

Incarceration What ~~Photography~~ has in Common with an Empty Vase



Herbert
Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry

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EXHIBITION GUIDE



What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase results from a collaboration between artist Edgar Martins and prison inmates in the West Midlands, their families and several other individuals and community groups in the region.

It is a multifaceted body of work, developed from a commission with GRAIN Projects, where Martins uses the social context of incarceration as a starting point. Martins explores the philosophical concept of absence. He also addresses a broader consideration of the status of the photograph when questions of visibility, ethics, aesthetics and documentation intersect.

By using image and text, new and historical photography, evidence and fiction, Martins' work proposes to scrutinise how one deals with the absence of a loved one, brought on by enforced separation through incarceration and lockdown.

The exhibition seeks to answer: How does one represent a subject that is absent or hidden from view? How can documentary photography, in an era of fake news, best acknowledge the imaginative and fictional dimension of our relation to photographs?

By giving a voice to inmates and their families and addressing prison as a set of social relations rather than a physical space, Martins' work aims to rethink and counter the sort of imagery normally associated with incarceration and confinement. The project intentionally circumvents images whose sole purpose, Martins argues, is to confirm the already held opinions within dominant ideology about crime and punishment: violence, drugs, criminality and race.

“We need to rethink the set of practices, relationships, and structures with which we look and relate to photographs” according to Martins and for this rethinking he skews photography away from a preoccupation with the referent. The work still comes from experience and engagement with inmates, incarcerated in the West Midlands, and their families, and is not detached from the real. However, Martins does not hold faith in the power of the photograph as document and instead uses the literal figuratively and moves with freedom and a lack of restraint through the abundance of images and image types he deploys.

Our relation to photography has been very much determined by its content: a concern with what is in the picture and how what is in the picture has been represented. In many respects Martins frees us from this responsibility: his use of all kinds of photography liberates us from the usual strictures with which we tend to approach the photograph— documentary especially can be a very sober form— and in doing so extends the differing potentialities and possibilities that photographs (still) have to engage and move us.

Mark Durden, *Against Documentary in What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*, The Moth House, 2019



Winson Green is the area where Birmingham Prison is located. It was considered one of the most rundown areas in the UK in 2010. It is also where the first series of Channel 4's *Benefits Street* was shot.

I'm a Celebrity, Get me Out of Winson Green!

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W glycée adhesive print



'After the ignominy of the trial and the stigma of having been sent to prison, the day of reckoning with the woman who used to boast to others about her blue eyed boy is fast approaching.'

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W resin print mounted on aluminium



