

NATURAL LIFE



NATURAL LIFE, PROPOSAL

The following is a proposal for the gallery exhibition of Natural Life, a two-channel video installation.

The piece consists of a two-channel projection, constituting an enclosed corner within the larger gallery space.

The corner is arrived at through a defined exhibition area, which itself is designed to embody portions of the information (statistical; historical) that the video project depicts.



I. PROJECT SYNOPSIS

What is the project about?

Natural Life, an experimental documentary installation produced in conjunction with the legal efforts of The Law Offices of Deborah LaBelle (LODL), challenges inequities in the juvenile justice system by depicting the stories of six youths who received the most severe sentence available for convicted adults--being sentenced to die in prison (i.e. given a sentence of "natural life" or "life without parole"). These stories are presented against the overlapping contexts of social bias, neglect, apprehension and alienation¹.

Fear of juvenile crime has in recent years violated the fundamental ideas upon which juvenile court rests, and specifically, the belief in children's unique capacity for rehabilitation and change. State law makers and the federal government have more and more frequently opted to resort to harsher punitive adult models, demanding that children be put on trial as if they were as culpable, liable and informed as adults who commit similar crimes².

Forty-one states in the U.S. elect to enforce a sentence of life without parole (natural life) on youth under the age of eighteen. The sentencing system for youth is especially vulnerable to a challenge where over half of the youth did not, themselves, commit a homicide, and at no point in the process was their youthful status and lesser culpability taken into account³.

Focusing on the extreme case of Michigan's legal system, the project aims to portray the ripple effect that the juvenile justice system's imbalance has had on the lives not only of the incarcerated youth and the victims of their crime, but on their family members, on law enforcement and legal officials and on the community at large.

¹ See also Bringing Human Rights Home, Praeger Press 2009, Vol. III, Chapter 5, Ensuring Rights for All: Realizing Human Rights for Prisoners, LaBelle, Deborah.

² "Prosecuting Juveniles in Adult Court, An Assessment of Trends and Consequences", Malcolm C. Young and Jenni Gainsborough, January 2000. [Http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/sp/juvenile.pdf](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/sp/juvenile.pdf)

³ "Prosecuting Juveniles in Adult Court, An Assessment of Trends and Consequences", Malcolm C. Young and Jenni Gainsborough, January 2000. [Http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/sp/juvenile.pdf](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/sp/juvenile.pdf)



I. PROJECT SYNOPSIS

The project's visual approach:

Natural Life extracts from the database of written interviews conducted by LODL, information on six individual inmates' stories. These stories, freshly recorded, interwoven and told from multiple angles, form an array of voices varying in age, gender, economic background and race. The project's aim is to create a loosely structured web of conflicting or differing views in which, for instance, the voice of a victim's sister who has, over time, formed an intense bond with the killers of her brother, is contrasted with comments by angry, unforgiving police agents or frustrated family members.

For that end we have videotaped close to fifty interviews with individuals who were involved with the crime, the arrest and the sentencing of the six featured inmates. Among them are judges, lawyers, police officers, reporters, wardens, teachers, child psychiatrists, legal experts, members of families of the incarcerated as well as of the victims' families; all this alongside extensive recorded phone conversations with the inmates themselves.

These interviews were coupled with staged and documented scenes from court and from the main characters' childhood and crime setting. That is, critical past moments from the stories (e.g. the arrest, the sentencing) were reenacted by the now older parent or brother at the original site of the event.

Lastly, to compensate for the legal restriction on videotaping the incarcerated juveniles in prison, we located an abandoned prison in Michigan, and with a group of youth actors and an ex-convict who assisted in directing them, shot dozens of hours of detailed images depicting the day-to-day experience of life in prison as told by the interviewees. Thus an additional layer--images depicting a prison inhabited by kids only--is woven into the array of recorded stories.



I. PROJECT SYNOPSIS

By injecting fiction (hypothesis) into the documentary format, we want to propose alternative interpretations of the documented facts, and to destabilize and question the public version of the crime as well as its inevitability.

