RICHARD ROSS: ARTIST-ACTIVIST

Words by Sydney Fry
Photos courtesy of Richard Ross, Juvenile In Justice, https://www.juvenile-in-justice.com/

As I walk into Richard Ross's studio, a warehouse space plastered with photos of juvenile detention centers, black and white portraits from his latest publication *First Arrests*, dozens of photos of his grandchildren, and a check signed by Angela Davis framed, he offers a passerby half of his tangerine. It seems he always has something to offer– the day of our interview it is raining heavily, and as soon as I enter the studio, he drapes a raincoat over my shoulders. Shortly thereafter, I watch him stick his head out the door and call out to a soaked passerby, "What shoe size are you? I have some dry size 12's." As I sit on the couch, which is frequently occupied by canine visitors, the dog babies of his employees, I look around and notice that the space is messy– patently messy. I can relate– "mine looks just like that," he tells me, as I open my laptop to a desktop cluttered with a chaotic assortment of images (I haven't used the trash can function for years).

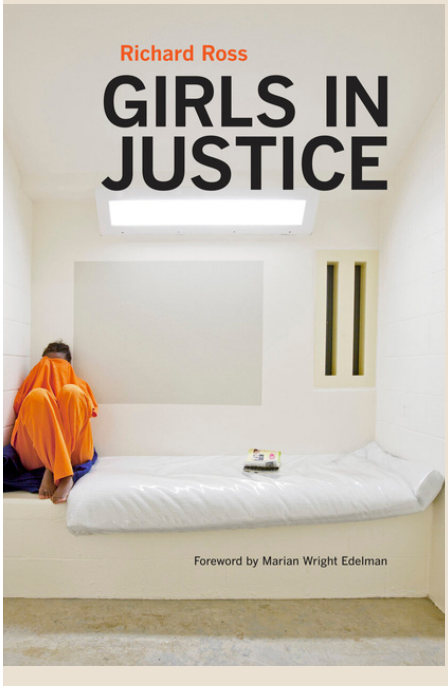
Ross is one of those people so caught up with the vision, he may be charged with a little absent-mindedness surrounding the details– it is clear that there are always a million grand and expansive thoughts circling around his head. However, from conducting an expansive project over 18 years primarily by himself, he knows when to show up– his philosophy is to always say yes and to always show up on time, which for him is fifteen minutes early. He won't miss any opportunity to speak to more people, to do more.

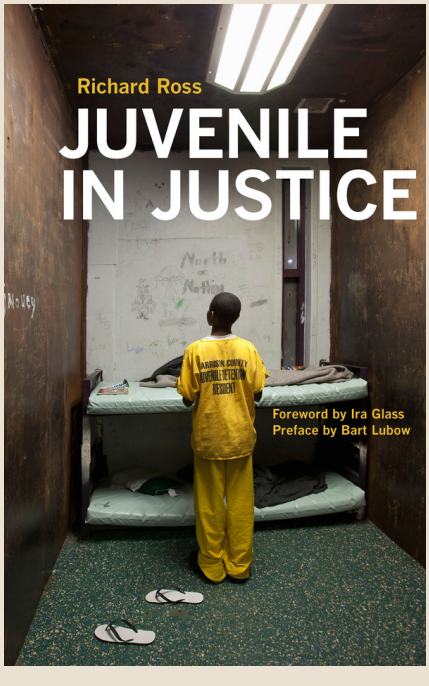
In the way he chooses to present himself, it is clear that Ross is an artist. His shock of white hair is thick and confronting. His eyes are piercing and curious. His glasses are bright green, oversized, and circular, lending a similar intensity to his gaze. However, as one might expect from a constantly traveling, never stopping artist-activist, he is comfortable and casual. Even though his appearance is almost a trademark, the way he chooses to express himself isn't relevant to his work, and he'd be the first to tell you that. Richard Ross will not allow you to capture his likeness– it simply isn't relevant to the work he is doing. If you're going to look at something, he wants you to turn your attention to the children, to the people he interviews and documents at hundreds of detention centers across the country. He wants us to disregard him and his camera– he is simply a conduit for the stories of others, those who have not been given the opportunity to share their lives with us.

