

Between Decorative Justice and Carceral Aesthetics: A Critical Comparative Analysis of Koestler Arts (UK) and Rehabilitation Through the Arts (US) within the Reform–Abolition Framework

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Abstract

In recent years, prison-based arts programmes have evolved into prominent cultural phenomena, yet their political implications remain deeply contested. Situated within the reform–abolition debate, this article offers a critical comparative analysis of two representative programmes: Koestler Arts in the United Kingdom and Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) in the United States. Drawing on a four-fold typology of prison arts developed from Cheliotis's work, his concept of "decorative justice," and Fleetwood's framework of "carceral aesthetics," the article examines the tensions among three registers of evaluation: participant benefit, institutional positioning, and political effect. Based on secondary scholarship, documentary analysis, and cultural criticism, the analysis reveals that while such programmes generate tangible benefits for incarcerated individuals, they simultaneously produce public-facing cultural products—exhibitions, films, and media coverage—that render mass incarceration aesthetically and affectively legible, and thereby potentially sustainable, within the public imagination. This dynamic may inadvertently reinforce the carceral system rather than advance the structural transformation demanded by abolitionist critique. The article proposes a tripartite evaluative framework to move beyond single-dimensional outcome measurement, offering new analytical pathways for research on prison arts.

Keywords

Prison arts; decorative justice; carceral aesthetics; prison abolition; Koestler Arts; RTA; reform–abolition debate.

1. Introduction

In November 2024, Koestler Arts' seventeenth annual exhibition—*No Comment*, co-curated by Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller and John Costi, a formerly incarcerated artist—opened at London's Southbank Centre [1]. Visitors engaged with over 200 works of visual art, audio, and writing selected from over 7,500 submissions received that year from prisons, secure hospitals, secure children's homes, and immigration removal centres across the United Kingdom. The same year, audiences in the United States and the United Kingdom encountered *Sing Sing*, Greg Kwedar's feature film depicting Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) at *Sing Sing* Correctional Facility in New York State. The film received three Academy Award nominations in 2025. Collectively, these developments reflect a significant cultural shift: prison-based arts programmes have evolved into prominent cultural phenomena increasingly accessed and interpreted by non-incarcerated audiences.

This heightened visibility raises a question that is gaining traction in scholarly discourse: What, precisely, do such programmes accomplish—and for whom? Existing scholarship offers two divergent interpretive frameworks. One body of research, grounded in participant interviews and quantitative outcome measures, positions the arts as catalysts for enhanced self-esteem, strengthened social connection, renewed hope, and reduced recidivism [2, 3]. A second, more

critical tradition challenges this view. Cheliotis characterises prison arts programmes as a form of “decorative justice” —an aesthetic veneer that makes the carceral system appear humane without altering its underlying logic [4]. Similarly, Thompson, writing from the perspective of applied theatre practice, cautions that an overriding emphasis on quantifiable outcomes risks obscuring the actual effects—and often the more intangible, relational, or transformative dimensions—of such practices [5]. This prompts a central analytical question: To what extent might these programmes pursue multiple, and potentially contradictory, aims simultaneously? This article contends that such contradictions are not anomalies to be resolved but constitutive features of the field itself. To substantiate this claim, it undertakes a critical comparative analysis of Koestler Arts in the UK and RTA in the United States. Although these programmes operate within distinct carceral contexts, employ different artistic disciplines, and function according to divergent institutional logics, they share a fundamental condition: both must continually justify their existence within carceral systems that abolitionist scholars—from Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore to Gina Dent—argue are irredeemably flawed and therefore demand abolition, not reform [6-8]. Whether or not one fully endorses this abolitionist position, engaging it seriously necessitates a fundamental recalibration of how prison arts programmes are evaluated—shifting focus from instrumental metrics toward analytical frameworks attentive to power, contradiction, and structural constraint.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 delineates the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis. Section 3 provides a concise historical overview and typological classification of prison-based arts programmes. Section 4 presents a unified comparative case study of Koestler Arts and RTA, situating each organisation within its respective national carceral context and analysing their practices through the lens of the reform–abolition debate. Section 5 critically engages Nicole Fleetwood’s concept of “carceral aesthetics” as an alternative interpretive framework [9]. Finally, Section 6 revisits the central constitutive contradiction identified at the outset.

2. Theoretical Framework: Prisons, Reform, and Abolition

Two intellectual traditions are especially consequential for evaluating the role of prison arts programmes. The first—associated above all with Michel Foucault—conceives the modern prison as a disciplinary apparatus. The second—the abolitionist tradition—maintains that prisons are inherently unreformable and must therefore be abolished. Both traditions fundamentally contest the prison’s stated objective: the “reformation of criminals.”

