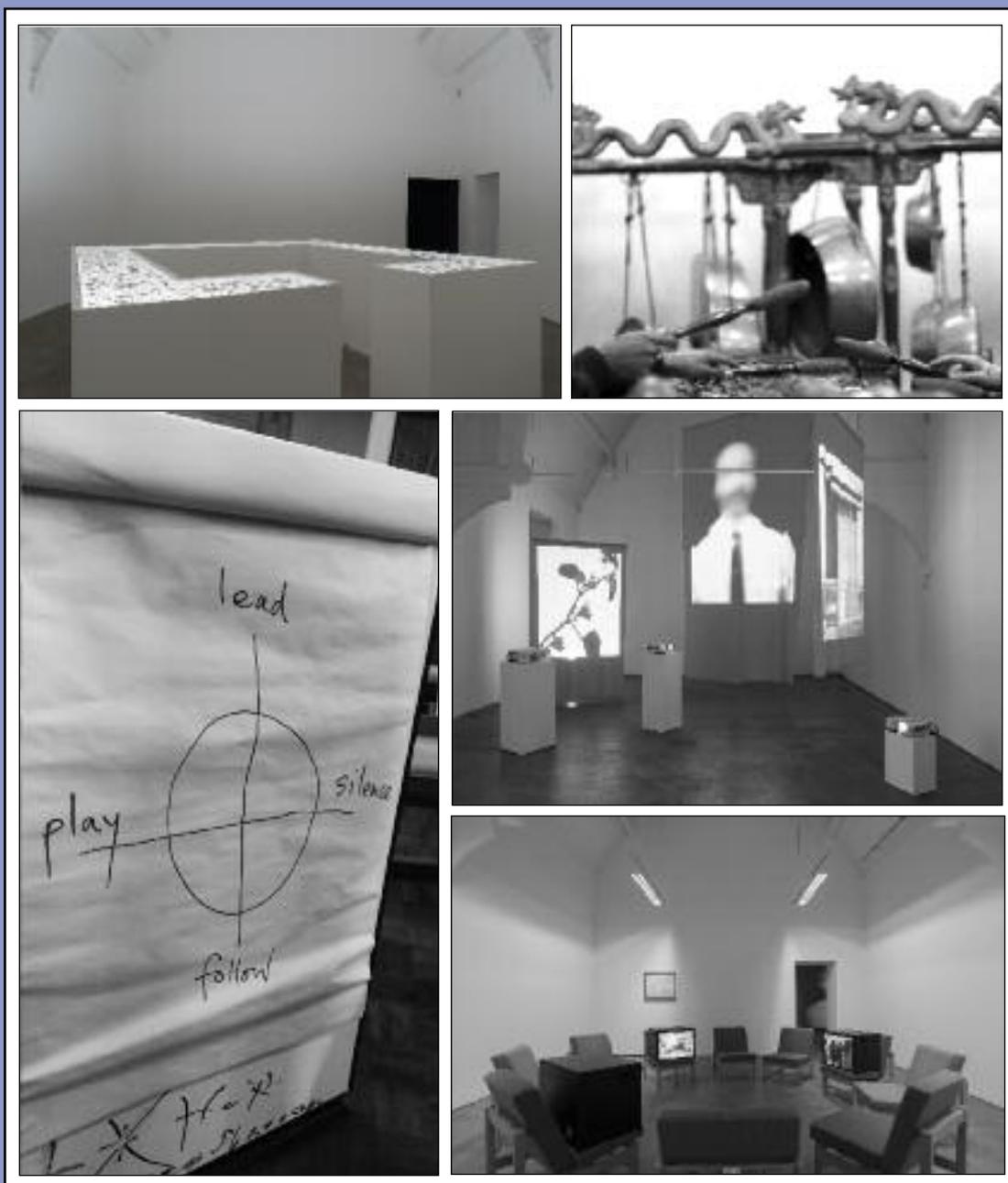


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Special Edition
The Arts in Prison

Interview with Edmund Clark

*Edmund Clark was the Artist-in-residence at HMP Grendon (2014-18).
He is interviewed by Michael Fiddler, University of Greenwich.*

Edmund Clark is an award-winning artist whose work has been exhibited internationally. Much of his work has explored carceral spaces. This has ranged from E-wing of the former HMP Kingston that housed elderly life prisoners (in *Still Life: Killing Time*), to the naval base in Guantanamo Bay (in *Guantanamo: If The Light Goes Out*).

