

Introduction to *Visual Arts Research*
 Special Issue, *Body Cam: The Visual*
Regimes of Policing

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On Wednesday, January 6, 2021, the world gawked as a nearly all-White mass of so-called protesters, many openly carrying law enforcement identification as well as battle-grade weaponry, violently entered the U.S. Capitol with almost no state interference. While one Capitol police officer was killed, and another assaulted by a man holding a pro-police “thin blue line” flag, others greeted the masquerading marauders amiably and posed for selfies, all enabled by the brazen provocations of a few officials and the noteworthy inaction of numerous others.

While the events of the January 6 insurrection will be analyzed for years to come, the image of the police, entangled within this violence, serves as a starting point for this special issue. From the origin of the term “police” up to the present day, the police as a concept has designated much more (and much less) than a specific group of public officers tasked with maintaining civic order. From 19th-century taxonomic archives to contemporary forms of electronic and online monitoring, alongside the practices of cognitive and academic testing that emerged from eugenics, the image of a harmonious society has relied on the policing of those who must be excluded.

Meanwhile, artists have contributed to a visual culture of the police by critiquing practices of exclusion. A vast body of artwork grapples with the role of the police, from Honoré Daumier’s lithographs of police brutality in 19th-century Paris, to recent projects such as visual artist Dread Scott’s lynching banners. By highlighting the work of art educators, art historians, activists, and artists responding to modern and contemporary policing practices, this special issue hopes to tease out aspects of the aesthetic aura that surrounds the idea of order, embodied in state agents whose legitimate use of force is practically unlimited.

Origin of the Word “Police” and the Aesthetics of Public Order

As feudalism collapsed in late 15th-century Europe, the mechanisms in place for maintaining the public order shifted in response (Neocleous, 2000). Policing projects emerged in newly formed towns to address a rise in perceived social disorders within a labor pool that was now more mobile and economically sufficient. The etymology of “police” finds its origins in this historical moment; from Middle French comes the word “police,” referring to “organized government, civil administration” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Over the next 3 centuries, the meaning of “police,” as the civil force ensuring the maintenance of the public order, ossified in European societies in their negotiation of the powers and responsibilities of the “enlightened” state. The English jurist William Blackstone, in his 1769 *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, provided a description of the purpose of the police that portends later policing practices such as broken-windows policing, noting that police maintain “the due regulation and domestic order of the kingdom,” through “the minutiae of social life” (as cited in Schrader, 2019). Consequently, when the two British models of modern policing—the paramilitary Royal Irish Constabulary (1822) and the unarmed, civilian-controlled Metropolitan Police of London (1829)—were established in the early 19th century, the social necessity of a police force to maintain order had already been fabricated both in practice and ideologically.

The emergence of modern police forces was also tied to shifting ideas about crime. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the assessment of crime was transformed; formerly a social evil, crime was now viewed as socially, environmentally, and/or biologically produced. Through relations of domination and exclusion, particular bodies and desires were medically scrutinized and legally criminalized. Modern police forces were tasked with scanning and tracking specific types of bodies to detect and predict potential crimes, and still are to this day.

The aesthetics of the modern police drew inspiration from other arms of government. The image of the uniformed police officer, or even the abstracted conjuring of the police as a “thin blue line” in the United States, reveals a historical link between the visual politics of the police and a modern nation-state’s armed forces. The symbolic effectiveness of the standardized military uniform established a precedent for 19th-century police forces across the globe. Modern police forces derive power and legitimacy in no small part from the reliance on the uniform as a visual marker. The uniform’s efficacy depends on a given society’s recognition of the uniform-wearer as belonging to an exclusionary group with a distinct social status (Joseph & Alex, 1972). The authority of the police in the maintenance of the public order is contingent on the visual negotiation between the officer as the wearer of the police uniform and an individual’s acceptance of the uniformed officer as the arbiter of the law—from the dark blue paramilitary-style uniforms of

London’s “bobbies” and the New York City Police Department to the colonial khaki uniforms still worn in decolonized nation-states. That exchange is further negotiated by the various weapons carried by the police. Even the unarmed Metropolitan Police of London were outfitted with lethal billy clubs to execute their patrols. Since then, police have turned to weapons such as Tasers, pepper spray, and collapsible batons in addition to firearms in their maintenance of order.

