

Beyond Incarceration: The limits of fictionalised documentary photography in Edgar Martins' 'What Photography and Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase' as a means of understanding the role of photography in challenging the notion of prison.

Edgar Martins' photography project 'What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase' exists in the gap between its colourful abstract tendency and the real-life interactions that created the final work. In order to understand how concepts of reality, fiction and absence converge into a powerful work of documentary photography, a knowledge of the methodology and historical art theory is required.

The ambitious project is primarily a take on prison's impact on society and photography's limit in representing or documenting that impact. Although not explicitly political work, Martins is clear that he wants the work to break away from imagery normally associated with prisons (Martins 2021) and to accomplish this he departs from the realist foundations of photography and towards a fiction where the narrative is accepted as subjective from the outset. The narrative is presented through photographs that function as literary devices of metaphor and allegory. We are presented with an array of different photographs and images that do not follow a singular narrative; there is mix of archive imagery, for example a graphic of a wolf, a plug of cable; staged studio portraits in front of pastel colours, as well as more landscape portraits and still life. The imagery is as numerous as it is varied, as quiet as it is noisy.



Figure 1: Martins, E (2019) The hatch is not the sort of place to have a face like a slapped ass

This other-worldly visualisation of prison has very little in common with traditional documentary photography. This is perhaps in part due to Grain Projects, the commissioning organisation, whose ethos is to engage photography with communities and audiences in new ways. Martins collaborated with HMP Birmingham and local community organisations over three years to create the work. An important aspect of his process was his visit to prisoners, and their families outside, listening to their stories. A real-life social engagement provides the basis for his attempt to ascertain the social aspect of photography

In terms of situating Martins' work in the development of social documentary photography, It can be characterised as continuing the turn towards the subjective which is first seen in Danny Lyon's 'Conversations with the Dead'. Lyon also documented prisons, mixing presentation of objective reality with subjective elements. Martins expands this approach and employs more radical aesthetic strategies, such that he moves almost entirely away from traditional social documentary photography.

Martins' visual strategy demands a lot from the viewer, both in terms of attention and visual literacy. He puts faith in the viewer that they will understand that photography is complicated, that it requires thinking and investigation. Why are there no photos that I would expect to see of prisons? Why can we not tell whether the images are from an archive or taken during the creation of the project? This confrontation of photography acting to resist but reveal at the same time leads to a questioning of what each photograph is (Martins, 2021).

For Martins, asking these questions the part of an ontological challenge of understanding, what photograph is if it doesn't identify with that which it is representing, its referent, but its absence. This will be answered by analysing how his images visually create an absence, through literary devices such as allegory and metaphor that move away from reality. For example, his staged images are looked at as a way of demythologising documentary photography. We may consider Martins' work as post-structuralist in that he adopts an allegorical tool of fragmentary images to disrupt stylistic norms to shift focus outside of the frame (Foster, 1996). The prison therefore is looked at as a device for understanding photography's role in a post-truth world. However, I will consider whether these ontological questions continue to distract us from the issues and systems that create the prison industrial complex, where profit is made from the imprisonment of others, namely, advanced capitalism.

Community engagement become integral to the work as it acts against any privatised, individualism brought about by capitalism. By understanding prison, as a set of social relations, rather than a physical space, Martins can avoid taking any photos inside the prison, or of the prisoners (Martins, 2019). Bourriaud's conception of relational aesthetics provides the framework analyse this socially engaged methodology.

Such a tension between the abstract images of objects and Martins interacting with the community of those imprisoned is fertile ground for forging a new documentary photography that can in the words of the abolitionist Angela Davis (2003) “imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society.” A key question is whether Martins’ work, in moving away from a traditional portrayal of prison, can have a transformative impact on our visual imagination of alternatives to the violence of incarceration.

The lack of written context, such as captions, is an important feature of Martins break away from traditional documentary photography. Instead, he asks a number of prisoners to keep diaries. A facsimile of this is published with the book and is on display at the exhibition. The text is deeply personal, honest and raw. Such recording of the real, necessarily cuts through the abstract photography. Arguably, the power of the text highlights the limits of documentary photography, in that we are forced to question whether the photograph can convey the lived experience of the prison with the emotion and accuracy of the prisoner’s own words.

