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A Study of Incarceration Outside of Prison Walls

11 August 2021 - Written by Laurence Cornet

In *What Photography has in Common with an Empty Vase*, Edgar Martins deploys a visual definition of incarceration and isolation while never shooting inside a prison. And by avoiding the frontal depiction of his subject, he questions the limits of photography.


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For 10 years, photographer Edgar Martins has been producing works in hard-to-access environments. He entered power stations in Portugal, collaborated with the European Airport Administration Authority, and responded to a research brief by the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (INMLCF) also in Portugal, exploring each time what artistic expression might arouse from mandatory confidentiality or restrictions.

His latest project delves into the prison environment, where he set up as a rule not to take any pictures inside the walls of the institution. "One of the things that I was worried about in the beginning was becoming seduced with the environment of the prison and ending up producing the sort of images that legitimize the ideas we already have about incarceration", he explained. Rather, he invested his time at the Birmingham prison, in the UK, in creating a relationship with a handful of inmates. He talked to them and to the guards, had them write a diary to collect anecdotes - one of the diaries will end up reproduced as a facsimilé along with the book he published about this project - and shared some time with their relatives on family days or at their homes.



"It almost became an act of resistance", Martins says. As a result, pictures that at first gaze might seem enigmatic unravel a complex narrative of the experience of incarceration. Appropriating the stories and archival material he collected, he asked the youth from neighboring communities to re-enact the stories that inmates were telling him, as well as the families of inmates and people affected in a direct or indirect way to the prison. Bruised faces captured in a surgical manner, impatient bodies waiting by the canal bordering the prison - all of them talk to the prison experience yet nobody ever knows who is being referred to.

More enigmatic yet, he recreated and photographed message-engraved pencils used by an inmate to communicate with others in the 1980s. Even more so, a series of colored balloons, an object that happened to be the tool in which Martins managed to "smuggled" prisoners' breath outside to give to their family.



"One of the things I wanted to do was to really talk about the stories that don't get told, but I was also interested in stories that overlapped with my own interests in language and photography", he says.

That is, to always start from the assumption that photographs are insufficient. With this multifaceted body of work, Martins favors multilayered narratives, metaphors, and even some references to psychoanalysis, when a girl is seen at the edge of swallowing a bird and replies with a strong presence to the question at the heart of the work, "How does one represent a subject that is absent or hidden from view?"



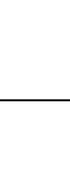
Edgar Martins, from the series "What Photography has in Common with an Empty Vase"

Edgar Martins is a photographer based in the UK who, while evolving in the documentary field, rejecting manipulation, challenges in his projects the boundaries of photography.

Laurence Cornet is a writer and curator based in Paris focusing on cultural and environmental issues. She is also the editorial director of *Dysturb* and the international photo editor at *Le Monde*.

*This article is part of our feature series **Photo Kernel**, which aims to give space to the best contemporary practitioners in our community. The word Kernel means the core, centre, or essence of an object, but it also refers to image processing.*

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