The aura of this uniformed police officer—a public servant who, through the uniform with its lethal weaponry, embodies the institution and demands society’s respect—is exemplary of the aestheticization of politics (Benjamin, 1955). Police power and legitimacy are therefore performative, inviting a public participation that manifests not only in everyday encounters, but also as visual culture objects, such as a collectible postcard of the mounted Staten Island police from the early 20th century (Figure 1). The six mounted officers in dress uniforms posing confidently in front of a public park invite the purchaser and recipient of the vibrantly tinted postcard to accept Staten Island’s police as a welcome urban presence.

Given modern police forces’ reliance on visual markers like uniforms as signs of power and legitimacy, social critiques that co-opt such markers have played a critical role in exposing the fabricated representation of the police as a social necessity. George Luks (Figure 2), for example, needs only to present his viewers with an image of two anonymous uniformed officers to convey his criticism of the NYPD’s efforts to regulate traffic in New York at the turn of the 20th century (Luks, 1899). The celebrated member of the Ashcan School was hardly the first

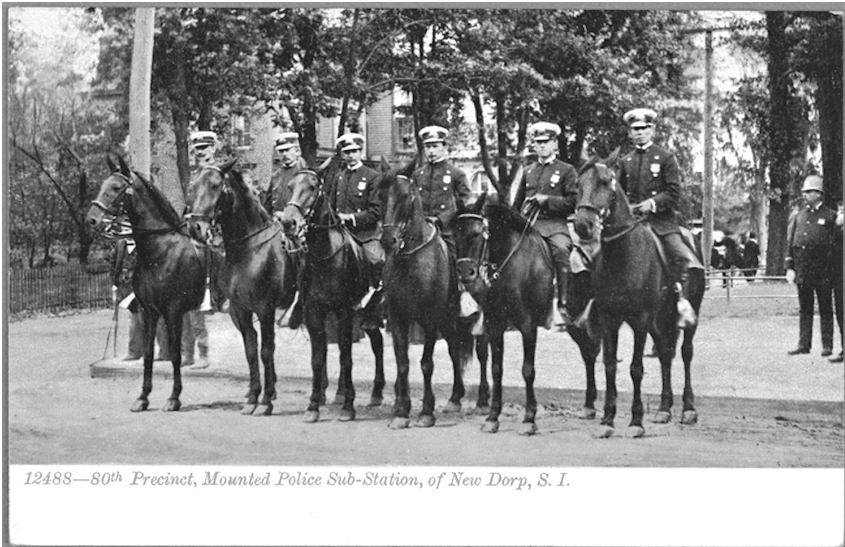


Figure 1. 12488—80th Precinct, Mounted Police Sub-Station, of New Dorp, Staten Island [six officers in dress uniform posed on horses], early 20th century, from [the New York Public Library](#).



Figure 2. Luks (1899).

and certainly not the last visual artist who has recognized the desired symbolism of the police uniform and attempted to deny or impugn its authority through art. Indeed, the visual arts have played a critical role in the production of a counter-narrative about modern policing from the 19th century onward. Art's capacity to act as witness—an ontological function intrinsic to mediums like photography or film—has drawn the public's attention to acts of police brutality and, more generally, the violence of the modern police state itself (Figure 3).

Racism and the Practices of the “Global Policeman”

The history of modern police forces is also contoured by a history of racism. The 17th-century slave codes established in French and British colonial space to define enslaved Africans as property were reconfigured in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries with the formation of slave patrols to police the movement of Black bodies (Robinson, 2017). Colonists and settlers' economic reliance on chattel slavery engendered a way of seeing race that operated through the observation, classification, and coercion of racialized others. The abolition of slavery ended the need for slave patrols, but the establishment of police forces in southern states after the Civil War drew from these patrols' legacy of racialized surveillance.