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces the historical transformation of penal practice—from public, corporal, and spectacular forms of punishment to enclosed, institutionalised systems grounded in discipline, surveillance, and correction [10]. Within this shift, the condemned body becomes the site of a more economical, pervasive, and systematic regime of training and regulation. Foucault contends that the modern prison does not constitute a humane advance over earlier punitive practices; rather, it instantiates a more refined, deeply institutionalised, and far-reaching modality of power. This insight bears directly on prison-based arts initiatives: much of their dominant discourse is articulated in the language of reformist correctional policy. When such programmes claim that artistic engagement fosters prisoner “rehabilitation,” their ostensibly progressive rhetoric frequently reproduces the very disciplinary logic Foucault identified—namely, the production of governable subjects whose conduct aligns with prevailing social norms.

By contrast, the abolitionist tradition advances a more radical critique. Angela Davis contends that prisons function less to redress harm than to absorb the social crises—such as poverty, systemic racism, addiction, and untreated illness—that other public institutions have neglected or abandoned. In her formulation, “prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human

beings" [6]. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* elaborates the political economy underpinning this argument. By tracing the dramatic expansion of incarceration in California from the 1980s onward, Gilmore demonstrates that the prison boom was not a response to rising crime rates but a state-driven strategy for managing four interlocking surpluses: capital, land, state capacity, and labour [7]. Prison, on this account, constitutes both a geographical and an economic project.

Dent extends this argument into the cultural domain. In the co-authored *Abolition. Feminism. Now* and through the *Visualizing Abolition* project at the University of California, Santa Cruz, she explores what abolition renders visible—and, crucially, what it enables us to imagine [8]. For Dent, abolition is not merely a negative critique of incarceration but a positive, generative project: the collective work of envisioning and building social arrangements that would render prisons obsolete. In the UK, *Abolitionist Futures* adapts these arguments to the British context, drawing on foundational insights from Mathiesen and the broader tradition of critical criminology [11-13].

This conceptual shift substantially reorients the evaluative framework. Within a reformist paradigm, key questions concern whether interventions reduce recidivism, enhance individual wellbeing, and support successful post-release reintegration. By contrast, an abolitionist framework introduces a second, critical register: even programmes that yield tangible benefits for participants may simultaneously reinforce—indeed, legitimate—the very penal system that confines them in the first place. This dual function is precisely what Cheliotis captures with the term *decorative justice* [4]. His critique is not that prison-based arts initiatives are inherently ineffective or devoid of value; rather, it is that they can also serve as instruments of institutional camouflage—masking structural violence beneath a veneer of benevolence.

Drawing on Cheliotis, this article distinguishes four overlapping yet analytically distinct phenomena: (1) institutional arts and arts education programmes inside prisons; (2) art created by incarcerated people, with or without programme support; (3) the strategic appropriation of artistic practice by penal institutions for administrative, rhetorical, or legitimating purposes; and (4) arts and cultural productions about prisons created by non-incarcerated outsiders [14]. Much of the conceptual confusion in existing scholarship arises from conflating these categories. Crucially, defending the artistic agency and expressive power of incarcerated people does not, by logical necessity, entail endorsing the institutional frameworks—or the state-sanctioned programmes—through which that art is mediated, curated, or displayed.

Building on these theoretical resources, this article proposes a tripartite evaluative framework organised around three registers: participant benefit, institutional positioning, and political effect. The following sections apply this framework to the cases of Koestler Arts and RTA.

3. The History and Typology of Prison Arts: From Peer-Led Practice to Institutionalised Programmes

Arts engagement within prisons is not a recent phenomenon. Historical scholarship on US institutions documents sustained, peer-led writing, performance, and musical creation among incarcerated individuals dating back to the late nineteenth century [15, 16]. The 1970s and 1980s saw a significant expansion of arts programmes in US prisons—most notably California's Arts-in-Corrections programme, which launched in 1977 [17]—as well as the growth of college-in-prison initiatives [17]. University-based efforts such as the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan (founded in 1990) followed. Although these programmes were substantially curtailed following the 1994 federal repeal of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, several continued in adapted forms. The federal ban on Pell Grant access for incarcerated learners was lifted in July 2023, after twenty-nine years. In contrast, the UK prison

arts landscape remains comparatively fragmented: although arts education has long been embedded within statutory prison education provision, charitable organisations have played a central and enduring role—supplementing official curricula since at least the mid-twentieth century [18].

