

“Model Prison” 2015:

HD video with audio installation; MDF and acrylic paint installation, 07:25 minutes, looped

Credits: Brian Joyce (actor), Alexi Creecy (props maker)

Carolyn McKay

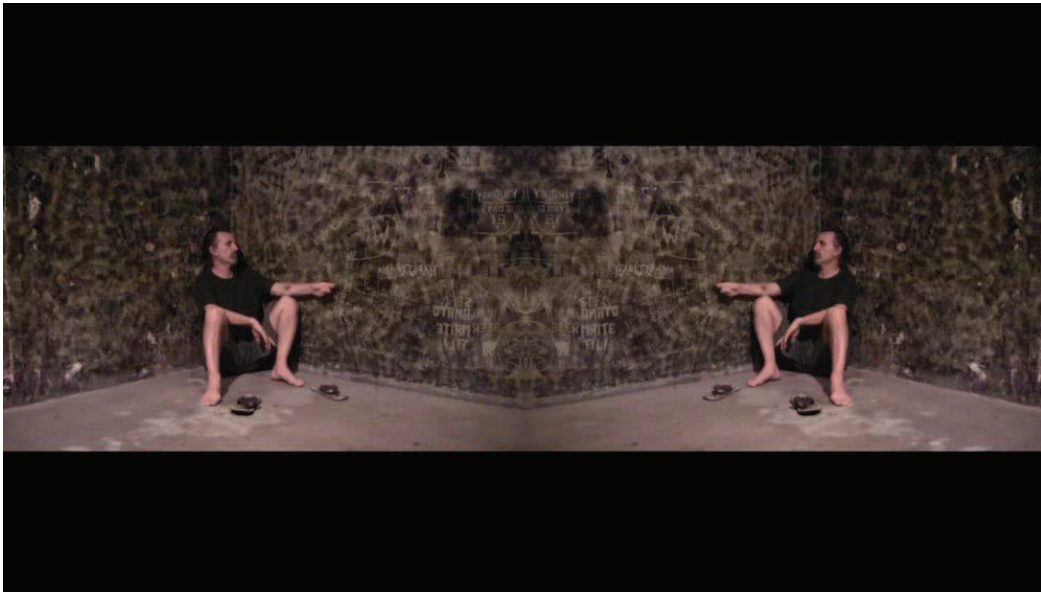
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Contemporary regimes of punishment inflict time on prisoners. Implicitly durational, incarceration allegedly focuses less on prisoners’ bodies and more on their psyche (Foucault 1977). Yet, as Foucault rhetorically asks, “what would a non-corporal punishment be?” (Foucault 1977: 16). That is, despite the shift away from corporal punishment in Australian jurisdictions, the body of the prisoner is necessarily implicated in and affected by incarceration and temporality. Imprisonment inevitably involves physical deprivations through incapacitation and traces of torture so that the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes 1958: 63–83) and the passing of time are inscribed on the prisoner’s body. As such, incarceration remains “profoundly corporal” (Hyde 1997: 188, 190–191) and is potently “lived and felt” (Chamberlen 2016: 215). It is in this context that I participated in *Doing Time* (2015), a group exhibition of five invited artists that responded to notions of detention and isolation. The exhibition, sponsored by the Sydney Institute of Criminology and Sydney Law School, was presented at the University of Sydney Union’s Verge Gallery on the campus of the University of Sydney.

For *Doing Time*, exhibition curator Carrie Miller (2015) encouraged the artists to engage with a critical conception of “doing time” and explore how temporality shapes an understanding and experience of confinement. The artists’ responses to this brief were diverse. Lucas Davidson’s *Black Cell* was a durational performance that explored solitary confinement. On opening night he was buried under a pile of blue metal gravel in a horizontal and rectangular frame, with only his nose remaining visible to the gallery audience who anxiously watched the slow rise and fall of his chest beneath the gravel. Sylvia

Griffin’s works — including *Hair Rabbits*, textile sewn with human hair — were deeply personal responses to being a descendant of Holocaust victims and survivors, those people who “did time” within the context of war and genocide. Debra Dawes’ works on paper, *Inside – out*, recorded an extended period of communication, telepathy and meditation with a young man being held on remand, while Anne Ferran’s photographic works revealed aspects of corporal and temporal alienation implicit in confinement.

