

DOING TIME

Lucas Davidson, Debra Dawes, Anne Ferran, Sylvia Griffin, Carolyn McKay.

Curated by Carrie Miller

July 16 – August 8

July 16 – Opening night 6–8pm

Saturday July 25 – Creativity and the Wandering Mind Panel Discussion

You and Me: Pros and Cons. OK YEAH COOL GREAT and Chris Dolman/ Paul Williams 1–3pm

August 8 – Artist talks and crit presented by Aggregate 1–3pm

Work listed clockwise from entrance:

SYLVIA GRIFFIN

Coloured Threads, perspex, duraclear photograph, 2015 (front window).

Hair Rabbits, silk organza, human hair, Perspex, steel, 2015.

ANNE FERRAN

Align 2, Align 3, Align 5, Align 7, pigment print on aluminum, performers: Victoria Hunt and Linda Luke, 2015.

LUCAS DAVIDSON

Black Cell, wood and blue metal gravel, durational performance 60 minutes by Lucas Davidson, 2015.

CAROLYN MCKAY

Model Prison, HD video, 07:25 minutes; MDF and acrylic paint installation, performer: Brian Joyce, props maker: Alexi Creecy, 2015.

DEBRA DAWES

Inside – out, 11 works on paper, typewriter ink on mulberry paper, 2015.

Australian Journalist Peter Greste was released from an Egyptian prison earlier this year after serving part of a seven year sentence for allegedly reporting news damaging to its national security; in April, Bali 9 prisoners Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran were taken to the island of Nusakambangan and executed by firing squad after ten years imprisonment for drug offences.

Despite the obvious differences in their circumstances – in one case, convicted drug smugglers who died for their crimes, in the other, a political prisoner - the common theme in mainstream narratives about these men was a certain romantic idea about 'doing time'. Chan and Sukumaran were valorised for 'rehabilitating' themselves during their incarceration, Greste for his relentlessly positive attitude towards confinement.

Not only do these examples highlight our interest in how people 'do' time, they also reveal how these stories can be seamlessly appropriated into the singular historical narrative about 'doing time' in mainstream western discourses around crime and punishment. It is a history pitted with cases of 'great' individuals (almost exclusively male) who have been able to do their time well. At the same time, this narrow reading of 'doing time' unconsciously exposes the extent to which we deny the simultaneously banal and profound realities of incarceration – the fact that, in most cases, time inflicts itself on the passively imprisoned body, dominating and disciplining it through regimes of punishment that serve to further marginalise vulnerable subjects (women, children, Indigenous people, the mentally ill, the disabled, the indigent, refugees and other persecuted ethnic minorities).

It is in this critical spirit that the artists in this exhibition have engaged with the conception of 'doing time'. In a number of interesting ways, they have considered the idea of temporality as it shapes our understanding of detention, confinement, isolation, and incarceration and how these regimes of punishment in turn impact on the confined's phenomenological experience of time.

Lucas Davidson's *Black Cell* is a durational performance work which responds to the sixty days former prison inmate Brett Collins spent in solitary confinement. Davidson buried himself under a pile of gravel and attempted to endure the constraint this material imposed on his body for sixty minutes, in a microcosm of Collins' isolation. *Black Cell* is a work that, via the embodied experience of the artist, allows the viewer visceral access to the more disturbing psychological dimensions of 'doing time', making us aware of the mental health problems that arise from solitary confinement such as anxiety, paranoia, aggression and depression.

The work of **Sylvia Griffin** is also concerned with the psychology of 'doing time'. From the perspective of post-memory, she confronts the complex ways that the past, present and future intersect at the site of collective trauma, animating our understanding of the inter-generational transmission of trauma experienced by the descendants of Holocaust victims and survivors. In *Hair Rabbits*, Griffin expresses her personal experience of such trauma through the use of highly personal, traditionally 'feminine' embroidery with human hair – in a work that reinterprets a dress Griffin wore as a child. And, symbolically, in the stone assemblage, *Coloured Threads*, the pattern created by the stones references the spotted pattern of her grandmother's handkerchief. Griffin's works articulate the imperceptible memory traces that trauma leaves, making material the type of unacknowledged pain and grief which is often beyond representation.

In the video work *Model Prison*, **Carolyn McKay** investigates the broader phenomenological shift implicated in and by the rise of the 'post-human' courtroom and technologized criminal justice. *Model Prison* extrapolates the concept of virtual court appearance in order to explore the possibilities of virtual imprisonment. McKay's video of a man in solitary confinement allows the viewer to experience the fragmentation of time and space suggested by such a system of de-corporalised and de-materialised carceral space. And its placement in the small opening in a large rectangular box reminds us of the slot in a prison door, peeking through it provides the viewer access to surveilling the person in solitary confinement.

Debra Dawes' work is an intimate portrait of her relationship with a prison inmate, articulated through a series of actions over time during his period of detention. The artist established a ritualised exchange with the young man: the same action was performed each night at 9 pm for fifteen minutes. In their regular phone calls, the prisoner meditated on a colour of his choosing and, in the process, telepathically communicated it to Dawes, who also meditated in an effort to receive it. The outcome was then recorded and communicated back to the inmate via weekly written letters. The result is a series of works on paper that record the passing of time, in the stark, unsentimental way one might record time on the wall of a cell – four lines with a diagonal one etched across them – through the documenting of the date, the colour received and the colour sent.

In her current series, *Align*, **Anne Ferran** is specifically interested in the alienating nature of imprisonment which she explores through photography and performance. Each of her images brings together two performers photographed in the same place at different times. At first glance the resulting image looks seamless, highly formal and tightly resolved. However, closer inspection reveals the artifice: the image is irreconcilably split, there can be no real possibility of contact between the figures. Their double alienation – from the outside world and from the individual physically nearest to them – evokes an experience that is common in prison life, of having no privacy while feeling completely alone.

The works in *Doing Time* contribute to alternative discourses around the politics and ethics of confinement and its subjects, expanding the sphere of understanding around questions of subjectivity, agency and temporality that arise when we think about 'doing time'. Through their work these artists help us to acknowledge that while certain subjects have a seemingly remarkable capacity for doing time, others have time done to them.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the support of the Sydney Institute of Criminology, the University of Sydney Law School and the University of Sydney Union.

VERGE GALLERY



PROVIDED BY
UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY UNION