

## *'A stitch in time' (2020): a textile work unpicking our prison system*

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### Biography

**James Fox** is a Doctoral Researcher at Lancaster Institute for the Arts. His dissertation is a practice-based thesis involving the creation of artifacts to enable awareness of alternative political and social narratives, allowing transformative truths to emerge.

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### Abstract

This article investigates the motivations behind the construction of my artwork 'A stitch in time', which was produced in response to a private conversation with a recently released prisoner. Jeremy Bentham's idea of the Panopticon as a building, as well as the idea of being 'constantly observed' were underlying considerations when developing a framework to contain the images and text from my research. My work highlights the facts and figures generated by a prison system struggling under the weight of persistent underfunding and overcrowding, as well as the group culture created by prisoners in search of a sense of identity, as revealed through their language and art practices.

**Keywords:** [Art](#); [Textiles](#); [Prison](#); [Panopticon](#); [Embroidery](#)

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### A conversation

'A stitch in time' (reverse appliqué with free machine embroidery, 150cm × 150cm) was produced in response to my experience as an educator and artist, first as a tutor at a young offenders' institute and then as an artist in residence at a homeless shelter in my hometown of Lancaster.

'What else can I do but go and rob!' This remark was made to me by a young man using the facilities at the homeless shelter after recently being released from prison. He had been given £46 in cash and a one-way train ticket after a two-year sentence. With no address, little chance of employment and no money, he was resigned to the treadmill of reoffending and incarceration. This conversation was the inspiration for my investigation, and the development of the artwork 'A stitch in time' (Figure 1).

The hidden world of incarceration is something that most of us will, thankfully, never have to experience, but for a historically increasing percentage of citizens it has become a significant

part of their lives. The UK prison population in 2021 stood at 78,037, a rise of 74% in the last 30 years, and is projected to rise by a further 20,000 inmates by 2026 (Prison Reform Trust, 2021).



Figure 1

## Aims

The aim of this practice-based research was to produce an artwork responding to aspects of the British prison system, and especially my observations on the buildings used to house prisoners. I was specifically interested in panopticon prisons. Along with the sobering facts and figures relating to this hidden way of life, I also aimed at examining some of the more unusual aspects of incarceration. This textile artwork is at once a comment on the penal system and also a meticulously designed, technically complicated, constructed artwork, to be viewed for aesthetic value as much as for information.

My work does not intend to present any solutions to the problems faced by the prison system. Instead, it is designed to draw attention to some of the aspects of prison life, which are

perhaps not commonly known, and even to develop empathy with the situation in which some members of our society find themselves.

## Creating 'A stitch in time'

### *Materials and composition*

Sewing has historically been associated with prisoners, from the 1800s when Elizabeth Fry gave sewing kits to female transportees on prison ships bound for Australia, to the practice of sewing mailbags, which was still in operation until the 1970s. In 1973, according to the Home Office, there were around 1,500 prisoners engaged in hand-sewing mail bags (Short, 1973). Currently, sewing is used as part of the rehabilitation process of prisoners through the charity Fine Cell Work.<sup>1</sup>

I came to the conclusion that textile work would be an appropriate medium for 'A stitch in time'. In devising the piece, I wanted it to be filled with imagery, text, facts and symbolic meaning related to my findings in the prison environment. I sought a thematic representation that would enclose the fragments of information in a cohesive manner, constraining the words and images inside a perimeter, like a prison wall, and at the same time reveal hidden aspects of this system through the cutting away of not only the physical cloth but also some of the themes associated with the realities of prison life.

There is a wide and diverse body of written work around the prison system, prison buildings and the psychology associated with punishment and justice, from Jeremy Bentham (*The Panopticon writings*, 1791) through to Michel Foucault (*Discipline and punish*, 1975), who both investigated the type of buildings holding inmates, as well as the philosophy associated with crime and punishment. Today, the use of buildings and the psychology associated with incarceration are as relevant as ever, with more recent writings including 'Designing "healthy" prisons for women' (Jewkes, Jordan, Wright and Bendelow, 2019) suggesting beneficial implementations for both prison planning and penal practice.

