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Captive Performativities: Art and Body in the Carceral Context

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40

Captive Performativities: Art and Body in the Carceral Context

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Abstract

This presentation explores the intersection of performance art and carceral spaces, focusing on the role of the body and spatiality in addressing the criminal justice system and its contemporary global apparatuses, including policing, surveillance, and institutional punishment – a.k.a. incarceration. While punitive regimes have predominantly garnered attention from prison abolition activists, artists have also addressed issues like mass incarceration, socio-political identity divisions, and carceral capitalism, which disproportionately impact racial minorities, marginalized groups, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Drawing from personal practice and contemporary examples, this text examines how performance art critiques systemic surveillance, hypervisibility, and the invisibility of prisons and prisoners. It categorises artistic interventions into four approaches: *From Outside to Outside*, showcasing external narratives on incarceration (1); *From Inside to Outside*, amplifying the voices of incarcerated individuals (2); *From Outside to Inside*, reclaiming former prisons as sites of memory and justice-making (3); and *From/To Inside-out*, navigating blurred boundaries in occupied territories (4). By interrogating “penal spectatorship,” systemic power structures and “carceral aesthetics,” it positions performance art as a potent medium for disrupting the carceral continuum and fostering justice-oriented imaginaries. It argues that such art transforms confinement into an embodied critique, exposing the performative boundaries of power and amplifying abolitionist and anti-colonial calls for systemic change.

Keywords: penal spectatorship; performance art; carceral aesthetics; arts in prison

Captive Performativities

It was about fifteen years ago in Sweden, as part of the queer feminist performance collective T.I.R. that I began examining the meaning of my staged body and performance as a simultaneous exercise of aesthetics and politics. I started considering the body as a main vessel for both re-enactment and undoing of identities and ground nto address the issue of justice in situ, vis-à-vis the onlooker – which is inherent in most performance art practices that challenge societal norms and shed light on what is “untold,” “overlooked,” and “underrepresented.”

Figure 1

Oubliette (2022), Ece Canlı, performance still



One of the most “untold,” “overlooked,” and “underrepresented” spaces and people today are arguably prisons and prisoners – as the current subject matter of my research shows. Therefore, the question *How can performance art, with such a spatial and corporeal immediacy, address these invisible spaces and bodies?* has increasingly become of interest to me, especially considering the paradox of spectatorship in these realities: On the one hand, prisons are systematically hidden in urban peripheries, rendered “invisible” in the social and spatial fabric of cities, to the extent that the carceral space has become alien and almost fictional to those who are free and out (Frödén, 2021). Prisoners, already dehumanised, are further marginalised as they remain out of sight and mind. On the other

hand, techno-punitive apparatuses of social control including electronic monitoring, CCTV surveillance, location and biometric tracking, and DNA and risk analysis render marginalised communities, and eventually society at large, hypervisible to authorities, which expands the prison space to daily life, while turning us into penal spectators (Brown, 2009).

Penal spectatorship, coined by Brown (2009), refers to observing and perpetuating the ideologies and practices of punishment from a distance. It involves “free people” looking at the other’s entrapment and punishment while maintaining a sense of detachment, external authority and judgement. It is amplified particularly by popular visual representations through, for instance, true crime documentaries, TV series, films or guided tours of prisons museums. Such depictions, from which individuals derive pleasure and satisfaction by externalising “the criminal” from a safe distance, often fictionalise and even fetishize prison life, reinforcing power structures and binary thinking about good and evil, while obscuring the complexity of harm and flattening the multifaceted nature of harmdoing (Brown, 2009). These dynamics, hence, make alternative representations that would challenge conventional penal spectatorship even more necessary and urgent.

With these concerns and the global escalation of mass incarceration in mind, artists and activists increasingly seek aesthetic forms and sensibilities that reveal the complexity of confinement and justice-making, foregrounding both the body (prisoner and performer) and the space (prison and stage). Performance art steps in here with its directness and blatant potential. Below, I propose a categorisation of approaches – or HOWs – illustrated with contemporary examples, through which performance is being used in addressing carcerality.¹

From Outside to Outside (1)

Many artists outside prisons create works addressing incarceration for audiences outside. They often transform passive penal spectatorship into, what I call, an *active witnessing of justice-making* by bringing prison narratives, historical facts and even juridical documents to the public eye. My work falls into this category, including performances like *Up Your Ass* (2011-2012) (based on Valerie Solanas’ legendary *S.C.U.M Manifesto* and the stories of executed serial killer Aileen Wuornos), *oubliette* (2022) (Figure 1) and *INVAGUS* (2022) (inspired by Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad and Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa Amini, arrested and murdered under police custody) (Figure 2).

Other examples include Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo’s performance at *Artpace, America’s Family Prison* (2008), which exposed the criminalisation of immigration and private prison companies like CAA. Using her \$8,000 residency funds, she built a gallery

¹ In doing so, I will use “inside” to refer to prisons and “outside” as the so-called “free world.”

cell and lived in it with her family for 24 hours, turning incarceration into a visceral spectacle for visitors peering through a small window.²

Figure 2

INVAGUS (2022), Ece Canlı, performance still.