Look. Look again

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

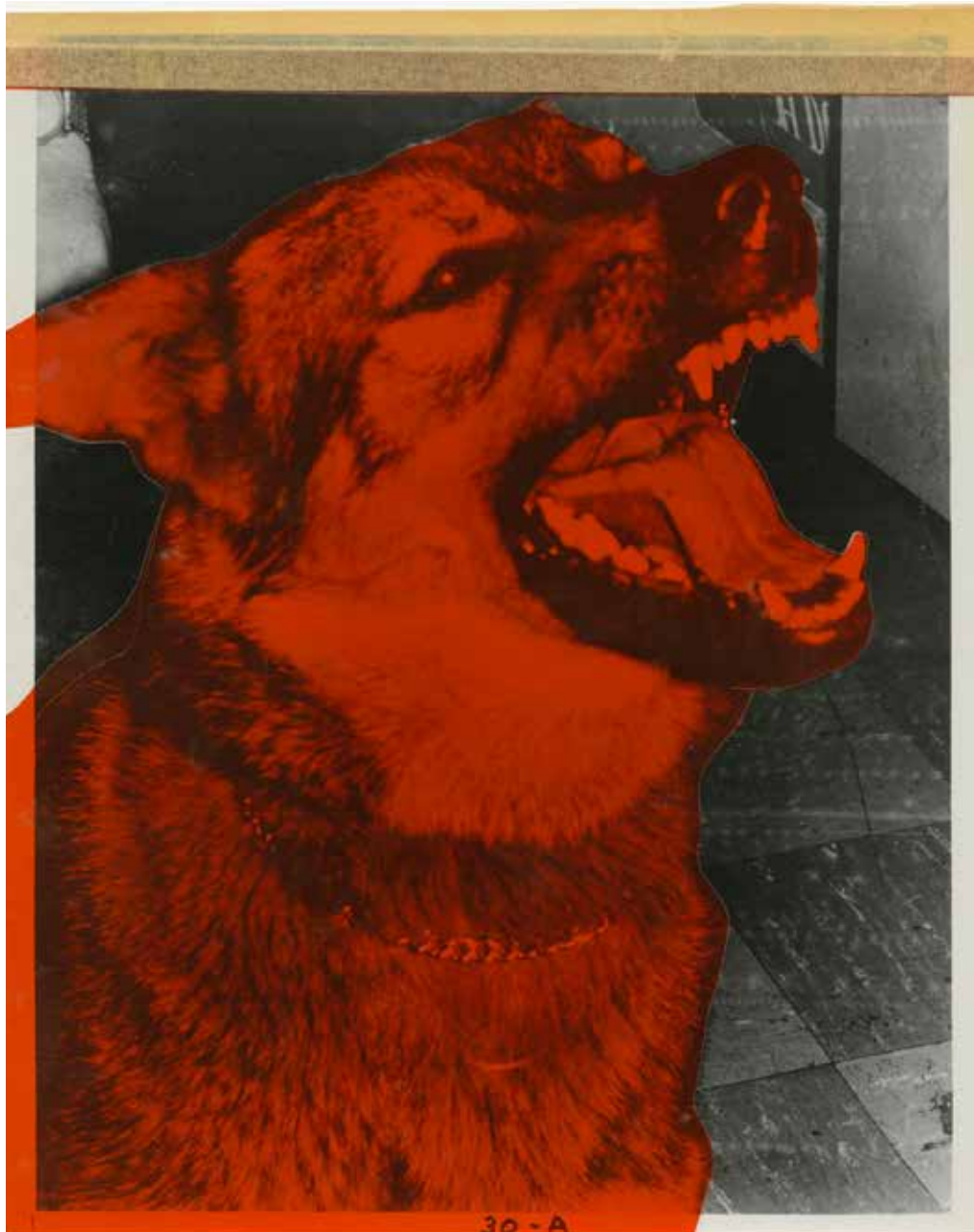
2019

C-prints mounted on aluminium and framed



Lockdown. Tonight. Let it Go
from the series *What Photography & Incarceration*
has in Common with an Empty Vase
2019
C-print mounted on aluminium

The messages on these pencils are based on material confiscated from an inmate that was incarcerated in Birmingham Prison in the 1980s. Due to spending most of his days in solitary confinement he found an ingenious way to communicate with others. He would carefully erase the brand names of stationery he got his hands on and painted or stencilled his own messages instead. He would then pass the stationery to unsuspecting guards to return to their 'rightful' owners, meaning other prisoners he wished to communicate with. When it was finally discovered that he was surreptitiously communicating with others, the prison guards confiscated all stationery from him.



'YOU DAWG!'

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

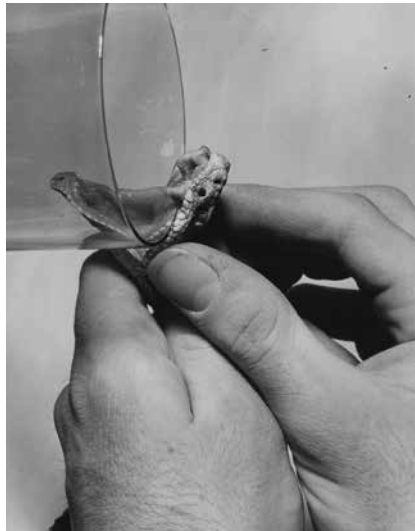
C-print mounted on aluminium and framed

The images of animals in this project are often understood by viewers as metaphors for psychological states. While Martins does not invalidate this reading of the works, they were actually employed to explore the idea of photography as catachresis.

To understand this concept Martins gives a quick example of a catachresis: 'the arm of a chair' or 'the leg of a table'. These terms are catachrestic because they use symbols related to human physiology to describe something where there is no other way to say it. So a catachresis reveals language's ability to respond to something when under pressure while also revealing its inadequacy.

Martins feels the same way about the role of photography in these environments. He believes photography is unable to respond to the environment of a prison adequately. That is why he chose not to photograph inside the prison walls and instead sought fictional and meta-representational strategies to tell the hidden stories that seldom get told, while at the same time pointing to photography's insufficiencies.

