Today I will speak about 142 Ways to Mark Time an art installation that I created and presented at Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The work was open to the public from April through November of 2004. The project intermixed on-site audio recordings of the prison environment and musical performances executed on the ruined artifacts of the penitentiary. The penitentiary was opened in 1829 and shutdown in 1971. Designated as a National Historic Landmark, Eastern State reopened for public tours in 1994, and has hosted art installations since 1995.

I’ll now provide an overview of the history of the prison complex. Through 142 years at Eastern State Penitentiary the changing approaches to penal philosophy were shaped into mortar, stone and concrete. Most eighteenth century American prisons warehoused petty thieves and murderers in common spaces. Physical punishment and mutilation were common, and abuse of prisoners by guards and overseers was rampant. The Quakers of Philadelphia intended to transform the concept of imprisonment by isolating individual offenders in solitary confinement. The Penitentiary would not simply punish, but move the criminal to penitence through spiritual reflection, change and redemption.

In 1821 funding to build Eastern State Penitentiary was approved by the State of Pennsylvania. The new prison was designed to break sharply with the harsh and chaotic jails and workhouses of the day. This new system of solitary confinement came to be known as the “Pennsylvania System” and it was eventually exported to over 300 penitentiaries in Europe, South America and Asia.

Eastern State Penitentiary took root in a former cherry orchard in 1822, and thereafter was commonly referred to as “Cherry Hill.” In 1829 the prison opened and accepted the first inmate, “Charles Williams, Prisoner Number One. Burglar.” The prison now stands within a brisk walk of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Rodin Museum, and other cultural attractions. The British-born architect John Haviland designed the prison by radiating seven cellblocks like spokes around a central surveillance hub. The architect was already familiar with radial designs for “lunatic asylums,” which were first developed in England around 1814. The prison was surrounded by massive Gothic walls, which turned a grim facade to the outside world. The imposing exterior structure was meant to deter the good citizens of Philadelphia from crime, and to contain the inmates within. Haviland’s interior structure was designed to isolate prisoners from the corrupting influences of peers, turning them inward to God, labor, repentance and reformation. His ambitious mechanical innovations included private cells, central heating, running water, a flush toilet, and a skylight. Adjoining each cell was a solitary outdoor exercise yard contained by a ten-foot wall. Andrew Jackson, the occupant of the White House, enjoyed none of these amenities, warming himself with a coal burning stove and seeking comfort in a privy.

Haviland described Cherry Hill as a forced monastery, a machine for reform. Tourist from around the world visited the prison, which threw open its gates to dignitaries and the curious.
alike. Observing Eastern State Penitentiary, Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

Thrown into solitude... [the prisoner] reflects. Placed alone, in view of his crime, he learns to hate it; and if his soul be not yet surfeited with crime, and thus have lost all taste for any thing better, it is in solitude, where remorse will come to assail him.... Can there be a combination more powerful for reformation than that of a prison which hands over the prisoner to all the trials of solitude, leads him through reflection to remorse, through religion to hope; makes him industrious by the burden of idleness? iii

Charles Dickens recounted his 1842 visit to the prison in his travel journal, American Notes for General Circulation.

In its intention I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; but I am persuaded that those who designed this system of Prison Discipline, and those benevolent gentleman who carry it into execution, do not know what it is that they are doing....

I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body; and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye... and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment in which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay. iv

Such criticism did not damage John Havilland, in fact he achieved considerable success as a designer of ambitious public projects. The “Pennsylvania System” soon became widespread. He became particularly well known for prisons such as the “Tombs” in New York City, and state penitentiaries in New Jersey, Rhode Island and Missouri and county jails in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Later building additions to Easter State heightened the compromises struck when the Quaker’s reformist impulse collided with the reality of modern prison operation. Open space began to disappear and exercise yards were converted to workshops, as prisoners turned more profitably from handicrafts to industrial labor. 124 years later, modern technocrats oversaw the construction of the last “improvement”, Cell Block Fifteen, or Death Row. This modern prison block marked the final abandonment of any aspect of Eastern’s monumental architectural vocabulary and the Society of Friend’s belief that all people are capable of redemption. From 1953 on, prisoners in Cell Block Fifteen awaited not redemption, but execution.