Finally, the work also has a film element that can only be accessed via a QR code and password in the book. The film is a short fictional documentary that uses archive images and the voiceover of a narrator to reveal leaked information about two fictional prison systems Cryoguard and Qsafe. The former is a fully automated prison system that allows sentences of hundreds of years. Whilst the latter is a prison in a remote unknown location where only two judges have keys.

The purpose of the film appears clear: it is to give fictional clues to assist in the reading of both the archival photograph in the film, but also the ones exhibited. Archival photographs, because they are in both the film and exhibition, act as a thread from the fictional dystopia of Cryoguard and Qsafe to the more real imagery of the actual prison system. The film’s effect then is to destabilise the assumption that what we see in the exhibited photography is actually what is meant to be, that the very concept of prison is dystopian. Due to the fact that it creates an entirely fictional world, the film will not be analysed for the purposes of this case-study.

Instead, it can act as a primer to the central question: does the use of abstract photography, in creating a fictional world, perpetuate misconceptions about prison and violence.

Danny Lyon's 'Conversation with the Dead'

Social documentary photography has long struggled with its real life portrayal of marginalised communities. In particular, the way it represents them to a more affluent, often middle class audience, who are meant to feel sorry for the subject upon viewing the photograph (Sekula 1978, Rosler 1989). To do this it relied on the photograph's indexicality; it transparently capturing reality to clearly narrate the hardship faced by the subject. This humanistic approach had to rely on notions of truth to convince the viewer what they were bearing witness to. An example of such traditional social documentary photography is Danny Lyon's *Conversation with the Dead*. In 1967 he was allowed free access to 6 Texas prisons. The resulting photographs are what you would expect from reportage of the era. Black and white images of men in all white prison outfits; queuing, sitting with tattoos on display, lifting weights, and of them literally behind bars. Although the work is humanist, in that it is sensitive in its capturing of these men at their most vulnerable, demonstrating them within refined composition upholds narratives that prisoners are better off in prison where they can be rehabilitated.

Only a few faces grimace, most are resigned to the fact that they have to serve their time. This presentation of prison life relies on a crystal clear image. They are presented so that it is not doubted that these scenes actually played out in front of the lens, without any direction. In that way they can be seen to contribute to creating a "penal spectatorship" that legitimates their capture and exclusion (Brown 2002). It is a singular perspective. As the viewer of the photograph is the only one looking at the photograph. It is not a transactional viewing process



Figure 2: Lyon, D (1971) Seven years flat on a twenty-year sentence

that engages or responds to the subject. Penal spectatorship is a fascination with the other, that traditional documentary photography pursued as part of its humanist impulse (Martins, Durden 2019). The men lift weights so stay healthy, they are holding a cat for more gentile companionship besides that of the other prisoners. They are humanised rather than just considered criminals.

We also see the the police rap sheet and mugshots of inmates. Using the aesthetic qualities of using facsimile copies, and the array of different fonts and handwriting styles, the rap sheet lay out the details of the crime each committed and the inmate's prison sentence. Lyon's writes in



Figure 3: McCune, B (1969) *Untitled*

the afterword of the 2015 edition that he did not believe his own writing would be able to convey the reality of prison, so he wanted to emotionally drag the reader through what he was experiencing (Lyon, & McCune, 2015). However, these documents justify their detention only satisfying the readers voyeuristic curiosity to know why these individuals deserve to be inside.

Lyon, like Martins, in perhaps a radical move for the photography of his era, does attempt to resist that normative viewing process. He does this by providing a space for Billy McCune, a prisoner, to have a voice.

