The Impossible Prison

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The Impossible Prison was a site-related group exhibition of contemporary art in the cells of an inoperative Edwardian police station that used the French philosopher Michel Foucault's landmark *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) as a touchstone for reflections on confinement, discipline and control. The police station belongs to the Galleries of Justice, a heritage attraction in the centre of Nottingham, built into the sandstone escarpment that runs through the city, that now houses Her Majesty's Prison Service's collection and archive. The Galleries of Justice is, in a sense, a literal archaeology of punishment; originating in the late Middle Ages, it consists of five subterranean floors of cells, exercise yards, pits and dungeons. Visitors to the attraction are cast in the role of actual historical convicts and subjected to aural accounts of the fate that awaits them by actors dressed as prison guards.

'Rock and judge' by Chris Evans 2006 (photo by Andy Keate)

Foucault, at one time, described his approach to history as archaeological: in his early works, he was concerned with revealing the underlying 'cultural unconscious' particular to a given age that determined what could and could not be thought. His method showed that concepts usually understood as universal and timeless - truth, justice, human nature, for example - are, in fact, historically contingent. He did this by mining the archive of specific human experiences down the ages: the experience of madness, of prison, of medicine, of sexuality.

The police station where the exhibition was held, on the other hand, is a small single story space. It comprises several cramped cells, a reception area, a fingerprinting room, two interview rooms, a washing area and a narrow enclosed exercise yard (which houses a timeline, from the eighteenth century to the 1980s of law enforcement uniforms on mannequins in a long vitrine). The police station is a Marie Celeste: it is still more or less as it was in 1985 when it ceased to operate, soon after the Miners' Strike (1984-85). Police posters and signs warn, advise, instruct and admonish, as if the facility is still in use, while the rebellious, ribald and despairing voices of those subjected to authority are written on the walls in scratchy graffiti.

The art works in *The Impossible Prison* - films, sculptures, drawings and photographs - were installed in these various spaces. Prison beds provided seating for viewing some of the videos. One of these was a two-channel video by Harun Farocki made using CCTV footage from Corcoran, a 'supermax' prison in California, entitled 'I Thought I was Seeing Convicts': we witness the fatal discharge of live ammunition on unarmed prisoners fighting in the exercise yard. The slow, lo-resolution frames abstract and distance us from the brutality of this routine incident. The exhibition enacted a literal

'cultural confinement' (Robert Smithson), the environment establishing a performative relationship between works, viewers and the space that reflected the exhibition's concerns. The exhibition was a fiction situated in a historical site, but a fiction that nonetheless forced one to consider the experience of being confined in prison and subjected to other, analogous disciplinary regimes.

For Foucault, the prison ceases to be an exceptional space at the dawn of what he designates the 'modern age', which comes into being circa 1800. Instead he regards it as the most complete form of a type of enclosed institution, which he terms 'disciplinary', that began to proliferate in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the onset of the Industrial Revolution in response to a range of economic and social interests and imperatives. The segmentation and observation of individuals in modern prisons is repeated in other disciplinary institutions - factories, schools, hospitals, military barracks - that are also designed to produce certain effects of human subjectivity: obedience, docility, efficiency, uniformity and contrition as part of a new, narrow but far-reaching conception of 'the normal'. The difference between prisons and these other institutions, in terms of the way they operate on the individual and the mass, is really just one of degrees.

The prison was the focus of Foucault's theorization of the disciplinary because it was in its spaces that power was at its most overt and concentrated, enabling him to reveal operations that were more obscured in other institutions. Power in the modern age, according to Foucault, threads men and women, particularly the under-privileged, through a succession or circuit of disciplinary 'apparatuses', in which knowledge and power become enmeshed and mutually reinforcing.

The advent of disciplinary institutions, Foucault argues, was accompanied by the advent of the so-called social or human sciences (psychology, sociology, anthropology, criminology, etc), which gave rise to an array of professionals that became part of the penal system for the first time. Quite suddenly it was no longer enough to determine whether what had been done was or wasn't tolerable; the nineteenth century social sciences developed a whole taxonomy of pathological types. It wasn't just the defendant's alleged crime that was being judged, but also what might be known of his or her biography and psychology. The homosexual, for example, was invented in the mid nineteenth century; previously, there had only been homosexual acts. Punishment in sovereign society was about marking the body; discipline was a means of touching the soul (the psychotherapist taking the place of the priest). Power was inefficient in sovereign societies: most crimes went undetected. This meant that when someone was convicted of a crime, his or her punishment had to be public and spectacular, dramaturgically elaborate even, so as to strike fear in the hearts of onlookers. In a disciplinary society the observation of the population by power achieves a high level of 'resolution', as Foucault put it, his use of photographic terminology anticipating the extent to which architectural enclosures have been superseded by ubiquitous security cameras (one per fourteen citizens in the UK today) in today's surveillance society.

Foucault develops a more generalised conception of power in *History of Sexuality: The Will to Power*, published in 1976, a year after *Discipline and Punish*. Although all pervasive, his analysis of power is not altogether pessimistic. Power, he says, is a force and a series of relations, rather than a set of structures. It may be asymmetric, but power is never exclusively one sided: it can be subverted and reversed by myriad tactics. The point is not to imagine an illusory space outside of power, which may not even be desirable, but to enter 'the game of power', as he puts it. We may all be governed, but we can also learn to govern ourselves. There may not be a true self to find, but there are selves to be constructed. This is the message of Foucault's second and third volumes of his History of Sexuality, published a few weeks before his death from AIDS-related complications in 1984. His analysis of knowledge of the 1960s lead to his examination of the interplay of knowledge and power in the 1970s; his analysis of the production of subjectivity by power in the 1970s, in turn, lead to his late philosophy

of the self. This from the philosopher who on the final page of *The Order of Things* (1966) predicted that man would soon be "erased, like a face drawn in sand on the edge of the sea".

