

**INSIDE
CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AND WRITERS
IN READING PRISON**

SEPTEMBER 4 - OCTOBER 30 2016



READING PRISON

Reading Gaol opened in 1844 as a 'new model prison'. Designed by Giles Gilbert Scott, it is one of the most important surviving examples of Victorian prison architecture in the UK. Sited 30 miles west of London, for the past two decades the prison housed young male offenders, before it closed in 2014.

Reading Prison – as it is now known – has resonated through Western cultural and social history over the past century for one specific reason. Oscar Wilde, one of the most flamboyant figures in late 19th century public and literary life, was imprisoned there between 1895 and 1897 for 'acts of gross indecency' following his notorious trial and shaming.

The devastating experience of his time inside the prison, and of the penal regime then in operation known as 'the Separate System', which eliminated any communication between prisoners, compelled Wilde to write *De Profundis*, one of the most extraordinary letters in the history of the English language.

Addressed to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, the hundred page letter charts Wilde's fluctuating states of mind, recounts the extraordinary harshness of 'the separate system', renounces his former decadent life-style and reflects on the role of the artist in society. After he left the prison, Wilde published one of his most famous pieces of writing, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which includes the famous refrain "Each man kills the thing he loves."

After extended discussions, Artangel have secured an agreement with the Ministry of Justice to present a major project in Reading Prison in autumn 2016, prior to the beginning of the formal disposal process of the site.

Generally speaking, Artangel works closely with individual artists over a number of years to realise exceptional new projects of scale and ambition in response to specific sites and situations. The challenges of working within a very tight time-scale, together with the particular characteristics of the prison's architecture, have suggested a different approach - an exhibition of work by exceptional international artists and writers in a place of enormous cultural significance.

EXHIBITION SUMMARY



Robert Gober in Reading Prison, 2016

Responding to the architecture of the prison and the legacy of Oscar Wilde, the exhibition will include new and recent work by artists including Vija Celmins, Rita Donagh, Peter Dreher, Marlene Dumas, Richard Hamilton, Robert Gober, Nan Goldin, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Roni Horn, Steve McQueen, Ugo Rondinone, Doris Salcedo and Wolfgang Tillmans.

The work will be installed in sequences of cells and corridors inside the prison. The intention is in no way to fill the prison. Most of the cells will remain empty. The interior will remain as quiet as possible, as it would have been when Wilde was inside.

Work exhibited in the exhibition includes:

- Robert Gober will install two new sculptures in the UK, one of which will be embedded into a floor of the prison
- Marlene Dumas is making a series of small new paintings based on images of Wilde and Douglas, Jean Genet and his Moroccan lover, and Pasolini and his mother.
- Nan Goldin is working on a new project for a row of cells, exploring desire and obsession through multiple photographic portraits of one of her muses, a German actor called Clemens, together with excerpts from films such as Genet's *Chant d'Amour*.
- Rita Donagh's works on paper representing H-blocks in the Maze prison in Northern Ireland will be juxtaposed with Richard Hamilton's studies of hunger striker Bobbie Sands inside the prison, as was the case when the work was first exhibited
- Roni Horn will install a small selection of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work in dialogue with two sculptures and several prints from her Some Thames series
- Peter Dreher will install a selection of his small day paintings, each of a single glass of water painted in his studio in a single day.
- Vija Celmins will show a series of new mezzotints of the night sky.
- Doris Salcedo will install a configuration of her *Plegaria Muda* sculptures, with leaves of grass growing through upturned tables resembling coffins.
- Steve McQueen is making new sculptures which involve shrouding existing prison beds in a cell with gold-plated mosquito netting.
- Historical material including 'mug shots' of prisoners taken before their release from Reading Prison between 1885 and 1895, as well as books and prints relating to the regime of the Separate System.
- The original door of Oscar Wilde's cell, with the number C.3.3 will be installed in the former chapel. Under the Separate System, the prisoners had numbers not names. Wilde was Prisoner C.3.3, and it was under this anonymous 'name' that *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was published in 1897.



Colm Tóibín in Oscar Wilde's cell, Reading Prison, 2016

- Letters commissioned by writers from around the world, addressed to someone from whom they have been forcibly separated, available to listen to and read in individual cells. Letter writers include Kenyan writer and activist Binyavanga Wainaina, Canadian poet Anne Carson, and South African novelist Gillian Slovo.
- Live readings of Wilde's *De Profundis* will take place in the former chapel of the prison every Sunday throughout the exhibition. Prominent writers and actors including Neil Bartlett, Maxine Peake, Kathryn Hunter, Patti Smith, Lemn Sissay, Colm Tóibín and Ben Whishaw will read the entirety of Wilde's extended letter over a period of 4-5 hours