Martins has always thought of photography as a singularly inadequate medium for communication, so he seeks to explore this in his work. His images are multi-layered, often self-referential. There is a constant tension between revelation and concealment in his work.



The sum of my complicated parts

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W resin prints with yellow acrylic paint on UV Perspex, mounted on aluminium

One of Martins' priorities, while engaging with prisoners and their families, was to tell the stories and narratives that seldom get told, while also protecting them from the gaze of the public. It became apparent to Martins early on in the project that many of the individuals he had connected with were highly vulnerable, particularly the family members. While Martins photographed offenders, ex-offenders and their relatives he also photographed people (actors) enacting their stories. This methodology was employed so one would never know who is being referred to.

According to Martins this strategy enabled him to disrupt the power relations and the voyeurism inherent in the consumption of this type of imagery. Martins went to great lengths to invert the role of the sitter. The people one might imagine to play a specific role, may not actually have this role in real life.

It is therefore also valid to enquire if the bruises and marks that are visible in images such as these were also deployed as a way to subvert the viewer's reading of the work.



The word is Bastd, Bast**d is the word**

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

Resin prints mounted on aluminium



Stop gein' me yon funny look

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W resin print mounted on aluminium



**The hatch is not the sort of place to have a face like
a slapped ass**
from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in
Common with an Empty Vase*
2019
B&W resin prints mounted on aluminium



The Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) favours overwhelmingly the state versus the inmate. If an inmate is unable to account for all their income before and during their prison sentence these funds are usually confiscated by the state. As a result, inmates' families often lose their homes

POCA hanging over my head

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W glycée adhesive print



Would you shed your skin for me?

from the series *Soliloquies and Soliloquies on Life, Death and Other Interludes*

2017

C-print mounted on aluminium with floating paper post-it

The post-it in one of these artworks refers to a letter of departure, a note that an ex-offender left to his family after taking his own life. Of all the forensic material that was accessed during the incursion into the Institute of Legal Medicine, this was one of the objects that was most moving. Martins was struck by the transient nature of the medium and the finality of the message contained therein.

In this artwork Martins was interested in establishing a kind of metaphor between the post-it, as an inadequate medium for communicating a message of this nature; and photography as an inadequate medium for communication (in general). This tension between concealment and revelation – is implicit throughout the project.



Golden hour

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W resin print with yellow acrylic paint on UV Perspex mounted on aluminium

*To read about the yellow rectangle featured in this work, please refer to the artwork *Sky Blue*. (page 26)*



The aptly named Asylum Bridge is located on the canal that surrounds Birmingham prison. By comparison to the rundown area of Winson Green, where the prison is based, the canal is serene and picturesque. The canal is one of the routes families and inmates use to go in and out of the prison and where they normally say goodbye or watch their partners be admitted.

Asylum Bridge

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W resin print mounted on aluminium



“You would do absolutely anything to preserve your social status. You would also prefer to keep your ruthless, pathological ambition under wraps, in case anyone notices what you are doing and pulls the ladder’. That’s my Capricorn Star sign for the day. It seems I’m better divorced and locked up.”

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

Installation comprising 2x Radioptican projectors with B&W resin prints



Make Men Great Again

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W resin print mounted on aluminium



Prisoner's breath #1

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

C-print mounted on aluminium



Prisoner's breath #2

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

C-print mounted on aluminium
and framed

In the 1960s, Italian conceptualist artist Piero Manzoni produced an artwork titled *Artist's Breath*. It was comprised of a balloon filled with his breath. These images were inspired by Manzoni's artwork. Martins asked the prisoners he met to blow up balloons which he then gave to their families.

Martins was effectively the conduit between the inmates and their families as few inmates get visits in prison. This act also marked a reversal of the journey of these balloons. They are normally used to smuggle things into prison. In this case Martins used them to smuggle something out: the inmates' breath.



These are passport photos, known as Polyfoto, from the early 1960s shared with Martins by one of the couples he collaborated with. The husband is currently in prison, completing his sixth sentence. These were the first and last

passport photographs they took as a couple before the husband was incarcerated. The missing photos on the male's set were used to commit his first crime, which was fraud. The female's sheet remains intact. She didn't

have a chance to use the photos, becoming the sole carer for their children and parents.

