



PRISM

Seeing Beyond
Mass Incarceration

PROJECT BRIEF

An interdisciplinary initiative
platforming art and justice
to end mass incarceration

Project Development by:

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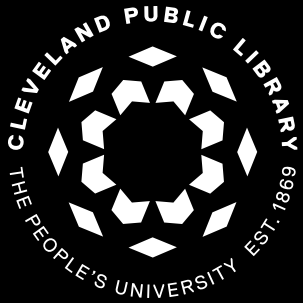


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“The prison is one of the most important features of our image environment. This has caused us to take the existence of prisons for granted. The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us. We do not question whether it should exist. It has become so much a part of our lives that it requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison **(Angela Davis, "Are Prisons Obsolete?")**.”

Maya Lin, *Reading A Garden*, 1998.
Photo © Rose Marie Cromwell



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A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Artist,

On behalf of Cleveland Public Library and our Board of Trustees, thank you for considering this project and adding your voice to a critical community dialogue.

PRISM: Seeing Beyond Mass Incarceration is where art and justice converge to raise awareness about mass incarceration and create conversation around its impact. Through a generous grant from the Art for Justice Fund, we are able to commission five public artworks at our neighborhood branches across the city of Cleveland. In 2024 and 2025, we will host educational programming around the origins, nature and alternatives to mass incarceration in Cleveland and beyond.

The Library has a long history of integrating artwork in our locations and making space to uplift all voices. We hope PRISM offers an opportunity for artists to engage with the people we serve and inspire Clevelanders to consider our pathways to a more just future.

Felton Thomas, Jr.

Executive Director & CEO
Cleveland Public Library

PROJECT OVERVIEW

PRISM: Seeing Beyond Mass Incarceration is an interdisciplinary initiative platforming art and justice as it examines the role of the library in efforts to end mass incarceration.

Cleveland Public Library (CPL) is facilitating the creation of public art and programming to further a more imaginative and expansive dialogue around the realities of mass incarceration, efforts to end this societal ill, and alternative solutions to safety.

This project brief accompanies an open call request for interested artists to submit qualifications to design and conceptualize public artworks to be sited at branches of Cleveland Public Library in the Fall of 2025.



Darius Steward, *Baggage Claim*, 2021.
Photo © Bob Perkoski



Yinka Shonibare, *The American Library*, 2018.
Photo © FRONT, Cleveland Triennial

Consulting Co-Project Managers

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Funding Support

PRISM is made possible through funding from the **Art for Justice Fund**, via the Ford Foundation, the George Gund Foundation, and the Fowler Family Foundation.

ART FOR JUSTICE FUND

“Those who want to construct a different social reality, one grounded in justice and joy for everyone, must first face social reality instead of escaping[...].” (Ruha Benjamin, *“Imagination: A Manifesto”*).

PRISM: Seeing Beyond Mass Incarceration emerges from Cleveland Public Library’s legacy of supporting democracy and addressing inequalities in the city of Cleveland while remaining a trusted resource for learning, joy and creativity. Under the leadership of **Executive Director & CEO, Felton Thomas, Jr.**, CPL has been intentional about its evolving role to fulfill the civic and social needs of its community, partnering with local organizations to provide expungement clinics, legal services, workforce development support, re-entry resources and more.

To identify answers to these and other significant societal questions, we turn to some of the most imaginative thinkers in our world — authors and artists. Whether its **Maya Lin’s “Reading A Garden”** in its Main Library’s Eastman Reading Garden or the traveling shows featuring **Yinka Shonibare’s “The American Library”** and **Nicole R. Fleetwood’s “Prison Nation,”** Cleveland Public Library has repeatedly looked to artists to help communicate the values of the Library and its patrons, to invite beauty and play into public space, and to create dialogue around pressing social issues and experiences of marginalization. Authors, including **Angela Davis, Nikki Giovanni and Reginald Dwayne Betts** have lent their progressive thoughts and unique perspectives to CPL programs.

For the PRISM initiative, Cleveland Public Library once again seeks to engage artists to create compelling artworks that will enhance public space. These artworks, and PRISM’s associated programming, will orient viewers toward a reality where mass incarceration, along with the practices, philosophies, and portrayals that created it, become distant relics.



This initiative asks:

1. How can public art frame critical dialogues and catalyze the transformation of library patrons, its community, and the Library itself?
2. At a moment when the gaps and inequities facing Cleveland communities and society loom large, how does a library determine its role and focus on the broader ecosystems of justice and care?
3. What does it look like to balance urgent issues, such as book bans and rapidly declining literacy rates, with the need to end longstanding ills including and resulting from mass incarceration?