McCune produces two colourful, yet deeply disturbing drawings of his cell, marked as colour by numbers and three other paintings: a landscape, a portrait and a still life. Besides the introduction informing us that McCune is found to be of feeble mind, we are also told in his letters that certain pieces of his art were sent back to him, and we never get to see them. By showing in such colour the pictures that suggest that McCune is suffering with his mental health, we are made to question and doubt whether what the state hides should remain hidden from view (Mizoeff, 2011). Prison acts as a place to hide from society those who are mentally unstable.

Martins also uses a prisoner's diary and pictures inside of it to humanise. The gallows humour provides an intimate insight into how those subject to incarceration maintain a sense of levity, but at the same time conveys their deep loneliness. Yet, this approach, for all that it does get us to listen to the prisoners as human beings with feelings and emotions, it all too much room for the viewer to believe that they can come to reasoned judgement on whether they deserve to be in prison. It relies on the notion that the photograph is able to interrogate the system of incarceration and the written word simply presents the real side of the story, the human and personal side. It does not use photography to propose a radically different world absent of prisons.

Lyons work is different as it works within the limit of photography's ability to reveal aspects of society that otherwise remain hidden. Martins, however, keeps those realities hidden, for example we only see a photograph of a visitor wrist band, whilst Lyons mundane details prompt a sharp insight; what Barthes would call the 'punctum' that which punctures through the photography. For example, in a photograph of McCune in his cell we see a plastic spoon perched on the bar next to his elbow. Prison life's tactile bareness and brittleness are suddenly made apparent.

Lyon's very honest photographs and a sensitive engagement with McCune to publish his life/story/visual art, act to resist the states' power to make a person invisible. For Martins, the photographs allude to something not there, whilst the diary very much evidences what has happened to the prisoner. The photograph and prisoner's personal account operate in the opposite way to Lyons. As a result, we are left questioning what purpose the photograph serves.

Breaking with the Referent

Martins also reproduces the diary in facsimile, as the type of notebook that the inmates have inside. It is a physically separate book from that of the photographs. The writing is a direct representation of the real and clearly communicates the lived experience of incarceration. When presented with the voice of the prisoner we comprehend photography's inability to grasp the intricacies of an experience with such clarity. The diary serves to highlight the limitations of the photographic medium and demonstrate that, for Martins, the two mediums operate separately.

To make this distinction between the ability of language to transfer the knowledge compared to the photographs, Martin's employs a second order visual world, where the referent disappears. The images are not literal like the words, the meaning is hidden. He does this through imagery that presents an emptiness. There is often only one act that is happening in each photograph, only one object, usually one person in the portraits. This emptiness, "From a humanist perspective... reflect[s] on how one deals with the absence of a loved one, brought on by enforced separation" (Martins, 2019). There is an absence of literal meaning to the

photography because the referent has been separated from the photography, alluding to the sensation of enforced separation.

Although Martins envisions himself following the humanist thread that runs through the social documentary tradition, he departs from

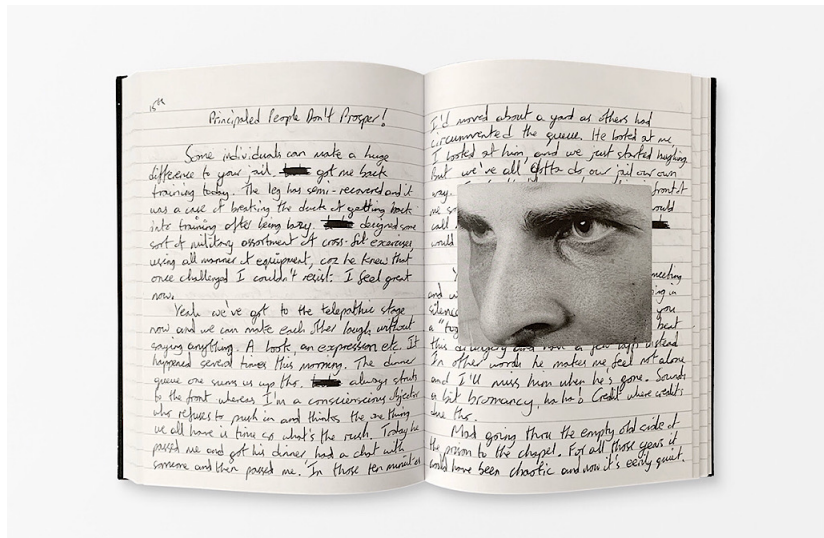


Figure 4 Martins, E (2019) What Photography and Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase

the photographic exceptionalism, that is photography's relation to the real that it typically relies on. He removes what the image is referring to, the referent, and asks "what does it mean for Photography if it does not identify with the referent but its absence?" (Martins, 2019).

