

Against Documentary

“Most of the work about incarceration often works to solidify and perpetuate certain power relations and dynamics: it’s always about violence, drugs, criminality, race”— as a result, Edgar Martins decides not to photograph inside the prison walls. It is a refusal that nevertheless leads to an abundance of photographs. He still chooses to respond through images to the impact of incarceration, pictures whose contexts and subject matter remain uncertain. We are now bombarded with images all the time and Martins’ approach is in part a dangerous tactic— in the wake of an abundance of images he seeks to compete, he gives us more images not less. At the same time, he is negating a certain tradition of documentary, one for which the referent is important.

Martins’ work sets up a gap between the real and photography, he appropriates images and stages photographs and even damages and destroys photographs to disrupt the certainties by which we tend to relate to photography as a document. But he still uses photographs in order to communicate a response to the complexity of his subject. In this respect his photographs work metaphorically, not literally.

One can set Martins’ varied uses of photography against the straight and proper documentary tradition and the assumptions it carries— that there is a real that determines the photograph. While we are not dealing with a documentary real in such pictures, we are still looking at photographs. They are and still remain documents. The difference is that there is a deliberate lack of information about their context. We often know little about his pictures, we don’t necessarily know where they were taken and who is being pictured.

The project is structured into three parts. The first is a film made up from still images, inspired by Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*. What the photographs are showing is to be treated as fiction or in relation to a fiction and in the second they function metaphorically and are intended to allude to certain psychological states and situations. The realm of a poetics of photography, how we form associations around what is presented is central. And we move through different forms or types of photography in terms of the three parts of this project. In the last element (omitted from this book but forming part of an exhibition of this project) we have only the abstract remains of photographs, photographs that before their destruction, we are informed, represented the letters and journals of inmates, extracts from which are printed alongside these ruined images. Martins has included a facsimile of an inmate’s diary for this publication.

It might be useful here, to track back in terms of documentary and describe one of the defining documentary projects on prison life. In his book *Conversations with the Dead*, Danny Lyon opened up a point of affiliation and identification with an inmate, Billy McCune, which subjectivizes and humanizes his more traditional documents of prison life in Texan penitentiaries. Lyon’s documentary photobook was in this respect not conventional. McCune’s pictures both supplemented and counter-posed Lyon’s depictions of incarceration and subjugation. Published in 1971, his black and white photographs already looked out of time, some even redolent of FSA photography of the Depression era— his picture of prisoner Cotton Pickers especially. I would assume this citation is deliberate and an acknowledgment of the photographic tradition he has affinities with. The relation with McCune, a convicted rapist, can also be seen as part of the romance of an outsider-identification, the continued trajectory of documentary’s fascination with the other. But the inclusion of McCune’s pictures and letters, and that the pictures are importantly reproduced in colour, signals a departure and rupture. They can be seen to be part of the humanizing documentary project— they “reveal a compassionate consciousness which confounds the ‘justice’ which brands him ‘criminal’”, as the blurb on the back cover of the book puts it. But the introduction of the colour reproductions of McCune’s ink drawings and paintings in the

book are prescient of what is now a very familiar use of appropriated material by photographers. Lyon's documentary photographs as good as they are, formally are redolent of another era, they are not responsive to the time of a shift in documentary photography, but instead trace a lingering fascination with a documentary past, its humanist model already reworked and challenged by photographers that John Szarkowski championed with his New York MoMA exhibition *New Documents* in 1967, in which social comment was lost to a more discordant impulse, testing the humanist premise of documentary through portraits of a broken and fractured humanity.

The documentary humanist moment— exemplified by the FSA — had also started to disintegrate in the experimental photo texts of the writer and photographer, Wright Morris— his fascination with structures and material artefacts was testimony less to economic plight but instead the life of their occupants and users. It was a special attachment to structures and things he photographed and described. With his *The Inhabitants*, 1946, anonymous architectural structures were combined with texts that reflected the multiple voices of Americans, and in *The Home Place*, 1948, the fictional story of its narrator's return to his Nebraskan home was accompanied by photographs of the environment and interiors of a farm, its furniture and belongings. With Morris' photography the structures and artefacts photographed are laden with pathos and sentiment— “saturated with emotion” as he put it.

And Edgar Martins? It is in Lyon's inclusion and reproduction of colour pictures and transcriptions of the letters from the prisoner that we can find a point of connection and continuity. And with Morris' photography, it is perhaps in that shedding of the burden of documentary associations and an acknowledgment of the obduracy and beautifully enigma of things, things photographed clearly, as they are, but not serving to illustrate or explain or teach.

The film element of this project by Martins deploys a succession of photographs, redolent 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. *Evidence* was the culmination of a three-year search through the archives of over 100 US government agencies and corporations. Photographs were seen as found objects within the tradition of the Readymade, but also had allusions to performance art and *arte povera* and minimalist sculpture. The book has an existential caste since it is to do with a relationship between man and machines, a loss of control and knowledge. Sultan was fascinated with Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up* and its register of a lack of certainty over the photograph as document and evidence.

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, there are also 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: an experimental facility set-up in the Midlands in the 1950s to explore the feasibility of two different incarceration models, Cryoguard and QSafe, which 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’ fiction about the disappearance of prison and prisoners might be seen as an extension of this shift towards invisibility in the penal system.