In researching the history of Eastern State I happened upon an arresting image of a hooded prisoner. An interpretive diorama at the prison also portrayed a hooded doll figure, lead by his keeper from a exercise yard to a solitary cell. Prisoners subject to the solitary regime of the “Pennsylvania System” were hooded to deprive them of corrupting communication with the world. Deprived of sight, they surely strained to make sense of their world through sound. 174 years later enemy combatants detained by the United States in the “Global War on Terror” were still subject to hooded disciplinary measures, blotting out individuality and sight, sound, and touch.
In the early years of operation at Cherry Hill a hooded prisoner was compelled to apprehend his location and relationship to guards, fellow prisoners and the outside world through what he could hear... footsteps, keys, birds, rain, passing people. In listening, prisoners heard the day described in the rhythms of labor, hygiene, disciplinary regimes, or personal ritual. The prisoner may have tapped out rhythms on the spare objects all around, or marked time by listening to the seasons as they slipped by, as rain gave way to sleet and snow, as geese arced overhead in free migratory flight. When walking through the prison I imagined what it would be like to be hooded and deprived of sight, and how I would respond to this deprivation by straining to listen, intently. I was thus motivated to interpret the ruins of the penitentiary and the daily life of prisoners through sound. I pursued two techniques in parallel, phonography and performance. Joel Smith writes:

“Phonography” (translated literally) says nothing but: soundwriting. To me as a listener that means: audio “read” — sound attended to — for any revelations and resonances it turns up — not only those that music knows how to handle, but the whole thing.

I wished for visitors to my installation in Cellblock Ten to “read” and “attend to” the sonic residue of time, performance and the environment. The 142 sound files and performances that I created were played back via eight MP3 systems, hidden well out of sight of visitors. The sounds were enrobbed in 10 seconds of silence, at the “head” and “tail” of the file, and then played back using a “random shuffle” mode on the audio decks. I thus directed the randomizing function of the boomboxes to take the place of John Cage’s casting of the I-Ching, combining and recombining new instances of silence, harmony, and synchrony. And as with Cage’s 4’33,” instances of quiet were essential, allowing the “background sound” of the prison to reassert itself. For instance, actual police sirens, jets, pigeons, or church bells regularly complimented “silences” when the players were mute.

Visitors to the cellblock also actively orchestrated the mix of sound, moving from point to point, blending overlapping audio as they moved through the corridor. An echo of manual labor and discipline was tapped out, scrapped, scrubbed and clattered in the cells and mixed in the cellblock corridor. The prisoners clearly were gone, but they were present as a sonic stain — stacking bricks, shoveling sand, and tying shoelaces. One quickly became disoriented… was that sound coming from “inside” or “outside” the installation, from 1829 or the present? Sound was thus “panned” ahead and behind the interactor, to the left and right, back and forth in time. The work was spatialized as visitors walked, poked their heads into cells or paused to examine my visual scores.

While working at the prison I photographed each sonic environment and performance, and the images were digitally printed on orchestral score paper. The resulting visual music scores were presented as large bound folios on music stands positioned at each end of the cellblock corridor. In my installation one music stand was constructed in the manner of a 19th century parlor stand, the other appeared as a functional and anonymous metal stand, an emblem for the early 1970s. Each stand thus served as a bookend for the active life of the prison, from 1829 to 1971. Visitors were invited to link the sounds that they experienced in the cellblock to images in the visual scores. By making that link, they were challenged to “attend to” the sounds of labor, freedom and incarceration — to identify with the lives of prisoners and prison keepers.
I'll now present DVD video documentation that captures my working process, the installation environment, and the sonic experience of the work. At the conclusion of the tape I would be pleased to further discuss 142 Ways to Mark Time. Thank you.

i http://easternstate.org/history/index.html


v http://www.phonography.org/word.htm