For Foucault, life and work, thought and action, were inseparable. He saw the Prison Information Group, which he co-founded in 1970, as a continuation of his work on the understanding and policing of society's others, whose voices power had silenced - beginning with the insane in *Madness and Civilisation* (1960). The name of the group, its method and ethos, were instigated, in large part, by Foucault himself. In order to confront the injustices of the prison system in France, Foucault believed the group first had to establish the truth of the prison from the prisoners themselves, as opposed to the truth of the prison system told by those in authority. To do this the Prison Information Group distributed questionnaires at prison gates to prisoners' families, who would hand them to the inmates for their responses. Some of France's greatest post-war intellectuals were involved in this endeavour - Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hélène Cixous, Jean Genet, for example. Deleuze once told Foucault in an interview: "you were the first to teach us of the indignity of speaking for others". This unusual alliance of philosophers, progressive lawyers, magistrates and journalists, ex-prisoners and prisoners' families - all of whom would meet at Foucault's apartment in Paris - enabled those that were without a voice, the prisoners themselves, to speak of their own experiences. These voices were the basis of the group's activism: the statements read at demonstrations, the content of its publishing and media activity. Foucault would later elaborate on this stance in his work on the Ancient Greek idea of 'Parrhesia'; for Foucault, the ethical and public responsibility of the philosopher was to "speak truth to power".

Impossible Prison exhibition (photo by Andy Keate)

The artists in this *The Impossible Prison* evoked these theoretical and practical reflections in a number of ways from various perspectives with varying degrees of specificity. Art historically speaking, the exhibition began with the late 1960s - in particular with the work of Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham and Vito Acconci - when the introduction of the body and video after Minimalism ushered in new relationships between performer and camera, art works and audiences. Elsewhere, the focus shifted from individual (or individuated) bodies to carceral situations that are national and transnational in scope.

Some artists dealt directly with the condition of prison itself, as a general phenomenon (Artur Zmijewski's repetition of the notorious Stamford Experiment, for example), and in its more specific socio-political manifestations (Ashley Hunt's documentary videos on America's super-prisons in the South and their ties to corporate interests and racial politics), while others evoked the isolation of human subjects under the observation of political power (Chris Evans, Evan Holloway, and analogously, Acconci and Nauman). Some reflected on disciplinary surveillance in various institutional contexts in society at large - school, bureaucracy, corporations, recreational clubs of various kinds (Angela Bulloch, Graham, Tatiana Trouvé) - while others evoked the carceral on a geopolitical scale: Palestine as a quasi-penal colony administered by Israel (Mona Hatoum and Multiplicity). The artworks were accompanied by photographs (by Elie Kagan), leaflets, posters, manuscripts, letters and press communiqués relating to the Prison Information Group. Foucault, whom

biographer David Macey describes as probably the only French philosopher to have had his ribs broken by French riot police, was back on the streets; this time his image and his words appeared full bleed in the windows of the police station on High Pavement (as shown on the cover of this newsletter).

A wide range of lectures and workshops for a range of audiences examined the legacies of *Discipline and Punish* in culture and society from various perspectives and knowledge areas: human geography, architecture, art history, philosophy, biography, business and criminology. In light of the work of the Prison Information Group, it was important to us that one of these speakers - Erwin James - had himself been a prisoner (now published author and *Guardian* correspondent). Deleuze, responding to Foucault's book in 1990, suggested disciplinary society was in the process of being superseded by a computer-facilitated 'society of control' that no longer has need for building-based institutions. In this Society of Control access to space, information and services would instead be determined on an individual-by-individual and incident-by-incident basis by infinitely mutable passwords and codes: this transition is now evidently underway. Another evident post-industrial and post-modern shift is that disciplinary power is increasingly operated by private interests - transnational corporations - as well as, or in league with, state administrations.

'Capital' by Evan Holloway 2005 (photo by Andy Keate)

These spoken events, in parallel with the works in the exhibition and the *Foucault Reader* we published on this occasion, considered how Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian thought can be brought to bear on varied phenomena in the age of information, biopower and geopolitics that his work anticipated.

The Impossible Prison was the final and most ambitious of Nottingham Contemporary's yearlong programme of preopening exhibitions and events, *Histories of the Present*, which took historically significant landmarks in and around Nottingham as sites and springboards for contemporary and international investigations. Our aim was to link the local to the international, the past and present, and reveal the cross-disciplinarity and social relevance of contemporary art in advance of Nottingham Contemporary's opening next year in our new landmark building.

The Impossible Prison was held at the police station at the Galleries of Justice, High Pavement, Nottingham from 31 October - 14 December 2008.

The artists featured were Vito Acconci, Shaina Anand, Atelier Van Lieshout, Angela Bulloch, Chris Evans, Harun Farocki, Dan Graham, Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons, Mona Hatoum, Thomas Hirschhorn, Evan Holloway, Ashley Hunt, Elie Kagan, Multiplicity, Tatiana Trouvé and Artur Zmijewski.

For more information go to www.nottinghamcontemporary.org
The *Foucault Reader* is available on request.