 1934, before new Bruno opened in August 2006. He was given permission to photograph across the six county jails (institutions for those on remand or serving short sentences of less than a year). These inmates, male and female, are held until sentenced, released on bail or have finished their trial. Those on suspicion of immigration or sex crimes can be held for some time.

He has been documenting the world of San Franciscan jails since 1994, opening them up to the wider public, whilst empowering the inmates to be themselves, without exploiting their vulnerability. Middlesex University was delighted to host an exhibition of his photographs, and they can be accessed on the internet (Take a Picture, Tell a Story, 2012).

The page opened, when accessed on 17 May 2012, with a picture of Troy Irven. There are four oral sections with his photograph. In the first, entitled 'games in prison', he describes how life goes on in prison, activities and which inmate groups can be engaged with; secondly, he

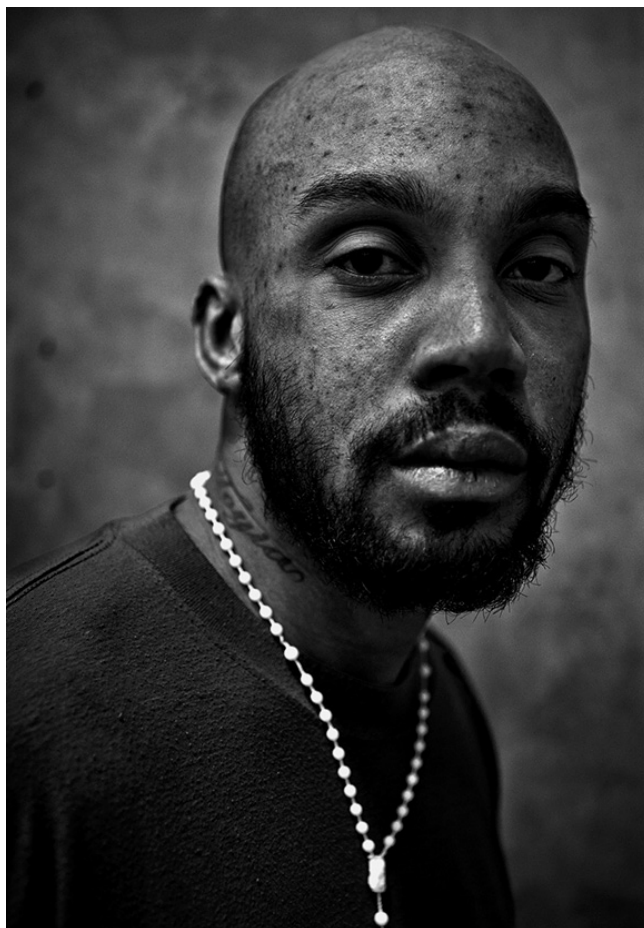
talks about his favourite food, again this leads to an understanding of his cultural background; thirdly, 'I can't do the crowds' is very revealing about how and why he finds interactions with other people difficult; fourthly, 'at the crosswords' where he talks about the rehabilitation programme he has embarked on and why he now wants to change. He describes his family background with remarkable honesty and how hard it is to get his life together.

Antoine Grays, 3 December 2011: talks about a poem he wrote about a gang. His power of language is very powerful and moving. It is a privilege to be allowed into this closed off world with the permission of the informants. They are remarkable testimonies and clearly Gumpert has an empathy and sympathy with the inmates. They in turn have the power to decide whether to take part and to decide what they want to say. For those with such little power it is an opportunity to transmit their views and share life experiences. Do have a listen; these people need not be hidden and anonymous!



