Our Common World..

Incarceration and Exile

Incantation

Human reason is beautiful and invincible.
No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,
No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.
It establishes the universal ideas in language,
And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice
With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.
It puts what should be above things as they are,
Is an enemy of despair and a friend of hope. […]

Czeslaw Milosz

The landscapes of Dublin are dotted with institutions that have thick walls and histories of abandonment, fear, violence, and control. The ruins and remnants, physical and mental, populate Grangegorman. Their visibility is stark, their pasts dense, protruding sometimes suddenly from main streets and suburban thoroughfares, their presence intimated by the walls that hold the senses at bay. Their inhabitants, upon committal, are still rendered ghosts and shadows on the edge of public spaces, losing the sense of substance or reality that accompanies ordinary human existence, as the time of their lives is confiscated and they come to wait and live behind stone trellises. From the perspective of the wider public whose gaze cannot pierce those walls and whose understanding of such sites relies on scraps of gossip or media presentations, such people risk becoming become faint outlines, generic classifications, traces of a full existence, and in the case of prisons, the undersides of binary oppositions – fallen, evil, monstrous, pitiable.

For such wider publics sometimes the sketched outlines of the retreating buildings, the enforced ignorance about their inner workings, and the caricatures of the media foster shameful desires to project fantasies about the nature of life beyond the walls as though these were the sites of self-enclosure of the super-rich. “It’s like a holiday camp..”, “It’s like a 5 star hotel..”, people say. Sometimes even prisoners themselves say such things as though oblivious to their surroundings, and co-opted by discourses that have taken a punitive turn.

And if one does pass through the gates and into its stone heart..

The bare, sterile corridors, the iron bars, the endless grey concrete, the clinical walls, the erasure of vegetal life, the razor barbed wire in the sun and rain, the endless noise, clattering, banging, echoing through the empty spaces, the thud of door after door as they close, bringing one into the depth of isolation. Other than the bodies who pass through gate after gate, there are few traces of non-human life. Human bodies were not made for tombs of metal, stone, concrete and shiny paint. Freedom vanishes and so too the senses are deprived, starved even, finding reprieve in the odd space, the art room, sometimes the cell.

It is impossible for most citizens to understand through lived experience the world of the prison and the life of the person in prison. Total institutions have no ready entry points. For many who traverse the all too porous boundary from societal marginalisation into exile - we know the areas that prisoners tend to come from are also those of greatest social deprivation and poverty - those housed within find their voices over-determined by expert discourses or the pronouncements of the media,

precluding participation in the public domain, despite affirmations of their legal status as fellow citizens.

It can be hard as a prisoner to tell stories without being captured in a pre-existing framework or classification that over-determines the mode of listening. Indeed, it is forbidden to speak directly to the world or to communicate with others without the eyes of the censor scanning or recording one's words. Those who listen carefully to the voices in these films will experience a rare encounter with the sheer ordinariness, including the banality or boredom, of the life of the person in prison.

Incarceration Altars is an unassuming and modest work in many respects that nonetheless manages to bear witness to our common humanity by showing the entanglement of all of our lives with material things, those things so ordinary to others but so precious to us, that come to house and embody our memories, our loves, our hopes, our losses, and our dreams. Things that extend our capacities for agency, expression, engagement and creativity, and that are co-constitutive of our selves. Things are elevated beyond the functionality of the quotidian, becoming vehicles for expression, mourning, imagination and engagement. Even in sites whose construction emulates the sparse homogeneity of a desert, humans create a sense of the embodied inhabitation of place through the relation to things.

"The deprivation of liberty is the punishment", it is stated. Indeed it is the principle underpinning imprisonment that no further punishment beyond the deprivation of liberty should be sought. But this statement speaks only of and to the incarcerated individual as though he or she is the sole subject of punishment. That deprivation of liberty extends far beyond the borders of the self, severing or weakening the capacity to touch and be touched by the world and its inhabitants, and it fails to acknowledge fully the way in which the punishment of depriving liberty affects those outside who mourn and miss the person in prison, who may struggle to manage, who have to navigate the stigmas that mark the family of the prisoner. This is not to make a normative statement about imprisonment but simply to register the real effects of imprisonment on others beyond the incarcerated.

All prisoners live on that unreal gradated continuum of distance from the world and the other. At times contact is too close when one must share a small cell with a stranger for over 17 hours a day, without the privacy for the most basic of bodily functions whilst being forbidden sustained contact with loved ones. At other times, such possibilities for contact retreat when on protection, voluntary or otherwise, or segregation, and the more this persists, the more one can become undone and even unhinged. Craig Haney describes with profound compassion the way in which men in solitary confinement would reach their pinkies through the iron mesh separating him and them in order to seek out the most basic and primitive form of human contact: the tenderness of touch.

