

*Prison Sentences: The Prison as Site/The Prison as Subject.* JULIE COURTNEY and TODD GILENS, curators. Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, PA. May 18, 1995–October 29, 1995.

Eastern State Penitentiary stands both as an ironic monument to the humanitarian social experimentation of the early republic and as a relic of the medieval revival in architecture that found its first American expression in Philadelphia in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. Designed by the immigrant British architect John Haviland in 1820, Eastern State accepted its first prisoner in 1829. The castled edifice, out of use since 1970, is fast becoming a magnificent ruin.

*Prison Sentences: The Prison as Site/The Prison as Subject* is an engaging attempt to interpret Eastern State through art. Todd Gilens, an artist and one of the show's two curators, became interested in possible collaborations between artists, historians, and historic preservationists while doing site-specific work in abandoned industrial buildings. With the Moore College of Art and Design acting as fiduciary agent, Gilens and Julie Courtney, an independent curator, invited artists whose work interested them to submit proposals for site-specific installations at Eastern State. Norman Johnston's book about Eastern State, *Crucible of Good Intentions*, was sent to all of the artists targeted by the curators. Seventy-five proposals were sifted through before thirteen installations and one comic book were selected for inclusion in *Prison Sentences*.

Whereas some of the exhibits make ironic and intellectualized statements about incarceration, other installations enhance the visitor's understanding of this building's unique history on an experiential level. The art installations become especially meaningful when the visitor brings background information about the prison to his or her experience of them. A short film and guided tour are helpful in this regard.

Until 1913, when the congregate system officially replaced it, the regimen at Eastern State was intended to be one of near absolute solitary confinement. Viewed in its historical context, solitary confinement was considered a humanitarian innovation aimed at the rehabilitation of prisoners, the possibility of which was itself an innovative assumption about criminality born out of the Enlightenment. Haviland's radial design, which made surveillance workable for the solitary system, became a prototype for prison design. Copied widely in Europe, Eastern State was the first American building to reverse a pattern of architectural transmission that had previously flowed in the opposite direction across the Atlantic.

Several of the installations are able to employ Eastern State's dilapidated condition to convey a message or feeling about the prison and the milieu of ideologies and intentions in which it existed. The prison's ruined condition is, in fact, a significant part of its history. Eastern State was operated at a financial loss because the solitary system was ill-suited to the task of organizing prison labor for profit. When the congregate system replaced it, the physical plant proved anachronistic.

James Casebere's *The Model Room*, in which architectural models of institutional buildings are smothered in debris, utilizes the prison's abundance of peeled and fallen plaster to relate a message about the ultimate futility of human efforts to control. Bruce Pollack's *Vas Hermeticus* also plays off of the prison's current state of decay but, in this case, to make a statement specifically about Eastern State's solitary system, which he compares to the alchemist's art. Pollack's installation is cryptic and not very effective. Working with the present condition of the prison in a much more compelling way, Carolyn Healy and John Phillips in *Overtones* have inscribed an entire cell block with an expressionistic language of light, form, and sound. Although the objects used by the artists complement the contemporary atmosphere of decay, they are also evocative of the madness that became endemic at Eastern State during the years in which the solitary system was operative. The prison averaged ten suicides per year during this period.

Both Virgil Marti's *For Oscar Wilde* and Allan Wexler's *Cell* comment on the minimal resources available to prisoners for sustaining a life of the imagination. Wexler has utilized objects found amid the debris of the prison to equip the cell of a hypothetical artist/prisoner. Marti has replastered and wallpapered a cell to suit Wilde's dandyish tastes. A path of day lilies delineates the entrance to the cell. This treatment sets Wilde's cell comically apart from the other cells in their barren and ruined conditions. Both installations are paeans to the power of the individual imagination to overcome external limitations and, thus, stand in contrast to Healy and Phillips's dark vision.

Marti's installation has a specific relationship to Eastern State on several levels. Marti is contemptuous of the purpose underlying Eastern State's solitary system. Whereas the religious reformers that founded Eastern State intended to construct an environment conducive to meditation and penitence, the wallpaper that Marti has fashioned is patterned with rebellious commentary from Wilde's literary works. Wilde, in fact, spent some of his jail time in Pentonville, an English prison patterned after Eastern State. Marti's installation marks the 100th anniversary of Wilde's imprisonment for "gross indecency." A chart reproduced in Johnston's book reveals that in 1928, twenty-nine inmates were being held at Eastern State and Graterford, another prison in the Pennsylvania system, for "sodomy and buggery."

Beth B's *A Holy Experiment*, in cellblock one, is the most experiential installation of the group. As the visitor enters Beth B's cell, a sensor causes the door to slide shut. The visitor is then presented with an eerie sound recording suggestive of both the madness that plagued Eastern State's early years and of the rape and rampant exploitation that afflicted the twentieth-century prison. Other visitors can view reactions from a video monitor in a neighboring cell so that the visitors, in effect, become part of the installation. Beth B's use of the video monitor perhaps makes reference to the peepholes that were originally installed in cellblock one, the first block constructed, so that guards could surreptitiously monitor prisoners. Beth B's cells are 12' x 8', the standard size for cells at Eastern State. The visitor experiences the cells as tiny and restricted, but they were actually quite luxurious when compared to the norm for other prisons of the day and even for our day.

In *Why Malcolm Had to Read*, Homer Jackson, Mogauwane Mahloele, John Abner, Richard Jordan, and Lloyd Jackson collaborate to explore the black experience in prison. Although on its surface, the work does not relate specifically to Eastern State, the impression of chaos and disruption of thought that it creates through overlapping sound recordings, like Beth B's installation, provides the visitor with a disquieting modern perspective from which to reevaluate the earlier solitary system.

Other artists featured in *Prison Sentences* include Jonathan Borofsky, Malcolm Cochran, Willie Cole, Christina Kubisch and Winifred Lutz, Simon Grennan, and Christopher Sperandio. Fiona Templeton, working with Amnesty International, turns a cell block into a memorial to prisoners of conscience world-wide.

Site-specific artistic interpretation of a historic site—as in *Prison Sentences*—asks more of its viewers than other methods of historical interpretation but has, at the same time, a far greater potential for communication. That this type of interpretation touches the visitor to a historical site on many levels—some subconscious and profound—presents both exciting possibilities and challenging ethical issues to be examined and debated by both historians and curators.

That the art installations point to and enhance the intensely evocative and communicative nature of the prison in its ruined state poses another question for historic preservationists: should ruins sometimes be left alone? A buttress here and there may suffice to preserve the historical lessons that Eastern State has to offer. Groups with an interest in the preservation of the prison such as the Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force, the Historical Commission of the City of Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Prison Society are undoubtedly, at this moment, grappling with the issue.

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