

Towards an Architectural Explosion of the Oubliette

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Architectural emotion: that's when the work resounds inside us in time with a universe whose law we are subject to, recognize, and admire. When certain relationships are achieved, we are apprehended by the work.

Le Corbusier, Towards an Architecture¹

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The prison is a carceral machine simultaneously producing visibility and invisibility.

To be incarcerated is to be divested of the wherewithal to be visible in public. It is also to be made an object of constant politicized surveillance. Positioned by the lines of force delineating carceral space, the incarcerated body is dismembered into an invisible and a visible entity by a mirror-box-function that produces the effect of the prisoner.

This symbolic bait-and-switch caves in the ground of self-consciousness that mediates our sense of integral self through the gaze of the Other.² To pass through the threshold of the prison is to experience a violent bereavement that leaves those who suffer this with no place to be. It is for this reason that we state that contemporary techniques of incarceration stage a return to the institution of the oubliette. She embodies a political subjectivity that congeals a total lack of recognition and consequently does not figure.

By means of these functions, the mechanism of incarceration exchanges subjects for ciphers. Both the labour forced from prisoners contracted by the state to capitalist forms and the symbolic labour of political disappearance operate to abstract the subject from herself. What remains is a mode of being reduced to a closed circuit through which the prisoner's pain—the pain of

1
Le Corbusier,
Towards an
Architecture.
Transl. John
Goodman (Los
Angeles: Getty
Publications,
2007), 97.

2
"The presence
of others who
see what we see
and hear what
we hear assures
us of the reality
of the world and
of ourselves."
Hannah Arendt,
The Human
Condition, 2nd
edition (Chicago:
University of
Chicago Press,
1998), 50. See
also GWF Hegel's
discussion of
recognition in
"The Lord-
Bondsman's
Dialectic" (The
Phenomenology
of Spirit) and
Jean-Paul Sartre's
in "The Existence
of Others: The
Look" (Being and
Nothingness).
Similarly, Jacques
Lacan and Slavoj
Žižek insist on
the dependency
of subjectivity
upon the fantasy
of symbolic
recognition by the
Other.

While we can think of the cipher, in visual terms, as the always-masked vanishing point of perspectival representation, it can also be thought of as a code with a one-to-one correspondency of translation, and therefore, as a medium of pure referential exchange without residue. The subjectivity of the prisoner is a cipher precisely because she is reduced to her function as a prisoner. No particularity adheres to her. She is rendered a totally universal signifier – a body, but without recognition, emptied of particularity; in the Hegelian sense, totally negated.

Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, 3rd edition (New York: Zone, 1995), 33–4

Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 2nd edition (New York: Vintage, 1995), 5. We argue that the iteration of carceral techniques described by Foucault is grounded in the industrial mode of production and the modernist nation state: “The seeing machine was once a sort of dark room into which individuals spied; it has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised

the subtraction into a state of pure corporeality—pulses as an affect without symbolic register.—³

Following Guy Debord, we diagnose the dialectical movement of capitalist logic as a mutation of its configuration towards necessity, and, therefore, the body:

Replacing that necessity by the necessity of boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs, all of which come down in the end to just one – namely, the pseudo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue—⁴

While labour in the late capitalist mode of production continues to be abstracted from our corporeal beings, the valorization process is now autonomous from our biological existence. This form of class exploitation requires a corresponding intensification of the carceral machine: The prisoner is forced to perform the limit case of our fundamental bodily incompatibility with the imperatives of capital accumulation, making manifest our new collective political entity as subjects who are physically surplus to the economy.—⁵ It is to this remaking, this reform, that we may apply Foucault’s observation: “Hence the expression, so frequently heard, so consistent with the function of punishment, though contrary to the strict theory of penal law, that one is in prison to ‘pay one’s debt.’”—⁶

II

To the law-abiding citizen, the prison cell appears as a black-box whose functions mediate the implosion we have described. It masks and disavows both the potential of the citizen’s own incarceration and her ideological identification with a state judiciary power whose organizing principle, thought in terms of the visual, can only be described as ob-scene.—⁷

Therefore, we suggest a counter-move: Construct a structure that deploys the carceral machine, and its scopic force, against itself.

