

Doing Time

Zanny Begg*

Reality is wrong. Dreams are for real

Tupac Shakur

The origins of the phrase ‘doing time’ are not exactly known, but for me it described quite well the nature of being in prison. In this one phrase the active, busy, continuous present tense word ‘doing’ butted straight into the vast, eternal and ominous word ‘time’.

The kids I met in Reiby Juvenile Justice Centre were certainly *doing time*, they were caught up in a range of *doing* typical of teenage boys – playing video games, or sports like footy, and going to school – yet unlike most teenagers, these activities were measured against an ever conscious register of *time*: every boy I met could reel off how long was left for him; ‘eight months’; ‘three years’; ‘one and a half years’.

These boys had been ‘doing time’ for a long time; all were on long sentences. Most had been inside before. Some also had parents in jail. For these boys, the rhythm of prison was familiar. Frustrated and intensely bored, they would call ‘time out’ whenever the class or conversation would drag. Yet against this ferocious impatience, they talked with an unbearable lethargy about how their days were spent; as one boy explained he was ‘letting the time pass’.

From March - August 2014, I visited Reiby Juvenile Detention Centre, in Airs in Western Sydney, as part of an artist residency organised by Campbelltown Arts Centre in preparation for the exhibition *The List*. Over this time I worked with seven 14-15 year old

boys in a series of workshops and projects that led to the filming of a video *Doing Time*. Reiby caters for kids between 10 and 16 years of age. These boys are deemed at high risk and are serving long-term sentences.

Through the residency I hoped to challenge, if only fleetingly, the institutional disempowerment these boys faced. In our first project, *Rooms*, the boys ‘curated’ their own living environment by producing oversize drawings to wallpaper the small grey boxes they spent most of their time in. This was a long and complex process – the images had to pass several levels of bureaucracy (references to Tupac for instance were banned because they were deemed part of ‘gang culture’) before we were eventually able to install them. These boys are not allowed on the internet, let alone the social media sites that predominate in teenage culture, so researching ideas was difficult. Strangely, their several years out of date idea of youth culture caught my fading connection with the world of teens and saw us meeting half-way. The day of installation was a minor victory with the boys hanging out in each other’s rooms (a rare social experience) and working together to wallpaper images on each other’s walls.

Our next project was working on a collaborative video project *Doing Time*. The video was shot inside the courtyard of the detention center and is an exploration of the experience of time through the eyes of four young people who have been forced to prematurely confront its gravity. In making this film, I became interested not only in the realities of life inside for these boys, but also the subjective and discontinuous nature of time itself. The phrase *doing time* describes the experience of being incarcerated but in this project it also described a series of experiments in how time “does us”.

One of the hardest things to grasp about time is its fluidity. Everyday experiences convince us that we all experience time in the same way – four months for me, it seems logical, should be the same duration as four months for one of the boys inside Reiby, even if experienced very differently. Yet for experts in time, such as physicists, things are not quite so straightforward. Einstein’s theory of relativity demonstrates that the apparent continuity of time is artefact of life at slow speeds

and weak gravity. When you zoom out on a cosmic scale the universal conception of time evaporates. As Brian Greene explains if your ‘hanging out near the edge of a black hole, an hours passage on your watch will be monumentally longer on mine.’ (2011: 66)

Prison is often described as a ‘black hole’. It’s an apt metaphor; prison is a mysterious and hidden place where little light of public scrutiny shines. Yet the way this metaphor is used misses the powerful density of black holes, their role in shaping everything around us. Some of us may never go inside prison, but to use this metaphor a little more scientifically if prisoners are in a ‘black hole’ prisons shape everything about the world outside. These kids may be ‘locked away’ from public view yet none of us are exempt from the gravitational pull of what Angela Davis calls the “prison industrial complex”.

Before entering the jail I knew that Aboriginal kids would be over-represented in the Juvenile Justice System. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare the national rate of Aboriginal juvenile incarceration is 31 times that of non-Indigenous young people. According to Padriac Gibson, Senior Researcher at the Jumbunna House of Learning UTS, more Aboriginal children are being taken off their families into institutional care today than during the era when the removal of Aboriginal children was official government policy (roughly 1906 - 1969). Once inside Reiby it was devastating to see that almost all of the kids inside were Indigenous.

Before the process began I asked that I not be told what crime any of the boys had committed, I felt they had been judged enough and I didn’t want to add my internal voice to this. I do not intend to diminish the hurt that some people must be feeling because of these boys – I can only imagine they must have gotten up to something bad to end up in a maximum security prison at 14 years-of-age – but my time with these boys convinced me the greater crime was locking these kids up.

Most of the boys described jail as a stabilising factor in their lives, somewhere they actually got to go to school, be fed, have a place to sleep. Yet all were emphatic that ‘you don’t want to be here’, it was a place of loneliness, isolation and fear. As one boy explained ‘you always have to watch your back in here’.