In Sultan and Mandel's *Evidence*, the sense is of a relation to machines and technology that has gone badly awry, the functionality and purpose of the original photographs is lost; in their edit, figures are functionaries not masters or controllers, and the book serves as an allegory of the political uncertainties and chaos of 1970s America. In many ways it looks towards the abundance of appropriationist photography that is to come in the digital age of photography's ubiquity. In a fitting analogy to the quality of the decontextualized photographs in *Evidence*, in the book's original essay by Robert F. Forth, he asks the reader “have you ever entered a movie you wanted to see after it had started, and then had to leave before the film was over, all the while being intrigued by what little you were able to see while there?” I have already brought in *Blow-Up*, and Sultan's fascination with photography's failure to function—the film's grainy blow-up, useless as evidence. *Blow-Up*'s degraded blow up photograph also links with the quality of Martins' ruins of photographs in the third element.

Part two, as Martins has said, concerns “my engagement with inmates, their families and others”. Some photographs show what we assume are the prison walls, from the outside, an oppressive and brutal structure against which human figures are posed and staged in situations that draw attention to the physical reality of separation and apartness. In some of his portraits faces appear to have been physically injured, wounded. The people photographed remain unnamed, they could be actors or families of inmates. Rather than document, these photographs suggest states and situations, we enter the realm of metaphor and allegory. The banishment of the social in the central perspective view of empty and boarded up streets serves as a corollary of the destructive impact of absence from loved ones, the loneliness and emptiness of confinement. An everyday detail of multiple plugs in an electricity socket invites thoughts about a system that is dangerously overloaded. Gerard Genette speaks of the figure in language, which sheds light on how these photographs are working: the figure “signifies more than the literal expression and concerns how it can designate not only an object, a fact, a thought, but also their affective value”; poetic expression involves a “sensory deviation.”

In element three Martins includes the voices of prisoners, powerful personal testimonies: sad, bitter-sweet, funny, records of feelings through direct, verbatim transcripts, albeit edited and bereft of the sounds of the voices. They puncture the distance and abstraction of the remains of the photographs of letters that accompany them. In one of the voices of the inmates that brings us up close intimately to the feelings of a prisoner, we have a vivid evocation of the erasure of subjecthood and individuality. But like Billy McCune's art in Lyon's book, it still nevertheless importantly involves an affirmative and distinctive creative act. In the excerpt from the journal, observed details accumulate to form a powerful way of figuring the dehumanising and life-denying force of the prison and we are given an image, an image of greyness, redolent of deprivations:

Sometimes all there is to do when you're stuck on the wing is to lean on the thin high rails and watch what's going on around you. That's when I noticed thick grey fluff on a step. And more on another step. Then I noticed it at the edges of the floor and above me on the piping. It was on the top of the nuts and bolts and on top of the wires that made up the netting. It was everywhere and I had never

noticed it before. The grey fluff had blended in with the grey clothing of the grey people that cast grey shadows on the grey walls. I suppose the ideal prisoner should be grey, dull and dismal in nature. THEY'VE CREATED THE PERFECT GREY SPACE HERE.

In his previous work, Martins photographed suicide letters but they were pictured in such a way we could not read the messages, the creases on paper from which the writing had been removed or the illuminated edges of letters. Now written letters are reduced to abstract material surfaces, prints from which the writing has gone and we encounter instead disintegrating surfaces, prints that have been purposely degraded. The physical erasure and effacement is an allegory of what he is doing to the photographic document and tradition— but also an acknowledgement of the insufficiency of photographs to depict. What remains instead are the voices of the prisoners— Wright Morris' *The Inhabitants* paired vernacular voices with pictures of vernacular architecture, snatches of language, “like bits of ballad and murmuring” as one contemporary reviewer put it; Lyon countered his traditional documentary photographs with pictures and the affecting and powerful voice of McCune. McCune wrote the introduction and closed the book. It is the voices that we are left with in Martins' project, beside the remains of the destroyed photographs of personal letters. McCune in a letter that accompanied an exhibition of his drawings with photographs by Lyon, all created from the “microscopic space that is a cell”, and a letter that closes the book, says how his pictures “represent feelings. My feelings to your feelings, from my heart and brain to your heart and brain.” The letters and pictures bring us closer and create a fantasy of identification. What we have with Martins is an allegory, a separation between the photograph and the subject, a disjuncture. He is stripping the photograph of its ties to the certainty of the real— all in order to register the impact of absence, allegories of loss. Element two also includes language, photographs of messages on cigarette packets: “Absence doesn't fucking make the heart go fonder.” Such improvised and rogue signs cut through the poetics with their blunt, dark humour.

For Martins “we need to rethink the set of practices, relationships and structures with which we look and relate to photographs”. For this rethinking he skews photography away from a preoccupation with the referent. The work still comes from experience and engagement with inmates and their families, it is not detached from the real. But he simply does not hold faith in the power of the photograph as document. Instead we move from the literal to the figural. Or rather he uses the literal figuratively, for all photographs are in many respects literal. And with this comes a certain freedom with images, a lack of restraint borne out through the sheer plenitude and 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.

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