

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

May 2011 No 195



Focus on Disability

Interview: Bettina von Kameke

Bettina von Kameke is a photographer and is interviewed by Jamie Bennett, Centre Manager of IRC Morton Hall.

Bettina von Kameke is a professional photographer whose latest project is a study of HMP Wormwood Scrubs, exhibited at Great Western Studio in London. Her work focuses on the human aspects of the prison experience, including the everyday routine.

HMP Wormwood Scrubs is one of the most prominent prisons in the country. It was built between 1874 and 1891 and has a grand and distinctive gate lodge including two towers and a façade featuring busts of prison reformers John Howard and Elizabeth Fry. The building has been listed due to its architectural merit. The establishment currently operates as a category B local prison for men, holding primarily prisoners on remand, following conviction and serving short sentences. It has a population of over 1200 prisoners.

Bettina von Kameke was born in Germany and moved to London in order to study at the renowned Central St. Martin's School of Art and Design, from which she graduated in 2002. Subsequently she has carried out a number of projects that have focused on enclosed communities. This has included sailing with 31 Burmese merchant seamen from England to South Africa. She has also taken photographs of the 23 Benedictine Nuns in the Tyburn Tree Convent in London and travelled through the Czech Republic with the traditional family run Zirkus Humberto. During 2008 she was invited to an artists residency at Christ Church College in Oxford. Her work there involved 101 portraits of the academic and the domestic staff, the choristers, the clerks as well as the Cathedral staff, which form the Christ Church Community.

Her works have been exhibited in numerous cities including London, Berlin and New York.

This interview took place in March 2011.

JB: Your photography has often focused on enclosed communities, including a merchant ship, a travelling circus and an order of nuns. Why have you focussed on these groups?

BvK: I am really interested in communities that are different from my own experiences, where I can become absorbed in a different world. Many of the communities I have photographed I have been able to go in and stand back and observe them in order to try to understand their day to day lives.

JB: It sounds like an ethnographic or anthropological approach

BvK: Yes, it could be described as that.

JB: Why were you interested in developing a photographic project in prison?

BvK: With my interest in closed communities, it was always inevitable that one day I would want to explore a prison.

JB: What background research or preparation did you carry out before you undertook the project?

BvK: It started several years before I carried out the project and it began with me cycling around the outside of Wormwood Scrubs on my bike. By doing this I could start to get a feel for the building, its scale and in some places I could glimpse inside. On these tours around the prison, I would also speak to some of the staff who came in and out. This gave me a better understanding and they also told me who I would need to contact.

I then started to get as much information as I could, by speaking to people who had been to prisons and reading articles and stories in the media. The book I read that had the biggest impact was Erwin James' *A Life Inside: A Prisoner's Notebook*.

JB: How did you gain access?

BvK: I wrote a letter to Wormwood Scrubs, where I described my intentions and what I wanted to achieve. Wormwood Scrubs showed interest and invited me to discuss my ideas further. After the interview I had a tour around the prison, on the basis of that tour, I wrote a detailed proposal. After a couple of months my proposal got approved, all the relevant papers got checked and I had to undertake a security training.

The project was funded by the Arts Council.

JB: Your pictures don't appear to include prison staff. Why did you decide to focus on prisoners?

BvK: I did take pictures of staff and prisoners. In particular, my work tries to draw out the humanity of institutions and that was often seen in the ways that staff and prisoners interacted with each other. This is seen in my pictures and I also took some portraits of staff. These pictures haven't been included on my website or some of the samples used in media coverage of the exhibition, but there are many pictures of staff.

JB: What was your process when you were in the prison? How did you select and complete the photographs?

BvK: As well as me, I had an assistant and we were accompanied at all times by a governor. All of the pictures were taken on an analogue camera, which makes the process longer. We would be taken to the places we wanted to visit and photograph. We asked to visit various places including work places, wings and cells. I became interested in different aspects as the project progressed. For example, I took many pictures of cells as that was one way in which I could show how people personalised their space and made it their own. This is one of the ways in which humanity came through. By spending time in different areas and with different people, it meant that I could capture different moments. Altogether, I visited between ten and fifteen times over a year.

photographed would say if anything or anyone we were planning to photograph was not suitable. All of the pictures were also submitted at the end of the process and were checked by the prison. I was asked not to use two of them because of the offences of those depicted. I accepted this.

