

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION INVESTS IN ARTISTS ADDRESSING  
THE EPIDEMIC OF MASS INCARCERATION**

*Ten Artist as Activist Fellows receive two-year grants for projects that imagine a world without prisons*



Los Angeles Poverty Department, "Chasing Monsters from Under the Bed," 2015. Photo by Michael Blaze.  
Courtesy the artist and Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

**New York, NY** (June 29, 2016) – The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation announced today the recipients of its 2016 *Artist as Activist Fellowship*—a two-year grant program designed to support independent artists and artist collectives who tackle important social challenges through their creative practice. The 2016 *Artist as Activist* Fellows—**Maria Gaspar, The Graduates, Titus Kaphar, Los Angeles Poverty Department, Jeremy Robins/Echoes of Incarceration, Favianna Rodriguez, Paul Rucker, El Sawyer, jackie sumell, and Shontina Vernon**—will each develop projects, often in partnership with community-based organizations, correctional facilities, and other stakeholders, that address the intersections between race, class, and mass incarceration.

Located in cities across the U.S.—Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Seattle—the 2016 Fellows will investigate several topics germane to the multifaceted issue of mass incarceration: juvenile detention and the impact on youth with incarcerated parents, the struggles around ‘re-entry’ for former prisoners, the connection between mass incarceration and immigration, the psychological effects of solitary confinement, the economics behind the prison industrial complex, and beyond.

“Persistent, systemic challenges like mass incarceration require more than temporary policy fixes, but also a transformation of our values and cultural practices, which is the terrain of artists,” noted **Risë Wilson, director**



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**of philanthropy for the Rauschenberg Foundation.** “Artists also have much to add to the process of practical problem solving—bringing creative lenses that expand our sense of possible approaches and solutions—and yet they are under-tapped resources in the ‘business’ of creativity.”

With 2.2 million people currently in U.S. prisons or jails, the growth rates of this industry combined with the disproportionate number of people of color locked up—58% of inmates are African American or Hispanic despite only representing one quarter of the U.S. population—mass incarceration is one of the most pressing issues of our time<sup>1,2</sup>. In communities of color, it has reached epidemic status as 1 in 3 black men can expect to be imprisoned at some point in their lifetime, and African Americans currently account for more than half of the youth admitted to state prisons across the nation<sup>3</sup>.

Mass incarceration has many causes and symptoms. More than the product of individual choices, it is a systemic issue that has been cited as The New Jim Crow, with inextricable ties to slavery and the U.S. economy, which from inception has pivoted on racial hierarchy and a permanent underclass<sup>4</sup>. Once in the correctional system, prisoners and former inmates find that existing barriers to affordable housing, gainful employment, equitable education, or the fundamental right to vote are compounded, if not stripped altogether. Extending far beyond the sheer number of people who have been locked away, mass incarceration is a complex issue interwoven with the infrastructure of inequity in our contemporary society. The Rauschenberg Foundation believes that artists are key partners in generating lasting social, political, and economic change—offering a unique set of interdisciplinary skills that complement the expertise of civic leadership and policymakers. Through the collaborative and participatory nature of their practice, artists are able to draw upon the wisdom and experiences of various communities, traditions, and ways of being to engage a broader public and bring fresh thinking to complex issues like mass incarceration. Perhaps most significantly, artists can reveal the true stakes involved by putting a human face to the overwhelming statistics that threaten to anesthetize the issue.

The Foundation identified this year’s cohort through a competitive, nationwide call for proposals to U.S.-based artists. From an initial pool of 228, these 10 artists and artist collectives were selected to receive support ranging from \$50,000 - \$100,000 over two years. In addition to investing a total of \$775,000 in grant dollars in the 2016 *Artist as Activist* Fellows, the Foundation will convene the group on their residency campus in Captiva, Florida, so that the artists can exchange strategies and connect to leadership in the fields of art and justice, expanding their network of allies and partners. Through mediums as varied as film, performance, radio, public art, music, and theater, the projects led by the 2016 grantees—many of whom have been previously incarcerated or impacted by the prison system—will share the stories and experiences of people directly affected by mass incarceration. In doing so, they will bring greater visibility and new insights to an issue that is typically shrouded behind prison walls, while sparking new dialogues around both prison reform and prison abolition.

**Christy MacLear, CEO of the Rauschenberg Foundation,** adds: “The Foundation’s support of artists and creative thinkers who are not afraid to defy the status quo directly stems from Rauschenberg’s own artistic practice. During an era of heightened activism in the 1960s, Rauschenberg was an early pioneer in viewing

<sup>1</sup> The Sentencing Project (<http://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Facts-About-Prisons.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> NAACP *Criminal Justice Fact Sheet* (<http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010)



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artists as activists. Through his art, Rauschenberg collaborated with countries around the world, took risks in the issues he supported and demonstrated his fervent belief that artists can enact change. This program stems directly from that legacy and addresses the issues of our contemporary society through Rauschenberg's own approach to living in the gap between art and life."

