How a Brooklyn art gallery is fighting mass incarceration

“We talk about a pipeline from court involvement to arts involvement,” says Recess founder Allison Freedman Weisberg.

By Diana Budds  Apr 20, 2018, 1:00 pm EDT

The Brooklyn gallery Recess is using art to fight mass incarceration. Courtesy Recess and Kaz Sakuma

Some artists have a subtle creative aura about them. Not Kerry, a 21-year-old filmmaker, dancer, designer, and model. Over six feet tall with dyed cherry-red hair, he walks and talks with a rapid clip and seemingly boundless energy.

He proudly tells me that he’s wearing jeans he customized himself and a sweatshirt gifted to him after he walked his first Men’s Fashion Week runway show in February. (He even got his picture in Vogue and pulls up his Instagram to show me.)

Originally from Houston, Kerry moved to New York when he was 18 to do exactly what he’s doing today: build his portfolio, design clothes, and make films. But
that might not have been the case without Assembly, an arts program run by the non-profit organization Recess that’s an alternative to incarceration.

After arriving in New York, Kerry got a job styling and merchandising for Urban Outfitters while working on his own clothing line. Last year, Kerry was arrested for a misdemeanor, and the courts gave him two options: go to jail or spend a few weeks at a gallery in Brooklyn to learn about and work in the arts industry. He chose the latter.

“It’s a life-changing experience,” Kerry tells me about Assembly. “I was always looking for a place to sit down and focus and create. Not only did I find a place sit down and do my work, I sat down to be creative and get paid to do my work. A lot of young people don’t get paid for their creativity.”

In New York state, black and Hispanic youth make up 33 percent of 16 and 17 year olds, but comprise 72 percent of all arrests. They also account for 82 percent of the youth who are sentenced as adults.

The dangerous and harmful effects of youth incarceration have been well documented, as in the case of Kalief Browder, a 16-year-old Bronx resident who was detained at Rikers for three years while awaiting trial, and who later committed suicide after his release.

New York City has recognized mass incarceration’s injustices and is planning to close Rikers Island, a decision that will involve numerous policy changes, including bail reform and alternatives to jail. Through its Assembly program, Recess is showing how the arts can become an effective tool in New York City’s decarceration kit—and how a community-driven arts organization can become a powerful force for social justice.
In 2009, Allison Freedman Weisberg founded Recess as an experiment: Could an arts organization make both the art world and its audience more inclusive and diverse? To that end, she opened a storefront space that was part gallery and part studio, and launched a residency program that invited creatives to complete socially minded projects that they wouldn’t be able to do elsewhere.

Right now, Philadelphia-based artist Tiona Nekkia McClodden is Recess’s resident artist. For the past month and a half, she transformed the gallery into a juke joint inspired by a character in The Color Purple and is using the space to explore queer identity, the history of juke joints as a social space, and what it means to be a black woman from the American south. The events for Shug Avery’s Kiss, all of which are open to the public, include letter-writing workshops, a wig-making session, and a conversation about love.
Many of the artists Recess worked over the years with were interested in mass incarceration since it intersected with so many other issues: race, class, poverty, and economic inequality, among others. “It’s this huge social failure,” Weisberg says. “After a while, it felt disingenuous to talk about it, but not to be directly involved.”

Recess decided to take a more direct approach; instead of making art about mass incarceration, it would become involved with solutions. In 2017, Recess launched Assembly, an artist-led diversion program for court-involved youth. Artist Shaun Leonardo designed Assembly’s curriculum and leads its program sessions.

“There’s a lot of talk about pipelines in the criminal justice world,” Weisberg says. “We talk about a pipeline from court involvement to arts involvement.”