In order to do so we have designed a model that replicates the spatial characteristics of a standard prison cell and of a prison cell which may be assembled in a public place. The proposed structure is designed to have the full dimensions of a standard prison cell (6 ft. x 8 ft. x 8 ft. tall) while being of easily portable size and weight. This is accomplished using a modular design incorporating threaded steel pipe that can be hand tightened into standard pipe fittings. The steel pipe is standard 1 inch schedule 80 black steel pipe available in most hardware stores. The pipe lengths are threaded at the ends and treated with teflon tape to allow ease of assembly/disassembly and to allow hand tightening. The pipe lengths are as follows: six 8 foot lengths, five 6 foot lengths, and eight 4 foot lengths (exact lengths to be determined during initial construction). The required pipe fittings are as follows: eight “corner” splits, two tees, and two 4-way splits.

[Figure 67, p 199]

This replication of the cell will be a frame structure, meaning that the people that we recruit to inhabit the cell will not be invisible, but will, rather, occupy in their bodily particularity the blind spot that the prison cell generates through its two-fold negation of the prisoner’s social being. We hope that those who choose to participate by inhabiting the structure will experience a moment of shocking identification with the subjectivity which we have described above as agonizingly impossible under any but an obscene regime of visibility. We would also hope that these acts of compassion will be confronted with what the black box of the cell currently scars over in our cultural imagination.

III

In her recent Alexander Lecture, Judith Butler identified “the interdiction against appearing” in the public square as the “condition of imprisonment.”⁸ Informed by this observation, it is our hope that the deployment of this structure, and its habitation by participants who are recruited from and may appear in the public square, will make manifest a moment of collective empathy with

by society as a whole”(5). The lines of force aligning our subjectivity have changed with the mutation in the mode of production, described by Jean Baudrillard as the advent of the “structural law of value” and roughly datable to the advent of fiat currency and digital logistics in the early 1970s (Symbolic Exchange and Death, London: Sage, 2007), 40. Accordingly, the phenomena of visibility and invisibility also resonate at different frequencies now than they did at the time of Foucault’s analysis.

6 Foucault, 232–3. Avant la lettre. Arendt qualifies Foucault’s proposition — that visibility is a technique of state power — by introducing the category of the social. This space is “neither public nor private,” strictly speaking, and is “a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern state and which found its political form in the nation state” (Arendt, 28). As social subjects inhabiting the nation state we are interpellated by “innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, to make them behave” (Arendt, 40). This mode of social practice — ie. Disciplinary education, is cited in the rhetoric of rehabilitation.

The prison's structure and accompanying determinations are applied to the reconditioning of the prisoner as a productive member of society.

7
As a prefix, ob- may indicate against, or signal an inversion or reversal of the noun it modifies. Here, the term to indicate that the prisoner is subjected to an encounter with the other that enacts an inversion of the primal scene of Hegelian recognition

8
Judith Butler, Alexander Lecture, "Public Assembly and Plural Action," University College, University of Toronto, February 11, 2014.

9
For a detailed discussion of the implications of this notion for political praxis see Mary Eileen Wennekers, "First as Tragedy, Then as Farce, Then as a Post-Apocalyptic Helicopter Flight with No Certain Prospect of a Safe Landing," *The Word Hoard: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5*, 2013.

10
Butler, Alexander Lecture, "Public Assembly and Plural Action".

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prisoners by agents of popular sovereignty. To participate in staging this scene as if imprisonment is not a possible consequence of resistance, despite knowing very well that it could be, is a praxis in which "vulnerability is mobilized as a political instrument."¹⁰

Accepting the ethical imperative "not to regard the body as an instrument of political claims but to make the conditions and requirements of the body the site or origin of political claims," this project may also achieve the complementary aim of demonstrating that the tendency to think political subjectivity as abstracted from our bodies is not grounded in any necessary quality of the political as such.⁹ By these means we reclaim a place from which to contradict the hegemony of what Arendt describes as the social, and that Foucault localizes in the disciplined body. Rejecting incarceration, we pursue the establishment of a solidarity grounded in all of our singularity and difference, unified in our alignment not with an abstract or abstracted political cause but rather by the desire that each of us be honoured alike.