Departing from the referent, the images necessarily become more abstract in their meaning. In that way a number of these images reflect back on minimalist art of the 1960's where the viewer's own sensibility of what the images could mean became the focus of the work. Martins' reference to the period is more obvious in his methodology which is discussed later but the aesthetic qualities of the movement are also applied to a documentary project. As the images are absent of caption, or context, the distance between the viewer and the reality of what the photograph is representing removes any objective aspect of the image. Photography is used to make the viewer think about their own interpretation of what is in the image, their subjective point of view, rather than tell them. Martins uses a number of devices to ask these questions: the allegorical or metaphorical, archive and staged photographs.

Using such different devices for each image presents no clear structure, or narrative. Each image is elusive in what it is exactly a picture of and has no direct relationship to the one following in reality, but often does aesthetically. Although we see images of people, we do not know who they are, objects have writing on them, but we do not know who wrote it, landscapes are covered in certain hues. Through this enforcement of the absence of the identifying referent, the work becomes allegorical; a series of images that do not directly

narrate to us, so we must create the story ourselves. This play with the allegorical, also allows the individual photographs to operate metaphorically, not literally (Martins, Durden 2019).

This may be most evident, in the piece titled 'No Man is an Island', where two images of birds are placed next to each other. In one, a young girl, with a flash delicately lighting her face looks away from the camera, her head filling most of the frame. Perched on her index finger is a budgie that leans into the open mouth. Is this a representation of how incarceration feels? It is placed next to a colour image of another a bird, a taxidermy Dunlin. Birds living entire lives in cages is brought to mind, an allusion to prison. Look at the image longer, and the glazed eyes of the long beaked Dunlin suggests it is dead. It has been made to look alive. A fictional story has been created, that this bird is alive, but we know that is not.



Figure 5: Martins, E (2019) *No Man is an Island*

And what about the photograph of the girl, is she still alive? The style of her hair, her turtle-neck jumper, and the sight of a top of lamp, along with it being in black and white suggests that it was made in a different era. The details ask us to ponder whether it is from an archive, who took the original picture? What is she doing? How does it relate to the referent, in this case prisons, or the photograph next to it? Again, we are to search for the hidden meaning.

These devices move away from relying on the truth of the image and instead interfere with the norms of looking at the photograph. In this respect Martins is seeking to understand “how can documentary photography, in an era of fake news, best acknowledge the imaginative and fictional dimension of our relation to photographs?” (Martins, 2019). The images, in their subjective nature, sheer number, and variety assist in understanding that we are constantly bombarded with images, most of the time not knowing whether to accept their claims to truth. Being presented with such different ways of doubting the image, we are induced into a post-structural mind-set of questioning what truth is. To get the viewer to question their own beliefs

in relation to photography's (and perhaps societies) claims to truth outside of the image, he invites us to explore existing stereotypes of prisoners. Prompting this are portraits of young individuals with cuts and bruises. It is interesting to note that they tend to be black in the exhibition, white persons in similar portraits remain in the book. We may suspect that they are criminals, perhaps victims, yet all along the deliberately obvious special effect make up throws doubt on the indexicality of the image and immediately makes you question who you are looking at.

Such fake imagery serves a dual function: It acts to direct attention to the stereotypical imagery usually associated with prison and crime and to resist it by questioning any truth claims documentary photography purports to make. We are presented, therefore, with images that reinforce what we already presume but also create another, confusing world, where the visual is not easily interpreted. The lyrical nature of the narrative provides an alluring aesthetic, but little to grasp on to as the doubt as to what you are looking at circulates. You are made to think about visual assumptions but are not provided with a reason for why those assumptions are made or given any alternative. For example, that black people are disproportionately represented in the prison system and are racially profiled by the police due to institutional racism (Lammy, 2017).