Our conversation took place shortly after the opening of *In Place of Hate* at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham. This was an exhibition of Edmund's work created throughout his residency at HMP Grendon.¹ The evaluation of the residency is discussed earlier in this special edition by Professor Elizabeth Yardley and Dan Rusu, whilst Professor Yvonne Jewkes provides a commentary on Edmund's work.

MF: I was fortunate enough to see your show at the Imperial War Museum.² One of the pieces that really stayed with me was *Orange Screen*³ and the idea of ekphrasis⁴—it was a term that I hadn't come across before—to elicit these visual memories, visual images. I was wondering, prior to your work that led to *Still Life: Killing Time*,⁵ what were your first visual images or memories of imprisonment?

EC: Prior to *Still Life: Killing Time* I had done work in prisons to a certain extent already. I had made the *Baby Fathers*⁶ series, of which some was done in a Young Offenders Institution. I had also done commissions for various publications. So, I'd been into

Feltham, Holloway. I'd visited a couple of prisons. I had some experience.

MF: Before that then, before your first-hand experience.

EC: The popular imagery of prisons that I was aware of was through popular culture and television. So, *Porridge*—that incredibly misleading representation of prison, Prisoner Cell Block H and prisoner of war programmes like *Colditz*. I'd seen photography taken in prison by people like Chris Steele-Perkins. I'd seen his work about a Russian prison.⁷ I think I might have seen Danny Lyon's work about a prison in America.⁸ From the 60s and 70s. Chris Steele-Perkins might have been a bit later than that. Maybe the famous Van Gogh painting.⁹

I also grew up in London and was familiar with the architecture of Victorian prisons like Wormwood Scrubs, Wandsworth and Brixton.

MF: So, how, having worked on these projects, up to and including Grendon, how might that have changed now? Is there a singular visual image that encapsulates imprisonment for you?

EC: A window with bars on it. Looking out through bars is the image which comes to mind as one that I've seen, that I've photographed, that I've seen photographs of. Physically being on the inside and looking out is the visual encapsulation of the experience of incarceration, isn't it? You're on the inside, everything is out there and you can't get there.

1. The exhibition included 1.98m2 (a lightbox displaying wild flowers picked by the artist within the prison grounds. The internal dimensions of the lightbox - the titular 1.98m2 - refer to the size of a cell at HMP Grendon); *Vanishing Point* (five widescreen video panels - oriented vertically - depicting journeys undertaken by staff and prisoners throughout the prison); *Oresteia* (three large CRT televisions played scenes related to the Greek tragedy *Oresteia* as adapted for psychodrama. Staff represent the play's characters as perpetrator, victim or witness whilst prisoners responded to their actions. The televisions were arranged in a small circle of chairs used for therapy - taken from HMP Grendon - that also allowed visitors to sit and watch); *My Shadow's Reflection* (bedsheets - again, taken from the prison itself - were suspended from the gallery ceiling. Photographs were projected onto them: images of pressed flowers, architectural forms, pinhole portraits of prisoners and staff).
2. *War of Terror (2016-17)* [Exhibition]. Imperial War Museum, London. July 28, 2016-August 28, 2017.
3. Edmund Clark. 2016/17. *Orange Screen* (video extract). [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.edmundclark.com/works/orange-screen/#1>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].
4. Ekphrasis is a literary description of a visual work of art.
5. Edmund Clark. 2008. *Still Life: Killing Time*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.edmundclark.com/works/still-life-killing-time/#1>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].
6. Edmund Clark. 2002. *Baby Fathers: new images of teenage fatherhood*. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.gbymn.org.uk/gbymnp/babyfathers_booklet_sample.pdf. [Accessed 18 June 2018].
7. Magnum Photos. 2018. *Russian Prisons*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://pro.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&LBID=2K1H86NWK8IR&IT=Document01>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].
8. Phaidon. 2018. *Danny Lyon looks back at his powerful prison photos*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/photography/articles/2015/august/17/danny-lyon-looks-back-at-his-powerful-prison-photos/>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].
9. Vincent Van Gogh.org. 2018. *Prisoners Exercising (1890)*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.vincentvangogh.org/prisoners-exercising.jsp>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].

MF: With the three year residency at Grendon, what were your expectations of being an artist-in-residence in a Category B prison?