My work, both written and constructed, adds to the investigation of the psychology of buildings made to inflict justice, by not only looking at the more sobering aspects of these institutions but also at some of the more peculiar and even light-hearted areas within them, giving greater insight into this system.

Victorian-built prisons and the ideas that informed their design are still in use throughout the UK today. This model has been adopted around the world and was intended to produce good behaviour and rehabilitation; however, more often than not, it consigned inmates to poor health and provided scant opportunities for reform (Moazen, Assari, Stöver and Neuhann, 2019, p. 1008).

Looking at prison buildings and architectural drawings to inform my initial composition, I came upon the layout plan produced by the architect Thomas Hardwick for Millbank Prison (1816/1890, Figure 2),<sup>2</sup> now the site of Tate Britain. The area was originally bought by social theorist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham with government funds to build his ‘panopticon’ (a type of institution and system of control). The concept of his design was based on all prisoners being observed by a single guard, situated at the centre of the construction. As circumstances changed, however, Bentham’s plan was abandoned in favour of Hardwick’s. Although the latter’s design was an adapted version of the panopticon envisaged by Bentham, I was still keen to use this blueprint for the foundation template of my artwork, not only for aesthetic reasons or the ironic connection to the art gallery that is now housed on that piece of land, but also for its association with the failed system of control that prison buildings with a central guard became.

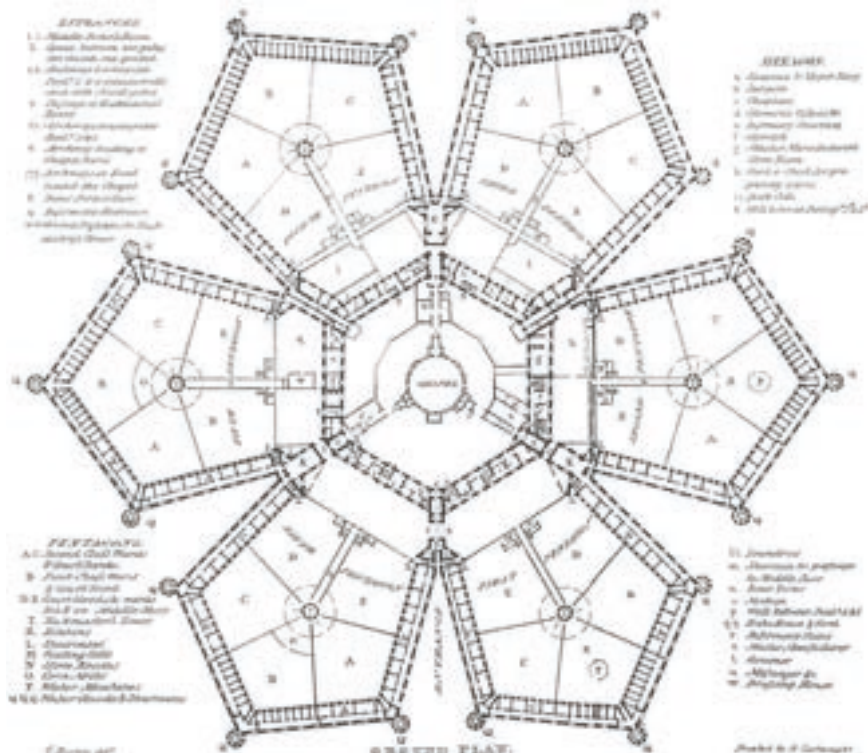


Figure 2

### ***Technique and construction***

My chosen art form is textile art and in particular the techniques of reverse appliqué and free machine embroidery, where cloth is layered together and then cut away to reveal the material beneath; this is then worked into, over and around with free machine embroidery. I found this to be a fitting metaphor for peeling away and revealing some of the hidden aspects of my investigation into incarceration. In designing the layout for ‘A stitch in time’, Bentham’s idea of the panopticon remained with me as I pursued ways to illustrate how people react and adapt to incarceration knowing they are under constant scrutiny. Each of the six pentagonal shapes placed around ‘A stitch in time’ are split into six recurring motif sections; each section