But the series also functions to question the legitimacy of punishment as a necessary consequence for a crime: the truth claim that the state makes when it imprisons people. By introducing uncertainty into the imagery, he alludes to the uncertainty of the logic of punishment. By inviting the viewer to create their own fictionalised story, the ideology is exposed as one that may not rely on a real, but rely on a fiction based on race, gender and class (Davis, 2003).

Mythology as a distraction

Literary devices of allegory, metaphor, and allusion work to deal with "the role photography should play and how it should operate" (Martins, 2019). These devices argue that photography is too reductive and are needed to reassert photography at time of greater visually literacy. The devices therefore shift focus to the fictional element of photography, the imagined, for which the photograph has to be accepted as something that is elusive and questioned.

In this respect, no truth can be attributed to the picture, they are lessened of the burden of communicating the reality of society, therefore altogether becoming something more palatable. The metamorphosis of such a serious condition of society, the detention of one another, into a series of short stories aestheticize the issues into artefact. There is a reliance on the commodity value of the photograph itself, in relation to its own position as part of visual culture of prison photography, that is in place of the realist representation (Benjamin, 1985).

The photograph is in fact relying too much on its role as a photograph, rather than being able to simply accept the role that photography can play in questioning cultural norms of incarceration. In this sense, criticising the epistemology of the photograph, prevents a comprehension of the system of capitalism that introduced and maintains prison. Namely, that incarceration is the result of policing which has its roots in class warfare and the protection of private property (Davies, 2007). More currently, that HMP Birmingham where Martins visited is now run by Serco, a large multinational corporation, and therefore creates a profit from the imprisonment of humans, a key aspect of the prison industrial complex.

Martins' concern remains with the documentary photography format, rather than the institution which provides him his subject matter or the politics that effect either. Therefore, his use of the fiction, "to consider the status of the photograph when questions of visibility, ethics, aesthetics and documentation intersect" only serves to makes those issues more palatable and resigns from any political consideration of them (Martins, 2022). In its attempt to explore those issues in the context of incarceration it packages the notion of prison into a commodity, an image consumed only to get us to think about the limits of photography. The commodity of the image, and its value in conveying a metaphor, is more important than the structure of the subject of the image. The poetics of such abstract imagery, draws us away from the power of the real social interaction that allowed the photograph to take place.

Benjamin Buchloh, following a Marxist school of thought, considered that allegory, by separating what the photograph is purporting to represent from the photograph, the photograph becomes simply a commodity to exchange. Culture becomes commodified. But he also believed that acting on an image on the same way that capitalism demands that we act upon could trigger a cognitive act.

“The allegorical mind, sides with the object [photograph] and protests against its devaluation to the status of a commodity by devaluating at a second time in allegorical practice. In the splintering of the signifier and signified, the allegorist subjects the signs to the same division of functions that the object has undergone in its transformation in a commodity. The repetition of the original act of depletion and the attribution of meaning redeems the object.”

(Buchloh, 1982)

Take for example, any number of archive images used. As it is obvious that these photographs have been taken out of context, it is immediately apparent they have become commodified, their original meaning stripped from them, the splintering. But as Martins has acted to put them into series (in the exhibition,) or alongside his own photographs, the viewer is invited to attribute another allegory to them. The images have been acted upon twice, so that we are presented with an image that is self-conscious of its role as a commodity.

