

INCORRIGIBLES

About the Exhibition



Installation view of 'Incorrigibles: Bearing Witness to the Incarcerated Girls of New York', which was on view at the Charles P. Sifton Gallery at the Brooklyn Federal Courthouse from October 11th, 2018 to April 5th 2019.

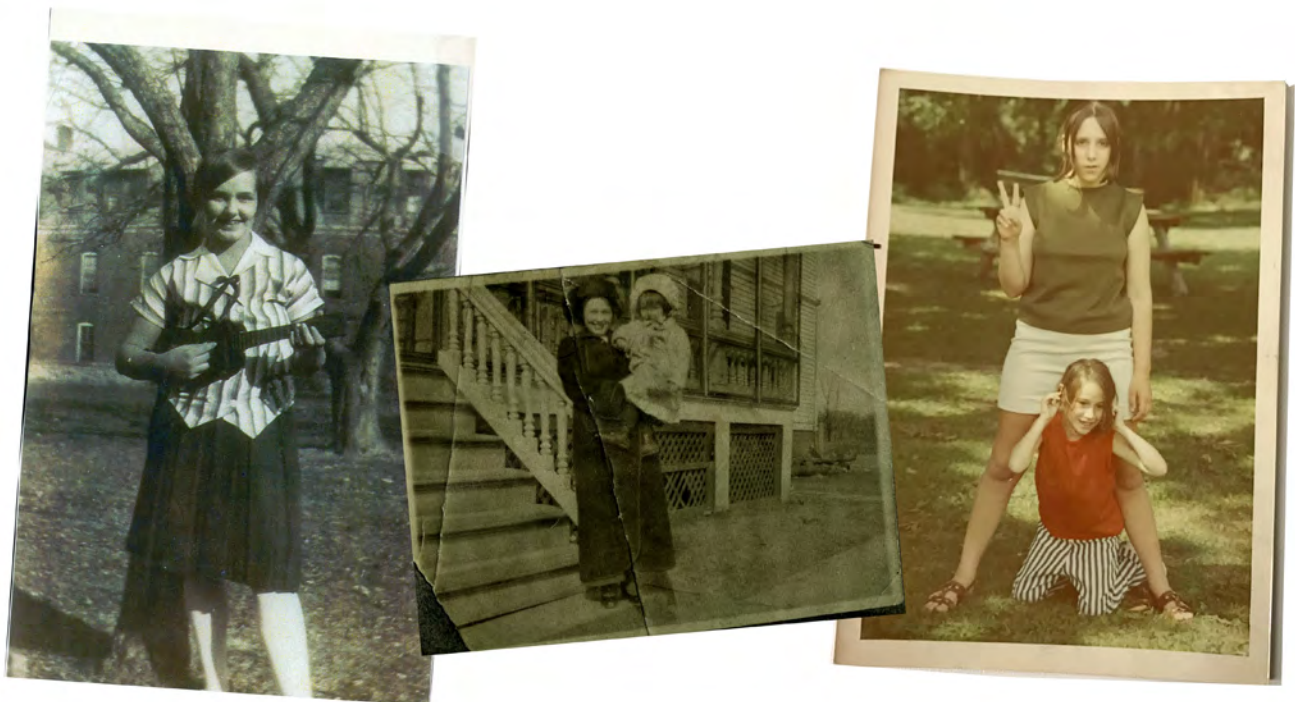
[From left to right] *Dazzle*, *Jewell*, *Sarah*, Pigmented ink on archival paper, 2013

About the Project

Incorrigibles grew from a moment in 2013 when the owner of a thrift store in Hudson, New York was parsing her way through a local yard sale for items to sell in her store. She stumbled upon a small cardboard box containing documents from the 1920's and 30's—personal photos and letters, news clippings, medical records, intake forms, and parole paperwork. She purchased the box for five dollars and shared its contents with artist Alison Cornyn. The stories and lives contained in this box were the impetus for *Incorrigibles*.

Today, *Incorrigibles* is a transmedia project that tells the stories of “incorrigible” girls in the United States over the last 100 years, beginning with New York State. The term “incorrigible,” which means “incapable of being corrected or amended,” was often used to describe girls who came into contact with the criminal-legal system. *Incorrigibles* explores the language of diagnosis and treatment, and the voices of girls who have experienced systems of confinement. Drawing on the personal narratives of young women in the carceral system, the work investigates the history and present state of juvenile justice and social services for girls through art, media and storytelling.