The project thus attempts to transgress and complicate the tension between fabrication and record, guilt and innocence, accident and intent, as well as the gap between acting and manifesting, projected and recalled worlds. We hope that the formal crossing over between staged scenes and documentary film will make tangible and felt the actual lives, stories, legal structures and statistics that underlie the current state of youth serving life without parole in the U.S. We are pursuing through it a desire to engage in a public conversation that makes tangible claims and has immediate bearing, as action, on personal and political realities.



II. GALLERY INSTALLATION

THE VIDEO

As described above, the installation version of Natural Life consists of a two-channel projection forming -- or contained within -- an enclosed corner.

The enclosed corner constitutes a cell-like isolated viewing area. All but the projection-lit corner of the cell is painted black. Two custom raw-steel benches are positioned in the corner mirroring the screen, thus replicating the floor-plan of a cell while providing seating for an intimate number of viewers at a time.

THE OBJECTS

A cast of five sets of the standard issue bedding (a pillow and a bedroll) given to prisoners upon their arrival to the facility, are arranged on raw-steel pedestals in the area leading to the video projection. The sets, scaled down to kid size and made of a stack of crumbling and thin sheets of material resembling deposits of rock, are cast in concrete. Individually marked with the date of birth and the date of arrest of each of the five prisoners featured in the documentary, they thus delineate the brief time the inmates spent in the free world.

THE WALLS

The walls in the exhibition area leading to the viewing area are uniquely designed to embody portions of the information (statistical; historical) that the video project depicts (see description of wall design below.)



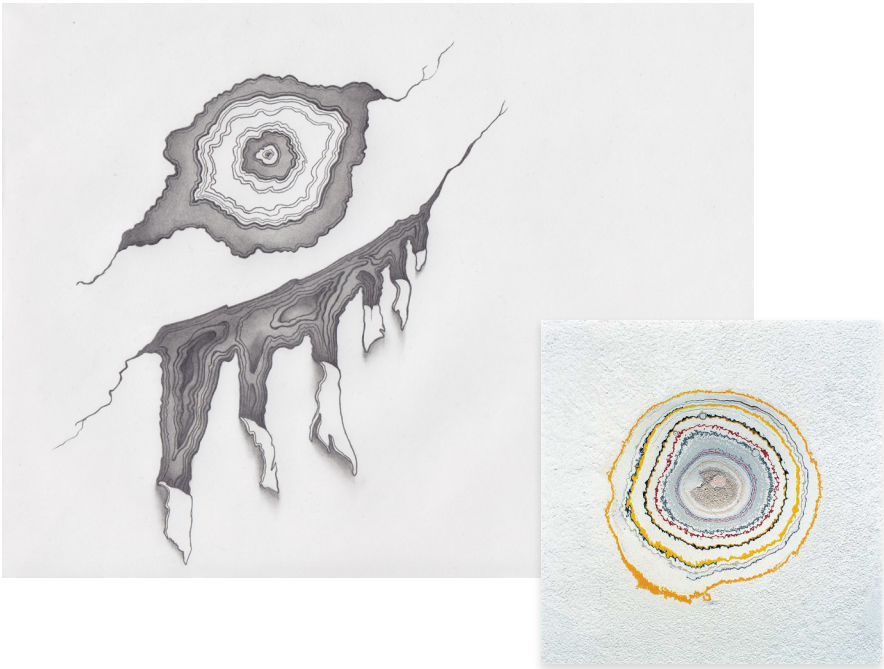
II. GALLERY INSTALLATION



STATISTICS

Several sections of the gallery walls appear to be ruptured by peeling layers of different color paint. These layers of paint are designed, using thin, laser cut material, to generate two complex diagrams. The first peel radiates from the center. Each color exposed within this circular shape depicts statistical information pertaining to the distribution of the inmates' age of incarceration. The second peel spills diagonally and down, with each large vertical coat of paint representing information about the race distribution of incarcerated youth in the U.S.

The diagrams are deciphered and explained within a handout or a booklet available to the visitors at the entrance to the gallery.