The landscape of prison-based arts is increasingly defined by professionally administered programmes—predominantly charities or nonprofit organisations—that operate across multiple correctional institutions and generate outputs accessible to the public. In the UK, Koestler Arts administers an annual awards programme and national exhibitions; Geese Theatre Company delivers performance-based interventions targeting offending behaviour; the Irene Taylor Trust facilitates collaborative music-making projects; Odd Arts delivers applied theatre in criminal justice settings; and Company Chameleon runs dance programmes in prisons. In the United States, institutionalised efforts include Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA), the William James Association’s Arts in Corrections programme, PEN America’s Prison and Justice Writing initiative, and the University of Michigan’s Prison Creative Arts Project. While most of these initiatives articulate their mission in terms of rehabilitation, education, and personal development, a growing number of artists and initiatives informed by US-based abolitionist frameworks—such as the Visualizing Abolition project and the work of Maria Gaspar and Mark Loughney—are deliberately reframing their work away from rehabilitative discourse [9, 19, 20].

This four-fold classification is especially salient here, for it guards against the common error of treating an entire organisation—or, worse, an entire carceral institution—as a single, homogeneous instance of “prison art.” As outlined in Section 2, any given programme may simultaneously operate across several of the four categories; specifying which one (or ones) is at stake is therefore a precondition of any credible impact claim [21].

The two case studies that follow focus principally on the first category—formal programmes—while remaining alert to the ways in which Koestler Arts and RTA inevitably intersect with the other three.

4. Comparative Case Studies: Koestler Arts and Rehabilitation Through the Arts

This section undertakes a critical comparative analysis of two leading prison-based arts initiatives operating within divergent national carceral frameworks: Koestler Arts in the UK and RTA in the US. While both organisations facilitate artistic engagement among incarcerated individuals, they exhibit marked differences in institutional governance, programme duration and scalability, public profile and media representation, and—crucially—their embeddedness within, and functional relationship to, their respective carceral systems. Analysing the two side by side, rather than separately, reveals how the constitutive tension between individual participant benefit and systemic legitimation is variably articulated, negotiated, and obscured across organisational models and national policy landscapes. The section is structured into three analytical subsections: (4.1) the UK carceral context and Koestler Arts; (4.2) the US carceral context and RTA; and (4.3) a cross-contextual analysis of decorative justice as a governing logic shaping both programmes.

4.1. The United Kingdom: Koestler Arts within the UK Carceral Context

The prison system in England and Wales entered 2025 in a state of openly acknowledged crisis. With a prison population of approximately 87,116 in England and Wales on 30 March 2025—the highest per capita rate in Western Europe—the system faces profound structural strain relative to national population size [22, 23]. The Ministry of Justice oversees His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), which manages a mixed estate comprising around

fifteen privately operated prisons alongside a publicly run sector subjected to successive rounds of austerity-driven cost-cutting. In 2024, the government introduced the early release of thousands of prisoners under SDS40—a scheme explicitly designed to alleviate overcrowding so acute that it jeopardised the system's operational integrity [24]. Independent oversight bodies—including HM Inspectorate of Prisons and the Prison Reform Trust—have documented deteriorating conditions: extended periods of cell confinement, severely curtailed access to education and rehabilitation programmes, and escalating rates of self-harm. The official rehabilitative purposes of imprisonment stand in increasingly stark tension with the lived realities of incarceration—a disjunction that Sim identifies as symptomatic of the persistent failure of institutional rhetoric—particularly the language of “decency”—to reconcile stated aims with material practice [13].

Koestler Arts—the UK's leading charity for arts in prisons—operates within this challenging context. Founded in 1962 by Arthur Koestler, writer and former political prisoner, the organisation administers an annual awards programme open to individuals detained in UK prisons, secure hospitals, and immigration removal centres. According to its 2024 awards guidance and results, Koestler Arts received more than 7,500 submissions across more than fifty artistic disciplines [25, 26]. Prizes are tiered as follows: Bronze (£20), Silver (£40), Gold (£60), and Platinum (£100), supplemented by special awards for entrants under twenty-five and for first-time participants. Each year approximately 200 selected works are exhibited at London's Southbank Centre—a partnership established in 2008—in an exhibition with a different guest curator from the cultural sector. Past curators include Antony Gormley, Benjamin Zephaniah, Sarah Lucas, and Ai Weiwei, whose 2022 *Freedom* exhibition explicitly engaged themes of state confinement, agency, and expressive autonomy. More recently, Jeremy Deller's 2024 No Comment exhibition—co-curated with John Costi—took its title from “the lack of opportunities for people in secure settings to share their voice and opinions” [27]. The organisation also runs an arts mentoring programme for people leaving prison and publishes Koestler Voices, an anthology series of poetry from prisons. Funding is drawn from Arts Council England, HM Prison and Probation Service, charitable trusts, and private donors.