OUR INTENT

- **INFORM** the public about mass incarceration
- **INCLUDE** impacted communities
- **IMAGINE** a world beyond carcerality
- **INSPIRE** new methods of seeing, speaking, & advocating for justice
- **IMPACT** shifts in Cleveland culture, conversation, systems, & spaces

“In public space, the presentation of those uncertain somethings (a sound, an image, a feeling) that comes almost from inside us is an invitation towards inclusion, towards access, and towards decentralized protection that puts maintenance above judgement, stewardship above punishment. **(Chloë Bass, "Public art as an invitation towards abolition")."**”

OUR APPROACH



ART

Development & presentation of artworks including:

- four public artworks sited at CPL branches
- Commissioned work sited at CPL's newly renovated Martin Luther King, Jr. branch
- An art exhibition featuring 2D, 3D, & new media works



PROGRAMMING

- Diverse & robust opportunities for community engagement with artists, advocates, & authors
- A symposium interrogating the role libraries play in addressing social challenges, upholding democracy, & innovating services as the needs of patrons evolve



ADVOCACY

- Center perspectives of people & communities most impacted by mass incarceration
- Support & contribute to efforts to end the ills & impacts of mass incarceration in NE Ohio
- Review internal policies, partnerships, & services to enhance CPL's support offerings

CREATIVE DIRECTION & THEMES

The project's title, PRISM, is the primary theme and serves as a representational framework for the initiative's aims. Participating artists are encouraged to develop concepts that guide viewers to consider mass incarceration through a lens in which **a society without prisons is possible, plausible, and present.**

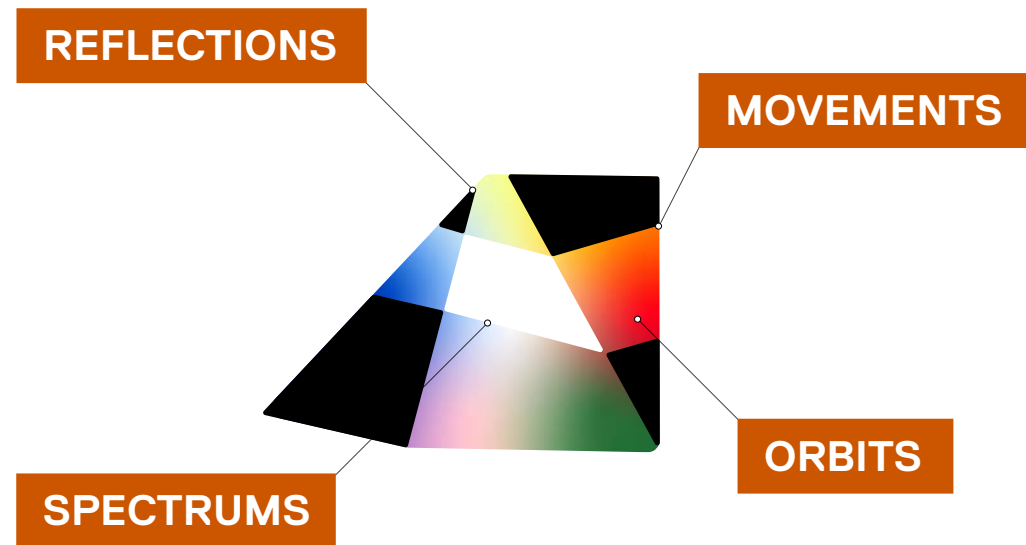
Prism: The clarification or distortion afforded by a particular viewpoint. alt. A way of looking or thinking about something that causes you to see or understand it in a different way (*Oxford Languages*)

“One of the main ways art can disrupt the carceral imagination is by refuting the eugenic classification and fragmentation of people — desirable or deplorable, worthy or disgraced, precious or superfluous. Art can remind us who we are beyond the trappings of privilege or prison (**Ruha Benjamin, "Imagination: A Manifesto"**).”

About the Art

The PRISM graphic, conceptualized and designed by Katie St Surin, features a deconstructed anamorphic prism, typically used in photography and filmmaking. Anamorphic images must be viewed from a specific angle to reveal their true form.

Here, the prism encourages us to view mass incarceration through an alternative lens — considering that creative visioning and perspectives of lived experience are necessary to see and understand the true nature and cost of mass incarceration in ways that lead us to expand our collective imagination and create a world beyond carcerality.



ABOUT THE PROJECT TEAM

LAND studio and Shooting Without Bullets serve as consultants and co-project managers, shaping the project's identity and processes in alignment with broader efforts encouraging the use of art for justice.

About LAND studio

LAND studio is a local nonprofit dedicated to creating and enhancing public spaces in Cleveland. For over 40 years, we've collaborated with artists, designers, and community partners to connect, inspire, and celebrate the city's diverse culture through public art and civic projects. Learn more at www.land-studio.org.

Ahlon Gonzalez | Erin Guido | Joe Lanzilotta | Maci Nelson | Katie St Surin

About Shooting Without Bullets

Shooting Without Bullets is a nonprofit agency and social enterprise with a mission to model an alternative arts ecosystem — a responsive and creative intervention to address, refuse, and eliminate inequities in the arts & society.

SWOB promotes the use of art + creative strategies as tools for social movement, utilizing a multidisciplinary model that moves art, artists and community through engagement with issues of justice. Learn more at www.shootingwithoutbullets.org.

Kelsi Carter | Amanda D. King

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Supporters

Special thanks to [The Returning Artists Guild](#) and [Towards Employment](#) for sharing insights and experiences that have helped shape the direction of this initiative.

Cleveland Public Library

The following individuals have played a significant role in making this project possible:

Felton Thomas, Jr. - Executive Director & CEO

Tiffany Graham Charkosky - Director of Arts & Culture

Shenise Johnson Thomas - Chief of External Relations & Development

Tracy Martin & Shirley Leonard - Development

CONTACT

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