EC: They were partly shaped by having made *Still Life: Killing Time* on E Wing at HMP Kingston, Portsmouth, where I worked over the course of about 2 years. I had some expectation of what the physical experience of being in prison would be like. I didn't know what to expect in terms of facilitating work and engaging with the men to make their own work. I had previously run with Young Offenders but beyond that I didn't know what to expect.

The therapeutic environment was a big unknown for me so I tried to go in there with as open a mind as possible.

MF: What were the mechanics of being an artist-in-residence? For example, in some of the interviews that you've done, you talk about the difficulty of getting a camera into a secure environment. Was that a similar experience in this instance?

EC: At the start the big difference working at Grendon, in terms of the process, was carrying keys. That was quite a substantial shift in my role compared to working at HMP Kingston where I never wanted them and could operate on the wing without them. It was essential at Grendon because I couldn't really operate without it but I was aware that it made me something else. I felt different being a keyholder. I wonder if the prisoners would have viewed me differently if I hadn't carried keys.

MF: Would you have preferred not to have had them?

EC: I think, initially, I would have done, yes. I've become inured to it now. Now that I've established relationships and people know and have seen what I'm doing, I don't think it makes that big a difference to the prisoners. But when I first started, I was very sensitive to that. I find the act of carrying keys and having to deal with the infrastructure oppressive. I took a hand tally counter in one day and counted just over 200 key turns in a normal day. That's a physical experience. It's also a mental experience. Because there are so many bars, gates and doors, you're doing it all the time. And it's not something that becomes second nature because there is always the risk that you will leave one unlocked. And that has consequences. So, that is an experience that I do find quite oppressive.

Getting used to the way all the different wings operate—getting to understand the democratic

permission giving process—took a while. I went in there thinking I was going to coordinate and work across all the wings and realised that wasn't really going to be feasible. It took time to come to terms with the place. Regarding ordering materials, I had no notion of how that was supposed to work in terms of the security process. So, actually, it was the men, who told me how it had been done before. I had no guidebook to the institution or the role.

MF: Was that freeing?

EC: It was initially quite an isolating experience. Being in that place, by myself, in the evening, trying to sort everything out, not really understanding how the place worked.

MF: And did it take some time?

EC: It took months to really get my head round it. It sounds incredibly simple, doesn't it, ordering materials. But prisons are bureaucratic places. And with those institutional structures, often each time a new person comes in they actually reinvent bits of it in their own way. So, I reinvented the process in my own fashion. Where to order from, what paperwork to use and so on. Never mind getting to understand the dynamic and process on each wing in terms of the therapeutic situation.

MF: Did the men that you were working with in the prison have expectations for your role?

EC: I think everyone had expectations for my role based on the predecessor. She is a painter. So, that was the role people projected on to me and expected me to fulfil. You're an artist-in-residence—you paint, that's what you do. I think the men were slightly more circumspect because I was dealing directly with them. There was a learning experience on all sides as I explained that I am a photographer and I work with film and I make videos and do all this other stuff. The first few times I'd take a camera out and start taking photographs people would stop me and say 'what are you doing, do you have permission for that?' That was fine. People had to learn what I did, by just seeing me doing it. There is a performative element to being an artist-in-residence in a non-art focussed institution, perhaps especially in a prison.

MF: Across the three years, were there particular goals that you had in mind or did you have a theme for year one that you would then see evolve?

EC: I was clear that one thing I had set myself was that I was not going to do what I had done before. So, I was not going to re-do *Still Life: Killing Time*. That was

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very clear. I was going to work in different ways. I saw it as an opportunity to explore my creative process, my practice as a photographer, as an artist. And to look at different ways of making work, of responding to the environment.

I was initially interested in ideas of archives. I remember envisioning that my role could entail making an archive of work about Grendon that would be the legacy of the residency. I was really interested in researching the history of the prison and was expecting to find this kind of archive. And, frankly, it doesn't exist. The archive exists in the minds and case files of the people who have worked and lived there.

MF: How did you arrive at the new formal techniques that you ended up using? Was there a period of experimentation?

EC: I didn't make work for a while. I was coming to terms with the place and with the role of facilitating and providing. That was my focus, initially. There were really good practising artists there who needed materials.