Ai Weiwei's 2022 exhibition *Freedom* warrants brief consideration, as it renders the curatorial politics of Koestler Arts unusually explicit [28]. The installation comprised fifteen cell-like spaces, each based on the size of a typical UK prison cell (roughly 1.8 by 3 metres). Visitors entered these spaces to encounter the artworks housed within—an arrangement that evoked, in spatial and experiential terms, what Fleetwood terms “penal space” (see Section 5) even as it temporarily situated non-incarcerated audiences within its physical logic [9]. Ai Weiwei, who was detained by the Chinese state for eighty-one days in 2011 on suspicion of tax evasion, brought to the curation a deeply personal understanding of detention—a perspective few prior Koestler curators had shared. He reviewed the more than 6,500 entries in person at the Koestler Arts Centre, which sits beside HMP Wormwood Scrubs, a prison he also visited. The exhibition exemplified the most ambitious potential of Koestler Arts' institutional model: a curatorial framework that leverages architectural intervention and the curator's lived authority to draw free audiences into closer proximity with the spatial conditions from which the artworks emerged. Yet it also laid bare an inherent limitation of the form itself: even Ai Weiwei could not exhibit the works within the prison walls. Instead, they were transferred to the Southbank Centre, while the audience retained full freedom of movement and access.

These operational details are consequential, as they fundamentally shape the scope of what the programme can—and cannot—achieve. The annual cycle, the modest cash prizes (symbolic rather than transformative), the reliance on volunteer judges, and the centrality of the Southbank exhibition collectively reflect a distinct institutional configuration. Koestler Arts is not a rehabilitation provider in the manner of an in-prison education department; rather, it is a curatorial and advocacy organisation whose principal public-facing output is an exhibition.

As Cox and Gelsthorpe observe, the relationships such organisations cultivate with the prison service and individual prison governors are inherently delicate: access is contingent upon sustained institutional goodwill—and that goodwill carries its own priorities and predispositions [21].

Cheliotis's concept of "decorative justice" applies here with particular force. The Southbank exhibition facilitates engagement with the artistic work of incarcerated individuals within a framework that humanises participants without interrogating the systemic structures that confine them. The exhibition does not misrepresent its subject: the artworks are authentic, the contributors are real people with lived experience of imprisonment, and their narratives convey genuine, first-hand experiences. Yet the cultural event it constitutes performs a specific ideological function for its external audience: it frames the encounter with mass incarceration as an aesthetic and affective experience—rather than as a catalyst for political accountability or systemic critique. Visitors may leave moved, even unsettled; yet they are not required to confront the fundamental question of whether the carceral system that produced these works ought to exist at all.

The curatorial framework arguably intensifies this decorative justice effect. Throughout the exhibition, visitors are repeatedly reminded that the artists are currently or formerly incarcerated; wall texts foreground biographical details in a manner that the same institution would never adopt for non-incarcerated artists. Works aligned with certain affective registers—such as sorrow, hope and transcendence—are more readily selected and displayed, whereas those expressing rage, systemic indictment, or outright refusal appear to be underrepresented. The 2024 exhibition title *No Comment* is itself revealing: while it gestures towards the systemic silencing of incarcerated voices, the exhibition simultaneously produces—and circulates—that voice in a form carefully curated for non-incarcerated audiences. This dynamic reflects the broader pattern Thompson identified in applied theatre: artistic practice becomes legible and socially acceptable only when it demonstrably evidences individual transformation [5].

A more nuanced and generous interpretation is not only possible but warranted. Koestler Arts has strategically leveraged its public platform to advocate for sentencing reform, highlight critical gaps in mental health provision within the justice system, and deliver tangible material support to artists following their release. Research on other programmes points in the same direction: Anderson et al. document substantial self-reported psychological and social benefits among participants in Scottish prison-based arts programmes [29]. Similarly, Atherton et al., in an interview-based study of the Soft Touch Arts project at HMP Leicester, identify "hope" as the central, recurrent theme across participants' narratives—suggesting that sustained engagement in purposeful creative practice cultivates the capacity to envision alternative futures and helps mitigate the relational harms inflicted by incarceration [2].

To dismiss these documented benefits outright would be analytically unsound; indeed, doing so would risk a form of epistemic paternalism that refuses to credit participants' own accounts of their experience. From an abolitionist standpoint—already elaborated in Section 2—this raises a further question: What kind of imagination does such work sustain? If prison-based arts programmes consistently produce works that audiences interpret as redemptive—as evidence that "even here" the human spirit endures—they may, collectively, constrain rather than expand the imaginative horizons of abolition. In doing so, they render the prison culturally legible and even habitable, rather than rendering it politically unthinkable.

