

## **Title, Commune Communicate**

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“Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualising distributions, an organisation in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power ... (It was characterised by) the great confinement on the one hand ; the correct training on the other.”<sup>1</sup>

In the above passage, the French philosopher Michel Foucault discusses certain cultural and political changes wrought by the bubonic plague, the beginnings of the “disciplinary society” which uses surveillance as a method of containment. According to Foucault, procedures of individualisation that mark exclusion have operated regularly since the beginning of the 19th century in psychiatric asylums, penitentiaries, reformatories, schools and even hospitals. In the case of prisons, Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon — a circular penitentiary that maximises visibility of the prisoners — was the architectural manifestation of this new way of thinking. While these new prisons still enclosed their prisoners, they no longer deprived them of light or hid them from view (as in a dungeon) : rather, they were branded and followed at every turn.

When Le FRAC de Lorraine and the Casino Luxembourg began planning a series of “public art interventions”, Lucy Orta decided to extend her investigation of isolation by holding a workshop with inmates at the Maison d’Arrêt de Metz (the Metz prison). She wondered about their feelings of identity while in detainment, since they were denied contact with the “outside” and, at the same time, under rigid scrutiny by the prison system. Communication seemed limited, so her idea was to host a “Communication Workshop”. Results of the workshop would be taken to the public, in whatever way the prisoners deemed fit. “What interested me in this project was that Lucy was able to take things on both intramuros as well as extramuros ; the dialogue between a world that is, as it were, closed, and the wider public that only has representations of this world.” Dominique Thiam, Director of Social Services, Detention Centre Metz.

Foucault was a tireless advocate of prisoners’ rights and lobbied for reforms to France’s prison system. Thanks in part to efforts like his, some French prisons now offer more creative programs and limited freedoms for inmates. The prison in Metz offers a video workshop, whereby inmates can make videos in the prison’s studios for broadcast on the prison’s internal television station. The videos they make include documentaries and recordings of their own football matches, performances and concerts that take place inside the prison. (These videos are often run when the authorities have decided, for whatever reasons, to censor certain television programs coming in from the outside). The group of men who volunteered for Orta’s workshop were all active in this video program.

At the end of June, 1996, Orta met with these men and talked about the possibility of bringing something from their enclosed space into the public space, in order to begin what would hopefully be an ongoing dialogue with the public. The prisoners discussed their daily routines, their problems and doubts

Orta filmed their meetings and recorded various personal testimonies offered by the men. In order to facilitate correspondence with the public, they decided to print a series of postcards, whose images would be representative of their glimpses of freedom — their hope — as well as their current predicament. Thus, there are photos of the blue sky crossed by helicopter deterrent wires ; a field of green wheat that lies opposite the prison ; the rusted, metal entrance gate recently set alight by a prison guard protest ; a concrete prison wall ; a prison-issued sock. The first four photos are superimposed with the “CP METZ” stamp, while the sock has the stamp right on it.

They designed a set of folding tables and suitcases that bore cibachrome prints of the prison environment, laminated onto perspex. Each Communication Object opened up containing a walkman inside. Orta brought these onto the streets of Metz, along with thousands of postcards, where passers-by could stop and listen to the prisoners’ testimonies on tape. Then, if they wished, they could write messages that would be sent back to the prison.

The response was overwhelming. Hundreds of people sent messages, some in the effort to boost morale, some to ask questions, others to relate similar experiences that they or their loved ones had been through. When Orta went back to the prison, the men decided to record these “messages from outside” in their video studio. The messages were then sent around the entire prison via their internal TV. “Their reaction to reading the postcards took on different forms : laughs, questions, nostalgia, humour and a little sadness.”

As a number of men in the workshop had been imprisoned on various drug charges, which they talked about in their testimonies, one of the important results of Commune Communicate was the ensuing debate among prisoners and the public about the different laws in the European Union regarding drug possession and use. In most countries where “soft” drugs are illegal — like in the U.S.A., which has one of the highest prison populations in the world — the majority of inmates have been incarcerated on drug-related crimes. The effectiveness of this response to drugs is doubtful, and requires further discussion everywhere. JB

1 Michel Foucault, *Discipline or Punish* (trans. Alan Sheridan), (London : Penguin Books, 1977).