I do recall bursts of activity with a camera in a fairly conventional way. I felt that I needed to make work but wasn't sure how. I took time. I spent time looking at the environment and reflecting on the processes in the prison. The experimentation was going on in my head, thinking about a new way to look, new ways to make work and to reflect Grendon. The big shift for me was when I started to look at the outside of the buildings as sculptural forms that reflected my reaction to the carceral space.

MF: In both *Vanishing Point*¹⁰ and the black-and-white photography of these sculptural forms, you present the buildings in a vertical orientation.

EC: Yes, it is all vertical. I very deliberately framed and, in some cases, cropped those forms as tightly as possible. They're uncomfortable in the frame. That was deliberate. I wanted to shoot the *Vanishing Point* film vertically because I wanted to visualise that in a way which was as close as I could make it to how we see normally, perspective-wise, proportionally. It's to give that sense of a person moving through space. It's how we walk. It's giving a confined view. It's just the space immediately in front of you. If you walk along almost looking at the ground, you have that tunnel vision. You're not looking around. You're not looking at the expanse around you. You're fixed on a path in a limited space with a restricted view on a circular, repetitive journey.

MF: Moving on to *In Place of Hate*, how important was it to bring the space of the prison into the gallery?

You've got physical dimensions in 1.98m²,¹¹ you've got objects taken from the prison.¹²

EC: I think that was really important. Most of the discourse around prison and prisoners and criminal justice is very reductive, stereotypical and fixed on binary notions of good and evil. I was clear from quite early on that I wanted to use the gallery space as a place to confront an audience with aspects of the prison experience and that is absent from media discourse, including physical and material elements. A space to create connections with prison that the general public do not normally get to make.

Bringing in elements of the prison environment—particularly of what happens at Grendon—was key to that. I didn't want to literally make it like a carceral space though.

1.98m²



¹ Edmund Clark, courtesy Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

The installation 1.98m² is a lightbox shaped so that you can enter it and stand inside or outside. It's covered with flowers that have grown inside the perimeter at Grendon that I've picked and pressed between sheets of prison paper towels under books in my office.

They're fragile and very delicate. Some have rotted. The interior dimensions of the lightbox are the dimensions of a cell at Grendon. That's quite a problematic contradictory experience. You are looking at these beautiful delicate things which you're looking at, yet the space you are walking around or inside is a prison space. It's introducing that carceral space into a gallery in as nuanced a way as possible.

The ring of chairs, which are taken from Grendon, is an installation on which to show a film called the *Oresteia*. This is based on the Greek tragedy and is a collaboration with the psychodrama department in the prison. People can sit and watch the films on monitors which are on the chairs next to them, the chairs they

10. Vimeo. 2018. Edmund Clark – *Vanishing Point*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/257474758>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].

11. Video clip: 1.98m². 2018. *In Place of Hate*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.edmundclark.com/works/in-place-of-hate/#4>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].

12. Detail from *Oresteia*. 2018. *In Place of Hate*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.edmundclark.com/works/in-place-of-hate/#7>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].

see on the screen. It's a very simple thing, a connection with the men they see on screen. But also other visitors. You go into the gallery sometimes and if it's quite busy there are 5 or 6 people sitting in a circle watching these monitors. The visitors have to engage with each in the gallery space in quite an intimate way. That's another connection which I think is quite important.

Detail from *Oresteia*



Edmund Clark, courtesy Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

The bedsheets in the projected installation *My Shadow's Reflection* are really important. That notion of the shroud—that whole notion of the intimacy of where you sleep—that's really as close as I can bring the gallery visitor to touching a prisoner. Those are the sheets that men in Grendon have slept between. I think that physicality is really important. It speaks about the people there, as well as the experience of incarceration and therapy. Physically, it brings the visitor closer to the incarcerated.

My Shadow's Reflection



Edmund Clark, courtesy Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

MF: As I mentioned earlier, I went to see *The War of Terror* at the Imperial War Museum and I visited it a couple of times. I was walking through the gallery and in one of the rooms and—as you know—there are blueprints...

EC: On the floor, yes. Architectural floorplans.

MF: And it was the summer holidays, so there were some children in there. And there was one little girl playing hopscotch across the lines.

EC: Interesting.

MF: So, I was wondering if, particularly with *In Place of Hate*, if anybody had been using the space that you've established in unusual or unexpected ways.

EC: I don't know to be fair. It's nice to hear that about someone playing hopscotch on a control order house floor plan though.

MF: It stuck me as being a really powerful juxtaposition.

