

ART

An Artist Caged Himself in New York to Fight for Prison Reform

Over the weekend, Lech Szporer's performance-disruption indicted a broken criminal justice system.

Julia Lourie

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Moments after the drop off. Photo: Hannes Charen

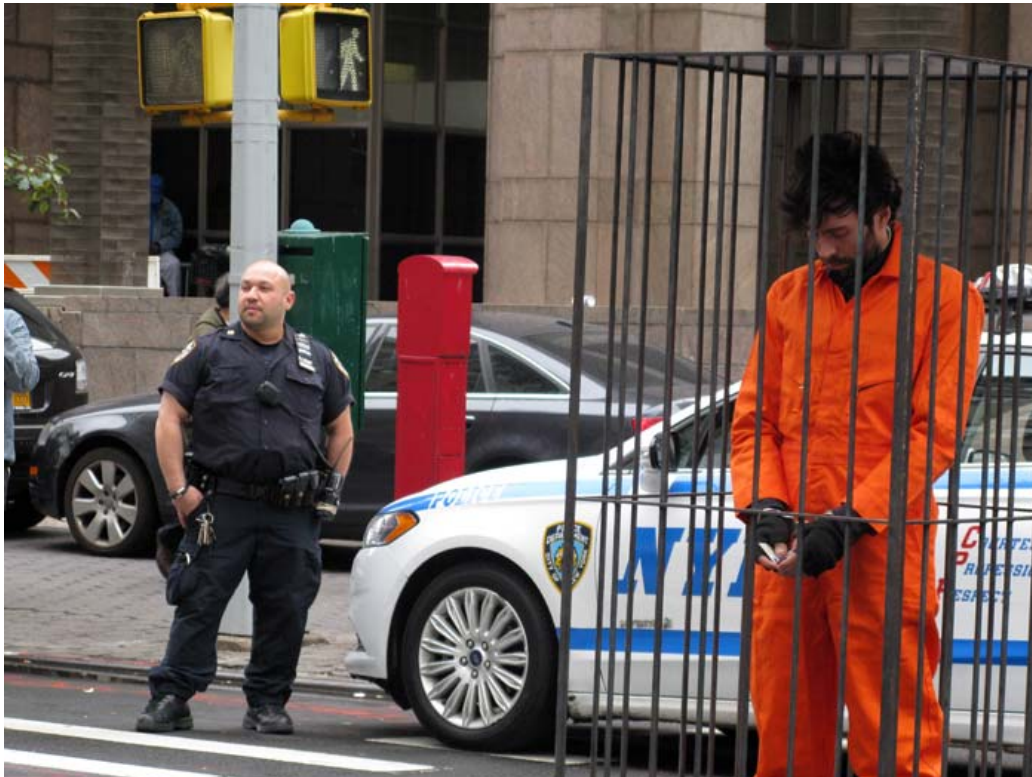
A nondescript blue van pulls up to the intersection of Center and White Streets in Manhattan, smack in front of the [Manhattan Detention Complex](#). Within

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seconds, a caged man in a seemingly standard-issue orange prison jumpsuit and handcuffs is unloaded into the middle of the busy intersection. The van speeds off. Within seconds, a caged man in a seemingly standard-issue orange prison jumpsuit and handcuffs is unloaded into the middle of the busy intersection. The van speeds off.

The man in the cage is interdisciplinary artist, musician, and organizer Lech Szporer. He and his dedicated team of 12 have been working on the piece, known as *The Cage Project*, for the past five years. The night before his performance-disruption, Szporer speaks to The Creators Project by phone: "Maybe it was even ten years ago I first got the idea: that was my first time getting arrested."

The artist is no stranger to the criminal justice system. Participation in numerous protests, as well as an unauthorized artwork that entailed attempting to canoe around Rikers Island, have seen Szporer apprehended, interrogated, and arrested multiple times. Then most recently, the artist willingly placed himself in another situation that, by his own admission, could likely only end in arrest. Why?



Silent during the performance, Szporer held a piece of paper that read: "Hello my name is Lech Szporer. This is an art performance. Nothing against you but the system needs to change. I'm not talking without my attorney." Photo: Hannes Charen

Szporer's work calls for a moratorium on mass incarceration. His performance is an urge to take immediate action and reform a criminal justice system he sees as predicated on mismanagement of mental health issues, institutionalized poverty, classism, and a racial caste system.

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During our interview, he asks, "Why do we have rights for some but not for others?" adding, "We need to ask ourselves [as Americans]: Are we progressive?" During our interview, he asks, "Why do we have rights for some but not for others?" adding, "We need to ask ourselves [as Americans]: Are we progressive? Are we caring? Are we fixing problems or exacerbating them?" Acting as a surrogate voice for people who cannot be heard—whether because they are behind bars, mentally ill, damaged, or afraid—Szporer caged himself to protest America's contemptuous neglect of those who have been labeled "criminal."

Ever since he was young, the idea of humans in cages has disgusted Szporer on a visceral level. In his own family—Szporer is of Polish descent—his grandfather was forced to work in a gulag and his grandmother was sent to a Nazi camp. The issue of mass incarceration runs deep for Szporer.

Szporer's caged performance is staged in front of the Manhattan Detention Complex, better known as "The Tombs," a facility where some 900 pre-trial inmates reside. The date, October 25, corresponds to the opening of the **first penitentiary in the United States**. With this performance, Szporer seeks to expose the warped ethics of a system that "warehouses humans," seeks always to place blame, and fails to privilege processes of reconciliation and **rehabilitation**.