depicts an aspect of prison life. The pattern of the fabric is repeated but the colours are different for each section, reflecting a systematic order. This order, however, is not to benefit the rehabilitation of the prisoner but, rather, to implement punishment through discipline and control. Foucault argued that the modern penal system was not brought about by any humanitarian ideals, but that it was designed to make punishment more productive with less input. Furthermore, the system that was developed has been used as the model of control, while the techniques of observation, judgement and examination have been employed throughout society by powerful institutions (Foucault, 1977). Between the coloured hexagon sections on my work there are images of prison interiors taken from historical photographs. These images have been printed and intentionally faded to give the impression of antiquity as a comment on the age of some of the prisons still in use in the UK.

Ultimately, the visual effect I was after was a cohesive, ordered, attractive piece of art which draws in the observer, only to reveal the complex collection of information contained within.

## Content and themes

### *The watcher and the watched*

The central section of my work shows the dilapidated ‘Presido modela’ (Figure 3),<sup>3</sup> a panopticon prison building used in Cuba between 1928 and 1966, famous for being overcrowded and brutal (Ryle, 1996). Bentham’s original ideas around the panopticon involved the watcher observing the watched continuously through a window at the rear of the cell, which would be illuminated by natural daylight during the day and by a candle placed outside the cell at night. Foucault asserts that ‘he who is subjected to the field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself...’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 224). He borrowed Bentham’s panopticon as a model to discuss power relations in the nineteenth century, arguing that the paradigm spread throughout society until it became the norm. It has been suggested that this model has failed because the more it tries to enforce dominance, the more resistance it faces in the form of prison riots, aggressive and passive behaviours, and self-harm, which can all be manifestations of a prisoner’s struggle with the panopticon (Rhodes, 1998). The use of panopticon buildings has been almost globally abandoned. Continuous surveillance, however, has become the norm in a world dominated by the Internet and technology.