The cross-stitched cloth visible over one of the thumbnails 'floats' above the image. This cross-stitched 'rag' was produced in Bedford, the town where Martins lives, by the Panacea Society, a Victorian, religious, apocalyptic cult. The Panacea Society is now a foundation and museum, which Martins has visited on many occasions. When they operated as a religious society, they used to produce embroidered pieces of cloth to raise funds for the organisation. The cult leader, Octavia, blessed them and sold them to the general public for various ends, such as good health and fortune.

When Martins visited one particular inmate in prison he noticed he had this embroidery on his wall so they immediately bonded over the item. Martins went on to discover that the inmate's family was from Bedfordshire and that this embroidery had been given to the inmate by his grandparents on the day of his trial.

Life is no Panacea

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

C-print mounted on aluminium



This work features the backs of historical news photographs that depict the crimes or trials of some of the inmates incarcerated at Birmingham Prison. Martins sourced these photographs from defunct newspaper archives. The colourful papers stuck to the back of the prints have annotations describing the images.

In order to protect the identity of the inmates and tell their personal stories, rather than the narratives portrayed in the media, Martins

intervened on the photograph descriptions, deleting some words. If the existing words are read sequentially, ignoring the gaps between them, they make up completely new descriptions, or *destinerrances*, as Martins argues.

Destinerrance is a term proposed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, which combines the concepts of error, errancy and destiny. In his book, *La Carte Postale*, Derrida explains that every postcard, every message,

everything that is communicated in writing, has a tendency to be decontextualised and has a life of its own, beyond its original purpose, given the inherent quality of writing to dissociate itself from its author. Martins decided to extend this concept to photography.

Lost in Translation

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

C-prints mounted on aluminium



Martins photographed ex-offenders and their families, and also individuals enacting their stories. One of the reasons why he was hesitant in photographing inside the prison was because of the potential to misrepresent, exploit and disavow the image of prisoners, something which he has often criticised in prison film documentaries and still-image projects around this topic.

This decision was also reinforced by the difficult and turbulent experience of dealing with the prison administration. During the three-year development of this project the prison had four different directors, the largest prison riots in UK history, chronic staff shortages and high levels of drug addiction. This meant that whenever Martins made headway with one director to get all the necessary permissions, they would leave their post and he would have to start over again.

Martins decided to produce the work directly with a handful of inmates, their families and the prison staff who provided

him access. He also changed his strategy to focus on visiting inmates and their families inside the prison while producing the visual work outside its walls.

This way he also managed to avoid images whose sole purpose, in Martins' opinion, is to confirm the already held opinions within dominant ideology about crime and punishment. These images normally revolve around themes such as violence, drugs, criminality and race.

Guid Ridance! Guid Ridance!

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W resin print mounted on aluminium



YOU RAT!

