

Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst
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ROBERT GLAS ROOMS OF MUTED VIOLENCE

25 April to 9 June 2024

Project coordination: Ulrich Kreienbrink

Technical realization: Carlo Bas Sancho, Mathis Oesterlen

Educational programme: Sandrine Teuber, Jan Blum

Graphic design: Katarina Ševič, Anna Mándoki

EXHIBITION WALK

Tuesday, 28 May, 5 p.m.

with Edit Molnár – director Edith-Russ-Haus (in English language)

Tuesday, 4 June, 5 p.m.

with Marcel Schwierin – director Edith-Russ-Haus (in German language)

GUIDED TOURS

Every Sunday during the exhibition
at 3 p.m. (Attendance free, regular
entrance).

Group tours on request.

Rooms of Muted Violence is a solo exhibition by the Dutch artist Robert Glas, whose research-based works revolve around the question of bureaucratically produced justice. With his films and film installations, he aims to open up spaces to scrutinize the ways bureaucracies produce justice, interrogate the kind of justice they produce, and tackle the question of at whose gain and whose cost. Following anthropologist David Graeber's line of thought, Glas is convinced that, next to politics, it is actually bureaucracy that is the true organizing force of modern society. Through his works, the artist aims to make visible the willful blindness—which bureaucracy itself produces—toward the violence inherent in its system.

The exhibition's central piece is the video installation *1986, Or a Sphinx's Interior* (2022), which takes as its starting point the notable expansion in the prison system from the 1980s onward throughout the Western world.

The urgency of Glas's artistic inquiry stems from the fact that decades-long abolitionist practices, building support until the mid-1980s, stand in stark contrast with today's virtually uncontested call for harsher punishments.

Meanwhile, in the field of philosophy, mainly inspired by recent neuroscience research, the existence of free will is being challenged yet again.

For *Sphinx*, Glas rather ambitiously chose to reproduce, at 1:1 scale, the architectural model of a Rotterdam prison cell, which stands in the middle of the exhibition hall. The original was built by the renowned Dutch architect Carel Weeber in 1986 as part of his design process. Working with actor Ali Ben Horsting (in the role of the architect's younger self), the former prison detainee Jonathan Geerman, and Weeber himself, Glas created a video work examining the architect's visit to his test model in the 1980s. The initial practical question of "How does one test a prison cell?" leads to underlying questions about how incarceration affects a life and a body.

Alongside *Sphinx*, the exhibition includes *1986, Or Recalling Louk Hulsman* (2024), which circles around the

legacy of the well-known professor of criminal law (until 1986), who toward the end of his career passionately advocated for abolishing the criminal justice system. The artist brings together five criminal law students with five fellow Rotterdammers who have spent time in prison. While reciting some of Hulsman's crucial texts, the law students—trained in public speaking—were asked to assist the former inmates in practicing a persuasive performance. During rehearsals, conversations arose about the relevance of Hulsman's propositions and insider perspectives from today's context, marked by politicized calls for increasingly harsher punishments while critical voices struggle to be heard.

The work *Voor vrij Nederland (For a Liberated Netherlands)* (2016), involves an actual legal battle the artist took on. It comprises a series of photographs and all documents produced in the process of taking the State of the Netherlands to court regarding the right to access photographs of state facilities. The photos depict the interiors of detention centers for asylum seekers with rejected application—a policy that became the target of international criticism. To exhibit these images, the artist had to engage in a second lawsuit to claim the right to distribute them, supported by lawyer Frans Willem Verbaas, Amnesty International, and the Dutch Journalists Union. The small marks left behind in the spaces—like finger scratches and nose prints on windows—create portraits of people who are, to this day, detained as criminals without having committed a crime.

How to Motivate Someone to Leave Voluntarily, also from 2016, feels like a video portrait of such a person. In this video documentation of an improvised performance, two actors and a coach in "motivational interviewing" reconstruct a dialogue between a "foreign national" and a "departure supervisor." Motivational interviewing is a governmental tactic intended to manipulate a person into believing they are leaving a country of their own will—a method in use in the Netherlands since 2016.

