



# PRINT AGIT PROP

**JOSH MACPHEE**

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Josh MacPhee

Set 1

An End to Prisons

A collection of

9 offset printed posters

8 risograph posters

5 screenprints

1 hand painted spray paint stencil

3 digital printed posters

1 embroidered patch

1 screenprinted foam object

All produced between 1997–2022

Edition of 3

**I** began producing political posters and prints in the mid-1990s. This was a simple pivot from designing materials for the punk music scene, shifting the same skill sets to bear on social justice issues. I initially worked on posters and materials for campaigns around political prisoners and challenging mass incarceration, but quickly expanded and began working with a diverse set of groups and issues, including housing struggles, immigration reform, labor unions, access to healthcare, environmental justice, police reform, right to the city, and more. Many of this print agit prop was produced in association with—and at the behest of—very specific organizations, while some of it I created on my own in hopes of contributing the struggles. Some of it I was paid for my work, others I donated my labor. Many of these posters were mass produced and widely distributed, used in public demonstrations or organized street art campaigns. All of the work speaks to the complex interplay between visual culture and social movements, and the unique place of the artist and designer in political organizing.

# TIMES Ledger

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## Rally urges closure of Rikers

Astoria march organizer says reforms at prison are 'lipstick on a pig'



Protesting conditions at the city's central jail system, nearly a thousand people marched through Astoria last weekend to demand that Rikers be closed and new, smaller jails be built around the five boroughs.

Photo by Michael Shain

Nearly a thousand people marched through Astoria on Saturday to demand the closure of the notorious Rikers Island prison. The march was organized by Glenn E. M. president of the New York City Police Association (NCPA), which has been a vocal critic of the prison system that drew national attention after the death of John Leger, a 41-year-old man who died in prison after being elected off-duty.

"It was a very hot day and the sun was shining," said M. "On Saturday, we had a hashtag #CloseRikers on Twitter and Facebook. It was a world of people who were interested in the issue. Our goal was to get the issue on the agenda of the city and state." M. said.

Just before the march, the New York City Police Association (NCPA) released a report that said the prison system was "a disaster." The report said that the prison system was "a disaster" and that it was "a disaster" and that it was "a disaster."

"I was just a shoplifter," M. said. "I was just a shoplifter" and "I was just a shoplifter" and "I was just a shoplifter."

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Vol. 4 No. 40

**End of Quarter** SEPT 21-OCT 4  
**CLEARANCE**  
Summer is over but the DEALS are heating up! Get more INCREDIBLE SAVINGS like these at your local store.

North American  
& European  
Laminate from  
**39¢**  
sq ft

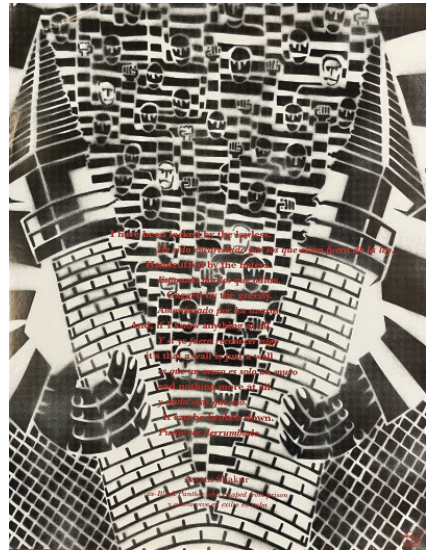
Vinyl Plank  
Flooring  
from  
**49¢**  
sq ft



## Attica

1997, 11" x 17", offset poster

I designed this poster over twenty-five years ago, way back in 1997. It is a promotional poster for a Chicago event to commemorate the Attica prison rebellion, organized by The Committee to End the Marion Lockdown and other groups working around closing prisons and freeing political prisoners. It was printed at C & D Printshop, the now-defunct movement printshop that had been founded by members of the Sojourner Truth Organization.



## A Wall Is Just a Wall

1998, 17" x 23", offset poster

This poster was one of a poster set—titled *Maximum Security Democracy*—created by the political design group Resistant Strains. The posters, all focused around the broad theme of prisons and mass incarceration, were distributed internationally and posted publicly in a number of cities, including Chicago where I went out with a team to wheatpaste them in multiple neighborhoods over a handful of nights.





### *Free Mumia*

1998, 10" x 16", offset poster

Throughout the 1990s, Mumia Abu Jamal was the most high-profile political prisoner in the United States, with one of the most active movements fighting for his freedom. During the decade I created over a dozen graphics in support of his campaign, and this one was printed in a large offset poster edition.



### *Free Sekou Kambui*

2000, 16" x 10", offset poster

I designed this poster for the Campaign to Free Sekou Kambui. Like Mumia Abu Jamal, Kambui was a political prisoner and former Black Panther but his case was significantly less well known. He spent 47 years in the Alabama prison system before his release was won in 2014.



*Steal the Poor—Feed Them to the Rich*

2004, 25" x 19", screenprint

This print was designed in response to the rise of the private prison system in the US, and in particular revelations of severe financial misconduct and human rights violations by two of the then largest private prison firms, Wackenhut and Corrections Corporation of America.