Weisberg and her team looked for ways that Recess could do what the organization does best—interrogating culture, fostering creativity, encouraging dialog—while also becoming a more effective agent for change. Working with the Center for Court Innovation’s Brooklyn Justice Initiatives, a non-profit that explores alternatives to prison and jail, Recess explored the psychology of being labeled a criminal (a word that Recess is very careful not to use, preferring
“court-involved” or “justice-involved” as more accurate and less prejudiced terms) and how to counteract the life-changing effects of entering the court system when young.

Once someone enters the justice system and experiences the dehumanizing experiences of arrest, jail, arraignment, trial, and sentencing, criminality can become their identity—they believe that they no longer have options, and their life story is set.

“A lot of times it’s folks who identify as, ‘This is my way of life. Because I have a certain set of limited and foreshortened options, my way of life is this. And that’s end of story,’” Weisberg says about the psychology behind the criminal narrative. “It’s a manner of describing yourself that’s not about you individually; it’s almost as if someone describes themselves as if they’re watching a movie. It’s a character outside of themselves that’s engaged in a specific set of behaviors and all of those are a foregone conclusions.”

Assembly works with youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who are arrested in Brooklyn for misdemeanor crimes. When caseworkers at the Kings County Criminal Court screen participants for alignment with the Assembly curriculum, they look for one of two factors: signs of “criminal” thinking or identification and/or an interest in creative pursuits. If either is identified young people are offered Assembly as an alternative to jail time and other adult sanctions. Instead, the program’s participants work with artists in Recess’s network to realize a creative project collaboratively. If the participants successfully complete the course—which is either a four- or eight-week-long cycle, depending on what the court mandates—their case is closed and sealed and they avoid an adult record.

Recess works with artists known for revising dominant narratives, which is precisely what Assembly is attempting to do. Through artistic interventions, Assembly aims to disrupt the criminal-thinking narrative of court-involved populations.
Assembly is headquartered in a storefront gallery space in Downtown Brooklyn and will soon relocate the Recess’s new space near the Navy Yard. *Courtesy Recess and Kaz Sakuma*

“We want to give [the participants] the power and agency to tell their own stories so that they leave [the program] with a shift in perspective and a way to articulate themselves,” Weisberg says. “We see artists as having a very specific set of skills that the rest of us don’t have. They’re able to imagine the possibilities in a way that others can’t. Artists offer a creative toolkit and problem solve in a way that’s very specific and involves the skills of creative reimagination.”

After participants successfully complete the court-mandated Assembly program, they have the option to continue with the organization as paid artist apprentices, where they learn about art handling, how to install artworks, and, essentially, become an extra set of hands for the artists. The extended program also includes resume and portfolio building workshops, and Recess works with its network to place participants in paid internship positions at partner organizations. Participants can also become peer leaders and become a point of contact for incoming participants in the court-mandated program.

So far, 75 young people have been part of Assembly. Kerry was one of the first participants in the program and somewhat of a test case for it. After getting
arrested, he joined in May 2017 for the court-mandated course and liked it so much that he stayed on for the apprenticeship and peer-leadership segments. Right now, he’s helping coordinate the program while he works on a personal project: a video about cultural appropriation, social justice, racism, and Black Lives Matter. He’s completed a trailer for the video, which he is releasing in chapters. Assembly helped him do what he originally came to New York to do: become an artist in every sense of the word.

“There was someone from the courts who was at my trailer’s premiere,” Kerry told me. “She was standing in the back and after she came up and shook my hand and she was super happy and said, ‘I didn’t know you were doing things like this here.’ She wanted to have a conversation and she didn’t look at me like I was that criminal; she looked at me like I was an artist. I loved that.”

To help support this new initiative, Recess recently moved into a new 5,000-square-foot space in Fort Greene, near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The space is still a work in progress, but it includes Recess’s administrative offices, affordable studio space for resident artists, a wood shop, and a recording space. It’s near other artists’ studios, and accessible to the youth who the organization will be working with. (Weisberg explains that even though it’s off the beaten path, the relative quietness of the area compared to Downtown Brooklyn made the program’s participants more comfortable.) Additionally, it’s walking distance to a number of public housing projects.

