

CAGES, WINDOWS, SHADOWS

JOURNAL NOTES FROM OTHER

EXPLORATIONS IN THE PENAL COLONY

» TOM MORRIS

» **GUANTÁNAMO. FEBRUARY 2007**

“The Insurance Man” installation’s wire mesh and grated doorway, cage-like, bolted shut. Shutters pulled down over locked windows. Keep in, keep out. The familiarity of something seen in any Vancouver, Phnom Penh or Nairobi shop street.

What would be understood of the inner life of such streets, imagined in some uncertain future as layers of earthy detritus? Shards of private property, of mine, me, them? Signs of powerlessness, vulnerability, fear, anger, repressed anger? Rooms of unintelligible documents in a commonplace tongue. Remains of walls, locks, things hidden, surveillance, guards, enemies? (Always, apparently, the need for and availability of enemies) Evidence of pain, crimes, calamities?

Hardly a blink and I see Guantánamo prison. Journal notes: “The wire mesh gates and razor wire walls, padlocks and cages, orange-suited animal-prisoners dragged by, neck under the boots of, robotic guards; one corner of a sprawling cage transfigured towards normalcy as unsavoury but necessary (to use today’s dizzying jargon), a thing designed to keep us secure, safe, free by housing rendered enemy aliens—‘our enemies’—brought to it across a now

globalized national security gulag of kidnappings, entrapments, black holes, secret flights, redacted documents (where ‘editing’ becomes the disappearing of evidence), a place where crimes of state are aberrations, the work of a few bad apples ... all the while hooding the rest of us in guilt for seeming to speak against our own safety, for not supporting our defenders, for not standing up for civilized values.”

“My anger at the inflicted torments, at our powerlessness, perhaps even, after all these years, at my stubborn ineptness—because of some irrepressible hope?—at taking advantage of the foresight that experience keeps offering. I hadn’t imagined, these past six or so years, the ease with which circumstances could be created in which due process could again be so openly disregarded, and where torture—its necessity and the earnest quibbles over its meaning—could so completely become part of the everyday.”

» **TUOL SLENG MUSEUM, PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA. OCTOBER 2003**

Once a suburban school called Tuol Svay Prey; then a Khmer Rouge torture and death prison (S-21) imagined and refined by one-time teachers, some imprisoned and tortured by the French; now the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes.

Tuol Svay Prey’s teachers would have expected unquestioning respect, the memorization of rules. That was just how things were. Later, S-21’s commandant, one of many ex-teacher leaders in the Khmer Rouge, organized the meticulous documenting of new prisoners (“called to study,” “called for consultation”) who, under torture and before they are murdered, would have to invent confessions to crimes only their keepers knew.

Journal notes: “First glances. A playground, the remains of a swing set. The school buildings, window after window, door after door, the shaded verandas running along each floor, like so many colonial schools, hospitals and asylums in the tropics.

“Walking further, closer. Peeling paint, scratches on the walls, stained drain holes, burn marks, barred windows, razor wire. Classrooms divided into cells, bare metal cots, some with manacles, some with small photos of chained bodies ... I remember reading that screams could be heard a half mile away, about the ‘mayhem’ that breached every demand for ‘correct procedures.’ Nausea. A window. I want the comforting solidity of that shaded veranda.

“Room after room of small mugshot photos (like any passport, passbook, licence or identity card) of nameless prisoners. I move closer. I have to see one person at a time. That angry frown. Eyes and cheeks and lips that suggest such gentleness. Startled eyes. Expressive blankness. Puzzlement. The staring eyes, many directly into the lens, into me, crossing a line that Khmer Rouge directives said must never even be imagined can be crossed.

“Then I’m in front of several images enlarged to life-size. The eyes of a baffled girl look into the lens, into me, I to her. Then eerily she’s behind bars that darken, then fade. Above her a sunlit window, a palm branch, then a soft arc of light, like a swing, that I imagine could lift her into that bright open space. Another image: a mother, overwhelmed sadness in her eyes, a number around her neck, holding a sleeping infant, and again over her shoulder a sunlit window, a half open shutter, and another small triangle of light with its fragment of shaded veranda over one eye, as if while obeying the order to look into the lens she can also see (or is longing to see) the smallest of bright openings towards life outside this horror.