Presently, we are researching archival documents from the New York State Training School for Girls (1904-1975) in Hudson, New York, recording and sharing accounts of women alive today who were confined there, and organizing exhibitions and community engagement events to encourage critical analysis around youth detention and behavioral intervention.



Photographs from *Incorrigibles*, [from left to right] Cecil P, 1930s; Julia M, 1910; Andra G with younger sister Ona, 1968
Interviews with family members were recorded and edited for each of these young women who were at the NYSTSG.

Historical Context

The Women's House of Refuge, founded in 1887, became the New York State Girl's Training School in 1904. The institution was founded as a gender-separated prison intended to cure "vice" through virtuous country living. Founder Josephine Shaw Lowell believed that while environment might cause criminality, a change in surroundings might change the inclinations of troubled women. Thus, the sort of thinking that inspired America's Hudson River School parallels this reform movement, which sought to improve the treatment of women in the criminal-legal system. The Progressive Era, which saw the founding of the House of Refuge and later the Girl's Training School, also produced the female activists who secured the passage of women's voting rights laws in 1919.



Postcard from the from the Incorrigibles collection, 'Buildings of New York State Training School for Girls, Hudon N.Y.'
year unknown

Past Exhibitions

Several exhibitions of this work have been warmly received, most recently at the Brooklyn Federal Courthouse Charles P Sifton Gallery. Past exhibitions took place at Hunter Gallery, The Bronson House, Collarworks, and the Irondale Center. These displays include large-scale period photographs of incarcerated girls, sound clips from oral histories of women, and family members of women formerly housed at The Training School, facsimiles of hand-written letters and documents, a short film, and two artist books. Beth Thielen's "American Dream" book is in the collection of the Getty Museum.

Each exhibition included related public programs to engage local audiences. A public forum called "Bearing Witness to the Incarcerated Girls and Women of New York" drew an audience of over 250 participants at the Brooklyn Law School in January, 2019. Our activities contribute to the goal of activating hidden archives by leveraging the power of art along with today's digital storytelling techniques.

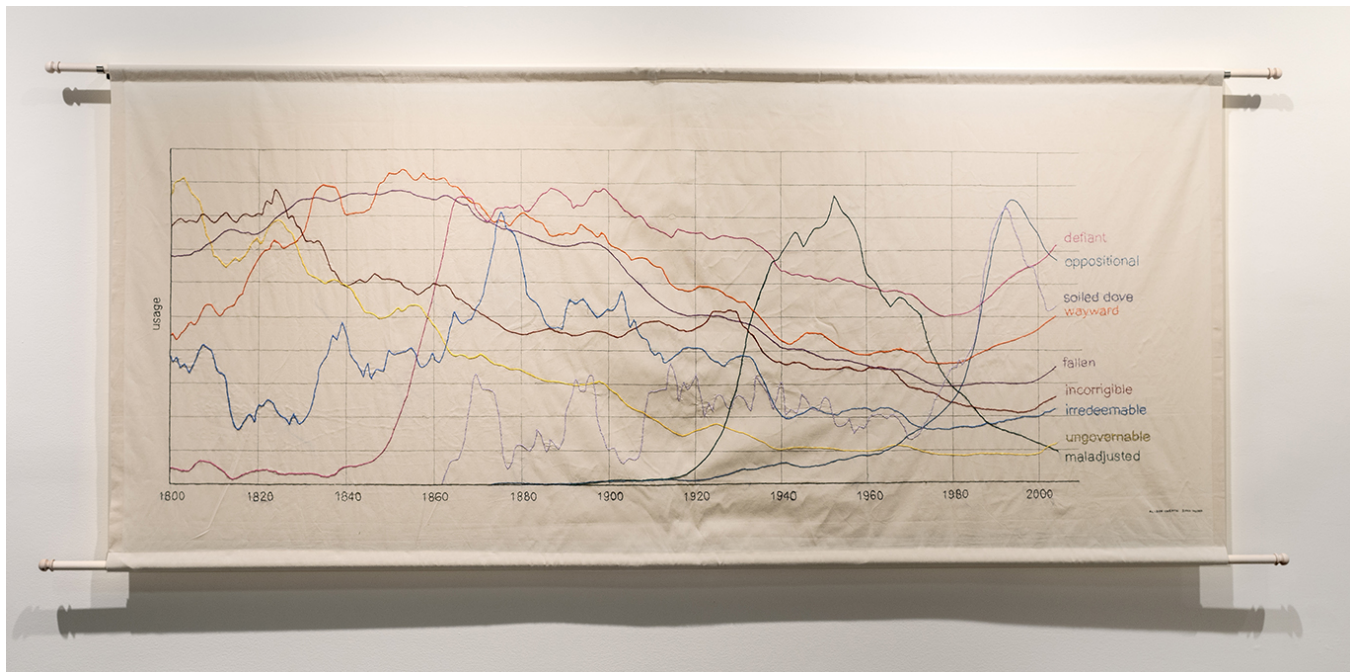
The *Incorrigibles* exhibition fits in with today's debates about the origins of criminality, our changing attitudes towards youth transgressions, and our policies of crime and punishment. What's remarkable is the persistence of ideas about containing and confining girls whose behavior would hardly lift an eyebrow today, even though the term "incorrigible" is still applied to disobedient girls. More stories are emerging from survivors of such institutions who are building a new vision for girls entangled with the justice system. These stories offer an important voice from inside that show how the telling and sharing of lived experiences intimately connects the public to a deep and significant history.