This desire to police property and territory more broadly, was also at the heart of efforts to form police forces in other colonial spaces; the paramilitary Royal Irish Constabulary, for example, was founded to ensure the protection of

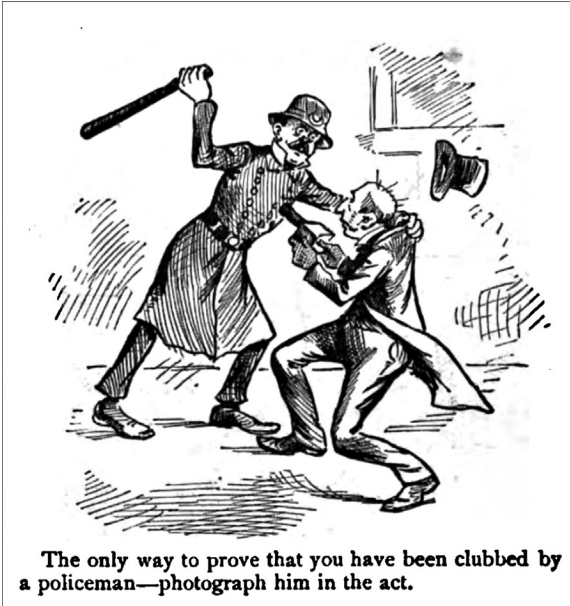


Figure 3. Opper (1884, p. 277).

British colonial interests in Ireland. A version of “the Irish model” was exported to Britain’s other colonies, and a system of trans-imperial policing developed in the 19th and 20th centuries wherein policing practices implemented in one colony were adopted in another (Anderson & Killingray, 1991). However, while local peoples were recruited to colonial police forces, the task of overseeing forces fell largely to White Europeans, ensuring that race was central to the organization of the colonial policing institution. An 1885 albumen print of Indian officers in British colonial Burma (now Myanmar), taken by the colonial photographer Felice Beato, visualizes the racial hierarchy, documenting Indian police at attention behind and subservient to British superior officers (Figure 4).

As nationalist calls for decolonization swept across colonies in Africa, Asia, and Europe in the first half of the 20th century, the inadequacies of the colonial policing enterprise in the maintenance of an imperial order were brought to light (Anderson & Killingray, 1992). Colonial police forces were ill-equipped to handle nationalist politics and widespread insurgency; they responded to this deficit by further militarizing. Nevertheless, policing as a political enterprise was refined during this period; the police directly targeted anti-colonial activists and organizations following intelligence-gathering missions. Decolonization was brutal at times, with colonial police forces taking a violent approach to the suppression of those who opposed colonial rule. In British colonial Kenya, for example, the police played a significant role in the capture and forced detention of the Kikuyu, Kenya’s largest ethnic group, whose lands had been taken during colonization.

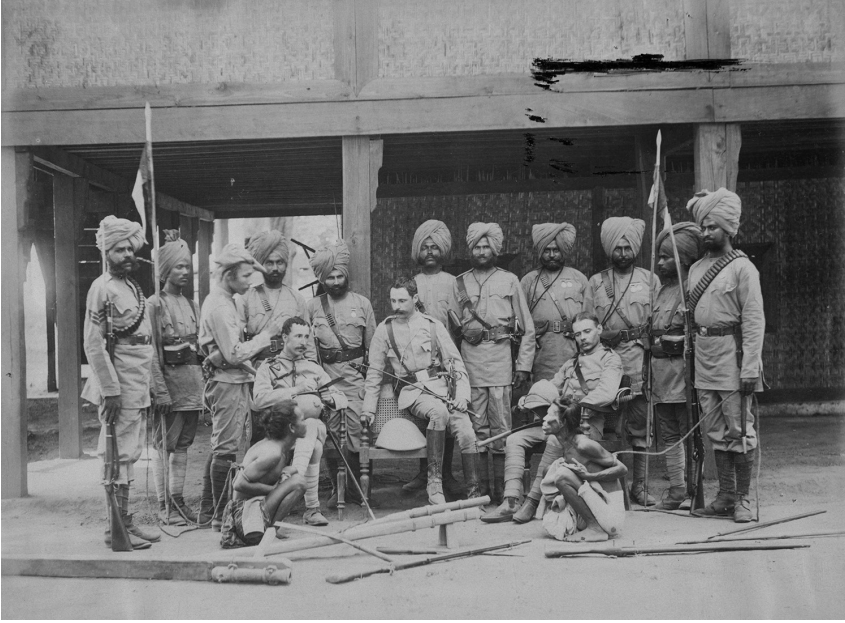


Figure 4. Felice Beato, 1885, *Police Officers at Their Work, Burma (Myanmar)* [Albumen silver print]. Courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