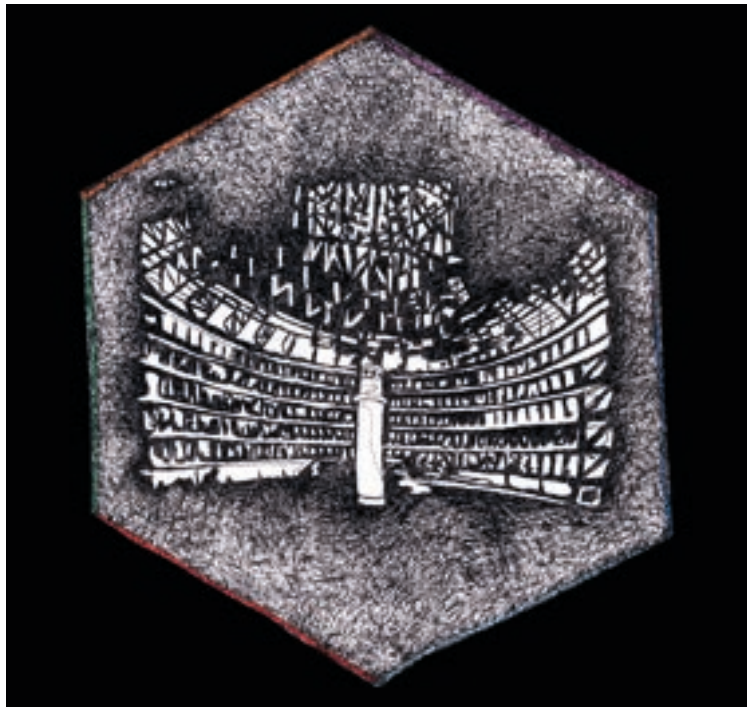


Figure 3

At the centre of each divided panel on ‘A stitch in time’ there is a circular section which represents the “peep hole” found in most prison doors. Once again, the notion of constant surveillance, as outlined in Bentham’s idea of the panopticon, is emphasised. The watched are constantly aware that at any moment the observer could be looking and judging. In Figure 4,<sup>4</sup> I have depicted the inside of an empty cell showing the cramped conditions. An analysis of government figures by the [Howard League for Penal Reform](#) reveals that three in five men’s [prisons](#) are holding more people than they are certified to look after (Bulman, 2019). One of the peep holes (Figure 5)<sup>5</sup> shows two partially visible men, there but hidden. As prisoners are removed from society, hidden behind walls, doors and bars, so are the issues that lead them to imprisonment neglected and obscured. They, too, are there but are often secreted within official documents and jargon. For example, black men are 26% more likely than white men to be remanded in custody. They are also nearly 60% more likely to plead not guilty (Prison Reform Trust, 2020). In her work *Dark matters*, Simone Browne uses comparisons with the panopticon and the racialisation of surveillance, from New York’s eighteenth-century Lantern Laws, where enslaved people had to carry lit candles at night in order to be identified, through to contemporary public surveillance as seen through the eyes of a white watcher: ‘...when white men are standing still and talking, using a mobile phone or passing an unseen object to one another, this may be seen as normal activities, whereas the same actions performed by black men will be seen as beyond the boundary of normal and subject to disciplinary action’ (Fiske, cited in Browne, 2015, p. 17). These observations show that the system of surveillance and containment is not only prejudicial to socio-economic groups, as highlighted in the case of the young man using the homeless centre, but that the very colour of one’s skin can have an adverse outcome on their interaction with systems of authority.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Whether it is through architecture designed to observe its users at all times, as manifested physically by the panopticon, or through the principles behind the panopticon in the form of modern surveillance fitted in institutions, being put under constant observation, whether real or imagined, may not always bring about the intended compliance. To the contrary, it may also cause non-compliance.

Taking any kind of control back from those who have taken one's freedom can be seen as a victory no matter how small. Nicole R. Fleetwood, in her book *Marking time: art in the age of mass incarceration* shows how Tameca Coles has used her art practice to help her cope with life in prison. Fleetwood points to the use of Coles' work during incarceration as a vehicle not only to enable self-esteem but also to control rage ignited through mistreatment from prison staff. 'I was so angry that I wanted to explode' (Fleetwood, 2020, p. 203). She goes on to say that, through the act of creating, Coles was able to enshroud herself in a state of calm that manifested as a visualisation of the constraints of penal time and space, and the artist's strategies to survive them (Fleetwood, 2020).

### ***Time and locks***

The images for the hexagonal panels in 'A stitch in time' have two recurring themes: time and locks, which I perceived as the two constants pervading the idea of incarceration. 'Time in prison, is not only a measurable, tradeable commodity: it is a form of currency that can be also used in prison as a technique of further punishment, when days can be gained and added to the length of sentence' (Wahidin, 2006). Dominique Moran says of prison time: '...the very fact of being in prison, mediated by inmates' age, gender, the length of their sentences and any previous experience of prison, changes the way in which they experience time' (Moran, 2012, p. 310).

The other constant in prison is locks and their keys. During my induction at a young offenders' institute, I was shocked to learn that if any keys went missing there would be a "lockdown" (closure of the whole prison) and all locks would need to be changed. This has happened as recently as February 2020 (*BBC News*, 2020).

### ***Prison language***

Another theme I highlight in the artwork is prison language. When used by officials, the media, politicians and public policy agencies, the language around prisoners often emits a negative perception of this community: '...when we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons – all terms devoid of humanness which identify us as "things" rather than as people' (Ellis, 2007). There is, however, a positive element to the language used in prison, which is fast-changing, creatively filled with wit, irony and rhyme, is multi-cultural and uses many terms drawn from a wide variety of sources, including Cockney rhyming slang, Hindi, Jamaican Patois, Romany and many others. I use some of this language in my



work by placing slang, jargon and cant used in prisons around the edge of the design. In a way, this language creates a metaphorical element of control around the perimeter wall, as well as actually on my design. Language, or the lack of appropriate language, can be a factor that hinders possibilities of rehabilitation and participation in society on the outside. A survey of 10% of young offenders within one institution found that 73% of these scored at a significantly lower level for their age on grammatical competence (Bryon, 2010).

Enrico Terrinoni (2008) suggests that humour flourishes where there is conflict, and that it is an act of resistance to tragedy. This dark humour is also observed in the prison language surrounding and containing the design (Figure 6);<sup>6</sup> for example, the term “ghost train” refers to the continual movement of difficult prisoners from one prison to another.