The photograph has redeemed itself by being subject to the same act of signification often associated with the traditional photographs of prisons. Images of bad people behind bars to consume as part of an ideology of capitalism that profits from suffering and therefore requires a dullness to imagery of it. Buchloh can be seen to adopt this idea from Barthes' *Mythologies* (Foster, 1996). Although *Mythologies* argues that the dominant culture, mythologises and appropriates a style, aesthetic, or object from a specific social group and then sells it on as cultural myths is still worth considering:

“the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mystify it in its turn and to produce an artificial myth; and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology...all that is needed is to use it as a departure point for a third semiological chain to take its significations as the first term of a second myth.” (Barthes,1972)

Martins approaches documentary photography as a myth, as he questions its claims to truth. He mythologises it again through the methods aforementioned and the abstract references employed in the photographs. The end result is the artificial myth of ‘What Photography & Incarceration have in common with an Empty Vase.’ This artificial myth has attempted to demystify documentary photography by creating new myths within the work. It does this by announcing the first myth, documentary photography, as naïve. It's naïveté to its issues of

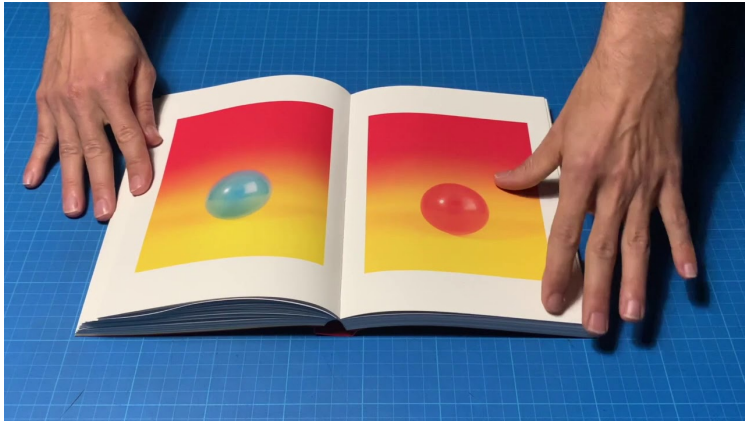


Figure 6: Martins, E (2019) *The Prisoner's Breath*

when there is a greater concern about the ethics of image making, and intention of documentary.

Although this interrogation of the system of signage in documentary photography and violence is pressing, it does not suffice to question the political systems that uphold it. Rather than critically interrogate the system that already exists, with(in) realist representation, our attention is drawn too far away and is thus lost in an existential contemplation of what the photograph is.

Avant-Garde as a practice

Besides being attentive to the systems of viewing the work, the methodology is integral to understanding the work. As argued by Benjamin (1970), the author cannot simply adopt solidarity with those whose cause they are trying to illustrate, but must take up a position where the means of production itself is progressive. Otherwise, the process of photography in particular simply renews the world for the purposes of entertainment as a commodity-sign. It is therefore incumbent on the artist to probe the viewer to think about the work, rather than just providing an object of consumption.

Martins' most clear example of synthesis of process and form in respect of activating the viewer is titled, 'Prisoner's Breath', and is two photographs of balloons. In his most explicit demonstration of avant-garde history, inspired by Piero Manzoni's, *Artist's Breath*, (1960) the balloons are created by prisoners blowing into them, which Martins then smuggled out to take to their families. Martins acts as a conduit for the life inside and outside of the prison. The collaborative element prioritises the social aspect of the work, which gives agency back to the

visibility, ethics and aesthetics. This second myth though, by relying on the first myth as its system of language, is thus able to demystify it. It is using the same devices of truth claims, albeit turned on their head, to question its formulation as a system for representing in an era

individuals who are deprived of it in prison. Clare Bishop in her work *Artificial Hells* argued that collaborative practices are the avant-garde of today: “artists devising social situations as a dematerialised, anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of life.” To this extent, his work must be considered political. Martins’ employs the notion of deferred action, whereby re-contextualizing avant-garde strategies into contemporary mediums, he to seeks redefines the documentary genre (Foster, 1996).

As we draw attention to this collaborative methodology a new discourse opens for understanding where documentary photography’s limitations are. To discuss these limitations in relation to the performative, Bourriaud’s (2002) practice of relational aesthetics is useful. That is art that takes “as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”

Bourriaud’s work is rooted in the notion, taken from Althusser, that culture produces society, rather than the other way around (Bishop 2004). Social encounters are where meaning is elaborated collectively in the public rather than the privatised space of individual consumption. In doing so communities, regardless of how temporary, are created in reality, outside of the realm of the internet. Bishop (2004) also notes that Bourriaud’s emphasis on the tactile and real follows on from 1960’s performance art where the artist’s body was encountered.