Minutes after the cage drop-off, the cops arrive. They begin touching the steel structure, trying to figure how to get Szporer out. He's been sealed in.

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An onlooker who's just come from visiting a friend at The Tombs opines: "The system is dysfunctional. As a visitor, the cops are gruff and treat you like you're complicit with the inmate's crime."

The cops acquire a metal-cutting saw and have snapped the bars of Szporer's cage open. As the artist steps out, modest applause erupts from the crowd, curtailed by people's confusion over why—or for whom—they're clapping. A poignant piece of dark comedy essential to the performance is that the cops must decarcerate Szporer in order to enact a piece with the aspiration to help decarcerate America.

By 1:30 p.m. on the 25th, the scene has cleared and no trace of the performance remains. But a crowd had gathered, had been there, had spoken and confessed hardships and worries to one another. It is Szporer's hope that we can shift toward systems grounded in empathy and forgiveness when addressing issues of criminality. He stresses the importance of community activism, policy change, and working toward a state of what he refers to as "post-criminality." He stresses the importance of community activism, policy change, and working toward a state of what he refers to as "post-criminality." He also urges Americans to pass the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015. He also urges Americans to pass the [Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015](#).



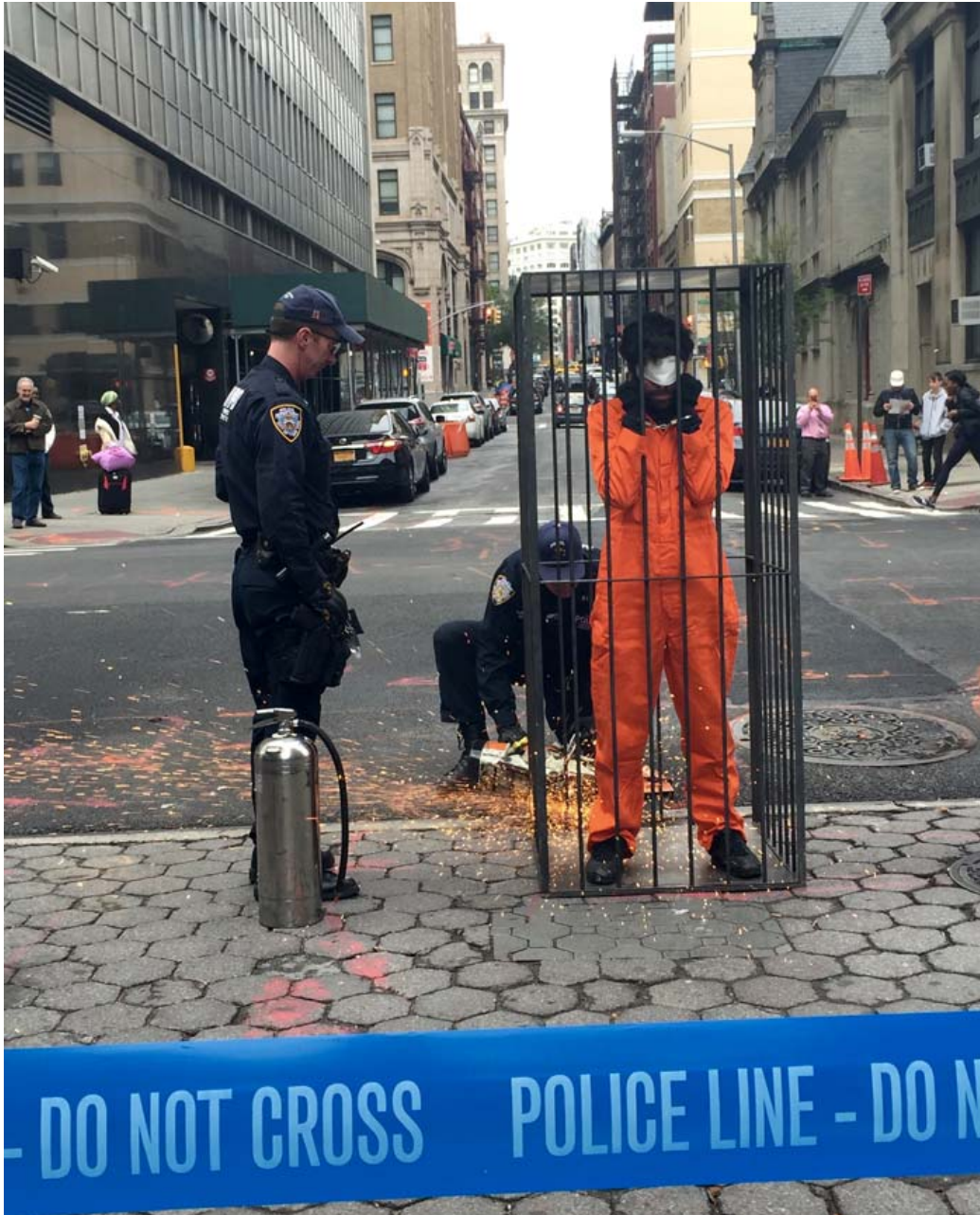
Police trying to get a read on the situation. Photo: Hannes Charen

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A crowd gathers around Szporer after cops move him from the intersection to the driveway of The Tombs. Photo: Julia Lourie

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Cops sawing through the metal to decarcerate Szporer. Photo: Julia Lourie

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With Szporer in custody, police clear the scene. Photo: Julia Lourie

Lech Szporer upcoming exhibit: *Burial for the Rebellion: Studies in Post-Criminality* takes place December 16 – 31 at Y Gallery at 319 Grand Street 5th Floor, New York, NY 10002.