During the Mau Mau Uprising (1952–1960), a violent conflict raged between the Kikuyu and British colonial forces. The colonial state worked to actively suppress the circulation of evidence of their detention of the Kikuyu; the British were fearful of any photographic witnessing of incarceration that could rupture the existing photographic narrative of the time, which represented Africa as a savage and uncivilized place in need of British “policing” (Elkins, 2005). Ultimately, the vast majority of British colonies gained independence by the 1960s, effectively ending the authority of the British Empire as the global policeman. However, colonial police forces were left behind, divorced from their imperial center but resembling their colonial forms in newly decolonized nation-states.

Similarly, in French colonies, police forces were initially formed to maintain colonial holdings and the French imperial order. By the 20th century, the police in French West Africa fostered a “culture of suspicion” that engendered an everyday model of surveillance designed to counter perceived threats to French colonial hegemony (Keller, 2018). In French colonial Algeria, the police searched for and condemned to death members of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) (Fanon, 1963). French colonial counter-insurgency in Algeria involved not only the killing of anti-colonial activists, but also torturing and “disappearing” individuals. Such practices, namely, the torture and execution of those forcibly abducted and thus

“disappeared,” were later adopted in Latin America—the act of “disappearing” exemplifies a policing practice of secrecy where the visible must be rendered invisible (Mirzoeff, 2011). Here, visual culture, specifically photographs of the disappeared, has been critical to the production of a counter-narrative, reinstating visibility to the invisible. In Argentina, for example, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, beginning in 1977, inserted their bodies and photos of their loved ones into the public space of the Argentine police state to contest the corporeal erasures wrought by the military *junta*'s practice of “disappearing” (Tandeciarz, 2006).

Policing Art: Borders, Criminalization, Fugitivity, and Violence

During this era of intense U.S.-backed state repression in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, a wide array of artists drew on the tools of conceptual art to circumvent, parody, and discreetly critique authoritarian surveillance (Camnitzer, 2007), an approach that also typified unsanctioned artwork in Soviet Russia (Bishop, 2012). In other settings, less subtle denunciations of policing peppered the visual culture of Western social and political movements (Auther & Lerner, 2012; Debord, 1961; Douglas et al., 2007). Themes of state surveillance and state-sanctioned violence continue to figure prominently in the work of recent African American artists (Browne, 2015; Copeland, 2013), such as Glenn Ligon's 1993 print series *Runaways*, based on antebellum advertisements to recover self-emancipated slaves; Hank Willis Thomas's early-2000s *Branded* series, featuring photos of Black men's bodies scarred with the Nike logo; and visual artist Dread Scott's 2015 flag, *A MAN WAS LYNCHED BY POLICE YESTERDAY*, based on an anti-lynching flag displayed outside the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1920 to 1938. And intimate forensic data of the sort gathered and deployed by organs of what Jean-Paul Brodeur terms *high policing*, sometimes displayed as leaked or redacted documents, has come to prominence in works by artists and documentarians such as Jamal Cyrus, Steve McQueen, Jill Magid, Hito Steyerl, Jenny Holzer, Heather Dewey-Hagborg, and Laura Poitras.

In his 1966 recording “How to Make a Happening,” the pioneering performance artist Allan Kaprow states in Rule 8: “When you need official approval, go out for it. You can use police help, the mayor, the college dean, the chamber of commerce, the company exec, the rich, and all your neighbors” (1966/n.d., p. 4). Some 21st-century public performers, however, engage with police more directly, and with more ambivalence. Actors representing police appeared in U.K. artist Jeremy Deller's 2001 video *The Battle of Orgreave*, a staged re-enactment of a 1984 confrontation between striking coal miners and police strikebreakers. In Cuban artist Tania Bruegera's 2008 performance *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, mounted police

practiced crowd control on the visitors to the Tate Modern museum in London. Bruegera's work often confronts practices of state surveillance, sometimes provoking authorities in her home city of Havana.