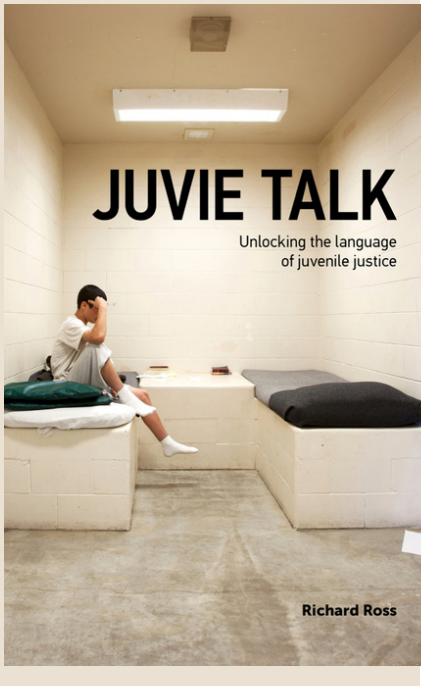
An Artist's Journey To Activism

In the late summer of 1969, as men around the country were drafted for the Vietnam War, Richard Ross made the most important U-turn of his life. Driving to Georgetown Law School with all his possessions, Ross made a sudden U-turn on the New Jersey turnpike. He couldn't bring himself to attend law school, to begin the life he had always assumed he would live. Instead, he spent the war years laying low with the woman who is now his wife (according to Ross, all of his major life decisions have involved women). He had received a degree in International Relations at Syracuse, but after the war, he decided to take a completely different direction– he enrolled at the University of Florida, studying printmaking. This brought him to UC Santa Barbara, where he taught printmaking until the university installed a dark room in the art department. It was then that he decided his interests lay in a medium more rapid and immediate than printmaking. He loved the quick result that photography gave him, and in 1981, he decided he would be the first to teach it at the university.

The flexibility of his teaching schedule provided him the opportunity to take on passion projects, as well as editorial work for the New York Times, the LA Times, and the Getty. This work took him around the world and drew his work into galleries. Witnessing the photography trends of the time, the era of Annie Liebovitz, which frequently centered around the photographing of people– of celebrities and models– Ross wanted to move away from the subject-camera dynamic, creating a series of images that captured light in various forms, emphasizing its inherent artistic quality.







The desire to photograph objects and things led him to his first project to reach a significant degree of success, *Museology*, a photo documentary series inspired by his lifelong interest in museum dioramas. He became inspired by the feeling of omnipotence that emerges when you are the viewer, pondering an animal, frozen in time and space in the natural history museum, the feeling that you are a God they can't see, that you can move and view them from all angles while they are static. He comments that, as a photographer, you similarly freeze a person in time and space.

His work took a turn at this point– he no longer felt he had to produce items that would sell at a gallery. His next project, *Waiting For The End of The World*, a photo documentary series of bomb shelters across the country, even he admits was not something that people would want to look at every day. But Ross no longer believed he needed to sell photographs in order to survive in the fine art world, and he wanted his art to be accessible to the public.

This ethos is reflected in Architecture of Authority, the project which led him to Juvenile In Justice. Architecture of Authority, an examination of the ways space can influence power and domination, brought him to elementary schools, courtrooms, army barracks, university lecture halls, the United Nations, FBI headquarters, a capital punishment chamber, and, finally, to a juvenile detention center in El Paso. Though he came to capture the architecture and interior design of the jail, he left knowing that he needed to speak more with the inhabitants of the building, the incarcerated children.

That day was 18 years ago, and since then Richard Ross hasn't stopped to breathe. His work, traveling around the country and speaking to as well as photographing hundreds of incarcerated children, is now represented in four publications, Juvenile In Justice, Girls In Justice, Juvie Talk, and upcoming First Arrests. They are also accompanied by user manuals and curricular prompts, as well as featured in guides for legislation, films, galleries, schools, and countless non-profits.

This project took a great deal of convincing on a personal, financial, and institutional level. For Ross, the vision was clear– he was going to put together a collection not intended to be displayed in a museum or a gallery, but one that was accessible and low cost, images mounted using push pins in hallways with high traffic, and in places with lots of young people, framing the conversation for the next generation. It was also important to make the images accessible to advocates, to give them stories and tools to supplement the data. He recognized the necessity of taking on this responsibility– no other organization had yet drawn attention to the treatment of American youth in detention facilities, no one had yet attached images, faces, and voices to the issue.