*The cure for disorder...*

2007, 24" x 18", screenprint

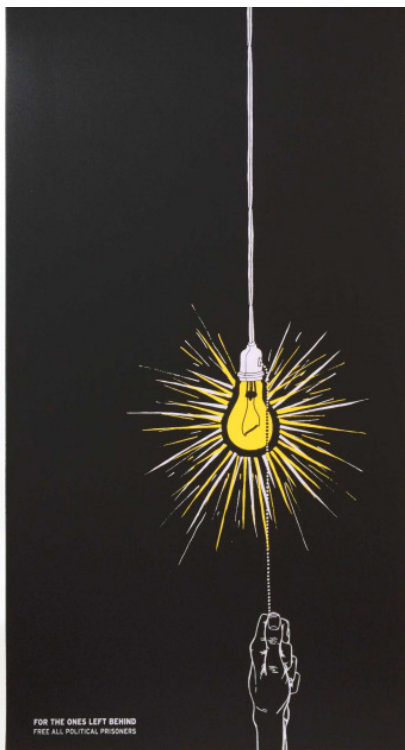
This poster was conceptualized and produced with Dara Greenwald, and initially given away as a New Years gift. It draws on a quote by early 20th century US anarchist and political prisoner Alexander Berkman—his words just as relevant nearly 100 years after initially being written.



### *Prisons Don't Work*

2006, 24" x 18", stencil print

This hand-painted stencil print is part of a body of work from the early 2000s in which I was exploring ways to visually humanize incarcerated people. By both cramming the figures into the frame behind bars, and through the simple act of prominently placing a heart on their chests, I tried to make clear that these are human beings forced into extremely inhuman conditions. In addition to this short run on stencil prints, a smaller stencil was used to paint this image on the street in multiple cities and variations of the image have been used as both magazine illustrations and book covers.



### *Left Behind*

2015, 12" x 24", screenprint

In 2010, I was listening to a talk by former political prisoner Laura Whitehorn where she described political prisoners as those "left behind." My mind immediately jumped to the idea of turning a light on for those abandoned by the larger society. The light represents both a marker to remember that there are political prisoners in the US (turning on the lights to the reality the government wants to hide), but also as a guide, or a prod, to move us towards freeing them.





*Education Costs Way Less Than Prison*

2015, 18" x 24", offset poster

*Prisons Don't Work*

2015, 18" x 24", offset poster

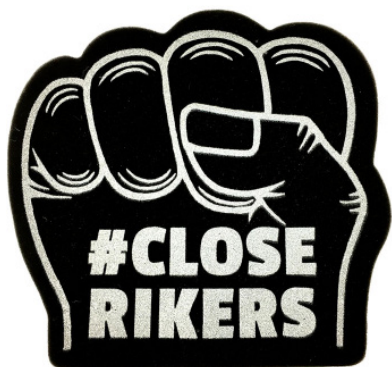
*There Are Too Many People in Prison*

2015, 18" x 24", offset poster

*We Used to Employ People In This Country...*

2015, 18" x 24", offset poster

These four posters were commissioned by the Amplifier Foundation back in 2015, and distributed to criminal justice reform organizations, exhibited in multiple cities, and wheat pasted in the street. Earlier versions of the designs had originally been used in a Philadelphia advocacy campaign where the images were placed as advertisements on commuter trains and public transit platforms.



### *Close Rikers*

2016, 24" x 20", screenprinted  
foam fist

This is the first piece of agit prop I produced with the Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice, a social justice organization which builds power through community organizing in both Connecticut and New York. 100 of these were produced for a fall 2016 march through Queens to the bridge to Rikers Island. The idea was to make something that people could embody, to amplify their sense of power. They were so popular that additional batches were printed, and it is rare for there to be a large-scale prison-related protest in NYC without a fist or two showing up. In addition, they are so photogenic that images of people wearing them have been published in dozens of news outlets, from neighborhood paper to the *New York Times*.



### *Beyond Prisons*

2016, 3.75" x 3", embroidered  
patch

This patch is part of a many year process of attempting to move beyond illustrating the horrors of incarceration, and instead pivot towards conceptualizing and visualizing what decarceration could look like. So many prison-related images and graphics include bars as a key element, so this is an inversion of that, with the bars being pierced by a rainbow of the ways we need to sweep prisons from our ways of thinking and being. As a patch, it can be affixed to jackets, backpacks, and other apparel, which brings it into spaces that more traditional art prints or even political posters wouldn't travel.



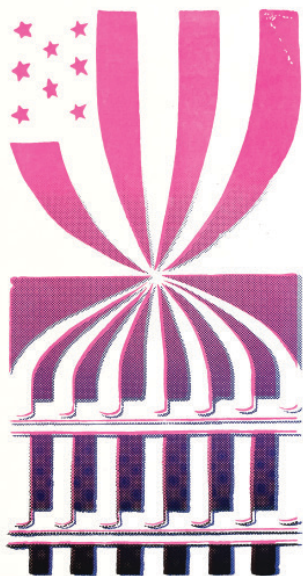
*Close Rikers/No New Jails*  
2016, 11" x 17", risograph print

This risograph print merges two early demands of the movement to close the Rikers Island Jail Complex.



