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MoMA PS1 curator Josephine Graf talks with a formerly incarcerated artist and a prisoners' rights advocate about activism, confinement, and revolutionary propaganda.

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Ojore Lutalo is an artist, activist, and revolutionary thinker whose work is included in MoMA PS1's *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* exhibition. While imprisoned for 28 years—22 of which he spent in a form of solitary confinement known as the "Management Control Unit" due to his affiliations with anarchist movements and the Black Liberation Army—he began making collages. Bonnie Kerness, the director of the Prison Watch program run by the American Friends Service Committee, was a key advocate and brought Lutalo's work to the world as part of a fight against the use of abusive practices in prisons—a fight she has been spearheading for decades and continues today. In the following conversation with MoMA PS1 assistant curator Josephine Graf, they discuss Lutalo's radical practice and the history of their shared political struggle.

Josephine Graf: Let's start at the beginning. How did the two of you meet? Ojore, what led you to reach out to Bonnie?

Ojore Lutalo: On February 4, 1986, I was placed in a pre-hearing MCU [Management Control Unit] with 10 other prisoners. Most of us had been in the control unit for several days, and they

tell me we don't have disciplinary infractions—we were there for being Muslims or revolutionaries, or jailhouse lawyers. I realized that I needed some outside assistance, so I wrote a letter to the national office of the American Friends Service Committee. They forwarded my letter to Bonnie, who sent someone from the Office of the Ombudsman to the prison to interview me. They told her that they couldn't find me! I was one of the most closely watched prisoners in the system, but the prison officials "couldn't find me." So from there, Bonnie, myself, and others in the control unit began the NJ Control Unit Monitoring Project.

Bonnie Kerness: I got a letter in February of 1986 from Ojore Lutalo, from New Jersey State Prison, saying, "I have just been placed in a Control Unit. What's a Control Unit? Why am I here? And how long will I have to stay here?" It was 22 years before we had any answers. The Management Control Unit in New Jersey was opened in the 1970s, for Sundiata Acoli, who was a member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, and Assata Shakur's co-defendant. The very birth of this form of isolated confinement was for political purposes. By the '90s, the Clinton administration began flooding states with money so that they could build not just prisons, but solitary confinement units and entire solitary confinement prisons. It was Ojore and 96 people living in concrete boxes without ever having been charged with any infractions. Prisons have always had punishment units, which were bad enough. But this was even more egregious because people were placed in the Control Unit feeling as if it were a personal dungeon. Everybody there was known to be political. And there they sat, for many years, until we were able to form the New Jersey Control Unit Monitoring Project, which led to the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons.

JG: This history challenges the idea that we don't have "political prisoners" in the US, and yet there are people that are treated differently because of what they think, who they are—not any infraction, but what they believe.

OL: As long as you don't become political, you don't pose a threat. I went to prison as a revolutionary, and at the time, in 1975, we had a high-profile case. I'm a New Afrikan anarchist. So, they thought my presence in the population was a threat, and they moved to isolate me.

JG: Ironically, it is a recognition of your power. In a collage on view at MoMA PS1 you include a letter from the prison denying your release from the MCU in 2008, just a year before your eventual release from prison, specifically because you might influence other prisoners. I found it interesting that they so blatantly admit the fact that they're holding you because of your beliefs, but also that you might be so persuasive as to sway the rest of the population.

BK: And it took us 22 years for them to say that. That, for me, was an ah-ha moment. My outrage, my grief, had to do with being very attached to my generation. It was a generation that was killed in Vietnam, murdered on the campuses of Jackson and Kent State. I saw young people being murdered by law enforcement in the South. To see people and groups I admired—the Panthers, the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, American Indian Movement, women radicals—thrown away in the solitary confinement units, I was profoundly moved to work on this and expose it. There are many extraordinary groups working on the issue right now, and I think you're looking at ground zero. Prison Watch started working on the issue of solitary confinement in 1986, and it has international implications because isolation in prison violates the United Nations Covenants on Torture that the US has ratified and signed.