Removing a human from our shared world is the most severe kind of exile. One can no longer speak, touch, move or act with autonomy. It is not just that one is cut off from the world; one is cut off from the self. For some, such forced retreat can come as a sense of relief when the world itself offers little to nothing in terms of meeting the most basic of needs, but for most the pains of imprisonment scar the self and those whom that self loves, even if some find forms of redemption, reprieve, and creativity behind those walls. There are elements of Irish prison life that can provide sanctuary and allow the walls to be temporarily suspended: the arts, education, cooking, woodwork.. As with outside, the act of turning to the world through reading, painting, study, writing, or listening can bring its own epiphanies, insights, and create the conditions for transformation and opening to the world beyond the self. These activities are not palliatives but essential to sustain a life and keep open a chink of opening to the world beyond the horizons of the prison walls.

Artist/teachers like Bernie Masterson locate pathways between worlds, holding onto a sense of compassion, insight and commitment to justice whilst refusing condescension, didacticism, or simplification in her collaborative practice. This practice has consistently cleared a space for shared speech for those who society has rendered voiceless, silent, giving form to the depth of experience that is the uniqueness of each life. It marks the capacity for renunciation that comes with years of listening and the depth of experience that comes with decades of teaching in a prison. Works like *Invocation, Impedimenta, Shrine, Remembrance, Unseen Unheard* resonate and speak to and with this current work in a silent choral haunting of our repressed and wilfully ignored presents and histories. Bringing these voices into the public domain affirms the prisoner as a fellow human being and fellow citizen. Following the Derek Mahon poem that orients this public art initiative, these are stories of lived lives and our common world.

Ethical Imagination

1855 F. P. COBBE Ess. Intuitive Morals I. 117 *The deprivation of Personal Freedom constitutes..an incarceration of the Soul.*

When I used to come and go with more regularity from these strange institutions, I began to feel as though my sensibility was being slowly corroded like a weak acid and that my body was pleading for release from captivity, despite the temporary nature of my short experiences of confinement. It came to feel like my skin was disintegrating, like holes in transparent muslin. It wasn't so much the people - staff or prisoners - but the site itself that seemed to undo the soul. Its labyrinthine rules meant everything was prohibited unless explicitly permitted, a Kafkaeseque underbelly of ordinary life. I wondered at those people who claim it is a site for rehabilitation as I underwent the crushing suffocation of its presence as an occasional visiting citizen. No exit.

Sometimes during breaks from teaching I'd lie in the grass opposite the prison and stare at the sky. One day I returned covered in stems and the men sighed their longing for the touch of the soft grass and earth. Our flesh needs the openness of materials that give and that live.

These experiences and encounters provoked my ethical imagination as I asked myself 'how would this be for me?'. How would it be were I to feel I were still me, despite committing some offence, but nonetheless be subjected the imposition of a whole new identity as 'prisoner' covering me like tar such that little of my previous self were acknowledged, except labels: 'prisoner', 'offender' and the plethora of dehumanising names that populate the media. To not be seen, to be invisible, to have no spontaneous contact, to find one's words distorted just because of the label placed on one, to be mistrusted, to strive to find some kind of relation of equality, to be under permanent suspicion..

Prisons damage people, not only those incarcerated but also staff and the wider community. Despite the overwhelming evidence of this, to demand recognition of the humanity and citizenship of the imprisoned is seen by some as a betrayal and a failure to acknowledge crimes committed. To speak of life stories, of legacies of institutional abuse or social segregation, of personal tragedy and systemic inequality is dismissed as 'making excuses'. It is easier to sustain the crude caricatures and the dehumanising identifications – feral, scum, lag.. – than to encounter the full complexity of the other.

Most people never encounter the person inside a prison; at most they come to the visiting spaces, but not the landings. As they never step foot within its walls, the prison risks becoming a blank canvas onto which the fears and hates of society can be projected, generally with little knowledge of the realities of the space or the lives of those housed within. As sites of exile, prisons operate at an intensified distance from the world, at least in principle. Prisons seek to control all communication, and, wittingly or not, diminish the person through numbering systems, censorship, and phrases like 'feeding times'. But this removal from the public gaze is also to protect those who are, for a period,

wards of the state and thus particularly vulnerable to exploitation. It becomes a site of permanently exposed privacy, private in its disconnection from the public, a site of surveillance, and a space of privation, not simply because one is no longer free, but because one can no longer appear to others in the world.

The title of this work *Incarceration Altars* reminds us of the duality of the nature of the prison. On the one hand prisons are symbolic sites of exile, punishment, and resonant with rites of sacrifice, providing visible reminders of transgression of the laws of the community and seeking to appease such wrongdoing. On the other hand, within them, one finds tiny spaces of reverence, investment in ordinary things that renders them symbolic and even sacred, filaments of connection to the wider world. The voice speaking could be anyone's voice. It transcends the walls.

Different people approach their cells differently. It depends on disposition, inclination, character, length of sentence, forms of resistance, but few cells are without some material things, however transitory, that can hold a world and that reach to the world. These things anchor existence, ground rituals, and keep alive to the texture of the world that self who is faced with the dull passage of time, sometimes years and decades, undoing somewhat with their material persistence the inevitable sense of isolation that takes hold with life in prison. The things described in these films are common place, overwhelming relational in gesture, saturated with memory, effecting sites of enactment or creation, expressions of love and mourning, providing foci and tools for transformation or the renewal of life. They bring the voice of the prisoner into our world, into the public domain, and in their intertwining with ritual and practice, they bring the world into the cell and the prison.