*No New Jails*  
2016, 12" x 19", screenprint

This print started out as a paper cut stencil which I used to show students how to create silkscreens from stencils. The resulting test prints became a short screenprint run of about 20 copies. The design's strong graphic qualities helped boost it as a key graphic in struggles around the US to halt jail construction in a number of states. It was used extensively on social media, but also placed on stickers, flyers, and posters.



### ***Stars & Bars***

2017, 11" x 17", risograph print

Another slight reworking of this almost 30-year-old design. The original illustration was made as a stencil for protest signs at an anti-prison rally in Denver, CO in 1996. I rejuvenated the design for the first Justseeds print portfolio, *Voices from the Outside*, back in 2008, and that print was included in the recent exhibition *Angela Davis: Seize the Time* (2020).

# FREE THEM NOW

*Free Them Now (#covidbehindbars)*  
2020, 11" x 17", set of 3 risograph prints

These variable 3-color risograph prints were created for a series of actions held by the Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since these protests were held as caravans of cars outside of correctional facilities during the winter, the posters were designed to be folded at the top and places in car windows, with the top white section held inside the car by the closed window. This was an inexpensive way to visually connect all the cars via the slogan of the campaign.



*Free Them Now*

2020, 11" x 17", risograph print

*Liberarlos Ahora*

2020, 11" x 17", risograph print

"Free Them Now/Liberarlos Ahora" was the campaign slogan used by Katal Center to organize their response to the COVID pandemic within prisons and jails. Extra large typography does most of the work here, with the smaller fist graphic (borrowed from a 1970s German political poster) connecting the struggles inside and outside the cells.

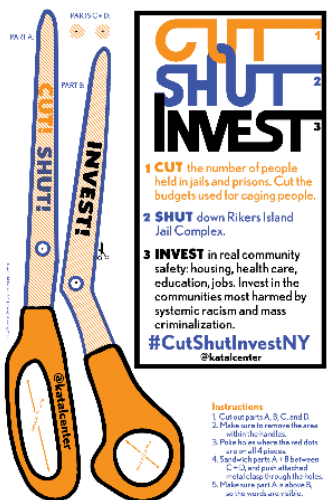


*Pandemic + Incarceration = Death*

2021, 19" x 26", offset poster

1000 copies of these posters were printed by Katal and distributed for free across the country to organizations working around issues of covid and incarceration. They were a small part of a number of successful campaigns across the country to vastly increase compassionate release for elderly and immunocompromised inmates during the pandemic. This poster was also featured in the *Activist New York* exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York.





### *Cut Shut Invest*

2021, 24" x 36", screenprint on cardboard

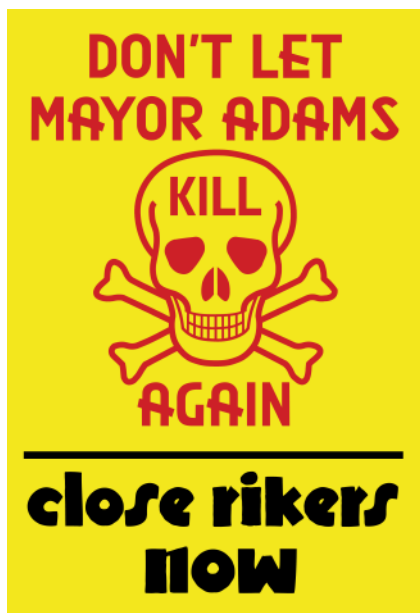
I worked closely with the organizing team at Katal to create a suite of logos, graphics, and materials for their "Cut, Shut, Invest" campaigns in New York and Connecticut. One of the first large-scale pieces of agit prop we created were these large-scale screenprinted scissor sheets, designed to be cut out by protesters and assembled into a movable pair of scissors. The tactility of the piece helps to engage the audience by making them part of the process of creation and use. The scissors have been so effective that we have both created smaller versions and a number of oversized pairs which are 6-feet long.



### *Free Mumia! Free Them All!*

2021, 11" x 17", risograph print

The graphic on this poster was originally drawn in 1993 while I was working with the Anarchist Black Cross working to free political prisoners. I resuscitated and redrew it for this poster in support of Mumia Abu Jamal, the first poster I had made for him in over fifteen years. It felt appropriate to repurpose an image I had originally made while doing similar support work back in the 1990s.



*Close Rikers Now*  
2022, 12" x 18", digital poster

*Don't Let Mayor Adams Kill Again*  
2022, 12" x 18", digital poster

*Rikers Is Death*  
2022, 12" x 18", digital poster

With the reforming in 2022 of a new campaign to again take on the closing of Rikers Island, I created a new suite of images and designs, which have been made used on posters, flyers, shirts, stickers, and circulated via social media. The focus here was on the idea of "emergency," with nearly 20 people dying while held at Rikers over the course of 2022. Using the skull on all of the material, this makes the association between Rikers Island and death dominant and intractable.