Similarly, Nigerian artist Jelili Atiku's *Ewawo – The Prisoner* (2005) used “installation theatre,” or “gorilla tactics” as he calls it, to simulate Nigerian prison conditions, constructing a cell-like space from university materials. Ironically, he was arrested in 2017 for public disturbance after a street performance, highlighting the risks artists face when addressing carceral themes.³

From Inside to Outside (2)

There has also been an increasing number of carceral projects worldwide bringing artworks from inside to outside. American curator Nicole Fleetwood (2020) calls this kind of work “carceral aesthetics” which refers to the genuine artistic representations of the prison system through the experiences of incarcerated individuals as first-hand narrators. This concept explores how artists behind bars challenge the prison-industrial complex (Davis, 2023),

² Retrieved June 10, 2024, <https://www.reginajosegalindo.com/en/americas-family-prison-2/>

³ Retrieved June 10, 2024, <https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/performative-practice-is-their-own-heritage/>

using their bodies as vessels to challenge policing and blur the line between the “invisibility” and “hypervisibility” of surveilled communities.

Most performance works coming from prisons serve as testimonies, including Kirsten Leenaars’ performance and music video work *Present Tense* (2019), made with *Circles & Ciphers*’ hip-hop-infused restorative justice practice. The video interweaves personal and communal stories with artist-made props and was developed through a multi-day community event, where members of *Circles & Ciphers* co-created the music video, providing the viewer with multiple points of connection and the lived effects of the current justice system.⁴

The opera *TRACTION* (2022), based on Homer’s *Odyssey*, also bridges this divide. Performed in Lisbon, Portugal, it involved four professional singers and sixteen amateur young prisoners aged from sixteen to twenty-one from Leiria’s “school prison.” The weeks-long co-creation process allowed incarcerated individuals to contribute their perspectives, disrupting opera’s elitist traditions and amplifying marginalised voices.⁵

From Outside to Inside (3)

Some projects open ex-prisons’ doors to performance artists as a way of reactivating these once cruel spaces differently, commemorating past injustices and reclaiming narratives. *Artangel’s Inside: Artists and Writers at Reading Prison* (2016), for example, invited renowned artists to perform in the UK’s notorious *Reading Prison*, where Oscar Wilde also served two years in solitary confinement for his sexual orientation. *Artangel’s* initiative included live readings of Wilde’s texts by notable performers such as Patti Smith, connecting past and present struggles for justice.⁶

Dublin’s *Kilmainham Gaol* similarly opened as a performance space in 2016, featuring artists like Dr. Katherine Nolan, who explored women’s suffering in Ireland’s national struggle.⁷ Globally, universities, NGOs and art collectives use performance arts in prisons as a way of fostering rehabilitation and community healing through well-known genres like “Theatre in Prison.” Artists and cultural workers visit prisons regularly, teach acting and guide prisoners in rehearsing and staging works, showcasing art’s transformative power in confinement.

⁴ Retrieved July 1, 2024, <https://www.kirstenleenaars.com/present-tense>

⁵ Retrieved July 2, 2024, <https://www.traction-project.eu/opera-in-a-prison-with-traction-technology/>

⁶ Retrieved June 24, 2024, <https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/inside/>

⁷ Retrieved July 1, 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/kilmainham-gaol-opens-its-doors-to-performance-artists-1.2656470>

From/To Inside-out (4)

This category addresses situations where the boundaries between inside and outside blur, as seen in occupied territories like Palestine, where entire cities function as open-air prisons (Chomsky, 2012; Kilgore, 2022). For Palestinian people, whether they are on their land or in the diaspora, the experience of being constantly surveilled and confined is a constant punishment; therefore, artworks dealing with such issues can be considered both besieged and freed simultaneously. In extreme conditions of occupation and displacement, where the body becomes the only currency, its performativity when expressed through art, transforms into a living manifestation rather than a symbolic act.

Palestinian artist Nidaa Badwan's *100 Days of Solitude* (2014-2016) exemplifies this overlap.⁸ Having been sequestered both by the Israeli regime and arrested as well as treated violently by Hamas in 2013, Badwan confined herself to her nine-square-meter family home in Deir al-Balah, in the dark, and documented her self-imprisonment, as a psychological escapism from violence and uncertainty and as a way of finding a refuge to work, cook, live, and create safely as a female artist under occupation. Her daily documentation transformed her confinement into a powerful statement on autonomy and resilience.

In stark contrast, Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar went to the streets of Wall Street in New York City in 2018, with his performance protest *Blood for Sale*, to sell 50 units of 10-milliliter vials of his blood from a cooler tied around his neck. The prices were changing based on the stock values of America's fifteen most prominent defence contractors with direct connections to the 1948 Palestine War and the forced expulsion of two-thirds of the indigenous population in Palestine by Zionist militias.⁹

Conclusion

The examples proliferate but to conclude, the abolitionist and anti-colonial approach in performance art is, overall, to practice these uni- and bi-directions, aiming at the "upside down," while challenging the "carceral continuum" and penal spectatorship dynamics. As Jackie Wang (2018, p.41) notes in *Carceral Capitalism*, "invisible forms of power are circulating all around us, circumscribing and sorting us into invisible cells that confine us sometimes without our knowing." Performance art might, at the very least, make those cells discernible, demonstrating that the distinction between who is inside and who is outside is as performative as power itself.

⁸ Retrieved June 23, 2024, <https://www.postmastersart.com/archive/badwan16/badwan16.html>

⁹ Retrieved June 30, 2024, <https://open-source-gallery.org/khaled-jarrar/>

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