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

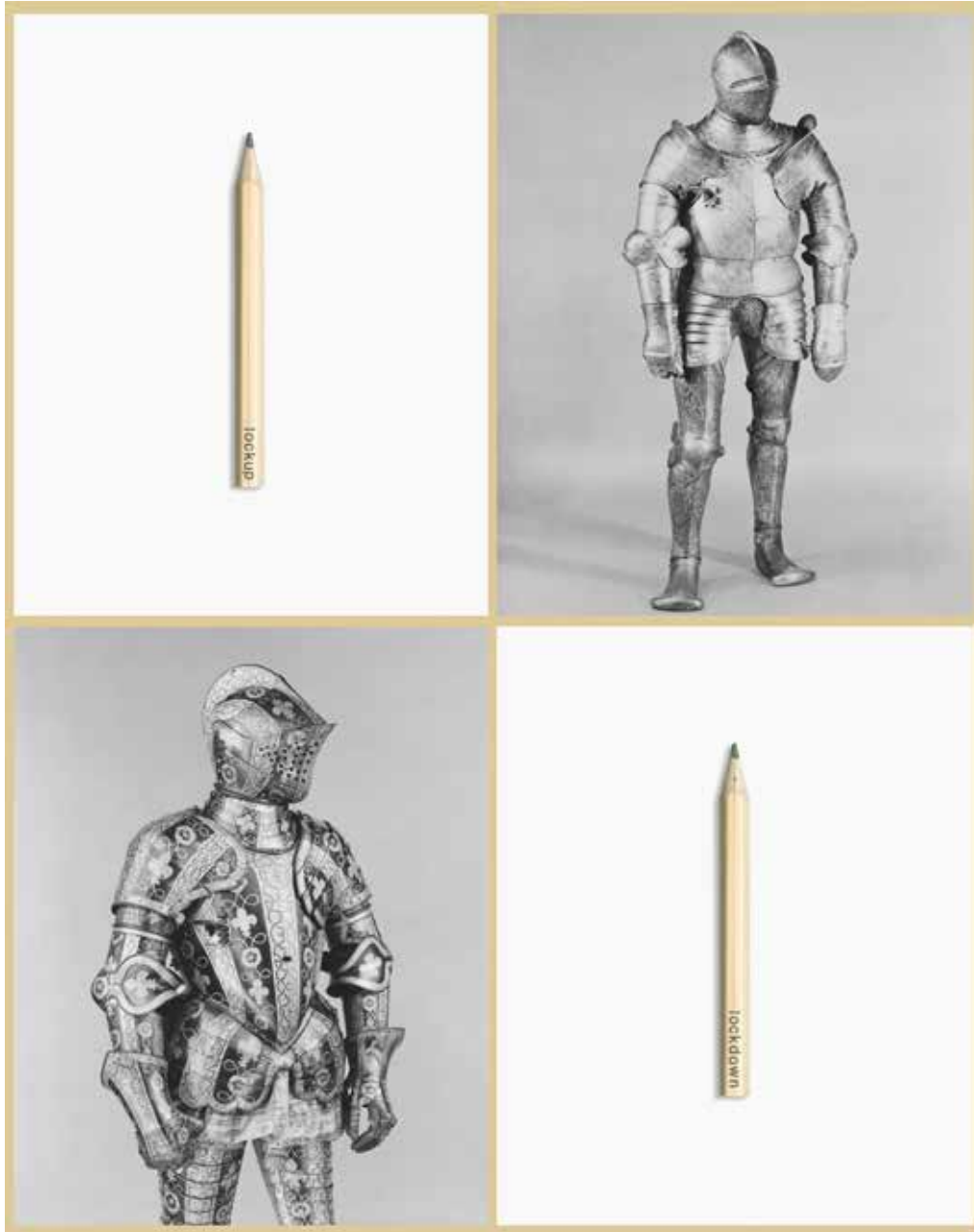
2019

C-print mounted on aluminium & framed



The camera featured in this photograph was made in the 1960s in the Soviet Union. It was used primarily as a paparazzi camera. Martins used it in this project as it encapsulates all his apprehensions about photography and photographers as 'the hunter of images'.

My spies tell me 'er Facebook status says she's in a relationship
from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*
2019
C-print/B&W resin print mounted on aluminium



Lockup is a piece of piss compared to lockdown
from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

C-print mounted on aluminium



The blue rectangle featured in this artwork is printed directly on the glass and so 'floats' above the artwork. The paint itself is applied using a special serigraphy process Martins developed. It uses the same kind of paint that is normally applied in stained glass windows in churches and cathedrals. He devised a special technique to apply it onto Perspex smoothly and opaquely and to make it UV resistant.

This photograph is a homage to an inmate Martins met at Birmingham Prison. This inmate was purported to have the darkest cell in the prison. Although he had requested a transfer to a different cell on multiple occasions, the prison authorities were reluctant to move him as he had a reputation for being very disruptive.

Resigned that he would have to spend the rest of his 10-year sentence in this dark room, he asked his family to smuggle in a yellow felt tip pen during

their monthly family visits. Stationery can often be used as weapons in prison, however, in this case the pens were not used for nefarious purposes. For over a year he collected enough pens to paint his cell window a 'sunset yellow' colour (see *Golden hour* artwork). Once he finished painting this window he started collecting smuggled, blue felt tip pens.

The inmate admitted to Martins that one day he would eventually be forced to clean the yellow painted window or that the prison authorities would replace it so he was already preparing his move. He would paint the new window 'sky blue'. The landscape depicted in this artwork was shot in the Everglades, where he vacationed with his family prior to being incarcerated.

Sky Blue

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

B&W resin print with blue acrylic paint on UV Perspex mounted on aluminium



During the three-year gestation of this project, Martins developed a close relationship with numerous individuals and organisations outside the prison walls, namely mental health charities, youth centres and youth groups and the relatives of inmates.

One day, he was invited by one of the families to attend a psychoanalytical session being offered to one of their children. This clinic was part of a programme launched by a local mental health charity that supported the relatives of prisoners struggling with the incarceration of their partners.