Glas's solo exhibition is completed with a newly curated selection of books, under the title *If Luck Swallows Everything (for Justizvollzugsanstalt Oldenburg Niedersachsen)*. The set of books was gifted by the artists and is located in the nearest prison, Justizvollzugsanstalt Oldenburg, and a copy of the library is available for reading in the exhibition space. The books all focus on free will, with authors ranging from free will defenders such as Daniel Dennett to fierce free will skeptics like Derk Pereboom.

Why is free will particularly significant in this context? Retribution—or simply, payback—is a key component of prison sentences. Through this component, the state, on behalf of the victim and society as a whole, avenges the crimes a convict is found guilty of. A guilty sentence requires that it be proven the suspect committed the crimes they are charged with and, critically, that they could have acted otherwise. The assumption that humans have free will is thus fundamental to the criminal justice system. As a philosophical concept, however, free will is far from uncontested and the subject of millennia-old debates.

The works in *Rooms of Muted Violence*, based on extensive research into both the justice and European asylum systems, share a calm and contemplative tone. The artist instrumentalizes conversation as a primary tool in tackling major political, ideological, and societal questions, unfolding from his interest in the possibilities of using a common language to move beyond the communication breakdown between the formalized world of bureaucratic justice and the world of everyday life.

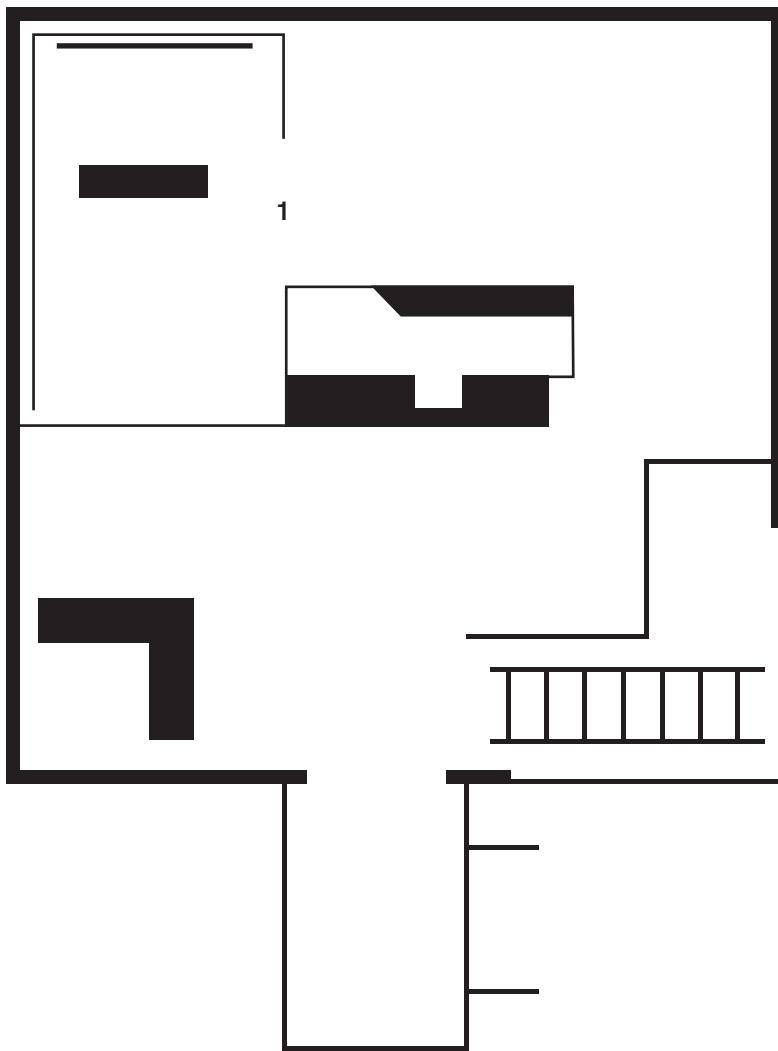
Biography