As for my work, *Model Prison* was a time-based HD video installation inspired by my doctoral research project into the use of audio visual links between prisons and courtrooms. Like many jurisdictions, the court appearance of incarcerated defendants in Australia is increasingly facilitated by live video links. Instead of embodied courtroom presence, prisoners appear virtually, digitally encased and hermetically sealed on screens; they are remote from their own legal proceedings. *Model Prison* extrapolates from the concept of virtual court appearance to explore the possibilities of virtual imprisonment. With increasing rates of incarceration, *Model Prison* ponders a futuristic virtual prison as the ultimate in a silent system of de-corporealized and de-materialized carceral space: the apotheosis of panoptic surveillance targeting the inmate’s psyche.



Carolyn McKay, *Model Prison*, 2015

I filmed the video in one of the men's cells at The Lock-Up, once a police station in my hometown of Newcastle, New South Wales, and now a contemporary arts centre. Since undertaking an artist-in-residence project at The Lock-Up in 2009, this evocative site has been a continuing source of inspiration for both my creative practice as well as criminological research. For instance, the site has influenced my artistic and academic engagement with contemporary and historical criminal justice issues including convict tattoo designs, typologies of deviance, criminal monikers, medieval suicide and surveillance technologies.

For *Model Prison*, I had the male actor dress in green prison attire as he paced, stretched, bent and crouched in his confined and cellular space. Through editing techniques, the space of the cell, the image of the prisoner and the original audioscape were manipulated to reflect the disorientation of solitary confinement. The resulting video was 07:25 minutes in length yet infinitely looped so that the prisoner endlessly performed his choreography of pacing, stretching, bending and crouching.



Carolyn McKay, *Model Prison*, 2015

The video was exhibited using a mini projector to create a rear projection onto a tiny screen built into a custom-made rectangular plinth. The audio and video technologies were hidden within the matte black plinth, and viewers had to slightly bend down to peer into the small opening to see the video. This placement, as the curator commented, “reminds us of the slot in a prison door, peeking through it provides the viewer access to surveilling the person in solitary confinement” (Miller 2015). It was gratifying to observe how gallery visitors engaged with my work, how they were compelled to stoop, somewhat uncomfortably, to watch the tiny prisoner continuously pacing in his tiny virtual cell. *Model Prison* was installed in the Verge Gallery near Lucas Davidson’s *Black Cell*, and there was a pleasing synergy between the rectangularity of my vertical plinth and Lucas’ horizontal box where he had lain beneath the blue metal gravel.

Given the increasing use of the prison system as a form of human warehousing and record levels of imprisonment in my own jurisdiction, the *Doing Time* exhibition contributed diverse perspectives to the discourse surrounding the ethics of contemporary incarceration. For me, *Doing Time* also presented a great opportunity

to imaginatively explore my academic interests in technologies in the criminal justice system, as well as present a work to a wider audience.

References

- Chamberlen, A., 2016. Embodying prison pain: Women’s experiences of self-injury in prison and the emotions of punishment. *Theoretical Criminology*, 20(2), pp.205-219.
- Foucault, M., 1977. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage.
- Hyde, A., 1997. *Bodies of law*. Princeton University Press.
- Miller, C., 2015. *Doing Time* Exhibition Essay.
<https://mscarriemiller.org/category/catalogue-essays/>
- Sykes, G., 1958. *The society of captives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Links to the exhibition:

- <http://sydney.edu.au/news/law/436.html?newsstoryid=15227>
- <https://verge-gallery.net/2015/07/30/julyaugust-at-verge-gallery/>
- <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/artist-is-buried-alive-to-explore-incarceration-in-doing-time-exhibition-20150713-giaxfl.html>

Dr Carolyn McKay holds a combined Commerce/Law degree (UNSW), two Masters degrees (Sydney) and her PhD thesis, completed at Sydney Law School, was entitled ‘Audio Visual Links from Prison: Prisoners’ Experiences of Video Technologies for Accessing Justice’. She lectures in Criminal Law, The Legal Profession and Criminal Procedure at Sydney Law School and is an academic member of the New South Wales Bar Association. Carolyn is also a visual artist: <http://www.carolynmckay.com>