Today, Recess is working with the courts to find Assembly participants, but in the future it wants to reach youth before they ever get arrested so they avoid the trauma of the court system. In a rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood, Recess is creating an arts hub that serves the entire community, from young people to artists to people who appreciate art.

“What we’re thinking about now is, ‘Is there a way to do this program pre-booking?’” Weisberg says. “That is a bigger challenge. This would involve basically intercepting cases or incidents before they go to court so no one has to experience what Kerry did in pre-arrangement.”

After I visited Recess’s new space, Kerry walked with me through Fort Greene to the organization’s temporary storefront gallery on a tree-shaded corner of Schemerhorn Street, across from the area’s new Whole Foods and Apple store.

For the past month and a half, Brooklyn-based artist Tiffany Smith has been working out of the space. Using photography, videography, and installations,
Smith explores identity and cultural representation. She transformed Assembly into a portrait studio, complete with vibrant backdrops and kitschy props at the ready for people to experiment with: saccharine faux cupcakes frosted in glitter, plastic roses and hibiscuses, artificial palms, wax-print fabrics, and a wicker peacock chair.

Youth in Recess’s Assembly program worked are invited to design their own sets and sit for portraits or selfies—an interactive way for them explore how they would like to present themselves to the world. Smith is also teaching them about photography’s principles and showing them techniques to master everything from vintage 35mm film cameras to Polaroids.

A 16-year-old girl in the Assembly program excitedly shows me a couple dozen of the Polaroids they took, which are propped up like a miniature gallery show on a ledge, and explains that for her project, she’d like to explore social justice through photographs. A 17-year-old girl tells me how she plans to use photography to delve into a topic close to her: What does it feel like to be a plus-size woman? She doesn’t think the fashion industry pays enough attention to this group; through interviews and images, she wants to fill in the gap.

Participants in Assembly worked with the artist Alexandra Bell to redesign biased news stories. This is the New York Times’s front page layout when it reported on a nationalist driving his car into a Charlottesville protest.
This is how the youth redesigned the layout and rewrote the headline to more accurately reflect the story’s significance. This exercise taught them about identifying media bias and how to critically think about the news.

They then show me some of the other work they've done at Assembly, like dissecting front-page news with Alexandra Bell, a Brooklyn-based artist from Chicago who investigates how people consume and perceive information. For her most recent series, Counternarratives, Bell redesigned layouts and rewrote headlines of racially biased New York Times front pages and posted the marked-up “before” pages alongside the “afters” all across Brooklyn. (Her piece about Michael Brown, the unarmed teenager killed by a police officer in Ferguson, MO, recently gained notice.)

Without missing a beat, the girls explain to me how important it was to think critically about the news, and how they redesigned the Times's Sunday, August 13, A1 layout alongside Bell. That weekend, deadly protests erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia, because of a white nationalist rally. But the story that took up the most front-page space was about immigration in the country's heartland. The girls questioned the hierarchy of photographs: The largest photo was of two individuals standing while the image of a car barreling through a crowd—which won a Pulitzer Prize this week—was small. They noted the difference between the headline that appeared in print and online, identified bias in the writing, thought about which stories were most important for the day in
comparison to which stories received the most real estate. Then they redesigned the whole page—and did the layout better than the Times’s front page editor.

“When [Assembly participants] see the creativity that other artists bring, it makes them want to be creative,” Kerry tells me about the impact of working with artists. “And I love those moments. They can do it, and no one is telling them they can’t do it. You feel like you’re capable of things. It’s a beautiful thing. That’s what it takes for a lot of people—they have to be inspired. If you’re not inspired, you don’t know what you can do.”

Perhaps someday in the future, one of the young people who participated in Recess Assembly might become a newspaper editor, or a photographer like Smith, or an activist artist like Bell—or something entirely different. Because people saw creative potential in these young people instead of projecting a stereotype onto them, they have more of a fighting chance.