NATURAL LIFE



Black

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White

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Latino

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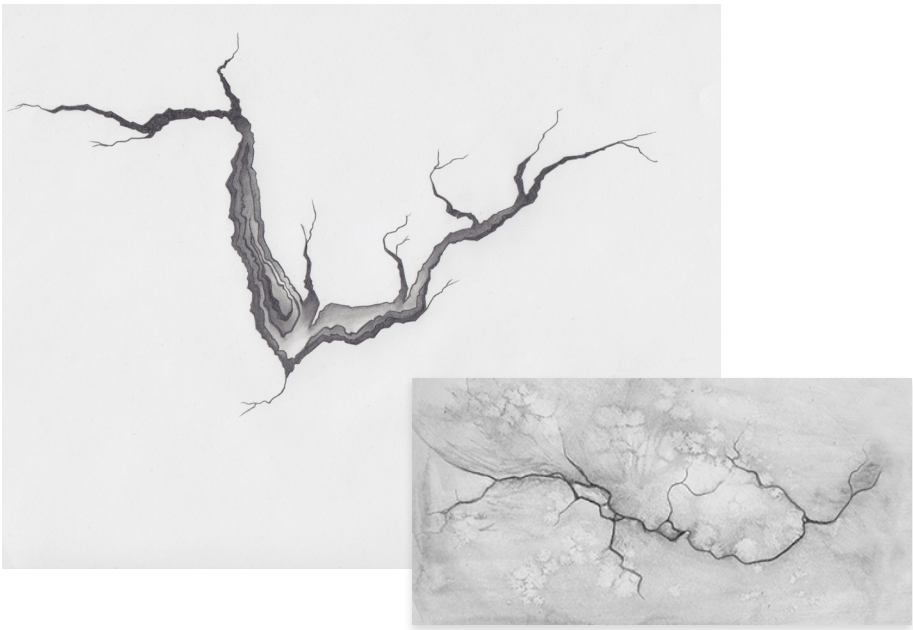
Other

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HISTORY

Similar to the statistical information, the historical outline of relevant legislation changes is also depicted through designed signs of entropy in the form of cracks along the walls. These cracks, constructed by thin material inserted into the wall, branch out to describe the evolution of the regulations that lead to the current high number of youth incarcerated for life without parole in the U.S. The path depicted by the cracks visually sketches the decline of the laws protecting juveniles beginning in 1988 and peaking in 1996, as well as the more recent restoration and rise, from 2005 and on, of legal support for juvenile rights. Similar to the peeled paint forms, the cracks are explained by a written code that unpacks the design and contextualizes it. This latter, again, is a part of a handout or a booklet available to the visitors at the entrance to the gallery.



NATURAL LIFE



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1988-1996

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1996-2005

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2005-Present

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OUTREACH

Our goal is to insert the project into the midst of the argument and impact public opinion on the issue directly. We intend to have the piece distributed to the larger community, to be screened to juveniles serving the sentence, family members of victims, community organizations, criminal justice advocates, educators, law enforcement and prison reentry programs, as well as at conferences, high schools and university settings, museums and galleries nationally and globally.



Images from a panel discussion hosted by Edwin gallery, Detroit, during a preview exhibition of Natural Life, Fall 2013.

III. RESUME AND BIOS OF KEY PERSONNEL AND ADVISERS:

Tirtza Even

Producer/Director/Camera/Editor

A practicing video artist and documentary maker for the past fifteen years, Even has produced both linear and interactive documentary video work representing the less overt manifestations of complex and sometimes extreme social/political dynamics in specific locations (e.g. Palestine, Turkey, Spain, the U.S. and Germany, among others).

Even's work has appeared at the Museum of Modern Art, NY, at the Whitney Biennial, the Johannesburg Biennial, as well as in many other festivals, galleries and museums in the United States, Israel and Europe, and has been purchased for the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art (NY), the Jewish Museum (NY), the Israel Museum (Jerusalem), among others. She has been an invited guest and featured speaker at numerous conferences and university programs, including the Whitney Museum Seminar series, the Digital Flaherty Seminar, Art Pace annual panel, ACM Multimedia, The Performance Studies International conference (PSI), The Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts conference (SLSA) and others.

Currently an Associate Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Even has been teaching at the School of Art & Design, the University of Michigan, at New York University, at Columbia University, NY, and at a number of other colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad, and has published articles about video art history and theory in Israel and the United States.