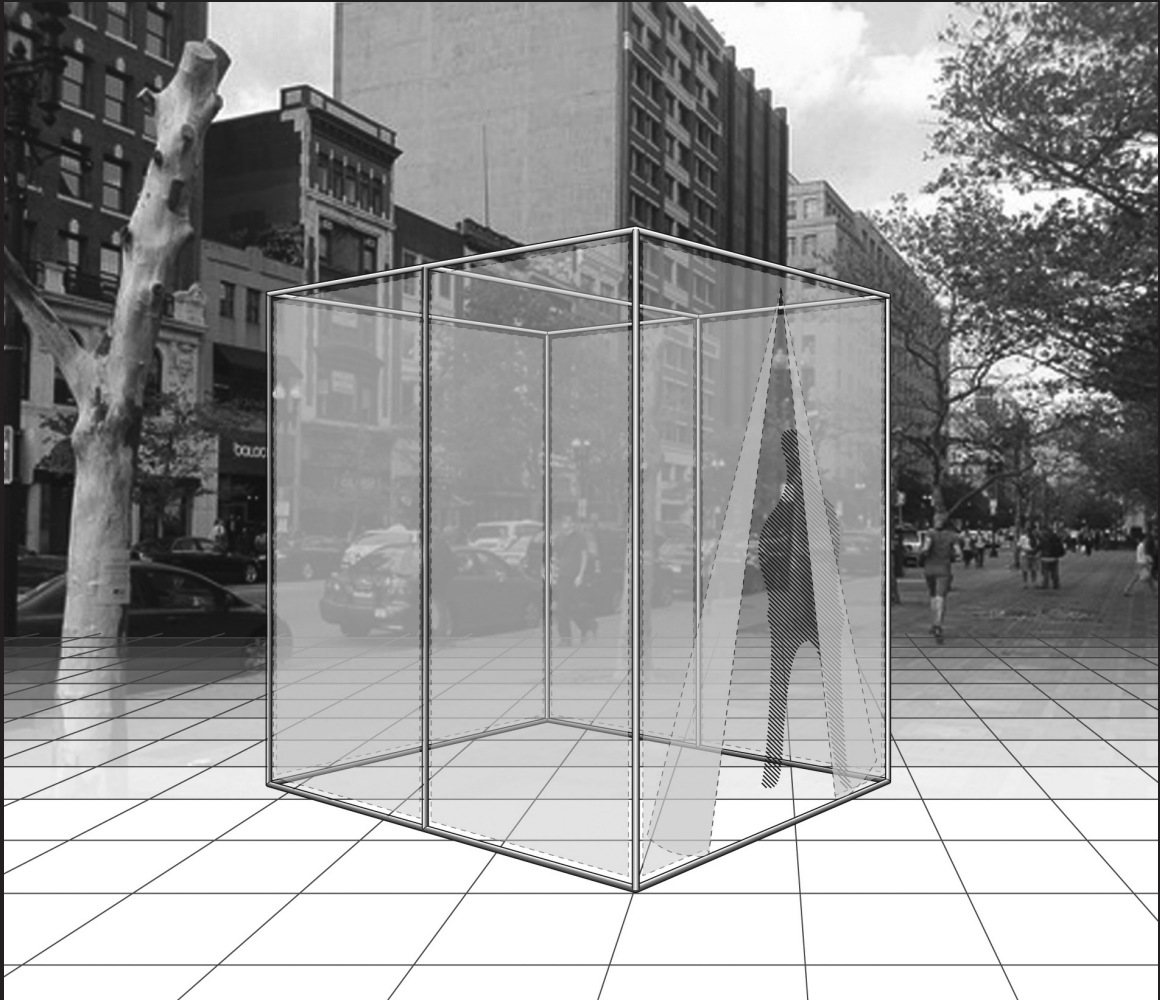


Figure 67