EC: I think one of the good things about putting that work on in a gallery is that it does permit us to cross boundaries, to bring elements of a prison into an art space.

We were talking yesterday at the symposium¹³ about how effective it would be if prisons were open to the public to visit. How that would radically change peoples understanding of prison and what goes on in prison. And in one small way, that's what I've tried to do with my residency. We have put on exhibitions of the men's work in the prison and invited people from the outside to come in. Also, using the gallery space at Ikon to take elements of the prison out into a public environment where people can sit on the chairs from a prison, touch the bedsheets that men sleep between. That kind of physicality and conceptual proximity, I think, is really important. And it does something that doesn't happen on our screens or in our papers. It's an experiential thing. The installation *My Shadow's Reflection* is designed so that as you move around the space you will walk in front of a projector and your shadow will fall on the bedsheet. It will fall on an image of the prison environment, of a plant, a flower, a leaf or on an image of someone who is resident there or works there. That is about trying to identify with the men at Grendon while or after learning about their own narratives of crime. For many of them, they are histories of extreme abuse and addiction, violence and chaos. And trying to understand that, were it not for the privileges that I have had in terms of the education, support, family, stability in my life which has informed my decisions, I could be there. We could all be there. You could be there. Any visitor to the gallery could be there, but for the circumstances of their life. And that, the image of the offender—particularly the violent offender, the sexual offender—as a monster that is tacitly and sometimes overtly present in much media discourse about criminality (and perhaps culturally ingrained) is actually potentially a monster that is in all of us. I am suggesting through the shadows that

13. Ikon Gallery. 2018. Symposium Edmund Clark, *In Place of Hate*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.ikon-gallery.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Edmund-Clark-Symposium.pdf>. [Accessed 18 June 2018].

visitors make in the installation that the image of the 'other' that is generated by the reductive binary discourse of good and evil around criminal justice is wrong. Everyone is on a spectrum. Some of us are more likely to offend for a range of reasons but we all have the potential given the wrong circumstances. My Shadow's Reflection is in me.

The men at Grendon are coming to terms with that image of themselves and understanding what they've done and transforming that image of themselves. The rest of us have to understand that we have that capacity as well. And if we understand that, then we understand the experience of incarceration and rehabilitation in a very different way. Using the materiality and recreating the spatial experience of incarceration in the gallery is another way—particularly through the pinhole imagery—of suggesting that it's not a binary situation.

MF: One of the ideas that particularly comes through with the pinhole camera is the idea of the visible and invisible coming together.

EC: I knew that I needed to confront the idea of disappearance and invisibility of the prisoner in the criminal justice system in the work. I had been told that I must not make images which identify prisoners. And that's for good reasons: for the protection of victims and victims' families, and also—in some cases—to protect the men when they get out. I understood that, but at another level that is an extension of this idea of invisibility and the absence of humanity once you've committed a crime and gone into prison. That led me to try and devise some form of visual strategy for making work which could confront that idea and the censorship of individual and was valid in its conceptual approach to the therapeutic process as well. That led me to experiment with a pinhole camera which is a technology which I've never used before. I was aware that it often involved long exposures. So it's about time. There is no lens. It's just, literally, a very small hole in a dark chamber to let light in so the images are often fluid and not sharp. That threw up the potential of making images of people which were indistinct.

I was also interested in that because it struck a chord with me in relation to notions of the Panopticon prison where all cells can be seen. The prisoner thinks they could potentially be seen at all times and moderates their behaviour in that environment. Anyone

that's read Foucault¹⁴ will know that extends into how society works. Anyone that's read Deleuze's¹⁵ Postscript on the Societies of Control will understand how that then relates to how we internalize and start shaping our own forms of behaviour. That was interesting for me because I see Grendon as a sort of psychological / psychotherapeutic Panopticon. People ask to be sent there. They go to be seen. The intense group therapeutic experience involves revealing a lot about themselves, dealing with their criminality in front of everyone else and exposing their histories. That's potentially a very traumatic experience. The communal dynamic of the prison is one where every waking moment of the day your behaviour is being held to account by your peers and you are holding their behaviour to account as well. Interactions on the stairs, on the landings, in the dining halls are all part of that

experience of learning to deal with your behaviour and live with other people in a responsible way. You are under observation all the time. That notion of a Panopticon-like existence was something I wanted to bring out.