Going beyond dramatic representation, the American carceral state has had a direct presence in contemporary art, as exemplified in artist Jackie Sumell's long-term work with Herman Wallace, a Black Panther and human rights activist who spent 41 years in solitary confinement in Louisiana. Their collaboration was immortalized in the 2013 film *Herman's House*. In that same year, Tamms Year Ten, a campaign led by artist Laurie Jo Reynolds, closed a supermax prison in Illinois. *Marking Time*, Nicole Fleetwood's remarkable curated group exhibition based on her book of the same name (2020), closed in April 2021, at the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition included a wide array of incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and non-incarcerated artists.

Perhaps no facet of policing has been more widely taken up by artists than border security. Artists from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and the Israel-Palestine border have long found evocative material in aspects of surveillance and its subaltern reversal, "sousveillance." In the United States, Ricardo Dominguez's 2010 *Transborder Immigrant Tool* was a memorable intervention in modeling digital mutual aid, and in 2015, the Indigenous group Postcommodity created "Repellent Fence," a collection of large balloons tethered at the border, each bearing a traditional image of a watchful eye (Postcommodity, 2017). In the Israel-Palestine context, Palestinian artist Emily Jacir's 2002–2003 photography project *Where We Come From* created virtual experiences for exiled Palestinians, while Israeli artist Michal Rovner's late-1990s paintings, created from security video at the border, prefigured the surveillance-inspired work of American artist Trevor Paglen. Legal scholar Eyal Weizman, recognized in the art world for his work with the collective Forensic Architecture (Huber, 2017), was widely acclaimed for *Hollow Land* (2007), his chilling analysis of Israeli security practices. More recently, in 2014, Israeli dancer Arkadi Zaidis lost state funding for choreographing a piece incorporating video taken by Palestinians documenting interactions with Israeli settlers and security forces.

Whether or not it can be understood or treated precisely as art, an enormous amount of creativity can be discerned in the dynamics of pursuit and evasion within the political dramas of history. Much like an artist or composer, police forces worldwide have produced an illusion of order, peace, and fixity (Rancière, 2010) largely through a centuries-long liberal rhetoric of professionalism and reform (Neocleous, 2000; Schrader, 2019). They do so artfully, through careful control (Brodeur, 2010; Garland, 2001), hidden violence (Ackerman, 2016; Benjamin 1955/1978), public spectacle (Bittner, 1990), legalized theft (Finneran & Luther, 2013), oracular algorithms (Perry, 2013; Scannell, 2019) and justified trickery

(Heiner, 2015; Manning, 1978; Shuy, 2017). At the same time, those who seek to avoid state authority show great ingenuity in their own life-or-death performances of escape (Holmes, 2010; Marty, 2016), resistance (Cruz & Forman, 2016; Van Horn, 2017), survival (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007), and refusal (Bargu, 2016). Artists like those mentioned above have demonstrated autonomy, but, throughout history, many more artists have reflected, represented, and rehearsed the pageantry of brutality (Agamben, 2011; Chave, 1990). This political theater of policing is not restricted to matters of criminality, but is rather a logic of codified transgression that extends throughout institutions of education and culture.

Citizens as Police, and the Carcerality of Non-Carceral Institutions

The increasing visibility and political influence of law enforcement organizations, including police chiefs' organizations and unions for police and correctional officers, demonstrates just one way that coercive authorities continue to dominate U.S. society and discourse; this is due in part to the ongoing decentralization of petty authority embedded in the notion of "police powers," from the Constitution up to and beyond the 1960s War on Crime (Schrader, 2019, p. 235). Even more than the proliferation of "thin blue line" flags and "back the blue" placards, the phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline makes this tendency apparent. As public schools have ramped up punishments and expulsions of Black, Brown, and disabled students, and as those schools have increasingly welcomed uniformed police into their spaces as "school resource officers," the tasks of teachers have increasingly been moving more explicitly and also more subtly into alignment with the work of police (Okilwa et al., 2017; Vitale, 2017). Guest editor Bert Stabler writes this as a teacher who spent 10 years working full-time as a public high school art teacher in Chicago, where he witnessed and was at times complicit in disproportionate punishments for infractions like disruptive behavior, tardiness, defiance, cell phone use, and dress code violations. At the same time, the police can on occasion be deployed as weapons of harassment against teachers (Miller, 2021; Slisco, 2021).