The storyboard for *Doing Time* was developed in collaboration with four boys in Reiby and works in two parts. One part is a reality sequence where the boys provide glimpses of their daily rituals in prison, and another part is a dream sequence where the boys experiment with alternate ways of experiencing this reality. The two parts overlap, filmed in the same small shadeless courtyard the boys spend their days in. The gaps between reality and dreams is small, but in this tiny gap lies a power of possibility, as Tupac Shakur once said, 'reality is wrong, dreams are for real'.

Notes

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References

Greene B 2011 *The Hidden Reality* Penguin London

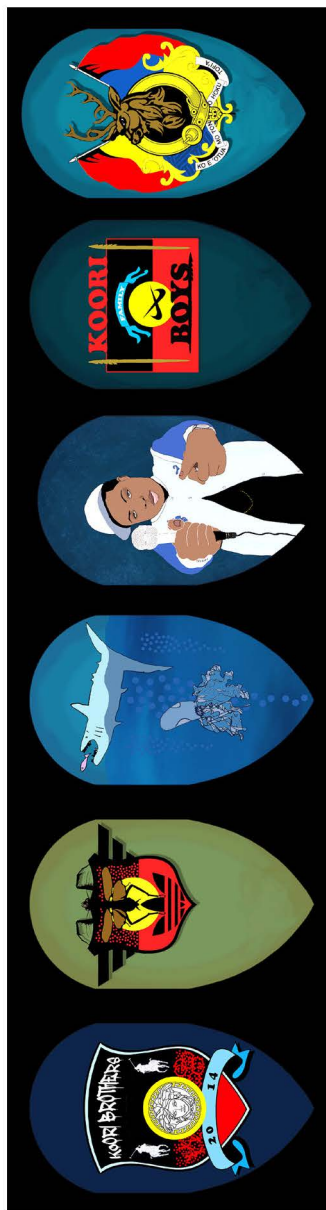
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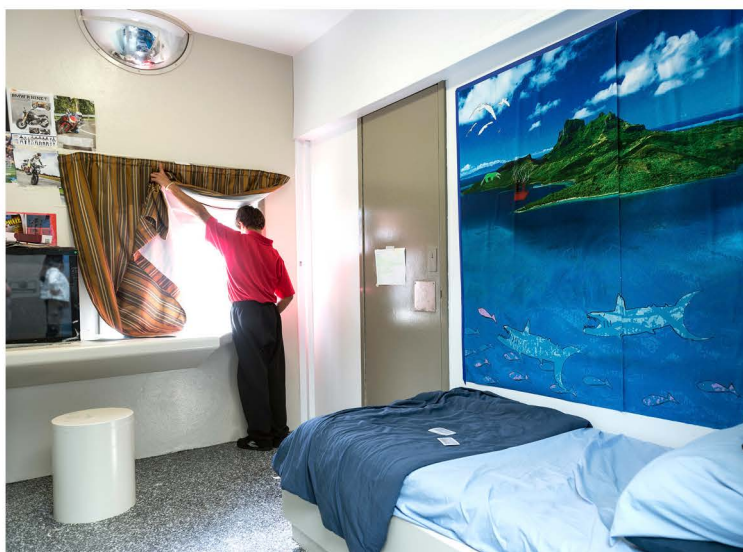
The Boys Home, film and installation by Zanny Begg, photo documentation by Alex Wisser, 2014.



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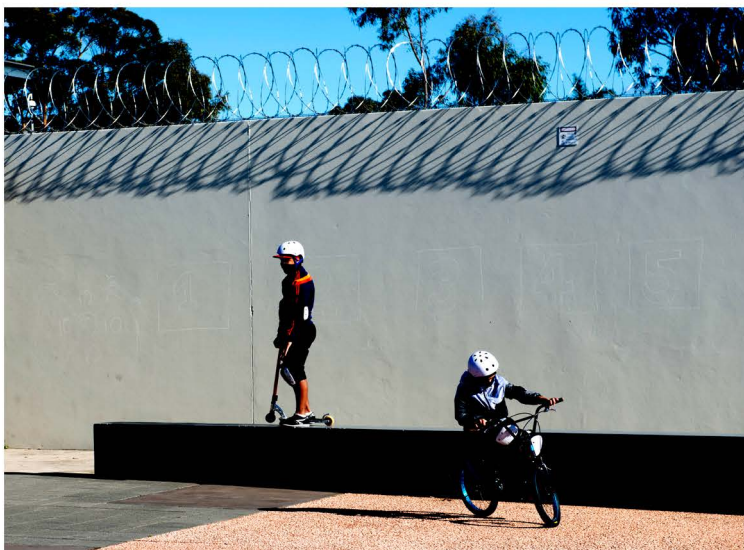


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