Installation view of 'Incorrigibles' at Irondale Center in Brooklyn, New York.



Installation view of 'If These Walls Could Talk' exhibited at The Bronson House on the grounds of Hudson Correctional Facility (formerly New York State Training School for Girls). Presented in collaboration with Historic Hudson.



'Language Sampler' Alison Cornyn and Diana Weymar, Muslin and cotton thread wall hanging, 2018

Wall text: This embroidery charts the ebbs and flows of words in culture (between 1800 and 2008) according to Google's n-grams: **defiant**, **oppositional**, **soiled dove**, **wayward**, **fallen**, **incorrigible**, **irredeemable**, **ungovernable**, **maladjusted**. Words deemed to be too obvious in their brutality are replaced by words with double meanings and metaphors; there is a game of hide-and seek between the language of repression and representation. While the label of being 'incorrigible' is still used in NY as a subcategory of PINS (Person In Need of Supervision), its overall popularity has decreased. In the current DSM (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), we now have 'oppositional defiant disorder'. Its symptoms include: "loss of temper, argumentative, and defiant."



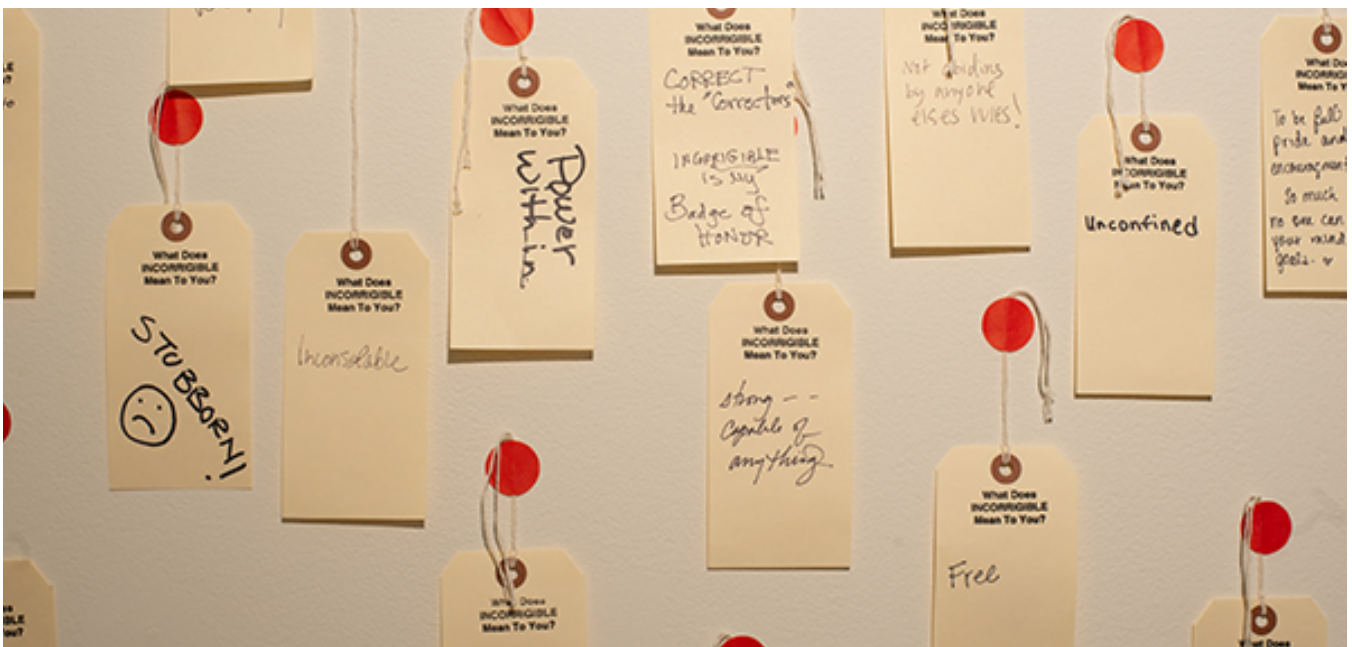
'American Dream' Beth Thielen, charbonnel ink mono-prints on black Arches Cover, variant edition of twenty, 2018