#### **List of 2016 Artist as Activist Fellows:**

**Maria Gaspar** (based in Chicago) will produce *RADIOACTIVE: Stories from Beyond the Wall*, a series of radio broadcasts and visual projections on the largest jail in the country—Cook County Jail in Chicago. Through connecting those who live outside its walls with those on the "inside," the project aims to dissolve, transgress, and collectively reimagine the brutal 96-acre division.

**The Graduates** (based in Louisiana), a performance ensemble comprised of former members of the 20-year-old Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women Drama Club, will draw on centuries of Black resistance in Louisiana to build awareness of mass incarceration and racial injustice. The group will perform monologues and mount public art installations that reflect how many citizens are missing from their home communities.

**Titus Kaphar** (based in New York City and New Haven) will build on his visually arresting, semi-autobiographical investigation of the criminal justice system through paint, tar, and canvas. Working with community partners, Kaphar will employ New Haven youth to help finish The Jerome Project's new multi-media extension, paying forward his own escape from incarceration through the discovery of his artistic talents.

**Los Angeles Poverty Department's** (based in Los Angeles) *Public Safety FOR REAL* articulates an alternate conception of public safety that critiques the "injustice system" while changing the narrative about the homeless community in Skid Row. Playing on the term and function of a Business Improvement District (BID), the other LAPD will devise informal community policing vehicles that maintain respect for the wellbeing of their Skid Row neighbors.

**Jeremy Robins/Echoes of Incarceration** (based in Brooklyn) provides training in documentary filmmaking and activism for youth with incarcerated parents. The collective will expand the footage they have assembled to date into a full-length documentary exploring the impact of mass incarceration on families.

**Favianna Rodriguez** (based in Oakland) will convene artists alongside movement organizers and activists to explore the intersections between mass incarceration and immigrant detention with the goal of devising a cultural strategy that envisions a world free of prisons.

**Paul Rucker** (based in Seattle) combines original cello compositions with data visualization and other media to illustrate the disproportional representation of young people of color in juvenile detention, the economics of the prison-industrial complex, the explosive growth of the US prison system, and the relationships among these trends.

**El Sawyer** (based in Philadelphia) is creating and disseminating curricula for agencies that serve the inmate and ex-offender population to accompany screenings of his 2013 film *Pull of Gravity*, which highlights the struggle of re-entry for men returning home from prison.



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**jackie sumell** (based in New Orleans) facilitates unexpected exchanges between persons subjected to indefinite solitary confinement and those of us living on the “outside.” Her project, *Solitary Gardens*, enlists communities to create public, green spaces designed by men and women currently in solitary, while simultaneously offering workshops and curricula for all of us to envision a landscape without prisons.

**Shontina Vernon** (based in Seattle) uses creative writing, music, and theatre to help youth, women, and people of color locate the power of their own voices. Based on an alternative-to-incarceration program for young people in King County, Seattle, *Visionary Justice StoryLab* is an interdisciplinary arts “collaboratory” in which artists and community organizers use media and performance to surface young peoples’ narratives of systemic oppression.

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#### **About the Artist as Activist Program**

*Artist as Activist* provides game-changing resources to artists of all disciplines, including visual, performing, media, design, and other creative professionals, who address important global challenges through their creative practice. Since its pilot in 2012, the program has invested nearly \$1.6M in 35 artists, collectives, and organizations working at the intersection of art and activism. For more information about the program, grantees, and fellows, visit: <http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/grants/art-grants/artist-as-activist>.

#### **About the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation**

The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation fosters the legacy of the life, artistic practice, and philanthropic practice of one of the most important artists of the 20th century. Through exhibitions, scholarship, grants, and a residency program, the Foundation furthers Rauschenberg’s belief that art can change the world, while ensuring that his singular achievements and contributions continue to have global impact and resonance with contemporary artists. <http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/>

Join the conversation on art, activism, and mass incarceration with the Foundation via Twitter [@RRauschenberg](https://twitter.com/RRauschenberg), Facebook [@RauschenbergFoundation](https://www.facebook.com/RauschenbergFoundation), and on Instagram [@rauschenbergfoundation](https://www.instagram.com/rauschenbergfoundation) with the hashtags #ArtistasActivist, #RRgrants, and #RauschenbergFoundation.

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