JG: Ojore, can describe what it felt like to be held in the MCU? What was a day like for you there? And what were your survival tactics? How did you make it through 22 years?

OL: As a revolutionary I came to terms with the prospects of death and captivity. So, I was prepared for it psychologically. I would get up in the morning, wash up, read, write, listen to the news, and exercise. Maybe I'd be able to make a telephone call.

I'd be on lockdown 22 hours one day and 24 hours the next. Then once I met Bonnie, she was my bridge over troubled waters. And she gave us a voice, she gave us a human face. She was listened to because she was a middle-class white woman. And the state didn't like that, telling her that these people were "the worst of the worst." Bonnie would challenge them, noting that they haven't violated any of the prison rules. Once the press began investigating, they contacted the Department of Corrections, who confirmed that what she was saying was factual. The inside/outside advocacy began from there, and once the attention came, the repression came. They put Bonnie on the FBI watch list. The harassment was endless.

BK: I was so impressed with how Ojore and the others survived and stayed mentally healthy. Because I deal nationally with people in solitary confinement, I know that many of them become quite ill. We began to collect testimonies to compile into a "Survivor's Manual," written by and for people living in solitary confinement. To this day, we send out about a thousand a year, and I've been told it's a life saver. People in prisons are teaching one another, and everything comes from the inside—teaching one another Tai chi, mediation, how to write, how to journal, how to stay street oriented.

JG: So much of your fight together has been one waged via communication and exposure. Ojore's collages form another facet of this struggle for communication. Ojore, when did you first start making them? What sparked the desire?

OL: It was in 1994, 1995. I used to do a lot of corresponding, answering a lot of questions. People asking: "What does your cell look like? What do you do every day?" So as opposed to repeating everything, I thought, I'm going to start making collages, because the visuals are more effective than the verbal. I would make the collages and send them out to Bonnie, who would take them to Staples to photocopy and circulate. I call that political propaganda. You've got reactionary propaganda and you've got revolutionary

that applies to Bonnie, because once she came around, she said, "Well I'm going till the end." She's there for the long haul.

JG: And the effect of seeing your works all together is that you understand how these movements are very much interwoven—the fight for women's rights is tied to a struggle against white supremacy, is tied to class struggles.

BK: That was also my experience when I came North late in the civil rights era. I was walking into the welfare rights movement, the housing movement, the women's movement—which was extraordinary, because this was all also connected with the lesbian liberation movement, the movement for gay rights. This level of activism was all going at the same time and peopled largely by women. Given what awareness I have of young people today, I have hope that we're moving into the next generation of activists.

OL: Well in today's world, you don't have that political mindset anymore. So it has to be reinvented. And to do that you have to set an example, it can't just be conversation, it has to be real life activities. A lot of people are talking about prison reform. Prison reform doesn't work. Abolition is just a thought, it's never going to happen that way, legally. Let's organize for a real social change. Voting don't work for us as a people. But we have to organize. That's a daily struggle. But really, it's possible.

propaganda. Mine is revolutionary propaganda. What's there isn't criminal at all, all you've got to do is fact check it.

JG: I love this idea of reclaiming the word propaganda, which oftentimes has a negative connotation. What your works suggest is that propaganda can be positive—it just means art that's *effective*, that actually gets a message across, and is made to be disseminated, to live in public space and discourse.

OL: Emory Douglas taught me a lot because his stuff was powerful. I realized I could do the same thing and be just as effective. And it was. All I had was newspapers, glue, and magazines. At the time, it didn't pose a threat to the administration, because it was just magazines and newspapers. But once I started putting them together, they started reading the content. Then that became a problem. They would come in my cell, take my collages and throw them away, even though I wasn't violating any of the rules.

JG: In some of your collages you talk about very specific experiences you went through. I imagine that it was a way of both bringing attention to these experiences, but also processing what was happening to you.