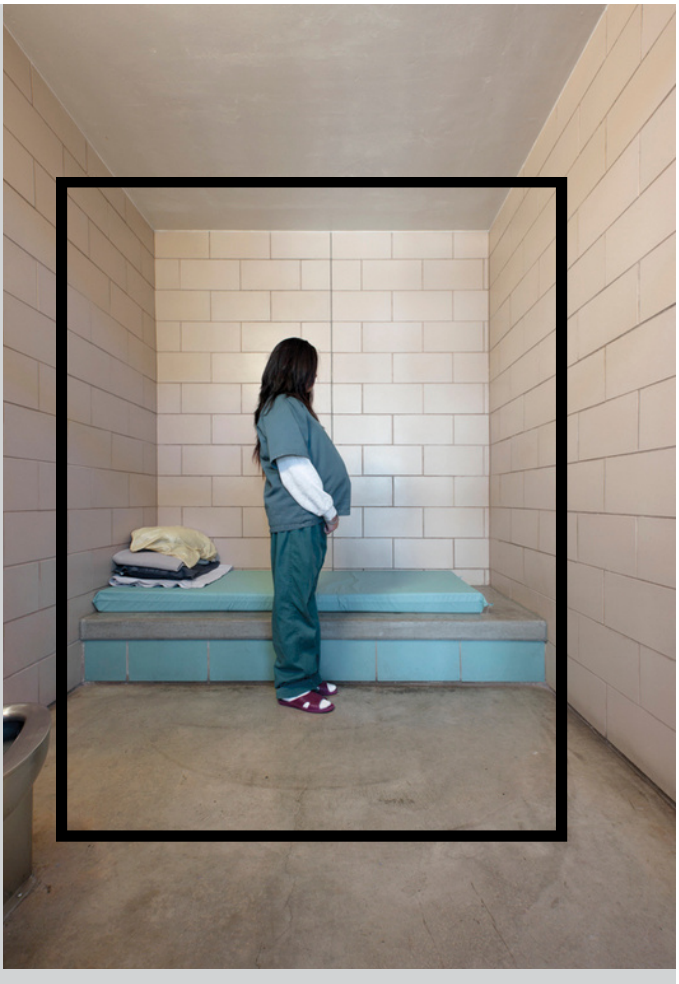
However, finding funding to take on this project was initially very difficult. He was denied grants for proposing what was deemed to be an overly ambitious plan. Even his wife called him crazy for taking on a project of this magnitude and weight– and his constant travel between states required a great deal of patience from his family. But within the first year, he accomplished what he set out to do and more, by any means necessary. Passion is a prerequisite for this kind of work, and for a schedule like his. He doesn't go to bed, he passes out; he doesn't wake up, he comes to; he's always thinking about what's next, what's going on in the lives of the kids he has come to know. As we speak, he receives updates on the parole hearing of one of the children. He is preparing to go on a sailing trip with a juvie lifer, a now elderly man who received a life sentence as a minor, who sends him almost daily emails.

Juvenile In Justice began in secret. Ross knew that if he were to publicize his work in any way, more barriers would be raised– these institutions don't want to be exposed, to have someone come in and take photos and share them with the world. After all, to quote the *Washington Post's* slogan, democracy dies in darkness. Darkness, obfuscation, and willful ignorance protect harmful institutions and prevent growth. In order to perform this work, he has to work around these institutional barriers while being careful not to sever relationships. Often, this involves balancing the requests of officials and detention centers while ensuring he is prioritizing the needs of the children first. He struggles with requests surrounding image releases, because he believes it is incredibly important to send both the subjects and their families their portraits. He speaks about the difference it can make for a parent to be sent their child's image and a note saying "I love you and this is what I'm doing…" a small way to provide some comfort to a person who no doubt experiences constant grief and worry about their child's experience being incarcerated. As the mother of his longtime friend serving a 35 year sentence says, "nobody loves you like a prison mom."