It is certainly the case that years of anti-racist work around police and prison abolition have gotten cultural traction as well, evidenced by the massive turnout for Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of high-profile police murders in the Spring and Summer of 2020, as well as the mainstream acknowledgment, however dismissive, of calls to defund the police. While media and merchandising expressing support for the Movement for Black Lives may offer hope, there is also the risk of de-radicalization and disavowal. This danger is evidenced in the way that "Black Lives Matter" murals, the removal of Confederate statues, and the recent Federal recognition of Juneteenth as a national holiday celebrating the end of slavery have

all aroused controversy, but have proved to be more palatable than anti-racist school curricula, let alone actual police budget cuts. The foundational racial assumptions of colonial society are more easily disavowed than dispelled. Looking back to the widespread and commonplace practice of deputizing White men for slave patrols in the United States (Haden, 2003), theorist Frank Wilderson has contended that White people “are—in their very corporeality—the police” (2007, p. 26).

This view of policing as more diffused than specialized can easily be extended to established cultural institutions. In a webinar panel discussion on May 27, 2021, as part of the Strike MoMA Working Group, Stefano Harney spoke about the museum as a “precinct” (Strike MoMA, 2021, 45:56). He described the narrow elitist appeal of the Modern in negative terms, as a form of general strike by those who pursue their own aesthetic practices and avoid institutions of dominant culture; in that spirit, Harney compared community outreach programs to community policing and aesthetic strikebreaking. Along these lines, Harney’s longtime collaborator and co-author Fred Moten, a renowned voice in contemporary Black Studies, spoke of MoMA as an extractive institution, extracting both aesthetic attention and aesthetic resources from the wider community (Strike MoMA, 2021, 55:50). Moten went on to make a bold statement in regard to the Cops Off Campus project brought up by co-panelist and prominent anti-carceral scholar-activist Dylan Rodriguez; Moten commented that the majority of policing on university campuses is done not by uniformed officers but by faculty (Strike MoMA, 2021, 1:00:00). For our part, we would include administration in this analogy since, like patrol officers, faculty tend to have only as much autonomy as they are permitted by their superiors.

While American schools have long promulgated ideological nationalism and social segregation (Barton et al., 1980; Loewen, 1996; Woodson 1933/2016), particularly accompanying faltering attempts at school integration beginning in the 1950s (Kafka, 2011), museums have valorized traditional hierarchies and shored up narratives of supremacy through displaying trophies of conquest (Bennett, 1995; Hicks, 2020; Silverman, 2004; Stoler, 2013). In both settings, the roles of art and other cultural artifacts are complex. The American and Canadian governments attempted to assimilate and subjugate Indigenous children through brutal treatment in residential schools that incorporated a Eurocentric art curriculum (Adams, 1995; Lentis, 2017), while public museums have collected and displayed uncounted stolen Indigenous artifacts (including bodily remains) in museums of both art and “natural history” (Krpmotich & Peers, 2013; Weiss & Springer, 2020). In schools, museums, and elsewhere, the function of community education can, of course, be more emancipatory than in these examples (Bruchac et al., 2010; Freire, 1975/2005; hooks, 1994; Love, 2019; Rickford, 2016; Sleeper-Smith, 2009).

But the role of surveillance as an exercise of power in all Western institutions, not only prisons and asylums, needs to be continually acknowledged—even, dare we say, interrogated.

Overview of the Special Issue

The special issue opens with a piece by Rebecca Zorach that presents several subtle but fundamental historical and philosophical overlaps between the police and aesthetics. Zorach, through a nuanced reading of Enlightenment philosophy, namely, Adam Smith's concept of the "invisible hand," posits that the modern investment in order is ultimately an aesthetic investment. Consequently, the apparent efficacy of modern policing projects, like the invisible hand of the market, is contingent on the appearance of order, and this appearance, when disrupted, gives the state license to exercise violence. With this opening contribution, Zorach frames with penetrating lucidity the ongoing conversation between ideas of art and policing.