OL: At one point they put me in a bloody cell. A prisoner had attempted suicide, so he took his blood and painted the cell red. Then they took him out and they put me in there. When I approached the cell, I see streaks of blood on the door, and once I stepped into the cell, I saw it was covered with blood. There was blood crunching underneath my boots. And that's called "no-touch torture." At another point, they put me in a mental health unit to see if I could cope for six days. I couldn't have visits, showers, nothing. I was in a freezing cold cell, lights on for 24 hours a day. And another time they put me on a non-contact status, which meant I could do nothing with the group, only individually. That's another form of no-touch torture. See, their goal was to break me psychologically. So they could reach into the general population and say, "If you become a revolutionary this will happen to you." And I understood that. Because I studied psychological warfare. The controlling pro-

gram is a psychological program, it's designed to break a person psychologically.

BK: And all of this is really a political experiment in the United States. Prior to the mid-'70s there were no control units. The use of solitary started in California in the 1970s for radicals in prison. Then they locked down Marion federal prison in Illinois, and created a control unit experiment. If you look at the country now, this experiment has gone nationwide—and worldwide in some places.

JG: Let's talk more about the connection between the way that prisoners are treated in domestic prisons and the kind of extrajudicial punishment that is used by the US internationally, as part of the so-called "War on Terror," for example. One collage in *Marking Time* is about Guantanamo. It incorporates an account by someone held there about the importance of being able to see a glimmer of the sea from their cell, and the way that glimpse was policed, taken away. How do you see your experience fitting into a larger global struggle?

OL: In the control unit, you never knew what day or week it was. You wake up, somebody calls out, "What day is it? What time is it?" So, I immediately related to the oppression described in that piece. It's going on all around the world. I did a collage around Iraq, how they train their prison guards in the US and send them to Iraq and implement the same torture. People don't see the US as being an aggressor, going overseas and bombing other people's homeland. They don't want to consider that.

JG: And what's so interesting about your collages is how you're actually using media outlets that are mouthpieces for a certain kind of mainstream narrative, taking their words, and then making them yours. You repeat this phrase in your collages: "in my own words." You would send them out to Bonnie, who would use them in lectures and as educational materials, bringing your words to a wider audience.

BK: I would make copies of them on good old copy machines. Sometimes I would take them and have them blown up to 2 × 3' on

vinyl so they could be hung on a wall. Once we were speaking at a school in Connecticut, which has a school of architecture. I asked him if he could do one of a blueprint of Eastern State Penitentiary, which was built in 1829, next to a blueprint of the supermax Control Unit prison in Florence, Colorado, which was built in the '90s. It's the same blueprint. It's the same design, like the spokes of a wheel, and it's on purpose. There's no sense of where you are in the world. No sounds, No life.

JG: That correlation between Florence and Eastern State gets back to the origins of solitary. Solitary was initially a Quaker idea first introduced in prisons like Eastern State.

BK: It was seen as penitence. It was seen as self-reflection, but then became punitive. A coworker and I uncovered material that showed that when 19-century Apache leader Geronimo was removed from his tribe he was placed in solitary confinement in a fort in Florida. Captors have been playing with solitary for a very long time.

OL: That was political isolation. Not punitive, *political.* Trenton State Prison control unit is clean, it's moderate. You walk in and the silence is eerie, I mean you can feel the oppression. You can smell it. Just stand back and look at the cells, how its structured. It's real oppressive. My collages, I'd put them in a box, push them underneath the bed. The cells were painted white. That was by design. When I came home I started making collages in color, because of the effect that colorlessness has on the psyche.

JG: You made colorful works like this honoring past revolutionary figures—Kathleen Cleaver, Assata Shakur, Emma Goldman, Harriet Tubman. I notice you honor many women in your work.

OL: Well throughout history women have been a backbone of all social movements. Assata Shakur, she's my hero. Marilyn Buck, another hero of mine, who helped liberate Assata from Clinton. Silvia Baraldini is another. Women were the backbone of the Panthers. I can say I have more confidence in women than I do in men. Once they commit themselves, you've got a problem on your hands. And