Figure 6

The language passing between convicts can also be used to hide information from authorities, make quick transactions, create a feeling of solidarity and lighten the mood. Some of the commonly used prison language I have chosen ranges from the comical “vegetable patch”, which is a term used for prisoners sitting around watching television, to the more poignant “all day and a night”, which means a prison term till death.

## *Tattoos*

Tattoos feature in prisons throughout the world and are another way prisoners can show individuality, identity, control, affiliation and aesthetic pleasure. Although tattoo art has become a mainstream fashion accessory, historically in Western society it has been used by sub-groups such as the working class, bikers, punks and prisoners to show allegiance to a particular group, assert cultural values and denote an act of rebellion (Kosut, 2006). Used in a prison environment, tattoos can serve as indicators of social solidarity and, in the case of certain gangs predominantly in the U.S. and Russia, they can communicate rank, specialisation or personal accomplishment, which typically revolve around murder, drug trafficking and other crimes (Phelan and Scott, 1988). Tattoos produced in prison represent a visual language shared but also hidden. They form a rite of passage into a group, a code of conduct and an outlet for creativity and individuality. This can be seen in the image of a ship at sea (Figure 7),<sup>7</sup> which when tattooed on a Russian prisoner can mean that the bearer does not engage in normal work; instead, they are a travelling thief who is prone to escape (*The Guardian*, 2014).



Figure 7

### ***Rules and regulations***

The chosen themes in the six panels are intended to provide a snapshot of aspects of life in prison and their collective impact on those within the system, thus affording a glimpse of prison conditions to someone on the outside.

There are strict rules on which items are allowed in prison and which are not. Pop-up books (Figure 6), chewing gum (Figure 8)<sup>8</sup> and hooded tops (Figure 5), for instance, are not allowed in prisons. Game consoles are permitted as a reward for good behaviour (Figure 9). To the contrary, the famous birdman of Alcatraz, Robert Stroud, would no longer be able to keep budgies, as pets are now disallowed from most prisons (Figure 5), although during the 2020 pandemic some schemes were set up to bring pets into prisons in order to reduce stress levels among inmates (*BBC News*, 2020).



Figure 8



Figure 9

## Reflections

Although my initial investigations for this artwork were directed at highlighting certain parts of the penal system, as well as enabling the viewer to discover aspects of prison life that are somewhat unfamiliar, it has also led me to an alternative understanding of the panopticon as a metaphor for modern life beyond the prison system. Nowadays, Foucault's expanded theory of the panopticon, controlling all of our social and work lives, is with us every time we log on to the Internet, use social media platforms or walk in public areas where CCTV is used. 'Visibility is a trap', argued Foucault (1995, p. 222). The idea that we are all potentially being observed at any time may force us into self-regulation. This could be the ultimate control by a single, central guard.

On reflection, the purpose of 'A stitch in time' is twofold. First, the content of the work seeks to highlight some alarming statistics, which betray the severely underfunded and neglected state of our prisons, as a stimulus to further the conversation on penal reform. Second, it attempts to illustrate the creativeness of a prison culture, which, through the codes of language and tattoos, provides a valuable sense of meaning and identity to those within the restraints of the system. The research I carried out has only confirmed my belief that many people who enter this system are thrown onto a path of reoffending that is difficult to avoid. Lack of investment in rehabilitation, staffing and buildings does not help. I fear that the



desperate sentiment expressed by the young man that first prompted my investigation will be repeated by many people leaving our prisons.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://finecellwork.co.uk/>
  - <sup>2</sup> Holford, G.P. Millbank prison. License: public domain.
  - <sup>3</sup> Detail of the central panel (2020).
  - <sup>4</sup> Panel showing cramped cell (2020).
  - <sup>5</sup> Panel showing two central figures (2020).
  - <sup>6</sup> Panel showing the term “ghost train” (2020).
  - <sup>7</sup> Panel showing a ship at sea (2020).
  - <sup>8</sup> Detail showing chewing gum (2020).
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