4.2. The United States: RTA within the US Carceral Context

The US carceral system is the largest in the world. Approximately 2 million individuals are currently incarcerated across federal and state prisons, local jails, juvenile detention facilities, and immigration detention centres—accounting for roughly one-sixth of the global prison

population despite representing less than five percent of the world's total population [30]. The system is structured by profound racial disparities rooted in the legacy of slavery and codified by the explicit constitutional exception in the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude "except as a punishment for crime." Drawing on distinct methodological approaches, Alexander and Gilmore trace the historical development and institutional consolidation of this system [31, 7]. Hartman and U'guez extend this analysis to examine processes of racial subjection and forms of resistance within carceral spaces [32, 33]. Collectively, these scholars argue that the US prison is not an aberration from American liberal democracy but rather one of its constitutive institutions.

Sing Sing Correctional Facility operates within this broader context. A maximum-security prison located in Ossining, New York, it houses roughly 1,500 individuals, the majority of whom are Black and Latino. RTA was founded there in 1996 by Katherine Vockins, an external volunteer who began facilitating theatre workshops with incarcerated men. Having expanded from Sing Sing to facilities including Fishkill, Woodbourne, and Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, RTA now reports programmes in thirteen prisons, eleven of them in New York State. According to RTA's own figures, fewer than 3% of its programme alumni recidivated within three years of release—a rate substantially lower than the national average (exceeding 60%) [34]. While this statistic is internally generated and has not undergone independent audit, it is widely repeated in media coverage and advocacy materials.

RTA's model is more sustained than Koestler's. Programme participants commit to weekly facility-based workshops, conducted over multiple months, integrating theatre with creative writing, dance, and life-skills instruction. Its curriculum is organised around a rotating cycle of productions—spanning Shakespearean drama, modern American plays, Greek tragedy, and original collaborative works. Performances are staged within correctional facilities for incarcerated audiences and select external guests. The Post-Release Programme delivers sustained, structured support to formerly incarcerated alumni under community supervision—including mentoring, vocational guidance, and opportunities for continued artistic engagement through alumni-led productions. Moller's 2003 ethnography captures the daily rhythms and embodied practices of this work [35]; Halperin et al. report that RTA participants tended to pursue more education beyond the GED than matched non-participants, although the differences did not reach statistical significance [3]; and Moller's 2011 study of Project Slam found that longer-serving RTA members committed significantly fewer disciplinary infractions and spent less time in solitary confinement than a comparison group [36]. Practitioner accounts gathered in Thompson's edited collection on prison theatre point to the same hallmarks of enduring programmes: sustained ensemble-based practice and continuity of support after release [37].

The theme of "hope" that Atherton et al. identified among participants in a UK prison arts programme resonates clearly in RTA's published materials and self-representations [2]. Here again, the abolitionist critique developed earlier applies: while fostering hope among participants is valuable, it does not, in itself, address the systemic inequities or the disciplinary logics underpinning their incarceration. Within Thompson's conceptual framework, the programme's persistent emphasis on hope risks functioning as an affective return—an emotional yield directed toward funders, external stakeholders, and the institution itself—irrespective of whether transformative change meaningfully extends beyond the confines of the workshop setting [5].

The operational difference between the two programmes is significant. Koestler operates through a public exhibition cycle; RTA, by contrast, functions via a sustained ensemble-based process whose outputs are largely experienced internally—within the carceral institution itself. Until 2024, RTA's external visibility derived primarily from scholarly publications and the organisation's own communications.

That changed with Greg Kwedar's feature film *Sing Sing*, loosely inspired by RTA's work and the lived experiences of John "Divine G" Whitfield—an RTA participant who was released on parole after roughly twenty-five years in prison and who continues to maintain his innocence. The film stars Colman Domingo as Divine G, with many supporting roles portrayed by formerly incarcerated RTA alumni performing versions of themselves, including Clarence "Divine Eye" Maclin.

Distributed by A24, *Sing Sing* garnered widespread critical acclaim and three Academy Award nominations in 2025—a level of cultural visibility unprecedented for a prison arts programme. Against this backdrop, two scenes merit close attention. The film opens with Divine G (Colman Domingo) delivering the closing lines of a fully staged production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—complete with professional lighting and costumes—to enthusiastic applause from his fellow ensemble members [38]. This choice is deliberate: the audience first encounters incarcerated men not through images of confinement or institutional control, but through their engagement with the Western theatrical canon. Shakespeare performed by an incarcerated person compels viewers to acknowledge a full, complex humanity—one systematically obscured, if not actively negated, by the carceral system. In doing so, the film positions its protagonists as cultural producers first and foremost, and only secondarily as prisoners. Later, during a dress rehearsal for the ensemble's new production, Divine G learns that his clemency appeal has been denied—while Divine Eye, his long-time ensemble peer, has been granted parole. The ensuing scene is neither subdued nor cathartic, but volatile: Domingo's Divine G suffers an emotional breakdown, attempts to physically confront Divine Eye, and abruptly walks out of the very production he helped conceive and develop [39]. This sequence deliberately subverts the redemptive narrative arcs that have long dominated mainstream prison storytelling—from *The Shawshank Redemption* onward. Art does not transform the carceral reality; it transforms only the manner in which that reality is endured—and even this transformation may fail. In this regard, *Sing Sing* demonstrates a more acute political awareness than most films within the prison drama genre.

