

“There must be some way out of here”

Bob Dylan

In the prison section of this newly built detention and remand institution I arranged for fifty-one personally chosen names of famous historical and contemporary men and women, who for one reason or another had been in prison, to be affixed to the walls together with either the title of one of their works—*Oscar Wilde · Picture of Dorian Gray*—or with an epithet attributed to them—*Jeanne d’Arc · La pucelle d’Orléans*. Similarly, in the administrative section for the cantonal magistrate’s office, I arranged for thirty-three names of writers who had campaigned for a modern legal system and humane punishment to be affixed to the walls, together with the title of one of their books—*Cesare De Beccaria · Dei delitti e delle pene*—for which they themselves had often been imprisoned—*Voltaire · Traité sur la tolérance*—or had even been sentenced to death and executed—*Olympe de Gouges · Les droits de la femme*.

These “typologies” appeared without any strict regularity, indeed quite fortuitously, in the staircases and stairwells, in the corridors, day rooms and waiting rooms of the prison building in 3 cm large letters of the fonts *Stone Sans Bold* and *Trump Medieval Roman*, in either red, blue, yellow, green or black. The walls to which they were affixed were either painted white or left in fair-faced concrete. The few exceptions—on account of the longer viewing distances—were the larger letters in the sports courtyard, in the two exercise yards and on the firewalls of the women’s wing visible from the cantonal magistrate’s office. I also had *Michel Foucault · Surveiller et punir* and *Publius Ovidius Naso · Metamorphoseon libri* chiseled in stone and let into the existing paving slabs in front of the two main entrances. All the named works and titles are available in the prison’s own library and may be consulted or borrowed at any time.

The artwork “Echos” is at all times partially visible in the entire building complex and is in no way affected by the latter’s strict safety regulations. It is based on a simple concept—the use of text—that develops a manifold field of perception rich in associations, a concept that has as its theme all the many different aspects inherent in a prison and its legal system.

The work may be perceived purely from a poetical aspect, in which case it is the “sound” of the words that appeals—*Hypatia · Oraculum lucis*, *Mata Hari · Das Auge der Morgenröte*—or we may interpret it as tongue-in-cheek self-reflection—*Keith Richards · Time is on my Side*, *Robert Mitchum · River of no Return*. Some typologies, however, may be understood as metaphors for an irrevocable reality, a reality that, whatever the circumstances may be, is hard to endure and yet can be constant and steadfast—*Nelson Mandela · Long Walk to Freedom*, *Anne Frank · Het achterhuis*. The work can also motivate the viewer to discover his own creativity—*Friedrich Glauser · Wachtmeister Studer*, *Miguel de Cervantes · Don Quijote*—or, conversely, it can awaken the awareness of the often unjust wielding of power, or the tragedy or perhaps “just” the relative justice of a sentence and punishment—*Alan Turing · The Universal Turing Machine*, *Angela Davis · The Meaning of Freedom*. It may also evoke the sentimentality of the feelings as true yearning—*Melina Mercouri · Ein Schiff wird kommen*, *Jacques Derrida · La carte postale*. And then it may also narrate something about the continual mutual contingency of intelligence, calculation, reverence and heroism—*Moses · The Ten Commandments*, *The Apostle Paul · The Epistles*. And it also tells us how an outstanding accomplishment can often go too far and, simply by questioning accepted conservative convention, be at odds with the law—*Galileo Galilei · Dialogo ...*, *Larry Flynt · Hustler*—, or how such accomplishments in turn generate artistic phenomena that even carry the tragedy of the conflict within themselves—*Giordano Bruno · Candelaio*, *Thomas de Quincey · On Murder as one of the Fine Arts*. And then its poetical side draws attention to the generally expressed wish for punishment that is often more of a precept or even mere eyewash than actual reality—*Publius Ovidius Naso · Metamorphoseon libri*—and tells of stories about the possibilities of self-righteous or sadistic behavior under the guise of justice—*Stephen King · The Shawshank Redemption*, *George Orwell · Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Last, but not least, it makes us realize that any leaning toward “just” punishment cannot but awaken uncommon forms of reflection that help us to mirror ourselves anew time and time again—*Michel Foucault · Surveiller et punir*.

While I have tried to avoid any possible moral, ideological, merit or prestige related hierarchies in “Echoes”, both as regards the choice of names and titles and as regards their location in the building, that great sportsman, showman and human rights activist Muhammad Ali—with all his many sides and talents, his genius, his tenacity, his discipline, his creativity, his sense of humor, his provocativeness, his good looks (“I am black and I am beautiful!”), his dedication, his opportunism, his contradictions and his personal tragedy—stood for us all in the center of the long wall of the sports courtyard: *When we were Kings*. Just before his legendary “Rumble in the Jungle” against George Foreman in Kinshasa in 1974, Ali himself said of himself: “I’m bad! Been choppin’ trees. I done wrestled with an alligator, I done tussled with a whale; handcuffed lightning, thrown thunder in jail; only last week, I murdered a rock, injured a stone, hospitalized a brick; I’m so mean I make medicine sick.”