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What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase



## What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase

By Edgar Martins

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Reviewed by [Alex Merola](#)

*What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase* by Edgar Martins was published by [The Moth House](#) in November 2019

'give me ma' reads the screen of a Nokia cell phone. The text message is being drafted, yet to be sent – if ever. It is an image that speaks of inhibition, vulnerability, regret and longing, and comes from Edgar Martins' latest work, *What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase*, a twin publication produced in collaboration with the inmates of Her Majesty's Prison Birmingham in the West Midlands and their families. Combining original photography with archival material, whilst oscillating between image and information, evidence and fiction, Martins produces a multi-layered visualisation of the absence of the inmates, as experienced by those on the outside. With no photographs taken within the prison walls, and no prisoners ever revealed within the photographs' frames, the work skews the medium away from its preoccupation with the referent.

Metaphorical and enigmatic, the photobook's imagery throughout evokes the piercing sense of vacancy brought about through enforced separation. We find deserted residential streets lined with barricaded houses, a seascape superimposed by a white chalk outline of a head and a series of photographs depicting contemplative figures outside the towering prison walls – we can only assume that these people are in some way emotionally connected to the inmates on the inside. Significantly, some of the latter feature fold-outs which can be lifted to reveal and conceal what lies beneath. By this design, Martins heightens the tensions between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence and, perhaps above all, the real and the imagined.

As well as what is revealed and concealed, the book also meditates on what is communicated and what remains silent – or rather, what *cannot* be revealed and communicated. The book frequently presents images of communicative tools; the telephone, the postcard, the letter (one of which had its words almost entirely redacted in black bars before it reached home). In addition, we find improvised devices as well; cigarette packets with darkly humorous messages overlaying their health warnings show how one prisoner sought to communicate with other inmates during his solitary confinement, whilst engravings on pencils suggest another's more private articulations with the self: 'let it go... tonight'. These artefacts – traces of human presences, and expressions of their desires to connect – signify the oppressive, life-denying conditions the penal system has imposed on them – a pursuit of justice for the 'greater good' of society.

Martins realises the work's human anchor-point in the counterpart to the photobook, a facsimile of an inmate's journal entitled *What Incarceration Has in Common with an Empty Vase*. It presents John F., who had recently turned fifty and is currently completing a fifteen-year sentence for drug-trafficking; his scribbles, spanning a period of nearly three years, tell of his frustrations and despondencies serving time; his fraught relationship with his children, his reflections on what has been and his dreams for what may come.

In an entry dated 9<sup>th</sup> March 2018, John F. writes:

*Unbelievable! Just got off the phone with my lad and feel a million bucks. I needed that! Since his phone broke it's been nigh impossible to get hold of him. And when we have spoken, the one syllable mutterings have made me feel like he's not bothered to hear from me. Today he started the conversation by saying he'd been thinking of me, which made me feel good. OK, granted, apparently it was whilst he was having a shit, but I'll take that. I'm buzzing with joy that he thought of his old man whilst having a shit.*

*We chatted for so long the money ran out. Brilliant, no computer games in the background.*

Twenty days later, his journal reads:

*Just feel like everything is going the wrong way again.  
No visits booked. No expecting mail. No courses to get into. No initiatives to push.*

*Just nothingness!*

Gradually, his entries indicate an increasingly explicit fear of being forgotten behind bars – a becoming-unseen that is intrinsic within a penal structure that locks lawbreakers away, hiding them from the public gaze. The generating and exchanging of information and emotions, within and beyond the prison gates, is largely stunted, and the journal reveals the ways in which the prison apparatus holds people apart, all the while exposing the fragility of the bonds that keep them together. This is playfully visualised by the balloons in Martins' photobook; blown up by the prisoners, and then delivered to their families by the artist himself, the prisoners technically smuggled 'into' the outside, even if only their breath.

The appropriation of John F.'s diary harks back to Danny Lyon's documentation of Texan penitentiaries in his seminal *Conversations with The Dead* (1971), one of the first photobooks to incorporate ephemera (including prison records, convict writings and letters). The work pays a particular interest in Billy McCune, who was serving a life sentence for rape. Included are his expressive and compulsive drawings; vivid bursts of colour against the parched black and white of Lyon's photography. One conveys an orange hand holding a pen to a piece of paper, set against a backdrop of flowers and stars twinkling in an enveloping night sky; symbols of his artistic sensitivity, the illustrations bear a dynamic, humanising dimension to the convict, in much the same way the journal functions.

However, the impulse and practice of expression is never as unceasingly constant as the infinite night sky. Where John F. experienced stutters and mental blanks, he collaborated with, and confided in, Martins to integrate archival imagery as a surrogate to language in order to, as truthfully as possible, mirror his psychological state: from recurring Sisyphean figures confronting boulders on top of mountains to images of fathers elevating their babies with a single hand, alluding to John F.'s anxiety of paternal inadequacy. 'I fear I've become the dad that you tell stuff to afterwards rather than let me know stuff beforehand', he writes. 'I don't hear no-one coming to me for any fatherly advice lately' (24<sup>th</sup> September 2018).

The simultaneous use of text and image suggests that neither in itself is a medium capable of fulfilling a documentary function. And herein lies the tension at the heart of Martins' work. Perhaps it is a disruption of the *fantasy of identification* that McCune envisaged – in advance of a 1970 exhibition of his drawings alongside Lyon's photographs – in the closing letter of *Conversations with The Dead*: 'My feelings to your feelings, from my heart and brain to your heart and brain.' [1] In Martins' dismantling of the traditional documentary function, the photograph and subject are separated, and, in doing so, the certainties by which we relate to the photograph as document are shattered. As a result, we feel here, with greater gravitas, the absence of, and thereby alienation to, his work's subjects.

In exploring the ontological concept of absence, *What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase* questions the status of the photograph when its subject eludes visibility – when it exists beyond the confines of the frame, in the realm of the imagined. A parallel is drawn between the photograph's partiality and the context of incarceration – the loss and longing that both those inside and outside the cell experience. Just like an empty vase, after all; without, missing, incomplete. Or an unsent text message, which may or may not plead for a mother's forgiveness.

– reviewed for Photomonitor by [Alex Merola](#)

[1] Danny Lyon, *Conversations with The Dead* (London: Phaidon Press, 2015), p. 198

*What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase* will be exhibited at the Macau Museum of Art, from 31 July – 11 November 2020

Below: images from *What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase* © Edgar Martins courtesy the artist and [The Moth House](#)



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