JB: The content of the pictures seems to draw out a number of themes. The first is the nature of the prison itself. A number of your pictures emphasise scale, showing the size of the institution, but also some of the pictures draw out the 'clinical' appearance of the communal space such as the landings and workplaces. These pictures give a sense of a mechanical institution. How did you feel about the prison as an institution?



JB: How did you gain the consent of the subjects?

BvK: The governor who accompanied us would speak to anyone I wanted to photograph and explain what we were doing and that it was for an exhibition not the media. They were also told that they could withdraw consent at any time, and one person I photographed did do that later on.

JB: How did you consider the effects that the project may have on individual prisoners or upon the victims of crime?

BvK: We relied on the prison staff to do that for us to some degree. Although I may have spoken to people about what offence they were in prison for, when I completed the pictures I could not honestly remember. I focussed on the individual rather than what they had done in the past. The governor who accompanied us and spoke to the people we



BvK: That is true of some of the communal areas, such as the wings which were very large. I also had a sense that the prison was a place where there

were many rules over the lives of the people inside and that this was a highly controlled world. In some sense, the size and nature of the place meant that was inevitable and necessary. However, what I also wanted to focus on was how some spaces, such as cells were personalised with pictures and decorations. Each one was different and I took many pictures of these rooms as this was an important way in which the humanity could be shown.

JB: Your pictures draw out a sense of individual identity and domesticity. One of your pictures is of a man in the kitchen who is a very distinctive individual with a large, ornate tattoo on his arm.

BvK: That picture is of a member of staff. He was sitting there and I asked to take his picture.

JB: **It is a distinctive image and gives a strong sense of character. Another example is your picture of a man looking through the observation panel of a cell door. Although that kind of image might not be unique, the focus on the individual and the strength of the individual character come through. What was your response to the idea of agency and individuality in a total institution like a prison?**

BvK: That photograph at the cell door was not staged, it was captured in a moment. I was on a wing watching some inmates play table tennis. This man was peering out from his cell at what was going on. For me it is the images what most represent the claustrophobic nature of prison life.

Another image that has been seen a lot is one of a cell where there is both religious imagery and pictures of pin-up girls. This inmate decorated his personal space with the things which are most important to him, which probably gives him a sense of comfort and feeling secure.

JB: **What was your sense of the gender aspects of imprisonment and your project. The prison you were in held only male prisoners and would largely have had male staff. As a woman going into that environment, what was your sense of that?**

BvK: The first governor I met was a woman, so I did not have a sense that being a woman was an issue. There were also many female staff in the prison that we met and spoke to. I had an assistant on the project and I consciously considered whether that should be a man or a woman. In the end I decided that having a degree of balance was important and therefore I selected a man. However, I did not feel that gender had an impact on the project or on the way people responded to me.

JB: **Some of the pictures appear to more directly expose and interpret the conflicts and tensions of prison life. For example, there is a picture from the gymnasium where prisoners working together are reflected in a mirror surrounded by a white wall with institutional signs. This is beautifully composed, looking like a painting, but also reveals something of the**

unreality of prison life and the tensions between institutionalisation and human interaction. How did you respond to the conflicts and tensions that you observed?

BvK: I felt the gymnasium was a very intense place. Firstly there were many inmates in such a small space. Secondly strength, masculinity and public performance were so dominant that I felt a very strong and immediate reaction when I entered. For a moment I was scared, but then I brought my mind back to my intention. to focus on the humanity rather than being judgemental.

JB: **The gymnasium is a place of public performance, where people are displaying their strength and masculinity, but also a place of great intimacy where people are physically close, touching each other and helping each other.**

BvK: Yes, there was certainly an element of people showing off and helping one another.

There was a contrast between public and private spaces not only in how they looked, but also in the experience of them. For example, some people said to us that they did not feel safe on the wings or at work and the only place they did feel safe was in their own cell. A man we pictured with the scar was flamboyant and confident in public and was happy to pose for me but when I asked him is there anything you are scared of in here, he said: 'I don't want to be cut again.'

JB: **What has been the response to your exhibition?**

BvK: There has been a very positive reaction to the exhibition. Many people have come to see it and have been interested in the project. However, some people have found it difficult to accept the humanity in the photographs, they have wanted to feel a more brutal experience and get a stronger sense of punishment. A woman, who has worked at Wormwood Scrubs for many years, came to the exhibition and said: 'your photographs really reflect the atmosphere in Wormwood Scrubs, it is a little bit like a village.'

The exhibition ends in March but I hope that it will be taken on tour so that other people can see the photographs.

A selection of the photographs can be seen at: <http://www.vonkameke.com/>

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