This artwork is based on the observations Martins made from one of the psychoanalysis sessions he attended. The bird represents the father of the child (in her dreams), the girl eating the bird represents the daughter 'appropriating' the memory of her father. The mouth in psychoanalytical literature is often seen as an eye, so 'the mouth as an eye' references the daughter constructing an identity for her father, in his absence.

No Man is an Island

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

C-print/B&W resin print mounted on aluminium



Whilst knife-related crime is up by 24% in the UK in the past two years almost everything about our assumptions about these types of crime is wrong. Knife crime is not an inner city or gang problem. The majority of teenage knife deaths take place outside major cities. The overwhelming majority of those killed by knives in Britain in the last 40 years are not black. The overwhelming majority of young people caught carrying knives today are not involved with gangs. These images represent a selection of knives and other bladed weapons analysed by the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences, which were used in serious crimes over a period of 2 years. However, for Martins these blades do not necessarily just talk of violence and crime. They are not mere still-lives. They are portraits, stand-ins for the individuals that once held them. They depict different individual dispositions, body shapes and temperaments. They are 'lipographs', a term coined by Martins. A lipograph (a concept inspired in the Oulipo movement's lipogramme) is a visual representational device, which omits its referential subject. It is the proverbial impossible document.

Lost in Translation

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

C-prints mounted on aluminium



This installation comprises a mixture of historical archive photographs sourced by the artist as well as personal photographs donated by the inmates and families Martins interacted with. The book that supports the visual work is a facsimile copy of an inmate's diary, which the artist intervened on, and which was written especially for this project.

Martins forged a close friendship with the inmate that wrote this journal. He visited him over two years, in his cell, during family days and during legal visits. Legal visits are normally only attended by inmates' legal representatives but HMP Birmingham enabled the artist to make use of this facility so he could spend one-on-one time with the inmate in question. This enabled Martins to share the work he was producing with him and edit the diary.

I need you more than you need me

from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*

2019

Installation comprising 16x Aldis slide viewers with B&W resin prints, accompanied by Book # 2

(*What Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*, 2019)



The film element of this project deploys a succession of photographs, strongly reminiscent of scientific illustration and documentation, and that remarkable 1977 photobook by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, *Evidence*, in which their appropriations use an older, outdated mode of photography to show a testing of truth and certainty in the wake of Watergate and Vietnam. All fail to illustrate and communicate and become instead science fiction, beautiful enigmas.

Martins sourced his photographs from the archives of CERN, the European Space Agency and an archive he has built up from

images in defunct newspapers. They typify a dated scientific aesthetic, testimony to a faith and fascination in the value and virtue of technology. The photographs show tests, experiments, very often with materials, images about vision, about looking and a lot of pointing, deictic gestures that do not give us clarity, but underscore the shortfall between what is being presented to us in the picture and what sense we are supposed to take from it.

The difference with *Evidence* is we do not encounter just pictures. Martins' photographs are sequenced to accompany an elaborate fiction (a script produced in collaboration with the renowned Portuguese physicist and CERN scientist João Seixas), an absurdist story of a prison that is built to create the maximum absence of its inmates from society. The prison is an experimental facility set-up in the Midlands in the 1950s to explore the feasibility of two different incarceration models, Cryoguard and QSafe. Cryoguard involves having fully automated penitentiary systems managed by autonomous robots and with

prisoners undergoing cryopreservation, so sentences can last centuries. QSafe involves confining dangerous prisoners in an unknown remote location, with only two judges having keys that give them access to the quantum encrypted information as to where the prisoners are. In relation to this fiction, we should bear in mind Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*—its powerful opening pages, which set up the opposition between the public spectacle of the brutal execution of a regicide in mid eighteenth-century France and the rules for the "House of young prisoners in Paris", eighty years later; an account of torture and a time-table, in order to show how punishment became the most hidden part of the penal process. In many ways Martins' 'documentary-fiction' about the disappearance of prison and prisoners might be seen as an extension of this shift towards invisibility in the penal system.

(Excerpt from *Against Documentary* by Mark Durden, in *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*, The Moth House, 2019)

The Life and Death of Schrödinger's Cat,
from the series *What Photography & Incarceration has in Common with an Empty Vase*
2019
25 min film, with four channel sound

Incarceration
What ~~Photography~~
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