The pinhole camera related to that because I actually don't think in an original Panopticon design you would necessarily see everybody. When you imagine an architectural structure where you have light in the middle and you have a series of cells around the outside with windows, where the

light is coming in from the back of the cell, often all you're going to see is a shadow, a silhouette or a presence. And I was interested in the possibility that the pinhole camera would create images which were like that.

Another aspect that appealed to me about the pinhole camera is that it is a camera with no lens. I'm not mediating or making the image. They're not photographs taken by me. It is literally just the light bouncing off the subject onto the sheet of film. For me, they're not even photographs. They're impressions of conversations. They are images made by the people standing in front of the camera. They shape their own image at Grendon which obviously relates to the process that they are going through in therapy.

On another level, I was also reflecting the history of photography in relation to criminal justice, particularly the idea of where the mug shot came from. The pinhole images are in black and white and show heads and shoulders and torsos. That's a very deliberate reference

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14. Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish* London: Penguin.

15. Deleuze, G. (1992) Postscript on the societies of control, *October*, 59, 3-7.

to Bertillon and his work at the beginning of what has become the mugshot photograph.

MF: *Portrait parlé* or 'the speaking portrait'.

EC: In relation to contemporary discourse around criminal justice, very often the last image that is seen of a person before they go to prison is the mugshot. That remains imprinted on everyone else's minds of what a criminal is. That's how you see a criminal: through a mugshot.

We make the pinhole images in a group situation. I put the camera up in a room with a group of men who take it in turns to stand in front of the camera for two exposures of about 6 minutes each. During that time I will ask them questions and other people in the room ask them questions about why they're there, what they've done, what the experience of the prison is like, what other prisons have been like, what therapy is like. Sometimes it's quite light-hearted. Sometimes it gets really quite heavy. It's up to the person how they want to react and what they want to talk about. As they talk, they move and that creates a blurred during the long exposure. Normally I do two exposures of each person. Often for the second image, I would encourage them to move more, to make a shape, to create some sort of form if they wanted to.

Now, the images are quite troubling. They're quite ghostly. They're faceless. You can't identify people. And that was problematic for me initially.

MF: How so?

EC: I thought it was literally perpetuating the image of the Other: an unidentified mugshot of a monster. It was what happened when I took the images back to the men and into the full wing community meetings that I understood what the photographs represented and why they the process made sense. One man said *'that shows how I feel in therapy...I just feel lost. I feel overwhelmed, faceless.'* Men started to talk about the images as an extension, as a reflection, as part of the process they were going through in therapy and as part of the experience of therapy. The images provoked or enabled men to talk in terms of how they 'see' themselves. Part of the point of going through therapy at Grendon is to understand what has

happened and that involves how you see yourself. The value you see in yourself. Your ability to understand who you are. To see that you are moving, you're changing, that you're evolving and ultimately to think how people outside might see them. In some cases to come to see and come to terms with the monster inside. Men started to talk about these images in relation to those ideas and the experiences they had encountered in their lives and at Grendon.

MF: In some respects it's a dual process of the pantopticon and the synopticon.¹⁶

If the panopticon is the few watching the many, the synopticon is the many watching the few. If you have a group interacting with an individual like that, the observation works in both directions.

EC: It is. That I think is clearly a reflection of the representation of criminal justice and prisoners. The many watch the few, but in an incredibly binary, stereotypical way, when we should be watching ourselves and understanding each other.

MF: You've mentioned that you will be sending out My Shadow's Reflection to opinion formers. Have you had feedback?

EC: I will send copies to criminal justice opinion formers, policy makers and commentators. Who knows what response I'll get. I haven't sent out that many copies yet. I will be giving a copy of the book to men and staff at Grendon that took part in the

work as well. I want them to have something that outlasts my residency that they may think is beautiful or at least a memory of part of their process. The book includes three types of images in the exhibition installation of the same name—the pinhole presences, the black-and-white architectural/sculptural images and photographs I've taken of plant matter that grows inside Grendon.

MF: Is there a response you'd like?

EC: I don't know. It would be nice if it created some kind of feedback. All I can hope is that when it lands on the desk of a policy maker or an opinion former they have the time to look at it and engage with it. Perhaps in some way it will change how they see, how they understand. Maybe it will bring them a little bit closer to their own shadow's reflection.

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16. Mathiesen, T. (1997) The viewer society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited *Theoretical Criminology* 1, 2, 215-234.