For his artistic practice **Robert Glas** (1986) uses cinematography, photography, scientific literature and fiction to investigate technologies nation-states deploy to enforce the law. His work is exhibited at the Van Abbe Museum, Kunsthall and Foam. In 2019 he received the Charlotte Köhler Prijs and the Artist-in-Residence Fellowship of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS-KNAW).

Glas lives and works in Rotterdam and Amsterdam (NL).

www.robertglas.nl

GROUND FLOOR



1 1986 OR A SPHINX'S INTERIOR

2022

Single screen film installation
38 min

In 1986, Norwegian prison abolitionist Thomas Mathiesen said: 'There is a clear and strong tendency towards the expansion of the prison system throughout the Western world. Even in Holland, traditionally the country with the lowest prison rate in Europe, the flagship telling the world that it is possible to have a complex industrialized society with very few prisoners, there is now a noticeable expansion in the making.'

That same year, renowned architect Carel Weeber drew up his design for a prison complex in Rotterdam, one of the many Dutch prisons built in the 1980s, in use to this day. As part of his design process Weeber had a 1:1 scale test built of a single prison cell. While there are conflicting accounts on how his test went about, one thing is certain: such a test demands the imagination of how the space will be used, by whom, and in what condition this person is.

For this film, Weeber's test set up was rebuilt. Working with actor Ali-Ben Horsting, Carel Weeber himself, and a former detainee of the prison, various versions of Weeber's visit to the test setup are constructed and reconstructed. The result orbits around imagining how a life and a

body are affected by confinement, this sentence we talk about so often and know so little about.

Credits

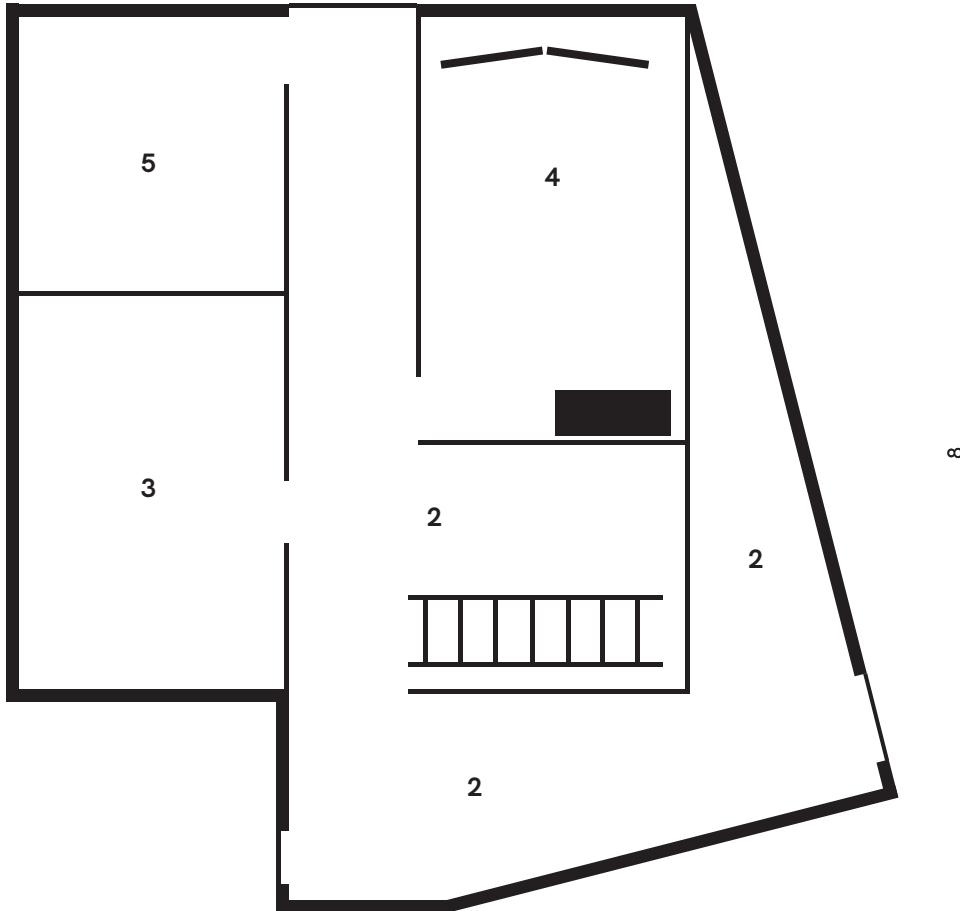
With:

Jonathan Geerman
Ali-Ben Horsting
Carel Weeber
DOP: Tom Enzler
Gaffer: Mark Groen
Sound recording: Gerard Verwiel
Costume design: Patricia Lim
Soundmix: Victor Bontje
Runner Carel Weeber:
Wilfred van der Weide
Catering: Zazie Stevens
Set assistance: Wouter van der Laan

Set:

Chris Bakker
Niels de Bakker
Stefan Cammeraat
Seamus Carter
Mats Cobussen
Roger Cremers
Nico Glas
Stephan Kuderna
Arend Nijkamp
Milad Pallesh
Monique de Wilt
Additional thanks to:
Talitha Beuken at CurrentWerkt,
Wim Cobussen
Timo Demollin, Anna Dasovic,
Laura Weeber

BASEMENT



2

VOOR VRIJ NEDERLAND (FOR A LIBERATED NETHERLANDS)

2014–2016

Legal intervention, photography

In order to ‘motivate aliens to cooperate voluntarily’ with their own deportation, the State of the Netherlands has a policy of up to 18 months of detention for those who refuse to leave the EU territory after their asylum application has been rejected. Until recently, the Dutch Ministry of Justice hosted the only publicly accessible database of photographs of the detention cells used in this internationally criticised policy, all made by their staff photographer.

For the project *Voor vrij Nederland (For a Liberated Netherlands)*, photographer and visual artist Robert Glas cooperated with lawyer Frans-Willem Verbaas, Amnesty International, the photography agency Hollandse Hoogte, and Vrij Nederland magazine to create an independent alternative to this database. Photographic access to the cells and the right to distribute the images without any interference from the Dutch Ministry of Justice was made possible by a number of lawsuits filed against the State by Verbaas and Glas. Since the last verdict dating April 6th, 2016, the photographs are now available to the press via the Hollandse Hoogte database.

At first the photographs seem to represent nothing but clean spaces, but a closer look reveals traces of those confined in the rooms: scratches from fingernails in the paint, nose prints on windows left by people who were detained as criminals without having committed a crime.

3

IF LUCK SWALLOWS EVERYTHING (FOR JUSTIZVOLLZUGSANSTALT OLDENBURG, NIEDERSACHSEN)

2024

Library of books selected by the artist

Retribution—or simply: pay back—is a key component of the prison sentence. Through this component the State, on behalf of the victim and society as a whole, avenges the crimes a convict is found guilty of. Being found guilty means that the court rules it proven that the suspect committed the crime he is trialed for, and, critically, that he could have acted otherwise. The assumption that humans have a ‘free will’ is thus fundamental to the criminal justice system. As a philosophical concept free will is nevertheless far from uncontested and subject of millennia old debates.

For this work Robert Glas invited the Edith-Russ-Haus to buy a selection of books on free will, ranging from free will defenders such as

Daniel D. Dennet to fierce free will skeptics like Derk Peereboom. Each title is ordered twice: One copy for the reading room in the exhibition space, and the other to be donated to the library of the nearest prison, Justizvollzugsanstalt Oldenburg, Niedersachsen.