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Troy Irven



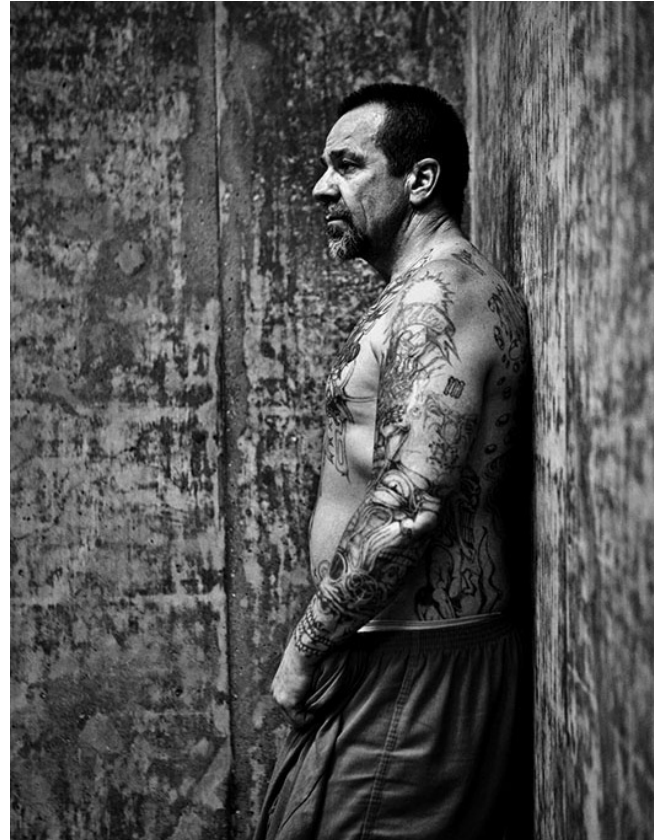
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Antoine Grays



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Amanda Veta



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Allen Hasley

The US custodial system locks up more people in numerical and percentage terms than any other country. In May 2011 the US Supreme Court ruled that overcrowding in Californian prisons had to be limited to 137.5 per cent of capacity from the 200 per cent it had been at for the previous 11 years (see Cohen, 2011). Indeed the overcrowding was so bad that it amounted to being a cruel and unusual punishment, banned by the Constitution's 8th Amendment. It is in this context that the work of Gumpert enables the most socially disadvantaged to have a voice, available for all to see and hear on the internet. Indeed their testimonies demonstrate the unfairness of society, it is hard to see what chance many had born into households where drug addiction was rife, violence was all around and many family members were in prison. The inmates are coping in a system that is being further pressurised as a result of the Supreme Court ruling. Non-violent and non-serious offenders are being reassigned from state to county jails, with their time in these institutions being expanded from one to three years. This realignment has not made

life any different for the inmates. The land of the free?

Gumpert makes anyone in the jail a simple offer, which is an exchange; photos for stories. Probably 99 per cent of those taking part are prisoners. In exchange for four prints and a copy of their recording, the inmate must tell him a story about or from their lives. The testimonies give an opportunity for those of us fortunate to have avoided such blighted opportunities to have an insight into this other world: 'The use of narrative accounts is a solution in how to translate knowing into telling' (Elliott, 2005).

Gumpert described what he does as follows:

I've always loved the interplay between words and photos. Together they can be more than the sum of their parts. In a sense I've been working on 'Take A Picture, Tell A Story' my whole career.

It has been said that photography and music are related mediums. I think that is true. What I've missed in photography is the 'hotness' of music, the way performer and audience directly

participate with one another. Because participants of the 'Take a Picture, Tell a Story' project are also the main audience, the work has a bit of music's 'hotness'. Prisoners use the images to personalise, humanise, their cell space. Through the website, exhibits, and publications, the photos and stories also work to humanise prisoners sometimes. To say, but for the grace of god, there go I. To make the case that a society is judged by how it treats its least wanted and perhaps we are found...lacking. ■

Anthony Goodman is Professor of Criminal and Community Justice Studies, Middlesex University. **Robert Gumpert** has been a photographer since 1974.

To find out more about Take a Picture, Tell a Story, visit: <http://takeapicturetellastory.com/>

References

- Cohen, A. (2011), 'The Supreme Court Declares California's Prisons Overcrowded', *The Atlantic*, 23 May.
- Elliott, J. (2005), *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, London: Sage.