Story Archive installation in 'Incorrigibles: Bearing Witness to the Incarcerated Girls of New York' at The Brooklyn Federal Courthouse in Brooklyn, New York.



'Incorrigibles Book,' 2nd draft one-of-a-kind artist book, 2017



Installation in the Brooklyn Courthouse exhibition (2019) shows visitors posting their own definitions of the word "incorrigible."



'Incorrigibles: Bearing Witness to the Incarcerated Girls of New York' was on view at the Charles P. Sifton Gallery at the Brooklyn Federal Courthouse from October 11th, 2018 to April 5th 2019.

Exhibition Elements

Portraits: Large-scale portraits printed with pigmented ink on archival paper, approx. 84"x 44" each

Dazzle
Ella Fitzgerald
Jewell Ward
Lila Thomas
Sarah Greco
Linda Odell
Anna Murphy

Graveyard Installation: Postcards printed with pigmented ink on archival paper, approx. 70"x 44" each

Fire Drill Graphic front
Handwritten Message back

Framed photographs, approx. 28"x20" each:

Cemetary, graveyards, and grounds

Story Archive Installation: table, solid state audio player, and headphones included ([link to SoundCloud](#))

Liz S. - committed 1970's
Ona G. - talks about her sister Andra, committed 1960's
Marie P. - talks about her mother Cecil, committed 1930's
Sharon A. - committed 1970's
Michelle R. - committed 1970's
Cynthia B. - committed 1970's
'Incorrigibles Book, Draft 2' Alison Cornyn. Artist Book, one-of-a-kind, work in progress

Incorrigibles Film, 13 minutes, monitor and media player included ([link to Vimeo](#))

Other Artworks:

'American Dream' Beth Thielen, Charbonnel ink mono-prints on black Arches Cover Artist Book, variant edition of twenty, 2018
'Language Sampler' Alison Cornyn and Diana Weymer, Cotton thread wall hanging, 2018
'Words of the Believer' Aaliyah Mandley, acrylic paint on canvas, 2018
'Power in Her Growth' Aaliyah Mandley, acrylic paint on canvas, 2018

As the exhibition travels to new cities and venues, we will connect with local artists working on issues around girls and womens incarceration and will incorporate their work into the exhibition.

Alison Cornyn is an interdisciplinary artist whose work often focuses on the criminal justice system. Merging photography, media, and technology, she creates engaging environments, both online and as physical installations. She is a founding partner and the Creative Director of Picture Projects, a Brooklyn-based studio that produces in-depth new media projects about some of the most pressing social issues of our day, through the investigation of complex stories from multiple perspectives. She has worked extensively on large-scale collaborative projects and is Creative Director of States of Incarceration and the Guantanamo Public Memory Project, the Humanities Action Lab, the Prison Public Memory Project (co-founder), and Incorrigibles.

Kathleen Hulser is the public historian for *Incorrigibles*. Hulser has taught history and urban studies at The New School, New York University and Pace University. She has curated many shows about New York at the New York Historical Society and more recently at the New York Transit Museum.