Ivan Martinez

Installation Space Designer

Ivan Martinez is an artist and designer from Miami, Florida, now residing in Brooklyn, NY. His work examines the commonly recognizable typologies found within our built environment in order to reassess those objects as a framework for storytelling, observation, and gathering. The resulting work has the ability to be altered and repositioned which consequently embeds, at times literally, artifacts of the transformative and functional history of the object.

Ivan's main interest is in the implicit social and political language embodied within these objects. When utilized, his work adapts, disappears, or continues to be built as an effect of the user's/ viewers' engagement with them. Personal memory, the public domain, and communal archive are explored in an effort to recognize the ethos of specific locale.

After receiving a BFA at Florida State University in printmaking and photography he became a designer and art director for various communication and media agencies in Miami and New York. In 2012 Ivan graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an MFA in Design for Emerging Technologies. As an artist he has shown internationally, investigating the relationship between objects, narrative, and technology.

III. RESUME AND BIOS OF KEY PERSONNEL AND ADVISERS:

Deborah LaBelle

Consultant and Resource Provider

Deborah LaBelle is an attorney, professor, writer and advocate who focuses on the application of human rights for marginalized communities. She has been lead counsel in over a dozen class actions that have successfully challenged policies affecting the treatment of incarcerated men, women and juveniles and their families.

Ms. LaBelle is a Senior Soros Justice Fellow and, the first American recognized by Human Rights Watch as a Human Rights Monitor. In addition to her private practice, she is director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Juvenile Life Without Parole Initiative. Her publications include *Women at the Margins, Neglect, Punishment and Resistance* (Haworth, 2002). *Ensuring Rights for All: Realizing Human Rights for Prisoners in Bringing Human Rights Home* (Praeger Press, 2008); and *Bringing Human Rights Home to the World of Detention* (Columbia Human Rights Law Review Article, Vol. 40.1, Fall 2008).

Ms. LaBelle is a recipient of Michigan's State Bar Champion of Justice Award, recognized as one of Michigan's top lawyers and received the National Trial Lawyer of the Year Award from the Public Interest Foundation (2008) and National Lawyer Guild's Law for the People Award (2008). She received the Wade Hampton McCree Jr. Award for the advancement of social justice presented by the Federal Bar (2009) and the Susan B. Anthony Award from the University of Michigan (2010).

Oded Zehavi

Music Composer

Oded Zehavi's music runs the gamut from atonality to neo-romanticism and has won international accolades from both audiences and critics for its appealing and emotional content. His tonal language draws from music traditions of the Middle East (Jewish and Arabic), European art song and contemporary techniques, exploring the fusion of western and ethnic musical heritages.

Scholarly pursuits include a recent sabbatical as a research fellow at the University of Michigan's Frankel Institute, investigating ancient and contemporary applications of the shofar as a Jewish ritual object. He is frequently invited to lecture on Israeli and Jewish music at conferences in Israel, Europe and America.

He has received numerous prizes and commissions for his works and has been performed by renowned conductors and ensembles such as Zubin Mehta, Valery Gergiev, David Robertson, Israel Philharmonic, London Philharmonic and Kirov Opera Orchestra in some of the world's great concert halls, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Festspielhaus and Musikverein.

Zehavi is a professor of Music at the University of Haifa, Israel.

III. RESUME AND BIOS OF KEY PERSONNEL AND ADVISERS:

Yoni Goldstein

Camera Person

Yoni Goldstein is an Israeli born, Chicago based filmmaker, cinematographer, and editor whose work investigate multi-sited transects of body, conflict, and diaspora. Developing multilayered approaches to the documentary, Yoni has gone on to work on a number of socially critical film projects: from examining hybridized healing practices in the Northern Andes (“La Curación”) to diaristic journeys through post-revolution Lithuania (“Cousin Kasyte”) to windows of dialogue in the Palestinian / Jewish Diaspora (“Zeitouna”). His films have circulated in numerous regional, national, and international festivals, conferences, and galleries. In 2009, he received his masters from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in Film, Video, and New Media.

In 2003, Yoni Goldstein opened Standing Point Films, an independent film and video production house. He and Meredith Zielke envision, design, and lead this organization from the ground up to develop independent and experimental media projects. Since its inception, Standing Point Films has produced and supported over thirty films and video projects and continues to operate as a critical documentary and video art production group.