The play rehearsed throughout *Sing Sing* is an actual RTA production: *Breakin' the Mummy's Code*, written by Brent Buell, the RTA volunteer portrayed in the film by Paul Raci [40]. This play is distinctive: a time-travelling comedy that shifts fluidly between contemporary New York, ancient Egypt, the American Wild West, and Shakespearean England—conceived expressly for the compositional and performative capacities of the RTA ensemble. The decision to foreground such a deliberately playful, absurdist work—rather than a more sober, autobiographical drama about incarceration—reveals a fundamental aspect of RTA's operational ethos. The programme does not require participants to dramatise their own carceral experience; instead, it offers a structured yet open framework within which they may attempt any creative endeavour. This distinction carries significant implications for abolitionist critique. A programme requiring participants to narrate their incarceration would arguably reinforce the disciplinary logic of individual rehabilitation; by contrast, one that empowers them to write comedies set in ancient Egypt advances a more modest—but also more honest—claim. Kwedar, co-screenwriter of the film, explicitly identifies this dynamic as the affective core of the project, arguing that the interplay between the production's playful creative rhythm and the unforgiving institutional setting forms the defining emotional undercurrent of the entire work. [41]. Read through Nicole Fleetwood's conceptual lens (see Section 5), this interplay constitutes a dynamic negotiation between penal time and creative time: participants are not asked to redeem or justify their time but are granted time to make something the institution neither anticipated nor authorized [9]. And yet, as a cultural artefact, *Sing Sing* occupies the same field of visibility as Koestler Arts' Southbank exhibitions. The film renders mass incarceration legible to its audience not as a system that ought not to exist, but as a site of human creativity and dignity. To observe this is not to diminish the film's value; rather, it is to note that the cultural economy of prison-based

arts—particularly in 2025—produces high-visibility events whose symbolic resonance may diverge from the structural aims of abolitionist praxis. Cheliotis's analytical framework applies to RTA in ways subtly distinct from its application to Koestler Arts. As an institutional programme, RTA is more sustained, more pedagogically rigorous, and more explicitly oriented toward post-release support. Yet the institutional deployment of art—the third category, in which penal institutions draw on artistic practice for legitimating purposes—is amplified both by the film *Sing Sing* and by RTA's growing public profile. For US audiences, the film and its surrounding media coverage perform a function analogous to that of Koestler Arts' exhibitions for UK audiences: they cultivate an image of the carceral system as a space in which, against formidable odds, the human spirit can be nurtured and affirmed. This is true in specific instances. Nevertheless, from an abolitionist perspective, it is precisely this kind of narrative—affirming the system's capacity for redemptive exception—that the carceral apparatus relies upon to sustain its legitimacy and perpetuate its operation.

4.3. Comparative Analysis: Decorative Justice Across Contexts

This subsection brings the two cases together to show how both initiatives—despite divergent organisational architectures—operate under a shared structural imperative: the ongoing legitimization of their presence within carceral systems that, from an abolitionist standpoint, are irredeemable. This condition gives rise to functionally analogous manifestations of decorative justice, albeit instantiated through distinct institutional logics and representational modalities.

In Koestler Arts' case, decorative justice operates principally through curated public exhibitions. The Southbank Centre exhibition renders incarceration legible to non-incarcerated audiences via aesthetic mediation—foregrounding individual narratives of creativity and resilience while systematically occluding the structural conditions (e.g., racialised sentencing, austerity-driven prison expansion, chronic staff shortages) that produce those narratives. Read through Cheliotis's critique, such exhibitions operate as an aesthetic veneer: they humanise incarcerated individuals and, by extension, the institutions that confine them—without subjecting the legitimacy, logic, or material foundations of those institutions to critical scrutiny [4].

RTA, by contrast, enacts decorative justice through sustained ensemble practice and its subsequent cultural translation. The feature film *Sing Sing* functions as a high-fidelity amplification mechanism, projecting RTA's work onto a global stage and recasting incarcerated participants not as objects of state punishment but as skilled cultural producers. While this reframing affirms participant agency and dignity, it also generates a potent counter-narrative to abolitionist critique—one in which the prison is reimagined as a site of artistic flourishing, communal solidarity, and transformative self-actualisation. Crucially, this narrative operates at the level of affective identification rather than structural analysis.