Ross also emphasizes that institutions are hoarders of bad habits, sometimes sticking to harmful practices they don't even believe in because they are so unwilling to adapt to changing times. Sometimes it is a matter of a simple lack of awareness as to what is going on within the system, the laws and systems that are minor and routine, the ones nobody thinks about, that can end up perpetuating the most harm. Ross recounts a visit to a juvenile detention center in Reno, where he met a fifth grader detained for getting in a fight at school with another fifth grader. In Reno, instead of the child being taken to the principal's office, the county had a system where a person on person fight was considered an offense, regardless of age or context. When Ross brought attention to the presence of this jailed child to the director of the detention center, the director asked him for the photograph to send to every principal in the Reno area, with the message to solve these issues in the classroom, not in the justice system. If no one had directed the director's attention to this injustice, it is likely that even more children would have faced the same fate.

And sometimes it is a matter of bringing awareness through public demonstration. In 2017, nearly half of juvenile facilities reported using solitary confinement (Layne Dowdall, Oregon Live). In some states, every single new arrival to the juvenile facility was placed in solitary confinement for the first 24 hours of their stay. Ross wanted to challenge this practice– he was granted permission by a juvenile detention center in one of these states to spend 24 hours in their solitary confinement intake cell, documented by a camera that took a photo every seven seconds. His experience was featured in

multiple major publications, and the result was significant– the state banned this practice and then banned solitary confinement for minors as a whole.



Finding Common Ground

However, large and powerful institutions like the justice system are not the only hoarders of bad habits– so are schools, organizations, and nonprofits. Ross not only experiences conflict in his dealings with presumably oppositional forces, but also from those on the same side of the fight.

He approaches this work from the perspective of an artist– Ross says his medium has never been strictly photography. In his series on light, film wasn't truly the medium he was working with, the light itself was, and, for the past 18 years, Ross's medium has been his conscience. As an artist, he feels he is in a unique position, to use his skills to bring awareness in what he perceives to be some small way, to a number of systemic, pervasive issues. He has been denied funding because of the desire to classify both him and this work he does. As an artist he doesn't qualify for certain activism grants, and as an activist, his work isn't considered 'art enough' for art grants. He has to be careful not to find himself placed in a box, because rigid classification can be the death of growth and mutual understanding.

A Path Forward

Ross also believes in finding common ground whenever possible, including across partisan lines, if we wish to inspire generational change. He writes to Clarence Thomas, and recognizes a common interest with George Bush, who sells his art in order to raise money for veterans. He tells me that the way in which you approach presumed opponents to your cause is crucial– coming in with judgment and telling someone what they *should be doing*, he says, are 'killer words'– instead, ask them how they think we could be doing better, what tactics could we be using to address a problem? Because, ultimately, despite the differences in how he and George Bush, for instance, might approach an issue, he can emphasize their shared interest in creating better outcomes for the kids of our country.

Richard Ross' work has always been future-minded. He recognizes the need for generational change in order to truly create a difference for the children he works with. This is the reason he focuses on connecting youth with these stories, focusing on display in schools and other crowded public areas, as well as in spaces populated by an older generations of lawmakers. He also believes that in order to reach people, an activist must meet them where they are, which involves making a real effort to listen– to understand the world they live in, the position they occupy, the language they speak. You can't reform an individual, but a generation, and to do so, you cannot impose your value system, your background, or your story on another person, or another community's experiences.

In order to create a sense of mutual respect and learning, Ross employs strategies he learned from *Architecture of Authority*. For example, because there is an inherent power dynamic between him and an incarcerated child, he reverses expectations by first knocking on the doors of their cells, asking permission to come in, then taking off his shoes and sitting on the floor. He is very aware of the way space and position can enforce a power differential– he ensures that his interview subject is always taller than him, sitting on a higher level, so they assume the position of authority.

I ask him how he maintains hope that these institutions will change despite their stubborn nature. Ross says he believes there is hope for growth and improvement because people like him, people like me, and people like us, who are not willing to accept things the way they are, will keep striving for the people in charge to do better. He has already noticed a significant shift in the way people perceive and treat juvenile mental health, an important step in the process of finding alternative methods to support and protect children, including counseling and social work, instead of turning automatically to juvenile detention.

His goal is ultimately to get as many people as possible to listen. He views himself simply as a conduit for the stories of others, and he can use the strategies he has developed over decades of activism and a lifetime of being an artist to let these stories be heard, to place them in the hands of people who believe we can envision and work towards a better future for our children.