The prisoner’s breath and Martins’ balloons are therefore pulling a convergence of avant-garde, socially engaged and photographic practices together. The result is a piece that calls for the social need to exchange, and to “seek the hidden narrative rather than the glaring truth” (Martins, 2021). Martins social encounters develop a culture of engagement with prisoners that is usually difficult or hidden and contributes to a society where art programs retrain, reduce the reoffending and reintegrate prisoners. A reformist, rather than abolitionist perspective.

The hidden narrative for Martin relies on the structure of how and why the photographs were made to become the subject matter. We are reminded that this work is about “giving a voice to inmates and their families and addressing prison as a set of social relations rather than a mere physical space” (Martins, 2019). Despite Martins’ concerns with social relations, there appears a lack of regard for the social systems that allowed the work to be made.



Figure 7: Murff, Z J (2016) *Corrections*

Martins shies away from questioning his role as a conduit for the prisoners and their families. When looking at these relations Bishop also demands that the system of capital that allows those social spaces to exist, or who occupies those spaces where the work is enacted must be acknowledged (2004). There appears a lack of self-reflexivity in his understanding of his positionality as an artist.

Although the work clearly articulates that he is able to visit the prisoners, we are never made aware of how the individual inmates reacted to Martins as this messenger cum photographer. This leads to questions about how much they valued their relationship to him. In this respect Bourriard's analysis is restrictive in that it, "defers to context without questioning its implication in it" and does not permit us to assess the quality of these relationships.

Martins also includes letters from prisoners, along with the diary, as Lyons did in *Conversations with the Dead*. But the letters that the inmates have written in response to Martins' emails read as if they are in response to interview questions posed by Martins, rather than a continuation of conversations he may have had. None of the human connection with Martins is felt. We are made to believe that he acts as an objective mediator between the prisoners and their families. The diary is emotive, but the letters act as if a caption to the rest of the work on show.

A photographer who engages with their positionality when photographing those affected by the incarceration system is Zora J Murff. While working as a tracker for Linn County Juvenile Detention and Diversion Services, he photographed a number of the children he worked with (Tapia, 2018). To adhere to laws protecting their identity their faces turn away. Murff acknowledges the contradictory role that he played as an employee of state ensuring that they followed court orders and photographing them. The awkwardness of these encounters is captured with a truth, humility and acknowledgement of the camera's role. Turning away from the camera is a necessary reaction, for legal purposes, but keenly highlights the camera's presence and its use in surveillance. Essentially the role that Murff is employed to carry out.

The social engagement of Murff is one sanctioned by the state, but in contrast to Martins, he is ready to use the camera to question the system that has brought him into contact with these individuals in the first place. The photography therefore engages with the real of the environments, clothes and awkward positions of the children and is not shrouded in any myth or tenuous connection to the subject matter. Murff's photographs of the objects used to enforce their tracking are tangible, the knowledge directly communicated, and in that way is directly disruptive. The relationship between the photographer and subject is more real, it is witnessed in the very photograph, and it accepts the social context it operated in. Nonetheless, he also publishes the handwritten notes of the children he photographs, their handwriting is clearly infantile.



Figure 8 Martins, E (2021) What Photography and Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase [Slide Projection]. Cardiff: Ffotoøallerv.

As socially engagement underpins the creation of the work then so should the space in which it is viewed (Bishop, 2004). Like a large proportion of documentary photography, this project is a book and touring exhibition so synthesis of the methodology and presentation as an “act of resistance, a counterpoint to the role documentary plays” must be put into question (Martins 2019).