Notwithstanding these divergences, both programmes instantiate a constitutive paradox central to prison-based arts practice: the very visibility that secures institutional viability—enabling funding acquisition, participant recruitment, policy influence, and public advocacy—also renders them susceptible to functional co-optation by the carceral state. Their publicly disseminated outputs—whether exhibitions, films, or theatrical performances—perform ideological labour that exceeds the stated aims of programme designers, facilitators, or participants. This is not an incidental failure but a structurally embedded feature of arts interventions operating within, rather than against, the logics of contemporary penal governance.

Moreover, the comparative lens reveals that the operative mechanism of decorative justice is not generic but institutionally specific. Koestler Arts' exhibition model produces episodic, temporally bounded visibility—broad in reach but delimited in duration and depth of engagement. RTA's ensemble model, conversely, cultivates longitudinal, process-oriented

visibility rooted in sustained relational practice; this visibility remains largely internal to the carceral institution until catalysed by external cultural production (e.g., Sing Sing). These contrasting modalities yield differential political effects: the Koestler exhibition solicits momentary empathic response, whereas the RTA film invites sustained narrative identification with individuated protagonists. Neither modality, however, inherently disrupts the foundational legitimacy of the carceral system; both may, in fact, reinforce its symbolic acceptability.

This analysis underscores the analytical necessity of maintaining conceptual clarity across the four categories set out in Section 2, rather than conflating them under the label of "prison art." While Koestler Arts and RTA originate primarily within Category 1—formal, institutionally sanctioned programmes—their strategic deployment of public-facing outputs propels them into Categories 3 and 4, domains where questions of authorship, representation, epistemic authority, and political accountability become significantly heightened. Rigorous evaluation of prison-based arts initiatives must therefore attend not only to intended outcomes but also to the categorical mobility of their outputs—and the shifting power relations such mobility entails.

5. Carceral Aesthetics as a Counter-Framework

Nicole Fleetwood's *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* advances a counter-framework that, while sustaining rigorous critique, opens conceptual space for examining how prison art actively intervenes in—and reconfigures—carceral logic itself [9]. Central to her argument is the concept of "carceral aesthetics." According to Fleetwood, the prison system organises experience along three interlocking dimensions: penal space (e.g., the cell, corridor, and yard), penal time (the protracted, cyclical temporality of "doing time"), and penal matter (the severely circumscribed material resources available for any form of practice).

Carceral aesthetics designates the strategies through which incarcerated artists navigate, negotiate, and resist these three dimensions. Jesse Krimes's *Apokaluptein 16389067* (2010–13)—a title combining the Greek *apokálupsis* ("unveiling" or "revelation") with the artist's federal inmate number—was conceived and executed during his incarceration at the Federal Correctional Institution in Fairton, New Jersey [42]. Using hair gel and the back of a plastic spoon, Krimes transferred images from *The New York Times* onto institutional-issue bed sheets; he produced thirty-nine individual panels, each smuggled out of the facility via the prison mail system—one piece at a time. Reflecting on the project, Krimes observed: "I would devote every minute of my incarceration—whether it lasted five years, twenty years, or a lifetime—to creating something meaningful and positive in the world. Everything could be taken from me, except my ability to create" [43]. Here, penal matter is not merely repurposed but fundamentally rerouted—transformed into an expressive medium the institution neither anticipated nor controlled.

The materiality of the smuggling is integral to the work's political argument. Each completed panel was inserted into an envelope and mailed from the prison's mailroom; had any envelope been intercepted, the work would have been destroyed and Krimes would have faced disciplinary sanctions. The dispersal of the work across thirty-nine envelopes—and over several years—meant Krimes himself never saw the assembled piece until after his release. Penal time, in Fleetwood's sense, thus structures not only the production of the work but its prolonged absence from view: the artist created the work without ever seeing the whole, while the institution that confined him was structurally incapable of perceiving what was unfolding—precisely because that unfolding consisted of panels being systematically dispatched, one by one, through the very administrative system it oversaw.

Gilberto Rivera's *An Institutional Nightmare* operates in a similar register. Rivera produced the work using a federal prison uniform, commissary stationery, floor wax, official prison reports,

newspaper clippings, and acrylic paint on canvas [44]. Here, the materiality of incarceration is not a constraint to be surmounted but the substance of the artwork: institutional documents and uniforms are transformed into artistic media. This practice is not merely self-expression accommodated within constraint; rather, as Fleetwood frames it, it renders carceral logic visible, palpable, and available for critical scrutiny.

What carceral aesthetics contributes to the analysis of the Koestler and RTA programmes is a conceptual framework for distinguishing—within the second category (art created by incarcerated people)—between works that operate within carceral logic and those that actively interrupt it. Not all prison-based art performs the same function. A technically accomplished landscape painting submitted to the Koestler Awards, for instance, may not deliberately engage with carceral space, time, or materiality as objects of artistic attention. By contrast, works such as Krimes's or Rivera's do precisely that. This distinction is not hierarchical in terms of aesthetic or moral value; rather, it concerns what the work makes available—epistemically and politically—to its viewers, including those seeking to think critically about incarceration.

