SPECIAL ISSUE ON ARTS AND JUSTICE

Edited by
Sarah Armstrong and Kirsten Sams

Theatre • Music • Writing
Sculpture • Film • Architecture

ALSO

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Angela Bartie and Alistair Fraser on the Easterhouse Project
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FROM VOCATIONAL TRAINING TO ARTISTIC CREATION

FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS, Lieux Fictifs has been involved in a continuous project of training in and creating visual and audio arts in the Marseille Penitentiary Centre. We work out of a studio in the prison measuring 400m², constructed specifically for this use by the prison administration.

This project is developed with the support of the Regional Prison Administration of Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur/Corse, the Reintegration and Probation Service of Bouches-du-Rhône and the Marseille Penitentiary Centre. It is part of the partnership strategy developed by the Penitentiary administration of the Ministry of Justice.

The distinction of Lieux Fictifs is to combine professional training in the performing, audio and visual arts with an artistic collaboration between artists and prisoners. These studios are open all year round, every day of the week and directly involve on average 26 people per year.

In this project, vocational training and artistic creation are intimately bound. Indeed the transmission of skills which are not directly linked to employability, is a necessary part of this dynamic for those like prisoners, who for the most part, have never acquired or been part of an employment culture.

The aim of Lieux Fictifs is to engage the individual in a comprehensive process of change. This process permits the imprisoned person to acquire both know-how and social skills to bridge and develop a range of tools (technical skills, empathy, an ability to articulate one’s own ideas…) which will allow them to progressively engage in a process of emancipation and transformation. This also creates the possibility for prisoners to participate in a collective work project, in which each person is called on to contribute as an individual but also as a member of the group.

For the imprisoned person who participates in this project, it offers not only the chance of learning skills, but also can stimulate a process of change by initiating a profound evolution in their personal development, their personality and their own sense of their lives.
Practical skills are not sufficient to reintegrate back into society, to secure a job and to succeed and keep up in a society of increasing complexity. The fast moving pace of our world requires greater adaptability and independence. In the face of the challenges of our modern world, artistic and cultural experiences are fundamental to the construction of our identity.

Such challenges are further exacerbated in prison, since being cut off from the outside world reinforces the gap between the accelerating movement of society and the inertia in which the prisoner finds himself or herself plunged. Indeed the prison also locks up the prisoner into a state of social invalidation, reinforcing a lack of autonomy and infantilisation. This reduces the ability of the prisoner either to manage the complexity of the world or to imagine the future.

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It isn’t just giving voice to prisoners but also offering them skills (educational, technical, theoretical and practical) which gives them the ability to articulate their ideas and reflect more deeply on their lives. In so doing, it also breaks the entrenched notion prisoners have of themselves and of society, allowing them to re-inscribe themselves back into the collective.

In prison as on the outside, art and culture cannot be reduced simply to commodities, entertaining diversions or modes of communication. They are tools in the construction of identity, of freedom and of the foundations of our humanity. Art and culture thus are a necessary part of the common good and they are vital for the construction of a better society.

INTERROGATING THAT WHICH SEPARATES, CONSTRUCTING SPACES THAT UNITE

The impact of this kind of work on prisoners cannot be underestimated. The project acts directly upon the prisoner’s ability to develop new imaginaries, transforming his perceptions and representations. Thus it allows the imprisoned person to find himself a place in the world, re-evaluating his position in it and building a new self-image.

From 2009 to 2013, Lieux Fictifs conducted two collaborative creative projects involving prisoners, students and local residents: a short film exhibition “Images en mémoire, images en miroir” (‘Memory images, mirror images’) and a film installation “Dans la solitude des champs de coton” (‘In the solitude of cotton fields’). The principle of this work was to share a common project between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’, through artistic creation: this enhanced the expected impacts on prisoners who took part in this project. Some of them deeply changed their self-image and recovered confidence in their ability to find a place in the community, and to integrate into a group on a basis not tied to delinquency or prison. Antar, a prisoner who participated in this project, demonstrates this: “Together. We have all dug. Those on the inside just as those from outside. Not with the help of a shovel, but with a book. Not to escape, but to find ourselves.” Two participants serving sentences are now working for Lieux Fictifs as video technicians.

It also allows prisoners to connect with the rest of society, to find a place in a ‘project space’ where the boundary between inside and outside is blurred.

For more than five years we have been developing collaborative creative projects that bring together prisoners with those on the outside. This collaborative dynamic allows different participants to share, over the course of the project and the walls that separate them, a common workspace. This puts back in play, specifically for prisoners, the possibility of finding a place within the community. What can we build together, despite this period of incarceration?

There is, in this type of arts work conducted in prisons as in other places, a political and social challenge of breaking down barriers. This process of movement and displacement must act both ‘inside’ (on the prisoners) as well as ‘outside’ (on the free). The awareness that we are all connected, and therefore responsible for each other, gives a meaning and constitutes a principle within a society.

“We see a multitude of ‘project spaces’ that are experimenting new relationships between people, art and place. Project spaces intend to democratise and demystify art in order to bring it into all levels of civil society and everyday life .... Looking at the functioning of these artistic and democratic project spaces, helps us to imagine aesthetic, political, economic and social modes of organisation, less hierarchical, more hybrid and rhyzomic...” (Frederic Khan, journalist, art critic, 2013).
A WORK OF DISPLACEMENT ON SEVERAL LEVELS

For all that, conducting this type of work in prison is not so simple: primarily, it runs up first of all against a problem of being recognised for the work done. Art and culture are frightening for people because they are seen as synonymous with exclusion, often considered elitist. It is necessary then to re-interrogate our own representations of what art and culture are.

It is not the opposition between ‘highbrow’ and ‘popular’ culture that is in play, but the interaction that can occur between the two. It is the process of making art that can engage the imprisoned person so that in time he comes to own this process, and in so doing, gain a sense of his own power to change. This demonstrates how crucial such intangible things as sensitivity and knowledge are to a person’s ability to transform themselves.

Working on artistic projects in prison thus requires the artist and the institution to engage in the work of displacement, allowing them, despite different professional cultures, to build a common language that guarantees prisoners engaged in these processes are recognised for their work and the changes they have made. This operates and ultimately has an impact on several levels: on the prisoner, on the artist and on the institution.

“Within collaborative creations, the closed environment must necessarily become open-minded and learn to interact with artists, but also with other institutions, and take part in the construction of a common language, which is constituted through mutual concerns, objectives and constraints. It is not to step aside [to let artists do their work] but to negotiate, to find new “arrangements” . . . and modes of operation that break habits and therefore inertia . . . “ Leila Delannoy (2014).

If the process of working with prisoners through the co-constitution of an artistic work is a central feature of this type of project, the resulting artistic work is equally important. The dissemination of the work outside the prison, through professional cultural networks, allows the artworks to be recognised as bearing universal values that can reach a wide audience outside. It also permits the society outside to transform its perception of prison and of prisoners.

Entretien avec Leïla Delannoy, doctorante en sociologie, LASCO, SOPHIAPOL, Université Paris-Ouest-Nanterre-La Défense, 2014

Khan F. Des Nouveaux Territoires de l’Art aux espaces-projets de démocratie artistique, Revue Faire et Savoirs N°10 décembre 2013, Les nouveaux horizons de la culture


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