The closest Martins gets to this is by projecting a number of images in the exhibition using a small projection device. This projects the slide image on a small mirror that reflects it on to a piece of frosted glass. It is made clear that the viewer is looking at merely a presentation of the photograph. The photograph is presented in a novel way, and thereby the image is not one that can be the victim of instantaneous consumption. The materiality of the photograph is brought to the forefront, and you can see the slide film. The light switches on and off, the image still existing on the slide but not being projected. You expect the image to stay on the glass, but it suddenly disappears, a method for surprising the viewer, drawing their attention back to the theme of absence.

Such a novel device, however, keeps the photography conceptual, and in doing so those who are not visually literate, who are less critical of the imagery they consume, become ostracised by images that have no indexical value and therefore refer back to, or rely on the predominant imagery. Martins wants “question their automatic pre-disposition for certainty” however, a reaction is caused that reaches for the real (Martins, 2021). An image that can be easily understood and does not require difficult concepts to understand.

As we saw, Danny Lyons’ ‘Converstaion with Friends’ is helpful as it shows images that are easily interpreted do not encourage the reader to look past what they are presented with. The work is only enlightening to the extent that it showed the clear realities of life in prison. Whilst Lyon remained attached to the real, revealing and confronting with the photograph, Martins shies away from it. He is more ground-breaking for his time in his reliance on the diary, but more importantly the illustration, to juxtapose his photographs than Martins. This in comparison again to Zora Murff’s use of handwritten notes by those in the justice system that instead serves the specific and subtle role of demonstrating how young his subjects are. Therefore, when Martins use of the diary as the most real aspect of the entire project to confirm the avant-garde aesthetic photography as fictional we are left to only rely on the diary for any context. We learn very little from the photographs as there is not enough context given to explain how they were made. Such a dependence on the written account to prompt an emotive response is mimicked in the art worlds turn to documentary. In times of great anxiety, there is a need for something to pull us back into the real, but Martins lets the imagination get lost in that anxiety.

This is created through an aesthetic that is not usually associated with prison, and is often heavily directed, destabilising assumptions of truth and certainty so that we become doubtful of any claims made about photography and prison. But this imagery, in its attempt to demythologise documentary photography dismisses it as a medium that cannot accept the uncertainty of the real or allow discussions of its own role in representing in these ethically charged times. Martins, therefore, has to simplify what documentary photography is, to be able choose his wide variety of images that question photography’s relationship to its subject. Imagery that is close to the real does not interrogate our misconceptions of prison thoroughly. Staged imagery attempts to look radical but is merely a performance of defiance.

This makes the performative and social aspect of the work the tangible element and is a vital method when documenting issues that marginalised communities face. Engagement calls on practising or discovering a process communally so that the benefit associated to anything created has already existed. Perhaps it is in this sense that Martins fully employs the tensions between the abstract and social realism of his work. If prison acts as a place to hide society's issues of poverty, mental illness and unemployment, as demonstrated by photographs with hidden meanings, then only through social acts in the community, that act as a preventive alternative, can we foresee a world in which incarceration is abolished. The theory that funds should be diverted from law enforcement to the community is a pinnacle to understanding how the abolitionist movement sees a development of society. If crimes are caused by poor mental health, youths not having social programs and a general feeling of exclusion, then funding should be redirected to programs that tackle those issues, rather than imprisoning those when they suffer from symptoms of a failing society. Workshops with photographers, such as those Martins conducted are perhaps more radical than they first appear.

A critical approach towards the methodology is therefore accomplished but at the expense of a serious critical approach to visual systems that maintain the notion of penal spectatorship. In his oversimplification of documentary photography, he has either used the photograph as a mirror, or has imbibed it with too much testimony about how it is made or what it means. This overly complicated mimesis loses any connection with real that existed when the photographs were made. When it does attempt to address the visual reality by showing imagery that reveals prejudice, it is not believable enough to demand an imagining of a society in which race and class are not primary determinants of punishment. (Davies, 2007). The work subscribes to the imaginative capability of the photograph and the viewer but shies away from any empowering potential that it may have. It does not provide enough reality to understand that a new imagining of society without prisons should exist, nor does it provide enough optimism to imagine how that could look.

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