

Philosophy & Photography Lab [Eng]

About the photograph *The Balance*, part of *Quartiers Libres* series.

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Guillaume Martial shot his latest photography series ironically titled, *Open Spaces*, inside and outside of Varennes-le-Grand prison. This particular photo “La Balance” presents the photographer at the corner with the markings of the Vitruvian Man.

His position at an outer corner of the prison demonstrates visually the way the building diminishes incarcerated persons. By placing his face close to the wall, Martial conjures the spirit of how painter Barnett Newman wanted people to view his work: by standing inches from the canvas so that you couldn't see the edges, thereby inducing the sublime. The sublime, according to Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, provokes a feeling of awe often coupled with terror. Beholders feel their smallness in the universe. The sublime, in a way, puts the beholder in their place, which encourages humility and humanity. In the prison context, tension arises between the confining space and the seemingly endless time someone spends in prison, which squeezes out a person's humanity. This is captured by Martial's position in his photograph as each wall points toward an invisible horizon line in the distance. Only the bottom of the wall is in view.

The Vitruvian Man drawing sought to connect the human with nature, according to Leonardo da Vinci's words. One thing suggested by the specific markings of the circle inside of a square is the human need for variety in lived spaces. Prisons fail in this regard, which can leave formerly incarcerated persons to struggle in various spaces upon release. Francis Hutcheson asserted that “uniformity amidst variety” contains an important aspect of beauty. Too little variety leads to boredom; too much variety leads to chaos. Variety, in Martial's photo, is suggested subtly by the rectangle and circle, angles and curvature. Spaces that are overly monotonous deflate a person's humanity; recent studies, for example, evince that a building's blank facade affects people negatively, compared with a facade with some detail. People need variety to overcome boredom.

Martial adds a triangle below his photograph, which introduces the idea of its title: balance. In aesthetics, balance (or harmony or proportion) often refers to the physical qualities something possesses. And human proportion is suggested by the Vitruvian Man markings. However, I'm drawn to a metaphorical understanding, meaning the practical concerns of balancing the punishment of incarcerated persons with the desire for them to reintegrate into society afterward. Prison reform concerns a multitude of issues, but one that is neglected is aesthetics. The desire for aesthetics is a basic pleasure. Depriving incarcerated persons of this basic pleasure further removes them from what it means to be human. While acknowledging that restrictions and safety are necessary, the prison system ought to consider how aesthetic details could be integrated.

In this complex photograph, Martial visually creates an empathic vision of incarcerated persons. Spaces impact our well-being, so it's not surprising that the space in prison damages people who are confined within its walls. This photo exemplifies their humanity.