The title of this piece refers to an essay by the philosopher Galen Strawson, a text which deals with the question of how much room there is left for ultimate responsibility after one accepts that; no one chooses the country they were born, the culture they were raised in, the womb they were carried, the genes they inherited, the schools they attended, the traumas they went through, and—ultimately: the brain that does the choosing. Strawson writes: “In the end, luck swallows everything: this is one way of conveying the fundamental respect in which there can be no ultimate responsibility. In this sense, no punishment or reward is ever ultimately just or fair.”

4 **1986 OR RECALLING LOUK HULSMAN**

2024

Dual screen film installation

38 min

Video documentation of a live event

18 min

In this work, Robert Glas brings together five criminal law students

with five fellow Rotterdammers who have spent time in prison. Their meeting revolves around a text that passionately advocates for abolishing the criminal justice system.

The text is by Louk Hulsman, a Rotterdam-based penal abolitionist who frequently featured in the media, influenced international policy, and was professor in criminal law at Erasmus University—until 1986, when he witnessed the toughening of the criminal justice policy.

Hulsman’s perspective on criminal law was influenced by his own imprisonment by the Dutch police during World War II. He experiencing first-hand what it means to be incarcerated and how easily individuals cease to recognise one another’s humanity.

This experience fueled his conviction that society benefits when people, especially in conflict situations, maintain face-to-face relationships and are enabled to seek solutions collaboratively. He still envisioned a role for judges and other professionals in this process, but they would act from a different outlook on society and speak in a different, common language, moving beyond the communication breakdown he identified between the system world of criminal law and the world of everyday life.

Glas invited the five participants with imprisonment experience to recall Hulsman’s ideas by reciting

them at the university where he once taught. The law students, trained in public speaking, were asked to assist them in practicing a persuasive performance. During rehearsals, conversations arose about the relevance of Hulsman's propositions and insider perspectives in today's context, which is marked by political calls for increasingly harsher punishments, while critical voices struggle to be heard.

Credits

DOP: Tom Enzler

Set sound: Tim Marsman

Coaching: Gino van Weenen

Allround assistance: Raquel Vermunt,

Liza Wolters

Grading: Tom Enzler

Sound mixing: Victor Bontje

Subtitling: VSI Amsterdam

With great thanks to criminal law student association Wichmann, employment agency CurrentWerk, and the Erasmus University Rotterdam, and very special thanks to all participants to the project, Jehanne Hulsman, Talitha Beuken, Jolande uit Beijerse and René van Swaanningen and everyone at TENT.

Produced for TENT, Rotterdam.

5

HOW TO MOTIVATE SOMEONE TO LEAVE VOLUNTARILY

2016

Single screen film

23 min

In a letter to parliament dated 6 October 2015, State Secretary for Security and Justice Klaas Dijkhoff wrote:

"By employing 'motivational interviewing' and building a working relationship, the motivation of the foreign national is influenced. [...] Using this methodology, the departure supervisor [of the Repatriation and Departure Service, RG] is shown how to balance most effectively making contact with the foreign national and exercising control and force in order to ensure their departure. [...] This method will be applied starting in 2016."

In this film a trainer in motivational interviewing, a director and two stage actors attempt to construct a realistic dialogue scene between 'foreign national' and departure supervisor, by combining an existing case with improvisation.

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für Wissenschaft und Kultur

Stadt
Oldenburg

OPENING HOURS

Tuesday till Friday

2 a.m.–6 p.m.

Saturday and Sunday

11 a.m.–6 p.m.

Monday closed

ADMISSION

2,50 Euro / 1,50 Euro

Free admission on 27 April, 11 May,

19 May and 25 May 2024

Closed on 1 May 2024

Open on 9 May and 20 May 2024

Admission is free for school children,
visitors up to and including the age of 17
and students at Oldenburg universities.

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