Read alongside Dent's framing of abolition as a generative project of imagination, carceral aesthetics offers a means of moving beyond the binary that the case studies risk reproducing. The central question is not whether prison-based arts programmes are either wholly complicit or inherently liberatory. Rather, it is what conditions of practice they generate, what forms of creative and critical work they enable, and whether such work contributes to the broader cultural terrain in which abolitionist imagination can take root and flourish. Koestler Arts and RTA should not be treated as discrete, self-contained entities to be assessed in isolation; rather, they are infrastructural formations whose effects hinge on the practices, relationships, and meanings that circulate through them—and on the wider visual and political culture in which their outputs are embedded.

Yet for all its analytical power, carceral aesthetics carries inherent limitations that must be acknowledged before it can be operationalised as an evaluative framework. The framework risks aestheticising suffering and romanticising art's capacity for resistance in ways that no rigorous political analysis could justify. Not every artwork produced within prison disrupts carceral logic, and to presume otherwise would obscure the profound material, social, and experiential differences among incarcerated people. Moreover, the framework presupposes the existence of audiences capable of engaging with carceral aesthetics as political practice—not as humanitarian spectacle. Garland's concept of "the culture of control" identifies a public culture in which punitive sentiment has become naturalised as a default response to crime [45]. Wacquant extends this analysis to diagnose neoliberal penalty, wherein incarceration functions primarily as a mechanism for managing marginalised populations [46]. Within a public sphere shaped by these dynamics, the political reception of carceral aesthetics remains profoundly precarious. Even the most incisive and disruptive prison-based artwork may be absorbed by audiences who already regard mass incarceration as necessary and legitimate: such viewers may be moved, but their understanding of the prison's purpose remains unaltered.

6. Conclusion

The central contradiction introduced at the outset—that prison-based arts programmes may simultaneously pursue several, potentially incompatible aims—is not a problem to be resolved through more refined analysis, but rather constitutive of the field itself. Koestler Arts and RTA are not monolithic entities possessing a singular political valence. Rather, they are sustained institutional practices embedded within carceral systems—systems neither organisation could plausibly dismantle. Within those systems, such programmes generate tangible benefits for participants. Yet they also produce public-facing cultural events whose broader political

effect—particularly in advancing the conditions necessary for meaningful reform, let alone abolition—remains far from self-evident.

The contradiction becomes legible only when prison arts are assessed through the lens of the reform–abolition debate, rather than through the narrower frame of instrumental outcomes. The reformist framework asks whether such programmes reduce recidivism and enhance participant wellbeing. The abolitionist framework, by contrast, asks whether the cultural visibility they generate renders the carceral system more—or less—imaginable as a permanent fixture of social life. The Southbank exhibitions, the *Sing Sing* film, and the broader genre of prison-arts visibility exert an influence on public consciousness that extends well beyond the scope of participants' personal testimonies.

This insight returns us to the three-register evaluative framework proposed in Section 2: participant benefit, institutional positioning, and political effect. Participant benefit can be measured using methodologies already deployed in the existing literature. Institutional positioning—encompassing how a programme is co-produced with carceral institutions, whose interests it serves, and what compromises it tacitly endorses—demands a critical organisational analysis of the kind programmes rarely commission about themselves. Political effect—the work a programme performs within the broader culture, including its role in shaping the imaginative conditions for structural change—requires longer temporal horizons and methodological commitments that quantitative outcomes research, by design, cannot provide. As Thompson argues, applied arts initiatives must be evaluated not only for their measurable outputs but also for what they produce affectively.

This article has several limitations. It does not draw upon primary fieldwork; rather, it relies on secondary scholarship, publicly available documents, and cultural criticism. A more comprehensive analysis would entail visiting Koestler Award exhibitions, attending RTA performances, and conducting interviews with participants, facilitators, and programme staff. Moreover, such an analysis would broaden the comparative scope beyond the United Kingdom and the United States to include national and regional contexts where the abolitionist tradition has gained less institutional traction.

The abolitionist framework insists that the carceral system itself—not any individual intervention—constitutes the appropriate unit of analysis, with any given programme representing only one small component thereof. Viewed at this systemic scale, the cultural visibility of prison-based arts initiatives is but one among many mechanisms through which mass incarceration is absorbed, interpreted, and rendered legible within contemporary public culture. Whether this process generates critical pressure capable of challenging the system—or instead renders it more palatable and easier to accommodate—remains the central, deliberately unsettled question this article seeks to foreground.

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