Incarceration Altars is a work of non-monumental portraiture told through the stories of things.

Ordinary Things: The Common Place

Ian Hodder notes often that we scarcely look at things: we are more interested in humans and their society. We don't consider the ways in which things make society possible, and how society and things are co-entangled. We fail to see how things depend on and are connected with other things, temporally, in their lineages, and spatially, and how human life, including social life, depends on things. In sites of deprivation like prisons, ordinary things can take on even more profound symbolic significance (hence this powerful phrase *Incarceration Altars*) that resist the oppression of sites of confinement and sustain a lived sense of one's being and existence, creating intimate sites of gathering and expression.

Paying even a modicum of attention to the affinities between that world in exile and the world of the everyday beyond the walls, it is easy to see how readily the most ordinary of things come to be imbued with a sense of reverence that verges on the sacred, and how things can gather and hold memories, seemingly in their very matter of their molecular structure, making tangible whilst conserving the singularity of that which is most intimate or expressive of a life. The mere act of looking with attention allows for the beauty and character of the most mundane of things to be experienced, from moss in a prison yard to the light changing in the cell over the course of a day. Memory can come to saturate bare perception in certain cases and at certain moments when the material world becomes charged with meaning, all things emitting signs.

Things themselves have a durability that means that they can be approached through all the senses, they can be given to the other, and create community: the famous Icelandic Parliament, the *Althing*, reminds us of the origins of the word 'thing' as that which gathers or assembles. They are the mediators that gather and hold the past, community, love, expression, holding the singular stories and thus the lives that cherish them. They are the tools that extend the body and mind permitting of forms of expression, investigation and enquiry. They are the gifts that sustain relationships.

Listening

The political and the aesthetic both require a form of manifestation, the appearing of something in a public domain. In *Incarceration Altars,* the sonorous texture of voice and the stillness of the image of the object offer, through an indirect gesture to public discourse and the commons, the possibility of a shared world, and this is where the power of the work lies. Fragments of stories are offered and elements of a life are told through the relation to the object described. They are understated, indirect, non-confessional, poetic and gestural. Their visual anonymity that refuses the directness of the face-to-face encounter reveals the uniqueness of each life through the timbre of the voice, ensuring listening without prejudice, the 'stretching' of ears to hear what the other saying, just as the speaking reaches out to the ears of the other, the listener. Hearing (*entendre)* opens the possibility for understanding (*comprendre)*, at least in being with and co-existing with the other. Bypassing the ordinary conventions of portraiture, the uniqueness that makes each of us different from all others, is disclosed through the voice as it tells the stories of the mute things that are precious to the life that speaks it.

Adriana Cavarero writes,

> The voice, however, is always different from all other voices, even if the words are the same, as often happens in the case of a song. This difference, as Calvino underlines, has to do with the body. "A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices…A voice involves the throat, saliva." When the human voice vibrates, there is someone in flesh and bone who emits it. Uniqueness is not a characteristic of Man in general, but rather of every human being insofar as he or she lives and breathes. It is worth underscoring again that this corporal root of uniqueness is also perceptible by sight—that is, by an aspect that is immediately visible to whomever looks at the other's face.
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> *For More than One Voice,* pp.3-4.

All things have their own characters, qualities, expressiveness, history, and proto-agency, mediating the relation to self, mediating the relation to the world, including the world of the prison, opening a pathway to those outside.

The hand needs to make and touch, the eye to read and look, the ear to listen, the self to reflect and express. The senses need to find other forms of expression that materialise and make ma the intimacy of experience and that are creative of experience through the exploration of materiality.

We listen to the voice of the one who tells the story of *this* thing, and thus tells the story of both its life and his own.

Hannah Arendt writes,

> Each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality, which, their intensity notwithstanding, they could never have had before. The presence of others who see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves [..]
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> *The Human Condition,* p.50.

The plural stories of these things, and the still images that accompany the stories, mean that that which previous occupied the realm of private existence, confinement, personal experience, and even isolation, are brought into shared presence, the reality of presence guaranteed by others, becoming part of and constitutive of our common world. They are still, but their temporality is sensed through the camera's lens, and time passes.

Still, a thing or 'ting' draws together, gathers or assembles. It creates publics.

The Ordinary Things: *Radio, flowerpot/candle-holder, cup, bowl, and cutlery, Angry Birds Painting, airfix models, prayer diary, dictionary, guitar, a model house, trainers..*

The Universal Themes: *Grief, gratitude, gift-giving, care, children, forgiveness, sanity, patience, acceptance, religion, reflection, intellect, enquiry, study, etymology, music, time, home, love, physicality, participation, time, boredom, exhaustion, aliveness..*

The Men: *Anthony, John, Paul, Paddy, Paul O, David, Warren, Mark, Chang, Robert..*

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