The overlaps of institutions for education, culture, and incarceration are addressed in this issue from several perspectives. Olga Ivashkevich and Oscar Keyes lay out a general theory of surveillance and human enclosure and then describe a video project undertaken through a juvenile rehabilitation program that encouraged the young women in the program to collaboratively and creatively resist the ways in which institutions defined the creators' visibility as problems rather than as complex social beings. In another piece looking at the experiences of the incarcerated, abolitionist scholars of education and art Erica Meiners, Therese Quinn, and Jose Luis Benavides, under the collective heading of the Illinois Deaths in Custody Project, share their reflections on speculative dystopian surveillance narratives and on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic within and beyond jails and prisons, leading into a call to bring about the end of both incarceration and the police.

This special issue also showcases three artists with parallel worldviews who all highlight different aspects of policing in their artwork. A co-founder of the prolific and renowned printmaking collective Justseeds, Josh MacPhee has been printing posters collaboratively and individually in conjunction with activist campaigns for over 25 years, as well as documenting and promoting numerous forms of street-based visual protest through publications and exhibitions. Untold numbers of teachers, including Bert Stabler, have for decades been making use of an ongoing collaborative poster series that Josh spearheaded, entitled "Celebrate People's History." This year, he is releasing a collection of his posters about policing, entitled *Cut/Stop/End*, and he shares a few of those images here. Marc Fischer, whose work appeared in the 2014 Whitney Biennial under the name of his Public Collectors project, has also made posters and stickers responding to police

violence. However, Marc's work has primarily emphasized researching and documenting overlaps between DIY culture, conceptual art, and resistance to state repression. In an interview for this issue, he speaks about his early work with incarcerated people; the recently re-issued collaborative book *Prisoners' Inventions*; his observation project and publication *Courtroom Artist Residency*, based on visits to the Cook County Circuit Court; his publication recording police transmissions, *Police Scanner*; and his debt to the work of acclaimed documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman. Lastly, via his montage-style video compositions, as well as through his written reflections on those pieces, scholar and artist Heath Schultz eloquently dissects the affective connections between subjects socialized as White citizens, and images of police that provide White citizens with idealized models and mirrors within a media bubble that naturalizes the fragile illusion of safety through segregation.

While the artists included in this issue generate thought-provoking work that touches on a range of issues related to contemporary policing, art historical scholarship invites us to look back on the image of the police both as a visible feature in the modern landscape and as an (in)visible force conditioning social exchange. Jordan Hillman concentrates on the work of the Franco-Swiss artist Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, whose lithographs offer a scathing critique of the police and the justice system at large in fin de siècle Paris. Steinlen's images of the police, Hillman argues, expose the pervasiveness of the police in the public space in the wake of Haussmannization and offer a means of allegorizing the corruption inherent in the modern policing institution. Hillman's contribution demonstrates firsthand how visual culture objects have provided a critically important mode of dissenting with ideas of order. Meanwhile, Martyna Ewa Majewska's piece complicates the reading of William Pope.L's 1970s street crawls by analyzing his earlier performative actions alongside some of his more recent work. Majewska concludes that Pope.L's disruptions occur on multiple registers. The business suits worn in his crawls confound the public, and particularly confound police officers tasked with surveilling urban space, who, in the process of observing Pope.L, become imbricated in his work. Pope.L's suits also, along with his sculptures and mixed media installations, subvert the icon/image of the Civil Rights Movement by calling attention to the ways in which respectability politics attempts to tactically appeal to the same aesthetic of order promoted by police, while also trying to ameliorate the social content underlying that social form.

While there are many other issues to consider in relation to the visual regimes of policing that are not featured in this special issue, the interdisciplinary perspectives that follow help to demonstrate the necessity of recognizing the police as the aesthetic expression of state power, as well as the importance of art and visual culture broadly in critiquing and challenging this visual entanglement. As we look

to the future, artists, teachers, scholars, and activists can hopefully draw on the tools and resources developed by one another in the shared pursuit of exposing and dissolving the social, political, and psychological boundaries of identification and abjection patrolled by those permitted to abjure responsibility for their violence.

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