“All this in the small moment before I notice the tricks of reflections coming off the plexiglass-covered photos. But in that moment I still remember the shock of seeing these ghostly presences. The barred windows unseen in the official photos but now as if insisted upon by the future-seeing eyes of the dead. And then the reassuring ordinariness of that sunlight, the palms, things I can name, a building’s edge,

as if I was seeing things that would undo that purely bureaucratized image of the already condemned. I even imagined that it was something they, the dead, had contrived to make happen.

“Another photo gallery, hallway, a window ... where they suddenly appeared through a frame criss-crossed by razor wire. Three boys, one wearing an American flag t-shirt, playing on the remains of the school’s swing set, one hanging by his hands, stretched out and swinging ... then someone, something awful there, hanging ... then the boy again, he’s back-flipped onto the ground, reassembling himself after passing through the razor wire ... and I look and keep looking, amazed that children are still possible, that play is still possible, that playing here is possible.

“Walking out through the walled gate of S-21. The tuk-tuks and motorbikes still sputtering up and down Monivong Boulevard. A rooster crowing down some alleyway. Mr Tha, who had driven us there on his tuk-tuk, having a smoke and chatting it up with another driver across the street, sensibly under a shade tree. The shock of all this unreal ordinariness, and then of asking Mr Tha how he had been spending his time, remarking on the heat, and being surprised that words were possible and seemed to work. Then driving away, watching Mr Tha’s back, and wanting to ask, if language had allowed, what he knew about S-21, if by chance he had been inside, perhaps even (given his age, not a far-fetched question) been one of its many adolescent keepers.”

» **SHADOWS AND BONES. OTTAWA.**
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Remembering other walks. The crowded, preoccupied bustle of Kuala Lumpur sidewalks after visiting a family preparing for the funeral of their father, beaten to death by the police in what is a pattern of beatings the city’s police carry out with impunity. Or the country trails up the valley near where I live outside Ottawa: the surprise of discovering one day

that I was walking through a 1940s internment camp (“Why were you arrested?” “I was Italian.” “I was a labour leader.”), perhaps walking over barbed wire and the mouldy files of those imprisoned without charge or trial. The sensation, as I once read was experienced by Dr. Juan Carlos Adrover in Argentina many years after the colonels’ dictatorship (1976–83), of ‘this whole country being a graveyard, and that we are all constantly walking on bones’.

Other people walking, this time experienced by the condemned, like Ana Maria Careaga—disappeared and tortured in the basement of a suburban Buenos Aires police station during the dictatorship—who remembers hearing/seeing signs of routine life through tiny openings in her cell, “on the floor the shadows of people passing by,” the sounds of cars and buses, “life going on as usual” ... a very particularized memory that also helps bring into view the many physicians, lawyers, journalists, electricians and cleaners (for example) in the colonels’ employ, or those many members of the Argentine propertied classes who so easily embraced the colonels’ rhetoric (now blaring again in our own ears) of criminal elements, terrorists, security, decency, civilization and the need for sacrifice, responsibility, toughness.

In a world where we are baited into identifying our ideals with the necessity of another’s murder, into not seeing the glimpses of fellow life in the face of the condemned, into not wondering where our shadow might be falling—how then to recognize the lie in tomorrow’s urgent, seductive calls to violence?

Perhaps all we still have is the threadbare advice of earlier refusers: the contingent powers of critical reflection, of single-bodied experience, of self-determination, of irrepressible hope, of not cooperating. And to ask where we are, where we’ve been, and where we’re going as we dig through this installation, with its unreconciled, eerily familiar furnishings, the stuff of our continuing calamity.

» **SELECTED SOURCES**

On S-21, David Chandler’s Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison (*Silkworm*, 2000). *On Argentina, Marguerite Feitlowitz’s* A Lexicon of Terror (*Oxford*, 1998). “Earlier refusers” refers, among others, to critics like Alex Comfort, Paul Goodman, T.W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse.



Tuol Sleng Museum display photo of Chan Kim Srung with her newborn child, based on the original S-21 prisoner mug shot taken May 14, 1978. Chan Kim Srung and her infant were reported “smashed” (murdered) soon after their detention. Photo: Tom Morris, 2003.



Tuol Sleng Museum display photo of an unidentified S-21 prisoner. Unlike the original mug shots, many of today’s display images, set under plexiglass, include shifting light waves and images amplified and projected through the tropical sunlight outside. Photo: Tom Morris, 2003.



Children swing on gymnastic bars in the courtyard of the Tuol Sleng Museum. In the same courtyard, a similar frame from Tuol Svay Prey school was used by the Khmer Rouge to torture prisoners at S-21. Photo: Tom Morris, 2003.